Lifers' Group (L-R) 66064 (Maxwell Melvins), 200662, 212238, 200394.

Jailhouse Rap

Mr.Melvins, how are you?

"As well as could be expected."

Oh boy. Interviewing people locked down for life is not fun. But fortunately for me this will be all over in an hour and I can roll off into the morning mist on my skateboard, cursing the dew and hoping for a fine day. Maxwell Melvins, No.66064, the man I'm talking to, doesn't exactly give a fuck about what the weather's like, he's in Rahway State Prison, New Jersey, for life.

It's a world so ugly it can make the hardest men around insane, sobbing wrecks, and it's a world Maxwell Melvins thinks young people should not have to deal with. To educate kids at risk to this, Melvins helped form the Lifer's Group who have been involved in a number of programs geared at keeping kids out of prison. The most recent of these is the Lifer's Group 'Real Deal' mini-album, a rap record made by prisoners about prison life. Aside from being a very good rap record, it's also a very scary record because it's real, there's no N.W.A., hang around outside McDonalds and pretend to be in a gang shit here, just the truth. It's best explained by the man who's living it.

Tell me about the record, was the whole thing done from within the prison?

"Yeah, I chose the guys I felt could relate what prison circumstances are, I asked them if they could define what prison was to them, I wanted them to define what everyday life was in here, how they see everyday life. From there we brought in a portable studio and three producers from Denmark, and they came in and recorded it. We also shot two videos in four hours, which was our first time doing that sort of thing and we did not rehearse, we shot everything as it came along, on the spot, and that was all put together by Penelope Spheeris."

A rap song was an unusual choice for a medium, we're all so used to rap glorifying the criminal way of life.

"It was done for that reason, because rappers glorify prison life. Also because I had a message I wanted to get out to the youth. The reason I chose rap is because I listen to rap, rap music is important and it's here to stay. You find kids are listening to what rappers have to say, so I'm using this to teach them what we've always tried to teach. We're just making them aware in a different way."

It's a real turnaround on how prison is usually depicted in rap.

"Well, those rappers are talking about things they don't know, they haven't been to prison. You see, I've been in prison for 12 years now so I can relate to these problems and I'm giving them first hand experience, they're not hearing it from some third party, they're hearing it from someone who's actually in here, someone who's been here a while. So why they should believe me is because I have credentials, a judge, a jury, a prosecuter who say I know about these things, that because of these things I'm in here to serve time. That is why I have the upper hand and we have the advantage. The rappers can speak about what they speak about, but they shouldn't speak about what they don't know about, and what they should never need to know about.

What about lyrics like .....?

"That's it, right there. A lot of kids listen to that and feed off it, they might be like 'Aaaah, it ain't nothing, I can go in there because he said you'll have nothing to fear.' Another thing is he's talking about a county jail, not a prison. But still, it's bad, I don't want to see anyone in any jail because it's a horror, there's no tomorrow for you in here. It's not just Ice Cube too, there's N.W.A., they talk about the streets of Compton, and how you can get popped there, but they don't speak about prison, they don't give kids any alternatives. They speak about drive-by shootings and blowing someone's brains out, 'Oh I'm packin' a nine' but they don't tell you if you get caught with that nine, or blow someone's brains out, you're going to spend the rest of your life in prison. They talk about this life, but don't talk about the consequences. We're telling them about the consequences and the bad choices, we're telling them think twice before you do shit, because this is where you'll end up, inside the belly of the beast."

The record really does present life in its rawest form.

"Raw? That's real, that's the bottom line, that's why it sounds the way it does. A lot of people will listen to what we're saying and will get the message, we're giving them the facts, we can't make the choices for them, we can just give them the facts and hope they make the right decision. Sometimes people will not listen, they have to go through a situation, so obviously we can't reach everyone, but if we even reach just a few then we've done the right thing. I know in my heart we will reach many though, I get responses from kids about how great they think it is, and I ask them 'Why do you listen to me?' and they say 'Because you're in there, you're tough.'I tell them that I'm not tough, you haven't seen that side of me when I'm in my cell and I've cried about being away from my family, they don't know about the psychological effects prison has. People don't tell you that when they get out of here, they're like 'Oh I ran the joint', they don't talk about how it really was, how they might have been pressured or raped or extorted, they don't talk about those things but the Lifer's Group will, we give you the real deal."

What's the next step for the Lifer's Group?

"Well, we run programmes every day, but musically I'm not sure what we'll do next. We do a lot of other stuff, educational videos, we have a book out soon published by Simon and Schuster and called *Lifers — Learn the truth at the expense of our sorrow* and it shows another side of us and our family members as well, talking about everyday experiences and personal things that we went through. It's more the personal side of it all."

As a summation, what's your message to everyone out there?

"Well, we may not be the solution, but we're part of the solution, we don't have all of the answers but we have some of the answers and this is a start. So I want you to *believe* the hype, believe what we're saying.

KIRK GEE