

## Kevin Liles Executive Vice President Warner Music Group

IT'S NOT EASY FINDING SUCCESS AT AN EARLY AGE. JUST ASK KEVIN LILES, WHO AS A teenager co-wrote a No. 1 hit single—1989's "Girl You Know It's True." That song initially brought fame when it was released by pop duo Milli Vanilli, but later it brought shame when it was revealed that they never actually sang on the recording. Liles used persistence to get past this strange turn of events. Joining hip-hop label Def Jam as an intern, he blossomed into a first-rate marketing executive while personally signing and cultivating new talent, and within three years he was named president of the label. Today, the man responsible for bringing the likes of Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Ashanti to the airwaves is Executive Vice President of Warner Music Group, making Liles one of the highest ranking African-Americans in the music business. His new book is entitled *Make It Happen: The Hip-Hop Generation Guide to Success*, which Liles calls "a guide for all of you who want to succeed in the music industry—and in life."



BY DAVID SIMONS

### Were your parents supportive of your musical ambitions?

My mom had me when she was a teenager, and there wasn't much money. But both my mom and my step-dad were always there for me, and at an early age, I realized that I couldn't let them down. More importantly, I knew I couldn't let myself down.

### As a teenager you wrote a song that became famous for all the wrong reasons—a song that you were never even properly paid for! What kept you from walking away from the music business altogether?

Before all that happened, I'd wanted to be a rapper and write hit songs—but I feel fortunate, because instead I became a teacher, and despite everything that occurred, I learned to love the music again. Best of all, I was able to bring business passion to the world of hip-hop, and I'm very grateful for that.

### You helped turn Def Jam into one of the most powerful independent labels ever. How did you develop your strong business skills?


I've always believed that along with formal education and the structure it brings, you need life education as well. That's why I always worked while I was going to school. Back when I was getting my engineering degree, I managed a telemarketing company. I had to get up in front of 100 people per shift and tell them why they should want to work hard that day! It taught me so much. It might sound strange, but without those experiences, I don't think I would be in the position I'm in today.

### As one who has been highly successful at developing talent, what kind of attributes do you look for in a new artist?

Honestly? I look for someone who, without even opening his or her mouth, can walk into a room and make people turn and say, "Hey, who was

that?" I sign artists who I sense will make a difference. I'd be lying to you if I said that I knew that every artist I signed was going to be huge. I might have liked their sound, but sometimes it's really hard to tell at first. Which is why I always start by focusing on the person—because if you have a good feeling about an artist as a person, you can then make a record to complement that artist's personality.

### What's the most important thing that kids should keep in mind when thinking about their future?

My mother and father told me that anything I wanted, I had to go out and earn. That taught me a real lesson—the importance of hard work. Don't just talk about what you want to do—learn the art of working for it. I know that's a tough concept in this "Google society" where kids have less patience and expect everything to happen immediately. But I strongly believe that by really working hard today, you're preparing your life for tomorrow. 

**FOR MORE INFO** go to [www.musicalive.com/coolcareers](http://www.musicalive.com/coolcareers) to learn about other cool careers in music.