



Sir Dyno's Deal with the Devil

Rapper David Rocha thought a norteno gangsta CD was his ticket to glory -- not life in prison.

By Justin Berton

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One morning this past August, Sir Dyno sat in his Dodge Caravan, stuck in I-580 traffic, knowing he'd be late for his court hearing in San Francisco. It wasn't quite the impression he wanted to make. In fact, the 31-year-old gangsta rapper, whose

real name is David Rocha, wanted nothing more than to distance himself from his codefendants.

Anthony Pidgeon



Sir Dyno at home in Tracy.

By the time Dyno got to the specially constructed federal courtroom, he was fifteen minutes behind schedule. The rapper arrived dressed in neatly pressed beige Dickies pants, spotless work boots, and an untucked flannel-print shirt -- a *vato* in his Sunday best, mumbling his apologies. His shackled codefendants didn't even look at him as he took his seat among them.

It was a hell of an audience to keep waiting. Chained to their seats on a triple-tiered bleacher facing the jury box were fourteen men dressed in blood-red jumpsuits. Black tattoo ink scribbled across their forearms and crawled up their necks, and some of them hid stone-faced beneath dark Ray-Ban-style glasses. They were, according to the government, members of Nuestra Familia, Northern California's most notorious and ruthless prison gang.

There sat Cornelio "Corny" Tristan, one of three alleged NF generals. He already was serving a life sentence for murder in Pelican Bay State Prison, but now he was under indictment for ordering a hit on an underboss named Miguel "Mikio" Castillo. Not far from Tristan sat Rico "Smiley" Garcia, facing the death penalty for carrying out his bosses' orders and putting two bullets in the back of Castillo's head.

There was also the lean and smooth figure of Gerald "Cuete" Rubalcaba, the gang's most powerful captain, whose job inside Pelican Bay, a fellow gang member told the feds, was to "keister" the syndicate's constitution in his rectum, along with the master hit list which, by now, read fifty names long. There was

Henry "Happy" Cervantes, built like a fire hydrant, who got caught on an FBI wire offering to murder two Santa Clara County district attorneys.

In all, 21 people were indicted in the FBI's three-year investigation into Nuestra Familia, code-named Operation Black Widow. When it concluded in April 2001, after a \$5 million investment, it was one of the largest takedowns on a prison gang in US history. The amount of violence attributed to the men inside the courtroom and their associates on the outside was staggering: fifteen killings, eighty conspiracies to murder, ten attempted murders, ten felony assaults, one hundred assaults, and two drive-by shootings. The official list of charges, which included more than thirty drug-related crimes along with acts of extortion and robbery, simply ended with the open-ended clause "and other numerous crimes."

One of those footnotes involves Sir Dyno who, despite his history of gangsta-rap posturing, clearly is not a criminal on a par with his codefendants. His alleged crime is conspiracy -- in other words, simply having associated with the men sitting beside him. The deep trouble in which he now finds himself has everything to do with his performance on a gang-funded rap CD titled *Generations of United Norteños -- Till Eternity*.

The rapper's story varies somewhat depending on who's doing the telling. Ultimately it'll be a jury's role to sort out the truth, but this much everybody can agree on: In 1997 an NF captain named Robert "Huerito" Gratton was paroled from Pelican Bay State Prison, moved to Modesto, and started a label called North Star Records.

Gratton knew nothing about the music business, but he had bricks of cash and a simple plan: to produce a rap CD that would work as a recruiting tool for Nuestra Familia and also serve to launder the gang's drug money. The album would preach the unification of *norteños* -- Chicanos born north of an invisible border located somewhere around Fresno who, once inside the prison system, were eligible to join Nuestra Familia. All Gratton needed was a rapper.

He found his man in David "Sir Dyno" Rocha, then a 26-year-old budding rhymer and producer from Tracy. It is here that the stories begin to diverge: Rocha claims that in the eleven or so months he knew Gratton, the parolee never discussed his ties to the highly secretive prison gang. Instead, he says, Gratton

talked business. He offered to cover all production costs and promised Sir Dyno a fifty-fifty split on profits. To the broke and ambitious rapper, the deal sounded too good to refuse.

Gratton, Sir Dyno says, wanted him to aim his lyrics at bringing together *norteños*. At the time, *norteño* street gangs were engaged in "red-on-red" turf wars, and were giving up overall ground to the *sureños*, their blue-clad enemies from the south. On seven of the CD's fourteen tracks, Sir Dyno raps as hired: He's a heartless gangsta with a nihilistic agenda. He makes drug deals here, he caps *sureños* there, he disses cops everywhere, all of it in the name of *norteño* supremacy.

"You see, this is Norte," he growls on "Scrap Killa." *"X-I-V fourteen, don't ever ask me what I mean/I got the gat that will put you in the dirt/I piss on your grave with your mama's feelings hurt."*

Sir Dyno claims Gratton stiffed him on payments a few months after the CD hit the streets, and that he never worked with the dude again. *Till Eternity* -- which most people simply call the *G.U.N.* CD -- turned out to be one of about fifty disks the prolific rapper has appeared on in the past ten years, and the most militant in its *norteño* ideology. Dyno has since expanded his own label, Darkroom Studios, starred in three independent movies, and penned a fictional autobiography about a gangster named Joaquin who takes up arms for the Zapatistas. Today, the real Sir Dyno has five kids, a home in Tracy, and makes a living off CD sales, which he estimates at beyond 100,000 nationwide.

"I didn't realize lyrics could be taken so seriously," he now says, claiming that he rapped for shock value on *G.U.N.* only to sell records. "In a way, it's a compliment to me. I even convinced the government that I'm this crazy guy."

If Sir Dyno's case were only about lyrics, it's likely the First Amendment would swiftly end the debate in his favor. But the feds believe his relationship with Gratton ran deeper than words on wax. Under the federal RICO laws used to indict criminal organizations like *Nuestra Familia*, anyone who knowingly associates with one member of a gang becomes part of it -- and if the gang goes down, so does he. When the NF trial begins on November 3 -- jury selection starts this week -- federal attorneys will use photographs and lyrics from the *G.U.N.* CD

to argue that Sir Dyno knew Gratton was affiliated with the mob. In the eyes of the law, that would make Sir Dyno a real-life gangster.

Now, for a CD he cut five years ago, for a guy he claims he barely knew, for a dollar he never made, David Rocha faces a life sentence on a single count of conspiracy.

There's no denying Sir Dyno is norteño, but he's careful to explain that a norteño isn't necessarily a gang member, just a Chicano proud of his provenance. "I'm a Northerner," he says, arms wide. "That's who I am." Inside his Tracy home, he sits comfortably against the oversize cushions on his fluffy couch, with his baby daughter rocking to sleep a few feet away. He's 31 now, soft-spoken and contemplative, a Papa Bear figure, a Chicano Dr. Dre; hardly the guy who would urinate on a dead man's plot.

But claiming norteño is at least a step toward gang culture, where the stakes are high. In the logic of the Chicano intrastate rivalry, there are norteños and sureños, and even if you're not running with the corner gang, you're still vulnerable to getting whacked by your enemy. If you're a norteño, and you're flamed-up in reds -- a 49ers jersey will do -- a lone sureño, who might be dressed down in his Dodgers blue, could make a move on you, unprovoked. It's just the way it is, Sir Dyno says. It's as sensible as that East Coast-West Coast thing.

Sir Dyno accepts this rivalry, and it's where many of his raps come from. As a kid growing up in this small town, David Rocha was a freestyle BMXer who bounced along on one wheel during Fourth of July parades. His bike frame was made by Dyno, so the kids at school called him "Dyno Dave." By the time he turned twenty, though, youthful angst had sunk in, and Too \$hort cassettes found a home in Dyno Dave's music box. "Sir Dyno" was born. He used rap to vent about what every other twenty-year-old male stuck in a small town vents about: how fucked-up life is. And when that rhyme ran out, as it usually does, he went where other rappers go to make up for the sudden loss of material: He started making shit up.

"Rap is an exaggeration of life," he says, "just like in a movie. Everybody knows that. Nobody expects you to rap exactly what your life is. ... I mean, I would think not, but you better have some realness to it if you're going to rap that way."

Despite his marketed image, Sir Dyno now claims he's never known anyone who died from gang warfare, never had anyone close to him go off to prison. But life was still rough, he says, and drug deals and violence went down in front of his eyes, even if it was what he calls "mostly high school stuff, kid stuff, stupid stuff." He admits to selling pot, but only small-time, just enough "to support myself."

From those experiences, he says, he extrapolated in his art, and began rapping in that netherworld of myth, that place where facts give way to the cushion of fiction, where arrogance and boasting overtake the narrative. He rapped about how much money he'd make, how famous he'd get, how many women he could tag, how many people he'd shoot. It sold, and he knew why. "The only way to sell was to shock," he says. "The more shock you had in your raps, at the time, the more you sold. Whatever it is, you gotta go to the extreme. Not just in rap, but everywhere. People like the extreme."

He was one of the few who really got off their butts and did it," says Eduardo "Crooked" Quiroz, a rapper and filmmaker who has known Sir Dyno for ten years. "Everyone says they want to rap, says they want to make CDs, but David was really doing it. He was all business, all the time."

By the time he turned 25, Dyno had carved his own niche as a Chicano gangsta rapper, mixing Spanish with English. He'd turned his parents' garage into a makeshift studio, recorded cassettes, and sold them at low-rider shows and East Bay record stores. He recorded *From the Barrio with Love*, taking his name outside California and into pockets of Chicano markets in places such as Phoenix, Denver, and Albuquerque. Along with Crooked and other Bay Area rhymer, the Darkroom Familia took off as a twelve-member supergroup, touring across the West on their own dime, all of them touting the street thug lifestyle. Even though he was broke and sleeping on friends' couches, Sir Dyno felt he was on the cusp of the big time, ready to break.

On April 30, 1997, Robert "Huerito" Gratton arrived in Modesto, fresh from Pelican Bay. He'd began his criminal career as a teenage norteño gang member,

pulling off smash-and-grab robberies of jewelry stores. When he entered Corcoran State Prison in 1989 for selling cocaine, he joined Nuestra Raza, a recruiting gang for the more esteemed Nuestra Familia. Inside the state prison system, norteños side with Nuestra Familia's syndicates, and sureños with La Eme, aka the Mexican Mafia. It's estimated for every NF member, there are seven La Eme.

During his time with Nuestra Raza, Gratton learned the boot camp basics: how to make shanks, decode letters, and memorize the NF Constitution. Most importantly, he showed a willingness to draw sureño blood. After Gratton stabbed an enemy in Corcoran, he was transferred to Pelican Bay's infamous Secured Housing Unit -- the "college" for prison gangsters. There, Gratton was made a full-fledged Nuestra Familia member. He took the gang's oath, "Blood in, blood out," and rose to the rank of captain within a few years.

On his first day of freedom, according to Gratton's account, a norteño named Big Smokey met him at the bus terminal, set him up with \$5,000 in cash, a 9mm pistol, and a condom. Gratton stands only five foot seven, but his bold tattoos did the talking. A small star on his forehead suggested he'd killed someone in prison, even though, in truth, he hadn't. The large XIV across his throat represented the fourteenth letter of the alphabet, N, for Norte.

Gratton had been deployed by his bosses to run the gang's Zapatista crew, which operated in the Modesto, Tracy, and Turlock areas. As a captain, he answered only to a handful of higher-ranking capos and the three generals inside Pelican Bay. He hung out at the Modesto nightclub La Familia Garcia's and set up a meth ring using known norteño gangsters as runners, an enterprise he now claims earned him \$10,000 a day. He kept a stable of flashy cars, but favored a cherryed-out 1969 Impala with a vanity license plate that read "NORTENO."

Gratton's wife was the cousin of a rapper named E-Clips, who at the time was a member of Darkroom Familia. Gratton sought out Sir Dyno because the rapper had a following, needed to produce a successful CD, and was familiar with music distribution and marketing. After a few meetings, he told Sir Dyno he wanted to finance a project, but instead of using the rapper's already-established label, Gratton opted to launch North Star Records.

The job seemed like a good fit. "I could rap political, I could rap street, it doesn't matter," Sir Dyno says. "I'm from up here, I grew up with norteno friends. I said, 'Yeah, I could rap like that, whatever. Whatever you want.' That 50 percent looked like gold."

Sir Dyno claims he never asked where Gratton got his money, and whether or not the jury believes that could be key to his fate. "[Gratton] said he was sick and tired of going to prison, he didn't want to go back, he wants to be legitimate," Dyno recalls, "so he wants to sell cars and start a record company. ... I didn't know the guy was selling drugs, too. I mean, he wasn't gonna tell me, and I wasn't gonna tell him what I was doing."

Even though the project had cash potential tomorrow, Sir Dyno still needed money today. For that reason, he explains, he turned to dealing methamphetamine. He had two daughters to support, and payments from other rap projects were slow coming in. "I did what I had to do," he says.

Gratton, meanwhile, had Sir Dyno write out a business plan, which offers a glimpse of the rapper's instinct to use shock value to boost sales: "By releasing *G.U.N.*, it will help establish the label financially. The quickest way to get money back fast would be to release a norteno album. It would bring the most attention and the most sales. The only problem is the limiting of audience outside Northern California."

After costs for radio spots and posters and printing, the plan estimated profits of \$21,051 on the first 4,000 units. Besides directing the tone of the project, Gratton asked to narrate the intro. Over an ominous keyboard drone, he speaks deliberately, as if issuing a UN speech: "The primary purpose and goals of this album is to promote unity amongst each and every one of us as nortenos. This is a combined effort to enlighten the worthy, as the time is now that we must leave old attitudes to the past, and adopt new and more meaningful and fulfilling ideas. ...

"Just as knowledge can be the key, there is strength in numbers; therefore, we nortenos can no longer continue to fight against one another. All nortenos must unite with the determination to fight and challenge all those who oppose our unity and advancement toward equal justice. ...

"With that, let each of us as *norteños* recognize the true purpose of this album and come together, henceforth, presenting a strong united front, *que viva puros norteños unidos*."

For the cover art, Sir Dyno says he told all his friends to tell their friends to show up at a park wearing their reds. On the back cover, he stands next to Gratton, flashing XIV signs. The images leave no doubt the rapper supports *norteños*. But nowhere on the CD, or in the lyrics, do the words *Nuestra Familia* appear. After a few weeks of writing and recording, the CD was released on Cinco de Mayo of 1998 and found its audience immediately. Sir Dyno believed he'd just made a wise career choice.

Jared Lewis, a former Modesto gang investigator, says the impact of *G.U.N.* was felt on the streets. "Right after the CD came out, red-on-red violence all but ended," he says. "Kids everywhere were listening to it, and closely." According to his informants, Lewis says, Sir Dyno was indeed just as the rapper portrays himself before Gratton came to town: broke, and desperate to get famous.

"Sir Dyno wanted to make a name for himself," Lewis says, "so he sold his soul to the devil. And he got what he wanted."

Out only three months, *G.U.N.* was drawing the attention its makers craved, and then some. For *norteños*, it was a rallying call, with a cruising, bounce-your-shocks soundtrack. Lo-fi beats backed simple, repetitive keyboard riffs. On one slow-burn track, Sir Dyno raps in a stoned vibrato: "*Today when I got up I knew it was a good day/Got on my red shirt, Dickies, and I'm on my way.*"

After the initial press run, Gratton restocked stores with an additional 1,000 CDs. Still Sir Dyno says he wasn't getting paid. The rapper says he'd press Gratton for cash, but the label owner always had an excuse. "Maybe he'd give me one hundred bucks to shut me up, or fifty bucks to shut me up," he says, "or gas money or something."

In August 1998, the CD appeared on the radar of Tim Helton, an investigator on Modesto's Street Terrorism and Apprehension Team. In a memo to his colleagues, Helton talks about spotting *G.U.N.* promotional posters around town and learning from a confidential informant that Robert Gratton, one of the faces

on the posters, was financing North Star from meth sales. Helton checked out Gratton's business licenses, and learned of Sir Dyno's involvement through the music distributor. Later, when Helton's team arrested an alleged Nuestra Familia member named Vidal "Spider" Fabela during a traffic stop, they found *G.U.N.* posters and CDs in his car, again cementing a link between the prison gang and local norteños.

The Apprehension Team's scrutiny proved to be Sir Dyno's downfall. In November 1998, he was pulled over on a traffic violation. Police dogs sniffed through his car and came up with three ounces of crystal meth. Following his arrival at the jail, Dyno was interviewed by Thomas Ribota, another Modesto detective. According to Ribota's report, when he asked about the rapper's affiliation, "Rocha denied having any gang involvement but is a norteño. I spoke to a classification officer at the San Joaquin County jail who confirmed that Rocha claimed to be norteño -- but didn't claim a particular set of a gang."

It was during that interrogation Sir Dyno says he first learned about Gratton's connections to Nuestra Familia. "That's when I started pulling away," he says. Still, the weekend he got out, he was intent on getting paid. By now, rumors were swirling that *G.U.N.* had pulled down between \$50,000 and \$80,000.

The rapper says his final meeting with Gratton occurred while the label owner was outside washing his car. Gratton was shirtless, a large Nuestra Familia tattoo visible in bold letters across his back. "I kind of paused," Sir Dyno says, adding that he suddenly thought better of asking too many questions. "Man, I'm from the streets. I know there's some things you don't ask."

Dyno claims that's the moment he realized he'd been duped and would never see his cash. "I can't muscle the guy because I don't know what he's involved with," he reasoned, "so either I make an issue of it and make an enemy I don't want, or just let it go. Chalk it up as a loss, just let it go, and move on. That what I decided to do."

A few weeks later, the rapper signed a new contract with Dog Day Records and quickly released an album called *Gang Stories*.

On the new CD, he pounded out a few norteño rhymes, deriving material from his meth bust, after which he'd pleaded guilty to a reduced charge and was sentenced to a year of house arrest. On one *Gang Stories* track about issuing payback on the cops, a voice in the background calls out Detective Ribota's name, a suggestion to watch his back. The voice doesn't sound like Sir Dyno's, but officers in the streets took offense. According to one source, Ribota took the CD to the San Joaquin County district attorney's office to see if it constituted an official threat to a police officer. Citing the First Amendment, the DA chose not to pursue the case. Ribota declined comment for this story, in light of the upcoming trial.

Not long after *Gang Stories* came out, Gratton released North Star's second title, a compilation called *Cuete*. Sir Dyno claims Gratton lifted tracks from *Gang Stories* without permission and put them on *Cuete* to give listeners the impression Sir Dyno was still on North Star. Regardless, the compilation had limited success, and never took off like the *G.U.N.* CD, Lewis and Helton say.

But rumors about *G.U.N.*'s success filtered back up to Pelican Bay, and Gratton began receiving frequent letters from his boss, Gerald "Cuete" Rubalcaba. The boss reminded Gratton that the money belonged to the gang, and demanded more deposits into Nuestra Familia bank accounts. Gratton, already growing weary with the gang after learning that one of his closest allies, Robert "Brown Bob" Viramontes, had been murdered outside his Campbell home, ignored Rubalcaba's letters. Gratton was also using heroin, another mistake in the eyes of the gang.

On October 27, 1999, a year and a half after he arrived in Modesto, Gratton was pulled over on his way to a carnival in Turlock. He was arrested by investigator Tim Helton for selling and transporting meth. Within minutes, the gang member confessed his role in Nuestra Familia and offered to trade information for leniency. At the time, Operation Black Widow was just getting under way, and Gratton's blueprint to the gang's hierarchy was invaluable.

In his interview with FBI agents the next day, Gratton confessed he'd concocted the idea for *G.U.N.* with his boss while in prison, and took it out of prison with him, "after the idea was ratified by the NF leadership." He estimated the CD had "netted about \$80,000" and that he'd sent only \$5,000 to a bank account in Boise, Idaho, where a female accomplice transferred the money into a separate account for NF prisoners. In his FBI interrogation, Gratton never makes it clear

whether Sir Dyno knew he was rapping for the mob, or that North Star Records had been set up to launder money. He told his interviewers Sir Dyno put out *Gang Stories* without permission and, for that, was "very close to being placed on a hit list."

After Gratton ratted out his fellow gang members one by one, offering a list of 350 names, he was moved into the federal Witness Relocation Program. He has since repudiated his former gang life, and spends his time writing and speaking to law enforcement gatherings about prison gangs.

Gratton's information cast a domino effect, eventually leading to 21 cooperating witnesses for the government. In April 2001, FBI agents, along with assistance from 24 local and state agencies, ended Operation Black Widow. Arresting the majority of the defendants was easy; they were already in prison.

Sir Dyno had only been to jail once, following his drug arrest. Then in late April 2001, more than two years since he'd last spoken to Robert Gratton, he was summoned to a meeting with his parole officer. He arrived on time, with one of his friends waiting in the lobby. Inside, he was greeted by FBI agents.

David Rocha's arrest report depicts a guy caught off guard. To Sir Dyno and his attorneys, the report demonstrates his utter confusion under unbelievable circumstances. Read another way, he's merely been persistent in denying his role.

"Special Agent Kelly explained to Rocha that he was being placed under arrest for violation of RICO conspiracy," the report states. "Rocha did not seem to understand the reason for the arrest or the charge. It was again explained to Rocha that Kelly was an FBI agent, and that Rocha was being placed under arrest for RICO conspiracy. Rocha then asked for what was he being arrested, indicating he did not understand the charge. It was explained to Rocha that the RICO charge had to do with racketeering and his involvement with Nuestra Familia prison gang; specifically in the creating of the *Generations of United Norteños* compact disc and how the CD was financed. Rocha still did not understand the charge or why he was being placed into custody.

"Rocha was asked, 'Do you want to speak to an attorney?' Rocha did not respond, and went on to state, 'I'm a musician.' He also stated something to the effect, 'If

you have a landscaper work on your yard, you don't care where the equipment comes from."

Under federal law, it's rather easy to be declared a coconspirator in a RICO case. Since the government began using the antiracketeering statutes to take down crime families in 1970, the definition of "coconspirator" has been legally challenged and modified several times. Now, the legal definition rests simply on whether a person has a "slight connection" to the mob. Once the government proves the existence of a criminal organization like Nuestra Familia, "evidence establishing beyond a reasonable doubt defendant's connection with the conspiracy, even though the connection is slight, is sufficient to convict defendant." If the legal standard is a "slight connection," then the CD and videos where Gratton and Sir Dyno appear side by side as brothers in crime may prove overkill.

At a hearing last month, Steven Gruel, US assistant attorney and Chief of Major Crimes, told the court that Sir Dyno's limited role with Nuestra Familia made no difference under the law: "It doesn't matter if you associate with a RICO enterprise for five years or five minutes; it still makes you part of the conspiracy."

At first, Sir Dyno's lead attorney Rosalind Manson thought she had a slam-dunk, a bring-on-the-First Amendment, let's-end-it-now case. Of the 21 original defendants, nineteen are already certified as Nuestra Familia through the state Department of Corrections. And all are charged with substantive crimes: drug sales and possession, murder, and so on. Sir Dyno, however, isn't charged with any individual crime, just one count of RICO conspiracy, and his connection to that crime seems to be largely related to his performance on *Generations of United Norteños*.

"It looked like they were unhappy with the content of *G.U.N.*," Manson says, "and that's why David was indicted -- for the content of his music. Well, if you're upset with the content, the First Amendment says 'Too bad.'"

All of the early motions from Gruel and his team of US prosecutors pointed only to Sir Dyno's role in making the album. "Not only does Rocha appear on the cover of the CD wearing the norteño colors (red)," reads one motion, "but he is seen giving gang signs for the norteños. The CD includes Nuestra Familia artwork and

a statement that the 'success of this project has resulted from true Norteño unity ... we applaud the Carnalismo ... we would also like to give a special thanks to **our family** [emphasis theirs] ... and all the warriors.' Trial witness R.G. [Robert Gratton] will testify that these messages on Rocha's CD is further proof of the project's connection to the Nuestra Familia."

In Manson's view, the government was also arguing that a person's identification as norteño equated to a claim of membership in Nuestra Familia. In her written response, she pointed out the government's logical error: "All NF members and associates are norteños; David is a norteño. Therefore, David is an NF member or associate. Consider this reasoning using an unrelated example: All chickens are bipeds; John Ashcroft is a biped. Therefore John Ashcroft is a chicken."

But a year into the case, the government's complaint against Sir Dyno shifted course. The prosecutors revealed that Gratton would testify Sir Dyno dealt meth on his behalf. The three ounces found in Sir Dyno's car, Gratton was claiming, came from him -- a statement which, if true, puts Sir Dyno squarely within the gang conspiracy. According to court documents, Gratton says he regularly fronted Sir Dyno four ounces at a time.

The rapper denied this new accusation. He says there's a street code: You don't ever ask too many questions, and both men stuck to that code. "They're trying to say that when I met Robert Gratton I started selling drugs for him, and to finance the *G.U.N.* CD," Sir Dyno says. "I was already doing what I was doing, you know? And I got caught what I was doing. And I did my time for what I was doing. ... It wasn't worth it to me anymore."

Yet the claim that the rapper was blissfully unaware of Gratton's gang connections doesn't pass the sniff test for law-enforcement guys like Jared Lewis. "He was more than just a studio rapper," he says. "You aren't just talking about some poor criminal who was abused by the NF and got drawn into the criminal net. He was a criminal too. He just happened to have this talent, and he put this talent to use."

Since flipping for the feds, Gratton is preparing to publish his story in a yet-to-be-released book, *The Rise and Fall of Nuestra Familia*. In it, he explains how the

CD brought him unwanted attention and more money than he'd expected, but he never reveals whether Sir Dyno knew North Star was a front for Nuestra Familia.

Ultimately, Sir Dyno's fate could come down to whether jurors believe the David Rocha at home on the couch, or Robert Gratton, the snitch on the stand. "None of these other [Nuestra Familia members] have a thing to say about [Sir Dyno]," Manson says. "Gratton is the guy who's going to make the entire case against David; it's his word against David's. And frankly, here's a guy who's committed numerous violent crimes, and he's getting a free pass. At the end of the day he gets to go home."

In a corner of his home that's been scribbled on with black markers by one of his kids, Sir Dyno still works daily, mixing beats on a computer, recording new rhymes, diddling on a keyboard. Since his first arrest, he's produced a new CD nearly every month. His most recent, *Engrave These Words on My Stone*, is probably his most cathartic, if not authentic. It's getting airtime on radio stations in the Central Valley, and Sir Dyno has gone into super-marketing campaign mode, making a goal to get the ballad single "Daddy's Home" in rotation on 75 radio stations nationwide.

"My stuff has softened up a lot," Sir Dyno says. He's turned his attention to rapping about what he knows, rather than what he fantasizes. "I see the reality of things now ... and now that I've gone through that, there's, like, no glory in it, you know?"

He's had plenty of time to contemplate. For months, Dyno's attorneys have been trying to distance their client from the rest of the defendants and get him his own trial. The Nuestra Familia trial is expected to last four to six months, and the government will call seventy witnesses. There are 150,000 pages of discovery to sort through, photographs from dozens of crime scenes, audiotapes from hours of hidden wires, and hours of surveillance videos. After they wade through all of the evidence, jurors will then be asked to turn their attention to David Rocha.

Sir Dyno's lawyers argue that a group trial will taint the jury's perception of their client. "At the end of the trial, after Mr. Rocha spends four to six months sitting with other Latin males, the rest of whom are chained to the floor, how will jurors

see him as an individual and judge him fairly in light of the limited evidence against him?" they argue in one motion.

It's a tough call. At home, Sir Dyno says he's just waiting for the "truth to come out," but the phrase emerges like one that's been worn out, a fortification against the harsher truth: He stands to lose everything. But the rapper has faith the judicial process will work in his favor. He's convinced he'll get off scot-free. "Preparing is something someone who's trying to hide their guilt would do," he says, fingering a synthesizer keyboard in his studio. "There's nothing to prepare. I'm just going to wait for the trial."

On "Daddy's Home," instead of the stone-cold thug who whacks his way through the streets, Sir Dyno raps about what he truly is: a 31-year-old father facing a life sentence for the choices he made years earlier. His character on the track writes a letter to his daughter, apologizing for his absence while she grows up.

Again, he uses a kernel of truth to anchor his rhyme, and a metaphor to exaggerate his reality. Somewhere in between, the blend of fact and fiction amount to the truth for Sir Dyno.

"I'm so afraid, oh my God/Don't take me away," he raps, slowly, to the jailers who've come for him. *"I want to be with my family/but I killed a man yesterday."*

1 Nuestra Familia 4

If I lead, Follow Me

If I Hesitate, Push Me

If They kill Me, Avenge Me

If I'm A Traitor, Kill Me

