

Police threaten to kill Detroit crew filming the story of Hayward Brown

Four faces charges despite permits

By Diane Bukowski

DETROIT – In a case of history repeating itself, Detroit police drew guns and threatened to kill members of a local film crew as they shot “Vigilante: The Life of Hayward Brown” outside the home of one actor Nov. 5. The head of the crew, Sean Brown, is the cousin of Hayward Brown, an anti-drug and anti-police brutality activist during the 1970’s.



He heads B.U.P Films, a Detroit-based production company. The police attack on his crew is shown on film because their movie cameras kept rolling throughout the incident.

“I was scared as hell,” said J. (Jermaine) Allen, who rents the property on Plainview. “I was looking down the barrels of six fully-loaded 9 mm. guns. For a minute there I thought that this was it. I just closed my eyes and braced myself. I was glad my girl-friend and two-year-old son had just left.”



Cop brutally handcuffs Allen despite injured elbow and explanation that crew had permits

Allen is shown being thrown to the ground by a beefy white officer, earlier seen aiming his gun directly at the crew.

“Shut your mouth, don’t f--ing move, you guys know how this looks,” the officer says as he stands over Allen, who asks not to be handcuffed because he had earlier broken his elbow and says they were shooting a film with the proper permits.

In addition to Brown and Allen, crew members Desmond Williams and

De’Andre King were nonetheless arrested, handcuffed and ticketed for “possession and brandishing facsimile weapons,” a misdemeanor. They face individual court

hearings at 36th District Court Feb 18 and 19 next year, although they should be co-defendants.

King was the cameraman and only possessed a movie camera, which police claimed they thought was a weapon.

The charges are being pursued despite the crew's claims that they were working through the offices of Mayor Dave Bing and the City Council. One of the officers is heard on the film declaring, "Forget the Mayor, the hell with Cockrel," and others are heard telling the crew that they should have contacted the Northwest Precinct directly.

One officer also tells the crew that they were lucky he wasn't first one the scene, because "I would have shot your asses, and film crews from '2, 4 and 7' would have been there instead."

Edward Cardenas, communications chief for Mayor Bing, said, "They did not have the proper permit to film on the day they were filming." Council President Kenneth Cockrel, Jr. who the crew said was extremely supported of the film, particularly because it portrays his father, was contacted for comment, but had not responded before press time.

Brown said he had received e-mail threats about the film which demanded that it portray Detroit police in a good light. Allen said that earlier a crew of Black police officers had driven by and waved, indicating they knew a film was being shot. He said that neighbors were very supportive, coming out to watch the making of the movie, and only "ducking and dodging" when the Detroit police showed up.

Allen said that particular crew of police has been stopping Blacks in the neighborhood for no evident reason for some time.

"We're more scared of them than the actual elements around here," he said. "People call them a 'military execution squad.'"



Mark Clyde Bethune (J. Allen), Hayward Brown (Sean Brown, John Percy Boyd (Desmond Williams) in clip from film "Vigilante: The Story of Hayward Brown."



De Andre King, L. Allen, Sean Brown and Desmond Williams of B.U.P. Films with footage from "Vigilante: The Story of Hayward Brown, showing Brown and defense attorney Ken Cockrel, Sr.

The movie tells the story of Hayward Brown, Mark Clyde Bethune, and John Percy Boyd, college students in the 1970's in Detroit.

"The three young men had been waging a private war against big-time heroin dealers in their neighborhoods," says historian Dan Georgakas in his book,

Detroit, I Do Mind Dying.

"STRESS [a notorious plainclothes unit that had killed dozens of Black men] had staked

out one of the dope houses that the three vigilantes attacked. Instead of pursuing the drug dealers, STRESS chased Bethune, Boyd and Brown. A shoot-out followed which resulted in the four STRESS officers being wounded, while their prey escaped. Three weeks later, in a second shoot-out with the vigilantes, STRESS officer Robert Bradford was slain and another officer wounded.”

Georgakas continues, “In the weeks which followed, STRESS put the Black neighborhoods under martial law in one of the most massive and ruthless police manhunts in Detroit history. Hundreds of Black families had their doors literally broken down and their lives threatened by groups of white men in plainclothes who had no search warrants and often did not bother to identify themselves as police.” One man was killed by the cops.

Police eventually tracked down and killed Bethune and Boyd in Atlanta. Hundreds came to their funerals. Hayward Brown was captured and tried in Detroit, represented by the late famed attorney Kenneth Cockrel, Sr.. Cockrel, Sr. used the strategy of putting STRESS (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets) on trial instead. Massive rallies were held in Brown’s support, including Council President Emeritus Erma Henderson, who recently passed. .

Brown was acquitted of all charges. However, said Sean Brown, his cousin was shot to death in Detroit in 1984 under “mysterious circumstances,” with many believing the police were involved. No charges have ever been brought in the case.



Hayward Brown (Sean) in custody

Brown said actors and crews from B.U.P. Films, co-founded by his uncle George Brown, have been all over the country for ten years making movies. But he said they have never experienced such treatment, even in Lapeer, Livonia, and other largely white areas, where portions of the film have been shot. He expressed particular gratitude to the police department in Lapeer, where officers actually acted in the film.

Detroit police officers normally cordon off filming areas and remain to protect movie crews from major companies everywhere in the city, including downtown Detroit and recently on East Jefferson. The procedure for notification is through City Council to the police before a permit is granted.

“These Hollywood people are coming in and filming all the time, getting tax breaks, but we pay taxes here and this is the way we are treated,” said. He said it is often difficult for local residents to get jobs in their films.

The crew said that everywhere they go, they hire locals. They also better the neighborhoods where they film, cleaning them up, feeding the homeless, and donating portions of the profits from their movies to non-profit groups like the Salvation Army, Purple Heart, and local churches.

“We are not advocates of violence, but people from all over this city, state and nation need to stand up to protest what is happening,” said Allen.