

## Roxanne's Nonexistent Revenge

Heard about the rapper who forced her label to pay for her Cornell Ph.D.? It never happened.

By [Ben Sheffner](#)|Updated Thursday, Sept. 3, 2009, at 7:19 PM

It was the feel-good story of the summer. [According to the New York Daily News](#), Roxanne Shanté, a 1980s female hip-hop pioneer famous for the 1984 underground hit "[Roxanne's Revenge](#)," had finally gotten her own revenge on Warner Music, the record label she accused of "cheating with the contracts, stealing and telling lies," to avoid paying her what she was owed.

How? After valiantly fighting, reported Daily Newsfreelancer Walter Dawkins, Shanté had convinced Warner to honor a contractual agreement to "fund her education for life." Warner ended up paying more than \$200,000, Dawkins reported, to finance Shanté's education, which Shanté said included an undergraduate degree from Marymount Manhattan College and a Ph.D. in psychology from Cornell. And now, said the Daily News, "Dr. Roxanne Shanté" has "launched an unconventional therapy practice focusing on urban African-Americans," in which she "incorporates hip-hop music into her sessions, encouraging her clients to unleash their inner MC and shout out exactly what's on their mind."



Roxanne Shanté

The story was endlessly blogged and tweeted, heralded as an example of a heroic triumph by a girl from the projects over her evil record label. Credulous music-industry critics lapped it up; [Techdirt](#), after stating flatly that Warner had "tr[ie]d to cheat [Shanté] out of her contract," reflected the online sentiment: "It's nice to see how Warner Music actually did some good in the world, even if it had to be dragged there kicking and screaming."

One problem: Virtually everything about the Daily News' heartwarming "projects-to-Ph.D." story appears to be false.

An investigation bySlate has revealed:

- According to Warner, neither it nor any of its subsidiary record labels ever had a contract with Shanté, and it was not obligated to pay for her education. Indeed, there's no evidence that it ever did.

- Shanté—real name Lolita Shanté Gooden—doesn't have a Ph.D. from Cornell or anywhere else. Indeed, she admitted it in an interview with Slate. And Cornell has no record of Gooden (or "Shanté") ever attending or receiving a degree.
- According to Marymount Manhattan College records, Shanté enrolled there but dropped out less than four months later without ever earning a degree.
- New York state records indicate that no one named Lolita Gooden or Roxanne Shanté is licensed to practice psychology or any related field.

In the course of several phone interviews and exchanges over Facebook's internal e-mail system, Shanté—who refers to herself as "Dr." and "doctor"—admitted that she never received a Ph.D. The Daily News, which trumpeted the false accomplishment in its headline, made a "mistake," she said. And she insisted that she received an M.A. from Cornell. "I got my master's in psychology. I didn't complete my Ph.D.," she admitted. But according to Cornell records, provided through a service called [National Student Clearinghouse](#) to which the university directed me, Cornell "was unable to locate either a degree or enrollment record for the subject of your verification request."

Marymount Manhattan College records, also provided through [National Student Clearinghouse](#), indicate that "Lolita S. Gooden" attended "02/06/1995 to 05/23/1995" but did not earn a degree. "Student withdrew for the semester and never returned," according to a notation from Marymount Manhattan. And in an interview, Marymount Manhattan communications director Manny Romero confirmed: "She was only here for the three months in 1995. She did not graduate from Marymount Manhattan." Romero would not discuss the source of Shanté's tuition money, citing federal privacy laws.

Told of the records indicating she attended only briefly and never graduated, Shanté maintained that she "absolutely" received a B.A. from Marymount Manhattan in 1995. "I didn't attend [the] graduation ceremony; at that time I was ..." her voice trailed off. "I had my own reasons for that." Yet she insisted: "Yes, I do have a diploma." Shanté did not respond to a request for a copy, and Marguerita Grecco, the Marymount Manhattan dean who, Shanté told the Daily News, fought Warner on her behalf, did not return several phone calls and e-mails seeking comment.

In a subsequent e-mail, Shanté wrote, "I also attended College under an alias, because of a Domestic Violence situation" and speculated that she "made a mistake on an application and put my old name so maybe that's the reason for the computer error?" But she was unable to substantiate such claims.

In a prepared statement, Warner denied that it ever had a contractual relationship with Shanté, explaining that "her agreement was with an independent record label known as Cold Chillin' Records." According to court documents reviewed by Slate, Shanté's record label Cold Chillin' did have an agreement with Warner starting in 1987 to distribute Cold Chillin's records—a common arrangement between a major company and an indie label. But Cold Chillin' was not owned by Warner, and, in fact, those two companies ended up battling each other in court; in April 2006, a federal judge ordered Cold Chillin' to pay Warner \$230,000 for copyright infringement.

And Warner's statement made clear that it had no obligation to pay for Shanté's education: "Our examination of that file [of Warner's relationship with Cold Chillin'] ... has not revealed any evidence of any 'education clause' in any agreement." Of course, Warner had no objection to her using any money she made in the music business to fund her education; it just wasn't Warner paying the bills: "Roxanne Shanté's story is a compelling one and we wish her all success in her good works. ... In fact, our view is that artists' compensation can be put to many good uses; if Cold Chillin' guided this artist's compensation to education expenses that would certainly be a worthy one."

None of the half-dozen music industry sources contacted by Slate for this article had ever heard of a record label making an open-ended commitment to finance an artist's education.

Although the Daily News article said Warner declined to comment about the newspaper's allegations, Warner Music Group spokeswoman Amanda Collins denied that the Daily News contacted WMG for its Roxanne Shanté article. "No one at the company was called for comment on this story," she told Slate. "It's quite possible he attempted to reach someone at a subsidiary label, but he did not contact Warner Music Group directly."

When Slate told the Daily News about the problems with the story this morning, spokeswoman Jennifer Mauer said the newspaper would look into it. Slate has so far been unable to track down freelancer Walter Dawkins, who wrote the Daily News story; the Daily News has not responded to requests for his contact information.

There is also no evidence that Shanté's original record label, a small indie called Pop Art Records, ever promised to finance her education. I spoke with Jonathan Black, an attorney who represented Pop Art 1982-88. He said he negotiated the company's 1984 recording contract with Shanté, signed by both her and her mother, since she was a

minor at the time. Black, who no longer has a copy of the contract—he stated in a sworn declaration filed in federal court that the company's copy was destroyed in a flood—is confident that it contained no obligation to pay for Shanté's education. "I'm sure that I didn't negotiate a contract that covered that kind of arrangement. I never did anything like that," he told me.

In a reversal of the common "my label ripped me off" scenario, Pop Art actually sued Shanté in 2005 after allegedly discovering that that Shanté was trying to rip off Pop Art by seeking to collect license fees for music whose copyright was owned by the label. The case quickly settled, said Paul Rapp, an attorney who represented Pop Art in the lawsuit. For her part, Shanté told me that she never had a contract with Pop Art, suggesting that her mother may have entered into an agreement with the label without her consent.

When told of Warner's denial that it financed her education, Shanté repeated, "Hip-hop paid for my education, kept me from going to the streets." But she was unable to provide detail. "To my knowledge, that [Warner] is exactly where the checks came from. ... All I know is that it was done." In a later e-mail, Shanté wrote that she was informed by Cold Chillin's former CEO Tyrone Williams that Warner "along with another party that chose to stay anonymous paid for my education." Shanté did not respond to Slate's request that she put us in touch with Williams.

Shanté's claim to be a "doctor" also fails to check out. She's not a medical doctor, and she admits (and Cornell confirms) that she lacks a Ph.D. And a search of the New York Office of the Professions [licensing database](#) fails to reveal licenses to practice psychology or in any related field for either "Lolita Gooden" or "Roxanne Shanté."

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**Update, Sept. 3, 7:19 p.m.:** After Slate posted its debunking of the [New York Daily News' story](#) on rapper Roxanne Shanté, the Daily News sent Slate the following correction, which it has now [appended](#) to the Web version of the original article: It has come to the attention of the Daily News that a number of statements in this article written for the Daily News by a freelance reporter are, or may be, false. Cornell University has told us that Shante did not receive any degree from it under either her birth or stage name. We have confirmed that prior to the article, at least four publications on Cornell's own website reported that Shante had earned a Ph.D. from the university. Those references have now been removed. And in response to an inquiry

today, Marymount College stated that Shante attended there for less than one semester.

Numerous e-mail and telephone inquiries by the freelance reporter to Marymount during the preparation of the article to confirm Shante's account were not responded to. Finally, there have been recent media reports that there never was an education clause in Shante's recording contract. When the reporter contacted Warner Brothers Records about the contract before the article, its only response was that it was having difficulty finding someone within the company who could "talk eloquently" about it.

Shanté herself [responded](#) to the Slate story on [Lemondrop.com](#), a female-oriented Web site. Shanté questions my motives but does not dispute anything in Slate's reporting:

I'm just gonna let it go. ... What he's trying to do is trying to get himself known, to get the popular sites to read after him. This is not a \$5 billion Ponzi scheme. What would make someone go so hard and heavy at that?

Shanté did not call me back, despite promising Tuesday that she would do so.

Cornell, from which Shanté falsely claimed to have received a Ph.D. (the university says she never attended at all), has altered references to Shanté on its Web site. Click [here](#) to see one such change, as documented by users of Reddit.com.

Techdirt, which trumpeted the original Daily News story, has [struck through](#) its entire post. After Slate's piece appeared, Techdirt posted [its own debunking](#) of the Daily News story. Later, the site posted a bizarre [interview](#) it conducted with a man the site believes to be Walter Dawkins, the freelancer who wrote the Daily News article. Techdirt reports that Dawkins told the site he had relied on information in a Cornell alumni publication and a "Hot97 interview" as sources.