

## Sales Make Them 'Thugs

Written by Westside ID181

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Lawlessness is pretty much down everywhere except one place -- the hip-hop charts.

The statistics are clear. During the past decade, across America, the murder rate is down. The violent crime rate is down. Overall crime? Also down.

In the past two years, gangsta rap's popularity soared to levels it hadn't seen since N.W.A. helped invent the genre 15 years ago, but are the streets where today's hip-hoppers grow up really that much more dangerous than the rest of the country?

Not exactly. It's really more about the Benjamins.

"If an artist makes more money talking about being a thug and his realness in the street, then he's going to do more of that because that's where the success is," said MC Serch, best known from the group 3rd Bass and now a radio DJ in Detroit. "They will do what sells."

What is selling these days, as the multiplatinum success of 50 Cent shows, is gangsta rap, hard-hitting songs laced with often- brutal images. Always looking to cash in on a trend, record companies couldn't get enough of the stuff.

However, it is harder and harder to find talented rappers who have struggled through crime-filled lives. To meet the demand, more and more aspiring rappers are tailoring their songs to fit the gangsta mold, whether they lived that life or not.

"A man who is starving will say anything and do anything to get on," explained MC Serch. "It's a new twist in hip-hop's long-running relationship with violence. And it's given birth to the most potent of put-downs -- "the wanksta."

No one knows the consequences of this trend better than Ja Rule, who only two years ago sat atop the music world. He had a string of Top 5 hits, four platinum albums and booming businesses as a songwriter and producer on the side.

That year, he once held the top two singles in the country -- a feat that only eight artists, including Elvis Presley and the Beatles, can claim.

The Hollis native's success came by forging a middle ground in hip-hop, which he summarized in a recent interview by singing one of his signature lines, "Every thug needs a lady."

"Flossin" or thuggin"

"When I came out, there were two styles of rappers: You were flossin" or you were thuggin'," he

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said. "I merged the two."

Not only did Ja Rule take the wealth-obsessed concerns of the flossin" rappers and place them in the tougher, gangsta context of the thuggin" ones, his albums ran the gamut from street anthems to crossover pop hits.

Ja Rule, like LL Cool J before him, tapped into that movie- star combo -- being tough enough to be admired by guys and sweet enough to be loved by ladies. That worked well. At least until 50 Cent came along.

When 50 Cent, also from Hollis, arrived on the scene in the fall of 2002, with mentor Eminem at his side, he began a meticulous character assassination of Ja Rule that was worthy of a presidential campaign.

Both 50 and Eminem harped on Ja's pop crossovers in a seemingly endless parade of songs, painting him as soft on crime -- because, well, he didn't commit enough of them -- while 50's history as a teenage drug dealer who had been shot nine times was drummed into fans' heads as much as his hit "In Da Club."

Though Ja and his labelmates from The Inc. tried to fight back, 50's battle strategy worked -- not because his verbal attacks were sharper, though most hip-hop observers say that helped, but because his attacks were aimed at Ja's fans, too.

In songs such as "Wanksta" and "Back Down," he not only portrayed Ja as weak, but he made it sound like anyone who liked Ja was effeminate -- a sure sign of weakness in hip-hop.

Within months, 50 Cent's debut, "Get Rich or Die Tryin'," was well on its way to becoming 2003's biggest-selling album, and Ja Rule's popularity was in free-fall. His album "Blood in My Eye," featuring harsh attacks on 50 Cent, became his first commercial failure.

"I think it's just the nature of the music business," Ja Rule said recently in The Inc.'s SoHo studio, The Crack House. "People like to see it when the guys who are not on top make it for a change."

However, what some saw as a harmless beef, others saw as a possible repeat of the East Coast-West Coast rivalry between Sean Combs' Bad Boy Records and Suge Knight's Death Row Records.

In fact, 50's campaign seemed straight out of the playbook of Knight, who had bankrolled the early solo work of 50 Cent's other mentor, Dr. Dre.

In 1995, when Bad Boy's artists began to steal the spotlight, Knight launched a similar crusade against Combs, questioning his manhood and mocking his clothes and dance moves.

It was seen as retribution for a 1994 incident, when Death Row star Tupac Shakur was robbed in the lobby of a Times Square recording studio and shot five times. He blamed the shooting on

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Bad Boy star Christopher "The Notorious B.I.G." Wallace and Combs, though no link was ever proven.

Unlike previous hip-hop beefs -- where the rivals simply sparred in a series of songs, usually to the sales benefit of both -- the East Coast-West Coast rivalry added a string of real-life deaths after one side hired the Bloods and the other the Crips as security.

Tensions were so high in March 1996, at the annual Soul Train Awards, that a scuffle broke out between the two camps, halting the show.

Six months later, Shakur was shot and killed in Las Vegas. Six months after that, Wallace was shot and killed after a Soul Train Awards party in Los Angeles. Though both murders remain unsolved, many blame the rivalry.

Of course, hip-hop's extracurricular violence didn't stop there. Though it also remains unsolved, Run-D.M.C.'s Jam Master Jay was murdered in his Jamaica studio in 2002.

Combs protege Shyne remains in an upstate prison for a shooting at a Times Square nightclub he was at with Combs and Jennifer Lopez. Other skirmishes range from Li'l Kim's and Foxy Brown's entourages mixing it up to Dr. Dre slapping TV host Dee Barnes.

### Brokering a truce

So when it looked like the 50 Cent-Ja Rule beef could become violent, several groups tried to broker a truce.

Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam spoke to both sides, even interviewing Ja Rule for a special broadcast by MTV, BET and radio stations around the country. Ja Rule believes that the rivalry began at a video shoot where 50 Cent felt slighted by him.

For his part, Ja said he has moved past battle rhymes.

"If I have a beef with someone, I'd rather beef in person," he said. "It's faster."

Ja Rule said his new album "R.U.L.E.," due in stores on Nov. 16, will have no beefs. He calls it a return to what he does best, combining the smooth and rough sides of hip-hop.

After what he concedes was a bad 2003, his career is growing again, including a string of movies ranging from "The Fast and the Furious" to "Scary Movie 3." His new single, "Wonderful," featuring R. Kelly and Ashanti, is selling well.

There are also signs that 50 Cent's attacks are now falling on deaf ears. At this year's Hot 97 Summer Jam at Giants Stadium, 50 Cent received a mixed response, including a chorus of boos as he continued his attacks on Ja Rule.

The rapper and his entourage got so upset that one of them threw a chair into the crowd.

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Through a spokesman, 50 cent declined to comment.

"Here's how I feel about the situation," Ja said. "Sometimes you don't have to climb the tree to pick the apple," he said. "Sometimes you just sit beneath the tree and wait. I didn't go out and attack him. I made some movies. I raised my kids. I made a new album. I didn't have to go climb up the tree; the apple fell in my lap."

Source: [NewsDay](#)