

The Message of Prison Fashions

Written by Robert ID881

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Jahiem Williams passes through the racks of Phat Farm, Rocawear and G-Unit clothing at Image in Crossgates Mall. He reaches his favorite display: State Property Wear.

He grips the thick khaki on the Maritime pant. Speakers pump out a Nas anthem to "every fed jail where all my dawgs lurk."

"They have a lot of pockets, see?" Williams says, tugging on the canvas pant leg. "And they kinda thick, see?" At 26 he is a fan of rap star and convict Beanie Sigel, who launched the clothing line with hidden pockets and gun holsters. No more guns slipping out of waistbands, Sigel declared.

The label has a message, too, Williams adds. Sigel is "trying to say the state got property of him."

Behind the cash register, manager Tony Chillemi watches. He digs hip hop. But he doesn't get the Sigel label. "If you're 'state Property,'" to me, you're failing," he says. "You're in jail."

Most rap artist worth their street creds have crossed over into clothing. Nelly, P Diddy, Jay Z, Beyonce and Eminem all followed Phat Farm's Russell Simmons onto the catwalk with their own labels in the multibillion-dollar industry.

Another style threading the industry is jail vogue, outfits that resemble prison uniforms. Fact is, some experts say, gangsta rap sprung from prison. The baggy, oversized jeans many young men wear mimic the inmate pants. With belts banned, their pants hang loose.

Outlaws have long swayed American fashion. Billy the Kid's holster and Jack "Legs" Diamond's zoot suit became style icons. Prison is real for lots of rap fans. For every black man who graduates from college, 100 are incarcerated, according to the National Urban League.

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In Virginia last week, state legislators abandoned a bill to levy \$50 fines against people wearing pants low enough for their underwear to show in "a lewd or indecent manner." While some high school students protested the bill, others said the look was already passe.

Prison chic also has bypassed the old school notion that dressing like a convict is a bad idea.

But some observers question the efficacy of a gangsta collection for black and Latino youth already front-and-center on many police radar screens.

"Over time there becomes a blur of prison and youth culture because so many black youth are in prison, so it's not surprising a lot of young black men adopt the prison style," says Hayward Derrick Horton, an associate professor of sociology at the University at Albany.

Urban clothing stores come and go. Image in Crossgates recently closed. And styles are fleeting. The question: Can clothing make a harmful statement?

"When you see prison garb become a fashion statement you need to look beyond that and see if it's indicative of a broader or evasive problem," Horton says. "If young black men are dressing like this, they are stereotyping themselves to the police. It opens the door for a lot of misidentification."

That's not cool, says James Green, 40, of Albany, standing outside the Ivey urban clothing store on Central Avenue in downtown Albany. "It projects that there's something bad about you."

Raised by a strict Christian father, Green wore slacks, shoes and a tie as a kid. "We were always neat," says Green, a truck driver. "My father wasn't having that."

Inside Ivey, T-shirts sport photos of black heroes from Malcolm X and Muhammed Ali to Angela Davis. On an adjacent rack: Al Pacino in "Scarface" and John Gotti. Faux bullet-proof vests hang on the wall. No political statement or criminal intent, says sales clerk Lamont Uzzell. "It's

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just for wearin'."

Up the street, NY Gear store owner Tad Akil says he gets orders from inmates requesting brown, tan, blue or orange hooded sweat shirts and field boots. "They still carry the fashion in jail."

Other customers say, "I've been in jail enough. I don't want to rock this color," Akil adds. They go for black.

Hip-hop clothing is generally a teen culture, says Frankie Bailey, an associate professor of criminal justice at the University at Albany who is writing a book on youth culture and clothing messages.

"On the one hand you have what the wearer intends to say, and on the other hand you have how it's perceived. Teens are making a statement about their membership in a certain group, indicating they're cool, street smart, tough, even though it's interpreted other ways by adults and even police officers."

Cops and other authority figures perceive such clothes as deviant, according to Bailey, particularly when worn by black or Latino youth. The perception is different for suburban kids, who are simply seen as being rebellious, Bailey says.

Alice Green, director of the Center for Law and Justice, agrees. Clothing has always been seen as a connection to crime, she says. People who dress fancy and drive expensive cars are assumed to be drug dealers. "I always tell young people when you go out with certain kinds of clothes on, people are going to assume you belong to a certain element, no matter if you have good intentions."

Whether a glamorization of crime or a reflection of what artists know, prison chic already has come full circle. Bruce Willis and Billy Bob Thornton wore Prison Blues outfits in the 2001 film "Bandits." The line of T-shirts, baseball caps, jeans and yard coats was launched by inmates in the Eastern Oregon Correctional Facility. It pays for incarceration costs and victim restitution.

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Inmates earn wages and gain work skills, making them 24 percent less likely to be re-incarcerated, according to the product's Web site.

In June, prisoners at the Lansing Correctional Facility in Leavenworth, Kan., launched the "Brak Out" line to warn youth that prison isn't fashionable. The inmate line urges youth to break out of old attitudes and reminds them that serving time doesn't make you a man or a woman, Warden Dave McKune said at the time.

Rapper Beanie Sigel agrees. Glorifying prison is for suckers, he told Rolling Stone magazine last fall. "That ain't a badge of honor. Not for me ... If you can learn what not to do from me, then I'm good with that."

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