

Rappers Rivalry Cools

Written by Westside ID269

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

Lawlessness is pretty much down everywhere except one place – the hip-hop charts. In the past two years, gangsta rap's popularity soared, 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 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, a radio disc jockey 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 brutal images.

More and more aspiring rappers are tailoring their songs to fit the gangsta mold, whether they lived that life or not. 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."

Ask Ja Rule, who only two years ago sat atop the music world. He had a string of Top 5 hits and four platinum albums. 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 New York native's success came by forging a middle ground in hip-hop.

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

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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 had street anthems and 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. Until 50 Cent came along.

When 50 Cent, also from New York, arrived in fall 2002, with mentor Eminem at his side, he began a meticulous character assassination of Ja Rule.

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."

Although Ja Rule and his labelmates tried to fight back, 50's battle strategy worked. 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.

"I think it's just the nature of the music business," Ja Rule said recently. "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 "P. Diddy" Combs' Bad Boy Records and west coast legend Marion 'suge' Knight's Death Row Records.

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

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And years earlier, an East Coast-West Coast rivalry between Christopher "The Notorious B.I.G." Wallace and Tupac Shakur ended in the contentious deaths of both.

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.

Ja Rule said his new album "R.U.L.E.," due in stores 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 movie roles in "The Cookout" and "Scary Movie 3."

There also are signs that 50 Cent's attacks are now falling on deaf ears. He received a chorus of boos from New York concertgoers this summer 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. A spokesman for 50 Cent did not return calls seeking comment.

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