

Crime doesn't pay for every thug rapper

NEW YORK (AP)—In the rap world, a criminal background is the ultimate resume. The former drug dealer Beanie Sigel, who spent years bucking the law before getting his big break as a Jay-Z protege, has never lacked for street cred. With his menacing glare and criminal-minded rhymes, the Philadelphia native positioned himself as one of the most authentic gangstas on the rap scene.

But last year he was sentenced to a year in prison on a weapons charge, and still faces a retrial on an attempted murder charge (the first case ended in a mistrial last fall). Now, as he releases his latest album from behind bars, Sigel is among a number of high-profile rappers finding that a criminal present may not be as lucrative as a criminal past.

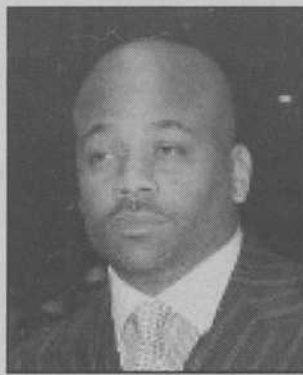
With the exception of ar-

guably rap's greatest artist — Tupac Shakur — most rappers who have done significant time have been unable to sustain their careers or revive them after being released. And while some have suggested that Lil' Kim, who was recently convicted of perjury, will gain more street cred if she goes to prison, the examples of rappers like Shyne suggest otherwise.

"There's no credibility in going to jail," declares Damon Dash as he talks about Sigel, the star of the Roc-a-fella label Dash started with Jay-Z. "I don't think it's ever a positive thing and I would never advocate anybody going to jail and I don't think Beanie would ever advocate it — Beanie did a crime, and right in front of the judge, he said, 'I said I did my crime, so I'll do whatever time you give me.'"

"I don't think it's ever a positive thing [being incarcerated] and I would never advocate anybody going to jail..."

— Damon Dash



Dash talks a lot about what Sigel says and thinks — because Sigel can't do it himself. He's at a federal prison in solitary confinement (which Dash blames on overzealous corrections officials), unable to promote "The B. Coming," his third album.

So the charismatic mogul Dash has become Sigel's stand-in, doing radio spots, appearing on TV shows, conducting interviews — all the

things artists normally do to push a new album.

"If they're going to try to put him in a place where he can't make money, we're going to try to reverse that, where we benefit from it to some degree, even though there's no real benefit from him being in jail," Dash said. "But we're going to make best of it, like making lemons into lemonade."

And Dash has made

enough lemonade to go around. Before Sigel (born Dwight Grant 31 years ago) was sentenced, he finished three albums worth of material, several music videos and filmed his starring role in Dash's crime drama flick "State Property II."

Dash even recorded Sigel's attempted murder trial and his entrance into prison for documentary fodder; some segments have already been shown on BET and MTV. His album cover shows him in a prison cell, glumly looking at the camera. And the saturation looks like it's helped: "The B. Coming" debuted at No. 3 on the album charts, selling about 131,000 copies, the best debut of his career.

"We had to do enough music to keep him prevalent in the market while he was gone," Dash said, "because

we didn't know how long he'd be gone."

While a numerous high-profile rappers have been charged with crimes at the height of their fame — such as Eminem, P. Diddy, Jay-Z and DMX — few have been sentenced to significant prison terms. Those who have — including Shyne, ODB, C-Murder, Mystikal and Slick Rick — often see their careers slide.

Antoine Clark, editor in chief of F.E.D.S. magazine, which chronicles street criminals and rappers, says time behind bars may help boost a rapper's tough image but won't help sell more records.

"For one, they're not going to have any promotion," says Clark. "Two, the people on the street, they want to hear a good record."

Clark pointed to Shyne. (See *Crime*, Page 15)

Cigars

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dent at the Howard University School of Medicine, doesn't think that hip-hop is the main promoter of cigar use.

"It's obvious for those that listen to and live hip-hop that images of blunts and cigars are prominent, but what many fail to understand is most people make choices independent of what they see on television and hear in songs," he explains.

"The sad part about tobacco is that regardless of why you started smoking, once you take that first hit, you are more likely than not going to become addicted. Even if people become aware of the risk associated with smoking, usually they have already developed an addiction that is not easy to overcome."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 45,000 Blacks die each year from smoking-related illnesses. Moreover, 1.6 million Blacks under the age of 18 will become regular smokers, and about one-third of those — 500,000 will die prematurely from a tobacco-related disease such as cancer, heart disease and pulmonary disorders.

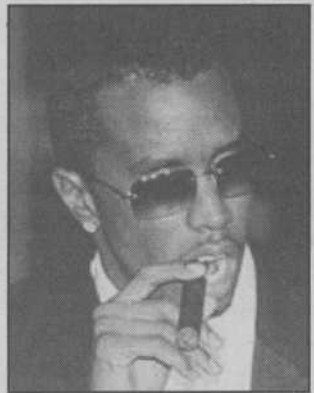
Cigars vary in size. Small cigars are called cigarillos. These are most popular among young people because they are inexpensive and come in a variety of flavors including strawberry, peach, green apple and watermelon.

"Most of my friends smoke Blacks because they taste a lot better than cigarettes," said Matthew Lewis,

a Howard University student. "Unlike cigarettes, Blacks come in different flavors and don't leave the nasty aftertaste that cigarettes do."

Watson-Hyde is concerned that the added flavor may mean added harm.

"We still don't know exactly the impact of all these combinations of flavors. You already have the chemicals that actually go into the product itself and then you add all those flavors, we've yet to



Sean Combs holds a stogie. see what the impact could be on overall health," she said.

The American Cancer Society has studied flavored cigarettes and has found that like cigars, they are also potentially more dangerous than traditional cigarettes.

"Bidis are flavored cigarettes imported mainly from India. Their popularity has grown in recent years in part because they come in a variety of candy-like flavors such as strawberry, vanilla, and grape, they are usually less expensive than regular cigarettes, and they often give the smoker an immediate buzz," according to the American Cancer Society.

"Even though Bidis contain less tobacco than regu-

lar cigarettes...they have higher levels of nicotine and other harmful substances such as tar and carbon monoxide. They are also unfiltered. Bidis appear to have all of the same health risks of regular cigarettes, if not more."

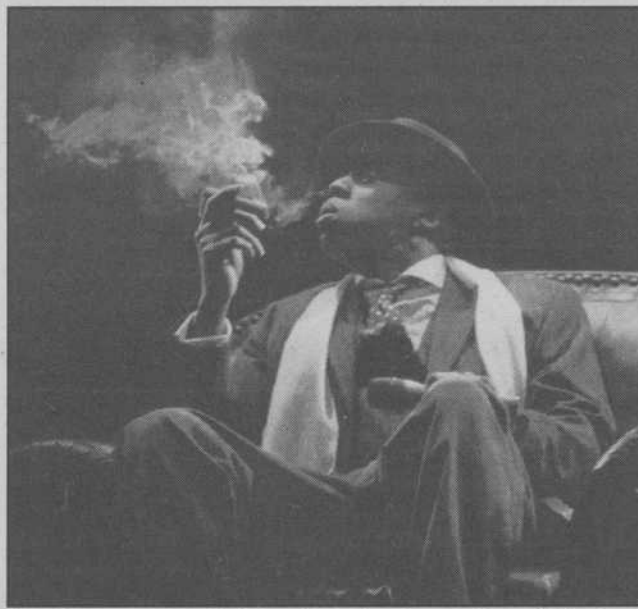
Many cigar smokers lack specific knowledge about the health risks associated with cigar use and think they are less harmful because of their low cost, sweet flavors and nice aroma.

"I don't consider cigars to be more dangerous than cigarettes. I actually think they are safer because they don't have all of the additional chemicals in them that cigarettes have like rat poison. Cigars are just tobacco," Lewis said.

Lisa Thomas, an Alexandria, Va. Resident who smokes a pack of Black & Mild cigarillos per day agrees.

"Blacks are much better than cigarettes. They don't produce as much smoke, the smell doesn't get in your clothes, they last longer, and they are more natural than cigarettes," she said.

Both Lewis and Thomas are wrong. Using cigars can be more hazardous. They are just as, if not more addictive than cigarettes because of the large amount of tobacco used in each one. Cigar smoking increases the risk of death from several cancers such as lung, lip, tongue, mouth, throat, esophagus and larynx. Inhaling cigar smoke can be linked to pancreas and bladder cancer as well, reports the American Cancer Society.



Jay-Z pauses to exhale and admire the quality of his cigar.

Last year, the American Legacy Foundation awarded a \$4.5 million, three-year grant to a coalition of six national African-American organizations — the National Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation, the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, the National Conference of Black Mayors and the National Association of Neighborhoods — to help curb tobacco use among African-Americans.

The American Legacy Foundation report, *Beyond Cigarettes: The Use of Other Tobacco Products*, shows that more than 36 percent of high school students who smoke cigarettes also smoke cigars. In 2000, 22 percent of males smoked cigars compared to 7.3 percent of females between 14 and 18. Among Blacks, 15.3 percent reported using cigars, 15.1 percent among Whites, 13.6

percent among Hispanics and 7.4 percent among Asians. Cigar use is higher among men than women and among Blacks compared to other races, nonetheless, use is decreasing.

In 2002, high school males were still almost three times more likely than females to smoke cigars. Among males, 16.9 percent reported using cigars, compared to 6.2 percent of females. Among African-Americans, 12 percent reported cigar use, 11.8 among Whites, 10.8 percent among Hispanics and 5.4 percent among Asians.

Some attribute the popularity of cigars to the tobacco industries attempt to glamorize the product. According to Donna Vallone, assistant vice president of research at the American Legacy Foundation, an organization designed to give young people the knowledge and tools to reject tobacco, anti-tobacco

advocates have a reason for not focusing on cigar use.

"It's a relatively small percentage of kids using cigars relative to cigarettes and the prevalence of cigar use among use is significantly lower than cigarettes and the prevalence of cigar use had remained particularly stable between 2002 and 2004," she said.

"The lack of anti-cigar campaigns is related to the prevalence trends. So many more kids are smoking cigarettes, which is why the prevention campaigns target cigarettes." Cigarettes smoking accounts for the majority of tobacco use among young people, but neglecting the use of other tobacco-products like cigars, and creating a glamorous aura around such a deadly product is dangerous, says Watson-Hyde.

"If we think we've won the battle, we have not; and there are...[conditions] that show we haven't. One, there is still a tremendous amount of marketing taking place that is targeting our young people, but there is a whole realm we have not touched upon with respect to cigars," she explained.

"With cigarettes we work very hard in terms of placement to make sure the product is sold behind the counter or above the register, but that's not the same rule for cigars. In many of the convenient stores in the Black community that's the first thing you see. You can't tell the difference between sour apple Philly blunts and sour apple Jolly Ranchers because they're all on the same row."