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Hard Knock Life?

Not anymore for hip-hop millionaire Jay-Z, whose wildly popular rap version of the American dream bridges the gap between his Gucci present and ghetto past.

DAILY NEWS

New York's Hometown Paper

Photography by Anthony Barboza

In an early rap, **Jay-Z** posed that question, **challenging** listeners to deal with his issues — and his talent — on his terms. They did, and the **rags-to-riches** success that resulted now permits the **hip-hop mogul** to hobnob in the Hamptons while nurturing his roots in the **'hood**.

FRIEND OR FOE?

By Craigh Barboza

Last November, Jay-Z accomplished something no other rapper and few recording stars in any category had ever achieved: He had two separate albums hit No. 1 in the same year. The first, *Life & Times of S. Carter*, actually was released at the end of 1999, but entered 2000 in the top position. Then, 10 months later, Jay-Z followed up with *Dynasty: Roc la Familia*, which debuted at No. 1 and was certified gold in its first week. The last artist to have a pair of albums based on original material top the charts in one year was Elton John in 1975.

But Jay-Z also made headlines for another, less auspicious reason. Next month, he is expected in court to face assault charges stemming from a 1999 nightclub stabbing. If convicted, he could get 15 years behind bars.

These are the two sides of Jay-Z: the crossover rap phenom who made platinum jewelry the new chic possession and the real-life, satin-smooth ex-street hustler who holds up his criminal past like a badge of honor. Both sides are genuine, and both are necessary, for Jay-Z knows he cannot represent who he is unless he describes, as he does in his recent hit song *Do It to Me*, where he's been, and where he's determined to go.

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At usaweekend.com, journey to Brooklyn's Marcy Projects, where Jay-Z grew up. Plus: View exclusive video of this interview.

At first meeting, there's something ambiguous about Jay-Z. He has that mysterious star-thing but tends to wear his fame lightly. The man is tall and lean and moves with a ballplayer's gait. He has firm, espresso eyes and prominent, pouting lips. It's a face that has become as well-known on MTV as that of Mariah Carey, his collaborator on the No. 1 1999 single *Heartbreaker*: "Hip-hop has crossed over," Jay-Z says. "Parents started coming home and their sons and daughters had big posters on the wall of tall black guys with do-rags, and they wanted to know what was going on." Perhaps he's trying to be funny, but the point is dead on.

From its start in the late '70s, hip-hop was defined by its ghetto roots. The music reflected the values of poor neighborhoods, where underground acts like the Sugar Hill Gang, Kurtis Blow and Run-DMC created party music with a defiant accent. Today, rap is a tool of mass culture, affecting everything from Gap fashion to the way Coca-Cola is marketed. The people behind the music now mix with the Establishment at polo matches and rent \$30,000-a-week summer homes in the Hamptons. Last year the Brooklyn Museum of Art hosted an exhibit called "Hip-Hop Nation: Roots,

who Jay-Z is. Wherever he goes — the projects, an art exhibit — it's important that he "glow," or stand out. His taste is not just sophisticated; it's exclusive. He can't have a mere Rolex to tell time. Jay-Z has to have a diamond-encrusted, Swiss-made Audemars Piguet ("It's one of one"). He loves Belvedere vodka and Gucci and aspires to a lifestyle that suggests a ransom note pasted together from images in the *Robb Report*, the magazine of the affluent. Jay-Z has a subscription.

His collection of luxury goods has a purpose beyond posturing, he says: It reassures him and others of his rise in the world. "They're the fruits of labor," he says. It's an afternoon in late November and Jay-Z, who has arrived alone, is sitting in the Trump International Hotel on Central Park West. "I'm making progress in this game," he begins, snapping his fingers. "I'm able to buy a Bentley now. Could you believe that? I came from the gutter. I only had three pairs of pants growing up."

Despite the trappings, Jay-Z by no means embodies the pampered country club stiff abhorred by rap pioneers. He is quick-witted and has a familiar way with people. He's given to jolting in a manner that undercuts the usual formalities. "When Jay walks in a room,

has come to symbolize, as Jay-Z puts it, "a way out of the ghetto for hungry black youth." Through music, he was able to realize his childhood dream of buying his mother a house and moving his cousins out of the projects. Jay-Z, himself, has a two-floor penthouse in Fort Lee, N.J., with a view of Manhattan. He knocked out the walls of two bedrooms to make an oversized home theater. Hollywood studios let Jay-Z borrow original prints of movies on reels. He recently screened *Charlie's Angels* for friends while it was still playing in theaters. "We don't go to movies anymore," says rapper Memphis Bleek, 22. "We go right to Jay's house."

From childhood on, Jay-Z (real name: Shawn Carter) had an urge to get out of Brooklyn's Marcy Projects, where he was reared. His father had walked out for good when Shawn was 11, leaving his mother to raise him and his three siblings. Marcy is not unlike many other self-contained ghettos: liquor stores, check-cashing joints, barbershops. "Boosters" conduct an alternate economy on the streets, selling everything from bootleg movies to designer knockoffs. Gunshots are part of the natural soundscape; kids lose

Today, hip-hop is about status. And no one knows that better than Jay-Z.

Rhymes and Rage." At the same time, Nelly was topping the charts with *Country Grammar*, which summed up hip-hop's new sensibility with the signature lyric "... Bill Gates, Donald Trump/Let me in now ..."

In the 21st century, hip-hop is about status, and no one knows this better than Jay-Z. The stories he tells depict not just escape from an imperfect world but a facsimile of the American dream: Learjets, beachfront mansions, an excess of model-gorgeous mommies. At 31, he's the biggest thing in rap, a self-made millionaire who has sold more than 10 million records, ghost-written hits for Dr. Dre, Puff Daddy and Will Smith, and coined more cool youth phrases than Budweiser and *Saturday Night Live* combined. What converted him from just another dynamic lyricist into a rap luminary was *Hard Knock Life*, his Grammy-winning 1998 CD. The video for the insanely popular title song, which sampled the Broadway musical *Annie*, introduced the now iconic image of his \$360,000 Bentley convertible parked in the 'hood. Since then, a steady flow of rap videos has featured Bentleys.

This is the formula — urban realism with a longing-to-live-large attitude — that has turned rap into the country's dominant music. SoundScan reports rap sold 106 million units in 2000, or \$1.5 billion if you figure the average CD sells for about \$14. For artists like Jay-Z, who work within the corporate music industry but run their own labels, rap's "Platinum Age" has meant new clout and more cash. Roc-A-Fella, the company Jay-Z and partner Damon Dash started in 1996, is now an empire that includes a clothing line, a sports agency, and film and music ventures. Last year, the company's sales totaled a quarter-billion dollars, says CEO Dash.

Making a powerful impression, it seems, is part of

there is a palpable rise in the energy level," says Peter Schwerin of Dimension Films, the studio behind the Jay-Z rapumentary *Backstage*. "People are drawn to him." Jay-Z may bluster about unparalleled rap skills and use courtroom terms to flirt with women — as in "You on notice, ma" — but he has a wry sense of humor. This is a guy whose favorite TV shows are *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons*, not *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and *Oz*. In both personal relationships and business, he will say again and again, karma is everything. "I'm a mirror," he says when asked about his inconsistent behavior. "If you cool with me, and we talking socially, I'm cool with you. But if you threaten me or attack me, I have no choice but to go back at you."

Part of the appeal for youth both black and white (whites buy 70% of rap) is that Jay-Z has "made it" without compromising, or worse, selling out. For all his attention to glamour, he's never lost his delight in pushing the limits of what is acceptable. Like Russell Simmons, Wu Tang Clan and other rap personalities, he has commodified his own cool-defiance. And it sells.

Rocawear, a line of luxury street clothes Jay-Z started in 1998, grossed \$100 million in its first 18 months. "It just fits that whole rebellious thing," he explains. Most sales so far have come online (rocawear.com), but Macy's and other stores recently have opened Rocawear boutiques. "I want to go into a meeting with my jeans hanging off while everyone's all stuffy. I want to go in there with my skully pulled down and my boots on and they gotta accept it. It's the thumb-in-the-eye theory."

Like basketball or an Ivy League scholarship, rap



From hustler to MTV staple: Jay-Z, left, with *Direct Effect* host Teck

their lives over petty beefs that never make the news.

Rapping, Jay-Z says, came naturally, like breathing. As a child, he tore through stacks of his mother's records, learning to scratch on albums like *Ain't We Funkin' Now* by the Brothers Johnson. He later developed a speedy rhyme style. When his boyz encouraged him to begin the uphill climb to a rap career, he resisted. His vision of that seemingly impossible dream was blocked by the more immediate sights seen through the child-safety bars of his fifth-floor apartment window: neighborhood drug dealers pulling up to the curb in "BMW's and Pathfinders with big gold chains."

The lure of fast wads of money was too strong, and as a teen Jay-Z was drawn to the project's corners and benches. Though he could read at the 12th-grade level as a sixth-grader, Jay-Z was thrown out of high

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"I experienced celebrity before rap. People knew me on the street."

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school before he could finish. He became — get this — "a resourceful person who puts himself on the line to improve his condition." Or, as it's commonly known, a street hustler. Jay-Z claims to have been large. Triple-XL large. "I experienced celebrity even before rap," he says like the boastful performer he is. "People knew me on the street. They knew what I was doing. It was legend."

It became clear he couldn't hustle forever. The life leads nowhere, and after someone pulled a gun and shot at him from less than six feet away, Jay-Z says, he was ready for a change. He recorded a demo tape in 1993, and when no major label would

sign him, he distributed the music himself from the trunk of his car. Mom-and-pop stores paid him as much as \$300 a box. The pivotal moment in his career came in 1996 when Def Jam, the most successful rap label, asked him to contribute a song to the *Nutty Professor* soundtrack. That song, *Ain't No N-ga*, featured later that year on his seminal debut album, *Reasonable Doubt*, became an instant crossover hit and launched his meteoric rise.

Unlike most other rappers, Jay-Z has produced a diverse body of work. Today, he's best known for catchy, thrill-seeking raps like *Big Pimpin'* and *Hey, Papi*. But more important are underground favorites that offer illuminating commentary on the

lives of young hustlers. With tracks like *Friend or Foe* and *Regrets*, Jay-Z redefined gangsta rap, and today's music in general, by creating cautionary tales that speak to the grim reality of street life. If it isn't a world the average listener inhabits, Jay-Z uses so many cinematic details and acute metaphors that it is utterly recognizable. That is how he has changed the rap game.

Though his lyrics have never brought him under the scrutiny white rapper Eminem is experiencing, Jay-Z's realness has placed him in a long line of artists accused of glamorizing violence, degrading women and paving the way for more explicit language on pop radio. While Eminem has been analyzed and criticized by everything from *The Washington Post* to *Nightline*, Jay-Z, who is nominated in the same category at this year's Grammys, Best Rap Album, says Eminem's homophobic, misogynistic spew is just an inside joke between him and his producer. "I heard Eminem say he raps to get a reaction out of Dre. He was just writing the sickest [expletive] just to hear him laugh." Jay-Z's lyrics, on the other hand, "point out details people don't normally see. People are like, 'Ugh ... I can't believe he just said that.'" He adds: "I really just rap for my friends."

Still, the essential question, and one the whole paradox of Jay-Z's life continuously poses, is: To what extent can rap retain its outsider-ness if the music itself becomes a part of the very culture that originally ostracized it? No one can fully answer this just yet.

As Jay-Z's trial begins in New York State Supreme Court, his new single, *Guilty Until Proven Innocent*, in which he takes aim at the criminal justice system, will be climbing the charts. Jay-Z says the charges against him are bogus, motivated more by his celebrity than by what actually happened on the night in question, and thus will be quickly dismissed. "It bothers me that I could be in a room with 30 people and if somebody I talk to does something the next day, [the police] could come pick me up," he says incredulously.

A few hours after our interview, he has forgotten about the trial. Jay-Z walks through the doors of Lotus, a fashionable Manhattan nightclub. The scene is a private party to celebrate the release of *Dynasty*, which will go platinum in December. Almost everyone there is young, beautiful and connected, and Jay-Z, ghetto-immaculate in a butterscotch sweater and light shades, is perfectly at home, sipping Cristal and moving to the beat with the crowd. People notice him, of course. He has the shoulder everyone is trying to tap in the roped-off VIP section. Yet despite his status, no one seems to think twice about reaching out to him. "People want to see some type of struggle," Jay-Z will say later. "Nobody cares about people who wake up to money their pops left them, someone who's just gonna wild out and blow it all. They want to see a person come from nothing and work his way up so they can be like, 'Yeah, he deserved that.'" **EW**



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