

Hip-Hop Sales Pop: Pass the Courvoisier And Count the Cash

By LYNETTE HOLLOWAY

Pass the **Courvoisier**.

Everybody sing it now.

Pass the **Courvoisier**.

So goes a refrain of the popular song, "Pass the **Courvoisier** Part Two" by Busta Rhymes, featuring Sean Combs, who is known these days as P. Diddy. It became a party anthem du jour.

But after the song improved the sales of the Cognac, it became something more -- a symbol of the economic power of hip-hop.

"Pass the **Courvoisier** Part Two" helped increase the sales of the liquor by 4.5 percent in the first quarter of this year and into the double digits in recent months, said Jack Shea, a spokesman for Allied Domecq Wine and Spirits, an American arm of the British drinks company that owns **Courvoisier**.

The influence of the song has kicked off a move by hip-hop artists to cash in more on the free advertising in their music by rhyiming about their own products and not just products like Prada, Gucci, Burberry, Belvedere Vodka, Alize Liqueur, Hennessy Cognac, and Cristal Champagne.

Leading the pack is Roc-A-Fella Records, the major hip-hop label that owns the clothing line Roc-A-Wear and the film company Roc-A-Films. Roc-A-Fella, whose parent company is Island Def Jam Records, recently bought Armadale Vodka from a Scottish company.

Rappers on the Roc-A-Fella label, including Jay-Z and Cam'ron, are now busily writing rhymes to the phonetically challenged vodka, said Kareem Biggs Burke, the chief executive officer of the company along with Jay-Z and Damon Dash, the hip-hop impresario. Jay-Z has already mentioned Armadale in his song, "All I Need."

"We've made a lot of money for a lot of companies over the years," Mr. Burke said. "Since we have so much influence, we can make money for ourselves by expanding our businesses. No more Belvedere Vodka or Cristal Champagne in our music or videos."

Also trying to cash in for their own products are Joaquin Dean of Ruff Ryders, who owns Dirty Denim; Russell Simmons, who owns Phat Farm and Baby Phat, which is run by his wife, Kimora Lee; and Mr. Combs, who owns Sean John.

Mr. Combs is seeing the benefit of the push. In a new remix of Foxy Brown's popular single, "Stylin'," she gives a shout out to the hip-hop mogul's clothing line: "It's necessary we rock the Sean John with a nice throwback and some Air Force Ones (Nike sneakers).

For years, hip-hop artists have helped the sale of certain products simply by wearing them in videos or mentioning them in their rhymes. It started in 1987 with Run-DMC's "My Adidas." Since then, rappers have sung about products in their music, including Tupac Shakur, who talked about Alize and Hennessy and Snoop Doggy Dogg, whose 1994 hit "Gin and Juice" extolled Tanqueray Gin. But only a few artists had product lines of their own.

charged a penny to provide the kind of exposure that companies pay millions of dollars for in advertisement and product placement. What many artists have settled for are free samples of products.

"That would be selling ourselves out - to get paid to advertise someone else's stuff in our videos," said James Street Outlaw, a spokesman for Armadale Vodka. "We rap about the things we like."

But Lyor Cohen, operating officer of Island Def Jam Records, is negotiating with HP Marketing to develop a plan to charge brands for placement in songs and video, a high-ranking company official said.

As hip-hop grows as a mainstream genre, rappers are increasingly appreciating the depth of their influence on products.

"Pass the Courvoisier" has changed the rules," said Biff Warren, a spokesman for Busta Rhymes. "Courvoisier is in the title and the chorus. It is itself a character in the video. It has a different meaning in that sense because Busta and P. Diddy are so big now that everything they touch becomes popular and sells. But that's not what they're thinking about. They're thinking about the music."

Mr. Warren said that Busta Rhymes unwittingly turned the "shine," or spotlight, on Courvoisier. "He picked Courvoisier because it worked in the song." Mr. Warren said that Busta Rhymes, who declined to comment, did not get paid to write the song. "Busta actually drinks Hennessy," he said.

Most hip-hop artists say they have not

Mr. Shea, the spokesman for Allied

Domecq, said that the company did not pay Busta Rhymes to write the song. But after the song's success, Allied and Busta Rhymes's label, Violator Management, struck a promotional deal, Mr. Warren said.

Avirex, the maker of leather jackets, has enjoyed free publicity from hip-hop artists almost from the beginning of the movement, said Mindy Gale, a spokeswoman. While the company does not pay artists, it gives free samples. "You need them wearing your product to create a buzz," Ms. Gale said.

Free of charge, Avirex designed an orange leather jumpsuit of embossed crocodile for Lil' Bow Wow that he wore to a photo shoot, Ms. Gale said. The company rejected a request from Eminem to give him free products, Ms. Gale said. "We don't like his image," she said, whispering as if he were in the room. Avirex has also given gear to Method Man of the Wu Tang Clan, the rap group from Staten Island, she said.

Cadillac is a beneficiary of free publicity from hip-hop, too. The company is enthusiastic about the influence of the music on its sales, said Leslie Rajewski, a spokeswoman for Cadillac Escalade in Detroit.

The company does not compensate artists for lyrics or placement of its cars. But Ms. Rajewski said that individual dealerships do lend the vehicles to rappers for video shoots.

"Usually when a vehicle comes out at launch, its popularity fades within a year, but not the Escalade," she said.

The sales for Cadillac were up 22 percent in July 2002 compared with July 2001, Ms. Rajewski said. The Escalade, a sports utility vehicle, boasts a 345-horsepower engine and looks like a Prada suit on wheels.

The rapper Ludacris, in his song

"Southern Hospitality," says, "Cadillac grills, Cadillac mills, Cadillac fills . . ." Besides Ludacris, the rappers Ja Rule and Baby also wax about Cadillac.

Hip-hop delivers a potent demographic. Last year hip-hop accounted for 21 percent of \$5.4 billion in music sales in urban areas, according to Soundscan, a system that tracks the sales of music and music video products in the United States.

Advertisers have also begun to focus on 18- to 34-year-olds, the age group that mainly listens to hip-hop. In the last five years, advertisers have increased their spending to \$40.3 million from \$28.7 million, according to research by Wilkofsky Gruen Associates, an economic consultants group in New York City.

David Mays, the founder and chief executive officer of The Source, the hip-hop magazine, said that in just one year, he has seen a difference in the way advertisers approach his business. Last year, The Source ran three pages of car advertisements, he said. This year, he projects that the publication will have 35 pages of car ads by the end of the year.

"Once our audience takes to a particular product, their influence is tremendous on the rest of the population," Mr. Mays said. "For years, automakers designed and marketed their products to the baby boom generation. But what they all have found in the past couple of years is that in order to go forward, they have to appeal to the new generation."