

CULTURE

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[THE WEEKENDER]

Rap's well-traveled path to prison

Lil Wayne is the latest in a long list of hip-hop stars who find themselves headed to jail at the height of their careers

BY JONATHAN LANDRUM JR
AP, ATLANTA



It's a ritual that seems to play out at least once a year in the rap community: A top star faces a criminal charge, and more often than not, is locked up at the height of his or her wealth and fame.

Lil Wayne is the latest example. Tomorrow, he is to be sentenced on a weapons charge, and will likely face one year behind bars. He is one of rap's most popular figures, a Grammy-winning, top-selling superstar whose clever rhymes permeate through rap, pop and more recently, rock.

He joins a long list of rap stars who have gotten caught up in the criminal justice system; perhaps the most prominent prison poster child was Tupac Shakur, who went to jail in 1995 as he was on the verge of superstardom. It begs the question: After all these years, why are hip-hop's top stars still finding themselves on the path to prison?

"People seem to think they are smarter than the system or that person's fate is not their fate," says Chaka Zulu, co-founder of Ludacris' Disturbing the Peace label. "Some people say, 'Oh no, that'll never happen to me. He just got caught slipping.'"

T.I., another one of rap's top sellers, reported to a federal prison last year for his conviction on weapons charges. He spent time in an Arkansas prison and is currently at a halfway house in Georgia.

Some thought rappers would learn from T.I.'s experience, which again proved that the top stars of hip-hop aren't above the law.

Apparently, the lesson has not been learned. "Hopefully, this isn't a cycle that next year from now we're seeing our top rappers in jail," Elliott Wilson, founder of the hip-hop Web site RapRadar.com, says. "Ultimately, it is a black eye to the culture I'm passionate about. Hopefully, the artists of tomorrow won't make the same mistakes as the ones of today."

While rap is a genre born from the streets, and drugs and violence have long played a prominent role, many rap stars find themselves facing their greatest — and sometimes their first — legal hurdles after they become successes, such as Lil Wayne.

Besides his court date in New York next week, he is also scheduled for trial in Arizona on March 30 on felony drug possession and weapons charges over a January 2008 arrest at a US Border Patrol checkpoint.



Above: Hip-hop artists T.I., left, Jay-Z, center, and Lil Wayne, right, perform at the 2009 Grammy Awards last year in Los Angeles. Left: Lil Wayne arrives for a sentencing hearing in a firearms possession case at Manhattan Criminal Court last month. PHOTOS: REUTERS

He has pleaded not guilty in that case.

"The whole rock star fantasy is to be the bad boy, to do whatever and not get caught. These artists are reaching a level of fame, but dealing with real consequences for their actions," Wilson says.

Lil Wayne joins a group of rappers with legal woes over the past year, from Gucci Mane to Soulja Boy to music producer Shawty Redd, who faces a charge of murder in Georgia.

In the history of hip-hop, other popular rappers such as Slick Rick, Shakur, Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Remy Ma, Beanie Sigel, Shyne, Mystikal and C-Murder have spent a few months to several years in prison. Snoop Dogg was acquitted of murder; Diddy faced jail time but he was acquitted in 2001 on bribery and weapons charges stemming from a club shooting. His protege, Shyne, wasn't as lucky and was convicted in the same case and sentenced to 10 years.

In January, Soulja Boy was given a year of probation on obstruction after he fled from a Georgia vacant house. Shawty Redd was arrested on New Year's Day and charged with murder after a man was slain in his home. Ja Rule still faces a gun possession charge from 2007.

Gucci Mane spent time in prison on a few occasions, most notably for hitting a promoter in the head with a pool cue in 2005 and for violating his probation stemming from his assault conviction. In 2005, he was jailed on a murder charge, but the charges were dropped because of lack of evidence. He was also arrested for possession of a firearm and marijuana, and for driving under the influence.

singer Bobby Brown. But as she returned last year, she declared herself healthy and free from substance abuse.

This is Houston's first tour in years. It started in February in South Korea and will take her to Europe until at least May.

Patti Smith, Iggy Pop, Regina Spektor and many others contributed to a potent sonic cocktail that rocked Carnegie Hall at the 20th Annual Benefit Concert for Tibet House US, a non-profit organization charged with preserving Tibetan culture.

An avid fan of Tibetan art since his teen years, Pop says the world cannot afford to lose it.

"[Tibetans have] been getting kind of a bum deal for like 50, 60 years now ... sort of losing their spot on Earth," said Pop.

Tibet is ruled by China. China insists Tibet has been part of its territory for four centuries and has governed the Himalayan region with an iron fist since Communist troops took control there in 1951. But many Tibetans say they were effectively independent for most of their history and say Chinese rule and economic exploitation are eroding their traditional Buddhist culture.

Tibetans have been fighting for

greater autonomy for years led by the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

Spektor, who was born in the former Soviet Union and later immigrated to the Bronx, said her familiarity with hardship makes her sensitive to the Tibetan people. "I'm all about protecting people's heritage," she said. "Any place that is kind of in danger of losing their culture or being oppressed and not being able to practice their religion just feels to me very close."

Traditional chants by monks from the Drepung Gomang Monastery opened the Friday night concert. A highlight was a performance by 15-year-old Tenzin Kunsel, a Tibetan refugee who moved to the US in 2003. She performed a Tibetan aria, backed by the Patti Smith Band.

"It feels like I'm fitting right in," Kunsel said. "It's such an honor that I got a chance to perform with such amazing people." Gogol Bordello, Pierce Turner and Jesse Smith — daughter of Patti — were also among the acts on the Carnegie stage. The lineup was curated by the event's artistic director, noted composer Philip Glass. He also performed.

Now, Gucci Mane is back in prison to serve a six-month sentence after a probation violation last year. The rapper, whose recent album, *The State vs Radric Davis*, released in December while he was imprisoned, acknowledged that his fast life set him up for failure.

"It was just apart of my life," the rapper said in a telephone interview from the Fulton County Jail in Atlanta, where he is currently serving a six-month term. "My relationship with drugs, my bad decisions, my relationship with partying too much — it was like a friendship I didn't want to let go."

Gucci Mane warns others to avoid his fate. "Don't keep bumping your head against the wall," he says.

"It's a serious situation. It's so many things that happen behind these walls. Think about how to avoid situations so you won't have to come in here."

Every time Zulu hears about a rapper getting arrested, he quickly alerts several of his artists — including Ludacris — about how to avoid making the same mistake.

For Zulu, it's a conversation that has come too frequently.

"We try to prepare them for different scenarios," he says.

"You look at it from every aspect on whether you can get out of it or not. Sometimes you meet it head on or alleviate it."

Zulu says he's not sure if hip-hop's top stars will ever stop getting into trouble. He does suggest that rappers should look to Jay-Z, who has stayed out of trouble after being sentenced to three years probation in 1999 for stabbing a record producer at a Manhattan nightclub. Now the global superstar is held in high esteem and even performed for US President Barack Obama at his inauguration.

"It's about choice," Zulu says. "As much as Jay-Z talks about street life in his music, he's making more strategic and more better decisions into those situations now. Let's learn from the good and bad."



Huang Yi's *Spin 2010* combines his love of dance and his love of video. PHOTO COURTESY OF CHEN CHANG-CHI

Puyuma artists, Taitung take center stage

BY DIANE BAKER AND DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTERS

Choreographer Huang Yi (黃翊) shows a command of movement and technology in his latest piece, *Spin 2010*, that belies his years. *Spin 2010* is part of a four-year experimental program in combining technology and dancers and was presented as part of the National Theater and Concert Hall's 2010 Art Images series.

The Experimental Theater was rearranged from its usual single block of tiered seating into a theater in the round, with banks of seats along all four walls and a white square stage in the middle. Large horizontal screens were affixed to each of the walls.

As the 26-year-old's beloved two-armed crane spun around the performance space, the camera attached to the bottom of the vertical arm captured images of dancers or parts of their bodies, which were then projected onto the large screens, creating almost a 3D effect. It was almost like watching the world go by looking out of a car's windows, but with close-ups of the action.

Although the screens were placed so that you could see the action from any seat, I felt torn between watching the dancers themselves or the projections — the screens were just high enough that you couldn't watch both comfortably.

If the piece had been all just the video projections, it could have gotten boring, but Huang also turned off the camera to create a series of solos, duets and trios that performed under a variety of lighting effects from the LED strips in the crane arms as well as a variety of computer graphic programs. One of the programs created a mirror effect that allowed one of the men to dance with himself until he disappeared (on screen) into just a pair of hands fluttering like the wings of bird; another created almost a Rorschach ink blot look where a prone man faced off against himself, upside down.

There was a beautiful duet for Lin Yu-jun (林祐如) and a partner with moves that mimicked the melding of bodies done by the camera and computer. The pair were always linked by either their hips, shoulders or arms, moving fluidly as one.

Composer Yang Chang-ching (楊常菁), who has worked with Huang on the *Spin* project since 2008, created a crackerly, techno soundscape that meshed perfectly with Huang's imagery.

Most of Huang's dancers were, either like himself a graduate of seven-year program run by Taipei National University of the Arts' College of Dance, which combines three years of high school with four years at university, or a student in the university's graduate dance program. This long-time familiarity paid off in the ease with which the dancers performed Huang's choreography.

As Huang feared, however, the rigorous rehearsals did take their toll and only eight of the 10 dancers planned for the work appeared in Saturday's matinee. If the loss of the two others made a dent in the program, it wasn't visible to the audience.

Over at the Concert Hall, it was a dream come true for a group of Puyuma Aboriginal musicians featured in *On the Road* (很久沒有敬你了), a concert that took place this weekend as part of the 2010 Taiwan International Festival.

The realization of that dream — to perform on the nation's most prestigious stage — also served as the main plot of this production, billed as one of the "flagship" programs of the National Concert Hall.

The cast was composed of Taiwan's most renowned Aboriginal musicians, including Kimbo Hu (胡德夫), Hao-en (吳恩), Jiajia (家家), Pau-dull (陳建年) and Samingad (紀曉君), who all performed with backing accompaniment from the National Symphony Orchestra (國家交響樂團).

The musicians performed mostly traditional Puyuma songs and dances from their home village, Nanwang Tribe (南王部落) in Taitung County. The show in many ways was a tribute to Taitung and its musical culture, with a semi-documentary film featuring the musicians shown as part of the production.

The film by Wu Mi-sen (吳米森), which was shown on a large screen behind the orchestra, set up the mood for each musical number, with humorous skits featuring the musicians and a romantic sub-plot between two fictional characters.

Highlights included a number sung by the Nanwang Sisters (南王三姊妹), whose three-part harmonies blended beautifully with the string and brass orchestra, Kimbo Hu's beloved classic, *Standing on the Mountain*, which garnered a rousing applause.

At times, though, the orchestra's presence was overbearing, as the arrangements of a few songs seemed lavish and sentimental. It was clear that the producers were excited by the idea of the stage musical format, but they included too much in the program. The show, which lasted two hours, lost some momentum in the second act. In the end, it was the Puyuma musicians who kept the production rolling, with Hao-en providing comic relief with his signature sharp wit, and featuring in several soulful, gospel-influenced numbers.

The show started and ended brilliantly. Samingad interrupted the first notes from the orchestra by entering the stage from the audience seating area and regaling the room with a diva-worthy capella performance. Her uncle, award-winning folk rocker and producer Pau-dull, brought the production to a jubilant conclusion with an operatic rendition of a traditional harvest song.

The show certainly achieved its aim: to affirm the proud musical heritage of Taiwanese Aborigines and its importance in the mainstream today. But the beauty of the music came through most clearly in the second and final encore, when the evening's performers sang without the aid of the orchestra and invited the audience to dance and clap along. At that moment, the "dream come true" felt most real.

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

FEB. 19 TO FEB. 25



1 Show Luo (羅志祥) and *Rashomon* (羅生門) with **36.2 percent** of sales

2 JJ Lam (林俊傑) and *100 Days* (100天) with **10.53%**

3 Rainie Yang (楊丞琳) and *Rainie & Love...?* (雨愛) with **8.88%**

4 Magic Power (魔幻力量) and self-titled album with **1.81%**

5 A-Lin and *Before, After* (以前·以後) with **1.54%**

ALBUM CHART COMPILED FROM G-MUSIC (WWW.G-MUSIC.COM.TW), BASED ON RETAIL SALES

PLANET POP