

Busta Rhymes in the "Pass the Courvoisier" video

Photo: J Records

"I'll mention Cheetos because I like them, but if I didn't they wouldn't be in our songs." — Roc-A-Fella's Damon Dash

These days, try putting on a CD by your favorite rapper without hearing an endless series of plugs for Burberry, Air Force Ones, Alizé, Maybach, you name it.

But are hip-hop's ubiquitous product mentions just about artists chronicling their high-rollin' lifestyles, or have the forces of marketing worked their way into your favorite rapper's tunes? What's next, a hit track written about Hummers paid for by the car's manufacturer? Well, maybe.

"Unless someone is paying me a billion dollars or offering equity, we don't play that," Roc-A-Fella Records co-founder Damon Dash said of writing products into a song on request. "That's never come up, because once you get that powerful that someone wants to pay me to do something, I don't need it. I've heard about companies asking [artists] to do that, but it hasn't really happened to us yet."

As it happens, his biggest artist, Jay-Z, doesn't need any help in that department. Jigga is already known for his product-heavy lyrics, but the Roc-A-Fella crew doesn't want to just give it away. With the success of the Roc-A-Wear clothing line and the recent purchase of the Armadale vodka brand, Jay has products of his own to hype (check the lyrics to "All I Need"). Same goes for Puffy name checking Sean John, or the Ruff Ryders giving shout-outs to Dirty Denim, because why give others free advertising when you can help yourself out?

"We only rap about things we like. I'll mention Cheetos because I like them, but if I didn't they wouldn't be in our songs," Dash said. Back in the day, artists would mention their favorite shoes, clothes or liquor for fun and floss, but it's no secret now that well-placed hype might land you a product endorsement deal, tour sponsorship or, at the very least, a closet full of free gear.

"The public is much more savvy these days about name dropping and promotion," said Lucian James, founder of the brand strategy company LucJam, which tracks product mentions in hit pop songs on its Americanbrandstand.com Web site. Since the site launched in January, Mercedes has taken the lead with 53 mentions, followed by Lexus, Cristal, Bacardi, Timberland and Nike. On the latest *Billboard* singles

chart there are six songs in the top 20 with one or more product references.

James pointed to the Busta Rhymes smash "Pass the Courvoisier" as an example of a product endorsement that changed the way deals are done. Busta's management has said that his massive hit about the cognac brand was merely an artistic choice, but it also helped Courvoisier's parent company, France's Allied Domecq, achieve a double-digit uptick in U.S. sales of the top-shelf liquor. Domecq later reached a promotional deal with Busta's management company, Violator. And Nelly must've known that his homage to Nike's Air Force Ones might land him a shoe deal, which of course it did, with a signature Nelly Nike shoe coming in the fall.

Things were much more innocent back in the day, when Run-DMC unintentionally started the trend with "My Adidas," an ode to their favorite kicks. Before hip-hop became the dominant purveyor of youth culture and fashion, it was a street genre that big business was either unaware of or unwilling to endorse because of its rogue image.

When Adidas execs saw thousands of fans waving their unlaced shoes up in the air at a Run-DMC show in '86, a light bulb went off. The band was offered a lucrative sponsorship deal in the neighborhood of \$1.5 million. That same year, rapper Kurtis Blow became the first hip-hop star to shoot a commercial when he passed the mic for Sprite. The floodgates were open, but it would take some time for Madison Avenue to realize that hip-hop was one of the most powerful marketing tools around.

Recently, rappers have been credited with raising the retail fortunes of everything from soda to shoes, the latter thanks to Fabolous and his spots for the RBK collection. Jay-Z's S. Carter sneaker was reportedly one of the quickest selling lines in Reebok's history, marking one of the first times that a shoe by a non-athlete has flown out of stores so quickly. The bigger the star, the more deals, as evidenced by 50 Cent's recent signing with Reebok for a signature shoe (see "**50 Cent Can Now Throw Out His S. Carters**") and with Ecko for a clothing line.

Is it selling out or selling up? Selling out has long been a concern in the rock world, but the impact of product placement has not hit that genre with the same force. Bruce Springsteen ("Cadillac Ranch") and Prince ("Little Red Corvette") are among the many rock artists who've penned odes to cars, but few artists outside hip-hop so generously

sprinkle brand names in their songs, a trend James sees continuing. That's because of what he called a fundamental difference between hip-hop and the rest of the music world.

"Hip-hop is about the here and now, whereas rock and pop songs tend to be more about eternal themes of love and hate," he said. "A lot of current culture is about the things we want and own."

Entrepreneurial rappers such as Puffy have taken it one step further. With his Blue Flame Marketing and Advertising company — whose clients include Versace, Nike, Pepsi, Foot Locker and Bentley — Diddy has further blurred the line between music and merchandise.

"Hip-hop is aspirational and more open to identifying itself with brands," said Blue Flame President Jameel Haasan Spencer. "It used to be cool to not have money when Run-DMC rapped about 'Calvin Klein is no friend of mind,' but now hip-hop is more entrepreneurial."

Spencer echoed Dash's perspective that as long as an artist seems to have a genuine affinity for a product, selling out is not an issue. "When I saw Kid Rock in South Beach and he invited me in to have a beer, there was a six pack of Coors Light sitting there," he said. "He really drinks it. Our artists mention Sean John because they get Sean John clothes every month and they know and like the brand. But when you see Fabolous in a Reebok commercial you know he just got a check, because he wears Nike in his videos."

Spencer said part of his job is listening to Bad Boy releases, finding out what products the label's acts like and trying to create relationships with those companies. An example is an upcoming video from Loon, in which the artist is seen holding a Kyocera cell phone. "I reached out to them and they wanted to promote it. He holds one in the video and now we're looking at what we can do in the future."

Though only a handful of major artists can secure major promotional campaigns, the rush to cross-promote has touched everyone from the Neptunes to such conscious rappers as Common, Rakim and the Roots, all of whom have appeared in ads and promotional campaigns.

An article in October's *Fortune* magazine referenced an Epic Records memo in which the company offered to place products in lyrics to B2K songs for a fee, later quoting an executive who said the same offer would be extended to "most of our pop acts."

Though that executive would not speak on the record for this story, Spencer said the offer is not shocking, just good business. "The reason

why corporations are coming at us is that TiVo can get rid of commercials and you have 900 cable channels, so you don't have to watch their commercials anymore," he said. "That's why they're looking at this as a viable space. Because people [still] watch videos."

—Gil Kaufman