

Rap and Hip-Hop Unite Gang Members Colors

Written by Sara A. Carter ID1486

Sunday, 05 June 2005 13:34 -

The lines between good and evil fade somewhere in the gray cloud that has followed Christopher Shaw, a Pomona gangster, his whole life. Shaw, otherwise known by his Crip name, "CE-LOC," spends his days behind bars, rapping songs of degradation, retribution, unity, politics and gangster life.

But he's not in a jail cell. He's behind the black-iron gates of hip-hop / rap Groove Time Recording Studios in San Bernardino.

Shaw and other former gang leaders are calling for a truce among street gangs. They say they're sending a message of unity in their songs straight from the Inland Valley to communities as far away as Kansas City. They produce and market their own hip-hop rap CDs through their own label, Yankee Doodle.

"We don't give up the (gang) colors," Shaw said. "We combine them. We're no longer a disorganized street gang. We are now an organized army of soldiers, but with the mission of peace in mind. You got Crips, you got Bloods no longer killing each other, but working together."

San Bernardino County has an estimated 12,000 to 16,000 gang members, belonging to 287 different gangs, according to the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department. Recently, violent crime is down, said Lt. Mark Garcia of the San Bernardino Police Department.

"If there is a truce, I suspect that the (police) gang units know what's going on right now," Garcia said. "They work with gang members and encourage them to get out of the lifestyle. A truce is encouraging."

"Gangsta" rap music, which became a cultural phenomenon in the 1980s, is still as controversial today as it was then. The lyrics, which include profanity and liberal references to drug dealing, violence and death; are poetic expressions of life on the streets, Shaw and the other Yankee Doodle rap artists say.

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Yankee Doodle's very existence, Shaw said, marks the re-emergence of underground gangsta rap, but with a twist: Though still laced with profanity, the music speaks to the horror of blacks killing blacks and the need for it to stop.

But Shaw, his friends and their music are complicated. They say they walk a thin line between the "normal" world and their lives as gang members because they cannot -- and will not -- give up their gang affiliations.

Shaw, who grew up in the Angela Chanslor neighborhood of Pomona, was first arrested at 14 and sent to juvenile hall, where he stayed until he was 18.

Like many young gang members, Shaw's violent past -- including assaults and armed robberies -- resulted in two long sentences in five state penitentiaries, including Pelican Bay in Crescent City, where Shaw found himself at 19, just four months after being released from juvenile hall.

As a Crip and a felon, life is never "normal." Nothing washes the past away, he said, but through his rap, he can make the gangster label work for him instead of against him.

Countless gangster rappers are cut from the same cloth, some famous, most not. Some take the gangster life with them to stardom. Tupac Shakur, who sold millions of albums, then made headlines around the world after being gunned down in Las Vegas, is just one of many examples. The Notorious B.I.G. -- reportedly killed in retaliation for Shakur's murder -- is another.

"Sometimes the guys can't let go of their past even if they want to," said Ray Ferraro, CEO of Prowl Entertainment, a rap management company in Rialto.

Ferraro searches for talented rappers in the Inland Valley, then manages them until they're signed to larger record labels.

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"Sometimes the notoriety gets them killed," he said.

It's always been a life of violence, said Assassin, a Blood leader from Los Angeles who is working with Shaw on the gangs' truce.

"We're all brothers," Assassin said. "We all bleed the same ... I have faith that the truce will grow from the West Coast to the East Coast."

Shaw, a 28-year-old father of two, wants a better life, but admits he has difficulty letting go of his past. He hopes that the music he and his friends are producing will be the start of something better -- if not for them, then maybe for the next generation.

Yankee Doodle

Last week, Shaw, Hollywood, Memphis, Mad Dog, Moss Major, S.C. Capone, Big Devil, Lil' Crackle, Seven, and more than 25 other gangsters from various parts of California met at Groove Time Studios before heading to Carlos O'Brien's bar in San Bernardino for a rap competition.

"Hey, put your rags in your pockets," Shaw yelled at the men. "I told you not to have the rags showing until the performance."

The rags -- red and blue bandannas, symbols of the urban gangs -- were tied together and strung around the necks, wrapped around the heads and hanging from the jeans of the performers and their groupies. Gangs have waged war over the colors in cities across the nation, leading to the untimely deaths of thousands of young people. Tied together, they are a symbol of unity, a "Yankee Doodle movement," Shaw said.

Sitting on the front porch of the old house near the studio where Shaw lives most of the time, he compared stories about the American Revolution -- patriots joining forces -- with his effort to

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unify gang members through music, making Yankee Doodle a historically appropriate name for their label, he said.

"This unity is a combination of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and the Black Panther movement," he said. "We have to stop killing each other and focus on the real issues that afflict us."

That Tuesday night, the gangs were choosing to not wage a war with guns and fists, but with words. The Underground Urban Icons rap competition, which offers a \$10,000 prize to the winner, was where they started.

In fact, these notorious gang members from the Inland Valley and Los Angeles believe that by displaying their colors together, they're getting the word out that a truce has been called.

"We're making history," Assassin said.

Heading downtown

The performers headed to downtown San Bernardino, gangsta rap blaring from an armada of souped-up vehicles ranging from Cadillac Escalades to Honda Civics. Seven, a young gospel rapper and former Sacramento gang member, displayed the new Yankee Doodle sign, forming a Y with his hand, to members in passing cars.

"Yankee Doodle," they yelled back, before disappearing around the corner and into a dark parking lot.

Once they arrived at the club, they jumped into a long line with other gang members and rappers from around the area. They hadn't been to the club in a few weeks. The burned-weed aroma of marijuana wafted out of a back alley near the club, lingering in the air on that warm night.

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Two weeks earlier, a fight had shut the club down and suspended the rap competition. This time, security was tighter, and three large guards searched everyone who entered the club.

Nothing marred the night's competition. And the four members of the Yankee Doodles who competed got the highest score.

"The hardest part of being a manager to these guys is getting them to maintain," said Ferraro, one of the competition's three judges. "Their gangster life makes their music really gritty. It's like a double-edged sword, but they've got to walk away from it."

The rap competition -- which is sponsored by record companies -- started four weeks ago and will continue throughout the summer until a winner is selected, Ferraro said.

Last week, Richard Baker, editor of Fresh Coast, a custom car and music magazine, stopped by Groove Time to hear Shaw's "Yankee Doodle" compact disc and meet some of the rappers.

"We're going to be distributing their music on our route across the country," Baker said. "The music is tight. It's good stuff."

But whether Shaw and the others will make any money from their music was unclear, and they could use the help: Many of the rappers live in the studio, are unemployed and nearly broke.

Chasing the dream

Seven months ago, Shaw's wife, Serina Stathum, had a baby girl at Pomona Valley Hospital. Shaw said his second child changed the way he saw the world.

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"My baby is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he said. "I'll change, because I want her to grow up knowing that I did what it took to change."

Stathum, who has never been involved with gangs or the gang lifestyle, says it's her love for Shaw that keeps her from walking away.

"I stay because a part of me wouldn't be able to forgive myself if anything happened to him," she said. "He believes firmly in this and, in a way, this is his penance."

Paying that penance comes in a variety of forms. This past week, San Bernardino police raided the studio after receiving a call that shots had been fired in the area, Shaw said.

Police confiscated one gun from the premises and made one arrest.

After the officers left, Shaw and the other rappers stood together behind the iron gates. Then they sat together in silence.

Hours later, Shaw was reflective. "I feel safe behind these gates," he said. "It's my compound, my prison yard, my music, and it's the only place I feel at home."