

JAY-Z INSPIRED BY 'GANGSTER'

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Loaded with a razor-sharp lyrical focus and packing serious cinematic production, Jay-Z's epic "American Gangster" shoots a hole straight through 2006's disappointing return-from-retirement "Kingdom Come." Jay's 10th studio album and first concept CD blurs the lines between the iconic Def Jam president's Brooklyn roots and the true story of Harlem heroin kingpin **Frank Lucas**, portrayed by Denzel Washington in the new film "American Gangster." This disc was inspired by the movie, but isn't the soundtrack.

Jay-Z went wild with storytelling inspiration after screening the film, and Sean (Diddy) Combs filled in key components (with his Hit Men production team) of the album. It's a lethal mix of retro soul, over-the-top funk, big-band instrumentation and ferocious beats.

An immediate sense of urgency pervades the intense "Pray," where Jay-Z waxes poetic about a young hustler confronted with a life-changing moral quandary. Lil' Wayne, who killed it on Kanye West's "Barry Bonds," adds his effortless gravelly slurs over the bombastic club banger "Hello Brooklyn." The Jermaine Dupri-produced "Success" features an organ-driven beat and former Roc-a-Fella rival nasty Nas. The Neptunes' Pharrell Williams worked the knobs for Jay on "I Know," and the first single, "Blue Magic," is an '80s-flavored joint featuring a chopped-up En Vogue sample for the hook.

On the bonus title track, Jay spits fire over Just Blaze's full-on production wizardry, proving once again it's never too late to reach a brand new high.

Jay-Z

"American Gangster"

THREE STARS out of 4 stars

(Roc-A-Fella)

In stores Tuesday

ILLUSTRATION: Photo

CAPTION: Jay-Z: Fired up.

CAPTIONWRITER: ARTHUR ELGORT

MEMO: SOUND JUDGMENT

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