

Godfather of Bling Denies He Aided Drug Ring

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He's been called the Harry Winston of the hip-hop world and the godfather of bling, and several rappers have referred to him in their verses. His name is Jacob Arabo, and federal prosecutors are accusing him of laundering money for a huge cocaine distribution network based in Detroit.

But to his loyal clients, who can't get enough of his diamond-encrusted baubles, he is known simply as Jacob the Jeweler. The list of those who have sported his pieces reads like a who's who of urban culture: artists like P. Diddy, Jay-Z, Missy and Pharrell, and athletes like Allen Iverson, Derek Jeter and Shaquille O'Neal.

"If you were a rapper on your way to the top, a stop at Jacob was almost mandatory," said Marvet Britto, founder of the Britto Agency, a public relations company for sports and entertainment figures. "It meant that you had arrived."

In his song "Get in My Car," the rapper 50 Cent rhymes about Mr. Arabo. "Take her to the diamond district/ introduce her to Jacob/ Tell

Colin Moynihan contributed reporting for this article.

her if she like me/ she should keep me icy." In "Touch the Sky," Kanye West raps, "I went to Jacob an hour after I got my advance/ I just wanted to shine."

Mr. Arabo has just a bit part — one short paragraph — in the 39-page indictment handed up by a grand jury in Michigan and unsealed on Thursday. The indictment lists 41 defendants and accuses two of them, Terry Lee Plenory and Demetrius Edward Plenory, of establishing a drug gang in the early 1990's, which they later named **Black Mafia Family**, and conspiring with others to distribute more than 476 kilograms of cocaine. Prosecutors say the gang made about \$270 million in profits from drug sales across the country.

The indictment charges the jeweler — who goes by the surname Arabo professionally but whose surname is listed in the indictment as Arabov — with failing to declare large amounts of cash from purchases that were made by the Plenorys and their associates as a way of laundering drug money.

His lawyer, Benjamin Brafman of Manhattan, said yesterday that Mr. Arabo did not knowingly sell jewelry to anyone involved in illegal activity.

"All of the cash earned by Jacob Arabov from the sale of jewelry was

fully reported, and all the appropriate I.R.S. forms were filed," Mr. Brafman said.

Emerging from his boutique at 48 East 57th Street yesterday, Mr. Arabo, dressed conservatively in a blue pinstriped suit, paused to tell reporters that he was "not guilty, definitely not guilty." He is free on \$100,000 bail, pending a hearing in a Michigan court on July 10.

The charge is the latest twist in what Mr. Arabo has portrayed as a Horatio Algeresque rise from humble Uzbeki immigrant to jeweler to the stars.

Mr. Arabo is known for his way slicked-back coif as well as his custom creations, which range from the simple to the garishly over-the-top. For years, his gargantuan "Five Time Zone" watches, with models costing from \$8,500 to \$1 million, were a must-have accessory. And he has "iced out" — that is, adorned with diamonds — car rims, playing dice, cellphones, video-game controllers and more.

"It's like Burger King with Jacob, you can have it your way," said Minya Oh, author of "Bling Bling: Hip Hop's Crown Jewels" (Wenner Books), in explaining Mr. Arabo's popularity.

In 2004, Mr. Arabo moved his busi-



Photo by Fred M. Conrad/The New York Times

Jacob Arabo, shown in 2005 at his store, wore a 15.80-carat diamond watch in 18-carat rose gold, of his design. It was valued at \$190,000.

ness from a modest counter inside the Kaplan diamond exchange on Avenue of the Americas and 47th Street, where he'd been since the early 1980's, to a \$12.1 million retail townhouse on East 57th Street, near Buccellati and Prada. He redesigned the interior of the boutique to look like a diamond mine.

He drives a Maybach Mercedes, is always impeccably dressed in luxury labels and is often escorted by an armed security detail. His 40th birthday party, held last June at Cipriani

in Midtown, was said to cost well over a million dollars. He has appeared prominently in several music videos and is a character in the video game Def Jam Vendetta. By 2003, he began crossing over to the mainstream, creating pieces for Jessica Simpson (she wore a 22-carat ring of his to the 2004 MTV awards), Sharon Stone (a watch for the film "Catwoman") and Madonna (a pendant).

"If it wasn't for him," said Ms. Oh, "bling wouldn't be the cultural phenomenon it is today."