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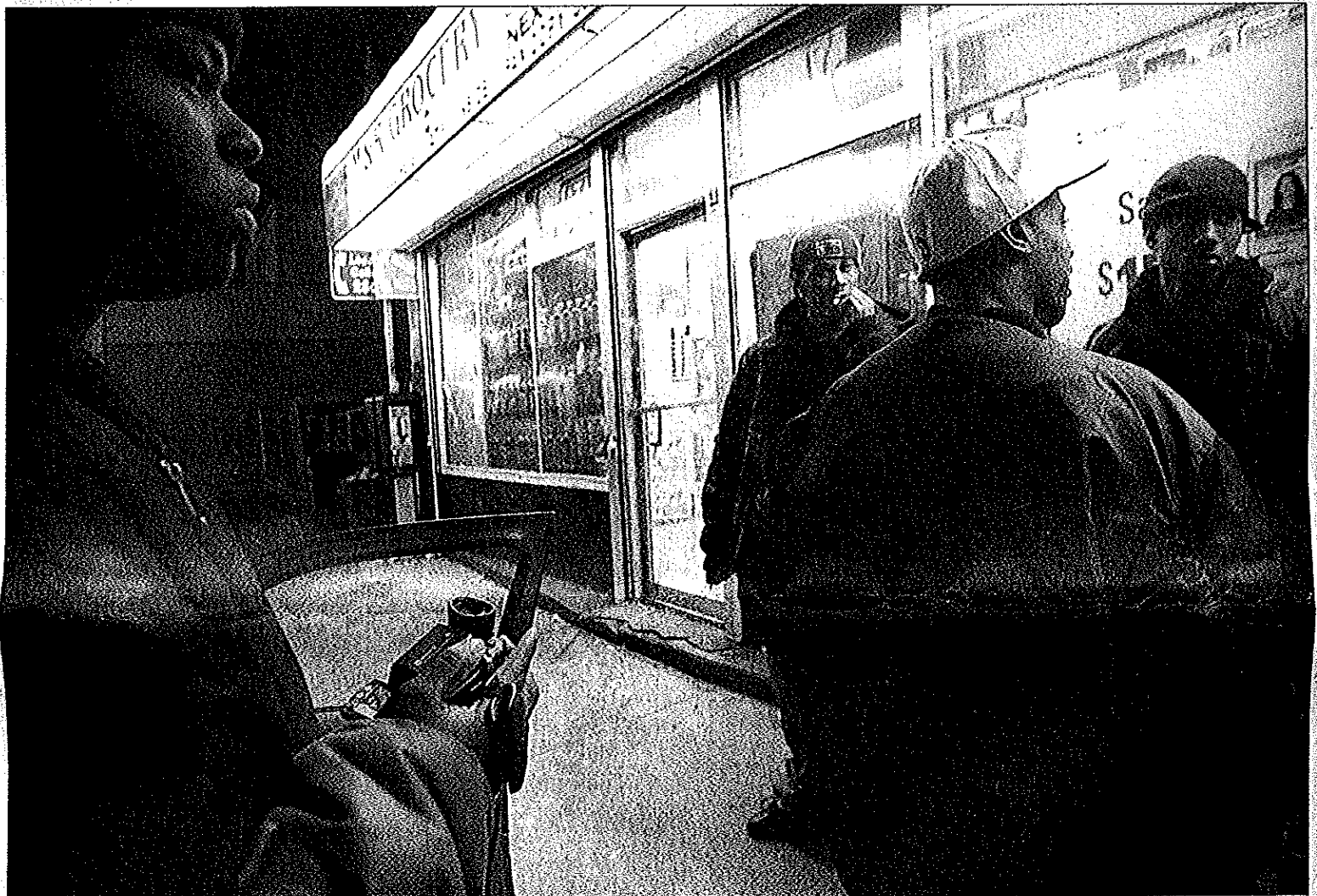
Sunday, February 26, 2006

An edition of The Record

Candid camera



Rob Jackson, a young entrepreneur, shoots part of a video recently near Lou Costello Park in Paterson.



Photos by MICHAEL KARAS/Herald News

Rob Jackson, far left, films a video featuring three local rappers – from left, Sean Skee, Fasinin' and Young Rick – outside of M&R Grocery Store and MultiService in Paterson. The local filmmaker hopes his videos will be his "ticket out" of New Jersey.

PATERSON

Underground videos offer unflinching look at street life

By TOM MEAGHER
Herald News

In the opening scene of one of Rob Jackson's earliest DVDs, a young black man hanging out on the street just lost a bet.

The winner starts to frisk the loser — who had wagered he could perform 150 push-ups — looking for cash.

Another man, a rapper who uses the name Loud Mouth Bully, chimes in with a ghetto truism, "When you lost a bet, either pay up or get laid up."

Without warning, two men start to punch the loser in the head. He turns and bolts down the street toward the intersection. A mob of onlookers gives chase.

On that night, Jackson, a local filmmaker, bounded along behind the assailants to record the scene. His camera bounced erratically and leapt out of focus. Lit only by street lamps, he stopped in the middle of an intersection to capture a shot of the loser curled up on the ground as three acquaintances punched and kicked him.

When another man tried to intervene, he, too, was knocked to the ground and pummeled.

Armed with little more than a handheld camera,

Jackson, 25, spends countless hours filming Paterson's raw street life and homegrown hip-hop artists.

He is one of only a handful of people in the country making "street documentaries," which chronicle the existence of some of America's alienated and forgotten young black men. He hopes that if he can put the Silk City's burgeoning underground hip-hop scene on the map, then he can also use it as his ticket out.

"I'm banking on that one big deal," Jackson said. "I want to get out of Jersey, so I've got to do this." Since July, the entrepreneur has released dozens of videos documenting the city's underground rap scene under the aegis of his one-man production company, G.P.D. — an acronym for "Get Paid Dollars." For Jackson, his logo is both a mantra of the city's underclass and a means to escape.

In his videos, none of the action is choreographed: It just happens. The beating under the traffic light made a great opening of a video for a rapper named Hoffa. A few minutes into filming, gunshots rang out around the corner, off-camera.

The rapper merely turned his head nonchalantly and kept rhyming without missing a beat.

**"I want to
get out of Jersey,
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to do this."**

ROB JACKSON,
Paterson filmmaker

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Jackson's digital camera never wavered, even as people ran past, fleeing from the bullets.

"Money on my mind/ I'm a New Jers' killer/ Keep hustlin' on that rhyme/Trying to be a rich nigg-a," Hoffa sang.

Through his work, Jackson has gained unfettered access to many of the city's neighborhood gangs and their favorite rappers. By association, the G.P.D. logo — built around a diamond-encrusted dollar sign — has gained its own cachet in the stores, where the videos sell for \$10 apiece, and on the street corners.

He has made bodega celebrities out of some of the rap artists he films.

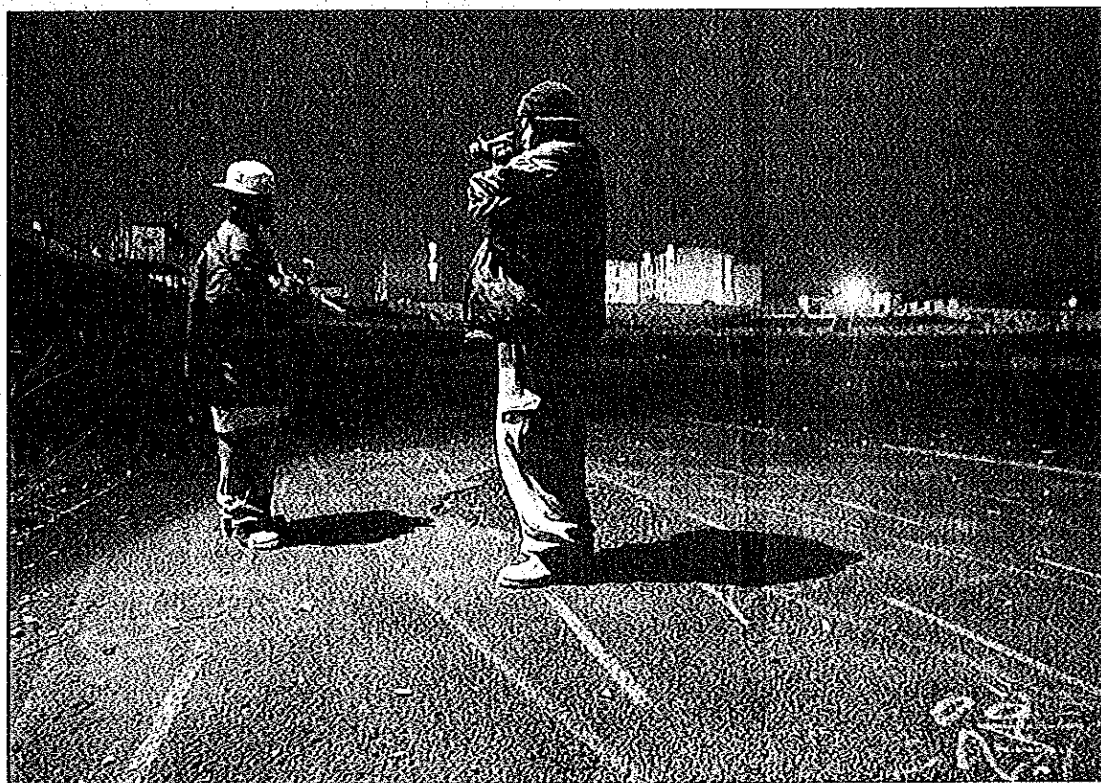
"These dudes don't know business. All they know is music and streets," Jackson said. "They all tell you they don't want to be out there." Most days, Jackson heads out with his camera within an hour of getting off work as a teacher's aide. He often shoots two or three scenes a night, sometimes staying out well past midnight. Then he heads home, edits video and gets a few hours of sleep before going back to work.

His films portray a desperate city eternally cloaked in darkness. Its young men display perfected anti-social postures: drinking Hennessey out of clear plastic cups, passing marijuana blunts and brandishing fists full of cash, gold chains and diamonds.

"Everything that you see is what they actually do every day," said Jackson. "They boast. They brag. They flash guns. They flash money. I want people to see firsthand what actually does happen."

Jackson lives with his grandmother on a quiet, working-class street literally in the shadow of the city's Alexander Hamilton Public Housing Development. But his roots in the 4th Ward, the heart of the city's ghetto where he grew up, have helped him connect with rappers who feel comfortable performing for him and his camera.

"Most dudes ain't real with it.



MICHAEL KARAS/Herald News

Rob Jackson films rap artist Fasenlin' at Hinchliffe Stadium in Paterson. Jackson films, edits and sells his own line of videos. They sell for \$10 each in local stores.

This brother's the most real," said a rapper named Nazkar, who went to grade school with Jackson and has appeared in several G.P.D. videos.

Jackson uses rappers like Loud Mouth Bully and another named Cancun to lead his viewers through the city's subterranean night — like Dante used Virgil as his guide through hell.

He said he films rappers and gang members, drug dealers and wannabes, because he knows there's a market for it. He sells an authenticity that the big name hip-hop artists can only mimic. For many of his subjects, however, he said the outlaw facade is only a pose.

"A lot of them portray this tough image, but they really aren't. When they're around a group of people, they tend to portray a harder image," he said. "Most of these guys, it's like they're rapping just for the attention. Some people rap as a tool to get out of this situation, but the lyrics that they write

don't reflect that. It's more (about) guns, women. That may be all how they see the city."

Jackson said he thinks that the people he films feel powerless. By adopting thuggish personas, they find a place in the culture to belong.

"People in Paterson want to feel like they're part of something. There's not many things to be a part of here," Jackson said. "They want to hang outside in different (gang) colors and create a lot of problems."

Despite profiting from the city's street theater, Jackson said, his ultimate goal is to move out of New Jersey and to the South. He's be-

gun to sell G.P.D.-branded clothes, compact discs and jewelry. But he's still waiting for one of his rappers to make it.

If that happens, he'll follow his own dream and leave.

"It's getting worse. You've got a lot of gang activity going on. Nothing's going to be done about it. If I'm going to raise a family and start a family, I wouldn't want it to be here," Jackson said. "I want to take my family somewhere where they have an actual chance to do something with their lives."

Reach Tom Meagher at (973) 569-7152 or meagher@northjersey.com