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For Jay-Z, Inspiration Arrives in a Movie

By [DAVID M. HALBFINGER](#) and [JEFF LEEDS](#)

LOS ANGELES, Sept. 19 — [Jay-Z](#), the rap superstar and president of Def Jam Records, has quietly returned to the studio to record an album of new songs inspired by the forthcoming movie “American Gangster,” his first “concept” album and second CD in less than a year.

The album, which his label plans to release in early November, came together over the past few weeks after Jay-Z was shown the film, directed by [Ridley Scott](#), in which [Denzel Washington](#) portrays Frank Lucas, a early 1970s Harlem heroin kingpin.

Following the underwhelming critical and commercial reception for his “Kingdom Come” CD late last year — and as Jay-Z grapples with whether to stay on in his post at Def Jam — the tie-in to a major motion picture gives him a chance to rebound strong and extend his reach to a wider audience.

At the same time, it could help Universal Pictures excite younger moviegoers, whom it will need to make money on a costly film with a troubled history. Though it’s not uncommon for films to be released alongside “inspired by” albums, it is rare for them to be recorded by a single artist, let alone by a major star who had no role in the movie.

In an hourlong telephone interview, Jay-Z, 37, who has spoken of spending his early years in Brooklyn both rapping and drug dealing, said that the movie had tremendous resonance for him and had sparked a

burst of creative activity that even he found surprising. He has already recorded nine tracks, almost every one prompted by a specific scene.

“It was like I was watching the film, and putting it on pause, and giving a back story to the story,” he said.

The movie, set for a Nov. 2 release, depicts the Lucas character as an underworld Horatio Alger and an innovator who, despite keeping a low public profile, rose to such power that he was able to defy the Mafia bosses who had traditionally dominated the New York drug trade before being brought down by a special narcotics task force. (Its leader is played by [Russell Crowe](#).) Jay-Z said he thought his fans would be struck by the image of a black man reaching such heights of success, even on the wrong side of the law, much like such ruthlessly efficient [Al Pacino](#) antiheroes as Tony Montana and Michael Corleone.

“It immediately clicked with me,” said Jay-Z, who has made passing references to gangster movies in previous recordings but has never delved so deeply into the genre. “Like ‘Scarface,’ or any one of those films, you take the good out of it, and you can see it as an inspiring film.”

A \$100 million gritty period piece that largely takes place before the birth of hip-hop or many of its fans, “American Gangster” marks a sizable gamble for Universal, which fired one director, [Antoine Fuqua](#), and scrapped the project at a cost of \$30 million before restarting it with Mr. Scott in charge and with Mr. Crowe in place of Benicio del Toro. (Though they share a name, Universal Pictures and Universal Music Group, the parent of Def Jam, are no longer corporate brethren.)

Mr. Scott said he cast the rappers T. I., RZA and Common in supporting roles, hoping to appeal to a younger audience. But [Brian Grazer](#), the film’s producer, said that Mr. Washington also pressed him more than a year ago to consider asking Jay-Z to do the film’s soundtrack.

“I just didn’t think there’d be enough for Jay-Z to do,” Mr. Grazer said, explaining that he resisted because he and Mr. Scott felt the movie required an authentic 1970s feel.

Instead Jay-Z offered to make his own album and release it in conjunction with the movie; Def Jam is also releasing the film's official soundtrack, which features songs by Bobby Womack, the Staple Singers and Sam & Dave. Jay-Z plans to attend the film's premiere but any cross-promotion deals have not been completed, executives said. The movie's trailer already includes an older Jay-Z song, "Heart of the City."

Mr. Grazer, who visited Jay-Z in the studio last week and heard seven of the new songs, said he was impressed by how the movie had "ignited all these memories of his childhood and how he grew up and the experiences he had, and the moral crossroads he had constantly in his life that were so parallel to Frank Lucas's."

Though Jay-Z, whose real name is Shawn Carter, said he'd never heard of Mr. Lucas while growing up in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, he still glimpsed much of himself in Mr. Washington's portrayal: "The way he carried himself. The way he went about things. The way he wasn't loud, but he was very strong."

Echoing the "stop snitchin'" campaign among some hip-hop fans and artists, however, Jay-Z hastened to dissociate himself from Mr. Lucas's decision to cooperate with the authorities to get a more lenient sentence.

"Me, I believe you choose your path and you walk your path, and whatever happens you got to accept it," Jay-Z said.

In "No Hook," a song on the new album, he says:

Please don't compare me to other rappers. Compare me to trappers.

I'm more Frank Lucas than Ludacris. And Lude is my dude, I ain't trying to dis.

Just like Frank Lucas is cool, but I ain't tryin' to snitch.

I'm-a follow the rules, no matter how much time I'm-a get.

I'm-a live and die with the decisions that I'm-a pick.

Jay-Z's new album is certain to punctuate what had been a year of relatively slow sales for Def Jam until the huge chart debut this week of [Kanye West](#)'s CD "Graduation." Jay-Z is said to be mulling whether to extend his three-year employment contract, return to recording and touring full time or explore other options. In the interview he deflected questions about his future. "I would love to work it out" and stay at Def Jam, he said, but he added that he was wavering and would do some "soul-searching" after finishing the album.

His decision to record "American Gangster" is a surprise, given that his last album was released less than a year ago. "Kingdom Come" sold about 1.5 million copies, his lowest figure for a full studio album since 1997. And its elaborate marketing campaign, including alliances with Budweiser and ESPN, prompted some suggestions that Jay-Z's branching-out into other business endeavors, and taste for the jet-setting life, had begun to undermine his street credibility.

He made no apologies for his transformation into a global brand. "Jay doesn't live in Brooklyn any more," he said. Rather, he ventured that "Kingdom Come" was a little too "sophisticated" for some listeners. "American Gangster," he said, would be a return to a tougher, more unflinching view of street life.

"Watching that film, it brought back all these memories," he said. "It took me back to those emotions."

Illustrating his point, he launched again into "No Hook": " 'Poor me, Dad was gone, finally got my Dad back, liver bad, he wouldn't live long, it snatched my Dad back.' "

He added that the song "takes you through this journey — his journey, my journey — so many people's journey that come from the areas that we come from."

Throughout the interview Jay-Z sounded almost jubilant talking about his creative process, and he repeatedly interrupted himself to try out his latest rhymes:

“ ‘Mindstate of a gangster from the 40’s, meet business mind of Motown’s Berry Gordy,’ ” he rapped from “Pray,” another new song.

“How crazy is that?” he said giddily.

And, in another rap:

This is the genesis of a nemesis

Mother America’s not witnessed since

the Harlem Renaissance

birthed black businesses.

“I’m not even joking with you,” he said, laughing. “It’s out-of-body experiences at this point.”