

Is Hip-Hop's Jeweler on the Rocks?

Jacob Arabo owes his jewelry empire to hip-hop. But now the man whose diamond-encrusted watches, crosses, and Jesus pendants decorate everyone from Jay-Z to Diddy to 50 Cent has been snared by the underbelly of rap: accused of laundering drug money for Detroit's Black Mafia Family

By Nancy Jo Sales

He left his house around 9:30 on the morning of June 15, the day he was arrested. He had dressed in a charcoal-gray suit with red pin-stripes made for him by his friend the Italian designer Domenico Vacca.

Jacob always looked good; from the time he opened his stall in the Kaplan Jewelry Exchange, in Manhattan's Diamond District, when he was just 21, he had dressed dip-down, fly. He'd learned some hip-hop slang along the way. They had all come to him: LL Cool J, Biggie Smalls, Jay-Z.

They're the ones who named him "Jacob the Jeweler."

Jacob, born Yakov Arabov in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, went by Jacob Arabo professionally, although everybody from his wife to the Prince of Dubai called him just Jacob. It was more than his name now—it was a modern brand, synonymous with bling.

And yet, there was something old-world about Jacob. With his thick black hair slicked back in its 1940s matinee-idol waves, he could have been an extra out of *Casablanca*—some savvy-looking guest at Rick's Café, winning at the roulette table.

He got into his car, a black Maybach, an expensive ride, around \$500,000. There was a little bit of hip-hop in Jacob too. He could un-

derstand the pleasure of ostentation. He'd come to this country at 14, and now, at 41, he was one of the most famous jewelers in the world.

His Jacob & Co. didn't do Harry Winston's sales (although it made some cake at \$20 million in gross receipts per year), but in terms of design it had become highly influential. It meant something to have a "Jacob," one of his giant, diamond-encrusted "Five Time Zone" watches, costing anywhere from \$5,500 to \$1 million. Everybody wore them now, Leo, Bono, Shaq. Elton John had bought 22 of them to give away as presents. They all came to Jacob.

His wife, Angela, got into the car beside him and fastened her seat belt. She was a petite, raven-haired beauty, a Bukharan Jew like himself, from a city outside Tashkent. They had married in Queens when she was 20 and he was 24.

She looked very nice, as usual, that morning, in a cream-colored suit, her hair pinned back in a curly halo. Jacob had named his line of Angel watches after her. J.Lo wore one. So did Paris Hilton.

Their driver, Alex, pulled out of the driveway of their multi-million-dollar brick Colonial in leafy Forest Hills, Queens, 20 minutes from Manhattan.

Jacob never imagined that, like something out of a hip-hop song, the police were trailing him into the city. As the car turned west

GRIPPING BY SACHA HARFORD;
FOR DETAILS, SEE CREDITS PAGE

onto the Long Island Expressway, the Manhattan skyline appeared before him, the Empire State Building rising like a platinum castle. Maybe Jacob had imagined it in diamonds. He had put diamonds on all kinds of things, from rapper Slick Rick's eye patch to the hood ornament on A Bathing Ape founder Nigo's Rolls-Royce Phantom.

Ever since he'd landed in New York, he had dreamed of owning a piece of it, and now he did: the \$12.1 million landmark town house on 57th at Park, where he'd moved Jacob & Co. in 2004. Lenny Kravitz had come to the opening party. The windows glittered with bling.

At 10:15, when the car pulled up, there were six New York cops standing outside. More inside. Drug-enforcement agents and state police. Jacob opened his car door.

"How you doin'?" said a man standing there, commanding officer Glen Morisano of the N.Y.P.D.'s Drug Enforcement Task Force. "We have a warrant for your arrest."

Jacob stared at him a moment, smiled, and said, "Come on in." He had a reputation for being accommodating.

When the story hit the papers the next day that Jacob the Jeweler had been arrested and charged with money-laundering for a notorious Detroit-based, alleged drug gang known as the Black Mafia Family, the question nobody seemed able to answer was: Why?

The *New York Post* ran the story on its front page—BLING STING; "JACOB THE JEWELER" IN DRUG-\$\$ BUST—with a picture of Jacob looking debonair, flashing his "Jacob." It was big news in New York, where Jacob had become a sort of celebrity, often snapped at events with other, bona fide celebrities—sometimes playfully flashing what looked to be his version of a gang sign. His 40th-birthday party, "held at the Midtown Cipriani's, was said to cost over a million

charged with "the failure to file Forms 8300"—required by the I.R.S. for cash transactions over \$10,000—"after having received large sums of currency" from the Flenory brothers "and others on their behalf," and with the "knowing acceptance of large sums of currency, money orders and cashier's checks from persons he knew to be nominees" of the Flenorys.

"A 'nominee' is a person that provides fraudulent qualifications and/or identity so that the true identity of the money-launderer is concealed," says Glen Morisano of the N.Y.P.D., considered an expert in the field.

On the day of his arrest, Jacob's high-powered New York lawyer Benjamin Brafman issued a denial of all the charges against him, saying, "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."

"Based on the materials reviewed to date," Brafman said in a statement faxed to me a few weeks later, "it is clear to us that Mr. Arabov... had no knowledge about whether or not any people he did business with were themselves engaged in any unlawful activity."

"How could he not know?,"

I asked Brafman—whom I know a bit, having watched him wipe the floor with the prosecution in Sean Combs's Club New York shooting trial, in 2001. How could Jacob not know that these B.M.F. guys weren't exactly choirboys?

"What do you mean, 'How could he not know?,'" Brafman said. "A person comes into the store, they're involved in B.M.F., they say they're involved in the music industry, their billboards are on display in Atlanta."

B.M.F.'s gigantic billboard, set against the Atlanta skyline, declared, THE WORLD IS OURS, a line from *Scarface*. But it could have been referring to the group's drug business as much as its record label, according to the government, which maintains that B.M.F. Entertainment was largely a front. Between the early 90s and 2005, B.M.F. is alleged to have sold at least \$270 million in cocaine, from a Mexico-based supplier, through a sophisticated operation extending from Detroit to Atlanta, Los Angeles, Miami, St. Louis, Orlando, and Louisville.

"The overall conspiracy is quite large and quite powerful," said U.S. Attorney Stephen Murphy on the phone from Detroit.

A two-year investigation, conducted by the Detroit P.D. along with the D.E.A., I.R.S., and N.Y.P.D., led to the October 2005 arrest of the Flenory brothers and 26 others, who were all charged in a superseding indictment.

"These are bad guys," said a detective close to the case. "It's not impossible they threatened [Jacob]."

"The fact is that Jacob did not commit the crimes he is charged with," said Brafman.

A report from a case agent with the N.Y.P.D. alleges that B.M.F. "is responsible for numerous acts of violence including the murder of Sean 'Puffy' Combs's bodyguard Anthony 'Wolf' Jones"—Combs's close friend, who drove him away from the scene of the Club New York shooting in 1999. While it has been alleged that Demetrius "Meech" Flenory killed Wolf, in Atlanta in 2003, in a dispute over a woman, the case agent's report says that Wolf and Meech may have actually been beefing over drug territory, according to an informant. "[Demetrius] has pleaded not guilty to the murder of Anthony Jones and in no way, shape, or form was he involved in it," said his lawyer, Feinberg.

B.M.F. had lived large and, as they say in hip-hop, raw. "We got

At 41, Jacob had become one of the most famous jewelers in the world.

dollars," reported *The New York Times*. Four hundred guests—including his friend Sean "Diddy" Combs, the Bad Boy Entertainment mogul whom Jacob called "Uncle Puff"—had celebrated as Mya, Pras, and Boyz II Men performed.

The United States District Court in Detroit had provided few details about the case. A single paragraph in its 39-page May indictment of the Black Mafia Family (in which "Jacob the Jeweler" is charged along with 40 others with lively and multiple a.k.a.'s) said that "Jacob Arabov facilitated the purchase of jewelry utilizing the drug proceeds of Terry Lee Flenory, Demetrius Flenory"—the brothers who were allegedly B.M.F.'s leaders—"in order to conceal the true source, nature and ownership of the funds involved in these transactions."

The Flenory brothers, now both in custody in Michigan, pleaded not guilty earlier this year. "[Terry] is not connected with B.M.F. in any way," said his lawyer, William Daniel, on the phone. "He denies everything in the indictment." "[Demetrius] denies all the allegations in the indictment," as well, said his lawyer, James Feinberg.

Meanwhile Jacob the Jeweler had worries. He was also being

our own houses, cars, clothes, hos," bragged Meech in a reality-style B.M.F. video. They were known for throwing lavish parties featuring live exotic animals, and for taking over nightclubs, sometimes rolling "100 deep." "I'll spend \$50,000, \$100,000 in the motherfuckin' club," Meech said.

When they came to New York, according to a report from a case agent with the N.Y.P.D., they stayed in the Presidential Suite at a luxury New York hotel and paid "doormen to watch their vehicles instead of using valets. This [was] to prevent security or the authorities from searching B.M.F. vehicles for guns or drugs."

B.M.F. also flaunted their success with jewelry. "Everybody shining like new money," Meech said in their video, and, behind him, other gang members literally shined, dripping with pieces by Jacob the Jeweler.

Having jewelry by Jacob perhaps made them feel like the Wu-Tang Clan, even if they would never be. On the B.M.F. Web site (BMFent.net), Meech can be seen decked out in the slick executive style worn these days by Jay-Z, now the president and C.E.O. of Def Jam and Roc-A-Fella Records. But while Jay-Z, a former crack dealer from Brooklyn, rapped the kind of rhymes that get hip-hop called poetry, the artists on B.M.F.'s label never showed the same sort of promise.

"We thugged out," said their star rapper, Bleu DaVinci, driving around waving a very large handgun in their video. "I got some shit that'll take your life. That shit's gonna blow you about four feet back."

What B.M.F. was good at, according to the government, was not only selling drugs but laundering money. "They had extensive methods," said Detective Morisano. "They'd have nominees buy them properties and luxury vehicles."

Of B.M.F.'s alleged \$270 million haul, Jacob Arabov is suspected of laundering at least \$5 million, according to a case agent in the D.A.'s office in Detroit. "That's just one seizure," said the agent, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

But why would someone as successful as Jacob the Jeweler do this?, I asked. "The only motivation I can think of is greed," the agent said. "Maybe there's more money in it for him."

"Any suggestion that Jacob did the things he is accused of doing for financial gain are baseless and preposterous," said Brafman. "Jacob is a very successful businessman who pays a fortune in taxes."

"It's customer service," said U.S. Attorney Stephen Murphy, also speculating as to a possible motive for money-laundering. "Your folks come in, they have a lot of money, folks without jobs buying \$200,000 worth of jewelry; it's like, 'Hey, I can help you.'"

"Jacob & Co. has very strict policies on how cash is handled,"

said Brafman. "It all gets deposited and reported. No exceptions, regardless of the client."

If Jacob is found guilty, he could be facing up to 20 years in prison. "This is serious business," Murphy said.

"It's a bunch of bullshit," said the rapper Busta Rhymes, a longtime client and friend of Jacob's. (Rhymes has been in the news recently, having been arrested in August for allegedly assaulting a man who

B.M.F.'s billboard in Atlanta declared THE WORLD IS OURS, a line from *Scarface*.

spit on his Maybach.) "Anybody that affiliates themselves with people that are from the street, they always go the extra mile to investigate them. At the end of the day, why would Jacob come this far, purchasing a \$12 million building on 57th Street—why would he do anything illegally? Before Jacob, criminals were buying from [lots of high-end jewelers], but you never heard the fucking feds indict any of these other motherfucking people. What they fucking with Jacob for?"

"There must be some mistake," Jacob said on the morning of his arrest as he led police into his store, according to a detective at the scene.

"I took out my card, and he looked at my card," said the detective, who asked not to be named, "and he says to me, 'Oh, I knew your boss, or your former boss,' and I said, 'Really?' And he goes, 'Yeah, Rudy Giuliani. I made his Yankee watch—very close friend of mine.'"

"If it was said, it was in casual conversation," Brafman said later. "Jacob would never look to inject any of his famous clients into this case. Jacob has regular customers who are far more powerful than the former mayor of New York."

Meanwhile, Angela had become "hysterical," according to the detective. "She just kept saying, 'I don't want any cops in the front, I don't want any cops in here.' She was making a lot of demands.

And then [a police officer] sat her down and said to her, 'Listen—we're all gentlemen here. We have a job to do.' And then he"—Jacob—"said to her, 'Please.'"

"I think Angela was very upset," Brafman said. "As any wife would be, seeing her husband arrested for something he didn't do. I'm not saying these things were said."

Jacob "kept telling us, 'This must be a mistake.' And we said to him, 'We're looking at these guys, the B.M.F.' And he didn't say it, but you could read his face, like: 'Oh, shit,' ya know? Then he said, 'I'll give you anything you want, open the safe.' But we didn't want him to open the safe. We

were interested in documents."

The D.E.A. officials at the scene had with them a search warrant listing 35 items sought as evidence: invoices, bank-deposit tickets, and files related to specific people and transactions. One of these people was Damon Thomas, a successful producer and songwriter who has worked with Mariah Carey and Jennifer Lopez. He is also, *Vanity Fair* has been told, one of at least

LEFT, BY JIM SPELLMAN; CENTER, BY JIM SIMEA

five witnesses in the government's case against Jacob Arabov.

Thomas, 37, a native of Kansas City who now lives in Los Angeles, is half of the hip-hop producing team the Underdogs, with Harvey Mason Jr., son of the great jazz drummer. They have deals with Clive Davis's J Records and Universal Music Publishing. They've had several Top 10 hits and received a Grammy nomination in 2004 for their work on Justin Timberlake's *Justified* album.

In 2004, Thomas, according to police sources, became involved in producing music for B.M.F. Entertainment. (Despite numerous attempts to reach Thomas, neither he nor an attorney for him offered any comment.)

Sometime later that year, 36-year-old Terry Flenory, B.M.F.'s alleged co-leader, introduced Thomas to his jeweler in New York, according to authorities. "Jacob knew of B.M.F. through Damon Thomas," countered Brafman. "Thomas is a well-known person in the hip-hop community. Jacob's understanding of B.M.F. was that they were in the hip-hop business."

Thomas became a big customer of Jacob's, but apparently he didn't pay in a timely fashion. On February 15, 2006, Jacob filed a \$1.9 million lawsuit against Thomas, charging that, between 2004 and 2005, Thomas "purchased numerous pieces of jewelry," and owed Jacob & Co. \$950,000. The suit also alleged that on June 21, 2005, Thomas "borrowed various pieces of jewelry" worth \$965,000 "and [was] either unwilling or unable to return any portion of the jewelry."

When Thomas was informed of Jacob's suit by the *New York Post*, the paper said he "sounded flabbergasted.... 'This isn't right,' he said, contending Jacob Arabo ... was blaming Thomas for a dispute with an unidentified third person." Later on the same day, Jacob dropped the lawsuit.

What was going on between Jacob and Damon Thomas? Flash back to July 11, 2005, and imagine a stretch of Illinois highway. A sheriff with the Bonds County Sheriff's Department stopped Terry Flenory for speeding, according to an N.Y.P.D. case summary. "During this stop the sheriff noticed a significant marijuana smell emanating from the vehicle," said the police document.

While searching the vehicle, the sheriff reported that he found a

"There must be some mistake," Jacob told cops on the morning of his arrest.

stash of jewelry, later estimated to be worth at least \$4 million. After being arrested, Terry Flenory told cops that the jewelry had been rented for a "video/photo shoot... by Damon Thomas from 'Jacob the Jeweler of N.Y.'," said the same case summary.

Released on bail, Flenory (who was not indicted for drug conspiracy until that October) called Thomas and asked him for a favor: to be a nominee, said the N.Y.P.D. document. Flenory allegedly requested that Thomas come to New York with him in order to meet with Jacob and make a claim that the jewelry seized from

Flenory at the time of his arrest had in fact belonged to Thomas.

"Mr. Flenory has no comments about any statements made by Damon Thomas," said his lawyer, William Daniel.

"Thomas stated that he did come to N.Y. along with Flenory," the police report continues, "and that they did meet with Arabov in order to fill out paperwork so that Thomas could make a claim that the jewelry seized from Flenory had belonged to Thomas."

On May 11, 2006, Damon Thomas testified before a Detroit grand jury as to his association with Flenory.

"I think desperate people do desperate things when they get in trouble to get out of it," said Brafman. "When you're a high-profile person like Jacob you're vulnerable. From what I've been able to put together, for every transaction that requires a form we have a form."

"The I.R.S. agents are still reviewing the financial records that had been seized from the warrant executed at Jacob the Jeweler's business," says a police report from June 20, 2006. "However, as an estimate at this point they can say that Arabov had falsified records at least approximately 22 times just from the 22 pieces of jewelry that were seized from Flenory at the time of his arrest."

Jacob wasn't sure what was going on as he led cops upstairs to his second-floor office on the morning of his arrest. His bookkeeper was already there being interviewed by police. She had let them in the store when she arrived at 8:15.

"His wife, Angela, told her, 'Don't say anything,'" said a police officer who had been at the scene.

"I think the reaction was 'We need to get a lawyer.' It was perfectly understandable," said Brafman.

But the bookkeeper had already been talking. "She said, 'I told him he shouldn't get involved with them,'" meaning B.M.F., said the detective with the N.Y.P.D. "She said, 'They would come in with bags of money. Most times we would count it upstairs,'" but sometimes "they would count the money right downstairs." She said, "I knew it."

"The employee in question steadfastly denies making that statement," said Brafman.

"What she also may have been referring to," Brafman went on, "was the fact that there had been a problem with some of the purchases by B.M.F. because some of their checks did not clear."

When cops looked in the safe, they found five pieces of custom-made jewelry waiting to be picked up by B.M.F., which kept an account at the store: large pendants with the gang's logo in diamonds. "B.M.F. 4 Life," one said.

"I said to [Jacob], 'Listen—what's B.M.F. stand for?'" said a police officer who was at the scene. "And he said, 'I don't know, Be My

Darling,
I said
I'm
seeing
a plastic
surgeon,
not
hiring
one.

Open

INTRODUCING

PREVAGE™ Eye

Anti-aging Moisturizing
Treatment

BLING

Friend?" And I was like, "Yo, man, come on."

"I don't believe Jacob said that," said Brafman, "but if he did, it was him, under the tension of the moment, trying to inject some humor." They led Jacob out the front of the store in handcuffs.

"His wife is telling me, 'You can't walk him out the front—he's not a crook. You can't put handcuffs on him,'" continued the officer. "And I said, 'Look, he's under arrest, this is procedure.'" "She did not want him to be embarrassed or publicly humiliated," said Brafman.

As they drove Jacob away in a black cop sedan, the rapper Bow Wow happened to pull up in front of the store, coming to shop. Seeing cops there, he leaned out and put a hand up as if to ask, "What's going on?"

"Sorry, we're closed," said an officer.

A few weeks later, I met Jacob at his store. The inside is fashioned to look like a diamond mine, lined with row upon row of bling.

"The first time 'bling' was used was in a Jamaican reggae song in 1969," I'd been told by Reggie Osse, co-author of the newly released *Bling: The Hip-Hop Jewelry Book*, "for the sound the sparkling of a diamond would make under sunlight if 'sparkle' could make a sound."

Jacob's other nickname is "the King of Bling." In Jacob & Co. you can almost hear the sound, from the elegant two- and three-carat platinum engagement rings (which the *New York Times* Style section tells us are now favored by "preppy girls from Connecticut") to the enormous diamond crosses favored by rappers who give thanks to God in their award-acceptance speeches.

"It's the quality of the diamonds," said Ines Gierke, Jacob's model-pretty German saleswoman. "They come from Russia." Actually, they come from all over, including the Angolan mines of Jacob's cousin Lev Leviev, the Israeli multi-billionaire and good friend of Vladimir Putin's. Leviev has mounted the first-ever challenge to the De Beers diamond cartel. In 2004, a controlling interest in Jacob & Co. was bought by Erez Daleyot, also an Israeli and owner of D.D. Manufacturing, with which Leviev has business interests.

Gierke led me back to a fancy private waiting area with a bar stocked with champagne; there was a noticeable absence of Cristal, which Jay-Z had announced a ban on after its president had said, "We can't stop them from buying it"—meaning rappers.

I waited for Jacob. He'd been released the day of his arrest on \$100,000 bail. On

July 12, in Detroit, he pleaded not guilty. He's not allowed to travel outside the U.S. without permission until his trial, which Brafman says could be postponed for up to a year.

Hip-hop Web sites had been buzzing with sometimes rude speculation about his situation, caught between the law and the law of the street. "Jacob da jewler better keep his mouth closed dem B.M.F. niggaz gona merck [kill] his rich ass," said "Real South Nigga" on the message board of XXLmag.com.

Jacob appeared. He was wearing another suit by his friend Domenico Vacca—gray with blue pinstripes this time, with a turquoise pocket-square. He looked great, as if he'd just come back from a month in the South of France. (Actually, he would miss his friend Diddy's perfume-launch party in Saint-Tropez the following week.)

I said something to him about my being sorry for his troubles. "What troubles?"

he said, blinking his big, friendly brown eyes, moving around swiftly. Angela was with him, looking shy, or perhaps wary.

The condition of our interview was that I could not ask Jacob anything directly about his case; Andrea Zellan, an associate from Benjamin Brafman's office, was also there, to make sure that I did not.

Later, when I asked her if Jacob could tell me something about how he feels about the case, she faxed me a statement from him saying, "This is my worst nightmare. . . . I did not intentionally violate the law and I would never knowingly deal with people involved in criminal activity."

We all went to a small, sleek office at the back of the store, where, Jacob said, "we make deals." There was a large collage on the wall, all pictures from Jacob's former stall in the Kaplan Jewelry Exchange. It was like a hip-hop history lesson, with photos of nearly

PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN BECKER

every rapper who ever mattered, coming to buy bling from Jacob the Jeweler.

Jacob gestured to a picture and said "Tupac" with a salesman's pride. "It gets hard on the fuckin' streets," Tupac once rapped. "I rhyme and do crime cuz either way pays me a little."

"Biggie Smalls," Jacob said, pointing to another picture. Biggie wrote a song, "The Ten Crack Commandments," a playbook of what he'd learned as a crack dealer in Brooklyn. (He was murdered in Los Angeles in 1997.)

It has become part of Jacob the Jeweler lore that Biggie was Jacob's first customer in hip-hop, after his girlfriend (later his wife), R&B singer Faith Evans, left a deposit of \$5 for a diamond ring, saying her boyfriend would come back to pay the rest later. That was 1993.

"Fat Joe, Ludacris, Ja Rule, 50 Cent," said Jacob, pointing to more pictures.

"Fitty," as he is also known, has rhymed about his former life as a crack dealer in Queens. "Don't make me run to you, put the gun to you / Have yo ass on Phil Donahue explaining what the fuck I done to you," he rapped in 2005's "Make Money by Any Means."

"He's a good friend of mine," said Jacob.

There was Allen Iverson (in 2004, Jacob signed a deal with the N.B.A. to design watches with logos for all 29 of its teams), Missy Elliott, Ashanti, Christy Turlington—who wore a 42.9-carat, \$180,000 necklace designed by Jacob when she wed Ed Burns in 2003—Nicky Hilton, Naomi Campbell, Kimora Lee Simmons. "She is a princess of jewelry," Jacob said appreciatively.

"You know this gentleman, right?" he asked. It was Brad Pitt. Then Spike Lee, Fred Durst, Justin Timberlake, Adrien Brody, Jessica Simpson. The pictures were a study in how hip-hop style had been adopted by Hollywood, and so had Jacob the Jeweler.

I asked him when he had known he had made it. "There was one moment," he said. "Puffy asked me to come to his suite at the Peninsula Hotel right before the MTV Awards," in New York, in 1999. "He was dating Jennifer [Lopez] at the time. He said, 'You're going to dress me and Jennifer for MTV.' They were the hottest thing in the world. And I was exclusive."

"It's hard not to become friendly with Jacob," Sean Combs told me on the phone. "He's a cool cat. At Christmastime, I was in there shopping with my girlfriend [Kim Porter], and he gave me a couple of things for my girlfriend and my mother. It was on him."

And there was Kanye West. "I went to Jacob an hour after I got my advance / I just wanted to shine," he rapped in 2005's "Touch the Sky."

West, who briefly considered doing a line of sneakers with Jacob, passed on commenting for this story. So did over 20 other hip-hop artists I called, many of whom have rapped

about Jacob, in more than 40 songs—a priceless sort of advertising which marketing surveys say makes Jacob the Jeweler "cool."

"Which is your favorite?," I asked Jacob, of the songs.

"I don't know, I don't know," he said, smiling. He didn't seem to know any of the names. He liked U2, he said. He pointed to a picture of Bono wearing a "Jacob." "At this party, he kissed my hand. He says, 'You're a genius.'"

"He's an incredible salesman," Busta Rhymes told me on the phone. "He knows how to charm the shit out of his clients and treat them with respect. I respect the way he handles me."

"Nothing is impossible," Jacob said, telling me about his reputation for making custom jewelry. (He actually got into some hot water for this practice in 2004, when Cartier filed a trademark-infringement lawsuit against him for putting diamonds on the faces of their watches and reselling them without permission. As part of the settlement, he had to take out ads in major papers including *The New York Times* condemning such "illegal conduct" and "unauthorized alterations.")

He told me he'd just made an 18-karat-gold BlackBerry cover for Pharrell Williams, the hot hip-hop producer and rapper. He seemed excited about it, dialing Williams on his own BlackBerry and handing it to me. "People are astonished by it," Williams said. "It's like art. It's like something a king would have."

I told Jacob a story recounted to me by the *Rolling Stone* writer Touré, who said he had gone on an interview with Kanye West, and "I started mocking him for having a white-Jesus [pendant]. So he called Jacob, and immediately Jacob was like, 'Sure, absolutely.' He dropped everything for Kanye. He spent hours trying to turn white Jesus into black Jesus"—pulling out trays of brown and yellow diamonds. "But in the end he convinced Kanye Jesus looked better white," Touré said.

Hearing this story, Jacob burst into laughter and started speaking Russian to Angela, who was sitting beside him. She'd been saying nothing the whole time. Now she also giggled.

"Nobody really sure that Jesus had blue eyes or brown eyes," Jacob said with a twinkle. Jacob & Co. now sells black and white Jesus pendants.

Tashkent, the city Jacob's from, is modern and dappled with the onion domes of ancient mosques. While mostly Muslim, it has an enclave of Jews (formerly from Bukhara, Uzbekistan) who never returned to Israel after the destruction of the First Temple, in 586 B.C. It was once a stop on the Silk Road, the trading route from China to the West.

Jacob's family, the Arabovs, were a "huge family whose history started 200 years ago,"

It just
breaks
my heart
when
I see
younger
women
look
older
than I do.

Open

INTRODUCING
PREVAGE™ Eye
Anti-aging Moisturizing
Treatment

I had been told by Jacob's rabbi, Itzhak Yehoshua, the chief rabbi of the Bukharan Jews in the U.S.A., out in Queens. "They were honest businessmen in the silk trade."

In 1970s Tashkent, Jacob's father was in the liquor business, selling his own vodka, wine, and beer. But, Jacob said, "you couldn't be very

"There's nothing wrong with taking cash as payment," says Jacob's lawyer Benjamin Brafman.

wealthy man. Like, everybody had to be equal. All the furnitures look the same. Everyone has the same jewelry." Seeking a better life, the family immigrated to Brooklyn in 1979. They were helped by Orthodox Jewish organizations, although they were not religious themselves, having been prevented from practicing Judaism in the Soviet Union.

Jacob's father worked in a bakery and sold hot dogs. "He was depressed a little," Jacob said. "He was stressed out because he couldn't provide the same things he could provide before."

At 16, Jacob dropped out of Forest Hills High School (his family had by now moved to Queens to live within its Bukharan community) and enrolled in a six-month jewelry-making course sponsored by Hasidic Jews. He graduated four months later. He'd always wanted to be a photographer. Jewelry, he said, was "just to make money, to support a family." But he found out he was good at it. "I have good eyes and I design, I create."

In the next nine months, he went from a craftsman's job in the Diamond District—"Here's a hundred bracelets, weld them together"—at \$125 per week, all the while making his own jewelry from leftover gold and selling it on the side in Queens, to owning a jewelry factory near the district, at age 17.

For the next four years, he would work in the factory four days a week and, the other three, travel to jewelry stores throughout New York and New Jersey, selling his wares; it was the 80s, so there was a lot of gold and big hoop earrings. And then, he said, "I almost got robbed and killed on the road, and I said, That's it. I quit this. And that's how I opened my retail store"—his stall on Sixth Avenue. This was 1986.

What changed his mind, he said, wasn't his fear of being robbed of money or jewelry, but of trust. "You buy on consignment, and you buy on credit. You owe people. If you get robbed, your life is over, because nobody ever will trust you again. In our business, trust is everything."

In 1998, Jacob was arrested by the F.B.I. for criminal possession of stolen property. Brafman was not aware of this when I first told him about it. "It was a mistake," he said later. "The charges were dropped and the records have been sealed."

Actually, the first hip-hop jeweler was not Jacob the Jeweler, but Tito the Jeweler, also known as "Manny," for his father, an Ecuadoran immigrant who gained a cult following in the 70s, selling wild, custom-made pieces to pimps and drug dealers.

Hip-hop style soon followed street fashion. In the 80s, "I got a call from a gangster in Queens saying, 'I'm gonna send over a friend of mine.' It was LL Cool J," said Tito Caicedo on a hot day in July in the Diamond District.

"They were all mine—Rakim, Salt-N-Pepa, Biggie," said Tito, 47, wistfully. "Maybe I should have fought harder for what I had. Jay-Z rapped, 'I took my Fritos to Tito's.' But it's too bad in the end they took their bigger Fritos to Jacob."

"Why did you and all the hustlers start bringing your business to Jacob?" writer Minya Oh asked the rapper Roxanne Shanté in her book *Bling, Bling: Hip-Hop's Crown Jewels*.

"Because he did not question our money," Shanté said. "A lot of times, when you're someone bringing over \$10,000 in cash, you want your money to be respected and accepted. Jacob didn't put you through no hassles—he took it."

"Jacob also filled out the appropriate I.R.S. forms and filed them," said Brafman. "There's nothing wrong with taking cash as payment.

The fact that Jacob didn't embarrass people is to his credit."

"Jacob's the man," said Gary Koptyev, a jeweler at Diamonds, U.S.A., and also a Bukharan Jew. "He's got the charisma, got the style. A lot of people are jealous of him. He was cool just like me."

"Jacob thinks he's black," said a young jeweler called "Red," smiling.

Koptyev spoke to him sharply in Russian.

"I will tell you something about Jacob," said Koptyev.

"He's the only man who could smoke cigars in a public place and no one would say anything. Even the owner of the restaurant would say nothing."

At the end of our interview I told Jacob I had just one last question: "Who's Damon Thomas?"

Immediately his demeanor changed.

He stared hard across the table at me. "Who told you this name?" he said. Angela pursed her lips.

"We're not talking about that on the record," said Andrea Zelman, the lawyer. There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

"What—is he running for president or something?" Jacob asked with a sarcastic smile.

And then he left without saying anything else.

"My grandmother had a saying," one of the diamond dealers on 47th Street had told me, talking about Jacob. "May your feet take you in the right direction, and with the right people." □