COLUMN ONE

Rap's Captive Audience

Ex-con musicians with a white power message are using a sales method pioneered by some black artists: promoting their album in prison.

By Chris Lee, Times Staff Writer

The three burly, skin-headed members of the hip-hop group Woodpile want a bigger audience, but they know the odds are long.

They have no hope of cracking mainstream radio or MTV with songs like "They Hate Us" or "I'm a Wood," in which they rap menacingly about blasting enemies with shotguns. Further limiting their commercial prospects, their August album, "The Streets Will Never Be the Same," boasts of the group's affiliation with the Woods, a white power prison gang. (CDs are banned in most maximum-security facilities because of their potential as weapons.) In recent years, RBC's prison marketing has resulted in underground hits for Compton rapper-producer DJ Quik — now serving a five-month sentence for assault — and Memphis rapper 8 Ball. To hear it from the company's executives, a cellblock hit can lead to superstar Jay-Z in 1996. "That was us branding ourselves and our artists as guys that had money."

So the Arizona-based group's label is using a viral marketing technique to create word of mouth. Its goal is to connect with an influential constituency of taste makers. Namely, people behind bars.

Since June, executives at the marketing firm RBC Records have been sending out bundles of Woodpile promotional material twice a month to several dozen of the group's incarcerated friends, supporters and family members.

As the thinking goes, Woodpile gets buzz in the prison yard that translates into positive word of mouth, spreading beyond penitentiary walls as prison visitors and released prisoners carry the gospel of Woodpile to the streets.

For Brian Shafton, an RBC partner, jailhouse marketing makes obvious sense. "Prisons are great because you have an incredibly captive audience that has a lot of entertainment time on its hands," Shafton said.

"These people are definitely influential, and not just in the prisons," he said. "A lot of these guys are still calling shots in the outside world. You look in some of these urban communities and you see some of these pimps and gangsters as the governors of the ghetto."

Major labels have tried unusual brand-building techniques, but prison marketing isn't on their radar yet.

"Back in the day, what we considered grass-roots marketing was running in the club, buying every bottle of champagne and leaving them on tables," said entertainment mogul Damon Dash, who launched Roc-a-Fella Records with rap superstar Jay-Z in 1996. "That was us branding ourselves and our artists as guys that had money."

But he was appreciative of RBC's innovations. "It's a saturated market now, and how many times can you sell people the same stuff?" he said. "I think it's creative to go the jail route."

In the past, targeted hip-hop salesmanship has resulted in gangbusters business.

In the late 1980s, marketers for the incendiary rap quintet NWA began peddling the group's albums from the trunk of a car at Torrance's Roadium Swap Meet and giving away promotional "merch" to Huntington Beach skateboarders and surfers. Within five years, NWA's label, Ruthless Records, was one of the most successful in the world.

"Rebels are always opinion makers," said Ruthless co-founder Jerry Heller.

A respectable album run inside prison means selling as few as 1,000 cassettes. (Although rules vary from state to state, CDs are banned in most maximum-security facilities because of their potential as weapons.) In recent years, RBC's prison marketing has resulted in underground hits for Compton rapper-producer DJ Quik — now serving a five-month sentence for assault — and Memphis rapper 8 Ball. To hear it from the company's executives, a cellblock hit can lead to outside sales of up to 300,000 copies: major success for an independent record label like Woodpile's imprint, West Coast Mafia Records.

With 2.2 million people incarcerated in America — an estimated 548,000 of them African American and between the ages of 20 and 39 — the penitentiary has come to take on an almost mystical importance within hip-hop, with its African American roots.
Nelson George, author of "Hip Hop America," says prison is an indivisible part of the black experience. "In this country, black people have been getting incarcerated justly and unjustly since we got here," he said. "The prison system has impacted black culture. And its influence on hip-hop is a subset of that."

Of course, hip-hop artists who have never seen the inside of a cell, including Kanye West and the Black Eyed Peas, regularly top the pop charts. But in recent years, the number of rap stars being incarcerated has skyrocketed, and the notion of the clink as a kind of "finishing school of hard knocks" persists in gangsta rap.

Prison officials have so far not taken issue with efforts to popularize hip-hop in prisons — there is nothing illegal about what RBC is doing. But according to Lt. Brian Parriott, a spokesman for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, officials will be keeping their ears open for Woodpile's music.

"We don't support gangsta rap that would encourage a criminal mind-set," he said. "The department is definitely not going to be supportive of anything that is influencing individuals to break any law. If the type of music they're producing would influence gang activities, the Department of Corrections will take actions to block the music from coming in to the prison system."

It's ironic, perhaps, that a white-power group like Woodpile would turn to rap as the musical genre best suited to their expressions of their prison experiences. But the members of Woodpile — all ex-cons — say their music celebrates "white pride," not white supremacy. As the most forward face of the Woods gang (the name is a play on a slur for a white person: "peckerwood"), they characterize themselves as in opposition to such racist gangs as the Aryan Brotherhood and the Nazi Low Riders.

In the song "I'm a Wood," the group makes its unflinching attitude toward violence explicit. "Bloody bodies exploding, bullets reloading... I'll never stop until your body stops convulsing," Woodpile member Critical raps. "I'm a Wood — the type right outta the pen. I'm a Wood — so let the beatings begin."

The song is also intended as a rallying cry for Woodpile's target audience. "They call 'I'm a Wood' the white-boy anthem," said Ben Grossi, RBC's vice president of marketing. "You don't think every white prisoner isn't going to want to own the white-boy anthem?"

The only way for prisoners to buy music is through direct-mail services, including Pack Central, whose most recent catalog offers cassettes from artists such as Kris Kristofferson and Queensryche alongside hip-hop titles from the Game and 50 Cent. But although RBC advertises its artists in the magazine Murder Dog — a publication with editorial content and tone specifically tailored to inmates' interests — a major part of the company's promotional push involves the use of "street teams" inside the slammer.

It's a prison version of viral marketing.

"It's real similar to the street teams that you use on the street," said Woodpile member Diesoul Ether Bunny, referring to urban guerrilla marketers many major record labels enlist to put up posters and stickers in exchange for music and merchandise.

"Here's a guy who loves your music," Ether Bunny said. "He hits you up to find out where he can buy it and you talk to him about doing promotion. He gets his friends involved, next thing you know, you send him a bigger box of fliers. We're doing the same thing in the penitentiary."

Consider the efforts of Richard "Cripper" Charles. Woodpile bandmates Ether Bunny, Crisis and Critical have been sending Charles copies of the group's magazine ads, lyric sheets, show fliers and CD inserts. Charles has been distributing them to fellow inmates at the maximum-security prison at Yuma, Ariz., where he is serving a 15-year sentence for aggravated assault.

Another incarcerated fan of the group, known to them only as "Juni," has taken a more direct promotional approach. He had the word "Woodpile" tattooed across his upper torso.

Sacramento rapper Shawn "C-Bo" Thomas, West Coast Mafia's founder and chief executive, knows how gangsta rap is trafficked inside. He's not in prison but has served time on numerous charges, including weapons and drug possession, promoting gang violence and making threats to law enforcement personnel. "The music is what everyone wants to hear behind the wall," Thomas said. "When a new tape comes out, it goes dorm to dorm. They listen to it and then another person says, 'I got next.' You gotta make a list to listen to this music. Then everybody's trying to order it."

In an era when pop culture consumers are faced with an overwhelming array of entertainment choices, RBC discovered that prison is also a place for fans to intimately connect with music without the distraction of television, the Internet or video games. And that can mean big business for RBC artists' back catalogs.

Like C-Bo's discography. The notoriously gang-affiliated West Coast Mafia CEO, 34, has 17 albums to his credit and promoted many of them while housed in the "super Crip" module at Tracy. Soledad and Folsom state prisons in California, selling more than 2 million copies over the last 12 years without the support of radio or music video channels.

"We rely on his loyal, rabid fan base to go out and buy all 17 albums," said Shafton, the RBC partner. "Serving these prisons, we sell 'em one record that's a current release, but we'll also sell 'em the back catalog and the future releases. So it's not one release, it's 16 or 17 records."

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