

Judge won't lower bail for rapper

Bail was set at \$145,000 for John Wilson of the group RAM Squad. His lawyer had sought a reduction.

By Maria Panaritis
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A Philadelphia judge refused to lower bail yesterday for RAM Squad rapper and alleged drug dealer John Wilson after a prosecutor with a penchant for theatrics warned that the performer known as Tommy Hill was too great a flight risk.

In a gesture-rich monologue that earned him accolades from Municipal Court Judge Frank T. Brady, Assistant District Attorney Scott Sigman unleashed a torrent of opposition to a defense request that bail be dropped to \$50,000 for Wilson, arrested Dec. 23 on drug-dealing and -possession charges.

Wilson, 28, is being held on \$145,000 bail on charges that he sold more than \$10,000 worth of cocaine to a police informant. A onetime associate of jailed South Philadelphia mobster Joseph "Skinny Joey" Merlino, Wilson is the lead performer in RAM Squad, a group of North Philadelphia rappers and producers who have been under federal drug investigation since the late 1990s.

To be released from custody, Wilson must post 10 percent of bail. Whoever produces the cash also must prove through income statements that the money was earned legitimately.

Defense attorney Gina A. Capuano asked that bail be lowered. She did so after Brady postponed yesterday's preliminary hearing until Feb. 23.

"The bail is set at an exorbitant amount," Capuano said. "He's not going anywhere. He can't go anywhere - everybody knows who he is."

Sigman, however, produced a thick computer printout suggesting otherwise - a record of aliases, bench warrants and criminal misdeeds dating to when Wilson was a juvenile.

The prosecutor dramatically flung the stack downward, where it unfolded like an accordion and clumped at his feet.

Wilson, he said, has 10 prior addresses in Ambler and Philadelphia, and he offered to list them.

Sigman continued: "He has six aliases: Thomas Bullock, John Wilson, Tommy Hill, Troy Hill, Anthony Faulkner, Tommy Green."

He said Wilson failed to appear in court 11 times between 1989 and 2002 for criminal cases in Philadelphia, Montgomery County and New Jersey.

And last Wednesday, a day after his latest arrest, Montgomery County authorities requested that Wilson be kept in custody because he violated parole there on an assault case, Sigman said.

If Wilson is convicted of drug charges in Common Pleas Court, he faces up to 10 years in state prison, Sigman added.

"Given the bench warrants, given the quantity of drugs, the commonwealth clearly requests this court to keep bail the same," Sigman said.

Sigman piled the unwieldy stack back into a messy heap and tossed it into a box.

Brady, meanwhile, smiled and commended the prosecutor's boisterous presentation during an otherwise subdued lineup of cases. Even the defense attorney, who suggested Sigman was playing to reporters in the courtroom, smiled.

"It was an appreciated change of pace," the judge said, "... an impressive presentation."

And for the time being, the judge ruled, Wilson's bail would remain unchanged.

Wilson was arrested in Northeast Philadelphia last week after police raided an Oxford Circle rowhouse, where investigators said he had been conducting drug sales in bulk.

Wilson, investigators said, had been supplying narcotics to dealers in North Philadelphia's Richard Allen Homes public housing development and elsewhere in the city. Police had trailed him for about 10 months.

Federal investigators, meanwhile, have been pursuing members of RAM Squad as part of their ongoing investigation. They say the *RAM* stands for Richard Allen Mob, a drug network involving members of the rap group's musical entourage.

As a musical entity, RAM Squad has been in limbo since being dropped by Universal Music Group around the time of their major-label debut, *Random Access Money*, in early 2001.

Merlino had recruited friend and veteran promoter Stephen "Eppy" Epstein to manage RAM Squad and help them land their only big deal. He befriended Wilson in late 1997, days after RAM Squad founder and manager Ronnie Johnson had been gunned down, according to an account Wilson gave in a 1998 RAM Squad video.

Merlino, however, was jailed in 1999 and convicted of racketeering in 2001. Epstein, of Ambler, has said Merlino made no money as RAM Squad's patron.

Other members of RAM Squad's entourage have been jailed in the last few years in connection with weapons offenses, murder and - in an April 2002 federal case - attempting to hijack two luxury cars being towed by the FBI. The cars contained \$852,000 in drug cash hidden in doctored gas tanks.
