

# Ex-dealer wants word out: He's no rat

by George Anastasia, Inquirer Staff Writer, Posted: September 28, 2010



Former Philadelphia rap star Tommy Hill wants his reputation back.

Not the drug-dealing, street hustler, associate of mobsters and kingpins rep. But the street-smart, stand-up for yourself, never turn against a friend rep.

"I'm not a rat," Hill, whose given name is John Wilson, said over lunch one day earlier this month during a visit to Philadelphia.

Once a major player in the local rap music scene and now a convicted felon, Hill, 34, is looking to reestablish roots in his North Philadelphia community and clear up any misunderstanding about who he is and what he's done.

Those misunderstandings, the street-savvy former leader of the rap group RAM Squad knows, can be fatal.

"I need to let the city know that I'm not a creep," he said. "When you cooperate with the government, your life changes. I need to have a piece of my life back."

Hill, who grew up in the Richard Allen Homes public housing project, is a product of the tough streets of North Philadelphia.

His mother was killed when he was 13. His father has been in jail for most of his life. In the mid-1990s, he and a group of friends formed RAM Squad, using an acronym for "Richard Allen Mob."

They called it a rap group. The feds called it a drug gang. In fact, time would show, it was both.

Through the late 1990s, Tommy Hill was a "playa," with one foot in the drug underworld and the other in the city's rap scene.

He dealt with record executives and promoters, and he came in contact with kingpins and mobsters, like jailed Philadelphia crime boss Joseph "Skinny Joey" Merlino, controversial West Philadelphia Imam Shamsud-din Ali, and North Philadelphia drug trafficker Kaboni Savage.

Now, he says, he's put the drug life behind him, but he wants to get back into the Philadelphia music scene.

He knows it's a risky proposition. (Several law enforcement sources, who asked not to be identified, agree. Hill would be better off not coming back to the city, they say.)

Which is why, during a visit from his home near Atlanta, Hill agreed to talk about his past while touting his future.

His comments offer a seldom-heard, street-level analysis of life on the corner.

Hill makes a distinction between being a witness in one drug case - which he was - and being a "snitch," a "rat," or an "informant." He was never, he says, someone who set up friends for drug busts, never someone who secretly recorded conversations, never a "confidential informant" for the police or the FBI.

Investigators are not sure those who operate in the drug world, which frequently overlaps with the rap scene here and in other cities, would make that distinction.

Despite rumors on the street and reports in the media, Hill said he never testified about Merlino, Ali, or Savage.

Now, four years after being released from prison on a drug-dealing charge, Tommy Hill wants to come home.

But in a move that says as much about the city's music business as it does about the drug underworld, he knows he has to "set the record straight" in order to survive.

Prosecutors who worked with Hill declined to discuss specifics about his cooperation but point out that there is nothing on the record in the cases against Merlino, Ali, or Savage that came from Hill.

They also seem to believe he has a chance to turn his life around.

"He's a very charismatic . . . likable guy," said **Scott Sigman**, a former assistant district attorney who used Hill as a witness in a 2004 Common Pleas Court case. "He can connect with people."

Mark Ehlers, a former federal prosecutor who worked with Hill, calls him a "colorful character" who was "misusing his talents."

Hill testified for **Sigman** in the 2004 trial of Johnnie Bellmon and his sons, Harry and Benjamin.

The North Philadelphia drug-dealing trio were accused of running a high-level crack network and stockpiling an arsenal of weapons (an artillery rocket, grenades, guns, and 20,000 rounds of ammunition) to protect their operation.

Hill said that he occasionally sold drugs to the Bellmons, but that they were not part of his organization. Nor was he part of theirs.

They just happened to be in the same business.

During their trial, Hill regaled the jury with stories about the drug underworld. He also told the jury that while they were cell mates in prison, Benjamin Bellmon discussed the weapons they had stockpiled and his plans to eliminate rival drug dealers.

Today, Hill says the only reason he agreed to testify was because prosecutors threatened to indict him on the same charges Benjamin Bellmon was facing.

"That's why I flipped," Hill said. "I wasn't going to go to jail for what he was going to do."

That's the only case in which he took the stand, Hill said. And the only case in which he cooperated.

End of story.

Now living in Georgia and working on a documentary about his life, the always-loquacious former RAM Squad front man says he has turned things around after serving two years in prison for a federal drug-dealing conviction.

Hill doesn't deny that he dealt cocaine during his days on the streets in Philadelphia.

And he doesn't deny that he knew some of the city's biggest players back in the 1990s.

But he says emphatically that he never implicated them in any criminal activity.

He says he considers Merlino, who helped broker RAM Squad's first big record deal, a friend.

He says that while he once dated the stepdaughter of the imam, he never had a business or underworld relationship with him.

Merlino, Ali, and Hill all ended up on the FBI's radar during a series of high-profile investigations in the late 1990s and early in this decade. Charged in three separate cases, they all ended up in jail.

But that's all in the past, Tommy Hill said as he dug into a plate of pasta at Pizzeria Stella on Headhouse Square.

He's no longer interested in the drug underworld. He's coming back to Philadelphia, he said, to put some juice into the city's floundering music scene, coming back to offer local artists an opportunity.

"It's unfinished business," he said. Hill still praises Merlino for helping RAM Squad get a contract with Universal Records back in the mid-1990s. Now he wants to do the same thing for other struggling local artists.

"I can't say enough about what he did for us," Hill said. "He taught me what was important, what mattered."

Some say RAM Squad the rap group was this close to making it big. But then things came apart.

The FBI brought the hammer down in a big drug investigation and linked the imam to a political corruption case that included bugging then-Mayor John F. Street's office.

Merlino was indicted on racketeering charges. And Hill got jammed up for selling crack to an informant.

One of his best friends and a RAM Squad member, Troy Smith, gave him up, Hill said. (Smith declined to be interviewed, but in a video recently posted on YouTube by Hill, Smith said he was pressured by police to set Hill up.)

In the world where Tommy Hill comes from, you don't give up a friend.

Hill says he has three children, ages 10 to 16, living in Philadelphia. And he wants them and their friends to know he's not a snitch.

"I'm coming back to the city, number one, to make sure my kids are all right and have the chance to live productive lives," he said. "And, two, I'm coming back to clear my name."

He's also coming back in search of talent.

He's got a studio set up in Atlanta, and he wants to take Philadelphia artists there to make music. The former rap star says he wants to launch a new Philly sound, albeit one that's recorded in Georgia.

"The music scene is hot in Atlanta," he said. "I want to build my tent where it's hot."

This time, Hill said, things are going to be different. And to underscore that point, he's no longer operating as Tommy Hill in the music world.

He's changed his name. Now he's "Tommy Butta" (as in "butter").

"Because," he said with a smile, "that's how smooth I had to be to get myself . . . out of the situation I was in."

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