

Rap groupie guilty in carjack plot

Tried to steal cash laden cars from the FBI

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Chad Johnson used to hang around with a Philly rap group known as Ram Squad, mob-backed hip-hoppers whose members and associates are subjects of a long-running FBI drug investigation into the so-called "Richard Allen Mob."

Johnson's late brother, Ronnie, who was slain gangland style in 1997, was a founder of Ram Squad, which took its name from a North Philly housing project and produced two CDs before breaking up.

The rap group had the backing of former Philly mob boss Joseph "Skinny Joey" Merlino.

Yesterday, a U.S. District Court jury hung a heavy rap on the former groupie, finding Johnson guilty of conspiring to try to carjack, in broad daylight — from an FBI convoy no less — two Mercedes Benz cars containing nearly \$852,000 in hidden drug profits.

The carjackers' plan was to steal money belonging to an independent drug dealer, but they

had no idea that they were trying to hijack cars that the FBI had just seized from garages in Northeast Philadelphia that day, prosecutors said.

The jury acquitted Johnson of involvement in a Wild West-type shootout with one of the tow truck drivers.

A third carjacker, a second tow truck driver, and a passerby sustained gunshot wounds during the botched carjacking nearly two years ago on busy 3rd Street, near Spring Garden, outside the headquarters of the Fire Department.

At least 26 shots were fired, 16 of them by the carjackers, and 10 by tow truck driver Jimmy Butler Jr., FBI ballistics evidence showed, said Assistant U.S. Attorney Anita Eve, the case prosecutor.

Johnson, who remains in jail, awaits a prison sentence of at least 11 years without chance of parole under estimated sentencing guidelines.

The acquittal on the gun rap saved him 60 months, said defense attorney William Cannon,

who plans to appeal the carjacking conspiracy conviction.

Johnson, 28, of Philadelphia, now faces trial in May in a city courtroom for murder, a charge he also denies.

It's alleged that he fired on a group of people playing dice on a street corner, wounding several, when a man fired back at Johnson and accidentally killed one of the craps players.

In the federal case yesterday, codefendant Jimmy Brown was convicted of the carjacking conspiracy and of involvement in the ensuing gunfight.

Brown, 28, of New York, faces at least 25 years in prison.

"I'm very disappointed," said defense attorney John "Jake" Griffin, who argued that Brown was nowhere near the area when the attempted carjacking went down.

The third carjacker, Fernando Sanchez, was wounded in the shoulder during the shootout.

Sanchez, 28, of New York, pleaded guilty earlier and became the star prosecution witness against Johnson and Brown, hoping to win some leniency for testifying against his former pals. ★

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