

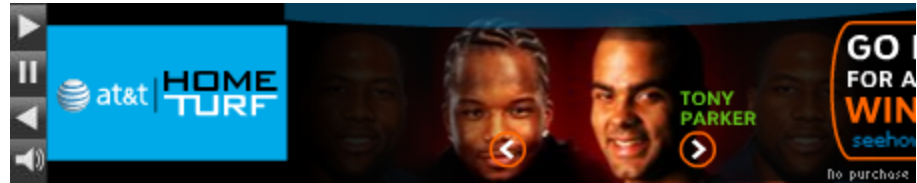
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HIP-HOP FASHION -- Diamond grills for the ladies

By **MEGAN SCOTT**

NEW YORK — Diamonds are a girl's best friend -- even in her mouth.

A diamond-laced grill, a removable mouthpiece with gold, silver, or platinum caps and diamond inlays, is becoming the all-important fashion accessory for hip-hop fashionistas such as singer Kelis and rapper and radio personality Angie Martinez, who spend thousands for a glittering smile.

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

50 Cent, Sean Combs, Vivica A. Fox are among jeweler Gabriel Avianne's high profile clientele. (AP Photo/Bernadette Tuazon)

And female hip-hop fans are following suit. A grill was as essential as a corsage for some prom dates in California. And a school district in Texas, tired of seeing students with gold and silver in their mouth, is planning to ban the metal apparatuses, claiming grills "do not put students in an academic state of mind."

But the women with flashy mouths say grills are just a fashion statement.

"It's just another place to accessorize, like jewelry," says Sunny Anderson, 31, who paid \$1,000 for one last year. "You have jewelry for your nose, eyebrows, your lips, your ears. Girls put diamonds on their nails. There is no body part left other than your teeth."

Grills, also known as fronts, have been around for decades, although with less glitz, and rarely on women. Flavor Flav was wearing gold fronts back in the late 1980s. He hands them out on

his "Flavor of Love" show on VH1. In the pre-Public Enemy days, black people had a gold cap or filling as a sign of wealth, says Carl Taylor, a youth violence and gangs expert at Michigan State University.

"You had a gold tooth, cap or so forth, that was looked upon as, 'He is doing well. He's making so much money,'" says Taylor. "These were older men, working men, big power in the community, wearing them, even some preachers. It was looked upon as crass by many in the middle class."

Preachers, of course, aren't wearing grills these days. Rather, the bling has become a trademark for hip-hop's finest: Master P, Snoop Dogg, and Nelly, whose 2005 song "Grillz," glorified the precious metals and diamonds. The song, featuring rapper Paul Wall, who makes grills on the side, compared the mouth jewelry to a "smile on the rocks."

"As soon as I heard that song, I was like, 'Oh. It's going to be a hit,'" says Raqiyah Mays, a DJ on New York's Hot 97. "Sure enough, it was a top 10 hit. It's introducing mainstream America to another trend. That's always how it is. As soon as you make a song about something, it becomes the new trend."

Adve



THE ELEGANT THUG?

Men are still the primary market for grills; some stores report making as many as 70 a week. But women usually follow male Elayne Rapping, a pop culture expert from the University of Buffalo. And grills are no exception.

Rapper Jean Grae says she has been wearing grills for more than 10 years. She says as a young teen she was folding alu her bottom teeth to imitate rappers like Just-Ice.

"It kinda sucks when you have something and you feel like it's your thing, you've been doing it, and then everyone's doing it "New York was definitely rocking fronts in the early 1990s."

Texas had them too, says Anderson, who went to high school there.

"I think the thing about hip-hop culture and music is when everyone else hears about it, it's already been going in our neighl good 20 years," says Anderson, a radio/TV host in California. "You wonder if 10, 15, 20 years from now people will they say with that song."

It's hard to deny the song had an effect, though, particularly among young women.

"I know a lot of women down south who are wearing them, and I think the Nelly song is a definite reason," says LaTrice Bur media manager for Atlantic Records. "A lot of these kids follow music trends, and one of the trends is to wear a grill. Paul V Nelly is doing it. If all these people are doing it, 'why not?'"

Grills still have that touch of thuggery, says Mays, also executive editor of The Ave Magazine, a hip-hop publication in New associates them with drug dealers, rappers who grew up in the hood, or at least want to pretend they did. The ladies who emanate an I-don't-give-a-damn classiness, an edgy toughness.

"Women no longer want to be the girlfriends," says Rapping. "They want to be tough and be just as tough as the men in the hip-hop, (the perception is) you have to be tough to make it in the world."

ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS

Grae says a grill is something you can get individual with -- maybe spell out your name in the caps, or have only a couple o know exactly what you want, and you are not going to look like the next person," she says.

But she says most people aren't getting them for that reason.

"I think it has grown to be a status symbol," she says. "How much money you can fit in your mouth, which to me, is not the r
But isn't it?

Hip-hop artists love to flaunt their sweet rides and multimillion dollar homes. A grill is an easy way to show wealth. All you h smile.

"Diamonds have been a status symbol all over the world for hundreds of years," says James Allen Schultz, founder and CE Allen Diamonds, an online diamond retailer. "Diamonds are not as expensive as they used to be. If the regular guy can now and display it, that's going to show his peers that he is special and that he is successful."

Anderson says it's not that deep. She bought her grill because she thought it was cute.

Burnette says she is considering getting one because it's cool. "I would wear it as an accessory," she says. "If I'm going to r with my friends, definitely outside of business hours."

Yes, the ladies agree bling bling is probably not coming to the board room. But between the hip-hop artists writing songs at diamond retailers marketing them to Gen Xers and Yers, the accessory is only going to become more popular -- but who kr long.

Hip-hop trends come and go, says Todd Boyd, a hip-hop professor (yes, you read that right) from the University of Souther

"I haven't seen anyone wearing an African medallion in 15 or 16 years, and there was a time when everyone had a fade an gone," says Boyd. "There was a time when pimp cups got to be so pervasive, you saw them everywhere. I think this is a tre think it's going to be around forever. But who knows?"

LISTEN IN:

Avianne & Co., which specializes in fine diamonds, has a high profile clientele -- 50 Cent, Sean Combs, Vivica A. Fox. The has been making "grills" for 20 years. Check out the audio clips for Gabriel Avianne's take on the recent fuss.

Megan Scott is an asap reporter.

Want to comment? Sound off at soundoffasap@ap.org.

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