

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A local rapper hopes the song that landed him in prison will find its way to the high court

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March 7, 2019

No one was supposed to hear the vulgar song that landed Jamal Knox in prison, but now the Pittsburgh rapper wants the U.S. Supreme Court to hear it — along with his lawyer’s arguments that his lyrics were political speech, not a terroristic threat.

The list of his supporters reads like a lineup for a hip-hop festival: Killer Mike, Yo Gotti, Fat Joe, Mad Skillz, 21 Savage, Chance the Rapper and Meek Mill are among the hip-hop artists who filed a [friend-of-the-court brief Wednesday](#).

Like Mr. Knox, whose stage name is Mayhem Mal, the artists want the Supreme Court to weigh in, but Allegheny County District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala Jr. opposes the effort.

Supporters say Mr. Knox “was convicted and sentenced to prison for making a political statement in the form of a song that no reasonable person familiar with rap music would have interpreted as a true threat of violence.” That’s what Alex Spiro and Ellyde R. Thompson, counsel for the rappers, wrote in the brief.

Hip-hop “has offered a legitimate career path, one leading away from the violence and despair so frequently chronicled in rap lyrics,” Mr. Spiro and Mr. Thompson wrote. “If we criminalize those lyrics, we risk silencing many Americans already struggling to be heard.”

The case was spurred by a song titled “[Expletive] the Police,” which Mr. Knox wrote with Rashee Beasley, who goes by Soldier Baez, seven months after Pittsburgh police arrested them on gun and drug charges after a 2012 traffic stop led to a car chase, crash and foot pursuit. The lyrics include, “Let’s kill these cops cuz they don’t do us no good” and mention Glock pistols, bullets and the two officers who arrested them and were expected to testify against them.

According to court filings, Mr. Knox never intended to release the song publicly, but Mr. Beasley uploaded it on Facebook and YouTube, where police — who had been monitoring the duo’s social media accounts — discovered it.

In a nonjury trial, Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge Jeffrey A. Manning found Mr. Knox guilty of terroristic threats, witness intimidation and conspiracy to commit terroristic threats. The state Superior Court upheld the conviction and the state Supreme Court followed suit, saying the song crossed the line from artistic expression to criminal territory when they threatened to kill specific officers. However, justices could not agree on a standard for determining when a statement constitutes a true threat.

That’s one issue Mr. Knox is asking the U.S. Supreme Court to resolve.

“The question of how to determine whether a statement is an unprotected true threat is the subject of widespread disagreement among federal and state courts,” his attorney, Lisa S. Blatt, wrote in her petition in January. “This case provides an opportunity to ... resolve a longstanding conflict in First Amendment jurisprudence” so that courts of every jurisdiction use the same standard.

“Especially because so much online content is presented as irreverent songs or screeds, it is critically important that online speech remain constitutionally protected unless the speech is objectively threatening,” Ms. Blatt wrote. “Internet users deserve robust free speech protections. But at the very least, they deserve clarity.”

Mr. Zappala responded in a brief, saying the lower courts ruled properly.

“The objective nature of the threat contained in the song was never at issue, as Knox at no time in these proceedings even attempted to argue that his song did not constitute an objective threat,” he wrote.

Briefs in support of Mr. Knox’s petition were filed by groups of historians and scholars as well as by the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, the Cato Institute and the Rutherford Institute.

The Supreme Court typically takes up fewer than 100 of the 7,000 to 8,000 cases it is asked to consider each year.