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Memphis Jury Acquits Man in Young Dolph Killing Case

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A Memphis jury on Thursday found Hernandez Govan not guilty of orchestrating the 2021 ambush killing of rapper Young Dolph, rejecting prosecutors' claims that he directed the fatal attack outside a local bakery. The jury deliberated for roughly three hours before acquitting the 45-year-old of first-degree murder and conspiracy charges.

Govan, who faced allegations of planning but not carrying out the shooting, embraced his attorney and thanked Judge Jennifer Mitchell after learning he was free to go.

Prosecutors had argued that Govan instructed two men to kill Young Dolph, born Adolph Thornton Jr., and sought to take a \$10,000 cut from the plot. The state relied on testimony from admitted gunman Cornelius Smith Jr., who claimed Govan supplied weapons and tipped the shooters about the rapper's Memphis visit for a Thanksgiving charity event. Investigators also presented phone records linking Govan to the alleged shooters and to Anthony "Big Jook" Mims, the late music executive said to have ordered a \$100,000 hit on Young Dolph.

The defense countered that the investigation was flawed and that communications presented as evidence lacked direct proof tying Govan to the murder. Lawyer Manny Arora described Smith as an unreliable witness who had previously changed his account, suggesting at one point that Big Jook himself arranged the attack. Arora also pointed to Smith's financial connections to Big Jook's circle, including cash payments to his lawyer, calling the testimony inconsistent and self-serving. Govan did not testify in his defense.

Young Dolph, 36, a Memphis native celebrated for both his independent music career and community philanthropy, was killed in November 2021 while buying cookies at a local bakery. Authorities reported that two men fired more than 20 shots into the shop, killing him instantly. Smith, who admitted being one of the shooters, remains charged with murder and conspiracy, while co-defendant Justin Johnson was convicted in 2024 and sentenced to life in prison.

The case, tied by prosecutors to ongoing tensions between Young Dolph and rivals linked to Yo Gotti's record label, has continued to resonate throughout Memphis' music community. Tributes to the late rapper remain widespread, underscoring his influence on local culture and philanthropy.