

AGAINST ALL ODDS

Dogged by lackluster album sales, anti-Puffy websites, and his own hot temper, **SEAN COMBS** is fighting to prove he's still got it. *Jeannine Amber* gets the story behind the struggle.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALBERT WATSON



There's this scene that sometimes floats into Sean Combs's head. It's like a picture out of one of those old movies where a man has been wrongly accused, and the whole town has gathered to watch him get hanged. The man is up on a platform with his legs dangling in mid-air. Only instead of choking, he refuses to die. Days go by, and he's still hanging on. The townspeople throw rocks at him, but he won't give in. Finally, they cut him down, and this guy—Sean “Puffy” Combs himself—just walks away. “Weird shit like that,” Combs says, “sometimes goes on in my head.”

There are other variations on the theme: Like the one where Combs is dead and everyone comes to view the casket, and just as he's about to enter the gates of heaven he comes to his senses like, “Hold up, God!” and gets out of the coffin. Or the one where there's some 600-pound man blocking the door and Combs is getting no oxygen. “And it's either him or me, and I don't care if the nigga's 1,000 pounds,” he says. “I'm gonna eat that nigga. I don't care if I have to start chompin' away, I'm gonna get through to the other side.”

Combs describes these visions late one night in the back of his tour bus. He's being driven from a soundstage in Burbank, Calif., where he's been rehearsing for the premiere episode of *BET Live From L.A.*, to the five-star Beverly Hills Hotel and Bungalows. He's so agitated he's standing up, waving his hands around and making sound effects (“*Whooshhh*, I come back from the journey to heaven,” and “*Shikaaa*, I raise out of the coffin”). Then he starts to yell: “It will *never*,” he says, “never, never, never be over.”

In all fairness, this high-drama interlude didn't come out of nowhere. The man's been provoked. He just got asked, “Did you know that when your new album, *Forever* (Bad Boy), debuted at No. 2, behind former Mousketeer Christina Aguilera, people in the music industry went bananas, calling each other and sending crazy e-mails about how it was over. How no one gives a shit about Puffy now that Biggie's dead. With lots of exclamation marks, like they were happy. *It's over!!!*”

“Never, mutherfuckers,” he says. “*Never*.”

Only two years ago, in '97, Bad Boy Entertainment CEO Combs and his roster of young artists (including the Lox, 112, Mase, and The Notorious B.I.G.) dominated the No. 1 spot on *Billboard*'s Hot 100 singles chart for an astounding 22 weeks straight. “Mo Money Mo Problems,” “It's All About the Benjamins,” and “I'll Be Missing You” pounded clubs, bounced Jeeps, and spun relentlessly on MTV. That year, Bad Boy sold \$200 million worth of records.

Combs's greatest skill has always been as a discoverer of talent, a producer of albums, and a businessman extraordinaire. He parlayed his love of music into a multimillion-dollar enterprise: There's Justin's, a chain of soul-food restaurants with locations in New York City and Atlanta, and tentative plans for Chicago and Miami; Sean John, his clothing line (which grossed \$32 million since its launch in February '99); *Notorious*, his glossy lifestyle

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magazine; and a new production company, Bad Boy TV and Films, currently developing the comedy *King Suckerman* with Miramax.

But the success of Combs's empire depends, at least in part, on the power of “Puffy”—the name, the logo, the celebrity. The question is whether Combs's rapacious efforts to turn himself into a hip hop star will lead to his undoing. A businessman's achievement is measured by the money he makes. But a star's success rests on his ability to capture the imagination of his fans and prove he's worthy of their admiration. Rub your followers the wrong way—with a mediocre album or a cocky attitude—and they'll knock you off your pedestal in a hot second.

By the third week of its release, *Forever* had fallen to No. 13 on the *Billboard* 200 and still hadn't gone gold. Given that his first album, *No Way Out* (Bad Boy, 1997) sold more than 560,000 units in its first week and went on to become seven-times platinum, the press had a field day. There were scores of bad reviews, with many sounding the death knell: “Puff,

the Magic's Draggin',” declared the *New York Post*.

In addition, Bad Boy Records suffered more than a 75 percent drop in revenue in 1998, grossing barely \$35 mil. And the talent that helped turn the label into a hit factory is slowly slipping away. Combs's ace, Biggie, is dead; Mase went to follow God; and the Lox hooked up with Interscope Record's Ruff Ryders imprint in August after complaining on New York's Hot 97 FM that Combs wasn't paying them their due.

To top everything off, Combs is still trying to get out from under the cloud of bad PR stemming from his much-publicized attack on Interscope exec Steve Stoute in April. (Following the attack, Combs was charged with second-degree assault, and faced a potential seven-year sentence. In August, amid rumors that he'd paid Stoute a six-figure settlement, Combs pleaded guilty to a violation and was ordered to attend a one-day anger-management course.)

Some people are so disgusted by what one hip hop fan refers to as Combs's “materialistic, money-hungry, wannabe-rapper” ways that they've gone to the trouble of launching their own anti-Puffy websites. Under cyber-headlines like “I Hate Puff Daddy,” “Why Puffy Sucks,” and “Please Puff Daddy, Ruin This Song Too,” music fans complain about everything from his lack of skills to his excessive sampling to his over-the-top arrogance. One site is so vicious it features an image of Combs having his brains blown out. Things are getting ugly.

It's humid and hot and excruciatingly early and everyone is waiting patiently for Combs at Miami International Airport. Not in the spot where the regular planes land, but on a separate stretch of asphalt behind a chain-link fence where the private jets touch down. On the tarmac, half a dozen ground crew in white coveralls pace back and forth. Two khaki-suited men—Combs's manager Steve Lucas and Bad Boy's VP of Marketing Ron Gillyard—sit in the back of a black Town Car calling air-traffic control, trying to track down the plane. Over to the

side, four police escorts in black knee-length boots and shiny white helmets idle their bikes. They've been arranged for by the city to weave in and out of traffic, blazing their blue flashing lights, clearing a path for Combs's motorcade, because, as Gillyard says with a laugh, "He's fly like that."

The plane finally arrives at 7:42 a.m., more than an hour past schedule. It's white, with "PD" emblazoned on the tail and "Puff Daddy Forever" across the body. Half a dozen duffel bags, a black Prada garment bag, a Gucci shopping bag, a stroller, and a car seat are loaded into the back of a black Navigator with tinted windows. Combs, his security man, his 2-year-old son, Christian, the boy's nanny, his much-hyped new artist Shayne, and a blond stewardess in an impossibly short gray skirt and matching jacket emerge silently from the plane. Combs says what's up to his manager, kisses a reporter on the cheek, confers quietly with his security, and gets into the Navigator.

For the rest of the day, Combs is motorcaded from radio stations to interviews to a press conference on the 55th floor of the First Union Financial Center, in downtown Miami, which boasts a spectacular view of the Atlantic Ocean. Neisem Kasdin, the mayor of Miami Beach, declares August 30 Sean "Puffy" Combs Day and gives Combs a key to the city, saying, "I've met Clinton, but no one has attracted more attention than you!" Combs holds up his foot-long gold-colored key. "Wow," he says, looking genuinely pleased. "I never got one of these before."

In the afternoon, there's a record signing at Spec's on Collins Avenue and Fifth Street in Miami Beach. The line extends halfway down the block. One teenager in braces and a ponytail is so bugged out she's sputtering, her hands trembling in front of her face. Meeting Puffy is, like, her dream. Combs puts his arm around her, smiles stiffly, and gives the cameras a "No. 1" sign with his index finger.

If Combs is in a slump, you'd never know it by the way he rolls: all-the-way extra celebrity, pop-star dignitary, with entourages and motorcades and barbers flown in to cut his hair just so. When his publicity tour is over he throws a soiree at his Hamptons home overlooking the ocean. Rich and totally random white folks like Chevy Chase, Christie Brinkley, and David Copperfield come to party with a live salsa band (*Queremos a Puff's Daddy!*) and hot cha-cha dancers in little white dresses with halos and angel wings strapped to their backs. Combs works the crowd, flashing his platinum pendants and his sparkling watch. And don't forget the two Bentleys in the garage.

"Before he even dropped *Forever*, I saw the wall of hate building up," says one industry insider who didn't want to be named because he has "business dealings" with Combs. "You can't really smack people in the face with wealth that they gave you. Take Will Smith: He has as much money as Puffy, but you don't see him with mad ice, a ridiculous amount of ice. You don't see it. But Puffy is really overdoing it with the jewelry these days. You have to have a certain degree of humility. Like, remember when you step into your limo or your Benz that the fan who put you there is getting on the train with a MetroCard."

For Combs, it's not just the tinted windows of his ride that separate him from his fans. He's deeply ensconced in a crew that shields him from the real world. This constantly shifting group of men, several of whom insist that "Puff's like a brother to me,"

do the practical: get his stuff, run his errands, handle his business, keep him company. And they provide a tacit endorsement that everything he does is A-OK. When he flips out and starts screaming at one, "You must be a stupid, stupid mutherfucker," because the guy knocked on the door while Combs is doing an interview, no one said a word. So who's going to step to him about him wearing too much jewelry?

Then again, why should they? "Puffy owes no one any apologies for his success," says MC Hammer, whose own \$33 million career self-destructed in the early '90s amid criticism that he was crossing over and selling out. "Anybody who makes revenue from the culture of hip hop has benefited from the presence of Puff Daddy over the past five years. We're talking about everything from FUBU to Tommy Hilfiger to soundtracks to everything else. And as far as humility goes, Puffy knows that, as a man, he would want to work on that. But knowing the type of man he is, he probably *is* working on that."

"That's what the black community is built on—bring people up and bring them down," says Snoop Dogg. "Keep your head up, Puff. [Forget] the haters."

When he was little, "back in the olden days," as he puts it, Combs lived in Harlem. His father was a hustler who was killed when Combs was three. His mother was an ex-model and part-time kindergarten teacher. Sometimes he hung out with a few friends. They called themselves the 7-Up Crew (on account of there were seven of them). But mostly he was a loner.

In the summers his mother would pack him up and send him to Pennsylvania Dutch country, courtesy of The Fresh Air Fund. (The nonprofit program enables low-income New York kids to have a summer break in the country with volunteer host families.) Combs was hooked up with some Amish folks who had no electricity, no TV, no cars. They had horses and wagons. Think Harrison Ford in *Witness*. "That's where I learned a lot of my focus," says Combs. Plus, he says, "I seen shit."

One day, 8-year-old Combs got it in his head to jump on the back of a red rocket wagon and take a spin. The wagon was perched on the top of a hill. At the bottom was an electric fence that kept the livestock from wandering away. (As for why the no-electricity-having Amish had an electric fence, he says it must have belonged to the neighbors.) So

Combs jumps on the wagon and it starts careening down the hill, headed right for the fence. "I was going straight toward it, full speed. I'm talking, like, 50 miles an hour," he says. Then suddenly the wagon just *stopped*. "Right before it, like, decapitated me," says Combs. "So I seen a miracle happen."

Memorable as the experience was, it wasn't enough to keep him from returning to his non-Amish TV-watching ways back in New York. He was especially fond of a soft-core porn show on cable access called *Midnight Blue*. "I used to watch it and jerk off when I was 11," he says. This came in handy when he lost his virginity at the ripe age of 12. "I was acting just like porn stars act. I was smacking that ass. I was smacking the girl's ass! I didn't do it on my own, she *wanted* me to smack that ass. I flipped her over because I saw it on the movie and then she told me to do it again, so, you know."

Later, when Combs got to Mount St. Michael Academy, an all-boys Catholic School in Mount Vernon, he learned a few new tricks. "You have to write this so it comes out right," he says, lounging in a booth at the front of his tour bus. He's dressed in a plush Sean John track-suit number. "I discovered that being natural was the best way to win a girl over. Like, you watchin' movies, you listenin' to older brothers saying things like, 'Hey, ma, lemme holla at you for a second,' you think that's the way to get a girl. But I realized in high school, girls liked me if I was a friend to them. That's when they would just start laughing, just by me being my natural persona. I was like, *Oh! The light bulb went off. Ding!*"

After high school, Combs spent a little more than a year at Howard University and became known for throwing huge parties on the weekends. In 1991, he and rapper Heavy D organized a charity basketball game at New York's City College where nine people were trampled to death in a rush to get inside. (In 1998, Combs paid about \$750,000 to the families of the victims as part of a settlement ordered by New York State's Court of Claims.)

At the time of the City College disaster, Combs was interning at Uptown Records, where Andre Harrell was the president. As the now legendary story goes: Combs hustled and got promoted to VP of A&R within a year. He brought future platinum artists Mary J. Blige and Jodeci to the label, dressed them in Timbs and suits and leather and silk and gold and diamonds, creating the prototype for "ghetto fabulous."

"Puff was my young warrior," says Harrell. "I could send him into the jungle and he'd bring back the lion's head every time."

Eventually though, the warrior, the chief, and MCA—the company they worked for—began to have issues. "We had this meeting and Puff told the general manager, 'I will never listen to you. I work for Dre. I don't give a fuck about you.'" So in 1993 Harrell cut Combs loose. Combs was 23 years old.

The following year, Puffy began doing business with music mogul Clive Davis, the head of Arista Records and the man who discovered Janis Joplin, Whitney Houston, Bruce Springsteen, and Aerosmith. Soon after, Davis signed up Combs's Bad Boy Records and, according to *Forbes* magazine, gave the young mogul \$10 million and a 50 percent ownership stake in the label. Combs retains the right to buy back his masters and Arista's 50 percent in the year 2003. Presumably buoyed by the phenomenal dollars Bad Boy generated in '97, Davis gave Combs a

\$55 million advance in 1998 against future Bad Boy Records earnings.

Given *Forever's* relatively modest sales, it's fair to wonder how soon Davis will recoup his investment. For now, he doesn't seem concerned. "The picture won't really be clear until next spring," he says. "Look at Whitney Houston, she's been on the charts for over 40 weeks." Though Houston's album, *My Love Is Your Love* (Arista, 1998) didn't hit big out the box, it recently passed the double-platinum mark.

"Any time an artist has a huge first album, there are always doubting Thomases in the world as to whether or not they can repeat that," says Davis. "I think it's easy to mark Puffy, to underestimate his staying power."

Here's what happened in hip hop," says Andre Harrell, who's sitting in a black Benz in a parking lot behind the soundstage of BET's *Live From L.A.* "The concept of 'ghetto fabulous' was more of a street kid's dream of getting the diamonds, getting the Bentley, getting the riches, and getting the pretty girl. But then one of the ghetto-fabulous stars really became *fabulous*," says Harrell, who Combs hired in October 1998 to be the president of Bad Boy Records. "Puff really is successful. He really dates a movie star. He really does all those things that people dream about. And once all those things are achieved, it's no longer a dream we can all share in. So a lot of people were left out."

The way Harrell explains it, Combs's real

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dilemma is that he has simply achieved too much, and his success is triggering resentment—that particularly potent mix of envy and resentment that philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said causes have-nots to vilify the successful. Think player hating. By extension, Master P, who is worth \$361 million—significantly more than Combs—should inspire homicidal rage among his fans. Only he doesn't.

That's because Master P, with his gold fronts and unapologetic ghettoism, fits so much more neatly into people's idea of what a rapper should be. No matter how much money P has made off whitey, you just know he's not gonna invite David Copperfield to his parties. Puffy, on the other hand, seems to love him some photo ops with Jerry Seinfeld and Donald Trump.

When Biggie was alive, Combs could be as flashy as he liked. The former Brooklyn crack dealer acted as a giant counterbalance—the ghetto to Combs's fabulous. "When Biggie died, Puffy lost a major source of his authenticity," says Michael Eric Dyson, a professor of African-American studies at DePaul University in Chicago. "Biggie was, in one sense, his image bodyguard. So, predictably, when Biggie dies, Puffy gets rhetorically assassinated."

At the same time, the bigger Combs has gotten, the more complicated his fans' expectations have become. "Hip hop has expanded so that now 80 percent of the audience is nonblack," says Russell Simmons, founder and chairman of Def Jam Records. "And when those kids are exploring this new world, they need a tour guide. Puffy is their ambassador. Not that he isn't 'ghetto,' but his scope is broader than that. Some people in the core hip hop community resent us speaking to a larger audience. They feel it is an abandonment of them."

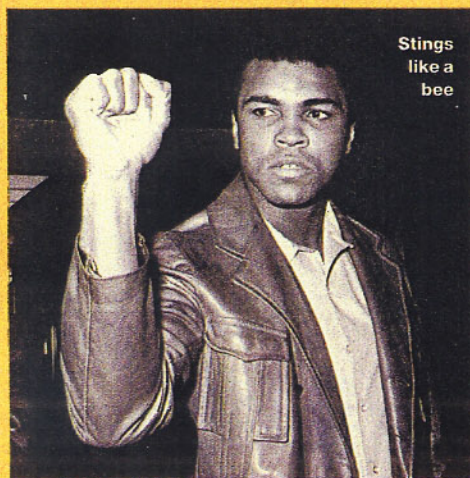
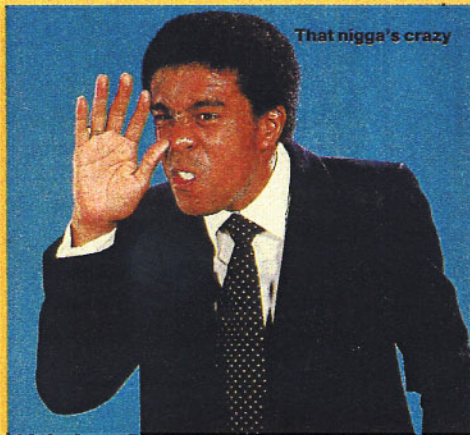
And if the community feels like they are being abandoned, its resentment can only be inflamed by Combs's relentless displays of wealth and his new embittered attitude. Two years ago, Bad Boy videos

BLACK NOISE

Michael Eric Dyson looks at what it means to be loud, proud, and "Puffy" in the good ole USA

Sean "Puffy" Combs is the latest figure to ingeniously exploit the commercial potential of the black big-mouth. Through relentless self-promotion, he has captured the heart of hip hop and fed the hunger for ghetto authenticity that grows in rap and beyond. When you bought a record by Puffy or his Hitmen a couple of years ago, you were also buying a slice of 'hood life dipped in chocolate aspiration. They wanted to rock the phattest ice, the hottest cars, and the plushest cribs. Puffy was able to work both sides of a divide in black culture that still resonates: the urge to maintain street credibility while enjoying the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Puffy blew up in Harlem and the Hamptons by shrewdly selling each to the other.

What Puffy didn't bank on was that the sort of black-male prosperity that literally thrives on word of mouth carries its obsolescence in its throat. That's because a huge paradox hides in a pun: America likes to see black men blow up but it likes even better to see them, well, *blow up*. America



loves to see black men at war—witness the huge popularity of boxing, verbal (and physical) battles in hip hop, and comedic routines praising blacks and scorning "niggas." But it hates to see black men at peace—check the controversy over the unapologetic Million Man March.

Worse yet, it hates for bigmouthed black men to get love in their menacing prime. That's why Muhammad Ali is now greeted as a hero even though he was widely denounced in the '60s as a traitorous and impossibly cocky pugilist. Or why Richard Pryor now gets his due as a genius despite being viewed by the mainstream in the '70s as a talented comic hobbled by rage against whites. The fact that Ali's and Pryor's heroism is cemented as their speech is sapped by chronic illness sends the chilling message that our culture prefers its black male icons saintly and silent. Or, like Michael Jordan, politically irrelevant.

Despite self-destructive habits and foolish missteps, Ali and Pryor backed up their bravado with deeds that even their enemies had to agree were great. To remain a force in hip hop, Puffy can certainly afford sluggish album sales. He can even survive the *playa hatin'* that hip hop loves to lay at the door of its real and fabricated enemies. What he can't afford is to let his mouth be louder than his skills. But in a genre where the game is sold by being told, Puffy may yet prevail.

Michael Eric Dyson's latest book, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (Free Press), will be out January 2000.

were all about having fun: Puff jumping for joy on the links! Puff hoofing it up with tap star Savion Glover! And Puff, in that shiny spacesuit, floating in a silver orb, Mase by his side, Biggie smiling down on them. Now he's all hostile, talking about, "You can hate me now" and "I'm public enemy No. 1." Bragging about your Bentleys, babes, and Benjamins, and then acting like you're tortured by it all, is not particularly endearing.

haven't been the humblest muthafucka at times," says Combs, his hands clasped in front of him. He's got a little shock of gray hair on the right side of his head, just left of his temple. He says he doesn't dye it. "I would dance in the end zone on your ass, and sometimes that right there would inflict certain emotions. But that's who I am."

It's 2 a.m., and Combs is still riding in the tour bus. There were some stops to make after the *BET Live* rehearsal. He went to look at a cut of his "Satisfy You" video and then spent half an hour making sure that the editor guy got the too ashy-brown skin tone in one shot to match the just-right mahogany tone in another. Then he stopped off at a liquor store for some provisions.

His girl, actress/singer Jennifer Lopez, obviously exhausted, is laid out on a sofa, the top of her head poking out from under the brown blanket she's cocooned in. HBO's series *Real Sex* is on the tube: Six naked white people and one confused sister rolling in a big pile of mud flashes across the screen. "I cannot be quiet and passive," Combs says. "I'm sorry." He shrugs. Reluctantly he talks about what it feels like to have people put up websites celebrating how much he sucks, and worse. He says all the contradictory, illuminating, slightly defensive things anyone might say: It hurts; he doesn't care; he pities those people; don't they have better things to do with their time; and of course he has feelings. And fuck them.

Then he says: "It enters your mind, about it breaking you. It crosses your mind sometimes, like I'm tired of this shit. But that's the way America is. They gonna put you through living hell. And then we only respect the people we put through hell. We put Vanessa Williams through hell. They broke her ass. She was never the same. They tried that shit with Madonna and she said, 'Fuck it. I'ma get all-the-way nigga. I'ma make a porno. I'ma eat some pussy.'" He pauses. "So you know, at the end of the day we'll just see who's still here."

He gets up then, walks over to the fridge and takes out bottles of Alizé, Malibu Rum, and Belvedere Vodka to mix himself a drink. He turns his back to the reporter. "Are you done now?" he asks, clearly frustrated. One of the bottles slips from his hand and goes crashing to the floor.

Snoop Dogg, who has had his share of career ups and down, sighs and shakes his head when he talks about Combs. "That's what the black community is built on—bring people up and bring them down. It's sad. It's terrible. I've seen that situation before when I've been on top of the world, and then I'll put out an album that people didn't feel was as hot as the other one and they labeled me a fall-off. That's a bad feeling," Snoop says. "[Puffy's] success happened so fast that he didn't get the chance to learn or to grow or to understand. So now it gives him a chance to get everything in proper perspective. Keep your head up, Puff. Fuck the haters."



The next day is the taping for *BET Live From L.A.* There's a crowd of 100 or so kids gathered in front a small stage at the back of the lot. Some of them have been waiting for hours to watch Combs perform. Michael Colyar, a comedian in shiny alligator shoes and a brown five-button suit, warms up the crowd. "We're about to bring on the coldest artist in the world," he says. "The man of the millennium!"

Then Combs comes on. He's got dancers in short-shorts, bikini tops, and long hair extensions. He's got three backup singers and a live band led by Mario Winans (who produced much of *Forever*) on percussion. And he's got pyrotechnics galore. Canons, airbursts, fireballs, flame projectors, and plenty of blue and white sparkly things. The set opens with the

swelling operatic intro to rock group Queen's "Flash's Theme" and segues into "It's All About the Benjamins" then "Mo Money, Mo Problems" and "P.E. 2000." It's a medley of hits, and every four beats a set of firecrackers blows up and a string of lights explodes. Flecks of white ash rain on the audience. One kid turns to another and shakes her head. "This is ridiculous," she says, and she doesn't mean in a good way. Some kids cover their ears against the sound of the explosions.

But no one in Combs's camp appears to notice. Their boy is onstage doing his thing! And that's all that seems to matter. He's still here, he's still swingin', he's still trying to prove, like the lyric says, *Can't nobody hold him down*. Harrell, standing in the back of the crowd, does a little jig. "It ain't over," he says, grinning. "It's definitely not over." ■