

# Sea Of Dreams

**PUFF DADDY HAS IT ALL, OR SO THEY SAY. BUT BENEATH THE GLITTER AND GLAM RESTS A MAN DRIVEN BY STEELY AMBITION AND HAUNTED BY DARK TRAGEDY. PEEP THE COMPLICATIONS, AND CONTRADICTIONS, THAT MAKE UP HIP-HOP'S MOST PERSVASIVE PERSONALITY.**

Words by Jeannine Amber

"I'm not saying I'm this big hip-hop underground genius," says Puffy Combs, sitting in the master bedroom of his summer home in the Hamptons. To his right, MTV beams from a big screen. Behind him, floor to ceiling windows look out onto the ocean. Lovely.

"When I say hip-hop, I think of KRS-One, I think of EPMD, I think Wu-Tang Clan and RZA. I don't think of myself like that. But I am an extension of hip-hop. I'm a part of it." Combs is wrapped in a plush, white, terry cloth robe, shoveling a big

spoon of applesauce into his too-small mouth. Over his shoulder, in a vision right out of *Architectural Digest*, the setting sun casts pink light across the strip of the Atlantic.

The beach that borders his property is so exclusive that when Combs and his entourage stormed it for a photo shoot earlier in the day, one of the locals turned to another and said, "Looks like we're setting an all-time record for number of people on the beach today." They didn't say anything about an all-time record for

number of Black folks, but they might well have.

Combs puts down his spoon. On his left pinkie finger sits a diamond ring as big as a marble. In front of him, a half eaten sandwich, turkey on Wonder Bread.

"That's the beauty of hip-hop," he says. "There's different genres. You have underground, you have hip-hop soul, you have commercial. I'm a little bit of everything. You may say I'm too commercial. But I'm just trying to make hip-hop grow. I ain't tryin' to fuck it up."





**"I never played no instruments. I never programmed no drum machines. So if I was at a party and heard a record that I loved, I would figure out a way to bring that record to life."**

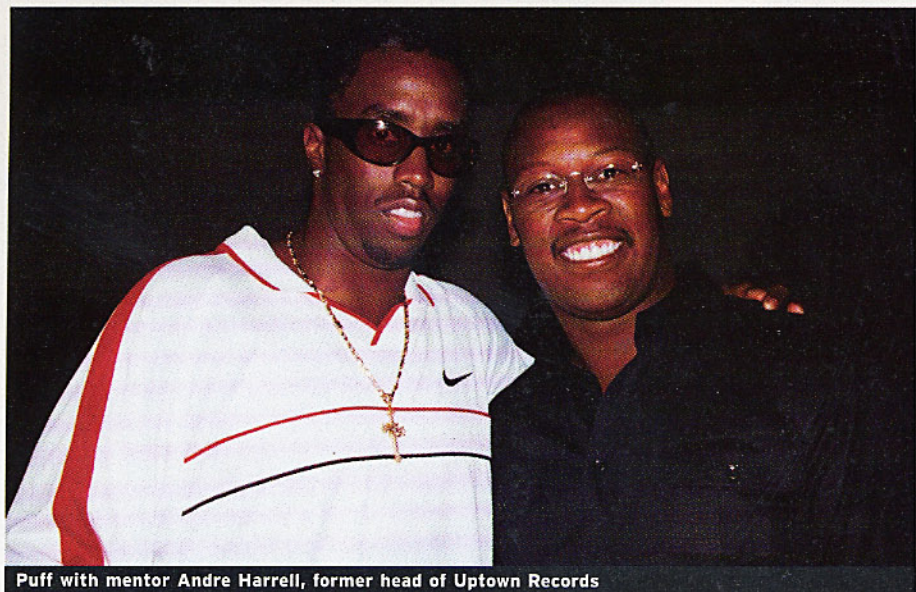
You can hardly blame the brotha' for sounding a little defensive. Combs is under tough scrutiny these days. With Tupac and Biggie dead and buried, Suge Knight locked down, and Dre on some other shit, Combs is truly the last man standing. In this money-making industry, he serves as reigning Prince. But how long can he hold the mantle? That's the question for many, especially now. Just four months after his Bad Boy star child was cremated, Combs is coming out with an album featuring his biggest new act—himself. We all know he can produce, we all know he's a business phenomenon. So why does he need to rhyme? Some say that with his new album, *No Way Out*, Combs is either going to prove himself truly unstoppable, or seriously test the patience of his fans. So here he sits, in his castle by the sea, defending his title to the throne.

"It's fucked up," he says. "We niggas don't root for each other." But Combs hardly needs a cheering section. He is, if nothing else, determined. In the less than ten years he's been in the game, Combs' career has careened from euphoric highs to calamitous lows, and back again. He hustled his way into the music industry, then watched nine kids get trampled at New York's City College during a celebrity basketball game he promoted. He leaped from Uptown intern to high powered VP in less than a year, then was fired. He landed a million dollar advance to start his own label, then saw his most promising star, and best friend, murdered. For every ascension, there has been a fall. But no matter what tragedy strikes, Combs always manages to climb back up. Still, he says, he doesn't always get the support he'd like.

"I can definitely say that there are times when I've picked up an award and I've looked out at the audiences and I see niggas mad. I see niggas with a smirk on their face, and that hurts," he says. "Maybe they don't like my personality. Maybe I didn't open myself up for them to like me like that, or to root for me like that. But at the end of the day, I would like for people to be happy for me. Because I know if I'm sitting in the audience, I don't care who it is, I'm going to be clapping," he shrugs and stares at the carpet.

"And it ain't just me," he blurts out, looking up suddenly. "It's anybody that's doing good. Why niggas ain't love Hammer? I loved Hammer! Hammer was doing his thing. That video, '2 Legit to Quit,' was one of the most incredible videos of hip-hop history. Niggas don't even understand how he broke down so many international barriers.





Puff with mentor Andre Harrell, former head of Uptown Records

**"Yes, I'm a beat jacker. That's my sh\*t! But you can't say you ain't gonna dance to my sh\*t. When that m\*thaf\*cka comes on, your ass is jigglin'."**

Hammer went all over the world and gave niggas the fundamentals of hip-hop—rhyming and dancing and musical expression. You ain't got to have the dopest flow, or be talking about the most hardcore shit, to be representing hip-hop. That ain't what hip-hop was about. When hip-hop started, you muthafucks gonna talk all that shit. . . 'hip-hop the hippy to tha hippy to tha hip hip-hop and you don't stop.' What the fuck that gotta do with keeping it real!" Combs exclaims in complete agitation. "Hip-hop is about expression, about putting words together. About music and movement. It's from what's inside of us as Black people. It's the shit that's in our genes, it's in our soul."

It's not surprising that Combs evokes the spectre of Hammer in his own defense. Like Hammer, he has taken hip-hop and repackaged it for the masses. He's floated rhymes over Diana Ross, over Sting, over infectious pop beats, disco beats; jacked entire hooks. Of course he gets us to dance. We danced the first time we heard it.

"I'm not afraid of using samples," Combs explains. "That's how I started producing. I never played no instruments. I never programmed no drum machines. So if I was at a party and heard a record that I loved, I would figure out a way to bring that record to life. Make it like it was some brand new shit."

Push him on the issue, and his voice raises in exasperation. He'll spit back with rapid fire delivery: "Yes. I sample records. Yes, I'm a beat jacker. That's my shit! But you can't say you ain't gonna dance to my shit. When that muthafucka comes on, your ass is jigglin'. To THE SOURCE magazine, I'm sorry y'all, I sample too much." Then he looks at you as though he's thinking, "I said it, are you satisfied now?" and

promises not to use samples for six months starting September 1. "But you may have to remind me on that," he hedges. "I may slip up."

Sean Combs is a study in contrasts. He's a former alter boy, a fatherless son, a genius, an altruist, a role model, a beat biter, scene stealer, mic jacker, a fake, a phony, a punk, or a pussy. Take your pick. He's considered overly attentive, and completely impatient. He's ingratiatingly friendly, then he completely ignores you. Kids say he's a genius for bringing hip-hop to the masses, and a fraud for flooding the airwaves with "that plastic shit." The only thing that's sure is that the man is getting paid. To date, he's sold an estimated \$100 million in records.

Successful as he's been, Puffy Combs is suffering the same dilemma countless others have grappled with before him. It isn't only the quality of music, his use of samples, or even whether or not he can rhyme that's going to seal his fate; it's the complicated relationship true hip-hop fans have with their heroes. Sure, we want our stars to live the life of the rich and famous. But if they get there by tweaking our shit, by making our music more palatable to the mainstream, don't expect it to be all love. That is the central conflict for Combs. He doesn't just want us to buy his albums, he wants us to love him.

"For years it's been a standard that once an artist crosses over to mainstream, the hip-hop community turns on him," says one veteran urban music exec. "True heads want things to be theirs and only theirs. No one's turned on Puffy yet, but let's see what happens when he tries to come out as an artist."

"A lot of people are going to be like, 'get the

fuck outta here,'" says another long-time industry insider. "But the fact is, if he was going to fall off, I think it would have happened already. Instead, he's passed all these hurdles: those kids dying at CCNY, getting fired from Uptown, Biggie's death, the whole Suge Knight and Tupac shit. It's almost like he's a little superhero. I hate to sound like I'm on his dick, 'cause I'm not, but he is a very smart man. Look at this new album. He's been dropping singles for months, and they've all been hits. The album is guaranteed to sell. He had this shit figured out months ago."

Everyone agrees on one one thing—Puffy Combs is a shrewd business man, brilliant even. Corporate smart, street smart, he's got it all locked down. And he's crazy-over-the-top ambitious. The man never sleeps. Not just now, Combs has always been that way.

When Sean Combs was a little boy he had a paper route. He made a decent dollar, but he

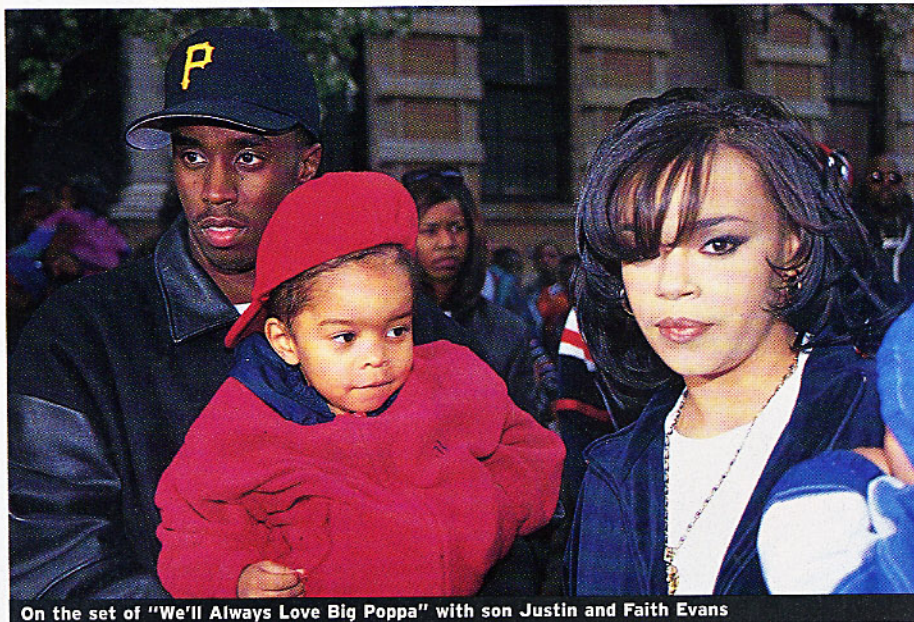


Even bad boys love their Mom Duker

wanted more. The problem was, each kid could only have one route. So in the spirit of a true entrepreneur, little Sean Combs got some other kids to sign up for routes and then bought them out. When Sean Combs was a teenager, he got himself a job at an amusement park. The problem was it didn't pay enough. So he clocked double shifts, working twelve hours straight, and he got paid. When Puffy Combs was in college, he was involved in a student uprising. The kids at Howard had taken over an administrative building, some of them even climbed on the roof. Afterward, in a stroke of capitalist brilliance, Combs collected magazine and newspaper clips of the event, made posters, and sold them back to the students.

"The thing about Puffy," says his long time friend, Howard alumnus, and one of the producers of *No Way Out*, Derrick Angelletti, "is that he has always been business minded. Back then, you could see how he's thinking of making money even in a crazy situation. The creativity of it was tremendous."





On the set of "We'll Always Love Big Poppa" with son Justin and Faith Evans

**"I feel a lot of pain. A lot of people don't know that. They think that everything that glitters is gold and it's just not like that. Sometimes when you're real f\*cked up you'd be like, 'God, can you please stop the pain.'"**

When Combs decided to start Bad Boy, he had no office space. Just three kids living at his crib, working on one computer, trying to get things rolling. Combs ran the house like a boot camp—up by eight, no excuses. He insisted everyone fill out daily reports listing all they had accomplished. "I don't think I've ever worked that hard in my life," says Harve Pierre, RCA senior director of Black music, who lived with Combs at the time. "Everyday, all day long, 24 hours a day." And Bad Boy grew. Combs signed Craig Mack, Biggie, Total, Faith, 112. And with more money came more problems, and then it all came crashing down.

On March 9, 1997, The Notorious B.I.G. was shot and killed in Los Angeles. After that tragedy, Combs says he seriously thought about getting up out of the business. "I just couldn't take it no more. That's when the whole 'no way out' [concept for the album] came about. It was just like, there just ain't no way out for me. I got to live with the reality of everything that's happened, so I might as well handle it." He pauses. "Biggie wouldn't want me to stop. Biggie wouldn't want Bad Boy to stop."

Combs didn't make any music for over a month. The only thing he worked on was "I'll Be Missing You," and it was that song that actually helped him make sense of what had happened. "I loved this man so much. But as much as I loved him, somebody didn't love him," Combs says. He's convinced that whoever killed B.I.G. was intimidated, threatened because Biggie was simply "too muthafuckin' fly." Combs compares Biggie to Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and even Tupac. "That's the sense I made out of it. They

were all just too strong and too powerful."

And what about Combs, does he think he's too fly? Is he up next to be shot for excellence? "I don't really know if I intimidate people like that. But if so, then that's just the way it's going to go down. It's already written. There ain't nothing I can do."

When Biggie was killed, Combs could easily have walked away from the industry. And no one would have blamed him. But ask, and he'll give you three good reasons why he's still in the game. Not one of them is about the money. ("Money don't mean shit," he says). First you'll hear the lofty goal: He's got a mission. He wants to make history; leave a legacy; change the face of music; open up doors for young kids coming up in the business. He wants to be an inspiration. "When I say I'm trying to be an inspiration, I mean that kids can say, 'He worked hard for this. If I want to get somewhere in life, I got to get up off my ass, I got to get off the corner. I got to get busy if I'm going to be somebody. I got to get my hustle and bustle on.' I tell my staff, 'You want to live like me, stay up till four and five in the morning doing your job. If you take this shit like it's a nine to five, you're never going to get where I am.'"

Then he gives you the personal reason; the one that makes his face light up; the one he calls "the selfish shit." "I love the time in a party between the hours of twelve and one o'clock when they play every one of my joints. Music I'm affiliated with in a prime time slot. I can just sit there and think, 'Mothafuckas is moving to that shit!' When they hear even a piece of that shit they scream, 'Ahhhh,' and start running to the dance floor. I did that shit. I'm making these niggas have fun!"

Then he tells you about the dream. From the time he got into the business, Combs says he would watch people ripping a stage and knew that he wanted to do the same thing. "One of my fears is being forty years old and thinking, 'I wish I would have tried this.' Even though the dream was far-fetched, I never want to hear myself say that." Combs says it's not that he thinks he's an MC—"I wouldn't disrespect MCs to say I'm on their level"—it's just about following his heart. "When I was younger, I always used to look at LL Cool J and say, 'damn, I wish I could do that.'"

Combs used to watch LL, and now, in a sweetly ironic twist, LL is taking direction from him. They're at the Bad Boy studios, Daddy's House, in midtown Manhattan. LL's in the sound booth. Combs is at the controls. He's getting impatient, telling LL he's not emphasizing the right shit. LL's like, "Okay, but sometimes I'm not even thinking about the words, I'm just, you know," and then he blows out a thin



Puff and Bad Boy wunderkind Mase

stream of air that vibrates against his lips, making a noise that cracks him the fuck up.

"Hey, hey, listen," he blows again, and gets a few snickers around the room. "Sounds like quiffing." Then everyone laughs except Combs, who just keeps working. "Okay, let's try that one more time, sir," he says to LL. And it's back to work.

An hour later, Combs says he has to leave. LL comes out of the sound booth to say good-bye, still blowing and laughing.

"I don't even know what the fuck you're talking about," Combs grumbles. LL leans in and mutters in his ear. Combs pulls back. "Naw, I don't know nothing about that."

"Then what do you hear when you pull out?" asks LL. There's a pause. Combs smiles and drops into an exaggerated whisper, "Thank you." And everyone cracks up.





A team forever: Lil' Kim, Big Poppa and Puff Daddy

Combs' got jokes galore. But sometimes he doesn't know if that shit, the laughter, is real. "When I'm making a joke, a lot of times everybody's laughing. But a lot of times I think somebody can be laughing just because I'm the leader. Sometimes I just want to be part of the gang."

It's late, three in the morning, and Combs is outside on the NY streets. Since he left LL, he's been to two parties, had drinks with Russell and Andre, stopped at a club (Puff Daddy's in the house!), dropped by a film editing spot, checked in on Faith's session, did an interview in the car, and now he's pacing back and forth, his cell phone to his ear. Finally, he sits down and starts to talk. When Combs is tired, another side of him creeps out—the maudlin, reflective side. Combs might say he wants to make you dance, but on his album, nestled between songs filled with bouncin' beats, is one of the most depressing tracks in hip-hop history. Aptly titled "Pain," it's got Combs rhyming over a sad piano riff:

*"There're times in my life where I just want to run away, I just wish the pain would stop and I could still hear the shots that left my man Big laying. On my knees crying and praying. Then I said, 'God why? Gots to know how hard we try. Don't let him die, please don't let my nigga be dead.' But it was too late. California sealed his fate. Gone now, hard now to move on now. Fuck making songs now. Wish I could die, I could fly. But they don't give a fuck. Fuck it, why should I?"*

"After [Biggie's death] I had a lot of feelings I wanted to express," Combs explains. "I feel a lot of pain. A lot of people don't know that. They think that everything that glitters is gold and it's just not like that. I wanted to make a song that was exactly how I feel, like sometimes when I'm at my house and I'm real upset and I'm crying. Sometimes when you're real fucked up you'd be like, 'God, can you please stop the pain.' That's where I got the song from."

Now he's up and pacing (he likes to walk) and

really letting loose a stream of melancholy. "I could be around a hundred of my boys, but I'm still lonely. I feel like I'm not connected with somebody. Like I'm not relating with what's going on. Sometimes I just want to be regular," he says, shooting you a sideways glance. "You ever see, like, three niggas on the corner, and they just be sitting there, hanging out, listening to some music, smoking cigarettes, maybe drinking something. They just be having a conversation with each other? Sometimes I wish I could be that nigga on the corner. I don't really have nobody I can talk to," he says, as he shoots you another look. "I hope that don't sound too sad."

Of course it sounds sad. But that's just another irony in the life of Puffy Combs. Everything he has is tainted by loss. He says even if *No Way Out* is a success, even if everything from here on in is wonderful, can't nothing knock him down because shit is already so fucked up.

"I don't give a fuck if when this shit drops, I sell four million copies. I will not be happy. Give me Biggie back and you can take all the records you want. Take every record off the radio. That's just the bottom line. I'm not happy. I want my muthafuckin' man."

Back and forth he goes. From despair to contentment, from euphoria to grief, from optimism to frustration. One day he insists, with a big grin on his face, that, "You all niggas is going to have to love me. You all are going to have to love what I did, and what I'm trying to do. We're just going to have to love each other. I'm just not going to see it no other way." Another day he sounds like he's teetering on the edge. "I can't take it no more. I be doing it to push the envelope, to be the best, but I'm tired of this. I just don't want to see no more tragedy."

It's now 4 a.m. Combs is still pacing back and forth on the dark Manhattan street. He's got a lot on his mind. There's his new album; a television special that's about to air; music to make; artists to coach; and reporters to satisfy. But Puffy Combs won't stop because he can't. As he says, "This shit we're doing right here is making history."

Maybe he's right. As much as he is derided for being too commercial, the man's singlehandedly changed the face of urban music—from Mary J., to Biggie, to rhyming over Sting for God's sake. And who else would have paired Mariah Carey with Ol' Dirty Bastard? You kind of *have* to give it up to him.

Out of nowhere, an NYPD blue rolls up. Combs' security men step out of the shadows—the hulk that's been across the street, the big guy who's been by the door. The cops and security exchange words. "They want to know why you're still out here," Combs' man calls back to him. Combs shakes his head, "What the fuck." The cops say they're not moving their car. Combs lets out a sigh.

"You see this shit. This is the kind of shit I have to put up with." He's completely fed up. Puffy Combs hops in a truck, and goes home. 