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Selling the ghetto: rap music and entrepreneurialism

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SELLING THE GHETTO: RAP MUSIC AND ENTREPRENEURIALISM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

by

Stuart Tully
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DEDICATION

*To Coach Carnell Washington,
I learned from the best*

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Throughout the writing of this thesis, I drew heavily upon the guidance and support of several people. Following God, I would like to thank my parents and family. To my father, for being a titan of editing, and my mother, for her grammatical expertise; they have been invaluable. Likewise, I must thank Maximus for his constant love and devotion, as well his ability to endlessly listen to my musings without question or a confused glance.

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ABSTRACT

By focusing on incidents during the careers of rap moguls Russell Simmons, Sean Combs, and Shawn Carter, it becomes evident rap music has become more conservative and affirmative of traditional American entrepreneurialism than believed by prior scholarship, which regarded rap music primarily as radical and counter-cultural black expression.

For Russell Simmons and Run-DMC, the Madison Square Garden concert and its effect on the perception of a subsequent endorsement deal with Adidas demonstrate the emergence of rap music unto the mainstream consumer culture. Though the parties involved would later claim singularity in the event, the process was not just a spur of the moment occurrence, but the calculated effort of Russell Simmons to entice the shoemaker.

Sean Combs' attempt to rebrand himself from "Puff Daddy" to "P. Diddy" following the negative publicity from his weapons possession trial also exemplifies this principle. Combs underwent the maneuver in an attempt to rebuild his economic viability after much bad press. By changing his moniker, Combs sought to continue his high esteem within the white mainstream as a purveyor of the ghetto culture.

Shawn Carter's return to rap music following a well-publicized retirement and ascension to CEO of Def Jam Records highlights the continued merger between black expression and the market. Though Carter had become perceived as a businessman despite not legitimately engaging in such activities through his music and public persona, he left the corporate sphere, preferring the perception of moguldom to its actual practice.

Based on these actions of these moguls, it is evident rap music is not inherently radical or counter-cultural, but instead represents the merger of traditional African-American expression with the entrepreneurial drive of the American Dream. This desire to gain wealth is not counter-cultural, but rather represents the emergence of African-American expression into a mainstream market.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1980s, rap music began to take over the American popular music charts. Armed with catchy beats and clever word play, rappers gained a lucrative following. As a result these rappers became quite wealthy. Although claiming to be counter-cultural and anti-establishment, the business model of rap music affirmed traditional economic values. The fusion of conventional African American expression and established economic beliefs resulted in a unique and different experience than previous African-American musical forms. Though rap holds much in common with genres such as the blues and jazz, the fact remains those musicians did not take advantage of the American economic system, nor have the prosperous perception of rappers and their managers. Blues artists often sang about their lack of financial means; rappers usually raved about the excesses of their current lifestyle. Even the grittier and supposedly "realistic" raps usually ended with the rapper escaping the ghetto environment through his guile and work ethic. Though the pursuit of financial gain is not inherently conservative, rappers advanced ideals such as self-determination and hard work. In particular, the rap mogul, an individual whose personal fortune is based not only in rap music, but other business ventures as well, exemplifies these ideals.

The origins and development of rap music is fairly set by most scholarship. The roots of verbal elements in rap music can be found in the "trickster" subgenre of the blues, as well as the later African American traditions of Toasting and Pimp narratives, exemplified by the Dolomite stories. Likewise, the musical elements of rap are borrowed primarily from the funk and disco styles of the 1970s. In addition, it is agreed hip hop

music arose in the South Bronx during the mid to late Seventies before rising to national attention in 1979 with the release of “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang.

Though rap music started in New York City, it would soon have national influence. Likewise, moguls also began to spring up in locales geographically removed from New York. In California, an ex-NFL lineman Marion “Suge” Knight started Death Row Records, home to such popular acts as Andre “Dr. Dre” Young, Cordazar “Snoop Dogg” Broadus, and Tupac Shakur. In St. Louis, along with his Derrty Entertainment record label, having the most successful rap single in the Billboard era, and selling over 21 million records in the United States, rapper Cornell “Nelly” Hayes started two clothing labels (Apple Bottom and Vokal), an energy drink (Pimp Juice), and was part owner of an NBA franchise (the Charlotte Bobcats).¹ In Louisiana, New Orleans based Cash Money Records, founded by brothers Bryan “Birdman” and Ronald “Slim” Williams, and No Limit Records, founded by Percy “Master P” Miller, each made millions, despite having little presence on the national charts, because of their ownership of multiple levels of distribution. These and rappers from other regions finding success demonstrated the influence the music has had on America.

Since New York remained at the center of rap’s origins, however, it is only fitting to focus on individuals from that city. Three of the most powerful rap moguls from the area are Russell Simmons, Sean Combs, and Shawn Carter. The development of the rap mogul from Simmons to Combs to Carter is an ideal progression. Each of these individuals was able to find success from different roles in the business of rap music by utilizing similar concepts; Simmons as an executive, Combs as a producer, and Carter as

¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Marked Man,” *Vibe*, November 2004, 107-112.

an artist. Furthermore, aside from all being from the same geographic area, there are indirect, yet evident links to each other. Likewise, all three are very successful and popular. Because of this visibility, their message has the highest chance of being seen. Also, all three have achieved a level of success that gives the appearance of establishment. Their entrepreneurial actions have paid off, and they are reaping the benefits. Rap music is certainly entertainment, but it also a commercial venture. Though all three certainly enjoy the music, their intent in pursuing it is linked more to finances than cultural expression.

Prior scholarship on rap music has been dominated by two disciplines, journalism and African American studies. Both focus primarily on the rappers as individuals and purveyors of black expression. The genre is viewed foremost as a black development. For instance, in *The Hip Hop Generation*, Barkari Kitwana calls rap music “the most significant cultural achievement of our generation,” with the word “our” clearly denoting African Americans.² Furthermore, for most scholars, rap music represents more than just musical entertainment. In particular, they believe rap music has the potential for further social, and ultimately political, change. Kitwana asserts once rap music embraces a social responsibility towards its audience, major political reforms would be imminent.³ In *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*, S. Craig Watkins takes Kitwana’s idea one step further and claims rap music was responsible for previous political change, citing the resistance to a change in Californian criminal law

² Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York, NY: Civitas Books, 2002), 22.

³ *Ibid*, 215.

towards juveniles was unified primarily by an interest in the genre.⁴ Likewise, throughout *Where You're At: Notes from the Frontline of a Hip-Hop Planet*, Patrick Neate claims rap music has the reach and authority in place to become the catalyst for major global political change. However, not all writers are as idealistic towards the power of hip hop for real political change. In *All About the Beat, Why Hip Hop Can't Save Black America*, John McWhorter questions the actual results of actions organized under hip hop activism such as the Million Man March, believing the genre has too many expectations for change placed upon it by the black community instead of letting it exist solely as entertainment.

Although several works of scholarship exist concerning rap music, the are most frequently cited and perhaps the most influential are Robin D.G. Kelley's *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* and Bakari Kitwana's *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. Published in 1994, *Race Rebels* only has one chapter that focuses on rap music, specifically the subgenre of Gangsta rap. Indeed, most early scholarship on rap music was on Gangsta rap, particularly after the subgenre was seen as prophetic in the wake of the Rodney King riots. Though he acknowledges rap music's origins lay in New York City, Kelley looks exclusively at the city of Los Angeles, examining the social and economic factors that led to its production and acceptance. While Kelley admits rap music had the primary purpose to produce "'funky dope rhymes' for our listening pleasure," deeper connotations, such as

⁴ S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005), 168.

challenging police authority and asserting masculinity, were readily apparent.⁵ Kitwana's *The Hip Hop Generation* speaks more of the generation raised upon rap music than the genre itself. In particular, Kitwana specifies black children born between 1965 and 1984 as members of the 'hip hop generation,' further defining it as those "...who came of age in the eighties and nineties and who share a specific set of values and attitudes."⁶ He also believes rap music had a homogenizing effect on black youth culture, "That Black youth in New Orleans, Louisiana and Champaign, Illinois...share similar dress styles, colloquialisms and body language with urban kids from Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City is not coincidental."⁷ Though Kitwana mentions the economics and entrepreneurialism available in rap music, he bemoans the resulting work ethic, claiming, "this desire to achieve not simply financial security but millionaire status is the driving force of our generations work ethic."⁸ In addition, while Kitwana acknowledges other races have played a part in the development and popularity of rap music, he still finds rap music is foremost a black cultural form.⁹ Once the music accepts social responsibility, improvements will arise for the black community. Both Kelly's and Kitwana's studies are representative of most rap scholarship in that they believe rap music as a black cultural achievement has the possibility to lead to further social change. For most of these scholars, hip hop represents much more than just a musical genre, but a political movement.

⁵ Robin D.G. Kelley . *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1994), 191.

⁶ Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation*, 4.

⁷ *Ibid*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid*, 46.

⁹ *Ibid*, 200.

In most studies of hip hop the economics of the genre are mentioned either briefly or in passing. For instance, in *Hip Hop Matters*, Watkins finds the early hip hop artists were not opposed to making money, “just seldom stopped to think that the art they were creating could command money-paying patrons of any significance beyond their immediate environment.”¹⁰ A few studies have examined for rap’s economic roots, most notably Eithne Quinn’s *Nuthin’ But a G Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap*. Following the example of Kelley, Quinn delves into the economic downturn of Los Angeles and its effect on Gangsta rappers. In particular, she finds Gangsta rap represented an entrepreneurial effort on the part of the rappers, leading to endorsement deals and other entrances into mainstream consumer culture. However, Quinn does not often mention the actual executives and moguls responsible within Gangsta rap, preferring to emphasize the efforts of the rappers and their personal artistic endeavors. This focus placed upon the artist is continued in most other economic analyses of rap music.

Rap moguls and their entrepreneurial spirit are not often focused upon as the primary figure in most studies of rap music. The managers of rap acts are portrayed mainly in an assisting role, “helping rappers get on the air,” secondary to the drive of the rappers. Also, most major endorsement deals are mentioned as merely happening as a side effect of the rapper’s success, not the product of effort on management’s part. The depiction of Simmons, Combs, and Carter as moguls is similarly framed in most scholarship. Russell Simmons’ primary identity is most often as one of the co-founders of Def Jam Records. Though his later political endeavors are mentioned, with his ideology

¹⁰ Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters*, 25.

cynically labeled as “Compa\$\$ionate Capitali\$m” by Ta-Nehisi Coates since, “business is politics and politics is business, so it’s essential that while he hawks voter registration he also hawks his latest product.”¹¹ Combs is usually depicted in a very dim light, the embodiment of flashy corporate rap. Even his biography by Ronin Ro ends with Combs achieving a hollow legal victory through sacrificing one of his artists as well as his artistic credibility.¹² Unlike Simmons and Combs, Carter is normally viewed primarily as an artist, achieving his success as a mogul after the publishing of most these studies. He is described as a rapper who is able to straddle the line between commercial viability and street credibility better than almost any other.¹³

A common element of journalistic and African-American studies’ depictions of rap music is the emphasis placed upon the content of the artist’s lyrics rather than the intent of the song’s production. Rap music is usually taken at face value; the rapper’s words are considered the embodiment of his truest thoughts and intentions. However, the aesthetic of rap music allows for expression often facetious and contradictory to the rapper’s actual beliefs. Though the content of rap music certainly expresses thought, it is not always synonymous with the rappers true intent. By focusing primarily on the content of rap music, those studies overlook the intentions inherent within in the genre.

Most authors of rap scholarship will go out of their way to prove they are a legitimate fan of the genre in order to offset their criticisms, in addition to affirming their allegiance to “real” hip hop. For instance, following his chapter on Gangsta rap in *Race*

¹¹ *Ibid*, 156-157.

¹² Ronin Ro, *Bad Boy: The Influence of Sean “Puffy” Combs on the Music Industry* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2001), 206.

¹³ William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007), 150.

Rebels, Kelley adds an italicized “Race Rebel remix version” as a postscript. In it he claims, “I wrote this little refrain not to contradict my analysis but to go out with a dose of reality while giving a shout out to the hardcore.” Furthermore, he affirms his desire for “legitimate” rap music, stating “Keep the crossover and save the ‘PC’ morality rap for those who act like they don’t know. I’m still rollin’ with Da Lench Mob...”¹⁴ Likewise, Patrick Neate spends most of *Where You’re At* discouraged at the state of “real” hip hop, in a seeming paradox since he both is white and English, yet still considers himself a legitimate member of the culture.¹⁵ Similarly, in *To the Break of Dawn*, Cobb takes great pains to distinguish between a rapper and an MC, believing an MC to be the true embodiment of hip hop culture.¹⁶ In this same vein, John McWhorter prefaces *All About the Beat: Why Hip Hop Can’t Save Black America* with “I could not write this book about music I hated,” before doubting its ability to promote sustained social change.¹⁷ In all, most scholarship on rap music is a personal endeavor, justified by enjoyment of the genre and the culture. But this adherence to personal enjoyment tempers their analysis, leaving the resulting work not as critical as it might have been without their frequent allegiances to the hip hop culture.

Despite the claims of prior scholarship, the fact remains rap moguls were primarily entrepreneurs, which supersedes any cultural obligations. However, because the genre’s nature as well as these men's egos and self-perpetuated persona, certain challenges and quirks exist in attempting to write a definitive and authoritative analysis

¹⁴ Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 227.

¹⁵ Patrick Neate, *Where You’re At: Notes from the Frontline of a Hip-Hop Planet* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2003), 5.

¹⁶ Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn*, 9.

¹⁷ John McWhorter, *All About the Beat: Why Hip Hop Can’t Save Black America* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008), 7.

of the subject. First, the majority of available sources are non-traditional. There are no hard numbers or magic bullet responses to deciphering the motivations and thought processes of these men. Interviews, lyrics, and images in music videos will all be used in order to showcase a slanted and skewed version of reality marketed by these moguls for mainstream consumption. However, because of the fluidity allowed within the hip hop aesthetic, quotes concerning motivations and occurrences are often contradictory, filled with half-truths, and loaded with boastful chest-pounding. This self-fulfilling prophecy of wealth perpetuated in their words, but also was implied by their demeanor and public persona. The fact Simmons, Combs, and Carter were each able to manipulate their image to achieve the same goal of success from different spheres of the rap industry show its persuasive manner.

Beyond the flash and delusional self-images, the economic and entrepreneurial foundation of rap music is revealed. These men sought to make money by utilizing the music and popular perception. Though the music and lifestyle was perceived as radical, the actions and words of these moguls tell a more conservative tale. However, this is not to say because of their economic drive, the potency of rap music is skewed. Rather, it is because of their desire to get wealth rap music was able to reach a wider audience and become a national and global enterprise. Were it not these individuals' personal ambitions, rap music and youth culture would look very different than it is in its current form.

“WE MAKE A MEAN TEAM, MY ADIDAS AND ME”:

RUSSELL SIMMONS, RUN-DMC, ADIDAS, AND COMMERCIALISM IN HIP HOP

“I remember pulling onto Seventh Avenue and looking out of the limo and seeing young kids...in lines wrapped around the Garden,” Run would later write.¹⁸ Indeed, 20,000 rap fans were expected for the sold out show on July 19, 1986.¹⁹ Along with opening acts Whodini and LL Cool J, the rap group Run-DMC, comprised of rappers Joseph “Run” Simmons, Darryl “DMC” McDaniels, and their DJ Jason “Jam Master Jay” Mizell, took the stage at Madison Square Garden for their triumphant homecoming.²⁰ While the trio of Queens-natives had already flirted with music stardom on the national stage, a supposed improvised action by Run would bring another level of success for the group. Prior to the performance of their single “My Adidas,” Run commanded the audience to raise their Adidas shoes into the air. DMC would later recall, “We didn't know the representatives from Adidas were there...But when [Russell Simmons] saw that, he ran backstage and said, 'I'm going to get you guys an endorsement contract.’”²¹ The sight of thousands of Adidas sneakers throughout the arena was enough to convince the Adidas executives to sign Run-DMC to a seven-figure deal.²² This agreement would

¹⁸ Joseph Simmons, *It's Like That: A Spiritual Memoir* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 10.

¹⁹ Surprisingly, date of the concert has fluxuated quite a bit in later retellings. Even on a videoed retrospective prior to their induction into the Rock and Roll hall of fame in April 2009, Run said the Madison Square Garden concert occurred in 1985. However, an announcement of the concert in the New York Times followed by a police brief three days later detailing the 18 arrest occurring around the Garden following the concert are fairly concrete on placing the concert on Saturday July 19th, 1986. “Run-DMC, Whodini, and LL Cool J” *New York Times* 18 July 1986, C13. “18 Are Arrested After Rap Concert” *New York Times* 21 July 1986 B3.

²⁰ For ease of reference, the members of Run-DMC will be referred to as their stage names unless specifically noted. In particular, this is to distinguish between Joseph “Run” Simmons and his brother Russell Simmons.

²¹ Erik Parker, “Hip-Hop Goes Commercial,” *The Village Voice*, 10 September 2002, available from: <<http://www.villagevoice.com/2002-09-10/news/hip-hop-goes-commercial>>..

²² The exact value of the deal is another figure that is not exactly solid. In his autobiography, Simmons writes “after we had a hit with ‘My Adidas,’ we negotiated with that German athletic wear company to give

become iconic for Run-DMC and Adidas, leading to a long lasting and mutually beneficial relationship for both. Run-DMC received even more exposure in the white mainstream, while Adidas gained precedence in the urban market. Furthermore, it also allowed the listeners of the music to buy into the product. Wearing Adidas shoes without laces became a means to show solidarity with not just Run-DMC, but the hip hop community as a whole. It was no longer just music that was for sale, but a lifestyle to boot. In addition, it opened up the doors for future endorsements with athletic companies for non-athletes. While Adidas remained known primarily as a sports equipment maker, they also gained a secondary identity within the hip-hop community. This would later manifest in rappers, as well as musicians from other genres, seeking sponsorships from non-traditional sources. While the product and the celebrity might not be explicitly linked, such as a soccer player and a soccer shoe, Adidas' name was gaining exposure nevertheless. Adidas was gaining valuable targeted advertising by Run-DMC's efforts, and the financial compensation provided through the endorsement deal was an affirmation of that which had previously occurred. Run-DMC had already caused Adidas sales to rise; it was only fitting for them to get paid for the job they had already done.

Although many elements must be taken into account for the success of the endorsement deal, most of the credit belongs to Russell Simmons, brother to Run and the group's manager. Simmons influenced and directed the group, particularly in the group's formation; he produced its records, made fashion decisions for the group, portioned out rhymes between Run and DMC, hustled the group's records onto the radio, and even

us a deal- at one point it was one million dollars a year for three years." Russell Simmons, *Life and Def: Sex, Drugs, Money, + God* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 67. However, many subsequent articles have often used the figure \$1.5 million. Regardless, all parties are in agreement the value of the deal was in seven figures.

named the group in the first place.²³ Simmons saw the bigger picture, particularly in regards to the financial potential of the group. As part of Simmons financial savvy, he compelled the group to write “My Adidas,” which Simmons felt had the potential to be an endorsement deal for the group.²⁴ At the time of the song’s inception, Run-DMC had national exposure, but was about to break into a larger realm with their new album, “Raising Hell.” The group had been flirting on the edges of superstardom with their film ‘Krush Groove,’ and their appearance at 1985’s Live Aid. In addition, Run-DMC also had two videos on MTV, and was the first rap group with a video to appear on the network. All of which would have aided giving the group credibility and potential in Adidas’ eyes, making Simmons’ designs not so outrageous. Because of the personal drive of Russell Simmons to get wealthy, he was able to utilize factors present in hip-hop in order to land the endorsement deal for Run-DMC, which had affects on both the group and the mainstream perception of rap music as a whole.

However, taking into account Simmons’ drive and influence over the group, a new series of events comes to life which tell a different tale than the members of Run-DMC’s later recollections. Because of targeted efforts by Russell Simmons, Adidas sent Angelo Anastasio, a marketing executive, to observe the concert.²⁵ The endorsement deal

²³ Nearly all sources detail Run and DMC’s disappointment when Simmons labeled the group “Run-DMC,” in order to become more commercially viable. Indeed, at their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in April 2009, DMC razzed Simmons, recalling he and Run preferred names such as “the treacherous two” and the “dangerous duo,” and that the name Run-DMC, “made us sound like a bunch of punks.” However, Simmons’ control over the group was compelling enough that they went with his decision. Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony, television program, Fuse TV, 4 April 2009.

²⁴ On an embedded video on Adidas’ corporate website, Simmons iterates how he helped write “My Adidas.” Available from:
<<http://www.adidas.com/campaigns/originalsss2009/content/#/lifestyle/myadidas>>.

²⁵ Anastasio has since moved on from working as an Adidas Marketing executive and has become an award-winning designer of women’s footwear. The website for his shoe line mentions his tenure at Adidas. Available from:
<<http://www.angeleghanastasio.com/Profile.htm>>.

was more than likely already certain, though the members of Run-DMC were not fully aware. However, as a final show of good faith, Adidas wanted to see for sure if Run's pronouncement of commanding the audience to put their Adidas sneakers into the air would get the same reaction they had seen on a video tape of a previous Run-DMC concert. As such, Russell pushed Run to make sure the bit was included in the concert. Because of Simmons unusual insistence to ensure the inclusion of the raising of the audience's sneakers, this particular instance stuck out in the group's mind. In addition, the inking of the deal immediately following the concert cemented the concert's importance in the group's collective mind. It is for this reason it took such a prominent place in Run's memory.²⁶ Because of this convergence of factors, coupled with a lack of knowledge concerning Simmons' innermost doings, it is only natural Run and DMC focused on the elements to which they were privy. As such, the concert and Run's proclamation became the most important aspects. Also, since Russell was not an official member of the group and his behavior was primarily behind the scenes, his inclusion was not highlighted.

As time went on and the importance of the deal with Adidas became apparent, the Madison Square Garden concert grew in mythical importance. The previous concerts were not mentioned since they were unremarkable. While the "raise your Adidas to the sky" line might have been said numerous times previously, it was only the Madison Square Garden concert that got the endorsement deal. Run-DMC got paid for doing it in New York, so of course it becomes more lauded. Meanwhile, Russell Simmons, who

²⁶ In his memoir, Run writes how surreal it felt to be driven home in a limo, knowing shoes with his likeness would be in stores, as well as seeing a photograph of the group on the front page of the paper the next morning. "I was on top and I knew it." Simmons, *It's Like That*, 13.

received his initial compensation in the form of a sizable hunk of the money, distanced himself from the deal in order to focus more on his other endeavors. Since Russell Simmons was not bound to endorse Adidas sneakers, there was no problem in him creating his own rival brand. There was no conflict of interest because Simmons was merely the facilitator of the deal, not one of the two primary parties. Though he was incredibly instrumental in bringing the numerous elements together, Simmons was not the overt recipient of the acclaim. Since his focus was primarily wealth and not personal fame, he accepted the higher esteem Run-DMC achieved as part of the deal as simply another avenue to get paid. He did not feel any attachment to Adidas. He was not the entertainer, he was simply the management.

Because to his management style at Rush management, Russell Simmons is the focal figure in the acquisition of the endorsement deal with Adidas. Indeed, even though Russell Simmons' Def Jam records and Run-DMC were never explicitly linked outside of Simmons' initial management of the group and the family bond between Run and Simmons, the assumption was there. Simmons' hands-on management style was key to both the label's success, but also its challenges. Artists were not fond of Simmons seemingly taking all their money. Complaints arose how it seemed Russell had his hands into everything, and his hands were taking all the money.²⁷ Simmons' level of control over his organization is evident with the Adidas endorsement deal. It was Simmons who

²⁷ The rapper Slick Rick, once signed to Def Jam, described Simmons' control "seemed like a conflict of interest. First you're signed to a record label, that's Def Jam; then your manager happens to be Russell Simmons, who is also involved with Def Jam. So now, you're forced to give up all of these different percentages for every little thing you do." Ronin Ro, *Raising Hell: The Reign, Ruin, and Redemption of Run-D.M.C. and Jam Master Jay*. (New York, NY: Amistad, 2005), 198. Interestingly, in his autobiography, Simmons claimed other artists were amazed by the amount of money he gave to his artists in his record deals. Recalling a radio interview in Los Angeles, "I told the interviewer I gave Kurtis Blow ten points on his records and Snoop Dogg almost fell out of his seat...My impression is that his early record deals weren't very generous." Simmons, *Life and Def*, 56-57.

first told DMC to make the song.²⁸ Russell delegated Lyor Cohen, an employee at Rush Management, to create a publicity package to send to Adidas.²⁹ Furthermore, he insured the song would get publicity, though Run-DMC was signed to Profile Records.³⁰ As creative director and executive producer of “Raising Hell,” Simmons made sure “My Adidas” got exposure, making it the lead single from the new album.³¹

Not only was Simmons’ marketing of “My Adidas” purposefully attempting to entice Adidas into an endorsement deal, the song itself was as well. The lyrics of “My Adidas” detail not only the Adidas sneakers of Run-DMC, but also the groups’ success. In the group’s official biography Bill Adler shies away from calling the song a direct commercial for the shoes, holding “the song isn’t really about Run-DMC’s footwear but what they’ve accomplished while wearing them.”³² Such claims are not entirely without merit. Indeed, there is an element of authenticity when DMC assures the listener that their shoe choice has not changed with success. They still wear the same Adidas when they “stepped on stage, at Live Aid, the people paid and the poor got paid,” as during their

²⁸ According to DMC, Simmons’ epiphany came whilst he was “dusted up.” Simmons ranted on for two hours about insuring the phrase “My Adidas” would be repeated often during the song. Ro, *Raising Hell*, 131. In his autobiography, Simmons freely mentions his past recreational usage of Angel Dust and other drugs, giving more credence to the claim. Simmons, *Life and Def*, 32.

²⁹ Lyor Cohen later became Simmons’ closest business partner and quite wealthy in his own right. During the fund-raiser efforts following Jay’s death, Cohen received equal amounts of bile as Simmons for not cutting Jay’s widow a check.

³⁰ Profile was not a rap label, and as long as they were getting their cut of the group’s profits, Profile appeared to have no problem in letting Russell Simmons take point on the creative elements of Run-DMC.

³¹ The B-side of the record was “Peter Piper,” which later would be the first track on the *Raising Hell* album. Brian Coleman, *Check the Technique: Liner Notes for Hip-Hop Junkies* (New York, NY: Villard, 2005), 400-401.

³² This would become the primary argument against the blatant commercial nature of “My Adidas.” Bill Adler, *Tougher Than Leather: The Rise of Run-DMC* (Los Angeles, CA: Consafos Press, 2002), 155.

formative years in Queens.³³ There is an assurance of validity, assuring naysayers Run-DMC is an unchanging constant force.

But at the same time, the song teased Adidas with the potential sheer volume of the endorsement deal. Run-DMC lauded its own success and exposure, but also advertised for the company, and linked the group and the shoe maker, “We make a mean team, my Adidas and me.” Indeed, DMC’s reference to owning fifty pairs of shoes is spoken in amazement and admiration, as though only a true fan would have multiple pairs of Adidas.³⁴ In addition, DMC detailed the advantages of having multiple colors of shoes specifically for particular activities, “got blue and black cause I like to chill. And yellow and green when it's time to get ill.”³⁵ Run-DMC was not telling their audience to buy one pair of Adidas, but several. The lyrical content was more explicit than even the brashest Adidas advertisement could ever hope. Although Adidas executives might long to tell the public to buy multiple pairs of sneakers, Run-DMC did their dirty work for them, seemingly free of charge. In addition, the song includes the phrase “My Adidas” 22 times.³⁶ In comparison, no other name brand comes even close to the sheer number of mentions in the rest of the songs. Furthermore, most name brands, notably Calvin Klein, are mentioned in a negative light or dismissively.³⁷ Also, even the artists’ names, which are often referenced in their songs, are never mentioned anywhere close to the twenty-two times Adidas is mentioned. Because of the drive of Russell

³³ Run-DMC “My Adidas,” *Raising Hell*, Profile Records, 1986. Cassette tape.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ The most well-known attack against Calvin Klein is “Rock Box,” in which Run claims “Calvin Klein is no friend of mine.” Run-DMC, “Rock Box,” *Run-DMC*, Profile Records, 1984. Cassette tape. Furthermore, on “Sucker MCs” the brand is described as part of the attire of fake rappers: “Youse a sucker MC in a pair of Calvin Kleins.” Run-DMC, “Sucker MCs,” *Run-DMC*, Profile Records, 1984, Cassette tape.

Simmons compelling Run-DMC to write such a song, they made the preemptive strike in securing a lucrative endorsement from Adidas.

Run-DMC's endorsement deal with Adidas, even in its extended form, shows a remarkable amount of initiative for the artists and their management. Though an entertainer lending his likeness and support to brands was not a new development, most did not willingly and deliberately seek to gain them. While the desire to gain wealth through musical success was already evident in hip-hop, its coupling with the entrepreneurial drive of Russell Simmons made for a lucrative brew.

This action flipped the paradigm of traditional endorsement deals. Instead of a company approaching an artist after said artist achieved a level of success, Run-DMC approached Adidas first.³⁸ Furthermore, this deal came before Run-DMC truly broke out on a mainstream stage. While their success with Live Aid and MTV was impressive, it was not up to the levels of their post-Raising Hell fame. In short, at the time of their deal with Adidas, they were not to the level as they claimed to be. Indeed, this deal with Adidas helped propel Run-DMC to legitimate superstardom.

This tradition continued with "Walk This Way," the group's biggest hit and arguably one of the most influential songs and music videos in rap music. The group had not heard of Aerosmith aside from using their records to rap over in freestyle sessions

³⁸ On Adidas' corporate website, the company describes the origins of the endorsement deal coming solely from the members of Run-DMC. Adidas calls the song "the first endorsement deal of a brand by a musical artist. No checks were signed. No managers approached. No media plan developed. It was conceived out of a pure love of the brand." Furthermore in the accompanying imbedded videos of Russell Simmons and DMC, both reaffirm Simmons' position of primary creator of the song. Of course, DMC also reiterates just how high Simmons was at the origin of the song.
<http://www.adidas.com/campaigns/originalsss2009/content/#/lifestyle/myadidas>.

with Rick Rubin.³⁹ Indeed, at their first meeting with Steve Tyler and Joe Perry of Aerosmith, the members of Run-DMC were under the mistaken notion the rock group was named “Toys in the Attic,” after the album the original “Walk This Way” had appeared.⁴⁰ However, Run-DMC’s unfamiliarity with Aerosmith was looked past in light of Russell Simmons drive. They recorded the record with the primary goal for it to be a mainstream hit. It was Simmons’ insistence that placed Run-DMC in a position to record with a band of which they did not even know the correct name. However, “Walk This Way” was a huge hit, providing Run-DMC with their first top ten song, it peaked at number four on the Billboard music charts.⁴¹

While “My Adidas” was not made into music video despite being a single, presumably from a lack of relationship with Adidas in order to achieve the rights needed, “Walk This Way” would get the full treatment.⁴² The video is a landmark for both the format and the bands involved. For Run-DMC, it gave them a wider fan base. For Aerosmith, it brought them back from the brink of being passé. In addition, the video has enough prominent Adidas shots to hint at the potential saturation a “My Adidas” video could have had. In particular, as Run and DMC walk down the stairs towards the screaming throng at the Aerosmith concert, the camera cuts into a tight shot of their

³⁹ Rubin is the other founder of Def Jam records with Simmons and a legendary producer in his own right. He was responsible for bringing most of the Rock music elements to Run-DMC records.

⁴⁰ Russell would later recall with amusement that the members of Run-DMC “kept talking about ‘My homeboy Steve (Tyler, lead singer of Aerosmith) from Toys in the Attic.’” Adler, *Tougher than Leather*, 159.

⁴¹ Five weeks into the “Raising Hell” tour, an employee of Rush Management informed the group that “Walk This Way” was the most requested record in Boston. Run’s immediate response was “On what station? The black station or what?” in seeming disbelief of their success on the white rock radio stations. Ro, *Raising Hell*, 147.

⁴² Interestingly enough, DMC makes the claim the reason a music video was not filmed for “My Adidas” because “We was on the road too much- we didn’t have time to make a video for it.” Coleman, *Check the Technique*, 398.

Adidas sneakers with the laces removed.⁴³ The shoes are clearly Adidas and receive close attention from the camera. Indeed, in light of Run DMC's endorsement deal with Adidas, it is only natural their next big public display would be loaded with shots of their beloved sneakers.

The success of "Walk This Way" also marked a transition in the way Run-DMC presented their band. As evidenced by the promo commercials for their April 1987 concert in New York City, Run-DMC began calling themselves "the kings of rap and roll."⁴⁴ The success of "Walk This Way" was the culmination of a self-fulfilling prophecy begun in their earlier "King of Rock" album. Run-DMC was no longer just a rap group, but had moved on into the wider mainstream arena of rock. While they still stayed true to their rap roots, the addition of "and roll" to their description implies inroads in a much larger market. No longer was Run-DMC the music of the black inner city, but the white suburbs as well.

Run-DMC not only achieved wider exposure with their endorsement deal with Adidas, it got a level of mainstream acceptance as well, again as the result of the actions of Russell Simmons. Although the seven-figures gained by the endorsement are not a paltry sum, the money was secondary to the publicity and exposure gained.⁴⁵ However, the value of the deal was not just in exposure for Run-DMC as a music group, but as a brand. The endorsement deal with Adidas allowed a much higher level of visibility and availability for people to buy into the hip hop lifestyle. It is this principle that sustained

⁴³ The shot occurs approximately 2 minutes and 34 seconds into the video and lasts for about 4 seconds. Run-DMC & Aerosmith, "Walk This Way," 1986, Music Video, Arista Records, Dir. Jon Small.

⁴⁴ In addition, the promos make early mention of Adidas' sponsorship of the group.

⁴⁵ Most accounts hold the members of Run-DMC did not see much of the endorsement money. According to DMC, "they basically gave us a bit of the money and put most of the money into the tour." However, nothing is said about how much Simmons pocketed from the deal. Ro, *Raising Hell*, 151.

Run-DMC as a relevant commercial force and Simmons' financial designs. Run-DMC was not only the music, but also existed as a commodity through which listeners could tangibly identify with the hip-hop culture. Furthermore, it occurred in such a manner that Adidas did not have to change its main company philosophy. Adidas was not primarily an urban lifestyles company, nor did the deal change their direction that much.⁴⁶ Over the course of time, Run-DMC and Adidas have become only synonymous with each other in regards to the rapper/shoe maker relationship.⁴⁷ The endorsement deal truly is unique in that regard. The deal with Run-DMC opened up the urban market to Adidas, and the mainstream market to Run-DMC. It was a perfectly mutually beneficial deal with neither side getting the short end of the stick; a uniquely win-win situation all around.

In addition, because of Run DMC's heightened exposure, their visual appearance became the major manner in which they could be emulated. While distinct, their style was easily obtainable. They looked like ordinary individuals, fairly free of the flash which denoted earlier rappers. In this same vein, their Adidas sneakers became an easily obtainable object with which to show legitimacy in fandom. By presenting themselves as the biggest rappers and superstars, they became the standard that the ghetto and the black lower classes, which they claimed to represent in the first place, replicated. Their earlier claims of being authentic gained validity since the ghetto was now emulating them.

Because of the sheer emphasis placed upon appearance, it was clear Simmons was not just fashioning himself as a successful individual, but the groups he managed as well. It was easier to claim success already rather than "pay your dues" as the case may be. It

⁴⁶ Indeed, Adidas is still primarily known as athletic and soccer equipment, without a major urban following aside from nostalgia for Run DMC.

⁴⁷ Granted, Adidas has sponsored other rappers, and Run spends time advertising Simmons' Phat Farm shoes, but the level of connection with any other product is not the same in the public eye.

also fits quite well into hip hop's overall element of bragging and not actually just doing something. For instance, on "Raising Hell," and throughout their discography, several tracks comment on the skills of the members. An example is "Peter Piper," the first track on "Raising Hell," which opens with Run-DMC lauding superior rhyming ability over Mother Goose Characters, "Now Peter Piper picked peppers, but Run rocked rhymes. Humpty Dumpty fell down that's his hard time. Jack B. Nimble what nimble and he was quick. But Jam Master cut faster Jack's on Jay's dick".⁴⁸

Therein lies the other side of rap's heavy Protestant work ethic and self-realization element, a rapper heaps praises upon himself instead of waiting for someone else. Though a rapper can claim hard work and hustling his way to becoming a success, all they were doing is claiming it, not actually doing it. However, because of the success they found by already claiming prior success, they validated their initial claims. Rap music is intensely aware of claiming in order to get first dibs on the experience. For instance, on the 1985 song, "King of Rock," DMC makes the boast, "I'm the king of rock, there is none higher. Sucker MC's should call me sire. To burn my kingdom, you must use fire. I won't stop rockin' till I retire," despite little validation for his claims utter than his bravado.⁴⁹ Because of this principle, rap is a very personal and immensely competitive field, as exemplified by battle rapping being central to the music's culture.⁵⁰ Interestingly enough, Run-DMC was not engaged in any major rap feuds, aside from their contention with Kurtis Blow, and instead attempted to have an aura of being above it all. Their essence of "coolness" was not under attack, even though they set it up

⁴⁸ Run-DMC, "Peter Piper," *Raising Hell*, Profile Records, 1986, Cassette tape.

⁴⁹ Run-DMC, "King of Rock" *Run-DMC*, Profile Records, 1985, Cassette tape.

⁵⁰ Battling is a contest wherein rappers trade improvised verbal insults towards each other.

initially as a defense mechanism against attacks on their lack of street credibility. Like Simmons, because they acted like success, they eventually became successes.

The purposeful “misremembering” of the past, a valuable aid in attempting to set one’s self up as a previous success, is felt in the particulars of the Adidas endorsement deal. Though both Run and DMC would later claim Run’s exclamation to call for the taking off of the audience’s Adidas to be unique to the Madison Square Garden concert, the exclamation had been previously filmed in Philadelphia by Lyor Cohen and sent to Adidas.⁵¹ The participants are probably well aware of the effectiveness of the story and have in time either willfully or subconsciously altered the tale of the endorsement until it became a more significant and clearer event. In their official biography, in 1986, not much emphasis was placed on the Madison Square Garden concert, since there was little reason to believe the deal with Adidas would become iconic to the perception of Run-DMC. However, as time passed the event became much more singular. Run’s call for the audience to put their Adidas sneakers in the air was no longer a regular aspect of their shows on the “Raising Hell” tour, but unique to their hometown arena of Madison Square Garden and spur of the moment, which combined to become a much better story.

Run’s particular remembrance of the concert marks another regular occurrence in rap music, retroactive justification and explanation. Though the facts of the matter might be contrary, the rappers’ explanation must be taken as “truth.” The transition of the endorsement deal with Adidas from a calculated move to lucky happenstance is engrained into the hip-hop aesthetic. One’s worth can only be proven by himself, a key principle in battle rapping. Even while the listener might be well aware of the

⁵¹ Adler, *Tougher than Leather*, 166-167.

exaggerations and humorous hyperbole of the rapper, it fits the rapper's persona. A rapper's on-stage persona is separate from the individual, a regular occurrence in music, taking on a separate identity. However, the line blurs significantly with rap music since so much of the persona is autobiographical. But at the end of the day, it is still a persona. While Joseph Simmons might be the working class child of well-educated parents, his character of "Run" was not as inclined. As such, attacks of credibility can be shifted to either the persona or the performer, depending on the circumstances and the attack.

In addition to transforming reality into myth, the retelling of the Madison Square Garden concert has also shifted the power away from Russell Simmons and his Rush management team to the artist themselves. It is interesting that in DMC's later telling of the Madison Square Garden concert, after seeing Run's display, Russell runs and quickly hustles the deal.⁵² However, in Run's reckoning, Russell is absent. The Adidas executive, astonished by Run's bravado, offers a spontaneous deal.⁵³ The later versions of the tale highlight the spur of the moment speed of the affair. Like freestyling, the action is depicted as "just nothing." There was no hard work put in; fate, destiny, and sheer defiance are what achieved Run-DMC's success.

This revision brings back some artistic credibility to the group. No longer are they pawns in Russell Simmons' get rich scheme, but controllers of their own destiny. They did not need the help of another in order to reach their achievements. Instead, there was little chance for them not to get the endorsement, their sheer presence made it possible. Interestingly, by this paradigm, the members of Run-DMC are taking on the mindset of

⁵² Parker, "Hip-Hop Goes Commercial."

⁵³ Simmons, *It's Like That*, 12.

Russell Simmons. Simmons was the initial entrepreneur in Run-DMC's eventual success in rap. Without his effort, it is doubtful Run-DMC would be a group in the first place, let alone have the level of success they achieved. But as time went on, Russell Simmons tried to separate himself from the initial effort he made within the rap music world in order to maintain the mainstream respectability he desperately sought as his ultimate goal. The members of Run-DMC, particularly his brother Run, took up the mantle of primary plotter in his absence. While Run would give praise and lip service to his brother, he would maintain his insistence of his authority over the group. Since Simmons branched off into other business ventures that took him further away from his hip-hop background, Run, who was already in business with Russell (save membership on his Def Jam label) became the new brains behind Run-DMC. Run would make mention of this dynamic on the later release "Simmons Incorporated" which claimed not being in full business with Russell was undertaken just in order to keep things fair in the rap world. Run raps on the song, "People wanna know why I ain't on my brother's label. If I did this whole rap game be unstable," insinuating if both Simmons brothers on the same label and making business decisions, no other rapper would have a chance.⁵⁴

However, Russell Simmons did not fit the traditional rapper mold since he did not create a performance persona. His sole identity was Russell Simmons. While he was adept at changing his behavior to fit the environment, he was always Russell Simmons. In his autobiography DMC recalls "Russell was able to come up into the Bronx and hang out at a night club called the Fever, but he could also go downtown and be at home in the

⁵⁴ Run-DMC, "Simmons Incorporated," *Crown Royal*, Arista Records, 2001, CD. This is also ironic since said album, "Crown Royale," was nearly devoid of DMC, who felt creatively squashed by the scheming of the Simmons brothers. Ro, *Raising Hell*, 288.

Village.”⁵⁵ He was driven by entrepreneurial desire; his decision to move into rap music was simply a redirecting of the energies he had been using as a drug dealer. In his autobiography Simmons writes of his choice to leave drug dealing after experiencing a rap show: “All the street entrepreneurship I’d learned selling herb, hawking fake cocaine and staying out of jail, I decided to put into promoting music. It seemed a lot less dangerous, more fun and more prestigious.”⁵⁶ All of Russell Simmons’ changes to the group stemmed from this explicit desire to make money and become more commercially viable.

A key example of Simmons’ financial designs getting in the way of his personal relationships came following the death of Jam Master Jay in 2002. Jay had often been at odds with the IRS. Indeed, after his murder, money to pay off his house and provide for his children’s education was sought through a public fund-raiser. Questions arose why Jay was in this predicament in the first place. Most claimed Jay was never flashy, and the material possessions he had were modest considering someone of his fame and the level of success gained as a member of Run-DMC. It seemed strange that Jay was lacking wealth. Furthermore, Jay was the only member of the group signed to Def Jam. It can be insinuated that perhaps Jay did not receive as lucrative of a deal as the other members of the group. In his own defense, Simmons claimed the bigger record companies were taking his cuts and he wanted to recoup what he felt was rightfully his. In essence, by taking large monetary cuts from his artists, Simmons hoped to rectify his treatment by Profile, Sony, and the other larger record companies he partnered with in order to achieve

⁵⁵ Darryl McDaniels & Bruce Harding, *King of Rock: Respect, Responsibility, and My Life with Run-DMC* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 11.

⁵⁶ Simmons, *Life and Def*, 35.

larger exposure for his artists. Indeed, when describing his attempt to make smaller individual artists labels within the larger umbrella of Def Jam, Simmons writes his rationale was to try and recoup some of the money he felt he was deserved. Simmons bluntly states in his autobiography, “The basic truth of the record business is this: You get ripped off, and then you learn to rip the next person off. That’s how I’ve seen it work.”⁵⁷

However, Russell Simmons was not as unfortunate as the group he managed. Simmons went on to found Def Jam records, as well as Phat Farm clothing, and a whole host of other businesses. Furthermore, by his own reckoning, Simmons had lost touch with the contemporary music scene, preferring to focus more on his clothing and other lines.⁵⁸ However, this discrepancy is resolved through Simmons initial insistence in becoming a mainstream product. It is interesting to note Simmons’ very definition of hip-hop is “modern mainstream young urban American culture.”⁵⁹ No longer does he want to be confined to a single racial facet of America, but wants to expand to all elements. However, his ability to reach a large audience is based upon him carving a foothold in a niche market. By focusing on such a small segment of an entire movement, Simmons was eventually able to move gradually on to larger fields.

Interestingly, the members of Run-DMC stop short of claiming Simmons cheated them out of their money. Even Ronin Ro, who takes a very critical view of Simmons in his biography of Run-DMC, claims all of Simmons’ rather unscrupulous business practices were taken out of ignorance with the best intentions in mind. “Russell Simmons

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 56.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 161.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 4.

did whatever he could...to help Run-DMC maintain their fame, their status, and their commercial standing in the unpredictable rap music industry.”⁶⁰ Still, whatever Simmons’ intentions were, it did not suppress some of the anger felt against him following Jam Master Jay’s death. There were those who claimed Simmons was to blame for Jay’s financial problems, and that he or Cohen could have easily cut a check to Jay’s widow rather than the fund-raising.⁶¹ Regardless, Adidas continued their relationship with Run-DMC, sponsoring charity fundraisers in Jay’s name years after his death.⁶²

Because of the ongoing efforts of the Run-DMC mandated by Simmons, both Run-DMC and Russell Simmons fit well into the American ideal that an individual, through sheer determination, skill, and luck, can carve out a better life for himself. Likewise, a typical American success story often links coming from poverty or similar disadvantaged situation, which makes the wealth of the successful individual all the more impressive. Run-DMC also sought to downgrade the affluence of their native Hollis, Queens, in order to heighten their level of success. The members of Run-DMC and Simmons all came from a middle-class two parent working class existence, albeit black, nowhere near the rougher perception of the Bronx and Harlem, earlier enclaves of rappers. Indeed, Run-DMC rapped often of going to school and staying away from street activities, taking pride in not being engaged in hoodlum and characteristically “gangsta”

⁶⁰ Ro, *Raising Hell*, 325.

⁶¹ Chuck D of “Public Enemy” was especially vocal in his opposition to Simmons’ treatment of Jay’s financial problems. Following an appearance at a fund-raiser, Sean Combs recalls watching Chuck punch walls in frustration and cursing profusely concerning the situation. *Ibid*, 322.

⁶² “Adidas Promotes Shoes With Run DMC Charity” Ito, Suzanne, *Biz Bash New York*. Available From <http://www.bizbash.com/newyork/content/editorial/4473_adidas_promotes_shoes_with_run_dmc_charity.php>.

activities.⁶³ Though they were not “gangsta,” nor did they claim to be, they came to embody the gangsta persona which the nation feared. For instance, following a gang riot which occurred at a Long Beach, California concert, the group had to defend their lyrics from accusations of violent subject matter provoking such outbursts, even though they had not yet gone on stage. Furthermore, these attacks against Run-DMC were spurred on heavily by Kurtis Blow, who was disgruntled with Simmons and was seeking any opportunity to attack his former manager. Kurtis Blow was the first artist signed under Simmons’ management, as well as the rapper under which Run first got his start rapping. However, the relationship between Blow and Simmons soured after Run-DMC started taking more of Simmons’ attention, as well as a myriad of other business related issues. At the time of the Long Beach Concert, Blow and the group were on the outs and in a semi-public relations war.⁶⁴ However, despite the stigma attached to them and hip-hop as a genre, Run-DMC was still able to sell records and become financially better off than their initial origins.

The squalor of Simmons’ and Run-DMC’s past was exaggerated and heightened for effect. While the group lived in two-parent homes in a decidedly middle-/working-class neighborhood, they always claimed to know where the rougher “corner” and “street” denizens lived within Hollis. Indeed, even after the Madison Square Garden concert, the group stayed at home with their parents.⁶⁵ While Run-DMC might claim legitimacy in their rhymes through their ghetto knowledge, it is evident their pursuits

⁶³ Run-DMC’s focus on their respectable behavior is best exemplified on “Sucker MCs,” the group’s first major single, DMC raps “I’m D.M.C. in the place to be/ I go to St. John’s University/And since kindergarten I acquired the knowledge/And after 12th grade I went straight to college.” Run-DMC “Sucker MCs” *Run-DMC Profile Records*, 1984, Cassette tape.

⁶⁴ They have since mended the relationship.

⁶⁵ Run recalls waking up the next morning at his parents’ house and seeing his father with a copy of the morning’s newspaper, with Run-DMC as the headline picture. Simmons, *It’s Like That*, 13.

were primarily financial in nature, not in advancing this underclass culture. However since their status, as well as future financial success, as performers came from embodying an element of the counter-culture, the expectations placed on Run-DMC were often ghetto in nature.

Likewise, Simmons was also under the same expectations as the group he managed. While it might be easy to demonize Russell Simmons as a money grubbing mogul, his true character is more complex. Coupled with his drive to succeed and make money is a sense of naivety and overcompensation. This overcompensation stemmed from insecurity about his background. Like the group he managed, Simmons was never completely at ease with the ghetto lifestyle. Simmons does not come across as the typical personification of rapper machismo; he is lighter skinned, short, and speaks with a noticeable lisp. Indeed, even as a child, Run remembered being by taunted others in the neighborhood with “Yo! DJ Bum! Your brother’s a homo!”⁶⁶ While such attributes are certainly not indicative of lacking manliness, in the hyper masculine world of rap, it was enough for him to become defensive. As such, Simmons focused on elements he could change, such as clothing, and his public perception as a party planner.⁶⁷ Once people believed he was successful and started acting like a success, he became genuinely successful, an element well accepted and prevalent in the rap world.⁶⁸ However, since his foundation as businessman was based upon overcoming initial obstacles, it became ingrained in his personality. Simmons details this sense of inferiority in his autobiography, “No matter how much fly gear I bought or how much cool I tried to

⁶⁶ Ro, *Raising Hell*, 9.

⁶⁷ Simmons, *Life and Def*, 17-18.

⁶⁸ It is not uncommon for a rapper to brag about their high personal wealth and success in the music world on their first record. The practice is akin to setting up one’s own self-fulfilling prophecy. Once the level of success is actually achieved, the rapper looks like they knew their future all along.

project, I was from Queens...⁶⁹ Because of this, he was never satisfied and always sought to move forward.

Simmons' actions as both manager and brains of Run-DMC came from his desire to make himself wealthy, which in his mind, is a very American undertaking. . Despite claiming to be counter-cultural, Russell Simmons claims to and does embody a form of self-determination and grit lauded in American culture. Simmons makes a very telling remark in his autobiography, "Most black people have always wanted to naturally go into the mainstream, to buy into the American dream just the way they say it on television, just like our white counterparts. The desire can burn even brighter, since that dream is often systematically denied to us."⁷⁰

This belief provides justification for a lot of his more selfish actions. It also fits into a greater American narrative. Simmons is a success story; he came from nothing to make money on underclass music. But Simmons' plight is a self-told success story; Simmons is guiding his own narrative, even prior to his actual success in the music world. As such, Simmons became very image conscious, evidenced by his branding and attention to visual appearance. Because of this heightened sense of image consciousness, clothing and other attire made a likely extension of his branding.

Clothing is visual, making it a likely link for commercialization and product placement. Since clothing and other attire can be worn as indicative of adherence to a particular rapper and/or lifestyle beliefs, it is only natural Simmons would focus upon it for endorsement purposes. In addition, at the time of Run-DMC's rise to fame in the mid-

⁶⁹ Simmons, *Life and Def*, 34.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 153.

1980s, name brand shoes were beginning to take an equal role to other articles of clothing. In the time of Air Jordans and people getting robbed for their shoes, it was only a matter of time before rappers, especially those with management as image conscious as Simmons, would focus upon the shoe as a status symbol. In addition, it would allow rappers further access into the mainstream consumer culture.

This move into the mainstream was part of Simmons' plan all along, should his autobiography be believed. Simmons claims it was only natural for hip-hop to move into the esteem of white youth, already naturally rebellious. He finds punk rock and other counter-cultural music forms only hinted at the potential contained in rap music. In his autobiography, he writes concerning rap's appeal to white youth, "Today a kid knows a rock star acts out because he's rebelling against his parents. A rap star, however, is doing it because he has a serious reason- discrimination, personal anger, or ghetto conditions. And on top of all that, a rap star wants to make money and enjoy success and enjoy doing it. The result is the kind of attitude of authentic rebellion that rock was always supposed to have."⁷¹ In short, because of his drive, Simmons eventually achieved his goal of becoming wealthy, which is part of the very essence of rap music. Though Simmons was not the performer on stage, nor was he part of the face of Run-DMC, he was considered by the group as an integral member on the same level everyone else. Indeed, Run would later claim there were five members in Run-DMC: "Run, DMC, Jam Master Jay, Russell

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 7.

Simmons, and God.”⁷² Were it not for Russell Simmons, there is little chance the group would have achieved the level of success it did.

Because of Simmons’ success in promoting the image of Run-DMC to the consumer culture, Run-DMC became icons. Elements of their on-stage persona have transcended the mere physical and have become emblematic of the era in hip hop. For instance, the all-black leather suits, the black fedoras, and basic the minimalist style compared to other rap acts, were all pioneered by Run-DMC and later became emblematic for hip hop in general.⁷³ Because Run-DMC gained the widest exposure, they became what the general public, both white and black, expected from rappers. Though Run-DMC was not the first rap group, they were the first rappers to be seen outside of New York on a wide-scale.⁷⁴ In addition, Run-DMC was the introduction for many future rappers outside of the New York City metro area to the genre.⁷⁵ There had been no precedence for rap music reaching such widespread mainstream audience prior to Run-DMC. Indeed, it can be reasonably inferred that rap music that developed outside of New York was influenced most by the rappers with the widest exposure. The artists most in the mainstream consumer culture had the most effect on subsequent rappers. While Run-

⁷² God’s inclusion in the group has not been that well documented, aside from Run’s later transformation to Reverend Run and the high amount of religious undertones on their 1993 album “Down with the King.” Indeed, at the time of the recording of “Down with the King,” DMC recalls Run’s desire to change their stage names to “Reverend Run and Deacon DMC.” Needless to say, such a switch was never made. Ro, *Raising Hell*, 264.

⁷³ Run-DMC’s exposure was what led to the end of the “old school” artists, as well as the heavy disco feel of early rap records.

⁷⁴ Years afterward, DMC would confess have been called “rap” by people who stop him randomly in the streets, “No name. Just ‘rap’.” McDaniels & Harding, *King of Rock*, 11.

⁷⁵ For instance, at their induction into the Rock and Roll hall of fame in April 2009, Eminem, who was inducting the group, remarked they were the first rap group he had ever seen on television. Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony, television program, Fuse TV, 4 April 2009.

DMC was not the first rap group, since they were the first seen on television and other visual forms of media, they became the originators.

Considering the convergence of these physical and mental factors, it was only a matter of time before Russell Simmons would fuse together his control over the group and their subsequent success to make himself personally wealthy. This mindset also permeated into his relationships with other artists, who were known to dislike the amount of direct creative control he took over them. Plus, there was a lot of resentment for his influence over Run-DMC even though they were signed with a label other than his own Def Jam records.⁷⁶ Regardless of the protests of others, Simmons needed Run-DMC, since it was this relationship which provided him with a level of business respectability to make Def-Jam, Phat Farm, and his eventual empire spanning numerous fields. Simmons' name as a business icon is due to his early management of Run-DMC.

Hip-hop, like other black musical endeavors such as the blues, started out as a reaction to a less than desirable socio-economic status. However, the infusion of a strong work ethic, which is readily evident in Simmons' approach to business as well as the manner in which Run-DMC portrayed themselves publicly, created a hybridized form of expression previously unseen. Because of the insistence on the artist's initial poverty and subsequent rise to success, it was impossible for a hip hop artist to "sell out," sacrificing their artistic and street credibility for financial gain; it was a major goal all along. Subsequently, this mindset also permeated into the manner in which hip hop acts were

⁷⁶ Run-DMC was signed with Profile records. Interestingly, the Profile deal included only Run and DMC, Jam Master Jay was signed to Def Jam. Jay's relationship with Def Jam would come under scrutiny following his murder in 2002.

managed. Russell Simmons embodied a new form of the classic American entrepreneur, a self-fashioned story detailing his rise from supposed poverty to the upper crust of society.

However, because of this infusion of traditional American economic values with the emerging sounds of hip-hop, Simmons was able to achieve a level of wealth previously unseen in black music for not only for himself and Run-DMC, but provide a blueprint for future hip-hop artists to follow. Indeed, because of Run-DMC's success with Adidas, future rappers followed their example by actively seeking endorsement deals with various levels of success. Furthermore, because of the saturation of upstart artists seeking endorsement deals, companies no longer felt obligated to financially compensate those who mention their brands. The practice had become so common that companies began to try and distance themselves from the hip-hop market by publically distancing themselves from the rapper lifestyle. No longer is any advertising or publicity good publicity.⁷⁷ However, not all rappers have the management of a Russell Simmons type entrepreneur backing them and actively bringing elements together. In short, these subsequent rappers are listening to the persona of Run-DMC's success rather than the actual occurrence. Because Run and DMC focused on their involvement with the deal, and they have the widest audience thanks largely to Simmons' earlier efforts, their story has become authenticated. Since they were the ones invariably linked to Adidas, their word was taken as more authoritative. Even when their story changed in time, it still maintained a level of authenticity. However, because the reimagining and reestablishing of the past is an accepted element of the hip-hop aesthetic, their depictions the event contained the same practice.

⁷⁷ Parker, "Hip-Hop Goes Commercial."

The reality of the Madison Square Garden concert pales in comparison to the mythic effect it has had on Run-DMC and the hip-hop genre in general. The particulars of the night are insignificant next to how the telling of the tale has shaped the economic drive of subsequent rappers. While Russell Simmons' backstage scheming was much more central in securing the Adidas deal, the success of said deal secured the importance of Run and DMC's skewed memory of the event. This contention between the desire to make money and championing a fanciful past is central in rap music, and is keenly felt in Russell Simmons and Run-DMC's involvement in the Adidas endorsement deal.

“DON’T WORRY IF I WRITE RHYMES, I WRITE CHECKS”:
SEAN COMBS AND THE NECESSITY FOR REBRANDING TO INSURE
FINANCIAL VIABILITY

In March of 2001, rap producer, artist, and media mogul Sean Combs announced he would no longer be using the stage name of “Puffy” or “Puff Daddy,” under which he had gained his public notoriety. In an interview with MTV, Combs stated, “No more Puff Daddy - the first week in June, we're going to have a name-change ceremony...I’m rocking with P Diddy now.”⁷⁸ Combs’ rationale for the move was fairly set; he wanted a new start with a new name. He had recently been acquitted on weapons possessions following a high profile trial which resulted in Jamal “Shyne” Barrow, a rapper signed to Combs’ Bad Boy Records, sentenced to ten years in prison. The trial had garnered much bad publicity for both Combs and the media empire he had managed to build in a relatively short amount of time. Along with Bad Boy Records, Combs also owned Sean John, a clothing line, and Justin’s, a chain of soul food restaurants, as well as appearing as an actor and rapper in other projects. Furthermore, he had aspirations for other business ventures, citing “Bad Boy will go down in history as one of the most important, diverse and powerful entertainment conglomerates... In addition to music, we're going to rock films, television, and sports management too.”⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the negative press from the trial and criticism of Combs as a thug threatened to derail his future plans. By changing his stage name to P. Diddy, Combs hoped to rebrand himself since he had become the driving force and public image behind his media empire. Furthermore, Combs stated the name “P. Diddy” had been given to him by the deceased rapper

⁷⁸ “Puffy Becomes P Diddy,” BBC News, 29 March 2001. Available from <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1249070.stm>>.

⁷⁹ Charles E. Rogers, “What’s Next for Rap Superstar Puff Daddy?” *New York Amsterdam News* Vol. 89 Issue 14, 8 January 1998, 32. <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=467650&site=ehost-live>>.

Christopher “The Notorious B.I.G.” Wallace, and sought to once again use the name in memory of the late artist.⁸⁰

Though Combs sought to change his stage name, his announcement was met with skepticism and ridicule from both the mainstream media and hip hop purists. Critics had long decried his music production style, in particular his heavy usage of sampling and creating a “remix” of previously released material. Combs was often viewed as the antithesis of creativity, seen as utilizing the imaginative prowess of others for his own means. Though “No Way Out,” his first solo album as a rapper, had sold seven million copies, Combs was labeled as a lackluster lyricist “supported by a host of more capable rappers and singers.”⁸¹ Undeterred by his critics, Combs fully got behind his new moniker of “P. Diddy,” announcing a new album as well as appearing in the film ‘Monster’s Ball,’ opening for the boy band *NSync on their 2002 tour, and starring in ‘Making the Band,’ a MTV reality show.

To the amazement of many, Combs was able to successfully change his moniker from Puffy Daddy to P. Diddy. Though he later claimed the name change was “just another example of how the media takes things and sensationalizes them,” and that his “fans can call me anything they want--Puffy, Puff Daddy, Sean, P. Diddy--and I'll still answer,” Combs was still the driving force behind his rebranding, often mentioning the name in songs and music videos.⁸² In time, the name became synonymous with Combs and most of the negative aspects of his past were diminished. The popular perception was

⁸⁰ “Puffy Becomes P Diddy,” BBC News.

⁸¹ C.A. “Picks & Pans: Song,” *People*, Vol. 56, Issue 6, 6 August 2001.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=4891977&site=ehost-live>>.

⁸² Sean 'Puffy' Combs, Jon Wiederhorn, “The Notorious Puffy Combs Tells All,” *Teen People*, August 2001, 148.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=5233907&site=ehost-live>>.

Combs had successfully taken a new name. While his name change was alluded to comically at times, most of the negative press from the trial was put aside for his current business endeavors and relatively well-liked public persona.⁸³

However, Combs' name of "P. Diddy" was not entirely a new creation following his trial. Combs had used the name before sporadically throughout his career, particularly as a producer pseudonym and once as a guest rapper on a remix. Furthermore, the name "P. Diddy" also followed Combs' pattern of capitalizing on the memory of Wallace. By stating Wallace had given Combs the name, he could continue to profit off the idea he was still grieving the loss of Wallace. In turn, this would lead to continued esteem and record sales. This is not to say Combs did not legitimately mourn the death of a friend and star of his record label, but he was able to channel that grief into sales figures. Combs is relatively frank about this principle, he remarks in a *Rolling Stone* article, "I think his [Wallace] passing added to the fame. I would say that at least 2 million [of the nearly 5 million copies of *No Way Out* sold] were due to that, straight up. And that doesn't necessarily feel good, but that's the reality."⁸⁴ Though uncomfortable with the concept, Combs had no qualms in utilizing Wallace's memory to create a new persona in order to distance himself from the recent trial by harkening to an older, more heroic past.

Combs' rebranding from "Puff Daddy" to "P. Diddy" marks a continuation of the type of entrepreneurship and economic focus exemplified earlier by Russell Simmons.

⁸³ For instance, an article in the *New York Amsterdam News*, begins with "Puff Daddy, P. Diddy or whatever he wants to call himself," before relating a story of how he aided an injured Naomi Campbell. The article also closes calling a recent traffic violation of Combs' merely police harassment. Anthony Florence, "Deals Are in the Works" *New York Amsterdam News* Vol. 92 Issue 16, 9 April 2001, 20. <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=4375996&site=ehost-live>>.

⁸⁴ Toure, "What Makes Puffy Run" *Rolling Stone* Issue 823, 14 October 1999, 48. <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=2314487&site=ehost-live>>.

However, Combs was able to utilize the same concept in a different facet of the rap business than Simmons. Though both men were able to rise to prominence through artist management, Combs also a record producer as well, while Simmons had very little to do with the actual production of the songs he marketed. Furthermore, Combs took a much more visible role than Simmons, providing commentary in the songs and appearing in music videos. Despite their differences in behavior, the same desire for financial gains fueled their utilization of rap music to achieve this aspiration.

Combs' early life contains elements that would eventually manifest in his later endeavors. Sean Combs was born in 1969, in Harlem, to Melvin and Janice Combs.⁸⁵ Though he was born into a two-parent home, his father was murdered at a young age, unlike Simmons, who was able to have both parents. As a teenager, Combs would discover his father was killed because to his involvement in drug dealing. While Combs was born in Harlem and could always claim street credibility, he spent his formative teenaged years in suburban Mount Vernon. Here Combs attended Catholic school and became known among his white classmates as an ambassador of sorts for the hip hop culture. In addition, Combs' strong entrepreneurial drive was being cemented, holding multiple jobs while going to private high school. Combs also sought a path to financial success, "I would always say that I wanted to be somebody who made history. I didn't want to be a man who just lived and died. I made up my mind early that I was going to be successful, a multimillionaire."⁸⁶ After graduating, Combs briefly attended Howard University, where he made his name as a party planner, before dropping out in order to

⁸⁵ Ronin Ro, *Bad Boy: The Influence of Sean "Puffy" Combs on the Music Industry*, (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2001), 4.

⁸⁶ Sean Combs and Susan L. Taylor, "P Diddy Style and Substance," *Essence* Vol. 29 Issue 7, November 1998, 140.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=1235728&site=ehost-live>>.

focus solely on the music business. Following his departure from Howard, Combs continued to intern at Uptown Records, where he became known to executives because of his intense drive. It was during this time Combs first met Russell Simmons, friend to Andre Harrell, owner of Uptown Records. Allegedly, their first meeting occurred while Simmons was on a StairMaster at a health club. Though Combs had never used the equipment before, he bet Simmons he could outlast him on the machine. Over an hour later, Simmons finally conceded defeat and gave Combs enough money to fix his Volkswagen.⁸⁷

Like Run's impromptu sneaker exclamation at Madison Square Garden concert resulting in a multi-million dollar endorsement deal for Run-DMC, the story of Simmons and Combs' first meeting has more than likely been exaggerated as years have passed. However, the tale provides a clear visualization of Combs' drive. Though Simmons had been viewed as the originator of much of rap entrepreneurialism, Combs sought to beat him at his own game. According to Simmons, the same determination Combs showed on the StairMaster was the source of Combs' success. In his autobiography, he writes of the incident, "I wanted to win too, but I wasn't gonna stay on it to the point where I couldn't walk the next day. Puffy, however, was prepared to go the distance-and he did... That's Puffy, highly competitive and willing to outwork anybody. That's why he wins."⁸⁸

Combs would become an even greater success than Simmons could imagine, arguably bigger than Simmons himself, by utilizing the same techniques Simmons used in establishing Def Jam and managing Run-DMC for his own labels. However, unlike

⁸⁷ Russell Simmons, *Life and Def: Sex, Drugs, Money, + God* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 210.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 210.

Simmons, Combs was able to step in front of the camera and take on the same visual trappings of success as the artists on his label. Though he did not broker an iconic endorsement deal with a large company like Simmons had been able to accomplish with Run-DMC, Combs instead created his own companies, most notably Bad Boy records and Sean John Clothing, each capable of generating lucrative amounts of revenue.⁸⁹

Like Simmons, Combs used his management over a rap artist as a basis for further economic pursuits. Combs linked with Christopher “The Notorious B.I.G.” Wallace rather early in both their careers. When Harrell fired Combs from Uptown Records, Wallace was the sole artist who remained with Combs when he formed his own Bad Boy Records.⁹⁰ During the production of Wallace’s first album, “Ready to Die” in 1993, Combs softened Wallace’s “hyperactive, angry tone” into a smoother and more radio accessible vocal. For instance, Combs recalled, “when Biggie was freestyling on “Gimme the Loot,”...there was this line where he said, “Give me the baby rings and the number-one-mom pendant.” It was so severe for this guy that he robbed this pregnant woman. I made Biggie change the lyric... It was important to change the lyric and mute it out for radio.”⁹¹ This principle also exists with Combs' selection of songs for Wallace. He ensured radio friendly and commercially viable singles such as "Juicy" and "Big Poppa" were on "Ready to Die" despite Wallace’s preference for rougher and more violent raps. However, Combs was able to overcome Wallace’s reservations by assuring him while the

⁸⁹ For instance, in 2002, Sean John clothing alone had \$235 Million in sales. Evan Serpick, “Who's Your Diddy?” *Entertainment Weekly* Issue 689, 3 January 2003, 6.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=9124487&site=ehost-live>>.

⁹⁰ Interestingly, in his biography of Combs, Ro suggests Simmons was the one behind Combs’ firing from Uptown Records. He quotes an unnamed music executive that Simmons, “told Andre to fire Puffy. Russell separated Andre and Puffy. He though they were too formidable of team.” Ro, *Bad Boy*, 42. On the other hand, in his autobiography Simmons maintains Harrell and Combs had a healthy mentor relationship and makes no mention of Combs being fired from Uptown.

⁹¹ Sean Combs and Susan Taylor, “P Diddy Style and Substance,” 41.

hard raps might give Wallace street creditability, the more commercial numbers would turn him into a megastar. Pacified, Wallace went along with Combs' changes for the promise of later financial gains.

Combs' focus on commercial viability also manifested in songs and music videos for Bad Boy artists. In particular, Combs would become known for placing himself into the finalized product. Combs was mocked for this behavior by Marion "Suge" Knight, owner of Death Row records and Combs' counterpart during the East/West Coast rap feud at the 1995 *Source Awards*. While accepting an award, Knight announced, "If you don't want the owner of your label on your album or in your video or on your tour, come to Death Row"⁹² This behavior is present in one of the first music videos released by Bad Boy, the remix of "Flava In Ya Ear" by Craig Mack. The video opens with an homage to the 1979 film "The Warriors" with Combs clacking glass bottles on his fingers together while taunting the viewer with the phrase, "Bad Boy. Can you come out to play?"⁹³ While the gesture was menacing towards the titular gang in the film, in the music video, it affirms the street toughness of the artists. Though Combs would eventually abandon the street edginess of his videos, "Flava in Ya Ear" contains a reference to popular culture, a characteristic that would mark Combs' later videos.

The music video for Wallace's "Big Poppa" is similarly marked by an appearance by Combs purveying the vicarious escape offered through the video. In the video, Combs is shown sitting in a hot tub with two light-skinned African-American females with bleached blond hair. He appears to be neither sweating nor wet. As he talks to one of the

⁹² Ro, *Bad Boy*, 77.

⁹³ Craig Mack, "Flava in Ya Ear Remix," 1993, Music Video, Bad Boy Records, Dir. Marty Thomas.

women about meeting later to have sex, his approach is fairly effortless. The woman readily agrees to consensual intercourse for not just the night, but with the assumption of several weekends to follow. She does not even verbalize her agreement, simply nodding her head.⁹⁴ While objectifying women, it also plays into male fantasy. Combs does not have to woo this woman individually, nor treat her differently from any other girl; his mere presence and asking for sex results in immediate acceptance. He can get any incredibly attractive woman as easily as he desires. Also, the participants have a high level of wealth without working; they are rich simply because they are rich. Spending money also does not have consequence; money never appears to run out because of the sheer force of their personality in describing themselves as wealthy. By acting rich, they are seen as rich, and treated as rich.

Combs' changes to Wallace's persona, in addition to Combs' own visual behavior, were successful and resulted in financial gains for both individuals. However, like Simmons and the members of Run-DMC, contention was beginning to be felt between the artist and the management. Wallace claimed he was lagging behind Combs in his finances, and Combs was continually squelching his attempts to gain extra money by drug dealing.⁹⁵ In addition, the contention between East Coast and West Coast rappers, exemplified by Combs' Bad Boy Records and Knight's Death Row Records, was becoming heated, further disillusioning Wallace. Despite his disenchantment, Wallace continued to work with Combs, hoping to keep getting richer.

⁹⁴ The Notorious B.I.G "Big Poppa," 1995, Music Video, Bad Boy Records, Dir. Hype Williams.

⁹⁵ Wallace's past as a drug dealer was often alluded to on his records, but Combs made Wallace quit before signing him as an artist. Ro, *Bad Boy*, 35.

However, the contention between East and West coast rap would eventually claim Wallace's life and present Combs with a solid opportunity to permanently move into the spotlight. Wallace's murder ensured a heroic legacy and allowed Combs to propel himself as a solo artist without much stigma. This transition into current business endeavors was often echoed in Combs' public remembrance of Wallace. Following Wallace's death, Combs called Wallace his "best friend" and claimed the feud which claimed Wallace's life "was blown out of proportion" by "people watching too many mob movies."⁹⁶ Wallace's mother disagreed with Combs assessment of her son and Combs as best friends, "They had a beautiful relationship. But it was a business relationship. Puffy was not Christopher's best friend."⁹⁷ In addition, he claimed his upcoming solo album was therapeutic, stating "I did those songs because at the time, I was going through so much hurt and sadness over Biggie's death that getting into the studio and putting down on wax what I felt seemed the best way to get through it."⁹⁸ He asserted his continued commercial efforts were part of Wallace's wishes, "Biggie wouldn't want me to stop...Biggie wouldn't want Bad Boy to stop."⁹⁹ Furthermore, he stated his album is "also what I feel Biggie would have done had it been me instead of him who got killed so senselessly."¹⁰⁰

Riding on the success of "No Way Out," Combs was able to make further personal strides into the mainstream culture. In particular, a whiter audience became

⁹⁶ Kevin Chappell, "Puff Daddy" *Ebony* Vol. 53 Issue 6, April 1998, 54.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=363896&site=ehost-live>>.

⁹⁷ Ro, *Bad Boy*, 105.

⁹⁸ Charles E. Rogers, "Biggie Smalls--The Legacy Lives On." *New York Amsterdam News*, 2 April 1998, Vol. 89 Issue 14, 32.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=467650&site=ehost-live>>.

⁹⁹ Ro, *Bad Boy*, 104.

¹⁰⁰ Rogers, "Biggie Smalls--The Legacy Lives On," 32.

enamored with Combs, and in turn Combs embraced their esteem for him. For instance, upon seeing a group of 300 white teenagers at a music video shoot, Combs told an assistant, “Yo, those are loyal fans. We gotta sell some albums. Tell 'em Puff says his album is coming out tomorrow and go pick it up.”¹⁰¹ Even though Combs had become quite mainstream, the assumption still remained by white consumers that Combs was a legitimate purveyor of ghetto culture. By the time of his arrest in 2001, Combs had become a staple of the Hampton’s social scene, as well as a regular subject of gossip columns for his dating of Jennifer Lopez. Despite his lower class upbringing, Combs had embraced the lavish life once portrayed solely in his videos.

However, the esteem built up for Combs in the white mainstream was threatened by his legal woes. Since Combs was able to beat the charges against him, albeit by sacrificing one of his artists to a ten year jail sentence, he wanted to distance himself from the negative publicity. This marked a change in Combs’ career, becoming more mainstream accessible and working with more radio friendly artists. He tried to become a revamped artist while still upholding Wallace’s memory.

The single and subsequent music video, “Bad Boy for Life” demonstrate Combs’ attempt to rebrand himself while still affirming the popular elements of his past. The song appeared to support the idea that despite his name change, Bad Boy was never changing, hence the lyric “We ain’t, going nowhere, We cannot be stopped now, cause it’s Bad Boy for life.” However, the music video tells another tale. The video depicts Combs moving into white suburban “Perfectown, USA,” patrolling the streets on a scooter and playing

¹⁰¹ He later told his entourage, “Nothin' like 1,000 white people to make you feel great.” Toure, “What Makes Puffy Run.”

golf. In addition, the video contains cameos by rock musicians Dave Navarro and Travis Barker, in addition to comedian Ben Stiller.¹⁰² Though he might be a “Bad Boy” at heart, he has clearly moved away from his roots in the ghetto. He is attempting to embrace the mainstream white audience while still claiming to represent his past accurately.

His reality show “Making the Band” also exemplified Combs’ continued self-promotion as a business mogul. The television show, which had originally aired on ABC and created boy bands, detailed Combs’ search for creating a new rap group for Bad Boy Records. The show, on which Combs had an executive producer credit, depicted Combs as an established hit and star maker, even though he been a legitimate music mogul for only a few years at the show’s inception. However, though Combs was known as a producer, the television show rarely portrayed him at a mixing board or crafting beats. His primary role was to enigmatically dispense demands in exchange for lending his name and status as an insurer of commercial hits. For instance, Combs commanded the participants to retrieve for him a piece of cheesecake from a particular bakery in Brooklyn on foot before opening up the music studio.¹⁰³ Despite occasional mocking of his demeanor on the show, such as a Dave Chappelle sketch depicting Combs also demanding breast milk from a Cambodian immigrant and a photograph of a midget holding balloons, Combs engaged in diva behavior not only because it was accepted, it was expected.¹⁰⁴ A man in his position was justified in having quirks and strong desires. It reaffirmed his wealth and value by emulating behaviors expected by other rich people.

¹⁰² P. Diddy, “Bad Boy for Life,” 2001, Music Video, Bad Boy Records, Dir. Chris Robinson.

¹⁰³ “Making the Band”, Television program, 2003, MTV Film/Bad Boy Productions, Dir. Diane Houslin et al.

¹⁰⁴ “Chappelle’s Show: Season Two – Uncensored,” 2005, DVD, Comedy Central, Dir. Dave Chappelle et al.

Despite Combs' success in the music business, he does not fit many of the genre's expectations. Combs never claimed to be a rapper, though he rapped and made rap records. Furthermore, his skills as a producer are problematic; Combs maintained a stable of producers while purporting to champion his own "Bad Boy" sound. Also, he heavily used the techniques of remixing and sampling, which led to Combs coming under fire by both mainstream critics and other rappers. Combs is quite frank in admitting his lack of musical ability as his reason for utilizing samples, "I'm not afraid of using samples....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".¹⁰⁵

In addition, Combs acts as an ambassador of sorts, giving commentary and advice for the listener right on the record. For instance, on "Honey," a collaboration with Mariah Carey, Combs directly addresses the listener prior to the bridge, informing them, "what we're going to do right here, is we're gonna smooth it out."¹⁰⁶ It could be argued Combs is bringing back the element of original rappers, highlighting the skill of the DJ and nature of the song. By announcing his intentions, Combs is bringing attention to the song, letting people know he approves of it. However, by stating his approval, he also reaffirms his value as commentator and judge of music.

Combs extensive image consciousness stems from his past as a party planner, an occupation also held by Simmons early in his career. A party planner's primary

¹⁰⁵ Ro, *Bad Boy*, 19.

¹⁰⁶ Mariah Carey, "Honey," *Butterfly*, Columbia Records, 1997.

responsibility is not to ensure the participants have an enjoyable evening, but rather guarantee their attendance, since party planners are generally paid by the number of attendees. Furthermore, the other important element party planning is to achieve an elite reputation in order to make certain of further success. Allegedly, Combs' skill as a party planner was legendary. For instance, Combs listed several rappers on fliers and other publicity materials as participants at his first major party without their permission or knowledge. However, by sheer publicity, Combs was able to insure that all rappers listed showed up. After this demonstration, a friend stated "and ever since that first party, everyone made it a point to go to Puff's parties."¹⁰⁷ Combs' early success demonstrates the necessity of this status. No longer was it just another party, it became a "Puffy Daddy" party, a brand name production.

An extension of this image as advertising exists in the street team, a marketing device Combs used heavily. Street teams are young and unpaid individuals charged with creating as much publicity as possible with flyers, posters, and directly asking for a particular artist to be played on the radio or club. It hopes to circumvent traditional outlets of publicity and hype, such as conventional media, and use a grass roots tactics in order to make songs popular. The success of street teams, now often used in other industries such as cigarettes and colas, proves rap music's continued perception as on the pulse of urban culture and trends. Street teams only work in an urban and highly populated environment. Rural street teams simply would not work due to the size of the area needed to be covered. However, since the ghetto could be considered the birthplace of all cool and hip trends in the culture, according to Russell Simmons and others who

¹⁰⁷ Ro, *Bad Boy*, 10.

use this sort of marketing, other companies want to harness this energy. In essence, these marketers believe though the ghetto is a necessity in order to maintain street credibility, the mainstream market is the primary source of income. In that way, the “Bad Boy for Life” video speaks on two levels. It both reassures the ghetto Combs is not changing while demonstrating vicarious escape for the suburbanites. Still, Combs makes a very telling remark in the song, “Don’t worry if I write rhymes, I write checks,” frankly admitting his lack of lyrical skill.¹⁰⁸ For a white listener just buying into the counter-culture lifestyle, it may not be apparent Combs lacks artistic ability a rapper. Yet, for the listener who recognizes Combs’ lack of skill, it is an admission that his aim is financial in nature, but at least he is direct about it.

However, the sale of only records was apparently not enough to sustain the desires of these moguls. A reoccurring trend in most rap mogul’s narratives is the nature of the music business supposedly forcing the diversification of their brands. Though they might have been satisfied with just music, because of the overhead and the non-favorable distribution deals with larger companies, they had to look into other projects. However, despite the many-sided business approach, the same level of assumed success applies. Combs directly states this principle, “I can't say that I had an exact plan in place about everything that I was supposed to do... I knew that I wanted to be a multifaceted entertainer; I wanted that to be my strength. But I never knew how it was gonna play out.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ P. Diddy, “Bad Boy for Life” *The Saga Continues...*, Bad Boy Records, 2001, CD.

¹⁰⁹ Minju Pak “The Maverick Sean Combs” *Hollywood Reporter* – International Edition Vol. 384, Issue 27, 29 June 2004.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=13729624&site=ehost-live>>.

This level of optimism is based upon two factors. First, these moguls were highly self-motivated and would accept failure. But second and more centrally, the nature of rap music allows for borderline delusion in regards to one's success. Victories and defeats are not measured by reality, but rather how one remembers the occurrence. Furthermore, by adjusting one's persona, one can attempt to rectify the mistakes and failures of the past. This is the central rationale behind Combs' renaming from "Puff Daddy" to "P. Diddy." In interviews given about the name change, Combs often mentioned a desire to forget the past and move on. No longer was he the producer tainted with accusations of violence and drug use. Instead, he became the pop radio friendly mogul repackaged and ready for mainstream white America to listen again. He was the driving and most adamant supporter of this name change, using his publicity machine and skill at promoting to reinforce his new persona, as evidence by his labeling of new albums as "P. Diddy" and further endeavors such as "Making the Band."

While most rappers cite a harsh past as justification for their rhymes, Combs did not claim a past of drugs and violence, but rather one of hip hop. Combs purports to have been at attendance at rap shows from an early age, sneaking out so well his mother had no idea of his absence. Such tales strengthen Combs' street credibility and legitimacy in the rap game. Though Combs was not one of the originators, he claims to have learned directly from those who did, "From Run-D.M.C. to KRS-One to the Beastie Boys to L.L. Cool J, I was there. I seen that."¹¹⁰ Interestingly, he only mentions successful commercial acts, not the underground "true" rap acts. It also reiterates a point concerning Combs and many other subsequent definitions of rap. True hip-hop is not the first artist, but rather

¹¹⁰ Ro, *Bad Boy*, 6.

artist with the widest exposure. Combs did not want to become a rapper, nor is he considered as such. He wanted to become a mogul, to be able to utilize the talents and skills of others for his own esteem. For Ro, this continues Carter's childhood of hiring tougher kids for protection from bullies.¹¹¹ Combs is able to get "street" protection and legitimacy from those who actually have it, like Wallace. In exchange, he provides them with sustained financial means safer and free of the stigma of actual criminal activity.

This freedom from the stigma of a criminal conviction also increases the esteem for the rappers. Though such conceivably don't exist because the individual never engaged in such criminal activities, they can claim it is due to their intellect and guile, in addition to police incompetence, they were never caught. The stoic facade works only free of any actual adversity. Combs never bragged about his escaping jail time for the gun incident since it would ruin his facade of being "not guilty." Though these moguls are able to change facades, even to those that are contradictory and over-lapping, they will not willingly destroy a past persona.

Combs attempted to use this same principle during the trial. Combs tried to manipulate his image with the jury by trumping up his religious nature. Combs was known to sit at the defense table reading a pocket Bible and claiming God's providence in interviews outside the courtroom.¹¹² Even more baffling was Combs' insistence he really was not as wealthy as he portrayed, stating his house in the Hamptons was relatively small and other remarks rarely uttered in his lyrics.¹¹³ While such talk might be

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 5-6.

¹¹² "Benjamin Svetkey, Lori L Tharps, Rob Brunner, Clarissa Cruz, Audrey Fan, Evan Serpick, Chris Willman, "Power Puff," Entertainment Weekly Issue 589, 30 March 2001, 10.
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=4243037&site=ehost-live>>.

¹¹³ Ro, *Bad Boy*, x.

denoted as an admittance of guilt or a lie crashing down, it is once again image manipulation to serve a purpose. Combs hoped to enact a self-fulfilling prophecy of innocence; by acting innocent, he figured the jury would find him as such. Such a behavior was how Combs gained his success in the first place.

Likewise, by changing his stage name, Combs hoped to enact another self-fulfilling prophecy by removing the stigma attached to his name and continue to remain financially viable. After the trial, the name Puff Daddy was no longer synonymous with positive memories of the Notorious B.I.G. and Bad Boy in the public eye, but a criminal element which would hurt his record sales. Yet, Combs was able to change roles when the environment called for it. Furthermore, "Puffy" was not the real Combs; it was just a persona he created in order to get wealthy. Prior to his death and during a period of disillusionment towards Combs, Wallace stated, "You know, Sean Combs and "Puff Daddy" are two people".¹¹⁴ The self-fashioned persona of "Puffy" was created to ensure his continued commercial success.

It is for this reasons accusations against Combs' lack of visible talent are diminished. Combs never advertised himself as an artist, but rather as a mogul. He never gave the appearance of gaining personal esteem through his lyrical ability, but rather through his success in making music and other endeavors. His success was not because Combs is particularly talented as a musician, rather because he is adept at making hits. Likewise, artists did not seek to work with Combs in order to create expressive or culturally relevant works. Rather, it is because they are assured wealth and mainstream popularity by working with him. For instance, the rapper Keith Murray lists the number

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 94.

of times he has collaborated with Combs as evidence for his personal commercial viability.¹¹⁵ Combs was never viewed as the lyrical king of New York, nor a worthy successor to Wallace's lyrical prowess, but it was a title he never sought. He wanted to sell not just records, but everything else. Furthermore, as a producer, he was able to grant that sort of success to other artists. They did not make such music because they were particularly novel or unique, but because the music became popular and well played. While Simmons preferred to hide more and more behind the scenes as his acts became more successful, Combs placed himself more out front. His acts were commodities, and his name brand became his strongest selling point. Likewise, his branding transcended into products beyond music, like Simmons. However, unlike Simmons and earlier rap music producers, he became the attraction as well. Though Combs cannot rap, dance, sing, or have any instrumental training outside of a good ear for melody and knowing what is popular, he became a force in several genres. His name change was in order to maintain this commercial viability, as well as continue the success of his rebranded persona.

It is this principle which allows Combs continued acceptance in the rap world, and justified in changing his persona. Combs willingly and purposefully rebranded his persona, and by extension himself, in order to sustain future economic worth. Combs was not changing his name from "Puff Daddy" to "P. Diddy" in order to remain viable to the ghetto, but rather to remain in the mainstream public's esteem. Furthermore, Combs had engaged in such behavior throughout his career, as evidenced by his efforts as a party planner and his image control over Wallace, in addition to his appearance on records and

¹¹⁵ Keith Murray, "Can't Nobody Do It Better" *Rap-Murr-Phobia (The Fear of Real Hip-Hop,)* Koch Records, 2007, CD.

music videos. Though Combs was primarily a producer for the bulk of his career, he was able to achieve moguldom through a utilization of the same attitudes as Simmons. It is this pursuit, coupled with the original intent of rap music, which validate Combs as a legitimate and worthy inheritor to the legacy of rap entrepreneurialism.

I'M NOT A BUSINESSMAN, I'M A BUISNESS, MAN":
SHAWN CARTER'S RETIREMENT, RETURN AND THE LEGACY OF THE
SUCCESS STORY

In the fall of 2003, the multi-platinum selling hip-hop artist Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter announced his retirement from rapping after a successful career in the music business. Over the course of seven years and six albums, Carter had amassed both impressive accolades and sales, with his 1998 release "Volume 2: Hard Knock Life" selling over five million copies.¹¹⁶ In addition Roc-A-Fella records, the label Carter established with business partners Damon Dash and Kareem "Biggs" Burke, averaged \$50 million in annual revenue. In addition to producing music, the Roc-A-Fella label also included a major clothing label, Roca wear, a film production company, and vodka distributor.¹¹⁷ Despite the success, Carter publicly claimed his seventh album, entitled "The Black Album," would be his final record before retiring as a performer in order to focus on other ventures. When asked for his rationale in retiring, Carter frankly stated, "I've had it with the rap game....Time to focus on other things. That's why I'm retiring."¹¹⁸ In addition to the album, a large blitz of commercial products ensued. A farewell tour, entitled the "Fade to Black" tour, was planned. In addition, a documentary would be filmed of the Madison Square Garden concert on the tour. Also, a line of Reebok sneakers and autobiography to be published by MTV Books would be produced in honor

¹¹⁶ Clark Collis, "Jay-Z Returns," *Entertainment Weekly* Issue 898, 22 September 2006, 34-38.
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=22478353&site=ehost-live>>.

¹¹⁷ Russell Simmons, "Jay-Z" *Time* Vol. 165, Issue 16, 18 April 2005, 75.
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=16707207&site=ehost-live>>.

¹¹⁸ Josh Tyrangiel, "In His Next Life Time," *Time* Vol. 162 Issue 21, 1 December 2003, 66-68.
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=11422375&site=ehost-live>>.

of Carter's retirement.¹¹⁹ Although Carter claimed to be leaving the music business, he planned to leave with as much fanfare as possible.

However, Carter was not simply retiring from all work. In his retirement, Carter would also take the mantle of CEO and President of Def Jam records. Though the position could be viewed as a figure head post, Carter was conceivably taking on much more authority as a corporate head than as a rapper.¹²⁰ In an interview with *Newsweek*, Carter claimed that such a move into business was always his intention, "In fact, my plan in the beginning really was to make only one album in the first place. But I was fortunate enough to have staying power, so I kept going."¹²¹ However, with one final album, Carter prepared for a new life as the CEO of a major record label.

Yet, Carter's retirement was not to be permanent. Three years after the release of "The Black Album," Carter announced he was returning to the music business with a new album "Kingdom Come." Though most had viewed Carter's retirement as merely a publicity stunt, Carter restated his sincerity, "I believed it, yeah....I believed it for two years....It was the worst retirement, maybe, in history."¹²² Boredom with the mundane nature of business life caused him to return. For instance, Carter lamented the amount of paperwork being a CEO entailed, bemoaning invoices as, "I sign off on everything in the building."¹²³ Carter returned to the music business with as much fanfare as he entered

¹¹⁹ As of date, an autobiography is yet to be published.

¹²⁰ When asked of Carter's plans to retire, Russell Simmons responded "Why should he make records?...Records are a distraction. He could be missing an opportunity to get really rich. I haven't produced a record for 15 years... Making records is over." Tyrangiel "In His Next Life Time" 66.

¹²¹ Sean Carter interview, "Jay-Z," *Newsweek* Vol. 144 Issue 2, 12 July 2004, 75.
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=13648175&site=ehost-live>. Accessed 8/17/09>.

¹²² Collis, "Jay-Z Returns," 34.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 35.

retirement. Along with the new album came a collaboration with Budweiser for his first new music video “Show Me What You’ve Got.” The video was to serve not only as a music video for Carter, but also tied into the release of Budweiser’s new beer line, Budweiser Select. Anheuser-Busch cited Carter’s public persona as a good way for the company to make a foray into the urban market, calling Carter, “...on the cutting edge of pop culture, music, fashion and business...one of the world’s greatest entrepreneurs.”¹²⁴ The collaboration between the two also produced a commercial, wherein Carter’s single was played in the background for the new Budweiser Select line. In addition, the music video demonstrated a subtle jab at Cristal Champagne, with whom Carter had contention during his time as CEO. When offered a bottle of Cristal, Carter is depicted as confidentially shaking his head.¹²⁵ Despite his three year gap in between the release of “The Black Album” and “Kingdom Come,” Carter demonstrated he was more than able to pick up where he left off as an artist.

Carter’s retirement, return, and commercial partnerships with alcohol makers marks both a continuation and evolution of the economic centrality of rap music. In particular, Carter took the ideas and concepts employed by individuals such as Simmons and Combs in representing an artist by manipulating their public persona, and applied it solely to himself. Carter directly references this concept on guest appearance on the Kanye West song, “Diamonds from Sierra Leone,” where he makes the declaration, “I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man.”¹²⁶ The same ideas of entrepreneurialism and

¹²⁴ Evan Serpick, “Jay-Z’s Red State Marketing Plan,” *Rolling Stone* Issue 1013, 16 November 2006. <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=23062536&site=ehost-live>>.

¹²⁵ Jay-Z, “Show Me What You Got,” *Kingdom Come*, Roc-A-Fella Records, 2006, CD.

¹²⁶ Kanye West, “Diamonds from Sierra Leone,” *Late Registration*, Roc-A-Fella Records, 2005, CD.

self-fulfilling prophecy are present in Carter's rise to success, albeit in a more personal form than Simmons and Combs.

Shawn Carter was born in the Marcy Projects of Brooklyn December 9, 1969. Unlike Simmons and Combs, Carter did not enjoy a middle class upbringing. Carter's father abandoned the family when Carter was eleven. As the situation worsened, Carter sold drugs as to supplement his limited income, though without his mother's knowledge. After being shot at during drug dealing, Carter decided to give up drugs and release his own rap album.¹²⁷ Though Carter had appeared as a guest rapper on earlier songs, such as Big Daddy Kane's "Show and Prove" in 1994, his public profile was not high enough to interest any record companies into signing him for a larger enough sum of money.¹²⁸ Undeterred, Carter founded Roc-A-Fella records, along with associates Damon Dash and Kareem "Biggs" Burke, in order to release "Reasonable Doubt," his first album. Though the group was able to garner a distribution deal with Priority, the foundation of a record company in order to create a single album shows a remarkable amount of initiative and entrepreneurialism.

From the beginning, Carter was image conscious enough to portray himself as a financial success, not only as a rapper, but as a businessman as well. Indeed, the cover of the "Reasonable Doubt" album illustrates this principle. The black and white picture shows Carter in stereotypical Mafioso clothing, hat pulled down low over his eyes with lit cigar in between his fingers. Though it is Carter's first album and a relatively risky initial foray into music, he is already showing himself as rich as well as a success; not

¹²⁷ David Kohn "The King of Rap: Jay-Z Has Built a Billion-Dollar Business," CBS News, 13 August 2003. Available from <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/11/18/60II/main529811.shtml>>.

¹²⁸ Big Daddy Kane, "Show and Prove," *Daddy's Home*, MCA Records, 1994, CD.

just new money, but a conservative approach to finances as well. For instance, the song “Coming of Age” ends with a job interview between Carter and Malik “Memphis Bleek” Cox, wherein the elder Carter advises Cox to keep his finances “on the low” and not “blow your dough on hotties.” Impressed by Cox’s willing eagerness to obey, Carter informs Cox that “I like resume, pick a day, you can start.”¹²⁹

However, to actually obtain the lifestyle of a rich businessman, Carter would have to make his records more accessible to the mainstream. Though “Reasonable Doubt” was a critical success, it did not gain the sales Carter wanted. As the founder of his own record label and with a great deal of creative control over his music, Carter decided to pair with Def Jam and Sean Combs to produce his second album “The Life and Times of Sean Carter.” This move would amplify Carter’s presence in the market. According to Def Jam product manager Jazz Young, “The overall plan is to increase his visibility and make him that crossover artist without sacrificing his full street credibility.” In addition to traditional methods of urban marketing such as “...retail and street posters, fliers, flats, stickers, and TV spots that will run on the Box, BET, and MTV for a month,” the album would be publicized “in about 10-15 mainstream publications.”¹³⁰ With Combs and Def Jam’s help, Carter was able to break through to a larger audience. Though Carter had to soften his style, the album was a much bigger hit than “Reasonable Doubt.”

Over the next couple of years, Carter made a name for himself for his prolific creative ability, as well as the success of his albums. Carter averaged a full album a year, allegedly never writing any of his lyrics down before entering the studio. He also

¹²⁹ Jay-Z, “Coming of Age,” *Reasonable Doubt*, Roc-A-Fella Records, 1996, CD.

¹³⁰ Havelock Nelson “Jay-Z Ponders His ‘Lifetime’ on Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam Set” *Billboard* Vol. 109 Issue 35, 30 August 1997, 20.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=9709095171&site=ehost-live>>.

continued his attempts to attract mainstream attention to his music. For instance, his first widespread single was "Hard Knock Life," which sampled the Broadway show tune of the same name. Even within the song, Carter announces to the listener to "check the baseline out," highlighting his utilization of the song from "Annie."¹³¹ It is interesting because such behavior seems counter-intuitive for a street persona to adopt. However, Carter proves his street essence dominated the qualms of a light and fluffy sampling.

From his early records, Carter had not been shy about heaping accolades upon himself, with little to no justification, in the hopes they would eventually become fully realized. In this same vein, he also engages in alluding to elements of his past and persona which are never completely spelled out or demonstrated. In essence, by vaguely mentioning such subject matter, Carter is putting the responsibility upon his audience to find out their complete meaning. By fabricating and highlight elements of his past, Carter seeks to gain credibility for his personal boasts. For instance, in the lead single to his 2001 album *Blueprint*, "H.O.V.A.," Carter makes much mention of getting off drug charges, but it is never explicitly stated, rather veiled behind slang and lyrics. For instance, he refers to his time supposedly drug dealing in Maryland by cryptically stating "Was herbing 'em in the home of the Terrapins. Got it dirt cheap for them. Plus if they was short with cheese I would work with them."¹³² Furthermore, he does not fully explain how he beat the drug charges against him, despite "the cops wanna knock me, DAs wanna box me in," instead claim "I beat them charges like Rocky."¹³³ Carter does not

¹³¹ Jay-Z, "Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)," *Vol. 2... Hard Knock Life*, Roc-A-Fella Records/Def Jam, 1998, CD.

¹³² Jay-Z, "H.O.V.A (Izzo)," *The Blueprint*, Roc-A-Fella Records/Island Def Jam, 2001, CD.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

provide specific details or suggestions for how to likewise avoid criminal charges, but rather to boast he was able to beat them.

In the next verse Carter calls out the record industry, calling it "shady and needing to be taken over" despite the fact he already claims to be a successful member of said industry. He also alludes to supposed unscrupulous practices of record companies, taking away money from the deserving artists. However, rather than holding out for an apology, Carter claims financial means for himself would be the preferred manner of settling the score, "we can talk, but money talks, so talk more bucks."¹³⁴ This accusation appears contradictory for Carter since from the beginning of his career in the mainstream eye, he has presented himself as a successful business person. Nevertheless, in this particular verse, Carter puts aside some of the facade in order to demand more payment. However, such lyrical content is opposed to the benevolent dictator Carter portrays in the song's music video. In the video's world, Carter's face is on everything, from cigars to bottled water. Even with the brief accusation against the record companies, Carter is still propping himself up as the mogul and successful tycoon. Though such imagery appears contradictory to the song's lyrical content, it maintains the image Carter has cultivated in his public persona.

Though the song contains supposed personal lyrics by Carter, it is still a commercial product. Carter is selling a lifestyle and himself, along with the actual music, despite what is said in the song. Though the subject matter might be personal, unless the audience finds enjoyment in the listening, Carter's desires to gain wealth will go unrequited. Though he might talk big about taking wealth back from the record companies, the record companies do not produce the wealth, but rather, the record and

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

apparel purchasing public provides the income he so desires. Because of this, rappers must be keenly aware of their public appeal, with Carter being no exception. Indeed, while the lyrics of "H.O.V.A." provide an interesting look into Carter's psyche, the actual record is very radio friendly. The song primarily features a sound sample from the Jackson 5 hit "I Want You Back," which is looped into a bouncy and catchy beat. Indeed, it is fairly easy for a listener to ignore Carter's lyrical content of drugs and unrequited profits in light of the sheer fun sound of the song.

Another element of Carter's, which demonstrates his desire to become a commercial success, is his habit of creating and self-promoting his own names and titles. While Simmons and Combs are notorious for shamelessly plugging their products and other ventures, Carter generally promotes himself rather than his products. A key example of this principle is his taking of the title "Hova." Carter claimed that the name of "Hova" did not come from him, but rather was given to him by others hearing his lyrical skill. In an interview Carter recalled, "I make music without writing, writing it down... So, my friends around me would be – 'What's wrong with you? Like, how do you do that?' ... And my name was Jay. So it's like, 'You're like a different guy, Jehovah.' And we all started laughing. And then, the name stuck."¹³⁵ In essence, Carter is taking the title of the god of rap¹³⁶. Though Carter claims he was not the originator of the name, he is still willing to repeat it, all the while stating he was not the one who gave him the title. Carter's lyrics demonstrate a sharp increase in his usage of the name "Hova" over his career. For Carter's first 4 albums, the name "Hova" is mentioned only 8 times; this

¹³⁵ When pressed further about the meaning of the name and its religious connotation, Carter stated "I don't think I'm God at all." "Being Jay-Z," Nightline, television program, ABC, 29 November 2006.

¹³⁶ Admittedly, the term "Hova" is used much more often than the full "Jay-Hova", but the meaning behind the shortened version is the same.

number increases dramatically to 156 references on his next 4 albums. As Carter became more popular and in the forefront, his persona became a marketable asset; no longer was he just referencing his wealth and success through name brands, but also by his own name.

Carter's feud with Nasir "Nas" Jones in the summer of 2001 marked a high point of not just creative, but commercial influence as well. It is difficult to isolate a particular cause for the animosity between the two rappers. Prior to the contention, the two artists had public esteem for each other. For instance, on his 1997 song "Where I'm From," Carter raps, "Who's the best MC's? Biggie, Jay-Z, and Nas."¹³⁷ However in the aftermath of Wallace's death, both rappers were viewed as vying for the title of lyrical champion of New York City. Furthermore, a personal dispute between the rappers regarding Carter's usage of a line from one of Jones' earlier songs simmered for years. The feud erupted in the summer of 2001, when Carter's unveiled "Takeover," his first insulting song directed at Jones. In "Takeover", Carter primarily criticizes Jones' lack of success in his catalog of albums. He raps, "That's one every let's say two, two of them shits was due. One was - NAHHH, the other was "Illmatic". That's a one hot album every ten year average."¹³⁸ In response, Jones released "Ether," which mainly attacked Carter as a supposed homosexual, "That this Gay-Z and Cockafella Records wanted beef... Put it together, I rock hoes, y'all rock fellas,"¹³⁹ The feud continued on radio stations and subsequent mixtapes. Their contention continued publically until 2005 when Carter and Jones

¹³⁷ Jay-Z, "Where I'm From," *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, Roc-A-Fella Records, 1997, CD.

¹³⁸ Jay-Z, "Takeover." *The Blueprint*, Roc-A-Fella Records/Island Def Jam, 2001, CD.

¹³⁹ Nas, "Ether," *Stillmatic*, Columbia Records, 2001, CD.

reconciled at Carter's "I Declare War" concert. While on stage with Jones, Carter stated to the audience, "All that beef shit is done, we had our fun. Let's get this money."¹⁴⁰

Although there was certainly contention between the two artists, they did not go into fisticuffs or other confrontations, though their personas might suggest such. Though there was malice in their lyrics, violence was never brought into the equation. In essence, Jones and Carter were returning rap to its roots in regards to using confrontation to sell records. However, with the success and relatively peaceful outcome of the beef between Jones and Carter, the centrality of direct confrontation and boasting within lyrics in order to increase one's public persona was reaffirmed. While certainly biting and witty, the insults contained in the Jones and Carter raps are hyperbolic, and fairly free of legitimate threats. Though there is Carter's allusion to having sex with Jones' girlfriend, with the elusive, "you-know-who, did you-know-what, with you-know-who, but lets keep that between me and you, for now," in "Takeover," it is in line with other rap battle lines.¹⁴¹ Also, there are no threats of specific physical violence contained within the lines, though each rapper wants to emasculate and humiliate his opponent, he does not wish physical harm. While Jones makes reference to "...cocking up my weapon, slowly loading up this ammo," he is alluding to his words, not actually firing upon Carter. This falls in line with the tradition of break dancing and other older urban contests, such as the dozens, originating as an alternative to gang violence. It is possible to achieve the same sort of victory without resorting to violence.

¹⁴⁰ Shaheem Reid "Jay-Z And Nas Put Beef To Sleep In Onstage Show Of Unity," MTV News 28 October 2005. Available from <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1512432/20051028/jay_z.jhtml?headlines=true&rsspartner=rssNetNewsWire>.

¹⁴¹ Carter and Jones both now admit the line is about Carter's sleeping with Carmen Bryan, Jones' girlfriend at the time.

However, the Carter and Jones feud also created much publicity and interest, which is vital since both artists had albums to be released. Carter's "Blueprint" was to be released on September 11, 2001, with "Takeover's" inclusion. Likewise, Jones' "Stillmatic" album included "Ether," and was to be released December 18, 2001. In addition, though Carter's label mates on Roc-A-Fella are mentioned periodically in Jones' raps, the record labels are not mentioned nearly as much as in the East Coast/West Coast feuds, providing a sense of earnestness. The feud is no longer perceived as two enterprises ramping up demand for their product, but rather the personal disagreement between two individuals. Though presumably their labels' public relations department worked overtime to insure exposure for the two rappers, it retained an intimate disagreement.

Their feud did not end in fireworks or gunshots, but rather with their albums being released. Once there were no more albums to release, the banter diminished severely. Jones and Carter both acknowledged the others' lyrical ability and value as an artist. Indeed, by the time of their public reconciliation at Carter's "I Declare War" concert in 2005, the contention between the two had long been put to rest. In addition, Carter was CEO of Def Jam at the time of concert, a fact heavily referenced in the stage pieces of a mock oval office and presidential seal. However, the centrality of further economic viability came into play at the concert's culmination, where Jones joined Carter onstage. Not only did the two perform together, but they announced a collaborative album would soon be released.¹⁴² However, regardless of the reality of such a record, it does not diminish from the spectacle of the scene. Carter, the CEO and President of a

¹⁴² Such a record has yet to materialize, however, they have both recorded verses on each other's subsequent solo projects.

major record label, is reaching out to his worthy adversary for the economic benefit of both parties.

However, Carter's contentions during his tenure as CEO of Def Jam contain a different tint, showcasing the commercial pressures of the office. For instance, Carter's contention with Cristal champagne marks one of the major events of his time as CEO of Def Jam. Rappers favored the over 100 year old brand of high end Cristal Champagne. Cristal fit the rapper aesthetic well: it was expensive, it was gold and flashy, and had the appearance of luxury. Carter is no exception to this esteem. Indeed, Carter mentions the alcoholic beverage often throughout his discography, even beginning early with his *Reasonable Doubt* record. For instance, on the song "Feelin' It," Carter raps, "I keep it realer than most I know your feelin it, Cristal on ice I like to toast I keep on spillin it."¹⁴³ Within his first four albums, Carter mentions the brand by name nineteen times, always in a positive connotation to denote wealth and success. Many of Carter's videos depicted club or party scenes with bottles of Cristal being popped and poured without care or discretion. For example, the "Big Pimpin'" video portrays Carter on a large yacht with several bottles of Cristal poured onto swimsuit clad females.¹⁴⁴ While a direct contact or agreement between the makers of the alcohol and various rappers was never explicitly stated, the association between the two became assumed, an afterthought with the liquor becoming just another demonstration of excess and wealth.

But in a 2006 interview with *The Economist*, Frédéric Rouzaud, one of the company's managing directors, commented on Cristal's place of esteem in the hip hop community, viewing the association with "curiosity and serenity." When asked if the

¹⁴³ Jay-Z, "Feelin It," *Reasonable Doubt*, Roc-A-Fella Records, 1996, CD.

¹⁴⁴ Jay-Z, "Big Pimpin'," 2000, Music video, Roc-A-Fella Records, Dir. Hype Williams.

linkage between the two could possibly hurt the brand, Rouzand responded, "That's a good question, but what can we do? We can't forbid people from buying it. I'm sure Dom Perignon or Krug would be delighted to have their business."¹⁴⁵ While not explicitly stating he did not desire rapper's business, the tone of his remarks implies Rouzand was speaking for the entire Cristal organization in being resigned to the esteem the liquor held. While the hip hop culture felt the appearance of Cristal signified the perception of wealth, Rouzand's comments seems to suggest Cristal viewed the association with rappers as undesired and sullyng to the company's reputation.

In response to Rouzand's comments, Carter issued a press release of his own. "It has come to my attention that the managing director of Cristal ... views the hip-hop culture as 'unwelcome attention.' I view his comments as racist and will no longer support any of his products through any of my various brands including the 40/40 Club nor in my personal life."¹⁴⁶ It is interesting that Carter made these statements not only as a jilted rapper after years of promoting the champagne, but also as CEO of a major record label. In addition, Carter makes reference to his other brands no longer being associated with the liquor. Though Cristal might have one commercial outlet, Carter makes reference to having several, which would compound the loss of profits for the drink maker. In addition, Carter also called for a hip hop wide boycott of the beverage, due to the supposed racial nature of Rouzand's comments. Carter hoped the loss of revenue and esteem for Cristal would punish the company. Furthermore, Carter replaced his traditional esteem of Cristal with Armand de Brignac in the "Show Me What You Got" video, which marked his supposed return to rap as an artist following his retirement. In

¹⁴⁵ "Jay-Z launches Cristal bubbly boycott," Associated Press, 15 June 2006. Available from <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13350034/>>.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

the video, Carter is seen approving of a bottle of Armand de Brignac in a style very reminiscent of the way in which he once approved of bottles of Cristal. The lyrics also reflect the sentiment, where in Carter calls out the "Gold Bottle with the Ace of Spade."¹⁴⁷ Though a gold bottle once denoted Cristal, Carter makes sure to mention the Ace of Spade, which is a trademark of Armand de Brignac. Regardless of Rouzand's later apology, Carter took the statement as a personal insult and altered his public perception to reflect the change.¹⁴⁸

Though the commercial contention between Carter and Cristal contains elements of traditional rap feuds and battling, there are elements in play which show the growth of the genre from the days of Simmons. First, Rouzand and Carter's statements were not made on a mixtape or in lyrical form, but rather in the pages of *The Economist* and press releases. Furthermore, the subject in question was not shoes or other more affordable commodities, but rather a brand of champagne that costs several hundreds of dollars bottle. It is highly unlikely any of Carter's listeners, regardless of income, were purchasing bottles of Cristal on a regular basis, if at all. Finally, the contention between the two never escalated to a major confrontation. Aside from no longer mentioning the liquor in a positive fashion, Carter did not further berate the alcohol manufacturer, after the disagreement. The sole mention of Cristal in one of Carter's songs occurs on "Kingdom Come." Carter raps, "Fuck Cristal, so they ask me what we drinking. I thought dudes remark was rude okay. So I moved on to Dom, Krug Rosé. And it's much bigger

¹⁴⁷ Jay-Z, "Show Me What You've Got" *Kingdom Come Roc-A-Fella/Island Def Jam*, 2006, CD.

¹⁴⁸ After the interview, Rouzand issued a statement attempting to clarify the Cristal's position, "The House of Louis Roederer could not have been in existence since 1776 without having the utmost regard for, and interest in, all forms of art and culture." Jeremy Mullman, "Cristal: 99 Problems But Jay-Z Ain't One," *Advertising Age* 26 June 2006, vol. 77, Issue 26.
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=21391122&site=ehost-live>. Accessed 8/14/09>.

issues in the world, I know. But I first had to take care of the world I know.” He appears to be referencing the controversy rather than insulting the alcohol maker¹⁴⁹ Likewise, Cristal did not seek to endorse a more suitable commercial culture than the hip hop community. However, despite the increased affluence of Carter, he responded to the perceived insult in a personal manner. Though he was CEO of Def Jam, he did not mention the label in his statements, but rather he would no longer use Cristal in his "personal life." However, the public perception of Carter's personal life was the image he maintained as a rapper, the gaudy millionaire pouring bottles of Cristal onto bikiniied beauties aboard his yacht. This perception was only strengthened by the appearance of Armand de Brignac in the "Show Me What You Got" video. The video shows attractive females responding to the unveiling of the bottle with gasps of glee.¹⁵⁰ While refusing to actively insult Cristal, Carter is stating to the public, which now has a history of believing his perceptions; other brands of liquor are just as acceptable as an indicator of wealth as Cristal ever was.

The focus on commercialism and financial success is noticeable throughout the music career of Shawn Carter, but it is most keenly felt in the build up to his supposed final album and retirement. Even its very name, “the Black Album,” implied finality and death. Carter claimed to be leaving the world of a rap artist to focus solely on his role as CEO. This announcement began a highly publicized “retirement tour” and general press about his upcoming plans. Though the idea of the retirement perpetuated by Carter’s marketing suggested his move would be mythic, the actuality was entrenched more in drumming up publicity than legitimately quitting work. While Carter’s retirement was

¹⁴⁹ Jay-Z, “Kingdom Come” *Kingdom Come*, Roc-A-Fella Records/Island Def Jam, 2006. CD.

¹⁵⁰ Jay-Z, “Show Me What You Got,” 2006, Music Video, Roc-A-Fella Records. Dir. F. Gary Gary.

heralded as unique and unprecedented, the concept of retiring from rap music was a reoccurring theme in his work. For instance, in the introduction of his third album, Carter makes reference to the idea that he was going to eventually retire from rap, “Five ten years from now, they're gonna miss Jay-Z.”¹⁵¹ Furthermore, seeds of his musical return were present even in his supposed final album. In “Encore”, Carter raps “When I come back like Jordan, wearing the 45,” making reference to Michael Jordan’s retirement from basketball and return a few years later.¹⁵² Even though questions of legitimacy arose concerning his retirement, his claims primarily went unchallenged.¹⁵³ Though it was seen mainly as a publicity stunt, it also echoed the previous statements upon the nature of the music business heard in rap. Carter claimed to be retiring, even though he was taking up the position of a CEO and president of a major record company. The insinuation is that compared to rap and living on the streets, as it were, legitimate business is easy. He would be able to relax, even though in theory, Carter is taking up a much more intense career.

Carter also uses the record to silence supposed cynics who decried his commercial records. For instance, in his song “99 Problems,” Carter refers to the criticism, “rap critics save he’s money, cash, hoes, I’m from the hood stupid, what sort of facts are those?”¹⁵⁴ The identity of these critics is left fairly ambiguous, but the perception of criticism was a necessity for Carter. Most rappers made their name by insulting other rappers and winning the subsequent battles. Also, in order to give a leg up to worthy

¹⁵¹ Jay-Z “Hova Song,” *Vol 3...The Life and Times of Shawn Carter*, Roc-A-Fella Records/Island Def Jam, 1999, CD.

¹⁵² Jay-Z, “Encore,” *The Black Album*, Roc-A-Fella Records/Island Def Jam, 2003, CD.

¹⁵³ To his credit, Carter did not release a solo album for almost 3 years, though he appeared on guest spots on several other musical endeavors despite his supposed retirement.

¹⁵⁴ Jay-Z, “99 Problems,” *The Black Album*, Roc-A-Fella Records/Island Def Jam, 2003, CD.

aspiring artists, more established artists occasionally begin minor feuds with artists. Carter did this in 1999 for Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson after Jackson mentioned Carter on his song “How to Rob.” In addition to many other rappers, Jackson insults Carter, “What Jigga just sold like 4 mil? He got somethin to live for... You ain't with Mary no more where gettin chips from now?”¹⁵⁵ Carter’s subsequently responded to Jackson on “It’s Hot (Some Like It Hot)” with “I’m about a dollar, what the fuck is 50 Cents?” thrusting Jackson into the spotlight.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, Jackson would later show appreciation for Carter for the publicity. In his autobiography, Jackson writes “I ran into Jay-Z...and thanked him. He laughed at me. It probably tripped him out that I understood what was going on. I was thinking businesswise.”¹⁵⁷

In “99 Problems,” however, Carter engages in a behavior unique to hip-hop and relatively unprecedented in other music genres. He exaggerates or fabricates criticism for his own benefit. Carter never names the source of such heat for his commercial music albums, but claims such ire is causing him to retaliate. His retaliation also raises publicity and hopefully record sales. Since rap is a highly competitive and egocentric genre, it follows naturally that an artist would manufacture an adversary if one were not readily apparent. This practice is akin to an up and coming rapper making blanket insults in attempt to bait a more established rapper into attacking, as evidenced by Jackson’s prior insult of Carter. As Jackson puts it, “The response to me helped put me in the game. The more they reacted, the bigger my name got. I couldn't pay for that kind of publicity —

¹⁵⁵ 50 Cent, “How to Rob,” *Power of the Dollar* Columbia Records, 2000, CD.

¹⁵⁶ Jay-Z “It’s Hot (Some Like It Hot),” *Vol 3... The Life and Times of S. Carter*, Roc-A-Fella Records/Island Def Jam, 1999, CD.

¹⁵⁷ Curtis James Jackson III, *From Pieces to Weight: Once Upon a Time in Southside Queens* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2005), 176.

and my record label sure as hell wasn't going to.”¹⁵⁸ However since Carter had already become established, he fabricated a higher entity to once again scrap his way to the top. This willingness to battle one’s way up is a key element of the hip-hop culture. Most, if not all, rappers will mention their rise from the ghetto and overcoming the odds by making it into the music business. Their past life of crime has avoided imprisonment or falling victim to the violence of the street gangs. In short, they have overcome much too simply get an opportunity to rap in the first place. If such drama did not exist, it can be easily invented by “knowing where it occurred” a principle put into place by many rappers.

However, such a claim restates a central fallacy of rapping; though rappers claim street credibility and authenticity at all costs, it is fairly evident that their background is not typical for individuals from the ghetto. The entrepreneurial drive and fierce individualism might be the source of their success, but it does not coincide with the forms of African-American expression, such as the blues and jazz, that most scholarship links with rap. While they give credence and respect to the environment, it is mainly to ensure such individuals continue to purchase their records and give them the counter-cultural credibility needed to market to mainstream consumers. If an act becomes too safe, it loses the vicarious thrill of listening, a large part of rap’s appeal as vicarious living. However, by being accepted by the ghetto, it ensures the perception of being rejected by the mainstream; since if a commercial product is held in high esteem by the counter-culture, it therefore must be not as accepted by the mainstream culture. Ironically, this supposed scorn of the mainstream culture guarantees the viability of the product in the larger

¹⁵⁸ Jackson, *From Pieces to Weight*, 175.

consumer marketplace. Rappers thrive on controversy to generate publicity for their music and other products.

However, after sustained success in the mainstream, the rap mogul becomes the establishment. Though they might antagonize elements of the “white” culture, they are still dependent on its acceptance to ensure higher record sales by volume and just sheer purchasing power. But, an edge must be maintained to the music, as well as keeping the esteem of the black audiences which initially supported the mogul in the first place. In this vein, a new approach must be taken to facing phantom opposition. In particular, since Carter was taking on the mantle of CEO of Def Jam, and would have to presumably work and sign artists he might otherwise battle, his choice of opposition was problematic. However, by choosing not to name his supposed critics, Carter had an advantageous position; in short, he could say whatever he wanted, claim someone else said it, and not alienate any particular audience.

This marks another interesting element of hip-hop music, though the lyrics are often antagonistic and heated, it is rarely if ever directed towards the audience. Although rappers are often particularly violent and threatening in the lyrics, the audience is not the recipient of verbal abuse.¹⁵⁹ Still, the hip-hop aesthetic treats the audience as listeners to be provoked into action, with the majority of the intent to have a good time and party. While occasional political and theological raps exist, by and large, the message of rap music is primarily for the listener’s enjoyment.

This principle becomes magnified in the persona of the mogul, who not only wants to ensure the purchase of their own records, but also the subsequent licensed products and

¹⁵⁹ Granted, Marshall “Eminem” Mathers occasionally directly mentions his utilization of black music to make himself wealthy. However, he does not belittle his music purchasers for their choice, but rather the black community for their frustration with him.

other artists also signed to the label. Carter exemplified this principle early in his career, not only bringing on label mates on his songs, but also very deliberately showing off the Roca wear clothing and other products. It is in this vein the public perception of Damon Dash comes into play. While Dash initially founded Roc-A-Fella records, his primary role in the organization appeared to be making cameos in Carter's music videos to publicly display products available from Roc-A-Fella's subsidiaries. This principle is even self-lampooned in Carter's "Hova" video where hordes of fictitious "Roca-Stuff" are available for consumers to purchase under the gaze of Dash. Even though Carter was yet to assume the actual mantle of rap mogul and CEO, he was already engaging in such behaviors in his work as an artist. While Carter's face on cigars and bottles of water was more in line with a parody of his position as a benevolent dictator portrayed in the video, it still rang true to the availability of Roca wear clothing and other products.¹⁶⁰ Though Carter was spoofing himself to an extent, it still allowed an opportunity for his products to be displayed.

Of course, such behavior begs the question if Carter sought out to primarily be an artist or a mogul in his musical endeavors. Though his entrepreneurialism in jump-starting his musical career is evident, he also quickly sought the assurance of continued commercial viability by seeking out Combs and Def Jam for his second album. Financial means outweighed the desire for independence early in his career. Though he might portray the persona of a successful businessman, such as in the music video for "Excuse Me Miss," where Carter is shown entering a board room and quickly resolving business quandaries, his true desire appears to be making records, not running businesses.¹⁶¹ This

¹⁶⁰ Jay-Z, "Izzo (H.O.V.A)," 2001, Music Video, Roc-A-Fella Records, Dir. Dave Meyers.

¹⁶¹ Jay-Z, "Excuse Me Miss," 2003, Music Video, Roc-A-Fella Records. Dir. Little X.

rap persona was overly successful in depicting his abilities as an executive as represented by his ascension to the office of CEO of Def Jam. However, he eventually left the position due to the mundane nature of signing invoices and other humdrum activities. For Carter, signing papers for three seconds on a music video was preferable to actually signing papers in real life for hours. Carter is an individual who enjoys playing the perception of a mogul more than actually having the responsibility of such an office. However, considering the heavy emphasis put upon image in rap music, Carter is viewed as more successful of a mogul than individuals who legitimately engage in such activities. Akin to Run-DMC becoming more revered as gangstas than actual gang members despite not engaging in such activities, Carter succeeded in become more accepted as a music businessman than actual music businessmen.

Despite the lyrical content of Carter's rhymes, and his attempts to perpetuate his own narrative, his supposed retirement and ascension to the position as CEO of Def Jam marks a different course. Although Carter might not be an example of Simmons and Combs' work ethic in establishing companies, he does exhibit characteristics of one who has listened to exploits of those and followed the story rather than the actual occurrence. Indeed, Carter's willingness to engage in the story-telling and self-actualization of speaking wealth into being demonstrates the success and persuasiveness of Simmons' retroactive explanations in reaching subsequent rappers. In addition, it also demonstrates the reach Simmons' message had. Granted, Carter was also from New York City and became linked to some of the rap individuals as Simmons and Combs, but Carter and Simmons are certainly from different generations. Since rap was initially targeted and a part of the youth culture, Carter represents part of the first generation who listened to

commercialized rap and followed its example. Carter saw the images portrayed by rappers and sought to follow the example given. Likewise, based upon the success of Simmons and Combs, their skewed perspective became a legitimate road map to gaining success in the music business, evidenced by Carter seeking both Combs' record production abilities and Simmons' record label for his second album. This process of self-actualization by championing one's own persona and speaking wealth into existence gained popularity and became commonplace.

However, by the time commercial hip hop matured to encompass a new generation of rappers who were in the initial audience of the music, most of the infrastructure was already in place. There was no need to create new record companies or hustle distribution deals since Simmons and others had already created such. Mythical endorsement deals such as Adidas' agreement with Run-DMC became actualized. This generation did not have Lyor Cohen working behind the scenes creating a press pack to entice Adidas, nor was it needed. Companies actually began to pay rappers for endorsements or ignored the rapper's mentions and became dismissive of the culture, like Cristal.

Carter's rise to moguldom is different from Simmons and Combs because it was not as deliberate or methodical as his predecessors. While the other two initially looked at rap music primarily as a product and were not too heavily involved in the actual writing and performance of rap, Carter was primarily a rapper, despite his founding of Roc-A-Fella records, with his true rise to actual mogul status not fully realized until later in his career. Though his legitimate establishment as a mogul did not come until his ascension as Def Jam's CEO, his lyrics are littered with references of him already accomplishing such a feat. In essence, Shawn Carter was finally catching up to Jay-Z's legacy as a

businessman. However, once moguldom was achieved, Carter drew away from the actual work of a music executive, preferring the perception of being a mogul rather than the reality. Granted, he certainly enjoyed the trappings of a mogul and CEO, being more than happy to make boastful outbursts concerning his wealth and station. It maintains an element of Carter's earlier character in regards to image consciousness. Like the exaggeration of Carter's past as a drug dealer for viability of his earlier works, despite his limited legitimate involvement, Carter once again utilized an exaggerated element of his life to sustain profitability. Because of this, Carter's boast of, "I'm not a businessman, I'm a business, man," becomes much more grounded in reality.¹⁶² Due to his behavior in establishing and maintaining his public persona for commercial success, Carter is a strong example of the continual persuasive economic emphasis of rap music.

¹⁶² Kanye West, "Diamonds from Sierra Leone," Late Registration, Roc-A-Fella Records, 2005, CD.

CONCLUSION

In 2006, rapper Nasir “Nas” Jones released an album entitled “Hip Hop is Dead,” a provocative title embodying his personal beliefs about the genre. He expounded upon his position stating, “When I say 'hip-hop is dead,' basically America is dead. There is no political voice...Our way of thinking is dead, our commerce is dead...If we don't change, we gonna disappear like Rome.”¹⁶³ The lyrics of the title single also demonstrate this belief, “Everybody sound the same, commercialize the game, Reminisce when it wasn't all business, It forgot where it started, So we all gather here for the dearly departed.”¹⁶⁴ Jones’ was not alone in his beliefs. At the time of the album’s release, many within the hip hop community were bemoaning the loss of the genre’s political bite, a lowering of production values, the rise of Southern rap which while popular, lacked quality, and above all, the centrality of corporations in rap production. In *Where You’re At*, Patrick Neate embodies most of these criticisms with the assertion, “hip-hop was once...an expression of street culture, so the current domination of multinational corporations seems particularly incongruous.”¹⁶⁵

An analysis of the criticism of commercial rap music by hip hop purists denotes a weaker argument than what is being touted. There are those in the rap world who are defensive about elements that they view as central and meaningful in their life and are not fond of seeing it so crassly and obviously displayed for commercial gain. However, their memory is more than likely skewed. It is doubtful they fell in love with anything but the

¹⁶³ Shaheem Reid, “MTV News Exclusive: Nas Previews Hip-Hop is Dead,” MTV News, 10 October 2006. Available from

<<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1542740/20061009/nas.jhtml>>.

¹⁶⁴ Nas, “Hip Hop is Dead,” *Hip Hop is Dead* Def Jam/Columbia Records/The Jones Experience, 2006, CD.

¹⁶⁵ Patrick Neate, *Where You’re At: Notes from the Frontline of a Hip-Hop Planet* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2003), 21.

commercial rap of the past. Very few individuals start out listening to conscious rappers, since they are by either design or circumstance considerably less exposed. Furthermore, many rap critics are holding on to the idealism of the potential for hip-hop as the catalyst for social change. They want to believe it can cause major societal transformation because of the change it caused in their life. Neate exemplifies this principle in his statement, “hip-hop has been the catalyst that has led me to most of the things I’ve learned to love, cherish, and believe in as an adult.”¹⁶⁶ Because of the direction or empathy they felt with the music, they suppose it can apply to all.

However, these are often the same individuals who are angered by rap’s supposed selling out by appealing to white audiences. Although they want as much exposure as possible for the music, this exposure is to be limited only to black listeners. However, despite the best efforts of the street teams and mixtapes, the most common and effective methods of promoting rap music are also the most accessible for all listeners to hear. As Cora Daniels states in her book *Ghetto Nation*, “Most folks will never hear the digging-in-the-crates hip-hop. That is because radio hip-hop is what sells and sells and sells. The reality is, it is the only hip-hop most of us know.”¹⁶⁷ There is jargon and lingo specific to the genre, but it is not quite insurmountable for a dedicated listener to crack. Despite the hopes of some critics, subliminal messages for wide-spread black rebellion are not hidden throughout the lyrics. Indeed, even the songs that could be considered highly afro-centric are not privy to widespread listening or public knowledge.

Still, such critics assert is the music has lost its political edge by becoming too commercial and no longer worrying about social commentary. However, at its origins,

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 254.

¹⁶⁷ Cora Daniels, *Ghetto Nation* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2007), 53.

rap music was for partying and having a good time. Rap was not a message, but simply desired to get the listeners' attention. As it evolved, certain elements had to be held to. Above all, the music had to be enjoyable with a good beat. Though non-rhythmic experimental rap might hypothetically exist, if it does, it is doubtful it has an audience. No matter what is said in the rap, the beat and sound of the record still has to be entertaining. People listen to rap because they like it or find it clever, not under any social obligation.

Furthermore, such critics might be harkening back to a social commentary that did not exist. Public Enemy, N.W.A., and other rap acts heralded for their socially conscious lyrics were not fully fleshed out in their arguments. For instance, while N.W.A. stated the difficulty of ethnic profiling in law enforcement, there was no emphasis placed upon solutions, other than "Fuck tha police."¹⁶⁸ Likewise, the majority of supposed older "hard commentary" rappers have gone either the way of Ice Cube into the movies or like countless east coast rappers into an ordinary middle-class existence, a far cry from the rebellious lifestyle they once claimed.¹⁶⁹ In addition, since these individuals were inspired by Run-DMC and other commercial rap artists, at least at a primordial level; some homage must be paid to Simmons' promoting methods to the mainstream.

It is unlikely an artist currently popular and successful would decry new acts as being "illegitimate hip-hop" or "killing the genre." Generally the artists who make such attacks are not very popular or relevant, and often use such tactics to drum up album sales or bring their name back into the press. For instance, at the time when Jones released

¹⁶⁸ N.W.A. "Fuck Tha Police" *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless/Priority Records, 1988, CD.

¹⁶⁹ Even MC Hammer, the poster boy for unscrupulous spending and going broke, now lives in a respectably middle class house as evidenced by his new reality show. Run, also the recipient of a reality show, also lives in a wealthy community, a far cry from the streets Run-DMC was supposed to come.

"Hip-Hop is Dead" and the ensuing controversy about the statement's factual nature, he was on a lengthy string of disappointing albums sales. It gives credence for Jones provocatively entitling the album for shock value and publicity, not legitimate social concern. Also, even in his direct criticism of the actions of Simmons and Combs, Jones states he has high respect for the two individuals, "No offense to Diddy and Russell...those are my heroes."¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, *Hip-Hop is Dead* included "Black Republican," a collaboration with Carter, demonstrating of their reconciliation from their earlier feud. While Jones might decry the results of their commercial influence, he still recognized their importance within the advancement of the genre.

As evidenced by these moguls, rap music is not a rebuke of capitalism, but rather a reaffirmation of its potency. Rappers were not attempting to change the system, but rather utilize the current status quo for their own means. While Simmons might claim, "I have never targeted any of my products to African Americans....What I do is for cool Americans," there is the understanding that those who follow the trends will be more than willing to pay.¹⁷¹ Likewise, the subsequent rappers inspired to not only rap, but become moguls of their own, also pay homage to this initial concept. In addition, the sustainment of this mainstream audience was paramount, as evidenced by Combs deliberate rebranding of his name. Were it not for economic drive of individuals such as Simmons, in addition to the lines of national distribution provided by linking with larger record labels, there is no way rap music could have reached as large of an audience, let alone developed into a cultural movement for both black and white.

¹⁷⁰ John McWhorter, *All About the Beat: Why Hip Hop Can't Save Black America* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008), 85.

¹⁷¹ S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005), 148.

Though many rappers claimed to bring the same hustle of drug dealing, just switched to music, the fact remains it is remarkable such hustle existed at all. In Simmons' own words, it stemmed from a desire to gain the things "he saw the white folks had on TV." Drug dealing was not the calling, but just the means to an end. Likewise, when an opportunity presented itself to leave the dangerous profession, Carter had no qualms in doing so "I realized I couldn't keep doing the same things and not have something bad happen to me. I knew I was going to go to jail or I was going to die....I also realized I had a remarkable talent, and I was letting it go to waste. I didn't have one foot in rap and the other in the drug game. I literally changed my life."¹⁷² Though their product changed, the same drive which got them into drug dealing in the first place kept their motivation strong. Likewise, when presented with legitimate mogul work, Carter shrunk away from the sordid details, but preferred to act the part without living it. It is interesting a former associate of Carter's claims Carter was never privy to legitimate drug dealing, just "nickel and dime stuff."¹⁷³ However, once all is said and done, Carter and these other moguls still have achieved major financial success. Though their actual net worth might be fluid and based primarily on image, the fact is, they are much better off than where they started.

This level of image control marked a major element of the rap mogul. They were image conscious since that was their main product. Once their image was lost, their entire empire could crumble. As such, they became immensely protective of it. For instance, these moguls might claim problems with the law, but rarely serve jail time. Likewise,

¹⁷² Michael A. Gonzales, "Changing the Game: The Stop Smiling Interview with Jay-Z," *Stop Smiling* Issue 33, 11 January 2008. Available from <http://www.stopsmilingonline.com/story_detail.php?id=1023&page=3>.

¹⁷³ Ben Westhoff, "Former Jay-Z Associate De-Haven Tells His Side," *New York Magazine*, 29 November 2007. Available from <http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2007/11/former_jayz_associate_dehaven.html>.

most rap moguls have not been charged with tax evasion.¹⁷⁴ It is also normal to claim copious drug use, and selling for that matter, in one's past such, like Carter and Simmons. But the assumption is always that they gave it up, or redirected that energy into selling records. It was a youthful folly they gave up in order to grow up and become wealthier through the music business.

As part of this image manufacturing, rap entrepreneurs will highlight a heroic past which provides legitimacy for their current actions and lyrics. Despite the fact such a past might be wholly or partially fictitious, it does not matter as long as it aids their image. Though Combs might claim, "Like a lot of kids who grow up in single-parent homes, I had to get a job much quicker and start thinking about the future much earlier," his upbringing was still quite middle class.¹⁷⁵ Likewise, the members of Run-DMC and Russell Simmons claimed to know where bad drug usage and gang activity went on, even though they bragged about their attendance in school and advised kids to "just say no," even there was casual drug use amongst the members. Though the time period where Carter was a legitimate drug dealer is not very long, it still provides the basis for his raps and street credibility. Truth be told, if any rapper was as successful a drug dealer as they claim they once were, they would either be in jail or have enough enemies to prevent them from coming into the public eye.

Though rap music claims to be counter-cultural, the economic designs of the genre assert a much more conservative ethos. While making money through business is

¹⁷⁴ The only major rap mogul who has been under serious tax investigation is Jermaine Dupri, founder of So So Def Records. However, the matter was settled and his career not seriously affected. "Hit R&B Producer Jermaine Dupri Owes \$2.5 Million To IRS." *Jet* Vol. 103, Issue 2, 6 January 2002, 62. <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=8768341&site=ehost-live>>.

¹⁷⁵ Sean Combs and Susan L. Taylor, "P Diddy Style and Substance," *Essence* Vol. 29 Issue 7, November 1998, 140.

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=1235728&site=ehost-live>>.

not necessarily conservative, the manner in which these moguls acted harks more to old entrepreneurs than African-American culture. In addition, there is an element of evolution or development from Simmons to Carter. The process by which they perceived themselves and utilized such image to gain wealth changed over the course of time. Simmons and Combs started out managing others in order to gain their personal wealth. On the one hand, Combs is a transitional figure since after Wallace's death, he was able to come out more into his own. Carter, on the other hand, managed himself. He manipulated his own image in order to gain wealth.

This focus on image has developed rap music into a conservative force. Once the music became a national phenomenon the industry needed to sustain itself in order to stay relevant. Likewise, rappers were under this same pressure, and more socially conscious lyrics were abandoned in favor of items they knew would sell. This principle is best exemplified in Carter's lyric on "Moment of Clarity" where he raps "If skills sold, truth be told, I'd probably be lyrically Talib Kweli. Truthfully, I wanna rhyme like Common Sense, (but I did five mil) I ain't been rhyming like Common since."¹⁷⁶ Though Carter claims he has the ability to rhyme like fringe socially conscious rappers, the appeal of finances was too good to pass up. The resulting music reaffirmed aspects of the American business world while bringing in a distinct urban flavor. Judging by their actions, Simmons, Combs, and Carter were not suggesting a complete overhaul of the music business, or business culture in general. Rather, they simply wanted personal financial gain and saw such business as the manner in which to accomplish it. Once their success allowed for other business ventures, they were more than happy to put aside the music for potentially more lucrative endeavors. Simmons even states making records was getting in

¹⁷⁶ Jay-Z "Moment of Clarity," *Black Album*, Roc-A-Fella Records/Island Def Jam, 2003, CD.

the way of making money. Since the ultimate goal of the individuals making the records was financial, it should only go to follow their product will also be financial. This is not to suggest rap music is devoid of cultural significance, but rather it should also be looked at as a commercial property as well. Though rap purists might decry the assumption, rap music frames itself primarily as a business venture, not artistic expression. The financial end is always stated and well noted.

As previously stated, the pursuit of personal fortune is not inherently American or conservative. However, the manner in which these moguls portrayed and marketed themselves suggests a style and behavior more in line with traditional American thought than purely radical. None of these individuals were suggesting the current establishment needs to be completely changed, but rather they wished to be included in the same vein. They were not suggesting a total overhaul of the system, but rather taking it over with their own personnel. All three engaged in language and imagery supporting the ideal of the traditional mogul, even though they claimed to represent the counter-culture. In turn, they were able to climb to the top of mainstream society. It has been said the American Dream is to come from the bottom, work hard, and eventually achieve prosperity and wealth. The rap mogul marks a new extension of this same concept; their dreams are limited only by their ambition. By vocalizing their aspirations, no matter how grandiose and self-serving it might seem, these individuals believed a self-fulfilling prophecy would occur. While rap music as an artistic genre might fall in line with older African American counter-cultural expression, the business by which it was marketed and sold falls more in line with traditional economic values. Although rap music maintains a presence separate from the white mainstream, it is not completely counter-cultural in that it does not oppose the traditional goal of personal wealth, but rather seeks a different method for its

achievement. In essence, rap music exists not in contradiction to the white mainstream, but parallel, seeking the same ultimate goal through alternate means. Furthermore, rap's expansion from a single metropolitan area to a national audience was spurred on by persons with financial means as their primary motivation. Because of the heavy involvement of individuals like Simmons, Carter, and Combs, the development and current incarnation of rap music and the hip hop lifestyle has more in common with their aspirations for wealth than the counter-cultural response to social conditions in the ghetto.

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