





Nobody Does It Better

SEAN COMBS, PUFFY, **DIDDY**—
CALL HIM WHAT YOU
WANT, JUST DON'T CALL
HIM NO. 2.

HIP-HOP'S TOP DOG EARNED
HIS TOP MOGUL SPOT, AND
HE STILL WON'T STOP.



Words **Thomas Golianopolous**
Photography **Travis Shinn**

D

rama students are such precious little creatures. Grown-up problems like mortgage payments and job security are not yet a concern. Aspiring actors care deeply about their craft. And they are eager to learn. That's why they have lined up outside of Pace University's Michael Schimmel Center, in Lower Manhattan, for a taping of Bravo's *Inside the Actors Studio*. Tonight they will hear from a real pro.

Backstage, the program's thespian star of the night skips up a side staircase, turns the corner and strides down the corridor toward his dressing room. He's wearing a tailored navy-blue suit, a black T-shirt, black Nike sneakers and a pinky ring that's visible from down the hall. The greenroom, filled with a congregation of lawyers, managers, record executives, A&Rs, publicists, assistants and production assistants, empties. Some folks just loiter in the hallway. Most make their way into the dressing room to get closer to the night's guest.

Inside the Actors Studio is a show where actors are interviewed in front of an audience of drama students. It's been on for 16 seasons, is seen in over 125 countries and has featured some of the biggest names as guests, including Al Pacino, Johnny Depp, Robert De Niro, Angelina Jolie, Will Smith and the evening's interview subject, Sean "Diddy" Combs.

The rapper and major music mogul has starred in two feature films (*Monster's Ball* and *Made*), one Broadway play turned TV movie (*A Raisin in the Sun*) and one direct-to-DVD sequel (*Carlito's Way: Rise to Power*). Tonight he's here to plug his latest film, *Get Him to the Greek*, a raucous comedy co-starring Russell Brand and Jonah Hill, set for release this month. He plays Sergio Roma, a savantlike record executive known for his hit records and loud mouth. Sound familiar?

The two-hour interview with James Lipton, the program's oft-parodied 83-year-old host, goes smoothly. The guest talks about his childhood and his long, storied history in the music industry, starting as Puff Daddy, up to Diddy. (Although he's gone through several official name changes—P. Diddy in 2001, Diddy in 2005—it seems he'll always be Puffy or Puff to most fans and folks around him.) He beat-boxed as Lipton jokingly freestyled. He even reluctantly rose from his chair and

Diddy-bopped. He also spent very little time actually talking about acting. In fact, the subject wasn't broached until 80 minutes into their chat. Still, Lipton thinks Puff was worthy of a visit to *Inside the Actors Studio*.

After the taping, Diddy's dressing room is calm. His mother, Janice Combs, sits quietly. His good friend, the unsigned rapper Jay Electronica shows off his iPad, while Diddy's artist Cassie gets half of her head shaped up by a barber. Meanwhile, Diddy huddles with his manager, Chris Lighty of Violator Management, and co-manager James Cruz. "He went in," Puffy says about Lipton's methodical and agonizingly obsequious interview. "It was surreal for me to be on *Inside the Actors Studio*. It was surreal for me to be on that stage."

Even Puff seems amazed to have scored this gig. And by now he should be used to winning.

After all, Sean Combs is the most successful entrepreneur to emerge from hip-hop. He surpassed Russell Simmons back in the 1990s, when the Def Jam co-founder backed away from the music industry. Even his contemporaries, booming businessmen such as Jay-Z and 50 Cent, either lag behind or travel down a road Diddy paved. His label, Bad Boy Records, set the precedent for Roc-A-Fella's and G-Unit's partnerships with Def Jam (1997) and Interscope (2003), respectively, when the boutique label signed a deal with Arista/BMG back in 1993.

He was a 360 artist before the term even existed—his business was founded on hip-hop but not limited to it. "Diddy is someone who taught young artists how to turn hip-hop into an industry," says Jimmy Iovine, chairman of Interscope Geffen A&M, where Diddy is now signed as a solo artist, and Bad Boy is signed as a label. Under the terms of the deal, any new artist signed to Bad Boy will be distributed through Interscope, while currently signed artists (and the Bad Boy catalog) will go through Atlantic Records, where Diddy signed a deal in 2005. Besides being an entertainer, he's a businessman. His vast empire includes Bad Boy Worldwide Entertainment Group, Sean John Clothing, Inc., Blue Flame marketing, which has counted Pepsi and Hewlett Packard as clients, and Justin Combs Publishing, which houses the songwriting credits of artists like The L.O.X. and 112. The latest, non-musical business deal, however, is with the Diageo liquor company. In 2007, Diddy entered an equal-share venture with Diageo to spearhead Cîroc vodka's brand management. It's been a fruitful partnership. In the second half of 2007, Diageo shipped 60,000 cases of Cîroc worldwide. That number jumped to 400,000 cases for 2008–2009.

All told, Puffy's unconfirmed net worth is reportedly more than \$350 million. It's quite a résumé. And he knows it. "I am the champion of hip-hop," he says. "Hands down, undisputed, I'm the undisputed heavyweight

champion of hip-hop."

It's a week after the *Inside the Actors Studio* taping, and Diddy sits in Los Angeles' Paramount Recording Studios. "We are going to have to deal with those facts. There is nobody that can fuck with me with what I do, which is getting busy. We are going across the board, as an entrepreneur, innovator, motivator. Who was there first? Who traveled to Europe first? The first. The first. The first. I was the first."

He lets the words hang in the air. "I was the first on the jet. I was the first running the marathon. I was the first donating millions of dollars. I was the first. I was the first with the 10 million records sold. I was the first with the label. I was the first with the renegotiations. Fuck a *Forbes* list—I was on the cover of *Forbes*. There is going to be someone that will pass me, but as long as I'm on the court, they are not going to be badder than me, because there is too much catching up to do... There is not one muthafucka that's here now who is going to outwork me. That is not going to happen, not right now. Maybe if I slow down, but to this day, no one can fuck with me when it comes to getting busy and working."

Sean Combs is feeling reflective these days, which usually happens to people after turning 40. He's come a long way since his days on 145th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem. His mother, Janice, was a social worker. Melvin, his dad, was a hustler who was gunned down while parked in a car on Central Park West, when Sean was three years old. The family told Sean it was a car accident, but he found out the truth years later after doing his own research. When he was 12 years old, his mom moved him and his younger sister, Keisha, upstate to the quiet enclave of Mount Vernon.

As a teenager, Sean thought he would be a football player, but a broken leg deferred those dreams. Instead, he studied business at Howard University, where he became the self-proclaimed "Director of Entertainment" for the student body. "He was the center of attention," remembers Ron "Amen-Ra" Lawrence, a Howard classmate who later became a member of Diddy's legendary crew of producers, The Hitmen. "I would scoop him and go to clubs to see Kool G. Rap perform. He was like, 'I'm going to have a record company one day, and I want you to be down.' Most cats wanted to be Herbie Luv Bug or Marley Marl at the time. This dude had a vision, and he was thinking about the business at a time when everyone else was thinking about being a producer or a rapper. He wanted to be an entrepreneur."

Puffy dropped out of Howard to work at Uptown Records, and from there the legend unfurled. He discovered Mary J. Blige and Notorious B.I.G., artists who shifted their respective genres. Diddy specialized in making



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R&B records sound gritty and hardcore rap sound polished. He dubbed it “hip-hop soul.” In 1993, he was fired from Uptown and soon formed Bad Boy Records. There, Notorious B.I.G.’s debut album, *Ready to Die*, made Biggie a star and Puff the industry’s most in-demand producer. During the mid-1990s, the label became embroiled in an East Coast–West Coast feud with Tupac Shakur and Death Row Records. The fallout was ‘Pac being gunned down in September 1996 and Big’s subsequent murder six months later.

Released just 16 days after his death, Biggie’s *Life After Death* was certified 10 times platinum by the RIAA. Still, there was a void at the top of the label’s roster. Puff Daddy rebounded by eventually becoming Bad Boy’s biggest star. At the time, the idea that he could transition from executive to artist was questionable, but his debut album, *No Way Out*, which dropped in July 1997, was certified seven times platinum by the RIAA and launched the indomitable Puff Daddy and the Family’s *No Way Out Tour* later that year. Purists scoffed at the crass commercialism and infamous shiny suits—“That bit us in the ass like bell-bottoms,” Diddy says today—but it worked.

By 1998, however, hip-hop had moved on from Bad Boy, choosing grittier cliques such as Ruff Ryders, Roc-A-Fella and Cash Money. Diddy was prepared. He was already taking his business into the mainstream. That year, he started Sean John Clothing Inc., a sportswear brand that, over time, became upscale. A relationship with actress-singer Jennifer Lopez ushered him further into the spotlight. And though his later albums—1999’s *Forever*, 2001’s *The Saga Continues* and 2006’s *Press Play*—didn’t match his debut’s success, Diddy stayed relevant in hip-hop through his outside endeavors.

2004’s *Vote or Die* campaign, running the New York City marathon in 2003, reality shows like *Making the Band*, and even inspiring his 2.6 million followers on Twitter with encouraging words made him bigger than hip-hop. But being one of the first rappers to cross over has its drawbacks. “I deal with racism every day,” Diddy says. “I deal with racism with Sean John. I deal with racism with Cîroc. When we first started, people were saying, because I’m African-American, Cîroc must be a Black drink. It’s 2010.”

Hip-hop has been more appreciative. “I’ve inspired the game,” he says. “The most positive impact, [though,] is on my community. You see kids, like, ‘I don’t even want to be a rapper. I want to own my own thing.’ I feel like I’m guilty in starting that shit. That was a foreign concept. That was crazy. They used to call me crazy. They still call me crazy. I wanted my own vodka. [People said,] ‘Don’t do that. These people tried it, and it wasn’t successful.’”

The secret of his success? Working 20-hour days and multitasking. “He loves being in that moment of controlled chaos,” says Cruz. “He lives in it. It’s like being in a tornado. You ever see the guys who spin plates? Some are great spinning two plates. Some can do five. Puff can do 20.”

Make that 21, since it appears he is expanding his business. “I am starting sort of an agency for people to have the potential to have a career like mine, to be more than a recording artist, to have a brand,” he says. It sounds awfully like a management company. Rick Ross admitted to being signed up in an MTV interview this past April, while Nicki Minaj is rumored to be a client. “I can’t really confirm that,”



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—JAMES CRUZ

Diddy says. “We’re just in discussion about having some sort of relationship.”

Needless to say, he is impressed with both rappers. “Nicki Minaj can do anything in the future, from movies, to fashion labels, to having her own Black Barbie doll. But you have to be a dope MC to interest me. I think she’s a dope MC.”

“Ross is a dope MC. People were like, ‘How can you compare him to Biggie?’ I never compared him to Biggie. I said, ‘I think Biggie’s spirit got in him,’ because of how he approached a rhyme. I never seen anyone have a similar thought pattern to Biggie. That’s why I said that. I told him, ‘All of that rap beef is corny. If we were going to do something, you have to let that go. We are about our money.’”

Paramount Recording Studios is in an inconspicuous building in West Hollywood. Inside, Diddy is in the studio with Swizz Beatz. The music blaring is a mix of frenzied keyboards with a touch of techno. For the next hour, the producer will tinker obsessively with the drums on one song. It demonstrates how the art of making music is truly obsessive-compulsive, time-consuming and, at times, unglamorous. “Let’s go,” Diddy shouts. “We can kick out three more ideas tonight. Let’s go.”

He’s in L.A. putting the final touches on *Last Train to Paris*, the album by Diddy-Dirty Money, his group with the female R&B singers Dawn Richard and Kalenna Harper-Vick. It’s been four years since *Press Play*, and Diddy knows he must play catch-up. “I have to deal with my status right now as an artist,” he says. “And right now, I don’t even know if I’m in the top 10.” It doesn’t help that he’s always been perceived more as an entrepreneur.

It’s a lot easier to sell a suit or vodka than a CD these days. So why does Diddy even bother making music? “I still feel like I have something to say,” he explains. “If I didn’t have ideas or feel like I couldn’t do it well, then I wouldn’t do it. Go listen to [Diddy-Dirty Money’s hit single] ‘Hello Good Morning’ in a club. That’s why I still do music... Music is the most important thing in my heart, in my soul, in my being. When I [fail at] music, it hurts.”

Last Train to Paris was originally scheduled for release this past November, but Diddy struggled concocting the new sound he had envisioned. “It wasn’t good enough,” he says. “The vision wasn’t complete. It’s that futuristic new Black. It’s futuristic Black music. It just didn’t have enough Black soul in it.” Lil Wayne, Drake, Rick Ross, T.I. and possibly Jay-Z and Jay Electronica are featured. Despite the cameos, *Last Train to Paris* is not a traditional hip-hop album—far from it. “It definitely stems from

rap music, but it’s a hip-hop-soul album, man,” Diddy says. And who better to push it than his new home, Interscope Records. They have made a mint off similar rap-R&B-techno hybrids, such as the Black Eyed Peas, Lady Gaga and Nelly Furtado.

Diddy has other reasons for distancing himself from hardcore hip-hop. “It was a way to diversify, with [the pop group] Dream and *Making the Band*, but there were a lot of things going on emotionally, where it was like I just needed a break,” he says. “I was the hip-hop guy from the East-West war, and I just wanted to get away. My brain just needed a break.”

Biggie, of course, was lost to gun violence. And several of the rappers who’ve been signed to Bad Boy’s roster since Big were troubled artists. Black Rob has been in and out of prison, G-Dep has struggled with drug addiction, and in 2004, Loon was charged with felony assault, after a stabbing incident. The charges were later dropped. But first, in 2001, Shyne, who was supposed to revive Bad Boy in the post-Biggie era, was convicted of assault, reckless endangerment and criminal possession of a weapon, stemming from a shooting at Manhattan’s Club New York, which involved Puff and left three people injured. Shyne and Puff were arrested and charged with the same crimes. Puff was found not guilty, while Shyne was found guilty and sentenced to 10 years in prison. During the trial, Shyne disagreed with the tactics of Diddy’s defense lawyers and vented in *XXL*’s June 2001 issue. In October 2009, Shyne was released from prison and deported back to his native Belize. “I spoke to him before he came out,” Puff says tersely. “I haven’t spoken to him since he came out.”

In Get Him to the Greek, his upcoming film, Diddy based his character on Lyor Cohen, Jimmy Iovine and himself. Judging from the trailer, it appears to be a scene-stealing performance. And it’s not just publicists and assistants saying that. “We call him the McLovin of our movie,” says the director, Nicholas Stoller, comparing Diddy’s performance to the breakthrough character of 2007’s \$170-million-grossing *Superbad*. “He’s a perfectionist. I shoot a lot of takes, and he was still like, ‘I don’t think I got it. I want to do one more take.’”

Diddy first made overtures into acting in 1998. He was cast as Willie Beamon, the cocky quarterback in Oliver Stone’s *Any Given Sunday*, but vacated the role (which Jamie Foxx eventually landed) after filming was delayed. “I was the No. 1 artist and had to cancel my European tour,” he says. “I was losing so much money—I didn’t have all these other things going on—and

was like, ‘I can’t wait.’ The director was like, ‘Your tour doesn’t matter.’ I wanted to be a committed actor, but, at the same time, you can’t tell me that [the tour] doesn’t matter.”

His big break was co-starring alongside eventual Oscar winner Halle Berry in 2001’s *Monster’s Ball*. Producers resisted casting Puff as a death-row inmate but did anyway, and the decision paid off. His performance received strong reviews, and a new path for the music mogul had officially opened.

Diddy takes a seat inside the recording studio’s artist lounge to eat dinner. He chews loudly on two different salads while talking about an upcoming appearance. “I don’t even have to promote Ciroc like that,” Diddy says into his Bluetooth headpiece. “I might slide one reference in. Don’t worry, I’m not going to go rogue.”

Diddy admits that, in the past, he was sometimes kind of a dick. “I burned some bridges,” he says. “Selling [close to] 20 million records between Biggie and *No Way Out*, you start acting a little crazy. Maybe you start raising your voice a little too much or being too demanding... I wasn’t myself, because of the Biggie stuff. Most of my spirit was taken away. I was doing a lot of fronting, as far as being happy, inside I wasn’t the same. But I couldn’t find me—Puffy, that fun, free spirit.”

Instead, he acted like new money running out of control. He spit Champagne in music videos and occasionally treated his employees with cruelty. Once, after three days of little to no rest, an employee begged Diddy for a break. “He was like, ‘I’m tired, I can’t do it no more,’” Diddy remembers. “Instead of being compassionate, I said, ‘You know what rhymes with tired?’ That’s the savage in me.”

It was even tough for the public to root for him. “People were getting turned off by my success,” he says. “It was all Champagne, bad chicks, winning all the time. Who wants to see that? I think a lot of artists who get that power go through that storm of self-destruction, and they learn to become better people. It was a lesson that I learned.”

His meal finished, both shoulders droop, and his voice is uncharacteristically raspy. He appears exhausted by more than just the day. “Slowing down is an option,” he says. “But right now isn’t the time. I’m about to catch flight. I feel good. I feel like I’m in a good place.”

So Puffy keeps working, hustling, promoting. He will keep getting by with only four hours of sleep. He will sleep when he’s dead. Go ahead, call him crazy. Tell him he can’t be incredible. Diddy accepts the challenge. “You don’t understand, baby,” he says. His eyes are now alert. “I believe I can fly.” ♠