

the **M** **M** **X** **M** **a** **s** **t** **e** **r**

Hip-hop has entered Manhattan's mainstream—even Martha Stewart now talks the talk—and Def Jam's Russell Simmons has done more than anyone else to get it there. Inside the world of hip-hop's godfather.

By Nancy Jo Sales

KEITH BARISH, THE TOOTHY, SANDY-HAIRED co-founder of Planet Hollywood, comes trotting across the VIP dining room of Moomba. Russell Simmons and his wife, the model Kimora Lee, and his good friend Andre Harrell are there, talking and laughing together. Barish smiles hopefully. "Hi, guys!" he says.

If Moomba, the inaccessible downtown lounge, is currently the high-school cafeteria for famous people, then Simmons and Harrell are sitting at the cool table. Hip-hop has become the new rock and roll, and Simmons (founder and chairman of Def Jam Records) and Harrell (founder of Uptown Records, now president of Bad

Boy) are two of the people who own it.

Simmons is dressed, as always, as a billboard for his clothing line, Phat Farm. He wears a cap with flaps that snap up on the sides of his smooth, round head. At 41, he's slimmer, fitter, and has taken on the often-photo-flashed glow of celebrity—though he still retains the impishness of the teenagers he sold about \$200 million worth of records to last year.

Simmons smiles. "Keith *Barish*," he says.

Simmons always greets people in this amused way, with an announcement of their full names. His ever-present cell phone, which in its latest incarnation has an ever-present plug in one of his ears,

PHOTOGRAPH BY MILES LADIN

never rings aloud now; you'll just hear him call out, "Ronald Perelman!" . . . "Donald Trump!" as if he had a kind of celebrity Tourette's syndrome.

"Russell Simmons!" says Barish, picking up on the game. "How you doing?"

It's mentioned that Simmons is about to go to L.A. to pitch some movies (he's produced ten now, including *The Nutty Professor*).

"Take my plane!" Barish says breezily.

Simmons is warm, but he's already going on "Tommy's"—that is, Hilfiger's—plane.

"Okay. Great," says Barish, a little too quickly. The partner of Sly and Bruce and Demi goes trundling back to his table.

Simmons goes back to his plate of grilled vegetables and tofu. "Puffy could call Keith up right now and say, 'Gimme that plane,' and Keith'd say, 'You got it, I'll take American Airlines,'" he says matter-of-factly.

Harrell, the yin to Simmons's yang, wears a chocolate-brown Armani suit and a Patek Philippe watch and is daintily sawing at a steak. "Puffy's the rock star," he says. "He's Michael Jackson."

"When I met Michael," Simmons says, "he made me shake Bubbles's hand."

Harrell laughs.

THIS IS NOT ABOUT A MOMENT," SAYS Harrell. "This is way past a moment. This is Americana; this is a cultural change." We're at Patsy's, the Italian restaurant on 56th Street, one night, talking about how hip-hop has changed New York City. "When Puff Daddy's having white-linen parties in the Hamptons, and Ron Perelman's dressed in white linen walking through the door, I say, All right. This is real.

"But we need to get the moment *all* the way right," Harrell adds, stabbing carefully at a plate of creamy tortellini. "And for that to happen, we're gonna have to have a better world."

Two stories about young black men and New York have made international headlines in the past six months: one, a horrifying news event, the police shooting of an innocent African immigrant, Amadou Diallo, and the other, a surprisingly uplifting celebrity event, the 29th-birthday party of hip-hop mogul Sean "Puffy" Combs, which was notable for its eclectic guest list, from the Duchess of York to rapper Heavy D. The contrast between the reality on the streets and the reality of the moneyed class has become more and more difficult to grasp. And at the same time, hip-hop, music born on the streets of New York, and high society have merged, creating a place and a moment unlike any other.

It was Foxy Brown (of the "ill na na," her pet name for her private parts) who

performed at the Whitney's Brite Nite fund-raiser this year, not the Peter Duchin Orchestra in their tuxedos. "John and Caroline"—Kennedy, of course—"asked Foxy, 'Are you gonna perform "Hot Spot"?' " says one hip-hop executive. "And Foxy asked Martha Stewart, 'Oh, aren't you the lady that does the gardening?'"

"It's a *fabulous* time," says Stewart, who snapped pictures at Russell Simmons's wedding on St. Barts last December—where, reports Bobby Shriver (brother of Maria, and one of Simmons's groomsmen), "there were four supermodels, two billionnaires, two princes, three movie directors, and a crackhead." Stewart adds, "I'm learning so much about what's going on!"

Unlike the Cotton Club days or even the Village jazz scene of the fifties and sixties, however, the "moment" is characterized by a burgeoning class of up-and-coming and increasingly powerful black entrepreneurs. "Money talks," says Monica Lynch, president of Tommy Boy Records. "And hip-hop is big business now." The "hip-hop-reneurial" movement, as it's called, has spawned the success of blacks in myriad offshoot industries such as fashion, advertising, publishing, publicity. Twenty years ago, it was Simmons who "laid the foundation" and "set an aspirational agenda," says Keith Clinkscales, publisher of *Vibe*. "He made the blueprint—the philo, 'nome sayin'?" says the rapper Jay-Z.

It's Puff Daddy who's been getting the attention lately, so much so that in the minds of non-hip-hop fans, he's become almost synonymous with the genre: There was Puffy on the March 22 cover of *Forbes*—there's been Puffy, Puffy, everywhere, including on the cover of the New York *Post* two weeks ago after the Bad Boy tycoon was arrested for allegedly beating Interscope Records executive Steve Stoute in a dispute over his appearance in a controversial video for the rapper Nas (there was Puffy in the video, nailed to a cross, which his mother, not his minister, as has been reported, apparently took issue with). Puffy may be in some real trouble now—but that, too, only seems to be increasing his profile.

But if hip-hop moguls like Puffy and Master P (of No Limit Records) have been getting more column inches recently, it's Simmons, the so-called godfather of hip-hop, who blazed the trails and—in an often volatile landscape—continues to be considered hip-hop's most important player. In 1979, he made a hit out of the second rap record ever (Kurtis Blow's *Christmas Rappin'*), and then he made his name developing (along with then-partner Rick Rubin) acts like the Beastie Boys, Public Enemy, L.L. Cool J, and Run-D.M.C. "Around '84"—the year Simmons started Def Jam—says Gary Harris, a former company executive, "we were in a bar and

DOWN WITH DONALD: Clockwise from top, Simmons with Trump and Puffy; hugging Martha; mugging with Tommy Hilfiger and Kimora Lee.

Russ was telling me, 'I'm sick of making other people rich. I want to own my *own* shit, my own record label, my own movie company.' What I really thought was he was drunk. There weren't a lot of blacks thinking that way back then. There weren't a lot of examples to follow."

Now Simmons has the movie company he always wanted (Def Pictures), along with an ad agency (Rush Media), a magazine (*Oneworld*), a TV show (*Russell Simmons' Oneworld Music Beat*), and his clothing line. Meanwhile, Def Jam has become arguably the most profitable label in America—and along with it, as Simmons

long predicted, hip-hop has become America's music, outselling pop and country last year. "Def Jam keeps setting the standards and opening up new horizons for the genre," says Doug Morris, CEO of the Universal Music Group, which, interestingly, is about to cut Simmons and his current partner, Lyor Cohen, a buyout check for \$100 million for their 40 percent of the company.

It's with dismay and even sadness, how-

ever, that some people in the hip-hop community watch Simmons prepare to close his deal with Edgar Bronfman Jr., Universal's owner. It may be part of the hip-hop philosophy to sell, because hip-hop is about "getting paid"; but Def Jam has consistently put out music that has influenced the consciousness of a generation, from Public Enemy's "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back" in 1988 to DMX's "Slippin'," an anthem of struggle in the ghetto, today. Even Simmons—who professes to be generally apolitical—says he believes "a lot of kids learned a lot about what's going on down the block from hip-hop. I absolutely believe there's a real coming-together because of this music."

Then how can he bring himself to let it

SIMMONS IS BOUNCING UP TO THE DEF JAM OFFICES on Varick Street on a cold March afternoon. He's wearing a maroon Phat Farm fake fur with a hood today, which gives him a royal look. "If you can't buy a Bentley, buy a Phat Farm golf vest" is something he likes to say these days.

Simmons—or Russell, as everyone calls him up here—has been focusing most of his efforts of late on turning Phat Farm into hip-hop's Gap. He's entered into a licensing deal with Nate Kestenman, the New Jersey financier who made Turbo Sportswear, and is rumored to be negotiating a \$100 million backing deal with Arnie Simon, the man who brought Calvin Klein from "zero to \$500 million in three years," according to one fashion-industry insider.

"In the last year, we've made deals for bags, boots, leather, lingerie, underwear," Russell says rapidly, traveling through the Def Jam corridors. ("What up, big dawg?" his young employees say.) "We're gonna do suits! Sharkskin," Russell says proudly. "You should see them. The fabrics are sick."

It does strike some people as puzzling that Russell, promoter of Redman and Slick Rick, seems to have become obsessed with such things as "fleece!" And some even wonder whether it's the best place for his energies. "I always told Russell to stick to the record business," says David Geffen, another friend. "I'd take the record business over fashion any day. But I would never bet against him; Russell's been right about a whole lot of things."

"T-shirts," Russell claims, "are gonna make me richer than records ever did."

Phat Farm did \$17 million in sales in 1998, which he plans to more than triple

by his record business, Russell has watched Hilfiger build an \$850 million company selling street styles to the hip-hop generation. You have to wonder whether at some level it rankles him to see another white designer capitalizing on black-influenced fashion.

All Russell will say is "Tommy is great!"

UP IN HIS OFFICE, LYOR COHEN, DEF JAM'S president and COO, is looking very upset. The head of another label has been trying to raid some of his artists that day—which lately, with the success of the company, and hip-hop in general, has become a troublesome theme.

"That's why we have to get inside the building," Russell's telling him. "We could never compete with Jimmy Iovine," the powerful head of Interscope Records, "or these other people who are buying up acts—we can't spend that kind of money to buy shit. That's *Titanic* money!"

He bops away.

"I'm very sad about selling Def Jam," confesses Cohen, a large, melancholy man with steely blue eyes, who's known for his fierce management style (he's about to become the co-president of Universal's Island/Def Jam Music Group). "Russell says, 'Oh, Lyor, don't worry, you'll be doing Phat Farm or films with me.' But I don't need to be doing a million things. I love what we've done here. These are my artists, these are my people." From a "classic hippie Jewish family," Cohen talks passionately about "the first time I heard the beat." He sighs. "I love the music," he says.

"I love it, too, Lyor!" says Russell, returning.

I don't want the money ... I want the *money*," says Russell Simmons.

"If you want to push bigger buttons, you have to get inside the building."

go? (He will stay on as chairman of Def Jam although no longer an owner.) "I don't completely understand it," says Selwyn Seyfu Hinds, editor-in-chief of *The Source*, the hip-hop bible. "There are deep, deep questions in black culture in terms of ownership, in the sight of somebody who is the very paragon of success selling his share off to the Man. People wonder, 'Is this Berry Gordy Part Two?'"

"But it's hard to talk about Russell," Hinds adds, "without assuming he knows what he's doing."

What Simmons seems to be doing is preparing for the next moment, his moment. "I don't want the money ... I want the *money*," he explains. "If you want to push bigger buttons, you have to get inside the building."

this year by widening his distribution into higher-end department-store chains. "Tommy," whom Russell once told there was big money in hip-hop fashion (and whom he gave street cred by introducing him to rappers and black supermodels) is now introducing Russell to people like the buyers at Macy's. "I figured you just made the clothes and showed them to Anna Wintour," Russell says.

"I think it's a genius idea," says Hilfiger of Russell's line, which is a funky kind of reinterpretation of preppiness. ("What Russell really wants to be," says Andre, "is the hip-hop Ralph Lauren.") In fact, last year Hilfiger tried to get his friend Russell to fold his interests into his company—perhaps to stave off the competition—but the deal never happened. While preoccupu-

But now Russell has to leave.

"Lyor Cohen doesn't mind me being the chairman and never coming to work because he gets to be involved in everything," he tells me, half joking.

DONALD HAS THE BEST PLANE I EVER seen," Russell says, sitting with Andre at Trump's restaurant, Jean Georges, in the Trump International Hotel and Tower one sunny day. "Some of these planes, you're there sleeping with your mouth hanging open for everyone to see—but Donald's plane? It has bedrooms."

Trump—blue suit, orange hair—arrives late. "White guy in the middle," he says, angling for the central seat.

"That looks staged," observes Russell.
"It is staged," Trump observes cheerily. The occasion is a *Vibe* photo shoot.
"These guys," Trump says, indicating Russell and Andre, "have done more for respect than anything."

Their friendship, oddly enough, seems to be based on a great familiarity with the same things: money, models, nightlife, publicity, and the social network of New York City. "Ever since the early nineties, Russell's been building a power base with these Upper East Side-type white people," says one friend of his. "He knew that the success of hip-hop depended on bringing together all different elements of society," says Monica Lynch.

"He can tell a 50-year-old Jewish man what's good about hip-hop—and make him laugh," says Gary Harris. "And then go on a vacation with him."

"Russell is the man!" says Ronald Perelman (whom Russell even persuaded to

Russell was always going to clubs that a traditional black man wouldn't go to, in the Village, in SoHo. He has always liked mixed environments.

perform drums on a hip-hop track). "If you look at this music," says Perelman, "which started out real *segmented*—it's now almost mainstream. Rap, urban city dress, is mainstream. These guys today are really—mainstream."

"I went to a Phat Farm fashion show. I go to all the top shows," The Donald says. "It was different from what I'm used to. But it was very awakening to me, because I saw this is not a niche. You have to say, now, Yves St. Laurent? *That's* the niche."

"Russell knows the market, he sees the future, and that's the ultimate businessperson," Trump says.

Andre coughs. Lately he's been thinking about investing in some real estate, maybe uptown. The Donald counsels: "Best views of the park in Manhattan, on 125th Street."

The photo shoot is over, and Russell and Andre go out into the bright day together.

Trump says thoughtfully, "I don't give them that much advice. I don't think they need it."

RUSSELL AND ANDRE ARE BEST friends. Andre was a rapper called Dr. Jeckyll and a salesman for WINS radio when Russell persuaded him to come to work for Rush Management, the former moniker of Def Jam, in 1985. "Andre was always booking himself above all the other artists. He booked himself in a show in the Beacon Theater on top of L.L. Cool J!" Russell says with a laugh.

"Super tie, extra fly, it's Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde," he raps Andre's old rap.

"Russell says Andre was the only rapper who, when they played his songs, they only played the instrumental," says one old friend. "He called Andre Dr. Doolittle."

But Russell insists Andre gets a bad rap, that people don't give him the credit he deserves for the success of Uptown Records, which Andre left Def Jam to found in 1986. "I don't like to read all the time that Uptown wasn't him," Russell says—that instead, it was A&R man Kurt Woodley and young Sean Combs who developed stars like Mary J. Blige and Jodeci. "Andre knows a lot more about music than 99.9 percent of record people," Russell says. "He changed the music business completely. He had a vision for R&B when R&B was worth zero, nothing."

Russell was never into the R&B sound much himself, however. "Russell's from the suburbs"—he grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Hollis, Queens; his mother worked for the Parks Department, while his father was a school administrator and teacher of black history—"so he's all about DMX and ghetto shit. Andre was from uptown, so he was all about Teddy Riley and fancy suits," says another friend. "The ones from suburbia always want to be hard-core, and the ones from the projects always want to be slick."

"Russ is totally alternative," says Andre.

"Andre was the straightest motherfucker I knew," Russell says.

"I remember," says Russell, around

1984, "when I moved in with Andre in Lefrak City, I was getting in the elevator with him one night; we were both going out on dates. I was wearing what I always wear, and Andre looked like Minister Farrakhan, he had on a three-piece suit. I was going out on a date with this crazy blonde punk-rock girl, I was going out to see the Circle Jerks at the World, some shit. And Andre, he was going out to play miniature golf with this girl—we used to call her the no-laughin'-and-jokin'-ho. She was a project girl who grew up to be a lawyer. You couldn't curse around this girl!

"Andre was a rapper, like, livin' a double life, which is a real conservative-colored-man thing to do."

"Most black families," says Jimmy Jenkins, a.k.a. J. Luv, a former Uptown executive, "rear their children to be straight, go to college, get a haircut, don't stay out late. Well, Russell was always going to clubs that a traditional black man wouldn't go to, in the Village, SoHo, Save the Robots, and all those places with Madonna and Iggy Pop. Russell has always liked mixed environments and mixed people."

"I was taking all kinds of drugs back then," says Russell. "I wasn't *free-basing*, but I woke up in the punk-rock girl's apartment that next morning and *she* was free-basing, looking like Courtney Love in her nightgown. I thought I was in hell! But it was all good. I got up, took a shower, and I come home and Andre's telling me about playing miniature fuckin' golf! In Co-Op City! . . . 'And how was *your* night?'"

"Russell developed a taste for nightlife, and he used to drag me around to these clubs," Andre says. "At Danceteria there was a guy who used to check my hat, he had hair all over his face—he looked like Cousin It. I'd look around like, 'Russ, why are we here?' I wanted to go to Bentley's—that was the upwardly-mobile-black-people club. And Russell would say, 'Hold on a minute.' Then we'd go to Bentley's, and Russell would be like: 'I don't know why we here with these uptight Negroes—what is *this* about?'"

"My real circuit," Russell says, "was Danceteria and Disco Fever"—one of the first places to feature rappers, in the late eighties. "Shit, Andre didn't want to hang out at no Disco Fever," he says. "He didn't want to be in no South Bronx where nig-

CLUB-ABLE: Simmons pals around with Bad Boy president Andre Harrell at the Bowery Bar (left) and with supermodel Irina (below).

gas were getting shot and pulled off the dance floor—in a back room with a bunch of rappers sniffing cocaine!"

"Russell's Mr. Oneworld," Andre says with a sigh.

"And Andre is the Minister of Colored People," says a friend of both men. "He keeps Russell in touch with that side of things."

Puffy, who is connected to both Russell and Andre, is, in a sense, a product of both of the cultural forces they represent: He was born in Harlem, raised in Mount Vernon; his father was a hustler who was murdered; meanwhile his mother, Janice, pushed him to go to Howard University—which he dropped out of when he got a job interning for Andre Harrell.

"Andre cultivated Puffy. And Puff was a genius," says Russell. But Puffy also seemed like a trouble magnet. "He was getting into fistfights constantly, constantly," says Russell. "He was a young kid; he needed management. Andre would be

like, 'Yo, Puff, you can't beat up people and do this and do that!' Andre stood by Puffy through a lot of shit." Like the rap-all-star basketball game at CUNY in 1991 that Puffy promoted, and overbooked, at which there was a stampede that led to the death of nine people, an event which haunts Puffy to this day. After the CUNY incident, Andre got William Kunstler on the phone for Puffy. Still, Andre fired him in late 1994. The split was dramatic, since Puffy had been nearly inseparable from his mentor, living in Andre's mansion in New Jersey, playing in his pool.

"Now the tables have turned. Puffy gave Andre a job"—last year, as the president of Bad Boy, after Andre was fired as the head of Motown—"just so he can have a chance to fire Andre himself," one music-industry executive speculates. "Puffy wants to humiliate Andre, just like Andre humiliated him. He'll fire him eventually."

When Andre fired Puffy, Puffy landed a \$10 million deal with Clive Davis at Arista within months. He immediately set to launching the career of the late Notorious B.I.G., a.k.a. Biggie Smalls, whom he already had under his wing and who is now considered perhaps the greatest rapper ever and the rapper who made Puffy's career.

"If Andre was so smart, why did he fire Puffy?" another music-industry executive asks. "Why'd he let Biggie go?"

"It was Russell who told Andre to fire Puffy. Russell separated Andre and Puffy. He thought they were too formidable as a team."

"I don't believe that was the reason at all," counters another hip-hop executive. "If Russell told Andre to fire Puffy, it was because he thought Puffy was going to get him in trouble. Andre was Russell's *man*," his close friend. "And Puffy was all up in the middle of all that East Coast-West Coast shit." Puffy was continually rumored to have had a hand in the feud between Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls that may have led to both rappers' unsolved murders.

"If Russell told Andre anything, it was probably 'That kid [Sean] is gonna get you killed.'"

"And I think Russell didn't like the way Sean had started treating Andre. In front of Andre, Sean was saying things like 'You wouldn't be shit without me.' In public and shit."

LONG BEFORE PUFFY WOUND UP IN the news again for allegedly beating Steve Stoute on April 15, a Puffy backlash was in full swing—something that has been lost in the stream of glowing reports on the rise of Puff Daddy in the mainstream press. "I was surprised when I went out on my book tour," says Nelson

George, author of *Hip Hop America*, "how many kids were saying they were fed up with Puff Daddy."

Puffy can't rap, the backlash says; Puffy's too heavy on his use of samples (as in the way Sting's "Every Breath You Take" became "I'll Be Missing You," Puffy's ode to the late Biggie, whom he has mourned publicly and relentlessly); Puffy rode Biggie's coattails to fame and is still riding them (even Janet Jackson waxed skeptical about the depth of Puffy's grief); and finally, Puffy is all about money. "It's all about the Benjamins, baby," he raps; but while money is a hip-hop value possibly above all others, when it comes to Puffy, no one seems to want to see him get over anymore—sometimes, not even his own people.

"Did you know he works for me?" Clive Davis reportedly complained to *Forbes* after seeing Puffy on its March 22 cover with Jerry Seinfeld (for the "Power Celebrity 100" issue). *Forbes* called Puffy's Bad Boy Records "rap's most valuable label," despite the fact that Bad Boy spiraled in sales last year (from almost \$200 million to an estimated \$35 million), while Def Jam was soaring. The mistake was said to irk Simmons as much as the reason behind it irked Clive Davis.

"Clive made Puffy, and he's put a lot of money into him," says one manager in the hip-hop business (indeed, Davis gave Puffy a \$55 million advance in 1998, which turned out to be a disappointing year for Bad Boy, which had only one hit record). "Clive is the dean of the record biz. So when Clive said, 'It's time, and this'—that is, Puffy—"is the one," it put rap on a whole other level. Puffy gets down with Clive Davis, and suddenly *he's* at dinner with Martha"—Stewart. "Tommy"—that is, Mottola, whom Russell used to work with when Def Jam was part-owned by Sony—"wasn't taking Russell anywhere! Russell did all that on his *own*."

But no one, least of all his mentors, will say Puffy isn't a talented businessman. "Anything that was told to Heavy D or Mary J. Blige or Teddy Riley, from *my* mouth," Andre says with emphasis, "Puffy was there to hear it."

"Puffy's what Andre always wanted to be," says one old friend. "But Puffy's slicker at self-promotion, he's a one-man self-promotion machine. People think he's doing great even when he's not." "Puffy's a better management person than Andre or Russell," says the head of an independent label. "He's the shit on that."

It's Russell, however, whom Puffy seems to have been modeling himself on all these years, more than Andre or "Michael" or perhaps anyone. "Sean studied Russell very carefully," says a former Def Jam executive. "This is how you do it—this is what you don't do, this is who you talk to,

this is where you hang out . . .”
Russell had a clothing line; now Puffy has a clothing line. Russell had a magazine; now Puffy has one. “They compete on a daily basis,” one close friend says.
But how deep does the competition go? Russell likes to appear above the fray. He’s “truly happy when other people are doing things,” according to the rapper Jay-Z. “He just feels it widens the market for everyone when someone’s doing well.” He grins. “I seen him with a Sean John hat on.” That’s Puffy’s clothing line.

“Puffy is the epitome of what rap is,” Russell insists. “Get some money and get fly, all that shit Puffy’s talking about—Puffy’s living that for real. Puffy got the mansion and the yacht. On St. Barts, he had a quarter-million-dollar yacht two years in a row, and it wasn’t an obscene thing for him to do. He belongs on the island, he’s the most important person on the entire island in terms of flavor, everyone want him on their boat—”

For Russell, it seems Puffy’s success is a statement, the importance of which goes well beyond any personal concerns. That may be why he sounds so upset when he talks about Puffy’s recent arrest and the fact that this young man—and rival—with whom he vacations, now faces a possible sentence of up to seven years in jail. “Frank Sinatra beat people up, and he didn’t go to jail!” Russell rails. “I’m disappointed in Sean, yes; I don’t like what he did, but Steve [Stoute] is gonna drive off in a new car with a trunk full of money! Why isn’t that enough?”

have a bigger appreciation at this point for good friends, good food. . . . Like, you know? We’ve achieved.”

People say that Russell, once a “wild man,” has changed recently, due in large part to his marriage to Kimora Lee. “She’s his love child. She’s Mrs. One-world,” Andre says.

This year, Russell put out a Phat Farm shirt with Kimora Lee’s face on it. There are a hundred Kimoras looking at you: Kimora looking up seductively. Kimora smiling intimately, as in a personal snapshot you would carry. Kimora’s long, long leg swinging forward, toe pointed.

“It looks beautiful with your pictures all over it,” Russell’s telling her in his car one night. “The only problem with it is you get in a hot room and it starts sticking to you.”

“It holds funk,” Kimora agrees.

“But those shirts are hot, they’re selling out,” says Russell.

Kimora fits in nicely with his genius for synergy, so similar to his friend Martha Stewart’s (“I think we have a lot in common that way,” Stewart says). Kimora is the host of *Russell Simmons’s Oneworld Music Beat*, the concept of which was a hip-hop *Entertainment Tonight*. “Isn’t she great? She’s so natural,” Russell says. He is Charles Foster Kane—like in his devotion, but Kimora is fun to watch. She interviews rappers and other entertainers while smiling her dazzling smile and wearing beautiful gowns, in between promos for *Oneworld* magazine and Phat Farm.

Russell saw Kimora up on a runway in a Mary McFadden show when she was just

Russell says.

Kimora laughs.

He clarifies, proudly, “Her daddy was the first black U.S. marshal.”

“My mother’s a very straight Japanese woman,” Kimora says. “And my grandma called me, and she said”—with a high-Japanese accent—“Kimora, at night, that rich man he come home and sleep with you? Only you?” And I said, “Yes, Grammy,” and she said, “Oh, very happy.” Kimora claps her hands.

“Have you calmed down, honey?” asks Kimora.

Russell looks impatient. “I was never not calm.

“I’m 41, shit,” he adds.

ON GRAMMY NIGHT IN L.A., RUSSELL, Andre, and Kimora—along with Kima and Keisha from the group Total—arrive at the Universal Studios lot for a party for Universal Music. The party is dull and full of suits. Russell is wearing a Phat Farm baseball jacket and a baseball cap slung sideways on his head, but somehow he still looks elegant.

Kimora glances around. “Honey, let’s leave!” she whispers.

But Russell has a frozen smile. Across the room is Edgar Bronfman Jr. “Should we say hello to him? We gotta say hello to him,” Russell says, and we inch over.

The most powerful man at the party seems a bit uncomfortable in his own skin. His tenure as a media mogul has been embattled, with stockholders and journalists second-guessing him constantly.

I’m disappointed in Sean, yes,” says Russell about Puffy’s recent arrest. “But Frank Sinatra beat people up and he didn’t go to jail.

But the fact is that Puffy has always had a somewhat different style. Russell, for example, always stayed far away from the East Coast–West Coast wars, while Puffy may have gotten some heat off his proximity to that violence. “A lot of people in the industry are saying Puffy did this [beating] on purpose to get his ghetto credibility back,” says an executive at Sony. “He did it to have the kids on the street respect him again—no one cares about the Bad Boy insignia anymore. White kids are only gonna buy what black kids buy, and Puffy thinks that by doing this he’ll win them back.”

“I THINK PUFFY’S HAPPINESS,” ANDRE TOLD me that night at Patsy’s, “is driven by a different level of challenge than Russell or myself. I think both myself and Russell

17. “Everyone said stay away from him,” Kimora says. “We didn’t do anything until I was 18,” she adds demurely.

Russell had a well-publicized penchant for models and had dated so many that, he says, “that shit was getting dull.” He had to get Kimora’s agent to talk her mother into letting him take her out.

“He sent me flowers—jungles of flowers,” says Kimora.

“Trees, a miniature forest. Oh, tell about the afternoon you flew to Greece just to have lunch,” teases Andre.

“I went to every show she was in,” says Russell, unapologetic and uncharacteristically poetic. “My ghetto sophisticate girl for Chanel.”

“She’s straight-up ghetto bitch,” he says proudly. She’s from St. Louis, Missouri. “Her mama works for the city government—and her daddy’s a pimp,”

Bronfman greets Russell stiffly.

“I’m doing a story on Russell Simmons,” I tell him.

“Oh. . . . Why?” Bronfman says flatly; he appears to be making some sort of joke.

I turn around and, suddenly, Russell and Kimora are no longer there.

Soon after, we all get back in their limo, and Russell is mad, mad, about something:

“I’m talking to that [name deleted] who does the buying for [name of shopping-mall chain deleted],” he sputters, “and she says, ‘Oh’”—he makes his voice high and phony—“we just don’t want any jeans stores in our shopping centers.” Now, what does *that* mean? He’s frowning, waiting.

“Means she doesn’t want a lot of little ghetto niggas runnin’ up in there,” he says.

We ride in silence a moment.

“Let’s go to a real party,” Andre says.

At midnight, amid the revelers at Andre's own Grammy party at Good Bar, virtually everyone who matters in hip-hop is there: Missy Elliot, Queen Latifah, Jay-Z, Jermaine Dupri, Mary J. Blige, Big Pun, top black executives from every label—and Russell, Andre, and Puffy.

Everybody's talking, everybody's dancing, everybody's having a good time.

And Puffy's talking to Jennifer Lopez.

Russell, Kimora, and Andre are sitting on top of a booth in the center of the room, as slick boys and fly girls dance around their table, trying to be seen near them. This is the heart of the moment, which kids around the world are trying to reproduce at this very moment. "I came here to ball!" says Chris Rock, who got his start on Russell's *Def Comedy Jam* on HBO.

SOMEONE WHO WAS AT THE MAGIC CONVENTION (the clothing showcase) in Las Vegas in March relates this story: Russell, who had a large Phat Farm display at the show—"We got a fence and a barn," he told me, pleased, on his cell phone—was stopped by security guards when he went backstage to get himself a Coca-Cola from a cooler. The guards didn't know who he was and assumed from his dress that he couldn't be who he said he was, a clothing mogul. He was almost taken into custody until someone came by who identified him.

But his friends say Russell doesn't lose his cool over such things. "I was on a plane with him once," says Bobby Shriver, "and the steward was, I thought, treating Russell less than respectfully. I got all stressed out about it, but Russell said, 'Look, if I got that upset every time something like that happened, I'd be dead by now.'"

"He's a very progressive person," says Harris. "He has a tremendous sense of entitlement. He's looking at the big picture."

One evening recently, Russell was on his way to yoga in his new black Mercedes Benz. He's been doing yoga for about three years now. "When I took him to his first yoga class in L.A.," says Shriver, "he came out and said, 'If I keep doing this, I'm gonna lose all my money.' Which is a great insight into yoga. But Russell's only managed to make *more* money."

We were driving east on Houston Street, and Russell was looking out the window at the East Village. "I think where we are right now in the East Village is probably the best American melting pot," he said. "This is where American culture comes together. People can understand each other here, people bump up against each other, the fusion is honest here."

"There's a whole communication, a dialogue amongst youth, going on in this city—it's a big deal," he said.

"You know what the *Jerry Springer Show* proves?" he went on, turning around and looking at me. "That white people are niggers, too. It's important. People don't realize it when they live in a different world, but a lot of those people are uneducated, they have the whole same set of experiences, they have the same lifestyle, and now, because of hip-hop, they're all dressing the same and they're using the same language." Seven out of ten hip-hop records are now purchased by non-blacks. "All those people on *Jerry Springer* listen to it," Russell said.

But "hip-hop didn't cross over from black to white," he added. "It crossed over from cool to uncool. There was always alternative white people into it." Russell scowled.

"People aren't threatened by black people getting 'economically empowered.' That's too much thinking. They're threatened by rappers saying that shit about we gonna rob you! They're threatened they might get robbed, too! 'Thank God, I wish they'd be successful, and not rob me—if that's all they want, *please*, somebody give them niggas some money!' " He laughed.

"But when Jay-Z's saying, 'I'm gonna rob you,' he's saying, 'I'm gonna rob you if shit ain't right.'"

"Rappers are spokespeople for the people who have nothing. We really can't empower them all," he said.

He went into his class in the Jivamukti Yoga Center. The wide, smooth room where he laid down his mat was filled with limber girls with henna tattoos.

The room fell quiet, and the teacher started telling the story of Ganesha, the Indian god who as a little boy was cursed with an elephant head. "And so, Ganesha teaches us how to deal with obstacles," the teacher said.

Every day, Russell Simmons stands on his head.

IT'S ANOTHER NIGHT AT MOOMBA, "THE regular spot": Russell and Andre, Gary Harris, J. Luv, and Andre's date, a young woman named Erica, are spread out over a booth. Russell's wearing a Phat Farm jacket with the company's mascot on the back, a jaunty cash cow called Money Moo. Andre is all in white—Calvin Klein.

Marilyn Manson is sitting long-faced in the middle of everyone, hands on knees, in white makeup.

"I got an idea," Russell says. "A restaurant chain . . . a Def Jam Cafe, like a hip-hop Planet Hollywood."

"Who would go there?" says J. Luv. "You wouldn't go there. Do you go to Justin's?"—Puffy's place.

"Yes," says Russell, "and yes, I would!"

"That's a onetime visit," says Erica. "People don't go back once they see the stars aren't really there."

"Oh, I'd get 'em in there." Russell nods vehemently. "We'll have everybody up in there—and all my artists' videos playing on the TV screens!"

Shoshanna Lonstein is coming by in tight jeans . . . tight everything. Russell's eyes light up. "Every Jewish guy in New York is in love with that girl," he says.

She crouches before him, smiling her wide, easy smile. Her dark hair gleams; her cleavage heaves. "Hey, Russell, whassup?"

"Hi, sweetheart," says Russell.

They talk business.

"Smart girl," Russell says approvingly as she moves away.

"You're feeling her—and I'm feeling you," Harris teases.

"She is a smart girl," Russell says. "Making a whole business out of her titties!"

"They're not that big," remarks Erica.

They keep talking; Russell lays down some more plans for the Def Jam Cafe.

"I think it could work," says Andre.

"Of course it could work," Russell says.

He isn't going to give up until everyone agrees with him.