Lost in the legend of Sean "Puffy" Combs's cultural-moment-defining birthday bash last November 4 is the curious story of the first notable to "arrive." That is, the first player, one who had arrived in terms of "blowing up"—years before 29-year-old Puff, but with much the same mind-set and in much the same style.

There he was—"like the first boy at a high school dance," says hip hop writer Nelson George—at a minute past 10, strolling solo into Cipriani Wall Street. He looked around, shifted caterpiller eyebrows sideways, and spotted a place to alight: 

"Ab, a throne."

The ticket clutches, all giddy with big-night expectation, were just starting to drift into the car-

kinship are strong—on both sides. Method Man breaks it down this way: "Like Trump's style. It's like, 'I'm rich, fuck you all, I build my buildings and put my name on them. Fuck you all.'"

How weird was it walking into my dad's booth at the U.S. Open and seeing Puff Daddy there? The man asks Trump's daughter Ivanka, 17, a hip hop head fan. "Ongoing to Grammys, the phone rings, and my dad's like, 'Yo, Puff, what's up?' And I'm like, 'You are not talking to Puff Daddy.'"

Trump was hip hop before he himself knew. For one thing, he was rich—a billionaire who reveled in his money. And he didn't care who he was. He was a real estate mogul, and he built big, and he built flashy, and yes, he put his name on everything from Trump Tower to Trump Plaza to Trump Parc to the Trump International Hotel and Tower. When people didn't know whether it was city government, banks, or the media—his response was always, "Fuck off."

"Everyone I see Tina Brown, I say, 'I'm going to Vanity Fair and The New Yorker,'" says The Donald says, "I give her the finger." Brown printed some player-hating pieces about him. "She treated me like a total sh*t!" The Top Ten Comeback Tips from Trump's 1998 best-sellers, Trump: The Art of the Comeback (Times Books), read almost like a rap song. (The Local's "Money, Power & Respect," comes to mind) "Be paranoid... Be passionate... Be lucky... Get even." Puff is currently writing his own book on the art of blowing up, possibly inspired by Trump's many best-sellers.

"Trump is respected by people in hip hop because he's not a corporate guy," says George, author of Hip Hop America (Viking, 1998). "He's a self-made entrepreneur, and that's key to the hip hop mentality. They respect him for being a 'fuck you' hero."

By midnight that night of The Party, Cipriani's was packed and pounding with the music of hip hop superstars now constellating in the room. There was Mase and Jay-Z and Missy Elliot and Heavy D and crazy Bus Bismillah, his mouth opening in an aghast laugh. Puff Daddy still hadn't arrived yet. His big entrance would come right after Muhammad Ali's.

And there was The Donald, amid all the flashing, neon, still up in the elevated VIP section, still sitting in The Seat. Meanwhile, Ferguson, Duchess of York, and Kevin Costner didn't seem to be able to find chairs. Striper girls in Plexiglas booths were rubbing on leather thongs, making men in baggy zoot suits go crazy.

"I think Puff Daddy is a great guy," said Trump. A security guard ventured over and asked him to find another seating arrangement. "Sean said he
I've been around the world / And Ay-Ay-Ay / I've been player-hated,"—Puff Daddy, on his 1997 hit "Been Around the World"

Trump can relate. A whole battery of power players from the upper echelons of New York society—including Victoria Newhouse, wife of media mogul S.I. Newhouse Jr., and billionaire David Koch—are reportedly gearing up to try to block Trump's most recent development: Trump World Tower, the world's tallest residential building (some 90 stories), set to rise on a plot of land smack-dab across the street from the United Nations. Newscaster legend and elder statesman of classiness Walter Cronkite has called designs for Trump's pet project "grotesque."

"Those people are going to end up moving into my building," Trump told The New York Observer. "It's going to be much better than where they live."

The naysayers never did understand him. Not his love of excess or publicity or gold-plating. They never got that Trump...is Trump.

"He's shunned socially by old money," says Jessica Rosenblum, president of Stress Entertainment and a longtime hip hop musichead. "But now hip hop is saying, 'Hey, you're our kind,' and he's saying, 'Hey, cool.'"

"Donald doesn't have flavor," offers one recording-industry executive, who asked not to be named, "but he knows where the flavor is."

Crockett Puffy and Donald shaking hands at the Polo ground's Long Island's exclusive Hamptons residential area—in effect thumbing their noses at all those stuffy longtime residents who, not so many decades ago, would have found some convenient way to keep either one of them from attending their lawn parties. Now, those very same people routinely pull out all the stops to try to get into one of Puffy's Hamptons parties—where Trump can always be found, possibly sitting in Puffy's chair.

Hip hop has seen itself in Donald Trump, and vice versa. "He's been taken by the energy and the chutzpah of the rap world," says George, "especially the entrepreneurs."

"The Hamptons has a certain rigid society," Trump says. "And people like Puffy and Russell and Andre Harrell [president of Bad Boy Entertainment] have done really well within it. The reason is because they're fun, and the Hamptons people are boring."

By the same token, some people in the hip hop world seem to think Donald Trump is fun too. "There's a lot of people out there who have money but they're not all accepted. Donald is," says DJ Funkmaster Flex, with whom The Donald spent time at Interscope Records host/cho Ted Field's Fourth of July party last summer in the Hamptons.

If Bill Clinton is, as Nobel Prize-winning authorTom Morrison insists, "the first black president," then, using the same word logic, Trump may be the first African-American billionaire. He doesn't see color if it gets in the way of having a good time, and he seems to have the best time when he's kicking it with his homies. "I think that these hip hop guys are smart, and they're fun, and I don't give a shit, because if I didn't like them I wouldn't bother," he says. "Because I don't need anybody, and I don't need anything."

Hey, Russell," The Donald says. "Will you send me a lot of money, please?"

On a fine winter morning, Trump is poised on his own throne high in Trump Tower talking on the telephone to the godfather of hip hop.

"We told Donald he was the illegit man alive, and he called a doctor," says Russell Simmons through the white noise of the speakerphone. "I love ya," says The Donald with a smile. "We told him he was the shit—and he said, 'Fuck you, too!'" says Simmons.

"I love ya, Russell, I love ya, baby," Trump says. "I was really mad about that one—Russell calling me the 'shit,' he continues, hanging up the phone. "I thought Russell liked me! Kara Young had to explain it to me."

It was Simmons who introduced Trump to model Young—now a former flame of both men—after he and Marla Maples split. It's Simmons and H., whom Trump hangs out with several times a year, into the wee hours at Moomba, N.Y.C.'s waterhole for the ultrachic. It was Simmons and H. who Trump picked as judges for last year's Miss Universe pageant in Hawai'i. "You know I own that, right?" Trump asks.

The skyline of Manhattan stretches out before him like a personal kingdom.

"I own the Empire State Building, too," he says.

"Did you know that?"

What could be more hip hop than self-promotion? The Slick Rick's, the L.L. Cool J's, the Jay Z's. The Donald's right up there with them in representational terms, he totes a copy of Crain's New York Business across his mahogany desk. It rates his Trump Organization the third most successful private real estate corporation in New York City. (Fortune sets Trump net worth at $1.5 billion.) "We're bigger than we were!" Trump crow.

It wasn't so long ago, though, that he was a nobody. After his celebrated rise in the '80s, he plowed more than $900 million in debt in 1996. The old man admits he stopped working as hard. "I was having too much fun!"

But now he's back. And a lot of people in the music business can relate to that," says Funkmaster Flex. "He made it happen, and he came back to make it happen again."

"Trump," says Rosenblum, "has a ghetto presence."

And he couldn't feel more at home within the rosy scenario of hip hop entrepreneurs with whom he's recently become so chummy. "They're all me," he says, "and they're all real businessmen." Trump says, "I have a real sense of where the market's going, and I have a sense of the future—and that's the ultimate businessperson."

Stumbling onto a concept, he adds, "I think hip hop has done more for race relations, and more respect among everyone, than anything. Because these guys really are respected. I can tell you—the most important white people have total respect for these guys."