

Puffy, Puff Daddy, P. Diddy, Love—no matter what name you call him, Sean Combs is an unmistakable figure in hip-hop history. With an eye for branding, an ear for talent and a lifetime of hustle, Combs introduced the Notorious B.I.G. to the world and helped make hip-hop the cultural juggernaut that it is today.

Born in New York City's Harlem neighborhood on Nov. 4, 1969, to Janice and Melvin Earl Combs, Sean was in the spotlight almost from day one. His first brush with fame came when he starred in a Baskin-Robbins ad at the age of 2. But for as early as Combs experienced renown, he endured hardship tenfold. Combs' father, a taxicab driver, fell into drug dealing in order to support his family, and on Jan. 26, 1973, he was shot and killed near Central Park.

After Melvin's death, Janice moved Sean and his little sister, Keisha, to Mount Vernon, a suburb north of Manhattan. Growing up in a single-parent household with a mom working three jobs taught Combs to be resourceful. He lied about his age in order to get his first job as a newspaper boy and, despite the rule of one paper route per person, regularly took other kids' routes off their hands. "Puffy is a *determined* guy," Mary J. Blige told *GQ*. "And he's not gonna let anything stop him."

Combs enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., in 1987, where he developed a knack for successfully promoting hip-hop parties. Wanting to dive further into the industry, Combs connected with Andre Harrell, founder of Uptown Records, and became an intern under Harrell's mentorship. By the dawn of the '90s, Combs, now going by the name Puff

Sean Combs, at the time calling himself "Diddy," attends his January 2014 Step Into the Circle event in NYC's Times Square, a promotion for the Ciroc vodka brand.

Sean Combs and Biggie were inseparable, and together they each became hip-hop icons. BY ROBERT STEINER

Nothing's Gonna Stop Me

Now





1. Combs and Lil' Kim share the stage at a Bad Boy Family Reunion Tour stop at The Forum in Inglewood, California, on Oct. 4, 2016. 2. That same night, the mogul-turned-rapper appears before a backdrop of Biggie and Tupac Shakur. The three of them were embroiled in hip-hop's infamous East Coast-West Coast feud of the 1990s. 3. Diddy with one of his first star signings, Mary J. Blige, at the 45th Annual Grammy Awards in February 2003. 4. A young Puffy with his Uptown Records mentor Andre Harrell in November 1994, the year after Harrell fired him. "It was my fault...I rebelled a little bit too much," said Combs.

Daddy, had dropped out of Howard and was Uptown's new director of A&R.

However, tragedy almost derailed Combs' career before it began. In 1991, he promoted a celebrity basketball game for AIDS awareness at The City College of New York that became overcrowded, leading to a stampede that killed nine people. "I kept saying to myself that it was all a bad dream. That I was going to wake up,"

he said. "But I never woke up." With inspiration from the Bible—particularly the story of Lazarus rising from the dead—he pulled himself back up. Combs discovered and developed some of the label's most successful acts, including Mary J. Blige and Jodeci. He oversaw every aspect of their careers, from producing their music to choosing their clothes to appearing in their songs and music videos.

While Jodeci and Blige's debut albums were both

multiplatinum hits, he recognized Christopher Wallace as a particularly unique talent. "He had so much melody in his voice," Combs told *Rolling Stone* in 1997. "It was like he was rapping, but it was so catchy, it was almost like he was singing. And he was such a clever poet, the way he put his words together, the way he saw things. If



"It looked like Puffy was finished a hundred times. It makes no difference. He's a survivor."

—RUSSELL SIMMONS, DEF JAM CO-FOUNDER

you sat and listened to a Biggie Smalls record in the dark, you'd see a whole movie in front of you."

Combs brought Wallace on board at Uptown, but Biggie's graphic music left the label's distributor, MCA, hesitant and unconvinced. Instead of leaving Combs and Biggie in limbo, Harrell fired Combs so that his protégé could strike out on his own. "I told Puff he needs to go and create his own opportunity: 'You're red-hot right now. I'm really letting you go so you can get rich,'" Harrell told *The Wall Street Journal* in 2014.

Now his own boss, Combs intended to turn Bad Boy Records into not just a label, but a cultural touchstone—a taste-making powerhouse following in the footsteps of Motown, Def Jam and even Death Row Records. With Biggie leading the charge, Bad Boy became the prime representative of East Coast hip-hop. "Everything Puffy touched was golden," said Def Jam co-founder Russell Simmons. "He just made hit after hit after hit." Before his star client's death, Combs was finishing his debut album, *Hell Up in Harlem*. But Biggie's passing plunged him into a profound sadness. "You can have all the success and money in the world, but at the end of the day it doesn't really mean a thing," he told the *Los Angeles Times*. "I can't be happy right now because my best friend is dead. I know God doesn't give you anything you can't handle, but I'm really struggling with it, man."

At the heart of Combs' debut, eventually renamed *No Way Out*, was "I'll Be Missing You," a touching—and polarizing—tribute to his late friend. Featuring Biggie's widow, Faith Evans, and heartfelt lyrics ("It's kinda hard with you not around / Know you in heaven smilin' down"),

the song became the first rap single to debut at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100. The single propelled *No Way Out* to multiplatinum success and earned Combs the Best Rap Performance and Best Rap Album awards at the Grammys—ironically, beating Biggie in both categories.

As successful as "I'll Be Missing You" was at the time, Combs' critics saw it as the epitome of his penchant to exploit artists for his own profit and use others' artistry to bolster his lack thereof. Bad Boy heavyweights like Mase and The L.O.X. have been vocal over the years about the shoddy record deals they signed with him. Combs also never wrote his own verses, a cardinal rap faux pas, including on "I'll Be Missing You" (ghostwritten by rapper Sauce Money). Combs wasn't fazed—"Don't worry if I write rhymes / I write checks," he boasted on the song "Bad Boy for Life." But this dissonance between mogul and artist, as well as accusations of exploiting artists and diluting hip-hop into a commodity, plagues Combs' reputation in the music world to this day.

Today, the near-billionaire is an award-winning fashion brand founder, TV network owner, reality star, Broadway and film actor, vodka brand owner and prep school founder. In 2021, he legally changed his middle name to "Love," ushering in yet another era with a new name. What Sean "Love" Combs will do next, and how this guise will differ from his past ones, is yet to be seen. But if history is any indication, he'll be unapologetically himself. ■



NO WAY OUT
Biggie's death brought *Hell Up in Harlem* back to the drawing board. Renamed *No Way Out*, the final album was a raw and introspective document of Combs' grief.

