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"Creating A New America:" A Dialogue with Russell Simmons

Rap music mogul Russell Simmons speaks during an interview Monday, January 21, 2002, in New York. AP Photo/Chad Rachman

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Russell Simmons, the hip hop impresario, promoter and philanthropist who took hip hop music and culture from the streets of New York and made it a worldwide cultural phenomenon, has recently come further into the public eye with his memoir *Life and Def*, his new HBO show *Def Poetry*, and his increasing involvement in urban politics.

Life and Def presented an honest portrayal of Russell Simmons's life, from a youth in Hollis, Queens flirting with drugs and crime to his rise to international prominence as one of America's most powerful and prescient music moguls.

Once a lowly concert promoter in Harlem, today Simmons is the CEO of Rush Communications, a conglomerate that is one of the nation's largest black-run corporations. Rush (Simmons's nickname) includes the record label Def Jam, the management company Rush Artist Management, the clothing line Phat Farm, a movie production house, Def Pictures, television productions such as *Def Comedy Jam* and *Def Poetry*, the print and online magazines *Oneworld* and *360hiphop*, and advertising agency Rush Media Co. Simmons has also established the Rush Philanthropic Foundation, which recently sponsored a "Speak Your Peace" poetry contest on Martin Luther King Day, to educate and promote young artists from disadvantaged

backgrounds.

Simmons also recently started working with the Nation of Islam, the Urban League and the NAACP to tackle the myriad problems afflicting America's black and brown poor, seeking to bridge the rift between blacks and Jews, and continuing to battle politicians seeking to censor rap artists.

On Monday January 28, 2002, Simmons sat down for a "public dialogue" with Professor Manning Marable, Director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University. Marable, an activist-academic, is working closely with Simmons on building the first hip hop think tank at Columbia to bring together hip hop practitioners, scholars and activists to explore issues of artistic freedom and censorship, the criminal justice system and reparations.

I was on hand to chronicle their conversation.

Manning Marable: Hip hop truly represents the voice of a new America. If there's a culture that captures the cultural pulse and vitality that exists in America and the global context, that culture is hip hop. Hip hop is creating a new America, continuously defining and refining the politics of America. The issues Russell defined a quarter of a century ago are coming into fruition now. Your book *Life and Def* is a very candid and honest book. You describe how you were involved in gangs and drugs. You describe one violent incident in 1973, at the age of 16, on 203rd Street in Hollis, Queens. Why did you choose to tell all this?

Russell Simmons: I'm honest about my youth because it's the same struggle that kids go through today. I want people to know I had the same beginnings and opportunity for change. I'm concerned about the suffering in our communities, our young black kids in ghettos are lost. I was lost. But I decided to start selling concerts instead of drugs. I hope they see themselves in my book — and in my music. Most parents are offended by my music, but the youth relate to it.

You're a very deft — or should I say def — user of the media. Run-DMC is without doubt the first rap group you worked with that made it into the mainstream. To what do you attribute their impact and success?

Run-DMC were successful because of their honesty and integrity. They did not try to be more than what they were. Other rappers were trying to escape the ghetto. Run-DMC embraced the community. While other rappers dressed like the clubs they played in, Run-DMC wore their leather outfits, shell toe Adidas and velour hats, which was the uniform of Queens. When Run-DMC played on MTV, it was the first black act on MTV — before that was Michael Jackson, and his nose was broken and his hair was straightened.

That was the beginning of the dialogue between the trailer parks and the projects, Beverly Hills and the Bronx.

Unlike other labels, you gave artists opportunities to share in their records' success. How was Def Jam different from other labels when dealing with artists?

Rappers used to take any deal they got because they had no choice.

Grandmaster Flash used to live in an apartment with no electricity — he used to get electricity through an extension cord connected to the electric post on the street. He signed with the first label that gave him an apartment and a limo.

If you want to protect your relationship with people, you have to be fair. I try to incentivize everybody. I want everyone to want to come to work.... In the beginning there was no vehicle for promoting style and ideas — only music. So we started Def Jam to develop and protect the artists. It took us forever to put Kurtis Blow's face on a record, and it was important for his fans. Video has been tremendously important in selling the lifestyle that goes with hip hop. Jazz and blues could never have sold lifestyles. Video captures the essence of the artist. Run-DMC was on *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair* ten times before they were on *Emerge* or *Ebony*.

Rap got on BET late. Adults didn't want it. Rap was too close to home for black adults, so they denied it — they denied that they were rebellious, that they had that energy, that fire.... Older [black] executives tried to step on it, stomp it out. Dick Clark was ecstatic with Run-DMC. But on *Soul Train* Don Cornelius told Kurtis Blow, "Ya know, I really can't stand this! But it's a hit, so here it is."

In your book, in a section titled "The Golden Age of Hip Hop," you speak of Public Enemy as a very powerful act. I know *Fear of a Black Planet* frames a political economic analysis of the African community in the 1980s — the prison-industrial complex, depressive social policy and so on. The youth looked to Public Enemy as a voice of discontent. What made PE so successful?

Honesty is what makes rap groups successful. Tupac on one day spoke of his momma, and the next day of booty. DMX says he's sustained by God, but he also speaks often of the devil. Chuck D was honest; he was focused and direct, he bordered on preaching — "my uzi is my mouth, my bullets are my words." PE created the climate for the film *Malcolm X*, removing the gold chains and putting on the Africa medallions.

How do you deal with racism in the music business?

I don't use the word "racism" often. Racism exists, it's damaging, it's difficult. And many people who are racist don't even know it. Part of our struggle is to take our advantage of that — move that racism around, use it for your business, your objectives. Black culture is the most influential culture in America. Black youth culture drives American culture. We influence the America mainstream, its ideas, fashions, trends. Eighty percent of our music is sold to non-blacks. To find out what's cultural, they come to us. A reason to be optimistic is that young people are watching MTV every day, it's programming them. And domestic change is driven by hip hop.

But we have to build alliances, integrate. For example, we have no black film producers. To have a black producer we have to build alliances — we can't handcuff ourselves. Eddie [Murphy] and Chris Tucker are producers because they're actors. Driving around in a golf cart with no talent is still a job for a white man! We need more black entrepreneurs. Grand Puba approved Tommy Hilfiger, who made \$2 billion and then he made Tommy Jeans — which was his "nigga company," it was damaging, exploitative, exploiting smart people. That's when we made Phat Farm.

You have worked with Minister Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, and tried

to improve black-Jewish relations. Talk to us about your relationship with Minister Farrakhan.

I grew up on Farrakhan. Where I grew up, there were dope fiends and black Muslims. If Muslims came by, you stood up straight. But [you could say] I'm also a Jew — I've worked with Jews, orthodox Jews, the Syrian Jewish community. Our young hip hop kids are the next Jews. Jews partly gave us the entrepreneurial spirit.

I work hard at bringing blacks and Jews together. Next month we are holding [The Nation of Islam's] Savior's Day, where we will bring together black and Jewish leaders. The concept is "Healing the Wounds [to Bring About a Universal Family]." I want to take Farrakhan to the Museum of Tolerance, but the rabbi said he's not welcome. S--t, it's the Museum of Tolerance! Farrakhan can bring a million people to Washington. He's not Jesse, he's not Al; he's the biggest, most powerful black leader. He's the conscience of black leaders. Dismissing him is not right.

You have been involved in politics recently - the Hip Hop Summit, the "Rap the Vote" initiative, backing Gore and Lieberman and Andrew Cuomo. You gave money to the Gore-Lieberman campaign....

No. I did not give them money. I raised questions, promoted issues but did not give Gore money. I'm not one of those black people happy with Bush. A lot of what we worked for is at risk. I work hard to engage young people, poor people, black and brown people. I was disappointed with Gore too — he never mentioned black, poor, or young people after the Democratic Convention. With "Rap the Vote," we are working with the NAACP and The Urban League to bring young people to vote. Young people have a lot to say about the suffering of the black and poor. Young people have more compassion, can push for progressive agendas. Puffy, Master P, Roc-A-fella all have foundations with the finances and the infrastructure, but have no leaders. The civil rights leaders have the finances and infrastructure but don't do s--t. We are constantly working to connect the old civil rights leaders with young creative people.

To the politicians and adults offended by hip hop's language, I quote Ben Chavis, who says, "I'm offended by the poverty and conditions of the ghetto, not young people's language." I don't care about politics, I care about poor people. And yes, in the New York gubernatorial race, I backed Andrew Cuomo and not Carl McCall. I didn't support McCall just because he's black — he's a nice man, well-spoken, he represents us well. But I supported Cuomo because he was the only white speaker at the Redeem the Dream March on Washington. McCall — for 35 years — has never been with angry black people marching anywhere.

You have become very interested in spirituality and yoga. What role does spirituality play in your life?

I spent the first 40 years of life consuming, getting. But after you get that third Rolls Royce, what do you do? You drive it, park it, and then you're like, "That's it?" For real, that third Rolls Royce is a bitch! In the past few years, I've enjoyed giving. I love doing it. I like yoga because it quiets the noise in your head and helps you reach your higher self. I'm bringing the Dalai Lama on April 18th to play at the Apollo — well not to play, to perform. We're building mentorship programs, a hip hop think tank, national literacy programs, hip hop summits. We're even doing conflict resolution. At Savior's Day, we're bringing gang leaders together. I love rap today as it is, but I have greater aspirations for it.

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