

Deconstructing DIDDY

BY ADRIENNE SAMUELS GIBBS PHOTOGRAPHY BY RANDEE ST. NICHOLAS
Sean Combs gives EBONY a glimpse of his hectic lifestyle
and a listen to the music erupting from his head

DIDDY DOESN'T SLEEP.

Anyone who follows him on Twitter suspects this. Because seriously, you can't film a movie, produce several TV shows, market fragrances, run a clothing label, promote a vodka, help raise six children, oversee a record label, write a hit album and send meaningful tweets about each of these endeavors at regular intervals—2 a.m., 4 a.m., noon, 3:15 p.m., 8 p.m., 10 p.m. and midnight—without skipping some z's. Friends, family and employees often discuss Diddy's quick, fast and always awake lifestyle. Still, it's hard to grasp his Energizer Bunnyness until you're in the Diddy-sphere and, therefore, subject to the impresario's deliberate decision to ignore the passage of time. He doesn't sleep, so why should you?

"I don't know, I get maybe three to four hours [of sleep] a day," says Sean "Diddy" Combs, 39, stretching into the leather seat of a black truck speeding to take him to a Los Angeles movie theater where, hopefully, tickets await the Combs entourage. It's opening weekend for a much-anticipated blockbuster and Christian Combs, who at 11 is Diddy's Mini-Me, wants to see the film. A pint-sized best friend tags along, as do the bodyguard, two personal assistants and a music-producing friend.

The crew goes up an escalator, walks down a hall, passes





PHOTOGRAPHED EXCLUSIVELY FOR EBONY BY RANDEE ST. NICHOLAS AT LACY STREET PRODUCTION CENTER IN LOS ANGELES. STYLIST: DEREK S. ROOHE. BARBER: CURTIS SMITH. MAKEUP ARTIST: REA ANN SILVA. ART DIRECTOR: WALTER BARNETT. SET CONSTRUCTION: BILL HORNBERY OF COMPANY, INC. PRODUCED BY HARRIETTE GOLE AND DIDLEY M. BROOKS. PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE: DARIN HOLT AND CHEY BELL. PAGE 70: EARRINGS: LOREE RODKIN; WHITE TEE: SEAN JOHN; JEANS: CURRENT ELLIOT; GOLD BRACELET: LOREE RODKIN. THIS PAGE: EARRINGS: LOREE RODKIN; LEATHER JACKET AND GRAPHIC TEE: ALEXANDER MCOQUEEN; JEANS: PRPS.

several high-end stores and walks through a marble courtyard. Diddy slows for no one. He holds Christian's hand, being sure not to lose the boy in the whirling dervish of movement. Finally, they arrive in front of the theater. No one is out of breath, yet the marathon has left onlookers in a daze. Adults of every hue and heritage point and whisper: "That's P. Diddy! That's Puffy."

As this point, there is no sign of paparazzi. But the fans are circling and gathering, working up the courage to ask for a photo or an autograph. The courageous one is a 6'3" Black man wearing jeans and a tight long-sleeved shirt. He's moderately muscular. Bald.

"Puff? Puffy?" he says, edging into the inner circle, "I just want to invite you to my church, man. I'm a pastor, and I'd love for you to come share in our worship." The man hands Diddy a business card. Diddy accepts it. Says "thanks." But the pastor won't go away. He's still talking. And talking. Finally, Diddy says, "I got it, man. Thank you." The pastor leaves, happy.

An assistant appears with some very bad news. The 6:30 p.m. show is sold out. Well, someone asks, what about the 7:30 p.m. show? Before an answer is found, Christian tugs at his dad's hand. He's hungry. "OK," says daddy Diddy. "Where do you want to eat?"

Someone mentions Houston's, a steak-and-potatoes kind of place. So away the entourage goes. The body-guard parts the waters. Minutes later, the entourage arrives at the restaurant. An assistant finds the manager. But now Christian wants food from Roscoe's House of Chicken and Waffles. An assistant jets off to buy the famous fried fowl, extra-cheesy grits, greens and cinnamon-tinged waffles. Time to move. Buh-bye, Houston's.

Next stop? The West Hollywood Hills, where Diddy is living (and filming reality shows) in a four-story house with four pools and a stunning view of Los Angeles. Food tastes better there, anyway.

En route to Diddy's house, the book *Outliers: The Story of Success* comes up in conversation. An oversimplified explanation of Malcolm Gladwell's best-seller would be to say that folks such as Chopin, Bill Gates and Diddy are examples of those who made it big because of great talent, tremendous opportunity, impeccable timing and at least 10,000 hours spent honing their craft. When did Diddy reach his 10,000 hours? The big guy in the front seat answers first, with a chuckle, "He's got well over 10,000 hours."

Diddy is interested in the ideas behind *Outliers*, so he looks up from his cell phone. He's been texting, or perhaps tweeting. "Hmmp. Ask anybody in here," he says, gesturing toward the guys in the back seat. "You get out of it what you put into it." He pauses. "It's just my gift and my curse. I was just having a conversation with my man Jay [Electronica] right there and I was like, 'Yo, I wanna also enjoy my life.' But this is my life right here. I'm squeezing in some time right now with my son to go to the movies, and I gotta go back to the studio at 9:30. Tomorrow, I'm squeezing in

church, but I got another photo shoot and then I got studio—two sessions—and that's even on a Sunday. I gotta be up at five in the morning to shoot the movie."

Such busyness is normal for a man whose businesses make hundreds of millions in sales a year. The hectic pace started two decades ago with his work at New York's now-defunct Uptown Records. There, he studied under legendary hip-hop CEO Andre Harrell and rapper Heavy D while helping to cement the careers of Jodeci, the Notorious B.I.G. and Mary J. Blige. The flurry continued when he left Uptown, hooked up with legendary music industry executive Clive Davis and created Bad Boy Records.

The business grew with Sean Jean clothing, several fragrances, partial ownership in Ciroc vodka, a Diddy YouTube channel, the executive production of shows such as MTV's *Run's House*, acting on Broadway in *A Raisin in the Sun* and playing the role of Sergio in the upcoming Judd Apatow-produced flick *Get Him to the Greek*. Despite this stress, he does not appear to be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of stuff there is yet to do. He also can't explain how he does it all.

Says Diddy: "It's like you're looking at Michael Jordan or Muhammad Ali. But not just on that point of them being great, it's just them having that natural talent for what they did. I was destined to produce music. There are things that people don't hear that I hear. Ask [people who are] really great at something. They see it in their heads before it happens."

Intuition and drive is why Diddy is Diddy.

"I'll tell you the first thing he did to stand out when he started interning for me," says Harrell, 49, of New York City. "I told him to go to [a] studio to get a tape and bring it to me. When he returned, his tie was behind his back.

My man ran there and back! That made me know this kid was different. That's 20 blocks. And it was in the summertime."

Harrell still mentors his student. He was one of the first people Diddy solicited to hear the tracks from his long-anticipated new album, *Last Train to Paris*.

A press release calls it "electro-hip hop soul funk." Diddy calls it "train music." It sounds like a sexual mix of world music, hip-hop, Chicago house, British pop and underground techno with a heavy dose of West African bass and Sade-esque vocal treatment. Some of it is as different from what's on the radio now as "Mo Money, Mo Problems" differed from the soundtrack of 1997.

Back then, Diddy shocked the world with his big sound, zany videos and bling lifestyle. For this sixth album, he's taking fans around the world musically. A mini-movie complements the album's story, which focuses on a beautiful young woman whom Diddy is hoping to woo by persuading her to ride with him on the last train to Paris.

The album spins pop culture forward, including the look of the newly introduced trio Dirty Money, Diddy, Dawn Richard from the now-defunct group Danity Kane and songwriter Kalenna Harper. The girls sport short, funky hair instead of long weaves. Their modern look is part of Diddy's strategic reinvention process.

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“I, I, I, think the longer you’re in this game, the less urgent your presence is if you don’t know how to reinvent yourself,” says Diddy, who stutters slightly. “For me, it’s important to make sure that I gave what I never gave before. The consumer always wants something new and fresh. So you have to give ’em a new fresh you.”

Friend and fellow rapper Heavy D knows this drill.

“He’s probably not the most-liked person,” says Heavy D, whose reggae album, *Vibes*, was nominated for a 2009 Grammy. “But if you want to define his position, it’s that he’s P.T. Barnum. You just have to accept the circus. Now, can you be great at all of it? I dunno, that remains to be seen. But I think his greatness is in marketing and business. . . . Ask him if he thinks he’s the best rapper and the answer will be, ‘hell, no.’ [But] he knows how to make something big.”

Diddy acknowledges that some people might not like the music, hence the “get on or get off” slogan accompanying the November album launch. This is a worthwhile risk, advises Harrell.

“We’re in the era of Kanye West, individuality, slim jeans and a healthier way to be,” says Harrell. “Now it’s the Obama generation and you can’t just be tough, you gotta be smart. This opens [music] up to different types of people and fashion that are smart. When you make the *Last Train to Paris* and it’s part of the electronic edge sound mixed with hip-hop beats, it opens him up to different kinds of factions. Everything is slim and modern.”

A STUDIO MOMENT

Everyone wants to know whether the Diddy-sphere is just like how it’s portrayed on *Making the Band*. Let’s take a look, backtracking to 12:15 a.m. Saturday.

Diddy has finally arrived at L.A.’s Chalice Recording Studios to put the finishing touches on a song that might make the final cut. Prior to his arrival, Diddy’s crew, including all the designers, stylists and assistants who grace his various reality shows, converge so they can select the clothing he’ll be wearing for the EBONY cover shoot.

They argue over two racks shouldering more than \$100,000 in designer clothes and \$1 million in jewelry and shoes. No, he won’t wear that because he already did something similar in 2004. No, the other combination is too close to 2Pac’s VIBE cover. Ah, but a dark, hooded, weirdly shaped pullover gets a tentative go-ahead. It’s different. Very odd. But is it sexy?

Stylist Derek Roche, a skinny White guy from North Carolina, thinks Diddy will go for it. But he shakes his head at the suggestion of worn-in jeans. “We did a rugged jeans moment in the video. I’m not sure if this is a rugged moment anymore.”

Clutching a Red Bull, Diddy peruses the clothes. Nods. Kisses everyone. He doesn’t really shake hands. He’s wearing black. He’s as tall as you would expect, as big as you would expect, as chocolate as you would expect. His presence doesn’t scream “I am a hip-hop icon, so you better recognize.” His energy is subdued. He observes everything. Misses nothing.

“I want to be fashion forward—modern,” he says, looking at the clothes lined up on the hallway floor. He motions at a piece. “That? Done that already.”

He also says no to bad ideas, even if they’d make a ton of money.

Last year, someone came to him with an idea for the super exclusive hair care product of the century! The Sean Combs comb!!!

Diddy didn’t do that.

At 12:35 a.m., he enters a music studio where a sound engineer plays an animalistic house beat. A comfy couch is against one wall and



strobe lights cross the ceiling. *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* is on the big-screen TV. The rest of the entourage appears: Jay Electronica. Dawn. Kalenna. A big-boned vocalist named James. All four could appear on *Last Train to Paris*, so all four are needed at this session.

As the artists file into the room, Diddy starts tweaking the music. He needs vocals. Now.

James drops his bag and goes into a sound booth and starts humming. It doesn’t sound as if he’s singing actual words, but whatever he’s doing becomes an underlying melody to the beat. Someone cuts the lights. Six candles burn in the darkness.

The bass thumps so hard that a Coke can vibrates. A guy leaves the room to fetch earplugs for anyone who wants them. Otherwise, all eyes are on Diddy as he directs James for the better part of an hour. When the melody is complete, it is looped throughout the song. It is finished. It’s also 2:15 a.m.

Ten hours later, Diddy arrives at the EBONY photo shoot with his usual whirlwind of assistants and friends. Employees call him Mr. Combs, but reporters, friends and fans can call him by any of his names: Puff, Puffy, P. Diddy, Diddy, Sean.

He wears most of the clothes selected from the night before, even the pullover shirt as he poses in a dark alley on the same set used for the movie *Saw*. A groomer cuts his hair, brushes his eyebrows, adjusts his belt. His shirt is undone, his shoes are just so. He takes 100—no, 200—pictures.

This photo shoot highlights yet another of his passions: fashion. He started out as an artist development executive, a stylist and a dancer while with Uptown. He then took the hip-hop fashion showcased in his videos and sold it to the masses. Kids who don’t even listen to rap wear Sean Jean clothes, which experts say bring in nearly \$500 million a year in retail sales.

Sean Jean, too, has changed with the times. Big and baggy isn’t as popular now as slim and thin. T-shirts sell alongside button-down shirts. Women get hand-stitched trench coats in primary colors while the fellas are offered dark wash jeans they can wear even to church.



And let's not forget about the high-end suits and ties, which helped Diddy win the Council of Fashion Designers of America award for Menswear Designer of the Year in 2004.

Diddy did all this with fashion, and then with fragrance, to prove a point, he says, not to make money.

"I'm not even trying to be influential," he says, happy to win the highest honor awarded this year in the Men's Luxe category for his I Am King scent from the Fragrance Foundation. "I go into something to actually change the rules, you know what I'm saying? There were no Black fragrances; there was no Usher having a fragrance back then and that rule had to be changed. I had to go to the Supreme Court and rewrite that motherfucker. It was like, 'No Negroes allowed in fragrance.' That was the rule. So I'm getting into it and I'm opening up the doors."

He goes on.

"I don't think I'd have been able to get this far if that was my motivation, just money," he says. "I wouldn't be able to work all of those hours. It has to be something bigger, you know? Something bigger than me."

Now back to that order of chicken and waffles. At around 8:00 that evening, everyone arrives at Diddy's Hollywood Hills home. The crew is famished and awaiting the Roscoe's chicken now that EBONY's cover shoot is hours behind them and they missed both a meal and a movie. Diddy disappears on the first floor, or maybe the third floor, to tend to business. The kids settle in front of a 50-inch

high-definition TV. A maid folds Diddy's whites. A fight is on HBO. A few guys are watching it.

When the food arrives, Diddy piles everything on his plate. He doesn't talk when he eats, preferring instead to watch the end of the fight. An assistant runs over with a placemat and drink recommendations: Lemonade? Water? Half-and-half?

The kids get the half-and-half. Grown folks get lemonade. There's no sign of Ciroc, but it's likely here somewhere, tucked away in this pristinely clean environment. Fight's over. Diddy runs downstairs to the studio inside the house. Bass thumps through the floors.

An hour later, he's ready to roll. It's back into the car with the kids, the assistants, the guard, the musicians. The crew heads to the Boom Boom Room. The kids crack jokes in the back. Diddy gets restless.

The driver makes a wrong turn and just a glint of the television version of Mr. Combs comes out. "Where you going? What are you doing? You missed it." The driver tells Diddy that he's going to make a U-turn, but Diddy is aggravated. Earlier today they missed the movie because they didn't arrive early enough. And now, he's paying for studio time and he's got to be there by 9:30 p.m. How did the driver miss the turn in the first place?

There is an uncomfortable silence as the truck finally stops in front of the studio, yet another nondescript building with a plain exterior. Diddy's clearly moved on to music mode. He's tired of talking.

But then, at 5:48 a.m. Sunday morning, what's that? A tweet.

It's classic Diddy. "I'm still in this studio!!! And I'm not coming out! Sweet dreams, people! I'll still be workin' when you get up! I'm soooo locked in!!!!" □