

CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

BY KERRY DOOLE

PUFF DADDY

The spin doctors have been working overtime with smooth operator sean 'puffy' combs, and it has started to pay off. combs, or puff daddy, to use his current stage name, is blowing up big time, chart wise. His debut solo release, *NO WAY OUT*, has just gone straight to number one, following the mega-hit status of its single, 'I'LL BE MISSING YOU'.



THIS IS THE ONLY KIND OF HIT PUFFY WANTS THESE DAYS.

He is still reeling from the March shooting death of close friend the Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace aka Biggie Smalls), the gangsta rapper who rocketed to stardom under the direction of Combs and his fast-rising label, Bad Boy. The earlier murder of rival gangsta superstar, Tupac Shakur, sparked rumours of a lethal feud between East Coast and West Coast rappers, and rival labels Bad Boy and Death Row (headed by Marion 'Suge' Knight, now back in prison). Combs name kept surfacing with the swirling rumours, and with federal heat descending upon him and his label, it is definitely time to tone down the rhetoric.

It is, then, a kinder, gentler Combs in the limelight now. A recent *Rolling Stone* cover story on the producer/rapper/record company mogul profiled his shock at the violence that has engulfed rap, and on this promotional visit to Toronto Puffy decried the situation.

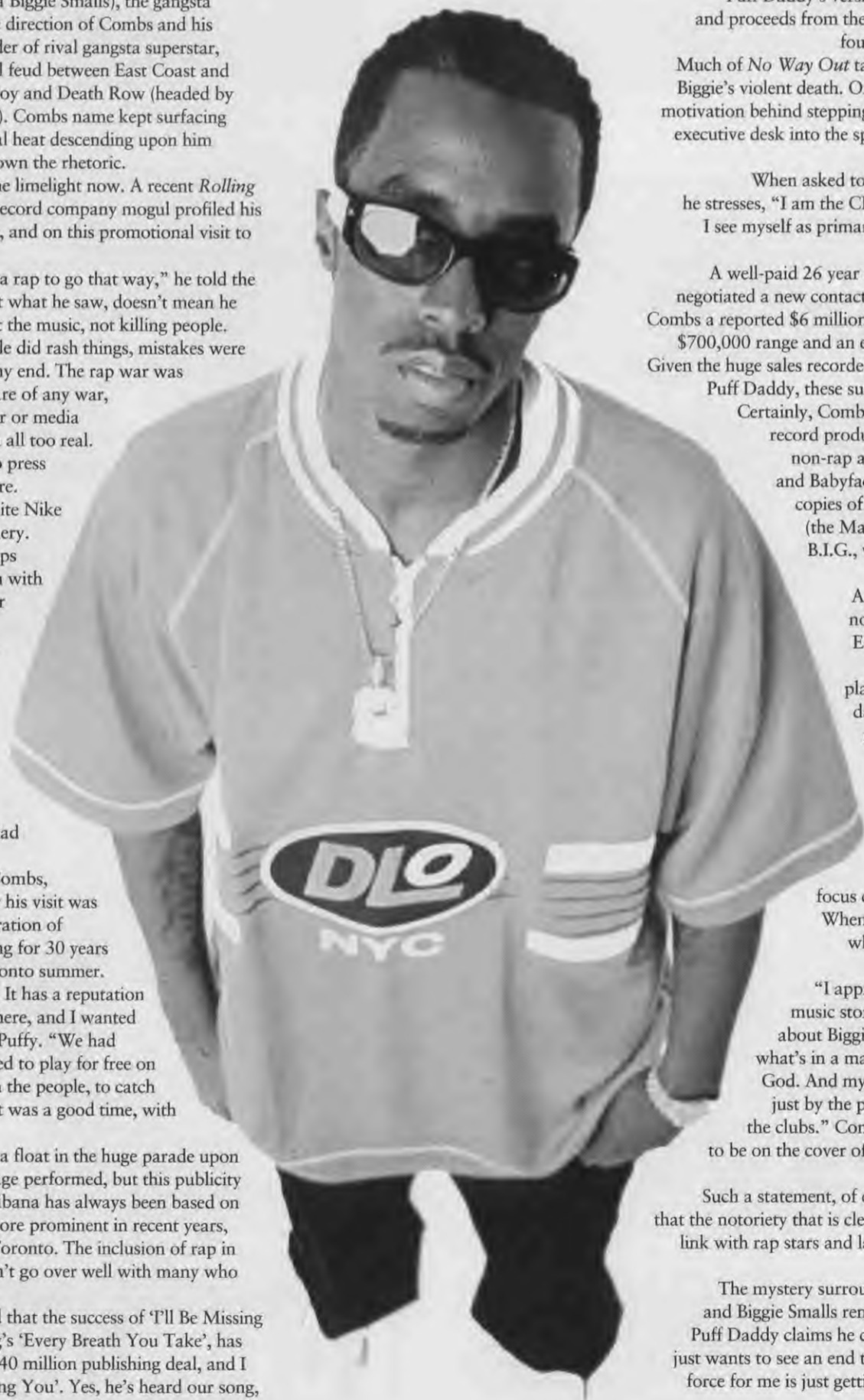
"I don't think anybody intended gangsta rap to go that way," he told the *Toronto Star*. "Because Biggie wrote about what he saw, doesn't mean he had to die that way. It's always been about the music, not killing people. There's a lot of young guys involved, people did rash things, mistakes were made. There was no premeditation from my end. The rap war was a media invention. I personally wasn't aware of any war, or directed any action in it." For a non-war or media invention, though, the casualties have been all too real.

The Combs who appeared at a Toronto press conference was far from a threatening figure. He sported a blue Phillies baseball cap, white Nike shirt, and inevitable shades and gold jewellery. Very politely, he posed for pictures with reps from his record label as they presented him with six different Canadian platinum awards for singles and albums he'd produced and recorded. The Puff Daddy and the Family, *No Way Out* album had entered the national chart at Number One the same week of his visit. Joining Combs at the conference was one of his artists, rapper Mase (Puffy produced his 'Can't Nobody Hold Me Down', a chart topping single earlier this year that appears on *No Way Out*), and an intimidating-looking black-clad bodyguard who remained close at hand.

Controversy always seems to shadow Combs, however. He explained that one reason for his visit was to check out Caribana. This huge celebration of Caribbean music and culture has been going for 30 years now, and is an annual highlight of the Toronto summer. "I've heard about Caribana over the years. It has a reputation for good music and a harmonious atmosphere, and I wanted to make sure I could see it this year," said Puffy. "We had chances to play in the clubs here but decided to play for free on a float in the parade. I just came to be with the people, to catch the vibe of what's going on there. I heard it was a good time, with a lot of love in the air."

His record company (BMG) purchased a float in the huge parade upon which Puff Daddy and some of his entourage performed, but this publicity stunt met with criticism. The music of Caribana has always been based on soca and calypso, with reggae becoming more prominent in recent years, reflecting a large Jamaican population in Toronto. The inclusion of rap in the form of a notorious American star didn't go over well with many who saw it as a dilution of the Caribana ideal.

At the press conference, Combs claimed that the success of 'I'll Be Missing You', a song that extensively samples Sting's 'Every Breath You Take', has helped out Sting. "Last week he signed a \$40 million publishing deal, and I think that's partly due to the fact of 'Missing You'. Yes, he's heard our song, and we're planning to do some dates and make a record together.



Our song is just his second American Number One (the first being the original of 'Every Breath You Take')."

Puff Daddy's version, of course, is a tribute to Biggie, and proceeds from the smash single are going to a special foundation established in his memory.

Much of *No Way Out* takes on new meaning in the light of Biggie's violent death. Originally, however, Puffy claims the motivation behind stepping out from his producer's chair and executive desk into the spotlight was "to just have some fun and entertain people."

When asked to define his current career priorities, he stresses, "I am the CEO and Chairman of Bad Boy first.

I see myself as primarily the coach, but with Puff Daddy I am a player/coach right now!"

A well-paid 26 year old coach at that. Bad Boy recently negotiated a new contract with parent label Arista, that gave Combs a reported \$6 million signing bonus, yearly salary in the \$700,000 range and an estimated \$50 million line of credit. Given the huge sales recorded by the Notorious B.I.G. and now Puff Daddy, these sums may prove a bargain for Arista.

Certainly, Combs seems to have a Midas touch as a record producer. He has produced hits for such non-rap acts as New Edition, Mariah Carey, and Babyface, and has sold well over 5 million copies of three Number One singles in 1997 (the Mase track, 'Hypnotize' by Notorious B.I.G., which he co-wrote with the rapper, and now 'I'll Be Missing You').

As he pleaded to *Rolling Stone*, "I'm not that guy [the centre of the deadly East-West rap war]. I'm the guy that every record I produced went platinum. I'm the guy that makes you dance. I'm the guy that just wants to make good music. And I'm the guy that wants to make history for my race and wants to be a leader of my race."

In that extensive cover story, there were only about two paragraphs on his music, with the focus clearly being on the violence in rap. When this writer asked Puffy in Toronto whether that emphasis bothered him, he claimed it hadn't.

"I appreciate that they saw it as not just a music story and that people wanted to know about Biggie. As a person, I can't be judged by what's in a magazine. I can only be judged by my God. And my music can't be judged in the press, just by the people who buy it and dance to it in the clubs." Combs then added that he was "proud to be on the cover of *Rolling Stone* as a black man who is not dead or in jail."

Such a statement, of course, conveniently avoids the fact that the notoriety that is clearly behind that honour is his close link with rap stars and label executives who are either dead or in jail!

The mystery surrounding the killings of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls remains unresolved, and Sean Combs/Puff Daddy claims he can shed no light on either. Now he just wants to see an end to that violent era. "The motivating force for me is just getting my music out there and making sure people can dance to it."