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# Russell Simmons Biography

**October 4, 1957 • New York New York**

Business executive



Simmons, Russell.

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Russell Simmons heads an empire built by rap music. As cofounder of the pioneering record label Def Jam in the 1980s, he helped launch the careers of a number of important artists, such as Run-D.M.C. and the Beastie Boys. His empire includes a clothing line and even an energy drink, but it is his social activism that has caused some to say he might one day make an ideal mayor of New York City. Simmons is often described as the man who made black urban culture a part of the mainstream, but *Newsweek*'s Johnnie L. Roberts noted that "in the view of many, he is now emerging as potentially the most credible and effective leader of the post-civilrights generation."

## (Neighborhood was on borderline of rough

Russell Simmons was born in 1957 in Jamaica, a part of Queens in outer New York City. He was the second of three sons in his family, and both his parents were graduates of Howard University in Washington, D.C. His father was a teacher who eventually became a professor of black history at Pace University, and his mother worked for the New York City Parks Department as a recreation director.

The Simmons family moved to the Hollis neighborhood of Queens when Simmons was eight years old. Their home was near a corner that was a known meeting place for drug users and their dealers. His older brother, Danny, was pulled in by the scene and became a heroin addict. Russell seemed headed down a similarly sad road. He began selling marijuana while still in middle school, and for a time was a member of a local gang called the Seven Immortals. When he was sixteen, he shot at someone who tried to rob him. He was arrested twice on other charges and received a term of probation. Danny, however, wound up serving a stint in jail for drug use.

"Black culture or urban culture is for all people who buy into it and not just for black people. Whether it's film or TV or records or advertising or clothing, I don't accept the box that they put me in."

In 1975, when he was eighteen, Simmons began taking classes at Manhattan City College. He found a job at an Orange Julius outlet in Greenwich Village, but at some point he also financed his club-going lifestyle by selling fake cocaine. If he was caught by the police, he reasoned, he was not doing anything illegal, but Simmons of course faced a bigger threat from angry customers. During these years he hung out at the dance clubs of New York's outer boroughs, where the music was predominantly disco. But then a new movement filtered in, one that had come out of the roughest Bronx and Harlem neighborhoods: performers sang their own rhymes over a classic track, such as "Flashlight" from George Clinton (1941–). Simmons was at one such club in 1977 when he saw how wild the crowd went over one song from an early rapper and DJ named Eddie Cheeba, and he decided that this was the sound of the future.

His future, in particular. Simmons quit the fake drug business, and eventually left City College just a few credits short of a degree in sociology. He began promoting concerts, and then formed his own management company for artists, which he called Rush Management, after his childhood nickname. Some of the first rap songs ever played on radio were from his acts, including "Christmas Rappin'" from Kurtis Blow (1959–). He also managed Whodini, but it was the group that his teenaged brother, Joey (1964–), joined back in Hollis that put Simmons and his company on the map.

## (Krush Groove

The 1985 film *Krush Groove* was loosely based on Russell Simmons's life up until that point. It featured an array of top music acts from the era, from Run-D.M.C. and the Beastie Boys to LL Cool J and a young Bobby Brown when he was still a member of New Edition. It was directed by Michael Schultz (1938–), who made two earlier cinematic classics of African American urban life, *Cooley High* and *Car Wash*. Simmons was one of the film's producers.

Two decades after its release, *Krush Groove* has become a cult classic, a snapshot of the early days of rap music when cultural critics and record company executives predicted the style was simply a fad. A then-unknown actor named Blair Underwood (1964–) was cast in the role of New York City music promoter Russell Walker, owner of the label Krush Groove. One of his acts has a surefire hit, but Walker does not have the funds to press the records, and enters into a dangerous financial arrangement with local drug dealers and loan sharks. He also battles with one of his stars over another artist, Sheila E. (1957–), whom both want to date. The plot of the movie, however, was beside the point: Simmons wanted to showcase the array of young talent emerging from New York's black music scene, and depict its vibrancy, too.

## (Launched rap's first serious label

Joey was the "Run" in Run-D.M.C., which had a spare, hardcore style of rapping that was also full of clever humor and incisive social commentary. The group's first single, "It's Like That," was released in 1983 and set the tone for the rest of the decade. Simmons helped make his brother's group immensely successful, especially after he teamed with a white college student from Long Island, Rick Rubin (1963–), to launch Def Jam Records in 1985. With their first office located in Rubin's dormitory room at New York University, they emerged as the first big players on the rap music scene. The label's first single was from LL Cool J (1968–), "I Need A Beat," and helped bring Simmons and Rubin a distribution deal with CBS Records.

During the mid-1980s Simmons became known for his sharp ear and ability to predict the next big thing in music. He helped bring the Beastie Boys to a wider audience, and even revived the careers of the fading rock act Aerosmith, when Run-D.M.C. covered their 1975 hit "Walk This Way." The two groups even made a video together, which became a classic of MTV's first decade on the air. As *Fast Company* writer Jennifer Reingold explained, by 2003 "the marriage of hard rock and rap seems natural, two strands of the same teenage angst and anger. But in the mid-1980s, the idea that black street kids and white suburbanites could like the same music was shocking."

Simmons went on to shepherd such performers as Will Smith (1968–), when he was still the rapper known as "Fresh Prince," as well as Public Enemy, to mainstream success. When asked by model/writer Veronica Webb in an article in *Interview* whether he had "invented" the rap genre, he said no. "I didn't invent it," he explained, "but I was the first to believe that the artist was bigger than the song. Other labels believed that artists only live record to record. I didn't have that disco mentality that you threw the artists away after the song hit." He and Rubin dissolved their business partnership in the late 1980s, but Simmons moved on to conquer audiences elsewhere. He launched Def Comedy Jam, which introduced comedians like Martin Lawrence (1965–) and Bernie Mac (1958–) in the early 1990s, and it became one of the top-rated shows on HBO. In 1992 Simmons founded Phat Fashions, a clothing line, which began growing at a rate of about thirty percent annually over the next decade.

## Expanded empire to serve community

Rush Communications became the umbrella group for all of Simmons's ventures. At one point early in the 2000s, these included an energy soda called DefCon3, a wireless phone he designed for Motorola that sold for \$549, a joint venture with a top Manhattan advertising agency, a sneaker company with his brother, and the Rush Card, a prepaid Visa debit card aimed at the forty-five million Americans who do not have checking account or access to credit cards.



**From left, rapper Eminem, Russell Simmons, Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, and Dr. Benjamin Chavis, CEO of the Hip-Hop Summit, backstage at the 2003 Detroit Hip-Hop Summit.**

AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission.

Simmons said the idea for the debit card came after someone suggested the idea of a prepaid phone card. While the pitch he heard sounded profitable, it was also a rip-off for the users. "I will turn away a deal.... Because people have dollar signs in their eyes," he told *Business Week Online* writer David Liss. "Making money is a pedestrian activity. The challenge is in creating a product or service that the world really needs."

As committed as he is to building an empire that keeps him at the top of the lists of black-owned entertainment companies in America, Simmons is also interested in moving forward on several new fronts. He launched the Def Poetry Jam, which was also carried by HBO and even became a Tony-Award-winning Broadway show in 2003, and he serves as board chair of the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network. The summits are held in various American cities, and mayors regularly appear along with special guests like Snoop Dogg (1972–). They aim to raise political awareness among young Americans, and also serve as a voter registration event. The political power that Simmons was suddenly holding brought all the major presidential hopefuls of the Democratic Party—from John Kerry (1943–) to Al Sharpton (1954–)—to his summit to discuss issues late in 2003.

## (Devotee of yoga and Deepak Chopra

Simmons sold his remaining stake in Def Jam in 1999 for \$120 million. Four years later, his empire was estimated to be bringing in sales of \$530 million annually. Much of that came from his clothing line, which he expanded with his wife, former model Kimora Lee Simmons (1975–), to include Baby Phat and Phat Farm Kids. They sold a stake in their company in early 2004 for \$140 million, in an attempt to bring it into more department and specialty stores. "When I started," he told *New York* writer Vanessa Grigoriadis in 1998, "they wanted to put me in the ethnic part of the department store. But Phat Farm's best-selling item is a pink golf sweater—it's not a grass skirt or a dashiki." Since then, Simmons has made Phat Farm competitive with such clothing lines as Polo Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger.

In his 2002 autobiography, *Life and Def: Sex, Drugs, Money and God*, Simmons recounts his business successes and the personal philosophies that keep him grounded. A vegan, he practices yoga daily and makes all his employees read *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* by Deepak Chopra (1946–) and then submit a report on the book. Some of his top executives began as interns at the company long ago. "I surround myself with people that share the same spirituality that I believe in," he told Liss. "People who are focused on living better and not just on being out for themselves. I want to be around people who aren't just money-oriented but are focused on how they can give back to the community."

Simmons enjoys a lifestyle that mirrors that of the most successful of his music legends, but it is also one that puts him in the same categories as corporate New York's biggest players. He has an office on the forty-third floor of a midtown Manhattan skyscraper, spends summer vacations in the Hamptons, and lives with his wife and two young daughters in a 35,000-square-foot mansion in Saddle River, New Jersey. He and his wife hosted a fundraiser for Hillary Clinton (1947–) during her successful bid for a New York State Senate seat in 2002, and he has also worked to overturn the harsh New York State statutes known as the Rockefeller drug laws. These date back to 1973 and the term of Governor Nelson Rockefeller (1908–1979), and force courts to give even first-time drug users long jail terms. Simmons has met with New York Governor George E. Pataki (1945–), and has traveled often to the state capital in Albany to convince legislators to replace these laws with more balanced sentencing guidelines.

Governor Pataki is just one of many high-profile New Yorkers who respect Simmons. According to *Newsweek*'s Roberts, fellow rap mogul Sean "P. Diddy" Combs (1971–) said that "Russell is raising the bar for us with our power to be responsible, not just for ourselves but for our people." Real estate mogul Donald Trump (1946–) told Reingold that "I consider him one of the great entrepreneurs out there today. He's a fabulous guy with a tremendous understanding of business."

Simmons is sometimes mentioned as a future New York mayoral candidate, but he claims to have no political ambitions—other than using his platform to raise awareness about timely issues. These range from the war in Iraq to the New York City school budget. "I'm not telling people anything that's a shock," he said in an *Inc.* interview with Rod Kurtz. "Maybe I'm telling them things they've already heard before. But maybe because of my luck and success, they believe me."

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