

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Russell Simmons

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Simmons, Russell.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Russell Simmons,
Dates:	October 22, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	Betacame SP videocassettes ()
Abstract:	Media company entrepreneur Russell Simmons (1957 -) is a cultural icon who brought hip-hop to the masses; he is founder of Def Jam Records, Def Jam Comedy, Def Jam Poetry, and of Simmons-Lathan Media Group. Simmons was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 22, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_213
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Russell Simmons' career has taken him from the streets of Queens to the heights of the music business and beyond. Starting out as a fledgling hip-hop producer, Simmons has gone on to build an empire that includes music recording and publishing, clothing, movies as well as Broadway. Simmons' name is synonymous with success, and he shows no signs of stopping.

Born in Jamaica, Queens, New York, in 1957, Simmons' parents were active in the arts and in the civil rights movement. His father, a schoolteacher, frequently wrote poetry, and his mother was a recreation director for the New York City Department of Parks and was also a painter. At the age of eight, Simmons' family moved to the Hollis neighborhood of Queens, where the adolescent Simmons became involved with drugs and joined a street gang called the Seven Immortals. His time as a gang member ended a few years later, following the murder of one of his fellow gang-members by a rival group.

In 1975, after graduating from high school, Simmons went on to attend the City College of New York in Harlem. While there, he met Rudy Toppin, who gave Simmons the nickname "Rush," and brought him into the world of music promotion and hip-hop introducing him to the sounds of Eddie Cheeba. Simmons left college during his senior year to become a full-time promoter, but no one attended his first show and he found himself broke. His father, quite angry with him, urged him to return to school, but his mother quietly gave him \$2,000. This loan held his production company, Rush Productions, afloat until Kurtis Blow, Simmons's first act made it big, first doing shows with hip-hop pioneer Grandmaster Flash and later becoming the first rap artist to get signed to a record label.

In 1983, after establishing Kurtis Blow and riding the crest of the hip-hop revolution, Simmons, his younger brother Joey, and two friends, Darryl McDaniel and Jason Mizell, formed what would become one of the most influential groups in rap history, Run-D.M.C. Unlike many other groups at the time, Run-D.M.C. maintained an

urban look and sound, rather than trying to mold themselves to the image of rock and R&B stars. This image, combined with their lyrics and beat, helped them become the first rap act to appear on MTV. In 1984, Simmons met Rick Rubin, a student at New York University and a fan of punk rock music who was heavily influenced by the hip-hop scene. Together, they partnered to form Def Jam Productions, and got the rock band Aerosmith into the studio with Run-D.M.C. to record a remix of Aerosmith's hit "Walk This Way."

CBS agreed to distribute albums produced by Def Jam in early 1985, and the next four years saw the meteoric rise of Simmons and the acts that he produced, including the Beastie Boys, L.L. Cool J, Public Enemy and Slick Rick. They produced hit after hit, including "(You Gotta) Fight for your Right (To Party)," "I Need a Beat" and "Children's Story." With the albums getting constant radio play and Def Jam's break into the predominantly rock and roll MTV, Simmons organized a series of festival tours of hip-hop acts, bringing their sounds to new audiences across the country.

Having already been labeled by the Wall Street Journal as the "mogul of rap" in 1985, Simmons decided to move into Hollywood. A semi-fictional film of his life had been featured in the film *Krush Groove* and so, Simmons, along with partner Rubin and Run-D.M.C., decided to give filmmaking a chance, and in 1988, they released *Tougher Than Leather*, a film starring Run-D.M.C. which received limited release in New York City but garnered widespread attention around the country.

In the late 1980s, Rubin left Def Jam, and the label began feeling pressure from Sony (CBS) over profits. Under threat of losing his company and best artists to Sony, Simmons made a deal with PolyGram Records in 1995.

The early 1990s saw Simmons partner with Stan Lathan, and from this collaboration came Def Comedy Jam. Simmons brought in largely unknown comics from around the country and used the show as a vehicle to help launch their careers, while at the same time expanding his own empire into television. Many of those early comedians are stars today, including Martin Lawrence, Cedric the Entertainer and Chris Tucker. Simmons also returned to filmmaking, acting as producer for Eddie Murphy's hit, *The Nutty Professor*.

In 1992, Simmons launched his own clothing and apparel line the formation of Phat Farm. Later, his wife, Kimora, expanded on the line with the creation of the women's line, Baby Phat. As part of this enterprise, he has also launched a financial enterprise with the RushCard and the Baby Phat RushCard.

Continuing to enter into new arenas, Simmons launched Def Poetry Jam, a poetry slam series on HBO, as well as Def Poetry on Broadway, which won a 2003 Tony Award for Special Theatrical Events. Recently, Simmons has entered the world of politics, forming the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, which works to promote social and economic justice among today's youth. Simmons is active in the arts community through the Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation, which he founded with his brothers Danny and Joseph, as well as getting into the beverage industry with the Russell Simmons Beverage Company and its Def Con 3 energy drink. Throughout his career, Simmons has continued to reinvent himself and to branch out into new fields, always staying true to the hip-hop roots that he holds dear. Tonight, let us salute Russell Simmons.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Russell Simmons was conducted by Cathy Hughes on October 22, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on Betacame SP videocassettes. Media company entrepreneur Russell Simmons (1957 -) is a cultural icon who brought hip-hop to the masses; he is founder of Def Jam Records, Def Jam Comedy, Def Jam Poetry, and of Simmons-Lathan Media Group.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Simmons, Russell.

Hughes, Cathy (Interviewer)

N/A (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Simmons, Russell.--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Music Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Russell Simmons, October 22, 2004. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage