Sean “Puffy” Combs-Swot Analysis Essay, Research Paper

Biography

Sean “Puffy” Combs has established himself as one of the biggest names in hip-hop (Heal). Combs a Harlem native whose father was killed when he was only 3 years old, rose from the mean streets to the top of the music business (AP wire, March 18). “It is true that he started from scratch, and I don’t think that because he was arrested, people will stop buying his albums (AP wire, March 18). Before pursuing his career as a vocalist, Combs was a business-minded Howard University student and an intern at Andre Harrell’s Uptown Records. Combs soon became the A&R representative for Uptown. He then began producing for soon to be mega-stars Mary J. Blige, Heavy D., and Jodeci to name a few. After being let go by Uptown Records (for reasons unknown to this day), Combs took his act over to Clive Davis’ Arista Records distribution team in late 1993 (who are rumored to have paid an estimated $75 million dollars to establish his own record label, Bad Boy (Heal). With the deal cemented with Arista, Sean Combs was about to embark on the greatest mission of his life. Turn Bad Boy Records from an unknown label into one of the most powerful world entertainment companies ever to be helmed by someone in their twenties.

Strengths

One only has to look at the Bad Boy roster of acts and the strong catalog to see that this is one their biggest strengths. They had early success starting in 1994 when Combs released his child hood friends album “Ready To Die”. That childhood friend was none other than Christopher Wallace a.k.a. “The Notorious B.I.G.”. B.I.G’s singles “Juicy”, “Warning”, and, “Big Poppa” took the then unknown label to new heights in the spring and summer of 1994 (Heal). Following the platinum success of Biggie and Craig Mack, other known artists clamored to have their songs graced by Combs magic touch. Artists such as New Edition, KRS-One, Mariah Carey, Lil Kim and others wanted their re-mixes done by the young entrepreneur. This being said to emphasize the power that the label had to sign other hot unknown artists. Faith Evans (now widow of B.I.G.), Total, 112, MA$E, and new artist Dream are all on the Bad Boy label. Every one of the artists has achieved gold, platinum, or multi-platinum sales. As a matter of fact “to date, all of the releases under the Bad Boy label have achieved these staggering sales figures…(AP Wire, December 5). Sales were solid for Bad Boy in 1995 and 1996, however 1997 was the year that the tiger was let loose on the hip-hop scene, and it has never been the same since. The year started off in March with what seemed to be a disaster. Chris Wallace a.k.a. “The Notorious B.I.G.” was gunned down in front of Combs outside of an industry party in L.A. What looked like a catastrophe for the label was actually a godsend. The shooting in March of 24 year-old Christopher Wallace boosted the ascent of businessman/producer Sean “Puffy” Combs, Bad Boy Records. In fact during the summer of 1997, most of the songs on the upper reaches of the music charts were either by, featuring, or about “The Notorious B.I.G.” (Cox News, Nov. 28). Combs and Wallace, joined by 19 year old prot?g? rapper MA$E, were at the top of the charts almost the entire year. Nothing prepared the label for the biggest selling single to come. Combs and R&B super group 112, together with Faith Evans recorded a tribute to Biggie entitled, “I’ll be missing you”. It was featured on Combs new album: “Puff Daddy and the Family”. Based on the 1983 hit, “Every Breath You Take” by the British pop group “The Police”, it went on to sale 3 million copies and garner Combs his first ever Grammy award (Color Blind, March 8.).

All of the Bad Boy albums that year such as Biggie Small’s “Life After Death,” Combs own record with the Family, “No Way Out,” and MA$E’s debut, “Harlem World”—offer standard gangsta topics: songs about wealth and materialism, harsh ghetto life, the threat of violence and explicit sexuality. But each one also offers the nostalgic thrill of revisiting songs from the heyday of disco and of 1980’s pop music (Cox News, Nov 28.). Such expansive borrowing has given Puffy Combs and Bad Boy a friendly, non-threatening air, allowing their raps to be cheerful boasting, rather than the nihilistic, violence-filled raps of their California-based rival, Death Row Records (Cox News, Nov. 28). Combs attained astronomical sales figures by relooping songs from a bygone era. Bad Boy Records had a very successful year in 1998. Many of their artists albums such as Faith Evans, 112’s “Room 112”, Total’s “Kima, Keisha, and Pam” were all certified gold in 1998, as well as a best of Bad Boy compilation. He was popular enough, “to add Rolling Stone cover guy to his list of lengthy credits (AP Wire, July 15.). Combs continues to be the mastermind behind the label he started.

He recently signed an unknown act from California called “Dream”. These four suburban white teen girls are his latest platinum creation. They offer a fresh sound and feel to the label that is so heavy with the stale urban fare that is prevalent in the industry. They (Dream) also are a little more parental friendly. The girls are one of the few if not only group on the Bad Boy label that does not carry the “Parental Warning” stigma. Shyne, another in Combs stable of lyrical arsonists (Jamal Barrows 21) is also set to have a huge album out this month on the Bad Boy label. That is, if the legal problems do not interfere with BMG agreeing to release the album, due to his recent court cases with Combs. Having a run in law enforcement is not always bad for a rapper.

These roots DeCurtis adds, are a reason fans identify with troubled rappers: “Those kid see Puffy and Shyne as people who know what their lives are like.” De Curtis says the trial could ironically benefit Combs, whose crossover successes as a businessman and pop star made him “seem a little soft to a hard-core him audience. This roughens his edges.”(Web Universe, p5.) Cases that Combs have been involved in, range from deaths at a college event he hosted as a beginning promoter, assault on an Interscope record executive, and lately, the shooting injuries that he stood trial for about a week ago. Although Combs has been found not guilty in the majority of these cases, they still add to his gangsta alter ego. In a statement made to reporters following his most recent case he said, “I am definitely the fault of my own image. (LA Times, March 17). “The hardest part of all of this is feeling that people have in the back of their minds, “Does he have a gun on him?””. (AP Wire, Mar. 18). This is a double-edged sword, both helping and hurting the young tycoon’s image. With all of the legal wrangling he is still surrounded by the toniest of New York scenesters. Clive Davis (of Arista record fame) is considered a close friend, mentor, and confidant. He shares living locales with the wealthiest clientele in New York. Donald Trump and Martha Stewart are rumored to never miss a party that he hosts. He started the Christopher Wallace fund in memory of “Biggie”. All of the profits from the mega hit “ I’ll be missing you”, went to the charity group headed by Big’s mother. Combs even donated his production salary to the fund. His image is still in tact and it looks like with 112 and Dream climbing the charts his star only continues to rise.

Weaknesses

Bad Boy Records, Sean Combs (its founder), and trouble with the law go hand in hand. Ever since Combs was just 21 years old he has had problems with the law. He hosted a college performance as a promoter and 9 people were killed. He is quoted about that incident in a recent paper as saying, “There is not a day that passes that I do not regret the fact that I was the promoter of this tragic event at City College. (Business Wire, Jan. 1999). I mention this to emphasize those things that he did 8 years ago still haunt him. Certainly, the trial did not represent the first time a rap star had had a highly publicized brush with the law. As head of the New York-based hip-hop empire, Bad Boy Entertainment, Combs himself had been a figure in the East Coast-vs. -West Coast feuds that allegedly led to the deaths of rappers Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. In 1994, Shakur accused Combs and B.I.G. of being involved in an attack on him. Since then, Combs and his close colleagues have been implicated in other assault cases (AP Wire, Mar. 19). As he moved into to his new homes in the influential Hamptons, he was slapped with an arrest warrant for assaulting the Steve Stoute the head of Interscope records (AP Wire, p.8). Just days ago Combs escaped his most serious case yet. He was charged with discharging a firearm in a public place, bribery, and possession of an illegal handgun. After seven weeks of intense trial, the 31-year-old entertainment baron was freed at last. All of these events are potentially a threat to his empire. The other odd thing about the ascent of the New York based Bad Boy Records, which is affiliated with the larger Arista Records, is that it has encountered criticism not so much for its tough gangsta rap lyrics as for Combs’ fondness of interloping the choruses of old pop hits (Cox News, Nov. 28.) Still, critics have attacked Combs from all sides.

Rap purists have offense at the highest level of Bad Boy’s musical interpolations, accusing Combs of being little more than a plagiarist. Others have argued that songs like “It’s all about the Benjamins” are a low point in rap materialism” (Cox News, Nov.28.) If the law and his critics weren’t gunning for him, then his fans would be next on the list. “Many (fans) felt his future before the trial as an artist and entrepreneur were in doubt.

His last CD, Forever, did not sell as well as its predecessor, and aside from his girl group Dream and 112’s recent successes, his Bad Boy label has not spawned any major upstarts recently. If in the next few months fans show a renewed interest in his career, or renewed faith in his street credibility, that may raise more troubling questions (AP Wire, Mar. 19.) All of this would be bad enough for anyone heading an organization as large as his, but there are even more weaknesses. He has lost 3 of his biggest acts, 1) Notorious B.I.G. 2) MA$E and 3) The Lox. We know what happened to Biggie. MA$E left Bad Boy to pursue a Christian solo career. The Lox in a very public statement asked for and got released from Combs’ label siting creative difference with the rapper/producer (AP Wire. Jan 11.) The German conglomerate BMG bought out their contract for 2.5 million dollars (Daily News. P. 62.) These are all things that Bad Boy and Sean Combs will have to overcome if he is to bring this once sprawling dynasty back to its 1997golden year.

Threats

No sooner did Combs finish his assault/bribery case, than another case was filed against him. His estranged wife has filed suit against the flamboyant record executive in federal court, alleging non-payment of child support.

She claimed that she did not file the case while the assault charges were being fought, so as not to taint him in the eyes of the jury. His image has suffered in the eyes of baby boomer CD buying parents. When you have the teen bubble pop offered by N ‘Sync and Britney Speers, who really needs a gun wielding, mad man as their kid’s hero. He has been compared to O.J. Simpson in recent articles. Combs was vindicated with this interview when a columnist wrote, “Unlike Simpson, however, Combs acknowledges in an interview he felt his fame, more than his race, led authorities to pursue him. Of course, it could be argued that fame ultimately worked to his advantage. “People’s inclinations for any celebrity, black or white, is they want to believe in them,” Light says (AP Wire, Mar. 19.). Combs isn’t letting jury deliberations in his weapons trial stop him from having a good time. The rap mogul and his entourage were at Radio City Music Hall, Thursday night, enjoying a concert by Grammy nominee Jill Scott and Carl Thomas, who is signed to Combs label (AP Online, Mar.16). Whether fans will remain loyal is something that SoundScan will be gauging in the coming months. Only time will tell. He does not seem to be very worried.

Napster, that evil word to the RIAA, is now evil to the Bad Boy label that is headed by the now infamous Sean “Puffy” Combs. Not only does Combs claim that Bad Boy has lost millions of dollars from illegal copied music on the site’s shareware, but he claims that the posthumous recording by B.I.G. was available on the site before it was available in stores. He did not seem to be that mad in a camera interview. His comments were one of mere disappointment. “It saddens me today to know that there are people out there who would take Biggie’s memory and rob his kids and mother of their due earnings. This was a labor of love and to all his supporters, who have illegally obtained this recording, I urge you to pay for the man’s work. (CNN news clip, Feb 16.)

Some of the same things that are weaknesses are also some of his biggest threats. You can not leave out the parent factor. When middle aged parents see night after night, a guy on camera defending why he was not the shooter, or who was the shooter, or whatever the case may be. It just does not sit well with them.

After watching in horror as Santana high school was shot up, the last thing that money conscious consumer parents want to hear about in white suburbia is GATT’s and Glocks.

Opportunities

Unlike many other hip-hop observers, the music writer Marriott sees value in Combs’ popularity. “I’m not a fan of Puffy’s music, but I see him having an enormous motivating effect on New York’s black youth. He has created an empire from his love and dedication to hip-hop. They know where he came from, and they’re beginning to feel that they can get where he’s at”.

A host of other African-American cultural entrepreneurs are now reaping some of the benefits of hip-hop capitalism (AP Wire, Mar.20.). Combs must seize what remains of his legacy and run with it. He still has one of the hottest labels. His distribution with Arista is still airtight. Dream is a run-away success with platinum sales and another single about to be released. 112 is at the top of the pop and R&B charts. Both are receiving heavy play on MTV, and this is no small feat. He still has over 100 songs that were recorded by B.I.G. in his repertoire. That alone stands to make him millions. If he can market those recordings and keep them out of the hands of pirates, who know what gold mines that could be. He has always had a genius for finding fresh new talent, he must go back to where he came from, and find that niche once again.

1) AP Wire. “Did Stoute “Puff” Up Fight Claim?” (No Date Given)

Final Ed.: 3D

2) AP Wire. “Police and Puff Daddy.” 20 Mar. 1998

3) AP Wire. “Statement by Sean Combs.” 12 Jan. 1999.

4) AP Wire. “Disc Disaster for Puffy Prot?g?.” 11 Jan. 2000.

5) AP Wire. “Rap and the End Game.” 18 Mar. 2000

6) AP Online. “Puffy Still Having a Good Time.” 16 Mar. 2001.

7) AP Wire. “Combs to be Set Free.” 19 Mar. 2001

8) DeCurtis, Mike. “Shyne to Get the Worst of the Deals.” LA Times. 19 Mar. 2001, Final Ed.: 3D

9) Entertainment Editors. “Cover to coincide with release of No Way Out.” 15 Jul. 1997.

10) Entertainment Wire. “Bad Boy Enjoys SoundScan success.” 13 Mar. 2001.

11) Finkelstein, Katherine. “Regrets: He’s had a few.” LA Times. 17 Mar. 2001.

12) Gardner, Elysa. “Combs acquittal can be read 2 ways.” USA Today. 19 Mar. 2001, Final Ed.: 8D

13) Haq, Farhan. “Bad Boy Hits the Big Time.” Cox News. 28 Nov. 1997.

14) Healy, Bridge. “Puffy Daddy the Bio.” EarthLink. 3 Apr. 1998.

15) Muwakkil, Salim. “Rap’s Dilemma.” Color Blind. 8 Mar. 1998.

16) Ogunnaike, Lola. “The School of Hard Lox.” Daily News. 18 Jan. 2001.

17) Web Universe. “The immortal Bad Boy” p.5 (No Date Given)