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DIDDY COOL

BY
JENNIFER
GRAHAM

P. DIDDY (THE FORMER PUFF DADDY) IS WEARING Sean John. His crisp white shirt, sweater vest and tailored slacks from that clothing line—which bears his former, former name—could easily be worn to, say, brunch with Ralph Lauren. Diddy calls the look “urban elegance.”

Fashion design is one of Diddy's five career successes; the others are rap artist, record executive, restaurateur and, most recently, actor. He is now gazing into a camera, trying out a sixth: talk-show host. “America, don’t adjust your dial,” he tells the 4.8 million viewers of *Live With Regis and Kelly*. “This is really happening.”

Filling in for a vacationing Regis Philbin, Diddy, 32, is a smooth morning gabber, correcting cohost Kelly Ripa on the latest rap expressions (*phat* is out; *hot* is in), swapping compliments with Willie Nelson, feeding marshmallows to a bear—and, just maybe, changing the way America views him.

“What a difference a year makes,” Diddy says a few weeks later, inside his plush tour bus at the Queens, New York, set of a music video for G. Dep (a rapper for his label, Bad Boy Entertainment). When this New York native graced TV screens over a year ago—then going by the name Puff Daddy—viewers glimpsed a disheartening rap-star stereotype: the hand-dog defendant at a criminal trial. The court case, shown constantly on the evening news, stemmed from a disastrous evening in late 1999, when a member of his entourage (the rapper Jamal “Shyne” Barrow) shot three people in a Manhattan nightclub. Puff Daddy and his then-girlfriend, Jennifer Lopez, sped away in a chauffeured SUV. But another gun was found that

With his clothing line, hit movie and, oh yes, freedom, Sean “P. Diddy” Combs is shaking off his bad-boy image and vying for mass appeal (*Live With P. Diddy and Kelly*, anyone?)

night, and the driver later testified that it was Puff Daddy's. He also accused Daddy of trying to coerce him to claim its ownership—leading to charges of gun possession and bribery. Long story short, according to Diddy, “The driver was lying.” Last March, after a protracted legal battle, a jury agreed.

As soon as his name was cleared, he dropped it. “[Puff Daddy] was in the paper for, like, two years straight,” he says. “So I was like, ‘I’m going to switch it up.’” Acquittal or not, he knew he’d been found guilty in the court of public opinion. “I don’t fault anybody for thinking that,” he says. “Like you hear about [Rep. Gary Condit]: The girl disappeared, and you jump to conclusions.”

But in the beau monde of Hollywood, people seem eager to forgive, if not forget, Diddy's past. His given name, Sean Combs, shows up in the closing credits of “Monster’s Ball,” a movie competing for several Academy Awards this year (see *Oh My Stars, It’s Oscar!*, page 14). Though not nominated, Diddy has received positive marks as a frightened inmate facing the electric chair. “He really tapped into the feel of [death row],” says the movie’s director, Marc Forster, who



adds that he's not interested in Diddy's real-life legal tangles. "When I first met him, I didn't even know about the trial. I judged him based on [his acting]."

Others are simply following that well-known tenet of show-business faith: Blessed are the notorious. "I think



sluggish compared with those of Eminem and Nelly) and more like an actor (who claims to be fielding a number of big-screen offers). "Sean Combs reinvented himself with his actions, not his name," says Tom Calderone, a senior vice president at MTV. And according to social activist Sister Souljah, who runs his charity, Daddy's House Social Programs, he's financed a host of programs for underprivileged kids. "He's always had areas in which he needed to improve," says Souljah. "But the great thing about him is, he's willing to work on those things."

P. is for pro: Diddy takes the chair with Ripa on *Live* (left); on death row in "Monster's Ball"

And while Puff Daddy enjoyed a high-profile love affair with Lopez, Diddy seems to view fame as a roadblock to romance. "It's hard for me to meet a nice, regular girl," he says. (Curiously, he describes Lopez as a "regular girl," too. "I never thought of Jennifer as famous," he says.) Although his latest single, "I Need a Girl,"

people at times want to be around something a little dangerous," says Diddy, who cohosted *The American Music Awards* in January. Laughing, he adds, "I think I kind of disappoint them." Perhaps they harbor a wistfulness for the old Puff Daddy. In the '90s, he came to prominence as a hugely successful rap artist and producer. But he also generated ink for his alleged involvement in a deadly feud between rappers on the east and west coasts. Puff Daddy had not only platinum albums (*No Way Out* in 1997, *Forever* in 1999) but also connections to the rap world's most fabled murders. His best friend, Notorious B.I.G., was shot, as was Tupac Shakur—who recorded for Daddy's bitter rival, Marion "Suge" Knight. Intrigued fans could only imagine how many times Puff Daddy had cheated death himself.

P. Diddy, on the other hand, seems less like a rapper (sales of his latest CD, last year's *The Saga Continues...*, are



features regretful lyrics about lost love, Diddy laughs when asked if the song is about Lopez. "I really can't comment on that," he says. He will only allow that "we didn't break up because of the trial."

That guarded response reveals a glimmer of his former, mysterious self. And in the literal sense, Diddy is still a daddy. He has two sons from previous relationships: 8-year-old Justin, for whom he named his Manhattan and Atlanta restaurants, and 3-year-old Christian. And while his name is gone, his ambition has certainly stuck around. "Whatever unfortunate incidents happened in my past, happened in my past," he says with conviction. "If people want to stay in the past, then I'm going to pass them by." ■

TOP: MARK HULL; BOTTOM: PHOTOJET