

Exclusive Interview With The Music Mogul: Andre Harrell

Written by Patricia Turnier

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[Andre Harrell](#) was born in Harlem in 1960. His parents were a supermarket foreman and a nurse's aide. He grew up in the housing projects of the Bronx, New York and attended Lehman College where he majored in Communications and Business Management.

His plan was to become a newscaster, but after three years he dropped out and went to work for a local radio station. This was a propitious move on his part, coming on the cusp of the emerging Hip-Hop movement which had genesis in the South Bronx in the mid-70s. A young generation was creating a new beat from those in old funk and disco records. It was the dawn of rap music. In addition to the fun and braggadocio, it was telling the story of social deprivation in America's urban communities.

Harrell became the first half of the successful hip-hop duo Dr. Jeckyll (Harrell) & Mr. Hyde (Alonzo Brown, a high school buddy). This rap duo Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde enjoyed three top 20 hits, "Genius Rap," "Fast Life," and "AM/FM."

The group was known for its corporate business image, wearing designer suits and ties during their performances. They first performed under the name "Harlem World Crew" and recorded on Tayster in 1980. In 1983, Harrell met Russell Simmons, the founder of Rush Communications, a company that launched the careers of cutting-edge black "street" artists like Run DMC, LL Cool J, and Whodini. He went to work for Rush and within two years became vice-president and general manager. Harrell quickly gained a reputation for having a "golden finger on the pulse of what's hot in the music industry." After a few years at Rush, Harrell moved on and founded Uptown Records, where he was responsible for discovering and hiring [Sean "Puffy" Combs](#). Uptown Records was created to fill a void in urban black music by holding it to a higher standard. Uptown Entertainment focused on the development of a full slate of film and television projects, many featuring Uptown recording artists. For example, it was not long before Uptown Entertainment sold a pilot to Fox Television starring Heavy D as a rapping dad.

A drama called *Flavor*, a variety/comedy show similar to *In Living Color*, and a feature film starring the soulful singers En Vogue were also soon in the works. By 1988, MCA Music Entertainment Group was courting Harrell and offered him a \$75,000 label deal. His first release under MCA, a compilation of works by then-unknown artists, was a huge success. Harrell then produced Heavy D's platinum album,

Livin' Large

and built on these successes with hit albums for Al B Sure! and Guy (1).

It was almost commonplace to see Uptown releases go gold or platinum as the enterprise became a major force in the music industry. In 1988, Mary J. Blige recorded an impromptu cover of Anita Baker's "Caught Up In the Rapture" at a recording booth in a local mall; which caught the attention of Harrell's entourage. Harrell met with Blige and in 1989 and signed her to the label. She became the company's youngest and first female artist.

Circa 1990, Andre Harrell also produced the film "Strictly Business" and its soundtrack. In 1992, MCA offered Harrell a multimedia deal which involved film and television productions. It was a seven-year, \$50 million deal to produce multimedia projects with MCA Music Entertainment Group and Universal Pictures. This astounding deal was rivaled only by those offered to megastars Michael Jackson and Madonna. The nearly unprecedented arrangement opened up Harrell's creative vistas to include film and television projects like "New York Undercover" and major motion films like "Honey" and "Strictly Business".

In 1992, Uptown Records was renamed Uptown Entertainment; its records were featured in productions for Universal Pictures and Universal Television. Uptown's musical prowess was celebrated in 1993 when Music Television (MTV) showcased its artists, such as Mary J. Blige and Jodeci, on the cable network's popular acoustic show, *Unplugged*. This was the first time the show devoted that entire time slot to artists of a single record label. The show was such a success that it was released as a video. By the end of 1994, according to

Billboard

, "Uptown ranked second among all labels for number of charted R&B singles."

In October 1995, Harrell was appointed CEO and President of Motown Records, a deal reportedly worth some \$20 million. It was an effort to update that labels image and utilize Harrell's considerable skills in spotting new talent. His new responsibilities were overseeing all of Motown's operations: marketing, publishing, creative development and sales for all of Motown's music labels and other business interests such as film and television, animations, video productions and multimedia productions. After two years at Motown, Harrell resigned because of particular challenges in supervising all of the label's operations. He decided instead

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to focus his expertise on identifying and developing new talents while supporting established ones. Harrell's entrepreneurial savvy and business acumen were reflective of his street-fighter sense of survival, his success stemmed from fierce determination. Following his tenure at Motown, Harrell formed Harrell Entertainment and returned to doing what he does best - working and consulting with new artists.

In the fall of 1998, Sean "Puffy" Combs, founder and CEO of Bad Boy Entertainment, hired Andre Harrell to take over the Chief Executive duties at the company. After a brief stint he departed Bad Boy in 2000 and created a marketing firm called NuAmerica to help big brands (such as Pepsi) target young urban consumers. In addition, he teamed up with his one-time protégé Babyface to launch NuAmerica Music, a music management company. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, Chris Albrecht of Home Box Office (HBO) Independent Productions told that Harrell's business edge was reflective of his street-fighter sense of survival.

Throughout his career, Mr. Harrell has been profiled in Magazines including *Black Enterprise*, *Vibe*, *Upscale*, *Jet*

and others. Andre Harrell's string of success continued in 2009 when he inked another major distribution deal with Atlantic Records for his newly developed Harrell Records. He had to maintain his presence and influence in the record industry searching for the next R&B superstar and struggling to stay healthy while recuperating from quadruple bypass surgery.

To conclude, Mr. Harrell credits his success to being both a rap artist and an entrepreneur. Several projects that he touched, turned into gold. He also has an eye for discovering the right people - talent and executives. Throughout his career, Harrell has worked with the entertainment elite for decades. He launched the career of Mary J. Blige, Puff Daddy, Halle Berry (who got her first starring role in "Strictly Business", produced by Harrell), Jodeci, Heavy D, Christopher Williams and so on. Andre Harrell's influence reshaped the music industry in the early 90s when he scored a number of chart-topping hits with a more 'Hip-Hop Soul' sound. From the heart throbbing sexy crooning of Al B. Sure and Christopher Williams to the Hip-Hop smooth sounds of Father MC. In 2002 he discovered a young White kid from Bel Air who sang and admired the sultry sounds of Marvin Gaye, Robin Thicke. Andre Harrell is a lifestyle entertainment mogul who uses things he observes in different trends whether it is Rock 'n' Roll, Punk Rock, Hollywood, Ghetto Fabulous, Country Hip and so on. In other words, his style can be eclectic. Andre Harrell has years of experience in the music industry primarily as an executive. Every Sunday, he can also be heard on the radio (New York's 98.7 WKRS FM) hosting his show "Champagne and Bubbles.

In 2011, after a nation-wide search, he signed the up and coming talented quartet Hamilton

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Park as the first act on his new label. One of the Harrell Records' major current projects is about finding the next soul music superstar. In this regard, Mr. Harrell set up last fall a Superstar Soul Search. It is an online and live competition to find the next big discovery in the R&B/ Soul music scene. The winner will be announced January 10th 2012. We spoke to Andre Harrell last fall. Here he talks about this contest and he shared with us his professional journey.

[As of January 10th 2012, the winner of the contest is Guy Furious: <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/19684189>]

P.T. Growing up, you were inspired by whom musically? In addition, how old were you when you realized that you had a passion for music and wanted to be part of the industry?

A.H. I was inspired by Marvin Gaye, Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, Barry White, the Isley Brothers and Diana Ross. The sounds of Michael Jackson and Barry White were fabulous, it was like Black disco. The work of Stevie and Marvin were sounds of love and struggle. The contribution of these artists in the music industry is profound and they raised the bar. I became interested in the entertainment industry when I was 14 after I saw Busy Bee Starsky at my junior high school dance. I was hooked from then.

P.T. Did you have a mentor when you became involved in the music business? In other words, who influenced you?

A.H. In my early twenties, my mentor was Kenny [a.k.a Kenneth] Gamble from Philadelphia International Records. He had a lot of experience. His label signed prominent bands such as the O' Jays. Gamble with Leon Huff produced The Jacksons' first two albums for Columbia/CBS after the group left Motown in 1976. So, Gamble is a veteran and he taught me

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about the music business and how to influence the milieu artistically.

P.T. In the early 80s what made you trade your microphone for management and executive positions in the music industry?

A.H. In 1985, I was the road manager for LL Cool J. We did a show in New Jersey. At the time, his first album *Radio* was released and had critical acclaim with its hip-hop ballads and hybrid sounds. It appealed to a younger music audience who were instrumental in the LP's success. I thought it was interesting that he became one of the first rappers to crossover. The album went platinum. The record helped establish both with Def Jam as a label (with a distribution deal with Columbia Records the following year) and LL Cool J as a rapper. Seeing the commercial success of the LP made me realize the benefits of being in the business side of the industry. In addition, *Radio* contributed to the displacement of the old school hip-hop by the new school genre (where artists tended to compose shorter with a self-assertive style). This pivotal moment in the history and the culture of rap made me see that it was time to go behind the camera and find a new style for my future artists.

I want to add that during this period I drew upon my early experiences of surfing the uptown Harlem club scene. I was convinced that I had more of an understanding of what this vibe was all about than any other major label executive I knew. I felt that I could bridge the gap between "street" and middle to upper class in music by branding new artists. In that sense, I wanted to use my strategic ability to package and market young black singers.

To finish, despite my early success in the music industry, I had other career aspirations and continued to pursue my studies by attending Lehman College in the Bronx. There, I majored in Communications and Business Management.

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