



**DEF JAM with RUSSELL SIMMONS & RICK RUBIN**

**In Conversation with Paul Holdengräber**

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**Celeste Bartos Forum**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Thank you for your patience. It's a great honor and a great, great pleasure to have you both here, Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin. I hope you will come back many times and I hope that someday we will be honored to actually protect your archives in one form or another. **(applause)** Whether here or at the Schomburg—we have the new president of the Schomburg here tonight—it is important that this history be told. In Hebrew the word for “tradition” and “transmission” are the same.

Now, since we are already in the spiritual realm, Rick Rubin asked me that we begin in a certain way, and he will lead us into this way. I have to say that a few months ago I was a Beastie Boys virgin. **(laughter)** I had never heard—I had heard of, I think, the Beastie Boys—but I had never listened to the Beastie Boys. And I listened to them about six months ago, and what we're about to do now will also be the very, very first time I put myself in the situation of immersion. So Rick Rubin, help us, what are we going to do?

**RICK RUBIN:** Okay, we're all going to close our eyes for three minutes—and let's do that, let's close our eyes—and we're going to focus on our breathing, just the inhale and the exhale. And the goal of this is to bring us all together this evening, giving thanks that we're all here and getting to participate in this event. And we're just going to focus on our breath: three minutes of silence.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Could be a brain break.

**RICK RUBIN:** Let's do it.

**(silence)**

**RICK RUBIN:** Okay, we can slowly open our eyes. Take a big breath, stretch. Thank you.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Isn't that much better than angel dust? **(laughter)** The first person that meditated with me was Rick. The first person to go to yoga around me, many years ago. I went there because of the chicks, I think, really, but Rick was the first meditator I knew. Now it's popular, all the schools have it. All of you, I hope it's a gift for you that you sit still, let your thoughts settle more often. Do it twenty minutes, twice a day. Makes you high as hell.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Why did you want us to do this?

**RICK RUBIN:** Just seemed like a good opportunity. There's a power that happens when a big group of people gather together and when they meditate. When we practice at home ourselves, there's one amount of energy; but there's like a multiple that happens when a big group get to do it together. I just thought it would be nice for people to get to share a moment and create a space in the room for something new.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** While—I mean for someone like myself who's done this for the first time, it was not easy. I mean, really, I did open my eyes a few times and peek. **(laughter)** You didn't!

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It takes—I would say it takes a little patience. But when Rick's making a record—I'm speaking for him—or every time I ever made a decent record, there are these seconds. And melody does this—music is one of the most transformative things in terms of happiness or presence—you want the world to move slow so you can

watch it unfold, and music does that. The notes, in between spaces there are notes. There's this awareness, all the other shit disappears, it's just the music. And making that great record, there's no thoughts of, "Wait till I get this money, I'm gonna get this payback, I'm going to do this shit." It's like, "Wow, music." It awakens you. People use it as a transformative thing. That's why music is so powerful, it brings you to the present. Meditation is a practice that brings you to the present, it's the same thing. You want the world to go—you drive your car, you see every flower, every cute butt, everything, you see it. And that's what meditation is for, is so you can see the world unfolding, a miracle.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It would seem, I mean, I know you, Rick, you lead a life where contemplation is very important. And it would seem that our lives today are made of very few opportunities like that. I mean, I see this machine you have there, and I have too, the BlackBerry. I feel like everybody—are you checking it? It's okay—everybody in the streets seems to be davening, you know, constantly walking around and not really looking at the world, and it was hard. I must say, this was not an easy exercise. I think it was easier to listen to the Beastie Boys than to meditate for three minutes.

**(laughter)**

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Was it that hard?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** No, it wasn't hard because you—you, well first of all, I was wondering, how do you know it's three minutes?

**RICK RUBIN:** It felt like three minutes. **(laughter)** It felt like three minutes, and when you start doing it, you keep getting a sense—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Was it three minutes, do you think?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It felt like eight minutes, felt like twenty minutes.

**RICK RUBIN:** But if it was difficult for you to do, the more difficult it was for you to do, the more you needed it.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** That's for sure.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Boy do I need it. You're quite right. Let's do it again.

**(laughter)**

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** We want your children to be spacious brains so they can let things come in, and creative people need to be able to be awake, you know, so they can be—nothing happens—happiness, laughter, no creativity, nothing happens except those seconds of presence. And he does that to lengthen those seconds.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And you think there's a relationship between that exercise and the way Rick works?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** He's a meditative person. I think, he can say it like—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Being porous in some way, open, being ears. This is what attracted me so much as I learned more and more about your career, was the fact that you listen, that you both listen.

**RICK RUBIN:** That's the job. That's our job.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But it's harder to listen than to talk.

**RICK RUBIN:** You have to practice.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** When you were—I'll begin with you, Rick—when you were graduating from Long Beach High School, in 1981, in the senior yearbook, the quotation there you chose is, "I want to play loud, I want to be heard, I want all to know I'm not one of the herd." Fantastic. I love it. In a way quite different from what we're doing now, or not?

**RICK RUBIN:** The same thing. I think it's all the same. I feel there's a unifying principle through all of it that makes, at least it makes sense to me.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** When you were both growing up, you went to a lot of hip-

hop clubs in New York, and I'd like you to tell us some of the stories of those early days when you discovered, as it were, hip-hop, what your first experience of hip-hop was.

**RICK RUBIN:** It was a club on Second Avenue called Negril, which was a reggae club, and I think it was on Tuesday nights—was it Tuesday nights?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I think so.

**RICK RUBIN:** They had these, the first places that I found where you could hear hip-hop live anywhere. And DJs would—DJs would DJ through the night and MCs would MC, and it was like a whole different world that I hadn't seen before, and it was really limited at that time, because, again, if you were in downtown Manhattan that was pretty much your only opportunity to see it. And then eventually, over time, it grew and got bigger and then it moved to the Roxy. And I remember going to the Roxy on the first night that the Roxy opened as a hip-hop club, and there were maybe, there were maybe fifty of us in the Roxy, which is this giant, you know, giant space. And then slowly you got to watch every week, more people came and more people came and more people came, and word traveled and it really happened completely organically. The whole scene was rooted in word of mouth, it had nothing to do with—it didn't seem like anyone was promoting this world, it just happened on a street level. And we got—I got swept up in it, Russell was already swept up in it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Organic, there was nobody promoting it at the beginning?

**RICK RUBIN:** Russell was.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You were!

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Yeah, my first experience was the place Charles Gallery. It was 1976—I guess, 6 or 7—and there was a rapper, Eddie Cheeba, and it was Tuesday nights, it was Tuesday nights. And I went in there and he was on the mic and it was crazy, because it was music that wasn't on the radio. It was an alternative that was created by people who didn't, you know, want to join the mainstream, or just—I think that experience is not unlike, you know, the way people first experienced jazz or blues or rock and roll or first created it. They did this because on the radio was Patrick Juvet, “I Love America,” or “YMCA” by the Village People, whatever was on the radio was just foreign to the hood, this was at Charles Gallery, 125th Street in Harlem, so it was dramatically—you know, it was our own shit. That's what it felt like. We walked in and said “Wow.” And the music they chose was from, you know, pre-disco or old rock and roll records: Billy Squier's “Big Beat” to Bob James' “Apache” or Bob James' “Mardi Gras.” They made their own music—James Brown all his drumbeats was good, “Funky Drummer” especially. And they played their own music, created their own cultural thing that they could claim.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** When you use, and I think both of you would use the word perhaps in a similar way, you use the word “counterculture.”



**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It's counterculture if you're on the outside. But if you come, you know, if you come up and it starts developing, it's just culture. You know, like, I didn't really—it was counterculture to the extent that there were other clubs, black clubs that didn't like us, we weren't really accepted nowhere.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** They didn't like you because—

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** They were like, you'd have to have on a sport jacket, and you had to have certain shoes on, and you had to be a certain way to get in, and we weren't really acceptable. So the hip-hop explosion was people who didn't want to join the mainstream, or really weren't accepted anyway. That's why downtown Rick experienced hip-hop before they let hip-hop into those kind of mainstream clubs that we were starting to frequent, you know, the Bentley's and Leviticus and Justine's. There was all these black clubs where guys would have like Louis Vuitton clutch bags and shit and shoes with no socks, and it was a different kind of dude. So we did something, and it was counterculture to the extent that we wanted to do our shit and we like had disdain for—. And I think even the music we produced—and Rick did the same from a rock example, I think, but he'll tell you about that—I felt the records I produced, I didn't want to hear anything that sounded like—because there was now developing an R & B trend as I started to make records, and that R & B trend was all that soft, happy, and it was really something. We didn't want to use any instrumentation. Larry Smith and myself when we made records, finally got to make records, which was years later, because we had Kurtis

Blow in between, the whole development thing, but the records we made, we didn't use any instrumentation on any of our records that were anything to do with black radio, so there was a counter thing, but it was ours, I didn't feel—it was counter to them, but it was ours, and it was us intentionally, you know, being young.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And the last two words that you used seem to me so powerful: being young. Because one of the things that strikes me most in discovering Def Jam through this utterly magnificent book, I must say—. Just get it, okay? Don't leave home without it. **(laughter)** I mean, I know I sound like an advertisement for a credit card, but it is absolutely outstanding. Cey, you produced it in a most exquisite way, and all the writers. **(applause)** It is built for helping me so much to understand, to use your language, all this shit. **(laughter)** I mean, I'm really—I'm, I mean it's a pleasure to use it in this library. I must say it is just wonderful, there's so much to learn, but what I find so extraordinary about it is just the level of undiluted passion and youth. And that seems to me one of the shining lights—I mean, my nine-year-old boy, of course, brings it to me now—but just the power of the birth of something that is so attractive. Def Jam is all about youth in the most substantial way. Am I right?

**RICK RUBIN:** It was about street culture, it's about street culture. And it's the power of this music much like—I would say the closest parallel would be punk rock. It was music made by people who weren't usually educated in music but who really loved this art form and who at the time when we started, there was no real upside in doing it, everyone who was doing it was doing it purely out of the love of doing it, because you weren't going to

get your records on the radio, because if you listened to the radio, it was so alien to the radio. It was its own thing and I'm surprised that it ended up being our jobs.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** That was a dream.

**RICK RUBIN:** It's unbelievable. It's unbelievable.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** That was the dream. That you might be able to. It didn't matter if I slept in Rick's dorm for the rest of my life. To be able to do that, that inspiration, to have that, to go to work on that, to produce or to manage or work with the artists, any of the jobs in that industry, even to promote their shows was a dream. And so to be able to do that for a living was, you know, a high aspiration for it to become the kind of job that it became, and you know the fringe benefits of it have been great, but the work itself was such a prayer, and that's the experience.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I mean, punk rock, in the book you say, "To me, Def Jam was an outgrowth of punk rock, expressed through black music. It was about counterculture." And you say, "The experience that I had going to hip-hop clubs, which was the greatest experience, wasn't being equaled by the records I could buy." And therefore, because you couldn't find the records to buy, you couldn't find the counterculture sufficiently around you, you created it.

**RICK RUBIN:** That was the goal, it was just to document what hip-hop was like. And

luckily the fact that, at least I didn't know anything, I came in not knowing anything about music or about the record business or anything. I was a kid in college who loved music. I just would go to these clubs, hear this music, get inspired, and want to create something in a recording that gave me the same feeling that I had in these places live, and no records were doing that. So it was really more like a documentarian kind of a role.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But it was also trying in some way to give people a strong feeling of what it meant to be in a live audience.

**RICK RUBIN:** It was to experience what hip-hop was. It didn't matter if it was in a live audience or not. It was just the only place that we could experience it at that time was in a live audience. It wasn't contingent on being in a club for it to be great, but the only place you could hear it great at that time was in a club because the records sounded like R & B records.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Why?

**RICK RUBIN:** Because the people who were making records were experienced record makers who made R & B records. And then rap came along, and they made the same R & B records and had a guy rap on top instead of having a girl singing on it.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** That's right.

**RICK RUBIN:** So it—they thought that was a rap record. And in a way it was, because there was somebody MCing instead of singing, but musically it was a very, very different thing.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** For a few years I made records, you didn't have to have a stitch of talent, but have a really, a real appreciation for the culture to make records that were dramatically different. And I was surrounded by talent, I had Larry Smith and we made records and said, "No, no we're not going using any of those instruments, we're going home now." And the engineer and Larry was such a brilliant musician, he made great Whodini records, which were some of the records that probably infuriated Rick. They were good at what they were, and they were really good and cultural, and for Whodini they were the best expression for them, but making, like Run-D.M.C.'s early records, was like, no one, all the talented people, all the people with melody in their heart, couldn't figure out why we wanted to make these spare records that just were, were inspired by the culture more than melody. The melody was implied, but we made records that were dramatically different because we weren't musicians. And Rick came along and made records the same way, but Rick is a musical genius. He's a genius. **(applause)** But he had to come into his own. He started, he made his records like, his first record was, he fixed up "I Need a Beat," and we put it out, I remember, that wasn't the first, but that was the record that I remember we opened up Def Jam, and I remember selling out the box with cellophane around it, and we went to the store—you remember this?—we went to the store, and the records were selling, and they didn't know what the fuck was in them. No one knew what was in the records. He had made a record before that with the same logo,

because Rick invented Def Jam, and he put out a record I remember, and I had some of those records were kind of R & B that I produced, and some were more just straight hip-hop.

**RICK RUBIN:** Right, like “Sucker MCs.”

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Right, “Sucker MCs” or “Rock Box,” they were different. We found different instrumentation.

**RICK RUBIN:** And the Jimmy Spicer records, incredible.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** But they were still—you know, I had to use musicians, he’s fucking with me—but what Rick made was so dramatic, I remember that record, he made a record before that, and the way that I came to meet Rick was he made this record commentating, illustrating, description-giving, adjectives, experts, analyzing—I don’t remember shit, all the dust, but I remember this, musical myths, because it was like, “Oh shit, what the fuck is this?” I had to find him. Like, they brought him to me, this was the only record on the radio that I cared about, and it was his record, and that was Def Jam, it was his first logo. It was T La Rock was the artist.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I am here with you now, in this moment. Tell me about the first time the two of you met.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Jazzy Jay who was a friend, a mutual friend, brought us together.

**RICK RUBIN:** We actually met, I think we met before that. But I'll tell you what I think, you tell me when you think.

**(laughter)**

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** You're right. You're right. You're right, I'm sorry.

**RICK RUBIN:** I think we met at—do you remember there was that—

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Danceteria?

**RICK RUBIN:** No, at Graffiti. Do you remember Graffiti Rock, that show?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Yeah.

**RICK RUBIN:** There was a party after it, in a loft somewhere on the West Side, and I met you at that party.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Really.

**(laughter)**

**RICK RUBIN:** And I was excited to meet you because your name was on all these great records.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Anyway, Jazzy Jay brought him to me. I had at the time, I was a manager of artists, and I had some of the only artists that really had decent deals. Other deals were decent—she just passed, God bless her, I hear you laughing—but I had Whodini and Run-D.M.C. and other artists. So meeting, starting this whole process with Rick, I was going to start my record company, I had Rush Records, I was almost going to make a deal. And then Rick said, “No, no, come with me,” and I went to his dorm and he had a drum machine, and I had still worked without drum machines, I was just starting to work with drum machines, and Rick had a drum machine, and his drum machine had fifty hit records on it. It was just drums, but it was fifty hit records, anybody opened their mouth on top of these drums had a hit. It was amazing, it was amazing. So it was like, “Wow, maybe.” He said, “Well, give me two thousand dollars, and we’ll have a record company.” And we started the record company out of his dorm. And the first record that he produced for this label was “I Need a Beat” by LL Cool J. And the story I told you about going to the store and people buying a box of records, you know, twenty-five records were sold out of that store, and no one knew what was inside of them. And we had to open one of the boxes, and pay for the record, and play it for the record store owner so he could know what the fuck he was selling, because there was nobody—it was just, people can smell good music, you know, or maybe it was the logo from the previous



record you made, but for some reason they had sold twenty-five records in a day, and we were the first to play the record for the record store owner. And it was called “I Need a Beat,” by LL Cool J, that was the first Def Jam record.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We will be listening to it. **(applause)** How great. Chuck D from Public Enemy said, “Rick thought like I thought my whole life. He wanted to totally destroy what was proven.” Now, let’s listen to Track 4.

**(T La Rock and Jazzy Jay, “It’s Yours”)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I’m sorry.

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Just about your first.

**RICK RUBIN:** That was the first. That was the one that Russell was talking about that he heard before we met.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And it sold—

**RICK RUBIN:** It did good, whatever it was, I don’t know. Again, it did good in whatever it was then, you know, it was—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And that's what you heard—

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** That's the record I heard on the radio—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And that made you decide—

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Fascinated to meet him. But I mean because he had made this brilliant record, but then going to his dorm and hearing all of those drum beats, like, you know, the wealth of product—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Just tell me, because I'm ignorant. **(laughter)** What does these fifty drum beats—what does that exactly mean?

**(laughter)**

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** See, there's no music. There's just scratching and a beat, right? And it's like, it allows artists to breathe, that he respect—the artist needs to breathe, you know. Just the drums, that was the real issue, you could do all the other stuff was polishing and it was in the way, and he allowed the artist some freedom. And he had other tracks that were inspired in the same way.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But when you were talking about the equipment—you

were also talking about—

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** The drum machine—stored on the machine were other beats that could have made records like that, and they did.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And—

**RICK RUBIN:** I programmed these beats on this machine.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Right.

**(laughter)**

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Everybody knows what he's saying but you—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I know, I just want to be sure that I'm getting it. And what was your—I mean, describe your dorm, was it a little room?

**RICK RUBIN:** It was like a—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Was it NYU?

**RICK RUBIN:** It was at NYU, 5 University Place.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What were you studying, by the way?

**RICK RUBIN:** I was a philosophy major at first, and then after two years I switched to film and television because all my friends were in film and television, and it seemed more fun.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** You got a degree?

**RICK RUBIN:** Yeah.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You didn't know that?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I kinda forgot.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So philosophy didn't do it for you?

**RICK RUBIN:** No, I loved it. I just had more fun in the other classes.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So it was a little cubicle of a room?

**RICK RUBIN:** Yeah, I would say it was like a nine-foot by twelve-foot cinderblock room, and I had a full PA system. Like a club PA system.

**(laughter)**

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Ridiculous.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It was ridiculous.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Ridiculous. The speakers were like—

**RICK RUBIN:** It went literally to the ceiling of the room.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And how did your neighbors like it?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It was at college. It wasn't so bad.

**RICK RUBIN:** It was, it became—

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Popular.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Popular.

**RICK RUBIN:** Some people liked it.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And that's where submissions were sent to after a while?

**RICK RUBIN:** Yes. Yes. On that record that we just heard, the address for the record company was 5 University Place, the dorm at NYU. **(laughter)** So demos would start coming to 5 University Place and that was Def Jam.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So the guard at NYU would be getting these submissions and he knew that some business was being done at NYU.

**RICK RUBIN:** True, and then eventually a lot of business was done because we had boxes of thousands of records shipped to the dorm, and they would all be—you know, you'd walk into the dorm and behind where the guy sits there, the front deskman, there were hundreds of boxes of records being shipped out, you know, on a daily basis. It was crazy.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** That was our man Rick, the door guy, the dude who ran the dorm was our man. He was close to him.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I imagine.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** And he allowed for a lot of little—

**RICK RUBIN:** He ended up directing some videos for us as well. He did.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What were you going to say? He allowed for a lot of—

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** The shit that we wasn't supposed to do. He did a lot of stuff with us and allowed us, you know, and we then afforded him the chance to direct videos.

**RICK RUBIN:** He made incredible videos. He made "Going Back to Cali."

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** He wrote the script for *Tougher than Leather*.

**RICK RUBIN:** He did.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The script of—

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** *Tougher than Leather*, the movie that we made. He wrote the script, the door guy for the dorm.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** He got an education too.

**RICK RUBIN:** We all did.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Made some great videos, as well.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Before the track we just heard, you were already pretty famous. I'd like us to listen to Track 3.

**(Kurtis Blow, "Christmas Rappin'")**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So Kurtis Blow. **(applause)** Tell us something about—

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Went to City College with Kurtis Blow. And my first experience going to that club was Eddie Cheeba, and Kurtis Blow was Kool DJ Kurt. And we really wanted to compete. I feel in love with rap after that first experience. I started promoting parties in Manhattan and Queens and places, and we thought Blow was better than Cheeba. **(laughter)** Cheeba is—they get it. **(laughter)** You got it, right?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I got it kind of, but my mother always told me when you don't understand, just smile.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** No, no, no, well okay. Eddie Cheeba was a rapper, he was very



popular, he was becoming popular when I first discovered him, and Kurtis Blow was with me, and that inspired me so much. And Kurtis Blow was also a rapper, or became a rapper right around that time, and he was Kool DJ Kurt. And he became Kurtis Blow because blow is cocaine and cheeba is marijuana, and blow costs more than cheeba. Kind of a silly reason, **(laughter)** but anyway, that record plays every Christmas. And it was, you know, it was me failing in school, me working hard, but, you know, my senior year in school I just couldn't get past any more classes, I was just in love with promoting these artists. And so that record—by promoting these shows, Robert Ford and J. B. Moore, and God bless them, because they had all the faith, and anything I learned about artist development, I learned from Robert Ford and J.B.—produced that record, and that record was “Christmas Rappin’.” And I remember taking them to the Hotel Diplomat to watch, and Kurtis Blow was opening for Flash, or I'm sorry, Kurtis Blow was one of the MCs for Grandmaster Flash, and they saw, and Eddie Cheeba performed that night as well. There was a shoot-out that night. You remember leaving. Anyway, and Kurtis Blow opened up and he came out, and Flash was this really underground rapper who had never played. He was not underground anywhere but Manhattan and Queens, but in the Bronx he was huge but younger and played to a much more alternative crowd than Eddie Cheeba and others who were more polished, whatever that meant, they were more polished than Flash. And Kurtis Blow opened up and he had this classic introduction, and they saw that and changed their mind from doing an Eddie Cheeba record to a Kurtis Blow record, and then they produced this record, “Christmas Rappin’.” Robert Ford taught me to manage, I became the manager, they were the producer, 1979. Why are you looking at me like that?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** No, I mean, I've learned a lot. **(laughter)** A lot of stuff. I mean, I've learned how to ask for the right drug. I'd like us to listen to Track number 5, of Run-D.M.C.'s "Sucker MCs." You say in—as people can probably tell, my knowledge of this is deep. You said, "'Sucker MCs' was the first track I had heard that reflected what goes on in the club. So that was the idea, to create records that made me feel what I felt when I went to a club and heard incredible DJs cutting it up and great MCs rocking the crowd." So I'd like us to take a listen to that.

**(Run-D.M.C., "Sucker MCs")**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Fantastic. It really—so you, there you were really working together on that.

**RICK RUBIN:** That was before me. That was me being inspired by him. That was him.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** No, that was actually Larry Smith. It was a beat I had actually written for a previous record, for a band Orange Crush. But then the drum machine came out, and Larry just tapped the beat out. And it was like "Oh shit." And then we spent, we must have spent twelve hours on the drum sound. Twelve hours on the drum sound. And it was also bottled up, like, having watched all these talented producers make these beautiful records, and there were many that were around me. But making a record myself, wanting to strip it down and make it honest or what I thought was honest expression, and

like I said, this record, this was the experience when everybody was like, “What are we going to do tomorrow?” I said, “We’re going to mix it.” “There’s no music yet.” “There’s not going to be any.” And that was the experience, that was like—from ignorance that allowed, because people that have habit or experiences, would probably want to put a bass line on that or a guitar or something, but we were done.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You were done, meaning that was enough.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** We were done, we had laid it down. We were happy, D.M.C. was happy, Rev was happy.

**RICK RUBIN:** That was the breakthrough.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The breakthrough.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It’s not a record. It’s an idea, for us to just be able to go home and say we’re done and rest in the fact that the record feels good like it is, it doesn’t need anything else.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The breakthrough, what do you mean by that?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It’s not a record, the idea or breakthrough was a different—

**RICK RUBIN:** It was a new kind of music. That record signified a change in how music could be. Because it was different before that song.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It seems simple, for everybody. But back then there were no records that were only drum beats, and only one drum machine played one program and then we could go home, and that's a lot. But it was the artist that was being highlighted, and it gave them the idea I told you, to let the artist breathe, and that's was what it was.

**RICK RUBIN:** You know what was interesting, too, is if we look back, if you went to a hip-hop club, the beats that the DJs would be playing would mainly be the drum break in a record.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Period.

**RICK RUBIN:** So we were used to hearing drum beats and vocals, but just not on a record. You'd hear that at a club, but you'd never hear it on a record.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It was just a simple thing. It wasn't a genius thing to do it, it was just a thing that people had habit and didn't know how to do. And from having this experience of being there, it was just a natural thing to do, but it was not natural for—

**RICK RUBIN:** To anyone who wasn't versed in hip-hop it would sound alien, but if you'd been in a hip-hop club you wouldn't think that needed anything else because you'd

know, well, that would be maybe a high point in a show.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But you brought people into understanding that world even though they hadn't been to hip-hop clubs.

**RICK RUBIN:** I don't even know if it was understanding. It was just showing it to them and they liked it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's about taste.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** But I think also, you know, the culture thing happens, you walk the street and you smell things and then you make a version of it. Sometimes that version of it doesn't have the trappings of everything else but it could be right there. In other words, it felt like everybody was supposed to go crazy but maybe it was only my best friends that would all like it, that the rest of the world wouldn't give a shit. It was a B-side of a record that we put there because we liked it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And you say this in the book. I find this line most exciting. You say, "It was through Def Jam that God first showed me the power of faith. You put your head down and do your work and realize that work is a prayer. When I was producing a record, I never thought, 'Wait till I get a check.'"

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** But I said that again.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** “I was thinking, ‘Wait till friends hear this.’”

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** That’s right, wait till your friends hear it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** “All I wanted was to inspire my friends, and that was my first realization that investing yourself totally in something could be fruitful.” **(applause)**  
Fantastic.

And if you don’t mind, I want to read your few lines, there are a few lines at the beginning. I’d love to read it all but we have other things to do as well. Rick Rubin, you write, “Def Jam was about purity of intention and the love of an underground culture. Def Jam was a collection of outsiders. We lived for music first and organized the rest of our lives around one passion, our passion. Def Jam was total immersion in the hip-hop experience manifest in recordings. Yet it was more than just music. We flew our colors in the form of Def Jam jackets and found home within our small circle. It was as if we had a special secret that nobody else was aware of. Our inexperience—” I love that. “Our inexperience and innocence allowed us to make music that went beyond the accepted norm. Enthusiasm drove us. It was and continues to be a great love affair with the primal universal life force as glimpsed through the prism of the beat.” Great!

**(applause)**

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** You wrote that shit?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Great. I mean, great!

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Oh my God, give me chills.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Isn't that great?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** That's beautiful. I gotta read that shit.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You hadn't yet read it? It's pretty great, no?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It is really great.

**RICK RUBIN:** The delivery had a lot to do with that. **(laughter)** That was very well done. Very well done.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** No, but I think—and you know, I must say, since they're here in the audience—Lyor Cohen's lines are fantastic as well: "Def Jam came to life in downtown New York during the early eighties. It was a unique and powerful time and place when night after night Jean-Michel Basquiat, Madonna, Kurtis Blow were

colliding. All the elements that anyone needed to start a fire were present: fuel, oxygen, and a spark. The fuel was rap music, these amazing beats and rhythms that could not be contained. The oxygen was the downtown scene, which was hungry for the newest art, fashion, and music. And the spark—” I love this also, “the spark was our innocence. The burning desire to run our own hip-hop record label was uncomplicated by any idea of how absurdly difficult it would be. If we had known *anything*, we would have run for the hills. But our success speaks for the lure of random possibility.” Fantastic, also, wherever you are. “If all you do is figure the odds, these long shots are always absurd. Me, I never let myself be lullabyed. If hip-hop and Def Jam in particular has taught me anything it’s that”—this is also fantastic, **(applause)** no, it really is—“it is if mutant mistakes—” I mean, those two words, I have never read before. “It is as if mutant mistakes often pay off in ways no one else can predict. You would have thought back in the eighties that we would never see a coffee-table book about rap.” We’ll talk about that. “All those years later, I still wake up every morning with the thought that maybe today I’ll bump into the next world-changing mutant mistake, and have the sense—” **(applause)** Yeah, wow, exactly. “And have the sense to recognize it.” **(applause)** It’s just great. Great, fantastic. That’s what I find so—it’s, I mean, just the enthusiasm, the belief in a culture, the belief that you can smell it. **(laughter)** It is extraordinary. And where is it around now, and is it around now?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** What do you mean?

**(laughter)**



**RICK RUBIN:** It's always around. It's always around.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's always around.

**RICK RUBIN:** Of course, of course.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Okay, I'm just getting excited.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I'm happy.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Well, that's good. Let's be happy and listen to Track number 2.

**(LL Cool J, "Rock the Bells")**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Oh, God, that's great. Say something about that.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** During that first album and around that time, LL, that's when—I said that Rick was a genius earlier—but that's when he started to explore his genius, when he started to really expose it in more ways. I mean, T La Rock's record is great, it's a first effort, you know, and it's really what it was, it's the genius of—like I said, I made those records, they were records because no one would make them, just because no one

would make them. He made them not only because no one would make them, he made them in a way no one *could* make them. He made them so excellent, and he was so good at it. He took it to another level. And by then, people were starting to borrow ideas or be inspired by what we did, and we weren't alone in making records that reminded you, that were really good expressions of the culture. People just said, "Oh, can we do that?" After that it was, "Can we really do that? Because that's really what we want to do anyway."

Can you imagine if you were on one of these other labels and it was owned by an R & B producer, and they'd say, "Okay, this is your track, and that's your track, and this is a big record that's out, and you can rap over that, and here's something kinda new, but it's really that other shit." And all the rappers would take what they got, and we tailor-made things that let the artist breathe, and then people started to do that. And then for Def Jam to come after they'd already been instrumental in creating a kind of freedom, then you had to make this shit the way that no one else could make it. And Rick made records at that time that were so good for hip-hop, so special for hip-hop, that that's what made Def Jam the best, for that moment, for that moment and lots of other moments that we've had with Lyor as a genius at finding so many great records and with all the support and then Kevin. And we've been lucky to keep the creativity, but there was a moment he stepped up and made records, produced records, that were just better than everybody else's. And even when I got to collaborate with him on the *Raising Hell* album, it was a phenomenal experience, because he would do things, that was—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** When you say "do," what do you mean?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Just, you know, “We’re going to make *Toys in the Attic*.” Or this was different, because we made “Walk this Way,” because we’re going to make *Toys in the Attic*, and he said “Well, have you ever heard of Aerosmith?” We said, “No what is that?” We were going to scratch up *Toys in the Attic* and rap over the beats. He said, “No, no, I know the group Aerosmith, that’s their record, we’re going to fuck with them.” I said, “Really.”

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You didn’t know—

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** We had no idea, we’d never—. *Toys in the Attic* was a record we scratched in the park and never cared about the artist. As soon as they started to open their mouth, we’d cut the record, fuck ’em. **(laughter)** We would play the instrumental in the beginning, and at the most, I would say, the beginning guitar riff would play for a minute, but that was it. So that was just part of the way we made “Peter Piper” and the other records on the album, and Rick said, “No, we’re going to make the record.” But that was also his history, his cultural insight that was different that was part of merging cultures.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What do you mean when you say that? What do you mean when you say his cultural insight?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** His insight. Rick Rubin grew up with—he liked loud, abrasive music. And we liked loud, abrasive music. But we didn't have the library and the history of growing up with the punk rock experience. He was in a punk rock band.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Yeah, I read that.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** He really lived alternative music that needed to merge. We were not accepted downtown in the black clubs, Leviticus, and I could name them all that we couldn't go to, until finally I was able to go and try to make them play my record, and they still wouldn't fuck with my records. We had to go all the way downtown. We had to go to the Mudd Club and the Ritz, and all the punks. And so we had this experience of developing, and we found Rick in Danceteria, really. I mean, we met in different places, but in Danceteria, the only place that would play a rap record beside the South Bronx was at Danceteria or the Ritz or the punk rock clubs. So Rick was there and Rick had all that experience to bring. And that's why making records with, making that album with Rick was the greatest experience, creative experience I was ever privileged to be part of, because just to watch the way Jay, myself, and everybody interacted and what Rick brought, which is now—I mean, it's all documented, this fucker makes everybody from Krishna Das to Slayer. You know, he makes the deep spiritual records by alternative spiritual teachers to devil-worship records. **(laughter/applause)** From Johnny Cash to the Geto Boys. You know, and go all in between, you know, all, everything—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So what you would say is just a voracious appetite. Just endless appetite.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** The melody is the thing. He was much greater than a beat man, he was a melody man, you know, he's maybe the greatest producer ever. **(applause)** If he wasn't here, I would *say* the greatest producer ever. If he wasn't sitting here.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's interesting to me also on the tails of this week because two days ago I had Harry Belafonte on this stage. And, you know, he was talking about, you know, great difficulties being in the Thunderbird in Las Vegas and not being able really to get through the door because, you know, he had an incredible difficulty being accepted as a black man. And here you are working with a white man, and I am wondering, were there issues there? Was it difficult?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I've always loved and always thought the culture was for everyone, but I also thought that diversity was such an important thing. I stress it every day. The integration of all of these ideas that make the great new American cultural things has been—for me, it's my life's work. And I always believed. So working with Rick and whatever was different that he brought to the table, was not only welcome, it was inspiring.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It was an enhancement.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It was an enhancement in every way. And so that's my answer to that, yes.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** For you, being surrounded by a black world?

**RICK RUBIN:** It was amazing that I was accepted into this world that was different, out of this shared love of this art.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It was the passion of the music as you say.

**RICK RUBIN:** Absolutely.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Because you say that, you—. The other day, Belafonte was talking about Martin Luther King and the March on Washington, what he wanted to do and what he was able to do with his celebrity was bring together all these incredible artists—I mean, incredible, from Marlon Brando to Tony Bennett. But also Martin Luther King said bring the enemies, bring Charlton Heston, he needs to come down too, bring the other side, you know, bring the great diversity of this country down because that's what's important, and that's the two hundred thousand people who marched down and maybe there may have been more. It was important to bring down a panoply.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It's still important. I want to say, as much as I love the integration that Def Jam represented of culture and how much it affected people and

brought people together—still today a lot of what they call integration and diversity and integration, it doesn't really mean integration, it's still segregated. There's still a segregation that exists, you know, and I gotta mention it, you know, because it needs to continuously be explored. How do we find, you know, this merger to make one and one three? In almost every instance it does. You have to be able to be comfortable doing it and I think that there was a moment always when it doesn't seem normal. You know, when he was DJ Double R, when I met him. He was a DJ for the Beastie Boys as well as their producer and partner. So seeing that was like so exciting, but, you know, everyone didn't necessarily see that. So I want more people to be like that, and even twenty-some odd years later, I still find that there's still—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Work to be done.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** People like to compartmentalize whatever they find, and Rick never did that in terms of the way he produced.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You probably couldn't.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Didn't know how.

**RICK RUBIN:** No, I just liked music. I never saw anything other than good music.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Your seven words. A music fan. I mean, that's basically

what it is.

**RICK RUBIN:** I think if you look back at the music business from the fifties and sixties, it was often white-owned companies selling black artists' music. And I guess it was unique at Def Jam and—by no plan, it just worked out—that it was owned by black and white people and the artists were black and white. And it just felt, it was a natural thing that just happened.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It was multiracial but singularly cultural.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Let's look at video Track A, please.

(excerpt from *Krush Groove*)

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I feel so bad for Rick because, I remember the moment we both saw that footage—we both cringed. I said, "Damn." It's like the worst acting, that scene.

(laughter) And the movie's not that bad, I promise you, if you haven't seen *Krush Groove*. But it was an embarrassing moment for Rick, and he just sat here and it came on and I looked at him and it was like—. And that was Blair Underwood and not me, so I didn't get the same kind of embarrassment.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Why did you not play you?



**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I was high.

**RICK RUBIN:** He was smart.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** He was smart.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Blair Underwood was a better me, you know. But I'd go places for years and they'd be looking for Blair. **(laughter)** I mean, girls would be like, "Is Russell here?" I was like, "I'm Russell." "No, you ain't him."

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** That was your only attempt at rapping?

**RICK RUBIN:** Yes. **(laughter)** Thankfully, yes.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Why'd you pick that scene? I'm just curious.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I think it's interesting. I think it's interesting also in terms of acceptance. I think it's interesting that, you know, it wasn't a done deal, you had to do it yourself. You wouldn't get a loan that easily. I thought the subject matter was interesting.

**RICK RUBIN:** That was a fictional movie.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But the fiction turned into reality. You created your own gig. Okay, let's move right along. I can see the pain, but we'll get over it, I promise you. Let's move to "Walk the Way," Track 6.

**(Run-D.M.C., "Walk This Way")**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So Aerosmith, "Walk This Way"—I said "Walk the Way," forgive me. Talk to us about that.

**RICK RUBIN:** The purpose of that song, that was—. Very few of the songs had purposes, that one had an actual purpose, which was... Up until that point, rap music was so alien to anyone who wasn't in the hip-hop culture. I remember I was in California and talking to these people at this record company who were fans of what we did because of the success we were having, and they said, you know, "Why do people like this?" These were people who were being nice to me, they said, "Why do people like this? It's not music." **(laughter)** And I realized, you know, there's a pretty big gulf between how we felt about this and how people perceived it other than our small little world. And I wanted to find a song that would help bridge that gap so that people understood it really wasn't that different, it really wasn't. And the Aerosmith song, "Walk This Way," that was just the Run-D.M.C. version of it, is very close to a rap song already in its Aerosmith version. And I thought if Run-D.M.C. did a cover of that song, as Run-D.M.C., just like Run-

D.M.C. would do it, people would make the connection like, “Oh, well, I’ve heard Aerosmith do this and now Run-D.M.C. are doing it.”

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You’re making a bridge.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Connecting the dots and making a bridge.

**RICK RUBIN:** It’s not so far from popular music of the day.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And so that’s what created the bridge, effectively?

**RICK RUBIN:** I think so, I think it was the purpose of it. And it was to really, like, educate people that this thing that you don’t understand. Here’s maybe one that if you hear it, it’s in a format that you can accept and then once you accept it, maybe that will be a gateway into the whole hip-hop world. And it sort of functioned in that way.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Russell, did you want to add something?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** No, I think that it also, for me, I mean, I was a coproducer on the album but not really on that record. In other words, I sat there, I helped them to get to say the vocals properly, it was kind of difficult for them, too, because they were really into *Toys in the Attic*, whoever that was, it was just the name of the album, in case you don’t know. And they were into, like, you know how you go, “rrrr, rrr, rr,” and that was

all you would hear of the guitar. So Rick, pulling them along, and when they got into it they loved it. But he had to give them the space to see it because they hadn't had any experience with it. So it was really what I said earlier about Rick and his genius, his experiences and what I said about one and one equaling three, or really two and a half of one. We had a mission in hip-hop and he had a different perspective of it that kind of helped us to broaden the entire landscape, and that was that experience. And "Walk This Way" was—we didn't make it a single, it made itself a single instantly when it came out. And it was what Rick had envisioned, you know, so that's the experience.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I mentioned earlier on that I've recently discovered the Beastie Boys. I'd like us to take a look, please, at Track C.

**(Beastie Boys, "[You Gotta] Fight for Your Right [to Party]")**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I must say I loved watching that. What does it inspire in you so many years afterwards?

**RICK RUBIN:** It's just really funny.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's really funny.

**RICK RUBIN:** Ridiculous.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Is it good music?

**RICK RUBIN:** Yeah, great.

**(laughter)**

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It was really funny. The Beastie Boys, they made that record and it became a hit and it was kinda—they backed their way into a hit. Not quite the same as “Walk This Way,” because they never thought that would be a single. It made itself a single. They didn’t perform it, I don’t know if they perform it now, because it was just a fun record. Lyor said, “mistakes.” I think that was Lyor’s quote, “mistakes,” right? It was kinda like not a mistake, I mean, you know, it’s the kind of damage for building a career that you really have to work at to protect that that becomes the image of the band, because they were so talented, they did so many great alternative, fun records.

That was a fun record, but it was not the brand of record that they wanted for their image. We had so many great records that represented who they were, but they were just too far for the mainstream to accept. And we were never chasing the mainstream, we never expected or wanted the mainstream, not really. So after that, you know, on the road, we never performed that record. We were on the road, they were on the road and never performed it, because it was not really what their fans wanted from them. It was a lot of exposure, but it was not what their fans wanted from them. And those who got that record maybe were converted when they understood the real integrity of the group. So that’s the

story there, in my opinion. I think Rick you probably agree, right?

**RICK RUBIN:** Yep.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It's just really funny.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It is really funny, and there's an energy.

**RICK RUBIN:** It was a commercial for the album. It was funny, and it made us laugh. And that was the goal with all of the music we made with the Beastie Boys, was just making records that we would like and we would laugh at with all of these crazy inside jokes and if, you know, if fifty people liked it, we would have been ecstatic. It was no—we would never think anybody was going to like this album.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I certainly didn't think they'd like that record. This is the thing, as a manager, and I said that early on Robert Ford, we were always, we had a record that we thought would broaden the boundaries of what an artist's potential was, we would always put a B-side on it, because the B-side would speak directly to the core community that we really liked, our best friends. Our best friends wouldn't have chosen that record over the other, how many records on that album?

**RICK RUBIN:** Twelve.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I think the other eleven records our best friends who loved rap the most, who frequented rap clubs, would have chosen those records first. So it didn't hurt, and in fact it expanded everything for them. But it's because the record had so much integrity, it was so many great records that sort of spoke to the heart of hip-hop.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The heart of hip-hop was more espoused, in your view, by Public Enemy and Chuck D.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** In my view, but not necessarily more than the other Beastie Boys records. But they were their own honest, authentic thing. Rick fell in love with them and begged Chuck D to sign. He'll tell you the story.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Tell us the story.

**RICK RUBIN:** Chuck—this is at the time of LL Cool J's first album coming out and doing very well and Chuck was probably I'm going to guess twenty-one years old. LL was sixteen.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** They were all so young.

**RICK RUBIN:** And Chuck felt like he was too old to be a rapper because LL's sixteen and he had already made two singles with a group called Spectrum City that didn't do well and he thought, "My music career is over." And I called him every day for probably

six months to convince him to record for us because there was—I mean, there was such a small pool of talent, there was nobody great, and Chuck was great, and we knew Chuck was great, and we loved Chuck.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And he gave in.

**RICK RUBIN:** Eventually. He called and said he wanted to meet. All I knew about it was Chuck D. I didn't know anything, and there was no such thing as Public Enemy at that time, there was no such thing as Flavor, **(laughter)** none of that had existed yet. He came in with ten people and he said, "I'm ready to do this. The group is called Public Enemy. It's me and Flavor and Griff and the S1Ws and we have this whole vision." And like, "Great." And that was what made it okay for him to do it, was that he didn't—I think that he didn't feel like he was competing on a one-on-one basis with sixteen-year-old LL Cool J. He had the S1Ws **(laughter)** and it was different, it was like a band, he saw it as a punk rock band kind of inspired by the Clash.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And he came up with that name?

**RICK RUBIN:** Completely. They came up with everything. They brought it all to us.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And your reaction was—

**RICK RUBIN:** "Great." I loved Chuck, I was willing to go on any trip he wanted to go



on.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Let's look at Track D.

**(Public Enemy, "Fight the Power")**

**(applause)**

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** When I see that and you ask me to reflect on that, I have so many thoughts, it's difficult to—I can say that the first album, and it was really Rick, who, like he said, called every single day, the first album there were really good things about it, and there was some criticism because they were very—they said a lot of very important social and political things, but it was also a very tough album, very street, pre-gangster rap, but a lot of this shit was really gangsta, you know. And so I remember, I always thought I said this, but then somebody told me that it was Bill Stephney who said, "their bullets are their words." "My Uzi Weighs a Ton" was the song in question, because it was my favorite on that first album, and it was also a record that you know caused us some controversy, although it wasn't a big hit or a pop record on the radio. It was, "My Uzi Weighs a Ton." And his mouth was his Uzi and the bullets were his words. And from then, hearing it, or whether I came up with it, or wherever it came from, it stuck in my head. And I realized, and I listened to the album again, again and again, and it was such a revolutionary album, and the next album, and in between I think you helped, *Rebel without a Pause* came out, that was the record really where they were coming into their

own, and then this, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Which you were crying—you heard it for the first time on an airplane.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** You started crying? That kind of shit?

**RICK RUBIN:** It just moved me. I couldn't believe anybody had made anything so beautiful. I tear up now thinking about hearing it for the first time.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I asked you while you were watching it, when you saw this last and you said twenty years ago.

**RICK RUBIN:** Probably.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But I read you were on a plane and it just made you cry to hear this.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** So phenomenal.

**RICK RUBIN:** It was so beautiful. It was so revolutionary and so passionate and so strong.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** But its cultural impact, too. It's all music, it's all heart, it's all what you felt in the experience. And what Rick is describing is the how breathtaking the music is and how it feels. But what it did, you know—it changed what kids were thinking, what adults were thinking, it changed the climate, it created the Million Man March.

**RICK RUBIN:** It changed what rap could be.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It changed everyone.

**RICK RUBIN:** It changed what rap could be. Because up until that point there was no content like Chuck was talking about in rap records. There was bragging, there was dissing, but there was very little social commentary outside of the neighborhood, and he was talking about bigger things and politics.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** There were social implications, and there are always political implications in all of poetry, even in stuff that you think is small and separate, and it means something politically and socially. But what Chuck D was saying and what he did to affect the community is proof that, you know, you have to be, each individual has to at least be concerned with what he represents, because the effect of Chuck D. took all the gold chains off people's neck and put red, black, and green around their neck. He got Rick Rubin to go see Minister Farrakhan speak. **(laughter)** There was a revolution that he was in the center of and helped to change for a significant amount of time, there was a

significant change in the black community that was a very positive change and it was about consciousness and all the things that—it wasn't that it was the music, of course.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** There was a positive change and then there was your, in some way perhaps, distancing in some way from Public Enemy. You have this line, which I think is strongly provocative. “If Public Enemy wants to do songs about killing whitey, and I'm whitey, that's fine, and I'll support them in that attempt as long as what they do is good musically, which is all I really care about.” **(applause)** And then you say, and I'm going to read this quotation because I find it so fantastic: “It's only commentary. I don't think music can change the world. It's okay to say anything in art.” And I believe this so deeply, working in this library—everything has to be part of this place, everything. From Plato to NATO, from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, everything has to be part of this place, we have to collect everything, with discrimination, of course, but we have to bring it under one roof.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Rick said, as an artist, what he said was absolutely right, and I agree a hundred percent. I'm never offended by what's on a record or even by people's opinions, but what I'm saying to you is that taking a seed and making it really affect all of culture affects humankind's consciousness in many ways. So it doesn't—you don't have to be offended by it, unless you're holding, you know, some kind of a fear inside you, but this reality being expressed is important. It's a reality that's in the hearts of people, and taking that seed and spreading it is an artist's—it doesn't have to be his, it's his heart that he's spreading, but each person could be mindful and conscious of what's in

their heart. And what Chuck D said was inspiring and uplifting, he never said about, and Rick had to defend himself in some of those lines that he's saying—he never said about hurting anyone. He never said anything that was not intended to uplift and inspire. So you have nothing to be afraid of or even to feel threatened by. He just said a lot of truth that's hard to digest, and there was nothing wrong with that. There's nothing wrong with any of it, as Rick said. Rick went on to produce the Geto Boys, if you all know them.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Rick speaks in the same commentary about the fact that these are not, you know, politicians in power. These are artists.

**RICK RUBIN:** These are people expressing their true feelings, and everyone's entitled to their feelings.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And we should be exposed to them.

**RICK RUBIN:** Absolutely. Otherwise you're not living in reality, if you just assume everybody thinks the same thing you do or only agree with that.

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You went your separate ways.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I went and produced Oran "Juice" Jones, he went and made

Slayer. But you can talk about that if you want.

**RICK RUBIN:** It just felt like our friendship was so strong, and our business grew very big very fast, and I don't think either of us really knew how to handle what it was. And really for me, out of wanting to protect our friendship, which has never dimmed in all this time, I said, "You know, maybe one of us should not be here," and I said, "Do you want to leave?" And he said, "No, I don't want to leave." And I said, "Okay, then I'll leave." And then we just continued doing what we liked. Just and it really had more to do with, now looking back I can see—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Retrospectively.

**RICK RUBIN:** Then I didn't know, again, we were kids. But looking back it had more to do with the fact that there was no infrastructure, really, and that people—there was such a volume of stuff to deal with and people would bring the same problems to me and to Russell, we would handle them differently, we would get each other frustrated, but there was no way of dealing with anything and there were so many fires going on all the time that had to be put out, whoever was closest put them out. And sometimes I would be upset with the way Russell put out a fire, sometimes he'd be upset with the way I put out a fire, and there was no system in place. So I felt like because of our love for each other, it would be better to just do the same thing separately.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I can say also about us being young, and I can look back and

say this, I don't know if you'll agree with me.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Younger.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** We had our responsibility to the label and Rick made the most beautiful LL Cool J record. But Rick also, in all of his life, he'd never gotten the chance from a music standpoint to live in a playground. To live in a playground, producing, not Slayer, but the other rock bands and other things and they all had this new experience included in the way he made their records. Rick was a creative spirit, and he had to make what he wanted. And me, growing up, also, I didn't like the shit they did, but there was some stuff that was pre what was hot that I wanted to emulate, and I made my "Juice" Jones and my Alyson Williams and we had some hits. And he made his Slayers and his Four Horseman. Meanwhile, we had the LA Posse making LL Cool J.

So we were not—Def Jam was a rap label. We made an R&B label separate and we made kind of a rock label separate, but we didn't have any adults supervising our effort, and good because we were creative and we had fun. I got to make a Blue Magic album. I still hear it sometimes. It didn't sell much, but I still hear that motherfucker. **(laughter)** I made a Blue Magic album. I grew up on Blue Magic. I had fun doing that. So we had great experiences, you know, and me being less creative and more of another side of my brain operating, I went back to work kind of. And then Lyor, who had been the manager of so many of the acts and helped me with management, he helped, stepped in and bring some kind of organization to the company and also a creative input and a business input,

so we just carried on, we survived. But we had to go out because we had nothing like this. We had to go out and find a lot of great talented people, and we were lucky. And he went on and became, you know what the fuck he does. So we were lucky that we both got to survive.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Well, in closing I want to talk a little bit about what you did separately and then bring back what you did together. Separately you discovered Slick Rick.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** No, Rick was there, Lyor was there. We all liked him. We all have different stories of it. When we went one place, Lyor was very intent on signing him, Rick was very intent, we all liked him, and we got Slick Rick, we were still together. We put out *Children's Story* as a team. Rick produced some of the songs on *Children's Story*. And Jam-Master Jay and the group that we founded with Public Enemy, the Bomb Squad. Remember, we worked for so long on that album, and Davey D, and we had all these—. And one day Hank Shocklee walked in, and the brilliant man that he was, and that was an amazing creative team, and they walked in after we had frustrated ourselves trying to get Slick Rick to record this record, and he just jelled, and they made a whole album in a few weeks after we had done so much for so many years trying to get a record—well not, a year and a half or something—he just went in and made the record, and that was one of the best records Def Jam has ever had. And it was made by the Bomb Squad for the most part.



**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So *Children's Story* you still made together, you had not left the company at that point?

**RICK RUBIN:** No, I was instrumental in bringing him to the label. Russell and Lyor signed him, and they oversaw the making of the record with Hank.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** You made a record from the album. You made got records on the album, are you crazy? You made "Treat Her Like a Prostitute."

**RICK RUBIN:** That's true.

**(laughter)**

**(Slick Rick, "Children's Story")**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I love it, wonderful. You went on to do things now I think quite separately. The Def Comedy and Def Jam Comedy and the *Def Poetry Jam* and I'd like us to look at a track if we could, Track H.

**(Kanye West on *Def Poetry Jam*)**

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Fantastic. Fantastic. Tell us about that adventure, because it continues.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** That particular adventure?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** That one, and it's continuing.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** He was signed through Kevin Liles and Lyor were part of it, with Roc-A-Fella and Damon Dash promoted him to the show, and I was still the chairman but not so involved. But the experience of having him on the show, he was loved. Damon Dash never gets the credit that he deserves. He saw so clearly in this kid a genius that was beyond what anyone else saw and that was just one, you know—. There were great poets coming on that show, and here's an unsigned, here's an artist we just signed to Def Jam, obligated to do it because I was still working there, but I didn't know. And he was fantastic. He was, you know, the whole experience of Def Poetry was great, but he—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's incredible. I want to create something like that here on this stage.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** A poetry experience?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Yeah. That kind of poetry experience.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Oh, that's easy.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Can we do that? Can we arrange that?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I think we could.

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We will talk later, I'd like to do that. I think it's just fantastic, I mean, really. And it's a way of getting, you know, since libraries now are— one begins to wonder what they are for, what are they for? You know, we ask the same question of how does the music industry work? You know, how do people access knowledge? Why come here? I mean, you can get everything on your computer, you can download everything. We're in a predicament which is very difficult, and yet I think, I mean tonight shows it. People want to be together. As I often say, you can't tickle yourself. **(laughter)** I mean, you can but you can't, you know what I mean? There's no real question there. But we're on our way slowly but surely winding down. Your experience now over the last few years has been to try to work in an industry that is suffering and that is changing. Bring us up to date.

**RICK RUBIN:** I just focus on music, try to make the best—help artists make the best music that they can possibly make, and that does as much of the work as we can do. I

think the industry's working on different ways of people getting music, that can be monetized and it's starting to happen more and more and there are better and better systems and Wi-Fi's getting better and everywhere, and eventually you'll be able to hear anything you want, anytime you want, anywhere you go on demand. And it'll be a good experience and it's moving in that direction.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And people are curating their own track lists.

**RICK RUBIN:** Absolutely.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And do you view this purely positively?

**RICK RUBIN:** Absolutely. Anytime more people get to listen to music it'll, in the long run, be a good thing. The old system is crumbling, a new system will rise up.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What will the new system be, if you had to prophesize?

**RICK RUBIN:** We don't know. We don't know. I don't think anybody really knows. I think we have to try a lot of things and then like we did Def Jam, we tried stuff, stuff happened.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You think there's hope for the mutant mistakes, there's hope that something will—

**RICK RUBIN:** To quote Lyor.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Yes, it's such a wonderful line.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I have to say something about Rick. Rick is happy to make a record and everybody hear it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** That is a justification.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** I mean, I'm sorry to talk for you, but you know, he's trying to answer a question that's never his concern in my opinion. I don't even have to look at him to say it. He's concerned, he likes—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** He likes the stuff.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Yeah, he likes to make—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The music.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** Yeah, the other stuff, the crumbling, is not even a thing he's considering.

**RICK RUBIN:** It doesn't get in the way of making great art. Our job is to make great art.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So the corporations, the industry, all of that doesn't—the fact that one can, you know, there's always this tendency to try to institutionalize, doesn't get in the way of producing great stuff?

**RICK RUBIN:** Absolutely not. The focus has always been purely on the art and everything else, luckily so far, has worked itself out.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** As we close, I must say that among the things that I saw of yours, the Def Jam Poetry I saw of yours which we will be hosting at the library soon, **(laughter)** I thought I would remind you of this because I really want this to happen—this library has to breathe new life, we have to not only oxygenate it, but elevate it, levitate it, you know, I always wonder how much does this library weigh? Nobody has been able to tell me. There are a lot of smart people around, but nobody has a clue. And we have to make it live, and one way of making it live is bringing people in here, they hear this and maybe they'll get this book, read about it, and learn something. And it's quite extraordinary that it's become a book. This experience which was run out of a dorm now becomes this massive, Rizzoli, beautifully produced book.

One of the—in researching and learning about your careers I was deeply, deeply moved, I must say by the way you reimagined and reinvigorated the late Johnny Cash and the work you did with him I find extraordinary and it really goes back in a way to—not that you've

ever erred from your origins—but it sort of reinforces the fact that your albums at the beginning were not called produced but reduced, and I'd like us to listen if we could to Track G.

**(Johnny Cash, “Hurt”)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It is extraordinary, I must say. **(applause)** How did you make this happen?

**RICK RUBIN:** I got to meet Johnny Cash and suggested that we start making some music together. And he had already been discarded by his label. At one time in the seventies he was the number one artist on Columbia Records. And then maybe seven years later they dropped him, and he had signed to another label, and wasn't having success, and he had really lost faith in himself. And I met with him and talked about the idea of making the best music he has ever made, and not—which was a radical idea for someone who had maybe made seventy albums by that time, eighty albums, but to not think about—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But you presented it that way?

**RICK RUBIN:** At first it was more, “Let's get together and talk about music,” but eventually it became, the goal became, “Let's make your best album. Let's not stop until we think this is the best you've ever done.” And he was, again, taken aback by that idea

at first, and then as we started working on it, he sort of got into the idea of “Wow, this could actually be good.” And he, through the success of our first album, found faith in himself again and it allowed us to make, you know, six albums.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But the choice of that song. How did you come upon that?

**RICK RUBIN:** That was a song written by Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, and I’m a big Nine Inch Nails fan. And I listened to the words, and the words are written by a guy who’s maybe twenty-three years old, written in his bedroom. And when Johnny Cash, seventy at that time, I think, is singing those words, they have an entirely different meaning than when Trent wrote them. And I just heard—when looking for songs for Johnny, it was always about the words. He was a great storyteller, and he would tell you a story and you believed the words he said. And it sounds like he’s telling his life story when it’s, again, the words of a twenty-three-year-old kid. But he breathed so much life into those lyrics to where, really, I feel like a lot of people got to hear the song for the first time when he sang it, and it felt like it was meant to be, written for him to sing it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It’s the pace, the pacing of it, the clear locution, and the way it’s also incredibly filmed. I mean, it’s tremendous. And the whole Johnny Cash Project now that I’ve discovered online.

**RICK RUBIN:** Incredible.



**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Isn't it?

**RICK RUBIN:** Incredible.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's like adding an archive to a life, I must say this is a—. In some way the word "reduction" is right here, it's back to the essentials. There's no frou-frou on it. There's no—is frou-frou a good word?

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It's a good word.

**(laughter)**

**RICK RUBIN:** It was a perfect bookend because his career started at Sun Records, and he made these incredible records to start with, and then he got very successful, and then there was a sort of a middle period where they weren't as good, and then he kind of lost faith in himself, and then to end on such a high note as these albums, it just—. And he was the greatest man. If anyone deserved to have the recognition that he got, it was him.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And you gave him that.

**RICK RUBIN:** I helped.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You helped, and if I may, I hope this is not in bad taste, I'd

like to recognize Rosanne Cash and her son.

**(applause)**

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** When I say that Rick breathed, gave people room to breathe, and he produced around them, and he sucked what was best from them. I mean, just listening to him talk about it, it brings you almost to—it's such a special talent.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And he gives back life.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** It's about listening. And you know just looking at artists, he'd always look at them and see their essence. He said, "whatever Chuck wanted to do," because he saw in him something. And when he produced them, he would suck that out of them, he would get them to be their best. And this example obviously, and listening to him talk about it, it reminds me of his experiences with his very first artists' productions and all the way until we separated. Every time he went into the studio, he went dedicated to making that person the best he could be. And that's a listener, not a controlling, but a person who is a giver, and that's what I saw.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** In closing, and I promise, Bill Stephney said, "In my opinion, it was Rick who built Def Jam without question. But if Rick built Def Jam, it's still subordinate to Russell's building hip-hop. Russell built the culture. There would be no hip, Def Jam, or the success of Rick in Def Jam, without the magic of Russell

Simmons, who essentially carried the culture on his shoulders and moved it all along.”

**(applause)** Would you agree with that?

**RICK RUBIN:** Beautiful.

**RUSSELL SIMMONS:** That’s a sweet compliment. I just, I went along for a ride with a lot of talented people. I was surrounded by the most talented people, and each one of them more talented in their field than I was. And I was able to aid all of them do what they do, from Kevin Liles there to Julie Greenwald. Lyor, you know, I remember being on the Stairmaster, he sends me a kid from my old neighborhood, Irv Gotti, brilliant, did so many, and Irv was bouncing and shit, like, “This stuff is good. They dance like this now, Russ.” You know, he’s telling me how they dance *now* like I’m that old, I wasn’t that old then. **(laughter)** But, you know, just to keep it alive and to keep finding new talent, and I was just, Michael Kyser, I don’t know where he is, but Lyor kept the team together, the people that we started with. Look at Mike Kyser, president. Kevin Liles, president. Julie Greenwald, president. These were all interns, these fuckers are presidents, all of them. Lyor made them all. **(applause)** Chris Lighty. So I was surrounded by a lot of very, very talented people, and I was just lucky enough to get on the ride.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We’re going to close the evening with Track B of the video. That’s the evening.

**(LL Cool J, “I’m Bad”)**

