

Feature

Keeping It Real: Hip-hop Mogul Russell Simmons Set to Launch 360HipHop.com

by [Lynne d. Johnson](#)

In hip-hop culture, it's all about authenticity. Is it real? So, it would only follow suit that when hip-hop aficionados go online, they'll gravitate toward the websites that authentically represent hip-hop culture. At least that's what hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons and his executive team at his new-media venture, 360HipHop.com, are hoping.

Set to go live later this month, 360HipHop is being touted as the ultimate destination point on the Web for all things hip-hop. And that's exactly what Selwyn Seyfu Hinds, the company's chief creative officer and former editor of *The Source* magazine, hopes will set 360HipHop apart from the slew of urban-oriented portals and content-commerce-community sites popping up all over the Net. "We are hip-hop, plain and simple," Hinds says. "The way we defined ourselves, from the very beginning, was as the entry point for hip-hop on the Web. We're not beating around the bush. Everyone else is defining their sites differently," he adds.



Another edge 360HipHop may have over its competitors is Simmons' 20-year career as hip-hop entrepreneur. To those who should know (but don't), Simmons is the founder of Def Jam, the hip-hop record label that launched the careers of the Beastie Boys, Public Enemy, LL Cool J, and Run D.M.C. He later turned Def Jam to film, coproducing *Krush Groove* and producing Eddie Murphy's *Nutty Professor*. His clothing line, Phat Farm, is one of the fastest-growing urban apparel companies--sales totaled \$69 million last year and they are projected to total \$150 million this year, according to Simmons.

Simmons has garnered a reputation for having a Midas touch, yet critics contend that he has his hands in too many pots. Not every project he's touched has been successful. The film *Gridlock'd*, starring Tupac Shakur, and Abel Ferrara's art-house vampire flick *The Addiction* both flopped. He also lent his name to *One World* magazine and the Warner Studios-produced *One World Music Beat*, two projects that never really took off. Earlier this year, competitor Urban Box Office, founded by deceased former Motown executive George Jackson, formed a strategic alliance with Oneworld Media, the company behind the magazine and TV show.

Hip-hop has become the vernacular for an entire generation of music fans.

Record of success or not, investors--including Sony, Seagram, actor Will Smith, model Tyra Banks, and rappers Method Man and Red Man-- have all banked \$7 million into the project. And a reported \$7 million to \$10 million is coming soon from another private round of financing from the executive team, including Simmons.

"Hip-hop has become the vernacular for an entire generation of music fans. We have not pigeonholed ourselves as another music site. It's a hip-hop lifestyle site," says Rick Holzman, 360HipHop COO and former VP, general manager for MTV.com. "It's primarily a content site, and we have a strong editorial group." Many of the editors are émigrés from hip-hop magazines known for their street cred, such as *Vibe*, *The Source*, and *Rap Pages*.

Simmons says he wants the site to be the most credible voice for the hip-hop community. "We want to be *Rolling Stone*, not *Tiger Beat*," he says. His plan is to leverage the site as a brand maker or breaker. 360HipHop's editorial voice will critically assess the fashion and entertainment industries, as well as the politicians. The site will join Rock The Vote in sponsoring Rap The Vote 2000, aimed at getting the hip-hop community into the voting booths.

Some of the site's more noteworthy features include a virtual subway station where the walls are lined with e-commerce opportunities. The subway will allow users to submit graffiti pieces, and when the train becomes eight-cars full it will be retired and a new train will emerge to take its place. Users won't be able to make the train run whenever they want to. They'll have to wait on the platform and adhere to 360HipHop's schedule. Another interactive feature will allow users to trade rhymes in a battle.

Ola Kudo, who is in charge of in-house design, is most proud of the site's use of the iPix technology. With this technology, a camera shoots at 180-degree angles on a swivel tripod. The images are then stitched together on the

site, enabling users to navigate around the image as if they were the camera itself. Kudo plans to use iPix for fashion shoots and videos, and as users click around, e-commerce opportunities and editorial will pop up. According to Simmons and Hinds, all of these goodies have been tested for the 56k user, so whether the average Internet user has broadband access should not a factor.

Editor's Note: [Lynne d. Johnson \(ljohnson@dnymag.com\)](mailto:ljohnson@dnymag.com) is the associate editor of Digital New York, and an adjunct professor of communications at the College of Mount Saint Vincent. She was formerly the managing editor of *Beat Down*, a hip-hop publication, and has written about urban culture for a variety of offline magazines.

Feedback: letters@digitalmusicweekly.com

Deals of the Week

✦ DM Weekly's Take on This Week's Announcements

*Ranking determined by *Digital Music Weekly* on a scale of 1 to 10, depending on a number of factors, including, but not limited to, size of deal, exclusivity, and overall effect on the digital music space.

Importance*	Who	With	What	Bottom Line
9	Napster	75 Ark Entertainment	Industry pariah Napster signs promotional download agreement with upstart hip-hop label. Exclusivity--YES; Time Frame-- IMMEDIATE; Financial Terms-- UNDISCLOSED	Napster's new CEO, Hank Barry, is scurrying to establish alternative uses for the file-swapping software, which is mainly a tool for finding illegal MP3 files in its current form. Promotional downloads with emerging artists could put Napster in the same camp as Scour Exchange, which is lawsuit free.
8	Launch.com	iBeam	Launch and backbone provider iBeam team up to offer dedicated network of music content to college campuses with Launch College Direct. Exclusivity--YES; Time Frame--IMMEDIATE; Financial Terms-- UNDISCLOSED	Give 'em what they want, what they really, really want! Launch and iBeam play by the RIAA's rules, and will offer college students access to major label content. The goal here is to displace Napster as the music app of choice.
5	Launch.com	Packet Video	Launch participating in trials of Packet Video's wireless video delivery service, delivering content in MPEG-4 format. Exclusivity--YES; Time Frame--IMMEDIATE; Financial Terms-- UNDISCLOSED	A big week for Launch. Rob Tercek's Packet Video is a likely winner long-term, but mass access is years away.
			Listen.com's pool of editors will review downloads from two of Enigma's genre-specific sites. Enigma will refer its	Deal should offer Enigma's KNAC.com and GrooveRadio.com with