

Sean Combs and Kim Porter

Ordinary a Ove

With the release of the most important and personal album of his career, Sean and a very pregnant Kim sit down for a heartbreakingly honest interview with **Jeannine Amber** and talk for the first time about monogamy, marriage and why the relationship that confounds so many works so well

Sean Combs and Kim Porter were photographed by Mark Liddell at the Hotel on Rivington in New York City, October 6, 2006. Porter styled by Agnes Cammock. Combs styled by Marni Senofonte.

Sean on Kim: “She deserves to get married. But I’m just not ready. It’s not a reflection on how much I love Kim. It’s that I’m just learning how to be a good boyfriend.”

Sean “Diddy” Combs emerges from the bedroom in his suite on the thirty-fifth floor of the Four Seasons Hotel in midtown Manhattan wearing a tan Sean John sweat suit. He’s ready for breakfast, even though it’s past noon. Sitting down at the dining table in his suite, the man is clearly half asleep, his eyes at half-mast, his body slumped in the chair. “That’s what you get for keeping me up till 8 in the morning,” Combs’s girlfriend, Kim Porter says, arranging a plate of bacon and eggs in front of him. When asked what he was doing all night, he grins. “Making love,” he says. “And it was good too.”

Combs, never one to mince words, is in love. He’ll tell you in a magazine article, he’ll tell you in person, and he’ll tell you in the songs on his newest album Press Play, an effort he says was inspired by his 12-year on-and-off-again relationship with Porter, whom he met when he was an A&R executive at Uptown Records in the 1990’s. “She’s my muse,” he says. “You know how they say it in the movies? It’s corny but beautiful: She completes me.”

But loving Sean Combs back is a difficult thing. He is a man driven by, if not demons, then something just as ferocious. It manifests as a complete inability to sit still, to enjoy the here and now, to be happy with what he has. Rather, Combs is caught in a perpetual quest for the next big thing, the next challenge, the next spectacle of which he is the shining star. Over the years he’s transformed himself from a hip-hop impresario into a political activist, marathon man, fashion designer, parfumeur, Broadway star and reality TV personality. And now at the age of 37, when most rappers would be throwing in the towel, he’s back onstage, ready to take on the likes of Justin Timberlake and Beyoncé for a spot at the top of the charts.

And while his role as trendsetter may not be what it was in the heyday of ghetto fabulous, Combs’s pockets haven’t suffered. Time magazine, which named him one of the most influential people of 2006, estimated his worth at \$315 million. Not surprisingly, he is, at turns, the focus of both adulation and derision by the general public and the object of constant desire by certain groups of women—from groupies to starlets—who all want a piece of him. “Not chickenheads,” he boasts. “If a woman approaches me, she’s going to feel like she’s stepping up for the championship of the world.”

It takes a strong and steady woman to stand by a whirlwind like that. But in Porter, 36, a former model who is due to give birth to the couple’s twin girls this month, Combs seems to have found his match, which makes you wonder why he still hasn’t given her that ring.

There’s Something About Kim

“The first time I saw her, she was at the studio with her ex-boyfriend [singer Al B. Sure, the father of Porter’s oldest child, Quincy, now 15],” says Combs, his face immediately brightening at the memory. “I wasn’t trying to holler at her or anything, but I was admiring her—her lips, her eyes, her mouth, her shape, her energy—and thinking, I wish I had a girl like that.”

Soon after, Andre Harrell, founder of Uptown Records, hired Porter as a receptionist. “Puff was in love with her from the first time he saw her,” remembers Harrell. “You could tell from the way he looked at her.” Every morning when he showed up for work, Porter would give Combs a smile. But still he didn’t make a move. “She kind of made me nervous,” Combs says. “She wasn’t like a New York girl. She was Bohemian, mixed with Georgia-peach hospitality. I got the idea she’d like doing stuff like walking barefoot in the grass. I didn’t think I could get her to like me.” Combs says now that what struck him most, and, ironically, what would later become his biggest complaint, was her reserve. “She was smooth, you know, like ice. She’s cool and collected and thinks before she speaks. You meet a lot of young ladies, and they just don’t do that. Kim was never pressed; she was always in control.”

It took a few years, a chance meeting at a party and several lengthy phone calls before the couple started dating in 1994. Quickly they became inseparable. “We went out together, we ate together, we played together,” says Porter. “He would want me at the office; I would want him at my shoots. Our bond was so tight.”

“It just didn’t feel right without her,” Combs says. “I’m talking about from a strip club to playing poker, she would be there.” The girl could even throw a football, he adds. Then in 1997, Porter became pregnant with their son Christian. [Combs has another son, Justin, 12, from a previous relationship with stylist Misa Hylton-Brim.] It should have been the happiest time for both of them. Instead, that’s when everything fell apart.

When a Man Loves Another Woman

“A friend called my cell phone,” says Porter of the way she heard that Combs had fallen into the arms of a certain Latina with a world-famous behind. “Then a few weeks later, the press hit.”

Porter, raised by her mother and grandmother in the quiet town of Columbus, Georgia, describes herself as a private person. Unlike other girlfriends of celebrities, she has never tried to parlay her relationship with Combs into a shot at fame. She’s stayed low-key, focusing on her children, her man and her fledgling career as an actress. (She had a small part in 2001’s The Brothers and this month stars opposite Tatum O’Neal in My Network TV’s new one-hour drama Art of Betrayal.) But when Combs took up with Jennifer Lopez, Porter suddenly found herself the focus of everyone’s concern. “Everywhere I went, people were asking, ‘Are you okay?’ I just hated that,” she says, over a bowl of squash soup during a three-hour lunch at a French bistro in Manhattan. Dressed in black leggings and a striped sweater, and wearing very little makeup, Porter is more stunning in person than in any red-carpet shot. “People just believed everything they saw in print, and they were talking to me like I was really crushed,” she continues, “But I had just had a baby. I couldn’t be somewhere in a corner heartbroken. I have kids. I’m a grown woman.”

Even Porter’s mother, Sarah, was amazed by her daughter’s calm in the face of such commotion. “The whole family was upset about the situation with Lopez,” she says. “You hear rumors, and you see things on television. And if your daughter is involved, you want >

Closer than Close

Sean’s jewelry, his own.

Sean on Kim: "Because I'm so aggressive, the best energy for me is someone who slows me down and makes me feel like I can breathe. When I'm around Kim, I feel like I can do that."

Just the Four of Us

Sean wears a Gucci shirt, Sean John pants, Jacob & Co. watch and his own jewelry. Kim wears a Vera Wang gown, Temple St. Clair cuff and bracelets and a David Yurman ring.

to know if she's hurting. But Kim didn't fall apart. She didn't stop eating; she didn't do any of that. She behaved normally. As her mother I was checking her out all the time, looking and watching to see if she was putting on an act. But she's very resilient; she handled it like a champ, even though I knew she must have been hurting. I was so very proud of her."

But while Porter held her head up and went about her business, there was no getting around the media's insatiable appetite for the Bad Boy rapper and the starlet in that revealing green dress. The couple were photographed everywhere, at awards shows and nightclubs, and emblazoned across the cover of magazines. "They were like Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe," says Harrell. "Our generation had never seen anything like it." As far as Porter is concerned, that was exactly the problem. "He just got caught up in the hype," she says matter-of-factly. "And my man *is* Mr. Hype."

The Lopez years—the couple dated from 1998 to 2000—were so public, so humiliating, so disrespectful, says Porter, and what made it worse was that it was all a lie. "That relationship wasn't real," she says bluntly. "The world just saw the bright lights and the camera. But I knew what was really going on. He was still in love with me." Porter, who says Combs fell for a "big booty and a smile," used to tell him that when he was finished with his "little Puerto Rican girlfriend," he'd be back. But, in fact, he never really left. The entire time Combs was seeing Lopez, Porter's phone never stopped ringing. "No one knows that part," she says. "He was calling fifty, sixty times a day. Sometimes I wouldn't even talk to him because I was so angry. I couldn't be 'nice Kim.' I had to be, you know, that bitch. Like, this is not going down."

At the time, Porter and Combs were living together. But as soon as she caught wind of the Lopez affair, Porter kicked her man out ("of my own house," he points out indignantly) and changed the locks. "I told him someone's got to go, and it isn't going to be me and these kids," she remembers. Combs moved into a hotel but ignored Porter's wishes to be left alone, continuing to stop by the house whenever he pleased. "It was like my life was not my own," says Porter. "He was very, very intrusive." The couple would eventually end up in the Manhattan Family Courthouse to hash out a visitation agreement, which Combs admits he did not stick to. "He would say he needed to see his son, but I was at a place where just the sight of him would turn my stomach," Porter recalls. "My feeling was, you made this decision, now stay over there. I can't repeat everything I said at the time, because it's really not that ladylike. But I was very expressive about it." In fact, she reluctantly admits that one day she got so angry she threw a television at Combs. "It was a small one," she says.

As Porter recounts this story of betrayal, she smiles politely, every bit the sweet southern girl. The only glimmer of venom you'll see is when you ask if Combs ever took their young son, Christian, around Lopez. "No," she bristles. "*Hell* no! No. No. No. Do you see me? I'm a full Black woman. We don't mix and mingle like that. I'd kill him dead. So he knew better. And besides, does she look like the type that would want to play house and family with two little Black kids? No. I don't think it was that type of situation."

Kim on Jennifer Lopez: "Does she look like the type that would want to play house and family with two little Black kids? No."

The next day over breakfast, Combs struggles to explain his side of the story. First, he admits he made a mistake. "I wasn't trying to hurt her, but with the cameras and everything it was probably the worst relationship for me to get into," he says. "I don't know if I could have been as strong as Kim was." But he also wants it known that when he did get into his "other relationship," he and Porter were already having problems. "It wasn't boom, I just woke up one morning and started messing with Jennifer and left Kim," he says. "That's not what happened."

According to Combs, it all started because Porter, who had won him over with her poise, turned out to be *too* laid-back. "I'm used to applause when I walk in the room," he says, "and she was just too cool. I would tell her, 'I guess I'll go be with someone else who'll take care of me the way I want to be taken care of, who'll be a little more aggressive.' " He lodged his complaints, but much to his chagrin, Porter "wasn't really conforming to how I wanted her to conform." With Lopez, Combs says, he was "making a statement."

"Jennifer was my perfect match in terms of energy," he explains. "I thought, *I'll test the waters and hopefully Kim will see I'm serious and come running after me.*" Only Kim didn't make a move. "So I was back at the house, trying to figure out what the hell was going on," Combs says.

As her boyfriend speaks, Porter listens quietly, eating her Cream of Wheat and sipping iced tea. But then Combs, perhaps feeling defensive about having to explain his indiscretion to both the woman he wronged and a skeptical reporter, goes to that place no man in his right mind would: "Do you really think that God meant for a man to have just one wife?" he blurts out. "Or a woman to have one husband? Do you think God meant it that way?"

Porter shoots him a look. "Do you really want me having sex with some other man? You want that to happen?" she demands.

"No," he says sheepishly, "but God made us different."

"That's such a cop-out," says Porter. "I could be just like you. I choose not to be."

Combs rambles and stammers for a while. "Sometimes things happen," he tries. Then, turning to his girlfriend, he says, "This is the most monogamous I've ever been in my life... that's all I'm trying to say."

Happily Ever After?

The next evening, alone in the backseat of his \$420,000 Maybach parked outside a studio in New Jersey where he is rehearsing for an appearance on *The Late Show With David Letterman*, Combs is more reflective about his love for Porter. "With Jennifer I was attracted to someone who had the same energy as me, but that isn't necessarily the best," he says quietly. "Because I'm so aggressive, the best energy for me is someone who slows me down and makes me feel like I can breathe. It's hard for me to breathe. When I'm around Kim I feel like I can do that."

Harrell, who's known Combs since he was a teen, agrees. "Puff is a superachiever," he says, "Kim is all peace, love and life. Puff finds calm in her presence. He never had that with Jennifer." >

Inseparable

Kim wears an **Angel Sanchez** dress, **David Yurman** necklace and Cartier earrings. Sean wears a **Sean John** sweater and pants, **Jacob & Co.** watch and his own jewelry.

*Sean on staying faithful:
“This is the most monogamous
I’ve ever been in my life.”*

But no matter how much love the couple had shared, winning Porter back was going to take some work. In 2001, Combs was tried on weapons and bribery charges stemming from a 1999 shooting incident in which three people were injured at a Manhattan nightclub. Although Porter says she knew in her heart he was never going to jail, she was down on her knees praying that Combs would be exonerated. (He was eventually acquitted of all charges.) But with the trial “and the whole whooptie whoo, there was just too much going on,” says Porter. So in September 2001, she moved back to Georgia to be with her family and raise her two young sons away from the chaos. And that’s when Combs really came around. “I think the threat of losing his freedom forced him to grow up and take responsibility for his actions,” says Porter. She adds that once she and the kids left New York, Combs was “forced to come to me to work things out. And he really had to jump through some hoops. He was on the plane every weekend, talking to my mom and my grandmother and telling the kids, ‘Daddy made a mistake.’ It wasn’t like I had been going out with Puffy by myself, I had a whole family behind me. I had cousins who wanted to beat him up.” Porter says Combs even had to make things right with her father. “I don’t know what those conversations were like,” she says, “but it was enough for my father to say to me, ‘Kimberly, I made a mistake with your mother. We all make mistakes.’ ”

Private Time

Sean wears a DSquared2 sweater, Jacob & Co. watch and his own jewelry. Kim wears a Zac Posen dress, Garrard necklace and Cartier studs.

In the end, Porter finally let her guard down because, for all his faults, there’s really no man who can love her better. “I know him like I know my kids,” she says, explaining their connection. Like all love, theirs is part chemistry and part mystery. Porter says she understands that some people don’t get why she took Combs back. And she says that her biggest fear is that if it happens again the relationship will have to be over. But she feels no one knows him the way she does. Yes, she admits that the rumors of his legendary temper tantrums with his staff are “all true,” but she insists he has a softer side. “He’s gentle, giving and sensitive,” she says with a smile, “especially to me. He’s really a good guy, with a big, big heart. I get to see that. I’m really thankful / get to see that.”

Porter says there’s no end to what Combs will do for her. When asked to elaborate, she doesn’t rattle off a list of lavish gifts of jewelry or trips or houses like one would expect (though he’s given them all). She’ll tell you about how last Valentine’s Day, Combs rented a screening room, filled it with candles, and played for her a DVD he had compiled of photographs chronicling their life together. “There were red-carpet shots, but mostly it was us and the kids,” she says. “It meant so much to me because I’d had a flood in my house and had lost all my photos.” Like most women with millionaire boyfriends, Porter is often accused of being a gold digger. To that she just rolls her eyes. “I’m not impressed with things—not a bag or shoes or a car—I’ve got a lot of stuff,” she says. “Impress me with your person. Show me you can be a really good man. That’s how to impress me.” >

Real Love

Kim wears an OMO Norma Kamali dress, Cartier ring and studs. Sean wears a J. Lindeberg vest, Sean John shirt and his own jewelry.

Still, Porter concedes that loving a man as driven as Combs will always have its challenges. "He could be a little more attentive to his family," she says with a nod, "but I understand who he is and what that requires of him. He's in a business where he wants to be the best, and he wants to make sure his family has the best. It takes a lot of his person to do that. You know, there's only so much time in the day. But as long as he makes us feel like we're a family, I'm fine. There'll be one day when he won't be working so hard, then we have a lifetime." She pauses for a moment and laughs. "I'm not a needy person," she adds. "If I were, I'd probably be somewhere pulling out my hair right now."

Since their reconciliation, Combs says he's made a real effort to "leave P. Diddy at the office" and make more time for Kim and the kids. "She taught me well," he says. "When you're in a relationship, there's a lot of give-and-take. Before I was just selfish." Of course, the juggling act is about to become a lot more complicated. This summer Porter told him she was pregnant and carrying twin girls by sliding a picture of her ultrasound across the table while the couple were eating dinner at Nobu in New York. The pregnancy wasn't planned, he says, and adds, "Someone must have been counting wrong." But on hearing the news, he bolted from his seat and ran around the restaurant. "I was

ecstatic," he says. "I've wanted girls for a long time. I just picture the babies falling asleep on top of me."

Despite the love, the history and the twins on the way, the couple still have no plans to marry. Porter insists she doesn't care. She doesn't know anyone who has a good marriage (her parents divorced when she was a child), and the last thing she wants is for the relationship to sour under the strain.

Back in his Maybach, Combs considers the marriage question. "I know she deserves to get married," he says, "but I'm just not ready." He leans back into his seat. "It's not a reflection on how much I love Kim. It's that I'm just learning how to be a good boyfriend. When I'm finished with this step, I'll move on to the next." He pauses, then adds, "But when I do get married, you'll be invited to the wedding."

With that, he gets out of the car and heads off to rehearsal. But a minute later he's back, rapping on the window. "You should end the piece like that," he says, suddenly struck with the idea, "with me talking about getting married. It'll give hope to all the girls who fell in love with a player." As he walks away, he calls out one last correction into the night. "Ex-player," he says. "Make that *ex*-player." [

Jeannine Amber is senior writer for ESSENCE.

For more of our exclusive interview with Sean Combs and Kim Porter and behind-the-scenes footage from our cover shoot, log on to essence.com.