



# AVENUE

Smokey Fontaine '93 made his reputation telling the story of hip-hop culture and now has taken on the challenge of a celebrity-oriented consumer magazine.

**BY LARRY GETLEN**

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL BURKHART**

In *Beat This: A Hip-Hop History*, a 1984 BBC documentary about the seminal days of hip-hop, rap pioneer DJ Kool Herc talks about the South Bronx house parties where he helped ignite the fire of the B-Boy nation. Off to one side sits a light-skinned, 10-year-old African-American boy in a blue Le Tigre shirt, with a mouthful of braces, and curls spilling out of his side-turned cap. He is the director's son, a friendly kid with a life in which the writer James Baldwin is simply mom's friend Jimmy. He is Smokey Fontaine, named for another of mom's friends, Smokey Robinson. And when he grows up, he'll use the creativity and hip-hop exposure he absorbed as a kid to become a powerful force in the music world.

Smokey Fontaine '93 was born in 1972, the son of Pat Hartley, an African-American Jewish actress from New York who starred in the Jimi Hendrix fantasy/concert film *Rainbow Bridge*, and a white documentary filmmaker from England named Dick Fontaine. Smokey wrote short stories as a young teen in Manhattan's Upper West Side, crafting mystery novels and dark tales of fiction, and was an early child of pop, blasting the soundtracks to *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever* and songs by Phil Collins. But he also lived around the corner from Rock Steady Park, home of break-dancing pioneers The Rock Steady Crew, and as hip-hop's big bang exploded around him, he absorbed the entire popular music landscape, from light pop to "Rapper's Delight" to the heyday of Michael Jackson. Headphones were his constant companion, and in his senior year of high school he bought a few turntables and became a DJ.

After graduating from New York's prestigious Bronx High School of Science, Smokey had his choice of colleges. A rocking house party at Malcolm X house sealed the deal for Wesleyan, where Smokey played basketball, double-majored in English and African-American studies, threw many parties, and developed a deeper appreciation of his heritage. Smokey describes the racial tension of his freshman year as pivotal to his sense of cultural identity. Racial epithets scrawled in Malcolm X House set off a controversy that dominated his freshman year. "That kick-started my personal sense of, 'OK, I'm aligning myself with the Black community from day one.'"

At Wesleyan, Smokey met a fellow freshman, Stephanie Addison. He invited Stephanie to one of his parties, and at first she thought he was just a loud, brash





sented unique obstacles. “All the challenges of the magazine came to a head at the Alicia Keys photo shoot,” says Smokey, who had hired a top fashion photographer to shoot Keys in a glamorous Brigitte Bardot motif. The singer’s management declared early on that she would not remove her trademark braids. The photographer thought they made her look like a schoolgirl and refused to shoot her until she removed them. A tense, three-hour series of negotiations followed. Smokey brokered a compromise wherein Keys would remove some of her braids, but not all. The resulting cover featured a tight shot on her face that made her look positively luminescent. “I showed her the pictures and she was like, ‘Smokey, oh my god, I’ve never looked more beau-



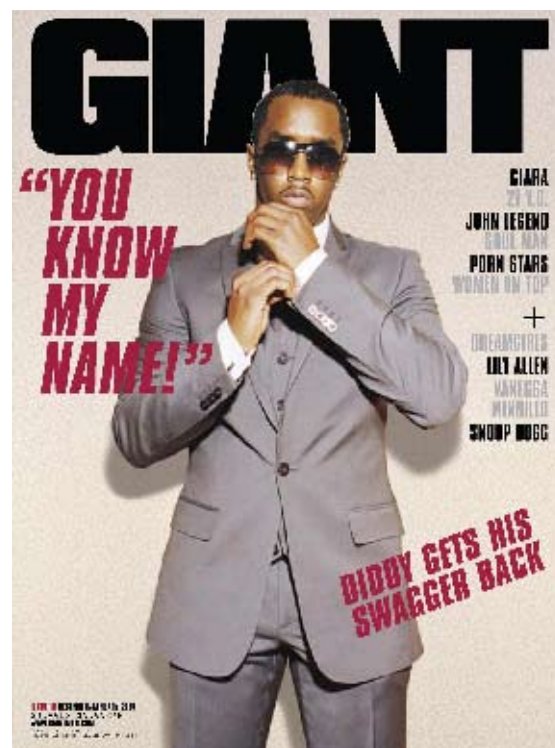
tiful,” he says, noting that Keys has not put the braids back in since.

Poulson-Bryant feels that *America* worked because of Smokey’s ability to perceive accurately the nature of hip-hop’s role in our culture, and role of journalism in reflecting on it. “Hip-hop, in a lot of ways, is about glamour and self-creation, and *America* gets that. A lot of other magazines don’t,” he says. “A lot of hip-hop magazines want to be part of the hip-hop game rather than report on it, and I don’t know if you can be effective that way anymore. Smokey gets that this is the mainstream culture, not just a corner. It’s the dominant youth culture, and it needs to be celebrated and examined that way.”

As always, Smokey has faced varying degrees of challenge, including those way beyond what might have been foreseen. On the day he was scheduled for a second interview for this article, Smokey had a meeting with Dash to discuss the magazine’s finances, and about half an hour into the meeting, Smokey says, Dash erupted.

“He was screaming and cursing at me, getting nose to nose basically, and he wanted to egg me on into a fight,” says Smokey, who says the confrontation suddenly turned violent. “He just kinda decked me in my chest as I was standing in front of his couch, and I fell over.”

The meeting ended soon after, and as the pain in his chest intensified over the next few hours, Smokey drove



himself to the emergency room. The doctors found an abnormal EKG and an elevated set of cardiac enzymes, and Smokey was admitted to the hospital, where he stayed for several days.

Not long after, Smokey met Jamie Hooper, founder and president of *Giant*, a mass-market entertainment magazine that had some of the same goals as *America* but lacked elements that Smokey had developed: top photography, outstanding design, and celebrity focus. *Giant*, however, had strong circulation and a good advertising

base. Hooper and Smokey saw opportunity, so Smokey moved in 2006 from *America* to become *Giant*’s new editor-in-chief.

“I was given full creative control to make, in my mind, a commercial version of *America* magazine,” he says.

At \$3.99 per copy, it’s on newsstands nationwide and remains faithful to the celebrity energy of *America*, but designed for mass circulation. Smokey believes that too many magazine editors have been scared by the Internet into ill-advised attempts to emulate Web style with charts, lists, and lots of data.

“You will never be able to compete with the immediacy of online,” he says. “But I can win as a magazine editor by creating a beautiful printed piece.”



His first issue featured Beyoncé on the cover in hair curlers—a far cry from her usual glamour shots. The issue, released in August, has become *Giant*’s most successful ever on the newsstand. MTV debuted the cover, and a blizzard of media coverage followed with attention on *Entertainment Tonight*, the E Channel, the *Jay Leno Show*, and the *Today Show*.

That’s great for the new *Giant* and for Smokey, who says, “I’m here to give *Rolling Stone* and *Vibe* a run for their money.”

Larry Getlen is a freelance writer living in New York City who previously wrote about DNA databases for Wesleyan.