



RUSSELL CROWS

Russell Simmons on harnessing the power of hip-hop to change the world [1](#)



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by [Sarah van Schagen](#)

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Hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons is a top-grossing music executive, [sometime reality star](#), and head honcho of a number of successful ventures including

Courtesy [Global Grind](#)

clothing lines [Phat Farm](#) and [Baby Phat](#). He's also a yoga-practicing vegan who's hoping to use his resources to make change in the world of hip-hop—and the world at large.

Describing himself as “hip-hop to the bone,” Simmons is quick to hail the power of that community in influencing politics, pointing to a [recent change in drug policy in New York State](#). “That was because Jay-Z and Puffy and Rev Run and LL Cool J and many other people came out to rally,” he says. “A lot of politicians joined them, but the artists made the noise and created the energy and made the change.”

Simmons has high hopes for rallying that same energy in the fight against climate change—an issue, he admits, the community has yet to truly embrace. But he’s harnessing more than the power of lyrics and videos to get the message out. He’s recently given birth to a new-media company called [Global Grind](#)—a hip-hop HuffPo, if you will—featuring news stories, video clips, and celeb blog posts on topics ranging from music and entertainment to “[politricks](#).”

Simmons has also taken on the role of spokesperson for the [America’s Greenest Campus](#) campaign, an effort to get college students (a key hip-hop demographic) to reduce their carbon footprint. The contest runs through October and offers prizes to the school with the most participants, the school with the largest percentage of carbon emissions reduced, and the creator of an [online ad for sponsor SmartPower](#).

During a recent phone call—and between bites of a Gardenburger-topped salad garnished with both salad dressing *and* ketchup (a combination his staff poked fun at, he says)—Simmons talked about his commitment to reducing his own footprint, the brand power of hip-hop, and the importance of well-informed consumers.

Q. Tell me about the America’s Greenest Campus contest. Why have you signed on to help publicize this campaign?

A. The hip-hop community has not been as concerned about the environment as they could be, so if I can loan my voice and my resources ... into growing it very quickly, then I believe that companies can create more awareness on this subject. It’s something that I’m very committed to, so I want to tie this educational vehicle, Global Grind, directly to this “America’s Greenest Campus” idea, and I want to see how I can help others to lighten their footprint.

Q. What role can young people play in helping change the way we think about climate change in this country?

A. [This campaign] is an educational tool and an empowerment vehicle. People don’t understand what it is to lighten their footprint, what steps to take. So if we give them the simple steps and we tell them exactly how much it affects the environment if they make certain changes—being a vegetarian, doing other things that make a dramatic difference in how much weight they carry in the world—people want to know that. When they realize that by changing simple things they can make a difference, it’s an empowerment vehicle.

Q. You’ve said that you used to live a life of overconsumption and abundance—how have your priorities changed over time?



A. One thing is that I'm an animal activist. I felt very disturbed about the way humanity treats its species on this planet. It was a spiritual matter, and it was not connected, at first, to the environment. And then when I found out that your footprint is *so* much heavier because you eat animals—that's [a bigger] cause of global warming ... than all forms of transportation put together—it became a part of my discussion when I was trying to get people to stop eating animals and abusing themselves by eating them. I didn't realize how much they were abusing the planet as well.



Photo: [Brett Weinstein](#)

Q. Hip-hop culture definitely trumpets a life of luxury and overconsumption, and that message is going straight to the youth, so it feels a little bit contradictory to say “hey, green your campus, lessen your footprint” but also be telling them “have the pimpest car and the blingiest bling”—

A. I'm going to interrupt you. First of all, the abuse comes from the top down. The president's flying around in a private plane. Stop playin'! Everybody's abusive and every channel's abusing us ... All the people pointing the finger at hip-hop need to point at themselves.

If hip-hop decides to buy something that's popular in culture and talk about it, that certainly doesn't make them more abusive. They're *more* conscious, not less. They're *less* homophobic, not more. They're *less* violent, not more. They're *less* racist, not more. But it's *wrong* [to say that] in general, they're less concerned.

I will say that it is a community that needs to be enlightened more. But that's not the issue—their mission of getting ahead. That's a mission America sends on every network, in every promotion, on every channel, and every commercial.

Because they sing about the things that people buy? I think that's a reflection of *us*. They are reflections of us, and our dirt is coming right out of their mouths ...

Q. Do you think the hip-hop community can lead the charge to help shepherd these changes?

A. You've gotta hope so, because the biz is depending on hip-hop to pick which color diamond is popular. The only way [the [Maybach](#)] beats [Phantom Rolls Royce](#) is to get rappers to choose it. Tommy Hilfiger's praying that hip-hop discovers him again. So is Coca-Cola; [they're] worried what hip-hop says versus Pepsi.

We need them; they're the best brand-building community in the world. If we can get a large number of hip-hoppers to take this on, then they will have a greater impact in lots of forms of media.

Q. Are there any artists in particular who have taken on this cause?

A. I don't have a rapper that I can point to the way I can point to Leonardo DiCaprio. But I'm going to work now as an individual, and I'm trying to find some leaders in the community who can make a huge difference.

Q. Have you done any work to move along environmental changes in the music industry —or have you seen any promising changes in the way the industry is run?

A. I don't know that they've done a lot of work yet. The reason I signed on [to this campaign] is because I felt they were not serving this initiative. They work on many things that are social and political, but this has not been one. It's not been on the forefront in their minds, and that's why I'm trying to make a difference now by joining on. I'm not joining on because they have a lot of hip-hoppers involved in the environmental movement. I'm joining on because they *don't*, and I think that we can put it in their face and they're conscious people and a lot of them will join.

Q. What about your clothing lines? Have you made moves to ensure they have minimal impact on the earth?

Not as much as I should. It's something we've talked about a lot. In fact, we had a discussion about making a lot of organic cotton for Wal-Mart yesterday.

Q. What's holding you back on that front? What needs to happen so that it makes sense from a business point of view?

A. You have to get customers to value it. Some of these choices we want to make—in order for us to be competitive and still make a difference, we have to be profitable. There is a resistance on the part of some consumers that is making it more difficult. We have to promote the value of organic choices to the consumers ... We're working on it. It's a marketing exercise.

Q. Do you feel it's your role as a public figure to use your status to promote change?

A. I try to go to work every day and make sure my businesses have a light footprint in every area. I stopped my licensees a long time ago from making fur; my new companies are not making leather. I'm trying, you know? I try to every day do a little better, but that's for *me* to sleep at night. If you live by example, if you speak in a way that people can digest it and see the value in it, then you can get people to join in. I know that as [people] learn to do better, they do better, they feel better, and they sleep better as a result of making a good choice.

Sarah van Schagen is Grist's Seattle editor.

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At first I was going to slam this article before I read it because I was assuming I knew where Russell was going but after reading I am impressed. He made a lot of sense. Hip hop has more influence than most music. The entire world is fixated on the music. I don't understand it but it's true. Maybe hip hop can have some influence on a greener planet.

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