



LEADERS OF THE PACK

The vice presidents of hip-hop's leading management firm mean business

By Kate Rockwood · Photo by Jennifer Becker

In the sleek, dimly lit conference room of Violator Management's Chelsea offices, everyone is in constant motion as I settle in for an interview with a rare trio of high-powered hip-hop businesswomen. A dual portrait of Busta Rhymes stares out over the room. Text messages are sent, phone calls are quietly taken, an assistant comes in carrying bottles of Vitamin Water (50 Cent's latest endorsement). And then, by some nonverbal cue I seem to have missed, phones are set aside, date books are closed, and the room goes from frantic to focused in a period of five seconds. The message is clear: These ladies mean business.

Whip-smart, intent, and bursting with energy, Claudine Joseph, Laurie Dobbins, and Gail Hansen are rocking the intersection of one male-dominated field (business) and another (hip-hop), as vice presidents of a leading hip-hop management company, which represents artists like 50 Cent, Macy Gray, LL Cool J, Q-Tip, and Diddy. For the past six years, the company's artists have sold more than 10 million albums annually.

"The hip-hop industry is changing, but obviously there are still so many more men in this industry than women," Joseph says. "And I think it is harder for women to grow in this business. I don't think [Violator CEO] Chris Lighty ever said, 'I'm going to put three women at the top here.' It just happened that way, through our own strength and execution."

But what exactly do these women, all in their 30s, do and how has working together fueled their success? As the top executives below the CEO, they're in charge of business expenses and operations (Dobbins), managing the day-to-day life of artists (Dobbins and Joseph), and orchestrating recording sessions and costs (Hansen).

"As a woman in the music industry, you definitely have to have tough skin and not be easily intimidated," says Dobbins, who was pre-med in college before deciding to enter the music business. "It's still a man's world, but we definitely can take a seat at the corporate table."

Dobbins met Joseph while working at Wu-Tang Clan's clothing line, Wu

Wear. Joseph, who graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology before joining Wu Wear, transitioned into the music industry as an executive assistant at Violator, and later recommended Dobbins as her replacement.

"I was very proactive as an assistant," Joseph says. "Whenever I could go to the studio to learn more, I did. There were so many sleepless nights where the studio time would just roll into the next day. But I wanted to know all the aspects of making an album. And that helped me transition into being a manager."

Joseph says her job involves being strategic and growing the artist. "It's the calendars and the requests for appearances, but it's also being a liaison to the label, to the attorneys, to the side projects like clothing lines and endorsement deals," she says. "This really is a 24/7 job."

All three women credit the collaborative atmosphere in the office with nurturing their success and creating an environment where they can confidently share ideas and opinions.

"We have to deal with each other all the time," says Hansen, who jump-started her career by joining Def Jam Recordings in 1996. "We all grew in this industry together and we all blend so well together. It just flows so easily."

The collaboration and support that have fostered these businesswomen doesn't stop at the doors of Violator. Now, Dobbins, Hansen, and Joseph act as mentors to young women looking to break into the business. "I'm not afraid to share information," Joseph says. "But the passion has to be there. For me, passion speaks more than anything." She recommends researching the music business as much as possible and seeking out people whose careers you admire.

"Everything that glitzes is not gold and you definitely need to be prepared to do the dirty work; that doesn't stop at the top," Dobbins says. "But I love being the concierge to the stars. No one's going to pat you on the back and tell you you're awesome, but it's one of the most rewarding jobs."

And as the tape recorder clicks off and the room erupts in a riot of movement, it seems it's also one of the most demanding.