



The rise and fall of

LOON

Exclusive Interview By Thomas Golianopoulos

How Loon, Once Puff Daddy's Right-Hand Hit Maker, Became a Muslim—and Then a Convict

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The music video for “I Need a Girl (Part Two)” is peak Puff Daddy absurdity, a guys’ night out of epic proportions that begins with a helicopter landing and ends at a mansion party featuring a girl-to-guy ratio of about 10 to one. For Chauncey Hawkins, then known as the rapper Loon, it was the first time he felt like a hip-hop star.

Loon arrived on the Miami set that February 2002 afternoon with a plan. First, he selected his motorcycle for the video, settling on a Harley-Davidson chopper with ape-hanger handlebars that not only looked cool but provided a stable ride. He also decided to play to the camera. In his previous video with Puffy, “I Need a Girl (Part One),” Loon at times faded into the background. This time around he was more confident, brazenly elbowing his way into shots—dancing, champagne flute in hand, surrounded by women; leaning on a Ferrari 360 Spider as if he owned it; weaving through the streets of Miami on his bike alongside Puff and the R&B singer Ginuwine, appearing to be every bit as much a celebrity as his more famous collaborators.

But something else had changed since “Part One”: The fans on the set—the women in particular—weren’t there merely for Puff. “It was amazing to hear people actually screaming for me,” Loon recalls. “It was everything I had worked for, everything I had strived for.”

Then it all changed. Just as Hawkins had become Loon, Loon became Amir Junaid Muhadith, and then, in July 2013, he became a federal inmate in North Carolina. Far from the private helicopters and champagne flutes, Muhadith is loath to discuss the journey—his debauched life as Sean Combs’s wingman; the horrors of crack-era Harlem that he barely escaped; the sex, drugs and violence.

“How can I explain this without glorifying it?” he says.

Situated about 20 minutes north of Durham, North Carolina, the Butner Federal Correctional Complex emerges like a squat concrete box from the verdant undergrowth. It’s a sunny spring morning, and the visiting room is awash with friends and family of inmates. A little girl plays Connect Four against a man with tattooed knuckles. A woman wearing a Tom Brady jersey hugs an inmate. The world’s two friendliest prison guards man the front desk.

A bit past nine a.m., Muhadith, the man who revived Puff Daddy's music career after writing the "I Need a Girl" series, enters the room. His standard-issue uniform consists of drab olive-green khakis, a matching button-down shirt and black Nike sneakers. For a man of 41, Muhadith sports a privileged, tight hairline. And though he's gained 17 pounds since being incarcerated, he's still in excellent shape thanks to daily callisthenics, cardio and the requisite lifting routine, though only to stay toned. "I can't get prison swole," he jokes. But what's most striking is his majestic beard, an unruly gray-speckled mass that extends halfway down his chest.

Since this is a minimum-security building, little trouble brews here. Sure, tempers occasionally flare, as is natural when some 300 men share any institutional facility, but nobody would risk being sent up the road to a higher-security building. Muhadith scans the room. "I know all these guys," he says. "You can tell who's in here for drugs and who's in here for white-collar crimes." Jesse Jackson Jr. served time here. Bernie Madoff is in a medium-security building. "A spy, Spanish guy, Dominguez, was here," Muhadith says. "He told me stories about [former Panamanian dictator Manuel] Noriega."

Muhadith's trip here began in December 2008 when he quit the music industry, converted to Islam and renamed himself Amir Junaid Muhadith. In 2010 he moved to Egypt, where he subsisted as a television host and nascent voice on the religious-lecture circuit. Then, in November 2011, he was arrested in Brussels Airport on felony drug charges. The indictment stated that Muhadith "knowingly and intentionally conspired...with others, known and unknown, to possess with intent to distribute" heroin in North Carolina between 2006 and 2008. He pleaded guilty upon his extradition to the United States. According to Muhadith, he had two felonies already under his belt and risked getting 25 years to life if he went to trial. He couldn't take that chance. He was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

Muhadith calls it "guilt by association. Everything was hearsay. There was no tangible evidence." To hear him tell it: One night at Hot Beats Recording Studio in Atlanta, a rapper he was advising asked Muhadith to introduce him to a heroin supplier. Muhadith complied, which he says was the end of his involvement but enough to place him under the umbrella of conspiracy once federal charges were brought against the other artist.

Muhadith says there are discrepancies in the case, including one that should have gotten it thrown out: The indictment states that he was involved in this conspiracy from 2006 to 2008. But, he says, he didn't meet the individual until 2008. Why did he even make the introduction? "That, um, was just me being stupid, really," he says wistfully. "It was just a brief introduction. It cost me 168 months."

Muhadith, who sprinkles his speech with Arabic and verses from the Koran, remains upbeat despite his long sentence. "The thing that makes this easy for me is my religion," he says. "As long as I accord to what Islam teaches, it doesn't matter where I'm at."

He is, in other words, firmly in the present—though at times he's like an old guy at a bar, reminiscing about his heyday. "I'm actually grateful that those things happened," he says, "because all those events led me to where I am now."

The Harlem of Amir Muhadith's formative years didn't resemble the glories of the Harlem Renaissance or the gentrified neighbourhood it is today; some of the brownstones featured on Million Dollar Listing New York were crack houses when Loon walked these streets. In his Harlem, kids grew up fast; Muhadith spent his boyhood fighting, selling crack, smoking weed, snorting coke, shooting dice and having sex with older women. "I grew up exposed to a lot of criminal behaviour," he says.

His parents, William "Hamburger" Hughley and Carol Hawkins, were dubbed the Bonnie and Clyde of 116th Street, hustlers who profited from Harlem's heroin epidemic in the 1970s. Burger was sporty, stylish. He also may not be Muhadith's biological father. Carol worked for the drug lord Nicky Barnes, dubbed "Mr. Untouchable" by The New York Times Magazine. When she became pregnant, Carol says, Barnes threw her a million-dollar baby shower.

Born in 1975, Muhadith had everything growing up but supervision. "I was a great provider, because I hustled," Carol says. "It didn't change until he was about five, which was when a lot of the crackdown started. Then that crack demon came along." Barnes was sent away in 1978, a few years before crack replaced heroin as the neighbourhood scourge. By the time that transition was complete, in the mid-1980s, Carol, once a budding queen-pin, was a junkie.

“

I told her, ‘If you stop using drugs, I’ll stop selling drugs, because you are about to get me killed.’ I left the streets.

”

While Carol battled addiction, her mother, Evelyn Hawkins, a pious beautician, and her father, John, a World War II vet, raised Muhadith in Esplanade Gardens. The 1,872-unit complex situated on the Harlem River was originally sold as a middle-class oasis with an Olympic-size swimming pool and the subway at its doorstep. But when Muhadith was 14, one of his friends was shot outside building number four.

Fearing for her grandson’s safety, Evelyn sent him to live with his godfather, the movie producer George Jackson (Krush Groove, New Jack City), in Beverly Hills. Suddenly Muhadith was the original Fresh Prince. He was still angry, though, and still hobnobbed with the wrong crowd. He was classmates with Angelina Jolie and other rich kids at Beverly Hills High but gravitated toward the Mansfield Crips on the West Side. He was nicknamed Loon, as in “loony Loon,” for doing crazy shit, mostly fighting, and he lived up to the moniker. “I beat the wheels off this white boy on my track team for putting his feet on me at practice,” Muhadith recalls. Embarrassed, Jackson threw him out after a little more than a year.

Back with his grandparents in Harlem, Muhadith slung crack. “I started hustling to be in the streets with my mother. In some sick, sadistic way that was my way of being with her,” he says. “Me and my mom are like brother and sister—that’s common where I come from. But she put me through so much.”

Carol Hawkins gambled, stole crack from dealers and even helped herself to her son’s stash, which was hidden in a hollowed-out stuffed animal. “My mom stole so much money from me that it put me in debt to some malicious guys,” Muhadith says. Once he’d paid back his suppliers, he made a deal with his mother: “I told her, ‘If you stop using drugs, I’ll stop selling drugs, because you are about to get me killed.’ From that day on, my mother was drug-free, and I left the streets. I never sold drugs again.”

Although hip-hop was born nearby, in the Bronx, Harlem wasn't fertile ground for rappers. Rap was considered a reach, while crack, on the other hand, was making a lot of people a lot of money. That route closed for Muhadith with his mother's sobriety.

He started by writing rhymes in a diary. Eventually, after filling "notebook after notebook," he found the courage to spit for hip-hop pioneer Fab 5 Freddy, a friend of George Jackson's and the host of Yo! MTV Raps. Freddy wasn't impressed. "That's a freestyle," he said dismissively after each rhyme. However, he did offer some constructive criticism: Write complete concepts and complete stories. With that advice in hand, the newly named Loon set out to pursue a career in rap.

In 1997, Harlem finally produced a bona fide rap star, Mase—a former high school basketball player who shelved his hoop dreams to hit it big with Puff Daddy's Bad Boy Records. After his 1997 debut album, Harlem World, went quadruple platinum, he asked Loon to anchor a rap group also named Harlem World. There was a problem: Loon and Mase were engaged in a cold war of sorts. The two rappers shared a similar voice and flow, which in the provincial world of Harlem—and hip-hop in general—was a violation. Still, Loon joined forces with his longtime frenemy. The group's album tanked, and Mase left the music industry for the church shortly thereafter.

Following a string of failed deals at Sony and Arista, Loon turned to ghostwriting for artists including Shaquille O'Neal and Puff Daddy. Then, in the summer of 2000, he found himself in Miami, writing for Puff Daddy's upcoming album The Saga Continues.... It was an important comeback attempt for Bad Boy following the Notorious B.I.G.'s death, Mase's retirement and the disappointing sales of Puff's previous album, Forever. Nothing was left to chance. At Circle House Studios, a blackboard loomed on the wall, marked with song titles and progress reports denoting which songs were complete and which needed verses or hooks. "I saw an opportunity in that blackboard," Muhadith says. What was meant to be a four-day gig stretched into a two-week-long residency that produced 11 songs and a relationship that would alter both of their careers. Loon even postponed his wedding, scheduled for the week after he first arrived in Miami, to write for Puff.

"Every day he said he was coming home. Finally I was like, 'All right, what is going on?' He was like, 'I can't leave. I have to finish this album.' This was days before the wedding," says his wife, Nona Crowd. "He convinced me we weren't canceling the wedding, just postponing it, because this was his big

chance.” The wedding was postponed for nearly nine years.

Puff was impressed with Loon’s drive. “Puff loved the work ethic—well, Puff likes whoever can make him money,” says Loon’s former Harlem World group mate Michael “Blinky Blink” Foster. “He also likes people who don’t complain. If Puff didn’t like what he wrote, Loon would just write another verse.”

The two Harlemites shared more than ambition: Their fathers, it turned out, had been friends—and largely absent from both of their lives. Puff was three years old when his father, a hustler named Melvin Combs, was murdered; Burger died of cancer when Loon was a teen. Puff and Loon bonded, and one night in the studio Puff spilled his guts about his recent breakup with Jennifer Lopez. “This was a broken guy,” Muhadith says. “He’s telling me the story of him and J. Lo. ‘I lost my girl. I got it all and no one to share it with.’ Then it hits me.” Loon took Puff’s tragedy—the personal anecdotes, the feelings, the emotions—and crafted “I Need a Girl (Part One),” a post-breakup love letter from Puff to J. Lo for the entire world to hear.

First we were friends then became lovers
You was more than my girl, we was like brothers
All night we would play fight under covers
Now you gone, can’t love you like I really wanna
But every time I think about your pretty smile
And how we used to drive the whole city wild
Damn I wish you would’ve had my child....

“I Need a Girl (Part One)” and its sequel, “I Need a Girl (Part Two),” both featuring Loon, were Puff’s biggest hits in years, peaking at number two and number four respectively on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. Bad Boy Records was back, armed with a new star. “Loon gave Bad Boy a boost,” says former Hot 97 DJ Mister Cee. “‘I Need a Girl’ dominated radio. It got the Bad Boy train rolling again.”

At first glance, Loon seemed to be a perfect fit for Bad Boy. Cool, cocky and handsome, he personified turn-of-the-millennium Harlem swag. His music also slotted nicely into the space left vacant following Mase’s departure: sly wordplay and a lethargic flow—which, yes, was similar to Mase’s—over bubbly production built for the clubs.

Loon’s ascent continued with cameos on hit records from Mario Winans, Toni Braxton and 3LW, but the business of music interfered when Bad Boy’s

transition from Arista to Universal delayed his solo album. There were also artistic differences. Loon was uncomfortable being the label's token dreamboat rapper—"the wedding singer," as he calls it—and yearned to make grittier records similar to his 1995 single, "Scotch on the Rocks," or "You Made Me" from the Harlem World album. But, he says, Puff frowned whenever Loon strayed from his lane.

Released in October 2003, Loon's self-titled debut was a modest success, peaking at number six on the Billboard 200 before plummeting. He believes the album wasn't promoted or marketed properly because, he says, he was receiving a higher percentage of royalties than most Bad Boy artists. "I had a few heated moments with Puff. I wanted to fight him," Muhadith says. "But I liked Sean John Combs; I wasn't really a Diddy fan." In December 2004, he left Bad Boy "on a good note." (Combs and Bad Boy president Harve Pierre declined requests to comment.)

Loon grew frustrated as he attempted to reignite his career out from under the shadow of Bad Boy. Performances and royalties paid the bills, but he lived check to check. He was drinking more, smoking more weed, playing video games all night. In interviews he lashed out at Mase and others. He hit the rapper 40 Cal with a shovel during an altercation at a Harlem barbershop. He felt overwhelmed: A hit record meant he'd have to write another hit record and another after that. There was no end in sight.

"I was empty," Muhadith says. "I hadn't cried in a long time. I hadn't felt anything in a long time." He was searching for something, and he found it early one morning while on tour in Abu Dhabi.

Now known as Amir Junaid Muhadith, Loon resides in the Butner Federal Correctional Complex in North Carolina. Nona Crowd

The story of how Loon converted to Islam is neat and convenient, almost like a superhero origin story. From his balcony at the Emirates Palace hotel, he saw three seagulls flying in the distance. When he went inside to unpack, the three seagulls landed on his balcony. "Something really special was happening in my heart," Muhadith says. His mind swam with the recent positive exchanges he'd had with Muslims in Senegal, Kazakhstan and Dubai. The solution to his problems became clear. He ran to the lobby, asking, "How do I become a Muslim?" A man led him in reciting the shahada, the Muslim profession of faith.

From then on he decided to abstain from past sins—drugs, alcohol, adultery and music. Crowd saw an immediate difference. “He was more caring, honest. He paid more attention,” she says. “Seeing the changes he was making was an inspiration.”

Being a Muslim in Butner isn’t that bad, Muhadith says. Inmates can prepare their own food and are provided with a meal before dawn during Ramadan. As the prison imam, Muhadith continues to study Islam and teaches Arabic.

“You see this guy behind us? Military guy,” he tells me without lowering his voice. “He said some derogatory remarks about Muslims that got back to me. I didn’t get mad. I approached him and said, ‘Seventy-two percent of Americans have never met a Muslim. Is it safe to say that you’re one of them?’ ”

Muhadith places his hand on my shoulder. “Look, I don’t want people to think I’m a square,” he says. “I’m not a holy roller. I still have a personality. I still have a sense of humour.” His high-pitched giggle and deadpan wit—“It’s my cheat day,” he says when selecting an Almond Joy from the vending machine—are apparent. “I just have boundaries. Before, I had no boundaries.”

Soon after his spiritual awakening, Muhadith’s life took another significant turn. For years he’d heard whispers that Joseph “Jazz” Hayden, a former associate of Nicky Barnes’s who’d served 13 years for manslaughter, was his biological father. After hanging out with Hayden, Muhadith noticed similarities. “Something about his style,” he says, “the way he walked, the way he talked.” Muhadith hopes to take a DNA test soon.

Who does he think is his father, Burger Hughley or Jazz Hayden? “I don’t know. I’m 41 years old and I’m not sure who my father is,” he says. “It doesn’t matter. Both are hood royalty.” He then smiles. “Ask my mom. I’m curious what she’d say.”

Two weeks later, I meet Carol Hawkins on the corner of 116th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, outside the First Corinthian Baptist Church, where she worships. She wears furry Steve Madden boots, khakis and a plaid shirt with a cream wool sweater coat over it. Her hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail. We drive uptown in her black Nissan Pathfinder before parking on 148th Street in front of Esplanade Gardens. Then she tells the story of how she met Nicky Barnes.

One day on her way home from tennis, she spotted a handful of police officers with binoculars at a gas station on 150th Street. As she walked toward her building, she recognized Barnes, by that point a notorious neighbourhood figure, at the bus stop. She warned him about the surveillance and offered to hide his stash in her parents' apartment. "Ever since then, I was holding drugs," she tells me. "After I started making all that money, I didn't want to go to school no more."

He does admit to sometimes thinking about rap, comparing the sensation to what a recovered alcoholic must feel when walking past a liquor store.

She met Burger Hughley soon after. He was older, at least 15 years her senior, and he showered her with money, clothes and attention. The fact that he was married didn't affect the relationship. "I wouldn't have cared if he had five wives," Hawkins says. "He was making me happy."

The drug game was lucrative, and Hawkins soon owned fur coats, a Cadillac, a Mercedes. Sometimes they'd drive to the airport and, on a whim, pick somewhere warm to fly. San Juan, Vegas and Acapulco were among their favourite destinations. When I ask her what specifically the money was like, all she can do is look up and mutter, "Oh God, oh man." A beat passes before she turns and says, "I used to make more than \$20,000 a day."

It didn't last, of course. "I got up with that crack," she explains. After her son's proposition—he'd stop selling drugs if she'd stop using them—Hawkins went to rehab in Rochester, New York, where she found God. She is now sober and works for a community health organization. A devout Christian, she tells me she's nothing but supportive of Muhadith's conversion to Islam. "He has found peace in his life," she says. "He found a god he loves and serves. Even though he calls him Allah, he's the same God I love and serve."

I ask if she knows definitively who fathered Muhadith. "No, I don't, to be honest," she says, speaking deliberately. "I do know for sure that I was in Vegas with Jazz and the math added up to Jazz, but I didn't want to hurt Burger's feelings because he was walking around being such a proud dad. I don't know. I was young. I made an executive decision to just say that it was Burger. It kept away a lot of hurt and explaining." Hayden, now a community activist, did not respond to e-mails.

We sit quietly in the Pathfinder. Then she calls her parents. “You wanna go up and meet them?” she asks me.

Hawkins exits her car gingerly. She’s 61, and her knees are shot. As we make our way to the entrance, she gives an improvised tour of Esplanade Gardens. “This is the smoking corner,” she says. “It was my smoke corner, then my kid’s, then my kid’s kids.”

On the 27th floor sits the Hawkinses’ three-bedroom apartment; a balcony offers stunning views of Harlem to the west and Yankee Stadium to the north. “My mother loves them damn Yankees,” Hawkins says. And here she is, Miss Hawkins, 86 years old but still going strong. She wears a shirt that reads when god closes a door, he opens a window. She makes sure I see the ASCAP award her grandson won for “I Need a Girl.”

Miss Hawkins plans to write a character letter for Muhadith later in the week. “Oh God, I miss him,” she says. “He calls me, sometimes twice a week. I said, ‘You see this situation you in now? That’s what I tried to get you to bypass. That’s why I worked so hard with you. That’s why I brought you up in the church.’ I was very disappointed with his situation.”

Later, on our way out, Carol Hawkins greets nearly every person she passes.

“You know everyone,” I joke.

“Yeah,” she says. “I been round here a long time.”

Although he’s not scheduled for release until August 2021, Muhadith is doing everything he can to expedite things. He has applied for executive clemency, a pardon that would arrive during President Obama’s final days in office. It has happened before—George W. Bush pardoned John Forté, the ex-Fugees associate who was serving 14 years in prison for smuggling cocaine.

Muhadith already has plans for when he’s a free man. He’ll re-establish his relationship with his wife, who works as a chef in North Carolina and visits him regularly, and his seven children, and he hopes to return to the lecture circuit to share his story with Muslim youth. A move overseas, once it’s possible, is more than likely. He won’t write or record new music, though he does admit to sometimes thinking about rap, comparing the sensation to what a recovered alcoholic must feel when walking past a liquor store. And

sometimes it's unavoidable. At one point during the afternoon, the visitation-room radio blasts "Mo Money Mo Problems" by the Notorious B.I.G., Mase and Puff Daddy.

Muhadith was disappointed to learn about the current Bad Boy reunion tour. "What kind of reunion will it be?" he asks. A fair question considering Biggie is gone, Craig Mack has reportedly joined a religious cult, and Loon and G. Dep are incarcerated. When asked why so many former Bad Boy artists either find religion or become incarcerated (or, in Muhadith's case, both), he says, "I don't attribute it to Puff. Being on Bad Boy you're riding this tidal wave that you can't prepare for. Like most people who ride waves of that magnitude, they often wipe out."

The wave no longer appeals to Muhadith, but the fame is residual. Just before visiting hours end, a young inmate and his girlfriend—long black wavy hair, green eyes, ballet flats, skinny jeans, stunning curves—approach Muhadith. "Hey, man, she saw you and wanted to meet you," the other inmate says. Muhadith appears embarrassed. The woman is starstruck, standing on her toes, head tilted, big smile, giggling non-stop. "Uh-oh, I better watch her around you," her boyfriend cracks.

Muhadith laughs afterwards. The encounter reminds him of a past that shaped him but no longer defines him. "This whole situation has been a purification for me," he says. "My life from the streets to the music industry was always ripping and running. It was non-stop. This has become a vacation. Am I over this vacation? Yeah, I am."