

LL Cool J (b. James Todd Smith) at the UIC Pavilion, Chicago, 1987



LL COOL J

THIS GROUNDBREAKING RAPPER AND RAZOR-SHARP WORDSMITH IS ONE OF HIP-HOP'S MOST ENDURING STARS.

BY AMY LINDEN

Don't call it a comeback, I been here for years." That opening line from the title track of LL Cool J's fourth album, *Mama Said Knock You Out*, was more than just braggadocio or studio posturing. Those ten words were an instantly iconic and electrifying "I told you so" aimed at sometime fans and an industry that, five years into a platinum-plus and groundbreaking career, had written LL off as irrelevant. As the explosive success of that song and album would prove, pity the fool that dared to count LL Cool J out.

For more than four decades, rap music has produced a veritable solar system of stars; LL Cool J is one of the most incandescent. He is, to put it simply, foundational. Since 1985, he has recorded a catalogue of classic singles that rock the crowd to this day, including "Doin' It," "Hey Lover," "Around the Way Girl," "I'm Bad," "Rock the Bells," "Going Back to Cali," "4, 3, 2, 1," and "Phenomenon," to name a few. In 2017, LL became the

first – and thus far the only – rap artist to receive the prestigious Kennedy Center Honor. He is a two-time Grammy winner, a multiplatinum-selling performer, successful actor, author, and entrepreneur. A fierce battle rapper and razor-sharp wordsmith, LL Cool J is a true child of hip-hop whose music and attitude defined and elevated the culture.

Born in 1968 into a volatile household, James Todd Smith was raised by his grandparents in Hollis, Queens. Like many predominately Black working-class areas of that borough, Hollis was a hip-hop laboratory where future legends like RUN-DMC, Marley Marl, A Tribe Called Quest, and Roxanne Shanté got their start. In a 1987 interview with Stephen Holden in the *New York Times*, LL noted, "In this neighborhood, the kids grow up in rap. It's like speaking Spanish if you grow up in an all-Spanish house." He began rapping when he was 9; at 11 his grandfather gave him a nod of encouragement and bought him recording equipment. Within



a few years, he was sending his homemade demos to various labels, including the then-fledgling Def Jam, run by NYU student Rick Rubin and promoter Russell Simmons. In a twist of fate, it was Beastie Boys' Adam "Ad-Rock" Horowitz who dug the 16-year-old's cassette out of a pile of submissions and persuaded Rubin to check the young rapper out.

In 1984, the newly minted LL Cool J (Ladies Love Cool James) became the first artist signed to Def Jam. His debut, "I Need a Beat," was one of the first two singles with a Def Jam catalogue number; the other was "Rock Hard" by Hall of Fame inductees Beastie Boys. "I Need a Beat" was bare-bones and immediate, the flow insistent and no-nonsense. It would see more than one hundred thousand sales, establishing both LL and Def Jam. LL's debut album, *Radio*, dropped in 1985 and featured the hits "I Can't Live Without My Radio" (a love song to the boom box), "Rock the Bells," and "Dear Yvette." Two

years later came *Bigger and Deffer*, which on the strength of the ballad "I Need Love" went to Number Three pop and Number One on the R&B charts. Oozing sincerity and vulnerability, "I Need Love" became one of the first rap records to seamlessly cross over. LL Cool J was a star.

It wasn't just the music that garnered attention. With his trademark Kangol bucket hat, doe eyes, dimples, increasingly chiseled physique, and a delicious habit of licking his lips, LL was equal parts B-boy and sex symbol; the guys wanted to be him, and the girls wanted to . . . well, you know. LL's hot streak continued with *Walking With a Panther* (1989), but his growing acceptance by the mainstream (a.k.a. white folks) began to undercut his cred. Hip-hop was becoming more substantive and artistic, and LL's fat gold chains and cocky flow seemed dated to some. LL felt the blowback and knew that something had to change, but also knew he had to stay true to who he was.



THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: With E-Love, DJ Cut Creator, and B-Rock (from left), outside Jones Diner, New York City, 1987; in Times Square, 2019; with Billie Eilish and Lil Nas X at the 2020 Grammy Awards, Los Angeles; onstage at Lollapalooza, Grant Park, Chicago, 2018; performing at Rockefeller Center, New York City, 2004; too big for the limo, ca. 1988.

In 1990, LL dropped *Mama Said Knock You Out*, and on the strength of the title track and cuts like “Around the Way Girl” (a shout-out to all the honeys in the neighborhood), he effectively shut down the critics and recharged his reputation. Cred restored, he began forging a career as an actor, eventually starring in films, the sitcom *In the House*, and most notably the long-running *NCIS: Los Angeles*.

Following up *Mama Said* was no easy task, but LL did his thing. After taking a slight stumble with *14 Shots to the Dome* (1993), he came roaring back in 1995 with the double-platinum *Mr. Smith*. The album included smashes “Hey Lover” (a collaboration with Boyz II Men), the steamy “Doin’ It” (which was supported by an even steamier video), and the banger “I Shot Ya.” Once again, LL proved his appeal knew no limits. Following *Phenomenon* in 1997, he raised the stakes by calling his next album *Greatest of All Time (G.O.A.T.)*, and the album hit

Number One. It was followed by *10* (2002), which contained the hit “Luv U Better.” LL would continue making music throughout the aughts, releasing a dozen albums on Def Jam, making him the label’s most enduring and consistent artist.

In 2021, it’s hard to remember a time when rap music wasn’t ubiquitous or ingrained in everything from politics to fashion. LL Cool J was not the first rapper, but he did do something that few had done before and many have tried to duplicate. Whenever a rapper can spit fire and whisper sweet nothings, that’s LL’s influence. He was a B-boy Romeo and a lyrical assassin whose influence still reverberates. He remains a household name, a hip-hop pioneer, and a revered artist. And now James Todd Smith a.k.a. LL Cool J is rightfully being acknowledged by the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame for Musical Excellence. Moral of the story? It always pays to listen to mama.

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Peace out: LL at
the Palladium, New
York City, 1988

