

ACCESS INTERVIEW

*Be
Cool*

RAPPER. ACTOR. AUTHOR. PIONEER.
LL COOL J HAS DONE IT ALL. MORE THAN
20 YEARS AFTER HE STARTED BUILDING HIS
LEGEND, HE'S STILL GONNA KNOCK YOU OUT

BY **ROBERT ITO** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JUSTIN STEPHENS**





IS DESCRIBING ONE OF HIS favorite daydreams. He's a rookie on the Knicks' roster, see, but he's not, like, a real rookie, he's still LL, and he's running down the court, and it's blowing people's minds. "LL's playing for the Knicks?" he says, acting out the part of a dumbfounded fan. Then, in that street voice: "He done led the Knicks to the championship in his first season?" The scene shifts, and now LL's wearing a Giants jersey, and that same stunned fan is *screaming*. "Yo, LL's playing for the Giants! And he just took the Giants to the Super Bowl! I can't believe it!" LL lets out a big laugh, and why not? "That," he says, "would be an *amazing* thing, you know what I'm sayin'?"

It's funny, partly because of the comical way he tells it, but also because man-myths like LL don't have daydreams, right? People like us have daydreams about being LL. But it's those big, confident dreams—and, of course, the screen charisma and unearthly rapping skills—that have gotten him where he is. You've got to be confident if you're going to rap about all the crazy, sexy, fantastical things that LL has over the years, about needing a girl who's as sweet as a dove, about chewin' it, oohin' it, all while we're doin' it, about rockin' his peers and puttin' suckas in fear. A guy with self-esteem issues didn't write "Mama Said Knock You Out." It's that very fearlessness that's propelled the man through a run of 11 consecutive platinum albums (the first rap artist to do so), two dozen or so movies (starting with the hip-hop classic *Krush Groove*), four books (two of which were best-sellers), to his current role as special agent Sam Hanna on *NCIS: Los Angeles*. LL doesn't do sheepish—in his raps, on the screen, or in real life. "I can honestly tell you that I've never tried to do anything and not been able to do it," he says.

It's five o'clock in the evening, and LL's sitting in

a semisecluded spot at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills nursing a ginger ale. On most nights, the Four Seasons is the kind of place where patrons make it a point of pride not to gawk at celebrities. Gotta be cool. On this night, though, ever since LL entered the room and eased into a corner table, a steady stream of people, ladies mostly, but men too, have slowed down, way down, to stare. As LL, 43, weaves his dream of Super Bowl glory, actress Lea Thompson comes up to say, "Hello, hello, it's so great to see you, haven't seen you in years." Stephen Moyer, of *True Blood*, does a "Hi, I won't interrupt you" wave from afar. The stream of slow-moving people continues, with LL doing a series of nods and smiles and hellos. Does any of this get, you know, tiresome? LL gives a little shrug.

"I know I've been lucky, and I'm grateful," he says. "I'm very clear about that. I mean, c'mon! I'm a kid from New York, from Queens. I don't have to be in this luxury hotel, talking to you. We could be in the Beef Patty Spot," he says, his voice getting slow and low. "Hanging out, with my hand on my nine." LL reaches down by his waistline, pulling out the imaginary 9mm he's got stuck down his pants. "You know what I'm saying?" he says, smiling. Then he erupts in wild, raucous laughter.

There are any number of ways LL's life could have gone the Beef Patty Spot route. When he was only 4, his father, James Smith, shot LL's mother and grandfather as the young boy slept nearby. LL awoke to find his mom slumped in the kitchen in a pool of blood, a shotgun round in her lower back. "Four years old and still being able to remember that so vividly, you know, shows the indelible impression it left on >

STYLING: ERIN TUNON; GROOMING: CHRIS BURGOYNE; PRODUCTION DESIGN: KENT CASEY; FOR THE REX AGENCY; PREVIOUS SPREAD: JACKET: GIORGIO ARMANI; T-SHIRT AND VEST: JOHN VARVATOS; SHIRT: HUGO BOSS; PANTS: TOMMY HILF; GIGER; BOOTS: BRUNO MAGLI; WATCH: CHOPARD; THIS SPREAD: T-SHIRT: JOHN VARVATOS; PANTS: TOMMY HILF; GIGER; WATCH: CHOPARD



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me,” he says. “She was just laid out. My grandfather was shot trying to close the door to save her.”

Both survived. From then on, LL lived with his grandparents in their small Queens home. “My grandmother used to tell me, ‘If a task is once begun, never leave it till it’s done. Be thy labor great or small, do it well or not at all,’” he says. “Between my mother, my grandfather and her, they just programmed me. Truth! I was brainwashed into believing I could do anything.” LL’s grandfather, a five-foot-seven saxophonist from Barbados, filled the home with music. “I grew up listening to Miles Davis, Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, the O’Jays, the Four Tops, Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, Teddy Pendergrass,” LL remembers. “My grandfather was a West Indian guy who didn’t want to spend *no* money. One day, I came in the house and he said, ‘Hey, look over there.’ I looked, and there were two turntables and a mixer. And those two turntables and that mixer changed my life.”

So what if that DJ set—two Toshiba turntables and a Numark mixer—was less about music and more about keeping LL in the house and out of trouble? It worked. The boy obsessed with motorcycles, the self-described “knucklehead” whose idea of fun was sticking rocks inside snowballs and lobbing them at passing cars, suddenly had a reason to stay inside. LL worked like a fiend, writing lyrics and refining his rapping skills in his grandparents’ basement. Born James Todd Smith, at 14 he renamed himself LL Cool J—short for Ladies Love Cool James, which they soon did, and still do. Two years later, he teamed up with Russell Simmons and then-NYU student Rick Rubin to form Def Jam Recordings, and quickly became their breakout star. At that age, LL wasn’t thinking IPOs or platinum albums. “I wanted to hear my record on the radio,” he says.

“That’s pretty much it. I wanted to have gold chains. A car. A *Benz*. Girls. That’s all I was thinking.”

Then—the hits came. “I Need Love.” “Going Back to Cali.” “Mama Said Knock You Out.” “Doin’ It.” LL went on to sell 20 million albums, winning two Grammys and carving out a niche—albeit a gigantic one—as the romantic rap act par excellence, the true Lover MC. He created music to make love to, providing the soundtrack for countless trysts and booty calls. With

JACKET: ROUGE; SHIRT: JOHN VARVATOS;
JEANS: AMBIGUOUS



all those couples grooving to LL’s jams, has he ever, you know, grooved to one of his own? “Yes,” he says, straight-faced. “Yes. I’ve done it many times, over the years. On *many different levels*.” He pauses—maybe to let that monumental image sink in. “I’ve *written* songs doing that!” he adds.

Did they turn out okay?

“Absolutely. You can dance to them. You *have* danced to them!”

Equally surprising (and less carnally revealing) may be LL’s love of art, “everyone from Picasso to Caravaggio, from Vermeer to Frida Kahlo to Warhol.” Although not a collector, he recently bought a portrait done of him by the American artist Kehinde Wiley, who reimagined LL as a royal figure, complete with coat of arms. “The Smithsonian asked me to loan it, so it’s hanging there right now. So, I may not collect art, but I have my own portrait, that I own, in the Smithsonian.” >



“BRUCE LEE WAS MY HERO. IT WAS EXCITING TO SEE AN ACTOR WHO LOOKED DIFFERENT FROM EVERYONE ELSE. SUPERCOOL, SHREDDED AND CUT. HE COULD FIGHT; HE COULD DO IT ALL.”

LEFT: T-SHIRT: JOHN VARVATOS; JEANS: SEVEN FOR ALL MANKIND; SNEAKERS: CREATIVE RECREATION; BELT: TUMI; WATCH: CHOPARD; RIGHT: MONITTY BRINTON/CBS



Got Your Back: LL Cool J with *NCIS: Los Angeles* co-star Chris O'Donnell.

If the range of LL's art interests surprise—it's a rare man who appreciates both pointille and pop art—the people he admires come from an equally diverse pool: Kobe Bryant, because of the man's stubborn belief that winning is his due. The Marines. Michael Jackson, who recorded a bunch of tracks with LL that are currently locked up tight in the Jackson vault. "Maybe we'll remix a song he did many years ago that was unreleased," LL says, "and I'll do something new on that." Bob Dylan—an LL fan who, a few years ago, covered one of the craziest versions of "Mama Said Knock You Out" you're ever likely to hear. "I would love to make a song with Bob Dylan," he says. "That would give me a reason to put a single out." His Uncle Bobby, may he rest in peace, a man who spoke 12 languages and played 20 instruments, give or take, the first guy to take LL to a recording studio, the mentor "who sat me down and talked to me about girls and life and music." His grandparents.

And Bruce Lee. Ask LL about the Little Dragon and the guy goes off, recounting favorite moments, complete with quotes and acted-out descriptions: the scene in *Return of the Dragon* in which he pulls out Chuck Norris's chest hairs and blows them off his fingers; the snake-in-the-guardhouse scene from *Enter the Dragon*; the epic nunchaku battle with Danny Inosanto in *Game of Death*. "It was exciting to see an actor who looked different from everyone else," he says. "Supercool, super-ripped, shredded and cut. He was fly. He could fight; he could do it all. Bruce was my

hero, growing up. He was the guy who made me want to act." Which of course LL did, playing an LAPD supercop (*S.W.A.T.*); earning critical raves as a cook and part-time preacher in the sharkfest *Deep Blue Sea*; and portraying three football players (on the popular sitcom *In the House* and in the movies *Wildcats* and Oliver Stone's *Any Given Sunday*). The film role he'd kill to play, though, is James Bond. "Obviously, Bond's a Caucasian Englishman, so it is what it is! But I just believe I have what it takes to bring that to life. I would make that character *crazy*." LL doesn't underestimate the legends that have come before him. "It's hard to be cooler than Sean Connery," he admits. "But I might give Daniel Craig a run for his money." He laughs. "You know what I'm saying? Maybe. *Maybe* we take our shirts off and stand next to each other, you know? I don't think I'd be embarrassed."

IT'S SUCH A BLAST HANGING OUT WITH LL, SO it stands to reason that being LL must be exponentially more fun. Serving as guest of honor at the Marine Corps' 235th birthday ball last year, eating the ceremonial cake, all thanks to his role as a former Navy Seal on *NCIS: Los Angeles*—that was great. Helping his wife of 15 years, Simone, start her own jewelry company: awesome. Doing all the *NCIS* stunts the show's insurance will allow—also fun. And if he ever wanted to tour again, time willing, well, that would really rock. "I love touring," he says. "I love doing shows, man. I have by no means walked away from my music. I have albums in the works, unreleased material that I recorded recently. A lot of new music. Of course I understand that after

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CLICK

NCIS: Los Angeles airs Tuesdays at 9 PM ET on CBS. And for this month's best LL Cool J films, turn to page **PTK** in the **AVAILABLE IN HD** Movies section.



BE COOL

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25 years, you're a legacy artist. You're not the new pop guy. I'm not Cool Bieber, you know what I'm saying? LL Bieber! But I would definitely tour."

Paradoxically, LL finds that the musician's frenetic life has actually made him a calmer, more easygoing dad. "When you do music your whole life, you're a little more relaxed," he says. "You're not so uptight." Of course, his four kids, ages 10 to 21, have video evidence, going back two decades. There's the "Doin' It" video, for one, in which LL has spirited phone sex, ogles a stripper while

chomping on an apple, then makes love in the front seat of a black Range Rover. You can almost hear the refrain from his kids: *But you did it, Dad.* "My kids can't use that video against me! They can only use that against me if I was uncomfortable with saying, 'So what? You still can't do it.' You know what I'm saying? 'Yeah, I *did* have that apple in my mouth! Now go to bed.'"

It's weird to think about now, but two of LL's kids are older than he was when he first became Def Jam's golden boy, when LL was still just dreaming of gold chains and girls. What would the LL of today say to that young kid? Don't sell your share in Def Jam? Don't take that crappy part in

Rollerball? "You know what? At this point, I'd have to slap him on the back and say, 'Thank you.' Because how a 16-year-old maneuvered his way for us to be having this conversation...you know, it's easy to talk about it now, at this age, because it seems like somehow I'm supposed to be doing it. But the reality is, I was a 16-year-old with no plan. Just getting busy, just going for it. You know what I mean? Adapting to whatever was put in front of me, just trying to make things happen." **A**

Robert Ito is West Coast correspondent for ACCESS. He profiled Eva Longoria in the December 2010 issue.