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## Sears Exclusive: LL Cool J Debut Set for Fall

BY JEAN E. PALMIERI

**NEW YORK** — Sears is getting serious about the young men's business.

The Chicago-based retailer has negotiated a deal with hip-hop icon LL Cool J to be the exclusive purveyor of the entertainer's new collection of men's, women's and children's apparel.

The LL Cool J apparel line is scheduled to hit 450 Sears stores the second week of September and will be rolled out to 600 stores for holiday. Sears has a total of approximately 900 stores across the U.S.

LL Cool J, whose real name is James Todd Smith, has long been involved in the business.

He was the face of early streetwear brands Fubu and Troop, and a year ago launched his own higher-priced apparel

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LL COOL J IN A LOOK FROM  
THE NEW COLLECTION

# LL Cool J Set for Fall Debut

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line, Todd Smith, which is now sold at several specialty stores and at [Toddsmith.com](http://Toddsmith.com). The new collection for Sears, though, marks the first time Smith has put his own "LL Cool J" brand—which stands for "Ladies Love Cool James"—on a fashion label.

The new Sears brand has several similar elements to his Todd Smith line, such as the fleur-de-lis and tattoo-inspired T's, but will be offered at a more affordable price point. Prices for T-shirts in the LL Cool J collection range from \$22 to \$36 and jeans are \$42 to \$50. The Todd Smith line ranges from \$39 for T-shirts to \$119 for hoodies. Jeans retail from \$69 to \$99.

He said Todd Smith has an "aesthetically similar taste and feel, but it will move up [in price] and be more exclusive. I want to make sure the LL Cool J line has room to breathe."

Calling it a "first," Smith said that "no one else has taken the youth culture and married it at this price point with a major retailer and launched it in the U.S."

For Smith, the association with Sears is "a great fit." In an exclusive interview with DNR last week, the Queens, N.Y.-born entertainer said that every weekend when he would visit his grandfather he'd beg to be taken to Sears on Long Island to go shopping. "So for me emotionally, this was a very important deal."

He appreciates the affordable prices that Sears will offer, which will make the collection accessible to the average working person.

"This is a brand that I've lived, eaten and breathed my entire life," he said.

Smith said he "cut his teeth" working on Todd Smith for the past two years, and as a result, the launch of the LL Cool J line is expected to go smoothly.

"We wanted to get all the bumps out first," he said.

Smith noted that he will be "extremely involved" with the fashion direction of the line



LL Cool J, a.k.a. James Todd Smith, will be involved with marketing the collection.

as it evolves. "I don't have to sit down with a needle and thread, but nothing will go out without my approval."

Sears is also expecting Smith to be prominently displayed in the marketing materials for the line. He noted that, as a result of the collaboration, Sears will be given "first dibs on everything I do." That includes running contests to visit the entertainer on his upcoming CBS drama, *The Man*—where he will portray an undercover Los Angeles police officer raising three adopted kids—and other multimedia tie-ins. In addition to his music and acting, Smith has written a fitness book, *LL Cool J's Platinum Workout*, as well as a children's book. His next album is due out in July.

Despite his jam-packed schedule, Smith said he is "focused on building this business and making it the best that it can be."

Irv Neger, senior vice-president of apparel for Sears, said the stores will install shops with separate fixtures within the young men's, juniors', boys' and girls' departments in the 450 launch stores. "There will be no doubt that it's LL's area," he said. The collection will also be offered online, which Neger said is a new "core competence" for the retailer.

Within the stores, the LL Cool J line will hang with other young men's brands such as SouthPole.

Neger said the LL Cool J collection will "fill the white space" currently available in the teen arena. "We're not going to the edge of fashion, but we've experimented with other things and had a great response. So we know we have this customer in the store," he said. "We thought there was an opportunity in the streetwear/urban space, and when we saw LL's line we said, forget the white space, we have a white-out."

He said that in the past few years Sears "hasn't done right for this customer" and is determined to change that. Fresh young men's product is expected to be flowed twice a season and juniors' on a monthly basis.

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**"What better time is there to ... look great at a price you can afford? My doing \$5,000 jeans won't help anyone. Real people shop at Sears." —LL Cool J**

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Neither executive would provide a projected volume figure, but Neger said he is "expecting an extraordinarily successful launch" despite the sluggish economic climate. "Tough times require innovation. You have to step up even in difficult times so that you're right for the future."

Smith agreed: "What better time is there to feel good and look great at a price you can afford? My doing \$5,000 jeans won't help anyone. Real people shop at Sears." Smith said he "wouldn't consider any other retailer" for the launch of this collection, pointing to Sears' commitment in terms of "numbers of stores, SKUs, categories and their personal passion. We have a common vision."

Neger said the LL Cool J line will not be offered at Kmart, the Sears' sister store. Although the two chains share some synergies, mainly behind the scenes, the merchandising is separate. Kmart too, however, has been pushing young men's and is launching several new collections this spring, including a surf-inspired Boarding brand, the Latino-infused Limon y Sal and its own urban/streetwear offering called Wckd.

Looking ahead, Sears plans to expand the LL Cool J line into other categories as well, including accessories. "I wear a lot of accessories," Smith said, pointing to his diamond bracelets, rings and necklace. "So there's more coming."

The LL Cool J collection is being produced by Regatta USA, which manufactures several other celebrity apparel lines, including Simply Vera by Vera Wang and Daisy Fuentes for Kohl's, Metro 7 for Wal-Mart and Todd Smith.

"We've become the go-to company for this kind of relationship," said Haim Dabah, CEO of Regatta, a division of Li & Fung. "And we don't go into any line without believing it has a 15-year opportunity." —CONTRIBUTIONS BY JESSICA PALLAY



Sears' Irv Neger

Two looks from the new line

