

# WWD MONDAY

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## Wal-Mart Wooing Urban Shopper

By Jean E. Palmieri

WILL THE YOUNG URBAN CUSTOMER SHOP AT A mass market retailer? That is a question Wal-Mart Stores Inc. will soon be able to answer.

Last week, the Bentonville, Ark.-based retailer quietly began flowing a new men's apparel line from hip-hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons to a small number of its U.S. doors. The line, American Classics, has a preppy sensibility similar to Simmons' higher-priced Argyle Culture collection for Macy's that launched at the end of 2007. The Wal-Mart line is being sold in approximately 350 stores as well as on [walmart.com](http://walmart.com), according to a report in *BusinessWeek*. Simmons' name is on the label and his picture will be displayed on the sales floors near the merchandise. There are two hangtags on each garment. One sports an American Classics logo and the second a quote from Simmons with his signature.

A Wal-Mart spokesman said the retailer was "not providing a comment" on the line at this time.

Wal-Mart is clearly hoping American Classics will have a better reception than the much-hyped LL Cool J collection that launched exclusively at Sears last year. Although sales of that line were initially good, according to sources, it's now struggling. There is widespread speculation the line may not have much life left in it.

In response, a Sears spokesman said last week: "We're getting ready to show LL Cool J at New York Fashion Week [Tuesday and Wednesday]. We think it resonates with the urban consumer and we're showing it for fall."

Unlike the LL Cool J collection, which boasts fleur-de-lis logos and tattoo-inspired T-shirts, Simmons' designs for Wal-Mart are less embellished. "It's preppy," said one observer who has seen the collection, "sort of like a less expensive Tommy Hilfinger."

The Wal-Mart Web site shows argyle sweater vests and tra-

ditionally styled woven shirts under the American Classics label along with classic five-pocket jeans, cargo pants and nautical-inspired jackets. Prices range from \$9.99 to \$29.

Simmons, who is on Wal-Mart's advisory board, could not be reached for comment and a spokesman at his company, Rush Communications, said it "would not be issuing any comments right now."

American Classics looks very much like a lower-priced version of Argyle Culture.

Equity analyst Jeff Van Sinderen of B. Riley believes the Wal-Mart launch is a smart move. "Wal-Mart has done an amazing job getting into areas where they haven't traded before. Kudos for them for staying on the cutting edge," he said.

Although he did not have specific knowledge of the American Classics line, Van Sinderen said he expects the retailer to put the collection into "a trial mode and see how it works." He said the young urban shopper is a "hard customer to reach," but if a line is fashion-right, it will succeed — at least for a while.

"We've seen a lot of names come and go," Van Sinderen said. "Sometimes there's an initial run of success, but it's followed by a steep decline. This customer base embraces what's something for a while and then moves on to the next thing. Wal-Mart is well aware of what the progression has been in that space."

Although Wal-Mart did stumble several years ago when it tried to offer more fashion-forward merchandise, the world's largest retailer has shown it's not afraid to test concepts and use its marketing muscle to jump on consumer trends.

Last week, the retailer said it will add "Twilight" shops to all 3,500 stores in March to coincide with the arrival of the DVD of the successful vampire-themed movie. The shops will carry apparel as well as messenger bags, totes and accessories, posters, the CD soundtrack and the four books by Stephanie Meyer that launched the teen craze.



A look from American Classics.