

**Talks at GS**  
**LL COOL J,**  
**Founder and CEO, Rock the Bells**  
**Hip Hop Artist, Music Producer, Actor**  
**Dan Dees, Moderator**  
**Recorded: October 14, 2021**

**LL Cool J:** You've just got to be true to who you are. You can't be all things to all people. You know what I'm saying? If we sell caramel, we sell caramel. That's what we sell. We don't sell chocolate.

[MUSIC INTRO]

**Margaret Anadu:** I'm introducing a man who needs clearly no introduction. Ladies love Cool James, also known as LL Cool J, also known as Todd.

So, he is a true multihyphenate. He's not only a multiplatinum, two-time Grammy award winning rapper, record producer, actor, author, he's also an incredible entrepreneur and philanthropist. He has truly innovated the music industry. He's clearly built one of the most important parts of our culture, which now dwarfs all else, hip hop. He's one of the clear early superstars there. And

he became the first hip hop artist to win the Kennedy Center Honors in 2017. And later this month, he'll actually be inducted to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

But since that's just clearly not enough, on top of the 13th season of *NCIS: LA*, he has since gone on to push his entrepreneurial spirit to start new ventures with his seemingly unstoppable energy. He founded in 2018 Rock the Bells, the preeminent voice for classic and timeless hip hop.

And Dan Dees, our very own Co-Head of Investment Banking globally will moderate the discussion. Welcome guys.

**Dan Dees:** Let's start by just level setting everybody. Rock the Bells. What is it you're doing there? What was the inspiration? All that stuff.

**LL Cool J:** Well, the inspiration, it's kind of a long story. I'll try to make it concise. About seven, eight, nine years ago there was a channel on SiriusXM called Backspin. And Backspin played classic hip hop or old school hip hop,

which people like to refer to it as some. I'm trying to change that. We are changing it. But I felt like when I would listen to the station it was like a glorified jukebox. It was like, "I Want to Rock Right Now" and "I Need Love" and nothing else. You know? "Now what you hear is not a test." You know what I mean?

**Dan Dees:** What's wrong with that?

**LL Cool J:** You know, there that. Like, I'm a big believer that anything that you do to be successful and to be effective, there has to be cultural nuance. You have to make sure that tissue and that connective tissue is there. And I felt like that was the problem.

So, I called up Scott, and it took me about five years to convince him, "Hey, you need to give me that channel." He's like, "Why do we need it? We have Billboard Top whatever. And we just look at that and we program our algorithm and we're done." I said, "It's just I could just make it better." So, finally I was able to convince him to give me the channel. Once I got the channel, we went from about 1.3 million listeners to about 7 million listeners

daily. And we're really touching that audience.

And what happened in touching that audience, I realized, you know what, there is more room. There are a lot of people out here who love, who were raised, who were born and love classic hip hop. Who live it, who breathe it every single day.

So, I was like, you know what, it's not enough to just have a channel and play the music for people. We could have content. We can have commerce. We can have experiences.

So, I met with Geoff Yang at Redpoint. He's my partner. We kind of whiteboarded the idea of building this business, building this Rock the Bells company for about six months. We threw a little money in. We'd hired a couple of people, you know, one guy from [UNINTEL] to kind of just do a market analysis and look at-- well, I already knew intuitively. But he wanted to do the due diligence. We went through that.

**Dan Dees:** We do that sometimes.

**LL Cool J:** Then we did a little seed round. First, we put our money in a little seed and kind of got things rolling. Hired a few people. Went from there and ended up doing a series A. And now we're off to the races. And we're helping brands-- we're winning on a lot of levels, right? We're connecting brands with, you know, if you're a brand and you want to touch that classic hip hop audience in a real way, you come to us.

But not only do we nurture the roots of classic hip hop, but we also have the fruit, right? So, what I'm doing is, between our commerce, our content, and our experience, I feel like hip hop needs to be organized. People always laugh when I say this, but when you look at the John D Rockefeller, you know, you read the book *Titan*, one of the interesting things was him consolidating the oil refinery business. I thought that that was real interesting. When I look at hip hop, it's all over the place. It's kind of scattered. It's like, you know, somebody took a shotgun and just BOOM. And it's like, you know what, we need a sniper. We need a surgical scalpel.

So, I went in there and I said, "I'm gonna get this thing

together." So, now I'm hiring the people who started it, those pioneers who founded it, and I'm bringing in young kids to bridge the gap as well. And I think, ultimately, when it shakes out, there will be other players in the market, but Rock the Bells will be the number one for hip hop in the world.

**Dan Dees:** So, you're going to be the Robber Baron of hip hop. You're going to bring it all together.

**LL Cool J:** Yeah. I'll take that as a compliment.

**Dan Dees:** I love it. It is.

**LL Cool J:** But that being said, it is coming from a sincere place because I felt like-- one of the things I did when we started the company is I gave equity to, like, Kool Herc who started hip hop. And I gave equity to Grandmaster Caz. And I gave equity to Run and D.M.C. And I gave equity to Salt-N-Pepa and Big Daddy Kane and Roxanne Shanté and a lot of people who started the thing.

**Dan Dees:** That's amazing.

**LL Cool J:** And look, yes, we want to be profitable. Of course, we do. Profit is the life's blood of a business. But I didn't do this for money. I did it because I really love it and I really live it. You know? I didn't have to do this. You know what I'm saying? I'm in the 13th season of my show. I've got a couple albums. I'm a'ight. You know what I mean? I felt like this is something that I wanted to do, and it was important to do.

**Dan Dees:** We just heard your future vision of where you're going. Go back to your past. What is it about your past, give us a run-through of that, that has put you on this path that you're on and this kind of tireless energy that you've got?

**LL Cool J:** Right. Well, you know, I'm from Queens, New York. And I grew up inner city Queens. Saint Albans, Highlands, Jamaica, that whole area. People from my neighborhood: A Tribe Called Quest, 50 Cent is from Southside, Run D.M.C., Mobb Deep is from the other part of Queens, Mark Jackson [?], a lot of people from Queens.

Had a lot of musicians in the area. You know, James Brown lived there. Duke Ellington lived there. Ella Fitzgerald lived there. Roy Campanella lived there. I mean, you know, it's a cool neighborhood.

**Dan Dees:** That's a cool neighborhood. That's amazing.

**LL Cool J:** That's pretty cool, right? I became a fan of hip hop at around nine. I started writing at around 11 or 12. And you know, at around 14 I started really wanting to be professional and make a record, professionally. And then at 16 I ended up connecting with Rick Rubin. Ad-Rock of the Beastie Boys gave my tape to Rick Rubin. Rick Rubin was in NYU in his dormitory. And we ended up forming the label Def Jam. He had Def Jam Productions at the time.

I used to go to the record store at that time. There was no Google. Right? So, I used to go to the record store and get all of the-- anything that looked like hip hop I would write down the address and write down the numbers of those companies. And then I would send my demos out. So, I sent demos to Sugar Hill and N-Joy, all of the labels back then.



And so, finally Rick called me back. We made this song called "I Need A Beat." It came out. It did really well regionally. And we ended up getting a deal with CBS to do a record, my first record, *Radio*. And you know, the rest is history. It just kind of went through the roof.

Rick and Russell connected. They were the label. I was the flagship artist. And you know, it just really went well.

**Dan Dees:** How did that vaunted neighborhood you talked about with all that musical history, how did that whole ecosystem react when, 1984, you signed with Def Jam and you put out a record? Your family, yourself, what was that all about?

**LL Cool J:** So, first of all, like, the first time-- after I made my song, I went to a block party and I was rapping, right? And I'm on the mic. I'm like, "Yeah, you know, I'm getting busy. Yo, yo. And my record's coming out in November." And a guy walks up. He walks up and he gets on the mic right after I walk away says, "Stop lying." The whole block laughing. You know? That's how it went.

Right? So, yeah, "Stop lying." You know what I mean? So, that was that.

Mind you, I saw him a little while later. We were in a shoe store. It was a great feeling.

I was so proud when I made my first song. I used to go to school, I would carry my record to school and walk around in the hallway with my record. You know what I mean? There was no video. It was like, I was just like, "Y'all, I made a record." You know? Walking around like, "Look." They're like, "That ain't you." You know?

And then finally I did a concert. I convinced the shop teacher, I had one of my friends convince our shop teacher to let me do a concert. This was ninth grade. I did the concert in shop class. And I left and never came back. You know what I mean? I ended up reading a couple of books later. But at that time, I was out.

**Dan Dees:** It's worked out all right for you.

**LL Cool J:** But it all worked out well. I was thankful.

You know, just to give you a sidebar, right, I remember being 14 years old. We're playing hooky from school. I'm sitting in there, you know, everybody's sitting in a circle. They're smoking weed. You know what I'm saying? And I wasn't. I was standing in the corner kind of recessed in the corner. And I remember saying to myself, there's got to be more to life than this. You know? There's a dark side to it too, right?

When you grow up in the inner city and see wreathes on the corner, you know, all of your friends are killing each other, you just want to do better. At least I did. So, that was also the inspiration. Right? It's like, yo, I can't just stay here and just do this. It just felt like a dead end. You know what I mean? So, I was inspired to really go after my dreams, you know what I'm saying, because of that. And that's what I chose to do.

**Dan Dees:** So, paint that picture for us. Those early days, you talked about you're on the mic and the next guy came up and said what he said. But I look back at the early days of hip hop, and the launch of a cultural event, a movement, right, that's now taken hold. And "Rapper's

Delight." Obviously, not you, but seminal moment in the history. It was 1979. That was in '79.

**LL Cool J:** Yeah, but even before that, like there were tapes circulating in the neighborhood, kind of. It's funny. It's like Seattle with the computers and software stuff floating around, right? It's the same thing. I mean, it's the same story in our lives. Same everywhere. Like, you had to be in New York at that time during those years in order to be involved in hip hop.

All of these groups, all of these tapes were circulating around New York. And so, like I fell in love with it immediately because it was the first time that I heard young Black men sounding empowered. Sounding like they actually had power. Because most of the time the-- first of all, you feel invisible because when your friend up the block gets shot, nobody cares. Nobody talks about it. Right?

And then on top of that, it's like growing up in the wilderness. You know what I'm saying? Because it's like everybody's watching, but nobody's watching. If that makes

sense. You know what I'm saying? So, it's like you're growing up in this wilderness.

So, it's like when I heard Kool Moe Dee and these different artists, I was, like, this is what I want to do. I remember I was walking in junior high, must have been about, I don't know, 11, 12, something, and I remember this guy was walking down the hallway. And it was like kind of dark in the hallway. And the light was shining through from the outside. The lights weren't on in school yet. And he was singing a Jimmy Spicer song. He was like, "This DJ, he gets down. Mixing records while they go round." And I just remember, like, being hypnotized watching him because it was, like, I was seeing him from the back, and he was walking with his knapsack on. It was like slow motion. I was, like, that's what I want to do.

I think one of the things that's important with any business, right, is you just gotta be true to who you are. You know what I'm saying? You can't be all things to all people. You know what I'm saying? If we sell caramel, we sell caramel. That's what we sell. We don't sell chocolate. So, you've just got to be who you are, right? You've got to

be true to who you are. That's in any business, you know what I mean?

**Dan Dees:** Well said. In that spirit of being true to what the industry is, could you have imagined back in the early '80s and you're nine, then you're 11, going on to do this and all that stuff, and now you flash forward to today and it's the music genre that dwarfs all the others. Dwarfs country. Dwarfs rock in terms of streaming and all this stuff. The success of this industry and the cultural phenomenon of it, has it taken you by surprise? Would you have ever dreamed?

**LL Cool J:** Well, here's the thing you have to remember. There are a lot of entrepreneurs in this room, businesspeople, career executives. Every founder in here knows, like, it's already that big in your mind. You have to have a vision. So, with the vision, it's already there. It's already that big. Any founder in here you talk to. It's already there. You know, they didn't start at this conference. People were scrappy. People were figuring it out. You know what I mean?

So, it was already huge. Did I know it would become this huge streaming thing and take over the world? No. But it had already taken over the world in my head. You know what I'm saying? I already was a believer. I was a convert. That's the thing about either being a founder or a pillar or an early adopter, you know what I'm saying? That's the difference, right? That's how you become a difference maker, by believing in something and having a vision early. And it doesn't matter if other people don't like it.

Like, everybody in here is not interested in every business that everybody in here is involved in. But that's not the point. The point is that the founder loves what they do. They're into it. They're passionate about it. They're enthusiastic about it. And then they're smart enough to get the right people, and then you figure out where you want to go.

**Dan Dees:** I think you just summarized our B&I conference. That's well done. It took us ten years. Now we've finally nailed it.

No, so, articulate it this way. If from where you were, as a

foundational member and a very early part of the hip hop movement to where it is now, what were the, I don't know, three or four steps, what were the major moments that drove hip hop to where it is now? Or the major artists? Like, what do you think are the foundation steps that get us to where we are?

**LL Cool J:** I would say, look, when it left my neighborhood and, like, the cool kids or white kids in Long Island like Rick Rubin started listening to it, look, we all know that Black culture really is the impetus for a lot of things that happens in America and around the world, right? Like, what's going on in the inner city at the end of the day, like, that moves the needle. So, I think it had to start there.

But I think when it started spreading throughout the neighborhoods, that's when it just went to another level. And you know, I'm doing *Bandstand* in '85. I'm talking to Dick Clark. I'm like, yo, this is crazy. You know what I'm saying? Like I'm standing here with Dick Clark. Yesterday we was standing on a corner with a quart of OE. Now I'm talking to Dick Clark. You know what I mean? It's like what



is going on, you know what I'm saying? It was so many fun moments like that.

But yeah, I think there were a lot of seminal points. I think the riots. You know, things that happened in Long Beach. Big moments that kind of made people pay attention.

**Dan Dees:** You've got a bunch of entrepreneurs in here, all of whom, all of us, are trying to be seen, trying to be heard, trying to have an impact. You've stayed culturally relevant for almost 40 years. I was talking to people at cocktails last night. You've been in it for a long time, and you've stayed at the top of this game and the acting game and then the Rock the Bells game. What is it about you, or you can take it out of you and just others, that gets them seen and heard? What's the secret to success to getting heard in the noise?

**LL Cool J:** Well, first thing I would say is that you always want to be better today than you were yesterday. I think that's very important. I think you want to look at your mistakes and incorporate the learnings. And you want to know why won as well, right? Like, it's not enough to

win. You've got to win, know why you won, and then take advantage of the victory. Right? It's kind of like in boxing, you know, you hit a guy with a shot. Then you stand back and admire your work. And then get chin checked. You know what I'm saying?

So, it's about momentum. Personal momentum too. Like, what are you doing with your victory? Are you going to get a check for, I don't know, whatever amount of money and go crazy? Or are you going to stay focused on the dream? What are your priorities?

**Dan Dees:** You never sit back. You never seem to sit back and take a victory lap and just take a pause.

**LL Cool J:** Well, I have fun. And I enjoy myself. But at the same time, you can't limit yourself. Right? Because what happens is if you don't continue to learn, you will rise to the level of your incompetence. Right? When you rise to the level of your incompetence, you know, when things start getting slippery, that's why you've got to keep learning. I don't care who you are. CEO. Founder. It doesn't matter. Like, you still have to be learning everyday and

mastering your craft, whatever that craft is.

You know, I don't have to teach anybody here about finance. That's not my job. But I have to know what I do for a living. I have to master what I do. And you have to master what you do. Right? So, I think that's a big part of it, is that.

And then it's not being afraid to take risks. I've done things, projects that were failures. Things that didn't work. It is what it is. There's no shame in that. Like, I'm not going to be ashamed because this went left, or this didn't go right.

**Dan Dees:** You are so confident and so energetic. No fear of failure? You just plow ahead and do your thing?

**LL Cool J:** You know what, it's not even about having a fear of failure. It's just about focusing on winning. Failure will take care of itself. You know what I mean? Failure. Oh, there you are. You ain't got to worry about that. Just focus on winning. You know what I mean?

**Dan Dees:** Amen. What are you most, of all this stuff, of acting, of music, of all your entrepreneurial activities, what are you most proud of?

**LL Cool J:** You know, to be honest with you man, I don't even think like that. You know what I'm saying? Like, I don't really have time to, like, think about that. It's more about, like, how can we just be great? How can we win? How can we take this to another level? How can we maximize the moment? You know what I'm saying? Like, I'm proud of it all. I'm grateful for it. I'm more grateful than anything.

I would say the thing that is the most rewarding is that I still actually see people. You know what I'm saying? I know who I am. You know what I mean? Like, I'm clear. I know my value. I know who I am. So, the fact that I still see people, even if they don't know me, that doesn't even matter because I know who I am.

So, it's like I love people still. And I still care about people. And I still, you know, "Oh, my grandmother wants to Facetime you. She loves you. [UNINTEL]." You know what I

mean? I still love people. So, that's the beauty of it.

Because I think when you become jaded, that can become a problem too. We can become very insulated in different ways. Like, for me, it could be hanging out with only hip hop people and only doing that all the time. For another guy, it might be he's a member of 15 country clubs and he only does that.

**Dan Dees:** You talked about this human level and the connection. And you brought up your partner who's running Rock the Bells. How do you think about building teams? Whether it was in the music business, in your own music pursuits, or entrepreneurially?

**LL Cool J:** Well, I think there are a few things. First of all, there are two cultures, right, there's the corporate culture that you're building. And then there's the culture of whatever business you're in. Depending on the role, that person has to really understand those cultures. In my case, I want a person who is best-in-class when it comes to their know how and their skill set. That's table stakes. But then you have to have the cultural nuance. And then they've got

to be a people person, right? If somebody has a forward-facing job, you know, but they're awkward and always stepping on people's toes and getting on people's nerves, that's not gonna work. So, you know, it's about choosing wisely and putting people in the right positions, people that know how to do their jobs.

And I'm never intimidated by people that are smarter than me. Like, that's not a problem. You know what I'm saying? Like, as long as you can do your job. Because I'm gonna figure out what questions I need to ask. You don't have to worry about that. I'll do the research. I'm going to figure out the questions. So, I just want to put people in roles where they really know what they're doing. And I think that that's really important.

And also, I think it's important too, you have to understand that A players are not gonna respond well if you consistently hire B and C players as well. You have to weed them out. It kind of goes back to, you know, in the Jack Welch book when he was talking about candor and all that, and talking about the levels of employees. I'm a big believer that, you know, I've got to have A players. And if you're a B

player, I'm gonna find out.

And also, I believe that you need people that understand how to collaborate without being intimidating. Because you have a lot of people, I don't care if it's a financial product, a t-shirt, it's a pair of sneakers, you have people that they have so much pride of ownership in whatever it is that they're doing, that they don't understand that it can be improved. You know? They get so set and locked in on what the product is that "This is the best it can be." No. I need you to be able to open up and let things be improved. That's important. Right? Flexibility. That mental flexibility and that creative flexibility is really important.

Like, if somebody'd putting together, I don't know, some big projections and you guys got some company and you're trying to sell it or buy it or whatever, it's like you don't need this guy, like, just being locked into this one way of doing things if there is a better option out there, right? So, that's the thing too. It's like having people that are flexible.

My grandmother used to always say a smart rabbit has more than one hole. You know what I'm saying? You know

what I mean? You know? So, it's like, you know, you've got to be flexible. Options.

**Dan Dees:** Indeed. Well, thank you for this. Fantastic. That was fantastic. Well done.

**LL Cool J:** Thank you.

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