

The
Economic
Club of
New York

ESTABLISHED 1907

The Economic Club of New York

113th Year
573rd Meeting

LL COOL J
Founder and Chief Executive Officer
Rock the Bells

December 1, 2020

Webinar

Moderator: Charles Phillips
Trustee, The Economic Club of New York
Managing Partner and Co-Founder, Recognize

Introduction

President Barbara Van Allen: Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us this afternoon. We are going to get started in exactly one minute. Thanks.

Chairman John C. Williams

Good afternoon everyone and welcome to the 573rd meeting of The Economic Club of New York, and this is our 113th year. I'm John Williams. I'm the Chairman of the Club and President and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. The Economic Club of New York is the nation's leading nonpartisan forum for discussions on economic, social and political issues. Before we begin, I'd like to thank our healthcare workers, our frontline workers and all of those in public positions that help make our lives safer and easier during this very difficult time.

Our mission is as important today as ever as we continue to bring people together as a catalyst for conversation and innovation. Particularly during these challenging times, we proudly stand with all communities seeking inclusion and mutual understanding. To put those words into action, the Club kicked off its Focus on Racial Equity Series where we've been leveraging our platform to bring together prominent thought leaders to help us explore and better understand the various dimensions of racial inequity and highlight

strategies, best practices and resources that the business community can use to be a force for change.

We'll be cataloguing, publishing and sharing these insights broadly. Now we're not doing this work alone and we would like to give special thanks to our corporate partners – Bloomberg, Mastercard, PayPal, Taconic Capital, and S&P Global – as well as the many members, speakers, and subject matter experts that are now and will be engaged in this work.

I'd like to take a moment to recognize those of our 312 members of the Centennial Society attending today as their contributions continue to be the financial backbone of support for the Club and help enable us to offer our wonderful diverse programming both now and in the future. And a special welcome to members of The Economic Club of New York 2020 Class of Fellows – a select and very diverse group of rising next-gen business leaders – and I make special note that applications for the 2021 Class are now open. Any member interested in nominating a fellow, please visit our website for more details. We'd also like to welcome graduate students from the Fashion Institute of Technology and Medgar Evers School of Business today.

Now, it's an honor for me to welcome our very special guest today, LL COOL J. LL COOL J is the founder and CEO of Rock the Bells, the preeminent voice for classic and

timeless Hip-Hop. The modern media brand, specifically designed for Gen X focuses on content, commerce and experiences that honor the culture and the core elements of Hip-Hop – MC's, DJ's, Break-dancers, Graffiti Artists all in one robust platform.

Known as a global entertainment icon and entrepreneur with a career spanning three decades, LL COOL J's impressive body of work includes the successful Sirius XM channel "LL COOL J's Rock the Bells Radio," ten consecutive platinum-plus selling albums, a *New York Times* bestselling book and the first rapper to receive the prestigious Kennedy Center Honor.

Currently, he stars in the CBS hit primetime drama series NCIS: Los Angeles, which is currently in its twelfth season. He's a two-time Grammy Award winner, and Image Award winner, and both a passionate and avid philanthropist.

The format today will be a conversation in which we're fortunate to have Economic Club of New York Trustee and Managing Partner and Co-Founder of Recognize, Charles Phillips doing the honors. We're going to end promptly at 2:45. And I'll assure you that any questions that were sent from the Club members have been shared with Charles. Now, as a reminder, this conversation is on the record as we have media on the line. And with that, I'm going to hand it off to you, Charles.

Conversation with LL COOL J

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Well, thank you, John, and good to see you again. And as everyone knows, John is President of the New York Fed and I've served on the board with him for three years. I'm not sure I would have guessed the three of us would be on a call together three years ago. But this is the march of progress, this is good, a good milestone. So, LL, welcome. This was one of the most highly anticipated sessions. We've been doing these a long time, but the membership really responded. Lots of guests who want to dial in as well, so it's a big hit.

And everyone knows you, at least knows of you and some parts of your bio, but it's such an extensive bio. I wanted to add a little bit more to what John said. You were one of the original pioneers of rap and hip-hop music, really defined the culture and spoke for a whole group of people who didn't have a voice before. As he mentioned, you're the first rapper to receive Kennedy Honors but you're also in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, multiple NAACP Image Awards. You're a businessman as well with Rock the Bells, and we'll get into that in just a moment – a software product, a clothing line, you name it – and then an actor. And so all of that means you've been very busy and so we'll start at the very beginning when your career started.

So you were among the early hip-hop artists to achieve mainstream success, and I think

your original hit single was “I Need a Beat.” I was living in Brooklyn at the time. I remember it. Everybody was hyped up over it. And then no one saw that you had a dual album coming and you sold a million copies of that. But you were 16, sending around tapes to radio disc jockeys. So you were building a business, an entrepreneur from early on. So where did that drive come from, and the commercial success? Did you see that as part of the ____ or was something else driving you?

LL COOL J: Well, you know, first of all, let me just say thank you to everyone at The Economic Club of New York for having me. Thank you, John, for that wonderful intro. Barbara, in the background, Frank, Jeff, everybody. And Charles, thank you for the invitation. It’s good to see you again, you know what I’m saying. Nominated for the Hall...nominated for the Hall, not in yet, nominated, but I feel good. In terms of, you know, what drove me, it really was just a matter of wanting my voice to be heard, right? You know when you grow up in a city, it’s kind of like, you know, a lot of people on this Zoom today are probably familiar with Ian Rand and Atlas Shrugged and the guy walking around with the big Atlas, you know, on his shoulders. Well, when you’re walking around in the inner city, that’s kind of how you feel, but you can’t shrug. It’s very difficult to shrug. And so I just wanted my voice to be heard to be honest with you.

You know I got into; I became a fan of rap music at nine years old. At around 11 or 12, I started writing my own lyrics, songs, rhymes. At 14, I decided that I really wanted to

make a record. I wanted to be a professional recording artist and I just worked really hard for two years sending out demos, going from door to door, going everywhere in the five boroughs of New York until Ad-Rock from the Beastie Boys gave my demo to Rick Rubin and I became the flagship artist at Def Jam Records. And so that's kind of how it started. And, you know, the passion just came from just really not wanting to be invisible.

You know you grow up, look, we know that anything is possible and we know that we can bootstrap to make it, but you really do, when you're growing up in the inner city, you really do feel invisible. And it's almost like nobody sees me, does anybody care? My friend down the block got killed. There's a reefer on the corner down the block. Nobody noticed. And so it was like I just wanted to be heard, you know what I mean. It wasn't about money. It wasn't about, oh, I want a zillion dollars. Yes, I wanted nice things. There was part of that, but it was primarily initially just wanting to be heard.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: You were with Def Jam Records at the very beginning. You released twelve albums with them and their first big solo artist. And then you left for a little while and came back, but most people don't stay with a record label that long. So how does that relationship evolve? How did the business terms evolve? Are you happy with that?

LL COOL J: Yes, the relationship went really well. I had some mistakes, some bumps and bruises early on. Initially I owned a stake in Def Jam. Sold it a little too early. So I would advise people that when you have equity in a company make sure you go for the ride. It taught me something. I only do now what I call champagne deals, right? So a champagne deal basically means that at the end of the deal if we have an incredible exit or we do amazing and we hit a certain number or some kind of crazy event, liquid event happens, when we're toasting our champagne, I feel good about my glass. If I'm sitting there sipping my champagne after the big event happens, I'm like, well, mine is a little dry, a little sour, do the right deal.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: You don't want the beer; you want the champagne...

LL COOL J: Okay, so that's part one. Then part two is I ended up ultimately doing a deal where I owned my own catalog so, you know, when you hear "Mama Said Knock You Out" or you hear "Going Back to Cali" or you see or hear an LL COOL J song in a movie, I've licensed it. So that, you know, now they have a small interest in it, but I own my catalog. Obviously co-writers and different people have interest as well, but I own and control my catalog, which is really great and pretty unusual for a recording artist, especially one that started when I started. My first single came out in 1984. So, yes, I'm happy.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: That was going to be my next question. I had read that you own your masters. I don't know anyone from that era that owns their masters. But you arranged that over time?

LL COOL J: You know what, it was just a matter of opportunity, timing. It's like, you know, when a rabbit sticks his head out a hole, the hawk has to...you gotta get it when you can get it, right? So it was the right time. I had the right leveraging. And to be fair, they were willing to do the deal. They saw the value. I have to give them credit. And so I have no, you know, I have only good things to say about Def Jam in that regard. Subsequently, I did a new deal with them recently just to put out a new album. And myself and Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest are working on this album, this new LL COOL J record. So, you know, that should be coming out next year at some point.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: So you have another business called Rock the Bells. I know of it from Sirius XM Channel 43 because I listen to it all the time, but I understand it's more than that. So why don't you tell people what that business is and how you came up with that.

LL COOL J: Okay, so to give people a little history, I have a channel on Sirius XM, Channel 43, called Rock the Bells Radio. And Rock the Bells is a channel that's dedicated to classic and timeless hip-hop. Basically what happened was they had a

channel called BackSpin and I called Scott Greenstein over at Sirius and told him, Scott, this channel BackSpin that's playing this classic or old school hip-hop, it's just not right. It's not being done right. He said, well, what are you going to do to make it? I said, trust me, I can make it better. I said, you know, Wolfgang Puck can do better in my kitchen than I can and I can do better with this classic hip-hop channel than you can. And he was like, okay, I'll take you up on that. But it took me five years to get the deal, so it took a lot of tenacity, but ultimately I got the deal.

And then from there I realized, you know, right now we're at about 7 million listeners daily up front about a couple of million, right, and what I realized is that there is a fan base out there and there's an audience out there of Gen Xers who grew up with this culture who are being totally ignored because everybody is trying to make the safe bet on either the young millennial or maybe the Gen Z but everybody's chasing that other audience. Everybody's chasing, okay, who's at the top of the Billboard Rap Charts. Okay, that's who we need to be in business with not realizing that there's a lot of equity and a lot of value in artists that have been around forever.

For example, you have, recently you saw Paul McCartney on the cover of Rolling Stone magazine with Taylor Swift, but in the classic hip-hop genre you don't see that as much. Like you don't see, you know, Ice Cube on the cover of a magazine with Meg the Stallion, and you should. And so I found out that this audience was being neglected.

They have, you know, they have all of this disposable income. They're clamoring to access premium and elevated experiences. They're engaged on social. You know the audience itself has a bigger influence even than rock. I know there are a lot of rock people, rock fans on the call, no disrespect to rock. I'm a fan as well, but my first love is hip-hop. But when you look at social media, classic hip-hop far, has a way bigger reach than rock and roll does on social media.

And so I said, you know what, somebody has to talk to these people. Somebody has to talk to these people and take these people seriously. These RUN DMCs and the Eric B. Rakims and the Big Daddy Kanes and the Public Enemy and the M&M's and the Snoop Dogs and the Ice Cubes and the Dr. Dres, they still have fans. There's nothing wrong with Drake. There's nothing wrong with, you know, with the Travis Scotts. There's nothing wrong with the newer artists. We embrace them. And, in fact, we think we should collaborate with them. But these artists shouldn't be marginalized. So I started this platform that, it's a flywheel, and it's content, commerce, and experiences. And between those three things, we get the flywheel turning and really speak to an audience that doesn't have an all-encompassing hip-hop brand that touches them everywhere they are.

And, you know, a lot of times especially with hip-hop, we're thinking about the future and how things can be. We're not thinking about how things were. So, you know, people

out there that are trying to find something familiar in it, it's only the actual product itself that's familiar, but our approach to it is very new. Does that make sense?

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Yes, do you think that collaboration between generations you mentioned that happens a lot, what is going to take for that to happen in hip-hop?

LL COOL J: Well, it just takes, first of all, you have to have a company that's dedicated to that. That's a strategic choice and a tactical choice depending on where you sit, right? So, you know, the company has to be committed to that. First, they gotta see the value. First you have to recognize that classic hip-hop is valuable and that there's value there. Like real value. Like, you know, when you think about a company like Beats by Dre doing an exit for, I don't remember, \$3 billion or something like that, you think about the numbers that Ciroc is doing, you look at these, those are instances where people are cherry-picking hip-hop culture.

When you look at a show like, a film like Black Panther – may Chad rest in peace – when you look at something like that, you look at how it's built on Black culture and how hip-hop it is in the approach, people saw the value. See, once you see the value in it, then you can, you can monetize it. And the difference is, the only difference is now we can monetize it, but the people that started the culture and the people who actually made a contribution to own it. So when I say this, it's not just about LL COOL J, I've

given the guy who started Kool Herc a piece and I've given Fab Five Freddy a piece and Salt-N-Pepa a piece. And I've given Run a piece. And I've given so many other artists a piece – Jonathan Mannion, the photographer.

And why is that important? It's important because they influence the influencers, right? So they are influencers, like a lot of things I do, I influence influencers. So now we have a situation where I can pick up the phone and call Ludacris and Run can pick up the phone and call that artist in. This one can pick up the phone and call that artist, create those collaborative moments and that allows us to scale. But at the same time, it allows us to set a narrative correct, set the trajectory of our narrative. For 200, 300, 400 years from now, we'll still be around and we'll have the narrative right. So unlike rock and roll, which kind of marginalized a lot of the forefathers and only really focuses – unless you're a core-core rock and roll person, right? – it only focuses on the Mt. Rushmore, so to speak. I felt like hip-hop has an opportunity to do better.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: That collaboration theme was something I was going to ask you about because you started with Marley Marl. You've worked with Z-Trip, A Tribe Called Quest coming up. A lot of them. And so how do you decide who you're going to collaborate with? Is it inspired by a certain sound you're looking for? Is it a business interest? How do you decide on all these different artists?

LL COOL J: Well, I think whether it's music, art, film, or business, right, if it's an investment in a business, ultimately it has to be authentic. It has to be organic. Your agendas and, you know, you have to be strategically aligned and it has to make sense. So for me, and it's about taste, right? You gotta have good taste. You know what I'm saying. It's like what shoes go with those slacks. You know what I'm saying. What tie goes with that shirt? It's about taste. So, you know, for me, I just go on, I use my intuition. That's an important tool in the toolbox. But I always back my intuition up with science and data, you know what I'm saying, in terms of how I look at things. So I think that that's really what's important, right? Like that's what we want to do.

You want to intuitively be passionate about what you're doing, know what you're doing, really have domain expertise to a certain extent because you can never know it all, but you want to constantly be learning. But then you want to back that intuitive, those intuitive impulses up with science and data. So that's how I approach the company. You know what I mean? So I can look at demos, I can look at numbers. And at the same time, you know, intuitively I know what to do. Like, you know, you can dip your finger in the sauce and there it is, you know what I mean.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Let's talk about the streaming business. I mean no one would have anticipated that hip-hop would be 30% of all streams, bigger than rock and roll and pop combined, but is that positive or negative for the business model? Do you like to

see the evolution of streaming? Is it helping you or hurting you?

LL COOL J: You know, look, I think that, look, there is room for there to be improvement in terms of the shares that songwriters and artists get on the streaming site for major companies. Right now we're not necessarily a streaming company. We're more content, commerce and experiences. And we are taking a look at a streaming channel, a visual channel. We are look at it because I believe that that audience is underserved and I believe that I understand that there is, we can aggregate the right and curate the right program and really speak to that audience, but that's a different thing.

Streaming just for musicians right now, look, it's, you know, the numbers aren't great. The numbers aren't great. We could be doing a lot better. These companies could be paying, look, and I understand the other end of it, right? Like the company's thinking, yeah, I hear you but there's a zillion artists and if I pay everybody top dollar, I won't have a business. But there's probably a good point of, they could take it up a notch and maybe cut into their profit margin and create a little bit more goodwill. And they would get, that money would probably come back in terms of support from the community, right?

Because if you can get goodwill in a community by doing a win-win deal instead of a win-lose deal, you know, at the end of the day, pigs get slaughtered, right? So if we do a

deal, you know, and I leave nothing on the table, you know, we're not going to have a relationship, but if we do a deal where we both win, then there's a possibility that we can move forward. I mean you already know this. I'm preaching to the choir. But, you know, so I think from a streaming standpoint that's how we have to, I think that's how the companies should think about it. What kind of emotional equity do they have in the community? Like, and even just any community, you know.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: What do you think happens with live performances? Do we go back to the way it was? It is a hybrid – part of it digital, part of it in person? Do you personally feel like you want to perform live again? Kinda what exactly are you thinking about it?

LL COOL J: Well, I think, you know, look, it's pretty obvious that we've hit an inflection point, right? Like, you know, you had to know that months ago, many months ago. You had to know we hit an inflection point. There's been a big major change, a sea change. It's different. That being said, I don't think things will ever go back to the way they were. But I do think that those things will be around forever, right? Like, you know, they had live performances, you know, the Greeks, you know, had live performances thousands of years ago. That's not going to change. You know it's like a knife and a fork and a pair of pants. People are still going to use them, you know what I'm saying, they're going to be around.

But I think virtual experiences are kind of obviously – for obvious reasons – growing in popularity. You have a lot of kids and a lot of people in general who will say, you know, this is my first concert, it was a virtual concert. Right? There's a lot of people who don't know what it's like to go to a concert and put a light in the air. They've come of age in this time and their concerts are all virtual and they're totally pleased with it.

So the question becomes how do we take that experience to another level? How do we innovate? How do we innovate? How do we, you know, make it not just a camera pointing at the person, but actually take the entire experience to another level? And so I think that's the thing we want to solve for, you know what I mean. But live performances are extremely important, I think, just to the health of the world. You know, just global culture in general, we need live performances as human beings. We need sports. We need entertainment. It can't just be all, you know, P&Ls. There's got to be more to life than that.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: You've been creative in the sense of creating new businesses around hip-hop. So you have a software product that allows musicians to collaborate. You did Rock the Bells. Are other musicians you know from that era doing that? And do you see more opportunities to create more businesses that you own around your own uses?

LL COOL J: Yeah, I think that a lot of people are thinking that way. I think a lot of artists right now, the trend is that they're taking control of their merch and they see an opportunity to go direct to consumers with their merch. But I just think, I think that the way we're thinking about it is bigger than just merch. We're thinking about, you know, connecting brands with the audience and really telling these stories in a way and connecting with the audiences in a way that kind of enlightens the brands, lifts the brands up and at the same time lifts the people up, right? So I just feel like there's a way that we can do this that can benefit brands and the masses.

And so the question becomes are you outward looking or are you inward looking, right? Like I'm looking more about what can be done for the world, you know, with what I'm doing. It's not just about LL COOL J. It's about what can I take my experiences and teach and give the world, you know, through this company, Rock the Bells. So beyond that. So in terms of a lot of artists from my era, look, everybody isn't, you know, in the position that I'm in. Some people are even way further ahead though, right? So it's all about, it's all relative. It's all relative.

You know, and for me Rock the Bells is the thing that I'm committed to. It's not, this ain't a vanity deal. I put, you know, when my partner and I, Geoff Yang, started this thing, we wrote checks. We put our own money in. We got somebody from CO2 to do a market analysis for us. Once we did a market analysis, we kind of, we took it to another level.

We whiteboard it, we brought a team in. I got connected with Geoff through Glenn Hutchins, who you know. Glenn Hutchins connected Geoff and I.

And so, you know, I take this thing really seriously. And the thing that I think that's been missing in hip-hop culture for this kind of business is that it needs to be loose and crazy and wild and out of control on the outside, right? But it needs to be buttoned up on the inside. And I think that that's been kind of the disconnect for a lot of hip-hop brands because you go to the meeting and the dude is sitting there and he's on his phone and it's, yeah, yeah, you know, yeah, yeah. But are we getting the deal done, you know what I'm saying. So I've learned that there's a time to be buttoned up and then there's a time to be loose and crazy. So I let the loose, crazy, full-blown hip-hop vibes be outward facing for the people. And I keep the inner sanctum of the company all the way suited and booted, and I think that that has helped us get to this point.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: You know this trend to race relations now, the country has been having this unique discussion over the last six months that's just different. What do you think changed? I mean you've been talking about some of this stuff in your music since you were 16, but suddenly after George Floyd, why do you think it's different now? It just seems different. Why do you think it's different?

LL COOL J: Well, I think, you know, because that was, look, things are hard to relate to

if it doesn't happen to you. It's like, you know, you hear women say they're afraid in parking lots at 1:00 and 2:00 in the morning. I doubt very seriously if you feel that way. I've never felt that way. So sometimes it's hard to relate to things. You know if I'm a White guy – and I'm not racist – but I'm a White guy in America and I see a cop and I ask him for directions and I don't get a weird vibe, it's kind of hard for me to believe that that same guy who was so nice to me can treat this guy like he's an animal.

It can be, you know, for those who aren't, because first of all, let me say the key to this whole thing is not to demonize everybody, right? All White people aren't racist, you know, it's just, there is a section, a group of people that feel a certain way and they have a loud voice, but it's not everybody. So the thing with George Floyd is that, that was the first time that they got to really witness it, pure, clear, no excuse, no way to defend it. It was indefensible and we have a just cause. And having a just cause is very important when you have, you know, a problem. It has to be a just cause. And we legitimately have a just cause and grievance in this area. And I think that because people know we have a just cause, they're able to relate and they're willing to support.

Look, America is imperfect. There's no question about that and there's been a lot of problems. But there has also been progress, right? So it's kind of like, it's not, it in no way is it excusable at all. All I'm saying is there was slavery and there's not. We weren't able to sit in restaurants and then we were. Like there was never a Black president and

then there was. What I'm saying is there's a woman of color who is Vice President-elect and there never was before. What I'm saying is America does make progress, but you have to recognize when unjust things happen and injustice does exist. And there are too many Black men in jail, alright, for nothing. When you put a guy in jail because he has a little crack, and then another kid has some cocaine powder and you're changing the laws just based on, you know, they're playing with probability at that point. They're playing with probability and just using, you know, turning these men into slaves. That's wrong. You see what I'm saying.

So I think that people are starting to get that. I think that, you know, the internet and the social media has connected a lot of like-minded people and a lot of small tribes have become big tribes and a lot of like-minded people who used to be scattered all over the place have now become this more cohesive voice and people have to respect and respond to those numbers in the masses, which is a reason why I think net neutrality, a lot of these things are important, right? Because we need to make sure that people can stay connected. We don't want to divide and conquer, or see the people divided and conquered.

So I think for America, though, for America it is better that all races of people, ethnicities, religions, genders, that everyone succeeds because any race or any people in America that don't succeed, if any race or ethnicity doesn't succeed, that's a leak in

America's boat as a whole. You can think, you know you're not going to be, you know you're not over there on your part of the boat watching TV and, you know, watching football with your remote control and you think you're good and there's a leaky hole in the boat at the stern, alright, because guess what, the whole boat ultimately goes down.

So that's why I think this is an important time for us. But I think it's important that we speak from a place of connection as opposed to demonization. I think that that's important too because if we're going to have a relationship moving forward, it just can't be you're the devil, you're the devil, you're the devil. You know, you're garbage, you ain't shit. It can't be that kind of a thinking. It has to be connection. It has to be like, you know, us connecting as people, you know what I'm saying.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: So a lot of the athletes spoke out early, they were kneeling. Businesses are putting out press releases, some are doing more than others, politicians. Hip-hop artists, you know it depends on who you talk to, some say they should be saying more and others say, well, they've been saying a lot for many years. How do you think the role of the artist, should the hip-hop artists be doing more? Should actors be doing more? Just artists in general, what should they be doing?

LL COOL J: I think that people have to be true to who they are. I think that if you get out there talking about something and you're just kinda doing it because somebody said

you should, you get yourself in trouble. It's gotta be real for you. Like I'm not lying. Like I'm on here and this is the economic forum and I know it's billionaires watching and different people that have built, and VCs and people that have built huge companies, but the reality is I'm talking about experiences that I'm familiar with, that I know. I'm not here pretending to be somebody else.

So I think for actors and artists, you know, you just gotta be yourself and you gotta be authentic to who you are as an artist and speak your truth. And I think that when you speak your truth, that's a beautiful thing. Now what I will say to the business community and to the economic community is I don't think that, I think that they have more of an opportunity to do more than they think they do. And I don't think that they should take as much counsel of their fears when they have those, you know, that 10% or that 5% calling them up with that racial tone, trying to get them not to do this and not to do that. I think that they have to be strong enough to kind of weather some of those storms and do business with people anyway, in spite of those voices because that's the only way to transform America. You know we're going to have to drown out those flames of racial injustice, you know what I'm saying, with the wisdom or the water, with the rain of just us working together and being one, you know what I mean. So, you know, in terms of the artists, they gotta do what they feel is real for them. That's what I do.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Yes, makes sense, makes sense. So let's lighten it up and get to

some of the fun questions people wanted me to ask. We're not going to get to them all.

LL COOL J: Okay.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: But, so in 2016, you announced your retirement from music and you almost broke Twitter when you did that, and then you un-retired. So now we hear you're back, you're coming out with new music with Def Jam. So when are we going to see something? Are you back? What's coming up?

LL COOL J: Well, I'm in the studio right now. Me and Q-TIP are working on an album. I got a lot of music done. You know it's coming from, it's new, it's innovative. You know I think the key to creation for me, art needs to be, you have to be that white part of the foam on the beach, when the wave crashes the beach, that white foam, you want to be right on the edge. You know you want to be right on the edge of that, you know, in terms of innovation. So I'm not trying to recapture what I did. I'm staying true to who I am, my roots are planted, but it's new fruit. It's a new year, it's a new fruit. Same roots, new fruit, you know what I'm saying. And I'm a big believer, like I always say dreams don't have deadlines so I'm just trying to create something that I love and that I think, you know, the people who loved me will love or, you know, maybe people want to explore. So we're working on it and it's coming together.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: So rumor has it you have some 40 unreleased songs with Dr. Dre...

LL COOL J: I do.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: ...which you two have collaborated on. A lot of people want to know what's on that and when we're going to see that coming out.

LL COOL J: I mean we'll see; we'll see. You know I may include some of the songs I did with Dre on it. We talk, you know, pretty frequently. We'll see. But I'm definitely working on this project and we'll see what makes the cut, you know what I'm saying. Me and Dre have some songs we need to finish. We've talked about finishing them. We'll see. It's like anything else. It just has to flow organically. You get a rhythm and then you gotta see it through, you know what I'm saying.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: So let's talk about TV. Some of the people listening first saw you as Special Agent Sam Hanna at NCIS: LA. So you've done a couple of films, more than a couple of films, so I guess how did the acting thing come about? How did you transition over? How do you like that relative to music? Kind of which one is your first love, let's talk about the acting side.

LL COOL J: Well, hip-hop is my first love. There's no question about that. The way, you know, I started, you know, when I was a little kid, me and my friend, Pierre, he used to have his camcorder and we used to be running around and, you know, filming and acting like we were doing karate movies, because I always loved Bruce Lee, you know what I'm saying. Bruce Lee was like, Bruce Lee is the reason I wanted to act, you know what I'm saying, because, you know, I mean he wasn't Black but he wasn't White, you know what I mean. He had a tan. And it was like, oh, I can relate to Bruce. So I was like, so Bruce Lee was the man, so he made me want to get into acting. Then, you know, so I've been acting all along and kinda doing things here and there.

Opportunities would come. People would ask me to do roles and I would take them. And I studied as well, right? I went to school, Aaron Speiser, the Speiser Workshop, I really studied, you know, acting. And I still have a teacher to this day, I keep a teacher. It's like, you know, having, like Jordan had Phil, you know, you gotta have a good teacher, right, if you want to be better. So I try to keep my mind renewed and staying fresh so I never phone it in. Develop good habits.

And then, you know, beyond that, you know one time in the music business I was talking to this guy, right, you know I'm not going to say who because I'm not going to throw anybody under the bus, it's not necessary, but I was talking to this music executive and I was like, yeah, you know, I got the new album coming up and I'd love to

get an advance because I got some things I want to do and blah, blah, blah, my family and blah, blah, blah. And he kinda like, you know, gave me one of these like, huh, well, you know...and I was like, oh, I see the writing on the wall. So I went to see ___ and we did a TV show immediately. I'm like, yo, I'm not, you know, it's like I just, you know, there's an old saying, man, you know the smart rabbit has more than one hole, you know what I'm saying.

So I was like I'm going to do something else and then you guys call me back when you're ready to talk. So I went and did a television show and just one thing led to another and I really focused. I was, you know, something I was able to do, something I loved. It was my second love. It wasn't my first love. But it was something I loved to do. And, you know, just one thing led to another and I ended up having some success in it.

And over the years, and then I did an episode of a show called House. I had an episode and I said, wow, these dramas, this television drama seems really cool, like I really enjoy this. I'd love to do this regularly. So we went, it took a couple of years, did a deal, ended up doing a deal with CBS. We did one pilot. That pilot failed or didn't get picked up. But then, you know, CBS was like, hey, you know what, we like you, we'd love to do some more with you. And I thought it was great, you know, Nina Tassler, Les Moonves, I know he's had some issues, but Les was really good to me, Nina Tassler. So we did a deal and, you know, the next thing we know, NCIS: Los Angeles comes out and it just

blew up. It went into syndication after seven episodes, you know, which is unheard of, like the fastest syndicating show ever. And here we are, twelfth season.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Well, as a board member of Viacom CBS, thank you for that. It's been a run.

LL COOL J: Definitely. Definitely.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: What music do you listen to? What hip-hop stars today do you like?

LL COOL J: Man, I listen to everything. I listen to everything from DaBaby to Lil Baby to a Drake song to the most classic, you name it, from James Brown to Rick James. I go down rabbit holes. I might, you know, the other day I was just listening to Rick James over and over again. I'll go James Brown. I'll go the newest thing out. I listen to everything. Tina Marie. But then I'll go to Travis Scott, you know what I mean. So my taste is eclectic. I'll go from Sade to, you know, Van Halen, may Eddie rest in peace, you know what I'm saying. Like I listen, I just love music. I love good music.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Do any of those influences make it into your music over time as it kind of mixes up in there?

LL COOL J: A hundred percent. Rick James was a huge influence, you know, all of his crazy antics. He was a great actor if you watch his videos. Rick James, you know, Michael Jackson, I mean so many of them, like, yeah, yeah, look, artists stand on the shoulders of other artists, right? We stand on the shoulders of giants, other giants. So, you know, every artist, you know so many Black artists paved the way for me. So many people have put me in a position to be able to do a lot of the things that I'm doing. So, yeah, they definitely, but they made their way into my music creatively too, not just from a, you know, social standpoint, but like it bled in. Absolutely. I absorbed it all. I tried to learn as much as I could.

I remember riding with Michael Jackson on a plane. I was on a plane with Michael Jackson and Michael Milken and Quincy Jones and we were on a plane. And I remember Michael Jackson just looking at me and saying, oh, never limit yourself. Never, ever limit yourself. And I'm just looking, I'm like, I'm just thinking to myself, I can't believe I'm on a plane with Michael Jackson, Milken and Quincy Jones right now. And then like a few hours later I was at a barbershop in Queens just talking to dudes in Queens like, just right in the block, right in the hood, and I was just saying to myself, yo, this is unbelievable. I wouldn't even try to describe to these dudes what I was just doing a few hours ago, you know what I mean.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: That's funny. Do you keep in touch with some of the early

pioneers, like Chubb Rock and Big Daddy Kane. Both are friends of mine, saw them recently. That whole network of people, because a lot of them would, you know, obviously love it to reconnect with you and, who knows, get you back at the Apollo Theater.

LL COOL J: A hundred percent. Well, first of all, Big Daddy Kane, I gave him equity in Rock the Bells, right? So Big Daddy Kane actually has an ownership position in Rock the Bells. Chubb Rock, I play a lot of his new music on the station, on Rock the Bells Radio. I haven't spoken to him quite as much. We did do a thing, Pass the Mike, together and he was part of that. In terms of the Apollo, look, I would love to do something at the Apollo. You know I've had great, I had great fun at the Apollo. I'd come in there and rub the log, you know what I'm saying. I had huge moments at the Apollo. There's footage of me doing "I Need Love" and girls rushing the stage when I was a teen heartthrob and all of that back in the days.

So it's like the Apollo was special. The Apollo was meaningful. The Apollo was the top, the creme de la creme in terms of performance venues. It's one of the most important venues in the world. I mean just going to Harlem, even though Harlem has changed so much, I remember just going uptown to Harlem and just going to the Apollo, whether it was amateur night, you know so many different things I went there for. It's a one of a kind, you know what I'm saying.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah. You've had so many awards and have been recognized for so many things. I mean you got a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, on and on and on. But when was the first time when you said, oh, okay, I think I made it now, this is different, that you recognized the trajectory that you were on?

LL COOL J: You know what's funny, honestly Charles, like I feel successful, but made it, I don't know what that really means because that almost sounds like you think you have an unassailable position. And I don't know if anybody has that. Like, look, hey, look, Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates look like they are light years ahead of us economically, but I don't even know if they like made it because what does that really mean? Right? Like, you know, in life we're making it. But, look, in terms of being successful, you know, it actually was a long, long time ago. I was coming out of McDonald's drive-through and pulled over to drink my shake and a girl came up to me and said, hey, LL, right?...because there wasn't that many videos then. I was like, yeah. She was like, I really like your music. I was like, thank you. And the reason it struck me so deep is because she said music. And before that it was just a song, like you make a song, you know, I had a couple of songs out. But she said I like your music and it made me think I have a body of work. You know it made me think about, wow, she looks at it like I have music. And that was a special moment for me and that was many years ago, you know what I'm saying.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, LL, I just want to thank you again. This has been fantastic. Your body of work, as you say, you're a force of nature, you're an influence to culture in many different ways, and we're just honored to have you here. So I appreciate spending some time with you.

LL COOL J: Thank you, man. I appreciate it very much, Charles, and I look forward to seeing you, you know, hanging out again, and good luck with everything you're doing. You know, economic alliances, the Black alliances, it's amazing.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: I'm looking for that next album to drop, that's what I'm waiting for.

LL COOL J: It's coming. It's coming.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: I'll turn it back over to John. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN JOHN C. WILLIAMS: All right, terrific. Thank you so much, Charles. Thank you so much, LL COOL J. This has been an amazing discussion. I really appreciate your willingness to spend time with us today and share your perspectives and experiences. This has been great. Thanks.

LL COOL J: Thank you John. I appreciate it very much.

CHAIRMAN JOHN C. WILLIAMS: So my last job for this session is to talk about some of the speakers we've got lined up for the rest of the year. Please, we invite everybody to, not only attend our events, but encourage you to invite guests. We've got, tomorrow, Mellody Hobson, Co-CEO and President of Ariel Investments lined up. Later, boy, we have a busy week ahead of us. We have Ken Chenault, former CEO and Chairman of American Express on December 8. We have David Steward, Founder and CEO of World Wide Technology on December 9. And then on December 17, we have Mark Carney, the U.N. Special Envoy on Climate Change and Finance and former Governor of the Bank of England talking about the Group of 30 Report on "Mainstreaming the Transition to a Net-Zero Economy." So please, as always, stay tuned for announcements of future events for 2021. We've already, one person we'll have early next is Fed Chair Jay Powell, who is confirmed for February. So please keep watching our screens for events coming up. And everyone stay well. Thank you.