

Arts ENTERTAINMENT

Kevin Mahogany

New female jazz singers seem to appear regularly, but for a long time the space behind Joe Williams (now seventy-six) and Mel Tormé (sixty-one) and Ray Charles (sixty-four) has been empty. A couple of years ago, the (then) thirty-six-year-old Kansas City singer Kevin Mahogany arrived in New York. There is little he cannot do. He has absorbed Billy Eckstine, Williams, Charles, Al Hibbler, Betty Carter, and Leo Watson. He can sing the blues, and he can sing ballads. He can scat. He can sing Monk and Gillespie and John Lewis and Miles Davis, and he can sing soul songs and novelty songs, and he is a startling, gospel singer, who shouts, hums, bends notes in two, growls, and locks every syllable to five or six notes...

—Whitney Balliett, The New Yorker, June 5, 1995
Celebrated critic and author Whitney Balliett could not have been

more correct in his assessment of Kevin Mahogany. There has been a dearth of young male singers. Stylists who matured long after the golden era of Tin Pan Alley, have developed not with the Broadway songbook that traditionally adapted so well to jazz, but rather with the pop, soul and rock music of the sixties, seventies, and eighties. Until now.

Kevin Mahogany, born July 30, 1958, in Kansas City - that most venerable and historically significant of jazz "cradles" - is a product of the previous three decades. Although he portrays a character modeled after Big Joe Turner in Robert Altman's upcoming film, *Kansas City*, Kevin grew up in the aftermath of the city's all-night, bawdy, no-holds-barred heyday. Kevin arrived during a time when classic R&B leaned towards Memphis and Motown, and soul co-existed with rock 'n' roll.

"The standards stand the test of



Kevin Mahogany

time," he states, adding that, "melodically, lyrically, a song has to have something extra. This helps guarantee that it's continually performed. Even

though we don't have as many musicals today as the industry did in previous periods, we do have great songwriters."

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LL Cool J

Since his auspicious emergence in 1985, LL Cool J has catapulted from overnight hip-hop sensation to bonafide cross-cultural phenomenon. A seasoned entertainer at the tender age of 28, his lengthy list of accomplishments boggle the mind: two-time Grammy Award winning rapper, star of a hit television series, feature film actor, trusted advertising pitchman, author, company chairman, humanitarian and devoted husband and father. Indeed, as LL swaggers confidently into the next millennium some fans must wonder: What unexplored challenges remain for the undisputed king of hip-hop?

It's a reasonable enough question, one to which LL replies, "plenty." Still restless and hungry after 12 years in the spotlight, the rapper wants to elevate his game to even loftier levels. "I haven't achieved everything I want, and I definitely want a lot more," the hip-hop legend admits. "To be honest, I feel like I'm at the beginning again. There's a desire to improve what I've built thus far and make it better."

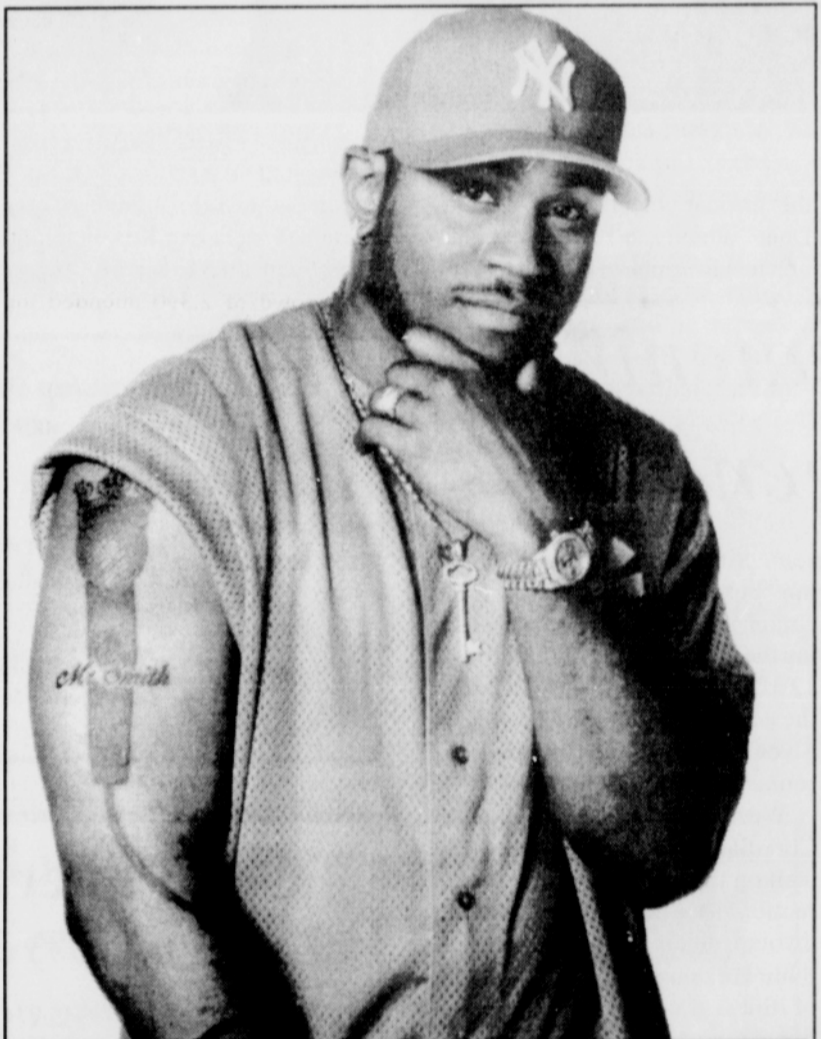
LL's insatiable ambition is admirable, especially considering his already mythic status in contemporary culture. With over 20 million albums sold he's the most successful hip-hop artist in history, yet his fame often threatens to overshadow his artistic achievements.

His vision and commitment to excellence have resulted in a series of historic firsts. He was the first rap artist to release a single and album on the now-legendary Def Jam Records label. He was the first hip-hop artist to amass six consecutive platinum-plus selling albums and six gold singles. In 1991 he made history by becoming the first rap artist to go acoustic on "MTV Unplugged."

Now with his music and acting careers firmly on track, LL finds himself poised on the precipice of multimedia superstardom. His latest album entitled *Phenomenon*, is another masterful synthesis of accessible rhythm and sublime rhyme. Featuring contributions by rap and pop luminaries such as Sean "Puffy" Combs, Babyface, The Trackmasters, Kirk Franklin & The Family, Busta Rhymes, Redman and Method Man, LeShawn, The Lost Boyz, Tamia, Prestige, L.E.S., Derek Angeletti, Big Ron and Stevie J., *Phenomenon* is LL's most introspective and forthright recording yet.

For his part, LL attributes his longevity to one simple fact: "I've always been true to what I was feeling emotionally and artistically," he says. "I don't like violence. I've seen violence, seen people I love be the victims of violence and there's nothing cool about it. It plainly just doesn't interest me."

"They pushed the lunch room tables together and me and my DJ, cut Creator, started playing," LL recalls. "As soon as it was over there were girls screaming and asking for autographs. Right then and there I said 'this is what I want to do'."



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