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Dressed for Success

By: Robert Wynne

When Karl Kani started selling baggy jeans out of the trunk of his car in Brooklyn, N.Y., eight years ago, he wasn't trying to rock the fashion industry.

But he did.

Kani, now head of his own fashion design firm that started in a Crenshaw storefront and is now based in the warehouse district Downtown, created the fall-off-your-butt jeans, oversized-shirt-hanging-out, hip-hop-homeboy style now wildly popular coast to coast.

At age 26, he sits atop Karl Kani Infinity, which he predicts will yield more than \$40 million in sales this year. Kristi Ellis, an editor at the West Coast fashion industry journal California Apparel News, called those figures "an exceptional number."

His success is phenomenal not simply because someone so young could fly so far so fast, but that in an industry dominated by white designers and manufacturers, a black man with no formal education is not only competing, but also leading.

He has done this in just three years, coming to Los Angeles without a car and settling in with a friend in an apartment over the Crenshaw storefront, where they eked out a living selling their funky clothes.

Discovered by the Cross Colours apparel company in 1992, Kani developed his own line for the firm and left earlier this year as it went belly-up.

Although he has left the streets--he now lives in the Hollywood Hills--the streets haven't left him.

His sales staff is headed by A.Z. Johnson, a boyhood friend from Brooklyn who, in turn, has hired others from the inner city, an example Kani implores other businesses to follow.

The hip-hop magazine Vibe calls Kani an "empire builder" who is "bringing his ghetto reality to the masses." But will Kani's good fortune last in an industry rife with overnight smashes--and crashes?

Kani is determined to cut out failure like a bad piece of fabric.

"I never feel like I'm where I want to be at. I always want to be better than I was yesterday," said Kani, whose real name is Carl Williams. Before moving to Los Angeles, he changed it to Kani--an alternative spelling of "Can I?" --as part of his new image. "I'm hungrier now than I've ever been before."

Clive [Paul] Taylor, owner of New York Looks clothing store on Crenshaw Boulevard, was one of the first customers for Kani's line. "It's kind of different, it's unique, it's attractive,"

Taylor said, adding that the majority of customers for the pants, shirts, and shoes are males ranging from teens to mid-thirties. “It’s a good portion of my business.”

But style alone does not guarantee success.

Ellis has seen dozens of high-flying beginners nose-dive. “In this day and age, it’s more important to be a good businessman and marketer than a good designer.”

Kani, shy yet exuding a cool, tough demeanor (he has several Rottweilers), said he is a businessman first.

Unlike Cross Colours, which at one time had 300 employees and manufactured its own clothes, Kani runs a lean operation with just 15 employees, licensing his manufacturing (and the resultant headaches) to several companies.

His passion is earning cash, creating clothing a means to do that. At 18, just out of high school, where he enjoyed time on the football field and baseball diamond more than the classroom, Kani eschewed a formal education in favor of honing his business skills on the streets.

He began with a simple idea: big jeans.

“We never liked our jeans fitting tight,” he said. “If you wear a Size 34, we’d buy a pair of [Size] 40 jeans but the waist would be too big. So I just figured, why not increase the size of the leg of the pants?”

With the blessing of his parents--his father is a real estate developer and his mother a doctor--and support of his older sister, he sold clothes out of his car and home.

He even sought out high-profile performers at rap concerts to wear his designs, which also included sweats with leather trim.

“The only thing that really kept me striving was seeing black people being successful in the music industry,” he said. “I wanted to be a part of that, but I knew I couldn’t sing or dance or rap. I couldn’t do all that, but I could provide clothing for these people who were out there, who could make me famous at the same time.”

Kani’s jeans and a variety of custom-made shirts, jackets and sweat suits with leather trim graced such big-name rappers as Heavy-D, LL Cool J and Big Daddy Kane.

“At the beginning, there was no real game plan. It was more like a fun, gimmick type of thing,” Kani said. “But when I started seeing the response I was getting and the way people were reacting to it, then a game plan came to mind that ‘I need to take this thing to another level because I’m getting a good response and I can create history.’”

But it was hard to make history selling jeans and jackets one pair at a time. Kani figured California was the place to be. Business costs were cheaper there and he figured it would be easier to make a name in the less crowded garment market.

“It cost me too much to produce in New York,” Kani said. “I found out a lot of bigger companies were producing out in Los Angeles like Guess?...I knew that to be successful, you had to be a part of what was happening. The garment industry was definitely happening in Los Angeles.”

Once in Los Angeles, Kani and boyhood chum Johnson opened Seasons Sportswear in the Crenshaw district. Johnson, whom Kani considers one of his closest friends, had moved from Brooklyn to the West Coast a year earlier.

The culture shock was swift. Accustomed to driving around Brooklyn in a new BMW and strutting about with a pocketful of cash, Kani had to adjust to the warmer climate and a bank account as barren as the Arctic. He had sold his car and devoted too much of his savings to business costs.

“Just the fact that we were living in the store showed you what kind of money we had,” Kani recalls. “It was just lucky for us the store happened to have showers. We were barely making it. People looked at us like we had a lot of money because we were making clothes and we were always dressed good. But that was all a front.”

Said Johnson, 28, now a vice president in charge of Kani’s upcoming children’s line: “We made a little, not much.”

The pair quickly became a team, as Kani honed his design skills and Johnson, a former shipping and receiving manager for Ralph Lauren in New York, worked the financial end.

Business grew steadily in Los Angeles, but the Crenshaw store was still the minor leagues.

Then the big leagues, in the form of Cross Colours owners Carl Jones and T.J. Walker, came calling. Kani and Johnson closed their store in 1992 shortly before moving over to Cross Colours.

In 1992, Threads 4 Life, Cross Colours’ parent company, hired Kani to create his own line for the company. At the time, Jones and Walker were hailed as the premiere African American fashion designers and manufacturers, with millions of dollars in sales and a reputation as modern-day Midases.

Earlier this year, Cross Colours, besieged by accounting and shipping problems, all but disintegrated under an ocean of debt. Jones and Walker continue to work today strictly as freelance designers.

But Kani surfaced with his name and image intact and he formed Karl Kani Infinity, starting shipments in May.

As the Cross Colours owners did, Kani plays up his background.

“We let people know that I started from a street level and that if I can do it, then surely anybody else can do it because I ain’t no different than any other kid that grew up in the inner city,” said Kani, who sometimes models that his clothes in advertisements that feature men with hard stares in gritty street scenes.

“Blacks are seeing that they cannot only be successful in music and sports, but now they’re tapping into the industry of clothing, which was unheard of, really, for any blacks to be really successful,” he said.

His sales staff of six, like him and Johnsons, come from inner-city Brooklyn. (A few employees are from Los Angeles.)

Said Johnson: “A lot of them don’t have 100% schooling on sales. We hire them and teach them and they end up better than people that were schooled for it. If you grew up in the city, you’re natural-born hustler. The inner city kids value a dollar more--they value it a lot.”

Kani’s clothing does not come cheap, as the outfit he wore during a recent interview--motorcycle boots (\$130), cream-colored baggy twill pants (\$75) and a virgin wool shirt (\$150)--attests.

But Kani makes no excuses. “You can’t have good quality and low prices,” he said, adding that he may soon come out with a lower-priced offshoot like Ralph Lauren has done with his Chaps brand of clothing.

Kani, whose passion for fashion is exceeded only by an obsession with weight lifting, holds court in a warehouse at 5th and Molino streets.

Bolts of mint green, blue and red-and-yellow striped fabrics fight for space along the brick hallways. Kani conducts business sitting on a black leather chair fronting a table topped with a huge slab of glass etched with his name and logo.

Hanging on the walls of his office are samples of the clothing he will introduce in the spring: earth-toned, long-sleeve shirts--some with zippers in front--hockey shirts, cream-colored pants, relaxed-fit jeans.

Kani also has plans to expand into the women’s and children’s market, although he has no firm date on those launches. Earlier this year, Kani put out his own brand of street-tough urban shoes--mostly motorcycle and hiking boots and leather sneakers in blacks, browns and earth tones.

“He’s changing the look. It’s more classy, top of the line,” Taylor of New York Look said. “He’s cut back a little on the street look. He has a conservative look and a trendy look.”

Kani said he must change to stay competitive.

“We put out so many styles before that now we’re starting to change a little bit. A lot of people are doing a lot of the things we used to do, and we want to look different,” he said. “By staying real and staying focused and always changing your style, you’re always going to stay ahead of the marketplace.”

He added: “For 1995, we’re coming into a very basic, relaxed look. We’re noticing that a lot of people are getting away from the big, oversized baggy jeans. They’re getting into relaxed-fit jeans,” he said. “Right now the earth tones are still going to be popular for us. We’re going to expand our tops. We found that button-down collar shirts and things like that are getting to be more a part of our business. A lot of people want to look dressy but still have a sport look to them.”

Whatever that look is, Kani hopes to get there first.