

# King of

# Bling

## Chris Aire brings hip hop to luxury horology

Josh Sims



Like it or loathe it, 'bling bling' matters. How else could high-end watches have gained such a boost in profile in recent years, without sparkling wrist candy being sported as-standard by paparazzi fodder such as the Beckhams, J-Lo and Paris Hilton? Californian Chris Aire has been quick off the mark to capitalise on this rampant phenomenon, offering a unique customisation service to those whose luxury timepieces just aren't luxurious enough...and to whom money is no object. Pimp your watch, with the self-styled horological King of Bling.

Chris Aire has always had a thing for diamonds. "Diamonds are just beautiful," he enthuses. "They symbolise loyalty, romance and, of course, glamour. And there's no doubt that they're a status symbol, a mark of success. As one client said to me, they could go and spend their money on a Ferrari, but then you can't drive a Ferrari into the mall. Spend it on your watch and that can go with you everywhere. People like to wear their money."

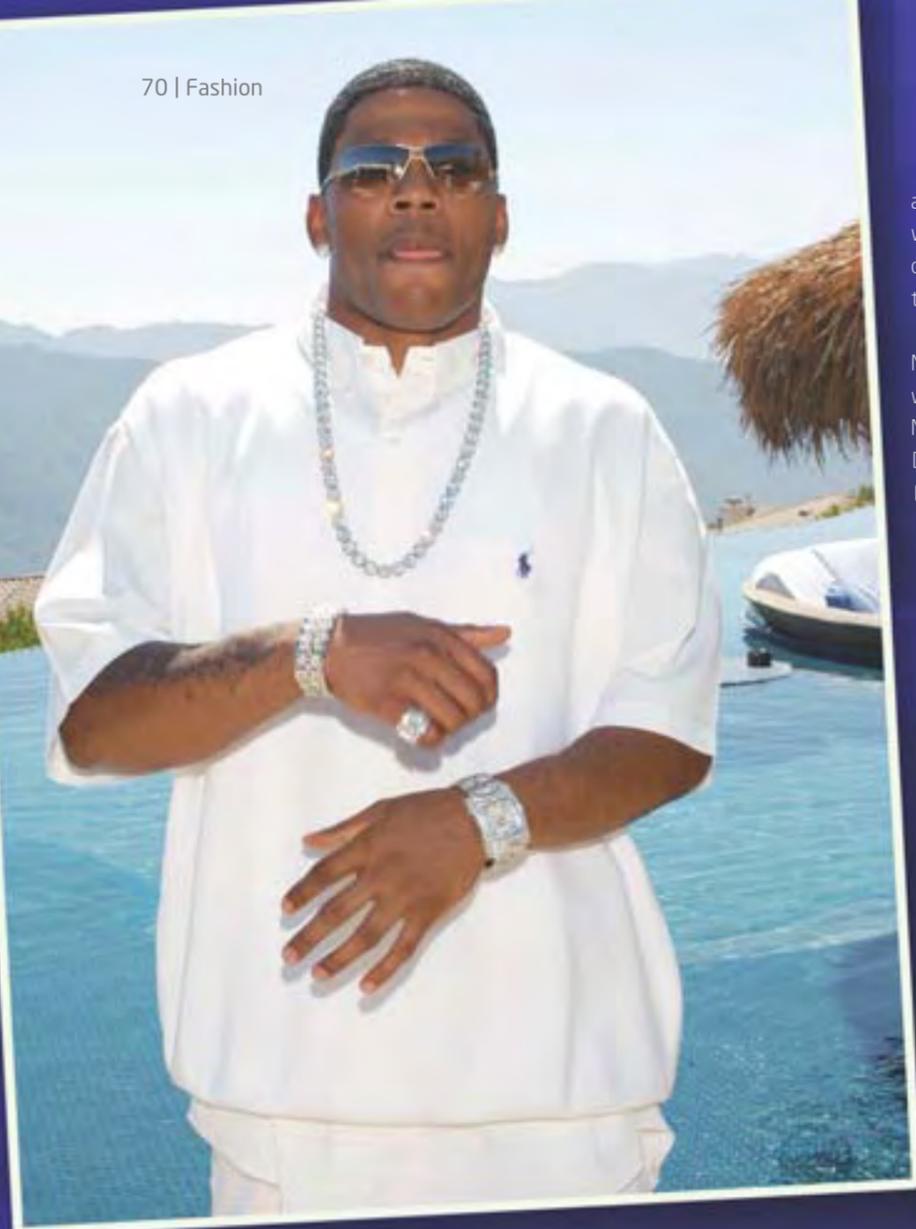
If Aire's opinions strike more refined ears as vulgar, it should be explained that the US designer's milieu is somewhat flashier than what British middle class taste is used to. If the rest of us may be reluctant to wear a watch as totem of wealth (though to some extent, that is precisely

what all prestige watches are), Aire's clientele revel in it. His private company has built a multi-million-dollar turnover in less than a decade, customising and now designing watches for the sometimes great and good of LA's entertainment industries – Hollywood, basketball, R'n'B. People hardly well known for understatement or modesty. Even Aire's jewellery company has a name of suitable self-confidence: 2 Awesome International (now consolidated with AireWatch timepieces under the single signature brand, Chris Aire).

### Sparkling clientele

It is to the Los Angeles-based Aire that one might take your all-gold, top-of-the-range model, to be given a touch of pizzazz. Aire might set your name

"Most important trends start on the street, and bling is no exception. It was there long before it became a worldwide affair; before the word entered the dictionary. It's a genuine lifestyle: self-expression, individuality, and the full enjoyment of life."



Aire nurtures a broad and loyal client base, including hip hop chart-topper, Nelly, pictured here in his 'iced-out' Traveler watch.

across the dial, add specifically shaped diamonds or, in the rapper Nelly's case, a 'rainbow' of different coloured diamonds around the glass. It makes for the ultimate collector's piece; an instant one-off. And it has given Aire a nickname among his clientele: The Iceman. He could also be The Harry Winston of Hip-Hop.

Such has been the success of his customisation programme – meeting with the client, discussing their needs and (usually limitless) budget, drawing sketches and sourcing the conflict-free stones – that two years ago Aire decided to scale down the customisation and create his own watches. The result was the Aire Traveler.

With strictly limited-edition Swiss mechanisms, a patented bouclier shape, the option of a five-time-zone display (New York, LA, London and Tokyo, but not Europe somehow appropriately) and even a case in 'red gold' (the result of a process Aire invented to turn gold

an autumnal hue), the Aire Traveler is not for those who like to stay low-key. And that is before you consider the mandatory crust of diamonds and price tag of up to \$195,000.

No matter, for these watches are hardly aimed at those with low-key lifestyles. They are for the likes of Muhammad Ali and Justin Timberlake; rappers Eminem, Dr Dre, LL Cool J and 50 Cent; actors Will Smith, Jamie Foxx and Denzel Washington; basketball players Michael Jordan and LeBron James...all of whom wear Aire's watches publicly and proudly. The watches are, as Aire puts it, for the kind of person who is "proud of their own taste and who sees what they wear as an expression of that. It's the flip-side of dressing to belong."

### Self-made man

Originally from Benin, West Africa, Aire has not wasted his past 21 years in Los Angeles (in true Hollywood myth-making fashion, he refuses to give his age). He has made a success of nothing but savviness, a few contacts and good timing. The son of a wealthy petroleum merchant, Aire scandalised his family by rejecting plans for him to study in the UK, disappearing to California and being cut out of his father's will in the process. He studied acting and directing at Cal State Long Beach University, but soon found himself in the classic young actor's Catch 22: unable to get a union card for union jobs without the right job to get the card in the first place. So he turned to music, establishing a dance band, Raw Silk, recording but unable to get a signing.

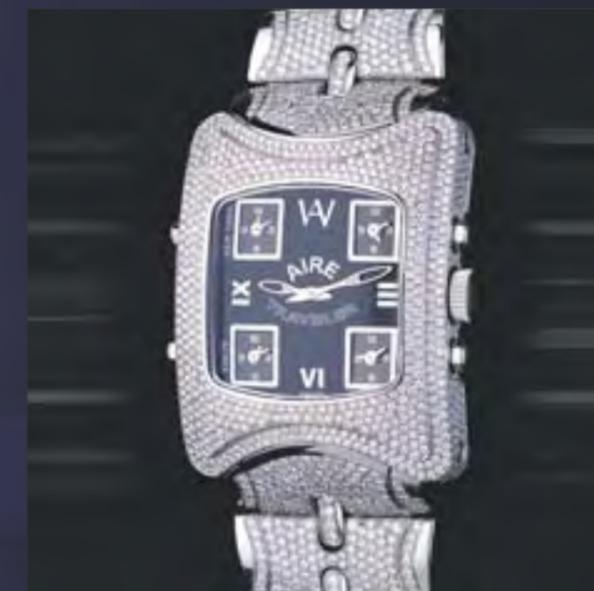
In the early '90s, desperate and without any design schooling, he made a friend at a self-help seminar and found work in his father's jewellery design business, initially as a clerk and finally as a designer of bridal jewellery, with training at the Gemological Institute of America. Convinced by the potential of an urban market that no other jeweller seemed interested in catering for, he left in 1996 with his \$5,000 savings, rented an office and bought a PC and a phone. He started designing as a freelancer while, for two years, he hawked his own distinctive jewellery pieces – platinum and red-gold bands bearing diamond-studded microphones and basketballs – and touted ideas for encrusted watches around his music, sports and acting contacts. To this day, he still has the same hands-on approach, travelling most weekends of the year to bring in orders.

"I'd love to sit here and say I had a game plan, but I didn't. It was a gamble leaving a guaranteed pay-check when

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(Left) This Aire Traveler's case is made of red gold – a material developed and trademarked by Aire himself. It is a special blend of gold enhanced with a secret blend of alloys that exudes a rich, autumnal hue. (Right) Aire Traveler, with five-time-zone dial: local, LA, New York, Tokyo and London.



I had bills to pay," recalls Aire. "I just knew that people in the entertainment industry were individuals who wanted to be different. I put the designs in a bag and started stalking everyone I knew."

### Bling bling, baby

Of course, Aire's timing, whether by fault or design, was impeccable. The culture of so-called 'bling bling' – overtly ostentatious clothes and jewellery as an expression of one's wealth, and therefore success – has now become a worldwide style phenomenon, notably among the hip-hop community and its many aspirants; David Beckham, famously, among them. A term coined by the New Orleans rapper Baby Gangsta, it is a look that certain watch manufacturers, whether by intention or not, have sought to profit from with more outlandish models. Aire was able to tap into it early, and at the trend's roots. He has won loyalty as a result.

"I'm an advocate of the theory that most important trends start on the street, and bling is no exception," explains Aire. "It was there long before it became a mainstream affair; before the word entered the dictionary. It's been important because it has come from an authentic, committed source. It's a genuine lifestyle: self-expression, individual-

ity, and the full enjoyment of life. And I share those principles...which I guess makes me a bling type too."

### Positive energy

Next up for the blinging Aire? Further options in his jewellery line, the continuation of his watch line with new model, the Aire Conqueror – details of which he is tight-lipped – a forthcoming online service and plans to open a flagship store in LA. The latter will no doubt need more than the likes of Nelly and 50 Cent to keep its sparkling time-pieces secure.

"Diamonds have a certain energy," says Aire. "Perhaps a consequence of the incredible forces over time that made them; a positive energy I pick up when I look at them. Regardless of the number of jewels you use, they have their own beauty. But given the opportunity, I'll indulge. I'm wearing a fairly plain Traveler with mother-of-pearl dial now, but that's because I'm at work. If I was going out, I'd wear the completely jewelled-out model." Out on the town sporting his own business's fully 'iced-out' watches? This is surely the apotheosis of true, heartfelt bling. "Do I enjoy my own success? Yes, I do." ●

Further information: 2 Awesome International, 315 W. 9th St, Suite 1211, Los Angeles, CA 90015, USA. Tel: +1 213 688 0900, [www.chrisaire.com](http://www.chrisaire.com)