

You Are What's On Your Feet: Men and the Sneaker Subculture

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Keywords: menswear / sneakers / collectibles

Abstract

Men's sneakers have evolved from being purely functional to having a cult-like following where sneakers reign superior. The sub-culture that sneaker fanatics have unknowingly created is a noteworthy explosion in the menswear fashion industry. The small niche of individuals that make up the sub-culture are highly regarded by sneaker companies because of their knowledge of what's hip. For this style tribe, sneakers are an addiction where rarity and limited editions bring status and small celebrity within. Don't be fooled: these sneakers aren't found at your mall's Footlocker, but rather in unmarked buildings in urban cities found by word of mouth. The intention of this paper is to explore the phenomenon of an unlikely male fashion trend turned into hypnotic obsession that, unlike many other male fashion trends, has pervaded all lines of race and economic class.

The Sneakers That Changed Everything

Sneakers have always been a popular form of footwear since the industrial revolution when rubber was readily available and sneaker production was cheap and efficiently produced by the masses. One particular sneaker that has transcended all others in widespread popularity is the Converse. Converse revolutionized the definition of sneaker popularity and, despite the fact that it is still being worn today, remains a nostalgic part of the United States' past. As the first sneaker with a celebrity endorsement (by basketball professional Chuck Taylor in 1935), it was also the first official sneaker of the United States basketball team in the 1936 Olympics. As a result of these two events, Converse became synonymous with basketball. Converse and basketball went hand in hand and the "All Star" was the standard for all high school, collegial and Professional basketball teams. Subsequently, the Converse Company started to produce the "All-Star" in colors other than black (the only color offered pre-WWII) in order to match team uniforms and introduced new colors to the classic collection. Hollywood actors popularized the sneaker even more when James Dean was photographed wearing white Converse, blue jeans, and a white t-shirt. The famous attire became the symbol of rebellion and youth for teenagers at the time. After these crucial events, the sneakers became ubiquitous. Although the line became blurred in the 1970's between an athletic and casual shoe, the classic Converse has become a cultural icon that is still worn today in distinctive and personal ways.

When exploring sneaker history, another popular shoe, the German born Adidas sneaker by the Dassler Brothers, cannot be overlooked. Adidas exploded on the American hip-hop scene and has made its mark in the sneaker hall of fame. Although the brand already had strong ties with U.K. youth in the 1970s, it was one particular economic crisis going on in a city an ocean away that made the now highly recognizable 3-stripe sneaker so popular here in the United States. Neal Heard explains in his book Sneakers:

During the 1970's New York City went bankrupt and all civil amenities and social services were cut to the bone. Street gangs marked walls in local neighborhoods to claim their territory, then individuals began spraying their names on the subways, making the writing masters All City.
(20)

The economic times resulted in a new form of music. "DJ Kool Herc developed a technique in the mid-1970s of looping the drum break of a James Brown record, or other selections, to create a super hot, new percussive sound." (Heard 21) In short, Hip-Hop was born. Respected MC's of the time were seen wearing Adidas and the younger audience entering the scene dressed for the dance floor wearing Adidas.

The famous Hip-Hop group RUN DMC's admiration of Adidas made the black and white rubber sneaker skyrocket. Their love of music and this sneaker became a hit single known as *My Adidas*. "DMC found a voice that spoke for a whole generation." (Heard 25) This "voice" made the sneakers so popular that Adidas agreed to sponsor the group. As a result, "the following year Adidas's U.S. profits were boosted by some \$35 million" (Heard 25). Heard points out that "DMC had both a substantial and long-lasting effect on youth culture, but almost more importantly it was DMC that made the corporate brands aware of the sheer scope of the affection urban youth had for their trainers" (24). Run DMC became the first group of individuals outside of professional athletes to be sponsored by Adidas (Heard 24). The collaboration between fashion, sneakers and inner city culture that took place with Adidas and Run DMC is the most famous and provoking to this day. Adidas is crucial in sneaker history not only because of the merge of popular music and shoes but also in that it awakened the big sneaker companies. These companies realized that what is popular is what the youth are wearing, and that this was their new target customer. Of course, company investors were hesitant but as can be seen with the statistics, the decision to tap into youth street culture paid off tremendously.

After the introduction of sneakers as new performance technology for athletes, sneakers started being endorsed by celebrities like Michael Jordan resulting in the design of limited edition sneakers. This was a crucial turning point for the industry as sneakers became 'special' and the resultant subculture thrived off this concept. The idea of a limited edition is now something avid sneakers crave. Limited edition "Air Dunks" by Nike are currently some of the most sought out vintage sneakers for the sneaker tribe.

These changes are crucial aspects of both what the sneaker sub-culture has evolved from and what it strives for when collecting. Even without including this small niche, sneakers are by far the most popular form of footwear around. There are dozens of sneaker retail chains that carry affordable, stylish, and readily available sneakers. For the avid sneaker collectors (“sneakeards”), these types of sneakers are too common and too average. These individuals desire more, and this “more” is often the result of an unexplainable obsession. Shoe experts point to “a mix of popular culture, nostalgia, technology and disposable income as drivers for the increased fascination with sneakers” (Skidmore).

A New York Thing

Los Angeles, like many other places, has always been known for its fashion. But New York is where sneaker freaks find their haven. Sneaker culture derived from social and economic hardships that took place in the later part of the 20th century New York City. Robert Garcia devoted a whole book on New York City’s 1960-1987 sneaker culture. He writes:

There was a worldwide mass culture of sneaker consumption, but only in New York, the global Mecca of playground basketball and hip hop, was there the subculture of sneaker fiends and connoisseurs. This group would wind up influencing the sneaker industry, the music industry, the fashion world, the vintage market, and the global consumer market for years after right through to the present day. (14)

The roots of the U.S. sneaker culture come from New York. The city is part of its heritage and it has always had a fascination with sneakers. This is why it’s believed that there will never be another place with such a prominent sneaker culture and why, according to Udi Avshalomov who worked for his parents in Broadway Sneakers in the late 1980’s, “L.A. is never going to understand the New York sneaker game” (Martin). And maybe this belief is true, because sneaker addicts do thrive in New York. All major sneaker releases occur in New York, it has the most specialty stores, and every sneaker freak interviewed by Sneaker-Nation is from New York City. With such deep roots, it’s hard to imagine anywhere else where this sneaker phenomenon could take place on such a scale. It is where sneaker freaks have found their Mecca.

How Long Would You Wait?

Would you wait outside for three days in order to be first for a sneaker release? Some might call it insane, but “sneakerheads” call it dedication. In the sneaker world, it is certainly not unheard of to wait all night to be able to own a limited edition pair of “kicks.” Often, not just one pair is bought but two or possibly three: one to scuff up by

wearing out a few times and an additional pair that remains in the box, untouched. These untouched sneakers are known as “deadstock.” They are the most valuable to sneaker enthusiasts because of their mint condition. So what has average men thinking that a couple of sneakers are not enough? The same drive that pushes stamp collectors to travel for stamps and baseball card collectors to annual trading shows. It’s being able to have bragging rights and status within the culture and to be able to possess an item that no one else has. Desirable sneakers include deadstock vintage sneakers, especially limited first edition Air Jordan’s. Other coveted sneakers include Bathing Apes by designer Nigo. His sneakers are flashy, expensive and over the top. Since his patent leather logo colors are constantly changing, there is always another need for collectors to buy more. Big companies can always find a reason to produce another desirable sneaker, especially if there is an anniversary. Recently, Adidas put out a line of sneakers to honor icons such as Muhammad Ali and they contract respected underground artists to design the sneaker print. Whether big companies or small sneaker designers, there are dozens of ways to keep the sneaker-obsessed on the edge of their chair, especially by leaking word of when new sneakers will hit the scene.

Sneaker Freak

Each month on the “original sneaker website” Sneaker-Nation, a “sneaker freak” is interviewed. The standard questions include naming their best sneaker purchase memory, their top sneaker of all time and, most importantly, why sneakers are such a priority. After going through dozens of these interviews, it is found that the answer for the latter is the same across the board. These collectors grew up at a time when all sneakers were the same and now that they are so unique they have become an expression of who you are - especially if it is not otherwise shown through sharp looking apparel. They assert identity in a world where everything can seem the same. " ‘You can tell so much about a person by what they have on their feet,’ said Andre Speed, 36, at a Portland specialty sneaker store called Lifted. ‘You might not have the freshest outfit but if you have the kicks, you are going to get the respect.’" (Skidmore) For sneaker freaks, the sneakers make an impression to others. All the interviewees agree on the same experience: there is no other feeling like the feeling when you’re walking down the street and everyone is looking at your sneakers.

From research gathered, most “sneakerhead” collections start during high school and continue into adulthood, with some collections ranging over 500 pairs. The expensive collection is never kept in one place, rather it is stored in numerous different places such as at the homes of family or friends or, more commonly, in highly secured vaults. Like any other type of collection, each worthy piece has a story behind it; where it is from, how it was obtained. It is a marking of a particular point of the past, ultimately creating memories. Some obtained sneakers are worth so much that, if sold, they could provide the collector with a car down payment or the ability to live rent-free for months. What

makes this obsessive collecting so unique among other fashion trends is that it does not have reservations about who can participate. In other words, as noted in Andre Speeds' statement on respect, it doesn't matter what you look like or where you come from - you are what is on your feet. Any avid collector invests a large amount of money in his collection. For most of these collectors, any money left over after bills is put towards the next pair of sneakers. When asked why the obsession, most don't have a specific answer. This might baffle some of us but it is a good enough answer for the sneaker designers who have men waiting in line all night to get their hands on the newest limited edition sneaker.

Conclusion

Although there is no definite answer for why the sneaker collector becomes so enthralled with sneakers, there are numerous factors that can certainly give understanding to the phenomenon that has swept men's fashion. The hypnotic obsession has most certainly been a result of sneakers throughout history, including the strong emotional ties it has with the United States as well as with the hip-hop culture. It is part of New York City and the legends that it has inspired. On a smaller scale, but equally important, sneaker collectors have a true passion that cannot go unacknowledged. The shoes are an expression of who you are and, in world where everything is the same, a way to express yourself. Sneaker design history has had a direct effect on the sneaker subculture and it undoubtedly has had an effect the sneaker industry's revenue within the past decade. It has inspired artists, fashion designers, and musicians alike with collaboration ideas. This small group of like-minded, head-over-heels individuals has been an extremely large driving force behind the sneaker industry we see today.

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