

WALK IN HIS WAY

CAN YOU KICK IT? MEET 10 GUYS WHO HAVE LEFT INDELIBLE FOOTPRINTS ON **SNEAKER CULTURE** BY BENJAMIN LESZCZ

THE TASTEMAKER

HIROSHI FUJIWARA

LOCATION: TOKYO

FAVORITE PAIR: NIKE FOOTSCAPE

Hiroshi Fujiwara, who has collaborated with Levi's, Burton, Converse, and Nike, has been called both the godfather of Harajuku culture and the man who brought hip-hop to Japan. He is the head of Fragment Design.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU COLLECTED SNEAKERS? I don't really collect them; I just wear them. Many people buy two pairs of sneakers—one to wear, one to collect. I understand this. They like to share in a community.

HOW ARE YOU SO GOOD AT PREDICTING WHAT PEOPLE WILL LIKE? People don't know what they like. If there's a new sneaker, people don't want to say, "I like it." They are waiting for someone else to say something. And I can say it first. I try to be really honest, so people trust my taste. Now, if I say, "That's a good sneaker," many people say, "Oh, I thought so. I didn't say it before, but I thought so."

HOW MUCH DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE COMMERCIAL ASPECT OF SHOE DESIGN? I don't. I just design what I want to wear. Nike understands me, so [they] let me design, and then they think about the market. They make a few hundred or thousand, and if many people like them, they will make more.

SO THE WILD POPULARITY OF THE AIR FORCE ONES YOU DESIGNED IS JUST LUCK? The Air Force One was already very popular before me. Anyway, it's not the shoe that I really like. I don't hate it, but I much prefer to do something new.

WHY DO YOU ENJOY DESIGNING SNEAKERS? Everyone needs sneakers. Ninety percent of the shoes I wear are sneakers, so I'm happy to make sneakers that I want to wear. I'm going to wear sneakers forever.

WHERE'S THE SNEAKER WORLD AT NOW? Companies were doing too many reissues and colorways. The movement became too big, and people left. I'm sure it'll come back again in five or 10 years. It's natural; it's like everything. Like art or watches or whatever people collect—there are changes.

some products that I don't understand. But if I start thinking like that, I will end up very bitter. I'm trying to keep it romantic.

WHAT WAS YOUR INSPIRATION IN DESIGNING THESE SHOES? Pure skateboarding. On one pair it even says, DON'T FORGET TO ACTUALLY SKATE IN THESE.

HOW DOES LIVING IN AMSTERDAM INFORM YOUR WORK? It's a bit of seediness, a bit of dark humor, a bit of sexual stuff, because this city oozes that. A certain amount of absurdity. I don't know exactly, but I know for sure I'd make different stuff if I lived in Los Angeles.

THE ARTIST

PIETER "PARRA" JANSSEN

LOCATION: AMSTERDAM COLLECTION SIZE: 50 PAIRS

FAVORITE PAIR: REMADE VINTAGE WAFFLE CORTEZ NIKES

Pieter "Parra" Janssen started skateboarding at age 10, competing seriously until his mid-20s, when he switched his focus to art. These days, he's best known for his iconic club posters and flyers, his apparel line, Rockwell Clothing, and his sneaker designs for the likes of Nike and Vans.

WHAT WAS THE FIRST PAIR OF SHOES THAT YOU REALLY LOVED? The first skate shoes I had were secondhand Airwalks. They were two sizes too big, and there was glue on them. I wore them day and night until they literally fell apart.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO SNEAKER DESIGN? My friends own the sneaker store Patta, and they put me

in touch with Nike. I did some Nikes, and then some Etnies. I was really happy when Vans asked because it's one of my favorite brands; I used to be sponsored by them.

WHAT'S THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ART AND SKATING? I think it's a freedom thing, not wanting to work for somebody. Skating relates to art because it's an individual thing.

IS THERE A CONTRADICTION BETWEEN THE SKATEBOARDING CULTURE OF REBELLION AND THE BIG-BUSINESS REALITY OF IT? Definitely. I'm collaborating with Vans, my youthful dream. Though Vans still has that skateboarding core, they're huge. And they make



PHOTOGRAPHED BY NAOMI NUYTEN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY KENTARO OSHIO



THE GURU

JEFF NG, A.K.A. JEFF STAPLE

LOCATION: NEW YORK CITY **COLLECTION SIZE:** 450 PAIRS
 (“ALL WITH A POLAROID TAPED TO THE FRONT OF THE BOX.”)
FAVORITE PAIR: NIKE PIGEON DUNK

Jeff Ng's career began in 1997, when he snuck into the silkscreen lab at Parsons design school with a pillowcase full of blank T-shirts. He is now the head of Staple Design.

WHEN DID YOU GET INTO SNEAKERS? It's been an addiction since sixth grade. My first job was processing film in a one-hour photo studio, and with every check, I'd go to Foot Locker. I was buying sneakers once a week. My parents thought I was nuts.

WERE YOUR FRIENDS INTO IT? In high school, the [other kids] were like, “How come you never wear the same sneakers twice?”

HOW WAS YOUR FIRST VISIT TO NIKE HEADQUARTERS, IN BEAVERTON, OREGON?

It was literally a childhood dream come true. I would fantasize about what it was like behind those doors. But it's also like seeing how a magic trick is done—it's kind of a spoiler.

WHY WAS THE NIKE PIGEON DUNK, WHICH YOU DESIGNED IN 2005, SUCH A LANDMARK? At the release, the lineup turned into a mini-riot. The NYPD came. There were weapons found and arrests made. It was on the front page of the paper, and people all of sudden saw what was going on in the sneaker world. Now, we have guys who work for Citibank and Merrill Lynch spending their bonuses on footwear. Before that, it was just straight-up sneakerheads.

WHAT'S YOUR READ ON SNEAKER CULTURE TODAY?

There's a lot of wackness. It's so oversaturated. There are so many stores, magazines, blogs. Everyone is a sneaker designer now, literally, with Nike ID. Five years ago, you used to be able to walk into a room and murder people with your shoes. Now it's like, “Oh. You're *that* dude.”

WHERE'S THE SNEAKER WORLD GOING? Now that sneaker culture has hit this mainstream pinnacle, you have independent people who are saying, “Fuck what's going on? I want to make my own shit.” It's how street culture always happens.

WHAT'S NEXT FROM YOU? We recently signed a deal with Airwalk and Payless shoes. It's for all the kids who look at Hypebeast everyday, but can't afford to drop 250 bucks on a pair of shoes.

THE STORE OWNERS

OLIVER MAK, JAY GORDON, DAN N.

LOCATION: BOSTON **FAVORITE PAIR:**
 MAK: CONVERSE JACK PURCELLS WITH CHECK PLAID LINING & TRIM
 GORDON: ORIGINAL NIKE AIR MAX 95
 DAN: JORDAN IV

Since opening Bodega in May 2006, native Bostonians Oliver Mak, Jay Gordon, and Dan N. have become some of the most revered shop owners—and most in-demand collaborators—in the sneaker universe. They've worked with Reebok, Saucony, Puma, Converse, adidas, and Rockport, among others.

WHAT INSPIRED THE CONCEPT FOR BODEGA—A SHOE STORE HIDDEN BEHIND A FUNCTIONING GROCERY STORE? OM: Bodegas are ubiquitous in New York City, so there's a reference to the birthplace of sneaker culture. And metaphorically, a sneaker store is like a market with perishable goods. What's more perishable than fashion? It has a nice illicit quality as well; it feels like it should be illegal.

DID YOU ALWAYS HAVE A STRONG CONNECTION WITH SNEAKERS? JG: I remember the first time I saw Air Force

Ones. I was 12. I was sitting on a basketball court, and this dude came up to me wearing them. Everyone just stopped and looked. It was amazing.

IS IT TOUGH CHOOSING BETWEEN THE DOPEST SNEAKERS AND THE ONES YOU THINK WILL SELL? OM: It's too bad that the best stuff isn't always what moves. But this isn't a volume business. It's about contributing to the dialogue.

CONSENSUS IS THAT THE LIMITED-EDITION SNEAKER BUBBLE HAS BURST. IS THAT BAD NEWS FOR YOU? DN: From a business standpoint, hype is good because it keeps the revenue coming. But in another sense, it's good that it's peaked, because it weeded out the people who were in it for superficial reasons. Now you have the people that have always been there—the people who are in it for the love.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY DEREK VINCENT

PHOTOGRAPHED BY FRED RAMBAUD



THE DJ

PEDRO "BUSY P" WINTER

LOCATION: PARIS **COLLECTION SIZE:** 200+ PAIRS **FAVORITE PAIR:** NIKE D.U.N.K.L.E. (U.N.K.L.E. X FUTURA X NIKE SB)

Pedro Winter, who DJs under the alias Busy P, was Daft Punk's manager for 12 years. Ed Banger, the label he started in 2002, is home to some of the world's biggest electronica acts, including Justice.

WHAT APPEALED TO YOU ABOUT PARTICIPATING IN NIKE'S 1WORLD COLLECTION? Designing shoes is something that's very different from my business and my passion, so I did it for fun. And I'm interested in the way that music, art, fashion, and sneakers can all mix together.

WAS IT ODD FOR SOMEONE WHO COMES FROM THE WORLD OF ELECTRONICA TO DESIGN A SHOE ASSOCIATED WITH HIP-HOP? Maybe for some people, hip-hop and electronica are different worlds that can't com-

municate, but really, they're getting closer and closer.

WHAT CONNECTION DO YOU HAVE TO SKATEBOARDING, THE OTHER ELEMENT OF SNEAKER CULTURE? I spent 10 years of my life on a skateboard. I skated in the late '80s and early '90s, when Airwalk was a major thing. I was crazy about those shoes.

WHICH CULTURE WOULD YOU SAY YOUR AF1S REPRESENT? Rather than reflecting a culture or being influenced by skateboarding or hip-hop, the shoes reflect a moment in time.

DO YOU WISH THAT NIKE HAD MADE MORE THAN 400 PAIRS? We could have done more, but it's nice that people who have the shoes feel special. I like the crazy limited editions, because people can

be different. Nike ID is great. It proposes to kids: Try to create. Don't wear the same shoes as your friends.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE KIDS SELLING YOUR AF1S FOR \$500 ON EBAY? I've seen \$1,000! Spending that much money on shoes is extreme. But this thing of queuing at the stores to buy the shoes, and then reselling them? I can't condemn it. We knew it would get crazy. But we just do our thing, and we let the kids do their thing.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU? We have new projects with Nike and Etnies. We're going to try something a bit more adult than our AF1, which was for crazy freaks like us. Now, we are trying to be classier. We're becoming adults.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHRIS SHONTING

THE DESIGNER

SUNG CHOI

LOCATION: LOS ANGELES **COLLECTION SIZE:** 300+ PAIRS **FAVORITE PAIR:** VINTAGE ORIGINAL ROD LAVERS

Sung Choi, who moved from Seoul to Queens in 1979, completed a degree in economics before helping a friend create Triple 5 Soul in 1989. After stints with the clothing line PNB, which he founded, and DC Shoes, where he was a designer, he launched Clae in 2001.

shoe hybrid is the main thing brewing. A lot of independents are creating a product that's not coming from the shoe monsters. It's refreshing. The big boys are playing catch-up.

WHAT'S THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SNEAKER DESIGN AND THE REAL WORLD?

Some footwear designers in the '90s had no perception of the culture. The perfect example is the Kobe adidas II, modeled after the Audi TT. The shoe looks like a toaster! every weekend.

WHEN DID YOU START THINKING ABOUT DESIGN? I learned fashion before I learned English. I used to work at my parents' friends' menswear store in Harlem

HOW DID YOUR VISION FOR CLAE EVOLVE OUT OF YOUR EXPERIENCE AT DC? For four years at DC I was trying to slim down the skate shoe—it looked like a loaf of bread. I created Clae to address the void between sneakers and shoes.

DO YOU THINK THAT VOID STILL EXISTS? Right now, I feel like the sneaker—dress

DO YOU THINK THE LIMITED-EDITION THING GOT OUT OF HAND? There have definitely been too many unwarranted collaborations. It's cheating the footwear. But we go full circle, and there's a trend now for classically styled footwear. It's about understated design. To get the message across, you can scream—or you can whisper.



THE EDITOR

SIMON "WOODY" WOOD

LOCATION: MELBOURNE
FAVORITE PAIR: PUMA BLAZE OF GLORY ("I DESIGNED IT FOR PUMA. IT'S THE MOST BEAUTIFUL SHOE I'VE EVER SEEN.")

Simon "Woody" Wood worked in advertising, fashion, and film before launching the globally influential website and magazine Sneaker Freaker on a whim, in 2002.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO START SNEAKER FREAKER?

My idea was to get as many free shoes as possible. Really, it comes from my love of footwear. I moved to London in the early '90s, around the time the Air Rift came out. It was this split-toe shoe that really polarized people, but it epitomized an excitement about shoe design.

HOW HAS PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF SNEAKER CULTURE CHANGED?

It's funny; in the space of two years, sneaker collecting went from a nerdy thing to the coolest thing. Online culture really accelerated that process.

WHAT'S YOUR OPINION OF TODAY'S SNEAKER MARKET?

I think it's at a point where it needs some fresh energy. If you look at the history of skateboarding or the history

of streetwear, there have always been peaks and troughs. It just takes a whole bunch of new kids to come along and kick it up again.

WHO'S GOT THE EDGE RIGHT NOW?

Nike's number one for a reason, but adidas has really picked up their game. At the moment, it's all quite conservative—it's all geography-teacher shoes. How do you make something stand out when you're making things out of beige canvas?

WHAT DO YOU DO WITH ALL THE EXTRA SHOES YOU HAVE IN THE OFFICE?

In our old office, we threw maybe 200 shoes on a power line. It looked amazing; people were stopping in the street. One day, some kids taped four broomsticks together, and put a flame on the end and burned the laces to get the shoes down. Unfortunately, they set fire to the power lines. The entire neighborhood nearly burned down. We won't do that again.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY VIRGINIA CUMMINS

THE COLLECTOR

CHRIS AYLEN

LOCATION: LONDON **COLLECTION SIZE:** 320 PAIRS
FAVORITE PAIR: HYPERBLUE NIKE AIRMAX

Chris Aylen worked three jobs during college to support his sneaker habit. The founder of CrookedTongues.com and a former consultant to Nike, Puma, New Balance, and adidas, Aylen is among the world's foremost sneaker collectors.

WHEN DID YOU GET INTO SNEAKERS?

I remember seeing the Rock Steady Crew on TV when they first played London in 1983. I was seven or eight. I got into hip-hop, and started B-boying. I started asking for sneakers instead of toys as birthday gifts.

WHAT WAS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SNEAKERS AND HIP-HOP? It was all about looking the freshest. If you were B-boying, you wanted to have fat laces and your

tongues out. If you were painting graffiti, you'd write your name on the back of your shoes, and you'd want something that wouldn't soak up too much paint. I was into skateboarding, and I had different shoes for that, too.

WAS THERE AN OVERLAP BETWEEN THE HIP-HOP AND SKATEBOARDING WORLDS?

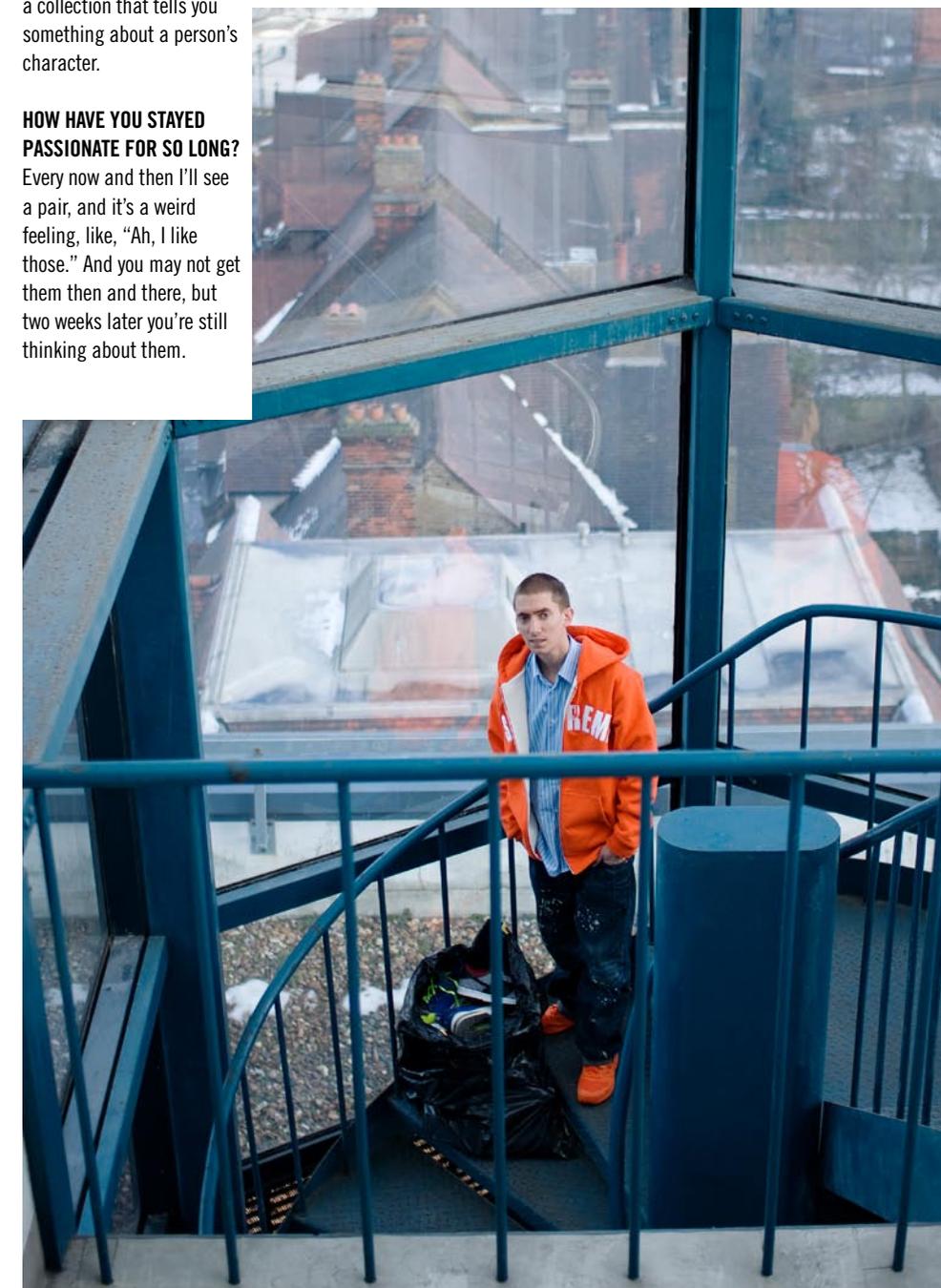
Though they mesh now, they didn't back then. A lot of my skating friends had no interest in hip-hop. I'd take a spare pair of shoes in my bag to change into once I put my skateboard down.

WHERE DO YOU KEEP ALL YOUR SHOES? My apartment is absolutely full of them. They're on top of bookshelves, under the bed, in the wardrobe, in the attic.... They're everywhere.

WHAT'S THE HIGHLIGHT OF YOUR COLLECTION? I have about 50 pairs of the Air Max Plus in different colorways. And I've got a lot of technical running shoes from the '90s, when brands were trying experimental things.

WHAT'S YOUR COLLECTING PHILOSOPHY? I don't follow the crowd. I'm interested in a collection that tells you something about a person's character.

HOW HAVE YOU STAYED PASSIONATE FOR SO LONG? Every now and then I'll see a pair, and it's a weird feeling, like, "Ah, I like those." And you may not get them then and there, but two weeks later you're still thinking about them.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY PHIL AYLEN