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Photograph by Hannah Frankel.

HIP-HOP SNEAKER COLLABORATIONS

WALLACE BURGESS

What's the most expensive pair of shoes you've ever bought? \$150 running shoes that you wore until they fell apart? \$250 Italian leather loafers? How about a used pair of the Air Yeezy 2s for \$4,600? ("Air Yeezy 2 Solar Red"). I hope you're a size 13. As absurd as that price tag sounds, these are not *just* a pair of expensive shoes. That's because the Air Yeezy 2 is rapper Kanye West's second collaboration with the sneaker brand Nike and is a perfect example of how popular the collaborations between hip-hop figures and shoe companies are. Although it was once unusual for hip-hop artists to negotiate a deal to brand and design sneakers, such joint efforts have resulted in some of the most coveted and highly-priced shoes in the world.

According to Stephen Albertini's "An Abridged History of Hip-Hop's Relationship with Sneaker Culture," it all started in the mid-1980s with Run-DMC. Adidas executives recognized

the potential for increasing sales when the group released a song called “My Adidas,” at a time when “early hip-hop artists used specific athletic brands and developed out of them expressions of affiliation, solidarity, meaning and status” (Coleman, “Classic Campaigns”). Over the past three decades, Black hip-hop artists, as well as other Black figures, have continued to play an integral role in what is now known as “sneaker culture.” Run-DMC ended up signing an endorsement deal for a million dollars, which is small scale compared to the sneaker collaborations we see today, but Adidas ended up making an estimated \$100 million from the deal. From there, the next notable development was in 2003 when Jay-Z and 50 Cent signed endorsement deals. They also got the opportunity to design their own

“THEN ENTERED KANYE WEST, THE FIRST HIP-HOP FIGURE (OR MUSICAL FIGURE, PERIOD) TO GET TO DESIGN HIS OWN ORIGINAL SILHOUETTE—THANKS TO NIKE.”

unique shoes because Reebok recognized that their names would potentially increase both sales and exposure. Albertini explains that these Reebok sneakers were smash hits, paving the way for a string of collaborations with brands such as Nike and Fila.

Then entered Kanye West, the first hip-hop figure (or musical figure, period) to get to design his own original silhouette—thanks to Nike. For those who are unfamiliar, a silhouette is a specific shoe model, such as the Air Force 1 or the Adidas Superstar. Although rappers in the past had changed color ways (the colors on the shoe) and had added their own branding, this was the first time a rapper was allowed to design a shoe entirely from scratch. What came next was the Air Yeezy 1 Blink in 2009, which

sold out instantly and currently resells for around \$3,000 on StockX—an online sneaker marketplace (“Air Yeezy 1 Blink”).

Soon after releasing and selling out a second original silhouette for Nike, Kanye West left the brand over creative control issues. He then joined Adidas to create his Yeezy Boost shoes, which are a staple among sneaker collectors everywhere. They can be seen daily around Syracuse University’s campus on the feet of wealthier students who can afford the resale prices or were lucky enough to get a pair at launch.

The reason I bring up resale prices instead of retail prices is because these collaborations, and indeed any limited-release shoe, exist in a market of their own. Their sales cannot be compared to the shoes you see on the walls of sporting goods stores. Collaborative shoes

are released in limited numbers, at a pre-announced date and time (although surprise drops do happen every now and then), both online and at certain stores. Because they are released in limited numbers and sell out so quickly, the only option for most wearers is to buy them secondhand. This creates a market for resale sneakers, which has existed as long as the shoes themselves and has exploded across a variety of online platforms.

These resale prices, like the stock market, are all a matter of supply and demand. This is not only because the supply was so small to begin with and the demand so great because of West’s fandom, but also because of how long it’s been since the shoes were first released. As with practically every product that people col-

lect, the older the shoes are, the more value they add to a collection. However, many of these collaborative sneakers resell for far over their original price only a day or two after being released. Perhaps an example that demonstrates the fervor around these collaborations best is the Air Force 1 Lows from rapper Travis Scott’s collaboration with Nike. They were a fresh take on the Air Force 1, with new designs on the panels and a unique lace-covering system. At a concert in September 2019, before they were formally released, Scott gave a fan in the crowd the shoes off his feet (Deng, “Travis Scott”). The hype surrounding the sneakers was already building at this point, but when the fan posted them on his Instagram page, he received offers for over \$20,000 to sell them. If that doesn’t show the excitement and the cash flow that these collaborations can generate, then I don’t know what will.

This success has led to a diverse array of collaborations, ones beyond the hip-hop world. Removed from the music industry entirely is professional Bicycle Motorcross (BMX) athlete Nigel Sylvester, who partnered with Nike in 2018 to make the Air Jordan 1 Retro High. While he helped design unique color ways and silhouettes, he also took his marketing strategies to the next level by making the shoe launch an event and not just a release date. Because he is originally from New York City, “the earlier Nike SNKRS Pass release of his shoes...started in Jamaica Ave. in Queens in the middle of the promenade outside the Coliseum Mall, a buzzing area rife with sneaker shops” (Kim, “Nigel Sylvester”). These sort of events and fanfare build hype and create a culture where creativity is celebrated. Additionally, a collaborator’s origins are brought to light.

The nature of these collaborations has evolved tremendously since Run-DMC first came on the scene. As stated by Albertini, “Now, signing a rapper to an endorsement deal or investing in a partnership with a rapper isn’t a shot in the dark or a leap of faith, it’s damn near a necessity.” This is mostly thanks to the collectors and fans who spend their hard-earned money on these shoes, as well as the resellers, sneaker magazines, and famous figures who have played a part in creating “sneaker culture.” These collaborations provide an interesting look into how the business of selling shoes and celebrity culture intersect, as well as how the product rewards people both financially and emotionally.

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