

how hip-hop saved adidas



By Nathan Canilao

Jason's last name is unknown. But he is a self-proclaimed investor and devout Denver Broncos fan. And he was one of the lucky ones. Really, it wasn't luck though. He was online at 4 a.m., waiting diligently, depriving himself of sleep. He earned this purchase of the coveted Nikes, and his son was going to be the beneficiary of his sacrifice.

These weren't just any shoes, either. They were the Travis Scott designed and endorsed Air Force 1s. The shoes that prompted millions to get up so early. The shoes that were so popular, the customers who won the online race that Nov. 16, 2019 morning didn't necessarily get to buy them. They were instead entered into a raffle for the chance to buy them. That's how exclusive the Cactus Jack Forces were. And Jason, unlike countless others who took to social media to post their rejection notice from Nike, actually got to buy a pair for his son.

When he finished the purchase, it likely warmed his heart envisioning his son's excited face when he opened the box and saw those coveted shoes. But fulfillment had fully morphed into desperation 12 hours later. Something happened with his purchase. It was traumatic enough for him to take to Twitter and beg from his @JayKris10 account.

Right when Jason thought he had the precious pair of

exclusive Air Force One's in his cart, an alarming message popped up on his dashboard. All of his excitement, exhilaration and thrill went out the window when Jason got the notorious message from Nike.com: "We've encountered an error. Please try again later."

Jason was devastated. His son was going to be the freshest kid on the block while Jason would have bragging rights as the coolest dad. But that didn't happen. The Nike giants only sold a limited amount of units, and the resale price on any Travis Scott sneaker is usually three times that of the retail price.

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"@Nike #travisscottairforce1 #CactusJack From #Canada sat online waiting for drop at 4 am. Purchased size 10 Cactus Jacks and then told the order didn't go through. Please anyone in this world that can help a single dad out get Xmas gift for son. A decent price please."



Well, @Jaykris10 is in luck — to a degree. He didn't avoid the markup common on the resell market. But Travis Scott came through on his promise to make his sneakers more available and affordable to the general public. On StockX and Goat, the two most popular resell sites, value of a Travis Jack and Nike collaboration is \$565. That may seem like a lot but compared to other sneakers he's sold in

the past. But the Travis Scott “AF100” Air Force 1 is reselling for an estimated \$1,450. So the Cactus Jacks Forces are a complete bargain.

Jason’s plight is common. Not the error on the purchasing, but the widespread clamoring for limited edition sneakers. Once a niche culture, the market for exclusive and unique shoes has hit the mainstream. The secret sauce, turning this from a weird and expensive hobby of sneakerheads to a popular pastime is the inclusion of celebrities into the mix.

The history of sneakers’ popularity dates back to Michael Jordan in the ‘80s. He revolutionized, actually created, the sneaker culture. His pairing with Nike during the height of his career made his shoes coveted and, suddenly, athletic sneakers were all the rage. The model continued forward from Jordan. Shoe companies threw bags of money at popular athletes to get them to endorse shoes, and fans would eat them up like pancakes.

In April 2003, the industry changed forever.

Jay-Z, at the time the biggest rapper in the industry, signed an endorsement deal with Reebok. The first release of the “S. Carter” sneaker line came in April 2003. The 10,000 pairs sold out in hours. In November, Reebok signed the new most popular rapper, 50 Cent, and he came out with a line of “G. Unit” sneakers. Reebok saw an double-digit percentage uptick in sales.

In 2009, Nike turned to Kanye West. The super producer-turned-rapper had recently released 808s & Heartbreak — the fourth of his seven consecutive platinum albums — and was one of the industry’s biggest names.

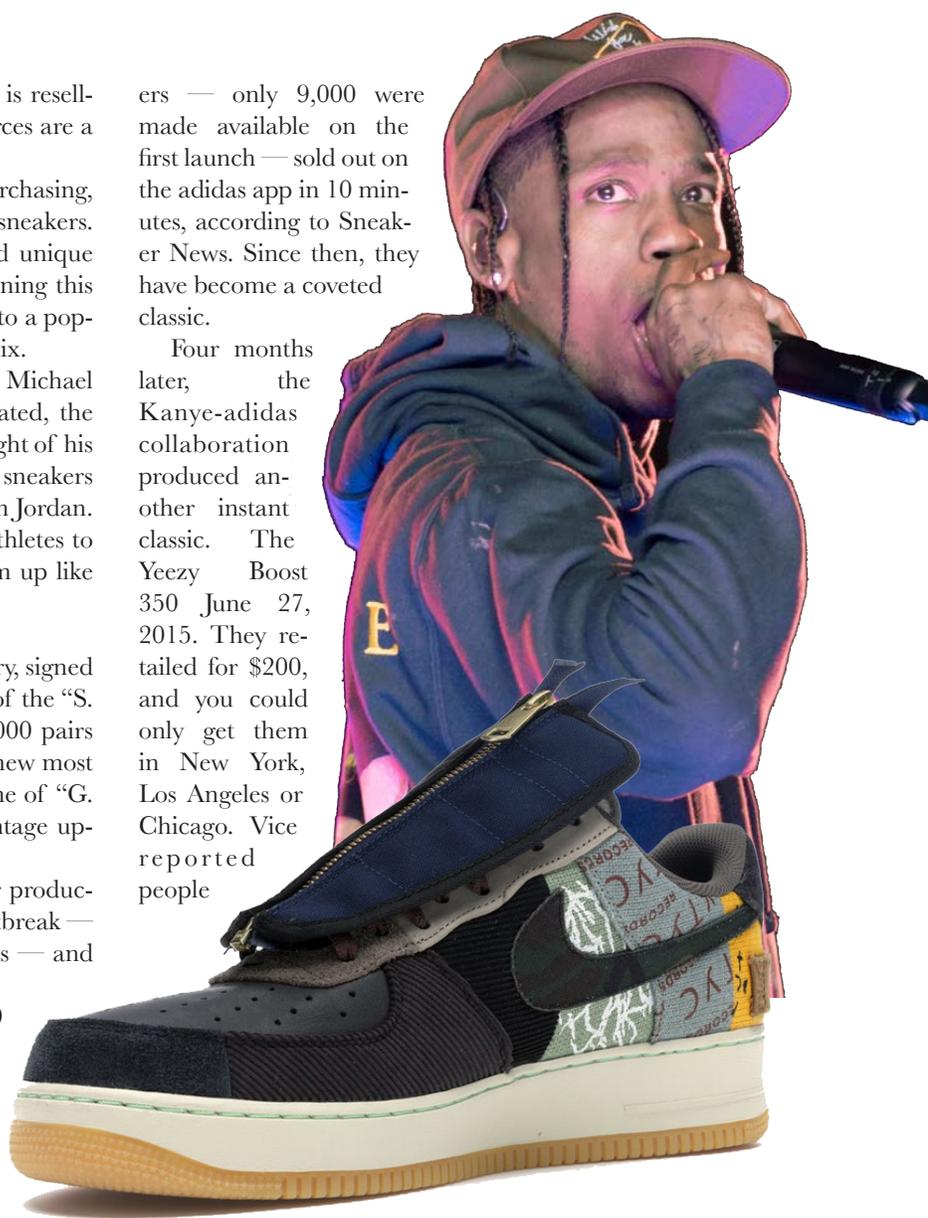
The Air Yeezy sneakers had three releases in 2009 — one colorway in April, one in May and one in June — and all sold out immediately at \$215 retail. In June 2012, the Air Yeezy IIs were released. Only 5,000 of each colorway were released, at \$245 and all sold out. It was the first to sneaker to create a crazy resale market. They were going as high as \$4,000 after retail. One of the colorways, the Red Octobers, re-released in June 2014 and sold out within seconds. Some sold on eBay for more than \$80,000.

Oddly enough, they came out after Kanye left Nike following a dispute over royalties. In December 2013, adidas signed Kanye West to a sneaker deal in which he would receive 15 percent in royalties for anything sold under the Yeezy brand. Adidas released the Yeezy 750 “Light Brown” on February 14, 2015 marking the first collaboration between West and adidas. They re-retailed at \$350, which was exorbitant at the time, but still the limited edition sneaker.



ers — only 9,000 were made available on the first launch — sold out on the adidas app in 10 minutes, according to Sneaker News. Since then, they have become a coveted classic.

Four months later, the Kanye-adidas collaboration produced another instant classic. The Yeezy Boost 350 June 27, 2015. They re-tailed for \$200, and you could only get them in New York, Los Angeles or Chicago. Vice reported people



camped out for more than three days for the black Yeezy 350 Boost “non-reflective.”

A trend was born. Previously, sold out shoes just meant getting a different show. But the clout of the attached hip-hop artist made them must-haves. It worked so well, adidas turned to another mogul from the culture: Pharrell Williams. The super producer, songwriter and performer with a grocery list of hits — including “Drop It Like It’s Hot” with Snoop, “Happy” from the Despicable Me 2 soundtrack and Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” — designed a pair of adidas’ most popular lifestyle shoe. The “Human Nature” edition of the NMD line debuted July 22, 2016, for \$240. They were only available in 21 stores across the U.S., and 28 internationally, and all the stores had to hold raffles to handle the demand as each store was only given a certain number of shoes.

These collaborations with hip-hop changed the profile of THE entire company. According to data released by the retail research firm NPD Group,

every year from 2011 to 2015, adidas share of the sneaker market declined. But after linking with Kanye, things turned around. From May 2016 to May 2017, the company nearly doubled its share of the market, from 6.3 percent to 11.3 percent. In April of 2017, adidas accounted for 13 percent of the market, the highest in the company's history. It was the first time it had gained on Nike in years.

This wasn't the first time the shoe company turned to rap stars. Kanye resurrected an old relationship between adidas and hip-hop.

In 1985, the popular duo Run DMC made a song called "My Adidas" highlighting the shell-toes that were a staple of their wardrobe. The song blew up and went mainstream, taking the urban classic shoes with it. Eventually, adidas signed Run DMC to an endorsement deal.

"I think that what Run DMC showed — in guerilla fashion, it wasn't something orchestrated by adidas — but what Run DMC showed was that street culture dictated fashion norms and trends," said Dr. Ameer Hassan Loggins, a professor of African-American Studies and Sociology at Stanford and UC Berkeley, who also was half of the early 2000s popular Bay Area hyphy rap group Frontline. "By doing so, adidas was wise enough to capitalize on it.

... Hip-hop artists, particularly, are important or key figures in sneaker culture because everybody sees Blackness as de facto coolness in the West. Not just in the United States. But the coolest motherfucka in Canada is Drake. The coolest person in most states usually comes from the African diaspora as far as forward-thinking fashion, music, arts."

Other hip-hop artists, and shoe companies, followed suit. Nike responded to losing Kanye by giving Canadian rapper Drake his own line of sneakers with Jordan Brand. In January 2015, Drake released his first official sneaker with the "OVO" Jordan 10s.

In December 2014, Puma got into the action, but on the women's side. The company signed platinum singer Rihanna to an endorsement deal and made her women's creative director as part of the company's re-branding. In September of 2015, the Fenty Creeper was released and became one Puma's best-selling shoes. Sales went up 16.4 percent thanks in large part to Rihanna's Fenty line.

In 2017, Puma added Detroit rapper Big Sean as an endorser. Nike followed with Travis Scott in 2018. In June 2018, Puma announced Jay-Z as its creative director.

All of this led to one of the most anticipated collaborations ever: adidas and Beyoncé.

They announced their partnership in April 2019. In December, the pop singer, who is married to Jay-Z, nearly broke the internet by teasing her new line. Her line, Ivy Park, was set to release her line January 2020 featuring unisex clothing and sneakers for both men and women.

Beyoncé signing with adidas means that the sneaker giant will have three hip-hop juggernauts on its roster: Kanye, Pharrell and Beyoncé.

Signing Beyoncé is a huge win for adidas for many reasons. The crossover appeal she has in both the music industry and fashion world cannot be denied. She is one of the world's biggest pop stars and was birthed by hip-hop, coming up in an era where R&B and hip-hop were intimately linked and is the heart throb of the hip-hop community.

The demand for hip-hop endorsed sneakers has produced a huge market. Out of it has come two major companies: StockX and Goat. The Founder of StockX, Cleveland Cavaliers owner Dan



Gilbert, reached out to various hip-hop influencers such as Don C, Eminem, and the Wu-Tang Clan to be endorsers and ambassadors of the company. Foot-locker, the athletic apparel giant, even invested \$100 million in Goat, a sign of the viability of the exclusive sneaker market.

Twenty years ago, two brands made people feel cool: Nike and Jordan Brand. (Nike owns Jordan Brand, but the latter is unique because under its umbrella are all of Michael Jordans shoes.) Fast forward to present day, with the influence of West and other artists, you can rock some dad shoes and some ripped jeans with a raggedy sweater and be considered fashion forward. That's worth about 200 likes on Instagram. Now that adidas and other brands have added hip-hop artists to the payroll, it is "cool" to wear suede and velvet Pumas. Even clunky and futuristic Balenciagas, which at a time would've been considered ugly, are now coveted because the fashion eccentricities of hip-hop celebrities have bled into sneaker culture.

"Kanye is a tastemaker. People value his taste," Las Positas student Alvin Sin said.

Hip-hop culture has turned the sneaker industry into a behemoth and made more brands acceptably fashionable than ever before.

The sneaker industry valuation was \$55 billion in 2015. It is expected to be a \$95 billion industry by 2025. StockX claims the resale market alone is worth \$6 billion.

"For enthusiasts and collectors, who really drive the hype market, the key product segment should continue to be official exclusives," Jacob Metzger, co-founder of popular resale menswear site Grailed, told Fashionista magazine in a March 2019 article. "Brands like Nike and adidas are smart and know that to control the top of the market they need to keep producing collaborations and one-offs in small quantities."

Hip-hop artists created hype around their shoes like few other athletes or endorsers of any brand. People have lined up for sneakers before, but nothing has ever matched the craze for Yeezys or anything Travis Scott releases. And certainly the prices have never been so high.

The influx of hip-hop artists into sneaker culture has taken the sneaker craze over the top and the sneaker culture is all for it. Sneakers made by rappers tend to be more valuable and in higher demand than sneakers made by LeBron James or Kevin Durant.

"Is hip-hop euphemism for a new religion?" said West on his track "Gorgeous" from his 2010 album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. Hip-hop has quickly turned into the most popular music genre in today's society. One reason why adidas wanted to recruit more hip-hop artists to their roster was that they are, in some ways, more relatable than an athlete or actor with their own sneaker line.

"People can relate to music artists over athletes or any other kind of celebrity for sure. Musicians like Kanye put their life into their work. Actors are just pretend, and athletes don't really say anything," said Sin when asked about the relatability of music artists as a whole.

There is definitely a relatability factor that rappers have over the traditional athlete. Hip-hop artists



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have more of a green light to what they say because of the creative space they're in unlike athletes who have to always be careful of what they say because they are held to a much higher standard.

A regular person can relate to a rapper or a singer who talks about their life struggles and the success they have now. People are definitely more in awe of athletes, but it's hard to relate to someone who has athletic gifts that only a small percentage of people in the world have.

Since the signing of both West and Williams, adidas sales have risen every year. In 2013, adidas made a gross income of \$14.2 billion dollars. By the end of 2018, adidas made a gross income of \$21.92 billion dollars.

The big jump in sales could definitely be linked to West and Williams' signings. The hype for both of their products was very high, and people were willing to spend hundreds of dollars to obtain these rare sneakers. According to Vox, the Yeezy 350 model would typically sell out in minutes online. Sneaker stores who were lucky to be able to receive a limited quantity of sneakers had lines that went around the block waiting for the chance to buy these limited and rare sneakers.

"Reebok baby, you need to try some new things. Have you ever had shoes without strings?" said West on his feature for Jay-Z and Rihanna's 2009 smash hit "Run This Town." West is arguably the biggest reason why the sneaker game is so diverse today.

West's switch from Nike to adidas not only made people think about another brand other than Nike or Jordan, but also made people explore brands like Asics, New Balance and Timberlands. West stated that he got tired of wearing Jordans and that he wanted to create something new and fresh.

When the first Yeezy 350 first released, it was praised for its sleek style and the overall design of the silhouette. Then, pushing the boundaries as Kanye has always done, he released the Yeezy 700 which resembled a "dad" shoe. The silhouette of the shoe would be considered ugly by any standard if Kanye did not design the sneaker, but since he did design the sneaker, many found ways to find the shoes stylish and attractive.

The appeal of West and other rappers in the sneaker culture has never been in question with sneakerheads. When asked about the appeal of West and other rappers, Reyes stated "What's appealing about hip-hop artists? It's them. They are the ones who push boundaries musically and in the fashion world. They make everything exclusive and find new ways to transcend fashion."

"See, I invented Kanye, it wasn't any Kanyes. Now I look around and there's so many Kanyes," said West on his song "I Love Kanye" from his 2016 album *The Life of Pablo*.

Through all the outlandish things said by West, his public outbursts and questionable behavior, he is the one that elevated hip-hop to the place it is in the fashion world. West, the most influential creator in sneaker culture of recent memory, has influenced not only the brands, but the hip-hop artists as well. Now, almost every major sneaker company employs at least one hip-hop artist or has collaborated with one.

Kanye West and hip-hop culture elevated Adidas to the upper echelon of sneaker culture. From Jordans to Air Force Ones. From Kobes to LeBrons, we all now have an excuse to rock some dad shoes all thanks to one man. Thanks, Yeezus. NAKED

You were made to be more. And it's OK to say it.

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