

SUPREME

A true originator and innovator, Supreme's mystique has been dissected and deconstructed to no end, but that hasn't hurt its brand value in the least. For those still trying to understand its continued appeal to young and old streetwear heads alike, it's simply a brand for people who "get it."

Long before the round-the-block lines, the security guards, the crowd control barriers, the ticketing system, the release dates, and even the Los Angeles, London, and Paris stores, Supreme was just a little skate store on a semi-abandoned block in downtown Manhattan.

With all the focus on the sunshine state of California, skateboarding on the East Coast was as alternative as it got during the '90s. New York's seasonal bad weather, rough terrain, lack of skate parks, unforgiving traffic, and overpopulated sidewalks made for a truly underground outlaw culture, with skate rats hitting up the Brooklyn Banks by day and the old Ziegfeld Theatre by night. Pretty much halfway between these two skate spots—and a short push from Astor Place—was an unassuming block between Houston and Prince Streets, tucked behind the main shopping strip of Broadway.

Before Supreme opened in April 1994, Keith Haring's Pop Shop was the only retail store on Lafayette Street, and most of the neighboring units remained empty—giving the street a quiet, neglected feel. It was an ideal skate spot. Much like it went on to do a decade later with their Fairfax store in Los Angeles, Supreme helped build a retail community surrounding its little shop on Lafayette. Stackhouse, X-LARGE, Clientele, Flight Club, Triple Five Soul, Brooklyn Industries, Diamond Supply

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place a distinct odor. There was a wall of decks at the back of the store, to the right of a glass counter cabinet of skate hardware, and clothing from skate brands like Zoo York, Shorty's, Independent, and Spitfire hung on the heavy industrial rails. Its staff—which to this day still consists of many skaters—gained a notorious reputation for a “cooler-than-thou” mentality.

“The store was always tight and looked amazing so it was the people that treated it like their messy bedroom who got the cold shoulder,” says Alex Corporan, who managed Supreme's Lafayette store from 1994 to 2005. It was just a well-rounded attitude saying “don't fuck with us.”

The shelving unit closest to the counter had a neat display of the store's own tees and sweatshirts. Most skate brands were covered in huge garish, colorful designs, so the simple white logo in a red box placed on the chest of these garments made a stylish contrast. The best thing about independent skateboard shops is that they aren't just a place to go shopping—they're a hangout, a meeting spot and the epicenter of the local skate scene. Supreme took this vibe and rolled it to the fullest. Before people were using social media to see what their friends were up to, they had to actually meet in person, and this little shop on Lafayette Street quickly became the clubhouse for every skate rat in downtown New York. It could be intimidating to outsiders, but that's just how they liked it.

“The NY skate scene was stylish, fun, and high energy,” says Corporan. “It was a tight-knit community that hadn't yet been exploited. Skate parks in the city weren't even close to being a thing, so the streets were all we had—we were like a wolf pack hitting the asphalt from morning to late night.”

Corporan got the gig through a friend who worked at UNION, a clothing boutique opened by James Jebbia and his then-partner Mary Ann Fusco. The two went on to establish the first Stüssy flagship store in New York, working with Shawn Stussy to expand the brand's footprint in the East, lighting a spark that became a global movement. After Stüssy left his eponymous label in the early '90s, Jebbia sought to start his own company and see if he could bring a different energy and approach to retail.

“As with any brand, Supreme started small. Nothing turns huge overnight. There's a lot of history, respect, friendship, and support within the skate industry and we always stocked brands we appreciated,” says Corporan. “Supreme still carries other skate brands today, but it's now very minimal due to the high demand for Supreme's own products, which James Jebbia has built up with attention to detail and quality production.”

Around 1997, the label caught the attention of discerning Japanese shoppers, who

Co., G-Star, American Apparel, and WeSC have all opened (and sometimes closed) doors on the short stretch of this SoHo street, making it a major destination for shoppers.

The store was well lit with bright white walls and a really high ceiling—the complete opposite of the little dark skate shops that dominated the '90s. The store's clean surroundings and impeccably displayed products presented it more like a high-end fashion boutique, and the Nag Champa incense burning near the front mixed with the faint aroma of weed, coming from the little room behind the cash register, gave the



Supreme releases its product every Thursday morning globally, and people always line up in anticipation.

