

The Roots of Streetwear

America is the country where streetwear was birthed. The movement encapsulated the varied desires and shared values of an underground creative class and made them into wearable pieces that spoke an elevated design language with an esoteric appeal. The garments were almost membership badges for a secret club with members around the world.

Streetwear's history is almost in step with the history of sneaker culture. Its appeal is so mired in the genesis of subcultures like hip-hop, punk, and skateboarding, but what it did was transcend any singular label, managing to create products



that spoke to a cross-section of like-minded people. What made the movement feel special is that the clothing created a lingua franca

for seemingly disparate subcultures, signifying that there was more they had in common than they initially thought.

Legendary New York City radio DJ Bobbito Garcia penned the ultimate guide to early sneaker culture. His book, *Where'd You Get Those? New York City's Sneaker Culture: 1960–1987*, is the definitive tome on how a crew obsessed with Pro-Keds could gradually progress into coveting Nike Dunks. Around the time that New York sneaker culture was in its infancy, Shawn Stussy was developing a reputation on the West Coast as a talented surfboard shaper with a penchant for punk and new wave-inspired graphics. His uncle, fine artist Jan Stüssy, was known for signing his works with a signature reminiscent of graffiti hand-styles. So Shawn Stussy began putting his own signature on his boards, and eventually began putting it on a series of graphic T-shirts.

Partnering with Certified Public Accountant Frank Sinatra Jr.,

the two started the Stüssy clothing line in 1980. For years, the two kept their day jobs as they tried to get the brand off the ground. What they offered was an alternative to the day-glo surf brands of the era, opting for dark primary-colored staples, like beach pants with an elasticated waist and button-down flannel shirts inspired by vintage offerings from JC Penney.



The term "streetwear" didn't exist as it does today. The only brand calling itself that was Vision Street Wear, a label founded by Brad Dorfman in 1976. It catered to a burgeoning scene of skateboarders, and even manufactured pro models for early pro skaters like Mark Gonzales and Mark "Gator" Rogowski. But Stüssy chugged along, and eventually found its way to the East Coast courtesy of UNION, a shop founded by James Jebbia and Mary Ann Fusco on the corner of Spring Street and West Broadway, during a time when SoHo was far from a shopping destination, and still a hangout for bohemian artist types. The boutique specialized in importing covetable British labels like Duffer of St. George, and also offered gear like mesh tank tops inspired by the

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style of Jamaican rude boys, and other gear that spoke to the subcultures of the time.

Since its inception, Stüssy was very discerning about the stores that carried it. There were

concerns about the brand getting too big, and losing the authenticity it was founded upon. What the brand realized early on was that skaters, graffiti artists, DJs, and other cultural progenitors were keenly aware of high fashion brands like Chanel, Gucci, and COMME des GARÇONS, but noticed the divide between how those labels spoke to a monied consumer versus one that was culturally rich instead. Its clothes helped cross the barrier between the cognoscenti aware of luxury brands and the casual sportswear they naturally gravitated towards.

Eventually, UNION began carrying Stüssy, where it was an instant hit. In fact, it was so successful that Jebbia and Fusco took their first trip to Los Angeles to convince the brand they should open a flagship store in New York City. The two stayed at the Chateau Marmont, where they happened to run into Robert "3D" Del Naja and Andy "Mushroom" Vowles of British trip-hop group Massive Attack. They expressed that they were in town to talk to the Stüssy crew, and the musicians were very aware of the up-and-coming label, and

