



# JOEY LIT FREE THE YOUTH ACCRA, GH

Most business owners can point to a moment when their idea crystallised; when their path became just a bit clearer. For Joey Lit (Jonathan Coffie to his mother), it was as a 10-year-old boy at home in the Ghanaian port city of Tema, watching one of his older brother's bootleg VHS tapes of MTV Cribs and American hip-hop videos. This was the era of 50 Cent and early Kanye West, but the video he kept rewinding was 'Right Thurr' by Chingy.

'There was something about Chingy's look,' says Joey, whose brother was part of the rap battle scene in Tema, which is known for swallowing up western influences well before the rest of West Africa has caught on. 'The durag, the way the shirt, cap and sneakers all matched – I didn't know at that point what I wanted to do with my life, but I knew that kind of style would be part of it somehow.'

Today, 27-year-old Joey is the co-founder of Free the Youth, an amorphous creative collective that he co-founded in 2013 with his Tema friend Kelly Kurlz. Initially, it was mostly about Joey and Kelly posting pictures to Tumblr and Instagram of their sharply dressed crew wearing the likes of Raf Simons and Alexander Wang, 'hoping to show the world a different side to Ghana'.

Now, though, Free the Youth is a streetwear brand hyped by Vogue magazine, sought out by Nike and TikTok for collaborations, and worn by many of Ghana's new Afrobeats musicians. Along with the likes of Ghanaian brands Daniks Peters and FearNoMan, and Nigeria's Motherlan and Modus Vivendii, Free the Youth has been part of the explosion of West African streetwear brands in recent years.

And the brand, which has until now specialised in limited runs of T-shirts and denim, is eyeing the next level. The core crew of six is busy working on plans for a new factory and shop between the smart Accra districts of Labone and Osu. After that, Joey says they want to open stores across

Africa, in cities like Lagos, Dakar and Nairobi, before going global. 'In three or four years, we'd love to be part of the LVMH group,' he says, boldly.

Until now, Free the Youth's success has largely been a triumph of marketing, a skill Joey has been honing since his pre-teen Chingy revelation. Not long after, he was cruising to school in a pair of pink Timberlands and competing in high-school sneaker battles, so afraid to dirty his box-fresh Phat Farms or BAPE STAS that he'd wear them around his neck. His style heroes were his older brother and his friends, who were channeling Cam'ron and Kanye on Tema's party scene. 'Even then, it felt like we were part of a new kind of African culture,' he says.

They started Free the Youth when Joey was studying electrical engineering in Accra and Kelly had just left high school in Tema, 20 miles along the coast. But it wasn't until two years later that they decided to parlay their sense of style into some of their own merchandise. They printed a handful of T-shirts, sweatshirts and hoodies, emblazoned simply with their name. Joey gave T-shirts to B4Bonah and Kwesi Arthur, two local rappers he was helping to style, as they pioneered new music fusing West African Afrobeats with trap and electronica. 'People saw the shirts and didn't know what it was,' says Joey. 'It was like some secret society that they wanted to be a part of.'

Early on, they made a virtue of their lack of resources. They couldn't afford to print much, but because their clothes were seen on the backs of Ghana's coolest musicians, interest was high. Their first collection, in 2015, was a small batch of T-shirts that read '1,000 Injured', referring to the Accra Sports Stadium disaster of 2001. Available for the equivalent of \$8 on Facebook, the collection sold out in days.

The crew became experts at generating excitement. At Ghana Teen Fashion Week, models smoked on the runway while wearing the new