

It's a story that's indelibly linked to the city in which it took place: New York. Ever since Ellis Island served as the primary gateway for immigrants seeking a new life in America during the late 19th and early 20th century, New York City has been a place where cultures, attitudes, and identities collide in ways that have reinterpreted and redefined the American spirit, from food and film to music and the arts.

With this in mind, it's little surprise that a designer in New York seeking to create the archetypal American wardrobe would eventually find himself an unwitting collaborator with the wealth of subcultures that sprung out of the five boroughs. Every subcultural movement that has bubbled up out of New York—whether graffiti, street skating, hip-hop, art, or otherwise—has been heavily informed by an interplay with the other cultural expressions that the city nurtures.

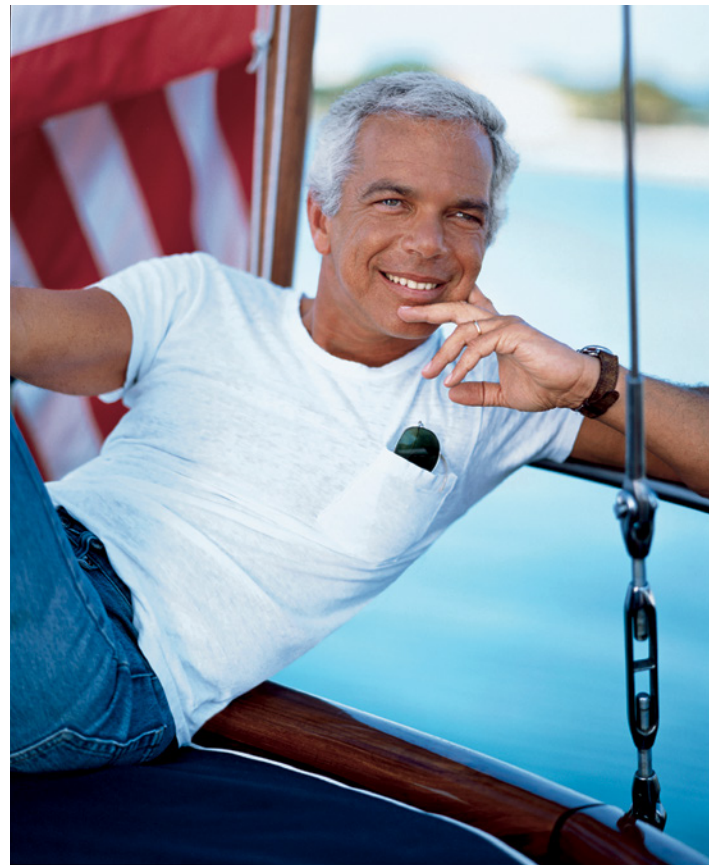
Toward the end of the 20th century, New York was emerging as a global hub of art, fashion, and culture, and the language of those industries was naturally absorbed by anyone who came into contact with it. When skateboarding erupted out of the West Coast surfing scene in the '80s, the style was largely defined by that lineage: T-shirts, surf shorts, canvas deck

shoes, and so on. The style of skateboarding itself was rooted in the evolution of tricks and techniques created by surfers. So when the phenomenon transferred across the country to the colder East Coast cities and their less forgiving urban environments, it was clear that the LA wardrobe wasn't going to cut it. New Yorkers needed a style that reflected both the culture and climate of the Eastern Seaboard.

Growing up in the radius of New York's burgeoning fashion scene, East Coast skateboarders and rappers were not immune to the influence of the runway on everyday style. And, conveniently, the concurrent rise of a handful of American designers such as Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger, Perry Ellis, and, of course, Ralph Lauren meant that, perhaps for the first time, the quintessential American wardrobe was beginning to be recognized as a phenomenon in its own right.

Somewhere at the center of all of this, you had New York's skaters and hip-hop fans dressing the way they always had, in the center of one of the world's fashion hubs, at a time when the style of their region was gaining global recognition. Everyday East Coast style gained global cultural capital, with designer brands defining the aesthetic. For the kid coming up in the city who wanted to look good, the equation was simple. How this then came to be such an enduring cultural moment while other styles fell by the wayside is a mixture of myth, luck, and, well, the fact that it looked good—and still does. Skateboarding's evolution into street skating in the '90s placed the East Coast city dwellers at an advantage to their long-haired West Coast counterparts, while cultural depictions of New York City life in films like Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995) injected character into Ralph Lauren's consciously dry, reserved aesthetic. In many ways, the scene in which Casper (played by late NYC skater Justin Pierce) steals a 40-ounce bottle of malt liquor by concealing it in the wide leg of his chino pants encapsulates the phenomenon of Ralph Lauren in streetwear.

Which is to say that, like every great cultural story born from the ground up, the brand's origins lie in unintended uses rather than conscious design. Even its very intentional decision to create understated, conservative clothing that would appeal to your average white, well-to-do American male fell victim to unexpected appropriation, as that American ideal Ralph Lauren created was so broad, accessible, and unassuming that virtually anyone could take it and mold it to their image.



Left: Ralph Lauren. Opposite: A shot from the Palace x Ralph Lauren campaign photographed by David Sims.

