

Hip Hop's Slimdown: The Transition from Prison Yard Sag to 'Skurban' Slim

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Abstract

For some time now, Hip-Hop and oversized clothing have gone hand in hand. Young African American, Latino and even Asian males sporting hoodies and jeans that appear a couple sizes too big can be seen as products of the Hip-Hop culture. However, the face, or more specifically, the silhouette of Hip-Hop fashion is changing - to the joy of grandmothers around the world.

Introduction

On July 15, 2007, the Louisiana town of Lafourche Parish passed a law banning the wearing of sagging pants. A person could get fines of \$50 - \$100 and 16 hours of community service for a first offense of exposing one's underwear due to sagging jeans. Town officials cited indecency and danger to one's self and others as the cause of the ban. "Our kids kind of got away from us...the people want their community back," said Lafourche county officials (Bacon). Some are arguing that this is an act of racial profiling, as most young urban minority males are saggy bottom devotees. However, if this is a step to convert the young Hip-Hop fan to better fitting clothing, it may be unwarranted. When asked about his feelings concerning this ban by BBC News, fashion designer and head of the University of Westminster's fashion department, Andrew Groves, said, "It's bizarre because in fashion we've stopped wearing those baggy jeans. They're getting worked up 15 years too late about something that is probably quite dying out" (Jackson). Oversized clothing has been the key silhouette and "face" of hip-hop fashion for many years now but in line with the music itself, the fashion trend is evolving to a slimmer silhouette.

Back In the Day

As with most fashion trends, oversized clothing in the Hip-Hop culture can be traced back to social tendencies. The origin of sagging jeans is believed to have begun among prisoners. When the ubiquitous jumpsuit is not required, prisoners' pants have been known to hang beyond the waist because of the lack of belts. In prison, belts are banned in effort to prevent the prisoners from using them to commit suicide. Because of the abundant presence of African American males in the prison systems, this look was easily

brought back to Black communities and grew into a fad even for those who never spent an hour in a correctional facility. Rap artists such as Run DMC, N.W.A and Kriss Kross can be named to have helped pioneer this style in Hip-Hop with their loose fitting clothing. The peak of the trend could be given to Kriss Kross. Kriss Kross was young rap duo, who can be credited as starting the trend of not only wearing excessively oversized clothing but wearing them backwards. The idea of backwards clothing did not stick for too long because it was just plain uncomfortable but huge tops and bottoms were here to stay.

Though oversized clothing may be iconic to the Hip-Hop culture, it did not begin this way. For instance, The Sugar Hill Gang, Kool G Rap and Afrikka Bambatta are usually named when tracking the origins of Hip-Hop music and yet during their reign in the music industry, they could be spotted in tee shirts and jeans that were almost skin tight.

30 Something

Many attribute the slimming silhouette of hip hop fashion to icons such as Jay-Z and Sean “Diddy” Combs growing older and having their fashion reflect their age. Kionna Coleman, a senior editor at MR Magazine, a men’s fashion publication told the Baltimore Sun that “you’ve got Usher with his blazer, Jay-Z with his suits. So the younger kids are seeing a new style come in. And since the younger kids are influenced by older people, well, they’re going to slim down too”. According to Metta Winter in the article *Interpreting the Influence of Diverse Cultures on Fashion*,

[there is] a wider range of choices of clothing for [certain] roles while still representing a more distinctive quality of blackness than was available even just a few years ago. Sean John, Sean Combs’ line of clothing-ranging from formal suits to street clothes-is an example for men.

‘30 Something’, a song on rapper Jay-Z’s most recent hip hop effort, ‘ Kingdom Come’, addresses the change in his wardrobe tastes because of the fact that he is getting a bit older. “I used to let my pants sag, not givin’ a (expletive). Baby boy now I’m all grown up” (White). Jay –Z, who garnered the #2 spot in 2007 for Esquire’s Best Dressed Man in the World list, has always been highly influential in hip hop fashion (Hochswender). Jay-Z can be credited to have pioneered many trends in the hip hop culture such as: Che Guevara tee shirts, ‘button-up’ shirts with cuff links, ‘throwback’ basketball jerseys, and even the T-Mobile Sidekick.

Arguably, 2003 is the year that Jay-Z decided to ‘grow up’ in terms of his fashion sense. This is that year that he released a single off of his ‘Blueprint 2’ album entitled “Excuse Me Miss”. In the beginning of the song Jay-Z states “This is for the grown and sexy, only for the grown and sexy,” a phrase that the hip hop community ran with, thus influencing a

more grown up approach to things. In most of this music video, of which the rapper meets a woman who intrigues him, he is wearing suits: in the nightclub, in a board meeting, and seated smoking a cigar. Pharell Williams, also seen crooning in the video, is wearing a suit. When Jay-Z ‘wears’, hip hop follows and ‘grown up’ dressing became fashionable again in the hip hop world.

Preppy Hip Hop

A recent fashion trend that has emerged in the hip hop industry is the ‘Prep- Hop’ look. Key pieces of this look include: brightly colored polo shirts sometimes sported with a ‘popped’ collar, v- neck tee shirts, sport jackets and blazers in an array of different fabrics and colors including seersucker, linen, and velvet, and shorts in plaid, madras, white or bright popping colors (Binkley).

The colliding of preppy and urban wear may seem like a new idea, but it is actually one of the iconic ways of dressing in the hip hop culture. American designers such as Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren have always been and, for the most part, will always be the “go-to” basic for the hip hop devotee. In the early to mid 90’s, having ‘Polo’ or ‘Tommy Hilfiger’ emblazoned across your chest in an oversized tee, hoodie or sweatshirt characterized you as more fashionable. Tommy Hilfiger was one who most blatantly embraced the popularity he received from the hip hop community by featuring Tyson Beckford and the late ODB from the rap group WU-Tang as celebrity models in his fashion shows. “I think that it’s very cool that I can walk down Fifth Avenue and see a messenger wearing my Rugby shirt five sizes too big and then go to Wall Street and see an investment banker wearing my pinstripes,” Tommy Hilfiger told Esquire Magazine in an article about “Prep Urban” in 1996 (Hochswender).

Skater Meets Urban

Unable to be pigeon-holed, the hip hop fashion devotees of today like their forefathers of the musical genre are expanding their minds and musical tastes. Hip Hop artists Pharell Williams and Lupe Fiasco are two contributors who have helped to propel a new look in the urban market, skater meets urban or “skurban” (White). The Skurban look is comprised of several elements such as shorter length tee shirts (more true to size than that of the oversize look of the past) often in bright colors. Or, they are sporting the logos of popular skateboard brands, chain wallets, slimmer jeans (but still relaxed), skater sneakers such as DC or Vans, or colorful but carefully coordinated sneakers. Like the name of the trend, the look of Skurban doesn’t just take from the skater look but blends it with the distinct styling of urban or hip hop.



Figure 1. Photo of Brandon Wesley in skurban look, 2007.

Photo Courtesy of Brandon Wesley, Philadelphia PA.

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dressing. The bright colors, repeat pattern hoodies, careful coordination and relaxed fits are hip hop's translation of skater style.

Chicago-born rapper Lupe Fiasco's first single and biggest hit was "Kick Push"; a skateboarder's ode to the sport, and the metaphorical connection to their outlook on life. Fashion is a component of this hit hip hop single. In it, Fiasco references the Spitfire brand and Nike Dunks which can be seen as the part of the typical skater look: "Before he knew, he had a crew that was no punks, in their Spitfire shirts, and their sp dunks."

Since the first time Pharell Williams got out of the music producer's chair and behind the microphone, he has helped to pioneer this cross of skater and urban street style. This can be seen in the music video, "Lapdance," by Williams' rock group N.E.R.D. Slim, almost Emo-style, brightly striped polo shirts, trucker caps, slim jeans and dunks are some of the key pieces worn by Pharell Williams in this video. Though this video was shot in 2003, the looks Williams dons can be seen on the streets of Philadelphia today. As result of Williams' love of skateboarding (he has been an avid skateboarder since the age of 11) and the "skurban" look, he started a successful skate brand named Ice Cream. Ice Cream offers men's apparel by way of jeans, tees, polos, shorts, hats and other items such as logo bandanas and skate videos. Pharell also has formed a skate team led by African American pro skater Terry Kennedy (Terry Kennedy is known to the MTV world

because of friend and fellow skateboarder Bam Margera's reality show, Viva La Bam. In the show Bam Margera, jokingly deemed him "Compton Ass Terry because of his extreme Hip Hop style (i.e. gaudy jewelry, extremely sagging jeans, etc.)). The Ice Cream skate team has five other members who go on tour to film and promote their skate DVDs and apparel, and to also participate in exhibitions. This skate team does not participate in competitions - just street skating. Pharell Williams told EXPN.com that his aim in forming this team was for skaters "to get recognition for shredding and to show that what they are doing is a beautiful thing to aspire to" (Hintz) Ice Cream team member Kato Williams added "We're gonna show that skating is not just about jumping off stuff and defacing property, it's a positive art and we are artists. We're just freestyling with our feet instead of our mouths" (Hintz).

Pharell Williams, who was recently featured in Louis Vuitton ads and has always been looked at by many as an exceptionally fashionable person; be it in a baseball jacket, bathing ape sneakers, baseball cap or a Tom Ford-esque suit with a silk shirt. With this influence of skate/urban coming from a major player in the hip hop industry, the fashion merge was destined to catch on by the young people and spread like wildfire.

Where the fashion is going...

Hip Hop brands may have to learn to grow with their market. The Hip Hop generation of today has done something of a 180 degree turn on the hip hop fashion retailers. They no longer need big logos or oversized tee shirts in basic colors and specialty chains are taking note. Recently, the major urban brands have been showing lackluster sales in contrast to retail brands such as American Eagle Outfitters and Zumiez which, according to MR Magazine, have "had double digit increase each quarter of 06" :

Except for a few items from Enyce and Rocawear, no major urban brand had any of our best-selling styles for 06,' says Billy Rudnick of Dr. Jay's. "They're playing it too safe, and there is an overwhelming lack of creativity; with a ridiculous raising of price. (Coleman)

In *Interpreting the Influence of Diverse Cultures on Fashion*, author Metta Winter discusses expert of Black African Disapora, Van Dyke Lewis. Black African Disapora is a cultural group with a particular way of wearing clothes. Lewis points out that

[the] 'hip-hop' fashion wearer who also works as a manager in an office where a suit is the appropriate dress. 'The important questions for many young black men then becomes: Do I wear a baggy cut that looks a little 'street,' or a well-tailored suit?...they'll often wear the appropriate 'uniform' but in a style that signifies an identification as a black.

Though young hip hop fashion lovers have adopted the influence of the skater look, it must be said that it is always carried off in a hip hop way. I do not believe that hip hop devotees will ever fully abandon a relaxed fit for the skinny jeans of the emo or rock crowd. Also, the gaudy, showy, in-your-face way of hip hop will still very much be present in any look that it chooses to borrow from. Hip hop fashionistas (or fashionistos) may adopt parts of skurban in terms of slimmer fits, chain wallets and Nike dunks, but the Hip Hop kids will have bright, neon color tops matching perfectly with their dunks. In doing my research, I have found that with the skaters and their look, function follows form. With the hip hop fashion elite, form is most important.

The influence of preppy and skater on hip hop fashion does not seem to fading all that fast. Skurban is a look of the fashionable and, in some cases, even the fashion –forward among young African American males in Philadelphia. In the article, “Kick Push” by Kionna Coleman in MR Magazine, she lists this year’s trends as:

Prints/patterns/fabrics: plaid, seersucker...allover prints, lighter-weight t-shirts.

Denim: raw denim, including an emergence of black raw. A slimmer silhouette, yet still a bit relaxed; a movement away from popular premium brands and to the classic traditional (e.g., Levi’s, Lee)

Color: Neons, pastels...colorway combinations

[Brands]...Stash House, Rocawear, Etnies, Billabong...

Style: eighties-influence sticks around for another season

When interviewing my hip hop peers about this new trend of skater urban and prep hop, the consensus seemed to be that though they like the new trend, it will not last forever and relaxed fitting will. Though all four of the men interviewed are in their early 20s, they all had something to say about respecting a more mature way of dressing, such as rapper Jay-Z would.

In interviewing several men about the Skurban look, the following comments were noted as indicators of the trends’ future:

“The skater boy thing is cool at times but it will fade, not die. Baggy clothes will always be in as long as hip hop is alive. ... At the same time you got to know when to throw on something different and be grown” – Omar Malcolm, 23, father & insurance broker.

“I do miss the "hood" clothes days... I still keep it gully as [expletive] wit white tees.. They will never go out of style, in my opinion, when all else fails... throw a tee on... just not a size 4 X...” – Brendan McNamara, 21, Owns successful roofing company.

“As time changes the skater look will become more prominent. And the best person to demonstrate my point is Jay- Z of course. He can go from hood to formal to casual and be fly in each style.” – Eric Jordan, 22, recent college grad, graphic & fashion designer.

“The skater/kanye/dipset- tight shirt-wallet chains-slim jeans-skater shoe and loud belts will fade away the same way velour sweatsuits and throwback jerseys did” – James Thornton, 22, college student & Hip Hop artist

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