

## **Interview with Stephen Lam (aka SLAM), Hong Kong-based Sneakerhead**

### **Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Maybe you could start by telling me when you got your first pair of Nikes.

### **Stephen Lam**

A the first pair that did me in was Adidas. They released this new performance basketball shoe for my favourite basketball player. His name was Tracy Mcgrady and the shoes were called TMAC2. I was in college at the time and when I first saw the ads for it, I was just mesmerized. The design was very minimalist, but because it was my fave basketball player and it just really appealed to me. Back then, I was a poor college student like everyone else, and I didn't exactly have the money for the shoes. I remember they were US \$100 and I saw them at the footlocker right by my uni [UC Berkley]. I was just kinda in awe of those shoes, cos they were just so beautiful! Funniest thing was, I was almost afraid to try them on or ask for help because I knew I couldn't afford then. But then the sales dude was really cool and he came over to help me anyways. He said those shoes just came in and asked for my siz. I was still kinda hesitant but then he offered me this coupon to buy them, 30% off. Those coupons were supposed to be given out for customers who wanted Jordans; I think it was the Jordan XVII; those re-tailed for a ridiculous us\$200 or something and no one were buying them. Anyways, the guy offered me the coupon and told me i could use it for the TMACS, and at that moment, I was sold and hooked.

### **Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

So how did it develop from there? How did it develop from a more or less functional purchase, into something much more profound?

### **Stephen Lam**

Ha ha...

That's a good question.

I suppose it always started with the athletes and the marketing that went with it, cos being a basketball fan, there'll always be different athletes you idolize and Nike/Adidas will always have the products to go with your favourite athlete. But the "hobby" really tuned "profound" I guess when I came back to Hong Kong. I started working so I had a little bit more money than college and I found an online community of fellow sneaker fiends. From there i think it really got me more knowledgeable about upcoming releases and the history of sneakers. I think I really started buying when the Air Force one hit its 25th anniversary. There was something about that campaign that really got me going in terms of buying. The Air Force 1 was a very iconic shoe with its history deeply rooted in basketball. the shoe first came out in 1982, and it was in 2008 when I really dived into the scene.

### **Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

So how many did you buy? And when did you realize that there was an obsessive quality to this?

**Stephen Lam**

I think by the time I had around 40 pairs.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Bought over how much time?

**Stephen Lam**

Less than a year i think. I don't think I ever realized there was an obsessive quality to this cos I keep seeing others who are way more addicted and obsessed than I am.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Ah yes, of course, fellow sneakerheads. But before we get into that... could you tell me how many shoes you have bought in the last 5 years or so?

**Stephen Lam**

Hold on, I can answer that cos I have a an excel spreadsheet where I keep a record of all the shoes I've bought and sold since 2008.

62+41+93 = 196

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Why did you add it up like that?

**Stephen Lam**

62 pairs I plan to keep. 41 that are on the market that I'm selling. 93 that I've already sold.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

So we're talking about US \$20,000 here, aren't we?

**Stephen Lam**

Yes, US \$100 per pair is a good assumption.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

And how did you feel when you bought each pair?

**Stephen Lam**

Hmm... I'd say there were different emotions I felt when buying new shoes, cos sometimes I 'd buy for different reasons. I've bought cos I was in a bad mood... so they might provide a temporary boost of happiness. I've bought shoes online, which I do not receive until they get shipped over, so that's also a very different feeling. I've bought limited edition shoes that I never thought I'd be able to buy, out of sheer luck, which made me feel very happy and fortunate.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

What kind of luck?

**Stephen Lam**

Oh, because many limited editions sell out the moment they are released in the stores, but every now and then, they'll restock at unknown times, so when you do stumble upon them and manage to buy them in your size, that would be considered wildly lucky. And other times Nike would do lucky draws or raffles just for the chance to buy limited releases.. It's really dumb when u think about it, but yeah, sometimes I feel lucky if I win the raffles.

Many other reasons. Hype; which is basically everybody wants a pair, so you go along for the ride. Those feel the worst. I'm not a big fan of doing that.

Another reason is purely because I really love the shoe in terms of design or colour or it just wasn't available in Hong Kong or whatever.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

So there is a collecting aspect, a fan aspect, a connoisseur aspect... I wonder what else.

**Stephen Lam**

Oh! There's also when you go on vacation and visit all these foreign sneaker shops and you might just buy something cos you've made the trip, almost like a souvenir of sorts. And there's also sales on certain shoes; you like them, but not that much for that certain price, but then when they do a discount or sale, then you may feel oh ok, that's a good deal, I'll buy it.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

And do you wear all these shoes?

**Stephen Lam**

Not all, but I wanna say most of them I wear.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

And would you wear one till it gets beat up, or would you avoid that out of respect.

**Stephen Lam**

I think it's hard for us sneakerheads to actually thrash a shoe... cos we do respect it a bit and don't wanna mess it up too much.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

And when you first buy a pair, what do you tend to do? Any ritual?

**Stephen Lam**

For me, I would take at least one photo of the shoes in its brand new condition, then I'd re-lace the laces, cos I have this special way of lacing them, and then I would decide whether I'd wear them soon, or maybe a little later. If it's a little later, I would put them in a zip-loc bag before putting them back in their original shoe box.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Why?

**Stephen Lam**

The zip-loc bag is to keep them fresh and pristine... to be as new as possible, cos some shoes may oxidize and that's one of the saddest moments in a sneakerhead's life. Some shoes have clear soles... and that material tends to yellow – oxidize- when time passes, so the ziplock bag is kinda to mummify it.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

What about the smell of new sneakers?

**Stephen Lam**

Ha ha ha! Yeah they do have a smell, just like a new car.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam.**

Have you ever regretted buying new sneakers?

**Stephen Lam**

Oh sure, regrets aplenty. There are different reasons for regrets. One: poor investment choice; cos u might think those shoes are rare and you can make a quick buck off it by flipping it, only to find out no one wants them, or there's a massive restock a week later. Two: You buy something that's on sale, and then you realize you didn't like it that much after all. Three: you buy something online and the size doesn't fit, cos u can't try them beforehand.  
let me lookup what's self-loathing real quick.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

So do you feel it is an addiction? Or an obsession?

**Stephen Lam**

what's the difference between addiction and obsession?

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

I guess an addiction involves consumption, of one kind or another, and helplessness before that desire to consume.

**Stephen Lam**

Ha ha ha! Then it's not an addiction. I never feel helplessness.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

So you can stop buying them.?

**Stephen Lam**

Ha ha! Of course you can stop. But the chance of relapse is high.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Then it's an addiction!

**Stephen Lam**

Ha ha! I dunno. I guess I always feel I can step away. Much like any other addict, cos I never actually do. The thing is, with sneakers now, they're just too expensive. And it's not like heroin where you'd steal to buy it. I'm just gonna buy less instead of resorting to that, you know?

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Right, cos it's not physical in that sense.

**Stephen Lam**

Exactly

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

But how does it make you feel?

**Stephen Lam**

It feels goooood. Ha ha ha

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Can you expand on goooood?

**Stephen Lam**

It's a feeling of ownership over something that's desirable for many people. And also, I have to give some love to the process of buying the shoes, cos it's not always easy just going to McDonald's and getting a Big Mac. There's this feeling that you've seized an opportunity, because Nike or Adidas may never release those shoes ever again. You kinda stole or captured a moment in time when those shoes existed. That is why I guess we ziplock our shoes and take pictures of them when they're brand new, cos u may never ever see them again in that state.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Has anyone ever told you there are worried about you or think you have a problem?

**Stephen Lam**

No-one has ever spoken of it as a problem, but it is frowned upon by some, just cos I think it's difficult to understand why a guy would buy close to 200 pairs of shoes.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Who frowns on it?

**Stephen Lam**

My ex-girlfriend. Some of my friends, but they do it in a teasing kinda way. My Mom just thinks it takes up a lot of space in the home, and she doesn't like me keeping shoes in my room cos there's enough crap in here already. It's not a strong disapproval, but but yeah, she kinda frowns and complains whenever i get my uncle, her brother, to bring shoes back for me from America.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

What did your ex-girlfriend say?

**Stephen Lam**

She would always use it against me as a sign of my immaturity. She'd say things like, "oh you don't care about anything but your shoes". Those kinda little digs.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Meaning you cared about sneakers more than about her?

**Stephen Lam**

Yeah I guess that's what she's trying to imply.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

How did you respond?

**Stephen Lam**

As any smart man would, I didn't..

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Did you ever buy her sneakers?

**Stephen Lam**

Yes, I did actually

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Did she appreciate them?

**Stephen Lam**

I think she did, but I felt she appreciated other gifts more

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Are there many female sneakerheads?

**Stephen Lam**

Not nearly as many

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

And how do you feel about girls in sneakers?

**Stephen Lam**

I love girls in sneakers. I always have this image in my mind, that if a girl can pull off wearing sneakers, she would look good in anything else. Cos in my mind, a girl wearing sneakers is usually

showing a lot of leg, and then they must be pseudo- athletic and into basketball.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

So sneakers are sexier than heels for you?

**Stephen Lam**

Well, I'll say this, if a girl looks good in sneakers, she damn well will look sexy in heels. cos heels are almost cheating...and they're freaking uncomfortable. Have you seen chicks in heels at the clubs? God I pity them...

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Now, what about feeling manipulated? You know, by Nike, a mega-corporation, with all its advertising, marketing, mind-control etc

**Stephen Lam**

I don't feel manipulated in that sense... because some of their products are really very well made, and I feel like Nike's advertising and marketing isn't totally without basis, because they're smart enough to use athletes to endorse their products and wear them who do these amazing feats on the basketball court. I almost have to hand it to them for doing such a great job at manipulating and controlling my mind into buying their shoes.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

So you never feel resentful?

**Stephen Lam**

I did at times, but the resentment never stuck to a point where I felt I was wronged and I'd boycott their products or anything extreme like that.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

So, could you tell me what you like best about sneakers? Is it their beauty? or functionality?

**Stephen Lam**

For one, it's definitely the beauty, but there's also a lot of emotion and heritage that I associate with a pair of shoes, especially Jordans. Functionality also, but that's almost a whole different category.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

Could you tell me about the sneakerhead community?

**Stephen Lam**

There are actually many online forums that perpetuate the sneaker community. There's a local one in Hong Kong and I've been a member for the past 9 years. Members will post their latest cops, bitch about how shitty Nike is in terms of limited edition releases etc. I don't hang out with them outside of sneaker events, like Nike would do a invitation-only event where they show us what they'll be releasing soon, and we might play basketball after the event, but that's it. I do have a few friends who appreciate sneakers though. It's even more pervasive in America where they have "sneaker-cons", conventions, but I know China, Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia and UK have these communities as well. Hip-

hop has a lot to do with it, but more so for Americans or people educated in America. Hip-hop is not a heavy influence in the Hong Kong sneaker scene.

**Rajeev Balasubramanyam**

So, a last word on this question: *are* you an addict?

**Stephen Lam**

Ha ha ha. As any true addict will say, no.