

Merchwear

by Silvia Bombardini



Maharishi x Travi\$ Scott, *Year Of The Cowboy Tour Jacket*

“You’re obviously in the wrong place”. A boutique saleslady in *Pretty Woman* implies that Vivian should peruse the racks elsewhere, for she surely don’t have the funds, or taste, to appreciate what’s sold in her store. It’s not difficult to imagine how the quote could just as well apply, in the whispers at least of fashion’s most traditionalist gatekeepers, to Virgil Abloh, whose Off-White FW16 womenswear show the film inspires. But just like Julia Roberts’ character, Abloh is precisely where he needs to be, and the mean-spirited will make a *Big Mistake – Huge!* – to presume differently. Best known as Kanye West’s longstanding creative director, Abloh co-founded the Bromance Records label and DJs regularly around the world as Flat White. In a timeline that goes from Jay Z’s Rocawear to Pharrell’s Billionaire Boys Club, to Golf Wang by Tyler, the Creator, Abloh is not the first and certainly won’t be the last personality from the hip-hop community to dip his toes in fashion. But his ambitions, which rival West’s own – he aims for a job at a major house, he told GQ – and the fact that they don’t sound so far off, since Off-White was in fact the only American finalist for the LVMH Prize last year, are indicative of an industry that’s permeable to new values and players more than ever before.

On its own, the infatuation of high-end designers with the culture Abloh and his peers represent, which sees the likes of Young Thug in Calvin Klein's FW16 campaign, A\$AP Rocky as the new face of Dior, or Chance the Rapper as an 'ambassador' of the Kenzo x H&M collab, could be written down as little more than a trend. Or perhaps more interestingly, as a way to make amends, consciously or not, for fashion's previous unwillingness to give credit or target to the hip-hop market, a bit like those salesgirls who wilfully ignore Vivian, despite the contribution to the lasting fame of some preppy labels which clearly came from hip-hop artists' name-dropping them in their best-known songs of the 80s and 90s. "Ralph Lauren was borin' before I wore him" raps West in *Brand New*, and maybe he's right. True, some gatekeepers may still turn up their nose, but already few of the ones that matter do: while it's no surprise that VFiles got Thugger as a mentor for its seventh season, it surely means something that even Vogue invited Gucci Mane to its offices, not four months out of prison, to give on camera a first-glance review the Gucci SS17 show. At the same time, we're witnessing the introduction of remarkably refined lines of merch: think for example of the Travis Scott x maharishi capsule collection, titled *Year Of The Cowboy* as a reference to the rapper's debut studio album, *Rodeo*, with the embroidered image of Scott himself on a bucking bronco as its logo. Along with countless similar collaborations, such as the JWA x AWGE line by J.W. Anderson and Rocky, they paved the way for ever more hip-hop artists to launch brands of their own, that operate in complete independence from their musical releases.



@virgilabloh

They are usually content to target to a customer who's already a fan, most often from an online store for quick revenue – although it should be noted that Drake's OVO line, for instance, counts now a flagship store in Toronto and one in Los Angeles. But the steady presence of labels like Yeezy, Fenty and Off-White at the New York and Paris Fashion Weeks, both on the official calendar and on the attendees, shouldn't be underestimated.

Firstly, and without wishing to undermine the quality of some of these collections, it tells us that design in the classical sense is less important now than it ever used to be. Training is superfluous. We'll call it luxe hoodie if it's glazed with Swarovski, but a hoodie it still is. Dad hats and slogan tees are what celebrities wear, and what the public want, regardless of their spending power. It's what designers wear, too, especially when they are rappers. *"Hip-hop was one of the first music genres that was born of the common people"* Frank the Butcher told Highsnobiety *"Hip-hop was the genre of music where it was accepted, promoted, and preferred that the artist looked like the fan"*. It might even be counterintuitive for Abloh to seek to broaden his range much further. As Amy Verner ventures in her review of the show, *"the issue is not whether Off-White can eventually master a deconstructed dress, but whether pursuing higher level design works against it"*. Because the century-old model that saw fashion's innovation as the perpetual race of the poor to imitate the style of the wealthy, who would then change their attire so as to distinguish themselves once more, clearly no longer applies. Today we expect our clothes to say more about us than simply how rich we wish we were, and to say it plainly and loud. Sometimes it's a message: a white t-shirt branded Dior that spells out how *we should all be feminist*. Often, certainly in the case of the labels mentioned above, they speak of our loyalty to our idols. You will buy the grey furry pool-slides Rihanna designed for Puma, if nothing else because you're part of her Navy.

This is something that gives musicians' clothing lines a quantifiable advantage on even the best-established of old-school fashion brands: fandom. From the get-go, it's the devoted, unwavering customer base designers always aspire to, and that some achieve at comparable levels only after decades of proving themselves in the business. It's why young fashion talents occasionally seem to behave like popstars, and why their collections remind you more and more of merchandise – *merchwear*, a term Abloh coined himself with a tweet in September. Boundaries blur. As rappers aim higher, trained designers appear quick to forget their craft: I wouldn't be surprised to find them all behind the console sometime soon.