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Owen, K and Owen, PB

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Whatever you call your footwear, there is a particular tribe who are obsessive about theirs.

volume 08 / mad on adidas
spring / summer 2023



@madonadidas

We talk to Chris Lee, an influential figure in the Wade Smith story of Casual Culture and Liverpool's love story with trainees. Trimm Trab, LA, Munchen or even a Grand Slam, every local sportswear enthusiast had heard of 'The Wall' on Slater Street. Fast forward 40 years, adidas aficionados still talk about their love for the three stripes. Mad on adidas, Chris's exhibition at Start-Yard, Birkenhead showcases his top ten trainers from back in the day in a gallery like setting, with commissioned artwork and memorabilia.

PO: Chris, you were pivotal in Liverpool's story of 80's Casual Culture, it was a period where style was changing rapidly. Tell us how the story started for you.

CL: I had my first adidas t-shirt (white three stripes) when I was seven or eight, 1974/75 and was given a pair of adidas footy boots by my uncle which I can remember clearly. I got into punk after that and seen a few bands play at Eric's like Crass and the Skids. The late 70s fashions were moving on monthly and adidas was getting worn more. Loads of lads had Stan Smith, adidas Jogger and Samba. My older brother Billy was into adidas and had some great clothing and that influenced me. In 1980 I remember selling all my punk records to Backtrack in Mathew Street, including a 10inch messages by OMD, to buy a pair of adidas ATP. I also started to write to adidas in different countries asking for catalogues,

@sole magazine

which was great when they sent me some back.

Obviously, a lot of away supporters were seeing what the Liverpool and Everton fans were wearing at games and that had a massive impression on them. Vinny Hambleton who also worked in Slater Street later, told me when going away to Blackburn in the late 70s, early 80s the Blackburn fans still had scarves around their wrists, long leathers, and Birmingham bags on, whilst the Liverpool fans were wearing Fila, Ellesse, Tachini, Cerutti, and loads of rare adidas.

PO: The North and especially Liverpool has informed the Terrace Casual movement, how did you see this evolving at your time at Wade Smith?

CL: Wade Smith from early on was a pioneering sports/fashion retailer and for a time a lot of the other regional sports shops; JD, All Sports, First Sports etc. spent more time looking at what we were doing than in their own shops.

KO: What did/does this culture mean to you?

CL: It was always interesting to see what other people were wearing. I'd go into town every Saturday and be looking in every sports store or fashion store there was in case you missed something. I remember trying to get Forest Hills which were like gold dust and Whittys said they were getting some in for the following Saturday, but when the sales assistant brought them out, I couldn't have been more disappointed, it was a new version, no gold yellow sole, but a white one the same as the adidas Wimbledon, just with a different toe box. As far as I was concerned, they were crap.

The whole thing about getting something different or unique the one upmanship is what



YAT No. 720 3340 20					
TEL 051-709 6083					
VAT reg no					
NAME DOB SMITH SHOE					
Address 11 SLATER STREET LIVERPOOL L1 4BW.					
Sub by	Cash	Gr and C/O	Charge	G/Tel	Cash order no
					Date 11/10/83
Quantity	Description	Unit price			
1	Adidas Bag TAN	13 60			

drove the whole thing. Lads were taking pride in what they wore a bit like the mods in the 60s. Bear in mind if you were earning £25 on a scheme, a pair of trainers would be a week's wages. The only time people would be getting clobber outside of their birthday would be Easter and Christmas and those times you would definitely see the next new thing.

PO: Fashion was changing it seemed on a weekly basis, the Liverpool football fans had been bringing all that rare continental fashion back to the city, did that influence the buying decisions you were making at the time?

CL: In the early days it did influence what Wade Smith bought because that initiated and created the demand, by '83/'84, we were getting direct access to foreign retailer suppliers and stocking them in store.



KO: You mentioned how golf and tennis influenced personal style and buying in '80/'81, any key stories?

CL: A lot of the sports brands were supplying tennis players with their kit, Lacoste, Ellesse Sergio Tacchini, Filà, Cerutti 1881, but also golf had influenced the late 70s early 80s with Pringle jumpers, Lyle and Scott, and even Slazenger. I started to go up and down the Southport line on my saveaway ticket and visit all the golf shops in Birkdale. There was something exciting about seeing loads of other gear that wasn't in town. I bought a V-neck lambswool adidas jumper and on another time, I'd spotted in a golf magazine a brand called musingwear, which people would now know, as Penguin, so I got two buses to Urmston Manchester to buy a golf polo with the penguin on. The collars were too 70s, so I cut them back and stitched it up.



KO: Like customisation trends we see today? Tell us more about your own quest for the unique.

CL: I didn't really know it was customisation at the time but when we were at school we were all wearing adidas Tenerife and Palermo it was part of the casual range. Palermo were tan leather and I decided to dye the stripes, heel and front, vamp brown, and then put brown polish on. As well as changing the golf polo in about 1980, I also cut down a white adidas tennis shirt with green stripes as the collar was too long, the middle green stripe of my adidas Nadi got stuck onto the middle stripe of my adidas ATP tennis shoes, but the best customisation I saw was adidas adi-colour where you had a set of coloured pens so you could change the stripes.

It was whilst in Birkdale I asked if they had any adidas catalogues, I'd seen some shoes in a golf

magazine and I always wanted a pair of adidas Albatross from Jack Sharpe which had a black Trimm Trab but with spikes, which I'd have obviously taken out to wear. But the sales assistant talked my mum out of buying me them, and that still bothers me now. The guy at the golf shop gave me a catalogue by Larasport which was the license or division that ran adidas golf, it had some great golf shoes in. They were using either Trimm Trab or Wimbledon outsoles and some with LA trainer soles. I showed this catalogue to Robert Wade Smith and told him to buy some, which he did. One pair was called Ismolas and they sold hundreds of them, which is how I was asked to work there one week in 1983 to cover Rob and Chris Staunton going to Germany on a buying trip. I'd wanted to ask for a job earlier but hadn't plucked up the courage.







IN CONVERSATION WITH

Chris Lee

mad on adidas

imagery sourced from Chris's personal archive



START YARD

Exhibition opens 29th July - 31st August
at STARTYARD, 108 Church Street, Birkenhead.

PO: We are fascinated by the obsession for training shoes in Liverpool. What do you make of it then and how the legacy holds up now?

CL: Liverpool has always been at the forefront of fashion since I've known. In the early 80s people would try their best to be different and outdo each other travelling to London or abroad to get something your mates didn't have. Now you see a lot of lads looking identical,



partly to blame from an adidas point of view was that adidas had various factories across Europe, Germany, France, Austria, Yugoslavia, Poland etc., all making different shoes. For example, a lot of the Eva die cut (mid soles) and ZX shoes were made in France, if you had Wimbledon made in Germany you were cool, but if they were made in Austria with adidas



on the middle stripe you were cooler. Adidas in the mid 80s closed all the factories in Europe and started to make one range for the world in the Far East, that killed one of the catalysts of why



they became popular, it took them decades to realise limited shoes in limited quantities was a way of creating dreams in the brand. Then obviously collaborations, limited colours, materials, etc. for different distribution retail sectors is what's been happening for a while now. I personally think they have taken it too far. I've seen some terrible collabs, re-issues that should not have been made in the first place and way too many colour drops of shoes. I could go on and on.

PO: The lads back then were true hunters for special, unique, or rare pairs, right? They travelled and used word of mouth – not like the ease of using social-media today.

CL: Social-media and the internet has really helped grow the market and accessibility to new drops, that used to be called a delivery. But it's also opened a way for smaller brands to exist and get traction. The only different unique adidas you're going to find now is if you stumble upon an old shop in a small town in Eastern Europe that's got some dead stock. I remember one day about five lads from Birmingham came into Slater Street, and all bought



two pairs, some for their mates back home. They had obviously heard tales of this little shop in Liverpool, we got talking to them and they were made up to have found the store. As they were leaving Rob Wade Smith gave one of them £5 and said that's for your petrol home.

KO: How different was the stock in Liverpool to the rest of the country?

CL: We had a bigger and better range in Slater Street, than anywhere else in the country. I've got a UK adidas catalogue from 1980 and a German one from 1980, the UK range is easily five times bigger. In those days the different countries would visit adidas HQ and make their selection of what they thought would be right for them to sell, but obviously the trainers they didn't buy would be available in Germany or maybe other countries. Most decisions in those days were made for sportswear to be sold in sports shops, but the training shoe phenomenon ignored that and wanted them for fashion. In later years when I used to go buying adidas at the UK HQ in Ilkley,



when the sales guy went out of the room, I would be straight in the cupboards looking at the samples they didn't select that season, to be in the range. I'd always find something great, and we got a few specials just for us exclusively, or they would listen to me and get it in the range. It was the same when I used to go to ISPO the trade fair in Munich, adidas had one big hall to themselves no1 with a stage for a fashion show and the rest of the hall divided up into country territories. I'd sneak into all the other countries particularly France and Germany and write down the ref. codes to all the clothing and shoes I knew the UK hadn't done and try and get them. I did that one year with Barry Mellis my UK rep at the time



adidas LOS ANGELES
Coinciding with the 1984 Olympics was another consistent seller in the early days, and adidas kept them in the range as a best seller. Each coloured peg was a different cushioning density so you could adjust and customise yourself.



adidas MUNCHEN
The cousin of Trimm Trab, but made with mesh and suede, there is a similar shoe with a different sole called Suisse, but I'm sure I've seen the exact shoe with that name, and that upper also was put onto the Tom Okker outsole as a squash shoe. Made in red and blue originally but slightly in the shadow of Trimm Trab.



adidas TOM OKKER PROFESSIONAL
I loved these when I had them, which was before I joined Wade Smith, they were like Wimbledon and Trimm Trab combined, but with the extra bump on the toe box like adidas Comfort. They did a reissue of a similar shoe about 12 years ago, but navy stripes called Tennis Super, I had two pairs, but for some reason I can't explain, I sold both!



adidas MARATHON TR
We sold loads of these for years at Wade Smith there was several different versions and updates made in Austria Germany and the inferior ones were from Yugoslavia. One day in the Birkenhead Wade Smith stock room I asked Neal Cowan (finance director), why were they stamped IRL, he told me it was for international, I found out later on a trip to Cork (Ireland adidas) with Rob that he had bought them from Micheal O'Connell the head of adidas out there, I don't think we were supposed to be doing that.



adidas MICROPACER
Very expensive at the time they looked like they came from space, the first shoes with a computer to measure your pace and distance, a ground-breaking shoe and a great design.



adidas GRAND SLAM
These along with Forest Hills were a level above Trimm Trab and Munchen in price and materials, made with kangaroo leather and the three-peg cushioning system that the LA trainer used, a very rare shoe.



adidas FOREST HILLS
I used to go into Top Man adidas concession nearly every Saturday in the early 80s just to look at these. I couldn't afford them and ended up getting adidas Nadi - no comparison at all. Whittys said they were getting them back in, but it was a totally different shoe with the same name, I was always envious of lads who had a pair.



adidas TRIMM TRAB
In 1982 I was still at school and one Saturday I went into Wade Smith Slater Street, and they had a pair of burgundy Trimm Trab. Robert said they'd only got three pairs and one was size 9 1/2, I didn't have the money on me, so I asked him to reserve them for me and I'll be back later. So, I went home to get the money off my mum, she wasn't in, so I had to walk to Old Swan to find her, which I did. I raced back to Slater Street expecting them to be sold but they hadn't. I was 50p short so Rob let me off which I promised to pay another day. So, I got them, not just a pair of Trimm Trab but a burgundy nubuck pair, I never knew existed.



adidas WIMBLEDON G.L
Grand Prix were good, Wimbledon were better with the red stripe, but Wimbledon with the extra adidas adidas written down the middle stripe, well you were the chap if you had them.



adidas SL80
Nicky Taylor a mate of mine who ended up working with me at Wade Smith had a pair of these, I think from Gansgear, for some reason when he thought they had had their day he tied them together and threw them over the telephone wires bottom of Brelade Road by where we lived, stayed there for months.

when I spotted this clothing range called ACC, sweatshirt based with large ACC on the chest. They had a massive run with that range for a few years after.

PO: We were looking at the figures for the global market in trainers. As of 2021 adidas has a net worth of approximately \$40 billion and the trainer/sneaker sector as a whole, is projected to be a \$95.14 billion industry by 2015. Can you remind our readers of the impact Wade Smith had - outselling Manchester and London?



CL: It wasn't just with adidas that we did so well, Liverpool has a history of retail chains where Liverpool was either the number one store in the country, or number two. I remember hearing that about Top Shop, Top Man, and others, which is the same reason Robert Wade Smith opened in Liverpool, as when he was the adidas concession manager at the Liverpool Topman it outsold every other



concession by miles. In Wade Smith, Mathew Street, we were number one in Europe for Ralph Lauren for a while and for adidas Reebok, Nike, Rockport, Lacoste, and a whole load of fashion brands like Versace jeans, Armani jeans, and Prada sport, when things take off in Liverpool they do in a big way.

PO: Trainers are a huge part of fashion's multi-million-pound industry, with high-end brands cashing in on the action. We know that Lanvin, Balenciaga, and Valentino Rockrunner are the appetite for some, but does the die-hard adidas fan still exist here?

CL: There are I am sure new die-hard fans for adidas, but I am so glad I lived through the 80s and 90s period, what you have to remember is that back then there were no re-issues, everything was new and exciting the whole industry was in its infancy with hundreds of independent sports and fashion retailers, all with passionate owners and staff. Now there's JD and Sports Direct.

MAD ON ADIDAS
An exhibition celebrating 1980s trainer culture and the story of Wade Smith. An exploration of history, culture, and the spirit of the 1980s.
Artwork by Nick Beedles commissioned by Chris Lee.

KO: What made you commission this exhibition?

CL: Several things combined really; It's 40 years since I joined Wade Smith, I recognised Nick Beedles the artist, would be great to commission to paint some iconic trainers, and it's an opportunity for me to show some of the 80s, 90s Wade Smith, adidas, Reebok and Nike artefacts and memorabilia I've collected over the years. Plus, it also coincides with the launch of the second stage of START-YARD in Birkenhead, so we have the space. And finally, it's a testbed for a much bigger exhibition I want to do around the book I'm writing called "Mad on Adidas". Where amongst other things I plan on rebuilding Wade Smith Slater Street and collaborate with some collectors, so it looks just like it did in 1982/83.

KO: Sounds like exciting times are ahead! Our readers will want to know if you have a favorite pair of trainers, and if they will feature in the exhibition?

CL: It could be Montreal 76, I had a pair in Slater Street and several others since, those for example I doubt any other store had them in the country, and maybe Tom Okker.

KO: So many shoes are being re-issued from the archives. What would you like to see resurrected?

CL: Adidas comfort, Tom Okker or Zelda. I'd also like to see Palermo...

KO: What we wear on our feet is an expression of who we are, what are you wearing today?

CL: Montreal 76 made in West Germany.

KO: Would you call yourself a collector?

CL: I am but I haven't got as many trainers as I should, I've also collected art, watches, and 20th century design chairs, most of it is now sold.

KO: What do you think is most significant about your collection of memorabilia?

CL: That's a hard one, either the first receipt I wrote, the letter from adidas, the 1980 adidas catalogue, or the two original posters off the wall from Slater Street.

Instagram:
@madonadidas
Size:
11
First Pair:
adidas Stan Smith
Latest Pair:
Nike Air Max '97
Holy Grail:
adidas Albatros

