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New Material

Forget hip hop: after collaborating with Louis Vuitton, KANYE WEST is absolutely determined to make it as a fashion designer, he tells Joe Yogerst

SUIT, SHIRT AND BOW TIE: LOUIS VUITTON
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FROM CHER to Schwarzenegger, there are plenty of entertainers who have reinvented themselves, sometimes in most unexpected ways. But none have done so with quite as much passion and pizzazz as Kanye West: the behind-the-scenes musical maestro who became a rap star is now ready for another change, this time into a global fashion icon. And we're not talking as a clothes horse here: West wants to create the hottest new threads and treads, and try to do the same for fashion as he did for hip hop - turn it upside down and change our understanding of what it can be.

West has always been a sartorial trailblazer, going back to the early years of the decade when he was producing hits for the likes of Jay-Z, Alicia Keys and Janet Jackson. His trademark shutter shades were an instant pop-art icon, and he even tried his hand at magazine fashion commentary. And while it may not have been couture per se, the controversial 2006 *Rolling Stone* magazine cover shot - in which Kanye was portrayed as Jesus wearing a crown of thorns - solidified his image as both a visual innovator and a cultural chameleon.

But his fashion fixation has reached fever pitch in the past few months. First *GQ* magazine named him one of the most stylish men in America, and then came the stunning announcement at Paris Fashion Week that Kanye was collaborating with none other than French luxury titan Louis Vuitton on a new footwear line. Had they both lost their marbles? Venerable old Vuitton suddenly finds itself working with an unpredictable

JACKET, JUMPER, TROUSERS AND SUNGLASSES: LOUIS VUITTON
DON'S MIXED PATCHWORK
SNEAKERS: LOUIS VUITTON KANYE WEST COLLECTION
NECKLACE: HIS OWN COLLECTION
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COAT, JACKET, TROUSERS AND
SUNGLASSES: LOUIS VUITTON
TOUR MIXED PATCHWORK SNEAKER
BOOTS: LOUIS VUITTON KANYE WEST
COLLECTION

Young Turk, and West is rubbing elbows with a fashion house that has often been seen as stodgy at best. The final results won't hit stores until this month, but there have been myriad photos leaked and plenty of speculation on the web - and it looks like this kooky partnership just might work.

LV Artistic Director Marc Jacobs and avant-garde American designer Stephen Sprouse had already cooked up some pretty far-out footwear. But their graffiti-inspired high-tops look downright tame beside some creations from the new collaboration with West. The shoes are like something from another planet - trainers in colours and materials that don't generally get combined: tomato-red, neon-pink, pearly-grey and soft, velvet-like black. There's footwear outfitted with both shoelaces (with tassels) and Velcro straps. "It means that sneaker culture and the sneaker market as we knew it are dead," ventured one fashion blog after seeing the pre-launch photos.

Kanye wouldn't have it any other way. He's always tried to break the mould. Born in Atlanta and raised in Chicago, West is the son of a former Black Panther activist father who later became a successful photographer, and a college professor mother who was chair of the English department at Chicago State University. West dabbled briefly with art school before getting sidetracked into music, at first producing for local Chicago rappers and then for an ever-increasing national and international clientele.

Not satisfied with producing hits for others, West struck out on his own in 2004 with highly acclaimed debut album *The College Dropout*. It showcased his own unique blend of original lyrics and sampling, combined with guest appearances by many of the stars he had produced. He followed up a year later with *Late Registration*, which earned worldwide acclaim and eight Grammy nominations. His third album, *Graduation* (2007), earned him the hardware he'd long wanted - four Grammys, including Best Solo Rap Performance and Best Rap Album.

Along the way, Kanye has also earned a reputation for speaking his mind, often to his own detriment. Miffed that he didn't capture Best Video at the 2005 MTV Europe Music Awards, West famously charged on stage while the winners were accepting their award and argued that the honour should have gone to him. That same year, during a Hurricane

Katrina benefit concert, West asserted on live TV that then United States President "George Bush doesn't care about black people."

I caught up with West, who turns 32 this month, on the phone in New York City; the interview unfolded as he walked the streets of Soho in lower Manhattan, rode the lift up to his apartment-cum-atelier and sorted through the spoils of a hard day's shopping.

How did you book up with Louis Vuitton – was it your idea, theirs or a combination of both?

It was my idea to call myself the "Louis Vuitton Don" when I was rapping, on my first album [on the song "Last Call"] that came out five years ago. I had always shown a dedication to fashion and after [LV] saw me perform on TV, they booked me for a few engagements. They liked the way I put myself together. They knew I had aspirations to design and they gave me this opportunity.

How much input did you have in the design process of your LV shoes?

I was so involved, that question itself is offensive to me.

But celebrities are coming out with products all the time, and it's impossible for the public – the people they want to buy these things – to know how much they're actually involved in the design and creation.

I still find the question offensive. Especially with a rapper or an entertainer or a black guy, people think we aren't capable of something like this. Maybe that's because there are no prominent black designers, no entertainers who wear dresses they design on the red carpet. There are times I've walked into stores with my Louis on and I say, "I designed these." Someone says, "That's a good collaboration." And I say, "No, I really designed these." It's very frustrating to me. This is my first step into actually getting established in design. It was a great opportunity to get involved with the biggest fashion house in the world: something completely positive. My end goal is to design and have control of the entire process and have my own brand.

What other fashion projects do you have in the works?

I'm just working hard every day on clothing. We have some great relationships, like this one with Marc Jacobs and Louis Vuitton. I'm in that place right now with design that I was in music when I was the guy running on stage



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DON'S RED CALF LEATHER
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with the awards and stuff. I'm very into it and very serious about it. It's not a fucking joke for me. I know in the design world, even with all the positive feedback I've got, there are people who still think it's a joke, that design is a joke for me. There was a point in my music career, when I used to produce, that I decided to rap. All the other people in the room would laugh - even if I had a couple of cool punchlines. They would say, "Look at you! You don't look like a rapper. You're never gonna be one." In design now it's the same thing. People think I'm a joke. They see all bright colours and think I'm fucking around. But I design with such dedication and such passion. I know there's so much to be proved, so much to be trailblazed to become a master creator in another field.

So you find the same sorts of attitudes in the music and fashion worlds?

In the fashion world, they think that anybody who makes a rap record will never be able to design. Both of those worlds are equally closed-minded. It's so interesting to compare the two. It's like ignorant and so close-minded and so stupid.

But you think you can bridge that gap?

One of my favourite moments in *The Devil Wears Prada* is that conversation [between Meryl Streep's and Anne Hathaway's characters] about the blue sweater and how all those things are relative to one another. When I saw that movie I thought, "I wanna be in that conversation!" I want to bring those two worlds together. I'm a boxer just waiting to get into ring. And when I get into the ring, we'll see what happens.

Have you always been interested in fashion?

I used to get in trouble for just drawing shoes in fourth grade. I was constantly creating. I wanted to be a designer before I wanted to be a rapper. In a way, music for me was just one form of design.

You performed last year at the Democratic National Convention and earlier this year at one of Barack Obama's inaugural balls - are we going to see more of this politically active Kanye in future?

All I care about right now is design. Seriously, that's all I care about right now. I'm a mad man. You cannot imagine how heavy my bag is - 30 magazines I'm carrying around, and I'm not going to sleep on red-eyes because I can't put

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them down. I don't care about anything else but design, aesthetics, taste. All I care about is creation. Kanye West does not have a house. He sleeps in his design studio. That's what I had to do to break out of Chicago and become a successful music producer. And now that's the same theory I'm putting into this.

What are your inspirations?

I just constantly have my eyes open. Like just now, this Jamaican character I just passed on the street. He's wearing red Escalades [shoes], a red button-up shirt, blue jeans and dark-navy cardigan. I'm thinking, "That's a cool look." I'm constantly just taking in visual information, seeing the way colours, shapes and fabrics work on real people. I stay in SoHo and I just go outside and look around.

Did your book-up with Louis Vuitton require a lot of transatlantic travel?

If we had a colour combination I didn't like, I would cancel whatever I was doing and hop on a plane to make sure the colours came out right. There were still mistakes. I wasn't totally in control. But that's what happens when you're collaborating. They did the prototype at a factory in Italy. I worked with this really great Louis Vuitton guy named Fabrizio [Vitti].


Do you think you'll work with them again?

That would be a cool thing. If it happens, it happens. I'm just glad to have the opportunity to work with them. I got to jump a lot of major steps as a designer.

Do you have any other joint ventures on the drawing board?

No other collaborations right now. I don't even wanna do collaborations with any other fashion houses; as a matter of fact, the only house I would collaborate with is Louis Vuitton. The others would have to give me the opportunity to design whatever I wanted.

And if given that opportunity, what would you design next?

The world. [Pauses to let this sink in]. I hope my passion and the frustration and the heart and soul and everything is coming across in an endearing way - not a combative way. I'm an artist. I'm just a fucking artist. All I wanna do is design. I don't wanna talk about anything but design. Put suede next to fuchsia piping next to neoprene. And have a really hot girlfriend [laughs]; that's all I want. 

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