

THE MILLION \$ MOUTH

BY ACE RUSSELL
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Ben Baller
talked the re-sale into life..

Ben Yang, aka Ben Baller, aka K-town Hustler, has never designed a shoe. He's not a high profile athlete. He doesn't own a boutique sneaker store. And he doesn't even have a big sneaker collection anymore. But he has history, an undeniable and near unbelievable record of being a part of key shifts in the ongoing momentum of the sneaker game.

So it's no surprise that he talks about a mile a minute, flosses goods like they were going out of style, and has a story about every person in that game - including himself.

"How many Asian kids grew up in the hood in Los Angeles and can say that they were there the first time?" asks Ben, at his home in Beverly Hills. "It got to a point where people would question who I am and what I've done so much that I was just like, 'I'm going to shut up because no one believes my life.'"

Through the glare of all the bling and beyond the mythology that surrounds him in sneaker culture, Ben Baller, the real guy, begins to shine through. Born to Korean parents who immigrated to Los Angeles for a better life, he got his introduction to the sneaker game by playing basketball.

"In 1982 you weren't even thinking of an Asian-American when you think hip hop and sneakers. I was 10 years old and my feet weren't big enough to wear a pair of Air Force 1s yet. So I had the kid's version, called the Sky Force, that I wore to basketball practice."

From that game in middle and high-school, Ben made the leap into the music industry, working A&R for Dr. Dre at Aftermath Records. And we all can know about the loot that was cycling through that office.

The paper from Aftermath boosted Ben into amassing one of the heaviest sneaker collections in North America. And that gave him play on eBay and other sites, like Niketalk, as a force in the sneaker game. With just about every model and colourway of any value or nostalgia, his Dunks and Air Force 1s got major online shine; we're talking Japanese exclusives, limited editions, 1-of-48 pair promo samples, unreleased samples, NBA player samples and on and on and on. At one point, he had them all and, along with his homies DJ AM and DJ Homocide - aka the Air Macks Crew - blew collectors' minds around the world.

"When I was ODing with it I had three or four rooms filled with shoes, and at least 600 pairs of just Air Force 1s. But really, I was going crazy on Dunks. I started the hype around Dunks on the internet just

off of pictures of my collection."

They call him K-town Hustler for a reason. Seeing an opportunity to cash in on his sneakers, Ben went full out and over-the-top with it, as only he would and could. With keen foresight and deep insider info he controlled almost the entire California supply of the now-legendary first run of Nike SB Dunk Lows. And that was just the beginning.

Back then there was no hypebeast.com or freshnessmag.com to force feed the masses what was supposedly hot. But there was Ben. Parlaying his personality, his flossing, his shoes and his celeb connects into a one-man lifestyle brand, he took the lead online, posting the first photo of UNDFTD when the store was still under construction on LaBrea and gathering thousands of hits on his eBay auctions. With that momentum, he stacked up his kicks and his chips until the game began to change.

As bandwagoners and new jacks jumped on collecting and sneaker companies learned of the power of niche marketing and controlled distribution, Ben flipped it by putting almost all of his entire collection on eBay in a few enormous auctions.

"Fortunately, as a businessman, I saw the market change. After that, no one got top dollar for some of the stuff I had because I saw the direction Nike was going in and how that would affect things."

Final prices for his collection far exceeded any sneaker-related bidding at that time, trumping even the \$30,000 (or so) total set by Nike's eBay Charity Dunk SB. And then, with the same loud-mouthed approach he pioneered it with, Ben Baller upped and left the game.

Well, not exactly. Under Ben's direction, his close friend, Peter Kim, aka Methamphibian, released a series of custom-painted shoes through UNDFTD. The first to run major line-ups and raffles for the chance to buy a pair, it turned out that most of the interested parties weren't buying them to wear or collect. They were hoping to live the Ben Baller-effect: buy low, sell high, floss even higher.

"I was able to sell used shoes for more money than people could get for deadstock pairs just because they were mine. Japan was spending big money to get a piece of us and all these kids tried to get that through the custom shoes that Methamphibian and I put out."

Unable to deny the hustle inside, Ben got back into re-selling after a young guy named Allon Iny contacted him via email. Together, they made deals that topped Ben's previous eBay auctions, and then

some. One of those deals went bad. On October 24, 2005, Allon was murdered by someone playing the odds and trying to rob him for sneakers.

Ben was motivated to stay in the game, but this time not for money but by grief and loyalty. Calling on Methamphibian to design a custom Air Force 1 that he could sell on eBay to help out Allon's family, the auction netted \$33,100 for the SoleRebel Foundation, and Ben once again topped the dollar figures for the highest-grossing sneaker sale on eBay.

Since that last bid and sale, he's never returned to the collect-and-sell game. But with Icee Fresh, an A-list clientele jewellery business he co-owns with his cousin, Ben Baller can't stop, won't stop flossing.

"I never imagined in a million years that I would have this lifestyle with a diamond jewellery business, luxury cars, condo in Beverly Hills and it was all from sneakers."

All from sneakers that are now gone, except for a few key pairs, like his top five Air Force 1 Lows: a Linen/Atmosphere-Japan Exclusive colourway, a Purple/Varsity Maize L.A. Edition, a Mister Cartoon Hyperstrike Promo-only Edition, a Methamphibian Custom Cement print Prototype in white/black/blue, and a Methamphibian Custom Camouflage in white/black. Still, he doesn't follow the game like he used to.

"I went into Niketown the other day for the first time in about two years and I tried on a pair of Air Max 360s and almost passed out. I couldn't believe how comfortable they are. Those make Air Forces feel like the worst shoe in the world, but I'm more about fashion than I am comfort, anyways. Say what you want, but I'm a snob. I like to have the best things."

