

# KICK STARTERS

They're the people who can make or break a shoe brand. For the first time, FN gathers five of the top sneaker influencers for a candid and revealing conversation. **BY GERALD FLORES**



Ronnie Fieg



Vashtie Kola



DJ Clark Kent



Bobbito Garcia



Jeff Staple

gravy on top. Even if my work didn't influence anyone, I'd still approach it the same way I do now. I try not to think so much about being tagged as an influencer because I actually have a fear that it'll change my ways if I start thinking so much about how people will react to it.

**Each of you has a massive following among sneaker fans. Why do you have that pull with potential consumers?**

**DJCK:** The fact that I really am a consumer. I'm not a guy who works for a sneaker company. I'm not a designer. I can think like a consumer. There's about 8 percent of the population that's really cool. The rest are trying to figure it out.

**BG:** It's a mixture of things. I've been a sneaker historian, in some ways, and a voice for the community. But legitimately, I'm a ball player. That adds so much credibility to when I'm saying things about basketball sneakers, because I've played.

**RF:** The Internet plays a huge part in terms of recognition, but I built my credibility when I was with the David Z [stores in New York] and I feel like I've worked hard enough for people to trust my opinions. That's the most important thing in any relationship — trust — except this relationship is between me and the consumer. It's important for the consumer to trust me because [footwear] is all I know and all I've ever done in my life.

**VK:** I'd like to think that I am aspirational because I came from humble beginnings. My parents are just two hard-working immigrants from Trinidad. Seeing me live this lifestyle could help impact someone else's life who grew up in a small town like I grew up in. I didn't

grow up with idols who looked like me or were women and where I felt connected to what they were doing. I had people I looked up to, but none I felt like my life could be mirrored after or who were doing the same things I want to be doing.

**JS:** My only explanation is that either I caught up with the times or the times caught up with me. For the first decade of my career, I was working in a bubble where the general public wasn't aware of what I was doing. It's reached a point where it's on people's radars now. Maybe it's social media. Maybe it's the Internet or trends in street culture. It could be all those things added together, but I don't care. It's not that big of an achievement for me. I just work.

**You've all been part of a lot of product collaborations. Why do shoe brands seek you out?**

**DJCK:** Brands turn to me because I'm a sneaker guy, but I'm not one-dimensional. When I connect

People were scrambling in the *Footwear News* fashion studio.

With just an hour to wrap a photo shoot featuring five of the most influential people in the sneaker business, one of the subjects was creating a small controversy.

Vashtie Kola, who splits her time between directing music videos (her clients have included Justin Bieber and Solange Knowles), DJing parties in the city and working on various design projects, was the only female in FN's pool of streetwear tastemakers. She also was the only person in the group wearing Timberlands.

"You shouldn't have worn boots to something called 'sneaker' influencers," Ronnie Fieg, owner of New York's Kith boutique and a footwear collaboration magnate, said sarcastically from the sidelines. Laughter broke out among the five personalities and Fieg's entourage,

which included New York Giant Victor Cruz and photographer Timothy McGurr (better known as 13th Witness).

"If there's a Foot Locker nearby, I can run and get some Air Forces or something," Kola said.

But after a quick search of the FN fashion closet for samples and an attempt to trade her size 6.5 boots for McGurr's size 8.5 red Air Jordans, the loudest voice in the room boomed through the studio.

"Vash, just wear the Timberlands," said DJ Clark Kent, a hip-hop original whose resume includes working on Jay-Z's first album and consulting with major sneaker brands like Nike. "Timberlands are sneakers in the hood."

And when DJ Clark Kent says 6-inch workboots can be considered sneakers, people listen.

These five New York trendsetters have the precious cachet with millennials that is highly

sought after by brands. "We can relay a message that brands can't relay to people in this market," Fieg said.

They've turned their digital followings and inside knowledge of sneaker culture into brand partnerships, cross-marketing opportunities and even their own media channels.

"Streetwear, hip-hop and skate — all of those things came out of this angst-driven, anti-establishment mentality," explained Jeff Staple, founder of design agency Staple Design and boutique The Reed Space. "Now the tune has switched a bit. Tony Hawk is a millionaire. Jay-Z is a millionaire. Marc Ecko is a millionaire. That [entrepreneurial] mentality is winning people over."

Here, Kola, Fieg, Kent, Staple and Bobbito Garcia sound off on how they've built their captive audiences, using social media and their unique style sense.

**Influencer is a word that's used a lot to describe this group. What does that mean to you?**

**Vashtie Kola:** From my understanding, it's a person who has natural access to a group of people brands are trying to reach. Influencers have that capacity or that connection to [consumers] that a company might not have.

**Ronnie Fieg:** When people are considered influencers, to me, that's more of a definition of someone like a musician. In our market, to be considered an influencer, it's really the work you put out that's influencing. The work should speak for the person. The work is what's considered influential.

**DJ Clark Kent:** That word influencer comes with a lot of responsibility. If all of a sudden I was to do something that was extra crazy, then all of a sudden, I have no influence. You have to be very careful with it. The term is actually a little scary. I can't subscribe to it, but if I do have any influence, it's because I'm true to what I like. I don't

believe I have any power. I just like what I like. If someone can take from my reality, maybe what my influence is doing is teaching people to like what they like.

**Bobbito Garcia:** For my era, the influencers were the ball players and drug dealers who had a lot of money. That was the epicenter that urban wear, street culture and eventually hip-hop took their cues from. If you look at the three most popular, iconic and biggest-selling sneakers of all time — the Chuck Taylor, the Air Force 1, the Adidas [Superstar] shelltoes — all three started as basketball shoes, as performance equipment. By virtue of their popularity in that circle, they became popular in casual lifestyle.

**Jeff Staple:** What you do says a lot more than what people call you or what you call yourself. Let your work speak for yourself and if, by chance, that work you produce happens to influence other people in a positive manner, that's just

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with a brand, they're hiring somebody who's connected to hip-hop culture, connected to consumers and connected to sneakers, and who can tell a story and make enthusiasts want or buy them.

**RF:** We can relay a message that brands can't relay to people in this market. It's very different with every brand, but I feel it's reached a point where the brands are like family. I'm on a friendship level with many of the brands, and we look to each other on how we can help each other grow.

**JF:** Collaborations are great. They allow you to do things you normally wouldn't do. They allow you to get exposure with people you might not be able to get exposure with, but we don't live and die by them.

**How do your projects with these companies usually come together?**

**VK:** I've never formally pitched an idea. I like being natural and letting things happen, and if someone's not interested in working with me, I don't push. I want to keep working that way.

**RF:** There's no real formula. Every project is different, but basically, it's me having a good idea when I sit down with the brand. I'll tell them what my idea is, they'll tell me what their ideas are, and we usually meet somewhere in the middle to make sure we both relay the messages that we want to put out there to the consumer.

**JS:** I never cold sent a brochure to someone and said, 'Look at our design services. Would you like to work with us one day?' Every collaboration we've ever done happened organically. I'd meet the person in charge of these things. We'd grab coffee, sit down and vibe to see if it worked out. We don't even make money off collabs sometimes. It's not a moneymaker for us. I

only do it when I feel like it's right. It has to happen organically.

**DJCK:** I've never pitched to anybody. I don't want it to seem contrived. There's a clarity when it comes to me, and it's as simple as my name — DJ Clark Kent. Not sneaker designer Clark Kent or brand manager Clark Kent. If you approach me as the DJ first, everything will suss itself out. I'm creative, but I'm creative musically first.

**Why do some collaborations not work out?**

**VK:** One brand in particular approached me about an ambassadorship, where I'd talk about the brand, tweet, Instagram and blog about them. With no disrespect to this company, I felt there was no way I could sign on for it because [the company] totally goes against my beliefs and views and feelings. I had to kindly say no. It's fine and I've [declined] from time to time in my career and it makes sense because a lot of the people who follow me find this natural infusion of [products] in my world. I believe that all collaborations need to be connected. They need to be symbiotic.

**JS:** I turn down a lot. Plenty. Some of them I've been in talks with for four or five years. Most of the time it's marinating, figuring out when the right time is to do something, and we'll strike when the iron is hot. The reason it all melts together is because it's organic, authentic and natural and not forced. That's why it looks like this mastermind thing when we release our collaborations, but it's not planned or that formulaic.

**RF:** Turning down a certain request from a brand is not always a terrible thing. It has to make sense for both parties. If my ideas don't really make sense for the brand and what they're trying to do, then the brand will tell me it doesn't exactly fit. It has to be right for both parties. If it's not right for both parties, then there's no



**VASHTIE KOLA**

**Twitter/Instagram:** @Vashtie  
**Web:** Vashtie.com  
**Resume:** Video director; DJ; founder, Violette; creative director, Ice Cream Girl  
**Brand affiliations:** Jordan Brand, Timberland  
**On being a female influencer in sneakers:** "I never think about it. At the end of the day, being anything is hard. If I was in a wheelchair, my life would be hard. Everyone has their own battle to deal with. There are issues being a girl in an industry that's very male-dominated, but I never looked at it that way. I don't think about it as a negative. I think of it as, more than anything, a positive. I'm a girl who can do a lot of things a guy can do and am getting some sort of recognition for it."

reason to make it happen. It's not about personal benefit; it's about building and evolving.

**Social media is a big part of what you do. How has that changed the relationship between shoe companies and the consumer?**

**BG:** There's an indirect relationship with brands and the community. Brands can put out what the people want because market research is a click away. The brands also have to continue to push the envelope and give choices that people may not realize at the time. You can't always listen to the consumer. They don't know any better sometimes. They're just following, so you have to listen to the leaders like us who are doing something different.

**JS:** It's an extremely powerful tool for spreading your message very quickly and very inexpensively. Many young people who have the power of social media at their fingertips are so enamored with the power they have that they forget they first have to figure out what to say.

**VK:** It's connected people much more. It's an easy way for brands to get to the consumer. It's weird in a way, too, where now everyone knows what's going on with everybody else. Information is more readily available and everything has plateaued because we all know the same information. In that sense, it's an interesting place to be. It's easier for a big corporation to see what their customers are thinking and talking about.

**When it comes to personal use, what are your dos and don'ts for sharing things on social media?**

**DJCK:** The ability to communicate with people anywhere is amazing, but it's also very responsibility-laden. Imagine all these people are paying attention to everything you say to the point where they may or may not do something different. So I'm very careful on social media. Besides the fact that I don't want to sound like a fool, I don't want

to banter back and forth with a kid who doesn't think the way that I think. I see people on Twitter say some of the most horrendous things about me, but how can I argue with a dude behind a keyboard?

**RF:** To be honest, I'm trying to scale back in terms of the information that's seen on the Internet. I feel like the formula's gotten very repetitive, in terms of how people and brands put out their information. I never want to end up in a position where people are thinking and acting as robots, but that's the way it gets sometimes. It's very important to get in touch with the people on an intimate level and make them feel like they're part of something more than just another shop or just another brand.

**VK:** The rule of Twitter is to make sure you're not oversharing. You have to think about what you're saying and how that might affect someone you know or don't know. That leaves less room to be who you are on Twitter, but I don't think it's meant to be your whole person in 140 characters. I've been put in a position when I've said something on Twitter and didn't realize who was paying attention to it and offended them. For Instagram, there's a balance of photos of me and consumerism. I also like to take pictures of friends who might not necessarily have the same following as I have, but to share something about them. You have to be responsible because there are so many things I can Instagram or



**DJ CLARK KENT**

**Twitter/Instagram:** @DJClarkKent  
**Web:** Djclarkkent.net  
**Resume:** DJ; music producer; co-host, "Quickstrike" on Complex.tv; brand consultant; partner, LTD+ Management  
**Brand affiliations:** Nike  
**How he got into sneakers:** "I'm from Brooklyn, N.Y. When I was young, the coolest guys on the block always had the best sneakers. When I was 8, we'd see the older guys on the block with all the girls, and I wanted to do what those guys did to have the girls. You see their shoes and, of course, figure that has to be a part of it. They were always clean and brand-new looking."

**JEFF STAPLE**

**Twitter/Instagram:** @JeffStaple  
**Web:** Stapledesign.com  
**Resume:** Founder, Staple Design, The Reed Space  
**Brand affiliations:** Nike, New Balance, Puma, Airwalk  
**On his influencers:** Bobbito Garcia. "I'm not just saying that because he's in this roundtable. When I first started, I really wanted Staple to be in Bobbito's [now closed] store — Bobbito's Footwork. I created all the graphics and line sheets, ready to present to him. He didn't know me from the Chinese food delivery guy. I remember sitting in the store for three hours waiting for him. When he finally came, he said he wasn't feeling my stuff. He wasn't being a dick, he was just being very honest and saying it wasn't for him. But I was crushed. I was in tears leaving the store. It was a defining moment for me because a lot of other people might have quit right there."

tweet on a daily basis, but it's not going to benefit anyone in the larger scheme.

**JS:** I definitely went through a phase where I thought I should do all these platforms and connect with people wherever they are. Now I'm not going to force myself to be on some things just because people are saying we've got to be on it. I'm not on Google+, I don't Tumblr. I just pick my spots in terms of where I want to be. By doing that, I've found the spots that I've picked have been successful for me.

**How much money is there in being an "influencer"?**

**DJCK:** If you're trying to be an influencer, you're doing the wrong thing. It sounds stupid to people. That's one thing I would never do.

**VK:** Creative directing and DJing are sources that keep me going financially. Those are probably the most successful areas for me. It varies. Directing music videos has been an interesting journey. As you know, the industry has changed dramatically over the last few years and I solely thought I'd be a music director and all of that changed.

**RF:** Money is really not the motivation. It's really how we can change the marketplace and help change the way people look at this business and this market. There are formulas people try to write. Professors try to find ways to break down and teach steps of what they think would be the best way to make something like this happen. But that's not the way we do things. It's not something that professors can teach or I can tell you. It's based off passion. Unless there's a course called "Passion," then I don't know how people can really learn how to do what it is we're doing here.



**RONNIE FIEG**

**Twitter/Instagram:** @RonnieFieg  
**Blog:** Ronniefieg.com  
**Resume:** Founder, owner, Kith NYC  
**Brand affiliations:** Asics, Puma, Sebago, Chippewa, Del Toro, Doc Martens  
**Got into the business when ...** "I started working in a shoe store when I was 13. And I started selling shoes when I was 15. My appreciation for these brands and for these silhouettes is different from the appreciation that others have for them. Selling those shoes really piqued my interest in how those shoes were put together, what exactly I was selling and what those brands represented in the mid-1990s. There's a nostalgic feeling for me with a lot of these brands."



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