

INTRODUCTION

The following text was originally commissioned by Nike as an investigative report into the spontaneous and totally unprecedented viral success achieved by one of its sneaker models—the Air Max 97 in its original colorway—in Italy in the late 1990s.

The Air Max 97 was the first Air Max model to feature Nike's signature Air technology along the full length of the sole, making it noticeably softer than previous models. Even though it was built on the same lasts as previous Air Maxs, its form appeared slimmer and distinctly tapered thanks to the bands of horizontal curves that reached from heel to toe across the shoe's upper.

This unusual upper was inspired by the image of a drop of water rippling out across a pond's surface and was constructed from the harmonious interplay of four materials: a synthetic leather (used in metallic silver and white), two grades of metallic mesh and a grey 3M reflective fabric. The small embroidered Nike swoosh was red.

The shoe was designed principally by Christian Tresser, a young internal Nike designer the bulk of whose previous experience consisted in the creation of professional-level football boots. (In fact, later the same year, he would design 21-year-old phenomenon Ronaldo's first signature football boot, the Mercurial, which used a similar design language to the Air Max 97 and which, from a product design perspective, inaugurated the beginning of the era of high-speed football.)

Released globally in the fall of 1997, the shoe sold well without ever accruing the strong cultural associations or iconic status achieved by previous Air Max models such as the Air Max 90, BW Classic and 95. Except in Italy.

In Italy, the shoe was first adopted by the country's various underground scenes (clubbing, the worlds of graffiti and hip-hop) before being discovered by the Milanese fashion system, before being adopted by the attendant public figures, before going on to become an unprecedented commercial success, spiraling further and further out into society, penetrating every demograph-

ic, city, suburb and scene like some kind of aesthetic virus.

Such was the Italian success of *le Silver* ("the Silvers," as they are known in Italy), that this text could have been an almost infinite sprawl.

Instead, it is a single line,



composed of the voices of the dudes that wore the shoe with the most obsessiveness. It moves with the sequential logic of a casual detective, from the Rome underground to the Milan underground to the Milan fashion system to Foot Locker and the commercial explosion of the shoe to the house music scene to its most famous clubs to nocturnal Naples to the memories of the shoe's designer.

This single line is occasionally interrupted by small flashbacks;



Echoes;



Dream-like deviations;



Longer, wilder deviations;



Visions;



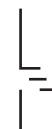
Visions during longer, wilder deviations;



Stories about more uptight Italian cities;



Footballers,



And so on, so that sometimes you barely know what's going on anymore, other than that you are exploring the aesthetic obsessions of late '90s Italian urban culture and why the silver Air Max 97 was particularly compatible with these obsessions, becoming an aid in their fulfillment and communication to the external world through style.

N.B. Particularly long derivations have been editorially marked by the use of a greater than usual margin indentation.

I. MASITO

I started as a graffiti writer in Rome in the early '90s. Like New York in the '70s, it wasn't a scene interested in high visibility—it was a technical scene, all to do with bombing trains and the streets but remaining anonymous.

If the Silvers had come out at the beginning of the '90s, I wouldn't have worn them. Back then, our look was more simple and anonymous, a mix of different things we'd seen or needed. We wore Alpha jackets because that's what people from the streets wore in Rome—including fascists, though they wore theirs in black whilst we wore them in green, blue or beige. We wore our keys on a big chain attached to the waistband of our trousers because we'd seen people at illegal raves doing it. We wore Carhartt jackets because they had big pockets, which were good for carrying cans as well as for stealing. Stealing was really important. We would get dressed up like good little boys, in clothes without paint stains—clean polo shirts and round-neck sweaters—in order to attract less attention when we went out stealing. We would spend all day riding the bus, tagging and stealing, then meet at Traste-

vere at the end of the day to show each other what we had got. There were people in our crew who were the kings of shoplifting, who would turn up with full backpacks of stuff. For stealing shoes we had various techniques, one of which was to take the right foot that was on display and then wait until, months later, after having sold all the remaining pairs in the display size, the shop was obliged to put out the left foot that paired with the one you'd stolen. At that point, you'd go in and steal your left foot.

We weren't that into hip-hop style at the time. Maybe one in ten of us listened to hip-hop.

But by the time the Silvers came out in '97, our egos had grown and we wanted them. We had painted a lot of trains and rapped on a lot of stages. We had big achievements under our belt and we began to want to express this, to show off more. We had to show that what we wore was expensive. The Silvers—which I acquired with the “old shoes” shoplifting trick (I went into a store with an old pair of shoes, tried on the Silvers, then made a run for it)—were perfect for this new attitude because they were highly visible. They made even a simple outfit of jeans and a black jacket shine. I remem-

ber around that time we saw the Xzibit video for “Paparazzi.” He was rapping on the beach and wearing a Helly Hansen jacket, and this had a big impact on us. The colors of these technical jackets were really out there and striking. Because of our success as writers, we were now confident with color. We liked a lot of color, so we were immediately into this style. We started wearing big puffers and technical jackets.

In the late '90s, if you saw a bunch of guys walking through Trastevere or Campo di Fiori wearing really colorful North Face jackets and a pair of Silvers, that was us: Rome Zoo. That was our instinctive style. Nobody else dressed like that in Rome, maybe even in Italy. People who saw us on the street thought we were crazy; they'd say we looked like we were going skiing, stuff like that.

Even though I was starting to have success in the hip-hop world by then, I considered myself a writer amongst rappers. We took the piss out of people in the Italian hip-hop world who tried to replicate American hip-hop style. I mean, I was attracted to the oversize thing, but I didn't go for it because the friends I went 'round with every day would have taken the piss out of me. We were much