

CheckOut

A smart buyer's guide to style and services

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Just for kicks

New shops and a build-it-yourself sneaker bar make unique design easier than tying your shoes

By Annie Tomlin Photograph by Nicole Radja

CHANNELING IMELDA Between the two of them, Lavelle Sykes (left) and Percy Gibson of Self-Conscious own more than 500 pairs of shoes.

Percy Gibson describes a city dweller's nightmare: "Imagine you're at a lounge or club and five people have the same shoes you have on," says the co-owner of newly opened West Loop sneaker store Self-Conscious. "Your whole night is ruined. And if those people stand next to you, you look crazy because everyone's wearing the same thing."

When it comes to style, being a sneaker clone disproves your ability to think outside of the (shoe)box. Gibson, however, doesn't have to deal with that problem very often. Sure, he owns more than 200 pairs of kicks. But like other sneaker freaks, Gibson's interested in the quality of his style, not just quantity—and that's why he's a big fan of customization.

Like many trends that explode into the mainstream, custom sneakers got their start in hip-hop culture. Conceived as a way to stand out in a sea of sameness, customization takes shoe lust to its next logical place. "Now that urban style has kicked in real heavy, the big shoe companies sell to stores all over," says Lavelle Sykes, Gibson's partner at Self-Conscious. "Foot Locker carries Air Force 1s, so therefore everybody has them. That's where customization comes in."

How you pick your kicks depends on how customized you want them. Some shops employ artists who create airbrushed phrases and painted swooshes. Industry giants such as Nike and Converse are getting into the game with websites that let you mix and match colors and styles. It's easy: Just point and click your way through designing your shoe, and you'll get your kicks a few weeks later.

If you prefer to create your shoes with your own hands, don't miss Puma's Mongolian Shoe BBQ. As the name suggests, the five-week program is like those build-your-own-stir-fry joints, but for sneakers. Josh Rubin, who runs trend-spotting blog Cool Hunting (www.coolhunting.com), was among the first to try it out in Manhattan this past spring. "I liked the fact that it takes customization away from the

computer and into your hands," he says. "You get a better sense of the different colors and materials that you're choosing. I also really liked that there's a bit of an element of surprise—even though you know what the finished shoe will look like, you have to have a bit of creative vision to see how all the pieces will look all stitched up."

Worried that your personal taste might not translate into a pair of spectacular shoes? Even if you can't tell a color wheel from a cheese wheel, you can design your own sneakers simply by following your instinct. Sykes, whose opinions have been courted by Nike's design team, insists that there's no right or wrong way to go. Coordinating your shoes to your outfit is key, he says, and you should pay special attention to the toe and sole because they're visible under even the baggiest of pants. "You want a shoe that sticks out, like 'Wow, why'd he do that?'" he says. We rounded up the coolest options for building your own style in person or online:

Converse One

Converse's foray into customization isn't fancy—the nine-color fabric palette is basic, and the five patterns resurrect memories of Zubaz. Then again, Chuck Taylors have never needed to raise a fuss to get noticed. The canvas classics can be designed in low- or high-top styles, and delivery takes about three weeks. \$60, www.converseone.com.

Mongolian Shoe BBQ

If you're looking for a tactile experience, Puma's traveling customization program is the way to go. Browse dozens of precut fabrics and colors, pick your choices from laces to sole, and off your materials go to the factory at Puma's boot camp. Six weeks later, the finished product is ready for pickup. Appointments are required, and spots are already filling up quickly. \$130. Puma (1051 N Rush St at Cedar St, 312-751-8574) hosts the Mongolian Shoe BBQ Mon 15–Sept 25.

Nike iD

Considering that Nike's inventory ranges from running shoes to soccer cleats, it's tough to beat its large selection of customizable styles. Forty-nine models are available, and the color palette encompasses a rainbow of hues from cotton-candy pink to tangerine. Personalize your shoes with a message on the heel (note to labor activists: SWEATSHOPS gets rejected) and you'll receive your shoes within a month. \$55–\$195, www.nikeid.com.

Self-Conscious

This urban lifestyle boutique skews toward a hip-hop crowd, and the affable owners are happy to provide design consultations on custom sneakers. Their artists will jazz up your kicks with snakeskin detailing, graffiti-style script or anything else. If you can dream it, chances are they can do it. Impatient shoppers, rejoice! Turnaround time is only around three days. \$100 and up, 1021 W Lake St between Morgan and Carpenter Sts (312-633-4000).

St. Alfred

Saint Alfred is the patron saint of learning, and the expert staff at this new Wicker Park boutique will gladly school you on the latest styles. Although it doesn't offer customization, St. Alfred's inventory features limited-edition and collaboration lines such as Yohji Yamamoto for Adidas (\$200–\$300) and Japanese import Visvim (\$200–\$300). 1531 N Milwaukee Ave between Honore St and Damen Ave (773-486-7159).

Vans Custom Shoe Builder

If only Jeff Spicoli could see his beloved checkerboard slip-ons now. The famous pattern is available in six colors (including a bitchin' skull-and-crossbones hybrid) as well as 18 solid fabrics ready to be matched or clashed. If slip-ons aren't your thing, design a pair of Old Skool lace-ups—their retro style befits their name. \$50, www.vans.com.



SELLING THE SIZZLE Pieces of fabric become full-fledged sneakers at Puma's Mongolian Shoe BBQ, where even the color-blind can create shoes like these.