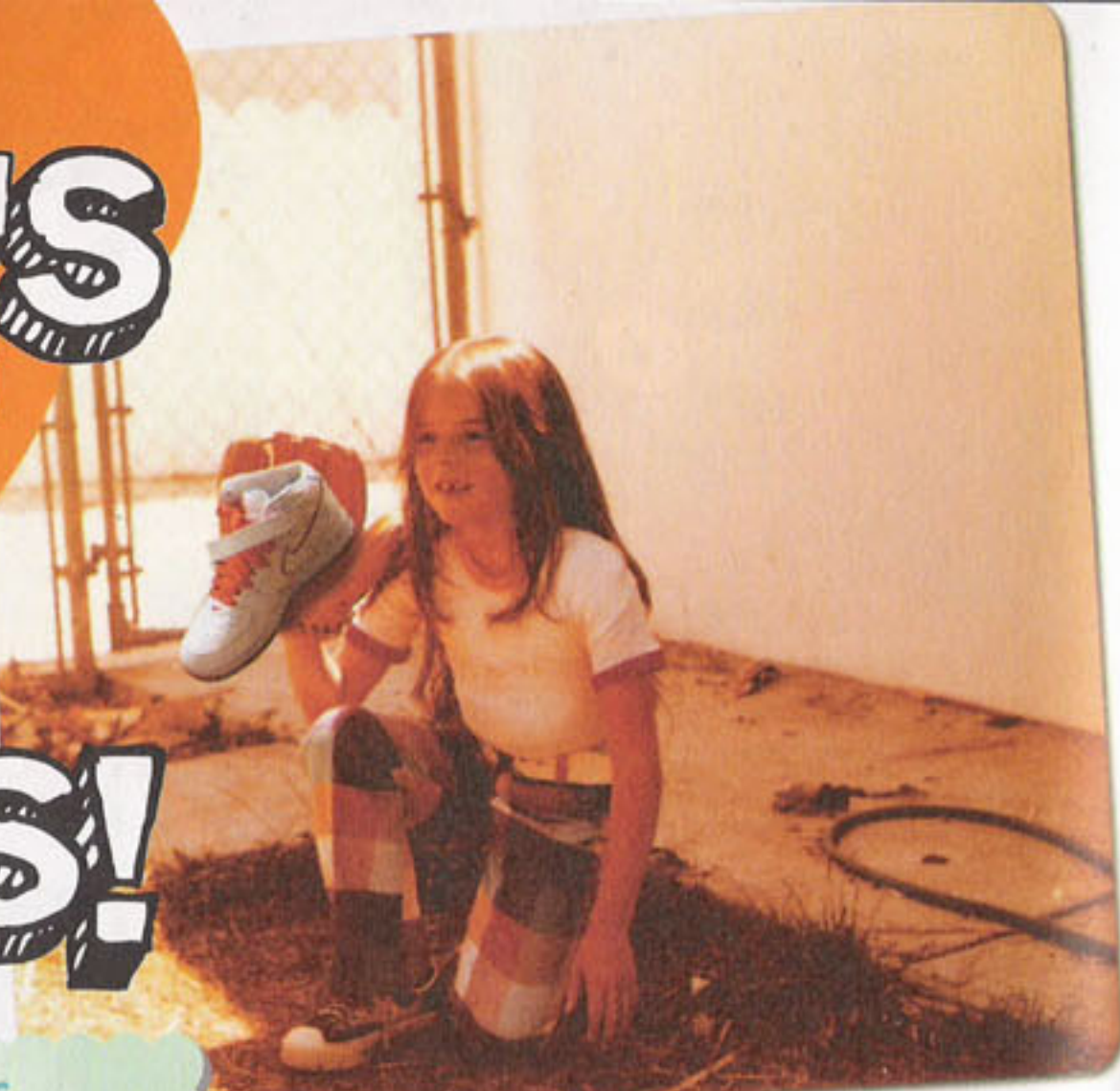


SHE'S GOT HI-TOPS!



PART ONE: The Birth of a Female Sneaker Fiend

How does one become a female sneaker fiend? Maybe these days you're born to a mom who's sporting the latest retro kicks, or your dad thinks it's cool to hook you up with some baby Nikes. Maybe your nursery school buddies tip you off how well shell toes hold up in the sand box.

Back in my day, it was nothing like this. My first problem was my parents. With them, style was out, polyester was in, and Value Village was their idea of a mall. So you can imagine their kicks. Oh no. Now, what about my siblings? I have one sister, who's my twin. We're alike in a lot of ways, but not in sneakers. She remembers being only six years old, and all happy about some new sneakers she'd just gotten, and I had to go and tell her they were bubblegums (our lingo for 'they sucked'). So my sneaker sensibility definitely started early. But maybe my love for sneakers did come from my family. Maybe it was because they were the only things I got to wear that were actually new, and the only things I didn't have to share with my twin. I still remember those annual trips to sneaker stores, where my mom insisted that we jump up and down and run around to make sure the sneakers fit right. It was kind of embarrassing, but kind of important too. Maybe they were growing a sneaker fiend without even realizing it... In any case, it all crystallized on the playground. I was a regular tomboy, out there playing kickball, dodgeball, whatever was in season. Really, I think my love for high tops started way before I started playing basketball, and I think it had to do with their visual message. To me, I felt like wearing high tops told the boys I was serious. When I was the first girl in my elementary school to have high

top Nikes (white canvas with a fat black swoosh), I heard the whispers and comments. 'That girl's got on Nikes.' 'She's got high tops.' The other kickball heads were sweating me on the sly. I loved it. I never looked back, and I've worn high tops almost exclusively every since.

PART TWO: A Note on Tomboys and Sneaker Fiends

First let me be clear: not all female sneaker fiends are tomboys, and not all tomboys are sneaker fiends. I know some girly girls who rock Air Force 1s very nicely, and some kick ass female ball players who look like they've had the same set since the '80s. But what exactly is a tomboy? Originally, it just meant girls who liked to roughhouse, play sports, climb trees, and do all those fun things that only boys were supposed to be into. Of course, for many of us, that included having a love for sneakers, the very items that announced our athletic intentions. If tomboys were alleged to grow into lesbians, no one had told us about it. I didn't hear that twist until college, when a boy in one of my classes said, 'I thought lesbians were just tomboys who didn't grow out of it.' You knew every straight and gay female athlete in the room was offended about being expected to grow out of being a tomboy.

As I said, a female sneaker fiend is not always a tomboy, and a tomboy is not always a sneaker fiend. Maybe this simple equation can expand to: a lesbian is not always a tomboy (hello - lipstick lesbians),

The possibilities are many, from straight tomboy sneaker fiends, to gay girly-girl sneaker fiends, to bisexual tomboys who wear ugly-ugly sneakers!



and a tomboy is not always a lesbian. Add the sneaker fiend part, and the possibilities are many, from straight tomboy sneaker fiends, to gay girly-girl sneaker fiends, to bisexual tomboys who wear ugly-ugly sneakers, and so on. So, no assumptions in the world of nice kicks, okay? Being a sneaker fiend means you love your kicks, that's it. If you want to love them with some girly matching bag - cool. If you want to love them with your girlfriend rocking a matching pair - much love. For the rest of the world that doesn't understand, what else is new?

PART THREE: Joining the Sneaker Fiend "Subculture"

Well, not only was I supposed to grow out of being a tomboy, but I was supposed to grow out of wanting to wear sneakers every day. Yeah, right! I actually changed my idea of my future career when I learned that architects had to dress up a lot to meet with clients. That didn't sound fun at all. So I followed my heart and my feet into being a youth worker. Now I get to wear jeans and sneakers all the time, and my sneakers are actually a plus - a great connection to many a teenage boy, and not just a few girls either. We eye each other across the teen center, and then one or the other sidles up and says, 'I like your sneakers.' It's funny how something little like that can be a great start to a friendship... It wasn't until two years ago that I realized the depth and breadth of the underground sneaker fiend subculture. When a friend got me *Where'd You Get Those?* by Bobbito Garcia, it opened my eyes. The book was beautiful, full of old pics of my favorite sneakers, not to

mention ball players and b-boys rocking them through the '60s, '70s and early '80s. I loved it! Up to then, I'd kept my sneaker passions local, just seeing it as kind of my own thing. But after that I started to really look around, finding such on-line sneaker fiend havens as Sneaker Freaker and Crooked Tongues. I surfed and surfed. Wow! I had found my community, and it was worldwide.

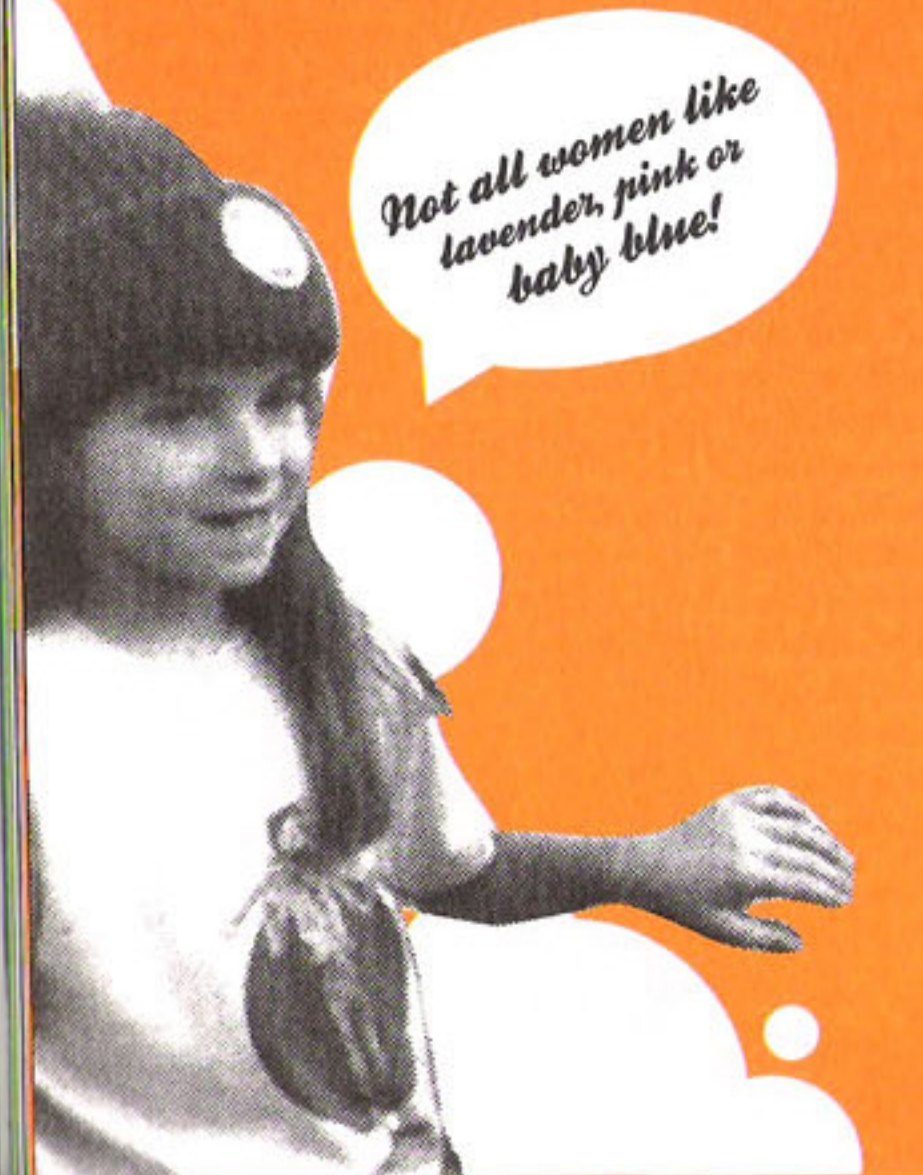
The only thing was, I wasn't in it. I didn't see any women in Bobbito's book, and not many on the websites either. So I looked around. Could it just be me? Nah. I knew enough females into sneakers to know that there are PLENTY of us out there. Plus, there are even some really famous ones right now - Ellen Degeneres and Missy Elliot are known not only for their fantastic careers, but also for their love of kicks! So why aren't we more visible in the sneaker subculture? As I started talking to the female sneaker fiends I knew, I realized that many of them loved their sneakers - always had - but didn't identify as fiends. They were almost scared of the term. 'What do you have to do to be a sneaker fiend?' they'd ask, as if they might not qualify. Most felt like they didn't have enough sneakers to be a real fiend or, if they did, they were somehow embarrassed by their collection. It seemed frivolous, and they didn't talk about it to people. One of my friends called herself a 'closet sneaker fiend', and said she got self-conscious when people noticed her new sneakers. Now, that seemed really sad to me. I love talking about sneakers, and I love it when people notice mine. And I can't say I've ever met a guy who was embarrassed about having too many sneakers!

Check out Lori's website...
www.femalesneakerfiend.com



PART FOUR: Sexism in the Sneaker Fiend World

Most of my interactions with male sneaker fiends are really positive. Total strangers will compliment me on my hard-to-find models, from teens on the subway to dudes working in sneaker stores. Mostly they're open-minded, maybe surprised, but definitely happy to give credit where credit is due. On top of that, I've gotten great support and feedback from some guys who are real leaders in the field (a quick thanks to Woody, Tim and Bobbito who took time to check out my stuff!) Even though a lot of guys are open to respecting both females and their sneakers, the sexism in the subculture can be pretty daunting sometimes. It starts with invisibility, like having no women in SLAM Magazine's Kicks editions, or Bobbito's book. But it gets worse from there, let me tell you! For example, I was pretty psyched to check out solecollector.com. Now tell me why they have a whole page of models?? Most of them don't even have sneakers on! (And holding them in your teeth DOES NOT count.) What the...?!? Then I bought *The Sneaker Book* by Milk Projects. The very opening page, the very opening quote, has some dude named Paul saying: "Both those c#@ts spill fucking black coffee on my red and gray Air Max 95s." What the...?!?



Not all women like lavender, pink or baby blue!



Keep Rocking Whatever Feels Right!

PART FIVE: So What's a Girl To Do?

Some of the most notorious sexism in the sneaker world comes from advertisers and sneaker companies. You know, I'm happy Vince Carter has a new sneaker out, but why do I have to see it marketed by a picture of him looking like a pimp, strutting with a line of sexy stewardesses in an airport? And I'm happy the Reebok Pumps are back, but do you think I want to buy them cuz they promise to 'fit you like Trina's booty shorts'? Come on now. Beyond marketing, there are the actual products. On the upside, Nike has actually had a few women's basketball players get their own models. I even bought the first Swoopes, in the mid-Nineties, cuz they were the first basketball sneakers named after a woman (Sheryl Swoopes, from the Houston Comets and the USA Olympic team). Even though I usually wear men's sneakers, I'll always ask salespeople if they carry any women's basketball sneakers, just because I want them to know there's a market. It's a shame how often the answer is no! If they do, the selection is pretty small, and the colors... what can I say? Not all women like lavender, pink or baby blue. And even though I love adidas (and give them props for the Missy collection), what am I supposed to think of them when they hardly make any women's b-ball sneakers, and then come out with some high top fuzzy pink things? Come on now...

My advice to female sneaker fiends out there is to recognize you're not alone, but at the same time, keep doing it your own way. Keep rocking whatever feels right, and keep loving sneakers for whatever they do for you. Maybe they're just practical (naw...), maybe you love having what no one else does, or having the cleanest pair, or the latest, hottest styles. And if guys love it, or hate it, or just don't get it, so be it. Just tell 'em you're a female sneaker fiend, like it's the most normal thing. Pretty soon, it will be. As for me, I'm spreading the word the best way I know. I started a website, www.femalesneakerfiend.com, where I'm hoping to bring together fiends from all over the world - whether they're old school hippies wearing their good ol' Chucks, hip hop DJ's rocking shell toes, or girly-girls with some crazy pink KangaROOS. Maybe even my sneaker heroes - Ellen and Missy! I have big plans for sneaker tours, sneaker stores, sneaker books... you name it. As long as I'm wearing high tops and talking sneakers, I'm happy. Peace...

LORI LOBESTINE
www.femalesneakerfiend.com