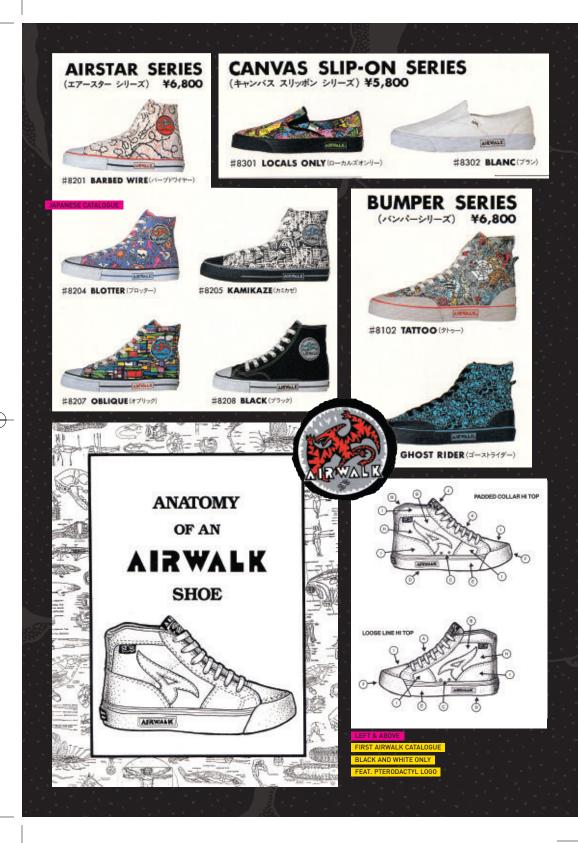


SERENDIPITY IS ONE OF THE LOVELIEST WORDS. ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERIES, RANDOM EMAILS, CHANCE MEETINGS, HAPPENSTANCES... SO IT WAS EARLIER THIS YEAR WHEN I WAS STRUCK WITH A RATHER UNEXPECTED DOSE WHICH LEFT ME FEELING THAT SOME THINGS IN LIFE ARE JUST MEANT TO BE. THE TIMING WAS IMPE VALK HAD RANDOMLY COME UP IN CONVERSATION SEVERAL TIMES WITH INDEPENDENT PEOPLE WHEN I WAS INT ED TO A LOCAL VINTAGE COLLECTOR IN MELBOURNE WHO HAD A CONNECTION TO A FORMER EMPLOYEE. WITHIN HOURS, I HAD BEEN REFERRED TO THE ONE PERSON IN THE WORLD QUALIFIED TO TELL THE STORY OF THIS ON MOST INFLUENTIAL SKATE BRAND. HOWEVER, FOR VARIOUS REASONS, HE WASN'T THAT KEEN TO RE AFTER SOME GENTLE PERSUASION AND EVEN MORE LUCK, WHAT STARTED AS A WILD IDEA QUICK ICKLY TURNED INTO REALITY AND A MAD DASH TO SO-CAL, WHERE I SPENT A FEW INTENSE DAYS TALKING SHOP WITH SINISA EGELJA, THE first and virtually last employee of the original airwalk company. During his 16 years with the firm, SIN' HELD VARIOUS POSITIONS FROM SKATE TEAM MANAGER TO HEAD DESIGNER. FROM ITS ORIGINS AS A START-UP SKATE SHOE COMPANY IN 1985, WE TALKED ABOUT HOW THE BRAND EVOLVED INTO A \$200+ MILLION COMPANY SPONSORING SURFERS, BMX RIDERS, BASE JUMPERS, BOOGIE BOARDERS AND MAKING A MYRIAD OF CASUAL SHOES, SNOW BOOTS AND DODGY BROWN LOAFERS. IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN A GREAT SUCCESS STORY, BUT THERE WAS TO BE NO HAPPY ENDING - THE ONCE RED-HOT YOUTH BRAND (AND THIRD LARGEST U.S. SNEAKER BRA AND ADIDAS AT ONE POINT) LOST ITS COMPASS AND ENTERED A DOWNWARD SPIRAL IT COULDN'T SNAP, EVENTUALLY BEING SOLD FOR A SONG. YOU MIGHT WANT TO GET COMFORTABLE, THIS IS EASILY THE LONGEST, THE RADDEST AN THE MOST INCREDIBLE STORY WE'VE EVER BROUGHT YOU. AND DID I MENTION OUR SUBJECT IS ALSO AUSTRALIAN? ST AND



FUNNILY ENOUGH YOU'RE AUSSIE AS WELL. HOW THE HELL DID YOU GET TO AMERICA?

Well, I got my first skateboard probably in third grade. I was surfing at Manly one day and my leash broke on the way to the surf shop I see this quarter pipe. This is probably around 1979. So that same day I traded my surfboard in for a skateboard. Skateboarding was the thing that I wanted to do and most of our inspiration was from American magazines and also the Aussie skaters. Occasionally some US guys would come over and that was amazing because they had such different styles. I somehow convinced my mum and dad to let me just go, in the middle of the school year to the US. I guess I was 17 or so.

BY YOURSELF?

By myself, I'd never been anywhere before outside of Oz. I just had a map from Skateboarder magazine of all the skate parks, and I just figured out how to get around by PT – half the parks weren't even there! I ended up meeting a lot of the same people I saw in the magazines and spent five weeks in the US and then came back home and my parents wanted me to finish school so I did that, I was still skateboarding and that's all I wanted to do. As soon as I finished, I figured out a way to go back and I stayed at Del Mar instead of LA, because my friends Brad Shaw and Dave Mock went over and said Del Mar's the coolest to hang out.

DID YOU HAVE IDEAS OF BEING A PRO? I think I might have... what happened was I was at this half-pipe and when I dropped in, I just couldn't breath at all. Ifound out when I was about 10, I jumped into a swimming pool and chipped my tail bone and my spine started growing weird which was the start of scoliosis. The chiropractor told me I really should give up skateboarding so that kind of worried me. But I wanted to go to the US, not really necessarily thinking about being pro or anything, but I just wanted to get better because when you're with great riders, you're going to learn more.

HOW DID YOU START AT AIRWALK?

I started working at the skate park and one day a friend of mine that was running the park, Sonny, says 'This guy came in and he's thinking about starting a shoe company and needs some help. Do you wanna go talk to them?" I was like 'Shit, yeah!' I wanted to work on shoes, because I knew at that time. Vans had these little areas where the little toe would rub and it would take two weeks to wear in. We had to put bandaids on, you'd get blisters and your foot would bleed. But I didn't know what to expect. I'd no idea, nothing. So I went in, I think the next day, into Bill Mann's office and we start talking and he asked me a bunch of questions. I told him I knew Tony Hawk and a lot of other pros and I think that's what got him excited. And then he asked me about shoes and I told him the positives and negatives about Vans and other brands. So then he asked me some auestions about school. I said 'Oh yeah I went to school in Sydney and I finished electronic engineering' and then he looks at me and goes 'What's that got to do with shoes?' And I'm like 'Nothing!' That was pretty funny.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT MADE BILL WANT TO DO SKATE SHOES? At the time, Bill was doing unbranded shoes for different customers like Sears, Mervyn's and a few others. Actually what got him started was his son, Mac, started skateboarding and goes to him 'Dad, you know, you could make a better shoe than Vans. These shoes suck!' and whatever else he said I don't know but he didn't like them and Mac was pretty picky. He liked the Vans grip but it wore out too fast. Finally Mac and Bill's wife basically convinced him to try it. And so Bill looked at it and he ended up taking pictures of skaters knee sliding and doing all these crazy tricks down at the park.

HE WENT DOWN THE PARKS AND TOOK PHOTOS?

Yeah. But he didn't talk to kids, he didn't do anything creepy, he was just standing at the fence like a spy so he could understand it all. And he brings this shoe out to show me and it's a vulcanised shoe, it's pretty simple, and he shows me the pictures. He's really excited and I could see that he put effort into it and I appreciated that he wanted to make something better. So I look at the toe and it's a hard plastic, not rubber, for knee sliding. As soon as I looked at it, the first thing I told him was that 'If you ran up the ramp and your toe hit it, you would have slipped and smashed your teeth against the concrete or the ramp." So then he asked me 'When can you start?' and I came in the next day.

HE MUST HAVE BEEN AN INTERESTING CHARACTER.

Yeah he was. I had full trust in him from the beginning, I really liked the guy, he was really fun. He was a shoe-dog.

SO YOU JOINED THE COMPANY, WHO ELSE WAS THERE ALREADY?

Lenny Holden, Steve Howell, and Carol Bomgardner were there already working on the unbranded shoes and that was it. So actually, I was the first person hired for Airwalk.

SOUNDS LIKE YOU WERE THROWN IN AT THE DEEP END SOMEWHAT?

I didn't know anything, but I was pretty confident about what was wrong with the skateboarding at the time. They asked me about where the seams met and what hurt and we talked about how important the rubber compound was to a skate shoe. Lenny did his best to get the hardness grippy and durable but I knew what I didn't know and I figured that they knew, so they'd ask me questions!

SO THEY ALREADY HAD SHOES DESIGNED WHEN YOU STARTED? Yeah, initially they had the shoe figured out, I think. Some of the models were pretty generic. Bill never said 'This is a Vans but this is a 'twin gore' or a 'deck shoe'. Those shoes were around before Vans. The 'slip on' and 'lace-ups' concepts are so old that that's just what they are referred to, even to this day.

PORTS FOOTGEAR

DO YOU KNOW HOW THE COMPANY WAS CALLED AIRWALK?

Garry Davis was the Assistant Art Director from TransWorld and I think he came up with the name for Airwalk. Tony Hawk was on the team and he does the trick known as the Airwalk, and he kind of suggested Airwalk be the name and everyone was pretty much in to it. We gave Garry six pairs of shoes and a duffel bag! (laughs)

WHAT A BARGAIN! ONE OF THE THINGS I NOTICED WHEN I LOOKED AT THE ORIGINAL SHOES WAS THAT YOU DIDN'T ALWAYS HAVE THE CLASSIC AIRWALK LOGO.

Yeah that's right, we originally had the pterodactyl head on the quarter of the shoe. The shitty thing was everyone always looked at it and said 'Oh, it's the A for Airwalk', but really it's the side profile of a pterodactyl and the opening is its eye. Cynthia Cebula was the Art Director and she designed the pterodactyl loao and Ollie the Running Man as well.

WAS TONY HAWK THE FIRST AIRWALK RIDER?

Actually the first rider we got was Billy Ruff. Bill Mann asked me who should we get? I go 'Billy Ruff has his head on really well, I think he'd be a really good salesman.' I guess Tony was really the second skateboarder on the team. At that exact time, he was talking to Puma. I don't know if they had an interest in him or whatever, but I said 'dude, you don't want to ride for Puma, they're not into skateboarding and Airwalk is a skateboard brand and we're going to make better shoes than Vans'. I don't know exactly what period of time this was, but he was riding for Stubbies...

STUBBIES? HE DIDN'T RIDE IN THOSE WORK SHORTS DID HE?

Nah. He wore the surf stuff and he didn't ride for them too long. You're Australian so you understand, but Stubbies was board shorts. No one will understand work shorts here. You can't explain it if you didn't grow up with it. So anyway, at that time I was basically helping with development and I didn't even know there was such a word at that time. And I was doing the marketing, the team promotions, you know, helping with advertisement's, magazines... all these different jobs.

THAT'S A BIG JOB FOR A ROOKIE KID.

Well when we started we didn't have like 500 shoes right away. Anyway, it got to the point where I didn't know how to lay out ads and I was living with Grant Brittain who was the photo editor of TransWorld and Cynthia Cebula, who became the first Airwalk graphic designer/art director.

IT'S FUNNY HOW A LOGO STICKS. I WONDER WHAT SHE THINKS NOW? WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Lenny Holden went over to Korea and made all these shoes with the prints, it was a mad rush at the last second. We got the samples back, and there was some stuff missing that wasn't done, so we basically went to the first trade show with hundreds of shoes and drawings that were rendered and in picture frames.

SO YOU WERE EXPECTING STORES TO BUY FROM A BRAND THEY'VE NEVER HEARD OF, AND THEY CAN'T ACTUALLY SEE THE PRODUCT AND THEY DON'T REALLY KNOW A WHOLE LOT ABOUT WHERE YOU'RE FROM OR WHAT YOU'RE DOING?

Well a lot of people knew Bill because he'd been in the footwear industry for a long time. I'd never really been to a trade show in my life. All I knew was that we had all these shoes and we had a bunch of pictures and I'm the one that's supposed to tell 'em about skateboarding and the marketing side of it. It's kind of weird because I'd never been in New York. Basically the show was so well received that afterwards we're all on sort of a high because Bill dian't expect that reaction and we did like a million dollars worth of business that first trade show. Bill was just ecstatic and super-psyched.

THAT'S A MILLION DOLLARS WORTH OF \$20 OR \$30 SHOES. SO THAT'S, UM, LET ME SEE. THAT'S A LOT OF SHOES. Actually I think the shoes were around \$50 dollars retail.

YEAH, SO THAT'S EASILY TENS OF THOUSANDS OF UNITS STRAIGHT OFF THE BAT.

All I know is, and as far as what I was told, we did a million dollars worth of business, however that was calculated. You know, when your boss is fucking wigging out and super-stoked, that's when you know it's gone well. Lenny was happy too.

SO IT'S LOOKING LIKE A WINNER, WHAT'S NEXT?

We kind of looked at what we needed. There were these lace savers that Dale Smith made. I don't know where he got it from, but it's it's a flap of leather that had a Velcro piece on the backside and it was stitched at the bottom and you slipped it through and it covers all the laces. One of the biggest problems on concrete and even ramps was you'd knee slide and eventually with the heat and friction, they'd break. I saw what Dale was doing and I told Bill We need to stitch this kind of thing to the shoe so we don't have to thread the Velcro under the laces' and that's where the lace saver came from. And that was huge. People looked at lace savers as a fashion thing, but this was purely a function of protecting the laces.

DID THAT SPARK YOUR INTEREST IN DESIGN?

I think the lace saver was really the big key for me because that's where I first really started to understand aesthetics and what I liked. And also Bill or Lenny would say 'That won't work because of this', and after all this input and knowledge, you'd start kind of building the basics of footwear. And remember at that time, it was pretty limited. It's not

like you could do things like you can do now, because some of it wasn't even invented.

AND SO MOST OF YOUR SHOES AT THIS POINT ARE BEING SOLD IN SKATE SHOPS OR IN OTHER PLACES?

No, we're not in skate shops, because skate shops didn't sell shoes. So we basically had mainstream distribution, I know that Mervyn's was one of our

bigger customers.

AFTER AIRWALK, VISION IS THE NEXT BRAND THAT COMES TO MIND.

Yeah, I'm not exactly sure when Vision came out with footwear but they were definitely there. It was pretty much Airwalk, Vision and Vans back then. Pierre Andre was working on Etnies around '86 as well. I have a lot of respect for him.

WOULD YOU SAY IT WAS A FRIENDLY RIVALRY?

Oh yeah, a lot of my friends rode for Vision and I had a lot of respect for them. There was competition, yeah, but it wasn't like it is now, it was sort of friendly.

OK, SO YOU GOT THROUGH THE FIRST RANGE? DOES THAT THEN LEAD TO A CASE OF THE DIFFICULT SECOND ALBUM?

I don't know. I was definitely not thinking that at all. I was figuring out what team riders to get and keep them happy plus marketing and photos and all that. Chris Miller started wearing the first Jordans and he was one of our top skaters. He said 'Sin, I don't like your shoes but these shoes I like!' And I started wigging out, you know, he's riding for us and wearing Jordans and I'm like 'Fuck!' He wouldn't wear Jordans at contests, he'd wear them mainly when he was practicing. Chris Miller was one of my favourite skaters. So I told Bill, we've got to make something for Chris and Bill says 'I'm not really familiar with cement shoes, I just know vulcanising really well'. Lenny finally said "I'll design it in Korea." I said "We need something for ankle protection for when the board hits you." Then Lenny asks me "What should we call the shoe?" I said "Just call it the 'Prototype' for now and we will figure it out later. When Lenny brought the shoe back I was totally blown away it was so rad. I knew Chris was going to love it and the name just stuck. I thought we were ahead of the Jordans since it was better for skateboarding. I think one of Bill's biggest mistakes was letting





Lenny go. He was so 'on' and fucking hard working I learned a great deal from him. Then after we started growing, Bill hired Walter Telford.

AND WHERE DID HE COME FROM?

I think he came from Gola. He was really technical and everything was done by hand. I mean, every blueprint. He knew about shoes 100% and it was all done on paper, nothing was ever done on a computer.

WALTER'S INFLUENCE IS OBVIOUS IN SOME OF THE MORE RADICAL LOOKING SHOES BECAUSE THEY HAD CRAZY RUBBER MOULDINGS AND TRIPPED OUT COLOURS. WHAT PLANET WAS HE FROM?

If you look at a lot of the Airwalk stuff, some of it was pretty crazy. Walter just understood moulding, but at that time, we were just like freaking out because we had never seen anything like it. Walter was just ... you know, he was such a great designer and where he got his ideas from I have no clue. I understand some of the things that we did later on when he showed me - 'hey there's that hub cap where I got that idea!' That was when I was realised that you didn't have to look at shoes for inspiration.

SO YOU GUYS ARE FREAKED OUT BY WALTER. WHAT ARE THE **BUYERS IN THE REGULAR SHOE STORES SAYING?**

Buyers were actually pretty stoked. I would say, "Walter, I think this is really cool...

BUT ...

'I don't think the skaters are going to really like it.' Walter didn't believe me. Bill wouldn't believe me. And I'd bring skaters in and wouldn't say a word. I'd stand aside and they would go straight for that crazy shoe and go 'That is so awful'. I remember one shoe that never came out had these sort of silicon ovals on the toe area and I just looked at it and I said 'If we make this we're fucking doomed!' And someone picks it up and goes, 'Does this shoe have a disease on it? It looks like some kind of ringworm'. I did this a few times and then I had their confidence. Lenny had more trust in me in the beginning than these guys. I loved a lot of the stuff that Walter did but I knew if we put the shoes in the line skaters would be bummed.

THEY'VE AGED WELL THOUGH, I LOVE THE WAY THEY LOOK. [LAUGHS]

When you look at it now, it's probably one of the raddest things you'll ever see. But we weren't used to seeing stuff like this. I remember trying to do shit like this later and I'm like 'I don't even know how to do this' but Walter did it and it was totally rad. So when you look at the 540s or the Velocity, it's not as bright or as busy and everyone liked it. It could've been detrimental to our skate image, and that's how I looked at it, 'cause if it was damaging then I just didn't want to do it.

WHAT ELSE WAS HAPPENING AT THIS TIME? YOU MENTIONED JORDANS. NIKE WENT TO THE SECOND MODEL AND ALSO USED AN ACCORDION RUBBER HEEL PIECE. WERE YOU GUYS REALLY **PUSHING SHOE MANUFACTURERS?**

I know for sure that the factories were not that stoked on Walter 'cause he was just... you know, he's South African, he knows what he wants and he knows his shit. I've seen him, he's like 'Just go make it'.

DON'T ARGUE.

Don't araue, just make it. I remember my first trip and I don't think he was rude, but you've just got to make sure that you're adamant about what you want and if you don't know what you want, you'll come back with crap. He was definitely, definitely, pushing the limits and when I look back and see where other people were and what time that was, he was doing shit and putting a lot of rubber on there that was not cheap

ACTUALLY, THAT'S WHAT GOT ME STARTED THINKING ABOUT AIRWALK. I THOUGHT, WASN'T SOMEONE SAYING 'HEY GUYS, TONE IT DOWN, THIS IS COSTING 'X' AMOUNT FOR MOULDS IN THREE DIFFERENT SIZES?' IT SOUNDS MORE LIKE BILL WAS ACTUALLY ENCOURAGING YOU?

Bill's a shoe dog and his goal was try to make the shoes as fucking cheap as possible. It was the biggest battle for me with Bill, but don't recall him telling Walter to tone down. Walter was, I'm not sure of the right word... his own man. He would listen to everyone that had an opinion, especially stuff on function, ollying or whatever, and he would fix it. I kind of trusted him. My concern was purely whether the skateboarders were going to like it. Bill just wanted to give kids a good quality shoe at a pretty good price.

THE OTHER THING THAT REALLY PEOPLE LOVE ABOUT AIRWALK WAS THE SENSE OF HUMOUR. DID THAT ORIGINATE FROM YOU PERSONALLY? THERE'S A FEW DIFFERENT WAYS I CAN SEE THAT. Yeah, a big part of it. It's just being Australian and the way we joke, Not being too gimmicky or like a clown in any way, but humour is just so necessary and if you don't have it, it just gets

> old. I definitely brought that there. My job was like a dream come true – picking the American pros to put on our team, and then telling them that we can pay 'em, which no-one was doing besides Vision. I guess Vans must have or whatever, but Vision and Airwalk were the ones that pushed it. The thing with Vision was that they also had the full package skateboards, clothing and all this stuff. They wanted or demanded all their riders to wear the Vision uniform, if they didn't have a different board sponsor.

SO HOW COME YOU NEVER DID BOARDS? We just felt that it was wrong, we were a

shoe company. Maybe we'd do some accessories, bags and clothes, but we just knew that boards were wrong. It wasn't about money. Plus the

other thing was if we made boards, we couldn't have all the riders we had. We would have confused the people buying the product - here's a guy riding for Powell and we make a skateboard and we do an ad... it would just confuse the kids.

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HOW DID VICTOR NOVETTIPOLAE COME ABOUT? HE WAS RAD. In Australia, we used the word 'vic' as in victim and it became a kind of a joke as in fashion victim or whatever. Not always super negative. My friend Brad started calling me Vic and I'd call him Vic as well. Then I was saying we should do a new line and Vic became Victor Novettipolae, which in Yugoslavian means 'new shoes'. Not many people got that. So then I had Vic, which was me, in photos doing these tricks that were not possible – I would bolt the skateboard to the ramp to get the shot. None of the tricks were physically possible, but somehow Vic did 'em. We did one where I rode a boogie board in the half pipe. So I put a wet suit on, put the leash around my wrist and then I put the skateboard down and sort of placed the boogie board perfectly on top with no pads, so I couldn't fall. So we did an ad saying Victor Novettipolae, 'world class pool bodyboarder champion'. And we put the ad in a surfing magazine and guys would write in and say 'who the hell's this

guy? and 'what is this sport? Is this guy a kook?' Some of them, they'd no clue. It was somewhat of an inside joke, everyone was always waiting for the next Vic ad.

DIDN'T HE HAVE A FAN CLUB?

I think Jamie Meulheusen or Roger Scarbosa in our art said we should start a fan club as a joke. I think I was the first member and then kids would write in to get their membership card and we ended up dropping the thing 'cause people actually wanted to join. So it was pretty funny. No-one really thought it was stupid, but then it kind of ran out, the biggest thing was the VIC shoe was horrible. It was really stiff and it hurt. So the bummer about that was everything was great, everyone was stoked on everything, but the shoe was awful.

NICE OF YOU TO GIVE YOURSELF A SIGNATURE SHOE! (LAUGHS) It's not like I got paid for it at all and the thing was, it wasn't about me. It was about this character. Dan Sturt was shooting the photographs and we did a lot of it together, so he was very instrumental in it. It was fun and people always used to say to me, bring Vic back. But we definitely should have focused a little bit more on the shoe.

I WANTED TO ASK YOU ABOUT YOUR OTHER TEAM MEMBERS. TONY HAWK IS ON BOARD, THEN YOU PICK UP DANNY WAY, WHICH A LOT OF PEOPLE MIGHT NOT REMEMBER. WHO ELSE DID YOU HAVE? JASON LEE? MATT HENSLEY?

It was ridiculous, we had pretty much everyone. Obviously I wanted to get Cab (Steve Caballero) and it was really close at one point. I was scared of talking to Cab he was ingrained into Vans even at that time. The Vision guys were pretty locked in and I had respect for all my friends that worked there like Gator and it didn't really feel right to steal 'em. There were times that I thought about it but you also don't unless it was a later period. Not that Vision was necessarily cooler, it's just they ... they had so much to offer that we didn't have, like boards and wheels. Vision wanted a lot of their riders to ride everything Vision. So I don't think Vision would have been stoked on one of their riders wearing

would have been stoked on one of their riders wearing Airwalks and I had a lot of respect for Brad Dorfman and Eric Maya, their Design Director.

I think at one point we had 70 pros and ams, a lot of rad pros.

There were some questionable ones on there, not that I would...

NAME THEM?

Yeah, but you know, it was pretly easy to kind of get rid of them. We would stop sending them shoes or send them really crazy ones. I think Owen did that for sure. Owen was our first team manager hired after me.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST SIGNATURE SHOE?

It took us so long to give Tony his shoe, we were afraid of bringing it out because of what everyone would think. So we probably developed it way before Etnies They say that they did it first, and I'm not disclaiming that they didn't, but they helped us to say 'it's OK'. We didn't care if we were the first or the second or the eighth, we just cared that it was right.

OKAY, SO YOU GOT 70 SKATEBOARDERS. WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO GO INTO BMX ? YOU THEN ALSO GOT INTO BASE JUMPING AND SURFING?

Basically, we started off with skateboarding and then I wanted to pick other sports because they actually meant something. So obviously the first thing that came to my mind was surfing, and BMX was something that I never really did but we'd always go by the dirt track and we would always say 'when I quit skateboarding, that's what I'm going to do'. We were pretty much the first people to sponsor the dirt jumping. I don't know what they even call it now. It was called dirt jumping originally, but it's basically freestyle, the thing that basically Bob Haro started was so much cooler because it was more of a resemblance to skateboarding and what they did was pretty nuts. I'm not saying bike riding's harder but you don't want to land on a bike. I don't. So we had a lot of respect for that.

DID YOU START MAKING SHOES FOR THE BMX GUYS?

We did, and it didn't matter in the beginning. But later on we definitely specifically made shoes for them. So we started with BMX, then freestyle dirt riding. The bike riders were riding pools before, but BMX vert was starting to get popular, and it was just the beginning. So I went to a contest and that's the first time I met Spike Jonze, Andy Jenkins and Mark Lewman. Those guys were basically skateboarders that were into bikes. Then we sponsored Matt Hoffman who was kind of like, one of the craziest guys, who everyone knows as the godfather of vert or whatever. After that I was hooked and it became a battle with Vision, over who was going to sponsor what and whom. Then we got to surfing and then bodyboarding. So that was the only questionable thing that was hard for me because I'm a surfer. And then we were the first ones to get into base jumping and all these... extreme sports or whatever we called it. We took base jumping on like we owned it, 'cause that was something we just thought was fucking really nuts. Not sky diving but base jumping. Dan Sturt was really

into base jumping.

1000[°] DID YOU SEE AN OPTION IN SURFING TO DEVELOP MORE CASUAL SHOES? CAUSE HOWEVER PEOPLE REMEMBER THE COMPANY, AIRWALK MADE A LOT OF BROWN SUEDE, DESERT BOOTS AND EVEN WEIRD SANDALS.

Yeah... basically the shoe I wore in high school was like a ripple desert boot. Somehow we found these ripple dessert boots instead of leather shoes and that's what all the cooler people would wear.

WE CALLED THEM ROLLERS. THEY WERE HEAVY DUTY.

I don't know. Maybe, I called them ripples because they looked like a ripple. Basically we took that concept and that was our first casual shoe. It was basically what I wore in school, and we made them in Spain and sold millions of them.

THEN HOW DID AIRWALK GET INTO SNOWBOOTS?

What happened was my first trip to Korea. I'm kind of freaked out, I've never been to Asia and we go in to land in Pusan and we're told that we have to pull down the blinds, we can't look out of the window. It was a military and commercial airport. We went to the factory and my first trip happens to be to probably the largest factory ever built. It had 100 production lines. Everyone went off to do something and I'm sitting in this room and it looked like a prison. I'm looking at this cabinet and I see some boots and I'm like, 'they're snow boots!' So we brought 'em back and I told Bill 'look we can make snow boots. We could totally make snow boots'. I think Walter designed the first models. He looked at it and made them so different and so much better, it had its own identity and that's how we started in the snow boot business.





DID THAT BECOME A LARGE CHUNK OF THE COMPANY?

Yeah, we ended up at one point being the number one snow boot brand in the world. I know in one year we did 496,353 pairs after Walter left. We were at the top for a long time..

SO YOU'VE BROKEN INTO FOUR OF FIVE SPORTS OVER A COUPLE OF YEARS. DID YOU THINK OF IT AS INNOVATION BEING THE KEY TO THE FUTURE OF THE COMPANY?

All I was doing was giving suggestions like 'This is what I wore in school or going out.'. Like the brothel creepers. I would say Lenny 'let's make creepers 'cause they're really cool, they might come back and this is what I wore'. So at least on my side of it, I always had a reason. Just like when we first started doing womens' shoes, riders wanted something they could give to their girlfriends or their mums and they accepted that. mean If the shoe was kind of weird and totally out there, that could have been an issue. But if it fit with what was going on, there was not too much resistance. Bill made shoes for Jazzercise so he and Walter wanted to do Women's shoes.

SOUNDS LIKE A FUN PLACE TO WORK?

Yeah it was. I mean, it was a relaxed environment. Well actually it's funny what you remember. Bill would smoke cigarettes in his office and I definitely didn't feel like I was the second guy on the totem pole or anything, but I started smoking in my office as well. And he was the only one that smoked in his office. Everyone had to go outside and then the girl next to me got pissed off that I was smoking in my office so...

SO YOU FIRED HER? (LAUGHS) Actually, she got fired later. (laughs)

Bill said, you can only smoke in my office. If you come in and if we're talking, you can smoke.

THERE WAS A CAMARADERIE THERE IN THE EARLY DAYS RIGHT? Oh, yeah. I mean it was evident in the company. When we moved to the new building, the warehouse guys, Dylan and everyone would get the forklift and we'd tie a rope to an office chair with wheels, so then the guy in the forklift would go around and then turn, and you'd start spinning around and you'd fly off and slam, hurt yourself, so that became a sport in the warehouse...

YOU SHOULD HAVE SPONSORED YOURSELVES AS A NEW EXTREME SPORT! SO AT WHAT POINT DID SKATING BECOME A NATIONAL TOUR? DID THAT CHANGE THINGS A LOT?

Yeah! (laughs). There was a national skateboard association series. They'd set up ramps and obstacles in Ohio, 5t Louis or Chicago, all these different places. Then Vision would hold an event or we'd hold an event. Vision did super-rad contests and they were a full spectacle. It was probably the raddest contests at the time. We also had the amateur series. We sponsored that for many years and to spend like \$80,000 on an amateur series held at not so good venues with very few spectators... but we had to do it. I believed in that so much that it was always a fight to keep giving that much money 'cause we felt it was building skateboarding and that's what we wanted to do.

THAT'S SERIOUS CASH IN THE '80S. DO YOU THINK THE PERCEPTION THAT AIRWALK WAS GOOD FOR SKATE IS WIDELY ACKNOWLEDGED?

No. At first it was resisted because at that time there was the big five companies. I'm not really going to go into specifics but a lot of them were afraid that we would ruin it. It took them a while to warm up and realise we were fine. Maybe in many respects they ended up being stoked because they didn't have to pay all the money for the fucking contests. They could see that we were doing the right thing, helping with the riders and they were not paying for all the travel.

SO WHEN DID IT ALL START TO CHANGE?

There was a period of time when we started snow boots and then we got into apparel and that was all starting to go well and there was some restructuring so it went from this huge team to five people which was basically like starting from scratch.

IS THIS THE EARLY '90S?

Yeah, I think somewhere around there. We had a new President, Lee Smith who also helped in snowboot ideas and changes. When Walter left, Lee looks at me and says 'can you do this?' I had never really designed a shoe on paper, basically I used to give my ideas to Walter and he'd draw it. Anyway, as Walter left, he gives me a package and looks at me and says 'you'll need this'. So I took a drafting table because I thought



a drafting table because I thought that's what you're supposed to do, even though I didn't know where to start. I had no schooling in design except for some art and drafting classes, but nothing in industrial or graphic design. So I looked at Walter's file that he gave me and I guessed if I cut the upper off and Xeroxed a bunch of outsoles, I can then trace around it. Later on I found out that's pretty much the way most designers work. Now it's all done on a Mac or whatever...

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO SAY, 'OH SHIT, I THINK I CAN ACTUALLY DO THISI' BECAUSE IT'S A SLOW PROCESS FROM

DESIGN TO PRODUCTION AND GETTING IT INTO STORES. I can't remember how much time I had, it was weeks to get the first stuff to Korea. There was no choice not to figure it out. So anyway, I go back into the warehouse, thinking maybe Walter's got a bunch of rad stuff, and I picked out everything that I thought was okay that people had chucked out. So I see this girl's shoe and it had this wacked out sole and it was just horrible. And I thought, 'you know what? I'm going to take this pattern and tweak it!' and it became the One Shoe, basically Airwalk's largest volume shoe ever which sold over seven million pairs at the minimum. Then Lee and I figured gym was probably one of the first things people did as a sport. So we looked at all the old shoes and it turned into the Airwalk Jim. our version of the athletic shoe. And that also was one of our more popular shoes. So at the point I started getting a better feel for stuff... are you laughing at something in the catalogue?

OH, JUST LOOKING AT THE NAMES. YOU'VE CALLED IT JIM WITH A J-I-M AND YOU'VE GOT HENDRIX, HOFFA, CRICKET...

Jimmy Stewart, Jimmy Olsen. We named our shoes messed up things which was funny. I don't want to claim anything, as I don't think we were necessarily the first, but a lot of companies were using numbers or codes. Anyway, Jim was rad because there were some sketchy names like Jim Jones that I wanted to do that but everyone's like 'no, you can't do that'. Lee was a great supporter of whatever I wanted to do and he came up with a lot of areat ideas.

Somewhere around this time we moved to a new office down the street. Everyone was fired except for 5 people – Art Director Jamie Meulheusen, President Lee Smith, Marketing Susan Daniels, Office Manager Kristin and me. Bill was working on other brands next door. Our first designer was Amy Egelja, my wife at the time, I was so happy to get her away from Ryka. She contributed so much to Airwalk for both the men's and women's lines. The next few people we hired were Kim Boyle to manage the BMX team and Tim Schwartz who managed the Skate & Surf Team and Rob Dotson who then took over the Skate Team and Marketing. Todd Finney became the Snow Team Manager and very soon after that he started doing snow boot development. He and I worked on the line that reached the highest volume - almost half a million pairs. Todd did so much for Airwalk and never got the credit he deserved. Let me see... Cec Anett was hired as the Snow Category Manager. We also brought on Katie Becker as the Outerwear Design Director, Somewhere in the mix of hiring all of these people. Mike White was hired as the Senior Designer. Soon after our first trip I asked Mike to be the Director of Development. There is nothing better than having a developer that completely understands design. Mike was very good.

ANOTHER AIRWALK MEMORY WAS THE ADVERTISING FROM THE EARLY TO MID '90S. I REMEMBER THEM FROM FACE MAGAZINE QUITE VIVIDLY.

That idea actually started when I told Dan Sturt to go dress up the skate or surf pros and get them to do something totally

different like play croquet or tennis – things they wouldn't normally do – and make it funny. Dan comes back with these pictures that are actually better than I even thought they would be and I was super stoked and we used them for a catalogue. Then Lee brings in Chad Farmer from the Lambesis agency. So we went over the product and he liked where it was going because we weren't just doing skate shoes, it was all this casual and active casual product with a twist. And I showed him the catalogues we had done

with Dan and the tennis and croquet images plus the saturated product and skate images that I had shot...

JIM SHOE

THEN LAMBESIS CAME UP WITH THE NEXT CAMPAIGN?

So yeah, he took what we gave him and that's when they came up with we called the 'Youthful Vigour' campaign and we were stoked. He really did a good job. He used that vivid colour, that really saturated style of photography. And that's when they did the lipstick girl with the patent leather shoe and the guy with the laces on his head and that's basically that's the beginning of that process.

SO DID THAT CAMPAIGN HAD A MEASURABLY POSITIVE EFFECT? Oh yeah. The product was king. If the product wasn't right, then the campaign wasn't necessarily going to work long lerm. So we had that lipstick girl and the candy apple shoe and it was perfect timing, the shoes were just right on. I'm not saying that it didn't matter what we did next, but everyone looked at the ad

THE CAMPAIGN BECAME FAMOUS AGAIN RECENTLY DUE TO THE 'TIPPING POINT' BOOK BY MALCOLM GLADWELL. DOES YOUR VERSION OF EVENTS MATCH THE ONE DESCRIBED IN THE BOOK? No comment.

which was amazing and the shoe was relative.

I SEE... SOME OF THE THINGS IN THAT RANGE ARE SIMILAR TO SHOES THAT HAVE COME OUT IN THE LAST YEAR, LIKE THE TENNIS BALL, DO I REMEMBER A BASKETBALL SHOE AS WELL? Yeah. So we did the Jim shoe. I said 'why don't we do a tennis shoe? Well let's just make it out of a tennis ball!' Then it's like. 'let's make a shoe out of basketball material', so our high-top became our basketball shoe. And then for the soccer shoe, we tried to do a couple of things but it never really turned out, so I basically took the stitching and just put that on a cool pattern and I think that the baseball shoe was made out of baseball glove material.

YOU OBVIOUSLY HAD YOUR SHARE OF 'INFLUENCES' BUT I WANTED TO ASK YOU, DO YOU FEEL THAT SOME OF THE STUFF THAT YOU DID WAS BLATANTLY SWIPED BY OTHER BRANDS? Oh yeah, for sure. I'm not even talking about skateboarding but we've caught people stealing shoes out of our trade show booth and we've seen shoes that are identical to Airwalks. basically the One with a circle with their logo on there. Copying is flattery or whatever, but when you work on something so hard, you don't necessarily want someone to steal it. I tried to do it physically as little as I could. What was rad was looking at a company that's got nothing to do with our footwear and you'd see an idea. Or you saw a process that you didn't see before or some jacked up brand that just had no relevance to anything on the planet. I remember this one time I was looking at a snowboot and how that's a rad shape sol made a low top sneaker on a snow boot last. And then I saw this brand that had the exact same design. I can't think of the brand...

NORTHWAVE?

Northwave yeah! Honestly, I'm sure of this, I know I made that shoe, brought it back, a couple of people in the office said it's too wide, it's crazy, it's not going to work! So we ended up making it on a narrower last. They may have seen it in our factory.

IT WAS A HUGE SUCCESS. Oh, yeah. It was huge for them.

SO BY THIS TIME YOU WEREN'T REALLY A SKATE BRAND? Yeah. Obviously, A skate shop's not

going to want an Outland sandal and we knew that. But we wanted to make shoes – all types of shoes. We loved shoes! When we did the Job shoe, that was literally for your job. We knew people would rather wear Airwalks than crappy brown old leather shoes to their job. Even though it wasn't a success, we wouldn't go after a market if we necessarily didn't feel we could fit into it.

DOES YOUR SENSE OF FASHION ADVENTURE EXPLAIN THE MULTI-COLOURED AIRWALKS? WAS IT DONE FOR A RIDER?

No, no. Actually that was a prototype pattern. This came from a theoretical question from Jamie and Roger "How many colours can you put on a shoe and will they make it?" And I said 'Let's make it and we'll send it over'. They actually made it. It was 13 colours, if you combined all of them.

AND WHAT DID YOU THINK?

It was a little too much, but we were stoked they actually did it. But if you look at it now, like you were saying, it's rad. It's exactly what people are doing now. We did so many different colour ways that it was crazy.

YOU ALSO HAD THE NTS (NOT THE SAME) - THE IDEA BEING THAT YOU BOUGHT ONE OF EACH - A YELLOW AND A RIGHT FOOT GREEN OR SOMETHING?

That was what I was hoping would happen. But the actual idea was that I always wanted to do shoes in one colour on every panel. At that time I don't think everything was right up to speed as far as technology because with all these different





materials from suede to PU to rubber to embroidery, it was almost an impossibility to get that right in production. You could probably do it in sampling, but no-one would be able to make them like that. Everyone in the industry knew how hard that was, to do an all-over yellow shoe. And everyone at that time knew that you can not sell a yellow shoe. It's just fact.

AND DID IT SELL?

Yeah, it did pretty well, but the thing that really helped it a little bit was you know, what the REM guy...

MICHAEL STIPE?

He came to the trade show with some guy that knew about skateboarding, anyway, he comes up to me and he says 'Hey, I love your shoes, I want to have a yellow and a green on each foot!' So I brought him both and then I gave the other half pair to my friend. And I had what I wanted. I didn't tell him that's what I wanted people to do. It wasn't like the success of the One or anything, but it was ok.

SO THE BRAND SORT OF FIZZLED OUT IN SOME WAYS. DO YOU HAVE ANY COMMENTS ON THE END?

Greed, coffee, and a man that hated skateboarding and action sports! George wanted to turn Airwalk into a stale brown shoe company. I remember this quote, 'Tony Hawk will never be as popular as Michael Jordan.' We were forced to move to Pennsylvania which was the dumbest idea ever. We starting hiring all these great designers, developers, marketers and category managers and we also hired Les Horne who was the one of the best developers I worked with because he understood me and what I wanted. So we're growing fast and all of a sudden we're in Footlocker and everywhere, but we're still in all these different places and these new brands start popping up. Sometime after this, all of a sudden, people

start talking about Airwalk. Was it cool anymore? To cut a long story short, basically we only had the same five shoes that were successful everywhere. Foot Locker started thinking that we're not cool and skate

boarders started guitting because

we're not hard core and it just starts going down and down. Not only that, there are all these other elements that are pushing it down. The other skate shoe companies were leveraging their way in by our mistakes.

SOUNDS LIKE A SPIRAL THAT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO DEFUSE.

Yeah, and a lot of things were starting to get weird. Everyone was in panic mode so everyone's saying to themselves 'Do I want to stay?' and a rumour started that they wanted to sell the brand.

HOW DID YOU FEEL?

That was probably the worst time in my life, you know, it was just hard because you could see what was going to happen. I said to people we need to push this line forward, but even if we did push, you know, would it matter? Maybe, but when you know something's going to happen and it does, you can't really say I told you so. It doesn't really fix the problem, you know. I learned that the hard way.

YOU OBVIOUSLY LEFT AT SOME POINT.

Well they sold the company. I left soon after the new management.

YOU'RE THERE FOR 16 YEARS? Yeah

DID YOU JUST FEEL, HEARTBROKEN OR RELIEVED IT WAS OVER? It was like someone died in my family, maybe like I died. I was devastated. I couldn't sleep. It was really hard because it's like you're a part of building something and someone is destroying it. So then you know, Lee was fired and that was really hard for me, not to mention how he felt. He was a real President. He could manage people and he didn't do anything wrong. He was trying to fix things and he was battling on with his feet and hands tied.

YOU'VE HAD A FAIR BREAK FROM THIS MONUMENTAL EXPERIENCE. HOW DO YOU FEEL NOW? ARE YOU ABLE TO THINK FONDLY OF THE GOOD TIMES AND FORGET ABOUT BAD TIMES? Yeah, I think for me it took a long time to get over the nightmare at the end. When you're hanging on only because you think that they're going to sell it, I felt bad about that sort of thing, but I should have just not worried. I should have left much, much earlier, but you want to believe in people. I loved that I had faith in so many people, even though I made a lot of mistakes because of that faith. I get excited thinking about all the good times, the people and how it was fun making the shoes with everyone. I was allowed to make anything I wanted. I've never known anyone that's had as much

freedom and was allowed to explore as much which in itself is enough to make me happy.

> HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE SKATE INDUSTRY NOW? IT SEEMS TO BE AT AN ALL TIME MORASS, EVERYONE SEEMS TO BE DOING EXACTLY THE SAME THING. DOES THAT MAKE YOU FEEL KINDA DEPRESSED?

Yeah, maybe they're all a little bit afraid to do something different and get called out because of it. If you look at the product, you kind of know where it came

from. But is that bad? It's not like someone really needs to reinvent the skate shoe. Maybe that's what skateboarding has to be. It's not like they're not innovative or creative. I think that they have to evolve themselves to what skateboarding wants and that's what they're doing.

I FEEL SAD WHEN I LOOK AT THE CURRENT MAGS AND ALL THE ADS, THE SHOES, THE LANGUAGE IS THE SAME. AND WHEN I LOOK BACK AT THE '80S, THERE'S SO MUCH FUN, THERE'S SO MUCH OPTIMISM.

Yeah. It was just a time that a lot of skaters that were wearing whatever crazy stuff they wanted. I mean you look at the ...

MC HAMMER PANTS FOR EXAMPLE!

Yeah, but you look at the Vision stuff. I mean, I'm not going to go wear MC Hammer pants and a fanny pack now. But there was a short time when Gonz and Mike V – icons of skateboarding – wore stuff like that. Gonz was riding for 'Life's a Beach', he wore these crazy prints like the Jetsons and stuff. You couldn't wear that now but that whole era didn't last for a long time. It's just changed. To me it seemed that people wore what they really wanted to and didn't care what other pros thought of them. And now it seems like the uniform is determined by a few, stays a lot longer and looks a lot tamer.

AMEN SIN. IT'S BEEN RAD TALKING TO YOU.