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## Afraid to Dirty Your Pricey Air Jordans? Call In the Super Sneaker Cleaners

Fancy footwear fans find best way to get their shoes clean is to pay someone else to do it; 'works of art'

By Ray A. Smith

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Moshood Olafunmishe rarely wore his \$660 Kanye West-designed, limited-edition Yeezy Boost sneakers, preserving them for special occasions only.

When he did finally wear the shoes to a party recently, the unthinkable happened: Someone spilled a drink on them.



Too pretty to wear

“It was a massive stain on the front,” said the London-based 28-year-old market researcher. “I was so annoyed when I looked at it and knew there was no way I was going to be able to do them justice.”

Because the shoes are made of knitted fused yarn, suede and have a fabric loop at the heel, he knew they would require a clean beyond his expertise. He put the Yeezys away in a box to languish in limbo.

“I was on the brink of throwing them away.”

Pressure to keep limited-edition, expensive footwear looking good has long been high among luxury sneaker lovers. But a toothbrush and soapy water are no match for today’s lavish styles

which can cost more than \$1,000 and feature at least three different materials whether mesh, suede, leather or some type of fabric in addition to rubber.

Hardcore fans, known as “sneakerheads,” are increasingly finding the best way to get their shoes clean is to pay someone else to do it for them. Some of the most effective cleaners turn out to be ex-Marines.

Mr. Olafunmishe eventually discovered a sneaker-cleaning business on Instagram with before-and-after pictures of cleaned-up kicks. After mailing in his Yeezys and paying about \$35, he says he got them back a few weeks later looking practically brand new. Now, he can take out any of his 20 high-end sneakers whenever he wants.



Moshood Olafunmishe's Yeezy sneakers before and after they were cleaned by Reon Codrington. PHOTO: REON CODRINGTON

The desire to keep these harder-to-clean shoes looking “fresh out the box,” has created an emerging industry of self-proclaimed sneaker-cleaning specialists. Companies generally charge about \$35 for a “basic cleaning” and more for advanced services; Other Peoples Kicks, a Moreno Valley, Calif.-based cleaner, charges \$150 for sneakers “in critical condition.”

Coveted styles such as the Nike Air Jordan 11 “Concord” can retail for \$220 and Balenciaga's blue and orange Balenciaga's Triple S sneakers sell for \$950. They can sell for hundreds more on the resale market. With those kind of prices, cleaners bet some owners won't blink at their prices.

"I wouldn't want to waste my money on a new pair of sneakers that I already had if I could clean them up," said Prentice Burluson, who launched Other Peoples Kicks in January. The 41-year-old used to clean and restore sneakers from his own extensive collection, currently at around 400 pairs, as a hobby, learning from YouTube. "I would see someone do it and go through the steps with them," he said.

Confident he had mastered the skills after two years, the retired Marine set up "a catchy name," business cards, a website and UPS Drop Box. "I love helping people," he said.

How-to-clean videos abound on YouTube with sometimes elaborate step-by-step directions. Methods vary, but can include disinfectant wipes, non-gel toothpaste, a lightly dampened cloth, a leather moisturizer and a suede and leather protector spray.



Balenciaga's Triple S sneakers sell for \$950. PHOTO: JEREMY MOELLER/GETTY IMAGES

Tramaine Oxley, whose seven-month-old business goes by the name Sneaker\_staykrisp, works out of the kitchen of his Brooklyn apartment, in the wee hours before and after work. The 37-year-old, who drives for Uber by day, says he is self-taught, having cleaned his and his friends' sneakers for years. His tools include a microfiber cloth, a soft brush, a hard-bristle brush, hot water, a cleaning solution, and an eraser.

It can be a dirty business.

"I've had people whose sneakers smell horrible," Mr. Oxley said. "Some people wear sneakers without socks. Feet sweat." He uses a sneaker laundry detergent plus a deodorizing spray in those cases.





Tramaine Oxley with some of the shoes he has worked on. PHOTO: TRAMAINE OXLEY

Some traditional shoe-repair shops are adding sneaker cleaning to their services. “We’ve been seeing a younger demographic bringing in designer luxury sneakers,” said David Mesquita, vice president and co-owner of Leather Spa, a New York-based service with five locations in the city including a Saks Fifth Avenue men’s store. “It’s definitely 50% more luxury sneakers business now than two years ago.”

Customers are often ecstatic when they get their dirty or damaged sneakers back from a cleaner. “I said ‘Are you sure you didn’t just buy a new pair?’” said Sindu Carty, a 27-year-old college student from Brooklyn, after seeing what Mr. Oxley had done on her scuff-marked and dirty \$500 Yeezys. “I didn’t believe it.” She was relieved after having been teased about the condition of her sneakers by friends.

“A sneakerhead can’t walk around in dirty sneakers; that’s like a huge faux pas,” said Richard Dudley, a security consultant who in 2015 founded Bespoq, a Washington, D.C.-based service that specializes in shoe shines and sneaker cleaning. He started the business after being unable to find repair shops that could properly clean his own footwear, including limited-edition sneakers.

Military training comes in handy. He is a 45-year-old former Marine. “Properly cleaned and maintained footwear is a part of our genetic makeup,” he said. “I got a couple of buddies of mine, former military guys, to help me. These are people that know how to do this.”



Sneakers on display at an event in Rome in September. PHOTO: ALESSANDRO BIANCHI/REUTERS

is grateful the high-end sneaker boom hasn't shown signs of slowing down.



Before and after photos of Air Jordans cleaned and repaired by Kenneth Collier. PHOTO: KENNETH COLLIER.

For Kenneth Collier, of Richmond, Va., who operates Sole Bandit Restorations out of the back of a barbershop in an office complex, this isn't just a side job. "This is my everyday hustle," the 24-year-old said. "If I don't touch shoes every day, I don't eat." He

"People see them as like maybe works of art," said Reon Codrington, who launched his sneaker-cleaning service, Crep Guardiola, in London last year.

The 30-year-old travel agent cleans and restores expensive sneakers out of the garage of his home.

He decided to

start the business after getting comments on how clean his own sneakers were.

“I was just winging it in the beginning, to be fair,” he said. He made “not too many mistakes” that he was able to cover up. Now he counts Mr. Olafunmishe among his clients. A beat-up pair of Balenciaga sneakers from another customer took him about two hours to get in decent shape. “I wasn’t able to get it ‘factory fresh’ but he was happy with them,” he said. “Luckily enough the person I was cleaning it for was a friend of a friend.”

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