

## DISPLAY OF POWER EXCERPT

DAYMONDJOHNS.COM AND  
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AN EXCERPT FROM

### **DISPLAY OF POWER**

### ***HOW FUBU CHANGED A WORLD OF FASHION, BRANDING AND LIFESTYLE***

By Daymond John with Daniel Paisner

# SHOW

I couldn't run this operation from the back of my van forever. After those first couple sell-throughs at concerts and marches and Black Expos, and after dipping my toe in the waters of direct mail advertising, I realized I needed to get it together if I meant to grow this "business" beyond a one-shot operation. I needed to incorporate. I needed to trademark the FUBU name and logo. I needed to find some way to streamline my efforts.

I registered the FUBU name, as a DBA—doing business as. That was the cleanest way to play it, at that early stage. I dug deep and paid for a lawyer, to dot all the i's and cross all the t's. I developed a business plan—a loose plan, to start, but it was a place to begin. I also brought in my boys as partners. There was me, J, Carl, Keith and one other guy. That one other guy, he came and went. We tried a few different guys in that role. Whoever it was, he was like the fifth Beatle. He'd work with us a while, lose interest and drop out. The next guy would work with us a while, lose interest and drop out. It was always someone with a short-term view. One week, it was some guy who wanted to be a rapper. Then it was some guy who wanted to be an actor. Always, there was something better out there—or so each one of these guys thought. It was just as well. Who wants to hang around chickens when you're hoping to fly like an eagle?

The four of us, though, we stuck with it. It was a sideline for each of us, so we stuck with it as far as our schedules allowed. We made it as much of a priority as we could. I kept my job at Red Lobster and worked my FUBU business around my shifts. A couple weeks in there, I don't think I had time to sleep. I thought, I'll sleep when I'm dead. The pipe dream was to open our own boutique, where we could sell our own clothes and some other independent lines. That was the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and we were a long way off. Short of that, we wanted to get our clothes in some local stores, maybe even get a department store display. In the meantime, we sold our shirts at every Black Expo in driving distance of New York. Philadelphia, Washington DC, Boston.

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There was usually a show every month or so. In between Expos, we continued to hit the concert circuit and do some selling there, if we thought it made sense. We got to be fairly well known. Anyway, our clothes got to be well known. They had a certain style to them, a certain flavor. And the concept behind our entire line—young guys from the neighborhood putting out comfortable, affordable clothes for other young guys from the neighborhood—seemed to hit with a lot of people. We put it out there, and it caught on, to where people didn't mind handing over twenty or thirty bucks to us for a nice t-shirt because it was like putting money back into their own community, because we offered something of value in return. Really, these were nice shirts, an easy sell at an easy price point, and soon enough we had some of our boys wearing them in the clubs, and that just reinforced the brand.

We did about six of these Expos in a stretch of two years, and each time we brought more and more inventory. Each time, we tried to do a little something new, to push things in some new direction. Different styles, different looks, different colors. And people came looking for us. We couldn't keep our clothes in stock, that's how much buzz there was attached to our product. Can't say for sure where the buzz came from, those first couple shows, but it came. We were too busy handling the mess of details getting ready for each Expo. It took time to design and print the shirts, to carry the goods back and forth from our suppliers, to make our booth look a little nicer each time out.

'Course, I know full well the buzz didn't happen all by itself. Without really realizing it, we did what we could to help it along. We didn't think of it as marketing or branding or advertising, didn't even think of it as a strategy, but we kept pushing the line in every way available to us. We wore our clothes ourselves, out at the clubs and at concerts, so we became our own walking billboards. We got our friends to wear our stuff, too, and since New York was the center of our universe and the locus of hip-hop culture, a lot of our friends were starting to make some noise of their own, so it worked out well for us that as all eyes were starting to fix on them they were fixing on our t-shirts at the same time.

At some point early on, we branched out into hockey jerseys, which were just becoming hot. Chris Latimer, a well-known promoter on the hip-hop scene who consulted for CCM, the biggest hockey jersey company in North America, was getting all these rappers to wear his jerseys, so I followed his lead and bought a bunch of blanks from CCM. I told them I coached in a youth league, or some line of bull, because they wouldn't sell it to me if they knew the intended use, and they shipped me the blanks with the colors of the current NHL teams. I worked with the color scheme on each jersey and added some nice FUBU elements. Big block letters. Embroidery. Whatever I could sprinkle on those jerseys to make them distinctive, something a kid would want to wear for a night on the town.

More and more, as I was putting myself out there and dealing with manufacturers and shipping people and lawyers and designers and whoever the hell I had to deal with to get FUBU off the

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ground, I started to realize how important it was for me to be able to communicate with all types of people, from all kinds of backgrounds. Black, white, Asian, Hispanic . . . you had to get along with everyone, especially in the garment industry. Gay and straight. Christian, Jewish and Muslim. College-educated and high school dropouts. I knew as much going in, and it was fairly obvious we'd have to draw on talented people from a variety of backgrounds, but it was something I had to pay attention to just the same. I was working with people of every conceivable stripe, from every conceivable station, and I was determined to do a decent job of it. The key was looking past those stripes, and getting along.

Around the time of our launch, the country started getting a little smaller, in terms of music and reach and pop-cultural phenomenon. We didn't plan on it, didn't anticipate it, didn't really notice while it was happening, but that's what happened. Anyway, that was my read. Throughout the 1980s, when rap was establishing a foothold on the music scene, the main influences were mostly regional. You had your East Coast rappers and your West Coast rappers, and a couple groups in-between. You had artists like Run DMC and LL Cool J in New York; NWA in Los Angeles; Luke in Miami; the Ghetto Boys down in Texas, and on and on. Maybe four or five regions, all across the country, setting the tone in terms of rap and hip-hop, and there was very little crossover from one region to the next. Kids in New York didn't listen to music out of L.A., not in any kind of big way, although kids in L.A. had no choice but to listen to what was coming out of New York, because truth be told that's where it was at.

Kids in the heartland listened to some watered-down, politically correct version of rap and hip-hop. But that all started to change, as FUBU came of age. All of a sudden, artists were on a level playing field. DJs started spinning their records, no matter where they were from, and that opened up the country in a big way. Not just in music, but in movies, in fashion, in business . . . across the board. Karl Kani was being sold in Macy's, just to give you an idea how mainstream we were about to become. LL was developing a sitcom for CBS. And for the first time the Top 40 pop charts were shot-through with rap and hip-hop.

So that was the mood of the room, the mood of the country, and it hit me that the way to tap into this new landscape was through television. Wasn't such a genius idea at the time. I mean, big companies had been advertising on prime time network television for decades, but we didn't have prime time network television kind of money. Hell, we didn't have any money. Whatever we made went straight to rent, or right back into materials for our next run. Or I'd spend it on gas and tolls and a new set of tires. The genius move, if there was one, was to tap into our target market on the cheap — mainly, through music videos. It was like guerilla product placement, the way these rap and hip-hop artists could start or validate a trend simply by wearing a certain type of outfit or mentioning a brand in one of their lyrics.

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It was so obvious to me, the power of this new art form—and yet, for whatever reason, it didn't appear obvious to anybody else. Weren't a whole lot of people doing what we were doing, looking to bust out on the back of the music business, and before I even realized it we had kind of eased our way onto the video scene. Very quickly, music videos had become our CNN, our Newsweek, our bulletins from the front. Music videos and BET—that's how we stayed in touch with each other, and on top of each new trend.

Back then, Ralph McDaniels was one of the most respected promoters of rap and hip-hop in our community—a real maven, in every sense of the term. He's still a force on local radio in New York, but in the middle 1980s he was one of the first people playing rap and hip-hop music videos in the city, back when MTV wouldn't touch this type of music. He had a one-hour show every afternoon, and it's impossible to underestimate the influence of that one show. For the first time, you could see young black people on television who weren't drug dealers or basketball players. It was a huge deal, to see kids just like us, making it big, or about to make it big, on the back of something positive like music. Everybody we knew watched Ralph McDaniels, so I followed him down to some event in Virginia one summer weekend, thinking I could give out some shirts and maybe get some coverage on his show. It was a no-brainer, and I ended up giving a bunch of shirts to Ralph McDaniels, and he ended up interviewing me on his show. He's a good guy, and we hit it off. That was the first time any of us were interviewed on behalf of FUBU, and as soon as that thing aired we started getting calls from stores all over the city, wanting to carry our line.

You could chart the cause-and-effect. Trouble was, we weren't set up to supply these stores in any kind of big-time way. Some of them operated on a COD basis, and that would kind of keep the FUBU engine running, but most of them did business on consignment, which meant we suddenly had all this inventory out there with no money coming back in. It was a real drain on our cash flow. With the Expos and concerts and stuff, we were used to selling through our line and plowing the profits back into the next run, but here we were stretching ourselves pretty thin.

Ralph McDaniels had a lot of things going on. He was a true promoter. He was into all kinds of fashion shows and events. He gave many of today's artists their start, and hip-hop owes him a tremendous debt. Mary J. Blige. Puff Daddy. LL Cool J. He was like the Ed Sullivan of our world, always spotlighting these young performers, trying to get them the attention they couldn't find on mainstream outlets like MTV, attention he felt they deserved, and he took a liking to us. He liked our clothes. He liked what we were about. He put us on the map, really, at least in New York, and other than the small problem of trying to figure out how to keep ahead on these consignment sales, we were really rolling.

Meanwhile, my boy Hype Williams started making a name for himself as a music video director (Ralph McDaniels gave him his start as well), and I started going down to his sets with a bunch of

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shirts, hoping to convince one of the artists or one of the dancers to wear them in the shoot. I didn't think this all the way through, to what it might mean for our business, but it was clear even to me that getting these young artists to wear our clothes in their videos could only be a good thing. I mean, putting one of my shirts on LL Cool J and seeing him wear it onstage . . . that was thrill enough, one of the best feelings in the world, and on top of that it created a huge demand for our clothes.

We had about ten high-end shirts we tried to keep in circulation among these various artists, on video sets around the city. Wasn't just Hype Williams. We also hit up Diane Martel and any other music video director who would give us the time of day. You have to realize, most of the video shoots back then were out in the open. They were big deals, in our community. A lot of them were non-union jobs, with a lot of our friends from the neighborhood working as part of the crew. A lot of the artists were still on the way up, still living in the same community, still plugged in to the same crowd. Most times, one of us would know someone who knew someone who was involved. It was like six-degrees-of-separation, only it wasn't even that far removed.

Usually, we were just once or twice removed from knowing someone like Hype Williams, or someone else high up on the set of each video, so there was always a way in. We'd find out where they were shooting, talk our way onto the set, hand out a shirt, wait around while they shot the video, take back the shirt, get it dry-cleaned, then find another set where we could hand out the same shirt all over again. In most cases, the artists and dancers were too happy to wear our clothes, because they were hot—and because we approached them with genuine respect. We were fans, first and foremost, and if we'd gone after these artists like it was a business deal, we probably wouldn't have gotten anywhere. These days, most product placement agents don't even know the artists' names, but we knew the lyrics to their songs. It meant something to us, you know.

We got a ton of publicity on the back of those first few shirts. The very first set we cracked in this way was a video shoot for "Punks Jump Up to Get Beat Down," by the group Brand Nubian. Jeff and Chaka set it up for us (they're the managers behind Ludacris's success), and that video ended up getting a ton of play, so we ended up getting a ton of play. We also got one of our shirts into a Mariah Carey video early on, with Old Dirty Bastard, and a video for "Where I Want to Be Boy," the second single for Miss Jones, which was about to break big.

Typically, there'd be about two months between the video shoot and the time these videos would start to get some airplay, so it took a while for us to see any results, and in the meantime we kept at it. Hard. There was another video in there for a group called Bitches With Attitude, another one of Hype's shoots. Sometimes we'd hang out at a set for ten, twelve hours and get nothing accomplished. I remember one long day on the set of a Grand Puba video, and we just couldn't get anyone to wear our clothes. Everybody was nice enough about it, and nobody seemed to mind that we were hanging around, but the look of our clothes didn't match up with the look of the video and we went home empty-handed—after eighteen hours of waiting around! That happened every once in

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a while, but we just kept hustling and hustling, lending out these ten shirts and maybe a couple hockey jerseys, and waiting for these videos to break.

Nowadays, this kind of stuff is often arranged beforehand, but in the early days of rap and hip-hop videos everything was a lot looser, a lot more casual. I even managed to jump into the shot myself, on a Biggie Smalls video. If you blink you might miss me, but if you look real fast you can catch me for half a second, popping in, wearing a FUBU hat.

When these videos started to break, our phone started to ring. In a big, relentless way. We were still a long way off from opening our own boutique, but a lot of small shops in and around New York City wanted to carry our line. All of a sudden, FUBU became the hot brand. There was a store called Montego Bay in Jamaica that was one of the first to give us some space, and another store out in the Green Acres Mall on Long Island. Our first prominent display at a Manhattan boutique was at a store called Bee's Knees, on Broadway, across from the downtown Tower Records. There was another store in the Bronx run by my boy Macho, and they also carried our clothes early on; their security guard was a no-name rapper who weighed just 170 pounds, who would go on to great fame (and great weight) as Big Pun. And for some reason, there were three or four stores out in Seattle, of all places, and another three or four in Japan, that started to carry our line.

A lot of people look back at our launch and think we were made by these little stores in our black communities, but that's not how it happened. That was part of it, no question, but all kinds of people sparked to the FUBU line, and to the message behind it. Surfers and skateboarders were big for us, in the beginning, and we were happy to include everyone under our tent. Some of these stores only ordered twenty pieces, and we still had to figure out how to deal with the problem of consignment sales, but we figured it was worth the hassle. If they wanted to carry our clothes, we could find a way to make it work.

Clearly, these music video "product placements" became the cornerstone of our start-up operation. Already, we'd seen an enormous word-of-mouth type buzz through these Black Expos. People knew about our clothes and came looking for us. But that was purely regional. That was our grasp not quite exceeding our reach. These videos, though, put us on a whole other level, a national level, so I did a little quick research and came up with what I thought was an appropriate next move. I thought we'd head out to Vegas, to the Men's Apparel Guild in California trade show, and try to make our first piece of real noise. It's a key show in the apparel business, the MAGIC show, and I knew we needed to be out there, that it was a logical next step, but that was about all I knew. I didn't know you needed to sign up as an exhibitor at least a couple weeks in advance in order to display your product on the trade show floor. I didn't know that we needed to dress for success and that our baggy jeans and loose t-shirts wouldn't quite cut it alongside all these turned-out fashion industry types.

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I didn't even know that the clothing business ran on credit, that even if we wrote a whole bunch of orders all we'd have was a whole bunch of paper, promising payment on delivery. I might have known, considering the few stops and starts we'd had with some of those boutiques that worked on consignment, but it still hit me like a giant surprise. We'd still have to find a way to pay for the goods to hold up our end of the deal, and on top of that we'd still have to produce and deliver all those garments, and at some point on that first trip out to Vegas I caught myself thinking, That's a lot of hoops to jump through just to get paid.

It's the oldest line in business—it takes money to make money— but money was tight back then. Real tight. My pockets were like rabbit ears. There were five of us out there on this trip. My mother still had her job at American Airlines, so we were able to get out there for free, long as we flew stand-by. Naturally, we couldn't all head out there at once, because we couldn't count on there being enough stand-by seats to go around, so we staggered our itineraries. My partner Carl, he had a broken ankle, and it took him about 18 hours hanging at the terminal at JFK, just to get on a plane, and it turned out none of us were able to catch a flight directly to Vegas. We all flew to Los Angeles instead, and drove the rest of the way in a cheap rental car, but these were the resources available to us so we worked with what we had.

Once we got out to Vegas, we got ourselves a single hotel room at the Mirage, about five miles from the convention center where the MAGIC show was being held, and the accommodations were about as tight as our budget: one of us slept in the bathtub, two of us slept on the floor and the other two slept in the bed, head to toe. We quickly realized—of course—that our single hotel room would have to double as our showroom. Again, something we might have known going in, but we figured it out soon enough. We ran out to Home Depot, bought a clothing rack, put it up against the window and called ourselves designers. The room smelled like feet and fast food, and we only had seven or eight garments so there wasn't a whole lot for the buyers to look at once we got them up there (other than our own clothes, thrown about the place, our underwear sunnyside-up on the floor)—but, like I said, we didn't have the paper to do this first show up right.

Turned out the buyers didn't care about that smelly hotel room, or the five-mile haul from the convention center. Turned out there was enough heat around our line to get us past these few glitches. For all I know, our seat-of-the-pants outsider approach might have made us more attractive as designers. Clearly, we were out of our element, but that was the point of our entire line. It said as much right there on our label and in our logo: FUBU. For us, by us. We were a bunch of kids from Queens, taking our hustle out to Vegas to try to sell our goods to the big boys, so it made sense that we were cut a little differently. Our clothes were cut a little differently—and for good measure so were we.

Turned out, too, that we did a whole lot of things right. We'd gotten our t-shirts into enough music videos to create some vacuum, and some name recognition. We'd been featured on Ralph

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McDaniel's show back in New York, and placed an ad or two in the back pages of a couple magazines, so people were starting to know what we were about. We'd even gotten fellow Hollis native LL Cool J to wear our shirts and hats out in public, and to pose for a picture we were able to use in some print advertising. This right here is a story. LL had worn one of our red polar fleece jackets in this video he did with Boys II Men, for a song called "Hey Lover," and it got a ton of play. I sewed the thing myself, in my house, and I convinced him to wear it during the shoot. (Doesn't get more ground-floor than that!) I used to drive for LL's manager, Brian, and do a little work for him as a roadie. Once, I even drove home his dirty laundry to be cleaned. There might have been another dozen or so kids doing the same kind of thing, and most of them wanted to be rappers themselves, but I was drawn to the power of it. The proximity to all that money and fame . . . not to mention all those girls. And LL was cool about it.

From when he got his first record deal, he was cool, and now he had a television show in the works, and he was starting to do movies, and he still came back to the neighborhood to check out his grandmother and keep connected. He remembered me well enough, and on one of these trips back home we got to talking. I told him what I was up to with my line of clothes, and he put it in my head to go after every person I could think of in the music business, from Russell Simmons on down, and get them into some type of FUBU product. The line he used (I'll never forget it) was that I should stalk them like a crazed pregnant woman. Be relentless, he said. Don't take no for an answer. Never let them breathe until they endorse you in some way.

So what did I do? I turned it back on LL—because, when it came down to it, he was the only person I really knew in the music business. I followed his advice and stalked him like a crazed pregnant woman. I learned from LL's new manager, Charles Fisher, that LL had to catch a plane one afternoon, so I grabbed a pile of clothes and a friend who knew how to work a camera and planted myself in front of LL's house, I guess on the thinking that it would be pretty hard for him to walk on by and not even stop to take a picture. Here again, I didn't know the first thing about endorsement deals, and of course it never occurred to me that if LL let himself be seen as a spokesperson for our little line of clothing he'd ace himself out of any potential deals with Levi's or Tommy Hilfiger or any other designer that might be in a position to actually pay him for the deal.

We didn't have any money, and LL knew we didn't have any money, and I didn't realize it but I was putting him in a tough spot, hanging out in front of his house like that. But I kept at it, and eventually I wore him down. He had to come out to catch his plane at some point, and when he did I pressed it on him like the crazed, relentless pregnant woman he told me to be. Started slipping one of our shirts around his neck before he could shoo me away. LL was understandably irritated, and on serious edge, but then something clicked. He just shrugged, finally, in a what the hell kind of way, and said, "Alright, let's just take the shot." LL posed with the group of us, and if you looked closely you could see my gold grills, that's how much of a street guy I still was at the time.

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Anyway, my head nearly exploded, that's how much it meant, him throwing in and posing for us. Then he said, "If you ever get successful, you better not forget this." And I haven't. Believe me, I haven't. And I never will. He might not see it the same way, but I will always be LL's biggest fan. For a while in there, he was our biggest fan as well. He even wore one of our hats in a GAP ad, and slipped in the phrase "For us, by us, on the low" in his rhyme. The ad ran nationally for weeks before GAP executives figured out the not-so-subliminal message, and it became a very famous example of guerilla marketing and a textbook case of David taking on Goliath, using Goliath's multi-million dollar ad budget without Goliath even knowing.

Several heads from GAP and the responsible ad agency started to roll, and they pulled the campaign. However, it turned out that many African-Americans and hip-hop kids were coming into their stores looking for FUBU, and they ended up re-running those ads about a year later, because of the attention. There are only a handful of artists like LL in this regard—Fat Joe (the gatekeeper of the Latin market), Slim Thug, Bun B, Fabolous, Ja Rule, Rick Ross and Jay-Z—people who can go to the wall for you and your product, because they're not only artists, they're businessmen.

I ended up using that LL Cool J shot in a full-page ad in a magazine called The Source, and I ended up using tear-sheets of that ad as our promotional flier out in Vegas, and taken together it created the impression that we were a happening young company with a devoted following—not to mention the resources to hire a hip-hop icon like LL Cool J to endorse our line. Didn't really matter that we didn't have a booth on the convention floor. We had the appearance of a booth. We had the display of power and success. And so I'd hand out a flier and scrawl the name of our hotel and our room number on the back, and after a couple days we'd dragged enough major buyers through our tiny hotel room all the way across town from the trade show to account for nearly \$400,000 worth of orders.

Four hundred thousand dollars!

You have to realize, that kind of money was incomprehensible to me at the time. Just off the charts, you know. And it wasn't just the money that set me reeling; what it represented was just so far off the map of my thinking that I couldn't begin to get my head around it. I was thrilled at the response the whole time we were in Vegas, but soon as I sat down on the plane headed home, I started to sweat. I started to obsess about the material I'd need to fill those orders. The machines I'd need to cut all those clothes. The workers I'd need to sew the product. The factory and warehouse space I'd need to set to work. And on and on. It got to where I looked around the cabin of that plane and caught myself thinking, What am I into here? But then I thought of my big, empty Honeymooners bag, stuffed into the overhead compartment above my head, and I realized full well what had gone on, what would happen next.

My suitcase may have still been empty, but we were finally in business—and good to go.

The preceding text is an excerpt from  
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