

## INTERVIEW

## CRAIG FORD

**Co-founder of Jacket Required, Craig Ford has launched a permanent shop on London's Marshall Street for the Billionaire Boys Club and ICECREAM brands. He's also about to open the first a number of names\* store at the old A Bathing Ape shop on Upper James Street - which will house a selection of the brands he distributes and other exclusive buy-ins, as Tom Bottomley discovers.**

**Tom Bottomley: When did you establish a number of names\*?**

Craig Ford: It was in 2008, initially with three brands - Billionaire Boys Club (BBC), Gourmet and Ambush. There was just me and two other members of staff, and now there are around 14 brands and 24 members of staff. We bring all of the labels to the Jacket Required shows. I started off in premises on Shoreditch High Street, above the Present shop, doing everything from sales, PR, marketing, distribution and accounts. The original office is purely a sales showroom, and we have another office around the corner - where the back-end of the business is - as well as an in-house design, PR and marketing team.

**TB: Why did you shut the A Bathing Ape (BAPE) shop on London's Upper James Street?**

CF: My contract with BAPE came to an end at the end of February this year. It was a six-year franchise contract that I signed with the original brand owner Nowhere - headed up by fashion designer Nigo. That company was subsequently bought by the Hong Kong fashion conglomerate I.T in 2011 - which kept Nigo on for two years as design director. They were not renewing any franchise agreements, so my time with BAPE is over, though it was an exciting six years. Nigo now concentrates on his Human Made label, which we distribute for Europe.

**TB: Are BBC and ICECREAM still owned by Pharrell Williams?**

CF: Yes. They used to be joint owned by Pharrell Williams and Nigo, but Nigo sold his shares to Jay-Z. I've worked with the brands since they started 12 years ago. I was originally distributor for those labels and, when Nigo sold his shares, it changed the structure of the company, and I became the licensee for Europe. So now I am effectively designing and producing part of the range. They make the main range, but I am allowed to design a percentage of it - which the rest of the world can buy into.

**TB: What's happened to the previous shop?**

CF: I changed the BAPE store into a temporary BBC and ICECREAM shop, but have now moved it to open a new permanent store on Marshall Street, which I feel is a better location for the brand. It opened mid-March, with a launch party hosted by hip-hop DJ Semtex from Radio 1, with Rejjie Snow, Vic Mensa, The Underachievers and Flatbush Zombies from New York performing live. It was invite only, and it went down really well. Regarding the previous shop on Upper James Street, I've been offered a good deal by the landlords to keep it, so I'm currently in the process of opening it as an a number of names\* shop. It will carry a hand-picked selection of products from most of the brands I distribute, such as TSPTR, Gourmet, Bedwin & The Heartbreakers, Human Made and C.E. It will open around mid-April.

**TB: Will there be any exclusives?**

CF: Yes - we are making special products with those brands that will only be for the store. We're also bringing in a small selection of other brands from the UK, Japan and the US - which are outside of our stable of brands. I want to have a real point of difference, and they will be unique to our store in Europe.

**TB: Why is being on the edge of Soho right for the new BBC and ICECREAM shop?**

CF: I've always considered Soho as the heart of London, ever since I was a kid coming down to London from Glasgow to go to shops such as M-Zone and Duffer of St George. Going back to the 50s and 60s, with shops such as Lord John and so on that happened in and around Carnaby

Street, Soho has been the epicentre of fashion and club culture.

**TB: Can we expect any further events to promote the shop featuring Pharrell Williams or Jay-Z?**

CF: They've got busy schedules, but they always do stuff for us when they're in town. It just so happened that our new shop launch wasn't good timing for them. But when they are next in London we will certainly see if we can do an event. We've done parties with Pharrell in London many times before and every time it's obviously a big draw.

**TB: Did you also look at East London?**

CF: There was a lot of noise surrounding retail in East London, and I seriously looked at shops there, especially since our showroom and offices are already there. But, ultimately, I decided that the rent-to-footfall equation was better value for money in Soho. Also, there was a bit of a spate of openings in East London, but now there's been a move of really good brands -and multi-brand stores - opening in Soho. Going to Shoreditch to shop now is a bit like going to Camden to shop in the late 80s and early 90s. It's in travel guides and so on as a destination to visit, but it's more of a trend thing. Whereas, from an international customer's point of view, if you come to London you are always going to come to Soho to hang out, eat, drink and shop. Marshall Street certainly appealed because of the rent to footfall ratio. We've designed a bright shop with stand-out neon signs that will get us noticed. We're still a destination shop because we're just off the main drag, but I think we will have decent passing trade, too.

**TB: Which products will you be introducing in the new shop?**

CF: We always make special products for the EU market. On top of that, we make special products just for our web store. But now we've got the permanent retail shop, we'll be making special products for that, too. A lot of stuff is printable T-shirts and sweatshirts, so we're going to do some exclusives that you will only be able to get in the store.

There's going to be a London theme to some BBC branded product. We recently did a T-shirt with UK grime crew Boy Better Know (BBK). We'd been planning to do something with them for quite some time. They performed at Sound Clash at Earls Court, which was a massive event with four different crews competing against each other. BBK won it the previous year, but controversially didn't this time. However, we did a BBK T-shirt incorporating the BBC logo, which they wore on stage. We sold the T-shirts in store the next day and they sold out in a day. People are still going crazy for those T-shirts, so we're always looking at opportunities like that which help to raise the profile of the brand in an environment where the brand fits.

**TB: How do you find selling two brands in one store? Do people differentiate between BBC and ICECREAM?**

CF: There are many differences. ICECREAM started from more of a skateboarding angle. Pharrell was into skateboarding, and his nickname was Skateboard P. He used to wear gold chains with mini gold skateboards on them. When he came onto the scene, there weren't many American rap artists and musicians who were into skateboarding. So he brought those two cultures together. Now there is much more of a culture, but he trail-blazed the way. The "ice" represents diamonds, and "cream" means money. Both brands started around the same time, and were originally the same kind of prices, but now ICECREAM is more accessibly priced, with T-shirts for £35. The style is more streetwear and skate influenced, and all graphic based. BBC is also very graphic based, but there are more expensive fabrics and more of an Ivy League preppy feel. The idea behind BBC was Pharrell playing on the notion that if you can send a man to space, you can do anything. Anyone can achieve anything. Hence the spaceman became the symbol

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of the brand. At first, it was just Pharrell and Nigo wearing the T-shirts, then they wore them in Pharrell's Frontin' video in 2003. It was a global hit, and BBC really took off. Roll forward to 2015 and the new shop, which I'm very excited about.

## FOUNDER

## A NUMBER OF NAMES\*