Waffles and A Jazzy Stripe Since ‘66

Lacing up a fresh pair of spotless sneakers or comfortably slipping into your old reliable shoes is a daily pleasure of our everyday lives. Around the world, there are countless brands, shapes, sizes, and uses of footwear. However, disregarding all of the corporate-laced-money-making-stripes and swooshes, there is one man who was the heart of the grassroots “Off the Wall” shoe brand, Paul Van Doren. His memoir, “Authentic,” lays out the rich history of his life, both internally and externally analyzing himself and those around him that made Vans what it is today.

Paul was born in 1930 in a small suburb of Boston named Braintree Massachusetts during the Great Depression. However, his father, John Bert Van Doren, an avid tinkerer, and Mother Rena Van Doren, a seamstress, provided Paul with an “extraordinary childhood.” From building firecrackers with his dad and siblings to sharing an outhouse with seven people, these simple times naturally drilled the importance of family into his head. Paul’s family lineage created a dynamic of Order and Discipline from his Dutch father and a keen sense for intimacy, disregarding anyone’s personal space, from his Italian mother. These strong familial values proved to be the glue that held Vans together many years later.

As a high school dropout at the age of sixteen, Paul stated, “the idea that I would rather work-never bothered me.” His generation was free of the negative stigma of refusing to finish school, unlike this day in age. He had plenty of time on his hands, dabbling in horse betting and effectively running the pool table for some pocket change at the local watering hole. His mom was unhappy with his delinquent teenage past times made the executive decision to throw him into a proper work environment. At Randolph Manufacturing Company, “The chucka chucka thumping was in concert a deafening buzz, but it was the smell - canvas mingles with rubber with a hint of diesel and human sweat - that was wholly novel.” This simple fabric and vulcanization manufacturing job introduced Paul to the art of being an efficient factory worker and later managed the workers in the Randy factory.

Paul quickly learned the ins and outs of the entire manufacturing process from vulcanizing the canvas shoes to organizing the factory. Although the focus of Randy’s was to produce shoes, Paul centered his managerial values on interacting with and physically connecting with his valued subordinates. A family-focused mentality, valuing an individual’s attitude and integrity. Paul’s explanation of his experience at Randy’s was filled with a positive reminiscent tone, as he rarely faced opposition, except his narrow-minded boss Bob. In February of 1965, Bob called him stating he was promoting two individuals from the management staff on the West Coast, whom Paul knew was incompetent and unfit to keep the company on track. In that instant, the young Van Doren called it quits and left Bob and Randy’s rubber factory behind.

35 years old. $250,000. The Van Doren Rubber Company. Paul and his long-time friend Serge D’Elia, who assisted him with sourcing raw goods and various materials, discussed a new venture into the world of shoe production. Paul was in his mid-thirties and knew his potential of establishing his own company. He was determined to make shoes the right way without cutting

corners or sacrificing quality. “Serge agreed to invest the $250,000 I’d need to start up the business.” This was only the start of the madness that ensued from their establishment in 1966 to the present day.

Paul’s kids played a huge role in the prosperity of the company, specifically his eldest son Stevie. Paul joked around stating that Stevie served as the unofficial title of CEO or Chief Entertainment Officer. He was enthralled by the surf skate culture of the ever-evolving streets of Southern California. The initial immersion into skating and surfing involving art, style, fashion, and individuality provided Vans with an established path to outward culture and inner purpose.

“Go Off the Wall!”

“Keep it fun. Don’t take yourself too seriously. It’s better just being spontaneous.”

By 1977 Paul had been running vans for a little over ten years, seeking creative and managerial help from friends and family working alongside him and growing the company.

Paul rarely focused on selfishly raking in profits, but as he worked day in and day out tirelessly until the early 1980s, he determined it was best to retire. Vans faced poor management over the next 20 years under multiple administrations. However, in 2004 VF Corporation bought the company and successfully reestablished Paul’s beloved styles of shoes, management, and company values, while adjusting for overall growth.

Nowadays, you can put on a pair of sunglasses with the Vans logo stamped on the side or even sign up for a Vans-sponsored surf competition. Paul was a simple creature of habit with extensive knowledge of designing and constructing vulcanized canvas shoes; although, his spirit lives on in every innovative endeavor of Vans today and the future.