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The Wild West Hustler: George Sully

by Matt Ho

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George Sully is probably the most animated person I've met to date.

We're in a conference room at his apartment complex in Liberty Village, and as I sit there like a therapist with my back against a single couch, notebook on my lap and pen in hand, George is across from me, moving. A lot.

He leans forward and backward constantly, his arms sway in every direction, he bangs emphatically on the table, and at one point, he searches for some wood to knock on. His speech is analogous with his movements; ironically, he tells me he can be at a loss for words, which he most definitely isn't in our three hours together.

The restless demeanor, intense enthusiasm and all-round friendly personality is a true testament to who he is: a purveyor of lifestyle, print media and fashion, which George says is probably the easiest way to define himself. The definitive term would be 'entrepreneur' or 'mogul;' Diddy is credited for inspiring him to amalgamate all his ventures under a single empire. He was also dubbed "Brand Man" by writer Jessica Sanchez in the August 2012 issue of *Localiez*, and he certainly dresses the part.

Today, George isn't his sartorial self. He's casual, but labelled. He's wearing a tee of indie pop band Stars with a g-sus leather jacket over it, Jonathan Shimoni denims, a Fossil watch on his left hand, a pair of thick vintage black-rimmed *Aeroplane* glasses, and a *Community 54* 'RAP' snapback on his head. "This is my homie's, these are your homie's, this is your family, this is your blood, so I had to wear some blood today, ya know what I mean? I have to do it right, so this is for you!" he says, cheerfully acknowledging our mutual ties.

The self-assigned moniker is the most fitting though even if it does take a sentence to make a statement.

Design Embassy Group is George's *Bad Boy Entertainment*, his 'umbrella corporation' (a word he uses lightly) currently housing his luxury coffee table book *TCHAD Quarterly*, sneaker label *Sully Wong*, youth program *The School of Hustle*, and consulting firm *Design Embassy Media*, specializing in re-branding for start-ups and corporate white hairs who haven't figured out hashtags or Pinterest. It's a lot to digest for one person, he admits, so his high energy is an absolute necessity if all operations are to be well-oiled and running. Business also involves making an appearance at every major media event in the city to smile, show face, shake a few hands, chat up the town. "Everybody knows me in every circle. I don't hide in one place at once at any time."

That's true. George is *everywhere*. The week before we met he was in a MasterCard campaign, a *Fuck Cancer* charity the night before our chat, a photo shoot with us eight days later and fourteen hours after that, aboard a 4am flight to Haiti with Michael 'Pinball' Clemons for *Adopt a Village*. That's only a small glimpse into his often hectic itinerary. I haven't even mentioned his recent trip to Barbados for a video shoot, nor the upcoming product launches and other endeavors that await him in the coming months. It's impossible to be in more than one place at once, and yet wherever he's not, he manages to maintain a

presence. “Go to [Toronto] Fashion Week, you turn to the back of the program book, and there I am looking at you like ‘Aha! Still fucking here!’ In Yorkville you see a poster of me and it’s fucking Sully in this crazy suit!”

His insane perpetual motion of chaos had me wondering how much I would’ve gotten out of George had I tailed him for the story in place of our calm Friday afternoon sit-down. His daily schedule would drive most to the brink of teary exhaustion and maybe even to senility. George *loves* it.

Growing up, he was already told he had too much going on, that he should focus on one thing, which was not a viable option for him. “I just can’t. I have all these things I want to express and I just can’t,” he says. Back in the day, he was an artist, designer, musical mutt producing beats, and a drummer for a Led Zeppelin cover band. For a guy who was pressured to figure it out, he did it pretty damn quick. Not long after high school he started his first urban clothing line *Limb Apparel* which saw a lucrative seven-year run at Athlete’s World. It didn’t fail either. In fact, it’s still around, only under a different name: *Sully Wong*.

“It just kind of merged. It was very subtle,” he describes the transition.

The ‘Wong’ to George’s ‘Sully’ is Henry Wong, a fellow sneaker aficionado whom George became acquainted with at a trade show. In a way, it plays out as a ‘right place at the right time’ story, though more so for Henry. For six months, he called repeatedly for designs he insistently swore he could put into production immediately. An initially cautious and reluctant George eventually caved and sent off one simple drawing he could live with being in someone else’s hands.

“Three weeks later, the same shit I put on paper was in physical form. I’m like ‘holy fuck...’” Holy fuck is right. One phone call and three years later, *Sully Wong* has turned into some kind of monster catering to names most only dream of. “Oh, did you see this?” I’m asked nonchalantly, as Sully shows me his iPhone screen on which Wu-Tang Clan’s Raekwon poses on a couch grasping the *SW micro traveler* firmly in his left hand. It gets better. This year, Hollywood A-listers Pierce Brosnan, Helen Hunt, William H. Macy and Adrian Grenier all got a piece of the action too.

Catering to sneakerheads notoriously known for their passion for limited editions, rare finds and vintage re-releases is a major gamble. He admits satisfying the thirst of that crowd is a “tough deal” and the pivot towards footwear was more expensive, but it eased a lot of stress. Coming up with a new season on a regular basis was becoming a pain in the ass. And the creative aspect satisfies his constant craving for evolving artistic expression.

The shoes are described as tribute sneakers honoring those past and present who have made a societal impact. Personality-inspired concepts aren’t new, but it’s a different interpretation conceived from two separate minds. Whether the final product sets itself apart from every other competitor is entirely up to you. The first release was the *SW Cassette* Chuck Taylor silhouette saluting rap’s finest MCs and DJs. Then came the *SWI TK APOLLO* commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing, and a nod to the first Chinese space walk led by taikonauts Zhai Zhigang, Liu Boming and Jing Haipeng. Their latest, the *SW J HEAVYWEIGHT*, is an homage to Jack Johnson, the first African American heavyweight boxing champion of the world whom George holds in high esteem. “He was in the greatest and the best hotels, he had the women coming in, coming out, and he lived till he was like 60. It’s the COMPLETE fucking thing of what you can have as a black man in those times. He had all the cars and all the luxuries. I had to tell the story.”

Two years prior to *Sully Wong*’s inception, George was telling stories in the traditional form through *TCHAD Quarterly*, a publication he co-founded with Chad Cranston in 2007. They established an online identity with Facebook/Twitter accounts, a daily entertainment blog, the aptly named *TCHAD TV* on Vimeo consisting of behind the scenes photo shoot clips, and travel video essays where George narrates details of his experiences in exotic locales. But that was just a small piece of who they were.

I had to ask, what was so important about sticking with print?

“Print is tangible. You can hold it, you can feel it, you can flip through it. It’s that whole experience...” he says. “It has always just been something I was attracted to.”

Still, sticking with physical format is risky given the changes in the publishing industry. There have been a share of rough periods, with critics foreshadowing the fall of *TCHAD* despite consistent distribution. Staff were seen popping up everywhere besides an office, and there was a strong presumption that everyone was flat-out clueless. The critiques, while misconceived and unfairly harsh, weren’t entirely wrong, particularly on the latter. George will be the first to tell you he and Chad had no idea what they were doing in the beginning and that their approach was based mostly on intuition. “I just wanted the publication. I wanted to express myself, fuck it.”

So how’d they prevail?

A ‘fuck it’ attitude, with little bureaucracy and politics interfering with direction: if it works, it works. Plus the fact that they were a book—which is adamantly stated in their bio—was integral to their survival. George explains advertisers felt justified being in print if it was in a medium they perceived as significant as opposed to a “frivolous magazine we can throw away.” Agencies that at one point told them to go fuck themselves came crawling back with clients looking for ad space, allowing them to graduate from the obscure shelf hidden in a corner to the main lifestyle section.

George tells a story of how he once published an image his friend’s 6-year-old nephew had made. “We featured this kid like anybody else,” he says. “I put him in the same spot I put **Vito Piacente** in and [Vito] is like fucking huge....I don’t care if you’ve been doing it for 20 years or two days, I’ll put you beside a guy who’s been doing it for 20 years and I’ll put you side by side.” In Sully’s world, anything goes: opportunities are equal for all undiscovered talent as long as they’re hungry.

George remembers a time when he was literally hungry.

I asked him whether that played a role in his almost-obsessive work ethic, that innate unsettling paranoia of losing it all that comes from growing up in poverty. “When I was a kid, that was definitely it,” he thinks back. “That fear now is just brilliant. What we did out of fear to eat is what we do now for fun. And it is fun, but it is food too. We get to eat, we’re sorted out now.”

He continues to reminisce about his childhood on the subject of his philanthropy towards underprivileged kids: life spent in public housing, living on welfare with two hardworking Haitian immigrant parents, and old friends, most of whom have been incarcerated for drug charges. “I’m that youth,” he simply replies when I ask how charities like the *IT Factor* and the *Michael Pinball Clemons Foundation (MPCF)* resonates with him personally

It was at an *MPCF* fundraiser in 2011 where he met *Academy of Lions* founder Dhani Oks whose *This Shirt* project was still in its infancy. “I’m like ‘This is fucking brilliant!’” George recalls, learning about its mission to provide education to children in Africa through t-shirt sales. He supplied \$10,000 worth of equipment from the Limb Apparel days, hooked up with Canadian clothing brand Roots and in December that year, the 500 sold built a school in Kenya and an additional nine soon after. That same partnership laid the foundation for The School of Hustle, an at-risk youth organization with a name paradoxical to its goodwill intentions. “We’re teaching them that to be successful is to stick your hand out, and yeah, it’s who you know, but it’s also what you know,” he says. “Get out there, network and you’ll move mountains. We showed them that.”

The career-building centre focuses on the fundamentals of entrepreneurship, centered on one important life lesson: no excuses. “If you’re homeless tomorrow, I’ll give you a fucking plan. If you got a month then I’ll give you a month’s worth. If you got six months then we’ll fucking incorporate you,” he explains. “If you have to eat for tomorrow, I’ll give you a plan to eat tomorrow, so let’s do it.”

The School of Hustle doubles as an ethical t-shirt manufacturer utilizing fair trade North American-sourced fabrics with profits going back to supplies funding. Those same kids who helped design the logo and hand-printed every single piece watched their labor rewarded with endorsements, shelf space in posh menswear boutique GOTSTYLE, and a gift lounge at the Toronto International Film Festival this year.

When he’s consulting suits 80 floors high up in an ivory tower flooded with their Devil Wears Prada staff scratching their heads over the next big move, he’s not telling them any different. Much of our business-related chat revolves around his Bruce Lee-esque theory that the recession has taught white collars “the way of the hustle”: adaptation and understanding it’s no longer safe to capitalize on one thing anymore. “Like the jack of all trades, masters of none? Fuck it. Be a jack of all trades and start mastering a few whatever you have to do to survive.” George himself packs three different companies he could easily fuck up with the madness that comes with running them all at once, and here he stands triumphant despite the economic shit show many suffered. “I’ve really been able to say, ‘wow,’ and pat myself on the back. Lucky I have a few tricks, lucky that I had a few things that I can leverage off the other. It actually made my business stronger.”

The last question I ask George is how he feels about failure. Most people I’ve talked to have had their confidence beaten and curb-stomped until salvation arrives last minute in the form of an epiphany or some serendipitous moment. In getting to know him, I can’t tell if he’s experienced the pains of professional struggle serious enough to force him into absolute submission. I haven’t heard any horror stories, there’s no sign of bitterness, there’s no vendetta against some cut-throat bitch who tried to screw him. He did call out local magazines for duping TCHAD Quarterly stylistically, but other than that I sense no real hate. Maybe there are things he hasn’t told me, or maybe he really is that optimistic; the F-word (failure) I learn, is not in his vocabulary. “It should be completely eviscerated.” he says frankly. “Take what you’ve learned in your negative and turn it into a positive to put back into your fucking engine. It’s your own flag now. Fuck, you can’t tell me that you can’t be a fucking successful musician because you have all the tools now.”

For better or for worse, the 21st century’s mantra, it seems, is that everyone is something. It’s often mentioned sarcastically, but there’s a certain truth to it. Social media and technology have afforded us the luxury of mass exposure and the potential to prosper on our own terms independent of the Evil Empire; how far we can take it is up for debate. “There’s no bureaucracy, there’s no gate, you play.” Everyone’s on equal grounds in a brand new playing field, and Sully will dance in the mayhem with the willing and the daring armed with something to prove. “And I welcome that. I got guns, well…” He pauses to gather his thoughts. “Metaphorically please. New York is listening.” he quips slyly.

Photography by Katie Sadie



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