

Jean Lover, Come Rescue Me

Written by Written by Marlene Montanez

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From bell bottoms and stonewashed denim to skinnys and boot cuts, AFM traces the roots of the jean, America's favorite fashion staple.

I remember clear as day the first time I stepped into jeans with a triple-digit price tag. I didn't understand what all the fuss was about, why everyone around me was doling out hundreds of dollars on denim. My girlfriend and I were at Neiman Marcus, as she was in urgent need of a new pair of 7 jeans. Needless to say, my denim days would never be the same again.

Lust quickly turned into obsession for the newest fill-in-the-blank-with-hot-trend-here jeans. In fall of '07 it was Rich & Skinny's high-waist wide-leg jean. Spring of '08, I fell hard for a pair of purple skinnys, Dittos (yes, Dittos are back), that zippered at the ankle. This fall, my major crush has yet to be found. But like any jeanophile, I know my heart will not be still until they've found a home in my closet.

As impossible as it is to imagine, denim wasn't always the fashion staple it is now. Before starlets strutted the red carpet in the latest high-priced jeans and we all became OCDenim, jeans were intended for men—workers in the West who wore them in the early 1900's. Although the roots of denim can actually be traced to nearly 500 years ago (it's thought to have first appeared in Europe*), it wasn't until 1873 that jeans first made their appearance as they're known today.

For those unfamiliar with the story, it was Jacob Davis, a tailor, who approached Levi Strauss with his idea of adding metal rivets to the pockets and button fly of denim trousers. He was seeking financial support to patent the idea since the pockets were a point of strain where jeans commonly tore. On May 20, 1873, now considered the birthday of jeans, U.S. patent No. 139,121 was issued to Levi Strauss's jeans. The going price? \$1.25. And the rest is history.

Jeans, or "waist overalls" as they were then called, quickly became popular among male workers for their practicality and durability. They were seen as cowboy and western wear through the 1920's and 30's. "There was a real demand in clothing that could, in fact, stand up to some pretty nasty treatment," explains Professor Robert Thompson, who teaches popular culture at Syracuse University. "If you were a miner or a shepherd or a cowboy out West, you couldn't wear your top hat and tails out to work—your clothing got a lot of abuse...Blue jeans became a symbol of the rough and tumble American frontier."

As vacationing in the West became more common, jeans were snatched up as a sort of novelty. They were regaled as costume and "dude ranch" attire to wear while on vacation. In fact, in the 1930's, Vogue featured a model donning denim on the cover, but they were not a fashion mainstay yet, just typical "western wear."

Jeans reached their cult status in the 1950's when they were endorsed by pop culture icons and the teens who idolized them. James Dean and Marlon Brando became the first few denim fashion fixtures, and jeans became associated with rebellious teens. They were even banned at many public schools. But denim began to prevail in the 60's, 70's and on with the "counterculture," as Thompson refers to the demographic. "The youth rejected what their parents stood for; attitudes about the war, drugs, sexuality and even adopting what was previously a work garment into daily wear was part of the rebellion," Thompson explains.

But it was the 1980 Calvin Klein commercials that many point to as the ultimate explosion point for the denim industry. A racy image of a 15-year-old Brooke Shields in a pair of Calvin Klein jeans cooed, "Nothing comes between me and my Calvins." Designer denim had arrived. From low-rise to boot-cut, skinny, acid wash and colored varieties, jeans were permanently adopted into the collections of designers. "Blue jeans now undergo the same perpetual revolution as the cut of a woman's suit," Thompson says. "You can't wear 2005 blue jeans, even though they might still survive."

As jeans evolved into an everyday staple, the immersion of premium denim into the market was inevitable. Usually starting at \$100 and up, brands like True Religion, 7 for All Mankind and Rock & Republic are some of the most popular today. "There's been a change in the idea of what dressing up is... it's the casualization of the fashion world; jeans were a natural progression," explains Erin Burke, product and trend analyst for Cotton Inc. "With our lifestyles, our lives are getting busier and busier and having to transition to so many different events in one day, it's nice to wear something comfortable. And denim is just that."

When jeans are worn daily, from the office to happy hour to just lounging around, it's easy to see why the premium market for denim has flourished. But beyond a label and price point, there's more that sets a pair of luxury jeans off from their ordinary counterparts. "It's really the finishing process that is the main difference and what adds to the cost of the jeans," explains Kevin Jones, curator for the museum at the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising in Los Angeles. "With luxury denim, it's all the extra processes [the jeans] go through: the faux fading around the knees and butt that make them look worn; the fraying of edges; any of the special kind of stencils, slogans or embroideries that are added on; any of the decorative elements," Jones says. The cotton used, aside from a lighter or heavier choice, is mostly the same across the board. And as far as the cut and fit, those are not necessarily contingent on the price but depend on the particular manufacturer and the sample they use to cut the jeans.

What is common, and perhaps most apparent to premium denim lovers, is the softness of luxury jeans, something I myself can't resist. Premium denim has been washed 10 or more times to achieve that special feel, a machine process that's promptly billed into the price. The drawback? "Any kind of mechanical process that you're putting material through is weakening the fabric. It's as if you have worn and washed them over a length of time, so you've lost that amount of wear. Fraying of edges already has started; it's purposeful deterioration versus naturally shortening the life of the garments," Jones says. You are essentially paying more money to purchase jeans with an already shortened life span.

Regardless of how inane this may seem, it hasn't and likely won't stop us all from purchasing treated premium denim. In the 70's we wanted our jeans with patches; in the 80's we wanted them with holes; and looking toward the future, consumers are still seeking that worn-in look. "Jeans that look like they have the crease from a wallet in the back, or rubbed in—[processing it] so that it looks more natural—we've been seeing that a lot," Burke says of denim trends to come. Some denim connoisseurs even advocate freezing jeans instead of washing them to

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save the natural wrinkles. Others never wash them at all.

What does have staying power this season are some of the trends seen last fall. "Buyers and merchandisers are being more conservative on their purchases because of the economy," says Burke of current buying trends. "[The] dark, straight, more conservative looks [are] what we're seeing a lot of...a little bit higher waist and the higher leg will continue. People aren't embracing trends as much—at least retailers aren't since it's more of a conservative market right now."

Despite there being a "conservative" market now, the average American owns eight pairs of jeans, according to Cotton Incorporated's Lifestyle Monitor. I counted 14 in my closet, 10 of which I actually wear, which makes me guilty of having dropped at least four digits on just jeans. And yes, counting gave me an anxiety attack. Premium denim is a \$680 million market (according to 2006 research by NDP group), likely to endure the test of time. And while fashion and the economy have always been inextricably linked, the luxury goods market is one that stays constant through hard times, so don't expect premium denim to disappear anytime soon. "If you would've talked to one of Levi's customers back in 1855 and said, 'Within a century and a half, this little pair of jeans, people are going to pay \$65 for and have holes put in them,' they would've thought you were crazy," Thompson says. And without a doubt, we are.

What's in a Name?

Legend has it that the actual word "jean" comes from the Italian city Genoa. It refers to the material that sailors from Genoa used in their pants in the 16th century: a cotton-wool blend that originates from Italy.

Denim by the Decade

50's Fashions: After World War II idols like Elvis Presley, Marlon Brando and James Dean made denim the coveted item of teens everywhere. Their rebellious reputation had them banned by schools across the country. Boys wore the jeans cuffed in light washes or black whereas women rarely wore denim during this time. Levi's, Lee Coopers and Wranglers were some of the popular brands.

60's and 70's Fashions: Aaah, the age of the hippies. In this decade, it was all about peace, love happiness—and personalizing your jeans. Embroidery, cutoffs, patches and psychedelic colors were a few of the popular trends among youth. Bell bottoms, hip huggers and stonewash jeans were a hit too. Jeans became much more affordable in the 70's as they were produced in Southern sweatshops.

80's Fashions: The 1980's gave birth to designer jeans and worn-in looks. Stonewash, acid wash and ripped were the preferred styles. They were manufactured in skinny leg cuts that tapered at the ankle. Calvin Klein, Jordache and Gloria Vanderbilt were among the most popular brands.

90's Fashions: Jeans were a little less popular in the 90's but still considered a fashion staple. Carpenter jeans were a hit in the early part of the decade along with baggy jeans made popular by the hip-hop artists of the time.

Now: We've gone from ultra-low-rise and boot cut, made popular by the likes of celebrities like Britney Spears, back to skinny jeans from the 80's and wide-leg and high-waist styles from the 70's. Fashion is cyclical, constantly referencing earlier time periods, and denim is a perfect reflection of that. Worn-in looks are still coveted and refreshed versions of earlier styles. Along with new innovations in embellishments, washes and finishes offer limitless possibilities for the future.