

A History of Denim

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

The throbbing bass-line of “I Heard It Through The Grapevine” kicks in. It’s 1985 and a dark-haired male model by the name of Nick Kamen enters a laundrette. He lowers his sunglasses to reveal puppy-dog eyes and pouting, scans the room. He removes his t-shirt and slides off his leather belt to allow for a glimpse of the Levi Strauss & Co. badge. Jeans are dropped and thrown into a washing machine. The camera captures fellow laundry customers as they shift uneasily in their seats. On screen a couple of girls giggle and off screen, no doubt others edge a little closer. The song pulsates. The world swoons. Two stars are born.

It takes less than a minute for Kamen to become a global heart-throb and for Levi’s to further cement their legend. Following the commercial, sales of the renewed 501 series increased eightfold, the bar for clothing ads was not raised, but obliterated. A decade and a half later *Time Magazine* named Levi’s 501 as the fashion item of the century. At the time of writing, a pair of 201s – the forebear of the 501 series – sits on eBay with a reserve of US\$14,500. In 2005, a Japanese collector paid over three times that for a similar item still stained with the mud of 19th century American gold mines. It is believed the dirt aided preservation. Dirty vintage denim will often fetch more, and ironically, given that Levi’s laundrette ad, many aficionados refuse to wash their jeans for long periods, if at all, for that genuine ‘worn’ look. Their denim will be like no other. For, like leather, it ages well.

“I have some pairs I clean more rarely,” says Brandon Svarc, founder and head designer of one of the world’s most sought-

Left:
Vintage Levi’s 501 jeans, customised into shorts



after denim labels, Naked & Famous. “The ones I’m wearing now have only been washed once in the past eight months. But I do have other pairs that I wash more often to keep them clean and uniform.” If there is such a thing as a ‘denim guru’, then Brandon Svarc is it. For nearly seven decades, the Canadian’s family has been involved in the design and manufacture of denim garments. Upon his birth, Svarc’s father created a brand of jeans and named them after his son. “My grandfather too was such a cool guy,” Svarc tells me. “He made workwear for 65 years and survived a lot in his life. He’s an icon to me.”

17th century paintings by an anonymous Italian artist depict various peasant workers dressed in what appears to be denim. Also in the 1600s, sailors from Genoa used cotton-corduroy similar to contemporary denim as protective barriers for their goods. The material eventually reached the French town of Nîmes where it was honed to be used in tailoring. The cloth became known as ‘de-Nîmes’ and denim was born.

In 1851, an 18-year-old man left his native Germany for New York before settling in San Francisco where he established a successful family dry goods business selling clothes and boots. It was the gold rush era and a tailor by the name of Jacob Davis invited the German to partner with him in the creation of a range of durable garments re-enforced with copper rivets for the country’s booming mining industry. Davis and his German friend eventually settled upon the use of denim for their workwear. The German man was Levi Strauss. In 1873, Levi Strauss & Co. and Jacob Davis were awarded patent #139,121 by the US Patent and Trademark Office and the ‘blue jean’ had well and truly arrived.

By the 1930s, the likes of Wrangler and Lee entered the fray and the jean was adopted by cowboys throughout America. John Wayne further added to the mystique by donning them in myriad iconic roles. Later screen gods like Marlon Brando and James Dean ensured denim’s counterculture credentials with films such as *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, complete with cigarettes, sneers and sexy leather jackets (a look aped in that Levi’s laundrette ad). Denim was considered dangerous. Elvis Presley provocatively rocked his hips – and the jailhouse – whilst wearing them in the 1950s, subsequently a host of US schools banned the jean from their premises.

Feathers had already been ruffled thanks to the manufacture of the first female jeans and when British brand Lee Cooper created a zip-fly for ladies in 1953, there was moral outrage. The following decade, the label sponsored a Rolling Stones tour and the band later released one of the most controversial album covers of all time with *Sticky Fingers*. It boasted a close-up shot of a man's skin-tight and somewhat bulging denim-clad crotch complete with workable zip.

One of the most widely worn materials on earth, denim has long since entered the mainstream, yet somehow retains its anti-establishment, rebellious cool. "From presidents to hobos and everyone in between, anyone can wear denim," says Thomas Bojer, founding editor of jean bible, *Denimhunters*. "It's ageless, genderless and classless all at once." Bojer rates Turkish and Italian denim, and highly regards Japanese labels such as Iron Heart and Momotaro. Though, he describes himself as a Levi's guy at heart. "I particularly love their early vintage garments made out of the old Valencia Street factory in San Francisco," he tells me. "That closed in 2002. It's a worn-out cliché, but sadly they just don't make it like they did back then."

And tips for finding quality denim?

"With new unworn denim you should feel the fabric; focus on its weight and crispness. The smell of new denim can be an indicator too. Once the fabric is properly worn-in and washed-down, it becomes easy to identify quality from the fading."

The world's most expensive jeans come courtesy of Secret Circus. They boast a diamond-encrusted back-pocket and the rather vulgar price-tag of US\$1.3million – certainly not the kind of garment you would expect to impress a denim purist. I ask Brandon Svarc if there is a difference in quality between so-called designer labels and a regular, denim-only manufacturer.

"Oh my goodness, what a loaded question! There is no specific answer to that. Show me one item against another and maybe I can compare. Levi's, for example, is a giant brand with many sublabels which vary in quality. Ask one hundred people and you may get one hundred differing opinions."

"Quality' is very subjective," adds Bojer. "Some like stiff, heavy denim and perceive weight as a sign of quality, whereas for others it's about the wash. Personally, I evaluate denim quality based on construction details and the thought that went into it. But it is very likely that raw, heavy denim, if washed occasionally, will outlast prewashed jeans."

Svarc says he's a fan of rare, small brands that design and create locally. Brands that "don't care about the rules". I ask him what he believes to be the secret behind denim's success. How it has managed to capture the imagination of the world, to remain so relevant and transcend such a wide range of trends, cultures and age-groups.

"It is funny how what are essentially blue twill cotton pants are so popular, isn't it?" he says. "There are literally books and studies written about this. I can't be sure why, but people have been rocking blue jeans for the last century, and I have no doubt that they'll still be wearing them for the next hundred years too."

Above right:
James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*

Right:
Scene from *The Wild One*

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