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The Cooper Collection
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Editorial Director & Publisher
David Hellqvist

Art Director & Designer
Charlotte Heal Design

Copy Editor
Phil Hoad

Photography
Barbara Anastacio
Dominic Davies
Dunja Opalko
James McNaught
Jasper Fry
Jean-Paul Goude
Karl Hab
Ko Tsuchiya
Liz Seabrook
Nick Clements
Piotr Niepsuj
Tec Petaja

Words
Andy Thomas
David Hellqvist
Emma McClendon
Jamie Millar
Josh Sims
Lena Dystant
Lucas Price

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Cover image
Jean-Paul Goude

Document Studios Ltd.
Studio 1, 230 Dalston Lane
London E8 1LA, United Kingdom
info@documentstudios.com
documentstudios.com

Lee Cooper Collection

The

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Document Studios

Editorial Director
David Hellqvist

Art Director
Charlotte Heal

Lee Cooper was founded in east London 108 years ago. A lot has happened since; the world now looks very different to back then. We, as humans, have changed and therefore, our surroundings have too. But there are a few things we can rely on as bedrocks of society: ideas and inventions that remain the same because, simply put, we've not been able to improve them. Take raw denim jeans, for example. They've been part of the Lee Cooper wardrobe since its foundation, a constant presence that is shaped according to the unique wear and tear of their owner.

Sure, Lee Cooper jean styles have changed over the years, in accordance with trends and with new customer demands, but the purpose of the garment has never altered: whether used as workwear, seen on mods and rockers or worn to the office, the blue indigo workhorse still forms the everyday basis of our wardrobes.

The Cooper Collection by Lee Cooper, the brand's new premium raw denim line, is a natural progression of that sentiment; it's the next step in the struggle to perfect an already brilliant fabric. What other garment is so versatile it can be worn seven days a week, no matter what time of day? Slim, straight or tapered, the raw denim jean provides the backbone for your daily outfit. Jeans look beyond age, race and gender — they provide for everyone. They are, arguably, the most democratic piece of clothing around. As such, this Document celebrates more than The Cooper Collection — it's an homage to denim as a universal sartorial language.

We've investigated the brand's past, present and future together with Tilmann Wröbel, The Cooper Collection's creative director, we've linked jeans to various music scenes with the help of Alexis Taylor from Hot Chip, and we've connected raw denim with workwear boots through Aki Iwasaki from the Red Wing Shoe Company. We've eavesdropped on four denim conversations throughout the world, from London to Tokyo and New York, and we've asked artist Lucas Price to reinterpret the rebellious attitude of a teenager's jean jacket using The Cooper Collection denim. We've also rediscovered a gem, a forgotten denim treasure, while rummaging through Nigel Cabourn's archive.

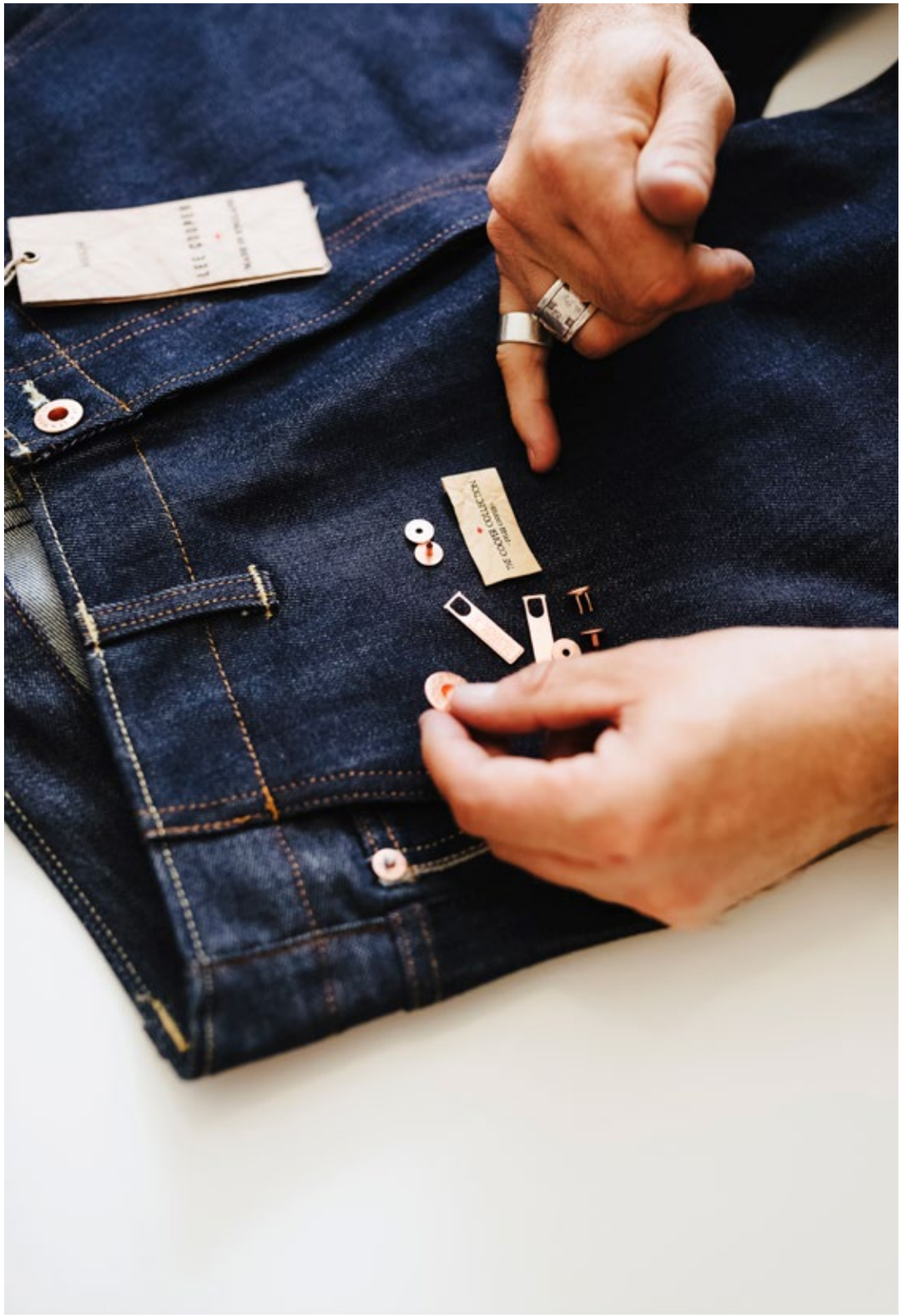
We've established Lee Cooper's European heritage and its unique place in British denim history, but more than anything, this Document is about paying respect to a fabric we love and wear almost every single day. Lee Cooper doesn't own denim; it just borrows it for a while. Denim is bigger than any individual brand, but The Cooper Collection is a worthy guardian.

Tilmann Wröbel

As Lee Cooper launches The Cooper Collection, a new premium capsule collection, the creative director discusses the merits of raw denim, its place in fashion history and what makes jeans the cornerstone of everyday wardrobes

Words Josh Sims
Photography Piotr Niepsuj

Tilmann Wröbel is getting worked up about a button. “Look at it,” he says. “Buttons on jeans often look good initially, but then wear down to reveal that they are coated and there’s some dodgy metal underneath. The Cooper Collection ones are solid copper.” And don’t get him started on belt loops. Typically tacked on only across their width — because that’s all most modern machinery allows — The Cooper Collection loops are sewn beyond the edges to give them genuine durability. It’s the same for the pocket bags. “So often, a pair of jeans comes with this thin fabric so that, before you know it, your mobile phone is falling through into your socks,” he says. “These are made from a 210g cloth to prevent that.” →



Wröbel is giving an enthusiastic breakdown of the details in The Cooper Collection, a top-flight capsule line from the classic denim brand Lee Cooper, initially launching with three styles for men, three for women. These are, he admits, not the kind of details that everyone cares about. “A lot of people might not even notice them,” he says. “But those that do — anyone really into denim, the ‘geeks’ — will be super-happy with them and appreciate those details. They’re an expression of how the people behind Lee Cooper are really impassioned by denim.”

That certainly includes Wröbel himself. He’s the German skateboarder who moved to Paris to study couture, worked with Christian Dior, André Courrèges and Nina Ricci, but then found himself drifting back into skatewear and denim — although this time armed with an intimate understanding of garment construction. He has, through his denim design agency Monsieur-T, been an independent creative for many brands for many years. He shaped Etnies’ early apparel and helped put the seminal French denim company Chipie on the map, for example. He has worked with Adidas and DC Shoes. He has launched his own brand, Nadel & Pen, which makes fully bespoke jeans. And since 2008, he has been collaborating with Lee Cooper on what might be described as its long-overdue comeback into the premium denim market.

“When I joined the company I saw the definitive European denim brand, Lee Cooper, as the one with real history,” Wröbel says. “But you could also sense that it was something of a sleeping giant. It was one of those important names that somehow people forgot about, despite there being so much to it.” Certainly, Lee Cooper’s long heritage is often

Long before any company in America worked with denim — long before ‘America’ in fact existed — there was a thriving market for denim in Europe

overlooked. Morris Cooper, a self-taught tailor, and his business partners originally set up as a waistcoat manufacturer in South Africa — but hearing of more buoyant buying in the UK, decided to establish an import company here in 1908. And business was good until the outbreak of the first world war, which prompted necessary diversification — the making of uniforms for the army and the creation of a womenswear line. Various trials and tribulations during the war years eventually led to the establishment of M. Cooper (Overalls) Ltd, provisioners of denim and twill workwear for various hard-working trades.

The company’s factory was established in Stratford, east London, where it thrived; and then, thanks to the second world war and lucrative War Office orders, positively boomed, notwithstanding Morris Cooper’s death in a car accident in 1940. Once demobbed, his son Harold took over, relocating the business to nearby Plaistow and later (aptly) Harold Hill. His masterstroke, however, came after studying the clothing business in America, where the superior fabrics and cuts of the trousers — not to mention more efficient manufacturing techniques — convinced him to emulate them to the best of his ability back home.

The timing could not have been better: the 1950s and the “birth of the teenager” provided a ready market for anything fashion-conscious and American in spirit. Lee Cooper would become pre-eminent in offering the British public what its ads called “American style jeans” and “lively authentic denims”. They also liked other casual styles in sailcloth, two-tone stripes — a first for the denim industry — or a cloth Harold christened with the Italian-sounding name Bravanti, precisely in order to appeal to mods. Lee Cooper can

also make a claim to have switched the fly around on women's jeans from the side to the front — a design decision not without some controversy for the moralisers of the time. Yet in a society in which clothing was still rationed, but "workwear" much less rigorously, it was small wonder that hardy fabrics and constructions in appealing fits would come to be deemed fashionable. Add to that the fact that Lee Cooper only had two competitors in denim production in UK — Westcott and Lybro, both of which would soon drop out of the market. Only the American players' products, then not readily available in the UK, could offer any challenge.

Most important was the need to create a collection that acknowledged the noble side of denim — not the distressed or aged denims you get today

Indeed if, as Wröbel says, it is surprising that Lee Cooper was ever forgotten in the UK, it was not forgotten everywhere. In its native land, Lee Cooper would by the late 1970s start to be overshadowed by the denim world's better-known American players — leaving it to become the choice of minority, if important, style tribes like the skinheads. But this was not the case abroad. To Wröbel, Lee Coopers were the jeans of impresario Malcolm McLaren and — thanks to the company setting up production in France — of musician and chain-smoker Serge Gainsbourg, singer Johnny Hallyday and photographer and film-maker Jean-Paul Goude. In other words, they were capital C Cool — a cool that, thanks to pioneering licensing agreements, would be exported around the world.

"On the continent, there was a time when it felt like everyone of any youth-cultural importance wore Lee Coopers," the denim designer recalls. "But this was a different time, when brands didn't have to operate globally to be considered successful, when you could be less relevant in your home country, but massive in other regions of the world. That was Lee Cooper. Its fans may have grown older, and fashion moved on. But what was left was this undoubted relevance that we could build on with this new collection."

To those less well versed in denim history, there is much about Lee Cooper that does not fit the conventional narrative of gold miners, the Wild West and Americana. After all, Lee Cooper is British, with roots in industrialism — a maker of clothes for factory-workers, not cowboys — which, perhaps in part, explains its historic emphasis on more progressive design ideas of the likes of stretch and water-resistant denims. One can sense that the resulting sidelining irks Wröbel. After all, as part of his research he made a study of textile archives in Venice, and there found evidence of Italian denim-makers complaining about being undercut by German denim manufacturers in supplying the English market — and this was during the 1300s.

"Long before any company in America worked with denim — long before 'America' in fact existed — there was a thriving market for denim in Europe," he explains. "Back then denim was a real workwear cloth from Nîmes, hence de Nîmes and 'denim', and Genoa, hence jeans. It's not all about San Francisco! Say out loud in America that denim is essentially a European fabric and people won't like it — but that's the truth. People may think of it as being more Italian now, with all of its great weavers and laundries, but look back further and it was British, with indigo, of course; before then appreciated in Japan, and before that in India and Bangladesh, going back millennia. Thinking about that fact — that denim is not all-American, or all about ranches — was central to creating The Cooper Collection."

It is this appreciation for British denim workwear specifically that Wröbel and Lee Cooper want to reignite, in line with a market that is now increasingly finding new appreciation for denim cloth and goods made in places as un-American as Indonesia, China, Turkey and Scandinavia. This is why, among the three key styles of The Cooper Collection, which include an iconic, straight-legged heritage silhouette and a more fashion-led, slimmer cut, there is also more of a denim trouser, with slanted front pockets, outsized fit and bevelled back pockets; the latter two tell-tale details of British workwear and Lee Cooper, respectively. It is the kind of garment one can imagine being worn by men wearing cloth caps and wielding large spanners, at least if such men liked to pull a fakey or a 360 spin come the weekend.

"Most important was the need to create a collection that acknowledged the noble side of denim — not the distressed or aged denims you get today, or the fact that much of the industry is tarnished by sweatshop conditions — but the craft, the detail, the singular vision that has seen denim at the upper level undergo a reappraisal in recent decades," Wröbel says. "We didn't want to tell stories other jeans-makers have already told, or just knock off what already exists. And we didn't just want to go back to the archives and create a reproduction — this had to be its own thing."

And all the more so perhaps precisely because denim has undergone this revolutionary reassessment in recent years, from Japanese makers introducing new benchmarks in historical authenticity and quality production, to the frequent opening for business of small, one-man-band makers appealing to the denim collector, to the wider fashion industry embracing denim as its stylistic and financial bedrock. Billions of pairs of jeans are now bought annually, from the most basic product to the most esoteric, hand-made artisan item. Indeed, jeans have become such a staple of everyday dressing — the core of the 21st-century uniform — that it might be tempting to assume that there is nothing more to say. Wröbel argues that this notion couldn't be more wrong.

When I joined the company I saw Lee Cooper as the definitive European denim brand, one with real history

"There is such a diversity to denim now — from cheesy to cool, crafted to commodity — and that diversity is only growing," he says. "The boom in denim is a reflection of the appreciation of just how versatile a fabric it is. I have young designers come to work with me, and they often say that they think they will be bored of working with denim in just a few months. But then they come to realise just what a vast universe it is. They get to understand why denim has become so central to the way we dress."

Quite why this is the case is, naturally, something Wröbel has thought about a lot. There are deeply social reasons, he suggests, with uncertain times (economic woes, unemployment, looming environmental catastrophes) encouraging people to revisit the security seemingly offered by products with obvious history, provenance and quality, which of course plays to Lee Cooper's strengths. It is a mindset that he doesn't see changing any time soon. But because jeans are also, as is commonly perceived, embodied by the largely static design template that is the classic five-pocket western style, there is also a concurrent demand for distinction. "It's precisely because a pair of jeans has become this uniform that people are looking for something that stands out to them, either by being more artisanal or more fashionable," Wröbel reflects. "These aspects were both part of our consideration of The Cooper Collection pieces."

And yet, really, who needs yet another denim line, yet another brand attempting to make hay of its heritage? Wröbel couldn't agree

more. “Of course there will be people who will look at what we’ve done with The Cooper Collection and say that it’s just a marketing exercise,” he says. “But I think that idea is dispelled when you look at the detail, when you consider that it is not just another re-production line, as much as I like what other companies do in that way. This is a line made with a traditional know-how, but it is as much about modern design too. A lot of thought has gone into these few styles. Some of what looks incredibly simple has actually been exceptionally complicated to pull off. A lot of factories we spoke to just couldn’t do it.”

Certainly, the strictly vintage enthusiast might be disappointed. As Wröbel puts it, The Cooper Collection is not about dressing as though in period costume. It is very much a reflection of gritty city style, since Lee Cooper was always a brand fixed in a metropolitan context. “Nothing it produced had the sort of details that made it easier to ride a horse,” Wröbel laughs. “And what we’ve done now is in keeping with that. It’s a blend of urban design and authentic workwear construction, a blend that is actually very hard to find. In fact, I’m pretty sure that this first generation of products — which have ‘1908’ stamped on the reverse of the rivets — will become super-collectible.” And that’s certainly true for a breed of denim nerds that, like Wröbel, gets excited at the thought of finding a chain stitch line under the narrow selvedge, or who can see that rivets of differing lengths have been used in the construction. (Longer to push through multiple layers of substantial shuttle-loomed Italian fabric; shorter in other places to ensure that they don’t rub up against the wearer uncomfortably, if you must know.)

“These jeans won’t be for everybody, but they will be for the right people,” he contends. “Perhaps the sort of nerdiness they speak to is more masculine, but I don’t think it’s necessarily particularly new. Look through fashion history and there have always been people obsessive about the way certain garments were made or worn. Look at Balzac and the dandies and how they even catalogued the thousands of ways you can tie your necktie. Look at how the slightest change in a font used on a Rolex can add several more noughts to its value. Some people just love those small but telling differences — and I think that includes a growing number of women, too. There are more women now that are seriously into denim, who want more from their jeans than just to make their butt look nice. But we use some smart stretch denims to make sure their butt looks nice, too!”

Times have certainly changed — with The Cooper Collection a recent and great example of that fact. As a denim-industry veteran, Wröbel remembers a childhood when wearing jeans was considered disrespectful, and a youth when he was treated as the black sheep for wearing a pair of jeans with his Timberland boots in a world of haute couture. “I’m not sure high design in fashion had a lot of credibility to me then. It had this ivory-tower attitude when what was happening on the street always seemed that much fresher and more relevant,” he says. “Of course, back then denim was in crisis. It was one brand, with one product made in a cheap fabric.”

No wonder youth didn’t want to wear it. Though Lee Cooper had a strong subcultural following at the time, customers who were genuinely into the jeans, interest in denim was generally speaking superficial; in the leaves of the tree rather than in the roots, so to speak. “Attitudes to denim have changed so much since then, and The Cooper Collection is part of that movement,” he adds, still boyishly enthusiastic. “No garment other than a pair of jeans represents your own way of life in the way they change over time. A great pair of jeans is pure and resistant enough to become these beautiful things, and I’m glad that, with The Cooper Collection, Lee Cooper can be part of that experience again.”

Matthew, left, Thomas, right

Thomas + Matthew

Thomas Stege Bojer is the founder of the influential *Denimhunters* blog and the author of *Blue Blooded*, a book about the origins of denim. In New York, he met Matthew Henson, who's just finished a tenure as fashion editor at American streetwear tome *Complex*, and works as A$AP Rocky's stylist, to discuss 'Texan Tuxedos' and Kris Kross jeans

Words Jamie Millar
Photography Barbara Anastacio

MATTHEW *Where and when did you first get into denim?*

THOMAS Maybe around 2007. I started working in retail whilst I was studying. I just got totally obsessed with it quite quickly, I guess. You?

My personal relationship with denim is best described as "married but open". I wear it at least five days a week, but by no means am I a purist. I mostly wear black denim and when I wear blue denim, it's usually worn in and I love to wear it to the point when it rips. The rips are always mine that I've made when I'm working or travelling.

Speaking of marriage, it was my sister-in-law who talked me into doing my blog. It was around 2010, and there were a lot of "look at me" blogs on the internet, which I hated. But I was spending so much time researching denim that I thought, "OK, maybe someone else might want to know this, too." For the first year, I was writing in Danish. Then around Christmas 2011, I started writing in English, which is obviously a much bigger market because Denmark only has a population of five million people. It took off pretty quick. Do you remember how you got into denim?

In my household, denim was a way to be a little bit rebellious. Neither of my parents were massive jeans wearers: they worked in the medical profession, so only wore dress pants or scrubs. Then, at the weekend, my mother would wear a skirt or slacks, and my father would wear his jeans immaculately with creases that

never came out, even when he washed them. So I had an affinity to denim, which led to me being quite goth (laughs).

I remember, as a 10-year-old, going through my dad's wardrobe and trying on his jeans. Back then, I was a skater and listening to a lot of hip-hop, so I was wearing really baggy jeans. When I started high school, I started wearing slimmer jeans, then raw denim in my 20s.

That makes sense. Denim is still really important and popular for hip-hop artists, and it goes for all types: raw, ripped, customised, distressed, black, white … I can't see the Kris Kross backwards jeans coming back though — they're difficult to pull off, especially when it comes to bathroom emergencies! Also, nowadays a lot of people are very keen on showing their shape and physique by wearing tighter jeans as opposed to baggy styles.

Stretch technology has made it possible for people to wear denim on more occasions. The mills are now able to make denim that looks like it's been stretched. It's really opened the market to new buyers.

Yeah, denim can be fairly constricting in certain fits. So stretch is good because denim can now fit a lot more body types …

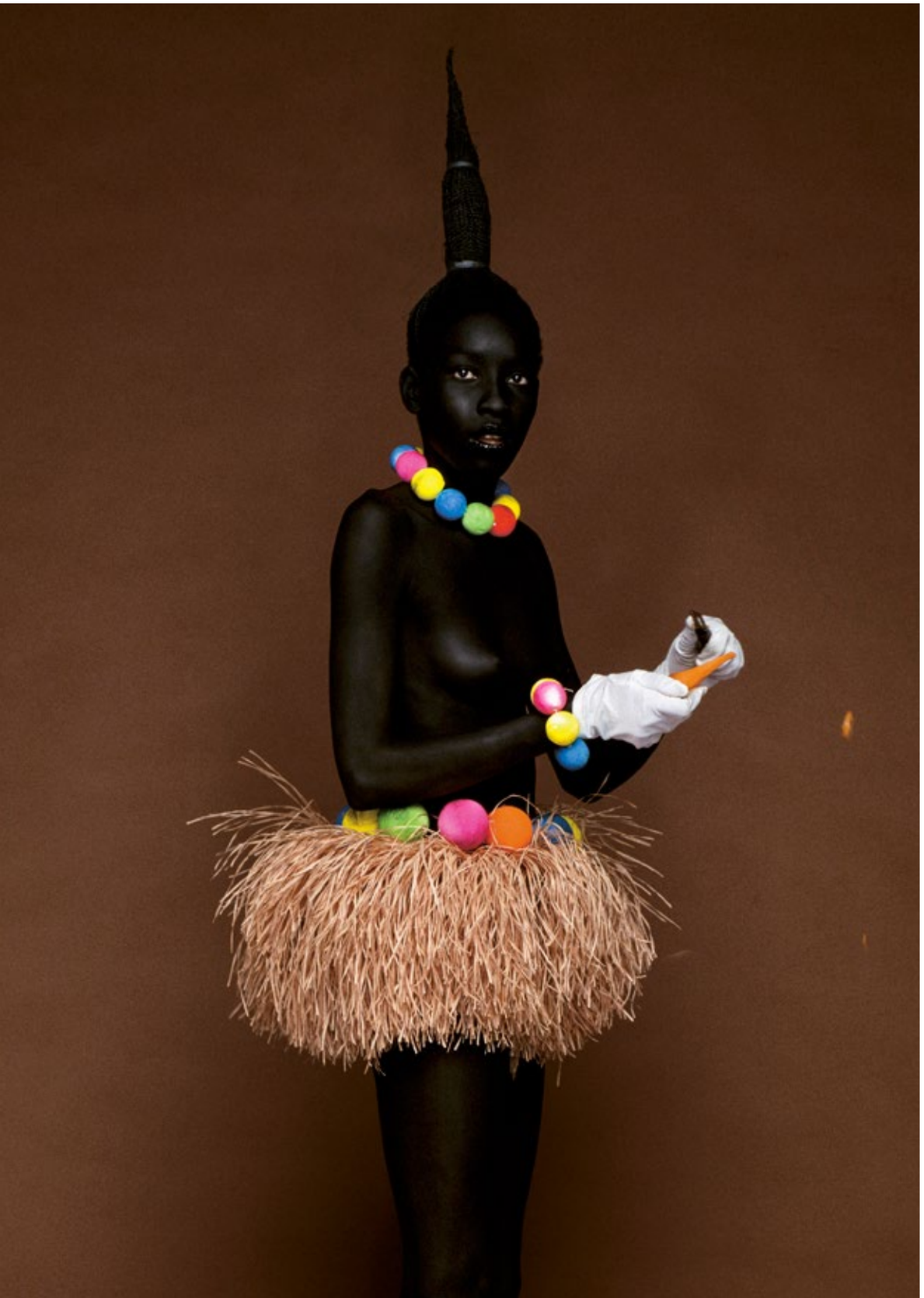
How do you feel about leggings slowing the growth of denim?

It's just sheer laziness. There's a trend happening right now where everything is moving towards the direction of sportswear: "Athleisure". It's great for some people, but it's not for everybody. It's really for a very active person. Everyone's entitled to their own opinion, but I don't think we should be walking around in leggings.

Are you a fan of double denim, the famous "Texan tuxedo"?

I've never been able to pull it off, but I've always wanted to try it.

I sometimes end up wearing four pieces of denim: a cap, a jacket and then a shirt or vest — and of course, my jeans. I feel very natural about it. But I'm sure many people think I look like an idiot …



Jean-Paul Goude

The acclaimed French art director reminisces about his famous Lee Cooper ads from the 1980s and discusses how his often controversial work was defined by multiculturalism

Words Andy Thomas
Photography Lee Cooper ads from the Jean-Paul Goude Archive

It's the photographers who, traditionally, are the most famous image-makers, while the people behind the scenes at editorial shoots and film sets, such as stylists, art directors and technicians, are often the unsung heroes. Some, though, are talented enough to cover all bases. Jean-Paul Goude, a true jack of all trades, has worked as graphic designer, illustrator, photographer and video director during a career spanning five decades. →

One of his creative highlights came in 1983 when, having directed Grace Jones's *One Man Show* film, Goude was asked to turn his genius to an advertising campaign for denim brand Lee Cooper. His subsequent TV commercials for the brand sent shock waves through the advertising industry.

Goude grew up in the Paris suburb of Saint Mandé where his American mother ran a dance school and inspired his love of ballet. What he calls his "eye for the exotic" was similarly awakened at an early age, by the frescoes of naked African, Asian and Arabic women at the Colonial Museum near his home. After studying at the renowned École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, Goude started to create the exotic art that made his name.

It was as an art director at *Esquire* in the 1970s that he created his most famous technique, the "French Correction", in which he spliced and rearranged photographs to exaggerate parts of the body. His best-known example was for the cover of Grace Jones's *Slave to the Rhythm*, the third in a trilogy of LPs Goude worked on with his most famous muse and girlfriend.

His Bauhaus and constructivist-inspired masterpiece *One Man Show* reached Philippe Michel of the CLM agency, who was open to Goude's ideas of blurring the lines between art and advertising. The two surreal commercials Goude created for Lee Cooper exploded on to French and Benelux TV sets back in the early 1980s.

Soon after, he created similarly surreal adverts for Orangina and Kodak. And in the 1990s, his commercials for Chanel — one casting Vanessa Paradis as a bird in a cage — were a sign that he had lost none of his eye for the bizarre. And his 2014 front cover for *Paper* magazine featuring Kim Kardashian, a reinterpretation of his own 1976 *Champagne Incident*, shows he still has the power to provoke.

I understand it was Philippe Michel who first approached you to work with Lee Cooper. Could you tell me about your introduction to him?

I was just coming off the success with the Grace Jones show and got a call from his agency CLM. I was hot and ready to go back to advertising, which was very much the trend

I thought maybe there was a different way of doing advertising. I told Lee Cooper's ad agency that it would be fun to do it but not like a classic commercial, more like a little piece of video theatre

in France at the time, bizarrely. There was even an event in a big theatre in Paris called La Nuit des Publivores [The Night of the Ad Eaters], where people would go and watch commercials all night. But I thought maybe there was a different way of doing advertising. I told Philippe that it would be fun to do it, but not like a classic commercial, more like a little piece of video theatre. It would be a kind of continuation of what I was doing with Grace on stage, but introducing new characters. I really thought if it wasn't a classic commercial, it would get the kids interested.

You then had to actually meet the people from Lee Cooper to talk about what was a pretty crazy idea. How did the meeting go?

There was one guy there who was very nice and knew me well because of Grace. He wanted to be the hippest guy at the time. I suggested to him we do this little theatrical piece and set it to exciting music and funny costumes. He hired me almost with his eyes closed as he knew I was the hot guy.

What led you to be very irreverent and rebellious in your ideas?

It's funny, I'm not really a rebellious person. It's just out of desperation that I become like that. I actually hate provocation, but I'm known as a provocateur. It's really bizarre. I just could not handle a project with denim that was cowboy-orientated. I could only work on jeans if I put them into my environment.

In what way were these commercials a continuation of what you were doing with Grace Jones?

The show I had done with Grace was very radical and almost austere in some ways. It had nothing to do with traditional entertainment at the time. The *One Man Show* was extremely arty and stylised. And so I thought: let's do that, but with advertising. It brought together my love of ballet, the old-fashioned stage and the exaggeration of the styling. That's what I always loved going right back to being a kid.

It's funny, I'm not really a rebellious person. It's just out of desperation that I become like that. I actually hate provocation but I'm known as a provocateur

The commercials feature a diverse multi-ethnic cast and some very interesting representations of race. Can you talk a bit about this?

Well, I have always been fascinated by cultures that are not my own. When it came to the Lee Cooper ads, I used all the races in a caricature kind of way. This is the way I had always done it, and my aim was to promote togetherness. Everyone was a bit of a caricature of their own ethnic group.

Where do you trace this interest in multi-culturalism back to?

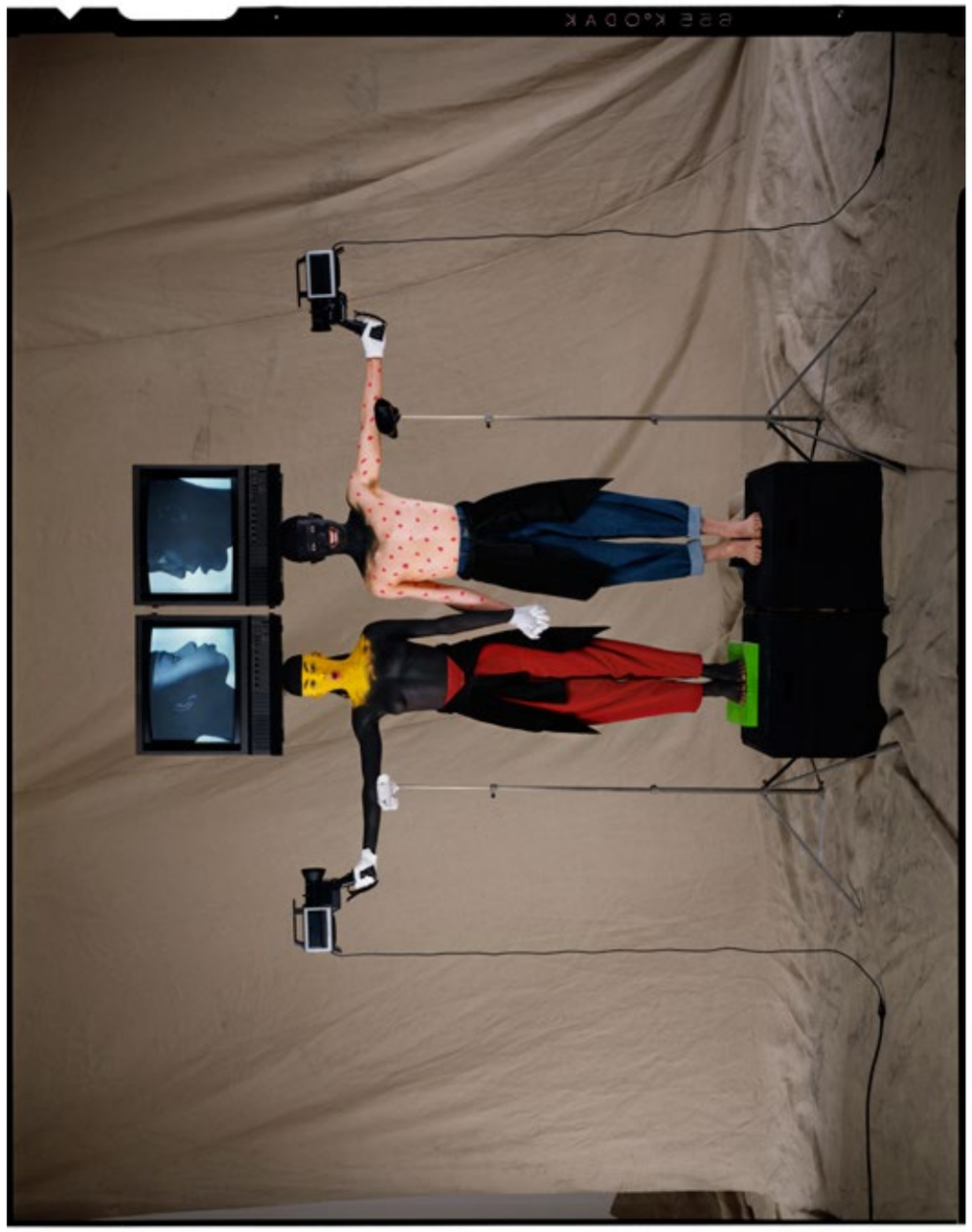
In my childhood and youth, all the comic books I read and the films I watched were like messages of brotherhood or friendship to me. In westerns, the cowboy was no longer the champion, and it was the Native Americans who were the victims. They were the ones who interested me. Then I got a comic book on Baden Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts. In it were these illustrations of the Zulus in South Africa. I found them really beautiful, and they fascinated me. These people were my heroes, and anybody with high cheekbones and dark skin was appealing to me and sexy. I was looking at ethnic groups that were different from mine in a very superficial and frivolous way because it was a child's view.

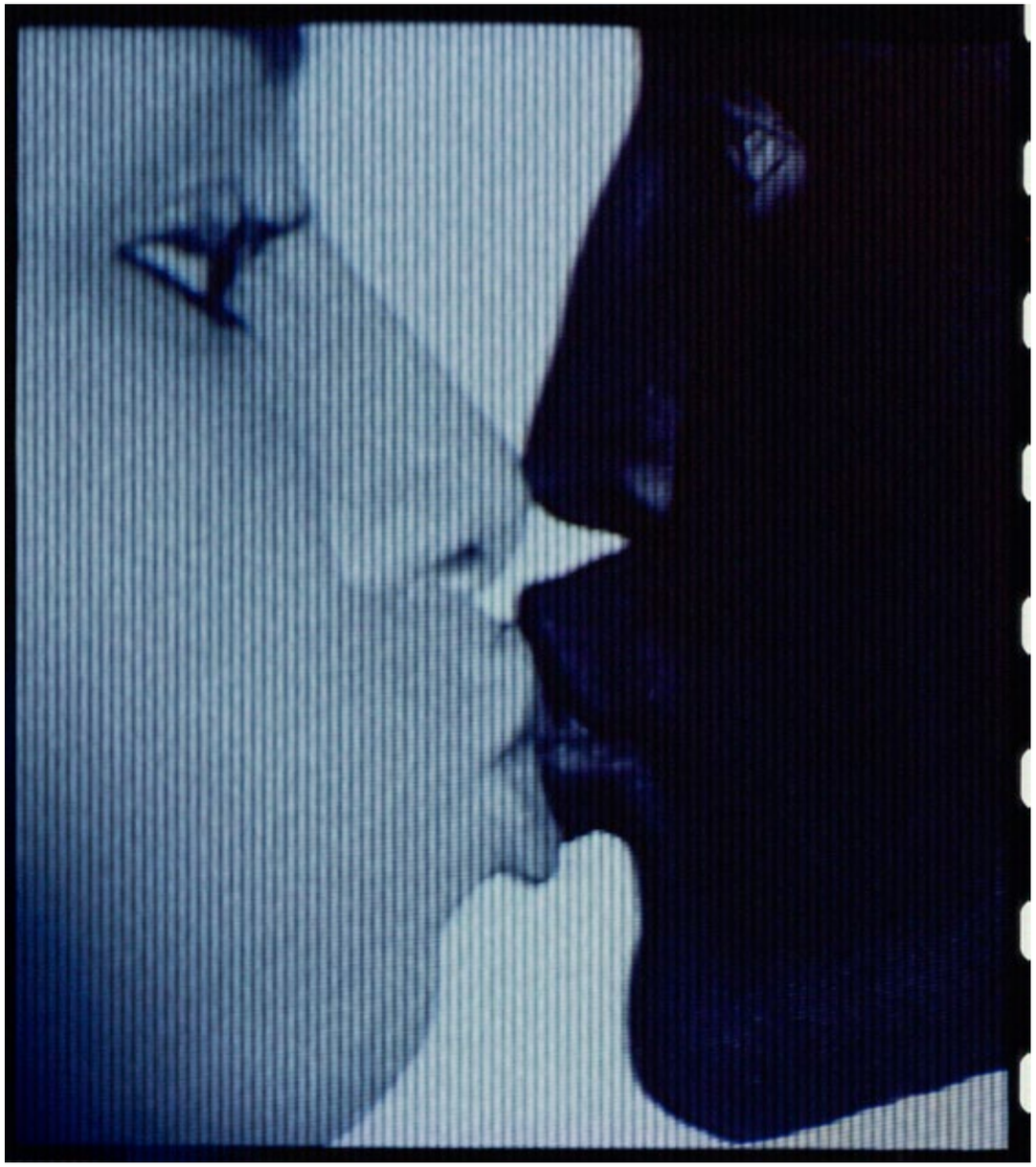
And this is what you carried on throughout your work with Grace into the Lee Cooper commercials?

Well yes, I have carried it on all my life. A lot of people have misunderstood what I have done. I'm basically an eternal child and, yes, maybe I should grow up. But everything I do is about togetherness, and that is why I have all the different races in the Lee Cooper ads. But it was also just fun. For example, the red dots on that one character's chest; those were meant to represent pimples, which you don't really see on non-white people.

Did you choose the people who appeared in the adverts?

Yes, completely. I was a little jealous of bigger people so I chose male models who had a morphology like mine. I was defending my own group (*laughs*).





Who was the woman who puts her head in the cannon in the Slave to the Rhythm *video and changes colour from black to white?*

I think she might have been the daughter of a diplomat and she was very relaxed about race. She loved the idea of posing as a white woman. So we put in these contact lenses and blond wig with white face. I wanted to show she was just as beautiful black as white or white as black.

How did you and your work fit in with the Parisian fashion crowd of the time?

When I heard we were going to play Le Palace [a famous Paris club where Grace Jones performed], I was very happy because I knew how important it was for the French fashion world. At the time Claude Montana was having big success with the girls with the big shoulders and everything. And so when I presented Grace at Le Palace, I think I really impressed them. I was very happy. She had played there before dressed up as a disco star, and nobody had taken her seriously. Then when we came back and I had her in all the costumes, they took her seriously. She looked like a real heroine. This gave me all the courage in the world to say to the people in advertising: "No, no, I am going to do what I think is right, because what I do is really popular."

Could you talk about the choreography in the commercials?

In a sense I choreographed dance that was already exciting on the street. This was the beginning of the moonwalk, and so I wanted to use this. Maybe it wasn't choreography as you might imagine it; I just dressed them up, put on the music and simply let the kids do their thing.

I read that Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus ballet was an influence?

Hmm, not consciously but I adored Bauhaus. I was also very interested in cubism and constructivism, and you can see that in both my costumes for Grace and in my first commercials. I didn't know who Schlemmer was at the time. But then later on, I saw a TV show on him with all his creations for the ballet in action. That was a complete knockout for me, and so then I put his work and mine side-by-side because I thought it was comparable.

Do you think these commercials could have been made today?

I don't think so. I am a big admirer of Spike Jonze and his commercials, particularly when his brother, Sam Spiegel, does the music. He has just done a new one for Kenzo, which is brilliant. I think in his way he is doing something in the tradition of my work.

You went on to do the famous adverts for Chanel in the 1990s. How much had the industry changed by then?

Well, to be honest, I never really cared about the medium of expression — I only ever cared about pushing my world forward. It's funny: the work I did in advertising is now in the private collection at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. What I'm saying is, I was right all along to work on these things. I could never have been one of these big money-makers who turn out campaign after campaign. I'm just a meticulous little artisan, and that is what I'm good at!

Lauren Yates

Sharing her time between Bangkok and Paris, Lauren Yates blogs as *Ponytail Journal*, while also — inspired by her love of denim, geeky details and historical references — blurring gender boundaries within traditional workwear with her own clothing brand, W'Menswear

Words Lena Dystant
Photography Karl Hab

It's always been easy for conversations around raw denim and workwear to adopt a language rooted in masculinity where women's fits are limited to "Skinny" or the rather irksome "Boyfriend", and with little reference to the female premium-denim consumer. It's an outlook reflected in the restricted offering available to ladies who prefer their denim rugged — but luckily, the lack of accessibility has not affected the enthusiasm. Undeterred by the scarcity of product available to them, there is a vocal band of women whose appreciation for denim and workwear, as well as an encyclopaedic knowledge of their chosen subject, has helped push forward both the market and the discussion across men's and womenswear. →

One such expert, Bangkok-based Lauren Yates, has racked up countless plaudits over the past few years. As the figurehead behind *Ponytail Journal* ("a blog that feeds on the goodness in life"), a writer, consultant and head of her own brand, Yates has been co-signed by the likes of *GQ*, US *Vogue* and Mr Porter. Her lifestyle journal is known for its informed take on workwear, denim and all things blue. With this finely balanced approach, Yates has managed to shine a light on women in workwear while avoiding cliches, her *Ponytail* project born out of a genuine love for rugged and useful clothing, geeky details and function with a historical basis.

A collector of vintage as both inspiration and wearable finds, Yates believes the past plays an important role in both the clothing she wears and that which she designs under her W'Menswear label. "We can't identify ourselves as anything if we do not have history. We can't move forward without history," she says. Denim has always carried a nostalgic feel, and for Yates its importance in terms of social history cannot be ignored: "Denim was originally used as tent canvas, and the fact that it has clothed working people through history means it has always had a purpose linked with great moments and great people. That's why denim is so special and why we talk about it so much. We don't go on about linen in the same way, or poplin, do we? I think when people talk about denim, they are really talking about history."

Citing the first and second world wars as the period in which workwear denim came into its own, Yates also points to this time as a moment in which women's contribution in the manual workplace became truly visible. "The two war eras were big turning points. Even in Australia, where I also have family, we had the Women's Land Army during the second world war. There were a lack of men in the country, and we had women coming out of their kitchens and putting on their overalls to become farmers, working the land and getting their hands dirty. For me, it represents a big transition in terms of female identity."

However, that was then, and things have most certainly changed today: "Because of our lifestyles nowadays, yes, we need our clothes to last a long time. But we don't have the same hardworking, physical and labour-intensive lifestyles that we did in the 30s, 40s or 50s." Today, a time when the purchase and use of denim follows very different patterns, what does the modern female consumer look for in a pair of jeans? "It's hard for me to talk on the

I think when people talk about denim they are really talking about history ... For me, it represents a big transition in terms of female identity

wider women's market because of my strong belief in good product. Today, we are bombarded with quick and cheap goods, which have saturated the market. However, there is the female denimhead who knows her 501s from her 701s, and who looks for details like stitching, washes and other special features on a pair of jeans." Denim, for this expert customer, is more of an investment. "These women have an understanding of construction and perhaps a great vintage collection of their own. It feeds their excitement when they see garments designed with a backbone of research. They put money on great design and the best denim fabrics."

Today's denim landscape seems a far cry from the time when a simple design tweak could ignite uproar. In 1953, Lee Cooper caused a stir when it became the first brand to switch the women's zip from the side to the front, in line with men's jean design. Now, when introducing a collection of raw denim for both men and women, the label is surprisingly one of only a few brands who offer premium, untreated denim in women's cuts. While the

demand and desire for women's workwear clearly exists, a fact proven by the numbers that *Ponytail Journal* pulls in, finding authentic workwear and raw, selvedge denim for women is no easy task. From an insider's perspective, Yates finds this particularly strange given the make-up of the menswear industry. "When you look behind closed doors in the menswear world, you'll find a network of female designers, fabric developers, and vintage purveyors running the show."

Raw denim is very poetic in a way … I guess people see romance in it, and a sort of toughness. I see workwear in general as a universal design

Looking to redress the balance, Yates has poured her passion and knowledge into her own label. "I started W'Menswear thanks to a gap in the market that was magnified by *Ponytail Journal*. It was clear to me that there are women in the world who seek out special garments that are inspired by the legacy of women at work; product that focuses on materials, construction, fun and function." Yates knows denim inside-out, and her vast knowledge of the fabric has given her licence to throw out the rules and explore this material with a more liberal attitude. Simply put: "I don't think we should police fashion."

If anything demonstrates her laidback approach, it's her response to the controversial topic of whether to wash or not to wash? "You see, I'm not a purist on this. I wash my jeans. I live in Thailand, so you can buy products that are made by the lady down the road, eco-friendly, no chemicals, no fancy bottle — just auntie's laundry liquid."

As a designer, Yates's approach to denim is to view it as unformed cloth, a building block. "Fabric is such a crucial element to the design process. To me, fabrics can elevate great design or destroy it. Fabrics can also tell a wonderful story about a garment, whether you have developed a special technical fabric, or if it's a weave that breathes life back into an ancient tradition." While the design is crucial, it is this raw material that guides the finished piece in both expected and unforeseen directions. "Yes, it's like a skin that dictates the way a garment is going to behave, function, or amaze us in its beauty." While weight, origin and depth of colour are all essential factors, she depends on something more innate for that final decision. "For me it's an instinctual thing. I get an indication by feel. It is more unexplainable, ephemeral."

While interest in raw denim and workwear is fuelled by nostalgia, it's modern communication and digital innovation that has driven global interest. While fade diaries and minute details are inspected by denim obsessives, the web has also allowed for more experimentation within the denim and workwear wardrobe. Yates knows better than anyone the power of the internet and its unstoppable reach. "The web has specifically played a huge role in the widening of a conversation surrounding feminine identity in fashion. It has acted as a catalyst and made more space for the mix-and-match playground. So much information is available to us at such speed and from every corner of the earth." She has personally seen how global relates to local in her own backyard. "In Asia in particular, the internet seems to be more impactful than in other parts of the globe. Here in Thailand, smartphones have connected ultra-remote pockets to the world. It has opened up new economies and inspired a hybrid sense of style within the country. It's fantastic!"

So what keeps Yates returning to denim in all its forms in both her own closet and in her designs? "Raw denim is very poetic in a way … I guess people see romance in it, and a sort of toughness." She continues: "I see workwear as a universal design. It's made to fit a rainbow of sizes and shapes, women included."

Rudy + Atsushi

Rudy Budhdeo is the founder of Son of a Stag, London's premium denim store, located just off Brick Lane. His good friend Atsushi Matsushima is the editor-in-chief of *CLUTCH* magazine, a Japanese publication dedicated to revival style. The two met at Clutch Collection, a denim tradeshow in Yokohama, Japan, to discuss the modern role of jeans

Words Jamie Millar
Photography Ko Tsuchiya

RUDY *How often do you feature denim in* CLUTCH magazine?

ATSUSHI I feature denim-related topics in every issue, and our big denim special issue usually comes out bi-annually. I also produce a special denim series in a so-called "mook" format — it's like a cross between a magazine and a book. How did you get involved with denim?

I got into the business purely because I felt that it's something that I wanted to do. I was involved in other companies, doing other products, but never specifically a product that I liked 100%. With Son of a Stag, I can choose the products, and all the buying is done from the heart.

But before Son of a Stag, when did your history with denim begin?

About nine years ago, when I was a young guy studying for my A-levels to become a medic. I bought a pair of jeans, and there was a flaw in the fabric. I went back very proudly the following week to illustrate to the shopkeeper the special, unique pair that I had; he misunderstood and thought that I wanted my money back. I went to a reference library and started studying denim, then I went back to the shop two weeks later with a whole file of research.

Rudy, left, Atsushi, right

Haha, that's the spirit. Denim has become very accessible in Japan over the past 30 years or so. I grew up wearing jeans all the time, and I believe that most Japanese have had the same experience. So it almost makes me feel strange to categorise denim as a part of a "special lifestyle".

Yeah. I met a very lovely elderly Japanese gentleman many years ago during one of my first trips to Japan who taught me a lot about denim. He could predict what a person did as a job, and whether they were right-footed or left-footed, just by the wear on his jeans. We would stop people on the street, and he would prove it to me!

In Japan, denim has been mostly worn by many younger generations, historically. Now those who know about denim are growing older, and the fabric is crossing generations. This will also make denim more "standardised" for all of us, like it is in America now.

But denim is fashion and fashion is denim. It's evolved from being workpants and dungarees. It's now used by some of the biggest fashion designers in the world. The proof is in the pudding, because you can see that some of the high-end brands from the catwalks are actually associated with usage of Japanese denim through the attention to detail. The relationship with fashion is binding and getting stronger and stronger. The two are integral to each other.

Yes, but it's not about "now" and whether denim is "in" for the season or not. Rather, denim is something that we have been recognising as a standard of the scene for a while. Of course there are always ups and downs in terms of trends, but I see denim as rooted.

I agree. Denim has already proved itself. It has a history going back 160 years; it's one of the most enduring fabrics. So it will carry on, and more and more people are getting into it because more companies allow their staff to wear denim at work. Even in the City [London's financial district], they're allowed to wear clean, neat denim on a Friday.

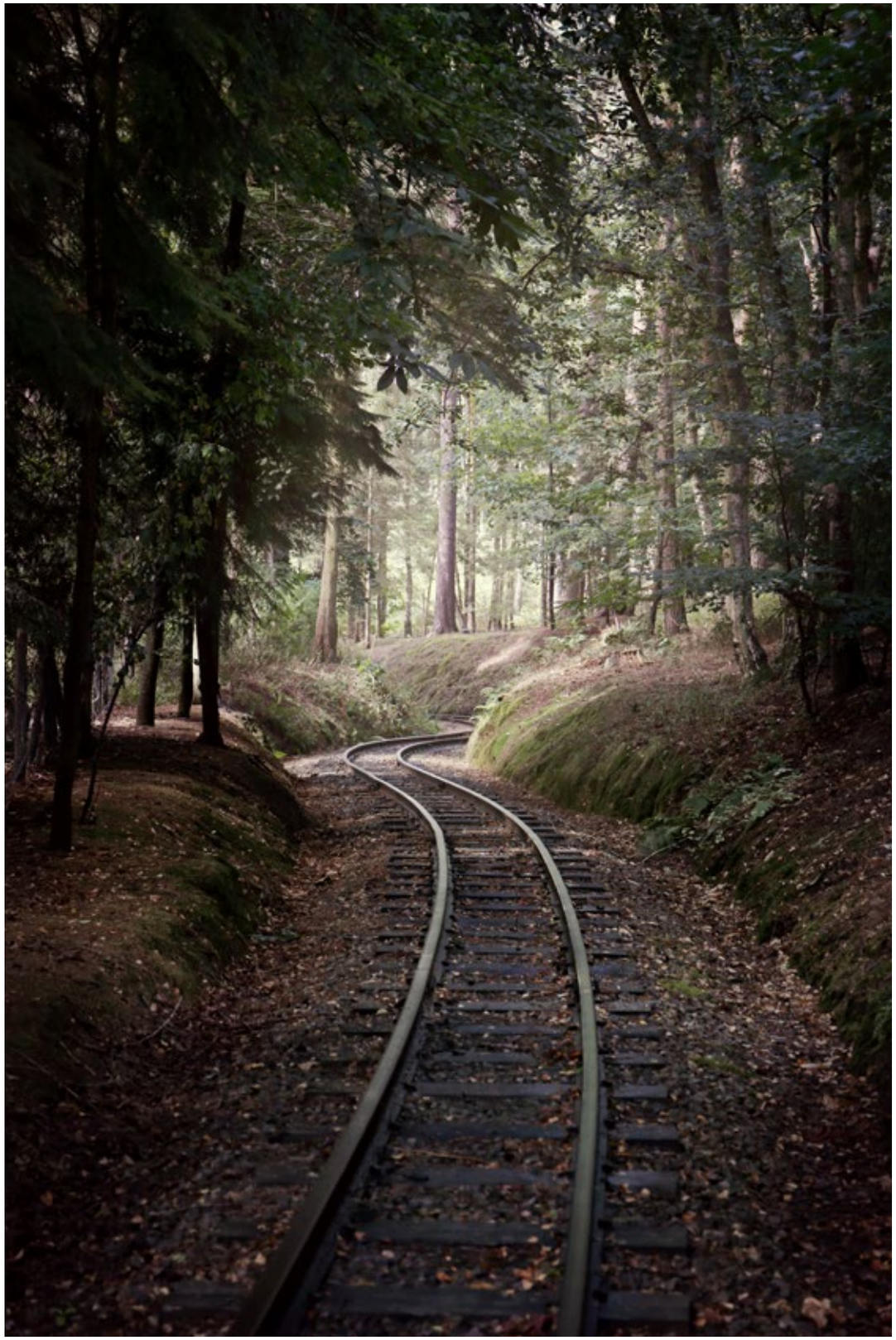
Hmm, interesting. I guess what I'm trying to say is that the idea of denim being a "standard" is a core point of view, not something I debate. It's an unchangeable matter. Like the blue sky we see today.

Woodland Walkies

Photography Nick Clements
Art Direction Charlotte Heal
Stylist David Hellqvist

The Cooper Collection

PREVIOUS PAGE Jack wears coat by You Must Create, jacket by J Crew, shirt by Our Legacy, jeans by The Cooper Collection and boots by Clarks x Christopher Raeburn. Lydia wears jacket by Julien David, shirt by A.P.C., jeans by The Cooper Collection and boots by Clarks x Christopher Raeburn
BELOW Lydia wears top by Missoni (from matchesfashion.com), jeans by The Cooper Collection and boots by Kickers



OPPOSITE Jack wears jacket by Craig Green (from matchesfashion.com), T-shirt by Dries Van Noten (from END Clothing), jeans by The Cooper Collection and boots by Clarks x Christopher Raeburn
ABOVE Jack wears jacket by Our Legacy, jeans by The Cooper Collection and boots, model's own

PREVIOUS PAGE Lydia wears jacket by Acne Studios (from matchesfashion.com), top by A.P.C. and jeans by The Cooper Collection ABOVE Jack wears jacket and bag by The Quality Mending Co. (from Coverture & the Garbstore), T-shirt stylist's own, jeans by The Cooper Collection and boots by Timberland PRO. Lydia wears top by Marques'Almeida, T-shirt by Le Kilt and jeans by The Cooper Collection OPPOSITE Lydia wears shirt by Sideline (from Coverture & the Garbstore), jeans by The Cooper Collection and boots by Kickers

BELOW Jack wears jacket by By Walid (from Mr Porter) and jeans by The Cooper Collection

OPPOSITE Lydia wears jacket by Maison Margiela 6, jumper by Carrier Company and jeans by The Cooper Collection. Jack wears jacket by Wåven, shirt by Norse Projects and jeans by The Cooper Collection

HAIR AND MAKE-UP Emily McEwan PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT Dan Black STYLING ASSISTANT Ryan Lee
MODELS Lydia and Jack @Models 1 THANKS TO Rural Life Centre in Farnham

Red Wing

At the footwear company's Minnesota HQ, head designer Aki Iwasaki traces the inherent connection and ongoing love affair between classic workwear boots and raw selvedge denim

Words Lena Dystant
Photography Tec Petaja

The simple act of getting dressed is a daily decision-making process and one that seems more complicated than ever before. Having access to every trend past and present, every new discovery, every global retail outlet is in equal measure liberating and bewildering. This democratisation of fashion, and the deluge of choice that comes with it, may go some way to explaining the workwear boom of the past 10 years. In a confusing world, where everything is up for grabs, there is safety in the simple and the established. What could be easier to understand than workwear? A pre-existing uniform born out of function — reliable, unfussy, no detail without purpose and just a few basic tenets to follow. →

At the heart of Americana workwear there are two basics that form the foundation: dark, raw denim and tough-as-nails work boots. For the latter, one name remains the standard-bearer: Red Wing, an American icon for over 100 years. Still going strong today, the company's core business is devoted to modern performance footwear, but the past decade has seen renewed interest in their Heritage label, devoted to remaking archive classics. At the helm you'll find head designer Aki Iwasaki, an understated figure who has channelled his long-standing passion for the brand into a collection that, today, has global reach and pertinence.

For Iwasaki, the key to Red Wing's popularity is its longevity. "The most attractive element of the brand is our 100-year history, which to the consumer equals quality — that's where the trust comes from," he says from The Red Wing HQ in Minnesota. At the turn of the century, in an age of rapid industrial development, shoe merchant Charles Beckman identified an eager and growing audience of blue-collar workers in need of footwear resilient enough to cope with a hard day's work. In 1905, with the help of investors, he launched the Red Wing Shoe Company, taking the name of the small town, an hour's drive from Minneapolis, where the brand was born. The region itself was in a prime position. Located along the Mississippi river, Red Wing, named after a Sioux chief, boasted lush wheat fields, a busy port, numerous mills and an army of skilled craftsmen and women. Geographically, Beckman could not have been better placed to create and sell one of the earliest work boots. Now simply described as the Original Boot, the 1905 model was a high-rise leather creation that featured both laces and buckles. Beckman's tale was typical of the ingenuity of the era, and today the Red Wing Heritage collection proudly tells the story of its birth without falling into stale nostalgia. As Iwasaki points out: "Stories are always important to our brand. The consumer wants to have some history behind the products that they buy. Red Wing are very good at telling those stories, from the store to the shoe itself."

Part of a shared story, denim and Red Wings came to prominence at the same time, both catering to the needs of a specific customer base. The millions who kept America's burgeoning industries and agriculture ticking over cared little for fashion, turning to these two icons for their durability and toughness. Paired together across the fields, ranches, construction sites and factory floors of America, boots and denim would become inextricably linked from the early 20th century onwards. Iwasaki is quick to extend the story across the decades: "They both come from the same roots. Their image is perfectly matched and, later, popular culture would tap into this relationship heavily." Referencing the moment when postwar biker sub-culture spilled over into something more mainstream, Iwasaki cites that Brando classic as a turning point. "Yes, a key moment was the 50s with movies like *The Wild One* where Brando wore denim and Engineer boots together, and it became an iconic look." And Iwasaki has a personal relationship to that particular aesthetic: "Actually, the Red Wing version of the Engineer is my very own favourite!"

Red Wing and denim continued their close and organic relationship into the 60s, 70s and beyond, but in latter years the duo's reputation has been further cemented with the surge of interest in the *LIFE* online photography archive, a resource that allowed images of denim and boots in pre- and post-second world war America to be enjoyed in close-up detail and re-blogged endlessly. The romance attached to this bygone era, and a new obsession with utility, can take credit for the recent fascination with workwear, be it apparel, boots or denim. There is, though, much to be said for the simple matter of aesthetics. Iwasaki explains their visual appeal as a partnership: "The consumer can enjoy the ageing of denim, colour changes, fades and whiskers. And, unlike most other products, this change

LEFT Red Wing launched its famous Moc Toe style in 1932, using a Goodyear Welt sewing machine, which had to be modified to handle the tough stitches.
BELOW This is the Iron Ranger boot and its Red Wing style number is #8113. The model was launched in 2008, inspired by a boot type worn by miners.

RIGHT This process is called "stick dry", as the hides are hung on the stick to dry slowly, which takes seven hours. The hides are from Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa and South Dakota.
BELOW The "Big Blade Edge Trimmer" bevels the edge of the welt to give it a cleaner look. The boot in the picture is the #1907, an updated version of a Red Wing boot launched in 1954.

in appearance is viewed as something positive. The denim is more prized when it shows signs of wear and damage. This is where the connection between the two is really clear," he says. "Work boots have the same desirable ageing process. The leather gets darker, richer, it changes shade, it scuffs and rubs, and this, in fact, makes it more beautiful then before." To put it simply, when worn together, the beauty of each is magnified by the other.

Iwasaki cites this visual connection as the reason behind his own love affair with the indigo cloth: "I've always felt that, for me personally, the denim I wear is a notebook of my life, my history. It's with me every day. It fades, it stains, it scars, it picks up marks depending on what I'm doing. It's like making a diary of my progression. The cloth reflects my history." His first jeans were a pair of Levis 501XX. "I was a high-school student fascinated by denim, and my friends and I would always wear jeans, even from early on." Nowadays, he's rarely seen out of denim. "For me, it's a uniform. For most people, that's a suit that they wear throughout the week, like a banker. My version of this setup is denim. It's the uniform that I have created for myself, it's what I'm comfortable in."

Having grown up in the Tokyo suburb of Saitama, Iwasaki has seen the Japanese boom in raw denim from its infancy. While he wouldn't go so far as to describe himself as a "denimhead", his personal requirements are indeed specific. "Thickness is key. Not that the thickest is always the best, but it does denote a certain quality. I favour dark, raw denim. I tend to go for that straight silhouette. I'd never wear skinny jeans." Japan's own obsession with Red Wing boots goes hand in hand with its denim culture. "The Japanese market has always liked super-thick leather for Red Wing; it is what they expect and look for. It's exactly the same for denim, the consumer in Japan wants the heavyweight cloth — the more ounces the better."

Authenticity seems to be the central point of difference between the Japanese market and the US and European audience. "The west is more flexible about the image of Red Wing; they like modified styles in softer, more comfortable leather, whereas Japan favours a more faithful look in general," says Iwasaki. So how does he cater to these differing tastes, and how does Red Wing Heritage balance the old with new? "If we started making fashionable products, like pointy shoes or something, we would never sell them. However, we can't get stuck in the past. If we made just vintage replicas all the time, the Red Wing fan might as well just buy an original pair at a flea market. To attract those guys, we need freshness, newness in a vintage style." Much like unworn raw denim, central to the idea of buying into the "new" is the ability to leave your own mark. "Red Wing boots may not be comfortable straight away, but if you give them a week they start to conform to the wearer's foot. They become personal to them; they would never be comfortable on another guy. It's like customising your own footwear."

With Americana and workwear very much post-boom — still present but on the wane — Red Wing are compelled to move with the times. "It's about developing slowly, making subtle changes." Jumping on trends is the antithesis of Red Wing's core values, but there are ways and means. "We don't follow fashion, but we do keep an eye what's happening. We're now looking at moving towards a dressier style of shoe, a smarter version of work footwear with a slimmer silhouette, like our Beckman Collection, for example." With the jean industry equally mindful of the change in mood towards workwear, he predicts a similar transition. "I think denim will go much the same way; less of the rugged style and more of a clean, dressier cut, something smarter." History has shown that where one goes, the other follows, as Iwasaki concludes: "The two are always in harmony."

Amy + Chris

Amy Leverton is a trend forecaster and the author of *Denim Dudes*. She's currently working on a *Denim Dudettes* version for the girls. Chris Corrado heads up Capsule, an influential trade show travelling between Paris, New York and Las Vegas. When Amy visited NYC for the Kingpins Show, the two met to settle on who's got the biggest denim wardrobe

Words Jamie Millar
Photography Barbara Anastacio

CHRIS *So I imagine denim must be an everyday staple for you?*

AMY I pretty much only wear denim. I own a few other bits and pieces, but generally, I don't think about it. It's a natural part of my life. It just is.

It's just there.

Yeah, it's become so much a part of my life, and I have a lot of denim, so it's just natural. But at the same time I've been hanging out with the guys from Heddels [an American online forum for denim], and they're different from me: they're purist denimheads, whereas I come from a fashion and trend background. I have my purist stuff, too, but I love a bit of sparkle!

I was under the impression that you were more of a denimhead than that, and that I was the "fashion denim" one here (laughs). Denim is an aspect of my wardrobe, but not a thing I've built an entire lifestyle around.

Usually that's a guy/girl thing, although there are tons of guys that are not denimheads. I'm not putting it down: I actually think it's fantastic, and also better as far as the environment and society is concerned, because people consider who made their garments, where the fabric came from, and so on.

Whether it's denim or toothpaste, men decide we like or love something, and that's the path we then walk on. I'm probably different in that I'm interested in all of fashion.

Chris, left, Amy, right

On another note, do you think denim is different in New York to Europe?

There was probably an easy answer to that question about 10 years ago. I think now, with the rise of Instagram and Snapchat, and the internet in general, trends are more global than local. But for the average consumer, there might be a difference. Maybe guys in France wear slimmer denim compared to the guy in New York City: we're a baggy town, for sure. But when you start looking closer, it's practically the same, whether it's New York, London or Copenhagen. It's practically identical for the cool kids, the opinion leaders.

As an English person living in America, I'd say there's definitely a difference in terms of general attitude. I think denim sums up the American dream — honesty, hard work, labour and going somewhere.

Where did the idea for Denim Dudes *come from?*

I love street-style photography, that's where I find a lot of my inspiration and trends. And then there's the job I do, going to a lot of trade shows and meeting all the head designers and denim obsessives ... I wanted to touch on that whole purist scene.

On the back of what we discussed earlier, the purist denim scene is male-dominated but I think, in general, there are a lot of women working behind the scenes. And the women's premium-denim business really set up the time we're in now, with an openness to fashion and prices. Denim was covetable: it was the foundation of your outfit. The heritage and Americana movement was a reaction against fast fashion. And it was 100% men.

And it still is really.

"These are my stovepipes in raw Japanese selvedge." It's got to be selvedge, obviously. All of these words suddenly became commonplace in the vernacular. And now we're getting to a stage that's more in line with your approach: taking this culture and mixing it with fashion. Denim is part of a guy's rotation. Rewind the clock 10 years, and denim was the foundation of every outfit. Dudes weren't thinking about twill, wool or cotton pants. It was denim that opened the door to all of these options. Most people don't want to be a one-trick pony. How many pieces of denim do you own?

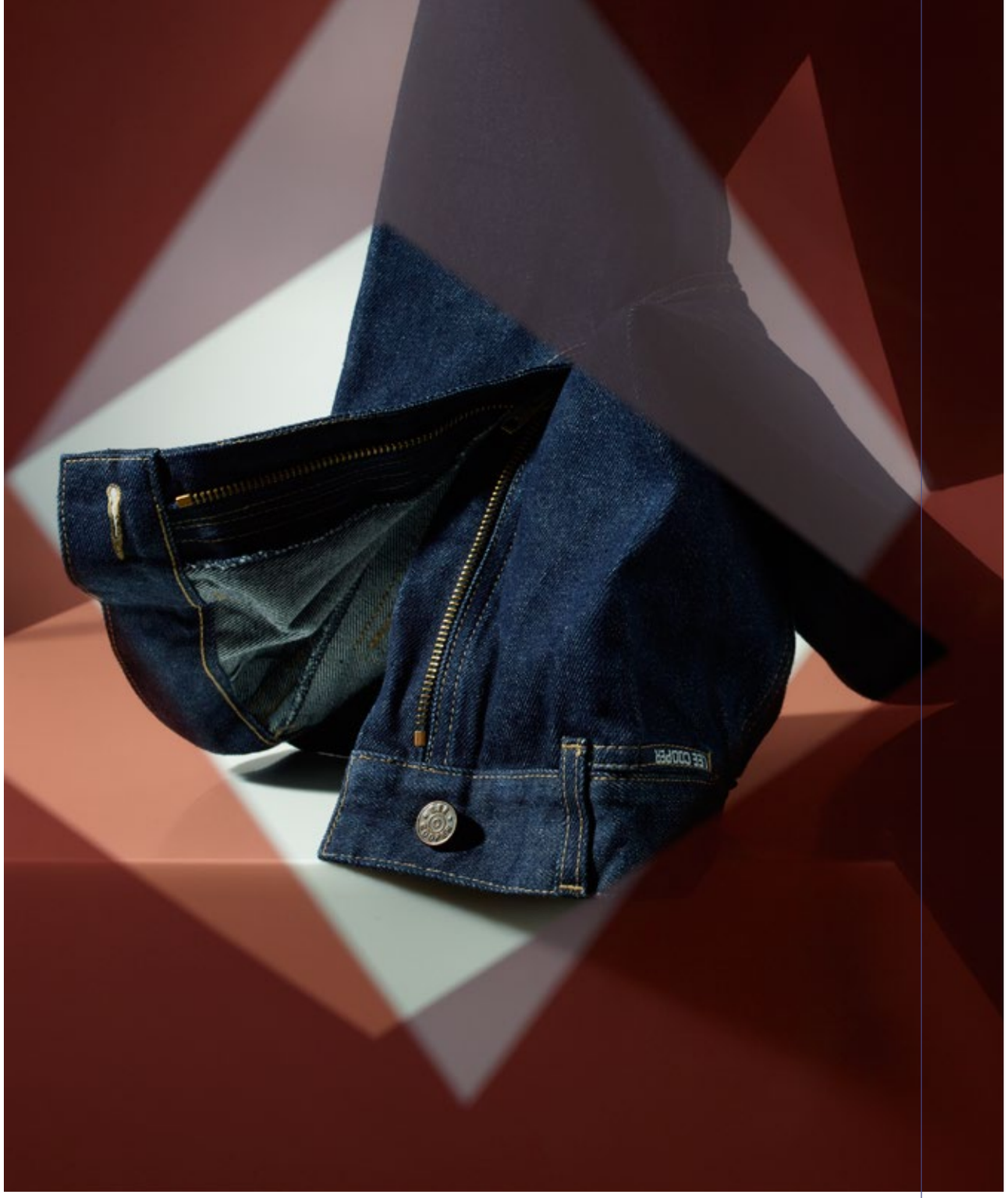
Probably 500.

I own maybe 100.

Are you a washer?

It depends what they are. I have plenty of raw denim — some of them I don't reach for enough to even warrant a washing. I wear eight pieces regularly; the rest are just part of my world. I'll come back to them in due course.

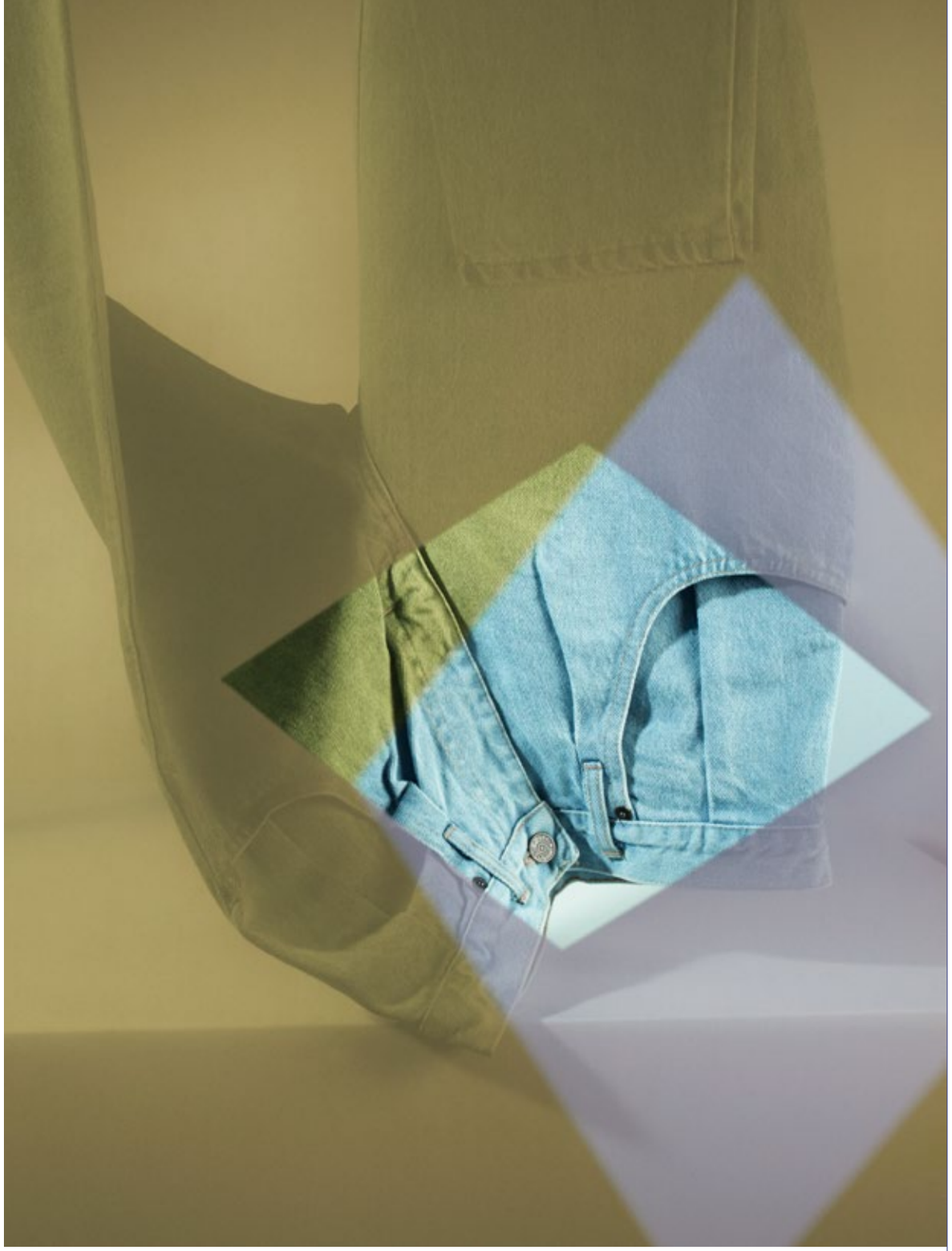
That's the thing about denim: it always comes back.



The Cooper Collection denim &
iconic archive jeans seen through
the Lee Cooper diamond eye

Details Twisted

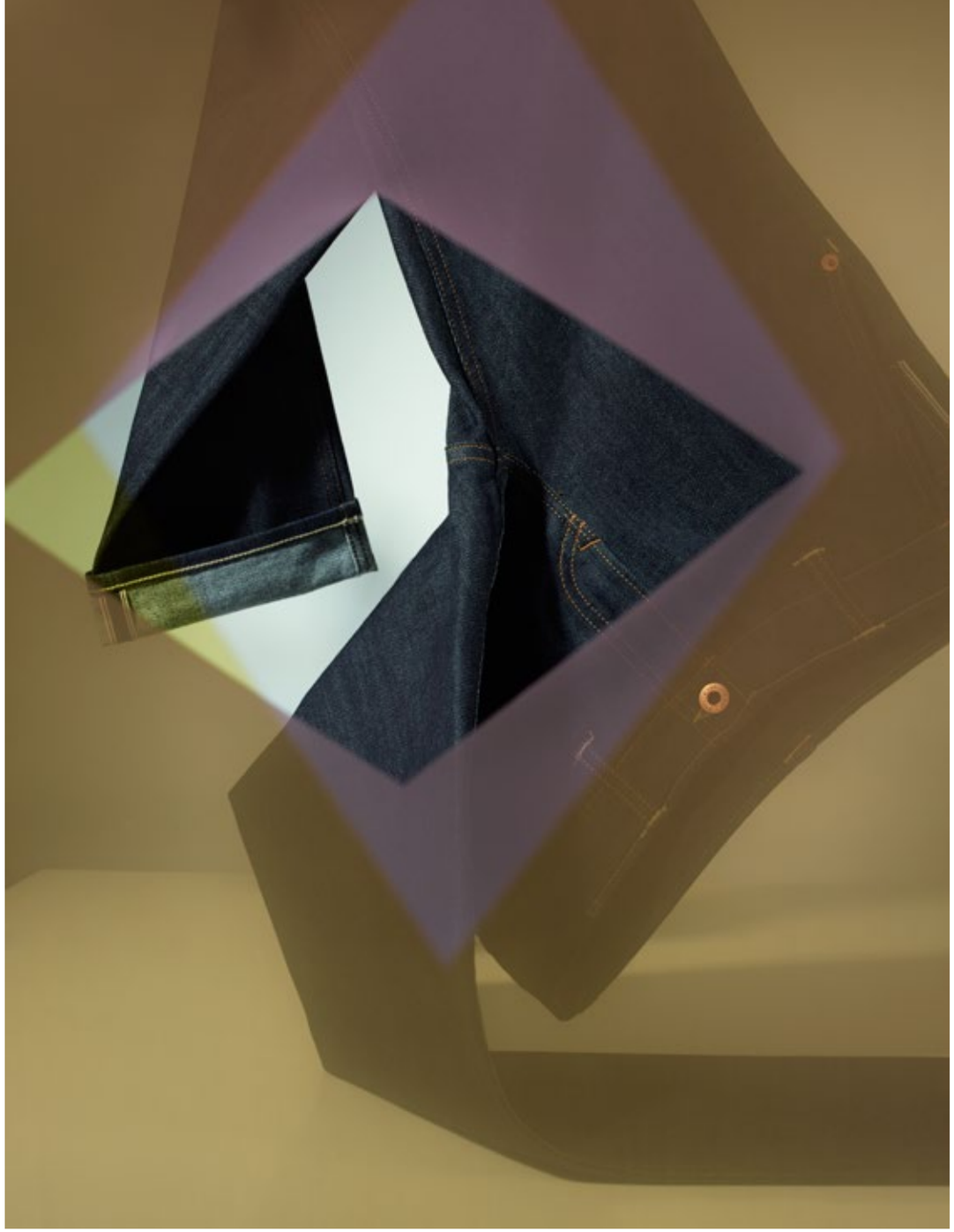
Photography Dominic Davies
Art Direction Charlotte Heal



PREVIOUS PAGE These high-waisted jeans from 1979 reflect Lee Cooper's workwear origins as the high rise protects the body **ABOVE & LEFT** Archive Lee Cooper jeans from 1981, which are now used as a reference piece for select designs for The Cooper Collection AW17

ABOVE & RIGHT Washed grey jeans from from the Lee Cooper Archive, 1987

BELOW & RIGHT Women's straight fit from The Cooper Collection with slanted workwear pockets and a coin pocket with red selvedge detail



Nigel Cabourn

Almost a decade ago, the British work-wear designer and Lee Cooper formed FU's, an exclusive and collaborative diffusion line that, in the end, never made it to the shop floor. Document travelled to Newcastle to unearth the collection from the Cabourn archives

Words David Hellqvist
Photography Liz Seabrook

It's a sunny day in Newcastle. Nigel Cabourn is constantly up and down the two-storey garden house in his backyard that functions as his design studio. He's surrounded by a handful of people, some of them design assistants, others in charge of production logistics or marketing. Cabourn is in a good mood, moving about and talking to anyone around him that will listen. Not that he normally isn't in a good mood: the designer is well known for his chatty manner and friendly smile. Often he'll go down to London and work in The Army Gym, his London store in Covent Garden, on Saturdays — much to the delight of his loyal following of hardcore customers. →

Nigel Cabourn trying on a shirt from the SS08 FU's collection, his collaborative project with Lee Cooper

But we're not enduring the six-hour return train journey from London only to enjoy Cabourn's cups of tea and listen to him explain the myriad of collections and collaborations he's currently working on. We're here because Cabourn, on a phone call a few months earlier, when discussing another matter in relation to The Cooper Collection, all of a sudden announced that he had, 10 odd years ago, essentially started a new brand with Lee Cooper, called FU's. I had no idea and, it turns out, not many people knew about it at all. It was meant to go into Colette in Paris, but the collection wasn't put into production and never saw the light of day; until now, it's lived a quiet and unassuming life in Cabourn's endless archives. We travelled up to unearth the collection and to hear the story of how Britain's finest workwear designer and the denim giant ended up working together.

When we reached the studio on the outskirts of Newcastle, we realised it wasn't just us that was happy to rediscover the collection: "I haven't seen these pieces for about 10 years and, when I look at them now, I see it's very much in the same vein as what I do now. I really can't believe it," Cabourn says, smiling while inspecting the jeans, jackets and sweatshirts. Consistency has always been Cabourn's currency. His collections, at least since his "breakthrough collection", a 2003 homage to Sir Edmund Hillary's Mount Everest expedition 50 years earlier, has always had the same sources of inspiration: early- to mid-20th century military uniforms, explorer outfits and classic sportswear. For FU's, Cabourn travelled forward in time a bit and settled on the late 1960s, early 70s and the Vietnam war era. As such, the collection was highly political, with various slogans and prints: "Kill for Peace — if you want to" and "100% Cotton, 100% Angry, 100% Hippie and 100% FU's". The brand name has its own quite controversial history and meaning. "The FU's was quite a funky jeans brand in the early 70s, and I believe they had their own stores. Lee Cooper bought the rights to the name. It stood for Fuck You, which was of course daring at the time. Mind you, I was only in charge of designing it, so I left the politics to others!"

I don't do denim the same way as everybody else. I do it in a way that I would do outerwear. There were so many people doing good denim, so I never felt the confidence

Much like Cabourn's current collections, the SS08 FU's range drew heavily from army uniform details, protest imagery and, of course, denim. Cabourn was, arguably, an odd collaborator for an expert denim brand like Lee Cooper in many ways. Or perhaps that was the very reason they turned to him, to get an outsider's point of view? "I didn't do denim for a very long time. We're known for great outerwear, and Massimo Osti [founder of Stone Island and CP Company] and myself were probably the two people that really concentrated on making just outerwear, and we built a business on this. I have only really been doing denim properly for about five or six years now."

And, not surprisingly, when Cabourn does it, it's not your average five-pocket jean: "I don't do denim the same way as everybody else. I do it in a way that I would do outerwear. There were so many people doing good denim, so I never felt the confidence. But the funny thing is that Adriano Goldschmied [co-founder of Diesel and owner of AG Jeans] picked me as his favourite denim designer for an article in Sportswear International, which I couldn't believe! He rang me up around six months ago and said 'Nige, I think you're the best at denim, I really love what you do.'"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At the time of FU's inception, Lee Cooper, very much a British company with its original HQ in east London, manufactured some of its wares in north Africa. "Yes, in those days the brand produced in Tunisia, and they owned a huge factory there," Cabourn remembers. He went out there a handful of times to oversee the production, but the idea of his line was sometimes difficult to explain to the people on site: "All those years ago, niche and vintage wasn't massively important. The vintage scene has only really happened over the last 10 years or so. This collection was before its time, and if we brought it out again now, in a new fit with the contemporariness of today, I don't think I would change anything on the design, apart from a small amount of the fabrication." The collection is still relevant, according to Cabourn. "Yes, definitely in the most part, a lot of the garments would perhaps need a little tweak, but some of those pieces fit great, and there is a bit of over-washing where the sleeves may have shrunk a little bit. But I was really pleasantly surprised with the colour and the branding."

I'm actually quite excited when I see all these garments that I produced many years ago, because I thought, 'Fucking hell, it all fits me!' It's like a time capsule really!

Let's circle back to Cabourn's consistency. More than most designers, he has managed to stick to a fairly slim creative brief without it ever restricting his output. There can be no doubt about what his field of expertise is, and I suppose that's why what he does is classified as style rather than fashion. He can easily identify where and how it started: "Well, I was at fashion college, and all the pieces I'm showing you now is what I started with: flower power, the Vietnam war and the whole of British pop music. All I did was regurgitate that because FU's was from this period, like the controversial stories of all these students fighting in the streets. All the students had this surplus style; a pair of jeans and an army jacket." Though there's a strong connection to the army in terms of his use of military details or camouflage, be it for FU's back in the day or his own collection today, there isn't anything "violent" about Nigel Cabourn. On the contrary: "The whole idea of this concept was to take the military and put a peace message into it, and that's why there are all those peace connotations within the garments as such. I'm actually quite excited when I see all these garments that I produced many years ago, because I thought, 'Fucking hell, it all fits me!' I think if you put it on the right guy and he is dressed in the right way, which is obviously what I'm about, it still looks quite cool on! It's like a time capsule really."

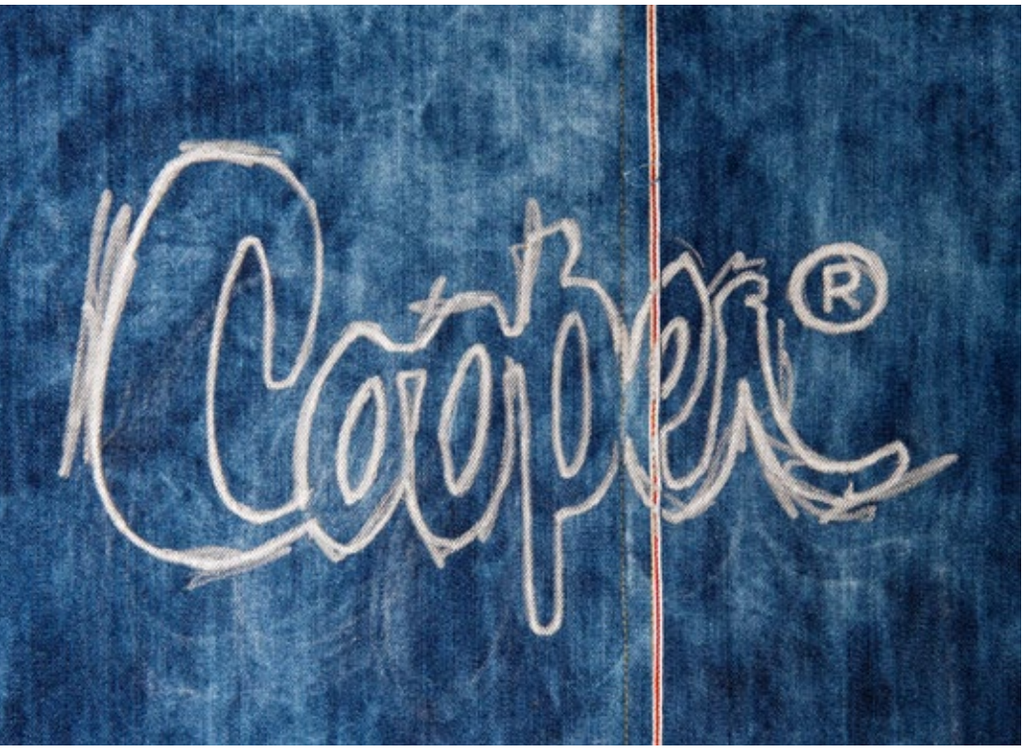
At a time and place when throwaway fashion rules, and creative directors complain about not having enough time to think before designing, it's refreshing to see a collection like FU's stand the test of time. And bear in mind this was before the height of collaborations, when sartorial partnerships were more than a marketing ploy and blog fodder. Cabourn's inspirations remain the same, his dedication to quality unchanged. Sure, you'd change a few details, but FU's is a testament to Nigel Cabourn's long-term vision and Lee Cooper's willingness to challenge itself in order to develop as a brand. I just wish that we, as customers, had been given the chance to buy into it. Perhaps there ought to be a 10-year reunion for SS18?

The Price Project

Using denim from The Cooper Collection, Document commissioned Lucas Price to create a triptych of paintings based on the raw energy and attitude of a teenager's jean jacket

Words Lucas Price
Photography Dunja Opalko

I'm really interested in subcultures and youth movements — especially the music that comes out of them and the secret languages that they develop. I'm referring to the visual language and the way in which cliques differentiate themselves from others. I often use this kind of language in my work, so for The Cooper Collection project I landed on this idea: using the visual language of when people draw on denim jackets. When I started thinking about it, there are so many movements that have had this concept of drawing on garments incorporated into their cultures. There's everything from the airbrushed denim jackets that came out of hip-hop culture in New York in the late 1980s and early 90s, to heavy-metal rockers and punks putting badges and pins on theirs. →



The Cooper Collection

When I grew up in north Wales, there used to be these rallies when around 1,500 Mods would drive through my town, all wearing denim jackets and parkas. What I noticed about all those jackets was the hand-stitched badges and prints. Whatever tribe people belong to, they use the denim jacket as a blank canvas, which gets used again and again. I definitely think rave culture and squatters also take a lot of different elements and blend them together on clothing, and I would say skate culture, with its cut-off denim jackets, fits in there, too. The garment is used as a space for people to represent their tribe and to let people know who they belong to, and what they want to be affiliated with. And recently, it has become a high-fashion thing with the likes of Raf Simons, Kanye West and Off-White reappropriating it for what they do.

I like slang and I have always appreciated how it's used as a subverted language, which is reclaimed and used it in a way that disregards formal rules. It is this concept of taking sentences and completely stripping them apart and recombining words to suit your own purposes that inspires me. I think this is often taken as a sign of ignorance, but in fact I think it is very intelligent. I read this kind of personalised language as a form of poetic licence, and that's why I'm interested in it.

In fact, when I was a kid, I did a lot of embroidery on my own clothing. I remember I had an MA-1 bomber jacket on which I spent hours embroidering a Def Jam logo. I cut out the logo from a piece of paper, and then I pinned it into the jacket and sewed over it. But when I was wearing the jacket in the rain, the blue colour that was on the paper underneath the embroidery started to leak out and spread! But it looked as if I had bought this really rare, one-of-a-kind Def Jam jacket. So I understand the personal aspect to these kind of pieces; it makes sense to me.

The three denim panels each have text on them; one of them says "Youth", another says "Spasms" and the third one says "Survive". I think that all of them are quite strong words and, all combined I think speak to the energy of youth and the energy of finding your voice when you are setting out on your independent life adventures. With "Spasms" I thought about it like the frustration and anger of a teenager, as it's a punk-like, sweaty word.

The three words — "Youth", "Survive" and "Spasms" — are quite strong words and all combined I think speak to the energy of youth and the energy of finding your voice when you are setting out on your independent life adventures

For me, thinking about it like that helps with building a narrative in my head. When I'm thinking about clothing, it's like a story in terms of what people are doing with musical and cultural references. It's almost like the idea of the Berlin Wall — but not in a political way, it's more about the fact that it's got time and history embedded in it, a place for people to leave a mark.

In that sense, and in terms of the material, there are parallels to denim, generally speaking; people leave marks on jeans, depending on how you wear them. But I guess the marks

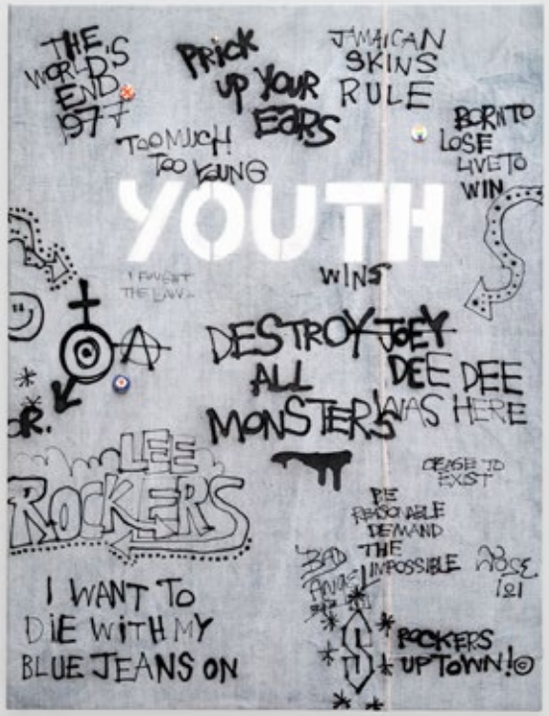
I have left are louder and the layers do go deeper. It is almost a given that denim is there as a thing that will change and be personalised in many different ways. It doesn't happen with other materials like cotton, tweed or twill. With denim, we are really asking ourselves straight away: "How are we going to make our mark on it?" I think the particular language I have used on these panels is kind of like a toilet in a punk bar, where different people and sound systems have passed through.

I'm really interested in sub-cultures and youth movements—especially the music that comes out of them and the secret languages that they develop

Even though there are three separate panels, there's obviously a connection between all of them. They are all one piece, really. They might not be bolted together, but they're part of just one flow. I changed them around from the original raw denim. One of them is showing the reverse because it is a lighter surface, and one of them has been bleached and beaten up a little bit. One of them has got the raw canvas that hasn't been touched where the seams are showing, and they're in various states of play. I preferred working with the thicker denim as it's closer to the weight and thickness of the canvas that I'm used to as a surface for paintings. I really enjoyed delving into these different subcultures like listening to all types of music and reading into black skinheads and doing lots of visual research.

Using words in my art is something that has gone in different directions, but I haven't focused on it until quite recently. I started making art quite late on and, up to a point, I am self-taught. In my late 20s, I realised I really wanted to make art and taught myself essentially. I went through various phases and picked up where I left off in my teens by getting back into graffiti, which really is about words as well. I taught myself to paint, but whenever I would make canvases, words would always creep in. As I educated myself, I realised that I much prefer thinking in terms of words and language. Then, when I grew up and matured, I realised that making paintings that consist entirely of words was me being honest and something that appealed to me. I realised that some sort of magic happens when you compress a few words, it starts to excite and ignite something. As I go on, language is really becoming the kind of medium I want to investigate more and more.

For me personally, denim always has been and always will be part of my wardrobe. As time has gone on, I have really stripped down my style, though, and I don't really go for statement pieces any more, as I don't really have a massive desire to stand out. I've got a whole bunch of white T-shirts and a whole bunch of grey sweatshirts and a lot of clothes that my friend in Japan, Kazuki Kuraishi, has made for me. I have got a denim jacket and a number of jeans that are falling apart, and that is it really. I keep it pretty simple these days!



Alexis Taylor

The Hot Chip frontman, who recently released *Piano*, his latest solo album, is almost as famous for his sense of style as his music. Here, he looks closer at the importance of denim for musicians on stage and why his first pair of jeans remains his favourite

Words Josh Sims
Photography Jasper Fry

Alexis Taylor is still looking for his denim holy grail. "I started wearing jeans as most of us do, as a kid, because they're practical… But it was when my sister-in-law gave me this old pair of selvedge jeans that I really got into them," says the singer-songwriter, best known as the frontman for the electropop outfit Hot Chip, sometimes appearing as a DJ or regular collaborator with About Group, but latterly on show as a solo artist: his latest album, *Piano*, is a stripped-back, one-man-and-his-keyboard, heartfelt 45-minute lament. ⟶

“I loved those jeans,” Taylor says wistfully. “I wore them for years and had to patch them up over and over, sometimes with bits of denim, sometimes with embroidered patches. My obsession with the way they fitted became a bit unhealthy. I kept trying to find the same in new pairs. And I never have.”

Taylor looks slightly crestfallen at this fact. But then slightly crestfallen — soft-spoken, gentle, erudite — is perhaps Taylor’s resting state. His outwardly easy manner certainly chimes with the kind of performer more typically found having his heart broken at a keyboard rather than rocking a crowd of 20,000. Indeed, it is perhaps those owlish glasses of his that, no doubt frustratingly, had Taylor and his fellow Hot Chippers, pigeonholed as the boffin nerds of powerhouse synth music, with the style to match.

“That used to annoy me,” Taylor admits. “But gradually those words stopped coming up. Maybe the visual side of the band has become less important between then and now, since we became more established. The media likes to package bands, and I just happened to be wearing these big glasses in one of the first photoshoots we did. But the fact is that I’m rubbish at maths and science, not very good with computers and really need my glasses to see.”

Not that Taylor doesn’t think about what he wears, both on stage and off. He likes the idea of clothing being part of the theatricality of a big stage performance — to provide an element of spectacle beyond the usual video screens and dancers. “I don’t read fashion magazines, but I do enjoy looking at vintage stores and flea markets around the world — it’s how I’ve tended to spend a lot of time when touring,” he says. “I enjoy the element of dressing up and wear a lot of bright colours on stage. I like spending time thinking about what I’m going to wear on stage, too. If it’s three gigs, I like a different outfit for each.”

“For me, the stage is a place to be playful,” he adds. “Through the years I’ve seen a lot of performers that are very good at that — the likes of Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy. He does his own thing, kind of plays the fool. He has this outlandish and odd appearance on stage. It’s not the classic rock look of leather jacket, Ray-Bans and skinny jeans.”

Denim is durable and rugged, and bands presumably want to be both of those things. It also seems to be a shorthand for cool Americana

That’s a look, which, frankly, Taylor would struggle to pull off — though he has recorded a distinctive cover of Bruce Springsteen’s *Dancing in the Dark*. “Denim is durable and rugged, and bands presumably want to be both of those things,” he notes. “It also seems to be a shorthand for both cool and the USA, or Americana, and a lot of bands only exist due to American popular music, whether or not they are fighting against that fact.”

Certainly, avoiding rock’s sartorial cliches, Taylor already finds that his day-to-day clothes are more provocative than he expects them to be. Every child is a critic. “But the other day a friend of my daughter’s asked me if the floral-print hat I was wearing was actually hers,” he laughs. “And sometimes you get blokes in the pub asking if I was dressed by my kids, because I have a dinosaur-print sweatshirt on. I like that kind of thing. My wardrobe hasn’t actually changed since having a daughter. That’s probably not that smart — you wear stuff that inevitably gets ruined.” Thankfully, Taylor says he has never felt pressure from his record companies to dress in a particular way — though one story has it that an executive once pleaded with them to stop wearing cords, which of course was met with an increased devotion to the cloth of kings. That’s given him free rein to explore dress, much as he does his diverse music. “I shouldn’t really have to justify making lots of music as a

musician," he laughs. "I just love music, making music with different people, the creativity, and sometimes retreating to make songs on my own, without a committee."

When I think of denim and music, I think of the patch-worked jeans of Jennifer Herrema and the cover to Royal Trux's single *I'm Ready*

But he's conscious, of course, that the music industry, the media and consumers alike prefer to digest neat packages, and perhaps all the more so in a multimedia landscape. "In Hot Chip we've always tried to have a blend of different things going on, but sometimes you feel the need to justify that, that you have to have an agenda, that you must make your mission explicit," he says. "Often records that do really well have really good press releases explaining the point, the storyline: 'This is the break-up album.'"

Taylor's more freewheeling attitude — resulting in the kind of music that repays close listening, music that might involve, as he puts it, "flipping between different modes and different techniques, experimenting with how songs can sound different just according to microphone placement, as opposed to fiddling with equalisers and synthesisers to get different sounds, the perfect balance" — seems to be as true of his dress sense.

Never mind the trends. For him, the very essence of denim is its flexibility, not its being fixed by fashion. "When I think of denim and music — to misquote an old Coca-Cola campaign that tried to sell MP3s — I think of the patchworked jeans of Jennifer Herrema, and the cover to her old band Royal Trux's single *I'm Ready*," he says. "It's something taken apart or destroyed over time and rebuilt anew. It's indestructible but malleable."

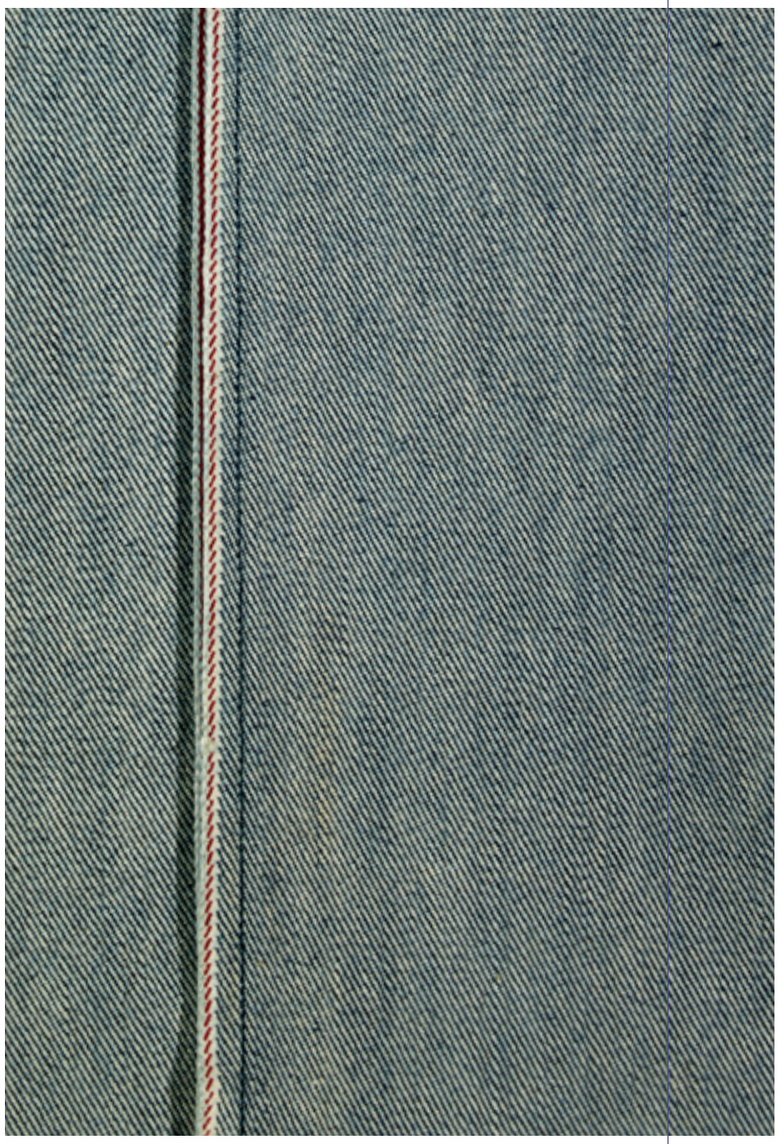
You certainly won't find him in skinny jeans. "I think people tend to look silly in skinny jeans, like they've been squeezed into them," he says. He speaks of his own favoured fit as being narrow but not too narrow, and tapered; his habit of getting them taken up due to his height soon became a habit of getting them taken in, too. "Especially since I found a place in Wood Green [where he lives in north London] that does what I want well and cheaply," he notes. "I like to put my stamp on a pair of jeans. And I've ruined some good jeans trying to do that too, though."

This small example of a desire to experiment is perhaps a tacit admission that jeans — given their utilitarian nature, their being centre stage as menswear's dominant workwear trend — can sometimes be a little too everyman for his tastes. "A lot of changes in denim are cyclical, or just a total rehash of what's gone before," Taylor notes. He's in his mid 30s now, so old enough to have experienced the trends of his youth ("Lots of Chipie and pintucks") resurface in twisted form. "We've seen denim transcend that rock'n'roll association — that tight-fit look, for example, is as much associated now with electronic pop as, say, indie. But do I feel I've left behind the idea of going on stage in normal jeans. If it's a low-key pub gig [of the kind he has done to promote Piano], then I don't dress in such an out-there way. I've always worn denim for those gigs. But maybe it's white denim —that's interesting enough for me not to feel I look like I've just turned up wearing any old stuff."

And as for that holy grail? Taylor has, he says, at least come to some realisation that perhaps just one pair of jeans that fit as you want them to is enough. But that doesn't stop the hunt. "Over the years I've bought so many more pairs in a weird quest to find the shape I really like," he adds. "You know, I think I'm just quite an obsessive person, with jeans as much as with vintage Snoopy sweatshirts, as with picture discs, as with music."

Raw Blue

Emma McClendon, assistant curator at The Museum at FIT in New York and author of *Denim: Fashion's Frontier*, looks back at the origins of blue jeans and considers how history is shaping denim's future



In 1999, *TIME* magazine declared the five-pocket, riveted blue jean the "Best Fashion Item" of the 20th century. With humble beginnings in workwear, it would seem more accurate to call blue jeans the "everyman" garment, separate from and unaffected by the ebbs and flows of "fashion". Fashion connotes exclusivity, prestige and constant change. Indigo jeans, contrastingly, are little changed since the late 19th century. They were designed for that lowliest of pursuits, hard labour, and continue to be worn as workwear. Blue jeans are also ubiquitous, which is the true poison of fashion — once a trend is everywhere, it is also obsolete. The early adopters and the "influencers" have already moved on to the next big thing.

The Global Denim Project, a university-based organisation focused on establishing denim's "history, extent, economics and consequences", estimates that "on any given day, over half the world's population is in jeans". This is a truly staggering statistic. It is supported by numbers from Cotton Incorporated, which found that, in 2014, the average American owed seven pairs of jeans, and the average in Europe was five, in Japan three and in Brazil six. This positions jeans as the great equaliser of clothing; the garment that can be found across ages, nations, races, and genders. The garment that has transcended fashion.

Yet *TIME*'s anointment of jeans as the ultimate fashion item does not seem entirely inappropriate, because if there is one defining feature of 20th-century fashion it is democratisation. Trend-following was no longer exclusively reserved for the elite, thanks to ready-to-wear and fast fashion. Trends also began originating on the street, among the young and less affluent before bubbling up to the echelons of the couture salon. No single garment represents this seismic shift better than blue jeans, and their transformation into a modern day luxury commodity. It is a paradox — jeans are simultaneously the pinnacle of 20th-century fashion, and also not fashion at all.

The modern blue jean as we know it was born in the late 19th century during the California gold rush. Many of the men who migrated out west in search of spectacular fortunes came with only the clothes on their backs. They were ill-prepared for the conditions they would face in the mines, and their clothes quickly fell to tatters. An entrepreneurial dry-goods salesman by the name of Levi Strauss teamed up with a Nevada-based tailor named Jacob Davis in 1873 to manufacture a solution: the riveted denim jean, the same style of riveted jean that is sold at countless retailers around the world today.

With the rise of 'slow food' movements, there has been a growing trend towards mindful consumption and a renewed interest in the authentic, durable and highly individualised jeans of the past

The metal rivets were placed at the trousers' most problematic stress points: where the pockets connected to the trouser legs and waistband. The rivets reinforced the seams and ensured the pockets would not rip away from the rest of the garment. The heavyweight denim also offered a more durable alternative to other workwear fabrics of the time. Often, miners would wear the jeans quite large, as a protective layer over less durable clothing.

The style became so popular among miners and farmers that it was coveted and copied throughout the American West. By the 1920s, versions of the blue denim trousers could be found across the United States and even abroad, with key workwear brands like Lee Cooper pioneering sales in Britain.

Nearly 100 years later, denim sales have grown into a global market worth of $60bn. A key question that emerges is: what has continued to make jeans relevant generation after generation?

The classic way of answering this is to look at the multitude of cultural symbols that have imbued jeans with meaning. Figures from film, television, music and even politics have influenced consumers, be it John Wayne as the consummate American cowboy, Marlon Brando and James Dean as 1950s rebels, the denim-clad "flower children" of the 1960s, or The Beatles performing in front of thousands of teenagers wearing high-waisted jeans. These references helped transform jeans from a mere functional garment into a fashion statement. And they are still employed by advertisers today.

Jeans are the great equaliser of clothing; the garment that can be found across ages, nations, races, and genders ... it has transcended fashion

While these cultural figures help explain why we each own a pair of jeans, I do not think they adequately explain why we each own seven. To answer this, we have to go back to the jeans themselves, to their origin in workwear, and to the denim, to the way it ages, wears, breaks down and fades.

Denim itself is a warp-faced twill fabric made from blue and white cotton threads. The blue threads sit on top of the white threads making a thick, double-layer fabric that is durable and cheap — in other words, ideal for workwear. The blue treads are dyed through a process called rope-dyeing (also known as long chain dyeing). In this process, the blue colour builds up on the surface of the thread in coats. The dye never penetrates all the way through to the thread's core. As the denim is worn, the blue coats begin to brush away, exposing the white core of the thread and leaving marks that are called "wear patterns". No other fabric ages quite like denim.

Wear patterns might take the form of fading across the top of the thighs and at the knees, or even the distinctive shape of an iPhone or wallet that has been kept in the same pocket every day. Maybe you have worn your jeans so much that they have begun to tear in certain places, exposing a hint of white threads. Likely, each of us has a favourite pair of jeans because of these marks and tears. They are unique to our bodies and lifestyle, inherently endowed with memories. Once worn in, no two pairs of jeans are the same, which keeps consumers coming back for more.

Historically, wear patterns were made exclusively by the wearer. Today, most jeans have been artificially distressed to soften the fabric and mimic natural wear patterns that can take years to make. This shift in jeans production is due to consumer impatience that drove the denim market during the late 20th century. As distressed jeans became more fashionable in the wake of the counter-culture movement of the 1960s, retailers recognised that the average consumer did not have the patience to wear out their jeans themselves. These same retailers realised that if they could artificially accelerate the ageing process they could sell jeans at a premium price. Manufacturers began distressing jeans with a number of different techniques that are still used today, from stonewashing and bleaching, to hand-sanding and even sand-blasting. Each technique comes with astoundingly negative effects, particularly on the environment. The wastewater alone that is produced from pre-ageing denim is colossal, but the financial return is equally significant for the producers.

The distressing process has mechanised denim's life cycle, transforming it into a veritable gold mine of its own. Contemporary denim lines reproduce identical wear patterns across product lines. They carefully map out the location and shape of each imprint — often based on a vintage pair of jeans. What were once marks of individuality are now homogenised.

The original blue jeans of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were made from a type of denim called "selvedge". It is distinctive for its width; woven on fly shuttle looms, selvedge denim is only 29 inches wide. Selvedge is also distinctive for a strip of white threads that is woven down both edges of the fabric. The strip prevents the fabric from unravelling (adding to denim's durability), and it is typically used along the outer seams of each leg to reinforce the jeans. When the demand for jeans sharply increased during the 1960s, denim mills began switching over to larger, industrial-sized looms that could produce denim in twice the width of shuttle looms. By the 1980s, selvedge denim was largely a relic of the past. It could not keep up with the global production pace of trendy, disposable jeans readily available on the high street.

During the early 2000s, the distressed and decorative "premium" denim market hit a financial peak. Around the same time, the huge environmental ramifications of artificial ageing techniques started to come into sharp focus.

Selvedge is also distinctive for a strip of white threads that is woven down both edges of the fabric. The strip prevents the fabric from unravelling and it is typically used along the outer seams of each leg to reinforce the jeans

We are currently in a period of momentous change in fashion, as well as in broader culture. With the rise of "slow food" and "eco-fashion" movements, there has been a growing trend towards mindful consumption. As a result, there is a renewed interest in the authentic, durable and highly individualised jeans of the past, both on the part of consumers and also legacy brands who are embracing their heritage and the importance of their original products. Selvedge denim has made a significant return in the denim market in recent years because of this shift, as has "raw" or untreated, unaged denim.

As consumers learn more about the true history and physicality of denim, the market will continue to evolve. Jeans were once highly personalised garments that were built to last. They were made from raw, blue, selvedge denim. This is where blue jeans began, and that is where they are heading next.

Jack, left, Alex, right

Jack + Alex

Jack Garratt is a British singer-songwriter and accomplished multi-instrumentalist. Obsessed with music and denim alike, Garratt released his debut album, *Phase*, earlier this year. Alex Powis is a founding editor of premium British street-style blog *The Daily Street* and creative director of trainer magazine *Crepe City*. The pair met in London to discuss the merits of raw denim, and why its slow pace is a welcome antidote to the speed of fashion

Words Jamie Millar
Photography James McNaught

ALEX *Do you have a favourite pair of jeans?*

JACK I remember picking up a pair maybe three years ago when I moved to London. They were acid-washed grey in a horrible stretchy, skinny material. One pocket was dyed light yellow and the other was light blue. They were from a vintage shop in Notting Hill … Maybe Buy & Exchange?

Ah yeah, that's a great shop. I found some awesome shoes in there a while back.

I also found a pair of Brazilian World Cup Nike Airs there — it's a treasure trove!

How, and when, did you originally get involved with denim?

When I was 16, I started hanging out in a shop back home in Oxford called Section 9, where I eventually ended up working. The guy who ran it got me obsessed with raw denim. So I have a pair somewhere that, over time, have become more precious. Saying that, I've ruined a few pairs as well …

Same here — I burn through jeans when I play live. I end up travelling with five pairs when I tour.

I have the opposite problem. I stopped buying raw denim for a while because I don't burn through them enough to get to where I want them, even after a good year of wear. I get impatient and wash them. And then regret it, ha!

I am horrendously envious of that.

What, of my inactive lifestyle?

Yeah. I need jeans for just sitting around in.

My housemate's jeans always rip just behind the back pocket. Every pair.

A friend of mine has a lovely wallet wear on his back pocket and a lovely little iPhone wear on his front one.

I can tell how old my jeans are by looking at the marks on the back pocket: is there a mark after an iPhone, a Sony Ericsson or packet of cigarettes from when I smoked? As a kid, I really wanted that Zippo mark on my back pocket! So for you, what does denim signify?

Wearing jeans on stage goes back to the birth of rock'n'roll and the whole cultural era when it was rebellious not to wear a suit. But ultimately, it's about durability. I live out of suitcases. The one thing I know, that I can depend on and that won't tear apart when I'm gigging relentlessly for a year, is a good pair of jeans.

The other thing is that they're one of those very few products that, arguably, get better the worse they get. There are certain trainers that do, like Converse, Vans and Adidas Stan Smiths; most don't. As jeans age, they develop their own charm.

A skater friend of mine said, "You don't buy jeans with holes in them: you earn them."

True. I seem to be out of a raw denim phase at the moment: it's either washed or black. Raw denim is great, but it takes a lot of patience. I think raw denim is going to become really interesting, though, in the next few years. Because even though the pace of fashion is getting quicker, you can't really speed up the denim ageing process much more.

It will force people to be patient.

When people suddenly decide that the world's gotten too fast and we are being too frivolous with our purchases, they might latch on to raw denim as a symbol of "slow culture".

Well, I hope they do. There have been enough clues within the music industry that our generation of twenty- to thirtysomethings are obsessed with regression. That's why vinyl sales are better than ever, even though we know that digital audio is a better, cleaner sound than analogue.

It's too *clean.*

Exactly. We buy vinyl because we miss the patience we used to have for art and creativity. If buying raw denim is another way for people to slow down, then I think they will.

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