

Black & Blue: Workwear & Men's Fashions in the Post-War Period

In the immediate aftermath of World War II US consumer goods became the touchstones for a modernistic and plentiful future; in many ways American goods such as cars, pre-packaged foods and clothes became 'meta products'. If for many America represented freedom, opportunity, modernity, it therefore followed that the products of US industry were imbued with those self same qualities. The war had helped spread the message of American consumerism and Hollywood further burnished the aura that surrounded US consumer goods and products. The ubiquity of blue denim has its origins in these processes of cultural communication.

In 1853 the young Levi Strauss arrived in California to open a branch of the family's 'dry goods' business and, it was hoped, cash in on the West's burgeoning economic development. From these obscure beginnings would emerge the American blue denim work wear phenomenon. Within thirty years Levis' were producing their famous copper riveted blue denim work pants and by the early years of the 20th century the 'big three' triumvirate of US jeans manufacturers had been established – Levi Strauss & Co., the HD Lee Company (manufacturers of Lee jeans) and the Blue Bell Overall Company (later to create the Wrangler brand),

The processes of cultural transformation that turned these garments from work wear to every-wear needed a further element, Hollywood. Wild West Shows had long been a popular theatrical entertainment and with the advent of the American film industry, the 'Wild West' was quickly absorbed into the Hollywood cannon. By the 1930s studios were churning out Westerns by the score and hugely popular screen idols regularly appeared dressed in denim – the cinematic myth of the cowboy helped further the mass appeal of blue jeans. Equally 'dude ranch' holidays popularized blue denim for the middle classes; family's could stay

on western ranches as paying guests and enjoy aspects of the cowboy lifestyle. The right look was essential to the experience and holidaymakers increasingly adopted the blue denim work wear associated with cowboys and ranch hands. From the 1930s to the 1950s, as the popularity of dude ranch holidays were at their height, American retail institution the Sears Roebuck catalogue featured large ranges of western wear aimed squarely at a suburbanite clientele - denim was now becoming associated with vacations and 'down time'. The essentially modernistic linkage of mass entertainment to leisure and consumer activity helped build a popular and emotive narrative around denim; when at leisure one could be the cowboy by simply purchasing a pair of blue jeans.

By the 1950s the perceived complacency and prosperity of US middle class lifestyles, one built around convenience, comfort and material wealth, had become a cause of concern for many younger Americans. This questioning of the 'American dream' can be read into such cultural phenomena as Abstract Expressionist art, beat poetry and new and edgy films aimed at a more youthful moviegoer. *The Wild One* (1953) starring Marlon Brando and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) starring James Dean, morally ambiguous films where young 'method' actors mumbled, slouched and shrugged to camera, had a seismic effect on audiences. The clothes chosen by film makers to costume these young actors were central to their appeal; short, zippered 'bomber' jackets (termed in reference to the jackets worn by US aviators in WWII), t-shirts, heavy-duty work boots and blue denim jeans. This simple ensemble of rugged, hard wearing and functional garments, garments primarily associated with the world of work rather than leisure, created a matrix from which so much post-war menswear would later evolve.

Denim blue jeans became an easily recognized signifier of youth, sex and rebellion and in the popular imagination what had once been associated with labour, thrift and economy was now something beyond, something deviant,

something threatening to an older generation. The association of blue jeans with rock 'n' roll music underlined a sense of generational demarcation; not only did Presley appear on screen and in publicity photos wearing denim, but references to blue jeans became a staple in popular song lyrics of the 1950s. Girls too could adopt denim jeans without sacrificing their femininity; indeed the visual contrasts created when the curves of the female form were dressed in heavy work wear simply served to emphasize the wearer's gender. The burgeoning appeal of blue jeans encompassed a broad, though youthful, constituency, from teenage girls to bikers, film stars to street gangs, from the respectable suburbs to inner city housing projects; blue denim jeans not only clothed the figure, but also defined the wearer.

WORD COUNT 756

300 WORD KEYPIECE – DESCRIBE PHOTO BRANDO ON MOTORCYCLE

Marlon Brando's character in *the Wild One* (1953) Johnny Strabler has become a menswear archetype – leather jackets, boots, t-shirts and jeans are staples of the modern masculine look. The seven-point peaked service cap, a type of paramilitary hat often worn by bus drivers and police officers, was popular with bikers in the days before helmets became mandatory. It's not clear exactly which make of hat Brando wore, but it was a generic item made by a variety of companies at the time. Brando's jacket can be clearly identified as a Schott Perfecto 613 'lancer style' leather motorcycle jacket. The Schott Perfecto was designed by Irving Schott in 1928 specifically for the motorcycle market and has remained in production ever since. Early Schott motorcycle jackets were made from horsehide and were famed for their durability – they were also notoriously difficult to break in. The jeans Brando wore in the film are probably Levi's 501, but it is difficult to verify this, denim fanatics still debate exactly which brand was worn – at the time a number of US companies produced 501-style jeans. In a

way the debate is meaningless as it is not what was worn but how they were worn that really mattered. The jeans have that crumpled, lived in look that has remained popular and, crucially, they are worn with a rolled up cuff, thus showing off the heavy-duty black boots to full effect. The boots, known as 'engineer boots', were produced by many American firms from the 1940s onwards and were originally designed as protective footwear for the engineering and construction trades. Key features of Brando's particular boots such as the stacked 'Woodsmen heel' and the Goodyear welted sole suggest that they were made by one of three companies Chippewa, Red Wing or WESCO, all of who were leading manufacturers of engineer boots in the early 1950s.

100 WORDS ABOUT MANUFACTURE

In the early 1870s a Nevada tailor named Jacob Davis began producing tough, hardwearing work trousers using a cotton 'denim' fabric; his clientele being miners, railroad laborers and ranch hands. He then approached Levi Strauss (from whom on occasion he had purchased denim cloth) for financial backing, and so began the association of Levi Strauss & Co with blue denim jeans. In the late 1880s Levis added their trademark leather patch to the rear of the waistband and from the 1890s they began to produce a version of the ever-popular Levi 501 blue denim jean.

TIMELINE TO FOLLOW