

VII. A Garish Hodgepodge of Flashing Lights

The word "boutique" is so nebulous, so subject to regional variations, that people aren't sure whether that small shop on the corner or that large store near the campus is really a certified boutique or not. Chet Flippo, in America's most underpublicized fascist-freak community, Austin, Tex, solved that problem by going to the people:

A precise RAGS survey, conducted first in the University of Texas area and then downtown, yielded some startling answers to such questions as, "What is your favorite boutique?" or "What is a boutique?"

Replies came generally in three categories. Group I, wearing the latest things, the right things, reeled off names like Bottoms Up, Hang It On, and Magic Rainbow. They said they thought boutiques were specialized clothing stores.

Group II, mostly students with mixed ensembles, thought that maybe boutiques were those cramped little shops where they burned incense and played, you know, groovy music, and sold peace symbols and roach clips and paisley clothes.

Group III, members of the, ahem, hip community, shop at the Austin Army & Navy Store and thought boutiques were, in the main, gross rip-offs. They did name a couple of places that sell mostly local craftsmen's works on consignment.

Austin is pretty much dominated by the University of Texas, and what the students buy determines, to a certain extent, the nature of shops in that

Rose Marie: Appetizing?



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Designed, apparently, to decorate dorm rooms

area. In the past year, it has become very fashionable at UT to be hip. Even the frat men are letting their hair grow and buying Levi's. As a result, the "quality" clothing stores on the Drag are hurting and flashy boutiques are springing up everywhere. Four jeans shops have appeared. Craft shops are plentiful and many craftsmen sell their wares on the sidewalks of the Drag.

If Austin boutiques were classified (which they are being done right here), they would fall into one of four classes: hopelessly plastic, not-so-plastic (some integrity left there), semi-hip (accepting some local work on consignment), and hip (handling only handmade items).

An excellent example of the hopelessly plastic is Hang It On, located a few blocks from UT, across the street from an expensive dormitory full of what seem to be rich girls. The window displays give Hang It On away: Snoopy things, a poster saying "When Better Women Are Made, UT Men Will Make Them." Inside, the clerks (and a lot of them there are) are wearing dreadful felt aprons with such inscriptions as "Bitch, Bitch, Bitch." The interior is a garish hodgepodge of flashing lights, posters, and a mass of indistinguishable, brightly colored objects, apparently designed to decorate dorm rooms.

The shop's manager, Rose Marie Holland, agrees to undergo the Standard RAGS Boutique Examination, although she is ve-e-e-rry busy. Hang It On is, she says, owned by a corporation (though she didn't say which one, it is Handy Andy, the food chain). There are two other shops in San Antonio and this one in Austin opened

August 21. Merchandise buying is done entirely by the corporation and no local craft items are handled, "since we found that consignment doesn't pay off."

Rose Marie says the kids who work there enjoy it and she has no trouble finding salespeople who aren't pushy "because we train them." There certainly seem to be a lot of them walking around, however, asking people if they can help them and in general keeping a sharp eye on anyone who looks like a possible shoplifter.

Hang It On's main sales technique is display. "We try to make it appetizing," she says. "The way our store is laid out, the items sell themselves.

"Eighty per cent of our customers are UT students. And we have a large male business, besides the girls, because we have a lot of leather. We also get some mothers and dads, buying things for their children."

At the other end of the spectrum is Austin's most pleasant boutique, Isis, located in an old house with stained glass windows in the back and high ceilings and a light, airy, sunny feeling. Inside, Adrienne Diehr offers tea and conversation and Dylan (other boutiques, lamentably, seem to favor Led Zeppelin). She opened Isis December 1, 1970, after deciding that working for a Ph.D. in English at UT was senseless.

Customers include the hip community, high school students, older people. While your RAGSman was dawdling over tea, two guys came in with white cowboy shirts to have Adrienne embroider them. One wanted armadillos on his; the other wanted peyote buttons ("green for the buttons, brown for the ground").

Adrienne: Tea, Dylan & conversation



CHET FLIPPO



VIII. Los Angeles Newsreel

A report and analysis on boutiques in Los Angeles, by Alan Metter.

Four years ago the hip boutique scene in Los Angeles was two little shops next door to each other on Santa Monica Boulevard, near the Troubadour. One was called "The Great Linoleum Clothing Experiment," the other, "Genie The Tailor." In the Great Linoleum, Ronald Stone was pushing every funky rag he could get his hands on: bellbottoms, tops, army surplus, leathers, handmades—anything that could be wrapped around part of the human anatomy and stay put until you got out of the store. Next door, Genie sat quietly sewing her custom creations for Jack Bruce, Jimi Hendrix and a lot of other fashionable show people who danced to a different drummer than Fred Astaire. Who would have guessed that these two little "hippie shops" would turn out to be prototypes for a whole new fashion consciousness? One that would revolutionize LA's jillion dollar retail garment industry.

Today there are probably as many hip and hippish boutiques in LA as any other type of retail merchandising operation. And the scene has become so sophisticated, complex and competitive, that just being a hip men's or women's shop doesn't target the market anymore. If the word on Wall Street is "diversify," the word on Sunset Boulevard is "specialize."

The big question on every lip is "can LA's hip capitalists and their vulnerable boutique scene survive the ripoffs and the Nixon depression in a city that dresses like its TV commercials?"

And the answer is a definite maybe. **SCENE ONE: Cockamamie, 4923 Topanga Blvd, Sherman Oaks, Calif, tel. 340-2055, hours: 10-9 Mon-Fri, 10:30-7:30 Sat.-Sun. Interviewed Stuart Eisen, owner.**

For chicks only. This shop is a microcosm of the San Fernando Valley scene. Like a chick who looks great from a distance, but as you get closer all you can see is the nose job, the facelift and the silicone injections. Stuart came here when he was 14, but he's still got the kind of New York accent that can only be maintained in Manhattan and Miami. He shucks

soooooo good . . . I like Stuart.

Opened about a year and a half ago on \$10,000. It was money he earned producing Kaleidoscope, borrowed against stocks and from friends. It could have been Bar Mitzvah money. Stuart writes and produces his own spots with the KPCC jocks as talent. They're usually entertaining. Calls himself "the token hippie of Woodland Hills."

Stuart about LA: "LA is the worst dressed town in the world. There's no dress consciousness here . . . so except for what we call the Jap scene (Jewish/American Princess), people don't even have occasion to dress." On the Thirties: "Anyone who designs to a particular era isn't a designer, he's a fad maker."

How does Stuart know his kind of customer? ". . . I know her when she says 'I'm looking for something I like.' not 'do you have a gypsy dress or a Gibson Girl dress.' I want to dress a chick that looks good to start with. Fat chicks should put sacks over their heads and not walk around."

SCENE TWO: Rags, 636½ N. Altmont, West Hollywood, 1-5 Mon.-Sat. or by apt. Interviewed: Ron Shipton, owner.

The shop is actually Ron's living-room and spare bedroom. Represents the hippest and funkiest in town. "As long as I do OK, I don't care how OK I do." Goods: Selected old things (20's through 50's). A line of shirts made of old fabrics in patchwork. For the right price, you could buy his couch. Prices: \$25-\$250 (latter for the "museum" pieces).

Opened June of 1969 on \$500-\$1000. Savings and money friends owed him.

"I tell people *not* to buy things . . . like if I just made the shirt and haven't had a chance to wear it myself." Hip Capitalism? "That's your word . . . my prices are determined by replaceability."

SCENE THREE: One, 9029 Santa Monica Blvd, West Hollywood, tel. 271-1011. Hours. 11-6 Mon.-Sat. Interviewed: Jan Jacobson & Paul Cole.

One is representative of the very best, or tastiest, chicks' shops. It is also a hipcap operation that is presently shooting for the big time (with a line of dresses for chain and dept. stores). First I'll deal with it as a

shop, then as a fledgling manufacturer.

The Shop: Everything is designed by Jan. Stuff is pretty thirties and forties, but I noticed several nice variations. She was one of the . . . clearer thinking people I encountered. Definitely alternate culture, but very professional.

A year ago they met, fell in love and got down to business. Incorporated. It's a better tax structure. No advertising, but some publicity in *Vogue*, *Mademoiselle* and *West*. "We need money to achieve what we want to do artistically," Paul declared. "The hip capitalist is eclectic. The choices often aren't purely capitalistic," Jan mused. One guy came in here and said 'I'm a manufacturer and I'm buying this dress to knock it off.' Department stores buy my dresses and *bring* them to manufacturers. 'Judy's' does it all the time. What can I do?"

Jan is the only LA boutique designer I talked with who has aspirations to turn her scene into the American Dream. And after talking with her and her business-oriented partner, I'm convinced they're not just having a wet dream. I'll try to be concise.

Doing the shop gave Jan experience in almost every important aspect of the biz: designing, marketing, management, etc. Also she got into the use of fabric, learned to use it well and it really *makes* her stuff. You can't rip off an ability like this one . . . and that's important. What she didn't learn at One, she learned by shopping the big stores, etc. OK. After being approached by several big LA manufacturers with shitty deals, she met Paul who had some money from—you guessed it, a silver mine in Nevada. They decided it was time to go on the trip—to see if it could be done without sacrificing all their integrity. But you know all that. \$25,000 capital. Jan designed a 10-piece line ("a full line has around 35 pieces") for spring. At \$25-\$45 retail.

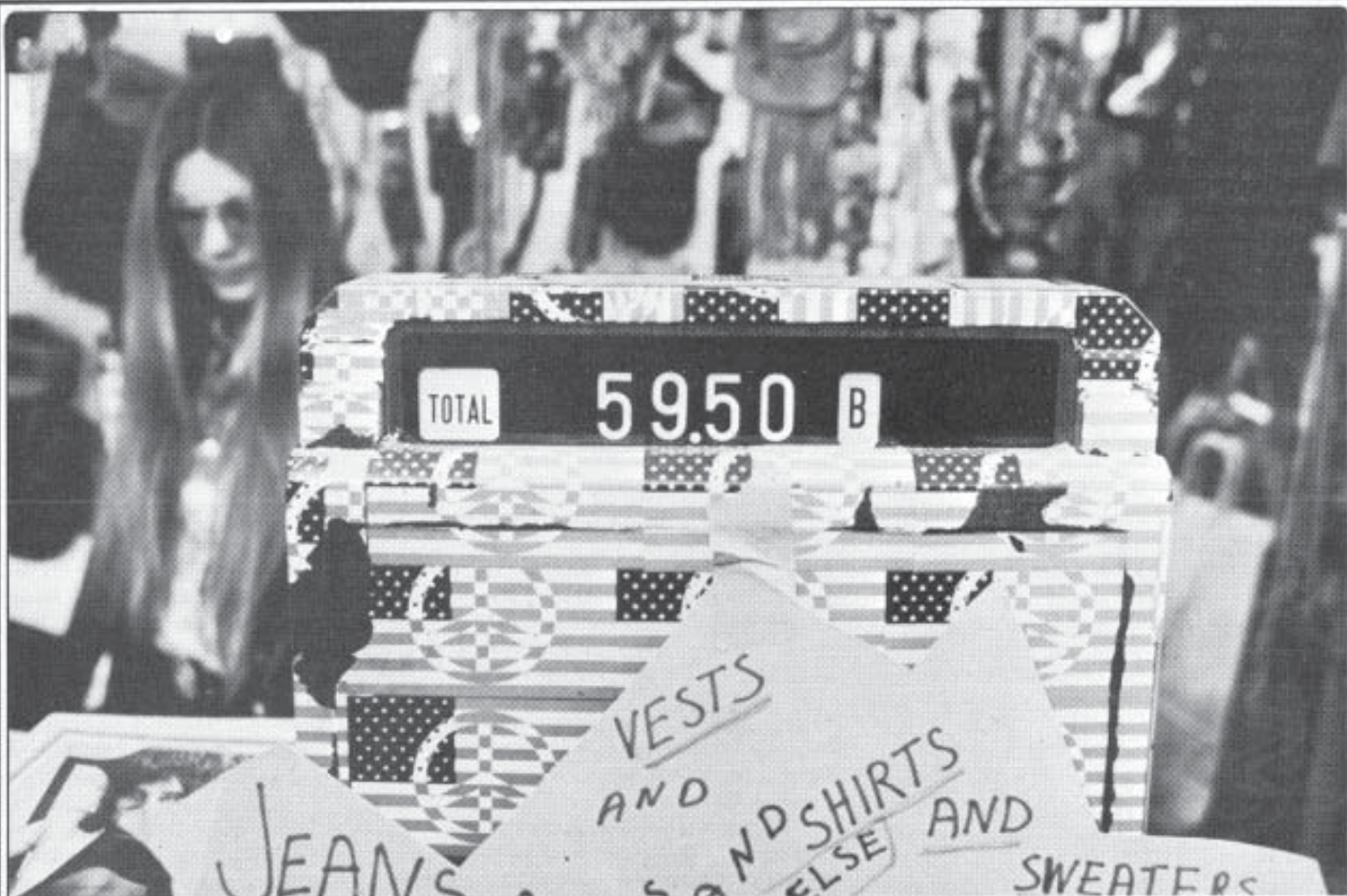
I. Magnin, Judy's and a lot of small boutiques have already ordered. Everything looks promising, BUTTT—the good reps won't take on the line unless she can do at least \$50,000 a month (a conservative projection of what they could do with the line). Right now her manufacturing is done by independent contractors on piece-work. And she can't even meet the orders she's getting with a friend showing the line in LA only.

Additional capital needed: \$50-\$150,000.

SCENE FOUR: Maxfield Bleu, 9091



SHAL MON BERNSTEIN



A revolution in LA's jillion dollar industry

Santa Monica Blvd, Tel. 271-5091. Interviewed: John Gross, partner. Hours, 12-7 Mon. thru Fri. 11-7 Sat.

Maxfield is an expensive shop. It's elegant and funky at the same time. The decor is like a barn, with stained glass and old fixtures. Lots of Parrish prints set the theme. John's partner is Tommy Perse. Goods: Pants, shirts, sweaters, shoes, etc, all made in Europe. Odd antique pieces. Custom suits. Also cartoon tops, etc. Look is contemporary but has definite roots. Open a year and a half. Capital: about \$20,000/parents.

"I'm a hip capitalist because I play the game, but I break the rules whenever I feel like it. I don't subscribe to the capitalist worry scene, so my mind is free to make incisive decisions." About LA styles: "Generally, the scene reflects the lack of culture in Los Angeles. A few of us try for classics that should never go out." Our (steady) customer likes to make an adventure out of his wardrobe. I try to buy with this person in mind." Heaviest pop star vibes in town: Crosby, S & N, 3-Dog, Lou Adler, Merry Clayton, Jack Nicholson, Donald Sutherland, Joni Mitchell, Claes Olden-

berg, Karen Black, Julie Christie, The Stones and Andy Williams.

A lot of other shop owners refer to Maxfield in some complimentary way. John puts it this way: "I guess our competitive game is try to set the standard for quality and trend-setting. And I think to some degree we're successful at it." Style, fabric, craftsmanship. "If you want to call us a boutique, I guess it's because our only shot at the masses is if they come to us. Because we're not interested in going to them. If they'll wear our clothes, we'll take their money."

SCENE FIVE: (The straight scene): Ohrbach's Wilshire — because they seem or claim to be the dept. store most trend-conscious, or most responsive to the boutique scene. And because they are strictly middle class in their outlook and have probably the most effective ad campaigns in the industry. Interviewed: Miss Cindy Cunnard, buyer (assistant) for the Teen "Junior Bazaar" dept. I found Cindy in the cubicle she shares with another girl buyer, going over an IBM sheet with a lot of numbers on it. The walls were covered with fashion graphics and a "free Angela" poster.

"Originally the boutique had tremendous influence on all of us . . . Junior Bazaar is a volume department, but the concept is boutique . . . In most cases you mark down the boutique items, but you need them to create the individual look." So it's just a ruse, like decor, to move the straight stuff? "My concept is like wow, the kid puts on some \$200 freaky weird item, like grooves on it, does her own little trip and then buys something sensible for \$15."

She does *not* think any boutique (even the big chain) is a threat.

Favors the "individual hand crafted look over the European look." Prices: 99c to 199 bucks. Volume is in the \$5/\$15 range. Did the senior execs fight the switch to boutiques at first? "Yes, but not for long. The boutique has made *our customer* more fashion conscious." She wouldn't admit they may someday become boutique customers. She thinks a dept. store buyer who doesn't show a manufacturer what to knock off isn't "worth a nickel"—it's done by every store on every level. She denied getting kickbacks for her trouble, but indicated that it got her store better



service, deliveries and generally preferential treatment from the chosen manufacturer.

"I feel that they (boutiques) are literally dead." Because they're all into the same thing . . . and that thing is copying Europe.

She agrees with Rudi Gernreich: "America is afraid of the future, so we're going back to the past—wearing costumes." The sub-culture is lethargic and therefore uncreative. "I've never liked clothing, it doesn't turn me on in the slightest. So I'm not

prejudiced by personal taste, because I have none."

(At this point, I must have given away my point of view and she got uptight and had to rush off to lunch. So much for Ohrbach's, the high fashion at low price dep't, store.)

IX. The Existential Agony of Phebus & McGee

Mike Snead runs a small manufacturing firm in Eugene, Ore, called Phebus & McGee, Associates in Leather. He also runs a boutique in Eugene called Magpie's General Leather Store (1130 Oak). In response to our query, he wrote how his boutique started and what it all means to the man who owns one:

"There wasn't a business head in the bunch when we started, so everything that came up was a game and a problem: taxes, pricing, zoning, sources, credit, policy — it was all new to us and turned us round and

round. But you sure do learn fast when your ass is at stake, and the second year was easier and now we've got it all under control (although it changes every day). Starting without experience is like getting on a roller coaster and you're never sure if the tracks go all the way through . . .

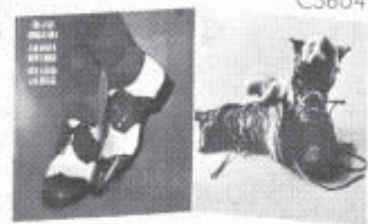
"The business always was, is and will be a shop full of heads — good heads, too. The biggest pain in the ass is the one through the head by just being a boss. Authority is so weird . . . you know you have to organize and tell the employees what's happening, and they know all that, but when it gets down to saying 'Hey, Spence, why dontcha clean up the cat shit today,' it's just putting an inch in-between you each time, nevertheless;

and at the end of the day, it takes some heavy smoke blowing to get back to that person. It's easy to see split personalities and why they work. But, no thanks.

"Personnel turnover is more of a phenomenon than a problem. You both know the dude needs a job and he can do what you need done, so you stick together 'til it's too much and then he splits. That way, turnover isn't so bad.

"Selling isn't so bad, either. The hard-core poverty people have bad vibes aimed at you, but there's rationalization in that—if they want a store, go to it! We started as poverty people too. But selling can eat up your head and so you have to watch yourself every day." 🐾

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