

TOWN



History in the Making

Twin City

FALL BACK IN TIME WITH A TRIP
TO WINSTON-SALEM, NC

Smooth Moves

SAVE FACE DURING THE
RAVAGES OF WINTER

LOOKING AHEAD REQUIRES LOOKING
BACK TO THE PEOPLE AND PLACES THAT
HAVE SHAPED OUR PRESENT

Jeans Genius

Bill Mitchell channels
Greenville's textile glory

/by *Ruta Fox*

/photography by *Paul Mehaffey*

He's barely out of Clemson University. He's got a burgeoning business. He's building a brand. And he's sitting on 375 pounds of blue-denim fabric. Bill Mitchell, 25-years-old and the owner of the homegrown clothing label Billiam Jeans, is living the dream. Mitchell recently opened his storefront factory in Greenville's arts district on Pendleton Street, and he's bringing a bit of textile history and tradition back to Greenville.

Tagged with the nickname Billiam (pronounced Bill-yum) in college, the marketing major found himself taking on side projects in school—tailoring the garments of his friends for fun—“reworking everything from bridesmaids dresses to tuxedos to ties,” he says. With no formal training, he slowly developed his skills, teaching himself to sew by “reverse engineering,” or by taking a garment apart to see how it was put together. After receiving the gift of a Singer sewing machine from his parents (which they found at Goodwill), he began making jeans for friends. They loved them. Within a year, there was a 400-person waiting list for his stylish, hand-crafted jeans.

In true twenty-something style, it was all happening out of his parents' basement, but that wouldn't work for long. So he took a leap of faith, sold his car, and signed a lease for 1,600 square feet of space on Pendleton Street. Billiam Jeans opened its doors in November of last year. Mitchell lives nearby and is encouraged by the changes in the up-and-coming neighborhood. “I wanted to jump in before it gets too expensive, both to grow my brand and help grow the district,” he adds. The square-footage encompasses his store and factory in addition to Shop-Keep, a space featuring Mid-Century Modern furniture, home goods, and collectibles owned by pals Mandy and Joshua Blankenship.

To set up shop, Mitchell searched the Southeast for non-automated sewing machines and bought seven of them on Craigslist. He scored two rivet presses and procured a huge, vintage cutting table from an old mill in Anderson. Then he sourced his premium selvage denim from one of the oldest and most renowned mills in the world, Cone Mills. Cone Mills is based in Greensboro, North Carolina, and is the original fabric supplier to the world-famous Levi's brand. The high-



Raw Deal: Bill Mitchell, owner of Billiam Jeans, began tailoring garments and making jeans for friends in college. Now, he sews and sells his jeans from a storefront factory in Greenville's arts district on Pendleton Street.

quality denim manufactured there is woven on 200-year-old looms, and at last count, there were only 11 vintage shuttle looms left at Cone capable of weaving denim this fine.

Mitchell then got down to the work of designing with selvage denim, whose distinctive weave shows in the seams when the wearer turns the cuffs up. True jean connoisseurs crave this signature detail. The denim Mitchell uses is also classified as “raw,” which means the starch remains in the fabric for a while. You break them in by consistently wearing them until they end up form-fitting to your individual body shape. From the double-stitched pockets to the rivets, his skilled sewers lovingly craft the garment entirely by hand.



Riveting Handiwork: *Billiam Jeans are cut and sewn by hand from premium selvage denim from North Carolina's renowned Cone Mills. Leather goods are similarly hand-crafted using the techniques learned from a local retired saddie maker.*

The men's jeans come in skinny, straight, and slim-straight leg styles and in four washes, or colors: indigo, oatmeal, grey, and black. Each pair comes with unstitched hems and is custom-finished in-store, with prices starting at \$200. Women's jeans are on the way, and he'd like to expand the collection to include jackets, or maybe dabble in khakis. In addition to jeans, there are Billiam screen-printed tee shirts and men's leather wallets and belts. Ever the purist, Mitchell tracked down a local retired saddie maker to learn his leather-working secrets. "I told him, if you don't teach the younger generation, your expertise will vanish," says Mitchell. The belts and wallets feature American hides—cut, dyed, stained, and stitched by hand.

Several international companies have contacted him about wholesaling his jeans, but in the near future he's hoping for acceptance in Greenville to support and grow his brand.

Part of his company vision is a firm commitment to giving back. Currently Billiam donates 20 percent of its sales to Wellspring Living in Atlanta. This organization aids survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation, helping women and girls with treatment and training programs. Mitchell says it deeply resonated with him "because I grew up with three sisters, and I couldn't imagine anything worse for them than being a victim of sex trafficking."

He does it all, as most young entrepreneurs do—juggling financing, accounting, designing, marketing, and social media. He utilizes the help of savvy interns from local schools, including Clemson and Furman, and provides college credit for those eager to learn how it's done on a shoestring.

With such talent in the works, it seems Billiam's got a great new venture all sewn up. 

*Billiam Jeans / Shop-Keep
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(864) 430-2762, billiamjeans.com
Open varlous days of the week,
by chance or by appointment*