

# Jean genie: The denim evolution

 By Katya Foreman, April 1, 2015

From rugged workwear to fashion staple, denim jeans have gone from strength to strength. Katya Foreman gets the skinny on the ubiquitous trousers.



Image above - Credit: Levis

At once esoteric – with a sacred status among so-called “denim heads” – and a mainstream wardrobe staple, the humble jean remains one of the most deceptively complex and mysterious garments of all time; one that creates an emotional connection with the wearer. “It’s a very personal thing because of the uniqueness of the dyeing... as you start to wear in your jeans they kind of take on their own personality; each wear pattern is unique to the individual. It’s something that you wear over time and that moulds to your body and takes on character,” says Kara Nicholas, from historic denim manufacturer Cone Denim.

Cone’s White Oak mill in Greensboro, North Carolina, which produces all of the firm’s authentic premium vintage denims and boasts a collection of American Draper X3 model shuttle looms from the 1940s, will celebrate its 110th anniversary on 20 April. “There is a depth and dimension that happens with those looms,” says Nicholas, for whom the authentic denim trend began in the ‘80s, “when people started collecting vintage jeans and there was this idea of trying to emulate or replicate that authenticity. We’re always looking at the same jeans from the turn of the century throughout the 1900s for inspiration, experimenting with the yarns or different dye formulas,” she says.



The weave room at Cone Denim’s White Oak mill circa 1909 (Credit: Courtesy of Cone Denim, LLC)

From indigo rockabilly turn-ups to bellbottoms to the ongoing skinny jean phenomenon (attributed to French designer Hedi Slimane during his stint at Dior Homme in the early ‘00s), since the second half of the 20th Century, jeans have been firmly entrenched in the fashion landscape. Their roots are wholly utilitarian, however.

Levi Strauss is credited as the co-founder of the blue jean, created in 1873 in the wake of the California Gold Rush that

had taken place a couple decades earlier. On its website, Levi’s shares the story of the Bavarian-born Strauss, who moved to San Francisco from New York in 1853 to open a wholesale dry goods business. There he was approached by one of his tailor customers, Jacob Davis, who was looking for a business partner to patent a trouser design featuring rivets positioned at points of strain to make them last longer. The patent (for the process of putting rivets in men’s work trousers) was granted to Jacob Davis and Levi Strauss & Company on 20 May 1873, creating a new category of workwear and marking the birth of the blue jean. According to Levi’s, the first blue jean design – originally referred to as XX “waist overalls” – had a single back pocket with an Arcuate stitching design, a watch pocket, a cinch, suspender buttons and a copper rivet in the crotch.



The patent for the trouser design featuring rivets positioned at points of strain, was granted to Jacob Davis and Levi Strauss & Company in 1873 (Credit: Getty)

The garment’s main ingredient – denim – is said to have originated in the French town of Nîmes, with its name an Americanisation of its local moniker, Serge de Nîmes (in English, Serge from Nîmes).

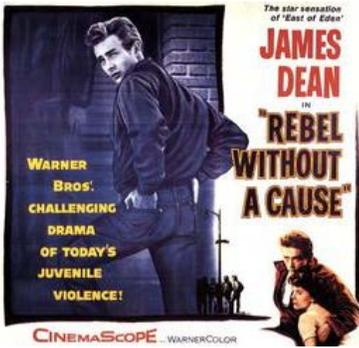
Characterised by a natural and indigo warp and weft, the robust cotton twill fabric in the 19th Century was used to make trousers worn by sailors from Genoa in Italy,



**Keks appeal:** In 1890, the XX model, which went on to be adopted as the uniform of horse wranglers out west, was given the lot number ‘501’ (Credit: Corbis)

regarded by some as the ancestor of the jean, with the French word for Genoa – Gênes – said to have inspired the word jean.

Billed as “riveted-for-strength workwear made of true blue denim”, Levi’s Two Horse brand leather patch – created in 1886 – depicted a pair of jeans suspended between two workhorses, as a symbol of strength. In 1890, the XX model, which went on to be adopted as the uniform of horse wranglers out west, was given the lot number ‘501’. A version with two back pockets was introduced in 1901, with belt loops added in 1922. The red tab was added on the right back pocket of the overalls in 1936 “to differentiate Levi’s overalls from the many competitors in the marketplace who were using dark denim and an Arcuate stitch”, according to Levi’s.



James Dean influenced the teens on the scene in the 1950s by looking mean in jeans (Credit: Rex)

As Hollywood Westerns sparked an interest in the cowboy lifestyle, blue jeans started filtering into the mainstream in the 1930s, then bubbled up through youth culture in the 1950s under the influence of Hollywood rebels in jeans like James Dean. Teens are said to have started using the word ‘jean’ in the same decade but it wasn’t until 1960 that Levi’s replaced the term ‘overalls’ with ‘jeans’ in advertising and on packaging. The first television commercial for Levi’s jeans aired in 1966, with a women’s shrink-to-fit 501 model introduced in 1981, accompanied by the iconic Travis TV ad.

Adding another twist to the tale, for many denim connoisseurs today it is Japanese “selvage” or “self-edge” denim that is deemed the real deal, produced on traditional shuttle looms – with 100% cotton threads and real indigo dye – using vintage machines that were abandoned by American denim mills in favour of more cost-effective industrial processes. Selvage refers to the clean woven

edge on denim produced on shuttle looms, as opposed to the frayed, cut edge on denim produced on wide, modern equipment.



The flared jeans were an iconic feature of the 1970s - worn here by teenagers in Florida, America - 1976 (Credit: Rex)

**Fabric of society:** Where denim’s rugged, hardwearing nature drove its utilitarian beginnings, revolutionary stretch fibres have helped fuel its flight in the fashion domain, gaining momentum in the ‘00s, the era of the joggging. The introduction of Lycra Spandex literally expanded opportunities, confirms Cone’s Nicholas, who cites among other key evolutions sustainable fibres and performance denims – “trying to bring the function into fashion”. Cone regularly partners with fibre and yarn companies like Invista on such innovations. A case in point is their recent hook-up with Unifi, whose Repeve technology, which produces fibres made from recycled water bottles, was used to create the Cone Touch fabric. “They used a special spinning technique to mimic the hand and look of a cotton yarn but it has all the strength and benefits of a synthetic fibre,” says Nicholas. “Ultimately the idea is whatever we do with regards to sustainability, technology, performance, we always want to try to maintain the look and hand of a cotton denim; you’re always trying to maintain that look.”

Jeanologia, a firm based in Valencia, Spain that specialises in industrial laser machinery is among pioneers of new planet-friendly technologies for replicating worn effects and denim washes (the term used for finishes on denim), one of the most polluting activities in the apparel industry. The company’s sales pitch centres on authentic denim that takes a couple of hours to produce.



The Jeanologia laser machine at work (Credit: Jeanologia)

“It’s this idea that jeans have a soul, that they become a part of you, as the way they wear is unique to each person. When we go to the denim store, subconsciously we are looking for something similar to our favourite old pair of jeans,” said Enrique Silla, Jeanologia’s CEO, who views the way water and chemicals are used in the textile industry as “prehistoric”. Such advances, he believes, are set to revolutionise an industry scrambling to clean up its act, and 20% of denim manufacturers now working with the firm’s technologies, according to Silla.

With over five billion jeans produced per year, average yearly denim consumption represents 1.5 pairs of jeans per capita in Europe, and 4 per capita in the US, soon to rise to “one pair per capita across the planet,” according to Silla. In a back-to-the-future approach, the denim industry continues to look to the original blue jeans for new inspirations.



The future of jeans looks to be just as durable as their tough-wearing reputation (Credit: Rex)