

Jonathan Cheung of Levi's Talks 100 Years in Partnership with Cone Denim

CLEO LEVIN APRIL 14, 2016



Cone and Levi's are the bread and butter of American denim. The partnership began with the "Golden Handshake" in 1915 when Levi's obtained the exclusive rights to Cone's Shrink-to-Fit denim for the production of its 501s. The 501 has since become a cultural icon that's been worn by everyone from rock stars to cowboys. Cone now works regularly with the brand on developing new fabrics and recreating past designs for Levi's Vintage Clothing. Rivet spoke with Jonathan Cheung, Levi's Head of Design, about Made in America, denim's influence on high fashion and the future of jeans.

RIVET: What qualities does Cone represent to you and how do these qualities enrich Levi's products?

Cheung: Authenticity. Levi's and Cone. It's the source, the mother dough. A partnership that's been in place for over 100 years. Built on trust, built on quality.

RIVET: In what ways are Cone and Levi's cut from the same cloth? How do the two entities complement one another?

Cheung: Haha... they are literally cut from the same cloth aren't they?

They are both great American companies who have defined the most iconic piece of clothing in human history—the denim jean. But let me tell you a little story about a conversation I had with Brad Johnson [group manager at International Textile Group, Cone

Denim Division] the last time I was down at White Oak. He's someone I hold in great respect. One evening, after work, I asked him what was it about Cone that meant the most to him. After taking a pause, he replied, "You know, it's about people. It's about the people." I think that says everything about the company, and Cone's history and culture.

A couple of weeks ago, I interviewed some design students of different nationalities and asked them what their perception of Levi's was. They all replied that they believed that Levi's is intrinsically a company that 'does the right thing.' They spoke about Levi's record on equality, workers' wellbeing and sustainability. You can draw the parallels with Cone right there.

RIVET: What does Made in America mean to Levi's today when apparel manufacturing is increasingly moving overseas?

Cheung: It's a living, unbroken link to our heritage. When you watch those Draper looms shimmy on the wooden floors at White Oak and watch them throw those shuttles back and forth to create the special XX denim for the 501, it's magical and incredibly special.

RIVET: What have been some notable product collaborations with Cone in Levi's history?

Cheung: We work together every season to develop special fabrics together. Levi's Vintage Clothing (LVC) develops historical reproductions of our denim at White Oak. There's a gorgeous, lightweight loomstate denim out this spring that was especially developed for LVC. Then this fall, we're launching something historic in our Shrink-to-Fit denim with Cone. Something that's never been done before on Shrink-to-Fit. As it's coming out this fall, I'll hold off from speaking about it too much, but I'll tell you this much, it's beautiful.

RIVET: Apart from its history, what makes White Oak selvedge a special product to design with?

Cheung: It's just a beautiful fabric. It wears really well and looks better with time. I've not seen a White Oak denim that wasn't gorgeous. And selvedge is just such a practical, common sense, utilitarian design. It's just wide enough to make a pair of jeans with. Nothing more. Beautiful in its simplicity of thought.

RIVET: In what ways do you think Cone and Levi's have inspired other brands and designers?

Cheung: You can see the influence trotting down the catwalks this year. Designers like Demna Gvasalia for Vetements and Virgil Abloh's Off White are literally using old Levi's in their collections. I think the 501 is the designer's jean. All the fashion designers I know hold it in the utmost respect. It's the ultimate, affordable design classic. And if you look at other brands that sell jeans—well, you can see the 501's DNA right there. Levi's and good old red-cast XX denim from Cone.

RIVET: How knowledgeable is the Levi's customer about denim and its origins? Do you think that the Levi's customer is conscious of the fabric used in his jeans? Is this a growing trend?

Cheung: The customer is pretty knowledgeable and growing in knowledge all the time. It's definitely a growing trend to know the background of the products that you buy. Whether that's coffee or your jeans. In a world of almost unlimited choices, the choices you make are more important. People increasingly place value on companies that share their values.

RIVET: What has made denim an ongoing important part of American style?

Cheung: I'd like to look at it from a slightly different angle and say that denim jeans, and by that I'm talking about the Levi's 501, is America's greatest contribution to style. Full stop. Period. I can't think of anything in the history of clothing that's been so influential. Why did that happen? It's partly to do with timing—jeans exploded in popularity post-war, just when the USA emerged as a cultural superpower. So jeans were adopted by rock stars and actors and represented freedom of expression, counterculture and cool. That cultural connection is still going strong—if anything there's been quite a resurgence.

RIVET: Denim is closely tied to history and nostalgia, but how do you see the next generation changing or influencing denim for the better?

Cheung: The future belongs to the young. I have every confidence that the next generation will make denim better. They will introduce new technologies, new innovations and make the production of denim more sustainable than ever. They'll shake things up, and they should.

RIVET: What is your favorite Cone item you own?

Cheung: That's a tough one. I wear 501s made with Cone denim most days. There's a pair that I have that are around 20 years old—these Cone denim, Made in the USA, 501s became my wife's jeans when she was pregnant with our first child. I still wear them. I reckon we can do another 20 years together.