

Levi's Head of Design Explains Why He Updated the Iconic 501

The times, they are a changin'.



LEVI'S

BY [JONATHAN EVANS](#), OCT 12, 2016

Few pieces of clothing genuinely deserve the title of "icon." The Levi's 501 sits right at the top of that very short list. It's the kind of status that comes with being the flagship style from the brand that invented the modern blue jean. But that doesn't mean it can't keep up with the times.

Since the first pair of riveted "waist overalls" from Levi's were given the 501 designation around 1890 (the exact date is lost to history), the jeans have changed significantly. They've gained pockets and lost cinches. The fit has expanded and contracted according to the style of the era. They've evolved. The most recent step in that evolution was the introduction of the slimmed-down 501CT last year. But now Levi's head of design Jonathan Cheung and his team have introduced something the 501 has never seen before: [stretch denim](#).

I caught up with Cheung to talk about what it's like to change a revered style, what it took to get the denim *just right*, and which pair he's wearing now. Right: Jonathan Cheung, LEVI'S

Esquire.com: Why did you add stretch?

Jonathan Cheung: People's expectations change over time and for anything to remain relevant there must be change. To paraphrase Charles Darwin, "it's not the strongest that survives but the one most responsive to change." A little-known fact is that over 60 percent of our men's jeans now contain stretch. It's become the new norm. The 501 has always been the do-anything piece of clothing. It has transcended its pure workwear roots to become part of everyday life, whether you work on a farm, bounce to punk rock in a mosh pit or are, well, Steve Jobs. By adding stretch, you get a little bit more comfort, so if you're cleaning out the back yard or getting on a long haul flight, your 501s will give you a little extra.

And why now?

Good question. It's a question that we faced amongst ourselves, too. The 501 has many die-hard fans, of which I'm one. Understandably there's the thought that "you can't change a classic." Except the 501 has constantly evolved with the times



and the changes have been much more significant than adding the small amount of stretch now. Pretty much every aspect of the 501 has been changed in time—from pockets, to rivets, to fabric, to labels and, of course, the fit. So the question we asked ourselves, was "why would we be the generation to stop the evolution of the 501?" In terms of timing, that was to do with fabric technology. Getting the denim exactly right was a challenge.

I'm sure it was. The 501 Shrink-to-Fit denim is an icon in its own right. Knowing that, how did you approach making this new fabric?

Yeah, the 501 has a special, proprietary denim that we call Shrink-to-Fit, and its characteristic look is an integral part of what makes a 501 a 501. Because of the special shrinkage parameters, the denim has a marbled look to it, like a fine rib-eye. Making a stretch denim is relatively simple, but trying to do shrink-to-fit stretch was really, really hard. And I mean 18 months of intense work. What we wanted was a denim that looked like 501, that was indistinguishable from the existing non-stretch version until you wore it. It just had to feel like the 501 with a little extra. No compromises.

Below: The 501CT Stretch in the Dillinger wash. LEVI'S



Luckily our partners for over 100 years, Cone Mills, are the shrink-to-fit experts. They were both our technical and spiritual guides. After 18 months of trial after trial we got there. The denim was beautiful. But I needed a gut-check. So whilst down at their White Oak mill in Greensboro, North Carolina, I asked them if this new fabric would be worthy of the 501 name. And these guys who have spent a lifetime in denim—they all nodded with approval and pride. "It's 501." That's all we needed to hear. Also the fabric code given to the new stretch denim, unbeknownst to me at the time, has nod to my name. Part of it reads "CHG." I'm pretty sure it was done cheekily to acknowledge what a pain in the ass I was about getting it made!

Some guys hate stretch denim. What would you say to them about this update?

I know what you mean. These don't look or feel very elastic-y at all. What I would say is, "Just try them." This denim has been approved by some of the most skeptical, hardcore, authentic denim nerds on the planet. I bumped into some of our Cone Mills guys a couple of weeks ago and they had all switched to the 501 Stretch. My design team—the Denim Jedi—wear them. I went on a two hour hike wearing them last weekend. Give them a try. It's a subtle difference.

There are some great washes in the initial lineup. How did you decide on what to offer for the launch?

Thanks! We wanted to stay in true heartland 501 country for our initial set of washes. They are all natural, vintage-inspired washes that look like your favorite worn 501's. The washes have been named after people at the Levi's mothership, which makes me smile. I would also recommend people try out the 501CT in stretch. We updated the 501CT recently and I see people wearing the Chip and the Hillman washes here all the time. I've been wearing the Rose—it's a simple rinse wash in the 501—but I've got my eyes on the Noten in the CT.