

BELOVED BLUE Jeans

Denim played a key role in the Swedish fashion identity that emerged in the Noughties. But where does this fascination for the blue fabric stem from? And what do jeans stand for on Sweden's fashion scene today? Habit International talked to jeans connoisseurs and fashion experts to find the answers.

By KARIN FALK

Like all history, Swedish fashion history can be divided into periods, and one period definitely kicked off with a pair of red seams in the late-1990s. A new Swedish fashion scene was evolving and denim was the mainstay. The Acne label was certainly one of the major players and made 100 pairs of unisex jeans with red seams. These were then distributed to friends and acquaintances, and were soon to be seen on the most revered fashionistas all over Stockholm.

These jeans with red seams, which were originally not intended for retail, grew into a bestseller and marked the start of Acne's success story. Even today, Acne is occasionally described as a jeans label, even though it produces outstanding ready-to-wear collections, and



Jeans with red seams were Acne's signature launch product.

Photo ACNE STUDIOS



Örjan Andersson, spring 2014.

shoes and accessories account for a considerable share of its turnover.

THE NEW YORK TIMES has called Acne the label that gives Sweden fashion cred, and Interview Magazine dubbed Acne “the leading fashion force for the next generation”. But jeans have undeniably played a huge part in forming that design identity.

Göran Sundberg is a designer and lecturer on fashion design at the Beckmans College of Design in Stockholm. He believes jeans are a garment that symbolises a democratic notion of fashion for everyone, and that this is what makes it so congenial with Swedish culture.

“We have a social life in Sweden where jeans are very suitable. We’re not like the French, for instance, who organise huge formal events and have a tradition of dressing for the occasion. Even if it has become more acceptable in Sweden today to be glamorous and draw attention to yourself, we have a social democratic heritage of equality that makes jeans everyman’s trousers. And then, of course, our great openness to Anglo-Saxon culture plays in.”

INFLUENCES FROM THE fashion Mecca of London were vital in the early history of Swedish jeans, the period dominated by Gul & Blå. In the 1960s and ‘70s, Gul & Blå launched Swedish jeans classics such as Fonzie, Marilyn and V-jeans. The last-named have cult status today, with flares measuring 80 centimetres at the bottom. Several of the Gul & Blå models were extremely close-fitting. Sitting down in a pair of them could make your legs go numb.

MANY YEARS LATER, in the mid-2000s, Örjan Andersson revived the ultra-slim silhouette. Like many Swedish jeans producers, Örjan Andersson had worked at JC, a jeans retailer that incidentally turned 50 in autumn 2013. But in 2004, Örjan Andersson wanted to try his wings and launched the Cheap Monday label.

“Cheap Monday started as a counter-reaction to the prevailing trend of exorbitantly expensive designer jeans. Even labels that weren’t that expensive to start with began hiking up their prices. I had a small shop in inner Stockholm where lots of people used



Göran Sundberg



Denim Demon



Örjan Andersson

to hang out, but they couldn’t afford to buy anything. I was a bit of a punk-rocker and wanted to go against the grain,” says Örjan Andersson.

His counter-strike resulted in a collection of super-slim stretch jeans with a laughing skull as its logo. The jeans were sold for as little as 400 Swedish kronor a piece, and soon the skull was adorning jeans-clad bottoms everywhere. The low price meant that most customers could afford to spend money on new jeans even on a Monday. In 2007, Cheap Mondays grew by 450 per cent. The company’s jeans were sold in more than 30 countries and stocked by 1,500 shops. That year, Swedish exports of jeans overtook vodka exports.

AFTER A FEW successful years, Örjan Andersson and his partners decided to sell Cheap Monday to H&M and became jeans millionaires overnight. In 2013, however, his desire to run his own business had returned, and Örjan Andersson opened a new store at Skanstull in Stockholm, where other labels, vintage and Örjan Andersson’s new jeans label in his own name vie for space in the four-storey shop premises.

“I’m not much of a punk-rocker these days,” Örjan Andersson laughs. “Pricewise, I’m targeting the middle-segment. But I use top-quality fabrics from producers who supply labels that charge much more for their jeans than I do. My focus is on perfect fit and great washes. I design fairly straightforward, pure models with a fashion/rock look that’s always appealed to me.”

JEANS LABELS SUCH as Cheap Monday have strongly influenced Swedish fashion, but Örjan Andersson also believes the general fashion scene has impacted on the development of the jeans industry.

1940s

Import bans prevent the NK department store from importing clothes and Algots in Borås is assigned to produce the first Swedish jeans. Success is conspicuously absent.

1960s

Gul & Blå opens a shop in Birger Jarlspassagen in Stockholm. The retailer JC is founded.

1970s

Gul & Blå and its competitor Puss & Kram battle for the jeans consumers.



“Fashion has done a lot for jeans”

Örjan Andersson

Örjan Andersson, spring 2014.

1980s
Gul & Blå starts a franchise, which marks the beginning of the end of the label's glory.

1990s
The birth of the Filippa K look, which is based around slim stretch jeans. Acne launches its first jeans with red seams.

2000s
Labels such as Acne, Nudie Jeans, WeSC and Cheap Monday enjoy international success. Dr Denim, Indigofera and Denim Demon make jeans focusing on heritage and tradition.

“Fashion is crucial to the denim sector. It’s lucky we haven’t stuck to the way jeans looked in the 19th century. Fashion has done a lot for jeans.”

THE NEED TO look back in time, and to market jeans with stories of a heritage, has grown popular in Sweden since the mid-2000s. Pace Jeans and Indigofera are among those who engage in retrospection to build a contemporary company. Pace Jeans was inspired by a forefather who emigrated from Sweden to the USA in the early 1800s, and Indigofera’s upcoming autumn collection harks back to the 19th-century entrepreneur Al Swearengen.

OSKAR SOMMARLUND IS the designer and founder of the jeans label Denim Demon, which he runs with his brother. The label has Sami influences.

“Denim Demon is inspired by the love and pride the Sami people take in their crafts. We put a lot of care into details that come from the Sami tradition. All our jeans, for example, have reindeer antlers engraved on the buttons, and the pocket pouch is a mountain map,” says Oskar Sommarlund.

In addition, all the wear and tear is carried out by relatives, who literally use the jeans to break them in. Preserving a heritage and a tradition can be a way of increasing your competitive edge, says Oskar Sommarlund:

“We want people to get something extra when they buy our jeans, a story that adds value to our product, and we also want them to learn about our heritage. You need to do something that stands out, because there’s so much competition on the market. You have to be clear about why consumers should choose your label rather than another.”

ONE LABEL THAT has won many faithful customers is Nudie Jeans, founded in 2001 by Maria Erixon Levin and Joakim Levin. It established itself at record speed as one of Sweden’s fastest-growing fashion companies, and in its second year it had already reached 20 million kronor in sales. In 2012, sales rose to 347 million.

Palle Stenberg, CEO, says that denim has contributed to putting Sweden on the global fashion map:

“We have a culture in Sweden where jeans are very important. You wear jeans to work, when you have coffee with friends, or have a pint after work or go clubbing. That makes jeans an essential item in any Swede’s wardrobe, and they know all about jeans, they are well-oriented and demand quality.”



Nudie Jeans, spring 2014.



Oskar Sommarlund



Palle Stenberg



Emma Lindblad

So, jeans are a garment that fits the local Swedish culture and mindset. Moreover, the international success of Acne and Nudie Jeans has added to the positive spiral of new designers daring to launch their own labels. But in an industry where change is the only constant factor, how relevant is jeans-based design to the Swedish fashion scene today?

EMMA LINDBLAD, RESEARCHER at the Centre of Fashion Studies at Stockholm University, is currently working on a thesis that looks at what it means to be mainstream, ordinary. She has given profound attention to jeans in her work.

Why do you think jeans have been so important to the Swedish fashion and design identity?

“I don’t think they are as important today as in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Sweden was hit by its second major jeans boom. Many of the labels that were big then, such as Acne, are more experimental now with their identity. And several new labels that have appeared in recent years are not as jeans-based as before.”

Why is that?

“I’ve noticed a greater openness in Swedish fashion today, there’s room for more than jeans-based styles. Swedish fashion has a wider scope, with more experimentation. For instance, the young designer generation focuses more on craftsmanship and tailored garments.”

Göran Sundberg agrees that denim does not have quite the same design status now as it did a few years ago.

“At present, worn patches and torn knees feel right, because jeans have to shout louder and stand out to get noticed today. Jeans have to be very expressive in order to be relevant in contemporary fashion.”