

MADE IN ARKANSAS

COWBOY COUTURE



BY ERIC FRANCIS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARSHIA KHAN

WHEN YOU GET RIGHT DOWN TO THE ROOT OF THINGS, Little Rock's Joe Brogdon—Joe B., or Joeb, as he's known to his customers—is a recycler. Of course, he's not recycling the same things you are. Belts that used to hold up cowboys' britches. Vintage riding chaps. Skins from exotic animals. These are the raw materials of his craft.

WHEN EMBELLISHED BY STUDS, stones, vintage buckles and other gewgaws, in Joeb's hands they become greater than the sum of their parts: High-fashion belts that have caught the eye of exclusive retailers and haute couture shoppers who will drop anywhere from several hundred to a thousand dollars or more on his one-of-a-kind creations.

"I've always been interested in the cowboy culture, the Western culture," says Joeb, who's 81 now and started making belts about eight years ago. "I used to be a rodeo cowboy when I was

a kid. I wasn't a professional like those guys you see on the PBR shows, but I was a bull rider and a bronc rider. It was a lot of fun."

His professional career, though, was spent as a psychological examiner, and he still works full-time in private practice. But he had long dabbled in selling second-hand or vintage clothing — it's amazing what Japanese folks will pay for an old pair of Levi's 501s, he said — and once while visiting some vintage clothing markets out West he ran across some old cowboy belts fetching similarly ridiculous prices.

"I said, 'Well, hell, I can do that,'" Joeb recalls with a laugh.

He started pretty simply: An old belt, some metal studs arranged in a repeating pattern. Maybe something in sterling silver, a vintage Indian piece perhaps. He insisted every part be absolutely authentic.

And people liked the belts. Some of those people ran swank shops and had discerning customers. He began selling every belt he had in hand, and was being asked how many more he could make.

Today his belts come in three ba-

Above: A few of the belts Joeb currently has on offer. Right: The beltmaker himself, and the tools of his trade.

sic types: The Stud, which is an old cowboy belt with metal studs; the Fox, a women's high-fashion belt with a mix of leather, fur, silver and studs; and the Outlaw, made from old cartridge belts. Every one of his pieces is signed and numbered on the back; he recently passed the 1,000 mark.

He buys his raw materials in New Mexico or California vintage markets, at estate sales, on the Internet, wherever he can find them. For the fittings — old buckles of silver and polished stones, for example — he often has to travel, and they're getting harder to find and more expensive to buy as collectors snap them up, too.

Once he has all the pieces, he and his assistant, Jack Lloyd, retreat to a small workshop and begin the slow process of planning, cutting, studding and sewing, every bit of it by hand. Joeb doesn't necessarily consider himself a designer, though.



“Well, I call it reconfiguration,” he says. “I guess you could call it design. I’ve evolved into different mixed media: fabrics and materials and leathers.”

He’s got a photo of Billy Bob Thornton hanging on the wall, who scribbled a message of thanks on it for his Joeb belt, and he’s made guitar straps out of cartridge belts for ZZ Top (who promptly slipped real bullets into the cartridge loops). His wares are in shops like RRL (Ralph Laruen’s Western tribute line) and Fred Segal Couture, and in cities like Aspen, Falconhead, Sante Fe and Hollywood.

But Joeb didn’t get into all these stores by following standard protocol. Buyers? He don’t need no stinkin’ buyers! All he needs is a bag full of his belts and the address of an upscale clothier, where he steps in and asks to talk to the manager.

“You call Ralph Lauren up and try to get an appointment with their buyers, I dare you,” says Joeb with something too good-natured to be called annoyance. “I just walk in the door and say, ‘Here, I’ve got this. Do you want it?’ If they recognize the quality of it as something they want, they’ll buy it.” **AL**

At The Heart of MARDI GRAS

From the joy of catching the beads to the grandeur of the floats, Mardi Gras is an age-old tradition in the state of Louisiana. Join us for an entire weekend of family-friendly parades, food, and fun on February 6-10, 2013, in Alexandria, Louisiana.

Wednesday, February 6
LSU-A Mardi Gras Parade

Friday, February 8
Hixson Autoplex's College Cheerleaders & Classic Cars Parade
Taste of Mardi Gras

Saturday, February 9
Children's Parade
King Cake Party

Sunday, February 10
20th Anniversary Krewe Parade

800-551-9546

WWW.THEHEARTOFOLOUISIANA.COM

