

Denim jeans designers targeting baby boomers

Some makers are producing jeans that are stylish but stretch to fit bodies that are less than model-perfect.

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Baby boomers were the first American generation to grow up in blue jeans. And they're not ready to give them up.

As the youngest boomer turns 46 this year, demand for hip jeans with a bit more give is on the rise. With roughly 76 million baby boomers accounting for half of consumer spending, denim makers are waking up to the fact that there is money to be made in women's jeans that fit middle-age hips and thighs while still looking cool.

Unfortunately, shopping for a pair of jeans for most women ranks on par with shopping for a swimsuit, a constant reminder that they're not Jennifer Aniston.

"It's a nightmare," said Alice Harris, author of "The Blue Jean," a book that chronicles Americans' love affair with denim. "You have to go first thing in the morning before you've eaten. You simply can't try on jeans at 4 in the afternoon, unless you're 16 years old. For the rest of us, it's an 8 a.m. call."

Part of the problem is that the denim culture was born in California. And the business is still steeped in the land of face lifts and celebrities. No shopper wants to buy fat jeans. But maybe it's time for a dose of reality.

Third-generation women's clothing maker Rob Mann, chief executive of Chicago-based Henry-Lee & Co., believes the opportunity is ripe for a Midwesterner with common sense to enter the premium denim game. Mann, 47, is so sure that there is a booming market for contemporary jeans that fit without looking dowdy that he is betting his company on it — literally.

"My wife is 44 and has three kids," Mann said. "Five years ago she wore 7 for [All] Mankind jeans. They're not appropriate anymore. She's not going to wear 7 1/2-inch rise jeans. But she's not going to wear mom jeans either."

So in March, Mann sold Henry-Lee's core 600 West clothing division to Ava Design, a New York women's apparel manufacturer, for an undisclosed sum. The two companies agreed to operate the line of women's blazers, tops and pants as a joint venture this year, and Ava will take over the division in 2011.

Mann is investing sales proceeds into turning the company his grandparents founded into Chicago's first major denim house.

The jeans, set to debut in August, are called Henry & Belle after Mann's grandparents, a fashionable couple who started designing women's clothes in the 1930s when Chicago was teeming with dress houses.

The line of "jeggings" (super-skinny jeans that look like leggings), straight jeans and boot cut denim is priced at about \$140 to \$150, and the fabric is made with four-way stretch XFIT Lycra, a cross-weave that its makers claim holds its shape better than other stretch denim.

Mann is targeting a corner of the premium denim market that he says has less competition, the \$100 to \$150 range. Market researchers define premium denim as any pair of jeans over \$50. But for shoppers, the brands most associated with premium denim, such as True Religion and Joe's Jeans, cost \$150 to \$200.

"There is a lot of flash and show business in denim," Mann said. "Denim lines pop out of nowhere and then go away. My grandfather founded the company, and my grandmother was a model who influenced how he designed clothes. He designed for elegant women like her who wanted to be on trend but not flowing to the winds of whatever the hot fashion was."

Piles of coveted labels commanding \$250 to \$350 before the recession descended have faded away. Remember Blue Cult, the jeans Gwyneth Paltrow made famous? Gone. The exit list also includes Paper Denim & Cloth, People's Liberation and Earl Jean. Even the highly recognized Los Angeles label Rock & Republic filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in April.

Still, for all its hype, the denim market is one of the few apparel categories that held up through the recession. Although the days of \$300 denim are past, sales of blue jeans continue to gain.

For the year that ended April 30, retailers in the U.S. sold 357 million pairs of women's jeans for \$8.3 billion, a 5.1% increase in dollar volume from the same period a year earlier and a 6.6% jump in unit sales, according to NPD Group, a Port Washington, N.Y., market research firm.

More striking, women ages 55 and older are the fastest-growing group of denim buyers. They spent \$1.1 billion on jeans this year, up 38% from last year, NPD said. In 2009, spending among the same age group rose only 9.6%.

But the competition is fierce. There are hundreds of denim labels to choose from and more are hitting the market every day.

Cookie Johnson, wife of retired L.A. Lakers basketball star Earvin "Magic" Johnson, launched CJ by Cookie Johnson jeans for curvy women last year. The jeans, priced at \$115 to \$198, took off after they appeared on Oprah Winfrey's TV show and made the media diva's list of "Favorite Things."

Likewise, Chip Foster, one of the designers who founded the flash-in-the-pan premium denim line Chip & Pepper, is making a comeback with a new label called Pray for Mother Nature.

In May, Gap Inc. hired 7 for All Mankind's head designer to ramp up its new 1969 premium denim line, priced at \$70. Even pioneer Levi Strauss & Co. is hoping to reignite sales with a new, edgier denim line that approaches \$200.

"The last few years we've seen so many new brands coming out on a weekly basis in L.A.," said Stefano Aldighieri, a denim designer who has worked for 7 for All Mankind and Levi. "It's not as crowded as it was two years ago, but there are still too many players."

Henry-Lee, for its part, is taking advantage of the still-struggling economy by hiring talent from the denim industry in L.A. and New York on a contract basis. The recession made its way through the denim industry as it did everywhere else, shutting down lines and leaving plenty of experienced designers, production operators and sales and marketing executives free for project work, he said.

So Mann assembled a team from Gap, Edun, DKNY, Michael Kors, BCBG Max Azria and Ralph Lauren to fly into Chicago monthly to create the new denim line.

The jeans line started out late last year with the name Denim 6, and Henry-Lee sold the collection to some independent retailers to test the market this year.

By April, the team began making adjustments to the whiskering and the rise and the wash, aiming to boost the cool factor. Mann hired a few more outsiders in marketing and sales to talk to Nordstrom Inc. and Bloomingdale's Inc. about carrying the line. The fresh perspective shook Mann into realizing that Henry-Lee's longevity — it was founded in 1957 — stood out in a sea of fly-by-night denim labels, so he renamed the line after the founders.

Mann hopes the Henry & Belle line will generate \$5 million its first year and eventually account for three-quarters of Henry-Lee's revenue. The company continues its sourcing business, manufacturing private-label clothing.

"Jeans is the defining piece of attire for the entire boomer generation," said Jennifer Ganshirt, managing partner at marketing firm Frank About Women.

"Boomers basically put jeans on the map and created a jeans culture," she said. "Of any generation to identify with jeans, it's the boomers. They will have a place in their lives for their entire lives."

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