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WESTERN MIMAGE MAKER

Manuel the Tailor possesses a rare gift: the ability to uncover the personal style found deep in our hearts

BY ANNE LANG

WHAT TIE-APART FROM FAME ALONE—COULD POSSIBLY BIND DWIGHT Yoakam and Dwight Eisenhower? The Lone Ranger and Elvis Presley? Bob Dylan and Ronald Reagan? What common element links Johnny Cash, LBJ, and Roy Rogers? Or Linda Ronstadt, Marty Stuart, and Tom Jones?

These famous folks, and a host of others past and present, indeed are linked by a common thread—or, more accurately, thousands of threads, masterfully entwined by Manuel the Tailor, a man whose unique apparel designs go beyond mere fashion to create nothing less than a personal image for whoever wears them.

“I’m not really a fashion designer,” explains the Nashville-based Manuel, known in the upscale Western-wear trade by his first name alone. “What I am is a costume designer. The artist, or client, has to have a style that is best for him or her. I have to find the little corner that defines that person in the best way. My clients discover me as a person who does this job. Then it’s up to me to discover them.”


Our true selves can never be fully discovered without a decisive, distinctive clothing statement, says the renowned designer. What we wear, he implies, should reflect our innermost nature—the very fabric, if you will, of what we’re all about, be it entertainment, politics, corporate dealmaking, or just plain kickin’ back.

Need an example of what Manuel is talking about? Look no farther than Johnny Cash.

Back in 1953, Cash was a singer without a signature—a signature *style*, that is. After intently scrutinizing the man’s brooding music and his imposing physique, Manuel came up with the “Man in Black” look. Cash liked it, carried the idea to the extreme, and emerged shortly thereafter as a star.

Did Manuel’s influence help boost him over the top? Have you seen Johnny Cash wear any other color since?





MANUEL, AN ENERGETIC MEXICAN-AMERICAN now 57 years old, also called on such skills to solidify cowboy images for presidents Johnson and Reagan. In fact, he forged a long-standing relationship with Reagan back in his acting years. "He dressed like a rancher, like a person who belonged on top of a horse," Manuel recalls. "He never wanted to forget his roots."

The same could be said for Americans in general, Manuel believes, going on to explain his theory on why Western wear is so popular today. "I think Americans are dying for identification," he reasons. "They're returning to an inner part of themselves."

One American who long ago sought Manuel's help in expressing his inner self was Elvis Presley. As the young star's fashion consultant, Manuel ignored the controversy surrounding his pelvic thrusting and designed the first of what would become a whole wardrobe of flamboyant jumpsuits that added dazzle to Elvis's movements.

It's a tribute to Manuel's artistry that you don't even need a hip-swaying singer to bring one of his creations to life. A stroll past a display of his one-of-a-kind Western fantasy designs elevates the senses. The eye feasts on brilliant hues of gold, silver, turquoise, plum, scarlet, olive, and vermilion. Natural fibers—mostly cotton, wool, and silk—provide a smooth foundation for glittering rhinestones, delicate piping, ornate embroidery, and intricate cut-outs, all exquisitely composed into almost mystical patterns ranging from understated elegance to bold floral displays.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OUT OF SANTA FE CATALOG

MANUEL'S GUIDE TO CREATING YOUR SPECIAL LOOK

Pulling together all the elements necessary to achieve a unique and comfortable personal image can be a tough challenge, especially on an off-the-rack budget. Whether you're looking to establish a basic, reasonably priced wardrobe or want to improve the one you've got, Manuel offers the following fashion tips:

- *Keep it simple.* Limit yourself to a few simple, well-made, basic items, all tailored in classic, timeless styles and solid earth tones. Invest in one or two blazers or sport coats, several blouses or shirts, and two or three skirts or pairs of pants. Depending on the occasion, you can dress these pieces up or down with your choice of accessories. A trendy accessory also brings a classic garment "up to the moment" in style.
- *Lean toward neutrals.* If you buy the above items in an assortment of black, beige, and white, you'll be able to mix and match them with ease. (Use the same basic colors to accumulate a small collection of shoes, boots, and belts.) Using neutral tones as a base allows you to accent with an unlimited variety of prints, pastels, or bright solids.
- *Consult with a professional.* Still unsure of where to go and what to look for? For an often-minimal fee, you can hire a stylist to accompany you on a one-time spree. At the very least, he or she can help you put together an appropriate basic wardrobe on which you can build later. To locate a stylist, check the classified phone directory under "Image Consultants."
- *Wear your denim appropriately.* Wear your blue jeans proudly and often, but stop trying to turn them into high fashion. "Designers have tried forever to dress up denim by adding rhinestones and such," says Manuel. "But it's really a leisure fabric."
- *Try on a brave new image.* Except for somber occasions such as board meetings or funerals, men needn't be afraid to venture beyond blacks, browns, grays, and beiges. "You can go out to dance at night in a beautiful moss-green or powder-blue suit," says Manuel. "Always retain your basic earth tones, but be confident in adding more vivid color to your overall wardrobe."

That such sophisticated Western artwear could come from modest origins only makes the legend of Manuel more alluring. Born the fifth in a family of 11 children in the town of Coalcomán, about 100 miles south of Guadalajara, Manuel knew by the age of 7 that he was destined to become a tailor. "I just fell in love with designing," he says. Young Manuel coaxed his oldest brother into showing him how to operate a sewing machine. Soon he was making his own clothes, turning himself into "a peacock. Kids my age would stay away from me, I looked so ridiculous to them."

The large-scale tannery owned by Manuel's parents provided him with an added array of outlets for his artistry. Boots, saddles, belts—he learned to build them all. Today, he still produces a variety of exclusive leather goods on the side, including the occasional custom saddle for extra-special clients.

Having perfected his tailoring craft in Mexico, Manuel emigrated to the U.S. in 1950. He was hired by Nudie's—the legendary (and, sadly, recently closed) Western store in North Hollywood, California. There he quickly rose to the rank of head designer. When he was chosen to create costumes for the likes of Roy Rogers




and the Lone Ranger, he first gained his long-standing reputation as "tailor to the stars."

Now divorced, Manuel has three children ranging in age from 8 to 27. The devoted father still works as hard as ever, out of the Nashville store that bears his name.

Manuel begins any commission by meeting personally with a client to analyze his or her needs and wishes. "I get more from talking to clients in a friendly way, as if they were somebody I deal with every day," he says. Though he appears to be making small talk, he's actually observing personality and style, detecting tiny nuances of which even the client may not be aware. Such is Manuel's rare gift.

Manuel's creative spark is ignited when clients share bits of family history they hope can be carried out in a design. "The client will say, 'I really like this coat. My grandpa had one, and I really liked the way he looked.'"

Hearing Manuel describe such moments of self-discovery, you can feel the excitement and fulfillment he and his clients find daily through his artistry. "It's just great, they love it, and that's what I do!" Manuel exclaims. "It's not difficult to find the style in a person. I just go for the heart!" 

To order the new Out of Santa Fe catalog carrying Manuel's designs, send \$15 to: 297 Newport Center Dr., Newport Beach, CA 92660; (714) 644-5953.