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Dress code

Young designer recommends color, dimension and self-expression

by Michael E Barrett

Want to express yourself? Then shut up and get dressed! That's the word on the street, and the voice behind the word is that of Jonny Shultz, an up-and-coming gay fashion designer.

The 25-year-old operates Jonny Shultz Designs, a startup fashion company based in his downtown Portland apartment. This Dayton, Ohio, transplant found his passion for fashion when his grandmother taught him to crochet as a child. He accessorized his family with hats, scarves and blankets until the onslaught of puberty and the gender conditioning that accompanies it. Put simply, crocheting "wasn't compatible with what other boys were doing" at age 13 in Middle America.

Luckily, teen-age rebellion brought Shultz back to his passion a few years later, largely out of a desire for self-expression. He found that self-expression through clothing and style. He says, "For me, it meant coloring my hair and going punk—my big 'screw you' statement."

Shultz eventually returned to crocheting and, after moving to Portland in 1997, found popularity for his creations—mostly one-of-a-kind hats and scarves. "I think I was one of the first to make fuzzy scarves," says Shultz of a fashion genre that only a gay man could have invented. Before long, he was matching colors and tones to personalities and body types and found himself filling custom orders for loyal clients.

Shultz's current focus is shirts and handbags—"I think women should have bags for everything, even a bag for bags"—but he says he's dying to make a dress. His mission is to "create clothing that will access and reflect people's personalities" and, at least for the moment, to help people "identify themselves through the colors they wear."

He's especially drawn to "neon in small details, but not like it was in the '80s," and he's begging you boys out there (boyz, bois and men, too!) to explore colors and be more creative with what you wear.

But Shultz says there's more to self-expression and a good look than color: Your body is the third dimension of an otherwise two-dimensional creation with which you cover it. This fashion baron starts with the premise that "everyone's body is beautiful, but you just have to know how to dress it."

And size is no exception. The key is to wear clothes that

fit, which, in the Jonny Shultz Dictionary of Fashion, is synonymous with balance. His modus operandi as a designer is about showing off the body without being trashy.

"Baggy clothing," he cautions, "always shows that you're self-conscious about your body. You're trying to hide something. If you've got the curves, show them!"

On the other hand, don't cut off blood circulation as you transform yourself into a skin-tight piece of eye candy. You'll run the risk of looking trashy or giving yourself an aneurysm. In summary, if it doesn't fit, throw it out...or save it for another time when it will fit.

Shultz likes uniqueness, too. He's thrilled that more people, particularly those in their late teens to late 20s, are shunning the prescribed catalog look in favor of clothing that reflects themselves as individuals.

Where to find such articles of self-expression? Not at Wal-Mart or Meier & Frank, but on the racks of vintage clothing stores such as Red Light and in local shops like Seaplane, where Shultz sells his creations for women.

And he encourages experimentation.

"Go with your feeling," he advises. "Find stuff that really produces your personality...something that makes a political statement. Be daring. You might look stupid, but it's OK. Treat yourself. It's an amazing feeling and a confidence booster that so many people deprive themselves of."

He laments that mass marketing has institutionalized blandness by "covering everybody in the same type of clothing, because people are too afraid to go beyond boundaries." Although he's not against production lines, Shultz prefers one-of-a-kinds. "Mass production," he says, "often sacrifices quality for profit." Luckily, there are designers who aren't sacrificing their creativity by "selling out...and becoming a corporate identity."

Clearly, Shultz is one of them.

"Fashion can give people a voice without opening their mouth," explains Shultz. "It can be an identity, an escape, a release. For many people, hair, makeup and clothes are the first place we experiment with ourselves and find out who we are. Sometimes it's loud and sometimes it's subdued."

As a designer, he loves seeing people exhibit their individuality through what they wear. "They are so powerful, and I look at them and I imagine, What would I put on them that would marry their personality with my fashion?"

Shultz prides himself on his grassroots approach to designing and marketing, and he considers Portland a cutting-edge place for fashion because of its low-key culture. The difference between a fashion haven like New York City and the urban equivalent of an outlet mall like Portland is that "in New York there are financial resources to put something on the scene faster than elsewhere, but others are looking at Portland for inspiration."

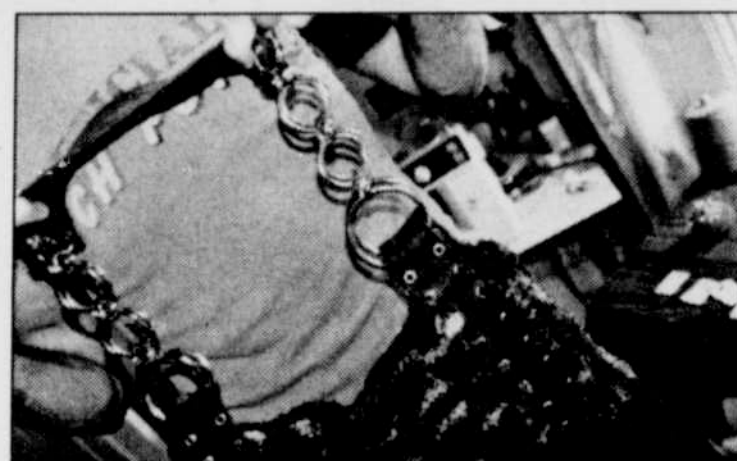
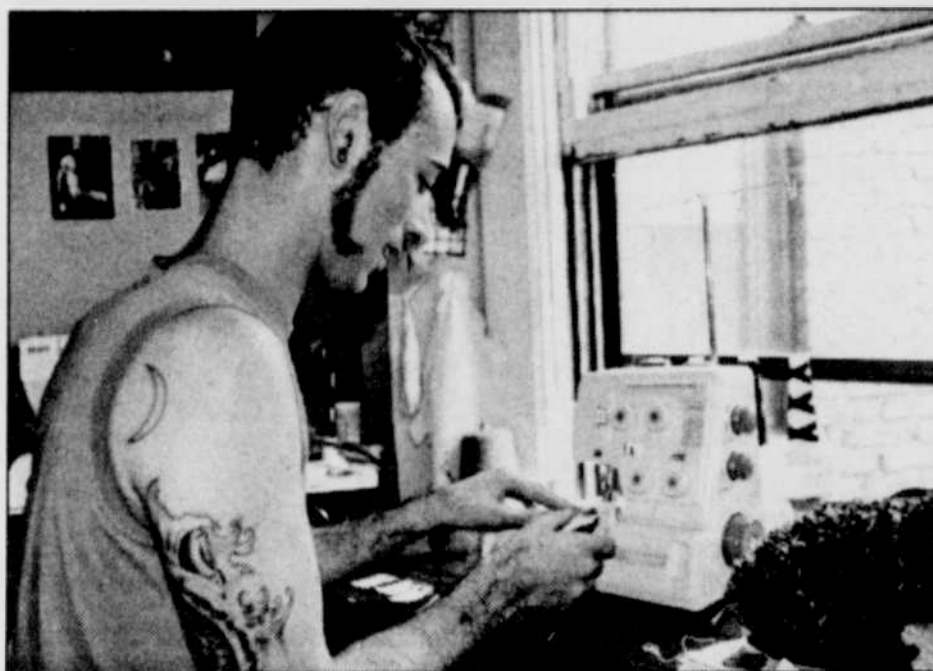
Shultz is clearly proud of the positive outside press coverage of Portland's fashion scene in recent years.

"People are doing what they like and wearing what they want, and the world just happens to be looking at us right now," observes Shultz. "I think outsiders are realizing that Portland is full of creativity and artistry."

The insiders have their eye on Jonny Shultz, and so can you. **JEB**

JONNY SHULTZ DESIGNS products can be found at Seaplane, 3352 S.E. Belmont St., and by custom order at nancyboy7@hotmail.com.

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Jonny Shultz uses a combination of fabric, grommets and crochet along with lots of metal and chains to create one-of-a-kind handbags that aren't easily lifted by a thief. He also designs original shirts with lace crochet detail.

Opening the closet

Going out? Follow these tips from Jonny, the Handbag Architect.

Boys: Wear a formfitting shirt that shows off your body yet accommodates the heat and sweat factor. Wear tight pants, but allow those legs room to dance (or not, if you prefer to strike a pose off the dance floor). Simple colors outlined with bright colors are in, and cute striped shirts are always fun. Also, every man needs a fun little bag to carry around, whether for your shirt, the phone numbers you collect or other trinkets of the night.

Girls: Skimpy is in! Wear a nice top with color that shows off your body. Try on a midlength skirt with high heels. Think low waistline for pants. Sleeveless shirts are really in right now for girls, especially for showing off biceps. Flowers, not floral, are in. Look for camouflage in different colors to splash onto the female fashion scene. And don't forget that handbag!

Oh, and a special note to you Gapsters, Abercromblings and Banana Republicans: Baseball caps and khaki are OUT!



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