

The vintage corduroy revolution



Submitted photo by Leigh Oviatt



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Coast Weekend contributor Matt Love seeks to inspire as many people as possible to wear this beloved cloth

Story by MATT LOVE

I no longer recall when or where I decided that vintage corduroy was the perfect apparel choice for living at the coast. I have some vague general notions of the timing, but nothing concrete.

Perhaps the moment arrived in a Newport wine shop when a cover model-looking woman (obviously from Portland or Seattle) came up to me as I was buying a bottle of Chianti, grabbed my shoulders, looked me up and down, and said, “You really got it going on!”

She referred to my vintage corduroy outfit. I was bedecked from head to toe, three shades of brown. She seemingly didn’t want to let go of me. I converted her right there; she told me so.

Or maybe the corduroy obsession began after repeatedly watching “Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid” and seeing its two stars, Paul Newman and Robert Redford, wear corduroy with more friendly gunslinger panache than anyone in the history of the world. Who doesn’t want to look like Newman and Redford in that movie?

Quite possibility my corduroy genesis story is hearing Tom Petty sing a stanza from “You Wreck Me” off 1994’s “Wildflowers.”

I’ll be the boy in the corduroy pants

You be the girl at the high school dance

Or hearing Pearl Jam’s “Corduroy,” off 1994’s

“Vitalogy,” a mysterious song with no mention of the cloth, just allusions to the metaphorical pain of never having worn it.

Perhaps, though, the corduroy fever originated much, much earlier, as when my mother read me “Corduroy,” the classic 1968 children’s story of a lost corduroy teddy bear and a little girl’s love that reclaimed him.

It doesn’t matter, really, knowing the precise moment of my epiphany. All that matters now is that I tirelessly extol the benefits of wearing these old groovy garments and inspire as many people as possible to return to these clothes for the first time in decades or try them on for the first time.

You’ll feel better. You’ll move more gracefully. You’ll drive your car more safely. You’ll read more. Your chess acumen will improve. A positive attitude adjustment is probably forthcoming. There is unity in wearing corduroy. Trust me. I’m an expert.

There is no irony in my beliefs in the merits of donning corduroy. Irony doesn’t exist on the coast when it comes to fashion. That’s for people in the big cities. These clothes are what they are — comfortable, peaceful and once made in America by unionized employees making a living wage.

The early 1970s marked the heyday of twisted-fiber fashion. Pick up any slick magazine from that era, and corduroy reigned with a velveteen touch. The Age of Corduroy. The age of the English countryside meets American hippie meets Joe Namath. What an aesthetic mix!

And those colors: Blue, green, yellow, black, pink, orange, maroon and the multitudes of brown.

And those garments: Pants, hats, jackets, coats, jumpers, dresses, skirts, shirts, suits, pant suits, ties, shorts, hot pants, vests, overalls, halter tops, bean bag chairs, belts, car and furniture upholstery, shoes, tennis racquet covers. Even bikinis!

And those styles: Bell bottoms, flares, tails on coats, wide lapels, pockets everywhere.

We were wild for fustian clothes and loved our wales. I

think national politicians from both sides of the aisle wore corduroy back then and seemed more measured, relaxed. They weren’t shutting down the government either.

One wonders why we ever abandoned corduroy for denim and polyester. It was pretty much all downhill from there. Fleece? Forget it! Hoodies? An abomination!

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About the photos

There was corduroy here, there, flying everywhere: pants, coats, jackets, shirts, shorts, dresses, hats, even a jumpsuit. Green, blue, maroon and naturally, brown, oceans of all the shades of corduroy brown.

Garbo’s Vintage Wear in Astoria must stock more classic corduroy garments than any shop in the Pacific Northwest. In fact, when my Portland-area friends visit me and check out Garbo’s vast and heaving collection of vintage clothing, footwear, records and sundry other retro items, they universally exclaim: “This is the best vintage store I’ve ever seen!”

I concur.

Garbo’s proprietor Lynn Hadley had graciously allowed my students from the Capt. Robert Gray School to borrow some corduroy for a fashion shoot to accompany my story about the joys of wearing old corduroy. It’s practically all I wear anymore, and I don’t mind evangelizing for it.

For most of the students, it was their first time wearing the fabric and it took a few minutes to adjust. After an hour of strutting around downtown Astoria bedecked in throw-back threads, vamping it up for the cameras, and eating hot dogs in the Arc Arcade, reactions were mixed to the clothing:

“I felt old wearing it.”

“I felt like my grandpa.”

“I felt straight out of a disco!”

“Hey, this isn’t too bad!”

“It makes me sweat.”

“I felt like a professor.”

“I feel pretty good in these clothes.”

I doubt I converted any of the teenagers to immediately join the corduroy cause. So be it. For one hour, at least, they got to experience corduroy’s groovy vibe, and they sure smiled a lot more wearing it than their regular clothes.