

Brit Grit

Designer Andrew Buckler is bringing a British edge to American footwear. << By Jocelyn Anderson



Since launching his eponymous label in 2001, Andrew Buckler has become much more than a denim designer. What started as a jeans line quickly expanded into suits, outerwear, underwear, knitwear and, in February 2007, footwear.

"The shoe designs began out of necessity for our fashion shows," said the British designer, who wanted to offer a complete look on the runway. Now he is branching out with new styles and anticipates his footwear sales doubling — from 5 percent of company business to 10 percent.

A graduate of London's Royal College of Art and former designer at Emanuel by Emanuel Ungaro, Buckler has tried to perfect the fashionable rock 'n' roll look, focusing on his original premise, "English bloke meets New York." It's paying off for the brand, with celebrities that include members of The Rolling Stones, Tommy Lee of Mötley Crüe and actors Shia LaBeouf and Giovanni Ribisi.

As a designer, Buckler finds inspiration in the unexpected. From insects to anatomical illustrations, he has been known to give his collections a theme. Until now, there have been only four dress shoe styles, including the Winkle Picker, a pointy toe laceup that retails for \$215, and the Chelsea Picker, a boot for \$230 to \$250. For spring '09, Buckler is adding a fifth style: a leather high-top sneaker with a wrap-around top, for \$295.

The shoes are sold at Mercury in Austin, Texas, and starting next season, at DNA in Chicago and New York. Buckler also sells them in his four stores, three of which opened this year in London, Toronto and New York's Soho neighborhood. His first flagship bowed in Manhattan's Meatpacking District in 2005.

1. What were the challenges of striking out into footwear?

AB: Quality manufacturing of shoes is very key and a huge deciding factor for men. We had to find factories capable of executing the designs and maintaining a high quality. We don't work with factories that just want to repeat their own products. I want to control the design of the shoe. Many weeks are spent checking and rechecking shoe prototypes [and] finally getting the appearance and fit to meet our design and standards. Within each element of Buckler, we work with manufacturers [in Brazil] who can work with our needs — design, quality, minimums, reliability, delivery.

2. For spring '09 you added a sneaker that's very different from your previous styles. What was your inspiration for that?

AB: The new addition brings balance to the current shoe collection, which has a formal edge. The sneaker's asymmetrical wrap design was inspired by armor and fencing, the theme of our entire spring '09 collection.

3. Is it difficult to find fresh inspiration for your work?

AB: I don't find it difficult. I usually draw inspiration from around me — news, music, film, art and always what's happening on the street, how people dress. Utilizing what moves me in a particular season is a huge part of having a passion for design.

4. Your designs have focused heavily on the pointy toe. Do you find most guys have accepted that look now?

AB: I don't think most guys have. Buckler's clientele has definitely accepted it, but it's still permeating the rest of society. The guy who can wear the pointy toe and feel comfortable is the guy who highly identifies with music and wears accessories to express the things he likes. As another option, we also have ventured into creating a bull-nosed dress shoe — not as severe, but just as sharp.

5. In blending American and British influences, how do you feel each country does when it comes to fashion?

AB: I like the preppy, urban edge of American

dress, as well as the slimmer U.K. style that has design attitude. I don't particularly take to either country's treatment of branding, for opposite reasons: America focuses too much on branding, which results in a lack of individualistic style; the U.K. doesn't focus on it enough, which results in no loyalty.

6. You've said you don't like the monotony of menswear today. Why is it so boring to you?

AB: Menswear reflects work and profession, which condones controlled looks. This has created barriers, unlike in women's wear, which is more experimental. Men need to try harder, be knowledgeable and be attentive to what is going on and what their clothing means. Venture outside the realm of camouflage dress.

7. How would you describe your personal footwear style?

AB: My style is sharp, like the Winkle Picker. But I also like being able to throw on a sneaker, as well, which makes me flexible.

8. Many celebrities wear your clothes. Who best exemplifies your work?

AB: Liam Gallagher [of Oasis] and James McAvoy.

9. Looking ahead, what can we expect from the Buckler brand, especially in regard to the footwear category?

AB: The shoe collection will continue to grow as we discover and imagine new techniques. We are also now designing leather bags and belts in-house.

10. Why do you think your business here in the States is growing when others are struggling with the tough economy?

AB: Men don't have to buy the newer version of a cookie-cutter jacket. People are more likely to dig into their wallets for something that gives them a reason to want it in the first place. The quality and detail of all my products are much more advantageous to customers on the price-to-quality scale.