

Guys' Girl

Artist-turned-designer Rachel Comey offers a classic take on men's footwear. << By Jocelyn Anderson



Rachel Comey is not a fan of heels. "I'm not really a stiletto person," said the up-and-coming designer. "I like shoes you can wear more than just from the taxi to the party."

So it makes sense that Comey — who has been a favorite of celebrities such as David Bowie, Adrien Brody and Beck — has become a standout in the men's footwear arena.

Comey graduated from the University of Vermont with a degree in sculpture and was a designer at Theory before launching her own menswear line in 2001, which she quickly followed with a women's collection and footwear for both sexes. Though the designer has focused more on her women's clothing lately, her men's footwear line of 30 to 40 styles has continued to gain traction at retail.

The collection is made in Peru and carried by stores such as Odin, Kesner and Opening Ceremony in New York and by Gimme Shoes in San Francisco. Retail prices range from \$300 to \$415 for men's shoes, and \$265 to \$495 for women's. Barneys New York picked up her men's footwear for fall '09.

"For some reason, I never cease having ideas for shoes," said Comey. "The collection grows every season."

Recently, her women's line got a boost, thanks to a three-season deal with Urban Outfitters. Comey's first collection for the retailer hit last spring and included three women's shoes for \$58 to \$78.

Here, the New York-based designer tells *Footwear News* about how she's adding her feminine touch to the men's marketplace.

1. How did you get involved in footwear design?

RC: I studied sculpture in school, but I had always been interested in shoes. And since I do runway shows, for the first couple of seasons, I was always looking for shoes to use and always getting frustrated when I couldn't find the right thing, and it seemed to lack in my point of view. So I started searching for opportunities and found some factories.

2. Does your background in sculpture help with footwear design?

RC: Just thinking about materials and how they work together and the 3-D silhouettes [helps the process].

3. Why did you start your label with menswear?

RC: At the time, it was a much smaller market. There weren't that many people starting labels with menswear. I had done some one-of-a-kind things for different performers, mostly guys, and I kept getting requests for things. So it seemed there was a hole in the market.

4. What's your signature footwear look?

RC: There are some classic elements, things I like to use. I love clogs, so every season in women's I'll have a new group of clogs. It references the past in that they are wooden clogs, but I feel they are modern takes on that. And then [in men's] there are a couple styles I've been making since the beginning. It's just about subtle differences.

5. How do you deal with the limitations in men's footwear?

RC: Men's is really fun *because* of the limitations. It forces you to be more creative. Whenever there are restrictions, you're forced to come up with creative solutions. I had a point of view about what kinds of shoes I like, and I wanted to make slightly more formal or classic shoes in terms of shape, but also [something that

can] be worn with more casual clothes.

6. How does your men's footwear differ from other designers' work?

RC: I have a vegan shoe. It has no animal products, but is really classic and clean. It's a classic oxford made of canvas, rubber and nylon. I just got an e-mail from one of my clients, and her son had worn it to his prom. It's a great photo of a young guy in a suit and tie wearing a canvas shoe.

7. Why did you want to focus on classic pieces for men?

RC: I don't want shoes to be the first thing you notice when you meet somebody. I like the subtleties you can address with classic silhouettes. They're not stiff and traditional by any means. They take elements of classical styles and are updated and more contemporary. Sometimes I do some far-out things. Sometimes you have to do some really crazy things to get [attention for] the ones you think are really modest. Then people will give the other ones a second glance.

8. What was the biggest challenge you faced going into footwear?

RC: Managing production is always the biggest challenge — the timing of everything, meeting demands, being ready with the shoes when the customer wants them.

9. What shoe should every man have in his closet?

RC: They should have a really well-shaped brown leather oxford with a nice toe. [That type of shoe is] harder to come by than people think. I like a brown shoe on men.

10. What are you planning for men's footwear in spring '10?

RC: I like "types" of shoes: moccasins, desert boots, brogues, hiking boots. I also like to put our spin on them, taking elements of classic things and putting them into other things — mash-ups. So I'm going to continue with some of those mash-ups, but I'm doing a lot more classic shoes with colored rubber soles.