

On the Mark

Designer Mark McNairy has set out to make traditional men's footwear fashionable again. << By Jocelyn Anderson



Mark McNairy enjoys juggling many creative roles.

In addition to serving as design director at J.Press, he also is working on three footwear endeavors. First, he continues to develop his namesake label, Mark McNairy – New Amsterdam, which debuted for fall '09 in two parts: Red Brick Sole and the New England Collection. Both are made in England and retail from \$250 to \$550. Then for spring '10, he will unveil a collaboration of almost 50 styles for Bass. Last, ready-to-wear brand Engineered Garments has enlisted his services for a few men's shoes to sell in its Japanese store.

A devotee of preppy style, the designer's aesthetic leans toward the traditional. Styles from his eponymous line include classic wingtips, loafers, tassel slip-ons, saddle shoes and chukka boots, which he will show at Compass in Las Vegas to court more U.S. accounts (so far the collection is mostly sold in Japan). "I like preppy, Ivy League, but it's not limited to that," said McNairy, who is based in New York.

Over the years, McNairy has designed for a number of American sportswear companies, including suit maker Southwick, which was acquired last year by Brooks Brothers. But ever since he created a single collection of shoes through J.Press in 2006, he has been itching to do more in footwear.

"I was going to do a whole clothing collection, but then this [footwear avenue] worked out," McNairy said. "Now I'm not sure I want to do a clothing collection. This is a nice change for me."

1. You have yet to get your shoes into many U.S. doors. Has the economy been a roadblock?

MM: [Yes], I started at a really bad time — probably the worst economic time since the Great Depression. All the buyers were not looking to buy. They wanted to cancel orders. But this is a side project for me, so I'm in no hurry. If I needed the money, I'd be in trouble. But there's a lot of crap in this world, and these bad times are going to weed out a lot of the unnecessary stuff and the strong will get stronger.

2. What was the inspiration for your namesake footwear collection?

MM: The first shoes I wanted to make were white bucks and dirty bucks. You can't find them. You used to be able to get Walk-Overs, but those have been gone a long time. Then I decided I should do a whole collection of Red Brick Sole. Then I wanted to do other shoes, too. So we called those the New England Collection because they're a mixture of English and American styles and different soles.

3. Why are your shoes made in England?

MM: I've always made clothes in a very hands-on way. When things are fully engineered, you can just feel it and know it lacks soul. I want [the shoes] to get better with age. I want to make money, but it's a passion when it's made from the heart. So that's why I'm not interested in making stuff in China that's mass-produced.

4. What was the idea behind the collaboration with Bass?

MM: We did a whole range of made-in-Maine [shoes]. It's not just a heritage collection. It does have the basic Weejun [look], but it has lots of other fashion elements to make it different.

5. Would you ever do sandals, or do you want to stay very traditional?

MM: I hate sandals on men. Flip-flops make me nauseated. If you are at the beach and you go in to grab a drink at the bar, that's fine. But if I'm at a restaurant and a guy sits next to me in flip-flops, it's disgusting. For women, it's a different thing. But I did do flip-flops for Weejun. It was my idea to do a Weejun flip-flop, so I'm a little flexible.

It's a saleable item. I'm not going to wear it, but I think it's acceptable.

6. Why is Japan so different for high-end men's footwear?

MM: They care. Price is not as much of an issue as it is here. [The Japanese] appreciate nice things. I've always been more successful in Japan than here. The "Made in the USA" thing was really big [in Japan], and then it started fading a little. China got big, but then it turned back, and now there's been a resurgence.

7. What do you think about hipsters appropriating preppy style?

MM: I like that. The guy wearing skin-tight jeans, Weejuns, a Barbour jacket and a button-down shirt is cool to me. Both [of my] collections don't really have an age range. My dad could wear the shoes, and my 14-year-old daughter's boyfriend could wear the exact same shoes.

8. How do you rate American fashion design for men?

MM: There's more good stuff out there now than there has ever been, but there's too much, too. There's very little out there that I am personally interested in and would buy and wear. I buy most of my clothes at the Salvation Army. And I love the flea market at the Meadowlands [in New Jersey].

9. What else do you have coming up?

MM: I'm working on opening a store [in Manhattan] with a couple of friends in about a year. It would be a small retail shop that would be all of my shoes, and we could tie it in with the wholesale business. I'd also like to do collaborations. Keds Triumph, a predecessor to the Champion, is my favorite model. They seem to be gone. And I'm not opposed to doing a sneaker with Nike.

10. Did you ever think you would become so involved in footwear?

MM: No, it happened so quickly. In December, I had coffee with [my factory's owner] on a Friday. We discussed it and thought it was a good idea. Wednesday, I flew to London. I had worked for two days on the collection. And by January, [the factory owner] brought the sample collection over, and we showed it [in New York]. I did the whole collection in less than two days.