

# Southern Living

Billy Reid's footwear is equally at home on the New York streets and in the woods of Alabama. << By Jocelyn Anderson



Billy Reid is loving the Americana trend that has made heritage styles so popular.

The designer's men's shoe collection reflects his Southern roots — classic with a twist — but the public's love for vintage is helping Reid expand footwear in his retail stores and at wholesale. This fall, Reid is starting a wholesale business for his women's boot line, which debuted last year (wholesale for men's began in spring '10).

Breaking into international markets is another focus for the brand, said Reid. "We're doing a test now with United Arrows in Japan, and we're hoping that the Japanese market will be a good fit," he said. "The U.K. is another place we'd really like to try to [reach]."

Reid has offered footwear since his William Reid apparel brand launched in 1998. (He won the CFDA Perry Ellis Award for Menswear in 2001.) But after Sept. 11, 2001, he disbanded the business and moved back to the South. Now based in Alabama, he opened Billy Reid in 2004, with branded retail stores in Florence, Ala.; Nashville, Tenn.; Charleston, S.C.; Dallas; Houston and New York.

The footwear is handmade in Italy, with the men's collection running the gamut, from boots to wingtips to loafers, priced at \$295 to \$595. In addition to Reid's stores, the men's footwear is sold at Bloomingdale's, Nordstrom and Odin in New York.

Here, Reid discusses the challenges of running a multifaceted business, making hard decisions and the item of the season.

## 1. How do your roots in the South inspire your designs?

**BR:** Mostly with usage. A lot of things that we make are things I use in my daily life — we spend a lot of time outdoors — and have really sturdy construction because we tend to beat the heck out of them. And that also translates pretty well for New York, too, because I wear the same pair of boots I wear out in the woods that I do walking around the East Village.

## 2. Speaking of boots, you recently launched a boots-only women's line. Have boots become your signature?

**BR:** When you see something that's selling, you definitely focus attention on it and try to make sure you're doing more of those things. It would be nice if it became something we were known for.

## 3. How big of a category can shoes be for you?

**BR:** It has been something that we started very small — maybe at 2 percent of our overall business — and it's grown to be more than 10 percent in a couple of years. So we see it growing even more.

## 4. Which has the economy affected more: wholesale or retail?

**BR:** It's probably a little more difficult on the wholesale side because you have no control over someone buying you or not. And there are so many other factors that play into it. It's not just, "Is the collection good?" or "Do they want to buy it?" There's also "Do we have room for it?" and "What are the budgets like?"

## 5. How does your business differ today from pre-Sept. 11?

**BR:** The most critical difference is probably the business model itself. The collection certainly has evolved and expanded, but that was because we have our own shops now. I was just wholesaling [before]. Back then we might go out and make 250 samples but at the end of the day, only 40 percent or less of all those samples would be produced. Also, I would do a runway show and try to communicate my message, but now [I have] an environment where people can come and get a sense of what it's about.

## 6. What did you learn from the experience of closing the first business and relaunching?

**BR:** So many things. ... I've become somewhat

more conservative with [my] money and want to make it last from a business standpoint. I also really look into cash flow and try to make sure [I'm] protecting [myself]. You also realize how important it is to create a strong message around what you're doing.

## 7. Has your physical distance from the fashion world posed any challenges?

**BR:** In some ways there are certain challenges, but for the most part it's the same. I'm in New York [frequently]; we have a base there at our shop. The first few years, when we were opening our stores, we just kind of let the chips fall. But we operate a bit differently than companies that are not based in New York. It works for us.

## 8. Your New York store got a lot of acclaim for having been made from reclaimed materials. Why was that important for you?

**BR:** It's something I've believed in for a while. When my wife and I had our house in Alabama redone several years ago, we gutted a huge portion and saved all the materials. Then we used everything to basically put it back together. I really fell in love with old building materials and architectural elements, and when we found the space in New York, it seemed like a perfect spot to do it. So we actually gathered almost all the materials from a 100-mile radius of our house, put them on a truck and brought them to New York. We did most of the work ourselves.

## 9. Do you have any plans to open more stores?

**BR:** We're not looking to open any new stores unless some incredible opportunity presents itself. Right now, the wholesale part of our business is a big focus for us because we tiptoed into it last season. This season, we tried to expand that and also [work on] some more international opportunities.

## 10. What can New Yorkers learn from Southern fashion?

**BR:** I don't know if there's a big difference between the two anymore. Information and trends are immediate now, and it doesn't take a season to get from New York to the rest of the country or the world. My friends here wear the same things [as in New York]. There's really not much difference anymore.