

WHAT U WEAR

LEATHER & SKIN

by Jerome Ryckborst

Why do we wear clothes? Why aren't we all naked, in the nude with no clothes on?

There are a few attempts to explain the function of clothing. The three most common theories have to do with shame, sex and beauty.

Shame: the modesty theory holds that our species has an innate sense of shame which leads the species to clothe itself. This is an ethnocentric theory which doesn't hold true. Across the world a variety of cultures have very different ideas about modesty. What's acceptable for one group may look either ridiculously covered or stark naked to another.

Sex: the modesty theory sees clothes as sexual lures. The species covers up parts of

the body for so long that *uncovering* becomes erotic. A recent example is Madonna's navel. But this theory doesn't explain how clothing behavior got started. It only describes an unexpected and interesting side effect of wearing clothes.

Beauty: the original function of body adornment is narcissistic. Man admires his own body and displays it to others. Clothing is simply a way to accent or decorate the body. Interestingly, while clothing is not universal in use, body adornment is. Adornment would include ear piercing, footbinding, scarring, tattooing, haircutting, and such.

Clothing is primarily a social thing. Our cultural norms are such that if you *don't* wear clothing you're not only considered weird; you're in trouble. Clothing has become so much a part of our social fabric that we have laws to regulate what we wear.

Take the "No shoes, no shirt, no service" slogan. Don't tell me that it's a question of restaurant hygiene. Otherwise we wouldn't be allowed to eat on the beach, or even to try on new shoes and shirts while shopping. How many people have tried something on

before you buy it? How many had warts on their feet, or acne on their back? I'd rather sit in a restaurant beside someone with no shirt on.

The point is there are rigidly defined rules which govern when, where, and what we wear. Each society has its own ideas of what's acceptable. In a restaurant you wear a shirt. On the beach you don't.

That's all fine and dandy, but what happens when you live in a society with restrictive ideas? What if I don't want to wear a shirt?

Do women in Iran enjoy being forced to wear veils after having had a choice in the past? Did North American Indians find western clothing more comfortable than traditional garb? The literature clearly says no in these two cases. So why put up with it?

For starters, society is powerful. First of all we are taught that deviance is wrong. At some point pants for women were bad news. Skirts for men still are. Bikinis for women, pink shirts for men, the list is endless, and gets complicated. The controversial bikini may have gained credibility, but you can't wear one to the office, can you?

Let's say that you manage to overcome your own feelings of modesty. You feel totally at ease at the office in your bikini. Then there's still the rest of society to convince. Good luck!

Even with today's mass media behind you there is still a limit to how much society will take. Right, Boy George? Deviants are frowned upon, beaten up, stamped out.

This can be most frustrating when you *like* deviance, when you know that your brand of deviance isn't particularly harmful to society.

Take nudists, for example, who question the need to wear clothes day and night. Clothes *do* deaden natural skin sensations and add irrelevant ones of their own by chafing and rubbing. In addition, clothing is restrictive. You can't tan with clothes on, and some winter clothing inhibits mobility. The picture of a child in one-piece snow-suit, bound by scarf, belt and heavy boots comes to mind. Nudists would rather enjoy themselves *au naturel*.

There is a certain pleasure in physical sensations. We all enjoy skin and muscle eroticism, as this is called. We all have a tendency to admire our own bodies and display it to others. A degree of self indulgence is normal. The pleasure of natural skin stimulation — the play of air, wind, sun and water on the body is something we can all relate to. Did you ever stand in the wind on a really stormy day, or in the rain just for the hell of it? Did you ever get a tan?

Muscle eroticism is more popular these days than ever. The movement and deeper sensations which we get from muscles are something we all enjoy in activities from massage to sports. What do you think the fitness kick is all about? It certainly has us at least aware and *looking* at our bodies if not *enjoying* them!

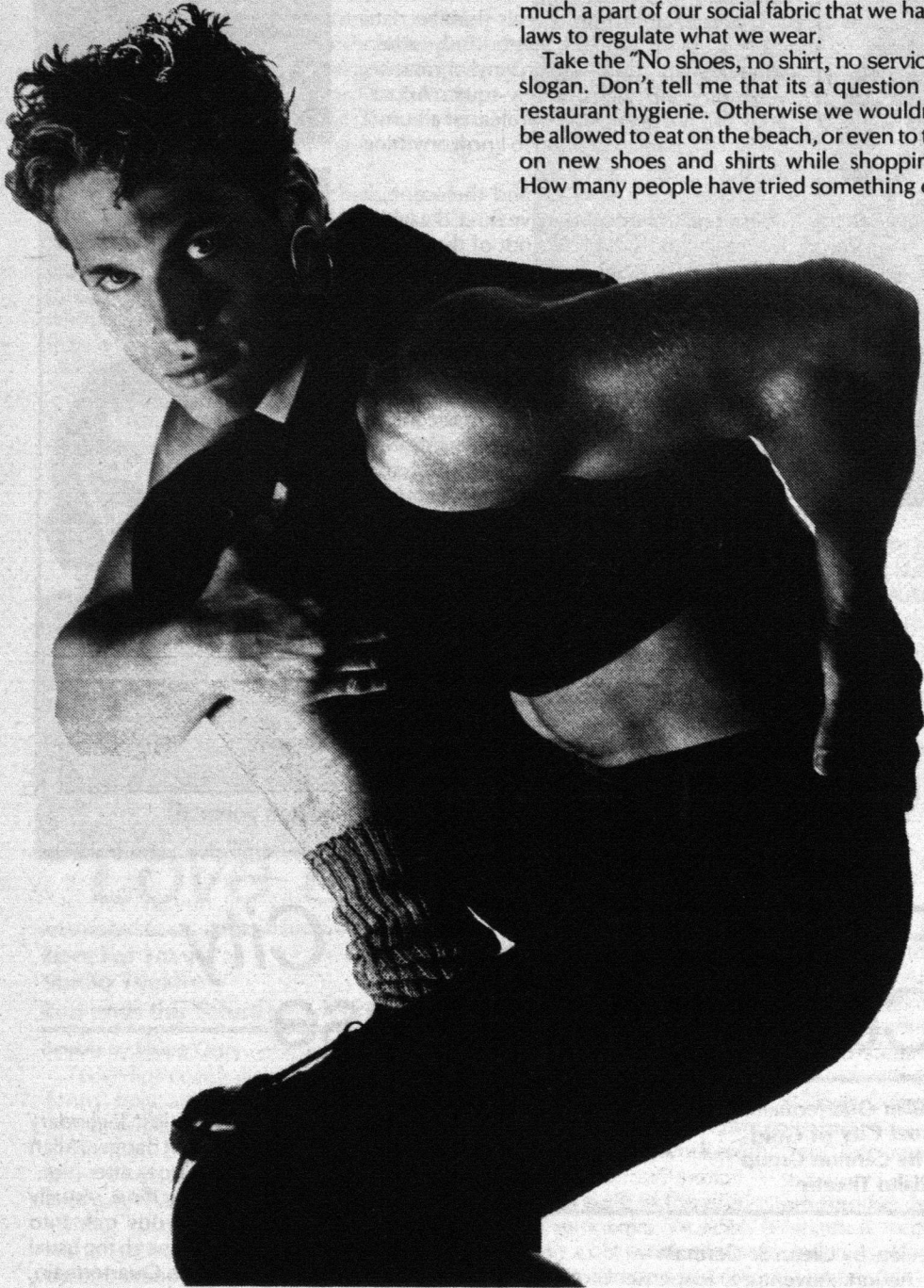
Still, in our culture there is a limit to how much you can enjoy your body, at least in public. Clothing gets in the way of it. Some people get around this by involving the clothing itself in their enjoyment. Leather, plastic, silk, fur, corduroy, angora, steel, the list of textures with which we interact is endless.

Once clothing enters the game the picture improves. And indeed, we see clothing made of metallic fibres, leather, synthetics.

But again there are limits. Where can you wear your metallic dress, or your leather pants? Who knows what the limits are, before society slaps you on the hand and sends you back home to change.

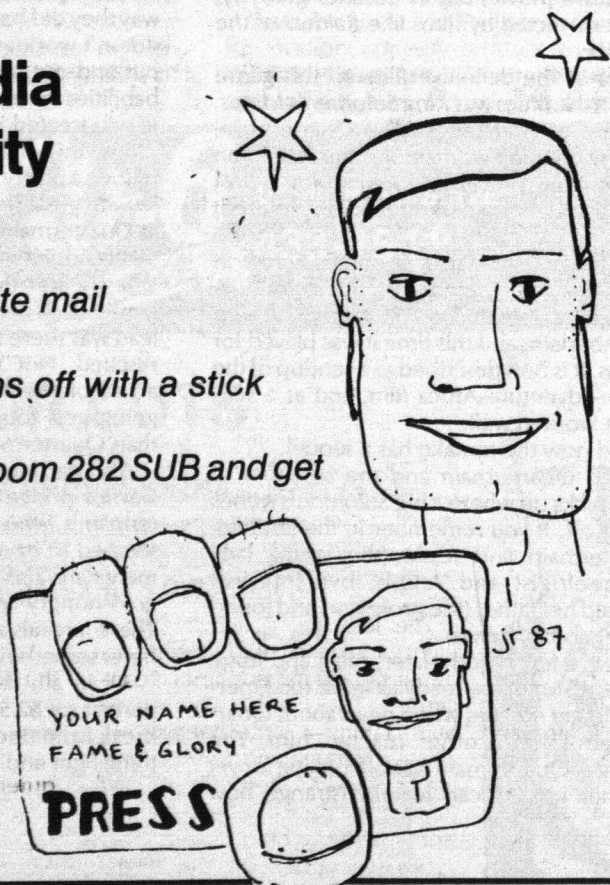
The current fitness trend may change things for the better, though. Even in fashion (or is it *especially* in fashion) we are seeing the effects. Models used to be stick-thin. Now they have muscle tone. And clothes have been taking on more body-consciousness for some time now.

Eventually we may get to a point where our social norms not only allow us to enjoy our bodies, but allow us a certain awareness of the self-indulgent nature of clothing. We need a more mature attitude towards how clothing can satisfy our needs and feelings. Maybe then we'll stop asking: "Why do I wear this, why do I put up with this shit?!"



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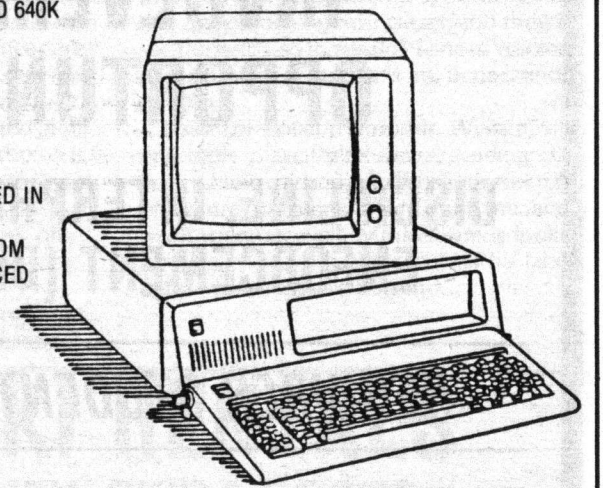
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