

WHAT·U·WEAR

by Jerome Ryckborst

Edmonton, we're not so blah! Not at all. Take a look around, I'm sure many of you went to Vancouver and Expo '86 this summer. Or perhaps you went east, south, wherever...

I went all over the place, down to the equator and over to Europe and I realized — we wear the same things in Edmonton that everyone else does. People in Amsterdam, Paris, København, Toronto, Vancouver: all the same.

In Edmonton we see images of the world. We are exposed to the same styles and trends. Today's media makes it all possible. The fashion picture snaps around the world at the speed of light, and everybody watches. So it's not surprising that we all wear the same clothes.

Yet there are differences from country to country, in Canada differences from coast to coast. Each country has its own ideas about how best to dress. Milano and Paris compete with each other, trying to show that each is more innovative, while London tends to go off on a tangent. Basically though, every designer is working within the boundaries of what the public will accept. Italian fashion tends to be softer and more comfortably draped, while Paris still tends to high fashion in a more traditional sense. London, and a few wild designers scattered around the globe can get a little zany. You know, the crazy stuff that looks like you couldn't wear it without a ten-page instruction manual.

The difference between us and other cities lies in the degree of fashion acceptance and participation. There are places which definitely set the pace, while the rest of the world picks up on a look and polishes it to give it a local flavor, like variations on a theme. This is the fun in fashion. The local variations can reflect an area's personality, politics, tastes.

Now, a cynic would say we need to reflect less of the politics and more of the personality; I say we need to learn how to be adventurous with the very things we wear today. According to a Calgary manager of Le

Château, people are less adventurous now than a few years back. While some fashion retailers attribute this to the conservative attitudes in Alberta, others know that it is more a question of fashion leadership.

Store employees and the "Fashion Tiger" segment of the population are the ones who pick up on a style and show the rest of us how to wear it. When you're selling sweaters, the staff should be wearing them three, four, five different ways. People get fashion ideas from each other. It seems Edmontonians have a hard time breaking free — we are bound by the lack of stimulus in our own environment.

Part of the reason we see less local excitement in fashion is the increasingly large numbers of national chain stores in the city. The unfortunate side effect of franchising fashion outlets is that they begin to resemble fast food outlets. The products are all the same: low-priced but boring.

A few local managers suggest that eastern buyers, who buy stock for an entire national chain send only the watered-down versions of the exciting stuff out west. That's just not true, they send according to what we buy. Many stores now keep track of their nation-wide sales day by day. We have just as much of a chance to see a larger collection as Montreal or Toronto, but only if the local retail sales warrant an expansion.

Fortunately some retailers aren't giving up. Designer Alfred Sung's "Club Monaco" was established in Edmonton as one of only three stores nationally (the others in Montreal and Toronto). Others are also doing their bit. Those of you who paid attention during your summer travels may have noticed the billboard: "Fashion Tigers Fly to West Edmonton Mall." This doesn't just promote the image of the mall, but Edmonton as well.

It's up to us to change our image and, more importantly, our self image. This means actively and consciously having fun with our clothing. Shop around, spend some of your leisure time looking for ideas or better yet, try them on. Focus not so much on what you wear but how you wear it. I know we've got spunk, let's show it.

What U Wear looks at all the aspects of fashion in Edmonton. Keep reading every week for interesting reflections on, and of Fashion.

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