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COVER STORY

LEVI'S & OTHER DENIM MAKERS LOOK AHEAD

True blue: Wardrobe staple adapts to trends in tech, comfort & high fashion

By Nerissa Pacio Itchon

Is it possible to be both a 164-year-old heritage brand and a fashion disrupter? Jonathan Cheung, Levi's head of global design for men and women, thinks so. Just ask him why the San Francisco denim giant born out of the California Gold Rush endures, and he'll relay a litany of reasons why the inventor of the first blue jean has for decades remained an international powerhouse that consistently breaks the mold. From its foray with Google into wearable tech for its "smart denim" trucker jacket launching in the fall, to spring's "bare-butt jeans" collaboration with Paris fashion collective Vetements, Levi's continues to innovate with some of the world's most prominent creative leaders.

"It's adapt or perish," says Cheung, who can often be found tinkering at the Levi's Eureka Innovation Lab, a short walk from the company's Battery Street headquarters. "In this Bay

Style Files: Explore photos and stories from San Francisco's fashion past at www.sfcronicle.com/style-files.

Area context, you have to have that mind-set of 'I'm going to disrupt myself' rather than sit and wait to inevitably be disrupted." Despite the dominance of athleisure, sagging sales in the \$12 billion U.S. denim market, and an industry reeling from the 24-hour online shopping effect, Levi Strauss & Co. has managed to grow its profits and stay true to its heritage while upping its all-important cool quotient.

"They've never left their roots, yet they've figured out how to get engaged in what is trending, what is important and what is needed to make their product stay relevant," says Marshal Cohen, chief industry analyst of the NPD Group, a market research firm. "They're still as important to the (Baby) Boomer who basically grew up on them. And they've become relevant to every generation from the Millennials to the Z and everyone in between."

Levi Strauss & Co. got its humble start when Bavarian-born Levi Strauss, the youngest son in a Jewish family, immigrated to New York in the late 1840s to help his two older brothers establish a dry goods business, according to Levi's historian Tracey Panek.

Looking for opportunity in Gold Rush country, Strauss headed to San Francisco in 1853, setting up shop on Battery and Pine streets to expand the family wholesale business.

Strauss sold wares such as blankets, footwear and clothing to stores throughout the American West for the next 20 years, establishing himself as an eminent business leader and philanthropist throughout the city.

In the late 1850s, the discovery of Nevada's Comstock Silver Lode led Reno tailor Jacob Davis to come up with an innovative pant design for the droves of silver miners working the area.

Adding tiny copper rivets on the pockets, waistband, crotch and other stress points, Davis created a stronger "waist overall" that could take the daily beating of hard labor.

"He got so many rave reviews for his pants that he couldn't keep up with demand," says Panek, who oversees an incomparable archive of denim collectibles at the Levi's San Francisco headquarters, ranging from mud-caked cowboy 501s from the 1800s to the bedazzled super low-rise jeans Jennifer Lopez wore at the 2001 Super Bowl.

With Strauss already his fabric supplier, Davis proposed a partnership, and on May 20, 1873, Strauss and Davis received an official U.S. patent for work pants reinforced with copper rivets. The pivotal date has since come to be known as the birthday of the blue jean.

Initially called "XX" and renamed the 501 in 1890, the iconic American garment has evolved from work wear to counterculture statement to modern-day wardrobe staple, and is considered Levi's — and San Francisco's — single-most influential contribution to global fashion.

"If you go through a who's who of who has worn Levi's, they are the cultural movers and shakers," says the 50-year-old Cheung, who has led the Levi's design team for the past four years. "Figures from the birth of rock 'n' roll to punk to grunge. Kurt Cobain, Marilyn Monroe, Steve Jobs — even Einstein! It gives Levi's this deep cultural historical connection that no other brand can rival in apparel."

Today's 501 jean maintains most of the same classic design details used as the industry prototype, from the signature red tab, five pockets and five belt loops to the leather patch on the waistband and trademarked arcuate back-pocket stitching.

"501s will never go out of style, in the same way a Burberry trench, Manolo pump, Converse sneaker or Hanes T-shirt endure," says Emily Holt, a former Vogue editor who founded womenswear boutique Hero Shop in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood in 2016.

Selling an average of 10 pairs of Levi's per month, the store saw an increase of one pair



Slimming down: Levi's embraced the skinny jean trend this year with this 501 Skinny style.



Influencer: Levi's 501s are considered the company's most influential addition to fashion.



Weaving in tech: A forthcoming Levi's Commuter jacket is interactive, thanks to Jacquard by Google.



Denim that rocks: The Levi's Celebration 501 was offered as part of a 501 Day capsule collection.



Denim plus: Warp + Weft is a new direct-to-consumer denim line that carries women's and men's styles, including the JFK skinny style for women (right) and Copenhagen (below), both \$98.



Warp + Weft

sold every other day throughout April and May.

"It's important to me that the store has a sense of place, and so carrying brands like Levi's that are representative of the city is crucial," Holt says. "It also helps that Levi's have become more visible lately among the high-fashion crowd, so they're particularly relevant for our customer."

Staying relevant and ahead of the pack is especially vital in the faltering \$200 billion U.S. fashion apparel business, where denim makes up about 6 percent of the market.

A publicly held brand that also has Dockers, best known for its khakis, and value-based denim brands Denizen and Signature in its portfolio, Levi Strauss & Co. earned \$291 million in net income in 2016 and has maintained top-and bottom-line growth for four consecutive years, according to the company's annual report.

Cohen characterizes the brand's status as "in a healthy position because, frankly, we've been ignoring our denim wardrobes for a while."

"Denim is not dead; it's just not as hot as it once was. For a while, people were buying five pairs a year and had 14 pairs in their wardrobes. So, between wearing those out and looking for new product, the life cycle of the denim business is starting to come back again."

Aiding that comeback is denim's entree into the technical and performance space. In recent years, Levi's introduced shape-recovery jeans with a higher stretch and higher recovery ability; Warp Stretch for men with a vertical stretch that mirrors movements such as crouching and running; rugged jeans with Dyneema, an ultra-durable fiber used for climbing gear and military applications; moisture-wicking Coolmax jeans; and heat-retaining jeans with Thermolite.

According to Sarah Ahmed, the New York creative director of DL1960 and founder of the new premium denim brand Warp + Weft, denim consumers are demanding more utility from their jeans.

"Remember in 2005 when everyone had rhinestones and crazy things on their back pockets?" says Ahmed, whose new denim-for-all brand offers an unconventionally wide range of sizes between 00 and 24, with every

jean priced under \$100. "First they wanted jeans to just look good. Then they wanted them to feel good with advancements in technology of stretch and retention. That's where the customer is now — they want everything."

At the intersection of performance textiles and wearable tech is Levi's Commuter Trucker Jacket with Jacquard by Google. The \$350 denim jacket, unveiled for consumer testing at the

2017 South by Southwest Festival, features a left sleeve with wireless digital technology woven into an interactive washable fabric. Created for the urban cyclist, a tap or brush of the cuff allows the wearer to play music or map a destination.

"They cover the low end, the high end, and even the super conceptual stuff," says Kiya Babzani, co-owner of Self Edge in San Francisco's Mission District, who began his salvage denim business 11 years ago stocking Levi's-inspired Japanese reproductions of vintage American jeans. "There's no clothing company in the world that does so many levels of denim the way Levi's does."

But even as the brand has learned to coexist with athleisure, shoppers will be hard-pressed to find a slick Levi's yoga pant anytime soon.

"That's not our identity," notes Cheung. "Comfort and versatility are fantastic. But we'll look at that macro trend, then produce it in the Levi's way."

Always walking the line between pushing the fashion envelope and remaining true to its rich history, the beloved brand is constantly iterating its fits.

For spring, Levi's reintroduced the 1969 Orange Tab collection with a new line of vintage-inspired jeans, denim jackets and shirts. A limited-edition 501 capsule collection featuring hand-distressed denim, scribbled embroidery and vintage customizations dropped on May 20, which the brand celebrated as 501 Day with concerts and special events at Levi's stores around the globe.

And for the first time, the iconic button-fly 501 with its classic distressed finish was offered last year in a stretch fabric, and this year in a body-conscious skinny fit.

"Our heritage is our anchor," Cheung says. "But newness is the oxygen of our business."

Nerissa Pacio Itchon is a Peninsula freelance writer. Email: style@sfcronicle.com.

PIVOTAL POINTS IN DENIM'S HISTORY

May 20, 1873

Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis patent work pants reinforced with copper rivets: A wardrobe staple is born.



Levi's

A pair of cowboy 501s from the 1800s preserved in the Levi's San Francisco headquarters.

1930s

Hollywood cowboys like Tom Mix and John Wayne popularize Western-style denim in their films and off hours.

1940s

As women go to work in the factories, denim becomes an important part of the Rosie the Riveters' uniforms.

1953

From rock 'n' rollers like Elvis Presley to onscreen rebels like James Dean and Marlon Brando, the cuffed jean, frequently worn with a black leather jacket, becomes the iconic look for brooding bad boys.

1967

As the Summer of Love sweeps San Francisco, hippies bell out and customize their jeans with fantastic embroidery, patches and other groovy embellishments.

1967

Rugged Paul Newman brings contemporary cool to the denim shirt in "Cool Hand Luke," paving the way for its ubiquity at brands like Ralph Lauren.

1980

Teenage actress Brooke Shields causes a sensation when she coos "Nothing comes between me and my Calvins" in a Calvin Klein commercial, sparking the designer jeans craze.

1990s

Hip-hop popularizes baggy, sagging jeans capitalized on by brands like Tommy Hilfiger. Grunge rockers like Kurt Cobain (pictured with wife Courtney Love and daughter Frances Bean Cobain) also relax the denim silhouette with an emphasis on patchwork.



Jeff Kravitz / FilmMagic/Getty Images



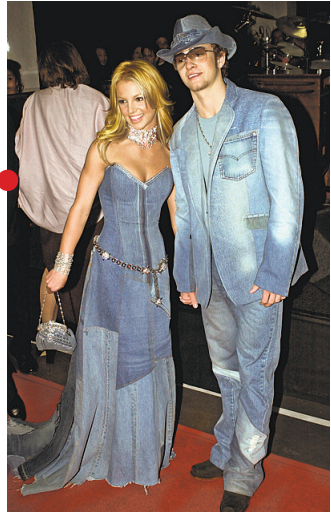
Gap

2000s

The Gap's celebrity-filled denim campaigns (pictured: Missy Elliot with Madonna) capture the heat of pop culture and spark trends.

2001

Pop sensations Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears (pictured) cause the fashion moment of the night at the 28th American Music Awards in head-to-toe denim formal-wear.



Mark J. Terrill / AP

2000s

Skinny jeans become the dominant denim trend from high fashion to mass-market retailers like Old Navy.



Tim Sloan / AFP / Getty

2009

Then-President Barack Obama (pictured) takes flack for his high-waisted "dad jeans," an ironic trend already embraced by hipster fashionistas.

2010s

Designers like Junya Watanabe bring a more high-fashion edge to denim on the runway.

2016

Levi's releases a stretch button-fly 501, its newest take on the classic.

— Tony Bravo, tbravo@sfcronicle.com

FIRST LOOK

LOUIS VUITTON MAKES A SMART MOVE

By Maghan McDowell

Louis Vuitton's new travel accessory might not look significantly different than the original it released 15 years ago, but a look under the hood, so to speak, reveals a major milestone in the luxury brand's timeline.

On July 11, Louis Vuitton unveiled a smartwatch — the Tambour Horizon — which builds on its Parisian and Swiss provenance with a little help from Silicon Valley. Consider it the new status symbol for the jet set — or at least a modern accessory for aspirational Millennials.

The connected watch starts at \$2,450, making it one of the most expensive smartwatches to enter the market. Still, the price is significantly lower than Louis Vuitton's analog Tambour timepieces, which are generally at least \$5,000.

The technology comes from Google's Android Wear 2.0 and Qualcomm Technologies, while the case was made at Louis Vuitton's Swiss watch-making headquarters, La Fabrique du Temps.

Although the 163-year-old brand's Google-powered smartwatch is a departure from its monogrammed leather luggage, the design mind-set is in keeping with the "Art of Travel" ethos that has rendered its LV monogram iconic.

Tambour Horizon is the first Android Wear device to be launched worldwide, including China, thanks to special arrangements with regional platforms (such as China's Weibo, a social network). The arrangements allow the watch to work while wearers travel internationally. Special functions include a feature called "My Flight," which provides information on flight times, terminals, delays and the number of hours remaining on a flight; and city guides (recommendations on restaurants, hotels and landmarks) for New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Tokyo, Beijing and Shanghai.

The watch relays all the standard smartphone notifications: call, text and email alerts; alarms and timers; and weather and step-counting alerts. It works with both iPhones and Android-powered phones, although "supported features may vary with platforms" might indicate that the watch works best when paired with Android devices.

Aesthetically, the Tambour allows for hyper-personalization — a theme in the growing smartwatch market. In addition to three colors — graphite, monogram or black — the wearer can choose among 60 detachable straps and a number of (digital) watch faces. And, naturally, that recognizable brown logo

is an option.

Luxury brands have been reluctant to jump on the smartwatch bandwagon, but some have been testing the waters. In 2015, Hermès partnered with Apple on Apple Watch Hermès, which offers a range of Hermès-created leather bands for the Apple Watch, starting at \$1,100. And Tag Heuer debuted a smartwatch, also powered by Android, for \$1,500. Montblanc's new smartwatches start at \$890. And

Apple's own Edition model starts at \$1,249.

Meanwhile, brands such as Rolex (the top-selling watch brand in terms of dollar value) and Tiffany & Co. have been adamantly analog. This makes Louis Vuitton's Tambour Horizon a very interesting crossover.

Experts say that smartwatches are a smart way for brands to appeal to a younger customer.

"There are very few luxury brands playing in this market now," said Jitesh Ubrani, a senior research analyst with the International Data Corporation, a market intelligence firm. Tag Heuer's offering, he said, did better than expected, and Michael Kors, whose watches are closer to \$350, "is doing fairly well."

Still, as long as luxury timepieces are seen as an heirloom, and technology's inherent pace of built-in obsolescence renders it useless, a high-end smartwatch could be a tough sell.

"Rolex has this image of being very high-priced — more of a watch that you hand down to the next generation — so to me it makes sense that Rolex is staying out of this game," Ubrani said. "Any piece of tech will only last you so long."

He added that the customers of brands such as Apple want the latest and greatest, while those buying a timepiece like a Rolex might skew older.

But as the younger generation becomes conditioned to accessorizing with \$700 phones, those lines begin to blur.

"The Swiss watch industry has faced troubles in recent times, so all the luxury brands have turned to the wearables

market," Ubrani said. "It's about capturing a younger audience earlier on and turning them into a lifelong customer — but it's too early to tell how that will work out."

For now, Apple Watch, which starts at \$269, remains the top-selling smartwatch. Will Louis Vuitton offer something even more exclusive to acquire with all that tech money?

Only time will tell.

Maghan McDowell is a Bay Area freelance writer. Email: style@sfbchronicle.com



Louis Vuitton's Tambour Horizon connected watch will be available in 19 stores in the U.S., including Louis Vuitton San Francisco Union Square and Louis Vuitton Santa Clara Valley Fair, and at louisvuitton.com.



Louis Vuitton

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ON THE COVER

Enduring appeal: Is it possible to be both a heritage brand and a fashion disrupter? Levi's, the San Francisco denim giant that got its start in the California Gold Rush and invented the first blue jean, pioneered the city's most iconic contribution to fashion, and continues to advance it 164 years later.

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