

## Confessions of a sole man

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"If Madonna hadn't bought eight pairs of my boots, I would have been dead in the water," says designer Tony Benattar.

Cowboy boots weren't hip in 2000 and he was down to his last dollar, says Benattar, owner of the Toronto-based Liberty Boot Company.

Enter the Material Girl, who bought tall, black Twiggy boots — at \$950 a pair — for herself and her backup dancers. Benattar says the boots look like Gucci but with a cowboy last.

That was then.

Last month, Benattar picked up an order from Ralph Lauren for two \$1,500 pairs of black Killaz with a white skull on the toe. Lauren also purchased 10 pairs of Liberty rock 'n' rollboots for his runway models.

Avril Lavigne, Brooke Shields, James Brown, Peter Fonda, Bruce Springsteen also wear Libertys.

"I'm turning down five new accounts a week," Benattar says. "It's impossible to make enough boots to supply them."

Last year, at retail, Bennatar, sold \$3.4 million (U.S.) worth of boots. About 90 per cent of his business comes from American sales.

Benattar refers to his footwear as rock 'n' rollboots. From the get-go, he was thinking more music than Marlboro Man when he saw a western boot.

"In the '80s, rockers like Alice Cooper wore cowboy boots," he says. "I'm making crazy boots for rock 'n' rollers and hooking it all up with my band," adds Benattar, who plays bass and dobro with the Cameron Family Singers.

Currently, he is fixated on macabre skull-and-crossbones motifs. One pair of Libertys, the 62 Muertos, features 62 hand-tooled skulls and retails for \$2,500. Another, designed for "hot chicks," is priced at \$950 and built in pink leather with a staring skull wearing a girly red bow and "Rock On" printed on the back.

But it's not just decoration and doodads that make for a sensational cowboy boot.

"The profile and shape is all," Benattar explains. "Look at this under-slung heel and the toes pointing up. This boot is made to bust a bronco in — but it's also in fashion. I don't charge extra for attitude; it comes with the boots."

All Liberty boots are handmade from centre-cut calfskin; the only thing not made of leather is a durable steel shank. As a result, the boots breathe and, even though they don't stretch, they do take on the shape of the wearer's foot. The sole of a Liberty boot has 100 lemon-wood pegs that expand and contract with temperature and moisture.

"Even the toe box is hand-carved from leather — there are no cheap canvas or pigskin linings," says Benattar, holding up a boot with a needle-nosed, cockroach-killing toe.

"I love the Liberty cut. There's a crisp line along the vamp like a marine's haircut."

He calls his boots "guilt-free" because he refuses to use exotic leathers of endangered species like alligators or snakes.

Originally from Montreal, Benattar has come along way since 1985, when he met a young Frenchman named Yan Ferry at a party in Mexico. Ferry had the coolest, pointiest cowboy boots Benattar had ever seen and he wanted some. Ferry directed Benattar to Leon, the boot-making capital of Mexico, and introduced him to the head of the pointy-boot company.

"I told him I wanted to take Mexican boots to Canada," says Benattar, who was 26.

The boot manufacturer was Vicente Fox, now the president of Mexico, who comes from a family of boot makers. Benattar apprenticed with Fox and his brother and also with Michael Lama, a scion of another legendary boot-making family in Leon.

Influenced by the great bootmakers of the past, Benattar learned to appreciate retro boots with hand tooling and overstitching *a la* Roy Rogers.

Back in Canada, armed with two pairs of Fox boots, Benattar visited a hip Toronto boutique selling western boots. The boutique owners agreed to meet Benattar at a bar where musicians hung out. When they saw Benattar's boots, everyone in the joint wanted a pair and the boutique placed a hefty order.

"Those boots had heels so under-slung, it was hard to step on your cigarette butt," Benattar recalls.

Benattar rocked on with Tony Benattar Boots until 1991, when NAFTA led to an influx of cheap U.S. footwear.

Business slowed, so Benattar and Ferry joined forces to make only "high-end, crazy boots." The Liberty Boot Co. was born.

They sunk all their money into a factory in Leon and into training boot makers. Liberty debuted its first line on a Mexican blanket at a Denver trade show.

The two lucked out when the Billy Martin (ritzy western) stores ordered \$250,000 worth of boots. Then Tyler Beard, the world's leading authority on cowboy boots, bought a pair of Libertys, which ended up on the back cover of his boot Bible, *The Art of the Boot*.

Beard describes Liberty boots as wearable art. His books feature more than 40 of Benattar's designs, which are inspired mainly by hard rock posters and nature.

"It sounds twinkly, but when I see a black-and-white butterfly with a touch of yellow, that inspires me," he says.

In 1994, cowboy boots went out of style and the partnership crumbled. Ferry started his own company, Old Gringo Boots, now a hot label.

Benattar blames the decline in the sale of high-end boots to "fat-assed" line dancers, who he refers to as "transwestites."

"They wore hokey costumes and cheap, uncomfortable boots and destroyed the 'cool' factor for the cowboy boot," he says.

In 1999, Benattar found a new partner in Leon and they re-vitalized Liberty. Fortunately, Madonna came on the scene and wore her Libertys on tour.

"She made western wearable again," Benattar says. "Madonna made it mainstream. That was huge."

But tragedy struck in 2001 when Benattar's wife died of cancer. So he took off across America in a Ford Mustang, setting up trunk shows as he went. His boot sales, miraculously, skyrocketed and Benattar hasn't looked back.

There are some 200 boot designs in the Liberty catalogue, ranging from a complicated Chinese dragon motif to sunflowers to eagles.

Sheila Bryson, owner of Barbwire boot shops in the U.S., describes Liberty boots as "cool, sexy and hip."

"What Tony has done with Liberty is get people into boots who've never worn a pair in their lives," she says. "Liberty gets people into cowboy boots for me."

She attributes Benattar's success to the fact he introduces fresh and exciting new designs every year. Her customers find designs like his new "Bad Kitty" boots, which have a cat's head with crossbones, irresistible.

Liberty also creates limited-edition boots for serious collectors. Benattar employs artisans intricately skilled in pitiado, a late 20th century art form involving the embroidery of pita fibre into leather.

(Pita is a fibre made from the agave plant, the base of tequila.)

Because Pitiado boots take two years of "poking and pulling" thread, they are stickered at \$18,000.

This year Liberty is projecting sales of \$7 million (U.S.) at retail. (In Toronto, Liberty boots are sold at the Rockin' Cowboy, on Queen St. W. and Western Corral, on Avenue Road.)

Liberty uses two marketing tools — advertising in *Cowboys and Indians*, a magazine that has subscribers worldwide, and a sexy and colourful website featuring celebrities wearing Liberty boots, Benattar's music and an online catalogue.

The website, at a cost of about \$10,000, was created by Pneumatic Press, a small Toronto company, and with the expertise of graphic designer Caroline Brown, who has a flair for the kicky and funky. She was responsible for Liberty's logo — a backward somersaulting cowboy in old-fashioned wrangler duds — which is stamped on the sole of each boot.

"A website, like mine, puts my small company on a level footing with a huge boot manufacturer," Benattar says. "It's as good as their advertising — if not better — and that gives me an edge."

Benattar, who runs Liberty from his downtown Toronto house, employs one contract manager/assistant in Toronto and 23 bootmakers and 8 artisans who hand-tool leather in Leon. Together, they produce 50 pairs of boots daily.

"Mexico is now expensive, but we still have the best bootmakers and they are the best paid," Benattar says.

His success, he says, is due to making sure his product is "super exclusive," achieves a top-notch quality standard and uses edgy and daring designs.

(On Saturdays from 6 to 8 p.m., Benattar performs with the Cameron Family Singers, who play classic country and cryin' western tunes, at the Cameron House, 408 Queen St. W.)

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