

ARTS

World-famous Western razzle dazzle begins with this Indianapolis tailor



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Key Points

Indianapolis tailor Jerry Lee Atwood is best known for making Western suits for high-profile musicians like Post Malone and Lil Nas X.

After learning to embroider, Atwood tried his hand at Western garments and learned to sew suits.

He has designed dozens of suits for people from all walks of life, including a doctor who wears his suit to cheer patients with ALS and people looking for wedding attire.

Each custom Western garment Jerry Lee Atwood creates begins with a conversation. In 2021, for example, Duke neurologist Dr. Richard S. Bedlack, who's [known for wearing wildly colorful outfits](#) that bring joy to his patients with ALS, told Atwood he wanted his suit to honor people he's treated.

The resulting rich royal blue outfit, which the doctor wore for a charity event, bears images related to hope and sparrows, which Bedlack told Atwood reminded him of a patient's tattoos. Talking with the doctor helped Atwood see his designs in a new light.

"It was memorable because hearing his stories about his patients and his experience treating people with ALS, I felt like I was contributing to that treatment, you know what I mean?" said Atwood, who is a longtime Indianapolis resident.

Over the past few decades, Atwood has listened to the stories of myriad clients — including couples who desire special wedding attire as well as the stylists for [Post Malone](#) and [Lil Nas X](#). The musicians have worn the artist's creations for televised shows and high-profile cultural moments.

Now, Bedlack's suit and many others will be part of a new exhibit dedicated to Atwood's work at the Eiteljorg Museum. While millions have seen the designer's Western fashions on TV, YouTube and social media feeds, the exhibit will explore the place Atwood's fabric creations hold in the art world.

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"[Cowboy Couture](#)" will show Atwood's suits, sketches and other garments in the context of famous historic designers while highlighting his deliberate and intentional process that averages more than 100 hours per suit — the antithesis of today's popular fast fashion.

"We are interested in presenting Jerry's work because he's really showing how the mythic American West continues to reverberate through pop culture today," said Laura Fry, the Eiteljorg's vice president for curatorial affairs and collections.

As Atwood helps shape the trajectory of Western wear in the 21st century, he wants his suits to appeal to a wide range of wearers, not just people who resemble Hollywood's version of cowboys.

A Western wear book sparked Atwood's curiosity

The 50-year-old Atwood took his first step into the fashion world about 2002 while working at a former coffee shop at the corner of 54th Street and College Avenue. During lulls in business, he stitched small hand embroidery projects, which prompted a customer to give him a book about classic Western wear that incorporated the craft.

Flipping through the pages, Atwood felt a wash of nostalgia. He'd grown up

watching his parents square dance and listening to his dad's country albums. He borrowed his roommate's sewing machine to try his hand at a garment that became what he now calls "the world's worst Western shirt."

But the artist kept at his craft, eventually working in the costume shops at Indiana Repertory Theatre and Butler University ballet.

He created his first full Western suit in 2011 at Tonic Ball, the annual Indianapolis music festival that raises money to fight hunger. Co-founder Ken Honeywell was stepping down as the event's chairperson, so his wife and friends decided to surprise him by hiring Atwood to create a white jacket and pants adorned with glittering roses, forks and a guitar.

Before the event, they led Honeywell into the Tonic Ball art gallery, where they'd hung the suit, and revealed the gift was for him.

"I guess (he) got kind of teary-eyed and, you know, they told me that story, and of course I got teary-eyed," Atwood said.

He still looks back on that commission as a milestone that led to his current career. The Lafayette native studied drawing, painting and printmaking at the Herron School of Art and Design and Indiana University before deciding to leave.

"The joke that I always make is that I realized that I could work in a coffee shop without the art degree," Atwood said.

In 2013, he formed [Union Western Clothing Co.](#) with business partner Joe David Walters, a vintage Western wear collector based in London.

Over the past 15 years, Atwood estimates that he's made about 100 Western garments — including for musician Orville Peck, actor David Harbour and singer-songwriter Nikki Lane. His suits often run between \$2,500 and \$5,000, he said. While their flash plays well on Instagram, the designer's meticulous method renders every detail more rewarding up close.

A slow process reflects Western wear's history

Atwood spends about 120 hours to make each suit. Instead of opting for the convenience of modern digital embroidery machines, the tailor uses a straight stitch machine from the 1930s and a chain-stitch embroidery machine from the mid-1960s in his SoBro studio. Underneath the latter is a handle that he guides to control the stitching, which he likens to painting with thread.

He completes the look with hand-stitching and 1950s-era rhinestone setters that secure the glittery pieces. Throughout the process, Atwood, who is colorblind, uses an app to help him identify specific colors or consults with people in his studio.

The immensely detailed result speaks to the person wearing it while telling another story to those who see the garment. The minidress that Atwood made for voice actress and musician [Grey DeLisle](#), which is on display in the exhibit, is adorned with bluebonnets, butterflies, and prairie dogs and wheat. The symbols correspond to her children's names and offer her comfort when she's away from them touring.

"The way she's chosen to represent her personal life in a nonverbal way, in a way that's also very public — it's just very touching to see the way people will carry these symbols with them," said Bryn Foreman, associate curator of Western American art at the Eiteljorg.

These personalized Atwood outfits reflect a tradition that draws from the clothing of Spanish and Mexican cattle herders and horsemen as well as American Indian attire, Foreman said.

"Even in the 1800s, when migrants were moving from the East Coast out West, they would get to these farms or these ranches and one of the first things they would do sometimes is send a letter and a photograph of themselves back home to the East of them wearing their cowboy clothes being like, 'Check this out. I've

moved up in the world," Foreman said.

By the late 19th century, Wild West performers wore eye-catching clothing that drew the audiences' eyes. Being a cowboy, or just dressing like one, became a coveted social status. In the 20th century, designers like Nudie Cohn, Manuel Cuevas and Rodeo Ben created iconic garments for country and rock musicians including Porter Wagoner, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash.

As Atwood has helped usher the art form into the 21st century, he's also focused on expanding the definition of who's known for wearing such garments.

Atwood's Lil Nas X suit explodes into a big cultural moment

In early 2019, Atwood pushed his physical and mental limits to sew a Western suit for Lil Nas X in just a few days. The country and rap musician's stylist had asked Atwood for sketches and now wanted to know if the designer could turn around the suit on a tight timeframe for the "Old Town Road" music video.

Atwood shipped the garment to Los Angeles and waited, knowing that sometimes costumes don't make the leap from dressing room to film. Atwood eagerly watched the video's world premiere on May 17, 2019 — and what he saw left him stunned.

Part of the way through, Lil Nas X strolled out the door of a "Super Mall" store, clad in Atwood's black suit. The brightly colored horses, flowers and the letters that spell the musician's name shimmer as the rapper walks into a bingo game and performs on stage.

"When I started doing this as an art school dropout, I just really didn't imagine that I would have a solo show or have anything that people all over the world see," Atwood said. "I mean, it's pretty crazy."

The official "Old Town Road" video starring Atwood's masterpiece has now amassed more than [730 million views on YouTube](#).

Atwood's sketches of Lil Nas X's suit are part of the exhibit at the Eiteljorg, showing how the musician is part of an increasingly diverse set of people who wear the style that was once largely associated with Hollywood's depiction of the rugged, adventurous American cowboy.

"This is very much inseparable from so many of the narratives that were crafted at that point by ... framing some of the conflict in the American West as a very positive march of 'progress' vs. a dispossession of land," Fry said.

Atwood finds that working with customers who come from a diverse set of backgrounds enriches his own artistry, too.

"There are a lot of things in my career where I feel like I've learned something about a certain type of person or gained some sort of insight that I would have never had if I was just making something on speculation," Atwood said, "like just making shirts and putting them out there in the world."

If you go

What: "Cowboy Couture: The Fashion of Jerry Lee Atwood"

When: Through Aug. 2

Where: Eiteljorg Museum, 500 W. Washington St.

More information: eiteljorg.org

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