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## FASHION



FASHION/NASHVILLE

# Earning its stripes

You know about Nashville's music scene – but what about its fashion know-how?

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Like most things in Nashville, to get a sense of the city's fashion industry you must first look to its music. "It was a perfect storm," says Libby Callaway. "Ten years ago things started to change. People were moving to Nashville from New York or Los Angeles for quality of life, rockstars were settling here and globalisation was making people look at fashion in a different way: they wanted to buy local. The music scene was growing and the fashion industry was able to expand with it."

Callaway, a former fashion editor, founding board member of the Nashville Fashion Alliance (an organisation that helps develop the city's fashion industry, though it is currently on hiatus) and the founder of communications agency The Callaway. We're sitting inside Cafe Roze, a brunch spot in hip East Nashville. Since moving from New York 15 years ago, Callaway has made it her mission to promote Nashville's fashion. She has plenty to smile about: the capital of

Tennessee boasts the third-highest number of independent fashion brands per capita out of all US cities – trailing only New York and LA – and its fashion industry generates about \$6bn (£5.5bn) a year in revenue, employing more than 16,200 locals, according to a 2017 report. The city is a thriving network of entrepreneurs making things in-house, whose style has taken the aesthetic beyond rhinestones, stetsons and cowboy boots.

Callaway's cause has been aided in the past decade by the diversification of Nashville's music industry and its increasing international profile. Music has always been woven into the city's fabric: Johnny Cash called the city home and it has long been the capital of country. But in recent years acclaimed rock band The Black Keys relocated here and singer-songwriter Jack White (once of The White Stripes) opened recording studio Third Man Records. Brands such as denim label Imogene + Willie benefited from this recognition.

- (1) Ethan Summers, designer and owner of Oil + Lumber  
(2) Mural keeping the faith





“[Those musicians] created an edge that made Nashville feel a whole lot cooler,” says K P McNeill, Imogene + Willie’s CEO. The brand was founded in 2009 by Carrie and Matt Eddmenson, who opened a shop in the city’s hip 12 South neighbourhood.

“The outlook was bleak the year we started,” says Carrie, whose family worked in the denim industry in Kentucky. With her southern drawl, indigo-stained hands and stetson, she is everything you’d expect a denim-maker to be. Businesses were closing all over town but the Eddmensons took a leap of faith and opened a shop selling jeans for \$250 (€227) a pair. “We’d tell people, ‘You only need one pair,’” says Carrie. In many ways the shop arrived at the perfect time: consumers were reacting against globalisation and seeking homemade Americana products. “Imogene + Willie had this ‘Made in the USA’ feel,” says Callaway. “The rockstars in town finally had a fashion company making what they wanted to wear: great blue jeans, terrific ‘Made in America’ tops,” says Callaway.

“We never considered ourselves to be a fashion brand” says Carrie. “It was all done on a wing and a prayer.” Nonetheless the Eddmensons paved the way, showing other



Directory:

**Imogene + Willie**  
One-of-a-kind  
all-American denim.  
[imogeneandwillie.com](http://imogeneandwillie.com)

**Oil + Lumber**  
Japanese-style  
unisex goods.  
[oilandlumber.com](http://oilandlumber.com)

**Elizabeth Suzann**  
Womenswear in  
natural fabrics –  
online only.  
[elizabethsuzann.com](http://elizabethsuzann.com)

**Emil Erwin**  
Handmade leather  
belts and jackets.  
[emilerwin.com](http://emilerwin.com)

**Nisolo**  
Slick leather boots  
and bags.  
[nisolo.com](http://nisolo.com)

**Savas**  
Made-to-measure  
leather jackets.  
[ateliersavas.com](http://ateliersavas.com)

**Able**  
Ethical, everyday  
womenswear.  
[livefashionable.com](http://livefashionable.com)



young designers in Nashville what was possible.

Inside the lofty Elizabeth Suzann factory on the outskirts of the city, workers in linen aprons stand behind steamers and sewing machines, carefully piecing together made-to-order items such as flax linen trousers and muted silk crepe tops. Elizabeth Pape (Suzann is her middle name) launched the brand in 2013 on the e-commerce site Etsy. It now generates \$5m (€4.6m) in annual sales and ships up to 600 items of clothing a week. “Liz was specific in what she was creating: a brand that is accessible to all women, that makes people look good,” says Callaway. Elizabeth Suzann pioneered an understated aesthetic for fashion in Nashville. It

(1) T-shirt in Imogene + Willie (2) Oil + Lumber showroom (3) Cutting fabrics at Elizabeth Suzann (4) Leather jackets at Savas (5) Imogene + Willie shop (6) Opening up

also prompted the city’s slow-fashion movement, in which items are created with care on home soil. “We produce everything in-house because it’s the only way to guarantee that our products are being made the way we want them to be,” says Pape. This discipline has lead to a consistent quality and a cult following: the brand has more than 98,000 followers on Instagram. Everyone you speak to in the fashion industry in Nashville will reference the success of Elizabeth Suzann; they’ll speak of how a homegrown brand started on a craft site could morph into something big without losing its core values and unique appeal.

Most independent brands in Nashville started with few resources, although the fact that the city has lower living costs than New York or LA is a big plus for a young designer. “This is all bootstrapped,” says Utah émigré Ethan Summers, gesturing around his studio and showroom, which is brimming with racks of indigo-dyed Haori coats, khaki cotton cargo trousers and sewing machines. Summers, the founder of unisex brand Oil + Lumber, had never intended to make products in-house but decided to hire three seamsters when he couldn’t find a company to make 100 jackets. “Now it’s become our thing,” he says. Oil + Lumber is still small scale and is self-funded, with help from family and friends, so being savvy is important. Some brands pool resources: Oil + Lumber and Elizabeth Suzann have shared shop equipment, sewing-machine sourcing and textile sourcing.

Nashvillians, who are known to be patriotic and generous, want to see their city’s ventures thrive. “When I started planning this business I realised that the community is super supportive,” says Savannah Yarborough, founder of Savas, which creates bespoke leather jackets. “Getting a loan from the bank wasn’t even a question.” Yarborough, who studied at Central Saint Martins in London and now works with many musicians, moved to Nashville from New York. “There isn’t a history of





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luxury clothes here,” she says, noting that basic materials and skilled staff are scarce in Nashville. “It’s interesting how everyone has been able to make their business run.” Yarborough brought two employees with her from New York and their expertise is essential. “You just have to be able to figure out how to make it work,” she says.

Brands also face the challenge of low footfall. Most shops are spread out across the city rather than being gathered in a major shopping hub so e-commerce is important: Elizabeth Suzann only sells online and 90 per cent of revenue at leather label Nisolo comes from e-commerce. Even so, some bricks-and-mortar flagships have become important destinations. Imogene + Willie is set on a buzzy street that’s now home to a flourishing restaurant and retail scene (accessory brand Ceri Hoover also has a shop here). Its outlet is like Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory for denim, with wooden shelves stacked high with jeans and cotton T-shirts emblazoned with slogans such as, “Support Live Music Hire Live Musicians”. Paper garment patterns hang from the ceiling while a seamstress in the back sews one-of-a-kind denim pieces. “Even if you don’t buy anything, you leave with a memory,” says McNeill.

Across town is Able, an accessories and clothing brand that empowers disadvantaged women and encourages shoppers to see the good that fashion can do: all its jewellery is produced in the Nashville showroom by women overcoming addiction.

These spaces offer a chance for customers to meet the makers. “People here care about the craft,” says McNeill. “Everyone’s small enough that they can tell their story in their own way, which is critical.” Even the bigger companies such as Able (84 employees) and Elizabeth Suzann (45 employees) have been careful to maintain a thread between customers and the people behind the clothes.

Callaway is connected with the capital’s most visible brands and encourages designers to add “Made in Nashville” to their branding because of the city’s reputation. “There’s a real cred to Nashville,” says McNeill. “Not just in the US but globally because it’s so unique.” Much like country songs, each brand has an important story to share. And like country music, Nashville fashion feels rooted in the US. “Products made in Nashville feel unique and kind of wholesome,” says Pape of Elizabeth Suzann. “They’re a little more gritty, a little more heritage – a little more American.” — (M)

(1) Jacket by Imogene + Willie (2) Belts by Emil Erwin (3) Savannah Yarborough of Savas (4) Inside Imogene + Willie



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