

End of an Era

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They say that everyone eventually experiences an era they most readily relate to, and then they stay there.

The woman who continues to wear blue eyeshadow and cat-like eyeliner long after it's fashionable. Or, the chambray shirt wearer who continues to double it up with denim jeans to complete the ensemble. The woman who felt smart and empowered in shoulder pads, still wearing them years beyond the eighties. And the lady who felt feminine in a flowing below the knee gathered waist skirt and made it her wardrobe staple, despite her now undefinable midriff and broadening backside.

It's that fashion trend they feel suits them the best. That moment in time when they've hit their stride. Kind of like a home-coming to the self.

This era-adopting behaviour, she thought to herself, is not gender specific. There are plenty of male equivalents given in any social setting, most prevalent on the suburban fringe. Her dad was one of them.

Short and nuggetty with black Bryl creamed hair, Earl seemed to find his fashion footing around 1981, and 28 years on, that's where he's stayed. A floppy sleeved black T-shirt fitted snugly to his paunch seemed to overshadow the handmade black Concho belt holding up his denim jeans. Teetering around on Cuban heels you could always hear him coming by the clinking of his boot chains. A black leather vest laced up at the sides and buttoned up at the front stretched across his broad back and over his even broader belly. Rain, hail or shine seemed to beckon his broad-rimmed leather hat, which was moulded to the shape of his head.

'Urban cowboy meets suburban bikie' would broadly describe his look.

But it was much more than a look to Earl. It was a lifestyle. Ever since taking that leathercraft workshop from the local saddler, she noticed her father's world expand. It expanded from bookmarks and journal covers to 'wearables' as he referred to them. Sometimes she wondered who would actually wear them, but he never seemed short of customers in those days. People would crowd around his market stall three deep at the table, trying on wrist bands, big buckled belts, hats, vests; even the odd handbag. Many were highly decorated, stamped and ornamented with silver or brass fixtures.

Earl seemed to be a walking advertisement for his handiwork. Black leather hat, vest, belt, boots, boot buckles, wrist band. He wore it like a uniform with great pride. An identity, a badge of creative honour.

He was Earl, the Leatherman.

And in those times, he was riding high on the hog. It was almost 'one size fits all' in terms of customisation and design. Rockdogs, Cowboys, Goths, and even Hippies alike all purchased his products, His craftwork was the cultural conduit between counter cultures. Earl made a living from his leatherman look. Weekends were his working pleasure. His was a regular stall at the larger local craft markets. They also became his community. He befriended the other stallholders and regular customers and enjoyed showing any willing passer-by the flexibility and versatility of leather. He was in his element.

As the years marched on, so did Earl, making the usual things he was accustomed to. Only it seemed that, as the years went by, there was less and less demand for his making skills. Where were all the people who used to buy the silver and black belts, the leather vests, the wrist bands? They were still there, only they didn't look the same. They had moved on with their lives (and their look) and their handcrafted leather accessories were relegated to hanging in the back of the wardrobe. Earl still had the odd die-hard customer who'd stuck with him (and their look) over the years, but he had nowhere near the uptake he'd enjoyed in the eighties.

Denying the fact that fashion trends had moved on, Earl blamed the downturn of business on tough economic times, his steely resolve saw him convinced there would come a time of renewed interest in leather accessorising. For several years he persisted with the market circuit, struggling on with the same old range of hats, belts, vests, and wristbands.

Then one day, he met a woman who would change all that. The woman asked Earl if he could cater for special orders. It was a leather hat, vest, and set of wristbands she was after. However, it was a Fedora-style hat, a lady's lace-up vest, and wristbands that could be tied together *she* was really after. Leaning across the table, she inquired in a whisper; had he ever made any leather lingerie before? A Beautician specialising in Brazilian waxing by day, the woman enjoyed pole dancing for her husband by night.

Cocking a hairy eyebrow, Earl knew he was onto something big.

By adapting his range and introducing some new lines, Earl had found a new market. Today his leatherwork enjoys an invigorated popularity at 'Sexpo' – the Health, Sexuality & Lifestyle Exhibition'.
