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Seven local designers who do it all



Coryn Madley owns boutique "Madley" in Venice, Calif., where she sells clothing by designers such as Vena Cava, Luxury Jones and Madley herself.

Photo Credit: Liz O. Baylen / Los Angeles Times

By Enid Portuquez

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Los Angeles is home to many hyphenates: the writer-director, the singer-songwriter, the actor-blogger. For the city's fashion scene, there's the retailer-designer. They are the independent shop owners who've expanded their repertoire by designing their own lines, as well as the fashion designers who have found creative solace within their own store walls. "L.A. boutiques are a great breeding ground for independent designers," says Jennifer Egan of Gen Art L.A., an arts organization that has promoted local design talent through fashion shows and events. "There are a number who've championed undiscovered talent and helped bring attention to them." As with many independent ventures, challenges arise. Some shop owners, like Shareen Mitchell, have had to cease their lines; other designers, such as Nanette and Grace Sullano of Bon&Ging, have had to close their stores. Despite this, they all continue to create and inspire. You won't be seeing these retailer-designers at L.A. fashion week when it hits March 7, but they no less embody the city's stylish spirit.

Madley

This Venice boutique can't help but exude youth, creativity and fierce independence. It's on Abbot Kinney Boulevard, the Westside's epicenter of bohemian chic. And owner Coryn Madley is the sharp, worldly personality one expects to oversee the colorful racks of eclectic clothing by designers like Vena Cava, Luxury Jones and Madley herself.

"I hope to engender more independent spirit and interest in being unique and fearless," says the 28-year-old. "In retail, you hear people's fears about what's in or out. I'm not that kind of dresser. It's based on what I think is timeless and what inspires me."

Born and raised in Venice, Madley earned her stripes at London's Central Saint Martins College before returning to L.A. to set up shop and work on her jewelry and knitwear lines. Her handmade necklaces are statement pieces; think thick and thin chains with beads, gems, medallions and seashells, often hanging all together.

Although her jewelry is also sold at shops like Fred Segal, Madley finds customers appreciate it more when they buy it from her. "They get this intimate experience of meeting the person who made it," she says. "How often does that happen?" *1227 Abbot Kinney Blvd., Venice; \$70-\$400; (310) 450-6029, [madley.com](#)*

Anzevino & Florence

A T-shirt isn't just a T-shirt at William Anzevino and Richard Florence's small boutique in East Hollywood. T-shirts can have four armholes, and loose-fitting jersey dresses can be manipulated to form various shapes.

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The pieces, while often found in solid colors, aren't for the shy or the staid. "We make conversation clothing," says Anzevino, 28. "People don't look to us for basics."

Since starting its men's and women's lines in 2003, the duo has been combining experimental styles with jersey and other comfortable fabrics, a strategy that works well with L.A.'s eternally sunny climate and evolving fashion sensibility. Two years ago, they opened their store away from the trendy shopping avenues in an arty building near Hollywood and Western. They have to vacate in a few months, but plan to move only a few blocks west.

"We were debating on moving downtown," says Florence, 29. "But we feel this is more off the beaten path." 5527 Hollywood Blvd., L.A.; \$40-\$300; (323) 467-4726, anzevinoandflorence.com

Rojas

Streetwear designer Freddie Rojas is no stranger to L.A. fashion: His parents worked in the city's garment industry. "I grew up all around it, so I knew how to do everything. I'm good with trends and color," says Rojas, 34. "I've always been the kind of designer that thinks, what's next?"

After a brief stint at the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising, he began selling his eye-catching pieces to boutiques along Melrose Avenue until he decided to open his own store, X, in 1998. When Rojas hit a stride with his label, he renamed the store in 2000 and filled its racks almost entirely with his designs.

Thumping hip-hop plays in the background and Rojas' gold lamé raindrop jacket, high-waisted nylon shorts and oversize neon T-shirts beg to be worn on a packed dance floor. "My clothes pop," the part-time music video stylist says. "When girls put them on, they feel sexy and confident. That's all that really matters." 7350 Melrose Ave. Suite C, L.A.; \$80-\$200; (323) 651-2699, rojasonline.com

Shareen Vintage

Discovering Shareen Vintage -- the spot "where the cool girls shop" for vintage -- is like finding buried treasure. The journey involves a few twists and turns (especially when Mapquest directions are involved), but once you find the hidden warehouse space -- marked by a cheeky chalkboard sign stating "No boys allowed!" -- you can't help but squeal with glee. Not only are the dresses gorgeous, but the prices are affordable.

"I've gotten a lot of press, but it's still a word-of-mouth business," says Mitchell, a former actress. "I have the greatest [customers] in L.A. -- they're brave, fashion-forward and totally groundbreaking."

You'll also still find some of Mitchell's lovely organza, taffeta and silk dresses, which she began designing in 2005 (they also sold at Diavolina on Robertson), only to stop late last year. "People wanted me to grow . . . but I wasn't prepared for it when it came to production," she says. "There's a possibility I might get back in." The cool girls wait with bated breath. 350 N. Ave. 21, L.A.; \$28-\$68; (323) 276-6226, shareenvintage.com

Matrushka

There aren't many stores where you can buy a dress and have it altered by the designer right then and there. Matrushka's Laura Howe keeps a sewing machine and a rack displaying spools of thread across from the cash register just in case her customers need to adjust a purchase.

"It takes me two seconds to take something in," the 40-year-old Silver Lake resident says. "I don't do production sewing here, but I'm always working on stuff."

Matrushka opened in 2002 as a collective of local designers who sold clothing and accessories at the store on consignment. After changing locations three times, Howe took sole ownership, settled in Sunset Junction and decided to design and produce all the merchandise under the Matrushka label. Her collections consist mostly of brightly printed dresses, tops, skirts and jackets, and there are never more than 15 pieces of any one style.

"The great thing about having a store is that even if a design doesn't come out perfect, I can still put it out there," she says. "And somebody can come along and still like it." 3822 W. Sunset Blvd., L.A.; \$45-\$200; (323) 665-4513, matrushka.com

Aero & Co. and Moss Mills

Temporary pop-up stores are a recent shopping trend, but West 3rd Street's Aero & Co. took it a step further last fall by renting half its space to L.A. clothing and accessories line Moss Mills.

Aero & Co. co-owner Alisa Loftin is known for introducing L.A. designers such as Magda Berliner and Rami Kashou, but she admits the economy has been rough on indie shop owners. "I decided to possibly close because I couldn't swing these numbers anymore," she says. "Moss came in and was really enthusiastic about doing a shop-in-shop."

The store's two halves couldn't be more different. Aero & Co.'s merchandise can be considered avant-garde while Moss Mills' clothing, jewelry and belts are vintage-inspired. The contrast somehow strikes a fun balance but, more important, lightens the load financially.

"There's no way we could have done anything like this if we had to oversee everything," says Mills. "It's worked out really well for her and us." 8403 W. 3rd St., L.A.; \$20-\$120; (323) 653-4651, aeroandco.com, mossmills.com

Bon&Ging

Though some clothing lines rely on obnoxious graphics and complex designs to stand out, 5-year-old label Bon&Ging makes its mark through simple elegance. Founded by sister team Nanette and Grace Sullano (Bon and Ging are their respective childhood nicknames), each collection offers only a few pieces -- a linen, scoop-neck shift dress here, a high-waisted silk pencil skirt there -- but they all become instant wardrobe classics.

In June, Bon&Ging closed its year-old Los Feliz boutique and encouraged shoppers to visit its website. "Closing the boutique was a good move for us," says Nanette, 30. "It enabled us to focus on design and create our online store, which requires less overhead."

The duo remains dedicated to staying selective by not mass-producing, but Nanette acknowledges it's not easy: "It's challenging to be recognized as independent designers, particularly when you are up against well-established, highly marketed brands." \$200-\$600; bonandging.com

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