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THE STYLE ISSUE

*Inside the
Nashville
Fashion
Alliance*

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BEHIND THE SEAMS

Music? Yes. Healthcare and tourism? Check. But did you know that Nashville has the largest concentration of independent fashion companies per capita outside of New York and Los Angeles? We'd call that a boon—and there is an entire network of people facilitating our local fashion industry's success. Here, we take a look at the Nashville Fashion Alliance, whose mission is simple: to incubate and accelerate emerging fashion brands. The nine experts featured here are just a sampling of the NFA's more than 400 members, all of whom are responsible for shaping—and sustaining—the local fashion industry. Together, they're proving there's much more to Nashville's fashion scene than rhinestones and cowboy boots.

WRITTEN BY: MICAH BRADLEY, MEGAN O'NEILL,
AND ANNA KATE READ

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PRODUCED BY: CHELSEA BEAUCHAMP AND SIERRA PILAND

JAMIE AND THE JONES MARBLED SILK BACKDROP THROUGHOUT



THE VISIONARIES

Van Tucker and Libby Callaway

Country music might have landed Nashville on the map, but it's the city's budding fashion scene that's now garnering national attention. With more than 150 brands and Nashville-based designers calling Music City home, this creative class is thriving, and we have Van Tucker and Libby Callaway largely to thank.

Tucker and Callaway connected in 2014, bonding over a mutual love of local fashion (both are Tennessee natives). While Nashville's fashion industry was taking off, the pair noticed an integral aspect was missing: an organization to support and facilitate its growth.

"I knew there were talented artists out there who weren't being represented in the cultural conversation that the city was having," Callaway recalls.

"I think that's where Libby and I really bonded," Tucker adds. "These were people who deserved the recognition, but they also deserved the help."

And, so, the idea for the Nashville Fashion Alliance (NFA) was born. After months of market research, planning, a white paper presentation, and a successful Kickstarter campaign, the NFA emerged in 2015 as a nonprofit organization aiming to incubate and accelerate local brands—with Tucker and Callaway (chief executive officer and board chair, respectively) at the helm.

From its outpost in East Nashville, the NFA offers four pillars of support to its members: advocacy, education, economic development, and shared resources.

"We want to enable an environment where the 'A' players can step up and be successful," Tucker explains. "That's what happened with the music industry, that's what happened with the healthcare industry, and that's all we're trying to do with the fashion industry."

Parallels between the two industries don't stop there, either.

"The quality of what's being put out into our local market is so strong, and I think that must be because of the music industry, too," adds Callaway. "You've got this world-class product and such a high caliber of artists that you can only expect the rest of the art in the community to be just as excellent."

If that's any indication, Nashville's fashion scene will have no problem finding success here, too. (nashvillefashionalliance.com)

—Anna Kate Read





THE INFRASTRUCTURE

Cara Jackson

Lawyer-turned-fashion-business-manager, Cara Jackson has a passion for local fashion. In fact, she tries to wear at least one piece of local clothing each day. Her love for style started as a young child with her grandmother sewing clothes for her Barbie dolls. Now, she's merged her fervor for fashion and business.

"It started out as a love for the glamour behind fashion and the clothes that you wear and the things that we consume," she says. "I find the business behind it fascinating."

Her clients currently include a womenswear designer, a jewelry designer, and a menswear designer. The services she provides include finding fundin , organizing finances and setting up social media and marketing; some clients have contracts and weekly meetings with Jackson, and some hire her for a specific project. Due to her background in law, she excels at helping her clients think through both sides of a decision.

"I'm a sounding board. A lot of people who go into business for themselves are really kind of on an island, and they have a lot of decisions," Jackson says. "I'm there to listen and help somebody think through the pros and cons and the risk associated with making a particular move."

Jackson got her law degree from Cardozo and did her undergrad work at Vanderbilt. In addition to her consultations, Jackson currently serves on the NFA board as the vice chair, as well as the head of the governance committee. Though she lived in fashion-hub New York for a while, Jackson moved to Nashville in 2007 and says she hasn't looked back since.

"No part of me has considered leaving since I got here," Jackson says. "The Nashville fashion scene is booming. It has an incredible amount of momentum." (carajackson.co) —Micah Bradley



On Cara, Atelier
Savas jacket



Hair and
makeup
by Jessica
Arnholt

THE FACE

Dylan Stephens

For Dylan Stephens, there's more to modeling than meets the eye. While he's worked with major fashion labels like Ray-Ban and Marc Jacobs (and you can glimpse him in the music video for Beyoncé's "Haunted"), the transgender model is using his career for good, disrupting gender labels and archaic stereotypes of beauty.

Stephens' striking, androgynous look often throws modeling agencies for a loop. "I'm on boards for both men and women," he explains, "so, it's hard for a lot of agencies to understand what they want to do with me without meeting me first.

Still, the model remains unfazed.

"I have to work really hard to stand out, to look good—it's a lot of work, but it's worth it," he adds.

Stephens' career spans from Los Angeles to New York, but he credits Nashville for landing him his big break. After teaching himself the proper runway walk (a true feat for someone standing more than six feet tall), Stephens, a Tennessee native, broke into the fashion scene at Nashville Fashion Week in 2012. He was modeling for Black by Maria Silver, a simple necklace in lieu of a shirt, seemingly ambiguous in gender, but beautiful nonetheless.

"Who knew I could do what I'm doing in Nashville?" Stephens says with a laugh, referring to how far the region's fashion industry has come in recent years.

Local agency AMAX Talent took notice, and the model's career has been on an upward trajectory ever since.

"That's what's so great about Nashville and the way it's growing," Stephens adds. "Everyone's evolving, and that's so inspiring. It's interesting to watch, and it's even more interesting to be a part of." (amaxtalent.com; [@hookerlegs](https://twitter.com/hookerlegs)) —A.K.R.

THE INNOVATOR

Gavin Ivester

A density of creatives exists in Nashville—technology, entrepreneurship, entertainment, and innovation form a regional think-tank through osmosis. At its hub are Gavin Ivester and his peers.

The founding partner of FLO | Thinkery, Ivester is often spotted in his version of tailored comfort: a soft cotton tee with a fitted five-pocket pant and wing-tipped shoes, no socks. He is one part of the catchall company's high-level thinkers offering strategy consulting, among a bounty of other solutions, to Nashville's brightest.

After moving to Nashville in 2008, Ivester found himself running around with Mark Montgomery, who was “collecting interesting people at the time. Five of us kept showing up to hang out, so, we founded FLO together with the broad mission of, ‘Do cool shit with smart people, or do smart shit with cool people.’ We didn’t care which.”

Each was attracted to the other for the levels of career achievement found thus far. For Ivester, it began in Silicon Valley with 11 years at Apple. A 14-year tour of the sneaker business was next, first as the head of Nike's global footwear design team and then to PUMA as the SVP of its global footwear division. Gibson moved him to Nashville, and the culture kept him here—but not before securing patents to his name for sneaker inventions along with a pair of products now registered in the Computer History Museum. Design-driven innovation has always been top of mind for him.

“One of the things I’ve always believed in is manufacturing as one of the most powerful design tools,” he says. An NFA board member, Ivester is unofficially driving the innovation agenda for the organization, pulling from the big company, high-volume, and high-dollar product leadership experience he’s had for the entirety of a career. Wearable healthcare technology is one area he’d like to see Nashville entrepreneurs champion.

“Fashion is always moving, and manufacturing capabilities are always changing,” Ivester says. The old apparel industry need not be rebuilt here in Nashville: There’s an opportunity to leap-frog it, he believes, building from scratch, instead, a resource-heavy environment with the talent already in place to support it. (*flothink ry.co*)
—Megan O'Neill





THE BRAND

Cavanagh Baker

This month marks the one-year anniversary of Cavanagh Baker's move to Music City, a choice the Birmingham-born designer has never second-guessed.

"I like the idea of being in a city that's creative, that's open, and that has a fashion community growing, as well," Baker explains. "For what I'm doing, Nashville is 100 percent the best decision I could have made, based on the caliber of the women I get to design for."

We'd have to agree: Megan Barry donned a custom Cavanagh Baker gown for her first Symphony Ball as mayor, and our cover girl, Kelsea Ballerini, sported an elaborate Cavanagh Baker romper—complete with train—in the music video for her recent single, "Peter Pan."

When she's not working on one-of-a-kind pieces for high-profile clientele, Baker designs upscale everyday wear, too. Her namesake brand, Cavanagh Baker, comprises made-to-order collection pieces and ready-to-wear separates you can peruse in her chic Cummins Station studio.

Be it custom, collection, or ready-to-wear, Baker's designs feature bold silhouettes with unique fabrics, such as a metallic twill she's especially excited to debut this fall, sourced from around the globe.

"My clients want what people don't have, and that's what I love offering them," she adds. "It's specialty, it's custom, and it's all small-batch."

Though she got her start in active-wear (Baker worked in Boston for Reebok's athletic design department before making the move to Nashville), the designer has certainly hit her stride in the world of womenswear.

"These women are so smart, so beautiful, and they're so open, so willing to give me a chance," Baker says. "That's what makes Nashville so special—you won't find a woman welcome like that anywhere else." (cavanaghbaker.com)

—A.K.R.





THE ICON

Jeanne Dudley Smith

In 1974, at a small country home in Lebanon, Tennessee, a three-year-old Stella McCartney sat on the lap of Jeanne Dudley Smith, sketching dresses with the Nashville native. Smith, who was designing an Americana-themed wardrobe for Linda McCartney, traveled 30 miles outside of Nashville to the farm that housed McCartney's band, The Wings, that summer.

"Stella was walking around this old barn and picking up marijuana buds, so I said, 'Stella, come over here, and let's draw dresses,'" Smith says, smiling.

Jeanne Dudley Smith is one of the early inductees to the Tennessee State Museum's Costume & Textile Institute. She's also a white-dress icon who self-navigated every seam of the bridal fashion industry, from fabric sourcing to stitching relationships with talented home sewers in Mexico—many of whom still seam, hem, and embroider her designs today.

"I love fine fabrics, I love handwork, I love detail, and I love romance, and that's played over and over in my lines," Smith says, sitting in her home studio. She still creates about 300 custom gowns a year in this West Meade atelier, which should be a registered historic landmark in Southern fashion. One framed picture of Jeanne's Fantasia-dressed Reese Witherspoon is surrounded by portraits of Southern brides, debutantes, and graduates from Charleston to Memphis. More than 50 homemade scrapbooks are scattered about; she fills these with newspaper cutouts, fabric scraps, sketches, photos of her clients, details of the dresses, and the names she remembers well.

Though Smith has dressed the likes of Priscilla Presley and Grace Kelly, the breadth of her career seems to culminate in the relationships and tales of the women in those homemade books. The harmonization is hard to miss between her career's work and the NFA mission: For 50 years, she has nurtured the regional fashion industry by dressing Nashville women for their most momentous occasions, educating us all with her stories along the way. (615-352-1726) —M.O.

THE PARTNER

Bob Antoshak

Sew, spin, spool: That's the heartbeat of a textile industry that has been heavily globalized over the past two decades. It's a shadow of what is once was, Bob Antoshak, NFA board member says, but its outlook isn't entirely bleak. The U.S. textile industry—yarn, fabric, apparel, and raw textiles—employs more than 233,000 people, and it is still vital in terms of employment dollars and potential.

If you see that potential and want to attract its supply-chain segments into your region, Bob Antoshak is your consultant on speed dial. This is his niche. With a 30-plus-year career that has orbited around the global fiber and textile industry, Antoshak provides companies with market analysis, forecasting, and insight. He has acted as a lobbyist for the American Textile Manufacturers Institute, representing the U.S. at trade negotiations and even advising the U.S. government on domestic and international interests. Today, he promotes the consumption of U.S. cotton for Olah, Inc.

It's no surprise his interests have quite synergistically aligned with the NFA's operations at the local level. A 15-year Nashville resident, Antoshak is the co-chair of the NFA's infrastructure and economic development committee—less technically, he's involved in creating a strategy for the region to grow in all levels of apparel operations, viewing the shifting paradigm in consumerism to local product as an opportunity for homegrown growth.

"Today's business is still very global, but there's been an interesting return, to some degree, of domestic production and certainly domestic design," he says. "That's where I think Nashville is doing really well, and it's where I'm able to make the best contribution—helping to raise its visibility."

Antoshak has worked to connect under-the-radar brands with funds and contacts in the venture capital space, while actively attempting to bring other textile, garment, and retail operations to Music City.

"The local industry formed around independent designers," Antoshak says. "We've got backing and a very diverse group of people. That's a strength. Once you create a specialized supply chain, a lot of business can be done, and synergies can be created." (*olah.com*) —M.O.





THE YOUNG GUN

Patrick Woodyard

Patrick Woodyard knows a thing or two about putting his best foot forward. In fact, he's cultivated an entire ethically sourced footwear and leather goods company, Nisolo, that is as economically sustainable as its products are well-designed.

Long before social enterprise was a common industry model, Woodyard moved to Trujillo, Peru, in search of a job that paired his business savvy with social impact and purpose. While working in finance, Woodyard met an expert shoe craftsman named William, who, despite his circumstances, had an unbridled ambition and enthusiasm for his craft. Using William as inspiration, Woodyard began researching how to support such fine craftsmanship on a larger scale.

The answer came as an opportunity for people to access quality leather goods at an attainable price by engaging craftsmen like William in an ethical sales environment. Circumventing a more traditional, customer-centric retail model, Nisolo was founded in 2011 with one simple question at its core: "What if we valued the creators and producers of our goods just as much as we value customers?"

"I wanted to educate people on what it looks like to run a for-profit business that creates social impact inherently through the way the business model works," Woodyard explains. "By investing deeply in the lives of our producers, we are seeing a massive impact on the communities where we're working. It's been amazing. It's what drives me, and it's what drives the people on our team."

Next month marks Nisolo's five-year anniversary, and the company shows no sign of slowing. To date, the brand has sold more than 30,000 pairs of shoes in all 50 states and more than 60 countries around the world. What's more, it supports the livelihoods of more than 300 people through partnerships in Peru, Kenya, and, most recently, Mexico. Thanks in part to Nashville's altruistic, philanthropic culture, Woodyard is able to take his success in stride—with Nisolo soles on, of course. (nisoloshoes.com) —A.K.R.