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Nudie Cohn sews gold for singers

NORTH HOLLYWOOD, Calif.—Have you ever wondered where country-and-Western singers get their rhinestone cowboy suits... where Johnny Cash finds his preacher's cutaway coats... where Bobby Gentry buys her see-through cowgirl outfits?

Nudie is their tailor. With a store that is impossible to overlook; even in North Hollywood (two life-size wooden bucking broncos guard the roof), the small and round and 69-year-old Nudie Cohn has achieved the second of his two lifelong ambitions: to become the world's largest Western outfitter.

Somehow his first ambition evaded him. "I wanted to be cowboy star, but I guess I didn't make the grade," he says. Then, brightening, he adds, "This is better. I seen a lot of cowboy stars. Some of 'em are a little hungry now."

Reticence is no more natural to Cohn than it is to most of his customers. He wears his own merchandise—enormous Stetsons, lizard-green shirts and pants, outside diamond rings mounted on little gold saddles, \$20-dollar gold-piece buttons and a silver buckle as wide as his head.



Gold and rhinestones... cowboy suits are what made Nudie Cohn rich.

"He looks," says one awed observer, "like the caricature of an American cowboy drawn by an enraged Russian cartoonist."

Cohn couldn't care less. He believes in advertisement, and his incredible automobile is a rolling landmark along the asphalt trails of Los Angeles County. A set of Texas longhorns is mounted on the front bumper. Chrome horseshoes and figurines of horses and rodeo ropers dot the hood, just ahead of the large "Nudie the Tailor" sign on the spare-tire cover.

Fourteen shooting irons are distributed about the car's exterior. These include derringers and revolvers on the front fenders and above the door handles, and three rifles mounted on the rear deck.

Inside there is hand-tooled saddle leather, studded with 400 silver dollars, and Cohn's pride and joy -- a horn that blows a recording of a cattle stampede, complete with the bellowing of fear-crazed steers.

Cohn gets a new convertible free every year from General Motors -- in return for the publicity the company receives from its use in rodeos and parades and in his day-to-day driving between the store and his four-horse ranch in Arleta, Calif.

Western outfits at Cohn's are not cheap. His custom-tailored cowboy suits start at about \$325, range upwards to a \$750 suit (used recently in a 20-second skit on "Laugh-In") and reach their peak in the likes of the 24-carat gold lame "singin' suit," bought by Elvis Presley for \$10,000.

There are also more reasonably priced articles. The British actress-model Twiggy buys her Indian headbands from Cohn. Made-to-order jeans go for about \$40 while shirts start at \$65 and hats at \$100. Saddles, however, can go as high as \$6,500.

It's all a long way from Pitkin Avenue in Brooklyn, Cohn's original home which he left more than half a century ago as "Battling Nudie," a not very successful flyweight boxer. He reached Hollywood first in 1918 and tried without much luck to crack the movies. He then turned to tailoring and for years it was hard going.

Now Cohn fingers his diamond horseshoes and his gold-coin necktie, and he remembers: "Once I was poor as a church mouse and I had nothing to wear, and I said someday I'm going to have all these things. My wife says I'm taking a chance, wearing all this gold. So, you gotta die sooner or later. And if I did die tomorrow, I'll say I had a good time."