

NUDIE COHN

THE TAILOR WHO PUT FLASH IN COUNTRY FASHION

Stage wear has always been an essential part of country music, and no one has brought more flash to country clothing than the “Rodeo Tailor,” Nudie Cohn.

Born Nuta Kotlyrenko on December 15, 1902, in Kiev, a city in present-day Ukraine, he was the son of a Jewish bootmaker and worked as a tailor’s apprentice. When he was eleven years old, his parents sent him and his older brother to the United States to escape violence against Jews by military forces. U.S. immigration officials misspelled the boy’s first name and shortened his last name, and he went by “Nudie Cohn” for the rest of his life. In New York, he found work shining shoes on the street. In his free time, he loved to go see cowboy movies.

As a young adult, he moved around the country and held odd jobs. In 1932, while traveling through Minnesota, he met his future wife, Bobbie. They settled in New York, and he opened a shop where he made costumes for dancers. In 1940, the Cohns moved to Los Angeles and opened a tailoring shop in their garage. By then, two other tailors, Bernard “Rodeo Ben” Lichtenstein in Philadelphia and Nathan Turk in the Los Angeles area, had spent a decade outfitting movie cowboys in showy western wear. Cohn hoped to join them and clothe the actors he had grown up admiring.

His big break came in 1947 when western singer Tex Williams ordered ten costumes for his band. Soon, Cohn was taking orders from actors and country artists, and he opened Nudie’s Rodeo Tailors in North Hollywood in 1950. By then, western stage wear featured sequins and gaudy embroidery, but Cohn was the first tailor to add rhinestones. Over the years, Cohn and his staff



designed and created stage wear for country legends such as Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, Porter Wagoner, Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, and Glen Campbell, whose hit “Rhinestone Cowboy” (written by Larry Weiss) was inspired by “Nudie suits.” Cohn also designed clothing for pop and rock stars. Among his most famous creations was a gold lamé suit for Elvis Presley.

Cohn’s personality was as colorful as his clothes. He wore his own designs and drove a custom convertible he decorated with pistol door handles and steer horns mounted in front. He always wore mismatched boots, to remind him, he said, of his humble roots.

Cohn died of kidney failure on May 9, 1984. He was eighty-one years old. Today, Nudie suits are valuable collector’s items, and his personal sewing machine is on display in the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

SOURCES

Encyclopedia of Country Music; the New York Times; Tablet magazine