

PUT YOURSELF IN HIS SHOES

After four decades spent helping people's feet look fabulous, a new exhibit attempts to gather the cream of **John Fluevog's** creations under one roof.



Vancouver-based footwear designer John Fluevog (left, with associate Stephen Bailey) at the April launch of the "Porter" shoe he designed for employees of the Opus Hotel. Inset: Fluevog and his first wife, fashion model Kecia Nyman, in Fox & Fluevog's first Gastown storefront in 1970.

By Steven Schelling

I guess I'm a rebel," says Vancouver-based shoe designer John Fluevog, shortly before the Museum of Vancouver launches its retrospective of his 40-year career, *Fox, Fluevog & Friends*. Lounging on a purple couch in one of the Opus Hotel's penthouse suites, the offbeat sixty-something footwear impresario's appearance makes a compelling case for his assessment of himself. Long-haired and leather-clad, there's an unapologetic tinge of rock-star vitality to his demeanour. "I like to be original," he says, adding, "You've seen my car, right?" He needs and, perhaps, expects no answer.

Downstairs, parked pride-of-place directly in front of the lobby — where employees tread around in the "Porter" shoe he recently designed for the hotel — is Fluevog's ride, a Jaguar MK-10. Bought overseas as a wreck by his father and shipped to Canada in 1965, the intervening years have seen the classic restored, chopped, remodelled, and redesigned into an unmistakable, one-of-a-kind calling card, a monument to its owner's signature style.

And what to say of that style? Like many subjective experiences, it can be very difficult to explain, but you know it when you see it. Or, in Fluevog's case, he knows it when he doesn't see it. "Sometimes I close my eyes and open them and then shut them again, and then I see something," he says of his design process. "But I'll see it how I want to see it, not really how it was. And in what I want to see is what I do. I don't always [only] do it with shoes; I'll do it with an image. And I'll see something else when I shut my eyes, and that's what I need to create."

This creative urge, which has underscored Fluevog's life, came suddenly and without warning. "When I was younger, I never knew I was an artist," he admits. "It never occurred to me. I had no idea. I took band in

high school, right? I played trumpet. I wasn't thinking about design. But, occasionally, I'm fortunate enough to have things pop into my mind."

Such was the case with his very first shoe, the Pilgrim, a Victorian-inspired cowboy-boot style he dreamed up in the 1970s.

"I remember walking down the street, seeing a girl," he remembers. "I actually knew who she was; she was one of my customers — a good customer — and a cutie. She was wearing cowboy boots. Her toes were all curled up and... (pause) that's where it came from. But then I look back," he adds "especially at the end of the '80s and '90s, at some of the crazy things I did, and I think, 'Dude, you were, like, really different and original.'"

Add playful, bizarre, outrageous, unexpected, and unique — all fitting watchwords when it comes to Fluevog's catalogue. Sloping heels, toe caps cut on a bias, rococo ribbon ties, upturned toe points, intricate leatherwork, and unusual shapes abound in a career that has attracted an international cult-like following.

From humble beginnings at Fox & Fluevog, a Gastown storefront he opened in 1970 with former business partner Peter Fox, through his rise as a savvy counter-culture marketer in the 1980s, to the apex of his work's popularity from the 1990s onward, Fluevog's core aesthetic has stayed recognizable and resolute. Finding examples to illustrate that distinctiveness for the MOV exhibition, however, was less of a concrete proposition.

"I'm not a particularly sentimental person," Fluevog admits, "so I didn't keep everything. And, in fact, I tried not to, because I didn't want to dwell on the past: 'Oh, look at how great this was,' or 'I'm going to keep this; it's so marvellous.' I'd rather not do that. In that sense, I didn't take care of these

things. We had to go diving and digging"

Much of that diving and digging fell to Joan Seidl, Director of Collections and Exhibitions at MOV. "He has what he calls the 'Fluseum,'" she explains while walking past still-uncovered display cases of artfully arranged footwear, a week prior to the show's

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opening gala on May 13. "In reality, it's really more of a large room in the basement of the Granville Street store, where it looked to me like they were shutting their eyes and throwing things down in the dark."

Through a concerted program of begging and borrowing, Seidl and her team have collected over 150 different examples of Fluevog's work, as well as that of Fox and the business partners' associate, shoemaker Ken Rice. In some instances, stories of how a particular pair of shoes was obtained are more interesting than the shoes themselves. "These boots," says Seidl, pointing to a

pair of canvas-and-leather granny boots called the Balmoral, "were lent to us by Roxanne Murdoch, whose father had been the accountant for Fox & Fluevog in those early, lean days. Sometimes, instead of getting paid in cash, he was paid in shoes. She had four pairs for us."

Fluevog, too, was approached after the call went out for donations, but with a slightly different result. "I was at the doctor's office to get a travel booster, and a woman comes rushing up to me [saying], 'I've got these shoes!'" he recalls. "They were from 1973. And I say, 'Yes, I remember them.' But she didn't say, 'Hi, John' or 'My name's Alice.' It's 'I've got these shoes!' It's because she had seen this thing for the Museum of Vancouver. But she didn't want to give them up [for six months]. She just wanted me to know she had them. Maybe she'll wear them when she goes to the show."

As much as Fluevog enjoys the prospect of the retrospective, it has forced him to look back on his life and analyze his work — never a comfortable exercise for someone used to looking ahead. "It's sort of a strange idea for me," he admits. "On one side, it's great, and on the other it's like, 'What? What have I done? What's going on?' When I look back at it — because I was there — I can see myself and where I was. It's a lot of water under the bridge. But it's also what I do every day. It's who I am."

Fox, Fluevog & Friends runs May 14-Sept. 26 at Museum of Vancouver (1100 Chestnut). Tickets \$12. Info: MuseumOfVancouver.ca