

**“How We Sold Western Wear in New York City”** -- by Doug Newton

*Jan. 2010*

Thirty one years ago, Billy Martin and I started selling western duds to eastern dudes in a tiny start-up boutique just off Madison Avenue on 69<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City.

I was a young sports agent at the time, and business manager to several well-known athletes, including New York Yankee greats, Roger Maris, Sparky Lyle, Whitey Ford, Phil Rizzuto, and the aforementioned Billy Martin.

Billy said the idea to open a western store was my idea, but if we became a success, it would be his idea. Actually, Billy’s best friend, Mickey Mantle deserves most of the credit.

A few months earlier, George Steinbrenner had just agreed to bring Billy back as manager of the Yankees for the 1980 season, or possibly even sooner. To celebrate, Mickey, Billy and I met up for drinks in the back room of PJ Clarke’s – an historic Manhattan watering hole that by all rights should have had saw-dust on the floor.

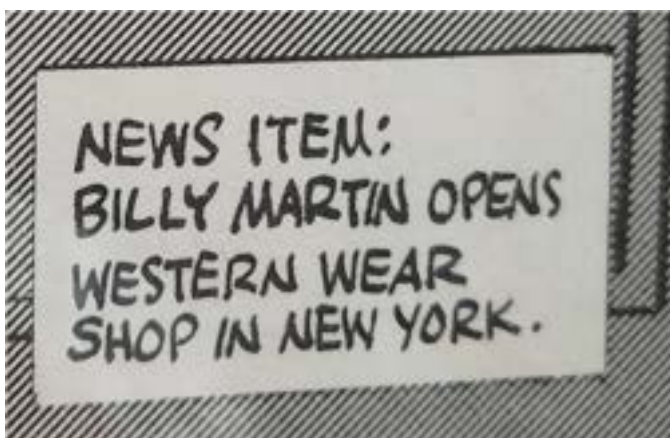
I remember the scene like it was yesterday. Mickey was wearing cowboy boots because he was an Oklahoman and country boy at heart. I wore boots because I grew up in Colorado, the son and grandson of Texans, and Billy wore boots because Mickey wore them.

At least a hundred well-wishers “happened” by our table that afternoon, many hoping to catch an autograph or two from these “damn Yankees”. Mickey started to notice and keep count that not a single one of them was wearing cowboy boots. This gave him a brain storm.

Based on a study he did on a cocktail napkin, Mantle figured that if we opened a western store in Manhattan, just imagine how many boots we could sell. Whew! The possibilities are *unlimited*, he said.

Now when you count in “extra sales and profits” from western shirts, belts, buckles, hats and assorted gear – Billy added -- we could all be on easy street and George Steinbrenner, his current boss and nemesis, can go herd cats, or something.

A few months later, “Billy Martin’s Western Wear” officially opened, with Martin and me being the co-owners; Mickey, it was decided, would probably do better putting his name on a local eatery, instead of a western store, which you had to agree with. (Ten years later, Mickey Mantle’s Restaurant opened on Central Park South and is still going strong today.)





*Nota Bene: Two "How I sold" images herein were generated in 5 seconds using AI tool / Microsoft Copilot Pro*

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At our 'grand opening', a bunch of sports celebrities including Whitey Ford, Roger Maris, Phil Rizzuto and, of course, Mickey joined us for a media party and major photo op. Good Morning America did a TV broadcast from the shop, and Dave Anderson covered it for the NY Times.

Right off the bat, we did great, despite the fact that Billy gave away boots and other gear to many of his friends for free, including his coaches and players. He even gave goods away gratis to other players and wives on visiting teams, and not just baseball teams either.

Billy left the business in the early 80's, but his name carried on. And so did I. Today, few people actually connect the store or its name with the colorful ex-ex-ex-ex Yankee who died in a one-vehicle wreck in Upstate NY on Christmas day, 1989.

In retailing, experts say location is everything, but in our case, it was a combination of luck, timing, hard work and our growing family of celebrity customers who have supported us over the years. We also caught some “lightning in a bottle” as the urban cowboy rage swept the country and gradually spread across the globe. Singers, songwriters, producers, actors, directors, athletes, teachers, authors, comedians, politicians, royalty, media personalities -- even a couple of world leaders -- all came through the door. They were looking for a little bit of the Old West on the upper east side of Manhattan.

From Bono to Bibi Netanyahu; Madonna to Mikhail Gorbachev; Prince to Princess Diana; Bob Dylan to the Dixie Chicks; Sheryl Crow to Whoopi Goldberg -- no matter what their age, sex, race, religion, politics or national origin -- they all shared a love for the western lifestyle.

One favorite customer is Bruce Springsteen. On the cover of his album, “Born in the USA”, he’s wearing a Billy Martin belt. Bruce gave me the idea to trademark the words “Born & Bred in the USA” (serial # 78312443) which we own exclusively in the apparel category.

Arnold Schwarzenegger also loves western goods. For his wedding, he and Maria Shriver selected sterling silver belt buckles from Billy Martin’s for all the groomsmen and bridesmaids in the wedding party. Maybe someday Arnold could run for president if *he* was born in the USA.

Eric Clapton has bought Justin-brand boots from us over the years. At first, they were pretty standard, run-of-the mill cowboy boots, until Eric recommended that Justin and Billy Martin’s make them in hipper, hotter colors, like teal green, and design them for women as well as men.

Many years - and fancy boots later -- Justin caught the eye of a dude from Omaha, Warren Buffet, a pioneer never lacking for fresh ideas or creativity, who bought the company lock, stock, and barrel for \$600 million.

Another musician who loves cowboy boots and wear western duds is Mick Jagger. One morning his assistant in London called to ask if we could take him a tan suede

vest at the Right Track recording studio on 56th Street, so he could autograph it for a charity function later that night.

We were supposed to wait a few minutes for Jagger to sign the vest, and then deliver it to the charity auction people at the Hilton Hotel, the site of the big raiser for the charity event.

Everything went off as requested, except that Mick insisted on wearing the vest non-stop for the next 6 hours because he said he wanted the vest to have a real honest connection to him and the new album his band was working on that day.

Billy Bob Thornton and Dwight Yoakam often come in the store together. Billy Bob wrote an article about Billy Martin's for the Hollywood Reporter in which he said "this place made me realize I have good taste." He said he must be among our "top two or three customers in terms of consistency; such dignitaries as Andy Griffith and Bruce Dern are laden with gifts from me and Billy Martin's!"

Mickey Rourke is a friend of Billy Martin's, too. He often visited the store with his beloved miniature Chihuahua, Loki always leading the way. Most people know Mickey won a Golden Globe, and an Oscar nomination for "the Wrestler" this year, but he could also win on Project Runway because the man has a terrific, uncanny eye for fashion and style.

Gilda Radner was America's comedic sweetheart. She passed away so early in her life, from ovarian cancer at a time when there was little public knowledge about the illness. Later, her husband, Gene Wilder gave us permission to use one of Gilda's favorite quotes about fashion in a Billy Martin's catalog: Her line was "I base my fashion taste on what doesn't itch."

Don Imus is another favorite customer, even though the son-of-a-gun tells everyone on his network radio and TV program that you need to be richer than Bill Gates to afford our high prices. Thanks Don.

We've also had a few notable "wannabe" cowboys visit Billy Martin's. Some of them are called "windshield cowboys" because they aren't real comfortable around

horses or livestock, and instead like to drive around their “spreads” in SUV’s or central casting pick-up trucks.

George W. Bush is one. When he was in office, he liked to sport an expensive three-piece “ranger style” belt buckle as if to say “this is not my first rodeo.” Some dudes think clothes make the man.

Thirty-one years is a long time to operate a business in New York City without interruption. In the present economy, there’s no telling what the future will hold for us and so many of our mom-and-pop suppliers who now struggle to make their goods in little towns and factories all across the country.

Today, we will need more than luck and hard work to keep Mickey’s inspiration and Billy’s idea alive, as the new challenges facing American workers and businesses big and small are huge.

A long time ago, the historian, Alan Axelrod wrote that “the Old West, like America, itself, was the land of great adventure, of untold hazards but unlimited possibilities, a romantic land in which a man or woman could be free.

“The West called out of the American character all that was best in it -- courage, optimism, energy, self-reliance, inventiveness and sheer exuberance.”

That’s not a bad set of values for us to aspire to -- and now, more than ever, the kind of American sprit that must be kept alive.

-- Doug Newton, New York City

to Billy & Doug  
My all time  
Favorites  
Do good as I  
think you can  
Trickett Thantle