



Rhinestone rodeo

Western wear designer Atwood finds celebrity clients suit him well

A new exhibition at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art showcases 17 examples of embroidered, sparkling suits made by Jerry Lee Atwood.

Indianapolis-based tailor and designer Atwood, known as a leader in the cultural resurgence of flashy Western wear, has a client list that includes Post Malone, DJ-producer Diplo and traditional country music singer Charley Crockett.

A horseshoes-and-roses suit Atwood made for Lil Nas X's video that accompanied 2019 hit song "Old Town Road" won't be seen at the Eiteljorg because it's presently on display at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee.

At the Eiteljorg, "Cowboy Couture: The Fashion of Jerry Lee Atwood" will offer visitors a look at suits commissioned by other musicians and non-celebrity customers of Union Western Clothing, the company co-founded by Atwood and vintage wardrobe collector Joe David Walters.

The four-month show, which opens Saturday at the Eiteljorg, 500 W. Washington St., will place Atwood's work in the context of 20th-century designers Nudie Cohn, Manuel Cuevas and Nathan Turk. Music stars ranging from Hank Williams and George Jones to Porter Wagoner and Gram Parsons dressed to impress in elaborate, detailed outfits.

Atwood — who previously worked as a barista at bygone CATH (Coffee and Tea House), 5401 N. College Ave., and as a costume designer at the Indiana Repertory Theatre — taught himself to embroider using chain-stitch sewing machines and to apply rhinestones by hand.

His original sketches used for a snake-themed suit Malone wore to the 2018 American Music Awards ceremony will be part of the Eiteljorg show. In 2022, Atwood crafted an eye-popping "Stranger Things"-themed suit for actor David Harbour that included imagery of waffles and monsters seen in the Netflix series set in fictional Hawkins, Indiana.

Atwood said he's looking forward to the "Cowboy Couture" exhibition because it will show his creations outside his studio southeast of Broad Ripple, where he's immersed in day-to-day tailoring.

"From the beginning, I had always said that I really wanted to be able to go into the show and see my work from the outside looking in," he said.

Atwood spoke with IBJ about how he sells suits and the solitary work that goes into making one. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.



Jerry Lee Atwood, who worked as a costume designer at the Indiana Repertory Theatre, taught himself to embroider using chain-stitch sewing machines and to apply rhinestones by hand. His brand is Union Western Clothing. (IBJ photos/Chad Williams)

Did a specific suit or touchpoint in country music history hook you on this style?

Porter Wagoner had a bright yellow suit with wagon wheels and cacti, and a covered wagon was on the back. I remember when someone first loaned me a book about the history of Western wear, I had a general familiarity with it because my dad was a big fan of country music. He had all of those albums. But it wasn't really something I thought too much about. But when I looked through that book, I saw that yellow suit and those wagon wheels. It just kind of slaps you in the face with nostalgia. That was the one that really got me thinking about making something like that someday.

What does this Eiteljorg exhibition mean to you?

Honestly, I will probably cry when I see it for the first time. After the first order for Post Malone in 2018, things really picked up. I don't feel like I've had a lot of vacations since then, and everything just kind of flies out the

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door. I make it, and it's gone.

I've never seen a lot of my work in one setting at one time. So seeing the span of pieces I've made during the past 10 years or more is really momentous and exciting. And I'm excited for other people to see that and to see the pieces in person. You can see a photo, but you don't see how the light hits the embroidery. You don't see the refraction of the light off the rhinestones.

How does someone commission one of your pieces?

People just contact me with an idea for a suit. If it's a good fit, I'll take it on. At least 60% of the time, people reach out to me and ask, "How much does a suit cost?" Then I tell them, and I never hear back from them.

That's a common thing, because I think people have a very unrealistic idea of what a custom suit costs. I don't think they realize that it takes more than 100 hours, start to finish, to make a suit. A lot of times, people say, "Can you do it for under \$1,000?" You know, by the time I buy materials, there's not much meat on the bone.

Is time commitment one of the primary factors in setting a price?

I try to give people a range. Some people just want a piece of my work, specifically. I give them a range from the most basic suit with just piping details and no embroidery to something that's [less extravagant than] the full embroidered and rhinestone suit I would do for someone like Post Malone or the David Harbour "Stranger Things" suit. I try to give them those options.

Who's a typical customer for your work?

A lot of people who purchase suits tend to be people getting married. They've always wanted a fancy Western suit, and it's an opportunity for them to have the license to drop money on a suit. A lot of the wedding customers are also musicians, so then they'll wear their suits onstage. But I haven't found there's a particular type of person who purchases. I've made stuff for musicians and actors and sports celebrities.

Has your aesthetic or technical approach to making Western wear evolved over the years?

I'm better at tailoring and faster at tailoring. In the last few years, I've had kind of a revolving door of helpers, and no one's ever stayed for a long time. Or they will be strong at the beginning and slow down over time.

This year, I've decided to not bring in

Celebrity clients

Indianapolis-based tailor and designer Jerry Lee Atwood's commissions include Western wear made for:

- **Post Malone**
The singer wore different suits at the 2018 American Music Awards, at the 2019 Grammy Awards, during a 2019 Elvis Presley tribute concert that aired on NBC, and for a 2020 Doritos commercial.
- **Lil Nas X**
This rapper wore a suit in the music video that accompanied 2019 smash hit "Old Town Road."
- **Diplo**
This DJ-producer wore a suit on the cover of a 2020 issue of Attitude magazine.
- **Charley Crockett**
This country music artist wore a suit while on tour in 2022.
- **David Harbour**
This "Stranger Things" star wore an "Upside Down"-themed suit to a season premiere event in 2022.
- **Margo Price**
This country music artist wore a suit in photos to promote her 2023 album, "Straits."
- **Orville Peck**
This country music artist wore a suit on the cover of 2024 album "Stampede."
- **Julien Baker**
This indie rock artist wore a suit during a 2025 appearance on TV's "The Daily Show."

Source: IBJ research

any help unless I have a really big project. I found that if I embroider a piece or sit down to set the rhinestones in an assembly line process, I actually get stuff done as fast as if I have someone here. Then I'm also not micromanaging someone. ... I'm not a confrontational person. It's always hard to tell someone, "Hey, you're not doing that right."

Do you listen to music while you work?

Yes, but I usually listen to podcasts. I catch up on my podcasts. Then when I've run out of podcasts, I usually just listen to shoegaze or dark wave [music styles]. I'll go through phases, depending on what my mood is. Sometimes I'll listen to old country music for months. But it's usually punk or '80s new wave or shoegaze. If I have a really tight deadline and want to get pumped up or whatever, I listen to Ministry or Nine Inch Nails.♦

— Dave Lindquist