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Midwest Fashion Week: Indy en vogue

by Melissa Fears



• Berny Martin (Photo by Mark Lee)

After launching a so-called "perfect mistake" in 2006, Berny Martin, founder of the Catou Couture clothing line, realized that what he had done was more than simply planning a fashion show. This was something big.

His brainchild, Midwest Fashion Week, began as a showcase of the designer's own collection, but it wasn't long before he felt compelled to address a clear gap in his local trade.

"There is a huge void in fashion," Martin said. "If I brought what I knew from New York here, it would not work. It just wouldn't."

Training models to walk the runway in a straight line was just the beginning. "We have videos where they didn't know where their left foot was and their right foot was," he said.

"That's who we are; we are Midwest," he said. "We are who we are."

Snowballing success

It's that attitude that has launched Midwest Fashion Week into what it is today. Now with more than 28 designers involved, the 2011 Midwest Fashion Week isn't just a party — it's a full-fledged business.

This year's event, March 12–19, will highlight what Midwest fashion is all about, Martin hopes. MFW will add to the city's already diverse culture, helping to more firmly establish a reputation of fashion and trendsetting.

"Yeah, Indianapolis is not considered a fashionable city... but we could be," he said. "We are making it happen, slowly but surely."

With the fashion world focused on shows in hubs like New York and Los Angeles, Martin said it's important to him that Indianapolis audiences concentrate on the craftsmanship and artistry at this year's event.

The week's sponsors include Catou, Down Syndrome Indiana, and Image Cube, LLC. These partnerships support emerging talent as they empower the designers and models, boosting the community as a whole.

Throughout its short lifetime, MFW has worked with several nonprofits — United Way, American Autism Society of Indiana, and Ambassador for Children, to name a few.

"Each day is dedicated for another producer so they can make their impact," said Martin. "The whole week is balanced between them to make it successful for all of their eyes. That's what a success for fashion week is all about. It's how I can make it a success for all of Indianapolis or the Midwest region."

With more and more celebrities and press attending each year, his formula seems to be working.

As the movement grows in popularity, though, Martin maintains a focus on holding true to the soul and values of the region. "Oh lord, I'm a born-again Hoosier," he laughed. "That's what they call me."

At the end of the day, the producer is realistic about MFW's future prospects and reputation. "Not saying we are going to be the Oscars of the fashion industry," he said. "I am very content being the Independent Film Festival."

A designer's dream

Martin is no stranger to the craftsmanship he hopes to showcase during MFW. He's a graduate of Purdue University, where he majored in computer engineering, but found his true calling while studying at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.

"After being in the corporate world for a while, I was like huh, that's what I want to do for the rest of my life?" said Martin.

A few phone calls to some close friends later, he started making his dreams a reality. Merging his creative initiative with the skills and patience he learned on the computer-engineering track at Purdue, he got to work.

The product was Catou Couture, named in honor of his grandmother, Marie Elizabeth Catou Louiseau.

Born in Haiti, raised in Brooklyn, Indiana-schooled and now a certified globetrotter, Martin is on his way to becoming a mogul in his own right.

"We get producers that have the same vision for the city. When I do Midwest Fashion Week, I think like a producer," said Martin. "If I think as a designer, I would be too selfish."

Helping Martin along the way since the summer of 2010 has been ImageCube founder Sola Adelowo. "When we met, it was a meeting of two different worlds that have a very common interest," Adelowo said. "We both love fashion. We just put our forces together."

The Texas-born image consultant credited her Nigerian parents and fabric merchant grandmother with helping her grow her business and develop an interest in the fashion world, including fine fabrics, tailors, and personalized clothing.

Adelowo has harnessed her vast cultural background to provide a unique outlook on what MFW can become. Working on the programming side of the producer role, she emphasized the importance of a healthy partnership in organizing an event like MFW.

"It just works well together," she said. "I don't see fashion as something that distracts me; I see fashion as a tool."

The Midwest rep

Adelowo explained that as a tool, fashion connects a fraternity of designers and models with the larger community. For this to work, it's important that Indianapolis first be seen as cosmopolitan. It'll take time, she said, but it will happen.

"It's all perception," Adelowo said. "The cool factor."

She and Martin hope that a Monday night event blending fashion and sports, one of many themed nights, will help boost that "cool factor," attracting larger audiences and enhancing the Midwest's reputation.

MFW has already begun to chip away at the surface of the region's outdated style status — high fashion was nearly nonexistent in middle America when they began, or at least very hard to find. Embarking on its fifth year, the celebration of Midwest design shows no signs of slowing down.

"Where we are now, I didn't know we would be here so fast," said Martin. "This is where I thought we'd be in 10 years."

Find more information and a full schedule of events at www.midwestfashionweek.com

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by Melissa Fears

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