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California dreamin' : Designer resurrects 1960s California shoe brand SeaVees

By ELIZABETH HAMILTON news-press correspondent
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Steven Tiller was a fifth-grader in 1970s Norman, Okla., when he first heard the siren call of the California dream.

"This kid moved in from California and he brought OP boardshorts and surfing T-shirts and his older brother Larry's vinyl collection," Mr. Tiller told the News-Press. "Through the well-worn grooves of that stuff and the warmth of the sun ... I fell in love with this lifestyle."

It would be another several decades before Mr. Tiller made his way to the West Coast.

After graduating with a degree in marketing in the 1990s from the University of Oklahoma, he moved to Portland, Maine, and began what would become a long career as a shoe designer, eventually working for major brands like Keds, Steve Madden, Nine West and Cole Haan.

In the mid-2000s, Mr. Tiller was shopping as a trend spotter for Sperry Top-Sider in Tokyo when he stumbled into a vintage Americana shop. It was there that he discovered an unopened shoebox. Inside were a pair of shoes he'd never seen before: SeaVees, a casual sneaker designed in 1960s California. The brand, which had ended after only seven years, had been a pioneer in advancing men's casual footwear.

"I bought the shoe because it spoke to me," Mr. Tiller said. "It had the seduction of the sea in the name."

And, it was "California."

Mr. Tiller, who had always wanted to branch out as an independent designer, began to wonder if this might be the serendipitous opportunity to realize his California dream.

"I started to think it was too good to be true," he said. "The fact that somebody doesn't own it (SeaVees), the fact that it's just out there, it's dormant, it's basically up for grabs."

But luck was on his side and in 2010, Mr. Tiller moved with his wife, two kids and dog to Santa Barbara, a town he saw as quintessentially California, and in 2011 he re-established the SeaVees brand.

The company opened its new office space in July at 118 E. Ortega St. In September, it launched three initiatives, including an appointment-only fitting room centered on Mr. Tiller's belief that "purchasing shoes online can be daunting."

"The fitting room is a nontraditional retail space," Mr. Tiller told the News-Press on a recent day inside it. "We're asked all the time by people who are just getting to know the brand, 'Where can I try on the shoes?' It's loosely based on the tasting rooms around town. ... If you're not sure of your SeaVees size, you can come in here."

Every day, several customers visit the fitting room. Sliding garage doors on two of the four walls let in sunlight and the sea breeze. Painted behind Mr. Tiller's desk is the California Route 64 logo in light gray and hanging on the adjacent wall is a series of photographs depicting the palm trees, bicycles and sunlit streets of Ojai.

The photographs were taken by Cara Robbins, a Santa Barbara photographer, and are part of the second SeaVees initiative launched in September: California Stories.

"It's a series of films and photographs," Mr. Tiller explained. "We select just really authentic people and we pull out of them their own unique California story. ... California Stories becomes a unique way for us to express our voice and capture the allure of California."



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whether you're a native Californian and you'd never leave or you left for school and you couldn't wait to get back or you're like me from Oklahoma and longing to live in California my whole life."

SeaVeEs' third initiative is called Parking Space Sessions.

"We had discovered a while back that there were a lot of bands that we were listening to that, come to find out, were wearing SeaVeEs," he said. "We have started to reach out to them and as they come through town, they come by here and we fit them with shoes and ask them to do a pop-up concert in our parking lot."

Mr. Tiller hopes to have four bands play per year. In October, Chicago-based The Orwells stopped by the lot for an unpublicized performance that drew a small crowd.

The theme of 1960s California threads through SeaVeEs concerts, stories and shoes.

"Every single shoe that I design is named after and derived from a date in 1960s California history," Mr. Tiller said.

He lifted his foot, showing the 0264 baja slip-on he wore that day.

"Surfing Magazine did an article on road tripping surfers who went to Baja, Mexico, because Southern California beaches were just so crowded," he said. "There's an article called 'Safari to Baja' and, being inspired by that article, looking back at old photographs from the era, beachside footwear and what these early surfers were wearing, we designed and launched the 0264 baja slip-on."

Despite the historical bent, Mr. Tiller emphasized, "We're not your dad's shoe brand."

"We work hard to constantly bring our attention back to the brand's origin as a way of respecting what happened before us," he told the News-Press. "We find that our young consumer is nostalgic for something that they've never known."

SeaVeEs customers include those in their 20s and 30s, as well as middle-aged adults who remember California in the 1960s.

Though the original SeaVeEs was a men's brand, the new SeaVeEs come in both men's and women's shoes.

There are 25 SeaVeEs styles and, allowing for color variety, a total of 60 different shoes. They are sold in the U.S. and abroad, both online and in 300 retail stores globally, with the U.S. as the best market, followed by Japan. The fabrics, which include leather, canvas and linen, are from Japan and Italy. The shoes are made in China. Prices run close to \$100.

Most days, Mr. Tiller is so busy researching and designing, he forgets he's living the California dream. When he stops to ponder, it takes him by surprise.

"In May 1966, National Geographic dedicated an issue to California and the title of it was 'The Golden Magnet,'" he said. "I saw that in doing my research and it just stopped me in my tracks. The golden magnet. That's it. There's something about the allure of California."

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FYI

SeaVeEs, the Santa Barbara-based casual shoe company, opened its new fitting room in downtown. The fitting room is available by appointment 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday at 118 E. Ortega St. For more information, visit www.seavees.com. To make an appointment, call 770-2633 or email thefittingroom@seavees.com.



Designer Steven Tiller resurrected the 1960s California shoe brand SeaVeEs in 2011. SeaVeEs' new fitting room in downtown Santa Barbara is available by appointment 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. Above, Mr. Tiller crafted these sneakers for SeaVeEs' men's and women's summer 2014 collection. Below, an original SeaVeEs ad from a 1964 Playboy magazine.



SeaVeEs' men's spring 2014 collection will be available in stores in January. THOMAS KELSEY / NEWS-PRESS



The Orwells played a spontaneous performance in the parking lot behind SeaVeEs in October as part of the company's Parking Space Sessions initiative to feature local bands who share SeaVeEs' California vision. The unpublicized concert attracted a small crowd outside the fitting room

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