



SHE'S A PISTOL

BY WENDY DENNIS

With a Texan in the White House and Americans embracing the rugged spirit of Republicanism, the fashion gods are channeling the Wild West this season. As someone who has harbored a serious cowboy fantasy for most of her life, Y'pee-ki-yo-ki-ay is all I can say. I'm talking about a devotion so deep I have driven Route 66, worshipped at the Cowboy Hall of Fame, watched *Lonesome Dove* until my eyeballs exploded, snapped up a mint condition copy of *100 Posters of Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, lived on a ranch in Montana, and danced a two-step with a cowboy named Kip. For a Jewish girl from Toronto, this is serious stuff.

I once met a hooker who told me she'd found her calling by watching *Gunsmoke* as a kid. Miss Kitty, she explained, appeared to be having way more fun than any of the other women in town, and she definitely had the best clothes. This made sense to me, because when I was growing up in the '50s, I thought cowgirls were the coolest women on earth. Alas, the job opportunities were limited for girls in those days, especially one whose mother dressed her in organza party dresses and patent leather Mary Janes and whose gene pool was not exactly lousy with bronco-riding, tough-talking, hard-drinking, rhinestone-wearing cattle queens, bandits and ranch women.

Posses may have been scarce in my hood, but a girl must have her dreams, and mine was to live large like Miss Annie Oakley, who, it has been said, was supporting herself by the age of nine, could shoot the head off a running quail by the age of 12, and, at the height of her career performing miraculous stunts with Buffalo Bill, was pulling down bigger bucks than the President of the United States. This, let me remind you, was a woman adopted by Sitting Bull. A woman fawned over by the Prince of Wales. A woman who once shot the ashes off Kaiser Wilhelm's cigarette. Far be it from me to disparage the spiritually impoverished preoccupations of celebrity culture and *US Weekly* magazine, but as worship-worthy female icons go, Miss Oakley could kick Sarah Jessica Parker's puny Gap ass clear across Wyoming.

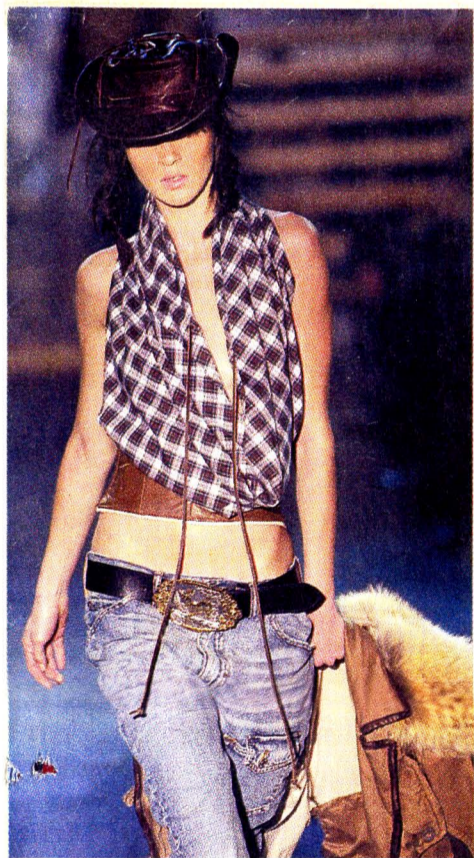
Cowgirls, as Madonna well knew, were the first gender outlaws. As a girl

with a loathing for frills and a taste for adventure, I loved everything about them. I loved their flowy skirts and fringes and the insouciant way they carried their rifles and their Stetsons. I loved their feminine toughness and daring and take-no-guff ways. Mostly, though, I loved the magnificently defiant contradictions of them. And really, if you think about it, how can you not love a woman who wears spurs?

According to Candace Savage, my authority on all things cowgirl, there was Lizzie Johnson Williams, one of Texas's most successful cattle dealers and entrepreneurs, who married the charming but drink-loving Reverend Hezekiah Williams on the condition that she retain sole control of her own property, including any she acquired while married. There was Willie Matthews, who disguised herself in her brother's clothes and rode from Kansas to New Mexico to land a job as a cowpuncher, fuelled by her father's spellbinding stories of riding the range. And then there was the woman jilted at the altar — a woman I'd have killed to meet — who dressed in drag and rode horseback "as reckless and fast as the rest of them" for months, until she finally met up with her ex, drew her revolver, said, Guess who honey? and was apparently satisfied enough with the results to head for home with the assurance that he'd never trifle with another girl's affections again.

Of course, if you can't actually go west, young woman, the next best thing to being there is bolstering your wardrobe with a little cowgirl chic. This season, designers like Michael Kors, Hermès, Stella McCartney, Salvatore Ferragamo, Dolce & Gabbana, Jean-Paul Gaultier and many others pay homage to this American classic by celebrating the urban cowgirl in us all. Choose from staples like dirty denim and ruffled suede skirts and checkered shirts and shiny calf capes. Assert yourself with tons of fringe, fur, vintage belts with monster buckles, dangly earrings, and slouchy moccasin boots. Top off the ensemble with a Davy Crockett hat and nobody will even think of messing with you. Once you're in the Calamity Jane zone, here's my advice: Pour yourself a stiff one and toast the fearless women who blazed the trail so that you could ride off into the sunset of your own extremely cool life. And don't even think about making that a *Cosmopolitan*.

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Clockwise from top left: Elizabeth Taylor in *Giant*; Renée Zellweger in *Cold Mountain*; Matthew Williamson, fall 2004; Uma Thurman and Rain Phoenix in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*; calendar print of a cowgirl ca. 1909; D&G, fall 2004; Jane Russell as Billy the Kid's girlfriend, Rio, in *Calamity Jane*; DSquared2, fall 2004; Marianne Cochran and Clint Eastwood in *Fistful of Dollars*. Inset: Jane Russell in *Outlaw*.