

Fashion Backward

By Nevin Martell

DISCLAIMER: There is nothing obscene or potentially offensive in this story, though the word 'penis' does appear once. Now it appears twice.

The Castillo de San Cristóbal in Puerto Rico is one of those imposing historical landmarks that conjures images of epic battles, scandalous romances and cloak 'n' dagger intrigue. There are beautiful ocean views, towering turrets and gigantic black cannons spaced out along its impressive stone walls. The centuries-old fortress has been gently worn down by the elements, but it still possesses a stirring majesty.

That is, until you insert a 9-year-old American kid wearing a neon green shirt, Coke bottle glasses (with superfluous sunglasses strung around his neck), an ill-fitting white baseball cap with a white braid on the rim, and shorts plastered with skulls and crossbones. Though he's leaning against a cannon in a pose he cribbed from *Never Say Never*, there's absolutely nothing suave or debonair about him.

That kid was me.

Most people get to edit their childhoods, because much of what they'd rather forget wasn't photographed. I'm not that lucky. I ruined a lot of family photo ops, though my depraved indifference to style never stopped my father from snapping endless pictures of me trampling good taste. The worse I dressed, the cooler my father assured me I looked and the more shots he took. There are literally dozens of a photo albums jam-packed with my crimes against high fashion. My outfits were so bad, even low fashion would have been offended. Evidence like this shot from the Caribbean fortress is why I have so many memories of dressing like the slow kid that somebody left at the zoo.

No matter where we traveled, I did my subconscious best to be the loudest dresser in the area code. There is photographic evidence of my ill-conceived Davy Crocket phase (buckskin jacket, coonskin cap, brown corduroy pants, and a wooden pistol stuck in my belt) that I introduced to Nova Scotia during one summer vacation. From 1987 until I discovered Nirvana, I made a point of wearing every bad hair metal t-shirt I could pick up on every school field trip and Model U.N. meeting. I still have a dresser drawer full of t-shirts emblazoned with Britny Fox, Winger, Cinderella and dozens of other long-haired, glammed-up guys who couldn't define the word 'androgynous' even as they personified it. Unfortunately, my parents still have all the photos of me wearing these t-shirts, so my chances of indie rock credibility is ruined forever.

Perhaps the most arresting photos of my misplaced aesthetic intentions are in the series my father took on our trip to Pentecost Island, a small blip in the South Pacific that is part of the republic of Vanuatu. It's out of the way in the profoundest sense of the phrase, but limited accessibility never stopped my father from pushing us to Captain Cook levels of exploration. In fact, the farther a location was from clean linens, telephones and US Embassies, the better. All these stipulations were part of an effort to avoid over-touristed sites, but it often lead to the avoidance of any comfort, much less luxury.

This particular out-of-the-way gem has a single claim to fame, land diving, which is basically bungee jumping, minus the safety harness. On Pentecost land diving is not a sport though, but a fertility rite that insures divers have bountiful harvests. The locals construct massive towers out of sticks lashed together with jungle creepers, then they jump off these rickety structures with little regard for personal safety wearing nothing more than a reed penis sheath, an appropriately pious expression and the vines strapped to their ankles. They are brave, both for what they do and what they wear.

We arrived on the island on a small Cessna plane that was literally held together with duct tape ("It's stronger than steel," I remember the pilot reassuring us as my father naively nodded) and metaphorically bound together by the fervent prayers my family ceaselessly uttered during the short flight from the main island. When we landed, we were met by a local

guide, who was in charge of one of the few vehicles on Pentecost – a beat up old US Army jeep that had been in service since the Second World War. There was duct tape holding together the jeep as well and my father cheerfully pointed that out to all of us, reminding us that work like that meant that we were in safe hands. We rolled our eyes as we renewed our beseeching to the heavens above.

Though we were there to watch the land divers, we soon turned into local attractions ourselves. My blonde haired sister and I were the only white children some of the younger islanders had ever seen, so they crowded around the jeep as we made our way slowly up to the jump site. I couldn't have known that I was going to be the object of attention, but I certainly dressed the part. I had on thick glasses, a white t-shirt advertising a Pennsylvania youth soccer team and bright blue fanny pack to complement a pair of tiny gym shorts that Richard Simmons would call "outrageous." It's sad to think that some of those kids grew up thinking that this was how all foreigners dressed. If any anthropological studies were going on while we were there, I single-handedly ruined them by doing inestimable damage to those childrens' expectations of the outside world.

We stopped at one of the small villages along the crude dirt road that winds around the island to try some of the local cuisine. I still remember the donuts we ate with our inquisitive hosts while crouched around a fire. These South Pacific pastries were misshapen and not particularly sweet, but my sister and I thought they were the greatest epicurean delight since we discovered Reese's Peanut Butter Cups on our first Halloween. My father loved this scene of cross-cultural bonding through snacking, so he ran through nearly three rolls of film before we even got to the land diving site. There are numerous shots of me, wolfing down donuts as I crouched on the ground, my fanny pack dangling down like an extra Smurf-like appendage. It's the kind of picture only a father could love.

Reliving such wince-worthy evidence of bad fashion choices, I'm still not sure how I became such an exuberant defiler of common sense dressing. I know now that I *loved* to wear clothing and accessories that never should have been worn, much less worn together. Tweed jacket, a Sherlock Holmes deerstalker cap and Dockers? Yeah, I rocked it. Black jeans with

spiked silver studs paired with a Guns ‘n’ Roses *Appetite for Destruction* t-shirt and white Reeboks? I wore that, too. Genuine leather lederhosen from Germany with slate gray socks pulled up to my kneecaps in the middle of summer? Um, yep. Mandarin orange Ocean Pacific shorts, a Batman shirt and a blue baseball cap with yellow lightning bolts? Guilty as charged.

One thing can be said for all those outfits though: I always stood out. In fact, my mother bought me the Mercury-inspired lightning bolt hat so she could easily find me in airports when we were traveling. My sister had her own hat with little silver wings on it, but she always managed to look cute while wearing it, unlike yours truly. It’s a testament to my mother’s thoughtful protectiveness that I never once got lost. I also blame her for the fact that strangers in exotic ports of call often wanted to take pictures with me. (I now know that they weren’t mistaking me for a child star, which is what my mother told me at the time).

I was still head-to-toe fashion-averse when I got to high school. In 9th grade I insisted on writing on my favorite pair of khaki Bugle Boys pants with a special pen that created 3D marks. Not only was my puffy penmanship ugly, I didn’t have a unified theme. “Ozzy” was scrawled next to a peace sign, while “Poison” found itself sharing a back pocket with a yellow smiley face. I guess I was a conflicted kid: I wanted to rebel *and* get along with everyone. And that’s how you come to have a 14-year-old boy sporting a Bob Marley t-shirt while listening to Metallica’s *Ride the Lightning* on his Walkman and obediently taking out the trash every Tuesday night.

What is interesting about these fashion faux pas is that most of my family are snappy dressers. My sister always stayed en vogue with ease, as did my mother (though for years she wore nothing but purple). However, there is my father to consider, since he had an inverse relationship with his fashion sense as he grew older. When we traveled when I was younger, I can remember him wearing loose fitting Guatemalan shirts with an open neckline and linen slacks. I thought that look was pretty cool; I still do. But as he got closer to retirement, he abandoned this tack and decided to embark on what I’ll lovingly call his “flamboyant adventurer” look.

At some point in his mid-sixties, my father decided that linen wasn't good enough for him in the tropical climes where we often traveled. He wanted something breathable and quick drying, yet hearty enough to withstand the rigors of an active outdoorsman's life. That's when he discovered Tarponwear, a technologically advanced fabric company that uses a lot of ®s and ™s to describe their clothing. Basically, it's high-tech outdoor gear made by fishermen. Unfortunately, these fishermen had the eyesight of jellyfish, because all their misguided paraphernalia only comes in unfathomably repugnant colors – dead salmon, moldy blue and anemic taupe. Just think of the wall color of your colonoscopist's office in hell and you start to get an idea.

Even if the colors didn't turn your stomach, their unique and patented "venting" system certainly would have. Though Tarponwear undoubtedly cools down the wearer, the strategically placed stretches of mesh unfortunately regale bystanders with all the odors that are normally contained by a run-of-the-mill cotton shirt. So while my father could contentedly sit back and cool off with four fingers of Scotch after ten hours in a rickety fishing sloop, the rest of us were treated to an olfactory journey through his day – the stench of the catch, the vinegary wreak of sweat and the unidentifiable strains of whatever lunch my father had spilled on himself while concentrating on hooking "the big one." All this exacerbated by the fact that my Dad always enjoyed a relaxed cocktail "hour" before dinner, so by the time we actually ate we were always torn between vomiting and wolfing down our meals.

My whole family reacted poorly to my father's new choices in leisurewear, but that didn't stop him from filling his closet with more and more Tarponwear. As our complaints grew louder, his allegiance to the Tarponwear's brand lifestyle became stronger. To this day, I'm convinced that his rebellion against style and his unwillingness to listen to his family was a big part of my parents divorce a few years later.

My father's unapologetic desire to flaunt convention did have one positive effect: it made me realize that I had been unfashionably out of step myself. As his poor fashion choices drove a

wedge into our family, suddenly looking like no one else within a thousand mile radius didn't seem so cool after all. All the heavy metal t-shirts, skate punk gear, historically correct costumes and odd neon color choices didn't seem like such a good idea, because it made me stand out for all the wrong reasons. The clothes forced people to look at me, but I really just wanted to fit in and have people accept me. What I didn't realize, until I came face-to-face with my father's abusive clothing choices, was that people oftentimes judge us by the clothes that we wear. Unfortunately, mine were saying something like, "Warning: I am the biggest freak in the Universe." I certainly didn't intend to push people away just because I wanted to boast to the world that I enjoyed colors normally reserved for highway construction warning signs and that I was familiar with colonial dress codes in New England. Tarponwear was my epiphany and it changed the way I dressed forever. Now the only time you'll find me in a deerstalker cap is at Halloween when I'm doing my best Sherlock Holmes impression.

Not that my transformation from caterpillar to butterfly happened over night – or that it is by any means complete – but now I dress well enough that my wife even compliments my sense of style on occasion. She has great taste and I don't want to let her down by slipping back into old bad habits that could destroy her ability to take me seriously. You can be sure that if we ever go to Puerto Rico on a romantic getaway, I'll be leaving the skull and crossbones shorts at home. After all, there's no reason I need to ruin the photos in my new family's album, too.