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Sole proprietor

From heel to toe tip, West Town cordwainer does it all by hand

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Erick Geer Wilcox is equally fond of making shoes and carving the wooden forms for shoemaking, called "lasts." But since each task is physically taxing in its own right, he's found he can't do both and still have feeling in his fingers.

"I could have gone in a couple directions," Wilcox, a soft-spoken man with a red goatee and multiple piercings, says wistfully. "I'm as much in love with lasts as I am with shoes."

Ultimately, Wilcox settled on shoemaking as his craft, lacking the "very large machinery" required for carving lasts. Wilcox runs his one-man company, RiotGeer, out of a small warehouse studio in the Kinzie Industrial Corridor, keeping things simple by concentrating on a single line of women's shoes: the Elf. The pointed toes and curved soles of the Elf's six variations—ranging from the flirty "Petal-Tongued Mule" in butter yellow to the courtesan-like "Button"—recall Moroccan boots and traditional English clogs called "duck toes," as well as Geer's fondness for Art Nouveau motifs. They're slightly offbeat without being flashy.

Figuring out exactly how to make shoes wasn't easy, considering that the trade has been all but dead in the United States for the past century or so. Wilcox took a course in footwear design while working on a degree in fashion at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. But he had to pick up the finer points through trial, error, and online advice from the far-flung membership of the Honourable Cordwainers Co., a guild for American shoemakers that despite its archaic-sounding name was founded in 1984. The guild has a conference every year and a coat of arms adorned with three goats' heads (in honor of their forebears' use of Musoli goatskin in the fashioning of 13th century Europe's finest shoes).



Erick Geer Wilcox at work on an "Elf." Photos by Frank Pinc

"There's so few people doing it anymore that it's one of the few resources to find out how things are done," says Wilcox of the guild. "There's little trade school education available."

Wilcox toils alone in his workshop, where shelves stacked with white and yellow shoe forms greet the

occasional customer. In practically every corner, it seems, another piece of specialized secondhand machinery awaits a call to duty: a motorized brushing and buffing contraption called a "finisher," a hydraulic "sole press" that uses anywhere from 150 to 300 pounds of pressure to cement a sole to an upper.

"Right now, I don't use it a lot," Wilcox says of the press, which he bought on eBay from a former bootmaker. For the machine to work properly for his styles, he'd need to build custom attachments.

"You have to pretty much know how to fix the stuff yourself," he says. "Or you have to pay a lot of money to have somebody come from far away."

Wilcox's Elf shoes range in price from \$250 to \$450 a pair. Clients must make an appointment for a fitting, where Wilcox measures the dimensions of their feet with a tape measure, then chooses the "best last for them size wise" from his shelves of plastic molds. He then builds the shoes, which takes about a week—from etching and cutting the cowhide tanned at a factory on Elston and Ashland to stitching the pieces together on an old sewing machine.

"The reason I have a machine for stitching is that I don't want to be a candidate for arthritis at an early age," Wilcox explains. "I don't want to have to quit early because I've ruined a tendon. It's hard work." Even in small factories, "they generally have one person who does one job, and that's all they do."

In the future, Wilcox hopes to be able to hire a few people to accomplish some of the repetitive tasks, but right now it's slow going.

Once the shoe is complete, the customer comes in for a second fitting, after which Wilcox might make more adjustments for a good fit with a healthy amount of "toe spring," or wiggle room between toe and shoe tip. "It's sometimes subjective," Wilcox says of the fit. "Perhaps they're used to having their toes pinched. I want them to be comfortable."

Custom shoes cost more. Clients must pay around \$150 to have their own lasts made, and Wilcox generally uses a more expensive vegetable-tanned Italian leather for this type of work. He first crafts a model of the shoe in low-grade leather to make sure the measurements are perfect, then remakes it in the finer material.

Getting the fit right is the part of the job that can take a lifetime to master, the part where Wilcox feels an apprenticeship would have helped. But where would he get the training? The only other cordwainers he knows of in Chicago are a cop on the Northwest Side who makes "mushroom boots," and an elusive "older gentleman" rumored to be making custom shoes. Wilcox is now the lone instructor of the two shoemaking classes offered at the School of the Art Institute.

"I'm still pretty young at this," Wilcox says. "I don't have enough experience under my belt with some things. I came from a design background, so I focused more on how things look and I came to the fitting part of it later.

"But I'm getting there. I want to make sure the customers are happy—and I get the experience."

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