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# liberty boot co.



**I**T SEEMS AN UNLIKELY BIRTH-PLACE of a world-renowned cowboy boot company, but *Liberty Boot Co.* kicked things off in London, England, during the height of **glitter rock** in 1974. **TONY BENATTAR** was a 16-year-old Canadian transplant from the Montreal suburbs shopping with his father for a pair of shoes to start the school year.



**PLATFORM SHOES WERE THE RAGE, BUT NOT FOR BENATTAR.** “Platform shoes would have gotten you beaten up in my neighborhood (back in Canada),” Benattar recalls. “There was no way I was going to wear platforms.”

So they kept shopping, and when Benattar saw a pair of Frye boots in a store window, he was sold. After all, like many boys of his generation, he had grown up with a *Have Gun, Will Travel* outfit. He was shocked when his father forked over the cash for the boots — “They had to be three times as expensive as the shoes we were looking at, but my dad wasn’t digging those platforms, either.” — and even more stunned at the reaction he got at school.

“Those boots made me a star at school,” Benattar recalls. “I was the Canadian kid in cowboy boots. I mean it was an instant identity. I remember even teachers taking me aside and going, ‘Where did you get those boots?’”

He wore those boots through high school and all the way to Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, then passed them down to his younger brother. “They turned green from all the salt on the road, but those boots are still in somebody’s closet in my family. Those got me started.”

**T**HERE WERE DETOURS, OF COURSE. Benattar was an unemployed college graduate when he saw his college roommate wearing a pair of cowboy boots. He recalled his Frye boots, so he got a job, saved money and bought a new pair of boots. “Those pieces of crap wore out so damn fast, they cost me every penny I could earn, and I needed another pair a year later. I remember freaking, ‘How can I afford to get a pair of cowboy boots?’”

He was doing seasonal work as a landscaper while his wife Robyn’s acting career was winding down. During the off season they would winter on the beaches

of Mexico. They decided that they wanted to work together. Unable to find cool pointy cowboy boots in Toronto, Benattar started thinking of a way he and Robyn could work together, spend more time in Mexico and get some cool cowboy boots. They started looking for cowboy boots in Mexico but quickly saw that there was the same mundane choice of styles. At that point fate took them to a party where they met a young Frenchman wearing some very pointy and very black cowboy boots.

Yan Ferry, then a quality control agent for a European company called GO WEST, and the Benattars became instant amigos. Ferry sent the Benattars to Leon, Mexico, the boot-making capital of the world, on “the bus ride from hell.”

“I remember Robyn complaining a fair bit going up there, and I told her, ‘Honey, one day this might make us a million dollars,’” Benattar recalls.

**I**N LEON, BENATTAR FOUND THE BOOTS HE HAD BEEN LOOKING FOR, and Ferry introduced him to the head of the company.

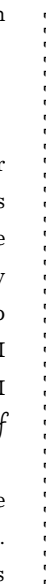
“Here I was, 26 years old, nobody’s taking me seriously back home,” Benattar says, “and here’s this guy, a tall, impressive man, and I’m telling him what I want to do with cowboy boots and he’s acting like it makes some sense. Of course he is, because there are a bunch of European guys who look just like me who are selling thousands of his boots in Europe. I didn’t know it was a trend, but it was.”

**The head of that boot company? Vicente Fox, now president of Mexico.**

Benattar bought two pairs of boots, one for himself and one for his brother, and went home satisfied. Back in Toronto, he visited a hip boutique that carried cowboy boots, but nothing like the fancy pair Benattar had bought from Fox’s company. The owners eyes popped, and they made arrangements for a meeting at



“BLUEBIRDS ROUGH OUT”



the bar next door.

There, Benattar showed them his brother's boots and pulled off one of his and set it on the table. "Within minutes, 20 people had gathered around — the hip, cool Toronto musicians who were downing a few pints on a Friday afternoon — and pointing, 'I want those pair,' and 'I want those,' and these guys from the boutique are looking at each other, thinking, 'We must be on to something.'"

They placed an order, and Benattar left the bar.

"I went out and bought a new car," he says. "That's ridiculous when you think about it, but that's what I did. **This was going to be good. I knew I could design more Rock 'n' Roll boots than I was seeing out there.**"

**A**ND HE DID. WITHIN A YEAR, TONY BENATTAR BOOTS — "very rock 'n' roll influenced, long curved up pointy toes, heels so underslung it was hard to step on your cigarette butt" — were the third-highest-selling cowboy boot line in Toronto. A year later, they were No. 3 in Canada. Darryl Hall of HALL AND OATES bought a pair, and has continued to be one of Benattar's customers. From 1987 to 1993, TONY BENATTAR BOOTS was a rocking little company in Canada.

"I was proud and happy with the work we were doing," says Benattar, who partnered with his wife and Ferry in the enterprise, "and saw you could make money and have fun and be creative and hang around with like-minded people."

Reality struck in the 1990s, however. Business slowed. Stores closed. Canada relaxed



"ROCKERO"



their boots blew mine out of the water. They were getting famous, making awesome boots and having a blast. I bought a book and had them autograph it for me."

Realizing that Canada alone could not support his dream, Benattar sat down with Ferry. Both agreed that they wanted to make "high-end, crazy boots." In January 1993, LIBERTY BOOT CO. debuted at the Denver market.

"We had put our life savings in that," Benattar says. "We rented our showroom, did a little black-and-white

its import laws to allow U.S. boot companies to come into Canada with fewer tariffs. "I could see that our lifestyle might go back to the old way," Benattar says.

**W**HEN HE ATTENDED the Western and English Sales Association market in Denver in 1992, and picked up a copy of **THE COWBOY BOOT BOOK**, written by Tyler Beard with photography by Jim Arndt, he was admittedly jealous, especially of El Paso-based ROCKETBUSTER USA. "I mean, here were guys my age, and

ad announcing "There's a new brand on the range," and put down a Mexican blanket with fifteen cowboy boots on it. "We were so broke at this stage, we had spent six months trying to produce these samples, train the guys, send them into the States (at PEDRO MUNOZ'S STALLION BOOTS) to learn how to carve toe boxes and to train very good bootmakers how to be even better bootmakers."

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"LIVE TO ROCK"



was signed. Tyler Beard walked in next, and a pair of LIBERTY BOOTS wound up on the back cover of his next book, *ART OF THE BOOT*, alongside legendary bootmakers Dave Little and Stephanie Ferguson. LIBERTY BOOT CO. was off and running. "Americans welcomed us with open arms," Benattar says. "Here was a Canadian guy manufacturing boots in Mexico."

**B**UT THERE WAS A PRICE. For the next three years, Benattar never drew a paycheck, and when the U.S. economy slumped, orders fell off — 22 accounts in southern California just disappeared. Ferry and Benattar were running out of resources.

"The economy was horrible," Benattar says. "The numbers were absolutely terrifying. I remember one friend telling me, 'Tony, your horse is dead and buried. Maybe it's time to get off.'"

But Benattar refused to bury his dream. He and Ferry agreed to go their separate ways in 1996. Ferry went on to open OLD GRINGO BOOTS & BELTS in 2000, manufacturing quality, mid-range boots out of Leon. Benattar found a new partner, his old friend Luis Torres, owner of BOTAS CARBORCA, a family-owned bootmaking business in Leon.

"Luis had the insight and foresight to see that Liberty could be like Ford-owned Jaguar," Benattar says. "Together we could be the high end and show the boot world that Mexico could make these wonderful, beautiful boots, and that would attract people to his lower-end line. He was willing to indulge my crazy ideas for a few years to get back on track and make my samples without charging

me through the head."

In 1997, LIBERTY was relaunched at the Denver market. Benattar had avoided bankruptcy. Two years later, he began to think, "This could be good again." Encouraged by Torres, he followed his heart.

**T**HE COMPANY GOT A TREMENDOUS BOOST in 1999, when Madonna wore LIBERTY BOOTS on tour and in a music video. Those boots came out of a tequila-

induced brainstorming session with Benattar, Ferry and Lucchese's John McAlpine. "What came out of that was almost a Gucci boot, really tall but black, on a cowboy last but with a taller than normal heel so when they look down at the foot they see a cowboy foot but when they see it on the shelf, it had a stovepipe top, simple chain stitch, a really simple boot. **Madonna made Western wearable again. She made it mainstream and fashionable again. She's the pope of fashion. That was huge.**"

Tragedy struck in 2000, however, when Robyn was diagnosed with cancer. She died the following year.

"This company supported me through that," Benattar says. "I tell you, *Back at the Ranch* (of Santa Fe, New Mexico) and *Buffalo Chips* (in New York),

*Cry Baby Ranch* (in Denver) kept ordering boots even though I wasn't able to do the service. They helped us out a lot."

In 2002, haunted by memories of the previous year, Benattar decided he needed a break. So he took off across America in a Ford Mustang convertible, setting up trunk shows at accounts across the States. It really was more of a much-needed journey, a bridge between his former life and whatever the new one held, than a



business trip, but six months later, Benattar realized his business had doubled.

**B**ENATTAR HASN'T SLOWED DOWN, or looked back. Today, he's at home in Toronto. When he isn't making boots, he's playing bass and dobro with the *Cameron Family Singers* at the CAMERON HOUSE or with the Latin-influenced *Rancho Misterio*.

"I've buried myself in LIBERTY BOOT COMPANY and the music these last few years, and have been quite shocked at how much fun this has been," he says. "And I've managed in my own way to tie the two things together."

*Celebrity customers* include Madonna, Steven Tyler, Ralph Lauren, Jean Paul Gaultier, Sheryl Crow, Lucinda Williams, The Godfather of Soul James Brown, Outcast's Andre 3000, Jennifer Tilly, Bruce Springsteen, Dusty Hill, Rodger Daltry, Kid Rock, Lucinda Williams, Billy Bob Thornton, Hilary Duff, Sandra Bullock, Angelina Jolie, Avril Lavigne, and New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson to name a few.

LIBERTY BOOT CO. has had mucho exposure in Tyler Beard's last two Cowboy Boot Books (*ART OF THE BOOT* and *COWBOY BOOTS*; GIBBS SMITH publisher), and is regularly featured in the COWBOY BOOT CALENDAR.

LIBERTY BOOT CO. was called the 14th best Cowboy Boot Company in history by TRUE WEST MAGAZINE. LIBERTY BOOTS have been part of various museum shows in America, including EAST MEETS WEST at the George Bush Presidential Library in College Station, TX; THE MUSEUM OF THE HORSE WESTERN EXHIBIT in Ruidoso, NM; and recently at the BUFFALO BILL MUSEUM in Golden, CO.

LIBERTY BOOT CO. has also — in conjunction with New York pop artist Ed Adler and the *Cameron Family Singers* — mounted the multi-media show POP GOES THE COWBOY in Toronto for the last 5 years. This show has travelled to New York and Dallas, and will appear in Portland, OR in February 2006.

But for Benattar, it's all about the boots.

**"I think the inspiration is the golden era, not the guys riding the range, but the '40s."**

"What we want to do is produce a boot that is every bit as good as it used to be. So how do you do that? You do it the way they used to do it. You hand carve the toe boxes, you hand cut the inlays. You use really great leathers, and an all-leather insole and outsole. What that does is these boots will take the impression of your foot, unlike cork insoles, because they're leather."

And most importantly, that LIBERTY BOOT trademark:

**"absolutely edge-  
pushing design."**



TONY BENATTAR

*For more information on Liberty Boot, visit our website*

**www.libertybootco.com**

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