

would be some mark to indicate how old the swoosh is, like the rings of a tree," she says dreamily.

Holden admits to feeling crestfallen that so few of her mesh-and-love-bead epiphanies have found their way into Nike products. "You might find something in the East Village that you think is really cool, and you'll show it to the designers and they'll say, 'Oh, yeah. We thought of that twenty years ago.'" She's not alone. There is a mounting feeling of unease among the trend-trackers. "So many people were going around saying, 'I'm a coolhunter,'" says Marta Loeb of the Boston-based youth-research firm Triple-Dot/Y Axis. "Lots of clients had bad experiences. There was bound to be a backlash."



David Art Wales

PERHAPS THE MAIN FACTOR WHIPPING up the backlash is the age-old question: Where's the beef? Or, more to the point, where's the black-chocolate stout? Where are the white-water rodeos? Where are any of the other esoteric products that were supposed to bubble up from Silverlake into the hearts of mainstream consumers?

Baysie Wightman, the former Converse executive, is among those asking the questions. Wightman, of course, was the sharp-eyed brand manager who had dispatched DeeDee Gordon on her first coolhunt. "Baysie and DeeDee are best friends," Gladwell wrote back in '97. "They're the Lewis and Clark of cool."

No longer. "We were friends," says Baysie, who now works as a con-

sultant to the Leo Burnett technology group. "But we've sort of parted." After the article came out, "we got invited to do a lot of speeches, a lot of press events. It did different things to both of us. I retreated from it. She created a whole industry out of it."

Wightman knows that the One Star sandal has become a folk legend among coolhunters, cited again and again as proof that coolhunting works. "It's such bullshit," she says. "It wasn't found by this method." Though Wightman acknowledges

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asking Gordon to brief her on street trends, "the One Star happened because I was the product manager. And I knew it would be a good shoe."

Several years after her sandal triumph, Wightman sensed momentum building around the lounge-lizard look. She urged Converse to run with it. "We created a corduroy slip-on," she says. "A lounge sneaker we called the wino shoe." Converse executives took one look at it and said no way. In retrospect, Wightman says, it was the right call. "The whole lounge thing just died," she says. "Killing that shoe was a sound business decision."

In the last few years, Wightman says, she has soured on coolhunting. "You have people making all these pronouncements. No one goes back to see if any of it was accurate. And it looks as if the only thing that ever came out of it was that goddamn sandal."

How did cool go so wrong? As acolytes of diffusion theory, which holds that an elite group of early adopters sets the trends for the rest of us, coolhunters are necessarily fixated on the teenage "alpha consumers," those nihilistically hip pubescenters who hate Coke, love Issey Miyake, and eschew Clearasil for tea-tree oil. But as coolhunting grew ever more competitive, its practitioners sought out newer, more subversive "influencers." In an endless cycle of dog-eat-dog vanguardism, the early adopters kept getting earlier, until the coolhunters were spending most of their time

studying odd-ball hipsters in burlap dresses. As a coolhunter for Kirshenbaum Bond & Partners, "I was always attracted to the most individualistic, wacky-looking people," says Daniel Maimin, whose clients included Target and Rockport. "Now I realize the trends they're into are not the trends that are going to be setting the entire country on fire. Lots of times, they're just freaky people." As a partner in OWN+P, Maimin says, he now hunts what mainstream kids think is cool, rather than what the

cool kids think is cool. "Things were getting out of control," he says. "It became cool for cool's sake. It almost turned into parody."

Paging through old copies of the *L. Report*, one can't help but notice that most of DeeDee Gordon's 1998 findings have yet to take the world by storm. Back then, Gordon predicted that many of us would now be listening to Zydeco, wearing aprons as a fashion statement, and emulating "the homespun, simple life of the Amish." She also contended that the runaway success of the upcoming *Inspector Gadget* movie would launch a style revolution: "Popular clothing with trendsetters will become more spy-like, with masks, Sherlock Holmes-type hats, [and] smoking pipes."

It's these sorts of clunkers that make clients see red. Coolhunters are "not necessarily in the loop of who our consumer is," says Michelle Clark, manager of product trends for Lee Jeans. Clark blames a coolhunter for the company's disastrous foray into wide-leg jeans two years back. "It was too early," Clark laments. "Consumers weren't ready. We pulled it off the shelves." The coolhunter lost further credibility when she urged capri pants—for men. "The clam digger," Clark says dryly. "Maybe that could work, from a high-fashion perspective. But for the JC Penney consumer? Our guy isn't ready to adopt that look."

Many of today's hip capitalists are

concluding that it's easier to merely shower the early adopters with freebies. This is known to the trade as influencer management.

"It's not like we're paying [influencers] to trick their friends," says Claudine Murphy, who works with DeeDee Gordon at Look-Look. "It's simply giving them a product we think they should know about. We call it creating brand ambassadors."

The problem is, influencer management "usually doesn't work," says Dan Hilbert of Rolling Rock. "Their

friends end up finding out what they're doing and yelling at them." Until last year, Hilbert worked as NFL marketing director. "At one point, we thought the NFL could be like FUBU and other urban brands. We hired trendsetters to give the product to their friends. Man, it failed miserably."

The friends were like, "This stuff sucks. I'm not going to wear this!"

Meanwhile, the hunt goes on. Rebecca Hawkins, design director for Levi's global and premium products, recently sent her passel of trend-trackers to the Jewish Museum in Berlin. "The museum is supposed to emulate the emotional journey of a Holocaust victim," Hawkins told me. "And so, there are points where the museum feels very dark and claustrophobic. And there are other points where the light is very jagged and disturbing." For the Levi's coolhunters, it was a "click" moment. Stirred by the museum's disturbing aesthetic, "we sewed big, jagged shapes into the jeans, washed them, and got dark slash marks," Hawkins says brightly. "So that's taking an example from coolhunting and actually putting it in a product."

Rebecca Hawkins hastens to add that Levi's will not play up this melancholy lineage. "We wanted to be really careful not to get too dark and depressing. These will not be known as Holocaust jeans." As long as it's not the Holocaust capri pant.

—Ruth Shalit