

Changes in women's footwear – part 7: 1980 to 1989

STUART MORGAN explores a decade of rapid fashion changes that led to the growth of sports-inspired styles.



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The 1980s saw great socioeconomic change as a result of technological advancements and multinational corporations within the manufacturing industry moving their factories out of Western Europe and the USA and relocated into such countries as China, Mexico, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand.

Such a dramatic change in where products were sourced affected a number of manufacturing sectors, including the footwear industry. For instance, in 1980, the USSR manufactured more shoes and boots than any other country, with a total production figure of 1,151 million pairs – some 8.8 per cent higher than in 1975. At the first year of the new decade, Chinese companies were rapidly catching up, producing 895 million pairs. By 1985, however, China was top of the production chart, with its manufacturing figure reaching 1,532 million pairs (no less than 71.2 per cent higher than just five years previously). By 1990, Chinese shoemakers had boosted their output by another 76.2 per cent over 1985 to total 2,700 million pairs. Other top footwear producers during the eighties included Brazil, Italy, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Footwear manufacturing in the USA declined rapidly throughout the decade – from 492 million pairs in 1980 to 293 million pairs ten years later.

However, throughout the 1980s, the USA was top of the list when it came to

footwear imports, and the quantity shipped into the country rose steadily – from 486 million pairs in 1980 to 933 million pairs five years later. By 1990, this figure had reached 1,097 million pairs. During the decade, other nations with growing levels of footwear imports included France, Hong Kong, the UK, the USSR and West Germany (before unification of the two Germanies).

During the first half of the decade, the 'Cold War' continued to cause international tensions, which escalated when US president Ronald Reagan adopted an aggressive stance towards the Soviet Union. However, the latter years of the eighties saw a dramatic easing of superpower tensions, and soon after the total collapse of Soviet communism.

Economic challenges

The early 1980s was marked by a severe global economic recession that affected much of the developed world. In addition, many developing countries faced hard-hitting economic and social difficulties, forcing many of them to apply for financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. For example, Ethiopia was hit by widespread famine during the mid-eighties, resulting in a dependence on foreign aid to feed its people. Various efforts were made around the world to raise money to help the Ethiopian population, including the 'Live Aid' concert in 1985, organised by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure and held simultaneously in London and Philadelphia.

Inflation peaked in the USA in April 1980 at 14.76 per cent. This figure subsequently plummeted to a low of 1.10 per cent in December 1986, but then rebounded to almost 4.7 per cent at the end of the decade. By contrast, the economy of Finland grew at an incredible pace in the world, which eventually culminated in the Finnish recession of the 1990s. On 'Black Monday' – October 19th 1987 – stock markets around the world crashed, wiping billions of dollars from their values in a matter of hours.

The world suddenly changes

In November 1982, Leonid Brezhnev, leader of the USSR since 1964, died.



Italian black suede evening court shoe with heel decorated in diamante

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Orange suede and leather ankle 'pixie boots'

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Multi-coloured ankle top canvas and fur trainers

He was followed in quick succession by Yuri Andropov, Konstantin Chernenko and Andrei Gromyko, each of whom had short tenures in office.

By 1986, communist states in Eastern Europe were being swept by calls for democracy. Such demands,

combined with the worldwide economic recession, resulted in Mikhail Gorbachev (who had become Soviet leader in 1985) pushing for political 'glasnost' – openness and transparency – and a restructuring of the USSR, called 'perestroika'. Thereafter,



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Italian red suede and cotton ankle boots

Communist Party power declined, dissent was made legal and limited forms of capitalism – such as joint ventures with Western companies – were permitted.

Events moved rapidly in 1989, which led to the overthrow and attempted overthrow of a number of communist governments, including in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania. Jubilant crowds celebrated the destruction of the Berlin Wall in Germany – a concrete barrier which had split the city since 1961.

Perhaps surprisingly, it was only during the 1980s that a number of former British colonies finally gained their full independence, although in a far more peaceful manner than was taking place in other parts of the world. These included Zimbabwe in 1980, Antigua, Barbuda and Belizee (all in 1981), Canada in 1982, St Kitts and Nevis (1983), Brunei in 1984, and Australia and New Zealand (both in 1986).

The birth of the internet

A technology that would change the consumer's retail experience forever started to take shape during the eighties. Although the origins of the internet can be traced back to research commissioned by the US government in the 1960s in order to build robust communication with computer networks, academic and military networks were interconnected in the eighties. By 1989, the internet and its linked networks had become a global system, and in this same year British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee conceived the concept of the World Wide Web. From his early work, the Web has exploded to become the primary tool used by billions of people in all parts of the world to interact on the internet, with the ability to buy virtually anything – including footwear – being just one of its benefits.

Among other technological advancements during the 1980s, the use of personal computers moved from being enthusiasts' playthings to well-marketed consumer products. The IBM PC was launched in 1981 and quickly became the dominant computer for professional users. Commodore also designed and manufactured popular home computers and Apple introduced

the first Macintosh computer in 1984. This was the first commercially successful personal computer to use a graphical user interface and a mouse.

Demand increased for portable Walkman cassette tape players and 'boomboxes', and they are said to have had a profound impact on both youth culture and the music industry. Video cassette recorders (VCRs) were purchased to millions of homes, leading to a proliferation of video rental stores on the high street.

The highest-grossing movies of the eighties were 'E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial', 'Return of the Jedi', 'The Empire Strikes Back', 'Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade', 'Batman', 'Rain Man', 'Raiders of the Lost Ark', 'Back to the Future', 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit', 'Top Gun', 'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom', 'Back to the Future Part II', 'Crocodile Dundee', 'Fatal Attraction' and 'Beverly Hills Cop'.

Fashionable people and their shoes

In terms of dress sense, the eighties was a decade of flux, with new looks arriving and departing at a rapid pace. Naturally, styles from the late seventies continued into the start of the 1980s.

During the first few years of the decade, footwear for women included knee-high boots with thick kitten heels, trainers (sneakers), mules, round-toed shoes and boots.

Although black and brown t-bar polyvinyl chloride (PVC) 'jelly' sandals were popular school wear for both girls and boys in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s, they did not take the world by storm until the eighties. According to legend, a banker named Preston Haag Sr quit his job in 1981 to look for a new business venture. At a reception in Brazil, he is said to have noticed the bright-coloured plastic shoes worn by many of the young women. On enquiry, he learned that the manufacturer was a small company called Grendene in the city of Farroupilha. In March 1981, Mr Haag signed a deal to distribute Grendene's PVC shoes in the south-eastern states of the USA, and he introduced the shoes during the World's Fair held in Tennessee during the following year. In February 1983, New York City department store



The Reebok Freestyle has changed little since the 1980s

Bloomingdale's ordered 2,400 pairs in nine styles, and the footwear's reputation was secure.

By the 1980s, working women were no longer considered an unusual sight. In order to get themselves seen as equals in the job market, women started to dress more seriously at work, and 'power dressing' was born. Kitten-heeled shoes were often worn to compliment knee-length skirts, wide-legged trousers, matching blazers and contrasting blouses. To make formal shoes more comfortable, manufacturers incorporated more flexible and supportive soles. Footwear with moderately spiked heels and pointed toes survived from the very late 1970s as a popular fashion trend.

As the eighties moved on, things became increasingly extravagant, with teased hair, ripped jeans, neon clothing and mix-and-match varieties of colours and designs. Well-teased 'big hair' was the style of choice for many women, as were denim jackets, skin-tight jeans, jumpsuits, leather trousers, leggings

and leg warmers (thanks to the craze for aerobics and other forms of exercise), polo shirts, off-the-shoulder shirts and oversized shoulder pads. After a ten-year absence, miniskirts made a dramatic comeback in the mid-eighties. Makeup was aggressive and very colourful. In addition, many young women – inspired by Madonna's 'Like a Virgin' music video – wore bra tops, jelly shoes and large crucifix necklaces.

The 1980s also saw the rise of a new group of ambitious consumers with money – well-paid young professionals who were soon nicknamed 'Yuppies'. These wanted to show off their wealthy status, so they insisted on only wearing expensive 'designer label' clothes and footwear. Retailers were, of course, only too happy to provide just what they wanted. Interestingly, many 'new' styles of footwear were actually based on popular shoes from the 1940s and 1950s, and lace-up brogues were as popular with women as they were with men. Strappy sandals were also popular in the mid-eighties and, as the



Pic 7: Light grey and purple floral trainers



Jelly shoes were very popular in the eighties

demand for sports-related styles of footwear for everyday wear grew, women wore the Reebok Freestyle high top and other aerobic styles with miniskirts, 'stirrup pants' (leggings with a strap extending under the arch of the foot) and regular-style jeans. Reebok Freestyles reportedly accounted for more than 50 per cent of the company's sales in 1984.

In the late 1980s, brightly coloured shoes with thin heels were the rage in France, the UK and the USA. Adherents to a number of subcultures – particularly in Britain – developed their own identity, often with specific styles of clothing, makeup and footwear. As an example, Doc Martens were deemed an essential fashion accessory for 'skinheads' and 'punks'. These boots were sometimes paired with miniskirts or full, flowery dresses, and they were also an important feature of the eighties' post-punk 'Gothic' look, inspired in part by British bands such as The Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and The Cult. This fashion statement featured black clothing, long, backcombed hair, dark eyeliner, eye shadow and lipstick, black nail varnish, spiked bracelets and dog collars which, as a trend, returned in the 1990s.

Boat shoes and espadrilles were also popular in the 1980s, and Dr Scholl's 'exercise sandals' continued to sell. There was also a demand for dainty 'pixie boots', which were available in a variety of colours and materials.

As with most decades since the invention of moving pictures, Hollywood stars greatly influenced eighties women when it came to their choice of footwear. Characters in such movies as 'Back to the Future' and 'Ferris Bueller's Day Off' were instrumental in the popularity of canvas high-top shoes – both with men and women.

Did the 1980s give us long-lasting styles of footwear? A poll has revealed the answer. When asked if they had recently worn shoes that were first sold in the eighties, 85 per cent of the female respondents said 'yes'.

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