

# Pluck of the Irish



## FASHION

Gerry Kelly is putting the "design" back into designer jeans through his hand-crafted, environmentally conscious Sonas Denim collection, writes **Elyse Glickman**

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MELIS+DAINON

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Elyse Glickman is  
US west coast edi-  
tor of *Lucire*.



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**D**UBLIN-BRED GERRY KELLY may have left his heart in San Francisco after 15 years, but his design vision carried him to Los Angeles to bring his denim company vision to life. It was dubbed Sonas, a Gaelic word meaning happiness, good times, felicity, and bliss.

Though Kelly's résumé includes several years as a real estate agent and bar industry professional, he always managed to find ways to get out to Burning Man, Lightning in a Bottle and other art and music festivals which opened the doors for him to express his true self.

'I started designing clothes to wear for the various festivals, including patchwork jeans,' says Kelly. 'The inspiration for these early designs came from a pair of vintage patchwork jeans I bought in 2001 at Aardvarks in San Francisco. When I wore them around the festival circuit, I received all kinds of compliments on them.'

Once those pants fell apart, Kelly went to work to create new interpretations of the hippie-chic staple, tailored for a 21st-century lifestyle. He came up with three patchwork prototypes: two multicolour pairs and another that was made up of different indigo blue pieces from bits he found in an old denim factory in San Francisco. Christine Garcia, a 17-year animal rights attorney whom he married the year he launched the denim company in 2011, completed the Sonas vision by bringing her own professional experience into the mix.

'Christine has been instrumental in helping me grow Sonas Demin especially with the busi-

ness aspects, as I know I have more of a creative mind,' he says. 'Our goal together is to accomplish something we both love: converging fashion and arts with animal welfare. We love the fact that we can give back to the community by donating a percentage of proceeds to animal welfare and creating products people can feel good about buying and wearing. Our mission is detailed on our website, and we ultimately hope we can use the profits to get our animal sanctuary, Possums Welcome, up and running.'

This means no animals are harmed in his creative process, resulting in a product that's free of leather, feathers, silk or wool that is, as Kelly puts it, 'a compassionate, cruelty-free lifestyle brand that gives back to animals.'

That process starts with the way he sources the materials, buying leftover denim remnants and rolls at various fabric mills that would otherwise go to waste or take up space in storage or a landfill. He then takes these materials and puts them into a washer to pre-shrink and cut them into pieces to be sewn together.

'There is no waste, in comparison to making a typical pair of jeans,' he points out. 'This means our production is totally sustainable, and I think people will appreciate our making a form of art out of leftover pieces of denim. I like to tell people that Sonas Denim rethinks patchwork. We've designed ours to be timeless and classic. It's a modern day twist on the '70s patchwork in that it's a fresher look that is more elegant than others, where the patches are just sewn on top.'









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Although denim aficionados worth their indigo know Levi's originated in San Francisco, Kelly sees LA as the denim capital of the world, and, therefore, a better place to lay down the groundwork for Sonas Denim.

'For about a year, I was going back and forth between San Francisco and Los Angeles to do my product development and production,' he says. 'I found I needed to be around some good wash houses. My lines for men and women involve both wet and dry dyeing processes, and while we could do the cut and stitch part of production in San Francisco, we found the factories there were not equipped for fashion denim.'

Although an early iteration of the line made its debut at an Oscar gifting suite, and it got a celebrity buzz going, Kelly admits that rather than lean on a celebrity muse or favourite designer to inform future designs, he says that instead he's got continuous inspiration from the various festivals he attends around the world, from full moon parties in Thailand to desert parties in Australia, jungle-based music festivals in southeast Asia, to Burning Man in Nevada. He takes note of the attendees, costumes and outfits they've made special for the events. Although Sonas Denim has a global outlook, however, he also thinks locally.

'We work with a special production facility in downtown LA, a family-run Mexican-American business that also handles a few other boutique denim brands,' he says. 'We take pride in the fact that we've provided some of their employees with consistent work to create a made-in-USA product. Because our jeans are so intricate, some made up from as many as 50 individual pieces, several local manufacturers wanted nothing to do with Sonas Denim because they weren't familiar with me or the brand, and we were a start-up business. Admittedly, it is easier for companies to make a conventional five-pocket pair of jeans than something with so many pieces, like putting a jigsaw puzzle together.'

One could say that everything for Kelly is coming together, nicely, piece by piece. Sonas Denim will be releasing limited-edition products every month, such as T-shirts, hoodies, jackets, and other accessories. He also plans to add laptop cases and, eventually, furniture.

'I hope to soon collaborate with local furniture designers to create multi-colour and denim patchwork covers for couches and armchairs, as I can really see unique pieces like this in clubs from New York to Miami to London to Dubai.' •

