

LEATHER BOUND

Baton Rouge's Damien Mitchell BY JEFFREY ROEDEL PHOTOS BY ROMERO & ROMERO

At first glance Damien Mitchell's workspace, nestled in one of Baton Rouge's older residential districts, could be mistaken for the home base of just about any creative in the newly surging, social media-fueled makers movement. A smattering of Apple products lay about the clean lines of

Damien Mitchell dedicates his time to creating timeless, functional and stylish leather goods.

a Mid-Century modern couch. Alabama Shakes and Tame Impala record covers rest on the wall. And tacked above piles of schematics, drawings and work-in-progress are hand-written goals, polished sketches and tangential inspirations on a mood board of sorts aimed like a Nerf gun at the year ahead.

Clad in a red flannel shirt with lumberjack check and burgundy-brown leather boots, the 25-year-old pours herbal tea for his guest.

One of his own creations, not for sale unfortunately, is an image of old-school Air Jordan sneakers levitating above the ground and subverted with a sharply succinct caption: "Vanity." *Swoosh.*

It's no surprise then that the maker label has not sat well with Mitchell until very recently.

"I struggle with the 'maker thing,' because it kind of gets a bit cliché," Mitchell says. "A lot of times it's just traditional patterns, nothing unique, nothing original to the design, but it's nice materials and it's handmade the maker can charge an extreme amount of money for it."

Where many makers are devoting themselves to preserving practices that are in some cases long lost, Mitchell's goal is innovation. He studied industrial design at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette where he worked on projects for new electronics, clothing, automobiles – one of his professors was on the team that designed the very first Ford Mustang – and even pitched futuristic conceptual designs to director Rian Johnson (*Star Wars: Episode VIII*), for the filming of Johnson's 2012 thriller *Looper* in New Orleans.

Mitchell keeps a day job as a designer at a local engineering firm, but this son of a seamstress who grew up around his aunt's tailoring shop has a real passion for working with his hands.

"Any time there's a pen in my hand, I'll be drawing a shoe," he says.



[2016 Baton Rouge Area Louisiana Edition]

Louisiana Life is featuring the leaders of various industries in our bi-monthly advertising series called, "Faces of Louisiana". This section will showcase those who make a powerful impact in their field. Throughout the year, *Louisiana Life* will focus on all major areas of the state, and in our May/June issue we focus on the Baton Rouge area of Louisiana.

For more information regarding this series, please contact Donna Childress at Donna@LouisianaLife.com 504.830.7250 • Louisianafaces.com



In college, Mitchell apprenticed at Musso Shoe Repair where he learned how to make footwear from men twice his age. For the past two years, he has worked almost exclusively with leather. His slim wallets reveal a love for Japanese minimalism and all things Apple. They look a bit like two U-shapes spooning each other and are perfect for the man that doesn't want a cheeseburger-thick back-buster in his pocket.

Mitchell sources his material from Tandy Leather Factory in Metairie, making the trip there twice a month to flip through hides and brush his hands over each piece.

"I like to make sure I'm getting the best ones," he says.

Though he has notebooks filled with more complex handbag and backpack designs and even some completed shoe prototypes, he knows he has to take things slow. He's a one-man operation – for now.

"The challenge is to create products simple enough for me to manufacture on my own but good enough for people to want," Mitchell says. "That's the struggle. How do I get past that roadblock? Continue to make better designs. Good design will get me there." ♦

Q&A

THERE ARE SO MANY SMALLER BRANDS OUT THERE TAKING A MORE HAND-MADE APPROACH TO THEIR PRODUCTS. BUT WHO DO YOU SEE BEING INNOVATIVE? Tanner Goods in Portland is great. I like a lot of their products. I'd say their leather turntable slip mat is my favorite of theirs, because it's such a simple product that typically wouldn't get much attention, but because of Tanner's execution you want to show it off. There's also a French company I like called Côte Et Ciel. Their approach to backpacks is unorthodox but still completely functional. I like their Isar rucksack.

DO YOU HAVE ANY INSPIRATIONS THAT MIGHT SURPRISE PEOPLE? I find graphic design inspiring. Massimo Vignelli basically revolutionized advertising and graphic design in the States when he came over from Italy. Women's fashion is inspiring. I don't know if it shows up in my work, but I look at it a lot. I follow Anna Wintour, Vera Wang and Chanel on Instagram.

LET'S SAY YOU CAN ONLY OWN AND WEAR THREE PAIRS OF SHOES FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE. WHAT DO YOU CHOOSE? Clarks Desert Boots, a pair of Air Jordan 1s, and some Vans Authentics.

WHAT DO YOU DO FOR FUN WHEN YOU'RE NOT WORKING? When I'm not working, I'm working. I'm always drawing and trying to make new things. I play darts at Radio Bar. I have a motorcycle, and I work on that a lot, ha ha. I probably work on that more than I ride it.

WHAT'S THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE ANYONE HAS EVER GIVEN YOU? "Don't try to figure everything out before you start. Learn along the way."

More information, damienmitchell.us



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SOUND DESIGN

Violin maker Anya Burgess connects classical and Cajun in her Arnaudville workshop

BY JEFFREY ROEDEL
PHOTOS BY ROMERO & ROMERO

"Part of my mission with the store is to connect the classical and traditional Cajun music cultures, because I come from both," says Burgess.

Anya Burgess' workshop lays nestled among only the pine-tops and gnarly oaks of rural Arnaudville and beyond the beaten path curving around the house she shares with her husband, a newspaper writer, and their two young children. It's the perfectly tree-shaded setting for her life's work. Each hand-built instrument Burgess creates begins as a solid block of wood. From there, the Massachusetts native's vigorous love of detail, design and purpose takes hold.

This complex mix of mahogany, spruce, maple, ebony, strings, varnish and years of expertise that makes up the violin demands nothing less.

"Doing this by hand is pretty challenging, and time consuming and kind of crazy, and I don't know why I don't use a router saw," Burgess says. "I guess I'm a purist. I learned to do this by hand, and I have the tools for it, so I don't take shortcuts."

Burgess sells, rents and repairs instruments out of her downtown Lafayette retail shop Sola Violins, but it is here behind her home in Arnaudville, an idyllic refuge for farmers and artists alike, where she spends three days a week alone with her instruments.

Burgess grew up in a family of creatives, educators and classical musicians. Her father was an architect, and her grandmother graduated from and taught music at the prestigious Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. Burgess' intuition for craftsmanship sprouted from long days of her childhood spent running around the family hunting camp in New Hampshire, where her

father was always at work on something.

"Even though I had not done much woodworking outside of shop class, which I loved, from childhood I had this familiarity with tools and the idea that you can make things and build," Burgess says.

The classically trained musician studied folklore at Bowdoin College in Maine before she turned 20 and spent a free-spirited summer traveling with a friend along Cape Breton in Nova Scotia. Her road tripping and couch surfing led her to the doorstep of Otis Thomas, a violinmaker who maintained a workshop ensconced in a rural regalia similar to Burgess' space now.

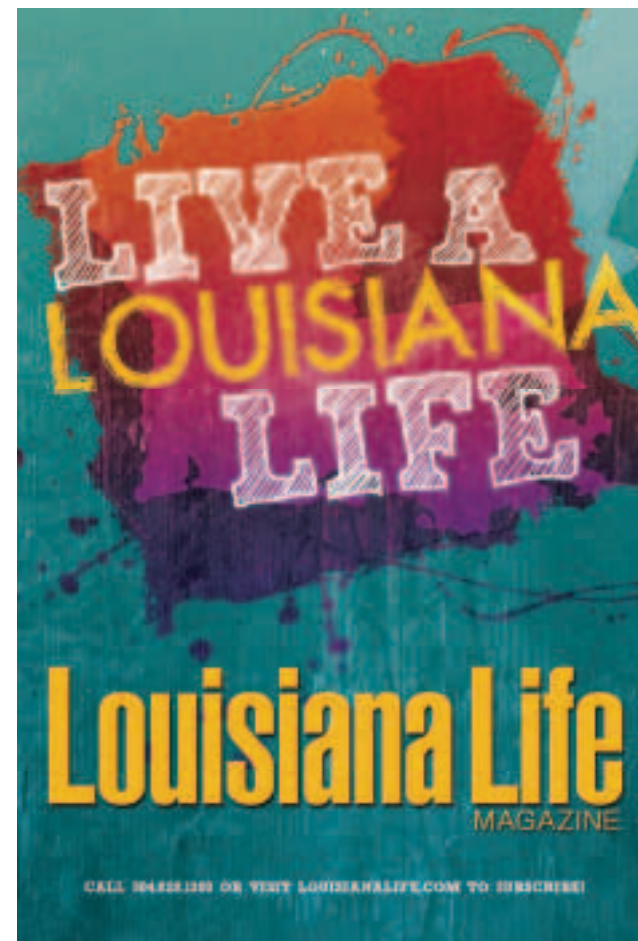
"I fell in love with it, the whole thing, the whole vibe," Burgess says.

Soon after meeting Thomas, Burgess transferred to Indiana

"I thought a violin shop was a natural place for everyone to come together and to get a deeper understanding and a respect for each other's worlds."

University where she serendipitously discovered a violin-making program.

Signing up with Teach for America brought her to Washington, Louisiana and though she decided teaching daily in elementary schools didn't jive with her "natural rhythm" as she puts it, meeting her future husband kept her in the Lafayette area when her stint ended. That coupled with playing and repairing





instruments in something of a Fiddle Mecca of the South, prompted Burgess to open Sola Violins in the fall of 2014.

"Part of my mission with the store is to connect the classical and traditional Cajun music cultures, because I come from both," Burgess says. "There isn't a lot of crossover, really. I thought a violin shop was a natural place for everyone to come together and to get a deeper understanding and a respect for each other's worlds."

That community-building and cross-genre respect soars across jam sessions and concerts among her growing legion of friends and collaborators across Acadiana.

Burgess describes herself as a perfectionist by nature.

The 40-year-old musician's passion for process is perfectly matched by the intricacy and devotion needed for an instrument whose design was mastered in the 17th Century and has not changed all that much since then.

"It's the ultimate work of art," Burgess says. "From its almost architectural design and the wood work, to the varnishing which is painterly, testing the acoustics, and then you play it, and it is so musical. Pulling in all these many artistic disciplines into one little thing is what is incredible to me." ♦



Q&A

What do you do for fun when you are not working? I play music! I'm in two bands: The Magnolia Sisters, which was around for 20 years before I joined, and then a newer band called Bonsoir Catin. Both are all-girl bands, except Bonsoir Catin does have a guy drummer. And I just play music with friends for fun. That's downtime for me.

Being out here in your workshop, does nature inspire you? I love working out here. People assume that working from home,

things around the house will pull you in and distract you, like chores, but I'm not distracted by anything in the house at all, ha. That's not a threat.

Are there any unexpected influences in your work? I've realized how tied into my past it is. My dad did historical preservation and worked on buildings at Harvard and Phillips Academy. My obsession with design comes from him. He did everything by pencil on a drawing board in his office at the house.

If you could have coffee with any musician who would it be? I had a really inspired experience at the Grammy's recently, talking to people who are in music in a completely different world. The rock world. I never would have imagined being a part of that. I'd love to hear about the vision of someone from that world, and their approach to making records. I met Don Was. He played with us. He produced the Rolling Stones but also Aaron Neville, but he's not untouchable. He's just this dude. I'd like to have coffee and talk music with someone like that.

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IN STITCHES

New Orleans designer Sigourney Morrison has her colorful brand of cool all sewn up

BY JEFFREY ROEDEL PHOTOS BY ROMERO & ROMERO

"I can sew for six or eight hours a day and feel happy at the end of it," says LSU alum Sigourney Morrison.

In Frankfurt, Germany, there's a young woman. She could be known for many things, but there in the birthplace of Goethe, Louisiana ex-pat Kristen Aul is known for one thing. People recognize her as the girl who always wears the jean jacket emblazoned with a custom chain-stitched Popeyes logo. Meticulously crafted by Louisiana designer Sigourney Morrison, from whom Aul purchased the item, this same jacket caused a joyful stir inside the Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen on St. Charles Avenue. Aul had returned to help her family with flood recovery in Baton Rouge and had stopped into the restaurant wearing the jacket.

"It's the piece I'm most proud of because it's the one that has given the customer the most joy," Morrison says. "That's why I do what I do. And I hope Popeyes reads this — maybe I can get some chicken out of this deal, ha."

Born in New Roads, Morrison grew up in rural Fayette, Alabama, an hour from the closest movie theater and mall — but she never missed a Mardi Gras. Her father, a New Orleans native, always rode in krewes with his side of the family. And though she felt detached from larger creative movements out in the country, Morrison's youth provided her with a foundation for her future craft.

"Football was king," she recalls of her small conservative town. "But I definitely found a way to express myself in a unique fashion. I got the art and culture from New Orleans, and I got my respect and love

"It was the first time I was doing something that didn't feel like work or a chore. I can sew for six or eight hours a day and feel happy at the end of it."

for nature and the outdoors from home."

Now 30, the LSU alum grew up cross-stitching with her grandmother and learning to sew as a practical craft that could also be a creative outlet. She still has more than a dozen dolls stitched for her by the family matriarch. After switching her major to fashion design at LSU, Morrison developed her sewing skills and began making hats.

"I think when I actually started making things that I love and hearing some positive feedback from people, I actually thought this would be viable as a business," Morrison says. "It was the first time I was doing something that didn't feel like work or a chore. I can sew for six or eight hours a day and feel happy at the end of it."

After graduation, she relocated to New Orleans, and when her run with Goorin Bros. Hat Shop ended, she bought a circa-1941 chain stitch machine and launched her

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own design business called Dressed New Orleans. The name is a playful reference to the Big Easy's love of loaded poor boys and the rich history the sandwich has with the people of the city.

"They're so unique, not unlike the people here," Morrison says.

A blend of folk and pop art, graphic design and fashion, Morrison's work is often color-rich or playful and can be found on eye-catching patches, stitched lettering slogans or accessories like a "double sided necktie thingy" she recently posted to Instagram.

She calls her art "thread painting," and it fulfills her knowing that she's adding bold beauty to the world in her own distinct way.

"I get lost sometimes," she says. "I definitely have some carpal tunnel damage creeping up on me." ♦

Q&A

What do you do for fun when you're not working? I'm in a shuffleboard league. We play once a week. I also am in the Organ Grinders. It's a local dance troupe. That occupies my time. It's great to get out there and dance and let loose and be around other inspiring women.

How do you stay inspired to keep progressing? I'm always inspired by New Orleans. It's my home, and I have deep roots here. My inspiration can come from so many different places. I really like vintage signs and the art of sign painting. There's a great one on St. Charles on the side of a building. It's for a moving company and has a momma cat carrying her kitten in her mouth. It's one of my favorites.

Are there any unexpected influences in your work? Well, I get requests sometimes for some weird stuff. And I have always honored those requests. No curse word or risqué image is off limits. But I will never do anything that is racist or sexist. And that's pretty much my only rule.

If you could design clothing for anyone who would it be? That's easy. Dolly Parton. She seems to like butterflies, doesn't she? I would make her the most glorious butterfly jacket the world has ever seen. Dripping with rhinestones and fringe.

OK, now I hope Popeyes and Dolly both read this. Me too! I would die so happy. And full of chicken.

Connect with Morrison at @dressedneworleans on Instagram.

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