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# MISTER FREEDOM: THE DILIGENT RACONTEUR

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*After spending most of his life in France and Africa, Christophe Loiron moved to Los Angeles in 1990. There, he started his small clothing legacy. He's scoured the world for the rarest of vintage garments for his shop, and the ones he can't find he makes himself.*

Writer Owen Parrott    Photographer Ken Tisuthiwongse

Hollywood probably isn't the first place you'd associate with timeless, iconic clothing. Thanks to the glamour and glitz of its celebrity residents, it's more often considered a revolving door of trends and overnight fads. Yet nestled in the heart of it lies one of the world's best vintage shops and studios dedicated to historical and timeless garments, Mister Freedom. The man behind it all is the slightly eccentric, French ex-patriot genius Christophe Loiron. For years, Loiron spent his time collecting an extensive inventory of vintage garments, rare textiles and one-of-a-kind historical pieces. After a while though, his searches became too specific and he realized that the things he was after likely didn't even exist, so he decided to make them himself. Thus, Mister Freedom Originals was born. Vintage inspired clothing with a perfect attention to detail down to the last stitch. While the garments are technically new, they show a lifetime of wear and being of the highest quality they're able to withstand another one and look even better afterwards. While it's up to the wearer to make the stories these garments will tell in decades away, each one of them tells a story off the shelf as interesting as the man who created them.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHE LOIRON

*Mister Freedom – where was the name derived from? Which came first: your own collection or the shop?*

Mister Freedom started as my store name, which then evolved into a brand name. The name comes from an original promotional picture book for William Klein's 1969 movie *Mr. Freedom*. I hadn't even seen the movie yet, but I liked the Pop Art graphics in the book. It was an interesting black and white photo collage with red, white and blue lettering with stars and stripes. The movie was okay but the name sounded good to me. I've had a couple funny stories thanks to the name too. Once I rented a car in Paris under the business name and it ended up getting towed. When I went to get it back I couldn't because the officer said it wasn't mine: it was rented to none other than M. Freedom, who would have to retrieve the vehicle himself. He was a real life Inspector Clouseau.

*You were into vintage items, clothing and denim even before you came to the USA right? Where did that inspiration come from?*

I've always been into old stuff. I've never felt concerned with current trends or about what was easily accessible on store shelves. I always liked to actually search for things as opposed to being fed them. I like the hunt, not the kill.

I was raised between Africa and France. My hero of a Dad worked for an oil company and his whole life he was sent to places where there was political turmoil. So as a family we accompanied him and lived all over from the '60s until his retirement in late '80s. Algeria, Ivory Coast, Chad, Zaire, and Djibouti to name a few. So quite a large mixture of things growing up influenced me.

*Do you have any specific memories from the past that you might consider to be a heavy influence on your connection with it (the past) now?*

It's silly that I still think about it sometimes but I only have one regret about vintage stuff from growing up overseas. We visited this crazy flea market on the docks at the port of Dakar, in Senegal in the late '70s. I remember huge mounds of used clothing, baking in the sun. Those rags were imported from the US and sold by the pound. Six-foot high piles of sorted materials: white cotton shirts, t-shirts, tropical weight trousers and denim! Man, you can just imagine what



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was hiding in that mix at the time! I had no clue back then though, so I just went for the white shirts.

*Had you been trying to create clothing of your own before Mister Freedom Originals, or had it been mostly a passion for vintage items that made you open your shop?*

I was into old stuff but never thought of it as a way of making a living. I started working as a member of the sales staff at American Rag Cie in the early '90s. It was my first real paying job which eventually led to my becoming the vintage buyer for them. Back then, remakes (making new stuff by remodeling/cutting-up old clothes) were happening a lot. I handled that department for a while and got to participate in making some 'new' designs and selling them at international trade shows. I don't think it was particularly tasteful stuff, but it was big in Japan and it was a good way to use unsalable grades of used clothing. A little while after that I went at it on my own. I just wanted to look around for stuff that I knew was still out there, which eventually led to MF.

In the early stages, the store and storage was mostly pure vintage, used or dead stock. I would always have some modified things though because I can't stand still. I think it's a natural evolution from pure collecting to making. Slowly I realized that I wasn't as excited as I was before about the as-is vintage stuff I was finding. I still loved old clothes but grew more demanding with what I was hunting for. I wanted to find very specific pieces and realized that they were either too scarce or had just never even been manufactured! So I started making myself the things I would like to find, stuff that maybe even never existed but could have.





01 The Mister Freedom shop floor  
02 Mr. Loiron in his workshop

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*When you're putting together certain pieces, how much do you look into the small details? What's your process like?*

Most of my 'education' is visual or personal experience. I take a lot of inspiration from old photos, movies, real characters, and books. I'll notice a certain fit, colour, belt, pocket or whatever, and store it until it becomes useful to a project. I don't plan on re-inventing the wheel, it's fine the way it is. When I am making something new, I use all that data and make a big salad. The lettuce is not mine but the salad is. I tend to stay away from knowing too much, technically. The books and manuals only tell you what should be done when in reality, what *is* or *was* done is almost always different because of the human factor and our restrictions with certain things. Sometimes the more you know, the tighter you are bound to other creators who have access to the same tools and you end up making the same stuff. If you don't have a compass, you can still draw a circle free hand; it'll be funky, but yours.

*Why did you choose to settle in LA after coming to the USA? Do you feel it helps facilitate, or sometimes hinders your work?*

After being released from the Marine Nationale, I spent a year in Aix en Provence, France. While there, I met this cat that played string bass, and we played in a Rockabilly band together with some friends. That guy was originally from LA and used to tell us stories about life back home all the time. So in 1989 I visited the USA for the first time. Culture Shock. Here I was in the very place where all that I loved was born: music, cars, clothes, movies, and fast and cool. I went back to France for a while but I had found where to drop my suitcase: Los Angeles. Here you're free to make whatever you want out of life. The city is the deck of cards, but you call the shots with your hand.

What I'm doing with MF is kind of a UFO for LA though. It's definitely a tough crowd for my niche as rhinestone bling, dragon print dress shirts and overly stitched back pocket jeans have plagued the city. MF just isn't even on most people's radars here. But LA is also filled with lots of cool people with a more subtle approach to personal style that wouldn't be caught dead in a tattoo t-shirt.

*So you have a personal connection to the navy then? Is that the only source of the naval influence in your recent work, or has being on the water in LA been a big part of this?*

Yes, when it came time to do my mandatory service in the French military, I picked the Marine Francaise. I served for about 2 years on a 165-man ship based in the Indian Ocean, anchored on Ile de la Reunion, off of Madagascar. We went on plenty of missions that ranged from chasing illegal fishing boats to just assuring presence in those waters. My cruise started from the south Indian Ocean and ended at dry dock in Lorient, France and along the way dropped anchor in a myriad of different places along the way as you can imagine. It was a pretty surreal experience for me back then and I finished as a Quartier Maitre Chef, with plenty memories in my duffle.

LA has molded me in several ways, but I'd say the influence dates back to an attraction to the sea as a child. To me the Sea symbolizes departures to unknown lands, an escape. I've always loved the image of old seamen and drifters at marinas and how they have no roots, they're bound only to the changing winds. Films like *The Sand Pebbles* and seafaring Jean Gabin movies from my youth influenced me as well.



## Q&A

*The Mister Freedom shop is another aspect of the brand that makes it so intriguing. It is a massive emporium of the world's best vintage on 7161 Beverly Blvd at the foot of the Hollywood hills.*

The beautiful 3,200 sq. ft. space seems perfect. How did you end up in such a great spot?

I spend a lot of time at work, so I need that time to not be an everyday torture. I always dreamed of an old brick building, big with enough space to move around and I wanted a mezzanine to do mad scientist experiments! When this place popped up, I had to get in. I lost my shirt, but I got my bricks. I've always done things kind of Joe Louis style: punch first, and figure out if it hurts afterwards. The place was gutted out, so I spent all my savings making it the way I wanted. I've never had a master plan, just to build upon it day by day. It's kind of out of place in a prime retail location in L.A. still but I'll be trying to keep it alive as long as I can.

Do you try to move around the items and keep the merchandising fresh, or kind of just let things take their own course?

I see the store everyday, so it has to be inspiring to me. Otherwise, I'd go more nuts than I already am. Some days I get here and I feel like I have a mission so I'll change things around like a maniac. There's no particular order, just what makes sense in my head, so I'll start in one corner and shift things. It also tends to happen after a big buying trip when I get piles of new stuff in. I like to organize racks by concepts and stories rather than shirts and pants. So you'll find a 1900s French chambray apron next to a striped, indigo narrow loom Japanese piece of textile, with a 1920s Henley shirt and a pair of beat-up dungarees. The organized chaos makes sense to me at any given moment though. I don't think it ever looks fake or forced though because it has to look like a true story.

Having your workshop above the retail floor is another great feature of the space. Do you do all of your design work up there in the mezzanine?

I used to have all my machines and make prototypes on the floor at my previous location just off Melrose. I always had people ask me, "So whatcha making?" That drove me nuts. So now, I'm upstairs in my bubble where no one is allowed, and I get to experiment with anything I want without any comments. That way I don't get Italian designers (for example) snapping photos at prototypes when I'm not looking like they still do downstairs occasionally. One of these days I might pull a 'Zidane' on one.







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K.K. 吉野

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*“A worker in the Dust Bowl in the '30s had to make himself a new pair of work pants with the scrap denim he had laying around. He had no technical knowledge, and just needed something to wear and be able to work in.”*

*The Naval Tailor collection you did with Sugar Cane last fall seemed to raise quite a bit of public awareness for both of your brands. How did you first hook up with Toyo Enterprises?*

I've known about Sugar Cane and Buzz Rickson's and their replicas since the mid 1990s when I had a vintage clothing store in Kyoto. It always amazed me that they were making things I only dreamed of finding in the rags. One day I met 3 guys, all decked out in Sugar Cane at my store. They had been coming to MF on buying trips for a few years and always got some of my graphic tees or sweats for inspiration. We eventually started talking and one of them, Mr. Tom Tanaka, asked if I would be interested in collaborating. They asked me to come up with a pair of jeans, and they would make and market them in Japan. I had no idea how to make a pair of jeans back then but of course I said yes!

For the first one, I stayed up all night before the due date and made some kind of 'Frankenstein' dungarees from scratch with my single needle machine and some old dead stock denim I had. That jean was the MFSC (Mister Freedom x Sugar Cane) 7161. My concept was that a worker in the Dust Bowl in the '30s had to make himself a new pair of work pants with the scrap denim he had laying around. He had no technical knowledge, and just needed something to wear and be able to work in. Anyways, Toyo showed those jeans at their annual trade show in Tokyo but the feedback from their customers was mellow. The jeans were just too weird at the time because they weren't your average 501, five-pocket knock off. Thankfully though, the people at Toyo still believed in MFSC and they asked me to design another round. That time it was to be a full collection, which was when I came up with the Sailor story and worked with that theme for 3 seasons. I needed a solid backbone to the collections, so creating a fictitious but plausible character gave me free range.

*How has the working relationship been with the Japanese Americana company and their brands like Sugar Cane?*

It's perfect, it all started with a hand shake and is still a gentlemen's agreement between us, there are no lawyers or other hindering BS. The collaboration with them was my first with a Japanese company and I have been loyal since then. I am very close now on a personal level, with some of the people at Toyo and I really respect what they have been doing for all these years. I have carte blanche with the design, and we are in constant communication throughout the making of the collections regarding technical issues. They are amazing and there is nothing they can't do. The only limit is the cost.

*Has the Japanese market been one of your biggest supporters from the*

*start, or is it mainly in the USA? Have you noticed big differences between customers from various continents?*

It took a while to get any recognition in the US. The store got quite some press in Japan, but domestically it was pretty much under the radar. Generally, in Japan everyone wants the same thing at the same moment. People there have an appreciation for things that have been around, and this translates in the respect of traditional type brands and iconic styles.

In the USA, sometimes novelty tells people what to do and wear. Something new beats something old often for the mere fact that it's the 'new thing'. So much has happened here in the past 400 years thanks to innovations. That's why the whole world is always looking at what's happening in the USA. It's the largest test market for new ideas and popular movements. Which is good because it makes things move along and pushes people to create. But it's also bad because constantly looking to the future makes you overlook the past, and what was good about it.

Things seemed to have shifted a bit lately, and more people are appreciating what was done right in the past. So now if it *is* new, it's got to be good, because just being new doesn't cut it anymore.

*Why did you decide to stop with the Naval Tailor theme? Tell us about the follow up collection. What's the back-story this time?*

Mister Freedom the brand got a lot of press from the MFSC 'Naval Clothing Tailor' concept. From it, some people thought MF was a nautical replica brand, which is a compliment. Like when moviegoers associate an actor's latest role to the actual person it means they did the job right. But we are all multi faceted and there is always more to it than what is shown at a specific moment. As my influences and interests are eclectic, and I've noticed that a *lot* of companies jumped on the navy and anchors wave, I started wanting something else in the 10 pieces I pick from in the morning to get dressed.

So, a different method of transportation, the motorcycle, has taken over for sailing. I created the story of 3 brothers, motorcycle riders, who had a clothing store that doubled as a clubhouse in LA in the late 1920s. They catered to their buddies, other riders and local workers. The store was in business until the late '60s, when it was closed down. I went and found what was left in the boarded-up building. There were clothes spanning from the '20s all the way up until the '60s. 'Speed Safe Clothing for Modern riders' was the store concept. By modern though, I don't mean by today's standards, no Kevlar or Mad Max shoulder pads, modern at the time they were made.

So that's the script. I had wanted some specific clothes to ride









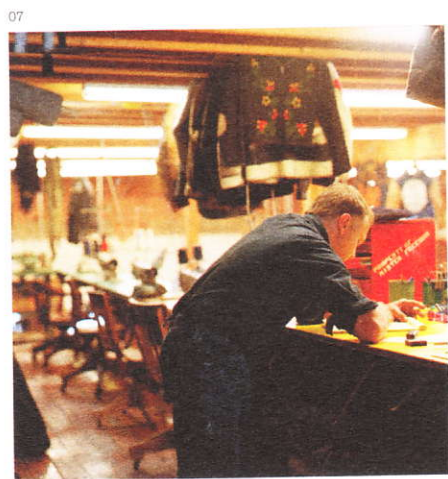








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around for myself, so that story was just an excuse to make them. Like the seafaring concept, where you didn't actually need to own a boat or do time on a ship to wear a peacoat, this concept has pieces that can be taken out of context and stand on their own. What the flavour of the month is doesn't interest me. This season's MF stuff will still be good to wear next year and will look even better in ten.

*Are you able to do most of the production/manufacturing on your own in the USA? Are there specific things you have to have made in Japan?*

This is a big issue in the clothing industry and everyone has their own take on it. I'm an American citizen now and would rather benefit my local, or at least US economy.

MFSC, as opposed to MF, will always be made in Japan because I have strong ties and deep respect for that country and company and that's where their facilities are. As for MF, I am working on finding a good network of small factories for manufacturing locally. It's not easy though, and Toyo spoiled me by allowing me access to anything I wanted. Some machines we use for MFSC production, they don't even have spare parts for them! When they break down, they're gone.

Unfortunately quality manufacturing is a dying art in the US. The knowledge is here, the skilled people are here, but off-shoring and cut margins have separated manufacturing businesses from profitable ones. Advertisers have fooled consumers by sending messages like: "Buy this and you will *be* Steve McQueen (or whoever shakes you)" No, I think the big guys should devote a big part of their advertising budget to telling the truth: You don't need 10 pairs of jeans, just buy the ones you feel and look good in. Buy them from a company you trust, that doesn't employ children for \$6.00 a week, from a place where employment regulations are known. All good things cost money and you can't have quality for dirt cheap without consequences.

People are pushed to own too many things, so of course they need to pay minimum for it. So the big garment makers find the loopholes and manufacture for peanuts in China and thrive on tiny margins and large quantities. Then huge crowds of hungry hipsters flock to H&M. But then hipster's dad loses his job to a firm in India...

*Lately you've been wholesaling to J. Crew. How did that come up? Has it been helpful in terms of raising awareness for Mister Freedom?*

When I first started selling vintage stuff back in late '90s I used to sell vintage pieces to Todd Snyder and Frank Muytjens, the heads of men's design there. Then they saw what I was making and started ordering custom-made stuff from me: t-shirts, bags and things. Then one day Mickey Drexler, the mastermind behind today's J. Crew, was in town and honored me with a visit. He made it all happen.

It was the first time a well-established American company would buy MF and put it as-is in their store with no re-design or re-labeling. It was a great honor for me to be allowed to play in the major leagues. J. Crew understands that MF is standing solely on its integrity. I don't have money to fool people with fake advertising campaigns or endorsements from big stars. I just design and make the stuff, then let it do its thing on the market. My niche is definitely not a big money making venture but J. Crew gave us some recognition as well as energy, motivation and the fuel to go on. The folks at J. Crew have been a blessing and are allowing us to not have to change or sell out but keep roaming freely. —

## Toyo Enterprises

Toyo Enterprises is a clothing and textile manufacturing company based in Tokyo. It is the umbrella corporation which produces better-known brands like Sugar Cane, Buzz Rickson's and Lone Wolf Boots, as well as smaller lines like Sun Surf and Whitesville. Each brand focuses on producing specific replica garments from various periods and eras in American history. Toyo historians carefully examine and analyze existing vintage pieces so that when it comes time to manufacture, the replicas are as close to the originals as possible. From the cut, to the stitching, down to the woven fabrics everything is considered. If certain materials aren't readily available, Toyo will produce them even if it means repairing broken weaving or spinning machines for producing and or dyeing the fabrics.

- 05 Mr. Loiron in his workshop
- 06 A selection of MFSC garments from the spring Naval Clothing Tailor collection
- 07 Sketching out designs
- 08 Sewing up a pair of dungarees
- 09 Showing off some intricacies