

## SHOWTIME /TRADE SHOW REPORTS

SEARCH



3 Feb. 2009

### CLASS IS IN SESSION

Though trade shows are vital, they are also intense experiences. Vendors, retailers and buyers end up rushed, stressed, even frazzled. That's why CLASS, held from Feb. 2-3 and now in its third season at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, is not a trade show in the traditional sense. Sure, Saks Fifth Avenue, Barneys New York, Fred Segal and Kitson are among the powerful buying forces in attendance. And yes, meetings take place and exhibitors include powerhouses such as Earnest Sewn, Ted Baker, Fred Perry and William Rast. But this is not the typical Vegas pressure. CLASS is uniquely laid-back Los Angeles.

"We're really coming into our own," says Jason Bates, CLASS' creator and organizer, citing the relaxed, comfortable setting as one of the reasons for the show's 25% growth this time around. "Our brands flow and we understand our buyers' needs. We look for a good brand mix that's relevant for this market and designers who are leading the trends, not following them."

Cutting-edge CLASS exhibitors such as menswear labels Huffer, footwear innovator Toms, luxe leather goods by Ben Stu and quirky womenswear brand Odd Molly are drawn to the show as a way to spend more quality time with important buyers whom they might miss or steal mere moments with at the bigger Vegas exhibitions. Fluevog Shoes wholesale director, Mike Belgue, feels the entire vibe of this smaller, more selective show differs from the others on his schedule, including the CLASS bananas and green tea cart that comes around offering vendors a healthy pick-me-up.

And if that little extra attention to vendors and attendees (including smoothies created on a bicycle-propelled blender) is not enough, there are also spa treatments, surf lessons, a special offsite CLASS bowling night, free pictures on the Toddland mule statue, groovy music and art. Aaron Kramer's cork chair and popsicle-stick lighting fixtures meld into the atmosphere while fellow artist Peter Goetz shows his strikingly beautiful photography. Meanwhile Parrot reflective photo frames are striking next to elaborate throw pillows by former commercial photographer, Lisa Pearl. The eco-friendly CLASS also strives for a carbon neutral footprint, offering visitors artistic yet environmentally intelligent rain gardens and even living plant art by Big Red Sun.

But fashion is still the number one priority at CLASS, as its approximately 500 retailers and over 100 exhibitors can attest. While bold prints rule the spring/summer collections (see for example bathing suits by Trina Turk), sophisticated dots and subtle plaids dominate the fall selections. WeSC showed an irregular houndstooth check on men's and women's sweaters, a whimsical update of the '70s classic print. Ludwig continued the plaid theme while Moods of Norway menswear went with a retro dot. Modern Amusement did a good job keeping its line youthful yet structured, adding some charcoal and jewel-toned denim to the mix.

House of Harlow, jewelry designed by Nicole Richie, makes its boho, ethnic debut with textural, rich pieces that are surprisingly affordable while, at the other end of the spectrum, Lulu Frost's recycled Victorian shoe buckle bracelets and vintage African beaded necklaces drew attention.

No Los Angeles show would be complete without comfy tees like those from Kinetix, denim lines such as Naked & Famous, cool leather jackets such as those by Orthodox, tweed hats, Kangol's Japanese jersey, and hot bags by J Fold and others.

Though growth seems inevitable for this show, arguably the hippest kid on the West Coast show circuit, Bates says it's tricky and he plans to "grow only with purpose. If a brand is relevant, we'll add them but we are not feeling forced to grow. Exhibitors must be compelling."

—Rebecca Paiement



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## SHOWTIME /TRADE SHOW REPORTS

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28 Jan. 2009

### NEW ESTABLISHMENT

Best known for his showroom Derelict in LA, Jason Bates launched CLASS, the Santa Monica showcase of premium sportswear, in March 2008. (The next edition of CLASS runs next week, Feb. 2-3.) Bates also recently announced that he has entered a licensing agreement with ASR to launch a new show, CLASS @ ASR, in San Diego in September. Here, part one of *Sportswear International's* exclusive interview with CLASS' founder on the show's success, his plans and what's on his hot list.

**Let's go back to the beginning. Tell me about the original idea of the show and the process you went through to launch it.**

The thought of starting a trade show in Los Angeles actually came to me about three years ago. I've attended most of the major trade shows in Las Vegas, New York and Europe, and felt that Los Angeles was in a prime position to support a curated, edgy, trend-oriented fashion trade show which, at the time, it did not have. Some of the most exciting brands I have seen are from Southern California. Our lifestyle and culture is now influencing fashion, and the world, on all levels. A lot of retailers, buyers and designers already come to LA a few times a year to shop the trends prior to the big shows, so it was natural to give them the platform to interact with each other and make an impact on the West Coast market. At the big shows lots of the new brands get lost in the shuffle; I wanted to create a venue where buyers could easily find and target these new brands to increase their brand mix and to bring something new to the stores.

**How has it grown since day one?**

CLASS has grown and developed tremendously since our first show in March 2008. Our attendance has grown, the brand mix has become stronger, the look and design of the show has become more artistic and inspiring. We've expanded categorically and now include men's and women's fashion and accessories, as well as beauty, home furnishings, and jewelry.

**What are your rates?**

February 2009 rates are \$3,500 for a 10x10 booth.

**Tell me about the impact that CLASS has had since on the industry.**

I think CLASS is an incredibly timely, regional show that is making a big impact on the way people do business. CLASS is affordable and allows buyers to spend quality time with their top A-list designers and showrooms, and vice versa. Retailers can see what the lines are looking like before they go to the bigger shows where it is a virtual feeding frenzy. CLASS creates a sense of newness and gives everyone an idea of how to put lines together and find new resources, which is vital for business to survive.

**People are wondering what's the advantage of showing at your show and not in Vegas?**

CLASS is a juried show that showcases the best of the best in each category. We avoid being an overwhelming experience where retailers and designers are so spread out and busy that they don't get to spend any quality time reviewing lines and meeting with core brands. We encourage personal interaction, where real business transactions are made and relationships are formed, and we do so in a pleasant, healthy, inspired environment.

**Define your exhibitors. Who are your biggest exhibitors and the most cutting edge?**

CLASS' exhibitors are designers who are the best in their classifications. They bring something new and exciting to the table that is relevant to the fashion elite. We have an amazing cross-section of brands that makes CLASS truly unique. Some of our biggest are WeSC, Ted Baker, Howe. Cutting-edge designers include Design by Humans, Kicking Mule Workshop and Operations.

**How are you keeping them happy?**

We keep them happy with our level of services that far exceeds every show in the world. We fly in specialty retailers from all over the world, we provide spa services on-site, as well as hair cuts, healthy slow food, a smoothie bar, better lighting and music. This year we've got Mark Mothersbaugh DJ'ing a special set for us.

**What are the kinks you'd like to work out of the show eventually?**

I'd love to get brands signed up for the CLASS shows sooner so that we can promote them through our highly effective bi-weekly newsletters and media alerts and generate some buzz. To avoid people missing out, we're offering special incentives and discounts for early contract confirmations.

**And what of visitors? How do you get people to make the trip?**

For one, we fly key retailers in, to guarantee their attendance and make the trip easy for them. In addition, we have a full range of services that entice people from across the world to come to CLASS. From a West Coast perspective anyone from San Diego to Santa Barbara will save money by coming to CLASS since they

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