



Photos by Ormond Gigli

Natasha (above, right), rain gear of many colors by David Freeland (center): A touch of Punk in Soho

LIFE/STYLE

# The Fashion Underground

Many of the clothes are simply unwearable—garish costumes with more than a touch of crass. But they are infusing the fashion scene with an exuberance, daring and wit that have been sorely missing in seasons past. The styles are reminiscent of the Paris and London looks of the '60s that set off the whole boutique boom. This time, however, the clothes are made in America—in the cavernous lofts and warehouses that crowd the section of lower Manhattan known as Soho.

Seventh Avenue designers and manufacturers are still the country's major clothiers, but these days much of fashion's innovation is coming out of Soho. The area is teeming with designers who, working on a small scale, create few-of-a-kind items that they sell to small boutiques. Recently, these underground stylists have captured the attention of buyers at such major stores as Macy's, Bloomingdale's and Henri Bendel. "Soho has now become a legitimate part of a buyer's trip," says Annie Flanders, style editor of the Soho Weekly News. This spring, Saks Fifth Avenue in New York will open an "art-to-wear" boutique featuring mostly hand-painted items from a dozen Soho designers. "I think these designers will have a long-range effect on the retail level," says Saks buyer Marilise Flusser. "Fashion needs an original look to spice up stock which is becoming increasingly classic and preppy."

The Soho designers are now being wooed by the same fashion establishment that most of them have deliberately avoided. While there is no single Soho look or trend,

the designers themselves are united in their scorn for the industry's strict seasonal changes and its commerciality. A few Soho designers are Seventh Avenue dropouts, but many more have no formal fashion training at all. Lynn Doherty, 31, whose feminine, Victorian designs are now being sold in Henri Bendel, started making clothes for herself when she couldn't find anything she liked in the stores. Natasha, 26, who works out of a boutique in the East Village, first fashioned her trumpy outfits for punk-rock bands. Now they're being sold in Bloomingdale's.

**Music:** Many of the designers have backgrounds in art. Claudia McNulty, 27, of Another Product, entered the fashion field with hand-screened T shirts. Two other artists, Jan Moseman, 34, and Beth Ellor, 35, design sheer hand-printed silk kimonos and dresses that are original works of art. "Jan likes to make designs and I enjoy shaping clothes, so we decided to collaborate," says Ellor, a former student at London's Royal College of Art. Some artists are creating clothes simply because they are easier to sell than paintings. Twenty-five-year-old David Freeland, a former Hampshire College art major, is now making bold-colored nylon outerwear which has been carried by Bloomingdale's. "I've had 26 jobs in the past six years," he says. "Finally, I'm able to support my art."

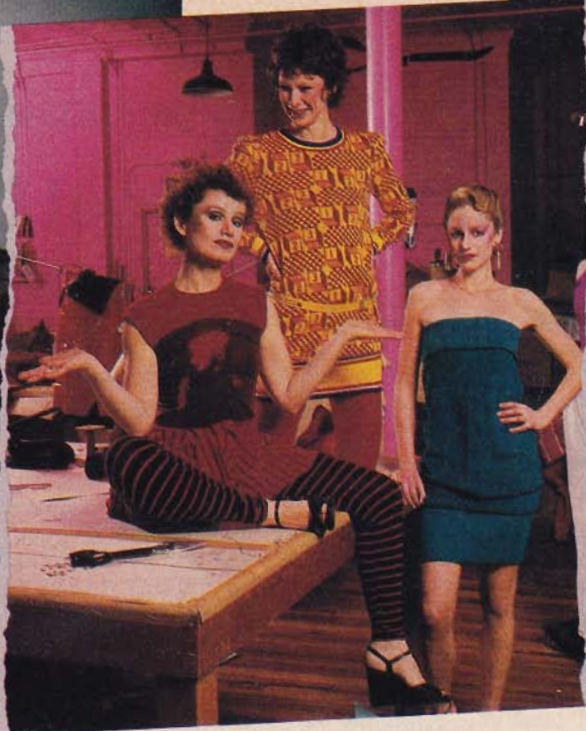
One of the main inspirations for

the more spirited clothes is music, particularly Punk Rock and its less grotesque spin-off, New Wave. Betsey Johnson, who pioneered many '60s fashions, says she was in a slump for much of the '70s—until 1978 when the music began to change. "To me, disco suggests the stuffy Upper East Side, Studio 54, Quaaludes and Halston," she explains. "New Wave is rock and roll: it's fresh, fun and young."

Like the music, the New Wave styles are a fusion of elements from the '50s, '60s and '70s, updated with a bit of punk and space-

Moseman and Ellor's kimono: Art work





Betsy Johnson (left, seated), Lynn Doherty (right, standing): *New Wave, old Victoriana*

age fantasy. Betsy Johnson's girlish skirts and patterned tights are an '80s version of the mini. Natasha, who has streaked her own hair shocking pink, harks back to the '60s with a heavy-vinyl, tough-kid look. Her women sport Frederick's of Hollywood cut-out jumpsuits and cocktail dresses with fish-net stockings. Her men look like classic '50s greasers: jet-black hair slicked back with gobs of Dippity-Doo. Eye liner is now unisex.

The Soho designers are heavily into synthetics. Millie David, for example, works mostly with Spandex, plastic and vinyl, and, like many other New Wave designers, she has taken a fancy to imitation leather. Patricia Field, owner of a Greenwich Village boutique featuring the new clothes, calls the preference for synthetics a high-tech approach to fashion. "We've had years of the silks and tweeds," she says. "People want

Designer Millie David (center): *Spandex and plastic*



clothes that are easy to care for, affordable and fun."

Many of the new styles are exactly that. Claudia McNulty's colorful cottons sell for under \$40, and the short skirts and sweater dresses in Betsy Johnson's high-spirited line are all priced under \$70. "Furthermore," she says, "everything I make can be washed in the machine." Even vinyl has its advantages because it's less costly than leather and can be wiped clean. The hand-screened silks and lace-trimmed linens aren't for those on a budget but they are elegant and pretty—and not the kind of looks that are easily copied.

**The Soho Influence:** Seventh Avenue, ever watchful for a new fashion current to ride, has begun following in Soho's wake. The mainstream's present infatuation with antique-looking lace blouses, down coats and loose, drawstring pants mimics what downtown designers were doing two years ago. Now, the mass manufacturers seem to be moving toward a more personalized fashion look, and they are even trying to duplicate the hand-crafted styles that Soho made famous. "This spring, we'll see sweaters from Seventh Avenue showing up with machine-made details such as puffy balls, fancy stitches and braiding," says Jean Rosenberg of Henri Bendel.

While most of the Soho designers rebel against anything resembling Seventh Avenue—and even eschew the word fashion (they prefer to call their clothes "art forms")—they nevertheless are responding to the new interest from



Claudia McNulty (right): *Easy-to-wear*

major fashion retailers. Last fall, 30 artisans formed Soho Designers, a co-op that operates a small showroom downtown to display their samples to eager buyers, and so far sales are booming. The question is whether the more talented designers can sustain their originality in mass production—and whether they will end up making clothes that they themselves wouldn't be caught dead in.

DIANE WEATHERS with LISA WHITMAN