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New York

SEPTEMBER 7-13, 2006 ISSUE 571
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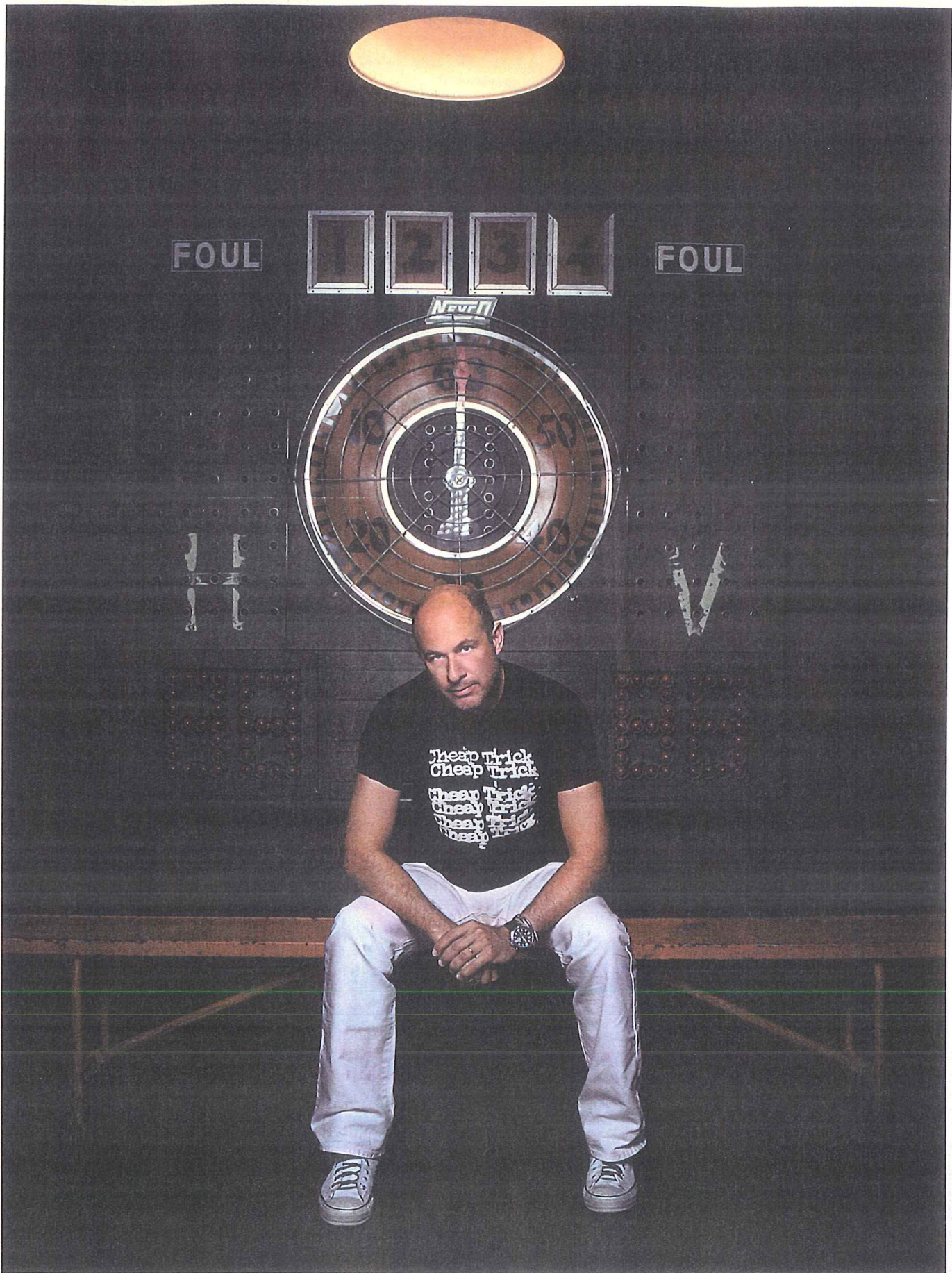
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All Star lineup

Converse moves well beyond the Chuck Taylor with a new clothing line by menswear hotshot John Varvatos.

By **Marissa Patlingrao Cooley**
Photograph by **Chad Griffith**

When John Varvatos set out to create Converse's first-ever line of clothing, he received some motivational design advice from his then-16-year-old son: "Don't screw this up." Well, Junior and the legions of Chucks fanatics around the world can relax: Next week, when the Converse by John Varvatos collections hit the racks, they'll likely be happy with the irreverent results.

The courtship between the menswear designer and the 98-year-old footwear company began four years ago, when Varvatos created limited editions of the beloved Chuck Taylor and Jack Purcell. Those laceless riffs on the iconic shoes sent ripples through the sneakerhead blogosphere.

Varvatos, who's been wearing Chucks himself since his Little League days in Detroit, was a natural choice to spearhead the company's first stab at apparel. The distinguished clothier—whose menswear label counts Matthew Fox, Brad Pitt and John Legend among its fans and can be found on the racks at Barneys and in Bergdorf Goodman, as well as in his eponymous Soho boutique—helmed the design teams at both Polo Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein before launching his own line in 1999. Varvatos's signature label has expanded to include two men's colognes, eyewear and a skin-care brand, soon to be followed by watches and a women's scent. He's been honored by the Council of Fashion Designers of America three times, winning the prestigious Perry Ellis Award for best new menswear designer in 2000, followed by two more CFDA nods for Menswear Designer of the Year in 2001 and

2005—among the professional needle-and-thread set, that's the equivalent of winning three Oscars.

Unlike many of the fashion world's recent collaborative lines (Luella Bartley for Target and Karl Lagerfeld for H&M, to name a couple), John Varvatos for Converse is not merely a greatest-hits facsimile of the designer's work. He deftly braids three threads of Converse's diverse heritage: athleticism (in the pre-Nike Air '60s and '70s, the All Star was *the* performance basketball shoe), the military (All Stars were once among the armed forces' government-issue footwear) and nose-thumbing rock & roll (à la the Who—one of classic-rock fan Varvatos's all-time favorite bands). The designer's contribution is a healthy eagerness to sweat the small stuff: Based on a photograph of Chuck Taylor in the Army, for example, a men's military-inspired jacket is rendered in washed wool to make it look aged and bears the monogram C. TAYLOR in gold bullion thread (\$495); and a skinny superlong scarf is winkingly dotted with shoelace eyelets (\$95).

While jockish references do surface in the men's collection, the overwhelming vibe recalls the irreverent Converse of the '60s mods and '70s punks—as Varvatos puts it, "a little fucked-up"—hardly the M.O. of a prototypical Varvatos apostle, but not an unfamiliar theme for the designer (the face of the John Varvatos fall ad campaign is Iggy Pop).

Younger-feeling than Star USA, his own label's more-casual weekend-wear spin-off, the accessibly priced Converse clothing is meant for the postcollegiate nephew of the more sober Varvatos man—or anyone with that sartorial mentality. A gentlemanly pair of pin-striped wool pants is turned counterculture by a set of green-and-white-striped suspenders (\$245).

A menswear designer by trade (though he created womenswear for three seasons), Varvatos finds making ladies' clothes

refreshing: "It's much more fun. There are no rules! Guys are happy if a button moves up a bit or the width of a lapel gets a little wider or narrower, but women invite big changes. In menswear, it's an evolution, but in womenswear, it can be a revolution."

Varvatos's catchphrase when discussing the Converse women's line is *sexy tomboy*—the type of chick who "doesn't want to look like a boy, but can pull off wearing her boyfriend's clothes. And not *every* girl can pull off this look—it's a confidence thing." The designer articulates this rarefied badass vibe in threads that look like they belong on a girl who spent high school smoking behind the stadium

"[Womenswear] is much more fun. There are no rules! Women invite big changes."

bleachers, not running on a field with a lacrosse stick: a distressed-leather biker-jacket-style vest (\$695), layered over a deep-V short-sleeve fleece sweatshirt with pockets (\$125) and paired with drainpipe jeans the color of cigarette ash (\$225).

In the designer's mind, the sirens wearing this garb aren't wearing Chucks—they're wearing heels, a vision that drives his future plans with Converse: developing women's shoes that aren't merely Adam's-rib versions of the men's kicks. It's a tall order from a company whose footwear designs have largely remained unchanged for more than 60 years. We can only hope that Varvatos's daughter will dispense advice on Converse fans' behalf as readily as John Jr. did.

Converse by John Varvatos will be available at Barneys New York, Bloomingdale's, Atrium and Saks Fifth Avenue starting September 15.