



story by HEATHER BURNETT | photos courtesy of JOAH SPEARMAN

On first glance, Joah Spearman appears to be the young, hip neighbor next door who always greets you in the hallway with a smile as he’s heading out to meet friends for another live show of that band your friend told you about from Norway or one of those cold Scandinavian countries.

Spearman’s youth works in his favor in this town. Because when you’re young, you still believe you can take on the world. Combine a little luck, motivation and passion, and you have a swirled cocktail that defies the apathy of others around you, clearing the way to make your mark. And let’s be honest; it’s going to take quite a few rounds of that cocktail to turn the heads of the leaders at South by Southwest. In 2010, that is exactly what Spearman did.

While interviewing the late SXSW Director Brent Grulke to get details for his book about the Austin music scene, Indisputable, Spearman threw out his idea: to include a fashion segment in the SXSW lineup. Grulke suggested he speak to Brad Spies, who became one of the biggest fans of what would be known as Style X (“style by”) that launched at SXSW in March 2011.

“I always had this idea that SXSW should have a style element because they have music, film and now interactive – why not style?” Spearman recalled.

“I’ve always been interested in fashion, or really, style overall,” Spearman said, remembering that he grew up with an older brother who was voted Best-Dressed in high school and another brother who has a sneaker collection.

The initial concept for Style X was Spearman’s, and with the help of his business partner they came up with the details of the first Style X. It was Spies and others at SXSW who served as a filter to suggest which ideas would work and which to toss. The free, no-badge-required event was an overnight success, drawing more than 15,000 people over the final weekend of the festival to see emerging designers, runway shows and pop-up retail shopping boutiques, which racked up more than \$200,000 in sales over two days. The first year in 2011 featured

31 brands. In 2012, Spearman had to turn away 45 percent of the applicants who wanted space to showcase in Style X.

“The idea was always, ‘Hey, SXSW is the perfect opportunity for pop-up retail. It’s stylish. It’s the most stylish time in Austin, even more than Austin fashion week,’” Spearman said.

Style is so prevalent during SXSW that outsiders stand out in a town that embraces its own weirdness. Blogs have been written about these visitors. Facebook updates mock them. Twitter runs wild with hash tag commentary about the #hipsters. They all come out to convene in Austin’s two-week SXSW enclave.

A graduate of the University of Texas at Austin, Spearman



worked in media relations for the Texas Longhorns before embarking on a career as the primary speech writer for the director of FEMA in Washington, D.C., following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. When returned to Austin, he wanted to find a side project to quell his thirst for something outside of his day job, so he launched Sneak Attack in December 2009 thanks to support from friends and family.

“I was looking for a passion project, so I started Sneak Attack. Basically the idea was doing a pop-up sneaker boutique,” Spearman said. “That became the business plan for Style X.”

Spearman calls himself a student of business, organizations and industries who seeks to understand how they connect on

an overall conceptual level and how those similarities can be leveraged in social media. He’s used this experience to take him into social media consulting and to his current role as Director of Market Planning at Bazaarvoice.

“A lot of people can’t see the connections between these things,” Spearman said. “I can see the connection points.” He sees the similarities between sports and politics and between the crisis control aspects of politics and social media.

“Going from politics to social media was very easy because a lot of social media, when it started, was out of fear, like ‘what happens when I do this’ and politics has that happen, too,”



Spearman said. He noted that when looking at social media and fashion, it's evident that the most universal uses of social media are about e-commerce. The first adopters of social media are typically fashion brands.

Spearman calls it a "natural progression" to integrate technology and social media in fashion, and saw SXSW as a great vehicle to showcase the emerging designers who will not only benefit from marketing themselves via social media but can gain media and customer attention and, Spearman hopes, financial gain. Style X 2012 saw more media coverage than ever before from GQ, Elle, Nylon, The Huffington Post and Women's Wear Daily, which wrote a full page story. It was through media interest for Style X that he met writers at the

Huffington Post, who offered him a fashion writing gig in 2011.

Spearman selects all the designers, traveling extensively to meet these creators, their publicists and boutique owners. In 2012 alone he's visited 31 cities.

"I travel a lot to experience those cities to understand why do people in Portland wear that or why do people in Atlanta wear that. Then I find the best designers in that city and the ones I think are doing the coolest stuff, the ones who are emerging and need the support," Spearman said about his selection process.

Spearman reaches out via social media tools like Twitter and LinkedIn to help conduct his research and meet people in the fashion industry. He attracted more established brands in the second year run of Style X.

"We have more established brands because they realize, 'these guys know what they're doing.' They like the energy of what they're trying to do. They see we're really building a community and building something positive," Spearman said.

For the third installment of this emerging fashion community, Spearman and his business partner are changing it up a bit. In 2013, the next generation of Style X will be known as The Neighborhood and will feature the same community-nurturing events, like panels to provide education, runway shows for entertainment and pop-up retail for shopping. Rather than being located in the Austin Convention Center, The Neighborhood will utilize more stylish venues and take place closer to the interactive portion of SXSW than music.

"All the things that people have grown to know and love about Style X – the panels, shows, pop-up retail – all of those will still exist. It will just be under a different name," Spearman said. "We don't want this to be an Austin event. We want this to be a global event that showcases the fact that it's in Austin."

Spearman says the whole idea around The Neighborhood is to create a sense of community, since it's his feeling that this sense of community has really never existed in the elitist-driven fashion industry. He calls this community a democracy and an opportunity to give other emerging designers a chance because they can't all afford to go to the big fashion trade shows in New York or Las Vegas. The Neighborhood allows for everyone to participate and gain more accessibility to fashion. Instead of getting your fashion fix from Tim Gunn on Project Runway or watching clips of New York fashion week, fashion fans can enjoy The Neighborhood.

"We had a great partnership with [SXSW]," Spearman said. "It was an awesome partnership. You can't help but learn from them when you're working with them on a daily and weekly basis." Plans to continue a formal partnership with SXSW are still being negotiated at the time of this story.

"It was so great to work through that process and create it, but at the end of the day the core concepts – pop-up retail, [fashion] panels, having musicians walk in the runway shows – those are my ideas or from my business partner, so we are going to take that and put into The Neighborhood."

Spearman's own disarming style stands out in a world of elitist fashion. He has an extensive colorful sock collection and loves color, T-shirts and ties. He shops a lot in an effort to "intentionally discover brands through ownership." He calls himself an über consumer and buys brands he wants to showcase and support. When he talks to the designers themselves, he wants to understand their story and the story behind the brand. Spearman believes fashion – like technology and social media – is a way to bring people together.

"Style isn't just about clothes, it's about confidence," Spearman said. "I will never be the most stylish guy in Austin or the best-dressed guy or the guy who knows the most about fashion. I'm not even trying to do that. The thing that I'm trying to do and have been able to do so far is to bring a business sense to style."

Ever since he was a kid, Spearman has been an avid reader of biographies and always interested in reading about accomplished people.

"It really rooted in me this belief that every person should figure out what their person is. It should be a one-to-many thing. It should be the thing that helps you help as many people as possible in Austin." For now, he's passionate about bringing fashion to the forefront in Austin in as many ways as it can be available – from bloggers to boutiques.

Joah Spearman and The Neighborhood are as emerging as their associated designers, but they've got the guts, integrity and heart to clear their own path.

Thoughts on Austin Fashion

"People say fake it 'til you make it, and nothing can do that better than clothes." – Joah Spearman

Austin fashion wins with women:

"Women do a good job at embracing the weather here." Hot or cold – hair styles, shoes, layering, etc – women dress appropriately for the weather conditions. The female concert goer knows how to embrace the weather here because they have to.

Austin fashion loses with the guys:

"Guys should never wear white socks." Unless they're anklets inside your running shoes, socks should not come above your ankle unless it has some flair to it.

"Men don't wear shirts that fit right." Spearman suggests finding a good tailor or a custom shirt maker, many of which are affordably priced.

Read more about Joah Spearman here:

<http://avecmode.com/>

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joah-spearman/>

<http://joah.typepad.com/>

Spearman has been blogging himself for eight years and has written and published a book, *Real Role Models*, about inspiring African-American youths. His book, *Indisputable*, is near completion and is intended to be published electronically through digital downloads. *Indisputable* is an introspective guidebook to Austin's music scene.