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These Grandpa Sneakers Are Made in America. They're a Hit Overseas.

San Antonio Shoemakers, one of the few American sneaker manufacturers left, caters to the geriatric set. But lately, a young international cohort is snapping them up.



By *Jacob Gallagher* [Follow](#)

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Paul Ben Chemhoun, the founder of Brut, a Paris vintage store so dedicated to selling musty old American clothes it might as well be in Kansas, first came across some sneakers from San Antonio Shoemakers a few years ago.

The shoes captivated him. They looked nice, but it was their provenance that really got his gears churning. The sneakers were, shockingly, made in America. “I was quite amazed by this,” said Ben Chemhoun, who thought that only New Balance still made sneakers in America.

Enticed by cheaper labor, most American-based sneaker juggernauts shipped their production overseas years ago. In the footwear world, an American company that actually produces its shoes in America is as rare as a three-headed dog: Today there is a dwindling group of shoe companies still able to print “Made in the U.S.A.” on their tags, of which Boston-based New Balance is by far the largest.

Like its regional neighbor the Alamo, San Antonio Shoemakers is an American relic. For nearly half a century, it has produced sneakers, loafers and dressy boots in the heartland.

But SAS is no marquee name like New Balance. Even among Nike-nerd sneaker collectors it doesn't ring many bells. That's because SAS has largely catered to the retirement-home set. Its traditional audience is more “This Old House” than TikTok.



Shoelaces await their shoes at one of SAS's Texas factories. PHOTO: SCOTT BALL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

That is starting to shift. Last year, Ye, the rapper formerly known as Kanye West, posted a photo of SAS's logo to Instagram, fueling speculation that the disparate entities might work together. (They did not.) More recently, SAS has basked in a curious moment of, daresay, coolness, thanks to the dad, or some would say granddad, sneaker trend. On Instagram, you can spot people many decades away from attaining AARP membership wearing the label's squishy shoes with pleated pants and bomber jackets.

Ryan Chang, 35, a writing professor in Los Angeles, has been a fan of SAS for years. He was drawn to the sneakers in large part because they were so clearly not aimed directly at his sub-50 demo. "Those shoes weren't algorithmically delivered to me," said Chang.

He likes how well his Journey Mesh sneakers have stood up over the years—and how easy they are on his feet. "They're not necessarily designed for style first," he said. "They focus really on foot health." His well-under-the-hill friends have even become SAS converts, not so much for the look, but for the orthopedic advantage. They're buying them, Chang said, "mostly because their feet have really started to hurt." Aching arches, after all, can strike at any age.



Each shoe at SAS takes somewhere between 65 and 80 steps to complete.

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The wide-set look of the shoes has its fans as well. “I have quite a strong interest in grandpa style,” said Ben Chemhoun. So much so that in June his shop released a collaborative version of the Journey Mesh sneaker.

The \$245 doughy trainers look like something a sweatpantsed retiree would wear for a walk around the cul-de-sac. As Ben Chemhoun tells it, they’re just the thing for his 20-something shoppers to wear around the third arrondissement. Online, the mesh-heavy shoes are sold out in many sizes.

Ben Chemhoun noted that it took him many messages over several months to hear back from SAS about working together. “It was pretty tough to contact them,” he said, a reflection of SAS’s at times unsure embrace of its sub-geriatric audience.



The Paris vintage store Brut released a collaborative version of SAS's Journey Mesh sneaker this summer. PHOTO: BRUT

“We are not a fashion house in any form or fashion,” said Nancy Richardson, SAS’s straight-talking CEO. Uniquely for shoe brands, which tend to be youth-obsessed, plastering smiley skateboarders and basketball players across their ads, SAS doesn’t focus on teens. “We really focus on 35 and above,” she said.

That’s not to say that Richardson has been a sluggish, change-resistant CEO. When she joined the company in 2012, SAS was releasing as little as one new style every five years. “It was almost as if the company had hit pause,” she said. (Richardson already had a grasp of the factory floor when she became CEO—she had run its accounting department from 1986 to 1992.)

Under her stewardship, the brand has sprung to life, introducing around four to five new styles each year. “I felt there was a great opportunity here to just move the dial from focusing so much on the street comfort of the shoe to more the intersection of elements of style and comfort.”

Today, the “new arrivals” tab on the brand’s website reveals \$329 dressy chukka boots, \$225 lace-up dress sneakers on a beefy gum sole and \$249 mesh sneakers that look not unlike a pair of Salomon’s hiking shoes. Each shoe takes somewhere between 65 and 80 steps to complete.

Everything from developing the last shape, to stitching on the mesh panels, to building the shoeboxes is done in house.



For foot-pained shoppers, SAS offers shoes in a range of different widths. PHOTO: SCOTT BALL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

On its website, the company's target audience remains clear. Product descriptions mention the word comfort right at the top, and indicate that a given style is Medicare approved. For foot-pained shoppers, SAS offers shoes in a range of different widths. Hardly things a Gen Z shopper would fret over.

SAS is a private company and doesn't reveal its revenue, staff size or production numbers. It operates three factories in south Texas and is still owned by the family of Terry Armstrong, the Maine-born entrepreneur who started the company in 1976 with his friend Lew Hayden. "They felt very strongly about keeping jobs in America," said Richardson of the founders.

While investing in American manufacturing is something that clothing industry honchos and politicians rally around, Richardson said that in her experience, it isn't something that actually sways consumers to spend. "Every study we've done would say 'no,'" she said when asked if people buy SAS shoes simply because they are made in America. "I think people buy from us because we frankly put a great product out there."

Producing in America is a persistent uphill climb, no matter how comfortable your shoes are. Skilled workers are scarce, so the company assumes that everyone it hires doesn't know word one about shoemaking. "It takes about six months in the factory before we consider someone fully trained," said Richardson.



A SAS employee arranges loafers on the factory floor. PHOTO: SCOTT BALL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

The elevated expense of manufacturing in America also means SAS's sneakers sell at a much higher price point than, say, Nike's \$110 Air Force 1s, or Reebok's \$90 Club C designs, and shoppers occasionally bristle.

Curiously, the shoppers that do see American manufacturing as a big plus are often overseas, which is SAS's fastest-growing market. On Instagram, the most fashion-forward people backing the brand are overwhelmingly from Japan. "U.S. manufacturing is still very well respected across the world," said Richardson.

"I'm a huge fan of Made in U.S.A.," said Mario Romano, a 50-something Italian actor and enthusiast of vintage clothing who previously wore New Balances but now savors SAS shoes. "These are the sneakers that I would ideally like to wear, along with old American Levi's 501, for the rest of my life."

Write to Jacob Gallagher at jacob.gallagher@wsj.com

Corrections & Amplifications

A previous version of this article incorrectly said that Brut released its collaborative Journey Mesh sneaker last month. The sneakers were released in June. (Corrected on Aug. 1)

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