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CHAPTER 3

STORIES



# KICKIN' IT

Rocketbuster Boots is doing it by hand the old fashioned way in El Paso, TX

Written by Melissa Corbin / Photography Courtesy of Rocketbuster Boots



**Opposite:** Custom mules in full bloom. **Above:** Navena Christi came to El Paso in 1995 to commission ROCKETBUSTER to collaborate on some outrageous boots for Nicole Miller's New York runway show, where she was design director. Almost 30 years later, the rest is history.

Photograph by Andy Austin



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“THE ONLY THING OUR CUSTOMERS HAVE IN COMMON IS THAT NONE OF THEM ARE BORING AND THEY ALL APPRECIATE SOMETHING UNIQUE THAT’S BEEN MADE BY HAND!”

Home to some of the world’s most revered boot manufacturers, El Paso Texas has long been known as the “Boot Capital of the World.” And, among the stylish eateries, shops and hotels within the historic Union Plaza District of downtown El Paso, a team of boot makers are kicking it old school with some of the most coveted boot designs in the world – Rocketbuster Hand-made Custom Boots.

Marty Snortum has been collecting all sorts of vintage stuff since he was a kid. From old cars to cowboy boots, if you can think of it, Marty probably has it. So, as his commercial photography career led him to shoot some of those legendary boots of El Paso, it was the vintage boot images that gave him pause. He couldn’t get his head around why manufacturers ditched the imaginative styles of the 40s for what he considered a boring new aesthetic.

As the story goes, Marty came to own the Rocketbuster name after trading his 1953 Cadillac hearse in a bar one night back in 1989 for a couple of sewing machines, a couple of employees, and a pile of leather. But, what next? An American icon. That’s what.

Marty had wide feet, according to his wife and self-described “Reigning Queen of Rocketbuster” – Nevena Christi, “If you have wide feet, you’re never gonna find a vintage pair of wide-footed boots.” Roy Rogers could relate. He explained to Marty that his old show boots never fit correctly and would love it if Marty could make him a new wider pair. The King of Cowboys not only got his new boots, but he and Marty ended up designing the first Rocketbuster signature boot collection showcased in the Roy Rogers Museum.

Marty rode on that happy trail for quite a bit, until the demand grew so big

**Clockwise, L to R:** “These took a long time to figure out. It’s funny how my mind works, but when it all starts to flow the pattern seems to build itself. Each element deciding where it wants to be. Then handcarving, stainwork, inlay, stitching.” • After taking the helm at Rocketbuster, Nevena developed new styles and they soon went totally custom. • Patience is a necessity. “We always want to surpass our customers dreams and that can be a time consuming challenge.” • Everything is done by hand; embroidery, cutting, stitching, tooling, and more.

that his small studio was busting at the seams. He needed growing room. That’s how he ended up in Union Plaza in 1992. To this day, Rocketbuster hangs its hat in an old 1900’s fur trappers’ warehouse where you can still see some of the hide’s origins scrolled on the brick walls.

At the same time Marty had acquired the new Rocketbuster space, Nevena was the design director for Nicole Miller in New York City and wanted “really crazy boots with crazy ideas featuring things like peacock feathers and Chinese dragons” for an upcoming runway show. She recalls that “out of all the boot companies I called, Marty was the only one that said, ‘sure, let’s do that.’ I fell in love with him in two seconds.” So, when he flew to New York to photograph the show, Nevena admittedly “was instantly smitten.”

After a two-and-a-half-year long-distance romance traveling across the United States together, Nevena finally moved to El Paso to be with Marty full-time, eventually taking over the company for him in 1997. As it turns out, what started as a collab evolved into a beautiful marriage – literally and figuratively.

Nevena remembers one of the first things she noticed about her new life in El Paso, “It’s like you’ve been living in a pot and someone took the lid off.” The lid was definitely lifted so much so that Marty often asked her why it took her so long to get home. Inevitably, she had pulled over to bask in the glow of the desert sunsets. It’s this same Chihuahuan Desert landscape that has inspired a great deal of Nevena’s work, “I am constantly pulling over to take pictures of clouds. We do a lot of landscape stuff.” She says their shopping trips to antique malls and estate sales are also where she has some of her best light bulb moments “But, we’ve sort of put a moratorium on our collecting. If I don’t have somewhere to put it, I’m not buying it. That’s my rule nowadays,” she laughs.

Still, step inside Rocketbuster and you’ll know what Nevena is talking about, in the best possible way. Wall-to-wall colorful boots greet you among a huge collection of vintage memorabilia, including the “World’s Largest Boots” and other playful items that serve as the launch pad for Nevena and her creative team, “It’s space-age vintage style for folks that just ain’t

boring. That's the only thing that encompasses our entire galaxy of ideas," she says.

#### The creative process begins...

A few preliminary steps are taken such as tracing your foot, and picking your preferred toe shape. She also recommends looking at some of her artwork on the Rocketbuster website and social media. You can always stop there, with say those iconic peacock feathers from her early days, or perhaps a classic vintage stitching. But, the sky really is the limit.

Nevena likes to start a custom design by talking to her customers about their dreams to learn what sparks their personalities. She says that when customers show up with just a list of requirements that can be tricky because of all of the unknowns she's thinking about. "I always feel like people are daring me, like when you were a kid on the schoolyard and was told that you can't do this. I usually say yes and then I kick myself later. Like, dude! Why did you say yes to that?"

As Nevena is always up for a challenge. She points to a design in her office that features an intricate pencil drawing of flowers. The client had requested flowers blowing in the wind on her boots during consultation. This one was going to be massive as she recalls. Visual artists have explored how to capture movement in their work for centuries. Take DaVinci's *La Scapigliata*, for example. Not even a master of movement such as Leonardo da Vinci finished the project. As it turns out, movement is difficult to illustrate unless you are working with film as your media. But, Nevena was determined. Her first attempt was to throw flowers into the air while photographing them. She recalls, "I was trying to draw them still and make them look like they were moving. It went on for a long time." Finally, she turned to Artificial Intelligence (AI). "We were shocked by what was coming up. We actually had a reference to draw from. So, that was great."

#### The right stuff...

There's a wooden plaque that reads "Boss Lady" hanging above the draft table in her office. But, Nevena is quick to say that it's not just about her. It takes an entire team of specialists to make each pair of Rocketbuster boots.

The primary stitcher has been with the company for pretty much the whole



history of Rocketbuster. That's his sole responsibility other than teaching a new young stitcher, "Her mom's a quilter. So, she does have some experience. But, in the meantime, she also does all sorts of detailed work on finishing the boots," explains Nevena. There are two artists that do stain work on the hand-carved boots, and one person who does finishing and cleaning to make sure that everything's great. There's a chief cutter, along with an assembler who also keeps track of production. She says that downstairs the two lasters turn the boots into three dimensional objects. And, when

Nevena adds to this team of skilled crafts people, she impresses on motivation as opposed to skill as her chosen criteria, "If someone's motivated, it's amazing what they can learn." In fact, she's not interested in bringing on new artists at the top of their game, "It's like trying to turn a pageant girl into a model – you can't unlearn certain things."

The same level of discernment that Nevena impresses upon her team is applied to the very imported leathers that they work with. While she says that their leather may sometimes be harvested here in the United States and beyond, those hides are then brought to the tanneries she loves to work with which are mostly Italian and French, "The leather is just so plush and when you touch it, it's just beautiful."

#### Want a pair?

With boots starting at about \$1500, the entire boot-making process usually takes about three to four months. But, depending on the depth and scope of design, it can take more than a year and spike the end product's cost substantially.

Roy Rogers may have been the first big name in Rocketbuster Boots, but a whole host of famous folks favor Rocketbuster Handmade Custom Boots from Leon Bridges, and Julia Roberts to Jane Fonda who sported her custom Rocketbusters in the 2023 comedy film, *80 For Brady*. Even still, there's one solid reason why so many walks of life swear by the Rocketbuster name, "The only thing our customers have in common is that none of them are boring and they all appreciate something unique that's been

**Above:** Belle, one of two leather stain artists at Rocketbuster. **Clockwise, L to R:** Come for a shopping excursion at the Rocketbuster shop. • The "Boca" with roses mule ears design and sterling silver cross conchos. • The Winchester talltops with gorgeous leather carving and silver conchos.

