

## FEATURE

### HUSH PUPPIES THE FIRST 50 YEARS OF A FOOTWEAR TREND

By Dave Hoekstra

Hush Puppies are a soft sanctuary in a dog-eat-dog world.

The famous shoe was born fifty years ago in Rockford, Michigan, just north of Grand Rapids. The suede brand has grown to become as smooth as brown sugar—which recalls the 1965 Rolling Stones concert in Sacramento, California, when Keith Richards accidentally touched his guitar against an ungrounded microphone. Richards was knocked unconscious. Medics believed the crepe-soled Hush Puppies shoes that Richards was wearing saved one of his nine lives.

Hush Puppies were introduced to the shoe industry in October 1958 at the National Shoe Fair in Chicago. Grand Rapids native son and future President Gerald Ford gave a pair to then-President Dwight Eisenhower. By 1963 one out of every ten adults in America owned a pair of Hush Puppies. They were the first shoes advertised on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson.

“Think about when Hush Puppies came out, 1958,” says Jenni Hamilton, global marketing director for Hush Puppies during an interview in Rockford. “It was the time of Ward and June Cleaver. Very formal. Much more serious. It was the first casual shoe, and it invited the world to kick back, relax and be more laid back about life.”

Did we say beach bum Jimmy Buffett name-checks Hush Puppies in his hit “Come Monday”?

Fittingly, Hush Puppies’ roots are along the gentle Rogue River in Rockford. In 1910 G.A. Krause opened Wolverine Shoe & Tanning Co. along the river. The original brick building still stands, next door to the Wolverine Footwear Depot, on 235 North Main. I picked up a \$119 pair of dark brown “Energy” Hush Puppies slip-ons for \$59.

The outlet store was previously a shoe factory, and if you look closely the workers’ footprints are still visible on the floor.

At the turn of the 20th century, Wolverine was searching for alternative leather as horses were becoming scarce. Krause’s son Victor sanded pigskin hide to create a soft brushed suede used in gloves for the military. His brother Adolf developed the prototype pigskin shoes in the 1950s.

The suede was paired with the crepe sole to create the slipper-like shoe that first sold for \$8.95. The suede accounts for the relaxed Hush Puppies vibe. It resists stains and doesn’t need treatment. Scotchgard is built into the suede.

Victor Krause was so proud of his work that he was buried in a lime-green pair of Hush Puppies. That’s stylin’.

The name Hush Puppies was the result of a road trip from the brand’s first sales manager. He ate some hush puppies while traveling through the south. The deep-fried

cornbread got its name because farmers toss the nuggets to barking dogs to hush them. And “barking dogs” is also slang for tired feet. It made a perfect match. And it gave birth to the trademark basset hound.

In 2006 more than 19 million pairs of Hush Puppies were sold in 135 countries. Styles range from sandals to boots. There are 400 retail stores across the world.

When a visitor drives up to the parent company Wolverine World Wide, Inc. headquarters, flags of 101 nations adorn the Courtland Drive entrance. Top management is in Rockford, the shoes are made at worldwide plants. The Rockford plant employs about 1,500 people who, besides Hush Puppies, also work on Caterpillar, Harley-Davidson and Patagonia footwear, all under the Wolverine umbrella.

The coffee table book *America's Greatest Brands (Insight into 80 of America's Strongest Brands, Vol. 1)* sits in the lobby of the headquarters. Hush Puppies is in the book with John Deere, Mr. Coffee and Oreo cookies. The book credits Hush Puppies for “a light-hearted approach to life.”

“There’s something about being in Rockford and being in the Midwest that keeps the brand centered and real,” Hamilton says. “And that dog is so recognizable around the world. People who don’t even speak English see the dog and mumble ‘Oh! Hush Puppies.’ Or they think basset hounds are called Hush Puppies.” The current basset hound used in Hush Puppies ads is named “Jason,” and his photograph has been used for the past twenty years.

But the Hush Puppies folks are not dwelling on the past in its golden year. The company created a Guest Designer series that will roll out in late August ([hushpuppies.com](http://hushpuppies.com)). In the men’s series New York designer Phillip Bloch (MTV, Halle Berry, Johnny Depp, Jim Carrey) pays homage to the early days of Hush Puppies. He created a collection that moves from denim to the elegance of the runway.

London-based Rachel Fanconi (David Beckham, Rod Stewart) mixes flashback details such as hand-stitching and paisley motifs in her women’s collection. “Rachel went to our London office and Phillip came here,” Hamilton explains. “We pulled out all the books from the archives and went through old catalogs and ads so they could get a sense of the brand from the product standpoint as well as positioning. They created something that is certainly vintage-inspired but fresh. The whole collection has our signature suede. And when we called Phillip about the project, he said he was wearing a pair of Hush Puppies. He had a passion for it.”

The Guest Designer series is an extension of the first chapter of Malcom Gladwell’s 2002 bestseller *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell said the company’s “tipping point” (the moment of “critical mass”) came between 1994 and 1995.

Hush Puppies sales had fallen to 30,000 pairs a year, mostly to “backwoods outlets and small-town family stores,” he wrote. “But then something strange happened. At a fashion shoot, two Hush Puppies executives ran into a stylist from New York who told them the classic Hush Puppies had suddenly become hip in the clubs and bars of downtown Manhattan.” Fans were buying Hush Puppies at resale shops in the Village and Soho.

Designer John Bartlett suddenly requested that Hush Puppies recreate its signature patterns in bright colors for his February, 1995, NY Fashion Week show.

Next, Manhattan designer Anna Sui called Hush Puppies for multicolored runway shoes. Los Angeles designer Joel Fitzgerald installed a 25-foot inflatable Hush Puppies-inspired basset hound on the roof of his Hollywood store and gutted an adjacent art gallery to create an organic Hush Puppies boutique. Paul Reubens (Pee-Wee Herman) bought a couple of pairs of suede shoes at the boutique. Word spread. The big dogs were barking.

By 1995 the company sold 430,000 pairs of Hush Puppies and the next year it sold four times that number.

Earlier this year, Hush Puppies linked up with the Grammy Awards. The shoes were part of a gifting suite, since the Grammy Award was also celebrating its 50th anniversary. Herbie Hancock, Paula Abdul, Tim Lopez (Plain White T's) and Will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas were among those who stopped by for some Hush Puppies. "It was the same, 'Oh, I remember Hush Puppies,'" says Tracy Fahselt, marketing specialist for Hush Puppies. "Kenny Aronoff [former John Mellencamp drummer] was enamored with the 'Civilian,' this shoe-boot men's pair we have. He wears them out in a heartbeat and always wants more."

Men's shoes range between \$80 and \$125 for a pair and up to \$165 for the detailed and upscale Black Label collection. Women's shoes sell between \$69 and \$100, while the children's line sells between \$30 and \$45.

Francisco J. Perez is vice president of Hush Puppies International. Based in Rockford, he travels the world selling the famous dog. "Germany, Argentina and Chile are big markets," Perez says. "There's between 14 and 15 million people in Chile and there are sixty-six Hush Puppies stores. One out of eight habitants in Chile wear Hush Puppies. In that country the brand is more visible than Nike or Coca-Cola. We're very close to China giving us big numbers. We're growing extensively in the Middle East." Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev invited Hush Puppies to be the first American company to do business in the Soviet Union.

Perez says the shoes are manufactured in China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Italy, Spain and Brazil. He was wearing black lightweight Hush Puppies from the fall '06 collection. He owns about thirty pairs of Hush Puppies. "I'm lucky I'm sample size [8]," he says with a grin.

The first licensee was England, in 1959, according to Perez. England's Prince Philip wore a pair when he visited the United States in 1959. Princess Diana once ordered a custom-made set. And of course the Beatles wore Hush Puppies.

They made an album called *Rubber Soul*.

