

## Hold on to Your Shorts, Boys! Utilikilts is Coming

By Cheryl Slean

I'm at a party and there's a guy in dreadlocks blindfolded and stripping. He throws his shirt away and the girls and guys in the room all scream their approval. The boots and socks are already gone; he unbuckles his belt and says doubtfully into the air, like a blind man, *do you really want me to do this?* And everyone shouts back *YEEAAH!*, especially the three girls on the couch directly in front of him. The stripper says *okay...* and it sounds to me like a warning. He unsnaps the kilt he is wearing and teasingly flips it around his waist. We howl, and I wonder if our enthusiasm stems from the fact that we know he wears nothing beneath (it's kind of an urban legend), or because the stripper is Steven Villegas, founder and head honcho of Utilikilts, the company that makes his line of male skirt garments, including the "urban camouflage" model from which he's about to be parted. Tonight is Steven's birthday and his girlfriend Megan has put this party together, including the earlier, tiki-torch-lit game of kickball in which a bunch of guys and one girl shouted encouragement to each other while running bases with beers in their hands, Utilikilts flying.

At last, Steven lifts his arms and his camo kilt falls, *and the crowd are loving it!* as Monty Python would say. Alas, at the last second, Megan steps in to cover him up, though maybe not quickly enough, because I see the women on the couch delightedly flick their eyes down, then up. Megan wraps a new, custom kilt made entirely of synthetic white fur around him, and adds a matching fur hat and fur boots and the blindfold comes off and the stripper has been transformed into a sort of shirtless, suntanned, polar bearish, Russian commando. The girls on the couch and I exchange approving glances; we all agree the getup's both nuts and terrifically cute.

A couple of weeks later at his Interbay shop, I asked Steven how he came up with the first Utilikilt design. He eyed my dog, a pit bull, warily and said the notion arrived while he was living and working in Barcelona as a street performer.

"I thought a camouflage kilt would be cool," he said. "But I didn't actually make it till later, back in Seattle. I had these old camo pants that had paint stains on the legs. So I ripped the seams out and cut them off at the knees and sewed them together."

"Did you know how to sew then?" I asked.

"Not at all," he said. "My girlfriend showed me how to thread the machine."

"And then you just took it from there?"

"It's a machine," he said, matter of factly. "I can figure out any machine."

"Impressive," I said, remembering all the botched starts on my prom dress. "And then what?"

He shrugged and lit an American Spirit. "I made a few more, and one night I wore one out to a club and the bouncer stopped me and said, hey man, I want one of those. So I told him to come to the shop. And that was my first sale." Steven pushed my pit bull aside; she was sniffing under his kilt.

"I'm sorry about bringing the dog," I said. He nodded. The last time he'd seen her she had attacked his dog at my house. "It's okay," he said. "It just gets me." He pressed his hand to his chest. "Right here. You know?" "Yeah," I said, "who knows what these dogs are thinking."

### **The *Moby Dick* in, and, or against the Utilikilt**

One of my favorite things about the fabulous Melville novel, besides the oddball names (Pequod, Queequeg, Bildad, etc.) are the mysterious chapters on cetology in which all kinds of useless information about "leviathan" is recounted. Doesn't every human endeavor have its own precious, ebullient, self-serving, dedicated language?

When you buy the *male unbifurcated garment* (MUG) Utilikilt, featuring *Patent Pending Symmetrical Pleating System* and *Patent Pending Side Mount Saddle Pockets*, whether it be an *Islander* or a *Workman's Standard* or an *Urban Camo Neotraditional*, you have entered the inner sanctum of the *Utiliclan*, a loose but fiercely loyal aggregation which has become, over the company's first year in business, rather large and diverse, thanks mostly to internet sales. The *kilture* now consists of people of every gender and race, of children and grown men and

retirees who take the bus from Spokane to personally visit the shop, not once, but twice, before making a purchase, then turning around in their new skirt and getting back on the bus. Of Minnesotan businessmen wearing Utilikilts on the golf course, posing for pictures in urban camos and bicolored golf shoes, leaning casually on their clubs. Of painters and carpenters and Bosnian rock stars and teenage boys at the movies (I've seen them!) and bankers who prefer to wear skirts, and cabir-tossing Highland Games-playing giants, Vietnam vets and Navy hospital corpsmen and film directors; at least three men of the cloth; amputees, a wealthy entrepreneur who sends the *Utilikilt minions* (staff) photos of his kilt-wearing zillionaire self in front of the Taj Majal. There is one six-and-a-half foot female transsexual who bought a canvas Painter's model to dye purple and decorate with the butterfly logo of her all-trannie construction company.

But maybe you still don't get it. (In *Moby Dick*, Ishmael was so appalled and fascinated by the whiteness of the whale that one whole chapter is devoted to the color white.) I mean, even after reading that last paragraph, you probably wonder-- who really would buy this garment? How could this be more than a fad for fashion trendies and local rockers and Fremont-based boho artists? Why would a typical straight guy (as a for instance) risk social debasement and possible gay- or female-identification by exposing his fishbelly legs in a skirt?

### **"I don't think I have to explain about comfort and freedom *to you*"**

I have known Danielle Villegas for many years, and I know this much about her: she can sell, to you, anything. She moved to Seattle a few months ago to help her brother manage his growing enterprise, and she now oversees the financial affairs. She also helps man the booths at the company's non-virtual sales locations-- Pike Street Market and Fremont Sunday Market, and soon to add Venice Beach. Danielle sells a lot of kilts, mostly, she says, to straight guys in the thirties-to-forties range. She admits there is often resistance up front to the product; she describes men who wander by, get a load of the wares, then briskly beat a retreat, glancing back over their shoulders. She talks about couples whose female component enthusiastically attempts to interest a partner who's off in some corner, attending feverishly to his nails. When Danielle does get a guy to stop, her pitch focuses mainly on the comfort angle. Wisely, when

dealing with men, she targets below-the-belt. She asks questions, especially of overweight guys, about how they feel in their pants. Though she's a girl, her butch lesbian disposition gives her a bit of an inside track to hetero maleness (at least in the sexual partner department), and she quickly has the men admitting to trouser truths that normally go unspoken in mixed company. Until I watched her at work, I didn't realize the extent of pants discomfort for guys: the chafing and summertime rashes; the squashing and underwear riding up and the ubiquitous right or left side adjustment. When I asked Steven later why I'd not heard more men fret about such problems, he said, "Why complain when there's no alternative?" He has a point, and in his claims to provide a radical alternative to the oppressive "tyranny of trousers," his revolution-speak seems to me appropriate in a culture that subjects men, according to David Foster Wallace, to an "arbitrary, restrictive, unfair, incommodius [and] illogical" dictum on male apparel. The company's motto is "we sell freedom," and it's an onanistic freedom they vend, the symbolic and actual male-empowerment totem of "swinging free." This *genitalia uber alles* design philosophy may be what allows the product to retain, despite its skirtiness, a masculinity that most people sense right away.

It's no surprise, however, that the resistance toward buying may sometimes come from the female end. Gals do like their boys to be men, and seeing her S.O. in a skirt may arouse in a female person some doubt. At Pike Street, I watch an engaged hetero couple stop by to check out the tux model. According to Danielle, the man is a repeat browser. The woman stands a few feet away while he gazes longingly at the photographs of the draping black fabric, the svelte pleating, the gray tux stripes down each side. "He wants one for the wedding," the woman explains, looking a little panicked. "Notice the cut," Danielle says to the shopper, "it hangs down long in the back." The man practically drools on the glass. The woman takes her fiancé's arm to lead him away. "But not in the pictures!" she says. "He can wear it for part of the reception if he wants, but not in the church or the pictures!" They head upstairs to the fish market, and Danielle turns to me with a grin. "He's got time," she says. "The wedding's not for a year."

**"Just writing to say THANKS for the excellentiously righteous kilt!"**

If you still don't believe me about the growing popularity of this garment, check out the testimonials from satisfied customers which dot the pages of the company's website like barnacles on a whaleskin. [www.utilikilts.com](http://www.utilikilts.com) is designed and maintained by Megan Haas, who, besides being Steven's girlfriend, a conceivably challenging job in itself, is an eclectic entrepreneur who's been manning the company trenches since its inception. It is she who has cultivated their extensive relationship with the press, prompting coverage from the local outlets all the way up to CNN. Her website has evolved into a voluminous storehouse of anecdotes and photos documenting the personal and public evolution of the Utilikilt and its far-flung aficionados. The entertaining site has deservedly earned the internet accolade of being *sticky*, which simply means it gets people coming back.

One afternoon I mosey over to the Fremont Market to check out the Utilikiltarians in action. Down the row, other vendors sit bored in the back of their booths, mowing through the Sunday paper. By contrast, Steven and Megan are out in the lane, chatting with various buds and buyers who continuously drop by. It doesn't feel like a sales event at all, but rather another episode in the general, ongoing Utilibash. I observe Steven attract attention just by standing there being him; I watch men and women get drawn to the booth without any pitch or appeal, but simply by the magnetism of happy hipness, or of witnessing something brave and original, or maybe it's the colorful kilts themselves, swaying in the wind. People come, they finger the merchandise, they hold it up to themselves, they listen to Danielle tell them about freedom and comfort and lifetime guarantees. I see the men glance at Steven, perhaps wondering if they could ever look as cool as That Guy with his Kilt hanging jauntily off his hips, in his dreds and his grungy boots. And I, swept up in the fever, try on a khaki green mini neotrad that seems to fit me just right. The lookers-on murmur their approval. Everyone says I look skinny. And though I rarely spend this much on a single clothing item, I feel a sense of satisfaction distinctly unfashion-related when Danielle grips my hand and says, *welcome to the Utiliclan*.