Cotillion Bureau: A Hotspot for Vintage Clothing in Portsmouth NH

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PORTSMOUTH, NH- If you’ve ever seen a vintage dress and romanticized an entire backstory for it, the carefully curated vintage clothing of Cotillion Bureau (CB) might be for you. CB is a consignment store specializing in vintage clothing and that takes special care in creating tags with unique messages that correspond to each piece. The store, located at 65 Bow Street in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, is just a 30 minute bus ride away from the University of New Hampshire (UNH) campus.

PJ Beaudet, the store manager of Cotillion Bureau.
“When I moved to New England 10 years ago I was super impressed by all of the creative, interesting and eclectic people who lived here but felt there was a disconnect between them and local shopping options. I couldn’t believe so many people relied on outlet malls, fast fashion and online for the majority of their wardrobe. I knew that I could offer something different in terms of a shopping experience and I have always felt that the best way to get high quality goods at an affordable price is to buy them second hand,” said Rebecca Earle, the creator, owner and operator of Cotillion Bureau.

Prior to starting her stores, Earle earned a BFA in painting and printmaking, and worked for eight years as a professional holiday decorator. The lack of quality shopping options in the New England area was especially apparent to Earle when she was searching for a unique item to gift her friend.

“Cotillion Bureau crystallized when I couldn’t find anything to give for a bachelorette gift that wasn’t tacky or plastic... I thrifted a white silk robe and upcycled it by hand, dyeing it to shades of violet and embellishing it with some tassels on the belt. The bride loved it,” said Earle.

After upcycling the gift for her friend’s bachelorette party, Earle opened CB in Kittery, Maine. In March of 2018 Earle moved the store to Portsmouth and a year later started another store, HELLO AGAIN, that focuses on 1970s and Y2K clothing, and is located in Dover.

CB’s inventory is a mix of consigned and non-consigned pieces of vintage clothing ranging from the 1940s-1970s. Earle curates the inventory of CB based on seasonality, provenance, style and need. Each item has a unique tag that corresponds to it.

“Our rule is: if there is nothing to say about the clothing, it doesn’t belong in our shop. I encourage employees to choose the items that inspire them the most to tag—that’s where the best tags come from...They can be descriptive, referential or even poetic but they all need to share what makes the clothing special. Our tags are a great way for people to learn about the clothing without needing to engage in conversation if they don’t want to,” said Earle.

PJ Beaudet, the store manager of CB has worked at the business for two years. He writes labels for the clothes based on the color palettes, movie references, or pop culture icons that come to mind upon looking at an item. He also does merchandising and puts together the window displays for the store.

Instead of using simple names for the color of an item, Beaudet will sometimes match a paint swatching tool to the garment to display the piece with an ultra specific feel. He states that finding the inspiration for what to write on some labels can evoke very niche pop culture references from around the time the item was made that makes the writing process more fun.
While some items have labels with references to the specific decade they were produced in, they are not pigeonholed to their history. For example, the label for the store’s 1960s purple velvet suit has references to musical artist Elton John who was popular in the 1970s. The store’s labels also contain suggestions on how to wear the pieces they are attached to. For example, one wrap skirt suggests its owner wear tights, while the flared bottoms of a purple crushed velvet suit are labeled ‘perfect to go over your platforms.’

Found shopping at CB was Gemma Soldati, the 2023 host of Project Upcycle, and Jen Moore, the creator of the event. Project Upcycle took place in Portsmouth from October 19th to 21st and was a competition between eight designers to upcycle the best streetwear look for their chance to win cash prizes. Contestants were judged on their execution, creative reuse of materials and styling by a panel of judges. Soldati came into CB looking for a sustainable and vintage outfit to wear to the event.
At the time of the interview Soldati was trying on a vintage tea hat, lime green bodysuit and a matching purple and green patterned button-down-dress-pant-combo. When asked if Cotillion Bureau passed the check for sustainability, Soldati said that they “absolutely” did.

“Last year at Project Upcycle there were so many people who were in head-to-toe Cotillion Bureau. So at this point, I think it’s a must. It’s sort of like an unofficial sponsor,” she said.

In finding her outfit for Project Upcycle, Soldati was helped by Beaudet.

“All the staff here are phenomenal, beautiful, fun and all have their own sense of style. When you come in, they really know what they’re talking about,” Soldati said. “And it’s not just a store. It’s the artistry of fashion. All the pieces you can tell are well taken care of and beautifully curated.”

Fast fashion has been a hot button issue in recent years with online fast fashion brands such as Shein and Asos rising to popularity.

“I do think more second hand stores are a great way to combat fast fashion. Sometimes buying new is the only option and sometimes you buy new and it still doesn’t work out- having a brick and mortar shop where clothing can be resold is a great way to find any garments a new home without shipping and adding to that garment’s carbon footprint,” said Earle.

Earle discussed her dream of turning the local mall into a massive emporium of sustainable second hand shops. “So many things can be used over and over again, it just takes a little imagination to make them desirable again,” she said.
Beaudet also believes CB to be an inclusive establishment.

“It’s an amazing queer space. Even if you’re not able to get the clothes we encourage people to try on, dress up and maybe put on something they’ve never tried before,” he said.

“Cotillion Bureau has paved the way for more vintage shops in Portsmouth and the Seacoast and that makes me very happy because second hand shopping is an immediate and tangible thing that people can do to help with our environmental crisis,” said Earle. “I am grateful that this amazing community has supported my vision and I am committed to providing them the best shopping experience I can.”

Cotillion Bureau is open all seven days a week from 11 A.M. to 6 P.M. UNH students can visit the store for free from campus via the Portsmouth Route of Wildcat Transit.