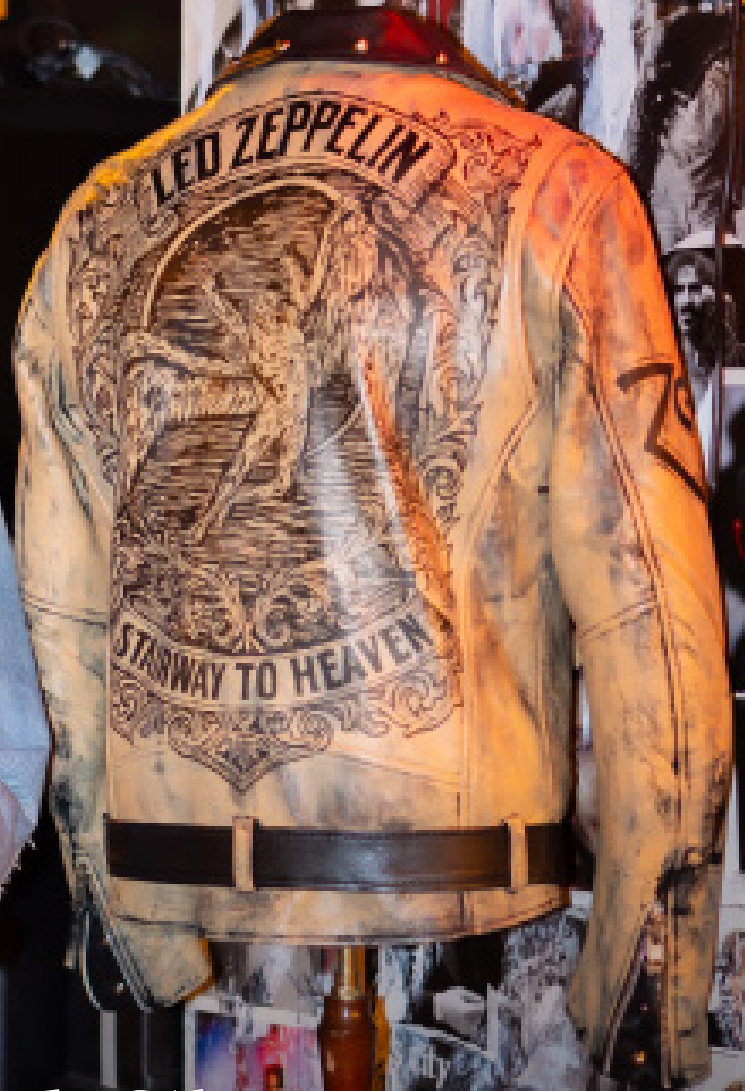


[ART SCENE]



# Second Skin

IN HIS ASBURY PARK STUDIO, THIS INNOVATIVE ARTIST AND DESIGNER TREATS LEATHER AS A CANVAS, CRAFTING ONE-OF-A-KIND PIECES THAT SIT AT THE INTERSECTION OF FASHION AND ART

BY EMMA FLOYD • PHOTOS BY AMANDA DOMENECH

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hristian Benner has built his name on custom leather jackets that look as if they've already lived a life of exploration and experience. Painted, distressed, and hand-finished, each piece carries its own story before it ever leaves his studio.

With his new shop in his native Asbury Park, Benner's brand lives in the space between fashion and art, defined less by trends than by the wearers themselves.

What defines Benner's work is not just the final jacket but the process that shapes it. Every piece begins with a story. He takes time to understand the person in front of him: the music that shaped them, which memories they treasure, and what makes them feel alive. From there, he sketches, studies balance, and builds a design that mirrors their energy. The act of painting becomes instinctive, layers of acrylic and metallic build texture across the leather, which he distresses until the surface feels as raw as the emotions behind it. A jacket leaves his hands only when it carries what he calls a heartbeat, already belonging to the person it was made for.

Benner works only with genuine leather, drawn to its weight, texture, and the way it carries history. Paint sits differently on it, sinking into the surface and changing as the jacket ages. He uses brushes, scraps of cloth, and even his hands to layer color and movement until the material feels alive. Distressing is never a flaw – it's the point. Scratches and scuffs add presence, giving each jacket a lived-in edge that perfection could never achieve.

Music lies at the foundation of his practice. Raised on rock and vintage album art, Benner sees each jacket as an echo of that world – fonts, grainy photography, and raw imagery reframed on leather. Fine art threads its way in as well, alongside pieces of his own story. He knows what it means to search for identity in difference, to carve out space in rebellion, and his jackets are built on that same energy. Every jacket is singular, built for one person and their story. They are both canvas and armor, just as fitting on a gallery wall as on someone moving through the city.



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Benner's workspace tells its own story as well. He left NJ for New York City in his early 20s and opened his first shop. The Seaport studio pulsed with the city's frenetic energy – music blasting, jackets drying, clients coming and going – a creative lab alive with momentum. “The city shaped me,” he said. “But after 12 years there, I wanted to return to Asbury Park to be part of the revitalization of culture and art.” His Asbury Park studio moves at a different rhythm, grounded by the town's strong community and long rock history, and built on connection and soul.

The artist's work is rooted in giving people confidence. When a client puts on a jacket, he wants them to feel unstoppable, to stand taller, to reconnect with a part of themselves they may have set aside. The pieces aren't made to show off, but to unlock something personal. As he explained, the jackets are never about him, but about the person wearing them.

Benner is currently working with musicians on custom jackets for upcoming tours, connecting his designs directly to live performances. Past clients include prominent headliners like Axl Rose, Steven Tyler, and Lady Gaga, and his work recently graced the cover of GQ on the shoulders of Dua Lipa. Benner is also developing new finishes for his next ready-to-wear collection and planning events that bring people into the studio to see a jacket evolve from blank leather into something personal. What hasn't changed is his approach: no two jackets are ever the same. In a fashion world often marked by repetition, Benner built his practice on difference. ■

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