

observer: wide-leg jeans

go wide

jeans loosen up (again!) for fall, and liza darwin couldn't be happier.

WALK THROUGH THE crowded streets of lower Broadway, past the Honky Tonk tourist shops and the country bars and you'll hit Robert's Western World. No, this isn't Broadway, New York City. This Broadway is the downtown drag that stretches through my hometown of Nashville, Tennessee. Robert's is a local institution, a live music venue that's decked out with rows of custom leather cowboy boots lining the walls. As a kid I would tag along with my music-loving dad, more entranced by the kitschy décor than whomever was performing on stage. I wasn't the only one. Everyone in town seemed to own a pair of cowboy boots, a look we fittingly accompanied with boot-cut jeans.

I sported boot-cut denim throughout middle school in the late '90s, but as I grew up I transitioned to a more stylish wide-leg cut. Instead of pairing my pants with cowboy boots (I ditched that look as soon as I entered high school and realized I didn't want to be mistaken for a wannabe country star), I opted for wedges, sandals, and flats.

This was around 2005, just as skinny jeans were coming back into fashion and people were looking to '80s icons like Brooke Shields in her skintight Calvins for style inspiration. Cigarette jeans also had a spot in my wardrobe, but wearing this looser version was my way of fashionably rebelling against the sea of straight-leg denim that had suddenly invaded stores.

The denim world is a pendulum, and it's been swinging back and forth from wide to skinny for decades, settling again this season on the more voluminous end of the spectrum. Even if we weren't around to see Jane Birkin in her Made in Heaven flares or Farrah Fawcett's high-waisted Jordaches in the '70s, you can spot their modern incarnations on the runway today.

For fall '11, fashion houses including Chloé, Marc Jacobs, Charles Anastase, and Habitual have put their own stamp on this formerly bohemian look with updated touches like darker washes and tailored silhouettes—a structured width that comes from the hip as opposed to flaring at the knee like a pair of bellbottoms. This season, roomy, wide-leg cuts are anything but sloppy.

I no longer have the boot-cut jeans that first spurred my fondness for expansive pants, but over time I've accrued several spin-offs inspired by the original. And each year when I clean out my closet, throwing away those of-the-moment pieces that I eventually grow sick of, I always keep hold of my wide-leg jeans, not only because I'll want them around for the next time they fall into fashion, but because, even in my adopted hometown of New York City, I can feel a little bit of Nashville every time I put them on.

