



# CALIFORNIA FASHION ASSOCIATION

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### LA Bluejeans Makers Fear Their Business Will Fade Away

By Sonari Glinton

**LOS ANGELES** — Los Angeles is the world leader in the most American of clothing items: bluejeans. High-end, hand-stitched, designer bluejeans that will you run well over \$100 a pair.

But as the U.S. apparel industry continues to shrink, LA's bluejeans business faces a threat: a nearly 40 percent tariff, imposed by the European Union, that could cripple the city's jean business.

When people talk about **Ilse Metchek** they use phrases like "she's a piece of work," "a force of nature," "she's something else." If you want to talk fashion, she's your lady.

Metchek, president of the **California Fashion Association**, has more than 40 years' experience as a fashion designer. I went to her office in downtown Los Angeles to talk about jeans and fashion.

No sooner than I could sit down, she scrutinized every piece of clothing I was wearing — especially the fabric on my jeans.

"You see the pix, the pixel? That's treatment," Metchek says. "The fabric doesn't come like that. Some machine is streaking them that way; that's expensive. And they fit. There's a different fit. You didn't buy Levi's, you didn't buy a Gap jean. You bought those."

Seventy-five percent of the designer jeans sold in the world are made in California. Over the past 20 years, an industry cluster was created in Los Angeles. While much of clothing manufacturing has been shipped offshore, high-end or more sophisticated manufacturing stayed here.

And high-end jeans are complicated — there are different washes, distressing and elaborate designs.

Fast Fashion's Challenge: Making Money With 'Made In The USA'. The more complicated you can make that jean look, the more expensive it is. And that is at the wash house. And we have most of the wash houses in the world right here," Metchek says.

To see how and where premium jeans are made, you have your choice of more than 30 different manufacturers in Los Angeles to visit. AG Jeans is one of the biggest, and the company makes some of the most expensive jeans — as much as \$300 a pair.

More than 40,000 people work in the apparel business in Los Angeles County alone, with women's clothing responsible for the lion's share of those jobs.

In April, the European Union announced that tariffs on women's denim jeans would rise to 38 percent from 12 percent. It's retaliation for the United States' failing to comply with a World Trade Organization ruling.

Samuel Ku, who runs AG Jeans alongside his father, says the European tariff puts many of those jobs at risk.

"For our women's jean that's made in this factory ... we can't continue to do the same business shipping that jean to Paris. It's impossible," he says.



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Los Angeles has attracted much of the world's designer bluejeans business. The industry employs thousands of workers in the area.

Ku says he'll still make the bulk of his jeans in Los Angeles, but he also has a factory in Mexico. He's likely to shift manufacturing there for the jeans that are exported to Europe. He says it won't be so easy for his competitors.

"[Because] they've got no options... Let's say you have a factory. Overnight, 30 percent of your business might be gone. You're going to be afraid."

Metchek says clothing companies could easily pick up and move to China or Mexico.

"They make them here, and they trade on the Made in USA label. ... They will still be in business, but that label will come off," she says. And with it, Metchek says, could go thousands of U.S. jobs.