

BACK TO THE MACHINE

Designer Cher Thomas (Akimel O’odham/Maricopa/Cocopah/Yavapai) on cultural couture, appropriation and what it takes to make Indigenous style both trendy and traditional. Plus, more about her new venture, Cher Shares, which combines fashion know-how with philanthropic ideals.

BY TATÉ WALKER (MNICONJOU LAKOTA)

IT WAS IN COLLEGE, during a particularly rough financial patch, that Cher Thomas went back to the machine.

“That’s what all the women on my mother’s side of the family call it, ‘going back to the machine.’ My grandmother, my [biological] mother, aunts—they were all seamstresses,” explains Thomas (Akimel O’odham/Maricopa/Cocopah/Yavapai), who learned her skills from the women of her family. “If they needed money or they were on maternity leave and wanted extra cash, they’d go back to the machine. Go back to making clothes.”

Thomas, then a junior at Arizona State University studying American Indian studies and human communication, wasn’t (yet) known for clothes making. But when her sister said someone from their home village wanted traditional dresses made for a daughter’s coming-of-age ceremony, she jumped at the opportunity to earn rent money. Thomas dusted off her sewing machine, cleared

Learn more about the dynamo behind Cher Thomas Designs, including her latest collection, philanthropic endeavors and cultural commitments, at www.cherthomasdesigns.com.

her dining table and spent the next four days designing and completing five dresses from scratch—all by herself.

“I got it done a day early,” she recalls with pride and maybe a little disbelief in her voice. “They asked me how much I wanted for my work, and I didn’t know what to say. I was embarrassed by my situation. But they knew—they knew my family—and they paid me enough to cover rent, electric and to buy some dinner for me and my sister.”

But Thomas still wasn’t thinking long-term. “I helped a young girl

come into her womanhood—and I thought that was it.” Then, people at the ceremony asked about the dresses. More requests came in for Thomas’ work. “That one order turned into two, two turned into four, [then] eight, and four years later my designs are being shown on runways all over the world,” she says.

Cher Thomas Designs is now a full-time fashion business. Thomas’ signature looks incorporate bold, tribally geometric patterns on bright, shiny fabrics. Her portfolio includes everything from contemporary wedding gowns and men’s ties to ceremony skirts for her O’odham and Yuman people.

Many things set Thomas apart from other fashion designers. First and foremost is the compassion she holds for her people, a trait she uses to set high standards for herself as an Indigenous artist and representative of her culture.

“I always ask myself who this is all really for? What am I really here doing and who am I impacting? I ask that all the time. At least three times a day I ask myself those questions, because for me, this isn’t just about cash and money,” Thomas says, adding that it can be a struggle for some Indigenous artists to refrain from exploiting their own cultures by, for instance, using spiritually significant imagery in their design work.

Chanelle Amber-Dawn (Diné) has known Thomas for about three years, during which time she has modeled many of the designer’s fashion looks, including a wedding gown featuring a sparkly splash of the artist’s go-to geometric patterns on the bust and a flared, mermaid-like bottom.

“One thing that is unique about her work is how she actively incorporates her tribe’s stories and symbols into everything she creates,” says Amber-Dawn, who has also modeled for many designers, including Jolonzo Goldtooth (Navajo) and Sun Rose Iron Shell (Sicangu and



Cher Thomas.

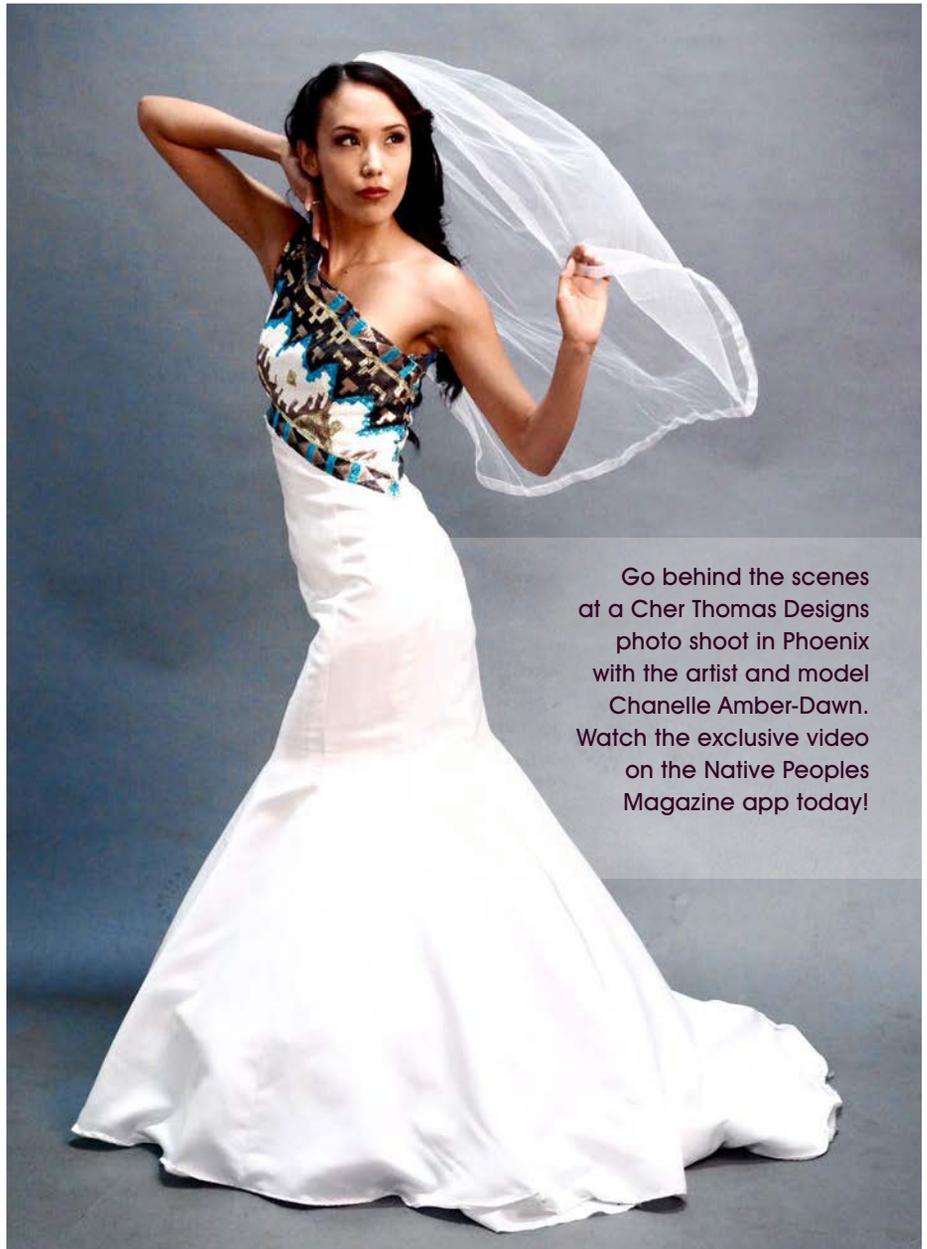
Oglala Lakota). “The last time we worked together, she was preparing for several fashion shows—one even in New Zealand—so I think that’s a special and especially important thing to be able to share that with the world, and especially now when our [Indigenous people] representation is not necessarily mainstream with Native artists, designers, etc., representing ourselves.”

Though balancing successful fashion commercialization and cultural priorities can be difficult for some artists, Thomas makes it look effortless. In fact, she recently launched Cher Shares, a philanthropic offshoot of her design company through which Thomas shares her profits and her personal experiences navigating the fashion industry with established nonprofit and educational programs to uplift communities.

“She’s considered a role model in my book,” says Mary Kim Titla (San Carlos Apache), executive director of United National Indian Tribal Youth, Inc. (UNITY), a national networking organization promoting personal development, citizenship and leadership among Native youth, to whom Thomas has spoken a few times.

“It’s important for youth to hear Cher, because she is someone who has been where they are,” Titla says. “She grew up on a reservation; she knows the challenges and overcame those challenges to get where she’s at today. She is able to motivate Native youth because she knows what they’re going through.”

In 2015, Thomas was chosen to show her designs at Melbourne



PHOTOS BY TAE WALKER

Go behind the scenes at a Cher Thomas Designs photo shoot in Phoenix with the artist and model Chanelle Amber-Dawn. Watch the exclusive video on the Native Peoples Magazine app today!

Fashion Week’s Indigenous Runway Project in Australia; her work was also featured on the red carpet at Canada’s Indigenous Music Awards.

This year, Thomas is preparing to show her work at the Indigenous Fine Art Movement in August and at Santa Fe Fashion Week in late September.

And while she continues to create one-of-a-kind garments for special orders and occasions, Thomas says 2016 is about expanding her menswear and accessory line, as well as pushing herself to tap into new markets, such as tribal casinos, resorts, tradeshow, conferences and major art markets.

“When I feel vulnerable and overwhelmed by all the risks I’m taking and the pushing of my own boundaries, I think of my beginning,” Thomas says. “I remember that my beginning came from a sacred place, and that my first order wasn’t just a way to pay my rent, it is my career, my purpose, and one of the greatest blessings of my life.”