

# The Perfecto: Off-Kilter Octane Icon

Adored in equal measure by riders and those who emulate their style, the asymmetrical leather jacket continues to fly in the face of fashion.



In the 1950s, the asymmetrical motorcycle jacket, defying conventional notions of style and aesthetics, moved from the margins of society to the very center of an emerging fashion movement. The Schott Perfecto, with its every-which-way zippers, had clearly been designed for riders, but it was adopted by style-conscious young men who, for the most part, had only a passing interest in motorcycles. While there were certainly more elegant motorcycle jackets they could have turned to, they chose the Perfecto, and not just because Brando and James Dean wore versions of them. They chose the asymmetrical motorcycle jacket because, like nothing else, it cut against the grain, evoking flinty defiance with its snaps, zippers, and, above all, its lopsided look. In spite of its function-over-form aesthetics, it managed to charm us with its counter-intuitive beauty, and still does.

Leather jackets first started to appear in the 1910s. Designed for aviators, they provided warmth and protection in an open cockpit. With pilots grounded after the World War I, it didn't take long for manufacturers to find another set of buyers who needed nearly identical protection: motorcyclists. Bikes were getting faster every year, which gave the wind more bite and made falls significantly more dangerous for the rider. The first manufacturer to rise to the challenge was, according to jacket historian Rin Tanaka, Boston-based Leathertogs, which started producing long leather jackets for a local Harley-Davidson dealer as early as the late 1910s. In the U.K., the first maker was D. Lewis, which started producing leather racing suits in 1924 and a double-breasted racing jacket (the precursor of the modern café racer) as early as 1926.

However, the brand that usually gets credit for inventing the motorcycle jacket is Schott. In 1928, it debuted the Perfecto, named after Irving Schott's favorite type of cigar. While the Perfecto might not have been the first jacket produced for riders, it was likely the first of the truly modern motorcycle jackets, with many of its features ahead of their time. First and foremost was the addition of the zipper, a relatively new invention that had yet to be



Marlon Brando as Jonny Strabler in *The Wild One* (1953): Director László Benedek made one of the greatest costuming decisions any director has ever made when he allowed Marlon Brando to pick his own outfit for the biker film. The movie became an immediate classic, and Strabler's Perfecto-style motorcycle jacket (probably made by Durable) became an eternal icon of rock and rebellion.