

Accessorizing Ken

by Alison Pion

There comes a moment in every person's life when she or he must contend with the forces of change or be swept away. It appears that this moment of reckoning has arrived for the blond-haired, blue-eyed Ken doll that runs around with Barbie.

Since the birth of Barbie in 1958, she has continued to develop new looks and fashions at a dizzying pace, based on the demands of the moment. So much so that Barbie's best beau and long time close companion, Ken, has struggled to keep up.

Introduced in 1961—and named after the son of Mattel founders Ruth and Elliot Handler—Ken has appeared in the garb of a sailor, soldier, athlete, doctor and surfer. He has ranged in personality from macho All-Star Ken to sensitive Animal Lovin' Ken to glitzy Rocker Ken. Through it all, though, Ken has kept that “clean-cut, innocent, never-slept-with-Barbie look,” as bookstore owner Mark Stewart puts it.

However, Ken's most recent incarnation—Earring Magic Ken—has caused all sorts of uproar. Two years ago, having decided it was time to bring Ken into the 1990s, Mattel surveyed a variety of different little girls from all over the country to find out what they thought about Barbie's pal. A summary of the results by Lisa McKendall, manager of marketing and communications of Mattel Toys Inc., revealed that these girls called for Barbie to stay with Ken, but “wanted Ken to look a little cooler.”

With Ken's love life in less jeopardy—but still not in the clear—Mattel conducted further research to identify specific changes that could be made in order to improve his popularity. The results were astounding.

Ken now sports a fine two-tone hair cut, an earring, black leather pants, a mesh shirt, purple vest, and most controversial of all his new apparel: a metallic silver necklace accessorized, in true to life form, by a device originally found only in sex shops—a “cockring.”

Initially worn by the gay leather crowd on either shoulder of their jackets to reveal a preferred sexual position, the rings became an increasingly popular fashion accessory among

young activist gay men in the late 1980s. It was not only fashionable to own one, but also to wear one—or two or three or four—as zipper pulls, bracelets, and most often as a necklace.

Well, after this, it was not long before these symbols of chic became a part of mainstream culture. Suddenly having a necklace with a ring on it was as fashionable as ripped jeans. In fact, it is such a common accessory these days that some people who sport them on their clothing seem not to know exactly what they are wearing. Apparently, the designers of the new Ken doll have fallen into this category.

One look at the new necklace adorning Ken and it is clear that he is now equipped for more than a nice Sunday drive with Barbie. However, Mattel ardently insists that the pendant on Ken's necklace is and never was a sex toy. Angry at the suggestive winks about Ken's new style, Lisa McKendall has publicly stated, “we're not in the business of putting cockrings into the hands of little girls.”

But it is not only for the necklace rings that the new Ken has felt public ire. Toy store owner Adriana Kanter of La Grange Ill. refuses to stock the new doll because she feels “that earrings on men and boys are on the wrong side of the road.” Accountant and mother of three Gale Vaupell echoes these sentiments, “there's no way you would sell me a Ken with an earring—it wrecks the whole all-American image.”

Many people feel that Ken's new style—“you can't look at Earring Magic Ken and not think gay,” points out Rick Garcia, director of Chicago's Catholic Advocates for

Lesbian and Gay Rights—combined with the distinct lack of wedding bells in Ken and Barbie's future, are veiled, and improper, messages about Ken's true sexual orientation.

Mattel insists that Ken's changes were the direct result of specific suggestions by little girls. Apparently the girls surveyed are a lot more savvy about the American nineties than the makers of Ken. Or maybe not. After all, sales of the Ken doll have increased substantially and line ups to buy Ken have been reported around the country. But, it appears that many of today's buyers are “no-longer-so-little” girls and boys. ●



[Mattel Toys]