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love those shoes

The United Kingdom appears to produce more than its fair share of influential footwear designers who are making waves with their directional styling both at home and in the global markets. Among them is Georgina Goodman who, in just a few years, has established an international reputation for creating seriously glamorous shoes.

Fashion footwear addicts—a fast-growing band judging by the current boom in luxury accessories—must be grateful that Georgina Goodman, (above) decided to switch careers from fashion stylist to shoemaker. Without that life-changing move they'd have been denied the opportunity to add her sassy and sexy shoes to their wardrobes.

Her striking and elegant shoes and boots, which are sold by leading retailers worldwide, have won her plenty of devoted customers which is hardly surprising, for her designs make a strong and definitive statement, exuding an appealing aura of vitality and powerful femininity.

Although she has always been involved in fashion in a variety of jobs, it wasn't until she reached her thirties and was working as a stylist for leading magazines such as i-d and Elle that Georgina Goodman realised that what she really wanted to do was to create.

To pursue her dream of becoming a shoe designer she enrolled at Cordwainers College in London where she graduated with a BA Honours, gaining the first ever first class degree awarded by the college. She followed this with an MA Honours in Womenswear and Footwear at the Royal College of Art in London, graduating top of her class in 2001.

For her, the career switch was a natural evolution. "I think you should treat your career as an evolution. This is what I do now but in the future I might do something quite different. At the moment designing shoes for me is creative expression; it's not who I am but it's how I express my creativity," she explains.

IMPRESSING MANOLO

Her progress from Honours graduate to influential footwear designer today has been rapid. She's become one of the hottest names in footwear and has been described by icon of shoemakers Manolo Blahnik as one of the few emerging designers to stand out in the industry.

Working with her husband and business partner, B.J. Cunningham, a brand and marketing consultant, she opened her flagship store in London's Mayfair in 2002 with her first women's couture collection. A relatively safe berth as an in-house designer for a few years before going it alone was not for her; an energetic and dynamic personality, she had always wanted to have her own business so plunged straight in at the deep end and got right on with it.

Her distinctive designs and understated luxury quickly attracted the attention of the fashion pack, both media and clients, including Jerry Hall, Mick Jagger's ex-wife, who became

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her first couture customer. A ready-to-wear collection was launched in 2003 and the Georgina Goodman brand now encompasses both couture and seasonal ready-to-wear (rtw) collections for women, plus bags and small pieces, such as purses and key rings. There are also bespoke men's shoes as well as exclusive pieces for the home, including leather cushions.

When the London store first opened, her couture designs were handmade on site at the rate of two or three pairs a week—and around 200 pairs a year are still produced there. A glass panel set into the shop floor gives customers a view into the workroom below so they can actually watch the shoes being constructed. The rtw collections are made by factories in Spain, where the soft moccasin styles are produced, and in Bologna, Italy, which specialises in the high fashion and higher priced styles.

'MADE IN LOVE'

Georgina Goodman's global retail business has grown steadily over the last few years, with wholesale selling conducted from the London store and showrooms in Paris, Milan and Las Vegas. Key export markets are Japan and the USA but she also has customers in most European countries including Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, Greece and Turkey as well as in Russia, Canada, Singapore, Korea, Dominican Republic, Australia and New Zealand. In addition her shoes are sold online via her website.

A fast and prolific designer she also finds time to act as a consultant for major fashion houses and retailers including Italy's Casadei and UK store group Evans, for whom she creates a range of shoes, bags and belts targeted at the larger woman. Most recently she has been appointed by Alexander McQueen, one of the acknowledged geniuses of British and international fashion and whose company is owned by the Gucci Group, as a consultant for his women's shoes and will be working with him on four collections a year.

Her philosophy has always been straightforward: be consistent, be clear, be who we really are and, most importantly, be in love. This philosophy is expressed in everything that bears her name, even down to placing the words 'Made in Love' on the sole of every shoe. Even the London store's annual sale is known as the 'Love Sale'.

Love is undoubtedly the emotion many women feel for shoes. "It's interesting that people use the word love when they talk about shoes," she declares. "I think women feel very emotionally attracted to shoes. I know from my own experience the frisson of real excitement I felt when I used to shop for shoes and saw something that really resonated with me. But buying expensive designer shoes or a bag is also about status; we can express our social standing through a luxurious product that says I'm rich, I'm savvy, I know what's going on," she suggests, jokingly adding that shoes and bags are like 'girls' toys'. "Boys buy cars, girls buy shoes and bags!"

TEMPTATION FOR SHOE ADDICTS

Her seasonal collections certainly offer passionate shoe addicts plenty of temptation. They comprise between 60-80 pieces and range from casual flats through mid-heights to fabulous, towering heels. Georgina Goodman's style is individual and instantly recognisable. She is known for her unique way with colour and meticulous—and sometimes rather quirky and humorous—detailing. There are contrasting textures and a variety of treatments such as appliqués, patchwork, cut outs, hand stitching and painting, pleating and gathering and, always, her signature stripes and spots. Black stripes are a constant theme in her designs, worked horizontally or vertically on heels, diagonally on wedges, across shoe fronts or curling around the legs of boots.

Sources of inspiration for recent collections have included the 1980s, the functional and aesthetic aspects of the 1920s' ➤

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Bauhaus movement, the elegant, decorative Art Deco style, and the '50s glamour of La Dolce Vita. But she is also inspired by her materials and her choice is eclectic.

She works with a range of hides and skins, but only from culled animals, including snake, ponyskin, crocodile, kangaroo and llama and also introduces woven fabrics, such as denim, elastic, grosgrain and canvas. Suede and patent finishes are also an important part of the palette. Vegetable tanned leathers are also a favoured material with reduced chemical load, which is important to her, because some clients may be allergic to chemical dyes. For spring 2007, she launched a capsule collection of 'demi couture' sandals—a mix of couture and rtw, handmade but not hand stitched—in vegetable tanned leathers for the London store.

However, as she points out, vegetable tanned leathers have their limitations. "There can be problems with them because they absorb water and are photosensitive so show water spots and bleach in the sun. But, they can also be softer and more supple than other skins and, personally, I love the water marks and the natural, aged and lived in look."

She finds it difficult to define a 'typical' customer for her shoes, especially in the London store as they cater for all ages. "In the shop we see customers from 14 to 85, mums and daughters and grandmothers. But for export it's essential to accommodate different tastes and offer a diversity of colour options and heel heights. The Japanese, for example, buy more flats and fewer high heels and the shoes are smaller, while in Russia and the Far East they love glamorous, sexy shoes and really high heels," she notes.

NO FREEBIES

Many couture customers are so hooked on Georgina Goodman's 'Made in Love' shoes they come back season after season for new pieces and her designs are worn by an increasing number of celebrities, among them Gwyneth Paltrow, Lindsay Lohan, Kirsten Dunst, Mischa Barton, Thandie Newton, Demi Moore and Claudia Schiffer.

But when those celebrities are photographed in her shoes it means they actually paid good money for them because, unlike many in the fashion business, she doesn't give away her products for publicity purposes. "If they're wearing my shoes then it's because they really love them, not because they got them for free. They fell in love with my design and that gives me a great feeling," she says.

In spite of the pressure of creating her own collections each season which brings a punishing schedule of constant factory visits—every week to oversee production—as well as consultancy work, she still loves and gets a buzz from what she does. "You couldn't do this job if you didn't really love it, you couldn't work this hard at this level of stress and anxiety if you didn't appreciate and enjoy it. And it is very stressful because, like any manufacturing business, it relies on people, not machines, for so many processes, from ordering the leather to delivering the shoes. But I like the fact that, to a great degree, it's still an artisan business."

The fact that artisan skills are still valued and available in Italy is one of the reasons she likes working there so much. "The Italians have got what I call 'the touch', so you can get almost anything you want made and, of course, you just can't beat them for creativity."

For the future she and B.J. intend to continue to focus on building her brand on a global scale by working in partnership with many more leading retailers around the world and also increasing the number of her own stores. Top of the list is a second outlet in London, followed by others in Milan, Paris and New York.

Georgina Goodman's passion for shoes and her unflagging creative energy mean that the footwear industry and her burgeoning group of fans around the world are likely to hear a lot more of her in the future.