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BAG LADY

THERESA HAROLD meets UK fashion phenomenon ALEXA CHUNG, whose iconic stature has been assured by a range of quirky handbags named in her honour

ANYONE WHO has seen Mulberry's spring/summer 2010 collection will know, this is the season of carousel horses, pastel shades and English fairground nostalgia. Hotel LKF's Azure restaurant, the venue for the collection's launch party, was no exception, festooned with balloons, childhood sweets (flying saucer, anyone?) and even a genuine carousel horse flown from England for the occasion. Cheesy disco classics such as *Funky Town* and *Celebration* set the mood of a happy children's party – yet somehow it is *cool*.

The children's-party theme is by no means accidental. Creative Director Emma Hill, who joined Mulberry in 2008, cited her little boy and all the childhood paraphernalia that goes with having young children as her inspiration. It suits the brand.

Despite wielding high fashion power on a global scale, this is one luxury name that feels homey – family-friendly, even. It could be because it is one of the few luxury labels still to manufacture in the United Kingdom – in Somerset, no less, which leaves me picturing their factory through a cider haze on a perpetual summer's day – but I digress.

Established in 1971, Mulberry is the quintessential purveyor of understated British luxury. The Bayswater and Roxanne bags have become timeless classics, undergoing numerous incarnations, which merely cement their iconic status. With the Alexa bag, they've done it again.

Hill explained how the idea came about. "We were looking through a magazine," she says, "and we saw a picture of Alexa [Chung] wearing the Elkington, which is one of our old Mulberry men's briefcases. We just loved the way it looked." So they made the Alexa bag: one-part Elkington, one part Bayswater, Alexa Chung described her namesake as a "lady's man-bag."

I first met Chung outside the bathrooms, as she was rushing out and I was rushing in. As first impressions go, this wasn't the one I had planned. Later, outside on the roof terrace when we're, shall we say, more *formally* introduced, Chung chirpily greets me with "My loo friend!" – and so it begins. Her surprisingly deep voice matches her British humour perfectly, a charming contrast to her girly attire. It's not just her humour, though, but her style – which was once described as "schoolgirl meets granny chic" – that is the embodiment of British eccentricity.

Born on November 5, 1983 in Hampshire, England, Chung had a middle-class upbringing. The daughter of a Chinese father and English mother, she is the youngest of four children, including two older brothers and a sister. Evidently brainy, she left sixth-form college with two A grades (English and Art) and one B grade at A-level, having secured places at both King's College London and Chelsea College of Art and Design.

But, as life had other ideas, she didn't go to

university after all – "I'm an uneducated lady," she now deadpans. At 16, while standing in a comedy tent at the Reading rock festival, she'd been scouted and then signed to Storm Model Management. What followed was a four-year modelling career that she's less than enthusiastic about, affirming how unglamorous and tough on a young girl's self-esteem it really was.

Appearances in music videos led to Chung's debut in 2006 on the Channel 4 show *Popworld*, where her candid interview questions and offbeat delivery style soon became her signature. If you have two minutes and 14 seconds on your hands, try passing it watching the infamous Youtube clip of her interview with rock band Panic! At the Disco – it's practically a cult classic.

Although her father's ancestry is Hong Kong Chinese, he was born and grew up in London, which explains why Chung has said that her Chinese heritage hasn't played a big role in her upbringing. This being her first visit to Hong Kong, I was keen to see what she made of the place. "It's lovely, yeah, but I haven't had any time off! I've been festering with illness in recycled air, but tomorrow I might do some sightseeing. So if you've got any recommendations..."

I suggest Lamma Island, though it's doubtful she'll have much time to squeeze in a visit before her packed schedule sees her dashing off to London, Paris and L.A.

Since her rise from presenter of hangover TV to topping British *Vogue's* online Best Dressed List, Chung's fashion credentials have been endlessly imitated. If you've caught yourself teaming tea dresses with boyfriend jackets; knee-high socks with penny loafers; or rocking some thick-rimmed, geek-chic glasses, you've probably experienced the Alexa factor.

March 2010 really was Chung's month as far as British *Vogue* was concerned. Not only was she the magazine's cover girl, she also featured in a month-long blog on its website entitled "Today I'm wearing," which included a picture of her outfit choices each day.

Speaking about the project, Chung says, "I've worn far more interesting outfits since I did that, but then having to think about what you're wearing every day got a bit contrived. So I just started wearing a navy cable-knit jumper every day and was like "Here it is again!" – plus the same Topshop jeans for five days in a row." So now we know what her fallback pieces are, what's one thing we'd *never* see her wear? "Leg warmers. I don't really know, maybe a boiler suit? It doesn't suit me."

Ah, fashion. Once the subject is broached, her eyes light up and there's a giddy excitement



to her tone. "When I was younger, my mum used to have a Singer sewing machine that I could work, but then she got an electric one. I used to steal it to make skirts then I jammed it one day. I remember my Dad shouted at me so hard I never went near it again: I was ostracised from my family for, like, a whole month for having broken this machine," she laughs. "Then I started modelling and I used to wear my handmade things into castings and they'd be like, 'Yeah, darling, stop wearing that. It looks weird.'" How those naysayers must be eating their words. Now, everyone wants a piece of Alexa – or at least a piece inspired by her.

"[My love for fashion] has developed over time," she says. "I didn't really care that much when I was modelling. I used to wear shit clothes until recently. But with TV, you're not allowed to wear the same outfit twice, so I started shopping more. Although I knew what I liked, I was really easily influenced. For example, I loved [indie rock band] The Horrors, so I just wore black and white for a whole year basically. [My dress style comes from] everything I've worn since I was a kid. In England, everyone just wears their Mum's jumper. That's the vibe, I think."

And what of fashion bloggers? "I like Tavi's blog," says Chung. "She's really good. Someone sent me this girl's blog on Twitter and it was brilliant. I was thinking, 'I've gotten so lazy, wearing the same things again, but she *really* inspired me. I've forgotten her name – she lives in America... Bunny something? I don't have a blog, though I would like to do a blog for my photography. I had a Twitter account but then people were just so mean..."

Returning to the subject of Mulberry, I'm curious to find out which Alexa bag is her favourite.

"Emma [Hill] has done this Alexa bag for next season [autumn/winter 2010], that's in hair calf with leopard prints. That one's my favourite. Weirdly, it goes with everything, even though it's the most..." She searches for a word.

"Outlandish?" I suggest.

Stabbing the air with her cigarette, Chung agrees,

"Yeah! 'Cos it's so silly and really frivolous – it just looks really good. Also, I'm obsessed with leopard print. I've got, like, 85 vintage leopard print coats that are all fake fur." Any other sneak previews of what she'll be wearing soon? "I found some new wellies that are gonna be sick next summer. They're a Norwegian brand which I'm gonna bust out at festivals and blow minds off!" You read it here first. ■