

# TEN STEPS AHEAD

*Having stepped out independently only a decade ago, RUPERT SANDERSON now has the fashion world at his feet. THERESA HAROLD goes toe-to-toe with the enterprising shoe designer at his London headquarters*

**I**N 2001, THE first Harry Potter film was released, Google became the world's most visited website, and George W Bush was named 43rd president of the United States. It was also the year that Rupert Sanderson launched his eponymous shoe line, giving womankind the gift of, as he put it, "the perfect pump."

Fast forward 10 years and I'm at the Rupert Sanderson HQ in the heart of Mayfair, and the affable designer greets me in the press offices above his flagship store. It's been a busy year for Sanderson, who is celebrating his decade in shoes with a revamped collection of his most iconic styles.

"I thought, what better way of marking [the anniversary] than by dangerously revisiting the past collections," says Sanderson. Having returned from Spain just

two days earlier, and dressed in a white shirt teamed with a Fair Isle tank top, he looks younger than his 44 years. "In the wonderful world of fashion, it's very dangerous to look back – we've got to look forward, and that's what excites me."

Sanderson explains how he plundered the past 10 years to come up with something commemorative and yet new. "What do 10 year olds do? They do homework," he says. "They get 10 out of 10 if they're really good. So we selected 10 shoes that we thought best reflected the last 10 years, and called the collection 10 out of 10. We gave it a little graphic device that resembles a teacher's mark."

"Once I was in that mindset about anniversaries, I [considered] materials associated with each year: gold, diamond, silver... I briefly got very excited, hoping that the 10-year anniversary was going

to be leather, or something you can make shoes out of. When I discovered it was tin, I thought, 'Ah.' Then I realised we should use the metallic qualities of a tin anniversary and make metallic-like shoes."

The resulting 10/10 collection includes everything from suede shoe-boots to foil-leather sandals. All are rendered with the sensitivity to materials that is Sanderson's calling card.

Sanderson was born in 1966 on the Malaysian island of Penang – the same island, in fact, where Jimmy Choo was born ("There's something in the water," Sanderson says) – and had the migratory youth of an army child. "I do enjoy being on the move," he says. "I don't know whether it symbolises progress for me, that things are going forward. Maybe being in a family that moved every three years gives you the confidence to be



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someone who's happy to be anywhere."

Sanderson opened his Hong Kong store in 2010 – "It was all a blur, I'm afraid," he says – and only a month later he unveiled its Parisian counterpart. Indeed, things seem to happen quickly for Sanderson. In 2008, he won the British Fashion Council's Accessory Designer of the year award, and in 2009 he received the *Elle* Style Award's seal of approval. All the signs are that shoe designers are receiving greater recognition.

"It's been a shoe decade," Sanderson says. "There's been a huge expansion, both in the mind of the customer, and in the power of certain shoe labels. They've become almost mythical. This has been a decade of the Jimmy Choo explosion, of Christian Louboutin, *Sex and the City* and the celebrity culture. It has all been wrapped up into making things fast. We now do four seasons a year. It's never-ending really."

I nod and murmur something about the pressure coming from blogs. Sanderson, however, is reluctant to condemn them. "It's

not a bad thing, it's just a different thing," he says. "What happens is that people are constantly looking for new things, and those last a very short amount of time before the next 'new thing' appears. That's a bit crazy, [considering] the amount of time and work that goes into developing new designs."

In case you're wondering, a Rupert Sanderson shoe can take three months to develop from initial sketch to final product, and all the stages are carried out at the designer's factory in Bologna, Italy. Asked what makes Italian shoes so special, Sanderson gestures, as if to show how apparent the answer is. "It's like..." He scans the room for inspiration, stopping at the well-stocked bookshelves. "It's like asking what the French have about wine that no one else has. I mean, people can technically make wine – and actually, the Americans make technically better wine than the French – but there's a cultural rooting to the process of making shoes that tends to come through in [Italians'] work; something in the minutiae.

It's like cooking, in a way. Also, you need specialists in every area. You need a man that makes heels beautifully, you need a man that makes soles, and you need people that can stitch leather. My job is to use those specialists to assemble shoes, and they're all to be found in Italy.

"Of course, in the modern age you can jet things in from all over the world. You don't necessarily have to make in Italy, but it still feels the right place to be. It's an expensive country to make anything in, but it's nice to work in a part of the market where people are prepared to reward exquisite work."

Sanderson's admiration for Italy began when, having resigned from a job in advertising, he enrolled in a two-year shoe-making course at the world-recognised Cordwainer's College in London. During a summer break he rode his Triumph Thunderbird motorcycle to the country, taking in as many factories, tanneries and museums as he could. The experience served him well, leading to stints at Sergio Rossi

"IF YOU DON'T ADVERTISE, IT PUTS A LOT OF EMPHASIS ON THE WORK ITSELF"



and Bruno Magli. Does that mean his Italian is *perfetto*? Sanderson groans, running his hand through his hair in mock horror. "I speak sort of enough, yeah," he says. "I'm ashamed really, at the quality of my Italian relative to the amount of time I've spent there, but I can survive."

With the designer's eyes drifting to his iPad with increasing regularity, I quickly tick off questions from my mental checklist. Plans for the future? "Lots and none," he laughs. And it's unlikely we'll be seeing Rupert Sanderson perfumes, sunglasses or handbags anytime soon. "There are lots of bag designers out there – more than shoe designers. So if you're going to come in, you have to be saying something that's relevant. It has to come from the heart. If it doesn't, you can get caught trying to cash in on what you do as a shoe designer. I just wouldn't want to do that."

Perhaps it is this integrity that has earned Sanderson his devoted following. Like many other luxury shoe brands, Rupert Sanderson does not advertise. "If you don't advertise, it puts

a lot of emphasis on the work itself," he argues.

The celebrities strutting red carpets in Sanderson's heels – Daisy Lowe, Lily Allen and Freida Pinto, to name just a few – also help the cause, as do savvy businesswomen the world over. All know they're getting Sanderson's unique brand of sexy, the sort that doesn't need to wave a flag. The sort that can, as he has said in the past, "let the shoe do the talking, and hopefully the walking."

Well, once an ad man... 📌

