



# Stella Achievements

STAYING GROUNDED AMONG MEGASTARS AND FIGHTING AGAINST THE FASHION GAME, **STELLA MCCARTNEY** TELLS HELEN RUSSELL HOW SHE'S MANAGED TO STAY TRUE TO HERSELF

**W**hite walls, white floors, a white desk and a single flickering scented candle greet guests at the unpretentious Stella McCartney headquarters in London's Holland Park. The designer is tall, slim and comfortably cool in combats and a cream-coloured jumper, with an instantly recognisable face: part Beatle, part Linda and featuring her signature glacial stare. She scrolls through a few emails before she puts her smartphone aside and smiles. "I'm sorry," she says, "It's manic at the moment. But then again, it always is."

To say that the English fashion designer is in demand would be an understatement. Quite apart from the fame associated with being the daughter of Paul McCartney, she's won numerous accolades for her work, designed Team GB's kit for the London 2012 Olympics and has just been awarded an OBE. She also runs a global business including ready-to-wear, children's wear, lingerie and fragrance and has four children under age eight. How does she do it?

"My kids are my priority," she says from the get-go. "Once you have that straight, you know everything else will get there in the end." Prioritising family first and fashion second isn't a typical approach in this famously competitive

industry. But then, Stella McCartney likes to do things differently.

Amidst the cardboard confections of fall 2013 catwalk invitations, she sent out a plastic polar bear along with a plea to support the ban on hunting the animal. Whereas her contemporaries regard leather as a seasonal staple and often send fur slinking down the catwalk, this staunch animal rights activist refuses to use skins.

"We're trying very hard to break the convention of luxury fashion and to show people that you can have a healthy business without using it. I'm probably the only brand at this level that doesn't," she says. Her approach is to use the carrot rather than the stick. "I try to design beautiful, luxurious pieces that people would rather wear than leather or fur."

Breaking conventions is something of tradition in the McCartney family. Multimillionaire celebrities Paul and Linda famously eschewed schools charging exorbitant fees and opted for the local state-run comprehensive when deciding where to send their children. Stella credits this "normal" education with shaping her personally and professionally. "If I had gone to a private school in London I might have been a bit celebrated because of who my parents were. But at my school there was none of that." Downplaying the glamour of her home life was an instinctual reaction and she kept quiet about her parents' famous friends. "I wouldn't go back to school on a Monday morning and say, 'Guess what? I hung out with Michael Jackson yesterday!' It was something I kept to myself."

Super-successful parents are a notoriously hard act to follow. McCartney describes feeling driven to achieve from an early age, but the pressure to succeed came from herself. "I didn't want to be the kind of person that was floating around wondering, 'What do I want to be when I'm older?' I was really quite afraid of that." Anxious not to become just another Trustafarian and inspired by the glamour of old Technicolor films, she started sketching. Aged 12, she made her first jacket ("a fake suede bomber, navy blue, very '80s and very cool.") and set her sights on becoming a designer.

"I remember seeing this woman on an aeroplane once and my mum told me, 'That's Jean Muir and if you really want to be in fashion you should get off your arse and talk to her.' I thought, 'Really? That woman? She looks terrifying!' But I did it. I went over and I spent three hours talking to her and got an internship." After that she wrote countless letters to designers begging for work experience ("some



**STRONG STATEMENT**  
this page, clockwise from left The Stella McCartney autumn/winter 2013 show; Gwen Stefani, wearing Stella McCartney; the Bailey Boo bag in faux python skin opposite The designer, shot by her sister, Mary McCartney



**"I'm a bit anti the whole game of fashion sometimes"**





said yes, a lot said no”) and ended up working with Margaret Howell, Betty Jackson, Christian Lacroix and Yves Saint Laurent. Working at the shows in Paris at 15, she made friends with Naomi Campbell, Yasmin Le Bon and Kate Moss. When McCartney needed help for her graduate fashion show at Central Saint Martins, the supermodels stepped up. “We were really close so it seemed the natural thing to ask them. I just picked up the phone a week beforehand and said, ‘Do you want to do my degree show?’ I was lucky, they were free!” Her debut collection was a hit and she began making a name for herself, taking over from Karl Lagerfeld at Chloé in 1997. It seemed the golden girl of British fashion could do no wrong – until she decided to go solo.

McCartney launched her own label in partnership with the Gucci Group (now Kering) in 2001. Some were surprised that the famous vegetarian had linked herself to a leather house but she insists there was no compromise. “I prefer to infiltrate from within rather than sit on the sidelines and make hemp bags,” she says. Principles aside, her first collection for them wasn’t a success.

“I didn’t hire anyone with experience. I didn’t want to work with anyone who’d ever done a day’s work in the industry. So I hired students.” Why? “Because ...” she thinks about this and laughs, “I’m a bit anti- the whole game of fashion sometimes.” She is also, she confesses, impatient. “I should have waited a season. I should have found my feet and found the people I needed to work with. But I rushed it.”

The haste showed and the resulting collection was described as “a car crash.” This wake-up call made the designer re-evaluate what she was trying to say and helped crystallise her real fashion directive: beautiful clothes for regular women.

“Hopefully now we have a good balance,” she says of her designs. “We have something that women can identify with and connect to, but at the same time make enough of a statement that it keeps things exciting. I like to create a feeling that the clothes will be with you forever and you’ll hand them down to your daughter.”

Feminism and fashion don’t always go together but McCartney makes a point of being “very pro women” in everything she does. She has spoken out against the use of size zero models and sits on the board of a women’s foundation. Priding herself on the family-friendly working culture she’s created in her company, she believes that, for her, it is crucial to success. “When people are happy, they work better. I know I do.” Doing things differently, it seems, is in McCartney’s genes. **T**



CRYSTAL  
CLEAR

clockwise from top: The Stella McCartney autumn/winter 2013 show; Charlize Theron attends the BAFTA 18th Annual Awards Season Tea Party in Stella McCartney; accessories from the summer 2013 collection

