

THE BIG INTERVIEW:

PAUL SMITH

It is a cold December morning, just shy of our annual celebration of St. Nicholas, and I am pretty sure that, for most people, a ribboned gift hand delivered by the bearded saint, and designed by the man who I am just about to meet, would induce joyous raptures of heavenly proportions. For a man who says he 'fell into fashion' as much as by accident as anything else, Paul Smith seems to be doing a spectacularly successful job of paying the rent.

We meet in a wonderfully tasteful reception area covered on the back wall with pictures portraying a man with a love of life and a sense of humour, and my eye is drawn for a minute to a particular framed garment, a relic of yesteryear. This item was sent in by a man who, by all accounts, had travelled across the length and breadth of the Earth wearing only a single pair of trousers, which, only after years of faithful service, had succumbed across a particular tricky mountain range where they were castrated at the knee.

At this moment I glance up from my seat at the towering figure just walking past. He is wearing a red and white striped shirt underneath a well-cut, dark, half-length jacket. He looks at me, I get up and introduce myself, we shake hands and then he goes off outside. An unusual, but probably sensible course of action. I am then taken upstairs. The interior is just as I imagined it - we walk past scores of delightful pictures scattered throughout and I am feeling a little like being in Willy Wonka's chocolate factory.

Paul Smith returns after about ten minutes or so and shows me how well he is adapting to twenty first century technology with a notebook that has to be mummified in string to keep the pages from falling out; a clear sign that he values sentimentality as highly as practicality. If this wasn't enough, our drinks are served in fine china with the Paul Smith stripy motif. Things are going well.

Smith's journey into fashion was quite inauspicious; at the age of 11 his dad bought him a second-hand racing bike from a close friend in Nottingham. "The guy was a member of the local cycling club and said 'why don't you come with us?' This was the catalyst for Smith's love affair with cycling: "by the age of twelve I suddenly started to race for the local cycling club as a schoolboy, and then I went up to junior and then up to senior and then ran into a car". This proved to be a career-ending injury, but also a catalytic converter: "(I) spent three months in the hospital in Nottingham and when I came out the couple of people I met in there just said 'do you want to meet up for a drink?' because we'd become quite friendly and not locked into our beds." The newly-found hospital chums went to the local pub, the Bell Inn, a Grade II listed building in the centre of Nottingham: "and by chance the pub that I went to was the pub where the art school people went and then through my strong sort of personality I chatted to them and made friends with some of them".

During this time, Smith met a young female designer who had decided to set up her own shop, and offered to help her even though, as he admits, he didn't have any experience in running a business. His only other previous experience was from working in a warehouse which his father had forced him into on leaving school at the age of fifteen. "I left school on a Friday and started work on a Monday...but working for two or three years in a warehouse gave me a good grounding because the shop was really old fashioned."

Smith's flair and creativity was evident even from this early age, where he was eventually promoted to chief buyer, before taking on the responsibility of running his friend's shop. He is famous for once describing himself as being 'okay at design and okay at business but exceptional at neither', and although he is adamant that this is not just modesty, his early workings in both the warehouse in Nottingham and the designer shop gave him a solid grounding and excellent foundation with which to begin his own business forays. However, with no formal knowledge of the technicalities of designing, it was not until the age of twenty one that he was able to start creating his own collections.

Meeting his wife, Pauline Denyer, was without a doubt the single most important moment in Paul Smith's personal and professional life: "she taught me everything...I absolutely would not be talking to you right now if it wasn't for her...she trained at the royal college of art as a fashion designer in the 1960s period and the good thing for me in hindsight was at that time when the Royal College of Art students were learning, they were taught a lot of hand making clothes as well as mass production and there was a lot of importance put on the history of fashion, the understanding of how clothes are constructed, the understanding of proportion and how clothes look, a bit like an architect in a way, how things are built and how things look visually. Her experience, her teaching, what she learnt, was so down to earth and so real and she passed it on to me."

The first Paul Smith collections were created using stock fabric; simplistic patterns which would be of little interest aesthetically, but which were his only option financially. However, to overcome this difficulty, Smith began his trademark 'classic with a twist' approach to really stand out from the crowd: "That's really how Paul Smith 'classic with a twist' came about, because the only fabrics I could get were very basic so I had to invent ways to make basic fabric interesting... and as I progressed and I got slightly more orders I was obviously in a position to design my own fabric even though that was quite tough because of the minimum quantities of fabric that you had to order and that's when I came up with this (pointing to the stripe motif on my tea cup) when I was looking for the idea of designing the definitive stripe trying to get as many colours in it as I could".

The twenty eight different colours that make up the stripe seem to be very characteristic of the designer himself, bold and vibrant, and most certainly very bright, and with the benefit of his wife's knowledge to boot, the Paul Smith collections were soon sold abroad in places such as New York and Paris. His wife's insistence on quality from the start meant that these collections were well made, well proportioned, and quality designs, and meant that none were ever returned. Poor quality had caused some businesses to go bankrupt around the same time, as clothes had been left unsold and were sent back: "some (of these designers)", Smith adds "were more qualified than me".

What can be seen throughout is a strong sense of awareness of the industry and of what the requirements for success are. "I always wanted to design clothes that people could wear and enjoy, but that had a character about them and had a little surprise maybe that when you looked inside the jacket there was an interesting lining...you knew there was something going on but you were in a business meeting with a bank manager". The idea of wearing something for yourself rather than showing off to other people shows a remarkable level of critical thinking, almost self-indulgent in fact, and is quite possibly the reason for Paul Smith having a massive fan base in the ranks of middle class men, for instance, who aren't necessarily going to be interested in clothes that bring unneeded attention to themselves, but will delight at a little flair and creativity on the inside. One can get quite philosophical when discussing this. In fact, one can

even use the argument of Geuss, who claims that one idea of a public good is where strangers are forced to take notice of something whether it be an action or a piece of clothing.

Paul Smith's designs contrast remarkably with other big name designers such as Galliano and McQueen, for whom he seemed to show signs of contempt, and whose designs you can't help but notice. The effect of this is that only the owner of a pair of leather Paul Smith brogues, for instance, will notice the map of London engraved on the soles, thus allowing Smith to make a personal and private connection with his customer and ensuring a fierce loyalty for his clothing, something which Galliano and McQueen cannot hope to match. Their customers are those who are more susceptible to trend-following, rather than continuity and sustenance based on quality of good and design. There are no 'little secrets' in skimpy see-through numbers, or at least not in the clothes themselves.

Smith also takes a slightly contemptuous and cynical view of celebrity, especially in the age of Big Brother, stating that: "I have never closed a store for a celebrity, although I have opened after hours". He likes to treat all of his customers the same and cites the perfect example of this: "a friend of mine's son who was 17 wanted a suit for his university interview and said that he wanted a Paul Smith suit to his dad, luckily enough for us, and came to the floral street shop and tried on a suit. We had 3 changing rooms in a row, and then somebody came out of this changing room at exactly the same time and they looked at each other and one was David Bowie and one was the 17 year old son of a friend of mine, and David Bowie said to him 'you look great'.

Smith, of course, is always delighted when real celebrities such as Bowie and Daniel Day Lewis are fans of his clothes and recently had lunch with Franz Ferdinand around the very table at which we are sitting. Still, his preference has been made clear by his company's decision not to have any celebrities at the opening of their new LA store: "The key point is to integrate not alienate...celebrities have no loyalty".

There really has been so much going on at Paul Smith that it is difficult to fit into a two page article. For instance most of you may not be aware that there are over 200 Paul Smith shops in Japan alone, a result of a collaboration with a Mr. Yamaguchi who popped into the shop one day, when there was just one, to inquire about the possibility of a licencing agreement. Expansion plans for the next year include new shops in New York, Paris, Red Square in Moscow, Tokyo, and six in China. There have also been collaborations with Triumph resulting in a handful of custom-made motor bikes and there is a furniture-only store in Mayfair which has just recently opened.

The idea has always been to 'think globally and act locally', but also to be original: "We try to makes all our shops different...yes we bring lots of Japanese things to our English shops, and in Japan we have old memorabilia: it could be rock posters or old vinyl like The Clash or Sex Pistols or like 60s memorabilia or 70s memorabilia...older record players like gramophones".

So what is left to achieve for the man who married his wife on the day he was knighted in the Birthday Honours list and who openly confesses to never once having a plan of any kind for his business? "What's left to achieve is continuity...continuing to have a company which has got a heart and a character and has got a down-to-earthness and... to still be special."

And so there I was, wearing my Paul Smith shoes and shirt (and a few other things beside) and making my way out of the head office after a brief tour of the hub of Britain's best designer with a signed Christmas card as well. What would St. Nick make of that?

Ben Lamy