

# IN HER SHOES

text PHILIPPA ANDERSON



In just 10 years, Tamara Mellon has built a global shoe empire and is now expanding the Jimmy Choo footprint in Asia. *The Peak* secures an exclusive interview with the glamour behind the brand.

It's rude to pry (so my mother says). But as the cupboard door was ajar I couldn't help noticing shoes — and lots of them — as I proceeded down the wide marble-floored corridor. I'm in Tamara Mellon's luxurious London flat. Mellon is late (her lunch has overrun) and her helpful press lady is looking after me.

Her sitting room is stunning — large comfy sofas, piles of tasteful art and design books on the huge upholstered ottoman. The painting over the marble fireplace looks like an Andy Warhol original.

Then the door opens and Mellon breezes in with seductive style: a sleek black dress with her usual revealing neckline, long shiny straight hair and unmistakably elegant Jimmy Choo high-heeled sandals.

She is charming and apologises. She returned from the Cannes Film Festival the day before and says her diary is “manic”. I ask about Cannes. “It's the first time we've been; it was really to test it out,” she says. “I think it will be as important to us as the Oscars — in fact, more so. Cannes is more international, there will be more events and opportunities to show off the shoes.”

We're talking red carpets and celebrities within the first minute — but of course, spotting this public relations opportunity is how Mellon launched the Jimmy Choo brand on the world.

Tamara Mellon, the woman behind the successful Jimmy Choo brand.

## CHOO WHO?

Fashion public relations is where Mellon began her career and, with a strong eye for style from the start, saw the opportunity to get into fashion journalism. She moved across to British *Vogue* and became Accessories Editor in 1990. There, she became increasingly frustrated with the style and variety of accessories on offer, particularly shoes. “I could never find the right style,” she explains. “I discovered this small couture shoemaker in the East End (London) and he made me exactly what I wanted. People began to know the name as I gave him a mention in the magazine, but the problem was they couldn't just go and buy the shoes. They had to be custom-made.”

That shoemaker's name was Jimmy Choo. With her creative vision and market knowledge, Mellon recognised a business opportunity in taking over a name that was only beginning to gain recognition — with shoes people wanted to buy but didn't have access to.

In 1996, Mellon borrowed £150,000 from her father and launched the ready-to-wear Jimmy Choo label with one small shop in London's Motcombe Street, sourcing the manufacturing from Italy. Three stores in the US followed swiftly: New York, Las Vegas and Beverly Hills. Ten years on with 40 Jimmy Choo shops around the world (and 50 planned by the end of next year, including Singapore and Kuala Lumpur), Choo is one of the most successful British fashion brands. Did she ever foresee such growth or success?

“It had always been my dream to start a fashion business — right from when I was a little girl,” she states. “My mother was a model and I was fascinated by her clothes, hair and make-up. But looking back, when we started that first shop it all seemed very small.”

The shop was so small that she had to show the first Jimmy Choo collection (spring/summer 1997) in her



apartment. “The buyers went crazy. We had gone for very different designs — like lilac suede with white feathers,” she says. “Now it's hard to recognise how distinctive those shoes were, as there's been a lot of plagiarism. But 10 years ago, Jimmy Choo revolutionised shoes.”

Those lilac suede sandals remain Mellon's all-time favourite — not least because they were the legendary pair that featured in the television show *Sex and the City*. When Carrie Bradshaw yelled “I lost my Choo!” in a 1997 episode and then retrieved this whimsical, super feminine, feather-trimmed sandal, Jimmy

Choo became a household name overnight.

## STEPPING UP A NOTCH

Mellon is one who knows how to work the fashion industry, not just with her contacts but her social influence. Born in London, the daughter of Tom Yeady, a successful entrepreneur (he built the Vidal Sassoon hair salon empire) and Ann Yeady, a former Chanel model, she was educated in England, Los Angeles' Beverly Hills and a finishing school in Switzerland, and became one of the ‘It’ girls in her 20s.

But she's not just glamorous; she cleverly knows how to exploit connections. All her public relations, marketing, creative and entrepreneurial skills came together when she saw the opportunity to accessorise the red carpet brigade, and use television and film stars to add cachet to the brand.

“The celebrity interest was like a wave that started in America,” she explains. “I spend a lot of time in Los Angeles and noticed all the stylists rushing around to buy accessories. We saw the opportunity to take the shoes to the customer and let them walk the red carpet with Jimmy Choo's that match their designer dress.”



The best-selling tiger print pony skin boot was launched in 1999, and has been remade for the 2006 Vintage collect.

She ignited Hollywood's love affair with Jimmy Choo and today, Mellon turns down more people than she dresses for the Oscars. Her diary is mapped out by such film and society events, with Cannes now added for next year. It may seem like one long party but, as she assures me, it's hard work. And on top of her roving ambassador role, she continues to provide inspiration for three collections a year, working closely with creative director Sandra Choi (niece of Jimmy Choo)

who has been with the business from the beginning.

"Sandra and I have real synergy. I can say the craziest things and she understands and translates that onto paper," Mellon explains.

### IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Would Mellon have done anything differently? "I wish we'd started handbags earlier. We only started those four years ago." Last year, bags accounted for 30 per cent of the brand's sales in Europe and equalled their shoe sales in Asia. And with the launch of an online Jimmy Choo shop, Mellon is confident that bag sales will become even more important.

"I should have also appointed a chief executive earlier. I had to do everything myself in those first five years," she adds.

Jimmy Choo's chief executive is Robert Bensoussan, who is also the chief executive of Equinox Luxury Holdings. In 2001, Mellon went into partnership with Equinox when they acquired Jimmy Choo's share of the ready-to-wear business (Choo is no longer involved in the business but makes his own bespoke shoes under licence).

Then in November 2004, with the company valued at £101 million, investment firm Lion Capital announced its majority acquisition of Jimmy Choo. "We decided to go for private equity investment rather than float the business. I

didn't want the public scrutiny around my shareholding," she states.

Mellon is now considering expanding the brand into clothing, perfume and possibly, lingerie. "I want to accessorise a woman completely. Jimmy Choo is such a strong name; it's almost part of the vernacular."

Could she slow down a little now and spend more time with her young daughter? "I'm passionate about what I do and just can't imagine not being involved. I'm the creative vision — I'm also the second largest shareholder," she states.

As I'm leaving, I venture one final question: "Would you mind if I look in your shoe cupboard?" Proudly she takes me into what seems more like a sizeable room than a cupboard. Floor-to-ceiling open shelves are stacked neatly with stunning shoes, sandals, boots and bags. With more than 500 pairs to choose from, it must be every woman's dream.

Another thing my mother taught me is never to envy anyone else. But what I wouldn't give to be in Tamara Mellon's shoes. ▲



### HEART AND SOLE

To celebrate 10 years of innovative design, Tamara Mellon and creative director Sandra Choi have gone back to the archives to select their favourite designs and are reselling them this fall. "We decided we didn't want to have a party but wanted to do something that all our customers worldwide could share in," explains Mellon.

The Vintage collection highlights key moments in the making of the Jimmy Choo brand, such as the classic Swarovski crystal-studded Oscar shoe, the lilac suede and feather sling-back immortalised by *Sex and the City*, and the exotic sell-out tiger print stiletto boot.