

living the dream

We spoke to iconic man-turned-global-megabrand **TOMMY HILFINGER** during his first trip to Australia
by **RACHEL SHARP**

It's 1969, man's just landed on the moon, Woodstock's worked its way into music festival lore, and in the small town of Elmira, upstate New York—former home of American literary figure Mark Twain—a high-school kid with big dreams called Thomas Jacob Hilfiger starts selling bell-bottom jeans out of the back of his van.

Young Tommy studies the business of fashion after school, makes his way to the Big Apple, works for various labels, eventually founds his own, then begins a decades-long professional adventure that sees him become a household name. Just like his contemporaries Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren, Hilfiger's name today is synonymous with all-American luxury style; his eponymous company's signature red, white and blue logo literally signifies the Western rags-to-riches dream come true.

He's rubbed shoulders with A-list celebrities; underwritten the creative endeavours of rock stars, pop stars, supermodels and even fine artists; pioneered a risky but profitable new way of selling from the fashion week runway coined 'See Now, Buy Now'; donated a ton of time, energy and money to charities (including Save the Children, World Wildlife Fund and Autism Speaks) and won a Lifetime Achievement Award from the prestigious Council of Fashion Designers of America. All the while raising a blended modern family—Hilfiger and his wife of 11 years, designer Dee Ocleppo, have seven children between them.

"The fashion industry is rarely nine-to-five, so my days vary, but no matter what, I always try to wrap early to spend time with my family," he tells *InStyle*. "Once our son, Sebastian [now 10], is in bed, Dee and I like to read, watch a movie or catch-up with the rest of our family by phone."

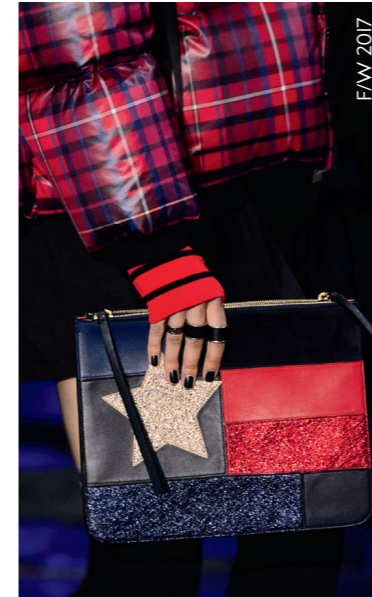


Hitchhiking in London, 1970s

While Hilfiger no longer owns the company that bears his name after selling it to an equity company for more than \$1 billion in 2006, he's still very much the face, heart and soul of the empire that spans more than 100 countries, boasting over 2,000 boutiques. Thirty of those stores are in Australia, where his cult status is higher than ever.

The designer's first official trip Down Under, in November, 2019, was a lesson on Tommy hysteria. Editors, celebrities and influencers fell over themselves for an introduction, while fans and loyal customers queued for a glimpse at store appearances. Still, Hilfiger has always known how to deliver what the kids want. For decades, his preppy design aesthetic has been inspired by four constants: fashion, art, music and entertainment

(FAME), an acronym he references often. He's always had a knack for aligning with the right celebrity ambassadors too, having engaged up-and-comers Aaliyah, Beyoncé and Kate Hudson in campaigns long before they became global megastars.



F/W 2017



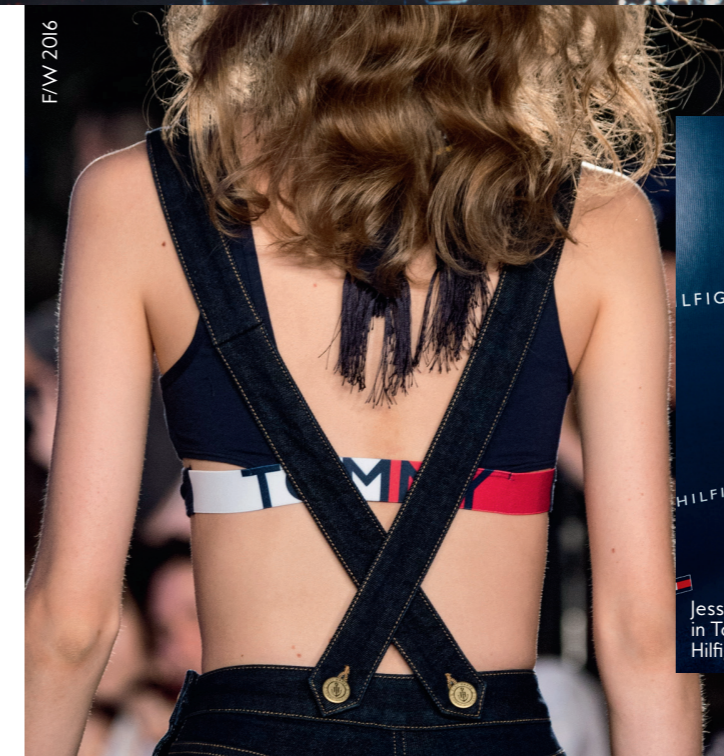
Aaliyah performs in Tommy Hilfiger, 1997



Hilfiger with former brand ambassador, model Gigi Hadid



A Tommy Hilfiger billboard, 1985



F/W 2016



Jessica Alba in Tommy Hilfiger



New York City



Models dance on the runway for the Tommy Hilfiger TOMMYNOW A/W 2019 show

"Fame is many different things to different people," says Hilfiger. "It might be a chart-topping song, backstage passes or paparazzi on the red carpet. At Tommy Hilfiger, FAME is a framework for style, design and never-ending inspiration that builds our brand community on a global scale.

"It has been really exciting to collaborate with pop-culture icons who share our determined optimism and values of inclusivity and diversity. They inject a fresh twist to our collections and campaigns each season, keeping the brand surprising and relevant for consumers.

"Collaborating with talented individuals like racing legend Lewis Hamilton and actor Zendaya [the brand's current male and female ambassadors] always infuses our brand with unexpected twists."

Hilfiger's obsession with popular culture extends to art, too: he owns an impressive private collection, including pieces from his late friend Andy Warhol, along with other pop-art luminaries such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. Ditto music as a long-time creative catalyst, starting with Jimi Hendrix and The Rolling Stones in the '80s, to more recent muses David Bowie, Beyoncé, Gwen Stefani, Lenny Kravitz, Enrique Iglesias and Mark Ronson, many of whom have become Hilfiger's friends and collaborators. In spring 2016, the brand became the official apparel sponsor of The Rolling Stones' first-ever exhibition, aptly titled *Exhibitionism*, now on a four-year global tour.

But for all the glamorous parties, riches and famous friends—the long list he's dressed includes Rihanna, Selena Gomez, Jennifer Lopez, Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, Jessica Alba, Bradley Cooper, Drew Barrymore and Naomi Campbell—Hilfiger prefers to surround himself with family and modern art when he's at home in New York. Life there is relatively simple but satisfying. "My personal office has an eclectic mix of inspirational artwork, photography and other iconic pieces," says the 68-year-old, who admits he prefers a night at home with his family to wild parties these days. "I have a photo of Paul Newman and Robert Redford from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, portraits of my children by famous American caricaturist Al Hirschfeld and a painting by my daughter, Ally. I also have a shovel from the ceremonial groundbreaking of the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial in [Washington] DC from November 2006.

"My wife Dee is my muse and I am so proud of my daughters, who have each carved their own path in life," he says. "I am also inspired by powerful and talented women like Zendaya and Beyoncé, who are trailblazers. Wherever I am, I'm constantly inspired by everything around me and how it could translate into our designs."

Reflecting on his success makes the designer pause. "It's unbelievable to think that the brand launched almost 35 years ago," he says. "Over the years I've met incredible people and learned important lessons on how to run a successful business. I always had a clear vision of what I wanted to achieve, and never gave up on my dream of building a global lifestyle brand."

Mission so very elegantly accomplished. ■

With actor and collaborator Zendaya



“Pop culture is my biggest inspiration, and injecting that into our collections and collaborating with icons who embody our brand values keeps us fresh”



Supermodel and fashion icon Pat Cleveland at the Tommy Hilfiger TOMMYNOW spring/summer 2019 show



Rock inspiration for spring/summer 2015



Muses The Rolling Stones

The welcome party in Sydney to mark Hilfiger's first trip to Australia

TOMMY'S GUIDE TO NEW YORK

Why the designer feels most creative in his adopted town of 40 years



SEE "Pop art and American contemporary art have always been big obsessions of mine. The Whitney Museum of American Art has amazing works by my favourite artists including Keith Haring (above), Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol."



EAT "The New York dining scene is so dynamic, with new places opening up every month. One of my favourites is Cipriani on Fifth Avenue (above). The food and service never disappoint. I love Peasant [in Nolita]; my wife Dee once planned a surprise birthday dinner there for me. My all-time favourite lunch spot is Katz's Delicatessen on East Houston Street. It's a New York classic."



SHOP "Dee and I love to collect beautiful home design pieces. Over the years, we have found many treasures at David Duncan Antiques on East 60th Street. When my daughters are in town we love vintage shopping—Trash and Vaudeville (above) is one of our favourites."



Tommy with wife Dee (centre), and daughters Elizabeth (left) and Ally