

English fashion designer and activist Vivienne Isabel Swire, also known as Vivienne Westwood, died on Thursday December 29 in Clapham, England. She was 81, with her cause of death unknown. She was with her family and close friends at her time of death.

Westwood was born on April 8, 1941 in Derbyshire, England. Her father, Gordon Swire worked as a cobbler and her mother as a cotton weaver. Westwood's first job was assisting her father in the factory.

Westwood and her family moved to London when she was 17 years old, where she would attend the University of Westminster and take jewellery courses for one term.

"I didn't know how a working-class girl like me could possibly make a living in the art world," Westwood said.

Believing that she could never become a renowned figure in the art industry, she took up training courses for education and became a primary school teacher. Not completely giving up on her jewellery dreams, she ran a small stall and made jewellery part-time.

In 1962, Westwood married Derek Westwood and had her first child, Benjamin Westwood, in 1963. They divorced in 1965 and she soon began a relationship with Malcolm McLaren, manager of the activist punk rock band "The Sex Pistols". The couple had their son Joseph Corr   in 1967 in Thurleigh Court in Balham.

While working as a teacher, Westwood designed clothing for the band along with McLaren. Audiences started to gain an interest in the bands' clothing and eventually, Westwood and McLaren would open a boutique called "SEX" in 1971.

"SEX" became the core of the anti-establishment London punk movement of the 70s and was a hangout spot for those within the movement. The clothing designed by Westwood would reference sexual activities and were typically sold to prostitutes and punk stars. Popular pieces of hers were a pair of bondage trousers, tattered and loosely woven t-shirts, and accessories such as metal chains and safety pins.

Westwood and McLaren began to gain traction within the fashion industry with their first catwalk show in 1981 titled "Pirate." The pieces shown were similar to items sold at the "SEX" boutique, which has since been rebranded as "The Worlds End." Westwood drew inspiration from the Buccaneer clothing (i.e. wide trousers, oversized dress shirts, and drapes) and reflected her interest in silhouettes and bright colors in her designs.

The "Pirate" designs went on to inspire many costume designers for musical acts in the 80s. It also started the uprising in the "New Romantic" style. Following the catwalk's success, Westwood and McLaren showcased many collections afterwards in London as well as Paris. Some of their most notable collections being "Buffalo Girls/Nostalgia of Mud" and "Punkature", both launched in 1982.

Westwood and McLaren ended their partnership in 1982 with their last official collection together being “Witches” in Autumn of 1983. Along with her new business partner Carlo D’Amario, Westwood continued to create collections and increase her reach.

Westwood began to build a reputation both locally and internationally. Her “Hypnos” collection in 1984 was invited to be shown at the Best of Five global fashion awards in Tokyo. These designs took references from professional football player jerseys and added provocative aspects such as exposed jockstraps. This style became popular club wear in London’s gay community.

As she went on to create influential collections throughout the late 1980s such as “Time Machine” and “Voyage to Cythera”, Westwood would see a new height in her career in the 1990s. She was awarded British Designer of the year for two consecutive years and received it at the Royal Albert Hall. In 1992, she was recognised by the Establishment and was awarded an OBE by Queen Elizabeth II.

Afterwards, her collections would be presented at multiple fashion shows across the world and she would expand her business into seven different stores in the UK. As she approached the 2010s, she switched her focus towards environmental activism and ceased any further expansion of her business.

“I’ve constantly tried to provoke people into thinking afresh and for themselves, to escape their inhibitions and programming,” said Westwood.