



Betsey Johnson stands in the middle of her store on New York's Upper East Side, a Styrofoam cup in each hand. One is filled to the brim with deli coffee, the other is half-full of black paint. As several employees scamper to clean up before opening for another day of business, Johnson lifts one cup to her lips and swallows a mouthful of . . . coffee. No surprise there. Johnson is used to having both hands full. She's a designer and retailer, a businesswoman and mother, a city woman and country girl, a creative whiz and hands-on laborer who has personally painted all seven stores bearing her name. Minutes after the boutique opens at the crack of noon, she spots a lithe college-age girl who has just walked out of the dressing room and stepped before a full-length mirror. Johnson puts down her paint brush, picks up a pack of Salem Lights and watches as the girl poses and turns, smiling at the way she looks in a long, black button-down dress that hugs and highlights every curve. Johnson smiles, too, but hers is a smile almost of awe, like a mother beaming at the sight of her dressed-up child. For Betsey Johnson, the child is the dress. "It takes a girl that slim to fit into that dress," Johnson says with a sigh. "Isn't that gorgeous?" It's been nearly 25 years since Johnson graduated from Syracuse University's School of Art and first designed the kind of close-cropped, sexy-yet-witty clothes that have become her trademark. Her apparel has been prominent in the wardrobes of hippies in the sixties, punks in the seventies, and the body-conscious woman of the eighties. "No matter what your aura, point of view, or concept, it has to be consistent," says Johnson, who started her own company 10 years ago. "I've done the same work for years. It's very simple and very classic. I either do sixties stuff

BY KEVIN HAYNES

B E T S E Y

**Somewhere between renegade and paragon.
Somewhere out in left field.**

KEVIN HAYNES, a 1979 graduate of the Newhouse School of Public Communications, is the features editor of Scene magazine and a former reporter for Women's Wear Daily.

or I do romantic/ballerina, kind of flower-power seventies stuff. That's my strength. I know what I like, what I wear, what feels right on me."

"She's enormously talented," raves designer Cathy Hardwick, a friend for the past 20 years. "Her designs have a totally balanced proportion yet there's so much humor that you look at it and there's sort of a happiness. That's what I like best about her."

"She has an absolute point of view. She's certain of what she's doing. That's the secret of her success. You see the clothes someone's wearing and you know immediately it's Betsey Johnson. It's unmistakable."

JOHNSON HERSELF HAS A commanding presence. At 46, the former dancer is still petite and dressed to amuse, in a tiny black vest and shorts over leotards, with a white top wrapped skintight. Her effervescent approach to business is as bright as her red fingernails and multi-colored hair pulled back in braids, helping her to come across like an incredibly merry milkmaid.

"Sometimes she looks like her own carnival," says Bernie Ozer, vice president of fashion merchandising and marketing for Associated Merchandising Corp., a New York-based retail organization. "But that's okay. She survives and functions."

Johnson's business partner, Chantal Bacon, says the company's wholesale volume approaches \$10 million. "When we started 10 years ago people would think, 'Who is this loony?'" Bacon says. "But once people work with us they know we're hard workers and serious."

The company's New York showroom, in the heart of the garment center, looks a lot like Johnson's stores, from the designer's pink neon signature right down to the black-and-white checkerboard floor. There are floral print chairs and a sofa covered in vinyl. The walls are blanketed with magazine clips and covers from periodicals such as *Life*, *Mademoiselle*, *Elle*, and *Details*. There are also postcards, sketches, and photos from Johnson's in-house fashion shows, infamous for their wacky movie themes (*The Wizard of Oz* last spring). The only difference is that the racks are stuffed with samples.

"When salesmen come in for the first time they look with bewilderment at the showroom," says Johnson's assistant Stephi Ruben, who followed in the boss's footsteps to SU, earning a bachelor's degree in fine arts in 1978 and a master's in theater design in 1981.

"This is sort of corny," she says, "but Betsey is one of the reasons I became interested in



Johnson and her assistant, 1978 grad Stephi Ruben.

fashion. Since I was 12 and saw her drawings in *Seventeen* magazine, I knew I wanted to be a designer.

"The reason I transferred to SU was because I knew Betsey went to school there. I started out at Parsons, but I didn't like it. I wanted more than just learning how to drape."

Sitting in a chair up against a wall, legs folded, Johnson munches a rice cake and mulls her stature as a veteran designer and retailer who is still perceived as a breath of fresh air in an industry renowned for its cautious, imitative mentality.

"It's relatively nice to be thought of as still young and new but the truth is that we're establishment now," she says. "We're not a flash in the pan anymore."

"My customer is probably a pretty independent woman. The chunk is the young working woman in the big cities, 25 to 35 years old. Her wardrobe is probably most important to her in those years. She's dating, she's clubbing, she's man-hunting. She just has to look good."

GROWING UP IN WETHERFIELD, Connecticut, Betsey Johnson wanted to be a dancer and, above all, a cheerleader.

She spent lots of childhood summer vacations studying dance in New York, but she finally traded in her toe shoes for pom-poms.

"I realized the way to be a dancer is you barely graduate from high school and you jump into the New York dance scene," she says. "No way you waste time going to college."

"I was seriously into dancing, but I was

seriously into going into college, too. And I was seriously interested in continuing my cheerleader career," she adds, giggling. "That was the most important thing to me for eight years—four years of high school, four years of college."

Johnson enrolled at the Pratt Institute, but decided to transfer to Syracuse after her first year. "It was too artsy and serious," she says of Pratt. "I was a cheerleader there and they practically laughed me out of the arts school."

At SU, Johnson earned a bachelor's degree in illustration from the School of Art. She also found happiness as a sorority girl and head cheerleader. Dated the quarterback, too.

"I loved cheerleading," she says. "I was an acrobat. I loved sports. I loved the guys who played sports—I always went for the jocks—and in Syracuse the head cheerleaders got to travel all over the country with the football team. I cheered in the L.A. Coliseum."

Johnson appears almost stunned when told that her surreal Raggedy Ann look doesn't exactly make her look the cheerleader type. "I don't?" she says, almost incredulous. "I am such a cheerleader, it's embarrassing. I have that energy—it was the dancing thing, performing—on the stage, on the football field. And I loved art."

A week before graduating from SU in 1964, Johnson learned she was one of 20 female college students who won a contest sponsored by *Mademoiselle* magazine. The prize: a summer stint as guest editor.

"So I get to New York hoping to be in the art department and, sure enough, because I had taken one semester of a fabric design

course, they thought, 'Here's someone for the fabric department.' The fabric department?"

Enter fate. Turns out the department's editor, D.J. White, "was just about 10 months pregnant," Johnson recalls. Johnson assisted White until she had her child, then Johnson was asked to stay on.

Johnson's first designs were handsewn creations made from innovative fabrics she came across in her research. "I was taking home \$63 a week and I started to earn extra money making clothes for different editors," Johnson recalls. "I advertised my little, tight, kind of French-cut sexy tee shirts in the ladies rooms. We were in the Graybar building attached to Grand Central and you had all of Conde Nast going to the same six bathrooms."

Mademoiselle soon gave Johnson some fashion illustration work and started advertising her tee shirts in the magazine. The mail-order response was so strong, she found herself ready to abandon art for a career in fashion. The decision represented a major breakthrough—and a challenge.

"Even though I made my own clothes, it just didn't occur to me to be a fashion designer," Johnson says. "I really wanted to be a commercial artist. I thought I would do children's books and record album covers—you know, those ideas you have in college.

"When I realized I wanted to be a designer—that I liked making clothes, rather than drawing clothes—I couldn't even get an interview because I didn't have any credits. They just won't see you without a real formal background—and I had one semester of fashion illustration that I took at Syracuse for fun."

THEN SHE WAS INTRODUCED to Paul Young, an Englishman who was about to open Paraphernalia, a chain of boutiques for young designers from America and Europe (including Mary Quant, Emmanuelle Khanh, and Daniel Hechter). "Paul Young would see anybody," Johnson says with a laugh. "So I called up all these people I made clothes for and I walked in with this big suitcase full of clothes that people bought, wore, and enjoyed. That, to me, is light years beyond a portfolio."

Johnson got the job and spent the mid-sixties designing for Paraphernalia. "I could make whatever I wanted," she says, "but I discovered I wanted to make clothes that people could afford. I had to learn how to do that. I had to make the patterns and samples myself and be at the little factories where they were made, but the most important lesson I had to face, right off the bat, was that they had to sell.

In return, I got my name on the label and it was just . . . whew!"

Johnson exhales deeply, shakes her head and smiles. "I met Twiggy," she says.

She also lived in the Chelsea Hotel, hung out at clubs like Max's Kansas City, and married musician John Cale of the Velvet Underground. Then Johnson went through an extended transition period. She left Paraphernalia in 1968, divorced Cale in 1969, designed for Alley Cat for five years, and had a daughter, Lulu, in 1975.

Three years later, in 1978, she started her self-named company with Bacon and opened the first of three stores in New York on her birthday. Betsey Johnson Co. boutiques have since opened in Los Angeles; San Francisco; Venice, California; and Coconut Grove, Florida. She hopes to open two more stores each year.

When it's time to create a new line, Johnson says she and Lulu abandon their TriBeCa loft and head upstate to East Taghanic, where Johnson owns a house that was built in 1810. "I need four or five days of total indulgence—no New York static, no interruptions—to really think a line out."

Like most major designers, Johnson claims she sticks to her own inner vision and doesn't pay too much attention to what her counterparts are creating. But she does keep an eye on the European designers, especially Gaultier and Azzedine Alaïa.

"And I love the Lower East Side," she says. "The streets are inspiring, but when I'm in the Shop Rite upstate I might see Farmer Brown and get ideas.

"The other night I was down on the Lower East Side . . .," she recalls. "At this cafe where I like to eat, this girl had the best corset cinch waist thing. And I thought, 'I'm gonna do a group of these.' It's not a drop-dead new idea—I've made wide elastic belts like this for 10 years—but I thought, 'Yeah, it looks great. I'm gonna really expand the life of this little cinch belt.' Just seeing that waitress can trigger a direction."

However, Johnson is bracing for a tough year. She's convinced that consumer confidence, bruised by Black Monday last fall, will remain low through the elections.

"In safe times people want to go out and raise hell, dress up and flip out and drink and dance. But people are concerned about their money now. Business is not that easy."

THERE ARE THOSE WHO THINK Johnson's stock would soar even higher if she got more aggressive and started actively licensing her name. Johnson says she's reluctant to just sign away her rights to control of a product line simply for the money. She'd rather open and paint her stores one at a time.

"To someone who makes millions or billions, she's nuts," says Ozer of AMC. "But maybe more would be too much for her. To survive and be relatively happy is being a good business person."

Exactly, says Johnson. "The extra money isn't worth what I'd have to give up," she says. "Chantal and I have worked many years to get to a certain lifestyle, which we love. I don't want to do much more work. I don't want an assistant designer. I don't care if I don't do sunglasses and bedsheets. That extra ten, fifty, hundred thousand dollars a year isn't worth it if it makes me lose the little time I have left over. Who cares about the extra money? When am I gonna spend it and what would I spend it on, anyway? A bigger house?"

Besides, Johnson already has her one great extravagance: a 1982 yellow Mercedes Benz convertible that she has finally paid off. "That car is real important to me as a materialistic token of 25 years of work," she says. "I feel great driving it. I should be in a pickup truck, but I don't care.

"When I'm driving around in the country with the top down in that little yellow car, that's my diamonds and my furs."



Betsey Johnson is but one of a number of alumni who've made their mark in the fashion industry. All across the nation, men, women, and children are wearing clothing that was either designed, manufactured, or marketed by talented SU grads.

On the following pages, we preview the fall collections of Johnson and five other prominent designers whose work has been heralded from coast to coast. You'll also get an insider's glimpse of the personalities behind these designs, which are setting the pace of American fashion.

So enjoy the "window shopping" and give in to the temptation to rummage through your closet and check the labels. Who knows, that favorite sweater might have been designed by one of SU's own.

Designer profiles by Renée Gearhart Levy

Fashion photographs by Steve Sartori