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Getting Into FASHION

A Career Guide

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in the fashion field—
from design to retail,
from manufacturing to sales—
and *much more!*



MELISSA SONES



GETTING INTO FASHION

A CAREER GUIDE

MELISSA SONES

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**This book is dedicated
to the memory of my father**

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GETTING INTO FASHION

A CAREER GUIDE

*C*ONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	Getting Into Fashion_____	1
CHAPTER 2	The Fashion Industry_____	9
CHAPTER 3	Myths and Myth Makers_____	17
CHAPTER 4	Apparel Design_____	24
CHAPTER 5	Apparel Production_____	53
CHAPTER 6	Apparel Administration and Sales_____	61
CHAPTER 7	Retail_____	75
CHAPTER 8	Textiles_____	106
CHAPTER 9	The Fashion Show and Its Showpeople_____	129
CHAPTER 10	Starting Your Own Clothing Design Company_____	148
CHAPTER 11	Licensing_____	160
CHAPTER 12	Women in Management_____	167
CHAPTER 13	Reentering_____	173
CHAPTER 14	Promotion, Publicity, Public Relations, Special Events____	179
CHAPTER 15	A Select Glossary of Creative Careers_____	183
CHAPTER 16	Hustling a Job_____	207
CHAPTER 17	Resources_____	221

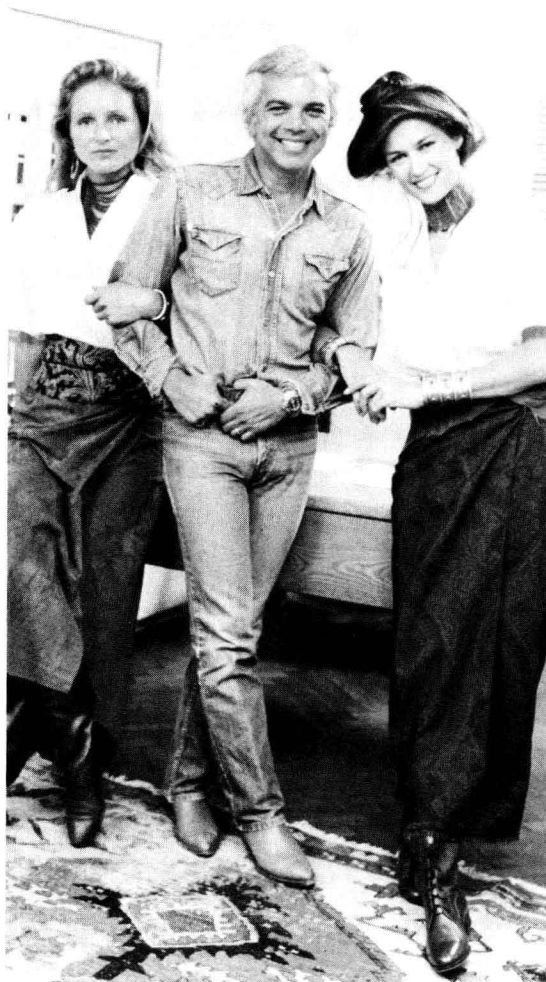
C CHAPTER

1

GETTING INTO FASHION

Fashion is glamorous business. Barbara Walters and Estée Lauder know it. They haven't missed a Blass show in years. Nancy Kissinger and Pat Buckley haven't missed a de la Renta either. "Fashion victims" is what *Women's Wear Daily* lovingly calls them. Listen to a bit from *WWD*, the newspaper which, as far as print goes, controls the industry:

"When Perry Ellis wants to visit his house on Fire Island, he doesn't worry about reserving a seaplane. He owns the seaplane. He knows it's a Cessna, but says he's not sure how much he paid for it. 'Six figures,' he says. 'Something like that.' What he is certain of is that the plane is khaki.



"Ralph Lauren also owns a plane. It's a Hawker Siddeley jet. Hawker Siddeleys cost about \$6,500,000, but that doesn't mean they're perfect. [Hawker Siddeleys, it seems, are empty shells, so Lauren had to have the interior designed]

"Calvin Klein owns no planes. He charts them. When he feels like a weekend at his Key West house (one of four places he can call home) he hires a Lear-jet. That can come to almost \$10,000, but it's good for a round trip."

Consider Michael Arceneaux, one of the country's foremost producers of fashion shows. He is credited with extravaganzas for Calvin Klein, Bill Blass, Issey Miyake, and Ferragamo in Italy. Says Arceneaux, "The problem with my getting into fashion was it didn't have enough show biz, so I brought show biz to fashion." Wouldn't it be terrific, after all, to hobnob in Paris, Milan, Hong Kong, or maybe Tokyo?

If you think so, stick around. You're hardly alone if glamour, money, and travel are among your reasons for aspiring to a fashion career. What else so easily explains the overwhelming popularity of design and buying jobs?

But design and buying are only two of a hundred opportunities in fashion, just as glamour is one of a hundred-plus reasons you're attracted to the business. Moreover, in the long run, your reasons for choosing fashion will matter little. You may be bored with a current job, fashion-related or not, reentering the work force, changing careers, or entering for the first time after raising children. What does matter is that you focus on the job or jobs that excite you, that you're super-determined to land them, and that you're willing to swallow your pride in the name of paying your dues.

Assume, like all successful people, you're not going to quit, whatever your goal. Not when you're feeling rejected and frustrated. Not when that glamour job means more stockroom than stagelights. Not when you're offered \$10,000 to start. Not when someone else marches in with an MBA. Not when the boss is a bastard, the hours outrageous, and someone with far less creativity is winning out.

The best way to understand a business chock full of glamour, show biz, and dream jobs is with a healthy shot of reality—in this case a candid conversation with successful clothing designer Alexander Julian.

Indeed, the most powerful career advice often comes from first-person accounts. The rub is that you have to know how to interpret the account. In this case, look for evidence of the two success essentials: guts and goals. Julian defines his goals in the first paragraph of the conversation and acknowledges later that he's never abandoned them. For Julian, every major career advance involved guts. But to cement guts and goals you also need crucial career building blocks like solid work experience (Julian "worked every day after school"), education, extremely hard work, people skills, patience, and passion for the field. Read chapter 16 for more on success essentials, then, if you feel so inclined, return for a second shot at the Julian chat.

ALEXANDER JULIAN

Alexander Julian may not exactly be a household word, but he's well on his way. His company racked up sales of \$44 million in 1981 and a whopping \$88 million in 1982. His showcase store is Saks Fifth Avenue, which saw fit to stage a spectacular parade down Manhattan's Fifth Avenue in his honor. He is a four-time winner of the prestigious Coty Award, the Oscar of the fashion industry, and a one-time winner of the Cutty Sark Award for outstanding menswear design. His menswear is carried in the most sophisticated stores across the country, including Jerry Magnin in Los Angeles, Wilkes Bashford in San Francisco, and Perkins Shearer in Denver. Julian is thirty-five years



old and married, with one daughter. He was born in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, lives in New York City, and maintains a summer home in Easthampton, Long Island, where his favorite pastime is sailing, and an apartment in Milan.

When did you become interested in the fashion business?

On my first trip to the market at six months old. My parents have a store in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. They also forbade me to go into the business. I designed my first shirts at twelve and my first jackets at sixteen. One reporter once wrote that “young Julian was raised with swatchbooks instead of fire engines.” I worked every day after school. When I turned eighteen, I did an *assets and liabilities tally* and realized I already had eighteen years retail experience. But I started out pre-med at the University of North Carolina. After four Coty awards and a Cutty Sark Award, my father would still like me to go to medical school. Anyway, my father developed health problems and I was catapulted into running the store. One time when he was out of town—I was twenty-one—I used his money to open my own store. I was a fairly brazen kid.

How did you end up designing?

I remember it well. I was in New York designing sweaters for my store. A friend with a shop in West Hartford and I were walking down Madison Avenue and he said, “I really think designing is your forte. You should be doing it all the time because you’re good at it.” It was one of those incredibly frightening moments. I wanted to do it but there were so many things involved. Then another friend, who had sold himself to a clothing manufacturer as a creative talent even though he was really more of a salesperson, came to me for the creative end. So I did my first collection. There were no names on the clothes or anything, but I decided this was something I wanted to pursue full-time. I moved to New York and decided to give it three years. I figured if I didn’t win a Coty Award before I was thirty I would quit. That was eight years ago. I got my first nomination after my second year in business and won my first Coty after three years. I think I was the youngest nominee.

What made you think you’d quit after three years?

I would have quit because I would have found out I wasn’t as good as I thought I was.

What happened in New York?

I went to a very staid old company that wasn’t involved with my kind of thing at all and sold them on the beneficial effects my designs would have on their company. It

was a struggle. I almost went out of business at least ten times and almost hung it up another ten. You beat your head against that brick wall twenty times and the twenty-first time you make it. The amount of time it takes to get anyone in the fashion press to come over even once is unbelievable. One major fashion editor stood me up for at least ten appointments. She never even called. Finally she promised to see me on her way to work at 8:30 A.M. That morning I had everything organized: coffee, a little danish pastry. At ten-thirty I called her office. She had forgotten. I was so incensed I bagged up the best pieces from my collection, the cold coffee and stale danish, and splurged on a taxi. I barged into her office and said, "Here's your coffee, here's your danish, and here's my collection. You're going to take a look at it!"

Did you get publicity?

Yes. I knew my clothes had validity. Getting someone's attention was what I needed.

How important is publicity?

Very. We had one jacket featured in more magazines and newspapers than jackets we sold.

Has money ever been your goal?

I didn't start out to see how much money I could make. I did it as a pure expression of what I thought was right.

A group of high school seniors, when asked why they aspired to fashion careers, responded "money." What do you think of money as a goal in terms of potential success?

It's fine. There are people like that in the industry, I'm sure.

What does it take to be successful?

First, you have to decide to stick with it. Then there's a lot required besides talent. There's luck and being in the right place. I abide by the axiom "the harder I work the luckier I get."

How many hours a day do you work?

Probably twelve.



Julian menswear

Do you take vacations?

I do and I don't. I get away and I don't get away. It's interchangeable. The trick is feeling comfortable with the anxiety. This is a twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week business. One of my assistants told me she wakes up in the middle of the night thinking, Oh, God! What am I going to do with that shirt? I used to do that.

When did you hire your first employees?

First of all my wife works with me. With the time commitments and travel, if she didn't, I'd never see her. She does everything. Our first employee came after a couple of years. She was also an all-around person writing orders, calling the factory to see where orders went, everything. As of three years ago we had four including someone in clerical/production and a national sales manager.

Does everyone do a little of everything?

Yes. It's only now coming to the point where everybody doesn't have to do everything.

How many people work for you now?

Sixteen.

In what capacities?

Receptionist and secretary to bookkeeper, production and quality-control people, a sales manager, two others in sales, and an executive vice-president who kind of floats between the couture company and the licensees and works with merchandising. I also have a part-time knitwear expert in England and three others in the design studio here doing everything from channeling information to the licensees to working on design projects.

Do they actually design?

Yes.

Do you hire entry level?

Yes. I hired my first real design assistant right out of school. A Syracuse University professor, an old friend, called and said, "I've got this kid and she's perfect for you. She's my top student and I want you to put her on as a summer intern." At the end of the summer I hired her. She finished up in night school. Another person in sales who concentrates on stores came out of design school.

What do you look for in someone you hire?

The real core work I always do. I look for another pair of eyes and another set of sensibilities. There are concepts involved that I can teach.

Do you prefer design school graduates?

After my first Coty Award I was given an honorarium to teach a Creative Menswear course at Parsons School of Design in New York. My first lecture was entitled "How I Won a Coty Award with No Formal Design Training." Obviously, training is very, very helpful but the most important thing is having the right ideas. What I was trying to drive home is not to get totally bogged down in the technical to the exclusion of everything else.

Undoubtedly many people aspire to your success. What career strategy would you recommend?

One particular student approached me and said, "What do I do?" I said, "Take the retail route." Work your way up through retail. Get into buying, learn your way around, make contacts, and then try to establish a business. Obviously, I told him to do what I did. Another designer who went to design school told him the opposite. I still think retail experience is essential.

Your clothes are easy to spot. Do you think anyone can develop a style if it doesn't come naturally?

When I lecture, people always ask, "Where do you get good ideas?" The answer is "everywhere." Creativity is part of somebody's makeup but you can become more or less creative by your own particular involvements with the world.

What are major pitfalls to avoid?

This is the advice I put in *Who's Who*: To be successful in any endeavor, whether fashion or something else, an important element is to liken your endeavors to defensive driving. To reach your goal, you have to look out more for what others are doing wrong than for what you're doing right. So many things can go wrong.

Is there some way to learn other than by your own mistakes?

I'm afraid not.

Have you ever been tempted to get into another business?

Every new licensee is another business.

How many licensees do you have?

Ten. They account for a fair portion of sales.

Aria/Zoli Agency



Womenswear for Spring '84

Do you design the clothes for the licensees?

We have total design and product control over every item produced with my name on it anywhere in the world. Everything starts here. We do it all. There are too many people that give licensing a bad name.

Do you have a personal career goal?

My goal is to singlehandedly change the definition of an idealist as a person in the loan line at the bank. We've just signed a major Seventh Avenue womenswear deal. It will be the first womenswear collection anywhere based entirely on in-house textiles.

C H A P T E R

2

THE FASHION INDUSTRY

Fashion is big, big business. We buy a whopping ninety billion dollars worth of clothing every year. Check your closet. Even if you don't have enormous sums to spend on clothes, the dollar amount when every last item is totaled is far greater than you think. And that's just *your* wardrobe.

There are 5,500 apparel manufacturers in New York City alone, mostly on famed Seventh Avenue. Fashion is New York State's as well as New York City's largest business and certainly one of its major claims to fame, although apparel companies exist in every state of the union. The biggies are California, Texas, New Jersey, and the southern states. As for textiles, there are 6,000 companies nationwide, most with sales and marketing divisions in New York City and plants that do the weaving and knitting and

research and development in the South. As for retail, there are over two million stores of various sizes with an estimated sixteen million people at work, making retail alone the largest job bank in the entire United States.



There are huge companies in the fashion business such as Burlington Industries in textiles, Levi Strauss in apparel, and Sears, Roebuck and Company in retail that individually gross over a billion dollars a year. There are top-ranking sales representatives who clear \$200,000 a year doing little more than selling moderately priced men's suits. First-rate female models rack up \$3,000 a day or more. Their male counter-

parts can pocket \$2,500 a day. And there are infinitely more nonglamorous jobs that pay handsomely. A well-trained production manager in an apparel manufacturing plant may not visit Paris on business but may earn enough to vacation there. The same goes for a top-flight engineer or product development expert.

Most jobs, of course, pay far less, especially at the beginning. An assistant designer can expect to make between \$10,000 and \$15,000 a year, as can a production assistant, assistant patternmaker, or a textile stylist. An assistant buyer in a training program may earn between \$15,000 and \$20,000 depending on the program, and a sales trainee in textiles or apparel will probably land closer to \$20,000.

TEAMWORK

Fashion is a team business. It is a group effort from the first ball of cotton picked or wool shorn to the hottest new boutique in Bloomingdale's, I. Magnin, or Filene's. That team effort is always spoken of in terms of its three major links: textiles, apparel, and retail. It is however, the job of fiber companies like Monsanto, Du Pont, and Celanese to start the ball rolling by shearing the wool, picking the cotton, and/or creating manmade fibers such as polyester, acrylic, and nylon from chemicals. Textile companies, mostly in the South, then buy this raw fiber, spin it into yarn, and weave or knit it into fabric. They're also responsible for dyeing either the yarn or the fabric.