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New York Fashion Spotlight on Amy Matto: Interview

By Tiffany Pham

Despite the sweltering heat of summer, the sidewalks of the Garment District bustled with activity. Vibrant energy bounded from the office of fashion designer and rising star Amy Matto, located on West 38th Street. From desk to desk, telephones rang; employees answered at a frenetic pace. By contrast, at the back of the office sat a young, blond woman, her demeanor calm and collected. A glow lit her face as she surveyed the room, acknowledging the fruition of years of hard work.

In the fall of 2009, Amy Matto launched her label from the living room of her New York City apartment. Inspired by fashion icons Coco Chanel and Jackie Onassis, she set out to create her own contemporary women's dress collection, teaching herself everything about the business from the ground-up. Influenced by her all-American upbringing, Matto decided to manufacture her clothing line locally in support of USA-based products. To further this mission, Matto has recently created a tongue-in-cheek T-shirt that aims to provoke discussion around the United States' widespread outsourcing to China; with the Chinese characters "Made in USA" sprawled across the front, the translation reads: "Made in USA."

Describing her own personal style as classic and timeless, Matto designs for the smart, educated, and savvy woman. Two years since her launch, she now counts numerous celebrities among fans of her line, including Halle Berry, Sharon Stone, Cindy Crawford, Kelly Rutherford, and Bethenny Frankel.

You came from a non-traditional background. How did you get started as a fashion designer?

In high school, I wanted to go to school for fashion, but it really wasn't what you did -- you went to school for business. This was before Project Runway made designing more well known. At the time, it wasn't an attainable profession.

In my prior career, I sold fractional jet ownership for NetJets. But I always knew what I would do if I had my own line - I had a girl in mind. At that time, Paris Hilton was on every red carpet, so I said, "If I had a line, my girl would sneak in the back door. She doesn't need the attention. She doesn't need the recognition of an expensive designer label -- she is proud to wear "Made in USA" clothing."

My husband dared me to do it. He said, "Quit talking about it, and do it." My initial reaction was: "Me?" But I thought, "If I don't pursue my dream now, when will I?"

I began walking around blindly, talking to anyone in the industry who would talk to me, trying to learn how the apparel business works. I didn't learn to make patterns or sew, but I found the best patternmaker and factory.

Reflecting on your recent success, what advice would you give to budding designers?

Intern at as many places as possible to learn as much as you can. You have to be extraordinarily passionate about designing. It requires a tremendous amount of energy as well as thick skin. The apparel business can be outright brutal at times, and it will soon unmask your level of determination. It is a lot of hard work, and it will cost a lot of money to build a business.

Has there been a time when you faced difficult obstacles?

There are obstacles everyday. Something always pops up. For example, we are held hostage by the fabric mills. If they are late shipping fabric to us, the factory won't have it in time to cut and sew the fabric before we ship it out.

When you encounter these obstacles, what is your best resource?

My employees. They are amazing. I love them.

What trends do you prefer now?

Our beach dress is perfect for right now. It's so hot out -- the celebrities are wearing and loving them. We have fun bright colors; they pack well for August traveling, and they transition well from day-to-night. You'll never want to wear anything else.

You are a strong proponent of USA-based manufacturing. Why do you have your clothes made in NYC's Garment District?

There are both philosophical and quality reasons behind the decision. I want to support the American industry generally and the NYC Garment district specifically. Many large brands decide to make gross margin their most important objective, but the result of their collective focus on margin has been a significant decline in the economic base of many American industries in many different cities. I find it particularly disingenuous when major companies that have built their empires on an "All-American" brand perception now produce their entire lines in China.

In terms of quality, by choosing to manufacture locally, we are also able to maintain direct oversight over the entire supply chain. By eliminating shipping time, we can make fresher designs closer to the season, and we can also implement design and merchandising changes immediately. We can literally be on the factory floor any day of the week to monitor our production process. We can touch, see, and feel each step of the product development process since all of our vendors are located within one square mile. It costs a bit more to produce here than in China, but it is worth it to us. We know we are offering a significantly higher quality product with quicker turnaround time from drawing board to store.

What are the benefits of your career? What do you find most rewarding?

Drawing inspiration from varied sources and turning them into fresh, wearable designs. Inspiration might come from the Mediterranean Sea and Greek architecture one season and the savannahs of Tanzania the next. I enjoy keeping an eye out for new design ideas during all of my experiences. But the reward really comes when I see other women wearing and enjoying our pieces.

What type of culture do you promote among your staff?

A casual, informal culture. We are very collaborative, with open communication. We have a lot of fun, and we love what we do.

Also, I think personal lives are very important, so family should always come first. Life is just too short.

What are 4 words that best describe your latest collection?

Classic, sensual, understated elegance.

Where can I find Amy Matto dresses?

You can find them at hundreds of boutiques across the nation. For a complete list of stores, check out www.amymatto.com.