

JESSICA BUMPUS

Vivienne Westwood

The Story Behind the Style



UNOFFICIAL AND UNAUTHORISED



A Revolutionary is Born

There are few British designers, or brands, that have made quite as much of an impact on the fashion landscape as Vivienne Westwood. A fashion designer of both cult and commercial success (which is a rare combination), she was a punk and a pioneer, a rebel and a provocateur, an activist and a change-maker.

Over the course of a career that spanned half a century, Dame Vivienne Westwood would become synonymous with the British punk scene. Punk is what immediately springs to mind for most when her name is mentioned, along with the King's Road, corsets, platforms, tartan, crinolines, pirate boots, sustainability and climate change awareness. The list goes on. Her shows and interviews have become legendary – she is famous for using fashion as a platform to speak out on the issues she cared most about.

There is no doubt that Westwood's affinity for fashion history has helped her designs stand out. They are often historically informed, yet never to the point that they look odd. Where something shouldn't work, it always did, thanks to Vivienne's ability to balance the old with the modern – she was a genius when it came to style mashups. And the original Vivienne Westwood aesthetic rooted in a DIY approach never fully went away. Her designs feel intrinsically British and perfectly eccentric.

Westwood was the original multi-hyphenate and, in many ways, light years ahead of her time. She has inspired generations of designers that came after her, whether established and successful or aspiring and eager. Fashion critics even noted whiffs of her spirit at the London Fashion Week collections of autumn/winter 2023, which took place in February 2023, after her death. It's no wonder that her name is up there with the likes of Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Lacroix and the late great Karl Lagerfeld.



ABOVE: Vivienne Westwood takes her bow at the spring/summer 2018 London Fashion Week Men's collections, June 2017.



Derbyshire Days

Vivienne Isabel Swire was born on April 8 1941 to Gordon and Dora Swire at the Partington Maternity Home, Glossop. The future fashion revolutionary had one sister, Olga Swire, born 1944, and one brother, Gordon Swire, born 1946. She grew up in the parish of Tintwistle, Derbyshire (which was formerly part of Cheshire until 1974), both during and after World War II, enjoying what has been recounted as a fairly idyllic childhood, living at the stone-constructed Millbrook Cottages and playing outside until late.

The young Swire clan were encouraged to be creative and make things more than they were encouraged to read. Vivienne knew from a young age that she was good at making things, notably models at school, and she especially enjoyed sewing classes. Her mother would often make their clothes, and worked as a weaver in a local cotton factory.

The young Vivienne – who remembers having a passionate spirit from an early age – attended Hollingworth and Tintwistle Primary Schools from 1946 to 1952, at which point she passed the scholarship exam for Glossop Grammar School. She continued to be good at art during her time at Glossop Grammar, and considered attending art school.

Among Westwood's noted formative fashion memories are the make-do-and-mend philosophy that came to define

Britain in austerity, as well as the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, when Vivienne was 12 years old. The influences of these two events can be seen throughout every era of her designs, and the make-do-and-mend philosophy is evident in the mantra "Buy Less, Choose Well, Make it Last", which the brand still promotes to this day. She expertly blended the elements of customisation, tradition and aristocracy together to create her own unique brand, which is now continued by her husband Andreas Kronthaler.



LEFT: Vivienne Westwood speaking at a festival wearing a "Buy Less" slogan T-shirt.



Malcolm McLaren

Westwood met Malcolm McLaren in 1965. An art student and a friend of her younger brother, Gordon, he would go on to become her creative collaborator for almost the next 20 years. Malcolm is as synonymous with the punk movement as Vivienne, and their partnership is legendary. He was something of a mastermind of marketing anarchy and disruption, before such things became commonplace in contemporary fashion. The pair were in a relationship for a time but never seem to have married.

Malcolm was interested in politics and was fascinated by the French Situationists, a creative enclave of writers and artists who wished to eradicate capitalism through acts of everyday life. He was a driving force in bringing politics, provocation, society and culture into Westwood's world. She found him to be charismatic and knowledgeable, but also full of contradictions.

In 1967, they had a son, Joseph Ferdinand Corré, who would go on to follow in his parents' footsteps and enter the world of fashion. He founded the very successful lingerie company, Agent Provocateur.

It was in the early 1970s that McLaren and Westwood began to build their empire. Malcolm, by this point, had left art school and Vivienne was about to quit teaching. The plan had been to sell vintage records together, and there was talk of setting up a stall. But a retail opportunity – via a new

friend – on King's Road was about to arise.

Tommy Roberts, of the legendary Mr Freedom fashion business, took over the lease of 430 King's Road in 1969. He and his business partner, the fashion entrepreneur Trevor Myles, were well-known for their eclectic and discerning fashion eye which appealed to the glitterati of the 1960s. It was under Myles' control the shop was renamed Paradise Garage; the spot was already well-known for fashion.

Vivienne and Malcolm, who were regulars on King's Road, ended up renting the back of 430 King's Road, before taking the whole thing over and rebranding it. It would be known over the coming years as Let It Rock, Too Fast To Live, Too Young To Die and Sex and Seditonaries, all of which would encompass the nuanced, confrontational and non-conformist nature of McLaren and Westwood. Eventually the shop would come to define the varied-but-defined styles we know as punk today.



LEFT: Malcolm McLaren, manager of Sex Pistols, and Vivienne Westwood, 1977.

