



*Founder and creative
director of
THE TOMMY
HILFIGER GROUP*

TOMMY HILFIGER

THE STORY OF TOMMY HILFIGER'S spectacular trajectory is as American Dream as the clothes he designs. Starting out as a plucky teenage entrepreneur with just \$150 in his pocket and 20 pairs of jeans, the New York-bred businessman went on to launch his label in 1985. Yet after a series of ups, downs, gains and losses, and a few financial partners along the way, he has ended up triumphant. In 2010, in the brand's 25th year, clothing conglomerate Phillips-Van Heusen purchased his company for a whopping \$3 billion. Between underwriting the new Americans in Paris designer initiative (alongside Diane von Furstenberg and Anna Wintour), consulting for Belstaff and launching a new concept shop at the Bay, plus talk of buying a stake in Michael Kors, it's clear that Hilfiger is still thinking big.

HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN YOUR ALL-AMERICAN AESTHETIC AND ENSURE A GLOBAL APPEAL? I don't think that fashion is

about a French look, a Japanese look or an English look anymore. Fashion is global. There are preppies in Tokyo and Rio and Dublin and Minneapolis and they may wear the clothes a slightly different way but the look is very universal. I think I had something to do with that. Other people [did as well], but I helped plant, inspire, motivate and bring [this look] to light.

YOUR CAREER HAS HAD SEVERAL HIGHS AND A FEW LOWS—WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM THESE EXPERIENCES? I learned to pay attention to the business. I went bankrupt when I was 23 years old and it taught me to really [watch] the business. Then in the '90s, we became so hot, we over-popularized and over-distributed—the brand was too available. We also tried to bring down the prices, [hurting the] make and quality. But, over the past 10 years, we put it all back in and the business went back up.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO CRITICS WHO HAVE UNDERESTIMATED YOU? They were wrong. I set out to build a global, affordable, accessible, fun, cool, American classic lifestyle brand. And I did it through surrounding myself with pop culture and by making clothes people actually wear. There were a lot of naysayers along the way, but you're never going to please everybody all of the time.

YOU WERE ONE OF THE FIRST BRANDS TO USE CELEBRITIES IN ADVERTISING. WHY? It was my philosophy that if celebrities would wear the clothes, their fans would also take notice. Because music has always been such a big inspiration to me, I decided that by dressing musicians, their fans would [respond] and it would add to the cool factor. A lot of people followed.

HOW ARE YOU EVOLVING THE STABLE OF BRANDS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY? By being more modern: new shapes, fabrics, advertising and ways of reaching the consumer. There's a lot of power to the brand that comes from my attachment to pop culture through fashion, art, music and entertainment.

DO YOU FEEL IT'S HARDER FOR EMERGING DESIGNERS TO SUCCEED IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY TODAY THAN WHEN YOU STARTED? It's easier because of the social networking to the consumer. On the other hand, it's harder because there is so much competition. You'll always need three things: money, manufacturing and distribution. Usually the money part gets in the way of everything. If you don't have money, it's difficult to get those other things going.

NOW IN YOUR 26TH YEAR OF BUSINESS, TO WHAT DO YOU ATTRIBUTE YOUR LONGEVITY? Hard work. Thinking bigger is better. Thinking small makes you remain small. If you think big you have the opportunity to grow big. Start small—you need some momentum and some traction first. But you should always have dreams in the back of your mind. —Aya McMillan

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