



Tommy

Text Kathrin Spohr

The first ever item of clothing created by the self-taught designer Tommy Hilfiger was a stripey rugby shirt. It was reminiscent of the Ivy League look knitwear, typical of the sixties. The year was 1985. However, his career had begun around twenty years earlier, exactly at the time cult sports tops were all the rage, in his small, sleepy hometown of Elmira. His only possessions at the time were \$150, 20 pairs of jeans and a rather strange idea in his head. He took to selling the most hip jeans, which he had come by in New York City, from the boot of his car. This venture was a big success. So much so, that in no time at all he was able to open his own shop "People's Palace" in New York State. With his extraordinary flair for business and skill at identifying trends, Tommy Hilfiger's designs came to epitomize American creativity and versatility. His range included the classical preppy look as well as modern outfitting for the business world. "Clothing should be about personal and creative self-expression and include garments which emphasise one's own individuality. My collections respond to the many lifestyle facets each of us has", explained Hilfiger, giving us an insight into the secret of his success. The Hilfiger logo, red, white and blue and rectangular in shape, has become the symbol of the All-American Spirit Style. The "classics with a twist approach" – as Hilfiger calls it – has made the label one of the largest lifestyle brands worldwide and a fashion empire which is a principal actor on the global markets.

The lightness of being

Tommy is an enthusiastic sportsman. His interest in sailing, diving, skiing and angling is not only reflected in his clothing designs. Indeed, the same energy and spirit of sportsmanship are always present in all of his business undertakings despite the enormous size of his company. And it is precisely this that makes Hilfiger such an interesting character, particularly in Europe at the moment. What drives so much output? "Popular culture inspires me", says Tommy, "It exerts such an influence on everything around us. I also get a lot of inspiration from my travels. It is important to become familiar with other worlds in order to understand what it is, really, that makes us tick." It would be easy to think that here is a man who has everything and to ask what more on earth he wants. Here, too, he has an answer ready-prepared. "I am constantly looking for new ways to challenge myself and of continuing to learn new things. Children are a great help in this!" Evidence for this was the opening of the new mega flagship store measuring 500 m² and housed in a refurbished and listed building on the Rue St. Honoré in the centre of Paris. Hilfiger responded as follows: "We are pleased that we can now offer our customers in Paris the whole Hilfiger Lifestyle range. This range really sets us apart from what is currently on offer elsewhere in Paris." Everything is available at the new store: classic sportswear for women and men plus accessories, shoes, cosmetics, fragrances and even childrenswear. And the opening of this new showpiece was celebrated in style in the fashion capital. Rock superstar Lenny Kravitz, no less, performed at the after-event party at the Palais des Beaux Arts.– Hilfiger and rock music? A fitting combination, as a few years earlier Hilfiger announced the fusion of fashion and music and proceeded to sponsor several concerts including ones by the Rolling Stones, Britney Spears and Lenny Kravitz. He also set up the "Hilfiger Sessions" in Europe – these are relaxed and funky sessions where new talent emerging from the scenes in Europe's cities can perform. The idea has proved to be a resounding success.

From youth culture come clothes to match

Promoting the young remains an important task for Hilfiger. As part of this commitment Tommy launched the "Tommy Hilfiger Corporate Foundation" which is committed to providing youth training and sees this as a stepping stone to a more positive future.

His commitment is just as unremitting when it comes to his own Tommy Hilfiger Kids collections. "Designing clothes for children is one of my great passions. My own children give me the inspiration to create looks which are fresh. They make me laugh and I am constantly learning new things from them", said Tommy enthusiastically. "When my children were small, there weren't any really cool children's jackets, shirts or trousers, the kind that in bigger sizes adults would have gladly worn. Today things are different. What I do now is create miniature versions of individual items from the men's and women's collections – but I always give them a twist."

Childrenswear is a business sector which in Europe is currently enjoying a period of growth. In 2005 a Hilfiger Kidswear store was opened in Hamburg. Then the first Tommy Hilfiger shoe collection for children was launched. This collection drew inspiration from the themes of the Autumn and Spring collection and the Summer and Holiday Season collection.

"We have twelve designers working for us full-time in kidswear. Our designs are young and fun. They are stylish and very functional at one and the same time. We tend to mix different materials so that our clothes are pleasantly soft in all the right places, on the one hand, but still remain hard-wearing and of a standard where safety is guaranteed, on the other," said Hilfiger.

Hilfiger is constantly in touch with young people. He has launched his own website for kids, hilfigerkids.com. The appearance of the website reflects exactly the tastes of this young target group. Currently the website is running a competition. In keeping with the winter season, we are presented with a beautifully illustrated ice landscape from Alaska. Visitors to the site can take part in a virtual husky race. The winner will receive two tickets to the world's biggest husky race. Hilfiger is also staging photo shoots – The Big Chill – in selected stores across Europe.

"Shopping has become an experience based on events. I always try to offer the customer the whole Hilfiger Lifestyle experience – and this includes fashion, the shop's modern design and layout and, of course, many other events and initiatives", said Hilfiger.

What advice does he give to his own children? "I support my children in any career path they care to choose, be that acting, rapping or a degree in law – All I wish for them is that they are happy." And what advice does Hilfiger have for young designers? "I would advise them to pursue their own dreams. You need to have many skills.

Creativity alone is not enough. You need a flair for business, social and communication skills. You need to be able to network – with talented people who can help you to take control of your future." – That is where Hilfiger is at today. In the meantime, he has put together and opened the exhibition Grace Kelly – Images of a Lifetime at the Galerie 75 Faubourg in Paris which will exhibit as yet unpublished photographs of the film star. Prince Albert II of Monaco was also amongst those who attended the exhibition. As if that was not enough, Hilfiger also wrote the preface for the exhibition catalogue. Versatility is everything, after all!