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STYLE FEATURE

ALL HAIL **QUEEN VIV**

Iconic fashion designer, outspoken political activist and all-round British eccentric, iQ met with fashion's grande dame, Vivienne Westwood, to talk about her newly opened Dubai store, saving the rainforests and Pamela Anderson

Words PAUL EWART Photos AFP/GRAPHEAST, GETTY, REX

Considering that Vivienne Westwood's first major movement in the fashion world was opening a store called 'Sex' that catered to 1970s London's burgeoning punk subculture, finding a receptive audience for her avant-garde designs in the Middle East would seem an unlikely prospect. But almost 40 years on and her first Gulf boutique is now open in the Dubai International Financial Centre's Gate Village, with her men's collection due to arrive later this month at DIFC's Villa Moda store. And this is only the beginning – plans are already in place to expand further across the region later in the year.

Born Vivienne Isabel Swire in Derbyshire, England, Westwood is probably one of British design's most influential and recognisable figures (the flash of vivid orange hair against porcelain white skin is unmistakable). Her first shop, Let It Rock, opened in 1971, but it wasn't until the boutique became Sex in 1974 that it began selling the bondage gear, ripped T-shirts and other clothes synonymous with Westwood and the punk explosion. In 1981, she put herself firmly on the international map with her first show in London and, two years later, presented her designs in Paris (becoming the first since Mary Quant to do so). Her seemingly meteoric rise continued and in 1990 she launched her first menswear collection in Florence.

Well known for her anti-consumerist views – she lives a relatively modest life, cycling to work each day and furnishing her home with only "two second armchairs, a trestle table, a fridge and a cooker" – Westwood's decision to open a store in one of the world's epicentres of materialism may seem at odds with her political preaching, especially considering the Westwood label retails at high-end design house prices. However, she is quick to counter any criticism. "My manifesto is against the consumption of crap and obsessive consumption, but it's not exactly against consumption per se – do you wish to go naked or do you wish to have clothes?" she asks a fully-clothed iQ. Items from Westwood's label come at a price, but she sees such purchases as an investment. "Buy something great and don't keep on buying," she advises. "If you can afford it, make it last. I'm advocating people to pursue art and, in the process, they will cease to consume all the rubbish and start discriminating. I think you can do the same with clothes."

Whether it be campaigning against consumerism or human rights or flashing her bits (she famously revealed all when collecting her OBE in 1992 and revealed she was knicker-less again, while being made a dame in 2006), Westwood has a knack for courting controversy. And, while other fashion designer stalwarts of her ilk do little with their celebrity in terms of vocalising political opinions and injustices, Westwood is more than willing to rant and rave whenever she feels strongly about something. She recently put together a manifesto on the nature of culture and the



Pamela poses with Dame Viv and her husband in the spring/summer 09 ad campaign

arts and she has campaigned tirelessly for the release of American activist Leonard Peltier. Indeed, her convictions are so earnest that she is left vulnerable to criticism, often being labelled with the 'loopy eccentric' tag.

'My manifesto is against the consumption of crap'

"I'm not sure how much politics and fashion are linked together; I suspect they always have to be, to some extent," she suggests, despite the abundance of badly-dressed

politicians globally. "One of the great things about fashion and my track record as an avant-garde designer of clothes, is that somehow it has helped to give me a voice which I try to use, and I'm really grateful for having this opportunity."

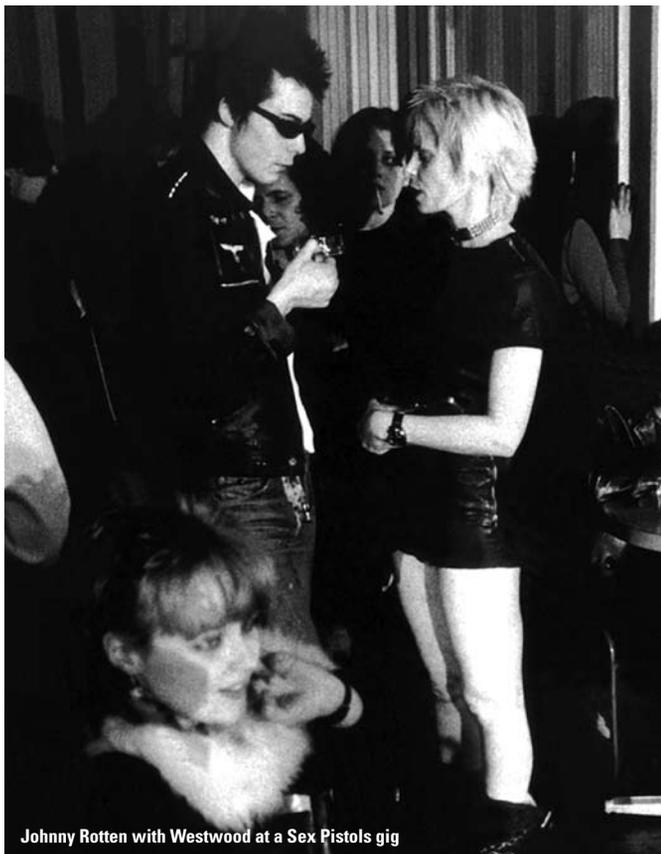
The respect that Westwood has achieved in the fashion community – and the notoriety that her work has provoked in the worldwide press – has created a captive audience, something that she obviously relishes. "I think a lot of people would love to have such an opportunity to voice their opinions, so I try and make the most of it, and speak up, not only for me but also for those people who I know share my point of view."

And now she's moving onto her next mission. "The most urgent matter is the rainforest," says a clearly agitated Westwood. "If we save the rainforest we have a chance to save the

world as we know it. We need international co-operation, not competition, between countries." Overpopulation and exploitation of the earth's resources – combined with nationalism – are the chief factors behind the world's current environmental crisis, she claims. "The only thing that can save us is public opinion. The human race has never before faced such an enemy: it is the planet itself that will wage war against us.

The future of our children and grandchildren hangs in the balance." Her solution is suitably utopian and idealistic, to humanise thinking and to globally pool efforts (and wealth). "It could be great. You get out what you put in, that's my motto. It could be a world motto if we applied it to the Earth."

With her talent for political gesticulation, fashion – as you can imagine – wasn't Westwood's first career option. She even acknowledges that it was initially simply to earn a living. "The reason I continued," she tells us, "was because I was full of ideas and I wanted to build on those ideas." While her influence extends far beyond this genre, Westwood will go down in history as the fashion designer most closely associated with the punk aesthetic of the 70s. An understanding of the punk ideology is integral to understanding Westwood's style. As shocking as punk was to society four decades ago, Westwood doesn't think that there's any chance of rebellion on a similar scale any time soon. "Today people want to be rebellious, but I don't think there is much room for them because the only true rebellion has to do with ideas, and there haven't been any ideas



Johnny Rotten with Westwood at a Sex Pistols gig

in the 20th century." Mass manufacturing and advertising are the two main evils in Westwood's world, and in response to this, her designs are aimed at those with a more adventurous sense of style – in a sea of homogenous, identikit fashion, Westwood clothing definitely stands out. "I feel if you're providing some sort of choice for people, then you are doing something right. Quality rather than quantity – business must work with creativity."

Likewise, her decision to use Pamela Anderson to front her new ad campaign may

not seem like sound business sense – surely the last person you'd expect to find frolicking with a semi-clad Pammy on an LA beach is the ghostly pale 67-year-old Westwood. But, in typical style, there is method to her madness. Meeting at Westwood's spring/summer 2009 fashion show last September, the pair hit it off with Anderson apparently eagerly accepting Westwood's offer to front the new season ads. "Pamela is a great woman and she is so wild. I love her," enthuses Westwood, preaching to an already long-converted iQ. Apparently, the unlikely pair exchange books on philosophy and politics. Pammy reading *Das Capital* or *Rights of Man* is an image iQ would definitely like to see.

Unlike many other designers who make a strong distinction between designing for men and women, Westwood is adamant that there is no difference in the actual process. The only objective is to make them both look great. "If I am developing a cutting technique, I will explore it both in men's and womenswear and similarly, if I find an amazing yarn or fabric, I will develop them in both men's

and womenswear." But she acknowledges that menswear has its limitations. "Men's dress is more codified than women's – it's difficult for a man to wear a skirt unless it's a continued tradition like a kilt or sarong." While the women's fashion market is obviously the more lucrative, Westwood genuinely considers menswear as much as womenswear. Perhaps just to flatter iQ, she tells us men dress better than women "because they have the standards of Savile Row". And women, she suggests, shouldn't simply dress for what they think we

35 YEARS OF WESTWOOD



1974

Westwood and her then-husband Malcolm McLaren opened the infamous 'Sex' boutique at 230 King's Road, London. The shop quickly became the epicenter of the punk movement.



1976

The Sex Pistols were at the peak of their notoriety and Westwood designed all of their costumes. Her most famous creation for the band was the bondage suit, sported by Johnny Rotten.



1981

Westwood shows her first collection, entitled 'Pirate', in London. The collection, based around gold, treasure and adventure, is a huge success with fashion editors and buyers alike.



1983

Thanks to her success in London, Westwood showcases her collection in Paris for the first time, catapulting her label into the big leagues. She is a regular at Paris each season from then on.

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find sexy. “They should dress to look beautiful and powerful – then they would attract more interesting men.”

It’s a tactic that Westwood has obviously put into practice. She met her current husband, Andreas – 25 years her junior – in Vienna, where she was teaching, and hired him on the spot. They married soon after and Andreas is now at the core of Westwood’s fashion machine: “It’s 50/50, whereby we both work together on the Gold Label, the crucial beginning for all the other lines. I look after the knitwear mostly and Andreas looks after menswear himself with a great team beside him.” Andreas isn’t the only man in Westwood’s family that has carved a name for himself in the fashion industry. Her



Westwood and her husband of 17 years, Andreas

younger son Joe has found success with Agent Provocateur, the high-end lingerie label. “Joe has followed fashion since he was a punk. He and I agree that fashion is about sex: ‘Fashion is about eventually being naked,’ I once said.”

From humble shop owner to head of a global fashion empire, to wannabe politico, it’s clear that despite her age, the subversive spirit of the punk movement, which Westwood helped spawn, is still alive and well. Her uncompromising and, often provocative, designs continue to make headlines and her legion of devotees grow. While other designers have fallen by the wayside, in terms of compromising their integrity, Westwood remains steadfast in her beliefs. And now, with the brand making its introduction to the Middle East, iQ is in little doubt that her unique medley of fashion and politics will begin to raise eyebrows once more.

The new Villa Moda store is opening at the end of this month at DIFC. Tel (04) 323 0277



Westwood strikes a pose in the mid-80s



1990

In July, she shows her first complete menswear collection in conjunction with Pitti Uomo in Florence. It receives critical acclaim and is the starting block for a designated men’s fashion line.



1992

Westwood collects her OBE from the Queen and, in a move direct from *Basic Instinct*, the notorious knicker-less Westwood twirled in front of the waiting crowd to reveal all.



1994

Supermodel Naomi Campbell falls on the runway during Westwood’s Anglomania show – not surprising considering the 9-inch platform shoes that she’s sporting. The event goes down in fashion history.



2006

She is made a Dame by the Prince of Wales for services to fashion, cementing her place in history as one of the country’s most celebrated designers. She reveals that she was knicker-less – again.