

1968



NOW

Riding THE WAVE

French couturier Olivier Lapidus talks to FYM editor Pamela Whitby about family conflict, having fashion in your blood and the opportunities our digital world holds for today's fashionistas

What do women around the age of 20 really want to wear? It was a question that Olivier Lapidus, a young, aspiring French fashion designer, was increasingly keen to answer. The year was 1978 and he was hoping to prove himself in the world of fashion by designing a collection that young women would be willing to die for.

To succeed Olivier knew that he needed to do his research. His first step was to approach a French magazine called *20 Ans* whose readership, as the name implies, was 20-year-old women. The magazine agreed to collaborate with him on the project and together they came up with a concept which involved asking the magazine's readership a simple question: What would YOU like to wear? Over 10,000 letters flooded in and in response Olivier began designing. Next he found a clothing manufacturer and before long his first collection was stocked by a well-known French department store. Olivier still sounds surprised today when he tells me that this range sold 200,000 pieces.

One could argue that Olivier Lapidus was born holding a pair of golden scissors. After all, he was the son of a famous French fashion designer, Ted Lapidus, who dressed The Beatles, Brigitte Bardot and British 1960's style icon Twiggy, among others. "As a child I was surrounded by beautiful women and famous people, swirling colour and fabric," he says. "And yes from a very young age I always had a pair of scissors in my hands and was on the floor in my Dad's *atelier* cutting bits of fabric."

Cut from the right cloth

Olivier's dad, born Edmond Lapidus (1929-2008), was a self-made man who learnt the trade from his own father, a Russian-Jewish immigrant tailor who came to Paris as a refugee. As life began to improve after World War II, Edmond - who changed his name to Ted because it sounded more English - began frequenting the *Club de Paris* where he met the trendy crowd he would begin designing suits for. By the age of 21 he had his own fashion label and over the next decade would

meet and design for many celebrities.

"You know the white suit John Lennon wore on the Beatles' Abbey Road album cover," says Olivier, "my Dad designed it. They were great friends." Ted Lapidus is also credited with making the 'unisex' look popular (think girls wearing ties and suits) and the four-cornered sunglasses which are still trendy today. He was also one of the first French designers to make high-quality clothing affordable to the ordinary person on the street, which at the time was considered revolutionary.

"My parents and their friends were riding a wave of freedom and success after the war," says Olivier. "It was a very happy time for them and their friends; they feared nothing."

Conflict and resolution

Although his memories of these early years are vivid, and he deeply appreciates the influences of his childhood, Olivier's relationship with his Dad wasn't always easy. "He felt very strongly about me making my own way and didn't want me to be a how-do-you-call it in English...a Daddy's boy," says Olivier. "He was, you see a self-made man."

Olivier had to prove himself and with his first collection he did. But this caused further complications in the father-son relationship. The conflict arose over there being two designers in France using the Lapidus name and for years their relationship was very strained. Yet despite this conflict, there was a growing understanding between the two men and in 1989 Olivier was appointed artistic director of the family company, Lapidus. Before his Dad



John Lennon in a white Ted Lapidus jacket

4 ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

- 1 Technical skill - can you sew?
- 2 A deep understanding of culture and ability to interpret the mood on the street
- 3 Knowledge and understanding of your own history and where you come from
- 4 Self-belief, a desire to succeed, hard work



The young Olivier with his Dad, Ted Lapidus

died in 2008 they had become very close.

Digital groupies

Is fashion in his blood? "Yes of course it is!" Olivier exclaims in response to a question that, with hindsight, was a bit obvious! Not only were his grandfather and father entrenched in the fashion business, his aunt founded the Parisian fashion house Torrente.

But what about those of us who don't come from a family of famous fashionistas? Does Lapidus believe it's possible to make it in the industry? "Yes, of course," he says, although not everybody has the qualities

needed to be in it for the long haul. "To be truly successful in the world of fashion you must be able to interpret the mood on the street, and have a deep understanding of your own culture and where you come from," says Olivier.

While having this cultural curiosity and understanding is essential, you also need technical skill.

"You must be able to take a flat 2-D piece of cloth and turn it into something three-dimensional," he says. This means learning how to cut a pattern, how to stitch, sew and fit a piece of clothing to the form of a human body - to really understand the craft and be able to visualise it.

"This is why my family loves Britain so much," he says, "because of the incredible tailoring skill that

still exists. For me it is important to keep this craft alive."

Olivier is also quick to point out that the Internet throws up many opportunities for young people today. "Today, like at no other time in history, young people have access to this 'group mentality' that arises because of how people are using social networks," he says. "This can feed ideas and help young designers really understand what people may want."

A question that perplexes Olivier is this: why aren't more young people designing for their own age group? And he doesn't mean 30-somethings designing for teenagers; he means teenagers designing for teenagers.

Why is this so important? "Because young people," he says, "are immersed in youth culture so it is much easier for them to understand what their peers want."

Choosing freedom

All the big names in French fashion - Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Dior, Coco Chanel - now belong to big luxury fashion houses. Even the Ted Lapidus Company and brand is now owned by the Bogart Group which Olivier left in 2000.

For his part, Olivier has decided to remain an independent couturier because it allows him to continue to have a very personal relationship with his customer. "It's the way it's always been in my family and I'm happy with that independence because it keeps the soul of the business," he says.

This is a choice all young people must make: to take a risk and go it alone or to work for somebody else. It doesn't have to be either or. After all Olivier's father, Ted Lapidus, cut his teeth in the House of Dior before setting up on his own.

Whichever path you choose, to really succeed in this dynamic, competitive environment requires hard work, determination, self-belief and a little bit of fashion in your blood. ■

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