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COVER



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a legacy

Cue executive directors Justin and Melanie Levis discuss their father's pioneering vision for Cue Clothing Co, and how they are continuing the brand's success today.

Interview by Jo-Anne Hui-Miller

Inside Retail: Cue is one of Australia's longest-standing fashion brands and it has such a rich history. Can you tell me about how your dad, Rod Levis, started the business?

Justin Levis, Cue Clothing Co executive director: In the early 1960s, our father went holidaying in England and became enamoured with the new youth culture spearheaded by Carnaby St, the 'London Look', and The Beatles.

Upon arriving home and sensing a gap for youth-driven fashion in the market, he decided to capitalise on that and started printing The Beatles t-shirts for the group's fan club in Australia.

It gained plenty of traction, so he opened his first store, called Levis's, on Elizabeth Street in Sydney.

Melanie Levis, Cue Clothing Co executive director: The concept fused music and fashion. He even did his own late-night DJ show in store.

JL: It was all about the loud music and playing rock 'n' roll and having fun.

ML: At that time, women were entering new roles in the workforce, so [work wear] was a niche market. Our dad started off creating dresses with the same silhouette but in all different prints. He sold styles designed by people such as Carla Zampatti and Prue Acton.

JL: Following the success of that original Levis's store, Dad employed his own fashion designer and started making everything vertically. Finally, on 28 November 1968, his store became 'Cue'. To him, the name says it all: It means to be on target, on the ball, ready for the next thing.

IR: That idea of a brand that taps into the zeitgeist while also providing entertainment and an experience is exactly what the retail industry is talking about right now. Your father was very progressive.

JL: Definitely. And the continued success of the business can be credited to that forward thinking. We're probably the longest-standing family-owned fashion brand. I do not know any others that still offer speed-to-market styles like we do. They have either closed, been bought out, or changed ownership.

ML: Dad was always thinking unconventionally – innovating. He had the first brand with a Myer concession and the first fashion company with an advertisement on the side of a bus. He was

always looking for the next thing. He even created an ad that showed before one of the Indiana Jones films.

JL: It was the first cinema ad in Australia produced with Dolby surround sound.

Also, because Dad was so involved in music, he ended up going into a partnership as a big stakeholder in Triple M radio network. There was always fashion and music in our house. In fact, framed and hanging on the wall in our office is our first advertising order with Triple M, which was the first Australian commercial on an FM radio station.

ML: Cue has been the source of so many firsts. That mentality continues to fuel the brand to this day.

JL: As an example, we're now the first Australian fashion brand to offer one-hour delivery with Uber. We were also the first company in the world to launch Afterpay in-store.

IR: How did you enter the family business?

JL: I think our mother carried us in to work when we were babies.

ML: Cue is part of our DNA. Justin is right, our lives have been ingrained within the business from birth. Our parents were always travelling the world, visiting fabric mills, and we were 'dragged' along (with our video games). I guess you could say our brains have been infused with the business.

JL: As children, we would play in the fabric racks, run through the dispatch area with the trolleys, probably causing chaos and annoying people during school holidays. And the funny thing is, the same dispatch manager, Leone, still works with us today. She is amazing.

IR: The business now includes other brands, such as Veronika Maine and Dion Lee. Can you give me a brief overview of how the different brands are going right now?

ML: We have many exciting things on the horizon for Cue and Veronika Maine. Both brands have just launched new winter campaigns and, very shortly, we will be showcasing Cue at Afterpay Australian Fashion Week for the second year in a row. A big focus for us is making sure our customers have an exceptional experience in-store and online. We are always focused on being modern, relevant, new, and fresh.

That can be seen in our sustainability ►

programs, which we have been building over the last couple of years. The more research we did for this initiative, the more we realised we were already using many sustainable products, so we became more focused on working with the mills to make sure they get their certifications. We have always had a cyclical way of making our garments, even before sustainability became such a prominent word. We encourage quality and longevity over fast throw-away styles, and we have a retail structure that caters to selling leftover styles at reduced prices or donating them to various local and international charities.

Now sustainability is front of mind throughout the entire season for both Cue and Veronika Maine. It is a large undertaking to manage and it is constantly evolving but we are passionate about learning and getting even better every season. We work with fabrics from companies such as Waste2Wear, Repreve, and Acepore-Eco, which recycle consumer waste into polyester. We also have Global Recycled Standard-certified recycled wool and Organic Cotton Standard 100-certified organic cotton.

JL: We also started a traceable cotton project many years ago. We made garments out of cotton that could be traced right back to one particular paddock. It was extremely difficult at the time but now, through the company Good Earth Cotton, which has the technology to trace its fibre supply chain, we are tracing [our fabric] the whole way through. The first styles from our partnership with Good Earth Cotton will be released in May.

IR: I hear Dion Lee is gaining attention overseas and that there is a store opening in Miami.

JL: Dion did a show in New York earlier this year, which was the first physical show we have done in a couple of years, due to Covid-19. It was a massive success, with a large amount of press. Much of what Dion does on the runway is distinctly progressive, he likes to challenge the boundaries.

Since the successful show, wholesale orders have just been booming. In less than two years, Dion Lee's wholesale orders have tripled. Such strong performance has given us the confidence to take on a lease in Miami.

We are also looking at opening in New York and we are even considering

Los Angeles. But we are excited to have Miami confirmed as a starting point. We hope to have it open in September or October this year.

IR: Returning to the Australian market, Cue is the largest local manufacturer of fashion in the country. What has that been like in recent years?

JL: There are always pros and cons to local manufacturing. During the pandemic it has been a double-edged sword. At the beginning, there were problems in China, which affected some of our offshore styles but we had our operation here in Australia to rely on. Then we had the lockdowns in some parts of Sydney, which halted our local manufacturing.

ML: Because most of our local manufacturers are located in the areas that were in lockdown. Everything stopped.

JL: In the lead up to Christmas, nothing was being manufactured.

IR: What are some of the biggest challenges for you at the moment, in terms of keeping manufacturing here?

JL: Manufacturing in Australia is highly unionised and very difficult. Most people just determine that it is too hard and go offshore. Luckily, we have been working with amazing people for more than 30 years. One of the best advantages to manufacturing locally is 'speed to market'. If we need to check quality control, the style can easily be brought into our Surry Hills studio and sent back for alterations in the same day, and then be in a marketing campaign in a matter of weeks. That being said, it is absolutely more expensive to make clothes locally. We work closely with the union and we are on the committee of Ethical Clothing Australia, which advocates for the ►



Lynette and Rod Levis

“ The continued success of the business can be credited to forward thinking. ”



“ A big focus for us is making sure our customers have an exceptional experience in-store and online. ”



protection of workers' rights, ensuring local manufacturing is above board and that people are not exploited.

ML: Also, the entire industry is experiencing a decline in the number of machinists. Unfortunately, the local industry has changed over the years, and the demand for skilled machinists is higher than ever. But, there is new technology on the horizon, and a real opportunity to develop local manufacturing practices.

JL: To be honest, China worries me, with what is happening in global politics. We seized the recent global shift as an opportunity to diversify our manufacturing base further across the world, which we have now done. That has helped with some supply-chain issues, but the pandemic affects everyone in international trade. A ship could be coming from somewhere and if it gets held up in Singapore and they lose our product, we do not know where it is.

ML: There have been shipping problems everywhere and shipping prices have had a steep incline, which makes it hard to get trims.

JL: Then you have the petrol prices and oil prices, which are spiralling up. It is safe to say there are many cost pressures in the world at the moment.

IR: Cue has done some great work online lately, from the new one-hour delivery via Uber to launching on The Iconic. What are your thoughts on bricks-and-mortar and its future?

JL: I am excited about our Uber and Shippit partnership, especially after just coming back from the States, where they are ahead of most other places in terms of opening up after Covid-19. I think customers are going to want to come into stores for a VIP experience. We are all tired of being cooped up. You just want to see something new.

So with that in mind, we are planning new store refurbishments. I want to change the way we look. There is a post-pandemic mentality now and I feel that it is time to make a shift. We are ready to move on from the pandemic. And I think we need to express that feeling to our customers. I feel we can do that at every brand touchpoint. The photography or the website can change, as a part of this effort, but I think the best way to

achieve it is to create a fully immersive physical space.

It is exciting. We are working with new interior designers to create new store concepts for Cue and Veronika Maine. And we have a new store designer for Dion Lee, too. So all three brands are launching new store designs. We want customers to say: "Wow, I haven't seen this before! Is this Cue? Wow, this is new. I love this!"

IR: When do you see this store transformation coming out?

JL: End of this year. We have new store refurbishments planned in Victoria and Western Australia from this September. But there are still leases that are not 100 per cent finalised and we obviously want to work with our landlords.

I think leasing has been difficult for everyone throughout the pandemic. Most of our landlords were good to us, but it was hard going.

We had to leave a few centres during the pandemic, but we are constantly thinking about where we can reopen. Now it is about starting new leases and opening brand-new store fit-outs. We're excited to initiate change. ■