

KIMMIE MORE FASHION

Fashion's fastest rising star, Birmingham-based designer Jacob Kimmie, talks exclusively to Style editor Sarah Drew Jones



It's turning into a vintage year for fashion's latest wunderkind, the fantastically charming, flamboyant and innovative Mr Jacob Kimmie. In the space of a few short months, he's opened an old-style couture house in the centre of Birmingham, seen international style icon Sarah Jessica Parker fall in love with one of his frocks, and - brace yourself - heard how the newly-reinvented Gwyneth Paltrow eagerly chose to don a Kimmie transparent bustier for a magazine shoot. That's a *transparent bustier*: on queen-of-clean Gwyneth Paltrow! Most designers would give their sewing arm for just one of those achievements...

But Jacob, like the edgy, show-stopping gowns he designs, is truly one of a kind. His story started in the townships of South Africa and now, at just 35, he's being hailed as the one to watch at London




Fashion Week, with high street labels clamouring to sign him up for a diffusion collection, and his work popping up on the pages of Vogue, Elle and Sunday Times Style. Meanwhile, Jacob's holed up in his Birmingham couture house, designing achingly beautiful fashion for women who travel from as far afield as Australia for a Kimmie original. How on earth did he end up here?

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"I love Birmingham, and love to walk around the city, something you can't do so easily in London," he says. "It seemed like a great place to set up my business. Let's not forget that the city has a rich history in fashion manufacturing, and we work with a lot of local factories, staffed by people who still have all the old dressmaking skills. I love to be a part of that." Unlike many modern designers, Jacob doesn't just talk the talk of fashion, he's happy to walk the walk too, able to create his cleverly-tailored pieces from scratch, by hand, right down to the last detail.

He attributes his skills to his South African childhood, saying: "I'm a fan of traditional dressmaking skills because I grew up with lots of aunts and girl cousins, who were always making dresses or preparing for a wedding, going to the shops for fabric and deciding what they liked. My aunts were dressmakers in



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factories in the fifties and sixties and back then it was all about creating a pretty frock: that's where it all started out for me.

“It was all about decoration, using pieces of fabric that were hard to come by, in special ways, to create something lovely to wear.”

It's this focus on the joy of fashion that's at the heart of Jacob's philosophy. “For me, fashion works when someone buys a piece from you and enjoys wearing it,” he believes. “I'm not an artist, I'm a craftsman, and fashion is about craft. Knowing how to design patterns and make clothes makes you a better all-round designer. Do I enjoy seeing clients in my designs? Of course, on many levels. I love seeing women feeling happy because

they know their outfit shows the best of their figures. I do believe there's a place for artistic fashion, and I respect the people who do it, but my interest in fashion goes beyond making the dress, and it's about preserving the craft, and doing it properly.”

It hasn't been an easy path for the modest but ambitious Kimmie, though. After winning a place at the acclaimed state-funded Natal Technikon College in South Africa, Jacob had no choice but to leave due to some financial difficulties, and ended up honing his skills making clothes for private clients and selling garments to an underground rave boutique. After falling in love with UK fashion during a trip to London at the turn of the millennium, he changed course and

moved here, building his reputation one triumphantly romantic couture gown at a time.

Kimmie's now shown his creations at London Fashion Week three times, each one 'off-schedule', where the exciting, ground-breaking, off-radar new labels start their path to glory. “I like off-schedule because it's edgier”, he claims. “As a new label, we're constantly trying to communicate what it is we're about, and I do like the fact that we're still a little secret. I think in the future we'll have no trouble showing in a bigger way, but for now, it's fun just to show there.

“London's heritage and tradition is all about cutting-edge, conceptual fashion, in a way that the Milan and New York shows are much more about



business. London's about people like Gareth Pugh, and it's also about people like myself, Ben de Lisi, Jasper Conran: London marries together such different designers and you don't find that done as well elsewhere at the other shows."

But with so many leading designers abandoning London Fashion Week - Stella McCartney has shifted to Paris, for example, and Burberry Prorsum to Milan - does Jacob see his future here? "I do think that London could be more supportive of its designers" he says.

"Alexander McQueen for example, showed his menswear in Italy because that's where the buyers flock to. We are constantly told that buyers come to London for ideas, but end up keeping their buying for shows like Paris. They're creatively inspired by London but commercially inspired by the other shows. That's why a lot of designers stop showing in London: for business reasons. It's sad."

For now, though, he's happy with the way the Kimmie label is developing, as it's being feted in the fashion press for his jawdropping dresses and incredible attention to detail, just like his idol Karl Lagerfeld.

"I love Lagerfeld, he's just an absolute genius at Chanel," Jacob admits. "I always joke that I'm waiting for him to peg in the hope that I'll get the job! I love Jean-Paul Gaultier, too. I'm very old-school in that way. But at the same time, I love the sense of sex, drugs and rock 'n roll in fashion, and I think maybe that's a concept that was absent from London for a while, but there are new designers that are bringing it back."

What's next for the man whose work has been worn by singing star Kelly Rowland, supermodel Catherine Bailey and, of course, Sarah Jessica Parker? Excitingly, the high street beckons, and after some persuading, Jacob admits he's been approached with offers. "We're in talks at the moment, and there will be something happening that I can't give details of just yet, but I think it's great when designers can lend their so-called expertise to the high street because fashion is for everybody, it's to make people feel good."

With the chance to bring his vision to a wider audience, Kimmie is further drawing on his South African roots for inspiration. He explains: "In the townships, music, and jazz in particular were so important, as that's the way people socialised, how they came together, and my memories of all that are so strong. My look has evolved to be slightly more romantic but my couture pieces do hark back to that time. I get inspired by the women I work with too, and design for, it's all such a creative process."

Even the demands of his new one-to-one couture business fail to dampen his love for all things fashion. "Couture is fascinating," Jacob enthuses, "and fun. When you're dressing a bride, for example, you're really dressing the mum, with her likes and dislikes and 'let's try this' and 'let's try that'! But it's that one to one service that people come to Jacob Kimmie for. It's a rewarding process, and can be a priceless moment."

Talking of priceless moments, who wouldn't have wanted to have been a fly on the wall at the recent photo shoot for a men's glossy, when Gwyneth Paltrow fell in love with one of Kimmie's transparent bustiers? "Unfortunately it didn't make it to print," Jacob laughs, "which is a shame, as she did love it, and it would have made a great cover, but these things happen. I think it's part of the image makeover she's been going for lately! And I was lucky enough to hear that Sarah Jessica Parker now owns one of my spring/summer gowns too, so it's been a busy celebrity year. That's fashion!"



JACOB ON...

HIS OWN STYLE

"I like to keep my own clothes as non-descript as possible, and I don't design for myself. I try not to dress up. Coming from South Africa, we're very relaxed, so I'm usually still in shorts in November! I like to blend into the background!"

TRAVEL

"I've just been to Istanbul and it was absolutely gorgeous. I love Paris, as well. In fact, I feel like I have many spiritual homes, and I like anywhere with a strong bohemian feel."

CELEBRITIES

"I really rate Charlize Theron. She's fantastic, and she has the poise to carry off couture. I think fashion is about edge, and a twinkle in the eye, and she definitely has that. And, of course, SJP is a worthy style icon!"

KIMMIE COUTURE

Jacob's bespoke service is exclusively for private clients, who have the opportunity to buy items seen on the catwalk or have something unique designed for them. The process, including initial client meeting, design, fabric selection, fittings, and finishing to completion can take up to three months depending on the amount of work involved. However, in the case of Ivana Trump an outfit was rushed through in a week with measurements faxed from America!

For more information, email bespoke@jacobkimmie.com or call 0121 270 6053.