

Going STELLA

She's successful enough to be known by her first name – but her kids' bath-time is sacred. Stella McCartney talks to *Christa D'Souza* about fame, family – and fitting out the Olympic squads. Portrait by *David Bailey*

S

tella McCartney is very tired. So tired, she's got what she calls "burny eyes". With two of her children sick, she got five hours' sleep at most. Last night, practical as ever, she found herself sewing blankets on to her baby daughter Reiley's sleepsuit so she wouldn't throw them off the bed and catch a chill. "So there I was, stitching away, thinking what a genius idea it was," she explains, "then guess what happened when I woke up this morning? She'd done this massive poo! I was like, Reiley? On the day I sew your blankets on to you, you have to do that?"

It is a crisp, blindingly sunny morning in Notting Hill, two weeks after McCartney's triumphant showing of her spring/summer '12 collection at the Paris Opéra Garnier, and 10 days after her father's marriage to Nancy Shevell. The pair of us are having coffee at her local caff, Clarke's, a short car ride from the wedding cake of a townhouse she shares with her husband, the branding whiz and furniture entrepreneur Alasdair Willis, and their four children, >

Stella McCartney, in her own-label tuxedo.
Hair: Tracie Cant.
Make-up: Kay Montano.
Sittings editor: Michael Trow





2009
Stella McCartney "tackles the needs of a modern woman's wardrobe" for a/w



2010
A flurry of flamboyant ruffles for spring/summer



2003
A raw-edged bustier dress proves Stella has red-carpet charm



2005
Lingerie influences are a constant - here in a voile sundress



2011
Fruit punch: Raquel Zimmermann cools off in Stella's giant citrus prints for s/s



2011
Going for gold - Gisele shows off the form in an Adidas/Stella tennis dress



2011
Double denim for spring/summer



2011
The silk shirtdress - a bestseller as summer's simple sense of chic takes off



2006
Cocooning coats hit the fashion wave for winter



2002
Inspiration from Savile Row is at the heart of Stella's DNA - with a bespoke service in-store and ready-to-wear tailoring



FAMILIES PAST AND PRESENT

From top left: Stella (left) with her sister Mary; early styling sessions; with her husband Alasdhair Willis and their five-year-old daughter, Bailey



STELLA'S LOYALISTS

Left: with Natalia Vodianova, wearing s/s '12. Above: Gwyneth Paltrow. Below: Madonna; Alexa Chung; Salma Hayek; Penélope Cruz



Miller, Bailey, Beckett and Reiley, all still under the age of seven.

Last weekend, the six of them plus dog, Red, all drove up to Worcestershire, to the family's Georgian mansion in whose 350-acre estate there is a heart-shaped "wedding wood", formed with trees that were given to her and Alasdhair in lieu of wedding presents by guests such as Tom Ford, Madonna and Liv Tyler. It is here at their "bolthole" – albeit a bolthole where the walls are decorated with Gary Humes and Tracey Emins – where Alasdhair indulges his passion for garden design and Stella her passions for riding and cooking. She describes herself as a three-cooked-meals-a-day mum at the weekends, and is one of those people who so loathes to throw anything out that the food that gets shuttled back and forth in the family Prius ought to be earning "car miles".

The other family milestone this year has been Stella's fortieth birthday which, in true McCartney style, she celebrated no less than three times with "a bit of a fabulous little dinner" at Number One, London, aka Apsley House (guests, including best friends Gwyneth and Kates

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Hudson and Moss, left with silver balloons and commemorative mugs), an all-girls dinner at the Wolseley, and then Welsh rarebit, dancing and chips in proper newspaper cones at the Cow in Westbourne Grove. "Basically just me wanting to go down the pub with my friends," explains Stella in her staunchly mockney accent.

Welcome to the ultra-domestic yet ultra-poptastic world of Stella McCartney. A world that keeps on growing. In addition to celebrating her fortieth, she's also just toasted the tenth anniversary of the year she set up her own label with the Gucci Group (now the PPR Luxury Group), the UK arm of which, according to latest figures, is up in profits by 34.4 per cent. There are 23 Stella McCartney shops dotted around the world, and this year there will be three more, including a 3,500sq ft boutique in Brompton Cross. And, to cap it all, this month she is returning to show at London Fashion Week for the

first time since her graduation, with a one-off eveningwear collection.

If ever Stella McCartney were in her stride, it is now. As even the harshest of critics would have to confirm, the spring/summer '12 collection – with its silk slips wittily interspliced with Aertex and edged in swirls of boudoirish lace, its paisley-print pyjamas and clever "pool" flats – caught the fashion breeze of sporty/sexy ease brilliantly. Avant-garde is not necessarily what Stella McCartney the brand is about, but the cocoon coats, the aqua prints, the polka dots... They couldn't be more on trend, on message, just plain *right*, if they tried.

In this age of the female designer, women who dress women – Isabel Marant, Phoebe Philo, Sarah Burton and so forth – Stella McCartney is way, way up there. "Well," she shrugs, "I champion women. I think they are impressive. I think the journey of being a woman is interesting, too, and I'm on that journey with everyone else."

And that's not all. Intertwined with all this designing and in-triplicate celebrating and nappy-changing and well-travelled coconut water is the hugely time-consuming, ultra-mainstream (not to mention super-political) job she took on last year as creative director of the Adidas 2012 Olympic Team GB range. (She has been working with Adidas, now the official sportswear partner of the 2012 games, since 2004.) In this role, McCartney is responsible for creating every single item of the 2012 hosts' kit – for the nearabouts 650 fencers, gymnasts, runners and so forth competing – from their performance-wear to their "sports casual" Olympic-village tracksuits. It is the first time ever that a designer has been commissioned to design the kit for every competition across both the Olympic and Paralympic games.

"I love the opportunity to stretch that side of design," she says, twisting her auburn hair into a makeshift ponytail. "I love that you can have the language between the two worlds of technology and fashion, because I don't think that many designers get to do that."

"And you know what's quite funny? Doing the fittings for the men. Quite out of my comfort zone. I'm like, 'Oooh, where do I look? What do I do now?'"

Wearing a trench from her eco-range, skin-tight jeans, a favourite holey T-shirt of Alasdhair's (which she has darned at to keep it from falling apart), teetering faux-leather heels, and no visible make-up on those stark, somewhat insolent features, McCartney looks as *du chien* as ever. What

a perfect couple she and her handsome, unerringly dandy husband cut on the red carpet. “Oh, I know,” she says matter of factly, “he’s a very good dresser... But I can’t take any credit for that.”

The couple first met on business at Browns Hotel: Stella was just starting up her own label after leaving Chloé, and Willis had offered her his services as founder of new company Wink Media. As he has fondly said, “We literally have not been parted from that day.” They married in a Roman Catholic service on the Isle of Bute in 2003. Clearly, there was no faffing around. When Stella decides on something, it usually happens. “When I wanted to have babies, I was like, ‘Yeah! Time to make babies!’ And then, when I didn’t make them the first week, it was like, ‘Oh. OK!’”

Like her mother, Linda, Stella has never been much of a faffer. No fuss. She’s never dyed her hair – “it must be such a bore having to do it all the time! The one perk of this colouring, I guess” – and she swears she’s not much into make-up either. To prove it, she brings out a tatty black vinyl make-up bag meagrely filled with a few stubby pencils – so old, she triumphantly points out, “you can’t even read who they’re by... My mum only ever used an eye pencil. I tell you, the older I get, the more I seem to be turning into her...”

“She’s not girly like that,” agrees her great friend Sam Taylor-Wood, with whom McCartney has had “this dresses-for-portraits ‘trade fair’ thing” going ever since they met 16 years ago. “We were at a birthday last night and Stella was marvelling at the way all us girls were cooing at the bag she gave as a present. Once, for her birthday, I made the mistake of giving her all these brightly coloured nail polishes, and I remember her calling me up two weeks later and saying, ‘They’re lovely – but do I look like the sort of girl who would wear them?’”

McCartney looks slimmer in the flesh than she did before she had children. But if I think I’m going to get her to tell me it’s Gwyneth’s influence – that she, too,

is now a client of celebrity trainer Tracy Anderson’s – forget it. (It was GP, by the way, who introduced Stella to Beyoncé. And, because Gwyneth doesn’t like horses, it is Stella who takes her daughter, Apple, riding.) “Oh, the weight thing,” she says, rolling her eyes skyward. “It’s such a weighty subject, isn’t it? Stress, for me, is what keeps it on, especially round here,” she pats her waist, “I chop and change. I ride my bike, I work out, do a bit of, er, dancey things. Last night, I went for a run in the park... More than anything I want to be fit so I don’t get out of breath when I play football with the kids.”

Marriage, motherhood and turning



Quincy Jones and Michael Jackson join the McCartney clan in Sussex, 1982

40, then – not to mention phenomenal success – clearly suit her. How sorted, how grown-up, how soignée she appears to be compared with the stumpy teen she used to seem, hiding behind a peace sign and that curtain of hair. And yet, a vestige of that former self remains in the stark, blue-eyed stare she issues when anything veers too much towards the personal.

As she knows better than anyone, dynastic fame is a double-edged sword. Ever since enrolling Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell to walk in her Central St Martins graduate show in 1995, McCartney has had to struggle with owning that surname. “It goes both ways, that one, doesn’t it?” she sighs.

“It’s hard to figure out what it is. It has opened doors but it has also closed minds. You just can’t let that kind of stuff drag you down...”

Even so, family still looms large over all she touches. Take the launch of her much-awaited, second scent, Lily: an acronym for Linda I Love You, the nickname Paul gave Stella’s mum and once etched into a tree. Lily of the valley was also Stella’s choice of flower for her wedding bouquet. She thrusts her wrist under my nose. “Are you picking up the moss and the truffle we put in it? As a vegetarian, you don’t get that many luxurious things to eat, but oh, truffles – they just make you feel so alive, so naughty, so sexual almost...”

The bottle, a crystal-faceted flacon that reminds one of a car headlight encased in a metallic geometric frame, is very much an object for keeps; just like the cardboard chest of drawers those cute “Monday to Sunday” pants of hers are presented in. Or the pink fluorescent invitation she created for the show, attached to a navy rubber mould spelling out “Stella” (which doubles up, she later tells me – duh – as an ice-tray). McCartney, she does love a pop-tastic twist. Like the funfair she erected at her Golborne Road design studios, complete with candyfloss and donkey

rides, for the launch of the kidswear in 2010, or the mad OTT Christmas lights ritual she’s been holding at the Bruton Street boutique for the past six years.

McCartney is fiercely proud of her rural, down-to-earth roots; how the Sussex cottage in which she and her three siblings, Mary, James and Heather (a half sister), grew up in had only two bedrooms and one bathroom, and how there was always a goat wandering in and out of the kitchen. But her upbringing was, of course, super-non-civilian too, what with folks like David Bowie, Allen Ginsberg and Stevie Wonder dropping by, and getting to go to Universal Studios with Quincy Jones and Michael Jackson, not to mention having all those Tommy Nutter suits, early Chloé slip dresses and acres >

of perfectly flared denim of Linda's with which to play dress-up. Then there were those long escapes to Linda's relatives, the Eastmans, whose grand East Hampton estate (a stone's throw from where Babe Paley lived) they used to visit *en famille* in the summer, and where she still visits with the family (though one has to call it "Long Island" because the H-word has become too "gross" for her to pronounce).

She never doubted what she wanted to do, though. As Mary, 42, who also has four children, remembers, "Stella was always sketching and flicking through magazines, fantasising about being a fashion designer. From the age of 10, that was all she ever wanted to be. She was very clear about that." Quincy Jones, a long-time friend of both Linda's family and Paul from the Sixties, remembers meeting Stella when she was just 11. "She was just like she is now," he says from Los Angeles, "with that sweet freckled face, and *sooo* tough, oh my God, telling like it is and not mincing her words. I remember her writing me a letter from Paris in red ink telling me she was about to go into business with Tom Ford, and saying, 'Hey Quincy, I'm not 11 any more!' We've kept in touch ever since. She's like a daughter to me, like family."

"I really don't know how she does it," says Laura Bailey, "but I think I love her most for being the loudest, most competitive mum on the sideline of our boys' footie games. She has that rare gift of being utterly present whatever else is spinning round."

"She is very, very boundaryed," agrees Taylor-Wood. "She won't answer her phone at bath and bedtime, that's very strictly imposed. Although she comes across as sweet and endearing, she is actually very tough. You really wouldn't want to mess with her."

François-Henri Pinault, CEO of the PPR Group, who sat with his wife Salma Hayek in the front row at the spring/summer '12 show (Alasdair also acts as a design consultant for PPR), emails from Paris: "I've always seen her as the modern woman *par excellence*, designing for women like her, dealing with the family and building a successful career at the same time. I think the brand's appeal relies on its unique personality. Stella invented a brand that is at the same time innovative, distinctive, down to earth, ethical and sincere." He adds: "We also share another common point: both of us had to walk our own way with a very successful father."

Oh, yes. The fame thing. What a scrum it was at that show with the puckish Sir Paul happily hamming it up for the cameras, the paparazzi all but elbowing the likes of Alexa Chung, Twiggy and Chrissie Hynde out of the way to get a shot of him and his future lady wife. And how loth Stella is to go anywhere near the subject of Nancy, despite my somewhat insistent prodding. Can we not just have one tiny, tiny comment? "Can we not, and say we did?" counters McCartney, her features visibly hardening at the very mention of her new stepmother's name. Off-limits.

"Look," she says, softening only slightly. "It's funny for me, the whole celebrity thing. It's always surrounded my life. I know people are drawn to that and I understand that, but I don't know how to talk about it, really I don't."

"I suppose what I'm trying to do with my work," she goes on, "is to make [the women who buy my clothes] feel just

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Because they are!"*

as important as they think those famous people are. Because they are! These are just human beings! And another thing, at the end of the day, I don't think all those famous people would be who they were if they didn't have some kind of energy that attracts. And I think everyone has that energy within themselves, they just have to bring it out."

It's true, one does feel that she invests a lot of her personal self into her work; you really are getting a bit of her when you wear the clothes. That Octavia dress – the optical-illusion one so popularised by her friends Liv Tyler and Kate Winslet; that peekaboo polka-dot one worn by Jane Fonda; and that sheer lace gown that hugged Rihanna's curves at the Met Ball... They are so very *her*. Just like the scent. Friends and family, meanwhile, are very loyal about wearing her on the red carpet – sometimes, it has to be said, to a fault. Take the dress she designed for Kate Hudson when she was nominated for an Oscar. "I walked the red carpet oblivious to the fact that I would end up on every worst-dressed list the following morning," emails Hudson, "but I felt

beautiful in that gown. It would become an appropriate metaphor for our friendship, to be able to laugh at our shortcomings and take criticism as it comes in my stride. And mark my words, you will see me in it again. With a smile on my face!"

Two weeks later, Stella and I meet up again at Clarke's. Since we last saw each other, she and Alasdair have popped over to New York for the second round of the McCartney/Shevell wedding celebrations at the Bowery Hotel, on Manhattan's Lower East Side. True to form, she remains schtum about the whole affair except to say, no, the kids weren't with them and, when the kids are with them, they don't always travel first class. Apparently, the last time Alasdair took them up to the front of the plane on a long-haul, they had other passengers "downgrading", it got so chaotic.

In the car on the way back to the Golborne Road HQ, she scrolls down on her iPhone to see how the rest of the day is panning out. She's got a Meat-Free Monday meeting, a store-planning meeting, a lingerie meeting, a conversation with photographers Mert Alas and Marcus Piggott about the next ad campaign featuring house favourite Natalia Vodianova and then, with no break in between, it's into the studio to design the autumn/winter '12 collection. Tomorrow morning, straight after the school run, she has a meeting down at the British Olympic Association's Canary Wharf headquarters to present her latest designs.

Tonight she has to go out again to supper, but it won't be a late one; it rarely is, as it was so often in her younger, wilder days. "Sometimes, someone will go, come on, let's have another tequila shot, and I'll have one, and then it'll be 11 o'clock, and I'll know I've got to get up for the kids, and I'm not even pissed yet, and I'll think, why bother? Sometimes I wish I were less sensible... Maybe I'll start again when I'm 50..."

Stella at 50. Who knows where she will be; how many more directions she will have taken her label in, or Olympians she will have dressed, or women she will have scented, or how many parties that particular landmark will necessitate. Still, one suspects, she'll not be much different to the woman I bump into a few days later on her way back from doing the school run, wrapped in one of her eco-knits, head down and distracted – just like any other normal, busy working mum. Just a little bit more so. ■