



SHOES *to Fill*

FOR FÊTED FOOTWEAR DESIGNER, **JIMMY CHOO OBE**,
SUCCESS HAS ALWAYS FELT SUPERFLUOUS IF IT HASN'T BEEN SHARED.
THAT'S WHY, THROUGH THE JIMMY CHOO ACADEMY,
THE MALAYSIAN-BORN FASHION MAGNATE IS DEDICATED
TO PRESERVING HIS FAMILY TRADITION OF GIVING BACK

Words: **Anna Solomon**

Which shoes do you wear to meet one of the most lionised footwear designers of all time? And that is exactly what Jimmy Choo OBE

is. I mean, when you think 'women's shoes', which names spring to mind? Christian Louboutin, of course; Manolo Blahnik, thanks to a certain Ms Carrie Bradshaw; and, perhaps above any other, Jimmy Choo. Courtesy of a serendipitous twist of fate – his real surname, Chow, was misspelt on his birth certificate – the man's name even rhymes with 'shoe'.

Not trainers, then. Not that they would be appropriate anyway; I'm due to meet Choo at the Jimmy Choo Academy, the fashion school founded by the designer in 2021, which is headquartered in a gorgeous Georgian townhouse on Hanover Square, Mayfair. It's the day of the graduate presentations, and the crème de la crème of the fashion world is turning out in force.

In the end, I settle on something classic: black, knee-high leather boots with a kitten heel and pointed toe. Safe, I think. Wrong. The glue on this particular pair was obviously pasted on some time ago. For, as I walk into work on the morning of the interview, the adhesive relents, and leather and sole are torn asunder.

It's 9am. My appointment is at 3pm. I have approximately six hours to rectify the situation. One of my colleagues suggests tape – it almost doesn't bear thinking about: me hobbling into the JCA with packaging tape wrapped around my foot as the 'fashion people' snigger and whisper behind their hands. Another suggests I raid the local charity shops – I have a similar premonition, except I'm donning a pair of ill-fitting BHS court shoes.

It turns out there's a cobbler around the corner, and the glue only takes a few hours to set. Which

makes my article opener slightly less *Bridget Jones*, but also delivers me from total humiliation. Even more anticlimactically, when I arrive at the Academy, I'm met with the news that Choo is stuck in New York. So I could have worn wooden clogs for all it matters – my feet will be out of view of a pixel-assembled Choo on Zoom.

Not that he would have judged me, I realise, once we start talking. Because Choo is the nicest person, ever. The affability is etched on his face (just see our cover image), which is pleasantly circular and only faintly lined, given that he will be turning 74 the week after our interview. "Every morning I have an English tea, two eggs and some toast, and I pray to God to make everyone peaceful. I'm an old-fashioned man, you know? I pray for peace for the whole world," he says, smiling.

Choo co-founded his eponymous brand with then-*Vogue* accessories editor, Tamara Mellon, in 1996, selling his 50 per cent stake in the company in 2001. Since then, he has worked on various education initiatives, including acting as an ambassador for the London College of Fashion. Then, in 2021, Choo founded his own academy for budding designers, describing it as a "dream come true".

The Academy doesn't just teach students how to create garments, says CEO Stephen Smith; it "[empowers them] to progress their entrepreneurial journey", imparting business acumen and industry knowhow as well as creativity. "It's a place where fashion meets innovation and style meets ambition."

Later, when I emerge from my interview with Choo, I get to see some of the graduate presentations. In one room, decked out entirely in white, five statuesque models pose in cocooning layers of outerwear. In another, I am transported to the set of *Mad Max*, where models in ragged garments prowl restlessly. "A student may have an idea, but, more importantly, they need to have knowledge – somebody to have taught you and cared for you," says Choo.

This altruistic desire to pass things on can be traced back to Choo's childhood. Back in the 1950s, in the state of Penang, Malaysia, he was the student. The teacher? His father, a shoemaker. "At first he didn't talk to me. He just asked me to sit down," says Choo. "Sit down for one month and just watch how we do the design, how we cut the pattern, and how we finish a shoe'. I said to my father, 'I've been watching for one month. Why are you still waiting?' He said, 'You have to be patient to learn. If you rush everything, you'll never feel it in your heart'."

Choo started making shoes aged 11. In his 30s, he moved to London to study at Cordwainers Technical College (now part of the London College of Fashion). "Malaysia was a British colony, so if you had the chance, you would go to London, ▶

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get a certificate, and double your price. It's very important to have skills, but in London they taught me the profession – how to sell a shoe.”

Nine years after graduating, Choo started his own business. He opened his first shop in 1986, and showed at his first Fashion Week in 1988. *Vogue* identified him as one to watch, publishing an eight-page spread on Choo's designs. “*Vogue* saw my designs and said, ‘Jimmy, we want to feature them, can you send us a shoe?’ But I had no PR, no money. They understood, and sent a car to pick up the shoe!”

In 1996, Choo and Mellon joined forces to establish Jimmy Choo Ltd – the iteration of the business that exists today (now under the ownership of Michael Kors Holdings, which bought it for \$1.2 billion in 2017). Mellon had the vision of developing a ready-to-wear line of luxury footwear, which was financed by a £150,000 loan from her father, Tom Yeardye, co-founder of Vidal Sassoon.

With the backing of It-girl Mellon and her father's hairdressing thousands, Jimmy Choo Ltd went stratospheric. The brand became a global success with a sprawling list of celebrity clients, including Princess Diana, with whom Choo had “a very good relationship”: “She would call me and say ‘Jimmy, come over’, and show me a dress and ask me to come up with some ideas for the shoes.”

Choo may have hung up his, er, shoes, but he still knows them back to front (or should that

be right to left). “I've been working for so many years that I can sense whether a design will sell or not,” he says. “When I was creating a collection, I designed 100 shoes – but I would only ever chose the 15 or 16 that would sell.” Yet this ability is not something he intends to gatekeep. He told *The Independent* that, at the JCA, he never wants anyone to think they're “better than you, [or] you're better than [them]”. When people collaborate, he said, “the whole thing benefits. We cannot be selfish.”

“My family has always passed down knowledge. If you don't, slowly, the skill will be gone.” Beyond this philosophy of knowledge-sharing, I detect a pressing sense of responsibility to give back; Choo feels that it was the generosity of others that got him to where he is today, and wants to extend the same treatment to others.

“I was very lucky – right timing, right occasion. The lady who worked at *Vogue* didn't look down on me. They sent that car to pick up the shoe. I will always remember that. That's what I say to my students: we teach you because we care for you. What is inside my heart is kindness.”

Some might call that karmic insurance – settling their tab with the universe. Choo simply calls it “kindness”. ■

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