



PETER PAN TURNS 20



A FRIEND IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY INTRODUCED ALEXANDER TO WHOLESALERS WHO COULD PROVIDE THE "WILD 'JOAN COLLINS' COLOURS" HE LIKED



Felicity Robinson traces the fairytale career of pyjama king Peter Alexander

Inspiration strikes at the most unexpected moments, according to fashion designer Peter Alexander. Consider, for example, one particular Saturday morning in the '80s when he was watching a Prince video on MTV. "Clouds were projected on to the background and then superimposed on Prince's suit," Alexander recalls. Where others viewers might have been impressed by the film clip's artistic brilliance or the pop star's kitsch cool, Alexander thought: "That is such a cute idea for a pair of pyjamas." It has since become his signature print.

Back in 1987, he was the first to spot a gap in the market for cute, comfortable, man-style pyjamas - for women. "There were really only two types of sleepwear available for women: *Little House On The Prairie* style sleepwear and femme fatale lacy red nighties," he explains. So, in the lounge room of his mum's Melbourne home, Alexander started designing the PJs that made him a household name. Now, his retail and mail-order empire has an annual turnover of more than \$35 million - and has resulted in some odd moments. "A lot of guys tell me I sleep with their wife more often than they do," he jokes. "It's constantly surprising that my brand is so well known - and because my brand is my name, it's even more intimidating!"

As a child, Peter was shy with a pronounced stutter, and was dyslexic at a time when the condition was little understood. "In Year 3, we had to spell the word 'Australia' before we were allowed to leave the class at the end of the day," he recalls in his book, *Peter Alexander: Celebrating 20 Years Of Sleeping Around* (www.peteralexander.com.au, \$59.90). "I was always the last one left."

After completing Year 12, Alexander worked a variety of odd jobs before landing a position at Sportsgirl, where he became visual merchandiser for Victoria at the age of 21. Two years later, "I had decided that my time working for other people had come to an end and I was going to go out on my own," he says. Here, his story splits into two versions. "The first is that I slept around a lot in 1987 - and realised everyone had really crap pyjamas," he laughs. "But the sad truth of the matter is that I was far better behaved than that." Searching for business ideas, Alexander remembered a pair of spotted pyjamas he'd picked up on a trip to Hong Kong. "They

reminded me of my childhood, they were very innocent," he recalls. He started to think other people might appreciate stylish pyjamas too. A friend in the fashion industry introduced him to wholesalers who could provide the "wild 'Joan Collins' colours" he liked, in new fabrics such as rayon. Armed with samples, and a large dollop of confidence, he made appointments with David Jones and Myer - and scored an order. He was on his way. In the next few years, Alexander and his mum, Juliette, devoted their lives to the business, which was receiving a lot of coverage in the media. Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan were pictured on the front of *The Age* newspaper in his pyjamas, and a pair even appeared on TV show *Ally McBeal*. Then

one day, disaster struck. "A department store cancelled an order, which left me with 2000 pairs of pyjamas I'd already paid for," says Alexander. "I thought my business was finished." Then, he hit on the idea of selling them directly to customers through an advertisement in the back of a fashion magazine. "I got 4000 orders!" he enthuses. And the mail order part of his company was born. In the early years, the experience of running a business was exhilarating, partly because he had full creative control. He would walk down the street and "see a girl had tied a jumper around her waist, and the colour against her T-shirt and pants was amazing, so I'd take a picture and turn it into a stripe". But the flip side was financial stress and Alexander struggled to manage the business, which was growing at a phenomenal rate. In 1999, his mother stepped in after he started taking antidepressants to deal with the effects of this stress. "She sent me away on holiday

because I wasn't coping, and when I returned, I said, 'I think it's time to pass the brand to someone who can manage it a bit better.'" That someone was the Just Group, who bought Peter Alexander in 2000. "It was one of those rare marriages that worked so well," explains Alexander - not least because they allowed him to keep all of his staff, continue to employ his mum and let him bring his dog, Penny, to work with him. He also retained the role of creative director. "I do all the fun bits and they do all the hell bits," he adds. Now, the Peter Alexander range has grown to encompass bed linen, kidswear, men's stuff and jewellery - and the company has opened 18 retail stores around Australia, with plans for more this year. But having achieved so much, Alexander doesn't plan to spend the next 20 years lounging around in his PJs. "There's still so much more to do," he writes in his book. "I believe Peter Alexander is a brand that can go around the world."

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