



SOLE MAN

BY MICHELE MEYER

Should you ever bump into Stuart Weitzman—on the street, in a park, in a restaurant—it's very likely he'll be zealously scribbling one of his latest ideas. The man behind the eponymous high-end footwear brand is always thinking, always creating, jotting down his thoughts on anything he can get his hands on.

"Once I wrote two ideas on the white-taped handle of my tennis racket before playing," he confesses. "Another time, I told a maître d', 'I don't know what these tablecloths cost, but I'd like to buy this one and take it home with me.' In 70 minutes, I'd made a lot of sketches—half a collection." The tablecloth, of course, was his canvas.

At 74, Weitzman sits at the helm of a hugely successful fashion brand that generated \$300 million in net revenue last year from the sale of 2 million shoes, including 400 new styles. He's been working with shoes for more than 50 years and is still so passionate about his work, he's been known to schedule interviews at midnight, despite a full day's work. "Shoes are not a nine-to-five job," he says. "Besides my family, they're my life."

Weitzman's sole obsession began early. Growing up in Long Island, New York, the son of a shoe designer and manufacturer, he remembers being mesmerized at age 5 by the stilettos his father created for his mother, a former model. "I couldn't get over how my mother could stand and walk in those shoes, yet they never collapsed," says Weitzman, his voice tinged with admiration. "I was used to the Erector sets I was playing with: You'd build things, and then they'd fall apart."

His curiosity piqued, he asked his father for a shoe to dismantle. "I tried but couldn't get the heel off," he recalls. "It was nailed on so well." It was a testament to the artful engineering of his father's shoes, something Weitzman would take note of and put to use later.

He went off to study at the prestigious Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, earning pocket money for college by drawing shoes—\$20 a sketch—for a shoemaker friend of his father. But

HOW A BOY
NAMED
STUART
TURNED A
HOBBY INTO
ONE OF THE
BIGGEST
NAMES IN
FOOTWEAR IN
THE WORLD.



Clockwise from top left: Soutash wedge sandal in ultramar; Blake Lively wears the best-selling Nudist sandal; the Nudist in pan goosebump nappa



it wasn't his intention to follow in his father's footsteps. "I wanted to go out and create my own path," he says.

When his father fell ill in 1965, Weitzman pitched in, helping his older brother—who was co-owner of the business with his father—to maintain the line, Mr. Seymour. He had only planned to fill in until they found the right new hire to bring on board. But one day, he spotted the snakeskin pumps he had designed in a window on New York's Fifth Avenue and asked a manager how sales were doing. "He told me, 'We're getting ready to reorder,'" recalls Weitzman. "They had just bought 100 pairs and already sold out. The job itself was so much fun, and now there was the thrill of seeing my shoes sell."

So Weitzman became a sole man—permanently. He became president of Mr. Seymour in 1972 and, after a few shifts in ownership over the years, eventually renamed the company Stuart Weitzman in 1996.

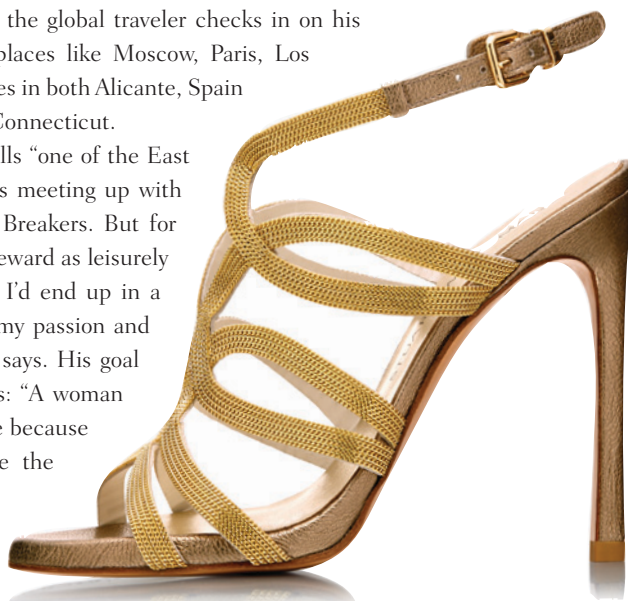
At the helm of his own shoe business, that lesson he had learned so many years before—the well-built shoe he couldn't manage to take apart when he was 5—now came into play. Comfort is in the engineering, and comfort was important to Weitzman. "So many shoes are bought on impulse, and the pain comes later," he says. "Every woman appreciates a shoe that feels good."

That's why, unlike other brands, Stuart Weitzman offers four widths. And Weitzman, who makes his own patterns, oversees the creation of each and every design. "Each design goes through my hands to be corrected from an engineering standpoint without compromising the beauty of it," he says.

To keep an eye on quality control, the global traveler checks in on his stores worldwide—making visits to places like Moscow, Paris, Los Angeles, and Sydney. And he has homes in both Alicante, Spain (where he has nine factories) and in Connecticut.

When in Palm Beach, which he calls "one of the East Coast's chicest playgrounds," he loves meeting up with friends for a game of tennis at The Breakers. But for Weitzman, work is just as much of a reward as leisurely days on the island. "I never thought I'd end up in a career that would take advantage of my passion and my hobby, but I'm so glad I did," he says. His goal is to share his joy with his customers: "A woman should smile when she puts on a shoe because it's surprisingly comfortable, because the color is great, or because she knows she'll get compliments."

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Clockwise from top left: Trifecta sandal in rose; Weitzman; Twisto sandal in gold



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In terms of design, his range is broad, geared to meet the needs of two distinct style icons. One is Marilyn Monroe, “the woman who enhances and exaggerates who she is and whose shoes enter before her and exit after her,” he explains. The other is Audrey Hepburn—or, as he describes it, “[women] so confident in who they are, they don’t need an overtly sexy shoe.”

Each style has its own personality and name, as in Legwrap or Broadband. “You don’t have to see a picture,” says Weitzman. “The name describes the shoe very clearly.” His all-time bestseller is the Nudist, a sandal with barely there straps across the ankle and toes. As of December 2013, Weitzman had sold 50,000 pairs of the Nudist. “That’s when I stopped counting,” he says.

His talents have won the admiration of celebrity clients as well. He made a splash when actress Laura Harring walked the red carpet at the Oscars for her nominated film, *Mulholland Drive*, in a pair of one-of-a-kind Weitzmans encrusted with 464 diamonds. More recently, the Duchess of Cambridge Kate Middleton, socialite Olivia Palermo, and young actresses like Emma Stone and Blake Lively have all been snapped in his designs. Weitzman also hired top fashion photographer Mario Testino and supermodel Gisele Bündchen for his latest campaign.

His philosophy: “If you can’t do things in a big way all the time, at least do it part of the time. You’ve got to spend money to make money.” That’s why when he decided to open a new boutique next to Chanel in Milan in 2013, he approached three of the biggest names in architecture to design the showroom—Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava, and Zaha Hadid. He eventually went with Hadid, winning her over with a gifted pair of shoes. “I got to her heart through her heels,” he jokes.

The same could be said of his wife of 48 years, Jane, to whom he proposed long ago with a pair of pearl-embroidered satin pumps with her future name printed inside.

An appropriate gesture, to be sure, from a man with such a passion for shoes, he simply can’t entertain the thought of leaving it all behind. “You retire from a job,” Weitzman says, “but who retires from a hobby?” 🐾

Shop Stuart Weitzman at Match at The Breakers.