

Is Stella McCartney The Queen Of Sustainability?

In 2001, Stella McCartney launched her eponymous contemporary label. Her shtick? Sustainability. Sounds cool, but is it working? Ask her.

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Recently, the idea of being self-made has been [called into question](#). A sudden peak of interest in the concept, which is rarely used to challenge powerful men, made a conversation with Stella McCartney feel all the more auspicious.

After launching her eponymous fashion label in October 2001 under a 50/50 venture with luxury conglomerate Kering, the daughter of Beatles member Paul McCartney saw immediate success with her eco-friendly ready-to-wear, men's, and accessories lines. Despite doubters along the way, she's remained the industry's gold standard for how to run a high-fashion brand while abstaining from textiles that have traditionally defined luxury. A lifelong vegetarian, McCartney does not use fur, leather, or PVC in her collections. But as [legacy fashion houses](#) and [e-tailers](#) slowly adapt to the model she's put forth, the time feels ripe to ask if it's working. And with rival designers only considering the idea on a [cause-by-case basis](#), how do we know?

In March, McCartney [made headlines](#) when news broke that she was ending her relationship with Kering. When asked to elaborate on her recent divestment from the company that owns Gucci, Saint Laurent, and Balenciaga, among others, she remained tight-lipped.

"Clearly, I'm not one to go at things conventionally and I think somebody has to mix it up a bit," she tells Refinery29, phoning from London. "I'm excited about the opportunities ahead. Who knows what'll happen. But in order to not know what will happen, that was the choice I had to make. Otherwise, things would stay the same forever — which was great — but I've got to shake it up a bit." By *clearly*, one could assume she's referencing an instinctual irreverence that's served her well since she started her business 17 years ago: McCartney, too, may be her own version of "self-made," but she's also willfully self-taught and, in her words, she "refuses to compromise."

McCartney credits her initial interest in conscious living to her upbringing. She was raised on an organic farm in East Sussex, England, where she says she "understood the elements": nature, seasons, animals. "It's just how I've always looked at the Earth," she explains. "I didn't have the conventions or

baggage that most other generations have had. My parents broke that rule of 'You have to eat meat. You're gonna die if you don't eat meat.'" Her vegetarian parents were outspoken animals rights activists; in the '80s and '90s, her mother Linda co-authored cookbooks with meatless recipes and developed her own line of vegetarian frozen meals. In 1999, PETA's first [Linda McCartney Memorial Award](#) was presented by Paul McCartney to Pamela Anderson.

Following her childhood, McCartney moved to London to study at Central Saint Martins. After interning in haute couture at Christian Lacroix, and a stint at her father's tailor, Edward Sexton, on Savile Row, the fashion design student presented her [graduate collection](#) on model pals Kate Moss, Naomi Campbell, and Yasmin Le Bon. They walked to "Stella May Day," a B-side ballad written by her father. Her runway shows have since evolved beyond college — and name recognition (whether that be her own or those of her supermodel connections) — and she has, one accomplishment after another, proven herself a serious contemporary designer. Think: less what you'd expect from the daughter of one of the world's most beloved and richest rock icons, and more something from someone who's not in it for the money.

How the word "faux" attached to anything, be it leather or fur, could entice older generations of consumers who can actually afford \$1,500 handbags is a mystery. But McCartney has prioritized what other luxury brands treat as an afterthought. Her question to the industry is as frank as it's always been: Why not just conduct oneself in a way that's less harmful to the environment? "Then you don't have to donate money to a cause — you can just be a part of solving the problem," she explains. "I'm always thinking, *Oh, I should give X amount of money per month to X charity*, but I know that what I'm doing has a bigger amount of contributing factors than a random check."

But as apolitical as Stella McCartney the brand is — in 17 years of business, she hasn't made a single political statement via T-shirt (or used the F(eminist) word) — McCartney the person takes a humorous, maybe privileged, approach to making her voice heard. "I've steered away from too much political messaging (at least without a tinge of humor) in the collections because I don't want to tell people off or make people feel bad about themselves and their choices," she says. Most recently, McCartney [wrote a letter](#) to Parliament backing the Labor Party's call to [ban fur in the country](#). "We should have a bit of fun with it. I want to label things — like fur-free-fur or skin-free-skin — but I prefer not to ram it down people's throats. It doesn't really entice people; I think it has the opposite effect. Our choice is to tell our story and if people are interested then they know about it."

She continues: "I firmly believe that my job and what I've studied my whole life is to be a fashion designer — not some sort of environmentalist or political campaigner. If people come to this house and don't have a clue of what the product is made out of and just want the product, well, that's okay. I want people to come here because they desire the designs. At the end of the day, that's when I'm doing

my job successfully and in a stealth manner. That's the most important thing. People don't come here because I tell them to be vegetarian or to not kill animals or harm the planet. That's not what you do in fashion. Maybe younger customers now *do* require that, but that's only just happening."

Since the founding of her brand, McCartney's commitment to sustainability has been anything but a secret, well-documented through [a timeline](#) imbued with action, not words, and her role in Kering's partnership with the Centre for Sustainable Fashion (a research center based at the London College of Fashion). It's one of many initiatives that speak to Kering's stated belief that [sustainable fashion is luxury fashion](#). "We're trapped between old and more established houses that don't genuinely have sustainability at their core (and might be doing it for marketing reasons or because they just have to be seen to do so to a certain extent) and younger, newer brands for which it's just a way of life or how they conduct themselves in business full-stop — regardless of what their message is," she says.

According to its [most recent filing](#), the brand's U.K. profits and worldwide licensing revenue saw a 42.5% increase from the previous year to approximately \$9 million. But that doesn't take into account wholesale figures or profits from international markets. And, despite separating from Kering, McCartney remains committed to publishing the [annual EP&L report](#), or environmental profit and loss account, which tracks the impact of the business and supply chain on the environment. Most recently, the company reported a loss of about 8.1 million euros, with 62% of that loss a result of sourcing expensive raw materials. McCartney was the first luxury brand to do so.

"It was just a different view and approach; I came into the world with a very different interpretation of the 'rules,'" she notes. "For me, there weren't any; I just thought the way people saw things was so conventional; that people had to eat the same food yet they weren't aware of the damage or the cruelty. I thought, *Wow, isn't it crazy that this is how we've shaped ourselves as humans on this planet?* I didn't agree with that."

It's no surprise that McCartney was made to question things. Though she may not have grown up with any strict dietary concerns, she's certainly making new ones for customers who are keen on shopping as consciously as they eat. "Why do we have to use all of those chemicals to treat leather? Why do we have to cut down all those rainforests to eat meat? We don't actually have to, do we? We're living in 2018 — surely the technology and compassion can work to our advantage. Because the end goal is to have more time on this planet, isn't it?" She adds: "It fascinates me that everyone doesn't look at the world in that way, that people are still ridiculing vegans and are so uncomfortable with people who look at things differently. For me, it's the way the world should be."

Her fall 2018 collection last February saw McCartney at her best. Yet again, she disguised sustainability as practical and contemporary womens- and menswear. In terms of outward-facing

trends, she culled more ideas from her repertoire — like sneakers paired with ankle-length dresses and relaxed, pinstripe suiting — and introduced fresh ones, too, like trompe l’oeil effects that clashed happily with lingerie-style cover-ups. Maybe some of the layering was a bit cumbersome, but it’s all part of the bigger picture: style doesn’t always have to be so serious, but fashion — especially how it’s made — should be.

McCartney’s empire sees sustainability built from the ground up. Today, the company boasts 51 stores, from L.A. to Tokyo. Last month, she opened her largest flagship store in London on Old Bond Street, replacing her Bruton Street location that opened in 2002. It’s an asylum of architecture and endless sustainability: handmade papier-mâché, recycled from the office’s paper waste, line the walls; most of the furniture is made of recycled materials, including reclaimed timber as sculptural plinths, foam, and vintage hand selected furniture; mannequins are made from a bioplastic material composed of 72% sugarcane derivative (which enables for significant reduction of Co2 emissions) — all this and more reflect the brand’s philosophy to reduce, reuse, and recycle. Even her bestselling bag, the Falabella, is still made from vegetarian leather and recycled plastic bottles.

"I had people who I actually employed who told me, 'I don't think you're gonna have an accessories business unless you use leather,' and things like that; questioning the ability to do something different in the industry," she recalls. "It's a fragile industry, so it's not like I don't have to work hard every single day to have a successful business, regardless of how I approach it. Both in design and everything — it's a massive puzzle. Regardless of whether or not I have a sustainable house, that doesn't mean I'm exempt from the problems every other fashion house has, too."

So, back to that idea of being self-made. It's not for nothing that McCartney's determination to expand and promote a sustainable brand in the face of skeptics and naysayers has gotten her so far. To thrive in an industry that doesn't set anyone up for success, let alone supports the idea that fashion should be conscious, is as political as McCartney is going to get — and shouldn't that count for something?