

**Lunchtime** in a fashionable cafe in west London, and a sleek young woman in an expensive ivory silk blouse and deftly cut black jacket smiles and asks the waitress what the soup of the day is. "Pea and ham," comes the reply. The customer's smile fades. Stella McCartney leans her head to one side and narrows her wide, gray-green eyes. "Why do you have to put the ham in it?" she demands, her voice cool and low but fractionally louder than it was a moment ago. The waitress, landed with the thankless task of defending pea and ham soup to one of Britain's most outspoken vegetarians, can only shrug and look mortified. McCartney sighs. "Oh, it's not your fault," she concedes, ordering scrambled eggs on rye toast instead. "But maybe next time, they could just leave out the ham?"

The true legacy, it seems, of an upbringing in the inner court of 1970s rock aristocracy is less a penchant for sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll than a trenchant respect for nature and a belief in vegetarianism. Right now, McCartney is a woman on a mission, her two passions having come together in a drive to encourage us to reduce our carbon footprint by cutting back on meat consumption.

As a fashion designer, she has spent 15 years trying to distance herself from the "Beatle's daughter" tag. But the moment I ask her about where her principles come from, all that changes. "The way my parents brought me up to see the world is still absolutely key to what I am about," she says. "The beliefs I was raised with — to respect animals and to be aware of nature, to understand that we share this planet with other creatures — have had a huge impact on me."

McCartney was born in 1971, shortly after the Beatles split up. After years on the road with Wings, Paul and Linda McCartney moved their family — Heather, Linda's daughter from her first marriage, along with Stella and her siblings Mary and James — to an organic farm in Sussex, southern England, where they raised sheep, rode horses, grew vegetables, went to the local state schools. "I was brought up to understand that we are all here on planet earth together. The idea of taking responsibility for what we take out of the earth ... it's not something we sat down and had lessons in; as a way of thinking it came quite naturally." Alternative though it sounds, Stella's upbringing sounds rather old-fashioned, in its way. The best piece of advice she was ever given, she tells me, was "do unto others as you would be done unto yourself. My mum and dad always said that and I don't think you can go far wrong with that." From the viewpoint of today's melting icecaps, the ethos of respect for nature in which the farm was steeped seems more prescient than far-out.

These days Stella, her husband Alasdair Willis (ex-publisher of *Wallpaper* magazine, founder of the British design company Established & Sons), their sons Miller, four, and Beckett, one, and daughter Bailey, two, spend their weekdays in west London and weekends in a Georgian house on the Gloucestershire/Worcestershire border in western England.

Rather poignantly for someone born into celebrity and making a career in fashion, McCartney is quite unusually unphotogenic; she's far more attractive in the flesh than she ever looks in pictures. With her watchful, heart-shaped face and red hair, she looks like a little smart-talking urban fox in skinny jeans. Today her hair is scraped back into a bun; she wears no jewelry except her wedding ring. Her skin is porcelain with a smattering of freckles and she is slender, almost fashion-skinny. (After ordering her scrambled eggs on rye, she muses: "What I really want, what I always really want, is baked potato and grilled cheese. But then I'd be really fat.")

Of course the driving force behind the McCartney family's vegetarian tradition was Linda, who died of breast cancer 11 years ago. Stella adored her mother, and you sense that the fierceness of her principles is, in part, her way of honoring her memory. Earlier this year, Stella, her dad and her sister Mary launched the Meat Free Mondays campaign. On a global scale, the meat industry generates nearly 20 percent of manmade greenhouse gases — more than the entire transport sector. The group Compassion in World Farming estimates that if the average UK household halved its consumption of meat, this would cut more emissions than if they cut their car use in half.

What's more, 50 million animals a year, says McCartney, are farmed, using vast amounts of energy, and killed for bags and shoes alone. Refusing to use leather in her work, McCartney has pioneered alternative fabrics for accessories. Pushing my leather handbag further under the table, I ask her why she thinks it is that the fashion industry not only ignores her protests on fur and leather but is also (it seems to me) backward in terms of environmental thinking. (The bi-annual, transatlantic tour of catwalk shows is starting to feel about as *de rigueur* as a patio heater.) Are people in the fashion industry particularly heartless?

"Yup," she says. "People in fashion just don't want to hear the messages. I find it astounding, because fashion is supposed to be about change — I mean, we're supposed to be at the cutting edge! I can only think they don't care as much as people in other industries. So, yes, I think people in fashion are pretty heartless."

At this point, the PR who has been listening in gets slightly alarmed about the direction things are going in, but McCartney will not be deflected. "What? They are heartless. They must be! Why on earth would they use fur and leather otherwise? There's no excuse for fur in this day and age. Baby kids are boiled alive. Foxes are anally electrocuted. If that's not heartless, what is?"

McCartney has experienced some of the venom of the fashion industry at first hand. By recruiting family friends Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss to model at her graduation show from Central St Martins in 1995 she made an instant name for herself, but put more than a few backs up. When she was hired just two years later as head designer at Chloe, the knives came out. Even Karl Lagerfeld went on record to mock the appointment. Quietly, however, she made a success of Chloe: not through Alexander McQueenesque pyrotechnics or by being a design prodigy, but by showing a shrewd understanding of what young women would want to wear next, and never compromising on a sexy, flattering fit. Under McCartney, Chloe came from nowhere to become one of the hottest labels in Paris.

After four years, she struck a deal with Gucci, who agreed to her own Stella McCartney label. (It is said that she argued to drop her famous last name, and call the line Stella, but Gucci refused.) The first Stella McCartney show, in the autumn of 2001, was a car crash, however. One particular T-shirt, emblazoned with the word BRISTOLS, is scorched on my memory. Trashy and vulgar, a world



Stella McCartney, lower right, and scenes from her spring/summer fashion show during Paris Fashion Week on Monday. PHOTOS: AGENCIES



*The greatest luxury of having the parents I had was that it has enabled me not to have to compromise. In the back of my mind, I always knew — if this all goes horribly wrong, I'll be all right.*

— Stella McCartney, fashion designer



away from the chic trousers and jackets her Chloe customers loved her for, the collection was universally panned. What happened? "Oh, God. Everything was wrong. It was all a bit messy. I was still finding myself as a person and I was trying to find myself as a brand too quickly. I was nervous and I was overthinking things ..."

After that bruising first season, McCartney returned to a less showy, more subtle aesthetic. "Things got better when I started being more true to myself. I like doing slightly masculine, Savile Row tailoring. A nice jacket. Wearable — it's almost a dirty word in fashion, wearable, but that's what I do. And yeah, it can get a bit boring, but I can push it each season into something better and more relevant for that season."

It works. There has been no punch-the-air moment of victory, but McCartney has established herself as a credible and desirable designer: the main line is a staple in the wardrobes of many tastemakers in the fashion industry, while the success of her 2005 range for H&M showed her box-office pull in the mainstream. In 1997, the Stella McCartney label turned a profit for the first time, meeting the target set by Gucci group. McCartney has found her place in the fashion firmament by largely bypassing trends in favor of skillful, wearable interpretations of the silhouette and the mood that is shaping how women want to dress at that moment.

I tell McCartney this. I mean it as a compliment. Most interviewees require a lavish show of flattery before they will relax but McCartney is the opposite: she seems to tense up and retreat the instant she thinks I'm buttering her up. She begins to talk, instead, about how the world has changed around her. "When I first started out, American buyers would come to see my clothes and I'd show them a jacket and trousers and they'd be like, 'What's the full look? What's the blouse, what's the shoe? What does the customer wear with this?' And I'd be like, 'Er, whatever they want?' They thought I was a bit odd. But that's changed. These days the customer makes her own decisions more. They're not being dictated to by gay male designers — not that gay's got anything to do with it, but as a female designer it's really empowering the way women have more ownership of how they dress now."

When McCartney joined the Gucci group eight years ago, many assumed that she would eventually capitulate to the necessity of selling leather goods to make money — the business model on which Gucci itself is based. But even in the sticky early years, McCartney never appeared to blink. This, she says, is because she was privileged enough to be free to be stubborn. "The greatest luxury of having the parents I had was that it has enabled me not to have to compromise. In the back of my mind, I always knew — if this all goes horribly wrong, I'll be all right. That's an option that most people just don't have, financially."

In March, McCartney was honored with an award for her support of environmental causes by the Natural Resources Defence Council. Accepting the award, she said:

"I try to avoid this kind of recognition because it can pigeonhole you. It's my job to make people not notice that I'm working in a slightly more responsible way." Why, I wonder, the ethics-by-stealth? "I am a fashion designer. I'm not an environmentalist. When I get up in the morning, number one I'm a mother and a wife, and number two I design clothes. So the main thing I need to do is create, hopefully, exquisitely beautiful, desirable objects for my customer. That's my job, first and foremost. If I can make you not notice that it happens to be out of biodegradable fake suede, if I can make you not notice that it hasn't killed cows or goats or unborn baby lambs, then I'm doing my job. There should be no compromise for you as a customer. I don't want to do scratchy, oatmeal-colored things, that defeats the object. And sometimes ... I try really hard, but if now and again I have to dye a bag using chemicals that are not as low in environmental impact as I'd like, in order to get a brighter color, then I will do that."

Family is certainly important to her. At Stella McCartney fashion shows, the show notes given to guests are prefaced with a page of dedications in her handwriting, almost always to "mum and dad," as well as her husband and children. Her father is a regular in the front row, and the pair seem closer than ever following his divorce from Heather Mills. When McCartney opened her first Paris store a year ago, I happened to drop in the day before the glam opening party and found McCartney showing her dad and Nancy Shevell, his girlfriend, around the shop in private. Paul was in jeans and carrying a music store carrier bag, every inch the everyman. Later, at a tea party for editors, McCartney arranged a puppet show and low benches so that guests could bring their children; the hostess could be found perched at knee height, discussing the merits of Ben Ten with younger guests. McCartney and her husband are known for being rather normal, at least by the glitzy standards of their milieu: I once heard an acquaintance of theirs comment on how charmingly quirky they were in not having a nanny at weekends.

McCartney can be spiky though. She is businesslike, direct — a world away from most fashion designers, whose idea of giving an interview is calling you darling a lot, and complimenting your shoes. When I ask her, genuinely curious, whether the people who work for her would ever eat, say, a bacon sandwich in the office, and she snaps at me for asking a question the establishment press would ask. No, I'm just genuinely curious, I say. "Do they? I don't know. I assume they do. I don't think about it. Sometimes, at lunchtime, I can really smell fish when people are eating, and then I'll shout — OK guys, enough fish. My argument is, if a journalist comes into our office and it stinks of fish, that's weird." She doesn't have much of a sense of humor about the vegetarian thing, but then, why should she? It's not a joke to her.

# Stellar Stella

*The designer talks about the advantages of having a Beatle for a dad, and why she wishes the clothing industry cared enough to stop using fur and leather*

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