

She's Bringing Sexy Back

As I settle into one of the leather armchairs inside Starbucks in Bournemouth, I begin to sense that rare but instantly identifiable feeling one gets when they know that they're witnessing the next big thing.

Sitting in front of me is budding fashion designer Catriona Rose Lennie. Aged just 21, she recently completed the launch of her own women's clothing range, Catriona Rose. Her glamorous dresses come in three different forms; Indian-style embroidered Saris, long, floor-skimming maxis and colourful satin minis, all of which have been independently designed and handcrafted by Catriona herself.

After telling me that I can call her by her nickname Cat, she politely orders an orange and mango smoothie, later explaining that she never consumes drinks with caffeine: "I'd probably get too hyper!" With her perfectly bronzed skin, slim physique and her enthusiastic approach to life, she's every inch the confident young woman you'd expect her to be.

Born at St Peter's Hospital in Chertsey, Surrey on September 19, 1987, Cat grew up in Woking alongside her mother, father and brother.

After completing her GCSE's at Winston Churchill High School, Cat went on to complete a National Diploma in Fine Art and Design at Guildford College in 2004.

She now lives primarily at her student house in Bournemouth with 'five other lovely girls' and will graduate with a BA (Hons) in Fashion from the Arts Institute Bournemouth (AIB) later this year.

She started designing her dresses in mid-2008, before she set off for the Balearic isle of Ibiza where she would work throughout the summer season. She says of the notorious party-island: "Ibiza has always intrigued me as it is such a fashionable place. Everyone can be whoever they want to be and wear whatever they want to wear. The whole island has this effortlessly cool style."

Her trademark dress design – extra-short and backless – was inspired by her love for scarves. She recalls, "I love beautiful scarves and I thoroughly believe that a woman should always show off her back, so I just came up with my first design through that. I'd always worn scarves in different ways. I used to keep them together with safety pins and then I moved onto using my sewing machine."

Cat started wearing her outfits whilst she was abroad, and constantly received rave reviews from admirers. People would repeatedly ask her about her dresses and after learning of their origins, would praise her on her resourceful creations. Cat soon came to the conclusion that she could turn her personal hobby into a business venture. "Every time I wore my dresses the compliments came flooding in. I quickly started to realise that I could make a real success out of them."

Her partner Mark gave her the final push that she needed to build up her own enterprise. She explains: "I met my boyfriend that same summer in Ibiza. By that point he'd already set up his own very successful club brand, and after I told him about my dreams of creating my own fashion business, he helped me realise that my vision was one that was actually very possible."

She started designing logos, making plans and arranging photo-shoots that would feature her dresses. Ambitious and pro-active, Cat exudes determination: "I've been setting up the business properly since December. I've spent almost everyday planning everything and finding out where I should buy my fabrics from. It has been a lot of hard work but I have loved it at the same time and it's what I've always wanted to do. I am extremely proud that people will be able to wear my designs."

"In a bid to raise funds, I sold lots of my old clothes in sales that I held at my houses in Woking and Bournemouth. I also decided to take up some extra shifts to help me save up some of the money that I needed to be able to invest in the launch of Catriona Rose."

Cat recently returned from a trip to India, a journey she embarked on in the search of some new fabrics to use as part of her designs. "It was amazing; Mumbai is such a beautiful city, and I found some great materials for my next collection."

I question her on her university course and whether it's helped her on the road to success. She pauses for reflection and says almost automatically: "AIB is great and it has lots of good facilities..." She trails off without finishing her sentence, her blue eyes averted. I probe further and she soon admits that she feels disappointed by her one detractor, ironically, her course tutor, "She just hasn't been supportive at all. She hasn't believed in me since the beginning and has basically laughed at my ideas."

I comment that her future triumphs would be the perfect revenge against her tutor's dismissals and Cat laughs and says in her distinctly husky voice, "Yeah, I'll be like 'I told you so! See you should have listened to me!'"

Today Cat is clad in a peach, beaded Reiss dress which she's wearing over some dark skinny jeans. Gold high-heeled sandals and a Chloe handbag complete her sexy yet understated look. Every now and again she'll tug on her long necklace which is adorned by a cute dove and some red tusks, or push back her shoulder-length dark hair.

Although she states that she hasn't been influenced by any particular designers or stylists, "My friends say I am my own muse," Cat does reference certain celebrities whose images she admires. "I like Sienna Miller, Kate Moss, anyone whose style is effortless yet glamorous. And Gok Wan is great fun!" She laughs her infectious giggle. "I have a very open-minded fashion sense. I love extravagance!"

She grows serious when she states her fashion-industry pet peeve: "I don't like it when people are pretentious about the way they dress and think they're much better than everybody else."

As well as her designing skills, Cat is also a keen model, stylist and photographer: "I love photography and styling so I like to organise the shoots way in advance. I'm very passionate about being on the other side of the camera, and in the future I would like to shoot all of my own work. I have dreams of doing exotic photo-shoots with elephants; I like to be as adventurous as I can."

Cat's name has been spreading fast through the realms of Facebook, the extremely popular social-networking site. Having just recently set up a group entitled 'Catriona Rose x' on her profile, it already has 575 members who are regularly monitoring her progress: "Since I set up the group and put up the latest pictures on Facebook, my inbox has been flooded with amazing feedback and lovely messages, with people telling me how they've been following my story of setting up a business and how great it is to see such a fantastic final result. Their support has kept me really motivated."

She has also launched her own website www.catrionarose.com to help keep her customer's updated with her newest designs and the locations of her sales.

Cat has a very busy few months ahead of her. This summer, she'll once again be returning to Ibiza from June until September where she plans on selling her dresses every week in the San Antonio hippy markets. "Before I leave for the season I'm going to sell a limited amount of stock during May. I will also be holding big dress sales at offices in Bournemouth and at friends' houses, and am looking into having a stall either at Spitalfields or Portobello Road market."

From October onwards she wants to travel the world, "I'd like to have next year's collection inspired by all of the different countries and places that I have visited. I plan to meet with different suppliers and factories and go to various markets to gather inspiration. I'm hoping to collect a host of gorgeous materials and designs along the way."

Clearly comfortable in her environment, Cat reaches for her drink, and her candy pink nail varnish catches in the light. Giving advice to aspiring young designers, Cat speaks the words of encouragement she wishes she had heard earlier on in her journey: "Anything is possible, don't let people that don't believe you get you down. Be yourself, and grab any opportunities that you can!"

As we stand up to leave, I throw in one last question before we part ways; the obligatory, but always informative: "Where do you see yourself in five years?"

Without a second's thought Cat replies: "One of my dreams is to sell my clothing in the Oxford Circus branch of Topshop. Eventually I would love to have my own boutique in either London or Ibiza and most certainly have my range in a lot of shops, boutiques and maybe even department stores. The world is your oyster!"

Indeed it is. She speaks with such conviction that it's difficult not to admire her. Sweet, talented, and most importantly, relentless, she has all the qualities one needs to succeed in life. I wish her the best of luck in her journey, and wouldn't be in the least bit surprised to see her Catriona Rose logo plastered all over department stores half a decade from now.

By Paris Shahidi

