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COLLECTIVE

ISSUE 6

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the phoenix

FOUR YEARS AGO, *Peter Morrissey* was lying in a hospital bed HOLDING ON for his life. But thanks to an unlikely partnership, he's turned his LIFE — and his BUSINESS CAREER — around.

WORDS: SHEREE MUTTON

He's the man behind one of Australia's most successful fashion labels. He's also refreshingly honest about his failures. With more than three decades in the highly competitive world of fashion, Peter Morrissey, or "Mr M" as he calls himself, boasts a multi-faceted career that most designers could only dream of.

Growing up in Sydney's Sutherland Shire with four brothers and a twin sister, Peter says his childhood was far from glamorous.

"We had to eat in shifts because we had only four chairs and four sets of knives and forks. I wore hand-me-downs and used to clean toilets," he says.

After launching his first collection in the early 1980s as part of the OX co-op in Darlinghurst in Sydney, Peter found success with design partner Leona Edmiston with their label Morrissey Edmiston. The duo quickly gained international recognition, dressing the world's A-list celebrities including Nicole Kidman, Jon Bon Jovi, Geoffrey Rush, Kylie Minogue, Elle Macpherson and Michael Hutchence.

Out of nowhere, the boy from a working-class family became a celebrity, mixing with the likes of Princess Diana and John Travolta but looking back, Peter says the life of a high-flyer was never his intention.

"I didn't want to be famous, I wanted to be successful," he says. "I designed not so people talked about me, but so people talked about the person wearing my designs."

After dominating the Australian fashion scene for 14 years, the partnership with Leona ended and Peter launched his own brand in 1997.

The name Morrissey became synonymous with sleek, sophisticated and sexy clothes, often worn by supermodels Megan Gale and Helena

{movers}

PETER MORRISSEY SUIT AVAILABLE EXCLUSIVELY AT BIG W

Christensen. His career went from strength to strength, as he won a multitude of awards including GQ Man of the Year — Designer 2002 and FHM Designer of the Year in 2003, 2004 and 2005. He says the most rewarding achievement was creating the distinctive Aboriginal-print uniforms for Qantas.

"The greatest airline in the world chose me to dress their staff and that was the greatest compliment. You could instantly tell who worked for Qantas and the staff were proud to wear it. It was the longest-running uniform design in the history of Qantas," he says proudly.

But it was far from roses for Peter. Despite the accolades, a grand apartment in hip Darlinghurst (which boasted 5.5-metre ceilings and a 14-seat dining-room table) and his celebrity status, he had lost control of the business.

Close friend and late multimillionaire Rene Rivkin, who invested in the label, sold the Morrissey brand to OrotonGroup in 2000 and Peter was stood down as the head designer of the company he founded, grew and loved.

Six years later, Morrissey was purchased by M Webster Holdings and in the wake of the financial crisis, the label and its stores were shut down due to poor returns. But the biggest challenge was yet to come.

Shortly after, in June 2009, Peter faced his biggest challenge yet — a cerebral aneurysm that took him to within an inch of death.

"I was very comfortable with dying because I've buried a lot of people I've loved," he says in reflection.

He spent four months in hospital recovering but doctors gave him little hope of surviving without brain damage. "It's a miracle I'm alive," he says.

Against all the odds, Peter bounced back from surgery with no serious damage and says he was more determined than ever to get his business

I didn't want to be famous. I wanted to be successful.

back on track. He sold his Darlinghurst apartment (downsizing to a rented unit in nearby Darling Point) and used the proceeds to buy back the Morrissey trademark from M Webster Holdings.

To the fashion world's absolute surprise, he accepted an offer from department store giant Big W to design an exclusive range.

And while his move into the mainstream market raised more than a few eyebrows, Peter says it fitted with his goals and the current economic climate.

"When Madonna sells millions of albums or when George Clooney's film is a success, nobody questions the demographic," he says.

"I went [to Big W] to design great clothes at appropriate prices. I dress more Australians now in one week than I did in 10 years at Morrissey. I love my association with Big W and it has been incredibly successful. Most people don't buy the clothes because of my name, they buy them because they need, want or desire them."

And it has proven to be a very astute move. He has continued to expand his empire, developing a homewares range in Big W (Home by Peter Morrissey) as well as bath and body products, which are also stocked in a number of leading hotels and resorts.

"I like to say I'm sleeping with you, showering with you and helping you get dressed, and they say my job is hard."

"I appreciate everything given to me.

I don't expect it, but I accept it and appreciate it. The only way to become incredible is to fail great at good and stand up and learn from it."

Last year, Peter shone as a judge on Foxtel's *Project Runway* as he mentored young designers about the challenges of the fashion industry.

"The greatest advice I give to young designers is [in order] to fashion people's lives, you have to understand what their life is like.

"When I did *Project Runway*, which I loved, I would say, 'do red carpet for your ego', because celebrities borrow the clothes, have them dry-cleaned and send them back. Designing is about making people feel better about themselves."

Now 51, Peter seems happier than he has been for years. He remains tight-lipped about what the future holds, saying, "I've been a success at failure. The only difference between me and another person is that I get up and try again."

It's with this optimistic attitude that Peter has proved he's not just a survivor in life but in business as well. "It has been a hard 30 years. It always gets darkest before the light," he says.

"I've climbed the mountain of success and I'm about 15 kilometres higher than I ever thought I'd be."

And if history has a way of repeating itself, then chances are this self-made fashion icon will keep climbing even higher. ■

of fashion