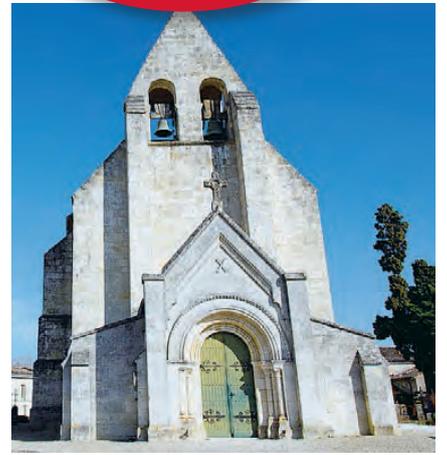


# sg2



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# Hedi times

He's transformed menswear and been lauded for his photography. But that's just the start for rock'n'roll's favourite designer, Hedi Slimane. By **Johnny Davis**



Hedi Slimane won't talk about fashion. Specifically, he is not to be asked when he will make his return to fashion design. Slimane's assistant has insisted as much via email, and she is telling me again as we walk down a Brussels backstreet to meet him. "He gets asked every day," she says. "Every day."

This represents something of a conundrum for the journalist dispatched to interview arguably the most influential fashion designer of the 21st century. The man who, during his seven years at Dior Homme, created a seismic shift in the most staid of all clothing categories, menswear. Slimane is said to have transformed the male silhouette. He produced jackets that were cut short, with narrow, square shoulders, and teamed them with very skinny trousers - exquisitely made, super-tight tailoring that was designed with rock stars in mind, but was greeted with so many standing ovations on the catwalk that pretty soon everyone from Versace to Topman referenced Dior Homme in their collections.

Slimane cast his shows by what he called "boy safari"; picking boys without modelling experience off the street. He favoured tall, thin, androgynous-looking teenagers, many from London. "I wanted the clothes to be about the boys," he will explain. "They even had their own name embroidered in the clothes. It was really always a tribute to them."

By the mid-90s, Slimane's lean look had completely upended fashion's traditional, chiselled version of male beauty. Waifs were everywhere; the odder-looking the better. The world's largest mannequin company, Rootstein, was compelled to roll out a dummy with a 35in chest and a 27in waist - 12 inches smaller than the average British man. One newspaper talked importantly about the spread of "manorexia". "No one wanted the big guys; it was all skinny androgyny," complained David Gandy, the well-built male model whose name was made more recently, smouldering away in the back of a boat in a pair 

Hedi Slimane: 'I do it if it's fun. If it's not fun I give up and do something else' Photograph YP

« of tight white Dolce & Gabbana pants. “People would look at me very strangely at castings. They’d say unbelievable, stupid things. You’re too big! You’re too good-looking.”

Slimane’s insouciant rock’n’roll take on suits, jeans and tuxedos was first influenced, then adopted by the resurgent indie music scene of the day: Franz Ferdinand, Razorlight and Pete Doherty. Especially Doherty. And the designer embraced the scene like a 16-year-old fan, attending gigs as often as he could and getting little-known bands such as These New Puritans to soundtrack his shows. “He turned up to a Dirty Pretty Things show with loads of free clothes,” recalls Carl Barât, Doherty’s sometime bandmate, referring to his post-Libertines project. “Then he started photographing all our gear. Our guitars, our jackets, our shoes . . . It was pretty odd. Hedi’s very sweet, though.” Not everyone agreed. “I’ve never met [Slimane], but I just think it’s wrong,” Jarvis Cocker said at the time. “The thing I like about music is that people make it up for themselves, and that extends to what they look like as well. So it’s a very personal thing. Then someone comes along and goes: ‘Oh, yeah, skinny trousers, de-de-de-de, that’ll be £800, please.’”

Today, the music scene may have changed but the influence of Slimane’s monochrome palate shows little sign of fading to grey, four years after he turned his back on fashion. Skinny black jeans are still everywhere, while a skinny black suit worn with a skinny black tie is still the default man-at-a-special-occasion uniform - even James Corden squeezed into one for 2010’s Brits. But Slimane, who has no training in fashion and whose career path surprised even his best friends, never set out to become the century’s most influential designer. “It’s just like if I would have done cooking in my house and then I ended up as a cook in a restaurant, then I opened a restaurant randomly,” he says in his heavily accented English. “I do it if it’s fun. If it’s not fun I give up and do something else.”

Fun right now for Slimane, is



**Slimane (right) with David Furnish, Kate Moss and Pete Doherty at a party in Paris, 2005**

**‘I miss the fabrics and I miss the atelier, but if I really miss it that much, I would have started again already’**

photography. He always wanted to be a professional photographer - now he is one. And very successfully so. Famous names, from Gore Vidal to Lady Gaga, have commissioned Slimane photo shoots, while European arthouse publishers have put out hefty collections of his work since 2001. He shoots for dozens of fashion magazines: Vogue, VMan and so on. Even during the mutual love-in with the indie rock scene, he never stopped snapping. London Birth of a Cult was 200-plus pages devoted entirely to a sweaty Pete Doherty, while Hedi Slimane: Anthology of A Decade is 10 years of his favourite photographs and is due to be published soon. Before that there was Hedi Slimane: Berlin.

The day we meet in Brussels, it’s the opening of Fragments Americana, a group art show Slimane has put together featuring his pictures and work by the film-maker Gus Van Sant and the sculptor/architect Oscar Tuazon. The following night in Paris there’s the opening of a show he has curated, California Dreamin - Myths and Legends of Los Angeles, featuring modern and contemporary west coast artists such as John Baldessari and Edward Ruscha.

“I love California,” Slimane says, who, after time in Paris and Berlin, now lives in the Hollywood hills. “It has such a strong contribution to the

history of culture, and popular culture. For better and worse, of course. Even the worst can be interesting to some degree sometimes for somebody creative.” (Slimane’s English isn’t flawless. He once told a journalist that he stayed so thin because he ate “baby food” but he meant “comfort food”, leading to the oft-repeated and not entirely unbelievable notion of him subsisting on Cow & Gate Yummy Harvest Chicken.) Yet he seems so European, such an aesthete - doesn’t he find California a little, well, shallow? “There is that scene!” he says. “But there was so many things born there of counter culture. So many political movements. Skate starting there. The surf culture is very connected to California, of course. The hippies.”

Slimane meets me in a bar. Profiles of him seldom fail to mention the fact he doesn’t drink, smoke or take drugs, as though this was somehow the most unusual thing in the world. But here he is, arranged in a booth, a glass of Belgian beer before him. “Oh, it’s nothing,” he says, when I comment on this. (It will remain untouched all through our interview.) He looks remarkable. He is 42, but ageless (he doesn’t drink, smoke etc), with deep baby eyes and boyish features. His hair, once memorably described as “a bit of an event”, soars upwards in a sort of sawn-off pompadour. He is dressed casually, but immaculately. That’s to say, like Hedi Slimane - jeans and a baseball jacket, but not in the same way Chris Evans dresses in jeans and a baseball jacket. He is courteous and polite, and good fun - not attributes you always associate with people connected with fashion.

Of course, Slimane will talk about fashion. It’s as much a part of his make-up as the architecture or graphic design or any of the other areas he brings his spare, sleek vision to. “I’m going to design again, but I come back when it’s the right project, so I keep my passion for it intact,” he says. The day after we meet, John Galliano is arrested for his antisemitic rant in Paris. Within days he’s sacked as the head designer



## Oranges and sunshine

### The story of a lost generation

Starring Emily Watson, Oranges and Sunshine is an inspiring film about the woman who uncovered a deportation programme that saw thousands of families forcibly separated. Read more about the film, released 1 April, and enter to win tickets to a special screening.

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at Dior. One paper suggests Slimane is 9/4 favourite to succeed him. Slimane suggests not. "I really love to design but when it's a big luxury house there is so much things around the design. Like the global branding, like the window displays. Oh, it's so much. You just have to be happy doing it. If you're not, you're really miserable. And I have no intention to be miserable. I miss the fabrics and I miss the atelier. But if I really miss it that much, I would have started again already."

Instead he designs collections in his head. "I listen to a track and I have the whole show after one song. I think about the characters, the allure, the walk, the proportion, the hair - it just makes sense from one song." When he does return to fashion his aesthetic is unlikely to have changed much. "I'm always suspicious of people who change too many times," he says. I've always been very repetitive. Which was a problem, because with seasons people always want, 'OK, what's new?' But the truth is, nothing is new."

And Slimane is nothing if not single-minded: everything bearing his name - from show invitations to photography books to his online diary uses the same Helvetica typeface. His assistant dresses in the given Slimane style. When he was living in Paris without a driving licence, his driver wore Dior Homme. ("It would be a bit strange for him to show up in a funny suit," Slimane explained.) A Berlin gallery owner has recalled Slimane turning up to stage an exhibition carrying a box of his own lightbulbs - he wanted to make sure he got the right sort of white light.

I ask him if he knows where such precise aesthetics come from, thinking he won't really have an answer. "No, I know where it comes from," he says, explaining that when he was 15, a friend gave him a book on the Russian avant-garde. "Alexander Archipenko, suprematism and all that. A lot of graphic design and a lot of propaganda references. When you are a kid, it kind of leaves a print. It's strong, this impression, like music." Even earlier, when he was six, his sister's best friend used to entertain him with her impressions of David Bowie and Mick Jagger. Slimane got hold of Bowie's 1974 album *David Live*. The cover features the androgynous, skin-and-bones singer in an angular, narrow, cropped suit. Next he bought *Angie* by the Rolling Stones and a Vegas-period Elvis single, both with similarly dramatic covers. Stagegear became synonymous with menswear. "It was the only connection I knew with men's representation, even masculinity. David Bowie, for me, was the butchest



Portraits by Slimane: A member of the Disconcerts, 2009



Courtney Love with veil, London, 2005



California boy with a cape, Coachella festival, 2009



Joe Dallesandro, Los Angeles, 2009

guy in town. Jagger was like a truck driver." Thirty-odd years later Slimane designed stagewear for both. (A 2002 *New Yorker* profile of Jagger records the singer in Toronto trying on some black satin pants Slimane has sent over from Paris. "They're a bit, a bit - for want of a better word - feminine," Jagger says. It also notes the then-59-year-old singer's waist size: 29 inches.)

Slimane's father is Tunisian, a former lightweight boxer who became an accountant. His mother is an Italian seamstress. When Slimane was a teenager she tried to dress him in clothes that she had made. She didn't get very far. He puts his head on the table. "She made flared jeans with the matching denim jacket! Sleeveless. All denim! Already, at that time, I was, like: 'I don't think so.' I would have thrown them back in her face! It's heartbreaking now." So he started designing clothes for himself. At the same time, he developed a passion for photography, starting in the windows along Boulevard Beaumarchais, Paris's famous camera street. He took an evening class in photography at school. "I was in love with my teacher. So that was that, really." Still, surely photography can't pay as well as being head designer at a label? "It can do," grins Slimane.

And besides, he is proud to have documented the British music scene at an exciting time. "I think it was really a golden age in London. It was the first decade of the millennium, the first decade of social networking, of blogging, which was a huge factor in the mobilisation of guitar bands. We are too close to it, but it was historical." And his passion for Pete Doherty remains undiminished. "I think he had a huge influence on youth, globally. His way of doing things was really romantic." He didn't mind that Doherty was off his head all the time? "No, no, no. He was always adorable."

Now California is his latest thing. He takes his camera off to Laguna Beach and San Clemente, soaking up the Americana. "It is totally preserved and it's very authentic - as opposed to New York. I find it very dead [there] now." I tell him it's difficult to picture him in shorts. "Now that is something you would never see! There is no way you would confuse me with one of the surfers."

Later that evening, at the opening of his exhibition, he has swapped his baseball jacket for a leather jacket, and his skinny jeans for another pair of skinny jeans. "I have a lot of my old stuff," he says. "That's why maybe I have to start designing again. 'Cos I have not so much to wear any more."

**i** Hedi Slimane: *Anthology of a Decade 2000-2010* will be published in April by JRP/Ringier.