

Top fashion designers go down-market

By **Maria Puente**, USA TODAY

Boldfaced names in fashion are turning up at a mass-market retailer near you — and you don't have to be rich, famous or skinny to buy.

Vera Wang has hooked up with Kohl's; Lela Rose is stepping out with Payless. Premium jeans kings Chip & Pepper and Ralph Lauren are doing JCPenney; Cynthia Rowley is holding hands with Avon. Sarah Jessica Parker, Amanda Bynes and Venus Williams are going steady with Steve & Barry's. Todd Oldham will team up with Old Navy. And Alice Temperley is flying in from London to air-kiss Target, the leader in what some in the industry call, without irony, the democratization of fashion.

No longer the exclusive province of celebs and ladies-who-lunch, big-name designer fashion is becoming affordable for everybody and available at the local mall.

"Fashion isn't a luxury, it's a right," declares Howard Schacter of the Steve & Barry's stores (200 nationwide), repeating the slogan for Sarah Jessica Parker's Bitten line and Amanda Bynes' dear line, launched earlier this year. Venus Williams' active-wear line EleVen will debut in November. "It's fashion democracy."

The benefits of "democracy" are obvious: The designer gets marketing, manufacturing, distribution and the huge customer base of a big-box retailer. The retailer gets designer cachet, important for transforming an outdated, or cheap-without-the-chic image. And consumers get runway styles they can afford.

"We have the ability to make shoes at the most affordable prices of anywhere in the world, and we want to marry that with the greatest creativity," says Matt Rubel, CEO of Payless, which has nearly 4,600 stores.

Consumers clearly like the result. Marshal Cohen of The NPD Group market analysis firm says in 1975 only 25% of U.S. retail sales involved private-label branded products; today it's 53%. "(Retailers) used to have 20 private-label products, now they have 20, but half are designer co-branded," he says.

All this could have a salutary effect on middle-class wardrobes. "No one has to wear elastic-waist pants ever again," says Linda Wells, editor of *Allure* magazine, who fell in love with what she thought was a couture Vera Wang skirt that actually came from Wang's Kohl's line. "Snobbishness in fashion is (declining); it's not so important to be exclusive. People are mixing expensive and inexpensive, and there's no sense of shame."

Designers, or some, no longer worry they'll lose their mojo by aiming at the hoi polloi, calculating they can sell both high- and low-end. After all, Chanel maestro Karl Lagerfeld and rock royalty Stella McCartney designed lines for down-market retailer H&M, and both continue to be worshiped in the fashion world.

"It's such an exciting thing to do," gushes designer Lela Rose, Payless' second "guest designer" (Laura Poretzky was the first). Five of Rose's shoes and two handbags debuted in 500 Payless stores Sept. 2; during Fashion Week she showed her Payless designs on the runway with her high-end clothing. "To me, there's nothing wrong with making a product I'm proud of and selling it for \$25."

Rose credits Target's alliance with fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi for opening her eyes. Mizrahi's couture career was in decline when he partnered with Target. "He resurrected his designer business, became more popular and famous by going low-rent and making it a success," NPD's Cohen says.

Mizrahi hasn't been Target's only dance partner: Architect/home designer Michael Graves was the first (1999) and Mossimo was the first fashion designer (2000); both are still selling at Target, which does not go

unnoticed in the design world. By the time Mizrahi arrived in 2003, plain old Target had become chic Target (fashion-mag-style advertising also helped); meanwhile, Mizrahi continues to sell higher-end shoes and apparel apart from Target.

Now British fashion princess Alice Temperley is Target's eighth GO design partner; her collection of what Target calls "wearable, functional and feminine" clothes arrived Sept. 16 and will be available until Nov. 6. The ninth GO designer, coming in November, will be Erin Fetherston, whose clothes have graced Anne Hathaway, Cameron Diaz and Kirsten Dunst.

"We look for emerging designers who can benefit from exposure to a larger audience," says Target's Amy von Walter.

For retailers in trouble, hiring a big-name designer can be Step One of a rescue plan. The Gap announced last week it was hiring fashion/interior designer and TV personality Todd Oldham, in part to help reverse a sales slump at its Old Navy stores.

Fashion designer Cynthia Rowley, who also once partnered with Target to produce home accessories, now is creating products for Avon —the first time the venerable home-sales company has enlisted a style maven to help create cosmetics.

JCPenney went looking for hot and trendy and found twins Chip and Pepper Foster, purveyors of pricey Chip & Pepper jeans popular with celebs. Their C7P line for JCPenney, launched in July, offers premium jeans at an affordable \$35 instead of \$180. Coming in February: Ralph Lauren's American Living, a huge collection of products for men, women, home and children.

"Everything is so quick now — it used to be from-runway-to-store would take months, and now we see it immediately online, so our customers are exposed to fashion in a much faster way than ever before," says Liz Sweney, executive vice president for JCPenney women's apparel.

Consumer excitement about all this is undeniable. Both Wang and Temperley's products sell on eBay for more than in stores. When Parker's and Bynes' lines launched at Steve & Barry's, hundreds of women waited hours in line to buy and to get autographs.

Steve & Barry's Schacter says consumers know when a celeb designer is just a front, and Parker is no front. "She's our collaborator, she believes in delivering the highest-quality merchandise and making it accessible to everybody, especially those who don't have money to buy the expensive brands they want."