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Casual clothes by intense design

Jhane Barnes wields software to weave menswear empire

By Gary Strauss
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Jhane Barnes is not your typical apparel industry fashion doyenne. She's more comfortable engaging in e-mail with physicists than hobnobbing in the Hamptons. And she's much happier doing yoga than attending pretentious fashion shows.

Cover story

There's the gender-obscure name that even some major clients can't pronounce, even though she's been using it since 1979. (The h in Jhane is silent). And then there are the physicist and applied mathematician Barnes has on retainer for daily consultations.

Strange? Maybe. But it all has helped her quiet, privately held menswear company, Jhane Barnes Inc., rack up sales of about \$100 million last year, making Barnes one of the leading women designers in the high-end, designer-label menswear market. Donna Karan, her far better-known competitor, had \$113 million in designer menswear sales last year, but the bulk came from Karan's lower-priced DKNY line.

Barnes' clothing isn't for the fashion-timid or fashion-challenged. The typical Jhane Barnes aficionado is affluent, self-assured and, unlike most fashion-impaired men, likes being noticed. Barnes' highly distinctive computer-designed ties, shirts, sweaters and suits are a blend of vivid colors and textures with geometric designs based on algorithms — essentially, design schemes based on specific parameters that can be manipulated into countless patterns.

Technical aspects aside, the clothing is cool enough to win a clientele that includes President Clinton, musician Wynton Marsalis, comedian Jon Stewart, Los Angeles Laker coach Phil Jackson and actor Don Johnson. Barnes, who's also designed the uniforms of the National Basketball Association's Orlando Magic, says scores of high-tech industry workers are also fond of her apparel.

At 46, Barnes has run her 20-person company for nearly a quarter-century. In the early years, a woman's label on a menswear line was unheard of, and Barnes lost sales



By Todd Platt for USA TODAY

Design by numbers: Jhane Barnes uses computers and math to design her hot-selling menswear fashions. Jhane Barnes Inc. recorded sales of close to \$100 million last year and plans to have 18 to 20 stores in the USA by 2004.

after retailers learned she wasn't a man. The main reason she altered her first name was to make her logo appear both more masculine and European. To this day, some major customers still don't know how to pronounce it. J-han? John?

"I get that all the time," she laughs.

The Fabric Curtain

Earlier in her career, though, just plain Jane didn't seem good for business. "Starting out, I certainly encountered blatant sexism," she says. "I still do. But it really isn't an issue any more. I got benefits from being a woman too, especially in early on because I was a novelty."

Over the past decade, the shift toward casual wear in the workplace, coupled with prolonged economic boom times has been good for business.

"Her line helps us serve a very important segment of our customer base, men who want modern but understandable looks," says David Witman of Nordstrom, one of her biggest clients. "These are styles that appeal to a not-strictly-traditional guy who wants to have some fun with his wardrobe without being too out there."

Barnes now plans to sew up a bigger slice of the highly fragmented, increasingly competitive menswear market.

Next week in Las Vegas, Barnes opens her fourth Jhane Barnes retail store, part of a string of 18 to 20 outlets by 2004, extending to tony shopping areas from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. Barnes' on-line shopping Web site, under development for the past year, will launch by the fourth quarter. She plans a women's apparel line for fall 2001.

Barnes and her venture capital partner, American Fashion, are discussing further expansion overseas. And she's grappling with whether to tailor a less-pricey line of apparel, as Karan has done with DKNY, to appeal to a broader market. Currently Jhane Barnes ties are priced from \$65 to \$125; shirts, \$125 to \$165; sweaters, \$175 to \$250, sportcoats, \$500 to \$750 and suits up to \$1,000.

"She makes a great product," says Stuart Nifoussi, publisher of trade magazine MR. "What's unique is how recognizable her designs are. When you see a sweater or a shirt, you immediately recognize it as her style. She understands sophisticated, casual clothing. That's the next place for the casual



Center photo by Todd Plitt for USA TODAY

In addition to her popular menswear line, including shirts that sell for \$125 to \$165, Barnes designs furniture such as the Duet Chair, left, and the Prelude Table, right.

clothing market as it moves out of Dockers and golf shirts."

Under separate joint venture deals, Barnes also designs furniture, carpeting and textiles for corporate clients. IBM, Coca-Cola and Walt Disney are among companies who've purchased her designs for their corporate offices. That market is also likely to expand — if Barnes finds time to design when she's not releasing seasonal apparel lines.

Despite her success — her network of 600 retailers includes Neiman Marcus, Saks and Nordstrom and she has a passel of industry design awards — Barnes eschews most fashion industry trappings and the managerial headaches of prototypical business executives.

"I'm not very glamorous, and I don't do a lot of public appearances," Barnes says behind her spartan desk at her headquarters in New York's Garment District. She's dressed, as usual, in one of her own men's tops and slacks, altered to fit a 5-foot 5-inch frame taut, trim and toned from daily Yoga workouts.

"When a lot of designers get big, they don't design anymore. They tend to be marketers, merchandisers and p.r. people," Barnes says. "I feel sorry for them."

Management recently held a marathon meeting to discuss the future of the company. At one point, Barnes' had enough. "I couldn't handle it any more. I had to get out of there — running the business is not something I enjoy doing," she says. "I enjoy designing."

Howard Feinberg, Barnes' chief operating officer, oversees financial operations. Another long-time partner, vice president Erasmo Di Russo, the former tailor, oversees production. Barnes says the pair allow her to spend 80% or more of her work time designing.

Forget sketchbooks and cocktail napkins, though. Facing twin jumbo Apple Computer monitors that dominate her office, Barnes is the consummate computer geek, mouse-clicking pattern and color scheme matrixes together at lightning speed. Manipulating both, she's able to create textures and patterns that will be blended into designs for the fall 2001 line.

Equation for Success

Central to Barnes' designs are patterns based on similarity of form.

Barnes began incorporating math into her design process in the early 1980s on an Atari computer, using a weaving program that drove a fabric loom.

Her work later evolved after meeting Bill Jones, an applied mathematician at Syracuse University, at a computer trade show in 1992, where he was peddling computer software called Weavemaker, designed to create specific design patterns for textiles.

"Jhane has that self-questioning ability that makes her open to new ideas from all kinds of sources. Her mind is never closed. This is what made it possible for her to allow software to help her be more creative," says Jones, a principal in Syracuse-based Design Software LLC.

Physicist Dana Cartwright eventually went to work with Jones. For years, the pair worked closely at what Cartwright jokingly calls the "Jhane Barnes School of Textiles."

Jones and Cartwright tried to market the software to other designers, but other than Barnes, few "seriously understand that you can use math and science to create beautiful designs," Cartwright says.

Both say Barnes has an excellent aptitude for mathematics — one that's already found its way into an algebra textbook. Barnes is also helping educators developing high school learning programs under the Ohio Mathworks Project, designed for that state's ninth-graders.

Over the years, Barnes, Cartwright and Jones have developed verbal shorthand and programming skills to smoothly integrate what Barnes wants and the software needed for her design work. When she wants software for a particular application, she talks to Jones. When she wants more user-friendly software, she talks with Cartwright.

Using Photo Realism, an advanced printing process that allows images to be transmitted from computer to printer, Barnes can use

About Jhane Barnes



By Todd Plitt for USA TODAY

Hobbies: Yoga, science fiction, shopping on the Internet.

Weirdest piece of home exercise equipment: Flotation tank, a coffinlike device filled with salt water used for meditation.

Significant other: Married to Japanese

textile executive Katsuhiko Kawasaki.

Pets: Two Dalmatians.

Charitable efforts: Working with Ohio state educators developing math programs for ninth graders.

Favorite recipe: Tuna steak marinated in lemon and garlic.

Home: Westchester County with adjoining one-acre pond, featured in latest issue of Metropolitan Home. "I can't really take credit — the people we bought it from did most of the improvements."

Drives: Land Rover.

Cooliest CEO: Apple Computer's Steve Jobs. "He's a visionary."

photo-quality reproductions on virtually any fabric, giving finished products a three-dimensional, textured appearance.

Barnes had a love for math, science and music growing up near Baltimore, and for a time, dreamed of a career in astrophysics or music. But her music and trigonometry teachers convinced her she'd be only average at best. A third teacher convinced her that she had immense talent for fashion; she had designed her own clothes since junior high and did the uniforms for her high school band.

That led her to attend New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, a decision that she doesn't regret. "I'm a competitive person, and I wouldn't have been happy just being average," she says.