

FASHIONISTA

WHY THE HALSTON NAME LIVES ON

With the launch of a QVC collection and the success of a contemporary line, it seems that the mass market — the thing that ruined the Halston brand in the first place — is now saving it.



Halston with models from "Ultrasuede: In Search of Halston" distributed by Tribeca Film. Photo Credit: Roxanne Lowit/Tribeca Film.

In early June, fashion personality [Cameron Silver](#) will present his first collection for H by Halston, a 128-piece line that starts at \$32, tops off at \$339, and includes caftans, jumpsuits and other silhouettes that nod to the 1970s. That is, of course, the decade that Halston — both the brand, and the designer — defined. “The aesthetic of Halston has always inspired me,” says Silver, owner of famed Los Angeles vintage store [Decades](#), which sells pristine ready-to-wear and couture from every decade. “[Halston’s designs] influence today’s runways, decades after his last collection.”

Halston was also one of the first designers — if not the first — to willingly participate in a high-low collaboration. In 1983, he was [reportedly paid somewhere in the eight figures for a six-year deal](#) with J.C. Penney. Halston III, as it was called, was a flop, and the designer did not ride out his contract. Priced between [\\$24 \(for a top\) and \\$200](#) (for a coat), my mother — who wore Halston’s fragrance — recalls it still feeling too expensive. To give you some context: \$200 in 1983 equals \$475 in 2015.

The J.C. Penney disaster marked the end of Halston's career — his earliest and biggest champions in retail, including Bergdorf Goodman, dropped him — although it's hard to blame it entirely. Born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1932, Roy Halston Frowick began sewing as a child, an unofficial apprentice to his seamstress mother. He started making hats in the mid-1950s while studying at the Art Institute of Chicago. As a milliner, he sold pieces to Hollywood actresses including Kim Novak and Deborah Kerr. His greatest coup, though, was designing the pillbox hat Jacqueline Kennedy wore to John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961. He launched ready-to-wear in the late 1960s, and was soon dressing the era's most alluring stars: Bianca Jagger, Margaux Hemingway, Liza Minnelli.

The Halston look was ubiquitous with Studio 54, gold lamé and bias-cut jersey, all things that floated away as the '70s came to a close. Even if he had said no to J.C. Penney, Bergdorf Goodman and other upscale retailers would likely have dropped his ready-to-wear line anyway. While his contemporary Yves Saint Laurent happily embraced the hard-edged and puffed-sleeve 1980s, Halston's aesthetic failed to evolve.

More than 30 years later, the genius of Halston's unwavering look is easier to appreciate. While the 1970s are having "a moment" in 2015, they never really go away. "So much of [Tom] Ford's work during his tenure as creative director of Gucci, from 1994 to 2004, recalled the slithering sexuality of Halston," writes *Washington Post* fashion critic [Robin Givhan in "The Battle of Versailles."](#) "When Ford added Yves Saint Laurent to his workload in 1999, he did due diligence in researching the house's history. But his work continued to display a louche attitude that recalled the best of Halston."

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For those whose personal style fits into the "glam bohemian" category, one-shoulder gowns and peasant-blouse tops have an enduring appeal. But the look can also easily veer into costume territory. That flaw in the formula is one of the big reasons why Halston has never been successfully revived as a ready-to-wear brand. (Halston, the man, passed away in 1990 from an AIDS-related illness.)

closed the clothing business shortly after his death. After being passed off to a Saudi investor, the clothing license was sold in 1996 to sportswear firm Tropic Tex, which brought on Randolph Duke as the designer. Just two years later, the license was sold to private equity firm Catterton. In 1999, designer Kevan Hall was hired. Later on that year, the license was sold — again — to Neema Clothing Ltd, which replaced Hall with Bill Blass-protégé Craig Natiello. In 2002, Bradley Bayou was brought on and stayed for three years. Designer Jeff Mahshie served as creative director from 2005 to 2007.

By 2007, if you weren't an avid reader of *WWD*, you might've thought that Halston no longer existed. However, that would quickly change. That same year, Halston was bought by Hilco Consumer Capital in partnership with the Weinstein Company. Hilco Consumer Capital — now called Hilco Brands — is part of the financial firm Hilco Global, and put down most of the money, according to sources familiar with the matter. (Later on, [The New York Times](#) reported that Hilco initially invested \$25 million.)

The Weinstein Company would provide the necessary glitz to relaunch the brand into the fashion stratosphere, and to make it a viable player on the red carpet. Tamara Mellon, who was at the time running Jimmy Choo, sat on the board. Rachel Zoe was also involved. "As soon as Tamara Mellon brought this deal to me, I knew that Halston would be the perfect fit for [The Weinstein Company]," Harvey Weinstein [said](#) in a 2007 statement. "Our company has already had tremendous success turning the hit fashion show, 'Project Runway,' into a global brand and we see the same potential with Halston. We believe this innovative partnership furthers the natural connection between the adjacent worlds of entertainment and fashion."

It didn't sound like a terrible idea. Hilco hired well-respected fashion exec Bonnie Takhar as the brand's CEO, and Marco Zanini — a former Versace designer — as its creative lead. Yet there was trouble from the start. While Mellon championed Zanini, Zoe was not impressed and stepped away. Zanini left the company within a year, and was replaced by British designer Marios Schwab in 2009.

It was around that time that the company decided to launch a contemporary line based on Halston's designs from the 1970s, called Halston Heritage. Takhar convinced Sarah Jessica Parker to join as its chief creative officer of the entire company in [early 2010](#): she subsequently wore the Halston Heritage in "Sex and the City 2."



Marios Schwab's ill-fated collection for Halston, shown in the February of 2011. Photo: Andy Kropa/Getty Images Entertainment

The excitement around Parker's appointment was short-lived. Takhar, the actress' partner and confidant in the business, [was let go in the fall of 2010](#). (She is now the CEO of Charlotte Olympia.) Schwab's first collection, which debuted in February 2011, was a flop, and both he and Parker exited the company — along with Weinstein — by the middle of that year.

What an exhausting series of events. One would imagine, at this point, that it was time to give up on Halston: that the name's contribution to fashion was more than enough. But instead, Hilco chose to make one more bet: This time on the Halston Heritage business, which showed more potential than contemporary ready-to-wear. Hilco, after all, has had great success in redeveloping storied brands — including Polaroid — and CEO Jeffrey Hecktman believed the Halston deal could be salvaged.

In 2011, Hilco [invested an additional \\$7.5 million](#) into the brand and brought in Ben Malka, the former president of BCBG, out of retirement. Malka [owns a majority stake in Halston](#), with Hilco providing additional backing. The partnership makes sense: Halston Heritage and the BCBG customer overlap a great deal, and the Los Angeles-based Malka was able to woo many of his best people — including well-regarded creative director Marie Mazelis — from his former employer. "I got involved in the company because of the great heritage and the DNA," Malka says. "The most difficult thing to do is define a brand."

Malka spent the next four years laying the groundwork to make Halston Heritage a legitimate competitor in the contemporary market, but to also edge it into boutiques that primarily deal in “advanced contemporary” and designer brands. (The advanced contemporary category includes brands like Alexander Wang and 3.1 Phillip Lim. Halston Heritage’s prices are lower — typically under \$500 for a dress — but it often sits with these labels.) The executive has also pushed hard to build the label’s concession business, which is more often referred to as department store “shop in shops.” The company opened four concessions at Bloomingdale’s in 2014: by August 2015, there will be 27. “Today there is so much noise — how do you get a consumer to understand your point of view?” Malka asks. “By having your store window, floor set, e-blast and your space at Bloomingdale’s consistent.”

Part concession, part traditional wholesale, Halston Heritage is stocked in nearly 30 countries across the globe, including Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom, Hudson Bay in Canada and Harvey Nichols in China. There are also several standalone stores besides e-commerce, including one in New York, another in Troy, Michigan, three in California, and outlet stores in Chicago and National Harbor, Maryland. (There are several international locations as well, including two stores in the Middle East — Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates — along with outposts in Central Jakarta and Mexico City.)



A Halston Heritage draped jersey gown with hardware details, \$425. Photo: Halston Heritage

Malka declined to offer any hard stats around the growth of the business, but he will say that sales have doubled each year since 2012. “All the channels are growing at very good rates, way above expectations,” he says. “And will continue to, I assume, as long as we turn out a good product and communicate with the consumer.”

Communicating what Halston Heritage stands for is more important than ever, given the introduction of H by Halston at QVC. In January 2015, Hilco and Malka sold the H by Halston and H Halston brands — separate from plain-old Halston and Halston Heritage labels — to Xcel, a firm that takes fairly known fashion labels and makes them mass. Xcel is best known for bringing Isaac Mizrahi, Judith Ripka and Liz Clairborne to QVC with great success. (Ripka in particular is a bestseller for the home shopping channel.)

Malka, who now sits on Xcel’s board of directors, isn’t concerned that the lower-priced line will dilute the brand equity of Halston Heritage. For one, the CEO believes in the expertise and trustworthiness of Silver, who has years of experience buying and selling the label for Decades. He also believes that while the customer may indeed overlap, H by Halston will offer casual daywear, while Halston Heritage is more focused on clothes for dressier occasions, from work to formal events. (After all, this isn’t the 1990s, an era Diane von Furstenberg was chastised for shilling her wrap dresses on TV. These days, QVC has plenty of Beverly Hills customers.)

In many ways, the QVC deal speaks to Halston’s history with J.C. Penney, and his foresight into what the fashion business would become. “Halston was a thoughtful and democratic designer dressing women of many generations, sizes, and backgrounds,” Silver says. “He was a designer for the people.”

What’s more challenging for Malka and his team is the idea of bringing back Halston, the luxury label. It’s easy to look at the European luxury houses as a template to revive a brand: bring on a dazzling designer, tap your network of craftsmen, and pour gobs of money into it until it becomes the next Givenchy, or Céline, or better yet, Louis Vuitton. But that takes more cash — and time — than most private equity firms would like. And unfortunately, the U.S. has yet to build its own LVMH, Kering or Richemont, and may never do so.

But if Halston Heritage continues to grow and H by Halston does indeed succeed, Malka might very well try again at the high end. “We’re very open to doing that,” Malka says. “But it has to be the right time.” One thing is for certain: the story of Halston is far from finished.