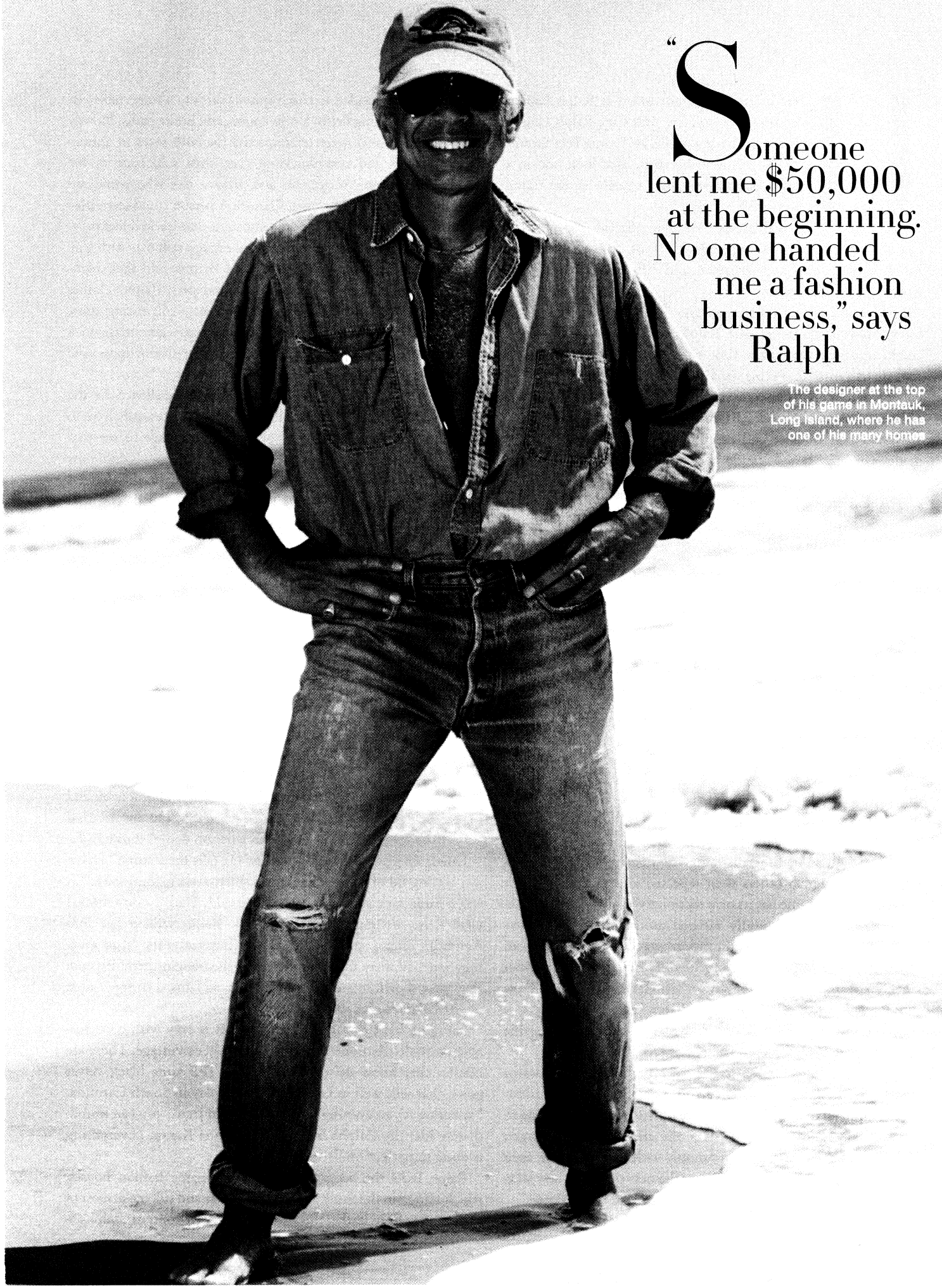


Fashion's Number One

Ralph Lauren is the biggest-selling designer in the world. He's created some of fashion's greatest hits, and his influence can be felt around the world. On the eve of his 40th anniversary year, he reveals the secret of his staggering success. By Phoebe Eaton

Portrait by Richard Corman
Photographs by Karl Lagerfeld



“Someone lent me \$50,000 at the beginning. No one handed me a fashion business,” says Ralph

The designer at the top of his game in Montauk, Long Island, where he has one of his many homes

Here in Ralph Lauren's office at Ralph Lauren headquarters in New York City, Ralph Lauren is appraising my outfit, an Emma Peel ski suit like so many in his stores that look hot on a chilly day but will never actually be seen riding a chairlift.

"Very slinky," he skittley-scats in that grizzled-jazz-musician voice of his. He approves, he thinks it's "cool," this champion of heroic consumerism and chairman and CEO of fashion's most globally influential atelier.

I admire the tan on Ralph's vintage brown motorcycle jacket, and Ralph laughs and says that every time the coat smacks into something, its sandpaper surface coughs up a mysterious dust cloud. A pair of black RRL jeans, a Navajo belt buckle, and custom-made cowboy boots exude Gary Cooper as surely as the many photographs in circulation where Ralph stands, legs apart, arms akimbo, seemingly poised to blast all his copycats to kingdom come with a pair of invisible six-shooters.

The evening's plans don't include my boarding a plane for St. Moritz, and Ralph's horse isn't tethered to a post outside this nondescript office building on Madison Avenue. But it *is* pretty to think so. Ralph calls getting dressed an "adventure," cites Ernest Hemingway as someone who wore the right clothes and essentially "took on the role of the rugged writer and elephant hunter and became the man he wanted to be."

Ralph was the first designer to go West and find something distinctly American worth repeating on a runway, which others then repeated and repeated. Ralph Lauren: the very name has its own dictionary entry in pop culture, means something splendidly rarefied around the world. Says Karl Lagerfeld, "Ralph's innovation was to give American sportswear and fashion a strong identity. He is the American Gatsby-dream designer," the sort of visionary who rules that we can now mix a camel belt with gray flannel even as he finds new things to say with prairie skirts, concha belts, romantic-heroine blouses, those bushy manes of suede fringe.

But for one of the greatest designers of all time, the elevator first stopped in the men's department. Ralph Lauren's career kicked off in an era when menswear designers were just starting to become household names. Out of his cream-colored Morgan convertible he was selling uncommonly wide Polo neckties, then the shirts he devised to accommodate the new ties, then new suits to accommodate the new shirts.

The Polo name communicated a clean and elegant athleticism,

and Ralph next decided to coach sportswear into a respectable visibility off the playing fields, tennis courts, and bridle paths. Dowdy mud-crusteds classics were reinterpreted for both sexes in antidepressant colors and swashbuckling cuts, then sold back to the woody-sided station wagon set and anyone else who wondered what they had missed out on at Oxford. A person could learn how to dress from those magazine-ad campaigns that tracked like movies set in swank penthouses, ivy-tangled estates, sailboats with teak topsides and cast with Breck girls, Lord Byrons, and their high-

strung pedigreed pets. Ralph's clothes always told a pretty convincing story, provided some class camouflage in a society where these distinctions were already melting away.

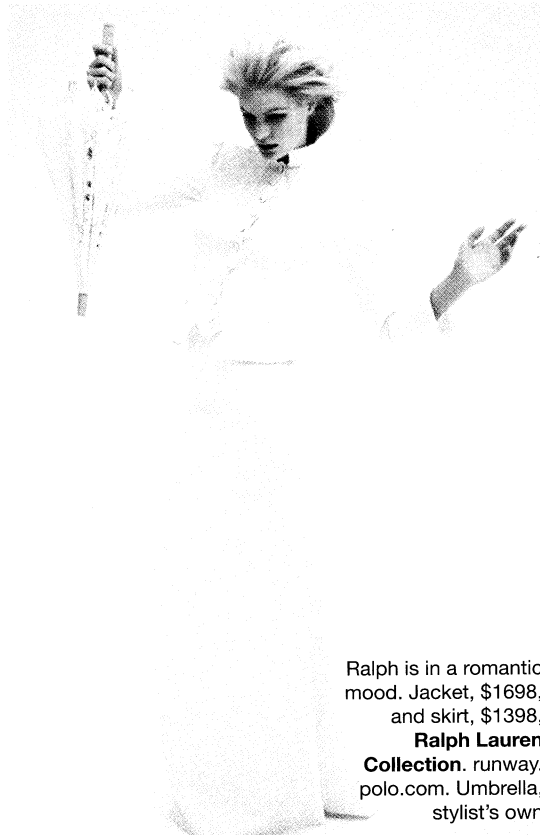
"I love to find excellence in the detailing. It doesn't necessarily have to be expensive. I just have to see that someone's eye *gets it*," says Ralph, now 66. He was always big on the element of surprise: a tartan ball gown, a sundress snipped out of bandannas, a tennis-sweater halter top. It's hard not to appreciate the matchmaking behind boot-cut deerskin jeans, a Hudson's Bay-blanket skirt, a glen-plaid spaghetti-strap sheath. "I make things that I love, that I can't find the right way," he explains.

He taunts me for fishing at the "trendy shops" for an Eskimo-style parka that won't ride up around my navel. His own RLX-line parkas neatly fit that bill, articulating the difference between the mindlessly fashionable and the timelessly stylish. His are the kind of clothes a person doesn't throw away.


Unless that person is his daughter. He tells me a story: "Dylan was getting rid of all her old madras shirts—*my* madras shirts!" It was a mule kick to the gut when she said, Dad, I don't think I need these anymore. Not long after, Ralph walked her into American Rag, a store he's been haunting for years. "And there they were, all these madras shirts. And she bought them! Because they were shown in a different way," he explains, a trumpet note of satisfaction in his voice.

Scrolling back through his archives, it is only with considerable difficulty that one can pinpoint a piece's vintage. These are classics that know no earthly borders: The same black velvet gown that sells well in London will also play in South Carolina. "Whether it's an evening gown or a pair of jeans, you can immediately identify Ralph's hand," says Donna Karan. "Everything is done to perfection."

Ralph lacks the baggage of several big-name fashion houses, which started in the trunk and valise business and still make most of their money from leather purses and pumps. By contrast, Ralph's ►



Ralph is in a romantic mood. Jacket, \$1698, and skirt, \$1398, **Ralph Lauren Collection.** runway.polo.com. Umbrella, stylist's own



“**R**alph’s
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The style arbiter’s genius lies in knowing how to take classic American fabrics, like broadcloth and eyelet, and transform them into sexy, sculpted pieces like this drop-dead-gorgeous gown. Dress, \$5000, **Ralph Lauren Collection**. See **Where to Buy** for details. Fashion editor: **Panos Yiapanis**

own *Forbes*-calculated fortune derives from the actual clothes: In fiscal 2005 he saw a 25 percent increase in revenues and sold more than \$1 billion worth of womenswear at wholesale alone. Ralph Lauren is the biggest-selling fashion designer in the world.

"I think I cater to nonfashion people," Ralph says. He likes to call his life's work "antifashion." Ralph never felt the need to skateboard through Studio 54, prove his cut-crystal edginess to anyone.

"I'm very private. I'm not hangin' out all over the place. You've read about me. I'm boring," Ralph says, throwing down a challenge.

Does he think he's boring? "I don't know. I could be. I might be," he says impishly. He is certainly weary of journalists poking at him with their pens, trying to sniff out his Rosebuds, teasing some neurosis or other out of his modest Bronx boyhood.

So—in case anyone's wondering—"I'm not an unhappy, bitter man," he volunteers. "I *like* myself. I have my own drive, but I'm not off-the-wall." He is busier than ever now that he runs a public company and attends to the needs of 300 stores and a multitude of brands: Purple Label, Blue Label, Black Label, Ralph Lauren Golf, Collection, Lauren, Chaps, RRL, Polo Jeans Co., RLX, and Ralph Lauren Home, among others.

"If you followed me around for a few days you'd see what I do," he says. "I don't get a chance to go to the bathroom." Time off tends to be split between a seaside villa in Jamaica and his almost-17,000-acre ranch near Telluride, where one guesses he's stressed those parkas on the double black diamonds.

But no: The Bronx was all stickball and no schuss, and anyway, a car accident a while ago left him with a pin in his ankle, so he doesn't ski. Instead, Ralph has preferred the heady thrills offered by more grand-scale engineering, a thoroughbred car from his museum-displayed collection of vintage automobiles, for example, or his favorite horse, Ferrari.

Ralph never had the urge to snap a string of ponies around a polo field like a hairy-chested Argentine playboy (though he admits he once played cowboy polo with a broom). But Ferrari handled like a dream, made him feel like a champion rider. "He had a good canter—smooth, silky, very fast. I knew how to hold him back," he says. Heart-sore when Ferrari died a few years back, he hasn't saddled up much since. But when his son David decided he wanted a motorcycle, Dad couldn't resist a Ducati and enrolled them both in racing school. One day, as Ralph was pulling out of his gravel driveway, the Ducati tipped over and crushed his ankle. "Nothing dramatic, nothing sexy. I just couldn't walk," he says. The bike is now safely stabled in his garage.

"Sometimes I go over and pet it," he says. "And if no one's looking, I get on. But I said to myself, what do I need that for?" He banned David from riding too (and one can imagine how that went over): "You know that one day you're going to fall, and it's more about my son falling than me," he decided.

Ralph is a family man. On weekends he can usually be found with his wife and his three grown children out at the 283-acre estate in Bedford, New York, far more scenic than Greenwich, Connecticut,

he points out (where Tommy Hilfiger lives, which he doesn't point out). Martha Stewart is his next-door neighbor.

By nature, Ralph is a curious person, always with the probing questions, sniffing out everyone else's Rosebud. His wife, Ricky, a therapist and counselor, has patiently fielded those questions about what she's wearing and why for 41 years of marriage. It is all the more entertaining to consider that Ricky, a stunning blonde who looks like a dressage medalist, is one of those women who tends to stuff everything she needs in her pockets, says her husband. But when she's being a grown-up, she grabs her new brown "Ricky" bag, a strappy leather pocketbook that's the chic second cousin to a saddle carrier. The distinctive lock looks like it was pried off a safe but was actually inspired by an attaché case from the '30s. That the Ricky can be left ajar and remains reasonably pickpocket-proof has major appeal, too.

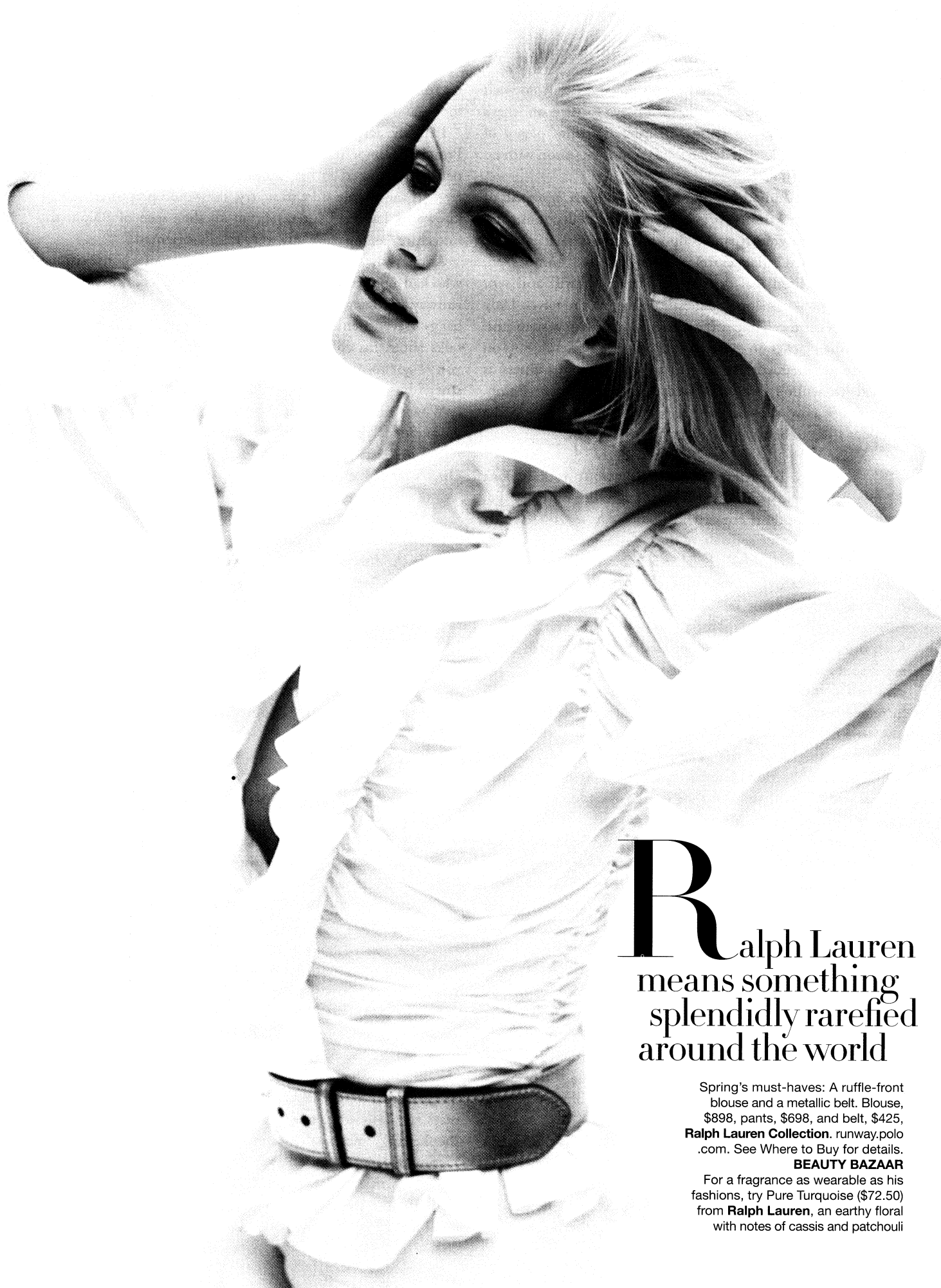
The Ricky bag is for sale just up the street at Ralph's fabled Rhinelander Mansion flagship store, a luxe-life ecosystem where, like Tiffany, it feels like nothing very bad could happen to you (as one of Ralph's long-stemmed-rose muses, Audrey Hepburn, famously observed). Later in the day, a salesman is justifying a Ricky bag's price tag to a troupe of wounded-looking women: "The cost of American alligator *has* gone up," he says cheerily. Time, perhaps, to transfer one's affections to the bitsier Bikini bag, with the utilitarian look of a traditional hunting-cartridge pouch and named for Ricky's Yorkshire terrier.

There was never any rule that his family could wear only Ralph Lauren. "But when they don't, I say, 'Why'dya get *that*!'" Ralph confesses, those blue eyes frosting over. His daughter, Dylan, 31, "is sleek and slim. She can wear it all," he says. She, too, is an entrepreneur, who opened a candy supermarket across the street from Bloomingdale's, where Dad had pioneered the first-ever in-store menswear boutique. A few years ago, Ralph's son David, now 34, started Ralph Lauren's Internet business. Polo.com is the largest store in Ralph's realm; with thousands of items for sale, no other designer's site is as robust. Ralph's eldest, Andrew, 36, has been an actor and most recently was an executive producer of *The Squid and the Whale*.

Ralph had always wanted to be in the movie business, so the ad campaigns became his movies. Occasionally, it's Ralph himself who stars. In the winter, a real-life carpenter played a bearded Count Vronsky in a vaguely Russian-themed portfolio. As for leading ladies, evidence suggests that Ralph's taste runs to the kind of woman who looks and comports herself like she can speak French and play Beethoven piano sonatas.

Next year will be the 40th anniversary of this \$10 billion-a-year empire its founder is proud to say he grew "from nothing."

"Someone lent me \$50,000 at the beginning. No one handed me a fashion business," Ralph says, indirectly referencing the dumb luck of all the nightclub-surfing design dudes who inherited prestige fashion houses in recent years without getting some dirt under their nails, without building a brand brick by brick. Ralph didn't go to fashion school, but it hardly matters: Hired hands ►



Ralph Lauren
means something
splendidly rarefied
around the world

Spring's must-haves: A ruffle-front blouse and a metallic belt. Blouse, \$898, pants, \$698, and belt, \$425, **Ralph Lauren Collection**. runway.polo.com. See Where to Buy for details.

BEAUTY BAZAAR

For a fragrance as wearable as his fashions, try Pure Turquoise (\$72.50) from **Ralph Lauren**, an earthy floral with notes of cassis and patchouli

can cut and draw. “They can’t do what I do, and I can’t do what they do,” he says. Ralph always keeps his eye focused on what’s next, filtering a thousand points of inspiration into plenty of blockbuster hits, looks that defined the theme of a season with no apparent expiration date.

“I’ve always admired his ability to evolve his aesthetic of modern elegance through generations of collections and clients,” says Giorgio Armani. Ralph revolutions have included turtleneck-topped taffeta skirts, a theory airlifted from Aspen, except Ralph sliced real ski sweaters at the midriff and sent them out over skirts sloped majestically below the navel. Lady Chatterley’s car mechanic was another seductive new snapshot: an Edwardian jacket on top, grease-monkey-boyfriend jeans on the bottom, shredded and stained to an heirloom hipness as defined by denim’s own Big Daddy Cool. Thanks to Ralph, turquoise is now allowed out past its 6 P.M. curfew, on the shoulder strap of Sheryl Crow’s satiny gold sheath.

I’ve always been in the business of “it won’t work, it won’t sell, people won’t buy it,” says Ralph. But buy they did, in spite of those critics whose binoculars remain slavishly trained on the runways of the Continent.

Ralph boldly launched his most recent flagship store in Milan, a tough town where every grown man has a fourth-generation tailor in his breast pocket. It’s women who have responded to the brand for the most part, but everyone digs his sportswear. “They know Ralph Lauren,” he says. Italy has a sweet spot for him: Twenty years ago he walked into an antique store in Florence and spotted a pile of shirts for sale. “My shirts,” he remembers, still in shock. “I said ‘*Ahhh*, I’ve made it.’”

After a fall season inspired by Amelia Earhart and the gleaming breasts, thighs, and rumps of a Bugatti and a Mercedes in his motorcar collection, Ralph’s imagination set sail for Saint-Tropez. “My idea of Saint-Tropez was, Wow, you could be sitting in a restaurant and all these beautiful girls are walking by. I always loved *the dream* of what it’s about,” he says. Sometimes, the dream alone could suffice: When Ralph rolled out his widely imitated Safari collection in 1984, he had never actually been on safari—and still hasn’t. But all was how he *imagined* it should be.

“He really celebrates beauty and glamour,” says Jim Gold, CEO of Bergdorf Goodman. “I’m always struck by how exquisitely beautiful the women look coming down his runway. One exit is just more beautiful than the next.”

For spring, Ralph is unpacking vintage-poster Deauville knits, an indigo-tablecloth blazer jigsawed together by Kentucky seamstresses, and a Bonaparte jacket over a nautical T-shirt. Ball gowns and Brontë-girl blouses rustle in the same stripy blue broadcloth that a bond salesman wears on the trading floor.

Naomi Campbell is in the show’s first row, her caramel hair gripped by a butterfly clip. Ralph designed a T-shirt for her charity, and Naomi is a past-ad-campaign ladyship. Ralph is a man of his word: He promised to put her in his ads, and he did. To Naomi, that meant something. While her closet is the better for

his tuxedos, belts, and suede shirts, she is all about his skiwear, too—“and I don’t even ski,” she adds.

Directly across the runway sits David Lauren’s girlfriend, Princeton senior and presidential niece Lauren Bush, her hands nervously clasped in her lap, a gray flannel Ricky bag at her feet. (If the couple were to marry, she would preposterously be known as Lauren Lauren.) From all she’s seen of Ralph, she finds him “an amazing guy, very family-oriented.”

At the show’s finale Ralph Lauren, the son of a house painter who had a penchant for trompe l’oeil, appears at the end of the runway, a Riviera-phase Picasso in a striped sailor’s shirt and baggy frayed denims cinched with a rustic belt. Ralph often talks about his collections in terms of painting a story, “but you’ve got to make it interesting. It can’t just be an ordinary story,” he says.

What’s news these days? The oversize Big Pony logo, which an audience of more than 86 million Americans caught on television last summer when Ralph Lauren, now the U.S. Open’s official apparel sponsor, dressed the ball boys and girls. “All of a sudden it’s the hippest shirt,” says Ralph, who adds that he doesn’t think a three-inch pony would have worked before. It might have seemed too Marvel Comics, too boastful—too *rap*. And then there’s Rugby, a frat-basement concept store geared to college kids who like their jeans patched with tie silks and their cords embroidered with a skull and bones.

“I didn’t want Rugby to be a Banana Republic, a Gap, or a J. Crew,” says Ralph. “It’s got a cult sensibility. So people find it, discover it. It’s not advertised.”

Ralph now obliges me with a quick tour of his office. Outside is all mahogany, Chesterfield benchery, and Chinese ginger jars. But Ralph himself is quartered in the most contemporary of living rooms, where some well-intentioned lighting compensates for a bank of louvered windows that block what I imagine is an authentically dreary view. Those chairs we’d been sitting in? Molded out of carbon fiber, just like a McLaren race car.

“Wanna see my bathroom?” Ralph asks with adolescent pleasure. Now I understand why he misses those bathroom breaks: With an Englishman’s sense of irony, Ralph has relegated some of his more interesting keepsakes and photographs to his water closet. On one wall he’s got that honorary doctorate from Brandeis University (like many moguls who have lived their lives in an accelerated form, Ralph is a college dropout). He’s framed a \$1452.57 check from his appearance on *Friends* (Jennifer Aniston’s character worked for Ralph Lauren). There’s Ralph with a dinner-jacketed Cary Grant. “He took me to the races in Hollywood one day with his last wife,” Ralph says, shepherding me past Audrey with Ralph, an autographed picture of Sinatra.

Perhaps this is Ralph’s greatest talent as a designer: that he can tune into the elegant iconography of a vanished world and hand it back to us, better than it ever was. ■