

California Apparel News
L.A. Indie Designers - April 2008
Nurturing the Indie Design Spirit



(left) of Los Angeles-based company Thread host Europe for consumers and buyers that feature emerging



WHAT'S IN STORE: Costa Mesa, Calif.'s eVocal nurtures independent designers, artists and musicians through events and in-store exhibitions.



Volok
WRITER

Operating under the sanguine view that "every great designer is usually a great artist," the brother-and-sister team of Lara and Alex Matthews launched its company, **Thread Independent Fashion Shopping Events**, to provide emerging designers with expert marketing, brand positioning and exposure to global markets.

Given the fact that many great designers and artists are sometimes lacking in business acumen, Thread offers a strategic approach for struggling independent designers to climb the fashion ladder.

It's a common challenge for new designers to learn how to sustain their business while staying true to their artistic ideas. "If you look at it through the lens of an emerging designer, the first two or three collections are often incredibly hard to execute without becoming pulled in every direction and losing sight of what they are good at," Lara Matthews said.

Thread is one of several organizations in Southern California founded to tap into and help California's myriad of independent designer labels. These organizations were created with the intention of providing emerging fashion designers with the tools they need to succeed in the industry and get noticed.

Thread

Launched in 2003, Thread shows are venues for designers to introduce lines to the public and wholesale buyers. "We take designers from being this amazing talent and give them the platform to build the brand up to a level where they could show with **Pooltradeshow**, **Project [Global Trade Show]** or **Bread & Butter**," Alex Matthews explained.

Thread boasts a loyal female customer base and an impressive male following. "Since I joined Thread in 2005, my mission was to breathe life into the show by introduc-

ing more male-friendly designers, including **Huf**, **Upper Playground**, **Adidas Originals**, **WESC**, **RVCA**, **Gama-Go**, **SPRFKR** and **Kingly Coverings**," said Alex Matthews, who has also focused on bringing the event to new markets (San Francisco, United Kingdom, Miami, Los Angeles and New York). He also facilitated partnerships with corporate sponsors, including **Volkswagen**, **Virgin Mobile** and **Nintendo**.

As a springboard for emerging designers, Los Angeles-based Thread also has a partnership with the **Pooltradeshow**, which allows Thread to take a select group of designers to the next level. "We identified that not only are these designers looking for immediate cash flow and exposure, but as they start to become more confident in who they are [with branding, new collections, store placements and Web site content] they will most likely make the jump to a trade show for the wholesale piece of the puzzle. That is where **Pooltradeshow** became an obvious affiliate to Thread," Lara Matthews explained. "Twice a year, Thread takes 12 of the best brands we have worked with at the Thread shows and presents them at **Pool**."

For the remainder of 2008, Thread is hosting shows in Los Angeles, Miami, San Diego and New York. Next year will mark the return of the United Kingdom shows and the expansion of Thread's European coverage, with shows in Italy and Barcelona. For more information, visit www.thread-show.com.

Citizen Fashion

The husband-and-wife team of Helen and Tom Lo has its hands in all areas of the fashion world. With plenty of experience under her well-fashioned belt, designer Helen Lo heads up the line **Mobius Lounge**. (The new collection is focused on women's knits while maintaining the company motto, "Life

Simplified.") Together, the Los are concentrating on the relaunch of **Citizen Fashion**, an organization that aids independent designers in launching their own collections. "We both feel that emerging designers have just as much talent as some of the more-established companies and brands that are out there today and believe that they also deserve to have contractors that can help them achieve their dreams," Tom Lo said.

Though the new and improved **Citizen Fashion** is still in the works, Tom Lo said there are many exciting new aspects they are exploring, including a social-networking platform. They are also hoping to plan an event for the fall. As for why they decided to launch the organization in the first place, Tom Lo credits his wife's personal experiences over the years and the knowledge of how difficult it is to find patternmakers and contractors willing to help emerging designers. "We decided this was a way we could give back to the fashion community and create a business at the same time," he explained. "In a way, we like rooting for the 'little guy or gal.' While we do have customers that we work with on a regular basis for larger production, we always like working with new designers. It's fun to share in their passion, and for us, it's a great way to keep a fresh perspective in this business. Besides, these companies may not always stay small, and we'd be proud to say that we had a hand in launching some of these future superstars."

Of course, there are challenges on both sides. Tom Lo said the biggest challenge is when designers are unfocused about what their brand is about. "Designers need to definitely do their homework and have a realistic picture of the market or niche that they feel they can tap into," he explained. "The other practical challenge on our side is how to produce smaller quantities for designers that are able to hit a price point that still makes the garment sellable. There's usually a trade-off somewhere between price, fabric or number of styles to run."

For more information, visit www.citizen-fashion.com.

eVocal

Costa Mesa, Calif.-based **eVocal** does not just identify indie talent, it provides a gallery-like venue for newcomers to showcase and sell their work.

"We set out to model an alternative that would provide an infrastructure enabling artists to build brand identity, create a product and create awareness," said founder Brett Walker.

Launched officially in 2006 with the grand opening of a creative-arts lifestyle boutique/gallery/event space, **eVocal** was born from a desire to change how the industry works. Under the moniker **Diverse Productions**, the artist-development lab has been in existence since 2001, Walker said. "Our niche in the free-lance design world was based on a core group of artists collaborating to create organic, hand-generated components for graphic and apparel

applications," Walker said. "We spent years working in the youth-culture and action-sports industries and were submersed in creative arts, identifying the problems and injustices with current standards. The need for change was obvious, with so much talent and original ideas buried underground and so few choices for the consumer. Technology has caused an eruption, which has fueled the creative-arts evolution ['Vocalismovement']. Independent artists cannot only make great product; they can reach people without 'the machine.' Our platform promotes freedom of expression and originality, and we aim to establish new standards, giving artists their own voice, credit they deserve and rightful compensation. It's all about a community of artists supporting the brand, the brand supporting the artists."

Walker said one of the biggest challenges that **eVocal** faces, besides funding, is simply keeping up with and facilitating all the great new ideas that come its way. "Our youth are super-creative and inspired by all the tools being provided to them; the sky is the limit, and what you put in is what you get out," he said. "Another big challenge we face is getting artists to wrap their heads around the need to define your own space as opposed to focusing on what's currently on trend or has sold well in the past."

Walker reported that most of the talent featured at **eVocal** is discovered via word of mouth, but he's always searching for hardworking artists. "I look for those who have a positive message, thought, attention to detail, innovation and originality."

The **eVocal** boutique/gallery has grown to include an impressive artists' network and online community. "We have been building our internal infrastructure, establishing strategic partnerships, creating systems and modeling our unique platform. 'Vocalism.' We've assembled a group of artists who're going to demonstrate the process and benefits to inspire others," Walker said. "We've been building products for the past two years and have invested in technology that will link buyers and sellers of indie products worldwide."

A beta version of the **eVocal** Web site is launching soon that will provide information about the company, its mission and event listings and will also feature news and an online shop. This summer, the next phase of the Web site will launch, featuring a streaming video platform that will broadcast all of the **eVocal** events. Additionally, the **eVocal MySpace** page will serve as a link to the Web site and keep fans and participants informed about upcoming events and activities. "We have a solid schedule of events lined up out into the summer in support of our affiliated artists and Web site," Walker said. "We'll be hosting exhibits showcasing artists of all forms. We're running two to four events per week and will be documenting everything to stream through the Web—loads of talent to be discovered and great music and art to be absorbed." ■



HOUSE BRAND: The Mobius Lounge collection from designer and Citizen Fashion co-founder Helen Lo