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If the Shoe Fits...

...you must have designed it on your iPhone. Can Sarah Mettler Cecil get back into the shoe biz?

by Jess McCuan . photos by Zaire Kacz



For a young woman interested in shoe design, it was an extraordinary windfall: In the early 1990s, Sarah Mettler got a call from Roger Vivier, a Frenchman who invented the modern stiletto heel. He wanted Mettler, then in



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her 20s, to basically act as his apprentice in the later years of his life. She had gone to art school in Manhattan and spent time in Paris and Italy, creating shoes for the likes of Salvatore Ferragamo, Oscar de la Renta and Perry Ellis. In 1991, while living in New York, she launched her own line of shoes. Still, apprenticing under Vivier—who, before his death in 1998, designed shoes for Brigitte Bardot, The Beatles and Queen Elizabeth II—was nothing short of a

dream come true.

Around that same time, though, another powerful, history-making man came calling. George Vanderbilt's great grandson, John F.A.V. Cecil, who goes by Jack, met Mettler while she was visiting her parents in Cashiers in 1992. He introduced himself as a dairy farmer, she says. (Cecil is president of Biltmore Farms, the real estate company behind several major residential and commercial developments in the area, including Biltmore Forest, Biltmore Lake, the 1,000-acre Ramble and 1 million-square-foot mixed-use space Biltmore Park Town Square.) He flew to New York to court her, she says. He was quite persistent. "I had no intention of settling down and stopping shoes," she says. But the next year, they married, and Mettler moved to Asheville.

Now, after putting her shoe career on hold to raise four sons with Jack, the question for 46-year-old Sarah Mettler Cecil is one that she puts well herself: "Can a mother take 18 to 20 years off and come back?" she says. The answer, she believes, is in her iPhone app.

In a lofted studio next to their 5,000-square-foot home in Biltmore Forest, Sarah Mettler has created nothing short of a girly playhouse. Her light-filled space is decked out in bright pastel furniture, fabric swatches, posters and a rack holding hundreds of Sarah Mettler shoes. One corner is entirely devoted to Barbie. At some point, in a previous studio, Mettler had started teaching fashion classes to neighborhood girls. One of them, Janie, was interested in shoe design, so Mettler sketched out a flip book for her: "You, Too, Can Design a Shoe." Then, one day not long after the family moved into their current home, Mettler was scanning her sons' iPhone applications. She saw very little on the fashion landscape (only shoot-em-up boy stuff, she says), and suddenly, a lightbulb clicked on. Why not create an app that would help young girls—and everyone else—learn how to design their own shoes? The Shoe Designer app was born.

Mettler has both a rare degree in shoe pattern-making from the prestigious ARS Sutoria Institute in Milan and a bit of an obsession with new-fangled gadgets. "I love technology," Mettler says, something that's apparent after a quick scan of her space, which is filled with iPods, laptops and tablets. Technophile though she may be, she didn't know how to write the computer code for her Shoe Designer app. After a few phone calls, she hired an Asheville



firm for the project, Top Floor Studio. All that talk about people designing their own iPhone apps in a jiffy? Turns out it's not that simple. Mettler employed six Top Floor studio employees for six months to make her app, which lets iPhone and iPad users pick the shape, style and color for every part of a shoe, from heel to toe.

Since last July, when the Shoe Designer app had its cyber-debut, more than 75,000 people have downloaded and used the app. Free at first, once the app hit the 50,000-user mark, Mettler decided to start charging for its use. The program is now \$1.99 for iPhone users and \$4.99 for an iPad. That move "decreased sales in numbers, but we have made more money," Mettler says. Users save their designs in an online portfolio.

The next step is to make the app more than an educational tool. Mettler has been in touch

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with her old contacts in shoe manufacturing in Europe and elsewhere to talk about how to make everyone's shoe designs real. Imagine prepping for a wedding or a big event, being able to design a shoe on your phone and then have it delivered to your door. Or, says Mettler, you might walk into a Manolo Blahnik store, modify the Manolos in some way, and have those custom shoes shipped to you.

Mettler sees not only a lucrative niche, but also a chance to get back into her shoe career in a hip and innovative way. This spring, at the downtown Asheville creative festival Hatch, fashion promoter Sonia Hendrix chose Mettler's Shoe Designer app as a "groundbreaker" project. At an April fashion show in the Grove Arcade, models walked down a runway carrying "Shoe Designer" signs. Now, though, before she and her family invest much more cash in the project, she's looking for some sort of momentum-builder, a big publicity boost from a story in a national magazine, for example. "In [the tech] world, it's still considered a mom and pop app," Mettler says. "I'm trying to take it to the next level."

In the meantime, she's got plenty to keep her busy—looking after her sons, ages 11, 13, 15 and 17, and attending high-society affairs as the wife of Jack Cecil. She's also working on a line of shoes with the Charleston designer Bob Ellis. About her re-launched career and her app's chances, Mettler seems both sanguine and patient. "I'm leaving it open and finding the path," she says. "Think of it this way: If I live 'til I'm 120, I'm not even halfway through."

For more details and to try out the app, check out www.shoedesignerapp.com.

Posted on Monday, October 31, 2011 at 06:00PM by  Verve-acious |  1 Comment

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totally awesome app for shoe lovers like me!

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