

**W**hen, sporting a black felt crown of his own creation, the London milliner Stephen Jones stepped on stage to receive the British Fashion Council's Outstanding Achievement Award on 25 November 2008, it would have been hard to find a more popular prizewinner. Breathtaking imagination and admirable consistency have kept Jones in demand ever since he launched his first hat collection in the early 1980s, and he remains the milliner of choice for many top international private clients and designers alike, more than 25 years later.

But what really made Jones the sentimental choice even in the sometimes bitchy fashion world was the reluctance of this unassuming 51 year old to blow his own trumpet. In a world in which hype and hissy-fits are par for the course, Jones's modesty stands out. This year, though, with his award still shiny and new and with a major exhibition, "Hats: An Anthology by Stephen Jones", at the V&A, "the nicest man in fashion" is finding himself in the spotlight, like it or not.

So prolific is Jones that it's hard to work out who he hasn't created headwear for – Boy George, Beyoncé Knowles, Comme des Garçons, Jean Paul Gaultier, Katharine Hamnett, Kylie, Lanvin, Marc Jacobs... the list goes on and on. He graduated from Saint Martins in 1979, where he'd turned to millinery during fashion's taupe period. "I was interested in how things looked, in people and how they behaved and moved in their clothing. But the fashion world of 1976 wasn't interesting at all. People were wearing a lot of beige and tweed – it was the American slightly country feel."

Jones, then a punk sporting a black beret and chipped nail polish, found the luxury look of a cashmere rollneck disgustingly decadent ("how things change!" he laughs). And if he hadn't, twentieth-century millinery might well



have taken a rather different turn. In 1970s Britain, hats were still required for weddings and society events, but even here it was a disappearing art. Jones's passion gained new momentum when in around 1980 he made the transition from punk to New Romantic and started hanging out at the now legendary Blitz club in Covent Garden. The extravagant and narcissistic strand in the New Romantic movement, which had led the likes of Adam Ant back to historic costume, also transformed the hat from mother-of-the-bride wear to cool clubwear.

By the time that Lady Diana Spencer started sporting Jones's hats (she particularly favoured his berets), the comeback was complete. "Diana reintroduced the hat to a younger generation," agrees Hilary Alexander, the fashion director of the *Daily Telegraph* and a long-time Jones supporter. "Between them, with Diana's help, Stephen Jones and later Philip Treacy put millinery back on the map." A quintessential British art had been saved from extinction.

Jones comes from thoroughly middle-class English stock. He grew up in the Wirral with two older sisters, where his father ran his own successful engineering business and his mother was a stalwart hostess for the local Conservative Party. When Alexander wanted to feature Jones in the *Telegraph* ten years ago, his parents were delighted to hear that their son was going to be in "their" paper, and agreed to be models. A life in millinery wasn't, however, quite what they had expected for him. "They wanted me to go into the family company," says Jones. "They supported me going to art school for four years, then I think they thought, 'righto matey, back you come!'" Instead, Jones moved into the basement of the most fashionable shop in London, PX in Covent Garden, and started a business of his own. "And one day, this woman walked in and said: 'Hello, I'm Rhoda Ribner, the buyer from Bloomingdales.' Bloomingdales was the shop at that point, and we sold very well there," says Jones.

In 1984 Jean Paul Gaultier spotted Jones, dressed in a fez and a zoot suit, in the Culture