

From Kate Middleton's single fashion faux-pas to his classic roots, *Project Runway* host and Chief Creative Officer at Liz Claiborne, Tim Gunn dishes to *blu*.



GUNNING for fashion

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Known almost as much for his eloquence as he is for his fashion sense, Tim Gunn might be a perfect southern gentleman if it weren't for his Washington, D.C. upbringing. He's polite, charming, gracious and makes you feel like you're his oldest friend, even if you did just exchange hellos.

"Call me Tim" were the first words out of his mouth after I gushed for many seconds about how thrilled I was to be interviewing Mr. Tim Gunn. After all, this is the man who helped make aspiring designers veritable rock stars to the general public on *Project Runway*. The man who cascaded on television in bespoke (I'm sure) suits, casting his bespectacled eyes downward at the (dramatically) worrisome outfit-in-progress, only to offer a few jarring critiques hours before deadline and then—as if he had the utmost faith in the cowering designer's abilities to pull off the impossible—breezed away with his signature "Make it work," following him like an invisible cape.

This ability to be simultaneously on edge and loose is one of the magical things about Tim — among many others. Always suited and booted, he looks like he would feel more at ease in a courtroom than at Fashion Week with the Betsey Johnsons and Marc Jacobs of the world. On the other hand, he's sympathetic to the points-of-view of designers who may not be as classically inclined as he is. In fact, when I ask him what's the difference between having great style and just playing it safe with neutrals (I was thinking of his well-known admiration of Angelina Jolie's beige, army green and black palettes), he says without a shred of apology that he is naturally attracted to classic looks.

"I tend to identify more with classically inclined people. On the other hand, there are the people who are on the cutting edge of fashion. But it's a very fine line, some people end up looking like a fashion victim...a walking editorial. But then there are—I'm loathe to say Lady GaGa, because those are really costumes, and the Patricia Fields' who are a sort of magnified version of their aesthetic. No one else can pull it off but them. And they own the look," Tim says.

Growing up in the patrician world of Washington, D.C., expensive boarding schools and ladies-who-lunch, Tim lived in blazers—part of his uniform six days a week—which, he admits, might explain his love for the classics.

"Maybe that's why I like suits and slacks. I was never a jeans kid...I have since become one, but when I was sixteen I wore khakis as casual wear. I wasn't a fashion guy. I actually liked wearing a uniform, there was something democratizing about that," he says.

The idea of a uniform being enjoyable, much less philosophically sound, is an interesting notion for someone who spends half her time in flip flops. Memories of itchy plaid skirts, starched Oxfords and unyielding leather loafers flood my brain, and not in a way that is remotely liberating. But, for one of the most recognized figures in the fashion industry today, this is precisely the problem of American women: we want comfort and we want it in Lycra, please.

"For the most part, American women dress for comfort. I say if you're going to dress for comfort, why go out? Why not just stay inside and wear pajamas. I don't think comfort should be the priority when dressing. I'm not uncomfortable when I dress, but I'm not completely comfortable either. My pants fit, my shirt is pressed, I'm dressed to go out in public," Tim says.

Whatever your style choices or in spite of them, he insists that three fashion principles should always come first: silhouette, proportion and fit. From pencil skirts which he touts as flattering on most shapes to the LBD (little black dress), if women rigorously applied these tenets to dressing then they would instantly look better—without spending a dime. "The first place you should shop is in your closet," Tim recommends.

After a brief discussion about the fall weather in Florida (slightly less humid—but only detectable if you're a native Floridian), I'm dying to ask what Floridians should wear after summer. Living in tropical splendor year-round has its drawbacks, namely when all the ultra-sophisticated fall fashions are paraded out in front of us in their tweed and woolen glory as the thermometer is barely breaking 93 degrees. Some of us die-hard fashionistas live in denial, wearing the new Jimmy Choo leather knee boots with a chic Burberry trench in October, as northerners lounge poolside in bikinis. Fall fashion in Florida is nothing short of tragic, we want so badly to ring in the holidays wearing something that isn't sleeveless or linen. We actually envy our northern counterparts when they

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email photos of their families all bundled up in cute jackets smack in the middle of a quaint, golden-hued New England pumpkin patch. Of course our envy soon subsides when we hear harrowing tales of snowed-in cars and blizzards—but in fall, we're still enmeshed in our Norman Rockwell version of the seasons—and that has as much to do with fashion as it does a crackling fire and changing leaves.

Unfortunately, Tim won't indulge our delusion. He asks us to be practical, appropriate—his guidance wise, but a hard pill to swallow. This begs the question: If Florida ladies aren't supposed to wear gorgeous coats and heavy fabrics, then why in the world is Neiman's selling it? Sadly, logic and fashion are not always compatible.

"I would be hard-pressed to think of a time when a knee-high boot would be appropriate in Florida. You can still feel you're on trend this season; part of it is in color choices. Go from vibrant colors to neutrals—and that certainly can be done with lighter fabrics," Tim advises.

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As our conversation meanders from Florida to his endless affection for New York ("The wonderful thing about New York is that you see everything there. I'm inspired when I walk outside") we get around to celebrity chatter, namely the latest one to make a big fashion splash across the pages of tabloids on both sides of the pond: Kate Middleton. With her perky yet subdued deportment and knack for looking casually hip and sweet without being too trendy or too cloying, Kate seems a shoe-in for fashion iconography. I imagine young Londoners revisiting that simple style of thick brows, a long straight bob, wrap dresses and just enough make-up to look quietly polished.

"I'm crazy about Kate Middleton. I love her style. I love the fact that she's well-behaved. The one nose-wrinkling complaint I have is her predilection for nude hosiery. It must be a Buckingham Palace edict, because she's so modern, but those hose are dated. I don't get it," Tim says with a quiet sigh.

We end on that note, well right before he says it was a pleasure talking to me and he hopes to see me next time he's in Tampa. As far as fashion goes, there's no one better to talk to than Tim Gunn (he gave me a terrifically insightful history of American fashion during the 90s) but I have a feeling that beyond blazers and boots, the one thing that will always define Tim Gunn's style for me is his good nature, unpretentious wit and smile-inducing sincerity. And, really, what could be more in vogue than that? ■



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