



Dream On

In his new memoir, *American Dreamer*, Tommy Hilfiger looks back on his career while keeping his eye on the present



Clockwise from left: Tommy Hilfiger's iconic first billboard in Times Square in 1985; Hilfiger and ad legend George Lois in 2007; the Raleigh Hotel in Miami Beach, which Hilfiger purchased in 2014

In 1985, advertising legend George Lois was asked by a businessman to drum up publicity for a young designer he was about to launch. Lois, always an envelope pusher, rented out a billboard in Times Square:

"The 4 Great American Designers for Men Are:

R____L_____
P____E_____
C____K_____
T____H_____"

At the bottom was a red, white and blue logo and a New York City store address that belonged to the "least known of the four." The ad didn't give a name. "Everybody knew it was Ralph Lauren, Perry Ellis, and Calvin Klein," Lois told me a few years ago. "Nobody had a clue who TH was. His mother didn't have a clue."

The TH in question was a young, then unknown named Tommy Hilfiger, who eventually earned his place with the other designers on the billboard. "When George came up with the idea, it frightened me," admits Hilfiger, sitting in the showroom at his Manhattan office on a bright afternoon in August. "But I'm glad I listened to him, because it went down in history. It was disruptive, and *disruptive* is not a bad word."

Since then, the global fashion star has regularly employed the strategy of disruption to his

advantage, as he chronicles in his autobiography, *American Dreamer* (Ballantine Books), a deeply personal look at his struggles and successes, out this month. "I was asked if I'd be interested in writing the book, and at first I said no," Hilfiger says. "But then I thought, if I don't do it now, I might forget."

After all, Hilfiger is a busy man. At 65, he's still the principal designer for his company, and he still oversees the creative process like he did when he launched his line in 1985. "My mind feels very fresh and fertile right now," says the designer, dressed today in a sharp navy suit, a black-and-white-striped tie, and thick tortoise-frame glasses. Outside the airy blond-wood-paneled room, a focused silence pervades the office, which takes up several floors in the landmark Starrett-Lehigh building in Chelsea. Staff members are putting the finishing touches on the fall 2016 fashion show, a carnival-themed extravaganza that, two weeks after our interview, will host 2,000 guests, offer lobster rolls and Ferris wheel rides, and feature a nautical-inspired "see now, buy now" capsule collection in collaboration with supermodel Gigi Hadid. If that's not enough, Hilfiger also recently entered the hospitality business, purchasing the iconic Raleigh Hotel in Miami Beach in 2014

with plans to relaunch it in 2018 as a membership-based luxury boutique hotel.

Hilfiger's book isn't concerned so much with the current frenzy, but how he got here. His career in fashion started in 1969, when, as a senior in high school, he and two friends opened their own boutique in Elmira, New York, stocking the era's rock 'n' roll gear—bell bottoms, tie-dye T-shirts, and fringed vests—rather than the staunchly preppy looks popular in their hometown. Hilfiger, one of nine children, was looking for an escape from the small town and his abusive father; fashion offered him just that.

By 1979, he was married, living in Manhattan, and working on his own collection, inspired by the Ivy League look he had loved as a child—uniforms with flocked script lettering, varsity jackets, Converse sneakers—but varnished with a nautical

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Luke Lois (billboard); Mychal Watts/WireImage (Hilfiger and Lois); Nikolas Koenig/OTTO (pool)



patina and a dash of rock 'n' roll. Tommy Hilfiger, the label, was born. "When I started designing the collection in the '80s, none of this casual-preppy look existed," Hilfiger says. "I like to think that I made it cool. I infused color and detail and a street sense into it, which is now global."

Of course, Hilfiger's memoir addresses his struggles as well. In the aughts, the label started hemorrhaging capital. The hip-hop community's embrace of the brand led to overexposure, as well as competition from new urban labels like Sean John and FUBU. The company was also selling to discounted merchandisers, losing its foundation of affordable luxury in the process. "I didn't know if we would spiral downward or reverse it and go forward," Hilfiger says. "But it seemed like it was spiraling down." The corporation, thanks in part to its successful business model in Europe, was able to reverse the spiral and bring its message of affordable luxury back to the forefront. In 2010, clothing conglomerate PVH bought Tommy Hilfiger for \$3.1 billion.

Hilfiger's perseverance through both professional and personal challenges makes sense when you consider his lifelong motto, which is also, fittingly, the rallying cry of the American Dream: "Never give up." As much as he appreciates what he's achieved, he's focused on the

Clockwise from above: Hilfiger and Gigi Hadid at the fall fashion show in September; looks from the spring 2017 menswear collection; the designer checks out samples in his showroom



present. During our interview, he walks around the showroom, fingering materials and pulling out pieces and giving them a once-over. "I'm looking forward to our fashion show," he says with a smile. "The clothes, the music, the set, the models, working on advertising for next season—there's always something new and exciting."

Now that he's conquered the fashion world, does it still excite him? "It depends on the fashion," Hilfiger says. "Sometimes I look at fashion, and I'm bored. Sometimes I look and think people are trying too hard. Sometimes I look and think, Why would they design that?" He laughs softly. "And sometimes I look at something and think, Wow, that's very, very cool." **Q**

Randy Brooke/Getty Images for Tommy Hilfiger (Hadid and Hilfiger)