

Personal journeys

THE EXTRAORDINARY LIVES OF PEOPLE IN OUR COMMUNITY

America's Coco Chanel

Rogers

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Soon Rogers was modeling and meeting “famous people” like Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, but her own fame would have to wait a while.

She enrolled at University of Miami, but went back to Boston to marry Alan Balter, a young man from a prominent family. “He was chasing me.”

It was 1952. Rogers felt trapped. “‘I had to get out of this,’ I thought. He was completely immature and wanted to possess me. He was a stockbroker. I was going to eat my way to death, jump out a window, or kill him, whichever came first.

“He cried every time the Red Sox lost a game!” she recalls.

So, Rogers wrote a check to herself and moved to the Mayflower hotel in New York City.

“I was in my early 20s, and I had to get a job, so I got all dressed up and went to Seventh Avenue. I remember it was June, and it was so hot that my heels sunk into the asphalt. In those days, you would go to the elevator operator of a business building and ask ‘Is anybody looking for models?’”

Rogers tried everything to make her break.

She began studying with Stella Adler to become an actress. “Did I tell you that I auditioned for Cole Porter, and he thought I was talented?” She didn’t get the part for “Silk Stockings,” but “he invited me back to his apartment at the Waldorf for tea, a lovely man ... a kind man ...”

She tried working on the stock market and wrote advertising copy, but modeling paid the most, and “it’s the way I ended up, because it was the way to make a living.”

While Rogers posed, something else was happening. “I’d end up telling the designers what to do with their clothes. Geoffrey Beene was one of them. He would ‘fit’ on me, and I would tell him what was right and wrong, and in the end he’d resent it, of course.”

For Rogers, design was innate – “It goes along with line and form and shape.” Rogers believes it’s her understanding of proportions “that (would later) drive my success to one-eighth of an inch.”

Rogers’ modeling was on fire, and that led to her smoldering social life.

“Did I tell you about El Morocco ... the nightclub? I would sit there for 5 bucks for the night. A man named Carlton Alsop taught me who was who in society, and I listened, sitting there in my green knee socks and a kilt from night school because my mother insisted I take secretarial courses.” Rogers quit night school and became romantically involved with Sammy Davis Jr.

“I met him at a fashion show at the Waldorf Astoria in the late ‘50s. One time he said, ‘I would like to go home to meet your mother,’ and I said ‘My mother? What, are you kidding?’ I ended up going to Vegas with Sammy and witnessed the carrying on, the drinking, the partying with the Rat Pack, and I said, ‘Let me out of here!’ As crazy as I might have been, I wasn’t that crazy.”

Soon after, Rogers met Betty Benson Spiegel, wife of Sam Spiegel, the producer who won Oscars for “On the Waterfront,” “Lawrence of Arabia” and “The Bridge on the River Kwai.”

“Betty thought I was beautiful and fun, so she asked what I was doing that summer. It was May of 1959. She invited me to her husband’s boat in Cannes. Everyone that’s anyone would be there.”

Everyone, that is, except Mrs. Spiegel. Sam had his own plans for the beautiful young Jackie.

“What did I know?” she recalls. “I was young, naïve, and I thought it was safe to be with Sam Spiegel because he was a nice married man.”

They sailed to Monte Carlo. “Here I am on this huge yacht with my own private state room. Dawn was rising and these Italian deck-hands were eating pasta at 7 in the morning as I watched the sunrise. Next thing I knew, Sam was standing next to me and I blurted out, ‘Oh, I would love to meet an Italian prince!’ Sam wanted to kill me, of course.”

Tell the universe what you want, and sure enough, Rogers’ wish came true. She eventually met Prince Andrea Hercolani. And Aristotle Onassis and Maria Callas, too.

And then ... “did I tell you ...” Federico Fellini created a role for Rogers in his 1963 film “8½” opposite Marcello Mastroianni.

“I had the line that really mattered.”

At the end of the film, she looks into the camera and declares, “You’re finished!” She is wearing a Chanel suit, a sign of things to come.

Going loco for Coco

That trip to Cannes led Rogers to Paris, where she and Dorian Leigh



Jackie Rogers (seated, center) met Coco Chanel (standing, far right) in the spring of 1962. “Chanel once told me ‘Jackie, when I’m dead, it’s finished!’ Yet she is the biggest name in the world of fashion today. I think of her and she remains very much alive to me.” CONTRIBUTED

were among the few American models.

With her first Paris paycheck, Rogers went to the House of Chanel and ordered her own Chanel suit for \$600.

Three years later, in the spring of 1962, she and her Italian prince, Hercolani, were invited to a party, and she met Coco.

“Before I got to the party, I went to have my hair done at Alexandre de Paris, where anybody who is anyone goes. There was a girl there getting her hair done. She inquired, ‘Are you a model?’ as Chanel was looking for models. So I went over to see Coco Chanel, and there she was looking down the spiral staircase at me reflecting through all those mirrors. She has a pair of her uniform scissors around her neck and a cigarette dangling from her lips – always dangling from her lips. She looked me up and down and declared, ‘She’s gorgeous. Look at those shoulders!’” Chanel asked Rogers “When can you start?”

For years, rumors have circulated that Rogers and Chanel were lesbian lovers. Will she confirm or deny now?

Rogers sits back with a hint of know-all playfulness. “My answer is ‘absolutely’ ... why not? If it turns people on ... it will be good for my memoir! Hell, I’ve heard so many stories about myself, it turns me on.”

Rogers then turns momentarily silent and remembers with great admiration and fondness: “Coco Chanel was 81 when I met her. My age now. There I’ve said it! But age never occurs to me. It’s a great thing unless it’s used against you. Chanel used to say, “Don’t you know men like older women ... and when men came in, she’d throw her legs up and throw them down, always flirting and entertaining. She was fabulous.”

“Chanel was the greatest! The greatest! We’d stay at her design studio until 8 p.m. some nights, sweating it out, getting it right ... I was the closest thing she ever had to an assistant.”

Rogers trails off sentimentally. “Chanel once told me ‘Jackie, when I’m dead, it’s finished.’ Yet she is the biggest name in the world of fashion today. I think of her and she remains very much alive to me. I loved her madly.”

When the enterprising Rogers quit a few years later to follow her own dream, Chanel advised her to do men’s clothes instead of women’s.

“Women will drive you insane,” Chanel told her.

Rogers opened a Madison Avenue men’s shop. She suggested the white-and-black wardrobe colors for John Travolta in “Saturday Night Fever,” she claims, and says she dressed John Kennedy Jr. for his high school graduation in a white double-breasted suit similar to Travolta’s.

Eventually, Rogers began designing women’s clothes, and it was John’s aunt, Lee Radziwill, who put Rogers on the society fashion map.

When a photo of Radziwill wearing a white organza Jackie Rogers blouse appeared on the cover of Women’s Wear Daily in 1982, Rogers’ design fame shot through Manhattan faster than a pair of scissors gliding up a bolt of silk.

“Lee brought her sister Jackie Onassis in to me. She was very private. We never discussed Ari (Onassis), my friend and her husband. But ever since that time I’ve dressed every-



Jackie Rogers in her Palm Beach boutique with model Donna Preudhomme, wearing a burlap trench and white tulle pant.

RICHARD GRAULICH / THE PALM BEACH POST

one from Condoleezza Rice to Courtney Love – and Nicole Kidman in between.”

Joan Juliet Buck, writer and former editor-in-chief of French Vogue, says, “Rogers was one of the most elegant and ballsiest women ever ... a good friend to my mother ... a friend to my parents because my dad, Jules Buck, was Peter O’Toole’s partner in Keep Films.”

Oh, and did Rogers tell you about ... when she was Peter O’Toole’s lover?

“Peter O’Toole ... I met him when he came to New York through Betty Spiegel ... It was 1964 ... We were lovers, but then his drinking drove a romantic wedge between us, but we remained great friends. He once told me that he would go out in London, and used to drink a bottle of vodka a night. Isn’t that crazy?”

Was there a love of Rogers’ life? The one that got away?

“No one got away ...” she answers slyly. “Andrea Hercolani, the prince ... he was from another world, and I loved him dearly, and he is always in my thoughts.” Hercolani later married and Rogers stayed close to both of them.

Palm Beach: ‘This is couture’

Rogers opened her Palm Beach salon in the 1970s, one of three salons. Her Lexington Avenue salon opened in 2004, and she also designs in Southampton.

“My style is European, though I’ve been called the ‘American Chanel.’”

At her Worth Avenue atelier, she offers privacy for customers. “I’m not looking to ‘flog’ the clothes at them. I derive pleasure from my customer’s love of my creations. This is couture.”

She drapes her clothing, adding feathers or bows for flair.

“I have an assistant who comes from Cambodia to help me. He’s been with me 18 years. Tiong Tan ... a very talented man. We work designs through Skype. He’ll be back in New York soon to help me with the next chapter.”

Dale Coudert of the Coudert Institute of Palm Beach says of Rogers, “She’s one of the most extraordinary dressmakers and an extraordinary woman ... never married. Her clothes have great style.

“You stop when you walk in the door ... you just stop. I wear her clothes every day.”

On this particular day, Rogers is searching for feathers for a feathered jacket. She fingers through her delicate fabrics.

“I never use darts. Never, ever use darts. I cut on the bias, like Chanel did. She cut off-grain. I cut off-grain. Women have been very supportive of my designs.”

Jackie Rogers sits in the window chair and gazes out across Worth Avenue to the Chanel store directly across from hers.

“No, I didn’t plan that,” she says, as if she can read minds. “She’d have been proud that I made it.”

She pauses and then turns, going back in time once more. “By the way, did I tell you about ...”

JACKIE ON JACKIE

Dressing Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis

Monday marks the 20th anniversary of the death of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

Jackie Rogers says she had a hand in the other Jackie’s style. Caroline Kennedy, too, has worn her designs.

The first lady’s sister, Lee Radziwill, also was key to Rogers’ fame.

When a photo of Radziwill wearing a Jackie Rogers organza blouse appeared on the cover of Women’s Wear Daily in 1982, other society mavens quickly learned of Rogers’ talent. “Lee brought her sister Jackie Onassis in to me. She was very private. We never discussed Ari (Onassis), my friend and her husband. But ever since that time I’ve dressed everyone from Condoleezza Rice to Courtney Love – and Nicole Kidman in between.”

For the anniversary of Mrs. Onassis’ death, author Tina Flaherty has released a special edition of her book, “What Jackie Taught Us.” Liz Smith wrote the introduction.

“Jackie gave away only what she wanted people to know and think, and she left us always wanting more,” Smith writes.

“She never spoke for herself. She didn’t give interviews. The press and public had to do all the work. That is something like mining for gold – forever – without hitting pay dirt. But still, she seems rich in spirit and personality beyond our wildest dreams. It is only in dreams that she really exists and in our imaginations. She didn’t allow much of anything more.”

