



Stephen Sprouse is back in fashion. On the eve of a major retrospective, and as Marc Jacobs unveils a Sprouse-inspired, graffiti-strewn collection for Louis Vuitton, Tama Janowitz pays tribute to the late designer's talent

My American idol

You never know what can happen when you meet someone. I first met Stephen Sprouse in around 1982. He had been studying at art school in Rhode Island, and I had just arrived from who knows where. I think a boyfriend from that time introduced us. No one could forget Steve. I thought he was the coolest guy I had ever met, and that he would never want to be friends with someone like me.

Steve was a fashion designer who created in his clothes a look that was classic and that also seemed to be adapted from an imaginary time, blending the Sixties NYC of Andy Warhol – Pop Art, dayglo colours, shiny Mylar – with Seventies punk-meets-trash-vaudeville. But although his outfits might have been made in black silk velvet and silk chiffon (sea green polka-dotted with pink) or in psychedelic stretch Lycra or in see-through plastic, he didn't dress this way himself. He wore a knitted black cap, with bits of hair sticking out from beneath it. And though he loved colour – really bright colour – in the clothing that he designed, he always wore black. His uniform was a boyish combination of jeans and a T-shirt. And he always smelled of patchouli, something I usually associated with pot-smokers, but, as far as I know, he didn't smoke pot and he didn't drink.

To strangers, he seemed tough and scary – he conjured in people those adolescent feelings you have as a 13-year-old when you meet a 17-year-old who smokes, and walks with that cocky walk, and laughs in a kind of stupid way. He was sexy and cool. And all the people he knew were super-cool – Debbie Harry from Blondie, Paige Powell, who worked with Andy Warhol, and Teri Toy, a model who looked a little like a Sixties Brit dolly such as Marianne Faithfull (or maybe Nico), with straight, silky blond hair and perfect features – except that Teri was a boy.

Steve wasn't very verbal, but he was a real phone person, which made me nervous. I hated the phone, but would gabble away nervously while he listened without saying much at all. Though many people would describe Steve as eccentric, he was actually a nice, regular American boy with a financially supportive father, a brother who raised alpacas in the Midwest and to whom he was very close, and a mother who he used to call often, and visit. And he was super-generous. He often gave away clothing as gifts, or traded it for other services – once I made a video for one of his shows and he gave me \$1,000 of clothing that I could pick out in return. Other times, he simply gave me things, although I was neither beautiful nor glamorous.

New York City in the early Eighties was a happening place in terms of art. Those were the days when you didn't need money or fame or anything much – you just had to be in the right place and time. With the right attitude. The galleries that weren't on 57th Street, or showing Old Masters, were downtown and had a kind of rock'n'roll graffiti spray-paint art sensibility. Steve's clothing designs were absolutely of that same sensibility – for men and women both. He didn't aspire to dressing the ladies who lunched on the Upper East Side, in their big-shouldered suits, nor the men of Wall Street in their too-tight suits. Instead, he wanted to dress the young and the hip, the people with attitude. A collection of Steve's might include cashmere hooded sweatshirts in dayglo orange, or a beautifully draped tomato-red halterneck dress in jersey, in designs that would always contain a sly wit and humour. If he was making a man's suit in blue, for example, he would use a neon blue and reference a Fifties teddy boy, or a businessman from another era.

One of Steve's earliest fashion shows, I remember, was held around 1982 or '83. It was held at The World, a former Polish wedding palace on First Street and First Avenue, or thereabouts, back when the East Village was still a strange realm somehow unconnected to the rest of Manhattan. In those days, homeless men would make fires in old oil drums, and there were drug dealers, junkies, feral dogs and garbage everywhere you looked. The whole place was crumbling. Steve looked so glamorous, in an anti-glamorous way – he was surrounded by people who were all, well, a bit frightening. These were his friends. Steve was always accompanied by an entourage, who, while generous and kind and sweet and nice, looked ominous on first meeting. He was instinctively drawn to people who looked like street waifs, who were missing front teeth, had bitten nails or were tattooed – back when it was still very unusual to have a tattoo unless you were a sailor. These were girls and boys Steve might have met on the subway, or spotted out of the window of a car, or passed by on the street, and they always had some "otherness" about them.

Thousands upon thousands of people came to that show at The World. There were no seats, just masses of photographers and paparazzi and eccentrically dressed people. The show started around midnight, when all these great-looking kids came out wearing dayglo-neon suits and dresses, and things made from fake fur and Perspex and feathers and vicuña, and it ended with everyone toppling over and crashing into each other. I'm sure it was set to some kind of Lynyrd >



Jeanne Blades in SS Showroom Fall 87

Below: a Sprouse design in *Vogue*, October 1984.
Below inset: a 1988 advertisement for Sprouse's store. Bottom: model Niki Taylor wears clothes from Sprouse's collection for Barneys, from *US Vogue*, 1993



Stephen Sprouse Art + Commerce, Richard Pandoico, Dustin Pittman, Stephen Sprouse, Kiri Ieshigahara, Max Yadduki, Ivez von Lamsweerde, Vinoodh Matadin. All courtesy Rizzoli Publications, Marina Garner, Patrick McMillen.



Whatever he touched was imbued with its own uniquely Steve-like coolness. He did stuff that no one else did



A shocking-pink Sprouse look, shot by Patrick Demarchelier for *Vogue*, March 1985. Although Sprouse loved to design with very bright colours, he always dressed in black

Skynyrd, Led Zeppelin or David Bowie soundtrack because that was the kind of old music that Steve liked. The evening was pure, deliberate, organised chaos, and everyone in the audience went crazy – it was like nothing they had ever seen. Steve took the idea of a fashion show and turned it into rock'n'roll. Nobody had ever done that before.

Just as the artists of the Eighties took on a new rebellious attitude, so too did Steve shake up and blow the cobwebs off the world of fashion. Now there are all kinds of fashion designers who are “stars”, from Gaultier to Alexander McQueen, but back then, this was not the case. Being a pioneer of all that was new and exciting had its pitfalls. The people who saw his clothes – and the people who wanted them – weren't the same as those who could afford them. The kids downtown couldn't afford the uptown prices that were placed on the designs at stores such as Bonwit Teller or Bergdorf Goodman. Steve's career suffered according to the whims of the fashion directors, as well as the financial backers, who would pick him up and then drop him as often as the seasons changed. He would be “in” one minute and not the next – not a fun way for a creative person to live.

Still, no one stayed away for long because whatever he did was cool. Whatever he touched was imbued with its own uniquely Steve-like coolness, from his amazing big rubber wristwatches, to the way he decorated his apartment with giant fake speakers, which also served as room dividers. He did stuff that no one else did. Even when he wrote names and numbers on his arms, you would think, “That is so great.”

Once, a whole bunch of us were on a three-day trip to Sweden. There were all kinds of activities planned, but Steve, who stayed up all night painting and listening to music wherever he was, could simply not be roused the following morning when we were all supposed to regroup. We had promised to make sure he was up, but it was hopeless. In the end, we had to leave on the day's excursion without him. However, as Paige said later, it might have been a good thing. For the rest of his life, Steve was never late for anything – except by accident.

In 1986, Steve gave me a suit. It was made from a fabric based on an Andy Warhol camouflage painting, in bright red, white and pink – you were never going to blend in

wearing this suit. It was made in glazed cotton, I think, and was beautifully fitted. Years and years later, the idea of camouflage-patterned fabric does not seem unusual. But back then, it really was. I once wore it to a London restaurant while on a book tour, and I remember the whole restaurant going deadly quiet when I walked in – a kind of hushed awe.

Steve had a much better reception for his clothing in the UK. When I wore the same suit to an uptown dinner at Le Cirque in Manhattan, people sneered at me. I always thought Steve would have been more appreciated in London, where people are much freer to wear eccentric things. In New York, if you wear something unusual, the kids will jeer at you on the subway, or just plain cackle out loud. There is fashion in New York, but the prevailing one is conformity.



From left: Sprouse, photographer Steven Meisel, an unidentified friend and model Teri Toyne on a night out in New York in 1982

Steve never put his money into buying a place to live; it only ever went back into his clothing or his work, and he never kept money for himself. He only wanted to design the things he wanted to create, and to see. As a friend, he was utterly unique. He always surprised me. One year, Steve and Paige came to visit me when I was living an hour or two outside Manhattan. They had rented a car (people who live in the city generally don't own one – unless they have a driver) and they collected me and drove me around Princeton, New Jersey.

He was the worst driver in the world! His timing was off, he speeded up when he should have gone slowly, then slowed to a snail when he should have put his foot down. He looked like he would sail by on a motorcycle, but he couldn't drive at all. How that endeared him to me – a tough-looking

thug who drove like my grandfather. How could I not love him?

Steve was sick for a few years before he died. He had lung cancer. And he only told a few people. It was only when he died that I found out. To be 52 years old and die of emphysema is horrible; it must have been like drowning, day in and day out, for a year. But almost no one knew.

Right before Stephen died, my friend Steven Greenberg threw a party for me. The party was supposed to have finished at 10pm. At 10pm, Steve walked in. “I thought the party started at 10!” he said in his husky, stagey voice. “Heck, it's over at 10,” I replied. “I hate parties, and especially ones for me. I'm leaving.” It was a swell party, but I had to get out of there. It made me too nervous, and I figured I'd see Stephen next week.

That was the last time I saw him alive. I did not know how much of an effort he had made to get there just to see me, and no idea how ill he was. His husky voice had always been husky... If I had known, I would never have left.

I have just spent the evening searching through my albums, looking for pictures of Steve. It's been a long time since I last saw pictures of that time. So far I've only found a few – one of Steve holding my daughter Willow when she was a baby, and another of Steve and Paige. Just looking through them has made me so, so sad – so many people in the pictures have died, or are still alive but used to be a lot younger, myself included. What happened to my life? It's like I don't even remember it. All the parties and places...

You just never know when you meet someone. New York is the kind of city where many talented people arrive, and, for a while, are praised for their talent, then – in almost every case, sooner or later – are knocked down by the very same people who originally praised them. Stephen Sprouse was no exception. During the time I knew Steve, he went up and down so many times that I think, by the end, he had learned not to take any of it seriously. Or maybe he never did. Either way, he was always true to his own vision, and was the best friend you could hope to have. ■

The Stephen Sprouse retrospective at Deitch Projects, 18 Wooster Street, New York, runs from January 8 to February 28 (Deitch.com). “The Stephen Sprouse Book”, a biography of Sprouse by Roger and Mauricio Padilha, £30, is published by Rizzoli in February