



HIGH FASHION

Born in Mississippi...

BY CHELLE ELLIS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN NOVAJOSKY

(Above) Fashion designer Hilton Hollis.

(Above, Left) Preparing for a photo shoot, Hollis gives his design a final finishing touch.

From the Big Muddy to the Big Apple, Hilton Hollis is making a name for himself in haute couture circles.

FASHION DESIGNER HILTON HOLLIS HAS HIS OWN AESTHETIC. THE NATCHEZ NATIVE DOESN'T LOOK TO OTHER DESIGNERS, BUT IS INFLUENCED BY NATURE, CLOTHING ARCHITECTURE AND FABRIC. WHEN HE IDENTIFIES WITH A FABRIC, HE KNOWS WITHIN MINUTES WHAT HE CAN DO WITH IT.

Born Hilton Smith, Hollis grew up on a Carthage farm. By 8 years old, he inherited a love of sewing from his grandmother, Irma Hollis Goolsby, part of the Hilton Hollis brand namesake.

"She was the type of person who could sketch out a pattern on a Piggly-Wiggly bag and make a dress come to life," Hollis fondly recalls of his grandmother who died in 1986.

Hollis followed Goolsby's legacy of making dresses for his family, all of which met with rave reviews. He even once completely redesigned his sister's prom dress. But Hollis didn't consider the idea of designing

professionally until he worked for Bernard Weiss, owner and founder of Maison Weiss in Jackson.

"Bernard has since passed away, but he led me in this direction and wrote a letter of recommendation to the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York," Hollis recounts. "Designing was a passion I always had but didn't know how to attain because when you grow up on a farm in Carthage, Mississippi, you don't know it's a possibility."

He regards his tenure at Maison Weiss, where he served as visual merchandising director, as one of his biggest influences. After graduating from FIT, Hollis remained in New York. The Hilton Hollis clothing line was conceived in 2000; a small collection of evening wear was shown to major stores like Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue. The collection was well received and Hollis secured a number of small orders.



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His second collection was released September 10, 2001. More than a dozen stores were scheduled to view the line during that week. Fashion editors took notice as Neiman Marcus planned a test run of his line in one of its stores.

The next day, September 11, brought New York to a screeching halt. Four months later, Hollis closed his showroom, unable to find a job in fashion. At his mother's urging, Hollis accepted employment with Bourjois Cosmetics and quickly became its regional makeup artist. Hollis eventually returned to fashion, designing a private-label collection for retailers like Nordstrom and Saks Fifth Avenue.

Hollis' defining success came when his new collection was shipped in April 2005. Within days, reorders began rolling in: "People were buying it out of the box, basically," Hollis relates. "Stores like Mario Pucci of Boca Raton sold everything, to the piece, at full price."

The Hilton Hollis line is well established and very competitive in the "bridge" fashion market. Bridge is a tier of fashion directly below top-tier designers like Calvin Klein, Donna Karan and Oscar de la Renta. Hollis saw an opportunity in that niche, joining notable bridge designers Dana Buchman, Ellen Tracy and Elie Tahari.

Hollis's clothes are not inexpensive; a top-tier designer jacket normally retails for \$900-\$1,200, while Hollis jackets run about \$500.

"I'm not about the bells and whistles, sequins and things people add to garments that take the refined



(Above, Left) The silk satin architectural-seamed evening gown is a study in elegance.

(Below) The 2006 Hilton Hollis Fall collection includes colors of slate and teal with lots of ivory and black, as exhibited in this slate satin jacket with rose embroidery detail.



(Opposite) The embroidered taffeta bustier and skirt is a design inspired by the exquisite fabric.

beauty out of it," he comments. He designs "for women from 35 to forever," producing a garment that lies well against the body.

"I find that the people who are buying higher-end European collections are the same buyers of my collection," says Hollis. "It's flattering that we're hanging next to Escada and Missoni and American designers like Badgley Mischka and Oscar de la Renta."

Hilton Hollis' fall collection began shipping in August to six times more stores than the first season. It focuses on muted tones – teal green, slate blue and lots of black and ivory – colors European textile mills are producing.

"This," Hollis explains, "is why it seems like (designers) gravitate toward the same things. People think all the designers get together and decide 'these are the colors,' but it's really the fabric mills and yarn suppliers that determine what the colors will be."

Eventually, Hollis hopes to expand into designing shoes and accessories and supply the entire line to fine boutiques worldwide. He's working to get his designs into local stores like James Davis in Memphis and a few Tupelo locations. Until then, his clothes are found at Betsy's in Nashville and in Mississippi at Ballin's Ltd. in Ridgeland, Fashion Post in Jackson and Mam'selles in Columbus.

Success hasn't spoiled Hollis, who is quick to remind that he's very proud to be a Mississippian: "There's something to be said for the type of people we produce. When you come from Mississippi you come from good people." ■



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