



Victoria

Now here is a woman who needs no introduction. Power wife, mother of four, acclaimed designer – Victoria Beckham is a success on every level. But how does she do it? ELLE follows her through her working life and discovers the woman behind the iconic images. Interview by Annabel Brog

Photography **Carter Smith** Fashion **Alison Edmond**

'I'm lost for words when I talk about Miuccia Prada. She's another level'



Previous page silk-crepe dress by Victoria Beckham. Bracelet, Victoria's own
This page metal cuff by Lanvin. Bracelet and ring, both Victoria's own



On a chilly Los Angeles morning, Victoria Beckham is in her element. The luxury American department store, Neiman Marcus, is hosting a private view of the designer's latest collection, straight from the catwalk, for 30 of its most prolific customers. The event is a lesson in PR from the master herself. Beckham enters the room - trailed by her eldest son Brooklyn and husband David, who is clutching their Chloé-clad daughter Harper - a snapshot of her picture-perfect family on display, alongside a catwalk show of the collection. I watch as Victoria snuggles up to David, puts her arm around him, rests her head on his shoulder... Afterwards, she gives a little speech - charming, informal, self-deprecating. By now, the crowd - who go on to spend thousands in pre-orders - are as in love with Victoria as they are with the clothes.

She tells them she's going to hang around for a bit, and proceeds to pose for photos and chat. As they mill, David circles the room, chasing Harper through a minefield of stilettos, occasionally throwing her up in the air, blowing raspberries on her bare tummy or dancing with her. If any proof was needed that Victoria Beckham knows how to work her market, it is all here.

So I know that Victoria can be charming to strangers - a skill much in evidence at the trunk show - but it's not something she finds so easy with journalists. Or, more specifically, British journalists, who

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Silk-crepe dress by
Victoria Beckham.
Bracelet, Victoria's own

• she feels consistently misquote her. When I first met her two days earlier - tiny and deceptively fragile-looking, curled up in a white-leather armchair on a private plane en route from LA to Las Vegas for the *ELLE* shoot - she was wary. She can perform in front of an audience, is in her element putting on a show, is fantastically charming inviting us along on her plane, but the minute she comes under direct scrutiny from a stranger? Her defences come up, despite a visible effort on her part to be friendly.

In fact it takes that one-hour flight, an eight-hour photoshoot, a two-hour trunk show and a good 20 minutes of lunch before she visibly thaws. It is, however, worth the wait. Once she drops her guard, she is endearingly gobby. Her pet hates are laziness ('I can't stand it. I always think, whatever you do, do it to the best of your ability') and women who hate other women ('I have no time for it at all, when women just don't like women. I don't get it. I think that women need to support women. [When they don't] that probably p**es me off more than people being lazy').

But the real surprise is her sense of humour, something so rarely caught on camera or in print. 'The media paints this image of [me] and that's fine,' she agrees. 'Oh my God, I even agree. I look at the pictures of myself and I think, "You look so *moody*." I get it, I get it. But I really do laugh quite a lot. My team makes me laugh. My kids make me laugh. We were driving around in the car the other day and Cruz wanted to listen to the Spice Girls and afterwards he said, "Mummy, why is it all you ever did was sing background?"' She cackles. 'I like to have a laugh.' She leans forward. 'You know, I've been called comedy gold. I'm just saying.'

If the public image of Beckham is control-freak workaholic business obsessive, the private Beckham is over-enthusiastic with a highly developed sense of the ridiculous. She babbles with joy when the restaurant manager agrees to give her five Yorkshire puddings to take home.

'The kids are going to *love* me when I walk in with these,' she says excitedly, patting the doggy bag by her plate. 'You know what they say to me, because I'm not the best cook, although I try really hard? They always say to me, "Mummy, we know that the main ingredient in what you make is love."' She roars with laughter.

Her home life sounds as chaotic as her work life is structured. One-and-a-half-year-old Harper, who travels everywhere with her and is thus prone to jetlag, is still waking her up in the night. Once Victoria's awake, she checks her emails, gets dressed (in a tracksuit: 'A nice tracksuit, but it's a tracksuit') and has done a couple of hours' work before she makes the kids' breakfast. When I remind her that, when he was on our cover in July 2012, David told *ELLE* that *he* makes breakfast, she rolls her eyes.

'Well, he lied,' she says. 'He *lied*. Let me tell you now, he is *not* the one. I'm always like, "Go and shake Daddy and get him out of bed, tell him that he has to take you to school."'

Beckham is sweetly grateful for the support David has given her but it's also clear she knows that now is her time. 'There was a time when David was playing football, not just for a club, but for his country, so he was very busy and it was just the beginning for me. He wanted to go to Spain, so great, we all went together. When he wanted to play in Italy, we all went to Italy. Well, the boys and myself were based here - we had to be because the boys were at school - but were there all the time. We are here to support each other and make each other happy. He is so respectful of what I do. I couldn't do it if he wasn't. Now David has finished playing for LA Galaxy and we are starting a new chapter in our lives; as a family we are all very excited about what lies ahead for 2013.'

In the fashion world, Beckham has a sense of belonging she never had before. 'When I was on stage with the Spice Girls, I thought people were there to see the other four and not me,' she says. 'And when I go out with David and people take pictures I think, "They're here to take David's picture."' But in fashion she has found her groove. She is incredibly proud that no part of her brand is licensed (anything with her name on it has been produced by Victoria Beckham, not a manufacturer who has paid for the right to her name). She oversees every creative and PR move ('Not one dress goes out to a celebrity or shoot without me approving it') and also has sign-off on every business decision. She runs a team of 78 - from interns to seamstresses - and is involved at every level (at our shoot she was negotiating staff holidays between set-ups). She has an accountant, but she can tell me what every fabric used in the last collection cost, what the lighting budget was. It's a good job her team adore her - and they very clearly do, gossiping with her about boyfriends and Barbra Streisand - because it can't always be easy working for her.

'Um... you've got to trust people,' she acknowledges. 'And because I am a control freak, sometimes that's difficult for me, because I want to micro-manage absolutely everything.' When pressed, she cannot think of one single thing she has handed over. 'OK, I can't. I can't hand over. But I'm trying to do that more. It's hard because I have such a specific vision. For instance, we were doing a look-book shoot for the bags, so I took pictures on my iPhone of how I wanted it to look and gave it to the photographer. Then that night I saw the pictures. They'd spent all day doing them and it wasn't right. So we had to shoot through the night to get it perfect. I couldn't let it go.'

She never switches off, she says. Ever. She hasn't had a holiday in four years. 'A lot of people don't have holidays. I'm a workaholic, David's a workaholic. We joke and say, "One day, when the kids are grown up, we'll start with holidays."' Quite why she works so hard is another matter. She doesn't need to, financially, and she's adamant it's not to prove a point to sceptics who didn't believe she could do it.

'It was never my intention to prove anybody wrong,' she says. 'I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. I don't have to work, I *need* to work. All these people [her fellow fashion designers], they've not just been given anything. They've worked hard. And I've never been given anything either. But I have a good work ethic; David has an incredible work ethic. I want my kids to have a good work ethic. I believe you can achieve anything if you work hard enough to get it.'

And why wouldn't she? Look where it's got her. That Beckham loves fashion has never been in question, not since her days as Posh Spice when every other word she uttered was 'Prada' or 'Gucci'. That she is quite so good at producing fashion came as more of a surprise. Beckham launched her eponymous ready-to-wear line just five years ago, and her catwalk reports are already in the top-five most-viewed on elleuk.com, while retailer Mytheresa.com cites the label as the quickest selling of all their ready-to-wear luxury brands.

'I hear things like that and it almost frightens me,' she says. I have noticed that when she is caught off guard, when she is being truly genuine, her voice rises, and she starts speaking *reallyreallyreallyfast* and she does that now: 'I almost don't want to hear it. I find it incredible and it frightens me.'

'I love fashion. I'm proud of
what I do. And I could talk
about it day in, day out'

Cotton-mix top by
Chalayan. Satin
briefs, stylist's own.
Ring, Victoria's own

Carter Smith

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Beckham puts her meteoric rise down to the fact that, five years ago, retailers, journalists and the public gave her a chance: 'That's all I wanted people to do at my first collection,' she says. 'Forget about the Spice Girls, just judge the collection for the collection. And they did. They left their preconceptions at the door.'

However, that's not strictly true. The ELLE fashion team still discusses how brilliantly masterminded the launch of Beckham was, in its modesty. For those who need reminding, there was no fanfare, no big show with big-name stylists attached ('You know, my name's Beckham but that didn't mean that the first season I had Guido [Palau, who does Prada, Balenciaga, Saint Laurent, Lanvin] doing hair and Diane [Kendal - Dolce & Gabbana, Saint Laurent, Chloé] doing make-up. I didn't. I refused to use my name, if you know what I mean.' For Beckham's spring/summer 2013 show, she did, of course, have Guido and Kendal). The collection of just 10 dresses was presented to small groups of retailers and journalists in a hotel room, while Victoria talked them through it. She disarmed them all - the purists, the sceptics, the snobs - with her knowledge of every tiny detail and, perhaps the greatest weapon in her armoury, her humility. Preconceptions were not so much left at the door as shown it, by her, as soon as she started compering.

'It wasn't planned,' she says, when I asked how much the style of the presentation had been mapped out in advance (by strategic genius and Beckham's business partner, Simon Fuller - a man who launched the Spice Girls and *Pop Idol*, manages the careers of both Beckhams and Roland Mouret and owns the majority share of Storm model agency). 'It was real. It was natural. I just started talking. The girls would come out and I'd stop one and open up the back of the dress so people could see the corsetry. I was proud of it, and it was important to me that people understood why I did what I did. I love fashion, I'm proud of what I do and I could talk about it day in, day out. I just wanted to talk.' She starts laughing. 'I think sometimes I was talking to Japanese buyers who didn't even speak English. But hey, you know what? If you're listening then I'm going to talk.'

She's not wrong. Beckham talks fashion in a way most fashion insiders do not. She remains, at heart, a fan. There is no intellectualising, no conceptualism and no reserve. When she discusses other designers it's *fun*, like she's gossiping about colleagues not deconstructing fellow artists.

For instance, when she tells me about the time Marc Jacobs came over to compliment her when she first launched the Victoria Beckham line, it is with glee, at high tempo in her Essex lilt. 'When he was talking to me about what I was doing it's a little bit like, 'It's Marc Jacobs!' It's *Marc Jacobs!*'

Karl Lagerfeld, she says, is the funniest man in fashion. 'He doesn't try to sugarcoat things. To be honest, he can say what he wants, because he's *Karl Lagerfeld*.' He has also been very supportive of her. 'It's a big deal when he says, "I really like what you do, I really like your clothes."

'And Manolo Blahnik... He's such a genuinely nice guy. The fact that I'm working with him now on the shoes for my ready-to-wear is a dream come true. I mean, who'd have thought? If you're gonna make shoes, who do you want to collaborate with? Duh. *Manolo Blahnik*, right?'

The fashion idol she has still to meet is Miuccia Prada. 'I'm lost for words when I talk about her. [Her collection] is always so relevant, she does it every season. You can't wait to see, not only what the clothes are like, but also what the hair's like, what the make-up's like, what the accessories are like. How many brands do that? She's another level. I'd love to see the world through her eyes. I would love to.'

Beckham's latest challenge is the launch of her all-new website, which offers customers the opportunity to shop her own personal edit of the Victoria, Victoria Beckham line, as well as accessories, denim and pieces from an exclusive Icon collection. It's a slick, user-friendly operation and offers fans a glimpse into her working life. It has been a labour of love (as well as a mark of her business acumen), three years in the making, and, for a control freak, hard to finalise. 'I want it to be functional, easy to shop on and look around. I want it to be different to what is currently out there. I'm doing this and I'm doing it properly. Because there's no point otherwise.'

By now, that's no surprise. Perhaps that's her secret; the thing that's taken her from a potential novelty fixture on the New York Fashion Week schedule - who turned out to be far more impressive than anyone had expected - to a designer whose collections aren't just respected but anticipated. She knows she's good. But underneath it all the need to prove herself, to herself, is still there.

I ask her if she can pinpoint the moment when she realised she'd done it. That she'd gone, in the eyes of the world, from being Victoria Beckham, former pop star, a celebrity with a fashion line, to being a serious fashion player.

'No,' she says, shaking her head. 'No. I don't know. And it makes me smile because I probably still have those preconceptions about myself.' ●

See Victoria Beckham's new website at victoriabeckham.com

Business sense by 'VB'

SEIZE ANY OPPORTUNITY

'I started with denim because I found a company [Rock & Republic] that wanted to collaborate. I just wanted to design.'

STAY TRUE TO YOURSELF

'I am me. I'm selling an image, but it is real. I'm not pretending to be someone I'm not.'

WORK WITH THE RIGHT PEOPLE...

'I had to build a team of experts. So

I took on the right people to help me achieve what I wanted to achieve.'

... AND GIVE THEM OPPORTUNITIES

'I encourage people to grow while the business grows. Everybody is given an opportunity.'

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

'Yes, I have a team around me but I always go with my gut instinct. I can live with my mistakes but if I didn't go with my gut, and it proved

to be a mistake, I'd be really p***ed off with myself.'

DON'T TAKE IT FOR GRANTED

'I can't understand it when people get cocky; there is always somebody else in the wings.'

NEVER FORGET WHO HELPED YOU...

'There have been a lot of people on this journey with me, not just my team, but fashion media and retailers. I'm terrified of some of

those women - they're incredibly influential. But when I had an event to launch my diffusion line they were all there, and to see all these people grinning, proud of not just what I, but we have all done... Everyone feels part of it. And they are. I haven't done this on my own.'

...AND DON'T FORGET YOUR FAMILY

'As a working mum you feel guilty, you feel torn. That's the biggest challenge, it's a tough thing.'

This page: Hair: Renato Campora at The Wall Group. Throughout: Hair: Kenna at Terrie Tanaka Management. Make-up: Wendy Rowe at Caren using Burberry Beauty. Manicure: Carla Kay for Cloutier Remix/Esse. Production: Lisa Grezo at G&E Projects. The ELLE team stayed at The Cosmopolitan, Las Vegas. For shopping details, see Address Book

Silk-crepe top, matching skirt and leather gloves, all by Miu Miu. Ring, Victoria's own

Carter Smith