

# Magic McKnight

Creating iconic hair styles for everyone from the Princess of Wales to the Queen of Pop, Sam McKnight reflects on 40 years in the industry with *SCARLETT RUSSELL* as Somerset House dedicates its new exhibition to the scissor-wielding prodigy

PRINCESS DIANA'S SLICKED-BACK '90s hairdo, Tilda Swinton channelling David Bowie for *Vogue* in 2003 and Cate Blanchett's soft waves when accepting her Oscar in 2014 – all courtesy of one man. Three months before this issue is due out, hair stylist to the stars Sam McKnight has a 25-minute window for an interview with me before his diary fills up with Fashion Weeks, editorial shoots and final approval over his upcoming exhibition at Somerset House. And you thought supermodels had a full schedule.

"Oh, it's always busy," he laughs. "But I'm an opportunist. I've grabbed every opportunity that has come my way and ran with it. I think that's what has shaped my career." The career in question is one that has spanned 40 years and includes no less than 190 *Vogue* covers,

Madonna's *Bedtimes Stories* album cover and lifelong working relationships-turned-friendships with Kate Moss, Naomi Campbell, Karl Lagerfeld and the late Princess of Wales. He first met Princess Diana on a shoot in 1990.

"She said, 'what would you do if I gave you free rein [with my hair]?'” recalls McKnight. "I said, 'cut it short.' She said, 'Can you do it now?'" From then on, he took charge of of Diana's hair up until her death in 1997. Gone were the perms and in was a stylish crop that cemented her transformation from girly princess to a powerful leader and certified fashion icon.

"I always tried to change things with her – go shorter, wavier or slicker," he comments. "She had started to modernise her clothes and I thought her hair should ▶



Karlie Kloss for British *Vogue*, November 2015, *photography*: Patrick Demarchelier



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Tilda Swinton, *Vogue Italia*, February 2003 ©Craig McDean, *image courtesy of*: Art + Commerce



► reflect that. We had slicked it back a few times in private and the first time she wore it out in public I knew it would cause a stir.”

Having grown up on a council estate in Ayrshire, Scotland, McKnight swept hair at a local salon before heading to London and Molton Brown in the 1970s where starlets including Bianca Jagger would pour in to have their hair cut. It led to Sam styling on shoots and entering the fashion world at a pivotal time.

“The industry was bubbling by then,” he says. “The ‘60s kicked it all off, of course, but then we came out of the three-day week and London started being cool again. By the ‘80s, *The Face*, *i-D* and London Fashion Week had started and things had become exciting.” He started shooting regularly for *Vogue*. During a stint living in New York, along with make-up artists Mary Greenwell and Val Garland, and photographers Steven Klein, Patrick Demarchelier, Steven Meisel and Herb Ritts, McKnight became implicit in the supermodel-defining decade of the ‘90s.

“Suddenly, Cindy [Crawford], Linda [Evangelista], Claudia [Schiffer] had more power and money than Hollywood actresses. It was crazy. I walked into a shop with Claudia and a girl actually fainted.”

McKnight first met Kate Moss when she was 16 and having test shots taken by Klein. “We all thought, ‘you’ll never make it’, and then Steven took these Polaroids of her and we were like, ‘wow, OK, she really is different.’ I’ve worked with her ever since. Kate takes it further than anyone else; that’s why she’s so brilliant. She wants to make every shoot the best she’s ever done. She keeps us all on our toes. And she’s got the dirtiest sense of humour.”

In 1994, Madonna asked McKnight to style her hair for the cover of her next album, *Bedtime Stories*. “She was lovely,” he says. “Patrick [Demarchelier] and I spent a day with her in a studio in Miami. She invited me to her birthday party that night, but I had a job for *Vogue* in New York in the morning so I apologised and explained I couldn’t go. Hello! Who turns down a party invite from Madonna?”

Having celebrated his 60th birthday last year (a lavish affair at Tramp in Mayfair with 600 guests, including Stella McCartney, Mario Testino and Moss on the DJ decks) McKnight now celebrates his career with a retrospective at Somerset House, *Hair*, and accompanying coffee table book. It’s been in the works for almost three years.

“It’s daunting,” he admits. “And quite emotional going through my entire archive. But it’s great. The exhibition is more than just pictures on a wall. We’re having wigs, clothes, books, other people’s voices. It’s exciting. I couldn’t pick a favourite aspect, but seeing everything together will be very special.” Opening this month, it’s the first major hair exhibition at the cultural institution, which has been home to many a Fashion Week show. Some of McKnight’s fondest memories of London are there.

“So many fashion shows, but my friend Oliver Peyton used to have a restaurant there, The Admiralty. There are lots of fabulous and hazy memories.” Having previously lived in Kensington, McKnight is now a North-West Londoner. On the rare occasion he isn’t working, he can be found gardening – “nothing makes me happier these days” – walking through Hyde Park’s rose garden and shopping on Kensington Church Street.

His career shows no signs of slowing down. Considering he worked through the 1990s – a decadent decade fuelled by supermodels, grunge and Brit Pop – does McKnight feel that the glory days of culture, celebrity and fashion have been deflated by social media?

“It was certainly much more elitist and guarded back then,” he says. “There was a mystery and a glamour to that world. Now, Instagram shows everyone working on the inside and it has become a little fake. We didn’t know what people were having for breakfast, put it that way.”

But one thing that won’t change is the cultural impact a hairstyle can have. Whether it be Princess Di’s crop, Victoria Beckham’s bob or Gigi Hadid’s beachy waves, looks from catwalks and covers sweep their way to high street salons and Pinterest boards to become global obsessions.

“British people have the most interesting relationship with hair,” says McKnight. “We aren’t afraid to not wash our hair for a week, bleach it blonde or make it pink. People look to Brits to be inspired and I love that.” ■

*Hair by Sam McKnight opens at Somerset House on November 2. The book is published by Rizzoli, £35, rizzoliusa.com*

