



Longtime friends, Ron and actress Vanessa Williams arrive arm in arm for the Canadian Art & Fashion Awards held recently in Toronto. She wears a pair of Ron White sandals custom-made to match her cobalt gown.

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW**

**AT HOME WITH SHOE DESIGNER TO THE STARS**

# **RON WHITE**

**TALKS ROMANCE, STYLE AND CELEBRITY CLIENTS AS HE MARKS A MAJOR MILESTONE**

**Y**ou would expect a shoe designer's front foyer to be lined with a myriad of covetable pairs, yet when you walk into Ron White's contemporary Toronto home, tucked away in a stylish uptown neighbourhood, it's devoid of any signs of his day job. Warm and inviting, the stunning light-filled residence he shares with his husband and business partner, Brad Wilson, is all about celebrating life's little pleasures.

Having ample outdoor space was important to the couple. In fact, "a great backyard and entertaining space were the top priorities," says Ron about their ultimate wish list before landing on this gem 10 years ago. "The dream was to take the cottage fund and the house fund and combine them to get a bigger piece of property with a great yard." Mission accomplished: their luxurious sun-soaked backyard is only steps away from the breakfast table.

For the busy pair who find themselves on a plane for work almost weekly, their home is a respite from their demanding schedule – overseeing the demands of a bustling retail business built around the Ron White brand. It's obvious in the details. The whimsical guest bathroom is a total escape from the ordinary. Painted in Tiffany & Co. turquoise, it's decorated with a framed portrait of Audrey Hepburn and cheeky drapery that reads "Bathroom at Tiffany's." In the family room, plush pillows fill the corners of the oversized crushed-velvet couch where the couple curls up to watch episodes of *Big Little Lies*. Framed photos with famous faces (including former U.S. president Bill Clinton) peek out from the shelves in the kitchen and trinkets from their travels line the top of the ▶



**'Looking  
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Ron kicks back in footwear of his own design – Chelsea boots that look as though they've been dipped in glistening black caviar. 'They illuminate under the bright lights,' says the designer of his go-to

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**'We're those opposites  
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The couple lean toward clean lines and modern design – aside from a vintage candy dish passed down from Ron's grandmother. Warm shades of taupe and grey draw

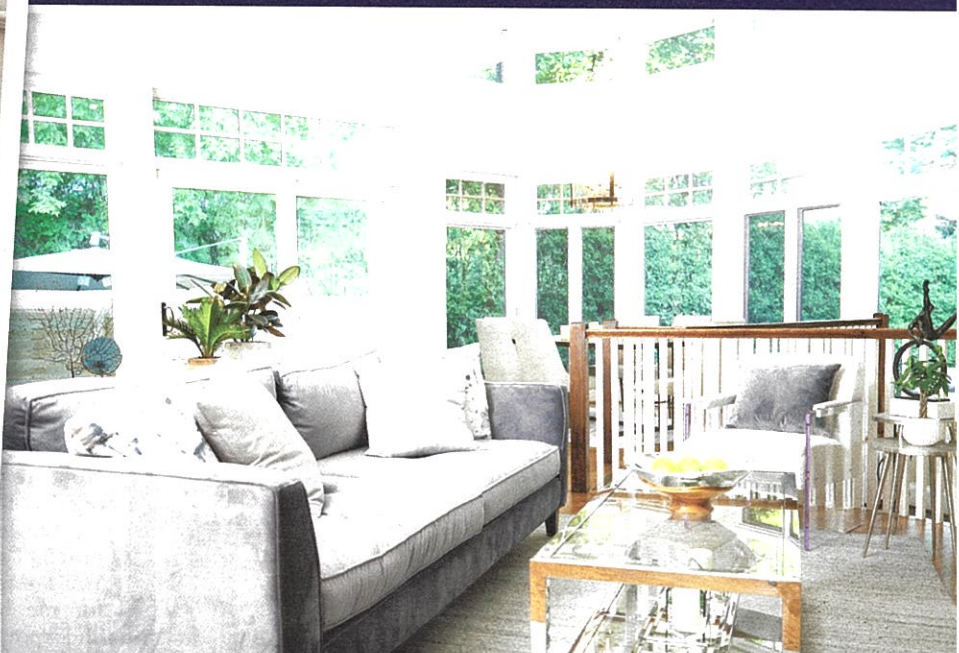
stove. Outside, the azure pool beckons with enough loungers to rival a five-star resort.

Their love story began 12 years ago when they were introduced at a Toronto International Film Festival party at the city's historic Casa Loma. "At some point, someone elbowed me when they were getting by and my drink spilled on his velvet jacket," recalls Ron. "So I had to get his information to look after the dry cleaning." The next day, Ron asked Brad out for dinner. "He accepted and things went lightning fast," says Ron. Three-and-a-half years later, Brad flew to Italy for a surprise proposal. "With Ron's assistant's help, I convinced him that my phone had broken down and I got him, with great effort, to meet me at our favourite restaurant," shares Brad. The couple were married at a stunning black-tie ceremony in front of 200 of their closest friends and family at Casa Loma, where it all began.

Entertaining comes naturally to the outgoing couple. They've made their home the hub for their inner circle, who drop in by the dozen for dinner par- ▶



Philanthropist Sonja Bata (left, with Brad behind her) wears Dorothy's ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz* at the White Knight Gala in one of the couple's favourite framed photos.





Ron's celebrity clients run the gamut from movie stars and politicians to royalty. 'It all started because of the Toronto International Film Festival, it had a ripple effect,' says Ron of the event that launched his brand in Hollywood. Clockwise from below: Celine Dion, Brooke Burke, Kim Cattrall, Rob Lowe (with wife Sheryl) and Justin Trudeau (who wore his leather lace-ups on *Live With Kelly and Ryan!*) are all fans of his footwear.



**'Oprah would be a great voice to have as an ambassador'**



ties (Brad does the cooking), drinks on warm evenings and dips in the pool. On gorgeous summer days, "our friends and family know to come join us. We put on some music, set out some refreshments and just hang," says Ron of his perfect Saturday spent in the city.

In August, their home will become party central – the spot where Ron will be celebrating his 50th birthday with a glamorous, 1950s Hollywood-themed bash. And with Ron celebrating his 25th anniversary in the shoe business this year, the power couple have plenty to celebrate.

**How are you feeling about turning 50, Ron?** It's interesting to say the least. I'm surprised how much I'm thinking about it. You know, 30, 40 didn't do much for me but 50 feels like a big checkpoint.

**You're also celebrating 25 years in the shoe business!** I know, all at once! I started as a retailer 25 years ago and it's about 12 years ago that I started designing my collection. When I launched it, there were a lot of other start-up brands. In the past three or four years, those have all closed so I feel like I'm the last man standing in my peer group. There's just so much transition happening in the retail world. We've been turning the ship dramatically and changing the way we do business.

**Looking back, what advice would you give yourself when you were starting out as a 23-year-old entrepreneur?** I didn't have the confidence to say what I was thinking. I would often edit because I didn't want to ruffle someone's feathers, I didn't want to disappoint some- ▶



LOCKWISE FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF RON WHITE (3); AARON LYNETT/CANADIAN PRESS

Ron transformed a spare bedroom into a custom dressing room with floor-to-ceiling shelves. 'The vision was to have a shoe wall that held 100 pairs,' he says. Ron wore these 'Canada red' suede loafers when Prince William and Kate came to Canada on their first royal tour.

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## The stunning light-filled home Ron and Brad share is all about celebrating life's little pleasures

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one, I didn't want to offend anyone. I was the Winnipeg boy who wanted to be nice and friendly and get along with everyone. Looking back, I would say to myself, "Say what you want, go with your gut and follow your heart. Don't settle for second best."

### What is your creative process like?

I feel like it never turns off. There's almost this little radar going off. I walked through a car show years ago and saw stitching on a vintage Mercedes. And I was like, "Wow, that's a cool Mercedes convertible, but that stitching is fantastic!" I ended up using it on a driving shoe. You take pieces of things. I send myself an email with little notes or ideas and I collect those over a couple of months. Sometimes I have five in a day and sometimes there are none for weeks on end. It comes in fits and spurts.

### What does having style mean to you?

Style, to me, is timeless. It is Grace Kelly or Jackie Onassis Kennedy. It was gorgeous and stylish then, and it's stylish today. They looked elegant and elevated when they were going for a walk along the beach or at a black-tie gala. Sometimes people think so-

phisticated has to be formal, but elegant casual is my favourite thing to be. My design style always has an elegance running through it.

### What was your first fashion memory?

When I think about when I got into fashion, it was *Fashion Television*. It was Saturday morning and waking up and watching *FT* and just being glued to it and then watching it a second time on Sunday when it reran. I always tell [host] Jeanne Beker that story.

### A life in shoes wasn't your original career choice. How did you make the transition from fashion design?

After graduating from the fashion program at Sheridan College, I went to work at Bretton's, but step one when you got hired into the management training program was that you had to work a year in shoes. And I did not want to do it. So I went kicking and screaming and didn't have any interest in it. But I had that drive and had that pride to be the best in the company. I fell in love with shoes and stayed.

**Your shoes have been worn by everyone from Celine Dion and Matt Damon to Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall. Is there anyone ►**



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**'I used to call Brad my Lego because we would hug and it would be a perfect fit'**

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The intimate covered patio is the perfect spot for cozying up at cocktail hour with a glass of sparkling rosé, Ron's favourite summer refreshment. The pretty cut-crystal champagne coupes are a treasured





**'Now that we're hitting our 50s, we're trying  
to get a little more life balance'**

'We tend to be the place where our friends and family drop into and we want it to be that way!' says Brad. 'We like to have our space so we can



**who you haven't dressed that you would love to?** Oprah! She was just in Canada and tweeting and live videoing about how her feet were killing her. I said, "Let's have some fun" so I sent a note back saying, "I think it's time you tried my All Day Heels!" Of course, she would be a great voice to have as an ambassador.

**When it comes to home design, whose esthetic reigns, yours or Brad's?** We have similar taste. The house is coming up on 117 years old and was built in a pocket north of the city around a golf course. The whole vision and dream was to take the cottage fund and the house fund and combine those together and get a bigger piece of property and get something that's got a great yard. You have these beautiful heritage bones and then we added contemporary pieces to it. We love the trim work, we love this 100-year-old home feel, but we have more modern furniture and art.

**Who does most of the cooking?**

**Brad:** It's all me! Ron can make a mean grilled cheese.

**Ron:** And I do a really good toast and peanut butter.

**You're both so on the go. How do you carve out time to spend with each other?**

**Ron:** Brad joined the business two years ago, so that gives us some additional time together. Now that we're hitting our 50s and trying to get a little more life balance, Brad's been coming to meet me toward the end of some business trips. Once you're in Europe, it's very easy to bounce around, and that part is true vacation.

**If you do find time to have a Saturday at home in Toronto, where do you relax?** The backyard! If the weather is hitting, our friends and family know, come join us, hang out. We put on some music, set out some refreshments and just hang. It's that or up at a friend's cottage.

**Music is an important part of your life. You danced down the aisle at your Casa Loma wedding and you like to listen when you're designing.** There is music on all the time. In the shower, in the office, in the car. We joke that we have all of these portable wireless speakers that can move to our covered porch and the pool. There's always music on! Brad will laugh at me, but Madonna's "Vogue" was my song. It was high energy, ▶



great to dance to and it would get my blood pumping. Up until a couple of years ago, I used to play it in my car on the way to meetings to get me going.

**What do you love most about the other?**

**Brad:** It's a long list. Ron's tenacity and perseverance in doing what he does, and doing it successfully, I just think it's so admirable. It blows my mind. You see him when he gets on television, it's phenomenal, he's truly a natural at it. And he's sweet and kind.

**Ron:** First off, Brad is the most handsome man I've ever met, so I feel like I have to pinch myself every so often that this person is living with me. The small touches of kindness and sweetness about him is what drew me to him and still does. There's this exceptionally kind-hearted person wrapped around a little bulldog on the outside.


**What makes you such great partners?**

**Ron:** We're a great yin and yang. I used to call Brad Lego because we would hug and it would be a perfect fit. In many respects, we're those opposites that attract. He likes to be behind the scenes and manage

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**The azure pool beckons with enough lounge chairs to rival a five-star resort**

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'Most people look for a great kitchen or bathroom or bedroom – those were lower on the totem pole,' says Ron. 'Having a great backyard and entertaining space were the top priorities.'


and preparing and prepping, and I used to be a competitive figure skater way back when. I'm the performer.

**Who has more shoes?**

**Brad:** Ron, by far.

**Ron:** But Brad has become a shoe-a-holic.

**Brad:** I get first pick.

**Ron:** I've got a few extra, and a number of sentimental pairs in my collection. Now when we get a new collection in, we don't like to wear the same shoes, so Brad has first dibs. They're all my babies! 

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