

# Got sole!

Once the toast of the 1990s, the shoe designer Patrick Cox had hit rock bottom, professionally and personally – until, he tells **Kate Spicer**, a surprising brush with toad venom led him down a new creative path

Photograph **Maria Santos**

**Recently, Patrick Cox** was driving down a dirt road near his home in Santa Gertrudis on the Balearic island of Ibiza. “I was behind this cyclist and I could just about make out it said ‘Doors of Perception’ in very small letters on the back of his cap. I kept thinking, ‘Is that mine? I think that’s one of mine.’”

Is this the same Patrick Cox who thrived in 1980s London when he arrived in the UK to study at the design school Cordwainers? A man who sold a million loafers a year at his peak? Who made shoes for Vivienne Westwood and John Galiano, and who was partying with the frilly-shirted heart of new romantic London at Camden Palace and with Leigh Bowery at Taboo, despite hailing from the backwater of cool that is Canada? Now he’s chasing baseball caps and cyclists down country roads. It makes no sense, unless you know the story of how he got here.

In the 1990s Cox appeared to be about as much of a British fashion insider as anyone could be, after creating a shoe that everyone wanted to own. Early in the decade the stylist Marcus von Ackermann asked him to design a loafer for the tailor Richard James’s catwalk show. “I gave him a slip-on that sat on the edge of good taste and bad taste.”

Cox grew up in his native Canada, with stints in Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon following his father, a professor of linguistics and teacher who spoke ten languages. “I spent half my childhood looking at Nigerian businessmen’s slip-ons in exotics like crocodile or lizard. Then there was Pee-Wee Herman, who always wore white loafers. It was ‘in’ me.” At college he’d been ridiculed for designing a square-toed brogue: “The teacher said, ‘We’re drawing shoes not cars.’”

He called the loafer the Wannabe — with its distinctive “tubular construction, it was more like a slip-on with a horse bit” — and launched it in 1993 under his eponymous shoe line, as well as an affordable diffusion line that he also called Wannabe. “It was a way of getting the brand, but if you weren’t the top client it was a ‘wannabe’ Patrick Cox shoe. Our target was to sell 5,000 but 20,000 walked out the door.”

Soon Cox, who describes himself as a boomer (he was 60 earlier this year),

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pretty much owned fashion from the ankle down. The Wannabe was the Britpop shoe, as worn by Oasis, but also by Michael Hutchence when he met Paula Yates on *The Big Breakfast* bed; while Mark Morrison’s *Return of the Mack* video “was basically a big Wannabe ad. Paul Weller and Jazze B collared me backstage somewhere and said, ‘This is the coolest f\*\*\*ing shoe.’ Jamie Oliver got married in them, Bob Dylan wore them. Bob Dylan! Barry Manilow! WTF! I met Nile Rodgers at a Kim Jones show once and he said, ‘Oh dude, I bought a lot of your shoes.’”

And the Wannabe was not only a showbiz red-carpet shoe: it was so de rigueur on the UK house and garage club scene that *The Face* magazine used the number of pairs spotted in a club as some type of benchmark of credibility. Cox won awards and his shoes now feature in museum collections.

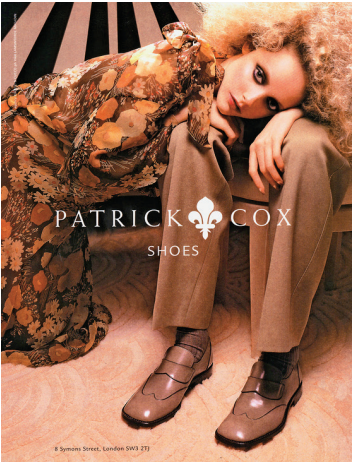
He seemed to be at the centre of it all. Today his conversation is littered with huge names in that unselfconscious way people have when all this is totally normal for them. Janet Jackson had a nickname for him: Party Pat. Her brother Michael wore bespoke Wannabes. “They were always a dancing shoe, soft through the sole like a moccasin so the foot can move.”

Things, however, were not OK. He was taking too many drugs, he freely admits. And he wrestled with low self-esteem, a legacy of an unhappy childhood that he says he is not ready to discuss publicly. He describes the 1990s as a “Fake it till you make it decade”. But Cox’s insecurities were evident. He was smart, trilingual, handsome, well-liked, but he couldn’t say a nice word about himself. “I couldn’t be put in front of customers. The staff would panic, ‘Get him out of the showroom’, because if a buyer picked something up and liked it, I’d immediately say it was rubbish.” Everyone loved his work except him.

Cox was a workaholic and the success of the business thrilled him. “I was constantly seeking validation and I validated my existence by my company’s turnover.” And, he concedes, he had a lot of friends. “But I always felt an outsider, I never felt like a cool kid. I had my gay friends, my straight friends, my posh friends, my famous friends, but never fashion friends.”



Patrick Cox wearing a sweatshirt from his new Doors of Perception range



Cox lost the Wannabe brand in 2003, walking away after the Italian factory where the loafers were made went bust and he had one “*Sopranos*-like” meeting with the new owners. A few years later some poor decisions with investors saw his name falling into the ownership of bankers. He fought to come back — and with some success, designing for other people — but in truth the fashion landscape had changed and was a challenging proposition for smaller brands not attached to one of the luxury conglomerates.

In an effort to escape the treadmill and himself, he moved to Ibiza in 2017 with his dogs, Caesar and Brutus, but doing a geographical, as they say, was not a solution. He admits a horror at being alone in the quiet with his thoughts. “I’m still clutching at straws, faking it. I poo-poo therapy, poo-poo mental health, poo-poo religion, I’m a poo-pooing cynic.”

In 2018 Elton John and Elizabeth Hurley intervened. “Elton said, ‘Do you need help?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’” Cox went to rehab for three months, where they wanted to put him on antidepressants and he said no. He did a lot of heavy-duty crying. Still he was not “fixed”.

Then in 2019, by way of some friends who were into the growing field of using psychedelics as medicine (rather than as party drugs), he smoked the dried venom of *Bufo alvarius*, aka the Colorado River toad. “Toad”, as he calls it, contains the compound 5-MeO-DMT. According to Rayyan Zafar, a neuropsychopharmacologist at Imperial College’s Centre for Psychedelic Research, “5-MeO-DMT is one of the newest psychedelics to be found and researched, showing extremely promising early real-world evidence for alcohol and drug dependence.”

After smoking toad his life changed instantly. “You don’t do toad for fun or some box-ticking peak experience. It is incredibly important to do it with someone who is experienced and safe. Toad is not for everybody, but I had an amazing reaction. There was a paradigm shift in my brain and my soul. Now I live in the light.”

**Clockwise from top left**

Elizabeth Hurley in an advert for Cox’s spring/summer collection, 2006; boots designed by Cox and Elton John to celebrate the film *Kinky Boots*, 2005; Cox with Boy George, 1987; Cox wearing a pair of his own shoes, 1995; an advert from the 1990s. **Below** Cox with Elton, 2008, and Kylie, 1998

Staying in the light takes work, though. “The thing that still triggered me was when people talked about fashion or shoes — I had to leave the room. I knew I had to make peace with my past and my creativity, with my former success and loss of it.” The answer to this was a small clothing label called Doors of Perception, named after Aldous Huxley’s seminal text about taking the psychedelic mescaline. The label, Cox explains, is “my love letter to entheogens” (an alternative word for psychedelics that, to translate from the Greek, generates the divine within).

So far it’s a line of sweatshirts and caps that are hand-embroidered with the archetypal eyes associated with psychedelic visions, and with little messages stitched into the fabric in unexpected places. His first IRL stockist was Agora, an upmarket sustainable boutique on the White Isle, and the range is set to land at Flannels in the UK soon. With sweatshirts priced at £395 the brand is on purpose not scalable, but it is popular with the multi-millionaire “Burner” (aka Burning Man devotee) brigade. How long until we see Elon Musk wearing one?

It is a way for Cox to return to his past as a designer while trying to “spread the word” with what he calls “entheogenic apparel”. “This is me returning to my roots, but in a happy way where I feel in control.” The embroidery is done on the island by a lady called Nieves. “I never again want to be in an Italian factory, to deal with American department store buyers or snobby Condé Nasties.”

And this is why he is now driving down dirt roads after baseball caps that might be one he designed. “The cyclist eventually pulled over, saying, ‘What’s your problem?’ I explained that I made the cap, and the joy you feel when you spot someone wearing something you designed. He thought I was a bit odd but he was very nice about it.” For Patrick Cox, the man who shod the 1990s, that cyclist’s choice of headwear was nothing short of therapy. ■

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