

## From muse to fashion magnate

She is one of the biggest fashion role models of our time, loved by the catwalk's designers and fashionistas for her relaxed, Paris chic look. After several successful collaboration collections with fashion brands, the former model, TV presenter and now creative director of ALEXACHUNG is currently working on her third autumn collection under her own name.

If you don't know who Alexa Chung is, but you're interested in fashion and have been shopping for women's clothes at some point in the past decade, the chances are that the British 35-year-old has had a part to play in your choice of clothes. Alexa Chung is one of the greatest style icons of our time, and rumour has it that she was one of the late Karl Lagerfeld's muses. With porcelain skin tones, chestnut-coloured hair (she is ambassador for the hair care brand L'Oréal Professionnel), winged cat-eyes and perfect pins, Chung, who is also a contributing editor to British Vogue, has established herself as an influential name at the very top of the fashion tree. She frequently features in best dressed lists and is a darling of street style photographers next to other British style princesses such as Kate Moss and Meghan Markle. She also had a Mulberry bag named after her that became a runaway success, making her an attractive partner to several fashion brands.

She created two collections together with American jeans brand Madewell (that sold out immediately) and AG Jeans. The first denim collection for AG Jeans was launched in 2015, containing pieces such as a mini dress, an a-line skirt and dungarees – all clothes Chung loved wearing during her youth. Perhaps it's not surprising then that the 35-year-old took the plunge in 2016 and returned to London from her then hometown of New York to launch her eponymous fashion label. The premise then was the same as it is now: she creates garments based on her own favourite pieces.

"I know there are designers who are creating art and some who are challenging form etc., but I simply want to make clothes I want to wear. I think it would be wasteful of me to make things that people can't actually put on their body," Alexa Chung told SvD Perfect Guide from her design studio and office in East London earlier this year.

From previously showing her collections at guerrilla-inspired events, she has just had her second show at London Fashion Week, where she showed off her latest autumn/winter collection in a temporary bunker in Kings Cross.

"I felt showing on the fashion week schedule was an important position, not only because of the international media focus, but also because it allows me to present a narrative about my collection; to create an immersive environment on a grand scale," explains Alexa, who is currently working on the spring 2020 collection.

Digging through the archives to look for inspiration is something that vintage-lover Chung enjoys. The day before we spoke to her, Alexa and her design team started their workday at a design library in London.

“We sifted through fabrics, illustrations and yarn dyes. Following this I had a catch up with our board for a business chinwag, I then met with a prospective new employee for an interview – I think he’s got the job. After lunch I met with our knitwear designer to discuss my dream jumper which I would like us to make. The day ended with a catch up with my marketing team about forthcoming events where we’ll be travelling to Istanbul, Munich, Seattle and New York.”

Constantly being in the media spotlight has become part of Chung's everyday life. Since becoming known to a larger audience as a host in the British TV series Popworld in 2006, she has been presented with the British Style Award by the British fashion council three times. One of the reasons why she took the step to becoming a fashion entrepreneur was to take back control of her public image. From being the poster girl for the sassy, rock-chic, boy-meets-girl look, with striped sweaters, peter pan collars, Mary Janes, vintage sailor dresses and denim cutoffs – a bit of a Jane Birkin for the noughties – Chung told the Oxford Union (a student debate club at Oxford University, Ed.) in a speech last year that she wanted to get away from her ‘fun’ and ‘friendly’ image.

In short, she doesn’t care much about what others think, or to put it bluntly: she doesn't just dress for men. So how will her look have changed for the autumn? It’s less girly, less festival, with more tailored silhouettes. The Parisian elegance is still there, but it breathes a raw, New York vibe. Think a figure-hugging dress in shiny black velvet, a classic oversized herringbone wool jacket, or a masculine seventies-inspired corduroy suit.

“Our signature corduroy suit has progressed into an emerald velvet number and there’s an oversized herringbone jacket that’s going to be part of my wardrobe,” explains Alexa Chung.

So how did everything begin? Chung grew up in Hampshire, on the southern coast of England, with two brothers and one older sister. The highlights of her upbringing in the sleepy British countryside were, in addition to a passion for equestrian sports, the family's art tours in London. She was discovered by the now legendary model agent Jane Duval at a music festival when she was 16 years old. Soon she was everywhere – from appearances in Fanta ads to modelling for Urban Outfitters and in fashion mags for teens. But she never really felt at home in the model world. She soon started appearing in music videos and was picked as a host for the British television series Popworld. With her dry humour and readiness to correct rock star’s grammar on-screen, her career led her to a TV venture for MTV in the US that was later cancelled. After almost four years in New York, she returned to London in April 2016 to throw herself into setting up her own brand.

“I’ve never been afraid to try which also means accepting failure. I’m proud that I’ve failed at things before but it hasn’t dissuaded me from taking new risks,” says Alexa.

This has proven to be a formula for success. Today, ALEXACHUNG is sold by 145 retailers in 22 countries. 30 people, including Chung herself, work the combined design studio and offices in East London. In an article on [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com) in 2018, Chung says that her transition from muse to founder and creative designer of a label, with a team of 30 employees, may look like a weird trajectory, but she herself isn't surprised to be where she is today.

"I come from a family of creatives. Graphic designers, packaging designers, DJ's, etc. Drawing and design is a family business so for me it was probably weirder that I peeled off for a bit and became a television host. Now I feel like I'm working totally within my comfort zone. It's not just the design I enjoy either, I love communicating ideas in general, whichever form that takes."

Now let's take a step back in time. We're in Universal Music's concrete office cellar, in the middle of St Pancras in central London. The cellar has been temporarily transformed into a catwalk and is adorned with moss garlands. Models of different ethnicities come out dressed in billowing feminine dresses, and masculine outerwear in herringbone and plush forest green velvet reinforces the strong-shouldered dress silhouettes. The models are chosen with care.

"Inclusivity is very important to us. As a mixed race person I know first-hand how impactful and important it is as a young woman to see someone like you represented in art and fashion. The only references children had at my school for Asian women in film were Lucy Liu and Chung Lee from *Streetfighter*, so that's what I was called."

The fact that her position comes with responsibility is not something Chung shies away from. Because does the world really need another fashion brand?

"When I started my business, I was fully aware that no matter how ethical or sustainable it could ultimately be, it would invariably leave some sort of footprint on the planet. I think the most important thing we can do right now is educate ourselves – only from this knowledge will we be able to move in the right direction. As a start-up brand, we are continuing to take the necessary steps to find ways to reduce our environmental impact."

Alexa Chung herself doesn't really shop any more. She doesn't have time, and doesn't like shopping online.

"I prefer to dig for vintage treasure and respond to how fabrics feel in real life."

Maybe one of Chung's favourite fashion designers, Erdem Moralioglu, said it best when he told [Elle.com](http://Elle.com) in November 2015 that "An intelligent beauty always marches to the beat of her own drum."

## **Fact box Alexa Chung**

Name: Alexa Chung.

Age: 35

Family: My mum and dad, who are still together, two brothers, a sister and a niece.

Lives: Dalston, East London. I also have an apartment in East Village in New York.

Right now: Founder and creative director of her own namesake fashion label ALEXACHUNG. Currently working on the latest autumn collection for 2019.

Favourite place in London: Towpath Café.

Where she finds inspiration: Everywhere but mainly films and music. “Anyone who is authentic and true to themselves and original in being so bold as to follow their heart I find inspiring because it reminds me to pay attention to instinct and expression,” said Chung in a press release in 2017.

Things you never knew about Alexa Chung:

Her style book “It” was the best-selling fashion book in the UK in 2013 and 2014. She’s been hypnotised on stage during a Stella McCartney fashion show. British Vogue called her a leading cultural figure, and according to the Business of Fashion website she’s one of the top 500 influencers currently shaping the fashion industry.

Her new autumn collection, ‘Off the grid’, has been on sale since the middle of August at alexachung.com.

/Title/ Spotlight on Alexa Chung

1. What is your motto?
  - I don’t have one!
  
2. What is the first thing you do upon waking and the last thing you do before going to bed?
  - The first thing I do is drink water and the last thing I do is take my contact lenses out and throw them on the floor which is gross and upsets boyfriends when they go crunchy.
  
3. What’s the best thing about the USA?
  - Their optimistic attitude.
  
4. What’s the best thing about the UK?
  - Their pessimistic attitude – makes for great humour!