

TIGER IN HIS TANK

RENZO ROSSO, THE MAN BEHIND DIESEL JEANS, IS NOT ONE FOR IDLING. HE MADE HIS FIRST INROADS INTO THE AUSTRALIAN MARKET 30 YEARS AGO, AND IS ON HIS WAY BACK IN MARCH FOR A RELAUNCH OF THE FIRST TRULY COOL DENIM BRAND.

STORY JOSEPHINE MCKENNA
PORTRAIT STEVE MCCURRY

W

ith his unruly curls and silver stubble, Renzo Rosso looks more like an ageing rock star than a billionaire businessman. But the rugged 60-year-old Italian entrepreneur who created the Diesel jeans empire is a dynamo with energy to burn. As our interview begins Rosso is celebrating the birth of his seventh child, daughter Sydne, and admits: "It's a beautiful feeling — it makes me feel young."

Rosso has spent more than 40 years making denim a stylish fashion essential. Diesel is now sold in more than 80 countries and Forbes magazine estimates Rosso's personal wealth at over \$US5 billion (\$4.3bn) but he is nothing like any of the other big names in Italian design.

Once dubbed the "jeans genius" by fashion commentator Suzy Menkes, Rosso is a renegade who revolutionised the concept of denim. He has also reshaped other brands after taking a majority stake in Maison Margiela, Viktor & Rolf and Marni which are now part of his company, aptly named Only The Brave. Rosso is also contributing £5 million (\$7.8m) to restore the Rialto Bridge in Venice and spearheading his own foundation (also named Only The Brave) which has invested €12m in 170 projects to reshape lives in sub-Saharan Africa.

A role model for a generation of young Italians who admire his drive and determination, Rosso is ready to share some of his youthful exuberance with industry insiders when he headlines the 20th Virgin Australia Melbourne Fashion Festival in March. "I want to leave my message, my energy, my blood, my soul," says Rosso, in heavily accented English. "This is what I like."

It will be Rosso's first visit to Australia in more than three decades. After a chance meeting in a Paris taxi with the late Mark Keighery, creator of the celebrated Mares label, Rosso followed him to Sydney in 1984 to offer him a few samples at a time when hefty tariffs deterred many importers.

"He said, 'How are we going to sell such expensive products?'" Rosso recalls. "I said, 'Pay me only if you sell them.' I put my faith in this guy and that's how Diesel began in Australia. They sold well."

"At that time Australia was very different to the Australia of today. There were no discos, in the evening there was nothing. Today it is fantastic, full of joy, full of life, young people. It's a really super-cool place."

For a child who grew up on his parents' farm in the Po Valley in northern Italy, it's been a remarkable journey, but Rosso had an eye for business at a young age. According to his corporate biography, when a schoolmate offered him a rabbit he turned it into a breeding business to pick up some extra cash.

Rosso loves telling the story of how at age 15 he sat at his mother's Singer sewing machine and made his first pair of bellbottom jeans. He was soon selling them to his friends and dreamed of starting his own business while studying textiles at Padua's Marconi Institute. These days he is often seen on TV shows or business forums discussing his teenage desire to do something different and exhorting others to do the same. "My philosophy is to be brave," he told one public forum.

Growing up in the post-war boom of the 1960s, Rosso saw a future filled with infinite possibilities. "All young people dreamed of leaving home," he recalls. "They were great years for Italy because it was immediately after World War II. There was crazy industrial growth and people wanted to start a business, to do something."

Rosso dropped out of the University of Venice at 20 and joined Moltex, a denim manufacturer run by Adriano Goldschmied, who went on to found AG Jeans. In 1978 they renamed the company Diesel, a catchy name after a decade of upheaval in the oil industry, and Rosso bought out his partner's stake in 1985. He was already thinking big. "My dream was an American dream: James Dean, American cars, and a jukebox," he says. "My ambition was to get to America one day."

In 1986 he took the plunge and ventured into the competitive US market where superbrands such as Levi's and Lee had been well established since the 19th century. It wasn't easy as the Italian jeans were far more expensive than their rivals, but consumers were looking for something different and designer jeans were fast becoming a fashion craze.

"At that time the most expensive jeans sold in America were Ralph Lauren's for \$US52 and my cheapest pair of jeans was \$US100," he says. "We were looking for distribution but there was no distributor. So I used to sell my jeans to beautiful stores that sold shoes, to vintage stores, to the most diverse stores that were cool or where interesting people used to go. We changed the philosophy in America with Diesel."



Renzo Rosso grew up in Italy's post-war boom of the 1960s, a time of 'crazy industrial growth'.

STYLING: NICOLA PERI. MAKEUP: DANIELA FERRARI. HAIR: DANIELA FERRARI.



SOPHIA



DIESEL BLACK GOLD PRE-FALL 2016

Rosso opened his first Diesel store in New York a decade later and the cheeky designer chose a position directly opposite Levi's in the heart of Manhattan. "I wanted to show them how beautiful our product was," says Rosso. Diesel didn't have enough merchandise to fill the 1400sqm store, so the Italian entrepreneur built a bar and a DJ booth. "Every few months we'd close the store at 6 o'clock and throw a party."

By 1989 Diesel had expanded to 40 countries and was generating sales of \$US130 million. From its global headquarters in Breganze, near Vicenza, the brand continued its dramatic expansion backed by unconventional advertising campaigns and the early adoption of social media. Today there are 5000 points of sale including 400 Diesel stores in 80 countries around the world, with Japan, the US, Germany, Italy and Britain its top-selling markets.

In 2008 Rosso launched premium line Diesel Black Gold, which has its own creative director Andreas Melbostad and shows during Milan Fashion Week.

Diesel's flagship Rome store sits beside the Spanish Steps and showcases the brand's latest designs in softly-lit display cases framed in chrome. Here customers can be seen sporting a Mohican haircut, their latest tattoo or a business suit as they sift through leather jackets, watches and an array of jeans priced from €150 to a staggering €700. Some of the jeans are torn to shreds, others are covered in studs but all have been washed in a laundering process that is a precious corporate secret.

Rosso attended the opening of the 400sqm store in October 2014 and made quite an impression, spending 40 minutes quizzing staff and checking every detail of their operations. "I was impressed by his energy the first time I saw him," says a sales assistant who was a loyal customer for 20 years before joining the team. "When I was adding studs to the jeans at the opening he came straight up to me and began working on the machines

"We are going to celebrate the rebirth of Diesel. Once again we have become cool, like we were in the past."

with me." Another sales assistant says Rosso's uncompromising approach makes a difference. "He said the store was beautiful but he wanted it to be even more beautiful. Perhaps that is the secret of his success. He started from nothing and now has an empire."

Rosso is quick to play down his achievements and prefers to pay tribute to Diesel's 7500 employees, the tempo of his delivery stepping up a notch. "The team you work with is always very important, together you share ideas and carry projects forward. What can you do on your own? Nothing," he says.

"I hope I am a good coach but the team is important. When you share ideas with everyone, you move in the same direction together. Every individual should be part of a team that looks to advance our company."

Rosso's team includes his three eldest children from his first marriage. The eldest, 38-year-old Andrea, is the creative director of Diesel licences, which includes everything from watches to eyewear, while Stefano, 36, is the chief executive of the OTB group. Their younger sister Alessia works in marketing for Diesel USA.

Since being appointed Diesel's creative director two years ago, Nicola Formichetti has revived the brand and cleverly exploited social media with his #DieselReboot

campaign, which generated widespread media attention. Last month he provoked a new buzz when he said Diesel would exploit porn sites Pornhub and Grindr for its latest advertising campaign. Rosso says Formichetti has "some of the madness I had when I was young".

Rosso is also happy with his decision to appoint the disgraced designer John Galiano as creative director of Maison Margiela, in late 2014. Galiano made headlines around the world in 2011 when he was sacked by Christian Dior after an anti-Semitic tirade in a Paris bar. Margiela revenues have been growing by 30 per cent and Rosso says only one retailer dropped the brand after Galiano's appointment. "I chose talent," Rosso tells Wish. "I think John Galiano is the most talented, most important, most incredible creative director that I have ever met. I am learning many things from him."

Since Rosso is happy to challenge traditional perceptions, perhaps it's not surprising that he has created a family-friendly, environmentally sensitive headquarters for his staff and promotes car-sharing and recycling. "I think a modern businessman must take responsibility — first for the salaries of employees, second to be more committed socially. The third is to lend a hand in saving the planet. We are destroying it, so we can do a lot with how we work, the materials that we work with, the waste. We can do a lot in helping to save the planet. Our company is 80 per cent self-sufficient using our own energy."

Dubbed the "campus", the 90,000sqm complex at the company's global headquarters is something that is rarely seen in Italy. Apart from offices, it includes soccer fields, tennis courts, a gym, a restaurant, a kindergarten and an organic orchard. Cynics may argue it is a sophisticated way to keep employees closer to the office to work longer hours but Rosso sees it differently. "I always say making people calmer where they work always makes them feel free to give more to their creativity and really contribute to their job," he says. "We have a very modern model for doing business. It is a community."

Rosso expects nothing less from himself and continues to set a cracking pace. "I am very organised. I get up at 6am and begin with my personal time — training for an hour, breakfast, taking the kids to school — and every hour I have appointments. My day is very organised. I am a war machine!"

It's unlikely Rosso will draw breath during his Australian pitstop. As well as his guest appearance in Melbourne, he is planning to relaunch the Diesel brand. "We have a fantastic distributor who is in love with us, we have a great business plan. We are going to celebrate the rebirth of Diesel [in Australia]. Once again we have become cool, like we were in the past."

Rosso is clearly excited to see how Australia has evolved since his previous visit and wants young Italians, so often stifled in their own country, to learn from Australians who pursue their dreams. "It is beautiful to see that talented people, those who want to succeed, go to Australia. I want Italy to learn from Australia, a marvellous country, an enormous country. And long live this mentality, it is a mentality that we really need."

When he's not dreaming of new things to do with denim, saving Italy's cultural icons or contributing to sustainable development in Africa, Rosso takes time out to practise yoga, cycle and kick back with his friends and his ever-expanding family.

But the denim legend is rarely still and he's looking forward to sharing his high-octane energy and good humour with Australians who might have heard his name and what he has accomplished. "I have been well-known for as long as Diesel has existed," he says. "It makes me really happy when people shake my hand and compliment me because Diesel was really created from a dream. It was the dream of someone who believed he could fulfill his dream and achieved it." **W**