



FASHION'S

QUEEN BEE

*Alexander McQueen's Sarah Burton is  
setting the world abuzz. By Harriet Quick*

*Photographs by Erik Madigan Heck*

Mother of invention. Jacket, Burton's own. FASHION EDITOR: Beth Fenton

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he setting is pure McQueen: A very pregnant Sarah Burton enters a greenhouse at Petersham Nurseries in Richmond upon Thames, England, on a drizzly Monday morning. The sky is thick with rain clouds, and the pathways are an obstacle course of puddles and mud. Burton is swathed in an animal-print scarf, leggings, a tailored black shirt, and an overcoat, her pale blue eyes immediately lighting up at the natural splendor before her. There are rows of seed packets, old-fashioned metal watering cans, shelves of Wellington boots, and rows of spring bulbs in pots. All of it feels wonderfully connected to Burton's Spring 2013 show, which was inspired by bees and beekeeping. Like McQueen before her, Burton has an incredibly fervid imagination. "With bees, I was really looking at the female form, at the way women dress, but I did not want it to be historical. We were looking at corsetry, underwear, and tailoring," she explains of the workmanship behind the featherlight pieces with their graphic plunging necklines and nipped waists, and the hand-smocked, bee-embroidered organza gowns held in by tortoiseshell belts and external corsets. The handiwork—lacquered lace, jacquard weaves, honeycomb-lattice trousers that looked as if they had been dipped in gold—stunned and delighted the fashion world. "It was a celebration of femininity," she says.

Burton herself seems a rather resplendent example of womanhood at the moment. She's just made a visit to her doctor for a checkup (she's due in February), and all is well. "My energy levels have been great," she says with a smile. "I feel very lucky, and especially so, as I'm bearing twins. Lee [Lee Alexander McQueen, the house's late founder] always used to ask me, 'When are you going to get pregnant?'" In preparation for family life, Burton and her husband, fashion photographer David Burton, have just renovated their St. John's Wood house in North London, although she concedes that she's been too scared to decorate the nursery just yet. "I'm in disbelief that two little ones might be here very soon," she laughs. But the prospect of family life does not seem so far removed from current reality. The Burtons are a private couple who enjoy walks, pub lunches, and excursions to the country. They do not play on the fashion scene.

The British Fashion Awards in late November, however, was an exception. Burton wore a vintage embroidered McQueen cape from the Spring 2003 "Pirates" collection and tux trousers to the event—a nod to her long-standing relationship with the house, which began in 1996, when she was just 20 and hired as an intern. During the inter-

view, the first question McQueen asked her was "Do you believe in UFOs?" Burton, a polymath with a deep love of the arts, music, and science, hit that question about imagination and faith on the nose with a resounding "yes!"

It's rare in the fashion industry—with its constant rounds of musical chairs—to find a creative talent who is so steadfast. The Alexander McQueen world is the only professional world Burton has known. When she joined the label, it was a small hands-on affair where everyone did everything. That family feel, despite the global punch of the name, and the tether of the main shareholder, PPR (the French luxury conglomerate), remains the same. The airy, expansive Clerkenwell Road headquarters is abuzz with multicultural talents in the default uniform of black leather biker jacket and skinny jeans. "It's like studying somewhere you never want to leave," Burton says.

Growing up in Cheshire, near Manchester, as the daughter of an accountant father and a music-teacher mother, Burton was one of five siblings and an A student. While one brother pursued a career in music (he's a professional oboe player) and a sister trained as an opera singer, Burton found her passion in sketching, art, and fashion. "At one point, I was going to study art at the Ruskin School in Oxford," she recalls. But her heart was set on fashion. She enrolled in the foundation course at Manchester Polytechnic before moving to London to study at Central Saint Martins. Her penchant for both drawing and research impressed her tutor Simon Ungless. He introduced Burton to McQueen, who at the time was working out of a tiny studio on Hoxton Square, in East London. ►

## THE FIRST QUESTION MCOQUEEN ASKED BURTON: "DO YOU BELIEVE IN UFOs?"

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McQueen, though indisputably a great talent and a visionary, was also a taskmaster who had his own demons to battle. Psychologically, one needed a strong backbone to endure the storms at McQueen headquarters and roll with the creative highs and lows. And following McQueen's suicide, in February 2010, the roller-coaster ride has only become more intense, as the little-known Burton accepted the position of creative director of the house. The speed of growth and change would likely have derailed many.

"I felt absolutely devastated, with an unbearable sense of loss," Burton says of McQueen's death. McQueen was her mentor as well as a leader, and he adored her, and vice versa. But Burton knew she had to concentrate on work. "I always feel you have to push yourself forward—you can never sit back and say, 'Okay,'" she explains. Adds Burton's close friend Anita Borzyszkowska, "She is incredibly focused."

When McQueen died, it could have heralded the end of the Great British fashion adventure—an era defined by romance, vision, and a devil-may-care attitude. He not only built a luxury house with deep roots in arcane British handicraft (from corsetry to lace-making and feather embroidery) but also influenced a generation of designers. Instead, Burton continues to make her mark on the house—and the world—through her love of storytelling. She has feminized and lightened the codes of fetishism, historicism, and romanticism that McQueen made his leitmotifs, lending the label a femininity and delicacy that's in sync with other leading women designers. Burton, like Phoebe Philo and Stella McCartney, is a voice of her generation.

"Every season has a set of new challenges," says Burton, "and all the collections—womenswear, menswear, and McQ—are very different, but I want to make sure that every collection is relevant to how both women and men want to dress." To that end, this past year, she relaunched the McQ brand as a go-to urban line for both sexes with a flagship on Dover Street in London. She has reconfigured the menswear collection and opened a shop on Savile Row, which includes an in-house tailor and artwork curated by Sadie Coles. (Savile Row is where McQueen interned at the tailors Anderson & Sheppard and, later, Gieves & Hawkes.) Then there are the new women's stores (done in collaboration with interior designer David Collins) in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Miami, and Dallas (the latter slated to open this spring) and a growing couture and ready-to-wear clientele that includes Michelle Obama, Blake Lively, and longtime supporter and friend Sarah Jessica Parker. And in December, the designer was awarded an Order of the British Empire by Prince Charles for her contributions to fashion.

And let's not forget 2011, Burton's annus mirabilis. That year alone saw the opening of the blockbuster McQueen retrospective, "Savage Beauty," at the Costume Institute at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as Burton's receiving the Designer of the Year award at the British Fashion Awards. Next came her creation of Kate Middleton's wedding dress—an epic feat of diplomacy and secrecy. Burton had to arrange fake meetings in order to visit the future Duchess of Cambridge for fittings, not to mention recruit a stream of embroiderers from the Royal School of Needlework. The gown will go down in fashion history: In the televised wedding footage, you can see Burton nip into the picture to adjust Middleton's train at Westminster Abbey. The relationship with the royal bride has clearly been a happy one, as Middleton continues to wear McQueen steadily. "The Duchess of Cambridge has an amazing sense of grace and style," says Burton. "It's a huge honor to dress her, and she is an incredible ambassador of British fashion."

If Middleton is the great ambassador of British fashion, Burton is one of its great creative lights. "I do get stressed, especially at the shows," she admits. "And that's because of how amazing Lee's shows were. But you just have to put your heart and soul into it. I have an amazing team, and it is so important to me that there are jackets and dresses that people really want to buy. All the boxes need to be ticked creatively and commercially."

At this point in Burton's career, it would seem that her business acumen is almost as strong as her immense design talent. As for where she will take McQueen next—the fashion world is waiting with bated breath. ■

*Harriet Quick is the editorial director of Luxup.com.*

ON MOTHERHOOD:  
"LEE ALWAYS USED  
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GET PREGNANT?'"

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See Where to Buy for shopping details. Model: Alla Kostromichova; hair: Bianca Tuovi for Bumble and Bumble; makeup: Celia Burton for M.A.C.; production: PCM (purecreativemgt.com); prop styling: Matthew Duguid. Special thanks to Petersham Nurseries, Richmond, Surrey.