



RAOUL WITH IT

Home-grown fashion brand Raoul opened its first store in 2003. Today, it boasts a global presence with over 30 stores worldwide, but continues to push the boundaries of fashion. By Alexandra Kohut-Cole

Swiftly developing into one of Singapore's best known and fastest growing fashion brands—no mean feat within a relatively short time frame—Raoul is synonymous with wearable glamour. The label currently carries an extensive collection of men's and women's ready-to-wear, luxurious leather bags, wallets, belts and shoes. It is part of the family-run FJ Benjamin conglomerate, a leader in developing brands and retail distribution for international luxury and lifestyle labels across Asia. The company's portfolio includes, among others, Céline, Gap, Guess, Valentino and timepiece brands such as Bell & Ross, Girard-Perregaux and JeanRichard.

For their homegrown label, one of the crucial factors in the Raoul design process is that of instinctively interpreting key trends and translating them into a wearable design

for the customer. Odile Benjamin, creative and business force behind the brand with husband Douglas Benjamin, explains, "The Raoul woman is a working, multi-functional woman who needs things that can take her from boardroom to ballroom, from supermarket to PTA meeting, that she can restyle and reinvent simply by adding or changing accessories."

The Raoul hypothesis grew in natural progression from the Benjamins' contribution of ideas to the assembly of international brands that are distributed by FJ Benjamin and by progressively learning from that involvement. The label was initially created as a men's shirt brand, and when the concept took off, it turned out to be the place to go for classic tailored shirts—which were to mature into the Raoul signature style. Three years later, bowing to demand from women who were buying and customising the men's shirts for their own

Raoul boasts a collection of sensuous satins



wardrobes, the women's ready-to-wear line evolved in 2005. A mere two years later, Raoul launched its first standalone accessories outlet in Paragon.

Raoul's women's line has consistently developed to respond to new demands. "It's been the customers telling us what they want and asking us to do new things," says Odile—an aspect clearly illustrated in their fall/winter 2009 collection. Pushing the boundaries with distinctively feminine details such as bold collars, pleats and ribbon-tied cuffs, the collection's signature shirts and shirt-dresses have been reworked in satins and printed silk chiffons.

There is even a bohemian twist to a modern take on the vintage hippie, updated from classic looks that have the ability to transform into perennial designs—a technique which embodies Raoul's principle of timeless designs. Dresses and jackets, lent a more sculpted air with a minute nod to the '80s power shoulders, are embellished with rich colour, prints of paisley, jewels, lace and fur dominating the collection. It is wearable yet lavish, and perfectly accessorised with modernistic black, white and transparent Resin bangles, traditional Swarovski diamante necklaces and pearls, T-bar wedges and pleated leather pumps.

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The look is held together with the calfskin Royalty bag detailed with lasered leather-lace and chain embellishments.

Heralding another first for the brand is the introduction of suits to the men's fall/winter 2009 collection, taking the form of power suits and jackets in Merino wool. The collection also presents a witty take on the classic shirt by tapering it into the waist, creating a fitted profile.

The attention to detail has pushed the boundaries even further for the brand, by opening up a new realm of possibilities. Culminating in a marriage of fashion and technology, the newest design venture unleashed from the Raoul stable is the Nokia N97 mini Raoul Limited Edition touch screen smart phone, which was

the result of a collaboration between FJ Benjamin and Nokia.

Encased in a rose gold metallic finish exclusive to Raoul, the phone has been specially designed for the fashion-conscious consumer. The handset has a fully customisable home screen and can be loaded with applications to reflect individual tastes. "It is a testament to the growing symbiosis of technology and fashion, which is leading development in the world today," says Douglas Benjamin.

The phone's star attraction is its pre-loaded Fashion Asia widget, which enables the user to receive updates on the latest in fashion news, trends and collections. The user can also access updated brand collections every month and locate stores via its built-in global positioning system. "The Fashion Asia widget enables the fashionistas of Asia to participate by uploading and sharing their own fashion looks," says Vlasta Berka, General Manager, Nokia Singapore/Malaysia and Brunei. *Harper's BAZAAR* and *Cleo* have partnered with Raoul to provide weekly content including fashion and style tips. In addition, the Lonely Planet, Michelin and Wcities sites can be accessed, making it the world's smallest travel companion. Other features include a tilting 3.2 inch touch display and QWERTY keyboard.

Accessories have also been exclusively created for the phone, including a matt pebble-grained calf-skin leather pouch, matching phone strap with gun-metal hardware and an alternative interchangeable back plate with signature Raoul stripes. The entire package is cocooned in a deluxe leather-wrapped box.

What will be next for the brand? Odile Benjamin says, "Over the next 10 years we hope for it to become a global player and international brand." Clearly, the way forward is Raoul. ■