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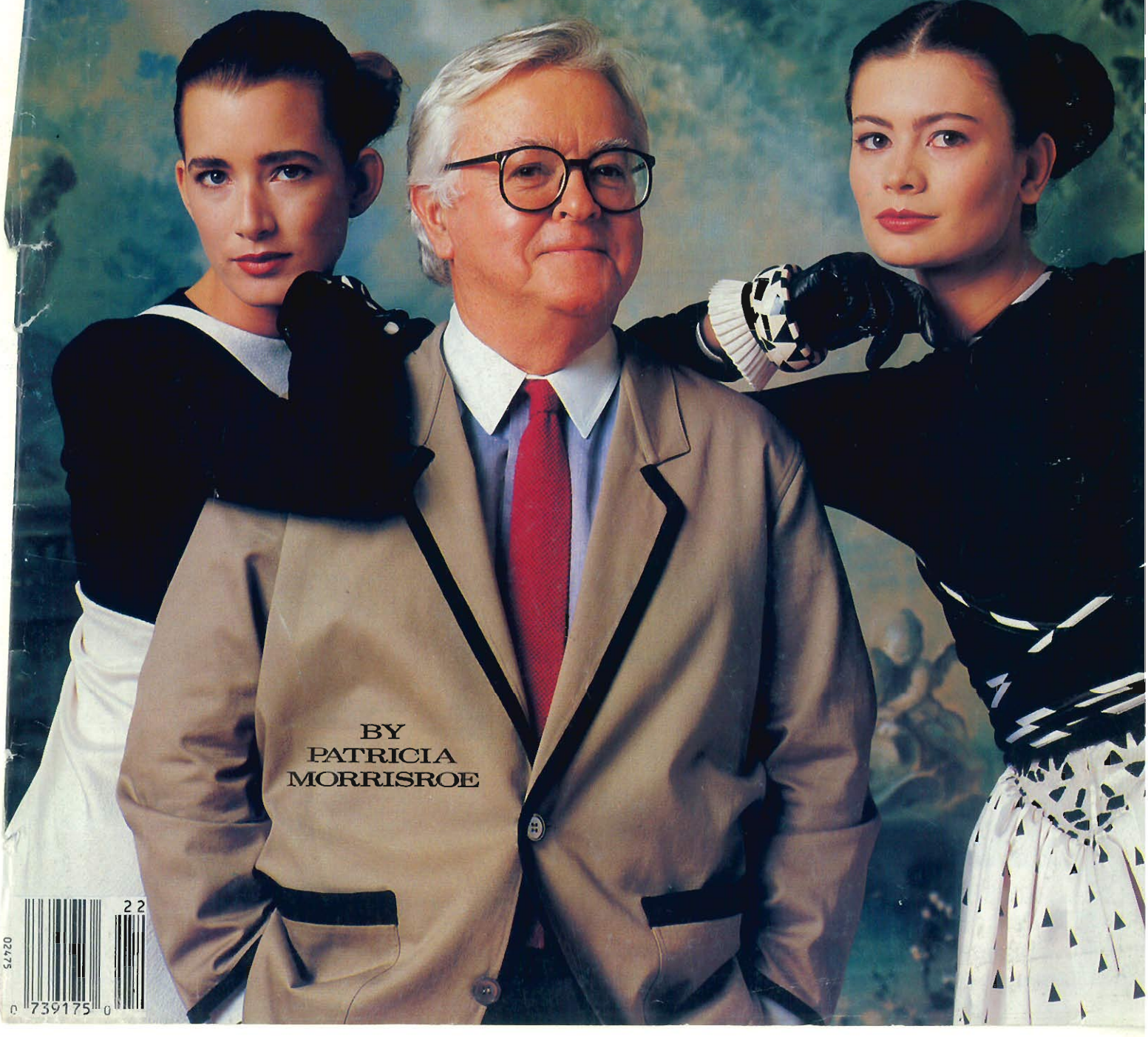
$1.95 • MAY 30, 1988

NEW YORK

AMERICAN BEAUTY

THE WORLD OF GEOFFREY BEENE



BY PATRICIA MORRISROE

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THE WORLD OF GEOFFREY BEENE

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PEOPLE WERE ACTUALLY weeping. Anita Gallo, former fashion-merchandising director of Altman's, couldn't control herself. She kept on wiping away the tears with the knuckle of her index finger. "He's a genius, he's a genius," she said over and over. Annie Flanders, editor of *Details,* looked almost dazed; she wore the kind of beatific expression usually seen in religious paintings. Even Dawn Mello, president of Bergdorf Goodman, admitted, "I have rarely been this moved."

Considering what people were moved by—a fashion show at the Pierre Hotel—the sentiment seemed a bit excessive. But this wasn't a typical show. It was a Geoffrey Beene show, and the "Beene Buffs"—those fashion people who worship the 60-year-old designer—were out in full force. Beene, the perfect cult figure, is an elusive, private man whose official photo invites as many questions as the Beatles' *Abbey Road* cover. He's sitting in his stocking feet, his shoes neatly arranged next to an empty chair. Beene is smirking at the camera, enjoying some private joke. Does it have anything to do with his feet? Is he saying nobody can fill his shoes?

Beene likes to be mysterious—which is a big part of his problem. In an era of designer as superstar, Beene—who has

PHOTOGRAPH BY HARRY BENSON


"I DON'T THINK ORIGINAL, CREATIVE WORK COMES ALONG THAT OFTEN."

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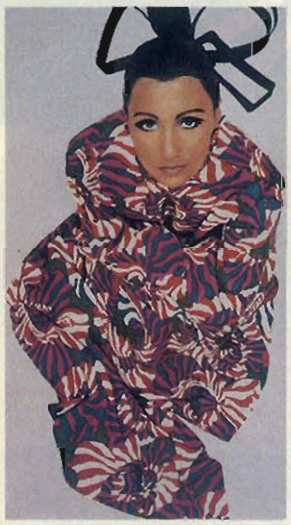

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THE WORLD OF BEENE 25 YEARS

won eight Coty Awards and is probably the greatest designer in America—is Seventh Avenue's best-kept secret.

Of course, he doesn't design for the mass market. He makes beautiful, expensive clothes in the tradition of haute couture. Beene is known for his luxurious fabrics and exotic contrast of textures and materials: lace on leather, plastic and diamonds, evening dresses made of men's-wear fabric. His clothes are full of hidden details—a polka-dotted dress conceals a striped petticoat; a short gown gets its prism effect from layers of colored lace. What you don't see in a Beene design is almost as interesting as what you see. These are rich, wildly imaginative clothes that seem to take on a psychological life of their own.

"Fashion journalists frequently have a problem writing about them," says Grace Mirabella, editor-in-chief of *Vogue*. "They're under the pressure of deadlines, and his designs are extremely complicated. You need time to analyze the collection, to understand the subtleties. He's an innovator in the truest sense of the word, a real creative talent."

This may be the year Beene moves beyond cult status. He is celebrating his twenty-fifth anniversary as head of Geoffrey Beene, Inc., and Bergdorf Goodman is sponsoring a retrospective of his work at the National Academy of Design. He is also dramatically expanding his corporation beyond his own couture line. Beene is designing shoes for Diego Della Valle, furs for Goldin-Feldman, and this summer, Warnaco will bring out Geoffrey Beene Sportswear. "He's at the zenith of his career," says June Weir, fashion editor of *Harper's Bazaar*. "Certain designers reach their plateau, get comfortable in that niche, and continue to do the same thing. Beene keeps on growing, moving forward."

"Beene is absolutely brilliant," says Ellin Saltzman, a senior vice-president at Saks Fifth Avenue. "He has always done his own thing and deliberately gone against the trends. His clothes are esoteric, and he doesn't hype them at all. They're very much a part of the world of Beene."

THE WORLD OF BEENE. HE HATES THE business side of fashion ("It's slavery, torture") but doesn't want a business partner. He'd like to overcome his conservative image as the designer for Pat Nixon and Nancy Reagan but cites Jeane Kirkpatrick as his ideal customer. He doesn't like to do interviews, yet his conference room is wallpapered with his publicity. He says he doesn't care if he's not a household name, but his official biography carries the notation "1978, 1987—name institutionalized twice in New York *Times* and *Newsday* crossword puzzles." His press packet contains a Xerox of a puzzle, with BEENE filled in with red ink.

Even Beene's continuing feud with John Fairchild, publisher of *Women's Wear Daily*, has an element of contradiction. For the past four years, the designer has been banned from the publication, although *WWD* takes great delight in needling him with references to "Sammy Bosman Jr." (According to Beene, his real name is Samuel Albert Bozeman Jr.) Beene says he has "lost respect" for *WWD* because it hasn't covered his collections. The problem is, he doesn't let the paper *into* his collections. *WWD* has tried to make peace for the past several seasons, but Beene will have none of it. Says Fairchild, "I can't comment, because I've never seen his shows."

The feud has been raging on and off since 1967, when Beene refused to give Fairchild a sneak look at Lynda Bird Johnson's wedding gown. The latest ban came about because Beene wouldn't let a *WWD* editor into his showroom. "She was an assistant editor or something," says a former Beene employee. "He got insulted by that, and the rest is history."

Beene, however, may be getting a little too militant. This year, Beene employees were told to be on the lookout for *WWD* workers who might try to crash the fashion show at the Pierre Hotel. "There was even some talk that they might wear disguises," says a Beene staffer.

At this point, Beene isn't about to come "crawling back," as one editor put it. But many of the designer's friends wish the feud would get resolved. Though Beene vehemently denies it, the lack of publicity from *WWD* hasn't helped his business. "I think a lot of out-of-town stores don't know what he does because he isn't covered in *Women's Wear*," says a fashion editor. "Of course, I think the whole thing would have been resolved long ago if Beene had had more ad money and more products to advertise."

The night before Beene's fashion show in mid-April, he got several calls from people trying to persuade him to end the fighting. He became so annoyed that he finally took the receiver off the hook. "The values in our society are just ridiculous," Beene says. "Can you imagine caring that much about a fashion show? It's only clothes."

"MISS MIRABELLA IS ON THE phone, Mr. Beene. Miss Mellon is on the phone, Mr. Beene. Sotheby's is on the phone, Mr. Beene. . . ."

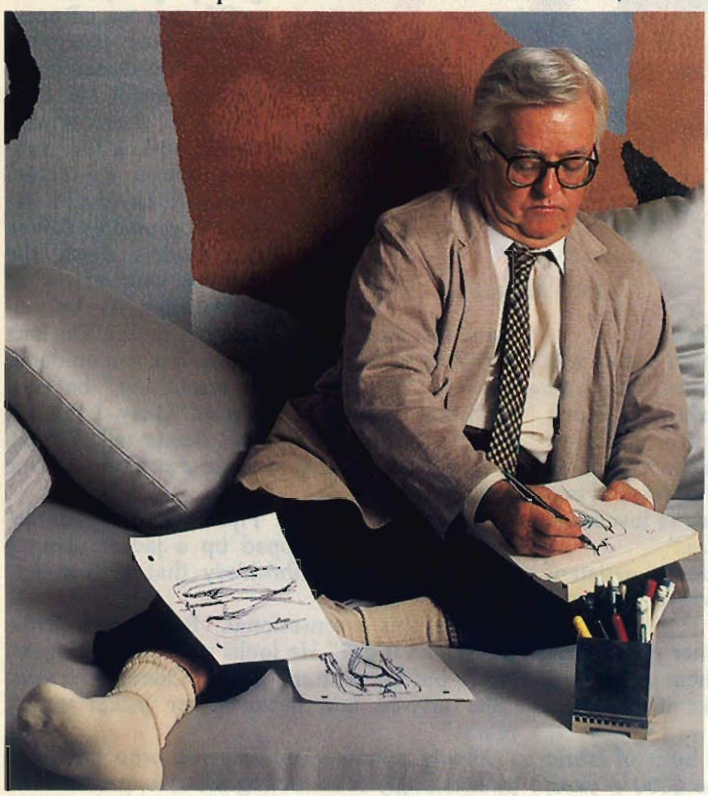
On Seventh Avenue, there are Bill, Oscar, Donna, Ralph, and Calvin. And then there is Mr. Beene. "To call him Geoffrey means you don't know him at all," says creative director Richard Lambertson. Many of his friends call him "G.B.," but he's always "Mr. Beene" around the office. It lends an air of formality to the atmosphere, and it also keeps employees at a distance. "I don't think I've ever had an hour's conversation with him," says Liz Lee, who has been the designer's model for twelve years. "You get the sense you're walking on real hallowed ground."

Beene's offices are on the fourth floor at 550 Seventh Avenue, a building that also houses Bill Blass, Oscar de la Renta, Donna Karan, and Ralph Lauren. Besides his couture line, Beene has twenty licensees (and fourteen boutiques in

Japan). According to Mary Filbin, Beene's executive vice-president, the company does $200 million a year in retail business. (Others estimate the figure at closer to $110 million.) Like most designers, Beene makes the bulk of his money from his licensing arrangements; the most profitable one, according to Filbin, is Van Heusen, which produces a line of men's shirts.

But Beene's licensing history has been spotty; he says he has been unhappy with the quality of the products and that "a person could have cardiac arrest looking at the merchandise."

"With his talent, he could have built up a bigger empire than Ralph Lauren," says Stanley Tucker, now in women's wear at Warnaco. "He was into licensing when people like Ralph and Calvin Klein were just entering the business." But Beene is not Ralph or Calvin. His clothes are much more expensive (from about $2,000 to $15,000), and though his designs are not one of a kind, they are more couture than ready-to-wear.



SKETCHING NEW DESIGNS AT HOME.

Still, there's the distinct feeling Beene could have done things better. Certainly, he's a wealthy man, with two homes and an extensive art collection. But he doesn't have the luxury to devote all his time to designing clothes for rich women. "At this level, it's very difficult for any designer to make money," says Eleanor Lambert, who created the Coty Awards. "The fabrics are so expensive, and ultimately, how many women can afford $10,000 dresses?"

Food critic Mimi Sheraton, who is a close friend of the designer's, says Beene has too much integrity to sully his name by putting it on things like chocolates. And one suspects Beene would rather quit the business than appear on the cover of *Forbes,* as Pierre Cardin recently did, with the headline WHY AM I BAD IF I SELL A FRYING PAN?

Beene did a line of sheets and towels for Fieldcrest, for instance, but eventually the contract was canceled. Beene says they tried to foist all these ugly colors on him, and he simply couldn't handle it. One fashion executive says Beene was inflexible. "Can you imagine Bill Blass throwing a fit because someone suggests navy and red?" he says. "Well, that's Beene. He needs total control over his world."

Perhaps that's why he keeps the World of Beene relatively small. He hates going to parties, especially industry functions, and prefers having dinner with close friends, such as Sheraton, writer Enid Nemy of the New York *Times,* and Helen O'Hagan, publicity director at Saks.

Unlike Oscar de la Renta and Bill Blass, ideal social escorts who have a coterie of rich female friends, Beene will have nothing to do with the "ladies who lunch" and the "bonbon Pekingese set."

Beene says the women who wear his clothes are "achieving women—married, with children and a career." Hank Waeckerle, who is head of Beene's showroom, claims many of these women own companies. "They have more on their minds than worrying about what publication is going to photograph them," he says. But how many married women with children own their own companies? And if that's Beene's target customer, how has he stayed in business all these years? Doesn't he let a few ladies who lunch wear his clothes? "My customer gives to society, she doesn't take from it," says Beene.

Beene has always been a bit mysterious about these customers. For a long time he even refused to reveal their identities (the women were "too private"). Now he lists Sigourney Weaver, Paloma Picasso, Claudette Colbert, Glenn Close, Mary Wells Lawrence, Jacqueline Onassis, and Faye Dunaway. As for the others, Lambertson says, "most of them are old money."

Beene doesn't like Seventh Avenue, and he has always been an outsider—a situation he does little to remedy. "He refuses to speak to Oscar and Bill," says a woman who knows him well. "When he sees them in the elevator, he just stares straight ahead. It's so uncomfortable."

Beene's latest plan is to leave Oscar and Bill behind and move to a townhouse on the Upper East Side. "I'd have the creative studio upstairs and a retail store below," he says. "That's the way the French couturiers used to do it." But he has been talking about this for the past five years, and nothing has happened. "It's hard to find a backer," he says. "This kind of move is very expensive."

But money may not be the only problem. "A few years ago, he found a place on the East Side and even had a backer," says a former

BEENE DOESN'T court the ladies who lunch, the "bonbon Pekingese set." "My customer gives to society, she doesn't take from it," he says.

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Photograph: left, Harry Benson.

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"I LOVE SLIGHT, vulnerable-looking women," Beene says. "These days, the European models—those Glamazons—are just too big."

employee. "But the whole thing fell apart because Beene didn't like the woman's personality. He wants a backer with taste as well as money. At times, his sense of perfection is a burden even to himself."

IT'S MID-APRIL, A few days before the show: Beene is accessorizing the clothes and planning the lineup of outfits. This is the World of Beene at its best. Creativity brings out a vulnerable, sweet side that has nothing to do with "Mr. Beene" and everything to do with the little boy inside Beene. To watch him handle the material is to remember what it's like to be young again. There is a look of absolute wonder on his face.

THE SIXTIES.

Right now he's figuring out which outfits will be grouped together on the runway; about 80 sketches line the wall of his workroom. Beene shuffles them around, making up little stories as he goes. "These girls are heading to Odeon to have dinner," he says, pointing to a sketch of two sleek women in dressy suits. "They've just come from seeing *Phantom of the Opera.*"

"What about this one?" asks design assistant Gene Meyer, who doesn't know where to place a flamboyant orangy-red dress.

"Put her at Odeon with the other girls," says Beene. "She's been waiting for them at the bar, having a few drinks." Beene looks at the dress. "More than a few."

In the corner of the room are bolts of fabric that cost anywhere from $125 to $350 a yard; Beene spent $500,000 on fabric for the show alone. "My accountant is afraid I'm going to be consumed by my passion," says Beene. "But I need them." His fabrics are almost like security blankets—take away his silk chiffons and warped taffetas and Beene would be lost. "He is absolutely in love with fabric," says Tucker. "To see him cut into something beautiful is to watch his heart bleed."

At this point, however, the cutting process is over, and Beene sits back to watch Liz Lee try on the clothes. Rail-thin, with an elegant Audrey Hepburn neck, she projects a waiflike fragility. "I love slight, vulnerable-looking women," Beene says. "These days, the European models—those Glamazons—are just too big."

On the subject of models, Beene is like Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard,* wondering where all the great "faces" have gone. He thinks plastic surgery has ruined the business, because now all the models look alike. "I was watching a fashion show from Estonia on cable TV," he says, "and the girls were so interesting. I called up Eileen Ford and said, 'You must go to Estonia.' "

As Lee walks in and out of the dressing room, Beene greets each outfit with a comment: "This is sensational, just divine.... Those stockings are sublime, like stardust on the legs—that's absolutely the essence of femininity.... Not even the Paris couture is doing this type of thing.... Yes, that has great propriety."

Of course, Beene doesn't stop designing even when something is "sensational." He continues to make adjustments until a few minutes before the actual show. If he could, he would probably follow the models down the runway with a tray of accessories. At the moment, he's staring at a black lace jacket. The lace is slightly iridescent; it glistens like sun on damp seaweed. "It calls out for something," he says, squinting through his glasses. "Okay, I think it needs a flower at the top." Beene tells Carlos, one of his assistants, to make a rose out of lace scraps.

Meanwhile, Charlie Pipia, Beene's samplemaker, has just whipped up a jacket using a piece of Indian embroidery that arrived last night.

"Why, this is sensational," Beene says. "Now where can it go?" He looks at the lineup again. "Let's put her with the girls at Odeon," he says. "She arrived late because her jacket wasn't ready."

Ninety minutes later, Carlos, who has been painstakingly constructing the rose, presents the final result to Beene. "Yes, that has great propriety," Beene says. "But now I think the rose needs something. A focal point. Hmmm . . . what about a stamen?"

BEENE DESCRIBES HIS EARLY LIFE IN terms of colors and textures. Beyond that, he has difficulty. He is guarded about his past, and even though he has been interviewed many times, he uses his well-stocked supply of anecdotes to fill in the spaces. When pressed to go deeper, he sometimes erupts in frustration. "You don't seem to understand," he says. "I am a very visual person. I don't know how many pictures they plan to run with this article, but.... "

It's obvious Beene would like to run all pictures and no text. Or maybe mostly pictures and a sidebar called "Fashion, Fun, Flowers, Food, and Dachshunds." That's how he summed up the World of Beene, scribbling it down on a scrap of

THE WORLD OF BEENE 25 YEARS

yellow paper. This theme permeates his life; in Mary Filbin's office, there's a collage of the designer sitting with cooking utensils in his hand, next to his dogs and orchids. In a field, headless mannequins are lined up in perfect rows like stalks of corn.

The past is not something Beene likes to dwell on; he's not a nostalgic man, and his clothes have never been retro anything. He rarely visits his hometown, Haynesville, Louisiana (population: 3,040); his mother, Lorine Pratt, who still lives near there, usually meets him in New York. But the South is very much a part of Beene, especially in his attitude toward femininity and in his Louisiana accent, which tends to grow stronger as he gets angrier. When Beene says that he has "lost all re-spect" for *Women's Wear Daily,* the cadence conjures up images of smashed mint-julep glasses and swinging veranda doors.

He was born in 1927, the first of three children. His father sold automobiles, and his maternal grandfather was a doctor with "a 1,000-acre plantation," but Beene's family didn't have much money. One of his earliest memories, he says, is spotting a piece of blue-and-orange fabric with white dots and begging his aunt to turn it into beach pajamas—"the kind women wore in Cannes." He was eight years old, and he remembers the other boys' playing softball while he was inside with his aunt and the fabric and the Simplicity pajama pattern.

"I don't think anything has changed for me since that moment," he says. "To see something that is so flat and totally without form and then to transform it into something else. Why, that's what I'm all about."

Beene adored his grandfather and spent much of his time picking cotton on the plantation: "It was thrilling touching the natural fiber." Beene's family moved to Texas when he was ten; it was the height of the Depression and money was scarcer than ever. These weren't happy years for Beene. His parents' marriage was falling apart, and they often discussed divorce.

He consoled himself by becoming almost intoxicated by "beautiful things." He hoarded pieces of fabric in his room; sometimes he would become so fascinated by something he would just have to buy it. Take the case of the wooden clogs. "I had seen them in the window of a store," he says, "and I asked my parents if I could have them. They said, 'Why would you want such a silly thing?' So I gave up my lunch money for two months to buy them. My mother began to wonder why I was losing so much weight, and I got the usual spanking."

THE SEVENTIES.

Beene never wore the shoes. "It was just the fascination with something so unique on the foot. I suppose my interest in these things was considered sort of bizarre," he says, "and my behavior tended to isolate me from certain people." But Beene says he had plenty of friends and that he was even nominated for president of his class. "The day that happened, my mother informed me that she and my father were separating and we had to move back to Louisiana," he says. "There's a history of these events in my life when I would reach something, and then it would get pulled out from under me."

Beene went into medicine, like his grandfather and two uncles, winning a scholarship to Tulane University. He studied premed and sketched dresses during his anatomy classes. Whenever he had extra money, he bought fabric. "I was totally torn apart by the whole thing," he says. "I even remember this nightmare I had. Horses were attached to each of my limbs, and someone cracked a whip and the horses ran away and all my appendages were torn off."

Beene managed to make it through vivisection, but "cadavers," he says, "were the moment of truth." He dropped out of medical school in his first year (after three years of premed), and his parents immediately sent him to a psychiatrist. "I think they wanted to know if their son was really insane or not," he says. Beene came down with double pneumonia—"the stress of everything"—and says he almost had a nervous breakdown. "At this point, I shall not blame anyone," he says. "But I wish I had had the opportunity to study what I liked instead of doing what somebody else wanted."

This is a sore spot for Beene, something that's a bit puzzling. He was only nineteen, and even though medical school was unpleasant, it isn't as though he lost decades of valuable time. Besides, the story has a happy ending: Beene became a successful dress designer. "That's not the point," Beene tells me. "I would have been enriching my own life earlier."

AFTER THE TULANE experience, his parents shipped him to California for a "rest cure"; he lived with an aunt and was scheduled to enroll at the University of Southern California, but he

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never made it. He got a job in the display department at I. Magnin, where a store executive noticed his talent and encouraged him to study fashion. "The addiction began," says Beene. "At this point, I could not be stopped."

He spent a summer at the Traphagen School of Fashion in New York. It was 1947, the year Christian Dior unveiled his "New Look," which radically altered silhouette proportions by softening the shoulders, pinching the waist, and widening the skirt. Says Beene, "I was just *étonné*, as the French would say. I remember seeing a magazine with Danielle Darrieux on the cover, and I said, 'I just have to go to Paris.' "

He traveled steerage class on the Queen Mary, where he met a group of young fashion students; together they rented a twelve-room villa that had been occupied by an officer in Hitler's army. "The moment I arrived in France," Beene says, "I just felt at home. It was so natural."

The two years he spent in Paris were the happiest of his life. He was a young man who had always felt conflicted about his love of design and who "squirreled away" beautiful fabrics. Now he was surrounded by people who didn't think his interests were strange or bizarre. Beene studied at L'École de la Chambre Syndicale d'Haute Couture and Académie Julian; he also apprenticed with a tailor who had worked for the couturier Captain Edward Molyneux. Beene might have stayed in Paris for good, but his grandfather died, and in 1950 he returned to the United States.

After working for several small custom salons, Beene got a job with Harmay, a Seventh Avenue manufacturer that turned out "little dresses, little suits, nothing monumental." He was fired eight years later because he wanted to make "modern" clothes and they were more interested in doing "Jolie Madame things." In 1959, he went into business with Teal Traina, whose uncle, Anthony Traina, was designer Norman Norell's partner.

It was a success right from the start, and Beene began to attract more attention. Though the label on the clothes carried the name Teal Traina, Beene was mentioned in most of the ads. Traina remembers the designer as "very private, somebody who always wanted to stay in the background. I remember we put on a fashion show at Neiman-Marcus, and afterwards I wanted to introduce Beene to the ladies in the audience. He said hello, but afterwards he told me, 'I'd rather not do that anymore.' "

In between collections, Beene lived in Rome, where he had an apartment overlooking the Spanish Steps. "I don't think he liked Seventh Avenue even then," says Traina. Press clips at the time quote Beene as saying that Traina gave him total freedom to design clothes that were "whimsical," even a little "crazy." Today, Beene claims Traina tried to control him. It got worse, Beene says, when Traina married the fitting model, who happened to be Beene's best friend. "When Mr. Traina came back from his honeymoon," says Beene, "he told me I couldn't do bare midriffs and that the dresses couldn't be too décolleté. Once I felt my creative work endangered, I just cut out."

"I was devastated to lose him," says Traina. "I guess it had something to do with my wife. Frankly, I wouldn't even have gotten married if I knew it was going to upset him. The marriage only lasted a year."

In the spring of 1963, Beene started his own business with Leo Orlandi, a former production manager at Teal Traina, and entrepreneur Ben Shaw, who also backed Oscar de la Renta. The name of the company was Geoffrey Beene, Inc.; the initial investment was $125,000. "It was the beginning of designer ownership," says Rose Simon, who lectures at the Fashion Institute of Technology. "Now the designers were taking the power away from the manufacturers and going straight to the public with their names."

Beene got a *Vogue* cover for his first collection; Jean Shrimpton was pictured in a beaded top and white gabardine skirt. As fashion started to get wilder in the sixties—the designs of Mary Quant and Courrèges broke all the old rules of good taste—Beene continued to go his own way. Known for his high-waisted Empire dresses and braid-edged jackets, Beene developed a reputation as an Establishment designer.

That reputation was sealed when he got the assignment to make Lynda Bird Johnson's wedding gown. (He did a rendition of Botticelli's Venus in seed pearls on the front.) The Johnsons introduced him to Washington society, and pretty soon he was dressing the wives of other politicians, including Pat Nixon and Nancy Reagan.

But Beene was never as conservative as he seemed. In 1968, the year after he did the White House wedding dress, he designed his "Mafia" collection—pin-striped suits that he dubbed "Alice Capone." The press had a field day with Beene's "mob molls," and Mrs. Al Capone jumped into the act by filing a lawsuit against the designer for "disgracing her husband's name." (The lawsuit was dropped.)

"Even Frank Sinatra was angry with me," says Beene.

In 1971, Beene introduced his Beene Bag collection, a less expensive, sportier line that was the forerunner of such designer offshoots as Anne Klein II and Calvin Klein Classifications. Beene Bag was a big success, and even customers who could afford his high-priced clothes loved it.

Like other designers who tried to maximize the potential of their names, Beene got involved in numerous licensing deals. He did men's wear, bed linens, eyeglass frames, hosiery, furs, bathing suits, shoes, costume jewelry, and even telephones. He did, however, decline puppy perfume and dental floss. The company expanded quickly, and at one point it occupied three floors at 550 Seventh Avenue. But the designer wasn't happy about the direction it was taking. He blames Leo Orlandi for "making me sign anything for money."

"Some of my licensing was done very badly,"

Photographs by Jack Deutsch.

BEENE'S LIVING ROOM, LIKE HIS WORK, HAS "GREAT PROPRIETY."

he says. "We made the mistake of going with the wrong companies, and Mr. Orlandi thought things would sell because they carried my name. Well, they would for a while, but quickly the public realized they had nothing to do with the designer, and people stopped buying."

Even one of the most basic licensing products, women's perfume, didn't work out. Both Geoffrey Beene and Red were failures. "A Beene scent is a tricky one to market," says one fashion executive. "He's hardly going to pop up on TV, tan and suave like Oscar, with a perfume bottle in his hand."

THE EARLY SEVENTIES WERE NOT THE best of times for Beene. He withdrew into the design room and didn't pay as much attention to the business. "I only cared about my couture collections," he says. That may have been part of the problem. Beene claims he wasn't satisfied with the way Orlandi was handling the business, but he didn't want to handle it, either. "They complained about each other constantly," says a Beene employee. "I don't think they even liked being in the same room together."

To make matters worse, Beene started to question his whole approach to fashion. "Kennedy Fraser wrote in *The New Yorker* that my clothes were beautiful," he says. "But she wondered if they were modern." Beene, who takes such criticism to heart, decided to give up the heavily constructed look that had been his trademark in favor of loose, flowing clothes that drew their shape from the body. The change, he says, was bitterly opposed by Orlandi and by the department stores. "Nobody wanted me to change," he says. "I was suffering terribly.

"I figured if they didn't like me at home, maybe they'd like me on another continent," he says. In 1976, he borrowed $125,000 from a bank and staged a fashion show in Milan.

At the time, this was considered rather quixotic, another example of Beene's unfocused approach to business. No American designer had ever gone to Milan, and there were good reasons. The city had not yet become a focal point of fashion—most people hadn't even heard of Armani—and the American press didn't attend the shows. So what did Beene expect to accomplish?

"I asked myself the same question," says Beene. "It was the first time I ever took a tranquilizer in my life." But the European buyers loved Beene's clothes. "They woke us up the next morning in the hotel," says model Patti Quinn. "They were pounding on the doors, asking to see the samples. We got such a great reaction that we decided to take the show to Paris. We

IN THE SEVENTIES, he moved to loose, flowing clothes: "Nobody wanted me to change. I was suffering terribly."

Photograph by Harry Benson.

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dumped all the clothes in a van and took off. It was wild."

"All the European retailers saw the clothes, and it was tremendous exposure for Beene," says P.R. woman Hilda Barnes, who staged several of the shows. "He's still the only internationally known designer in America."

With all the positive feedback from the European retailers, Beene and Orlandi decided to set up a company—Cofil, s.p.a.—to produce and distribute the clothes in Europe.

Again, Beene was plagued by quality problems. The Italian factories started making cheaper versions of the original fabrics, and the clothes were selling for half their American price. The company fell apart in 1978, but Beene didn't give up his bid for international recognition. Through the years, he showed his collections at the American embassies in Rome, Paris, and Brussels, and this February, he previewed his new line in Munich. Beene, who rarely advertises, spent $30,000 for a full-page ad in the *Times* announcing the Munich show. It was a picture of a dress on a headless mannequin.

THE WORLD OF BEENE 25 YEARS

DURING THE LATE SEVENTIES, Beene continued to add and subtract licensees. Some of the projects that emerged from his workroom were getting too big for the company to handle. Beene Bag was being delivered late to the stores, and jackets and skirts were arriving weeks apart. At the same time, he was trying to handle the distribution of Grey Flannel, his successful men's cologne. Something had to go, and, says Beene, Orlandi recommended licensing Beene Bag to Bobbie Brooks.

It was a terrible move. Bobbie Brooks specialized in moderately priced junior merchandise and didn't understand the upscale quirkiness of Beene Bag. The contract was canceled, and the line disappeared.

"Today, all these designers have their secondary collections," says a fashion executive, "and Beene, who started it all, lost his. I don't think it's a matter of bad luck. Look, it's nice to pretend this is Paris in the thirties and you're Balenciaga, but then just do what Galanos does. Only have one or two licensees, and focus all your attention on making couture clothes. You can't have it both ways."

AROUND 1981, BEENE TRIED TO GET rid of Orlandi, but they were equal partners in the business; Orlandi sued Beene for $1.2 million. Eventually, Beene solved the problem by selling Grey Flannel and using the money to buy out Orlandi.

Once Beene didn't have to answer to anyone else, fashion editors saw a big change in his collections. "There was a new kind of freedom, a real insistence on modernity," says Mirabella. "Beene has always been creative, but suddenly his clothes were about style and function. You began to sense that Beene really understood women and what they wanted in their lives."

"I had always thought Beene made beautiful clothes for older women," says Anna Wintour, editor of *HG*. "Suddenly, he seemed to take off in a totally different direction. Women like Paloma Picasso began showing up in his things."

Of course, the new Beene was just as contrary as the old one. In 1982, he started showing miniskirts when everybody was heavily into the Milanese man-tailored look. "The stores begged me to put shoulder pads into my jackets," he says. "If I'd let them have their way, they would have been sticking those adhesive things everywhere."

Throughout the eighties, Beene's designs became increasingly imaginative. "He evolves within himself," says Dawn Mello. "He's a real risk-taker. Christian Lacroix is credited with innovations that Geoffrey Beene introduced several years ago. Right now he has reached a pinnacle of sorts, and it will be interesting to see what he does next."

From a creative point of view, Beene will probably continue to do quite brilliantly. It remains to be seen how he handles everything else. After Beene bought out Orlandi in 1981, he tried to run the company himself. When that didn't work, he hired Stanley Tucker, a former executive at Associated Merchandising. Tucker arranged a lucrative licensing deal with Warnaco in 1983, but little came of it. In 1986, Warnaco was bought out by Linda Wachner, who has spent the past year repositioning the Beene lines. The designer is much happier with the way the new clothes look, but there's friction in the relationship. Warnaco executives are not happy with Beene's continuing war with *WWD*. "With the sportswear launch, we could definitely use the publicity," says a Warnaco executive. "Frankly, if we had known the cold war was going to continue this long, there might not have been a deal."

In 1987, Tucker left Beene to join Warnaco. People say he was frustrated by Beene's lack of interest in marketing. "You have to agree with everything Beene says or else you run into problems," says a former employee. "Nobody is allowed to say no. The only way you can exist with Beene is to treat him like a god."

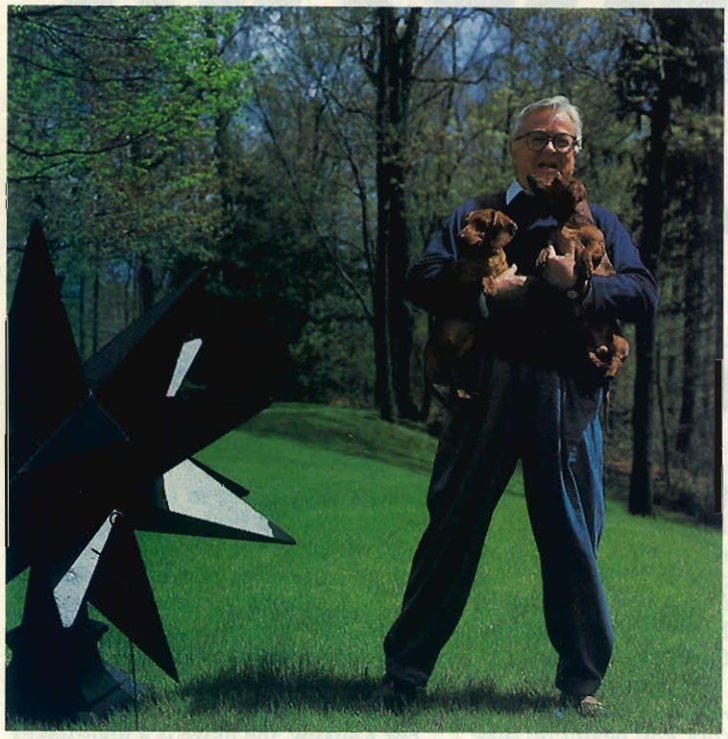
The same year, Beene fired his showroom manager of 22 years, who filed a lawsuit for age discrimination. Last winter, he lost Jesper Nyeboe, his design assistant, who had worked with him since the mid-seventies.

"The whole atmosphere was just so unprofessional," says Nyeboe, who is now working for Hanae Mori.

Beene replaced Tucker with Mary Filbin, a former merchandise manager from Bergdorf Goodman. She oversees his current licensees and is responsible for developing new ones. "There is just so much potential in Mr. Beene's name," she says. "His clothes have such propriety, and he cares so much for his designs. I am totally in awe."

Photographs by Jack Deutsch.

OYSTER BAY ON A GRAY, MOODY Sunday: Beene, who has lived alone for most of his life, is sitting in the backyard of his beautiful Palladian home, silently observed by several neoclassical stone busts. In the background, gardeners quietly move in and out of the greenhouse, where Beene keeps his prize possessions, 2,000 orchids. It is an almost flawless display of country living—the Technicolor-green lawn rarely gets trampled by anything heavier than a robin or a pheasant, water from a fountain spills into a reflecting pool, and the formal gardens are being prepared for the debut of the Queen Elizabeth roses. Everything, to use Beene's favorite expression, has "great propriety."



WITH HIS DACHSHUNDS IN OYSTER BAY.

Everything except the dachshunds, Maximillian and Sir Lancelot, who run around the perimeter of the swimming pool, barking, begging for attention. Beene loves his "puppies," but he's not quite sure what to do with them. When they started to chew up his Art Deco apartment, he exiled them to Oyster Bay. Maximillian wants to play; he's holding a blue rubber ball between his pointy teeth and he's jumping up on Beene. "Be quiet, Maximillian," Beene says. Maximillian doesn't pay the slightest bit of attention; both dogs keep yelping and barking, destroying the tranquillity.

He tries to ignore them, pulling out a scrap of yellow paper with some scribbling on it. " 'There are some fabrics that are just so exquisite you can't even use them,' " he reads. " 'To cut into them, well, it's almost blasphemous because you have destroyed something that is perfection.' "

Beene has his agenda for the day: fashion, fun, food, flowers, and dachshunds. He discusses fabric on and off for the next several hours, and then brings me inside for a tour of the house. Beene is constantly changing the interior because he's never satisfied with the way it looks. When it was photographed for *Architectural Digest* four years ago, the colors were muted. Now the living room is painted a Chinese-lacquer red.

Recently, Beene hired a muralist to cover the dining-room walls in leopard spots to match the drapes. He also painted two monkeys over the beds in the guest room. A dog motif runs through the master bedroom, with portraits of his dachshunds in silver frames and an antique cast-gesso bulldog that sits on a footstool. In the hallway, there are black-and-white photographs of Beene's early days in Paris; he's sitting on the steps of the villa, looking as pensive as Jean-Pierre Léaud in the early Truffaut films.

Though Beene's house is small, it's impossible to really see it in one brief tour. Like his fashion designs, it needs to be studied, almost meditated on. "I don't think original creative work comes along very often," he says. "Students ask me, 'What is the formula?' There is no formula. Who is to judge what is creative and what isn't? The judgment must come from other people. I only work to satisfy myself."

After the tour, we have lunch in the kitchen; Beene's mother, remarkably young-looking for someone in her eighties, has made tuna-fish salad. Beene, who is a very polite host, wants to know if I've had enough and then offers some apricot cookies. I eat two, and then we're off to the garden. Beene has his schedule: We've talked about fashion, we've played with the dachshunds, we've had fun touring the house, his mother has fixed us some food, and now we're seeing the flowers.

When Beene is stuck for an idea, his orchids sometimes bring him inspiration. "Sensational, divine," he says, looking at the various plants. The orchids range from white to yellow to the palest purple; flowers as distinctive as these are usually displayed alone in vases so their exquisite beauty can be fully appreciated. It's a little humid in the room, and there's something claustrophobic about it. But Beene seems almost euphoric surrounded by so much beauty. "You know what I'd love to do?" he says. "Have my fashion show right here, in the orchid house."

Beene points to a white flower that is almost fully bloomed. "Would you like that?" he says. He nips it with a pair of scissors and then puts the stem in a green plug filled with water. "I think the best way to carry this," he says, "is to hold it carefully in your hand."

Now that I have my souvenir from the World of Beene, the designer drops me off at the train station; I am the only person on the windy platform worrying that a delicate white orchid might be almost too beautiful to survive the commute. ■

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Photographs: left, Harry Benson.