



Boot's on the other foot as Stella McCartney's husband takes to catwalk

Alasdair Willis leads Hunter wellington boots into a new era with show at London fashion week

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Hannah Marriott

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Dynamo performs at the Hunter boots show during London fashion week.

When it comes to fashion shows, Alasdair Willis's usual role is to provide a supportive presence on the front row for his wife, Stella McCartney. On Saturday, however, roles were reversed as the British wellington boot company Hunter showed its first runway collection at London fashion week. The show raised the curtain for a new era under creative director Willis, the former publishing director of design magazine *Wallpaper*.

Although wellington boots were in the news for all the wrong reasons last week, Willis was at pains to avoid making links with the terrible weather. "We would never want to profit from that, in any way," he said before the show.

As McCartney looked on, models showed off vinyl capes, waxed jackets and dresses and mackintoshes in weatherproof materials. Colours ranged from primary brights to classic khaki, deep purples and metallics.

Willis said the collection was inspired by extremes of exploration – by deep-sea diving and outer space, and by the pioneering spirit of the era in which Hunter was first established, as the North British Rubber Company, in 1856. The designs also took cues from the component parts of the wellington boots themselves, with details such as the "moustache" on the toe of the boot being echoed on shoulders and pockets of jackets.

The most spectacular moment of the show came just before the finale, when magician Dynamo made a surprise appearance on the catwalk. First, he performed his *Matrix* move, leaning back on one leg until parallel with the floor. Next, eight of the models on stage were magically "disappeared" before being summoned back for one last walk, during which playing cards showered down on models and guests.

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Willis said that the Instagram-friendly spectacle was symbolic of his ambitions for Hunter: "We are drawing on our heritage, but we are pioneering and forward-looking. The British heritage brands that are successful globally are not just stamping a union flag on clothing and trying to sell it to China – they are moving forward." Dynamo was a canny match in marketing terms, too: "He is the most-followed magician in the world," said Willis, "with a reach of six million on his social platforms."

Though Hunter has been firmly on the fashion radar since Kate Moss wore a pair to Glastonbury in 2005 – a moment that many have identified as the starting point for the now omnipresent "festival chic" trend – it was only in 2012, when US private equity firm Searchlight bought a stake in the business, that taking the company global and diversifying beyond boots became a possibility.

Searchlight hired Willis to lead this charge, and Willis restructured the company into two divisions: Hunter Original, the "twentysomething, cooler, fashion-conscious" line, with prices starting at £85 for boots and £380 for rubber jackets, which were being shown on Saturday, and Hunter Field, a tech- and performance-focused line which will launch in spring/summer 2015. His plans show Willis is thinking very big: Hunter will open its first store in London in July, with plans for others in New York, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Shanghai.

Overseeing a catwalk show is a huge challenge, as Willis's wife knows only too well. McCartney's best advice? "Trust your instinct," said Willis, and also: "Keep calm, don't get stressed – although I know what it's like, seeing it on the other side for 13 years. When you're at the centre of it the lead-up to the show is very difficult."

The woman who made Hunter a household has not been forgotten, either – the collection includes a heeled wellington boot inspired by a certain Ms Moss. "Kate told me that she would love to wear a heel to Glastonbury – especially this year, when it was so dry," said Willis: "and this is the perfect wellington heel."