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Robert Godley  
— a legal assistant

# An Englishman in New York

As the recession takes hold, many UK designers are taking advantage of the international demand to “buy British” by taking their fashion labels to the US. **Christina Williams** talks to accessories designers who have made the journey across the Atlantic to find out what life is really like as a legal alien in New York

With 10,000 people within every three blocks, it’s difficult not to meet new people when you move to New York City,” says Robert Godley.

When he arrived in one of the world’s most densely-populated cities from rural Kent, Godley was prepared for the lifestyle change that awaited him. A UK designer with a speciality in printed silk scarves, he relocated to the States to establish his own accessories label Psycho Bunny and, three years on, he only has to walk into the likes of Saks or Barneys to see his products showcased within some of America’s leading department stores.

The US appetite, it seems, is as strong as ever for British design and materials that carry a Made in England label. It explains why Godley



doesn't have to walk too many blocks before he stumbles into another fellow ex-pat, and it's just one of the reasons why he has no regrets about leaving Britain behind.

"I learnt my skill from some of the UK's most skilled craftspeople on a factory floor of a silk printer in Kent," says Godley. "Neckwear crafted from silk made in England is still the core product for Psycho Bunny and, although it's been hard starting a business from scratch, I have been able to develop the label at a manageable pace from my base in New York."

**Psycho Bunny has branched out into belt buckles, small leather goods, cuff links and ties** during the years that Godley has been living in the US. The combination of English materials, British design and the accessibility of a New York base holds an appeal for US buyers that Godley couldn't find in his home country and, according to immigration specialist Amanda Gillespie, Godley is one of many UK designers deciding to set up home in the US.

"I started off helping people to write their O-1 Visa applications as a part-time job to help pay my rent when I first moved to New York," says Gillespie. "Now, Amanda C. Gillespie is a fully-established immigration consultancy with 11 employers and a water cooler."

"All of my clients come to me because they've heard of my services. The O-1 visa is the visa for "aliens of extraordinary ability", and is best known as the artist visa. Basically that covers musicians, dancers and artists, as well as fashion designers, and it never ceases to amaze me what my clients have achieved with a two-year period when they come back to me to renew their visas."

According to Gillespie, the current economic downturn has actually led to more people making visa applications in a bid to start a new life overseas.

"We're busier than ever in ways that we didn't anticipate," she admits. "Many of my clients are using the economic changes not as a handicap, but as an opportunity. They're starting their own companies and seeking clients on their own terms."

One such example is Johnny Diamandis, who is currently working on a range of high-end, luxury men's bags which he predicts will launch in 2010. Having studied at St. Martin's School of Art and Design in London, Diamandis went on to work with denim label Fake London, Burberry and premium denim and accessories brand Evisu. He relocated to New York to pursue projects under his own name, and has since established a successful line of menswear and men's accessories.

"Young Brits are a good professional export," says Diamandis. "For some reason, Britain breeds great creative talent in music, art and design which gives us a great global standing, and yet some aspects of growing up in Britain can be pretty dull and harsh. We have this Galloway humour that makes us popular."

○ Amanda Gillespie



○ Johnny Diamandis

For Diamandis, New York was the only city he had in mind when he decided to emigrate in 2003.

"New York has such a dynamic and cutting-edge environment, as well as a really open and positive attitude to new ideas and ventures," he explains. "There is a great variety in the industry here and from small, emerging brands to the mega-corporate establishments. Creativity can really drive a business forward here, whereas I do feel that fashion is not properly backed by the government back in the UK. I personally feel that it is a missed opportunity."

After six years in New York, Diamandis has no intention of leaving and is happy in what he now considers to be a home from home. However, not all designers can make the move across the Atlantic so easily.

While establishing her immigration consultancy, Amanda C. Gillespie has become all

too aware that gaining the much sought-after O-1 visa is no easy feat.

"I meet so many incredible people, full of hope and bursting with talent that I can't help but want to find a way to get them to where they want to go," says Gillespie. "But, no matter how infectious their desire is to take that next thrilling step in their career, we do have a general rule that we only take on those cases that we feel sure will be approved."

**When Gillespie feels sure that a client has a good chance of securing a visa**, she helps him or her to write their visa petition and, more specifically, to complete the writing-intensive "extraordinary ability" category. When submitted alongside the client's portfolio, she generally finds that he or she will be accepted as an "alien of extraordinary ability" and allowed to live in the States.

"That's when we have the happy experiences of helping people arriving in New York to meet people and make new connections," says Gillespie. "It is a big, iconic and wonderful place but it is simultaneously a small place where, if you attend fashion shows, gallery openings and the like, you will begin to make connections with other people."

As part of the consultancy service, Gillespie throws parties every few months for her clients in a bid to help them to settle into their new homes.

"There's a real kinship amongst amongst new arrivals in New York and, while it's a very busy and ferociously competitive place, the people are very warm and open," she says. "If designers feel that a relocation to the US could be the next stage of their creative and professional development, I could only say that it's one of the greatest adventures you could ever undertake. I, for one, will be maintaining my insatiable appetite for extraordinary aliens." ○

