

RACHEL ZOE
HOW HOLLYWOOD'S FASHION POWERHOUSE BUILT HER BUSINESS EMPIRE

Words **TIFFANY BAKKER**
9-min read

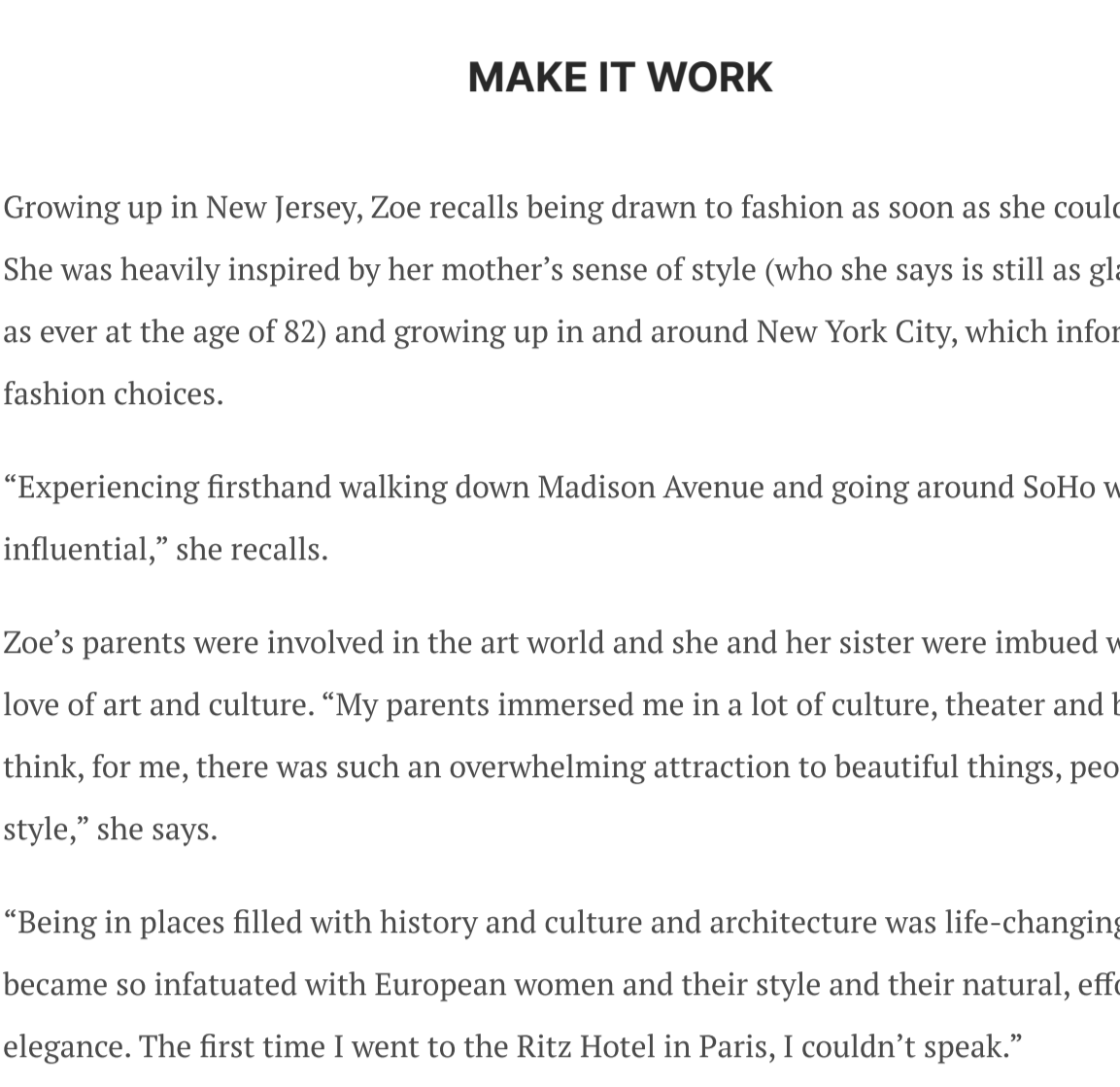
Entrepreneurs

She became Hollywood's first super-stylist, getting the likes of Anne Hathaway, Jennifer Garner and Demi Moore red-carpet ready, but Rachel Zoe had far bigger designs in mind when it came to creating her own fashion empire.

When legendary style icon Rachel Zoe recently tuned in to old episodes of her influential fashion reality TV series *The Rachel Zoe Project*, she was struck by something she hadn't noticed at the time of filming.

"I hadn't watched it since it aired – and I wasn't sure I wanted to," Zoe says with a laugh. "It was interesting looking back, because I was watching myself talking to people and taking these meetings and saying I wanted to launch a brand, start a media business and make clothing. At the time, I didn't realize that I was creating a brand in real time."

Zoe shot to fame with the show, which ran from 2008–2013, as the stylist responsible for the look of early 2000s 'It girls' Paris Hilton, Nicole Richie and Lindsay Lohan, and gave fans a glimpse behind the fashion curtain.



"At the time, I didn't realize that I was creating a brand in real time."

In the decade since the series ended, the super-stylist whose iconic 'boho' style made her as famous as her enviable client list – which includes A-listers Anne Hathaway, Jennifer Garner, Kate Hudson, Demi Moore, Cameron Diaz and Jennifer Lawrence – has built an impressive fashion and media empire.

She is the Co-CEO and Founder of Rachel Zoe Inc, plus she founded the membership fashion network CURATEUR, the Rachel Zoe Collection (licensed across more than 40 categories, including apparel, home, handbags, fragrance, eyewear, childrenswear and babywear) and *The Zoe Report*.

Zoe is also the Chair of Rachel Zoe Ventures, an early stage venture capital firm launched in 2021. In this role, she serves as an active and engaged investor and advisor to an esteemed portfolio of brands, including Intro, Nori, Cleancult, Seed, Joy and many more. Just to add to Zoe's busy schedule, in April she launched the third season of her podcast *Climbing in Heels* with iHeartPodcasts.

"My business was something that evolved – I follow my instincts in everything I do. Now, if I was starting out at 21, I might have clearer goals, but when I was coming up, this sort of career didn't exist," Zoe reflects.

"There was no such thing as a stylist starting a business. There was never a plan for me – I just kept my head down and kept working. I was buried in it."

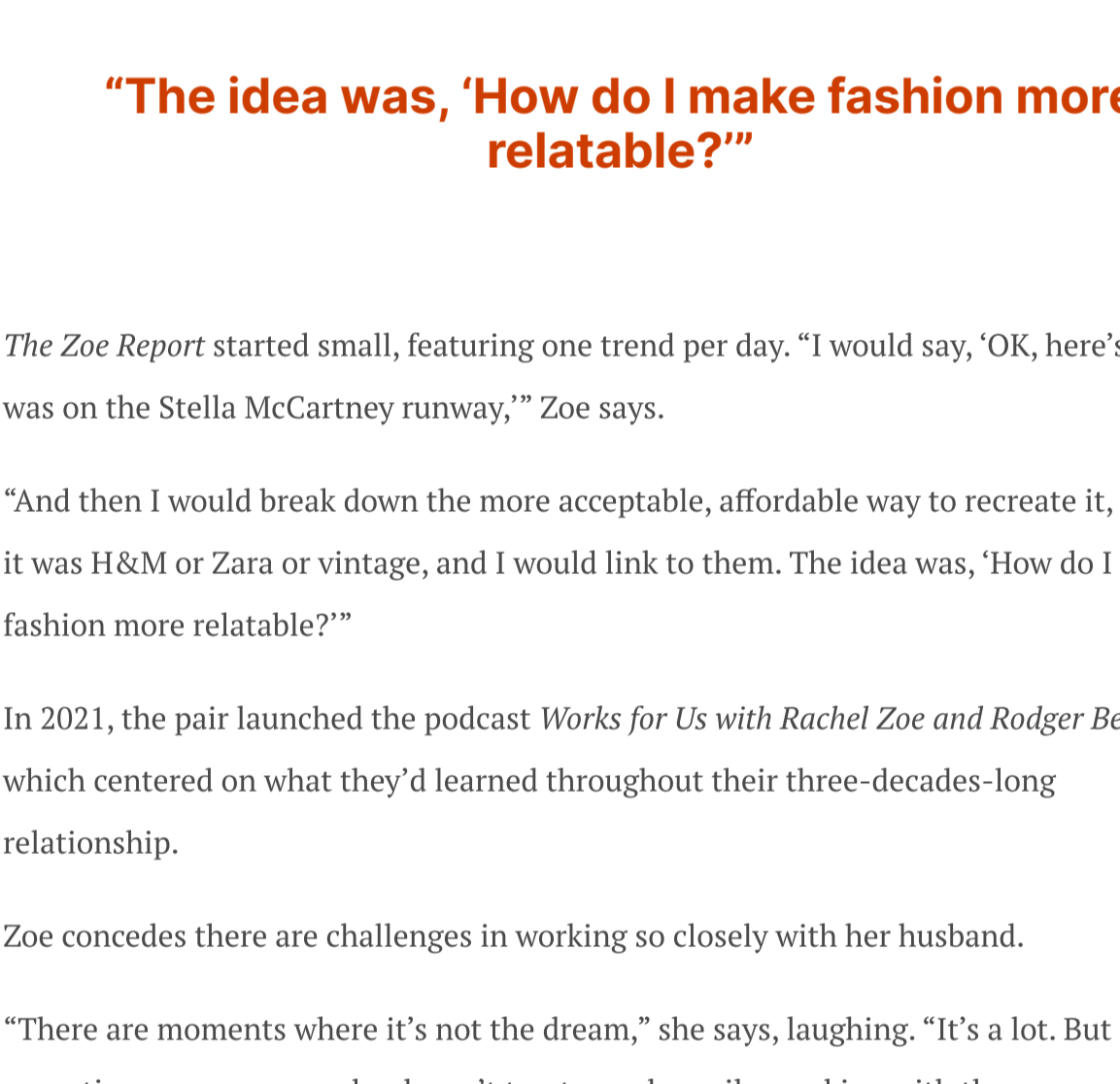
MAKE IT WORK

Growing up in New Jersey, Zoe recalls being drawn to fashion as soon as she could talk. She was heavily inspired by her mother's sense of style (who she says is still as glamorous as ever at the age of 82) and growing up in and around New York City, which informed her fashion choices.

"Experiencing firsthand walking down Madison Avenue and going around SoHo was influential," she recalls.

Zoe's parents were involved in the art world and she and her sister were imbued with a love of art and culture. "My parents immersed me in a lot of culture, theater and ballet. I think, for me, there was such an overwhelming attraction to beautiful things, people and style," she says.

"Being in places filled with history and culture and architecture was life-changing. I became so infatuated with European women and their style and their natural, effortless elegance. The first time I went to the Ritz Hotel in Paris, I couldn't speak."



"There was no such thing as a stylist starting a business. There was never a plan for me – I just kept my head down and kept working. I was buried in it."

But gaining a professional entry point into the world of fashion was another matter entirely. "I was always very attracted to glamor and glamorous women and magazines, but I had no idea how that went from point A to point B," Zoe says.

"Had I known I was going to be in fashion, I would've gone to the Fashion Institute or Parsons [School of Design in New York] or Central Saint Martins [in London] and I didn't do that."

At university, Zoe majored in psychology and sociology, with little idea about how to make a career in fashion work. Serendipitously, after she graduated, she scored a junior position on a fashion magazine via a friend of a friend, and she was on her way.

"I didn't even know at the time what the job was, I just knew that I wanted it," she recalls. Times, she says, have certainly changed.

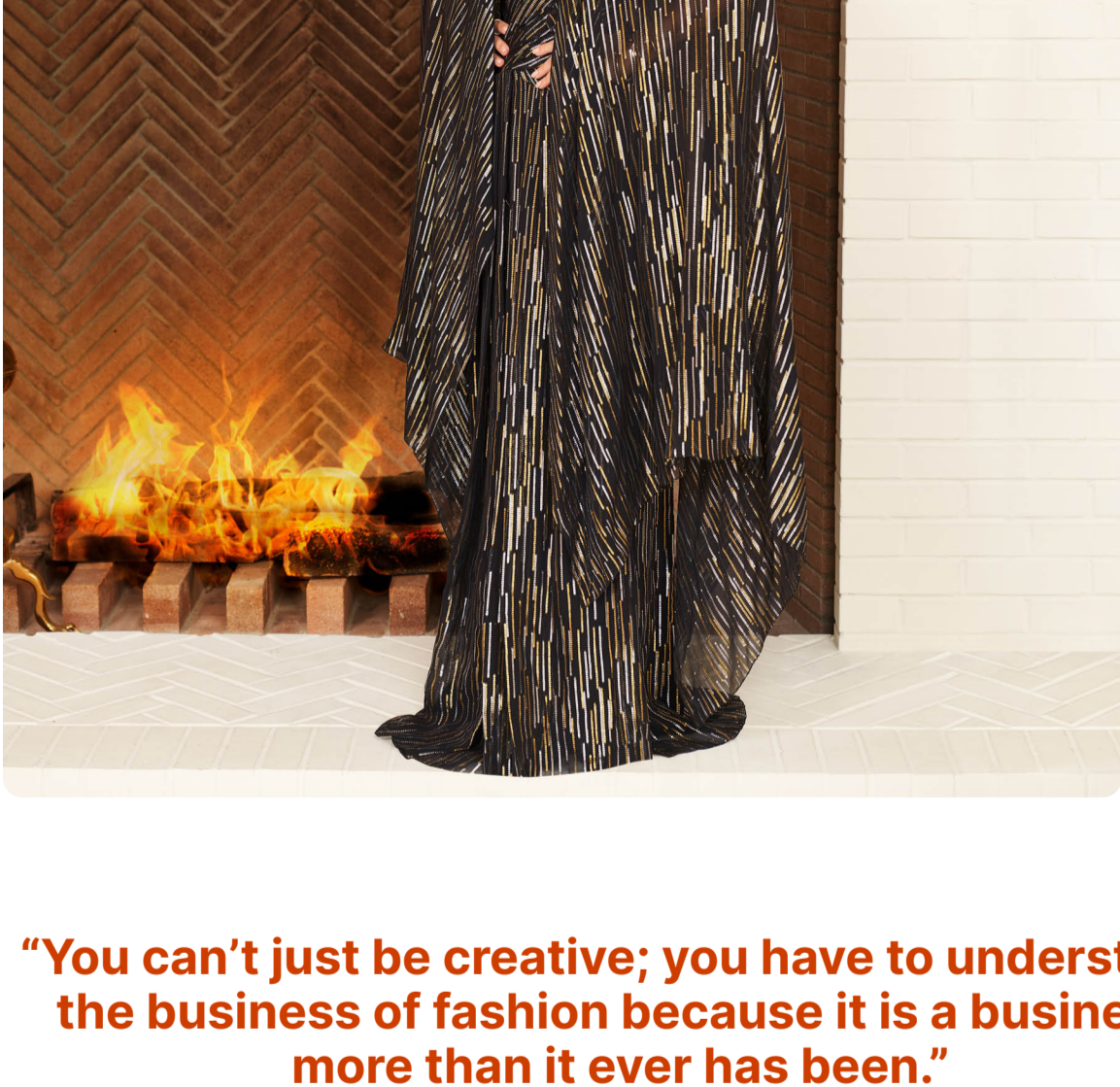
"I meet eight-year-old girls who say they want to be a stylist and by 13, they're interning. By the time they've graduated college, they've been at seven different places and had five different jobs. It was so different when I was growing up."

FAMILY MATTERS

Zoe says what really changed the game for the Rachel Zoe brand was her husband, Rodger Berman, who joined her as a business partner 15 years ago. They met as students at George Washington University in Washington D.C. and now have two sons, Skyler, 13, and Kaius, 10. With a background in media and finance, Berman challenged her early on to look outside the box and explore where she thought her brand could expand and evolve.

Zoe says it was her husband who encouraged her to start *The Zoe Report* in 2009, well before online newsletters had become as ubiquitous as they are today. Bustle Digital Group acquired *The Zoe Report* in 2018, and today it reaches more than four million people every month through daily newsletters and the website.

"At the time he said, 'I know there is a better way for you to talk to as many women as you want to talk to, and this is it,'" she explains.



"The idea was, 'How do I make fashion more relatable?'"

The Zoe Report started small, featuring one trend per day. "I would say, 'OK, here's what was on the Stella McCartney runway,'" Zoe says.

"And then I would break down the more acceptable, affordable way to recreate it, whether it was H&M or Zara or vintage, and I would link to them. The idea was, 'How do I make fashion more relatable?'"

In 2021, the pair launched the podcast *Works for Us with Rachel Zoe and Rodger Berman*, which centered on what they'd learned throughout their three-decades-long relationship.

Zoe concedes there are challenges in working so closely with her husband.

"There are moments where it's not the dream," she says, laughing. "It's a lot. But at the same time, as someone who doesn't trust people easily, working with the person who has my best interests in mind and knowing we're on the same team is incredible because there's no trust issues. I think right there it's a win."

JOINING FORCES

Zoe is also a keen collaborator, having worked with brands such as Starbucks, fashion retailer Express, United States childrenswear label Janie and Jack, and eBay, among many others.

So what draws her to working with other companies or labels? "It has to resonate with me in some way," she says.

"It has to be something I feel I can advocate for organically, because I'm a terrible liar. And it has to be a brand that I am interested in – it needs to feel right and I need to feel like I can help elevate it, change it or give it another perspective."

"Now that I have such a great group of women around me, I'm so excited to advocate for whatever it is that they're doing."

These days, Zoe's wildly successful podcast *Climbing in Heels* is giving her a different kind of collaborative joy. The episodes feature Zoe interviewing other women – many of them friends – about their lives and careers.

"I did it because I was not supported by women throughout my career at all," she says. "Now that I have such a great group of women around me, I'm so excited to advocate for whatever it is that they're doing."

DESIGN FOR LIFE

Zoe also takes her role as a mentor to young people seriously. "I have so many young people in my life that I mentor, and I want to pass on what I've learned," she says.

Of course, she's constantly approached by young people keen to break into fashion. "I always get asked how I built my brand, and the answer is, because I wasn't trying to," she admits.

Zoe says she never sugarcoats the challenges of following a career in fashion.

"Honesty is everything, and they need to know that the business of fashion has changed. Now it's not, 'Oh, I want to be a designer, I want to be a stylist!' Now, you have to be across every aspect of the business, from the creative side to the financial aspects to the marketing," she explains.

"You can't just be creative; you have to understand the business of fashion because it is a business more than it ever has been."

"You have to know how to run a business and build a brand. The creative side, I would say, is not even half of it anymore. It's so much bigger than that. Nothing about it is simple and you have to work hard."

"You can't just be creative; you have to understand the business of fashion because it is a business more than it ever has been."

She points to iconic American brands Ralph Lauren and Martha Stewart as the gold standard.

"When you look at brands that are successful over a really long time, what you realize is that there's an authenticity to those brands," she points out. "Those brands mean something to people. You look at Ralph Lauren – whether it's a towel, a belt, a hat, it doesn't matter, you know it's Ralph Lauren."

"You know when something is Martha Stewart. I have friends who, when they cook or garden or build something, straightaway they're like, 'What would Martha do?'"

And for Zoe, it's the same; it's her fans' enduring love of the Rachel Zoe brand – the newsletter, the books, the podcast, the online Zoe community – that keeps her motivated.

"To the extent that the brand and the name continues to inspire people to do better, to love fashion, to want to work hard, to want to get dressed, to want to be a stylist," she says.

"I meet people who say to me, 'I look in my closet and think, what would Rachel Zoe wear?' And I'm like, 'OK, I have to keep doing it because I think as long as it matters to people, is as long as I want to keep doing it.' And that's what keeps me going."

It has been more than 30 years since Zoe embarked on her career in the fashion industry, but she loves the work as much as ever and admits she's still learning.

"People say, 'I've never seen you make a mistake,' and I'm like, 'Are you joking?' Very few people see what you see, but the important thing is, you see it and you recognize it and you learn from it," she muses.

"For me, when work doesn't feel like work and it's impacting many people, that's the win. At this point in my life and career, when I feel like something I'm doing is resonating with people, that's the best. For me, that's amazing."