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DESIGNED FOR SUCCESS

Five local fashion teams who want to stay by the bay

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Do talented young fashion designers have to leave the Bay Area to make it?

Committed to living and working here, the newcomers in this story say being in the Bay Area inspires them to push the envelope, get noticed and break through.

We think that 2007 will be the year they take their careers to the next level, whether that means hiring a staff, participating in their first trade show, getting representation, serious investors or national publicity.

All but one has fashion school experience. Some financed their own lines; others relied on family members to help them along, and one found a backer. Many work together as teams, something that has become commonplace in fashion.

Having sartorial ambitions in the Bay Area -- a place not known for its fashion-forward image -- has its ups and downs. Mostly ups, the designers say. Being a part of an easygoing fashion community is a good thing when it comes to making it big in such a competitive arena. When you're not bumping into the latest crop of Parsons graduates everywhere you turn, when your city is not fashion central for kids from all over the world, you have more of a chance to shine.

How to make your clothing stand out? From a folded collar on a car coat, to an organza wrap dress, meticulous handwork or a bold poppy print coat, these designers each have a distinctive vision. To make it, they must be focused and have a clear, concise voice. Each of these labels is just different enough from the others to have caught our attention.

Here is a look at five names we think will still be around in the years to come. The designers may end up with boutiques of their own or create lines that will someday be sold all over the country.

We look forward to saying we knew them when.

Verrières & sako

Sleek evening wear

Stephanie Verrières and Kimie Sako met in 2004 at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in San Francisco, where each was a loner. When they were the last two in the room to be paired up on a

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project, they realized how much they had in common. "We both have this thing for fabric manipulation," said the 24-year-old Verrières.

They love ruching, a gathering of fabric to create a rippling effect, and favor organzas; pencil skirts; curvy, fitted jackets; and stretch satin evening wear. Dressy clothes.

Working out of a large, sun-filled studio in Oakland's historic Cotton Mill Studios, the friends are at that phase of their lives when life is all work and very little play. Verrières works at the studio full time; Sako, 27, has a part-time waitressing job when she's not at the studio. They finance their line with part-time jobs as ballet costume designers.

Confident they have chosen the right path, the two have ambitious goals. Focusing on cocktail and evening wear, they have a clear vision. Silhouettes are slim, with sexy ruching. They like sheer or stretchy fabrics, a hint of ruffle, a fluttery sleeve, a garland of ruched flowers on the shoulders or sleeves. They like a neutral palette of grays, taupe, olive, ivory, midnight blue and black. For designers so new to the game, they are extremely focused. And extremely confident.

"We have dreams," Verrières says. "Really big dreams."

"We want to be at least 10 times bigger than we are now; we want to be as big as Nicole Miller, or someone like that."

Slowly but surely, their name is getting out there. A Hollywood stylist got wind of them and voila: Jack Black's wife, Tanya Haden, wore their midnight-blue ruched sleeveless sheath to, ta-dah! -- the Academy Awards this year. "That gave us a boost," Sako said proudly.

That, and being chosen one of the "Fresh Faces in Fashion" by GenArt (the fashion and art group that champions new talent) last year gave them some serious encouragement. The Oscar dress and their elegant organza coat/dress that wraps in front just below the bust, are signature looks and come in different colors and fabrics.

With their confidence steadily building, the friends are not thinking about moving out of the Bay Area, even if their dream takes longer to come true here.

"This is my hometown," Verrières said. "I really hate L.A., and I've only been to New York once. I'm really proud to be from here, and I'm always inspired by the Bay Area's beauty." Sako agrees. "The Bay Area reminds me of my hometown of Okayama; it's a small city with culture ... if we only had a garment district here, it would be really perfect."

-- Basics: Organza wrap coat, \$315; stretch satin ruched sleeveless dress, \$255.

-- Where to find: Flobell, in Danville and Saratoga; Anniki, in Los Altos, Duarteau, in San Rafael, www.verrieres-sako.com.

Grdano

Creative classics

Designers Jill Giordano and Brian Scheyer, a professional as well as romantic team, blend their skills well as GrDano. He's an art director; she teaches pattern making at the Academy of Art University. Their goal is to create a line of classics with a distinctive personality.

In business for two years, the couple, both in their mid 30s, have kept their day jobs, have no outside investors or paid employees, and want to take their time to build their brand. Giordano makes all the patterns and samples herself in their Sausalito studio. The clothes are manufactured in South San Francisco.

"We take classics, modernize them and add fluidity," said Scheyer. They do tailored blazers with folded or pleated collars, coats with asymmetrical collars and buttons, shirts with curvy seams and architectural draping. Their version of the crisp white shirt has an asymmetrical Peter Pan collar and buttons tilted slightly off to the side. A classic gray sheath has a keyhole back; their pinstriped jacket has a button-down folded lapel.

"We spend a lot of time thinking of how to frame the face," according to Giordano.

Their signature red wool coat, which came out last fall, does just that. An updated pea coat with a crossover lapel that attaches to the collar, it was featured this year in a Women's Wear Daily spread on Bay Area designers. "That changed things dramatically for us," said Scheyer, and led to the designers being chosen by GenArt as one of its "Fresh Faces in Fashion" last year. "Both those things paved the way for a lot of boutiques to take us seriously," he added. "We are planning to do a red coat every season if we can."

The inspiration for their current spring collection came from the '60s black-and-white film "I Am Cuba," Giordano said. "It was one of the most beautiful films I've ever seen," she added, remembering the crisp white blouses, pencil skirts and cocktail dresses mixed with the utilitarian clothing of working-class men and women. "We wanted the collection to look like dressed-up day wear, like the Hollywood jet set might wear."

This year, they are moving forward fast. "We just signed with our first rep in Los Angeles; for spring '08 we're going to try for the first time to get into a New York showroom. We want to be in 50 boutiques within a year," Scheyer says.

Like the other designers featured here, the couple wants to stay in the Bay Area. "We don't want to live in L.A. or New York," he says. "We don't want to push too hard at first. In San Francisco, everybody helps each other out; and we have the time to develop organically here. We don't want or need to rush to market to beat the competition."

Their biggest dream is not to open their own boutique but to run a business, run it efficiently and well, and provide designs to sell in boutiques.

-- Basics: Asymmetrical white shirt, \$150; \$350 for a gray sheath with a stand-up collar; \$435 for red car coat.

-- Where to find: Bloom boutique, in Palo Alto; RAG in San Francisco; and www.ungdesigners.com and www.style-scene.com. For a look at the collections, visit www.grdano.com.

Erin mahoney

Bold femininity

Thirty-one-year-old Erin Mahoney has been in the fashion business for about three years, and like most emerging designers, she has yet to turn a profit.

But 2007 looks to be her breakout year. "I've just hired my first employee, a sample sewer. This is the year I will hire a marketing and PR person. This is the year I'm going to do a new trade show in New York to define my direction and target women in their 30s who like to go to parties, to hire a production manager."

Mahoney loves color. She loves pattern. She works with bold prints, often vintage, like paisley or flower prints. Her first big seller was a jersey "tango" dress, with a gathered halter neckline, natural waist with a swingy skirt, in bold prints or solids. It comes in sizes 0-22 and is a popular seller at RAG in Hayes Valley.

Her clients are women who like to go out, to dance; her clothes are not for the feint of heart. A gold brocade coat with mother-of-pearl buttons is one item that Mahoney sees as a signature piece; it can be worn with jeans or over a dress. "I'm always trying to bridge the age gap," she said.

After her business grew too big for her San Francisco studios, she recently relocated to 1724 San Pablo Ave. in Berkeley. With a few years of experience under her belt, Mahoney has assessed her situation and rethought what it means to be a real-world designer.

"I used to just make what I liked -- now I'm listening to my customers more," she said. "I used to make everything tight, and I'm easing up on my fit more. I thought I'd never do a button-down shirt, but customers like them, so I used square buttons on a Liberty print, and that felt like I was listening to them, but it was still me."

A Liberty print cotton sundress with hand-pleated cap sleeves, a silk petticoat and horsehair sewn into the hem caught the eye of Bloomingdale's fashion director Stephanie Solomon when she attended San Francisco Fashion Week last summer, when Mahoney showed her spring collection of sundresses, brocade coats and cocktail attire. Solomon never followed up, but that's show business. "I'm going to have to make an appointment with them the next time I'm in New York," Mahoney said.

The designer loves linings. The lining on her linen poppy-print coat (shown above) is a dictionary print from the turn of the last century.

Mahoney, a former dancer who used to make her own costumes, graduated from Apparel Arts in San Francisco, where she learned pattern making, couture techniques and fashion illustration. She started making her first salable items, the jersey halters, in 2003.

They began to sell at RAG. With a loan from a family member, she started a line. "It was someone in the family who had to give up his dream of being a musician, and he believed in mine."

When she cashed that first check, for \$500, she figured she had a chance. "I feel like it's a miracle how much I've been able to get done, just by myself," she said. "I've made a lot of progress in a short amount of time."

-- Basics: Brocade coat, \$460; poppy coat, \$480; sundresses, \$250; tango dresses, \$280; tops, \$135.

-- Where to find: Cat Seto in San Francisco; Utopia in Oakland; Em and Co. in Los Angeles; Darling and Girl Store in New York; or by appointment at www.erinmahoney.com.

Gytha mander

Urban hipster guy

How to explain the Gytha Mander line? First, there's the strange, tongue-twister name.

What -- you're not well versed in Old English?

It means "a gift from me," said Michael Phillips Moskowitz, 28, a vocabulary nut who'd be a killer crossword puzzler if he had the time. As it is, he has two full-time jobs; by day he's the editor of *Todo* magazine, a monthly urban entertainment guide he started a year ago that can be found in city cabs and hotels.

The rest of the time the verbally confident Moskowitz is a fashion designer. His menswear line -- striped shirts, silk ties, tailored blazers and leather holsters that strap under the arm, are for a guy with a healthy ego. In answer to the question of why, exactly, a guy needs a \$250 leather "holster" for his cell phone, Moskowitz replies, "When you're wearing tight jeans -- look at mine -- where are you supposed to put all your things?" The holster comes equipped with pockets for your credit cards, iPod and phone, and pen-holder-like loops for cigarettes. "I designed these when I was still an avid smoker. I've since quit."

For spring '07, his fifth collection, Moskowitz -- who has had no formal fashion training and who started out designing herringbone and pinstriped T-shirts to wear under jackets -- was inspired by Baghdad, of all places.

"It's called "re-imagining Baghdad," he said. "Assuming things had gone differently in Baghdad, it would be, like Beirut was in the '50s and '60s, the Paris of the Middle East. And this is what neo-colonials ought to be wearing."

His dress shirts come with contrasting patterns on the collar, under the cuffs and on the inside placket. Add the holster and you've got "the aplomb of a soldier, the pomp of a dandy and the attitude of a weapons anti-trafficking officer," Moskowitz explains, as only he can.

Even though he has been in the fashion world for several years, last year was the time he began to get noticed. His line was singled out in the Best of the Bay issue of *S.F. Weekly*; it was chosen label of the month by *Esquire U.K.*; Moskowitz was chosen as one of the new guard emerging designers by GenArt San Francisco; and he is backed by Revel Industries, a San Francisco fashion collective that provides financial, graphic and operational support.

Moskowitz, a Palo Alto native, believes the Bay Area is inductive to creativity and success: "This is an arable economic landscape. As a fashion entrepreneur, it can be a very promising landscape," he says. "There's less competition and therefore it's easier to succeed. And I love designing shirts and blazers for our Mediterranean climate."

-- Basics: Dress shirts, \$175; holsters, \$250; ties, \$85.

-- Where to find: RAG and Mingle in San Francisco; Fred Segal (holsters) in Los Angeles; Tokyo; and custom orders, www.revelindustries.com.

Oda

Fancy free

Angie and Maggie Kim are used to people doing double takes -- and not because they are identical twins. In their voluminous skirts, appliqued tops, hand-dyed silks, beaded medallions and dresses with seashells dangling from the hems, they look like something out of an 18th century fairy tale book or "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Mandalyn Begay, 32, who completes this design threesome, might wear bloomers under her skirt, and lots of ruffles and embellishment. Oda, the Spanish word for ode, is their ode to all that is Edwardian or Victorian.

Maybe they're barking up the wrong tree in sometimes conservative San Francisco. They're our wild-card choice.

Still, the workmanship of their clothing -- almost entirely done by hand by the three -- is remarkable in its meticulous detail. And they have a client base of about 20 women, women who "embrace individuality," Begay says. "We like the beauty of imperfection."

The three women make everything themselves in the attic of the big Bernal Heights Victorian where the Kim sisters reside. Begay, who lives in Berkeley, joins them evenings and weekends. "We sit up here and sew every Friday night and all weekend long," Maggie says, not to mention cutting patterns, beading, hand-dyeing fabric and making trims all by hand.

The three attended Fashion institute of Design and Merchandising in San Francisco but met years earlier at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. The Kim sisters, who are 29, work in non-fashion arenas, in the corporate world; Begay also is a full-time mom with her own small line of kids' clothing. The Oda line is self-financed by the women.

Last summer, they put on a show at San Francisco Fashion Week. Their collection included a hemp silk charmeuse quilted vest with Swarovski crystals; handmade beaded medallions; brocade shorts; knitwear; and hand-beaded and embroidered dresses. Their clothing incorporates the sisters' Korean roots, in the embroideries and silhouettes, and Begay's American Indian heritage with feathers, medallions and beadwork. The line is made from nearly all organic cottons and silk; the feathers come from a friend's chicken farm.

Their goals for 2007, says Maggie Kim, include working on a portfolio, acquiring more private clients, trying to become profitable and getting some of their looks into a local boutique, such as Shoku, an upscale eclectic boutique near Berkeley's Fourth Street. "That's the one we'd like to target," Angie says. "And we're thinking of selling in Japan -- people there are more willing to spend money for clothes."

"We think we make wearable art," Maggie says. "We could make it cheaper, but we don't want to lose our aesthetic."

Living and working in San Francisco is another thing that won't change, they say. "We get a lot of inspiration here," Maggie says. "We have lots of artist friends; we like the cool indie art scene here." Begay says, "I think the Bay Area is a great place to make eco-conscious clothing, and it's a place known for people who like to take chances."

Every day, the sisters climb up and down the Bernal Heights hill from the bus to home. "We love that this is the second-highest hill in San Francisco," Angie says. "Every day we are inspired by the views, by being close to the ocean. Everything here has texture and we love that."

-- Basics: Strapless lace tea-dyed and embellished dress, \$740; knit silk blouson top with vintage cotton crocheted back, \$320.

-- Where to find: Revolution (Vermont), and by custom order. For more information, go to www.odastyle.com.

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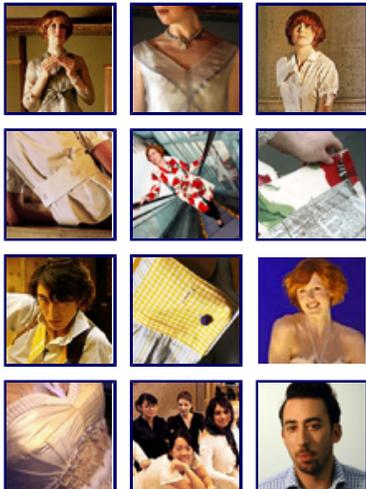
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Out and about: Lace and embroidered dress, \$740, by Oda, with seed pearls and feathers, hand-beading and tea-dyed hem. Jil Sander flats, \$430, Gimme Shoes, San Francisco. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



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