





THE BUCKLE THAT SPARKED A REVOLUTION

EACH OF THE BLACK EYED PEAS SNAPPED UP A 'FLAME CROSS' NECKLACE WHEN THEY WERE IN TOWN, AND EVEN HI-SO PORN STAR PARIS HILTON IS INTO CRYSTAL EVOLUTION. SHE BOUGHT BELLY PIERCINGS IN SIX COLORS AT A DEPARTMENT STORE IN TOKYO. BUT FOR THOSE OF US WHO LIVE IN BANGKOK, ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS VISIT THE CRYSTAL LOUNGE TO FEEL THE SPIRIT BEHIND THE BRAND, AS WELL AS SEE THE ENTIRE COLLECTION – BEFORE IT GOES GLOBAL.

It all started at Don Muang airport. Bella, en route from Japan to her native Romania, was in the departure lounge when she spotted a great... no, not guy, but buckle belt. Forever intrigued by funky looking jewelry and accessories, she struck up a conversation with the man behind the belt and six months later they were married.

"I've always been attracted by jewelry," says designer Bella, who started her creative career designing stage costumes.

The man wearing the eye-catching accessory in question – a belt with a silver and turquoise buckle – was Robert Redl, a train driver from Vienna. A bit of a renegade hippy in those days, he would take a few months off each year, traveling to Thailand to buy jewelry and to sell back home at festivals. "I was real scary looking, with hair down to here," he laughs, pointing to his shoulder.

Fast-forward 12 years. Bella and Robert, after trotting around the globe for years in search of adventure and financing their travels by selling trinkets on the streets of Tokyo, finally settled down in Bangkok. They set up a wholesale company called Bodysteel & Silver, which quickly developed it into the world's first and most successful body jewelry brand, at a time when body

piercings were all the rage. While Robert concentrates on building the business, Bella set off for Milan for one year to study fashion. In August this year, the couple fulfilled their dream of opening a concept store, Crystal Lounge, selling the unique designs created by Bella under brandname 'Crystal Evolution'.

Quite the evolution indeed – from street vendors to owners of their own upscale Bangkok boutique. Robert clearly has the business acumen of the pair. In Japan, he built a thriving wholesale empire. He was the first to introduce the red laser pointer key chain to the Japanese. "I'd load up a rucksack full in Taiwan and then they'd be sold out in one night. The fun of the gadget was that people were jumping up and down in the streets," he reminisces. "It was a crazy time."

After four years of 'craziness' in the Land of the Rising Sun, the Land of the Smiles was next. Familiar with the problems as a buyer in Thailand, "back then, people would cheat your all over the place", they switched to the supply side. The 'Bodysteel & Silver' shop is set up in the backpacking and wholesale mecca of Khao San

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Road. The company was the pioneer in selling body jewelry under its own brandname. The key to their success was the fact that from the beginning Robert has gone to great lengths to ensure the business is run professionally, complete with catalogues, shipping and the possibility of ordering by email. Overseas buyers prefer to buy from them rather than from the lower-priced local suppliers. “The business just grew and grew,” he says.

Meanwhile, all pieces are crafted at a 300-man factory in Pink Lao, where an old school friend of Bella’s oversees production.

While Robert is the managerial brain, Bella is the creative force behind their brands Bodysteel & Silver and Crystal Evolution. After a year of honing her design skills in Italy, she returned to Thailand full of (r)evolutionary ideas. “Back then all the body jewelry was hardcore 80s punk from England,” she says. “I started creating prettier versions of what was out there, like belly bars in the shape of a butterfly.”

Another auspicious meeting involving jewelry took place at a function at the Austrian embassy. This time it was a beaded necklace of Bella’s which caught the attention of a Swarovski representative. He enquired whether the piece was made with genuine Swarovski crystals, they started talking and a collaboration was soon established. From then onwards Bella incorporated the fine-quality crystals in all her designs. She loves the versatility of the products, with the extensive variety of colors, shapes, sizes and high-precision cuts. Impressed by Bella’s talent, Swarovski recently chose her as one of eight designers to create a Swarovski-themed piece, which will be showcased at jewelry fairs around the world.

As we’re given a tour of Crystal Lounge, we wonder why the combination of jewelry store and lounge bar? “I hate department stores,” Robert says vehemently. “The plan was to develop a new concept that will attract people and also give us the opportunity to do other things like home décor items.” He admits that the Crystal Lounge concept is still fluid and they are experimenting to find what works best. “We thought customers would come in for coffee and cake, walk around and end up buying something. But people seem to come in mostly for the jewelry,” Bella adds.

Once they’ve managed to firmly establish their flagship store in Thailand, the couple’s dream is to franchise the concept in other major cities around the world. “We’d like to get rid of the headache of selling to distributors and only sell our own designs,” says Robert. “Our biggest challenge is building brand awareness and making it work here.”

Walking around the showroom, it’s apparent that the Crystal Evolution collection is not limited to women’s jewelry only. Bella has recently started developing a men’s line consisting of bracelets, cufflinks, necklaces and pendants. “A lot of my pieces are big and chunky, and inspired by the hip-hop scene and R&B music,” the designer says. The ‘flame cross’ necklace, a tribal inspired design, is currently the store’s most popular item. Although some men may prefer the less showy, plain designs using only black colored crystals, Bella has noticed that “there are plenty of fashion conscious metrosexuals out there.”

The eclectic mix of products does not stop at jewelry alone, testify the glitzy tuk-tuk and Harley Davidson which greet customers as they walk into the store. The tuk-tuk functions as both a marketing tool as well as a flashier alternative to a limousine service, picking up guests for special events like birthdays. Nevertheless, all items, including the large crystal covered dragon, the store’s unofficial custodian, are for sale.

Closer inspection of the glass case reveals a few more interesting items: a whip, handcuffs and thumb cuffs. What are these S&M paraphernalia doing here?

“That’s an interesting story,” says Bella. “While I was living in Tokyo, someone kept stealing my underwear – outside from the clothes line or raiding my laundry at the Laundromat. Totally fed up, a friend and I decided to try and catch the perpetrator in the act. The thief turned out to be a Japanese guy. I don’t have to tell you his motive... Some Japanese must be very sexually frustrated.” This thief with a kinky side led to the idea of adding a few quirky pieces to the collection. They’ve become hot-selling items. Bella was surprised to observe that “the girls only look but it’s the guys who buy.”

It has become crystal clear that at this jewelry store cum lounge bar, girls & boys can find just about anything to their heart’s desire: from elegant necklaces, rings and bracelets, to chunky hip-hop chains, crystallized cufflinks and ear studs. Also for those in need of a whip, looking for a conversation opener, or in search of a twinkling tuk-tuk, Crystal Lounge is the place.

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