

REINO LEHTONEN-RILEY OF
ROCK 'N' ROLL COUTURE
JEWELLERY LEGEND THE
GREAT FROG TALKS
CELEBRITIES, INTEGRITY
AND STAYING RELEVANT
IN A CHANGING WORLD
WORDS: LOUISE HOFFMAN



GIVING THE FINGER



W

e're sort of... the metallers' and grebs' Cartier," announces second-generation jeweller Reino Lehtonen-Riley as he reflects on 50 years of The Great Frog.

Not many brands can boast such longevity in success or relevance. Today, customers come in to replace pieces of jewellery because their children have stolen it all. "We once had Paul Weller visit the shop with his daughter, and she was like 'yeah dad, this is a really cool shop, you don't even know about it', and he was like, 'I've been coming here for 25 years'," Reino laughs.

Since being founded in the 1970s in London's Carnaby Street – the beating heart of youth subculture – The Great Frog has been the self-expression of generations of alternatives on the street, stage and screen. It collaborated with and made jewellery for the big rock and metal bands of the '70s and '80s, such as The Rolling Stones, Metallica and Iron Maiden.

"My absolute ultimate was Lemmy from Motörhead," Reino recalls. "My mum and dad knew him from back in the day, before huge licensing agreements and loads of money changing hands. It was all kind of done

on a handshake – like, if you make me one of these rings with this logo then you can sell them, and other people might like them too. That was it!

"Just by chance, on a trip to LA, I was going through immigration and saw Lemmy in the other line," he continues. "I went up to him and said, 'Oh my god, you're Lemmy. You won't remember me, but you might remember my parents.' He did, and ended up giving me a lift in his limousine from LAX to, like, the sofa I was crashing on. It all just slotted into place. I worked with him a lot over the years."

Indeed, when Reino's father identified this emerging market and started the company in 1972, his timing couldn't have been more perfect. The brand grew both with and within the community it serviced, starting from the ground up through hard graft and determination, and mirroring the bands' rags-to-riches stories.

"Metal and rock 'n' roll started out from people wanting to express themselves but not having a lot of money, and largely all the bands remember that, even though they were teenagers at the time," says Reino. "They were all guys who started out touring pubs in the back of an old van,

LOWER LEFT

The Ramones meet The Great Frog, by Alec Nguyen

RIGHT

Lemmy

“We’re still making things that actually mean something to people”





LEFT
Slash
UPPER RIGHT
The original store
LOWER RIGHT
By CG Watkins

and for us it was carrying jewellery in suitcases to Hells Angels motorbike shows. Maybe they see that in me too; a sort of underdog.”

The original shop premises in Ganton Street, Soho – then a cheap option on a quiet backstreet, now one of the most sought-after retail locations in London – is still the flagship store, recently the beneficiary of a million-pound refurbishment. The jewellery is all still handmade in London too. But The Great Frog is now well and truly a global brand, with outlets in New York, Los Angeles and Japan, plus another in London’s Shoreditch.

The audience has also evolved and widened, with the celebrity client list moving from ‘who’s hot in the 1970s’ through to ‘who’s hot in the 2020s’. Now, you’ll see Great Frog designs adorning the likes of Jay-Z, Lady Gaga, Kanye West and Jason Momoa, as well as gracing the catwalks and making cameos in films such as *Harry Potter*.

“Often, stylists will come in and buy pieces, unbeknownst to us, and then overnight we’ll have 50 orders for a ring that we’ve been selling for years. Then a customer might say, ‘Can I get the ring that’s featured in the new Harry Styles video?’ and it suddenly all makes sense,” Reino explains.

“We’re not courting celebrities or signing deals for them to wear our stuff, so we just have no idea! It happens organically. It still baffles me when PR people ask if I’ll gift celebrities jewellery. It’s not genuine – it’s forcing something. And I’m not in the market for giving away what we’ve worked so hard to make.”



Most recently, the company has seen soaring sales of its gothic-type 'Dad' ring (a piece Reino originally created for himself as a tongue-in-cheek take on a classic) after grime MC Skepta was seen wearing one.

"The 'Dad' ring is a good example of how, as you get older, your ideas change; priorities change. I'm a 40-year-old man now, and a father of two. That also means I don't know how to be 'down with the kids' anymore. So, it's about bringing the younger generation on board."

Even though times have changed, and The Great Frog has adapted to engage with each new generation, the brand's original ethos has remained front and centre. "I really like the idea that, in today's throw-away culture, we're still creating products that have integrity. We're still making things that actually mean something to people," says Reino.

So, for the semicentennial anniversary, they're doing what they do best: celebrating British manufacturing and culture at its finest with a series of exciting new collaborations throughout 2022... as well as a big party.

"We're working with brands such as Doc Martens and Lewis Leathers, not to mention the biggest rock 'n' roll band in the world – The Rolling Stones!" Reino enthuses.

"Of course, the band have put their logo on pretty much everything you can possibly think of, so for this collaboration I really wanted to go back to the early days when they weren't a stadium act – when they were a group of guys doing stuff 'DIY', and album covers would be a photo of some graffiti they'd scrawled on the back of a toilet or something. I think people appreciate that because it's a bit of realism and hope. Yes, you can do it from nothing!" ■



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