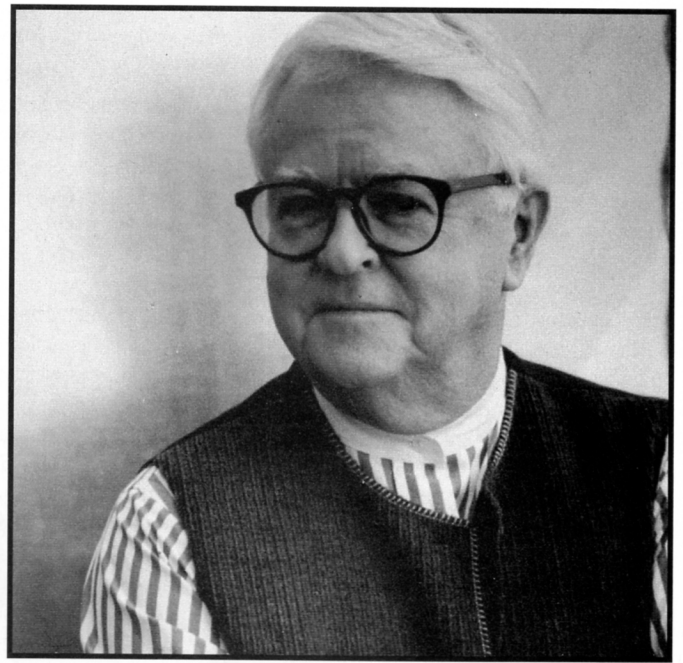


Q&A

DONNA SHRYER

GEOFFREY BEENE

If you sit long enough with Mr. Geoffrey Beene, you cease to hear the commotion of models sashaying, photographers snapping, assistants arranging, or even journalists loudly waiting their turn to interview this American Living Legend. The man is a gentle man, and the very air around him takes on a similar calm. He has a soft, melodic southern accent, easy body language, and a cultured yet courteous manner. If you sit long enough with Mr. Beene, you begin to imagine yourself on a breezy verandah in his native Haynesville, Louisiana, and you're quietly chatting with Sammy Bosman Jr., as Mr. Beene was named at birth. Imaginary or not, pull up a comfy wicker chair and share a moment on our porch – just you and an American Living Legend.



Q. Some people get their brightest ideas while driving a car. Others get brainstorming while brushing their teeth. What are you doing when you get your brightest ideas?

A. I'm waking from a sound sleep, around 3:30 in the morning.

Q. 3:30 AM? Do you rush off to find your sketch pad?

A. No, it's beside my bed, so there's no rush.

Q. What is your definition of style?

A. Grace Mirabella, who is a dear friend of mine, said that fashion is what you wear, and style is how you wear it. I would go a little further. It does go into personalizing, until there is no awareness of the clothes – the individual and the clothes are seemingly one and you go on with your life. It's a natural thing, so it becomes not a part of the designer, but has removed itself to the person. I actually have nothing to do with my clients' style.

Q. Tell me the name of someone who, in your opinion, has style?

A. Well, I know people who have style, and then there are loads of people out there who will never know really how much style they do have. I'm on 57th Street, and I see the world in front of my window. They are just wonderful looking people – strangers who I believe I will never know, but they have such great style.

Q. You have been compared to master colorists, from Goya to Matisse. You've been named the Greatest American Designer by your peers. Strong-minded women of style and substance call you a genius. What adjectives would you use to describe yourself?

A. Oh, I'm quite content with what they say. I'm not going to fight it. I'm very flattered by

what is already being said. About myself I would say I like my work. I am an ex-medical student drop-out who is very happy, and I have succeeded in certainly another world. I'm very grateful.

Q. Trial-and-error is how you describe your own designing experience. Which collection or part of a collection was your closest call, the one when the error might have kicked in?

A. Well, I had many errors in the beginning of my career. And the greatest critique was way back in the early '70s before I switched to soft clothes. It was written that my clothes were beautiful, beautiful fabrics, beautifully made, but they were not modern. They did not move well. And I was very hurt by that. But in the end this criticism made me change my whole attitude about soft clothes. So sometimes from the worst collection can be an awakening of direction and change.

Q. What's the one color that flatters women the most?

A. I'm not sure. I know first I would like to see any woman in black. But a lot of women do not consider black flattering. In the end, though, it is the one color that frames the individual. Those in the south wear pink, those in California love beige, but I love the starkness of seeing an individual in black.

Q. What's your all-time favorite movie, the one video tape you own that's worn out?

A. Bette Davis in *Now, Voyager*. (Editor's note: In this 1942 star-studded classic, Bette Davis plays a lonely spinster who is trying, with the help of her psychiatrist, to get over a long ago and tragic romance aboard an ocean cruiser.)

Q. When you get home, and you're absolutely exhausted, describe to me your most comfortable chair.

A. It's a hard frame, upholstered, and there are three very soft pillows. So when I first get home, that is where I collapse.

Q. What color is it? Black and white?

A. Natch. The frame is black satin, the pillows are black and ivory satin. Double-faced satin, that is.

Q. What is the most fantastic trend in womenswear you have ever seen?

A. Well, if it was really good, it never went away. But I would have to say boleros.

Q. What's the best part about being an American Living Legend? And you are! Everyone wants to talk to you, everyone wants to be you, everyone wants to think like you?

A. They *do*? It's nice that my work is appreciated. It's a great feeling when people admire anyone's endeavor.

Q. What's the worst part about being so famous?

A. Wondering when it will end.

Q. You say that good fashion should be timeless. What's the oldest piece of clothing you own that you still wear?

A. Or *can* I wear? I have my saddle shoes from the university, and they still fit, and they still look good, and every now and then I put them on and enjoy them.

Q. Outside of the fashion world, what cause or hobby do you feel the greatest passion for?

A. Apart from human health, I raise charities for the animals. Humans can generally take care of themselves. 