

A
preppy,

fashion designer

amy smilovic

By Jill Johnson

look





We've been told by the media in recent years that women can't "do it all." Apparently they haven't met Greenwich resident Amy Smilovic, founder and designer of the hip clothing line, Tibi; wife and business partner of Frank Smilovic; and mother of three-year-old Gabriel and one-year-old Charlie.

Only a little bit older than young Gabriel, Tibi is already on the radar screen of New York's fashion editors and in the wardrobes of stylish women from the Hamptons to Hong Kong — which is where Amy launched the line. Both she and her new husband were working for American Express (they met on a tennis court at a conference in Hawaii) when Frank was transferred from New York to Hong Kong in 1997. Amy would have been reporting to him in Hong Kong, so she quit and started a company that now has them reporting to each other.

"I've always loved art and I've always loved business; fashion was a perfect merging of the two," says Amy, who grew up on

Betty — not that compelling," says Amy), and Tibi was born.

After much deliberation over the business plan, they took the advice of another entrepreneur — "The best business plan is this: Make the product. If you sell it, you have a business; if you don't sell it, you don't have a business" — and set out to make 400 dresses. "I really had no understanding of the business at all," says Amy. "At the first meeting with the factory, they kept talking about 'interfacing.' I said, 'I know, that's why I'm here, because I really think that interfacing is important.' They replied, 'No, interfacing goes in your jacket!'"

The two women traveled around Indonesia — to places where few Americans would dare go now — seeking out manufacturers. "We contacted the Indonesian consulate and got a list of fabric printers. We were staying at the Shangri-La in Jakarta waiting for the eight appointments we had that day, and only one showed. His name was Zen," says Amy. (It turned out the other seven came but left after searching the hotel lobby for two Chinese men, as they never expected to be doing business with two women.) Amy and Octavia visited Zen's strictly Muslim factory

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St. Simons Island in Georgia and graduated from the University of Georgia in 1989. "I come from a very right-brained family. My dad is an artist. My aunts and uncles are psychologists. No one had a business side, but I was trying to hawk stuff from the minute I was born." Amy majored in advertising in school and started her career at Ogilvy & Mather, where American Express was one of her first clients. "I just fell into hard-core marketing in my job at Amex," she says, "and I really wanted to get back into doing something creative, but very much from a business perspective." Hawking pretty little dresses made sense, especially in Hong Kong.

"You have a country-club lifestyle there, but the fashion is very label driven. The locals would be sitting by the pool in Gucci," Amy explains. "A friend of mine, Octavia Jones, and I were lamenting that there was no Lilly Pulitzeresque clothing in Hong Kong. She grew up going to Nantucket and I grew up on an island. We both wanted to wear light, cotton clothing, and there was no such thing." The two friends decided to create some bright, printed dresses, named the company after Octavia's grandmother ("Mine are Bernice and

in a small village, where pockets of al-Qaida have since been identified, and hired him to make their fabrics for the first year.

The risks — financial and otherwise — paid off. They sold their 400 dresses and ordered 400 more. Octavia left the company a year later and moved back to the United States where she opened a store that now carries the Tibi line. Amy started getting orders from other stores back home; retailers were spotting the Tibi label on Hong Kongers summering on the East Coast's trendy beaches. The first shipment of 4,000 dresses landed in Amy's parents' dining room on St. Simons, and her mother — either anxious to be able to use the dinner table again or bowled over by the success of initial sales — quit her job and set up Tibi's U.S. office. Amy's husband, Frank, who had left American Express after twenty-seven years to take over Gateway's Asian operation, also saw potential for a new life through Tibi.

"My wife had brought the company to the point where she needed assistance on the business side. That, coupled with my desire to run my own business, reduce the tremendous amount of travel I was doing, and return to the United States with Amy — who was pregnant at that point — prompted my decision to

SKETCH BY AMY SMILOVIC

join Tibi," explains Frank. He took the title of president and claims he had no reservations about becoming his wife's business partner. "Our strengths are so different," he says. "Her ability to be creative is a unique gift; my strength is a knowledge of how businesses are run."

In 2001 the Smilovics moved back to the States, set up Tibi's showroom — and their temporary home — in a SoHo loft, and began scouting out a more bucolic setting for their family of three. Gabriel had been born while they were living in a hotel waiting for the loft to be finished. Now the Smilovics are living out the Greenwich version of the house with a white picket fence dream: a stone mansion with white pillars off Round Hill Road, a gated drive and a pool and tennis court set on ample

and knit sweater, a pair of Seven jeans rolled up to create a five-inch cuff midcalf, and a pair of Prada flats — a cool SoHo look that one rarely finds on someone also attuned to the latest toddler toys. Beaded earrings mixed with blonde, highlighted hair that fell casually below her shoulders.

"I try to bring a lot of my lifestyle into the line. I work in SoHo; I live in Greenwich; I think the line really brings together those two facets of my life," says Amy, in a pleasant but barely southern-belle tone. "Even the preppiest Greenwich girl has a little bit of SoHo about her; she wants to look

cool and hip. And most customers have a lot of Greenwich in them; they don't want their clothes to make this huge statement. Often, if you compare the identity of the designer with that of

fashion was a perfect merging of the two."



acreage for their two romping boys.

On a visit last fall to the Smilovic's home, a glorious quilt of red and orange leaves covered the lawn. A fall clean-up crew was busy with their blowers, and one of the crew directed me through the kaleidoscope of leaves. His Eastern European accent and genial greeting gave him away — this was, in fact, Frank, whose family immigrated to Phoenix from the Czech Republic when he was seventeen. He seems to be the type who can't sit idly by while others are working hard; he joins in with a smile. Inside the house, Amy was in a kitchen dotted with toys. A nanny held Charlie, and Gabriel clung to his mother's leg. "He's not used to having me at home during the day," Amy explained. While the proportions of the house are grand, the feel is relaxed, mirroring Amy's style. Her slender five-foot-five-inch frame was clothed in a Tibi gingham blouse

the customer," she says, "they're really different people. I think I'm a pretty average customer. Going about it in a roundabout way, without having a degree in design, forces me to design what I

think is pretty — what I would want to wear, what my friends would want to wear."

Marcy Butzen, department manager at Saks in Greenwich, agrees Tibi is what working women and nonworking moms in their late twenties to early forties want to wear. "We've carried the line for two years, and our customer loves it," she says, noting that the line has "a lot of novelty to it; it stands out." The store's display of Tibi is a colorful collection of pretty items with unique detailing — pearls, ribbon, metallic thread, tulle. A hippie/schoolgirl/geisha theme runs through the line but in a subtle, playful way that isn't likely to raise eyebrows (except among the

super-snotty — most of whom have a Botox habit that will preclude eyebrow raising anyway).

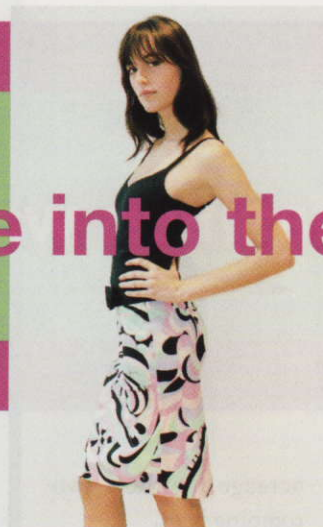
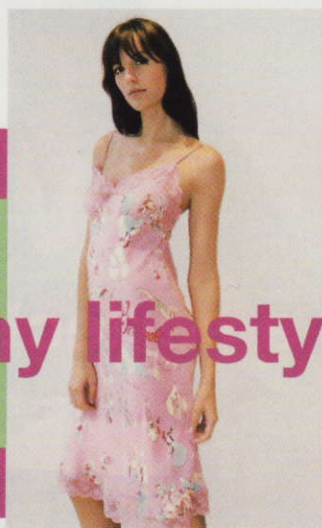
"Our customer has fun dressing up," says Amy. "She may be an eighteen-year-old with a platinum card in Greenwich or a spunky sixty-five-year-old woman in Nantucket." Tibi has two labels: The Green Label is the "more urban, during-the-week wear," and the Pink Label is "weekend/country-club wear," which some refer to as "SoHo Lilly." In addition to the special touches in the line, Amy prides herself on Tibi's one-of-a-kind prints and high-quality fabrics. "I design most of the prints myself — I either hand-draw them or I rework vintage fabrics," she explains. "Most companies buy from fabric manufacturers, but then you don't know if the same print will show up in another designer's line or at Limited Express.

"I'm crazy about nice fabrics," Amy continues, as she pulls out her favorite looks from a stack of pictures featuring the spring 2004 collection. A fitted seersucker jacket is mixed with a polka-dot and flower-printed

unique color, fabric or button," she says, "and depending on the pieces you choose and how you mix the clothes, Tibi can go from sophisticated to really cute and sweet." Hope considers Tibi well priced. Most items run between \$150 and \$350 — not exactly in the back-to-school budget, except in the Smilovics' neighborhood, but not bad for the work of someone whom *Lucky's* editor describes as "one of the most creative people I've ever met in my entire life."

InStyle magazine's fashion market editor, Tobi Tucker, has followed Tibi since the first collection. "Amy was in Asia and only coming to the U.S. sporadically. She only had about twenty-four pieces then and they were so cute. It was great leisurewear that every girl I knew would be clamoring for," Tobi says. "Since then Amy has stayed true to her style — and she has great style — but the collections continue to evolve and get more interesting. That's a hard balance to strike."

Tibi does not show during the fashion weeks in Bryant Park. "It costs a lot of money



pleated skirt in a rich Italian jacquard fabric. A shift dress made of Austrian lace is similar to what one might see on Marc Jacobs's runway. Amy calls a boat-neck silk blouse with winged sleeves and a tropical-flower print the "date top" — "it's perfect if you don't know how dressy you should be." A fitted V-neck argyle sweater is typical of what Amy likes to design: "those great things your mom had in her closet that you would have liked if they were just a little bit tighter and the shoulders were a little bit smaller and it was just a little bit cooler."

"Amy puts a new twist on the classic preppy silhouettes, with interesting color and fabric combinations that update the preppy look," says Meredith Melling, market editor at *Vogue*. "She does these fantastic shrunken, bracelet-sleeve, tweed jackets in fun colors like green and pink. I ordered one for myself."

Hope Greenberg, fashion market director at *Lucky* magazine, describes Tibi as "whimsical but wearable" and notes Amy's attention to detail as what sets her work apart. "There's always something a little bit surprising on each piece, whether it's a

and other than an ego thing, it doesn't pay," says Amy. But that has not kept her clothes out of the pages of *Elle*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue* or the wardrobes of celebrity clients such as Reese Witherspoon and Kirsten Dunst. Amy has told the Tibi story on both *20/20* and *CNBC*. This past year has been a successful chapter. "We finally feel like we've hired all the right people," she says, "and it's been just me designing the line. At the beginning I felt like I had to have a real designer on board, but I always knew what I wanted the line to look like so I'd be fighting with a designer who had a different vision."

Amy's style — inspired by travel, home and her island upbringing — is also in sync with the times. "We had loads of New Jersey stores come in and say, 'This is great because pretty is back in so we want Tibi this season,'" she remarks. "And one of our Atlanta accounts was like, 'Well, I had no idea pretty was out!'"

Amy clarifies that her kind of pretty isn't frilly — "a pretty tomboy, not a girl who wears ruffles all over." She is inspired by the clean style of Prada and Michael Kors. She also wears

"I try to bring... my lifestyle into the

Rebecca Taylor and Chaiken and says she practically lives at Sophia's Vintage Clothing in Greenwich. She does confess to not always having been so chic though. "In school, I was over-the-top preppy. If it didn't have a whale on it, it wasn't in my closet," she says, laughing, "and I had a bunny sweater, but I wasn't five, I was nineteen. It had bunnies on the front and their tails were on the back. That was really bad. At least I never wore holiday wear. I have friends in Greenwich who were all breaking out their pumpkin earrings the week before Halloween!"

Jack-o'-lantern jewelry aside, her friends are part of what she loves about the town she and her husband chose for their family's home base. "I love the people, the restaurants, our library, my kid's school, Greenwich Hospital. Giving birth there was one of the greatest experiences of my life," says Amy, who is on the hospital's gala committee. "I also love the nature. Where else can you be that you have a Saks and a Tiffany's and then

you come home and there are turkeys in your yard? It's such a great mix. Being European,

home at six." The couple sometimes runs into trouble with their different work shifts. "Last night, no lie, I came down to feed Charlie at 11 o'clock. We're sitting on the couch, and Frank leans over and says, 'So how are the margins looking for fall?' I said, 'Oh my God, I'm enjoying time with my baby and you're asking me about gross margins!' I can handle a question like that at 9 a.m., but when I walk in this door at night, I don't like anything about Tibi in this household."

"In the beginning there were nights of crying," Amy admits. "I sent out this huge shipment of dresses, and the stores were calling my mom saying the dresses had 'cone boobs.' I asked, 'What do you mean?' She replied, 'Like those bras Madonna wears.' So we had dresses with monkeys on them with boobs like Gaultier bras! You think it's never going to get worse, but in this industry it can always get worse and it will. It's just a matter of learning to deal with the ups and downs."

"It's a pressure cooker sometimes," comments Frank. "You have to be able to argue, say

line. I work in SoHo; I live in Greenwich."

Frank had a hard time with the idea of American suburban life. Greenwich offered the most diversity. He would go nuts in Georgia."

The couple used to commute to the city together every day (with Gabriel in tow), but now Amy works at home or at the Greenwich Library one day a week, and Frank plays house-husband a few days a week, then catches up with work at night. "I'm doing some of the things that historically only women did and I love it," says Frank, who shuttles Gabriel to tennis camp and helps coach the soccer team at the Whitby School. The busy dad admits, with a groan, to being fifty-three (seventeen years Amy's senior), and says they don't plan to have more kids. "Parenting takes so much energy. There would be a way to do it — with a house full of help — but that's not how we want to live."

"I don't like the idea of my kids growing up with a nanny," says Amy. "As long as Frank is home, that takes away a huge amount of the guilt." She adds that "setting schedules and sticking to them" is their secret to balancing work and family. "If you tell your kids you're going to be home at six, you have to be

I'm sorry, then hug and kiss and go on." He does maintain autonomy as far as his wardrobe goes.

"The only thing Amy picks for me are socks, and she's done a great job with that."

Amy may not have time for sock shopping if Tibi's growth goes as planned. "The next step is growing our business overseas," she says. (Currently Tibi has accounts in Hong Kong, Japan and "off and on" at Harvey Nichols in London; nationally Tibi is available at Saks, Bloomingdale's, Neiman Marcus and approximately 180 boutiques, including Saturnia in Greenwich.) "We're also looking at lots of different licensing opportunities. I'm doing a maternity line for Pea in the Pod, and we're looking at doing a home line for Anthropologie."

All this and home by six to play with the kids? "She's a very strong lady with an unbelievable energy level," says her husband. "She can do it all, but not all women could."

