



# RBG

## the Robert Graham

by JILL JOHNSON  
photographs by GUS CANTAVERO

# Effect

Fashion's contrarian  
has fun breaking fashion rules



**L**t's a new year—the perfect time to overhaul the wardrobe. Perhaps even consider buying some “wearable art.” To members of its Collector's Club (those who own 100 pieces or more), Robert Graham is just that.

Known for its bold men's shirts, Robert Graham exploded onto a dull menswear scene in 2001, like Picasso, Warhol and Dali crashing an Impressionist party. Imagine a guy who'd wear lemon pants and sunglasses at night, or a raspberry-hued shirt with a navy, pumpkin and baby-pink striped tie. He probably lives in Southern California. He's the Robert Graham customer. No, scratch that: the Robert Graham collector. Or is he?

He may be, but he's not the only one. While hipsters in southern climes flock to the I'm-on-perpetual-vacation styles in the casual line, Robert Graham is now just as likely to dress a buttoned-up East Coast banker. The wild child has grown up. Robert Graham has evolved into a full luxury lifestyle brand, known as much for the quiet, hidden details in each piece—the “surprises”—as for the loud fashion statements.

The best surprise of all? The guys behind Robert Graham are right here in Fairfield County.



## Robert Stock

CREATOR

Robert Stock, founder and CCO of Robert Graham, doesn't come from a fashion background. His father owned a gas station in the Bronx. But Robert admired the beautifully tailored dress shirts his dad liked to wear at dinner and on the weekends. They were the seed of inspiration that planted Robert at the men's shop Alvin Murray, on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, where his path intersected with other fashion-obsessed street kids like Ralph Lauren and Joe Barrato (former longtime CEO of Brioni and Westport resident).

“It was 1967,” says Stock, recounting his first meeting with Lauren. “This guy pulls up in a beautiful Morgan, wearing a shearling-lined leather flight suit, goggles and a helmet.” Lauren was selling ties, not even Polo ties yet. “We struck up a friendship. He had started Polo by the time I wanted a full-time job. I went to see him in his tiny office in the Empire State Building to ask if he'd hire me. He said, ‘I don't even have room to put the ties in here!’”

Stock started his own company, but by the early seventies the two boys from the Bronx joined forces. They developed the ultra-successful Chaps collection together. Stock's own line, Country Roads by Robert Stock, followed, garnering him Coty (Best American Sportswear Designer) and Cutty Sark (Leading American Menswear



The Robert Graham showroom in New York City



Robert Stock, David Sweedler and Bill Sweedler at Mitchells of Westport

Designer) awards. “He was brilliant and aggressive, with a very unique vision, and as a result, he was very successful,” comments Barrato, who worked at Ralph Lauren during the same era and now sits on Robert Graham’s board.

In his spacious office at the Robert Graham showroom in New York’s garment district, Robert Stock wears his favorite go-to outfit: a Robert Graham shirt (blue and white check, not loud) and jeans. He’s a compact guy with an easygoing manner. He’s balding but his beard seems to compensate; he looks younger than he must be.

“Joe Barrato was here the other day. He said, ‘You know, your desk looks exactly like Ralph’s desk.’ I said, ‘I promise I didn’t copy it! I haven’t seen Ralph’s desk in thirty years,’” recounts Stock.

His desk is artistically cluttered, like a messy chic outfit or hairstyle. Coffee-table books, a cluster of fragrance bottles, an antique pencil sharpener, a globe, notepads, a color fan deck, a

Mac laptop.... Another table across the room holds more fragrance bottles and plush boxes (Robert Graham is launching fragrance in 2015) and a leather couch is pleasingly strewn with fabrics, footwear sketches (launching fall 2014), men’s hats, a collage of Beatles albums and a plaid teddy bear donning a top hat—the scene could be photographed for one of those children’s “I Spy” books. A Rolling Stones poster hangs nearby.

This mélange of the whimsical, edgy, classic, colorful, artsy and erudite is like one big inspiration board—Robert Stock’s brain, picked and displayed. Behind his desk hangs a giant picture he bought at Lillian August. It features a fifties prop plane zooming over Manhattan, at such an angle that when Stock sits down he appears to be piloting it.

Stock is in the pilot’s seat here, even if an acquisition in 2011, a decade into the Robert Graham journey, brought him several copilots. After all, he is the one who happened upon





The Collector Club, for those who own more than 100 Robert Graham pieces, is set to relaunch and be more inclusive this spring.

from almost a kind of hippie fashion to a more refined look, and we upscaled it quite a bit,” Stock explains.

Stock offers a tour behind the scenes in the design area, where the creative energy is palpable. “I have about twelve designers working for me,” he says, noting that one focuses on trims alone. Stock points out the vintage-fabric library; a corridor of fabric samples; a New York-themed concept board and a subway scene print; hundreds of buttons; a gazillion color swatches; and his design director, Tom Main, whose tattooed biceps look like they might steer a Harley to the office (Main has worked with Stock for twenty years).

The showroom, like every Robert Graham store, features an eclectic couch, with patches of shirt fabric; a chair made out of thirty-nine shirts and held together by twenty belts; a display table made of recycled car hoods; and a lamp shade formed from sunglasses. Everyone passing through is incredibly stylish; one guy carries a pile of pants in autumn shades, which actually match the clothes he’s wearing. There are jeans and “Jeanos” (chino pockets in front, jean style pockets in back), shirts with the old hippie-esque prints, including a psychedelic rock band in neon swirls, paint-splotched pants, luxurious knitwear, unusual women’s blouses, pastel-colored business shirts with ties in amped up Easter hues, a purple paisley shirt (“the most popular shirt right now,” he notes), a rich blue striped shirt (“the most popular shirt at Mitchells”).

For the life of Robert Graham, and over twenty years of his life, Stock has lived in Fairfield County. Perhaps this demographic—“pretty conservative when it comes to dress,” comments Stock—influenced the design of the classic X Collection.

Mitchells has carried Robert Graham for a decade. Co-CEO Bob Mitchell comments, “Robert Graham is fun. It has a whimsical nature. The details add spice, especially to the shirts. We sell everything from the most outrageous to the classic ones with fun details... What’s great is you can dress them up or down.” Mitchells is buying more categories as Robert Graham grows. “They have very loyal customers. Lovers of the shirts will buy a knit, a pullover, a sport coat.”

Stock plays down any Connecticut influence on the creative side, but on the business side Fairfield County has been key—namely due to the Sweedler brothers and a firm called Tengram. Stock stresses, “I’m just one spoke in the wheel here.”

## Bill Sweedler

INVESTOR

In 2011, Westport resident Bill Sweedler cofounded Tengram Capital Partners, a private equity firm focused on the consumer and retail sectors. The name is derived from ten (“the tenth in a set or one deserv-

some eye-catching shirts in Paris in 2001.

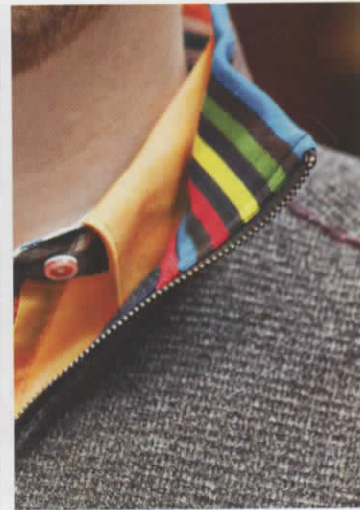
“There was really a tremendous void in the men’s fashion industry,” says Stock, referring to the start of the new millennium. “Everything being sold was very plain, very simple—not so different from today actually. I was at a fabric show and ran into Graham Fowler, who I used to buy a lot of prints from at Robert Stock. He had a lot of shirts hanging up in his booth, with prints on them and patchwork. They were kind of wild. I asked, ‘How many of these shirts are you selling?’ He said, ‘One of each.’ I asked, ‘How would you like to sell a couple hundred of each?’”

The pair collaborated, conceptualizing an Americanized British look. They designed the first collection in six months, working through the night. “It was a completely different look than anybody was doing: classic, fun, colorful, with fabrications and embellishments that were different than anyone had ever seen,” says Stock. “Initially when people looked at the samples, they said they couldn’t be made. Then we found Naren Goenka in India. He believed in our project and would make anything. The sky was the limit.” Upscale clothier Fred Segal in L.A. liked the shirts, and Robert Graham was off and running.

Stock never forgot a lesson he learned decades before from Ralph Lauren: “To constantly strive for perfection. He pushed and pushed until he thought a product was right.” Fowler left after a year and a half, but Stock kept pushing and partnered with Goenka. “We went



Robert Graham pieces exhibit an obsession with details



ing the highest rating”) and engram: “the hypothetical neural change in the brain that accounts for the memory of a word, image, or great consumer experience.” Sweedler had helped create those kinds of experiences running Joe Boxer, working at Polo, and through his previous brand development and investment company, Windsong Brands.

“I love strategic partnering with great managers and brands,” says Sweedler from his Westport office. “I watched what Robert Stock created in 2001 and approached him a year later.” In 2011, Tengram acquired a controlling position. “It’s been a longtime coming,” says Sweedler, who has known Stock for decades.

“In the American market, there was no brand that was serving such a loyal men’s luxury customer,” continues Sweedler. Over time, the brand had developed almost a cult following—guys who found that their Robert Graham clothes brought not just the usual fashion compliment but an unusual cuff trim or surprising jacket lining actually sparked conversations, and fellow enthusiasts would gravitate toward one another at parties. “I met one guy who had over 300 pieces of Robert Graham apparel. He actually pulled out a picture of his closet to show me!” recounts Sweedler. “People want to fall in love with what they buy. We love brands with that emotional connection.

“Robert Graham also had an incredible distribution channel, with top retailers: Neimans, Saks, Nordstrom and the Mitchells and Richards of the world,” says Sweedler, “with sell-throughs that no other brand rivaled. They were in one or two product categories, which meant a great opportunity for expansion. Our collectors [jargon for ‘customers’ at Robert Graham] were clamoring for more product. It was an easy transition to a full-blown sportswear line. Now we are working on our wholesale expansion, retail roll-out, a licensing strategy, and international expansion, along with a big e-commerce play.” Sweedler’s favorite product at the moment: Jeans. “I have every color!” he says.

Sweedler, like Stock, has confidence in the team at Robert Graham: “I’m a huge believer that you have to have fun with what you’re doing. We

have a world-class management team, and the individuals working at Robert Graham are passionate and love what they do.” Stock uses “happy” as his favorite descriptor for the brand, and that does seem to be the pervading emotion at the showroom. But Bill Sweedler finds happiness working out here. “My office is right on the Saugatuck River. I prefer that any day to sitting over Fifth Avenue,” he says. “A lot of fashion people live in Connecticut. New York is the fashion capital of the world if you ask me, but there’s nothing like the charm of Westport to get away from it all.”

Sweedler lives in town with his wife, Amber, and their three children. Bill has been a Westporter since he was ten. His father was the president of Gant, based in New Haven, and his mom “had the most important job of all: corralling the Sweedler kids.” His parents still live in Westport. Bill’s brother David lives in Fairfield and just so happens to be another spoke in the Robert Graham wheel.

## David Sweedler

VICE PRESIDENT OF MERCHANDISING

At six-foot-six and resembling a Ralph Lauren model (not to overdo the RL thing, but it’s true), David Sweedler has what his brother describes as “impeccable style.” He’s hard to miss; although, he could be mistaken for a mannequin in the Robert Graham showroom. He wears a classic navy sport coat with a cobalt kerchief in the breast pocket, a gray scarf fashionably knotted about his neck and jeans.

Argyle socks appear when he sits down and a Rainbow Loom bracelet gives away that he’s a dad.

“I came over with the acquisition,” explains David. “My background has always been working with Billy, my role always on the brand management, design and merchandising side. With Robert Graham, which was primarily known as a woven shirt company, the first goal was to branch out into other classi-



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fications. Over the past two years, we've established ourselves as a true luxury lifestyle collection in the U.S. We do knits, sweaters, bottoms, jeans, outerwear, sport coats, and license socks, bags, neckwear, dress shirts, eyewear. Fragrance and footwear are coming. On a yearly basis, we do over 1,500 SKUs of product—that's a tremendous amount. Our goal is to become a global luxury lifestyle collection, à la Etro or Paul Smith."

With the eclectic Robert Graham collection, the updated traditional X Collection and the casual collection, David Sweedler says, "We try to capture that guy's wardrobe from Monday through Sunday." What he gets most excited about are the details in each item. "I've worked at a lot of other higher-end luxury brands. No one goes to the level of detail that we do. Look at the Jeano, for example. The stitching on the outside is copper, and on the inside, it's a two-color twist. We select these two colors for the bottom hem for our collectors, who literally collect our product like art or wine. They'll put on this pant for the fifth or sixth time and say, 'Wow, I didn't see that!' That's the level of detail we offer on every single garment." The company's internal motto is "The devil is in the details." David points out some new polo shirts with a little red devil logo. "We wanted to come up with something that really identifies the brand, and we are a little devilish. We are an irreverent, tongue-in-cheek brand. We dress men who don't take themselves too seriously. Here everyone understands that we are designing clothes; we are not putting someone on the moon."

Even in Connecticut, David says, "We are finding that average guy who doesn't want to be average. He is looking for clothes that make him stand out." Fairfield County collector Rob Citrone, a principal at Discovery Capital, raves about the fit of Robert Graham sport shirts, "the exciting pops of color on the cuffs and collar, and the slogan 'knowledge, wisdom, truth' embroidered on each creation."

David adds, "We get hedge-fund billionaires, average joes, bikers, young kids, celebrities..." Blake Shelton, 50 Cent, Melissa Joan Hart, DJ Pauly D, and Mike Tyson are all fans. "There



Robert Graham, CEO Michael Buckley

are over 150 people in the world who own over 100 pieces of our product. You could count on your hands the number of brands on the planet that get that type of reaction.”

## Michael Buckley

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

CEO Michael Buckley, who came on board after the acquisition, says, “We’re in over 900 locations in the U.S.” Living 100 yards from the Pacific Ocean in Manhattan Beach, Buckley is not in Fairfield County. But the Westchester native says, “My grandfather started Arnold Bread and put its first bakery in Greenwich.”

Buckley isn’t a baker, but he does make things rise—like the price of jeans. He was at Diesel when it introduced a \$100 jean. “That was unheard of at the time,” says Buckley, “but now jeans sell for \$250.” During his recent stint as president of True Religion, the number of stores shot up from one to 100. “We’ve opened eleven Robert Graham stores (our goal is forty to fifty), and we’ve installed sixty shops within shops (our goal is 125),” says Buckley. In November, a store opened on Bleecker Street in the West Village.

Incidentally, each store that opens gets a case of Jack Mitchell’s book *Hug Your Customer*. “It’s on our training checklist,” says Buckley. “Every employee is required to read it, as were all the employees at True Religion.” One way or another, it all comes back to Connecticut. **W**



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