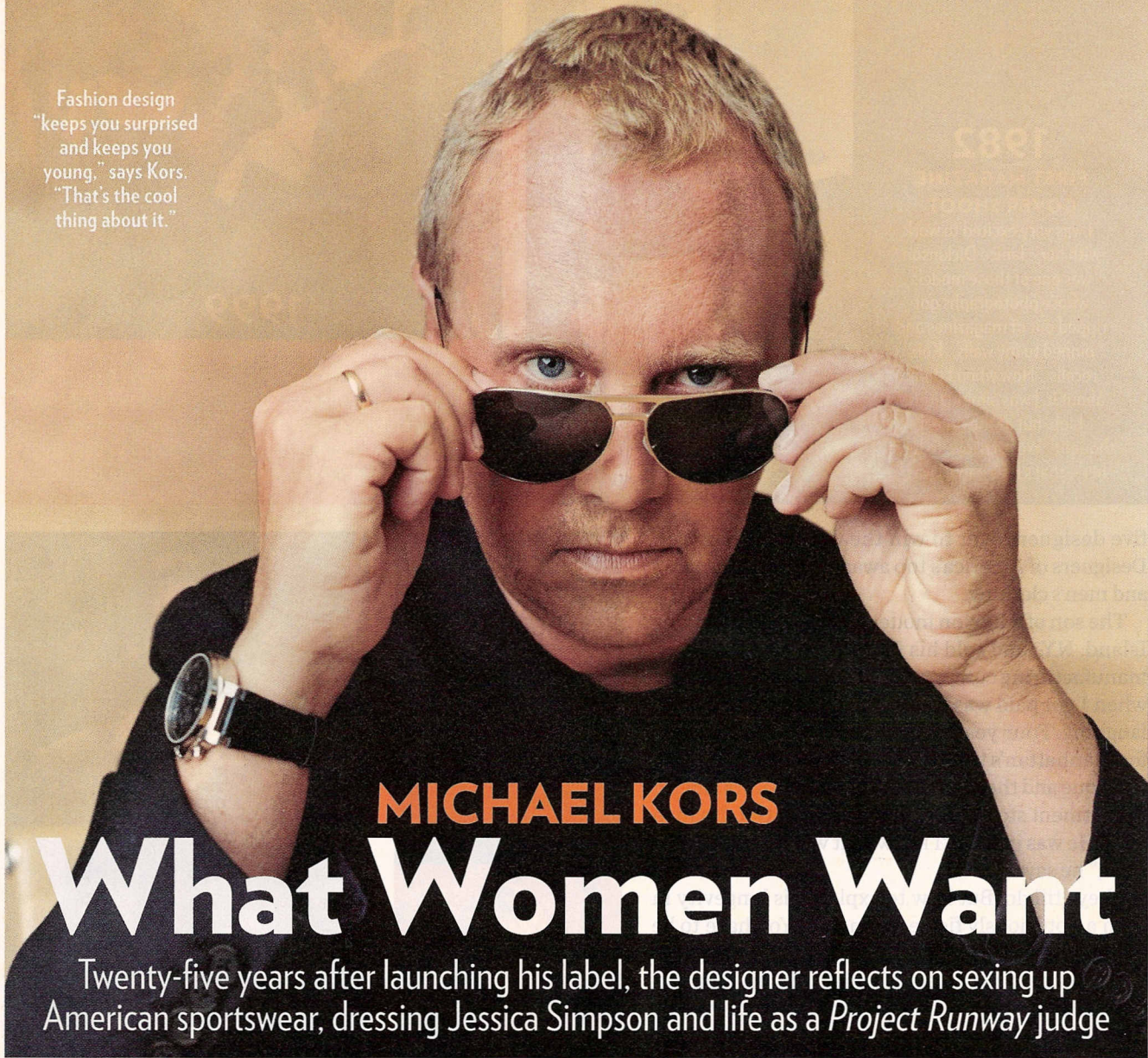


Fashion design  
"keeps you surprised  
and keeps you  
young," says Kors.  
"That's the cool  
thing about it."



**MICHAEL KORS**

# What Women Want

Twenty-five years after launching his label, the designer reflects on sexing up American sportswear, dressing Jessica Simpson and life as a *Project Runway* judge

BARBARA NITTE/BRANO

**2006**

**PROJECT RUNWAY**

"People stop me everywhere and have an opinion about the show," says Kors (with, from left, Diane von Furstenberg, Nina Garcia and Heidi Klum). "I was on this motorboat in Capri and this woman said, 'You know, that Santino was so nasty.'"



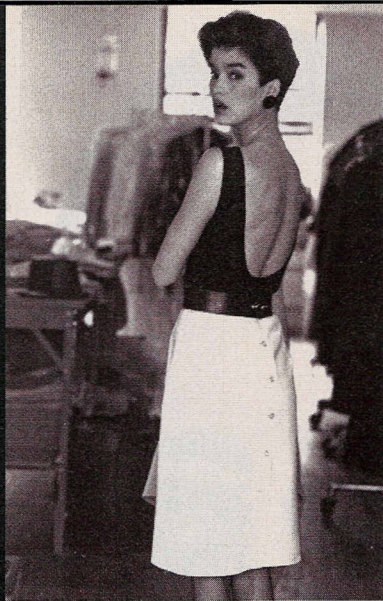
**M**ichael Kors buyers, beware: Even after nearly three decades in fashion, the designer has difficulty letting go of his creations. "I walk up to people on the street [in my clothes] all the time and ask, 'How is that dress going for you? Are you comfortable?'" he says. "I can make something beautiful, but if it doesn't work in real life, then to me it's a disaster."

Indeed, he is the *Project Runway* judge most likely to ask, "But does someone really want to wear that?" In his case, absolutely. Masterfully mixing sex appeal with comfort, Kors, 46, has turned his trademark luxurious ease (think cashmere tank tops) into a fashion empire with sales expected to top \$260 million this year and boasting more than a dozen lines, including accessories and an upcoming home collection. Along the way he has attracted a celebrity following that includes Madonna and Jessica Simpson and joined the likes of Ralph Lauren and Donna Karan as one of

# 1982

## FIRST MAGAZINE COVER SHOOT

"I was very excited to work with her—Janice Dickinson was one of those models whose photographs got ripped out of magazines and pinned to my walls," Kors recalls. "Now when I think about it, I was aiming pretty high, but at the time, I thought, 'Wow, I'd love to have her'—that's how naive I was."



# 1999

## THE THOMAS CROWN AFFAIR

"Rene [Russo], who is an old friend, called and said, 'I'm finally making a movie where I get to be glamorous,'" recalls Kors, who at the time was head of the Celine label. "The movie proved you didn't have to be 20 to be sexy."

five designers ever to win the Council of Fashion Designers of America's top awards for both women's and men's clothing.

The son of a Revlon model, Kors grew up on Long Island, N.Y., and sold his first fashion sketches to a manufacturing company at 15. "The first thing I did when I got paid was buy ridiculous shoes!" he says, laughing. Four years later Kors became a designer for Manhattan's trendy (and now defunct) Lothar's boutique and then debuted the Michael Kors label at department stores including Bergdorf Goodman in 1981. He was just 21. "I knew that women liked what I did," he says.

They still do. But how to explain his longevity in such a notoriously fickle business? "You have to be consistent, but also change," says Kors as he pores over photos of his career highlights in his Manhattan office. "It's like making the perfect porridge for the three bears. It has to be just right." ●

# 2001

## THE ACADEMY AWARDS

"Because everyone perceived Joan Allen as a serious actress, I don't think anyone realized she was such a knockout," Kors says. "I felt like such a proud father."



# 2001-2002

## MEN'S LINE AND ACCESSORIES

"I'm in constant competition with myself," says Kors. "Could I do things better? How can I improve on that shoe? What can I do just to make it more delicious?"



# 2004

# 2005

## THE COSTUME INSTITUTE GALA

"When I made this dress, I said, 'It's such a show-stopper, but it needs a really confident woman.' So I called Jessica Simpson and said, 'I think I have the right dress for you.' She gets glamour, but she's also really down-to-earth. The two of us could go out and eat hot dogs and have a cocktail and just laugh."

