



Alexa wears leather pea coat,  
£2,860, Louis Vuitton. Cotton  
sweater, £448, JW Anderson,  
at Browns Focus and Liberty.  
Locket, throughout, Alexa's own.  
Hair: Shon. Make-up: Hannah  
Murray. Nails: Jenny Longworth.  
Digital artwork: Jon Hempstead.  
Fashion editor: Kate Phelan





*Her singular style  
and girl-next-door  
personality have  
inspired a generation  
of tomboys, countless  
fashion designers  
and a sell-out bag.  
So what next for  
Alexa Chung?  
By Christa D'Souza.  
Photographs by  
Josh Olins*

# SHE'S GOTT



lexa Chung

used to be obsessed. *Obsessed*. “Like, you know, how most little girls are? Well, I was really, really obsessed. They all said, ‘Oh, you’ll grow out of it’, and I swore I never would. I did, of course, but it’s still one of my favourite things. It’s not yours? Come on. Why not?”

It is 9.30am, a brisk but springlike London morning, and the 27-year-old Chung and I are standing outside the tack room of Ross Nye Stables, in a cobbled mews somewhere north of the Bayswater Road. This was her idea, not mine – to go horse-riding in Hyde Park. Aside from not having done the rising trot for about 35 years, there was the terrifying issue of what to put on this morning; what exactly *is* the correct outfit to go riding with possibly the hippest, coolest, most blogged-about style icon of our times?

Not the whole kit, that’s for sure. Chung’s look today is skin-tight jeans (her own, Madewell by Alexa Chung), chipped lilac nails, a rumpled APC smock top, and desert boots purchased from Topshop. “Except I’m not wearing any socks today, so I might have to change into these...” All arms and legs and cat’s eyes, she dives into a tatty canvas holdall and pulls out a pair of Russell & Bromley men’s lace-ups. Out, too, comes a crumpled paper bag containing a sandwich she bought on the way here for her breakfast. “Do you think I have time to eat it? Might cry if I don’t.”

Before mounting, she dons a battered hat from a peg and asks me to take a quick picture of her on her Blackberry. Not for a blog (“Blogs are ridiculous; they’re just mood boards – unless you are Tavi [Gevinson, of Style Rookie]”), but for Twitter, which she absolutely rates (because “you’ve got to be funny in such a short amount of space”).

Hipster muse. Rock chick. TV presenter. Writer. Designer. Pop-culture phenomenon. The veritable “Kate Moss for this new generation”, as she was recently dubbed in the *New York Times*. And if that sounds like hype – sorry, it’s not.

Her appeal, like that of Moss, her durable predecessor, is perfectly, mathematically

quantifiable; everything she puts her name to really does translate into ker-ching. Take the “Alexa” bag, which Mulberry famously launched last year and which not only attracted a 9,000-strong waiting list but helped boost company sales by 79 per cent. Take the line she designed for Madewell, the offshoot sister of J Crew, which sold out almost immediately after its debut last September. Take the good old Bedale Barbour jacket – remember, with the Breton-stripe tee and the wellies and the high-waisted cut-offs? – which acquired almost pre-order status after she wore it to Glasto. No wonder Karl Lagerfeld enthuses: “I love her! If someone were to ask me who is a modern girl, I would say Alexa. The way she looks, talks and works makes her very modern. She is multi-talented and does it all in a perfect way. She is beautiful and very clever!” No wonder Guillaume Henry, creative director of Carven, lovingly calls her a “ray of light”.

Right now though, she’s just a horse-mad tomboy from commuter-belt Hampshire, peppering our guide, Caroline, with questions as we clip-clop across Bayswater Road on to the sandy track bordering Hyde Park. She looks adorable, with her fringe sticking out, all ends, from underneath her hat. All her protests about not having been in the saddle for years are unnecessary. Watching her deftly canter off into the distance on Amber, the pretty, skittish mare she has been assigned (as opposed to Enigma, the cobby compulsive hedge-eater they gave me), listening to her chat away about Pippa, the pony she had as a little girl – “It was so sad... We sold her to the butcher’s daughter in the end” – one realises she’s not quite the disaffected urbanite she might first appear.

“I’ve always liked other horsey girls – they don’t fuck around,” she says in that gravelly alto, rubbing her eyes. “Bloody hell, though, this horse hair gets everywhere, doesn’t it? *Pheweeew*, do I have to wash my hands...”

Our riding session over, we’re now sitting in the Rose Bakery at Dover Street Market, one of her other favourite things to do of a morning. Not having slept very well last night – her boyfriend, Arctic Monkeys frontman Alex Turner, is in Los Angeles, and she hates sleeping alone – she looks just a touch hollow-eyed. She also has slight jet lag. Not 48 hours ago she flew back from New York, where she was filming a “secret” pilot for a new TV series and working with the folk at Madewell on a new collection. “It’s amazing,” she says, those slightly myopic green eyes widening. “I literally draw things

and they turn it around so fast. Look,” she says, pulling up a picture on her Blackberry of a black suede biker jacket with quilted lining – just the sort of thing you can see all the girlies wanting to wear to Glasto.

Designing for Madewell, fronting campaigns for the Italian sports-shoe brand Superga and Lacoste’s scent Joy of Pink, her travel show for American MTV – these are just some of the things Chung has got going on at the moment. There’s also the MTV show she’s got to film here, *Gonzo with Alexa Chung*, and the *NME* awards, which she’s been booked to present with her ex-colleague and great mate Nick “Grimmy” Grimshaw. All this, combined with the upcoming mayhem of the spring/summer fashion weeks which means being deluged by designers wanting to dress her for their respective front rows. This afternoon, for example, she’s going to Burberry for a fitting – where, if she dares, she’s going to attempt to blag a mac for one of her elder brothers, who sent her a message on Facebook the other day going “Oi, where’s my coat?”

In the meantime, she’s really worried she’s not going to see enough of “Al”... whose name is not supposed to be brought up in this interview, but which she keeps sweetly bringing up herself. There are all sorts of details she cannot help but divulge. Like how he pathologically loathes having his picture taken; she has to protect him by always walking in front, so they get a picture of her instead. (“And then the tabloids twist it so it looks like we’re having a row. That *really* pisses me off.”) And how she often shows him what she’s written, and then worries he’s not going to approve. “‘Like [brilliant Sheffield accent here], y’know that sentence where you say this? Well, er, maybe it should be that instead.’ I get nervous because he’s so brilliant at language,” she says. “He’s the sort of person who reads the dictionary at night. I’m like: Dude! You’re 25! Let’s go to the pub!”

Chung has ordered her usual, a pot of signature green tea and a medallion of carrot cake. When it arrives, she takes two bites and then promptly abandons it, preferring instead to fiddle with her brown paper placemat. According to Chris Gove, a mate from sixth-form college in Winchester, who now heads up the menswear label Percival, she is famous for not finishing either her food or her drink. He says this is because she has such a staggeringly short attention span. An extremely low boredom threshold is not hard to imagine. Though brilliant company and what you might call one of life’s natural radiators (as >



# Alexa's style...

"The Sixties – that's the era that most pleases me; the features accented during the decade are the most flattering: pale lips and a strong eye, like **Chrissie Shrimpton** [right, with **Ossie Clark**]. I like **Bobbi Brown** gel eyeliners and the 260 brush by Mac to put it on with"

"I don't like shoes that are too dainty. Because my legs are quite scrappy, I look like I'm *en pointe*. I like to look like a plant in a pot. I met **Alex [Turner's]** grandma the other day, and she said: 'Big shoes and big bags. That's you, isn't it?'"

"I'm a **Blackberry** person. I always have to do stuff over email and I'm really bad at touch screens: I think I have the wrong kind of fingers"

"I'm inspired by photographers like Juergen Teller, Sally Mann and David Bailey. I've been looking at **Mick Rock's** pictures of **Iggy Pop** lately, so now I quite want the silver leather trousers"

"I love ballet pumps – navy-blue suede from Repetto, or the classic two-tone beige and black from **Chanel**"

"I love everything **Charles Anastase** does: I want the navy blue riding coat from his a/w collection, and the red corduroy jumpsuit..."

"I carry my **Contax** with me everywhere. I hope the pictures will be something nice to look back on when I'm bored and old – like the time I interviewed **Karl Lagerfeld**. I lead a strange life and want to record it"

"Evening gowns can be quite ageing, so I often wear a tuxedo. When I go to an event I like to think there'll be a less glitzy after-party, so I try to look as if I'm hanging out rather than on show. I go to **Carven** [above], **Phillip Lim** [left] and YSL"

"On our childhood holidays [right] in Majorca, My mum used to wear **Supergas**, so I love them. You can wear them with lots of things; it's quite English to wear pumps with a tea dress"

Grimshaw rightly says: "She's a catalyst, one of those people you bounce off. One of the few people who makes me funnier than I actually am"), she does have the habit of glazing over and looking, at times, like she'd prefer to be somewhere else. "It's true," she shrugs. "Once someone was talking to me and I got so bored my eyes started closing and one of my contacts fell out."

Which makes it easier, perhaps, to understand the genesis of Team Evil, the "society" she created with her best friend Tennessee Thomas – drummer of girl band The Like – Kelly Osbourne and the stylist Valentine Fillol-Cordier to celebrate all the hearts they had collectively broken. "Oh, that," says Chung in her here-we-go-again voice. "First of all, we were only 21. We were all hanging out at K West at the time, and were in love with all these boys in bands, but we thought we should treat them mean because of all the groupies that were all over them. It was lame and a bit slutty. A hilarious joke that wasn't actually very funny. I'm not evil. At all."

She's not. In fact, I really like this girl. I like her punctuality, I like her style, and I love her very British sense of humour: "I'd like to look like Ali MacGraw," she observes at one point, "but I look shit with long hair. I saw a picture of myself at a Mulberry event last year in LA. I had a really deep tan and long, slightly blonde hair. And I just wondered: who are you? Terry Nutkins?"

"She makes you laugh," agrees Pixie Geldof, at 20 the "baby" of the Chung clan. "I genuinely don't think there exists a person who has a reason to dislike her..."

Except, of course, there does. How could there not, when she is bestowed so very much attention? For a start there are all the jealous Arctic Monkeys fans out there, so jealous in fact that they've formed a Facebook group called We Hate Alexa Chung With Alex Turner. Then there's the not insubstantial brigade of people who wonder what exactly it is that she does. Is she a model? Is she a TV presenter? Why is she on the cover of *Vogue*? Again? "Oh I know," she chuckles huskily. "It's like, is there anything actually left to say about me, right?"

She gets it, in other words. Being brought up on the cannibalism of reality television and the cult of celebrity, she gets the ephemerality of it all, the in-built perils of It-dom. "It's funny, I just read *Girl of the Year*, by Tom Wolfe, about Baby Jane Holzer," she goes on, "and it just made me so happy, the pure silliness of it all. I'm so glad I've experienced what it's like to be



"Don't make the mistake of thinking that I'm sexless," says Chung. "Just because I don't pander to men in that way, doesn't mean I don't aim to please. I know what's going on."

*Opposite:* wool cardigan, £145, Daks. Silk blouse, £527. Leather skirt, £945. Both Holly Fulton.

*This page:* cropped cotton cardigan, £88, Carven, at Browns. Satin bra, £18, Topshop. Lace skirt, £700, Erdem, at Harrods



the girl of the moment, so when I'm older I can be like, well, that was fun..."

Meanwhile, despite the fact she couldn't be more entrenched in the Scene, she has an exceptional ability to observe it as an outsider. "Because I *was* on the outside!" she insists. "I know where I came from, modelling for all those shit companies and never being allowed into a fashion show or anywhere near the offices of *Vogue*..." She holds her folded placemat aloft: "Ta-dah! The Epcot centre in Disney World, right? Ha, I shouldn't have gone into presenting; obviously, I should have been an origamist..."

The daughter of Phil (a first-generation Chinese immigrant) and Gillian, Alexa was brought up in the Hampshire village of Privett, the youngest of four. Gillian – whom Alexa describes as having "an absolute obsession with being humble and never getting above herself" – hailed from Southampton; Phil was from East Ham, where his stepfather owned a Chinese restaurant called Chan's (which, as it happens, Jean Shrimpton and David Bailey used to frequent in the Sixties). A shy, gawky child, Alexa spent most of her childhood vying for the attention of her two fastidiously disinterested elder brothers, Dominic and Jamie ("my idol growing up"). Dominic – or Dom – a part-time DJ who works in the music department of talent agency WME, confirms that she was not in the least bit spoilt or coddled. "Out of all the Chung children," he tells me over a coffee, "Alexa wasn't the one destined to be the star." She was, though, "stupidly clever" and a "bit of a goody two-shoes", always coming top of the class at Perins, the local comprehensive she attended in the wake of her older sister, Nathalie, 38 (now a successful creative director). Perhaps surprisingly, she says she was also one of the "jock" crowd – "because I was good at swimming and, weirdly, throwing the discus" – and a Spice Girls fan. Geri was her favourite, "because I was such a stick insect and the idea of a girl with boobs really appealed."

The fact that she was such a perfect example of hybrid breeding, meanwhile, seems to have been healthily lost on the family. "Like when I first got spotted on a

beach in Majorca, at the age of 14, I don't think my parents actually even believed me. But that was the point about my parents; they were the least pushy, least impressed people in the world. My dad's still like that. Whenever I tell him about anything I've done, he always goes: 'Ah, yes, but look what Nathalie's done.' Nathalie is my dad's favourite. Dom is my mum's. Fact. I tease them about it all the time..."

Eschewing a place at King's College London to read English (she got two As and a B, and is still "pissed off" about the B), Chung began



"I'm so glad I've experienced what it's like to be the girl of the moment, so when I'm older I can be like, well, that was fun." Faux-fur stole, £230, Prada

modelling at the age of 17. It wasn't, she concedes, a particularly happy experience (the nadir might have been when she was sent on a job to Finland and had to pose astride a giant loo roll in a pair of suspenders), but she persevered. "I was addicted," shrugs Chung, "like a gambler. Yes, I could be making a measly £200 one day, but tomorrow I might make a commercial for £30,000."

"She was so young," remembers journalist Kate Spicer of the teenage Chung. "But she was very feisty and savagely funny about the modelling business. She did, though, have this near pathological obsession about her body, always grabbing hold of her stomach

going 'look at this', which was weird because quite clearly she had an absolutely amazing figure compared to any of us."

"God, did I have low esteem then," says Chung, crossing and uncrossing those stick-insect legs. "It had always been my mantra, at school, that as soon as I worried about putting on weight, I had to stop [worrying]. But, you know, you'd overhear an agent and then they'd call you into a room and tell you to tone up. Which, in retrospect, I probably did need to do, but it's not what you want to hear as a teenager and not loving life."

Chung is now, she admits, thinner than she has ever been. Usually a size 27 in jeans, she's now a 25, for no other reason than stress. It was hard, after all, having her first very own live television series cancelled so unceremoniously after two seasons, hard having been such a cause célèbre, having to pack up all her stuff from the loft she shared with Alex in Brooklyn (and still keeps for all those trips back and forth), and ship it back to London. And, as she points out, she's not *that* thin. Yes, she's got slightly bony shoulders and freakishly skinny legs. "But look," she says, patting her bottom proudly, "I do have hips [which she does]. And I do have secret boobs. I do – 32Cs! It's just I have such clavicle issues, I don't like to have them on show..."

Part of Chung's USP is that she never plays the sex-bomb card. Quite the opposite, in fact – with her kitchen haircut, and Peter Pan collars and the smocks flapping about her knees. "That's the thing about Alexa," says the ever-loyal Geldof. "Girls aren't threatened by her. She doesn't try to be sexy, she doesn't want to be liked by boys

in that way. It's how she manages to get away with saying anything to anyone and never seeming offensive. She reminds me of a little doll with those rosy little cheeks."

"Oh, she's just a geek," laughs Tennessee Thomas. "What probably happened is she made a decision quite early on that she could either be funny or she could be sexy – and she chose the former. The thing is, of course, she's very pretty, so she can mislead..."

"Yeah, well, don't make the mistake that I'm sexless," says Alexa briskly as we meander through the store, me in her wake watching the discreetly awed reactions of the sales staff as she flicks through the > 200



"I'd like to look like Ali MacGraw," says Alexa, "but I look shit with long hair."  
Crêpe open-front dress, £460.  
Bra, from a selection. Both Carven, at Net-a-Porter.com.  
Faux-fur stole, £230, Prada







rails. “Just because I don’t pander to men in that way, that doesn’t mean I don’t aim to please. I know what’s going on.”

“For me, she’s sexy without thinking of being sexy,” says Guillaume Henry, who first met her at a dinner she co-hosted for Carven at Barneys in New York. “That’s what I like. She can be a bit boyish, but always with a sense of proportion. She is everything I like in terms of style and aesthetics.”

“Chung can definitely do sexy,” offers Chris Gove, “but I think her modelling days made her wary. So, she will be sexy, but stealthily so – which in my opinion is the way all women should dress. Actually there’s a bit of a plan afoot for her to do my womenswear. We’ve got this idea to share a studio; she’s definitely got the creativity and the business head to do it. She’s an entrepreneur – she’ll have an empire one day...”

There are quite a few things Chung is contemplating at this slight crossroads in her life. She has a passion for photography, for example, and she adores writing as a contributing editor for *Vogue*. “But what I really want to do is *make* things,” she says with genuine earnestness. “I want to learn that whole process of design so I can have my own label and my own studio with awesome music and all my friends around. God, that would be *sooo* great. I’ve done some visualisation around it. It works, that. I remember when I was little, I used to say to my mum, OK, this will happen. And, you know what? It always did.”

What Alexa Does Next. It’s the six-million-dollar question. How does one make the move from It-dom into a career with longevity? And what about, dare it be mentioned, the idea of marriage and kids? Though she keeps claiming she and Alex lead ridiculously parallel lives, they are very much the cosy domestic couple when they do get to be together. They love to host dinners at their house in Dalston – Alexa, for example, makes a mean cauliflower cheese and sometimes, according to Gove, even holds whisky-tasting sessions for friends.

Besides, wouldn’t it be nice to dress up and have a big wedding? “I don’t know,” she says thoughtfully. “I feel like I’ve had my wedding day so many times, getting all dressed up for all these events. That time I dressed up for the Met Ball in New York in Phillip Lim was seriously one of the best nights of my life.”

What about babies, then? She does keep saying how old and middle-aged she feels (at the grand old age of 27), how she’s in the middle of a “quarter-life” crisis. Tennessee Thomas, for one, thinks she’ll be a great mum. Dom, meanwhile, reckons out of all the Chung children to have babies first it’ll be “Alexa or Jamie”.

“Hmm, I dunno about that,” she says, that familiar glaze threatening to descend, “they’re a little boring, aren’t they?” Her attention wanders towards a sparsely filled rail of Céline, and homes in on a little cream and navy woollen minidress. “Oh, *hellooo*,” she purrs at it. “You’re my dream.”

The following week, I see her wearing the Céline dress at the Topshop Unique show, with Pixie, looking spectacularly on-trend. The following day at Burberry, having shimmy-shimmied her way over from Erdem, the bank of cameras go mad as she poses for them in a navy mohair boyfriend sweater, skintight leather trousers and prim little patent turquoise Burberry bag. Later she’s to be found at the Liberty party for *Love* magazine, on the DJ desk with Pixie and Grimmy, and singing along so loudly during Beth Ditto’s performance that Ditto admiringly interrupts the set to serenade her: “Alexa Chung, you’re so fucking rich...”

Right here, right now, it’s all happening for Alexa Chung. Who knows where she will be in, say, five years’ time? But with a little focus, she could probably conquer the world. ■

Syria’s population concerned with finding school shoes, or cooking oil that was not rancid. No one could find time to agitate, the regime crassly supposed in designing this policy intended to trivialise the concerns of the people, if flour or toilet paper were unavailable. In addition, books, films, newspapers, music and artworks were censored or banned.

Arabs have long endured the ludicrous politics of no-nos. No free speech. No freedom of the press. No demonstrations. No elections. No opposition. No accountability. No political parties. But governed by corrupt ruling families that consider the state’s coffers to be their private piggy banks. They have been kept in power till they reek to high heaven, often with the approval of Western democracies, who want malleable despots to make space for their bases and fleets, and guarantee them unstoppable business contracts and oil.

Even the Western press has been seduced by dictator glamour and acts as its publicist. Saif Gaddafi – very much his murderous father’s son – was praised as a clubbable Anglophile in good, workaday suits. Queen Rania of Jordan remains flavour-of-the-decade abroad, no doubt for sounding so unthreateningly “Western”, when at home she is pilloried for the corruption that shames a country struggling with poverty under a repressive monarchy. Syria’s Asma al-Assad is presented as the fetching face of an ugly dictatorship, who plays at “democracy” with her well-turned out children – though her husband loathes the very idea of it, and packs civil rights activists and teenage bloggers into his jails, or orders the shooting of unarmed protestors.

In the past few weeks, I have begun dreaming of returning to Damascus once again. Of seeing the apricot trees in blossom, or buying a bag of sour green plums sprinkled with rock salt to eat while I stroll with my friends, just as we used to do when young. As I watch the uprising that will bring long-overdue change and a representative government elected by its hard-pressed people, I picture the courtyard home I might come to inhabit in the Old City, like the houses in which both my parents grew up.

My exile’s nostalgia has no doubt affected my own children deeply. My daughter has changed her name from Jasmine to its Arabic equivalent of Yasmine, and has chosen to study Arabic and Turkish at Oxford, so keen is she to decipher the culture she belongs to. Perhaps, as she tells me, it always was reflected in the meals I cooked, the rooms I arranged, the way I received guests, or spoke or sang or laughed. My son, whose quips are offbeat but comically apt, pronounces, on returning from a dinner with some Middle Eastern friends, that Arabs *never* act like “frozen prawns” – meaning in his shorthand that they have fewer inhibitions than do his European mates. He loves Arab food, music and cinema; he falls in love more than readily with Arab girls with long hair and mysterious eyes, who interject Arabic words into their faultless French or English. But more seriously, the painful politics of my region engage his conscience in a way that surprises me, though of course it shouldn’t. After all, he and his sister are part of the new Arab generation that straddles several worlds, is at ease in several cultures and speaks several languages. They have none of the fear I have, which is why Arabs of their age are taking the place by storm.

The Arab world is changing before our very eyes and, in doing so, it is reminding the jaded world that people can and should seek to overturn corruption, cronyism and human rights abuses wherever they may take place, whether in Washington, Manama, Gaza, Tripoli, London, Baghdad, Algiers or Damascus. ■