

BABY LOVE

THE DESIGNER BEHIND THE EDGY KING BABY STUDIO LINE OF JEWELRY AND ACCESSORIES FOR MEN INTRODUCES A COUNTERPART FOR WOMEN: QUEEN BABY. By Jancee Dunn

When jewelry designer Mitchell Binder was a teenager in the '70s, he and his mother moved from Jackson, Mississippi, to Los Angeles—an experience that would alter his life forever. "I got off the plane right into the Summer of Love," he says. "It was like a free-for-all. My mind was officially blown." Dazzled, he threw himself into the city's creative scene. He apprenticed with a jeweler at age 15 and then began to make his own designs, selling them on a street corner during weekends. "That's where I first started meeting rock bands," he explains. "They'd say, 'Hey, can you do our logo?'"

Becoming the go-to jeweler for rockers involved some trial and error. He deliberately made the pieces large to be visible on stage, but some of his heftier necklaces were hazardous.

"Bands would rock out," he recalls with a laugh, "and their jewelry would fly around and actually do physical harm." As his reputation grew, bikers showed up with requests to design club rings and belt buckles. "So that's the origin of my company," says Binder, himself an avid motorcyclist. "It's half rock and roll, half outlaw biker."

And now, for the first time, Binder has launched a line of original designs for women called Queen Baby. He made the jewelry more delicate and feminine by scaling down the size, but it retains its trademark heft and rock-and-roll heart. "I wanted to keep the irreverence," he states, "and they're still going to be big, because that's what we're known for. But I haven't made them too heavy, so they're really wearable. And we're using stones—rubies, diamonds—to flash it up a notch."

Binder speaks so enthusiastically about his new venture that it's hard to believe he once turned his back on jewelry design. In the early '90s, when he was "riding high," adorning both rock and Hollywood royalty, he attended a trade show and found that all his designs had been knocked off. Furious, he quit the business and went into entertainment, writing scripts for shows such as *NYPD Blue*. Later, when friends spotted his jewelry on eBay® selling for outlandish prices, he decided to auction off a few boxes' worth that he had stashed in his garage. "It was a shark frenzy," he says. "Evidently there's a huge fan base in Japan. Two guys from Tokyo flew here with briefcases of cash and bought everything I'd ever touched." Reinspired, he took the money and founded King Baby.

And now, once again, his incredibly diverse fans range from bikers to bankers. "The best thing about what I do is the people," Binder contends. "One day I can meet the head of a Fortune 500 company and the same day I can meet somebody who just got out of jail." His most unlikely customer?

"Neiman Marcus," he says, laughing heartily. "I swear! You know, I wish my old man was around, because when I was growing up, I knew he had a good year if there was a package from Neiman Marcus under the tree. For me to have this relationship—well, I'm in awe."

Jancee Dunn has been a writer for Rolling Stone since 1989 and was a correspondent for Good Morning America and an MTV VJ. Her writing has appeared in Vogue, Vanity Fair, GQ, Harper's Bazaar, and the New York Times. She also authored the memoir But Enough About Me, now available in paperback.

