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A Golden Touch Without the Glitter

By CATHERINE SAINT LOUIS

SHE'S not the Ronson who dated Lindsay Lohan. That's her fedora-wearing fraternal twin, Samantha, a celebrity D.J. and singer. She's not the Ronson who in 2008 won three **Grammys** including one for producer of the year for working with the late Amy Winehouse. That's her brother Mark, the recently married record producer.

Rather, the shy woman with enviable rocker-messy hair who was sitting, largely unnoticed, in the NoHo restaurant the Smile on a recent sunny Friday morning is Charlotte Ronson, the clothing designer, who in the last few years has quietly and somewhat surprisingly evolved into one of the most successful retail entrepreneurs of her generation.

Ms. Ronson, who began designing feminine grunge-inspired looks under the label C. Ronson in 2000 and who has shown at **New York Fashion Week** since 2006, has also scored deals with the cheap-chic chains Urban Outfitters and Uniqlo. Since 2009, she's had a diffusion line, I Heart Ronson in J. C. Penney's 600 stores, and last month her beauty collection arrived at Sephora, the makeup emporium's first-ever collaboration with a fashion designer on a full-scale beauty line.

Ms. Ronson, who was born in London and raised in the more privileged downtown corridors of Manhattan by her mother, Ann Dexter-Jones, and a stepfather, Mick Jones, of the rock band Foreigner, has an aesthetic of studied nonchalance (her Sephora collection includes a hair spray called A Perfect Mess, intended to help achieve beachy, tousled locks) and a demeanor to match.

Sitting at the Smile, which is near her apartment, she resembled a cat perched on a ledge, waiting, watching, wary — and not smiling very much. Dressed in floral shorts and army-green canvas espadrilles of her own design, along with a 3.1 Phillip Lim gray, long-sleeve T-shirt, Ms. Ronson answered questions succinctly. She was hands-on with the Sephora collection, she said, making sure her lip gloss, flavored with lemon and mint, was “not sticky”; that the hair spray didn't leave hair “crunchy”; and that her eyeshadows didn't “crease.”

Lest you cynically suspect mere famous-name rubber-stamping: “We had over 30 rounds of design, an unusually high number,” Nancy Rappaport, the director of product development at Sephora, wrote in an e-mail later. “It was Charlotte who brought all of the elements together (the muse, the sketch image, the fabric inspiration, the textures).”

In a crowded market, Ms. Ronson, 34, has pulled off the rare feat of retaining indie cred — her Charlotte Ronson line is sold at boutiques like Blue & Cream in Manhattan and East Hampton, and online at shopbop.com — while also going truly mass. “She is on a roll,” said Robert Passikoff, the president of Brand Keys, a New York research company that monitors consumer perception of brands. “I don’t think it’s happenstance. I think it’s a well-thought-out strategy in terms of expanding the brand. There are plenty of companies out there looking for just that, an association with someone like Ronson.”

Now that work has kicked up a notch and her twin, Samantha, lives in Los Angeles, they keep in touch by calling, e-mailing and texting frequently. “I just hire her for things so I can hang out with her,” said Charlotte jokingly, while eating cheese fries and a salad at the Coffee Shop in Union Square on another day. Asked if she was in a relationship, she replied, “Nothing serious.” (She had a brief consultation with her publicist, sitting next to her, and elaborated: “It’s always mine to have as my own — not that anyone cares.” Laughter.)

In a phone interview, Samantha Ronson said that Charlotte was born with a reserved nature. “She can be, I guess, standoffish,” she said. “She’s just careful — waits and watches to see if someone is good or not. I’m like ‘Hey, let’s be best friends.’ ”

The more sedate twin has proved just enough Ronson for J. C. Penney, which has already renewed its original deal with her twice. I Heart Ronson’s kittenish print dresses and back-studded leggings have helped raise the company’s profile among 18-to-30-year-olds, who otherwise think of it as “my grandmother’s and mother’s store,” said Elizabeth Sweney, its senior general merchandise manager. “She has an eye for mixing fabrics, that when combined, create a very special and individualistic item with a personality of its own,” Ms. Sweney added in an e-mail. “Charlotte also has an eye for taking a vintage print and making it new and relevant.” Many of her work-to-play dresses for \$50 come with a belt, so as Ms. Ronson put it, it’s a “complete ensemble,” one priced to be recession-friendly.

However legitimate her design bona fides, though (Ms. Ronson graduated from New York University in 1999 with a bachelor’s degree in studio art), the fact that she and her siblings give parties that attract fellow celebrity offspring like Nicole Richie (father: Lionel) and Rashida Jones (Quincy Jones and Peggy Lipton), and the attendant paparazzi, is also doubtless part of her appeal to retailers. Ms. Ronson’s runway shows are family affairs, with Samantha as D.J.; their angelic-looking half sister Annabelle Dexter-Jones walking (Ms. Dexter-Jones, 24, is also the face of her campaigns); and their mother, a socialite and jewelry designer, often in the front row.

“We appreciate that she has a network of famous friends,” Ms. Sweney said, adding that the debut party for the I Heart Ronson line at the Chateau Marmont had a stocked closet from which guests

like Paris Hilton and Mischa Barton could take freebies.

Ms. Ronson told me, “I just think it’s nice to be known for what you do, not who you know or who you’re related to.”

LIKE most fashion powerhouses, Ms. Ronson has an effective business partner: Aaron Nir, 46, who first noticed her as president of Sanei International, a large apparel company in Japan. He suspected she would catch on with the teenage-to-20s market there.

In 2005, when Mr. Nir started managing Ms. Ronson’s American operations, one of the first orders of business was to change the brand C. Ronson — known for customized tank tops, vintage T-shirts and rompers — to the more grown-up Charlotte Ronson, with embroidery, more sophisticated fabrics and more trims.

Back then, Ms. Ronson had also pushed a cutesy underwear line called Tooshies and worked with Damon Dash, a founder of Roc-a-Fella Records and Rocawear. That collaboration ended in C. Ronson Inc. suing ROC Apparel Group LLC, maker of Rocawear, for money owed. They settled for \$325,000.

“This was a business matter, never personal,” Ms. Ronson said of the lawsuit in an e-mail. “It has been resolved and I’m glad it’s behind me.” (Attempts to reach Mr. Dash were unsuccessful.) By contrast, Mr. Nir is a bespectacled figure in a blazer who stands out among the P.Y.T.’s at Ronson parties. “People must be looking at me and thinking, who is the old dude with no hair,” he said.

In 2009, Mr. Nir became a full partner in the company. “It was the interest I saw from potential partners that validated my interest,” he said. “When Urban Outfitters said we want to do a special one-off brand called Play by C. Ronson, that was a very large-scale commitment.” (A \$2.3 million payout at wholesale, he said.) “It sort of raised my eyebrows.”

These days, he dreams of turning Charlotte Ronson into a global lifestyle brand. He hinted at an imminent handbag deal, and envisions eyewear, housewares, bedding, jewelry and more shoes. “We’re constantly approached by companies,” Mr. Nir said.

Uniqlo sought out Ms. Ronson, whose day-to-night looks aren’t uncomfortably glamorous, to create six pieces of knitwear. “Especially Japanese girls, they understand and also like her taste and very sophisticated, feminine fitting,” said Yukihiro Katsuta, the research and design group officer of Uniqlo. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s not girly-girly. It’s not too young. It’s sophisticated, tasteful and very feminine. That’s why we could sell out in New York, too.”

Gene Krell, the creative fashion director of Condé Nast's Asian and Pacific editions, said that Ms. Ronson's looks have appealed to young and middle-aged women there in part because "the Japanese still have a preoccupation with kawaii," or cuteness. Despite her success there, he said, referring to Vogue Japan, "in my office, she's rarely the topic of conversation." (Stateside, her designs are more a staple of Teen Vogue than Vogue).

But the perennially youthful-looking Ms. Ronson, long a mainstay of Manhattan party pages, is still very much a draw on the New York scene. She's had a "Gossip Girl" cameo, and is pals with Becca Diamond, a dark-rooted blond-haired D.J., and Sky Ferreira, a grungy saucer-eyed model and singer of catchy tunes like "Sex Rules."

Both women came to a late-summer dinner in honor of Ms. Ronson's Sephora beauty collection on the rooftop of Hotel Chantelle, a restaurant on the Lower East Side. As guests nibbled on small portions of roast chicken and organic-vodka-infused cupcakes, a video introducing Charlotte Ronson Beauty played above their heads. At one point in the video, Ms. Ronson has her arm up, posing, her sunlit golden-brown hair falling seductively in her eyes. Catching a glimpse of that pose, Ms. Ronson grimaced and mouthed, "Awkward."

IN early September, days before her runway show at New York Fashion Week, Ms. Ronson did a hair and makeup test to get the look just right. "It feels too red," she said, referring to a lip hue. Next, the designer and Natasha Royt, a stylist, asked Gilbert Soliz, a makeup artist for Sephora, to try a poppy-colored lip with the choker necklaces they were using. After a belt was fastened around the model Katrina Hoernig's neck, Mr. Soliz applied eyeliner under her upper lashes for a less done-up look — classic understated Ronson — then worked on her mouth.

Ms. Ronson, wearing her gray scalloped-edge booties (\$285), a floral Anastasia keyhole dress (\$335) and a disorderly bun — A Perfect Mess, contained — examined the shiny orange lips and nixed them. "It goes too far," she said.

Ms. Royt, who has worked on seven collections with Ms. Ronson, said that she has urged her to make more runway-only "wow" pieces (known as "press dresses"), but she often declines. Stubbornly commercial, Ms. Ronson replies: "I don't want to put anything on the runway that my customers can't buy."

After her latest show, she waved and blew a quick kiss on the runway in front of a rowdy crowd that included Kelly Osbourne, Joy Bryant and Peaches Geldof. As she explained later: "I'm happy to be behind the scenes."

The Ronson Rundown

BORN in London, Charlotte Ronson moved to Manhattan at 6 with her mother, Ann Dexter-Jones (who had broken up with Laurence Ronson, a real estate entrepreneur); her brother Mark; and her twin, Samantha. Her mother went on to marry Mick Jones of Foreigner, and raise a brood of artistically inclined children:

Mark Ronson, 36, a founder of Allido, a record label. In 2008, he won three **Grammys**, including one for producer of the year for his work with Amy Winehouse. He is a D.J. (who spun at Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes's wedding in 2006) and has put out three albums, the latest, "Record Collection," in 2010. Last month, Mr. Ronson married Joséphine de La Baume, an actress and model. Mark Ronson is collaborating with the singer Katy B on the theme song for the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Samantha Ronson, 34, Charlotte's twin. She lives in Los Angeles and is a singer and songwriter, and a D.J. who usually chooses the set list for Charlotte's runway shows. Last month, at the latest one, she played "Chasing the Reds," a single by her band, Samantha Ronson and the Undertakers, and "You Gave Me Nothing," a song by her brother Mark. In April, Samantha was the D.J. at an event for Reuters at this year's White House Correspondents' dinner.

Annabelle Dexter-Jones, 24, Charlotte's half sister, and the ethereal muse pictured in her campaigns and promotional videos. Recently, she has been romantically linked to André Saraiva, the night life entrepreneur, and has starred in his short film, "The Shoe." She is designing a capsule collection of her own as well as studying acting at the William Esper Studio.

Alexander Dexter-Jones, 27, Charlotte's half brother, a D.J. at private events. He is also producing and writing songs for an album by a new band he started with Alexandra Lenas, who is engaged to Sean Parker, the founding president of Facebook. **CATHERINE SAINT LOUIS**



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