STYLE on Wednesday

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IN THE FRONT ROW

Hilary Alexander on Victoria Beckham's new androgynous look, two stars making music together and a facelift for a Parisian institution

Chilled: Victoria Beckham at Chanel's haute-couture show

Victoria Beckham's presence at the Chanel show in Paris yesterday was so low-key that she almost managed to slip away unnoticed – until the paparazzi spotted her heading for her limo with Glenda Bailey, editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar*.

Victoria was fielding a new androgynous look, courtesy of Balenciaga's designer, Nicolas Ghesquière, which consisted of a slim-cut black trouser suit and a golden cravat tucked into the cleavage of her white shirt.

We can expect to see her at the Jean Paul Gaultier show this morning but, with snow threatening in Paris – and chill Siberian winds forcing the fashionistas to bring their duvet coats out of mothballs – she can't wait to get back to Los Angeles: "It's fantastic," she said. "I love it."

● Hollywood stylist Rachel Zoe, who has nurtured the looks of such influential teenage fashion plates as Mischa Barton, Lindsay Lohan and Nicole Richie – with whom she had a spectacularly public spat last year – was sitting in the front row at Christian Lacroix yesterday. But whose style does she admire?

"It's all about Cameron Diaz," she said. "She may not make all the best-dressed lists, but she oozes movie-star glamour. And she looks fabulous in Chanel. She really knows what suits her and she *wears* the clothes, they never wear her." Zoe's other celeb to watch? Anne Hathaway, star of last year's fashion flick *The Devil Wears Prada*.

● Sean Lennon and his girlfriend, Canadian-Romanian model Irina Lazareanu, (the impossibly cute "face" of Chanel's cruisewear and former Babyshambles drummer), are making sweet music together. The couple are currently writing songs and plan to record an album in Los Angeles.

"It's going to be kind of folksy; a bit Sixties – that's the best time for fashion and music," Irina told me. The pair are in tune in style terms, too: she is currently channelling early Diane Keaton, via Chanel trouser-suits, vintage ties and waistcoats, while Sean is into an equally funky look, mixing a Turnbull & Asser jacket with jeans and a Trilby from Bates of Jermyn Street, the traditional men's hatters.

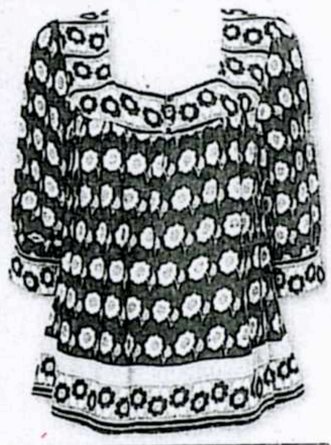
● The latest Parisian hotspot is L'Hôtel, the Left Bank hostelry where a dying Oscar Wilde is said to have uttered the immortal words: "I cannot stand the wallpaper; one of us has to go."

Recently acquired by Jessica Sainsbury, an heiress to the supermarket chain, and her husband Peter Frankopan, whose sister recently married Lord Nicholas Windsor, L'Hôtel has been faithfully refurbished, with the cellars converted into a private swimming pool for two. The Oscar Wilde suite, briefly the "home" of rock star Jim Morrison, features green walls inlaid with gold peacocks.

Its most recent guests were Johnny Depp and his wife, Vanessa Paradis, who apparently preferred a bottle of red wine to the bar's lethal Le 13 cocktail (named after the street number) of lime, violet syrup, liquor of violet and Champagne.

TOP OF THE SHOPS

Neon brights are hot for spring; check out this fabulous **leather bag** by hip accessories label BE&D: it will make your outfit zing (£650, at Harvey Nichols; 020 7235 5000)



Topshop's pretty, viscose, **floral-print smock** will hide a multitude of sins (£35, Topshop; 0845 121 4519)

Short **swing-shaped cardigans** are all the rage for spring. Try Cherokee's lemon wool-mix version for size (£12, at Tesco; 0800 505 555, www.tesco.com/clothing)

Kurt Geiger's *jewel-toed* **snakeskin pumps** are a stylish alternative to killer heels (£129; 0845 257 2571)

Snap up this ultra-chic **silk Sixties dress** by Collette Dinnigan when it hits stores at the end of the month (£300, 26 Cale Street, London SW3; 020 7589 8897)

Sarah Baker

It'll take more than T-shirts to fill the Gap

After years of success at the top table of high-street fashion, with support from the likes of Madonna and Sarah Jessica Parker, the leading retailer is suddenly battling. ***Clare Coulson*** *finds out why*

When Sharon Stone turned up at the Oscars wearing a black Gap T-shirt, in 1996, it seemed that the brand could do no wrong. The unchallenged leader in providing clean-cut, reliable basics – chinos, jeans and T-shirts – it had its finger on the pulse, street cred *and* red-carpet acceptance, and the future looked certain.

But despite the roll call of famous faces, including Madonna, Sarah Jessica Parker and Seal, queuing up to front its glossy, cheerful ad campaigns in recent years, things are looking far from positive at Gap.

Since the company's dismal sales figures for the Christmas and new year period were revealed – along with the third profit warning in six months – the fashion industry has been rife with speculation about buy-outs and break-ups of Gap, which also owns the American chains Old Navy and Banana Republic.

Earlier this month, Goldman Sachs was taken on to look at future options for the company. On Monday, Paul Pressler, Gap's chief executive – brought in four-and-a-half years ago to turn the ailing company around – resigned. Suddenly it's make-or-break time for the purveyor of the "perfect T-shirt".

So where did it all go wrong at the store, which started out in 1969 in San Francisco as a supplier of jeans and records for the "generation gap"?

At this point, I should put my hand up and admit to being a huge fan of the brand. It's one of the few high-street shops from which I regularly buy. I live in Gap jeans and cords, and I'm not alone – fashion editors regularly praise its offerings. However, I can see why sales have been on a downward spiral.

Over the past few years, British fashion retail has changed immeasurably. The market is now dominated by dynamic, fast fashion, with stores like Topshop, Zara and New Look turning around trends at a dizzying speed. A company such as Gap, which has 130 stores in Britain but more than 3,000 in America, cannot compete with the lightning-quick design and manufacture of smaller European retailers.

In recent years, Gap has attempted to combine a more trend-aware approach – it was one of the first high-street stores to market skinny jeans widely last year – with its mainstay products, khakis, denim and T-shirts. Ultimately, it seems that Gap can't do both things well, and its lack of flexibility means it misses out on many key trends. Last summer, for example, when the high street was dominated by pretty dresses, Gap stores had nothing much to offer beyond a few jersey frocks.

In many ways, Gap is facing the same problems that Marks & Spencer had three years ago. M&S was trying to be all things to all people – and failing. It has taken chief executive Stuart Rose more than two years to turn the high-street giant around and retail analysts predict it will take Gap at least that long to solve its problems.

While the company won't admit to it publicly, not having an online store in Britain (there is Gap.com in the US) has undoubtedly had a negative effect on sales. As *The Daily Telegraph* reported recently, retailers are experiencing the slowest rate of sales growth for 40 years, but online retailers are flourishing.

Last year British consumers spent £20 billion online; this year that is expected to rise to £30 billion. Topshop, Dorothy Perkins, Next, Debenhams and M&S, along with most other large fashion retailers, now have strong internet operations and have responded promptly to the ways in which some consumers want to shop. Ignoring these shifts in consumer habits is a high-risk strategy.

In its defence, Gap would argue that it has been a tough period for most retailers and its sales figures are undoubtedly skewed by those from America, where Gap and Old Navy are struggling. (The company does not report European sales separately.) Executives say, however, that some of Gap's biggest problems are already being tackled. In 2005, it employed Stephen Sunnucks, formerly chief executive at New Look, as European chief executive. One of his first jobs was to create a new design team in London that could cater more effectively to the European market.

"We were absolutely aware that customers in Europe were looking for something entirely different than those in the US," says Anita Borzyszkowska, vice-president for public relations. "They wanted more directional pieces in terms of trends and were more interested in quality – silks, cashmeres – and more directional silhouettes, but very much in the context of Gap simplicity."

The new design team will not only allow Gap to respond to European tastes independently of the US but will also make it easier to turn collections around quickly, which is crucial.

The results of this will not be seen fully until the autumn collections arrive in stores this year, but the spring ranges, which pick up on many designer trends for this season, certainly hint that something is afoot.

There is a neutral colour palette of soft pinks, beiges and camels, which were a dominant look on the catwalks. Details also reflect a more trend-focused approach; there is a bracelet-sleeved trench coat similar to those shown on Burberry's catwalk, slim, slouchy jeans – edgier than the store's signature "classic" denim – and a chambray shirt dress with a directional cut.

So it is not all bad news for Gap, and there have been some recent positive developments on which to build. The skinny black trousers that featured in last autumn's advertising campaign were a big success, as were the cashmere ranges in the run-up to Christmas. And despite some negative reports late last year, the company's dress collaboration with designer Roland Mouret was also a success, with half of the range selling out within three days. More "strategic partnerships" are planned for later this year.

The radical overhaul of the brand's ethical credentials is another step in the right direction. Once the focus of many high-profile anti-sweatshop campaigns, Gap has turned around its image, not only checking the implications of every element of the business but helping to launch one of the biggest socially responsible ranges in recent years.

Product Red – U2 lead singer Bono's widely publicised initiative, whereby 50 per cent of sales of all specially designed pieces go to help Aids and HIV sufferers in Africa – was launched in UK stores last April. No separate figures are available, but the collections are said to have performed well with the new band of ethically aware consumers.

Gap's figures make for bleak reading, though, and whoever is hired to run the company has a huge challenge ahead. A fashion retailer lives and dies by its product – and it is the consumer who always has the last word.

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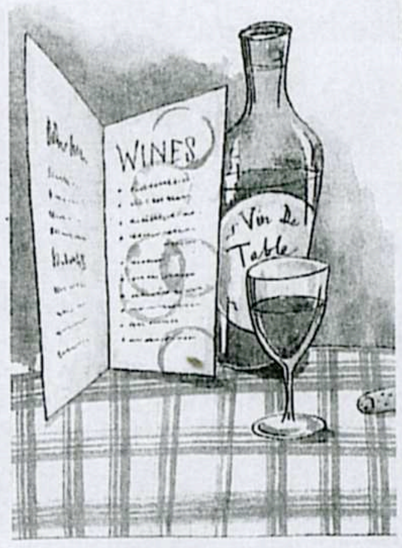

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