

Perth's designers measure up

WA's isolation hasn't stopped a steady stream of talent from developing and succeeding, writes **Khia Mercer.**



It may be known as the most isolated city in the world, but there seems no shortage of creative spark in Perth, where young designers are bringing life to the fashion scene. The city was first noticed by the international style circuit for producing a steady stream of supermodel expats such as Emma Booth, Gemma Ward and Nicole Trunfio, and its designers are now making their mark at home and abroad.

Locals once needed to go east to find unique, edgy pieces, but West Australian fashion has been nurtured over the past decade by events such as Perth Fashion Festival and the annual charity event, StyleAID.

Misty Pearson, designer of labels Elsie-Jean and Lilly Pilly, has never considered living anywhere else.

"We have a great lifestyle here and the fact is you can pretty much run a fashion label from anywhere. Many WA designers develop a cult following and people are chuffed they're supporting someone who's local."

High Street in the city's bohemian port of Fremantle has traditionally housed the debut collections of emerging Perth designers. But boutiques have since popped up along the Beaufort Street café strip in Mt Lawley and redevelopments in inner-city Northbridge are also popular among burgeoning creative types.

Merge Clothing in Subiaco's The Colonnade also provides emerging designers with space to showcase

their work. Designers stocked include Story By Tang, Katou, Elsie-Jean, Lesser Lantern and Joanie Wong, and fellow designers Pierucci, Wheels & Dollbaby, s2 and Ruth Tarvydas are close by.

These designers have built up a loyal following among the city's fashionable elite and most say the city's remoteness and laid-back culture are a strong influence.

Lisa Chau says the philosophy behind her label Zanthus – also stocked in Merge Clothing – has been inspired by the "rugged romantic elements of our natural environment – our landscape, its grandeur, uniqueness in its creation and understated beauty".

Her label caught the attention of local buyers in 2001 when Chau

first stocked her work at Merge, and her handmade collections were quickly snapped up by boutiques in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide. This resulted in her snagging the 2004 Mercedes-Benz Start Up award for Western Australia.

Eccentric label Material Boy was launched by former pro surfer Mic Eaton during Australian Fashion Week in 2005 and features his signature rock star edge. Patricia Hong's men's label, Preacher, adopts a more classic feel, often featuring embroidery as a key design element.

"The design talent pool in WA is standout and seems to just keep growing," Perth Fashion Festival director Mariella Harvey-

Hanrahan, says. "The fact that so many of our WA designers are doing so well nationally and internationally further cements Perth as a world-class city of style.

"One to watch is Antipodium – they showed at our very first WA Designer Collections show last year and are making a huge splash internationally, now showing at London Fashion Week.

"Another is Alison Cotton of Joveeba, who also showed at the 2008 Festival. The ability to bring effortless chic with a bohemian edge to her designs has given her a huge national following."

Fashion fever erupts in September during Perth Fashion Festival, where the city's top designers showcase their spring/summer collections.

Emerging local talent is showcased in the Ferngrove Wines WA Designer Showcase, while the Model of the Year awards feature the state's top modelling talent. Many hope to follow in the footsteps of previous winners who have gone on to blitz the international circuit.

Harvey-Hanrahan has announced that this year's fashion week would be shortened by two days because of slowing retail spending.

Economic pressures have also affected the ability of Perth's designers to showcase and market their collections in the United States and Europe.

Pearson says while WA boutiques are supportive of young talent, only the cheaper of her two labels has grown market share during the financial crisis.



Locals looking for edgy pieces once had to travel to eastern states. But no more.

Pierucci, far left, and Wheels & Dollbaby.
Photos Stefan Gosatti