

COMFORT & JOY // PHILANTHROPY

FASHION SANTA'S WORKSHOP

Role model Paul Mason embodies the heart of the season

SANTA CLAUS IS
COMING TO TOWN
Tuxedo, coat and shoes,
Hugo Boss; faux fur scarf,
stylist's own

JINGLE SWELL
Opposite: Shirt, Roxanne
Ouellet-B; knit sweater,
Sarah Pacini Man; suit and
sash, Philippe Dubuc; skirt,
Simons; sunglasses, Cutler
and Gross, Bui Optométriste;
faux fur hat, stylist's
own; boots, Hermès



Photography by Chris Nicholls // Creative Direction By Stephanie White
Fashion Direction By Randy Smith // Set Design By Daniel Onori

SUGAR PLUM
Sweater, Jacquemus,
at Holt Renfrew;
brooches, EleQueen;
gloves, Fipasen; pants
and skirt, MRKNTN;
boots, AdTec; faux fur hat,
stylist's own

MERRY & WHITE
Opposite: Turtleneck and
scarf, Sarah Pacini Man;
tuxedo jacket, Brunello
Cucinelli; coat, Canada
Goose; baseball cap,
Dsquared2, all Holt
Renfrew; long johns,
Amazon.ca; sunglasses,
Moncler, Bui Optométriste;
boots, ZOSCGJMY



They say Santa is the heart of Christmas and Paul Mason's irreverent take on Old Saint Nick is no exception. For almost a decade now, Mason has delighted young and old with his alter ego, Fashion Santa, a trim reinvention of the holly-jolly character with designer duds that put the "slay" in sleigh. On the cusp of turning 60, Mason is entering a new era, exploring what it means to live with heart through his fundraising and volunteering efforts.

Fashion Santa made his debut in 2014 at Toronto's Yorkdale Shopping Centre, where grown-ups could have a laugh and pose for a selfie with the dapper Mister Claus. "We, as adults, lose some of the magic we used to know," Mason says. "I suspect my own wonderment about life and a slight immaturity was how Fashion Santa materialized." When Canadian pop star Justin Bieber shared a picture with Fashion Santa on Twitter in 2015, Mason went viral, earning media coverage from every corner of the globe and billions of social-media impressions. That year, he spent some 88 hours taking selfies; for each snap shared on social media, the mall donated \$1 to the SickKids Foundation. Since then, each of his appearances, collaborations and product launches has included a charitable component.

Mason may not have anticipated he'd become a global sensation, but he's very familiar with being photographed – and clearly very good at it. Before his figurative move to the North Pole, he had a successful career as a male model, working with designers like Armani, Versace and Dolce & Gabbana. But male modelling is a profession that's sometimes ridiculed in pop culture, famously parodied in the 2001 film *Zoolander*. It's also one of the rare industries where men are out-earned and overshadowed by their famous female counterparts, many of whom are household names and don't wake up for less than \$10,000 a day.

"Pre-Fashion Santa, Paul was probably one of Canada's most successful top male models," says former Toronto journalist Glen Baxter, who first encountered Mason as host of the TV show, *In Fashion*. He says Mason has celebrity status after working with photographers like Patrick Demarchelier, having a cameo in a Paco Rabanne fragrance ad and appearing on the cover of publications like Australian *Vogue*. "It's hard for most people to picture Paul without the beard and the custom suits, but when you look back at him doing a Gap campaign, he looks like the all-American boy: athletic, clean cut, very good-looking. He

has done most anything you can do in the industry."

Mason, who is ridiculously good-looking, is still at the top of his Blue Steel game as an in-demand fashion model, and recently signed with The Marilyn Agency in Paris. When the legendary French couturier Jean Paul Gaultier staged his final runway presentation in 2020, he asked Mason to close the show, a pinch-me moment Mason describes as the highlight of his modelling career. "It was like riding a bicycle," he says about being back on the catwalk. "Backstage was the best. You had all the supermodels. Boy George was singing behind me. I was just thrilled to be part of it."

His authenticity might seem rare in an industry known for its cooler-than-thou attitude, but Mason's down-to-earth good nature and sense of compassion gives lie to the stereotype that models are self-centred fashionistas. Mason's empathy is rooted in a childhood diagnosis of a heart murmur and leaky valve, which was essentially a death sentence at the time. When he was four, his parents brought him from their home in Mississauga, Ont., to St. Joseph's Hospital in Toronto for heart surgery. He made a full recovery and went on to play sports like hockey, but the experience left its mark on Mason in more ways than one, including the foot-long scar across his back.

In 2018, exactly 50 years after that surgery, Mason was invited by the Israel Ministry of Culture to tour the country with a group of Canadian television personalities. Unbeknownst to him, the itinerary included a visit to the headquarters of Save A Child's Heart, a Tel Aviv-based humanitarian organization that provides cardiac health care to children around the world. "I like to say that it found me," he says of the serendipitous encounter with the organization. During his trip, Mason was delighted to connect with children who shared his medical condition. "I could show

them my scar and compare it to their little scars and show some type of unity," he says. "It was profound to me, and I never forgot it." Mason visited once more before reaching out to Save A Child's Heart to ask how he could get involved.

In early 2023, Mason spent eight life-changing weeks volunteering at the Save A Child's Heart recovery centre in Tel Aviv. Mason doesn't have children of his own, and he was intimidated at first to do arts and crafts with the young patients. He found his groove with some 11- to 15-year-old boys, accompanying them to and from the hospital, watching Marvel movies and dealing out cutthroat games of Uno. "They put on a strong front, because it's the right thing to do," he says. "I saw myself in that aspect of them." Our interview took place a few days after the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks, and Mason is very emotional, worried about friends

he hasn't been able to reach, including a former patient who lives in Gaza.

Marni Brinder Byk, executive director of Save A Child's Heart Canada, explains some young patients travel alone to Tel Aviv from other countries, and Mason was a reassuring presence for kids like Joshua, a Zambian boy who arrived at the centre the same day as Mason. "To have someone as kind, warm and gentle as Paul is a real comfort," she says. "He's willing to do anything to help out these kids, because he understands where they have been, and he can appreciate that they're in a foreign land dealing with a serious heart condition."

Mason's Santa character is the best possible case of personal branding, because it is informed by purpose-led, authentic storytelling and feel-good social-media moments. "I started off in Ryerson [now Toronto Metropolitan University] doing social work, and it's almost come full circle where I'm now deeply embedded with people who need help," Mason says.

He was walking in a student runway show in the '80s, when he was discovered by Judy Welch, the fashion-industry legend who founded one of Canada's first modelling agencies. (She was also rumoured to have dated Elvis.) It wasn't long before Mason left sociology class to travel the world, spending the next six years or so flying from Toronto to the fashion capitals of New York, London, Milan and Paris. In 1993, he finally moved to Manhattan. "It changed my life," he says. "Right away, I stopped doing the collections, because I could do one catalogue shoot in New York, and it would pay the same as doing all the shows in Europe."

Throughout the '90s and early 2000s, Mason, along with industry contemporaries like Kirsten Owen, Shalom Harlow and, of course, Linda Evangelista and M.A.C. Cosmetics co-founders Frank Toskan and Frank Angelo, was part of a cohort of Canadians making waves on the international fashion stage. But in 2009, after 16 heady years, he returned to Toronto when his mother was diagnosed with cancer. After she died in 2013, Mason stopped shaving. "She was a big spirit in my life, a very, very positive role model and very important to me," he says, describing her as a mix of grit and grace. "I don't know what it was. I just wanted to look different since she'd left the planet. I'm a different person now she's gone."

As his silver beard grew in, Mason's fashion friends began to tell him how much they loved his new look. One day, while he was in a silly mood, he had an idea to reinvent Father

Christmas – a makeover befitting a world-class model. He called on industry heavyweights to bring the character to life, tapping award-winning fashion photographer Chris Nicholls – who has shot the likes of Taylor Swift, Steve Carell and Miley Cyrus – and stylist Randy Smith, who dressed Fashion Santa to the nines in festive suits and accessories from designer labels like Ferragamo and Dior. (The trio was reunited for the *Zoomer* cover shoot.) He pitched Yorkdale mall on the concept and Fashion Santa was so successful that they later claimed ownership of the concept. It escalated to a legal tussle that was settled out of court, with Mason winning ownership of the trademark.

Today, he's carefully considering where to take Fashion Santa next. "I'm in a really precarious situation now, because I went viral with the brand and that was amazing," he says, explaining he wants to ensure future partnerships and licensing deals are made with companies that share his vision. "It's only in the last little while that I've been able to sign contracts with the actual fashion side, so where do I go from here? This is the challenge."

For now, Fashion Santa's calendar is filled with partnerships with brands like Ritz-Carlton, Indochino and Grand Marnier. He also plans to launch Christmas cards featuring cheeky illustrations of Fashion Santa to raise money for Save A Child's Heart, and hints at releasing more merchandise in the future. "Christmas and holiday – it's a marketing dream. There's apparel, there's home, there's beauty, there's anything that I can align myself with, and all with a percentage of the proceeds always going toward a cause." Just like his namesake, Fashion Santa will be flying around the world over the holidays and making many stops, including Washington, D.C., to host a Christmas movie night for Make-A-

Wish Foundation, Las Vegas to raise money for homeless teens, and England for an event with the Children's Heart Surgery Fund in Leeds.

Mason is unfazed by turning 60 in June, but he does embrace a healthy lifestyle, focused on an anti-inflammatory diet, prioritizing sleep and getting plenty of exercise. "I'm trying to challenge the aging process or just correct my life as I'm getting older, because it doesn't get easier," he says, adding that he's "obsessed" with seeking information on lifestyle choices and how they affect things like brain health and mobility. He's also learning how to say no, slowing down and, above all, approaching life with a sense of optimism. "Almost 60, I'm learning so much," he says. "And excited about what's to come – really, really excited." —Caitlin Agnew ➤



Suit, Dolce & Gabbana; sweater, Bottega Veneta, Holt Renfrew; gloves, Simons



Tuxedo, coat and shoes, Hugo Boss; faux fur scarf, stylist's own



LET IT SNOW

Hoodie, Essentials;
faux fur bomber, Moose
Knuckles; pants, Givenchy,
both Holt Renfrew;
beanie, Fjallraven;
boots, Zara; ski goggles,
Outdoor Master

STAR OF WONDER

Opposite: Ski goggles,
Outdoor Master. Don't
be an abominable
snowman: Protect your
skin from the elements
with L'Oréal Paris Men
Expert Vita Lift SPF 15
Anti-Wrinkle Moisturizer
and condition beard
with Khel's Grooming
Solutions Nourishing
Beard Grooming Oil.

MERRY GENTLEMAN
Tanktop by Simons;
faux fur coat and pants
from Lakuachimoto;
gloves by Simons;
boots from Zara;
faux fur hat, stylist's own

PUFF DADDY
Opposite: Beanie by
Fjallraven; turtleneck
from Hugo Boss;
blazer and trousers by
Sarah Pacini Man;
puffer vest by Givenchy
at Holt Renfrew;
boots by Browns



*Hair & makeup, Caroline Levin
PIM.ca; assistant fashion
styling, Emanuelle Neron;
assistant, Neil Franklyn;
assistant set designer, Mark
Worsfold; photography
assistants, Thomas Lee and
Finlay Moore. Shot on location
at the ZoomerPlex, Toronto*