Lenny Kravitz Rocks Design Like Nobody's Business

On the day his “Flash” photography exhibit debuted in Miami during Art Basel, Lenny Kravitz the designer faced the music.

Rock star Lenny Kravitz drops the words “beautiful,” “dig” and “vibe” more than a 1960s flower child. No, he’s not a hippie. This is his natural jargon—descriptive terms withdrawn from a bank of rich childhood memories that profoundly influenced his syntax, personal style and inner soul. You’d also speak this way if you chilled with Miles Davis and Duke Ellington as a kid. Your innocent world view would expand exponentially beyond bicycles and jungle gyms too.

At 51, Kravitz’s eyes are still wide open. He’s happily still soaking it all in. He lives in a constant state of discovery, exploring a diverse landscape of beautiful things that inspire him—music, art, photography, fashion, furniture, people (yes, women too), architecture and design—or anything else that radiates a vibe he was groomed to detect.

Not surprising for a handsome, talented cat who exudes a smooth swagger, curiosity, modesty, and sophistication—which is precisely why, along with his music, he slays the hearts of millions of fans, including women who want to be with him and men who want to be him.
The multi-talented musician/actor/designer/photographer is very cognizant of his privileged universe, this hard-earned utopia that surrounds him, and he's determined to make the world (or at least a residence) better for it, either audibly or visually.

“I grew up around people like Miles Davis, actors, and New York theater people who had great wardrobes and great homes,” says Kravitz. “They were artists who knew how to create a vibe that’s really interesting, welcoming, with lots of personality and expression. The early 1970s was a very expressive time in design, fashion, music, art—in everything. I think via osmosis this all happened. It wasn’t something I was thinking about or looking for. I dug it and kind of took it all in.”

Today, nearly everything in Lenny Kravitz’s universe is by design—his anthemic music, his funky threads, his choice movie roles, his photography hobby, and his company, Kravitz Design Inc., the boutique residential, commercial and product design house he launched in 2003. The New York-based firm should be listed as KDI on the Rising Stock Exchange in design, if such a thing actually existed. KDI’s respect in the design community now matches the reputation of its famous proprietor.

If you dig his music or his halcyon role as “Cinna” in The Hunger Games, you’ll understand where Kravitz is coming from. His life and design aesthetic is cosmopolitan, fearless, eclectic, sexy, fun and in your face whether you like it or not—uniquely Lenny.

The musician could have followed other celebrities down the runway, launching a fashion line of his own (his Cinna character was a stylist, after all). But Kravitz rocks to his own tune, following his passion for interior and product design where he can still play with fabrics, textures, shapes and materials—leather included, of course. What else would we expect from the super soul dude who rocked Black Velvet in song (the best fabric title since The Artist currently known as Prince killed Pink Cashmere on vinyl)?
“Fashion is something I’ll probably get into one day but I’m really into architecture and interior design,” says Kravitz. “So many people were going into that fashion direction, I thought let me do my thing over here.”

So Kravitz dwells in spaces and products. His designs are excavated and crafted from his masculine sensibility—typically conceived while on tour or traveling. He experiments with lights and shadows, and three-dimensional solids and voids. He explores colors, contrasts, textures and reflections. Design has become a picture window into his soul.

Over the last decade, the rocker and his small design team at KDI have furnished private homes, condominiums (Miami’s Paramount Bay Condos), hotels (penthouse recording studio at the Setai Hotel and Residences), TV shows (set of The Queen Latifah Show); and executed select high-profile design collaborations with starchitect Philippe Starck (reinterpretation of Starck’s Mademoiselle chair) for Kartell, Swarovski (Casino Royale LED crystal pendant chandelier), and Lea Ceramiche (modern Goccia ceramic tile collection).
Now KDI’s gone mainstream, collaborating with CB2 on a home decor collection that’s starting to blow up like a bad amplifier. In Rock-n-Roll lingo, that’s a good thing—kind of like intentionally smashing a guitar on stage.

“So much of my work is in luxury which is very expensive,” says Kravitz. “[With CB2] I wanted to work with a company that’s very good at making very affordable things of very good quality.”

This CB2 x Kravitz Design by Lenny Kravitz collection is a mouthful but it amplifies glam metallics from the 1970s New York studio club culture and California Rock-n-Roll scene playing off an intrepid fusion of natural woods, lush textiles, leather, metal and reflective surfaces—some of which could glimmer as the cover of a classic rock album. This exclusive collection is inspired by Kravitz’s 25-plus years of tour travels and global experiences, including his international homes in New York, Brazil, Paris and the Bahamas.

“[Whether it’s] architecture on the street or furniture from different countries, I’m always inspired by shapes and textures I see on the road,” Kravitz effuses. “Walking around Paris, no matter how many years I’ve lived there—a door, a roof, a window, a column, there are always beautiful things to look at. I also love that whole Nordic area. I love Copenhagen. They have a great aesthetic in that area—very clean, great design. I’m a big fan of [Danish architect] Arne Jacobsen.”

Fully inspired, the CB2 collection boasts a range of comfortable furniture and versatile home decor—sofa, console, tables, wall hangings, sconces, pillows, shag rugs, lamp, etc. Kravitz describes the modern-to-rustic collection as “natural glamor” that appeals to nearly everyone, including college students, young married couples, even older, stylish folk. Zebra stripes, zig-zags, monograms, and cozy pillows and rugs reflect the 1970s vibe.
There’s the Ya Ya Coffee Table that doubles as bar storage; the 18-inch New Mack Barstool; Vibrations Shag Rug fit for floor or wall; Leather Director’s Bench; and a variety of pillows, including the Icelandic Sheepskin Pillow which looks like a soft white, shaggy sheepdog. One of Kravitz’s favorite pieces is a distressed wood side table anchored by a polished gold brass vessel—in what resembles an upside-down wine glass table.

“What’s great about them is they even work well with very expensive artisan pieces,” Kravitz says. “I just put one in my home next to a Hans Wegner chair and an incredible Paul Evans console and they look great next to one another. It doesn’t look like something inexpensive next to something extravagant. They work really well together. If you dig the shape and texture and style it will work with whatever you’ve got.”

Kravitz is working with everything he has. Thankfully, there’s no alter ego B.S. from him. He keeps it real. In fact, it’s difficult to discern any Kravitz ego at all—at least over the phone. Confident, relaxed, sincere and alarmingly humble, Kravitz has designed a nice life for himself.

So why dive head first into design, a field that’s crawling with cut-throat competition? Are his designs too eclectic? Is he dabbling? Is he only capitalizing on his fame? Well, Kravitz would be foolish not to promote his recognized brand. And 13 years in, it’s apparent the Grammy Award-winning artist takes the craft very seriously, wearing his designer title like a badge of honor. Design resonates his soul nearly as intensely as music does. The genesis dates back to an ambitious tween who constantly tricked out his bedroom.
“I was always very aware of my surroundings, especially my room as a kid,” says Kravitz. “I was very particular about where I put things, the lighting, the way the room felt. I didn’t know what I was doing, it was just the way I felt.”

For Kravitz, home means comfort. The musician lives comfortably in his international pads and in his own skin. But the essence of the CB2 collection is about being comfortable in your space no matter where you live. The collection crosses genres, sexes, economic status and style preferences.

“For me it’s all about the experience of bringing people together in an atmosphere where they’re comfortable, open and creative,” says Kravitz. “Comfort comes first for me. Then you can make it aesthetically whatever you want.”

Like music and photography, Kravitz’s design journey was banked from childhood. It wasn’t direct—it percolated on a Map Quest path of roundabouts, wrong turns, recalculating, and eventually a GPS-guided resoluteness that brought him to this peaceful place.
“After I did my first album [around 1989-90], I wanted to make my place interesting and funky,” he says. “I was looking for a desired vibe at the time. Then I’d get bored and change it. Then I’d get bored and change it again. As I started buying more expensive homes and more expensive items, I’d do the same thing—change it, change it, change it. After awhile, I knew this was absolutely ridiculous. I couldn’t keep changing everything and spending all of this money. So I decided to start doing it for other people.”

Kravitz’s mother, Roxie Roker, achieved stardom as an actress on the hit 1970s TV show, The Jeffersons. When Kravitz was 11 or 12, his mother’s success led them from New York to Los Angeles where Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones, mid-century modern architecture and big doors from their new neighborhood rocked his universe like the Big Bang.

“My Mom bought a beautiful mid-century modern house and it had beautiful door ware with brass, sculpted handles,” Kravitz reminisces. “At that time, a lot of front doors were monumental with different metals, wood, brass with great handles. To me, the windows, doors and door handles are the earrings, necklaces and earrings—the jewelry of the house.”

No doubt, this fond memory inspired his current collaboration with Idaho-based Rocky Mountain Hardware, which is premiering the Trousdale collection of door ware and cabinetry by Kravitz Design.

“They’re really beautiful, heavy substantial brass door ware,” he says. “I’m really inspired by doors from mid-century modern homes. They reveal some personality and character like, ‘This is what you’re about to step into. This is the kind of person that I am.’”

Who is Kravitz? He’s definitely his mother’s son. He followed her footsteps into acting, winning respectable reviews for his performances in The Hunger Games series, Precious and The Butler. Meanwhile, his father Sy Kravitz’s connections (as a former NBC producer and jazz promoter) influenced some of his musical, fashion and photography psyche via friends named Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan, Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald—members of Lenny’s “osmosis” crew.
Like anyone, Kravitz is a product of his environment—only his environs were hipper than ours. We never sat on Sir Duke’s lap as a toddler while he sang *Happy Birthday* to us. To Kravitz, that moment was like riding a bike—a cherished formative memory he’ll never forget, but of little use to a busy adult.

To Kravitz, the creative process in design is similar to music—the bliss of creating “something from nothing.” His design concepts sound like Hollywood movie pitches.

“When I’m designing, I’ll put together a list of things that makes sense to me,” he says. “I’ll say, ‘Okay, this room will be Helmut Newton meets Miles Davis.’ Now, what does that mean? It has nothing to do with the furniture. But I understand what that means as far as home, bold, texture, sexiness. I’ll use names that have nothing to do with furniture. This will be Yves St. Laurent meets Richard Avedon,’ whatever. Things I understand. Absolutely, it’s the same process.”

Kravitz excels on camera. He’s also pretty gifted behind one. Photography is his release, a hobby born from childhood tinkering with his father’s Leica camera. He’s since designed a camera for Leica called the “Correspondent.” Now he’s gone pro with “Flash,” his 50-photograph exhibit (shot on Leica in black and white) which was presented by The Leica Gallery and Reiner Opoku during the Art Basel and Design Miami fairs in December.
Flash captures snapshots of Kravitz’s life as a famous musician in the public eye. As photographers, paparazzi and fans worldwide jostled for an exclusive photo of the artist, he turned his camera on them—transforming spotlight flashes from frustration to art. His fans were down with it, hamming it up and forging an even closer bond with the artist.

“These are photographs of people who are photographing me—fans, paparazzi, people who confront me on the street,” he says. “They have a Fellini-esque feel to them. There a lot of stories going on in the faces of all of these people. A lot of them were taken on tour in Europe.”

Kravitz promises new music this summer where some element of design may work its way into his lyrics—if he feels that vibe. Perhaps an Icelandic Sheepskin Pillow or Swarovski chandelier verse? If not, we’ll forgive him. We’ve already bought into the messenger and the message, musically.

“The studio is probably the most inspiring place,” Kravitz says. “I just open up and get into the process of expression, recording, and the floodgates open. Of course, all the things you’ve experienced and collected from life, you unlock and it comes out.”

Fortunately, Kravitz has more experiences to unlock than Joe Citizen. When his next album drops, he will metaphorically open a new door, unlocking his talents again, giving us another unique peek into his character—who he really is. It wouldn't be the least bit surprising if that metaphorical door was adorned with a mid-century modern brass handle—something big and shiny for us to behold.