

**Simon Jones** talks to Robert Roope, owner of Black Eyewear about how he has fused a life-long love of jazz music with eyewear

**D**ispensing optician Robert Roope celebrates 50 years in optics this year and while many would see that as a sign to slow down, Roope only has eyes on the expansion of his Black Eyewear brand.

Started in 2006, Black Eyewear was created to satisfy demand for 'simple' black frames. 'At the time it was really hard to find black frames. All the major companies were sold out, so I had to take matters into my own hands,' says Roope. A collection of six black frames was created – each made by hand in Italy.

Since then, the Black Eyewear brand has grown significantly, culminating in the opening of a new dedicated practice on Goodge Street in central London last month. Roope said he began to look at locations in London after he noticed that many of his Black Eyewear customers were making the trip to his St Albans practice. His son works close by and made him aware that a suitable premises would soon be available on Goodge Street.

The practice space is compact, but design-led. Each style is presented for viewing and trying on, then once a patient finds suitable styles, vast drawers open to reveal a plethora of colour options. It's a simple concept, but one that doesn't overwhelm the patient with options. Roope has plans to adorn the walls with framed pictures of the jazz musicians who inspire the models in the collection and even plans to use the practice as a meeting place for fellow jazz lovers. He splits his time between the two practices and carries out the majority of the glazing at his on-site lab in St Albans.

Today the Black Eyewear collection comprises over 85 models, in both sun and ophthalmic styles. As a



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# Back to Black

development of the Roope Vintage online shop, which sells a wide range of vintage eyewear, it's clear to see that the collection has a decidedly retro feel. Frames in the collection are heavily influenced by Roope's love of jazz, and each frame is named after old and present jazz musicians. 'I wanted designs to be from an era when frames were made by frame makers,' says Roope on the influences in his range.

Styles such as the Alice, named after Alice Coltrane, are heavily influenced by retro shapes, with a heavy cat's eye silhouette and nine on-trend hues. The Buster frame, named after Buster Bailey, is similarly retro, with a classic 50s shape and 3D detailing. In among the retro creations, there are more modern styles. The Courtney frame, designed for Courtney Pine, is more rectangular in appearance, with a flat brow line and 3D construction.

## Style guide

From talking to Roope, it's clear that he has a passion for the past, but this hasn't stopped him thinking about the present digital age. Roope has distinct websites for his brands and one which offers frame advice to people around the world. [www.framestyleguide.com](http://www.framestyleguide.com) sees Roope suggest three of his Black Eyewear styles to visitors, based on pictures of their faces which are mailed to him via the site. Roope says he has completed over 2,000 online consultations and believes one in 15 come back and purchase products from his online stores. 'It also gets them

thinking about what sort of frames fit their face,' he adds.

Blogging is also another key tool for Black Eyewear and Roope. As well covering topics such as eyewear in the world of fashion, the blog also suggests Black Eyewear and Roope Vintage frame styles which mimic certain popular looks. It also gives the brand an outlet to talk about its latest celebrity clients and consumer media coverage. Latest additions to its growing portfolio include Fearné Cotton and *Look* magazine.

Videos are another area in which the company attempts to maximise its exposure. 'Videos get you higher up the search rankings,' says Roope cannily. He says a short video on a topic such as cat's eye glasses can get you near the top of search rankings in a way that regular SEO methods struggle to achieve.

So what does the future hold for Roope and Black Eyewear? Another location is on the cards and Roope says he is looking at franchise options both here and abroad. 'It would be a prospect for adventurous practice owners,' he says on the venture. More eyewear designers are also on the agenda, to inject a different impetus into the collection.

It's undoubtedly a busy time for Roope, who admits he wishes he had made the move into eyewear sooner. Nonetheless, his story should resonate with practitioners who have always dreamt of offering their own eyewear collections. ●

