

MEDIA

On the Road with Martha Stewart. The original domestic goddess is exploring new territory, endorsing sewing machines that don't have the Martha brand. How her empire is expanding

BY LISA MCLAUGHLIN

MARTHA STEWART HAS MADE A CAREER OUT of trumpeting the joys of long-abandoned homemaking skills like gathering eggs from Araucana chickens you've raised yourself. So it shouldn't come as too much of a surprise to learn that she made her own wedding dress. The embroidered Swiss organdy gown and matching hat she wore to her 1961 nuptials were the culmination of years of practice. "I learned to sew as a little girl," Stewart says. "My mother made our clothes—every year we had a new Easter coat—and taught me the basics of sewing at a young age." Stewart admits that she hasn't sewed her own clothes in years, but she still makes the occasional dust ruffle and says her skills remain sharp. Gesturing to her spring jacket, she says, "This coat, I must tell you, I did not make. But I could."

Her long love of the craft has led her to her latest venture, a partnership between Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia and the sewing-machine company SVP Worldwide, which Stewart announced on April 3 in New York City. Stewart will endorse SVP's Singer, Husqvarna Viking and Pfaff lines of sewing machines—the first time she has endorsed a product without the Martha brand. Why is she flogging another company's goods? "I learned to sew on a Singer machine," she says, adding that she still has a 1901 Singer in working condition. And this was a rare moment when Stewart didn't think she could improve on the original. "These are simply the best machines out there," she says. The devices have come a long way since 1901. As we talked, the Pfaff Creative 2170, completely unattended,

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Clothes call Stewart didn't make this outfit. But she could

embroidered intricate monograms onto napkins as if by magic.

Stewart's high-profile endorsement will give these venerable sewing-machine brands that have been around for more than 140 years another way to reach the generation of young women who are embracing sewing. Call it the *Project Runway* effect. Inspired by the reality-TV show, in which aspiring designers compete for

an entry into the fashion world, young people in growing numbers are trying their hand at wielding needle and thread. The Home Sewing Association estimates that there are about 35 million sewing hobbyists in the U.S., up from roughly 30 million in 2000, and annual sales of machines have doubled since 1999, to 3 million. Since the seamstresses in this new generation are less likely to have learned at their mother's foot pedal, they

are looking for guidance. Stewart launched *Blueprint* magazine last year for them. The women's lifestyle magazine will publish six issues in 2007, up from two in 2006, and reaches a total audience of 250,000. While the flagship *Martha Stewart Living* magazine features sewing projects for the home, *Blueprint* is targeted at a younger audience. Fashion editor Katie Hatch's frequently innovative projects, from a swirling microsuede skirt to lace appliqués on a plain, white button-down shirt, are featured in each issue. Stewart calls Hatch over and asks her to show off what she's wearing—a dove gray dress with delicate embroidery that she made in a day. "Many of the staffers at *Blueprint* make their own clothes—beautiful things," Stewart says proudly. "I think sewing is such an important thing to know and especially to teach kids." She adds, without a hint of irony, "It's important to be thrifty."

Can a famous multimillionaire really be a spokeswoman for the

down-home art of making your own clothes? Stewart does, at least, understand the impulse driving so many young women to assert their individuality with one-of-a-kind, homemade clothes. In 1961 Stewart was named one of *Glamour's* 10 Best Dressed College Girls. "One of the reasons I stood out," she recalls, "was because I sewed all my own clothes." Now that's an endorsement. ■