Growing up in suburban Alexandria, Virginia, she filled her closet with vintage finds and clothes she sewed herself. Harvard, Mehlinger acknowledges, has never been fashion-forward: “It’s neither a place where you can study fashion, nor a place where people care much about fashion. But I loved that—the seriousness of it. I loved that during reading period everyone walked around in sweatpants and dirty hair.”

Nevertheless, in her senior year, Mehlinger staged a fashion show in Pforzheimer House. “I assembled a 40-person volunteer team of students, including all the models,” she recalled. “I designed and sewed the outfits in my bedroom. It was lots of fun, but it was also a test. I wanted to gauge whether my love for fashion was something I felt strongly enough about to throw myself into.”

It was. After Commencement (her graduation gift was her prized Bernina sewing machine), she worked for Gap in San Francisco, then Manhattan, designing women’s wear and intimates. In 2005, what began as a three-month trip became a yearlong journey traversing North Africa, Europe, Australia, and Asia. The travels bolstered her independence. “I returned with the confidence to start Lola Haze,” she says.

Each collection begins in the imagination. “I sketch and sketch and sketch,” she says. “I start pushing ideas to see where they’ll take me.” For her “I Love/Hate Lucy” fall 2010 collection, “I was working with the concept of destruction,” she says, indicating fabric samples patterned by burning and discharge dying (a chemical process that removes color in a controlled manner).

Next comes the stage Mehlinger calls “creative discipline.” With her drawings tucked to the wall, she conceives the collection. “I chop what doesn’t make sense,”