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Sarah Bibb



Designer Sarah Bibb Talks Transitions, Trends, and Taking it All in Stride by Becki J. Singer

Known for her signature vintage aesthetic matched with a playful, modern sensibility, Sarah Bibb's eponymous clothing line is a perfect fit for Portland's nostalgic chic sense of style. Her career began simply—with a reversible wrap skirt so popular, it became the first piece she mass-produced. The skirt is still in her repertoire. Indeed, it's the most popular item you'll find at Folly, Bibb's boutique in NW Portland, proving this is one designer who knows her customer all too well.

Bibb arrived on the fashion scene in Portland back in 2008—in other words, the worst possible time to open a business. But her vision was bold and her resolve was strong. She survived a shaky year, watching shops close all around her, and her gamble paid off. Today, Bibb's business is thriving. We sat down to talk about where she's been, where she is now, and where she's headed. If her inspirational, irreverent attitude is anything to go by, it's going to be a wild ride.

Let's start at the beginning: Since you're not originally from the area, how did you end up in Portland?

I was born in Alabama, and I grew up in Boulder, Colorado. I lived in Los Angeles for twenty years after that, and then I wanted to open a store. Portland was the place that really made sense for me to do that. There was no way to do this in Los Angeles.

So you came to open Folly?

I really did. I opened the store ten months after I got here.

Tell me how you got started in design.

I went to the Fashion Institute in Los Angeles about a hundred years ago, and I did a summer program with Parsons Paris. But my grandmother is a seamstress, so I guess that's sort of the progression. I watched my grandmother make clothes and always enjoyed that, and then I took a sewing class in high school. I even made my prom dress—it was very "Pretty in Pink."

When I moved to Los Angeles, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I somehow landed at the Fashion Institute. I didn't graduate, I just did one year of the program. And at the time, I didn't know how to translate what I learned into a job. So I just put it behind me. I went on and did a bunch of other things, and then came back around to fashion many years later.



Sarah Dress - \$170

How did your clothing line finally get started?

I had my line in Los Angeles for, I guess, four years. I had a by-appointment boutique, and everything was one-of-a-kind. I had a lot of clients that were actresses, or people that were going to events and needed something special. The first piece I put into mass production was my reversible wrap-around skirt, and then a couple of times a year there would be two or three pieces that I would manufacture in multiples. Eventually, I decided to close my boutique to save money and work on my line—to really focus on wholesaling. But then I got a divorce, which kind of abolished the whole plan. It just completely shifted my focus. I had to move my equipment into my apartment, and just focused on surviving for a while. About a year later, I realized I really just wanted to have a store. I looked around Los Angeles, but there was no way to make it feasible there. Portland was really the best choice. I wanted to stay on the West Coast, and I wanted a city that was big enough to support the business but small enough that it was affordable. So I very randomly ended up in Portland, and I just got lucky that it's a great place to be.

What do you love about designing?

Well, I love fabric, mostly. I think fabric inspires me a lot. It's very exciting, because fabric is very limited in its capabilities. Not every fabric will do everything

you want it to do—period. People come in all the time and say, "I wish this had this certain detail," and in my head I think, yeah, but it can't do that. Fabric isn't a magical thing. It's a very tangible, solid thing, and it will only do what it will do. To me, that's exciting—to take a piece of fabric and then figure out its possibilities. Sometimes I have a very specific picture in my head of what I want, and then depending on the materials I am using or my mistakes along the way, something even more exciting comes out of it. To me, that's the fun: to really explore the limitations of things.

How much does knowing what a customer will want or will buy factor in to your design work?

It factors in a lot right now because my time is very limited and production is really limited. So I focus much more on things that I know will translate to this particular market. Instead of more conceptual design. And I think I'm good at that. I'm really grateful that I can do that because that helps me pay my rent! And it makes people happy to come in and find something that's different. I also try to fill the gaps. Last year, for instance, all the dresses in the summer were so short, you know, mid-thigh. I'm five feet tall and some of the dresses were too short even for me. So I was thinking, what are my tall girls going to do? So, I started making some dresses that were below the knees, or dresses with little sleeves—things that my customers were missing in the marketplace.

That's the benefit of doing it small. I can fill that gap very quickly, which is great because women appreciate that. It's rewarding in its own way.

It's interesting to hear you talk about the importance of a real-world sensibility in fashion. I don't think that's terribly common.

I love problem solving. When people come in and they have a specific situation, or they come in and tell me exactly where they're going and what they need, then we can find the solution. I love that. They come in frustrated, but they leave knowing that they have something that they feel good in and that fits their situation.

What do you think is unique about designing in Portland? Have you found you have to change your aesthetic a little bit to meet your customer?

Yes, I do. When I moved, I mean—Los Angeles and Portland are so different. I think the weather here is a big factor in how people get dressed. In Los Angeles, it's warm all the time. I didn't own a single pair of boots when I moved here. Now, I am like the Imelda Marcos of boots. It's crazy! I have this whole closet full of sandals that look at me longingly, like, "Are you ever going to wear us again?" And also in LA, things are very short. You're just wearing as little as you can because it's hot. Here, I notice women are a little more modest. And people are much more



“It’s more about a vibe or a feeling than it is about age.”



Sarah Dress - \$ 170

“It’s a missed opportunity if you’re not expressing yourself visually.”

used to layering. It took me a while to figure that out, but I love it. It's a really easy way to get dressed.

I would love to know a little bit about your design aesthetic. Who are some designers that you really admire?

Oh, I love anything really dramatic and beautiful. So, I love John Galliano. To me, his pieces—I could weep, they're so beautiful. He's amazing. It's art to me.

Loving those extremes as you do, are you able to find inspiration in that and translate it into pieces as wearable as yours?

I think being inspired in general is a good thing. There's no direct "A to B" from seeing those collections to making a piece of clothing for me. I don't think, oh, I'm going to take that and make it into something someone can wear in Portland. But just knowing that that exists makes it a little bit easier to live on this planet. Life on Earth is hard; it's really, really difficult for most people. And sometimes, the only thing you can really latch onto is beauty.

Tell me about your customer. Who is the woman you're typically designing for?

I have the most interesting, broad range of customers. I have teenagers—that very special, rare 16 year old who doesn't want to look like everyone else—all the way up to, I think my oldest customer is 92. It's great. I always say that it's much more about a vibe or a feeling than it is about age. I think there's something here that's age appropriate for all of those women. They all have a similar appreciation for detail and a vibe that is feminine but not overdone, not fussy. People that like ease, and timeless pieces with a vintage aspect to them.

What do you love about Portland fashion?

I love that it doesn't matter. In a way, there's something fun about being in a really trendy place like Los Angeles because it challenges you in a different way. You always have to push, and that's really exciting. Portland doesn't seem very attached to trends, and that's exciting in another way because you can relax a little bit and do what you want. People are expressing themselves on a more personal level, I think. They're not wearing something just to fit in or to be part of the next thing. They're wearing what they want to wear, and everybody has their own way. You know, I show people how I intended something to be worn, but they'll say, "What if I want to do this?" and I tell them to take it and go crazy. A lot of what I'm designing is simple silhouettes, so they really translate easily to your own version of it, and I think that's great. It's like being a piece of the puzzle.

That's probably fun for you, to be in the store and see how people actually use your pieces.

It's great! And it sometimes gives me ideas like, oh, I never would have thought of that. I don't think there's any right or wrong way to dress. To me, it's a missed opportunity if you're not expressing yourself visually. That's the problem I have with Portland fashion is that there's too much function sometimes. I think there's a way to express yourself and still have it be rain-proof. I get a little bored by the monotony of function. I mean, I'm a really practical person so I understand it, but I think there's a balance. But I think that people are becoming more aware of fashion generally, even in the short time I've been in Portland. People are talking about it more, but I don't think it will ever really be a fashion town. I think a lot of that's the weather. You just can't wear the right shoes here most of the time!

If you weren't designing, what do you think you'd be doing?

Gosh, I don't know. Anything I have ever enjoyed doing had something to do with a visual medium. I'm not qualified at all, but in Fantasy Land, I'd love to be doing textile design. I think it would be so interesting. But, like everything, I am sure it's a lot less fun than it looks. But the fantasy of it is so exciting! **AFH**



Gina Dress - \$175
Obi Belt - \$40
Vintage Slip from Folly - \$50

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