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Fashion Love Story: Wool and the Gang



'Professional knitters' Jade Harwood and Aurelie Popper are the designers behind three-year-old, crazy-cool NYC based knitwear label Wool and the Gang.

Their SoHo studio and boutique houses monthly knitting parties (the parties also take place in Tokyo, London, and Paris), where customers can acquire the know-how to attack Wool and the Gang's DIY knitting kits. In addition to the kits, which include yarn sourced from Peru, WATG offers handmade knitwear basics, accessories, and outerwear.

With a stated mission to dust off the cobwebs and invest knitting with long-elusive cool-cred, WATG is dedicated to innovation. Jade and Aurelie are also all about longevity, creating timeless, high-quality products that endure passing trends. Both women draw on their experience at Parisian luxury house Balmain and as students at London's Central St. Martins (where they both concentrated on fabrics and handcraft) in formulating their designs. The long-time friends talk about making knitwear modern, the inherent fun of fashion, and gleaning insight and inspiration from skilled Peruvian knitters in this week's wool-tastic Fashion Love Story.

JADE HARWOOD

“Being a girl from Southampton, a small coastal city in England, didn’t do a lot for me on the fashion front. My memories stem from coming from a family of girls and having a mum who is fearless in experimenting with style. Mum’s been there, done it, and definitely gotten the T-shirt, from the fabulous workout days of Jane Fonda, to Farrah Fawcett’s big hair, to Cher’s more risqué episodes, to Princess Diana’s sleek slender dressing, my mum worked it all. And with my Nan’s musical collection, my family had a very Brady-Bunch-meets-Von-Trapp vibe. My earliest fashion memories are dressing up with my sisters in my mum’s biggest platforms and dancing to anything from the Spice Girls to ‘Singing in the Rain’. I wish I could go back to those days.

“The whole creative process inspires me, but more specifically the textiles and craftsmanship behind fashion. The early stages of designing for WATG are the most exciting. Aurelie and I discuss and brainstorm, sketch and paint, and make a big creative mess. Then from the sketches we develop the textiles and knitting samples with different yarns and stitches, while remembering to keep our designs easy to knit and easy to wear. Then it’s off to Peru, where we work with an incredible team of Peruvian knitters. They are the most inspiring women I’ve ever met, not only for their mind-blowing skills but their whole attitude to life and their warmth and generosity. Every step of the design process is so rewarding.

“It’s difficult to pinpoint when I fell for fashion, although from a young age I set my sights on attending Central St. Martins. I even wrote a letter at age 13 asking what I needed to do to be accepted to the school. I got no reply, but I was undaunted! My time at St. Martins gave me the confidence and skills to pursue a career in fashion; it gave me my friendship with Aurelie, and it brought me to WATG. We have always worked really well together. When we went off to Paris to work at Balmain, we discovered that even in a high pressured environment, we would still laugh together all day long. It’s so much fun to work with your friend. It’s such a great partnership.

“Fashion can mean so many things. For me it’s ultimately FUN. Fun to design, fun to wear, fun to experiment. On the flip side of the coin, it is an industry like any other. Hard work and passion are necessary to succeed. Fashion is also a very personal and individual experience. I hope when I’m older, I’m able to look back on my career and see an exciting archive of clothes that evokes wonderful memories, reflects changing trends, and, of course, contains the occasional fashion faux pas.

“Every week brings different challenges. At WATG it’s a pull-up-your-sleeves-and-all-hands-on-deck scenario. I was primarily hired to design, but because we are a small team, everyone does it all: design, running the shop in SoHo, organizing knitting parties around the world, overseeing the showroom, attending tradeshow, managing WATG’s social network. It’s endless. But it’s so nice to work for a small team. All your

network. It's endless. But it's so nice to work for a small team. All your hard work really pays off, and you get to learn how to run a start-up business and to take responsibility for every aspect of a fashion brand. I'm really lucky to work for a company from conception and to be so involved in the launch. I believe in the concept of WATG, the values of our DIY brand, the community that's growing around the world. It's been two years since we launched, but I still get a kick out of the whole sharing, learning, and social side of knitting, and particularly the look on people's faces when I say I'm a professional knitter.

The Gang is going global. We envisage a WATG tour bus that will travel around America, stopping in every city where we can host a knitting party. Simultaneously we are developing our new website. The digital world has had a huge impact on the fashion industry. We're developing new social media platforms so that WATG is accessible from wherever you are in the world. We want to wool the world."

AURELIE POPPER

"My earliest fashion memory is of my grandmother's house. One room was full of sewing stuff, about twenty machines and piles of colorful fabric, needles and thread, and pattern books. Twice a week women from the neighborhood would come to her sewing class. The room would change into a tea-room boudoir. Once they were all gone my cousins and I used to go in and make scarves out of scraps of fabric they had left behind. We would then open a small shop on the street and sell our scarves.

"The textile part of fashion is where my heart beats. It took me a while to understand that what attracted me to fashion is fabric. My first job at Balmain made me realize that print and embroidery were the crafts where I could express my creativity. Attention to detail, color combinations, textures, and hard work make every piece unique. It's easy to stay inspired when you work in the fashion industry; there's always so much going on and new techniques to discover and old ones to be rediscovered. New trends constantly arise, only to be replaced by newer ones.

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“While growing up in Switzerland surrounded by bankers, lawyers, and doctors, working in fashion was seen as a crazy way of life. Of course fashion is fun. It represents the mood of the moment, the color of the day, walking down a red carpet in Cannes, dining at a new restaurant, the exciting color of your lipstick, the perfect bikini. Fashion translates people’s moods. It allows us to experiment every day, to show who we are, to be playful and feel comfortable. But behind all the fun it takes a lot of work and a variety of skills. It takes being creative and having fun with your work, even under pressure. At the end of the day it is a business. I love that fashion is so demanding in so many different fields. It combines a crazy dreamworld and knowledge of business. It is always moving and every season is a new challenge.

“Jade Harwood and I think that WATG is the first DIY fashion brand. We offer handmade knitwear alongside do-it-yourself knitting kits. I joined the gang six months before the launch. We were aiming to change the dusty image of knitting into a fashionable brand. Now it has been 3 years and I have loved the challenge to design for a young brand that has brought a new approach to fashion. We are about longevity. We want to create pieces that will last, products that are made with quality materials and that will stay in style. Jade and I design consciously. We now design clothes and products for people around the world, a creative community that shares certain values and skills. My career has developed not only as a fashion designer but also as a businesswoman. I have realized the importance of every aspect of a fashion company: design, production, press, budgets, communication around our brand, and the value of listening to our customers.

“As Lisa Sabrier, our founder said, ‘Wool And The Gang is a school.’ We don’t only offer DIY kits, but we also teach people skills; we have video tutorials online, and we organize knitting parties around the world. We want to push the school idea and organize more events. We also want to keep working closely with our community of knitters in Peru. Jade and I are going to Peru in a few months to work on our SS12 collection. The challenge of this year it is to look for new exciting materials.”