

Fashion designer Christian Joy on learning as you go along



February 8, 2018 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2598 words.

Tags: [Fashion](#), [Music](#), [Design](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#), [Independence](#), [Process](#).

You didn't have formal training when you started doing design. How did you decide to go for it?

When I moved to New York—I think it was like 1998—I had a job over on 6th Street not very far from CBGB's. I was constantly thinking about the punk scene. I remember reading [Please Kill Me](#) and being really inspired. I was like, "Wow, they decided to do it and they just did it." I had had all these ideas for making clothes but was like, "Oh, maybe I should just be a stylist or, you know, something else because I don't really know what I'm doing." Then I started thinking, "Well, you know, people have always made their own clothes so I'm sure I could figure it out."

It was this idea of: What's holding me back? Here's this thing that people have always had to do. So I started to look at traditional clothing and Japanese clothing, and clothing from the Middle Ages, and seeing how it was made and I thought, "I can probably figure this out." I started from there. I was inspired by this idea of people being like, "Ah, fuck it. I don't know what I'm doing but I can just try."

I just really wanted to do it, and it came together by accident.



Photo credit: Ioulex

Did learning on your own shift the way you design clothes?

Definitely. I went to school for a year for photography; that was the only art education I had. Because I had to do it on my own, it created a whole other look. I decided to teach

myself pattern making and so I bought a bunch of books on how to do it. Math is involved in it, and I was so bad at math, but now it's like I'm constantly using this math and understanding it and figuring it out.

I don't know if I would've been as successful if I would've gone to school for fashion. When I was in school I didn't feel interested or challenged. It was better for me to try to do it myself. Though some people need that to be more organized; to have that thing that they do every day. The thing that actually helped is that when I decided to do it I just made this decision of like, "Okay, well I have to do this every day and I'm going to have to do it this way." So it's more about keeping your eye on the prize. I think that persistence is why it worked.

You began working very early on with [Yeah Yeah Yeahs singer] Karen O. What was it like finding a lifelong collaborator when you first started?

It was amazing. Karen is pretty amazing to put up with some of the things that I was making. I worked at this store, Daryl K, on 6th Street, and she used to come in all the time and we would talk. I remember having a dress that I'd made there, it was this ratty prom dress that was repainted and stuff, and she came in with her record and was like, "Oh, will you make me one of these?" And I was like, "Yeah, okay." So I made her this kind of ugly, crazy dress. I remember seeing Yeah Yeah Yeahs for the first time and immediately realizing that they were going to be famous. It was like suddenly I saw her on the cover of all these magazines and I could just see it happening.

It's definitely the reason I kept pursuing it. Right away I was like, "Ok, if this is how it's going to be, then I have to teach myself how to do this, because you can't keep making the same thing for someone over and over again." So, as the band progressed, I tried progressing along with her to keep creating new looks and ideas. But, yeah, I can't imagine a better thing to have had happened. It really propelled me forward. I think it propelled both of us forward. It challenged each of us as well.



Photo credit: Ioulex

You've done installation work. Do you see this as a different aspect of the same practice? How does the art making fit in with the clothing design?

I see the art as an extension. The thing I like the most, actually, is creating prints and surface design, almost even more than making clothes. That's part of the whole process for

me, because I like to start with something that's recognizable or classic, and then work within that. I feel like it communicates something to the audience or to the way people think. It's sort of like, "Oh, you're looking at this form that you've seen a million times, but within it there are all these other things happening." It draws the viewer in, but then it also changes the way they think about what it is.

Mainly I just really want to create this whole world of my own. It's like these creatures and this environment that you walk through. It's almost like a story or creating your own history. I'm a huge fan of *Lord of the Rings*; it's kind of like this idea that you create these characters and this little world and you created this language and all this kind of stuff. For me, doing all of that stuff is an extension of this little world that I want to make.

How do you avoid burning out?

I'm usually by myself, so if I'm juggling a lot, I'll bring in more people to work with me, just to get a fresh perspective. In those situations, I like to have people around. That's kind of the opposite of how I usually am, because usually it's just me, and I'm in here sewing and making everything and off in my own head. So, to bring someone in, even just a friend, to hang out, is a thing for me. It relaxes me and makes me rethink things. Having someone you trust look at things is helpful, too.





Photo credit: Ioulex

I have a tailor that I work with, and she just knows what I want. I have an assistant that's also the same way. I can be like, "I want this, this is what I'm thinking," and she just knows how to do it. But I don't like sending it off to a factory. I like being able to work one-on-one with someone, and have them either here working with me or have it that I can go over and work with them. There's more of a discussion happening that way, and that's really what I need. If I just give it to a factory, there's no discussion, they're just trying to whip it out. Especially with stuff that's custom, you really need to be able talk. It has to have a certain quality to it.

Do you ever find yourself being pigeonholed?

For a long time I actually didn't get any work from working with Karen. I was always like, "Why don't people want this stuff?" But I think they so identified it with her that they didn't think I knew how to do anything else. It actually didn't change until I started working with Alabama Shakes, and then it was like, "Oh, she knows how to do more than one thing." Then I actually started getting work. Once I started working with them, I got work. Before that, I hardly ever got any work. I mean, I understand why. I'm mainly known for that stuff that I made for Karen because it's so extreme in comparison. For Brittany Howard I'm making her a white dress with a cape. It looks great and it's awesome on stage and stuff, but it's not to the level that Karen's stuff was.

When did you realize it was time to hire a manager or to have more of a team helping you out?

I needed somebody to help me with money because I'm the worst. I don't know how much to charge. Probably a lot of people are like that, but for me that's where I get screwed up. The problem is, I don't fit into a slot very well. I was thinking the other day about how when I first started off I thought, "Well, I should be a stylist." And I met with a couple agencies and they were like, "Why are you going to be a stylist? You should be a designer." And then I was like, "Eh." But the thing is you don't make any money being a designer, you make money being a stylist. So then I kind of was like, "Okay, well what am I then?" And then I'm like, "I guess I'm a costume designer because I'm making these costumes." And then people will see the term costume designer and go, "Oh, do you do movies?" And I'm like, "Wait, no." I'm creating these pieces that people wear on stage, but people don't see it as that. So it's hard.

I've found that it's hard for people to understand exactly what I do. They're like, "Oh, why are we going to hire her? To do what?" Because it's not like I'm an illustrator and I only do illustrations, or I only do this or I only do that. It's such a niche. But now I have this manager that helps with money and things like that. That's really what I need the most.



Photo credit: Ioulex

What's something that you wish you had known when you first started?

It would've been useful to have somebody say, "Oh, here's Christian. She can do this and this..." I would've liked somebody to sit me down and go: "Here are your options. You could try

to maybe do something like this or something like that."

When I started, I could've used a publicist. Somebody who helped me frame who I was. It was a free-for-all. I felt like I was tumbling down a hill. I'd worked for a couple small designers before, so I understood going to factories and doing stuff like that and what things cost. That was super helpful. But just figuring out how to guide my career would've been helpful, too.





Photo credit: Ioulex

I think part of the thing was Karen. I'm Karen's costume designer, so really what they want is Karen ultimately. Karen as the package. You're kind of a part of it, but you're kind of not. I remember we were doing this magazine shoot and they wanted Karen on the cover and it was this whole thing, and this guy calls me up and he goes, "Christian, Karen is a fashion icon." And I was like, "Yeah, but I made every single thing that she's worn."

I mean, I would get lots of press. I got great press. And Karen was always awesome about it, going, like, "This is Christian Joy," or whatever. But then people would still kind of go like, "Oh, I love what Karen made for herself." I remember getting so steaming mad. I'd be like, "She didn't make that!" That's the other thing. That's the incredible thing about being a rock star or a pop star. People just put all their beliefs in you. They want to believe that person is doing everything. Like with Beyoncé: she's making her outfits, she's doing her hair, she's choreographing her backup dancers.

Being a designer is a lot like being an editor or a director. I'd rather be behind the scenes than be on T.V.



Photo credit: Ioulex

Are you still learning things and still stumbling upon stuff and still figuring things out?

Hell yeah. It's only now after 16 years of pattern making that I'm like, "Wow, I'm really good at this. I actually know how to sew." My friend that's a tailor is so incredible. I wish I could be her in so many ways because she knows how to do all these things and she just whips it together so fast, where I'm still fumbling through it.

I was watching this room full of friends making things. I wasn't making anything myself, but they were all at these sewing projects. I was watching every one of them and I was like, "You're doing that wrong, you're doing that wrong, you're doing that wrong." And then I realized, "Oh, I actually know how to do this. Because I know what you're doing wrong and I can actually teach you how to do that right." And I was like, "Oh, I could teach a class on this." It's so stupid. It's like, "Of course you could, you dumb ass, you've been doing this for 15 years." So, yeah, I always feel like I'm never quite living up to what I could really do.

Christian Joy's top 5 influencers:

John Waters for his irreverent humor and because his DIY approach to film making inspired me to make clothes.

Yoko Ono. In the beginning of my career I read something about Yoko Ono taking a piece she had made in the '60s that was meant to represent the '60s sky and how in the '80s she poured gold over it. (I think I'm remembering this correctly!) I liked that she wasn't so precious about her work that she didn't feel like it could change. I also of course was impressed by her willingness to change. When I first started making looks for Karen O she would pour beer all over herself and people would ask me if it upset me, but I always felt that Karen was adding history to the piece and made it more relevant.

Issey Miyake. He's my all time favorite designer. It's everything, the bold shapes, the colors, the inventive use of fabrics, even his ad campaigns. It's all incredible.

Sonia Delaunay. I remember walking into a show of her work that was up at the Cooper Hewitt and nearly bursting into tears. Her work feels very joyful.

David Bowie. Ok, I know everyone loves David Bowie, but I remember around the Yeah Yeah Yeahs second record rediscovering David Bowie. When I was maybe like eight or nine I remember my friends babysitter being a huge David Bowie fan. This was in the '80s and I remember her having this huge poster on her wall with David Bowie as the Thin White Duke. I thought he looked like Dracula with his sharp teeth and slicked back hair but I also just loved the starkness of his clothing and that he kind of scared me. That is actually my favorite Bowie look. Later on when I started making Karen's looks for *Show Your Bones* I became really influenced by the looks Kansai Yamamoto made for Ziggy Stardust. I loved that David Bowie looked like an alien and that he was the genderless being. I felt like there was so much power in this and I tried to work it into Karen's looks.

Name

Christian Joy

Vocation

Fashion Designer, Artist





Photo by Ioulex