



## INTERVIEW WITH SARAH BIBB-DESIGNER AND OWNER OF FOLLY



**BY: MICHAEL CAVAZOS**

Local designer, Sarah Bibb, can be found nearly every day in her charming shop, [Folly](#), located on [Northwest 16<sup>th</sup> and Lovejoy](#) in the Pearl. After visiting her store last week, I was fortunate enough to get an interview appointment. A petite brunette with an infectious smile and laugh, Ms. Bibb openly shared much of her story as a designer and her experience in Portland. I am a great fan of her store and even more so after getting to know the woman behind the fun fashions and thriving business. Check out my review of the store [here](#). Please enjoy the following interview with an inspiring voice in our Portland design community!

### **How long have you been designing for?**

I guess I've had my line for 9 years.

### **Why did you start designing?**

I went to the fashion institute in LA a long time ago and I did a Summer program with Parsons Paris, also a long time ago, and then I stepped away from it. I didn't really know how to make it any kind of career. I veered into other things and I did a lot of other stuff for a while. And then, it just kind of came back around. A friend suggested I make things. I was having a mental- (she starts laughing) like a nervous breakdown in my life and I was like, *What can I do?* Ahhhh! And she said, *You should make things. You're really good at that. You should just make things.* And I was like (in a mock hysterical/half crying voice), *What should I make?* And she said, *Make skirts.* 'Cause we had a friend who was making tops who went on to pretty good success, and she was like, *Make skirts and I'll sell them with Carmen's tops.*

### **And that's how it all started?**

Yeah... She was a little bit of a guardian angel.

### **So when you decided to go to fashion school, what was the big push... at that point were you just in love with fashion? You thought this is what I want to do with my life?**

Um, I don't really remember. I remember that I didn't know what I wanted to do. It was the only thing that had any interest to me... my grandmother was a seamstress.

**Did she teach you?**

She didn't really teach me to sew. We made other things. It's funny, 'cause I always attribute it to her, but, when I think back, I don't think she ever really taught me sewing. Now I understand it's 'cause she probably didn't want me touching her machines, you know. (She laughs.) 'Cause I don't want anybody touching my machines either! But we did all kinds of other things. I spent a lot of time watching her.

**And so you graduated from the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising (FIDM)?**

No. I went there for a year. It was a two-year program and I did not go back for my second year.

**You were just disenchanted? You just thought, oh, I want to do something else?**

For me it was- it's a technical school. And I'm not a very- that's not my strong suit. So I think after the first year I realized it wasn't the right program for me. I had no interest in becoming a pattern maker. Or, you know, the technical end of it. At the time, that's all I could see that it was leading me towards. I mean this is like 20-something years ago. I was in a different place. I wasn't good enough at any of the technical stuff. My illustrations weren't beautiful enough to be an illustrator. My pattern making skills weren't like high enough to be a pattern maker, and I didn't understand how I could take those things and make it my own at that time. That took me a long time to come to.

**So then you started making skirts.**

Yeah, like 15 years later. (She giggles.) Yeah, it was a long circuitous route. The stuff that I learned at school was valuable to me, but it's not like it was an A to B to here.

**You mentioned the other day that you had a boutique by appointment in LA.**

It was in a building, you know, so I didn't have a store front. I saw people privately, and I would have parties... open house parties like every 6 weeks where people could come and shop. It was really fun and it was a really creative period because I would spend my days making things. It was like the opposite of what I'm doing now. Like now I see people all day long (giggle) and I have very little creative time. And THEN, I had so much creative time, but I didn't have access to the people the same way. There's a benefit to both. The balance is still what I long for. It was a beautiful little shop. Really, I built sort of my name or whatever by doing that. I still have people who will call me or send me pictures of them wearing a skirt they bought from me five years ago. It's nice.

**So what was the impetus to move to Portland? Did it have anything to do with fashion?**

I wanted to have a store and there was no way for me to do that in Los Angeles. I mean, everyday I look at just the physical space that my store's in, and I cannot believe how lucky I am. It's huge, it's light, it's really everything I would want; and there was just no way at that moment for me to do that in Los Angeles.

**When you moved to Portland, had you already staked out a place? Or were you like, at some point I'm going to open a place?**

I moved to Portland with the intention of sort of slowing my life down. I just wanted to make things. I wanted to get back to what really makes me happy and Portland seemed like a great place to do that. I noticed immediately that there was a lot of boutiques and independent businesses. It's just big enough to support this kind of business. So I moved here and spent about 10 months doing random jobs and getting my bearings of where I am and where I wanted to be and then I got ready. I was like, *Ok, it's time to make the move*, and stumbled on this place. I wasn't even looking in this quadrant. I knew I couldn't afford anything in Northwest. I just was driving by and there was a 'For Rent' sign. I called on a whim, really. I was like, *Hmmm, I probably can't afford it, but I'll call anyway*.

**And it was fate and you found it!**

Yeah, it was totally meant to be. And when I first moved here, I thought, *I want a business on Lovejoy*. I was like: I love that word. What a nice man that must have been to deserve that surname. (Laugh.) You know? So it was totally meant to be.



**So what's the story behind Folly then?**

The name?

**Well, I mean, yeah the name, but also, the business itself. When did this business model form?**

Well, this is what I guess I had in mind even when I was doing my by appointment place. When I opened, it was all my stuff, and, as it went on, I started incorporating other things. I would carry a shoe one season or some bags, because it's also fun as a buyer. That's when I knew that I wanted to have a store, because it's also very fun. I'm not a big shopper, ironically, but it's very fun for me to shop for the store.

**I'm sure. That must be exciting and also inspiring to see what other people are doing.**

Yeah, and it's really nice to also support other small designers or find things that nobody has and nurture that in someone else. So the concept was always there that I would have a store and a certain percentage of it would be my designs and that it would be supported by these other things. I don't make jeans, you know. I don't make t-shirts. All these things that you need to have, especially in a casual environment like Portland. You need to have these casual basics.

**Right. To broaden the scope and make things more available.**

Yeah, and when I opened here, I didn't have very much stuff because, you know, there's the lag time between when you buy things and when you can receive them. There's only certain things that are available immediately in retail. And I didn't know anything. (She laughs.) My stuff was about half, maybe more than half, and I carried a friend of mine's line called Cameo. We did sales together and worked together a lot in Los Angeles. She was really kind and sent me boxes of stuff, kind of on consignment so that I could fill my store. I think I had jeans, too, 'cause I found a jean line and it just grew. The longer you're in business the more people find you. So that's really nice.

**Do you do trade shows and things like that?**

I do occasionally, but I don't really have a good travel schedule 'cause I'm in the store all the time. I try to go to LA once a year and, if it coincides with a market week, that's great. If it doesn't, I go to the showrooms and buy stuff. Some of the lines have Northwest reps so they'll see me up here. Once I get to know the line, I can order online. The first round of doing that is very nerve-racking. Sometimes it comes and it's just wrong.

**'Cause you're just looking at everything online. So you're never quite sure how it's going to be in person.**

Yeah. You need to know how it fits. Once I'm familiar with it, though, I feel more confident that I can do that because I can gauge by the way it (the clothing) normally is. I'm a pretty conservative buyer. I don't ever get very much of anything.

**You know what I love about your store is that it does feel very curated. It feels like you have a very specific idea of what you want. So it all works really well.**

Yeah, and not everything in here is something that I personally would wear, but it is all within like a specific band of what I like, even if it's not my personal style. 'Cause I don't expect everyone to dress like me. (She laughs at herself.) 'Cause I wear the same thing almost everyday. I wear vintage if I'm going out. New clothes don't really fit me unless I made them.

**I love vintage.**

Yeah. I'm just really attracted to old things. So people a lot of time will come in and they're like, 'Is this a vintage store?' You know, even the new stuff. Even if it's not mine. I think it all has that feel. That's what I'm attracted to. That's why I liked this space. I like the old floors. I like that it's old. It makes it more interesting to me.

**And it is nice that you have very modern touches to everything.**

Yeah. 'Cause you don't want to actually be old. I don't want to be old. I just like old things. I like old things as they move forward. It is specific. I'm not doing vintage head to toe. It's a piece. The flavor of that is nice.

**What's the story with the name, Folly?**

That's too long of a story! (She laughs.) 'Cause there is no story. I just like naming things. If I could have my dream job, it would be that person who names colors or something. (She laughs some more.) The definition that I prefer and that actually makes more sense with my store is an architectural folly. In architecture, a folly is something that doesn't



really serve any purpose other than for aesthetic reasons. I started out doing skirts and my skirts had these asymmetrical ruffles. The ruffles are sort of folly because they don't serve any purpose actually. They're not clothing... they're not-

**There's no utilitarian reason behind them.**

Exactly! They have no use except for beauty or aesthetic reasons. Like if you're at a castle and there's dinosaur hedges, those are folly. It's just an extra little (squeak). That's what I like. That's the definition I adhere to. I also like the shape of the letters (in the word Folly) and the sound of it.

**Yeah. Your logo is great! You're line though, is called Sarah Bibb.**

I recently changed the label. It used to be called One Ear Dog Frog and that was just kind of random and it just stuck. Pretty soon people kind of knew me as, 'oh you're that one dog frog' whatever person. Then, this past year, I decided to just kind of grow it up a little bit.

**What have been some of the biggest challenges you face as a designer?**

Well, as a designer in Portland, there are many challenges.

**What would they be?**

(Giggling) They would be access to labor, materials, and industry, you know. It's a very different challenge than in Los Angeles, where there is a fashion industry. It's really strange 'cause there are so many designers here, and there are so many creative people. It's wonderful! It's a very nurturing, really supportive community of artists, but I would like to grow my line so that I can be manufacturing and wholesaling and making money and all of these things. That's really impossible in this town, I've found. I mean there are some people doing it. There's some small production houses up here but it's just very different. It's on a different scale than it is in a city like LA or New York. That's what I miss because I feel like I was spoiled with that at the beginning. It's hard to be without it.

**So right now you're making everything yourself?**

No. When I opened, I was making everything myself, but the store was very slow. It was a slow beginning. Now, the store is really busy and I'm so grateful for that! I don't have nearly as much sewing time. Almost everything (anything that's not one of a kind) is actually sewn by someone else. I'll make the first one or two and then do a pattern, and we sort of move forward from there.

**And they're made locally?**

I work with two different sewing facilities. One is here and one is in LA.

**What were some great surprises along the way?**

I've really been so pleasantly surprised by how people take the time to care about small businesses in Portland. They really do. It's a very wonderful and remarkable thing. I think that's the advantage of being in a slightly smaller place, where you have time to think about where you shop and care about making sure that your local places are busy. It's really nice.

**And you would say then that that's very different from LA.**

Yeah, I feel like in big cities you don't have time almost. I mean, LA is a very progressive place but your day-to-day life is just about getting everything done as quickly as possible. There's just a different priority attached to things so you just don't ask the same questions... It's a different vibe completely. I don't have any interest in having a retail store in Los Angeles. I'd like to be producing my line in Los Angeles and taking advantage of the industry 'cause that's the thing that I miss the most, but I love the people in Portland. They're just moving at a nice pace where they can think about things like that and talk to you about it. I have people that will come in and aren't really my customer, but they just check on me. *I just want to make sure you're doing ok. How's everything going?* It's very kind. And that's not the vibe you get, I think, in a bigger city.

**Can you tell me who are some of the key people or key aspects that have shaped the success of Folly?**

Well, every single one of my customers have been key. I have some really incredibly loyal regular customers. And I know people have been really good about spreading the word. Word of mouth being the absolute best advertising possible. Then, I have some friends who have been really helpful just by being here. My friend Lauren who's on all my Facebook pictures. She's such an angel, you know. It's just so great that she has been at my beck and call to do modeling, which has really been helpful. People are really generous with their time and support.

**Where is your specific line going?**

(She gives a smile.) You'll have to just wait and see.

**Tell me about the materials you like to work with:**

I love working with chiffon, silk or even like poly-chiffons. I love that weight. It's really nice. And I love cotton, but it has gotten so expensive. It's killing me.

**All of your [Hyla](#) skirts are made with cotton?**

Yes. Sometimes I do wool in the winter, but I have to make sure that it's soft enough that you'll reverse it. But mostly cotton. I do denim, too.

**Tell me what your inspirations are as a designer.**

My main inspiration is the fabric. That is part of what is challenging in Portland, not having as much access to fabric as I did in Los Angeles. *I love fabric! I just love it! I love touching it. I like walking through a fabric store with my eyes closed and stopping when my hand feels something.* I'm super tactile. So everything in my store is really soft. People always comment on that, *God everything is so soft!*

**Your Hylas also have really great prints! Is there a strong attraction to particular kinds of prints?**

The fun with the Hylas is the mixing of the prints. I love mixing!

**So who do you imagine wearing your clothes and why?**

I have this incredibly broad range of customers that's so exciting to me. I have young girls, like teenagers, who love

my clothes, and my oldest customer is I think 92. Defining my customer doesn't have an age attached to it is what I've realized. It's more of like an attitude. I get so many women that come in that will say, *Oh, I'm too old for this* or *This is too young for me*. They can say that at 25 or 70. So I don't know how to define her, but, usually, it's someone who appreciates design. A lot of the creative people in the community love my things because there's always specific elements to the design, either my stuff or things I carry, they have specific details. So I think appreciation of design is really a part of it. That can be anybody. That can be a mom, that can be a kid, that can be a grandma.

**I think I read a comment where somebody was like *Sarah's great; she'll tell you exactly how you look.***

I never let anyone walk out of here looking foolish. I'm very honest about it. People will ask me, 'Is this length appropriate?' Sometimes I'll be like, 'Well, it's close. How do you feel?' 'Cause it really is how you feel in the clothes. It's like people ask me, 'Is this a dress or a top?' And I'm like, 'Well, I guess it's just how you feel about your thighs. It's whatever you want it to be.' Usually if people will let me help them, they almost always end up with more things that fit and that they feel great in. So then they have to pick. So then we pare it down. And I'm very good at that. You know, like saying, you'll wear this one more or this is more fun. What's your goal? Are you trying to impress an ex-boyfriend or do you just want to go to work?

**Personal attention is great! And that's why the internet is more difficult.**

The internet is more difficult. I sell a lot of stuff on Facebook because there's all that immediate interaction that works really well for me. People can ask me straight up, 'Is this gonna look good on me?' And if I know them at all, I can say yes or no. And I'll tell them, 'cause if you don't feel good in something, you don't wear it. I attach agenda to inanimate objects all the time, and they don't want to sit in your closet. A beautiful party dress wants to go to a party. Why does it want to hang in your closet? Like with its tags on. They want to go out and do stuff.

**And again, this speaks to the wearability of your clothes. If they know they look good in it, and they feel good in it-**

Then they're gonna wear it all the time. And if it's a little out of people's comfort zone, I usually tell people there's a 48 hour rule. Wear it immediately and then it's easy. The longer you let it sit, the less likely you are to wear it. Sometimes I'll just like have people wear it out of the store. 'Cause then they're wearing it and people will be like, *Cute dress!* And they're gonna wear it again.

**So where do you think fashion is going in general? And specifically in Portland?**

I do pay attention to trends, but they have nothing to do with Portland at all or what I buy for the store. Portland is a really interesting market because people don't really care about trends as much, which in a way is very fun. It has its ups and its downs. The downside is you can't bring something in just because it's on trend. Because it will sit. There's no radar here. People care about fashion but they just don't... I don't know. The good news is that I don't have to pay attention to them as a buyer. I can buy things that fit my aesthetic and sort of like ease things toward that direction without having to hit them over the head with the new pocket on a jean. In Los Angeles people will know if it's last year's stitching. Nobody here knows or gives a shit. (Laughing.) It doesn't matter. That's kind of great! But sometimes there are trends that- I mean maxi dresses for instance, I tried a few years ago and realized that I don't know if that'll ever really happen in Portland in a big way. Because we have such a short summer, we want to expose our skin when we have the opportunity. Maxi dresses are really big for Fall and they're on trend for Spring next year again, but Fall and Spring here, once it's wet, you can't wear things that touch the ground. There is something about pragmatism that drives people here. I think the weather dictates a lot of this, which is why Los Angeles is the trendiest city... Here you do have to think a little more... You know, I had beautiful rain coats last year, but they didn't have a hood. And people were just like, *There's no hood.* I was like *Uhhhhhh!*

**So they really are looking for something more practical.**

Yes, they like this balance. In the summer, they are more willing to throw that away 'cause we don't have the weather to deal with as much, but, you'll see once November, middle of November rolls around, you go into a very long rainy season and there's a lot of things that people just can't do or won't do. That's hard. That's hard for me because I'm a sun person. I like the warm and flip-flops and sandals and I now have so many boots in my closet it's crazy. I wear boots and tights for about seven or eight months out of the year.

**Do you sell shoes here ever?**

I do. I'll have boots for Fall. Some really beautiful boots. I don't do many. I'll do maybe one or two shoes a season.

**Tell me some designers you admire:**

I love [Kenzo](#). I love the old stuff and the new stuff so much. That's one of my favorite lines. I love pretty much all Japanese designers, I gotta say. I love that style. It's not at all reflected in what I do. Kenzo somewhat because I love the way that they mix prints and that's a much more playful, especially now, it's a more playful, light, really feminine and beautiful line. I love that. But I love all the sort of old school Japanese designers, as well.

**Where did the idea for the Hyla skirt come from?**

Well, ok, so I was making all of these really fancy, girly skirts and I had a whole slew of customers that they were just jeans girls. Like LA is really a jeans town. Fancy jeans but jeans. And they were just like, *Mm, I don't wear skirts, I don't wear skirts, I don't wear skirts*. So I decided to make a wrap skirt thinking that's easier for jeans girls. It didn't have a ruffle. I think I did three versions of a reversible wrap and sold them all. And a friend of mine bought one, and every time I saw her I was like that's the best one I made. That's the best one. And she was like, *I love this skirt!* And she was a total jeans and t-shirt girl. So I asked her to borrow it back. I was like, *Can I borrow that to make a pattern?* 'Cause I didn't make a pattern for any of them. I just cut them free hand. So they were all different. They were all different lengths, different grades of A-line. So I borrowed it back from her and her name was Hyla. So I had it like for two weeks working on a pattern and she called me every other day, *Are you done with my skirt? Are you done with my skirt?* She wanted it back because she's an actress and it was her audition skirt. Because she felt really confident in it, and it looked great on her. She still has the original Hyla.

**And it looks like it's suited for every shape and size.**

Yeah, and it's funny because when I made the skirt, everyone was wearing everything really low. Really, really low. So it really only looked good on the girls that had those tiny little boy bodies. Like it didn't look good on hippy girls because if I wear it low, I just look shorter and fatter. She was built like that, like one of those slim hipped girls. For years I didn't wear the skirt 'cause I was like it just looked dumpy on me down there. Then, as time went on, and things started moving up, I was like, *Oh, it does work on everybody!* They can wear it down there, where they're not the widest, and I can wear it up here at my waist. And so it does work for everybody now. There was a time period at first where it didn't 'cause nobody would wear anything above their hip bones. So now I make people tuck in their shirts and put it at their waist if they have a really feminine shape and they're like, *Oh my god, that's so much better.* It came about to get girls out of their pants.

**And it worked! Ok, last question, 'cause I know you have to greet your public. Any upcoming events?**

Yes, the PDX Collective sale is August 27-28<sup>th</sup>. 11 boutiques are participating. It's a great sale! Also, right now we are having a sale on Fidelity denim in the store! All 50% off!

**Thank you!**