

A podcast series by Sara Fowles about Black women knitters as part of 'YARNING' projects by Trevor Pitt

Episode 1: Sara

Sara Fowles 0:01

Hello, welcome to Yarning: Tales from Birmingham, a short podcast series by me Sara Fowles about Black women knitters in Birmingham. This podcast series is also part of 'Yarning' projects by Trevor Pitt. This is episode one, where Trevor Pitt interviews me Sara Fowles.

Sara Fowles 0:23

My name is Sara Fowles. I'm a Black woman from Birmingham. I live in Kings Heath with my partner and our cat overlord Zeus. I describe myself as a maker, I think it's probably a good title. Yeah, I love to make and I always have always had something in my hands. And I probably think especially now, in 2022, you need to do something with your hands to stop you from going quite crazy.

Sara Fowles 0:55

I think it's probably the only thing battering down my sanity at the moment. I love to create things. So I'm not a designer, I want to be able to take a pattern or a garment or whatever and kind of do my whim. As I feel. As I see fit. At that time.

I like following a pattern. But then I also like going off piste a bit by taking things like taking the framework of a pattern to use as something else to take the basis of something like the general measurement, stitch counts, and then made something like you know, do my own kind of fair isle patterns or colour work or whatever. And just use the structure of that, I'd quite like that. But designing no.

You know, making is definitely important to me. I've got like a whole room dedicated to it at home. Two big windows, lovely big cutting kind of central table with a Formica top, bright red. And then a big white table with sewing machine, overlocker on it. And then underneath live my knitting machines. And there's a sofa in there; little sofa bed. Lots of shelving, to store everything. Record deck. Kind of everything's on hand.

Sara Fowles 2:18

I've got like, what are they called that, you know, those pegboard, where you put the little... with tools hanging out, all my fixed circular needles and then good plastic storage tubs with lids for all my yarn. Yes, it's a nice place to be.

I always listen to music when I'm making. And I think that in some ways, maybe sometimes what I listen to affects what I'm making. So if I've got something quite difficult to do, there's only certain things I can listen to. So maybe something that I'm really familiar with for an awkward task. Whereas if something's a bit easier, or something I'm much more comfortable with or not too anxious about I can listen to new music, but definitely a record player. And I also like the interruption of going and having to turn the record over. It's like a little mini break to walk from the table over to the record player, turn it over and back. And it also gives me it's a good way of keeping track of time.

Sara Fowles 3:20

My mom had, I think they're called Horn, I think the proper ones are called Horn Cabinets. And it's like a cabinet that your sewing machine's built into and you kind of lift the lid on it and kind of pull the sewing machine up. And then a little flap of wood came down to kind of keep it in there. And it was kept in my mom's, in my mom's room, in front of the window. It had like pride of place this cabinet. And I was fascinated by it because the sewing machine came out at the top. But then there was kind of a little cupboard next to it, where you were meant to keep all your, you know, accessories and whatever. But in there was my mom's medical kit from when she was a district nurse. So it was kind of off limits because there were scalpels and syringes and you know, all kinds of things that little kids shouldn't be messing with. But my mom taught me to sew when I was about six or seven, because I think she was just annoyed with me being obsessed with the cabinet. So it was kind of show her what it does. And then the mystery will be taken away and then hopefully she'll leave it alone. But then I really got massively the sewing bug and I tore up like pillowcases and my mom had a whole stash of old clothes from the 70's that she didn't wear any more. So I'd make things out of that. And then I think I just kind of was like, you know sewing's where it's at. Fashion. It's fashion, darling. And I wanted to, at that point, I think I wanted to be a fashion designer. Oh, I think that's what I thought I wanted to be what I actually wanted to be was a seamstress.

Sara Fowles 5:00

I wanted to make clothes. But I didn't know that that was a thing. But I knew about a fashion designer. So I wanted to be a fashion designer. And I made all kinds of things. A waistcoat, tie dyed it myself, in a bucket in the garden. My mom made pretty much all of my clothes till I was about nine or ten. It wasn't something we necessarily did together, it was something that both of us did.

Seemed more like these are the things you have to teach your children like, you know, teaching them to go to the toilet and to brush their teeth. And I think she was thinking of it as this is a skill that you need. And that will always come in handy. And in that respect, she's absolutely right.

Sara Fowles 5:51

So my mom was originally born in Jamaica, and came to Britain in the mid 50's. As an 18 year old. Where my mom grew up is really rural, you know, it's not a town. You know, I think the equivalent is like a hamlet here in the UK, it's a tiny place. And I think it was mainly out of necessity, you needed to be able to sew, because that's how you made your clothes, or that's how you got a garment when you wanted it. There weren't shops. Everything they needed they had to make themselves.

But she came to the UK and trained to be a nurse, was at nursing college for, you know, two, three years, when she first arrived here. My mom would save up money to buy fancy clothes. So she's got gowns, from the 60's and 70's. And there are pictures of her in them and also there were kind of things that I wasn't allowed to touch when I was a kid because they were like nice things.

There's definitely like a Sunday best thing. And also that thing of even if you know, you just worked on the buses, or you were just a nurse, that didn't mean that, like fancy things were out of your reach, it just meant you had to, you know, maybe you had to save up for them and that kind of thing.

Yeah, my mom always looked fantastic, actually, and was very proud of her appearance. I still don't know what my mom's natural hair colour is, I've never seen it in my whole life. She's always dyed her hair, this kind of red colour. She's always nicely presented, and she is quite a 'proper lady'. You know, she has a petticoat on, for example.

I had a Vogue subscription when I was like 16/17. So it came through to the door every month. And I would read it from cover to cover. And then a lot of that was kind of I wanted to wear 'x'. And if I wanted to wear that, then I was going to probably have to try and make it, and a lot of it half successfully. I'm not sure how good my actual sewing skills were. But I wore everything that I made. And I was quite proud to wear it. And I didn't really care what anybody else thought. And I think that's that was definitely instilled by my mom, as in, you know, be proud of what you've made.

A bit of a DIY aesthetic there, I suppose of like, if you had money, you'd buy Chanel, but you don't. So you do something else. Like having those skills that my mum gave, gives you the opportunity to do it exactly how

you want it. And that's really, still now is the thing that massively kind of is massively satisfying. I'm the master of my own destiny in that way. And that's quite a nice thing to be able to do.

Sara Fowles 8:51

And I think that that comes from that kind of passing it on, that she passed it on to me. So now it's my turn to pass it on to somebody else. You know, anybody can knit, you know, yes, some people knit better than others. But it's like everything. You know, some people sing better than others. Some people run better than others, but everybody can. Everybody can try and do that. And so it's just about imparting their skills. Also, I quite like the idea of kind of having an army of knitters and makers, like, get them over to like, to my side. A bit like Darth Vader, come to the dark side and make all your things, you can build worlds! You can have anything you want!

It's such a simple thing to teach somebody. But then what they can then do with it afterwards is there's just a myriad and you know, a lifetime of things that they could do after that, just from learning two stitches. That's incredible. That is incredible. And I think once you get that connection, or once you start to make that connection, then it becomes like everything else with making, a bit of an obsession.

Sara Fowles 10:00

If you don't keep developing, then it gets stale. You know, there's a whole world of sewing and knitting out there. There's always going to be somebody else out there who's, even though they're a knitter, they've got a different specialism to you. And they're the best people to learn from. A person who's knitted socks for 20 years, that's the person I want to learn to knit socks from, or give me tips. Or somebody else who's, I don't know, you know someone who does Entrelac or something that you'd never really thought of doing. And that informal library of, of information. And the best way to get it is, you know, over a cup of tea and slice of cake or a pint or something. You can draw so many fantastic things out of, out of people and, and then and share it as well. And it somehow transforms into this communal thing, you're making something personal or something private for yourself, but yet you can do it in the company of others. It's a really, it's something quite, it's quite hard to put into words, you kind of just need to be there, you know, that kind of the string, the yarn that that kind of ties us all together is, is really, it's kind of addictive, actually.

It's like music in that way. It's, in some ways, it's a universal language. I don't, you know, there's stuff about sewing and knitting and making that I don't even necessarily need to speak the same language as somebody, I

can communicate with them through my knitting or through my sewing. And, you know, like musicians can, I can, I could 'play' in inverted commas, my knitting with somebody else. And I don't even need to share a language or a culture with them. We can get together. And it's community building, a way of building bridges and also a way of understanding other people. You know, so it's a good, it's a good entry into someone else's world.

So I suppose one of the biggest projects, and it's ongoing from when I started devising my own things, where was Stitches and Hos, which started out as a social kind of meetup stitch night. Borne out of me not knowing any other knitters to ask advice about a thing in a pattern that I didn't understand. And it was kind of before a lot of that stuff was really online and easily accessible. So yeah, we started a night and it seemed like a good way, a safe-ish way to try and meet other people. And also that it was going to be fun.

Sara Fowles 12:40

I had a conversation with some friends about how if you walked into a pub, and kind of walked into the back room, and there was a load of people knitting, you'd almost think you'd stepped into some other kind of dimension, and how great that would be. So we kind of decided, well let's do that! So we did. And we've made it more like a social event. Like you were going to go around to someone's house for an evening and just have a few drinks, but you were going to knit and they were going to play music, and it was all going to be quite relaxed. To go to the pub and you could meet anybody. Go to a venue to do one of our social nights and someone who doesn't know that it's going on, turns the corner. And that second, that split second look on their face is what it's all about. Because they still can't quite compute of why this quite personal, or some or seemingly private activity is out and proud. Got my needles out knitting and there's nothing you can do about it. But also that that is a really great conversation starter, like knitting in public: it doesn't matter where I do it, I will always end up talking to somebody about my knitting.

So at the moment, we hold our Stitch Ups together at a place in Moseley called The Hive. It used to be a Pizza Express restaurant. It's really informal. And I think nearly 10 years since we've been doing it, that people are still amazed that they can come along. And they can just sit down next to whoever take out their project, whatever it is that they're working on, and just be. And you know, they can talk to somebody if they want to, or if they don't want to, or they can they can make or they can just ask questions. There's no money involved, either. We get the space for free. You know, we buy some biscuits and there is tea, and it's just very gentle. A very gentle way of doing it.

So our tagline is you don't even have to be good. At a Stitches and Hos event, not interested necessarily in "oh, you've got to be an expert" or "you've got to have been doing it for years and years." No, it's very much about just come along and take part. There's not much in this life that you get for free anymore. Yeah, there's nothing better than a room of what 20 odd people sat around knitting. Where they, in inverted commas, shouldn't be.

Sara Fowles 15:20

So Yarningham is an annual yarn festival, I suppose the best way to describe that we that I produce with some friends. And then I think the thing we've always tried to do with the Yarningham is we've been to other wool festivals, and other yarn shows. And there's lots of it that I really like, but there was lots of it that I really didn't like. And so it was kind of, well, if we do a yarn festival, we can we can do the things the way we want to. And also we can kind of try and shake things up a little bit. And yeah, it's been a real been a real journey, kind of taking that Stitches and Hos project, in some ways, kind of formalising it into a festival.

We really try to ensure that every edition is not the same as the last one. Taking things from what I knew from, you know, music events and being into music, that thing of putting it into, like an urban context just seemed like, well, why wouldn't that work? That's a perfect way of doing it. We've kind of wanted to be the kind of cutting edge of the yarn world. So we were very interested in the new. The new indie dyer; the new technique; the new workshop. You can go to lots of yarn shows and see the same exhibitor in the same space year after year and in some ways, that's quite nice and comforting, but I wanted none of that in the Yarningham. I wanted almost, like, every time someone came, every corner was going to be different to how it was last time.

And you know, the clue's in the name, it's yarn and Birmingham as a portmanteau. And so that is really important that the Birmingham aspect of it, you know, I'm a Brummie, and that makes me a Brummie knitter, you know. I don't think Yarningham could really exist anywhere else other than Birmingham.

Sara Fowles 17:20

So places like Stirchley Baths, where we first held it, were just really important. It was a building that was firmly part of its community for years and years and years, as the swimming baths. Gone into, you know, gone into disrepair. And then it was a community group that basically kind of raised it from the ashes. And so it was the perfect space for us. Through it being quite successful, it kind of outgrew that that room, if we could somehow put extra rooms into Stirchley Baths, we would have

stayed there. But then we moved to Uffculme in Kings Heath, Moseley borders. And I think that is, like it's a really Brummie venue.

Our in-person event this year, fingers crossed, will be on the ninth and tenth of July at the Uffculme Center. And we are planning to shake things up quite considerably. This year. Having an enforced break from in-person events has given us an opportunity to really think about what works and what doesn't work. The basic elements of it will still be there, you know, two, three hour workshops, now all exists digitally. And I think that's brilliant, because it means so many more people can access them. So really changing that into, like I said, some really special workshops; very bespoke, very of a time of a moment, here and now and unrepeatable as well.

And then looking at really how we use the space at Uffculme differently. I think there are potential opportunities. It's a great building. It's a beautiful building, but it's also actually quite accessible. It's easy to get around, maybe take less of the yarn and more of the festival aspect of it, I suppose, is the best way of describing it, our current thinking at the moment.

Because we've always been about that community. And I think that's the thing, that's always exciting about Yarningham. And it's about potentially bringing that even more to the fore and making it absolutely the most important thing about the festival. And that the kind of the commerce bit of it, is a second and to truly make it a second, that it's not necessarily about coming and spending money. It can be about coming and having a good time.