

Singing with every fibre

What does music and knitting have in common? Wren Ross tells Judy Darley that the answer is fibre, of course!

American knitwear designer and performer Wren Ross regards singing and knitting as natural bedfellows, and explains this by using string theory—the idea that the essence of every atom consists of vibrating string.

“If that’s so, then the whole universe is an amazingly complex musical afghan!” she says. “Using two sticks and some yarn, I can make something that wasn’t there before and make a joyful noise by singing while I’m at it.”

This isn’t a recent discovery for Wren, however, as she has childhood memories of knitting garter swatches that she wrapped around her Barbie doll to form impromptu ‘couture’.

“My Barbie doll would sing cabaret songs and the fusion of my singing and knitting career had begun, along with my penchant for design.”

From the age of 13, Wren was learning arias, art songs and show tunes, and by 14, she was a soloist in her synagogue’s choir and sang professionally at coffee houses. She went on to study

Classical Voice at Boston University before transferring to the Theatre department, beginning an acting career that’s still going strong 30 years later. However, cabaret remains top of her bill. “I love to create thematic shows with songs that tell stories,” she says. “The challenge is to find the dramatic or comic event in each piece of music as well as play with musical genres.”

Stories of Fibre

Wren continues to knit to help channel her relentless energy, and now takes commissions and teaches classes in creating floor-length knitted coats that use symbolic motifs, patterns and colours to tell the stories of the wearers’ lives.

“I call them ‘Stories of Fibre,’” she says. “For centuries, human beings have woven, sewn, and knitted their personal symbols into fibre to tell their stories. The Hmong women of Cambodia relayed the saga of war and escape to the United States through woven picture cloths. Coats, shawls, scarves, jackets, ponchos, or blankets can be great canvasses for our stories.”

Wren believes that the process of knitting a ‘Story of Fibre’ is a personal one, whether she’s knitting for herself, someone dear to her, or for a client who has commissioned the garment.

“Choosing the symbols means I have to unearth what is essential to each person: What does she love? How does she live? What fills her mind? Then I have to research and learn about the symbols themselves.”

A good example of this is a jacket Wren knitted for a friend who often had dreams about bears. “I placed a bear on her sleeve, then later discovered that bears are symbols of the unconscious. My friend is a Jungian analyst working with deeply subconscious themes. The fact that I placed the bear on the left sleeve was also noteworthy because the left side of the body has to do with receptivity and being open to dreaming and intuition.”

Putting on a show

Wren soon found the fusion between knitting and music developing in a new direction. “While knitting I amuse myself by thinking up lyrics about the trials that fibre lovers experience: being one skein short of a sweater, yarn addiction, and the ever-common dilemma of having too much stash!”

In 1999, Wren was invited to perform at the Taos Wool Festival in New Mexico and she created a cabaret show solely with songs about knitting. “I wrote ‘Ba Ba Blacksheep’



Wren performs one of her knitted-related songs to a receptive crowd.

(a bluesy version of the nursery rhyme about a woman addicted to yarn – three bags was not enough), ‘It Had to Be Ewe’ and many others.”

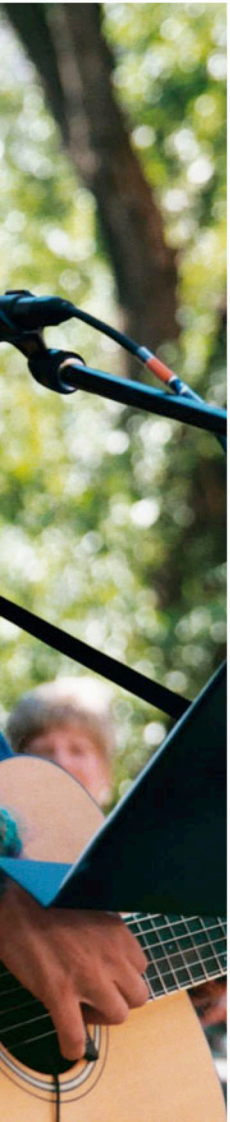
The positive response from the audience of fibre lovers inspired Wren to carry on writing knitting-related songs. “Before you knew it, I had enough tunes for a CD,” she enthuses.

Since then she’s put together a new cabaret programme inspired by knitting: ‘Singing With Every Fiber!’ and will release the album of those songs later this year.

Wren already knew that music and knitting worked well together, but the true extent of this became clear when she sang at an event jointly sponsored by the Madison Knitter’s Guild and Madison Folk Society. “Both

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Wren Ross



Knitting not only helps Wren to relax, it also helps her to sing more freely.

Wren's distinctive knitted coats are decorated with meaningful symbols.

Photo taken for Body and Soul magazine by Troy House.



For Wren there's a strong connection between music and knitting.

these groups had something important in common: fibre," she says. "Folk musicians depend on the strings of the guitar, banjo, mandolin and fiddle to warm our hearts, and knitters use yarn to make something to warm our bodies."

Wren sees fibre as the major connection between her singing and knitting. "With singing, there is the connection with the music, the lyrics, and that magical bond with the audience. In knitting, the connection is quieter. The rhythmic click of the needles and using both hands at once helps me connect with myself, allows me to hear myself think."

Knit. Purl. Rip.

Wren points out that both knitting and singing have the connection of community,

relating an experience that's familiar to anyone who knits in public. "It's inevitable that someone will approach me to talk about what's on the needles. Similarly, whether I sing for a small group of friends or in a large venue, a sense of community is created as separate individuals are intertwined through the strands of music and lyrics."

Wren finds knitting helpful on a number of levels. "Besides being relaxing, knitting has helped my singing by teaching me how to deal with making mistakes. I learned early on that there were three stitches: Knit. Purl. Rip. Making mistakes are an integral part of the process. After a short bit of shrieking, I could forgive my errors and just rip out and begin again." Through this

process of learning to accept mistakes, Wren feels that knitting has helped her to achieve new heights with her singing and performances.

"Part of being a good singer is to learn how to let go so that your body does what it wants to do naturally, without forcing the sound," she explains. "I realised that if I could sing with the same spirit that I knit, I would release the tension caused by any perfectionism and enjoy myself more. The end result is that my

vocal tone is freer, fuller, better. In that way, knitting became my new 'inner voice' teacher!"

To order one of Wren Ross' CDs, go to the site at www.storiesoffiber.com. You can also contact Wren via her website if you are interested in learning how to make a 'Story of Fibre' coat or to commission Wren to make one for you.