

Who Are You Wearing? With Michelle de Swarte

Kiri 00:00

Hello I'm stand up comedian Kiri Pritchard McLean here to tell you that I'm on tour with my brand new show home truths. I'm going all over the country, wherever will have me. I'm touring right through the spring and then because some of you lovely lot have bought so many tickets, I'm now getting to talk for the whole of autumn as well. If you would like to get tickets, they're all available on my website. Or you can go to littlewander.co.uk and get tickets there. I can't wait to see you, and I don't want to brag but I've got one hell of an outfit. Hello, and welcome to Who Are You Wearing? A podcast that chats to stylish folk about their sartorial choices. I am the host Kiri Prichard McLean. I'm a stand up comedian and sequin obsessive. Now in this episode, I'm chatting to a funny fucker who was brilliantly stylish, mad talented and an ex catwalk model its the phenomenal Michelle de Swarte. I feel like I should give you a warning about how much I laugh on this podcast. It's real sort of fillings to the roof stuff of like two thirds of it, there is some phenomenal insight into the noughties world of fashion here, a real sort of Devil Wears Prada Deep Dive, and there's a story that makes me wish that Donatella Versace could sweep in, and sort my tits out. One of the many things that's amazing about Michelle is how clear eyed she is about that time in her life, especially for someone who at the time was so young. It's fascinating to hear from what sounds like the most laid back catwalk model there's been. This episode was recorded in November 2021. Michelle was in her place in London, and I was in my place, my cupboard in Wales. Now in this episode, we asked some really big questions like where are trousers meant to end now? Someone, please tell us because we are both out of the loop. This is a riotously funny episode with a stylish, smart and hilarious woman. Please enjoy me asking Michelle, de Swarte. Who are you wearing?

Michelle 02:40

So I grew up working class. It's weird in this country that we always kind of whatever we grew up in, that's the class we stay in, right? Even if you sort of price yourself out of, do you know what I mean? So yeah, so I'm working class, and we always grew up on, I don't know, there was sort of, there was definitely a lot of value put in how you dress, right, and I remember being a kid in the 80s, and it was all about white socks then. If you was a girl and you was going to school, white socks, and then white socks, but have frills around the top, and I always remember taking like a lot of pride in my socks being really white and having loads of frills on it. You know what I mean? I remember thinking like, this is a power thing here. It's like a kid's power suit in the 80s.

Kiri 03:35

Cause it's like, it's the equivalent of box fresh trainers.

Michelle 03:38

Yeah, exactly. But like socks with white socks with frills, and I remember, like getting compliments for it, and really liking that.

Kiri 03:46

So you must've been young then, right? Yeah. Just into school.

Michelle 03:47

Yeah, yeah, it was probably like, yeah, like the first year of infants.

Kiri 03:52

So did you have a strong style as a kid then? Did you have an idea of how you wanted to look?

Michelle 03:54

As a very young kid? Not necessarily because your sort of parent, you know, determines what your sense of style will be. But definitely when I hit my, I guess, anything from like, 10 onwards. Yeah, style was important to me. But I think it was really important to me because we didn't grow. We didn't have a lot of money, and so it was just really important that I had some control over how I was perceived. Which in turn meant something to how I felt about myself and that it wasn't sort of determined by my environment that I was living in.

Kiri 04:39

Right so your, for you clothes were telling a story about you and your circumstances, and no, they weren't going to like yeah, they were, is a way of redefining yourself as not necessarily the kid with no money or the family with no money.

Michelle 04:54

I think to be more specific, I wanted my clothes, I wanted to make sure that my clothes didn't tell a story, of my surroundings.

Kiri 05:05

So did that mean that you went with like, would you look around and be like, okay, everyone's got this so I need the same so I don't stand out?

Michelle 05:12

Yeah, it was important to me where my self worth lied, unfortunately you know as you get older you sort of get over that kind of stuff but when I was younger definitely.

Kiri 05:22

So who was, who was dressing you then outside of school, who was like, was it mum, was it dad, was it like cousins aunts, like who was, who was the influences on you?

Michelle 05:31

I guess, aunts, and I guess just adults, you know, like your mom's got a friend and she's got a nice bag and you're like, one day. You know, I definitely like, I definitely used to be really like, also my mum was someone who was really funny about certain things like you had to have real leather shoes. You can never, I remember I started working at shoe express when I was like, 15 do you remember shoe

express? Yeah, it was like Shoe Zone right, I started working there when I was like, 15 and I remember using the store discount to get myself like this pair of clever shoes, and my mum was like, ready to kick me out of the house. She was like, what? How can, after everything I've done to instill in you and you come home with? and I was like, Yeah, well, the store discount only cost about four pounds. She was like, yeah, yeah, it reads.

Kiri 06:25

My mother's exactly the same. This obsession over leather shoes, and you have to look after your feet, and it was a weird thing that like, we didn't have lots of money growing up, but it was like you'd go to Clarks and you get them measured and we get a proper pair of leather shoes, and yeah, exactly. When I started going to Shoe Zone and getting like awful stilettos and you know, like plastic white stilettos. She was like, You're gonna regret this. But you know, you're an adult. Now you make your decision.

Michelle 06:53

Yeah, that and making sure you took the label off the sole of the shoe. Yeah. Which to this day, I know its like, if someone's walking down the street, and I like their outfit. But I can see like the price label on the soul of their shoe. I'm like this absolutely means nothing to me.

Kiri 07:08

I will take people aside and be like, I'm so sorry. It's like almost like I'm in the same way that you would tell someone that they've come on and they haven't realised, I've like pulled them aside, and I'm like, I'm so sorry there's, you actually left the stickers on the underneath of your shoe because I think it's such a faux pa. Were you ever put in anything that you hated wearing that you just were like erugh?

Michelle 07:32

Not really no. But when I turned 20 I became a model. So that was like I spent 10 years modelling so all I did was wear clothes that I thought were fucking ridiculous.

Kiri 07:46

But how does that cut like, that's so, maybe it's not in modelling terms, but to me to be like 20 and be like a model and that cause you're like proper, proper model like walking down a catway model, is such an intense thing that I think at 20 as well like you got, you suddenly, your body, and how you look, and how you walk, and everything's under massive scrutiny, like did that quickly change your relationship with clothes?

Michelle 08:15

Yes, it did. Because I was definitely shamed about what my previous style was. So as far as modelling, I started quite late, do you know what I mean, I started when I was 19. But I really started when I was 20 properly. So before that I was a bartender and I modelled in the UK for a little while and I quickly got scouted by an agency and taken to New York, and I remember going into the agency in New York and the agents which were like fucking really bitchy, just really bitchy people, right. But I didn't understand, you know, when you don't realise you're being insulted until like, later, and I remember, I remember one of the agents going, Yeah, I'm sure your style is really interesting. You dress like a musician, and I remember being like, oh my god thanks, and I had on like this crazy, like 70s coat and these shoes

from Shelley's shoe shop and some weird corduroy pants and in my head I was dressing like the singer Anastasia and was like really bringing like, the now but for New York, higher fashion, they were just like, What the fuck is this? Like, what are you doing? Please tell me you've got some other shoes in your bag with you. Because we cannot send you out to castings looking like this. Like I remember my agents also sitting me down and being like, you really need to invest in a bag and I was like, what? They were like, you need to get a decent bag. But these bags are like two grand. They were like it takes money to make money. Yeah. So I think they, there was in all intents and purposes for that industry for the time that it was, which is like the early 00s. They had a point, you know, if you're going to turn, if you're going to sell things and present yourself as a blank canvas for designers to sort of paint whatever picture they want, and you kind of got to turn up looking like you're worth the day rate they're gonna pay you. Right? Yeah. So, so, so yeah, they definitely, I definitely had to, like learn the hard way about sort of high fashion items, and I learned through shame and humiliation.

Kiri 10:28

That's wild, isn't it? That's another like, that's a world obviously, I don't understand, and, and is it one of those things a bit like comedy where it's a complete sort of like, hidden system until you're in it, and no one explicitly tells you, you just got to work out as you go?

Michelle 10:44

Exactly. Exactly. That's exactly what it's like, no one teaches you how to down a runway. No one, you know, no one teaches you how to be a fashion model. You just learn through trial and error. You know what I mean, then you're like, Oh, right, and you have to learn really quickly, because your careers for most models, your career is going to start at like 14, 15, and it's probably going to be over by 26. You know, so by the time you've got it, it's on its way out. It's kind of reminds me of like periods. So I've just got a hold of how my periods work. I'm like, Oh, my God, in this part of the month, I'm gonna feel like this. I'm really horny now. No, I'm not now I'm really angry. Okay, cool, and I'm like, have I just worked this out, and I'm 41? How many? How many period years do I have left, and I've just cracked the code, and that's kind of what it's like being a model, you sort of like, by the time you've worked it out. Gravity's already like wrap tap tappin on your window, sort of giving you your retirement clock and being like, you can piss off now.

Kiri 11:46

So this, this is maybe an interesting question for like, model and pre model Michelle, is I asked people, was there an item of clothing when you were growing up in those formative years, either as a kid or an adolescent that you put on that you just never wanted to take off was like, this is this is my thing. I'll wear this?

Michelle 12:06

Yeah. So growing up in London, I grew up in Brixton, and so your whole year would be kind of centred around Notting Hill Carnival, you know, as a young person, because like, you know, festivals weren't really a thing in my community at that time. So we would all kind of just be all about, like dressing up for Carnival, and in the 90s, it was all about Dancehall, you know, I mean, it was all about like, Jamaican Dancehall, and it was really, like, ornate, ridiculous, you know, like just colourful and I remember, at the time my thing was like jeans, and a string vest with like a sports bra underneath and I remember going

to carnival one year and just being like, this is me, this is who I am. I have my Calvin Klein knickers poking out the top of my like low slung jeans, and I basically you know, it's just like I've arrived. A string vest, dressed like Raspy Nesbitt basically, low slung jeans, the top of my fucking knickers poking out the top, probably an ass crack just above that and a string vest, I was like, I'm chic.

Kiri 13:16

I remember that look and I remember never, like always wanting to pull it off but never feeling like I had any of the assets that would make it anywhere near palatable for myself or anyone else around me. What about when you're a model because I wonder like, as a model you put on these clothes and you're right some of them will be fucking ridiculous. But did you ever put something on and be like, This is amazing, and it costs three grand so I have to give it back?

Michelle 13:41

Three grand if you're bloody lucky. Yeah, yeah, I did, and you know what, I just found a picture of the outfit actually, because I hadn't. So I did this show for Donatella Versace. Right, and they've made the outfit, they'd made this. I've always been a bit like self conscious about my boobs, because they're not like up, well, now at this stage, if I could go back to those boobs I'd be so fucking happy, but at the time, and you know getting changed around other people that were sort of, you know, perfect. You're like I'm an ogre right? So I thought I had these saggy tits and basically Donatella Versace, she put me in this outfit, and then they got all the, you know, people to sew it. So it was like really, basically a flesh suit, right? So perfectly fit in, it was a flesh suit, and it was this lace top, and when they zipped it up, I had the boobs that I always wanted, and I just remember thinking, Oh my God, and I recently found that picture because I was always like, Man, I wonder about that outfit. I remember wearing it and just thinking let's put my hair in like two little bunches. I had this crazy fur jacket on. I'll send it to you after when we get off, but I remember, I wouldn't wear it now but I remember at the time just being like, fucking, I'm the shit, I don't want to take this off. I wore it for a whole two minutes.

Kiri 15:10

But that's also incredible because like, I think modelling sounds just like really hard on your brain and your body and everything. But there is this flipside in me is like how many other people have a collection of them looking professionally, like pictures, looking professionally fit, that you can look back and be like, Oh, my God, I wore that, I went to this place. Like, look at me there. It's amazing.

Michelle 15:33

Yeah, it's, I don't think you're, it's weird, because I think I was quite lucky to start at the age that I did, and I was lucky to start stand up at the age that I did, you know, I sort of like, it was quite a conscious decision that I was like, I need to do something that is the total opposite of what I have been doing, and obviously, you can't model forever. But I think that it, it hasn't, it didn't have too many long lasting bad effects on me, because I never really took it that seriously. I was never that invested in the way I look. That's not to say I'm not vain now, and do you know what I mean? I'm not like, Oh, my God, I want some Botox, and I want this and I want that, get it all. But yeah, now it's kind of nice to look back. But at the time, I think if you, if you invest in the way you look too much as in for your own confidence. I'm not talking about clothes. I mean, your actual face, is not going to serve you well later, because it's not going to last for it.. So I think at the time I wasn't. Now I can look back sort of safely from the sidelines

and go, Yeah, that was, I liked these pictures, and it was a fun experience. But at the time, I was quite dismissive of it, which I think was probably good for my mental health.

Kiri 16:54

Yeah, it's but that's to me, is like sums you up. I always think I just as soon as I met you, I was like, well, she's fucking smart and wise, and it feels like everything you come to, even things like comedy that can consume you. You come to on your own terms, and you do it. No, this is what I want from it, and I'm doing it this way, and it's just like, I remember being blown away when I met you from like, just immediately getting that vibe, and it sounds like it was the same with fashion right, it was on your terms.

Michelle 17:21

Yeah, it was. I'd say that. Thank you. First of all, likewise, I think with fashion it wasn't, wasn't necessarily on my terms, I probably could have done a lot better than, I did well, I did really well. But I probably could have done a lot better. Had I'd taken, had I'd appreciated it more or taking it more seriously. So I think that I did the bare minimum, for the success that I had, to come away, not too fucked up by it. That makes sense? I don't think I made a conscious decision. Yeah. But you know, when you're young like that, you're not making a conscious decision really, because you're too, do you know what I mean, you're not fully developed properly are you? You haven't been fucked by life enough times yet.

Kiri 18:10

Great careers advice for anyone listening. When you were a teenager, what were the big trends then, did you go in for those? Were you someone who, like looked at pop culture and went for the trend?

Michelle 18:40

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, my trends were quite specific to where I was growing up. So I was definitely, I mean, now everyone sort of gels down their baby hairs. But I was first wave, first wave of gelling down all your hair, you know what I mean? So the first wave of gelling down baby hairs. Hair was like, massive, you know, like what we did with our hair in the 90s in the black community was, it was art, it was art man. It was just like, I'm surprised I've still got hair on my head. Because the stuff that we were doing to our hair, I mean, I was like, using loads of different hair pieces, I would, just the way I would treat it, there was no fault about hair care. It was just like make it look good today. I would do my hair the night before. That's how much hair product I'd have in it. I wrap it, wake up in the morning and it was almost like I take my bandana off, but it would peel off like clingfilm and it was like so that I was into, I was all about the hair. As I said I was definitely into like, dancehall and I guess yeah, dancehall and hip hop culture as far as fashion is concerned, and definitely like, I had my nose pierced. I used to wear like a big weed leaf in my nose. I had my eyebrow shaved I was you know, I was the body shop. Bronze lipstick with the brown lip liner, baby, bronzer all around your face bronze balls, bronze balls, bronze balls, you always had one mate who was good at knicking from the body shop. I remember that big jar with a bronze. I specifically remember that. Yeah. It would just be like little peas. Tiny, tiny little oh let's try and get some of that.

Kiri 20:32

So that's so interesting, because lots of people I speak to on this podcast are influenced by like, pop stars. But it seems like the influence was your specific culture and locality. That's where you're getting your influences from.

Michelle 20:45

Definitely. It was definitely about like, dancehall bashment culture. You know, there's some things that I guess when you're in your community that, like I didn't even, I don't even, I remember being in, because I moved to New York when I was 20, and I remember sitting in a model apartment with a friend and I was like, I really like this music. Who is it? and she was like, are you kidding me? It's Nirvana. I was like oh is it? Yeah that's good. She was like, how do you? I said no, no, I know team spirit. I know that video and she was like What? don't you know any, and I was like no. She was like don't you remember the dud. I was like, vaguely, but at my school, no one was crying. It came and went. It was a non event. You know what I mean? Yeah, we definitely, where I was growing up, weren't doing anything to do with grunge culture or anything like that. In the 90s. Everything was like quite sleep in, it was all about like looking your best, for the parties.

Kiri 21:48

It's amazing. Because I read a really interesting book. Can't remember what it's called now but it's a collection of essays from from black british men. Because it was really interesting. It talks about how the so often the experience being black is american that's represented, black british is so massively underrepresented, and so it's a collection of essays from these men, and one of the things they talk about is that thing of being like, I think it's called, called flossing, and not like the dance, but it's where you make sure that everything is perfect. So like scrubbing your trainers with like a toothbrush. So everything is like really just everything on point and everything, like a level of perfection and a wonder, like, what the root of that is, do you know what I mean?

Michelle 22:33

And it's potentially one less thing to be judged on as well, when everything is being judged. I think it's, like, important, especially if you live in a white society, and you're dealing with people's perceived ideas about your race or your culture or, you know, so it's important to, it's important to, like, make sure that you feel good, and that you look good. Well, yeah. 100% I mean, it's layered. We could go into that, but it would be would definitely be you know, there's it's layered 100% yes, and yeah, yeah, that's definitely, definitely got a lot to do with it. But then also, there's, you know, in terms of like, what we were just speaking about and growing up in, in the 90s where it was all about kind of dancehall culture. It was like, that was our interests. It didn't really matter if someone else was in their grunge look you were just like, Yeah, that's great for you, I would never wear that.

Kiri 23:40

Well did you have when you're a teenager like a rebellious phase, and if so, was it was it showing up in what you wore?

Michelle 23:46

Yeah, and I guess just piercings, do you know what I mean? Piercing my nose, shaping my eyebrows, dyeing my hair, the norm.

Kiri 23:53

So did you just completely get rid of your eyebrows?

Michelle 23:56

No, I mean, shaving lines in them.

Kiri 23:58

I thought you meant you completely got rid of them. Oh my god. Yeah. When people put the lines in!

Michelle 24:04

And kids are doing it now, young people do it now, though they don't do it in the same space. I think they kind of, and it looks great. Yeah, I love it.

Kiri 24:10

It is cool, isn't it? I was always jealous of that. I didn't think I had enough eyebrow to pull it off.

Michelle 24:14

Well in the 90s, we were definitely short on eyebrows, there was an eyebrow drought happening. With overmind as well. I think every teenager sat there like stones with a magnifying mirror and a pair of tweezers and then they sort of sat back, 40 minutes later and gone. Oh shit. What have I done?!

Kiri 24:38

And it's the women I know who are now spending so much money like trying to get their eyebrows to grow back again after just annihilating them for the whole of the naughties.

Michelle 24:48

Exactly. We see each other and we're like yeah, man.

Kiri 24:51

I want to talk about sort of now I guess in your style journey so, so the style that you have now, which is like to me is like, really effortlessly cool, and like a just this, like, sweet spot of being able to look expensive but without ever trying like to me when I'm like, oh, okay, well, everything here is well made and it's worth something. That's what I always think when I see you it's like, but it's not just, it's not that flashy, big watch bullshit, kind of like expensive. It's just like this athermal thing. So what age do you think that style started showing up with you?

Michelle 25:37

I can tell you exactly when that happened. I turned 30, and I remember my early 30s, making a decision that I was like, I'm never going to wear a hoodie and trainers in the same outfit ever again. If I wear a hoodie, I'm wearing boots, and if I wear trainers, I'm wearing a shirt. Like, I'm not, I'm not like I've made a choice, man I was like, no. I need to, and I'm having it again actually, I just had it recently. But it happened then, and also I was, I had a kind of new roughly like the kind, at that point, I'd made peace with not experimenting with shit that I was never going to wear. You know, like when you'd open up

your wardrobe and just be like, why did I buy this, I've never worn it, but it cost me loads of money I bought it on impulse, and so I kind of got into a bit more of a uniform then, and I remember being like, I like shirts, I like shoes, I like loafers, or boots and trousers, and I kind of knew what my Silhouette was, you know, and I kind of stuck with it. But then just recently, literally last week, I went up to Scotland, and I had a chat with my two friends that were a married couple and I was like, guys, I need help. Because I've hit another, like that's run its course now. I mean, it's still the silhouette that I'll wear but it's like I need, I need a refresh. It's time and they made me a little mood board, and they were like I was kind of, it was a lot of sports max, a max mara weekend and Joseph and I was like, Oh god. nothing has said 40 more than these brands, why do I love them so much? Like in my 30s it was a lot of cos I remember being like cos I'm in my 30s is now and now it's sort of like cos has turned into h&m, you know, for me, and I'm like, okay need to sort it out again. I need to like dress a bit smarter. But also I've just finished filming this show, and I realised that I can't like everything needs a little, everything needs a little ?. Do you know what I mean? I want to get some freebies when the show comes out. I don't feel I'm gonna get it if I'm dressing exactly the way I have been. Not that I'm not happy with my clothes. Do you know what I mean, my personal style, but do you ever think that? Do you ever just go?

Kiri 28:16

Yeah, well, you hit point where you're like, okay, not revolution, but evolution here. You know, like, I'm gonna leave this thing behind, and you know, because you want to keep pushing yourself as well and like, they'll always be things that will come with you. But yeah, it always just moving forward.

Michelle 28:32

Do you know what, I had to ask them, I was like, Where should trousers end now? Because I'm not, I'm not young enough to be in the loop. Baby. Where is, where should the trousers end? Is it ankle? Is it to the floor? Is it like, what are we doing? what are we doing?

Kiri 28:52

I can't get my head around. The kick flair that hits your ankle because in my school. You get bullied for that. Because it looks like you've grown out of your trousers.

Michelle 29:00

And I'm a tall person. So I've always had a real, it's very triggering for me. It's very, very triggering for me to have an ankle swinger. You know what I mean, it's I can't, an unexposed sock. What are we doing? what's happening here?

Kiri 29:17

I'm so excited to see the next phase of you of like, rich lady in her 40s, I can't wait to see.

Michelle 29:24

That's what I'm going for. Yeah, I've seen this. I've seen this nice Mac, this green level mac from sports max, and I was like, Yeah, I'm getting that, and I did one dud. I bought some weird wellies from JW Anderson and I was like Michelle you cannot do this again. Wellies babes wellies. I literally want to go get them to show you because if you saw their like their patent, their ankle and they've got this big gold buckle on the front and I was like oh statement wellie yes bitch and I put them on and I was like you

look like, Will Ferrells elf. Like I look like Santa's helper. Like I in my head, I was like making moves and I put them on and I was like, what do these go with? Nothing in your wardrobe. You look like a black jewish woman bringing Christmas spirit. It's not a vibe babes. It's not a vibe. £350 they cost me and I'll just be looking at him like you fucking idiot.

Kiri 30:34

They sound, genuinely sound amazing. I feel like you'll find a way or you're gonna make that money back on Depop somewhere.

Michelle 30:42

Every day I'll put on one and take them off.

Kiri 30:47

Floss, take the Heil hillbillies. Take them off again.

Michelle 30:54

Listening to the radio, I'm like, Yes, babes. Go look in the mirror. And I think you.

Kiri 31:07

I wanted to ask you do you think of hair or makeup as part of your outfit as well?

Michelle 31:10

Yes. But understated. Like I'm not big into crazy makeup like, I've got makeup on today because we're doing this. Even though I was protesting, don't judge me on my clothes, it's a podcast. But I'm into like, I'm into a strong eyebrow, and that's pretty much it, a strong eyebrow and a little bit of bronzer. But I'm definitely into like a strong eyebrow.

Kiri 31:37

When I first met you, you had your, you had your hair wrapped as well. You'd just come back from somewhere. Yeah, where do you come back from?

Michelle 31:46

Oh, I think I just come from Kenya.

Kiri 31:48

That was it. That was it. Yeah, and I remember like, it was the first time I met you, and you had this like, such a togetherness, and then also, like, stunningly beautiful in and I was just like, who is this person, and why are they doing comedy? and then obviously I see you do stand up and like, well, that's why because they're really fucking funny. But like so many people when you meet them, you're like, I get why you need to do comedy. You need this. But you just seem like, you could do anything you wanted to, I had no idea what you were grubbing about doing comedy, because you just had this like, you look like a model you like speak like a politic, you're so smart. That and then yeah just, I would just remember it being so impactful. Is that something that you because you've got like, your hair? There's so many pictures of you, when I was like looking through your pictures, like your hair makes a

statement as well, and is that something that you're, what it sounds like, you were definitely aware of it as a teenager, hair was a big thing, is that always, has that retained its importance to you?

Michelle 32:42

It's, I think as a woman of colour, it can't not be important because it's always such a bloody issue. Do you know what I mean? Like any kind of, you know, even the job I've just come off, it was an issue. Like it's always an issue about like, Can, is there the right people to be able to do it? Do they know what they're doing? They feel that you know, like, what kind of lens are they looking through by saying we think your hair looks alright, you know, if you've got a hair team of white people, and they go yeah, it looks alright, you go, yeah to you. Yeah. But like, no other person of colour is looking at that hair and being like, oh my god, I love it, like, so it's always been an issue. When I was growing up, it was an issue, because I used to relax my hair, chemically straighten it. When I started modelling, it was an issue because then my hair was natural, and it was a big afro, and it was always like, presented to me, like my blackness was my problem. So like, I always had to turn up, having done my hair, to make sure that I didn't end up looking, busted, basically. So my hairs, I think, for any woman of colour, like, hair has great importance to us, and there's, you know, it's only recently in certain workplaces that you can have dreads and braids, and hair, hair is really important, and, you know, we change our hair all the time, most sort of women of colour, we can change our hair, and it's really versatile, and it's definitely something that I like to play with. But there's also, it's also, it's interesting, like when when my hair is in an afro, which is what it naturally does, like if I just washed it and left it it would be in a big fro, and I think the perception of it when you're in the western world is kind of like that's a hair do. That's a look and it's like no, that's what my hair does the same way that your hair lies flat, and so it's funny that sometimes, even if someone's being complimentary, and they're like, oh my god, great hair, you're kind of like fuck off. Even though I don't know, you know what I mean? It's sort of like, it's kind of it feels gimmicky, and it isn't. It's just your hair. As in how it's perceived, you know what I mean? Sometimes.

Kiri 35:10

Well cause it's like, especially when it's like natural in like, in an afro. It's, is it the idea that it's being that, like the compliments is still playing into that fetishized thing of basically this?

Michelle 35:21

Not always. I mean, look, you can't, you can't always be sure about what someone's intent is and where it comes from. But I can totally, I mean, I've had a shaved head, and when I shaved my hair when I was, in my late teens, it was sort of like a rebellion of just like, I'm just done with all of this. You know, just, there's just kind of like wanting to, like, let go of, of the social commentary of my hair. Although I would wear it in these crazy styles, that of course, would get attention. So I kind of feel like the pendulum swings, and I can't really be sure about what is coming from me and what's coming from someone else and what their intentions are, and it changes day to day. You know, if you catch me in a pub and my head's in an afro, and someone's like, Oh, my God, I love your afro. I'm like, Yes, I love it, too. You know what I mean, I'm walking down the streets. I was like, Cool afro. I'm like, Yeah, thanks. But another day, someone'll say it and I'll just think oh piss off.

Kiri 36:30

Is there any trend that you've tried to repeatedly pull off and it's just, it's just not happening?

Michelle 36:36

Yeah man. High waisted, high waisted jeans. It's just not for me. It's not for my body type. Just not I've got a really short torso, I look like a kid's drawing. I got really long legs and a short torso. Not a complaint. I understand. But me in high waisted jeans, tight high waisted jeans. You know, like when a kid does their first drawing, it's just like a head and the legs come from the head. Like it's not, it's not a good look for me.

Kiri 37:00

Oh, god, that's so interesting, because I would have thought that you being so like tall and gorgeous, that high waisted jeans because they're not built for little five foot three and a half like dumpy Welsh women. So I'm like, Oh, they must be built for people like you. But then of course, it makes sense that you're all like no torso.

Michelle 37:16

They don't look right man, they just don't look right, and I've tried it. I've tried it and I've put it on and I'm like, Oh God, no, like not unless my back is like be on straight. You know what I mean, I'm sort of like craning my head like a meerkat at all times. I can wear it but I can't relax.

Kiri 37:33

Is there an item of clothing that you've had for a really long time that you still love?

Michelle 37:37

Yeah, just like T-shirts, T-shirts and shirts. Things that I just love? I've got this brown chequered shirt that I've had since my late teens. And I think it's from Tammy girl.

Kiri 37:50

That age, is it?

Michelle 37:51

Its like saying its from babe trading for pinkeye.

Kiri 37:56

Clockwork was the other one as well, which I think was B&A sort of like clockhouse? Clockwork, one of the two. Yeah.

Michelle 38:03

It's from time you go. I don't know what it is about this shirt. But like, still a winner is still a winner.

Kiri 38:09

I love it. I think that's great. Well, how do you feel about like, so I think we're all starting to, especially with everything that's happening at the moment, starting to think about sustainability and things like that. So is a lot of your stuff, secondhand or vintage or thrifted or anything like that? Is that something you think about when you're shopping?

Michelle 38:25

Yeah, but just because I'm tired, not about the environment. Do you know what I mean? It's not, it's not like I wouldn't buy brand new things.

Kiri 38:34

Such an honest answer. Everyone else is so like, thoughtful and like yeah, no, no, I'm really aware of it, and you're like, oh, yeah, just because I'm fucking tired.

Michelle 38:41

Yeah, and like, I like vintage clothes. Because you know, you know that you've got like a one of a kind, and because I used to spend money when I first started modelling on ridiculous clothes that was stupidly expensive, and I still look at some of those clothes and go you could have been a house. But you're not. You're a weird pair of clogs from YSL that I'm never gonna wear. So, yeah, sustainability. Yeah, crack on everyone. That's good. I like it. I am getting this green leather mat from sports Max. Brand new baby, brand new. I'll turn my lights off or recycle a bit extra. You're welcome.

Kiri 39:29

It's so funny. Is there an era that you wish you existed in for the fashion?

Michelle 39:36

The 70s, I love that, I just love the style, man. It's just nice. I love all the prints. Yeah, so it'd be the 70s.

Kiri 39:49

I think it's a great mix of all the 70s outfits look like you're making an effort to make a look but there's also some real comfort in those things like jeans and a shirt is comfortable, chords comfortable. Like, it's not like the 80s, a lot of it was about like extreme discomfort.

Michelle 40:06

Oh crunchy, noisy, loud, you look at those clothes and you go, that's got audio to it. Do you know what I mean? The 70s as well. It's all, it's all polyester. None of that stuff needs ironing, that's appealing to me. But it doesn't look like polyester. Do you know what I mean? Like the prints are so bright and vibrant, that it looks chic. But like I've got a lot of those tops. There's this place in Lancaster and Pennsylvania, on the east coast in the States, and it's this vintage shop that I absolutely love, right, and like no one goes there and I always go and get all these amazing things, and there's, there's this one, there's this one shirt that I wear from time to time, and it's gorgeous and beautiful. But it really kicks up a scent and it doesn't matter how many times I wash it. I know what I'm doing is activating 70s anxiety from whoever had this before me. Like it holds the scent in it that, you know what I mean, there's something about that, right?

Kiri 41:07

I know exactly what you mean. You know what, I've had a tip for this, because some things are like, yeah, get a priest, it needs to be exorcised, that's it. Where you put it on for like five seconds, and you're like I stink of someone else's sweat, and it's just from being in it for five seconds, apparently with

sweat stuff, what's it called? Is it like white wine vinegar, like, eats it? So like if it's on, if it's on the pits and stuff like that, you can put it on that and it will eat the like whatever it is. So there's I'm gonna Google it afterwards and message you just in case I've told you to put on something that's gonna destroy it.

Michelle 41:42

It's so brilliant to put on vinegar and be like, Yeah, I'm on the tube. I smell like chips. Thanks a lot.

Kiri 41:54

Is there an item of clothing now that you've got that you put on and you just instantly feel like, like the tits, like this is, I feel great in this?

Michelle 42:03

I've got these two coats. That are, they're the bollocks, they are the actual bollocks. You cannot tell me nothing in these coats, right? One's like leather patchwork with like a big fur collar that I got from my mate, I was visiting her in Alaska, and I opened up her closet and I was like, oh my god that coats amazing, and she went, Oh, you can have it if you want, which never fucking happens. Never in the history of 'that's nice', does someone turn around and go, I can have it. It's this coat is the actual bollocks, and who is it? Is it Chloe or Stella McCartney have just come out with a similar coat and I was like, goals bitch goals, and then I've got this other big sheepskin 70s coat that ties up at the waist. That is also like your mom's a slag, I'm winning all the races here. It's really good. It's really good.

Kiri 43:06

Coats as well, I think they always cost more money. But also if you think about how often you wear a coat, you get so much wear out of them, and you can just keep bringing them back year after year after year. Like, we've all got, like people in our family have had coats for like 20 years. I think that they are, I basically think they're often overlooked.

Michelle 43:26

Yes, yes. But I think the thing is with a coat is if it's a really distinctive coat, you should shelve it for a couple of years, rinse it for a winter or maybe two and then shelve it for a few years, then break it back out again.

Kiri 43:40

I've got coat like that, that's just come, yeah, that's just come back round again, and everyone's like, where's that from? You're like oh god I've had this old thing for years, You can't get it is what I'm saying.

Michelle 43:52

No, sorry. No, sorry.

Kiri 43:55

So obviously what you're, what you said happened there as you saw a coat in a friend's cupboard and was given it is, that never happens. That's a kind of story that I hope that Disney adapts one day to the feelgood hit that we all want it to be. What's your relationship with shopping then in general? Do you

like to do it in person? Do you like doing it online? Do you want to touch stuff? Do you hate it? Do you avoid it?

Michelle 44:17

I don't love shopping. What I love is having a little cruise around a charity shop and finding something great. Do you know what I mean? You know like a Sue Ryder in like a really fancy area, where there's no young trendy people, and no one can clock that, that's a designer something.

Kiri 44:37

So rich old white lady has died, gives away all her stuff.

Michelle 44:40

Give me all your dead rich old white lady clothes. Thank you. My dream is to find like a silk scarf in one of those shops but it hasn't happened today. But yes, My dream is to like, what I love to do is have a little mooch around charity shops. Like I love Edinburgh for that it's got loads of charity shops but can't go when the bloody festivals going on because everyone fucking rinsed it. But yeah, I like a charity shop or maybe a vintage shop but not a cocky vintage shop. Do you know what I mean? So like, I like yeah, so I'd say a charity shop or I like liberties.

Kiri 45:21

Is it the big black and white Tudor thing? It's the most magical place in the world. I only started going in a couple of years ago, and I was like, I could live here. There's every part of it I love, and it just gives you ideas. Even if you can't afford anything in there. It gives you like, because everything's so curated in there, and I think shoved in is fucking great. I love it.

Michelle 45:45

Exactly. That's what I'm into. I like liberties. I'm like, yeah, just ease into 40 Michelle, you can get all your skin products here. Scented candles, can have a little look at the clothes. Maybe you're not going to buy anything from there, but you just can have a little look exactly. Get some ideas come out. Go to ? get the cheaper version. Tell yourself it's just like that. So yeah, I like, I like liberties, I don't really like shopping online. Because otherwise I end up buying wellies that make me look like the bloody Christmas elf. I'm someone who kind of needs to try something on, but I don't really love clothes shopping. It doesn't. I don't like trying loads of stuff on, I don't like the lighting in those dressing rooms. I don't like seeing myself from that many angles. I get quite caught up in like wanting to send an email just being like you guys need to sort out your lighting situation, and actually, it's like you do have that much selling like so shut up. Do you know what I mean?

Kiri 46:43

See, I always thought, lazily that being a model, you must like know your measurements and every inch of your body and how it works in clothes that you could just look at stuff and be like, that'll fit, that'll suit me.

Michelle 46:56

No, because I'm not those measurements anymore. Like, definitely not those measurements anymore. Like definitely, like there's just no, there's no way I could fit in to any of that stuff now. So no, I don't, I don't have you know, and also when, when you, when I was modelling, people are dressing you, you're not, you don't have that much kind of choice over what it is that you're wearing, and you kind of want to stay quiet sort of like neutral. You don't want to be expressing yourself too much with clothes at that time. Now it's completely different. You know, the landscapes changed, thank god. But no, I'm not someone I know what I like, but I'm definitely not someone who can like look online and go yeah, that's gonna fit me. Can't even get shoes that I'm like, certain of. I'm Seven and a half, it's like a weird size.

Kiri 47:51

Do you have to go to America because they're good at half sizes, aren't they?

Michelle 47:54

Yeah, yeah. But, you know, just like, I'm just, it just doesn't. I like clothes. I like what I like, I like finding one item. But I don't love, like a day out shopping for me normally ends in the pub with a couple of skin creams in my bag. Do you know what I mean? Like a new perfume or like a new lipstick or something, and like one black T shirt. I start off with all the intentions like yeah, we're gonna fucking buy loads of stuff, and I'm just like, two shops later I'm like, I don't care. I just don't care, this is not bringing me joy.

Kiri 48:29

But you are like me then, you love a charity shop, what's the best thing you've got from a charity shop or thrifted or bought secondhand?

Michelle 48:37

I got an amez taupe, and it looked like, it just looked like a plain black wallet. Yeah, ? do them right? So it just looks like a plain black walle, and then when you zip it open that is the base of a tote, and like you could not talk to me for a good year after me finding, like I was just like, I do believe I'm a genius. Like I'm the shit. Do you know what I mean? I was just like, holy crap. So like yeah, an amez taupe.

Kiri 49:13

That's amazing. That's a good one. That's one of the best answers we've had.

Michelle 49:17

Exactly. podcast over, like don't even have any more guests, don't even ask anyone that question again. An amez taupe bitch!

Kiri 49:32

Let's chat about the future now. Your future with clothes. Is there, like do you see your style changing a lot as you, as you get older? I know you're having sort of like, seems like every decade you have a refresh. But do you think it's gonna be like a complete change, or are you just like, you know, recalibrating every now and then?

Michelle 49:49

Yeah, I see it changing because this is, I've always, I've probably when I was younger, as a little push back to working in fashion and being a model, I used to dress quite scruffy, do you know what I mean? Like in my teens, as I told you, I was all about dancehall and smart and then I moved to New York when I was 20 and I was sort of like, Oh I don't care about being gorgeous. Look at me. I don't care. I'm one of the people. As I said, like dressed quiet trampy as a sort of like, Oh, I'm not working right now, and just with each year that passes, I realised that as you get older, the more casual you dress, the more unemployed you look. Do you know what I mean?

Kiri 50:33

Oh, yeah, because you can toy with it when you're young, and it's a statement, and then when you're older, it's like, if you had a, she left you like, it's sort of like, it looks like life circumstances led you to that point. Yeah, you're having a tough time.

Michelle 50:49

Exactly. There's no sort of like rebellion or pushback. You're just like you alright babes? I'm alright I'm okay. So yeah, I've just been a bit more aware of that, that where I'm like, I would like to yeah, just maybe, just comfortable, comfortable. I'm not talking about walking around in a three piece suit or anything, comfortable but like, you know, like a bit of like, seven is Gloria Steinem. Do you know what I mean like, you know what I'm saying, like a nice pair of glasses, maybe a silk scarf around the neck babes and a shirt and like a pair of slacks, but like, I don't know just like a bit more fitted I think. But like comfy.

Kiri 51:36

Yeah, love it. Absolutely love it. Well, with that in mind, is there an item of clothing you can kind of always see yourself wearing?

Michelle 51:43

Yeah, black polo neck. Classic in it?.

Kiri 51:46

Yeah. Goes with everything. Literally everything.

Michelle 51:50

And it will always make an outfit look smart.

Kiri 51:53

You could put it with tracksuit bottoms and it would still look.

Michelle 51:58

Black polo neck, tracksuit bottoms, and a nice pair of Dr. Martens, and a nice 70s coat over the top. Yeah, you're looking smart. Maybe one statement ring. A little small bag. That's a look babes. That's a look. Put a head scarf on top of that. Forget it. Are you seeing it? Are you seeing it?

Kiri 52:30

I'm seeing an app where you put in like, you, people put in the clothes that they want to wear and you come back and you go right, I'll tell you exactly what to do with that. Go and get one of these, go and fetch that everyone's got one of these. You got a look.

Michelle 52:43

Oh my god. What was that thing that we had in the 80s and 90s? Was it called Girls world? No, it wasn't called Girls world. It was like, you could trace it right, and you had these different plates.

Kiri 52:53

The fashion wheel?

Michelle 52:54

Yes! Yes! Exactly!

Kiri 52:57

Michelle's fashion wheel.

Michelle 52:59

There's probably a million apps like that, and we're just like yeah, we've cracked it.

Kiri 53:05

That's our pension.

Michelle 53:06

We see ourselves like Scrooge McDuck, diving into gold coins. It's like, yeah, yeah, there's millions of apps like that.

Kiri 53:16

Is there any trends that you're hoping never come back?

Michelle 53:19

I'm watching them all now.

Kiri 53:21

I think that, that's Y2K.

Michelle 53:23

Oh my god yeah, because like the 90s, okay I wasn't really old enough to buy the things that I wanted then. But the 00s, some of this stuff, man. Yeah, I'm watching it with my own eyes, and I'm like, What the fuck? No thank you.

Kiri 53:43

Do you know what I think it is as well is, not that everything's about money. But it felt like a purposeful thing in the 00s that everything looked cheap, even pop stars look cheap, like they all look flammable,

they all look cheap. Whereas like if you go five years earlier or five years later, people have looked like special I guess and that was never the case for that period.

Michelle 54:05

But do you think it's just because that was our era, so we don't revere it, or respect it, or have any sort of like, we lived it, we wore it?

Kiri 54:15

No because I think, people I've spoken to on this podcast who are a bit older than me. Still love 80s stuff, and I think we were particularly unlucky.

Michelle 54:27

The 00s was absolute crud. it was absolute fucking...

Kiri 54:33

It was landfill. It was like fast fashion really hit its stride, and everything was just made for the landfill and not for actual bodies.

Michelle 54:42

Remember, layering your vests? Who in the what realm of reality layering your vest over some like weird I've just been to goer type sort of, you know, silk skirt that like, was like the high low skirt, Do you know what I mean? With a horrible little shoulder bag that look just it was bad. The hair was bad, the clothes were bad. God dammit the cocaine was bad then as well, everything was bad.

Kiri 55:23

I've got one more final question for you. You've been absolutely brilliant, like I knew you would be, could be seen as sombre, but I'm seeing it as a celebration. So its your funeral. What would you wear to be buried/cremated in? What's the final outfit for you?

Michelle 55:38

The final outfit? Honestly, because you asked me that question earlier about sustainability, I would like to just be, you know, buried in some like biodegradable paper that would like look really good in my cardboard coffin.

Kiri 56:02

But really, what's the real answer?

Michelle 56:05

Chanel baby.

Kiri 56:12

Do you know what, you should be buried in those wellies with the heels because you'll find every reason to wear them.

Michelle 56:16

Jesus Christ. Every day I put them on, I put them on today and I was just like, I could hear the festive Christmas music playing in the background. I was like, you dickhead.

Kiri 56:33

Michelle de Swarte, what a woman. I am so desperate to see the wellies that made her look like elf love interest, then I just get a mental image of it. Do you know what though, I look forward to the day when I do an interview with a black woman who hasn't had shit for her hair. It's so depressing and I'm not even someone who's experienced it. It's just I guess this is the nature of like, white supremacy and privileges. I don't even see this but it seems like it's just par for the course for black people to encounter these microaggressions and sometimes just plain old aggressions in so many parts of their lives. A sentence I keep thinking about is Michelle saying that as a teenager she shaved her head to avoid the social commentary around her hair, it is such a clear example of how black bodies are completely politicised just every part of them including the hairs on their head. I also love Michelle for her incredibly honest answer when it came to buying vintage too, it's cuz she's tight. That's it plain and simple, no saving the planet, that is such, do you know what it's actually a refreshing answer. Because I think so much of us are wringing our hands over the environment and you know rightly so the planet's on fire but Michelle just be like nah I do buy it but only because it's cheaper. Also who is going to invest in an app of Michelle putting outfits together for you. I genuinely would if that was Dragon's Den and she came in and was like what have you got? this, this, this, pop it with this. If I had any money, I would absolutely invest in it. Money's well spent. I think. If you want to get in contact with us, you can find us on Instagram @whoareyouweaingpod. You can also email us whoareyouwearingpod@gmail.com If you've got something longer to say we love getting your emails, and I'm gonna ask you if you can give us some nice reviews. We've had some beauts come through. Carly said oh my god this is so nice. Always a day brightener I love this series. Always interesting guests discussing their fashion journey. Often the discussion connects what people wore during different formative times in their lives and leads to interesting often hilarious or sad anecdotes. As soon as the episode drops I put it on immediately that's so nice. A sign of a great podcast for me I love Kiri, already a big fan of her all killer no filler True Crime podcast but this is something completely different context wise but with her brilliant comedy skills used to interview. Carly that is such a nice thing to say I'm so glad that people who like all killer are liking this podcast as well. Because I think it's like with true crime is massive obviously I'd argue fashions even bigger, and I just want as many people to find this podcast as possible just because I think everyone has a journey with their clothes and hearing all my guests have been so open about their you know, their clothes journey and so honest with it. I honestly think that everyone could get something out of it, and I love that you guys are. I'm also going to read out this lovely one from Monkey Lou Who says fabulous listen, there's a question mark at the end. I think I read it well enough so you could sort of hear the exclamation mark anyway. fabulous listen, I can listen to Kiri talk about clothes all day, babe, get on a whatsapp with me. That's all I'll do. It's like an audible hug that makes you think about what you wear and why, also they give a shout out to small businesses, every episode that has opened my eyes to sustainable brands I was not aware of, thank you for creating this podcast. Well, thank you so much for saying that. What's so nice is the feedback that we're getting about it is exactly all the things that we, I guess why the podcast to be wanting to shout about businesses that we love, we wanted to chat to interesting, stylish people, and we wanted to like get into the weeds of why they're dressed the way they do, and the fact that it's all those things are resonating. I feel like, I feel like if this

is an, like an assignment, we'd have got an A on it, maybe even an A*, but I don't want to be cocky. Now, monkey Lou was talking about sustainable brands that you might not be aware of, here's one for you. So this week's small business was inspired by Michelle's headwraps that she got when she was in Kenya. But that was, that was the first time I ever met her, and I remember walking in obviously, she was like, incredibly beautiful, she had her hair wrapped, and I was just like, who is this woman? As I think I say on the podcast, I just immediately was in awe of her. She made such a big impression. So I would like to talk about the Bristol indie business Gangster Wraps, and that's wraps with a W. So they make the most striking just fucking badass hair accessories, including wraps. They do a stunning line in statement earrings and accessories, and they're all wrapped in the most amazing material. I've got a pair of their earrings, and I love them so much, especially when I found out that the material covering them, it's sort of like a shiny pink Lamay, I'll wack a picture of them on the Instagram. That's vintage. So all the fabrics that they use are vintage or reworked or exclusive patterns, which means no matter what you buy, it is totally unique to you, which I absolutely love. They're also made to order by hand, which means Yeah, you wait a little bit longer for your product but you get something incredibly well made, unique and nothing is going to end up in landfill because it didn't sell. I'm eyeing up the scrunchies now because the earrings I got, are really well made, and I always get compliments for them, and to receive compliments is the main reason for my existence. You can find Gangster Wraps on Etsy and Insta, don't forget the W, and the website is gangsterwraps.co.uk and thank me later for the great accessories that you come back with. Thank you so much for listening, and please join me next week as I chat to the icon that is Ian 'H from steps' Watkins, I know, a proper popstar, See you then! Who are you wearing is produced by Joe Southerd the artwork is by Mary Phillips and the music is by Annie glass. This has been a Little Wander production.