

## Who Are You Wearing – Susan Wokoma

[Upbeat electronic music]

KIRI PRITCHARD MCLEAN: Welcome to Who Are You Wearing with me, Kiri Pritchard McLean. This is a podcast where I chat to very stylish people about the clothes they wear and their relationships with them. This episode is with actor, writer, and director Susan Wokoma.

I love this chat because Susan, as well as being a lover of a bold and dramatic look, is also so so funny. The pictures she paints of her days as an Avril Lavigne loving teen are amazing. And I still think about her mum's advice about how you should dress on a daily basis. We have a great chat. She's really honest about navigating fashion and her work environment as a black woman too. It also contains a story about a Chanel handbag that is so joyous, I dare you not to grin with happiness for her as you listen. This interview was recorded in April 2021. Susie was at home amidst a huge DIY Project and was resplendent with blue hair. Uh, you don't need to know that for the podcast, but I wanted you to have the visual image because she looked incredible. So sit back, relax, and enjoy me asking Susan Wokoma, who are you wearing?

[Music stops]

SUSAN WOKOMA: In my family, so I've got an older sister and then a little sister, and then an older brother. Um, so I was effectively the middle child. I'm going to hang onto that. And, um, it meant that I, when I was really little, my mum would dress me the same as my older sister. And then when my little sister arrived, I had to dress the same as her. So I was in perjury for a lot longer than those two fuckers. So I – I think, you know, the whole

kind of like – the way that Nigerian parents dress their children, like to go to church or whatever, grinded on me a lot quicker than it did my siblings, because I had to endure like eight, nine years of it. So I remember at school every – the brand that was really in was Bon Bleu. Do you remember? Bon Bleu, Bon Bleu, Bon Bleu. Yeah, tracksuits and stuff.

And I was like, ‘yeah, mate. I fancy one of those.’ So I remember one of the first – I never asked my – I wasn’t into like getting the latest trainers. I wasn’t into any of that. But I saw this Bon Bleu tracksuit that was orange, so my love affair with orange started at a very young age. Primary school age. And I was like, ‘Mum, I really want those.’ So that was the first time that I asked my mum to buy anything for me. And – and she got me it. So about eight, I think. I think I was about eight or nine.

KIRI: That’s amazing. The whole dressing you like the siblings thing, because I have two much older brothers, it completely passed me by. But I – I remember like looking at kids who dressed like their siblings and thinking it was the coolest thing in the world. But now as an adult I see that that would’ve probably been absolutely unbearable.

SUSAN: Unbearable. Especially when you start – especially when you look different. Like I don’t particularly look like my older sister or my little sister. So we just looked – we didn’t even look like twins. We didn’t look like sisters. We just looked like two kids dressed the same. It was just fucking weird.

KIRI: A coincidence. That’s what you looked like.

SUSAN: A coincidence, yeah. Our parents both went to the same shop. Um, it was – I really really hated it. Because it was a lot of

dresses. And I do love dresses now, but I – for a while, I was very much like, ‘I’m a tomboy.’ And my older brother was only a year and a half older than me. And we used to call ourselves twins. Um, and I just wanted to kind of like run around. And so in my head I was like, ‘I’m a tomboy.’ Even though I didn’t really know what that entailed except trousers, which is not really tomboyish, is it? Um, so yeah. I really – that was about eight or nine, is when I got that orange tracksuit.

KIRI: So did you – I mean orange is such a bold move. And I think it’s probably the colour that most people say they can’t pull off or have the least sort of affinity to. But it sounds like you had a strong style as a – as a kid already, going for an orange full tracksuit.

SUSAN: Yeah, which didn’t go down so well on my like estate. Like I remember there was this – oh my god. We – and I think it’s because I had an older brother, our family went through phases of like – I don’t get when boys do this, when they’re like, ‘oh, I want to fight your brother.’ You’re like, ‘okay. Why?’ Like to prove something. All of a sudden my brother had it periodically. Just boys going like, ‘I want to fight you.’ And he’s like, ‘I don’t understand what that is.’ And so I would be walking around in my orange Bom Bleu, and they’d be like, ‘ugh, you, tangerine. Ugh, tango. We all want to fight your brother.’ And I was like, ‘okay.’ So it wasn’t – it wasn’t like there were loads of kids in orange tracksuits. Everyone was kind of like in the black and white Kappa. They didn’t want to stand out. But I didn’t wear it because I wanted to stand out. I just preferred it.

KIRI: Yeah. I love it.

SUSAN: I just preferred it.

KIRI: Because I was – I was chatting to my producer before, and I was thinking about you this morning when I was, um, washing up.

SUSAN: Oh, good.

KIRI: I was like, ‘what do I think about – how would I describe’ – always thinking about you when I wash up, babes. It’s a real – really a coincidence.

SUSAN: [laughs] Yeah.

KIRI: And I was like, ‘what do I – how would I describe Susie’s style? Or like what’s her’ – and I think you are so, um, I was just saying – I was saying to Jo that like – so you’ll go for like a – you know, that amazing tulle number that you wore for the – for the BAFTAs.

SUSAN: Oh my god.

KIRI: Like huge voluminous, amazing, black, really chic but also like really femme, really big.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: But then I’ve seen you in like a gorgeous like skin tight like – was it blue sequin? Like a bright blue like gown to the floor.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: But – but there’s – but what I was saying to Jo is like the common theme with your looks is – and I don’t know if I’m being

lazy here because of what you do, but it's drama. They all have so much drama.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: There's – because I was like, 'oh, it's colour.' And then I was like, 'no, because she wears black as well.' But it's drama. That's the thing I get from you.

SUSAN: Yeah. Well, you know that – that, uh, that dress that I wore for the BAFTA nominations. I'm just going to get the designer's name. So I'd never heard of this designer. And, um, so I've got a proper, actually – let's go even further back than that. I've got a publicist. The guys at DDA, they've got the connections to all those big, you know, designers and whatever. Um, but very, very early on, it was clear that they would put the call out to get me dressed and there would be no response because I'm not size eight. So I knew if I was going to go to events, I had to turn the fuck up. I had to source the dress.

And for a really long time, I enjoyed it. Because it meant that whatever event that I went to, I felt completely comfortable. I felt really comfortable. And I would always, you know, it didn't matter if I'd got something from – I remember I went to another BAFTA thing, um, I think in 2017. And I'd got this dress really last minute from Asos, and it was like a lilac number with sequins on it. It was quite flowy. I didn't want it to be figure hugging. I was like, 'yeah, this is cool.' And I went for a really dark lip. I went for like an almost black lip, which I never do. But I was like, 'drama.' And everybody was like, 'oh my god, you look amazing.' I was like, 'damn right.'

And that is kind of what we realised. So they didn't want to, you know, the – my publicist didn't want to tamper with that. So we've been very careful about them approaching people. So that black number, which is by an amazing designer called Inga Konovalova, and, um, I – I don't really wear black. I don't really do a black dress. But we saw it and we thought, 'shall we? Shall we?' So it was a moment. It was a moment for the team. It was a moment. But we knew it. And it was so fun to be able to – to be able to go to those extremes.

Rather than having a particular style, which is, 'this is what I dress like all the time.' To be able to kind of like mix and play and for things to be fun. Like there's no point going through the stress of like those kind of events if you're not – if it's not going to be fun and you're not going to feel amazing. Um, but I do think I do go for drama. Not because – not particularly because I want to stand out or anything like that, but just because it's – it's an expression. I don't want to – I don't want to get it right. I don't want to get it right. I just want to be able to be like, 'boom. Hello.' And look at it and go, 'oh, it –' you know, when I'm in my 60s or 70s – that's what I have in my head a lot.

When I'm in my 60s, 70s, 80s, if I look back on something and be like, 'ooh, I wore that.' Like that's what I want. I think that a lot, with a lot of my – my gowns and my – I'm – that's going to be a nice picture to find when I'm old, and be like, 'fucking hell, she was nice.'

KIRI: I love that.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: And I, um, I dress exclusively to see the compliments of gay men.

SUSAN: Yes.

KIRI: And you dress to – to be – to impress 70 year old you.

[Both laugh]

SUSAN: Yeah, to impress myself when I'm old. That's literally – that's literally it. And like even when I'm, um, decorating my flat at the moment, I've been trying to like get a few of the big looks. Like some really lovely pictures that I've taken and then put them up. And be like, 'yeah, that's something that I've done. I wore that thing.' And I think because a lot of the times – I don't think I'd wear them all – I don't think I'd wear them again. Like there was this pink tulle number. It was just the – the maddest thing.

And I got it from some random no name website, which was basically like, 'here's the material, make it into a dress.' And I used to live on Harrow Road, um, by Ladbroke Grove. And there was a tailor. This guy who literally – a guy called Mohammed – and he literally had a wall. It was the weirdest shop. It was like a wall. You'd sort of knock on the glass. You'd go, 'could you – could you do this up for me, mate?' And he'd be like, 'okay, leave it there.' And so me and Mohammed, we just like tailored the shit out of this material. And it's honestly one of the best outfits I've worn.

KIRI: Amazing.

SUSAN: One of the best.

KIRI: Oh, I love it so much. Uh, so when you – I – going back to childhood now, um...

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Do you remember who dressed you? So was it – so you say it was – it was your like – your mum putting you in these matching outfits. And then – and then...

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: But did your – did your older sister have a say? Was she trying to like dress you up as well? Were you influenced by her?

SUSAN: No. No, actually. So it was really strictly my mum for ages. Then I got into the sort of the tracksuit thing. Um, my older sister was always quite – actually no, both my older sister and my little sister, really glam, really femme. Actually no, that's not true. Jo, my little sister, was a bit of a tomboy for a while. Um, but I do remember – [laughs] I remember going to Safeway. That's the time we're talking.

KIRI: Yeah. Okay, yeah.

SUSAN: It was on the way to – back from Safeway's. My mum had sent me and my little sister – and I can't remember what – I think I was wearing like this sort of lumberjack oversized shirt because I was really into Dawson's Creek at that time. And that's all Dawson wore. And I was walking with my little sister and she just stopped, turned around and looked at me, and went, 'why do you dress like that?' And I was like, 'what?' She was like, 'you just dress – you just dress like a ten year old boy,' and then carried on walking. I was like, 'fuck's sake.' So there was a lot of kind of like –

this is going to sound really mean. I'm going to make my family sound awful, but there was a bit of like, 'you're wasting your potential, Susan' chat in my house, yeah? 'Why don't you dress like this? Why don't you look a bit like this? Susan, oh my god, you should do this. If I looked like you, I'd wear this.' And I just was like, 'I really love Dawson's Creek.'

[Both laugh]

SUSAN: So there wasn't pressure. If there was pressure, I didn't – I didn't sign up to it. I just – I really didn't. And I – I don't know why. Couldn't tell you why.

KIRI: It just feels like you've always been like marching to the beat of your own drum. In an orange tracksuit around your estate.

SUSAN: Yeah. [laughs] Around Elephant and Castle. That, 'oh god, there's tango.'

KIRI: Were you ever made to wear an item of clothing, then, that you hated? That you're like, 'I – I don't want to put this on but I'm doing this because I love you.'

SUSAN: Ooh.

KIRI: Or – or you're going to – in my mum's case, 'or you're going to smack my ass if I don't.'

SUSAN: Yeah. [laughs] I'm trying to think. What did I – oh, so there was a quite a lot – so my parents are, um, Nigerian. And there's quite a lot of, um, like events and functions that we used to go to. And we'd be in traditional Nigerian clothing. Um, which was always really gorgeous and really, really fun. I loved it because I

was like dressing up like my mum. Like sometimes we would look identical. And all the women would wear like jewellery and – I was actually talking to my friend Damola yesterday. We were talking about, um, our Nigerian taste, which is like gold. Gold. I was talking about these lampshades I went to get and it's just gold. And he's like, 'yes.' I've got like a mini sphinx thing in my – anyway, um, it's gold, like I'm in Egypt. Like what the fuck. Um, so I used to love that. But then there was one event where we had to wear this hat, which was from my dad's tribe, and the only way to describe it is like a – it's like a sort of, um, if you get a rugby ball and you cut it in half, and then you dip that rugby ball into steel, and then you attach gutta, we're good, um, sequins, we're good, some beads of like varying colours, we're good, and then spikes. Spikes. Like hard spikes. And I remember putting that on my head and going, 'this just – it's just penetrating my scalp.'

[Both laugh]

SUSAN: I had to wear that all night. And I've got a picture of me with it on where I'm just sort of like – there's my – because I remember my mum going, 'Susan, smile, smile.' And I'm just like, 'there's – on my head.' It hurt so much. I didn't – it's the only bit of Nigerian clothing that I've ever had to wear that I've – it's completely passed me by. I – I'm sure there is cultural, deep spiritual meaning behind it, but it fucking hurt.

KIRI: So – so where did the spikes – were they not going out of the rugby ball?

SUSAN: Everywhere. They were going out and they were going in.

KIRI: Oh my gosh.

SUSAN: Like the way it would rest on your ears, you had spikes going into the top of your ears.

KIRI: Ooh.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Sounds really painful.

SUSAN: Yeah, it was – it was very, very – I was very stressed. I was a very stressed eight year old. It was all around that time. Seven. That's when my mum started going, 'oh, okay, let's go. Let's wear this.' And I was like, uh, stressed. And then you've got to dance as well. It's not like you're just sitting there. You've got to dance. For fuck's sake. Very painful.

KIRI: Go on, get up and dance in your medieval torture implement on your head.

SUSAN: Yeah. Your crown of thorns. Off you go. Weeping with the blood going in my eyes. Just like –

[Both laugh]

KIRI: But – but that shape and those – those colours, those textures, and also the traditional Nigerian ware that I've seen, again drama.

SUSAN: Drama.

KIRI: Like dramatic outfits and statements.

SUSAN: Yeah. I – there’s nothing I love more than seeing a family going to church on a Sunday and they’ve gone to town. Like that brings back – I miss that. Like as we got older, obviously we had our own styles and whatever. And we didn’t really go to church. And I don’t really believe in god or, you know, anything like that. But what I missed was waking up in the morning, my dad would have his radio on, uh, I could smell my mum’s dupe perfume.

We’d all have to get ready. Like it was such an event. Like you could – my mum gave me quite possibly the worst – the worst piece of advice, and also the best piece of advice that’s to do with clothes. And she said, ‘never look like your situation. Ever.’ Didn’t matter how poor we were. And we were poor. We were very, very poor. Particularly when I was a lot younger.

It didn’t – and it wasn’t just my family. It was all families. The way we would – we would be living next to each other in this run-down estate in Peckham, but the way we would all look when we would go to church was outstanding. And that piece of advice isn’t great because sometimes you aren’t feeling well and you should say. Um, but oh, I’ve used that through some break-ups. It’s like, ‘oh, do you know what? If he catches me on the tube, I’m going to look amazing.’

KIRI: Yeah.

SUSAN: I am going to look amazing.

KIRI: Yeah.

SUSAN: He might be at that party. I will turn up and ignore him and look amazing. It’s – I do live by that. Quite – [laughs]

KIRI: It's so great. That phrase is the culmination of 'best foot forward' and 'dress for the job that you want.' So it's –

SUSAN: Yeah, yeah.

KIRI: It's everything.

SUSAN: Yeah, I love it.

KIRI: And it has such a clear understanding of like how clothes can change how people see you outwardly and change how you feel inwardly as well.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: It's a great bit of advice.

SUSAN: It is. I really – and that's the thing. It was about how you would feel. Where you would – you would put yourself. That's what I – I think my mum meant by it, is if you don't feel – if you don't look good, you're not going to feel good. And I do really believe that. I really, really believe that.

KIRI: Of course. And – and that bit of advice has informed how you dress on red carpets.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: And is why you shine so much on them as well, which is a beautiful thing.

SUSAN: Thanks. Thanks, mate.

KIRI: It's great.

SUSAN: Thanks. My mum takes all the credit. Like I said the picture would be, 'mum, I wore this.' She'd be like, 'of course you wore this, you're my daughter.' I'm like, 'okay.' She's never surprised. I'll be like, 'look. Look how amazing I look in this, Mum.' She'll be like, 'yes. You're – you come from me so you look amazing.' I'm like, 'cool.' End of conversation.

[Both laugh]

[Electronic music]

KIRI: So when you were a teenager, you said you sort of like stopped going to church and, you know, finding your own style. Like what's – paint a picture. What's the era? What are the big trends? Anything you tried to pull off there?

SUSAN: Oh my god, where to – okay, so secondary school. Uh, so I started secondary school in 1999, so we're talking early noughties. Vintage. Vintage. All you've got to do is look on the Instagram account Love of Huns, and that's what we're talking about. That's literally the style. I've got Mis-Teeq, [sings] 'All I want is' – it's going through my head. I can feel the sun. I can – I can like – so many awful styles. But Girls Aloud first album. That – that style. Come on. That's what we're talking about. Um, what – what of those looks did I try? I did have – oh, Christ. I had a – oh, it's disgusting. I had a two tone – [laughs] um, uh, suit. It was flared. Flared trousers and sleeveless kind of top, vest thing. And it was kind of a purply blue. The material was disgusting. It was from Tammy Girl.

KIRI: I know the material you mean.

SUSAN: Did you have it?

KIRI: The one that like rubs –

SUSAN: Yeah, it's like shiny –

KIRI: Yes! Oh my god, that was everywhere.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: That material. Yeah, and – and the purply blue was very our generation.

SUSAN: Yeah, yeah.

KIRI: Oh, yes.

SUSAN: Very our generation. So that was Tammy Girl. That made an appearance. In fact, actually, when I was – I think I was 12. I – do you remember Ms. magazine?

KIRI: Yes.

SUSAN: Right. So I applied – because I had this weird thing where I would apply for competitions and I would win them. All the time. I won a free bus pass for a month once. Just by filling out something. And my dad used to open my post and he'd be like, 'Susan, you've won a bus pass.' I'm like, 'oh, okay, cheers.' I used to win stuff. Lucky streak. Anyway, so I decided to apply for this competition in Ms. magazine, which was like, 'you and your friends get to be models for the day and then you get to go to Planet Hollywood.' So was like, 'cool.' So I had to get like, um,

what I did is we had to take pictures of ourselves. So I got a, uh, disposable black and white camera. And we went to the playground and we were all like capturing the wind in our hair and our braids like, 'oh my god, the weather.' We won. And so we had to go for our photo shoot. And it was like, you know, the bumps in the hair. You've got the hair mascara going on. You've got the, um, you know those, um, bandana, um, tops? The ones that – the sort of – Destiny's Child used to wear them all the time.

KIRI: Yeah. Yeah. [laughs]

SUSAN: We had that going on. Like oh my god. Lots of one shoulder like – one shoulder like top – crop tops going on. It just was the best day. And actually they loved the photos so much they reused them. Like we definitely should've got some royalties. They used us a lot. We were popping up in Ms. all the time. And everyone thought I was a model. And I was like, 'yeah.' It's the same shoot from a year ago. 'Yeah, you know? Just me in Ms.' But it was a real like – I've got a lot of love for that time. S Club 7, you know? Those sort of looks. That's what we're sort of going for. But that two tone Tammy Girl outfit was a bit of a hero outfit until I realised it was disgusting. Very – switch. Extremes. I loved it and then I wanted it burnt.

KIRI: But – but – and also how you're describing it as well, in that the – the – I know the blue and I know the purple.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: As we have this conversation, you're wearing that purple – that colour purple hoodie and your hair is bright blue. So you might feel like you've left it behind, Suzie, but she's here.

[Both laugh]

SUSAN: Do you know what? Oh christ, you're absolutely right. I've just seen myself. Yeah. Yeah. You're right. Yeah.

KIRI: You're the essence of that outfit.

SUSAN: Oh my – I'm like – yeah, listen, this – the thing is, right, I really shouldn't. Life makes hypocrites of us all. Like I hated pedal pushers, but I actually think they're going to make a comeback.

KIRI: Definitely. Definitely.

SUSAN: They are. Things like that, I shouldn't – I shouldn't – yeah. God bless that Tammy – Tammy Girl suit. Fuck.

KIRI: Was there, um, did you have a rebellious phase as a teenager? And if so, did it come out in your style?

SUSAN: Oh, that's hilarious. Okay, sort of – I had sort of two. Uh, the first one was so fucking weak. The weakest rebellion. This is what it was. This is what it was. I'm in my Tammy Girl – because it lasted a while – uh, I'm in my Tammy Girl jogging – jogging bottoms and my top. Oh, no, I was wearing a crop top. Little crop top. Little bit of tummy. Hoop earrings. Hoop earrings. That was my first rebellion. My dad told me with hoop earrings, he was like, 'who are' – this is – this is actually his sentence. 'Who are you enticing?' I was like, 'enticing? I'm not enticing. I got these at Surrey Quays shopping centre.' He thought – he was like, 'take them out.' I was like, 'I don't understand what's going on.' He thought that hoop earrings were like the calling card of slags. [laughs] I was like, 'I've got no intention.' I've got an older brother. I know that boys stink. I've got no interest unless they're

Orlando Bloom in – as Legolas. Just was not interested. So that – I would have to sneak like some hoops. I'd be like, 'okay, Dad, I'll take them out.' And then when I like got outside, I'd be like, 'yeah.' So that was rebellion one. And then when I was about – [laughs] when I was about 14, um, I had a friend at school. A girl called Mallory. And I went to a very – it was quite a mixed school in terms of like, um, ethnicity there. Um, but there was a lot of kind of like West African kids and Jamaican kids and, um, Asian kids and stuff. So Mallory was a little bit outnumbered as a white girl. But, um, music taste of course at school was really, really huge. And Mallory was always very alternative. Really alternative. And so I was like, 'what's this alternative thing?' So of course I bought my Avril Lavigne. And then I got my wristband. I got my little wristband. [sings] 'He was a skater boy.' I got my – I've got a picture of me in Camden. First time I ever went to Camden. Flat cap. Flat cap, like white blouse, white flared jeans, platform trainers, eye shadow, eyeliner. Just like, 'I'm emo now.'

[Kiri laughs]

SUSAN: Went through a proper phase. I was always at Astoria, Tottenham Court Road, Mean Fiddler. I was there watching live bands like Starting Line. I was like, 'yeah, give me all this guitar stuff.'

[Both laugh]

SUSAN: If you saw me – like I remember hanging out – it was in Greenwich. We went to a gig. We went to a gig. And I remember this – this is what my life was like. So I'm there like trying to integrate, thinking, 'I do like guitar music. I hate the clothes.' And I met this girl. And she was so – she was really, really beautiful. And so I was like trying to be friends with her. I was like, 'oh, my

name's Susie. What's your name?' She went, 'my name's Needles.' That's the kind of shit we were talking about. I was like, 'what do you mean Needles? What – what needles have been in your arm? You're fucking 13, shut up.' Like – but there was a lot of that. Like, 'oh my god, I've just got loads of problems.' And then so that only lasted like a summer. Only lasted a summer. You know the chains?

KIRI: Yes.

SUSAN: People would have on their jeans.

KIRI: Yeah.

SUSAN: That would go from the back pocket to the front. Yeah, a lot of that. A lot of that. Um, so yeah. That was my rebellion. But see my dad was really perturbed by the earrings. But when he saw the emo thing, he was just like, 'I've got no opinion on that.' He would not say a word.

[Kiri laughs]

SUSAN: He would just look at me like, 'what the fuck? Okay. Alright.'

KIRI: So funny. Also to me the fact that you've gone emo, and when I think of emo, I think of like lots of black, unapologetic stance, you know? Like one of those studded belts. That kind of thing.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Um, but your first outfit – white flares, flat cap, white blouse, say drama again. Like you can't even downplay emo.

SUSAN: Nope.

KIRI: Like it's all incredibly like drama.

SUSAN: Very, very confused. I've got a picture of me with that ensemble. And I've also got like a pink – that my wristband was pink. Like fluorescent pink. I've got like two drumsticks in my hands like – not chicken drumsticks. As in like drums. Drums, like – and I'm just there with like – I was like, 'did I – did I fucking buy those? And just walked around Camden with drumsticks?' I think I did.

[Kiri laughs]

SUSAN: Oh my lord. It was a long summer. It was a long summer, fucking hell. So yeah, those are my two rebellious stages.

KIRI: It's so great. They're both great. So I feel like this sense of like drama and from your mum of like best foot forward, always like make the best of yourself and always look the part whatever you're doing, that has been there it feels like forever with you.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: But with your style how it is now, when did you think that style – it clicking for you?

SUSAN: Ooh. I think, uh, I think it was all the trips that I would take to normally Topshop Oxford Circus with my mates. And the amount of times I would find it really hard to find something that

fit. Like if I went, um, up a size, it would be – it would fit my bum really well and my thighs. But the top just would be shapeless and weird. And if I got something that fit the top, it would just – you know, I – like most people, I was – I spent so much time crying in changing rooms. And I just think that worked – becoming an actor and, you know, not being one of the actors who sort of just hang out with actors, like some of my really good friends are costume designers particularly, and realising that I could just not necessarily make stuff because I'm not that talented, but like I could get people to make things. Like the clothes that I have don't have to just be that. They could become other things. Knowing the – then realising, you know, um, I remember talking to somebody and – or no, I dated a guy who is quite famous. And, uh, he used to – he used to get loads of suits made for himself. And there were a couple of times I would go with him to like to these proper like – proper white boy Soho places where they've been making suits for like the Krays or whatever, do you know what I mean? And, um, and I just remember the whole process of it. And I thought, 'fuck, that must feel so nice.'

And then realising that that is how people used to wear their clothes, is that they used to get it made. And so not necessarily that I was like, 'I'm going to get everything made for myself,' because I can't afford that, but just going, 'oh, the fact that I don't fit into these shapes, these sizes, is completely fine.' Like this is a new thing to just buy it and it's meant to fit. And so I think around the time of, yeah, me sort of leaving drama school and me, you know, dressing myself with the money that I had or didn't have, I just started to think, 'what makes me feel good?'

And especially with actors you've got to go to auditions. You've got to think about what you're going to wear in auditions. There's a lot – you've got to think about how you look all the fucking time.

So I feel like there was an awareness that I had. Then there was a moment where I was like, 'I don't want to get caught up in like self-loathing. I really, really don't want that to happen.' Then realising, 'god, there's nothing wrong with my body.' God, back in the day like, you know, you look at Marilyn Monroe in all these dresses and stuff, and she'd got them made for her. I was like, 'okay. Alright.' And yeah, the slow realisation of that, and then having to go to events and stuff like that made me go, 'do you know what? Let me get a grip of what I like.'

So whenever I do a job, they'll ask me, 'where do you get your jeans?' I'm like, 'Fashionova.' They look at me like I'm mad. I'm like, 'trust me. Trust me. Trust me.' So I know the places where, oh, if you go there, that's really good. If you go there but you take that in, that will look really good on me. And I think, yeah, I think my job is the thing. So around the age of like – I left drama school at 21, 22. That was the point where I was like, 'I've got to get a grip of what I look like.' But not just – not to please other people, but what makes me walk into a room and feel like I can do my job. And you can do your job when you're not worrying about what you look like. So I would actually say my career choice has been a lot to do with me learning what my body's like.

KIRI: Wow. That's amazing. Because I was, um, I was thinking about how hard it is – like on the odd occasion when I've filmed stuff where I'm having to be someone that's not me, and they just go, 'okay, send over your sizes.' And I'm like, 'which shop are you going to?'

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: And like it sends me into this existential thing.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: But for – to – for you to have the – I guess the – not even resilience, but like the – to go, ‘okay, this is my body. These are – this is this, this is this. You can take in this, you can do that.’ Like that shows such a – well, I – does that sum up what you are? And that you refuse to be like, ‘oh, there’s these categories. By the way, I don’t subscribe to those, but we can bring all these things together and make me.’ And – and that’s like how you exist anyway.

SUSAN: I think – do you know what? I actually think it’s been out of necessity. And I think it really started with my hair. Because when you do jobs, definitely when I was starting out, most makeup and hair designers didn’t know how to do black hair or know how to make up our skin. And so very quickly I realised that I needed to have the black hair salons, the black hair stylists who I could go, ‘maybe we could try this style. I know this woman. She can do it. Bla bla bla bla.’ And I think from then, I was like, ‘okay, it’s not just – it doesn’t just stop at my hair and my skin.’

My body shape is something that, you know, I’ll be on sets and I’ll look around and there is not a single person with my body shape. But I’ll step off set and go to Tesco down my road, there’s loads of people that look like me. It’s just a weird world. And I think that if you’re within that world all the time, you don’t see bodies like mine. And I don’t even think that my body is particularly, um, anything to write home about, do you know what I mean? Or extraordinary or weird or – I think it’s completely just fine.

And I think it’s been out of necessity of making sure that I can do my job, which is act. If I have that information, it means that I don’t have to fanny about with any kind of fucking nonsense. But

actually, something that happens – oh fuck, I won't talk about it. Something happened in December. I, uh, was about to start a job. I went in for costume fitting. December's always awful because I'm like, 'Christmas is coming' and I'm eating all the pies. So you're going to – you're going to measure me now, but things are going to change. But anyway, so it's fine, you know? I go in there and I walked in and the costume designer looked at me and she went, 'ooh, you're – you're a lot bigger than I thought.' But she said it in a way that was so like it was a problem. It wasn't like she went, 'oh my god, you're – oh, I think I've got the wrong sizes for you.' She said it like it was a problem.

And then I had to have – and I'm, you know, I'm hugely experienced. I've been acting professionally since I was 17. And I was made to feel like my body was a problem. And I was just so aware that here I was with this room full of white women, all of them thin, and I'm meant to take off my clothes, be in my underwear, try on stuff, then take pictures of me, me spin around like it's a mug shot, and – and be okay with it. And it spun me. And also on top of that I fucking hated the clothes. They were – they were rank on top of that. They were nasty.

We had to have a whole – I was like, 'this is – all of it's got to go.' The director had to get involved because I was like, 'you've seen the pictures, right?' She was like, 'yeah, you look awful.' Um, but it was – I remember sort of thinking, 'oh god, do I say something?' Because you have to be so – it may seem like oh, you know, you're being too 'woke' or whatever, but you have to be so careful about what you say about people's bodies. You have to be so careful because you don't know what I'm dealing with or what I've been through. And so I ended up sending her an email going, 'that was wrong. That was absolutely wrong. You never do that. It's never a problem, my body, but you made it out like it was a

problem because you had an idea of what I should be in without actually looking at my body first and making that decision.’ And yeah, I told her off basically.

KIRI: Good.

SUSAN: Because it’s just – that idea of like, ‘your body is wrong’ is something that I’ve been trying to dismantle for ages. Um, and then to kind of very recently get slapped with it, I was like, ‘god, it’s so ingrained, the idea of “you’re not right.”’ But I know women who are so thin who don’t think that they’re right. So I know that that isn’t – thinness isn’t the answer. Um, but I’m very, very aware, to go back to your question, I’m very aware of the spaces that I’m in that a lot of the time, most of the time, the people that are trying to dress me or do my hair or do my makeup, don’t look like me and don’t encounter bodies or hair or skin like mine that much on sets. They may have friends and family, whatever. Um, so I have to be armed with knowledge.

I would love to just walk in and for it to be easy and not have to worry and not give my list and, you know, tell them about my acne and my hyperpigmentation and, ‘these are the things that I can’t use on my skin, and these are the things I can’t use on my hair, and these are the shops that – to get the shoes from,’ or whatever. But I’ve just learnt – I’m like, ‘look, I can have a whinge about people not having that information, or I can just give it to them. And then if they choose to ignore me, they’re being a dick.’

KIRI: Yeah. I mean you’re – you’re totally right, but it’s, um, well it’s a good sense of perspective. Obviously acting’s not my world, but just the idea that – I – I do film stuff and there people do do my hair and they – I – do do my makeup. And I never have to worry if that’s going to be an issue and actually if I haven’t

brought my own stuff with me, it's going to be a problem. And it's just – the way you talk about it is with such pragmatism, because obviously you're a professional. But also it's – I guess it's just depressing to hear a woman has to be a costume designer.

SUSAN: Yeah. Yeah.

KIRI: And a – and a hair stylist and a makeup artist. Because they're – no one's interested in accommodating people who aren't what they think that every actor, every performer, every person who takes up space in the world should be. And it's, um, I – has it got any better? I guess – I bet it hasn't.

SUSAN: Yeah, no. Do you know what? I was literally about to say it has got – even though that horrible costume designer thing was recently, um, it has got better. Like the job that I'm about to start, they have a black hair stylist. Um, so – and, you know, there are things that I now say, like terms. Like actual names of hairstyles that before I could hear the person go, 'what's that?' And they'd be googling. And I'm like, 'you – literally most black women know this style or have this style. The fact that you don't know it is just mad.' Now I will say and they'll go, 'oh, yeah. I know what that is.'

It's not – you know what? It is not necessarily about having all black teams, although that would be awesome. It's just about the knowledge. And black hair particularly is really – it's not just like, 'all black – all black hair is like this.' In the same way that all white people's hair is not the same. Um, but having the – the time and the interest to learn about it, having the, you know, understanding that, you know, sometimes I've had to, you know, give my weight or mention my weight. And people sort of look in horror. They're like, 'oh my god, you weigh that much?' I'm like, 'yeah, my body's sort of – yeah, at my slimmest I'm – I'm still in

double figures.’ Like when I look, the idea or the perception of what I look like and what I weigh and stuff is so warped, but I’m like – but that’s my family. Like that is our body, that’s our mass, that’s, you know, African DNA. Um, and then having to explain that sometimes, you’re like, ‘oh, christ.’ But I just think it got to a point where you have to lead it. You have to lead it and then people will understand. And I feel like I haven’t just done that, but actresses older than me, the generation, um, above me have. And it means that, you know, there’s a lot of things that are so much easier, as they should be. Like I just think as designers they should have an interest. Um, and it is definitely – it is definitely getting better.

KIRI: That’s good. Because you think like if people can go on a – because also like if you can’t do it because you’re just being a decent human, do it because it makes you more employable. That’s what I think about anything to do with representation. Like as –

SUSAN: Exactly. Like you don’t want to say, ‘do it to make more money,’ but do it to make more money. Like –

KIRI: Yeah.

SUSAN: Go on. If that is the thing that motivates you, fuck it then. Just get it done. My friends say, um, I’ve got this Whatsapp group of amazing women and they always say, ‘don’t show me the homework, just get it done.’

KIRI: Yeah.

SUSAN: I don’t want to see your working out. I don’t want to see the long division. Whatever is motivating you, I haven’t got time

to hear. Like, 'oh my god, I read this book about anti-blackness and it was just like' – no, I don't care. Just start the anti-black stuff over there. I'm tired.

[Both laugh]

SUSAN: I'm trying to live my life and trying to do my blue hair. Um, I'm being wry. I'm being wry, but yeah.

[Electronic music]

KIRI: Do you think of makeup and hair as part of the outfit as well?

SUSAN: 100%. 100%. Um, I – to be honest, I've had more difficulty and shame and, uh, with my hair. Because I was really from the generation where our parents were trying to conceal our hair. So in amazing elaborate styles and braids and stuff, but it wasn't – I didn't really have much knowledge of my natural Afro that grew out of my head, because we were always concealing it. And so I felt a lot of distance from my hair, a lot of shame.

There is a lot of kind of like, you know, within the black community, like getting your hair done, the pressure to get your hair done, where to get your hair done. But also there aren't – one of the things that is not prevalent is – or, well, wasn't, was businesses. So, uh, for a lot of my white friends, they could go to a Toni & Guy, get their hair done. There wasn't – businesses like that. You had to know this woman who would sometimes come to your house, maybe between the window of 9 am and 2:30 pm. She might turn up. And then she might have to leave and go get her kids. Like – and then bring the kids home, and the kid's screaming as she's doing your hair. Like there wasn't that infrastructure. And so it meant that sometimes you would get

your hair done really rogue. Like I remember once getting my hair braided and they were pulling so tight that they ripped it from the root. Um, true story. I got that done in a backstreet salon on the Woolworth Road. Literally it was a corner shop. No, it was like a sort of like African world supermarket with like – it had like a Polish section and then a West African section of food. Then around the back was a shed, which was a salon.

KIRI: Sure.

SUSAN: You sort of knock and there'd be like kids after school there eating McDonalds and then like just random women. They're like, 'oh, sit down. Sit down.' And then they'd do your hair. And so it got ripped out there. But, um, so I – I feel that the importance of hair has been there. And the hair makes the outfit and all of that sort of stuff. But I think now that I've been starting to have more understanding and love for my natural hair growing out, I don't feel so precious about getting it done or it looking a certain way. I remember once somebody on Twitter, when I was on that hell site, um, said, 'oh, you know, Susan Wokoma, she's such a good actress but why does she always have messy hair? Why is her hair always messy?' It was another black girl who said this. And I was just like, 'so?' Like why does it need to be neat and slicked down and, you know, have your edges slicked down? I was like, 'I don't really' – I like a – I like a sort of mane of hair. I like – I like a silhouette, that's what it is. I do fucking like a silhouette.

KIRI: Yes. Well when I think of you, I can – I can draw you. And it's – the hair is a big part of it. Like literally. But it's – it's gorgeous. To me it's like – signature Suzie is – is big hair. And – and when I've seen you with braids even, there's loads of them, like do you know what I mean?

SUSAN: Yeah. Yeah.

KIRI: And they're long. It's a statement again.

SUSAN: But do you know what? Do you know what's so fun about that? Is that when I decide to like cut it all off, it's going to be such a thing. When I cut it all off and dye it platinum, I'm like –

KIRI: [laughs] Yes.

SUSAN: A new era. It's like Madonna. I told you what I was before, and now I'm telling you now what this is. I just love the idea of being able to, uh, not that anyone's really watching, but to just shock and just wear something that's a bit like, 'oh my god!' And I'm like, 'yeah.' Yeah, it's fun. I don't know, I just – I don't – all that I've said about like hair and antiblackness and all of that stuff, I just – I've – I always come back to the beginning point, which is don't take yourself too seriously. Don't take any of it too seriously. It's not fucking serious. Like I love it. So many of my mates, some of my girlfriends, are just shaving their hair off. Literally bald. Fucking sick. Just going, 'do you know what? I don't care. I'm not – I'm not subscribing to that bullshit anymore.' I'm just – do whatever the hell you want. I always come back to that no matter what. No matter what.

KIRI: Oh, that's beautiful. Is there, um, obviously we've got the shaved head thing looming in this future, and I'm absolutely here for it. I can't wait.

SUSAN: Yes. Yep.

KIRI: Um, but is there a trend that's been knocking around that you've tried to pull off and it's just not – it's not happening?

SUSAN: Oh, okay. Um, my friend from school, from secondary school, is a lovely woman called Emanuela Menza. Um, Manny Menza. And she is really like this amazing, amazing woman who basically, if you wear – if you see a celebrity wearing Christian Louboutins, she hooked them up. She works for Christian Louboutin. Like that's it. I didn't know this. So she was the year above me at school and then one of my really close friends, um, Alex Roach, uh, was at a film premiere. Her first big film premiere. And she was like, 'oh my god, you know someone at Christian Louboutin.' This is two thousand and what, 13? I'm like, 'babes, I don't know anyone at Christian Louboutin, I'm very very sorry. You are mistaken.' She's like, 'oh, this woman, Manny?' I was like, 'fucking Manny's at – woah, that's so cool!'

And so, uh, reconnected and she was like, 'you know, whenever you need some shoes.' I was like, 'girl, I cannot wear them shoes. Like – but thank you very much.' Anyway, uh, I then, uh, start doing some events. And she's like, 'let me hook you up with the shoes.' And I'm like, 'do you know what? Let's do it.' And we tried the classic, you know, stiletto, high pointy, and I was like, 'oh, girl. Oh, girl. They do look good on the leg but I – I will fucking bread my neck in these.' And Manny is this amazing woman where she can – I remember I went once to, um, their offices. And she was like carrying all these boxes and stuff in stiletto heels. I was like, 'how the fuck are you doing that?' She's amazing. She's amazing. And I was like, 'I want to do that but I just don't think it's my portion. I just don't think it's for me.' And so now what's really funny is like if I have an event, she now knows my style so much. She'll send me three – pictures of three shoes and I'll be like, 'that one.' She knows it's got to be a thicker heel, she knows exactly what – a little bit of a platform, if she can get away with it. And – and then we're good to go. And so, yeah. A stiletto heel. Like I

know that there's a lot of talk about like, 'are stiletto's good? Should we be putting ourselves through it?' Some people really love it and I do think it elongates the leg in a way that's [chef's kiss]. But it is not for me. I can't do it. I can't. I wish, but I can't.

[Both laugh]

KIRI: Oh, and when I started going out as well, as well I was like – you know, like properly out, girls going big, like big outfits...

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: The stiletto heel was everywhere. It was unreal.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: And I could do it. And I can do it now. But put me in a – like a – I love a block heel.

SUSAN: Block heel.

KIRI: Like a – that's why I like platform boots.

SUSAN: Yes.

KIRI: Because like 70s infused, I'm like, 'yes please. Give me the height because I'm only little, but with all of the stability of a smart shoe.'

SUSAN: Yes. Of a smart shoe. We're talking a Clark's smart shoe but it looks good. Like I just – I wish – yeah. I wish I could – I've never been able to, actually. From like when I got my first pair from New Look and I just was swaying in Leicester Square. Like

swaying. I was like, 'this is not – I don't want my friends to have to like scoop me from the floor.' So yeah, that's the trend. Maybe one day. I don't know.

KIRI: One day. Um, so what's your relationship with vintage? Do you – are you – are you a fan of it? I mean because vintage I think is so restrictive in terms of body shape.

SUSAN: Yes.

KIRI: But have you got like an – an item of clothing that's got some years on it that you still love?

SUSAN: Yeah. Oh, so I used to – when I – I remember the first time I discovered like, uh, what was it? Pop Boutique. I was like, 'fucking what? It smells musty. I love it.' And so most of my jumpers, if I fancied a jumper, was from Pop Boutique. Um, and I just loved the idea of rummaging around and finding stuff. In fact – or, no, the first time I went to New York, um, I went to a thrift store. I was like, 'I want to go to a thrift store.' And I went to one in Williamsburg. And I – oh my god. I found this varsity jacket, which was just the most beautiful thing ever. It got nicked when – as soon as I got back to London, went on a night out, someone nicked it. Fucking annoying. But I've got a picture of me wearing it by Central Park. And I was like, 'okay, that's something. That's going on my wall.' Um, so I went there and I found loads of things there. And I was like, 'oh my god, this is great.' Then I started to try, you know, I wanted to get some dresses and all of that stuff. And you would get, you know, the good thing about Pop Boutique particularly is that you would get the dresses that have been altered and you've got a bit of an elasticated waist. But my weight fluctuates all the time. And sometimes it's, you know, it just – whatever. And I know how to dress myself in all those weights.

But it – I found it more and more hard to find those really lovely pieces for my body shape. And that made me quite sad, because I think that if there was more variety in that sense, that’s probably where I’d shop all the time, I think. Um, but I did actually – a friend of mine did forward me, um, this sort of online sale, which was vintage, uh, clothes for, um, bigger women.

KIRI: Yeah, plus sized ones. Yeah. Yeah.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Was that recently? Because I’m sure I saw that on Instagram.

SUSAN: Yeah. Like I think about a week ago.

KIRI: Yeah, well send it over, babes. Because I lost the link now.

SUSAN: Okay. I think it’s in my DMs. I’ll find it. Yeah, she sent it to me and I was like, ‘oh fuck.’ Like that is – because I do love a dress. I do love a tea dress. I do, you know, come on. Like big sunglasses, I’ve got my Chanel. I’ve got my Chanel. And like off we go. Nice little tea dress. But I do have – in terms of – I guess it isn’t necessarily vintage but secondhand, I do – because I do like – I’m not big on designers when it comes to the outfit, but in terms of an accessory, a bag, I do like – I do like a designer bag. Um, always secondhand. Always secondhand. Like I’ve got some fucking outstanding buys secondhand.

KIRI: Really?

SUSAN: Always always always. I really enjoy that hunt.

KIRI: Where do you hunt for it then?

SUSAN: I hunt for it Vestiare Collective, which is – I don't know if you've ever heard of the app. Basically just secondhand designer goods. And just scroll through and scroll. I mean that's basically what I did, uh, during first lockdown. I was buying stuff like, 'why have you bought this Gucci belt, Susan? You're not going to wear it for at least a year and a half.' Still got it. Still got it.

KIRI: I love it.

SUSAN: But yeah, I tend to do – I would – I would love to find a – a store, like an actual shop, and go and have a little rummage. Because I do – I don't always quite fancy online shopping for that sort of stuff. But Vestiare Collective is my – my designer go-to.

KIRI: Absolutely love that, uh, little, um, a little tip.

SUSAN: A little plug.

KIRI: So do you think – do you like vintage because it's like more – well, because it's more affordable and it's more one-off? But is there sustainability? Like is that something?

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Obviously you talked about it with the Fashionova, that you're somewhat of a wearer of fast fashion and things like that. But how much of a part does it play in your shopping?

SUSAN: Yeah. Yeah, I think it does. I think it's just one of those things like with anything. Once you know it, it's hard to go back. And so I have been very careful about how much I buy. You know, there was a reason why I was going on Vestiare Collective.

Because I was like, 'I might as well get something – something secondhand.' Like I'm very, very, very aware. I'm really trying. And actually I say, 'trying.' I am successfully reinventing, um, uh, a lot of my clothes. In fact a friend of mine who's, uh, normally a costume supervisor for live events and for theatre, um, she's called Jenny Quirk, and I didn't actually know that I was going to plug her, but this makes sense. So she, um, started a company during lockdown called House of Quirk, where she does alterations. And I was like, 'great!' So I literally just went through all my clothes. She came over and I was like, 'alright, I want to take this in at the waist, I want to do this,' and she just noted it down, took the bin bags, and did it all. And I just –

KIRI: Love it.

SUSAN: That was so fun. Because now I've got like stuff that I've had ten years that I'm wearing with a new kind of kick to it. And there were things that I was like, 'yeah, I want that shortened, I want that taken in.' And there were other things I was like, 'look, I've got no idea what to do with this dress. What do you think? What – what do you think we should do?' And so, um, yeah. I'm really falling in love with the clothes that I have. Because I've had so many compliments about my clothes. So buying new clothes is – is harder for me. Because I'm like, 'I love them and I get such lovely feedback like from when I'm out and stuff.' I don't want to say goodbye to them. So yeah, really I am very, very aware. But then also if you're a certain size or you're above a certain size, it – yeah, sustainability's cute, but where is it? You know? For a lot of my friends, a lot of my fat friends, they're just like, 'I wish.' But, you know, what are you going to do?

KIRI: Yeah, no. It totally is a – is a huge – it's the worst. Just a huge, huge problem that again, that – that it doesn't always seem

– the people who are talking about sustainability, um, don't seem to understand that like, uh, and – and to do with plus size stuff, that like it's – why is it on plus size people who are only just getting stuff that they can feel nice about themselves in?

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Why is it up to them to have the – the moral standards that, you know, plenty of people who could shop anywhere and walk into any charity shop and walk out head to toe in something amazing, they're not the ones having the conversations.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Or the big companies.

SUSAN: Yeah. And I do – I do think that that's unfair. Because a lot of the stuff that I've seen for bigger sizes, you know, you're getting more interesting patterns, more interesting cuts. Those were the things that women, um, have been screaming about. Is going, yeah, like the bra thing. Over a certain cut bras just become tents. And you're like, 'why? Why can't it be pretty and gorgeous and sexy and why does it have to just be just like a "keep them in? Keep them in?"' Like it just – so I – I do understand it, but a lot of the people that I see talking about sustainability all are a certain size. And I'm just very very –

KIRI: Yeah, I agree.

SUSAN: And class as well. That comes into it. Like, you know, the stuff that my mum would get was East Street market stuff. It was, you know, cheapy cheapy stuff. We would buy it and then try and make it last. But, you know, sometimes, you know, when Primark

emerged, that was like, great. My mum could get me this, that, and the other and bla bla bla, because that was truly what we could afford. And I remember there was an actress at my drama school who did a big old rant about sustainability. And I just – I just looked at her and I was just like, ‘yeah, but you’ve got money.’ And there’s nothing wrong with having money. God, I want money. But, you know, fuck, I need it. But you – some people really don’t have a choice. And I think that it’s you with the money and the time should go and sort that out. I really do.

KIRI: Yeah, totally agree.

SUSAN: I really – I really think that.

KIRI: No, I totally agree. I think you’re bang on the money.

[Electronic music]

KIRI: You – you know with your job, it’s things like, uh, you’re the rabbit, it’s like period costumes and all the Holmes.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Things like that. Do you – is there an era that you’ve like tapped into or just generally with vintage that you’re like, ‘I could see – that – that I love this fashion on me.’ Like, ‘this works for me.’

SUSAN: Oh, do you know what? I – so for the – oh god, this was like one of the last big old events that I went to. For the ‘Evening Standard’ theatre awards two thousand and, uh – 2019, I think. Um, I – that was the blue number that you mentioned.

KIRI: Loved it.

SUSAN: Glittery, blue number. I think that was the first time I hired a dress. I found it on, um, oh, what is it called? It's a company called – based in Chelsea. I think they're called like One Night Stand, I think. Is it One Night Stand? Something a little bit – it makes you do that. Um, but, uh, I just wanted – I wanted – I have always been a – a fan of 1950s glamour. Um, 40s, 50s, like those silhouettes, those shapes. And I've never really leaned into it because I feel like you've got to have the event to go to like – dress up and look like that.

KIRI: Yeah, it's not for a barbecue, is it?

SUSAN: It's not for a barbecue. Or like, you know, sometimes there's such an understatement with stuff. So there will be times where I'm like, 'oh, I really want to go like this.' But like people are quite muted and then they're quite understated. I'm like, 'ugh.' And you know for instance if you go to the TV BAFTAs, do you wear an Oscar dress? Or do you just get something from John Lewis, do you know? It's just a merry go round of – of conundrums. And so because the – the 'Evening Standard' theatre awards is hosted by Anna Wintour, I was just like, 'uh, yeah.'

Now obviously that would be the chance to wear something designer. So that was one of the few times that I went to my publicist and said, 'could we try' – but I also didn't want to put myself in the firing line. So I found this place, this quite wacky woman in Chelsea, went to her studio, and she just had – I mean you would die there. Just sequins, dresses, gowns. Loads of gowns. Beautiful gowns. Beautiful gowns. And I was like, 'this is the best place on earth.' And she looked at me and she went, 'okay, I think I know.' And the first dress that she pulled was that

blue dress. And I put it on and she was like, 'yes. Yes.' And I was like, 'yes.' And she was like, 'yes.' And I just felt – I just felt like an absolute 1950s glamour puss. Like that is what I would love to lean into more. But you do need the invite.

KIRI: Yes.

SUSAN: That's the problem. That is the problem.

KIRI: It's – it is like golden era of Hollywood kind of look.

SUSAN: Yes.

KIRI: That's to me what it screams of. And it's beautiful. Beautiful.

SUSAN: Oh god, yeah. I'd love to do that. But I just was like, yeah, not every – also some places and events don't warrant it. They don't deserve it. Like, fuck off. You don't deserve this. But that was a night I was like, 'you deserve this.' Oh, I felt amazing. And you know like when you're walking? Like I remember I went to the toilet and then I came back the toilet, I was going back to my table, and you know when you just – you're like, 'you're all looking at me. Shit, oh my god. Stop looking at me.' But they probably weren't. But in my head there was like, 'god, get over yourselves, like whatever.'

SUSAN: 'Who does she think she is?' Oh, actually that night I met Christian Louboutin.

KIRI: How was that?

SUSAN: That night. That's actually on my wall. There's a picture of that. So, um, my lovely friend Manny, they – so Christian

Louboutin have a table at the 'Evening Standard' awards every year, and I was invited to be on the table. So we all met at Claridge's before and like met him. It was just –

KIRI: Wow.

SUSAN: It was a real moment. And actually I saw my friend at work and with him and it was – it's so weird when those worlds like collide. We went to a state school in South East London, and then there she is speaking fluent French. I'm like, 'when did – when did you fucking learn that?' No – no one was listening in French. You're just speaking, [imitates French] I was like, 'oh, okay. Shit, I should've listened.' Um, but yeah, that was a big – that was a big fashion night. That was a big fashion night for me. Yeah.

KIRI: I love it. I also love your, um, hate crime of a French accent that you just did.

SUSAN: As you can – I know. I mean they're all going to come for me. But do you know what? It comes from love. I'm a big Francophile, um, I just – I love – do you know what I love about the French accent? Is when they hesitate. I'm going to do it for you. This is going to be better. I'll redeem myself. So when they go, um, [imitates French accent] 'uh, how do you say, uh, um, bon, uh, uh, je ne comprends pas, uh, uh, bon.' I'm like, 'ah! Kiss me. Kiss me on the face.' I just love it.

KIRI: My friend, one of my best mates, who again is someone – a similar relationship to you. We both went to state school in North Wales. She's a Guardian journalist now.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: It's this weird thing where like, how did we get to do what we're doing from that mad school?

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: And she went to live in Paris to do her degree. So it was 50 quid return flights from Liverpool where I was in uni at the weekend, so it was cheaper for me to fly to Paris and stay with her than it was to go home.

SUSAN: Bloody hell.

KIRI: So I'd go there and we'd go to all these flea markets in Paris, which are so like – so much good vintage shit in great sizes.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: And so, so cheap. So I just have like so much joy. And also we'd get loads of attention because everyone's like, 'the French are really stylish, they're really stylish.' They are, but they're very chic. And we were in like these vintage ball gowns and like mad like cowboy boots and stuff. So everyone was like, 'who are they?' And we're like, 'we're from Britain. We're from Great Britain.'

SUSAN: Oh my god. That just sounds amazing.

KIRI: And obviously if I went there now, I wouldn't say it.

SUSAN: No, you – you'd be like, 'I'm here, is all you need to know. I made it. I made it.'

KIRI: I wanted to ask you about – with, you know, talking about that gorgeous blue dress...

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Is – is there an item – and I wouldn't be surprised if it was this one, that you just put on and you just feel a million dollars? Or you feel yourself?

SUSAN: Oh.

KIRI: But it can be a hoodie. It can be a slanket, though.

SUSAN: Yeah. I think [laughs] – I think – what's – well I – I feel like that item changes all the time for me. Um, the one that has been quite, um, endearing is, uh, Fila Disruptor trainers, which are basically like –

KIRI: Oh, the big bubbly ones?

SUSAN: Chunky trainers. Yeah, a chunky trainer. It reminds me of being a kid, it reminds me of the Spice Girls, it – and I still – I swear by them. In terms of like the way they look, I've got lovely ankles apparently. Someone told me online, because they like to tell you. Um, and my ankles look really good in them apparently. I don't know. Um, but I just love – I love a chunky shoe. And that's kind of like – the flat, everyday version of the chunky heel I would wear. So Fila Disruptors. I love them so much that, uh, Fila sent me some Disruptors on Instagram. Yeah, I literally was just wearing – I didn't go, 'look at my trainers.' I was just wearing them and then they just slid in my DMs and were like, 'do you want some?' And normally I'd be like, 'that's a bit weird.' But I

was like, 'I do actually love your brand, so – you owe me, so fucking send – they did, they were lovely.

KIRI: Yeah. Yeah, no, well this is the weird thing, isn't it? About like – I think to have a little influencer moment, if it's something you love anyway...

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: And you're basically advertising for free and they want to say thanks, because people have clicked through.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: And that's how they find you, like they go, 'oh, here's some free trainers because now this many people have seen what we do.'

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Because yeah, I think that's – that's the most honest kind of influencing there is.

SUSAN: I think that's honest, isn't it? I do feel bad. If you look at my DMs, I want to read you them. Like where I'm like, 'is that okay? Is that alright? If I could get – is that alright?' And they're like, 'yeah. We approached you. Also I've sent eight pairs to my cousin today. Like don't worry about it. You're good. You're good.'

KIRI: Do you – how – what's your relationship like with shopping, then? I know you mentioned you did a lot of online stuff in lockdown. But like how did you feel? And I remember the tears in the changing room. Because that's, you know, we all feel that

pain. But how do you – is it online? Is it through Instagram? Is it from seeing other people?

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Because I remember you did a photo shoot and you were wearing this absolutely iconic like sequin tiny little outfit. And I was like, 'where's that?'

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: And you were like babes, 'it's this mad shop in Ibiza.' And I was like, 'how have you found that?'

SUSAN: Yeah. Instagram. Instagram. This is why – this is why I'm still on Instagram and not on Twitter. Because I was like – I was trying to explain it to some friends of mine. Because they were – you know, I mean social media's evil. But what I was trying to explain is there are things that I've learnt about my skin, about my hair, from other black women going, 'oh, use this product. Do this style.' Or – and the clothes. It's not about ads. It's literally about women that, you know, either pop up accidentally or that I follow and love. And I see something that they wear, and I'm like, 'that's hot.' And then I might not buy that thing, but then I'll go to the store and I'll be like, 'oh my god, there's other things.' That's literally how I've been shopping on – how I like to shop online. It's always from seeing somebody on Instagram wearing something that is – I'm like, 'oh my god, you – I would never think to go there to look for that thing.' Like that thing is from – that outfit that you saw was from a – a store called Annie's Ibiza. And if you look on the website, all the women wearing those things are tiny. They look like models. They're probably models by the – yeah, because

they're modelling. Uh, but I got it and it looked amazing. I was like, 'that fit. That's great.' I have that now.

KIRI: Yeah, it's so good.

SUSAN: God, I can't wait for the next festival that I can wear that. God, I cannot wait. Literally can't wait. Cannot wait.

KIRI: Well is there like – are you – are you someone who would – who would like nose around a charity shop? Is there anything amazing that you've got that's thrifted? I know about the varsity jacket, but anything that you're like, 'yes please, pick that up.'

SUSAN: Yeah. Ooh, what's the thing?

KIRI: Because I think you've got such a good eye.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Because before this I was talking to my producer about – I was walking down the street in Soho, it was a gorgeous, sunny day, I was walking towards the Soho theatre. Obviously this is in the past now, a few years ago.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: And there was this girl in front of me and like the silhouette was amazing. And she had this – this big hair, she had this amazing – she was wearing I think like that yolk yellow and like purple.

SUSAN: Ooh, nice.

KIRI: And I kept trying to – and she had these shoes on, and they were like clacking. So everyone was looking at her and she was just like taking her time. She smelt amazing. And I was trying to take a picture of her like surreptitiously. To go, ‘Susan, this girl reminds me so much of you.’ And then I went on your Instagram, you – fucking – it was you! It was you in the outfit and I was like –

SUSAN: No.

KIRI: I was – yes.

SUSAN: Are you joking? [laughs]

KIRI: I went to – I went to message you and go – no, I promise you. I promise you. You’re walking from Soho House up towards Soho Theatre and you were just taking your time and you had this –

SUSAN: No.

KIRI: Yeah. It was like this little skater skirt and I think it was a yellow – or it – you were definitely wearing this like deep yellow and a deep purple. And you just looked like you were floating. And everyone was watching you. And I was – I was going to go, ‘god, this girl reminds me of you. And I looked on your Instagram and it’s you in the fucking outfit.

SUSAN: [laughs] Oh my god, that is – that’s like – honestly, that is the best compliment I could – for me, nothing tops that, is, ‘I saw this person, I thought they were really fucking cool, and it was you.’ That is the – literally the – I mean, what else? Alright. I’m – I’m done then. Can die tomorrow. Fuck it, that’s genuinely the best thing.

KIRI: I was describing the outfit and you were going, 'oh my god, that sounds great.'

SUSAN: Yeah! Can you imagine if I was like, 'ew, that's shit. Looks like shit. Sounds like shit.' You were like, 'it was you!' I'm like, 'well we all make mistakes.' Oh, that's hilarious. Oh, that's – that's cheered me up. Um, oh, I don't – I don't know. What's the thing that I've – I can't really think. Oh, well do you know what? Not like a charity shop or anything, but I got this, um, uh, this jumper and it was sequinned. Purple jumper. And I got it in a – this was in New York. I got it in a pink and then there was a slightly sort of similar but, you know, the way charity shops and – and stuff, they're not the same thing. Um, a green one. And it was – those two were like my hero jumpers. So whenever I couldn't be assed to dress up, I would literally wear like leggings and then I'd put that on. And everyone would be like, 'oh my god, I love your jumper.' And I'm like, 'suckers. I just put on the jumper. You're dickheads.' They were like my two and I used to oscillate them. Like but now I think the green one I gave away and then the purple one had holes in it and stuff, so, um, it's done its job. But those are my two like, oh, I'm – like if I was feeling really down or low, low energy or tired, whenever I put it on it just looked like I made an effort, but I hadn't.

KIRI: I've got the exact same thing. I've got – there's um, there's two. I've got a jumper from Ragyard, which has got this peacock feathers all over the arms.

SUSAN: Nice. Oh, yes.

KIRI: And I've got – this is Zilla kids. And they make kids' clothes, but they make adult stuff. And leggings and that jumper, and

everyone's like, 'well you've made an effort.' And I'm like, 'I fucking haven't, mate. These knickers are three days old.'

SUSAN: Yeah. 'They're stuck to me. But peacock feathers.' Do you know what? I've actually got – I've got a jumper, it's black, and it's got peacock feathers, um, on the arms.

KIRI: Oh, we might – I bet it's the same place.

SUSAN: I bet it is the same.

KIRI: Ragyard.

SUSAN: Yeah. I think it is.

KIRI: Upcycled vintage stuff. Which reminds me, um, after this I'm going to send you two pictures. I've got a tea dress I think would suit you and fit you behind me.

SUSAN: Ooh.

KIRI: And I've got a – a vintage bomber jacket that I think might be up your street. But – but let me crack on because we're going to run over.

SUSAN: Okay. Okay.

KIRI: Um, so thinking about the future and your style and how things are, like do you see your style changing as you get older? Or are you still going to be like clacking down the street in purples and like yellows and golds?

SUSAN: Do you know what? I really – there’s a bit of me that really wants to like ascend to the 1950s Hollywood glamour that I know that I would absolutely kill. But I am – I don’t want to ever be too chic. I don’t ever want to be too fashion. I – I need to have colours. Like if anything, it – it needs to be colourful and glittery and sparkly. So even though I do hope it will evolve, but I – I want to be able to wear the stuff that I’ve got now for a very, very long time. I just think because you – as you get older you do become – oh, I don’t know if you’ve felt this, but like the sort of – the more responsibilities I’ve sort of accumulated, I find that my sense of fun sort of disappearing. And that’s why – that’s literally why I got the blue hair. Because I was like, ‘woah woah woah woah woah, I’m taking everything too seriously. I need blue hair.’ Because you cannot walk out on the street and people are just like [mumbles]. Honestly I’ve had some of the best conversations in the last week. Of people just like, ‘what the fuck? Your hair is amazing.’ I’m like, ‘thank you.’ And so I just want to keep that joy and that not taking it too seriously. And if people look at me when I’m in my 70s and they’re like, ‘uh, what dress is that?’ so be it. So be it.

KIRI: That’s beautiful. I mean is there an item that you’ve got that you can see yourself wearing forever?

SUSAN: Oh. I think – oh, do you know what? This is boring. But it’s – it’s my Chanel bag. The reason why – it’s black. The reason why it’s boring is because it’s – it’s black leather. So you’re like, ‘that’s a bit boring.’ But I bought that with my first big pay check. And my friend Emma, um, she was like, ‘right, you need to treat yourself.’ Because I wasn’t treating myself with the money. I was being very careful. She was like, ‘you need to treat yourself. You’ve always wanted a Chanel bag. And I know you do secondhand. But let’s get you like a proper one. Like a classic, you know, flat bag, 2.55’ –

KIRI: Is it like a quilted...

SUSAN: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. So she arranged it for me. She literally called up all the different Chanel stores and found the flat bag at the Bond Street one. So we went, uh, one morning. And I'd never been in – in there before. And they were like, 'what are you looking for?' And I was like, 'well, I'm going to buy my bag.' And so I knew the bag was there. But they made such a fuss of me because they were like, 'oh, it's your first – your first Chanel.' So they brought out all these bags and like, 'try this one on.' And they had like gloves on and stuff. I was like, 'fucking hell.' So I was trying them all on and then they went, 'okay, we shall now bring the 2.55 flat bag.' They brought it out and I was like, 'wow.' And they brought it out the glove and they were like, 'here you go.' I was like, 'right, okay. Cool. I'll – I'll buy it.' Um, and then – so I went to a back room, like which was just a room to pay.

I was like, 'this is weird.' And so paid for it, it went through, thank fuck. And then they were like, 'well, you – you must celebrate your first Chanel bag. Would you like some champagne?' I was like, 'what?' So they took us upstairs, which was I guess another part of the store but it looked like a museum. It was a bit weird. And they gave us a bottle of champagne and some nuts and they said, 'stay here as long as you like.'

And so me and Emma drank champagne. I think they gave us a second bottle. And then Emma was like, 'oh fuck, I have to go and teach. I've got to go, I've got to go.' She had to like run a workshop. But it was the best day and it meant so much that I had – because I knew that I wasn't going to be buying brand new bags all the time. I knew that I wanted – Emma knew that I wanted to get one like brand new bag, and then from then on everything else is vintage. But so it was just – it was the nicest day, and they

were really, really sweet. They could see how giddy we were, and they were like, 'you need to celebrate.' And so I will wear that forever. Just because of that memory.

KIRI: Oh, gorgeous.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Absolutely gorgeous.

[Electronic music]

KIRI: What can you – slightly downbeat question, but it depends how you take it.

SUSAN: Go on.

KIRI: What outfit do you want to be buried in?

SUSAN: Oh. Um, I want – oh my god. Do you know in – oh my god, it's such a beautiful dress. The orange dress that Marilyn Monroe wears in 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes'? There's this orange dress. It's kind of – there's a scarf there, but you've got a bit of chest there, and it's just gorgeous and fitted to fuck. And it's – an up do, a down do, you're good to go. That dress. Either that dress or, um, so this – these aren't dresses that I own. Um, or in the – I can't remember what year the Oscars it was. Michelle Williams wore this I think Miu Miu dress. It was either Miu Miu or Prada, and it was yellow. It was yellow. Oh my god. That one. So either of those two. Those two dresses. I want one of those.

KIRI: There's a hashtag. There might even be a – an account, called like 'Black girls in yellow.' Because it is such a stunning

conversation. Because also there's – I – I'm learning about colourism with –

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Within like – in skin tones anyway. And like you're much darker skinned, so then there's like an added layer of oppression on that as well.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: But one of the like – this hash tag is such a gorgeous celebration because like the darker people's skin, the fucking more insane they look in yellow.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: It is so beautiful.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: Um, so yeah. And – and yellow is – is a colour that I just wish I could pull off.

SUSAN: Oh.

KIRI: And just always look like a cow in. But yeah, the – so that, like, is one of my like joyful places is to go and watch all of these black girls look like absolute fucking magic in yellow.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: It's so good. Oh, I'd love – I mean this in the nicest way: I want to see you buried in yellow.

SUSAN: Yeah. Yeah. 'Get in yellow. Get in the coffin.' Like I just – I think it's – and I do think that's – that's true, that because I'm dark skinned, I – I didn't – I remember I with somebody who went – I must've been quite young. Somebody just said, 'oh, you're really lucky.' Which is something I never heard. 'You're really lucky to be as dark as you are because bright colours suit you.' And I just ran with it. I was like, 'oh, do they? Okay. Alright. I'll dedicate myself to the cause.'

[Both laugh]

KIRI: And also there's something beautiful in it as well because I think bright colours are a clear expression of joy.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: And so often like black people – the focus is on their pain and not joy.

SUSAN: Yeah. Yeah.

KIRI: Like pain is fetishised and celebrated. And it's understandable when there's so much of it.

SUSAN: Yeah.

KIRI: But like joy is gorgeous.

SUSAN: Yeah. Yeah. 100%. And again it's always where I come back to: fun and joy. With everything, really. But definitely with – with my clothes.

[Electronic music]

KIRI: So that was Susan. What a gem of a woman. And do you know what? The best thing about this podcast is it's reminded me to send her that bomber jacket and that tea dress. I'm going to go to the post office after this. My memory is so bad. Now we're going to be putting up pictures of her outfits on our insta this week, so do have a nose at that. We are @whoyouwearingpod. It's time for me to do a little shout-out to a small business that I absolutely love. And I looked around my cupboard and my eye was immediately caught by a collection of very shiny jumpers. So I thought I would take this chance to sing the praises of their makers, Zilla kids.

Also mentioned in this episode, actually. Don't let the name fool you, because as well as making excellent clothes for children, they make astounding stuff for adults too. I've got a, um, slight addiction to their hand appliquéd sweatshirts, which go up to a 5XL. The sweatshirts are Fair Trade and then the appliqués are all sewn in Brighton. And they're sold in batches to avoid waste and it means that the founder, Emily, can make sure everyone involved with making her banging clothes is being treated and paid well. And I really love that. I feel like I should put some kind of warning here, because the jumpers are easy to become clinically addicted to, so do proceed with caution. Thank you so much to everyone who sent lovely messages after the first episode. I've got one here from Vic, who said, 'I was really looking forward to this podcast and the first episode was absolutely amazing. What a fantastic interview touching on the reasons why

we love and need clothes. The social history, total nostalgia. Bravo. Reminding me of my bright orange leather 70s jacket from Flip that I rocked as an undergrad in 1997 in Glasgow. Thought I was the bomb.’ Vic, mate. Bring back the bright orange leather jacket. It sounds absolutely incredible. Thank you for that lovely message. And Kate says, ‘awesome first episode. Brightened a gloomy and a bit of a shitter of a day. Sounded like two mates just chatting fashion and style. Loved it.’

Do you know what? It is like – when you sit down with people and ask them about what they wear, and it’s people who you can tell care and really love clothes and are stylish, it’s just so hard not to become giddy and excited. And I think we ended up being like, ‘and this thing, and then this thing. Oh, and let me show you this thing.’ So I’m glad that came over. Um, Ezra said, ‘I feel so greedy wanting to hear all the episodes straight away. The first one was amazing.’ Thank you, Ezra. Do you know what? We’re so proud of them.

We’ve recorded, um, like 21, 22. And the original problem was I was like, ‘let’s just release them all at once and let people binge.’ Um, but, um, my producer Jo was like, ‘yeah, okay. Cool. And then I’ll have a – an absolute mental health breakdown.’ Um, so we have to release it weekly, but I promise you there’s some – god, there’s some amazing conversations coming out. I’m so excited for you to listen to them. And Sarai, um, who makes gorgeous earrings that I’ll probably chat about one day on this podcast, said, ‘great first episode. Inspiring me to be more daring with my clothing.’ Do you know what? Doing this podcast has been exactly the same for me, um, in that I have, um, come away from it being like, ‘you’ve got all these amazing clothes that you never wear. And don’t just always go for grey jogging bottoms that you got for

a sketch that never worked for your sketch group from Primark. And wear those mad leggings with cartoon sushi all over them. They're just as comfortable.' So yeah, I think it's making me be a bit more adventurous and just remember the joy, I guess, with clothes. Because that's the other thing as well, is being like plus size. Sometimes the joy of clothes can be really sucked out of it. So chatting to people who are stylish and all different shapes and sizes and budgets has been absolutely, um, inspiring. So I'm glad you're finding it too. Got a message here from Rach, who said, 'I'm so excited to listen to this. I'll be dotting new episodes of this in between constant replays of All Killa No Filla,' my true crime podcast with Rachel Fairburn. And she says, 'oh, fab shout out for Fizz Goes Pop. Her creativity and talent constantly blows my mind. She's so well deserving of every success.' Absolutely. Liz is amazing at Fizz Goes Pop, the small business that I chatted about, um, last week. Do you know what? If you want to get in contact, you can email us at [whoareyouwearingpod@gmail.com](mailto:whoareyouwearingpod@gmail.com). Love your messages. It fills me with joy to see that people are getting something out of this. It's – honestly it's absolutely great. We will be back next Monday and I'll be chatting to the immaculately turned out Laura Whitmore. See you then.

[Electronic music]

Who Are You Wearing is produced by Jo Southerd, the artwork is by Mary Phillips, and the music is by Ani Glass. This has been a Little Wander production.