

**Caryn Franklin** is the former i-D Fashion Editor who helped bridge the avant garde with the mainstream, when she took the role as presenter of *The Clothes Show* in 1986, a role she continues to this day with *The Clothes Show Live*.

Interview Tricia Jones  
Introduction Ben Reardon

Caryn in bondage strides 1982. Photography Steve Johnston.

**WITH HER HEAD WRAPS** and crazy clothes, Caryn Franklin blended cultures in one fashion look and represented London street fashion, the catwalk and the experimental, always in a cerebral and conscious way. Like a fashion superhero, Caryn used her powers for the greater good of mankind using her lofty fashion kudos and second to none knowledge to help raise awareness for worthwhile causes including Breast Cancer, eating disorders and size issues. Turning 50 this year, Caryn is looking better than ever, with her streak of grey hair and strong sense of style empowering women up and down the land. To prove the point, we asked some of Britain's most important designers and editors what Caryn means to them and why she is important for British Fashion and caught up with the fantastic lady herself to speak about Jeff Banks, shaved heads and plastic surgery.

**When did you first become aware of fashion?**

I was aware of the power of clothes quite early on, because my mum was a great dressmaker and she occasionally dressed us all in identical clothes. I am the oldest of four sisters, and at nine, I would wear the same as my little sister who was still in nappies! In my passive aggressive way I would sabotage the look by wearing black plimsoles while all the others wore neat white sandals with their dresses. I ruined a few photo opportunities. That was early protest fashion for me.

**What's been your best and/or worst look?**

Well I happen to think shaving all my hair off for a Nick Knight shoot in the '80s, was liberating. I enjoyed having a shiny scalp for six months. Others have said they weren't so keen on it.

The first time I met Caryn she was wearing hobnail boots and a tutu. Oh, and she had a shaved head. Apart from that she was completely normal, which, I have to say is one of her defining characteristics. In her chosen area she is forthright, fair, and funny, and that makes her very good at her job. Although the way she laughs – throwing her head back and barking at the moon like a deranged banshee – is one of the most disturbing things I've ever seen. Which is one of the many reasons I love her."

**DYLAN JONES, EDITOR  
'GQ'**

"When I was a teenager in the north of England, I used to watch Caryn on 'The Clothes Show', she had great style, taste and fashion business awareness, the whole show was an inspiration."  
**GILES, DESIGNER**

We never had a telly in the dining room when I was little, and every Sunday afternoon we ate our Sunday dinner at the table like a proper family. My brother had a Sunday job at Asda, so we used to have to eat late, around six. Every week I used to beg my Mam to time dinner so I could watch 'The Clothes Show' but somehow she always managed to shout 'dinner!' just as the first familiar bars of the theme tune, the Pet Shop Boys 'In The Night' – the song that harked the beginning of my fashion education – blared out into the living room but we had a video recorder. I grew up with 'The Clothes Show'. Every week there was a different theme – I watched an old tape a while ago and they had a whole section on fleece?! It was the access to designers and in-depth coverage of fashion weeks that I loved. I remember Bride Of The Year, when Vivienne Westwood made the wedding dress for this Scottish couple. It showed the whole process from sketch to finished article – it was amazing. It was establishment, as addictive as 'The Antiques Roadshow' and all the more interesting because of its enigmatic presenter. Caryn Franklin was the engine that drove the programme – sharp talking, head-scarfed, rectangular spectacled, mallow streaked Caryn showed me what fashion was. There was never great access to fashion books at my local library so 'The Clothes Show' was like a beacon, all shiny and new, exciting

and fresh. It's amazing that Caryn is still very much a part of fashion, hosting 'The Clothes Show Live' and presenting Graduate Fashion Week. It's very admirable how she does her bit in supporting young talent. Bringing new ideas to a wider audience has always been her thing, even back when she worked at i-D – she's a communicator and people take notice of her. I'm very proud to have the support and encouragement of someone I used to idolise. I was so happy when she name-checked me in an interview for i-D a few years ago! I have said it to Caryn a dozen times, and I'm sure she hears it from many other designers, but if it hadn't been for her and 'The Clothes Show', I might never have thought of being a designer.

**GARETH PUGH, DESIGNER**

"What I love is how mainstream her appeal has become through her TV work, yet she is still down with emerging fashion talent, running around in stilettos wearing Gareth Pugh.

**MANDI LENNARD, PR**

"Caryn Franklin has class. She's a woman of calibre and one of the best I know, the kind you could trust with your life. We met at a fashion shoot for i-D in the mid '80s, she was the first journalist to champion me and has been a great friend ever since."

**PAM HOGG, DESIGNER**

"When I think of Caryn Franklin, my mind travels back to Sunday afternoons waiting for 'The Clothes Show' to come on, it made my Sunday. The video recorder would be set so I could re-watch the episode over and over through out the week. To this day I still have a video

cassette catalogue at my Mum's house marked with 'NEVER TAPE OVER' with black permanent marker. Through Caryn I realised what I wanted to be, she brainwashed me, Central St Martins was always featured and I just knew I would go there, so overall she was a great influence on me. At that point I was about ten or eleven years old, living in a small village in Scotland, if I said out loud at school that I wanted to be a fashion designer I would have been laughed at. I could only share my thoughts with my art teacher, close friends and my sisters. Caryn opened up the fashion world to me and made me realise that I could actually follow my dreams. I was totally hooked and focused all through high school on one thing only – Central St Martins, so thank you Caryn!"

**CHRISTOPHER KANE, DESIGNER**



Backstage at The Clothes Show Live, Caryn wears dress Gareth Pugh.

Photography David Venni, 2008. (This photograph has not been digitally enhanced).



**What was it like working at i-D?**

It was family. I still have all my friendships from those days. It was ad hoc, coming up with ideas and not having to sit in a boardroom to get them approved. I feel uniquely lucky to have been part of that. When that marvellous party moment of the '80s fell away, I realised I was in a high-pressure yet mundane environment around the reporting of hemlines and I knew I had to add purpose to my life, or I would have just killed myself of boredom and stress! (laughs)

**How long were you at i-D?**

Six years, from 1982-'88. I left at 28 because I thought I was so ancient and it was time to move on; but also because I had been filming with *'The Clothes Show'* for two years and it was getting harder to do both. Also, (as I think it's important to tell it how it is), I needed to earn extra money to support my partner (my first daughter's father), who had become seriously affected by worsening Multiple Sclerosis. We saw healers, Harley Street practitioners, and alternative therapists across the spectrum. He even travelled abroad to look for a cure. TV paid for that. Experiencing the emotional chaos of that time and his physical demise, made me more intolerant of our cultural pre-occupation with physical perfection. I just wanted him to be able to walk again.

**What were your best and worst moments working on *The Clothes Show*?**

Interviewing Yves Saint Laurent was a magical thing; just sharing the moment with someone who was such a legendary figure did it for me. But I've had such variety. Following a request from Children In Crisis, I was part of a convoy that drove through the mountains of Bosnia at night with

the headlights turned off to avoid snipers; we delivered lorry loads of clothes to Serbian teenagers. I also visited slums in the Dominican Republic to talk to garment workers and union officials in Free Trade Zones about their working life. I was a guest in the mud and tin huts of women who worked in factories patrolled by male guards with batons. It was privileged access.

Being booed offstage, by thousands, at the very first *'Clothes Show Live'* in Earls Court, probably stands out as my worst moment!

**How did that happen?**

We had created this huge live event and invited the nation to come. We hoped they would turn up, but we didn't know the queue would go round Earls Court and it would take three hours just to get in the building. Jeff Banks, ever the man of the people, spent hours outside calming those who had travelled down from the other end of the country, but when they finally got into the building they were seriously fed up. So when we appeared on the catwalk to introduce the show, there was massive booing (laughs), my mum and dad were sitting in the audience, I felt really bad for them and me. Anyway we apologised profusely and moved it up to the N.E.C. in Birmingham. It's now in its 20<sup>th</sup> year and I still do it. Last year I wore Gareth Pugh on stage.

**How did you become involved with raising awareness for eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia?**

One of my sisters had anorexia for two years when she was 16. Back then there was no understanding that this was a condition with the highest mortality rate of all mental disorders, so we were all ignorant of her distress. She left for L.A. and when she returned 10 years later, she talked

to me about it, she educated me. This was also around the time that Kate Moss achieved supermodel status, with the label 'super-waif'. And so I became conscious of the fashion industry's glorification of emaciation. I heard many stories from models around the same theme of weight maintenance like eating cotton wool with honey on it or repeated vomiting. Heroin chic was also surfacing as an aesthetic and there was a lot of excitement about really thin women who either took drugs or looked as though they did. The fashion industry has often used thin, as a short cut to edgy, it's a language we all unthinkingly agreed upon, but I now had an audience of 13 million, some of them very young, impressionable women. I would regularly be accosted in the street by worried parents who didn't know who else to talk to about it. That was when I insisted that *'The Clothes Show'* use models who weren't too thin. It was a battle; I threatened to resign at one point. Making the TV feature on eating disorders within the fashion industry was a battle too. I became a patron of Beat (formally the Eating Disorders Association) at that time.

#### **Who would you say are positive role models in fashion?**

I like individuals. Vivienne Westwood doesn't pander to trend. She is authentic, and in an industry where the players are so often judged by appearance, she lives in her skin, she owns her reality. I see a wonderful witchy woman. I have interviewed her many times and even produced a TV special on her for ITV. Very early on she got me thinking about the politics of clothing when she created the mini-crini as an alternative to the square shouldered power-dressing silhouette of the eighties. Katharine Hamnett and Stella McCartney are others who have content and conviction. Jane Shepherdson, formerly of Topshop, now at Whistles really raised the retailing game, Professor Helen Storey who is at the scientific frontier of sustainable fashion, Safia Minney founder of People Tree for her vision and Tilda Swinton I just love her natural grace and lack of artifice.

#### **Why did you decide to work for plus size women?**

I always call my women curvy women. I never say plus size and I would take anyone who calls them plus size outside and shoot them. (laughs)

#### **Can you explain your recent design project?**

I create clothes for women who are between dress sizes 14 to 32, called Simply Be. As a stylist working with curvy women, which I do a lot, I will pull clothes out that have the features to create a streamlining effect on the body. So I just start a little earlier in the process, I draw what I want to see, I choose my fabrics and my trimmings, then I work with a great team of women who create the technical specifications for the sampling. I've added footwear, sleepwear and swimwear to the collection and I'm having fun.

#### **What's your opinion about plastic surgery and beauty enhancing procedures?**

I grew up in a post-feminist culture, which demanded women be evaluated on abilities and achievements, I never dreamed it would regress in the way it has. We are now judged in the media as an exterior only. Women are under pressure to achieve physical perfection as a goal.

#### **Is this pressure our fault as women in the media?**

Because of some mass low self-esteem, we belong to a culture that idolises the exterior. I see racks of magazines carrying banner headlines about someone's shock weight loss, shock weight gain, new miracle diet blah blah. I'm bringing up two daughters in this environment and asking them to see beyond this, but where are their role models? Yes I'm part of the problem because of the industry I work in, but I also see myself as part of the solution. I have given many talks in schools and I always say I love the fashion industry and I am in one of the best places to influence reform. I could be a person with a protest poster standing outside the building but I prefer to get inside that building and be involved in small incremental changes. Fashion does offer a powerful vehicle for communicating to women, I've seen that first hand in the 13 years that I have been co-chair of Fashion Targets Breast Cancer with Amanda Wakeley. We have helped build and maintain Britain's first ever dedicated Breast Cancer Research Centre it's staffed by world-class scientists. We can all be proud of that.

#### **If you could change anything about your appearance without surgery what would you change?**

I've already done it! I got my crooked teeth straightened and whitened.

#### **Does that kind of contradict what you were saying?**

For the price I paid for this crockery, I could have had a full body lift, (laughs) but invasive carve-up-your-body surgery isn't for me. I'll defend any woman's right to do whatever she wants to her body though, in the hope that she would feel happier afterwards. But the media's promotion of cosmetic surgery as a marvelous quick fix is misleading and just not authentic. Similarly I think women should be upfront about what they have bought for themselves. The denial and the lying is un-sisterly. I tell everyone I have veneers and I recommend my dentist!

#### **What do you think about the amount of retouching that goes on in magazines?**

The technology of tinkering, (that happens with post-production on a computer) is seen as taking good lighting to the next step. But let's be upfront as an industry. Let's print 'this model has been digitally enhanced'. Viewers are then reminded to think about the process, otherwise women forget and quickly shortcut to a place where they are berating themselves because they don't look that good in their holiday snaps.

#### **Absolutely and possibly that's another area where we in the industry are helping women feel insecure?**

The Model Health Enquiry raised this and the British Fashion Council contacted the British Society of Magazine Editors to create debate on rules around the use of digital enhancement. We just have to be more honest. I have a natural grey streak, which appeared when I was in my early thirties but I was told by the BBC bosses to get rid of it because it made me look too old. I ignored them but I know that if I let all my hair go naturally grey, I would not work on television; so we all have to make choices about what we will do to pay the bills and put food on the table.

**At this point I have to say 'thank you' to Alex Shulman, because I was asked to be part of an issue on older women. At first I was embarrassed and I didn't want to do it, then I asked for it to be on condition that Terry did the photos. I wanted to wear my own clothes, do my own makeup, looking as I do normally, I didn't want to be re-touched and I have to say there was no argument about it. They published the picture exactly as we had submitted it and I was very grateful. So maybe even if we couldn't say, 'This picture has been retouched' we could do it the other way round and say 'This picture hasn't been retouched'...That's possibly an interesting idea.**

Respect to you and respect to her I say. Let's run with that!

#### **What else would you like to achieve? Have you got something that you would really like to do?**

Get that labelling on magazine covers! (laughs). Write that second novel, spend more time gardening, learn to keep bees when I retire!

#### **What have you learnt from your mother and what have you learnt from your two daughters?**

From my mum grace and dignity, from my daughters the freedom to indulge in sensuality.

#### **Is there anything else you would like to add Caryn?**

Yes I'm 50 and I'm feisty. I don't subscribe to the cultural hysteria around getting older. If you look back through history you will discover that the Christian church was petrified of older women who had herbal and healing knowledge – not to mention status in the community. When those same women objected to the church investing in sugar plantations and bringing sugar to Europe because it would be bad for health, the elders needed to silence them. Millions of women were burned at the stake during a three hundred year holocaust. The Church actively targeted older women and especially single older women who weren't under the control of husbands. At first it was under the pretence that they were in league with the Devil, and therefore witches, but later it became a handy way to shut up politicised women. As women, the older we become, the cleverer we become and the more outspoken we become, our faces show our wisdom and that's the way I like it.

**Thanks Caryn, this conversation's been an absolute pleasure!**

**At this point I should like to own up and acknowledge that for many years Caryn has been one of my closest friends and one of the group of 'sisters' that I never had as a child. Thanks Caz! x**