

Golden girl of the west

by Gillian - Thursday, December 27, 2012

<http://3storymagazine.com/sydney-ballesteros/>

New York and Los Angeles beware. Tucson's Sydney Ballesteros is making waves in the world of fashion styling. And we're placing bets on her sailing straight to the top. By Gillian Drummond.

Photo by [Stacia Lugo](#). Wardrobe courtesy of [Black Cat Vintage](#).

Styling by [Sydney Ballesteros](#)

As a young child she was sneaking into her mom's clothes closet and slipping into her high heels. At 12 she was diving headfirst into movies like Casablanca and Breakfast at Tiffany's. In high school she was known as "Syd with the crazy clothes", and every spare dollar from a part-time job was spent combing the thrift stores of Fourth Avenue.

Sydney Ballesteros. Photo by [Puspa Lohmeyer](#)

It's no surprise, then, that [Sydney Ballesteros](#) should have ended up working in fashion, and specializing in vintage. Today this 30-year-old is wowing with head-turning looks, as a fashion stylist for magazines, stores and fashion shows. Quietly, assuredly and very cleverly she is carving out a niche, and emerging as a bright young talent not just locally but nationally. Clients include, locally, [Zocalo](#) magazine and [Black Cat Vintage](#). At the recent opening reception for Tucson's first Modernism Week, she styled live 'sculptures' with midcentury looks. This month she makes her second appearance in the national [Matchbook](#) magazine.

Although vintage is her thing, that doesn't mean she styles exclusively vintage. She likes to put vintage into an editorial and make it look fresh and modern. "Vintage is so timeless, and fashion recreates itself from the inspirations of what's been done already, so with care, attention to detail and the right pair of eyes, vintage can do that," she says.

Claudine Villardito, owner of Black Cat Vintage, a client and a close friend, calls Sydney's style unique for its "cutting edge concepts told through vintage pieces." Adds Claudine: "She can take a half-century old piece of clothing and make it look like it just walked down the runway."

Photo by [Stacia Lugo](#). Wardrobe courtesy of [Black Cat Vintage](#). Styling by [Sydney Ballesteros](#)

"It was inevitable," says Sydney of her passion for clothes. Her parents were musicians, and Sydney would sneak into her mom's closet to try on her shiny stage gear. Her grandmother was an antiques collector, and at the age of five or six, Sydney was already fond of yard sales and antique malls. At age twelve Sydney started to notice her grandmother's clothing from the 1930s and '40s. She would stare at old black and white photos of her, be intrigued by the teased hairstyles, and wonder what it was like to live back then. She began to watch old movies with her grandmother, and still rates Casablanca, Breakfast at Tiffany's, 42nd Street and Rear Window among her favorites.

At Tucson High School she was "Syd with the crazy clothes". The school is just a hop and a skip from Fourth Avenue, where she would go thrift shopping at every opportunity.

At college, she began studying costume design, then quickly realized she was more interested in "painting the picture on things already made." Some basic art classes followed, and a class in creative writing would also prove valuable when she started conjuring up vignettes for shoots.

Sydney's first foray into fashion styling came in 2006, when she was asked to style someone in the 1930s

era for a film audition. She started writing and then styling for Zocalo magazine. Meantime, her blog, [Golden Girl of the West](#), was getting noticed, and now draws high numbers every month.

When Sydney styles, she also directs and writes, if only in her head. Many times she creates a character for a model to inhabit, even a back story for them to act out, with the storyline usually taking an unexpected turn. "I like to get people as excited as I am about the end result," she says. She tends to use the same crew to achieve that: make-up artist Tangie Duffey, hairstylist Raul Mendoza, and photographers [Puspa Lohmeyer](#) and [Stacia Lugo](#).

Photo by [Puspa Lohmeyer](#).

Styling by [Sydney Ballesteros](#)

Sydney is quiet, polite and modest, yet not afraid to steal attention with her work, and attract stares with her own personal look. One day she may be dressed 1930s, with pin curls, cupid bow lips, round wire-rimmed glasses and a pencil skirt. Another, it might be floaty 1960s. "I still jump around a lot and it depends on mood. I'm a mood dresser. It could be music I hear or something I'm inspired by that day," she says of her clothes choices.

On the day 3 Story met her, Syd was having a mod '60s day: black and white shift dress, red Mary Janes, and pale lip gloss. She has enough clothes that they inhabit a spare bedroom of her 1940s adobe house, and then some (there are more outfits in storage boxes in her garage). But before you start forming the wrong impression, she says she rarely buys clothes these days. "I started building my collection at a really early age, so I don't need to go and buy a lot of things."

Self-taught in the history of fashion - by reading books and magazines, and watching films and documentaries - she didn't take an actual fashion history course until she attended college for the second time, aged 24. She knows what to jump on when she sees it for sale and what she may easily find again down the line.

"Sydney was my Christmas present in 2009," recalls Claudine Villardito. Syd made an appointment to see her, and hours later they were still talking. Now Syd is Claudine's stylist, helping create a monthly fashion editorial on her website called Garment District. (For more on Claudine, see 3 Story's feature, [Seriously](#)

[Vintage.](#))

Photo by [Stacia Lugo](#). Wardrobe courtesy of [Black Cat Vintage](#). Styling by [Sydney Ballesteros](#)

"Since then she has become my right hand or perhaps, more specifically, my right thumb. I can't imagine running Black Cat Vintage without her," says Claudine. "Sydney has that curious mix of talents that can't be taught or listed on a resume; her skill set comes from living what she works. It blows me away when she uses a garment I've looked at a hundred times in a completely unexpected way. I have seriously considered hiring her to dress me in the morning."

Photo by [Stacia Lugo](#). Wardrobe courtesy of [Black Cat Vintage](#). Styling by [Sydney Ballesteros](#)

"I wonder sometimes if she is a fashion messenger from the past, here to revive the styles of old. With just a little verve, she is able to transcend time and prove nothing is passé," says David Olsen, publisher and creative director of [Zocalo Magazine](#), who calls Sydney's creativity "limitless".

"Working with Syd has made me a better photographer," says Stacia Lugo, who believes she has not only perfected her craft, but learned a lot about vintage fashion. "Sydney is like no other creative I've worked with. She has big things coming her way."

"In the beginning it was very hard. It's hard to get people as excited about it as you are. It's a unique thing, to have such a passion for something," says Sydney. "It's hard to get vintage fashion on the map. For years I had to be a go-getter and knock on people's doors. Now I'm getting to the point where work is coming to me."

Photo by [Puspa Lohmeyer](#)

Styling by [Sydney Ballesteros](#)

But being grounded and happy is as important to her as her career. Married to Carlos, whom she has been best friends with since the age of 12, and mother to 11-year-old Romeo and her wheaten terrier Gracie ("the diva daughter I never had"), she says she prefers a glass of wine and a quiet night in over a party or big night out.

She is deeply rooted in Tucson – with ten generations of family before her – and says her family keeps her real. (She is also passing on her passion for vintage to young Romeo; she's proud to say he was the only kindergartner in his school to know about the retro product [Bakelite](#)).

Tucson has been good to her professionally too, she says. This is a place without the resources of big North American cities, and often limited or no budget, she says. Yet through her collaborations with local stores (Black Cat Vintage, [Razzle Dazzle](#), [Buffalo Exchange](#), [Desert Vintage](#), [How Sweet It Was](#)), and with the help of her regular make-up, hairstylist and photographer crew, she says she is able to give other cities a run for their money.

"Sydney is undoubtedly "one to watch" in Tucson and far beyond," says Claudine Villardito. "Look for her on Vogue's masthead within ten years."

Sydney realizes that she may have to make a move eventually, probably to New York City, if she is to climb higher up the fashion ladder. Until then, though, she's happy to help put Tucson on the fashion styling map. "Just because I'm in Tucson doesn't mean I can't put out the same work as someone in New York or Los Angeles. Tucson, and Arizona, is a treasure trove of talented, kind and creative people. It's like the best kept secret."

Photo above by [Stacia Lugo](#). Wardrobe courtesy of [Black Cat Vintage](#). Styling by [Sydney Ballesteros](#)