

Sam ([00:00:02](#)):

Welcome to the Grow My Salon Business podcast, where we focus on the business side of hairdressing. I'm your host, Antony Whitaker, and I'll be talking to thought leaders in the hairdressing industry discussing insightful, provocative, and inspiring ideas that matter. So get ready to learn, get ready to be challenged, get ready to be inspired, and most importantly, get ready to grow your salon business.

Sam ([00:00:30](#)):

Hey, it's Antony Whitaker here, and welcome to today's episode of the Grow My Salon Business podcast. As always, it's great to have you here. Sometimes you have to look for words to describe achievements and a status in the hairdressing industry for someone that is way ahead of the pack. My guest on today's episode is one such person, and I'm gonna describe him as a hairdressing genius. Sam McKnight is a session stylist that has a list of eye watering achievements that include having worked with every supermodel you can name, as well as celebrities movie stars, royalty, photographers, magazines, and fashion designers over the last 40 years. And it's a list that just goes on and on and on. He has so many vogue covers to his credit that he's lost count, that is well over 250, by the way. He's won awards, had exhibitions, published his own book, and been a contributing editor to British Vogue. And he is currently a judge on the UK reality TV show about hairdressing called The Big Blowout, which is sponsored by Paul Mitchell. And on top of all that, Sam is founder of his own product range, simply called Hair by Sam McKnight. In today's episode, we just talk about being Sam McKnight. So without further ado, welcome to the show, Mr. Sam McKnight.

Sam ([00:01:54](#)):

Hi. Thank you for having me,

Sam ([00:01:56](#)):

Sam. It's a absolute pleasure. You probably know I've been trying to get you on the podcast for quite a while. I know you are an extremely busy man, so thank you very much for making the time, you know, to do this for us. You know, first thing I did wanna say is thank you for sharing. You know, I know that you are you have a lot of projects on the go at any one time, which we're gonna talk about, but I just wanna ask you right off the bat, do you ever get talk sick talking about your story and your background?

Sam ([00:02:27](#)):

Yes, I do. Okay, of course I do. I mean, everyone knows the story now anyway. I guess there's always some people, some people are still finding it interesting and I'm grateful for that, but it does get, it does, yeah. We say, oh God, do people wanna listen to me droning on about myself? But what's good is that I, I'm very interested in doing new things. So it's not always so much about the past. Of course there is cuz I'll have have a big past from, you know, the last, what, 50 years doing this, and that's fine. But what keeps it interesting is the stuff that's going on now, you know?

Sam ([00:03:09](#)):

Yeah, of course.

Sam ([00:03:10](#)):

For me, that's the stuff that keeps me going. Of course the past is, you know, I've had a great time, it's been amazing. Let's be clear about that. But it's almost more interesting to be looking to the now in the future, if that makes sense.

Antony ([00:03:29](#)):

Oh, that totally makes sense. And that sort of already answers a question I'm gonna ask you about later. I think there's a lot of value in talking about the past because you have quite humble beginnings as a lot of hairdressers do. And when a hairdresser listens to your story, whether they've heard it before or haven't heard it before, and then they see what you've achieved, it shows them what is possible in this industry. And so I always think that there is value on touching on your past. And I'll, I'll.....

Sam ([00:04:01](#)):

No, I totally agree with you. I mean, don't check this the wrong way. I, we did a book in an exhibition, I guess we started working on that about eight, nine years ago. So that kind of four or five years working on that retrospective book and exhibition was where I really delved into my past, like I'd never really done before, you know? Because what happened was people started posting a lot of old images when Instagram started, you know, at the beginning of Instagram. A lot of my old work that I'd forgotten about, you know, because it's been a long time and it's been a lot of work under the bridge too. So I saw there was an interest in it. And anyway, long story short the people at Somerset House contacted me and said, would I be interested in, you know, doing an exhibition?

Sam ([00:04:53](#)):

And my first thought was, well, really, someone's gonna be interested in looking at all these old photos that I've had in boxes for months. And then they kind of presented it in a way that seemed very interesting and you know, spoke to how relevant that period in the past has become nowadays. So we did that, but that was quite an emotional journey, if you like, because it was, we had 40,000 images to go through and, you know, whittling that down to 3000 was quite hard because, because you know, I'm moving on all the time and to look at something from 30 or 40 years ago, you look at it, and I remember very clearly the day, the people, whether it was a good day or a bad day, the person there who may no longer be with us, you know, I may not have seen for 30. That kind. It brings up all these thoughts that have been in a box along with the tear sheets for many years. So it was quite a emotionally exhausting time. And, and so I almost felt once I had done that, that that gave me the space to move on, if that makes sense.

Antony ([00:06:17](#)):

Yeah it does.

Sam ([00:06:17](#)):

And then the way things have happened since then is we had a couple of years doing that. We launched a few products, then everything got halted by the pandemic. I mean, everything just stopped dead in its tracks for most people, especially our industry. You know, we were one of the hardest hit really. Cause everything was closed and even photo shoots weren't happening, You know, it was, so that was, that was sort of that was, well it was weird for everyone, but I think what I'm trying to say is that once I'd put all those things in their past box, I became really, really energized about what to do next. You know, I kind of took a major positive out of that. And the past almost belongs in the past. So for, to bring it right back to your question. So for me to talk about my past now really feels like the past. It really kind of, it

really feels like there was a demarcation between book, exhibition, Pandemic. My world has changed dramatically, you know? And so it's become, and you know, I'm getting older, you know, so it's become more and more important for me to find a new future. Does that make sense?

Antony ([00:07:35](#)):

It does. Totally. I mean, I you're a little bit older than me. Not much. And I know, you know, your background was in, when you started hair dressing in London that you were at Molton Brown. Well, I was just next door in Sasoon.

Sam ([00:07:50](#)):

Oh, you were?

Antony ([00:07:50](#)):

Yeah. In South Molton Street. So very, you know, like I started there in 1980. I think you, I heard you say you started in Molton Brown, mid seventies or late seventies or something.

Sam ([00:08:00](#)):

77. I left in 80 and I walked down there the other day and they've still got that beautiful, you know, original facade, I guess Georgian in Molton Brown, I guess there must be a preservation order on it. And it, it kind of, you know, when you walk along those streets, it brings back so many memories, doesn't it? It's quite amazing. Cause it was, cause it was an amazing street to work in.

Antony ([00:08:25](#)):

It was, in the eighties in particular it was incredible.

Sam ([00:08:28](#)):

Incredible. Yeah, it was amazing. And there was that amazing sandwich bar at the nanios across the road.

Antony ([00:08:36](#)):

Yeah. En Ricos or something like that. There were two of them, weren't there? But anyway,

Sam ([00:08:41](#)):

There was two, yeah, there was two. But that one I used to love and everything was vegetarian and modern brand. It was very, it was very, it was macrobiotic. And I would go across there and sneak a bacon sandwich in on the way back.

Antony ([00:08:58](#)):

I can totally relate to that. But one of the things I wanted to ask you about that was that, now this might say more about my focus at the time than what was actually happening, but you know, for me, being a young hairdresser starting it so soon, at that point in time, all the focus was on hair cutting. And yet here's you that at that beginning of that point in your career, decided to go off into this new area, which essentially it was of being a session starters, being an editorial hairdresser. So talk to me about that. What did you see that, you know, a lot of other people didn't? I mean, was it, you know, it was an era of,

the focus was on the haircut and you went off into dressing hair and doing photo shoots. So, tell us about that transition and what was driving you.

Sam ([00:09:48](#)):

For me, it was, I mean, I became very aware of fashion photography and the likes of Vogue and Bizarre, you know, in the mid seventies, early seventies. And I started looking at the hair and images and how important it was. And hair dressing was always important in fashion magazines. You know, it was as important, if not more important than hair cutting. It was, it was all about creating, using hair as a kind of medium for creating an image. And I was sent out on some photo shoot early on at Brown when I think Carrie Worn must have been ill or overbooked. Carrie was doing everything, and I got to help him a couple of times. And I mean, Carrie is one of the best hairdressers that ever lived to this day. It's incredible. And so I dunno, I felt, I felt a spark from that, that I wasn't getting, doing 12 clients a day in the salon.

Sam ([00:10:53](#)):

I think I, I just felt, I felt the creative spark ignited really. Which I had felt the salon, but then I suddenly realized there was a bigger flame for me out there. And at the time, you are absolutely right, you're absolutely spot on. And a lot of people don't realize this. I have to keep telling people this, is that the business as existed today did not exist. There was nothing. There was, there was a handful of small magazines. Most people doing hair on shoots were from a salon, or they did hair and makeup. They did both, or they did movies. There wasn't, there was no money to be made in dirt fashion magazines. Like there still isn't, let's face it. But there was no real kind of commercial arm to it where you made money apart from going into the movies or TV commercials.

Sam ([00:11:50](#)):

And I didn't really wanna do that. But I could sense there was a new era coming cause fashion was becoming more public facing rather than, because fashion shows back then were, there were trade shows, you know. I remember the first show I went to with Molton Brown, I think it was for probably Emmanuels. And it was, we had I think eight models and I had two assistants or maybe one assistant. And there were, there were two of us, maybe three with eight models. I mean, that would be a dream now. And you know, it was, it was a much smaller, maybe 40 people in the audience. They weren't allowed to take pictures. They had to do sketches. They sometimes weren't allowed to do sketches. You didn't see a single thing from those till six months later till they were in the shops.

Sam ([00:12:40](#)):

And I guess there, there were people like Vidal and a couple of people at Vidal Sasson, John Frida, Leonard, you know, there were that small culture of people doing fashion magazines and I could see, I could see there was something happening. I could feel it. You know, when you are young, you get a feeling for those things. And when, I remember when I left, so many people said, Oh my God, are you sure? Are you sure you're gonna do that? There's gonna be no work. But I think once you've learned to do hair, I thought, well, you know what, I can do a few clients, I can mix it up. And I used to drive around my little mini doing haircuts for, I think they were 12 pounds or something like that. And that was fine, that kept me going.

Sam ([00:13:24](#)):

I mean, I didn't have a mortgage, it was you know... I know I slept in my car a couple nights. I know I did that. And it was, yeah. I mean, it was, it was a risk. But I'm still a big risk taker. I think you have to really, you have to take those risks or you're not gonna get anywhere, you know. And I thought, okay, I can cut hair, I can do hair. So if it all doesn't work out, I can go back in a salon, you know? You've always got that behind you. Whatever, wherever you end up, if you've learned a skill, you always gonna have that skill as a backup.

Antony ([00:14:05](#)):

Definitely.

Sam ([00:14:06](#)):

And I took the risk jumped and yeah that was it. Never looked back.

Antony ([00:14:12](#)):

Did anyone...

Sam ([00:14:13](#)):

It was a risk. It was a business. It was a business that did not exist, really. It was, it was, cause as you know, at the beginning of that decade, the models did their own hair, makeup.

Antony ([00:14:24](#)):

Yeah. Exactly. Did, you mentioned Carrie Worn? Did anyone take you under their wing, so to speak? I know that everyone was sort of in the same boat, but was there any early influences that that sort of, you know, really helped you in that area? Whether it was a hairdresser or an agent or a beauty editor or whatever?

Sam ([00:14:44](#)):

No, I have to say Michael Collis at Molton Brown. Had a great holistic natural ethos. And and he taught us to do hair with our hands and not rely on heated tools and all that kind of stuff. So we used those Molton Brown, no foam rollers. We used our hands to do almost everything, even with.

Antony ([00:15:08](#)):

Towel dry the hair, wouldn't you

Sam ([00:15:10](#)):

Towel dry and use our hands. So that, that really, really was important to me to get my hands into it and not be reliant on tools. So I think for me, that was the one most important thing that I learned. And I have to thank Michael for that cause that, that ethos was, was amazing. Cause it was kind of almost the opposite of Vidal Sasson. It was, it was going in a much more natural way, which was kind of, I guess it was the kind of the beginning. He was the first one to do that sort of natural hair products too, you know? I mean, he was, they were really ahead of their time there, you know, and I'm forever grateful for that.

Antony ([00:15:59](#)):

Yeah. Now I know you spent a long time in New York as well, didn't you?

Sam ([00:16:05](#)):

I did, Yes, yeah.

Antony ([00:16:06](#)):

Right. How long were you there for, 10 years or something, or more?

Sam ([00:16:09](#)):

No ,I was in New York on and off for 18 years.

Antony ([00:16:12](#)):

Right, Okay.

Sam ([00:16:13](#)):

I, well, quite early on after I'd left Molton Brown, I, the girls Lister Barris and Anna Harvey at Richie Stone. I worked with them the beginning and they became kind of very loyal to me. You know how it is, you meet, this is, this is important for people starting now. You meet a team in the beginning, you become part of a little team. And that's very, very crucial because that, that team can, I still work with some of those well, those two women are no longer with us, but Lucinda Chambers, who was at Vogue in 1980, 1979, I think it was, that I still work with Lucinda to this day. So you kind of develop these relationships and they can be really crucial to your, not just to the beginning of your career, but to your entire career.

Sam ([00:17:08](#)):

So treasure those. But I had done a few jobs for British Vogue and an agent called Brian Banter in New York had spotted them. Well, the thing is this hair and makeup agency thing was quite new too. There were a few in London, but there was a much bigger industry in New York. You know, it was, the fashion industry was a commercial and creative hub really, with lots of photo studios. And they were kinda light years ahead of us. And Brian asked me to go in to see him in New York. So off we went to New York for a holiday, and six months later I had an agent and I was doing lots of jobs outta New York. And that went on, on and off, from 82 till about 2000.

Antony ([00:18:01](#)):

Yeah. Okay. You are rarely renowned for not being a name dropper. And you've just touched on that whole thing about relationships and how important those relationships are. And you're also renowned having a lot of humility about you. You know, just like you, you are very easy to talk to about your background. You're very open and you share a lot about your background. What I wanted to ask you is, do you ever get intimidated, you know, when you are a young hairdresser. I mean, you have done the hair of pretty much every iconic, you know, princess, movie star, model, you know, whatever over the course of the last 20, 30, 40 years. Do you ever stand on set knowing that someone's about to walk in the door, who, you know, is fame personified and sort of feel, Oh my God, I am about to meet this person? Does that impact on you? Or does it just sort of like, Antony, where I grew up and how I grew up, everyone's all the same, and I just treat everyone as I find them. And that's the way people are. I'm rambling.

Sam ([00:19:16](#)):

No, it's alright. I mean, I dunno if intimidated is the word, but I, you certainly, you know, you certainly hope that someone's gonna be nice and cool and not, and you're gonna get along with them, you know? And sometimes it can be quite disappointing when they're not, you know?

Antony ([00:19:36](#)):

Right okay.

Sam ([00:19:36](#)):

You know. But as far, the thing that probably I find a little intimidating is when people have a big entourage, you know, and you have to get through layers of people to get to them. I'm very much a one on one. I prefer dealing with a person. I, you know what, I tend to work with nice people. You know, I work a lot to this day for many years with Kate Blanchette, Kate Moss, and I kind of gravitate towards likeminded people, if that makes sense. I'm not really a, I'm not really a lover of drama, a lover of diva, kind of, I don't think, I don't sort of worship people and think, oh, I wanna meet them and do their hair, I don't care.

Antony ([00:20:25](#)):

Have you ever been? I mean, you're not 30 anymore, so you've always pretty unaffected by it all and just, you know, take 'em as you find them, so to speak?

Sam ([00:20:36](#)):

Yeah. And if someone's a pain or the drama, I don't go back, you know? It's kind of, it's, you know, really, I'm not, not into that. I'm just not, some people love that some people actually. I mean, I know some people do what I do, who absolutely love all that and thrive and all that, but that's not me, you know?

Sam ([00:20:58](#)):

Okay. I was thinking before,

Sam ([00:21:01](#)):

I'm not gonna go into, I'm not gonna go in sheep for some celebrities that have, bow down and say, oh my God, you're amazing. All that stuff. I've seen that done.

Antony ([00:21:09](#)):

Yeah. Okay. Before we got on this call, I was thinking about, about you and the things you've witnessed in your life, the people you've been privy to meet and see, But it's not just that you meet and see them, it's that you meet and see them at their most vulnerable, you know, backstage in their hotel room, in their bathroom, doing their hair, whatever. And, you know, you famously you know, did work with Diana Princess of Wales for a long time and, cut her hair, styled her hair, did some incredible, you know photographic shoots with her and traveled with her a lot. And I, and I've heard you talk about that and I realize that when you're talking about it, but there's another layer to this, which I'd never considered, and that is, there's this layer that you are privy into glimpses, into history, and people like, at a level that is really quite remarkable. I heard you talking once about Princess Diana and Mother Teresa in the same sentence and how you are in Pakistan or somewhere with them, and I'm, and I'm just thinking what an amazing opportunity that is that you are, you are witnessing. Yes. In hindsight, neither of those ladies

are with us any longer, but you are witnessing history really up close and personal in all their vulnerability. Does that impact on you at all?

Sam ([00:22:42](#)):

Dunno if it impacts, I mean, I appreciate how fortunate I was to actually meet the princess and spend so much time with her and to get to visit all those incredible places with her that I wouldn't have been able to visit before if it wasn't for my job as a hairdresser, you know.

Antony ([00:23:05](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Sam ([00:23:05](#)):

When you do someone's hair, it's an intimate relationship. You know, it's kind of one away from a doctor really. So even probably closer than a doctor, you know? Because you're actually touching someone. You're in their space and it's, but you have that inbuilt hairdresser's ability to kind of be distant from it at the same time. Do you know what I mean? To be involved, yet not involved, to be friends, but still clients. To be respectful and to know when, just to know how to behave and to know how to behave in someone's personal space, you know? But it's a two way street too. You must know that as well, that it's, you're in each other's space. You know, you see each other, you know, five, six in the morning, you know, you might be both a bit raw, vulnerable, as you say.

Sam ([00:24:09](#)):

So you can kind of unload a bit on each other. But I always say with me, things go in one ear and they're actually out the other, you know, it's kind, I've almost forgotten what you said. I'm a good listener, but I'm not gonna hold onto anything. You know, it's, I'm not being, I'm not being sort of flippant when I say that. I mean, it's, I guess it's a coping mechanism for all of us, isn't it? It's that kind of you're not taking everyone's load home with you, you know, and that's not just Diana, that that's anyone whose space that you're allowed into, you know. And, working with her, I mean, I guess because I'm not daunted and not sort of intimidated by those situations, I was never thinking of it as history.

Sam ([00:25:06](#)):

It was much more personal than that. You know I'm there to do a job to do someone's hair, and I get to do, I mean, she explained to me once why, cause she didn't have a huge entourage. She didn't have any makeup artists there or anything, she had really, really difficult hair for herself to do. And I said to her once, Look, your hair looks really good when you come out the gym, when you don't do anything to it. Do you need me to come on these things with you? See, the thing is, personally no, I don't. But when I turn up to these things, people wanna see Princess Diana, you know, they don't wanna see me coming out the gym. And she respected that sort of expectation of the people who, who idolized her, who made her who she was.

Sam ([00:25:54](#)):

...who gave her the platform. So, and she had a total, total respect for that, you know? And I mean, and I was really, I mean, really in awe of that. But she was a, she was a really lovely, lovely woman who liked to have a really good laugh as well. So I think there are so many sides to different, different situations, different people. But as a hairdresser, I think probably, maybe why I've been around so long is, is because I'm really respectful of people, you know? And I demand that back too. If someone's not

respectful, then it's not gonna work. It's like, it's a collaboration, isn't it really? It's not, it's not just you, whether they're a, you know, amazing, you know, high flying personality, or it's someone sitting in a chair in your, in your salon. It's very much a collaboration, you know? And some people say, Oh, do whatever you want. And that, that's always a warning sign goes up there with me. And some people say, some people bring in a dozen photos. So people have different reasons for getting their hair done. Some people like it as a mask or a disguise. Some people like it as a weapon. And it's, it's a very, it's quite a complex relationship.

Antony ([00:27:16](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Was there a turning point anywhere in your career where, looking back on it, you go, that's where things went to another level?

Sam ([00:27:27](#)):

Quite a few. Yeah. I mean the kind of getting the agent in New York in the early eighties, that was one. And then when I started to shoot with Patrick Demarsh in the mid eighties, and I mean, I started to work with American Vogue and British Vogue early on, but when the supermodels came along, not that we knew there were gonna be supermodels, but there were just these gorgeous girls like Naomi and Christie and Linda and Cindy. When that started to build into this sort of phenomenon, you think, wow, there's a moment gone on here. And it was from that, that I got to make the Princess of Wales. And then after that, I started to work with an incredible photographer called Nick Knight. And then I moved back to UK and spent the best part of 20 years creating amazing images with Nick Knight. Many of them with Kate Moss. I went on, and also working with people like Vivian Westwood and Karl Lagerfeld. I mean, there's like sort of continuous sort of,

Sam ([00:28:33](#)):

episodes of my life, lots of them running concurrently. But I think, yeah, there's been a lot of those, but it's been a lot of recognizing the opportunity and saying yes.

Sam ([00:28:48](#)):

Do you know what I mean?

Antony ([00:28:49](#)):

Yeah, I do. I do. You just mentioned that era of the supermodels and then, and then on the end tagged on Kate Moss, who I know you work with a lot, and you have a close relationship, friendship with her. What is it, what is the magic? That's, cuz that is what it is, isn't it? It, there's a, there's a sort of a magic that makes a model go off. Just like Kate Moss, right time, right place, right look. Talk to us about that magic ingredient that sets one model apart from the next, because she just exploded. And there's still like....

Sam ([00:29:30](#)):

I mean there is no, there is no one magic ingredient, but it's a lot, it's a combination of all those things you just said. I mean, timing is everything because Kate at her height and her tiny size 10 years before would never have got that opportunity. So the timing there is amazing. The camera has to love them and they have to love the camera. They have to be very photogenic. And I have met so many incredibly beautiful photogenic models in my life, but they, if they don't understand how to work a camera, then it's not gonna go much further. You know? And I think, and also with, with all those women, there's a

kind of, there's another worldly thing about them. They, the really successful models are models who probably don't look conventionally pretty, you know? Cause you get some of your friends with a pretty daughter that, oh, do you think she could be a model? You go, she almost needs to be stranger. There needs to be a kind of strangeness to them that that sets them apart from normal beauty. If that makes sense.

Antony ([00:30:48](#)):

That makes a lot of sense.

Sam ([00:30:49](#)):

And that combination of that and personality, you know. And the personality has to come through. So it's a combination of many things, you know?

Antony ([00:31:01](#)):

Do you have or have you ever had a particular muse, and then we might have just been talking about it, someone who encapsulates your trademark hair. Is there anyone that comes to mind?

Sam ([00:31:16](#)):

No. I've never really thought of that. No.

Antony ([00:31:20](#)):

Okay. What would you say your trademark hair was? How would you describe it to somebody who didn't know?

Sam ([00:31:29](#)):

I dunno. Or probably, probably quite a broad spectrum really. It depends on who the client is, you know?

Antony ([00:31:38](#)):

Is there any particular era that was your favorite? Because I've heard you say before that you've grown up with this industry and you have, you know, seventies, eighties, nineties, you know, 2000, decade by decade by decade. When you look back on them, was there a decade that you go, that's, you know, a decade of hair or beauty that I loved the most?

Sam ([00:32:02](#)):

No.

Antony ([00:32:04](#)):

Okay. That's alright.

Antony ([00:32:05](#)):

Well maybe that in itself is also one of those things that is, you know, you touched on this right at the beginning about you like to look forward, you know. When you talk about your longevity, it's not like dining out on some past thing. How would you, how would you describe modern hair today?

Sam ([00:32:24](#)):

I think for me, modern hair today is about, it really is no rules. There really isn't a one or two or three things that are modern hair. I think modern hair really is absolutely anything goes. You know, I think the rules are all broken and, and I think that has filtered down from, you know, the lofty heights of fashion or, you know, high end. I don't know. It's, it really is amongst the people now that you could do anything with your hair. I mean, you know, what, 10 years ago, blue, pink, green hair was still a bit of an unusual thing to see. Now it's just, it's normal. And I love that. It's amazing. And I love that you can have, you can have three different hairstyles in your head at the same time. And that's amazing too. You must see that as well.

Antony ([00:33:22](#)):

Well, yeah, totally.

Sam ([00:33:25](#)):

It's equally as amazing to have your hair in a big blow dry one day to a slick back chignon on the next day and a short fringe the next day. I think that for me, what's really exciting now, is about the possibilities of having a different hairstyle every day or multiple times a day. And I think young people really understand that and embrace that.

Antony ([00:33:49](#)):

Yeah. And do you think that a lot of that's because of social media, whereas before fashion was of magazines,

Sam ([00:33:56](#)):

Social media? For sure. And also the technology of new products has moved on so far in the last, the last sort of couple of decades that what you kind of were restricted by in the eighties you're not anymore, you know?

Antony ([00:34:14](#)):

Yeah. Exactly. Okay. I know you had a long working relationship with Karl Lagerfeld. So again, you know, looking at someone like him, sort of asking the same question I just asked about models, but now about designers, you could equally ask the same thing about photographers. What is it that sets that sort of genius aside if I've got it right? You worked with him on collections for 12 years or something. Do you get an insight into what is it that makes someone a creative genius as a fashion designer?

Sam ([00:34:51](#)):

Well, for me, Karl, he wasn't your normal someone. He was, there was only one. And I don't, we'll never see the likes of that again. You know, cause Karl was so multi-talented. He kind of, it was, he was an amazing designer. He was a great photographer. He was a great artist. His illustrations were just fantastic, he was a great cartoonist. He could get someone's look in like four or five strokes. You knew exactly who that was. He was a great reader. He was a great rack on tour. He was an amazing entertainer. He was a great cultural barometer as well. And he was an amazing, he was really funny. And he never stopped. I mean, he was relentless. He barely slept. He never stopped. It was quite, he was incredibly powerful. And he set the bar really high.

Sam ([00:35:53](#)):

He really, really did. And I had the pleasure of working with him in the latter part of his life, you know, the last 12, 15 years. And he was still, he was still designing six collections a year for Chanel. Four for Fendi, or three or four for Fendi. Three or four for Fendi, and a couple for his Lagerfeld brand. I mean, it was, and and he would do freelance work as well. I mean it was really, it was an absolute power house of creativity. And he made us laugh all the time too, so, so yeah.

Antony ([00:36:33](#)):

Okay. You were talking before about relationships and you said how you automatically forget things that have been said straight away, etc. And you put a lot of emphasis on the importance of that. And I've heard you talk before about how, in that room, when you're doing someone's hair and when they're getting their makeup done and getting dressed before they go on set or go out to do a show, it is not just the hair that you're doing, it's that you are getting them ready psychologically for what they do. And I thought that was, in fact, I think you even said it's every bit as important or even more important that that's part of your role.

Antony ([00:37:19](#)):

Talk to us about that. Cause I was fascinated by that. And I suppose,

Sam ([00:37:23](#)):

Well, I'm a great believer in hair. It's not just, hair is not just gonna make you look good. Yes, we can do that easily, but it's gonna make you feel good. Even if these models or actresses are portraying a character, they have to feel like, feel like the character. They have to feel good about it or it's gonna show. So because hair is, it's the great, it's the kind of great feel good tonic, isn't it? It really can make you feel good or not about yourself. Well, I mean, I can't really speak for myself, but I have had hair once, so I do know how it feels. But it is, it's equally as about making you feel good as looking good or maybe even more about feeling good, you know? Cause you, if they don't feel good, I can tell, you know, you're not feeling this, are you, let, let's change it. Let's do something else now and let's just tweak it. Cause sometimes a little tweak can make a big difference, you know? Like a changing of a parting or just one piece in the right direction can make a huge difference. And that's the power we have. To make change.

Antony ([00:38:41](#)):

Yeah. When you have young hairdressers working with you on your team and they want to be Sam McKnight is that where they go wrong that they don't understand the importance of those relationships and humility and understanding the psychology of, you know, that process that you're just talking about? Is that where they go wrong?

Sam ([00:39:08](#)):

I dunno, I dunno where they go wrong. But I mean that kind of thing really kind of, it comes from experience really, doesn't it? That in your youth, you're not really thinking, you're too busy making a mark and, you know, you have to put the, put your stamp on everything. And I mean, I guess that works for some people too, but I never felt that that's what I wanted to do. So I can't really speak for every young person. I dunno whether they go wrong like that. But it is, it's a common mistake that's made. But it's a mistake that maybe once you've made a couple of times it should click, you know? Oh yeah, maybe

I need to do this. You know, I think it's that thing as well. When you're a young hairdressers, you're learning all the time.

Sam ([00:39:53](#)):

I mean, for instance, these kids are on the big blowout. I mean, one of them said to me on the last day, they said, I said, how has this been for you? And they said, this has been the most amazing masterclass for the last six weeks we've been recording this. And I thought, wow, that's fantastic that they've taken this away from it. Cause it's really intense for everyone with all those lights on, and, and they've never been on TV before. They've never really been filmed like that before. And I mean, me too. It was pretty intense for me too. But just the fact that they were learning something was really, I thought that was absolutely fantastic. That is so the right attitude to have. And that's gonna, that's gonna take you through many years if you keep that attitude going. That constantly being aware and aware of people, aware of learning, all that kind of stuff. It's just as important as the hair.

Antony ([00:41:02](#)):

Okay. Now you and I were talking about the big blowout before we pushed the record button. So I was just gonna, I was just gonna start, so you segwayed perfectly into that. I just wanna make sure our audience know that the Big blowout is a reality TV show on E4. And it's about new hairdressing talent. Yeah? And you are a judge on it with Lisa Farrell. And it's fantastic tv. It's good reality tv. I mean, sometimes TV shows about the hairdressing industry have not always been particularly positive. And this is, this is positive and it does show the industry in a good light. So congratulations on that. Talk to us about the, just give our listeners, because I know people in the UK have probably seen the show, outside of the UK people will have no idea what, what the sort of concept of that show's about. Can you just give us a sort of a broad outline of what the purpose of it is? And hopefully it does get exported to other countries as well. Cause it is good tv.

Sam ([00:42:07](#)):

Well good. I'm glad you like it. I'd love it. I think they've done a fantastic job. I got a message on Instagram just before Christmas last year from a lady who introduced herself as a representative from Love Productions, who when I Googled them, were responsible for the Big Bake, the Great British Bakeoff, Sewing Bee the and the Great Pottery Throwdown, which are four hugely successful shows in the UK. Now, I only told them after we had finished filming and I said, you know, you had me at Bakeoff because as soon as they said that okay these guys, these guys are serious. You know, because I was a little concerned and rightly so, that I didn't want it to be something that was shown and shown the industry in a bad light, which has happened before as we know.

Antony ([00:43:07](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Sam ([00:43:08](#)):

And I thought, I don't wanna get involved in it. They came and Madison Studio, they filmed and they were very thorough. It was a little sort of three hour session of them asking questions and filming. They were really thorough and I liked them and I liked that they were planning to show the industry in a good light. So it was gonna be celebratory that was the key for me. They were gonna celebrate the industry. Cause you know, it's been through a hard time. So I, you know what, I took the risk. I took the plunge. I thought, you know what, I'm probably gonna, I dunno if I'm gonna like doing this or I, you know, I might

hate it. I might just hate it, sort of being on camera all the time. And I signed up, took the plunge and I loved every minute of it.

Sam ([00:43:57](#)):

It was a joy. Love productions are so brilliant. And, you know, they explained a lot to me beforehand. It was gonna be a similar format to the, to the Bakeoff format, which they own. And they were, the operation was so slick. They were so respectful. Everyone, they were really looked after the, the stylists. And Lisa and I. AJ was just a dream. She was fantastic. I think we all found it really uplifting and joyous and I'm really glad you like it. Cause you know, you kind of dunno how it's gonna end up. But I'm actually, I never really, I never listened to myself or watched myself or anything cuz I, I can't bear it. But actually I've watched myself on the big blowout. And actually really enjoyed it. Really enjoyed the, I really, cause I didn't really get to spend any time with the stylists because we're, you know, we're not together in the same place because, you know, that wouldn't really be right.

Sam ([00:45:05](#)):

And so all we see of them is what you see. I mean yeah, actually you see much more of them than I ever did. We get to see their work, but less of them. And it was really, really lovely to get to know them through that as well and see the whole thing put together. And I think Love productions did a really fantastic job. And I think if I was a kid looking at that, I'd be thinking, Oh, maybe I could do that for a living. And I don't think you see that much of that about, you see a lot about makeup and fashion. You don't see a great deal of that. And I think it's definitely, it's definitely been uplifting, I think.

Antony ([00:45:49](#)):

Good. Do you know if it's been exported to other countries? Or is it just uk?

Sam ([00:45:54](#)):

I have no, I have no idea. I don't know. So I guess we'll find out about that when it's finished. I think the last episode is next week.

Antony ([00:46:04](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Good. Okay. All right. Now I want to talk to you about your products because TV is, as we said right at the beginning of this, you are more focused on the future. And you are at an age and a point in your career where most people would be winding down. You seem to just be winding up and going from, you know, one job to the next, to the next. The TV thing is a fantastic stepping stone. And I know you've dabbled with products for a while, but you've now come back at it with a vengeance and really, you know, developed a product range over the covid, you know, lockdown time and getting that out there. So talk to us about that.

Sam ([00:46:52](#)):

Well, we had, I mean, we had been developing that for a couple of years and we were kind of ready to launch just before Covid and then Covid hit and there was no point in doing it then. So I kind of took that time to really look at what I was doing and what I wanted to do. And as covid went on, our manufacturer went bust. So I'm always a great glass is half full person. And, as I kept saying from the beginning, we gotta look at this as an opportunity, not as a disaster. What can we do here? So what we did was we found a new manufacturer who we love and we reformulated everything. We tweaked everything, we made everything vegan. And weirdly, another thing gluten free that customers had been asking about.

Sam ([00:47:51](#)):

So we just, and we repackaged everything and recycled plastic. And, we are looking at, actually we've got an amazing plastic alternative yesterday moving forward. So we kind of, we're not pushing ourselves as the green brand, but we really are looking at how we can make it better. And I'm really excited about the stuff I saw yesterday was amazing. The plastic alternative which is affordable cause it was never affordable before. I mean, one of the best things we did during lockdown, because we've been talking about doing some hair cleansing wipes for a while. Cleansing cloths. And we could just never do them because they were made from plastic. But we found a company who could make them from tree pulp cellulose, which compost in six weeks. And they do, because I put it in my own compost bin.

Sam ([00:48:47](#)):

And that kind of thing really excites me, you know? So we reformulated everything and because I kind of, as the lockdown was going on, I kind of felt that I'd been on this merry-go-round of, you know, travel. I was away from home most of the time and I really enjoyed the not traveling. And I thought, Okay, I'm getting on in life. I certainly don't wanna retire. But I feel like, I felt like I wanna do new things, always wanna do new things. And I thought, okay, we've gotta, and my products had all been self-funded. So we went, hell bent, to find investors, really good in, you know, compatible investors, to come on board and help us to take products which we had dabbled with, we had very successfully dabbled with. I'm like, okay guys, we gotta get serious here about this.

Sam ([00:49:47](#)):

Cause if we are gonna do something, we do it 100% wholeheartedly and stop dabbling. Which is what we did. And we'd launched in September. I mean, you know, it's not been easy. Supply chain has been a,

Antony ([00:50:02](#)):

I can imagine

Sam ([00:50:03](#)):

I was gonna say the F word nightmare. And, but we've got there and we're, I've a very small team. Amen's been with me for 24 years and Valerie's been with me for 12 years. And we have, we now have Joel who's running it for us. So we have a small team of very dedicated people. And I mean, I couldn't possibly have done this on my own and we've just been really, really giving it our all.

Antony ([00:50:34](#)):

Yeah. Good, good. Well they look

Sam ([00:50:37](#)):

been taking up most of my time. But I've kind of and also that, that decision to give some time to other things. Cause in my fashion merry go round I think if I'd still been, you know, traveling all the time, I wouldn't have been able to do that. I wouldn't have been able to do the Big Blowout. So I have kind of switched gear and given the products and we have some other projects on the go, my full attention. I've not stopped doing what I was doing, but I've, we've kind of, we've got a bit more balance now. And we still did, We did six great shows during fashion months instead of 16, you know. Because I'm seeing this as a new phase in my life.

Antony ([00:51:29](#)):

Yeah, good. Fantastic.

Sam ([00:51:31](#)):

In a very positive way.

Antony ([00:51:32](#)):

Yeah. look, I know you haven't worked in the salon side of the industry for, you know, a long time, decades 20, 30, 40 years, whatever. But what are your, what are your thoughts about the salon industry? What are your observations about the salon industry? How do you see it evolving over the next 10 years?

Sam ([00:51:55](#)):

I don't know. I mean, I have a couple of friends who have salons and it's not been easy. I mean, I see how really it hasn't been easy. And a lot of the kids on the Big Blowout have salons and, and you know, I know it was a big thing for some of them to give six weeks up from a salon post pandemic. So, I dunno, I think I honestly don't really know much about that. But I think like retail, like we are having to do selling products, I think they're gonna have to offer more. You know, I think you're gonna have to offer more of an experience than just a product. Does that make sense?

Antony ([00:52:40](#)):

It does

Sam ([00:52:40](#)):

I think, I think the demands are gonna be much higher if you wanna stay in business. I think. I think it's not gonna be easy. It really isn't gonna be easy. But I think, I think people are more and more interested about how they look than they've ever been before. Absolutely. I mean, far more people have professional hair color now than they ever did before. That's a massive thing, you know? And lots of people have their hair styled now in a salon, whereas they used to just come from haircuts. And I think that's, cause a lot of my team that come and help us on shows work for salons, they'll rent a chair or they'll do it part-time. I think because of social media, people are really interested in doing different hairstyles and I think salons are probably gonna have to cash in on that. They're gonna have to move away from that one haircut every six weeks thing or, kind of expand that out, you know, and cash in on...

Sam ([00:53:49](#)):

Cause we have a, we have a motto in our brand because I'm a great believer in that what's happening now, what's happening now with celebrities and if I do red carpets, we do magazine shoots, they wanna see six different looks on the same person. It's not about just doing one look over 10 pages. You made a different look for a page. Now that can be created very simply or you know, or complicated if you want. But it can be a very simple thing to achieve if you use the right easy to use products and tools, which we have developed. We did a survey a couple of weeks ago and we found that 82% of women only ever do one or two things with their hair. Now my mission really is to change that. And I think that's probably, I think salons are gonna have to get behind that. You know, they're gonna have to encourage people to discover the possibilities of your hair. You know, discover the magic that hair can, the magic hair can, the effect hair can have on your mood, you know? I think, and it's not just, it's not just about cut and

blow dry. It's about, you know, braids, ponytails, updos, color, fake fringes, you know, just embrace hair like the makeup industry has embraced makeup. Do you know what I mean?

Antony ([00:55:22](#)):

Yeah totally. Yeah. Okay. No good.

Sam ([00:55:25](#)):

Am I rabbiting on now?

Antony ([00:55:26](#)):

No, no, no, no, no. I'm intrigued to get your thoughts on it cause you see it from a different perspective. I mean, everyone sees it from their own perspective and your perspective's very interesting about that. So, and it definitely also links in with the changes in product technology that what you can do now with hair because of the product that you have available is different to what you could do 20 years ago.

Sam ([00:55:50](#)):

You change your hair with product, you can change your hair instantly, temporarily with products that are not gonna damage your hair. That'll wash out and your hair will still feel great. You know, it's really, it's quite easy now. It's not as difficult as it was. You know, you could, you're not gonna, we've tried to make products that are foolproof that, you know, you can layer them on and brush them out. They're not gonna, it's not gonna be that moose thing that goes on your hair and suddenly it's crispy. And you have to wash your hair. It's not about that. I think probably salons in my mind would do really well to really embrace that sort of hairdo. I mean, I've been saying this for years, to kind of really make the, I'm sure a lot of them do, but I think they almost have to make that not mandatory, make it sort of, the norm for people just to go in for an updo or a, or a something for a party or something. You know, I'd love to see that.

Antony ([00:56:56](#)):

Well, it's almost going full circle right back to when you started hairdressing where women used to go back to the salon every week for a shampoo and set or whatever. Yeah. But it's the ethos

Sam ([00:57:06](#)):

I'm not sure about, I'm not sure about keeping that shampoo and set in for a week though. Maybe that could change.

Antony ([00:57:12](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. Exactly. Okay, well look, we need to start wrapping up, but I've got a couple of quick fire questions here for you. Just like a one sentence, you know, answer. First of all, I'm looking at you and you've got this beautiful garden behind you. I wanted to ask you, well, first of all, do you work in the garden or does someone do it for you? Because your Instagram garden is famous?

Sam ([00:57:33](#)):

I've got a couple of great guys who come in on Monday afternoon for four hours. And yeah, they do a lot of the grafting, but I do, yeah, I do quite a lot. I grow all my own annuals and veg from seed and I do all that and I do all my veg beds. They do all the planting of the tulips cause we've got three thousand tulips

going in next month. So I mean yeah, I mean, I do, I stop going up the ladders if I'm on my own because I fell the other day, and I thought

Sam ([00:58:11](#)):

my days of going up ladders....No that's over. But what they do is, cause it's quite a big space that someone needs to keep on top of it. And if I'm away for a couple of, and I've missed it, so I'm kind of, you know planting a few bulbs pottering about yeah. No, no, I do quite a lot. But they do the kind of regular work. My favorite thing to do is, I've got the walls are covered in climbing roses. So I'm constantly pruning roses, tying them in, shaping them, doing all that kinda stuff. It's a bit like hair it's not, it's not a million miles from that.

Antony ([00:58:56](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Well, it looks beautiful. I often see it on your Instagram and think how you know, stunning it is. I can see there's a lot of work that goes into it. Okay. what's your biggest strength Sam? Just quick fire questions.

Sam ([00:59:09](#)):

My biggest strength is probably my resilience. My kind of my also, no, maybe I say what it is. It's definitely my positivity. I'm very much glass half full and I try to take the positive out of every situation.

Antony ([00:59:30](#)):

Okay.

Sam ([00:59:30](#)):

I think that's kinda, that's kept me going.

Antony ([00:59:33](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Well, that may answer this next question as well, which is, how do you stay relevant? How do you reinvent yourself? What's the key to that?

Sam ([00:59:40](#)):

I dunno. I think I've got an instinct for reinventing myself. I get bored with things. I get kind, I think, ah, sometimes reach something. Do you know what? I feel like I've done that. I wanna move on. I wanna do something else. And I think I've got an instinct for knowing when the time, I mean, I'm not getting any younger, and I think, okay, if I wanna do some more things, I need to do it now. Which is hence why we did the products. And why I did the TV show and that kind of thing. So it's for me, it's about constantly doing new things. And I think that keeps me feeling relevant, whether I am or not, I dunno. But it certainly keeps me feeling relevant.

Antony ([01:00:24](#)):

Yeah. Oh, I think you're as relevant today as.....

Sam ([01:00:26](#)):

I think there's, there is a, I mean, the relevance thing, who are you relevant to? I think so long as you're relevant to yourself, you're fine, you know?

Antony ([01:00:37](#)):

Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But your work, I mean, your work is as relevant today as it's ever been. What's the biggest lesson that you've ever learned in life? Doesn't have to be hairdressing.

Sam ([01:00:53](#)):

I guess the biggest lesson I've learned is that it's not all about me.

Antony ([01:01:00](#)):

Okay. That's good. I like that. Yeah.

Sam ([01:01:04](#)):

That was, that's quite a big one. But that came from experience, really, experience of kind of just sort of realization that, hang on, it's this, in this room that we're in, it's not just about me. My whole life's work's about collaboration. And learning to collaborate was a massive lesson for me. Yeah.

Antony ([01:01:30](#)):

Yeah. Okay. What do you wish you were better at?

Sam ([01:01:35](#)):

Oh God. I wish I was better at delegating.

Antony ([01:01:38](#)):

Okay. All right. That's it. That's a wrap. So listen, let me just wrap up here with everybody. First of all, Sam, whereabouts can people connect with you on Instagram or other social channels?

Sam ([01:01:53](#)):

We are on, I'm on Instagram personally at Sam Knight 1, and the brand is on Hair by Sam McKnight.

Antony ([01:02:03](#)):

Right. Okie dokes. Well, I will put those links on our website, which is Grow My Salon Business.com, in the show notes for today's podcast. If you listen to this podcast with Sam McKnight and you've enjoyed it, then do me a favor, take a screenshot on your phone and share it to your Instagram. And don't forget to subscribe and leave us a rating and review on the Apple Podcast app. So to wrap up, Sam McKnight, thank you ever so much for being on today's episode of the Grow My Salon Business podcast.

Sam ([01:02:32](#)):

Thank you for having me.

Antony ([01:02:33](#)):

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