Sharon Schultz and the Influence of Clothing and Culture in the 1970s

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Abstract

For most of her life, Sharon Schultz was a stay-at-home mom or could be found working in family-owned restaurants. She had a more casual wardrobe that reflected the needs of having children and a family. This paper will explore where Sharon’s style influences came from in the 1970s. Although she was not thinking too much about her fashion at that time, her style reflects popular television shows and trends.

Introduction to Sharon Schultz’s Life

Sharon Schultz grew up around Watsontown, Pennsylvania, as well as right outside of Philadelphia in Roxborough. She was born November 8, 1956, and is the second oldest of five brothers and sisters. She lived in Texas for a couple of years but eventually moved back to the east coast, and while living in Maryland in June 1986 she married for the first time. Later that year in December, she gave birth to her first child, Kelly. During this time she worked at restaurants that her husband, Jim, owned. She had another child, Cassie, in September 1989. In 1990, Sharon and Jim got divorced and she headed to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with her two children. Her daughter Kelly remembers watching a lot of older movies and television shows like *Grease*, *Happy Days*, and the *Dick Van Dyke Show* when she was growing up.

While living in Lancaster, Sharon was mostly a stay-at-home mom. She attended different photography and gym classes and worked in different restaurants during the day while Kelly and Cassie were in school. In February 1995, Sharon remarried to Don Schultz, and they remain together to this day. In 1996 she had her third child, Zane. Sharon is active in school functions, helps out at church, and takes trips to the beach whenever she can.

Recollections

In an interview, Sharon Schultz admits that she has never considered herself fashionable in her youth. She felt she “looked nice,” though. She shared photographs of herself from the 1970s and 1980s as examples of her personal style. She told me that the “photo (figure 1), long blonde hair and cool glasses, was taken at Fidelity Mutual Life Insurance, where I worked as a clerk. My first ‘real’ job. Also, where I met Denise!”
Denise is one of Sharon’s closest friends. They met in the late 1970s, and they continue to be close to this day. She comes to Christmas dinners with her daughter, as well as movie premieres or beach trips. They can be seen at the same camping trip to Maryland in figures 2 and 3. I asked Sharon if she and her friends ever shared clothes or had a similar style. Sharon responded, “I never shared clothes with my sister or my friends. I think I borrowed a shirt maybe once or twice from Denise. Similar style, yes. Denise and I frequently wore jeans and flannel shirts.”

In an interview, conducted in person July 20, 2013, Denise Riggle shared her thoughts on Sharon’s sense of style:

*What do you think Sharon would consider her personal style would be? Do you feel like you and she have different styles?*

Her personal style ... I would say that we definitely have different styles. She basically goes with like a classic, basic, casual elegant? Very relaxed.

*What did you think of her wardrobe when you were younger? What about now?*
Now it's to die for, back then it was basic jeans, boots, T-shirts, and flannel shirts. It was very basic stuff. When we went out she would definitely change her shirt but it was never anything particularly extravagant.

*Do you ever think she saw herself as stylish at any point?*

I think after she was married to Jim [first husband]. Basically whenever she had the money, I think people probably said things to her too, like "you could afford to have nicer clothes." I mean, I always had decent clothes but I was broke. She always had a bank account but really basic clothes.

*Did Sharon enjoy shopping or fashion, or trying on different clothes/accessories?*

For hiking boots or jeans. Sharon didn’t really like shopping. I would say, once she had the money and enough people bugging her about having nicer clothes.

Figure 2. Sharon, age 25, camping in Maryland, Summer 1982.
Figure 3. Denise, age 25, camping in Maryland, Summer 1982.
1970s Casual Style

According to Jane Farrell-Beck and Jean Parsons in *20th Century Dress in the United States*, during the 1970s, “pants of all kinds, especially blue jeans were popular. The predominant style, called hip huggers, had wide, flaring or bell-bottomed legs, fitted smoothly across the hip, and was often made with a facing rather than a waistband at the top. These pants were set lower on the hip than the anatomical waistline. The flared bottoms of bell-bottom pants derived from the shape of the pant legs of sailors uniforms” (200). In the late 1970’s, a “soft, natural hairstyle” (Tortora and Eubank 15) was a very popular trend. This was also a time where in spite of the resistance to the midi and the continuation of the mini as part of fashionable dress, mainstream fashions continued to evolve. The prevalent silhouette of the mid- and late 1970s has been described by fashion writers as “fluid,” “an easier and more casual fit.” At the same time, the use of softer fabrics molded the body and displayed body curves. An emphasis on fitness made the long, lean, trim and well-exercised body the ideal of feminine beauty. (Tortora and Eubank 60)

![Figure 4. Sharon, age 25, and her dog Misty in West Virginia, Summer 1981.](image)

Jeans became a casual wear standard in the late 1970s to early 1980s (Farrell-Beck and Parsons 217). Sharon can be seen wearing long jeans with a high waist and a pale T-shirt in Figure 4. In a portion of the book *Fashionable Clothing from the Sears Catalogs in the Late 1970s*, author Tina Skinner discusses the trend of jeans:

The term “designer jeans” was coined in the 1970s, and the competition grew so fierce, and was so well supported that Calvin Klein sold 350,000 pairs in one week for an astonishing $50 per
pair. Denim blue jeans have been the staple of the American wardrobe for more than a century now, and probably always will be. Yet the emphasis has changed. Here, in the late ‘70s, we see an emphasis on high, round derrieres, and we see denim take on the era’s fashions - incorporating the peasant look with embroidered details, and we see denim take on the era’s fashions - incorporating the peasant look with embroidered details, and the disco look with wide, notched-lapel blazers. (49)

Some of the following chapters of the book describe the “hottest looks,” which they call “Peasant-ly Exotic.” This style included a lot of dresses, ruffled shoulders, floral prints and embroidery. A whole section called “Western Ideals” features items such as cowboy boots, bandanas, plaid shirts, and vests. Sharon always enjoyed country music and when asked, “Was there an article of clothing or accessory that you really loved or held onto for a long time?” she enthusiastically answered, “My cowboy boots! Although we don't really go country dancing anymore, I still keep my favorite boots!”

In the Sears catalog, there is a variety of clothing and accessory choices: footwear, coats, swimwear, casual attire, etc. The first chapter covers “Success Dressing” which includes polyester suits, four-piece outfits (blazer, vest, pants, and skirt), and different striped and plaid outfits. The skirts and pants are long and there is an emphasis on cinching the mid-waist with a belt. Shirtdresses, having a modest price and comfortable look, were also popular in this section. In the second chapter, “Casual Attire,” high-waist denim jeans run for $10 in the late 1970s, about $35 in 2013. The women’s attire all seems very modest, not showing too much skin or a defined body shape. The casual attire is loose fitting for the most part. The colors either pop (bright reds, yellows, blues, oranges, etc.) or have a dull color scheme (pale yellows, browns, grays) but neither style seems to overlap. Although patterns, floral prints, and embroidery dominate the pages of this book, Sharon’s wardrobe does not include much of this.

Influence of Television Shows

What was Sharon watching during the late 1970s and early 1980s? She said, “I watched a lot of James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart movies. Laverne and Shirley and Happy Days were also favorites. Three’s Company, [and] Alice. Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman was also a favorite.” The movies Sharon enjoyed were black-and-white films from the 1950s, but the television shows she watched were from the late 1970s to early 1980s. Sharon’s preferences reflect a national trend:

Television became the dominant entertainment medium in the 1960s but perhaps truly came of age in the 1970s. The number of hours people spent watching television increased, and by 1978, 98 percent of the U.S. households had at least one television. Much programming was in direct response to events of the period, reflecting racial problems, women’s issues, and even war. Television had, from the beginning, brought Americans directly in contact with news events, including presidential campaigns and the Vietnam War, and by the 1970s many people acquired all their news from the television. In fact, TV Guide became the most widely read publication. (Farrell-Beck 191)

Sharon does not say that television shows influenced her, but some styles of the time are similar what she wore in photos. I asked her when her personal style evolved and she said, “I don't know that I actually have a personal style, but in the past ten to fifteen years, Don has enjoyed
choosing some outfits as well as pocketbooks for me. Most of the time, his choices suit me.” In *Three’s Company* (1977 – 1984), the character Chrissy Snow, portrayed by Suzanne Somers, often wears her bright blonde hair in pigtails or off to the side. She also wears items similar to those found in the Sears catalog at this time. These influences are clear in a photo of Sharon from 1981 (figure 5), where she wears a romper much like Chrissy did in *Three’s Company*.

![Figure 5. Sharon, age 25, in Penn State with Nittany Lion statue, August 1981.](image)

**Conclusion**

Sharon continues to take photography classes, is quite active at the gym, and travels to the beach whenever she can. At her home in Lancaster, there are black and white photos of older celebrities decorating the walls of her sunroom, and large posters of Humphrey Bogart or Lucille Ball in the living room and kitchen. Her casual lifestyle remains relatively the same and her wardrobe also reflects a comfortable style. “Now,” she says “I feel I am a bit more fashionable, I try to put outfits together, and try NOT to wear sneakers all the time.” In the late 1970s she may not have put much thought into her outfits or even seemed to care. In spite of this, her clothing was very similar to that of popular television shows at the time and would have been considered stylish for many.
Works Cited


Riggle, Denise. Personal interview. 20 July 2013.

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