



Chapter 4: The Assistant

Sam Wilkinson wears knitted swimsuit (stylist's own), with hat by Stephen Jones for Issa and jewellery by Milly Swire, styled by Danielle Griffiths and photographed by Sarah Louise Johnson for Compônera magazine.

The role of a stylist's assistant is to help the stylist shine. The work is not as glamorous as it may seem, and the hours are long, but you will learn an enormous amount. Just observing others will teach you the tricks of the trade, how to deal with certain situations, how to organize yourself and where to find particular items. By working hard and being efficient and well organized, you will learn how to style and deal with clients and others in a professional manner.

Getting Your Foot in the Door

When looking for work as a stylist's assistant, it is important to understand the full range of tasks that you will be expected to undertake: helping to research and prep, calling in samples, dealing with docket and returns, sewing, steaming, washing, drying, taping or packing, and of course making the odd coffee! You will often find yourself running around town trying to find obscure items while needing to think on your feet, and it is important to be realistic about the hard work and long hours that the job requires.

It is much better to undertake a work placement or internship at a magazine before assisting a freelance fashion stylist (see Chapter 3). A freelancer will be unable to guarantee you work on a regular basis, and is more likely to hire a paid assistant than to offer someone unpaid work experience – their jobs are short and there isn't much time to train up someone who does not know the basics of styling.

When you do come to assist a freelance stylist, the major advantage is the variety of work – anything from editorial to music, advertising or even short films and television. A stylist will take on an assistant who has been recommended by a fellow stylist or an agent. An assistant just starting out with little or no experience may do a week's trial with the stylist for free then, if they are good, start as a paid assistant.

When freelancing, you need to be available at short notice. The hours can be very long: early starts and late finishes, sometimes working into the early hours. While hours vary between placements and jobs, whether with a magazine or a freelance stylist, days are long and hard but fun. You should not always expect to be paid, but your expenses should be covered. A table of pay scales for freelance assistants is provided in Chapter 9.



While working as an assistant, you should be setting up test shoots in your own time as well.

Testing

In order to meet stylists and attract clients for future work, you will require a portfolio of images. Testing is the way to start getting the experience you need to shoot for real jobs and editorials.

A test shoot is a photo shoot at which everyone works for free to gain experience. It enables you to work with different teams of photographers, make-up artists, hair stylists and models, and to make and learn from your mistakes within a supportive environment. It is important to meet and test with the assistants of the other professionals as you are all starting out together and they will be your contemporaries during the rest of your styling career. Testing is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

Finding a mentor

It is incredibly important to find a mentor, someone who can advise and guide you within the world of styling. Try and find someone you feel you can ask questions of – it could be an agent, freelance stylist, magazine editor or whoever. For me, it was my first boss's agent, who was a tough cookie but knew the business backwards. When you go into freelancing, you really are on your own and you must work out a lot for yourself – this is why it is important to have someone on your side.

If your mentor is a stylist, once they get to know you better, ask if you can shadow them for a week on a photo shoot. Be discreet and respectful on the shoot and, if you can, be helpful. This is a job you learn by watching and asking questions where appropriate.

Getting work with your chosen stylist

Once you have researched which stylist you would like to work for, the first step is to look in the fashion directories and contact their agent, if they have one, to offer your assistance. The stylist will have a booker. Ring them, explain your aim and ask for their email address, then send in your CV and a covering letter to be forwarded to the stylist. Be persistent and keep calling (though get the balance right – don't be a nuisance by calling every day). You want to appear eager and show that you want to work with that particular stylist. Research the stylist's work and display that knowledge when speaking to the agent.

When you get an assisting job, work as hard as possible so that the stylist recommends you to their agency. As you start to build a good reputation, more regular work will come in. Always try to work with two or three stylists to widen your pool of work.

When I first started out, I was doing work experience with a British designer. I assisted her stylist for the LFW show. I had overheard her talking about losing a great assistant and that she was now looking for a new one. I plucked up the courage, albeit after three days, to ask if I could assist her. She said yes, that would be great, but it still took me six months of calling up her agency every week, sometimes twice, to say I was available and would love to work with her. Sometimes it does just take persistence.



Opposite

Behind the glamour, an assistant is called on to hold a curtain out of the shot.

Below

Fridja steamers in action.

What a Stylist Expects from You

When you start working as a stylist's assistant, you need to hit the ground running. There won't always be anyone on hand to tell you what to do, so knowing what is expected of you will give you a head start in your first jobs.

It is essential to carry a notebook and pen with you everywhere – you will be writing endless lists every day. As the stylist's assistant, you will be expected to find everything on your list needed for the shoot. Here's an example:

- ✗ A large vintage British flag (approx. 5 x 4 metres)
- ✗ Toupée tape
- ✗ Spanx

You might not know where to find any of these things, or even know what Spanx are. If you don't understand or know where to get something, *ask*. Don't ever think you can leave anything off, you must find everything, that is your job!

You must also be computer literate, and clear in both your spoken and written communication, as you will be liaising with PRs on a daily basis, by phone and by email. Be sure to know the exact pronunciation of the stylist's name and of designers' names before you call them.

Meetings and fittings

As an assistant you are not likely to attend many meetings, most are between stylist, talent and client. When you do attend, listen and learn and get a feel for what is expected of the stylist. This is not a time for you to say what you think – that is the stylist's job.



You will, however, be expected to attend the vast majority of fittings. For a music client, these will usually take place at the management's offices, the record company or the client's home. They can be long and, if you are inexperienced, this is not the place for you to voice opinions. You are there to fit the garment on to the talent and make any necessary adjustments. You will be expected to sew, keep notes on budgets, take Polaroids of each outfit chosen and to keep the space tidy and in order.

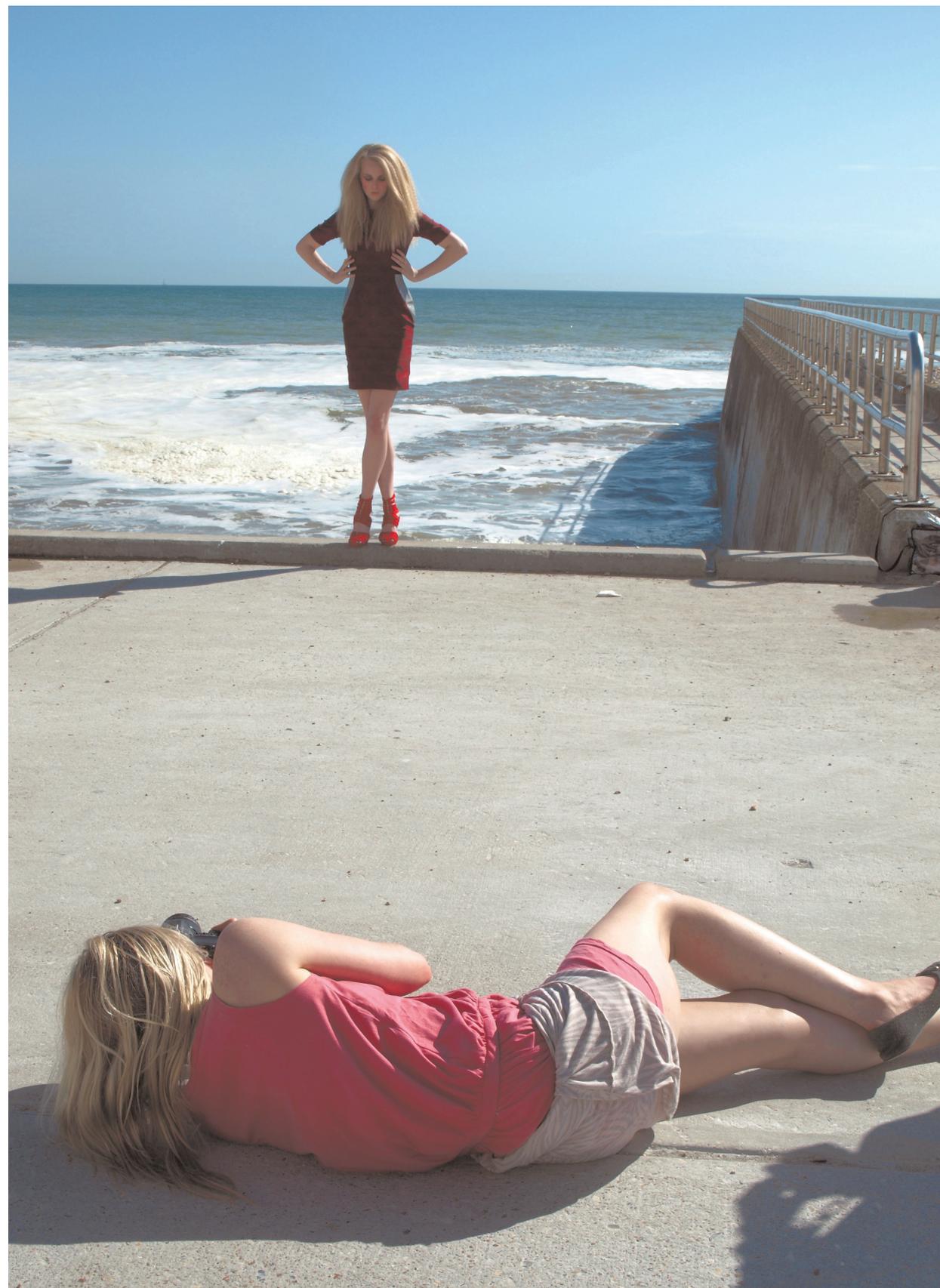
Photo shoots, ironing and steaming

At a photo shoot you need to be fast and efficient; everything must be ready, ironed and steamed for each shot. You will be expected to keep the styling area in order and keep an eye on it at all times. Samples are incredibly expensive and things can go missing, especially small expensive pieces, so always stay vigilant.

At the end of the shoot, you will need to bag all the samples up as they originally arrived, and return them to the correct PR.

An assistant needs to:

- ✘ **Learn the ropes quickly:** You need to learn very quickly what is going on – think on your feet and be a can-do person. Don't complain about being stuck in the fashion cupboard or carrying all the returns, it's all part of the learning process. Having a good, hard-working attitude and being adaptable and resilient will push you up the career ladder.
- ✘ **Research:** Stay on top of current trends in the fashion community and the wider world – go to galleries, see films, go to gigs, read books, magazines and newspapers, follow blogs. A bit of research into your current job will give you a good start with your stylist. Find out as much as possible about the concept for the shoot and the client's particular style. If you have an idea while the client is in the room, mention it quietly to the stylist so that they can decide whether to use it – don't put them in an awkward position by voicing your ideas publicly.
- ✘ **Know how to sew:** This is an exceptionally important skill for making adjustments to outfits. When budgets are low, you need to be creative with clothes that have to be reused. Sewing has become a popular hobby again and there are dozens of affordable classes and workshops available to improve your skills.
- ✘ **Have a driving licence:** It is hugely helpful if an assistant can drive – I have walked my fair share of returns back to PRs and it's hard work! Having a driving licence and a car increases your value to the stylist, whether for making returns, pick-ups or just driving to the shoot. The costs of parking and petrol should be included in your expenses.
- ✘ **Dress for comfort:** This job involves running around all day and carrying heavy things – you do not want to be wearing heels. Most stylists will dress appropriately for a meeting or fitting, but on the job they wear flats or trainers.



*Sarah Louise Johnson
photographing Sam Wilkinson
for Compònere magazine.*

Miss Molly, Stylist

www.missmollyrowe.com

What is your definition of a stylist?

Katie Grand – she has her own look, she absorbs the past, doesn't look like a glossy clone and works so hard.

What do you expect from your assistants?

I expect my assistants to be hard-working, not complain about the hours (they get worse and we all have to do them!) Dress appropriately for location, have an awareness of fashion and a lust to succeed as a stylist.

What qualities do you look for in a good assistant?

A good assistant understands it is not all about flying to the Maldives in first class. That it's about running around London in the rain carrying a million bags, sewing until 3am and getting up at 5am to drive to Canvey Island to stand in an unheated hanger until 11pm... It's the people who don't mind helping you load and unload the car, research a brief off their own back and put in ideas. I have been assisted by these people, but they quickly move on to styling themselves.

What advice would you give an assistant?

If you are given a list, you get everything on it and if you have a problem you call me. I am always looking for someone who can troubleshoot well but is not afraid to ask, and somebody who is looking to learn and not flounce around.

What advice would you give an aspiring stylist?

I advise a fashion degree – knowing how to make clothes is so important. If you can't find it you can create it, and that can give you the edge over a competitor who has no making experience.



Miss Molly photographed by Zoë Buckman. Styling by Miss Molly (opposite), photographed by Tim Sidell (top) and Zoë Buckman (bottom).