

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - MICHAEL OWEN (Katie Elliott & Michael Owen)

My guest on today's show is Michael Owen, the founder and designer at *Always Wear Red*, a clothing brand whose aim is to create confidence. He's also the author of *50odd*, a blog he describes as 'daily mind-food for anybody at all that is, was, or plans to be, 50odd'.

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It's my pleasure today to have on the show Michael Owen from *Always Wear Red*
Michael - hello!

Good morning.

Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Well, I did a degree in furniture design. Then I started a little business making wooden things and that ran for a couple of years. Then I spent 10 years helping people to start their businesses. Then I spent 15 years running my own suite of five or six communications businesses and creative agencies and then I packed it all in at the age of 47 to run a fashion brand, which I'd never done before. And we had a baby at the same time. So I just ventured in my late 40s into this whirlwind of newness. So there you go. That's me.

A whirlwind of newness in your late 40s. That sounds great. I'm just entering my later 40s now, so I think a whirlwind of newness sounds pretty good. Tell me a bit about *Always Wear Red*. What's the idea behind it?

Always Wear Red has a simple purpose and it's the creation of confidence. So it's a fashion brand which wants to make you feel great, because when you feel great, you do great and if you do great things, you might end up doing that thing that you feel you were born to do. Because the older I get, the more people I meet, they're not doing what they're born to do. They're doing this thing, "Oh I really wish I could do this". And my answer is always very simple, "Well do it then". You know what I mean? Because we can come up with so many excuses not to do that thing we were born to do. So the short answer to your question about the fashion brand is, it puts two notions together. One is, when you wear something amazing, you think, "Wow", a bit of a swagger. And the second notion is, just do what you were born to do because life ain't that long. So we create things that make people feel great, so they do great. That's it.

And when you say 'life ain't that long', I know that you've also got a wonderful blog, which I very much enjoy reading called *50odd*. Can you tell us a bit about that?

So when I was in my late 40s I said, "Because when I'm 50 I'll be 50 and I'll still be odd (because I've been odd for about 50 years now), I'm going to launch this thing called *50odd* and I'm going to write one blog a day for 10 years. I hadn't really done the sum and worked out that it was like 3,650-ish blogs, one a day. But that's what I'm doing and really all I'm doing is chronicling the life of me being 50: my worries, my concerns, my ups, my downs. And I like it. And a few people that read it like it too.

And there's that wonderful celebration of the fact that we act as if we have infinite amounts of time ahead of us, but realistically - I know on the blog you've got some statistics there about the average lifespan of a man in the UK at this point...

Yeah, I mean, the only one that a person needs to remember, I think, is 1000 months, because 1000 months is 83 and a half years, which actually is bang in the middle of how long the average man and the average woman lives in the UK. So the average fella lives to 80 and a bit, and the average woman lives to about 86. So if you just keep in mind that, you know, when I reach 50, I've lived 600 weeks of 1000. That's what I'm going to get. So I'm thinking what am I going to do with them then? And it's quite sobering, you know, it focuses the mind. 1000 months, that's the thing to remember.

1000 months. I love that. So, what I'd like to ask you about, and we've talked about this a little bit before because, as you know about me, I'm someone who's not very confident about all things visual. I'm somebody who's very auditory, so I like words and I like sounds. I'm not so good at figuring out things that I can see. And that means that I'm not hugely confident about things like clothes and design. And I totally take your point that wearing beautiful things and feeling good about how you appear in the world can be transformative. But I'm sure I'm not the only person who has a bit of a stumbling block around that kind of thing. So if you were encouraging other people, let's say that there are other people listening who maybe are a bit like me and are a bit unconfident. So they might be listening to you talking about confidence in clothing and thinking, "Well that's lovely, but where would I start?" So how could you encourage us to feel a little bit braver and a little bit better?

Well, there's a sentence that I said once and I get quoted on it now, which is quite simply, "Wear what you want - no one's looking - but then all of a sudden they are". And it's based on the idea that I think if we overthink what we wear, we blend in. And because we're trying to link it to something else, you know, if you're a Goth or a

Rocker or something, it's really just one kind of uniform. But the world's full of individuals but not many people are individual and you can only be an individual, I think, if indeed that's what you would like to be considered as, if you start with what makes you feel nice. I think you have to switch off - going back to your question about being confident - just don't worry about what other people say. Dress for yourself. It sounds really simple. The other thing I'll bolt onto that is within a fashion brand or a clothing brand I always try to wonder who our muses are, the people who influence us. Now I'll just tell you this, cause it's a short story. Towards the end of 2018 I thought, I'm going to base what we do on the classically good-looking or the classically attractive. So I started to collect imagery, thousands of images of Robert Redford, Paul Newman, Marlon Brando, and I quite quickly got bored, with all due respect to these people. But the point is, yeah they look great, but I sometimes wondered what else was there? Because I didn't read much that made me really interested in them as men - and we're a menswear brand. But this happened to me during the research: I stumbled across David Lynch, him what did Twin Peaks etc. And then I found myself, OK, I've done the Paul Newman thing, I've got some images of him, Robert Redford as well and James Dean, of course, you know that kind of shenanigans. They all look great in jeans and t shirts. Then I looked at David Lynch and I thought, "He's an interesting looking fella". Then I looked at some of the stuff he says and I thought, "He's a really interesting fella". And then I thought, "What is it about him?" Cause he's not a classically good looking guy. But I mean, me as a straight guy, I was thinking, "You know what, I find him fascinating". So I'd spent maybe half an hour having a look at Robert Redford, but two or three hours in I was still exploring what it was about David Lynch that made them interesting. And then Nick Cave and then, is he called Matt Smith, the young man who played Doctor Who for a little bit? I find these guys fascinating because they're not typically good looking, but they're quite magnetic. And coming back to I think one or two or things that you've asked in the last five minutes, I don't imagine for a second that these guys dress for anybody else but themselves. It's that kind of person who has become my muse. I use three words to describe these people: restless, creative and awkward. And that word 'awkward' is perhaps the most important of all. Awkwardness is such an attractive thing, I think. And I think it's weird not to be weird. I really do. Because we're all weird. So if we slot into a stereotype, you know, going back to the James Deans and the Marlon Brandos, they all look the same. They look great, but I'm thinking I don't want to look the same. I just want to be an individual. I'm sorry to ramble and wind and spin around this subject, but...

Not at all, I'm enjoying it. So there's something about embracing your inner weirdness?

I think so. Yeah. And 'restlessly creative' I think is different than 'creative' at a fundamental level, because I'm never happy with where I am and the little bit I know of you, you're the same. And there's this thing about, "Oh well if I can do it, can't be that good then". So I'm constantly moving forward. So I'm awkward and I'm restless and I think I'm creative because I'm constantly trying to do new things. But yeah, awkwardness is part of it. I like that.

Well that's totally reframed things for me. That's wonderful. Thank you.

Be awkward. Be awkward. What's the opposite of awkward? Not-awkward. But I don't want someone who's kind of "I'm like this", cos as I soon as I get it, I'm not interested any more. Awkward and restless, that's good, I think.

I think some of us are quite novelty-seeking. I don't know about you, but I do like learning new things. So I think I used to, as you just were mentioning, I think I used to be sort of propelled forward by that insecure feeling of, "If I can do it then it's probably not worth doing. I'd better find something else to prove myself". These days. I don't really have that going on too much. What I feel is just that there isn't that much time. Like your 50odd blog. There isn't that much time and the world is such an interesting place. There are so many extraordinary people to be around and to learn from that, that I don't feel I have the inclination not to be learning and paying attention, really.

Yeah. Yeah.

So you talk a bit about dressing for yourself, not trying to please anybody else, just trying to express who it is that you are. For many of us, that's quite a...well that's a lifelong process, isn't it? Trying to figure that one out. If anyone has figured that one, it would be lovely to hear from them. But for most of us, there's a constant process of reinvention at work, I think. And you've obviously been doing an awful lot of it in the last few years.

Yeah.

How do you keep yourself well and sane and feeling good about life when you're going through that degree of change? Because one thing I do know about change is that it can be enormously unsettling and can kind of throw us into a tailspin sometimes. So how do you look after yourself while still doing all of this growing and reinventing and building of businesses?

You're kind enough to suggest or assume that I'm sane. So let's not talk too much about that... I think to be confident and comfortable with change. You know, if

Charles Darwin was sat with us, he would go, "Well, of course, because it's like breathing. It's the only constant isn't it? Change." And it's interesting - I'm going to make a comment about this... If someone's given, you know - "I'm sorry Michael, you've got this long to live" - that's change because it touches every area of your life. But most change is not reaching every corner of your life. It touches one bit of your life. People lose their jobs and it's horrible and it's destabilising and disconcerting but is not the end. It's the beginning of something else. I used to have a little scrappy bit of paper stuck next to my desk with a quote from Salman Rushdie, and I can't remember the exact quote, but he mentioned 'endism'. And he said, 'Endism is the thing'. And I don't even know if it is a thing and I'm probably gonna misdefine it. But the quote was something around the idea that endism such a dangerous idea because we're never really at the end or the beginning of anything. We're only ever in the bit in the middle. And you know what? If we accept that, and I do think he's right, I worry less. Because things change and start every day. The comment I was going to make about the horrible subject I brought into the room about the finality of life and the average amount of time, blah, blah, blah, 1000 months. We know we're going to die. So if you want to work how long you've got to live, do a sum, have a look how long you've got and then think first of all, you think, crikey, that's not as long as I would like. And clearly it's going to be a bit more or a bit less, but just go for things, you know. That thing that you were born to do. If you believe as a young man or a woman that you can be an amazing doctor, but you're kind of a bit nervous about that, you could be saving the life of someone related to you, me or anyone that you might know. Maybe you have a responsibility to other people to do those great things. You know, generosity is massively undervalued in this world. I think it's one of the most important things in life. So if you're going to be amazing at something, you're going to make someone happy. Do it, because you're not just doing it for you. Do it for other people as well... I think.

So, many reasons for kind of tuning in to what it is that makes you tick and what you really want to be doing in the world. I think that sense of finality is very important, that it's really hard to focus your mind on something sort of amorphous and dwindling off into the distance.

Yeah.

So, something I like to ask every guest on the podcast is if they could suggest a *Little Challenge* that people could try. Is there anything that you can think of relating to anything that we've been talking about or the work that you do that you think people might enjoy trying at home?

A little thing which is easy to do which will change you is, every time you feel yourself asking, "Why is something so expensive?" also, conversely, ask why certain

things are so cheap. This is very important. I think the reason people don't ask why things are so cheap is because they kind of sense they're not going to like the answer. The reason a three quid chicken is three quid is because a chicken is allowed to live in a world no bigger than a piece of A4 paper and I don't like that answer. And because over 300,000 tons of clothing is burnt every year or buried, you know, incinerated or becomes landfill, these kinds of things are linked to asking the wrong question at the point of purchase, cos with more expensive clothing the answer should be about how long it's going to last. And the fact you're going to love it more, etc. That's all good. But the answer to the question of why are things so cheap? I think a lot of the answers are bad, you know, because the workers don't get paid very much. Because chickens are allowed to live on a world that's no bigger than a side of A4, and that's the truth, by the way. I don't like all the answers linked to that. So if you're going to ask why things are so expensive, ask why things are so cheap as well.

I'm curious to explore that. So if, inevitably, in asking why things are so cheap as you say, there are some really uncomfortable answers, what's the positive that comes out of having that conversation with yourself? If you start regularly asking, where does that lead to that feels good, because this is all about helping people to improve their quality of life. So how's that going to take people forward into a place that feels better?

It takes you to a place called by less and buy better. That's it. Because, at the point of buying something, it's just a more considered purchase about, it might be, the sustainability of the product itself, how long it lasts. It might be helping a business that does more good fundamentally than another one. We want to find out why it costs a little bit more. For me, it links back to what I'm doing with my brand, I suppose. If you're buying something that's super-duper, it makes you feel great and if you feel great, you'll be more confident and do better things. Cos when billions, it is literally, billions of pounds per year of clothing, every year will be buried or burned - coming back to your question, "Why should we ask this?" It's to reduce that, so that when we buy stuff we wear it. 80% of the clothing that most people wear they don't wear regularly anyway.

So by buying less and buying better, not only are you addressing some issues that might be making you feel fundamentally pretty uncomfortable, like environmental issues or ethical issues, but also, I guess, that means that you probably have a little bit less around the place, and a lot of us are aware of the benefits of having less stuff. I mean we're living in an age where there's a surfeit of information, of stuff, everywhere and actually it's getting quite difficult to do anything in our heads and in our homes because of all the stuff that we have there. So to have a bit less, but for it to be something that we feel good about?

10 years ago, I reckon if you or I looked for, you know, these storage companies, where you just bung things in storage. I know there weren't as many as there are now, but there's a massive increase and I sometimes think what a shame because we'll wander up the street won't we, and see people sat with everything they own in a bag or two and many people have got a house full of stuff and storage full of stuff. The word stuff is what you and I have used more than once here. It's odd. We don't need, you know, as much as we think we need. It's a strange old subject. It fascinates me. Fascinates me.

Thank you, Michael. If people want to find out more about *50odd* or about *Always Wear Red* or about you, in general, where should they go?

50odd is the number 50odd.co.uk. And AlwaysWearRed.com or across any of the social media platforms, just have a nosey around for *Always Wear Red*. So yeah, that's it.

It's an absolute joy to talk with you. Thank you, Michael.

Thank you.