



The fashionable world of Suzi Walter

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Suzi Walter, the fashion designer behind the Sweezy label, has successfully revived a career that once saw her named among the best young designers in Australia.

Words and photos by Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] 'W [/dropcap]e are so lucky, aren't we? Doing jobs we love," says Warrnambool fashion designer **Suzi Walter** as she spreads out the scrapbooks and patterns, drawings and diaries, samples and swatches, from a lifetime of work that has unfolded in two chapters.

Chapter 1, for Suzi, who owns the Sweezy label, began as a teenager living in Adelaide in the 1960s, when she was **Sue Bell** and sewing her own clothes using popular patterns from big names like Butterick, Simplicity, Vogue and McCalls.



“I would take one of these patterns and tweak it a bit because I didn’t like the collar, or how the pleat fell or something like that,” she laughs, which is something Suzi does often, and infectiously.

These tweaks revealed an early talent for design and turning a standard pattern into a striking original.



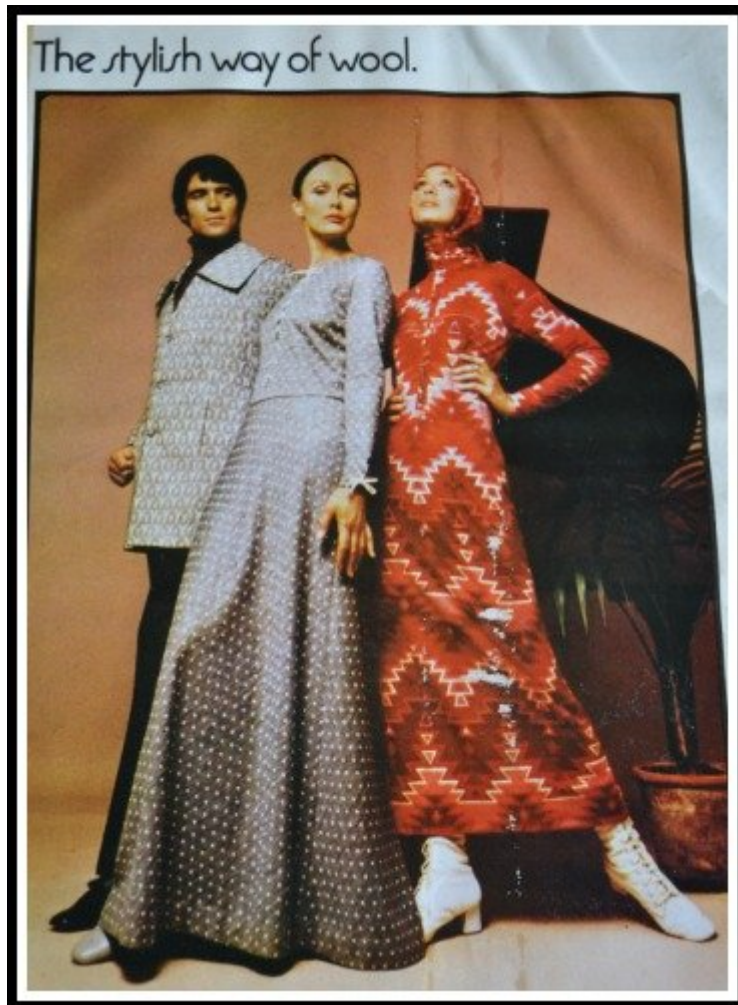
A 16-year-old Sue Bell, right, who was still a student at Seacombe High School when she won a competition to design three outfits for 60s pop star, Bev Harrell, left.

Her first real 'break', however, came when the young Suzi entered a competition to design three outfits for 1960s pop singer **Bev Harrell** (you can see Bev in action [on Youtube here](#)) and won. The prize opened up the opportunity to work with Adelaide-based designer **Bruce Westwood**, so at 16, Suzi quit school and did just that.

Westwood saw her potential early: "She always had a flair for designing..always," he was later quoted as saying.

"She has her own flair, she will go a long way," he said.

And he was right.



Suzi's winning design for the label, Emma, on the right, took out the Australian Wool Award ahead of a design by fashion giant, Norma Tullo, centre.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] S [dropcap]uzi enjoyed a career trajectory that would see her work in the heart of the thriving fashion industry around Flinders Lane in Melbourne during the vibrant early 70s when women like **Prue Acton**, **Norma Tullo** and **Adele Palmer** were taking Australian designs to another level.

"I worked on the *Emma* range that was sold through Myer, and Sportsgirl and pretty much had free rein to design what I wanted, but a particular favourite was hotpants," Suzi laughs.

In 1971, although still a relative newcomer to the fashion scene, Suzi won the top Australian Wool Fashion Award – the "Golden Ram" – with an *Emma* Aztec-printed hooded bean pole dress, beating a Norma Tullo designed dinner dress.

Where does a young, world-at-their feet designer go from there? London, of course!

"I had some money from another prize I won (the Adelaide Festival of Arts Fashion Award) which I knew would pay for my fare, so off I went," Suzi explained.

I assumed she meant by plane. But no. She and seven other adventurous souls bought a Kombi van

and drove it to Perth, where they loaded it onto a ship and sailed across to India from where they *drove* to London.

“We travelled through Nepal, India, Madras, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Istanbul, Iran...all the way through Europe and across, finally, to London,” Suzi says, showing me the notebooks she kept along the way that are jammed with sketches and jottings: the mind of an artist at work.

“These little books became my bibles for ideas,” she says.



Suzi decided to get back into fashion after designing a dress that drew multiple compliments during a visit to Bali: “It got me thinking that, hey, I can still do this.”

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] S [/dropcap]uzi spent three years in London as a freelance designer, including working for **Jane Carlin**, in Bond Street, on high-fashion items destined for places like George’s in Collins St, Melbourne. This was a world where zips and hems were hand-stitched, and some garments were taken by Suzi to the Queen’s beader.

After meeting the man who would become her husband, **Andy Walter**, Suzi returned to Australia – via a road trip through Africa – and the pair settled in Melbourne to start a furniture business and a family. It would be another 25 years – in 2005 – before Suzi, as Sweezy, would return to fashion.

“It really began again with a design I called my ‘shoplifting’ dress,” Suzi says, before going on to explain that she made a one-off dress with a large bustle, that drew dozens of compliments during a trip to Bali.

“It got me thinking that, hey, I can still do this – I can still make really interesting clothing that people are drawn to.”

Suzi and Andy saw an opportunity to not only revive Suzi’s fashion skills, but to also help the Indonesian people.



Up close: just a small sample of the designs and swatches Suzi prepares to send to her team in Indonesia where they are created into garments.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] H [dropcap]ow it works is this: Suzi and Andy travel to Bali twice a year to select high quality, eye-catching and beautiful fabrics, often the whole stock if they love it enough, as Andy did with a fine red-and-black Japanese silk.

They then work with two Balinese men who, it is easy to see, have become a very special part of Suzi's life: Gunter who cuts the patterns from her unique designs she sends to him via email, and Made, who does the sewing.

“When we first met Gunter, he had an old sewing machine out on his verandah and when it rained he would pull the whole lot in,” Suzi says.

Gunter has since built a new house, on the back of his work for several designers, including Suzi.

The Sweezy label (which is Andy's nickname for Suzi) produces between 400-500 garments a year sold through Melbourne, Ballarat and Warrnambool and has built what Suzi describes as a “beautiful story” between the Walter's and their Indonesian friends.

“When I first said I wanted to get back into fashion, I was warned not to, that it was no longer what is used to be. Well, of course, that only made me more determined to do it,” Suzi laughs.



Suzi with a dress made from the stunning Japanese silk fabric her husband, Andy, spotted on one buying trip to Indonesia: "He took the lot!"

[box]The Sweezy Emporium is located in Warrnambool at the end of Ozone Walk, off Koroit St. You can also find Sweezy [on Facebook here](#). Suzi can be contacted on 0439 415 713. [/box]



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4. clothing
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7. Guntar
8. Indonesia
9. Norma Tullo
10. one-off designs
11. retro fabrics
12. Sue Bell
13. Suzi Bell
14. Suzi Walter
15. Sweezy
16. Warrnambool

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