

The drafters

WHERE DO WE TURN WHEN WE WANT TO COOK, MAKE, DANCE OR PLAY? THESE WOMEN DEVISE THE BLUEPRINTS FOR US TO FOLLOW, AND MAY WELL SPARK OUR OWN CREATIVITY IN THE PROCESS

Words: **MADÉVI DAILLY**

Trust your instincts *The composer*

"I am the orchestrator. And the performer. And the composer. And the music!" says Amy McKnight, taking a break from wrangling with the score of BBC teen drama *Phoenix Rise*'s third series. Born into a musical household, the wearer of multiple professional hats has finally found her calling after a lifetime of trials and tribulations: a party DJ career started at 15, a Music Technology course left a month before graduation, a touring band dropped by a major label, and a fledgling stint as a pop song writer. However, after one of her tunes was picked for an advertising campaign, something clicked: "Oh, that's where the money is."

Amy's lesson from these years in the musical wilderness? "Find a space for yourself through creating your own style – and network. Network, network, network." Thanks to her connections, scoring came as a natural progression. Each genre, she says, uses a different part of her brain. With ads, it's "really intense", but she loves being able to connect image and sound, creating a new dynamic between the two.



She peppers the soundtrack with what she calls "air candy: a mix of flourishes, little audio highlights of what we're watching. Sometimes it's emotion-driven, sometimes it's fun."

Long-form – films, TV series, documentaries – are different. "I get to create these character themes and these textures and these worlds," she says. On *Phoenix Rise*, "the school has a sound, the playground has a sound, all the characters have their own sound, and then I have to find ways to make it all merge into one kind of sonic universe."

Working digitally means she can

sketch, scribble and scratch to her heart's content. Her sound libraries can conjure a virtual 100-piece orchestra in her room – a magician's toolbox for a composer at any stage of their career – but nothing, she thinks, beats the range and emotional punch of a human performer.

Being the last cog in the production line, however, brings its own set of challenges. "You normally take a hit when it comes to budgets and timeline," she warns. "So you really have to love it and be good at dealing with stress and multitasking. If I support the script in the best way possible and if I help the characters through the story with the music, by the end, as a viewer, you shouldn't even have noticed that I'm there," she smiles.

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"I create these character themes, these textures and these worlds, then make it all into one sonic universe"



With Merchant & Mills, Carolyn's beautiful and useful dressmaking patterns have helped transform the wardrobes of home sewers



Learn to let go *The pattern designer*

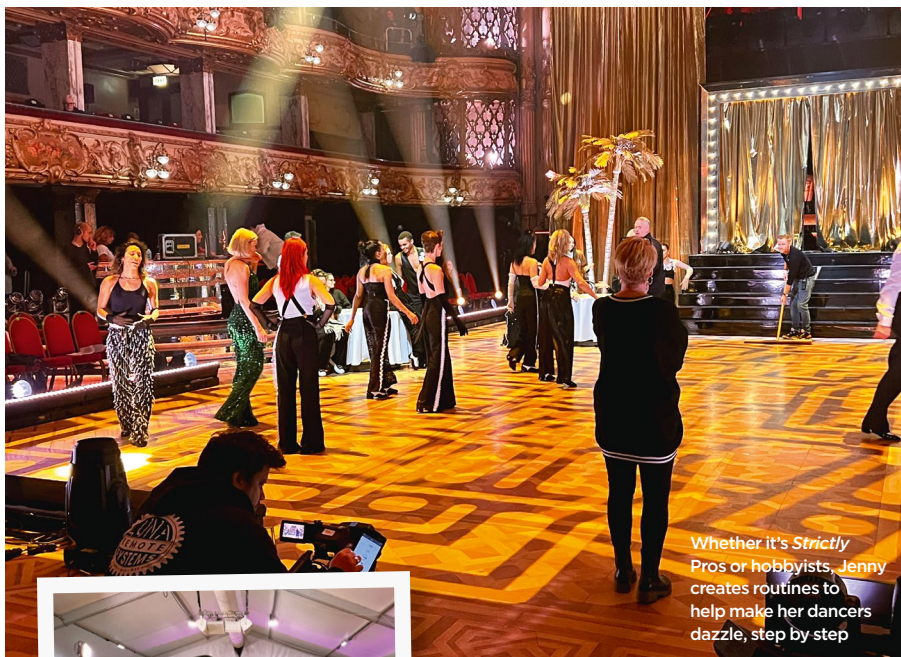
If you've ever tried making your own clothes, you'll be familiar with the magic moment where a flat, rustling paper pattern becomes something you can pull and drape around your body. For Carolyn Denham, who grew up in a small village in Yorkshire, drafting her own clothes was a chance to emulate the London designers whose aesthetic she so admired. "In the '80s, goodness, I drafted some clangers," she confesses. "I'd march around the village in outrageous outfits, looking like a member of the Communist party. I didn't have a clue what I was doing."

Her pared-down, utilitarian aesthetic now underpins the success of Merchant & Mills, the fabric shop she co-founded in 2010. Aware that the home-sewing base

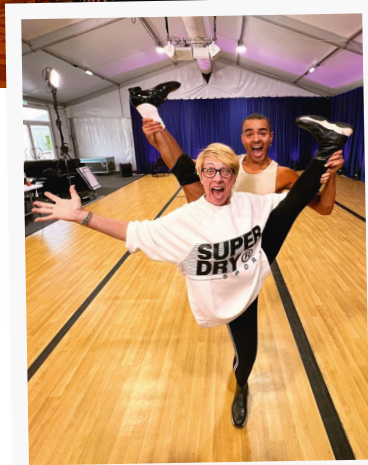
of the '60s and '70s had all but disappeared, and unimpressed with the "clumsy, mumsy" styles offered by the big pattern companies, she kept her creations very simple, hoping to inspire a new generation of sewers with a first win. "You want people to make something, feel like it's achievable, and be really happy with it." Like the Trapeze dress, a top-selling number that just slips over the head and that's easy for beginners to customise.

Despite a degree in fashion design and many years in the industry, Carolyn doesn't see herself as a pattern-cutter. In fact, she now feels privileged to work with two expert cutters, Karen Cunningham and Hannah Exley, both Vivienne Westwood alumni. In business, she says, "It's really important to be able to let go of something and say somebody else is much better at it."

She shares a common language with her colleagues, but admires the skill they bring to the table. "It's engineering. There's a real understanding of what something in the flat is going to look like in 3D, and how exactly to achieve that." Not that Carolyn plans to stop tinkering with "practical, useful and beautiful" things. "Because that's really what it's all about, isn't it?" merchantandmills.com; [@denham_carolyn](https://twitter.com/denham_carolyn) »



Whether it's *Strictly* Pros or hobbyists, Jenny creates routines to help make her dancers dazzle, step by step



Connecting the steps

The choreographer

"The important thing with choreography is finding the inner self," says Jenny Thomas. The *Strictly Come Dancing* choreographer has always encouraged her performers to find their own personality in movement, whether they're seasoned pros or keen hobbyists, like her senior dance troupe, the Dawlish Dancers, many of whom are in their 70s.

"I'd say it's never about me. It's about making the best of the individuals that you're choreographing for and showing them in their best light, not in my image." This can be a particular challenge when working with the amateur celebs on *Strictly*, she admits. "I don't want them to look like they've never danced before, so I'm going to try to be as creative as I can, work around things they can do and disguise the things

"A piece always starts with the music – looking for the feelings, the highlights or low points"

they can't." With professionals, she can workshop a piece on the fly, coming up with moves that she's no longer able to do herself. "Or maybe I could do it once, but I wouldn't be able to walk afterwards," she laughs.

Enrolled in dance classes as a shy four-year-old, Jenny lacked, by her own admission, the sophistication of her classmates – but made up for it with plenty of character. "My mum used to say 'just wink at the end!'" Fast-forward 35 years – a *Billy Elliot*-like journey that has taken her from a Plymouth council estate to choreographing Ed Balls' and Katya Jones' raucous *Gangnam Style* routine – and she still has a way of moving that's entirely hers.

For Jenny, a new piece always starts with the music. She breaks down the structure, looking for the feelings – highlights or low points, energy or intimacy – that will help her hook her audience. What can she do to help them connect to their emotions? "I want the performer to speak to the audience, to look at the person. When you feel it come from the centre with real, genuine feeling – that's when I think you've got the audience."

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Find your voice

The recipe writer

Roasted cauliflower, noodles, chilli flakes... It's a pared-down ingredients list, and Uyen Luu isn't sure why this particular recipe of hers has been such a hit. "It's really naughty," she guesses, "because I use loads of butter in it, as well as loads of garlic and fish sauce. So it's an unusual combination, but simple as well."

Fourteen years after starting a food blog to share recipes with a friend, the commercial photographer-turned-author has developed her voice with each of her four books. She's come to grips with the technical aspects of her creative process, imagining how someone who's never cooked the recipe before would use their kitchen. Her mother could rustle up a six-dish feast in 20 minutes. "That sense of structure has filtered into my own life, just making use of every minute. Instead of standing around waiting for, say, pasta to boil for eight minutes, you could easily chop, wash, stir-fry something in garlic."

Uyen isn't precious when it comes to authenticity, offering alternatives for hard-to-source ingredients. "Making good use of what you have around you is completely in our culture," she confirms. For *Quick And Easy Vietnamese*, due to be published this summer, she experimented with making her own vegan fish sauce, using things like fish mint (an invasive herb), fermented tofu, kimchi and capers. "It always gives me a thrill when someone tells me that they've enjoyed my recipes," she says. "I can't believe they're using my recipe or opening my book out of all the millions out there." *Quick And Easy Vietnamese* (Hardie Grant) will be published in August 2024; @loveleluu 

