

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:05] DC: It takes the right skills and the right innovation to design and manage meaningful print marketing solutions. Welcome to Podcasts From the Printerverse, where we explore all facets of print and marketing that creates stellar communications and sales opportunities for business success. I'm your host Deborah Corn, the Intergalactic Ambassador to the Printerverse. Thanks for tuning in. Listen long and prosper.

[EPISODE]

[00:00:32] DC: Hey, everybody, welcome to Podcast from the Printerverse. This is Deborah Corn, your Intergalactic Ambassador. More specifically, we are here with the Out and Proud in Print series and I am thrilled to welcome Aimee Stevland to the program. With expertise in visual storytelling, layout, and design, illustration, brand management, product development, and production, Aimee Stevland has a proven track record of delivering successful projects to her clients, such as Janet Jackson, Coca-Cola, The Beatles, EA Sports, Mariah Carey, Doritos, Usher, The Doors and even more names that you know. Whether your brand is looking to refresh a dated concept, or you're in the market for a remix style for your marketing and merchandise or a uniquely fresh take on incorporating a brand in a new space, Aimee is the partner you've been looking for. You can see all of her work at aimeestevland.com. All the links you need to connect with Aimee are in the show notes. Welcome to the program.

[00:01:42] AS: Thanks, Deborah. It's a pleasure. Thanks for having me.

[00:01:44] DC: Thank you so much for answering the call. We'll get to that in a bit. I, pretty much, gave the cliff notes of a storied career. Can you fill in the blanks?

[00:01:55] AS: Yes, that's pretty crazy to hear all of that back. All of that happened. Yes, I've been really fortunate to have a 20-plus-year career in entertainment, and as a creative. So, gosh, in terms of gaps, I think, I mean, there's a lot there. I started in print. Print was my trajectory for my whole career. I learned about print in high school. I had an incredible teacher who had a letterpress, an old letterpress thing in his farmhouse, and then taught us all of that stuff. One of my first jobs was at a printing company. I started out in the bindery and the

shipping department with the old shrink wrap machine and I was back pestering all the – look, we called it back then the lithography department where they were back there, I was back there playing with the Photostat camera and the stripping plates and all that stuff. I just have a real affinity for that. That really set the trajectory for, I think, where I ended up because it gave me a background in understanding like how does all this stuff get created, like get out into the world, and print gave me a really great – that was my college. It gave me a really great sense of how that all works. So yes, that's been a very poignant part of my career.

[00:03:12] DC: I mean, a lot of times when I speak to people, they'll list brands off. I worked on Coca-Cola, as a matter of fact, internationally. But it's very rare to come across somebody who's designing like directly for Janet Jackson. Can you speak about that relationship, if you can? In general, how did you get into that space?

[00:03:35] AS: Yes. So, thank you for that. Anytime anybody gives me a platform, I'm going to talk about Janet Jackson because she's amazing.

[00:03:42] DC: Excuse me, Miss Jackson, if you're nasty.

[00:03:47] AS: Right on, yes. I mean, the industry or the media has tried to erase her ever since the Superbowl, so I will take any opportunity to big up Janet. Now, back in the day, I'm really – I mean, I've already aged myself talking about Rubylith and Photostats and all that stuff. But in the early days of the Internet, Janet was really very present. She was one of the few big names that had an Internet presence. I was just out of high school, and I was drawing these caricatures and cartoons, and I was sharing them with the fan communities back then, and I was fortunate that they happened to catch her eye.

They reached out and it was crazy. This is somebody that I admired, and this creative person that I admired so much. It led to, I was asked to develop some concept sketches for the album that was about to come out at the time. It was a *Velvet Rope*. I was just too green to execute that the way that I envisioned in my head and obviously, Janet went on to create the iconic album cover that we know today. But just being asked meant the world to me. She really invested in me. I was just this kind of 19 nerdy dork living in Michigan. I was a nobody. She invested in me and that gave me this incredible confidence.

I mean, if somebody like that believes in you, you really take that to heart, and not that I was, out everywhere saying, “I did this for Janet Jackson.” But just internally, it was like, “Wow, this person believes in me.” Again, I think that just really gave me the confidence to this kind of dork from Michigan to get out and to actually have a career in this. That's my Janet story. She's incredible.

[00:05:24] DC: Yes. For everyone who's not of age, there was a time when Janet Jackson, was it. I mean, number one on the charts. I'll tell you, when I was in college *Control*, the album *Control* was our anthem. I mean, *Rhythm Nation* came after that and she was number one in the world. I mean –

[00:05:42] AS: She was everything.

[00:05:42] DC: – for many, many years. Yes. I mean, it was just incredible that – and you're right. When somebody like that takes an interest in you, it becomes this affirming thing.

[00:05:56] AS: Absolutely. Yes. I mean, again, she was just somebody who was really at the top of her game, music royalty, obviously, coming from the Jackson family, and somehow little old me got into her orbit, and it's always stuck with me. I've always wanted to take her lead and return that kindness to the other people that I've encountered in the space and up-and-comers and things like that because it just meant the world to me.

[00:06:23] DC: Yes. All right. I don't want to focus too much on Janet. Okay. I mean, attention to detail. She's meticulous about this on her stages, in her videos, on everything that she does. Everything on that stage has a purpose. It has a place. Every move she makes is coordinated and calculated. What's it like working with someone who's that creative?

[00:06:46] AS: Yes. I mean, it was interesting, because they really left me alone. They saw what I could do, and gave me this – they gave me this photograph that hadn't been seen yet and they just kind of said, “Just try something with this.” They saw my cartoons, I was very much into this kind of cartoony caricature vibe. I'm still curious as to what vision they had, even asking me. But yes, so I just took that image and I had this vision, I did this great sketch, and then I got into the

early days of Photoshop and everything. I didn't have it at home. I wasn't a digital painter. That's where it kind of went wrong. I just couldn't finish it the way I saw it in my head.

They loved it as a piece. They loved it. But I think, they could tell that perhaps this is just what, at the standard, that was needed for Janet at this time, which was completely understandable. So, they liked the concept, they liked the drawing. But for whatever reason, she had a different vision, but it was so great to be asked, just to throw something out there and see if it works.

[00:07:57] DC: So, there's a big difference between design and illustration, which I'm sure that everyone listening to this podcast is aware of. You mentioned this just a second ago, and it was actually one of the things I wanted to ask you about. Over your career, you went analog to digital, and I want to know a little bit about that journey. Who were some of your inspirations for that? How did you learn how to do it? Were you self-taught?

[00:08:24] AS: Yes, I mean, mostly self-taught. I grew up enjoying a lot of – again, I was like, big into caricatures. So, it was all about folks like Walt Disney and Al Hirschfeld. All of those really great caricature artists.

[00:08:40] DC: Al Hirschfeld. He got his name in the picture.

[00:08:44] AS: Yet, he would put Nina. He would hype Nina in the pictures.

[00:08:47] DC: Right, or his daughter.

[00:08:49] AS: His daughter, I think.

[00:08:49] DC: Oh, my God, I forgot all about that.

[00:08:53] AS: Yes. So, it was people like that I – in those early days, I was drawing with a sharpie. It was not fancy. In my journey to digital, I mean, certainly, as the technology got further and further, I got to practice. But then, there was a point in my career, and in my life where I actually lost the use of my drawing hand. I wouldn't know until years later, but I had developed a functional neurological disorder called focal dystonia, which basically crippled my hand. My

brain and my hand do not get along. So, as an artist, as somebody whose bread and butter was drawing with markers and pencils and stuff. I really had to learn how to adapt.

My style changed. My approach kind of changed. I was inspired by some folks that I met that worked in wood. It inspired me to – I was like, “Well, I can make digital shapes and build my drawings and build my portraits that way.” Yes, I didn't have a choice in my digital progression. There was a point in my career where it abruptly almost ended and then, in order to adapt, I had to really, really embrace digital illustration.

[00:10:04] DC: If we look at, we go back to when you were drawing or sketching, we can use Andy Warhol as an example. He would do one, and then it would be a mass production of the one in different manners. Or you could scan in that one drawing and then output it but moving to digital is different if you're going to output it on a printing press, not the same process. So, I assume that you had a learning curve on that as well. I'm interested in how you got up to speed on really how to design or illustrate to get the creative results you wanted on a printing press.

[00:10:47] AS: Yes. I mean, I think this is where my background in print really came into focus and helped me – I already had the sort of background knowledge in dot gain and all this, things like that. Just CMYK versus RGB, in general, which a lot of folks don't have that cursory understanding now. But yes, I already had a lot of that background knowledge. For me, when it comes to my personal art, I just think all that was just running in the background. It was already in the computer just running in the background.

[MESSAGE]

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[00:12:08] DC: How do you learn about the new presses that are out in the marketplace? For example, just based upon some of the milestones that you've mentioned, I have to assume like me, you started off only with offset printing. Now, there's digital printing, and there's inkjet printing, and 3D printing. I want to get to apparel in a second. But keeping apparel to the side, do you pay attention to these types of things and make any considerations about how things will be output when you design them?

[00:12:43] AS: Yes. As I progressed in my career and got a little bit further away from prints, you lean more on your print partners. You lean more on your vendors and your printing partners to really clarify these things for you. So, I think as my career went on, you make sure to build really great relationships with your vendors and your printers. Collaborating with them, bringing them into the process, and making sure that you're creating can be reproduced, because you spend all this time on something, and it gets depressing and looks crazy. You've wasted a lot of time and money. Yes, so I just really – I think at this point in my career, I just really lean into our partners, and yes, that's been an incredible process.

[00:13:27] DC: It gets really interesting that all of the creative people I speak with, or people like me who think they're creative, but worked at an advertising agency, we all have the same perspective on this, that a printer is not just a place where you output something. They have to be a partner in your creative process, or it is not going to work out for you. Well, it could. But it's a crapshoot versus, let's do everything possible to make sure that we're all doing everything possible to get what you want on the other end of this press.

The other conversations are like, “Well, how much does it cost?” It's all focused on that. So, I really appreciate that you've just echoed and even strengthen this position, and I hope everybody out there hears it. If you have creative partners, talk to them about what they want to achieve before you just start throwing pricing at them. If for nothing else, they will at least gravitate to you and that, “Oh, maybe I can actually collaborate and have a conversation with this printer.” What is your actual best advice for the creatives out there to open up these conversations with printers? Because I think sometimes, designers are afraid. They don't know

what to ask for. Maybe they feel dumb and they don't want to ask questions. What are your thoughts about that?

[00:14:48] AS: Yes, I mean, that's probably it, right there. I think, this kind of up-and-coming generation has been so – they didn't necessarily have the beginnings that I had, so they may not even know that all this exists. If you're a creative who solely worked in the digital space, and are just used to hitting that upload button, and that's it, I would just say, “Hey, do a little homework. Pick up a book. Go visit a print shop and just maybe talk to somebody.” When you're ready to actually maybe do a real project, they're there to guide you. Don't feel stupid. I mean, if there are things you don't know, it's actually really best if you acknowledge that, and let them help you through the process. Because if you go in there like a know-it-all or some kind of diva designer, that's really not going to work out for you. Yes, acknowledge what you don't know and collaborate. That's what I would say.

[00:15:46] DC: How do you assess printers? Do you ask them for samples? Do you look at their website? See if they have gallery? When you're looking, what is your advice for people who look if you're not sourcing vendors yourself at this point?

[00:16:00] AS: On the occasions that I've had to source my own, a lot of it comes from word of mouth. People that I respect that have worked with folks, and then, I reach out and do my own little due diligence. Yes, I mean, sometimes it's just connecting with them as a person if you feel like you're vibing, and they understand what you want to create, and what you want to do, and they seem knowledgeable. Other times, sure. It's like, what's some of the previous work? Or sometimes what will happen is I've seen this really great piece that they worked on, and then it's like, “Oh, wow. I want to work with them because they produce this really great piece.” It's kind of a variety of things. So, like all the above.

[00:16:39] DC: Do you establish relationships with the paper companies to get their samples and promotions, and see all the things that are possible in printing these days?

[00:16:48] AS: That, honestly, I'm a bit removed from that at this stage in my career. A lot of what I do now is more large format, environmental graphics. So, paper. I haven't – now that I'm talking about it, I feel like I miss it.

[00:17:03] DC: You should.

[00:17:05] AS: That's not something that I've actually had to work within a while.

[00:17:08] DC: Well, the wide format space has a ton of funky substrates and media that you can print with, and they have swatch books for those things, too. So, you should embed on that.

I want to talk to you about apparel because that's a big part of what you do, and that certainly has been through a renaissance in the past few years, including the output methods, which were used to be pretty limited to screen printing and embroidery, if you agree with that assessment. Now, we have dye sublimation and digital to film transfers, and direct-to-garment printing, and all of that. How do you keep apprised of that? Are you excited about all the new opportunities and how you taking advantage of them?

[00:17:55] AS: I'm probably going to sound like a real old head when I say this, but I really am a fan of the classic screen-printed t-shirt. The classic, cool, vintage rock t-shirt. I'm still really a fan of. I love the dye sublimation and some of those technologies. The direct to garment, it's a little hit-and-miss for me. I understand that it's all about speed now. I'm getting out as many units as you can. For me, that's been a little bit of a disconnect between the art and the commerce piece. Because when I started my work in music apparel, I actually came up and studied under Frank Visconti who was basically at the start of it all with Winterland Productions, and just the start of the mainstream rock and roll merchandise. I learned so much from him. It's such a lost art.

So, I really, really appreciate that screen printing as a craft. At the time that the artists did so much more even though they had so much less technology, and here's where I sound like an old fuddy-duddy, but it's like I feel like the technology is almost made people a little more complacent and not as intentional and creative with their work. So yes, there you have it.

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[EPISODE CONTINUES]

[00:20:05] DC: Look, there's a place for everything, and I am certainly on the craft versus commodity side of this fence as well. One of the problems is that I'm not being Debbie Doom here. I'm just being a realist. It is harder and harder and harder to find people who understand and can implement the craft of screen printing. So, we will end up with a couple of specialty places that still do it, like places that still make vinyl albums. But to your point, the in and out, at the lowest price possible, the many units as possible, it is a business, that they like to say that about show business, but it's also a printing business. But I completely understand what you're saying.

I have screen-printed shirts that are like 30 years old, and they are still intact. They are a little faded back, but they're supposed to look like that. They are the softest things – I mean, it's something that I hope does not go away. Something more modern, however, is you occupy some space in the video game arena. I am really – I've got a zillion questions about that. We typically feel it what's online gaming, and people – there are communities around it. There's a whole social media platform called Twitch around it. Do they chat on Discord too about the – is that part of it too?

[00:21:39] AS: Yes. I think that's new and upcoming.

[00:21:40] DC: Yes. I mean, this is bigger than anything. If you're not in this space, you don't realize how gigantic it is.

[00:21:46] AS: Gaming has really become ubiquitous. I think it's a bigger industry now than movies and music. Yes, it's really taken over.

[00:21:55] DC: Poor parents, because I remember when I was growing up, and they were like, "Stop playing video games. You're not going to make a living playing video games." Now, they could all go, "Ah, actually, I can." And not developing them literally playing them on YouTube. That's all I have to do, is be good enough to get to do that.

But I have always had this thought that the printing industry is really missing out on this video game phenomenon. And it is, for now. We don't know what's going to happen in the metaverse. But for right now, everything's contained there. But there is, or could be a lot of printing associated with it. Before we started this podcast, I mentioned just haphazardly that sometimes I see kids running around with Minecraft swords or costumes. I'm sorry, that's printing. I mean, however you look at it still, that costume was printed somehow. That sword was made on a flatbed printer and cut out. There are collectibles. There are special edition supplements and all of these things that I just believe the people in this space would pay a zillion dollars for if it was unique and special.

In general, what are your thoughts about the opportunity for print in this space and where might there be a crack in the door that some very creative, crafty marketing/sales team from a printing company can get in and open up some new conversations?

[00:23:27] AS: Yes, I think you nailed it. I mean, the first thing that comes to mind is the licensing opportunities. If you are a particular manufacturer or printer of something really unique and interesting, I think licensing opportunities are probably the biggest available opportunity, right off the jump. I think licensing is the first thing that comes to mind. That's the biggest opportunity in this space. But certainly, there are ways our companies have their sort of vendors of choice. Anytime you can start a relationship just, start with a small project, and then you can potentially become one of those preferred partners.

[00:24:05] DC: I mean, start by getting a ticket to a gaming convention, walk around, meet the people, see the merchandise that they're giving. I remember I went to a – it was called Kush Con. It was a CBD Convention in Tampa with a printer. We went there because we knew that

they needed a lot of printing and stuff like that. But my God, we didn't realize how much help they needed until you have a printer walking on the show floor where there are not really printers. They were calling – he was wearing a shirt. That's a Tampa printer, so they knew he was a printer, and they just kept calling him over, and it was for like little things. Can you help us with stickers? Can you help us with labels? Can you help us with – we don't want to ship hats and stuff from overseas. Sometimes, just walking the aisles, you don't even have to go for that, do I have the rights to print everything for Minecraft? You can help aid vendors at these conferences and almost get in that way.

[00:25:07] AS: Yeah, I think that's a great idea. Again, it usually starts with a small project that kind of feel you out. Then, yes, you build relationships. Yes, I think that's a great idea.

[MESSAGE]

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[EPISODE CONTINUES]

[00:25:52] DC: Speaking of relationships, you had a podcast series that was out in the world. Can you talk about that?

[00:25:57] AS: Sure. Yes, I was also, kind of during the pandemic, we all, I don't know, had these existential crises, I suppose. I think I was just thinking a lot about the attention economy and this clout-based society that we seem to be living in, and this notion of influencers, so-called influencers. People who, I don't know, had they ever really done anything of influence? I just again thought about all the people that I had worked with in my career starting with my print career, and I just felt like I've worked with some really incredible people along the way, and

they're the unsung heroes, the behind the scenes craftspeople of culture, pop culture. I was like, "I have these relationships with them, and I just wanted to tell their stories."

So, from, like, I mentioned, rock and roll merchandise, and Frank Visconti to Janet Jackson, stylist, Wayne Scot Lukas, and then just some friends of mine, who was an author, and then one is a musician. I just felt like these are the people who I really feel like have an important voice, and I just wanted to uplift them. I just made a limited series just to get their stories out there, so people could meet these people who are too often just kind of stuck behind the scenes.

[00:27:15] DC: I'm going to put the link in the show notes. But where can people listen to it in case they don't want to click down there?

[00:27:20] AS: Sure. So, the podcast is called, This Is How It Starts with Aimee Stevland. You can find it on Google Podcasts, Apple Podcasts, or Pod Bean. Just throw it in search bar, it should hopefully come up.

[00:27:31] DC: Excellent. Okay, so I put out a post on LinkedIn asking if people were willing to share their story for Pride Month, and you were one of a handful of people who responded. Why did you respond?

[00:27:50] AS: That's a great question. Because I was a late bloomer when it came to my identity, and it came to me at a point in my career where, again, I mentioned that I was dealing with this neurological function, and it really just completely broke down my identity as an artist, as a person, as everything. It just completely imploded my world. One of the things that I had to slow down and take a look at was my own sexual identity. I had been with a man for many, many years, and something just didn't feel right. During that sort of time of rebuilding myself, it was a big deal in the way that I was coming to understand myself.

So, it kind of tough in the sense that I now have a language for, I guess, the way that I had felt my whole life, and I just hadn't really placed it. It was like during this time, where I've just completely broken down and really had no choice but to look at it. So, came out the other side. Now, I think I'm glad that I came out at the time that I did. I was older, self-sufficient. I really

didn't have to worry about a lot of the things that younger people have to worry about, and I want to acknowledge that, that not everybody – that's not everybody's story.

But coming out later, now, I can just be me. I mean, I always was. I don't think I ever actively hid who I was. I just didn't have the language for it. I just thought I was open-minded, honestly. It was just kind of, okay, this is a thing. But yes, I guess I didn't have the language for it. I knew what it was. I obviously have folks in my life who are gay and everything, but I just couldn't assign it to myself. I didn't have the language for myself. But now that I do, I just want to live my life openly and do what I do, and be who I am in my fullest self. So, I guess having said all that, I guess that's what I'm bringing to your show today. I just am who I am and I happen to be gay.

[00:29:55] DC: Coming out later in life, as I did as well, you have to go backward too, and fill everybody in on the news, right?

[00:30:05] AS: Very true, yes.

[00:30:05] DC: In many ways, and I've said this on other podcasts in this series that, when you're a person of color, you walk in the room, and it's obvious that you're a person of color. But there's not – you cannot, unless you want to be very stereotypical, which, by the way, sometimes is true. I mean, in any case, however, you look at it, more so with women, I think in many cases, you have to decide, "Okay, I'm going to tell a story now about my partner. Am I going to say they and keep it as – let's leave this ambiguous? Although these days, they could actually mean something else. Or am I going to say she and really just go out there?" So, how have you handled all these mini coming out since you've come out?

[00:30:56] AS: I think when you were just talking about that, I think, I kind of think back, and I think I was very intentional there was not going to be any ambiguity. I am telling you, I am with her, that is my wife, or my girlfriend, or whatever. So, yes, I think, I was like, "Okay, well I've wasted enough time without the language." I believe that, yes, when I did all those little coming-out events, I was very intentional about making it very clear. I didn't want there to be any ambiguity about it.

[00:31:28] DC: What do we say to the Gen Z'ers now? What do we say to the 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20-year-olds who are trying to navigate this in a world that is literally telling them no?

[00:31:47] AS: Yes. This is so hard, because on the one hand, congratulations, because you figured out your stuff way before I did and that's wonderful. Then, yes, on the other hand, there are a lot of people trying to hold you back and keep you down. I guess, just know that there are people like me and Deborah, who are continuing to fight for you and we want to lend a hand and do what we can to help you through it.

So yes, if you're questioning if there's somebody in your life that you trust, yes, find some refuge, find support wherever you can. We're out here.

[00:32:21] DC: I want to thank you so much for your time, for your openness, and for your talents that you've put out into the world. As I mentioned a few times, everything you need to connect with Aimee will be in the show notes. Until next time, everybody. Print long, have pride long, and prosper.

[OUTRO]

[00:32:39] DC: Thanks for listening to Podcasts from the Printerverse. Please subscribe, click some stars, and leave us a review. Connect with us through printmediacentre.com. We'd love to hear your feedback on our shows and topics that are of interest for future broadcasts. Until next time, thanks for joining us. Print long and prosper.

[END]

Mentioned in This Episode:

Aimee Stevland: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/aimeestevland/>

Aimee Stevland Design & Illustration: <http://aimeestevland.com/>

This Is How It Starts with Aimee Stevland: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/this-is-how-it-starts-with-aimee-stevland/id1616206463>

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