

Love What You Love Podcast

Episode 46: Balloon Art with Shana Sharp

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Welcome to *Love What You Love*; I'm Julie Rose. I'm insatiably curious about people and the world around us, and absolutely in love with passion and unselfconscious enthusiasm. Every other week I geek out with someone about the thing that they love, and then I share it with you.

Welcome back! Or, Welcome! Just a quick request before we get started. If you're enjoying *Love What You Love*, please leave a rating or review on the podcast platform of your choice. It really helps other curious, big-hearted folks like yourself find the show. And if rating and reviewing isn't your thing, I would love it if you would share the show with friends, or family, or neighbors, or DoorDash drivers, or whatever.

Onto this week's show. Shana Sharp is a balloon artist and self-described professional joymonger, dedicated to making people smile four days a week on her Twitch stream, where she's building a community dedicated to creativity and fun. It's balloon art like you've probably never imagined it.

In this conversation, we talk freedom, entropy, zombie parades, why balloons are life in microcosm, the shrunken head of Edward G. Robinson, where she finds her inspiration, and so, so much more. So find out why Shana loves balloon art and why you might learn to love it, too.

Julie: Hello, Shana! Thank you so much for joining me today.

Shana: Thanks for having me, Julie!

Julie: I'm excited to talk to you! I just recently discovered you on Twitch, and you call yourself the Bob Ross of Balloons, and that made me so happy. And a manic pixie stream mom, which just tickled me to death. So, I would just love to know, like, when did you start making balloon art and how did you get into this?

Shana: Sure. It's been a journey. So let's see... I've been making balloon art for 15 years now. In my 20s I had an office job, and at some point I just kind of said, you know, "This isn't for me." So I quit that and I became a birthday clown. I happened to know a family friend who had... He was a professional clown. He supported his family on that. He was an ex-Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey circus clown, you know? And just to be able... It's so important, I think, for young artists to meet other artists who are making it work for themselves, you know what I mean? Not even being successful, just supporting your family, just paying your bills, just being a normal human being with the dignity of a living wage but doing art, or performance, or whatever it is that inspires you.

So, I met him and saw that it could be done, and he trained me in all the basics. So I did... As a birthday clown, you do everything. It's a shotgun approach, where you're, like, face painting, magic shows, silly stuff, wear makeup, and I'll do balloon animals as an add-on for ten minutes at the end, you know? And I was really into face painting at first because I've always been an artist. I've always been a painter or an illustrator. I've always loved that. So, I loved the face painting, and I still do, but the thing is I saw firsthand how much more people respond to the balloons. It's amazing. There's something... I don't know.

Julie: Why?

Shana: I've spent more hours than the average human being trying to figure out what it is, and I can't figure it out. And at this point, I'm just like... I embrace that it is. But there's something about... It's bright colors, smooth shapes, something that wasn't there a moment before and now suddenly is, you know? I literally take a handful of, like, rainbow spaghetti, and within - depending on what I'm making - five minutes to, if I'm on Twitch, two-and-a-half-hours later, we've got a three-dimensional cartoon character. There's something that physically exists in space, an artifact that...

Like, think of any other medium that you would create an object in that approximate scale. Like if you made a stuffed animal, if you were carving a sculpture, if you were... I don't know, a Lego sculpture. That would take you days, at least hours. But with balloons, you can really inflate it with air, and make it live... Someone can see creation in almost a timelapse kind of speed. And it's interactive because they get to request a thing. And the magic of that interaction was really what charmed me to my core and brought me to balloons as a medium.

I think I'm a visual artist second, but I feel that I'm a performer first. And balloons are this wonderful medium that allow me to both make a visual art product and entertain in the moment, engage with this human being, make them smile, make them laugh, show them a little bit of wonder, something that they didn't think could exist in this world before they met me. Now their concept of what's possible has changed in this tiny, tiny, insignificant way. I'm not trying to, like, *over-inflate* the importance. [laughs] But there's something magic about that. I could go on forever. I'm sure all of your guests could.

Julie: I love it. That's just... I have never thought of it that way. But bringing this little gift, this little gem of joy to somebody. I love that.

Shana: I think that's why it appeals to grownups as much, if not more, dare I say, than to children. It's been... Like I said, I've been doing this for 15 years, and when you do balloons, the way you make a living is generally children's events, right? Kids parties. I worked a few corporate events because there were kids there. I work a few weddings because there are kids there. But it was the hardest sell to tell people, "No, no. At these parties, sure I get balloons out to the kids. But you know who's standing around me ten minutes in? All the grownups," because they are like, "Whoa! Hey, all I've ever seen in my previous 40 years on this planet has been dogs, and swords, and flowers. And now I'm seeing cartoon characters, animals, vehicles..." just crazy stuff! So, adults are the ones who truly, maybe, appreciate the level that we're bringing it to.

And it taps into a nostalgia and a wonder that adults are not used to feeling daily anymore. As children, you feel that every day, right? As children, you walk around and you're like, "Whoa! I guess that exists! I didn't know that yesterday!" And it's a feeling that's so normal. But for adults, that's not something we feel every day. So the fact that I get a chance to show just a little bit of that is such a gift and such a motivator for me.

Julie: Yeah, what a joy! You were a clown and you were doing kids events. When did you transition out of that, when did you start your Twitch stream, and what made you start that stream?

Shana: So, 2020 was kind of that year that the bottom fell out of the market for hot rubber bags of my breath. [laughs] Not really a large call for that in, like, a respiratory infection environment. So, you know, people are like, "We're not doing in-person events," so

no parties, and that's been my entire income. And it's been a hustle for sure. I've never... That's just how it is... I figure, as an artist, you always make that trade, right? You're like, "Well, I guess I won't have comfort or stability, but I will love my life."

But then, here it is, it's like, "Oh, I can't actually..." For the first time in 15 years, I was really scared. Even through the economic downturn of about 2008, we were fine. The last place people like to cut back on the budget is for their children. So, that was a thing where it's like, "Even if we're not going to the movies every week, for Jimmy's birthday party we're still going to blow it out." So, that really supported me. But when what's canceled is parties, is togetherness, there's nothing.

So, you know, I luckily was able to apply for unemployment, and I have local family that was just exceeding generosity helping me keep my young family afloat. But I just personally knew I needed some kind of creative outlet or I'd go insane. So, I looked up live streaming. I'm 40 years old. It felt a little intimidating, you know, because I don't even do video game... See? That's how out of it I am. I said, "Do video games." I don't do video games! I'm not a gamer. Man, I've just been so out of touch, you know, with tech. So, it was a real, kind of, moment where I had to just step in and be like, "Well, the stakes are very low."

The hidden gift for me of 2020 that I have to remind myself is that, you know, nothing left to lose is just another word for freedom. When everything else shuts down, that's when you can take those risks, because it's like, "What am I risking? Nothing? Oh no. What's the worst that could happen? I could make \$0. Well, I'm still doing that. That's what's happening now, except I'm going to be learning and it's so uncomfortable."

Oh man, when you feel like you've got it figured out and you're like, "I'm a professional," and then you step into a completely new ecosystem, it is... It's intense. But I did find my way to Twitch and started live streaming. And what a joyous experience. What an uplifting, reaffirming, in-love-with-humanity and the possibilities of life. Like, "Whaaaaa...!" I was worried that I would be that old lady who didn't understand how to type commands into the computer, and didn't know the lingo, and would have audio failures or whatever.

And I just found a community of people of all ages, all walks of life, all experience levels who were able to empathize with you when you went through technical difficulties, as a human being, who are able to assist you in ways, who are able to cheer you on, and who feel that the part of your learning curve is an adventure that they themselves are on. So, with that support and that kind of...

You know, what is failure? Define it in your head; what is it that you're afraid of? And I realized I couldn't put words to that that justified my anxiety. Just diving into this supportive environment, it's been amazing and it's really exploded in a way that I hadn't anticipated. It's only been, like, four months maybe that I've been on Twitch, and I have over 3,000 followers. It's crazy. I didn't do anything; I didn't advertise. I have zero social media presence. It's just been people reaching out and finding me and sharing it. It's glorious.

Julie: Yeah. My husband was just looking through the art category on Twitch and found you, and we were just both like, "This is incredible!" It's so joyful!

Shana: Yeah, and the thing I keep hearing is... Everyone's like, "I had no idea this was even a thing." Nobody knows to search for balloon art! Who's going to... "You know what I could really go for?" "Is it Netflix tonight or is it a bespoke balloon art live stream?"

But the beauty of Twitch... and it's a complicated platform; I'm sure there are pluses and minuses. But one of the huge benefits is that it truly allows people to be organically found and supported searches, by recommendations. It is, for better or worse, and data-ocracy. They have all kinds of information on what people are looking at, what people are responding to, and what people like. And that has served me quite well. I'm sure it's been frustrating for others. But my content is such that it's very shareable, it's very visual, it's high energy. So, it's getting a lot of that feedback and a lot of... It's been discoverable in a way that, as a small mom in the San Fernando Valley working birthday parties, I never was before.

You know, I was doing it. I'm not saying that I regret before or that I look down on it. I was making it happen and I didn't have to have a 40-hour-a-week job, you know? But this platform has allowed me a kind of reach that I didn't think was possible before because entertainment has always been... The entertainment industry has always been, kind of, opaque, and there are these gatekeepers at the top. There's a small number of movie production companies, a small number of television companies, and a small number of... you know, your Netflixes, your Hulus, and they... even though it feels like there's a lot of them, relative to the landscape there's quite a few, and how do you get in there?

But Twitch allows content creators to, essentially, have their own public access channel that they can schedule and program any way they like (as long as, obviously, it adheres to the terms of service). But that's incredible. One of the neatest functions of Twitch is raiding. At the end of your show, you can take your audience and export them into another channel. You can turn the dial for them and change to another public access channel and now they're watching that show.

You get to introduce your audience to something they might like, and you can literally put it in their hand as opposed to saying, "Hey, by the way, click this link to watch this." No one clicks the link. But if the screen just automatically changes and now, "Hey, I don't know what this is but apparently it's balloons? Let's go check this out." Now I'm being introduced to 30 people who were watching someone play music just earlier or 20 people who were watching someone play a video game.

Oh man... And I've scratched the surface. I know that I have because I am a mother to a toddler so my time is limited. But I'm just at that stage... I can feel it. You know, that new romance stage. [laughs] The love bubble, you know, where it's like, "Ah, my new partner can do no wrong and the possibilities are... I'll probably be with them forever!" I can feel that energy on me. It's fine as long as I acknowledge it, I think.

Julie: Yeah, I love it! Now, on the stream, requests are like the centerpiece of your stream. Can you talk a little bit about how that works? How do people request things? And what's your process when you get a request in? How do you get started?

Shana: Sure. So, let me take it back to how it used to work in the *traditional balloon industry*. [laughs] I love talking about it like this because there are... It is a legit industry. There are industry conventions globally, all over, that I've taught at. People make their living at this, so they take it very seriously. But in general, for balloon artists who are more, they would say, performers; the ones who do parties and twist creations as opposed

to decorators who are the ones who do, like, balloon arches and helium bouquets, etc. So, the balloon artists are the ones who usually... Like, when I learned balloon art, I learned maybe ten animals that you could make out of one balloon each, right? The dog, the sword, the bunny rabbit, the giraffe, the horse, and all of these are basically the dog but with a long neck or... [laughs] There's a few finite things you can do to a cylinder, right? It's limited.

And that was what I did at first and I didn't take it seriously. Like I said, I've always been an artist. I've thought that balloons were... you know, you could basically do a line sketch with them, is what I thought. And that's what everything is that you learn at the beginning. And you know what? 80% of kids are completely overjoyed with that. I'm not poo-pooing the art of simple balloons because, most events, that's what the kids want. They just want something colorful in their hand and to run around and enjoy the party.

But because I'm an artist, eventually I started to get comfortable with my medium, so people... When you're a balloon artist, people ask, "What can you make?" And they expect, like, a list of, "Well, I can make..." starting with, maybe, my most impressive thing. Like, "I can make a monkey in a palm tree." Ooh! "Or I can make a mermaid." Ah! "Or a unicorn." Oh! And then you keep going down the list. But I had a point at which I realized I can make anything as long as I take my artist brain, and instead of applying it to pencil, and marker, or digital color, just apply it to the medium of balloons. The balloons come in different gauges. What's the proportion of the animal I'm making, or the Pokémon that's been requested?

And let me tell you, that was really nerve-racking at first, telling a kid I can make anything. If they say... I honestly don't even know... A Lightning McQueen. Oh boy, I don't actually know a "Lightning McQueen." I don't have a Lightning McQueen recipe memorized in my head. But it's like, "Okay, let's think about this," he's a rectangle, and he's red, but he has a bit of white in the front that would be his windshield, and he's going to need four black bubbles for his tires. So, I know that I have red balloons, and black balloons, and white balloons. And I can create that shape. And then, with Sharpie marker... That's where my secret superpower comes in. I can tap on my history as being an artist in a two-dimensional medium and put on the details that really bring this three-dimensional balloon canvas to life.

So, that's how I approach the requests at this point. I love telling people, "I can make anything," and letting that sink in for them because... Mashups of the most bonkers things I've had on stream. Let's see. We made last night R.O.B., the NES robot from the '80s. We made Hagrid and Fang from *Harry Potter*. We made Gaston being confused by a book! [laughs] And we decided that the book that was confusing him was *Eat, Pray, Love*, which I thought was hilarious.

On stream, people have had me make a balloon me making a smaller balloon me, making a smaller balloon me. We made Golden Girls in a bobsled team. One of my favorite ones. So like, we can do mashups. The possibilities are literally limitless! I can do abstract concepts. It's so funny; people are like, "Anything?" It's like, "Yeah, man, because it's art. It's subjective." That's the thing that people... "Anything?" Yeah! Who's to determine? *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, right? I'm not literally making you... Someone asked for the Roman Colosseum. I'm not... I can't make you the Colosseum, but I can make you a facsimile thereof, and because it's art I have artistic license. That's just

understood. No one's ever stormed out of a stream because the balloon was not 100% accurate!

But the freedom that gives me, and the freedom of the Twitch medium, where I can... Because so much of it is entertainment, and talking, and improv games with my husband who also co-streams with me, the balloons can take about an hour apiece, and my streams are sometimes four hours long. And I'll make three to four balloons over the course of that four hours, and they love it! They keep coming back. I was worried that I wasn't making enough balloons, but it's almost like, "Come for the balloons. Stay for the fun." Stay for the energy, stay for the community.

So, the thing that... if I can go back to Twitch. The thing that I really love, I started seeing happening, I would start streaming, and then about five, ten minutes in, a regular would pop in. And in the chat they'd say, "Hey, I can't make the stream but I just wanted to pop in and say hi." And everyone says, "Oh, hey! So-and-so!" And then they leave. So what that tells me is that they're not here for the balloons. They clicked on the link for the balloons, but now, they're here for the friendships, for the community. Twitch is the show *and* the water cooler at the same time.

Julie: That's a great analogy. I love that! Yes!

Shana: Thank you! When I thought of that, I *totally* high-fived myself. But that is... Instead of, "Hey did you watch the show," it's, "Hey, we're all watching the show right now." So, I'll get one user who makes a joke that references a video game that I don't know. I don't know that video game! I'll see it in chat and I'll, kind of, shrug my way out of it. But another user does play that video game. Maybe three or four other users play that video game, and they chime in, and they chat back and forth, and they're laughing at each other. The audience is entertaining themselves on some level.

It's a community. It's the sense that we're all watching this thing, every once in a while we can ask Shana a question, she will absolutely respond. Maybe it sends her and her husband on a little comedy conversation riff that lasts for two minutes. I'm very ADHD, so that has lent itself very much to Twitch because I'm constantly... my attention is being drawn in 12 different directions but in a way that, I hope, is entertaining, and positive, and energetic.

Julie: So, what's the process when somebody requests a balloon? Do they have to be a subscriber? How does that work? Which ones do you pick? How does that work?

Shana: Man, that... The functionality of that was one of my biggest hesitations moving over to Twitch, because I was on another platform before Twitch that had a poll function built in that I really liked and I couldn't find any other platform that had that. Twitch does have a live poll feature, but it limits it to five entries, so you can only vote between five things, and as the creator of the poll, you have to populate the choices. So I can't just say, "Hey, type in what you want and then, amongst yourselves, pick and choose."

If anyone's curious, the platform I worked on before was Crowdcast, and it does have a user-generated poll feature which I really like. It's sort of like an upvote people's questions. It's sort of like the most relevant question to the largest amount of the audience gets answered by the host. It's a really great feature, not something I could find anywhere else.

But what I found out is, with Twitch, there's a huge overlap with Discord usage. If you're familiar with the Discord app.... So I, again, just learned about it. But I love it so much!

So, I have a Discord server. It is completely free for anyone to join. I didn't want to hide nominations or requests behind a paywall because that was something that... I mean, we can talk about the monetization of Twitch. I think that's an interesting area to probe, but for Discord, there's a specific channel in our Discord server for balloon requests, and you just post there. And periodically, my moderators will say, "We're clearing it out. Now you have to post below this line," so we don't have a huge backlog. And the requests are voted on by other Discord users with the thumbs-up react. So, the number of... You can react with whatever emote you want, but the thumbs up are the votes, and then the top five nominations in the Discord, by votes there, get populated into the live Twitch poll.

So, users who are more casual, like your husband who just happened to find me and aren't already a Discord user... Why would they be? That's another level of engagement. They can still, if they happen to be there when the poll goes up, vote on what is probably pretty funny things. My community, I've managed to foster this community that loves the sort of humor that appeals to Twitch users. A lot of meme comedy, a lot of '90s retro stuff. A lot of irony; a lot of mashups. So, it's great. It's almost that you're assured that your choices are going to be, something in the five, that you would love to see.

I love how that works because it doesn't reward those who pay; it rewards those who are more invested in the community. It rewards those who are like, "Yeah, I'm going to join your Discord and I'm going to take the time to go into this balloon channel and type in my request, and if it doesn't get voted this week, I'm going to take the time to go back and put it in again." Because, like, Golden Girls Bobsled Team was suggested at least five times and bypassed. It never made it. But finally, it got voted up and it is one of my all-time favorites. But it's that people get determined. They don't get discouraged because, along the way, even worst-case scenario, still something cool is getting made.

And then there's always that... It's kind of worked out in my favor because there's a little bit of that FOMO of like, "Oh, is she going to make that thing I requested this stream?" because you don't get a schedule when your request is made. If you put it in the Discord, it could get made on Tuesday night or Wednesday afternoon. So there's a motivator to check in every time just to see, "Is she making it? She's not making it. Is she making it? Oh she is making it! Okay, I want to see this one." So, it's really been spectacular.

Julie: So what would you say are your favorite kinds of balloons to make and what are your least favorite kinds of balloons to make?

Shana: My least favorite, I would say, are when someone wants the thing that someone right in front of them got. You know what I mean? That happens a lot at birthday parties. A kid will say, "I want a unicorn!" I don't mind making a unicorn. I've made a billion unicorns. I don't mind making a unicorn again. If it makes this kid happy, absolutely! When the next kid comes up and says, "I want a unicorn too." And I'll try, because the thing is, maybe that little girl loves unicorns even more than the first little girl, but then it's like, "What color mane do you want *your* unicorn to have?" What makes your unicorn special? Does your unicorn also HAVE A TENTACLE?! Does your unicorn also HAVE A THIRD EYE?! What's cool about *your* unicorn? Is your unicorn an astronaut unicorn? "No. I want it exactly like hers." Okay.

And again, I am a professional. I do not show my disappointment. This is a child. I'm not trying to, "Ugh! You're so unoriginal!" [laughs] I'm not. I would never do that! But in my mind, I'm judging that child! [laughs] No, in my mind, I'm bored as an artist, but I'm also an employee in a lot of respects when I'm working live events.

My favorite thing to make is the absolute flip of that coin. People always say, "What's your favorite thing to make?" and I can't just say, "I love making this one thing." My favorite thing to make is the exact request that the person in front of me wants. You know, people push on that and I say, "Okay, I like making cartoons," because I am a big cartoon nerd. So, like someone asked for Quailman the other day, which is not just Doug Funnie from the *Doug* cartoon, but his superhero alter-ego where he wore his underpants on the outside of his shorts and his belt around his head. And that was so specific.

I *loved* making... You know what I mean? Because again, what I love is the interaction, so when I hand the completed Quailman to the person for whom that was such a meaningful piece of pop culture, the look on their face, *that's* what I like. I want to see the absolute, "I didn't think it could be done, and it is done, and it is here." Balloons are balloons. I can make anything out of balloons. It's paints, it's markers, it's pencils, it's chalk, it's marble. It's just a medium. I want the reaction. Because my art, unlike more art forms, is very ephemeral. Balloons are like sandcastles, or fireworks, or flowers. They're *beautiful!* And then they're gone. But also, *aren't we all?* Right?

Balloons are life! They are, in microcosm, this thing... Literally, we breathe air into it, and it is beautiful, and then it ages, and then it's gone. It's very in-the-moment. It's an art form that's meant to be enjoyed now, and it's not meant to be up on a shelf, or you know... So, Jeff Koons and his amazing balloon sculptures, I think they're so wonderful because they do that thing where it combines these two very opposite aspects of the permanence of a ginormous, metal-cast sculpture and, like, a balloon animal; the simplicity and the brevity.

But I like to keep my old balloons around on my shelves to watch them, kind of, shrivel. And I show the audience. If they say, like, "Oh my gosh. Is that Calvin and Hobbes on the shelf?" And I'll say, "Yeah, look at 'em! They're so shrunk up now! They look so ugly!"

Julie: [laughs] Yeah, I was going to ask you. What do you do with your balloons? Do they all go on the shelf, or do they...?

Shana: I keep them around. The entropy is part of the fascination. You know, I keep them around and every once in a while we'll have a special stream where we'll do what I call a zombie parade, and we'll show all of the past balloons. And if they're too far gone we'll put them out of their misery and release the last remaining air molecules back into the room to be repurposed in future balloon art.

And you know, obviously we take pictures of things, and as the saying goes, it lasts longer. But the balloons themselves, the medium itself, is very much an in-the-present... you see almost the entire life cycle of this work of art, and I think there's something really cool about that.

Julie: Now, have you received a request that, kind of, plays on that... I mean, not just the ephemeral part, but the entropy?

Shana: Ooh! The decaying.

Julie: Yeah.

Shana: I mean... So, I haven't had a request that specifically... Well, I don't think it was made to capitalize on it, but I was requested the shrunken head of Edward G. Robinson.

Julie: [laughs]

Shana: And while I don't think it was my most spot-on creation at the time, as it aged, it certainly got more accurate looking. I will say that. [laughs]

Oh, we have a Plankton that we made from *SpongeBob* that I had to make pretty big, but as he got older, he started to look a lot more... They're kind of like Shrinky Dinks. The artwork that I draw on the balloons gets even more fine, you know what I mean? Because as it shrinks down, it almost looks more impressive, the artwork, because it's on a smaller canvas. So, it's pretty funny how it just, like, kind of tightens up.

Julie: So funny. Have you ever had, like, a catastrophic balloon failure on stream?

Shana: Oh yes! All the time. That's the... Again, I come back to, Julie, I've just found my home. This is what I... I don't know if this is exactly what I'll be doing X years from now, but this format allows the failure to be a part of the show. It's understood as a part of the medium, so there's not a disappointment. It's like NASCAR. It's like the "Oh, whoa!" Nothing bad ever happens. There's no stakes. It's a balloon. It's a ten-cent piece of rubber. Although, I will say, we're currently in a balloon shortage.

Julie: Seriously?

Shana: I'm not kidding. More on that, but that's just a 2020 thing. A lot of rubber manufacturing was shut down or delayed, so now we're kind of in the backlog of demand, so... *It's fine*. Again, I'm only making three or four balloons per stream, so I'm going through less balloons than I used to in my regular job.

Julie: Is there a request that's come in that you're like, "I don't even know where to start with this one."?

Shana: The ones that give me the hardest time are the ones that are... I wouldn't say the hardest time, but the ones that are interesting are those that are abstract. When someone's asking me for a concept rather than the recreation of a physical thing, or property, or character, or animal, you know? If it's... It's like, "Make this Roman Colosseum," that sounds pretty hard. But it's like, yeah, but also it's a physical object and I can observe it and recreate it.

If someone asks for Mr. Sharp's voice... Mr. Sharp is my husband, and he's on mic but not on camera, and he has this beautiful, deep, chocolatey announcer voice. It's wonderful. So it's like, "How do I make a balloon of his voice?" But the great thing is, then that just becomes a chat discussion where people are pitching ideas at me. It's not like a, "Okay lady, we're all going to sit here and if you don't come up with something good we're leaving." It's a collaborative experience. And when I'm stumped, or when I need a detail, or when I want input, I have a room full of people who are like, "Oh, his voice is like a velvet hammer. Or like an obsidian flame."

So, we did an obsidian flame and a velvet hammer on either side of an old-school microphone. It was just a silly... Who's to say whether or not that was successful? But when I say I can make anything, I'm counting heavily on the subjectivity of art.

Julie: Now, do you have, like, a balloon art goal that you haven't reached that you dream about?

Shana: Oh, that's a really excellent... I mean, no. I guess my goal at this point is, sort of, the amorphous goal of wanting to reach as many people as possible, wanting to make as many people smile as possible. That has been my driving mantra, my mission, as it were. Companies have mission statements. I'm just like... you know, I consider myself a happiness person. That's my real medium. I make balloons and that's why people are in the room. But what people love is the energy, and the fun, and the silliness, and the back-and-forth, and the... You know, there's a redemption where I'll do a chicken serenade where I cluck like a chicken to a song until they can guess which song I'm singing.

Or my husband and I will do what we call a mind-meld where we try and read each other's minds. It's an improv game where you try and meet between two words. So, you know, we try and say the same word at the same time. We have four chances to do it, and if we do it in under four or over four... There's an under/over bet that's run, and people can gamble their channel points, which are this fake currency that you get for just watching. You don't have to be a subscriber, but you get free points for watching for an hour. Twitch is so smart. They've really implemented a lot of ways for interactivity.

But I am, at this point, an entertainer first and foremost, beyond being an artist. So, it's not that I want to make X number of balloons. It's that I want to make X number of smiles. I just want to make people happy. I want to make people smile. I want people to see what we're doing and I want people to experience that wonder. I think we need it.

Julie: Oh, do we! So, where do you go... I mean, I can't believe you have a toddler. You have so much energy. Where do you go to get inspiration and fill up your wonder bucket?

Shana: Ah! You know... Well, my son is huge for that. That is... I mean, talk about a wonder bucket! [laughs] That may be his new nickname. Any new human who's, like, learning language, and like I say, in that stage of, "Wow. That's new. I didn't know that before today," just every day has those moments and every day he's showing me a little more about who he is, and who he's going to be, and how he's seeing the world around him. So, he's very much this bottomless well of inspiration for me personally.

And then, again, my energy... I think people are always surprised to hear that I don't consider myself an extrovert. [laughs] I am a performer, and when I have an audience, and even in a conversation I can consider the other person that I'm speaking to as an audience member, there's an energy that I get from that. There's an energy that I can feedback loop on, and it builds me up, and I can start firing on all cylinders, and I like that. But if I'm out in the world, or at a social gathering, or... There's something about, like, a conversation, or an interview, where it's understood that I'm going to be talking for a long time. "Please just talk a lot." "Oh, okay!" Like, hand me a microphone and I'm good! Because I'm like, "Oh, I have the talking stick. I can turn it on."

But when you're in the real world, it's more nuanced than that and I don't trust my sense always. I don't trust my ADD always. So, I am much more reserved out in real social situations. I'm an introvert who gets her energy from performing, which is so strange to people. But that's as close as I've come to understanding it, and I'm sure my understanding of myself will, I hope, deepen as I age. But this is where we're at at 40.

Julie: If someone wanted to... They're like, "Hey, making balloon art sounds kind of cool," where would you direct them to learn, besides your stream of course. [laughs] Where would you direct them to learn about it?

Shana: I mean, YouTube is spectacular. There is so much quality, free tutorials for the entry-level stuff. And although... You see the stuff I'm doing and you're like, "I wanna do that stuff!" I can't stress how important it is to just get a general understanding of the basics of... And it comes quickly. There's this steep learning curve of, like, inflating and tying the balloon and getting over the fear of it popping. But once you're over that hump, it's very fast. Once you actually understand, once your hands understand what they can and cannot do to this cylinder, then... Wow. It's very fast. I've seen children pick up techniques that I didn't learn until I was four or five years in.

So, I absolutely recommend people get their hands on a bag of... The balloons that you want are 260s. And brands, I like Qualatex or Betallatex. There are some very cheap brands out there that are terrible quality. I know that's shocking. I like to learn on high-quality balloons because I find a lot of people... A lot of those beginner kits come with low-quality balloons, and then the balloons pop, and people go, "Oh, I'm terrible at balloons!" It's like, "No, your balloons are terrible." And I know it's a poor workman who blames his tools, but in this case, if a failure means the entire thing disintegrates, kind of important that it be a good product.

YouTube, just searching balloon tutorials. Holly the Twister Sister is one who has a lot of good ones. @MBFloyd, I think "Balloon Animals" is his channel. There's just so many. And there's probably newer, more current ones that I'm not up to date on because I don't go out and search a lot of the intro stuff these days. But I mean, the internet is a beautiful place.

Once you're ready to graduate to more intermediate or advanced designs, there is a whole industry awaiting you with open arms of creative artists who have... People will usually release things like, "This is a Princess DVD..." DVDs, in the old days. Now it's streaming. I actually... I've never had a VHS tutorial, but I did produce some DVD tutorials for sure, to age myself. But that's where... People will release a series on how to make farm animals, how to make interactive pieces, how to make vehicles. So you can, kind of, stock up on that. And those tend to be, like, \$50, but if you're working a birthday party, you book one birthday party, you've made that money back, and you're good.

But really, I just can't stress enough getting the product in your hand, because everyone starts with recipes. Everyone starts with, "Here's how you make a dog. Here's how you make a sword. Here's how you make a SpongeBob. Here's how you make a wearable jetpack." Yes, the recipes get more complicated, but the real fun is that once you've done enough recipes, you can start reverse engineering recipes with your own artist's eye and your understanding of the medium you have and your options. That's when you really are starting to have fun.

Julie: Well Shana, thank you so much for being generous with your time. I'm sure your son is getting ready to get up from a nap...

Shana: [laughs] Any minute now.

Julie: But I'm so grateful for so much time. I've learned so much and I've laughed so much, so thank you.

Shana: Thank you, Julie. Thank you so much for taking the time and reaching out. It's always fun to just ramble on forever about this sort of stuff.

Julie: We love it!

You can find Shana on Instagram [@SharpBalloons](#) and [Twitch.tv/SharpBalloons](#), which you'll find in the show notes. I'll also include links to her favorite nonprofits and mine too. Huge thanks to Shana for sharing her passion with us.

Just a reminder that you can find this podcast on Instagram [@LoveWhatYouLovePod](#), on Twitter, [@WhatYouLovePod](#), and the website is [LoveWhatYouLovePod.com](#).

All of the transcripts for *Love What You Love* are available for everyone on the website. Thanks to Emily White, transcription magician and proprietress of The Wordary. If you need transcripts, reach out to her at [Emily@TheWordary.com](#). The music for *Love What You Love* is called "Inspiring Hope" by Pink-Sounds. A link to that artist is included in the show notes.

As always, thank you so, so much for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

Links:

Find Shana on [Instagram](#) and [Twitch](#)

Shana's Favorite Nonprofits:

[National Public Radio](#)

[Educate Girls](#)

My Favorite Nonprofits:

[Everytown for Gun Safety](#)

[Humane Society of Silicon Valley](#)

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