



How Lisette Scott Launched Her Jewelry Business Inspired by her Family's Caribbean Roots

She studied fashion and worked for big clothing brands like Vince Camuto and DKNY, but when it was time to step out on her own, she went back to her passion from childhood -- jewelry. Now, the founder of Jam + Rico reveals how to start even when you don't think you're ready, and how to turn a loss of job security into an opportunity.

Alicia Menendez: Lisette Scott spent the early part of her career, designing clothing. She worked at DKNY, Tracy Reese, and Vince Camuto. But when she decided she wanted to build something of her own, she made the leap to jewelry, and Jam + Rico, a celebration of the two islands her family comes from, was born. We talk about building a product line, how luck forced her hand in making Jam + Rico her full-time job and how you celebrate culture without exploiting it.

Menendez: Lisette, thank you for doing this. Thanks for making the time.

Lisette Scott: Of course, of course. Happy to be on the call with you today.

Menendez: So Lisette, your grandparents are from Jamaica and Puerto Rico. By the time your parents were raising you in New York, which part of those cultures were they still preserving? How was it showing up in your home?

Scott: Definitely food, music. It was definitely a blended family. Everyone migrated to Brooklyn, so it was also very much a community. A lot of immigrants came to Brooklyn to find better place, a better home. And I think that was what everyone bonded on when my parents first met, and so I think it was definitely lots of love on both sides.

Menendez: You were a designer by training and by trade. You went to college for design at the University of Delaware. You worked in fashion after college, but you didn't start in jewelry, right? By-

Scott: Well, I would say I did start with jewelry. I had a family friend that opened her own jewelry store and when I was in high school, and I thought it was the most amazing place. I was like, "Oh my gosh." She had all these jewels everywhere. She did engagement rings. It was mostly fine jewelry. Then of course, my mom was always shopping in there, trying to find something for herself. So I was in there, just admiring everything, and she was a family member of a close friend. So I was like, "Wow, if she can open a jewelry store in this neighborhood with the customers she's getting," and to this day, the store is still opened. I really was inspired in high school just to learn how to wire wrap, figure out how she was doing it and just started getting curious about it, buying beads, and then just every weekend, I was just making jewelry on the side and figuring out how I can just make stuff for myself first and then figure out how, "Oh, my mom likes it. She's interested. Oh, her friends are interested."

- Scott: It just grew from there as a passion, and then when it came time to say, "Okay, what are we going to go to college for? What are we going to go and study?" I mean, I was so nervous to say, "Okay, jewelry is going to be it." I applied to college for education, and that's something that, in my mom's eyes, was something that was stable and could definitely get the bills paid, but in my heart, I always knew that that really wasn't what I wanted to go to college for. I had took my first class the first day. It was teaching math, and I hated it. I was so miserable, and luckily, the college that I went to had a fashion department. I ran to the fashion department, and I was like, "Help me. I do not want to be in this class ever again. I will tell my parents that I transferred, but I need to switch to fashion," and that was the sign that I needed. No, I did not want to teach math to children.
- Menendez: I imagine that being a designer for a brand, as you were for Vince Camuto, for Tracy Reese, that it's a little bit like being a speech writer or a television producer in that you are applying a skill you have to someone else's style. You're still working within the parameters of someone else's vision, and I wonder, both, how you do that, and then also the point at which that begins to feel limiting.
- Scott: Yes, when you're in school, they want you to design from your heart, do designs that come to your mind, whatever inspiration you have. That is not the truth at all. Like you said, you have to apply those design skills to a business, and we did do projects like that. I had a project design for H&M or designed for Zara, but I think when you're going and there's this dreamy aspect of fashion design, that you'll be able to develop these outrageous, gorgeous pieces and someone is just going to buy them from you, and you're going to have all this success.
- Scott: Starting out in your career, you have to learn from the greatest and the best that you can in the industry and how, I definitely tell everyone that connects with me and reaches out to me that's just graduating, and they're like, "I want to start my brand. I want to develop this and make this." I'm like, "Well, I thought the best way for me to start and develop was to get that knowledge from a business that's already doing it to see what their faults are, but also see their accomplishments and how they got to that point. It really shapes how you will take your brand and develop your brand and go forward."
- Menendez: So take me to the moment where you realize, "Hey, I could be building a brand on my own."
- Scott: It did take some time. Like you said, designing for other brands is limited, and it just got mundane after a while to just have to keep doing the same look, the same style. I missed the excitement of doing my own thing and started sketching on the side and dreaming about different things that I could make, and I decided to take the leap into my own brand and make pieces that were unique to me, but instead of doing apparel, I decided to focus on jewelry because it was just more fun for me to create, and I like the fact that I didn't have to... I mean, in apparel, you have to do fittings. I was like, "I don't want to be in fittings anymore. I don't want to fit to a certain body type or have to make clothes fit all heights." I wanted to make something that was a little bit more freeing and fun, so I chose jewelry.
- Menendez: I think about Jen Zeano, who we've interviewed before on Latina to Latina, and she runs what is now a big apparel company, but originally it was t-shirts, and it was her and her girlfriend in an apartment, surrounded with their t-shirts because they didn't have a warehouse, and it's a thing when you go into printing t-shirts. You don't think about just the volume of the product that you were selling, where the volume of the product that you're selling is a little bit different. It takes less space, but the material and such is coming in at a

higher price point. How did you think through all of those questions? Because the design is one piece.

Scott: Yes.

Menendez: The running the business of this is a whole other.

Scott: Oh, it is a whole other beast, and I think it was just more so trial and error for me once I decided. I said, "Okay, I want to design." I did my first show at Essence, and I was so nervous to sell in-person. I was like, "I'm not ready. I don't think so. This is my first popup." I was like, "Okay, let's do it. Let's get out there and just sell some jewelry and see what happens."

Menendez: Wait, why weren't you ready? Because you thought people would bock at the price point? You were afraid of no one liking it?

Scott: It was just a combination of things, yeah, no one liking it, maybe this wasn't my best collection, maybe I should start having more press or having it in more stores. It was definitely all the fears just circulating in my mind, like, "What could possibly happen? Maybe somebody doesn't like it, and they just throw it on the floor, laugh at it. Who knows? Anything could happen," at that time.

Menendez: That's so cruel.

Scott: I was just like, "Maybe not," but a couple people talked me into it, and they were like, "Just go for it. Take that leap and see how you can grow from there and learn." That was my first popup to see, "Okay, what do people like, what people don't like, the prices. Do people like the price, not like the price? How can I make the customer happy?" People were just loving it. At that time, I don't believe I was registered as a business. So now, I was starting to have to figure out taxes and how to get registered in New York City, and I built my website myself. I was like, "Okay, what are the next steps, and what are the next things I have to do?" What really helped me figure that out were applying for grants and incubators, and just seeing what other brands that were starting off on the same level as me, what they were working on. Yeah.

Scott: A lot of people don't want to take advice from other people or ask questions. That was a really hard thing for me to say, "Okay, I don't know something. Let me go and ask." I made sure that with every step that I was unsure of, I reached out to a business that I was inspired by and just sent them a message and said, "I'm starting this. How could you help?" Or reached out to people that I had worked with previously in the industry, asking about factories. A lot of businesses are growing at the same rate that you are at the same time, and then the popups, I would always make sure I introduce myself to everyone that I was selling with, because we're all pretty much trying to figure out the same thing.

Menendez: At what point do you quit your job?

Scott: It took me a really long time, actually, to say, "Okay, I'm going to quit," and that would be it. What made that transition a lot easier was, during the pandemic, a lot of people were at home shopping. The Black Lives Matter movement happened. A lot of focus on Black businesses was coming around, and my website and my Instagram blew up, and I luckily had just updated my website, had new products. So at the height of the pandemic, I didn't have what other companies had with halt of production. I had just ordered inventory.

Scott: So, I was fully stocked and ready to go, so everyone was coming to the website, ready to shop, ready to check out the brand, which was a perfect opportunity for me to leverage that, and I was let go of my job I think around October during the pandemic, and it was so funny because I kept pushing back my end date. I was like, "I'm going to quit in..." I think it

was January. Then I was like, "I'm going to quit in February." Then I kept just pushing back when I was going to leave because my business was picking up. I was getting very overwhelmed with orders and having to work long nights, and it was getting to be a lot, so I was like, "Okay, I'm going to do it." The pandemic hit. Everyone was like, "Okay, we're going to shut down, and we're going to start letting go of people." I was like, "Oh, this works. Okay, thank you."

Menendez: Pushed out of the nest.

Scott: Yeah. I was like, "This is a wonderful thing that just happened." It was definitely an easier way to take that leap and go for it and not have any regrets.

Menendez: So much of your business model is based on direct to consumer, on someone coming to your website, ordering a necklace, ordering a side of earrings, and having it delivered to their door. I wonder, as you think about the future of Jam + Rico, how you are imagining. Do you think it can stay direct to consumer, or does it have to have a storefront? Does it have to exist in major retailers in order for it to grow into what you want it to be?

Scott: Yes. This is a question that I have been having more recently. When I first started, I did have that dream for our brand to be in major retailers and to be across the country and have this big rollout, but as I've evolved the brand and have had many wholesale partnerships, it has resulted in a shift in some way because whenever you have a partnership with a major retailer, there's a lot of back end within the contract, and there could be buybacks. There could be discounts they want to put to the product. There could also be a lot of interviews, questions, things that the designer has to take time out of the business that's run full-time to focus on these brand partnerships.

Scott: So, it's not to say that I'm not looking forward to having those major retail partnerships, but I'm definitely taking a step back to see how that would affect my business and be very strategic. Right now, I'm really excited about doing more special collaborations, meaning I would do custom design work for different brands. That is more fulfilling for me, but our direct to consumer model has definitely shaped how we've been able to grow, and our customers are excited when they receive their boxes, and they keep coming back to our website, so we definitely value that as our business model, as well.

Menendez: It is my understanding that as part of Jam + Rico, you do a lot of traveling to source inspiration, and I wonder if you could tell me about how one of those trips directly impacted the design or the products that you put forth.

Scott: Yeah. That was something that I wanted to incorporate into my business to connect more with the Caribbean. I grew up in America, my mom and dad, also. So, my grandparents were from the islands, and I always had that craving that I wanted to go down there. I wanted to connect to family. I wanted to see where they lived, where they grew up, and I decided as I was going to create my brand, I wanted to focus on my heritage and make something that I would want to wear, but also would connect with other people that were from the islands, as well.

Scott: My favorite trip, thus far, I think would be going to Puerto Rico. This was the one that we just went to, our newest collection, and I think it was my favorite because this time, I was a little bit more focused on the business, and we traveled to three parts of the island, and I was able to connect to so many different people and so many organizations. With each trip, we do a giveback, a non-profit day, as well, so just having the opportunity to share my experience that my grandparents were from the island and then come back home and

develop each piece that was made with love and care and thought was definitely very fulfilling.

Menendez: When you build a brand that is an homage to a place you come from, I think you'll agree there is a push and pull between honoring those cultures without wanting to exploit those cultures, and I just wonder how you have come up against that and how you have thought about that challenge.

Scott: Another reason why I wanted to focus on these islands was because I noticed a lot of brands were and used the resort life, and traveling to the beaches, and going to these all inclusives, and we all want to have a good time, and we all want to have a fun vacation, but I felt like the experience was getting lost. These resorts aren't providing the full experience of food. They're not cooking, using the right ingredients. So definitely, I wanted to show a different part of the island that wasn't that. There's other restaurants. There's other events that are happening that are more so within the community.

Scott: I took that as my opportunity to share the culture a little bit more. We are also going to be launching a blog, sharing our journey and our trip, because we do get a lot of people that are like, "Oh, where did you go? How did you like it?" Even they're like, "I'm wearing my earrings at the same place you went, and I got to meet the people that you stayed at the Airbnb with." That is a part that really touches me and really helps me see the bigger picture of how I can help people on the island and help people's businesses get more customers.

Menendez: Lisette, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Scott: Thank you so much. I'm so happy to share our story and connect, as well.

Menendez: Thank you, as always, for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer who mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us @LatinaToLatina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, latinatolatina.com/shop, and remember, please subscribe or follow us on Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, GoodPods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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