

A Conversation with Alison Lee



In 2006, Alison Lee launched Craftcast.com, hosting a series of podcasts dedicated to the world of craft and creativity. In the past 4 years, she's expanded the program to include online master classes with a choice list of leading jewelry makers. I talked with Lee as she planned for the upcoming year and celebrated the release of her brand-new Craftcast iPhone "app." —HLW

I have to admit, this interview made me nervous. You make interviewing sound so easy!

I just realized this — I'm just that kind of person. It must be written on my forehead. "Tell me your life story because I love it." I just love, love, love hearing people's stories. I want to know who you are, how did you get to this place? It's just talking for me. [A friend] pointed out to me, "I can't go anywhere with you; you just pick up people!" We forget what our gifts are. Mine is just being able to talk to people.

It's interesting to me that one of your major early craft influences was a TV show. That fits with the way you're passing on your love of craft, with the new media.

I wish I could find reruns of that show! I know it was called Fun at One. Remember Ivory Snow [detergent] flakes, and you add water and beat it with an egg beater, and you have clay? And then you add food coloring — when she put food coloring in, I swooned as a 3-year-old. That, to me, was just like *genius*.

Also, my grandmother. When she showed me how to knit when I was 3, again, I went, "This is something big." And I loved playing with sound, from when I was very young. I used to have a ham radio, and would send Morse code. I wanted someone to hear me! And if it came out dash dash dash, dot dot dot, dash dash dash, I was happy!

It was still getting your voice out there.

It was! There I was, tapping it out for the world to hear me somehow. I had to build the receiver; it came in a kit. I was in the basement tapping away and the only thing it did was disrupt my mother's TV signal upstairs. When I look back on it, I was definitely trying to make contact one way or the other. In Girl Scouts, when I got my first badge, it was for

communication. I was writing to girls — pen-pals — around the world, about their love of crafts and what they were making. If I'd had the Internet, that would have been it. I've been waiting to have this equipment, and it finally appeared, years later. As soon as I saw that it was possible, I got back out there. I was sending out S.O.S. all over again!

I see you worked at Radio City Music Hall—

That was working with performers backstage. Which was great, because you learn the 'how to' of a live show. When a class starts and it's live, there is a certain pressure. It's a high, but it's also scary. When I was working in Radio City, I'd be thrilled when something was all of a sudden a challenge, like a Rockette was going on and her zipper broke and you had 5 seconds to fix it and get her onstage. I know that's a little twisted, but it was like, "Woo-hoo! Did it!"

The photos on these pages feature work by artists and instructors that Alison Lee has hosted on Craftcast.com. [Top] Bracelet, Thomas Mann. Sterling silver, brass, and bronze. [A] Swashes Inro by Seth Savarick. Polymer clay.



When I went to college, I did take audio engineering. You had to get your Radio 3rd Class Operator's Permit. So I learned the basics of sound back then. Now the equipment's all different but the principals are still the same.

How do you choose the artists you want to talk to?

I want to talk to people about their creativity. I don't care if you're a baker or if you're a dancer, if you're a musician. I believe that all creativity has something in common. So if I can look at your work and see a little bit about you, I know right away if this is my sort of person that I want to talk to. If someone is passionate about their work, that usually seals it for me. That's my kind of person.

You added the live online classes in 2008—

Yes, it started [in November 2008] in a very different format. It was really wacky, freeform streaming radio! Like a big old-fashioned telephone party line. Robert Dancik came on with about 100 other listeners and did a class with me. There were no images. I just threw up links to URLs in a chat box, and people clicked on the links. I had to wear a sweatband and sneakers, because I ran between two computers. I was a wreck. I had to keep talking with Robert as well as technically keep the whole thing going. I was exhausted at the end. I thought, "Oh, that's gotta change. I'm not gonna make it if it's like that every time!" In 2010, the online live class software is much more sophisticated. It's ready to explode to the next level, and I'm ready to have that happen, because now I don't need a sweatband and sneakers to get through it anymore!

Was there something you wish you'd known before going live?

No, I'm very happy I didn't know what I was getting into, 'cause I probably wouldn't have done it! I hosted a live online open house event with about 200 people in attendance, and I couldn't unmute any of the teachers who were online to speak. I had 90 minutes to fill then on my own. I could have just said, "Never mind!" and turned off the computer, but I didn't and I managed through it. It was an excellent learning experience, but if I had known beforehand what could happen, I never would have pushed the 'start broadcast' button.

And probably all the biggest and most satisfying projects, if we had known when we started, we wouldn't have started at all.

I know I'm going to look back at some point, at the beginning stages of Craftcast and say, "Oh my god, that was crazy!" People who ask my advice on how to start something similar, it's hard to tell them where to start, except to be insane and passionate, and jump in.

It is a cliché, but the Internet has changed everything. How we do things, how we put things out there. It's all new.

Yes. My life is all about tagging, linking, and code. That's my whole day. How can I tag it better, and where does it link to? It's very important to keep up with everything.

Someone called me because she didn't understand how the live online classes worked. She wanted to know if she would see something on their computer or just hear the instructor, and

I said, "Remember when you went to college and you'd go to the big lecture hall and there'd be a lecture with a slide presentation? It's like that." She went, "Okay, now I get it!" That's what it is, you're using your computer as a lecture hall and you can raise your 'virtual' hand and ask questions.

With the addition of classes, do you feel that your role has changed?

I am the facilitator no matter what. When I do an interview, I try to get out of the way and be in the moment with my guest. Same thing with teaching; I'm there to facilitate and support the teacher so that they can teach.

That being said, I am aware of what I like to bring to the teaching experience and make it a party. I'm going to be the student, I'm going to ask the questions that everyone has in their brain anyway. But that being said, it has to be fun too or else you could fall asleep. So I like it to be a little bit of a soiree, of a party. It should be fun. We are just sitting on a computer doing this, but my goal and my passion is also to create a feeling of community when everyone's listening.

What would you like to do that you're not able to do now, and is it a technological barrier?

You know, it's a good question. I don't see any barriers. For me, I love talking to people in other time zones — I can't even call them other countries anymore, just other time zones is how I think about it. My goal is to be the online go-to source for how to learn all kinds of art and craft, live, with fabulous instructors.

For the new year ... I'm going to host a class that is set up as a critique format with a wonderful instructor. I'm very excited about it, [bringing] the old-fashioned art-school critique into this arena. That's a dying art that has to come back. Or, it's a not-known-enough art that needs to be revived. It's important and it does move you forward in your work, [but] it's not for everyone. And if you're not in art school, how the heck do you get a constructive critique? It's scary, but it's good for your work and your soul!

Just remember to get some sleep!

You know, someone said this, and I remember it because I love it, they said, "I only work part time because I have to sleep six hours a night. If I didn't have to do that, it would be full time." That's my approach to the day. That's what it should say on my T-shirt. "Keep it all going, and at some point, I'm going to lie down." ☑

[Top] Pendant, Brenda Schweder. Bottle glass, steel wire. [B] Cage pendant, Charles Lewton-Brain. Beach stone, electroformed stainless steel wire. [C] Granulated Dome Ring, Jill Hurant. 22k gold, diamonds. [D] 21st Century Breastplate, Christine Dhein. Recycled circuit boards, brass, rubber. [E] Winter Seeds necklace, Kathleen Dustin. Polymer clay, sterling silver. Largest bead 2½-in. (64 mm) diameter. [F] She Always Hummed in the Key of C pendant by Robert Dancik. Sterling silver, pearls, cat's-eye chrysoberyl.