

Where the Heart Is: Who are Your Style Influencers?

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Daughter Erin Goulding and her fiance Jake Poterbin prepare breakfast in their Austin loft's kitchen. Erin admits she owes her affinity for boldly painted walls to her parents. (Photo by Susan Christian Goulding)

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Daughter Erin Goulding caught her parents' color bug when decorating her loft in Austin, Texas. (Photo courtesy of Erin Goulding)

When my preteen daughter was staking out her independence from Mom, who knew nothing, she decided on a dream house polar opposite to her familiar surroundings.

"It's going to be really big with beige walls," Erin proclaimed, casting about a critical eye at our dinky and garish abode.

Fast-forward a dozen years. Erin now occupies an Austin loft crammed with every color that could possibly fit in its 600 square feet of space.

The kitchen boasts a mural of white magnolias bursting from their coral backdrop, courtesy of an artistic landlord. The wall behind the bed is turquoise, and the bedspread a sunny yellow. The sofa is royal blue.

Best of all are the curtains. Each panel hanging over the trio of tall windows claims its own color – orange, teal, navy and gold.

"Do you think I was just a little influenced by you, Mom?" Erin rhetorically asked with a smile.

Yes. But her tastes will continue to metamorphose as other "influencers" catch her attention. Who knows? Maybe by the time she and her husband-to-be Jake can afford a house, Erin will lean toward neutrals again.

We all develop our personal preferences from a host of visual seducers along the way. For whatever reason, we click with a little something here and a little something there until all those inspirations blend to create a sense of aesthetics.

My own first, and forever, major influencer was Edwina.

Recent college graduates, my buddy Meg and I headed out from Texas for a “temporary” California adventure that, for me, continues. While apartment hunting, we stayed with family friends Tom and Edwina.

Edwina liberally sprinkled color throughout her lovely San Marino home. But it was the unassuming back bathroom that most impressed me. There, towels stacked on an open shelf created a vibrant rainbow.

I grew up in a house where towels unquestioningly matched each other. Sofa upholstery matched chair upholstery. The dining room table matched the china hutch, and the china pieces matched each other.

While plenty attractive, my childhood home wore standard attire.

Until I fell head over heels with those audacious towels, I had never considered the possibility that accessories could stand on their own.

My next big influencer was inanimate rather than human. Meg and I wound up in a quirky apartment overlooking Echo Park Lake – decades before the edgy neighborhood would become hipster central.

Cobalt-blue mini-tiles shimmered on the kitchen and bathroom counters. Tangerine and lime-green molding abounded. This was definitely the place to try out the lessons of Edwina.

Edwina fanned the flames with a Christmas gift of Melamine dinnerware in a variety of primary colors. Soon thereafter, I bought a knockoff set of art deco Fiestaware for 40 bucks at Woolworth’s – to this day, my best purchase ever.

And the beat goes on.

Before their recent remodel, the kitchen of Los Angeles friends Tom and Rosalie charmed with heterogeneous pastel walls of peach and sage and lavender. What? Walls can march to their own beat? My husband and I would later incorporate the look in our hallway.

Austinites Dave and Kem, the latter an artist I’ve known since high school, laid randomly colored linoleum tiles on their kitchen floor. Random is OK? We followed their lead with random tiles around the fireplace.

Las Rocas, our favorite hotel across the border, pointed us toward our Mexican décor –which includes a dining table edged with one-inch talavera tiles and, yes, multicolored chairs.

South Bay colleagues Brad and Stephanie strung, yes, multi-colored lights over their patio. So, too, would we.

My sister Elizabeth nailed a row of tin milagros on a bathroom wall just below the ceiling. So cute! We did something similar.

The Watts Towers taught me to decorate cinder block with re-purposed pottery fragments. Pal Deb, an amazing gardener, got me into shabby chic and overgrown flowerbeds. Thanks to their Santa Fe adobe, Uncle Walter and Auntie Sis are behind our periwinkle front door.

Play this game: Look around your house and identify your various influencers. And, if applicable, look around your kids’ homes and note theirs. You might see that you give away what you get.