

Zoot Suit Origins

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The year is 1943, you're walking down the street in Los Angeles and you see a man wearing a jacket with jacket arms reaching the fingertips, pants are worn tight at the waist, bulging at the knees, and choked at the ankles. It's a sight that is almost impossible to ignore, but what is he wearing? That man is wearing a zoot suit; an extreme style of men's dress that cannot go unnoticed.

The origin of the zoot suit is uncertain, various experts claim that it is merely an exaggeration of the English drape styles, while others declare the clothes affected by swing-band leaders afforded the inspiration for the zoot phenomenon. Differing from both these explanations, another group of sartorial leaders feels the zoot suit developed from the costumes worn by Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind* (Toomey, 1943.) The zoot suit evolved from the "drape" suits popular in Harlem dance halls in the mid-1930s, with its super-sized shoulder pads, sprawling lapels, and peg leg pants. The flowing trousers were tapered at the ankles to keep jitterbugging couples from tripping while twirling. Minority men in working-class neighborhoods across the country were wearing the suits by the 1940s (Gregory, 2016.) Chicago big-band trumpeter and clothier, Harold Fox, once said "it came right off the street and out of the ghetto." This cleared up any confusion to anyone that thought the zoot suit was just another costume or uniform from the world of entertainment, but it did not stop musicians, actors, activists, and even gang members from wearing one. Black and non-black working-class people around the country could be seen donning an ensemble perceived by the white middle-class as gaudy, even offensive (Viera, 2018.) It was showy in every aspect, a deliberate call to attention that was far more than just a fashion statement.

The zoot suit was looked down upon by some in the 1940s, but it became unpatriotic to wear during times of war. The reason being that zoot suits were seen as wasteful after the United

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States entered into World War II in 1941, which led to a strict rationing of materials. The zoot suit was notorious for the amount of extra cloth that it used, and many servicemen stationed in Los Angeles did not appreciate that. Young Latinos in Los Angeles, who called themselves “Pachucos,” wore zoot suits; servicemen that had no previous experience with the Latino culture were now located in direct proximity to large groups of young Latinos because of the war. At first, the servicemen mocked the Latino men for what they were wearing, but later on they got upset because they were wearing zoot suits instead of uniforms and fighting for their country. In addition, the local press had been promoting fear by asserting that a “Mexican crime wave” had hit the city and zoot-suiters and gangsters were one and the same (Chiodo, 2013.) Things reached a boiling point on June 3, 1943 when thousands of servicemen and civilians marched down streets, clubbing and stripping zoot suiters, who in turn fought back (Abramovitch, 2021.)

The fighting lasted about nine days and all of this happened because a suit used a little too much fabric (figure 1.) It goes to show that when a country is at war, fear can spread in a society that is home to a minority group, causing social unrest. The slightest thing can trigger anyone at any moment and cause mass hysteria so one should always be careful.

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**Figure 1:** Zoot suit/1990/Cotton, Silk/2002.160a-j

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/83517>

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