

THE SUIT - THE CULTURE - THE RIOTS



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Garments are the non verbal way to express yourself. It is a way to say who you are, and what you're about without having to speak a word. In the 1930's to 1940's African Americans and Mexican Americans used this form of nonverbal communication to influence the world. In times of war, clothing regulations and restrictions, these two minority groups expressed their voice and style through a particular garment to reflect their unique ethnic identities. Not only was this item of clothing a way of self expression, it gave a sense of brotherhood/ sisterhood and belonging to the minority youths. These minority groups became a representation of unfamiliarity and were quickly considered un-American. This garment was used to make political statements, and in worse cases used to disguise from criminal activities. This specific item is the first piece of clothing known to have an important impact on African American, Mexican American and later on Europeans and White Canadians. It had a social and political effect on Fashion in the 1940's and was the first article of clothing to cause race rioting throughout the United States and Canada. I introduce to you, the zoot suit.

The zoot suit fashion trend was at first well known among black Harlem dance hall youths in the 1930's. Soon, it included Mexican American who adapted the style also. The obsession with this trend and the minority youths of this time created anxiety among their parents who worried that their children were drifting away from their culture and roots. This also created anxiety among many white authorities who felt threatened by this unusual fad, causing riots throughout the United states especially on the streets of Los Angeles in 1943.

What is a zoot suit?

The zoot suit was initially an African American youth fashion trend connected to jazz culture in the 1930's when a Jazz sound called "swing" came about. Later on, it was adopted by a generation of Mexican kids who made it their own. This suit was oversized and had a flamboyant

style. With restriction on fabrics during World War II, this suit was made out of a state of bold disobedience and open resistance. The pants were high-waisted, wide at the legs, and tight cuffed at the bottom. They were low-crotched and were held up by suspenders. They were also long and swallowed the lower half of the bust, then skirted around the hips. They were big and baggy at the thighs before narrowing to sit softly on dress shoes. The coats were long with wide lapels, wide shoulders and were often double-breasted. They were so long that “they fell to the knee and hung like some saggy frock- coat”- Farid Chenoune. The suit came in a variety of colors such as pink, lime green, bright yellow, and some were made of plaid stripes and houndstooth patterns. The amount of material and tailoring needed to make this suit made it a luxury item, some now worth around \$80,000.

How was it worn?

To complete the suit, accessories were added to the already stylish and extravagant suit. This also consisted of the wearer styling his or her hair a particular way. African Americans straighten their hair while Mexican American wore ponytail hairstyles with some of the hair curled over the front of their head for a clean stylish look. They also added tando hats that were made famous by Tin Tan Mexico, and Cab Calloway. Most of these hats were made out of 100% wool felt, fully lined, with a 4 inch wide trimmed brim, a 6 inch feather coming out from it and came in several colors to compliment the suit. Also, a prominent, luxuriantly hand painted tie, a colorful pocket handkerchief, and a lengthy watch-chain was added to complete the look.

The zoot suit and the culture:

The zoot suit became popular in swing dance halls. For example, the Harlem’s Savoy BallRoom, was a place where such a suit like that can be seen in its full glory as the wearer danced his or her way throughout the hall. Jazz artists such as Cab Calloway popularized the

zoot suit and later on, became the new craze that depression-era youths between ages 18 and 21 caught on to.

The zoot suit fad quickly became a “racially and ethnically diverse youth culture” movement.

With the zoot suit came along a slang unique to the ethnic groups that took part in the fad.

African American, also called “hep cats” spoke an African American slang we know as jive and Mexican Americans, also called “pachucos” spoke a form of Spanglish known as caló. The fad didn't stop there, a few second generation of Japanese Americans known as Nisei wore the suit and made it their own calling it the “Nisei style.” Filipinos, European American men including working class Italians and Eastern European descent took on the look and it also spread into middle class, white American families.

Young women also wore a form of the zoot suit. Most of them derived from Mexican origins and were called “slick chicks” or “puchachas”. Their outfits consisted of a cardigan or v-neck sweater, with a broad shoulder fingertip coat. They also wore knee length skirts which were fairly shorter compared to the standardized skirt during those times. To finish the look, they wore fishnet stockings or bobby socks, platform heels, saddle shoes or huarache sandals. Some also wore dark lipstick and used foam inserts called “rats” that helped lift their hair into high bouffant. They lightened their hair with peroxide, had tattoos, and the daring of them all took it a step further by wearing the masculine version of the zoot suit.

Culture differences:

Mexican parents did not think their children were Mexican enough because they were born in the U.S and, because they were Americanized. They were horrified by how their children dressed and spoke. Their daughters abandoned the traditional braids and buns of their mothers, wore heavy makeup, teased their hair, and wore short skirts for night outs at dance halls. Male

zoot suiters were viewed by authorities, the general public and the media as too feminine because of the appearance of the suit and female zoot suiters were viewed as the opposite; too manly and masculine because of the boldness of the suit.

The suit and the gang:

The zoot suit became associated with gangs. As more youths from the lower class level wore it, the more delinquents wore it to blend in. For many white Americans, the zoot suit was a symbol of gang activity or subversion. This way of thinking became worse as racial tensions continued to rise, particularly in southern California against Mexican-American pachucos. The media and press didn't help either and made things more unpleasant. In 1942 a report was given out on the Sleepy Lagoon Trial against a pachuco accused of allegedly killing another pachuco. The press also released news on "pachuco" Mexican American gangs assaulting white servicemen stationed in Los Angeles before deployments, because of rumors stating that the servicemen were looking for young "chicanos", Mexican American women for sexual pleasure. This pushed things further and prejudice was brought upon Mexican American community.

Two famous zoot suit wearers associated with criminal activities were Cesar Chavez from Los Angeles and "Detroit Red" who was in fact from Detroit. Later on, Cesar Chavez became a famous Chicanos union activist. By wearing the zoot suit, he came in contact with community politicians. Detroit Red participated in some of the zoot riots in Harlem and this began his political education transforming him into the man we know as Malcom X. As Cesar Chavez and Malcom X found their gift, and passion later on in life, they dismissed the suits. It was said that the suit was a form of "mask, which permitted adolescents to present themselves as adults and as urban sophisticates"- Daniels 1993.

The zoot suit riots:

In June 1943, hundreds of Chicanos and African Americans were beaten and arrested after fights broke out between pachuco zoot-suiters and navy servicemen; commencing what is known as the zoot suit riots. To intimidate the Mexican community, police men cruised the neighborhoods in the prowl cars. The zoot suit riots which were race related spread to other cities like Detroit, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond and Harlem. The media presented information about these 'zoot suit riots' with articles called the 'Zoot-Suit War,' and 'Zoot-Suiters Learn Lesson in Fight with Servicemen'. By then the Nation had enough of the press and its articles. On June 11, 1943, they voiced their opinions towards the press stating how unbalanced the reporting was in an article called the 'Hearst Press Incited Campaign Against Mexicans, Promoted Police Raids, Whipped Up Race Clashes.'

In the article, the press was called out for its 'great smear campaign against Mexicans' and the publication of these sympathetic articles continued to make light, loaded with information that compared the war overseas with pictures of Mexican boys lying on the street of Los Angeles in pools of blood; naked, with mobs of people standing around smiling from ears to ears and pictures of Jews being made to clean the streets of Vienna.

These times were hard and challenging for female zoot suiters as well. Pachucas received negative press amid the riots just like their fellow pachucos. Various reports claim that these young Chicano women fought servicemen in the middle of these riots alongside their brothers, boyfriends, or friends. There were also reports of them attacking white women with knives that were allegedly hidden in their hair.

In conclusion, the zoot suit was associated with cultural, political and social issues, and although the zoot suit fell out of fashion for both men and women by the end of World War II,

social issues of race, till this day continue to grow. Despite being a short-lived fad, its draped shape is an icon of its time and considered the first true American suit. To some, it represented an American sign of individuality and freedom. To others it was viewed as unpatriotic and categorized as a symbol of non-white identities. Due to the different point of views, this brought along a segregationist culture ending in brutal riots. While it was in style, it gave the wearers both male and female, a sense of power, swagger, and boldness. It's amazing how a suit can bring about different points of views, and this is why it is viewed as the first article to create such a considerable movement.

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