



HOME ONLINE STORE HISTORY FAQ CONTACT



How It All Started . . .

[History In The Making \(View Photo Gallery\)](#)

In Fall of 2001, while contemplating her subject for her Master's thesis, Lynda Estrella (Phyllis Estrella's daughter) decided to research the 'Zoot Suit' culture. Her theses, entitled 'A study of the Zoot Suit culture – Past and present', is a study of 'Zoot Suit' history, culture, and most importantly an interesting look at how society views the 'Zoot Suit'. Below is an excerpt from Chapter 5:

Phyllis Estrella, my Mom, remembers hearing the word Pachuco for the first time when she was just five years old. It was during the 1940's and she recalls the word Pachuco being used with neither a negative nor positive connotation. It was in her predominantly white first grade class when the Mexican-American boy who sat next to her was named "Chukie", pronounced "Chookie". The name "Chukie" was outside of the norm, so one day she asked him where his name came from. He told her that when he was born he had a head full of hair so his mother said he looked like a Pachuco (the Pachucos had a distinctive haircut in the 1940's resembling a duck tail). She then formed a lasting curiosity regarding the word Pachuco.

In the 1950's when she became a teenager and rock and roll was born, the boys in the neighborhood started wearing baggy pants and calling themselves Pachucos. She remembers hearing the neighborhood teenagers using Pachuco slang. One example of this slang was the word "simon" (pronounced see-mon) which meant "yes". If you didn't use slang when talking to the neighborhood teenagers, you were considered a "square." She thought these self named Pachucos were "cool." She also recalls several songs referring to Pachucos constantly being played on the radio.

It was a Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1978 while driving down the street in Los Angeles when she saw a billboard advertising the play "Zoot Suit" featuring the main character, "El Pachuco." She couldn't believe her eyes! She excitedly turned to my Father, Ray Estrella, and said, "We have to go see that play!" She had never been to a play, much less a real Broadway play. Needless to say, she was beside herself with excitement. She was finally going to see a real live Pachuco, which she had heard so much about, but had never seen a for "real" one. Her family was quite conservative, so she could only imagine what a real one looked like.

After patiently waiting four long weeks, what seemed like an eternity, the day of the play was finally here. She remembers driving up to the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and seeing the huge crowd of well dressed Latinos. She remembers seeing the red carpet and her heart started pounding. She finally got into her seat, and the 40's music started playing. The play began, and "El Pachuco", played by Edward James Olmos, walked out onto the stage and started talking Pachuco slang. The suit, the slang, the attitude, the image, suddenly it all came together. This was the true essence of a real Pachuco in her mind, and Phyllis was impressed. She enjoyed the play thoroughly, but most of all, she was impressed with the actual Zoot Suit, the official dress of the Pachuco.

Had it not been for the play "Zoot Suit", by Luis Valdez, Phyllis would have never seen a Pachuco wearing a Zoot Suit represented on stage. She was convinced that other people must share with her the same fascination about the Zoot Suit. She felt this sudden urge to purchase a Zoot Suit. She knew her husband wouldn't wear it, he was much too conservative, and she knew she couldn't wear it, so she immediately thought of her younger brother. Her younger brother loved to dance and she could picture him being the center of attention wearing a Zoot Suit. Phyllis always considered herself a risk taker and she definitely loved a challenge. During this time in her life she was self-employed as a jewelry storeowner, but exploring new ventures. Her father, Elbert Duran, was a World War II veteran with a Purple Heart who became a jeweler with his rehabilitation training. Phyllis and Elbert had been in the jewelry business for five years and were ready for a change. She was instantly attracted to the idea of creating and selling Zoot Suits. She decided, along with the support of her husband, father and family, to take on this new venture, and was committed to make it a success. It was here that the journey began...

The "Beginning". Phyllis decided to name the business "El Pachuco Zoot Suits" after the main character in the "Zoot Suit" play. She saw "El Pachuco" as a handsome, brave man, with extreme character that turned heads and was highly respected. According to Phyllis, "El Pachuco" was who you became when you put on the Zoot Suit. As long as she could remember, she had always recalled the term Pachuco being used with a negative connotation. She could never understand why, she felt if she used the term Pachuco in her business name, she would give the term some "dignity."

Being that we were in the jewelry business at the time, a small section of the store was used for the new Zoot Suit venture. The first item for sale was a Zoot Suit chain. With the current family business being jewelry, creating the Zoot Suit chain was an easy task. We then placed a small ad in a new magazine by the name of Lowrider Magazine, also a brand new company at the time. Against my Mother's wishes, my Father added "Zoot Suits coming soon" to read on the ad. Knowing how difficult the Zoot Suit was to locate, this only added pressure to the situation. The magazine ad produced a great response with many Zoot Suit chain orders. We just had one problem, the customer wanted to know where he/she could find a Zoot Suit to go with that chain.

The Search for the authentic Zoot Suit. The main priority on the agenda was to find an authentic Zoot Suit. Phyllis never thought it would be almost impossible to locate or purchase a Zoot Suit. She went shopping in downtown Los Angeles, and was unsuccessful. She then figured if she couldn't buy one, she could have one tailor made. She was unsuccessful again. The tailors she spoke with could not understand why in the

world she would want one of “those” suits. Many of the tailors didn’t even know what a Zoot Suit was! That did not stop her; she then moved her search to Orange County, and again, no success. It was then she realized that a market had to exist, but a supplier did not. Finally, after about six months of searching and being criticized for wanting to start a Zoot Suit business, she found a tailor in Santa Ana that claimed to know how to make a Zoot Suit. We now had the main ingredient, the Zoot Suit. We were now officially in the Zoot Suit business. The First Ten Years. During the first ten years of the business, the clientele was mainly Latino. Our family also sold at the swap meet and rented booths at car shows to promote the business. We had now expanded our inventory to include Zoot Suit accessories such as hats, shoes, and suspenders. We had an extremely positive response from the Latino community. They were happy to see that some of their fashion “culture” and “history” was now available to them. Our business sold and rented Zoot Suits. Most of the Zoot Suit rentals were for weddings and Quinceañeras (a 15 year old coming out party for the Hispanic girl) during this time.

We did attempt to franchise our business during this period. We had many inquiries over the phone, but once the interested party came into our shop they decided against the idea. Their main concern was that they did not want this type of “element” in their shop. They did not want to promote the negative connotation that came along with the Zoot Suit. They claimed that Zoot Suits were associated with gangbangers and troublemakers.

In 1984, the jewelry part of the business was phased out. Our clientele was steady and growing. Even though it still remained mainly Latino, the business was making progress. We purchased a commercial building and occupied one half of the premises, and leased the other half to a restaurant. We now employed three tailors who worked out of their homes and provided us with high quality custom made Zoot Suits. The cost was \$500 and we were the only business in the United States that had them available.

The Second Ten Years (1988-1998). The second ten years was quite the turning point for El Pachuco Zoot Suits. Our clientele was now one third Anglo and two-thirds Latino. We continued to advertise in Lowrider Magazine, which had also become very successful during these years. Lindy Hop and swing dancing, two popular dance styles from 1920 to the early 1940’s, made a comeback during this time, which exposed the Anglo community to our Zoot Suits. Before we knew it, we had clients coming in from as far away as Switzerland, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

In 1992 the section of our commercial building we occupied was no longer able to accommodate our growing business and inventory. We took a chance and decided to occupy the entire building. It was a risk, but we felt confident enough to take the chance. Our clientele was expanding, and as years passed, it seemed as though the degree of negativity that the Zoot Suit once carried was slowly fading away. We had a full time crew of employees, which included Phyllis, her father Elbert, her son Ray, and tailors who worked off site.

In 1994, Warner Bros released a movie entitled “The Mask” starring Jim Carrey. In the opening scene of the movie, Jim Carrey is dancing and wearing a bright yellow Zoot Suit. Suddenly we had a major demand for yellow Zoot Suits. The clients had no idea what type of suit it was, they just knew they liked the style. Also, in the late 1990’s, a musical group by the name of “Cherry Poppin Daddies” released a song entitled “Zoot Suit Riot.” Regardless of the contradictory history of the Zoot Suit, the song, along with the movie, became quite popular and held no type of negative connotation. With the release of “The Mask” and “Zoot Suit Riot”, our Anglo clientele increased.

In the late 1990’s we became a fashion trend for high school proms. We rented suits out to high schools in all fifty states. The overwhelming response was awesome. We received numerous thank you letters and photos of the stylish teenagers. When they would call to place their Zoot Suit order, they would express the fact that they wanted to “stand out” at their prom. They didn’t want to wear an average tuxedo and look like the rest of the guys.

Ironically, in the late 1990’s, tuxedo shops started carrying suits with longer than usual coats and called them a “Zoot Tux”. Also during this period, several men’s clothing stores started carrying Zoot Suits. Again, they were just plain suits with long coats and a chain. We began to get requests from men’s clothing stores to carry the Zoot Suit. Just ten years before the Zoot Suit wasn’t wanted anywhere, and suddenly it was quite the fashion statement. There have also been many stores that claim to have authentic Zoot Suits, but to this day, we are the only makers of the original authentic Zoot Suit.

1998 – Present. In 1998 our business was approached by the Orange County Fair to present Zoot Suit fashion shows daily for the entire two-week run of the fair. At first we were skeptical of the idea, but we also knew this was a great opportunity that we could not miss. The fashion-show was a total success, and exposed us to an Anglo market that we had been unable to reach in preceding years.

It is hard to believe that we have been in business for twenty- five years. It is now too difficult to say what percentage of our clientele is Latino, Anglo, Black, etc. We rent suits for Proms, Weddings, Graduations, Baptisms, Halloween Parties, and Company Parties. Much of our clientele comes from local and out of state schools. The fact that schools are now on this fashion bandwagon makes quite a statement. When our business opened in 1978, no school or educational institution would have any part of wearing a Zoot Suit. It makes for an interesting day to spend a Saturday afternoon at our store and interview the future Zoot Suit wearers. It is also interesting to find out just what exactly they know about the infamous Zoot Suit and it’s history.

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History of El Pachuco (in the making)

Zoot Suit the movie / Zoot Suits

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ZOOT SUIT





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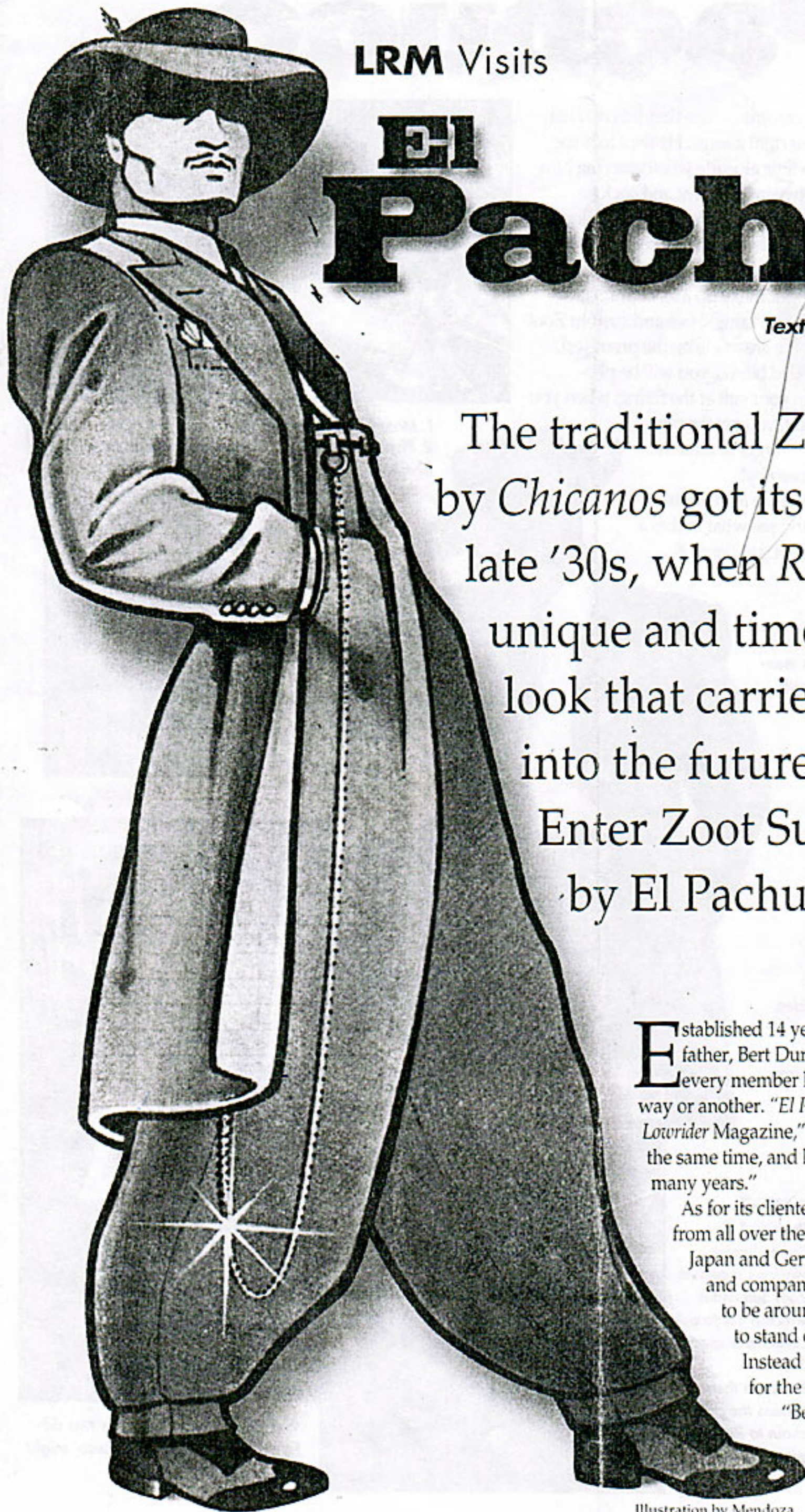
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LRM Visits

El Pachuco

Text and Photos by Marco Patiño



The traditional Zoot Suit worn by *Chicanos* got its start in the late '30s, when *Raza* created a unique and timeless look that carried on into the future.

Enter Zoot Suits
by El Pachuco.



El Pachuco's staff (from left to right): David, Bert, Phyllis and Ray Jr.

Established 14 years ago by Phyllis Estrella and her father, Bert Duran, the business is a family affair, and every member has helped out over the years in one way or another. "*El Pachuco* has been around for as long as *Lowrider Magazine*," says Phyllis. "We came out at about the same time, and have supported the community for many years."

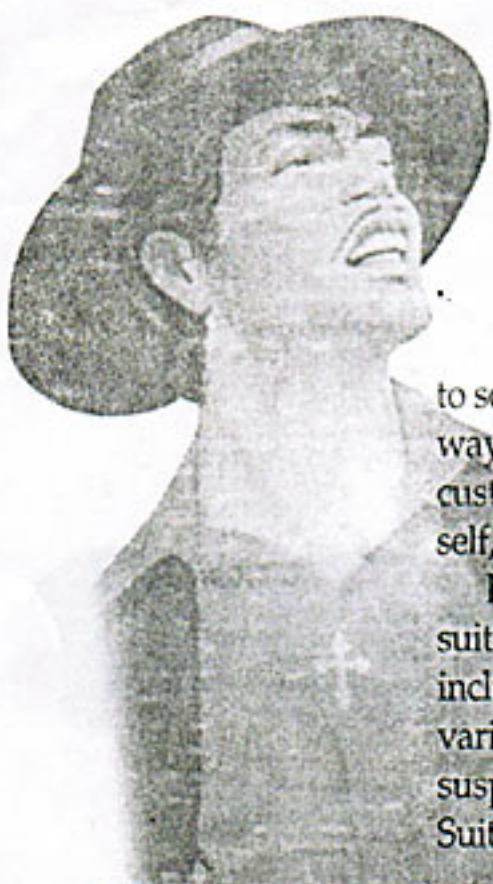
As for its clientele, *El Pachuco* has received orders from all over the world! Rentals from as far away as Japan and Germany are not uncommon for Phyllis and company. "Our busiest time of the year seems to be around prom time. A lot of the kids want to stand out a little more than the others.

Instead of getting a regular tuxedo, they go for the more stylish Zoot Suit," says Duran.

"Before they leave the shop, I give them a little lesson in being a *pachuco*.

First, I tell them to arrive late to whatever function they are going

Illustration by Mendoza



El Pachuco

to so as to make an entrance when they arrive. That way, they notice you right away!" He then tells the customer to have a little attitude when carrying himself, somewhere between confident and cocky.

Besides renting the suits, *El Pachuco* will tailor a suit to your specific needs and in any color or fabric, including wool and gabardine. Also available are the various accessories that make up a Zoot Suit: hats, suspenders, ties, Stacy Adams shoes and custom Zoot Suit chains (all of these are made on the premises).

As an added bonus, you will be photographed in your suit at the fitting; when you return the suit, you get the photograph (no charge) to remember the occasion by!

Now, let's take a little tour of *El Pachuco* and see what makes a traditional zoot suit *firmé!*



4. Next, the back of the coat is measured for length.



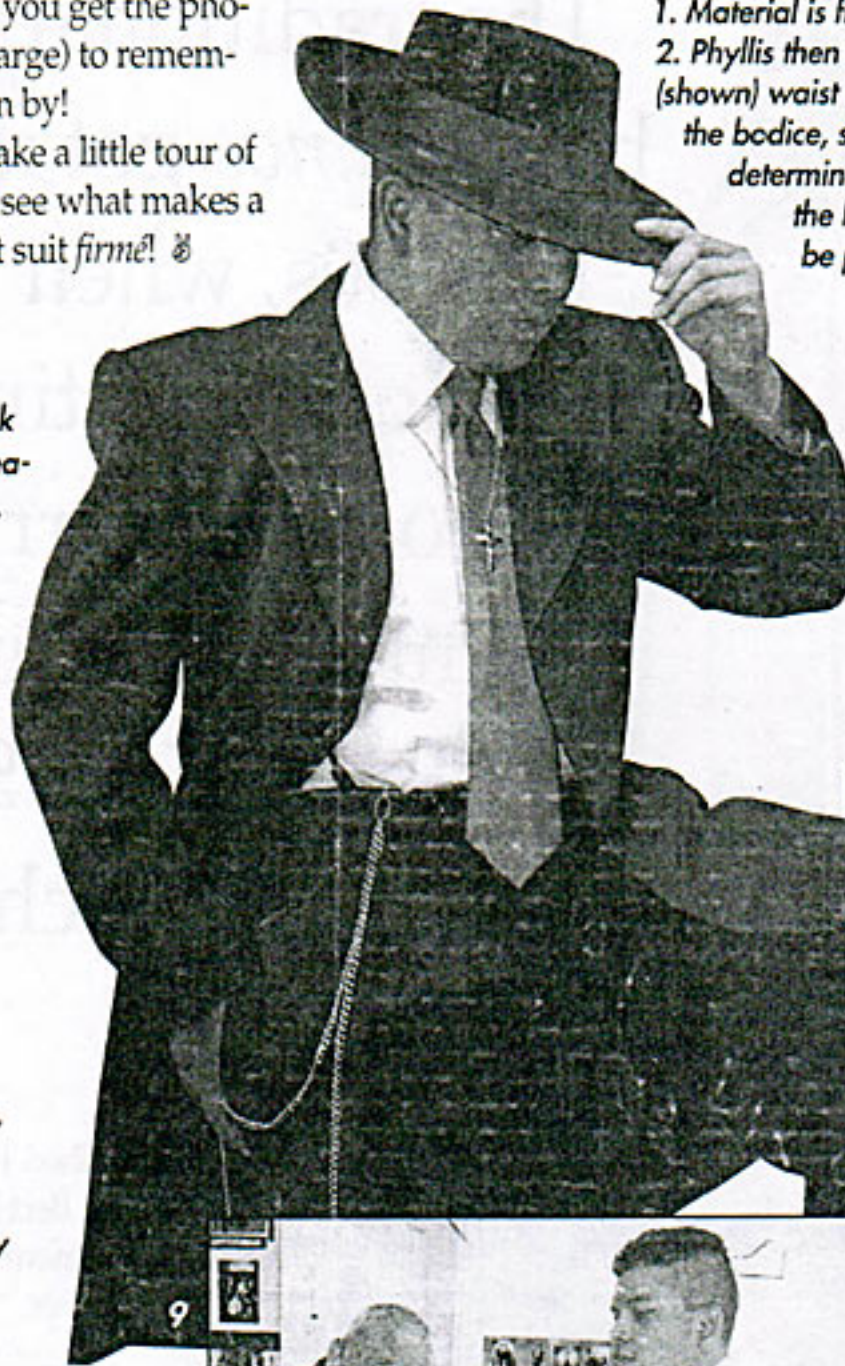
5. Zoot Suits come in all sizes.



6. *El Pachuco* has a wide array of pant sizes.



7. "Head Pachuco" Bert Duran begins work on a custom Zoot Suit chain which is cut to a customer's specifications.
8. Duran then fastens the gold chain to Ray's waist.

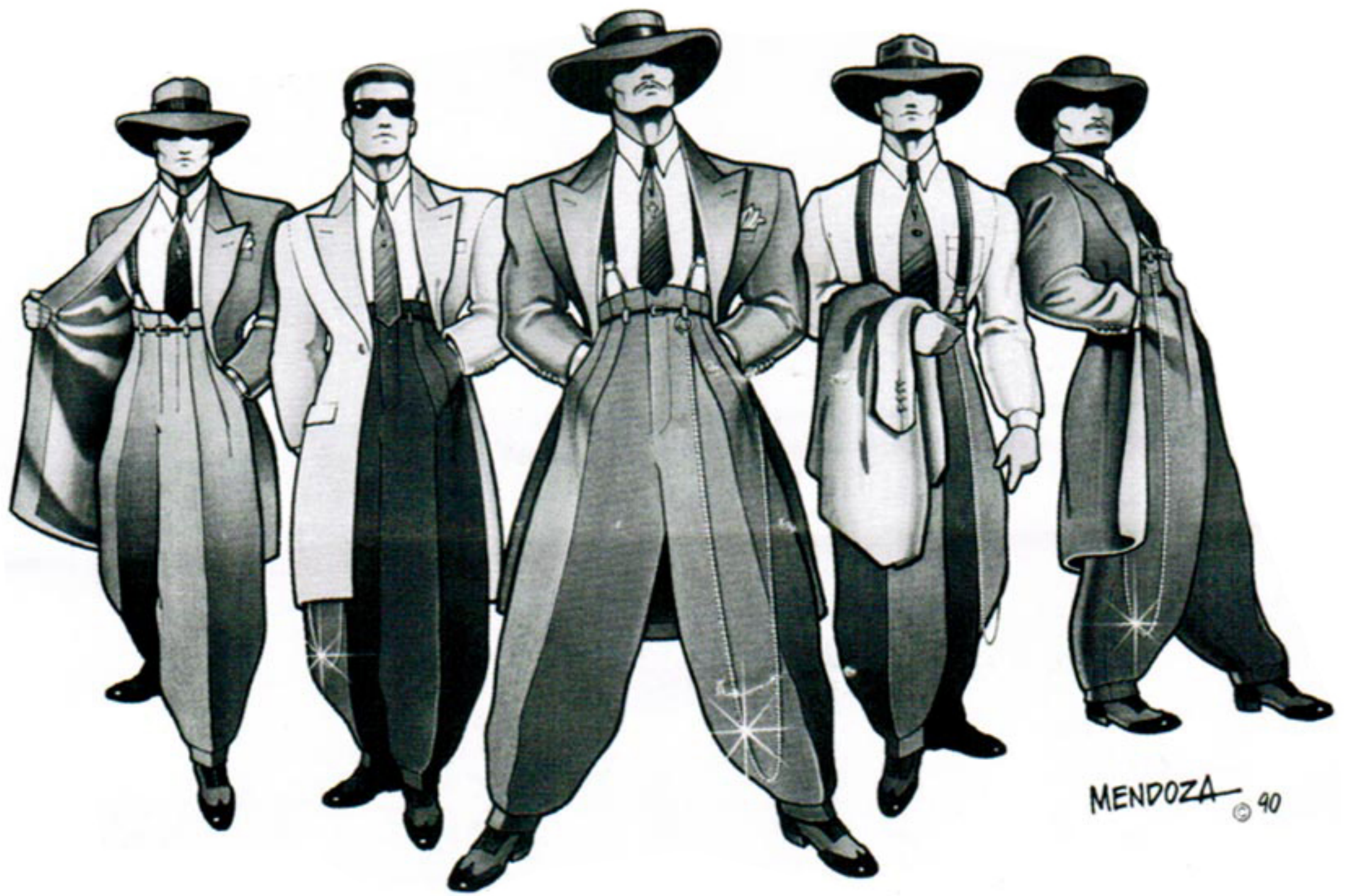


1. Material is first chosen for the coat to be tailor-made.
2. Phyllis then takes measurements from the chest (shown) waist and arms. 3. Having sewn the sleeves to the bodice, she then determines where the lapels will be placed.



9. & 10. Homeboy gives us two different looks of how a pachuco might be decked out.







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