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# The Zoot Suit: Its History and Influence

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## Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, African-American men had been discriminated against and stereotyped, but relied on one thing that set them apart from others, and that is the clothing they chose to wear. Living in a society where it is difficult to have a voice,<sup>1</sup> African-American men found self-expression through their own personal style. For African-American men, clothing signifies where they are and more importantly where they want to be (Boston 1998: 15). This is quite evident in the swing era of the 1930s and 1940s when young African-American males were trying to make a cultural identification statement through a suit known

as the *Zoot Suit*. Besides cultural identification, young men wore the suit as a part of a dance cult, to make a political statement, and unfortunately, for some, to disguise themselves from criminal activity. The zoot suit's influence was so great that it would have an effect on men's fashion in the future, and it would become one of the first articles of clothing to cause a spontaneous youth movement among African-American, Hispanic-American, and eventually European and Canadian whites. It would have a social and political effect on Fashion in the 1940s, and it was to be the first article of clothing to cause race rioting throughout the United States and Canada.

### Description

The Zoot suit was best described in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1965). The invisible man describes three young African-American men approaching the platform of a New York subway station.

Tall and slender . . . their collars high and tight about their necks, their identical hats of black cheap felt set upon the crowns of their heads with a severe formality above their conked hair?<sup>2</sup>. . . Their legs were swinging from their hips in trousers that ballooned upward from cuffs fitting snug about their ankles: their coats long and hip tight with shoulders far too broad to be those of natural men (p. 380).

Zoot, as a verb, means something done or worn in an exaggerated style, but as a noun it is the ultimate in clothes.<sup>3</sup> Mainly young African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans wore this killer diller suit.<sup>4</sup> The craze is said to have begun in lower-class neighborhoods in major cities such as the borough of Harlem in New York City, Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago, and Atlanta, and the suit was usually worn by boys ages sixteen to twenty (*Z: Zoot Suit* 1994). Zoot-suitors spared no expense on the suit, which could cost an average of US\$78, and the clothing was meticulously worn from the head to the feet. Everything was exaggerated, from the V knot tie, the zoot chain, the tight collar, the wide flat hat, and the Dutch type shoes (White and White 1998: 256). The suit came in various colors, such as lime green or canary yellow, and many suits bore a plaid stripe, or hounds-tooth print.

The zoot suit was but one part of a total look that included not only the suit and accessories but also the way you wore your hair, the walk, and the zoot suit argot (White and White 1998: 255). The hairstyle for African-American men meant slicking back the hair so that it was nice and smooth. This was achieved by either cutting the hair close, or by relaxing or straightening the hair with a process called congolene. This was a process that involved a mixture of lye, eggs, and potatoes. Slicking

the hair back was popular, as well, for Hispanic-Americans. Some chose to wear their hair in the signature “ducktail” (Tovares 2001).<sup>5</sup> The zoot-suit also had a particular walk or strut. The way you walked and presented yourself enhanced the suit.

Then there was the argot, a secret type of vocabulary or slang that was known in the African-American swing community as Jive, a Harlemese speech. Some define it as a language that was embraced by African-Americans, partly to put the white man off, partly to put him down.<sup>6</sup> To give you an example of the Jive talk, here is an excerpt from Cab Callaway’s song “Are you Hep to the Jive”:

Here’s the stone bible for you to collar that apple trickeration  
That will truly get your boots on! Say you cats and chicks,  
Don’t be icky. Bust your conk on this mess and you’ll be wailin’  
With the mellows. (Brooks 2003a)<sup>7</sup>

*Translation:* Here’s the solid truth for you to understand, that the big city strut will truly help you know what it’s all about or become a hip swinger. Say you swingers (musicians) and girls, don’t be stupid, apply yourself to this good thing you will be wailin with the best of them.

The Hispanic-American community, as well, picked up an argot of their own. They used some of the expressions of the African-American zoot-suitors and gave names for the meanings. For example: “My brother” (friend) is Carnal. “What’s up” is Orale. A “guy” is called a Vato (Opfer 1999). The argot language, in conjunction with the suit, helped the argot become an important part of colloquial slang for Hispanic- and African-Americans. It also helped to develop the ways and attitudes of the Hispanic-American and African-American youth (Daniels 1997).

## Origins

The exact origin of the suit is unknown. There are several different myths as to how the suit originated. Some believe it began with a Georgia busboy by the name of Clyde Duncan who ordered the exaggerated style suit in 1940. Others believe it originated in a Filipino colony in Los Angeles, who then discarded it, to later have the African-Americans and Mexicans pick it up (White and White 1998: 250). Many say it was Hal Fox, a Chicago clothier and jazz bandleader, who invented the suit and who accessorized the suit with the famous chain that he got off of a toilet. He is also credited with its rhyming: “the reat pleat, reave sleeve, ripe stripe, and drape shape,” and calling the suit “the end to end all ends” referring to the letter Z. However, he admits being inspired from the fashions of slum-dwelling teenagers (Eig 1996). Some sources credit two famous white men for the

zoot suit: Clark Gable, who wore a version of it in *Gone with the Wind*,<sup>8</sup> and Edward VIII who, in his youth, wore an exaggerated style suit that resembled the zoot suit (White and White 1998: 251).

Although African-American in origin, many Hispanics, especially Mexican-Americans, or Chicanos, believed it to be a way of dressing by Mexicans that caught on with other ethnicities. In an interview for the PBS special *The Zoot Suit Riots* (Tovares 2001), George Sanchez States:

The zoot suit was also worn by black youth . . . so there was a sense that the zoot suit was not just a Mexican dress; it was also a connection with other minority youth.

Whatever its origins, there are two things that are for certain: first, mainly Mexican-Americans wore the suit in the western part of the United States and mainly African-Americans in the eastern part of the United States; second, most of these young men were socially and culturally disadvantaged, trying to let people know who they were through their clothing. For these young men, the suit became “an emblem of ethnicity and a way of negotiating an identity” (*Z: Zoot Suit* 1994). Later, the suit was a refusal or gesture to submit to the norm of not only white society, but of the older generation and black middle-class society who saw the suit as an embarrassment (White and White 1998: 256). They saw the suit as outrageous and many parents forbade their sons to wear the suit. Many young zoot suit wearers had to sneak around wearing their suit. In the PBS special *The Zoot Suit Riots* (Tovares, 2001), Carlos Espinoza talks of how his friends would change at a neighbor’s house before going to a dance.

### Jazz and the Zoot Suit

There is no question, however, that music started the craze to wear the elaborate suit. The 1930s brought about a new sound in Jazz called Swing. Persons into Swing were not only into the music, but the newest dance steps, which were usually African-American in origin. Like most dances, such as the tango, or the Charleston, the clothing sometimes changes to accommodate the dance. The suit men wore to do these dances needed to be comfortable and roomy, so many men adopted the idea of wearing full pants, like the English Oxford Bags. H. Daniels states in an article entitled “*Los Angeles Zoot Suit Race Riot, The Panchuco and Black Music Culture*” (1997) that:

Eventually, as more and more swingers or *hipsters* adopted the zoot suit, not only did it become a definite style statement in African-American urban culture, but also an expressive dance cult emerged. Among the hipsters, African-Americans were the most “cult

conscious” spreading their music and the zoot suit to other cultures and ethnicities. The zoot-suitor would be found not only among the poor African-American youth, but Mexican-American and white urbanites as well. This would be fueled by not only swing and later bebop music, but by dances such as lindyhopping and jitterbugging (Daniels 82: 201–20).<sup>9</sup>

Fritz Redel, a professor of social work, wrote in 1943 that for many zoot-suitors, boys as well as girls, “jitterbugging” was something very serious (Daniels 1997). These swingers frequented such places as the Harlem Savoy club, where the famous Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers were formed. Not only did African-American zoot-suitors frequent the club, but also many white urbanites. “Harlem zoot-suitors knew no color lines,” and because it was a club of racial harmony, the police closed the club down for three months in 1943 due to the mixing of races. The official reason was that US servicemen contracted venereal disease at the club (White and White 1998: 240). Racial mixing could also be seen in downtown Los Angeles clubs, such as: The Million Dollar Theater, the Orpheum, and the Paramount. Many pachucos,<sup>10</sup> who did not fit into Anglo-America, frequented these clubs to listen to the big bands (Swanson 1999).

Swing music defied all racial lines, and as the cult grew, many of these new “hipsters” began to wear the suit. This included swingers from Austria, Germany, The Soviet Union, Canada, Britain, and France (Tantner 1994). Many of these youths wore versions of the zoot suit. For example, French youths, who were very much into the African-American swing culture, called the suit “the zazou.” It is said that they eventually wore the suit as a means of defying their Nazi conquerors (Brooks 2003b). In Britain, zoot suit wearers were called spivs, a handle which referred less to the style of dress than the occupation of the wearer (Rushgrove n.d.), which was a racketeer.

The idea of wearing the exaggerated suit caught on by many musical personalities, who became the fashion trendsetters. As Lloyd Boston (1998: 30) states, “Jazz Musicians became the supermodels of the day.” One of the most famous musicians to wear the suit was Cab Calloway. It is reported that he spared no expense on his zoot suits. He reportedly spent \$185.00 on a zoot suit like the one worn in “Stormy Weather.” The Baltimore Press at Fort Huachua in Arizona reported that, following instructions from the studio, Cab Calloway had to refuse the Black press from photographing him in the garment that he wore in “Stormy Weather” (White and White 1998: 255). He became such a cultural icon, that the youth movement in France prior to the German occupation named the suit the zazous after Calloway’s famous scat singing “zah zah zaz.” Later those zoot-suit wearers would become part of the French resistance, using the song as their anthem during the war (Brooks 2003b). Other musicians who wore the suit were Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton,

Count Basie, and members of the interracial Jimmy Dale Orchestra. These personalities did not wear the exaggerated version of the suit, but a close copy. This idea of wearing the suit slightly exaggerated could also be seen on Frank Sinatra, who wore wide lapels and extremely baggy pants (Badfads Museum 2000). Some people also believe that some members of the mafia wore a version of the zoot suit.

### Zoot Suit and the gangster

Unfortunately, as more and more youths from the lower class levels started to wear the suit, so did many delinquent youths. There were many young people, especially in the Los Angeles area, who had become members of gangs or involved in racketeering. During World War II, many of the young men's parents were working "unsocial hours" and "it became possible for many more young people to gather late into the night at major urban centers or simply on the street corners" (Cosgrove 1984). Many of these delinquent youths were very much into the swing movement and hid behind the zoot-suit. By 1942, the zoot suit wearers began to become stereotyped with criminal activity. This is why many youngsters who wanted to wear the suit to be "hip" had trouble with their parents and the older generation accepting the suit.

There would be two famous zoot-suit wearers who were associated with criminal activity. In Los Angeles it would be Cesar Chavez, who in his later years would become a famous Chicano union activist. His wearing of the zoot suit would bring him in contact with community politics. The second was a Detroit pimp by the name of "Detroit Red." His participation in some of the zoot-suit riots in Harlem began his political education and transformed him into the Black radical leader Malcolm X (Cosgrove 1984). Both men recalled what it felt like to wear the zoot suit, but both dismissed the suit as they grew up and found themselves. For these delinquent youths, as well as the hipsters, the suit was a "mask, which permitted adolescents to present themselves as adults and as urban sophisticates" (Daniels 1997). Trying to act and be adults through the suit, a new term was coined as wartime statistics revealed this new pattern of behavior, the Juvenile Delinquent (Cosgrove 1984).

### World War II and the Zoot Suit

As people began associating criminal youth with the suit, a rationing order was put into place in the United States on March 8 1942. The order placed restrictions on everything from nylon, soap, milk, and the amount of fabric used in certain outfits, especially the suit. The US Government War Production Board issued regulation L-85 that placed restrictions on clothing. The regulation would limit the length of the suit jacket, the

number of pleats, number of pockets and pocket flaps, cuffs, and the vest would no longer be a part of the suit. Zoot-suitors, however, continued to wear their elaborate suits, which could take up to as much as five or more yards of fabric in the pants alone (Cats' Corner 1997). The cost of the suit on average was \$45–75 during the war years, and could be purchased from a bootleg tailor. Therefore, the Government considered the suit an illicit item and contraband during the war. Many of these zoot-suit wearers would continue to flash around town in them as an "infraction to the expected rules of conduct during the war" (Swanson 1999). This was especially associated with African-Americans and Hispanics who paraded around town displaying their cultural, social, and political freedom, a combination that many would probably find threatening.

In June 1943, fighting broke out between Mexican-American zoot-suitors and navy servicemen on shore leave in Los Angeles. Sixty zoot-suitors were arrested and charged. This created a wave of rumors throughout military bases, and in the weeks to come rioting began throughout the Los Angeles area. Servicemen went throughout the streets throwing and beating Mexican-American and African-American zoot-suitors. Some were beaten with so-called "Zootbeaters," a two by four with nails, and the popular thing to do was to strip the zoot-suitor of his clothing and humiliate him in public (Cats' Corner 1997).<sup>11</sup> The press did not help matters, calling the young wearers "Zoot suit gangsters." They created a devious image of the zoot-suitor, and helped perpetuate the belief that these youth were receiving justly deserved punishment. This was quite evident within the headlines of the *Los Angeles Times* which read on June 2 1943 "Youth Gangs Leading Cause of Delinquency" and on June 9 1943 "Zoot-suitors Learn Lesson in Fight with Servicemen." By using these references many of the public saw only a conflict between patriotic fighting men and a "fringe group of maladjusted youth." Many servicemen stated that they could not stand the so-called "gamin' dandies," young Mexican-Americans whose cultural norms were an affront to the culture of wartime America (Swanson 1999). However, if one looks at the time the riots took place in American History, one would observe that many zoot-suit wearers wore the suit as a political and social statement against the way African-Americans and Hispanics were being treated in a country that, as a whole, was a segregated society. This was a time when the rights of African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans were limited. These young zoot-suit wearers were wearing the suits to violate laws that existed to keep them in their place. The media used its influence to try and keep the zoot-suitors contained, and eventually people started to wonder if these were more race-related riots than politically related riots as many servicemen had suggested.

The riots sparked investigations into what had happened. One was a fact-finding investigation headed by Attorney General Robert Kenny, and the other investigation was by State Senator Jack B. Tenney to determine if the zoot-suit riots were sponsored by Nazi agencies (Cosgrove 1984).

The only thing done was that the Los Angeles City Council encouraged the War Production Board to be harsher on the illegal production of the suit and a law was put into effect that wearing or possessing a zoot suit was illegal. Political and racial studies done during the ten-day rioting concluded that most of the 600 youths who were beaten and arrested were Mexican-American and African-American youths, and that it was a blatant display of racial prejudice among not only the servicemen, but the police and press as well. Chester Himes warned Blacks, in an essay entitled "Zoot Riots and Race Riots," of police and military brutality and compared the riots to lynching (Cats' Corner 1997).

The effects of the riots in Los Angeles did nothing to stop rioting in other cities. From 1942 to 1944, more riots occurred throughout the United States in areas such as Detroit, Harlem, and also in Canada. In Detroit, the authorities chose to dismiss a zoot-suit riot at a local High school as an adolescent imitation of what occurred in Los Angeles. Within weeks, Detroit witnessed the worst racial riots in its history. Racial riots raged in Harlem, after a white police officer shot a black serviceman, creating a full fledged zoot-suit racial war. However, on May 27 1944 in St Lambert, Montreal, riots broke out between zoot-suit youths of Italian and French origin, and Canadian servicemen. The youths' social values clashed with wartime moral standards, similar to the riots which occurred in the Los Angeles area (Durflinger 1998).

In many eastern southern states, rioting was not a major problem, because zoot-suit wearers, depending on where you lived, were very few. More than any other African-Americans, Southern African-Americans had to endure the Jim Crow laws, and the Klu Klux Klan. During the 1930s and 1940s, the NAACP was trying desperately to have an anti-lynching law established. Those who dared to wear the zoot suit wore it to state their individuality and did not worry about the consequences. Eighty-three-year-old Theodopelus Mathew Alford, a resident of Norfolk, Virginia, at the time of the riots, discusses wearing his shadow stripe blue zoot suit during the war. "Anyone who was *hip* had one. I just loved mine because it was different from the other boys in the neighborhood. The stripes were two hues of blue which caused a shadow effect on the suit." When I asked him how long did he wear the chain, he stated that many southern boys didn't "roll like that" or go out in public with one on. You wore it for special occasions not to parade out in." I asked if he was fearful of wearing the suit near the Navy base in Norfolk, the largest in the United States, during the time of the zoot-suit riots. He stated, "Norfolk wasn't a bad place to be. We didn't have any problems with the service boys. Many of the problems with the military occurred in the bigger cities. There were just some places that were rough during those days."<sup>12</sup>



## Its Influence

The popularity of the suit was worldwide, and no matter where you lived zoot-suit wearers wore their outfits for a number of reasons. They wore the suit as part of an expressive dance cult, as a statement of cultural independence, as part of a spontaneous youth movement, or as a gangster hiding behind the suit. Eventually, the suit, which has been hailed as the first truly American suit, was integrated into the fashions of the late 1940s and 1950s. The influence of the zoot suit can be seen in the generously cut suits worn by American men after the war: their elaborate pin-stripe, herringbone, and plaid suits; their long roomy coats, and generously pleated and cuffed pants. It can be seen on the European youth of the 1950s, like the British Teddy Boys (Rushgrove n.d.). The influence continued into the late 1960s and early 1970s in the long jackets, loud clothing, and meticulous way of dressing. Today we call them “pimp daddies.”<sup>13</sup> In the 1990s, the influence of the zoot suit returned back into fashion. The coat was longer and the silhouette seemed to fit the big and tall physique. Today, the jackets are still longer, and the pants are still wide and roomy. The suit is still colorful and can contain shadow stripes, plaids, and other prints. Many entertainers have brought the popularity of the zoot suit back to life. The original zoot suit has been seen in various music videos, for example, Janet Jackson’s “Alright” video, in which not only does she wear a zoot suit, but also it features Cab Calloway in a zoot suit. It has also been seen in movies such as “The Mask” starring Jim Carrey, and on famous American entertainers such as Steve Harvey and Bernie Mac. You can buy the zoot suit custom made at places such as Zoots by Suavecito’s or El Pachuco Zoot Suits, two companies who make some of the most well-known and stylish zoot-suits. African- and Hispanic-American men still wear versions of the zoot suit, because it still sets them apart from everyone else, making a definite cultural statement, and proving “that the styles born of a struggle for self-definition have often been whimsically appropriated by mass-market fashion” (Boston 1998: 15).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the zoot suit bore cultural, political, and social implications. It still remains a mystery, not only because its origins are unknown, but also because it comes from a group of peoples whose lifestyle and history remains a mystery, the African-American race. A race of people who tend to conceal those mysteries within their dances and their clothing. A group of people who tend to set themselves apart through their own personal style. The riots themselves prove this theory, indicating that African-American as well as Hispanic-American youth “found highly charged emotional and symbolic meaning in dress, music, and dance fads,” and

they spread that lifestyle or philosophy to the American youth (Daniels 1997). This is why it has been deemed the first article of clothing to create a spontaneous youth movement. In the new millennium, once again, we see young people dictating what they are going to wear, wearing their clothes based on political, social or cultural reasons in the new “hip hop” generation. Their dances, music, and style have not only caught on with the American popular youth culture, but the international popular youth culture as well. Like the zoot suit, the clothing the hip-hopper chose to wear was first rejected by society. There were many school boards, within the United States, who passed policies prohibiting youngsters from wearing the sexy clothing and the baggy jeans low down on the waist. Even the attitudes that people had about the zoot-suit culture, has evolved into the hip-hop culture. Parents, black middle-class society, and white society find the style an embarrassment and outrageous, and the media and law enforcement have once again stereotyped these hip-hoppers with the “gangster look.” But like the zoot-suit, black expressive culture has influenced other minorities and young white urbanites to the point where the garments have become popular and acceptable. The influence, like that of the zoot suit, is now worldwide. The hip-hop generation is now enjoying a new genre of clothing called urban wear, which includes the new version of the zoot suit. In essence, the zoot suit became a symbol for the enigmas of black culture, and those fascinated by that culture have found themselves inspired, and enjoying the pleasures of their new found identity (Cosgrove 1984).

## Notes

1. During the early part of the twentieth century African-Americans were discriminated against, and lived in a segregated society where their views and opinions were not heard.
2. A process by which African-Americans relax or straighten their hair.
3. As defined in the *The Jive Dictionary* (Brooks 2003a).
4. *The Jive Dictionary* (Brooks 2003a).
5. A hairstyle that became popular with young delinquent males in the 1950s.
6. As defined in Webster’s *Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1985).
7. As defined by Calloway Brooks, grandson of Cab Calloway, *Notes of Interest* (2003).
8. Referring to his exaggerated confederate uniform.
9. Extreme dances that required jumping under and over one another.
10. Referring to a low-status blue-collar Hispanic worker.
11. Taken from an online article “*A Bombs, Bebop, and C Rations: Jazz as Cultural Call to Arms Against 1940’s Anxieties*” (Vaidhanathan 1997).

12. Mr Theodopelus Mathew Alford, interview with the author, Richmond, Virginia, May 3 2003.
13. Men who love to control fast cars and fast women.
14. A youngster into hip-hop music.

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