

***WHAT WE WORE***



# **WHAT WE WORE**

**A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF BRITISH STYLE**

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This is our history. Books on the history of high fashion will never include us in their pages



Lynn Procter and Ted Polhemus in (sort of) glam mode, London, 1972-4

## FOREWORD

From the post-war Teddy Boys in their drape jackets and brothel creepers through the less-is-more mods to the more-is-more psychedelics, followed by the extraterrestrials of glam rock and punk and the New Romantics, not to mention goths, casuals, skaters, junglists and a host of others too numerous or indescribable to list, Britain has – decade upon decade, subculture after subculture – produced mindboggling, gobsmacking street style. And we're talking proper subcultures, lifestyle choices, rather than some Saturday-night-only, for-a-joke fancy dress. What people in other countries might just about wear for Halloween, people in Britain flaunt 24/7.

One clue as to why is Britain's long history of bubbling class rebellion. Just after World War II, in open defiance of the clothing rationing that was still in force, a bunch of rich, upper-class 'toffs' adopted the fancy, extravagant New Edwardian style. In reaction to this, a bunch of uppity working-class 'Teddy Boys' (as they came to be known; Edwardian > Teddy, get it?) aped their 'betters' with ever longer drape jackets in riotous colours matched with thicker crepe-soled shoes.

Another clue is Britain's enriched multicultural heritage. Imagine the scene when, in the late 1950s or early '60s, some white British proto-mod guys got up the courage to enter one of the West Indian clubs, like Count Suckle's Roaring Twenties, a joint

on Carnaby Street. There they became intoxicated with the trim, modern cut of the Jamaican rude boys' two-tone suits, their wraparound shades and tightly cropped hair. Let's also factor in that the 'all pull together' effort of the war now prompted a call for the Establishment and their self-serving ways to be swept aside in a tidal wave of shiny, sexy modernity and youthful experimentation. Once the nation of grey, drab sartorial invisibility, a new, 'swinging' Britain would strut down Carnaby Street – as in an Austin Powers film – dressed in anything and everything that would give the pinstripe-suited Old Guard palpitations.

But there is one final clue to consider: that other side of British traditionalism that tolerates and even rejoices in eccentricity and flamboyance. As an American hippie with waist-length hair, I was immediately struck by the fact that no one stared at me when I came to Britain in 1969. In America there were billboards that proclaimed 'Make America Beautiful – Get a Hair Cut.' If you looked different from the norm, then you just had to accept that everyone would gawk at you, point and, more often than not, tell you, 'You Commies ought to get out of the country.' Yet in London you could be stark naked and painted blue, waiting for a bus, and still no one would stare. Why? Because British people would think it makes them seem unworldly to act as if this was the first time they had seen someone naked, painted blue and waiting for a bus. In Britain, in public, everyone is in a private bubble. The downside is that no one talks to you, and London in particular is the loneliest city in the world. The upside is that, within your bubble, you can dress as outlandishly as your imagination will permit. While American punks like the Ramones dressed like a parody of 1950s 'juvenile delinquents' (or 'no-good punks', in '50s US slang), British punks went with a strange mix of the extraterrestrial and the primitive, demonstrating beyond any doubt just how much you can get away with in your own private bubble (which is not to say you won't get beaten up on the late bus home, but at least you won't be stared at).

In 1947, the year of my birth, Christian Dior's 'New Look' collection was launched in Paris. This was the last gasp of the old-school sort of fashion industry, to whose dictates women around the world submitted like docile sheep. But by the 1950s and right up to the

present day, the obedient fashion victim has increasingly been replaced by those who favour 'alternative' street styles derived not from the fashion system but from subcultures or individual choice and creativity. People can now sample and mix a style statement that serves to visually signal where they are coming from.

One of the most significant revolutions of modern times, this transition from dictatorial fashion to subcultural or individual style has made one's appearance (the 'presentation of self', in Erving Goffman's telling phrase) a kind of personal marketing. Never before in human history have individuals had such freedom to look as they want.

Since the 1950s there has been a dramatic disconnect between what you see in glossy fashion mags and what you see real people wearing on the street. This is why a book like *What We Wore* is so crucially important. If we don't cherish and share these old photos, we will simply have no record not only of what we wore, but of who we were. This is our history. Books on the history of high fashion will never include us in their pages. In the past, when a new trend in fashion trickled down the social order, what one saw in, say, a book on the history of fashion gave some indication of what 'ordinary' people wore. This is no longer the case: high fashion spirals off in its own fantasy world while most people create their own unique presentation from all the variety on offer in our 21st-century supermarket of style.

Today everyone takes photos constantly. But how many of us take the time to copy, label and occasionally print them? I have boxes and albums of often tiny, often blurred photos which date right back to 1947. Together with all the other prints and negs accumulated over my life, these constitute a visual record of how I chose to style myself at any point in time – indeed, a visual record of who I am and how I have changed. I worry that kids born today – in an age when everything is photographed, but perhaps few, if any, images are copied, preserved and labelled – may not have such a visual record. *What We Wore* serves to remind us how incredibly important it is to keep and to share these visual resources.

Ted Polhemus, Hastings, 2014



**Clockwise from far left** Christine Bassett, London, 1957; Paul Dyson, London, 1985; Cathy Manandhar, Manchester, 1967; Joel Mills, Manchester, 1985; Don Letts, London, 1973; Devious Rebels of Art, Hull, 1987; Gemma Pharo, West Sussex, 2001; Morgan Clement and Kate Sergeant, Barcelona, 2008; Valentine Amartey, Northampton, 1986

## INTRODUCTION

As a teen, style played a big role for me, both in the expression of my personal creativity and in helping me to form friendships that enabled me to feel for the first time that I was part of something. It was not about what *I* wore, but always what *we* wore.

The uniform of youth acts as a kind of security net, allowing for a deep sense of belonging while also providing space for experimentation. In a world away from the complex negotiation of adult life, this 'uniform' is simultaneously constricting and liberating. In youth, the body becomes a walking shrine to newfound obsessions, cultures and the collective rituals that bond friends and define enemies. It is a vehicle for the expression of chutzpah and conviction that only the young can get away with.

I don't think I've ever quite got over that gang feeling, the pack life, the sense of absolute belonging I experienced then. It's something I come back to again and again, and it is the driving force behind *What We Wore*. This first striking out – exploiting personal style as a means of creative expression that helps one find a place in the world – can be seen in so many of the contributions to this project: from the young DJ, musician and film-maker Don Letts in his two-tone loafers and tailcoat to producer Charlie Dark stepping out in his Stussy t-shirt and handmade beads, designer and stylist Fred Butler dressing up like Tank Girl for her passport photo and musician Graham Massey sulking in his Harvard tee at fourteen.

Barring a handful, the photos in this book have been taken by amateurs. From mums with APS cameras, to best friends or boyfriends with disposables, to young photographers learning their trade at art college using 35mm SLRs, this is life through the lens of the people who lived it. There is something to be glimpsed in people's own photos that cannot be captured by someone looking in from the outside. It feels like being transported back to that moment in time when the photo was taken, travelling for a split second into the sensation of someone else's freedom and innocence and feeling it for yourself.

There are, of course, a wealth of photographers who have powerfully documented street- and subculture over the past 60 years. It's now 20 years since the release of Ted Polhemus's groundbreaking exhibition and book *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk*, which is regarded as the Bible of the sociology of style and the body in relation to 20th-century youth tribes. Polhemus traced the lineage of the style habits of Teddy Boys and hippies right through to cyberpunks and gothic Lolitas, creating a visual blueprint of the role of dress in 'drawing a line between "us" and "them"'.

*What We Wore* began as a simple pool of photos on Flickr. The process of collecting material has been far more complex than a browse on Google Images, however. The first step involved

DISPOSABLE YOUTH

In youth, the body becomes a  
walking shrine to newfound  
obsessions

reaching out to friends and family to source content and publish it through the ISYS Archive, a website I co-founded with Cieron Magat. Consequently we developed a standalone website and built a small but loyal team of researchers. We've also run 'live archive' events at Tate Britain, the V&A Museum and other locations around the UK, encouraging people to bring us hard copies of their photos to be digitized. It's been both exciting and rewarding to unearth real stories from real people, and at times I have felt like Tony Robinson on the archaeology show *Time Team*, digging up a rare Palaeolithic rock.

It's only now, with the possibilities opened up by technology for people to digitize, share and connect, that a project like this could happen. The Internet has spawned a thousand subcultural revival communities, websites and Facebook pages which we turned to for help in gathering a broad selection of images that showcase the history of British youth style. Alongside gathering fresh perspectives on well-known subcultures such as punks, mods and skins, I also wanted to include more recent history. It seems that 'all jungle all garage heads' and one-time emo kids are now sharing their stories and images for the first time online, too. It's like a second coming of age, a waving goodbye to youth for this generation.

The world we live in today is obsessed with documentation. If there's no photo, it didn't happen. Our culture is increasingly led by pictures rather than words. In the process of collecting photos for this book, I realized how much we have come to take this

urge to document for granted. 'I can tell you what I wore, but I don't have any pictures. We just didn't carry cameras back then like you do now,' was an answer I was often met with. There is something to be said for this refusal to document – the desire to live fully in the moment rather than to try and conserve it. However, the human need to document and share seems enduring and important. It needn't be an all or nothing approach. In my youth the only option was being seen in the flesh. Today the hashtag and the selfie fuse with the flesh to make a maximal connection.

*What We Wore* was never meant to tell the full story of subculture in a neat timeline (by its very nature, the project cannot be exhaustive). Instead, it's an ever-expanding archive of perspectives that shed light on the subtleties and nuances of youth identity. It celebrates the originality that has been born of British street culture.

As social history moves online, I often wonder which stories will be saved for posterity and which ones will disappear into the ether. If they do disappear, who will retell them in the future, and on whose behalf? Perhaps this is why it is so important that this project lives in the form of a book, as well as existing online. Hopefully it will serve as a reference point on the relationship between style and personal identity in years to come. Through *What We Wore* I hope I can bring the viewer closer to people as they are, inside their private worlds. People's own photography can take us closer still.

Nina Manandhar, London, 2014