

Too Hip to be Square

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DHM 3213: Heritage of Dress

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April 22, 2021

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Between the 1980s and 1990s, it was largely apparent that the fashion industry had increasingly become unable to uniformly declare specific styles for consumers. The market was gradually becoming more and more divided, making it more difficult to pinpoint one particular style. However, this actually began long before this time, with the birth of style tribes. While the rejection of the mainstream was more underground and discreet than it had grown to be in the 1980s and 1990s, the early style tribes of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s set the tone for future style tribes and market segmentation as a whole.

Prior to this point in time, fashion trends generally formed within the elite, upper class members of society and then trickled down to those in lower socioeconomic classes. However, a stark turning point eventually developed. Unlike the operation of the fashion industry before, styles began originating on the street among the less affluent and then rose from the bottom up. These trendsetting groups banded together in unity through shared interests, and became known as style tribes. Style tribes formed over various commonalities such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political affiliation, drug usage, and more.

One of the most influential style tribes, although sometimes misunderstood and misrepresented, is the Beatniks. Beatniks emerged during the late 1950s and continued into the 1960s, serving as predecessors to the birth of several widely influential style tribes. The 1950s is distinctly characterized by conformity culture. Following the devastation and hardship of the Great Depression and World War II, Americans were grasping for any sense of peace, safety, and security. This led to a mass move to the suburbs, where cookie-cutter homes were sprinkled across the rapidly-expanding suburbs of postwar America. A family-centric lifestyle was adopted by the majority of society, which stunted the baby boom. In turn, this sudden, exponential rise in

births and growing families further solidified strict gender roles. Furthermore, this suburban lifestyle for families accelerated materialism, which became the name of the game in the 50s. Americans were finally finding their footing and learning to navigate a world free from the financial restrictions of the Great Depression and World War II. So naturally, consumerism boomed and material goods were highly sought-after and valued, mirroring the rampant consumer culture of the 1920s.

The foundation of Beatnik culture was built upon their aversion to the traditional, or “square”, mold of society in the 50s. Beats, as they are often referred to, considered this new obsession with abundance that was brought in with the materialism of the 1950s to be excessive, unauthentic, and superficial. Instead, they placed their focus on the spiritual rather than to the material, and looked to Eastern religions such as Zen Buddhism for meaning. The Beatnik movement was spearheaded by writer Jack Kerouac, poets Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, and writer William S. Burroughs. Kerouac’s novel, *On the Road*, was not only his breakthrough book as an author but also went on to define the Beat Generation. This 1957 novel is based on a cross-country roadtrip that Kerouac took, and contains strong themes of jazz music, poetry, and drug use. Each of these themes carried into the culture of the Beatniks and became defining characteristics of this style tribe as a whole. Kerouac also coined the term, “Beat”, which grew to include a variety of different definitions and contexts over time. To be a Beat is to be layered—To be a juxtaposition of sorts. At its core, a “Beat” is someone who is worn down. As Kerouac described it, “[It is] more than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It invokes a sort of nakedness of mind, and ultimately of soul,” (Tamony, 1969). However, to that same point, it is this rawness that reveals a person’s true self, which is largely fulfilling. This contrasting philosophy played a significant role in the culture of the

Beatniks. From there, the definition continued to expand and became a term used to describe their literary style, aesthetic style, and overall way of life.

Beatniks were brought together over a number of ideas and ways of life, however the primary factor was found in their worldview. French existentialism was a core belief system of many Beats, and it permeated every aspect of Beatnik culture. This idea highlighted the individuality and alienation of the human experience in a cruel, hostile world. These views also declared the very idea of existence to be unexplainable, which played heavily into the intellectual debates and conversations among Beats. The Beats were highly intellectual people, and this guided much of the Beatnik lifestyle. Many Beats were involved in the arts, from literature, to poetry, to art, to music, and beyond, and used these as vehicles for self-expression, which was another pillar of Beatnik culture. Jazz clubs and coffee shops were typically the gathering places for Beatniks, where they could come together to discuss their existentialist views and dwell on the meaning of life.

Beatnik style is one of many things. First, it is very distinct and easily recognizable. Their clothing choices and overall appearance were very characteristic and an identifying factor. Beatnik style, along with Beatnik culture itself, was built on understated coolness. To look and be cool were of the highest priority for a Beat, but only if done with true authenticity. An effortless, nonchalant attitude was crucial to the Beatnik culture. Unnatural, performed coolness was seen as incredibly low and immediately negated any status. Second, their style is extremely reflective of their views. Upon deeper examination, a Beatnik's seemingly simple look actually speaks volumes about their way of life and philosophy. Typical Beatnik style includes casual clothes, such as workshirts, sweatshirts, and jeans. Later, as French existentialism became a key aspect of Beatnik culture, typical French style was integrated into Beatnik fashion. This included

all-black ensembles, Breton shirts, and berets as the style tribe's chosen headdress. This clean yet eccentric look became a symbol of Beatnik culture, as berets, black and white stripes, and simple black clothing are still associated with the Beats today. For women, looks often consisted of black tights paired with black skirts and ballet slippers, black knit blouses, or black striped shirts. These silhouettes were often form-fitting, which speaks to the Beatniks' views on sexual freedom. For men, styles included black turtlenecks, dirty sneakers, beards, and ponytails. Just like everything in Beatnik culture, these grooming techniques were not by accident—They emphasized their opposition to the mainstream and capitalism by dismissing salons and allowing their hair to grow freely. More often than not, Beatniks wore used clothing. This served as an anti-capitalist statement, which plays into their outlook on politics and economics. Further, their laid-back, minimalistic style is a testament to their stripped-down view of the world. They strongly opposed frivolous fashion and unnecessary abundance, even more so in the face of 1950s materialism and consumerism, and their dress embodied these ideals. Nonconformity pervaded every facet of Beatnik culture, but was visually very obvious through their style of dress.

The influence of Beatnik style on fashion of today is more inconspicuous than that of some other style tribes. The Beats' impact on fashion, however, very much exists. Further, their philosophies, ideals, and social views as a counterculture have a strong influence on today's society, which can be clearly seen. In terms of dress, stripes are still widely prevalent in today's fashion. The black and white stripes of the Breton tops worn by Beatnik women can be seen in many ready-to-wear looks of today. Additionally, the all-black outfits donned by men and women of Beatnik culture carried into minimalist styles of today. Many fashion icons, those in the fashion industry, or even just the very well-dressed consider black clothes to be their uniform

of sorts. During colder months, it is not uncommon for women to wear turtleneck shirts and sweaters. Even more so, this silhouette has been modified in recent years with the development of the mock-neck neckline. Sneakers are extremely prevalent in the trends of today, with heavy emphasis on streetwear and the rise of athleisure styles. Further, the second-hand clothes worn by the Beatniks have made a comeback in fashion today as well. In an effort to create a more sustainable world, thrifting and wearing vintage clothes has become very trendy among youth and young adults today. While the purpose of pre-worn clothing for Beatniks was to defy capitalism and the purpose of it today is geared towards sustainability and aesthetics, the style remains the same. Finally, influences of Beatnik style can be seen in several designer collections, such as Saint Laurent's 1963 collection or some of Ralph Lauren's 1993 designs.

Beatnik ideals and values are obviously influential of the social movements of today. Emerging at a similar time as the silent generation, the Beatniks paved the way for a much more vocal youth than society had previously experienced. The Hippies of the 1960s and 1970s have strong ties to the Beat Generation, as they led the way for others in social protest and activism. Beyond that, the Beats also impacted the Hippie movement through their lifestyle choices, such as adopting Eastern religions and philosophies. This led to a shift in attitude and less boundaries upon expression of sexuality. Lastly, Beatnik influences can still be observed in present-day society. Today, people are so full of passion for causes that they believe in and are often found protesting and calling others to action. Parallels can be drawn between the social activism of the Beatniks and that of movements such as Black Lives Matter, environmentalism and the fight against climate change, gun control activists, feminists, and more.

Although the Beatniks were often misconstrued in the media, their impacts greatly outweigh the negative light they were sometimes painted into. From literature, to fashion, to

lifestyle, to philosophy and culture, and beyond, Beatnik culture permeated society both then and now, and shifted the landscape of society into what we know today.

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