

Menswear in the 1980s

Revolt into Conformity

What did men wear before menswear? Fashion folk spent much of the eighties proclaiming, designing, photographing, and selling the 'revolution in menswear', so it's worth recalling the pre-revolutionary epoch of the Great British Male to remind ourselves of the extent of our transformation. What's so different?

Not much. The suit still rules absolutely as what a man must wear to be taken seriously in society – as we shall see, its command in an authoritarian and retrospective decade was more absolute than ever – while outside of bohemian circles a man is still not considered fully dressed without a tie. Though equipped with a far fuller wardrobe – thanks to the menswear boom and a general upsurge in affluence – the office drudge of the eighties wore much the same as his counterpart in the twenties or fifties. An unpleasant mac, a dowdy overcoat, a shaggy jumper and slacks for weekends, an insistence on dour colours from the sludge spectrum unique to the GBM, a sullen resistance to sock-changing – some things just don't change. Only the creeping arrival of Euroman, with his suspect peacockery and his handbags, threatens the dull purity of this strain.

Alongside this uniform of respectability, which in Britain descends in an unbroken chain from royalty to the suburbs, exists the uniform of jeans, blouson, T-shirt and trainers that clothes almost every other GBM. In contrast to the office drudge, the working (or unemployed) drone of today looks strikingly different from his antecedents in their demob suits, cloth caps and overalls. Hunched into a technicolour bomber jacket, hands in pockets and elbows flapping, indigo legs tapering spindily into rubber shoes, ass and belly hanging – much of working-class male Britain now resembles budgerigars in running shoes. The Hunt Ball may still dress in the style of its grandfathers, but on the football terraces of the Stanley Matthews era, the aliens have landed.

This is an altogether new silhouette in twentieth-century fashion; originating in fifties' teendom via James Dean, it is now seen on men in their sixties, and considering how unflattering it is to all but the athletically inclined, its

popularity is astonishing. (Latterly, sportswear has helped disguise the sagging male gut, while implying that the degenerate inside the tracksuit is actually doing something about his physical problems – but that’s another story.)

Though these two GBM looks may be regarded as contrary poles rather than as mutually exclusive looks, the area that falls outside their embrace – the zone of the ‘menswear revolution’ – is, in practice, small. The fashion pages of the newly established male fashion press strutting their bold colours and shapes; the now-subsiding rash of Next; Ralph Lauren tradition at Marks & Spencer; the Italian fashion machine; feminism and the new man: their collective impact on the GBM has been puny. Conformity and solidarity rule alongside mediocrity of design and material, and if the GBM’s sartorial self-awareness has been raised an iota or three in the last decade, the ‘menswear revolution’ has also helped stifle the British tradition of eccentric dressing. These days even dotty squires come off the peg from Hackett’s.

What made the ‘menswear revolution’ of the eighties so fascinating was not that new looks were created and better clothes more widely marketed (both were), or that fresh fortunes were made – though this remained a powerful motor, in keeping with both the times and rag trade tradition. Menswear was an idea whose time had come – ‘everything has been done in womenswear’ went the cry – and one which offered the media a handy microcosm for the contrary social currents set in motion by ‘new right’ governments at home and abroad. Any crack in the social consensus demands a new set of sartorial codes; the trauma of dismantling the welfare state, a notion embedded deep in the post-war British psyche, demanded a revolution. New codes were duly found to reflect the realigned status quo, which from the outset demanded that everyone ‘knew their place’, that the ‘haves’ be readily distinguishable from the ‘have nots’.

Never before had the GBM enjoyed such a choice of clothes, a mirror world of the wider ‘choice’ being offered by the new government. Instant upward social mobility – the carrot ahead of Mrs Thatcher’s stick – gave rise to the second biggest fashion movement of the decade – the yuppie. In his over-sized pinstripe suit, fake Jermyn Street striped shirt, authentic Jermyn Street brogues, hair swept back in brilliantined glory, the yuppie was Cecil Parkinson made manifest, a paradigm of ‘enterprise culture’. Margaret Thatcher, of course, was the yuppie mum; when she railed against the ‘nanny state’ no one seemed to fit the description better than herself.

The new cult of the label ensured that social mobility could be bought off the shelf. It was as if the new regime could not tolerate the social gaffes of the seventies’ *nouveau riche*; the suburban kitsch of purple swivel chairs and ankle-tickling carpets, footballers in kipper ties with a knot as big as your ankle, the tacky Mediterranean tan of medallion man. The label, which was suddenly flipped through fashion’s looking-glass to the outside of the garment, was not

only the apogee of conspicuous consumption, it bestowed the certainty of good taste for which previous *nouveaux* could only grope. Every jumped-up young estate agent or futures-dealer knew to aspire to Paul Smith and Giorgio Armani and had the readies to buy them. Acute as ever, the Japanese coined a word for the label 'junky' – *miha* – a condition venerated in the 'shopping and fucking' novel, a genre dedicated to making the latter as mundane as the former.

While the yuppie aped ruling-class tradition – the big shouldered, double-breasted business suit, the yachting blazer, polished black Oxfords from the quad – the country's male elite did not surrender up its threadbare wardrobe so easily. Though it occasionally toyed with yuppie and Euroman – Prince Charles in an Italian suit, a junior cabinet minister in gaudy tie – it mainly retrenched itself in dull tradition; barbour and wellies signify rural squirehood, old school ties and Tricker's hunting slippers a style that can't be bought from French design houses. The need to be seen as pre-yuppie money made the Sloane Ranger a fêted species for a few years, and called into being shops like Hackett's to supply young fogeys with the requisite gnobly tweed jacket and itchy tattersall shirt.

The biggest male fashion movement of the eighties was inevitably not among the newly enfranchised but among the dispossessed millions who piled up the unemployment statistics. Unemployment as much as aesthetics ushered in the era of the anorak, trainer and jeans as the bog-standard garb of the working-class/unemployed service-sector GBM. Cheap, practical, hard-wearing, the look also identified with the macho heroism of le rocker, with the icons of Dean, Brando, Presley, and with eighties' counterparts like Springsteen and Cruise, and is now Regular Guy garb from Hong Kong to Hounslow to Houston, all of which watch the same Levi's ads.

While jeans and a C&A bomber were what grown-up poor people wore, there were more studied responses to the stick of new austerity that accompanied the yuppie carrot; exquisitely torn jeans adorned the 'Hard Times' cover of *The Face*, while the long macs and second-hand suits of the 'Oxfam brigade', with their doomy Joy Division rock and George Orwell haircuts, made a suitable fanfare for the advent of the dreaded 1984. In one sense Oxfam chic was a lament for the passing of the old working-class certainties, much like Bleasdale's *Boys from the Blackstuff*. From here on in, the only mufflers and hobnail boots to be seen were in the haywain and haircut films of the Heritage industry, alongside Rupert Everett in Eton crop, linen shirt and braces.

The effects of the new right's social engineering aside, there were other, and perhaps more significant forces at work, to which the 'menswear revolution' was in part a response. Central has been the concept of the 'new man'. Sounding like a term from Nazi ideology, the term implied no less fundamental a transformation of human nature; the creation of the post-feminist, non-sexist

male. Like the thousand year Reich, one suspects the 'new man' is a doomed idea. His begetting, however, was unavoidable. The rise of feminism and the advances of the women's movement demanded some kind of response from men, however feeble. The 'male feminist' proved deeply creepy and unappealing to both genders, not least because of his unsexy 'woollyback' wardrobe.

Indeed, sartorial matters proved deeply troubling to most sectors of the left during the eighties, from the 'disgrace' of Michael Foot's donkey jacket at the Cenotaph to the accusations of yuppie sell-out that greeted the arrival of Neil Kinnock's groomed and fragrant Red Rose Rallies, and their overseer, the ever dapper Peter Mandelson. Citizen Ken Livingstone, in his fawns and flares, exemplified GBM drabnitude and politically died, while GLC lawyer and dandy Paul Boateng prospered in Gaultier. Tony Benn, in his DMs and button-downs, maintained an even keel. As for the donkey jacket, it started the eighties on the back of *Socialist Worker* street sellers, and ended as a double-page advertisement for Liberty's, replete with paisley shoulders.

The new man was always as much the creation of women as of men, a kind of projected animus that roamed the rails of menswear looking for fun, eventually becoming a well-dressed *yeti*, a mythical creature thought to exist, much speculated upon, occasionally sighted, but damnably evasive. A few years ago I conducted a straw poll of female acquaintances on the subject of the new man. 'I know they wear Paul Smith,' said one magazine editor, 'but I've never met one.' 'A friend of mine went out with one once,' went another typical answer, 'but it didn't work out.'

Though at first it seemed like a media fad – set 'em up with the picture of a tender, bare-chested hunk holding a baby, then shoot 'em down when reality fails to follow suit – the new man has proved more enduring than expected. Deeply in touch with his anima, and the suppressed female side of his nature, yet retaining the admirable male values of paternity, strength, and virility, he continues to haunt the sexual arena. At first he was derided as a wimp, the real-life victim of the symbolic castration of men by feminism. New man also became gay collaborator. Pop's 'gender bender' boom of the early eighties – Phil Oakey of the Human League in lipstick, Boy George in frocks – was followed by Jean Paul Gaultier's celebrated 'men in skirts', while stylist Ray Petri put his *Face* male pin-ups in DMs and boxer shorts. For a while 'new man' became father, a young buck saddled with a baby but taking on his responsibility, as in the numerous baby movies of late eighties' Hollywood (*Raising Arizona*, *Three Men and a Baby*, etc.), while film and rock stars increasingly took to posing with their offspring.

Most recently the new man has become realist rake, a style exemplified by Jonathan Ross (whose early success revolved as much around his exemplary wardrobe as his show). This is essentially 'new man' as lad, though the new

rake is as likely to be in steady partnership or marriage as on the tiles; he takes his commitments seriously. He is not, however, neutered, and wears his sexuality proudly. He is steeped in the realpolitik, rather than the ideology, of sexual relations, and he is increasingly the focus of the men's magazines, where the traditions of collective male lust are refined and renewed in articles like 'Measure your manhood without using a ruler' (*GQ*), or 'Girls Girls Girls, one hundred women we'd die for' (*Arena*), or 'Women we'd like to take to lunch' (*Esquire*). It is one of the ironies of the male press that while outvying each other in red-blooded heterosexuality, and murmuring asides to their female readers, their substantial gay readership is addressed only through homoerotic fashion plates (which are often posed, styled and snapped by gay men).

The men's mags depend in part on men's newly found self-consciousness about their appearance and identity, but they have also given women new ideas about the shape of their menfolk, who have learned for the first time how it feels to be measured against the male equivalent of the dolly model. 'Why don't you look more like this?' ask the women, dangling a shot of some cleft-chinned animal beauty draped in a grand's worth of Hamnett. As the decade wore on the subject of female erotica and pornography became an increasingly popular media hunting ground, an evolution of the growing power of women to dress (or undress) men. This was no longer confined to a devoted wife's selection of a tie for an important occasion (scene from a thousand old films) but became a full-scale invasion of menswear by female designers like Westwood, Hamnett, Cappellino and Farhi, though all modified rather than revolutionised the central tenets of menswear, and were often dismayed by the conservatism of the male market.

Another major social current to which British menswear has responded is race, and the emancipation of a new generation of black Britons has been as central to fashion as it has to sport and entertainment. In fact black Britain could be said to be the synthesis of all three. One origin of the now ubiquitous sportswear is reggae chic in the late seventies; when Bob Marley started posing in his football gear and donned a red, gold and green tracksuit he set in motion more than he knew. By the early eighties tracksuit 'n' trainer was in vogue in ghettos from Watts to Moss-side, and has remained the staple fare of hip-hop ever since: Run DMC (who composed 'My Adidas' and were rewarded by sponsorship from the company); Public Enemy, LL Cool J - all have worked out in sportswear.

In general, though, seventies' UK black style was overturned; 'earthman' shoes, ex-army 'jungle greens', woolly hats and other signifiers of ethnicity and militancy were abandoned for the language of emancipation: crisp Italian suits, or the MA1 jackets, gold chains and hi-top trainers of Afro-Americana. Outclassing the 'grey boys' in the 'gears' stakes became a matter of pride; Frank Bruno's Saville Row suits, Lenny Henry's comic character 'Delbert' with his

'sponditious' trousers and 'crucial' jackets, the fact that the sharpest shop assistants on the King's Road were usually black; all were outcrops of the same mood.

The rediscovery of jazz (another aspect of the wider retro mood) brought other traditions of black dress to the fore. The Zoot Suit, the embodiment of bagginess, was re-cast by the likes of Blue Rondo a La Turk, led by Wag Club founder Chris Sullivan and dressed by Demob, who were an impressive example of sartorial form over musical content. Be-bop threads were back, along with young men with horns, dusky chanteuses, and clubs wreathed in blue cigarette smoke. The romanticism of jazz was evoked in lager adverts, pop videos, fashion shoots, film flops like *Absolute Beginners* and box-office hits like *Bird* and *Round Midnight*. Miles Davis, a leading edge rake since the forties, was on T-shirts in his 1961 mohair suit and in Gap adverts in his 1991 incarnation.

British jazz was riven apart by all this, caught up in a style wars squall beyond its comprehension. Young poseurs who knew more about Charlie Parker's wardrobe than his solos were one thing, but the new breed of talented black players who now came to symbolise British jazz – Courtney Pine, Steve Williamson – also dressed with poise, insisting that the average jazzbo's grubby T-shirt, unkempt beard and beer-soaked jeans showed 'lack of respect' for the music. Appropriately, Williamson's 1990 debut LP was launched at Armani's Brompton Road salon.

Black designers also appeared; several of them, like Charlie Allen, part of the tradition of Caribbean tailoring. This was also the case with Jazzy B of Soul II Soul, whose successful bid for World Domination was launched not by the group playing live (indeed, there were no musicians, just DJs, tapes and singers), but by fashion shows, dancers and clothes shops; the most intimate collusion of pop and rag trade since Westwood and the Sex Pistols.

Male fashion continues to be more influenced by music and movies than by fashion houses, which is why the Italians love to wardrobe *Miami Vice* or *The Untouchables*. Rolling up suit sleeves came in with Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' and continues to sort out the lads from the yuppies; rockers (other than teddy boys) rarely feel comfortable in suits. Both rocker and mod looks prospered through the early and middle eighties. The Reaganite return to the Cold War fifties (the last time the United States felt good about itself), ushered in an era of quiffs and shaved necks, of pumping iron and hulking physiques in 'power suits' with shoulders like cliff tops (Superman also returned). The transformation of Bruce Springsteen from wispy-bearded wimp to muscular Joe Six-pack in motorcycle boots and bandana, yawping 'Born in the USA', exemplifies the shirt. There are numerous rocker cults – billy, punk, metal, etc. – but the uniform remains essentially the same. Le rocker survives partly because it is tight, which despite a decade of flapping Yohjis, is still what most Westerners consider sexy.

The influence of British Mod was more subtle, and was tangled up with US retromania and the appropriation of the preppy look by continental Europe, but it was no less pervasive. Several eighties' fashion shakers had mod backgrounds. Paul Smith, *Face*-founder Nick Logan, stylist Ray Petri and numerous retailers had spent their youth as clothes-obsessed moddy boys in loafers and Fred Perrys. Paul Smith's creations were basically updates of mod, with a nod to the Edwardian world of the traditional gent's outfitters; Smith bought up stocks of old shop fittings to give his shops the requisite glow of burnished wood, and was also able to capitalise on the established rag trade of his native Nottingham.

The clothes which sixties mods yearned for were mostly hard to obtain US imports – shrink-to-fit Levi's, loafers, wing-tip brogues, Fred Perry tops, Ivy League suits, button-down shirts – which in the United States were the uniform of the collegiate middle class, the North American equivalent of Jermyn Street respectability. This was the 'tradition' which Ralph Lauren now sold the world, along with manly, check lumber shirts, hiking boots and other trappings of the Western Frontier, and a logo which suggested you belonged to the polo-playing classes. Though the package was as hokum as the ranch Lauren bought himself (importing mature trees to show how long the place had been around), it was popular, not least with his European imitators.

Suddenly every shirt, every pair of chinos (another preppy item to achieve mass popularity) had a label boasting their maker's pedigree. Blousons sported lettering in pidgin English claiming that the wearer belonged to the Saskatchewan Husky Trading Company or some other unlikely institution. Crested blazers and naval brass buttons replaced such homely 1920s obsessions of the seventies as Fair Isle jumpers, tweed baggies, collarless shirts and Hovis ads.

Today, the mod/preppy tradition is the *lingua franca* of menswear, the skeletal wardrobe of most men who consider themselves 'dressers', and what people mean when they drop that over-used epithet 'classics with a twist'. One of the greatest achievements of this twist – apart from making some beautiful, though often over-priced clothes – is extending the range of men's accessories with which to dress up one's 'classic'. Braces, cufflinks, belts, scarves, handkerchiefs, watches, socks, hats, fountain pens, wallets and more all became available in a variety unprecedented since the days of Jeeves and Wooster. The intricacies of the Edwardian 'gentleman's wardrobe' now became available on every high street, right down to the foreseen production and style.

Mod culture proper, which since its sixties' heyday had mutated through skinheads, soul boys, the Mod Revival (The Jam et al.) and Two-Tone (Specials et al.), re-emerged in the eighties as the Casual. The casual shared his predecessors' predilection for neatness and elitism, for soul music and dancing, for dress that could pass muster both sides of the wire; respectable in suburban shopping centres but loaded with detail and meaning for the initiate. His

clothes sense, though, was oriented more to Italy and France than to North America. He brought guile and violence to the cult of the *miha*, 'taxing' other casuals by quite literally stealing the clothes off their backs, while it was folklore that the most violent football hooligans were the most expensively dressed (much to the initial bafflement of the police and public, who still expected their hoodlums to be shaven-skulled boot boys). Influential on the growth of the casual was the continuing success of English football teams, particularly Liverpool, in European competition. Hordes of English 'away' supporters fell ravenously upon the boutiques of Bologna, Milan, Naples and Rome, pillaging them for Armani, LaCoste and Fiorucci with which to out-trump the terraces of domestic rivals.

Three successive 'summers of love' from 1988 to 1990 wrecked the tribal distinctions of young Britain, which imploded under the impact of 'rave' culture and the widespread use of Ecstasy as clubland's, and later rock and roll's, drug of choice. The fashion consequences were immediate and widespread, as the hot-weather minimalism of surf shorts, fluorescent T-shirt, bandana and baseball boots undermined label-based elitism, the first of several knock-backs for the fashion industry. Spending disposable income on 'E' and warehouse parties (neither particularly cheap) simply proved more rewarding for many than splashing £80 for a Comme des Garçons shirt.

The new baggy, unisex look of loose jeans, long-sleeved T-shirt ('the fashion garment of the nineties', according to John Galliano) and Wallaby shoes proved massively popular, and ushered in a hippy influence last sighted at the start of the seventies. Pop likewise headed back to the sixties, rather than to the fifties, for inspiration; to jangling guitars, mop top beat groups with pouting lips (Stone Roses, Charlatans, etc.). The ghosts of Hendrix and Morrison prowled again; the former as soundtrack to a Wrangler ad, the latter in Oliver Stone's *The Doors* biopic. The sixties had become a *verboden* zone under Thatcher, decried by Norman Tebbit and chief constables as the root of our societal problems. Things had unravelled dangerously under their 'permissive' sway; everything from AIDS to the Crime Wave to left-wing subversives in education could be traced back to the same sixties root. Made taboo, the lure of the sixties proved too tempting to ignore, while under the onslaught of deepening eco-crisis, the rural and spiritual orientation of hippiedom looked less dippy than for a decade.

The menswear boutiques have shifted accordingly; the flowered shirt made an unexpectedly widespread return, leather has given way to suede, shaved necks to floppy fringes. More than ever, it seems, male Britain is divided into two breeds: those who wear suits to work and those who don't. The rag trade itself has been hard hit by the recession, and with the removal of Mrs Thatcher from office, the 'menswear revolution' is starting to look as much of a mirage as the 'economic miracle'. Already the Thatcher years look like a distant and

time-bound era, and are presented as an inexplicable aberration even by Cabinet ministers who presided over them. The sartorial codes are shifting too; Mrs Thatcher's taste for fine clothes had been one of her trademarks (reaching its pinnacle during her last few weeks, when her outfits became more and more lavish); now we have the epoch of the 'men in grey suits', as her supplanters became known. And who more grey, more Great British Male, than John Major himself, in his dull serges and M & S white shirts. This is government by bank manager, the day of reckoning after the spending spree. The golden age of menswear may already be over.