

ROBYN GIBSON WITH PAUL DUFFICY, DAVID SMITH,
LAURENCE COY AND JOSHUA BARNES

A HISTORY OF MEN'S SUITS: AN INTERLUDE

I recently took my 20 year old son, Beau 'suit-shopping.' We had purchased a non-descript suit for his Year 11 formal in 2009. It had fulfilled a purpose and was never worn again. With his teenage years behind him, he wanted a 'proper suit.' His only requirement being charcoal grey; mine being one that didn't cost the earth.

Entering the men's wear section of our local department store, we were confronted by a sea of black and navy apparel. Moving aimlessly between the rows of jackets and trousers searching for something distinctive; something memorable. What could easily have become an exercise in fruitility, we were rescued by Mrs Chen, a petite Asian woman whose mind seemed crammed with useful morsels concerning men's suits. Having ascertained Beau's size at a glance, we now advanced towards some grey tailored jackets. Donning his correct size, Mrs Chen looked over her spectacles and informed him that it looked "like a school blazer." What about black? he murmured. She was having none of that either. Her considered response? "You can wear a black suit to your Mother's funeral." Our shopping expedition seemed to be going nowhere, fast.

Sensing our disappointment, she relented her attack and suggested "something new and modern; something suitable for a young man."

Gone in a flash, she returned armed with a slate blue suit jacket. She manoeuvred behind Beau and effortlessly slipped the jacket onto his tall, slim frame. Cautiously approaching the floor length mirror, he scrutinised his reflection – turning this way and that. It was then that I witnessed an instant bond between man and suit. Looking at the label, I grimaced when I read 'Pierre Cardin.' I calmed myself by examining the jacket's fine details, the pale blue Damask lining and matching handkerchief square in the breast pocket. Matching trousers were located and Mrs Chen began to croon. "Oh my. Don't you look handsome?" And with every compliment, I saw a young man grow taller and more confident.

So, we exited that department store with a slate blue suit, Beatlesque in style that seemed somewhat fitting for a budding musician? And it was at that point that I started to ponder – what is the relationship between men and suits

and what memories are carefully folded and kept in the right breast jacket pocket?

The modern suit has a complex lineage. It began in England during the 18th century through the production of military uniforms. The precision of these uniforms eventually resulted in Saville Row in London. The Saville Row tailors began to introduce various design elements from military garments into civilian clothing. The flat lapel evolved from flattening the traditional stand-up collar on British navy frock coats that were designed to keep out the cold. The buttons on cuffs were designed for 19th century surgeons who needed to roll up their sleeves to avoid blood stains (Chertoff, 2012) since taking off one's jacket would have been out of the question. Working in skirt-sleeves was for tradesmen. In fact, the now familiar vents at the back of suit jackets were added for Victorian horse-riding enthusiasts.

Hindsight led me to realise I'd spent a good part of my first 18 years in a uniform of one sort or another. OK, I did finish my HSC and within two days was working as a bus conductor (in a uniform). The elusive voice of foresight told me that, given the choice, and when I was done with bus conducting, a suit was not for me. So I found a job that didn't require a suit and I attended weddings and funerals in whatever I cobbled together. But then when I was 52 the lure of the East once more took hold and I was advised a suit was the uniform of these Recruitment Fairs. So I bought one. Wore it once, got the job, suit left in Australia. My next job interview for a job in Thailand, when I was 57, was by phone – not even Skype – so the suit sulked in the closet. A week before I left for Thailand my mum died. I wore my suit to her funeral. My brother and sisters asked me why, after so many years, and after so many rants about conformity with my parents, I chose to wear a suit. I couldn't answer them. And still wonder why. (Paul Dufficy)

Influential in the evolution of men's fashion was Beau Brummell (1778-1840), a military officer in the 18th century who enjoyed the fit of military uniforms. When he left the military, he continued to return to his tailor to create clothing specific to 19th century fashion. Brummell is often associated with the emergence of the dandy movement (see Gibson's chapter on "Dali's 'Fashion Memories' of Fashion"), a subculture that focused on perfection in cut, perfection in fit (Long, 2013).

'Wow!' I am overwhelmed just looking at the rows and rows of beautifully made sets of pants and jackets in fabrics that had to be felt to be believed and a range of colours that would make your head spin.

It was February 1961 in Cronulla, a southern beachside suburb of Sydney. I was just 17 years old, having completed my Leaving Certificate only months before and next week I was leaving for Bathurst Teachers' College. Here I was with my Mum and she was buying for me, her eldest son, a suit. Shopping with Mum was pretty special – if a bit embarrassing. It had never happened before. But shopping for a suit was a new experience and there was a strange mix of feelings associated with the occasion. It was the first suit I

had ever owned. Until now the only jacket I had ever worn was a second-hand school blazer: expensive formal end of school functions in even more expensive attire were not yet part of the final years of school culture!

For the last good few years all my clothes I had bought myself with money I earned from a number of part-time jobs. With four hungry mouths to feed and my Dad working four jobs I felt guilty that my working class Mum had to fork out the exorbitant amount of twenty quid to buy me a suit to take to teachers' college. But it was one of the specified pieces of required apparel.

Some of those feelings of reservations did pale as I tried on a number of suits of different styles, fabrics and colours. I can clearly still remember the soft feel of the fabrics against my skin, feelings that were entirely dissimilar to the rough feel of the school uniforms that I had worn for the previous five years.

Although awed by the occasion, I still felt I had to be selective. After all, I considered myself, within my limits, to be a reasonably sharp dresser: a rocker, with an Elvis hair curl who liked tapered legs and pointy toe shoes – still like them, although it is a bit hard now to fit the 70 year old body into them! So finally we settled on a wool single-breasted suit in a dark green with muted darker stripes, three buttons and tapered cuffless legs. I felt very proud and looked forward to wearing it on many future occasions.

I did wear it on many occasions to numerous practice teaching assignments, to graduation from Bathurst Teachers' College and to my first wedding. All of these were positive and uplifting celebratory occasions, at the time. However, the first time I wore that suit was only a few months later, to my mothers' funeral. I will never forget my first suit and the memories and experiences buried in its warp and weft. (David Smith)

Saville Row tailors estimate it was about 150 years ago when elements of the various predecessors of the modern suit wove themselves into a single garment (Kraegen, 2011). From the Industrial Revolution, the businessman was born. He required a suit that conveyed a sense of respectability combined with productivity. As a result, the suit became quite sombre, devoid of any embellishment and almost always black; a man's standard corporate ensemble.

Throughout the 40s and 50s, the trend was to simplify and modernise the suit. *The New York Times Style Magazine* describes one iconic suit of the era the grey flannel suit:

Back in 1955, when denim was the height of rebelliousness, Sloan Wilson's novel *The man in the gray flannel suit* turned a man's classic into a synonym for drab, middle-class conformity ... Flannel had humble beginnings ... It was used for underwear in the 19th century. In the 1880s white flannel was worn for summer sports; by the 1920s the more seasonless gray had become a favourite. When the Prince of Wales wore gray flannel trousers on his 1924 trip to America, they were aped by collegiate on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Cary Grant and Fred Astaire then carried the trend through to the 1940s. (Bryan, 2009, n.p.)

In the late 1960s, the Nehru jacket made its appearance and was worn by many trendy males. In the 1970s, the fitted three-piece suit became popular once again. Most equate this tight suit with discotheque music and culture popularised by the film *Saturday Night Fever*. It featured exaggerated lapels and flared trousers often in white or brightly coloured polyester fabric.

Thirty five years ago I was nineteen. I could run for hours without pain; I could drink beer all night while listening to loud music; and, incredulous to me now, I enjoyed conversation with other nineteen year olds. I can't remember doing any of these things but there is photographic evidence.

What I do remember about those days is being released into the adult world and being hopeless at everything. Starting at the bottom was traumatising when I'd only recently been near the top as a school boy. And progression through the ranks seemed so arduous, slow and random for those who managed it. But one had to work. Going out cost money. Some of my friends even had careers.

So after picking up glasses in pubs, working on a car production line, waiting tables, handing out brochures, labouring, delivering milk, washing cars and caddying on a golf course – you can only imagine my thrill at being offered a Retail Cadetship with a chain of department stores. I had a future!

A year later, aged twenty, I'd worked on the shop floor in various departments in the big city store; I'd done a stint in the distribution warehouse out west; I'd gained experience in a smaller suburban branch and now I was posted to the buying office. And I loved it in the buying office. In the buying office there was no humiliating red vest to identify me as a customer servant, or compulsory safety clothing to make me feel like a potential statistic. In the buying office, we were businessmen. We were the face of the company to its suppliers. People flattered us and bought us lunch to get us to stock their bookcases, rugs and haberdashery. We were out on the road visiting factories and passing judgement on the quality of merchandise. We spent someone else's money. And we wore suits.

The only thing standing between me and complete immersion in the buying office culture was not owning a suit. I managed to avoid the issue for a while but I didn't want to look like a trainee. I wanted to look like the successful person I wanted people to see me as. I wanted to be a grown up.

So with a budget of \$60 I went to David Jones one Thursday night after work and hunted down a suit.

I had a few references in my head from movies I'd seen. At the forefront were 'Saturday Night Fever,' 'The Stud,' and 'American Gigolo.' It was sale time and mass produced synthetic garments were just starting to flood the

market so I was delighted to find my \$60 was going to take me a long way towards looking like the disco pimp I was fantasizing about. After watching me try on three or four white three piece suits my helpful sales assistant pointed out that this style, while elegant, wasn't quite right for the office. So I tried on a couple of navy blue three pieces, a grey polyester flannel, a nylon Prince of Wales check – but they just weren't Richard Gere enough. With only ten minutes to go before the shop closed I made my decision. It was a Trent Nathan four piece suit – beige and chocolate houndstooth jacket and waistcoat with two pairs of plain beige 'slacks.' I teamed it with a cream polyester shirt with brown buttons and a collar that looked like a seagull in full flight. The tie was a very long and wide caramel and dark brown paisley. My budget didn't extend to footwear so my battered black school shoes had to last another couple of years.

My mother for many years made a dessert that consisted of vanilla ice cream with smashed Violet Crumble bars stirred through it. Looking back, my outfit looked a lot like that dish. (Laurence Coy)

The clothes worn on the television series *Miami Vice* had a significant influence on men's fashion during the 80s (Janeshutz, 1986). 'Sonny' Crockett (Don Johnson) and Ricardo Tubbs (Phillip Michael Thomas) popularised the T-shirt worn under an Armani jacket style. Don Johnson's typical attire on the show usually included an Italian sport coat, T-shirt, white linen pants and slip-on sockless loafers. In an typical episode, Crockett and Tubbs wore five to eight outfits appearing in pastel shades of green, blue, peach, fuchsia and pink which reflected Miami's art deco architecture (Trebay, 2006).

I bought my first suit in the dying days of the 90s. My 21st birthday was coming up and while this North Queensland boy had evolved to wearing long pants, a suit was a very big thing.

I can still remember the feeling of wearing my first suit jacket loaned to me by my Mum's boss when I was just 14. It was like being offered a precious object or given the keys to sit in a big Mercedes. A whole other layer of clothing, angular and precise. I felt important; handsome for the first time. My chest puffing up to fill the space in the suit.

Age 20, I set out with money promised to me by my Grandparents. Whisked into the upper reaches of the Wintergarden Centre, off Brisbane's Queen Street Mall, my first ever boyfriend took me to buy my first ever suit. It all happened very quickly. I have a memory of the shop attendant – a tall sharp silvery man who I had seen in the nightclubs of the Valley. A glass encased room filled with rows and rows of suits. I tried to behave with aplomb, hiding my nerves with loud confident tones that attempted to tell the man what my style was.

My first suit was a stony bone ensemble. Rather square with three buttons, wide shoulders and un-pleated pants that I thought were sleek and hot. I wore

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it accompanied by a tight black round necked long sleeve shirt – bucking the expectations that I needed a collar and tie. I wore my suit two nights in a row for the two parties that my parents had put on to mark my coming of age and I don't think it was worn again.

Soon after, I left to travel around the world. (Joshua Barnes)

According to Timothy Long, curator of fashion at the *Museum of London*, London's influence on the development of men's fashion continues. Postwar subculture from the Teddy Boys to the Mods and the Punks “reinterpret, deconstruct and subvert the meanings and codes of the modern suit” (2013, n.p.). For some, the suit represents power; for others a ‘gilded cage.’ “But it has spent a century and a half at the pinnacle of men's fashion, leaving no room for debate – the suit remains the ultimate symbol of style and machismo” (Kraegen, 2011, p. 1).

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