



REVOLUTIONARY DRESS
PRESENTS

THE
CIVIL RIGHTS
MOVEMENT



THIS IS REVOLUT DRESS



A collection and conversation about social and political movements through the lens of what people wore. We're looking at the ways dress has been used as a strategic tool of politics, protest, resistance and revolution, across countries, cultures, and communities of the past and today.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION & MORE ZINES LIKE
THIS ONE VISIT [\(insert url here\)](#)!**



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DRESS is a powerful window into so many aspects of human life and behavior. By studying what people wore, we can look for clues that help us understand their daily experiences, beliefs, values, social structures and so much more. We can use what we've learned about past people and movements to inform our choices today, and better recognize how our dress can be one tool amongst many in our collective fight toward liberation.

NO, WE DON'T MEAN THAT KIND OF DRESS. While a dress is a specific kind of garment in which a top and skirt are connected in one piece of clothing, dress can also be much broader than that. Dress includes all aspects of how someone presents themselves: including clothing, shoes, jewelry, hair, tattoos, perfumes, and other accessories like headwear or bags. Just like "getting dressed" doesn't always mean putting on a literal dress, dress can apply to all aspects of how you look and how others perceive you.

Time to slip on your Sunday shoes and dust off that suit and tie! Not much of a formal dresser? Denim overalls will do the trick too! We're headed into the heart of the Civil Rights movement, to uncover some major differences in the dress styles of key leaders and what that says about their views of Black liberation at the time.

IN THE 1950S AND 60S, Black Americans are organizing all over the United States to demand equal rights, in the face of widespread discrimination, segregation and racist violence, much of which is allowed and even encouraged by politicians and wealthy white people at the time.



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Two of the prominent, leading organizations of the Civil Rights movement are the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (S.C.L.C.), which was founded and led by Black religious leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.), founded by students and faculty with the goal of giving young people a voice in the movement.⁶

Both groups use dress as part of their organizing strategy, to

communicate their beliefs and show solidarity beyond what can be said with words. However, the unique ways each group chooses to dress gives us clues about conflicting views, generational differences, and the evolution of the movement for civil rights at the time.



SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE



MEMBERS:

Martin Luther King Jr, Septima Clark, mostly ministers & churchgoers

SUNDAY BEST



modest & “respectable” clothing, formal attire fit for attending church, middle class aesthetics: put together, but not too fancy²

“...there remained a clear sense of what respectable attire was; it included items like **stockings, cardigan sweaters, skirts & dresses, pearl necklaces, & modestly heeled pumps...**”¹





SUNDAY BEST SYMBOLISM:

- ✦ Combats racist depictions of Black people as immoral, lazy & unkempt²
- ✦ Symbolizes the gravity of the movement & desire to be taken seriously²
- ✦ **Press tactic** to make police & white supremacists look worse for roughing up well-dressed, peaceful protesters
- ✦ Reclaims Black dignity & status⁴



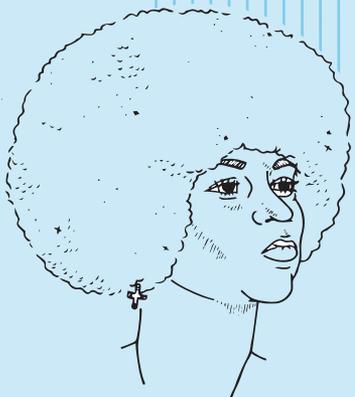
PRESS TACTIC: using media and news coverage strategically to your advantage

“We thought that by dressing more conservatively we would be taken more seriously. People wanted to be respected.

DR. DARIUS SWANN

Civil Rights Activist





MEMBERS:

Stokely Carmichael (a.k.a. Kwame Ture), Ella Baker, Julian Bond, mostly college students



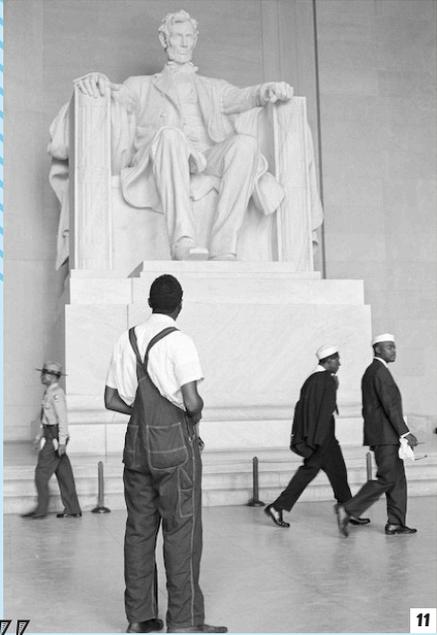
SNCC
SKIN¹



“Sharecropper style,”¹
denim, overalls, plain
white tee shirts or
collared shirts, natural
hair, little/no makeup



STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE



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SNCC men wore **white or light-blue collared work shirts**, and women wore shirts of the same color, with petite collars. Both genders wore **denim pants or overalls** (some women wore denim skirts).¹¹

SNCC SKIN SYMBOLISM:

- ✦✦ Solidarity with Black poor/working class people
- ✦✦ Comfort and utility for protests, demonstrations & organizing
- ✦✦ Vision for a society without class or gender
- ✦✦ Pride in African American legacy, culture & labor



"We used [denim] to identify with the sharecroppers which we were helping organize."¹¹

DEBBIE AMIS BELL

SNCC student volunteer

While SCLC and SNCC were largely fighting for the same things and often standing alongside each other, their differences in dress represent crucial differences in their visions of liberation and strategies for achieving it—all of which were mostly split along generational lines, especially amongst the leadership.



The older generations of the SCLC saw dressing respectfully as a way to challenge white supremacy.⁴ Their formal attire did not beg for respect, but rather demanded it. The “Sunday best” and “middle class” aesthetics were the SCLC’s way to reclaim the dignity and status that had so long been kept from them and their ancestors in chattel slavery, a time when there were real laws

barring enslaved people from dressing “above the condition of slaves.”⁴

In addition, many SCLC members saw SNCC’s denim dress as inauthentic and romanticizing poverty, since SNCC was mainly comprised of college-educated students who had not experienced poverty themselves.



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"When I was growing up, we were poor. But we were clean, and we took great pride in the way we dressed and looked. Stokely and his American friends, who are not poor, dress like vagabonds. Stokely wears dirty jeans and torn jackets. He and his friends say that being dirty and wearing tattered clothes means that a person identifies with the masses. This makes me mad, because it is just wrong and it sounds patronizing."¹

MIRIAM MAKEBA //

South African singer, activist

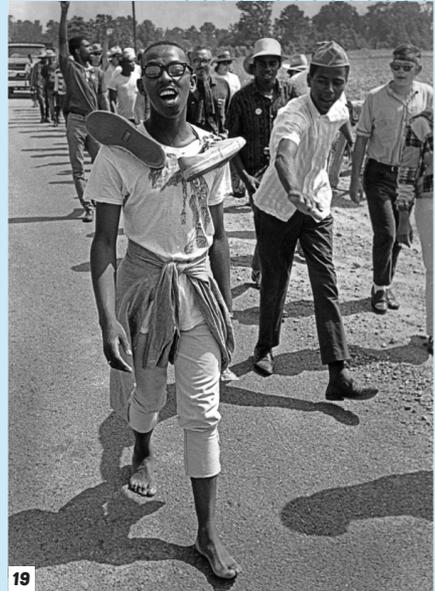


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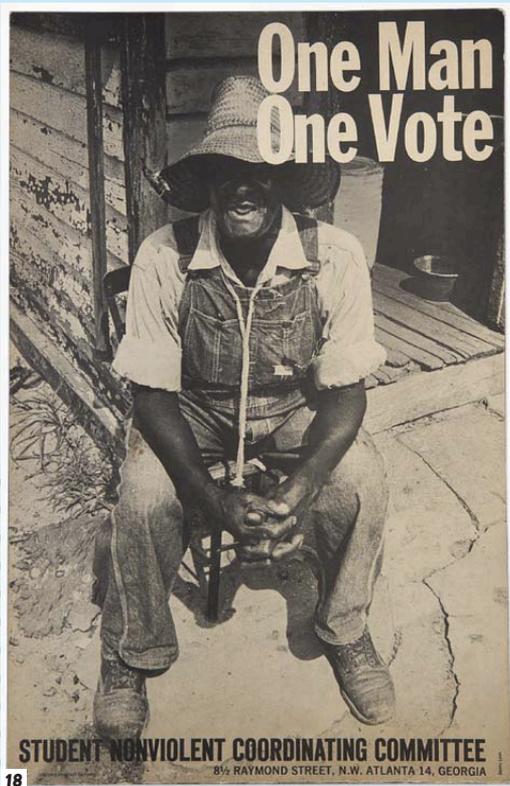
"We were talking to people in work clothes. We wanted to be in work clothes too. Why is anybody going to really listen to anyone all dressed up in the middle of a cotton field? Yes, we were from a university, but we saw ourselves as workers, and we were doing work. So did we want to dress up like we were there for Sunday church social? Not us. Not then."²

IRA STOHLMAN

SNCC student volunteer



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The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was started to give Black students and youth more of a voice in the Civil Rights movement. Just like the SCLC, they saw the power their clothing could have when it came to organizing for liberation. But they also saw the limitations of “Sunday best” dress and wanted to try something new.



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SNCC understood that if their freedom depended on dressing or presenting themselves a certain way in order to further their cause, then they would never truly be free. True freedom meant equal rights, opportunities and care regardless of their looks, race, gender, or class. They wanted the freedom to be themselves and express themselves without fear of backlash, judgment or violence.

Their denim dress symbolized solidarity with the most marginalized, those who didn't have the wealth or power to dress in middle class attire, receive advanced education, or present themselves in a way that white people deemed acceptable. The sharecropper style was a reminder that no one would be free until they were all free.

REFLECTION

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) knew that dressing in their “Sunday best” would be seen as more respectable than casual dress and meant they would be taken more seriously by government leaders, the media and white society as a whole.

What kinds of clothes or styles are deemed more “respectable” than others today?

Who decides what kind of dress is considered “respectable” in our society?



We learned that both SCLC and SNCC dressed the way they did as a press tactic, so that photos or videos of them in the news and media would communicate a specific message to viewers.

Think about all the anti-police violence demonstrations, actions and protests from summer 2020. **What were some common ways of dressing you noticed either from first-hand experience or from the news, social media etc?**

Were there ways of intentional or strategic dressing in 2020 movements? **What might people be trying to communicate with their dress in these modern movements?**

Can you make any connections to the Civil Rights movements we learned about?



MEET THE ILLUSTRATOR

NICOLETTE SCHWARTZ

Since studying illustration at Columbia College Chicago, artist Nicolette (she/her) shifted her passions into styling vintage clothing and homewares. To keep up with her latest visions, you can follow her on Instagram @nic.O.lette and @rejoycevintage.chi.



DIG DEEPER



READ

1. *SNCC Women, Denim and the Politics of Dress*, Tanisha C Ford
2. *Dressing for Freedom*, Abena L Mhoon
3. “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia,” Angela Davis
4. “The Dress Codes of Respectability,” Richard Thompson Ford
5. *Dress Codes: How the Laws of Fashion Made History*,
Richard Thompson Ford
6. *SNCC Digital Gateway* (snccdigital.org)

PHOTO CREDITS



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