

## **So Sexy and Cool: Military Inspired Dress of Rock and Pop Stars**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper will explore the meaning of uniforms in popular culture. Since the 1960s, rock and pop stars have appeared in military uniforms on stage and in private life which invites the following questions: Why do they choose extravagant military-looking clothes? Is it because of the erotic allure of military uniforms? Do uniforms on stage propagate rebellion against traditional societal values? Or do uniforms in the first place transform rock and popstars to superheroes on stage? Should one regard uniforms as a means of racial and female empowerment? The paper will show that the meaning of uniforms of rock and popstars on and off stage is contingent and alters due to changing social and historical conditions.

When this author gave a paper on the “Beauty in uniform – the creation of ideal masculinity during the 19th century”<sup>1</sup> at the ICOMAM meeting in Brussels in 2006, she looked at uniforms of a bygone era. This article will now explore the contemporary phenomenon of rock and pop stars dressed in costumes that are inspired by military and non-military uniforms. As discussed before, men in uniform have represented ideal masculinity since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The fascination of military uniforms, and their erotic allure has been documented by many contemporaries, such as Jane Austen in her novel “Pride and Prejudice” (1813).<sup>2</sup> Despite all historical and radical changes this fascination has continued until today.<sup>3</sup> It has inspired rock and pop stars to dress in uniforms on and off stage, sometimes in real, sometimes in historical, and very often in flamboyant fantasy uniforms.<sup>4</sup>

The following short essay will discuss different interpretations of military uniforms used by rock and pop stars from the 1960s until today. Why do musicians choose to wear bellicose outfits on stage or during public events? Can one define this as transgression, rebellion or even as sign of political protest? Or do uniform-style costumes turn rock and pop stars into superheroes and cover sexual ambivalence? Or do they propagate gender and racial empowerment? How did the meaning of uniforms on stage change during time?

There are three main arguments explaining the meaning of military inspired dress on stage: 1. transgression-subversion, 2. heroes on stage, 3. costume of empowerment.

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### **Transgression – subversion?**

Several authors claim that the vintage uniform jackets worn by rock stars in the 1960s were a sign of political protest, transgression and subversion.<sup>5</sup> When Eric Clapton, Mick Jagger and Jimi Hendrix bought vintage military jackets in London in 1966 this marked a revolution in fashion.

Suddenly vintage clothes of bygone eras became fashionable. Mick Jagger had bought a red vintage tunic of the Grenadier Guards Corps of Drums richly trimmed with white and blue braids from about 1900 at a store called "I Was Lord Kitchener's Valet" in hip Carnaby Street, London. He only paid 4 to 5 GBP for the tunic. According to the store's director Robert Orbach about 100 people wanted to buy a similar tunic in his store soon after Jagger had worn the stunning tunic on the TV show "Ready Steady Go".<sup>6</sup>

Jimi Hendrix also fell in love with a richly gold thread embroidered and fur trimmed Hussar uniform jacket in the style of an 1850s Hussar *pelisse*. Being willing to pay double the price originally demanded by the shop "I Was Lord Kitchener's Valet" Hendrix payed 200 GBP in order to secure the purchase. Several record covers show him wearing this and other ornamented antique uniform jackets. Gered Mankowitz's portrait photo, which he took of Jimi Hendrix in 1967 clad in the splendid Hussar jacket, became the iconic image of the musician.<sup>7</sup>

Orbach regarded this new fad for vintage military, or military-looking, clothes above all as a sign of jaunty youthful rebellion. He felt that at this time youth was striving to move away from the grey 1950s. Young men began to enjoy colourful fashionable clothes instead. As a consequence, Orbach did not relate the flashy uniforms to serious statements of transgression or subversion, nor did he see a connection to the anti-Vietnam War movement which had started in the USA two years earlier in 1964.<sup>8</sup>

Allen Ginsberg, another contemporary eyewitness, and who has been regarded as the American intellectual leader of the youthful counterculture of the 1960s, also does not interpret the colourful uniforms worn by the Beatles on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band* of 1967 as a form of serious revolt. Instead, he considers the colourful vaudeville uniforms as the youth's desire to leave the horrors of WWII and the "apocalypse of the Bomb" behind. He saw it as sign of a young generation taking its fate in its own hands and looking into a more cheerful future by flouting old authorities.<sup>9</sup>

This attitude changed only a few years later. In 1971, John Lennon wore a US-military shirt clearly in order to publicly protest against the Vietnam War. John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono actively took part in the Anti-Vietnam War movement. They had transformed their honeymoon into a public performance in 1969 which they called "Bed-ins for Peace" promoting the motto "Make Love not War". On this occasion, Lennon and Yoko Ono wrote and performed the song "Give peace a chance" which became an anthem of the anti-Vietnam War movement. During an interview with Lennon and Ono on the Dick Cavett show in 1971, Lennon wore an original US-Military OG-107 fatigue utility shirt. It was a gift from Andrew Reinhardt, a former US Army-Sergeant, who had served in Korea and Vietnam. Lennon had met him at a German airport in 1971, when Reinhardt had just left the army. The shirt is decorated with badges awarding Reinhardt for his action in the Korean war.<sup>10</sup> Lennon wore this shirt often in public and during his legendary performance in the "One to One" concert in Madison Square Garden in 1972, where he performed his two famous anti-war songs "Imagine" and "Give Peace a Chance".<sup>11</sup>

By dressing in a real army shirt John Lennon was obviously inspired by Vietnam veterans who were wearing their old US Army shirts in order to protest against the Vietnam War. For instance, American veterans wore US Army shirts in casual ways when they returned their war medals in order to protest against the Vietnam War in Washington D.C. in 1971. As the anti-war movement grew, and as more and more Vietnam veterans joined the demonstrations in their old army clothes, the wearing of ragged military parkas and tunics became a sign of anti-war statement and was picked up by many pacifist youngsters around the world. Therefore, it is justified to speak of transgression and subversion in the context of John Lennon wearing a real military shirt on stage.

## Heroes on stage

How did military uniforms function as costumes on stage in the following decades? According to Donatella Barbieri, who wrote one of the few theoretical texts on stage costume, dress on stage is important for the performance as it is able “to communicate metaphorically and viscerally” and “provides a direct, visual, and embodied connection to the audience”.<sup>12</sup> Mick Jagger confirmed this in an interview when he claimed that clothes are an integral part of his performing on stage. He feels that clothes are particularly crucial for the lead singer and transform him into the star on stage. “If they (the clothes) are wrong you are in trouble”, Jagger once stated in an interview.<sup>13</sup>

By the 1980s, the meaning of uniforms on stage had changed again. The student revolt and protests had declined after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Now, uniforms on stage transformed rock and pop stars into heroes on stage, if not into superheroes. Uniforms transcend the body of a mortal musician into an awe-inspiring superhero. According to Andrew Bolton superheroes have enjoyed widespread popularity because they project our fantasies, they escape the “banal, ordinary, and the quotidian” and offer “virtuosic transcendence beyond the moribund and utilitarian”.<sup>14</sup>

Freddie Mercury may be regarded as such a superhero on stage. He frequently wore stage costumes inspired by uniforms. His famous “rock soldier” uniform created by Diana Moseley for the Queen’s “Magic” tour in 1986 is clearly inspired by military uniforms. His costume produced a perfect, virile masculine body: a short bright yellow jacket emphasized a slender waist, epaulettes or shoulder pieces created broad shoulders, and gold and red *lampasses* (trouser stripes) decorated the side seams of his white trousers accentuating long and strong legs. Straps, gold buckles and gold bullion trim recalled the disciplining effect of the tight-fitting uniforms of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, here intriguingly combined with the cut of a casual Levi jeans jacket. Mercury, a former design student with some experience in fashion design, was interested in the design process of his costumes and worked closely on the design together with his stage costume designer Diana Moseley. An article of GQ in 2018 still praised the flamboyant style of Mercury’s stage costumes calling this “rock soldier” outfit one of his best-known iconic stage costumes.<sup>15</sup>

The city of Montreux, Switzerland, a former residence of Mercury, erected a 10-foot heroic statue of Mercury at the lakeside promenade in 1996. The statue by Irena Sedlecka depicts the dynamic singer wearing his “rock soldier” costume. This over life-sized superhero statue continues to be popular today as evidenced by fans who are still decorating its base with fresh flowers every day.

Jennifer Craik has pointed out that the uniforms worn by rock and pop stars on stage are also fascinating because of their ambivalent connotations.<sup>16</sup> While on one hand the uniform constructs an image of stereotypic super-heroic masculinity, emphasizing physical strength, discipline and male power, at the same time, it also embodies physical “erotic impulses” by playing with covering and exposing the body. Mercury often exposed his chest by leaving his jacket open showing off a white, tight fitting and low-cut t-shirt. This erotic strategy, better known from female dress, lends an androgynous look to Mercury.

Michael Jackson adored masculine looking uniforms and owned a large number of fantasy uniforms he wore on stage and during public appearances.<sup>17</sup> His sexual ambivalence is particularly revealed by his lavish costumes inspired by uniforms. A famous photograph which Annie Leibovitz took for Vanity Fair in 1989 makes this quite obvious. Standing in front of a triptych mirror Jackson is inspecting a bespoke uniform made by the exclusive Savile Row tailors Gieves and Hawkes. Jackson had ordered this dazzling uniform for his performance in Wembley

Stadium as part of the UK leg of his 'Bad' world-tour in 1988. The uniform's design is based on the diplomatic uniform of the British privy counsellor, and was additionally embellished with large epaulettes, long gold fringes and large *aiguillettes* (shoulder cords). Leibovitz is renowned for her celebrity photos which reveal the personality of the person she portrays. The portrait shows Michael Jackson in contemplative pose reflecting himself from several sides. This can be understood as a metaphor of his ambivalent if not constructed masculinity.<sup>18</sup> Looking rather dainty in the opulent uniform Jackson's pensive self-reflection in the mirror, his long curly hair, feminine face with a delicate nose, created by plastic surgery, and his full lips, all highlighted by heavy eye make-up, make him appear effeminate and sexually ambivalent.

### Costume of empowerment

Can uniforms on stage represent a form of racial or female empowerment? Michael Alexander Langkjaer of the Saxo Institute, Copenhagen, suggests that the main reason for rock and pop stars to wear military inspired costumes on stage has less to do with transgression, subversion or political satire than with empowerment.<sup>19</sup>

He argues that African American Jimi Hendrix, a former parachutist with the U.S. 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, never intended his vintage uniforms as a sign of anti-Vietnam War protest. Quite to the contrary, Hendrix explained that he wore these uniforms "out of respect for the fighting man and for the army". In Langkjaer's eyes, Hendrix wore his lavishly decorated Hussar jacket mainly in order to demand respect and racial acceptance.<sup>20</sup> However, Hendrix' intention received little if no attention by the public media at the time.

The rock and pop business has been criticized for being male dominated and propagating stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>21</sup> This is revealed in many lyrics, styles of performance and costume on stage, as well as in the management structures of the music business itself. It may well explain why uniforms have been so popular with male rock and pop musician. However recently, gender studies shed a new light on the music industry and investigate the role and performance of female rock and pop stars.<sup>22</sup> The African American pop star Beyoncé wears salacious costumes on stage, some of which are inspired by military dress. Some feminist scholars debate if her dance performances and scanty bodysuits reproduce a stereotyped, sexualized image of women intended for the male gaze. Other feminists declare that Beyoncé intends to encourage female pride, confidence and sexual empowerment.<sup>23</sup>

Beyoncé has appeared on stage in military inspired costumes on several occasions, most famously during her controversial Superbowl 50 halftime performance in Santa Clara, California in 2016. She wore a militant looking black leather outfit clearly inspired by Michael Jackson's "Dangerous" world tour of 1993. Her costume and the costumes of her dancers were heavily criticized as they recalled the dressing style of the militant Black Panther movement.<sup>24</sup> On this occasion, Beyoncé performed parts of her song "Formation" which deals with police injustice against African Americans and propagates the ideas of the Black Lives Matter movement, a message for which she was also criticised in the media.<sup>25</sup>

Beyoncé entered the arena calling out the following lines of her "Formation" song: "Okay ladies now let's get in formation ... Prove to me you got some coordination ... You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making..." Beyoncé frequently addresses black female empowerment in her songs. Her aggressive dance style performed with groups of female dancers in uniform costumes intends to envision black sisterhood. It is inspired by the J-Sette band dance lines originally created by majorettes at historically Black Jackson State University, Mississippi, in 1971. Still popular with African American Colleges today the vigorous J-sette style dance

combines the marching style of military music bands with acrobatics, Jazz and African dance. Clad in militant looking uniform, Beyoncé used this strenuous and aggressive dance style during her Superbowl 50 halftime performance in order to underline her lyrics calling for black respect and female empowerment.

Beyoncé regards dance and uniformity as a means of racial and gender empowerment. She has started initiatives to encourage the performance of her dance choreography by African American girls in slums, schools and universities.<sup>26</sup> The rigorous dance training is intended to encourage pride, self-respect, discipline and ambition. Expressing sisterhood, girls dancing her routines like to be uniformly dressed, too, as recorded on many online videos.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the meaning and function of rock and pop stars' military inspired costumes is contingent and changes depending on the historical and cultural background. They changed from youthful play in the 1960s to political statements during the early 1970s, and created the illusion of superheroes during the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast to Jimi Hendrix' little promoted intentions of racial empowerment while wearing vintage uniforms in the 1960s, today Beyoncé's cool and sexy use of uniforms on stage has been widely understood as a means for racial and female empowerment. Her lyrics send a clear message which she successfully popularizes in social media combining her music with vigorous dance routines promoting her campaigns for racial and female empowerment.

## References:

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<sup>1</sup> Published: Elisabeth Hackspiel-Mikosch: „Men in Uniform: the Sartorial Construction of Beauty and Ideal Masculinity in the 19th century”, in ICOMAM Symposium 2006, *Uniforms Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, Proceedings*, ed. Philippe Thilly (Brussels: Royal Museum of Armed Forces and of Military History, 2007), 82-87.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Fulford, “Sighing for a Soldier: Jane Austen and Military Pride and Prejudice”, in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 57, no. 2, (2002), 153-178; Sharon Peoples, „Embodying the Military: Uniforms”, in *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion* (vol. 1, no. 1, 2014), 7-21.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Tynan, “Military Chic: Fashioning Civilian Bodies for War” in *War and the Body. Militarisation, Practice and Experience*, ed. Kevin McSorley (London: Routledge, 2013), 78-90. Valerie Steele, *Fetisch, Mode, Sex und Macht* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 1998), 186.

<sup>4</sup> This article will have to do without illustrations because of the difficulty to attain the official right to publish photos of rock and popstars. However, the reader can find ample illustrations of all objects described here.

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed. From Conformity to Transgression* (New York/ Oxford: Berg, 2005), 211-228; Gertrud Lehnert, *A History of Fashion in the 20th Century* (Könemann, Cologne, 2000), 60, 61; Timothy Goldbold, *Military Style Invades Fashion* (New York: Phaidon, 2016), 175.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Robert Orbach, February 2006, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/robert-orbach/>; Richard Lester, *Boutique London. A History: King's Road to Carnaby Street* (Woodbridge: ACC Editions 2010), 68-69.

<sup>7</sup> It is possible that Hendrix' iconic jacket may not be an original antique Hussar military jacket, as Emma Mawdsley, curator at the National Army Museum, London, pointed out to the author. She assumes, that it might be rather a theatrical costume, because of the unusually rich embroidery on the sleeves.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Robert Orbach 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Ginsberg, "The Lost Beatles Interview", 1995, cited in *Uniform, Order and Disorder*, ed. Francesco Bonami et al. (Milan: Charta, 2000), 288.

<sup>10</sup> Raul Rosssell II, "feelnumb.com EXCLUSIVE: The Man Who Gave John Lennon the Famous U.S. ARMY Jacket", feelnumb.com, 7 March 2017, <http://www.feelnumb.com/2017/03/07/feelnumb-the-man-who-gave-beatles-john-lennon-us-army-coat-military-jacket/>.

<sup>11</sup> Lennon's vintage shirt has become legendary itself. Replicas are still being sold today (see Key Canvas) and inspire fashion designers. Rachel Waldmann, "The Alpha Industries M-65: How the Field Coat Went From Army Surplus to Runway Staple", *Vogue*, (27 November 2015), <https://www.vogue.com/article/alpha-industries-field-coat-army-jacket-spring-2016-runway-trend>.

<sup>12</sup> Donatella Barbieri, *Costume in Performance. Material, Culture and the Body* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), XXII.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mick Jagger, Ian Parker, "Chic Mick" 2003, cited by Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed*, 216.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Bolton, *Super Heroes. Fashion and Fantasy* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Joobin Bekhrad, "Yes, You Should Start Dressing like Freddie Mercury", *GQ* (4 September 2018), <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/gallery/freddie-mercury-style-throughout-the-years>.

<sup>16</sup> Craik, *Uniforms Exposed*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Busch, *Michael Jackson. King of Style. Die Fashion-Ikone* (Leipzig: Seemann Henschel, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Craik, *Uniforms Exposed*, 218; , Stan Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music. Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality* (New York/London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Michael A. Langkjaer, "Not Entirely Subversive: 'Rock Military Style' from Hendrix to Destiny's Child". In *Fashions: Exploring Fashion through Culture*, ed. Jacque Lynn Foltyn (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, Critical Issues, 2012), 193-227.

<sup>20</sup> Langkjaer, "Not Entirely Subversive", 201.

<sup>21</sup> Marion Leonard, *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse and Girl Power* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)

<sup>22</sup> Marion Leonard, *Gender in the Music Industry*; Lisa Rhodes: *Electric Ladyland: Women and Rock Culture* (Philadelphia ; Univ. of Pennsylvania Press; 2005); Pauwke Berkers and Julian Schaap, Julian, *Gender Inequality in Metal Music Production* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Adrienne Trier-Bienniek (ed.): *The Beyoncé Effect. Essays on Sexuality, Race and Feminism* (Jefferson N.C.: McFarland, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Timothy Goldbold, *Military Style Invades Fashion* (New York: Phaidon, 2016), 8.

<sup>25</sup> Ryan Parker: "Beyonce's Super Bowl Halftime Show Criticized by Rudy Giuliani as "Attack" on Police" in: *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 8, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/beyonces-super-bowl-halftime-show-862947>.

<sup>26</sup> Video of Beyoncé surprising students at public Haarlem middle school PS/MS 161 Don Pedro Albizu Campus, during a flash work out in 2011 supporting Michelle Obama's "Let's Move Your Body" campaign fighting childhood obesity launched in 2010 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3iQilABZLQ>). Beyoncé

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initiated the Instagram Challenge #BeforeLetGoChallenge in 2019 inspiring thousands of young people to dance her vigorous choreography.