



VIDEO TRANSCRIPTION

**A Queer History of Fashion**  
From the Closet to the Catwalk

**SIMON DOONAN**

Creative Ambassador, Barneys New York

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Video length: 7:37 | This video is online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jVOAuc7pbg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jVOAuc7pbg)

So my personal style goes back to the mid-60s, I think, and there was a time on Carnaby Street when the gay men started to make men's clothes out of women's fabrics. Because the gays, always being slightly ahead of the curve, were experimenting with the small family fabrics like Liberty prints—hello—but done in a preppy way with a button-down shirt, and these became very popular with rock stars at the time, like Mick Jagger, Jeff Beck, Ray Davies and The Kinks... So here's an example of gay style feeding a broader mass culture via straight man, via pop music. And that's my style. It definitely goes back to Carnaby Street. And that hasn't always been my adult style but it's where I've kind of ended up. I've gone back to my first fashion flush of youth, which was Carnaby Street, mid-60s London.

I think the fashion landscape today is huge, and very, very complicated. And it's gone from being this small universe of creative people and customers to being this global spectator sport which is really, very incomprehensible. So on that landscape there are specific gay styles, but it's very hard to zero in on them at this point in fashion history because the landscape is so vast and so confusing. And as Bill Cunningham explained to me one day about ten years ago, fashion is becoming enormously confusing and complex because our culture, because the internet is becoming enormously confusing and complex. So it's very hard to zero in on something now and say well that's specifically gay. Once in a while you can do it, but then you go to another country, like for example, dinky small swimsuits in America are considered to be very gay; they are associated with gay men—that's who wears small speedos—that type of swimwear, which is more sort of sexual. But in Australia everybody wears them, and in Italy, everybody wears them, so there's cultural differences too that make it even more complicated and incomprehensible.

When I started in the fashion industry, there's obviously an enormous number of gay men who were working in the fashion industry. Why is that? I think gay men are very familiar with the idea of disguise and transformation and self-presentation. Those are enormously important things in gay culture, particularly if you go back to the time when it was illegal to be gay. It was classified as a mental illness. I mean, this is when I came out of the closet, so gay men are enormously sensitive to the idea of self-presentation, transformation, disguise... It was a lot about appearances so I think it was natural that gay men, who also have some connection—identification—with straight women, because they kind of want to be straight women because then they'd be married to the good-looking bloke with the cash, buying you a nice evening dress, you know. So you see an enormous number of gay men coming into the fashion milieu, which for straight men would be challenging. Obviously there've been great straight male designers but they're outnumbered by gay men. And gay men are sensitive to form, transformation, the transformative power of glamour. You know if you're gay in 1950s America when it's illegal, it's classified as a mental illness, you know you can take pleasure in at least presenting yourself in a way that is either to avoid detection or to be attractive to other gay men. It becomes very much about how you look whereas, straight men, often their main driving goal with their style is to be anonymous. They don't want to be noteworthy. That would be very painful for the average straight man. And it still is to a large degree even though the metrosexual revolution has come along. There are still many men who would—their main fear is screwing up. They want to get it right. They want to not make any faux pas, whereas gay men are looking to distinguish themselves, exercise creativity and flamboyance. Those things characterize gay males.

The 70s was a very complicated time for gay style, gay fashion, because you had all these magazines like *After Dark* that sold caftans, and little bikinis for men, and you had stores in West Hollywood, like *International Male* and *Ah Men* that for fashion people who were involved in fashion consider those to be very tacky and very déclassé, they certainly weren't considered to be fashion. So there's a whole area of gay style, the Leatherman, the cowboy, the Village People style, which was associated with sex and with fetish-wear that was considered to be not fashion. It was considered to be sort of tacky, but subsequently those styles have been revised and revisited and, you know, Christopher Street gay look and bandanas, and the sort of tribal iconography of 'gay' which became quite cliché and quite sort of reviled even by gays, has been subsequently re-embraced a few times over the years, as those things often are.

When AIDS came along 30 years ago it devastated obviously the gay community but also the fashion community. The number of gay designers from Patrick Kelly to Halston to Perry Ellis...it's a very lengthy list, of—Moschino—you know, very significant creative forces who were just wiped off the landscape. And I think it did have a devastating affect on fashion, style, gay men, all of these people, a huge number of people—Willi Smith, Patrick Kelly, Perry Ellis, an enormous list. The young designers today unfortunately don't know who they were and it's terribly sad that these people aren't memorialized in some way.

So it's good for young people to do your homework and figure out who these people are and pay them some deference and respect because they were titans of the industry, and younger people too, who were just getting their foothold, just getting started, just starting to make an impact. You know, Isaia, Angel Estrada—it's a long, terrifyingly long list. So I think there's a terrible glaring omission in the history of fashion—the debt that we owe these fallen heroes from our industry. ▼