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75 years ago, Zoot Suit Riots marked a dark period in Southern California history



These youths, one stripped of all his clothes and the other badly beaten, fell victim to raging bands of servicemen who scoured the streets in Los Angeles, June 20, 1943, looking for and beating zoot suited youths. The servicemen blame the zoot suited youths for numerous unprovoked assaults on their colleagues. (AP Photo)

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The look is unmistakable: Crisp lines in voluminous trousers, polished shoes

and exaggerated proportions. They are hallmarks of the zoot suit, which became connected to a youth subculture during the American jazz era.

In Southern California, the flashy attire also is linked to rebellion and Mexican-American pachuco culture.

And 75 years ago this weekend, on June 3, 1943, the zoot suit became forever tied to one of the darkest periods in the region's history when U.S. military men took the streets of Los Angeles attacking young Mexican-American men, targeting those adorned in the attire.

Experts and scholars say the causes of the ensuing violence, that came to be known as the Zoot Suit Riots, are complex and varied: a growing distrust of immigrants, rampant racism and a perceived lack of patriotism from outsiders, among them.

But what is certain is that signs of racial and cultural tension, exacerbated by changing demographics — and ultimately by war — had been growing for years.



Violence erupts during the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles. MUST CREDIT Special Collections, UCLA Library

Jose Leonidas Lara, of Fontana, known as "Pachuco Jose," models a zoot suit from his clothing line, "Drape Shapes" by Pachuco Jose Productions, at Tequila Hoppers Bar & Grill in Upland, CA., Sunday, May 27, 2018. (Staff photo by Jennifer Cappuccio Maher, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)



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Jose Leonidas Lara, of Fontana, known as "Pachuco Jose," models a zoot suit from his clothing line, "Drape Shapes" by Pachuco Jose Productions, center, with models Valerie Valentine, left, and Marty Mae, both wearing Lady De Couture, by Sheena De La Cruz, at Tequila Hoppers Bar & Grill in Upland, CA., Sunday, May 27, 2018. (Staff photo by Jennifer Cappuccio Maher, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)



Paramount resident Manny Alcaraz, with his 1933 Chevy Master, has been immersed in the pachuco culture for four decades and although he was a very young child during the Zoot Suit Riots, he said he's experienced bigotry due to the way he dresses. Portrait taken in Paramount on Friday, May 25, 2018. (Stan Lim, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)



Soldier, sailors and marines who roamed the street of Los Angeles, June 7, 1943, looking for hoodlums in zoot suits, stopped this streetcar during their search. Crowds jammed downtown streets to watch the service men tear clothing off the zoot suiters they caught. (AP Photo)

BUILDING ANIMOSITIES

What erupted into rioting by servicemen, off-duty police officers and regular citizens in

1943 began building in the 1920s, explained Eduardo Obregon Pagan, a historian and professor at Arizona State University who wrote the book, "Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A."

During that time, immigration increased from countries other than northern European nations such as Germany and England, according to Pagan.

"We started seeing people who were different," he said. "They were religiously different. They tended to be dark-skinned."

In response to the country's shifting demographics, in 1924 Congress attempted to close the borders of the nation to nearly every country except those in northern and western Europe.

When youth culture began to cross color lines in the 1930s, at a time when there was legally imposed segregation, it caused anxiety among adults, specifically whites.

"A lot of this was precipitated by black cultural expression hitting the white mainstream," Pagan said. "You have this underground highly sexualized, highly physical, artistic expression and it was like the entire Western civilization was about the collapse."

Zoot suits became popular during the 1930s and early 1940s among some of those marginalized young people — particularly black, Latino, Jews and immigrant youth — who frequented jazz clubs and dance halls where black musicians performed.

Pachucos and pachucas were well-dressed Mexican-American men and women who typically wore a zoot suit. The term originated in El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

"It was punk rock before punk rock," said John de Luna, a pachuco historian and Boyle Heights zoot suit designer known as Barrio Dandy. "They were actually in resistance, in creating a youth movement that would hopefully change the world for the better."

WARTIME TENSIONS

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, pulling the United States into World War II, anti-immigrant sentiment was on the rise, and along with it disdain for the style of the flashy zoot suit.

The excessive style of the suit was seen as indulgent, especially when fabric was being rationed for the war effort.

"Here the sailors are saying, 'That fabric should be used for our uniform, instead you're using that fabric for a zoot suit,'" said artist and zoot suit designer Jose "Pachuco Jose" Lara of Fontana.

"The notion of patriotism was tied to difference — symbolic difference — and the idea that somehow that recent immigrants are somehow not patriotic and are a threat," said Professor Brian Levin with Cal State San Bernardino's Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism. "And that's a narrative that we teach today."

Then, in the summer of 1942, several pachuco, or Mexican-American, zoot suiters were arrested in connection to the murder of José Gallardo Díaz. The case was subsequently known as the Sleepy Lagoon murder.

The zoot suit and anyone who wore it were vilified in the Los Angeles press, Lara said.

Headlines like “Marijuana Orgies Before Terror Sorties Bared in Gang Roundup” and “BLACK WIDOW GIRLS IN BOY GANGS; WAR ON VANDALS PUSHED” painted young Latinos and Latinas as hoodlums and thugs and the zoot suit as the uniform of their gang.

While some of the zoot suiters were parts of gangs, not everyone who donned the style was a criminal, Pagan and Lara both said.

“Even before the Zoot Suit Riots, people were tearing the zoot suits off these kids,” Pagan said. “Why would you try to rip clothing off of kids? This was a way of putting working class kids back into their place. As a person of color your obligation was to remain in the background of public places.”

Americans were so incensed and offended by a piece of clothing, they felt the need to tear it off the person, which both Pagan and Levin said has been echoed in recent reported attacks.

“We see it in the ripping of the hijabs off Muslim women’s heads — it’s just a piece of cloth. It’s doing nothing to anyone else,” Pagan said.

THE RIOTS AND THEIR LEGACY

The skirmishes between young Latinos and servicemen intensified on the evening of June 3, 1943, when about 50 sailors, armed with clubs and sticks, from the local U.S. Naval Reserve Armory marched through downtown Los Angeles, attacking anyone in the pachuco garb.

Over the next several days, it was more servicemen, off-duty police officers and civilians joined the racially motivated, riots not only attacking zoot-suiters but also blacks and Filipinos.

It wasn’t until the U.S. military barred personnel from leaving their barracks did the attacks finally die down on June 8. The Los Angeles City Council issued a ban on zoot suits the following day.

“When people who are different are affirmatively exercising their rights in public, it is frequently deemed a threat,” Levin said. “It’s also presented as a symbol that existing tradition is somehow under attack.”

But the week-long attacks did not stop young Latinos from wearing the suits. In fact, the riots may have had the opposite effect, despite the temporary ban on the suits after the riots.

“A lot of the zoot-suiters became activists,” De Luna said. “Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, they were pachucos and zoot-suiters. They became involved in these movements of youth resistance that would allow them the take on these large systems of oppression in the ’60s and ’70s. They defined themselves in a new way. In an American identity born in the barrios and in the boroughs of New York.”

In the 1950s and 1960s, the popularity of the suits began to wane. That changed in 1979, when Luis Valdez brought the style back into the spotlight with his play, “Zoot Suit.” It told the story of the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and subsequent riots.

One of those inspired by the “Zoot Suit” movie starring Edward James Olmos was Manny Alcaraz, 70, of Paramount.

“It really grabbed me,” Alcaraz said. “It’s part of my heritage and since then I knew I had to have a zoot suit. I have seven now.”

Alcaraz feels the suit and the associated car culture gives him a connection to his cultural past.

Today, the pachuco subculture continues to thrive and evolve in Southern California with a variety of styles that mimic the vibrant East Coast zoot and the more subtle and subdued West Coast drape. There are regular meetups, including the popular Barrio Boogie in Los Angeles.

And on the 75th anniversary of the Zoot Suit Riots, a commemorative cruise, organized by Alcaraz, will kick off Sunday, June 3 at 11 a.m. at Lincoln Park at 3845 Selig Place, make its way into Downtown Los Angeles and conclude at Joe's Autopark Lot at 330 S. Main Street. The cruise will then be followed by an after-party, complete with music and dancing and a photo exhibition entitled, "From East to West; Heads up, fists clinched: 1943 & The Black & Brown Zoot."

"It's important for people to know that it was a real thing that actually happened and that it's part of our history," said Alcaraz.

Seventy-five years later, some historians see similarities in the climate during World War II-era Los Angeles and today.

"I think the fears that existed at that time: international conflict, immigration and even the taking in of refugees, has some reflection today," Levin said. "The difference today is we actually keep data on these kinds of things."

According to the center's most recent study released in May, Los Angeles had a 10.8 percent increase in reported hate crimes from 229 in 2016 to 254 in 2017. This marks the fourth consecutive annual increase in hate crimes in the city.

Pagan noted the views that preceded the riots included one that "race caused social danger," and that there are troubling parallels evident today.

"Those who didn't fit into the box of Americanization was seen as a threat and that is part of the subtext that we're seeing today," he said. "If someone stands out as a religious or racial minority they are a threat of what the American society is."