

# The History of

# Black Fashion



**1863**

So gifted is Virginia-born **Elizabeth Keckley** with a needle and as a designer that less than 20 years after buying her freedom from slavery and starting a thriving dressmaking business in Washington, she is chosen as first lady Mary Lincoln's seamstress.



**1911**

Long before the fad for grills, jazz musician **Jelly Roll Morton** of New Orleans had diamond fillings in his teeth. Another pianist puts diamonds into his bulldog's teeth and ties his pet to the piano leg during sets.

**1916**

The daughter of slaves, washerwoman-turned-self-styled **Madame C. J. Walker** moves to Harlem. Working with her daughter A'Lelia, Walker establishes thousands of franchises that use her patented techniques, cosmetics, and hair growing and straightening products.



**1925**

Sporting little more than processed, "patent leather-hair" and a miniskirt of bananas, **Josephine Baker** is the toast of Paris among theater lovers.

**1929**

Captivatingly lovely, movie actress **Nina Mae McKinney**, from 110<sup>th</sup> street in Harlem, starring in King Vidor's hit "talkie" *Hallelujah*, is America's first Black film sex goddess. from designing for Paco Rabanne to design director for The Gap.



**1935**

Generously cut, draped and padded, the hipster **zoot suit** comes on stage, screen and avenue, courtesy of Black musicians.

**1939**

Based in Beverly Hills by 1939, former maid **Mildred Blount** designs hats exclusively for celebrities, including Gloria Vanderbilt, Louise Beavers and Marian Anderson.

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**1946**

Ophelia DeVore opts to call her new modeling agency and beauty school by the made-up name "Grace DelMarco." Graduates include Helen Williams, Cicely Tyson and Diahann Carroll.



**1948**

Zelda Wynn Valdes starts the first Black-owned store on Broadway in New York, selling her sexy, hip-hugging dresses to Black legends such as movie star Dorothy Dandridge, opera diva Jessye Norman and singer Gladys Knight. She creates the Playboy bunny costume in the 1950's.



**1949**

Dorothea Towles moves to Paris. Modeling for renowned designers like Christian Dior and Schiaparelli, Towles literally stops traffic, when long before Lil' Kim, she dyes her hair platinum blond!

**1953**

Jacqueline Bouvier wears an Ann Lowe dress to her 1952 wedding to Sen. John F. Kennedy.

**1962**

Among the first Blacks to have a successful and visible clothing business in the country's fashion center on Seventh Avenue in New York, Wesley Tann is chosen to make maternity clothes for first lady Jackie Kennedy.



**1966**

The afro sweeps the nation among a generation eager to express pride in African heritage. Airman August Doyle serves 90 days in the brig for refusing to cut his "fro." His stand changes policy in the Air Force.

**1968**

Creating sleek, flowing dresses that make customers from Eartha Kitt to Mary Wilson look great on the dance floor, Jon Haggins sets up his own design studio.

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**1970**

Founded by a righteous group of four men, directed by distinguished photographer and moviemaker Gordon Parks, Essence magazine provides Black women with a forum all their own.



**1973**

Often outrageously revealing, Scott Barrie's evening wear, made from clinging jersey, makes him, at this moment, one of the country's most sought-after designers.

**1973**

Stephen Burrows achieves international acclaim as the most celebrated among four American designers. They triumph over France's top fashion houses at a charity gala at the Palace of Versailles.



**1974**

Beverly Johnson becomes the first African-American woman to grace the cover of Vogue magazine in August, which was a historical moment in time. The color barrier was broken.



**1976**

Will Smith launches a hip, affordable, sportswear line that eventually makes him the most successful Black designer in fashion history.

**1983**

Founded in 1938 and later popularized by LL Cool J, it isn't until 1983 that the British Kangol hat company acquires the signature logo, in response to rap artists' requests for "the hat that sounds like a kangaroo."

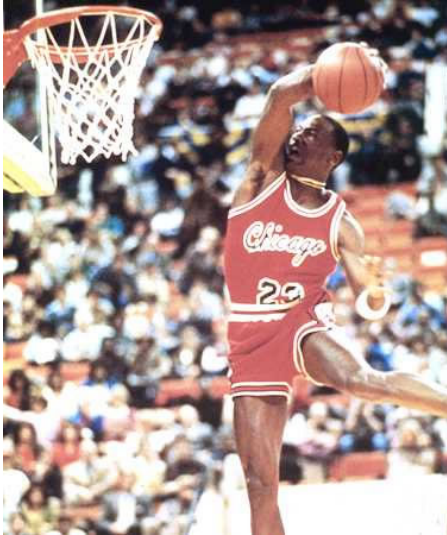


**1983**

Vanessa L. Williams is the nation's first Black Miss America, only to later lose the title in a scandal involving nude photos.

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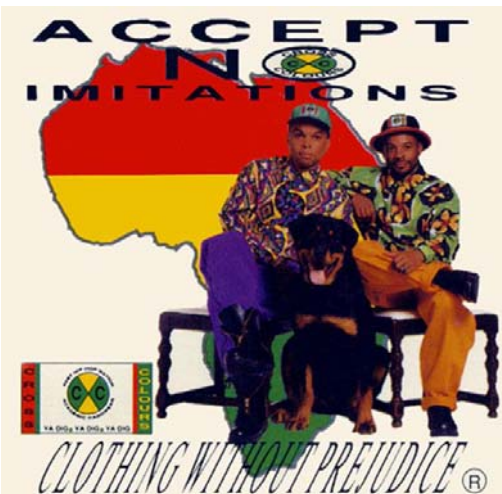
**1984**

"So what if the NBA says basketball players can't wear black sneakers." Michael Jordan does anyway. His endorsement fees from Nike far outweigh his \$5,000 per game fines.



**1988**

Mississippian Patrick Kelly, who takes Paris by storm with his button-embellished designs, is the first American ever to be inducted into France's prestigious Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne.



**1990**

In Los Angeles, designer Carl Jones starts Cross Colors, a political-artistic commercial enterprise that celebrates street-style, even as it condemns Black-on-Black gang violence.

**1992**

Five young men, including Daymond John and Russell Simmons, notice how White manufacturers are appropriating the aesthetic of urban Blacks, leading to John's FUBU (For Us By Us) and to Simmons' Phat Farm. Fashion rooted in popular culture leads to controversy, which of course, is good for business.



**1998**

A man whose name undergoes several transmutations, Sean Combs kicks off his evocative Sean John line. Just six years later he wins the award for Best Menswear Designer from the CFDA (Council of Fashion Designers of America).

**2002**

Triple threat Serena Williams causes consternation on the U.S. Open courts by wearing a leather-look catsuit in favor of traditional tennis whites. In 2006, her sister Venus on the runway, Williams shows her Aneres design line in Miami.



**2005**

Megastar Beyoncé Knowles turns her hand to fashion, debuting the House of Deréon 2007