

Denim and Civil Rights



Civil rights activists on their march on Washington, 1963

Denim is a daily staple in both America's history and its ideology, too. From dusty gold miners in the late 1800s to the cowboys of the 1930s who made the popularity of jeans leap from workwear into the wardrobes of Hollywood stars like James Dean. The jean stands for something larger about the American spirit: rugged individualism, informality and a democratic respect for hard work. But while class and gender differences have been acknowledged and largely written about since blue jeans were first invented 147 years ago, the narrative has been mostly whitewashed, especially when it comes to discussions around race and Black America's part in the history of denim. [...]

The civil rights movement began to unfold in the mid-50s, and ushered in over a decade of boycotts, sit-ins, and marches. Jeans were not only the preferred dress of some activists, but also a symbol of protest for the movement. [...]

In a 2017 Racked article titled "What the Civil Rights Movement Has to Do With Denim", editor Marlen Komar explains how activists wore overalls out of practicality - they were tired of mending tears from attack dogs and high-pressure hoses, as denim could withstand the abuse. "They used to be referred to as 'Negro clothes' - slave owners bought denim for their enslaved workers, partly because the material was sturdy, and partly because it helped contrast them against the linen suits and lace parasols of plantation families and their inclusion in the civil rights movement suggested that pointed societal divide" Komar writes.

Samuel Trotman, Denim Dudes, June 2020.