

OVERALLS

ON IDENTITY AND ASPIRATION FROM PATRICK KELLY'S FASHION TO HIP HOP

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Patrick Kelly and models displaying his Fall/Winter 1988 Collection. / Photograph by Oliviero Toscani (courtesy of Patrick Kelly's estate).

It would not be a surprising scene in the late 1980s to come upon fashion superstar Patrick Kelly — dressed in his daily attire of denim overalls with or without a tee shirt underneath, Converse sneakers, and a signature messenger's cap with the word "Paris" emblazoned across the top — walking or chatting casually on the street near his Paris atelier on Rue du Parc Royal in the historic Marais neighborhood. In the thick of what were his busiest and most successful years in fashion — his commercial accomplishments, celebrity status, and being the 'It' designer for fashion icons and socialites seeking the cutting edge — Kelly's 'everydayness' was remarked upon by journalists in numerous news venues as evidence of his down-to-earth, accessible, and exuberant ethos. Kelly, who skyrocketed to international fashion fame over a period of six years, and ultimately made history in 1988 as the first American designer and first designer of color admitted into the prestigious *Chambre Syndicale du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode*, passed away in 1990 from AIDS-related complications.

Alongside his accessibility, other details of Kelly's "realness" are evident in many other areas of the aesthetic enterprise that form his label Patrick Kelly Paris. As a designer, Kelly's original and controversial visual vocabulary blended the real, painful, and also traumatic histories of race in the United States, including racial terror and racist iconography: watermelon hats and bandanas like those featured in representations of Mammy's and *Aunt Jemima* pancake ads, maid uniforms stylized as those worn by Black domestic workers, on clothing racks, and perhaps most controversially, the logo of Kelly's company — a golliwog, a character in British children's literature reviled for the racism in the depiction of its features, with the company name *Patrick Kelly Paris* written around it. His work also mobilizes the aesthetics of the South's Black poor and working classes with the joy and fantasy of nightlife, the value of noted works of visual art, and the glamour of celebrity and superstardom of Black pop icons. For example, Kelly would also reappropriate iconic images such as

renowned entertainer and activist Josephine Baker's "banana skirt" from her famous, and for some controversial performance, "*danse sauvage*" ("savage dance"). Baker, also a Black southerner who fled the U.S. and achieved fame in Paris, was a constant source of inspiration for Kelly. All of these things shaped his fashion design and personal style, showroom salesmanship, commentary on beauty and style, and perhaps most memorably, the unapologetic centrality of Black life and culture as he knew it in the showmanship and presentation of his collections. Kelly often began shows inviting his entire team to pray with him in the tradition of the Black church, his runway shows often featured a soundtrack of R&B, funk, soul, and house music, as a stage full of Black models stormed the runway. Similar to the "rent parties" in the Harlem Renaissance, and sometimes just for fun, Kelly loved to host gatherings with friends in Paris where the Vicksburg, Mississippi native would often create a menu and invite friends to share some of his favorite soul food dishes — fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, collard greens, candied yams, and cornbread. These are just some of the oft-repeated details contributing to the narrative *bricolage* wedding Kelly's fashion label to the racial, class, gender, and sexual politics implicit to Black representation.

Perhaps the only details more remarked upon with regularity was Kelly's own signature style of dress, which were frequently the center of attention. This style of dress was so associated with the designer that in "Runway of Love" — a 2014 Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibit chronicling the success of Kelly's fashion career as designer of the label *Patrick Kelly Paris* — there is a mannequin adorned with a replica of Kelly's signature look, displayed alongside the designs that made him famous. In fact, Kelly even featured male and female models wearing denim overalls as part of his high fashion show, another sign of its association with his label. That a designer's personal style can itself become iconic is not unusual, but it is also not so common as to be banal. And still, that personal style is not necessarily vested with any significance beyond a calling card or extension of what the designer put on the runway. But Kelly was different. **His personal style, and especially his overalls, were both a reflection of some central tenets of his aesthetic enterprise, while simultaneously linking him and his work ever more overtly to the history, politics, cultural traditions, and aesthetics of the Black southern poor and working classes.** Along with Black pop icons, they were the designers most enduring and limitless resources for his art.

Kelly's denim overalls make up the very fabric threaded to these details in his life and work that narrate and complicate discourses of race, class, gender, sexual, and regional politics within and beyond fashion, inclusive of and not exclusive to the U.S. and France. Indeed, as will be examined here, the recursiveness and persistence of the overall as an object of Black cultural politics — as evidenced in the enduring popularity of the style across generations and locations — holds epistemological abundance in the depths of its metaphorical and literal pockets. **Of Kelly's personal style of dress it is his denim overalls that have been the most enduring symbol of his dress.** As such, I wish to use Kelly's denim overalls as a critical precipice from which to dance on the edge of this provocation, but there's more, beginning with the development and emergence of the style.

"Overalls," as defined by Alex Newman and Zakee Shariff in their 2009 book *Fashion A to Z: An Illustrated Dictionary*, refer to "a one-piece garment with long legs and long or short sleeves, fastening up the front of the torso with a zipper, buttons, Velcro, or press studs." Though "typically made from denim or heavyweight cotton, overalls," the British term for this style, are also referred to as "coveralls," "dungarees," or a "boilersuit." In all styles, overalls include "an attached front section that covers the chest, and shoulder straps to hold the garment up." Constructed also with multiple compartments in the chest section and the back of the pant area, overalls also feature very large pockets on each side, as well as loops on which items can be hung for easy transport. The function of these compartments and other features of overalls links to its frequent use as a uniform "traditionally worn by manual laborers," and given the durability of the garment, is also often "donned over normal clothing for protection against dirt, bad weather, etc."

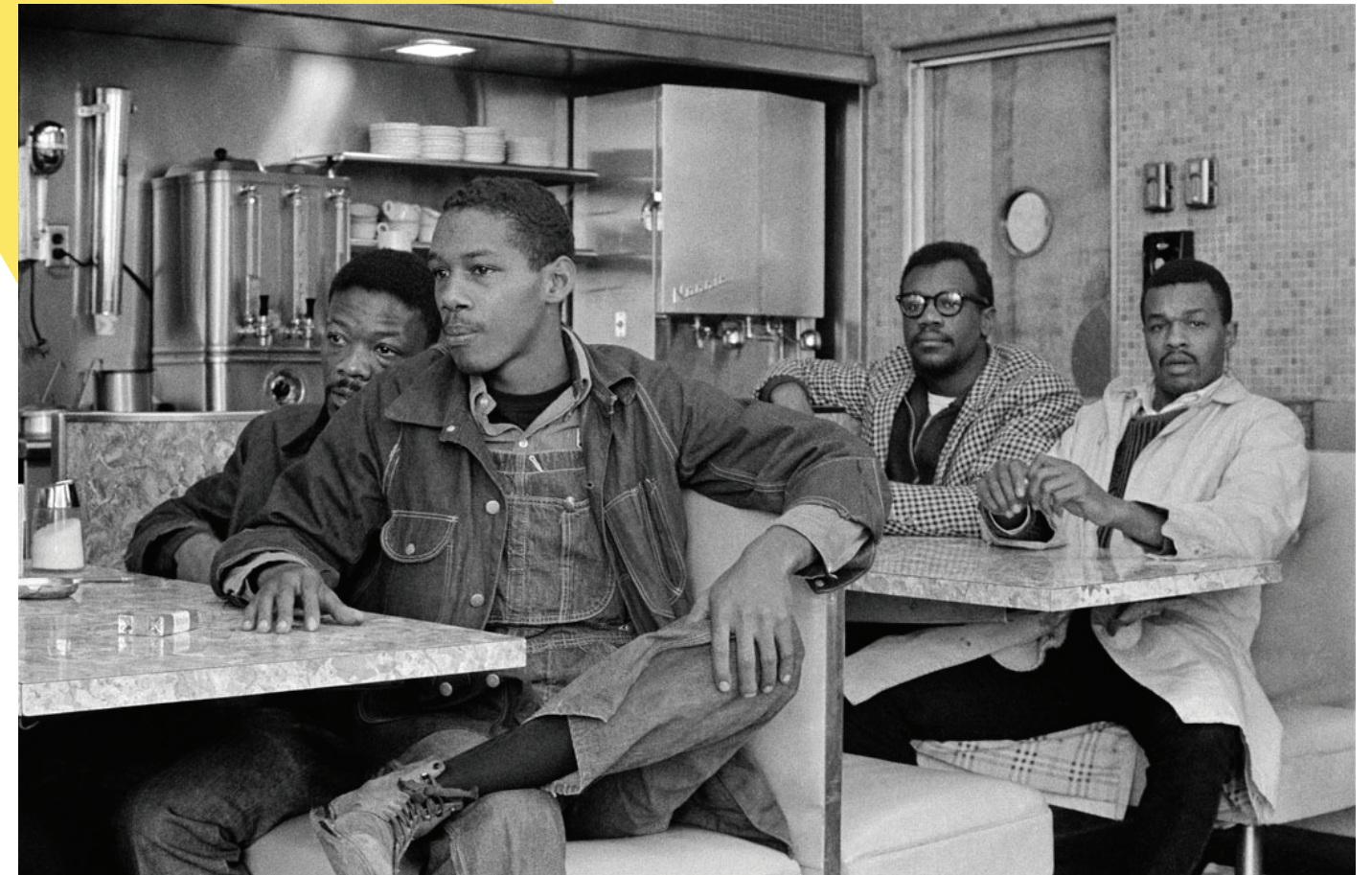
Of all the materials in which overalls are made, denim is the material most associated with the style, so to talk about the social, cultural, and political history of overalls is also to talk about the work of denim. The most frequently referenced idea of denim is that produced by Levi Strauss & Co. (Levi's) — patented in 1873. As noted in the Museum at Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) 2015 exhibit "Denim: Fashion's Frontier," this is the style that has held reign on the market ever since. Being early on referenced as an example of Americana, Cowboy culture in the West, workwear, and leisure, are some of the more positive associations that have supported denims popularity and commonplaceness in fashion. But, denim became more controversial in about the 1950s and through the 1960s, when it was considered disrespectful largely through its association with the youthful spirit of rebellion evidenced

in actor James Dean's *Rebel without a Cause*, musician Jimi Hendrix, and the hippie counterculture of the music festival Woodstock. This countercultural meaning is evidenced specifically in Black history as well.

Denim is a textile sourced by cotton twill, connecting it to the U.S.' history of race — and the specific experience of Black people — through cotton plantations and slavery. In her award-winning 2015 book *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*, Tanisha Ford notes that “in the early nineteenth century, New England textile manufacturers designated raw denim and other cheap manufactured fabrics such as osnaburg for southern slave owners who bought it in bulk to clothe their bondmen and bondwomen.” In fact, so tethered were these fabrics to enslavement, the phrase “negro cloth” was employed as a shorthand for the material. Consequently, “white Americans ensured that clothing created social and cultural differences between them and the enslaved.” **This practice resonates with what social theorist Pierre Bourdieu called “distinctions” in his 1979 study by the same name, where individuals and groups maintain dominance over others through constructing and imposing beliefs and practices around taste (which would include dress) as a form of symbolic violence that empowers those in the ruling class force separations between self and other.** Shortly after Levi and Strauss began mass producing jeans, the clothing were purchased and worn regularly “by miners in California and by sharecroppers in the South.” The dimensions of this history linking denim overalls to enslavement, sharecropping, and other exploited economic classes adds an even more vivid understanding of the performativity of the sartorial choices of Patrick Kelly and others given the various other ways in which race figured into the context of their work, background, and public life.

An early and especially noteworthy example of this performativity through denim overalls are Black women activists in the civil rights movement. In her examination of Black women's “soul style,” in the Black freedom movements through the Black diaspora, from Selma to South Africa, Tanisha Ford provides a history of Black women in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) wearing denim as one moment in the history of the Black Freedom Movement wherein Black women civil rights activists interventions included choices around adornment. Ford shows how some Black women civil rights activists fashion and beauty challenged rigid notions of Black gender and respectability circulating inside and outside of Black communities, including among other activists, at that time. For example, the Black press was active in representations of attire tied to the construction of a “church-based civil rights movement that was tied to middle-class respectability, Christian values, and feminine propriety.” Doing so, Ford writes, Black women in SNCC affected the social identity of “SNCC soul sister,” a woman who “wore her hair natural, donned unisex denim overalls and other casual clothing, and risked her life to advance the Black freedom agenda by confronting segregation in the South. Such attire was central to SNCC women's self-presentation as a signifier of political radicalism and an alternative definition of gender.”

Two of the SNCC women Ford discusses were sisters Dorie and Joyce Ladner, who wore denim overalls at the March on Washington in 1963, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. The choice to wear denim overalls, Ford shows, was an important aesthetic departure from the “Sunday's Best” style encouraged by many elder and some peer Black civil rights leaders who were anxious about how Black people and their allies would be (mis)represented in their struggle for civil rights. Thus, denim overalls were not among the sartorial acts that would be seen as acting respectably. **Thus, the Ladner sisters wearing denim to the March on Washington was a radical political choice in the midst of an already disruptive political moment in the pursuit of racial justice and social change.** As Ford notes, part of what their wearing denim — including denim overalls — initially enabled them to do is to employ fashion as a tactic of building community with the working class Black people they were organizing alongside in the South. As



Courtland Cox, Marion Barry and other SNCC members sitting-in at Atlanta Toddle House, in December 1963. Photograph by Danny Lyon (Wisconsin Historical Society).

such, this attire “was initially a response to the realities of activism,” however this shifted and “natural hair and denim became a uniform for SNCC.” Thus, the SNCC uniform was “a cultural-political tool used to create community and to represent SNCC's progressive vision for a new American democracy.” A young Kelly would certainly have encountered student activists like the Ladner sisters in and around Vicksburg and Jackson Mississippi, where a number of Black civil rights activists were also born and raised or visited to organize alongside locals in the community. For instance, Vicksburg was the site of an active site of “Freedom Schools,” alternative independent Black educational institutions set up across southern cities in the 1960s as an extension of civil rights activists. The most known example of the Freedom Schools occurred in 1964, known as “Freedom Summer.”

This definition of overalls and brief history of denim melds well with an exploration of its private and public function in Patrick Kelly's wardrobe. In terms of its public function, Kelly's denim overalls became

part of the larger visual vocabulary of the labor. His overalls, given his background and referencing images, objects, and histories of race and racism in the American South, were gathered into this broader theme within his work. In particular, for many, Kelly's wearing denim overalls may appear to reference the lives of the Black southern poor as overalls were, in reality and in representation, the work clothes of Black sharecroppers on plantations that formerly held enslaved people of African descent in the antebellum South. As such, his overalls are an extension of the Patrick Kelly Paris label's commentary on race, stereotype, and racist iconography. There are also those, for whom, neither the overalls nor his engagement of discourses about race resonated in a meaningful way. In such cases his overalls, especially placed alongside the skateboard, messenger cap, converses, and Kelly's characteristically joyful and humorous demeanor, was



Patrick Kelly and models displaying his Spring/Summer 1989 Collection. / Photograph by Oliviero Toscani (courtesy of Patrick Kelly's estate).

regarded as a childlike form of adornment and an expression of Kelly's many public declarations that fashion make people smile more and not take itself too seriously.

Details from Kelly's earlier life, however, affirm more the former than the latter. Kelly, who attended racially segregated schools in Vicksburg for all but his final year of high school when the school integrated, began to research and take classes in Black history and art history his first year of college at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi. Some high school classmates, close friends, and employees, in interviews with me for a forthcoming biography on the designer, described Kelly as informed, insightful, direct, and at times extremely vocal and occasionally angry about matters of race and incidents he perceived to be racist. Kelly continued to dress this way attending college in Jackson, moving to Atlanta and New York City pursuing a career in fashion, through to Paris where he was ultimately successful, and until the day he died. From work in his atelier, to high fashion editorials in

Elle Magazine and a *Patrick Kelly Paris* ad campaign, both photographed by legendary photographer Oliviero Toscani, Kelly's denim overalls have its own archive from which meaning may be drawn. Part of my own analysis is Kelly's denim overalls are an example of his signifying and sartorial disruption in and through the Black vernacular across his lifetime. As a young Black man in Vicksburg and Jackson, his style of dress challenged Black respectable and class aspirational notions of what was appropriate dress for a young man who came from a family that Flagg and others described as "one of the pillars of the community." **As a designer, the denim overalls show Kelly adorned in garments that make his literal work legible and establish affiliative ties with manual labor, a distinct difference from the actual glamour of being the head designer of a history making and viable fashion house.** Different than many of his peers and predecessors in the fashion industry — especially the very traditional, very serious, and somewhat stodgy Paris establishment — his personal style also demonstrated Kelly's choice not

to dress according to the trends of the times or in a way that would have marked him as a leader of his own successful fashion house. Rather, his style of dress — as with so much of his aesthetic enterprise — challenged race and class politics that dwelled in the assumption that he was either out of place or simply a novelty.

And what of the recursiveness and persistence of the denim overalls beyond the labor I have identified it as performing in and through Kelly's personal style? One does not need to look any further than hip hop fashion, one of the stylistic descendants of Kelly's aesthetic enterprise, where a clear conversation between the designer and popular culture is amplified through an analysis of the race, gender, class, and sexual politics of the overall as sartorial object. In the early to mid-1990s, Atlanta based R&B group TLC were often photographed donning baggy overalls in magazines, concerts, and socially. In this respect, they were trendsetters and purveyors of the tomboy couture that took hold of fashion at the time, a sartorial baton they passed to the late star Aaliyah — with whom the tomboy couture style is perhaps most associated with in mainstream fashion, as evidenced in her memorable fashion campaign for designer Tommy Hilfiger wearing denim overalls and oversized jeans with fitted crop tops. This look and silhouette would remain with the songstress until her death. Most recently, Chicago's Chance the Rapper has become especially associated with overalls — wearing them in denim, leather, and most famously, a khaki overall ensemble by designer Sheila Rashid at the 2015 MTV Video Music Awards. *Vogue*, the *New York Times*, the *Hollywood Reporter* and numerous news sources and magazines have since published articles about the enduring popularity of overalls, citing Chance the Rapper's style as one reasoning. In the interview "How Chance the Rapper is Redefining Hip Hop Style One Pair of Overalls at a Time," Chance's stylist, Whitney Middleton, describes creating this signature look for her client noting

"Chance was asking for overalls, but there really weren't a lot of great menswear brands doing cool overalls, so I found Sheila [Rashid] and brought a photo of her overalls to a fitting and showed him, and he was like, 'Yes! I want these.' [...] It's still aspirational because he really brings the wardrobe to life and infuses bright colors, and yet it's still something that his fan base can go out and emulate. [...] He's a man of the people, and he wants to be inclusive in his messaging."

When Middleton discusses the "aspirational" imperative linked to the clothing Chance the Rapper wears, we cannot ignore the capitalism central to the comment. The idea is not only to build a look that distills Chance the Rapper's style to a label, but to also make that label some-

thing others wish to consume. However, that Chance the Rapper's fashion calling card is built around such a widely accessible and cross-generational item as overalls evidence his intent, as Middleton says, "that his fan base can go out and emulate" this "man of the people." But what is also undeniable is that those who emulate him, especially his young fans, feel a sense of connection to him and affirmation in their ability to bond with him through this accessible form of dress. **In addition, as overalls are gender-neutral fashion, as evidenced from its employ from the civil rights era and through 1980s and 1990s hip hop fashion through to today, the garment achieves another dimension as a potentially boundary breaking material.**

It is clear that one may never be able to afford Chance the Rapper's leather overalls, and certainly wearing overalls does not remake the realities of rigidity, injustice, inequity, and indeed violence tied to gender identity and expression. Still, overalls, here visible in the context of the luxury of celebrity fashion, still evidence potential as a sartorial object that is rich with analytic potential for examining race, class, gender, sexuality, and place. What anchors and keeps Chance the Rapper tethered to the heart and soul of his own aesthetic enterprise, artistic intention, and greatest creative resource is the people. In this way, the significance of Chance the Rapper's overalls function as a sartorial object that invites a commentary of depth and breadth — replete with manifold contradictions, complexities, and contestations — on the cultural-political history of the intersections of identity, performativity, and adornment as did Patrick Kelly's overalls and others who wore them before him.

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