



‘I Just Thought It Looked Cool’: Cultural Appropriation by Music Festival Attendees

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Keywords: culture, appropriation, music, festivals

Ethnic clothing styles have been popular dress among attendees of rock music festivals since the early days of Woodstock and the emergence of the ‘hippie’ youth subculture. During the Woodstock era, ethnic dress fulfilled the dual criteria of being inexpensive but eye-catching, while simultaneously expressing the hippies’ interest in Eastern religions and the rejection of Western consumerism. In photo essays from Woodstock, women are shown wearing Indian or African cotton that had been made into maxi skirts, shawls or peasant blouses, while men wore Eastern-style tunics, embroidered waistcoats, denim jeans and velvet trousers, all common elements of hippie dress (Powe-Temperley, 1999). Ethnic styles could consist of a culture’s ceremonial dress as well as those items of dress worn as a part of daily life, and wearers could express their degree of identification with a particular culture through a spectrum of dress adoption. For example, wearers with low interest or affinity for a culture wearing a single ethnic scarf, wood beads or blouse with otherwise Western-style clothing, while those with high interest or affinity for a culture wearing a full ethnic ensemble (Lurie, 2000).

Since the millennium, music festivals have experienced a resurgence in popularity, and have emerged as a key influencer in the cultural Zeitgeist. The style of dress known commonly as ‘festival fashion’, features styles that would look right at home at Woodstock such as floral crowns, floppy hats, fringe, lace, peasant blouses, halter tops, crochet and macramé, flowing maxi dresses, kaftans, slip dresses, tie-dye, denim cutoffs, ethnic prints and accessories. Festival fashion represents a prime example of George Field’s (1970) trickle-up theory, which posits that higher-status segments with more power and affluence take their style cues from those of lower status, such as young people. Just as several of the styles of the hippies were reinterpreted as luxury garments, contemporary ready-to-wear designers are now creating bohemian-influenced garments similar to the ones worn at music festivals, as well as participating in music festivals through social media and creating style guides for festival attendees.

Cultural appropriation was a key signifier of the hippie movement, as hippies frequently wore native peasant garments from a variety of cultures in order to identify themselves as members of the counterculture, such as Eastern Indian print garments, Moroccan kaftans, Indonesian batiks, Native American fringed vests and moccasins, Mexican serapes and leather sandals (Lurie, 2000). Cultural appropriation becomes more noticeable when people choose to wear highly symbolic items from other cultures. This is what occurred when Coachella music festival attendees began wearing Native American headdresses as a fashion statement. Other ethnic

items of dress quickly joined the headdress among attendees, which has created a tension between members of these ethnic groups, such as blogger Adrienne K. (2010), who writes, "You are pretending to be a race that you are not, and are drawing upon stereotypes to do so," and festival goers who feel that they should be allowed to appreciate the aesthetic of other cultures without being judged.

For this research project, data collection consisted of a large scale fashion count for categories of garments or accessories with non-Western roots worn by non-native wearers at the Coachella music festival between the years 2011-2015. The fashion count was first developed by American cultural anthropologist Alfred Kroeber in his 1919 article, "On the Principle of Order in Civilization as Exemplified by Changes of Fashion" in *American Anthropologist*. For this study, Getty Images' photos of Coachella from the years 2011-2015 served as the data source, as they are home to a large number of journalistic images taken annually at the event (2011: 6,758 images; 2012: 7,585 images; 2013: 7,974 images; 2014: 11,214 images; 2015: 10,050 images).

Examples of categories of culturally appropriated dress that were tabulated and tracked during the fashion count process included Native American headdresses, war paint markings, bindis, Vietnamese Non La hats, chopsticks as hair accessories, paper parasols, kimonos, henna tattoos, saris, sombreros and dreadlocks and cornrows. Results indicated the frequency of which types of culturally significant items were worn most commonly by attendees, and changes in adoption levels demonstrate how looks from different cultures come in and out of style. This paper has implications for trend forecasters as well as for fashion designers and merchandisers who are interested in tracing the flow of trends through this burgeoning youth market.

References

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