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Fashion and the Fleshy Body (In a White Jumpsuit): David Cassidy as Unsung Nonbinary Style Icon

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Abstract

In March 1972, the pop idol David Cassidy played a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden dressed in a white lace-up jumpsuit. Although this outfit has been widely documented by fans, photographers and journalists, it has not been as widely discussed as signature costumes worn by his equally famous contemporaries — David Bowie and his man's dress, for example, which helped make the musician the androgynous style icon he is known as today, or Elvis Presley in his iconic white jumpsuit, which redefined ideas of masculinity in American culture. Yet when discussed through Joanne Entwistle's framework of dress as an embodied practice — David Cassidy wearing this particular jumpsuit, at this particular event — the individual garment regains a deeper meaning. Through an analysis of the jumpsuit and dress as an embodied practice, the stage is set to show Cassidy as a powerful conduit of social change who subverted gender norms in mainstream American culture in the late 1960s and early 70s — an unlikely but worthy nonbinary fashion icon.

Keywords: Gender; Nonbinary; Unisex; Fashion; Pop Culture.

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On January 19, 2015, Italian designer Alessandro Michele debuted his first collection as the creative director of Gucci — a date that fashion writer Angelo Flaccavento names the "official birth certificate" for the "advent of genderless-ness."[1]
It was the opening look that sealed the deal: the model Hugo Goldhoorn, hair like Sharon Tate's in *Valley of the Dolls*, in a lipstick-red silk pussy bow blouse — a garment historically associated with women in male-dominated spaces. Think trailblazing women entering the American workforce in the 1960s and '70s, think British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who reportedly wore them to "soften" her look. As for Goldhoorn's girl-tie, asserts Flaccavento, "That very item worked like a Trojan horse on preconceived ideas of masculinity and ignited a massive commercial phenomenon."[2]
Reignited is more like it. While the pussy-bow blouse has paved a path for today's genderfluid styles, credit for the blurring of contemporary masculine identity is due less to Gucci and more to the young men of the Peacock Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. These youthquakers shook conservative America to the core with their fashion — known for bright colors, soft fabrics, and typically feminine details — that reflected the sexual revolution and their activism against the Establishment and social and political injustices.

One worthy and equally willowy precursor to the pussy-bow: David Bowie's "man's dress", as depicted on the cover of his 1971 album, *The Man Who Sold the World*.
The image is well-known and often cited: The singer draped on a chaise covered in iridescent, almost-midnight satin; designed by Michael Fish, his shin-length dress a silver-gold splashed with blue florals. Two pairs of knotted buttons resembling traditional Chinese pankous fasten at his chest, as smooth as, its sheen the same as, the garment's. Long gold hair sculpted in waves and curls.

Figure 1: Left: Bowie as posed on the cover of his 1970 album, *The Man Who Sold the World*; right: *Odalisque with a lute*, Hippolyte-Dominque Berteaux, 1876. Image of album is official scan of 1971 UK pressing of album.

Bowie's presentation and the use of mise-en-scene on the album cover pack a powerful subversive punch. His pose is that of an odalisque in an Old Master painting — but whose gaze is this game-playing harem girl holding, the King of Diamonds between his fingers? The image of a feminine-looking man in a dress was so shocking at the time that record executives pulled the cover for the United States release of the album, where it was swapped out for a cartoon illustration of John Wayne.[3] The young men who wore styles like these were typically seen by the general public as rebellious and nonconformist. But not all of them.

1. Angelo Flaccavento, "Unisex, Genderless: Let the Debate Ensue," *ZonaModa Journal*, 12.1 (2022): 23–28, https://zmj.unibo.it/article/view/14902/14299.
2. Flaccavento, "Unisex," 26.
3. Nicholas Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie* (London: Titan Books, 2016), 337–343.

Figure 2: Ernie Sisto/The New York Times. Taken at Madison Square Garden, March 11, 1972, published in article: Taylor, Angela. "David They Yelled and Parents Quietly Paid." *The New York Times*, March 13, 1972.

Up for nomination to the canon: David Cassidy and his white lace-up jumpsuit, for their steamy, dreamy mix of masculine and feminine. Worn during one of the pop idol's concerts in 1972, the suit is both fluid and fitted to the body, with flared bottoms that elongate the legs in dancerly lines. The sleeves are long, slightly belled at the cuffs, adorned in fringe from armpit to wrist. Around the waist a sequined belt, strung with tassels that swung as he moved. The laces criss-cross from waist to mid-chest with the toppermost one undone, the suit's collar extending beyond the shoulders as if they were wings. Like Bowie on his chaise, Cassidy's embodied presence breathes meaning into the ensemble. How would this white lace-up jumpsuit look on a being not as androgyne?
The prettiest face, a pendant on a braided chain glimmering between the laces, hair kissing the clavicle. Although this outfit has been widely documented by fans, photographers and journalists, it has not been as widely discussed as iconic costumes worn by his equally famous contemporaries. It has not been declared, like Bowie's dress, as a "powerful step forward for androgyny."[4] Cassidy was not named, as Elvis Presley was, a style icon who changed "how men dressed forever"[5] with his white jumpsuits and effeminate styling. Nor was he cited, as were Bowie and Harry Styles, as following Elvis' lead with their nontraditional gender expressions.[6]

That may be because he was not borrowing from Elvis.
That may be because he was the one going with the flow.

"I Don't Care If He's Old, He's Beautiful! Give Him to Me!"

Whether it was Karen, a 7-year-old fan sharing the above sentiment with a reporter while waiting to get into Cassidy's March 1972 concert at Madison Square Garden, or a young Marc Jacobs who recalled his childhood crush ("He was hot. That shaggy haircut") in *Harper's Bazaar*,[7] David Cassidy made the whole world swoon.
And for about two years, he was one of the most popular people on the planet. Cassidy rocketed to fame as Keith Partridge on the hit TV series *The Partridge Family*, at its peak reaching 14 million U.S. households every Friday night at 8:30.[8] The highest paid solo performer in the world, he received more than 25,000 fan letters a week, and smashed the Rolling Stones' record for consecutive shows at Wembley Stadium.[9] American youth could buy everything from a David Cassidy Double Cutaway Guitar — marketed to boys in Montgomery Ward catalogs for 6.66[10] — to David's choker "LUV" beads in blue, white, and red at $1 per kit.[11]

4. Alex Arbuckle, "David Bowie's dress: A powerful step forward for androgyny," *Mashable*, November 5, 2015, accessed November 17, 2022, https://mashable.com/archive/david-bowie-dress#mD43miLFSkqD.

5. Megan C. Hills, "Remember when Elvis Presley's white jumpsuit changed how men dressed forever?," *CNN Style*, June 22, 2022, accessed December 9, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/style/article/elvis-presley-fashion-remember-when/index.html.

6. Hills, "Remember when".

7. Romy Oltuski, "Celebrity Secret Crushes," *Harper's BAZAAR*, January 29, 2015, accessed December 8, 2022, https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/g5190/secret-crushes-0215.

8. Seth Abramovitch, "Hollywood Flashback: 50 Years Ago, America Loved The Partridge Family," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 26, 2020, accessed December 8, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/hollywood-flashback-50-years-ago-america-loved-the-partridge-family-4064741.

9. David Gill, *"David Cassidy: Weekend at Wembley"*, TV episode, BBC, March 22, 1973, https://youtu.be/eYsGLjjrMMY.

10. "1973 PAPER AD Guitar Double Cutaway David Cassidy Signature Picture Partridge," Montgomery Ward, accessed December 12, 2022, https://www.ebay.com/itm/311542495203.

11. "David's Choker 'LUV' Beads ad," Tiger Beat Magazine, November 1971, accessed December 12, 2022, http://www.davidcassidy.com/fansite/InPrintPages/Mag1971Nov_TigerBeatOfficialPFMag_6.pdf.

Figure 3: *Tiger Beat Magazine*, November 1971. David's Choker 'LUV' Beads ad", *Tiger Beat Magazine*, November 1971, accessed December 12, 2022, http://www.davidcassidy.com/fansite/InPrintPages/Mag1971Nov_TigerBeatOfficialPFMag.

He even showed up as a straw man in Joan Didion's seminal and scathing critique on feminism, "The Women's Movement", published in *The New York Times* on July 30, 1972: "The derogation of assertiveness as 'machismo' has achieved such currency that one imagines several million women too delicate to deal with a man more overtly sexual than, say, David Cassidy."[12]
Didion references his nonthreatening appearance and dis-embodiment of traditional heteronormative masculinity — more lithe, less linebacker — yet this is the basis of Cassidy's appeal. Fans regularly talk about him in such decidedly nonmasculine terms as "pretty" and "beautiful". For a less subjective analysis, *The New York Times* reported on his "emaciated, wistful quality"[13] and "androgynous appeal,"[14] and indeed, as reported in *Tiger Beat*, his stunt double on the show was a 24-year-old young woman.[15]
Though regularly referenced, Cassidy remains largely unexplored through a critical lens in any area of academic study. An initial search on JSTOR reveals Cassidy is often cited as a signifier of pop and material culture and a "teenage heartthrob,"[16] though there are also name-drops that hint at the possibility of juicier analyses. Queer studies scholar Alexander Doty, for example, in proposing queerness as a mass culture reception practice, cites Cassidy on a list of stars one could queerly examine as an "impetus for gays to be more vocal about their 'lowbrow' sexual pleasure."[17]

Equally telling are the references to Cassidy not as a performer but an artifact of material culture, via his likeness — his fashionably dressed likeness — on posters and pin-ups on the walls of children's and teen's bedrooms in the early 1970s. The thing is, at the time Cassidy was in a better position than, say, Bowie to influence popular culture and style and, as I will show, shake up ideas of traditional gender roles and inspire young Americans. While Bowie is beloved and celebrated today, it's easy to forget that this was not always the case. In the early 1970s, his presentation and art were considered radical, even off-putting. To be sure, Bowie was playing with gender norms at the time — when asked in an interview why he wasn't wearing his "girl's dress" that day, he famously replied, "Oh dear. You must understand that it's not a woman's. It's a man's dress"[18] — but he was still relatively unknown. In comparison: By June 1971, *The Man Who Sold the World* had sold just 1,395 copies in the United States;[19] four months after its release, The Partridge Family's first single, "I Think I Love You", was closing in on 3,500,000 in sales. And Cassidy's audience was broad: during the first season of the show, 38% of the show's viewers were children, 19% were men and 28% women over the age of 19.[20] In today's parlance, because of his reach and acceptance by mainstream American public, Cassidy had simply earned more opportunities to see. In other words, a lot of *Tiger Beat* 8-by-10 glossies.

"A Wind-up Version of an Updated Elvis Presley"

The study of the dressed body is relatively new in fashion analysis, which has historically concentrated on history, the documentation of material culture, and fashion as a visual rather than corporeal spectacle. "While the body has always and everywhere to be dressed", writes Joanne Entwistle, "there has been

12. Joan Didion, "The Women's Movement," *The New York Times*, July 30, 1972, https://www.nytimes.com/1972/07/30/archives/the-womens-movement-women.html.

13. Aljean Harmetz, "Two Partridges in a Money Tree," *The New York Times*, September 5, 1971, https://www.nytimes.com/1971/09/05/archives/two-partridges-in-a-money-tree.html.

14. Angela Taylor, "David They Yelled and Parents Quietly Paid," *The New York Times*, March 13, 1972, https://www.nytimes.com/1972/03/13/archives/-david-they-yelled-and-parents-quietly-paid.html.

15. Jan Freeman, "I'm David's Double," *Tiger Beat Magazine*, February 1972, accessed December 12, 2022, https://www.davidcassidy.com/fansite/InPrintPages/Mag1972Feb_TigerBeat_17.pdf.

16. Susan J. Douglas and Andrea McDonnell, "Musical Celebrity," *Celebrity: A History of Fame*, 13 (2019): 206–207.

17. Alexander Doty, "There's Something Queer Here," In *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture,* eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 79–80.

18. "Bowie: 'I'm gay and always have been'," Bowiebible.com, August 27, 2018, accessed December 12, 2022, https://www.bowiebible.com/1972/01/22/bowie-im-gay-and-always-have-been.

19. Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, 342–343.

20. Harmetz, "Two Partridges".

a surprising lack of concrete analysis of the relationship between them."[21]
Using Cassidy's concert-worn white jumpsuit as a case study opens a door to an analysis between body and dress. There's no way to ignore the flaming specter of Elvis Presley who, through the power of celebrity mythmaking, may very well be at the head of the jumpsuit line in the public consciousness. It's hard to divorce Cassidy's embodied presentation from the cartoony trope of aging, sideburned masculinity that eclipsed it, thankyouverymuch. Even Cassidy himself deemed the outfit "silly" in retrospect.[22] But when discussed through Joanne Entwistle's framework of dress as an embodied practice — David Cassidy wearing a particular jumpsuit, at a particular time — the individual garment regains a deeper meaning and can be read as a powerful conduit of social change.

"Dress is always located situationally and temporarily", Entwistle proposes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the body as groundwork for her thinking about dress as embodied practice. To Merleau-Ponty, we understand the world through the experience of our bodies in space. "When getting dressed, one orientates oneself/body to the situation", writes Entwistle, "acting in particular ways upon the surfaces of the body in ways that are likely to fit with established norms of that situation."[23]
Entwistle's framework is particularly useful when applied to Cassidy's jumpsuit, because it is associated with a particular date and venue — the afternoon of Saturday, March 11, 1972, at New York City's Madison Square Garden, 31st to 33rd Streets between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. The garment was worn for a sold-out crowd of 21,000, mainly young girls and their friends who had likely never seen him — his embodied presence — in the flesh.
Because this jumpsuit was worn and experienced by the wearer and attendees in a performative nature, certain norms surrounding clothing and behavior strictly adhered to in daily life would have been relaxed. For example, a 21-year-old man may very well have been arrested for directing gestures of a sexual nature toward a minor; all parties have deemed such actions acceptable, however, when performed in a concert. Cassidy's television image of big brother Keith Partridge, combined with his embodied androgynous presence, likely facilitate easing of the rules. Indeed, *The New York Times* described Cassidy as a "diminutive, extremely mobile young man who moved around... like a wind-up version of an updated Elvis Presley, gyrating his pelvis, leaping into the air in wide-spreading splits and trying, with all his might, to project an image of writhing sensuality."[24]

As Cassidy noted in the 1973 BBC documentary *Weekend at Wembley*, "It is a sexual experience for them all — for me too, you know. It's not blatant — it is to a certain extent, but I only, *we* only, carry it to a certain extent. If I were to carry it further, it would be a burlesque show (mimes ripping off shirt). It is a matter of saying, 'Okay, there is where we draw the line, kids.' "[25]
One line was drawn at the collarbone, actually. Photographs taken that day record the top coming undone as the concert progressed, revealing most of Cassidy's bare torso. This is likely due to his continuous movement — the leaps, splits and gyrations as noted by the *Times* reporter or, borrowing Llewellyn Negrin's description of the clothing designs of Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo, "a much more fluid and organic relationship between the fabric and the body, in which the garment is constantly changing its form in response to the movements of the body."[26]
Now that the jumpsuit has been located in time and space and set in motion, it can also be looked at through a gendered lens. Using Entwistle's discussion of the orientation of men's and women's bodies in work spaces as a jumping-off point, it can be shown that Cassidy's embodied presence in his work

21. Joanne Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleshy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice," *Fashion Theory*, 4:3 (April 2015): 324, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2752/136270400778995471.

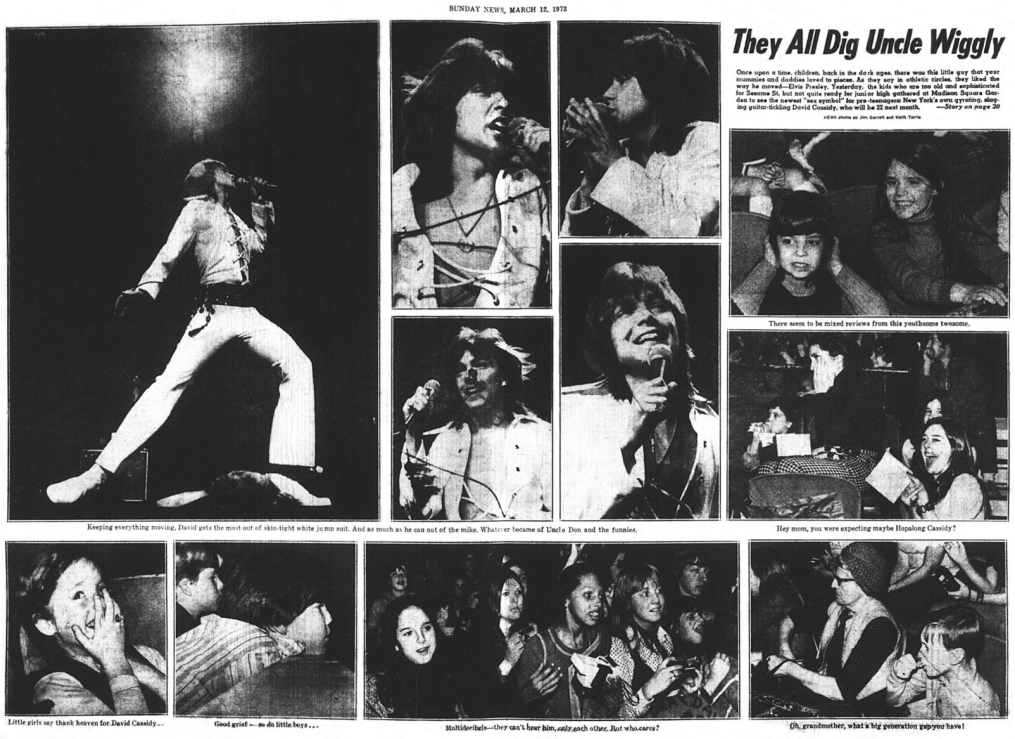
22. Bill Boggs, "Bill Boggs Corner Table: interview with David Cassidy," filmed March 28, 1999, at the Palm in Las Vegas, video, 32:10, https://youtu.be/zng53EPNuxs.

23. Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleshy Body," 335.

24. Don Heckman, "Cassidy Is Focus Of New Pop Trend," The New York Times, March 12, 1972, https://www.nytimes.com/1972/03/12/archives/cassidy-is-focus-of-new-pop-trend-partridge-family-star-puts.html.

25. Gill, *David Cassidy: Weekend at Wembley*.

26. Llewellyn Negrin, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty: The Corporeal Experience of Fashion." In *Thinking through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, eds. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, (London: Bloomsbury, 2106), 125–126.


SUNDAY NEWS, MARCH 12, 1972

They All Dig Uncle Wiggly

Once upon a time, children, back in the dark ages, there was this little guy that your mommies and daddies loved to pieces. As they say in athletic circles, they liked the way he moved—Elvis Presley. Yesterday, the kids who are too old and sophisticated for Sesame St. but not quite ready for Junior high gathered at Madison Square Garden to see the newest "sex symbol" for pre-teenagers: New York's own gyrating, sing-ing guitar-tickling David Cassidy, who will be 22 next month. —Story on page 30

There seem to be mixed reviews from this youthsome twosome.

Keeping everything moving, David gets the most out of skin-tight white jump suit. And as much as he can out of the mike. Whatever became of Uncle Don and the funnies.

Hey mom, you were expecting maybe Hopalong Cassidy?

Little girls say thank heaven for David Cassidy...

Good grief — so do little boys...

Multidecibels—they can't hear him, only each other. But who cares?

Oh, grandmother, what a big generation gap you have!

Figure 4: The New York Daily News, March 12, 1972. From davidcassidy.com, https://www.davidcassidy.com/fansite/InPrintPages/News1972March12_NewYorkDailyNews1.pdf.

space represents a subversion of gender norms.

In the business world where, Entwistle states, "sexuality is deemed inappropriate" as it distracts from production, the traditional man's business suit attempts to de-sexualize the male body. Indeed, the jacket, trousers, shirt with collar and tie leave only the head, neck and hands uncovered. "While it does not obliterate the sexuality of the male body, it works to obscure, blur or reduce it". In contrast, Entwistle reiterates many women's studies theorists' argument that a woman's body, even in a business space and wearing a man's suit, is always a sexual body. "In other words, women are still seen as located in the body, whereas men as seen as transcending it."[27]

For David Cassidy, performing at Madison Square Garden in a lace-up jumpsuit was considered work, the stage his work space; the jumpsuit and his movements in it constitute labor, for which he was compensated $50,000. In this case, a man's sexuality did not distract from production, but enhanced it, Cassidy's business attire leaving much of the upper torso, in addition to the head, neck and hands, uncovered. And not unintentionally tight and white — features favored by young men at the time, shares Daniel Delis Hill in *Peacock Revolution: American Masculine Identity and Dress in the Sixties and Seventies*, "not only for the eye-catching brightness of the color, but also because white accentuated the legs and buttocks."[28]

But does the meaning change if Cassidy's embodied presence is read here as not [traditionally] male but androgynous? Does the jumpsuit function to obscure, blur and reduce the male body by emphasizing his epicene features? Cassidy's body can also be read as inhabiting the role of a woman in a business space. Because his labor is physical, because the products of his labor — singing and dancing — are products of the body, he is, as is a woman in a business space, always located in the body. Because he

27. Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleshy Body," 342–343.

28. Daniel Delis Hill, "The Peacock Revolution," in *Peacock Revolution: American Masculine Identity and Dress in the Sixties and Seventies*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 85–172.

sexualized, even if by tens of thousands of pre-teen girls, he takes on the role of woman at work.

While one might lean into Erving Goffman, who'd argue that there are different rules for performing on a stage than there are for working in an office, nevertheless, the haptic experience of gendered dress plays a role in both arenas. Cassidy was following — if treading lightly — in the footsteps of other male stars such as Bowie and Mick Jagger who, per Delis Hill, "perpetuated the masculinity of sexual exhibitionism" performing in pants "that displayed their crotch for a female audience looking up from below stage level."[29]

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a discussion of gender and fashion becomes even more interesting when considering age. Entwistle notes that fashion's preoccupation with gender "starts with babies and is played out through the lifecycle, so that styles of dress at significant moments are clearly gendered."[30] Some might expect a toddler girl to choose, say, a pink tutu for dress-up and play. As documented evidence of Cassidy's influence on traditional gender norms, what of this photograph of a very young fan who came dressed for the concert in a white lace-up jumpsuit just like his? "The fans love David Cassidy", read the caption accompanying the photo as captured by *The New York Times*. "They buy his banners, copy his hairdo and wear his white suit in the 2-year size."[31]

Figure 5: Ernie Sisto/The New York Times. Taken outside of Madison Square Garden, March 11, 1972, published in article: Taylor, Angela. "David They Yelled and Parents Quietly Paid." *The New York Times*, March 13, 1972.

Dress as a phenomenon — perhaps even a *happening* — allows us to consider all relationships and in-

29. Hill, *Peacock Revolution: American Masculine Identity and Dress in the Sixties and Seventies*, 129.

30. Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleshy Body," 329.

31. Taylor, "David They Yelled and Parents Quietly Paid".

terconnections associated with the white lace-up jumpsuit worn by David Cassidy while performing at Madison Square Garden on March 11, 1972. This enables us to ask questions about not only Cassidy's embodied experience of performing in the jumpsuit, but questions about those who witnessed it. How was Cassidy's embodied experience documented, and how might this embodied experience impact other instances of embodied experiences in similar garments, such as the 2-year-old fan? Consider the web of relation between the jumpsuit and Cassidy, and the relation between the jumpsuit and those who witnessed it, and the relation between the wearer and the witness, both before, during, and after March 11, 1972. As Negrin reiterates, "One's awareness of one's body is not just influenced by physiological changes in the body or by physical changes in the environment in which one finds oneself, but also through encounters with others."[32] In thinking more broadly about a particular garment's universe, about dress as an embodied event, the white lace-up jumpsuit worn by David Cassidy on March 11, 1972, sits on a continuum, on to which chronological data points like these may be placed:

- the embodied presence of Cassidy in his jumpsuit at Madison Square Garden on March 11, 1972, versus the embodied presence of Elvis Presley in his jumpsuit at Madison Square Garden on June 10, 1972. What does a white jumpsuit say on a beefish, six-foot, 170-pound, 37-year-old body, and what does it say on a slight, 125-pound, five-foot, seven-inch, 21-year-old one?
- audio of the concert as captured by a young fan with a cheap cassette recorder.[33] We cannot see David and the jumpsuit, but his embodied presence, and a synchrony between his vocal and kinesthetic performances, are implied. Say, perhaps, he was leaning forward in plié, thighs, knees and jumpsuit legs touching, bending the right elbow and holding the mic in such a way that set in motion the fringe at the cuff?
- the physical movements and psychological states of the parents accompanying their daughters to the concert, covering their ears at the "20,000-voice screech of 'David, David' "[34] at first appearance of the embodied presence of Cassidy in the white jumpsuit.
- the psychological states of the viewers, for whom the jumpsuit represented Cassidy's *living* embodied presence. The young fans respond in state of contrived hysteria when he stepped on stage in it, a phoenix with sequin-spangled wings. "This is the peak", as Cassidy put it. "After having built it up and seeing me only on television, magazines, radio and so forth, this is it — these are the few moments 'he' comes to life."[35]
- the psychological state of the wearer, who named the concert at which this jumpsuit was worn as the highlight of his career. "It was so emotional for me", recalled Cassidy, "because my whole family was there. I felt so blessed to have that moment with them and have them see me doing something I knew I could do very well."[36]
- the final disposition of the white jumpsuit on March 11, 1972. As to avoid discovery by fans, the body wearing it was wrapped in a blanket, carried through the service entrance, deposited into the trunk of a Toyota, and left, "cold, miserable, and exhausted, at a crummy motel out in Queens."[37]

32. Negrin, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty: The Corporeal Experience of Fashion," 119.

33. "Concert Audio: Madison Square Garden, New York City, N.Y.," DavidCassidy.com, http://www.davidcassidy.com/fansite/ConcertPages/1972March11_ConcertAudio.html.

34. Taylor, "David They Yelled and Parents Quietly Paid".

35. Gill, *David Cassidy: Weekend at Wembley*.

36. CNN, "Piers Morgan interviews David Cassidy," filmed April 22, 2014, 27:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlVjcuWDRj8.

37. Chip Deffaa, "David Cassidy... Behind the Scenes," Theatrescene.net, January 1, 2020, accessed December 12, 2022, http://www.theaterscene.net/columns/david-cassidy-behind-the-scenes/chip-deffaa.

An Egalitarian Message, Strung up in Puka Shells

"On adult bodies," writes dress historian and American Studies scholar Jo B. Paoletti in *Sex and Unisex: Fashion, Feminism, and the Sexual Revolution*, "unisex clothing can accentuate physical differences, creating a pleasant sexual tension."[38]

David Cassidy, in the costumed embodiment of Keith Partridge, personified this tension every Friday night. By the time he had risen to fame on *The Partridge Family* at the end of 1970, unisex clothing — either intentionally branded as such, or the result of women wearing men's styles, and vice versa — was readily available, coinciding with the fight for gender equality and the sexual revolution that redefined masculinity and femininity.

Pink bell bottoms. Man-dallions. Chain belts. Scarves. Long-sleeved ribbed tops with lace edging at the neck. Ponchos. Floral-print shirts and tight white overalls with rainbow appliques... While he was not the first to wear these casual, everyday styles that sexualized males and females, yet still could be read as androgynous, Cassidy lead the charge to embed them in the collective fashion consciousness — simply by virtue of his everywhereness. The average American teen would have much more access to Keith's casual, hip styles than, say, a custom-made white sequined jumpsuit, and it's easy to imagine her — and him — showing up to school in paisley with a puka shell choker, just like David's...

And for one lucky fan and reader of *SPEC* magazine, the chance to "Win David Cassidy's Complete Outfit". "How'd you like for your very own — to have, to hold, to wear and to show off to your friends — the exact, beautiful, flowered-calico, buttoned-front, long-sleeved cotton shirt David is wearing?!" read the advertisement in the October 1972 issue, as shown in figure 6. "And how 'dya like to have for your very own (and maybe even wear, if they fit you) this pair of David's favorite denim slacks?!" If the winner had a 28-inch waist, like Cassidy's? Golden.

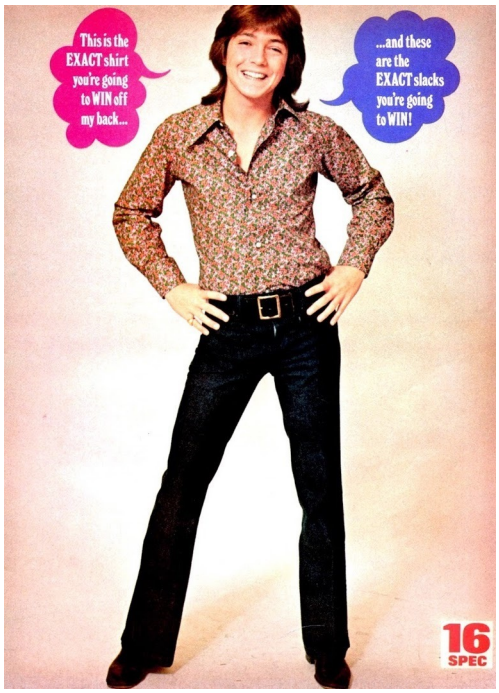


Figure 6: *Spec* Magazine, October 1971. Original scans from Pinterest, including: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/728879520926398108.

Indeed, Cassidy and his character were cool enough to be influencers. *The Partridge Family* likely carried a lot more cache with socially aware viewers than *The Brady Bunch*, which it followed on Friday

38. Jo B. Paoletti, *Sex and Unisex: Fashion, Feminism, and the Sexual Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 115.

nights; the former addressed the women's liberation movement and protests of unfair working conditions, while dopey plotlines for the latter centered around Cindy losing her doll or Carol developing laryngitis.
But you needn't have been socially aware — or even agreed with those seeking change — to fall under the influence. Cassidy is known for his young, pre-teen fanbase, which I believe is unfortunately one reason he's not only dismissed, but left out of the gender-bending conversation. Yet it's important to note how profound this was. And equally important to suppose why.

The various movements toward a rethinking of traditional gender roles and rules — including women's liberation, gay rights, and the peacock revolution — began to impact how parents raised their children. For many, states Paoletti, "this desire for equality resulted in a more personal, long-term goal: a new generation of men and women raised to be unrestricted by gender stereotypes."[39]
While gender-neutral clothing for toddlers and pre-teens was nothing new — for one, it was cost-effective as garments had many lives as hand-me-downs — there were some interesting developments regarding who was wearing gendered garments. Not only did girls' fashion copy boys' styles, Paoletti reports that girls were buying boys' clothes. "Sears acknowledged this practice by including size conversion charts in the boys' pages", she writes, and juvenile fashion industry magazine *Earnshaw's* reported in 1978 that "as much as 25 percent of boys jeans and pants were actually sold to girls."[40] The reverse wasn't as common, but one manufacturer of girls' stretch pants started including images of boys in his marketing communications when he realized that mothers were purchasing them for their young sons.

However, not all parents found gendered clothing to be repressive to children. Per Paoletti, many hung tight to the conservative and heteronormative, feeling that unisex clothing would "confuse children and possibly steer them to homosexuality."[41]
Everyone seemed to agree that what one wore carried transformative power.
Quantifying Cassidy's influence is challenging — should we look at concert photos of fans, best-guess their age and catalog what they wore? — but it is known that many of the parents buying clothing for their kids were familiar with him. And children who saw older teens and adults in androgynous styles, whether they wore similar clothing or not, would have "absorbed the egalitarian message of the unisex movement", writes Paoletti.[42]
Cassidy certainly, repeatedly, delivered this message.

Shall We Shag Now?

Man buns. Man ponies. Curly lobs. They're taken for granted today, but long hair on men was not always accepted without censure and repercussions. Yes, Elvis, the Beatles and other musicians had been inspiring young men to grow and style their hair as symbols of musical taste and values, and counterculture youth who identified with the hippie movement grew theirs long as statements of social protest.[43]
Still, as Delis Hill writes, "From the mid–1960s well into the 1970s, for a young man in America to simply grow hair long enough to cover his ear tips and brush the shirt collar was sufficient for suspension from school."[44]
Hill reports there were over 70 cases litigated in state and federal courts between 1965 and 1978 against school dress codes that prohibited long hair. While most of these cases were dropped as they went against freedom of expression, the schools' arguments ranged from classroom discipline ("boys with long hair

39. Paoletti, *Sex and Unisex*, 108
40. Paoletti, *Sex and Unisex*, 113–116.
41. Paoletti, *Sex and Unisex*, 118–120.
42. Paoletti, *Sex and Unisex*, 119.
43. Anthony Synnott, "Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair," *The British Journal of Sociology*, 87.3 (September 1987): 381–413.
44. Hill, *Peacock Revolution*, 70.

were disruptive because of their primping and hair flipping") and criminal activity ("boys with long hair might try to sneak into girls' restrooms") to social order ("short hair on boys was necessary for the maintenance of social norms") and violation of gender norms ("longhaired boys might be confused with girls").[45]

The last two examples offer insight into the profound, yet unexplored influence that Cassidy and his shag haircut had on both male and female youth in the 1970s — a time when long hair was very much considered a female trait.

Figure 7: *16* Magazine, February 1972. Scan from davidcassidy.com.

The shag is a unisex cut, in which the hair is cut in layers, often fringed and feathered at the top and edges. It is also synonymous with Cassidy: In conducting a review of online media sources covering his 2017 passing, I was hard-pressed to find one that did not mention his hair. A visit to the "Shag" entry in Wikipedia revealed one photo to illustrate the hairstyle — a headshot of Cassidy.[46]

How he did it: Simply by being invited into American homes every Friday night, and portraying the wholesome, non-threatening (sometimes even church-going) character of Keith Partridge. While many conservative, mainstream parents whose kids watched the show may have associated long hair with "dirty" hippies, they didn't seem to make that connection with Keith. In the video series on 20th Century Style Icons on YouTube's Ultimate Fashion History Channel, host Amanda Hallay notes that what made David's hair different was that it was coiffed. "It changed hippie hair into something pulled together", she narrates. Hallay imagines mother-viewers watching and thinking, "If Shirley Jones' son is allowed long hair, then my son is allowed long hair, too". (Note: During the video she does a Google search and types in "1970s shag haircut", and sure enough, Cassidy pops up. "He owned the shag," says Hallay).[47]

The show's creators worked hard to present Keith as relatable, flaws and all — and they employed his hair as a device to achieve this. The teen is vain about his hair, flipping, fluffing, feathering, carrying around a pocket comb. There's even an episode in which all the other Partridges jokingly mimic Keith's iconic hair flip,[48] perhaps adding a sense of lightness that rendered it even less threatening in parents' eyes.

Many children and teens got shags not because they wanted popular haircuts that other girls or boys had,

45. Hill, *Peacock Revolution*, 71.

46. "Shag (haircut)," Wikipedia.com, accessed December 12, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shag_(haircut).

47. "20th Century Style Icons: David Cassidy," The Ultimate Fashion History channel. Posted May 30, 2017, Youtube, video, 7:46, https://youtu.be/AM2p3OyGqeI.

48. Nancy York, "David Cassidy Hair Flip," Posted May 25, 2018, Youtube, video, 0:46, https://youtu.be/bwj-x2xLoSQ.

but because they wanted hair like David Cassidy's. This is an important distinction — they weren't identifying with a boy's haircut or a girl's haircut, but with Cassidy's haircut. Gendered hair conventions were not, at least overtly, playing a role in their decision.

A 2018 post on the Honoring David Cassidy's Love and Light public Facebook fan page asks if "anyone else also copied his hairstyle".
From Kim: I first got a David Cassidy shag in 1974. I STILL HAVE IT.
Anne: I tried to copy his look especially how it looked on top but could never get it as lovely as his hair.
Julie: Right before I started high school in September of 1973 I went to the beauty shop and said, "Give me the David Cassidy shag!."[49]

A press conference was held the day he cut it off. In an article entitled "Look what's happened to David Cassidy", in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 24, 1974, the reporter asked if he was trying to get away from his youthful Partridge Family image. "I think it is time", said Cassidy.[50]
A copy of the article was posted on the David Cassidy Facebook page this past September. Some representative comments:

"I was horrified, but at the same time, as a 14 year old, I understood his need to make changes to his appearance".
"I was so shocked and saddened, that it just ruined my day."[51]

The 8●s Called... They Want Their Gender Back

Within ten years, the pendulum would swing the other way. While long hair on boys and men remained, the unisex looks of the 1960s and 70s fell far out of fashion in favor of the gendered — make that hypergendered — styles of the 1980s. Bowie had changed. In his 1983 video for *Let's Dance*, the hit that earned him mega-mainstream-stardom, he's looking elegant, British and, well, professional, shadow-striped shirt with gray tie, belted ivory trousers, loose-fitting and linenlike, with white pointy-toe shoes.[52] This was typical of his look at the time — polka-dot bowties, thin suspenders, suit jackets — reflecting, not challenging, current styles and traditional menswear. Cassidy's look, too, was consistent with 1980s style, the shag morphed into a longish mullet with blond highlights, floral-prints swapped out for New Wavey, shoulder-padded tailored jackets in shiny fabrics, grown up and away from his pre-teen fanbase.[53] Trading in dresses and mandallions for suits — suits! shoulder pads and all, they still echo the standard business attire worn in a male-dominated professional space — it is not as easy to argue for these 80s iterations as nonbinary icons.

Another reason that making a clear-cut case presents challenges: neither artist fully owned up to it. While he may have presented otherwise, Cassidy was heterosexual, and did acknowledge a large gay following. And though he was referred to as "androgynous", he didn't describe himself as such. Bowie's 1972 statement, "I'm gay and I've always have been", is now infamous — though most citations don't

49. Honoring David Cassidy's Love and Light Facebook group, "I wonder if anyone else copied his hairstyle?," Facebook status & comments, October 7, 2018, accessed December 12, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/FansofDavidCassidy/photos/a.291695731249326/578626609222902.

50. "Look what's happened to David Cassidy," The Sydney Morning Herald, October 24, 1974, DavidCassidy.com, http://www.davidcassidy.com/fansite/InPrintPages/News1974Oct24_The_Sydney_Morning_Herald.pdf.

51. David Cassidy Official Facebook Page, "A newspaper article from October 24, 1974" post & comments, September 29, 2022, accessed December 12, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02znBC9LkDNRCdCCAfsaMoyVaeRbgBi6wTvVbpQb3g21Yhg55aZi8CHCxU6cvHJwLjl&id=125896720838014.

52. David Bowie Youtube Channel, "Let's Dance," Official video, posted June 24, 2018, video, 4:08, https://youtu.be/VbD_kBJc_gI.

53. "Terry Wogan Show – Britain: Premier of"The Last Kiss" video," February 20, 1985, DavidCassidy.com, http://www.davidcassidy.com/fansite/TvFilmPages/WoganShow.html.

mention that he later named that utterance as "the biggest mistake I ever made."[54] Today, in a time of both personal branding and social and political upheaval, when many find strength and solidarity in self-identification, Cassidy and Bowie are conundrums.
What does it mean that the word used to describe much of the clothing that David Cassidy wore in the 1970s — unisex, in support of more egalitarian gender roles — has fallen out of use as a fashion term today? And why is there a strong imperative to identify oneself today that was not the case in the 1970s?

Indeed, musicologist Tiffany Naiman, who teaches a course at Stanford entitled "It's The Freakiest Show: David Bowie's Intertextual Imagination", elucidates, "I have a couple of students that are working on Bowie's queerness. And they are very interested in the idea that he said he was gay, said he was bisexual, was married to a woman, said he was a heterosexual. And they're really trying to be rigorous and understand, because we're so used to categorizing people and identities. They want to fix him somewhere and they're realizing that they can't...."[55]
If Cassidy were on their radar, the same could be said of him.
When we imagine an apparently heterosexual male as a nonbinary icon who did not identify himself as such, we open up our thinking to new possibilities and are able to ask new questions about gender and gender expression. If a teenager styles her hair after a man's without an awareness or intent that she is reversing traditional expressions of gender, does that make her less genderfluid, or diminish Cassidy's ability to inspire nontraditional choices? If 1970s moms let their sons grow their hair long because they liked Keith Partridge's shag but not Ziggy Stardust's orange-red one, does that make either Davids less or more non-binary? What might we gain by not using a name?

Figure 8: It's a wrap... or is it? Time will tell how the pussy-bow pendulum will swing. Left: ASOS product shot of Gucci knock-off "regular fit shirt with pussy bow in pink." Right: Cassidy, circa 1975, image from an RCA publicity photo. Collage by the author.

"Those who are truly contemporary are those who neither perfectly coincide with their time nor adapt to its demands".

Alessandro Michele used the above quote by philosopher Giorgio Agamben as a pretense to help market his 2015 collection as ground-breaking.[56] Looked at through a Cassidian lens, he could be half-wrong. Gucci seems to intimate that the genderless-ness of the collection — as performed by a long-haired male

54. Katie Rogers, "Was He Gay, Bisexual or Bowie? Yes," *The New York Times*, January 13, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/14/style/was-he-gay-bisexual-or-bowie-yes.html.

55. Andrea Domanick, "David Bowie: How the glam rocker pushed the boundaries of gender expression," interview by Madeleine Brand, May 24, 2021, accessed December 12, 2022, https://www.kcrw.com/news/shows/press-play-with-madeleine-brand/blm-politics-music-oc/david-bowie-man-who-sold-the-world-gender.

56. Steff Votka, "Alessandro Michele's Gucci by the Numbers," *Vogue*, June 1, 2016, accessed December 12, 2022, https://www.vogue.com/article/alessandro-michele-gucci-statistics.

model in a $1,100 pussy bow blouse — does not perfectly coincide with the time, and that one who wears this style does so with an enlightened rebelliousness. I wonder, though, if this could be seen as centering heteronormativity by positioning the genderfluid Pussy Bow Wearer as Other, in a way that unisex styles of the 1970s, with their egalitarian mission, did not.

I think people who do adapt to the demands of the time are truly contemporary — if they are fully present (which, it can be argued, is a form of timelessness) and if it happens organically, unintentionally. Ideas of gender roles and what it meant to be masculine and feminine needed to change in the late 1960s and early 70s, and Cassidy represented and normalized these changes to many in the mainstream, across genders — including those who'd be put off by, didn't have the language to read, say, a beautiful man in a dress. More scholarship is needed to explore the loop between the egalitarian, unisex 1970s and today's genderlessness through the lens of fashion and star studies. Testing the hypothesis that self-identification of one's gender expression plays more of a role now than it did in Cassidy's 1970 may also be fruitful when considering fashion and the fleshy body. It's exciting. Walking down the streets of New York City today, guarantee you'll come across many a gorgeous being who could rock Cassidy's white lace-up jumpsuit — but none who could rock it quite like he did. That show is over.

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