

La Dolce Hood: Rethinking Hip-hop Masculinity through Italian Cinema and Fashion. The Case of *Vibe* Magazine. 1992–1997

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Abstract

The essay explores the intersections between Italian film, fashion, and hip-hop “Golden age” masculinity from 1992 to 1997, with a specific focus on *Vibe* magazine. Through an analysis of *Vibe*'s coverage of hip-hop and fashion, I argue that the representation of hip-hop masculinity in *Vibe* was shaped by sampling both American and Italian cinematic and cultural tropes (specifically Hollywood musicals, spaghetti westerns and gangster movies). The essay examines how *Vibe*'s portrayal of hip-hop masculinity through sophisticated fashion services, crafted and intercepts broader cultural and visual trends over hip-hop, proposing an alternative and progressive vision of black male identity in respect of the toxic image of “gagsta rapper” and its associated racial tropes. Combining original archival perusal and interviews with an action-network oriented methodology, the essay retraces the complex and often ambiguous nature of hip-hop masculinity, as well as how cultural cross-pollination might orient our understanding of hip-hop, gender and national identity.

Keywords: Hip-Hop Studies; Italian Cinema; Italian Fashion; Vibe Magazine; Hip-Hop Masculinity.

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Introduction

In 1999, as a young Italian b-boy eager for knowledge, I came across a book featuring a captivating photograph of the legendary black rapper LL Cool J. The picture showed him performing live, confidently holding the microphone in one hand and his crotch with the other, displaying his impressive muscular arms and tattoos. In a move that was a clear act of artistic and sexual confidence, Cool J wore a classic Kangol bucket, perfectly matched with a basketball tank top and a pair of baggy jeans, giving the whole image a look of elegance and ghetto glamour that encapsulated the essence of late 90s hip-hop masculinity.¹ Or, as I soon understood, just its front image.

On the one hand, such a “machist” version of hip-hop male identity appeared as the re-enactment and commodification of old racist tropes concerning black masculinity surfacing the history of Anglo-American popular culture: from the late 18th Century “black dandy” as a hyper-haute dressed and mischievous subject in the British stage; to the mid-19th century blackface minstrel tradition, depicting black people as music enthusiasts but with the potential to be rapists; up to the “Birth” of American narrative cinema where black male characters were also represented as brutes and hypersexual “Mandingoes”, and later as mendaciously “gangsta”.²

On the other hand, from its very mainstreaming in the early 1980s “hip-hop masculinity” and its associated fashion, were characterized by a certain “ambiguity” which challenged the racialized representation of black people mentioned above. Take black graffiti pioneer of Italian descendant Rammellzee whose casting of cross-gender characters made a staple of hip-hop redesign of visual and performance art;³ the flamboyant stage costumes of Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force reconnecting with the Afrofuturist and Panafricanist movement, or the “1970’s-pimp-meets-the-Village People” look of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five;⁴ up to the characterization of Ozone (Adolfo “Shabba Doo” Quinones), the leading characters of *Breakin’* (Silberg, 1984), whose dance moves and fashion look are indebted to the LA gay club scene and reminisces the androgynous looks of artists like Prince or Michael Jackson.⁵ Vikki Tobak’s *Contact High: A Visual History of Hip-hop Culture* offered a good picture of that by recollecting intriguing backstage stories of famous shoots which oriented the idea of gender identity in hip-hop consumers from 1979 to 2003, revealing a prismatic, self-conscious and progressive thinking behind the work of photographers and hip-hop artist.⁶

By deconstructing the racial (and economically profitable) framework underpinning the perpetuation of a stereotyped “blackness” into hip-hop culture, the seminal work of Tricia Rose aims to reassess this prismatic image and the empowering role of black and rap masculinity.⁷ As Rose aptly analyzes, from

1. The book in question is Paolo Ferrari, *Hip hop* (Firenze: Giunti, 1999).
2. See Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012); Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films, 4th edition* (New York: Continuum, 2001).
3. For Rammellzee’s creative bond with Italy see Lorenzo Ottone, “When Rammellzee, pioneer of Hip Hop art, hosted a class in Milan,” accessed February 21, 2024, <https://www.domusweb.it/en/art/2022/02/18/quando-rammellzee-pioniere-dellarte-hip-hop-tenne-una-lezione-a-milano>.
4. Elizabeth Wellington, “The Evolution of Hip Hop Style,” in *Fresh, Fly and Fabulous. 50 Years of Hip Hop Style*, edited by Elena Romero and Elizabeth Way (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2023), 29.
5. See Nate “Chops” Johnson, “‘Lockin’ with Hip-Hop’s own Fred Astaire: Shabba-Doo (aka ‘Ozone’ from Breakin’),” accessed May 2, 2024, <https://sheamagazine.com/lockin-with-hip-hops-own-fred-astaire-shabba-doo-aka-ozone-from-breakin/>.
6. See Vikki Tobak, ed., *Contact High: A Visual History of Hip-hop* (New York: Clarkson Publisher, 2018).
7. See Tricia Rose, “Fear the Black Planet: Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990s,” *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 60 (Summer 1991): 276–290; Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994); Tricia Rose, *The hip-hop Wars. What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop — and Why It Matters* (New York: Basi Books, 2008). For an essential historical and critical overview on hip-hop culture respectively see Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop. A History of the Hip-hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005); Murray Forman, Mark Anthony Neal and Regina N. Bradley, eds., *That’s the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies*

being a counter-hegemonic tool of liberation, hip-hop (especially rap music and its associated culture) has been progressively demonised for causing violence, undermining American values, reflecting dysfunctional social behaviour, and hoasting women and black people: “since the middle of the 90s” — the author points out — “the social, artistic, and political significance of figures like the gangsta and street hustler substantially devolved into apolitical, simple-minded, almost comic stereotypes” inflating what she defines as the “hyper-gangsta-ization” of black rappers.⁸

As it’s known, the first mainstreaming and flattening of some distinctive traits of hip-hop masculinity took place during the rise of a third generation of black rappers and their association with the subgenre of “gangsta rap”. A period of canonization and mainstreaming of hip-hop aesthetical and cultural traits writ large, which took place from the late 1980s to the end of the 1990s and soon was mythicized as the “Golden Age rap”.⁹ As in the context of cinema, over the years, hip-hop artists and scholars deconstructed this monolithic vision of masculinity, highlighting its *role-playing* performativity and conscious storytelling as opposed to traditional (i.e. Wasp) modes of representation. Not only does “gangsta rap” share tropes with other rap subgenres but, as Annette J. Saddik points out, it “has been the most misunderstood by the American public at large, the most easily targeted by political conservatives, and yet, is arguably the most ‘theatrical’ style of rap in terms of black masculine performativity within commodity capitalism and dominant power structures”.¹⁰

It followed that at best, the media, political and artistic debate opposed gangsta rappers (those interested in “girls, gold and guns”) with conscious Mc’s (whose lyrics aimed to raise awareness and social justice), often cementing on a dualist discursive framework over who — between West and East Coast rappers, *N.W.A.* and *Public Enemy*, Tupac Shakur and Nas — were the more “hardcore” or “black”.¹¹ “Why did a sub-style based on hustling, crime, sexual domination, and drug dealing”, Rose questions at the end of the 2000s, “become rap’s cultural and economic calling card, and thus the key icon for the hip-hop generation?”.¹²

To contribute to solving this dilemma, two mediators are worth to be re-considered: fashion and cinema. A monolithic association of hip-hop culture with machismo and hyper-sexuality, criminal behaviours and gangsterism, indeed, has often paired with an equally trivializing nexus to specific types of menswear. Take for instance the common interpretation of the rapper’s adoption of golden jewels and designer clothes as symbols of opulence and “street credibility”; of oversized clothing as a means to “hide drugs” [sic.], or of tattoos to flag gang membership; and, among others, of mafia-style fashion as a homage to the criminal world *they*, the rappers, came from.

Accordingly, Hollywood gangster and crime films depicting *hyphenated* American mobsters, young hustle, street dealers and inner-city villains, have historically reinforced a racial semanticization between a social group and its supposedly way of dressing, as in the case of African and Italian American communities.¹³ As many influential hip-hop old and new schoolers started wearing, rhyming and acting like those characters, during the Reagan and Bush eras, the Us media assembled, image by image, a “ghet-

Reader. 3rd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2023).

8. See Tricia Rose, *The hip-hop Wars*.

9. For a discussion on the mythopoetic elements of hip-hop fundative histories see Nexus [Giuseppe Gatti], *Stradario hip-hop* (Rome: Alegre, 2020).

10. Annette J. Saddik, “Rap’s Unruly Body: The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage,” *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 47 (Winter 2003): 112.

11. See Bakari Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap: Who Run It? Gangsta Rap and Visions of Black Violence* (Chicago: Third World, 1994); Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998); Mark Anthony Neal, “‘Real Niggas Do Real Things’: Hip-Hop Culture and the Authenticity Debates,” in *That’s The Joint!*, 58. For a reconstruction of the debate cf. Annette J. Saddik, *Rap’s Unruly Body*. For a discussion of rap cultural politics avoiding this dualism see Tricia Rose, *Fear for the Black Planet*.

12. Tricia Rose, *The Hip-Hop Wars*, 13.

13. See Dana Renga, ed., *Mafia Movies. A Reader. 2nd Edition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019); Fred Gardaphé, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men. The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Keith Harris M., *Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

to-centric” imagination which reunites under the same profitable flag criminal behaviour, urban decay and hip-hop culture.¹⁴ If the blaxploitation era favoured the popularization of the figure of the stylish “pimp”, the rise of new black cinema and the consequent film career of male rappers impersonating “thug boys” — among them Ice-T, Tupac Shakur and Ice Cube — marked a shift in the creation, negotiation and identification of a more advanced and counter-hegemonic vision of “blackness” within the hip-hop landscape, but hardened the idea, in the public opinion, that rappers and crews were representative of *real* gangsters and criminal families.

Therefore, hip-hop bodies and symbols were captured between two visual fetishisms,¹⁵ resulting in the perpetuation of disciplinary and oppressive policies toward “hip-hop fashion”. From the adoption of the NBA and NFL “dress code” in 2005 which denied league’s emerging stars dressing “hip-hop style” or “too hip-hop”,¹⁶ to the Chinese government which has recently banned from public television programs which feature actors with hip-hop clothes or related tattoos as considered decadent or not-aligned to the Party’s moral.¹⁷

Considering the long-lasting adoption of this discursive frame surrounding the hip-hop world, my essay aims to contribute to cracking the dualist, monolithic and toxic “gangsterification” of hip-hop masculinity by discussing the complex and sense-making “sampling” of the cinematic Italian menswear by the American hip-hop generation.¹⁸

Debating hip-hop’s fervent conversation with Italian film and fashion, my analysis focuses on the original and proactive employment of cinematic tropes in delivering a counter-narrative of hip-hop menswear and its associated masculinity, which, among many actors in the play, found a fervid site of application in *Vibe* magazine editorial line. Founded in 1992 by producers Quincy Jones and David Salzman in partnership with Time Inc., *Vibe* magazine is indeed considerably responsible for the diffusion of hip-hop Golden Age imagery thanks to its specific combination of high fashion and cinematic culture.¹⁹ In particular, *Vibe*’s fashion editors curated a series of photographic services with rap stars donning the biggest names in European and Italian couture and, as my recent perusal provides evidence, advertisements, reviews and photographic references to the *Bel Paese* and Made in Italy products exerted their presence in every issue of the magazine.

In doing so, I would reassess the lively role of the black and hip-hop community in undermining hegemonic discourse over them, along with their interplay with film and fashion culture in assembling Golden Age rap progressive masculine traits and hip-hop generation’s peculiar nexus with Italian modern style, or, in a broader sense, with hip-hop’s creative sampling of “Made in Italy”.

14. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

15. See Giuseppe Gatti, “Toxicscape: An Epistemological Approach to Graffiti through American Narrative Cinema,” *Empedocles*, Vol. 8 (2017): 23–36.

16. See Stacy L. Lorenz and Rod Murray, “‘Goodbye to the Gangstas’: The NBA Dress Code, Ray Emery, and the Policing of Blackness in Basketball and Hockey,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 38 (2014): 24. See also Gamal Abdel-Shehid, *Who da man? Black masculinities and sporting cultures* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2005). A first-person experience of this policy is recounted by NFL’s quarterback Colin Kaepernick in his biographical TV series *Colin Black and White* (2021).

17. Casey Quackenbush and Aria Chen, “‘Tasteless, Vulgar and Obscene.’ China Just Banned Hip-Hop Culture and Tattoos From Television,” *Time*, accessed May 2, 2024, <https://time.com/5112061/china-hip-hop-ban-tattoos-television/>.

18. The “zoot suit,” a men’s suit with an exaggerated style, was popularized by Mexican and African Americans musical subcultures during the 1940s. Later on, this fashion was also adopted by hyphenated French and Italians. Holly Alford highlights a similar demonization towards criminality that was associated with this fashion trend. See. Holly Alford, “The Zoot Suit: Its History and Influence,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 8 (2004): 234.

19. See Alan Light, *The Vibe History of hip-hop* (Three Rivers Press: New York, 1999). For the cultural relevance of *Vibe*’s cover in disseminating hip-hop imagery see Vinita Srivastava, “The Story of Vibe Magazine’s TLC Cover: How it Helps to Explain Race, Representation and Resistance from Journalism’s Hip-Hop Generation,” *International Journal of the Image*, Vol. 2 (2012): 57–66.

Hip-Hop Fashion and Made in Italy: Reknitting the “Sample”

If many fashion histories recognize the hip-hop’s remediation of European labels and its contribution to their continued relevance,²⁰ only a few have identified the cluster of elements associated with modern Italy underpinning these practices of “cultural transition”.²¹

As noted by Eugenia Paulicelli in her analysis of the cross-pollination between Gucci and black fashion designer Dapper Dan, what made Italian fashion particularly appealing to hip-hop stylists was the enduring cultural cachet that “Made in Italy” had developed in the United States. This also revealed a shared taste between Italians and black fashionistas.²² But how to retrace the formation of such a cultural prestige? And how can we grasp the connection between identifiable agencies acting as “local” or national brands (eg. Dan or Gucci) and others, such as hip-hop clothes or Italian films, operating on a wider and more suffuse transnational and intersectional scale? In his action-network theory, Bruno Latour suggests studying the formation of the intangible “cultural capital” supposed to operate above the human and non-human actors by retracing the specific sites — the “offices” — where this hypothetical capital was assembled and compiled, *localized* and *connected* to the whole.²³

Therefore, to take Latour literally, the first *office* which should be taken into account is that of Eunice W. Johnson, founder and director of the Ebony Fashion Fair (EFF) from 1958 to 2009.

Under the sponsorship of *Ebony* (the famed US magazine for black readers whom Johnson was fashion editor), the EFF was a big annual runaway that toured dozens of American cities showing black male and female models wearing the top of European and American brands.²⁴ In a cutting-edge vision subsumed by the slogan “Back to Glamour”, Johnson was particularly attentive in putting at the leading of her initiative “French, Italian and Black American designers”.²⁵ As Johnson was portrayed in friendly chatting with famous Italian designer Emilio Schubert²⁶ (who also earned *Ebony*’s cover in October 1963), a deepen perusal of *Ebony*’s digital archive reveals that Johnson was very active in authoring stories about Italian ready-to-wear and high couture.²⁷ In 1979, for instance, Johnson discussed the introduction of

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20. See Elena Romero, *Free stylin’: How hip hop changed the fashion industry* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012); Elena Romero and Elizabeth Way, *Fresh, Fly and Fabulous. 50 Years of Hip Hop Style*; Eleonora Chiaia, “From the Bronx to the Boutiques: The Rise of Street Style in the Fashion Industry,” in *The Culture, Fashion, and Society Notebook*, edited by Simone Marino (Milano-Torino: Pearson Italia, 2020), 55–77.
 21. See John Gennari, “Passing for Italian: Crooners and Gangsters in Crossover Culture,” *Transition*, Vol. 72 (1997): 36–48; Simone Cinotto, “Italian Doo-Wop. Sense of Place, Politics of Style, and Racial Crossovers in Postwar New York City,” in *Making Italian American: Consumer Culture and the Production of Ethnic Identities*, edited by Simone Cinotto (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 163–177; John Gennari, *Flavor and Soul. Italian America at Its African American Edge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4, 10.
 22. Eugenia Paulicelli, “Made in Italy: Translating Cultures from Gucci to Dapper Dan and Back,” *Textile. Cloth and Culture*, Vol. 20 (October 2022): 216–230.
 23. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 181–182. The author identifies this site as an “oligopticon,” meaning places which offer a solid and scaled vision of the whole totality. Drawing from Foucault’s notion of “panopticon” device and Deleuze/Guattari’s concept of “assemblage,” action-network theory echoes with theorists, among others Édouard Glissant, Donna Haraway and Edwin Hutchins, who see cultures and societies as dynamical systems in perpetual *enaction* with each other, rather than dominated by a sovereign ideology or impermeable cultural traits. See Donna Haraway, *Simians Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Édouard Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity: By Édouard Glissant*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020); Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996).
 24. Miller retraced the origins of black dandyism in the figure of the 1790s enslaved black courtman “Mungo Macaroni,” making an intriguing parallel with the contemporary rap star Andre 3000. “Macaronism” is a term used to describe the practice of British aristocrats travelling to Europe with the aim of acquiring cultural refinement and becoming gentlemen. As a part of this process, they would often visit Italy and indulge in the local cuisine, particularly “maccheroni,” a type of pasta. The popularity of “maccheroni” among British gave rise to the term “macaronism” which became synonymous with the dadyists’ trend of adopting European manners and customs in the 18th century.
 25. Anon, “Ebony Fashion Fair Opens 1978–79 Show ‘Back to Glamour’,” *Jet*, September 21, 1978, 15.
 26. Anon, “Italian Style Join Fashion Fair Americana,” *Ebony*, October 1963, 144.
 27. See (all by Eunice W. Johnson): “Back to Glamour with Italian couture,” *Ebony*, November 1978; “Italian Ready-to-Wear: It Emphasizes Glamour with Colors,” *Ebony*, February 1979, 119; “All Out Glamour. Italian Couture,” *Ebony* October,

“furs” in black stars’ casual wear, which she believed challenged the old-fashioned stereotype of black machismo. Among many models, a picture of Jerome Barkum wearing a racoon fur by “Emilio Gucci” (an erroneous crasis between stylist “Emilio Pucci” and Gucci) stands out as a paradigmatic progressive encounter between black stardom and Italian fashion.²⁸ Shortly thereafter, following a new course in athleticwear, *Ebony* will review Italian swimsuits, tennis and jogging clothes showing black models in Fila and Ellesse fashionable “acetate” outfits in a time when Western sport brands were still building their image over white sports stars and models.²⁹

As I maintain, *Ebony*’s editorial focus on Italian couture stands as a prime site of the subsequent dialogue between Made in Italy and the hip-hop generation, which returns, with many commonalities, on *Vibe* magazine.

Italian Film, Hip-Hop Style: a Brief History of “Dress Connection”

Along with illustrated magazines, cinema played a crucial role in keeping connected Italian fashion with the Black and Latinx, and then hip-hop, community.³⁰

The second location where Italian “sampling potential” was discovered takes us to the American movie theatres and television screens, where previously overlooked films such as “old”, “foreign”, or “rated B” movies have become the most popular and easily accessible films for the hip-hop generation. Firstly, through good coverage on neighbourhood and grindhouse theatres (famed those on the block of Manhattan’s 42nd street), which showed crime and action films at cut-rate ticket prices. Secondly thanks to their broadcasting on national TV, and the subsequent circulation on VCR/DVD, during the 1980s and 1990s.

As in the case of Martial arts films,³¹ for early hip-hop dancers the domestic visions of classic and technicoloured Hollywood musicals were a fundamental vehicle for developing spectacular moves and dance bravado.³² As street dance O.G. Mr Wiggles (Steffan Clemente) often remarks “old” musicals were still very popular among New York Black and Latinx teenagers of the 1970s, as many hip-hop foundational steps were literally “sampled” by those of the musical films aired on TV. MGM’s opulent musical, mostly directed by the Italian American Vincente Minnelli and starring Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Judy Garland and occasionally Frank Sinatra, was particularly influential in this sense, especially when they showed cross-racial performance numbers, acrobatic ground steps, and delivered a certain “taste” for the figure of the man who performs in a solid-colour suit.³³ If the cinematic suit negotiates “action-packed male

1980; “The Luxury of Italian Couture,” *Ebony* November, 1981; “The Drama of Italian Couture,” *Ebony*, November, 1983, 119; “For All occasion: Italian Ready-to-Wear Fall/Winter ’87-’88,” *Ebony*, August, 1987, 131. A complete digital collection of *Ebony* magazine from November 1950 to December 2008 is accessible at <https://books.google.com/books?id=RNcDAAAAMBAJ>.

28. Eunice W. Johnson, “Fabulous men in their fabulous furs,” *Ebony*, January, 1979, 106–109.

29. In the same period, many ads featuring white models with the same Italian-made sport lines could be retrieved on *Vogue* and *Life* magazine.

30. As Guerrero points out, a survey revealed that almost the 35% who attended the first American release of *The Godfather* in 1972 were black people. This data pushed the industry to shift from making blaxploitation films to “crossracial” productions that would attract both white and black spectators. See Guerrero, 105.

31. See Erin Pellerin, “Kung Fu Fandom: NYC B-Boys and the Grindhouse Distribution of Kung Fu Films,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Dance Studies*, edited by Mary Fogarty and Imani Kai Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

32. When not specified I draw upon hip-hop dance histories from Mr. Wiggles’ website and Patreon’s account, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://www.patreon.com/mrwiggleshiphop/>; <https://wigzee.biz/>.

33. Examples include *The Pirate* (Vincente Minnelli, 1948), where Gene Kelly, in the iconic performance number “Be a Clown,” duets with the Afro-American tap-dance duo Nicholas Brothers. It is a paradigmatic cross-racial screendance which presents team-up acrobatic routines and ground “footworks” which would reappear on- and off-screen during in breaking battle and cyphers of the 1980s and 1990s; *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* (Busby Berkeley, 1949) where Kelly performed a “double legs kick” with Sinatra in the leading performance number of the film; and *Robin and the Seven Hoods* (Gordon Douglas, 1964), which I will discuss soon.

spectacles” of vanity and violence, interior feelings and hard-boiled silhouettes,³⁴ focusing on this item as a cultural mediator would help in reknitting Italian film fashion to hip-hop across different genres and epochs.

Indeed, the iconic Fred Astaire’s outfit in Minnelli’s backstage musical *The Band Wagon* (1953) — an Italian-styled white suit, worn with a blue shirt, white tie and fedora curated by costume designer Mary Ann Nyberg — was proposed almost identically by Michael Jackson in his *Smooth Criminal* musical video (Chilvers, 1988), becoming one of his most iconic stage outfits.³⁵ As the video clip remakes Minnelli’s “Girl Hunt”, a famed chasing scene where Astaire runs into a glamorous speakeasy, notably Jackson’s screendance, as that of Astaire, plays on the capacity of beating enemies without corrupting the shiny integrity of the white suit.

Elected in 1995 by Bönz Malone as hip-hop’s “O.G.,” along with Astaire, Frank Sinatra provided another example of a cinematic-suited musical star, adding to the formula a specific “renegade masculinity”.³⁶ John Gennari aptly discusses the role of Sinatra as neuralgic centre for the vibrant exchange between Italian Americans and African Americans in the Us entertainment system.³⁷ In particular, different films and TV shows starring The Rat Pack — Sinatra’s famed crossracial ensemble which includes Sammy Davis Jr and Dean Martin — portrayed a prismatic vision of The Voice which echoes in many tropes surrounding hip-hop masculinity and menswear: from his rise-to-the-top narrative to the “air of stylish menace” he maintained once he got there.³⁸ According to Susan Nanes, Frank Sinatra embodied a unique form of masculinity that was not dominated by any particular ethnic group. He navigated between the processes of de-masculinization and re-masculinization, all while remaining connected to both the world of organized crime and the world of classic male fashion.³⁹ This is particularly epitomized in Sinatra’s last self-produced musical, *Robin and the Seven Hoods* (Douglas, 1964), a parody of classic gangster movies and a romanticized recapitulation of Sinatra’s rise to the top in the guise of an all-green suited Robin Hood. As for *The Band Wagon*, the film combines multiple “gangster-styled” performance numbers, displaying a colourful flamboyant wardrobe curated by costume designer Donfeld. If Davis Jr’s solo was accounted by Wiggles as one of his favourites,⁴⁰ in a performance number over the song *Style*, Sinatra and Martin teach Bing Crosby how to add class to his dress by “tilting the hat”, a practice in common with 1970s street hustlers and then early street dancers. Intriguingly a photo from the early 1980s depicts the teenage members of the break dance group Rock Steady Crew with outfits reminiscent of Sinatra’s film, giving a hint of the prismatic “fashion connections” that the hip-hop community re-knit during the years of hip-hop’s first mainstreaming (Fig. 1)

34. See Lorraine Gamman, “On Gangster Suits and Silhouette,” in *If Looks Could Kill: Cinema’s Images of Fashion, Crime and Violence*, edited by Marketa Uhlirova (London: Koenig Books, 2009), 218–229.

35. Whether the inclusion of Michael Jackson in the pantheon of hip-hop artists could be doubted, it is quite uncontested his transformative connection with black and hip-hop culture. From funky/soul music, as a member of the oversampled band the Jackson Five, to dance, for his unique dance style, combining pop/locking with new-jazz elements which became a staple for “new style” street dancers of the 90s. Notably, MJ covered the July/August 1995 issue of *Vibe*, showing himself in an unusual “b-boy” stance and outfit.

36. Bönz Malone, “O.G. Frank Sinatra didn’t take orders: he took over,” *Vibe*, September 1995, 6–7, 11.

37. Gennari, *Flavor and Soul*.

38. Gennari, *Flavor and Soul*, 41. In 2009 Nancy Sinatra gifted Jay-Z with an original photograph of his father during the shooting of *It Happened in Brooklyn* (Worfh, 1947) another Sinatra’s emblematic musical performance. Notably Jay-Z combined his love for Brooklyn with his admiration for Sinatra in his opening of *Empire State of Mind* (2009): “Yeah, I’m out that Brooklyn, now I’m down in Tribeca / Right next to De Niro, but I’ll be hood forever / I’m the new Sinatra, and since I made it here / I can make it anywhere, yeah, they love me everywhere”.

39. See Susan Nanes, “Maturity and Masculinity. Frank Sinatra in the 1950s,” in *America Under Construction. Boundaries and Identities in Popular Culture*, edited by Kristi S. Long and Matthew Nadelhaft (London: Routledge, 1997).

40. Mr Wiggles, “The Greatest Entertainer of all time”, accessed May 2, 2024, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/greatest-of-all-38943260>.



Figure 1. A comparison between a still from *Robbo and the Seven Hood* (right) and a Rock Steady Crew photoshoot (circa 1980)

Approaching the 1980s, Tony Manero's white three-piece suit in *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham, 1977) brought by costume designer Patrizia Von Bernstein in a boutique in Brooklyn's Bay Ridge, resurfaces as an iconic gear for the hip-hop generation. *Fever* portrays a NY Italian American teenage disco dancer who shares many affinities with the figure of the "b-boy" (his obsession for practice and battling, his admiration for Al Pacino and Bruce Lee, but also his homosocial and homophobic behaviours, and his struggle with interior sensibility and exterior bravado). Additionally, Travolta's white-suited screen-dance results from an intriguing mix of street dance and studio dance, which helps in revamping disco culture, but also cracking racial barriers.⁴¹ The Mighty Zulu Kingz leader and old-school Bronx b-boy Alien Ness (Luis Martinez) describes Tony's solo dance scene on Bee Gee's *You Should Be Dancing*, as crucial for his dance career:

The thing about that solo is when he stepped out and open up the dance floor [...] everybody stops dancing and look at the dancefloor and watch him, and I just thought that *power*. To me it was *power*, you know, and he was in a "zone", you know what I'm saying? I thought it was super-dope. And then it was what start me dancing-dancing, not breaking dancing. After I started breaking I've actually got to me Daney Terrio who was the choreographer for that movie and the story he told me about, you know, teaching John Travolta, especially that scene cause I've told you that scene inspired me, made it more special to me.⁴²

Notably, Terrio worked for *Fever* as a dance coach but wasn't credited. Along with the reevaluation of his contribution, the figure of Terrio is particularly interesting in terms of actor-networking since he also worked with Frank Sinatra and The Lockers, a groundbreaking locking dance crew from Los Angeles from whom he arguably learnt the "Scooby Doo" step that Travolta executes during the solo. In a closing circle, while the suited Astaire and the Rat Pack provided sampling moves for two generations of street dancers, at the end of the 1970s *street dance* had already influenced Hollywood *screen dance*, which lately will incorporate break dance "battle moves" in a new era of urban-pop musicals such as *Flashdance*, (Lyne, 1983), *Breakin'*, *Fast Forward* (Poitier, 1985) and later in the cycle of urban dance movies of the 2000–2010s.

41. Sima Belmar, *Behind the Screens: Race, Space, and Place in Saturday Night Fever*, in *Oxford Handbook of Screen Dance Studies*, edited by Douglas Rosenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 461–479.

42. Giuseppe Gatti, Personal on-line conversation with Alien Ness, May 5, 2022.

Italian Westerns: for a Fistful of B-Boys

Ten years before *Fever*, Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) smashed the 1967 American box office opening a fortunate export of Italian and European-made westerns.⁴³ Between 1967 and 1974 what at the time were simply labelled as "spaghetti westerns", today were consistently reevaluated as the cinematic movement responsible for the introduction of new tropes, narratives and a progressive portrayal of black and female characters in the American quintessential, yet declining, genre of western films.⁴⁴ As Leone's westerns were first viewed with suspicion by American critics for their violence and anti-heroism,⁴⁵ nonetheless they got great popularity and fashion allure in the hip-hop generation.

Firstly, the popularization since 1967 of Italian westerns articulated similar stylistic, narrative, musical and distributional "key-elements" which, only from 1971–1973, granted the influential reception of blaxploitation and martial arts movies by the hip-hop generation. Secondly, as they were not interested in American post-civil war patriotism but more intrigued by the class and racial conflicts that occurred during the Mexican revolution, according to Lee Broughton the cross-racial intermingling sustained by the carnivalesque atmosphere typical of many Italian westerns "encourage the emergence of black gunmen who are able to defy the race-related rules that governed contemporary Hollywood Western".⁴⁶ In particular, the "martial style" of the suited male dancers like Astaire and Jackson, Sinatra and Manero discussed above, I argue, finds a fascinating relocation in Leone's cowboy fashion. Clint Eastwood's "man with no name", the outlaw hero of the dollars trilogy, represents an iconic type of dirty, unshaved but unusually "cool" anti-hero thanks to his distinctive, and unusual as well, garment: the poncho. Oral stories told Leone's costume designer Carlo Simi took the poncho from a closet of John Ford's old movie wardrobe at Western Costume in Hollywood, which Leone creatively "sampled" to craft his fairy tale Western hero. In 1967 *The New York Times* reviewed Eastwood's character as follows: "Wearing a Mexican poncho, gnawing a stub of cherooot and peering intently from under a slouch hat pulled low over his eyes, he is simply another fabrication of a personality, *half cowboy and half gangster*, going through the ritualistic postures and exercises of each".⁴⁷ Indeed, Eastwood's poncho was functional to his shooting style, consisting of pretending to be one-handed while hiding his gunned hand under the coat to surprise the opponent. This connection between signature look and signature move, characterizes many Italian western outlaw heroes, including Lee Van Cliff's three-piece black outfit and his extendible rifle, or Woody Strode's martial style and his "Mare's Leg" Winchester rifle in his scene for *Once upon a Time in the West* (Leone, 1968). According to Strode himself, Leone's unprecedented close-up who framed him as an unfathomable black cowboy donning a black hat and a light-coloured coat, "set a new paradigm for the visual representation of blacks in Westerns".⁴⁸

DJ Kool Herc, the Jamaican American teenager who spun and mixed vinyls at the foundational West Bronx "hip-hop parties" of the early 1970s, was probably the first hip-hop leader to introduce cowboy fashion in the community as he used to style himself with cowboy hats, denim jackets, and pointed boots. The reason for this out-of-date attire is that in Jamaica, from where Herc and his family emigrated in the late 1960s, Italian Westerns were very popular, delivering narratives, iconographies and terminologies that were incorporated almost verbatim by Jamaican musicians, as the reggae band The Upsetters did in

43. See Damiano Garofalo, *C'era una volta in America. Storia del cinema italiano negli Stati Uniti* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2023), 148–156.

44. Lee Broughton, *The Euro-Western: Reframing Gender Race and the 'Other' in Film* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2016), 119–158; Mary Ann McDonald Carolan, "Lo spaghetti western, il genere transatlantico per eccellenza," in *Transatlantic Visions. Culture cinematografiche italiane negli Stati Uniti del secondo dopoguerra*, edited by Enrico Carocci, Ilaria De Pascalis and Veronica Pravadelli (Milano: Mimesis, 2023), 105–121.

45. David Forgacs, "Retromodernità. Nostalgia e innovazione nel cinema italiano e americano. 1964–74", in *Transatlantic Visions. Culture cinematografiche italiane negli Stati Uniti del secondo dopoguerra*, edited by Enrico Carocci, Ilaria De Pascalis and Veronica Pravadelli (Milano: Mimesis, 2023), 91–104.

46. Broughton, 139.

47. Bosley Crowther, "Screen: 'A Fistful of Dollars' Opens," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1967, 29. Italics mine.

48. Broughton, 120. A similar outfit and attitude was recently re-styled by Idris Elba in the neo-western *The Harder They Fall* (Samuel, 2021).

their album covers of the period.⁴⁹ As Herc recounted, “I love cowboy boots from back in Jamaica and watching cowboy pictures”, and once in the Bronx he “thought that, you know, cowboy boots was — you know, was the bomb”.⁵⁰ Alien Ness, confirmed that view: “You know I’m a biker but my dressing style is more Western [film] style than Outlaw biker style, causa I was inspired by the Westerns and a lot of Westerns I watched was Spaghetti Westerns, you know”.⁵¹

Secondly, Italian Western’s portrayal of violence as a mirror and critical tool of American society shares links with rap and break dance aesthetics, precisely on what J. Griffith Rollefson identifies as the “weaponization of knowledge”.⁵² Throwing rhymes as bullets and battling opponents in a circular space as in many of Leone’s showdowns, pairs to the fact that Ennio Morricone’s soundtracks for Italian westerns were abundantly sampled in hip-hop music, from the foundational breaks *The Mexican* (Babe Ruth, 1972) to *Sadat X’s Hang ’Em High* (1996) and EPMD’s *Draw* (1999), providing a fervent and coherent audiovisual texture to be sampled by the hip-hop community for the times to come.

Therefore, when first rap stars were introduced to Mtv, the figure of the “black cowboy” regained a certain iconographic momentum.⁵³ *Kool Moe Dee’s Wild Wild West* (1987) portrayed Dee and his crew as a bunch of cowboys battling each other with rhymes and “(up)rocking” steps in the snowy rural scenario that explicitly recalls that of Sergio Corbucci’s *Il grande silenzio* (*The Great Silence*, 1968). Notably, *Wild Wild West* introduced the unusual combination of classic cowboy gear with hip-hop garments like gold necklaces, black sunglasses and puffy jackets, suggesting a fashion code for other videos to come. *The Symphony* (Juice Crew, 1989), *Cowboys* (Fugees, 1996), *Hang ’Em High* and *The Posse* (*Shoot ’Em up*) (Intelligent Hoodlum, 1996) all portrayed black rappers mixing elements of spaghetti western and hip-hop fashion, cementing an “aesthetic link” which was also retraced in the pages of *Vibe*:

In the late ’80s, videos from the Juice Crew, EPMD, and, most memorably, Kool Moe Dee established an aesthetic link between New York’s shoot-em-up rhyme battles and gunslinger showdowns from the 19th century’s “Wild, Wild West”. Now, it’s time to strap on your start to chaps again and saddle up, potna; hip hop’s cowboys are riding back into town.⁵⁴

As I’ve shown, the “19th century’s Wild Wild West” *Vibe* speaks about, is arguably the one portrayed by the Italo-made “fabulous” West: carnivalesque, mestizo, and fashionably thug (as it was the Bronx block party scene of the 1970s) but also detoxified from American patriotism and bigotry which let the

49. See Galilee Abdullah, “Global Notes: The Outlaw Narrative In Jamaican Music,” accessed May 2, 2024, <https://medium.com/wbezworldview/global-notes-the-outlaw-narrative-in-jamaican-music-278b8900cf10>. In the opening of the blaxploitation film *The Harder They Came* (Perry Henzell, 1972), a group of young Jamaicans galvanizedly watch the scene of Sergio Corbucci’s *Django* (1966) when Django (Franco Nero) slaughters the racist sect of Crimson Hoods. The scene was recently presented and discussed in the documentaries *Is That Black Enough for You!?* (Mitchell, 2022) and *Django & Django* (Rea, 2021) where Quentin Tarantino speculates that the hero Django (Franco Nero) came to the southern city to meet the wife of his black unionist comrade who died in the civil war.

50. Terry Gross, “‘Fresh Air’ celebrates 50 years of hip-hop: DJ Kool Herc,” accessed February 21, 2024, <https://www.wusf.org/2023-08-28/fresh-air-celebrates-50-years-of-hip-hop-dj-kool-herc>.

51. X Giuseppe Gatti, Personal online interview with Alien Ness, May 5, 2022. It is worth remembering that the “outlaw hero” is a typified model of Hollywood cinema. Among many influences, the NYC street gangs’ look, which gained momentum in the Bronx between 1968 and 1971, were largely inspired by the hippie-outlaw bikers outfits displayed in *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969).

52. Griffith J. Rollefson, “Hip Hop as Martial Art: A Political Economy of Violence in Rap Music,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music*, edited by Justin D. Burton and Jason Lee Oakes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). As McDonald Carolan points out, “the ‘Italian-style’ Western sought to repudiate westward expansion as a phenomenon of civilization, emphasizing the violence on which this supposed progress was based” (“Lo spaghetti western il genere Italiano per eccellenza,” 105, eng. translation mine). At the same time, Rollefson identifies the supposedly “violence” of rap lyrics as a critique of the colonial violence on which America was built and sustained.

53. On the presence of “black cowboys” in American film and social history see Bruce A. Glasrud and Michael N. Searles, eds., *Black Cowboys in the American West: On the Range, on the Stage, behind the Badge* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016).

54. David Bry, “Wild Wild West. New York Rappers Get Back in the Saddle”, *Vibe*, December 1996-January 1997, 60.

hip-hop generation certainly prefer Leone's style to that of John Wayne's flicks.⁵⁵ As for the Hollywood dance movies, these initial sampling of Italian elements set the stage for the mainstreaming of the black cowboy as a leading character in later Hollywood productions: from his deliberated (and debated) re-enactment in *Italian sauce* by Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) and *The Hateful Eight* (2015),⁵⁶ to an entire subgenre of "black neo-westerns" such as *Posse* (Van Peebles, 1993), *Wild Wild West* (Sonnenfeld, 1999), *The Harder they Fall* (Samuel, 2021) and *Nope* (Peele, 2022).

Mafia Movies: the Godfathers of Style

If the fashion style of the saddled black gunslinger distinguished from that of the shiny white-suited musical dancer, that of "The Godfather" — in the form of the Italian American mobster and, later, of the "black gangster"⁵⁷ — sublimates the twos. Journalist and black gay/queer activist Emil Wilbekin rises out for being one of the few voices to propose a connection between Hollywood gangster fashion and the sampling of Italian high-fashion clothing in the heyday of the gangsta rap era:

With literal references, these rappers *traded* in their gang-inspired, dark denim prison gear and crew-related bandannas for expensive, double-breasted suits, silk shirts, and bowler hats which — with the growth of the Italian menswear scene among designers like Giorgio Armani, Gianni Versace, Dolce & Gabbana, and Gianfranco Ferré — were becoming popular on the high-fashion circuit. Mike Tyson bouts in Las Vegas were packed with hip hop heads all sporting brightly printed silk shirts by Gianni Versace and puffing on Cuban cigars.⁵⁸

Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the relationship between Italian fashion and hip-hop style goes beyond the classic gangster films from the 1930s. Instead, this connection was facilitated by a specific intermediary in the form of New Hollywood's Italian American gangster movies, which gained popularity on American screens. With a centre of cultural gravity in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* saga (1972–1990)⁵⁹ spanning titles such as *Scarface* (De Palma, 1983), *Once Upon a Time in America* (Leone, 1984), *The Untouchables* (De Palma, 1987), *Goodfellas* (Scorsese, 1990), *A Bronx Tale* (De Niro, 1993), and *King of New York* (Ferrara, 1990), post-classical gangster movies authored by and/or representative of Italians or Italian Americans, were oversampled by the hip-hop generation in terms of lyrics, gestures, vocabulary and, mostly, fashion.⁶⁰

In respect of classical noir and gangster films Wilbekin refers to, Italo-made mafia movies and novels of the 1970s proposed a romanticization of the *mafioso* as a Promethean defensor of the "good old values" of patriarchal manhood, then shifting in the 1980s to a more crude and psychopathological portrayal

55. Italian outlaw cowboys and Mexican villains stand as opposed to Wayne's cowboy roles, especially from Ethan in *The Searchers* (Ford, 1939), an ex-Confederate soldier whose quest consists in saving a white young girl from the "wild" Indians. After Wayne's controversial interview with *Playboy* when he stated to "believe in white supremacy", the Duke was addressed by black critics as the American No. 1 "racist super-star." See Riley Clayton, "John Wayne Dethroned," *Ebony*, September 1972, 127–136. The article also comments on Wayne's last film as actor and director *The Cowboys* (1972) "in which he casts the gifted black actor Roscoe Lee Browne in the role of a very dignified ... cook" (128). Hence, it is not surprising that Wayne became one of the most *dissed* American stars by black rappers. "Elvis was a hero to most / But he never meant shit to me / Straight up racist, the sucker was / Simple and plain / Mothafuck him and John Wayne!" (*Fight the Power*, Public Enemy, 1989); "Fuck John Wayne, I shoot the sheriff" (*Cowboys*, Fugees, 1996).

56. See Mary Ann McDonald Carolan, *The Transatlantic Gaze. Italian Cinema, American Gaze* (New York: SUNY Press, 2014), 131–133.

57. The articulation of black gangster motif was introduced in literature by Donald Goines (who authored *Black Gangster* in 1972) then screened in the blaxploitation era in films such as *Black Caesar* (Larry Cohen, 1973). Black gangsterism was later portrayed in films such as *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991), *Hoodlum* (Bill Duke, 1997) and *American Gangster* (Ridley Scott, 2007). Intriguingly, the narrative of these films often opposes Harlem black mobsters with Italian criminal families.

58. Emil Wilbekin, "Great Aspirations. Hip hop and fashion dress for excess and success," in *Fashion Theory: A Reader. 2nd Edition*, edited by Malcolm Barnard (New York: Routledge, 2020), 358. Italics mine.

59. Notably the saga consists of a film trilogy (*Part I*, 1972; *Part II*, 1974; *Part III*, 1990), plus a television miniseries combining the first two parts which was originally aired on NBC in 1977.

60. See also the short documentary film *Scarface: Origins of a Hip Hop Classic* (Benny Boom, 2003).

of contemporary urban “mafia life”.⁶¹ Both the models provide fashion narratives which were highly sampled by Black and Latinx breakers and rappers. From New York breakers donning tilted “coppola hat” reminiscent of the one worn by Mike Corleone (Al Pacino) in the picturesque Sicily of the *Part I*; to Cold Crush Brothers, Notorious Big (Fig. 2) and Slick Rick wearing white three-piece suits in their live concerts and photoshoots resembling Don Fanucci’s attire styled by Gastone Moschin in the *Part II*; up to Run-DMC “Godfather hat” as a key component of one of the most distinctive looks of hip-hop’s Golden age rap. As I’ve discussed, arguably hip-hop heads sampled those gears for they “embody” a cinematic discourse, including their “Italianness”, which gave their adoption a total “inclusive” value.⁶²



Figure 2. On the right an image of Don Fanucci (Gastone Moschin) in *The Godfather Part II* (1972) and on the left a photoshoot of Notorious Big (circa 1995).

Of course, the combination of Rat Pack’s flamboyant style and gangster attitude (subsumed in Sinatra’s look as Robbo) and the Godfatheresque fashion narrative was already retractable in the black street hustler style of the 1970s. This trend intertwined with the popularization of the “super bad” masculinity of the blaxploitation films,⁶³ and even before with the black dandyism and the “zoot-suitors” tradition of “styling out”.⁶⁴ Since 1971 famed retailer for black consumers Flagg Bros promoted their fancy outfits over the look of black cinematic hustlers pictured in films like *Shaft* (Parks, 1971) and *Superfly* (Parks Jr., 1972), advertising multiple Italian-style white suites, alligator-skin shoes and fedoras, also called “The Godfather hat” (the promotion of whom were also abundant on *Ebony*).

It is now acknowledged that back then, black dressmaker Dan “Dapper Dan” Day followed this fashion trend in his Harlem boutique until a young LL Cool J stepped into his door looking for a fly dress to fit with his “new” image of rap star.⁶⁵ Cool J, and soon other NY male and female rappers, gave impulse to Day for enterprising a new approach to couture as he started sampling European high-end models and monographs into urban and street clothing, giving to a new generation of male and female rap stars a look quite different from that displayed by Cool J in the cover book I mentioned in the incipit. During the 1980s and 1990s black stylists such as Dapper Dan and Mysa Hilton, original fashion designers

61. Gardaphé.

62. For an extensive analysis of the sampling of these three Italian fashion elements see Giuseppe Gatti, “Sampling the Don. *The Godfather*’s Italianness and the Rise of Hip-hop Masculinity,” in *Beyond the West and the Rest: HipHop in Scholarship and Society*, edited by Anna Oravcová and Alena Podhorná-Polická (London: Intellect, 2024, in course of publication).

63. Keith Harris, “Super bad: Jim Brown, Blaxploitation and the Coming of Boyz,” in *Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media*, edited by Keith Harris, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 63–78.

64. See Miller.

65. See Daniel Day, *Dapper Dan: Made in Harlem. A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2019).

like the Shirt Kings, Carl Jones of Cross Colours, Karl Kani and Mark Echo, hip-hop trendsetters like Run-DMC and Salt-N-Pepa, Notorious BIG and Lil' Kim, sampled both the gangsta/street and the European couture imageries to craft a distinctive hip-hop visual style.⁶⁶ Along with that, all participate in canonizing a new form of dressing which nowadays is considered “hip-hop fashion” but, around 1994, was identified by the insiders as “Ghetto Fabulous”. As Wilbekin remarks:

The style was based on high-end designer clothing like Versace, Giorgio Armani, Prada, Fendi, and Dolce & Gabbana — but this was no runway look, baby. The suits were worn like the jeans, big and baggy. Italian designers make beautifully tailored suits and extravagant luxury items, and hip hop appropriated those labels, still wearing them with true ghetto grit.⁶⁷

And at a time when hip-hop was establishing its aesthetic and look, Emil Wilbekin worked as chief stylist for *Vibe*, aiming to connect with (and give a voice to) the “new” black audience who might not be as interested in the services of *Ebony* as their parents were.

Italian Fashion Meets the Streets: the Case of *Vibe* Magazine (1992–1997)

On September 2023 I conducted a specific perusal of *Vibe* magazine at The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York, looking for elements reconducible to Italian culture. The investigation covered 34 volumes, from *Vibe*'s preview number in Fall 1992 to the first volume of January 1997, and resulted in 148 records including advertisements, photographs and articles which make an explicit and relevant reference to Italian subjects (brands, people, stories, films and goods).⁶⁸ Realigning those items into a digital spreadsheet unveiled an intriguing network between Italian and hip-hop actors which were scarcely spotted or discussed by hip-hop and fashion scholars. In particular, firms such as Armani (Exchange and Emporio line), Versace (Jeans line and Versus perfume),⁶⁹ Mauri, Dolce & Gabbana, Gucci, Moschino and, for the sportswear, Fila, were quite omnipresent on *Vibe*'s pages.⁷⁰

In a period where only a few American brands and designers deliberately embraced the nascent “urban style”, these Italian brands invested in hip-hop readers with full-page promotion of their goods (in particular clothes, shoes and occasionally perfumes), while *Vibe* spotlighted multiple Made in Italy dresses and gears in its fashion columns and photoshoots.⁷¹ In both cases, I recognize a progressive adaptation toward the hip-hop/black taste which resulted in marketing contents more akin to the urban style and, as I'll discuss, in lingering on their aesthetical affinity to cinematic imagery, in particular to gangster movies and westerns.

66. As Davarian Balwin remarks: “The general critiques circulating around gangsta rap highlight the patriarchal masculinity, drugs, sex, gunplay, and consumption habits without either remembering the Dapper Dan and Gucci days of hip hop’s golden age” or noting the earlier progressive move that gangsta rap was making against the evolution of nation-conscious hip hop in the early 90’s.” See Davarian L. Balwin, “Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip-Hop,” in *That’s The Joint!*, 162.

67. Emil Wilbekin, *Great Aspirations*, 358.

68. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to peruse the May 1996 volume due to its unavailability in the library collection. I am sincerely grateful to the Schomburg Center staff for their invaluable help and assistance during my research.

69. Versace’s Versus perfume was the first good ever advertised in the magazine (see *Vibe*, Fall 1992, 5).

70. Other Italian brands were occasionally placed, showing ads with black models. Examples include Mondo di Marco and Sanmarco Calzature (shoes).

71. *Vibe* fashion services are similar to those of other illustrated magazines. They consist of full or double-page photographs of models wearing outfits, with descriptions of the clothing featured in the margins of the page. The descriptions include the brand name, the model’s name, and occasionally the price and location of the shoot. Each service is given a title, and the names of the photographer and stylist are always displayed.

With an editorial staff of young contributors (most of whom were black people in their 20s) fashion photographers in their early careers such as George Holz, Guy Aroch, and the Italian Australian Daniela Federici, tied up with *Vibe*'s resident stylists Emil Wilbekin, Derick Procope and Phillip Bloch, creating a specific editorial line which made the magazine stand out from other competitors devoted entirely to hip-hop culture such as *The Source* (1988–), *Hip-hop Connection* (1988–2009) or *XXL* (1997–).

Here the figure of the fashion stylist emerges as a key “mediator”. As for Latour’s metaphor of the “office”, it is useful to take the motif of the mediator literally since the stylist was the person who actively mediated between the client and different professional figures (photographers, editors, artists) in order to create, as Wilbekin maintains, “the aspirational look and feel of fashion and style for the masses”.⁷² This role, Wilbekin reflects, was central for Hollywood executives aimed at reinventing star personas in the studio system era, and regained centrality on *Vibe*'s stylism by spreading new hip-hop looks through “vintage film references” and “archival fashion imageries”.⁷³ To do so, *Vibe*'s trademark resided in an original combination of *Vogue*'s fashion glamour and *Rolling Stone*'s devotion to pop music:

Inside the magazine, stylist Phillip Bloch took brands like Emporio Armani and emboldened them, making them feel *culturally relevant to the streets* and high fashion at the same time. Supermodel Naomi Campbell posed in a photo spread wearing Gianni Versace’s designs embellished with the brand’s hallmark sexy bondage references and romantic Italian Baroque prints. *Vibe* understood the *amalgamation of hood style and high-end fashion and the art of the remix that created a cultural conversation*, focusing the spotlight on hip hop: the revolutionary resilience of the Black community and the renaissance of rap.⁷⁴

In these lines Wilbekin seems to reassess the existence of an Italian network sustaining *Vibe*'s mission. Evoking two important Italian brands such as Armani and Versace (as a continuator of Italian “baroquism”) Wilbekin informs on the conscious employment of Italian signs in promoting what he elegantly subsumed as *Vibe*'s formula of hip-hop fashion: an “amalgamation of hood style and high-end fashion and the art of remix”. Additionally, the references to Phillip Bloch (one of the most influential stylists of Hollywood black stars) and to Naomi Campbell (whose supposedly love affair with Robert De Niro was revealed in the issue) also expose *Vibe*'s nexus with the Italian cinematic *milieu*.⁷⁵

Opening the issue with an interview about LL Cool J’s career as a new Hollywood actor,⁷⁶ *Vibe*, indeed, regularly hosted interviews and film ads which put the spotlight on the rise of black cinema and its connection with Italy. Additionally, the preview number also places an article on “Dialogica”, a duo of contemporary furniture designers composed by the Italian Sergio Savarese and his wife Monique, who was accounted for designing pieces of furniture both for black film and music stars.⁷⁷ Later on, Bönz Malone reinforces the interplayed fascination for Italian film and fashion to his readers with four articles.⁷⁸ In a two-part story titled “La dolce B-zo” Malone recounts his voyage to Italy as a perfect, peaceful place for a black man like him for a “reevaluation of life and style” where an atmosphere reminiscent to that of *La dolce vita* (Fellini, 1960) pervaded his description of Italy.⁷⁹ While action films with Italian/African American couples like *Demolition Man* (Brambilla, 1993) with Wesley Snipes and

72. Emil Wilbekin, “The Stylist in the Golden Era of Hip Hop,” in *Fresh, Fly and Fabulous*, 63. As described in detail: “Stylists were magazine editors who would “edit” or choose specific looks from fashion designers to show in their magazines and curate fashion stories that would influence store buyers and magazine readers on the latest trends. The editor would collaborate with photographers to create the aspirational look and feel of fashion and style for the masses”.

73. Emil Wilbekin, *The Stylist in the Golden Era of Hip Hop*, 63.

74. Emil Wilbekin, *The Stylist in the Golden Era of Hip Hop*, 61. Italics mine.

75. Ricky Lee, “An Inconvenient Woman,” *Vibe*, Fall 1992, 109.

76. Anon, “Hip Hop Hollywood,” *Vibe*, Fall 1992, 74–83.

77. Lucie Young, “Dialogica,” *Vibe*, Fall 1993, 52.

78. Bönz Malone, “Food For Thought,” *Vibe*, December 1994/January 1995, 36; Id., “O.G. Frank Sinatra didn’t take orders: he took over,” *Vibe*, September 1995, 6–7, 11; Id., “La Dolce B-zo. Part 1,” *Vibe*, June/July 1996, 52–54; Id., “La Dolce B-zo. Part 2,” *Vibe*, August 1996, 46.

79. Bönz Malone, “La dolce B-zo,” *Vibe*, June/July 1996, 54.

Sylvester Stallone or *White Men's Burden* (Nakano, 1995) starring John Travolta and Henry Belafonte were highly advertised,⁸⁰ in an article on Spike Lee the figures of Italian Americans actors Danny Aiello and Giancarlo Esposito, who interpreted two of the main characters of Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), were described as part of Lee's "extended family".⁸¹ Occasionally, *Vibe* also peeks into "bizarre" chronicles highlighting the Italian non-pacified love for "blackness".⁸² The most emblematic cases include a story on Italian beloved black soccer player, the Dutch-Surinamese Rudd Gullit, who was asked to come back to AC Milan by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (who, in the while, had "joined a neo-Fascist coalition that includes Benito Mussolini's granddaughter").⁸³ Or with a "point-blank news" about Denny Mendez, the first black girl to be elected "Miss Italy", who in 1996 sparked a public debate over race and national identity.⁸⁴

Other relevant stories cover the emerging career of Giovanni Salah, an Italian-African American rapper who costarred with Dough E Fresh in *Let's Get Bizzee* (Clay, 1993) providing a "fusion of street-smart charisma and bohemian-artist flavor",⁸⁵ and Articolo 31, the first Italian rap group to go platinum in 1996, who had recently shot their music video in Little Italy, "of course".⁸⁶

On the issue of April 1996, then, the magazine dedicated a full-page article to The *Vibe* Experience, an unprecedented "men's fashion show" and hip-hop jam organized by *Vibe* at Magazzini Generali event hall in Milan. Here hip-hop stars like Fab Five Freddy, the Rock Steady Crew, and Shaggy, plus *Vibe*'s executives and intermediaries, hung out with Giorgio Armani, Donatella Versace, and art director Nando Miglio in a gigantic event which attracted more than 3,000 fashionable guests (Fig. 3).⁸⁷

In terms of "vintage film references", as anticipated, *Vibe* intercepted the imagination of Italian Westerns and the black cowboys with a multipage fashion service styled by Derrick Procope on November 1995. Showing black male models wearing "western-inspired" clothing by Italian brands such as Armani, D&G and Pepe, the cinematic style adopted by the photographer Dina Shultz seems reminiscent of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, with a particular shot that appears as a direct reference to the first long shot of Woody Strode in Leone's film (Fig. 4; Fig. 5).⁸⁸ Another shot portrays a black cowboy in an all-black outfit lingering on the saddle which reminisces the scene of the same film when the villain Frank (Henry Fonda) falls after Harmonica (Charles Bronson) shoots him to death. In general, the photographic style, which privileges warm colours and overexposition aligns with Tonino Delli Colli's (Leone's cinematographer) visual style and sense of suspension. Reference to black gunslingers returns in the LP ads for Ronnie Laws' *Natural Laws*⁸⁹ and Sadat X's *Wild Cowboys*,⁹⁰ along with the aforementioned article by David Bry on hip-hop's aesthetical linkage with the Wild West.

80. See. *Vibe*, May 1994, 22; and December 1995-January 1996, 62.

81. Anon. "Spike Lee's extended family," *Vibe*, June/July 1994, 67. While Aiello was identifiable with an "Italian", Esposito's role as "Buggin' out" (and others he interpreted) made it hard to identify him as an Italian decedent. For a discussion on Esposito's racial and narrative framing see John, Gennari, "Giancarlo Giuseppe Alessandro Esposito: Life in the Borderlands," in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, edited by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Routledge, 2003), 241-242.

82. On this complicated relation and the role exercised by Italian cinema in its construction and representation see Greene, Shelleen. *Equivocal Subjects: Between Italy and Africa. Constructions of Racial and National Identity in the Italian Cinema* (Bloomsbury: London, 2014).

83. Matthew Yeomans, "Soccer's Rudd Boy. Rudd Gullit gets set to Shake Up the World Cup," *Vibe*, June/July 1994, 30.

84. Anon, "Ciao Ebony Bella!" *Vibe*, December 1996/January 1997, 60.

85. Emil Wilbekin. "Giovanni Salah. The hippie/homeboy hybrid," *Vibe*, February 1994, 30.

86. Anon, "Shoot: Articolo 31," *Vibe*, August 1996, 120.

87. Anon, "Vibe's Milan Party. A full dose of flava," *Vibe*, April 1996, 111. The article contains a photographic report by Agnette McBeth.

88. *Vibe* tributes Woody Strode (who passed away in 1994) with a full page story, recounting his career as a model for the emergence of black actors in Hollywood, also mentioning his work in Italian westerns. See *Vibe*, April 1995, 112.

89. Advertisement for "Ronnie Laws, *Natural Laws*," *Vibe*, August 1995, 135.

90. Advertisement for "Sadat X, *Wild Cowboys*," *Vibe*, August 1996, 136.



Figure 3. *Vibe's* article dedicated to the Milan Party (*Vibe*, August 1996).



Figure 4. Woody Strode in a shot from Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1971).

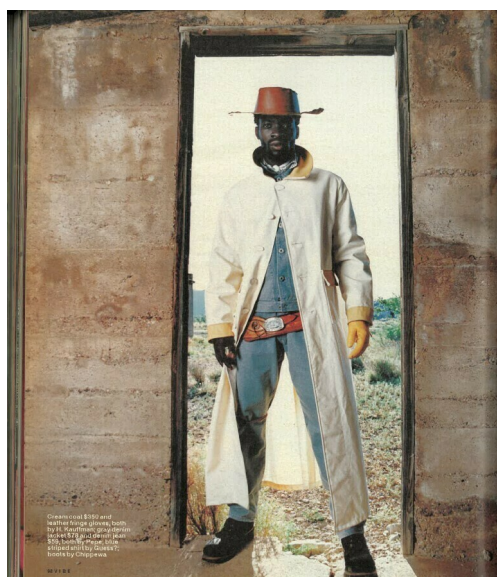


Figure 5. A picture from Dina Shultz's photoshoot "Tumble Weeds" (*Vibe*, November 1995).

Many of *Vibe's* services, as well, linger on the cinematic imagery of mafia movies and its associated fashion. As anticipated, in "O.G. Frank Sinatra didn't take orders: he took over", Malone elects The Voice as the truly hip-hop "Original Gangster" retracing similarities in fashion and attitude with Italian American *mafiosi* such as Al Capone and John Gotti, and by insisting on Sinatra's connection with black culture, delving into his friendship with Quincy Jones and Sammy Davis Jr.⁹¹

A page after Malone's tribute to Sinatra, a column draws a parallel with the adult film *Powertool* (1986) for enlisting fashion garments as the "lethal weapons" that define important hip-hop and stardom figures. Gears displayed include a black homburg hat (simply called "fedora") as iconic "weapons" both for "Capone" and "Malcolm X" and Fila's Grant Hill sneakers whose commercial success (over \$42,5 million in 9 years) make *Vibe* exclaim "that's Juice".⁹² "Juice" was a term which recurred over the volumes as *Vibe* tried to define its significance in the hip-hop vocabulary. To have or be "juice" means exercising authority effortlessly or without using violence, but also doing something thug with style and finesse. A concept which overlaps with the notions of Italian "sprezzatura" and "bella figura" about the solid-colour suited man and his associated masculinity.

Among a variety of works, "Film noir" stands out as an intriguing 1996 service shot by Guy Aroch and styled by Wilbekin which portrayed black rappers in famous Hitchcock's films scenario. "Hip-hop and R&B — like all Alfred Hitchcock's films — are filled with thrills, chills, and romance. So who better act out scenes from famous Hitchcock flicks than a cast of urban music superstars?"⁹³ With a long cigar on his mouth, Biggie was portrayed in an iconic hitchcockian silhouette as he, like the British director, likes making cameo "in everybody's else single".⁹⁴ Sadat X appears in an all-navy blue Versace wool suit while running away from a maniacous plane resembling the equally iconic look of Cary Grant in *North by Northwest* (Hitchcock, 1954) (Fig. 6). And again, a few pages later, the issue presents another service titled "Dressed for Success", where Daniela Federici exalted famous Motown rappers styled by Procope

91. John Gennari discusses Malone's article in Id., *Flavour and Soul*, 40–41. In 1994, Wilbekin reported Toby Huss' imitation of Frank Sinatra by singing Cypress Hill and Snoop Dogg for an MTV commercial. See. Emil Wilbekin, "Mtv's Sinatra," *Vibe*, March 1994, 100.

92. Anon, *Vibe*, September 1995, 113.

93. Emil Wilbekin, "Film Noir," *Vibe*, September 1996, 126.

94. Wilbekin, *Film Noir*, 126.

in elegant Italian black and white outfits by Armani, D&G and Spadafora, with the explicit intent to relaunch the label's new image.⁹⁵



Figure 6. Sadat X in a picture from Guy Aroch's photoshoot "Film Noir" (*Vibe*, September 1996).

Outro

Unveiling a fervent Italian/hip-hop connection spanning film, fashion and publishing, that of the "stylist" emerges as a key mediator for diffusing an alternative vision of hip-hop fashion and masculinity. In particular, the mediating figure of Emil Wilbekin stands out as a crucial mediator of this cross-pollinating network. Firstly, for his role of stylist-in-chief of *Vibe* during the hip-hop Golden age. Secondly for his contribution to historicizing the Italian presence in hip-hop fashion. Thirdly for his commitment as hip-hop entrepreneur and black gay/queer activist. As Wilbekin notes, at the time the only American designer who explicitly embraced hip-hop was Tommy Hilfinger, while other power brands such as Polo, Calvin Klein, Nautica and Timberland feared their association with the "hardcore urban attitude".⁹⁶ As my research has started to dig out, however, there is evidence that designers such as Gianni and Donatella Versace, Giorgio Armani, Mauri, and Italian sportswear brands such as Fila and Ellesse, as well, have embraced the American hip-hop culture and — not without failures, frictions and backwards — were transformed by it. Additionally, the sampling potential of such firms by the hip-hop generation delves into the Italian cinematic culture which, concerning Hollywood Wasp-oriented narrative, facilitates the spinning of an intricate tapestry involving black masculinity, Italian stylism, new urban wear and street cinéphilie. In particular, if "gangsta rap" identifies a *role-playing* performance instead of a real adherence to a criminal lifestyle, certainly mafia movies offer a privileged and fashionable setting to be sampled. This should be the way to interpret Wu-Tang Clan's habit of re-watching *The Godfather* or *Once Upon a Time in America* in order to "model" their personality and lyrical "cadence" over these cinematic storyworlds.⁹⁷

95. Anon, "Dressed for Success," *Vibe*, September 1996, 176–183.

96. Emil Wilbekin, *Great Aspirations*, 358.

97. See Raekwon [Corey Woods] and Anthony Bozza, *From Staircase to Stage: The Story of Raekwon and the Wu-Tang Clan* (New York: Gallery Books, 2021), 162; RZA [Robert F. Diggs], *The Wu-Tang Manual* (New York: Plexus Publishing, 2004), 123–126.

Reading *Vibe*'s pages almost three decades from their publication reveals a portrayal of hip-hop masculinity which looks far away — or strives to stray from — the stereotyped model of the “financially profitable but socially destructive images” of black rappers that have dominated hip-hop visual culture of the 1990s-2000s.⁹⁸ The picture gets gladly complicated if we think that this type of masculinity was also negotiated by gay/queer subjectivities who, concerning the traditional hip-hop vs. disco divide, have been excluded from the cis-normative history of hip-hop for too many years.⁹⁹

By acknowledging the important contributions to hip-hop cultural history of figures like that of Emil Wilbekin, we can work to redress these historical imbalances and create a more inclusive and accurate narrative sustaining the emergence of the double h culture and its global spreading. Within this framework, hip-hop culture and its associated fashion actively participate in the ongoing opening/closure process which characterizes masculinity in contemporary media scenario, generating forms of “personalized” or “inclusive” masculinity that contrast with the traditional hypermasculine ideal and reject the supposed need of restoring patriarchal manhood.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the reconnection with Italian culture, far from being an attempt to downsize the Black and Latinx roots of hip-hop, could inform future research not only on Italian endemic cross- and poly-cultural identity but also toward a more intersectional and transnational approach on the study of hip-hop culture.¹⁰¹

98. Tricia Rose and Christopher Roy, “Hip-Hop Warrior”, in *Follow for Now, Volume 2: More Interviews with Friends and Heroes*, edited by Roy Christopher (New York: Punctum Books, 2021), 172.

99. See Lauron J. Kehrer, *Queer Voices in Hip Hop. Cultures, Communities, and Contemporary Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

100. See Eric Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* (Routledge: New York, 2010); Jon Swain, “Reflections on patterns of masculinity in school settings”, *Men and masculinities*, Vol. 8 (2006): 331–349.

101. Future research aims to reconnect the circuit of NY Italian American disco clubs and gay DJs and the hip-hop network, trying to debunk both the disco vs hip-hop divide and the cis vs gay culture framework underpinning many traditional hip-hop histories.

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