



Elvis Presley and his famous gold lamé tuxedo on the cover of his LP, 50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong—Elvis' Gold Records—Volume 2, 1957



Liberace (Wladziu Valentino Liberace, 1919–1987), American pianist and music-hall artist, circa 1975, Everett Collection

Glitz, glamour, and guys

Jillian Moore

I understand escapism. If I had been alive to choke down the shit-sandwich of World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, I'd probably be much more susceptible to the myth of American exceptionalism and its accompanying pageantry. No wonder the middle of the 20th century saw an explosion of consumerism. No wonder Hollywood and Las Vegas, in particular, blossomed into hedonistic hotbeds. Both situated in former deserts (stolen land) and irrigated into excess (with stolen water), they represent the myopic and willfully ignorant optimism of the middle of the last century.

The strange blend of materialism and naïve romanticism of that time inspired a counterintuitive shift in popular culture. Broad taste and deep pockets proved to be a fertile environment for a loophole in gender norms with regard to self-adornment. Ornament got married to aspirational consumer culture and, somehow, the figure of the dandy was able to

make a comeback in the middle of the otherwise aggressively gender-normative mid-century. Capitalism and patriarchy often bend the rules for one another: The rhinestone-studded glamour hunk was born.

Rhinestones used to come from the Rhine river. A natural rock crystal, they were attainable to those lucky enough to have disposable income, but not lucky enough to be born into the diamond-studded aristocracy. When they ran out, some enterprising jewelry makers faked them with leaded glass. Then, late in the 19th century, Swarovski invented a machine to cut them and spit them out, rapid fire. Several times removed from the signified, the signifier was now free to do its own sparkly thing.

What's more American than Elvis? More American than fringed jackets, jumpsuits with built-in capes, and costumes paved with rhinestones? More American than big-budget bad taste, the flaunting of new money, the



Nudie Cohn (Nuta Kotlyarenko, 1902–1984), American tailor and creator of the “Nudie Suits,” in front of one of his customized cars, photo: unknown

public performance of conspicuous consumption? There’s a ubiquity to the Elvis iconography that creates a sort of cultural blind spot around the surprising evolution of his style. Young Elvis begat Old Elvis, or “full-Vegas Elvis” to be more polite, and then full-Vegas Elvis died, spawning the Elvis impersonators, who continue to flourish in their multifarious iterations. But in trying to understand the genesis of full-Vegas Elvis, I keep getting distracted by Liberace. It’s hard *not* to be distracted by Liberace, more spangled than Elvis ever was, replete with mirrored pianos, feather boas, and jewel-encrusted capes. As the son of working-class European immigrants and the third of four children raised during the Great Depression, he performed his own hyperbolic interpretation of European royalty in an attempt to put as much distance between who

he was and who he made himself into. Were he pitted against Elvis in a Battle of the Baubles, he would certainly be declared the winner.

“Bad taste is real taste, of course, and good taste is the residue of someone else’s privilege—and Liberace cultivated them both in equal parts and often to disastrous effects.”¹

More American than Elvis? Liberace bought a Rolls Royce for a fur coat that had a 16-foot train.

But Liberace didn’t wake up one day and start gluing crystals on his tux after a flash of gaudy inspiration. Long before the invention of the Bedazzler, there was Nudie Cohn. Like Elvis and Liberace, Nudie also went by just one name. He wasn’t a performer, though. After emigrating from Kiev as a child, he made a living as a tailor in New



Between 1950 and 1975, Nudie Cohn had 18 vehicles customized to his specifications. They mostly were white Pontiac Bonneville convertibles, with silver dollar-studded dashboards, pistol door handles and gearshifts, extended rear bumpers, and enormous Longhorn steer-horn hood ornaments. This one is a 1975 Cadillac Eldorado, collection of the Valley Relics Museum. Photo: Bronte Lord/CNN Money

York City, mostly making costumes for burlesque dancers. Being utterly smitten with his adoptive home country, Nudie became a fan of the pastiche of country-and-western Americana, though he found it lacking in one important way. By wrapping the macho trappings of the cowboy in the flamboyant style of the showgirl, the Nudie suit was born.² This was also very likely the advent of straight (and closeted) men appropriating drag culture, which Nudie, unlike most of his clients, likely had on his radar. Thanks to his sartorial authority, he could safely package opulence for his clients, and give them permission to skirt the fashion binary. He made Elvis’s gold lamé suit. He made most of Liberace’s best get-ups. He dressed Grand Ole Opry singers, Motown artists, and rock legends. More importantly, he successfully subverted the idea that it was unmanly to

peacock around, sparkling like a Vegas showgirl, wearing your extravagant heart on your extravagant sleeve.

¹ Dave Hickey, “Liberace: A Rhinestone as Big as the Ritz,” in *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997), 54

² Nudie Cohn also customized cars, known as Nudie Mobiles, including his own 1975 Cadillac Eldorado convertible with steer horn hood ornament, covered in chrome horseshoes and various guns-as-adornment. If, God forbid, John Wayne were to come back to life in the form of a car, surely this would be it.

Further reading

Dave Hickey, “Liberace: A Rhinestone as Big as the Ritz,” in *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997)

Mairi Mackenzie, *DreamSuits: The Wonderful World of Nudie Cohn* (Tieft, Belgium: Lannoo Publishers, 2012)