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Cultural & Contextual Studies 2A: Fashioning Identities

Music and Fashion: Through the Eyes of John Varvatos

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Music and fashion are closely linked — one is as important to the other as it is vice versa. Both are tools of expression, individualism and forms of art. As Karl Lagerfeld once said, “Fashion and music are the same, because music expresses its period too.” Even until the present day, the last five and a half decades in music history still have an impact on trends. Various people listen to different spectrums of music and express themselves through their clothing choices. The hype of The Beatles came about in the sixties, directly influencing London, one of the biggest fashion capitals of the world. The hippie look of the sixties carried on over to the seventies where David Bowie and KISS made Glam Rock possible. The eighties broke every fashion “don’t” and could easily pass as one of the more eccentric decade music has influenced on fashion. The birth of vintage grunge became really popular in the nineties thanks to Kurt Cobain. Although it might not be the case for all, style is influenced by your preferred music choice or artist, be it subconsciously or not.

We are honouring our past decades by keeping their movement alive. As written by Sinnreich and Gluck, “Fashion is perhaps the most cyclical of all design industries. As with music, ideas and aesthetics constantly have been recycled, particularly from the 1930s to the present.” Glam rock of the seventies has made one of the most significant impact in both the fashion and music industry. Many still appreciate and get inspired by the style created in that decade even till present day, as proven by countless glam rock-inspired runway collections.

The music genre glam rock is a movement that began in the early 1970s. During that time, both the United States and Britain suffered a poor economic climate and in

response to it, both countries produced cultural movements to serve as an antidote.

Glam rock was Britain's answer to its economic depression. This genre is defined by its theatricality and eccentricity of dress, featuring variations of skin tight leopards, dramatic makeup and far more flamboyant stage costumes as compared to United States' cultural movement. As posted on a music blog RebelsMarket, this subculture, that is filled with eccentricity, gender bending and out of the norm clothing, has to be seen to be appreciated. Because of its colourful and flashy visuals, "glam rock is all about the show." Stages were dominated by bands like KISS, Alice Cooper and New York Dolls, as well as artists like Marc Bolan and Ziggy Stardust, also known as David Bowie.

Subcultures like Visual Kei and pop punk were created from the original glam rock movement with the same concept of "cry for help" and "curing depression". On top of that, numerous designers are inspired by this specific movement, the beginning of them all was Japanese-born fashion designer Kansai Yamamoto, who designed various looks worn by David Bowie himself. Designers like Balmain, Maria Nilsdotter, Aladdin Sane and Givenchy have all paid tribute to the rock and glam rock scene on the runway. This essay will analyze two designers and examine the different ways in which they have used music as a source of their inspiration, as well as how they fuse their own style to it. They are many collections where rock music influence is evident, however the collection discussed will be John Varvatos' Fall/Winter 2014 collection.

John Varvatos is an American contemporary menswear fashion designer. He joined Polo Ralph Lauren in 1983, then moved to Calvin Klein as the head of menswear design, but later went back to Ralph Lauren as head of menswear design and later

created Polo Jeans Company. Varvatos is a self-described “music junkie” (Grow, 2014) and is among the first people to turn rock stars into campaign models. He had featured Iggy Pop, Alice Cooper and others in his ad campaigns since his brand launched in 2000. He launched a record label John Varvatos Records with Republic in 2014, and has co-signed Zac Brown Band, Hollywood Vampires and folk-soul artist Amos Lee. Lee also mentioned that wearing Varvatos’ clothes were the same way as working with him: “A good fit. Never like, I’m trying too hard or doing something that doesn’t feel right.” In an article for Rolling Stones, the Republic Executive Vice President Charlie Walks said, “His knowledge and perspective on music is something invaluable to us because it comes from a completely different angle with him being embedded in fashion. He’s not approaching it from the standard ‘label side’ of things. He has the ability to find music through untraditional means that we’re not accustomed to. He can sit in a room with an artist and offer a viewpoint from the lifestyle and fashion world. That’s really incredible for talent to see.”

As a man that idolizes rockstars, he served up genuine rock ‘n’ roll with his indirectly-direct interpretation of the glam rock aesthetics of sequins, glitter and dramatic makeup as he presented his Fall/Winter 2014 collection during Milan Fashion Week. The runway featured rock icons KISS where the band flew 17 hours to make a special appearance, to be capped off by a performance at the show’s after-party. Guitarist and vocalist Paul Stanley offered his own critical appraisal of his friend. He mentioned that Varvatos represented not capricious fashion, but timeless style. He added, “John is not a member of the fashion community. He is a member of the rock ‘n’ roll community.”

This could be said that Varvatos genuinely loved the rock scene and understands the music instead of only seeing it from the surface level. Because of this, his analysis and translation of the glam rock genre into garments and designs would be far more in-depth and personal rather than just an interpretation and modernization of its style.

For the concept of the collection, Varvatos expressed, “I wanted to sprinkle a little magic dust throughout the clothes in this collection, highlighting the idea of sartorial daring and masculine confidence that is integral to my vision, bringing it a new level.” This collection, which will be discussed in detail later on, focuses a lot on subtle details. The dramatic flare of glam rock is fused with the refined menswear look, giving the collection a refreshing allure. Due to working with KISS in the previous season, where they worked on a campaign inspired by one of the band’s album covers, “Dressed to Kill”, Varvatos fell in love with “the idea of the superhero, a man in disguise with incredible powers that makes the KISS myth so enduring and appealing, and it’s exactly that mindset that I wanted to explore, adding a dash of fantasy to my work while keeping tailored finesse and elegance high on the agenda. The result is energetic and strong, for a confident man who dares.”



Fig. 1 Look 1

Reflecting its concept, Varvatos incorporates essence of glitter and glam into tailored menswear that is characterized by movements that create a revolving sense of surprise. The first look of the runway was a motorcycle-styled blazer that was diagonally zipped with sleeves that had patches of intriguing silver-foiled croc. The outfit was decked in black and completed by pairing simply with gloves and boots, a staple go-to look for the rock scene. In an interview with Fashion Channel Milano backstage before the Milan runway, Varvatos said, “KISS, like Spiderman and Superman, they’re superheroes. And so we sprinkled a little bit of superhero into the collection.” The patches are resembling that of an armour to echo its toughness and superhuman

message. As it was the first look of the collection and being the look to introduce the concept collection as a whole, Varvatos opened the runway with a rather toned-down outfit so as to let the audience absorb its content comfortably before proceeding to slightly more dramatic looks.



Fig 2. Look 23

Fig 3. Look 18

In comparison to other designers, such as Jean Paul Gaultier, who were inspired by glam rock music in their collection — where the designs were more dramatic and theatrical to represent glam rock's flashy appearance and aesthetics — Varvatos' take on it was far more different. One of the key points to this collection is the interesting fabric pairings. The subtle mix-match brings a compelling aura to the slick and elegant. The look in Fig. 2 consisted of a matching jacket and vest worn together with stretched

leather jeans and cut-out finger gloves and boots. It has a different vibe to a general look of a three-piece suit, where any creases were eliminated and followed abide by the classic tailoring look. This look, as well as many others from this collection, introduced a new vision of the tuxedo and the classic menswear where minor details are changed. In Fig. 3, the double breasted suit sport heather silk lapel and contrasting double welt pockets. These are the little, fine details of the concept of “sprinkling superhero” into the collection. Even though the craft of it is minor, its impact is far from that. The statement it is making gives emphasis and personality to the suit as a whole, adding character and a tinge of rebelliousness into the look, one of the things that KISS and glam rock in general stand for.



Fig 4. Look 4



Fig 5. Look 10

In Fig. 4 and Fig. 5, the silver toggle closures punctuate the outerwear pieces as visual marks. Although these clasps are small in size, its contrast against the dark outerwear pieces is great. The shimmering quality of these metallic objects add toughness and a shine, though miniature it may be, its significance to the concept is vast. The message from these two looks might not possibly be able to reach the audience at first glance as the overall aesthetics of it was far from any stereotypical visual of glam rock or KISS inspiration, as it is said to be “the use of glittery, shiny and soft fabrics...; leather clothing; spangled, shiny or brightly coloured platform soled shoes... Heavily applied make up and extreme quasi ‘feminine’ hairstyling...” (Gregory, pg. 41-42). However, it was intentionally done as so by Varvatos as he wished to fuse the glam visual and the tailored finesse in this collection.



Fig 6. Look 7



Fig. 7. Screenshot from Runway



Fig. 8 Look 11



Fig 9. KISS Makeup

The most iconic thing about KISS is their makeup. Although some of the models that walked the runway had face-painted makeup on, which we will later discuss, Varvatos incorporated the art of the face-paint onto the garments itself. The art was converted into a pattern which was then made onto the high-neck cardigan in Fig. 6 as well as the sweater in Fig. 8. The stroke and style of the patterns can be referred back to the legendary eye face paint. In Fig. 9, the make-up of the bottom person is the main inspiration behind these patterns. Fig. 7 is a screenshot from the video of this collection's runway, showcasing the back of the cardigan which could not be seen in a runway look photograph. The pattern of this specific cardigan starts from the shoulders and forearms which then spreads to the back, just like how the makeup starts from the

centre of the eye and then spreading downwards and more dramatically upwards. For the sweater in Fig. 8, the colour was inverted, using the grey as the pattern of the inspiration instead, as it spreads from sideways towards the centre. This could be said that Varvatos' take of using KISS as inspiration not just from the pieces of clothing and style that they wear, but rather the whole aspect of their stage presence and presentation.



Fig. 10 Look 2



Fig. 11 Look 30

As mentioned briefly above, some of the models on the runway were face-painted, ranging from the basic rockstar star to the ultimate dramatic, full-faced KISS make-up. Most of these face-painted models were paired with more toned-down looks of the collection. Similar to the idea mentioned previously, the make-up give character

and individuality to these looks as well as a strong sense of presence. Though the outfits itself were subtler with its fabrication and detailing, it focuses on other features of the look, which is silhouette and cut — slim and elegant. As Gregory wrote that glam rock was a “masculinist hagiography”, this could be concluded that The reason for this style of look could be to showcase the masculinity that glam rock portrays in different perspective.



Fig. 12 Look 28

Towards the end of the collection, the looks became more and more expressive. The look in Fig. 12 is a fluid coat made of washed calfskin and wool with cut-out fabric feathers swarming on the shoulders of the slim coat. This look was paying more tribute

to stage outfits of KISS, with its theatrically and dramatic visual presentation. However, as compared to actual stage outfits of KISS, this was more toned-down and formal with majority of the look being black and paired with a blazer that has a satin finishing lapel. The interesting aspect to this look, other than the intricate feathers, were the subtle metal accessories styled along with the outfit — the chain around the right side of the pants and the ring. Relating back to Varvatos' concept of adding minor touches of KISS as superheroes, metallic accessories adds the glitter and bling to the look.



Fig 13. Look 33

The runway closes with a range of winter white coats, cutaway suits and shearling coats. The transition of dark and dramatic to the lighter looks bring a refined and martial allure. In Fig. 13, the sleeves of the white leather jacket were instead a silver, metallic fabric. The contrast of this fabrication against all the other whites is somewhat similar to the metallic clasps' contrast to the darker fabrications — both adds toughness and shine to the looks. It echoes very much the glitter and studs used by not just KISS but various glam rock artists and rock fashion enthusiasts. This indirect translation of usage is the very basis of Varvatos' collection where his inspiration was not a full "cut and paste" mentality, whereas it is an abstract thinking process and interpretation of each point he was inspired by.

Many have the perception that if a collection was inspired by music, it was inspired by the fashion of the particular music scene, when in some cases it might be the lyrical content, a band's album concept, a band's concept or a genre's origin concept. Even when Varvatos was inspired by KISS, it wasn't just KISS' iconic image, but it was the message that they have in their album concepts as well as the emotion that it brings to people who listen to it. "The visual language of metal album covers and the spectacular stage shows offer larger-than-life images tied to fantasies of social power, just as in the more prestigious musical spectacles of opera." (Walser 1993:2) Just like what an album of an artist narrates a story, so does fashion when a collection is launched. Fashion is just as much of a vessel of storytelling as music is. In that aspect, fashion plays a huge role in assisting musicians to set a mood and tell their

story better. Thus, it can be said that fashion and music have a symbiotic relationship that has been evident since the beginning.

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Figure 2: Look 23

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Figure 3: Look 18

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Figure 4: Look 4

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Figure 5: Look 10

<http://www.thefashionisto.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/john-varvatos-fall-winter-2014-collection-0010.jpg>

Figure 6: Look 7

<http://www.thefashionisto.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/john-varvatos-fall-winter-2014-collection-0007.jpg>

Figure 7: Screenshot from Runway

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBbm0SQy9Ho> @ 1:31

Figure 8: Look 11

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Fig. 9: Kiss Makeup

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Fig. 10: Look 2

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Fig. 11: Look 30

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Fig. 12: Look 28

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Fig. 13: Look 33

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