

Lloyd Johnson: 'My designs were pure Rock'n'Roll'

The fashion designer to Britain's pop royalty on how he dressed everyone from the Beatles to Bowie

By Lois Wilson

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'I created what I saw as stage wear for the street' ... Lloyd Johnson in 1965

Starting in 1966, Lloyd Johnson helped change the look of Rock'n'Roll fashion, selling his iconic designs to Bob Dylan, Keith Richards, David Bowie, Oasis and many more. A teenage modernist from Hastings, he began procuring tab collar shirts for the Beatles and Stones at Cecil Gee's menswear shop in London's Charing Cross. On opening his own boutiques, the Heavy Metal Kids in Kensington Market from 1967 and Johnsons, The Modern Outfitters on the King's Road in 1978, he became an image-maker, kitting out Roxy Music in embroidered shirts, Rod Stewart in velvet suits and the Cramps' Lux Interior in gold leather. He also pioneered the black-studded leather "La Rocka!" look, immortalised by George Michael in his 1987 Faith video, and made his mark on Britpop, wrapping Take That and Oasis in fake fur coats.

What sparked your interest in fashion?

It was 1959. I was 14, at a battle of the bands competition. I saw three guys there, they had Tony Curtis haircuts, were wearing bum-freezer jackets, cutaway collar shirts, slim Jim ties, tapered trousers, winkle-pickers with side laces. I went up to them and asked: "Why are you

dressed like that?" They said: "We're modernists." I didn't know what that meant but I thought, I'm going to be a modernist. My mum bought me a £10 brown suit with all the trims from Burton for my birthday. With my college boy haircut, I'd arrived.



Lloyd Johnson (right) with his friend Bruce Gearing in the 50s

You went from Cecil Gee shop assistant to tailor of choice for the Beatles and Bob Dylan.

It was quite by accident. There was no game plan. I started making my girlfriend's clothes and wearing my own homemade ties to work, then I started selling my ties and it expanded from that. I took a stall in Kensington market, made it look like a silver submarine with a port hole as the entrance, and I combined my loves – music, rock'n'roll imagery and posing – in my designs and created what I saw as stage wear for the street. That's what attracted them to the designs, they were from the heart – and pure rock'n'roll.

Rod Stewart and the Faces were big fans?

Rod used to live on a houseboat in Shoreham in the early 60s. He'd come over to Hastings and really cut a dash – he already had a great haircut, and wore a black cord jacket and matching trousers, which were really hard to get hold of then. He didn't have any money and he got chucked out of the local coffee bar because he couldn't afford to buy a coffee. Later he and the Faces would come over to the flat in Earl's Court, to get fitted for their suits. Ronnie Wood would come down the Greyhound pub round the corner from the stall in Kensington market, Marc Bolan would be there, Freddie Mercury, who at that time ran the stall next to me, too. I remember telling him I thought Queen was a silly name for a band.



'Punk was a wake-up call' ... John Lydon in 1979. Photograph: Evening News/Rex Features

As a member of the previous generation, why did you embrace punk?

There was a recession, the three-day week, everyone was struggling, I couldn't get my clothes made and then punk came along and bang! It was a wake-up call. Let It Rock, Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's shop on the King's Road, was selling 50s-style clothes and that opened my eyes to retro fashion. I started selling second-hand vintage clothing. Not many people were doing that then. I was selling mohair jumpers, plastic sandals and peg trousers to the soul boys and Bowie fans such as Siouxsie Sioux and Billy Idol. Siouxsie was pure art form. The youth always inspired me, the rubber spy-like trench coat I made in the 60s that John Lennon was fond of, that was inspired by the riding coats a lot of French boys were wearing at the time, they were rubber and oil skin for practicality, but looking back, mine were more kinky, they had a Joe Orton feel to them. A range of clothes I made called R'N'Roll Suicide that Siouxsie, Billy Idol and Joe Strummer wore was inspired by a photo a friend of mine had of a young American pilot in the war in the Pacific. Even though he was fighting in this dreadful war, he had a swagger, and it reminded me of the punk swagger. It didn't matter what the circumstances, the youth always had a confidence, coolness and swagger about them.

You designed the clothes for the 1979 film *Quadrophenia*.

We measured all the suits but no one told me they'd be wearing them over wet suits and fighting in the sea, and then they wondered why the seams split and the sleeves fell off. No mod would fight in their suit. They'd go out of their way to keep their suit smart. Once word got out that we did the clothes though, it got ridiculous. The press jumped on it and it was: "Want the mod look? Go to Johnsons." The shop became overrun with teenage mods. There'd be queues round the block before we'd even opened in the morning. The Jam, the Specials, Madness, they came down and bought clothes. But we sold rock'n'roll stuff too and I thought no one else will come to the shop because it's "mod this", "mod that" so I got some French 50s window display dummies with rocker hair cuts, put them in skin tight jeans, biker boots and cut-off jean jackets I'd designed, I called it the La Rocka! range and our first customers the next day were the Stray Cats.



George Michael wearing a Lloyd Johnson outfit in his *Faith* video, 1987

George Michael launched his solo career with La Rocka!

George wore our BSA leather jacket and steel toe cap and heeled boots, they got a starring role in his *Faith* video. It was a big statement; here's George, out on his own, serious, part of rock'n'roll's heritage. He bought loads of those boots because they kept being stolen by fans, and he had four of the BSA jackets too.

What advice do you have for those starting out in fashion?

Don't give up. If you believe in what you are doing people will be drawn in like a magnet. We didn't advertise for our staff, they came to us because they believed in what we were doing. They were the best looking girls and boys in London and every night they were out clubbing in our clothes. You couldn't get a better promotional vehicle than that. Likewise the musicians who bought our clothes, we never did product placement, they found out about us, through word of mouth. If people are wearing your clothes because they want to, you know you're on the right path.

What are you doing now?

I'm in the process of putting together a new La Rocka! 12-piece collection. It's La Rocka! for now, for those who grew up with the original range and who still love rock'n'roll and rock'n'roll imagery.

Lloyd Johnson: The Modern Outfitter celebrates four decades of Lloyd Johnson's fashions at Chelsea Space, Chelsea College of Art and Design, London SW1 from 24 January to 3 March.