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Revolting Style: How London's Clubbers Got Dressed in the Eighties

BY [LIBBY BANKS](#)

“Dress as though your life depends on it or don't bother,” Leigh Bowery famously said of the dress code for his weekly club night, Taboo, just off London's Leicester Square. Bowery — designer, performance artist, club

superstar, and finally a paint-splattered one-man canvas — was the outrageous master of ceremonies for London's mid-eighties underground club scene. With him he brought a bizarre, and often drug-fueled, carnival of psycho-glamour and polysexual debauchery. Taboo's notorious doorman, Mark Vaultier, would hold a mirror up to wannabe clubbers whose fashion efforts didn't cut it and witheringly ask: "Would *you* let yourself in?"

These dress codes might seem galaxies away from what [Princess Di](#) was wearing to royal engagements in the same era, but a new exhibition at London's Victoria & Albert museum aims to show just how eighties fashion emerged directly from the underground music scene — and its draconian door policies. *Club to Catwalk* features creations from names like [John Galliano](#), [Vivienne Westwood](#), [Stephen Jones](#), [Betty Jackson](#), [Paul Smith](#), Pam Hogg, [Katharine Hamnett](#), Rifat Ozbek, and Leigh Bowery.

It gives a fascinating glimpse at the world of upstart British designers in the eighties who found international fame thanks to their bold aesthetic — an aesthetic that was often directly influenced by the city's outrageous club culture. With each new club night, new style tribes emerged, and the exhibition celebrates the extreme styles of eighties London subcultures like Fetish, Goth, Rave, New Romantics, and High Camp. The blink-and-you'll-miss-it scene meant clubs, let alone club nights, rarely made it passed their first birthday, but the appetite for subversion and total individuality lingered throughout the decade.

[John Galliano](#), who studied at Central Saint Martins art college from 1981 to 1984, remembers how on Thursdays and Fridays "the college was almost deserted. Everybody was at home working on their costumes for the weekend."

Trojan, a club star and Bowery's former lover, famously once hacked his ear half off as a fashion statement, because, as a 1986 article in *The Face* helpfully explains, he was "simply, fed up of being copied" by the girls at Taboo. It's the kind of hedonism that makes [Riri](#)'s bad girl antics feel, well, a little tame.

The V&A's Head of Fashion Claire Wilcox, who curated the exhibition, says that she was keen to dispel the assumption that eighties fashion boils down to "power dressing and perms." And what the exhibition lacks in shoulder

pads, it makes up for with in men's dresses, mint condition [Westwood fetish gear](#), pirate outfits, a dance floor, and a purple Lycra leotard with its very own penis sheath.

We spoke with Wilcox about how the beautiful and grotesque of London's dingy clubs were crucial to eighties mainstream fashion.

Do you think that the exhibition is about restoring the fashion reputation of the eighties?

I hope so! Princess Di gets a brief mention but we deliberately didn't include any of her outfits, and there are very, very few shoulder pads. This is about art school fashion; we've got incredible designers John Galiano, who was just starting his career, but also Vivienne Westwood who absolutely radical throughout the eighties. It's also about calling out influential designers who are not necessarily well-known today, like John Flett and Michiko Koshino. We wanted to show how what people wore to these places had an influence well beyond the club basement. [Designers](#), musicians, artists, and dancers were going out together so this crossover was inevitable.

Can you give an example of this club to real world crossover?

The classic example is the billowing New Romantic shirt that translated into the piecrust collar beloved by Princess Diana and her chums. It was this moment where designers were straddling two worlds and bringing the anything goes vitality of the club scene and melding it with skills learned at fashion colleges. [Stephen Jones](#) was making hats for his clubbing friends, but he was also making hats for royalty.

How did the club music affect fashion?

A lot of it comes down to how people danced. Rave was about dressing to sweat, but as one of the New Romantics told me, for them it wasn't about dancing: they just jigged around as they didn't want to ruin their extravagant costumes. If look at the earliest pieces, which are quite precise and utilitarian, they are associated with the robotic music of 1979 or 1980, and then you go into the historical phase when clubbers went into theatrical costumiers for their Saturday night outfits. Towards the end of the decade you have increasingly body-con, clothes become much more clingy with plenty of Lycra, and then our latest outfit, from Rifat Ozbek's 1990 White collection, is somewhere between rave and new age.

Given the complexities and nuances of the scene, it must have been a tough exhibition to curate.

The thing about the London clubbing culture in this period is that no one wore the same outfit twice. We've got five outfits from the New Romantics, who were only around from 1979 to 1980, and they're all utterly different. There was an extraordinary refreshing and reworking of their look, night after night after night, and there were tribes within tribes within.

It's impossible to talk about London's club culture in the eighties without mentioning Leigh Bowery. What was his contribution?

What people forget is that he was a great pattern cutter and seamstress. When he started out, he went on a business trip to Tokyo with other British designers. He received lots of orders from buyers but he didn't want to make them up as he was only interested in one-offs. His role was to provide a phenomenal performance every night for his peers, and his inspiration disseminated into both the fashion world and the fine art world. The Leigh Bowery clothes in the exhibition represent the extreme of club fashion, he saw it as a theater for individual expression. In the end his body became a theater for performance and I love that.

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