DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 454 018 RC 023 039

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TITLE Hey Pachuco! "That Zoot Suit Can Cause a Riot."
PUB DATE 2000-02-00
NOTE 21p.; In: National Association of African American Studies & National Association of Hispanic and Latino Studies: 2000 Literature Monograph Series. Proceedings (Fine Arts Section) (Houston, TX, February 21-26, 2000).
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Culture; Films; Higher Education; Hispanic American Culture; *History Instruction; Mexican American History; Mexican Americans; *Multicultural Education; *Multimedia Instruction; *Popular Culture; Popular Music; *Racial Bias; *Social History; Subcultures; Violence
IDENTIFIERS California (Los Angeles); *Civil Disturbances

ABSTRACT

Popular music and films can become vehicles in the study of racial prejudices and stereotypes and provide a framework for understanding the popular opinions of a particular era. At the College of Staten Island, City University of New York, a course incorporates popular music and videos into the study of historical accounts of the 20th century focusing on racial stereotypes. The sometimes-obscure Los Angeles "Zoot Suit Riots" of 1943 come alive with the combination of colorful, energetic, visual and musical references. This paper looks at some themes examined in the course: the social history associated with the "swing" music of the 1930s and 1940s; the reemergence of swing music in the 1990s; the Mexican American "pachuco" youth culture of 1940s Los Angeles, with its flamboyant fashions in clothing; the "railroading" of pachuco youths during the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and subsequent riots; swing music in films and accompanying portrayals of Black-White segregation; early television's treatment of minorities; the movement of 1980s "grunge" bands into swing music; and social statements in the lyrics of modern swing music. (SV)

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ED 454 018

HEY PACHUCO!
"THAT ZOOT SUIT CAN CAUSE A RIOT"

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Hey Pachuco! "That Zoot Suit Can Cause a Riot"

In recent years there have been numerous studies on the influence of music and videos on society and culture. Within this context, these forms of media can become a vehicle in the study of social views towards racial prejudices, stereotypes and a framework to gauge the popular opinion of that age. As a faculty member at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York, I incorporate popular music and video into the study of historical accounts of the 20th century focusing on racial stereotypes. With a young 21st century audience weaned on "visual stimulation" issues such as the sometimes-obscure "Zoot Suit Riots" of 1943 come alive with a combination of these colorful, energetic, visual, and musical references. The notion of presenting vibrant media formats of contemporary song and video stimulate the learning process to students beginning the new millennium.

The popular culture portrayal of the Latino has suffered defamation through racial prejudice and stereotyping. A film before its time was *Zoot Suit* (1981 David Valdez, director). In *Zoot Suit*, Valdez presents a surrealistic portrayal of a mythical

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Zoot-suited "El Pachuco," who escorts the audience through a representation of the factual Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, the eventual "railroading" of Latino youths who are forced during trial proceedings to remain clothed in their Zoot suits and subsequent riots of 1943.

This discussion will investigate current popular songs such as Cherry Poppin' Daddies *Zoot Suit Riot*, and Royal Crown Revue's *Hey Pachuco*, featured in the 1994 Jim Carey movie *The Mask*. Each of these bands 90s swing sound can be traced to the 30s and 40s Big Band sounds. Yet from their punk and "grunge" roots of the 1980s their lyrics pack a "punch" lyrically commenting on the social injustices of the of the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943.

A focus will be drawn on the reemergence of Swing music in the 1990s. The intent is not to trace an in-depth history of the music. It is, however, the intent to comment on the lyrical content. Whereas the lyrics of the 1940s supported the war and were carefully controlled, in some cases by government intervention, the lyrics of the 90s make a social statement, which could not be said during the Second World War. Similarities and differences will be explored, illustrating how a new generation has reached back to the

music of World War II and adapted swing to enter the next millennium.

Swing music throughout its history has proven itself to be a modern American art form, which transcends religion, race and ethnic barriers. As country music is considered traditional middle white America, and rap music is comparable with inner city - swing has a history of up-beat tempo fun dancing, it is also closely associated with the Second World War.

Swing songs, however, were hampered by the racial prejudices prevalent to that era. Bands such Duke Ellington, and Count Basie were denied the mainstream audiences such as were afforded the predominantly white bands. The "Zoot" suited Latinos of southern California were stereotyped as hoodlums, criminals, and gang members. Dark skinned Italian singer/trumpet player Louis Prima from New Orleans was assumed by a club owner to be black, and therefore denied the right to perform to New York audiences. During that same year, 1938, Prima wrote the swing classic, *Sing, Sing, Sing,* popularized by the Benny Goodman Orchestra. The 1993 Hollywood movie *Swing Kids*, (Disney Studios, Thomas Carter, director) which was set in 1939 Nazi Germany sets a scene with the resounding beat of Goodman's

classic rendition. This film coincides with the re-emergence of swing music to the American youth of the 90s.

The predominant audience for swing in the 1930s and 40s, as it is today, were high school and college age students. The nature of this youthful mainstream audience often caused critics to dismiss swing as an offshoot, and the music industry commercialization of jazz. At that time predominantly white "sweet bands" such as, Guy Lombardo, Fred Warring, and Glenn Miller, among others were the dominant radio force, which drew support of the big money advertisers. Swing, however, served as a revolt against the commercial predominantly white "sweet bands". Swings creator's, Chic Webb, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Fletcher Henderson, Benny Goodman, Shorty Snowden, and Frankie Manning, to name a few, viewed it as a viable music culture of a democratic society.

The reality of life during this time was that segregation laws existed in the south. No integration was allowed for any reason whatsoever, especially dancing. Evidence of the Jim Crow mentality, however, was everywhere in the United States. Though the north was not "legally" segregated it was very prevalent in the

minds in all of the images of what America was presented and what it should be.

In New York City, 52nd St. was considered the dividing line; north of there was where the black bands played, south of there the white bands with some impromptu integrated areas along 52nd street itself. Café Society, appropriately in New York's Greenwich Village, was the first integrated club. The opening was on the same night as Benny Goodman's historic concert at New York's Carnegie Hall, January 16, 1938. The opening of an integrated club on the same night as Benny Goodman's concert has been viewed by many as not a mere coincidence. At Carnegie Hall, Goodman had an integrated ethnically diverse "all-star" orchestra, including Harry James, Fletcher Henderson, and Gene Krupa. Goodman did not hold back playing the same music his orchestra played in all the dance halls every night, including the infamous *Sing Sing Sing.* Segments included a trio of Benny Goodman, drummer Gene Krupa and pianist Teddy Wilson. Wilson, was the first African American to play regularly with a white ensemble. Prior to the end of the first half, Goodman introduced a quartet, adding another African American, Lionel Hampton on xylophone. During the evening Goodman's orchestra played tunes by Duke

Ellington and Fletcher Henderson, presenting a portion of American culture which was now racially and ethnically mixed, something that existed but was not portrayed by American pop culture. The entire ensemble even played a remake of a Yiddish tune, *Bei mir bist du schoein* originally a hit for the Andrews Sisters. Swing historian Lewis Erenberg, stated of the concert "(w)ith this combination of musicians of various backgrounds the Goodman orchestra struck a note for a new democratic American pluralism." [1]

Abbott and Costello were considered by many as the top entertainment act in the country. Their movies were immensely popular and viewed by a wide range of audiences. One such film *Ride 'em Cowboy,* featured Ella Fitzgerald singing her hit song "*A Tisket A Tasket.*" Although Ella could be appreciated as an immensely popular entertainer, she was still black and she literally takes her place in the "back of the bus." One such scene portrays Fitzgerald singing her hit standing in the aisle of a bus. Upon completion of the song she goes to the back and takes a seat. It can be argued that those involved in the making of the film did not do this intentionally, it was, however, what mainstream American

[1] *Swinging the Dream*, Lewis Erenberg, p. 67.

audiences expected how a black person should act. In a later scene, Ella is at a dance dressed as a "maid." Once again a role in which whites would traditionally accept for a black female. Fitzgerald introduces a group of black dancers demonstrating "swing" supposedly as they perform it "up Harlem way."[2] The group is tightly choreographed, and limited in performance style. In addition segregation is evident as they move off the floor to allow the white dancers to enjoy the festivities. Although this portrayal of swing dance as performed in "Harlem," is totally inaccurate of the predominant New York Savoy style of the 1940s.

Swing music is known to many as the music, which helped win the war. To those that were over in Europe and in the Pacific they did not want to hear anything new; they yearned for a nostalgia of what they had heard prior to leaving for war. Or more appropriately to remind them of what they left at home and exactly what they were fighting to preserve. Song lyrics set a popular image of the faithful girl at home that is encouraged not to "sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me."[3] The uniformed Andrews Sisters encouraged people to enroll in the draft singing of

[2] *Ride 'em Cowboy,* 1942 Arthur Lubin, director.

[3] Lyrics, *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree,* Andrews Sisters.

that "famous trumpet man from old Chicago way."[4] In *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy* everything was positive using swing music, which was cool to the kids at the time. The music was cheerfully *Lindy Hopped* and *Jitterbugged* with a happy abandon, causing smiling to become second nature.[5] The lyrics when applied to the music supported the war and were carefully controlled.

Swing, during World War II, literally stopped creating any thing new. Ironically during the height of the war years a musicians strike prevented bands from producing commercial recordings. The United States government, however, was actively involved in recording performers on "V" discs and shipped them overseas as quickly as possible. Glenn Miller formed an army band bringing a bit of home and a nostalgic view through the music the young GIs were most familiar – Swing. To those serving in the front line trenches swing music reminded them of their homeland. Some say Captain (later Major) Glenn Miller was just as instrumental in the war effort as any other American industry of that time.

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[4] Lyrics, *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy,* Line 1.

[5] *The Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 1999.

At the height of the Second World War - Americans were urged to shorten the hemline and eliminate "cuffs" from pants to preserve clothing material for the war effort. The "Zoot-suit" was unlike any fashion of the time. Colorful long draped jackets, baggy pants, and flamboyant feathered "tando" hats characterized these so-called *Zoot suits*.[6] The excess material of these suits worn by southern California Latino's were viewed as un-patriotic.

The actual Southern California *Zoot Suit Riots of 1943* took place after several key events were in place. Or to state more succinctly as a result of a propaganda-driven effort to eliminate Mexican blood from American society. The beginning can be traced to the United States Government Executive Order #9066 which "removed" the Japanese- American from Los Angles during the spring of 1942. Without the new found Asian enemy, the mainstream whites of Los Angeles set up the *Pachuco* as a symbolic domestic enemy. Newspapers, of that time, called these Zoot-suited *pachucos,* violent protestors of the war, draft dodgers, and an element of a "Mexican crime wave." Los Angeles officials decreed that only hoodlums wore Zoot suits. "Yellow Journalism"

[6] Many agree that Cab Calloway coined the term *Zoot suit.*

likened the Mexican Americans as having inherited the "naturally violent tendencies from the bloodthirsty Aztec's."[7]

The arrest of 20 year old Henry Leyvas and 24 members of his so-called "gang," for the supposed *Sleepy Lagoon* murder, represented one of the most significant miscarriages of injustice in the history of United States trail proceedings. A film before its time was *Zoot Suit* (1981 David Valdez, director). Valdez would later achieve widespread public acclaim for his 1986 work on Latino rock n' roller Ritchie Valens in the film *La Bamba.* In *Zoot Suit*, Valdez presents a surrealistic, although factual portrayal of these historical events. A mythical Zoot-suited "El Pachuco," escorts the audience through a representation of the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, the eventual "railroading" of Latino youths who are forced during trial proceedings to remain clothed in their Zoot suits.

On a June night in 1943, a group of eleven sailors on shore leave claimed a gang of *pachucos* attacked them. The following night approximately 200 sailors piled into cars and taxis roaming the streets of Los Angeles attacking at random anyone dressed in a *Zoot suit.* The sailors, joined by other military personnel continued

[7] *The Mexican American Heritage,* Carlos M. Jimenez, 1994, p. 159.

the attacks; riots broke out and continued for days. The police and local Los Angeles officials supported the servicemen and jailed the *pachucos.* Local newspapers portrayed the servicemen as heroes for thwarting the "Mexican crime wave."[8] Only a decree by Navy officials, fearing an all out mutiny ended the riots.

The Zoot-suiters, however, represented less than 10 percent of their community's youth. More than 300,000 Mexican Americans were serving in the armed forces in numbers greater than their proportion of the rest of America's draft-age population.[9] Although the Zoot suiter's, or even the "swing kids," of Hamburg, Germany, represented only a small portion of their ethnic community, due to their physical appearance were singled out for discrimination and subsequent violent attacks to suppress their actions. The incident of racial attacks was not isolated. In fact, during 1943, similar riots occurred in over 50 U.S. cities.[10]

After World War II, the swing music of the big bands just were no longer economically feasible, and with the end of the war,

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[8] *Occupied America,* Rudolph Acuna.

[9] *Out of Many: A History of the American People,* 2nd edition, Prentice Hall 1997. Chap. 25, pp. 807-809.

[10] *The American Journey: A History of the United States*, Prentice Hall 1998, Chap. 28, pp. 863-865.

were not needed. This also was not what America had wanted at that time. The atomic bomb changed the world. One war was over but the ensuing Cold war paranoia was getting "hot" in Korea. The trend in the new economically powerful America was conformity. Soldiers back from the war, wanted to "get on with their life;" go to school, get back to work, and start families.

The powerful new media, television began to shape a powerful image of popular culture. Popular sitcoms of the 1950s portrayed homogenous white nuclear families such as Ozzie & Harriet. The Nelson Family created a new American cultural image, including the new musical image of the "teen idol." Yet evidence of segregation and non-integration were very much in the minds of Americans. Television was careful to excluded stories and portrayal of minorities, and excluded the faces of minorities from corporate advertising. Although every loved Lucy – Ricky was stereotyped as a Latin bandleader. Yet curiously during the Cuban Missile Crisis – television executives changed his ethnic origin from Cuban to Mexican.

As late as the 1950s Elvis Presley was surprised to find that within the southern performance venues there was a physical dividing segregation line. Blacks to one side and whites to the

other. Although segregation laws did not exist in the north, mainstream attitudes towards blacks were to remain segregated. Levittown in Long Island, New York refused to sell integration into the new suburbia. Emmett Till, *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, and Rosa Parks were arousing socially conscious Americans. At this time, Swing continued in smaller forms. Louis Prima and Louis Jordan', pop icons of the 1950s played a form of jump blues, which preceded and influenced many early rock 'n rollers.

Two songs most often credited with the 1990s resurgence and mainstream acceptance of swing are – *Jump Jive an' Wail,* by Brian Setzer, and *Zoot Suit Riot,* by Cherry Poppin Daddies. *Jump Jive* written and originally performed by Louis Prima in 1958 was revived in a 1998 GAP television commercial. Setzer's rendition of *Jump Jive* is not new. He has been performing this style of music for over 20 years beginning with his "rockabilly" group the Stray Cats. Leading Rock and pop icons of the 1980s such as Linda Ronstadt, Pat Benatar, and Joe Jackson, among others paved the way with mainstream adaptation of swing with popular works such as, "What's New," "True Love," and "Jumpin Jive," respectively. Rockabilly artists of the same time period, such as the

aforementioned Stray Cats, Robert Gordon, Shakin' Stevens, and Billy Burnett strutted their music to the top of the pop charts during the waning years of Disco. The roots of their sound can easily be traced to a fusion of the pre-war Big Bands, with 1950s Rock 'n Roll, Rhythm and Blues, and Country. Today's swing combines these same influences with the addition of the Grunge musical sound.

Grunge, a dominant anti-pop culture music genre of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which emerged from the Pacific Northwest area of the United States, is a music based on both punk and heavy metal. Characterized by their anti-fashion appearance of flannel shirts and jeans, such Seattle based bands as Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, and Soundgarden cultivated a feel in their music, which was originally described as "grungy." As with rap and the fashion of contemporary hip-hop culture, grunge reflects the sociological and economical realities of divorce, unemployment, and the apathy and hopelessness of the so-called "Generation X." Pearl Jam has also been involved in protest in its crusade against Ticketmaster's economic monopoly on ticket sales. Grunge began in the 1980s, but it was in 1991 that Pearl Jam's *Ten* and Nirvana's

Nevermind were released, making Seattle a major influential musical center.

Two former grunge bands, which moved into swing, are Royal Crown Revue and Cherry Poppin' Daddies. Their contemporary style of swing is more of an outgrowth of grunge, with new original lyrics, which make a social statement. Royal Crown Revue and Cherry Poppin' Daddies are different than the numerous 90s swing cover bands. Rather than recycling the standards of the 30s, they each search the musical and historical past for inspiration to create original songs and go forward. Each band has crossed into mainstream pop acceptance using the swing beat with lyrical social comments of racial prejudice of an incident, which occurred during the Second World War. The unique element of these two songs are their social statement reaching back to 1943 - lyrically commenting on the prejudicial "*Zoot Suit Riots*," of 1943 in Southern California - something the swing bands of the 1930s and 40s could not do.

Royal Crown's music was featured in the Jim Carrey Hollywood movie *The Mask* (1994 - Chuck Russell, director). In one scene a Zoot-suited Carrey danced to Royal Crown Revue's,

Hey Pachuco. Lyrically the song references the riots. "Summer '43, the man's gunnin' for me." [11]

Cherry Poppin Daddies a self described "band that Swings – not a swing band," is another such musical group lyrically commenting on the same incident. Steve Perry the singer/songwriter indicates he searches historical accounts for his lyrical references of substance rather than seeking mass popular appeal. Of the lyrics, Perry admits that many do not know what it means historically. Many within the Chicano and Hispanic community have applauded the Daddies effort to address the situation of the riots and bringing it to the consciousness of the public.[12] *Zoot Suit Riot,* however, is a song, which has transcended generations, quickly becoming an icon of contemporary Pop culture. Wedding bands and DJ's play the hard driving rhythmic drumbeat, which causes people to move their feet and dance to the beat. The words however are meaningful. During 1943 the riots could not be publicized in song. The riots would not have been supported by popular opinion, and were detrimental to the war

[11] Lyrics, *Hey Pachuco,* Line 1.

[12] Steve Perry, www.daddies.org.

effort. In 1998 Cherry Poppin Daddies brought forward the reflections of the prejudicial riots.

With the resurgence of swing music, the song and the historical background of the riots in '43 can now make a lyrical social statement in swing, contradicting the lyrics, which were evident during the 1930s and 1940s. The songs and video recap an unfortunate event – although an ironic twist of the music so much associated with the "Good War," serves as a reminder of the riveting horrors of life on the home-front was not as *Rosey* as many were led to believe or even allowed to remember. Many of those whom I have interviewed who grew up during the war lived on the East Coast – and they have no recollection of the event- although it was heavily publicized in the Los Angeles press and radio. With the Riots these popular culture productions by Cherry Poppin' Daddies and Royal Crown Revue have brought a "reality" to swing music and some contradictions of 1943.

- The victims were jailed and the committer's of the crime were praised for the continued attacks upon minorities under "protection" of the law.
- The concept of "pluralism" as displayed by the *Pachucos* in direct contrast to the assimilated white uniform of the sailors – not unlike the white uniforms of the KKK.

- The second verse of Zoot *Suit Riot,* " now you sailors know where you women come for love," is a contradiction to the American popular portrayal of the faithful girl waiting under the apple tree.

With a young 21st century audience born into "visual stimulation" the use of surrealistic stories by David Valdez combined with the music of Cherry Poppin Daddies, and Royal Crown Revue - deserves a thoughtful look. The issues of the "Zoot Suit Riots" of 1943 come alive with this combination of colorful, energetic visual and musical references.

As swing in the 1930s grew from an underground force into a dominant force of popular culture during World War II, there are those today who argue, not unlike 1938, that swing is a commercialization into mainstream corporate America. Hollywood, Television, and Fashion have jumped on the wave in an attempt to capitalize economically. Major publications such as, *Time* magazine, *The New York Times*, and *The Los Angeles Times* have featured favorable articles on swing.

The observation is raised – that many people simply do not listen to the words. Rote learning causes us to recite the words of the Declaration of Independence but not understand the vitality of Jefferson's concept. Yet of the new swing and of the published

review of the songs – the comments are on the music – yet so many fail to, or is it intentional not to comment on the lyrics? The overwhelming majority of swingers and *Zoots* simply displayed a youthful flamboyant exuberance of fashion, music, and dance, not unlike the preceding "flapper" generation and the following, rock 'n roll rebels, hippies, disco dudes, punks, "grungies", or the contemporary hip hop culture. Each of these groups have endured many a look and criticism. I am still surprised of the continued outright anger and prejudice, which still exists, simply for what a person chooses to wear!

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