

LIFESTYLE

Remembering the jheri curl, the hairstyle we'd love to forget

Follow the drip

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Pillowcases destroyed by chemical muck. Plastic bags trimmed with elastic and worn over the head at night. Shirt collars ruined, soiled by dollops of hair conditioner and moisturizer. Towels wrapped around the neck.

Hairstyle or mess?

Guess.

Follow the drip, follow the drip.

The juicy, patted-down, wavy, poufy hairstyle commonly called the jheri curl.

The ultimate example of pop culture gone awry, it's an African-American touchstone of the 1980s, the hairstyle that in the Bad Hair Hall of Fame ranks alongside mullets and beehives. It's a hairstyle that has prompted jokes and movie subplots and caused a superstar to nearly lose his head.

It's a hairstyle that is still -- believe it or not -- being worn by a few intrepid souls undeterred by memories of Michael Jackson's curl catching fire while he was filming a Pepsi commercial in 1984.

The jheri curl is not something a lot of us are proud of. It's a skeleton in our proverbial hair closet. We jheri curl survivors have old school and family photos in dusty albums and rickety cardboard boxes, not to mention the oily locks we snipped, sealed in plastic bags and tucked away for posterity, praying no one ever finds out.

"It's gross," said Katrina Hayles, 24, of Houston. "I think it was one of the most horrible things to happen to black people. In order to look good, it has to be all greasy and drippy. And if you don't put anything in it, it'll look like a really bad afro.

"You really can't win with that hairstyle."

But that didn't stop millions from sporting the style in the 1980s, lured by trendsetters such as Jackson, rapper Ice Cube and actor Billy Dee Williams.

"If Beyoncé went out and got a curl, everybody would get it," Hayles said. "I would probably think about it. If it were that big a part of popular culture, maybe I'd think about it again. My hair is braided like Beyoncé's because she got it and it looked good, and that's why I did it."

Hayles, to her credit, admitted having once worn a jheri curl.

Many wouldn't admit that much.

We asked readers to share their jheri curl stories. We expected thousands of people to flood our mailboxes, overjoyed at the prospect of sharing their tales of the curl.

We got a dozen entries.

That's cool.

We know who you are.

And so does everyone else.

Pretty, pretty hair

Clifford Fields couldn't do a thing with his 'fro. Slap it up, whip it, rub it down. Oh, no. Nothing worked.

His answer? A jheri curl.

Dates got interesting.

"It made a lot of women jealous," Fields said. "They would tell me that my hair was prettier than theirs. Well, that's because I was going to the beauty shop every two weeks."

Yikes.

This was back in the mid-1980s, when Fields was living in Killeen. He eventually married a beautician, a woman who "experimented on me" with different hairstyles.

Fields, now 48 and a Houston resident, used to have what could be called a supercurl: packed down and stretched past his shoulders. His look was definitely high-maintenance. When he returned every few weeks to the beauty shop for "touch-ups," he'd give specific instructions: Use little rollers on the sides and top, big rollers everywhere else, especially in the back.

A jheri mullet.

"I would be out in public, and a lot of women would touch my hair," Fields said. "They thought it was a wig. A lot of people thought it was a wig."

It was one of those long, drippy curls. Hair dripped so much he had to keep a towel in his car just in case. Fields said his hair dried out easily, so he kept bottles of moisturizer and conditioner in his car.

"It dried out all the time," he said. "It dried out when the wind blows, it dried out when the sun went down, when the sun came up. It was always dry. So I had to keep it moisturized, which is why I had to carry all that stuff with me."

Which is also why the hairdo has been mocked by comedians and in movies. The late Robin Harris, known for his biting, blunt urban humor, took aim at curl-wearers in one of his famous stand-up routines. Harris joked that people who wore jheri curls were easy to find. They left a trail. All you had to do was "follow the drip, follow the drip."

The 1987 cult film *Hollywood Shuffle* -- director Robert Townsend's satire of blaxploitation movies -- featured a villain named Jheri Curl who had hair so drippy that when he turned his head, everyone in his wake was saturated.

Eventually the detectives got him. How? They took away his moisturizer.

One of the better-known jheri curl references in pop culture is from *Coming to America*. The 1988 film starred Eddie Murphy as an African prince living incognito, trying to win the heart of an upper-class girl whose dad wants her to "marry well." His competition? The heir to a hair-moisturizer empire who carries around bottles of hair gel and whose head regularly ruins pillowcases and sofas.

Fields can relate.

At a dinner party one time, he rested his head against the wall -- and left an oil spot.

"I don't know what happened there. I didn't moisturize it right or something," he said, laughing.

Curled and proud of it

Why wear it?

What's the point?

It's "easy to manage," say those who still wear the style.

"People say it's out of style, but I say it's not out of style as long as I have it," said Ida B. Bowie, 71, a retired

postal worker and Hitchcock resident. "They're not as popular as they used to be, but they're definitely not out of style."

Bowie, who also worked as a substitute teacher, said she was teased about her hair, especially by curious -- and often cruel -- kids.

Bowie said she perspires a lot, and a curl is easier to manage than other hairstyles. Jheri curls, she said, have evolved. They're less wet and messy and don't require as much maintenance as before.

"These days, they can get wet," Bowie said. "I can walk in the rain, and it doesn't bother me one bit. It takes on all kinds of moisture. And you don't have to worry about all that stuff dripping onto your clothes."

Still, Bowie isn't one to take chances: She sleeps with a towel on her pillow.

Back up for a minute.

Where did this style come from? Who created it? What's the appeal? What's the point?

First, the basics. The jheri curl is, to put it simply, the addition of chemicals to hair conditioner and shampoo. The chemicals curl the hair, resulting in Shirley Temple-like

locks. To maintain the look, the hair has to remain wet, or moisturized.

Keeping hair moisturized meant drenching it with conditioner at bedtime, then sleeping with a plastic bag over your head. These days, as the style has become shorter, all that's required is a little moisturizer in the morning.

Other names for the jheri curl were California curl, s-curl, carefree curl, luster curl and luster silk.

The style was created in the late 1970s by Jheri Redding, a Chicago-based entrepreneur and stylist. Redding went on to create Jheri Redding Products, a company that specialized in ph-balanced hair-care products. The company later was sold to Conair, the billion-dollar corporation. (Redding died in 1998 at the age of 91.) Cynthia Odniran, owner of La Fleur Beauty Salon in southwest Houston, said she sometimes gets five or more customers a week seeking a Wave Nouveau, a drier, more stylish version of the curl.

"A lot of people don't like the activator and moisturizer," Odniran said. "They don't like that wet hair. That's why I think it's shorter now. People don't want to be in here all the time, getting their hair curled. They just want to get up and go."

Hayles, who earlier described the curl as "gross," said her mother "forced" her to get a jheri curl in the fifth grade. At one point, she, her mother and her father had the same hairstyle.

"Kids at school were saying, 'Follow the drip'; I couldn't go anywhere without being teased," she said. "I begged my mother to take it out."

Hayles said there was a time when both of her grandmothers and several aunts, uncles and cousins had jheri curls. Somewhere, she said, is a photograph from a family reunion of the entire family wearing the curl. That photo will remain hidden, never to be seen again.

She hopes.

A friend once discovered a photo of her with a jheri curl and nailed her.

"She said, 'I can't believe you used to have a jheri curl. What's wrong with you? That's so tacky.' "I think it's a little embarrassing (to admit to having had a curl)," Hayles said. "I can't say why. Nobody wants to be the butt of a joke. The photos have been buried for a long time. I told my mom not to give out photos of me with a curl. It just doesn't look good. To me, it's not very becoming -- on anybody."

She blames Jackson (we blame him for everything, don't we?) for popularizing the curl. The stringy curl was Jackson's trademark style for most of the 1980s, until the hair-blazing incident.

Houstonian Vivian Ross is very clear about whether she'd go back to the Dark Side.

"Oh, no-o!" Ross said. "I wouldn't go back there for anything."

The 55-year-old Ross said she was turned off by the curl after losing nearly a full head of hair during a jheri-curl processing fiasco in the early 1990s. A beautician had created a way of processing the jheri curl in half an hour instead of two hours and wanted to try it on Ross.

Mistake.

"She did one side of my hair, then did the other side," Ross said. "It was really fast. But when she took the rollers off, my hair started falling off. She said, 'Oh,' and I said, 'Oh, what?' Then she told me my hair had been overprocessed."

Ross left -- the shop and the hairstyle -- and never went back.

She doesn't buy the argument that the style was easier to manage.

"The smell was awful, and it messed up my allergies," Ross said. "Instead of me controlling it, it was controlling me. Anytime I went to someone's house, I sat straight up. I didn't want to have to get my money out and pay that person for their sofa. It was a big, drippy hassle."

And when she sees people wearing the style these days?

Tsk, tsk.

"When I see them, I know they just don't know what else to do with their hair," Ross said. "I feel bad for them. Now, if it's drippy, I might be the one standing behind them laughing."

Fields still has his curl -- somewhere. After chopping off his locks, he put them in two plastic zipper bags and gave them to his mother, who still has a curl and is dubbed the Jheri Curl Queen by friends and family.

Fields isn't ashamed of his walk on the wild side.

"If somebody asked me if I'd grow it back, I'd do it again in a second," Fields said. "I'd do it just to see how I'd look at this age."

And to see whether his friends would say, "Follow the drip, follow the drip."