

The revolution will wear a dashiki

How a 1960s Harlem couple popularized Afrocentric fashion and built a community where black power thrived



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The New Breed fashion boutique in Harlem, 1968. (Yale Joel/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images)

In August of 1967, in a cozy apartment on Sullivan Place in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, Mable Benning began designing a garment that would symbolize a

radical shift in black American politics. Two years after the assassination of Malcolm X, and eight months before Dr. King was gunned down on the second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel, in Memphis, Tennessee, there was a feeling of fear, anticipation, and panic about the state of so-called race relations in America. While legislative gains had been achieved through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a younger generation of black Americans were embittered by the racism they'd experienced, and disillusioned by the country's futility and hypocrisy in waging the Vietnam war.

But in that apartment in Brooklyn, what was simply an African print tunic with a scoop-neck, kangaroo-shaped front pocket and two additional pockets beneath the waist would soon define a generation transfixed by the possibility of internationalist and anti-imperialist revolution and the existence of Black Power in America. It was called the dashiki.

According to *Ethnic Dress in the United States: A Cultural Encyclopedia*, the dashiki can be traced back to West and East Africa, where it was worn as a light tunic that offered protection from the sun. Other iterations of the dashiki can be found in the Dogon burial grounds in southern Mali, dating back to the 12th and 13th centuries. The word *dashiki* originates from *dansiki* in the Yoruba language (commonly spoken in Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Ghana), which refers to a vest with short sleeves, commonly worn by working men. Dashikis made their way to the United States in the early 1960s, when members of the Peace Corps who volunteered in regions of West Africa brought them home as souvenirs.





Eldridge Cleaver sporting a dashiki while exiled in Cuba, 1969. (Lee Lockwood/The Life Images Collection/Getty Images)

The idea to mass-produce the dashiki came from Jason and Mable Benning, a young black couple living in New York City. As a black man, Jason Benning yearned for affirmative messages about his history and culture. He decided to quit his post as a professor of Negro history at Queens College in 1967 to start an Afrocentric fashion company called New Breed Clothing. While Jason was in charge of business operations, Mable, a seamstress, designed and made the dashikis. The couple enlisted the talent of other black designers and public figures like Howard Davis, an established shoe designer, William Smith, a clothing designer, Em Bryant, a former New York Knicks basketball player, and Milton Clarke, a New York City Youth Board administrator. “The Breed,” as it was commonly called, was determined to put Afrocentric fashion on the map in America.

In January 1968, the Bennings purchased an old brownstone on the corner of West 147 Street and St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem as the company’s storefront. Black youth, influenced by the messages of Black Power from Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks, would flock to the New Breed and purchase the uniform of the socially conscious. In an interview from the time with PBS, Benning stated that the company’s mission was “to create a nation of citizens of the world” where they could “free every person in the world who is enslaved.”

Howard Davis, a professor of footwear design at the Parsons School of Design and one of the two surviving members of the original New Breed Clothing, tells *Timeline* that Benning found him through word of mouth and wanted to have the most talented black designers working for the brand. “I was probably one of the few African American shoe designers at the time,” Davis says. “And when Jason asked me if I knew anything about clothes, I said I did, and I was involved in the New Breed from the time we had our store on St. Nicholas.” He knew that he couldn’t miss the opportunity to become part of what he was sure would be an historical venture. “I just had this feeling I had to be part of it.

When Jason told me what he wanted to do with the Breed, I remember thinking, Yes, yes!”



Dashiki fashion advertisements from Ebony magazine in the 1970s.

In a 1969 interview with the newspaper the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Benning defined the two principles of the New Breed as “freedom and economic independence for the black man.” In its early days, the company received a \$20,000 loan from the Negro Industrial and Economic Union (now the Black Economic Union), which helped it get the early prototypes of the dashiki produced. According to Davis, Burlington Mills Fabric donated unlimited materials to the company, allowing it to incorporate different colors and fabric in the dashiki. “I always say one of the best advertising tools in fashion is word of mouth,” says Davis, who’s designed footwear for Michael Jackson and made Muhammad Ali’s costume for Oscar Brown Jr.’s Broadway musical *Buck White*. “Eventually people were asking, ‘Who are these New Breed guys?’ and we opened our factory in Brooklyn [in 1969].”

From the time the New Breed began manufacturing garments in their four-story red brick factory in Bedford-Stuyvesant, they received interest from black American

celebrities like James Brown, Sammy Davis Jr., and Bill Cosby. Brown and Davis gave seed money to the company to further its business. Eventually, the New Breed went on to establish boutiques in Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., partnering with retailers like Sears and Bloomingdale's to distribute the dashiki to mainstream consumers.

But their storefront in Harlem, with its racks of multicolored dashikis, photos of Afro-clad men and women, and an array of handsome African masks, remained a popular meeting place for black activists, politicians, celebrities, and ordinary people looking to join the wave of Afrocentrism. Valarie Benning Thompson, daughter of Jason and Mable, was 11 at the height of the New Breed's popularity. But she remembers the atmosphere at the storefront and factory as being "a hub of activity" where a collaborative spirit prevailed. "Most of the children that came out of that have now gone on to become creators of something themselves," Benning Thompson says. "We grew up in the factory, and also a lot of the time we'd be in the [fashion] shows that [our parents] would do. When they'd go out and do performances, we were the ones who modeled the clothes and did the photo sessions. So that's what's our childhood was."

Aretha Franklin, a family friend of the Bennings' and a frequent wearer of the New Breed's designs, was always blaring from the speakers of the Harlem storefront, along with numbers from Miles Davis and Stevie Wonder. As Davis recalls, "New Breed wanted to be to fashion what Motown was to music." He believes the company's decline in the late 1970s coincided with a lack of retail and marketing experience, as well as the demise of the Black Power movement. But he remains proud of what the company was able to accomplish at a time when there were few people championing black American fashion. "I've always believed African Americans were the fountainhead of fashion," Davis says "I think Jason's initial idea was genius, because it influenced so much of what we see in American fashion today."

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