

“I See You Shining: Reflections on Southern Reflections”

Written by Alexandra Jane

“There is a light that shines, special for you and me.”

The Light, Common, 2000

Through the car’s passenger window, a golden smile spreads and stretches toward a raised solo cup, three waving red-tipped fingers, and a wrist wrapped in stacks of silver bangles. The slight jingle carried in the space between them are the only notes that sound. This is a Black southern greeting in passing. This is the scene of a love story where accessories set the stage and recite the script. This is embellishment as dialogue. But what is being said?

In “Black Brilliance: The Language of Jewelry in Black and Southern Culture,” photographer Will Jenkins closely examines this conversation, leaning in to listen and translating for those who may be unfamiliar.

From the late 1970s through the bling era of the early 2000s and beyond, jewels and other bold embellishments on Black bodies have come to be known as markers of status and association. From doorknocker earrings to nameplates, waist beads to anklets, Cuban links to pinky rings, these accents ask: “Do you see me? Do you recognize who and what you’re witnessing? Can you identify to whom I belong? Can you tell where I’m coming from?”

While southern cities have adopted many northern jewelry trends, the Black American South has a specific relationship with jewelry, particularly gold teeth plating. Originating as a common way for formerly enslaved communities to restore deteriorating smiles due to lack of access to dental care dating back to the early 1900s, this form of adornment holds deep cultural significance. Southern rap culture, featuring artists such as 8Ball & MJG and Juvenile played a pivotal role in popularizing this ornamentation. They offered a mirror to neighborhoods across

Houston, Atlanta, Memphis, Jackson, Mississippi and throughout the Carolinas, resolutely affirming white tees and gold grills as appropriate everyday attire through music videos and live performances. The trend later evolved, incorporating diamonds, platinum, rubies, and other gems, which elevated its cost and delineated new lines of social positioning. Some sought out custom sets of tops and bottoms, while others opted for imitation versions, placing mail orders from the back of Vibe magazines and hoping for the best.

As southern Neo Soul stars emerged, such as Erykah Badu, cowrie shells, glass stones, and beads began to mark their own new affiliations, following the legacy of the rock and soul eras of the 1960s and 1970s. These culturally rich adornments not only serve as aesthetic embellishments but also carry profound symbolic meaning. They become powerful tools for self-expression, allowing them to convey their spiritual beliefs and ancestral connections through stylistic choices, thereby fostering a deeper sense of pride and identity.

Through the lens of Will Jenkins, Black southern embellishment becomes a revelry of cultural resonance, each piece a testament to resilience, creativity, and the enduring spirit of a people whose history reverberates in every shimmering bead, polished stone, and gleaming gold accent. When attuned to the frequency across the images featured in Black Brilliance, you can hear the clink of chains meeting on a southern stage when the mic is cut, the refrain of metal bracelets that keep time with the double dutch rope, the echo of ancestral metalwork worn 'round necks, wrists, and ankles. This collection dials you into the sounds of a living history. A Black, brilliant southern symphony. Come closer. Can you hear it?