

The digital Harrington. Reflections on subcultures and jackets in the age of technomagic

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Abstract

The Harrington Jacket is a longstanding sartorial feature of various youth and musical 'subcultures' or 'tribes' in the United Kingdom. This article considers exactly what the Harrington is (as will be seen, not a straightforward issue), and how the term 'Harrington' came to be applied to it. The Harrington is then used to illustrate some important points about British working-class subcultures in general, and some points are made about the specific line of subcultures the jacket has been a 'fetish' for. The impact of the internet on the jacket and its world is then examined, and some points are made about 'authenticity' and its role in subcultures. The role of the internet in presenting a counter-narrative to that generally accepted is the final issue considered.

Keywords

Harrington | Fetish | Authenticity | Fashion | Subcultures



In the world of youth and music related subcultures in Britain since the mid-1960s the 'Harrington' jacket has played a huge role as a 'fetish'. (We can simply take this an object attributed with inherent value by a group, aside from any practical or monetary consideration.) For several different subcultural groups – we will go into this below – in this period the Harrington jacket has been a marker of membership in what Michel Maffesoli has called Tribes (Maffesoli, 1996). So to start: what is a Harrington? And why is it called 'Harrington'?

The 'history' that 'everyone knows' is that the Harrington is 'really' a Baracuta G9 jacket (See Fig 1 below). At a pinch, the slightly different Baracuta G4 is also acceptable. The "G" stands for golf: these jackets can be used if you are playing golf, although it is not advisable in Britain, because the jacket is not really waterproof. Baracuta, originally a Manchester company run by the Miller Brothers, John and Isaac, commenced making these jackets in 1937.

They started to be called the Harrington in 1965, when John Simons, then running his Ivy Shop in Richmond, a suburb of London, noticed that the character 'Rodney Harrington' (played by Ryan O'Neal) in the American soap opera "Peyton Place" was wearing a G9. He put the item in the middle of his shop window with a handwritten note "The Rodney Harrington Jacket", and the name stuck. In an interview with Simons, when Cedric Bardawil asked "The Harrington Jacket, how did you start that?" John Simons replied:

I found it in Baracuta. A friend of mine was working there, they were making the jackets for the States as well as for here. At the same time Peyton Place, the series was on TV and Rodney Harrington wore that jacket in it. It started off with me writing a ticket for our window, "The Rodney Harrington Jacket" then after 6 months, got a bit lazy and wrote "Harrington Jacket". It became a word for a jacket, now it doesn't need an explanation, it could be in the dictionary to describe a cotton casual jacket. (Bardawil, 2018: 195)

It may seem almost sacrilegious to slightly disagree with the man who named the jacket, but there are some distinctive features to a Harrington.

It has a two-button collar - this marks it off from the rather similar 'Bomber' jacket. The Baracuta Harrington has a lining in Fraser Tartan, and an 'umbrella' back yoke. It also has rather distinctive front diagonal pockets with a single button closure. Its traditional colours are Natural, Navy Blue, Red and Green (see Fig 1 for the Green). Note that the Baracuta is now very far from being the only Harrington on the market, a point we will return to but which is probably the root of Simons' "Dictionary" comment.



Fig. 1 - A Barracuta G9 Harrington (Photograph: M.Tyldesley)

So why did the “Harrington” become a ‘fetish’ among subcultures like the mods, skinheads, suedeheads and ‘soulboys’? Or to use the terminology of some of those involved, why did it become part of ‘The Look’? It is important to pick up on a point in the interview with John Simons. He noted that Baracuta were making the jackets for the US market as well as for Britain. Peyton Place, where it was seen on the character of Rodney Harrington was an American “soap opera” that was immensely (if briefly) popular in the UK. The jacket had also been worn by Elvis Presley in the 1958 film, *King Creole*. Steve McQueen was also frequently seen in the Harrington – there was a cover shot of him in one for *Life* magazine (July 12th, 1963), and he wore a navy-blue Harrington in the glider scene in the film *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968).

Why is this American connection important? In his important book *The Soul Stylists: six decades of modernism – from mods to casuals* cultural commentator Paolo Hewitt quotes James Ferguson: “In this country [the UK] working-class people don’t take things from the middle classes, they take them from America and then they twist it round. Which is why no one can work out where The Look originates from.” (Hewitt, 2000: 89)¹ In some ways this is a key premise of Hewitt’s book: in the introduction he mentions a sort of stream of British tribes (he says cults): the Soho Jazzers, Mods, Skinheads, Northern Soulers, Soulboys and Casuals². These are the Soul Stylists of

¹ Hewitt’s book mixes his own commentary with ‘witness statements’ from people who ‘were there’ – for instance, John Simons and presumably James Ferguson. If an objection is raised in the case of 1950s “Teddy Boys”, note that this involved a working-class subculture appropriating upper and not middle-class English styles. Even here, though there were possible North American influences as well (the “Zoot Suit”).

² Most of these subcultures are either well known or easily followed up. However, Northern Soul is a very distinctive British – northern British perhaps – phenomenon. The manager of the Soul City record shop in

his title. He notes: "Within this extended family, the most enduring and fertile relationship is the one that links British working-class fashion to contemporary American black music. Time and time again this combination produces something unique and exciting." (Hewitt, 2000: 16)



Fig. 2 - Bar Italia, Soho, London: locus of many of the subcultures discussed.
(Photograph: M.Tyldesley)

If we return to John Simons for a moment, his shop was not called the **Ivy** shop by chance – the sartorial style he was inspired by and wished to sell to young British executives was the American Ivy League style (perhaps best exemplified by Brooks Brothers). He did not sell it to young executives – he sold it to the members of these subcultural tribes instead. Incidentally, as the interview with Simons also makes clear, he was also personally inspired by and listened to jazz. So much so that he

London, Dave Godin, an important commentator on soul music, noticed in the late 1960s that Northern football fans bought different records when they were in town than the stock that was selling to Londoners. He started to talk about "Northern Soul" and the term stuck. It developed a "canon" at clubs like the Wigan Casino, based upon soul music with a heavy beat, but which had not adapted to the style changes (eg Funk) of soul music in the mid to late 1960s. See the Appendix to this article for a personal discography. Godin also coined the term "Deep Soul", but that is another story. See Appendix for some details on these two genres of soul music.

took saxophone lessons and played in bands. (Bardawil, 2018: 187)³ We can see two of the streams in Simons' imaginary – American Fashion and American Jazz – come together in a sort of fusion with the cover of Miles Davis' *Milestones* album and the iconic lime green button-down shirt. (Bardawil 2018: 190)

So, the Harrington is, in a sense, a part of a British post-World War 2 cultural phenomenon, in which aspects of American popular cultures are incorporated into British working-class popular cultures. The irony here is, of course, that a British clothing item was reincorporated in this way as an American item. Such are the vagaries of these processes.

The internet has changed the world of the Harrington in important ways.

Technomagic has worked its spell, and as we will see shortly, this has changed the whole scene. What is Technomagic? We use Susca's definition here:

technology no longer manifests itself as pure panoply of instruments with which to solve problems, accomplish tasks and act on the environment. It takes the form of a technomagic, capable of fostering the communion of communities around communications, icons and other fetishes. (Susca, 2022).

Prior to the internet the way 'into' subcultures and their stylistic markers was a murky process of personal connections and vague hints that occasionally found their way into the 'mainstream' media. I recall in 1985 buying my copy of Dexys Midnight Runners' third LP "Don't Stand Me Down".⁴ Like just about everyone else who bought the LP I was speechless at the clothing they wore on the cover and in the publicity shots for it. In an interview with a music newspaper at the time I learned from frontman Kevin Rowland that they were wearing Brooks Brothers' clothes, and he went into the sort of history that Paolo Hewitt covered in his book years later. He added that he, like others of his generation, had first come across this look at the Ivy Shop in Richmond. Taking this as my cue, one afternoon in mid-1985 I wandered around Richmond asking anyone who would give me the time of day if they knew where I could find John Simons' Ivy Shop. No-one could help. Of course they could not. John Simons (mentioned by Rowland in the article, I think) sold up around 1978/9 and then re-opened a shop under his own name in 1982 in Covent Garden, central London.⁵ He later moved to near Baker Street, where the shop is today. I was looking in the wrong area all together.

³ Note that he also talks in the interview about film, modernist architecture and art and defines himself as a "modernist" not a mod. (Bardawil, 2018: 204)

⁴ Dexys Midnight Runners were a British 'new wave soul' band with a sound based fairly heavily on a sort of combination of Stax and Northern Soul, with an attitude derived from the punk they had played previously. Indeed, they had done cover versions of Northern Soul songs on their LPs and elsewhere. Their first 2 LPs were "Searching for the Young Soul Rebels" (1980) and "Too-Rye-Aye" (1982). The band is still in existence, with an LP/CD out in July 2023 and a British, Irish and European tour scheduled for the autumn of 2023.

⁵ Bardawil, 2018: 19.





Fig. 3 – John Simons' shop today (Photograph: M. Tyldesley)

Jason Jules, who wrote a film about Simons⁶ is quoted in *The Guardian* newspaper about going into the shop in Covent Garden:

I remember seeing all these shoes – Florsheims, Walkovers, Sebagos,” Jules says. “The quality of these things I'd only ever seen in films. This was pre-internet, so I didn't know these things actually existed (Welch, 2018, online).

This is a tremendously important insight into the new age we live in with the internet. Jules is – in effect- saying that things are now only real if they are digital, and on the net. This, surely, is the working of Technomagic. As Susca put it:

It's that experience is less and less an individual phenomenon than a collective and connective one. I don't experience it if the other person isn't there to make it a common story. It doesn't matter that Google, Facebook or Microsoft are devouring our existences transformed into data and commodities (Sadin, 2015) by betraying the societal impulses that animate digital sociality. What matters, for the users in question, is the paradoxical pleasure of being connected to others, even depending on the lives of others (Susca, 2022).

So, if you do not believe me when I tell you that there is a cultural phenomenon called 'the Harrington Jacket', well then, go away and 'Google' it. My point will be

⁶ *John Simons, A Modernist*, Mono Media/Garmsville, 2018. Available as DVD.

proved and you will be spending a lot of time reading your screen. This is now the context for the Harrington and the subcultures that it is a fetishistic item for. If you are interested in the Mod subculture after reading this article, your starting point for further research might very well be to go to <https://www.modculture.co.uk> and a little searching around the site will reveal their Harrington buying guide, as well as much more on many aspects of the subculture.⁷

The Harrington today can be seen as either more diverse or more exclusive than ever following the working of Technomagic. Let's start with exclusivity. Now that the inside story of the jacket is told on hundreds, if not thousands, of websites, tweets, and other places on the internet, it might be suggested that Baracuta⁸ have cashed in. A Baracuta G9 now costs upwards of £340 (392 Euros approx.) on the official webshop of the brand and at many retailers. (Suede versions cost £580, which is 668 Euros approx.). John Simons' shop sells them at that price, as do other retailers. Discounts are available on the internet, but they still cost around that price in general. In 2023 Great Britain – the land of the 'cost of living crisis' – this is a substantial cost. The jacket was never cheap, but at this price it is likely to sell only to two classes of buyer: the rich, dabbling in fashion or trends, or serious members of subcultures for whom the cost of a 'fetish' might be seen as part of their commitment to their tribe. I would suggest that without the internet and its spreading of the 'legend' of the Harrington, Baracuta would not be able to sell the jacket at this price.⁹

The diversity of the Harrington comes in the fact that today if you want a Harrington you do not need to buy a Baracuta. There are many varieties on sale, at a whole range of prices. If you want to dip your toe into the world of subcultures, you can do so at a price compatible with the straightened budgets of most Britons living through today's inflationary era. If we take Modculture's guide to the Harrington, they list a number of alternatives.¹⁰ The most expensive alternative is the Fred Perry Harrington.

At time of writing this retails for £160 (184 Euros approx). This jacket has some cachet in itself, as some mods favour the Fred Perry brand, and so the Fred Perry Harrington has its own 'fetish' like appeal in some circles – in this it is perhaps alone among the non-Baracuta Harringtons. Prices go downwards as we search through the options. Fashion guru Patrick Grant's interesting Community Clothing brand sell a British made beige Harrington for £139 (160 Euros approx.): note that the dearer Fred Perry is made in China (Fred Perry also do a slightly more heavyweight one at £250 – 288 Euros – that is made in England.) Brutus sell one at £69, but this is available discounted on the web at around £30. (80 Euros/35 Euros approx.).

⁷ See also: Weight 2013. This is perhaps a more historical exploration.

⁸ Owned since 2012 by Italian company WP Lavori in Corso, who opened a Baracuta store in Milan in 2016.

⁹ It is worth noting that unlike even some 'upmarket' clothing lines, the Baracuta Harrington is made in the UK. This is likely to be a factor in its price point.

¹⁰ Note that this guide was posted in 2020 and some of the links in it no longer work, prices are outdated, and some of the brands are no longer available (eg John Simons now only sells Baracuta Harringtons, and not his own brand). It is, however, a document of interest for studying a subculture.





Fig 4 – a Fred Perry Harrington. (Photograph: M. Tyldesley)

“Fast fashion” brand Matalan sell something they call a Harrington – it lacks many of the key features identified above- for £32 (37 Euros). If you are happy to take a chance you can find new unbranded ‘British made’ Harringtons for £13.99 each, dropping to £11.75 if you buy 4 or more (16 Euros/14 Euros approx.) on Ebay. In fairness these actually look reasonably like an actual Harrington (or at least the pictures do), and at that price if you take a chance, you have not lost an awful lot if it doesn’t quite work out when it arrives. With the working of Technomagic the Harrington has exploded upwards into a high-end luxury item and downwards into the dismal world of ‘fast fashion’, with its aura of exploitative labour practices.

As indicated towards the start of this piece, ‘everyone knows’ that the authentic Harrington is the Baracuta G9. We have the word of the man who invented the name, John Simons, for that. In the last few years however Technomagic has conjured up an alternative. The story of a different original Harrington has started to appear on the web. London company Grenfell, using their own Grenfell Cloth, designed to be wind proof but breathable, brought out an all-weather Golfing jacket in 1931. According to their webpage, this was “later to become the Golfer and Harrington styles.”¹¹ According to the same webpage one of the first Harringtons was presented to the then Prince of Wales, the notorious King Edward VIII, not something that is often mentioned in chronicles of the mod subculture. So, there is, according to this line of argument another authentic Harrington: the Grenfell Harrington. It is still made and available. On the Grenfell website you can buy one for

¹¹ See <https://grenfell.com/pages/legacy>

£295 (340 Euros approx.). Not quite as expensive as the Baracuta, but the illustrations make it clear: very much a Harrington with all the features and made in London, England.

Would this 'dispute' have existed without the workings of Technomagic? It is hard to say, but as a connoisseur of the Harrington for some time now, it is only recently that I have heard of the Grenfell Harrington, thanks to the web. Interestingly the Grenfell did not feature in the Modculture guide to Harringtons. This rather arcane discussion points to something important. In the world of the tribes discussed here when it comes to a fetish item authenticity trumps price¹². As Susca puts it:

The worship of the various fetishes that underpin the contemporary cultural scenario involves, for each person involved, a high degree of ecstasy and bewitchment. It also results in a consciousness with a connected memory and embodied knowledge that is highly refined. (Susca, 2022)



We have seen how this is the case with the Harrington. For the 'hard core' better to pay £340 for a genuine Baracuta G9 than £13 or so for a cheap but serviceable imitation. The Technomagic of the web is a key factor in ensuring that the enough potential customers of the high-end alternatives of the Harrington are put in touch with the retailers or manufacturers that want to sell to them.

Appendix

Playlist. A personal selection of Northern Soul songs, all available to listen to on Youtube.

Timi Yuro: It'll never be over for me.

Chuck Wood: Seven days too long.

Garnett Mimms: As long as I have you.

Gloria Jones: Tainted Love.

Billy Butler: The Right Track.

Terry Callier: Look at me now.

Ray Pollard: The Drifter.

Johnny Johnson and The Bandwagon: Breakin' down the walls of heartache

Also note that the 'other' Soul genre 'invented' by Dave Godin mentioned above, Deep Soul, can be explored by checking the series of 5 compilation CDs he produced for Kent Records, "Deep Soul Treasures Taken from the Vaults". Vol 1 features Irma

¹² In his article, Susca points to the way that 'reason' no longer directs the senses, but that the senses are invited to think. Surely this is happening here? The 'logic' of neo-liberalism is to buy as cheap as you can – this is how the market 'works'. But these fetishistic items fail to work to this logic. Arguably there is little downward pressure on Baracuta's pricing from their competitors because Baracuta have the authenticity the other brands can never achieve – however good their product. (Susca, 2022)



Thomas's "Anyone who knows what love is", familiar to anyone who has watched "Black Mirror". Volume 4 has Roy Hamilton's version of the 'definitive' Deep Soul track, "The Dark End of the Street". The best version of that song, available on Youtube is:

James Carr: The Dark End of the Street.



Fig. 5 – a Northern Soul badge (Photograph: M. Tyldesley)

Michael Tyldesley
The Digital Harrington

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(Website: <https://johnsimons.co.uk>) (Accessed: 30 June 2023)



