

A VIEW OF WHAT WAS WORN IN THE 1950s

Guidelines Only - July 2010

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this dossier is to help judges when officiating Best Dressed sections at NZARRA rule based competitions. Please be aware that the dossier looks at what was worn in all different settings in the 1950s for example, formal, informal, adult, teenage, female & male.

Judges must remember that competitors should be dressing to the era, going out for a night's dancing and looking to impress their beau or belle. We do not favour any style or penalise clothing that was worn in other parts of the world. We are looking for the best look of the day within the era.

I would like to thank all those who have contributed pictures, thoughts and feedback to the publication and acknowledge the original document that was authored by Jan Morgan and other senior judges in 2007.

Shane Taurima
NZARRA Head Judge



A couple at a New Zealand Rock n Roll dance in 1950

1950 DANCES



The above picture was taken at a formal dance where parents and their young teens would attend. Note the contrasting dress, dance and relaxed attitude of the picture below which would have been taken at a typical rock n roll dance.





WHAT DID MEN WEAR IN THE 50s?

TEDDY BOYS

Smart but outrageous

Stovepipe or Drainpipe trousers, Waistcoat, Drape coat

Sometimes worn with String Tie, Brothel Creepers

Plain bright socks



Teddy Boys made it acceptable for young people to care about what they looked like and to dress for show instead of having work or school clothes and Sunday-best. The trend arose as income increased after the war.

Teddy Boy clothing was drape jackets, usually in dark shades, sometimes with velvet trim collar and pocket flaps; high-waist "drainpipe" trousers, often showing brightly coloured socks.

Favoured footwear was chunky brogues, large crepe-soled shoes, often suede (known as brothel creepers), or pointed boots known as winkle pickers.

Plus a high-necked loose collar on a white shirt (known as a Mr B. collar because it was often worn by jazz musician Billy Eckstein); a narrow Slim Jim tie, and a brocade waistcoat. The clothes were mostly tailor-made at great expense and paid for through weekly instalments.

Preferred hairstyles included long, strongly-moulded greased-up hair with a quiff at the front and the side combed back to form a duck's butt at the rear. Another style was the Boston, in which the hair was greased straight back and cut square across at the nape.

AMERICAN – SMART CLEAN CUT LOOK

Tapered or cuffed trousers

Waist coat, Sports coat

Worn with plain or striped shirt

Wide Tie, two toned shoes, lace up or patent leather (not brothel creepers)



Please note the bowtie worn by Bill Haley as above and also the different bowtie styles below.



EUROPEAN

3 Piece suit, single or double breasted

Narrow, tapered or cuffed trousers

Plain jacket or white sports coat

Long jacket with contrasting trim on lapels or collar

Worn with Bola Tie

Western style shirt with inserts - Romeo Boots, patent shoes



OTHER STYLES

The Teddy Boys drape coat was very popular for those teenagers who wanted to make a statement. Long draped jackets were not that easy to come by in NZ and most had to make do with two toned cardigans, pullovers and sports jackets.

Most rocker males wore dress jackets or sweaters when going to dances. Single or double breasted jackets were popular.

Long line jackets with contrasting Trim on lapels or collar made a fashion statement.



The cardigan sweater seen above at left was a popular style which was used for the "letter" sweater so cherished among athletes.



Most guys in the fifties were conservative. This look was often called "Ivy League" or preppy and was definitely the preferred look if your date was meeting your Dad for the first time.

SHIRTS



1950 Sports Shirts

There was a wide range of shirt styles for men in the 1950's consisting of many designs and utilizing different fabrics. The basic shirt was made of cotton broadcloth or oxford cloth.

Colours usually were basic white, light blue, light pink, pale yellow, light beige or tan.

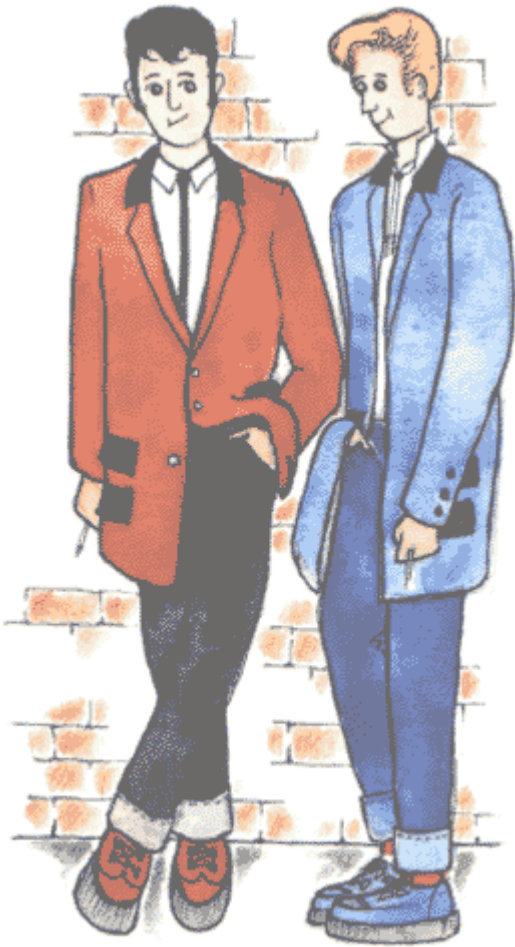


In the mid 50s shirts became a little more elaborate and pleated fronts with French cuffs entered the fashion scene.

In the early to mid 50s medium and long point collars were fashionable as well as short to medium widespread collars. Button down collars especially on oxford shirts were common.

Two toned colour combinations were ultra stylish. Some designs included the body of the shirt one colour and the collar and cuffs and pocket flaps another colour. These were more into the Sport shirt design.

There was also the 'cowboy' look which was influenced by the dominance of the TV Western.



TEDDY BOYS: Smart but outrageous

Stove pipe trousers, Waistcoat, Drape Coat

Worn with: String Tie, Brothel Creepers, Winkle pickers, Patent Leather shoes & plain bright socks

Teddy boys wore tight trousers, narrow ties and long jackets, trimmed with velvet. They were always careful to dress smartly.

AMERICAN: Smart clean cut look

Tapered, or cuffed trousers
Waist coat, Sports coat

Worn with: Plain or striped shirt, Wide tie, Two toned shoes, lace up or patent leather (not brothel creepers)



EUROPEAN: No stage jackets

3 piece suit, single or double breasted



Dudes

Dudes were another kind of dandy who were American in origin. They wore spanking clean white socks, white buckskin shoes, 5 buttoned jackets, trousers with top waist pleats and turn ups. The outfits were often enlivened with coloured bead belts or jazzy patterned hats, with for example polka dots. An exaggerated version of this was favoured by Little Richard.

Beatniks

As the trend for a beatnik look developed, oversized chunky long sweaters with huge cowl collars were worn over slim fitting pencil skirts or slacks with stirrups. The girls usually had a French pleat hairstyle or showed the start of a beehive. Wearing all black was a favourite choice for beatniks.

Bowties



Bowties were worn by males to dances as is illustrated by these photos of Bill Haley. Males who wore bowties were making a different kind of statement to the Teddy Boys.



WHAT DID WOMEN WEAR IN THE 50s?

Women dressed "smartly" in the Fifties. Good grooming and a tailored look were prized. Acting and looking "every inch the lady" was taught virtually from the cradle and wearing a dress was a given.



Summery Floral



Pencil Style

Notice the lady on the left has heels and gloves. This was required to complete the look. The dress, a summery afternoon floral, has what was called a swing skirt. This very popular style had many forms, including the poodle skirt.

The skirt part of the dress to the right above is in the pencil style. The object here is to attain an hourglass, or figure eight, body shape. This type of dress or skirt was not worn by young girls or teens. It was too provocative. The dress also boasts bolero sleeves, which were popular.

Pencil Skirts



Swing skirts



SKIRTS

No wardrobe was complete without at least one pencil skirt, shown on the previous page. The pencil skirt was glamorous and accented a womanly figure. It was only worn by adults.

Remember that women didn't wear pants except for the most casual activities, so you needed a couple of practical skirts.

Also on the previous page on the right is a variation of the swing skirt, modified to make a peasant style of flare.



Poodle Skirt



Pleated Skirts



The poodle skirt. This is the look most associated with the Fifties. And when you saw the "skirt" link, it's what you most expected to find. Yes, young women wore them.

A poodle skirt is a wide swing skirt with a poodle appliquéd or transferred onto the fabric. Poodles were not the only items used to adorn these skirts, they are just the best remembered.

The poodle skirt was worn with wide belt, blouses – stand up collars, $\frac{3}{4}$ to full sleeves, colourful petticoats, booby socks and saddle shoes.

Pleated skirts complimented the tailored look favoured in the 50s. Whether as at left with a broader front panel or at right with the slightly larger flare to the skirt.

Hemlines were to the knee or just below it.

MORE DRESS STYLES



The two ladies are probably off to shop or to lunch. One wears the pencil style and the other a swing.

The blue suit dress on the right features a short cropped jacket, accentuating the hourglass shape.

The pink dress at right is an afternoon tea dress with characteristically Fifties soft feminine touches.



Again, dresses very typical of the day. At left, with or without a short jacket, a breezy look.

Note the wide collars at right which soften the neckline. "Peter Pan" or broad collars were a fixture of the 50s.

BLOUSES

These pictured below are very basic Fifties blouses. Note the soft draping. The first two blouses are simple and timeless. The rolled sleeve was popular, as was monogramming.



Below left, we see essentially the same shirt, one with short sleeves, and one with the kimono sleeve. Both have a soft collar.

The soft feminine look of the puff sleeve blouses at right (below) is in keeping with the Fifties idea of womanhood.



Variations on a theme. At left, the yellow blouse has a shawl collar to soften and flatter. The other three could be worn alone or under a suit jacket. Fabrics tended to be natural so ironing was required.



Halter Top



Different Sleeves

Left - A young woman might wear a halter top in summer. The look was still very discreet and unlike today, no belly buttons are showing.

Right - Showing the many possible sleeve variations of the Fifties.

EVENING WEAR



Soft, feminine, romantic...these words best describe Fifties evening wear.

Middle: two afternoon to evening dresses. The shawl was a common evening accessory. A mink stole was popular for a wrap.

At right is the type of party dress a younger woman might easily wear. Customarily, it was deemed inappropriate for young ladies to wear sexy clothing. But even this "pretty in pink" dress accentuates the bust and waist to advantage.



The harem draping seen above, at both left and right was a short-lived look. Although very stylish at the time, women quickly tired of going out looking like a hot air balloon. In keeping with the femininity of the period this did nothing for a woman's figure.

PARTY GIRLS – TEENAGE GIRLS



ACCESSORIES



Gloves

A lady wore gloves in the Fifties. She was not seen as properly dressed without them. They came in many lengths and all colours. Short white gloves were most commonly worn and women always had several pairs. Why? Because they were the very devil to keep clean!

Scarves

Much can be done with a scarf. Drape it as a belt; wrap it as a halter top; tie it about your head, babushka style. The latter also served well on bad hair days or between trips to the beauty parlour. Scarves were a useful and convenient accessory in the Fifties. Most popularly, a short, brightly coloured chiffon scarf secured many a ponytail!

Other Accessories: Shawls, capes, boleros, belts, bobby socks, buttons, bows, pearls, sweaters, petticoats, satin jackets.



UNDERGARMENTS – PETTICOATS



Women and teens wore girdles and petticoats. They were uncomfortable. They were hot. They were mandatory.

The Fifties came at the end of a long history of trying to enhance the female form to allure men. Curves were essential to getting the all important husband, thus insuring one's economic future and fulfilling the proper career of wife and mother.

Petticoats, which even young girls wore, were often starched with a mixture of sugar and water, which was then hung to dry. Those wonderful "swing" skirts got their rhythm from layers of such petticoats.



MENS SHOES



“Pointed boots” or Winkle pickers

Winkle pickers are a style of shoe or boot worn from the 1950s onward by male and female British rock and roll fans. The feature which gives both the boot and shoes their name is the very sharp and quite long pointed toe, reminiscent of medieval footwear and approximately the same as the long pointed toes on some women's fashion shoes and boots today. This pointed toe was called the winkle picker toe because, in England, periwinkle snails are eaten with a pin or pointed object to get the winkle out of the shell (hence the term "to winkle something out").

Winkle picker shoes were a conspicuous contrast to the brothel creepers worn by Teddy Boys. The male shoes were lace-up Oxford style with a low heel and an exaggerated pointed toe.

OTHER STYLES WORN IN THE 50s



Patent Leather



“Creepers” or Brothel creepers

They found their beginnings in the years following World War II, as soldiers based in the deserts in North Africa wore suede boots with hardwearing crepe soles because of the climate and environment. Having left the army, many of these ex-soldiers found their way to the nightspots of London wearing the same crepe soled shoes. Those became known as Brothel Creepers. In the late 1950s, these shoes were taken up by the Teddy Boys along with drainpipe trousers, draped jackets, bolo ties, quiff and pompadour haircuts, and velvet or electric blue clothes. The brothel creeper was a hit throughout the 1950s and 1960s.



Nothing characterizes the Fifties quite as well as the saddle shoe. Everyone had them. Everyone wore them. They were heavy and rather stiff.



1

2

3

4

1 & 2: The spike or stiletto heel was a fashion fixture. Designed to draw attention to the leg and calf, it was a chiropractor's dream device. Ferragamo is credited with creating the steel support in a synthetic heel which allowed for a very small heel tip. This phenomenon impacted in more ways than one. Hoteliers and other managers of public facilities had to find ways to protect their floors from all those indentations!

3 & 4: These shoes are the type a woman might wear shopping or to lunch. (Much more reasonable)



Flats were appropriate for slacks and were what was worn to school.

The "ballet" slipper was a popular choice and was often worn with little white socks.

HAIRSTYLES – LADIES



If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the ladies above say it all. Fifties hairstyles were soft and curly. Straight hair was out. Short hair was in.

Young women often tied their hair back in a ponytail and circled it with a pretty chiffon scarf. But this would have been for casual activities and rarely for evening.



The Poodle Cut



Pin curling & Rolling



Sandra Dee look came late 50s

MEN

The ducktail haircut. Other than the poodle skirt, no other symbol of the Fifties has captured the imagination and endured so well.

Also called the D.A. or duck butt, the style requires that you comb the hair back to the middle of the head, then with the end of a rattail comb, make a centre part.

Let us consider its contribution to the term "greasers." To accomplish this look, lots of hair grease is required. In this case, a little dab isn't going to do ya. In the 50s, there were no blow dryers to create a look. To make hair stay in a certain style, you had to either spray or grease. Well, real men didn't spray.

The D.A. quickly identified a guy as a rebel, a non-conformist.

Although the ducktail was adopted lovingly by Hollywood to represent the wild youth of the Fifties, the fact is that only a small minority of guys actually sported a D.A.



Ducktail



Crew-cut/Flat Top

Most looked more like the guy at left. The crew-cut was the hair style of choice for many young men.

What's the difference? Herbert Klug explains:

"The crew-cut was one type of cut and the flat top was totally different. In the crew cut, the hair was shaved to an even distance all over the head. The top of the head was rounded. This was also called a "butch haircut". It was the sort of hair cut that one would get if one went into the military. In the flat top, the sides were shaved close, but what made it different was the hair on the top of the head was allowed to grow longer and was then cut off in one level plane so that it produced a "flat top".



Adult men weren't allowed much hair within the confines of respectability. A short, neatly trimmed cut such as that at left was standard.

JEANS

Jeans fashion history was truly made in the 1950s when film stars wore it in movies that the teenagers of the day followed with avid interest. For many years jeans were only used as work wear clothes, but by the 1940s they were considered leisure wear in America.

Once pop and film stars like Elvis Presley, James Dean, and Marlon Brando sported them, they became desirable internationally in the 1950s and are associated with rock and roll and pop music. Later in the 1960s, jean brands old and new were worn universally in the western world.

HATS



Men wore hats in the Fifties. Not sometimes. All the time. There was some variation as to style, but no man was dressed unless a hat adorned his head. Hats were not worn at balls.



WHAT WAS WORN IN THE 50s?

LADIES CLOTHING

Dress

Pedal Pushers

Skirts – Straight, Circle, Pleated, Bell

Halter Neck Dresses

Blouses

Off Shoulder Dresses/Blouses: short, no sleeve, $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeve

Beaded & Bolero Cardigans

Knit Tops with Pearl Necklace

Bolero Jackets/Matinee Jackets

Petticoats, Stockings

Bobby socks, ankle socks

FOOTWEAR

Slip on

Lace up

Patent Leather

Pumps

Stiletto Heels

ACCESSORIES

Neck & Hair Scarves

Wide Belts – Elastic & Leather

NOTE: Although stiletto heels were in fashion, for safety reasons we would prefer ladies to wear flat shoes during dancing.

HAIR

Short, shoulder, long hair tied up

LENGTH OF SKIRTS/DRESSES

Skirts were worn (depending on your height) between the bottom of the knee and mid calf length – NEVER ABOVE THE KNEE.

MEN'S CLOTHING

Collared shirts
Drape Coats with velvet collars
Leather Jackets
Waistcoats (Plain, Brocade)
Suits – single & double breasted
Stovepipe/Drainpipe trousers
Pants with cuffs – wide leg
Bright socks
Ties – string, narrow, western
Knitted, Wide 3"
Bowties

FOOTWEAR

Boots/shoes
Winkle pickers
Brothel Creepers
Lace Ups
Patent Leather
Romeo Boots (Short Elastic Sides)

ACCESSORIES

Cufflinks, Tie pins, Top Pocket Hankies

NOTE: Because Saturday night was a big night, men didn't wear jeans. They would not have been allowed into the dance hall with jeans on. The same goes for T-shirts and sneakers/sandshoes.

HAIR

Short Back & Sides
Crew Cuts
DAs (Ducktails)
Slick Back (with and without sideboards)

SUMMARY – Rock n Roll Dress

Competition guide:

For competition dancing, the following rule taken from the NZARNRA Rule Book A states:

A dress code for competitors shall be traditional rock n roll clothing. When standing naturally the lady's dress and petticoat must cover the kneecap completely, that is the crease at the back of the kneecap as well, inclusive of petticoats, which by definition shall be tiered, layered or frilled to enhance the fullness of the dress. In Restricted Sections, ladies have the option of wearing calf length straight skirts.

Polo or t-shirts are not recommended wear for competitions and National Competitions have specific rules – see NZARNRA rule book.

Ankle socks in appropriate colours add authenticity to the outfit. Wide skirts and tiered petticoats are sure to fly up in spins, so full knickers are a must. Frilly lace and matching colours are fine.

Dress materials varied in colour and patterns – floral, spots, checks and plains were all popular. Colours ranged from pale pastels to vibrant oranges and greens. Cottons were popular as they were cheap, shiny materials were rather more appropriate for evening styles, and today's wide range of polyester mixes retain the 50/60s look combined with easy care and no ironing.

Male dancers are encouraged to blend in with their partner, with an appropriately coloured shirt or waistcoat, matching socks can add the final touch. Trousers were generally shorter than today's fashion, so socks are definitely part of the picture.

A drape coat will complete the ultimate English Teddy Boy. American boys preferred sports jackets in checks or plain materials, or baseball/letter jackets in college colours. However wearing any sort of jacket is definitely not a requirement.

Don't be fooled by the western look – it's great for square or line dancing, but the cool cats that went to R&R dances wouldn't be seen dead in brightly coloured shirts with fancy yokes and/or floral ties.

Above all, keep in mind that we are dressing to the era, going out for a night's dancing and looking to impress your beau/belle. For judging at competitions it is the best look of the day within the era.

