

# Lifestyles | Fashion Culture Podcast

## Dandy Wellington Transcript

***[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]***

**[DR. VALERIE STEELE]**

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City. Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

***[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT]***

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

I would say probably more than half of my wardrobe is vintage, but I always mix modern pieces in, not only for the quality and the accessibility of those items, but I feel it's important to find ways to marry what's new and what's old, the past and the present. That's how I see the world. That's how I function in it. And so dressing in that way is sort of a nod to that.

***[GROOVY MUSIC FADES IN]***

I'm Tamsen Young, digital media manager at The Museum at FIT, and this is our special podcast series, Lifestyles. In this series of interviews, I am speaking with people whose distinct expression of style is outside conventional fashion trends. Images of the guest's look is available on the website.

***[GROOVY MUSIC FADES OUT]***

***[JAZZ MUSIC FADES IN AND THEN OUT]***

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

Today we welcome Dandy Wellington. Born and raised in Harlem, New York, Dandy's a band leader, entertainer, event producer, and creative consultant. He has performed with his jazz band all around the world, and as a vintage menswear savant, he's consulted on events throughout the United States, including the recent fashion exhibition, *Superfine: Tailoring Black Style* that was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Dandy's look epitomizes the undeniable cool of the jazz age. He's an impeccably dressed man about town whose signature style has earned him features and outlets such as the *Financial Times* and *Vogue* magazine. Dandy's appreciation for the swinging big bands, elegant parties, and beautifully tailored clothing of the 1920s and 30s make him a certifiable Renaissance man and a true modern dandy. So, thank you for joining me.

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Thank you for having me.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

So, can you describe what you're wearing today?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

What I'm wearing today? Well, you know, it's always interesting to figure out where to start. Do you start with the most obvious thing, which is the suit?

I am wearing a two-piece peak lapel two button suit that's also a belted back and has pleats. It's from a brand called Thomas Farthing in London. And it has a very subtle geometric weave throughout it. So it may be navy, but there is quite a lot of dynamic to it. Under that, I'm wearing this waist coat, a double-breasted tan waist coat made by Alexa Figuerres of Winterling. And then I'm also wearing a bangle striped black and white dress shirt that also has a contrasting tab collar from ProperCloth. This is also a French cuff, which allows my vintage D cuff links to show off. Under that I am wearing a medallion, a blue, red, white and blue or a blue, white and red. Hm? The order matters.

**[DANDY LAUGHS]**

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

... medallion tie which is vintage. On my head I'm wearing a newsboy or Applejack cap, which is tan, so that ties into the tan of the waist coat. And then on my feet, I am wearing button boots that are brown and tan, from a great company called American Duchess, a company that I have my collection – my shoe collection – that's called Harlemology.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

You're also wearing a red carnation. Is that a real flower?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

No, I'm wearing a red carnation, which is a fabric carnation from the legendary New York company M & S Schmalberg, which I mean has been making fabric flowers for I don't know over a hundred years. And so that I stay on time, I also have an Apple Watch on a pocket watch situation that is in the pocket, you know, with my logo as a fob here.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

That pocket watch is fabulous.

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Pretty good.

**[DANDY LAUGHS]**

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

So would you say that this look is similar to how you dress on other days?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Yeah, this is very similar to how I dress. Every day that I leave the house, I am certainly figuring out my life at home. Sometimes I dress this way. You know, you never, I just don't feel comfortable walking around the city or the world without being as well-dressed as possible.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

How would you describe your distinct style?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

I would describe my style as a bit of 1930s does like a little bit of a mix of vintage and modern, you know. There are lots of vintage pieces within my wardrobe. I would say probably more than half of my wardrobe is vintage, but I always mix modern pieces in not only for the quality and the accessibility of those items, but I feel it's important to find ways to marry what's new and what's old, the past and the present. That's how I see the world. That's how I function in it. And so dressing in that way is sort of a nod to that.

It also is a beautiful marriage with what I do for a living. The music that I play is music from the 1920s and 30s that's mixed in with tunes that I have written that are in this style. So being able to take that history, whether it be on my clothing or in the music or, you know, connected to this beautiful city that I call home and have called home for my entire life. It's all connected.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

When you wake up in the morning and you're going to get dressed for the day, do you have a vision for the whole look or do you start with a shirt that you feel like wearing or the suit? Do you have an order or is it just random?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

When I wake up in the morning, deciding what to wear is sometimes very difficult. You know, especially if I don't have a task that I am dressing around. I'm not just walking out into the world to do nothing. I do love my city, but if I'm going out into the world to explore, that's the activity, you know? So I have to know why and where. Dressing is an occasion but that occasion is filled with destinations. So dressing for that is important.

I would say that the weather of course plays an important role. Listen, I don't like rain. So the moment it rains, I'm putting on those knee LL Bean wellies that I have that are like hunter green and not even...they are for hunting ducks not for walking on you know runways. So it's just practical at that point.

But there always has to be a hat and the shirt is the foundation. It's the first thing that comes on. So if you don't have a good shirt, which used to be underwear, historically, you can't build on anything. You have to have something to build on.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

I have heard you have a lot of hats.

**[DANDY CHUCKLES]**

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

What other elements must go into your style?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Yeah, it has to be a hat. That's the bit of punctuation at the end of the sentence. I have a lot of hats. One hundred plus. Whether that be fedoras, bowlers, top hats, straw boaters, caps, berets.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

Do you ever not wear a hat?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

I never not wear a hat unless I am being coerced into it in some way that I would rather not.

**[DANDY LAUGHS]**

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Yeah, if I'm not wearing a hat, I'm definitely not happy about it.

**[DANDY LAUGHS]**

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Or I'm sleeping.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

So, it sounds like you acquire your clothing through a variety of ways.

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Yeah.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

A little bit of vintage shopping. Some things are custom made. Do you make anything yourself?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

I don't make anything myself. I'm very fortunate to know a lot of incredible makers and I take a lot of pride in celebrating those people, celebrating those makers whether they be from the past or in the present. I mentioned Alexa Figuerres, the amazing maker of clothes and costumes. So yeah, I always like to celebrate the makers, whether they be a small brand like Thomas

Farthing, which has been dropping incredible collections inspired by the Old West, the 1930s in England in different parts of the country or jewelry makers that I'm able to work with. But then also, there's just nothing like a beautiful vintage piece. There's nothing like it.

### **[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

How long have you been dressing in this manner and what shaped its trajectory?

### **[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

I've been dressing in a sort of classic style in one way, shape or form for most of my life. Growing up there was definitely an emphasis on the special times, traditions whether it be big family meals, or of course going to church on Sunday, going to theater and concerts, and that's when you dressed up. So that element of it was very important. My sense of music and art and Black culture and all of that is very much formed by my mom. And her mother was a tailor and a seamstress in Jamaica. And so that sort of appreciation and care for style and getting dressed and and and putting it on, you know, was brought to me from an early age.

But in terms of vintage, elements of it, definitely when I was in middle school, those things were coming in here. I had an uncle that had a bunch of vintage ties that just gave them to me. And it was my first sort of glimpse into what that could be. But of course, I grew up looking, you know, uh, listening to Duke Ellington and watching Fred Astaire dance and the Nicholas Brothers and listening to the Mills brothers. So, you can't help but see the style, you know, Louis Armstrong and you know, his style is extremely underrated even as you know, he was thought of as kind of a frumpy country boy, but no, Lil Hardin made sure he dressed well when he got to Chicago. And so, that style definitely informed me.

But in terms of real vintage and the scene and my place and understanding in it, after college, a good friend of mine named Gin Minsky, who is a tap dancer, burlesque performer, sword swallower, fire eater, and one of the best vintage dressers I know, a very dear friend. We went to NYU together and I was a teacher. I was sort of helping to run this sort of dancers, choreographers alliance that she was a part of and so I was one of the choreographers and teachers there and so she knew my style a little bit. She knew who I was and saw what I was doing and in college it was very much experimental. It was a mix of being in conservatory and having to dress like a dancer and then wanting to dress up for those days when I didn't have to sweat all day.

And then years later, I started to bring a little bit more vintage back into my life as I spent time in nightlife and changed and adjusted and lived in the city more and understood it. And as I started to bring in the top hats and bring in the detachable collars and things like that, she was like, "Yo, there's a whole world. There's a whole scene of people that dress this way, that hang out in this, that live this fully, and I think you'd be into it."

And that was my entry point into the scene. And a different kind of permission to live fully this way, to dress fully this way. I mean, that per of course that permission had always been there.

I'm a New Yorker. Like, this is the city where style is loud. It is present even in these days you know.

**[DANDY LAUGHS]**

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

But you can see lots of style and be inspired. So I would say it was Gin Minsky and probably around 2010 is when I was that's how long I've been dressing this way. 2010.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

Does the scene have a name?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Ah! This is a great question. I mean I think it's just that the scene is colloquially called the "vintage scene." It is made up of many different scenes, whether that be the scene of car collectors, some of whom are here and in New Jersey, but many many are in LA. Swing dancers, burlesque performers, of course, jazz musicians, clothing collectors and people that are sometimes known as the loungers because they always love lounging, lounging in that style. cocktail lovers and makers and people who really dig into the history of it, whether it be tiki culture, whether it be early cocktails of the 1920s that date back to New Orleans.

There's a lot of different collections and corners of what could be known as the vintage scene. It connects to, of course, historical dressers who are going even further back, you know, 1400s and forward and I would say what is vintage? Vintage is 1890s to I guess the 1970s, if we want to include the 1970s, but I mean they're doing it. They're doing it.

Yeah, it's a big scene. And the great thing about New York is that New York is the largest concentration of all of those scenes together in the closest proximity because of course we have our five burrows. It's a chaka block. We're all here, you know, one of the great public transportation systems in the world. And so it allows us to connect. You will go to an event and you will see all of those people that I mentioned. Whereas in LA, it's just too spread out, you know.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

That makes sense. Yeah. And also, New York is full of historic places.

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

That's right. Yeah. It's it New York is a place where there is no...there's a wealth. There is a wealth of beautiful historic buildings, histories that connect us not only to the buildings that we walk by and walk in every day. The train system that connects us, but also so many of the icons that inspire us. Whether they be you know, people that were on the silver screen, people that were adorning the amazing stages that we have or just everyday New Yorkers who filled neighborhoods and fought for a place to live that they could call home.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

So, what does having this distinct style mean to you? I read that you call yourself a style activist.

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Hm, yeah. Of course, I dress for myself. You know, I dress because this brings me joy, but it also connects me to my culture. It connects me to Harlem, where I was born and where I live: to my people, Black people, AfroCaribbean people, who have time and time again fought for and found a way of fully being themselves no matter what. The style of the 1920s and 30s, it resonates with me because that was a time, especially in Harlem and in Black neighborhoods, you know, all across the north and many parts of this country where people could be fully themselves. Definitely in Harlem, you know, I mean, to be able to walk down Lennox Avenue and feel free, free enough that you could show out and adorn yourself, not only in what you had on, but what was possible. Style is possibility. Style is resistance. It's saying that you can, and you will and because you're dressing you should. You know, for me, it's an affirmation of what I want to be in this world and the people that I always want to honor. And so that's a part of that activism.

And it, you know, it's personal. It's connected to but it's also connected to the people that I love that are dear friends of mine. And the idea also behind vintage style not vintage values is that we look back not to go back, but to move forward. We have to know who has come before us. We have to allow ourselves, give ourselves a space to be inspired by them. So that we can step forward in style.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

I love that. What challenges do you face in fashioning your look?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Hmm, well, I think the challenges I face in fashioning my look, fashioning myself, are, you know, sometimes it's inspiration. The world's a messy place and sometimes it takes really blocking it out and diving into what has resonated with you in the past and what you know is a is a point of powerful joy to help you adorn yourself to put on that armor in order to wade into this interesting sea of life that we have. But of course when it comes to vintage, there's not that much of it anymore. It's not like there's none of it. There is vintage. I just recently went to LA and there was tons of vintage out there, amazing vintage dealers. So, you can find great vintage, but that's often the challenge. You know, there we all have our, not to be Captain Ahab about it, but we all have our whales that we're chasing. Uh, you know, the perfect top hat, the just the most beautiful detachable collar. Oh, a belted back suit that is just...back stuff. I just want like pleats and pockets and goodness. That stuff is hard to find.

**[DANDY CHUCKLES]**

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

How about linings? Do those matter?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Oh, you know, the linings sometimes matter. I mean, they're often for me, so it's not, you know, I don't... Linings are good. Linings are good, but what's going on on the outside?

**[DANDY CHUCKLES]**

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

You're a performer. You're a musician. So, what relationship does this style have to your creativity, to your work?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

That's a good question. Thank you for the question. My style is very much connected to the work that I do. I am a band leader, event producer, and much of what I do is within the vintage vein. You know, I'm with my band. I'm performing 1920s and 30s music. Um, 40s sometimes. And I could do it dressed in any way. Sure, I could definitely do it because the music does speak for itself. But there is something about putting this on, right?

In honor of all those things I've said, in honor of my culture, in honor of those greats that have come before me that continue to inspire me. Fletcher Henderson, Andy Kirk, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Noble Sissle, Billy Strayhorn. There's a whole... Nat King Cole... there's a whole host of cats who are just inspiring. So to dress for this fully, it brings it all together. And I'm also honored to produce quite a lot of events that give people that permission. My Easter Egg Strut, which is one of those events, an annual event that is sort of a very unofficial afterparty for the Easter Parade of my creation, of my own making. And it's a place where errorless elegance can reign supreme, where folks of all stripes can come together and dress and be and listen to music and meet and just be in a safe space with each other.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

My final question today is, do you have any insights about personal presentation, about being fashionable, or a life of wearing vintage that you'd like to share with our audience today?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Sure. I think having personal style, real personal style, that resonates with you separate from outside influence. Personal style can open up doors. It can help you to connect with others. At the end of the day, you have to be a good person. You have to create an environment of welcome and kindness and neighborliness. That's just being a human being. But style allows you to be fully yourself in this world.

If you are someone who loves incredible makeup, that style, that's part of it. If you're someone who loves to dress in the 1930s or 1940s style and you don't have the clothes, that red lip will save you. That vintage tie will do it. That's the first step. Building it is a different thing. But aspiring to it, finding a way to connect to it is a beautiful thing.

My career would not be the same. I would not be in the rooms that I was able to be in that I have the honor of being in if I didn't dress the way I dress. Not because I don't have the ability to be there on my own merits clothesless. No, not clothesless. That's weird.

***[DANDY LAUGHS]***

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

You know, not that I don't have the merit or ability to be in those rooms wearing, I don't know, cargo shorts or jeans or something else, but because I am showing up fully as myself, authentically and honestly me. And so that part of it is out of the way. I don't have to worry about being fully myself. I am fully myself. So now I'm creating space for the opportunity, the conversation, the connection, all these other things. When the plane is going down, remember, you have to put on your oxygen mask first before you can do it for others. So you have to be fully yourself. You have to be present and proud and joyful of who you are in order to bring that joy to others.

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

Thank you so much for sharing your Lifestyles with us today, Dandy.

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

You're welcome. Thank you very much.

***[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]***

***[DR. VALERIE STEELE]***

If you like what you hear, please share your thoughts on social media using the hashtag fashion culture.

***[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT]***

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

Do you have any insights about personal presentation, about being fashionable, or a life of wearing vintage that you'd like to share with our audience today?

**[DANDY WELLINGTON]**

Always eat ice cream.

***[DANDY AND TAMSEN LAUGH]***

**[TAMSEN YOUNG]**

I concur!