

Pet Shop Boys | As a new book celebrates their music and style, the pop duo talk Mark C O'Flaherty through 40 years of pioneering looks

It's 40 years since the Pet Shop Boys released their debut album *Please?* From day one, Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe made it clear they were brand more than band: an arch pair of cool Noël Cowards with a keyboard. They knew about art, graphics and the nuance of clothing. Their deadpan irony, costumes and live shows designed by Derek Jarman and Es Devlin made them the Gilbert & George of pop. Now, an epic discography goes hand in hand with a timeline of imagery that incidentally documents changes in menswear over the decades. Much of it — including shoots by Eric Watson and Robert Mapplethorpe, as well as stills from videos shot by Bruce Weber — is showcased in a new book by Chris Heath with Philip Hoare, *Pet Shop Boys Volume: The Complete Visual Record*.

From the mid-1980s onwards, record companies frequently employed stylists to assemble racks of Gaultier and Westwood for their acts. Lowe and Tennant dressed themselves by studying the streets. "It was the time of the sports casual cult, which we were obsessed with," says Tennant, who is talking to me via FaceTime. "I was into playing tennis at the time," says Lowe. "I wore Sergio Tacchini and Fila. I got on a train one day from Liverpool and there were loads of lads in the same stuff, and they were obviously hooligans, not members of a tennis club. I loved it. They had Diadora trainers teamed with bleached Fiorucci jeans. Fashion has never got any better than that."

When it comes to the legacy of the era, fashion curators seemingly can't stop putting on exhibitions of what a handful of art students pulled out of a dressing-up box to wear to clubs. But the legions of teens who followed the codes of football-terrace dress have been relatively overlooked. Which is why early Pet Shop Boys shoots — including the imagery to accompany "Rent", a 1987 single which plays on what a teenage male sex worker might wear having just arrived at King's Cross station from the provinces — are so significant.

Similarly niche is what Lowe and Tennant did with "Paninaro", the B-side to "Suburbia", a year before. It was a tribute to the Stone Island and Moncler-clad Vespa-riding youths in Italy who were a constant presence hanging around outside American-style fast-food restaurants. The year it was released, Valentino Garavani began legal action to try to have the McDonald's next to his HQ in Rome on Piazza di Spagna closed down. The paninaro trend petered out but the McDonald's outlived Garavani.

"We thought those kids looked so cool," says Lowe. "We saw them hanging around a square in Milan and they were so similar to the sports casuals." The lyrics to "Paninaro" demonstrate classic Pet Shop Boys observational wit: "Girls, boys, art, pleasure... Armani, Armani, ah-ah-Armani."



Miyake was always architectural and never dates. Also, it's polyester so you can wash it easily in a hotel bathroom on tour'



'Fashion never got better than that'

Changes in casual menswear and its styling are tricky to pinpoint, but there's perpetual motion. The paninaro kids loved pastels, brightly coloured puffer gilets and yellow Timberlands. They rolled up their denim to ankle length. A decade later they'd be into grunge. "You might think the design of a pair of Diesel jeans stays the same," says Lowe, "but you take an old pair out after a few years, realise how much they've changed, and you can't wear them any more."

Along with streetwear, the first 40 years of the Pet Shop Boys capture key moments in runway fashion. The long black coat that Tennant immortalised in their first music videos was by Stephen Linard, the influential avant-garde designer from the Blitz Club era who died in 2024. Lowe's fondness for Issey Miyake made the designer's circular 1985 dark glasses world-famous when he wore them on the cover of "Suburbia" with a striped top by lesser-known Tokyo label Posh Boy. Along with Hedi Slimane, Miyake has long been their go-to, but they also modelled for Dior under Kris van Assche in 2018.

The day we talk, Tennant is in a black Homme Plissé top: "I remember we were doing a shoot with the great stylist Michael Roberts in 1987, and he'd brought an inflatable Issey Miyake jacket which Chris wore. I started shop-

ping there too, for collarless shirts and those voluminous light coats which look great with a wind machine." Tennant says he stopped wearing Miyake in the late '90s but has been buying a lot from the new IM Men line, which folds flat into perfect geometric shapes like pieces of minimalist art. "Miyake was always architectural and never dates," he says. "Also, it's polyester so you can wash it easily in a hotel bathroom on tour."

Lowe is fascinated by garment construction, whether that's a blow-up Michiko Koshino coat or bespoke tailoring. "I had a suit made on Savile Row at Kilgour just so I could enjoy the process," he says. "But I still wear it for weddings and funerals." Tennant has always gravitated towards suits: "I wore Jean Paul Gaultier for Gibo in the late '80s and early '90s, then moved to Mugler when he reinvented himself around 1990 with the severe collarless jackets, until George Michael and Bowie started wearing them. I recently bought two IM Mens suits."

The Pet Shop Boys have worn wild, high-concept video and stage creations by Gareth Pugh and Jeffrey Bryant but they have never been fashion victims. Duran Duran sailed around on yachts in swanky Antony Price suits, and Bowie commissioned Alexander McQueen to make a tattered union jack frock coat

for his 1997 *Earthling* album as an earnest artistic statement, but the PSBs have a disarming, amiable sense of camp. "I remember being at an awards ceremony wearing Dior denim by Hedi," says Lowe, already chuckling about the anecdote he is about to tell.

"We were presenting something to New Order and Bernard Sumner turned to me and said, 'Even your jeans are pretentious.'" Tennant chips in: "The thing is, Hedi's always done good jeans. At Celine, Dior and Saint Laurent, always cool."

There could easily be an exhibition devoted solely to Pet Shop Boys headwear — from Stetsons, cartoon cone hats and Lowe's BOY baseball hat and silver Miyake swimming cap to the plaid bucket hat he wears on the cover of "So Hard" in 1990. Then there's the JW Anderson quilted bonnet from the artwork for "Leaving" in 2012 and the extravagant orange women's Kenzo hat from the video for "Was It Worth It" in 1990. For a tour in 1991, the duo adopted a Hergé-inspired Thomson and Thompson matching partner look. "We had pink and yellow bowler hats," says Tennant. "I think our use of bowler hats is a



Clockwise from left: Chris Lowe and Neil Tennant, with Lowe in inflatable Issey Miyake jacket; on the set of the 'What Have I Done to Deserve This?' video, 1987; a shoot for 1993's 'Can You Forgive Her?' by Chris Nash; cover of 'West End Girls', 1985; new book 'Pet Shop Boys Volume'

Pet Shop Boys/Krause & Johansen; Cindy Palmato; Getty Images



recurrent British motif. Otherwise, I'd say our style has been more European. When we shot with Mapplethorpe, I think Chris is wearing a Versace leather jacket and I was in Romeo Gigli."

The Pet Shop Boys is an ongoing concern. After 15 studio albums, Tennant and Lowe continue to record and are

touring a greatest hits show, *Dreamworld*, this summer. They still have looks up their sleeve we haven't seen yet, but what would they like their legacy to be? I ask what they'd choose for their "ghost outfits" — the clothes they'd haunt the world for eternity if they knew they were about to die in them. Lowe answers enthusiastically in detail: "I'd want people to immediately

know it was me, so it would be Adidas trainers, Diesel jeans, a fabulous Adidas Spezial jacket, baseball cap and a pair of sunglasses." Tennant pauses for a moment: "It would be... a beautiful black suit with a white shirt buttoned all the way to the top. It's perfect and very me."

'Pet Shop Boys Volume: The Complete Visual Record' is published by Thames & Hudson on April 7

India: And the bride wore white

Wear in the World | Most Indian brides wear red for their big day. Now, some are putting a modern stamp on an ingrained wedding tradition. By Sujata Assomull



This might sound remarkable to western ears, but in much of India, wearing white to your wedding was once unthinkable. Historically, white has been associated with mourning: a hue of widowhood rather than celebration. Traditionally, bridal-wear leaned towards red, a colour symbolising prosperity and auspicious beginnings in Hindu customs. Some regional variations exist: brides from Maharashtra often look to green, while in Kerala a white and gold sari drape has long been part of some wedding dress codes. But until recently, wearing white, even as a guest, would have ensured the wedding was the talk of the town for all the wrong reasons.

Now, younger millennials and Gen Zs are putting their stamp on longstanding wedding traditions. For many, that starts with challenging traditional dress codes. Some brides are turning to shades of white for their reception looks — or even for the actual religious wedding ceremony.

"I used to think it was a rebellious act, but what I've seen in my brides who choose white is that it's more of a quiet confidence," says New Delhi-based Shweta Kapur, founder and creative director of 431-88. The label, founded in 2012, is known for its elevated take on everyday essentials and a relaxed approach to cocktail wear. "They don't second guess, they don't ask for opinions, they just know. It comes from inner clarity. You don't need the noise of colour to make a statement." Five months ago, Kapur launched her first wedding collection with a capsule of 12

pieces to the surprise of many, as bridal-wear had not previously been part of her label's vocabulary. The response, she says, has been strong.

Kapur's own wedding in December 2024 was a blueprint. The multi-day celebrations became a viral moment in India due to her fashion-forward choices that spoke of her minimalist aesthetic, earning her an article in Harper's Bazaar India titled "Designer Shweta Kapur's wedding wardrobe was a masterclass in personal style over bridal clichés".

"I was looking for restraint when I was shopping for my wedding. Being a comparatively older bride in my late thirties, I wanted something that was more me and something I could be myself in," says Kapur. For the *dhol* night, a pre-wedding celebration centred on music and dancing, she wore an outfit anchored around a crisp white men's shirt from her own label with a mirror-work gold skirt by Itrh, enhanced with mirror tassels on the yoke and shoulders. For the *phas*, the wedding ceremony, she wore a Jade by Monica and Karishma custom-made design: a delicately embroidered sage green *lehenga* (a traditional Indian skirt worn with a fitted blouse and *dupatta*, a scarf, the chosen silhouette for the religious wedding ceremony.) For the reception, with 1,000 guests, she chose a pristine white cocktail sari with pearl accents again by her own label.

It was Gen X brides, the mothers of today's brides, who introduced a special "gown function" at Indian weddings, a moment inspired by western red-carpet glamour, giving brides their first chance



Alia Bhatt wore an ivory and gold sari during her wedding to fellow Bollywood actor Ranbir Kapoor in Mumbai, 2022

Left: Shweta Kapur in one of her wedding looks

Getty Images

Wear in the World is a regular column that looks at micro style trends on the ground in a particular city or place. Have you spotted a micro trend? Contact elizabeth.paton@ft.com

to wear a gown during a wedding celebration.

Now, that boldness is being pushed further: shades of white are entering other key celebrations such as the *sangeet* (dance and music evening), the *dhol*, a lively drum procession, and for those making a bold statement, even the *phas* (the sacred wedding vows).

The move towards brides wearing white can be partly attributed to younger generations being influenced by western codes. Many have graduated from universities in the UK, North America and Australia, bringing back a more fluid, less codified approach to occasion dressing. But it mainly reflects the way in which Indian brides are embracing a new approach to dressing: many want something more individual, less prescriptive, and rooted in personal

style rather than tradition alone. "Young urban couples are pretty much making autonomous decisions when it comes to the creative direction of their wedding. It is not just the wardrobe, but the venue and the number of functions," says Divyak D'Souza, celebrity stylist and costume designer. Indian wedding festivities were traditionally dictated by elders and parents.

Part of this shift can be traced back to the pandemic. During the Covid-19 pandemic, weddings shifted from the grand "Big Fat Indian Wedding" to intimate gatherings, which encouraged simpler silhouettes, muted palettes and pared-back embellishments. Brides began experimenting with softer shades, which felt simultaneously modern and respectful of tradition. "People weren't looking to be ostentatious. Everything went more minimal, more demure. Simpler silhouettes, softer colour palettes and I do think that's influenced what we're seeing now," says D'Souza.

This trend has been given validity by celebrity brides, notably when actress Alia Bhatt wore an ivory and gold sari (that commentators preferred to call chai-coloured) by Sabyasachi Mukherjee at her intimate Mumbai wedding in 2022.

Four years later, Shades of white are no longer outliers but fixtures across bridal collections today from couturiers such as Rahul Mishra, who reinterpret tradition through softer palettes, intricate embroidery and lighter silhouettes — clothes a bride can dance the night away in. White (or shades of it) is no longer a sign of rebellion but rather a recalibration.