

Vogue

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## The Wide Awakes Are the Civil War–Era Activist Group Making a Comeback in Bold, Joyful Style

by Brooke Bobb



Cape designed by Dionne Fraser-Carter and Steve LockePhoto: Tom Taylor

In 1860, two diametrically opposed foes ran against each other for the president of the United States. The candidates were Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, and John C. Breckinridge, a Southern Democrat. The election took place during a time when the country was deeply divided over slavery, territorial borders, and workers rights. After Lincoln was elected, the Civil War began.

Fast-forward to 2020, and we're on the precipice of another contentious, terrifying election with two deeply divided sides of the country—one that puts God and country first and the other that puts human liberties and social justice first. But aside from drawing parallels between the perils of a discombobulated democracy then and now, there are also similarities between the two eras when it comes to advocacy and activism.

Tomorrow, an 1860s-era youth organization called the Wide Awakes will make a timely return. The Wide Awakes were, back in that day, a diverse group of young Republicans who supported Lincoln and the abolition of slavery. They represented a youthful, hopeful generation that believed strongly in democracy, civil liberties, and basic human rights. It began with five store clerks who marched behind Lincoln after a rallying campaign speech he gave in Hartford, Connecticut. They provided him with a parade and torch-lit escort, and they wore oilcloth capes in order to protect their clothing and skin from the dripping wax of the torches. The movement then gained momentum in the Northern states, and on October 3, 1860, 10,000 Wide Awakes marched three miles through the city of Chicago. By the time Lincoln was elected, the group counted some 500,000 members.

The Wide Awakes of 2020, however, look a little bit different. Cofounded by the artist Hank Willis Thomas, photographer Eric Gottesman, Michelle Woo, and Wyatt Gallery, the group includes hip-hop king Fab 5 Freddy, the Roots' Tariq Trotter, and artist José Parlá, among many others. The new Wide Awakes group was born out of Thomas's political organization For Freedoms, which he founded just before the election in 2016. Since December 2019, they've been planning this year's October 3rd march from their home base in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The processions are set to take place around the country, beginning at locations that include the Brooklyn Museum, Times Square, the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Alabama Contemporary Art Center, and more. In addition to spotlighting these starting points for tomorrow's nationwide marches, the 2020 Wide Awakes website also provides information for those who would like to start their own activations in their local communities.

Members of the founding group in Brooklyn will pay homage to the original Wide Awakes and their protest fashion by wearing bold, handmade capes designed by a range of BIPOC designers. These designers include Michelle Obama's New York City-based tailor Christy Rilling and artist Wildcat Ebony Brown. The vibrant capes are a far cry from the oilcloth styles of centuries past: There are kaleidoscopic prints, colorful embellishments, and symbolic nods to the designers' heritage and the history of the Wide Awakes movement.

Below, the designers explain the meaning behind their creations and how tomorrow's march can inspire a new generation to throw on a bold, beautiful cape and fight for freedom with joy.



Capes designed by Anya Ayoung-Chee and Kambui Olujimi Photo: Jeff Vespa

All four of these cape designs were inspired by carnival culture. The intent was to blur the lines between ready-to-wear clothing and festival wear. My label, Wyld Flwr, was born from a love for both Carnival and Burning Man, as well as the idea that fashion is a conduit for one's radical imagination. Joy as an act of resistance is at the root of the Trinidad Carnival. For me, this new iteration of the Wide Awakes advances the movement beyond traditional protest to a form of protest well-known to Caribbean people, where we boldly proclaim our freedom through acts of celebration. —**Anya Ayoung-Chee**

I hope the presence of all the cloaks in the October 3rd procession will inspire a sense of unity, not through uniformity, but through multiplicity. The many fabrics and designs mirror the variety of people and ideas that come together to shape the Wide Awakes and the larger social movements of our times. —**Kambui Olujimi**



Capes designed by Coby Kennedy Photo: Jeff Vespa

The original Wide Awakes wore their capes as protection. Today, we face so much danger in the public sphere, through institutional persecution and overzealous police tactics, that I want my cloak designs to embody a forward-thinking look and functionality of military and medical protective garments and equipment. In my own life as an artist, internationally active in life situations that can “get out of hand” and have been called “unconventional,” this kind of clothing and equipment has been essential. Whether it's being accosted by throngs of unhinged riot police in Central Park or fighting my way out of an angry mob in central Cairo, my fashion choice of elegantly brutal clothes and equipment has always played a part in making it out in one piece.

Retroreflective material is something we've played around with, art-wise, for a while. It glows with direct light, and when I mix it with vibrant colored patterns, the dual effect can be mesmerizing. Thematically, I'm lining them with vibrant African wax prints which is a callout to our past and future, and at the same time is interestingly problematic in terms of their origins involving Indonesia and the Dutch. —**Coby Kennedy**



Capes designed by Dionne Fraser-Carter and Steve Locke Photo: Tom Taylor

I chose to use black faux leather, inspired by the unofficial uniform of the former Black Panthers. I also chose denim to symbolize the all-American blue jean, which symbolizes unity. The various Ankara prints are used to acknowledge African heritage and the struggle for persons of color who are most often disenfranchised and politically and socially suppressed. We are living in an unprecedented socioeconomic climate to which millions of people of all backgrounds have been affected. Historically though, it has always been the descendants of the diaspora who have had to fight for their voices to be heard and their existence to be acknowledged as valuable.

—**Dionne Fraser-Carter**

The fabric I created has an image of Fred Hampton, who was a key member of the Chicago Black Panther Party and was murdered by the Chicago Police Department with the assistance of the FBI during their COINTELPRO program. The blue is to mimic police light and the image of Hampton is tessellated to make him readable from any direction. He is there to protect the wearer from state violence. —**Steve Locke**



Capes designed by Paula Crown Atelier and Christy Rilling Studio Photo: Andrew Walker

The imagery is directly taken from Paula Crown's work. The main black and red print is taken from her Kinematic series. An artwork process that represents a moment in flow. It begins from an investigation into liquid graphite and water, two materials that, like oil and water, do not mix. The poured liquid graphite flows in water, creating a dynamic and ephemeral composition, and two disparate materials achieve a harmony and balance. The resulting forms are photographed and printed in this case on a woven iridescent silk faille and double silk charmeuse. Interwoven into the fabric is Lurex, which has a watery and metallic appearance, mimicking the original artwork process.

In contrast to these two dark prints, we interspersed a more recent painting from Paula's Aspen Map series, which she made in her Aspen studio during the pandemic. The series is based on trail maps in Aspen that are abstracted, layered, and rotated to reveal new forms and patterns. Digital and analog drawing and painting techniques reveal what is present in a novel way. As we orient ourselves to space, our perceptions are easily distorted by point of view, time, and memory. Maps often have their own viewpoint and biases. Her reconfiguration is a reminder that we must always question the information presented to us and ask what has been left out of the story. The resulting works are puzzle-like compositions that are both adamantly flat and invitingly deep.

—Christy Rilling (cape designed in collaboration with Paula Crown)



Capes designed by Wildcat Ebony Brown x theGoodGood Community Photo: Benjamin Lozovsky

My cape tangibly connects the past with the present. The silhouette is based on one of my favorite pieces in my vintage collection. In 2007, I rescued the entire wardrobe of a jazz violinist named Angela “Angel” Creary. The universe literally plopped it into my lap. I’ve wanted to reproduce it for years, and this procession anniversary was the catalyst and the conduit for its resurrection.

My cape is an escape. Within it lies the magic of the universe and the force of Mother Nature. When worn, wings will unfold and you will start to fly, fueled by divine feminine energy. Your third eye will open and never again will you underestimate the power of fringe.

People respond to beauty and as artists; we fully understand that and use it to convey our equally beautiful message of radical love and the upliftment of humanity. —Wildcat Ebony Brown



Capes designed by Wildcat Ebony Brown x theGoodGood Community Photo: Benjamin Lozovsky