

TRACKSUITS OF ST MARYS

In 2003 I was working in St Marys at Chifley College: Dunheved Campus on an anti-violence hip-hop concert which was part of the *Anita and Beyond* exhibition's education programⁱ. Whilst on a tea break in a Queen Street café, I noticed that a large proportion of people passing by were in full tracksuits or parts thereof. This intrigued and delighted me because in the global cycle of fashion at that time tracksuits were in a slump and, as a dancer and lover of hip-hop, I am a devoted tracksuit wearer.

I started to research the garment, finding very little about its material or social history. The computer search engines kept returning me to the Black Power salute protest of the Mexico City 1968 Olympic Games.ⁱⁱ This image resonated with me as a Sydney western line train commuter, as for decade I had passed by a Macdonaldtown mural based on that moment. I remember being struck by the incongruity of that mural – a prominent piece of Sydney graffiti art featuring African Americans. Nevertheless, I admired the gravity of the image and the statuesque grace and stylish look of all three athletes.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Black Power salute protest by American 200m gold and bronze medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos, with Australian silver medalist Peter Norman in support, made a significant contribution to the transformation of the tracksuit from sportswear to everyday/night wear. It very quickly became a uniform for those who identified with the global human rights and civil rights movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, for example counter culture heroes and style mavens such as Bob Marley and Marvin Gaye^{iv}.

Since then the tracksuit has been adopted as the emblematic costume of many subcultures – from jogging and gym movements of the past four decades, to break dancers and radical hip-hop artists of the 1980s. In the late 1990s it became the neurotic plaything of celebrities and high-end global fashion and it endures, well into this decade, as a mass-produced utilitarian clothing option^v.

It seemed that my developing research project in St Marys had collided with a moment, though prized by millions of Americans, was still virtually unheard of in Australia. I felt that the Black Power salute should underpin the *Tracksuits of St Marys* project; the photo presents the tracksuits at a significant moment in its history while the civil rights message and the bravery of the athletes, including an Australian, are surely worth remembering in 2007.

Tracksuits of St Marys developed into a focused study of the tracksuit, the leisure suit, the sweat-suit and their separates alongside a series of photographic portraits of a hard-working and engaged community. In the context of the exhibition I see the tracksuit as a motif for positive action, both physical and political. Yet there is no escaping the irony; whether worn by rich or poor, tracksuits are also a symbol of sloth, corruption and withdrawal of all kinds – physical, psychological and emotional^{vi}. This irony is expressed succinctly in the fact that tracksuits are an accepted signifier for potential criminality; are standard prison uniform as well as standard infants and primary winter school uniform.

Throughout 2005 photographer Harold David and I worked in St Marys, attending community events and mounting free photography, costume, music and dance workshops. Participants were asked to wear their favourite tracksuit in which they were photographed^{vii}. One hundred portraits and two collections of tracksuits were selected for exhibition. The 'action collection;' features seventeen of the tracksuits worn in the portraits, installed as running figures on track. The 'spectator collection', standing in support on the sidelines, consists of garments borrowed from VIPs of the St Marys community and other sport, dance and music stars. The exhibition soundtrack is drawn from the music of the civil/human rights era, and then surveys the music of track-suited musicians to the present. Occupying a unique place in the exhibition is Peter Norman's 1968 Australian Olympic Team track top and personal memorabilia documenting his

sporting and humanitarian achievement in Mexico City^{viii} and his enduring friendship with Tommie Smith and John Carlos which continued up until his sad and sudden death on 9 October 2006.

Representative, expensive, cheap, old school, stylish, misshapen, always appreciated and often cherished, the garments on display and those featured in the portraits demonstrate something of the multifarious and expansive realm of the tracksuit.

“I’LL STAND WITH YOU”

As I came to understand the significance of the Black Power salute, I was proud to discover that the third man standing quietly in the famous photograph was Peter Norman, a young Australian from Melbourne. Peter had been aware of the *Olympic Projects for Human Rights* and of the complex race politics surrounding the USA Track and Field team in the lead up to the 68 Games^{ix}. He was not surprised when, shortly before the medal ceremony, Smith and Carlos asked him to join them in their protest. In an interview after Peter’s death, Smith recalled Peter’s simple response as, “I’ll stand with you”, while Carlos added, “not every young white individual would have the gumption, the nerve, the backbone, to stand there.”^x

With ‘Australia’ emblazoned across the back of his track top and an *Olympic Project for Human Rights* badge pinned to his chest, Peter joined Smith and Carlos on the dais, his humble stance forever promoting the power of thinking for yourself and acting accordingly.

Whilst researching for *Tracksuits of St Mary* in 2005, I became annoyed at how little information was available about Peter’s involvement in the protest. Consequently, I was thrilled to speak to him that year and meet with him in August 2006. I discovered that the three athletes, and their families, had become good friends over the years; Peter had attended several 1968 USA Track and Field team reunions and had just returned from the unveiling ceremony of a major sculpture dedicated to the protest at San Jose State University where he spoke, alongside Smith and Carlos at seminars and special events.

Peter still had his 1968 Australian Olympic team track top in a cupboard and quickly told me that as a member of the Salvation Army in the early 1960s, he had often worn a tracksuit top with the words “God is Love” specially sewn on the back. I was clearly talking to the right man, he gladly agreed to participate in the *Tracksuits of St Marys* project and that agreement has been generously honoured by his wife Jan and daughters Belinda and Emma.

The fact that Australia, a nation which pathologically valorizes sportspeople (and boasts of its unique and morally superior character traits) has failed to properly recognize Peter Norman’s status as outstanding sportsman and humanitarian role model is galling^{xi}. In contrast, the *USA Track and Field Association* have proclaimed that day of his death on 9 October as *Peter Norman Day* in the USA.

Tracksuits of St Marys is dedicated to the memory of the Black Power salute protest and celebrates the strength of character displayed by Peter Norman.

Victoria Harbutt 2007

INTRODUCTION ENDNOTES

ⁱ St Marys is situated 45kms from Sydney with a population of 13, 044 (2001 Census). Dunheved Campus is a secondary school in North St Marys. The *Anita and Beyond* exhibition of April 2003 at Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, was in memory of Anita Cobby, and a response to the spirit of her family and the community outrage at her brutal murder.

ⁱⁱ African Americans Tommie Smith and John Carlos won gold and bronze medals for the USA in the 200 metre sprint at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games. Smith and Carlos were members of the *Olympic Project for Human Rights*, an organization which was encouraging black American athletes to boycott the 1968 Games as a means of highlighting American civil rights abuses. The boycott was called off but Project members were asked to protest individually at the Games instead. On the victory podium Smith and Carlos, bowed their heads as the each raised a gloved fist, as a gesture of power and unity. Silver medalist, Australian Peter Norman wore an *Olympic Project for Human Rights* badge in support of the Americans.

ⁱⁱⁱ A photo of the mural was shown to Smith and Carlos in 2001; both were impressed by the fact that the mural had at that time never been vandalised.

^{iv} The Black Power salute photo was declared by LIFE magazine and Le Monde to be one of the 20 most influential images of the 20th century; ABC television (USA) made Mexico the first large scale broadcast of a summer Olympics.

^v See *Fashioning the 'hood: the tracksuit as a cultural icon'* Vicki Karaminas Page 21 *Tracksuits of St Marys* catalogue

^{vi} in Jim Jarmusch's 2005 film *Broken Flowers* the lead character, played by Bill Murray, wears three different Fred Perry tracksuits in the first 30 minutes of the film; the use of this brand of tracksuit establishes the character's upper middle class status and his stylish but nevertheless "conspicuous consumption" lifestyle whilst his commitment to the garment quickly articulates the depth of his emotional sloth. Prime Minister John Howard's repeated donning of the tracksuit displaying a corporate sponsors logo draws attention to the garment's highly corruptible nature: similarly, fleeting television footage of a track-suited Alan Jones accompanying an injured and wheelchair bound tennis player Mark Philippoussis brings to mid the garments' darker side.

^{vii} Photographs were taken at: St Marys Spring Fair; Encore Historic Costume Group (St Marys Community Centre); Panthers BMX Club Meet (St Marys BMX track); St Marys Community Art Centre; St Marys Primary School; Don Bosco Youth and Recreation Centre, St Marys; Nepean District Athletics Club (Blair Oval, St Marys) a& Chifley College: Dunheved Campus (Nth St Marys)

^{viii} See Paul Jenes, *Memories of '68*, catalogue page 17.

^{ix} For detailed history and analysis see Douglas Hartmann, *The revolt of the Black Athlete. The 1968 Olympic protests and their aftermath* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003.

^x Martin Flanagan, 'Tell your kids about Peter Norman' *The Age*, October 10, 2006.

^{xi} Sadly it has taken Peter Norman's premature death in 2006 to bring his part in the protest to the attention of the wider public in Australia; many people have expressed to me their complete surprise that Smith and Carlos would be pallbearers at his funeral.