# Deborah Carnegie’s archive unveils the ritual behind Black British Saturday‑night style



Before the music arrives, there is the enactment: the hot comb taken from the stove, the last stitch on a self‑made hem, the ritual swapping of shoes and secrets on a carpeted floor. Deborah Carnegie, a London‑based archivist, has spent the past year collecting those moments — photographs, portraits and candid shots that map how Black British women have dressed for Saturday night from the 1950s to the present — and arranging them into a single, living archive. According to Carnegie, the project is less a fashion plate than a social chronicle: a record of preparation, pride and communal performance that predates club lights and DJ booths.

Carnegie assembled the collection through a grassroots research practice: trawling family albums, seeking out nightclub photographers’ negatives and inviting submissions from friends and strangers alike. The work was shown earlier this summer as part of the London College of Fashion’s Fashioning Frequencies programme, a research‑led exhibition that framed garments, images and sound as carriers of memory and resistance. The show at the East Bank has now closed and Carnegie is actively seeking a new venue to make the archive accessible to a wider public.

We met for lunch at Jumbi in Peckham — a hi‑fi music bar and supper‑club‑style venue that, Carnegie says, still functions as the kind of communal space her great‑aunt once ran from the cellar of a south London flat. Speaking over plantain and jerk rice, she told the writer that places such as Jumbi keep Saturday‑night culture alive in neighbourhoods where it has otherwise been pushed to the margins. The venue itself, co‑founded by musicians and curators, emphasises vinyl, Caribbean flavours and community programming — the sort of living context in which Carnegie’s photographs are rooted.

Carnegie’s personal history is braided through the archive. Her great‑aunt, who came to Britain with the generation for whom "Windrush" became shorthand, ran a nightclub below the family home and enforced a strict dress code: you wanted to go down into the cellar, you had to be "dressed up", Carnegie recalls. The arrival of the Empire Windrush in June 1948 and the subsequent Caribbean migration brought a visible sartorial counterpoint to postwar Britain, and contemporary historians and archives remind us that migrants used dress to assert dignity, identity and resilience in the face of discrimination.

The practicalities of that assertion are visible in many of Carnegie’s images: makeshift tailoring, repurposed fabrics and bold colour palettes that owed as much to home interiors and tablecloths as to imported textiles. Museum and curatorial writing on Windrush style notes how Caribbean migrants adapted domestic materials and home‑based dressmaking to craft looks that signalled respectability and belonging. For Carnegie, the often inventive use of material was not simply thrift but a creative refusal to accept the sartorial limits imposed by a society where ready‑made clothes rarely fitted Caribbean bodies.

Hair and grooming recur throughout the archive as both technical labour and cultural statement. Carnegie points to the hot comb’s presence in early photographs — the metal comb heated on a stove being a familiar sight in many preparation scenes — and frames those domestic acts as part of a broader history of Black hair culture. Scholarship in museum collections traces the hot comb’s evolution and ambivalence too: it was a tool of style and upward mobility, associated with entrepreneurs who built early Black hair industries, but it also carried real risks and complex meanings about beauty, assimilation and identity.

The images themselves read like a social history in thumbnail: a bespoke suit on a 1956 wedding day that rejects the era’s bridal norms; a pearl‑necklace and broad‑brim hat outside Wandsworth town hall in the early 1970s; a new mother posing in lemon‑yellow tailoring in the mid‑70s; a 1993 leather‑jacket‑turned‑dress arriving at a gig; friends bound for Notting Hill Carnival in 2001; and a 2023 dancehall‑themed birthday portrait that channels fluorescent organza and luminous wigs. Presented together, they reveal continuities — hair as focal point, head‑to‑toe dressing, the importance of accessories — alongside the specificities of each decade.

Carnegie is deliberate about the archive’s argument: Black British women have long been tastemakers even when they were excluded from runways, magazines and institutional recognition. She points to the diffusion of styles — trainers, oversized hoops, slick‑back buns — that originated in community scenes before being absorbed into mainstream fashion. Curatorial commentary in the Fashioning Frequencies programme echoes this view, positioning diasporic aesthetics as active social forces rather than mere commodities and asking how archives like Carnegie’s can reshape cultural histories.

The project remains openly collaborative and unfinished. Carnegie hopes to find a new home for the photographs where they can be displayed alongside oral histories and sonic material that reflect the full ecology of Saturday night life. As institutions and community projects reassess whose histories are preserved and how, Carnegie’s archive offers a corrective: a people’s record of making, dressing and insisting on visibility, one hot‑combed curl and improvised hem at a time.

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* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive), [[3]](https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/london-college-of-fashion/cultural-programme/fashioning-frequencies), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive), [[6]](https://www.jumbipeckham.com/about)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive), [[4]](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/the-empire-windrush/empire-windrush-caribbean-migration/), [[7]](https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/blog/windrush-style-psychology-identity-resilience/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive), [[7]](https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/blog/windrush-style-psychology-identity-resilience/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive), [[5]](https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/sizzle)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive), [[3]](https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/london-college-of-fashion/cultural-programme/fashioning-frequencies), [[7]](https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/blog/windrush-style-psychology-identity-resilience/)
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive), [[3]](https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/london-college-of-fashion/cultural-programme/fashioning-frequencies)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/aug/15/how-black-women-dress-saturday-night-deborah-carnegie-photograph-archive> - This Guardian feature profiles Deborah Carnegie, a London-based archivist whose photographic collection traces Black British women’s Saturday-night dressing from the 1950s to the present. The article describes Carnegie’s research practice—gathering images from family albums, nightclub photographers and submissions—and situates the archive within her personal history, including memories of a great-aunt who ran a cellar nightclub after arriving in Britain with the Windrush generation. Carnegie emphasises pre-night rituals such as hot-combing hair and home-sewing outfits, and argues Black women have long been tastemakers despite exclusion from runways and magazines. The piece accompanied images from Carnegie’s collection shown at the Fashioning Frequencies exhibition.
3. <https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/london-college-of-fashion/cultural-programme/fashioning-frequencies> - The London College of Fashion’s exhibition page for ‘Fashioning Frequencies’ outlines a research-led show exploring how garments, images and sound transmit memory, identity and resistance. It lists participating artists and projects and describes curatorial aims to reframe fashion as an active social force rather than mere commodity. The page names Deborah Carnegie among contributors, notes dates and venue (London College of Fashion, East Bank) and details associated events, talks and commissions. The description emphasises archival practice, diasporic aesthetics and speculative design, situating Carnegie’s photographic archive within a broader programme that foregrounds community histories, sonic culture and fashion’s political resonances.
4. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/the-empire-windrush/empire-windrush-caribbean-migration/> - The National Archives’ resource on the Empire Windrush provides historical context for the 1948 voyage and subsequent Caribbean migration to Britain. It explains the ship’s route, arrival at Tilbury Docks on 22 June 1948 and the passenger manifests, noting the wide range of origins and occupations among those on board. The page describes immediate responses—temporary accommodation such as the Clapham South deep shelter, employment assistance set up by the Ministry of Labour—and the social and economic challenges migrants faced including discrimination. The resource highlights the Windrush story as emblematic rather than singular and points researchers to original documents and passenger lists held in the archives.
5. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/sizzle> - The National Museum of African American History and Culture’s essay ‘Sizzle’ traces the complex history of the hot comb and heat-styling within Black hair culture. It explains how metal pressing combs were used—often heated on stoves—how their use intersected with aspirations, beauty standards and economic opportunity, and how figures such as Annie Turnbo Malone and Madam C. J. Walker contributed to a burgeoning Black hair industry. The piece contextualises the tool’s painful risks and cultural ambivalence, while documenting technical innovations and patents. It situates the hot comb within broader social histories of grooming, identity, assimilation and creativity across the Black diaspora.
6. <https://www.jumbipeckham.com/about> - Jumbi’s official ‘About’ page describes the Peckham venue as a hi‑fi music bar and restaurant celebrating the sounds and flavours of the Afro‑Caribbean diaspora. Co‑founded by musician Bradley Zero and Nathanael Colours, Jumbi centres a single‑turntable vinyl setup and a curated food and rum‑focused drinks programme inspired by Caribbean island heritage. The site outlines the project’s community focus, event programming that ranges from DJs and live music to supper clubs, and its location in Copeland Park off Rye Lane. The page supports the article’s reference to extant south‑east London African‑Caribbean nightlife spaces that continue to host communal Saturday‑night culture.
7. <https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/blog/windrush-style-psychology-identity-resilience/> - The London Museum blog on Windrush style explores how Caribbean migrants used dress to assert identity, dignity and resilience after arrival in Britain. It discusses the colourful textiles, tropical prints and tailored suits associated with the Windrush generation, and documents how migrants adapted fabrics and patterns—sometimes repurposing domestic materials—and developed home‑based dressmaking and tailoring practices. The piece outlines how clothing signalled respectability and countered prejudice, and how subsequent generations fused African, Caribbean and British aesthetics. The article underlines fashion’s role in psychological and cultural survival, connecting domestic sewing and bold colour choices to a lasting Black British sartorial legacy.