BLACK POWER DRESSING

IN THE '60s AND '70s,
EBONY MAGAZINE FOUNDER

EUNICE JOHNSON CHANGED THE COLOR OF FASHION.
A NEW EXHIBITION PAYS TRIBUTE.

BY VANESSA LAWRENCE
EBONY FASHION FAIR
Presents
The Natural Feeling

Johnson Publishing paid for the venues and local African-American charities—churches, sororities, chapters of the Urban League—were responsible for selling tickets. The company deducted the cost of a subscription to Jet or Ebony from each ticket sale, and the rest went back to the nonprofit, ultimately raising $5.5 million for numerous charities over the years.

As time passed, Johnson upped the ante, adding live music, hand-painted sets, and even more stops, visiting up to 50 cities a year. She was determined to introduce African-Americans to the world from the European runways as well as to the work of America’s top designers. It was not small feat. The Civil Rights Movement was in full force, and many designers weren’t thrilled with the idea of seeing their clothes on black models.

Johnson, however, was up for the challenge. “I would describe my mother as a steel magnolia,” says Linda Johnson Rice, now the chair of Johnson Publishing.

“Shes very intelligent, very persistent,” And, says Johnson Rice, it helped that her mother, a meticulous woman known to color-coordinate her emerald and ruby rings with her Bill Blass and Dior day suit, “looked the part.”

Still, Johnson’s old calls to European designers asking for invitations to their shows were never really well received. “Valentino once told us we couldn’t come to his show,” Smalls claims. But others embraced the opportunity. Emilio Pucci, according to Johnson Rice, was one of the first, even asking Johnson if she could help find black models for his shows. “If you look at some of the photographs from the ’60s and ’70s, you see that Ebony is alone in a sea of white buyers,” Smalls says.

Johnson held a powerful trump card: cash. A lot of it. Unlike the heaps of other charity fashion shows, she was looking to buy, not borrow, purchasing up to 200 looks a season. “We had stacks of checks, and we didn’t care about the balance—Mr. Johnson covered everything,” remembers Smalls, who accompanied Johnson on buying trips and rode the bus with the models for months on end, creating a home away from home in the front seat, complete with carpeting lamp, and fresh flowers.

And Johnson was an incredibly enlightened consumer. One more interested in a designer’s creative vision than the commercial concerns that limit department store buyers and magazine editors. “She always looked for what the people who best understood his work. ‘She was buying the most difficult, eccentric, and flamboyant numbers, often my favorites,’” he says. “She wanted pieces that helped women feel unassimilated, as if by wearing these clothes they were sharing the creative process with the designer.”

Still, each garment Johnson purchased did meet certain criteria: It had to look as good going out as it did coming back. And she loved the idea of a big reveal; she’d often commission a wrap to accompany a strapless evening gown so the model could slowly show off the dress as she walked. That theatricality was central to the Fashion Fair vibe, from the casting of the models to the style of the production. “You had to work it,” says Audrey Adams, who modeled in the 1975 season. “Be fabulous. And if you weren’t fabulous, Johnson would take that out of your way and give it to somebody who could carry it.”

The models, mostly unknown girls who ranged in age from late teens to early 20s, were specifically cast for their strength and presence. And as demanding as she could be, Johnson was highly protective of them. Beverly Johnson (no relation) recalls running into her in the ’70s. The supermodel, who by then had already been on the covers of both Harper’s Bazaar and Harper’s Bazaar, was walking in the fair to walk in free in New York and Buffalo. “Johnson responded, ‘And take the clothes away from the other girls? You have to do 88 cities and ride on the bus with all the others.”

Otherwise you might get to the next mouth opening and that’s the result.”

And it wasn’t just the buying trip; it was an event. “It was a buying trip, a buying trip and a buying trip,” recalls someone staying at our hotel. “We woke up at 7 in the morning, went to the country and then we would be touring around and doing a lot of shopping,” says Rogers, Orleans. “It was like the Olympics.”

While the runways were Johnson’s forte, in 1975, the company finally opened the first of its two-hour stands, a fully dressed and staffed stand. And so began the tradition of the right fashion fair.

At the Ebony Fair, the stands were a mix of all things glamorous. The sandwiches were served on Arapahoe bread, a 100-year-old recipe from the state of Colorado.

John Johnson, co-founder of the Ebony Fair, 

64

Johnson Publishing, founded by John H. Johnson, has been a major player in the world of fashion and entertainment for over 60 years. The company’s flagship publication, Ebony, has been a leader in covering the latest in fashion, news, and culture. Johnson Publishing has helped to shape the fashion industry and has been a voice for African-American designers and models. The company’s founder, John H. Johnson, is a trailblazer in the world of publishing and has been instrumental in bringing African-American voices to the forefront of the industry. The Ebony Fair, one of the company’s most significant events, has helped to introduce African-American designers to the world and has been a platform for showcasing their talents. Johnson Publishing continues to be a leader in the world of fashion and entertainment, and its commitment to providing a voice for African-Americans remains unwavering.
Otherwise you can't do it," Beverly recalls. "I was standing there with my mouth open. Now I realize she was really sticking up for her models—that's respect she had for them."

And it was respect well earned. In the earlier days, the models encountered an even more vicious strain of the racism that Johnson faced on buying trips. Pat Cleveland, who was 14 when she did the fair in 1965, recalls some "haughty" times in the Deep South. "There was a riot outside our hotel. People were throwing rocks with torches and saying, 'We don't want niggers staying in the center of town.' It was horrible. There were times when we had to leave town quickly because we were being harassed by the Ku Klux Klan. Our bus driver was a retired Marine, and he had a pistol and a rifle."

But the shows, by everyone's recollection, were utter magic. Akin to Broadway spectacles in choreography and entertainment value, they were two-hour stage pieces, complete with an intermission. "The models literally danced down the aisles, strutted and glammed, taking off a coat and doing a 360-degree turn and then snatching it over their shoulders," says Rogers, who attended her first show when she was a teenager in New Orleans. "You could just hear the crowd go, 'Ahhh.'" Says Cleveland: "It was like the Harlem Globetrotters meets Cirque du Soleil."

While the fair was gaining a reputation as "a place to be," as Rogers puts it, Johnson leveraged its success to delve further into the universe of style. When she realized her models were having problems finding makeup to match their skin tones, she created the Fashion Fair cosmetics line in 1973. It was wildly successful—Arthra Franklin appeared in the ads—and other companies like Revlon and Avon soon followed suit. Johnson also made special efforts to include African-American designers in her shows, providing less widely known names with a list of fabulousness by association. "You were on the runway with Yves Saint Laurent or Oscar de la Renta, so I think from the perspective of the audience, it put you in the right frame," B. Michael says.

As the Ebony Fashion Fair was becoming increasingly luxurious and fabulous, so, too, was Johnson's life. She and her husband had a house in Palm Springs, just down the street from Bob Hope's, and in their apartment on Chicago's Lakeshore Drive were works by Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Giorgio de Chirico. Perhaps her greatest design statement was Johnson Publishing's headquarters, which she decorated with the interior designers Arthur Elrod and William Raiser. John Johnson loved red, so his office had a crimson leather desk with a matching typewriter. Eunice's office was a sea of ivory, with a sofa anchored to the wall to give the impression that it was floating. Lisa Minnelli, Elton John, John Lennon, and the Jackson family all were treated to elaborate seated lunches and dinners in the orange, yellow, and purple cafeterias, which served up soul food, per John's preference. Johnson often wore ensembles from her stable couture collection and, as a major presence on the Chicago social circuit, also loved to show off her Urago and Lacroix at the opera or the Art Institute. For a dinner at the White House during the Reagan administration, she chose a red Dior gown shot through with gold lucite. "She was never afraid of glamour in any shape or form," Johnson Rice says.

The vision of glamour was quite literally the life force behind the Fashion Fair. When Johnson passed away in 2010 at 95, after having helmed the fair through 2009, the shows passed with her. But now, after a four-year hiatus, Rogers and Johnson Rice have decided to reignite the flame. In the fall, they will debut a new Ebony Fashion Fair, starting with just one or two cities and featuring a mix of archival pieces and contemporary looks. "The goal is, again, a celebration of fashion, of people coming together," says Rogers, who will also relaunch the fair's makeup line. "We are the curators of African-American fashion history, and we're going to continue in that vein."