

AGENDA

A Matter of Taste: Rock of Eye

Outstanding tailoring is all about cultivating an eye for the finer details

By Christian Barker



*Above: The late, great Edward Sexton.
Opposite: Bespoke suit by Kimberley Lawton.*

From Jay Z to the Duke of Windsor, Ralph Lauren to David Bowie, Gianni Agnelli to Miles Davis, the best-dressed men tend to be those unafraid to bend the rules, playing with pattern and proportion, texture and tone. They're the guys who heed Miles' advice: "Do not fear mistakes.

There are none."

Among the most daring sartorial adventurers in recent history was "rebel tailor" Tommy Nutter. In 1969, when Nutter opened his shop on the London thoroughfare, considered the epicentre of classic men's style, his was the first new name to grace

Savile Row in a century. Aged just 26, he was also probably the youngest tailor to ever have his own premises on the Row.

While he had little formal training as a tailor, what Nutter did possess was a brilliant eye for colour, cloth and silhouette. "Tommy had a remarkable ability to throw together disparate things, patterns, materials in a way that seemed both exactly right and irresistible," Lance Richardson writes in his biography, *House of Nutter*.

Lean, angular, flamboyantly flared and voluminous of lapel, the suits Nutter created in collaboration with his immensely talented cutter, Edward Sexton, "represented a culmination of everything modern" happening at the height of the Swinging Sixties, Richardson writes: "everything mod, smashing, subversive, Continental American, queer and camp – combined with a keen fidelity to old-school Savile Row craftsmanship."

Nutters attracted numerous rockstar clients, including Eric Clapton, Mick Jagger (who sported a Nutters suit when marrying his first wife, Bianca), the Beatles (Paul, John and Ringo wore Nutters on the famous Abbey Road album cover), and Elton John (who'd often spend a full day in the shop guzzling champagne with Tommy, ordering 20 or more suits per visit).

After Sexton took over the business in the mid-'70s and eventually went solo, the musical elite continued to seek him out for svelte, unashamedly sexy tailoring. In recent years, he and protégé Dominic Sebag-Montefiore cultivated a new generation of stars, including Pulp frontman Jarvis Cocker, super-producer and songwriter Mark Ronson, and a young troubadour named Harry Styles.

The international sartorial community entered a state of mourning when the much-beloved Sexton died in July, aged 80. Sebag-Montefiore bears the honour and heavy weight of carrying the business forward. "I believe legacies are hard-earned and easily lost," he says. "A reputation is dependent on maintaining the standards that won it. A legacy is kept by pursuing higher standards."

To wit, Sebag-Montefiore says he will focus on keeping craftsmanship at a level that would make the famously exacting Sexton proud, and ensure the house continues producing “clothes that are striking, bold and timeless, that are true to our rebellious roots while staying relevant to the times. We approach what we do boldly and unapologetically, which are true Sexton values.”

One of the greatest lessons Sexton taught him, Sebag-Montefiore says, is that the goal of good tailoring is not to conform to the client's shape but instead, “to create beautiful lines that flow and flatter the body.” This is certainly the approach taken by Kimberley Lawton, an ascendant London-based tailor who cites Nutter and Sexton as key influences.

In a neat twist, when Lawton and former partner Joshua Dobrik held a six-month residence on Savile Row, they were the youngest tailors to do so since Tommy and Edward, 52 years beforehand. “Joshua had previously worked at Edward Sexton so I was like, ‘Oh my God, tell me all the secrets, tell me all the Tommy Nutter goodness, how did they make their flares? How did they cut these lapels – and those shoulder pads?’” Lawton herself had mastered her craft at Huntsman, one of Savile Row's most esteemed, exclusive houses but also among the more conservative.

“As amazing as Huntsman was – and I do thank them so much for the opportunity that they gave me – I did feel restricted there,” Lawton says. “It was fantastic learning about classic men's wear; if you think about Huntsman, you think of the most beautiful, traditional, well-made suits. But their style is not something that's going to turn anyone's eye. That's not what it's about. It's about just being beautifully crafted, a structured suit that someone will look at and say, ‘Oh, he looks nice.’”

Lawton yearned to release her inner Nutter, to make rakish, eye-catching garments with exaggerated roped shoulders and disco-grade lapels. “I really wanted to be a lot freer with my pattern cutting, with my making,” she says. So it was that she set out to build an independent



tailoring business, first in partnership with Dobrik and now on her own. Inspired in equal parts by 1930s Hollywood and 1970s rock'n'roll, Lawton's tailoring is designed, she says, “to give my customers a sense of power, confidence, and passion. I want them to be like, this is my ‘I'm gonna kill it’ suit.”

Initially learning the trade from his father, master cutter Robert Bailey has been in tailoring for some 35 years. He spent seven of those running Huntsman's Asia trunk shows, fitting customers in this region for British-made bespoke garments, before starting his own firm doing the same. (Note: Proper modern-day armour, you'll slay in Bailey's suits, too. Perhaps not on the dancefloor but definitely in the boardroom.)

The term “rock of eye” is used by tailors to describe the skill of sizing a customer up visually, accounting for the client's physical foibles and using artistic license rather than strict measurements to pattern and fit a garment. “You kind of pick it up as you're going along, and you don't realise quite how much you're learning on a daily basis,” Bailey says. “And then suddenly, you're visualising the client in your head when you're working on their clothing.”

Tailors become students of the human form, Bailey says. He can often tell what sports a client participates in, simply by assessing their build and posture. “You can't help but look

at people's idiosyncrasies,” he says. “If you're on public transport or in a queue or whatever, you'll take notice of people's figures. Normal people might just notice pretty girls or pretty boys, but tailors tend to look at people's shoulders and backs and ponder what they would do if they had to make something for that person. It's a little bit of a pastime, for tailors.”

Bailey conducts his Singapore trunk shows in collaboration with The Decorum, which also brings bespoke tailors from Florence's revered Liverano & Liverano into town. Charles Yap, The Decorum's managing partner, says these guest tailors not only take the time to understand local clients' bodies – they also make the effort to understand their mindsets. “Our visiting artisans are truly tuned into Asian culture,” he says. “They spend lots of time in key Asian cities, and connect really well with their clients, frequently building friendships over the extended period it takes to complete a bespoke commission.”

Yap recalls that he once spotted a book on world spirituality in the onboard bag of Liverano creative director Takahiro Osaki. “When I asked about it, he told me that he often reads up about global cultures, religion and thinking so he can better connect with people he meets from all corners of the world.” Turns out, tailors are getting your measure – mind, body and soul. **E**



Liverano's Takahiro Osaki oversees a fitting for The Decorum's Charles Yap.