Masses of shape and flare

The blue-collar brothers who ‘pulled themselves up by the force of their imagination’

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Lance Richardson

HOUSE OF NUTTER
The rebel tailor of Savile Row
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The tailor Tommy Nutter bought his first suit from Burtons for £8 in 1959. He would later recall the brown worsted, boxy jacket and tapered trousers “so often and with such wistfulness that [it] came to seem almost talismanic”, Lance Richardson writes in his absorbing biography *House of Nutter: The rebel tailor of Savile Row*.

Tommy was sixteen at the time and bored with being “an office chai wallah” at the Ministry of Works. His working-class father, Christopher – “a leftover from the Victorian era” who managed the cafe above which the family lived in Edgware – wouldn’t let him go to art college. As children, Tommy and his older brother David hated “all those butch things” they were forced to do, such as Boy Scouts and communal sports. They enjoyed painting their bedroom walls in bright colours, doing fashion shoots (Tommy as the stylist and model, David as the photographer) and sunbathing with their mother Dolly, “a carefree bon vivant”. (The book’s many excellent archive photographs include a portrait of Dolly wearing dark lipstick with a sharp, flapper-style bob haircut.) Their mother was “like a slave” to her husband, the brothers thought; he was “holding her back from reaching her full potential”.

In an act of defiance (“I went against everything to do it”), Tommy later got a job as an errand boy at G. Ward & Co, a tailor’s shop on Savile Row. Here, he saw how clothes could be manipulated as a means of fitting in or standing out. The “Savile Row magic trick”, Richardson explains, is to create a suit that “enhances your real self into heightened fantasy, then presents this fantasy as your real self”. There are many strands in this book, including some charming insights into the bespoke suit-making process. We learn, for example, that alongside your physical measurements, a cutter will write down your “figuration” in a series of covert abbreviations (“DR: Sloping down on the right shoulder”; “RB: Rounded back”; “FS: Flat seat; no backside”; “SLABC: Stands like a broken-down cab horse”). They might also run the shears through their hair to oil the blades slightly when cutting out panels from the fabric.

Round the corner in Soho, a men’s fashion and gay scene was flourishing. During the day, Tommy conformed to the Row’s prosaic tradition; at night, he wore unconventional clothes to the Rockingham Club with David, where Tommy stood out as “a fashionable clothes horse” (he was six foot two, with a 28-inch waist) and they would rub shoulders with Francis Bacon and Quentin Crisp. “There’s been no violence. Savile-row hasn’t been put to fire and sword, just quietly elbowed aside by a lot of under-20s with tiny pointed heads and suede bootees”, the *Daily Mail* reported in 1964. “Savile-row goes on producing beautiful clothes, timeless and built to last forever. But the gimmicks, the bright ideas and new styles which make fashion fizz are produced by and for the mods.”

After nine years as an apprentice, Tommy set up his own tailor’s shop on Savile Row with Edward Sexton, who had been one of the more experimental junior partners at G. Ward & Co. Nothing like it had existed before. Other shops on that street had bronze nameplates and frosted glass, but Nutters, which opened in 1969, boasted extravagant window displays of purple and fuchsia ostrich feathers, champagne bottles dangling from red ribbons, or frescoes of Egyptian ruins. The distinctive Nutters suit added “masses of shape and flare” to formal, classic templates, in particular with the size of the lapels (they were often so wide that they grazed the top of the sleeves) and the materials and colours (a candy-orange trim inside a reversible tweed coat; a grey-and-gold shooting suit; an evening jacket with an art deco shawl collar in white, green and burgundy). The trousers were tight-fitting, though made for people who liked to dance. The overall effect was “an eccentric mix of Lord Emsworth, the Great Gatsby and Bozo the Clown”, *Punch* wrote in 1977. “I usually build the suits around myself”, Tommy told *Men’s Fashions* in a television interview in 1973, wearing a wide-striped three-piece suit with a bow tie. “[They] are a little bit larger than life.”

Peter Brown, who helped Brian Epstein manage the Beatles, and the singer Cilla Black were among Nutters’s financial backers (Peter and Tommy were romantically involved for a couple of years). Part of the label’s success came thanks to the famous people who wore the clothes. John Lennon, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr turned up wearing Nutters to shoot the album cover for *Abbey Road* in 1969; Mick Jagger married Bianca in 1971 in a three-piece eau-de-nil Nutters suit, with a small star pinned to the huge lapel; David Hockney was a regular in the showroom (when a cutter asked how he managed to achieve his rakish look, Hockney replied: “I don’t have any hangers in my wardrobe”); and Tommy created much of Elton John’s image.

Tommy Nutter, Central Park West, New York, 1974

But because of an economic downturn in the mid-1970s, the public’s desire for bespoke was being usurped by improved and affordable ready-to-wear. Some Savile Row tailors merged to protect themselves financially; Tommy, however, tried to expand. Soon after, he fell out with Edward, who took over the shop and steered it in a more orthodox direction. Richardson quotes a hurried note from David’s diary (April 20, 1976) – “Apparently Edward has taken over the Nutter business from under Tommy’s nose” – and speculates about what really happened (there is no official documentation) by inventively quoting from “a chorus of inharmonious voices”: Peter, Edward and several former employees. (The book is largely based on Richardson’s interviews with more than seventy people.) Tommy himself told different versions: he was bored; there were squabbles among the cutters; he was infatuated with a blond, Adonis-like dancer and got distracted.

A year later, he made a comeback by designing high-end ready-to-wear “Tommy Nutter” lines for the menswear brand Austin Reed and a boutique on Dover Street. These sometimes eccentric, tongue-in-cheek suits included a “Rugged Couture” collection with serrated hemlines inspired by *Jaws*, and a “Nautical Look” designed in response to the Falklands War (marine blue, “with an armada of peaked caps angled jauntily”). By 1983, he had opened a rival shop in his own right a few doors down from the original one. Instead of the soft “ski-slope” shoulders that Savile Row tailors were providing, Tommy gave his jackets high, wide shoulders. His ideal silhouette, Richardson writes, was “a capital letter V” – and this is what 1980s fashion became known for. We are also told that while on work experience with Tommy, the young John Galliano noticed that the jacket sleeves were cut in a gentle arc rather than straight; they would later inspire his signature spiral-cutting technique.

There is a lot to celebrate in *House of Nutter*: the history of gay liberation, which Richardson neatly weaves into the narrative; and two brothers, fated for a blue-collar life, who “pulled themselves up by the force of their own imagination”. David went on to become a photographer; throughout, Richardson tries to focus on his life as much as Tommy’s, but it isn’t quite as interesting. Perhaps he made that decision because, as he admits in the epilogue, David came to his apartment almost every week for a year while he was writing – to go through his memories and diaries, and to give him Tommy’s scrapbooks, letters, sketches and photographs; “it became as much [David’s] project as it was mine”. David’s co-operation does yield some delightful vignettes, though. In a letter dated July 8, 1975, Tommy says to his brother:

> Trying hard to think of a new look . . . . The saddest thing of all is an in-between look. Like the woman who plays safe all the time with handbag and shoes to match . . . . I think it is terribly sad when a woman gives in like this and instead of setting the trend, follows it. But I suppose this is what it’s all about. If there was no one to follow it, what’s the use of creating the new look?

It’s a shame that Lance Richardson doesn’t go into what became of Nutters after Tommy died from AIDS-related bronchopneumonia in 1992, aged forty-nine. (He describes his death, and the lead-up to it, very movingly.) Instead, he ends with Tommy’s endearing revelation in a 1991 interview for *HeLines* that what makes him happiest is watching *Coronation Street*. “The poet John Betjeman once said, ‘It’s like a half hour of sheer bliss,’ and I couldn’t agree more.”