

Fashion / Flashback

THEY SAY THAT WRITING IS A solitary pursuit, and no doubt Lance Richardson had anticipated a more sequestered existence while researching the life of Tommy Nutter for his new book, *House Of Nutter: The Rebel Tailor Of Savile Row*. But what began as a straightforward biography about the audacious designer, who died in 1992, developed into a story that reads more like a work of fiction, pieced together by the personal accounts of more than 70 people, among them The Beatles' business manager Peter Brown and the venerable lyricist Sir Tim Rice.

The research process also led the author to forge an unlikely friendship with Tommy's 81-year-old photographer brother, David Nutter, who unwittingly became the second protagonist in this tale of two siblings who burned bright through tumultuous shifts in social history, from the idealism of the Swinging '60s to the heartbreak of the AIDS crisis in the '80s.

Legends were made in the '60s, and Tommy and David were at the epicentre of this very real *sturm und drang* – freedom of expression, sexual liberation and rock 'n' roll orchestrated by a generation thirsty for disruption. Tommy is credited with having single-handedly changed the face of Savile Row in that decade by reconciling long-held traditions in tailoring with London's 'Peacock Revolution'.

"Simply put, Tommy united tailoring and fashion," says Richardson. "Savile Row was this bastion of tradition where clothes were exquisitely made, flawless. But these tailors were scared of change, and they became calcified. With the youthquake of the '60s you had this enormous groundswell of creativity, but a lot of these new clothes weren't well made. A few people started to marry quality with fashion, like Mr Fish, but Tommy combined these two things in the heart of the old establishment. This was in no small part thanks to his head cutter Edward Sexton, who was, and still is, a master technician. Today, if you see Nutter suits from that era, they are still so radical, so exquisitely made."

Tommy Nutter famously dressed three of The Beatles for the cover of the album *Abbey Road* and was responsible for the white suit that John Lennon wore for his wedding to Yoko Ono. David, meanwhile, was the man behind the camera during this famous elopement to Gibraltar in 1969; a covert wedding with just five attendees (bar the registrar): the



Rebel Rebel

Lance Richardson's biography of avant-garde British tailor TOMMY NUTTER is twice the story you expect it to be

bride and groom, David, and Tommy and his partner at the time, Peter Brown. (Lennon immortalised it in the song *The Ballad Of John And Yoko*: "Peter Brown called to say, 'You can make it OK. You can get married in Gibraltar, near Spain.'")

"My interest in the House Of Nutter began when a friend told me a story about Tommy being ejected from a party at the Tate and reacting by jumping into the Thames!" laughs Richardson, an Australian

"Tommy lived such an unusual life, almost cinematic"

journalist based in New York, whose investigative pieces on travel and culture have featured in *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker* and *GQ*. He's not your typical fashion writer, having previously penned in-depth articles about Rwanda's mountain gorillas and Kenya's Samburu tribe, but his passion for anthropology throws a light on his fascination with the Nutter brothers.

"What I initially thought was going to be a compact book about this remarkable man on Savile Row and the interesting things he did became something very different once I reached out to his brother David. Fashion is at the heart of the book, but what I loved about their story was that it is so much more than this. Their journey is equally about music and dancing and the

history of what it meant to be gay for 45 years. By exploring their lives, I also had the opportunity to write about the decriminalisation of homosexuality, as well as what preceded it with Lord Montagu, wild nights at Studio 54, The Beatles – because Tommy knew them intimately – and of course the AIDS epidemic, which robbed the brothers, who were both gay, of so many friends."

The book also includes previously unpublished photos taken by David Nutter at the height of his brother's fame. They reveal the siblings' coterie of famous friends, some snapped off-guard, others pictured in full Nutter regalia. One image of a young Elton John ticks both boxes: it shows the singer fast asleep, dressed to the nines in a suit made by his tailor friend. "David lives on the Upper West Side surrounded by crates of photos," says Richardson, who began his project in the summer of 2015. "Every week, he would come round to my place with a new box. There are over 130 photos in the book and they are all incredible."

"Tommy, especially, lived such an unusual life – almost cinematic, because his story has clearly defined peaks and climaxes and then moments of drama that made the book quite easy to structure. Weaving in David's story was more challenging, but happily it all came together and the writing ended up being hugely pleasurable."

For the cover of the US edition of *House Of Nutter*, Richardson chose a very dapper image (above) of Tommy, shot in the mid-'70s.

"There's something about his pose in New York with those dogs," says the author. "The picture was taken by his brother and it encapsulates Tommy's spirit of subversion. He just exudes style and defiance. He's wearing a frock coat he designed, made from eau-de-Nil gabardine. In many ways, it's quite traditional, but it has these wonderful elements of Teddy Boy experimentalism."

"It's 1974 and he's on the Upper West Side, which was pretty dicey then – not the place it is today. The photo perfectly captures him and everything he stood for. Tommy and David were the most singular people, and they shared what I call the Nutter sensibility – a way of looking at the world that was unique and incredibly seductive. People just fell in love with them." *House Of Nutter: The Rebel Tailor Of Savile Row is out on May 10, published by Chatto & Windus*

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