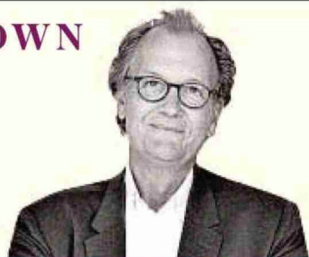


MICK BROWN
BOOKS



How Tommy Nutter brought the Swinging Sixties to Savile Row

HOUSE OF NUTTER

by *Lance Richardson*



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In the egalitarian spirit of the Sixties, it was a working-class boy from north London called Tommy Nutter who rose to become Savile Row's most fashionable tailor. He made the white wedding suits when John married Yoko, and Mick married Bianca. When The Beatles strode across the pedestrian crossing at Abbey Road, all but George were dressed by Nutter. So, an interesting minor character in the history of Swinging London, you might think. But what makes Lance Richardson's biography so much more than a humdrum story of rags to riches – or rather rags to bespoke – is its illuminating and vividly drawn account of the milieu, both social and sartorial, in which Nutter moved, and the intriguing parallel history of his elder brother, David, a photographer.

A war baby, Nutter grew up in Kilburn, London, his father a petty

tyrant and his mother downtrodden. Devoid of qualifications or prospects, young Tommy seemed doomed to a life of clerking at the Ministry of Works until, on a whim, he answered an advertisement to perform general shop duties for a Savile Row firm of tailors called G Ward & Co. Nutter soon got himself into the cutting room to work as a trimmer.

Both Nutter and his brother were gay, and infatuated by the notion of glamour peddled by Hollywood and Broadway musicals. Early photographs of Tommy, taken by David, show him posing as if for the Hollywood photographer George

Hurrell. Together, the brothers immersed themselves in the still-clandestine gay scene, frequenting clubs such as the Rockingham, where Tommy would “brush shoulders” (and, presumably, much else besides) with “Grenadier guards and movie stars like Charles Gray”. With his matinee-idol looks, Nutter made the most of the opportunity; notoriously promiscuous, and given to frequent nocturnal excursions to Hampstead Heath, he was “an attentive, intoxicating lover”, apparently, but feckless, too, “always the leaver in a relationship, never the left”.

The book reminds us how much

the gay aesthetic shaped Swinging London, from the eccentric Glaswegian John Stephen, who built a fashion empire on Carnaby Street

– a seminal influence on Nutter – to The Beatles's manager, Brian Epstein, whose aide-de-camp, Peter Brown, became Nutter's lover and (along with Cilla Black and her husband, Bobby Willis) set him up in his first shop: Nutters of Savile Row, which opened in 1969 when Tommy was just 26.

The Row, steeped in a tradition of snobbery, deference and resistance to sartorial change (that incorrigible narcissist the Duke of Windsor had caused palpitations when he insisted on zips rather than fly-buttons, "a controversial development in the history of royal trousers", Richardson soberly notes) was confronted by the Sixties "peacock revolution". Nutters of Savile Row had an ornate wooden door flanked by two "heraldic crests"

bearing initials "that resembled Napoleon's monogram on the gates at Fontainebleau". Nutter perfumed the shop with patchouli, and kept a bottle of sherry in the drawer, taking nips in a porcelain tea cup to steady his nerves. The Beatles had their headquarters a few doors down the street, and the *Daily Telegraph* talked of Savile Row's "schizophrenia" – "like a discotheque in a graveyard".

Nutter could barely thread a needle, but he had an eye for design, and more front than Harrods. It was his partner in the business, a young cutter called Edward Sexton, who provided the artistry and brought what became the "Nutter look" to life – long, full-skirted jackets with wide, flyaway lapels, and Oxford bag trousers, in dandified fabrics and

colour combinations: suits in many patched materials, a green velvet jacket with brocade lapels, a Norfolk jacket with "puffy knickerbockers".

Nutter boasted it was an entirely "new look for menswear". Within the first year of opening, he had sold 1,000 suits, 470 of them to Americans, and was complaining in an interview that he was so busy that he hadn't found the time to see *Giselle* at Covent Garden. The client

list included not just The Beatles but Kenneth Tynan, David Hockney, Eric Clapton and the Duke of Bedford. Prince Rajsinh of Rajpipla – Pippy to his friends – ordered a full wardrobe. Twiggy had one in crushed tomato velvet and, for a while, Bianca Jagger wore little else. Nutter charged women extra, claiming he could

never get on with their breasts.

A walking billboard of his designs, Nutter worked the angles at parties and fashionable restaurants, but he had no head for business: a man who "didn't really know the difference, or notice the difference, between a 51 per cent stake and 49 per cent stake in the company". He dreamed of America, and of expanding into "shirts and toiletries". Instead, he fell into debt, and frequently went Awol, sunbathing on the terrace of his Brighton bolt-hole with tinfoil under his chin, leaving Sexton to mind the store. When Sexton, inevitably, took control of the firm, Nutter walked out. Sexton describes him as "a big girl".

He was saved from bankruptcy by a spell "standing" in the showroom of the tailor Kilgour, French and Stanbury, moving into ready-to-wear with an ambition to emulate Hardy Amies as "the top menswear designer in Great Britain". In practice, this meant experiments in "rugged couture" featuring jackets with serrated hemlines, inspired by the film *Jaws*, a matelot suit that redefined the phrase "hello, sailor", and cashmere shawls with leather belts that even Nutter confessed to "feeling a little absurd" wearing.

His brother, David, meanwhile, helped by Tommy's association with the stars, was making his own way as a photographer. Somewhere "between friend and employee", he played court jester to Elton John, partying at a New York nightclub where John "threw chocolate cake in his own face and everyone inhaled helium balloons". David comforted the singer in his darkest moments, sitting on a beach in Barbados, with "Elton rating crashing waves from 1 to 10 while David did some knitting". (David

was known to everyone as “Dawn”, Elton as “Sharon”.) Freddie Mercury gave him a male stripper for his birthday.

A mood of the “last days of Rome” begins to descend on the book – the boundless extravagance, the endless parties, the New York bathhouses and rackety “trucks” that lined the river where gay men would gather, and where Tommy was a frequent visitor. There is a terrible inevitability about his death from an Aids-related condition in 1992, at the age of 49.

He was clever, ambitious and impulsive; vain and callow, but undoubtedly charming. Towards the end of his life, when invited to reflect on a life of glamour and success, he confessed that his greatest pleasure had been “watching *Coronation Street*”.



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