



EDWARD'S SCISSOR HANDS

*One had the social cachet, the other a magic touch in the workshop, and together Tommy Nutter and Edward Sexton dragged Savile Row into the modern era, writes **TOM STUBBS**. Nearly half a century later, Sexton might be part of the establishment he once helped storm, but his maverick spirit remains undimmed.*

*photography **luke carby***

When Tommy Nutter and Edward Sexton opened Nutters on St. Valentine's Day in 1969, it was the first new company established on Savile Row for 100 years. Despite 'happening' times, the Row was hardly a hotbed of innovation. Nevertheless, the hallowed location didn't daunt these two pioneers. The boys threw everything they had at their new business, not only because they were on a creative mission but because they needed to survive. Their special blend of artisanal elements and personalities created something unique, ingenious and breathtakingly chic. To tell the story of Edward Sexton the tailor, one has to talk about his partnership with Tommy Nutter — and the stylistic legend they produced together.

Sexton's devotion to craftsmanship is, in the first instance, fundamental. "I was always drawn to working with my hands and sewing," Sexton tells *The Rake* from an armchair at his atelier in Beauchamp Place, south-west London. "I worked in the East End. I kept hearing the name Savile Row. I heard they did everything by hand and their clientele was quite different. It just hugely appealed to me. I thought, 'If I'm going to learn my trade, I want to learn it in the best possible places'."

In 1956 he responded to an advert in *Tailor and Cutter* (a now defunct trade magazine) for an apprentice role, and got a job with a tailor he knew as Mr. Kingley (even to this day, Sexton does not know Kingley's given name; as he points out, things were more formal back then). Kingley worked for Harry Hall, a leading equestrian tailor, on Regent Street. After a year, Sexton became assistant cutter, and stayed a further two years.

He was attracted to the workmanship and reputation of Kilgour, who in turn were keen to benefit from his prized skills. "Their clientele was Cary Grant and Fred Astaire, all the top international film stars and financiers, the best of the late fifties," Sexton says. He divided his time between the cutting room and college, where he continued his schooling in cloth technology and pattern making. He grew and grew. Eventually he joined a company called Donaldson, Williams and G. Ward, where he met Tommy Nutter, a front-of-house par excellence.

Sexton and Nutter became friends, going out in the evenings for fun and general scheming. During this time, Sexton was honing his style on his personal customers. "I developed a strong private clientele while moonlighting," he says. "The only way you get experience is going out and doing your own thing. Following

your own dream and making the styles and designs you want, not conforming. It was a huge relief, being open-minded and creative. It gave me that kick up the backside to get out and do it."

Then, as now, young people needed help to harness their energy and go it alone. "Tommy was extremely handsome and charming," Sexton says. "He would go off in the evening and meet people socially — that's how we met Peter Brown, who managed The Beatles. There were others, such as James Vallance-White, who was a barrister in the House of Lords, and Cilla Black (who later introduced the Mersey Beat scene to Nutter style). Tommy's social life was really out there, he was meeting all sorts."

Brown, Black and some other eyebrow-raising luminaries went further, and invested in Nutters of Savile Row. Sexton and Nutter worked on their ideas for a new look, and were heavily influenced by what they saw on the King's Road and Carnaby Street. At the time he was working on a combination of evening styles and the hacking jacket look he knew from Harry Hall. "We took two jackets and created a style that was longer than average, waisted and flared. The rope shoulders were very narrow but square, with an extraordinarily wide lapel — a peak double-breasted shape lapel on our single breast jackets, which was very rare for that time."

The outfits worn by Mick Jagger and Bianca Pérez-Mora Macias at their 1971 wedding were typical Nutter style. They cut for men and women from the outset. Twiggy, Cilla and The Beatles (including their girlfriends) would often be seen in their look, complete with parallel trousers (19" at the knee and 19" at the bottom). They defined the iconic image of masculine tailoring worn with panache by sexy women. "It had all the bells and whistles," Sexton says. "It was our look. It was tremendously elegant, too, edgy but elegant. It was sophisticated, but totally revolutionary to what was being produced elsewhere."

They transformed the 'Row' while they were about it, even becoming the first to feature dressed window displays where previously tailors had hung a velvet curtain. The walls (and curtains) were coming down. Fashion was very creative then, and it was fast and frivolous, too. There was a hunger for the new, but Nutters combined its vision with a respect for construction from the past. "We'd take a big check and cut it to attenuate the waist, because the checks were broken," Sexton says. "It was extremely architectural. That's what my work is about today."

Sexton's clothes have a different feel to other tailors. They make you stand differently, relaxed but with a debonair sway across the shoulders. They make you feel grand and yet lend a cheeky hip-glide to your stance. The combination of Nutters' architecture and verve was trailblazing stuff. Did they know how original their work was? "We were too young to realise we were breaking ground," Sexton says. "We had no advice or team behind us, we just did it. We didn't intend to set the world on fire — we were just two young guys in business. The facts of life were that you had to produce so many suits to meet your overheads, say 10 a week. That's the look we designed and worked on, but we wanted it to be made beautifully in the old tradition of Savile Row. We've never, ever shifted away from that craft of having beautiful sewing and workmanship. When the two were combined it was quite outstanding."



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The special look they created was noticed in all the right places. "Tommy socialised so well, he wore clothing so well, and he mixed in great circles," Sexton says. "We were fresh, and so the fashion editors were very keen on what we were doing. It was exciting for them to write about, coupled with the fact that we were doing work for The Beatles and Mick Jagger, but also [Lord] Paul Hamlyn and Robert Maxwell." It is worth noting that three out of the four Beatles are dressed by Nutters on the cover of the Abbey Road album. "Our clientele was very diverse,

and we also had a huge American following," Sexton says. When operating long-distance, with Americans, Sexton worked on toile as if it were a finished garment. "So when a client put his first fitting on, and bearing in mind we were going to work long-range, they were very impressed," he says. "We'd take repeat orders based on their first try-ons. They'd come in for the first one, and leave ordering another four or five." He still uses this *modus operandi* today.

They also had a large gay clientele. Sexton says: "They would fancy Tommy and come in to see him." Being out was still taboo in the sixties, so the fashionable underground code known as Camp Polari (based on the British slang of various subcultures) was used. Sexton has been married to Joanne for 52 years — they have three children and five grandchildren — but he became well-versed in Polari, which included the amusing practice of giving men suitable female nicknames. As well as the in-house crew — Tommy (Pamela), Edward (Roxanne) and Joe Morgan (Misty) — clients included Elton John (Kitty), John Lennon (Susanne) and Mick Jagger (Catherine). "The celebrity clients in the seventies were very fun to work with and extremely charismatic," Sexton says. "There were no egos — we left that to Pamela! They could not keep their appointments. If they did show up, they were never on time.

"Apart from tailored clothing, I made John and Yoko linen jumpsuits in every colour. We made the first piano-back jacket for who else but Elton. The design was taken from a suit made for Fred Astaire for one of his 1950s films.

"Tommy always wanted to change the look to be the big designer of the time. He always wanted to push for change. We did another look for Bianca, more forties, with very wide square shoulders and a short jacket, and Oxford bags." The meeting of Nutter's and Sexton's style minds generated fabulous creativity, but it was tempered by correct refinement.

Nutter died in 1992, aged 49, from complications arising due to Aids, but he left a legacy that will resonate for ever. Sexton continued solo, his maverick status intact. Sir Paul McCartney introduced him to his daughter, Stella, and she collaborated with him in his workshop, later bringing Sexton in to work on her first Chloe collections in Paris. Sexton turned production in a different direction at Chloe. "I used men's factories to make women's clothes," he says. "It was the only way to get the expression right. Women's factories couldn't capture the expressions I wanted. We collaborated with fabric producers and new methods of cutting with feminine fabrics, like silk or chiffon, yet with tailoring. It was quite a steep learning curve — and a massive success."



Naomi Campbell opened McCartney's first Chloe show in Paris, which is where Campbell and Sexton first met. Recently they collaborated in the vaunted Duran Duran supermodel shoot for *Tatler*, and Sexton still cuts for his good friend. Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser al-Missned, of the Qatar royal family, has also become intrigued by the Sexton style. "My women's clothing had the same philosophy as my men's, except more curvaceous and body hugging," he says. "Extremely sexy. Women did not mind being uncomfortable as long as they looked sexy. A lot of men also had their clothes so close they could hardly move — don't forget the cloth was much heavier then. They believed you had to suffer to be beautiful. Over the decades I have refined my techniques to achieve this close sexy silhouette without discomfort. Clients enjoy looking great and enjoy it all day and night long."

I'm lucky enough to have worked with Sexton frequently in the past few years, wheeling in various celebrities for a variety of projects. Recently, leading film actors have benefited from Sexton's new made-to-measure sample line during awards season. They received plaudits among those given to the designer offerings, as the collection is still possessed of that signature Sexton verve. But it was when I brought my best friend in for his groom's outfits that it was clear the Sexton warmth extends to all.

Sexton's eye for chic proportion and his sense of old-fashioned glamour is second to none. His cutting skills put twenties and thirties glamour into contemporary expression. His belief in craft and in teaching his apprentices is vital. But it is the way the man conducts himself that, for me, sets him apart. "I am 72 but not an old man," he says. "I feel young and keep my thinking young and modern. I love working with young creative people." He's still making clothes for rock stars, sons of rock stars, and is sought for consultancy by the likes of Rick Owens and tailors such as Chester Barrie.



Mick Jagger wearing Sexton in 1971.

Watching Sexton work, balancing and weighing proportions, he seems more like a couturier working with swathes of fabric on a stand. He calls in his protégés — working in his open atelier — to commune with him, ripping garments apart again and improving, tweaking, elevating. The exacting focus with which Sexton approaches the pitch of a sleeve or the line across the back of a jacket is fanatical. Team these with his talent for channelling stylistic accent, and you understand the potency of Sexton's work, or 'Sexton appeal', as he jokingly refers to it. He also talks of 'romancing' the look: this is the way he styles with high tab- and pin-collar shirt styles, and mixes in fabric pattern and colour.

The atmosphere in his workshop is imbued with Sexton's energy and passion. He generates positivity. In fact, the man shames many of the young stylemakers of the day. He's the most egalitarian man I've met, considering, or maybe because of, the stellar clientele he's worked with. Whichever way you break it down, Edward Sexton is a style merchant extraordinaire, and his legend is assured. ■