

THE NEAT SURRENDER

Andy Thomas meets John Simons, pioneer of the mod aesthetic

‘It may only have been a small shop tucked away in what was at that time a rather quiet corner of Covent Garden, but John Simons’ clothes shop became the fulcrum of a whole kind of scene,’ writes JP Gaul in *The Ivy Look*. ‘Men of all backgrounds came together to get hold of the very best of traditional American style, Oxford cloth, button-down popovers from Troy Guild, soft, finely tailored natural shoulder jackets from Linet, the G9 blouson... it was all there.’

It was 1981 and JP Gaul was doing what in-the-know modernists had been doing since the Sixties: searching the rails of John Simons’ shop to feed their Ivy League habit. And nearly 40 years on from that mod revival, John Simons’ latest store on London’s Chiltern Street is equally revered by men who know their Wingtips from their Weejuns.

Brought up in Hackney, East London, John Simons’ passion for clothes began at an early age. ‘My dad had several brothers – and I remember when I was about 11 or 12 them going to Europe and bringing these lovely clothes back with them,’ he says, sitting under a row of Pendleton board shirts and J. Keydige Ivy Slack jackets in the Marylebone store he now runs with his son Paul.

The year was 1952 – and Simons would spend the weekends at his family’s barbershop on the Kingsland Road, Dalston, watching the sharply

dressed men of his neighbourhood. ‘Back then everyone went to bespoke tailors and the East End was full of them, places like Alfred Myers and Millers,’ he recalls. It wasn’t long before John was being measured up at his first tailors. ‘I got a shirt made for my Bar Mitzvah by Ron Hitchins,’ he says. ‘He was a

‘YOU’D GET THE BARROW BOYS NEXT TO THE LANDED GENTRY’

barrow-boy-turned-sculptor and cutting-edge shirt designer... so a real New Wave individual.’

Simons would soon be meeting other alluring London characters when he started working in the West End as an apprentice window dresser at Cecil Gee on Charing Cross Road.

‘The man who gave England the new stylish Continental look,’ in the words of Paul Anderson in *Mods: The New Religion*, Cecil Gee opened up a whole new world to the young East Ender. ‘You had people like Ronnie Scott coming in buying his stuff,’ says Simons. ‘Soho was such an amazing place then, full of brilliant artists, photographers and musicians. If you went to a jazz club like Cy Laurie’s, you’d get the barrow boys next to the landed gentry, so it

was a real eye opener for me. Of course you also had Ronnie’s and The Flamingo and other little jazz clubs like The Florida, there were so many places like that. At 16, I was like a piece of blotting paper soaking in all this new music, style and art. And soon us young guys into all this stuff were being called modernists,’ he recalls. ‘We were buying all the modern jazz records coming out of America and seeing all the covers with people like Miles Davis, Chet Baker and Jimmy Smith – all looking extremely stylish. In Soho, you’d see all these young Italian waiters who were really well dressed. So these were all expressions of modernism coming from America and Europe.’

Central to the modernists’ style aesthetic was the Ivy League look that would seep into the public’s consciousness through film stars like Steve McQueen, Paul Newman and Anthony Perkins. ‘I first became aware of the Ivy League style around the age of 15 when I started looking in the windows of Austin’s shop on Shaftesbury Avenue,’ says Simons. ‘I started to yearn for a shirt like the American ones I saw. And as a youngster this whole silhouette just became really hip to me.’

‘In America, Ivy League was an egalitarian tradition and a rigid format of dress. And they did it in an incredible way. Everyone wore it. Around 1959, the Ivy shape held



around 80% of the male market – from thugs to presidents.’

Inspired by both American and European tailoring – but wanting to provide something fresh for London’s young modernists – Simons opened his first shop, Clothesville, in 1963, next door to the Hackney Empire. ‘The first pieces were inspired by a short corduroy coat by Burberry – but with a button-down collar,’ he says. ‘We followed it with these reefer jackets. It was basically things that we wanted to wear.’

After the success of the Hackney store, he opened another Clothesville in Walthamstow, but it was in South West London that Simons really made his name. In the summer of 1965, at the height of the mod movement, Simons opened The Ivy Shop – inspired by his trips to New York. ‘I was buying all the clearance lines over there,’ he says. ‘It wasn’t too hard to get hold of this stuff at a decent price as I was the only one from England doing it.’

Haspel seersucker jackets, Bass Weejuns loafers, Oxford shirts by Lion of Troy or Sero buttondowns with the perfect roll – The Ivy Shop dressed the sharpest mods from across London. ‘Although we were originally an Ivy League shop, we became a pivot point for the mods,’ says Simons. There was one item that came to become most associated with the shop: the Harrington G9 jacket,

EMILY MARTIN

named by Simons after Rod Harrington: a character played by Ryan O’Neal in a soap opera called *Peyton Place*. ‘I went to see Baracuta (the company who made the G9) and asked if I could see their export stuff,’ recalls Simons. ‘There was this guy called John Beddingfield who was a great jazz drummer working there. He would take the slight seconds and put them aside for us at really low prices. And all this was informing the new mod culture that had been created by then.’ In 1969 he opened his first West End store, The Squire Shop on Brewer Street, followed two years later by The Village Gate on Old Compton Street.

By the late Seventies the mod revival had created a new interest in the old Ivy League styles. In a new documentary on John Simons, *The Neat Offensive*, Paul Weller recalls first going to the J. Simons’ store on Covent Garden’s Russell Street: ‘It was interesting for me to find stuff that I hadn’t seen for such a long time.’ The film, which also features long-time admirers Kevin Rowland, Robert Elms, and *GQ* editor Dylan Jones, is a fitting tribute to Simons’ 60 years in retail.

‘Whether I’ve still got the same passion now I’m not sure... but I can pull it out when I need to,’ says Simons. ‘It’s always inside me.’ johnsimons.co.uk

1941

Terylene

Tougher and more resilient than nylon, the first commercial polyester fibre was patented by British chemists John Rex Whinfield and James Tennant for the Calico Printers’ Association.

1958

Spandex

A polyether-polyurea copolymer invented by Joseph Shivers for DuPont. An acronym of ‘expands’ due to its elasticity, it is also known as Lycra in certain markets, including the UK, Brazil, Australia and Israel.

1973

Kevlar

A para-aramid introduced by DuPont, with outstanding strength-to-weight properties, used in body armour, sports equipment and the aerospace industry.

2002

PLA

Confusingly a polymer and not a poly acid, Polylactic acid is now one of the most popular manmade materials on earth. Derived from renewable resources such as corn starch or sugarcane, it is biodegradable and used in 3D printing, injection moulding and medical implants.