

A LEAGUE OF HIS OWN

His aloof demeanour may not be that of a man locked in the groove, but Charlie Davidson has spent seven decades making Ivy Leaguers and his very own jazz heroes “hip to my kinda clothes”.

by **christian cheusvold**

Half a century ago, a certain American social set really had its priorities in order. Life’s list of pursuits ran something like this: jazz, tennis, newspapers, Yankees vs. Red Sox, Newport and Nantucket, sailing, contemporary literature, prize fights, prep schools and the Ivy League, cigarettes and cocktails, college football, Broadway shows, and New York parties that blended socialites with beatniks.

Somewhere in this overlap of old money and the creative class, between college town and metropolis, between traditional and cool, lies what Charlie Davidson calls “my kinda clothes”. And what kind of threads are these? *Multus ne multus*, English country attire with an American twist and a guiding spirit of jazz-hip. Davidson, after all, is the man who dressed Miles Davis in 1954, at the height of the style chameleon’s Ivy League phase.

That mid-century date would suggest that Davidson is now at the age where one is either long-forgotten or a living legend. At 86, Charlie — as everyone knows him — is incomparably the latter, the last of a certain breed of American haberdasher from an age more golden than ours. He is the epitome of ‘old school’ — and that old school, founded in 1636, is Harvard.

Since 1953, Davidson has operated The Andover Shop in Harvard Square, the off-campus commercial centre of the distinguished university in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Along with his original and still-extant shop, founded in 1948 in nearby Andover (where it serves the elite Phillips Academy Andover prep school), Charlie has been dressing students and faculty members in tweed jackets and penny loafers since before the Ivy League look’s 1950s heyday. The entire Anglo-American guise of chinos and button-downs, herringbone jackets, Shetland sweaters, argyle socks and tassel loafers — the garments that Ralph Lauren does so fantastically, selling the look around the world — Charlie Davidson has been selling since *before* it was popular the first time around.

“Charlie is the last of the greats of the natural-shoulder business, back when it was the power elite who were wearing that stuff,” says bespoke clothier and menswear historian Alan Flusser. “Charlie goes back to when it was just for prep-school and college students in the northeast, and remains the lone standard-bearer of East Coast/elitist-trad male style. His eye for colours and materials is first-rate, and he is masterful in his interpretation of conservative New England style. He has

been able to make a living selling his vision of classic American traditional style longer than any other retailer. This speaks of Charlie as a force of nature as well as a force of personality.”

The Andover Shop is certainly an unlikely style mecca. For a start, it’s in a college town adjacent to the sartorially reserved city of Boston, rather than, say, on Madison Avenue in the heart of Midtown Manhattan. It’s tiny, and the merchandise is sparsely presented, without fuss. But the advanced sartorialist will immediately notice the copious bolts of fabric that line the wall, a dizzying variety of rare English cloth that Charlie has accumulated over the decades. The off-the-rack house cut is a two-button jacket with an undarted front, while bespoke services start at a modest US\$2,500 — well within the limits of Yankee frugality.

But to stimulate Davidson’s enthusiasm — to get him to bust out the really rare stuff — one must demonstrate a genuine interest in clothes and a certain sartorial esprit. Due to his notorious aloofness, shyer customers commissioning a suit from Charlie Davidson feel like they’re going to an audition. “He’s a brilliant designer and an excellent merchandiser, but a very private individual,” says Richard Press, grandson of the founder of rival Ivy League haberdasher J. Press. “I’ve always felt that The Andover Shop was a very private commercial enterprise. It served a fairly narrow range of people who met Charlie’s very difficult credentials of acceptability. He didn’t seem to welcome customers he didn’t feel belonged at The Andover Shop. He’s a vastly entertaining individual, but does not suffer fools lightly.”

In a 1995 article for *Atlantic Monthly*, John D. Spooner shares an anecdote about Davidson’s lackadaisical attitude when it comes to serving unknown customers. One day, a wealthy businessman came into The Andover Shop and ordered three suits. Davidson told him they would be ready in a month. “After five weeks,” writes Spooner, “the customer, whose last name was Zachary, called to inquire after his suits. ‘Not quite yet,’ Charlie said. Another two weeks went by and Zachary was put off again. Charlie had not made the suits. ‘He’ll get the message,’ Charlie told me. ‘I am not sure I like the cut of his jib.’ Four weeks more and Zachary called, irate. ‘What the hell do you do over there?’ he asked, ‘make the clothes alphabetically?’ After hearing this line, Charlie went ahead and made the suits. Zachary had passed the test.”



From top: The Andover Shop in Harvard Square has seen countless luminaries in every field of human endeavour pass through its doors; at the age of 86, Charlie Davidson, below, calls work “a party all day long” and rarely even takes a moment to sit down.





Dyeing breed: the cross-generational sales team at The Andover Shop puts customers into English-made accessories and American-made suiting in conservative cuts livened by bold patterns.

When it comes to style, Davidson reserves his greatest appreciation for everyday men with individual panache (what he and writer friend George Frazier would call *'duende'*, or a kind of magnetic charisma), as opposed to ambulatory mannequins dressed by designers — or tailors, for that matter. “The customer knows more about style and taste than the merchant,” he avows. What he notices most in a well-dressed man is the whole picture, “from his haircut to his shoelaces”, which suggests something deeper, a core competence in the art of dressing and exquisite taste. He scoffs at curriculum-based dressers punctiliously concerned with rules and genre perimeters. Sophisticated dressers, he says, see a wide horizon beyond button-downs and striped ties. “Charlie has a larger sartorial vocabulary than the dyed-in-the-wool traditionalist,” says Paul Winston, whose family ran rival trad clothier Chipp. And while he’s the oldest-practising torch-bearer of the Ivy League Look, Davidson is strongly opposed to “looking like a 1950s caricature”, and cryptically calls Ivy style more of an attitude than a wardrobe. “You know a preppy,” he says drily, “as soon as he walks in.”

Charlie Davidson believes that he is the right man in the right place at the right time, and that the result has been a life so satisfying that he wouldn’t even consider retiring. “It’s a party all day long,” he says, “just being enthralled by the people who walk in the door.” Though his father was a Texas farmer, Davidson grew up in Andover and attended the noted prep school. That he would eventually found a shop with strong ties to the school shows some magnanimity, considering he was kicked out (that’s right: the greatest preppy clothier alive was a prep-school dropout). After serving in World War II, Charlie spent one semester at Bowdoin College in Maine, then worked for J. Press in New Haven, Connecticut, serving the Yale community. Whereas Brooks Brothers, which travelled frequently to prep schools and colleges, provided the upstanding establishment look, J. Press was more youthful, Charlie says, “adding a little more stylistically to get kids away from their father’s clothes”. During his brief stint with Press, Charlie sold a hat to Gregory Peck that the actor wore in the film *Gentleman’s Agreement* (Peck doffs it in one scene, revealing the J. Press logo). Shortly thereafter, in 1948, Charlie opened The Andover Shop at the age of 22 — an event he describes as “the perfect moment”.

He hosted trunk shows at such leading prep schools as Groton, St. Mark’s and St. Paul where, because of his youth and cool attitude, he became better known than the travelling reps from the bigger stores. Five years later, he opened a second outlet in Harvard Square, and there Davidson found himself at an outpost through which countless 20th-century luminaries would pass through on visits to the famed university. “Harvard Square is the epicentre of the universe,” he says. “The whole world goes right by and comes in here.” George Bush Sr. was a former classmate and Andover Shop patron who’s regularly asked ‘How’s Charlie?’ all his life, and when African-American author Ralph Waldo Ellison received an honorary degree from Harvard, Charlie Davidson was his guest.

A jazz fan since he was a teenager, Davidson went on to befriend boyhood crushes such as Billie Holiday and Anita O’Day. And in the mid-1950s, when campus concerts became popular and jazz musicians began taking style clues from their audience, Charlie provided clothing to such jazz greats as Chet Baker, Stan Getz, Paul Desmond, Gerry Mulligan and The Modern Jazz Quartet, and became lifelong friends of legendary producers (and Newport Jazz Festival founders) George Wein and Charles Bourgeois. Recalling a night with Charlie hearing Bobby Short at New York’s Carlyle Hotel, *Rake* contributor G. Bruce Boyer says the entertainer rushed over to give Davidson a hug, while the band waved at him as though he was their favourite uncle. “I share Charlie’s love of jazz,” Boyer says, “but envy him because he actually knew so many great artists — and they loved him.”

Adds Richard Press, “Charlie brought jazz musicians within the boundary of establishment style, but still let them express themselves individually.” Davidson also became the chief clothing consultant — and closest friend — to George Frazier, *Esquire* magazine’s witty style columnist and author of the seminal essay ‘The Art of Wearing Clothes’, who was said to have developed his own understated yet dapper style — chalk-striped flannel suit, pink oxford button-down, navy dot tie and boutonniere — under Davidson’s tutelage. “Charlie is special,” notes Paul Winston, “in part for having outlived the very legends he’s dressed.”

Even as an octogenarian, Davidson remains “mad for clothes”, passing hand-me-downs to his tailor and acquiring new garments with delight. “I love getting something new,” he says, “while my old clothes are like old friends.” Some things never change, including, apparently, the world around him. When you’ve turned your vocation into your own private gentlemen’s club, with yourself as Grand Poobah, there’s something to be said for having rose-coloured blinders on. “People say how much Harvard Square has changed,” says Davidson, “but I haven’t noticed. To me, nothing’s changed. The ties get wider, then they get narrower — that’s it.”

It took some convincing to get the notoriously press-shy Davidson to talk to *The Rake* (though that was nothing compared to getting him to sit for the camera). His reasons for reticence are myriad, but they come down partly to the ephemeral nature of style — something which, he believes, you ultimately have to feel, not notate by chiselling into a block of marble. “I hate giving interviews because by next week, I’ll change everything I said,” he sighs. “That’s why I can’t read articles about me. I’ll say, ‘I said that?’”

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For bespoke services, The Andover Shop sits on a hoard of rare English cloth that proprietor Charlie Davidson has acquired over the decades.

