



Meet the king of kinky

John Sutcliffe brought extreme fetish wear into the British living room, normalizing something previously seen as shameful. Here's the story of the man — and magazine — that brought leather to the masses

BY WILL HODGKINSON
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The British fetish industry has surprisingly practical beginnings. In 1957, John Sutcliffe, a former aircraft engineer from Hampstead, north London, was taking a girlfriend out for a trip on his motorbike. Heavy rain soaked her through, no motorcycle clothing being available for women at the time. "So I went into Soho and bought a dozen skins of red leather," Sutcliffe said, "and asked my landlady if I could borrow her sewing machine." The result was not only a waterproof suit for Sutcliffe's friend, but also the birth of AtomAge, a clothing label and magazine that brought a fetish for rubber and leather into the open for the first time.

Sutcliffe's designs came out of personal obsession. When his weakness for leather was diagnosed as a symptom of mental illness, he went through a breakdown and a divorce, gave up his engineering job and moved out of the family home. But his motorcycle suit brought requests for similar outfits, and an unexpected career shift. Working out of a loft in central London Sutcliffe used his engineering know-how to transform leather — notoriously hard to stitch — rubber and vinyl into "weatherproofs for lady pillion riders." He designed a sewing machine for leather and approached Singer to manufacture it. "Singer were so horrified," recalls his friend Robert Henley, "they called the police." His experiments with rubber also brought a sticky encounter: Henley came into the studio one day to find Sutcliffe lying on the floor, gasping, almost killed by the toxic fumes of a rubber glue he'd invented.

Sutcliffe went on to make Marianne Faithfull's all-in-one outfit for the 1968 film *Girl on a Motorcycle* and influenced Emma Peel's leather catsuits for the cult TV series *The Avengers*. With the artist Allen Jones, he designed some extremely rude waitresses' uniforms for Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (they were never used), and his work was an inspiration

for Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's punk-era boutique Sex. But AtomAge remains Sutcliffe's greatest achievement. It made extreme fetish outfits look as threatening as a car boot sale in Cobham, normalizing something previously seen as shameful.

It was Henley who suggested publishing the magazine, which ran from 1972 until 1980 and captured that particularly British ability to combine kinkiness with a suburban sensibility. "It wasn't pornographic, but it stirred up a lot of fuss," Henley says. "It was terribly popular, but very hard to find an outlet for. When we finally convinced a bookshop in Victoria [central London] to stock it, people would queue for hours to get a copy."

Readers were encouraged to send in photographs of themselves in their favorite outfits, resulting in a woman in head-to-toe rubber before a mantelpiece with a photograph of the kids on it, a man hosing down a caravan in leather waders and a gas mask, or a rubber-clad man on a ladder, by a shed, apparently engaged in some sort of sadomasochistic DIY. AtomAge introduced the uninitiated to such diversions as wading (walking through a river at night encased in rubber) and total enclosure. E.E.D. of Middlesex claims in a reader's letter that after sitting around the house for an hour or so in head-to-toe rubber, he feels "wonderfully relaxed and at peace with myself."

Jonny Trunk, who has compiled *Dressing for Pleasure*, a pictorial retrospective of AtomAge, says, "Leather clothing wasn't available until Sutcliffe came along. He was out there on his own, creating a liberation in women's fashion. Led by a desire to see women in odd yet functional outfits, he kicked off the whole thing."

The book revives a strangely innocent secret world, one that almost gained wider exposure in 1977 when the documentary-maker John Samson shot a profile of the fetish scene, with Sutcliffe looking and sounding for all



Author Jonny Trunk compiled *Dressing for Pleasure*, a pictorial retrospective of AtomAge, after spotting a rare copy of the clothing label's magazine on a friend's workbench.

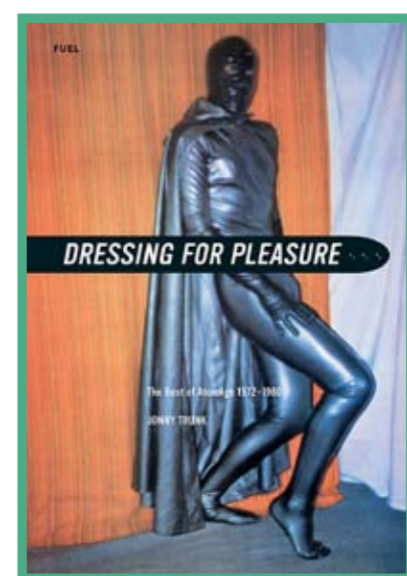
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the world like a retired major, albeit one wearing a vinyl catsuit and a chain around his neck. But London Weekend Television banned the film and, despite its success, AtomAge remained an underground phenomenon. It was ultimately destroyed by the prudish nature of the times: In 1982 Sutcliffe published Jim Dickson's erotic novel *The Story of Gerda*, leading to a police raid, a US\$1,540 fine, confiscation of stock and the pulping of the back catalogue. Sutcliffe continued working, but the dream was over. He died five years later.

The story would have ended there had not Trunk, a friend of leather

designers Patrick Whitaker and Keir Malem, spotted a rare copy of *AtomAge* on their workbench. This "extraordinary-looking magazine" led him to "a kinky warehouse in Essex, talking to a guy who owned the rights," determined to "investigate it all further."

One question remains. What was Sutcliffe like? "He was an old-fashioned gentleman, very inventive and not interested in money, driven by a fascination he couldn't explain," Henley says. "Until John came along, the only references to leather and rubber fetishes were in psychology books, and in the most derogatory terms. John was the man who changed it all."



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