

To Survive the Pandemic, Savile Row Cuts a Bespoke Strategy

With formal events and travel canceled, the tradition-bound tailors are gently embracing technology — and finding leverage on their landlords.

By David Segal

Nov. 15, 2020

LONDON — One morning in early November, a tailor on Savile Row took the measurements of a client 5,500 miles away with the help of a robot. The tailor, Dario Carnera, sat on the second floor of Huntsman, one of the street's most venerable houses, and used the trackpad on his laptop to guide the robot around a client who stood before mirrors in a clothing store in Seoul. Mr. Carnera was visible and audible to the client through an iPad-like panel that doubled as the robot's face.

"I'm just going to come a little bit forward," said Mr. Carnera, moving the robot a few feet to the left.

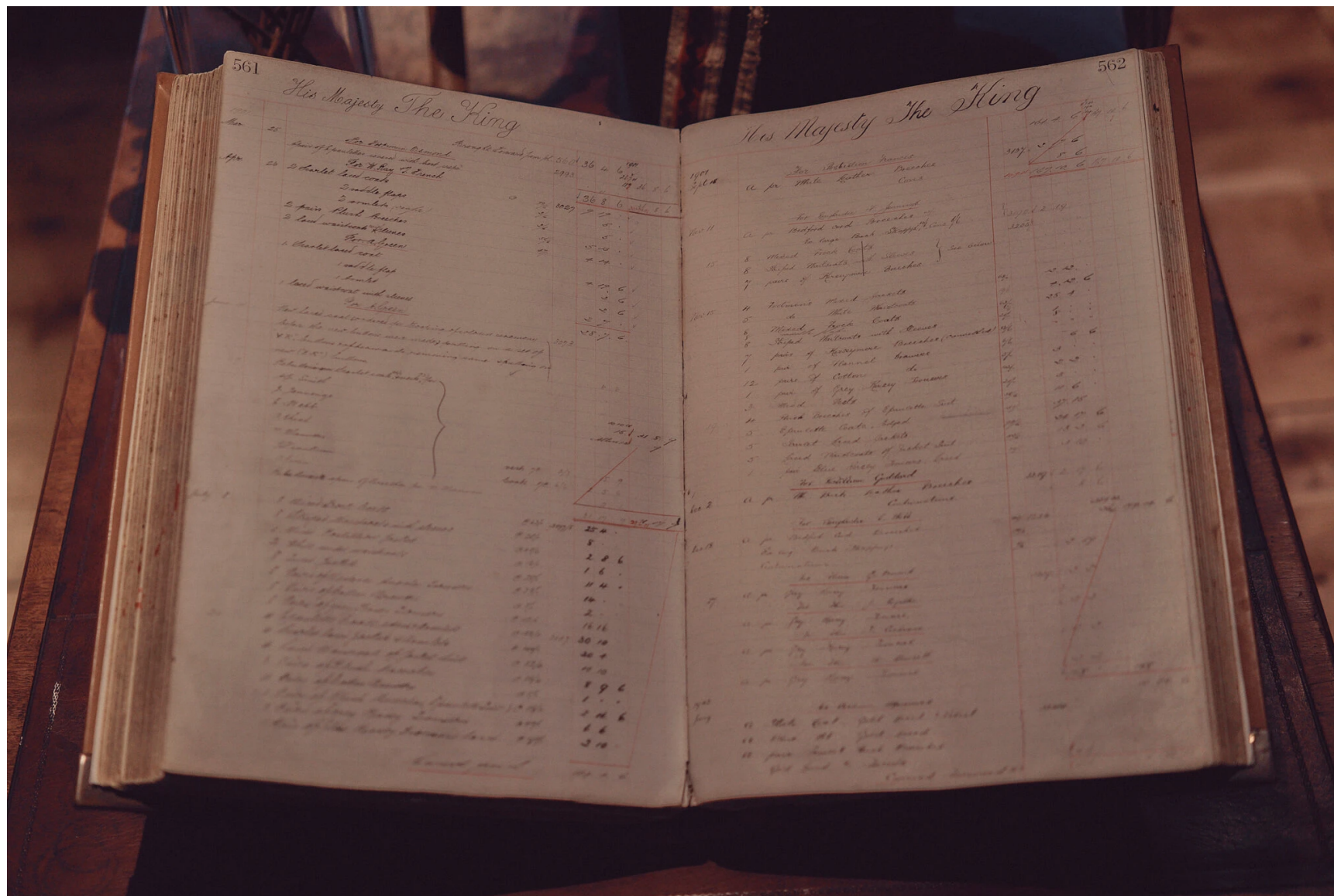
He was collecting the roughly 20 measurements that are standard in a first Savile Row fitting, the initial step in the fabrication of a made-from-scratch suit that starts at about \$8,000 and can reach as high as \$40,000 for the priciest material.

"Twenty seven and a quarter," said an assistant in Seoul, through a translator, holding a measuring tape.

This system, up and running since September, wouldn't work without a pair of living, trained hands on the client. As robots go, Huntsman's is primitive — essentially a camera and intercom on wheels. It doesn't have arms, let alone the fingertips to find an inseam. The point of the gizmo isn't to eliminate the need for the human touch. It's to eliminate the need for Mr. Carnera to travel, which, because of the pandemic, he can't.

This grounding is a fiasco for Savile Row tailors. They typically spend nearly as much time flying around the world, fitting clients, as they do cutting and sewing. For many houses, 70 percent of revenue comes from these overseas trunk shows. With tailors stuck in their shops, and London tourism in free-fall, the most famous men's clothing street in the world is gasping for life.

"Our company lived through the Boer War, World War I, the Depression, World War II, recessions," said Simon Cundey, the managing director of Henry Poole & Co., which traces its roots to 1819. "But through all of these crises, we could visit our customers and they could visit us. This is a tragedy on a different scale."



An aging Huntsman ledger is a sartorial record of the monarchy. Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

The struggles started before the pandemic. The decades-long drift from formal wear has wounded a retail strip known for elegant, hand-sewn garments that take up to 90 hours to produce. Plus, the cultural cachet of the suit has waned. All Savile Row shops are associated with a Hollywood star who was a regular: Fred Astaire at Anderson & Sheppard, Charlie Chaplin at Gieves & Hawkes. Most died decades ago.

Covid has turned the Row's challenges into a brush with the abyss. Even dandies are now trundling around their homes in Lululemon. The four months of business between the first and second lockdowns helped, but not a lot. Profit-sapping quarantines meant that tailors still could not fly to other European countries, Asia and the United States, as they typically do three or four times a year.

American Anglophiles are the street's not-so-secret sugar daddies. New York, Los Angeles, and a few other U.S. cities account for roughly one third of all revenue on the Row, managing directors here say.

Fortunately, the biggest landlord on the street has pockets deep enough to afford some rent forbearance. Most of the Row is owned by one of the richest entities on earth: Norway's \$1.1 trillion sovereign wealth fund. It owns a majority of the Pollen Estate, a holder of prime acres of central London real estate for nearly 400 years.

The overseers of the fund know that if the celebrated houses of Savile Row close or scatter for cheaper premises, the street's cachet will disappear, along with much of its value. This gives tailors here a rare kind of leverage. Which may be one reason there's a lot of we're-in-this-together talk from Julian Stocks, a Pollen Estate property director.

"The fund family are actually very long-term thinkers," he said. "It's not about that slightly American approach of 'make a quick buck and move on.' It's all about sustainable growth and value over the long term."

How long this generosity will last is a major preoccupation for owners and employees here. So is the broader question of whether the street can shake off its image as a fusty redoubt of old-school haberdashery. Many of the nearly 30 shops are attempting an update. Some are opening or expanding online shops that offer ready-to-wear lines. Others are selling bespoke doctor's scrubs and pandemic masks. A few are experimenting with Zoom. So far, only Huntsman has built a robot.

"I was skeptical when I first heard the idea," Mr. Carnera said. "I'm very traditional. I work with a pair of shears that are about a hundred years old. But the bottom line is that we had to do something."

The birthplace of the tuxedo

The "golden mile of men's tailoring" is actually just over 150 yards long. Starting in the early 19th century, it was the unofficial couturier of the British Empire, the place where England's military leaders, equestrians, barristers and aristocrats bought ceremonial finery for parades, hunts, dinners and coronations. Both the tuxedo and the bowler hat were invented here, and when the suit emerged as the uniform of capitalism, the street set the gold standard for craft and durability. Its history and reputation are stellar enough that the name has found its way into at least one language. The Japanese word for "business suit" is *sebiro*. (Say it out loud.)

Suits made here don't simply fit in ways that feel uncanny. They are intended to perform the sartorial version of plastic surgery, fixing imperfections like pigeon chests, splayed feet, uneven arms, humpbacks and more. It's a goal that can't be achieved through math alone. A fitting on Savile Row is a handsy tango that lasts anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour, and there are three fittings in all. As tailors measure, they take notes, mental or otherwise, on physical quirks that no tape could capture.

The ability to meld numbers and observations is what is known in the trade as "Rock of Eye." For years, Rock of Eye was assumed to be possible only when tailor and client were in the same room. Now, in the age of the coronavirus, Mr. Carnera thinks otherwise.

"He's got a dropped left shoulder and a slight bow to his legs — quite erect posture," he said of the customer in Seoul when the fitting ended. "I can see all I need to see."

Other tailors are dipping a tentative toe into the online world. Kathryn Sargent, the first woman to rise to the title of master tailor, was recently cajoled into her first Zoom fitting by a husband and wife in Manhattan who were tired of waiting for their clothing.

"I was reluctant because a fitting is quite intimate, and I didn't know if I could create that feeling on Zoom," she said from her new shop on nearby Brook Street. "But they told me, 'Kathryn, you need to lower your standards.'"

Phoebe Gormley, of Gormley & Gamble, started an online store she hopes will be “completely Covid-proof.” Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

Phoebe Gormley, who co-owns the first bespoke, women-only shop on the Row, Gormley & Gamble, won’t be conferring with her clients over the internet. The degree of difficulty is too high.

“Men are more straight up and down, with or without beer bellies,” she said. Instead, she has sold tens of thousands of dollars worth of pandemic masks, some from leftover shirt fabric, and, more ambitiously, is prepping a new, socially distanced venture — an online store called Form Tailoring by Gormley & Gamble.

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“Completely Covid-proof,” she said.

Richard Anderson, owner of a shop that bears his name, stuck to an in-person approach to sales in the months between lockdowns. He had designed a trio of casual blazers, and one afternoon, before he had to close his doors again, he modeled them in a mirror. They were identical in cut — one button, peak lapels, slightly padded shoulders — and sold in wool, suede and leather. The leather version was a shade of shiny, riotous red rarely seen on anything but fire trucks or Michael Jackson.

“We’ll put it in the window and it brings them in,” he said, eyeing himself in the leather. “We’ve done something similar before. A peacoat in an orange billiard cloth. No one bought it in the orange, but we put in the window and people bought it in blue and green.”

Three out of four Beatles

Set in the upscale Mayfair neighborhood in Central London, Savile Row is a three-minute walk from Regent Street, one of the busiest shopping boulevards in Europe. Somehow it still feels separate and secluded, like a private club you might miss unless someone pointed out the entrance. It’s a by-appointment destination that doesn’t get a lot of foot traffic. Customers range from royals to mobsters, plus plenty of financiers.

“I had this one customer, young guy, whose father brought him in,” Mr. Carnera said. “He insisted I make an inside pocket for his joints.”

Raised in southeast London, Mr. Carnera skipped college to start an apprenticeship at Anderson & Sheppard that lasted for three and a half years. During that time, he worked solely on jackets, though his duties also included sweeping the floor, making tea and enduring practical jokes, like being sent on errands to buy button holes.

He later learned the art of cutting patterns, which are made from pieces of brown paper that provide the blueprint of every garment. Unlike made-to-measure clothing, which starts with a jacket that a customer tries on and is then tweaked, bespoke begins with the customer’s own contours. Every house on Savile Row keeps its paper patterns, thousands of them, usually strung on a line. At a glance they look like animal pelts.



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“This one is Gregory Peck’s,” said Mr. Carnera, after rummaging through a closet at the rear of Huntsman where patterns are kept in chronological order.

Savile Row is known for producing one-button jackets with roped shoulders that give men a slightly squared off look, a vestige of the street’s military roots. Every house, though, has its own aesthetic. Dege & Skinner cuts its trouser narrowly and makes wider-than-usual lapels. Owners of a suit made by Huntsman — jacket cut long and close to the chest, an equestrian silhouette — are said to nod in recognition when they encounter each other.



Savile Row on the first day of the new lockdown. Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

Most of the august, old houses are clustered on the “sunny side of the street,” namely the east. Many of the buildings opposite were constructed after World War II. Members of the Third Reich were once a source of income, but when the hostilities began, the street wasn’t spared. A few of the many bombs dropped on London during the Blitz landed on Savile Row.

Since then, successive generations of tailors have trickled in, each offering a jolt of the new. Like Edward Sexton, who showed up with his business partner, Tommy Nutter, in 1969. At the time, most houses kept their storefronts partially covered with drab fabric and speaking to the media was not cricket. If you had to ask what was behind those decorous scrims, you were encouraged to just move along. Mr. Sexton shocked the street by putting dazzling jackets in the window and attracted rock star clients. Three of the Beatles on the cover of Abbey Road are wearing suits he designed.

“Paul was the most conservative,” Mr. Sexton said. “John was more quirky.”

He sat one morning in late October in his newly opened store at 36 Savile Row, wearing an aqua blue, three-piece suit that was about 20 decibels louder than his voice, which registered just above a whisper. He’d worked for the last few decades out of a studio in Knightsbridge, and sounded somewhat ambivalent about returning to the street that launched him.

“It’s asleep now, and not because of Covid,” he said. “When I was here earlier with Tommy, it was really buzzing. There was an intelligence — the tailors spoke to each other, and they spoke tailoring. Today, there’s no sense of the needle in these places. They’re just showcases for brands.”

It doesn’t help that five storefronts are now vacant, just enough to make the place seem like it’s in distress. Pre-pandemic rents were high, demand for suits declined and Brexit hurt, too.

“Given the number of empty stores here, the survival of the street is at stake,” said Oswald Boateng, shown here in his shop.
“Some real, radical rethinking of approach is needed.” Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

“Things were already starting to unravel before Brexit,” said Oswald Boateng, one of a handful of “new bespoke movement” tailors who opened shops in the 1990s and early 2000s. “All of that international traffic that was coming through London, well, it’s going somewhere else now.”

Tailors with a “sense of the needle” aren’t necessarily in a hurry to open on Savile Row. Ms. Sargent knows the street is her natural milieu, but she gets along well with her current landlord on Brook Street and isn’t expecting a bargain if she moves back to the place where she learned the craft.

“It’s evolution, not revolution, on Savile Row,” she said. “It’s just been really expensive, and I can’t take on the added costs now.”

Some combination of high overhead and poor strategic choices have defeated some boldfaced names in fashion here. Lanvin and Alexander McQueen opened stores on the Row that have since closed. Pillars of the community have folded, too. Kilgour, French & Stanbury, which made the suit Cary Grant wore in “North by Northwest,” was acquired years ago by a Chinese investment company and closed in March, citing “challenging trading conditions.” (A pop-up shop on the Row is planned for December.) Hardy Amies, which opened in 1945 and designed costumes for Stanley Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey” as well as frocks for Queen Elizabeth, closed last year.

The space is now occupied by the flagship of Hackett, a company that is a relative whippersnapper at 37 years old. It started elsewhere in London and has dozens of stores around the United Kingdom and Europe.

In other words, it has some trappings of a brand showcase.

Queen Victoria’s Western Angolan trousers

Huntsman seems an improbable site for high-tech innovation. The second floor has a bar, a dart board and huge ancient ledgers with handwritten notes in elegant script. They look like props for a film adaptation of a Dickens novel. Actually, they are the in-house accounting books. There are entries for dukes, earls and many pages devoted to Queen Victoria, whose purchases included “2 Striped waistcoats with sleeves” and “5 pairs Western Angolan trousers.”

The robot idea sprang from the ever-churning mind of Pierre Lagrange, a long-haired 58-year-old Belgian hedge fund manager who acquired the company in 2013. Part nerd, part swashbuckling capitalist, Mr. Lagrange rides a Harley and exults during an interview about the pink, wide-wale corduroy jacket he owns. (“Everybody says it’s amazing.”) He’s been pushing Huntsman to expand its audience and offerings, bolstering its website and opening a Huntsman satellite in a Manhattan apartment that once belonged to Tony Bennett.

When Covid shut down retail in March, he brainstormed with a manager and started thinking about physicians who perform remote-controlled surgery. If a robot can work on a kidney, he figured, why not a suit?

Taj Phull, Huntsman's head of retail, appears on the screen that functions as Mr. Hammick's "face." The robot is named after Colin Hammick, the house's much-revered and now-deceased head tailor. Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

"I've always been a proponent of using tech in ways that let people focus on what they're really good at," he said, "whether that's a hedge fund or in tailoring."

The company had six robots built and christened all of them "Mr. Hammick," a tribute to Colin Hammick, Huntsman's much-revered and now-deceased head tailor. Five Mr. Hammicks are now in the United States and Asia. They are assembled in places convenient to customers, like their homes, by employees who live in the same country.

To date, the Hammick brigade has yet to produce a finished suit. But even before that proof-of-concept moment arrives, Mr. Lagrange is optimistic. Suits made on the Row for overseas customers take about a year from start to finish, largely because all three fittings require a visit, and those are spaced a few months apart. By relying on Mr. Hammick instead of planes, the whole process will take five months.

"I don't know how fast we would have gotten here without Covid," said Mr. Lagrange, of the machines. "Sometimes you need a crisis."

Some traditionalists here will be put off by what the mother of invention has wrought at Huntsman. Then there's Mr. Stocks, the agent of the Pollen Estate, who is a fan of any innovation that adds vitality to the Row and keeps its character intact.

"Let's face it, 10 years ago we'd be sitting here in suits," he said, after settling into a chair in the spacious tearoom in the rear of J.P. Hackett, where we met for a pre-lockdown interview. "But the world's moved on and we need to make sure that Savile Row moves with it. Because if you don't, you're dead."

A few years ago, Pollen hired a PR firm for the Row. It has also pushed for improvements to the streetscape. The current priority is keeping tenants afloat. Many did not pay rent during the first lockdown and the estate is now speaking to all tailors about further support during lockdown number two. During the four months stores were open in the summer and fall, discounted rents were paid, and some paid no rent at all.

Plenty of managing directors here give the estate high marks for the way it has dealt with them during the pandemic and for the tenor of negotiations about rents in the near future. Others are less impressed. Life on the Row, they say, has been far too expensive for too long.

“My understanding is that they are now willing to talk and find solutions,” said Mr. Boateng of the Pollen Estate. “That’s good to hear, but given the number of empty stores here, the survival of the street is at stake. Some real, radical rethinking of approach is needed.”

The estate has extra motivation to keep mainstay tenants *in situ*. With historic preservation in mind, the local government imposed a singular restriction on some properties on the Row: If a space has been zoned for in-store tailoring, it can be rented only to shops with in-store tailors. Pollen couldn’t fill a vacancy with a Zara or a Topshop if it were so inclined.

Which it is not. Mr. Stocks acknowledges that this tailors-only policy hands tactical advantage to some tenants. But it also prevents the five other landlords that own properties on the Row from letting to chain stores that would make the place generic.

This is not merely a hypothetical. Eight years ago, Abercrombie & Fitch opened a kid’s store in an unrestricted retail space. This was especially appalling to many because the building had once been home to Apple Corps, the Beatles’ multimedia company. In 1969, when the band couldn’t figure out where to play the show that became its last, instruments were hauled upstairs and the group played on the roof.

Before Abercrombie opened its doors, a group of dapper protesters, organized by a magazine called The Chap, gathered outside the space holding placards that read, in a nod to John Lennon, “Give Three Piece a Chance.” The store opened anyway and has since closed.

‘The algorithms got me!’

Suits at Oswald Boateng. The row is known for producing one-button jackets, but every house has its own aesthetic. Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

Mr. Stocks is engineering more palatable additions. A bespoke shoemaker, Gaziano & Girling, moved in last year. A coffee shop called the Service opened in July, the first of its kind here. A made-to-measure shop for women, the Deck, debuted last month.

“And we’d like to add the best leather goods, the best shirts, a watchmaker, male grooming,” he went on. “Make it a sort of bastion of men’s luxury — which it always has been, but in a broader, 21st-century sense.”

All of the Pollen Estate’s space on Savile Row is spoken for, so newcomers will move into the estate’s holdings nearby, on Old Burlington Street and Clifford Street. As it happens, one of Mr. Stocks’ newest tenants opened there in September, and he was eager to show it off.

Thom Sweeney, as the store is called, is a four-story townhouse with a spiffy new barbershop in the basement and two floors of clothing. The top floor has a full bar, leather sofas, a hearth filled with lit candles and a television playing a Sean Connery-era James Bond film.

To Mr. Stocks, this is the new model of hip, immersive retail — one he’d like shoppers to include in their image of Savile Row. The owners of Thom Sweeney, on the other hand, are happy to have a good 20 yards between them and the more famous street.

“We didn’t look at it,” said one of the owners, Thom Whiddett, about Savile Row. “We wouldn’t fit in there. The street has amazing tailors, but we didn’t want to pigeonhole ourselves.”

The idea was to open near enough to the Row to benefit from its prestige without getting saddled with its drawbacks. A number of tailors, on and off the street, lament the intimidation factor that keeps customers away. James Sleater of the nervily named Cad and the Dandy on Savile Row likened shopping on the street to beckoning a sommelier at a Michelin-starred restaurant. It could end up costing you so much you might not be inclined to do it. In a break with tradition, Cad puts prices on its website.

“Even if you can afford an Aston Martin,” Mr. Sleater said, “you want to know how much it’s going to cost you.”

Cad’s fondness for reinvention extends to online fittings. They have gone well enough for Mr. Sleater to call them “another string to our bow.”

Across the street, Ozwald Boateng sat in the office in his store and talked about lining up his first Zoom consultation. The prospect irked him. Last year, he unveiled his debut collection for women in a show at Harlem's Apollo Theater, which he titled A.I. The name was a feint. The initials stood for "authentic identity."

"I was really fed up with algorithms running our lives," he said. "So I flipped the meaning. I was trying to say, 'Keep your truth, keep your identity.'"

Eight months into the pandemic he's realized that, like it or not, technology is the only end run for Covid-19 — and perhaps the only way his company can survive.

"The algorithms got me!" he said, laughing, with a hint of resignation. "Even here, the digital world has won."