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SUR-LA-SEINE

BRITAIN MAY HAVE HAD GRANNY TAKES A TRIP AND MR FISH, BUT FRANCE HAD ITS OWN FABULOUS FASHION HOUSE: **RENOMA**. **VADIM KOSMOS** EXPLORES THE HISTORY OF THE COMPANY THAT GAVE PARIS ITS OWN SWINGING '60S STYLE



Maurice and Michel Renoma about to change the face of French fashion forever, 1963

"French rock is like English wine," John Lennon apparently declared in the '70s – and after countless appearances by Sacha Distel on cheesy Saturday night variety shows, or one-too-many radio spins of Sheila And B Devotion's 'Singin' In The Rain', this dismissive view has remained uncontested for years.

But the truth is more complex, and the reality is that the French have always operated in their own parallel universe of psychedelic rock, countercultural comics and underground movies. It's a universe inarguably influenced by the popular culture of the UK/USA axis, but that influence hasn't always flowed one way.

This is a parallel universe where Claude François' song 'Comme D'Habitude' inspired both Sinatra's 'My Way' and

Bowie's 'Life On Mars?'; where Humble Pie formed as Johnny Hallyday's backing band; and where Mungo Jerry had a UK Top 3 single with a Jacques Dutronc song (1973's 'Alright, Alright, Alright', Mungo fans).

And that parallel universe extended not just to rock music, but also to rock fashion.

While The British Invasion bands of the '60s were notable for their Italian-style

short "bum freezer" jackets and narrow tapered trousers, the French silhouette developed along more formal lines – long, tight-fitting double breasted blazers with wide trousers, giving our Gallic counterparts a cool, individual look that starkly contrasted with our own, and one that Brit rock stars would eventually seize upon themselves.

And this is how it happened.

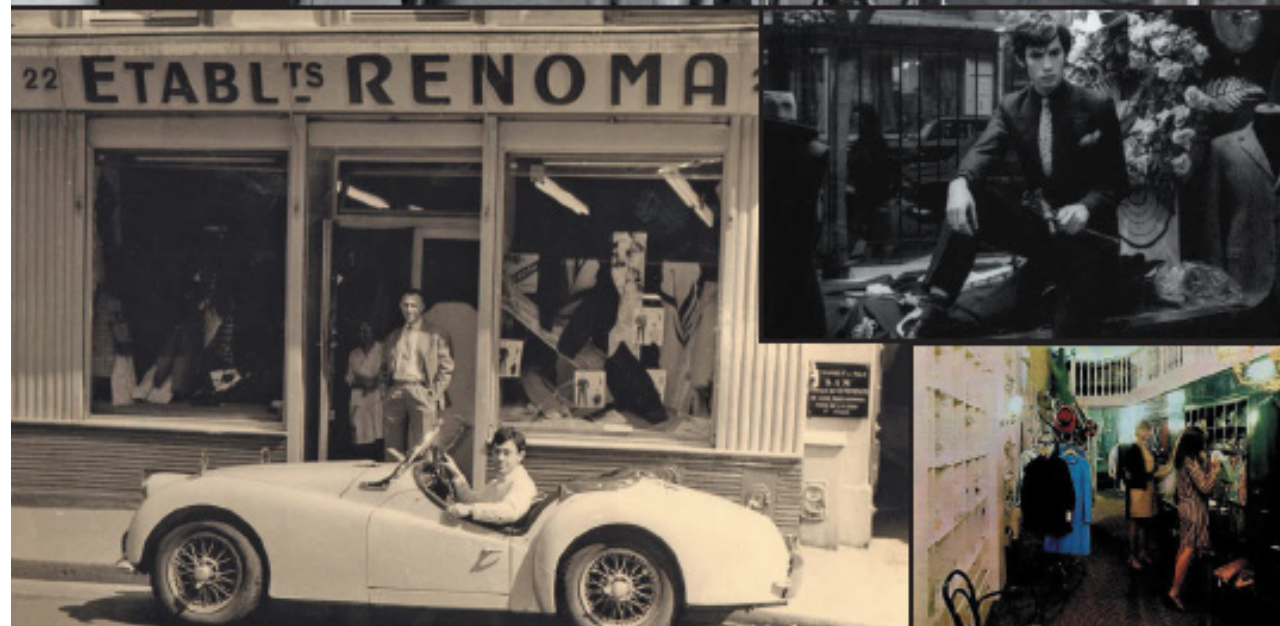
Although France had had stylish youth



The Renoma style. Double-breasted jacket with geometric patterned



The Drugstore, November 1960. Maurice and Michel outside the Renoma boutique, '63; Pierre Clement models, '64; inside the shop in '68



cults before – from the Apache street gangs of 19th century Montmartre, to the Zoot-suited Zazous of the '40s, and the *Blouson Noir* (black jacket) rock 'n' rollers of the '50s, the beginning of the '60s saw the start of a sustained youth fashion movement in France, and perhaps one man could claim to have been its driving force. His name? Maurice Renoma.

1960s France was a conservative, Catholic country and President De Gaulle presided over it in a strict, patrician manner. Rock 'n' roll hit France late, and not without resistance. For a country dominated by the cool intellectualism of jazz, the reaction to rock was either mockery or the creation of feeble carbon copies, and the whole genre was abruptly neutered with the conscription of a large proportion of its male fans into The Algerian War.

In their absence, rock 'n' roll was

replaced with a tamer product – *yé-yé* (named for the "Yeah, Yeahs" in English-language pop songs), in which rough, tough male rockers were swapped out for virginal, if coquettish, girl singers like Sylvie Vartan, Sheila and France Gall. Consequently, the *Blouson Noir*'s Levi's and leathers look was quickly replaced by a new trend for what could be called a "Middle Class English" style.

Cut back to '58 and the opening of Le Drugstore Publicis at 133 Avenue des Champs-Élysées, close to The Arc de Triomphe. Converting the fancy façade and interior of the former Hotel Astoria, the Drugstore was built to house the headquarters of Publicis, a holding company for advertising agencies around the world. The Drugstore cashed in on a craze for all things American sparked by the occupying force that had liberated the city, and it contained bars, restaurants, cinemas,

nightclubs, record stores, and international book and magazine stores (and would eventually inspire the similarly named Chelsea establishment that opened some 10 years later, immortalised in the Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want").

With the Drugstore came La Bande du Drugstore (or "Drugstore Gang"), a small group of youngsters from the wealthy 16th Arrondissement, including a number of future stars, most notably rock photographer Jean-Marie Perier, and pop stars Ronnie Bird and Zouzou.

The kids of mostly well-to-do parents, the gang acquired an early nickname – "*Blouson Doré*" (golden jackets), to differentiate them from the lower class "*Blouson Noirs*". The Drugstore created a convenient environment for the gang to meet up and obsess over the exciting worlds of London and the USA via imported R&B records and rare copies of *Melody Maker*

"Maurice had holidayed in England and it was on Carnaby Street and the King's Road that he first saw jackets with nipped-in waists. A style unknown in Paris, Maurice copied the look and improved on it"

that were only available to purchase at the Drugstore or neighbouring shops Sinfonia and Lido Musique.

By '65 the gang were known by a different name – *Les Minets*, literally meaning The Pussycats, and they wore a uniform of crested blazers or twin-vented tweed jackets, club ties and boat-necked sweaters; for though they loved English bands like The Who and The Small Faces, they didn't want to dress like the Italian-inspired mods. Instead, they wanted to look typically English.

Although it was considered *très chic* to buy clothes in London, especially from Austin Reed, there were Parisian outlets for "*Le Style Anglais*", such as the long established Old England near Opéra, and Burberry in the Madeline quarter, where you could pick up clobber like jumpers and blazers. For the less wealthy *Minets*, there were also the stalls and second hand clothes merchants at the Saint-Ouen flea market, where one could rummage around for button-down Oxford shirts and straight white raincoats.

Cue Maurice Renoma. Born in 1940 to a Polish Jewish family, Renoma grew up during the "*Trente Glorieuses*", the "glorious" 30-year period from '45-75 during which France rebuilt itself after the war. Maurice's tailor father, Simon Krzepicki, had a workshop on the Rue du Temple in the 9th Arrondissement and he came up with the brand name Renoma after attempting to trademark *Renomé*, the French word for renowned.

In the late '50s, French men had a reputation as being the worst dressed in Europe, stereotyped as short, fat fellows in berets. Maurice longed for change, inspired by Hollywood stars like James Dean and Marlon Brando, and the American GIs he saw as a youngster. In 1960, Maurice and his older brother Michel were given 15 square metres of the Renoma shop by their father and, in an attempt to change French style, the brothers began building a clientele of their own.

Like the hipper young Parisians of the era, Maurice had holidayed in England and it was on Carnaby Street and The King's Road that he first saw jackets with nipped-in waists. A style unknown in Paris, Maurice copied the look and improved on it.



Models from the first Renoma collection in 1967. Jacques Du Ponce sports Renoma on his '68 debut album



Maurice's first move was to change the established cut of men's suit jackets. This more fitted look – tighter waists with straight shoulders and wider lapels – was a sharp departure from the oversized jackets that had come before. Maurice's father called them "chimney-sweep suits", because they hugged the body and shoulders so tightly you could fit a chimney down them. Beforehand, such tailoring could normally only be found at Ted Lapidus' ready-to-wear menswear boutique Tedd, at much greater expense, and with much less flair.

Bellbottoms also featured, inspired by a pair of wide, horseman's trousers Maurice's girlfriend had brought back from holiday in the Camargue region. Maurice made his first pair of hound's tooth Camargue trousers at age 15, which figure-hugged like jeans but were very wide. Here, the Minet silhouette developed – bell-bottoms, long jackets, high armholes and nipped-in waists.

Given a Triumph TR3 by his mother in '61, Maurice rode the convertible up and down The Champs-Élysées, handing out business cards and promoting his new wares. Word spread throughout Paris, and soon enough Drugstore gang members were showing off their newly purchased Renoma suits in all the coolest places, as often as possible.

In the early '60s, for a young Parisian man to make an impression on girls and to be "with it", an English-style blazer was considered a must-have. The Renoma blazer was close-fitting and double-breasted, with flat silver buttons instead of traditional golden, curved ones. Michel also noted that the fit of the blazer had the advantage of making "nice little bums".

Michel asked his English girlfriend to source the pattern of the blazer that young people were wearing in England, and when the pattern arrived, his father cut it. Michel and his brother thought the finished product was wonderful, but their father exclaimed, "It's for gays! Don't you dare wear such a thing!" His opinion changed when they sold 15,000 blazers within a year.

Eventually Maurice and Michel realised they had to move out of their father's premises, now on the Rue de Notre Dame de Nazareth in the unfashionable 9th, as it was too far from their wealthy customers. Passing the Janson de Sully on Rue de la Pompe – the High School where many of his clients studied in the 16th – Maurice saw an antique shop opposite and arranged to receive the keys the next day.

Fascinated by America and the US President John F Kennedy, Maurice took inspiration from Kennedy's style and the

Jane Birkin and Serge Gainsbourg by David Bailey for Renoma, 1977



PHOTO BY DAVID BAILEY

"Renoma's window displays were designed to provoke. Enraged by the religious symbols, taxidermied animals, hand grenades and machine guns in the window, passers-by would throw stones through the window at night"

modernity he embodied. It was a huge contrast to the patrician President de Gaulle, or indeed Maurice's own cold, strict father, and so it was that his new shop White House opened on October 22nd '63. When Kennedy died exactly one month later, a swift name change was required, and Renoma it became.

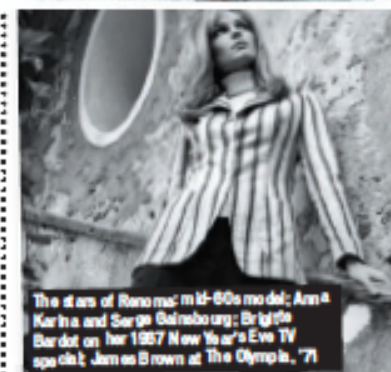
Renoma was a revelation to the youth of Paris, becoming the first boutique to focus on young people of 15 or even 14 years old. At the time, young men went to their father's tailors, and a suit was supposed to be worn for a decade or more. Renoma flipped that dynamic, and soon teenagers were bringing in their dads.

Within a year of opening, Renoma expanded across Europe, opening 60 shops in total, including one on Beauchamp Place in Chelsea, London. Soon after, Jean Bouquin, a buyer employed at the launch of Renoma, opened a rival store called Chez Mayfair in a former butcher's shop on Rue de la Pompe. Further boutiques called Harrison, Kerrington and Princeton followed. Carnaby Street had come to Paris!

In '64 Renoma introduced a '30s Chicago collection, *Les Incorruptibles*, the French title for the American TV mobster series *The Untouchables*. This pinstripe three-piece or double-breasted gangster look – modelled by a pre-fame Pierre Clémenti – predated the Beatty/Dunaway *Bonnie & Clyde*-inspired styles by three years.

Renoma's window displays were designed to provoke. Enraged by the religious symbols, taxidermied animals, hand grenades and machine guns in the window, passers-by would throw stones through the window at night, so Maurice employed a carpenter to make spare windows. Come the morning, the new windows were in place, but the broken windows were almost part of the décor. Indeed, Maurice preferred them broken, as they were more visually more arresting.

The Renoma brothers' restless imaginations led to the search for novel and unusual materials. Maurice discovered printed velvets in the soft furnishings department of the BHV department store, and combined with a daring use of colour (in a time when French menswear was dominated by greys, blues, beiges), he also employed bold geometric patterns inspired



The stars of Renoma: mid-60s model Anna Karina and Serge Gainsbourg; Brigitte Bardot on her 1967 New Year's Eve TV special; James Brown at The Olympia, '71



by the Op-Art of painter and sculptor Victor Vasarely.

His choices of fabric attracted other young designers looking for inspiration – Nino Cerrutti, Karl Lagerfeld and Yves Saint Laurent were all regular customers, and Renoma's figure hugging menswear designs grew so popular they were adapted for a female clientele with a unisex collection soon following. Maurice claims Yves Saint Laurent lifted this look for his ground-breaking women's trouser suits.

Celebrity customers flocked to them, including French stars of screen and music. Antoine acquired his flowery silk shirts from Renoma, and in '66 on his song 'Les Playboys', Jacques Dutronc sang, "J'ai pas peur des petits Minets qui mangent leur Ronron au Drugstore" ("I'm not afraid of the little pussycats who eat their cat food at the Drugstore") – and he dressed in Renoma on his LP cover.


Similarly, Nino Ferrer sang on his track 'La Bande à Ferrer', "Pour faire partie de la bande à Ferrer, il faut... S'habiller chez Mayfair ou bien chez Renoma..." ("To be part of the Ferrer gang, you have to... dress at Mayfair or Renoma..."), and he dolled up accordingly on his sleeves.

In '67, Serge Gainsbourg appeared in Pierre Koralnik's comédie musicale *Anna* sporting a silver-buttoned double-breasted Renoma blazer. The following year, Gainsbourg's then-lover Brigitte Bardot donned a military-style Renoma jacket for the 'Devil Is An Englishman' segment of her own New Year's Eve TV special.

And, of course, international rock stars gave Renoma the final seal of cool caché – Jagger, Richards and Hendrix all sporting the look. James Brown also wore a Mao style jacket at his '71 Paris L'Olympia concerts and Bob Dylan bought two Renoma suits on his 25th birthday.

In '73 Maurice expanded the brand into Japan with Renoma customers Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin as Brand Ambassadors. Serge and Maurice would become fast friends, Maurice introducing Serge to his partner of his final years, Caroline Von Paulus, aka Bambou.

Maurice's first store remains on the Rue de la Pompe to this day; for their 50th anniversary in 2013, Renoma reproduced a range of their signature garments from their '60s and '70s heyday, including Gainsbourg's iconic pinstripe jacket – reassuringly tagged at a modern reproduction of the price Serge would have paid in the '70s.

In '71, John Lennon released a short film in support of his new single 'Imagine'. Lennon sits and sings at his white piano as Yoko Ono draws back the wooden window shutters in the all-white music room at their Berkshire mansion. Visible in close-up, Lennon wears a brown velvet jacket. Its label? Renoma. 

With thanks to Maxime Boyer at Renoma