

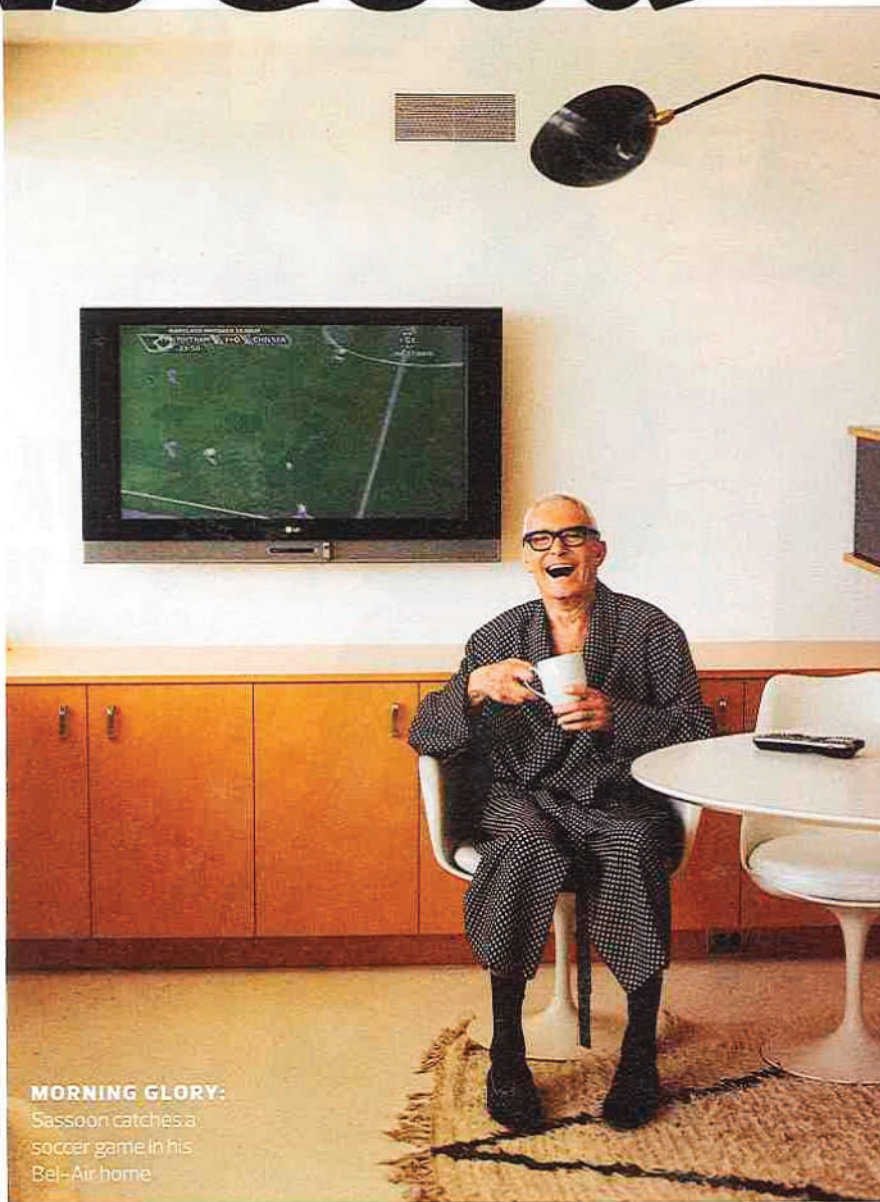
He Still Looks Good

Orphan, soldier, father of modern hairdressing—**Vidal Sassoon** is also a longtime Angeleno. A new film reveals how he built his empire

BY LAURIE PIKE

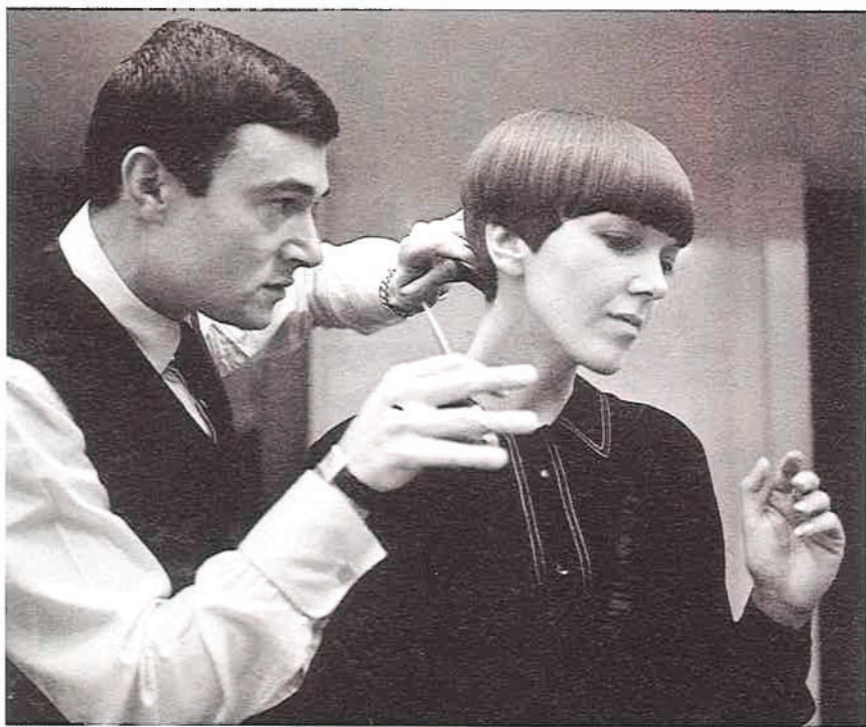
He is 83, but the man behind the catchphrase “If you don’t look good, we don’t look good” is still trim, tan, and impeccably groomed. Almost half a century has passed since Vidal Sassoon invented his signature bob; in the ensuing decades he launched salons, cosmetology schools, and hair products internationally. His transformation from a Jewish East End orphanage kid to hairdresser to the stars is captured in the documentary *Vidal Sassoon: The Movie*, to be released this month, and in the book *Vidal: The Autobiography*, out this summer. Sitting in the sparsely furnished den of his 1959 Richard Neutra “glass box” in Bel-Air, Sassoon recalls his Bauhaus inspiration, a frisky ex-wife, and what he did with a machine gun in the war that helped establish Israel.

You grew up during the Depression with your brother and your mother. Is it true that your father deserted the family? My father and his brother imported carpets from Turkey and Greece. They were born in Salonika in northern Greece. My father was the one person who let the family down. He was a playboy. As I like to say, he spoke seven languages, and I swear he had sex in all seven.



MORNING GLORY:

Sassoon catches a soccer game in his Bel-Air home



SASSOON SCISSORHANDS: Vidal gives a bob to Mary Quant, his fashion collaborator in Swinging London

The Egyptian army was advancing tanks and armored cars on the only road to Tel Aviv. We surprised them at four o'clock in the morning. We were halfway up a hill before they started shooting. Except for people like Wingate, the Brits mainly were pro-Arab because of the oil and business. We were bombed by the same Spitfires that had protected us three years before in London. With sheer determination we held the hill for 13 days. The casualty rate was enormous—much more on their side because they would send troops up the hill and you'd take them.

So you killed people. I'd like to think I didn't because I have always thought of these faceless men in Cairo sitting behind desks sending young boys to do their killing for them. You had a sense of purpose in doing what you were doing, but you knew the young Arabs didn't want to be there. Why would they? They came out of Cairo, some sort of marvelous life in Egypt, and suddenly they're being drafted and mowed down. Despite all the criticism, I have never doubted the necessity of Israel. We felt "never again" were absolutely the right two words.

Your mother placed you and your brother in an orphanage for several years. Did you resent her for it? It was what she had to do. Nobody had any money. She visited once a month, which was all she was allowed, and took us back when she remarried. She dreamt one night I would become a hairdresser. I was 14 and never good in school, so I dropped out to support the family. She took me to a salon to be an apprentice.

That was in the low-rent East End of London, where you had grown up. What did you learn there? Discipline. This was during the Second World War, and we slept in a bomb shelter. But you had to show up with your pants pressed, so you slept on them. Your shoes had to be polished, so you found a rag and wiped them off. After your first shampoo, your nails would be clean. At other salons, while I was still a teenager, I worked on call girls. When I couldn't learn anything more, I'd say so. I got fired from so many places. After my stepfather had a heart attack, I became the only wage earner in the house. So I worked nights teaching at salons for extra money.

Before you opened your own salon, you spent a few years fighting fascists in London and Arabs in Israel. How did you get involved with that? The Second World War had ended, and there was a lot of political stuff going on. All the fascists were let out of jail. Would you believe it? They put on their uniforms and

started marching around London. Gerry Lambert, 250 pounds of solid muscle, had been a private in the army. He and other ex-servicemen and women formed the 43 Group, a vigilante organization. They said, "We're not going to allow this. Not after five years of what we've been through." I joined it when I was 17.

Where did you fight the fascists? On the streets? Yes. I walked into the salon where I was working one day and someone said, "Good God, Vidal, what happened to your face?" And I said, "Oh nothing, madam. I just tripped over a hairpin." We were told never to talk about what we were doing.

When did you go to Israel? In 1948, when I was 20. An Israeli officer came to London and said that as soon as Britain left Palestine, there would be a war. Israel would be attacked. They wanted volunteers. I joined a commando unit of the Palmach, a militia that preceded the Israeli Defense Forces. It was one of the best years of my life. They were kids from *kibbutzim*, like Yitzak Rabin and Moshe Dayan, trained secretly by people like Orde Wingate, a British officer.

What weapons were you given in Israel? A machine gun.

This was the first Arab-Israeli war. Did you kill people? I tried not to kill people. [Laughs.]

When you returned to London, you started your own salon. Where did you get the funds? A client got her husband and his brother to put up the money. It was a third-floor walk-up.

That was in 1954, almost a decade before you updated the bob and became the father of modern hairdressing. What was different in the '50s about how you cut hair? People would come in with a picture, saying, "This is the way I want my hair." We would take control. We would say, "No, let's look at your bone structure. Let's talk about that. First of all, stand up." You need to know how tall she is. If a woman wanted backcombing and shellacking, we'd say, "We'll get you a cab." We would never compromise.

What inspired the bob? Architecture has been at the forefront of my thinking. When you looked at the Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius buildings that were going up, and the way that fashion was changing, everybody knew that hairdressing had to change. I created short hairstyles with bangs for Mary Quant, the fashion designer who invented the miniskirt. But when I did the five-point cut in 1963, with three points in the back and one on each side, it was perfect geometry. The Bauhaus later recognized it as "part of the forward movement of design."

Was the wash-and-wear perm as revolutionary as that five-point haircut? No, it was a typical



PERFORMANCE: Sassoon cuts Mia Farrow's hair in front of the press on the *Rosemary's Baby* set.

Sassoon cut that we permed without setting it first. I wanted to call it "the Harlem" or "the Caucasian Afro." But it was the late '60s. Riots were happening. People said, "Look, that could be a danger." So we called it "the Greek Goddess."

What were the critics' responses to the Vidal Sassoon aesthetic? Some of the older press said, "This will never work. It's too masculine." David Bailey, the famous British photographer, preferred the tousled look, as if the woman had just rolled out of bed—preferably with him.

You have been a physical fitness buff from childhood. Did that manifest itself in your work? We had a juice bar in the salon in 1965. We had a nurse giving vitamin C and B-12 injections to clients. The health authorities made us stop. Some people come along who are brilliant, but they just don't have the stamina. And then ten years on you think, "Whatever happened to so-and-so?" We didn't party all the time. If I knew that the next day would be difficult, I'd say goodnight at eleven o'clock.

In 1964, Britain exerted the biggest influence on culture. So why leave? I had to make a decision: Do I stand behind a chair forever, or do I go out and turn this international? I decided to take an artistic team around the world. At the Pierre hotel in New York, 14 hairdressers from 14 countries were invited to do a show,

each with his own style. I gave triplets three different geometric cuts. I hope this is not presumptuous, but I was the only modernist. New York and Paris, I'm afraid, were a little behind. We got rave reviews. The chairman from Charles of the Ritz called me the next day, and I met with him. He said, "I'll buy a building on Madison Avenue. You go back and train a team, and we'll open next year."

So began your chain of salons, which were followed in 1969 by cosmetology schools and then in 1975 by your hair products. You always have shared credit with your employees. A psychologist might say you became the father you never had. I have always felt a great responsibility for people who work with me. I don't think one person can do what we did alone. The top people all got shares. I wanted them to feel it was their company and we'd all grow together. Some stayed 40 years. They got great dividends, and when they sold their shares they did very, very nicely.

L.A. has figured prominently in your life. When did you make it your home? I had a breakfast appointment at the Beverly Hills Hotel with a man named Don Sullivan in 1973. He was a research chemist who wanted to create a product line with me. I said, "When can you come to New York?" And he said, "If you want me to do your products, you'll come to L.A." So I came to L.A. with my wife, Beverly, who was from Burbank, and it was a whole different life. We were asked to guest host TV shows, which later turned into my own morning show, *Your New Day*, with guests like Peter Ustinov, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Bob Hope. I did 200 shows.

Did L.A. influence your work with hair? My collaboration with the late Rudi Gernreich, who was an L.A. designer, was as inspirational as what I did with Mary Quant. Rudi and I had such a great rapport that once he asked me to do the hair for a show he was preparing for London. He said, "I don't have to tell you what do to—I know it's going to work." We were on the same page.

Your first wife, whom you married in your twenties, left you for her ski instructor. Your second wife came to L.A. with you, and you raised your four children together. Now you are married to Ronnie Holbrook. Wasn't there another wife? That was all about sex. She was a very horny

girl. She baptized me as a member of the mile-high club. But she was more in love with horses than she was with me. I've been married to Ronnie now for 20 years.

The documentary reveals your sadness over the loss of your first child, Catya, to a drug overdose in 2002, when she was 33 years old. Are you close to your other children? Elan, who is 41, has gone into the hair product business and is doing incredibly well. It's a very good product. I told him, "Tell me about it after the initial excitement dies down and salons are buying it because of the quality, not because of your name." My little Eden, who is 37, has two children and runs a Pilates studio in Beverly Hills with a partner. She is quite ambitious.

What about David, the African American child you adopted when he was three years old? We felt that young people here should know one another's culture rather than hate one another's culture. He could read three books at a time. He has an eclectic mind, and the possibilities there were enormous. But with that came an extraordinary lethargy. As a child, he was always in trouble. At the moment I don't see much of David.

You have referred to selling your product company to the American conglomerate Richardson-Vicks, in 1982, as one of the only regrets in your life. When Richard and Git—I mean Richardson-Vicks!—decided to seduce me, the promises were unreal. We were going to be worldwide. But a year and a half later, I was left to hang dry. I had very little training in business. I did things instinctively. I didn't have a clause that says "If Richardson-Vicks sells the company, I get my name back." Once they sold out to Procter & Gamble, P&G made up their mind what to do with the products and my name. That was their prerogative. Of course we became big in the Far East—still are—but they decided that Pantene, which they also bought, would be their brand in Europe. I don't cry over spilt milk. We had a court case, which they settled. There are no bad feelings.

Do you regret the changes in the product? I'm not really allowed to say.

Why write the autobiography now? I wanted to leave something behind. Young people can look at me and say, "Good God, he started in an orphanage, couldn't speak the language properly, was treacherous at school, and yet something happened for him. Could that happen to me?" I want them to know they can do it if they dig deep.