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cutting-edge artist

A New York minute with hair-styling legend Vidal Sassoon

BY MARK ELLWOOD
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

Vidal Sassoon was the original celebrity hairdresser, a handsome lady-killer with a dashing dose of Austin Powers.

The just released "Vidal Sassoon: The Movie" examines his extraordinary life and career. At 83, a life-long love of yoga has left Sassoon more limber than Madonna, and he even demonstrates some poses on screen. Though he's based in Los Angeles, Sassoon always fondly recalls the decade he spent living and working in New York.

You're best known for the bob haircut, the 'do now synonymous with Anna Wintour. How did that happen?

[Actress] Nancy Kwan came to London and she had 4 feet of hair. Her director said, "I want you to give her one of your new looks, starting from scratch." She was one of the most beautiful girls so you couldn't go wrong unless your scissors slipped.

That cut turned you into the first celebrity hairdresser. One of the reasons was that you didn't just focus on VIPs.

We had an open salon on Bond St. [in London] where not only did the socialites and showbiz writers come, but we also had nurses and secretaries who would save a few shillings a week in those days and come once a month, once every five weeks, for a super haircut. Our people would take very special attention with them. I used to say, "Treat the secretaries like the princesses and the princesses like secretaries."

Very soon after becoming famous in the 1960s, you moved to New York — and spent a decade here, so you must have felt at home.

I had 10 years of lovely theater, great music, extraordinary art. I love New York, and I think there's a certain period in anyone's artistic life, whether writer or whatever they do, that New York must be important to them. It gives you so much, so many ideas that are spread around. I did exactly the right thing.

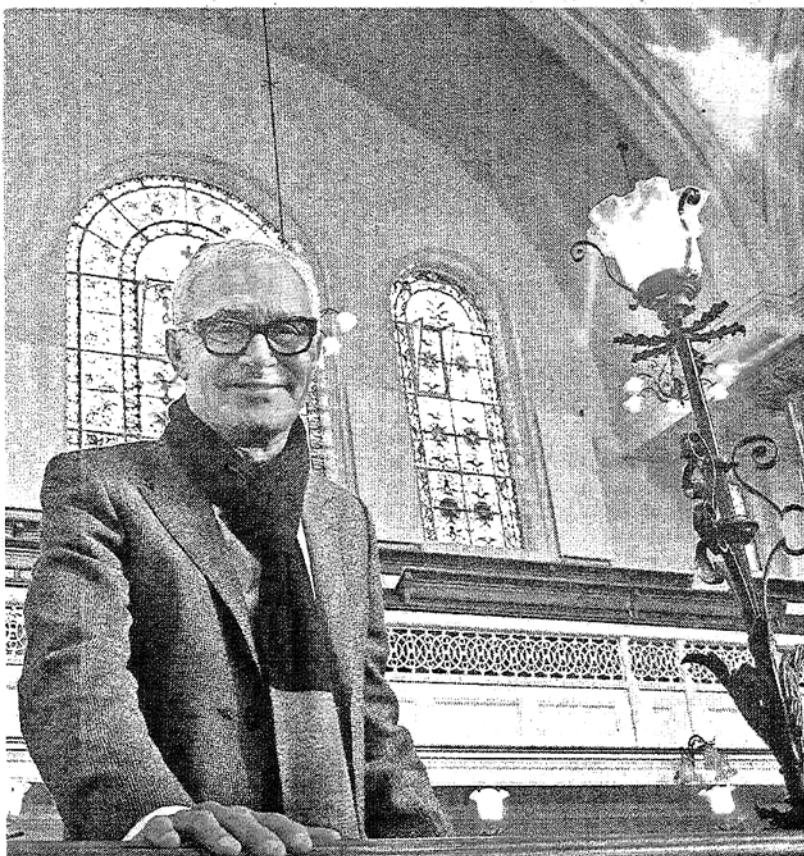
How did New York compare with London then? Your haircuts were very edgy — I can imagine they intimidated some people.

They weren't quite ready for it. When we opened, for the first six months, we didn't get the ladies who lunched, we got a great art crowd. People were nervous to have a brand-new look.

But soon you were as famous here as back in London. How did New York inspire your work?

I'm a great jazz fan, always have been since I was a kid, so I used to go up to Harlem. I was looking around Harlem, and I thought, "How can I give this look to Caucasian and Asian people?" I went back to London, and organized a whole weekend at our second salon, inside the Grosvenor House hotel.

I said, "Look, I'm booking a couple of rooms and we're staying the whole weekend" until we got it right, as close to what you could get in Harlem as possible. I called [the style] the Greek Goddess, but I should have called it Harlem. That was 1967 and it was New York-inspired.



Ever-stylish Sassoon (above) in a scene from the documentary "Vidal Sassoon: The Movie"; top photo, models in the film sport some of his trademark hairdos.