STYLE & FASHION

LOVE STORY

Just for Kicks

Writer Gay Talese's shoe obsession started early—in the dapper Deep South—and continues up North in stride

BY STEVE GARBARENO

WHEN MANHATTAN journalist, author and man-about-town Gay Talese bagged his day around 7 a.m., he dressed "Like I'm going to the lunch I'm not going to." Inevitably, that means he's imperceptibly turned out, from his signature fedora to his bespoke Oxford shoes. For the author of "The Neighbor's Wife" and writer of many other books and false biographies ("Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"), shoes have helped make him the man he is today: dignified, matronly, dapper.

Mr. Talese isn't sure how many pairs he owns. "I have about 40 pairs here in the house. And we have a house in Rosbury, Conn., where there's about the same," said Mr. Talese, who was wearing on this day what he called "an afternoon outfit," consisting of a dark-green three-piece suit made by Cristian of Paris, a button-down from Addison on Madison by Brian Wall (he has 60 such shirts); a red Sulla tie; a pocket square from Stefano Ricci; and a Cartier bracelet watch.

His ten fedoras—which beg a "FREES" card in his head—were made, like all his hats, by Bruno Lacozanis, of Puerto Rico's Star in New York.

For footwear, the 80-year-old often loans toward the looks of woods and spirits. On this day, to match his suit, he wore a pair of lace-up olive Oxford from Domenico Vacca on Madison Avenue. "A very nice shoe," he said from his writing room, a converted wine cellar he calls "the Banter," where he's currently at work on "A Nonfiction Marriage," a history of his life with Ms. Talese.

But the shoes he's most famous for are created by Roman Vainzuks of Vincent & Edger, a Lexington Avenue boot maker. The handmade affairs are exact replicas of a pair Mr. Talese purchased in 1960 at a dearly departed Manhattan haberdashery called Leftkurz. "What distinguishes them is this suede trimmings around the leather, and these tiny raised metal hooks that hold the laces in place," he said. "The original Leftkurz were 2.5 inches wide, which is when I discovered Vincent & Edger.

Nearly all of Mr. Talese's shoes abide a similar design: "two-toned with six eyelet rows and a narrow toe..." he says. "It looks so much that some have been stolen for 30 years," he said. "Looking smart and wearing nice shoes is in Mr. Talese's blood. The Ocean City, N.J., native's mother was a buyer for a Brooklyn's department store. And her son and the grandson of "prideful" Italian tailors.

Mr. Talese—who's first name is short for Gastano—has worn tailored clothing since he was a grade-schooler. It was in Rome, in 1969, however, that he first saw a Brioni suit (he now owns a dozen of them), while visiting the city as a lieutenant stationed in Frankfort. It was a defining moment in his sartorial evolution: "I'd never seen a Brioni until I stroked past the store window and liked what I saw." In New York in the mid-'60s, he became a regular customer (as has he with Zegna and an Upper East Side tailoring shop called LAA).

The power of the shoe, however, preceded its custom suits. Mr. Talese's first loves were the white buckskins that students were at the University of Alabama, where he started as a freshman in 1939. Since then, his affinity for white bucks has faded (he owns none), but distinctive footwear has occupied and overspent closet spaces throughout his home.

"The two-and-a-half writer doesn't revel in shoes simply to showboat around," he said, explaining how he changes pairs four times a day, with each set playing a functional role in his routine. "I don't own a pair of sneakers. I don't have bluejeans—neither blend in with my day."

When he's writing at home, he said, "I wear a fine pair of Articoli slip-ons. They're very soft leather, very comfortable, and yet not so casual that I could not remain in them when dressed in one of my Cristies suits, or a Brioni."

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For his daily workout at a nearby gym, he wears "soft, low-cut white leather lace-up Barbiaglia sports shoes, which vaguely resemble moccsins."

Exhibiting a dozen or so of his favorites, up in shoe trees, Mr. Talese mused that he enjoys stylishly startling through each living hour as if it were his last. "People dress up for funerals," he said. "Why not dress up to celebrate that you're alive?"

The former New York Times reporter has long said that for a man who came from an era in which men never "dressed for the story."

And then there are all those common threads that writing and shoe-making share. Mr. Talese often bonds the two—their process and craftsmanship—into conversation.

"It's hard to tell you the cost, or the time Roman Vainzuks takes to make me a pair. You could write a novel faster than he makes shoes," he explained.

"I love doing something well. It's the craftsmanship. And how, like a seamless story, it all stands up to the test of time."