

Rogers Perlis: King of Subtle Sartorial Style

By JEANNETTE GOTTLIEB

On Mardi Gras morning, when the Dukes of the Krewe of Rex make their way through the entrance of Canal Street's exclusive Boston Club, they'll be visions of sartorial splendor in their classic morning suits. Vestiges of another age. A testimony to old-time pomp and circumstance. A defiant fist raised in protest against the leisure suit.

You might suspect that their tasteful attire had been brought to New Orleans from Harrad's of London, or some lushly carpeted shop with snooty sales people on New York's Fifth Avenue. But the truth is that all that elegance draped tastefully round the Dukes of Rex was, until recently, hanging in a stuffy little attic at Perlis' Men's store on the corner of Magazine and Webster.

Riding the Magazine Street bus you pass the rather ordinary-looking little store without a second glance, hardly guessing that behind its simple glass and wood-paneled facade stands the clothier to New Orleans' uptown establishment — Rogers Perlis.

Dwarfed but not overwhelmed by racks and tables filled to a fault with pants, shirts, ties, tuxedos and full dress suits floating in a sea of cardboard boxes and discarded wrapping paper, Perlis has been roaming these aisles for 11 hours a day, six days a week since 1939. And today, at age 60 and in spite of a small army of salesmen, he remains his own one-man show.

He's an inveterate jokester and like all good comedians he's got a gimmick every bit as effective as Jimmy Durante's nose. Perlis' tour de force is playing the role of an aging businessman, reduced by his son and younger employees to the role of maitre d' in his own bailiwick.

His style and delivery are taken in stride by the three generations of customers who come to the store and demand his personal service — even when the problem is as simple as lengthening a pair of pants or checking the delivery date on short-sleeved cotton shirts.

"I love to wait on the people, by gosh," Perlis says. Leaning on a stack of Lee's jeans and surrounded by swarms of customers, he looks like a proper Garden District gentleman should look.

Perlis is wearing his subtle-striped gray suit fitted in the uptown manner . . . not too tight. In fact, in this day of the European cut, some fashion-conscious folks might even say it is a bit baggy. Around his collar, just grazing his striped tie, are strewn a couple of measuring tapes.

His brown wingtips kick aside a huge hunk of brown wrapping paper as he walks toward a reporter to explain that he's a shy man, that he doesn't want any publicity for the store. This is not a place



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for the masses and the proprietor would just as soon keep it that way. Talk to his son David, or his manager Buddy Bond, but leave him to his customers.

He calls to a sheepish newcomer to the world of deb parties and Carnival balls who's just entered the store: "Be right with you, Mac, I'm supposed to be fitting your full dress." And he heads toward the nonsensical fitting room to make Mac feel as at home as possible under the circumstances.

Perlis went into the clothing business 25 years ago. He was 24 years old, and the Depression was ending. He found an investor in the owner of the nearby Royal Cleaners and used the money to buy tuxedos and full dress which he would rent and Royal Cleaners would

clean.

The arrangement prospered, Perlis did a thriving rental business and eventually repaid the investor. Meanwhile, he established a reputation for renting tasteful formal wear in a city that abounds in occasions that require it. Gradually he lured the stalwarts of local society into his store. And he's kept them there because of his strictly conservative attitude toward men's clothes.

No fast-talking, hipster salesmen here. No trendy pitches about what they're wearing in Paris or Rome. No Pierre Cardin and no rock music. The stock and trade here is tradition — suits bearing labels like Haspel, H. Freeman and Palm Beach. Discreetly placed here and there are a few reluctant concessions to

the flashier trends of 1976. But not many.

Perlis pulls out a drawer beneath a table piled shoulder-high with clothes and sits on it. You must be pretty busy around here at Carnival time, eh, Mr. Perlis? Twirling the tape measure around his neck, he announces quietly that he probably sells more full dress outfits than anyone in the country — between 100 and 125 a year.

Presenting a couple of manufacturer's brochures to illustrate what is correct, Perlis starts leafing through them to find an example of classic full dress. He can't find one. Instead, there's page after page of hair-sprayed models wearing full dress fashioned out of velvet, in plaids, stripes and frills. He blanches and a low level "yeech" comes rolling through his teeth.

"I'm thinking of dropping the After Six line and carrying something else," he says, taking a page from an After Six catalog and pointing with obvious horror at the wide lapels and Western pockets.

New-fangled formal dress is just one of his enemies. Perlis refuses to carry double knits in his Magazine Street store (standards are more liberal at the shops he operates in the Gus Mayer stores in Carrollton and Oakwood and the newest shop in Lake Forest Plaza). Summer vests are bad form and ridiculous for New Orleans. He turns pale at the mention of leisure suits.

Rogers Perlis has for years lived three blocks from his store but never takes time to go home for lunch. He prefers to stay at the store and serve as host to his customers and curmudgeon-in-residence to his employees.

Every so often he looks around at the empty boxes on the floor and wonders aloud why the boys don't straighten the place up. But despite this and other minor irritations like the mere existence of the abominable tux-tail (some marketing man's idea for consolidating tuxedos and finally into one neat package) — he firmly declares that he won't give up centerstage to retire.

"My hobby is my work. I'm slowing down but I'm afraid that I won't be long for this earth if I retire." And with that he spies an old friend carrying an armful of suits to be altered. The man is 70-ish, sports a striped bow tie and a graying crewcut. He's the kind of man you see in August on the corner of Gravier and Carondelet in a wrinkled white linen suit.

As the man dons his first candidate for alteration, it's apparent that he's lost enough weight to warrant the elimination of at least a couple of sizes from his billowing pants. Perlis takes a critical look at the suit, pulls a piece of chalk from his pocket and cracks to his old customer, "Doc, I told you to stop fooling around. If you keep losing weight your wife is gonna start suspecting something."

Over at the main counter a salesman tells a telephone caller who has stumbled upon Perlis' in the yellow pages that no, they don't carry purple tuxedos.

Photography by William F. Haber