

# A FAMILY AFFAIR

FATHER-AND-SON FASHION POWERHOUSE CASELY-HAYFORD IS REDEFINING THE ROLE OF THE BLACK MAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY – AND IT'S DOING IT IN STYLE

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oe and Charlie Casely-Hayford are the father-and-son design duo behind fledgling luxury menswear brand Casely-Hayford. Now in its third

season, Casely-Hayford has hit its stride with its spring/summer 2010 collection, which looks to Africa, via east London, for inspiration. It's to the latter I head to meet the two men at work.

Welcoming me into their bright, white studio, Joe and Charlie Casely-Hayford are a striking sight. Joe has a distinguished air about him that borders on regal. Tall, lean and demurely dressed head-to-toe in grey, he instantly commands respect. His son's hair is more wild and his clothes more dapper (red socks peek out above his Dr Marten boots, which, in turn, are exposed by deliberately rolled up trousers). But despite his youth, the 24-year-old exhibits the same quiet confidence that his father possesses in abundance. A chip off the old block.

In fact, the family's pedigree precedes them both. Joe's Ghanaian grandfather Joseph Ephraim Casely-Hayford MBE was a prominent author, lawyer and pan-African thinker, who studied at Cambridge and dedicated himself to the emancipation of West Africa. His family has had strong ties to England ever since. Joe was born in Kent in 1956 and trained as a tailor before attending Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design, where he met his wife Maria, who today is labouring on the studio computer. He then launched himself onto London's fashion scene in the early 1980s.

"As a young black guy at that time, I was really aware of social uniforms. I didn't feel I belonged so that made me interested in the

cult of the individual. I wanted to create my own identity, and that's what drew me into fashion," says Joe of his early years. "It was a completely different time back then, you could create a label and start out cutting on the kitchen table. I guess I was quite naïve, I was full of energy and was even selling clothes to various stores on King's Road as a student. I don't think that businesses could blossom like that today. People are far more limited by commerce."

## LEADING THE WAY

One of his first designs, which helped the Joe Casely-Hayford brand take off, was a shirt in two halves that buttoned up at the front and back. "We're thinking of bringing it back for next season," Charlie chips in. Joe was soon approached by bands (including The Clash, Lou Reed and U2) to make stage clothes. Throughout the 1990s he showed his collections in Paris, London and Tokyo and had over 100 stockists worldwide. "I can't imagine how I did it all now," Joe sighs. "I was designing womenswear and menswear simultaneously, as well as costumes for film and ballet productions. It was quite intense."

Charlie, who shares the same birthday as his father (May 24), grew up among this glorious chaos. "The studio was like my home. I spent most of my childhood there with my sister, playing around and annoying our parents," Charlie recalls. "I remember going to his first London Fashion Week show when I was a kid and sitting next to Princess Diana. All these flashing lights were going off and I didn't really know what was going on."

Although Charlie's fashion trajectory seemed inevitable, he chose to study art (he followed an art foundation at Central Saint Martins with a degree in the history of art from The Courtauld Institute of Art). Joe actively tried to dissuade him from following in his footsteps. "He just wasn't having any of it. He explained to me how difficult the industry was.

But while I was at St Martins I became aware of the social connotations of clothes, just like my father did, which is when I really started to become interested in what he was doing."

At the same time, Joe had become creative director of Gieves & Hawkes. During his tenure (2005-2008) he reinvigorated the brand and took it to Men's Fashion Week in Paris – a first for any Savile Row tailor. "I had always been considered an anti-establishment designer so it was a beautiful challenge for me to contemporise such a bastion of English tailoring" says Joe. During his time at Gieves & Hawkes, he received an OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire), and when he left he was ready to team up with his son.

Together they launched Casely-Hayford for spring/summer 2009 with a collection influenced in equal measure by English sartorialism and British anarchy. "Our intent was to create desirable clothing that tells a story," says Joe of their debut, which could glibly be described as Edward VIII-meets-sports casual. "Our brand is not just about fashion. We try to give a permanence via the idea of innovation through tradition. We like modernism and classicism side by side."

Autumn/winter 2009, which brought the opposing forms of formal clothing and workwear together, continued to explore the brand's notion of duality, whether in the function of the clothing, the polarity of their references or in the very nature of their double act. Thanks to the brand's cornerstones of understated elegance, innovative detailing and enduring quality, Casely-Hayford has gained a loyal customer base both



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in London, where it is exclusively stocked at Dover Street Market (Charlie also works at the concept store) and in Tokyo, where much of its production is based.

For inspiration for their current collection, called Kings Of The Kings Land, they've looked no further than Kingsland Road, the London thoroughfare on which their studio is situated. An area steeped in history, it's where a culture clash of artists, Turkish immigrants, wayward public school boys, original Eastenders, rude boys and indie kids all cross paths. Joe and Charlie have stolen elements from each sub culture to create a dangerously new style they call "Afropunk". Sports fabrics are turned into tailored suits, Ottoman- and Wedgwood-influenced prints cover baggy pants, silver chains button onto shirt collars and multiple scarves become "hankersleeves" (a reference to the metal hoops some African tribes people use to elongate and adorn their limbs). A muted palette of grey, navy and cream allow flashes of vibrant African textiles to pop. Yet the overall aesthetic is so subtle the collection whispers its intent rather than shouts it.

#### LINE OF THOUGHT

"The response has been phenomenal," says Joe, smiling proudly at his son. Charlie smiles back. "It's not specifically a 'black' collection even though we call it our African collection. It's more a reflection of contemporary London. But we are conscious of making a strong black statement as black designers. We are redefining the role of the black man in the 21st century by peeling away formal, often self-imposed, roles. The world is your oyster and you can be whoever you want to be. We try to reflect this concept in our clothing."

Charlie is the embodiment of the kind of modern-day gentleman Joe describes. He may have attended public school yet he blends in on London's mean streets of Dalston. "I call a lot of people my age kleptomaniacs because they draw from different cultures and identities and fuse them together to make their own. This is how my generation has come to define itself."

And it's partly because today's cultural landscape is so different from the one Joe grew up in that their work dynamic has proved

so fruitful. Nepotism doesn't come into it when two such strong-willed yet finely tuned minds meet. "A lot of the ideas I come up with my father's already done 20 years ago. But today it means something different because of the social context. Sometimes it's a struggle but the dichotomy between us always creates interesting results," continues Charlie. "The design process is pretty much entirely verbal – an ongoing conversation between the two of us. Basically my dad doesn't sleep so I have had to learn not to as well. We discuss our ideas at the most ridiculous hours of the night. I think we designed the whole collection on Blackberry messenger."

#### KEEPING IT REAL

But whatever the differences between them, the two remain peas in a divinely tailored pod. "We are very similar so we don't have to communicate as much as we would if we weren't father and son. But there are times where I'll just say something and he will go 'no'. And then I'll just persist like a five year old until he says yes," Charlie admits, giving his dad a knowing look. "It's true," Joe concedes. "He just texts, texts, texts until he wears me down."

The Casely-Hayfords presented their spring/summer 2010 collection at London Fashion Week last September as part of LFW's 25th anniversary, but they have no intention of returning for the time being. For now they're happy to shun the razzle-dazzle of the fashion circus, preferring instead to create with disarming dignity.

"We want to build our brand DNA before we go into expansion. I see a lot of brands thrust into the limelight that then don't survive. We want to go slowly so that people can understand our foundation and then eventually we'll show to the masses," explains Charlie.

As for next season, due be unveiled in Tokyo this month, well that's still under wraps, according to Joe. "It's a little darker and a little harder than spring/summer but I can't really say too much more than that," he says, pausing, an almost imperceptible glint of mischievousness in his deep brown eyes. "All we need to do now is design it!"



FIRST LOOK:  
CASELY-HAYFORD'S  
SPRING/SUMMER  
2010 COLLECTION