

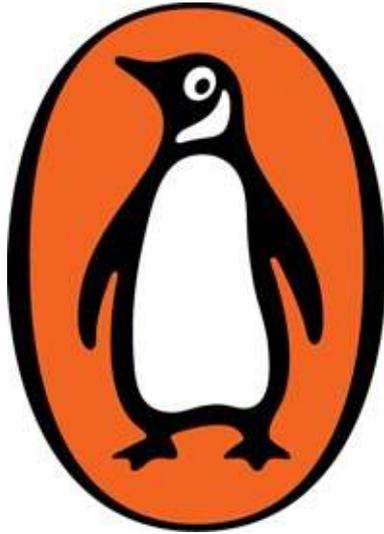


# Fantastic Man

THE  
EAST LONDON  
LINE

# Buttoned-Up





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Fantastic Man

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# buttoned-up

*A survey of a curious fashion phenomenon*



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Dedicated to mankind

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# East End

Street corners along the East London Line, photographed by Andrew T. Vottero

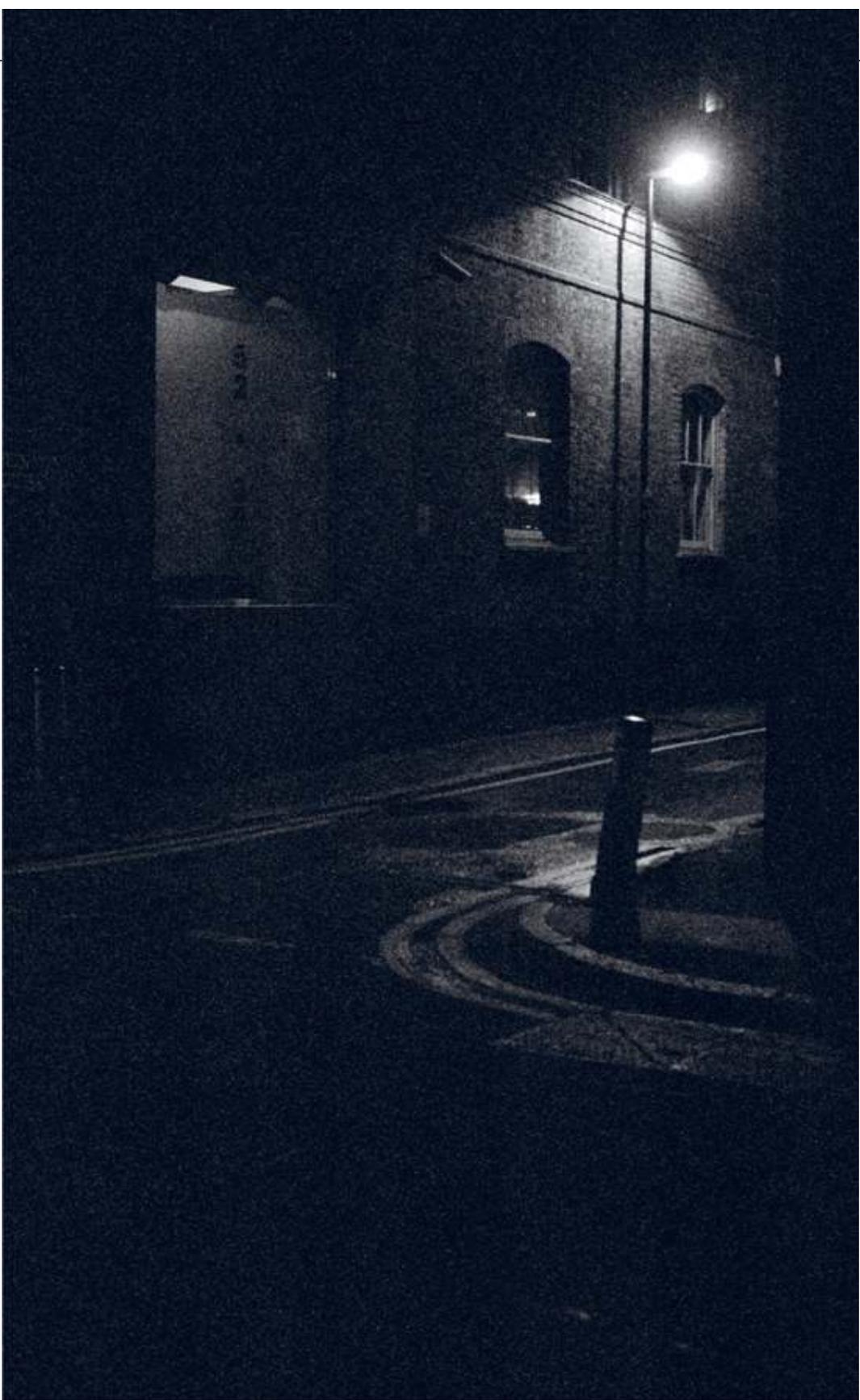


Junction No. 1:  
Fleur De Lis Street and Blossom Street, E1





Junction No. 2:  
Tabernacle Street and Plantina Street, EC2A





Here, and on the cover, 25-year-old Giordano Cioni, a production manager living in East London. Photograph by Benjamin Alexander Huseby.



## Buttoned-Up

The editors of *Fantastic Man* explore a curious fashion phenomenon

When departing the East London Line at Shoreditch High Street, one might choose to visit one of the several fashionable menswear retailers that thrive in the Borough of Hackney. It is likely that one will notice a distinct similarity in the way these shop's employees and customers have dressed themselves: they'll be wearing their shirts with the buttons done up all the way to the top, the collars closed tight around their necks. This approach to dressing is not the most comfortable one by any means, but in this area of London and many other corners of modern society it is miraculously popular.

Buttoned-up has become the norm.

The simple act of fastening a shirt's highest button and the plainness of the look it creates belies a variety of intricate and complex intentions. It presents an appearance that is at once proper in its neatness and rebellious in the deliberate exclusion of a tie. Buttoning up stakes a particular territory for its wearer, especially in East London, an area famed for its creative industry. It suggests something puritanical, an almost Amish eschewing of decoration, a refusal to reveal anything below the neck. It infantilizes, recalling images of first days of school and boys being dressed by their mothers. It is an up-tight look dating back to the restrained aggression of the mod sixties. It is virtually unavoidable in menswear fashion imagery, where it easily provides a sense of considered smartness. Buttoning up is contemporary but timeless.

The following pages present an attempt to understand the look's basis in fashion, history and pop culture – what motivates men to expose themselves to the discomforts and delights of buttoning up.

Gert Jonkers & Jop van Bennekom  
editors of *Fantastic Man*



White cotton shirt, photographed by Maurice Scheltens and Liesbeth Abbenes for *Fantastic Man* No.5, 2007.



## To Button Up

Why men in East London dress the way they do, by Paul Flynn

Patrick's school uniform in rural Scotland was a white shirt and V-neck jumper, no tie. He says the boys would wear their shirts one button open and the girls maybe one more. Just teenagers, loosening up. When he was sixteen he happened upon a picture in a magazine of Orange Juice guitarist James Kirk. 'He was holding his guitar and he had a really long trench coat and a bowl cut,' says Patrick. 'He had his shirt buttoned up. I thought he looked like the coolest person in the world.' Prompted by this revelation, Patrick decided in a small moment of schoolboy rebellion to follow his lead.

This was his first personal styling decision, inspired by a whimsical Glasgow pop group nobody could guess the reach of at the time. Orange Juice's deftly amateurish fusing of black groove with white noise, not to mention their charity-shop chic, would set a template for the future sound and look of bands who were interested in any of the crossover points on the tangent between wee small hours disco and college rock.

Whenever he buttoned up like James Kirk, Patrick felt nice. 'At school I thought I was a lot cooler than everyone else.' Given his unusual key visual references – he also mentions The Go-Betweens and The Jesus and Mary Chain – he probably was. 'I guess it was my way of asserting difference.'

Last summer, I wandered with my brother Peter up the regulation East End pathway, from Whitechapel through Columbia Road, on to Hackney Road, winding through backstreet Haggerston estates through to Kingsland Road and ending up in Dalston. My brother was of the age and inclination to listen to those musicians in his bedroom and watch them play the first time round. We stopped and took the temperature of this strictly self-regulated new Metropolitan runway. A lot of boys looked like they might've had their lives changed by a picture of a pasty '80s musician. 'Everyone looks like they are going to Devilles,' Peter suggested.

Devilles was one of a small selection of Manchester nightclubs in the early to mid-'80s that housed an angsty, interior youth subset that would peak and swiftly implode after the *NME* magazine *C86* compilation dropped. It smelt of Breaker lager, Benson & Hedges cigarettes and early adult anxiety. The DJ sported a quiff just like Tintin. The patrons of Devilles coupled a bracing Northern humour born out of boredom with poetically abject thought. The soundtrack of this mating ground was

winsome independent rock and New York City street funk, tied together only by sharing the noisy distinction of being made on a shoestring budget. It was one of those places that was driven by teenage difference; whose visual undercurrent said 'we might not have as much money as you but we have got better ideas,' cocking a snook at the emerging, blousy wine-bar scene in the city. Everyone in Deville in 1985 was buttoned up.

Almost three decades later, Patrick is one of those faces that you find dotted about the East End, who brightens the social landscape with a similar dismissal for corporate culture to folks in '80s Manchester. He shares more with his native predecessors in Scotland and the North of England than a penchant for fastening his shirt at the collar, that wilful style act of self-strangulation. He is the drummer in a band called Veronica Falls who continue the emotional lineage of matching cheap music to exquisite thought. It is a band that leaves the tendons of its intention exposed and unpolished. Patrick gives off the primary air of not giving a fuck whether Veronica Falls makes a penny from what they are doing beyond funding the next night out. He has served counter shifts at the amusingly diffident pub the Nelson's Head, housed behind the Costcutter on Hackney Road, to make rent between tours. Veronica Falls will never be Coldplay in the way Orange Juice would never be U2. Some people don't want that.

He always buttons up on stage; a nod to his ramshackle heroes and forebears. 'If I ever see a picture of myself playing, and for some reason I've unbuttoned my top button, I always feel a bit angry at myself,' he says, 'I feel it makes a big difference to the way you wear a shirt. It's really subtle but it changes an entire outfit. If I'm not buttoned up it feels a bit like something's missing, like I've not finished getting dressed.'

Once, on a date, someone asked Patrick to unbutton his shirt. 'I remember being shocked because I didn't even think of it as being weird. They made a comment about me trying to give off the impression that I was unobtainable, or really strait-laced.'

And did he honour the request?

'No.'

The Nelson's Head sits at the almost exact midway point between the Pride of Spitalfields and the Shacklewell Arms, the two pubs that are the most obvious outer map points of buttoned-up London. It is a marvellous place, its buttoned-up customers a fractious and brilliantly divisive reminder that the wheels of the countercultural bus set in stone in the '80s – at that fascinating, intensely style-conscious time post punk and pre acid house – not only refuse to stop turning but can also career toward reckless, drunken fun.

This subset of buttoned-up London has not quite been nailed and taken into mainstream dialogue, apart from some mocking in *Vice* magazine's online drama *Dalston Superstars* and on the comically accurate website *East London Gays*. But nobody has sincerely explored why it is that boys who feel different from other boys ended up on the Brick Lane/Stoke Newington strip of decrepit, anti-corporate night-time culture and, moreover, ended up wearing their shirts buttoned up to inhabit it.

Some of it must be a reaction to the predominant suburban neck-line of the reality TV generation: the deep-V-necked T-shirt favoured by boyband stylists and body obsessives. The man in a deep V is open, ready, disposable. The buttoned-up man has a flavour of some entrenched, considered mystery. We would've once considered him pretentious, if preferring books to TV can be adjudged as such. He

does not favour the more expositional approach to male sex-appeal in his wardrobe.

‘I think there’s something sexy in people taking the time to consider their appearance,’ says Josh, thirty-year-old button-up devotee from Dalston. ‘I don’t think you would accidentally walk around with your top button done up and no tie. It’s all the little details.’

Stephen is twenty-seven, lives in Bethnal Green, and always buttons his shirt up, despite it drawing attention to a part of his body he feels slightly awkward with. ‘I have quite a fat neck,’ he says flatly. But he finds buttoning up a satisfying way of dealing with another body issue, his hirsuteness. ‘I’m quite hairy, and I always had my chest hair on show.’ He began buttoning up two years ago. ‘When you’re hairy you tend to always look a bit scruffy, and I wanted to show a different side of me. It also looks quite neat.’ He says buttoning up is not a sexual statement, before reconsidering, ‘maybe, but that wasn’t really in my mind when I was doing it. There is a sort of uniformness about it. It’s like a school uniform for adults.’

‘I feel more attractive personally when I do it,’ says Sam, an artist from the East End, of his decision to button up. ‘It is quite sexy. Look at it this way – if one more button is done up, then that’s one more button that has to be undone. If somebody’s done-up, then there’s going to be a certain amount of undoing to do, in a good way. There’s more left to the imagination. For instance, if someone’s wearing a belt then you can’t just whip their trousers off – you have to get the belt off first.’

There is a simple, architectural fashion angle to buttoning up. ‘I think this looks more refined,’ says Sam, purposefully separating himself from the neighbourhood bar scruffs. ‘It’s just something that I’ve always known to be smart. It looks a lot smoother, it accentuates the neck and the face in a much better way and also it accentuates the shirt itself.’ There is history to it. ‘You know, Edwardian gentlemen who would wear a tailcoat and a stiff collar? A squared-off collar, where you steam the corners. I would say what I do is a modern take on that.’ There is economy, too. ‘Part of the nicest thing about it is that you don’t have to buy something new,’ says Stephen, ‘you can just wear something in your wardrobe in a different way.’

‘There’s been a bit of a return to traditional styling, but slightly nuanced,’ says Josh. ‘You do see people who are buttoning their collars or who are wearing a decent tweed jacket. There’s more of an emphasis, in the same way that men’s grooming took off after a while. It’s a natural progression that once they’ve sorted the grooming out, they’re not going to want to wear a suit from Burton with some horrible open-neck collar or estate-agent tie.’

The problem with a point of difference when it comes to personal presentation is that once a lot of people who feel different congregate in a small area, all sporting their difference together, it becomes normalized. It is not different anymore. It is the same.

Buttoning up feels like not just a recognizably Metropolitan styling tic but a recognizably East End move, as postcode-defining as the jumper over the shoulders is to the Putney and Fulham public-school set at the capital’s other economic extreme in the West, or wearing one’s hood up is in South London. Anyone exposed to the provincial geographical style-markings of the London boroughs will identify buttoning up as an East thing. This is the menswear language I see every day in the square two miles circumnavigating my home.

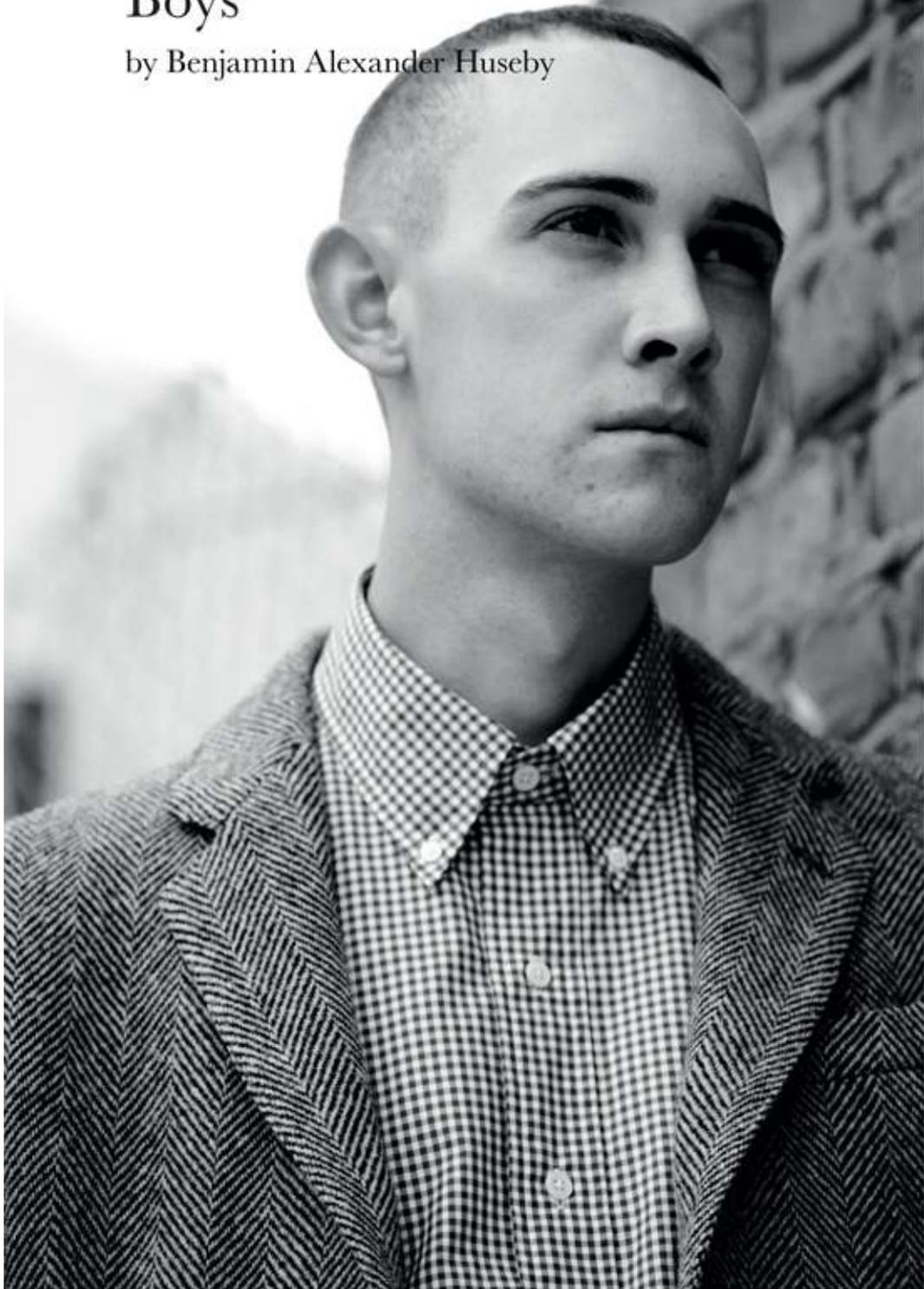
The self-consciously thought-through pubs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets, with their junk-shop

decor and continuing investigation into the aesthetics of the wrong are dotted with compelling top-button wearers. Though one might expect buttoning up to be encouraged in the defining industries of the area that trade off their point of difference – fashion, design, art, music, advertising, outré bar and restaurant cultures – it still comes as a mild shock to hear that Josh, the thirty-year-old from Dalston wears his East End outfit (healthy beard, groomed moustache, trousers half an inch too short, lustrous hair side-parted, shirt buttoned up) to work at as a legal support at a City law firm.

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# Boys

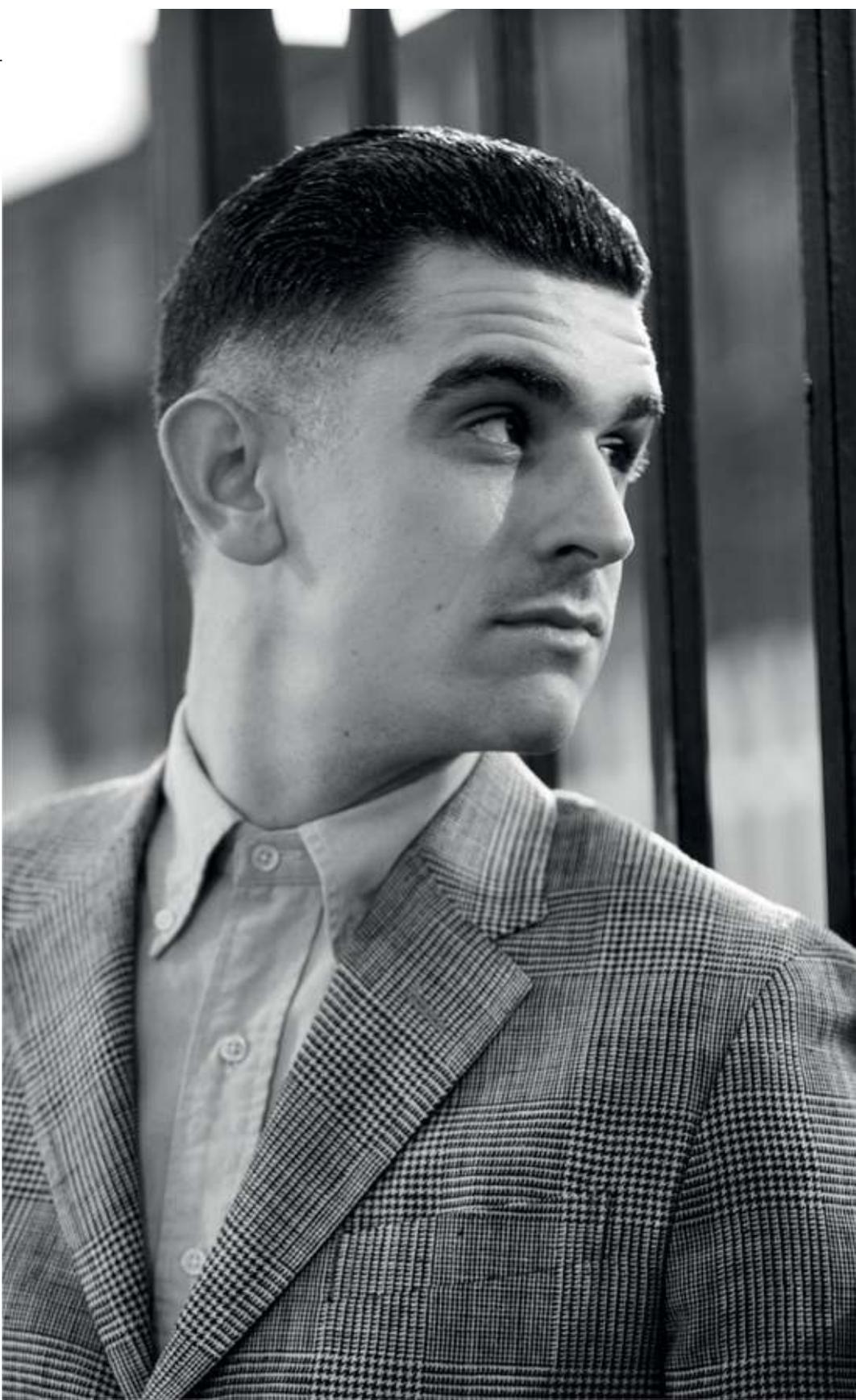
by Benjamin Alexander Huseby



Joshua Aberhart, 22, works as a costume designer and pastry chef.



Joshua moved to London from New Zealand in 2011. He lives in Hackney Wick.



Moses Manley works as an umbrella maker. The 23-year-old lives in East London along the Regent's Canal.



25-year-old Owen Myers moved to London to pursue a career in journalism. He lives in Dalston.



Abel Llavall-Ubach, 26, works as a film production assistant.



Abel was born in Paris, France, and has resided in London since 2010.

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