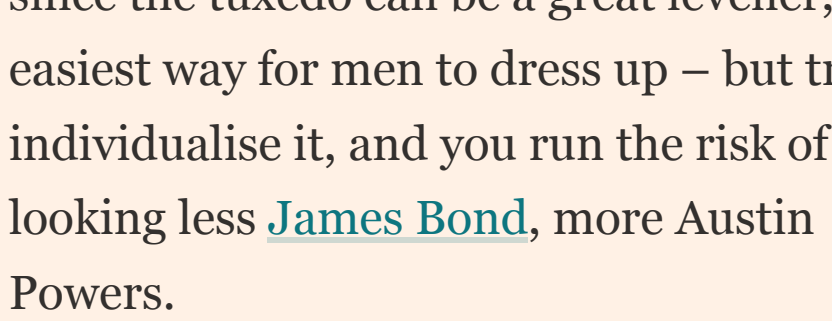


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The debonair is in the detail

Master the basics of wearing a tuxedo before you experiment



David Hayes NOVEMBER 25 2011

Few things mark this time of year as much as hordes of black tie-clad men hailing cabs at cocktail hour. Once reserved for aristocratic dinners and state banquets, black tie now appears on invitations everywhere. A good thing, you might think, since the tuxedo can be a great leveller, the easiest way for men to dress up – but try to individualise it, and you run the risk of looking less [James Bond](#), more Austin Powers.

“Even though you’ve had the invitation for weeks, a black-tie event always catches you by surprise somehow,” says City of London analyst Robert Shaw. “I usually end up going for the safest option at the last minute. You don’t want to stand out like the guys in the jazzy cummerbund and dickie bow sets – and you are never going to compete with the guy in his father’s second-hand Savile Row tux and antique shirt studs – so straight down the middle always seems best.”

According to Jonathan Swartland, suit buyer at Marks and Spencer, there’s a new mood of smart dressing. He says: “I don’t know whether there are more formal functions now but men are certainly making more of an effort to dress up when they do go to such events.”

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Stacey Smith, men’s wear buyer at Matches, agrees: “We have definitely had a surge in tailoring sales, and the evening suit has been a big part of this,” she notes. However, a quick poll of experts reveals a surprising lack of consensus about what modern black tie really means.

“I think that classic is the only way to wear black tie,” says designer Tom Ford. “I love wearing black tie and usually end up attending a black-tie event several times a month. It’s the perfect occasion for a man to look elegant. While I often vary my black-tie looks by wearing a velvet evening jacket, accessorising with diamond studs and cufflinks and the like, I always wear a classic evening shirt and a bow tie with my tuxedo. Make sure that the fit is perfect and you will feel comfortable. I also think that you must always wear patent evening shoes with a tuxedo.”

But “classic” has a relatively elastic definition in Ford’s lexicon. “I love experimenting with different fabrics,” he adds. “I have velvet evening jackets in almost every colour. I wore a pale pink evening jacket to an event in Los Angeles recently, and that style sold out of our stores.”

This season Ford has gone further, offering velvet jackets in fuchsia, purple, kingfisher blue, iridescent navy, lead grey and chocolate (£2,050).

For legal adviser Stuart Lonsdale, such a flamboyant look would be out of the question: “I work in a pretty conservative business so anything too showy, like a velvet jacket, even in black, would be frowned upon,” he says.

Happily, some men’s wear specialists are more traditional. “Black tie comes down to getting the basics right,” says Clare Little, head of retail at Ede & Ravenscroft, London’s oldest tailor and maker of ceremonial robes for royalty and members of the peerage. “What you need is a single-breasted, peak lapel evening suit, a traditional collar Marcella shirt, a plain black silk bow tie, black moiré silk braces, onyx studs and cufflinks, black patent shoes and perhaps a white silk fringed evening scarf.”

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Max Summerskill, men’s wear director at Dunhill (evening suits from £995), agrees: “There’s a move back to the traditional dinner jacket, shirt and black silk bow tie, and away from the Hollywood slim tie look. It is the most iconic style of dress for men. This season we’re focusing on midnight blue tuxedos with black silk-faced lapels.”

Those falling somewhere between these two camps include up-and-coming label Rake, which has just launched a premium evening wear line, Rake Lounge. This was “to take the edge off an area of clothing that most men panic about”, says Clive Darby, the label’s founder and a Savile Row stalwart. “There had to be a different way to how men address the question of dressing for black-tie events, so we took a more flexible approach and decided to sell everything as separates,” he says. “That versatility means that men have more to play with, more fun. Black tie can come across as pompous and outdated, but this does not have to be the case.”

His advice? “Keep it simple. It’s all in the details. Make sure the suit fits; it sounds simple but it is amazing how many people get it wrong. No belts on trousers. In fact, no belt loops. The shirt should be fly-fronted and with a semi-spread collar rather than a wing collar. Cufflinks should be the same colour metal as your watch. And black shoes mean plain black socks.”

The importance of detail is something all experts agree on. As Summerskill says, “The most common mistake men make is cutting corners on the details: far too many men think wearing their scuffed and worn black work shoes with a tux is all right. It’s not. Also, learn how to tie your own bow tie. It’s a sartorial rite of passage.”

In [How To Spend It](#) – Penguins and peacocks: colourful alternatives to black tie

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