For the Oral History Collection

at the

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

an interview with

ARNOLD SCAASI

Interviewed by:
Mildred Finger
May 3, 1989
Q: For the Oral History Collections of the Fashion Institute of Technology, this will be an interview with the designer, Arnold Scaasi. The interview takes place on May 3, 1989; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

I really would like to talk about you starting way back. I know you came from Canada.

A: Right.

Q: Would you like to talk about where you lived there? Were your parents--

A: Well, before I came from Canada--What really changed, I guess, my whole life is that I went to Australia as a teenager.

Q: I want to do before that. What happened to you before that?

A: Before Australia?

Q: I would like to know were you parents--

A: I lived in Montreal.

Q: And were your parents from Montreal?

A: My father was from New York, my mother was from Montreal, and when I was--

Q: And what was your schooling like?

A: I had normal schooling, high school and grade school.

Q: Were you interested in going into fashion at that time?
A: No, but I always drew. I could always draw and I always did drawings and sometimes paintings and that's what I did, sort of as a hobby.

Q: Did you like color? Did you work in color when you painted?

A: Well, if I did in water colors, yes. Absolutely. Of course I worked in color. And then when I was about 15 I went to Australia to visit an aunt of mine, my Aunt Ida, who was a very erudite person who had been married in England and her husband was a Sassoon who had died very young in their marriage, and she toured the world, really, speaking for the Zionist movement at that time. She dressed at Chanel and Schiaparelli, and she would come back to Montreal each time after one of these trips and open up this wonderful trunk full of clothes, and that's how I grew up with these sort of extraordinary trunks of clothes being shown to me, each time she came back from a trip.

As you know, clothes at that time were very beautiful and people dressed for dinner, and when she'd sail on one of these trips, she'd sail away and there'd always be a midnight sailing, which is very gala. Anyway, I have all these wonderful memories and that, I think, really started me on it. Also I had a very pretty mother and a pretty sister who loved clothes, so I sort of grew up with clothes. My father was a furrier, so--That's the aunt I went to
visit, because when she remarried, she married a man in Australia and my sister was going to visit her and I went over with my sister and finished my high schooling there.

So, I finished my high schooling in Melbourne, Australia and I lived with my aunt in this wonderful Tudor house, and it was a whole opening up to me, this thing of traveling half way across the world as a teenager and pretty much on my own. That was, I think, a very important step in changing my life from what was then a very provincial city—Montreal—to the world. I mean, suddenly, there I was, in Fiji, and in San Francisco, and all over the place.

Then it was decided that I—My aunt said, "What do you want to do? You can't fiddle around with your life. You've got to decide." So I decided that because I drew and liked drawing I would go into--Sorry, what do they call it?--Commercial drawing. I did a couple of months of that and I hated it. I had to do toothpaste ads and all kinds of terrible things that I didn't understand or want to do. Then I said, "Well, I think I'd like to go to design school," so I went back to Canada where there was an extraordinary school called "the Cotnoir Component."

Q: Would you mind spelling that?
A: C-o-t-n-o-i-r "Component." I think it's--And the woman had been one of the--What do you call it?--professors at the Chambre Syndicale in Paris, and she had worked out a plan
with them that three years of her schooling would put you into the fifth year of the Chambre Syndicale Ecole (it was a very accelerated course), and I did those three years in 27 months. I was a star pupil, and I had found, at that very early age, exactly what I wanted to do, what I loved doing—making clothes. I loved doing it, so that's what really got me going.

Then, after that first time, the 27 months, I went for the fifth year of the course to the Chambre Syndicale Ecole in Paris and--

Q: Did you have a chance, really, to make clothes?
A: Yes. Well, in the Canadian you could make--We made clothes, just as you do here, at Parsons or whatever. But also, I had two customers, because I had done a little exhibit of little mannequins for my graduation at the time, and people came to see it, and because I was, as I said, the star pupil, I was also, I think, one of maybe two men in the class. Everybody else was women. So, through that funny little exhibition, two women came and said, "We would like you to make clothes for us," so I made some clothes--

Q: Do you remember who they were?
A: One—They're both "dead," yes, they're—I had a lot of nerve because, one, I didn't know what the hell I was doing, and secondly the—I mean, I had a very good basis of opinion—training in how to cut and, you know, drape and sew
clothes, but I really was very young. I remember one woman came and it was—She came in an enormous hat and a very fitted checked dress with an enormous wide belt and she was about that high, and she said, "I want you to make my clothes, I love what you did there." I said, "Well, if I did make your clothes (I remember it very well) I'd never dress you like that, because you're much too small to wear the big checks and that big hat." I remember that and she remembered it for years afterwards; that there's this little kid telling her that the Dior outfit she had worn and paid so much for was all wrong for her.

So, anyway, I made clothes for her and her name was Saykaoy, Loti Saykaoy.

Q: How do you spell Saykaoy?
A: S-a-y-k-a-o-y. And another friend of hers, whose name I can't remember, and then it was decided I would (that was sort of in my "finishing" year), and then it was decided that I would go to the Chambre Syndicale Ecole and take the final year in Paris.

So, I did that, and I found when I got there that everything I had learned I was learning again. In other words, I was very advanced for the Chambre Syndicale Ecole course—

Q: How old were the people in that course?
A: I'm sorry?
Q: How old were they? Were they also teenagers?
A: They were all--They were people from Parsons and from Pratt and from FIT, and they were going for that last, finishing year also, and it was interesting--Because I spoke French, I also asked if I could be moved out of the American class and be put into the French class, because I thought I would learn more and it would be more interesting, anyway. I really didn't want to be with all these Americans when I was in Paris. So, I made many French friends because of it.
Q: That's a very enriching experience, isn't it.
A: It was great. I had a--It was a wonderful time for me, obviously. I mean, to be a student is a marvelous time anyway. So, I stayed in that school for very months, maybe three months, and then I stopped.
Q: You said the war was over?
A: Oh, yes, yes. This was the early '50s. I stopped and began to take private draping lessons from a woman who worked at Dior. Then I traveled around Europe, through the--I stayed at a wonderful--You know, there's a marvelous compound in Paris called the Cite 'Universite' where every major country has a house of its own where they house their students for a minimum amount of money. Very little money. I think we paid $1.50 a day or something. If you paid $1.80 you got breakfast. If you paid $1.90 you got an egg or something. It was something--It was really extraordinary.
And the Canadian house was a wonderful house. We had hot water 24 hours a day. The American house only had hot water in the morning and in the evening, like for six hours a day, so they all came—All the other houses came to the Canadian house. It was rather nice.

Anyway, I took some extra draping lessons, and then I traveled with some friends through Europe. We went to Italy and we went to England and so on, and then I came back to Paris and that was, I guess, about a—maybe a six month—Not even. Maybe a five month period, between going to school—not going to school, traveling, then deciding what I was going to do. And I did a book, you know. I went around to the different Houses, and as I remember it, it was the wrong time of the year. It was the wrong season, you know what I mean? But I did get a job at Paquin for $50 a month. My parents were horrified and sent me CARE packages. Anything they could send me. They were furious that I would stay in Paris and work for only a few thousand bucks.

But anyway, it was a nice training, and I went around to—I met Dior and I met Jacques Fath and they both said, "Well, if you want to stay until the season begins, we'll take you on as an apprentice. You obviously have a talent, but we have nothing for you now." I don't remember the lapse of time that was, but anyway, Dior was very interesting because he said—First I met Madame Loulou, you remember?
Q: Oh, yes, very—Madame Loulou, yes.
A: And then, then she liked my sketches well enough to bring me to Dior, and Dior said, "We will take you on when the season begins, but I don't know why you want to stay here when you have a chance to go back to America, because America is the future of clothing." I always thought that was fascinating.
Q: Yes, it is.
A: So I thought about it, and then my parents got very crazed about my coming back and not being in Europe anymore and I came back. I arrived by ship, and they drove down to meet me from Montreal, to drive me home. I had a big, oversized trunk and all those things you carried on shipboard that you don't have on airplanes, and they met me at the port. We went to the Sherry Netherland and stayed overnight, and I had an introduction to Charles James, so I called Mr. James and he said—I said I was in New York for two days and what I had done and everything and that I'd been—And he knew the Cotnoir Component school very well and thought it was an extraordinary school, in Montreal; and, of course, he knew the Chambre Syndicale and he said, "Why don't you let me interview you?" or "Come and meet me," and he was going to a vernissage of a man named Erte. Do you know the drawings up at the Carlyle?
Q: Indeed I do. Yes.
They were all done by Erte.

He was working

Really?

Oh, yes.

A wonderful illustrator.

Marvelous.

But anyway--He--James said, "Come and meet me at the Lolas Gallery on 57th Street, there's an exhibition of"--whatever--I didn't know what he was even talking about, obviously, "and I'll meet you there at"--I don't know, 6:00 or something. So, I put on my best blue suit and I went--My parents said, "Where are you going?," and I said, "I'm going to meet Charles James." They knew of him, of course, and it was interesting, because Dior knew of him, and Dior had said to me, "If you could work with Charles James you will have the best thing going for you, because you have Charles James in America, which is the future of fashion."

So, I went to the Lolas Gallery, and I was sitting there and (Mr. James was late), and in came Anita Loos and Joan Crawford, and Joan Crawford had a black broadtail suit on--I remember it to this day--with a wonderful, tall black hate with a black tulle veil that came way down, and she just looked knockout! It was, you know, the early '50s. So, I sat there and I saw these two women go by and I thought, "Gosh, here I am with Joan Crawford! I'm not going back to
Montreal! I'm going to stay right in New York."

I went--I met Mr. James, we went back to the atelier, he showed me what he was doing and, of course, it was very impressive, and he said--He asked me what I had done and I told him, and then he said, "Well, I'll give you a job."
Right there and then, "and I'll pay you $45 a week--"

Q: Really? That was--?
A: I said, "That's extraordinary, I'll take it," and I grabbed it immediately and he said--I'll never forget that, because it was one of the few times where his sort of kindness and humor came out. He said, "Oh, you won't thank me for the $45 after you've lived here a month or two."

So I worked at Charles James for, I think it was almost two years, and I got to the point where I ran the work rooms, and--You know, it was at a time when he was sort of beginning his decline. He had wonderful clients, still--I mean, Mrs. Paley and--

Q: Mrs. Hearst.
A: --Mrs. Hearst, who is a great friend of mine now,
And--But, he was declining and he was a very difficult person. I mean, he was a genius in what he did but I don't think he was able to (and this has nothing to do with my part, but)--It didn't seem that he could change with the times. He was sort of set in time, and I think that was quite sad.
Anyway, I got--He had--Well, I left when I'd had enough. It was always very traumatic and very difficult and whatever, but it was interesting, and I think what was interesting and what's important is that though he had many apprentices and many students, he did not pay. One of the things that he--I understood what he was trying to do; the way he constructed his clothes, and other people would come, other students would come--people, apprentices--and they would say, "Oh, well, yes, I guess you could do it that way, but that's not the right way to do it." I never felt that way. I felt that the way he constructed clothes was the right way to do it, because the clothes reshaped the body and flattered the woman, and that seemed to be his sort of, you know, his sort of idea. I mean, he built a dress to make the ideal woman, of that time, and it was something that I have kept with me my whole career, that--I think that it happened that it was a very good thing for me because, as I said, I understood it. Other people went there and did not understand it. So, I don't think you can--I say this, because I think it's interesting for students to know. I don't think that you can just go somewhere and say, "Well, I've worked here or there." It's what you get out of that particular job that's important, and I got an enormous out of my years with Charles James because I really loved the clothes, I loved what he was doing, and as digital as he was
I understood what made those clothes the way they were, and it really sort of started me in my life's work, you know; what I felt about fashion and how I felt about dressing women and making special clothes for them.

Anyway, I left there, and because he had such a terrible reputation, everyone—I couldn't get a job. I left there because I'd been offered a job and then—It was funny, by Sam Winston, who had his ready-to-wear, and the Winstons loved what I did, you see. I did my own sort of group of things. They loved what I did, but they were scared to death that he would sue them if they hired me, and he would have. He finally did sue them—

Q: He did sue them.
A: Right, but not for that reason. So, I couldn't get a job anywhere, and so I did sort of free lance stuff. I did all the fashion shows for the Lily Dache hats, and Dache was a great help and she always gave me a job. And Eleanor Lambert was a great help. I would do—I always kid Eleanor that she got me my first job doing skirts for the Ship 'n Shore Blouses, because she had the Ship 'n Shore blouse account. So I did anything I could do—

Q: Did you go to Paris during that period, is that what—?
A: No, I did not go to Paris. I didn't have any money. I mean, I wasn't working.
Q: I just wondered when you went to work for Scherrer.
A: Scherrer I never worked for.

Q: Maria Moutet.

A: Who?

Q: Maria Moutet.

A: Oh, no. That was a whole other thing. That wasn't until the '60s, or maybe the '70s.

Q: It must have been the '60s because she came to the USA in '67.

A: No, no, because she had stopped working and I went to do a collection for her, with the idea of an American designer designing in Paris, and that was a ready-to-wear collection, so we tried and we did, I think, two seasons.

Q: I didn't mean to take you away from your period.

A: Right. No, Marie--Mme. Moutet was long after I was established.

So anyway--Where was I?

Q: You said that nobody would hire you--

A: I had known "Harry" and Lily really was very kind, and everybody--I mean, people understood--I don't know if they do today, but Lily understood that there was a talent and they were willing to help it, do you know what I mean?

Q: Absolutely.

A: So, anyway, I finally got a job with a firm called Dressmaker Casuals, and that was really the beginning of my career. It was about 1955-56, and they had done the Charles
James coats when Winston was doing the dresses, so the man who owned (I can't remember his name now, but), the man who owned it said, "We want you to come and do the coats," and they gave me my own label, which is the first time the name Scaasi ever appeared, and they gave me my own label and all the publicity and whatever, if I would just do this collection. We did the collection and—Oh, could you stop that one second [recorder off]?

This is all coats and suits, and interestingly enough, I don't know, I guess whatever I felt—This man was wonderful because he would allow me to do anything I wanted to do, and I did really marvelous coats. I mean, extraordinary coats, I'm sure in the idiom of Charles James, and I did really the first—On the ready-to-wear scene the first important evening coats of satin and velvet. Things like that. And then they were, you know, sort of mid-calf length back at that period, and I did really the first—You know, people like Zuckerman and people like that were doing suits and coats, but they did suits and coats period. I always did a dress under the coat, and then I always did a blouse that matched the lining of the suit. So, they gave me a great deal of freedom and I became known very quickly. By the time I—After the very first—In the very first collection I had my first cover of Vogue magazine, with a red satin coat and a wonderful hat and I got recognition
very fast. It really just sort of went haywire. And I think because no one was doing what I was doing in the market. Sometimes there weren't even buyers who could buy it because the buyer could buy the coat, but then she couldn't buy the dress, and the suit guy could buy the suit, but he couldn't buy the blouse. So it was--You know, it was sort of--In the beginning, it's hard to believe that it was so different from what it is today.

Q: Departmentalization.

A: Totally. Sometimes we'd have people come in who wanted to buy the blouses, but couldn't buy the suits or the coats. Anyway, it was very fast. It happened very quickly, and I got a lot of press and became known very quickly.

After that I knew--By this time I knew some of the store buyers, and three stores in particular--Neiman-Marcus and, you know--Kay Kerr was here, still is here, and then Bendel's had a wonderful woman. Her name was "Jacques," I think her name was "Virginia Jacques," and the New York office person for Magnin's, and I--I don't remember who that was. Because we're talking now about 1956 or '57, and I said, you know, I would like to go out on my own and I would like--And if I did--I'd see these people and say, "If I did some clothes, would you come and buy them?" And they said, "We're very interested in what you do, we think you have a talent and, yes, we would, but we have to see what you do.
We can't--"You know. Whatever. So--"We can't guarantee anything until we see what you do."

So--There's something, though, that happened, and it's gone right out of my head. It happened before I opened my business. Oh, I know. Because it's interesting.

I had planned to open, with the Saykaos, a made-to-order business in New York.

Q: In Canada.
A: No, in New York. They wanted to come and invest in a business in New York, so I planned to open this business in New York and they were going to buy a house or something that would act as a salon. But then there were a lot of made-to-order people. There was Mainbocher and Valentina and Sophie and--

Q: And Brogas had a salon.
A: "Brogas" had a salon. So everybody--You know, Best--I think maybe--Not Best but--

Q: Bendel.
A: --Bendel had one, DePina had one, and Bonwit Teller had a wonderful made-to-order salon. So, it was sort of the thing to do, and I was in a car one day with Lily, and we were going to--I remember a costume for her, for a costume ball, and we were going up to Yves Costumes to work out something for her to wear--Did you know Lily Dache? You must have known her. You know she was a great character. So I
said to her, "You know, Lily, I'm going to start--I have these friends coming down from Canada, and I'm going to start a made-to-order House, a House of couture." And she said, "Oh, you are crazy! Couture is finished! You must do ready-to-wear. If you do anything you must do ready-to-wear or don't do it." And that was so extraordinary, because I called my friends in Montreal and said, "Well, I'm not going to do couture, I'm going to do ready-to-wear, and we're going to start a ready-to-wear business." They didn't want to start a ready-to-wear business.

Anyway, by this time I had a couple of customers that I made clothes for in my apartment, which was then a third-floor walkup at 58th and Lexington. And it's so funny, because my first charge account was at Bloomingdale's, but so many years ago. So, I had, really, some nice customers and my first really important customer was Arlene Francis, and they came to me--She had the Morning Show then, and they came to me to ask if I would do some clothes for her for the Morning Show. We did a very funny, interchangeable wardrobe, which was really terrible if you look at it today, with all those tops and bottoms and skirts and jackets and all moved around so she could look different over several days, but really she didn't at all. But anyway, we tried it, and--Well, interesting--Nan Kempner's mother came to me. She's a very chic woman, Mrs. Schlesinger from San Francisco, and
brought Nan with her, then. You can imagine how many years ago that was. Interesting. So, anyway, finally, I had saved up about $2,000 and I was sort of fed up with New York, because I had really had a tough time since I had left James. And though it was all kind of wonderful, it was--I thought, this is crazy. I really love my friends in Europe, I loved living in Europe. Why not go back and get a job in Paris? Why do I have to stay here?

So, I had to make that decision; to take the $2,000--which was a lot of money to me in those days--and either begin to show a little collection of clothes, or to go back to Europe. I made the decision to do the collection of clothes. Are you bored there?

Q: Oh, my goodness, no!
A: Okay. Tell me when you want me to stop.

So, anyway, I hired a tailor and a seamstress, and in my sort of little dining room I had, in that flat, I began to make some clothes for a collection, which we opened in 1957 at the Plaza Hotel. It's so funny, because the Plaza Hotel would not--would let you do a show there but they wouldn't let you--They wouldn't let you work out of the hotel. So we had to go across the street--I had no showroom. We went across the street to the Savoy Plaza. By that time--Remember that? By the General Motors building. So by that time I had a secretary who did everything from wash the
floor to type the letters, and I had the seamstress and the
tailor and whatever, and I found some contractors and I had
these 20 pieces, which went from daytime into evening, and I
showed it in the State Suite at the Plaza Hotel.

Q: At the Plaza.

A: Yes. At the Plaza Hotel, the little state suite that--
And there I was. I mean, I was a kid and I had no money but
I thought, well, I've got--Here I can get started. If it
doesn't work, I'll just close it and I'll go back to Paris.
My life is just beginning. And it's interesting enough
because--Someone even said it this morning. "You were so
courageous." I think that is so stupid, because I think at
that age, you're not courageous; you can do anything you
want. I mean, courageous is when you're 70 years old and you
decide you're going to go into some new business or
something. But when you're just starting out, everything is
wonderful.

Anyway, I was very lucky I think, and a lot of people
liked what I did. The magazines were very kind to me, and I
had a wonderful girl you might remember, a girl named Muriel
Maxwell.

Q: Oh, yes.

A: Muriel did my publicity. She came to me and said, "I
love what you do and I know all the people at all the
magazines. I will set up--" I want you to hear this. Muriel
Maxwell did my publicity for this first show and then she continued, she and her partner, Jane, who had been in Bazaar, a very tall, angular woman--Wonderful girl. They were both really terrific together. They were like Mutt and Jeff, they were terrific, and Muriel had great chic. She said, "I will--" She worked on Vogue, as you know, and had been a model before. She said, "We'll do your publicity and we'll do it for nothing. You give us each a dress at the end of each collection, and then as you--If it works then you'll begin to pay us, but for the moment, we believe in you." It was really--Well, my model, Gillis McGill--

Q: Oh, my goodness, she was?
A: She was my model that I did all the fittings on--
Q: Really.
A: --and she worked for me exactly the same way. Because I had no money. She said, "I'll do the fittings for you and you'll give me a dress after each collection."
Q: Were they smart. They knew.
A: I guess they knew. I didn't know, but they knew. Thank goodness they knew. Somebody knew.

So, we started this and it worked. I mean, there was a lot of--I can't say it worked, you know, just marvelously, because there were a lot of sort of heartaches and a lot of problems, you know, getting the contractors--I've had some wonderful contractors, luckily, on 57th Street, so I stayed
uptown. But it was tough. I remember, very late one night during that first week, at the Savoy Plaza, and I had taken the penthouse suite or something, and they were—I remember calling Blum's Department Store in Chicago and I got Mrs. Blum. Remember old Mrs. Blum? Anyway, I got Mrs. Blum on the phone and had to call—You had to call late, like 8:00, because that's when the buyers came back to their hotels, right? So I called and I remember saying, "Oh, Mrs.—" You had to talk very fast because otherwise they'd hang up on you. I said, "Mrs. Blum, I'm Arnold Scaasi and I've just opened a new dress collection and we're going to have the cover of Vogue for February and I know—Everybody says you have the best store in Chicago—," and blah, blah, blah, "and you've got to come and see the clothes." I remember it was darkening outside. I'll never forget that. Some things stick in your mind. It was getting dark outside and it was sort of gloomy in the room and I was on the phone with this woman, whom I'd never seen in my life, and she—I finished my spiel and then this voice on the other end of the phone said, "Oh, my God, another dress collection! Do we really need another dress collection?" And I burst into tears! I was probably exhausted, but all I got was, "I really don't need that," and so I said, "Oh, yes, you do, and you must come and see them. Neiman's has purchased the clothes and Magnin's has bought the clothes," etc., etc., so she said,
"All right, if I get there, I get there, I'm here for two days," I don't remember. But anyway, finally Blum's became a very good buyer of our clothes.

But, I mean, it wasn't all easy. You know. You remember all the good things. I remember I had moved out of the hotel before Neiman's came and there was a wonderful buyer called Laura Goldman.

Q: Oh, I knew her very well.
A: Remember her.

Q: Very well.
A: So she--And she was very rotund, as you remember, and very funny, charming, and she--They called me and said Miss Goldman would come to see the clothes, she would come on Saturday (by that time I had moved out), and I said, "But you know, she's got--" I didn't know what she looked like. I said, "Fine, we're on the third floor, and I'll never forget--"

Q: Of your walkup.
A: --Of my walkup. So 11:00 Saturday morning there was a knock on the door and there was this large lady outside huffing and puffing, and she said, "Well, I didn't know you were on the third floor. There's no elevator in this building!" I said, "No, there isn't."

Q: Just like Paris.
A: She came in and sat down. I said, "I'm so sorry, if I
had only known I would have brought the clothes to your hotel," or whatever. We had 20 pieces in the first collection. She said, "Honey, I'd walk to the top of the Eiffel Tower—" What do we have here? "--the Empire State Building to find a good dress, and I'm told you have a good dress up here and I want to see it." And that's how we began selling to Neiman's. I guess probably two years later I got the Neiman-Marcus award. And it all went very fast--

Q: Was that your first designing award?
A: No, I think I got--I got the Coty in 1959 and I think I got the Neiman-Marcus award the same year. Strange, the way they came simultaneously. I do believe that a lot of it--I don't whether it's luck--I think a lot of it was talent, but I think the timing was extraordinary. I didn't plan it that way, but I was evidently doing the right clothes at the right time, which were very much the kind of clothes I do today--very feminine, pretty, lavish kind of clothes. There wasn't very much of that in America. There was a lot of it in Europe, but not in America. So we sold--We ended up selling probably 100-150 stores across America and I had a very good business. Then I moved from there to my first showroom, which was probably 1958 I guess, which was a small showroom on 57th Street, and then in '59 I bought a townhouse on 56th Street--the Stanford White house--and Blair & Rebar decorated it for me, and we began to show the
collections there. Then I got very ambitious I decided I would do a sportswear collection and I would do a jewelry collection and I would do—Whatever. I would do everything. I did those things and some of them fell by the wayside. Of course, I was also doing furs with Ben Kahn, which is really not the Ben Kahn we know today because at that time they were down in the 30s on 7th Avenue and they showed 150 pieces per collection and it meant that they would show one mink coat and they would show it 27 times. They'd shorten the sleeve, they'd take the collar off, they'd shorten it an inch, then they'd shorten it to three-quarter—It was always the same coat and they'd show these—I said to Ben, "You know, this is all crazy," and I really sort of revolutionized, at that time, the fur market, because—In fact, I got letters in Women's Wear and everything, because I said you can't just show a collection in mink. This is stupid. There are 17 other furs out there that we can use, and I did—At that time there weren't all the conservationists and all those things. I did, you know, monkey fur and I did zebra and I did—I tried—I made a big effort to try to do everything I could do that the other furriers were not doing.

Q: Don't you have to learn the "working of fur"

A: No, because he was in raw skins. But I sort of grew up in furs. I knew all the furs in my job. I would go every
Saturday with my father and we would--I'd see furs. That was my life. It's interesting. Fascinating.

Anyway, I--That sort of all hit in 1958 and 1959, and that's when the Neiman's award--I think Neiman's might have been '58. It had to do with, really, the times the awards were shown. Do you know what I mean? I think they were very, they were really parallel. Then we were in business.

Then, in '61 I think it was, '60 or '61, I had had the house for about two years. Then I sold the house, because I was told I had to go down to Seventh Avenue. So we opened the showroom at 550 Seventh Avenue, and that went along very well and--

Q: You had contractors down there?
A: We had contractors--I think we had the same contractors uptown if you want to know the truth. I can't remember. There were two wonderful contractors on 57th Street. They were marvelous. I wish I had them today.

But I have to tell you--The first collection I showed, not only did I do the fittings of the duplicates, and stand there while they cut the fabric, and make sure they used every inch and did everything they could do to save, because we were buying all these extraordinary fabrics from Europe. They were then considered very expensive.

Q: Yes.
A: Nobody was buying there except Norell. I mean, Norman
was the only one really. Then, I would pack the boxes and I would tie the boxes and I would take the boxes to the post office until I had—until I could afford someone to help me, you know. And it was interesting—What was interesting then, I must say, is that if they believed in you, the stores would give you an advance. That's fascinating, because, obviously, they don't do it today. They almost don't pay their bills, right? But at that time, they really believed in me and you could call a store and say, "Well, I would like—You've given me an order for $50,000; could you, could we have an advance of $15,000 so we can put your clothes into work?" And they did it. That was wonderful. It was very helpful. I never had a factor. You know? I really never had a factor. It just all grew, of itself. But the stores were very much into new—into nurturing new talent. I don't think it's like that today.

Q: No, it's not.
A: Nothing's like that today so it doesn't matter. So I was very lucky. I think I came at a time when the world was right for it and I was right for the world, where it all meshed together, do you know? That was very nice, and it was sort of wonderful.

By 1963 I was doing about 10 licensing things. I was doing children's wear, I had my own jewelry, costume jewelry company, and when I closed that—I was the person who said
to Kenneth Lane, he brought me some buttons, some jeweled buttons, because he had done jeweled heels—You know, Kenneth was part of the Dior shoe—Remember? Okay. He brought me these buttons and he said, "I want you to use these jeweled buttons, using the same technique as we do on the heels, without the setting." And I said, "I don't need buttons, but we can put a hole through it and we'll string them together and make a necklace out of it, and we'll make some earrings out of it." So that's what we did, and the next year he opened his own jewelry business. So he always said it was because of me that's he's in the jewelry business, which is true.

Then when I closed my—I told him—I gave him, sort of, my factories, because I didn't—And that's how the Kenneth Lane thing got started. But, about 1963 I was really exhausted (It sounds like I am today), but I was exhausted because I was doing then, really, what I'm doing today. But I was very young, I had made a lot of money, I was very successful at my job—

Q: I did not ask you when you were born.
A: Don't ask me anymore.
Q: Approximately.
A: I'm in my early 50s. I think that's enough to be in my—So anyway, they—Where was I?
Q: Well, you had finished—you said in 1963 you started—
A: I started to feel that I--I was doing the fur collections for Ben--I was doing fur collections, I think we had stopped with Ben and started with somebody else by then. Maybe not. And I had the jewelry collection and I was doing Kate Greenaway dresses for children. I was doing a ready-to-wear collection of less expensive evening clothes for Sylvan Rich--

Q: Were you? At Martin?

A: At Martin. And Molly Parnis's sister was the person who ran it.

Q: Are you sure--Gerry Parnis.

A: Gerry. Gerry ran it. She was a wonderful woman. Fabulous. She ran that business and it was a great success, and I was still doing the quality ready-to-wear on my own. I was doing men's sweaters, I had a men's--

Q: Isn't it nice to be young?

A: Yes. It was nice, because I found that I would go to my house in the country with stacks of stuff, and I would go from the car into--and every--I put the fur collection in one bedroom and the jewelry in another and another in another and I ended up doing nothing but work.

[End of Side 1]

Q: Nineteen-sixty-three.

A: I found that I had made a great deal of money on everything I was doing. Eleanor Lambert says that I was
probably the first American designer to be licensed, with the use of the name. Because they were licensing European designers, but not many Americans. I don't know if that's true or not.

Q: I'm not sure. I do know the history of the licensing.
A: I was certainly one of the first where the name was used and purchased, and I was doing so many things that I never had a minute to myself. I thought to myself this is really crazy. I am—Two things happened simultaneously. I am making all this money, I'm young, I'm not having any fun, I'm just doing nothing but working seven days a week, and what is it all about? It's kind of crazy. It shouldn't--It doesn't--I don't think it's right. And at that very time, in '62-'64, what was then known as street fashion came into being fashionable. I had lunch one day with Norman Norell and he said, "Where are your clothes landing?," and I said, "My clothes are landing--They're buying--The stores are buying these clothes but they're using them as a come-on."

He said, "That's exactly what's happening to me. We're being screwed by the stores, really, because they're using us as a come-on, but they're selling the less expensive, inferior quality street clothes--" You know--Street-style clothes. "--and it shouldn't go on that way." So I thought about it a lot, and I thought, now, if I'm going to continue in this business I must either go into the less expensive, inferior
quality merchandise or I could, because I had built up a clientele in the stores, through the stores across the country, I'd done a lot of personal appearances in Texas and California and everywhere--I had built up a clientele across the country that I saw when I went to do my personal appearances in the stores. I thought if I could keep these clients, and keep them happy doing what I'm doing and not change what I'm doing and continue to do what I know how to do well, and like doing, then I think I should stay with that. And the answer was to open a made-to-order business and get out of ready-to-wear, and not go into less expensive ready-to-wear. I really had sort of had it with just working so hard. That was the major thing. I just felt that I wasn't getting anything out of life but work, and what good did it do me, making all this money if it wasn't giving me any pleasure. So, I decided I would just stop it all. I stopped it. I closed everything. I stopped doing the licensing, I stopped doing the Martin thing and stopped doing the children's wear, and I went to Europe on a sort of sabbatical and I looked at the most beautiful, expensive, extraordinary fabrics I could find, and I had Staron and Bianchini make special things for me, and I came back with the idea that I would then continue doing what I knew how to do and would do best, and did best, and I contacted some of my clients that I had been selling to the stores through,
and they said, "Yes, if you do some clothes and show us the clothes, we love your clothes and we'll buy them," and that's what started the made-to-order business. I started--I opened--I rented two floors above Knize on 56th Street. Remember the tailor at Knize?
Q: How do you spell it?
A: K-n-i-z-e. And there was a very fine men's tailor. We opened upstairs with--and Valerian, again, did the showroom and everything, and one floor was the salon and the fitting rooms and the other floor was the workrooms. In '64 we opened our first made-to-order collection. Suddenly, life was wonderful because I was doing two collections a year, I had six months off to do whatever I wanted to do, and I traveled a great deal and had fun, and I began to live, and it was heaven.
Q: Did you enjoy working with private clients?
A: I loved it. I found that I loved it. One of my first clients was Tuti Weatherall, whose mother had backed Mainbocher, which is very interesting, and she said, Mainbocher is getting too old for me and I love your clothes and I will--actually I will come and you will make all my clothes." And she was one of my first customers in the made-to-order. We opened--The day we opened we had Rockefeller women and Vanderbilt women and Barbara Streisand and Joan Sutherland and we had--Well, I'd been dressing Joan since
she came to America; Streisand, in '64, you know, opened in *Funny Girl* in New York, and we had a wonderful group of women. We didn't dress all of them immediately but we dressed a lot of them.

Q: Now, somebody like Barbra, was she difficult?
A: She was wonderful. She was not difficult. It is very interesting because the first day, when we did our opening in the salon, we must have had, I guess, about 50 people, and with all the sort of cream of New York, you know, and society, and Philadelphia because of "Tuti Weatherall," and Barbra walked in in a big floppy hat with a big poncho, sort of looking like a hippie, sort of, and I thought, "Oh, my God, that girl!" I didn't know her or anything and I said, "Oh, that's terrible," and all those other ladies in their Mainbocher suits, right? And Chanel. Real Chanel suits. My gosh, she's going to turn them off, how'd she get in here sort of thing. The next day she called. I had closed the show with a very austere wedding dress of silk faille that had a hood, a very tight-fitting hood, almost monastic, right? With about, I don't know, 50 buttons going down the front and sort of fitted and then moving out, and it looked sort of almost like a priest's robe in very stiff-like silk.

It was beautiful.

They called me in the next day and said, "Miss Streisand is on the phone," I said, "Well, find out what she
wants, and they said, "She wants to know if you would make the wedding dress in black." I said, "What?" I wanted to know why she wanted to know that. They went away, they came back to me, and I had a woman who had been at Chez Nino. I can't remember her name. She was a wonderful woman. She had retired and came out of retirement to help me open this salon, for the made-to-order, and she said, "Oh, you shouldn't get into--You shouldn't bother--This is going to turn everybody else off if we--she becomes a client." No one knew how famous she was going to become and that. This was her first show, you know. So they came back and said she wants the wedding dress in black to use as an evening coat. I said, "Well, that's brilliant. That's fabulous." Then she had some other questions about a lace dress; could the lace dress be made in rust instead and I thought that was terrific. I don't remember what, but there were four things she loved but wanted to change them all, to become her own dresses.

So, finally I went to the phone and said, "I think your ideas are terrific," and she said, "I love your clothes," so we made a date to meet for lunch at Twenty-One--she had never been to Twenty-One, and she was so adorable, because she came in this terrible seersucker suit with her long, stringy hair, but she was very charming and she said, "You know, they let me use the phone here for nothing, can you
imagine that? Can I come back anytime and use the phone for nothing?" I said, "You know, Barbra, after your success in *Funny Girl* (she had been in it for about a month or something) I think they'll let you use the phone anytime you want. You don't have to worry about that anymore." But she was very funny, and she was an inspired person. I mean, I loved dressing her. I dressed her for about seven years, until she went to Hollywood and we just couldn't--It wasn't logical anymore, you know. But I made all of her clothes for a lot of things and she was not only a joy to work with, but she is an interesting, intelligent woman and she had an innate sense of style, and her own style. I mean, she knew exactly what it should be and she loved detail and she loved quality. The inside of the dress was as important to her as the outside. It was fascinating, and we're both Tauruses. We got along very well, we never had an argument in all the years that we knew each other. We're still--If I'm on the Coast I will call her, and sometimes when she comes here she'll call me. But, we don't work together anymore but I think she's very, very special and I think maybe people think she's difficult because she is such a perfectionist. She's an extraordinary perfectionist, and she takes nothing second-quality, nothing second-hand, for herself as well as what you do. And as I'm a perfectionist, as Barbra will tell you (I was driving her crazy) she--I understood her
perfectly and we got along perfectly.

Q: That's great.

A: I mean, it didn't matter to me what we had to do, when we had to do it, where we had to do it. I thought it was great and she was a great inspiration to me. She was wonderful.

Anyway. There I was, doing made-to-order clothes and we would take--At that time, because it was very unusual--Everyone had closed by then so it was very unusual that there was--somebody would open a made-to-order salon. Mainbocher was still there but he was getting near the end.

Q: Yes, well Bergdorf's [Goodman] was still there, but was getting toward the end.

A: Bergdorf's was there, Sophie was there, and Chez Ninon was importing clothes and copying them, and Madame Clara I think was the name of the woman--

Q: Yes, Clara--

A: I never met her, but I think she did--But I forgot to tell you what I thought was so funny. Because, you know, the way your balance in life can change by one thing.

When I first opened (I'm going back now to '57), when I first opened the ready-to-wear in '57, I had been (and I forgot about it), but I had been trying to get a job everywhere, as I told you, and I must have had 10 interviews with Hattie Carnegie. I showed her the clothes I had made, I
showed her sketches, she always said, "You're wonderful, you're talented, and we'll find a place for you, somewhere."
The day after I opened my own collection she called me. It came out the—In the New York Times and the Herald Tribune we had then, everybody gave me just great reviews, and she called me and said, "Well, I see that you really do great clothes. Now you have to come and work for me." And I said, "But Miss Carnegie, I've just opened my own business and I want to see how it's going." She said, "Oh, that will never work out. You really have to come to me."

Now, I suppose if I had not had the tenacity that I did have I would have been—I could have gone to her—I don't know—and my life would have been totally different. So it's interesting how it can change, just by a word or a deed of somebody, you know.

Anyway, there I was back—Now we're back to '60, and we used to take—to get it going we took the collection out and did the collection early as I could. Oh! It really was a lot of work. That's something that one has to understand, certainly students should understand, that it's all hard work. There's nothing glamorous about it. There's nothing particularly fun about it. You do it because you love it and probably it's the only thing you know how to do or do well, anyway, so you—but it is all hard work and there are no hours and there are no minutes and there are no days and
there are no vacations, if aren't any, because there isn't time for them, and that has to--The work must come first or else don't do it.

So, I remember we used to do something--It's incredible to me today to think of it--We would take, we would do the collection, about half of the collection--And say we wanted to open in the fall, in September, when people got back from their holidays. We would take the collection out in early August, whatever was made (Which meant that in July we were making clothes, right?). We would take out whatever number of pieces were made, sometimes even not finished, and we would travel to about eight cities with the collection, and we would then have--The rest of the collection that had been planned and that they were still working on in New York, I would take sketches and swatches out, big boards, and we would take a suite in the best hotel, or the best suite or whatever. I had a representative in each city, usually quite a social girl who knew all the right women and to bring them to the hotel to see the clothes. That's how we really started the made-to-order, because I would go to Houston, I would go to Dallas, and I would spend two or three days in each place and we would do eight cities in four weeks, and sometimes nine or sometimes seven in three weeks. But we would do it very fast, and we'd take out the beginning of the made-to-order collection because once we opened it in
New York, I wanted it to stay in New York. But that's really how we got going. We built up the clientele across the country.

Q: So you showed in Oklahoma City, didn't you?
Then took the orders back to New York.
A: Right. I would take all--We'd do 62 measurements (we still do the same measurements) and those measurements would be taken and we would build a dummy for the person. They would order their clothes, they would give us a deposit (or we wouldn't take the order) and we would leave that city and then we'd go on to the next city. It depended on how many women there were--I mean, you know who the women are in each city--

Q: Sure.
A: --if you want to find out, and we'd--The person there would fill out the appointments beforehand--

Q: But you had a very complicated schedule. I assume, for instance, you would not sell two women the same dress.
A: You couldn't, no.

Q: So you had to know exactly what each one--
A: Well, this--Our representative, the girl--who was really just a young socialite who wasn't working and liked the idea of getting--Again, they wanted the clothes. They didn't need the money, right? Because their husbands were rich, but they wanted the clothes and so whatever we would
give them for their lifestyle—It was interesting, they would say, "Well, yes, if you sell Mrs. Zweig this to wear to the opening of the opera, you can't sell it to Mrs. Robert Watt Miller, because she's going to wear the same thing to the opening, another dress." But we built up a wonderful clientele across America.

Then, of course, after—I don't remember how many years but I think we probably did it for about two or three years, each season, we'd go to Palm Beach—

Q: Didn't you develop the 62 measurements? Is that combination of Charles James and—?
A: No, it is not. I really did it—I suppose I must have learned the first basics of it in design school. You know. How to—whatever.
Q: Yes. Because that's very difficult. And building the dummies is—
A: Well, the dummies are very difficult. That I developed in Charles James, because Charles James would build a dummy that was absolutely a replica of the woman—
Q: Marvelous.
A: --and then he would change the dummy on how he wanted the woman to look. So that then the dress was made and then he would squeeze the person into that dress, right? There were some women with enormous bosoms who really had no bosoms at all because he would pad the dress so they had
these bosoms, which made the waist look smaller, and so forth. Anyway--We did it in the '60s, we developed the measurements, and the idea of the measurements was not only to--for size, but it was for your stance. From that measurement, from the neck, say, to the shoulder blade bone, to the waistline, to the hipbone, to the buttock, to the floor--those six measurements, going down the side of the back, would tell you whether the woman was round-shouldered, or whether she stood very straight, or whatever. We would pretty much develop the dummy with her own stance.

Q: Your made-to-order business, you stayed with it straight through?

A: We established the clientele, which is major, and we found there were an awful lot of women who wanted made-to-order clothes.

Q: What was your price range during that period? Do you remember?

A: Oh, God. I suppose in '64 it was probably from about $300 to about--I mean, $1,000 was a lot of money for a dress. We were able to find good sample hands and things like that, and we established a very good business. What was surprising, though--I must say, I've always based the theory of my business on that if you charge--If a dress costs you $5 and you charge $10 for it, you had to make $5 profit; if you didn't, there was something very wrong there. So, we did
calculation sheets, exactly the way they did on Seventh Avenue (because that had been my training when I did ready-to-wear) and the business was very successful.

Well, I don't know how we did--I don't remember now. I don't think we did because, don't forget, that in the made-to-order there is no middle man. You know what I mean?

Q: Yes, but you have to count your own talent in there.
A: Yes. Well, we didn't count that. We counted only what--We counted the overhead--[recorder off]

Q: The overhead.
A: The business was not only a financial success, but it was successful in women, and it's interesting because I found--Well, one, I found I loved working with the women, that I loved working uptown, and that I loved making special clothes. I didn't know whether I would really like that or not, but I enjoyed it. I loved it, and it continues to this day that I like it. And if a special friend or a special client is going down, is going into the salon on Fifth Avenue, then I try to be there for that person.

Q: Well, that brings us through the early '60s, and you continued your business--
A: We continued all the time. Yes, we did, and during that time very often stores like Jerry Stutz always said, "Oh, you know, you made the best black cocktail dress, won't you
make me some clothes?" We would always say no, we only do made-to-order and that's what we do. We are indeed, ourselves, a retail outlet so we cannot work with other retail outlets.

In the--I guess the early--In the late '70s, I think--Obviously through those years, the years before the late '70s and after, I dressed an enormous amount of famous people because--I don't know, it just was the right moment. Again, the time was right for us, for what we did.

Q: Most of your competitors disappeared, right?
A: The competitors disappeared, and if you wanted a wonderful made-to-order dress, made the way it was made in Paris, fitted by wonderful fitters with extraordinary fabric--I mean, I went twice a year as I do now to Europe for the couture fabrics. I never went for the ready-to-wear fabrics, but for the couture fabrics I went, and I'm probably the only American designer--or one of--maybe they do it with Galanos (I mean, I think they do, but we show at different times)--that the couture fabric people will show to. They--You know, it's a special group of fabrics that comes out--Like, I'll go now in June for their fall fabrics, and I will see the fabrics at the same time that St. Laurent or Givenchy or anybody of the couture is seeing them. They will not show them to manufacturers.

Q: Do they confine them to you, or do they sell to
America?
A: Well, they're so expensive today that there aren't many people who can really afford them, you know? I mean, sometimes Jimmy will have something that I will have, especially in the print market, but again, I think he's looking for something special also. What we're mainly looking for, I think, is something special. Made-to-order clothes must stand apart from the ready-to-wear, and it always happens that anytime we put something in the made-to-order collection that we think is going to work because it looks salable or could be appropriate, it always happens that that dress dies in made-to-order and becomes a big success in the ready-to-wear.

So, it's interesting—I'm jumping ahead now, but the made-to-order becomes a kind of laboratory for the ready-to-wear. Very often.

Q: Would you talk a little bit about your brief venture into the ready-to-wear market in Paris?
A: Yes. I don't remember the dates (I guess we could find out easily enough), but in the '70s I got this idea that it would be—Well, I had sort of had a hankering—It seemed to me for a long time—Not in the very beginning, because it was fun in the beginning, as anything is—But it seemed that after a while I was doing an enormous amount of work, and my people, the people who worked with me—my sales people and
people at the couture—would say, "Isn't it fab, you do all of this work and you go to all this trouble and you go to Europe twice a year and you spend all this money, and in the end there are 30 women that you dress, or 50 women that you dress. Isn't it fab that there aren't more, and why is so and so getting all this publicity and here you are working so hard and you're not getting it?" And I would explain—Of course, as I knew, the magazines couldn't use me because I had no store outlet and the magazines—

Q: Sure.
A: --as time went on, you know—Mainbocher was really—I mean, I guess they did feature me now and then, but it was sort of like a handout, you know, because they didn't really need a page that could not bring in revenues from stores. I understood it, and it didn't matter to me. I didn't really care. I just wanted to do what I was doing. As I said, my life was very pleasant. I had lots of free time and I sort of liked it, I enjoyed it.

Then, sometime in the '70s, I think, Maria Moutet came to us and said it would be a wonderful thing for an American designer to be designing in Paris, and would we do a ready-to-wear collection that she—It would be based on the made-to-order collection that we did here. We would simply take the designs and translate them into less expensive fabrics and they would be manufactured in Paris, and there would be
that extra cachet of doing it in Paris. Then American stores would buy it, of course, and hopefully the European stores would buy it. She only wanted cocktail and evening clothes.

So, I did it, and I was unhappy about it because, again, it was a great inconvenience. I mean, I still had to do the two made-to-order collections, and it was a great inconvenience to have to go to Paris, work with the French, and also stay there for six to eight weeks to do the collections because they had to be made, then they had to be launched when the ready-to-wear opened. Then I'd have to suddenly run back and do the made-to-order. I really became lonely. I remember—I had a wonderful suite at the Ritz, and I remember lying there one night thinking, "What the hell am I doing here? I have a perfectly good business at home, I make a great deal of money, I have a lovely house in the country, I have lovely friends and my dog and my life is wonderful in New York. Why am I in this stupid hotel room in Paris?" I thought it was really dumb.

Again, I looked at it from the way it affected me. Do you know what I mean? I thought, well, even if it's a big success, so what? So I've made a couple thousand dollars more but so what? I'm unhappy doing it, and I stopped it. And that's really how I stopped—And I don't think it was that successful. I mean, from a—I don't know, from Maria's point of view, and she was very good about it. But I don't
think--She really wanted to do her coat--She did a coat collection or something--
Q: Yes.
A: --with some people in Lyon, I remember--
Q: Yes,
A: --and she had a backer who was American. Anyway, it was a nice experience. It got it out of my system, which was--
Q: A chance
A: --to work in Paris, see. I was going to work in Paris and wasn't that fabulous? I was going to be written up by the Paris press and all this kind of stuff. Indeed I was and they were very kind and it was sort of successful, but it was not successful from an emotional point of view. So I stopped that. I would continue with the made-to-order, which continued to be a success and I was very happy about it.

Then, I think it was in the late '70s, Saks came to me. I knew many people at Saks--Salzburg in particular, and Mr. Solls, who was then the merchandise manager, and they came to me and they said, "We love your made-to-order clothes. Is there any way we could sell them at Saks?" So I said, "Well, you can't sell them in New York, because we're just--We're at Fifth Avenue and 53rd Street and you're at Fifth Avenue and 50th Street, so that is not going to work. But I will let you have them for outside of New York, if it can be profitable and pleasant. I remember making a big thing about
that. I said, "The minute it gets unpleasant, and I'm unhappy about it and you're unhappy about it, we're going to stop it, because it's not going to work. But if it can be fun and we can show the clothes--" By this time we had stopped taking the clothes out before the collection--

Q: Oh, yes?

A: --because our clients--You know. Air travel became a cinch and our buyers began to fly in for the openings, or they'd fly in after the openings and order their clothes. It was not necessary anymore to take them out on the road. So, I decided that we would do the same thing; that we would take them to the Saks stores, where we were not selling women in that city, or where we were selling them in that city but to the important stores that they felt--And we worked out a routine and we went to about four or five stores, again, the same way, with the nucleus of the collection. Whatever was not finished we'd have the sketches and swatches of, and we built up a very good business.

Of course, when you consider the retail of a made-to-order dress, if they sold 10 dresses in the three days we were there, that was several hundred thousands of dollars. I mean, that made their figures for the month, you know. They would just--It was extra, added sugar that they never expected and it didn't cost them anything.

Q: Was Adolfo at the same time?
A: Oh, yes. Adolfo was in existence, and another big resource of theirs was Chloe. Those were the two main--But what we brought was something totally different. We made--Again, we took orders on special dresses for special women for special occasions, and if we had one good customer who would buy 10 dresses and another who would buy three or four, and a third one who would buy another two, if you figured that on those 15-20 dresses that they sold, that was a hell of a lot of money that they made. They also were required to buy a certain amount of clothes they had to buy from the collection. That was a stipulation I made.

So, it went along very nicely and we were both very happy with it. It was a pleasant relationship. They were very good to me and acted very straight with me, and they were very happy that we were doing this extra business for them.

Then--But through that I began to see that when I would go to a store, the women--really men and women--would come up to me and say, "I just love this dress, but obviously I can't afford $5,000. I wish you'd make a dress that I could buy." And really, from that, I began to think about going back into ready-to-wear. So, in--It's very funny how it happened, again, because I went to an evening--to an affair one night and I found I was very badly seated because there was nothing--There were two other gentlemen at my table and
that was it, and I was furious. It was something Barbara Sinatra had worked out and Barbara was a client of mine. So I was very upset when I got there, I had gone to all this trouble to stay in there, then I was seated with these two men. It turned out that the two men were absolute financial wizards. They were brilliant. One of them was Marvin Davis's accountant, so we did pretty good for him. He had a young accountant he wanted me to work with (they've since become very good friends) and I, indeed, hired this man who really changed my life and said, "You must stop talking about going into ready-to-wear and looking for a partner (which was what I was doing." He said, "You have enough money to do it yourself and I want you to--Either don't do it and shut up about it, or do it, but let's make a decision."

So, we decided to do it and try it, and again I said, "Well, you're right. If it doesn't work we'll close down. If it works, fine. If it doesn't work, we always have the made-to-order, which we'll always continue to do." So in '84 we opened the ready-to-wear, and it's worked very well.

Q: At 530 7th Avenue?
A: At 530.
Q: At 530.
A: Yes, and we do mainly (and it's going to be completely again, because we sort of veered away from it this season), it's really a cocktail-evening collection, because I felt
that that's what the market needed and that's what I was
good at and that's what I was known for. Now, in the made-
to-order collection, we do everything, because we have a lot
of people who have racing stables and go racing and they
want suits and day dresses and afternoon dresses and coats,
and--So the made-to-order collection is a complete
collection.
Q: Now, in your ready-to-wear collection, do you have
somebody in charge, totally, of production, for example?
A: Yes, of course. I have a production man and I have a
managing director. Jerry is the managing director. Then I
have very good sales people and--
Q: So you really run as a ready-to-wear business would
run.
A: Oh, yes. It's totally ready-to-wear. It's a totally
separate showroom, there's nothing--It has nothing to do
with the made-to-order at all. Excepting, I think, a
designer only designs one way, and sometimes there are
overlappings of designs, but other than that, it is run as a
totally separate business.
Q: And do you find at this point in time that specialty
stores are your more important clients, or--
A: Our most important client is still Saks. But, of
course, Saks is everybody's most important client because
they have 45 stores--
Q: Sure, sure.
A: --so that's terrific. But we do marvelously well with Saks, with Neiman-Marcus, with all the major stores. Martha--
Q: I was going to ask you about Martha.
A: --Elizabeth Arden, Bergdorf Goodman, Lord & Taylor, Bloomingdale's, Bendel's--We work with every major store--I. Magnin is a terrific buyer of ours, and we work with every major store in America.
Q: And what's your price range in the ready-to-wear?
A: The ready-to-wear begins at about $1,000 retail and goes up to about $2,500, and about $500 wholesale to about $1,300.
Q: And where is your custom collection placed at this point?
A: The custom collection begins at about $6,000 for a day dress. For an afternoon dress it goes up to--anywhere to $10-12,000 for an evening dress, depending on the amount of embroidery that's on the dress or, you know, what the dress is. That includes as many fittings as you need and the dress in the same way that I always built clothes; we begin from the underlayer and that's fitted, and then the next layer is put on and that's fitted, and then--We build a dress.
Q: You don't work with the Orient at all, do you?
A: The Orient?
Q: Yes.
A: No.
Q: So everything's made in America.
A: Everything's made in America.
Q: And what about the accessories? Do you buy them on the open market?
A: I'm not interested in accessories.
Q: I didn't mean--I'm sorry. I didn't mean accessories to sell separately, but things like belts or your findings or whatever.
A: The belts are made in New York. I'll design a belt and it will be made in New York, both for the ready-to-wear and the made-to-order.
A: The fabrics all come from Europe.
Q: So when you go to buy for your custom collection, you also buy for your ready-to-wear.
A: No, I don't.
Q: You don't.
A: I buy the ready-to-wear--I'm buying the ready-to-wear right now, for spring, and it gets a little confusing at this point because (in my mind, anyway) I'm buying for spring--
Q: Well, I should think the calendar would be difficult
for you, too.

A: It's difficult. Very difficult. Especially when there's something that--Two bridal collections that we now do--

Q: Oh, really?

A: --for licensing. We started licensing again, and it seems to me that I'm right back where I was in 1964. But--I don't know how long this is going to go on for, but anyway here I am, still doing it.

Q: You don't run a design studio with several people working for you?

A: No, no. We're trying--We're starting now with the idea of forming one, but I find it difficult because I think too many students come to me with portfolios and they all look alike, or they look like somebody else. They always look like the hot designer on Seventh Avenue. I mean, there are more portfolios going around that all look like either Calvin Klein or Donna Karan or somebody else. There's very little originality, and I don't now whether that's the time we live in or what students are given in the schools; you know, what theory they're getting. I don't know.

Q: Have you done any teaching yourself?

A: No.

Q: You have not. Are you horrified--

A: I'm horrified because--I have so little time to myself as it is, so when on earth would I--I don't think I could
ever--I think I'd be very impatient, because I am impatient when someone comes and shows me a portfolio and I feel it really is not original and that is not—that they have sort of based their whole idea of designing on someone else's idea, and I think that's sad, because I think the only time you can really be original and be free and use your imagination is when you're young and you begin. Because otherwise, afterwards you get pushed into a slot, whether you like it or not. The buyer of the store will come to you because—No matter how beautiful my day clothes are in the ready-to-wear collection, they go to somebody else for those clothes.

Q: So you don't make them anymore. Daytime clothes.
A: No, not in the ready-to-wear. We may do a new division, which is a daytime division. That's what we're thinking of.

Q: Between 2:00 and 4:00 in the morning.
A: Yes.

Q: Well, I must say, this has been a very exciting and very interesting--
A: Really?!

Q: Thank you very much.
A: I'm sure I missed lots of points but I think you got the general idea.

Q: Well, I'll tell you--It's wonderful. You obviously like what you're doing enormously.
A: Yes. The thing that I think is important about it is that I more than like it, I love it. I mean, it's my life, and I find that working in this business, in the dress business, in my capacity is totally exhilarating, very exciting and--

Q: You're talking about the dress business. You're not doing coats as well as--?

A: Well, we do coats in the made-to-order but we don't--

Q: But not in ready-to-wear.

A: No. We only do cocktail and evening coats. Well, sometimes we do, yes. Once in a while--Like last spring we did some white dotted--You know, dresses, short, with multi-colored silk coats over them--

Q: That sounds very debutante.

A: They were--No, because they were very short. They were four inches above the knee, and they just looked fabulous and they were absolutely right for that moment. But I think you have to love what you do, and it makes me very annoyed sometimes that in America, I think much more than in Europe, sometimes people take jobs out of necessity. Obviously because they must earn a living. But, I don't see why they have to take a job they don't like. They should go into the business that they would like to be in, and I'm sure that--You know--I mean, if you're going to drive a cab. I think it's perfectly great to drive a taxi. What's wrong with it?
Nothing's wrong with it. But at least you like doing it. If you don't like doing it, then don't drive a cab. Go and be, you know, a clerk in a shop or become a dress designer if that's what you want to do. But know what you want to do and then follow it, and don't be afraid of the hardships and don't be afraid that you will—that you'll fail. Because if you fail, you just do it again. If you don't like it well enough then you do something else, but I don't think you should not try it. I think that's in any business. But if you love it, do it, and I love it.

Q: Yes, indeed it's very obvious and it's really very exciting.
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