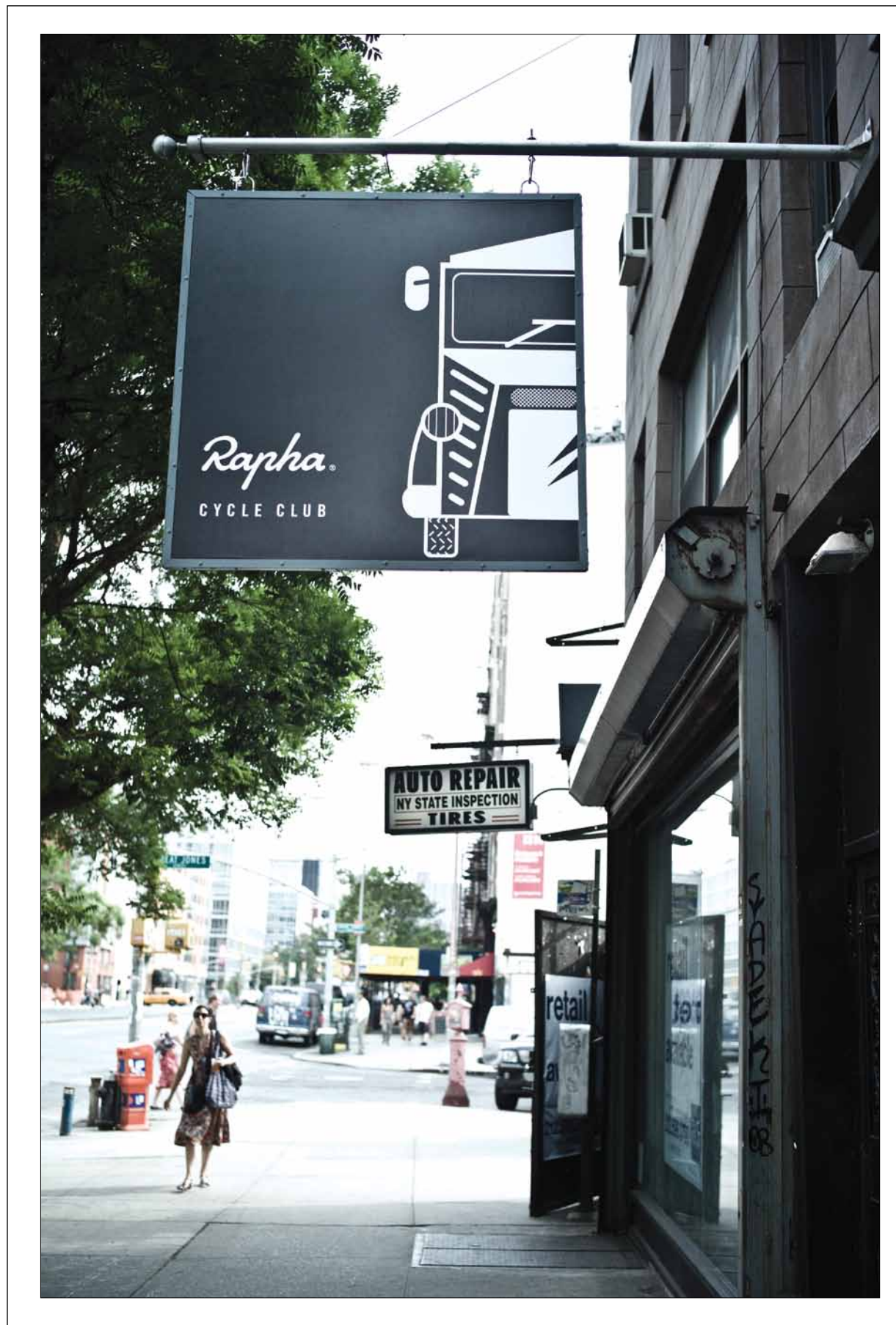


# Rapha

Based in the United Kingdom, Rapha's U.S. presence continues to grow and is causing the other, more known brands to venture into areas and styles of apparel that aren't normally in their wheelhouse. They are a little bit of old-school mixed with modern fabrics and every bit about the romance of the sport. All of what they do clearly portrays that they are, and always will be, a high-end brand.

*Interview > Tim Chamber*

*Photos > Russ Lamoureux*





**Explain the name Rapha?** When Tom Simpson went to the Continent he rode for Rapha, a “development” team for the French St. Raphael team that boasted Jacques Anquetil as leader from 1961-64.

**What separates Rapha from other clothing companies?** There are a handful of storied companies that we have always respected. However, Rapha started because it felt like there was a genuine hole for cycling clothing that captured the beauty and spirit of the sport. Cycling has always had such class, great style and wonderful character through the decades and from around the globe, yet we felt nothing really existed that captured that essence, imagination and refinement. People we’re walking out of bicycle shops with \$5,000-6,000 bikes and it felt like they didn’t really have that same option for top design and performance. Hence, Rapha began in 2004.

**How do you explain the quick rise into a recognized and respected company?** We are honored that we have been

able to find such loyal customers, friends and fans. I believe that cyclists recognize and appreciate the design and insight that Rapha has brought into the marketplace. I hope that what people are drawn to is the authentic passion that we have for the sport, and how that love of the riders, racers and monuments of the sport translate into the products we make and the stories we tell. Rapha founder, Simon Mottram is a big reason for who and where we are, it was and remains his vision and his passion.

**What motivates you guys to continue pushing the creative envelope?** As a primarily-online company, we have to push how we bring our stories to life, using films, pictures, maps and constantly staying in touch with our customers via our blog and other social platforms. As designers, we believe there is bigger opportunity to infuse the style of cycling into the everyday lives of people who ride bicycles—which is a population that is promising to only continue to grow. Watching more and more people come into the sport (activity, or method of

transportation) offers us new ways to approach new problems. While we’re looking at the city rider, rest assured that we have as much of a focus and will be pushing what we’re doing in the areas of racing and training.

**Describe the Rapha cyclist.** Until last spring we would have described him as a “he,” but with a long-awaited collection of women’s pieces, we’re now using both genders. It’s tough to point out the exact customer as we have a wide-range of people across the globe who have come to the brand, but if I had to create just one picture: They are someone who loves the sport of cycling. Likely a professional of some sort who has a busy work and family life, and sees cycling as something that they have to do to keep their life grounded. It is their time for themselves. They may race (although many also do not) or have ridden a sportif. They appreciate and yearn for that place where suffering and glory meet.



**Is there ever a temptation to dip down and make mid-range and entry-level type cycling gear?** Funny enough, there are a number of brands that out-price us nowadays. Still, we look to use the best materials and work with only the best makers to deliver Rapha products, delivering high-end, top-quality pieces. Partnerships with Paul Smith, Timothy Everest, Apolis Activism and Maharam are exciting areas where we get to really push, helping to keep our reputation for high-end. As busy and stretched as we are to make the pieces we love, I don't see us bringing any entry-level gear to market anytime soon.

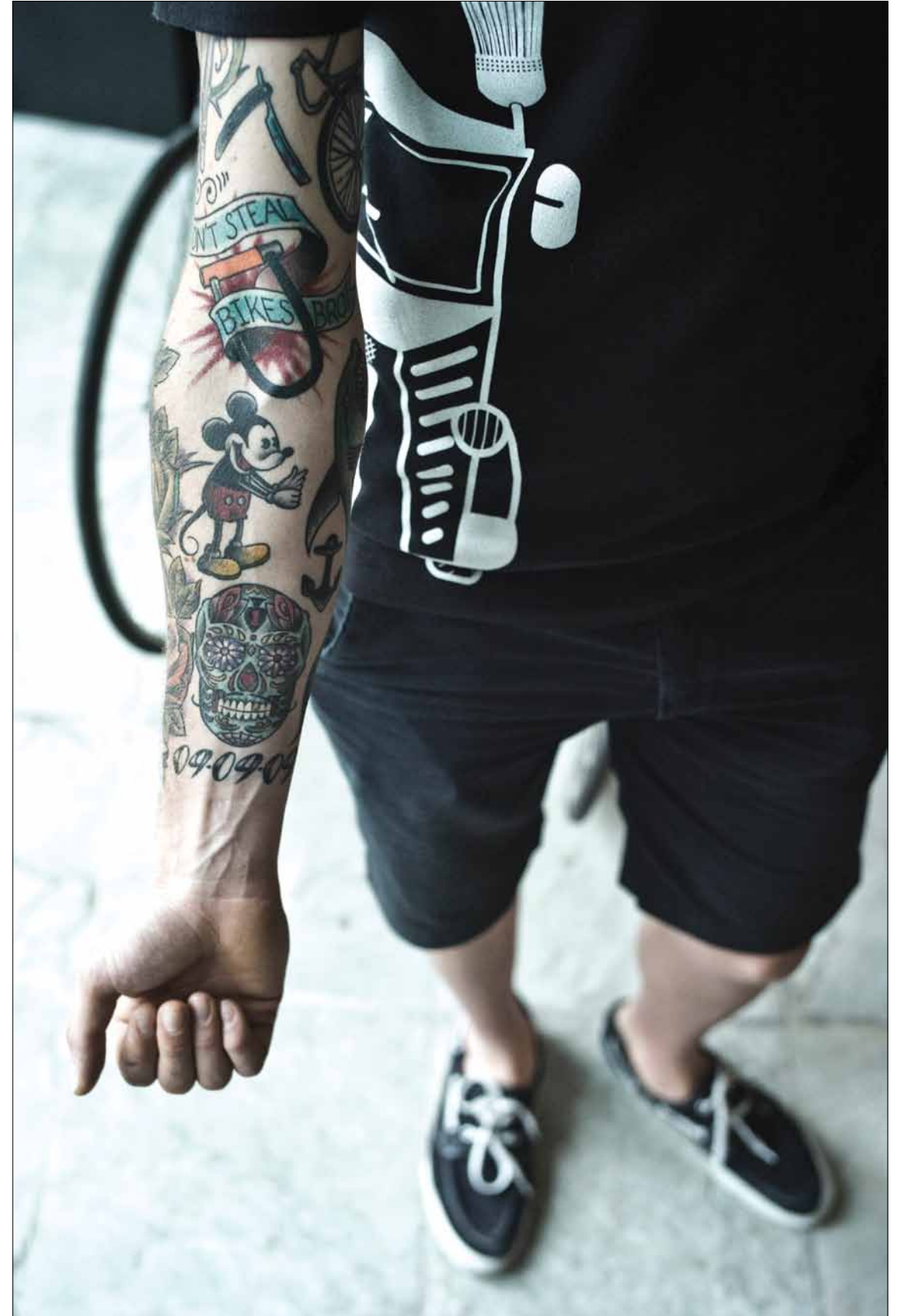
**There's great detail to every piece of Rapha gear, from the bite piece for zipping up a jersey to the graphic detail on the inside a jersey to the front zipper that's not on a straight line. How do you guys come up with this detail?** A lot of the insights come primary through us using the products ourselves.

It's not comfortable when you have zipper stacking on top of zipper, etc. We have standing weekly rides and everyone is encouraged to get on the bike to test prototypes or just to have time to think about what else we're missing from the range. The ongoing Rapha Continental program has also provided us fertile ground for testing and concepting. We also constantly have an eye on what other top makers of sport or high-end fashion are bringing to market. We might find something from a ski company or an idea from Savile Row.

**If Rapha were to ever make a road bike what would it be?** It would be a race bike in steel or carbon. The Continental bikes are one example and Simon would kill me if I didn't mention his love for the Colnago C-50.

**Tell us about the Rapha Gentlemen's Ride.** It's really just a group ride, but the term "Gentlemen" is an attempt to

bring some context to the expectation of the group. Inspired somewhat by the Rapha Continental, the idea was that we should encourage people to ride at a pace that wasn't racing, but also wasn't a Sunday spin, and that we hoped people would keep an eye out for one another—to work together. Lastly, it is about being part of the communities that you pass through along the way, stop in and have a Coke and a local treat, don't just pack all the gels you can and blow on through because you'll miss a lot of the color if you do.





**The Rapha-Condor team seems to be a bunch of hardcore dudes.**

Our passion is road racing. When we were first starting, many of the riders we featured in our brochures or online were friends who were racers in London. As Condor is a long-time partner and primary seller of Rapha in Central London, the chance arose to sponsor the team together and we've been fortunate to have John Herety at the helm as team director. John has a long history within British cycling and has done a splendid job to create a team that has delivered British national champions for road and criterium in Kristian House and Dean Downing.

**You guys have started moving into casual wear like trousers and a tailored jacket. How did this come about?**

You see it in London, nearly 500,000 bicycle trips everyday. Many of these people likely will never set out on the bicycle to train or race, yet they're riding five days a week as their main mode of transport. The challenge of creating clothing that delivers on performance while appearing completely appropriate for the office or the pub is really exciting. Much of what we've learned in making racing/training pieces is translatable to what a cyclist about town needs or would appreciate. There is a great opportunity to bring cycling into fashion in a way people likely are not expecting.

**It's about time Rapha ventured into women's gear.** We spent a lot of time to get this right. We're still quite a small company and as you can imagine the resources and effort to bring something that we were happy with wasn't easy. Especially with the North American market continuing to grow, we had been wanting to bring a range for women, we had a customer base already of women and were confident we could offer something female cyclists would appreciate. Still, to do



>Simon Mottram, founder.





it right is never easy. We spent nearly two years working with designers and testers to work to get the fit just right, putting extra here and there. The pieces are built just as we have always done for our men's range, except with a lot of consideration for the shape of the woman who rides.

**Several years ago I did part of a stage of the Tour de France with Simon and the crew, and at the time Rapha was really just breaking on to the scene, especially in America. Even then there were hardcore Rapha loyalists. It seems like once you buy Rapha you never go back. How do explain such loyalty to the brand?** Again, we feel fortunate that this is the case. We have built our brand and our business because we have customers who have found us, loved us, put up with some of our imperfections and still told their friends, who tell their friends. I think that the people that "get" Rapha and

what we believe really get it and share our vision for the sport.

**Customer service seems to be a huge thing for you guys.** We are customers ourselves and we have all experienced the good and bad interactions when you're shopping, staying at hotels, etc. The good interactions stand out just as much as the bad ones. We appreciate that people are expecting a high-quality experience along with their high-quality Rapha item. Whether on the site, over email or via the phone, and through product, we tend to everything we can to ensure that people are more than satisfied.

**Rapha's branding efforts are unlike any other brand and now we see Rapha venturing into short film. Was this a calculated move or did someone approach you guys?** We have used photography as such a compelling method for bringing the people,



places and rides we've done to life. The extension or evolution into film was a natural next step. The first real commitment to film came in working with Dave Christensen on the Rapha Continental last year. Dave is a customer and friend who heard about the plans for the Continental team to pre-ride the Tour of California and wanted to capture that. We had

done some great films for events previously, but I think this really signified a movement to film as a really compelling way to bring life to the Rapha site and our products. The films inspired by our Club Jerseys came together because of friendships with filmmakers and RSA Films (Ridley Scott Associates). It's pretty fantastic really how much of the

creative community is into cycling. Makes sense that they would be drawn to the beauty and humanity as we are.

**Can we expect Rapha to go big and sponsor a ProTour team in the future?**

Never say never, but again, we're just a small company. Still, we're happy that more than a few riders in the current peloton are fans already.



## The Rapha club.

**Where did this idea come from? Did it come from vacancies with the bad economy or was it always on the radar?** The opportunity to bring the Rapha experience to life in a physical space has always been something we've wanted to do. Again, our model hasn't changed, we are still an online brand first and foremost, but to create an experience that delivered community, events, great products and some inspiration is something we were excited by as a way to push the brand ahead. Getting a chance to interact with existing and new customers at the store level has been a really terrific chance for us.

**Are the clubs going to be a permanent fixture in places like NYC?** Sadly, they are not going to be permanent. There will likely be Rapha Cycle Clubs in different locales in the future.

**How do you measure the success of the clubs?** We do look at the register tape each day, but that's not the real

measure of success. I imagine it will take a little while to see the full effect, but in the present we are pleased with the attention that the Cycle Clubs have received from an array of press and within the cycling community. We're hopeful that the impression we've made will translate into a long-term relationship through the online expression and store.

**Are they driven by the notion of selling product or strictly to expose the brand to people?** We'd of course like to sell as much as we can, but the brand is the thing if you made me choose.

**How much design time goes in to the shaping of a club?** The devil is in the details, same as it is with our products. We were fortunate to collaborate with the London-based creative agency, Antidote, on both the London and New York clubs. Antidote has long been a friend of ours and was the agency that created everything for Team Sky this past

spring. They are very keen cyclists and helped to bring a lot of their own insights to the store experience.

**Will we see Rapha stores across the U.S. soon?** Not likely, but we do have 15 great retail partners across North America. ]p[

