

# In Praise of Serious Hats

**A** hat has the effect of making the human head a kind of residence. It gives the brain a dome and porch roof, and a strange little portable sense of place. It is a wonderful spot to look out from under, a sort of individual estate. A man feels at home in a hat, established. But wearing a hat is also like having the FBI set you up with a new identity in a different city. It can change you.

The subject here is the serious hat. Not the "fun" hat. Not the Greek fisherman's hat. The writer Roy Blount Jr. has correctly remarked that no man should ever wear a Greek fisherman's hat who is not 1) Greek and 2) a fisherman. In the same spirit, it is probably true that no man should wear a cowboy hat who is not 1) a cowboy or 2) President of the United States.

The serious hat is not a masquerade, not a goof and not an announcement that while a man may look like a middle-aged New York City account executive, he harbors a West Texan in his soul, the real interior galoot made manifest in the feathered Stetson that sits on the bar. The serious hat is the opposite of a disguise. It is a working piece of clothes and an adjunct of character.

Freud implied that a man putting on a hat was performing a phallic gesture. One historian of costume, James Laver, remarked that "epochs of extreme male domination have coincided with high hats for men." What does that tell us about Abraham Lincoln? Well, Freud is also said to have conceded that a cigar is sometimes merely a cigar.

But a hat does have psychological power. A man places the thing just on top of his brain, and the one takes emanations from the other. The ancient Egyptians would go to parties in an ornamental cone of perfumed wax. The wax would melt down onto the wearer as the party heated up. The hat responded to the brain's temperature. A hat can be revealing, intimate. It can also be dangerous: no other article of clothing has the potential to make a man look so ridiculous. There is the terror of the whisper: *Why does he wear that silly little hat?*

The first problem that serious hats and hatters face is that most men tend to think they look idiotic wearing one. That is often true, but need not be. Fred Astaire may be God's best human design for a serious hat (or for something more problematic, like the straw boater). But even short fat men, who think that serious hats turn them into Nikita Khrushchev, can usually find one that makes them look better than they deserve. Oddly, women often wear men's hats more handsomely than men do.

The second problem facing hatters is that, except in a metaphysical sense, the hat is far less necessary than it once was. Men confront the elements only briefly, as they walk through the parking lot. So hats and hatters live at the mercy of fashion, the whimsical Red Queen. ("Off with their hats!")

The serious hat dies out regularly, like a rare bird. Then it is sighted only occasionally, resting, say, on Tom Wolfe's head, or disappearing down the street on the pate of a doddering banker. But it usually somehow struggles back. Fashion makes great lazy circles in time.

John Kennedy did the most serious recent damage to hats. After all the earnest geriatric hats of the Eisenhower

years (John Foster Dulles peering over the Brink in his gray homburg), Kennedy went around tousled and hatless, displaying the thick hair of which he was proud. Hatlessness became a mark of youth. A stretch of profound hatlessness set in.

That may be ending. A period of modestly ripe hattedness could be coming on. It began with the Western hat fad a few years ago. The demand for Western hats has fallen off sharply now, of course. "Nothing dropped dead so fast," says Burton Berinsky, president of New York City's Jay Lord Hatters. "It was like the Nehru jacket." But, fortunately for hatters, a sense of what is called "retro" elegance has taken hold with many men in their 20s and 30s. Movies have made the difference: *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (with Harrison Ford), *Chariots of Fire* and *Brideshead Revisited*. The hats were period costumes, but close enough to be plausibly wearable now. Serious hats skipped the generation of the '60s. Now men are buying trilbies and fedoras and, with spring, panamas and boaters.

The serious hat remains a sort of minority item of clothing. The most popular hats are still the adjustable baseball-type caps, often with the logo of some tractor manufacturer on them. Such hats are entirely serious to farmers and truckers. So are cowboy hats to ranchers. Otherwise they degenerate to the status of costume: rube chic.

Although some men are returning to the serious hat, most find that the point of the thing still eludes them. The hat is a strange, noble and faintly absurd object to put on the top of one's head. Separated by the interval of face from the rest of the body's clothing, it has a certain singularity, resting just above the eyes, the countenance, the character. The hat's ancient (pre-urban, pre-car) purposes were 1) to keep off sun or rain or snow; 2) to protect the soldier's head; 3) to delineate profession and status (the king's crown, the bishop's miter, the academic's mortarboard); 4) to express some religious significance; 5) to provide ornament; and 6) to conceal baldness.

The hat still performs Function 6 well enough. What otherwise is the point? Serious hats can still be useful as signals of social class, and even, vaguely, of profession. The awful old narrow-brimmed Madison Avenue crash helmet of the '50s (what Tom Wolfe calls "the stingy-brim") still walks around Wall Street in numbers. Ornament, certainly. A hat makes a wonderful prop. A man can pose endlessly in it, and scowl like Bogart. He can display weird vestigial courtesies, like removing it from his head when a woman gets onto the elevator; the gesture will inevitably make her think of Rhett Butler. A hat can italicize an attitude or bring an interesting, enigmatic shade across the upper face.

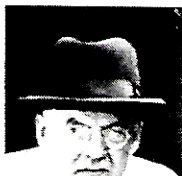
Men for centuries have worn much more bizarre things on their heads. Disgusting powdered wigs, like great greasy rugs of flour, for example. In the 16th century, some European men wore a red rose or a carnation behind the ear. It is probably just as well that that is no longer the custom among, say, business executives.

Some of today's hats are splendidly elegant. They can give a man a certain jaunty completeness, if he is careful in the way he chooses. The first rule should probably be: Never try to wear a hat that has more character than you do.

—By Lance Morrow



Harrison Ford



John Foster Dulles



Fred Astaire



Marlene Dietrich