

## Beatnik Fashion

Not every member of the Beat Generation wore a beret

BY KALI PAPPAS

As any fan of the Beat Generation writers will tell you, there's a chasmic difference between the beret-wearing, bongo-beating "beatnik" of popular imagination and the people who created and lived the Beat philosophy in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. In

*The Beatnik.* When most people hear the word "beatnik," they probably imagine bored-looking bohemian gals in berets and guys in turtlenecks and weird little goatees. These stereotypes are rooted in truth, but like the term "beatnik" itself, they're not really very representative of the movement

defined by the "Beat Generation" nor the people inspired by its counterculture philosophy. The reality is that the intellectuals, artists, and anti-bourgeois iconoclasts of mid-twentieth century America dressed a lot like everyone else.



Fig 1: Spoofing beatnik stereotypes



Fig 2: Jack Kerouac

anticipation of our "On the Road" event in November, I've compiled a short list of looks - for both men and women - that combine standard 1950s fashions with enough bohemian sensibility to help you fit in without looking like a stereotype (unless you really want to).

Legendary San Francisco columnist Herb Caen created the term "beatnik" in 1958, a portmanteau of "beat" and "Sputnik" (as in the Soviet satellite) that - in conjunction with a short report about freefloating hep cats helping themselves to booze at a magazine party - was meant to poke fun at common perceptions of the counterculture. Namely, that the group was full of lazy opportunists with far

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*Finery* is the newsletter of the Greater Bay Area Costumers Guild, an educational group dedicated to all aspects of costume and textile arts, and is published bi-monthly. The next deadline for submissions is 10/25/14. For details about submitting articles, please see our website at [www.gbacg.org](http://www.gbacg.org), or contact the editor, Gailynne Bouret, at [newsletter@gbacg.org](mailto:newsletter@gbacg.org).

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left political leanings. According to Caen, however, Beat Generation mainstay Jack Kerouac didn't find it very amusing. "You're putting us down and making us sound like jerks," Kerouac apparently told him. "I hate it. Stop using it."

Indeed, Kerouac himself was more Libertarian than left, and the core of the movement was supposed to be about intellectual independence, spiritual purity, and distance from materialistic concerns. So, how should we approach an event dedicated to the aesthetic of a movement that is often associated with style yet wasn't really all that into consumerist stuff like fashion?

Artist Josh Agle, also known as "Shag," illustrates the separation between style and substance in his 2003 work "Beatnik vs. Beat" (Fig. 3). The elegant beatniks in the piece have appropriated the trappings of the bohemian stereotype to the exclusion of core Beat ideals, while the disheveled Kerouac lookalike toils unglamorously on his typewriter



Fig. 3: "Beatnik vs. Beat"

nearby. The scene offers you two sartorial directions: the ironic parody, the real thing, or a little of both.

*The Beat Writer.* This is the stuff that we can associate with the lifestyle and activities of the active Beat writer. Jack Kerouac was photographed living and working in everything from Pendleton-style shirts and khakis or corduroy slacks to jeans and t-shirts. He and his literary compatriots kept warm with old bomber jackets, twill work jackets, Irish knit sweaters, and pea coats (men and women!). These are all comfortable, functional clothes that anybody in the late 40s, 50s, and 60s might have worn.

*The Hep Kitten.* On the women's side, Beat poet Diane DiPrima presents a crisp blouse and capri set with slick strappy



Fig. 7: Poet Diane DiPrima

sandals. The look is echoed in the stereotypes. Audrey Hepburn's cool signature casual look, for example: black capris or cigarette pants, a slim boat necked top in neutral



Fig. 4: Kerouac in a Pendleton shirt

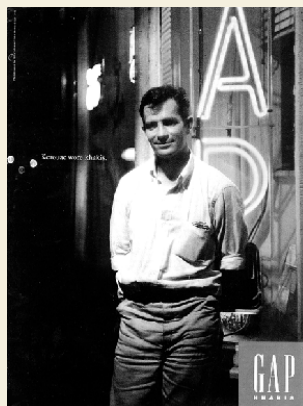


Fig. 5: The Gap's 1993 ad campaign using an altered photo of Kerouac taken in 1958 to promote their khakis.



Fig. 6: Peter Du Peru, Neal Cassady, and Natalie Jackson in San Francisco, 1955. Photo taken by Allen Ginsberg.



Fig. 8: Audrey Hepburn, 1954

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## Books Reviews

BY ANN MORTON

### **The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug Chronicles: Cloaks & Daggers**

Weta

Harper Design (Publisher)

This is not a review of the movie, its variance from the book, or a critique of the actors. Weta has written a series of Hobbit books about the movie production. This may be the best of them. Costumes for Hobbits, Orcs, Elves, Wizards, and Man are described in detail that will delight costumers. Armor and weapon specifics are discussed; fabric choices and colors are fully illustrated. Quality artwork and photos of the sets and the different ideas presented for the film are included. If you are thinking of a Middle Earth costume, this is an ideal guide.

As we have a Hobbit Picnic in September, this is the perfect to buy or borrow a copy of this book to up your costume to spectacular!

*Hint!* There is even a chapter about food and service.

Something to keep in mind for the Hobbit Picnic, where this text will be one of the prizes.

### **Stitch Magic: A Compendium of Techniques for Stitching Fabric Into Exciting New Forms and Fashions**

Alison Reid

Stewart, Tabori and Chang (Publisher)

I bought this book hoping for a sequel to Colette Wolff's incredible *The Art of Manipulating Fabric*. What a disappointment. While the book promises to "teach sewers how to manipulate and sculpt fabric by using such techniques as folding, cutting, pleating, tucking, gathering, and stitching, creating entirely new surfaces and textures in the process", what it provides is a dumbed down version of only a few of the techniques that Ms. Wolff provides. The bright colors and large photographs are distracting from the minimal process teaching that the book provides. I see this as a book appropriate to a middle school sewing class. Save your money. If you don't already own *The Art of Manipulating Fabric*, buy it now.

#### **BOARD OF DIRECTORS ELECTIONS 2015-2017 Terms**

The GBACG By-Laws stipulate that the board of directors offices of President, Treasurer, and Secretary be elected by the membership. Terms of office for these positions are two years, and commence at the beginning of the fiscal year (in this case, terms run from January 2015 through January 2017). Any GBACG member in good standing is welcome to run for any office, with the exception that any candidates for President must have previously served on the board. If you wish to run for office, please contact Judy Grivich at [secretary@gbacg.org](mailto:secretary@gbacg.org). Nominations must be received between September 14 and September 30, 2014. Voting ballots will be included with the next issue of *Finery*. All members, including student and household, are eligible to vote. Election results will be announced at the Open House on January 17, 2015, and published in the January/February 2015 issue of *Finery*.

## Upcoming Events

### **GBACG Workshop: Mechanical Wings**

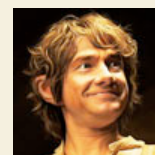
Sept. 13, 2014



Make a small pair of moving wings for hats! Questions? Email [workshops@gbacg.org](mailto:workshops@gbacg.org)

### **Hobbit Potluck Picnic**

Sept. 21, 2014



Come celebrate Bilbo's eleventy-first birthday in Hobbiton, also known as Holbrook-Palmer Park in Atherton. All hobbits, elves, dwarves and humans welcome. \$

### **Costume Salon:**

**Victorian**  
Oct. 5, 2014



Join us for potluck tea snacks, socializing, and sharing resources.

Theme appropriate books, patterns, garments, or projects also welcome. Our Salons are free and no dress-up is required. If you'd like to attend, email [costumesalons@gbacg.org](mailto:costumesalons@gbacg.org) Location: TBD.

### **GBACG Lecture Series #2**

Oct. 26, 2014



Please join us for our second Sunday lecture as we listen to the wisdom of an expert in the field of costuming. Location and topic: TBD.

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colors, and flats. Boxy cropped jackets (like the one worn by the girl on the left in the “Miss Beatnik” beauty contest photo - I know, it seems incongruous, but this was Venice Beach) and turtlenecks (like the one worn by Kim Novak in *Bell Book and Candle*) or fluffy mohair cardigans are an iteration on the theme. Stretch belts and slim pencil skirts in dark colors work well, too. The key is avoiding fuss - keep things sleek and simple. Very short, rather flat, or somewhat messy hair works. The counterculture wasn't interested in maintaining a weekly roller set!

*The (Jazz) Hipster* is the original Beatnik, or at least its direct ancestor. The quirky facial hair, jive-inspired vernacular, and bebop-y “rap” speech of the Beatnik stereotype borrows heavily from the urban jazz scene of 1940s New York and the gritty street culture that was often associated with it. A double-breasted suit might feel like a bit much, but it isn't really as out of place as you might imagine, especially in the 1940s-early 1950s Hipster context. Even the Beat Generation regs wore suits sometimes. In fact, writer William S. Burroughs wore three-piece suits all the time. If you're uncomfortable going the suit route, a fedora or beret (pick



Fig. 9: Miss Beatnik competitors



Fig. 10: Kim Novak

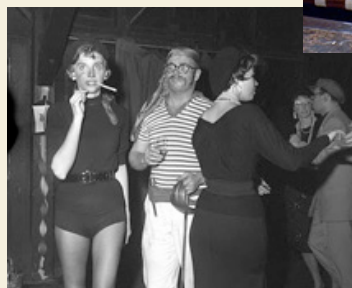


Fig. 11: Short or long, black was the color



Fig. 12: Dizzy Gillespie



Fig. 13: Bing Crosby



Fig. 14: William S. Burroughs

your hipster cliché!) is just enough to put you in with hep cats like Dizzy Gillespie and Bing Crosby.

*The Student.* The nucleus of the original Beat Generation crew met at Columbia University, where they were students. Numerous photos show them wearing slacks, button-down shirts, and sport coats, which is essentially the semi casual uniform of the midcentury young adult. Quirky glasses - like Ginsberg's - were in then as they are now for both men and women. If you wear these already - like I do - you can use them to help you make something that might otherwise seem unhip a little



Fig. 15: Jack Kerouac, Lucien Carr, and Allen Ginsberg

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more cool. Those who don't wear prescription lenses can get the look with sunglasses during the day.

And speaking of women and accessories - women can literally almost wear anything period and achieve the right look. A simple cotton boat necked dress in a neutral color, no-nonsense pencil skirt with a crisp blouse or sweater, anything! The key lies in keeping things from getting too fancy or formal. A little kooky or bohemian is fine, but showy jewelry or consciously couture looks run the risk of coming off too bourgeois.

*The Ethnic Fashionista.* The showy exception would be the ethnic stuff; clothes that represent cultural connection, travel, artiness - a bohemian sensibility. Mexican skirts and peasant tops would be perfect for women. Full skirts in international novelty prints with crisp blouses present a variation on the theme. Ethnic-themed dresses - like Trashy Diva's Del Rio dress - would work too.

Figure 17 is a photo of famed film costumer Edith Head in a folk-inspired Mexican ensemble. Poet Denise Levertov wears a peasant top in a dark color, presenting a perfect way to balance a more colorful skirt. Beatniks in New York City's East Village wear ethnic-influenced fashions, including an embroidered

Mexican peasant blouse. The last photo isn't a "beatnik" outfit, but it does show you an example of a spiffy vintage Mexican circle skirt that could work into one.

*The Artist.* Maynard G. Krebs from *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* combined the casual side of The Student with the slovenly side of the Beatnik stereotype with his messy look. Torn sweatshirt, rumpled

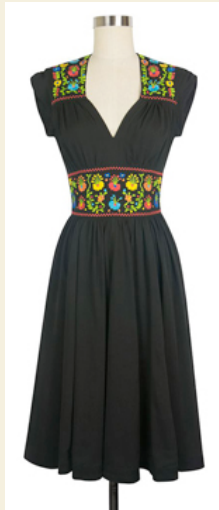


Fig. 16: Trashy Diva's Del Rio dress



Fig. 17: Edith Head at Casa Ladera



Fig. 18: Denise Levertov



Fig. 20: East Village resident in ethnic fashion



Fig. 22: Actor Bob Denver as Maynard G. Krebs

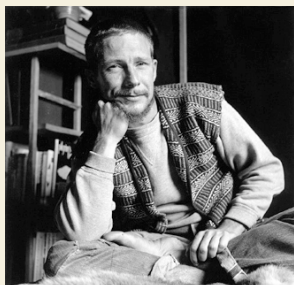


Fig. 23: Poet Gary Snyder



Fig. 24: Del Close

khakis, really old jeans - these work for both the incredibly casual and for those who get dirty in the course of their work. Poet and ecological activist Gary Snyder and comedian Del Close (on a 1966 episode of *My Mother the Car*) present a proto-hippie spin on the look with these woven vests.

With so many options you can toss aside the beret when you walk through North Beach in the steps of the Beat Generation. *ℱ*



Fig. 21: The author in a vintage Mexican skirt

Kali Pappas blogs about fashion (historical, vintage, and retro) and her other interests at <http://www.strangeirl.com/>.



## President's Column

BY DEBORAH BORLASE

When I first joined the Board in 2009, all of our event ideas were generated by the existing or recently exiting Board members; none appeared to be coming from our non-Board membership. I wanted to change all of that, and give our membership more ownership into the workings of the guild. I took deliberate steps year after year to make these activities more accessible to

our membership. I can't tell you how delighted all of us were during the Brainstorming Meeting to have received at least 30 ideas, with well over half of them provided by our membership. We are thrilled at the level of participation, and can't wait to see what will be on our calendar 2015!

In addition, all of the members of this Board have stepped up to offer additional ideas for educating our membership. We are super excited and proud to say that there is now a scholarship program offered for next year, with a variety of options. I hope that some of you will take advantage of it. You can find the application on the Yahoo Group list in Word & PDF format:

<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/GBACGCostumers/files/GBACG%20Scholarship/>

Interested in joining the GBACG or renewing your membership? Want to purchase tickets to events or workshops? You can do all of this on the GBACG website:

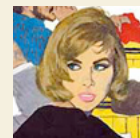
- Join/renew your membership: <http://www.gbacg.org/about-gbacg/join-gbacg.html>
- Purchase event tickets: <http://www.gbacg.org/gbacg-calendar.html> - see individual event webpages to order online (via PayPal), or to print out a form that you can mail in with a check.
- Purchase workshop tickets: <http://www.gbacg.org/gbacg.org/gbacg-calendar.html> . See individual workshop webpages to order online (via PayPal), or to print out a form that you can mail with a check.
- Post or view pictures on Flickr: <http://www.flickr.com/groups/gbacg/>
- Follow GBACG on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/gbacg>

## Events, continued from page 3

### GBACG Event: On the Road

Nov. 8, 2014

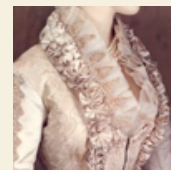
Don your 1950s best and come howl with the Beatniks as we explore North Beach on a walking tour. \$-\$\$\$



### GBACG Workshop: Quilted Ribbon Trims

Nov. 15, 2014

Learn to make 15 different trims that are ideal for garment edging, hat bands, accessories, etc. Email: [workshops@gbacg.org](mailto:workshops@gbacg.org)



### Sister Organization Events

Discount ticket information: <http://www.gbacg.org/about-gbacg/member-benefits.html>

### PEERS: Girl Genius Oktoberfest Ball

Oct. 4, 2014

<http://www.peers.dance.org/girlgenius.html>

### BAERS: The Waverly Ball

Oct. 11 2014

[http://www.baers.org/Waverly\\_2014.jpg](http://www.baers.org/Waverly_2014.jpg)

### PEERS: Le Bal des Vampires

Nov. 1, 2014

<http://www.peersdance.org/vamp14.html>