

Nice Hat!

by Tony Beckwith © 2007
www.tonybeckwith.com

THE OTHER DAY, at the dry cleaner's, the man standing beside me pointed at my beret and said, "Nice hat!" The woman behind the counter smiled and murmured, "Ah ha!" I thanked him and he added, "Good weather for a hat like that."

It was a cold day, it's true, but wearing berets isn't always about the weather. They are a traditional item of apparel in some places: many rural Mediterraneans, for example, would no more leave the house without their beret than without their pants. For some, too, they are part of a uniform. Berets were worn by the French Army's mountain infantry as early as the 1880s, and elite military units the world over have used them ever since, the Green Berets to name just one. Guerrillas and revolutionaries have also worn them, from Che Guevara to the Black Panthers to Patty Hearst after she was kidnapped by the SLA.

In the English-speaking world, generally speaking, berets are seen as a French fashion accessory (instead of "Nice hat," people sometimes say, "Hey Frenchy!") To some extent, this might be because we call them by their French name, but France has certainly contributed a great deal to their image and appeal. Berets were at their most popular in the United States during the nineteen-fifties and sixties, when the poets and writers of the Beat Generation took to wearing them in San Francisco and other places where cool was king. They were simply following the lead set by Picasso and other Left Bank artists, and Camus and Sartre and the Existentialists, not to mention the heroes of the French Resistance during World War II.

But in spite of the beret's French connections, both military and

bohemian, its origins can actually be traced back to the Basques, those mysterious people living in the borderlands between southwestern France and Spain. For centuries, the *Vascos* have inhabited their mountainous corner of Europe, where they



raised sheep and spun the wool they needed to knit the soft, flat, one-piece *txapela*, their trademark hat. During the Carlist Wars of the early eighteen hundreds its popularity spread to Spain, where it was called the *boina vasca* in honor of its ancestry—or *boina* for short. And of course, when the Spaniards began their great migrations to the River Plate region of Latin America some years later, they brought the *boina* with them, and it is still widely used in rural areas of Argentina and Uruguay to this day.

The Basques were intrepid sailors and fishermen, whose sturdy ships sailed up and down the western coast of Europe and, according to some, probably made land in the Americas

long before the arrival of Columbus. It is interesting to note that the Scots, far to the north, also had a version of the traditional Basque headgear: a woolen bonnet known in Scotland as the *tam o' shanter*. Is the *tam* a first cousin to the beret and the *boina*? It's certainly possible, but we shall probably never know.

I grew up thinking that the beret was something worn by peasant farmers, and it never occurred to me to put one on my head. The iconic (and, in my opinion, dashing) images of Che Guevara shown in the media in the sixties, made me rethink that narrow-minded stance, and I started seeing the beret as an outward expression of my inner revolutionary. If I wore a beret, I reasoned, I might be taken for a romantic poet or a freedom fighter, either of which sounded far more exciting than what I was actually doing at the time. I must have mentioned this to someone, who replied that if I wore a beret I could be anyone I wanted to be. I couldn't wait!

And then, very late one night on the outskirts of Madrid, at a carnival that was camped on the banks of the Manzanares, I tried my luck at a rifle range. Against all odds I hit the bull's eye three times in a row, and got to choose my prize. "Anything you like from that table," said the man running the booth. I scanned the assortment of stuffed bears, wine skins, and castanets, and my heart skipped a beat when I saw a black beret wrapped in clear plastic. "I'll take the *boina*!" I said, suddenly very excited. The man's dark-eyed daughter took it out of its wrapper and handed it to me, smiling. I put it on and her smile brightened. "It suits you very well," she said. "You look like Che Guevara." So, of course, I've been wearing one ever since. ★