

Sorry Charlie: How a cartoon fish became America's most enduring icon of counterculture
capitalism

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Everyone knows Charlie the Tuna, the lovable and unsinkable spokesfish who is so famous for getting rejected that "Sorry, Charlie" became part of the American lexicon. Although he has come and gone on television over the last sixty years, Charlie has remained an ever-present piece of American advertising iconography; his permanent home on the cans and pouches of Star-Kist brand tuna products. Most Americans have grown up with Charlie, and they take his red hat, heavy-rimmed glasses, and Brooklyn accent at face value- that is just Charlie. However, each of those pieces of Charlie's persona gave him a precise identity, deeply rooted in the early 1960s when Charlie was created. Charlie the Tuna is both the creation of, as well as the technicolor embodiment of the intersection of three different movements that were occurring in the late 1950s and early 1960s; the youth counterculture, specifically the Beat Generation's hipsterism; advertising's creative revolution; and Star-Kist's transition from a successful family-owned business to an international corporate powerhouse. This paper traces Charlie's pedigree from the tuna industry's origins in the early twentieth century, with its unique reliance on advertising, through Star-Kist's ascension to one of America's top tuna brands. It ends with his launch in 1961, as a creation of the Leo Burnett agency, where Charlie will become one of the first, if not *the* first, counterculture capitalism icon.

If things had gone differently in the early twentieth century, Charlie the Tuna might have been a sardine. Terminal Island, a small, mostly manmade island within the Port of Los Angeles, would be the future home of the American tuna industry; however, the first fish cannery built there in 1893 canned sardines and mackerel.¹ When sardines disappeared off the Southern California coast in 1903, the California Fish Company looked to other abundant fish in the area to can, instead of closing down the cannery until the undependable sardines returned. They

¹ Andrew F. Smith, *American Tuna: The rise and fall of an improbable food* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 29.

canned rock cod, halibut, and tuna to see what stuck with consumers. Sales were dismal on all fronts, but for some reason, Wilbur F. Wood and James McMann, the company's chief canners, and Joseph H. Lapham, the company's president, decided to keep canning the tuna, even once the sardines returned the following year.

Tuna was a bit of a gamble for the California Fish Company, especially since it was considered a luxury food consumed primarily in Europe. There was also a steep learning curve when it came to canning tuna in a way that would be appealing to consumers. In 1905, two years after the initial tuna cases were sold, some were still sitting on the shelves due to the fish being too oily and an unappealing brown color.² Wood tried his hand at canning albacore due to its large portion of white meat, although it was not classified as part of the tuna family at the time. The first lesson learned was that albacore needed to be caught in a certain way. Most fishing boats in nearby San Pedro were purse seiners that caught fish with drawstring nets. Albacore could not be caught with nets because the fish would fight to free itself and damage its flesh. Luckily for the California Fish Company, a new Japanese fishing community had recently been established on Terminal Island. These fishermen were experts at pole-catching albacore. With the catching methodology solved, it was up to Wood and McMann to come up with a canning process that made the albacore less oily.³ After several failed attempts, they were ultimately successful with a four to six hour-long steaming process that produced a "mild-tasting white-meat product that was attractive to consumers."⁴

With the catching and processing components figured out, it was up to company salesman Albert P. Halfhill to put it out into the world. The only problem is that most Americans

² Smith, 30.

³ Smith, 31.

⁴ Smith, 32.

were unfamiliar with albacore. While most Americans did not consume tuna, they were familiar with it due to sportfishing's popularity in Southern California. It was due to this fact that the California Fish Company decided to call their albacore product "tunny," the British equivalent of the American tuna. Halfhill spent the next couple of years introducing consumers to the tunny fish, giving away free tastes at the county fair, and driving it around the country.⁵ He was so successful in his efforts that the California Fish Company launched Blue Sea Brand Tuna in 1910.⁶

Blue Sea Brand advertisement, Los Angeles Times, May 17, 1913.

California Fish Company did not have to wait long to see their advertising efforts bear fruit; the firm more than doubled its number of packed cases from 6,000 in 1910 to 14,000 in 1911. This noted success attracted competition, meaning more canneries sprouted up on Terminal Island.⁷

Among the competitors looking to strike it rich in tuna was a household name who knew a thing or two about canned goods. Frank Van Camp, the man who created the famous Van

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Smith, 33.

⁷ Ibid.

In a few short years, the California Fish Company had established pole-catching and the canning processes that future tuna canneries would benefit from. With the Blue Sea Brand launch, they would establish another critical industry practice, aggressive marketing campaigns. Blue Sea Brand was advertised "directly to the public through demonstrations, signs in streetcars, billboards, and advertisements in magazines and newspapers." The

Camp pork and beans recipe, had lost his company and most of his fortune. His son Gilbert recommended they acquire a tuna cannery and put their canning expertise to work in California. In 1914, the Van Camps purchased Wilbur F. Wood's solo effort, the California Tunny Company, changing the name to Van Camp Sea Food. They modernized the canning plant with the latest technology imported from their connections back east and also ramped up promotions for their product. Again, increased advertising efforts showed an immediate uptick in sales for Van Camp. This pushed other canners in the industry to follow Van Camp's lead. Advertising made a huge difference, not only increasing sales industry-wide, but the increased messaging surrounding tuna began to change tuna's image in the minds of consumers as a potential meal choice.⁸ As consumers started to seek out tuna, how much the cannery spent on advertising would begin to make a huge difference in market share. The Southern California Fish Company that had acquired the pioneering California Fish Company would stay ahead of their competitors for the sole fact that they had a very sizable advertising budget.⁹

In a strange twist of fate, the most profitable advertising the tuna industry would receive in its young life would be from the U.S. government during World War I. The U.S. Bureau of Fisheries and the United States Food Administration would create advertising campaigns imploring Americans to eat more fish to help with wartime rationing. Fish was not rationed, so more Americans looked to tuna as a viable protein source for their families.¹⁰ Europeans had similar ideas about tuna during the war, and exports increased dramatically.¹¹ The tuna industry was booming.

⁸ Smith, 37.

⁹ Smith, 35.

¹⁰ Smith, 39.

¹¹ Smith, 38.

During this wartime boom, in November of 1917, Martin J. Bogdanovich and his partners founded the French Sardine Company. The fledgling cannery on Terminal Island canned both sardines and tuna, and in its first year of business, it sold all of its processed tuna to the government.¹² The boom was short-lived for French Sardine and the tuna industry as a whole. At the end of 1918, all of the abundant wartime tuna purchasing dried up, as did the albacore supply.¹³ This was followed by a recession that saw many of the canneries start to close or consolidate. With such a poor market outlook, most of Bogdanovich's partners withdrew from the firm, forcing him to buy them out.¹⁴ Bogdanovich was undaunted by the industry's downturn, after all, he had witnessed the birth of the tuna canning industry from the very beginning.

Martin J. Bogdanovich was born on the island of Vis when Croatia was still part of the Habsburg Empire. He emigrated to the United States in 1909, settling in San Pedro after hearing about the excellent fishing prospects there. In the eleven years before founding the French Sardine Co., Bogdanovich worked as a fisherman and eventually purchased a fish market in San Pedro, just across the channel from Terminal Island, where the tuna canning industry was beginning to take off.¹⁵ He had a front-row seat to the industry's explosive growth and, after his previous successes, was intent on running a successful cannery operation. Bogdanovich was a visionary and an innovator; it was during his years as a fisherman that he first had the idea to use crushed ice to preserve fish on boats, an idea that would revolutionize the industry by allowing boats to travel farther to catch fish without the worry of spoilage.¹⁶ This very idea helped the industry when the albacore supply drastically decreased after WWI, forcing the fishing fleet

¹² Smith, 39.

¹³ Smith, 41.

¹⁴ Star-Kist Foods, *The Star-Kist Story* (Terminal Island: Star-Kist Foods Inc.), 3.

¹⁵ Star-Kist, 2.

¹⁶ Star-Kist, 3.

south where they found the smaller yellowfin and skipjack that could be caught with purse seiner nets.¹⁷ The catches would be preserved on ice until the boats returned to the canneries. With these smaller, more abundant fish, the tuna canning industry would rebound and be profitable even in the 1930s when the rest of the country was still reeling from the Great Depression.¹⁸



In the late 1930s, Joseph Bogdanovich joined his father in the family business after graduating with a business degree from the University of Southern California.¹⁹ Joseph had big ideas of branding their tuna product and growing it into national retail distribution.²⁰ In

1940, Star-Kist brand tuna made its first appearance on the market.²¹ While there is no recorded provenance of the name, the similarity it bears to another famous California product, Sunkist oranges, is worth mentioning. While Sunkist was chosen due to the orange's resemblance to the sun and to make natural connections to the solar vitality of California, perhaps the Bogdanovich's chose the name to benefit from similar connections.²² This could be connections to the brand recognition of having a "kist" name, and the stars that fishermen used to navigate the seas. The night sky was so important to fishing that Martin J. Bogdanovich once refused to show up in court unless it was a full moon because it meant the fish weren't running.²³ The earliest branding image for Star-Kist took a more literal approach to the name, depicting a man

¹⁷ Smith, 40.

¹⁸ "Fish Packing Industry Revives Under Magic of Roosevelt Code," *News-Pilot*, July 29, 1933, 16.

¹⁹ Star-Kist, 4.

²⁰ Star-Kist, 3.

²¹ "New Tuna Product Goes on Market," *The Herald Journal*, May 24, 1940, 11.

²² Douglas Cazaux Sackman, "By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them: Nature Cross Hybridization and the California Citrus Industry, 1893-1939," *California History* 74, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 96.

²³ "Litigants Wait for Full Moon to Shine Favorably on Suit Trial," *Los Angeles Times*, December 6, 1938, A1.

and woman kissing next to a can of the product, but future advertising would show that the Bogdanovich's not only fashioned the brand name after Sunkist, but they also borrowed some of the great orange seller's marketing tactics as well. While the launch of the new Star-Kist brand heralded the beginning of a new era, another war would put off the big advertising push it required to grow it into a national product.

As it did in World War I, the French Sardine Co. joined in the war effort by ramping up production to feed the nation and the armed services. In 1943, sixty percent of the company's output was sold to the government.²⁴ Martin J. Bogdanovich, a proud American patriot, also personally aided the war effort. In 1944, as hundreds gathered at the Yugoslav-American Club for a war bonds rally, Bogdanovich suffered a heart attack and died before he was able to address the crowd.²⁵ Joseph Bogdanovich's first act as the French Sardine Co.'s new head was to accept the prestigious "A" award from the War Food Administration for outstanding achievement as a war food processor. The company was the first fish cannery to receive such a distinction.²⁶



The post-World War II years were an era of great action and growth for the French Sardine Company. With the hectic war years behind them, the company could finally focus on building the Star-Kist brand. After the war, the tuna markets centered on the country's two coasts, with

low consumption in the nation's heartland. The second world war had had a similar effect on tuna

²⁴ Star-Kist, 4.

²⁵ "M.J. Bogdanovich Rites Arranged," *News-Pilot*, June 19, 1944, 1.

²⁶ "French Sardine Wins 'A' Award," *News-Pilot*, August 18, 1944, 1.

consumption as it did in the first war, introducing more people to the mild, chicken-like flavor of tuna. Joseph Bogdanovich thought it a perfect opportunity to "capitalize on this new interest in tuna by establishing, as quickly as possible, a demand for, and national distribution of his relatively new brand of tuna."²⁷ To achieve this, Bogdanovich enlisted stars like Bob Hope, Alan Ladd, and Bing Crosby to lend their faces to advertising campaigns that claimed Star-Kist was the "tuna of the stars."²⁸ Again, an aggressive marketing campaign with in-store displays and radio, magazine, and newspaper buys was utilized to take tuna to the next level, in this case, national distribution.

At the beginning of the 1950s, three major tuna brands emerged; Van Camp's Chicken of the Sea, Oregon produced Bumble Bee Tuna, and French Sardine's Star-Kist. Together, they controlled eighty percent of the market share.²⁹ A strong belief in advertising helped the three major brands pull away from the pack and grow their market share, leaving smaller canneries to close or face acquisition.³⁰ Van Camp Sea Food, Star-Kist's Terminal Island neighbor, produced one other tuna brand, White Star, which made it the largest tuna packer in the world and Star-Kist's primary competition.³¹

In the 1950s, both Van Camp Seafood and French Sardine Co. made significant changes that signaled their moves into a higher stratosphere of business. Van Camp's brand, Chicken of the Sea, launched its mermaid logo in 1952, which kicked off a major advertising push over the next several years.³² This included the innovative sponsoring of the "Chicken of the Sea Pirate Ship," in 1955, at the newly opened Disneyland theme park in Anaheim, CA. The ship was a

²⁷ Star-Kist, 4.

²⁸ "Here's Finer Tuna," *The Tennessean*, August 12, 1949, 25.

²⁹ Smith, 165.

³⁰ Smith, 167.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Smith, 165.

restaurant that served Chicken of the Sea tuna recipes and had a plastic-cast version of their logo mermaid placed prominently on the ship's bow.³³ In 1952, the French Sardine Co. opened a new \$2 Million Star-Kist plant dedicated solely to tuna processing, with the ability to produce over 600,000 cans per day.³⁴ That same year the company had also achieved sixty-five percent distribution in national retail outlets.³⁵ To celebrate this achievement, Joseph Bogdanovich announced that the French Sardine Co. had their articles of incorporation amended, changing its name to Star-Kist Foods in 1953.³⁶ Regardless of all Star-Kist had achieved in the early 1950s, Bogdanovich knew the company would need the help of a professional advertising firm to gain any ground on Chicken of the Sea. In 1958, the Leo Burnett ad agency took over all advertising



for Star-Kist Tuna products.³⁷

The first order of business for Leo Burnett was to assess their new client's situation. According to an internal company document, Leo Burnett identified Star-Kist as being the second leading tuna brand after Chicken of the Sea, but that it had "no discernable product, processing, or packaging differences from the competition to substantiate a claim of being different." Agency research had concluded that consumers wanted tuna that tasted good, not fishy.³⁸

Leo Burnett's first deliverable for Star-Kist was a company logo that appeared on cans and in advertising beginning in early 1959, the "Fisherman with the earring." This logo set Star-Kist

³³ "Pirate Ship Café Carries Tuna Mermaid," *News-Pilot*, September 30, 1955, 18.

³⁴ "Cannery to Dedicate New \$2,000,000 Plant," *News-Pilot*, November 10, 1952, A1.

³⁵ Star-Kist, 5.

³⁶ Star-Kist, 6.

³⁷ "Appointment of Leo Burnett Co.," *Citizen News*, February 21, 1958.

³⁸ Leo Burnett Co., "Charlie the Tuna Backgrounder," 1994, 1.

apart from Chicken of the Sea and their mermaid, who is gendered female and "of the sea" like the product she represents. The fisherman, gendered male, represented the labor "on the sea" that tuna production necessitated. At the same time, ads showed fishermen in the act of catching tuna and equating this labor with "Captain's table quality."³⁹



Star-Kist making their product synonymous with quality was a tactic borrowed directly from the Sunkist marketing manual (the growers famously made oranges equal health).⁴⁰ Using labor in advertising, however, was not.

Sunkist was known for purposely obfuscating the labor required to get oranges from the trees to their consumer's lips. They believed that showing the many hands that touched the product (pickers, processors, packagers, etc.) created too much distance in the consumer's mind from the natural source. Fruit needed to just materialize from invisible labor.⁴¹ Ron Laraneta, Martin J. Bogdanovich's grandson and a Star-Kist employee from 1958-1967, noted that the fisherman with the earring logo did not make much of a splash in its first year, the highlight of labor in the advertising could potentially be the cause of the campaign's failure.⁴² The fisherman would remain on Star-Kist branding until 1977, when he would be replaced by Charlie the Tuna, a fish who interacts with an anonymous hook operated by invisible labor.⁴³

The fisherman with the earring and Charlie the Tuna essentially conveyed similar messages about Star-Kist tuna quality. However, the difference in their personalities and modes

³⁹ "Captain's Table Quality," *El Paso Times*, May 24, 1959.

⁴⁰ Sackman, 84.

⁴¹ Sackman, 96.

⁴² Ron Laraneta, phone interview by author, October 5, 2020.

⁴³ "Sorry, Charlie. You've got no taste," *The Windsor Star*, September 16, 1978.

of delivery, over a short span of two years, speaks to a change in the advertising industry's nature at this precise moment in history. Thomas Frank covers this period at length in his book, *The Conquest of Cool*. According to Frank, the advertising industry was experiencing a creative revolution, a response to the doldrums and conventions of 1950s advertising.⁴⁴ In the 1940s and throughout most of the 1950s, the organization man ruled Madison Avenue, represented by the account executive in the gray flannel suit. The advertising produced was dry and typified by "careful scientific programming arising from years of research."⁴⁵ This new revolution was pervasive, upending marketing practice, management's thought process, as well as its feelings towards creativity and its role in advertising.⁴⁶ Advertising mavericks like Bill Bernbach started to adopt a more liberated advertising type, centered on creativity, abandoning the puffery and overblown rhetoric of 1950s style ads. Doyle, Dane, Bernbach (DDB) ads were easy to spot because they offered clear and uncluttered messaging that resembled straight talk.⁴⁷

The first major successful campaign of advertising's creative revolution was DDB's campaigns for Volkswagen. The advertisements, which began in 1959, are famous for their graphic minimalism, but especially for their honesty, a novel concept for traditional automotive advertising of the time.⁴⁸ DDB was lauded for being one of the first agencies to produce work that spoke to consumers like they were adults and were not "contemptuous of the consumer's intelligence," as was the style of 1950s advertising.⁴⁹ The Volkswagen advertising's most powerful feature was its "awareness of and deep sympathy with the mass society critique."⁵⁰ DDB was sympathetic to consumers' distaste for mass society's conventionality because they

⁴⁴ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 27.

⁴⁵ Frank, 37.

⁴⁶ Frank, 20.

⁴⁷ Frank, 55.

⁴⁸ Frank, 63.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Frank, 64.

struggled against the same system within their industry. The success of the Volkswagen campaigns with consumers made advertising executives sit up and take notice. A realization that the old ways of "caution, deference and hierarchy drowned creativity and denied flexibility" swept through Madison Avenue and other large agencies across the country.⁵¹ Agencies now sought out creative types to produce advertising with clean minimalism, wit, humor, and style.⁵² Agencies of the 1960s idealized the "unrestrained creative person in offbeat clothing" who would make the advertising industry a place of unbridled creativity, wild passions, and occasional chaos.⁵³

The fisherman with the earring was a product of the old mass culture advertising world that prized research over style and creativity. One year after the fisherman's launch, Leo Burnett was on the lookout for fresh creative talent that fit the bill of the creative revolutionary. In 1960, they found Tom Rogers at a small agency in Minneapolis. As Rogers tells the story, "I was kidnapped! And I went kicking and screaming, of course, in protest." It is easy to see why Leo Burnett wanted the young copy-writer with an "off-the-wall" reputation.⁵⁴ Rogers fit the bill of the "creative genius," the tragic character from Frederick Wakeman's *The Hucksters* who "invented slogans and campaigns spontaneously, prone to bursts of enigmatic eccentricity," and was now looked at as the hero of this new era of advertising.⁵⁵ It would be Rogers whom Leo Burnett would task with creating a new campaign for Star-Kist, and the result would be Charlie the Tuna. The genius of Roger's creation would not be the fact of what Charlie is, a talking fish, but *who* Charlie is.

⁵¹ Frank, 28.

⁵² Frank, 54.

⁵³ Frank, 54.

⁵⁴ Ruth Welecchi, "A fishy tale: Charlie the Tuna turns 25," *The Daily Item*, November 19, 1986.

⁵⁵ Frank, 37.

Before we get to the who of Charlie, it would be wise to include a short history of Star-Kist's use of fish in their advertising. This genealogy would show that the idea of Charlie was not the singular genius of Tom Rogers, but a culmination of previous ideas. Star-Kist first started using talking fish in print advertising in 1945. In the ad, a bigger fish touts its size to a smaller fish who rebuts it with a claim of its tenderness.⁵⁶ This is a matter of educating Star-Kist consumers about the type of tuna in the can. As mentioned previously in the tuna industry's history, albacore, a much bigger fish with heartier meat, was the original canned tuna until



overfishing made it more scarce after World War I. This led to the smaller yellowfin and skipjack, with more tender meat, to replace it as the more predominant type of canned tuna. Star-Kist sold this tenderness as an advantage over albacore, which was still being consumed under its own name now that more Americans were familiar with it.⁵⁷ Star-Kist repurposed this ad and messaging in 1950 but replaced the old realistic-looking fish with some that were more cartoonish. The gendering of these cartoon fish is also important to note, the tough fish being gendered male and the tender fish being gendered female.⁵⁸ Another ad from 1950 introduces two elements that will be important to Charlie the Tuna, standing upright and exclusivity. Unlike

⁵⁶ "I'm tough, see? But I'm tender," *The Sacramento Bee*, October 22, 1945, 12.

⁵⁷ Smith, 40.

⁵⁸ "I'm tough, see? But I'm tender," *Fort Worth Star*, November 9, 1950, 12.



the fish in the previously mentioned ads, these three fish are not swimming; they are standing on their back fins and wearing hats. This progressive use of anthropomorphism also shows the development of Charlie the Tuna, who will swim initially and eventually remain upright while wearing signature accessories. The copy of the advertising introduces the

concept of Star-Kist's discerning tastes when it comes to the fish they allow in their cans. The ad states, "To be awarded our highest degree – the Star-Kist label – tuna must meet rigid requirements. They must come from a good family, for instance, they must be mild and have good taste..."⁵⁹ In all fairness, Charlie could also use this ad in a lawsuit disputing Star-Kist's claims about accepting fish with good taste. Finally, in 1951 Star-Kist introduced Loona the Star-Kist Tuna, a 4ft-long inflatable plastic fish that could be ordered for the price of a dollar and a Star-Kist tuna label. This shows the progression towards a singular fish representing the Star-Kist brand and an appeal towards parents through their children.

Regardless of his repeated rejection, Charlie the Tuna did come from a good family. It is not widely known, but Charlie's mother was a Bogdanovich. Martin J. Bogdanovich's daughter, Geraldine, is credited with coming up with the idea of Charlie.⁶⁰ Knowing the history of how Star-Kist had previously employed cartoon fish, it would not be hard to fathom that Geraldine, a part-owner of the company, could make such a suggestion to Leo Burnett for potential campaign

⁵⁹ "From a very exclusive school," *Spokane Chronicle*, August 9, 1950, 14.

⁶⁰ Mother Dolores Hart, *The Ear of the Heart: An actress' journey from Hollywood to Holy Vows* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), Chapter 13, page 2.

ideas. We must assume then that Tom Rogers took the suggestion of creating a character, Charlie the Tuna, and ran with it— straight into his past.

Before he was a midwest advertising man, Rogers lived in New York in the 1940s when the beat scene was just getting started. He scrounged up a living writing for the stage and creating comedy sketches for nightclub comedians.⁶¹ It was there that he met the man he would



Henry Nemo (center).

base Charlie the Tuna's character on, Henry Nemo. Nemo's identity was never revealed while Rogers was alive, possibly because he described him as "a real con man. [Whose] biggest desire was to associate with classy people."⁶² Who Henry Nemo was and how Tom Rogers translated that persona through advertising is precisely what makes Charlie the

Tuna a counterculture icon.

Henry Nemo was born on the lower east side of Manhattan but grew up in Coney Island.⁶³ Nemo had his finger in nearly every type of entertainment in New York; he was a singer, comedian, actor, playwright, novelist, sculptor, painter, costume designer who played the piano and made most of his money writing songs. He also counted various celebrities among his close friends, including Bing Crosby, Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, and Milton Berle.⁶⁴

While Nemo eventually became a successful songwriter, writing such standards as "Tis Autumn" and "Don't Take Your Love From Me," he was most famous for being a character's character and

⁶¹ "Ad writer reeled out Charlie the Tuna," *Chicago Tribune*, July 10, 2005.

⁶² Jackie Risse, "Only Charlie's ads are in the can: Hapless tuna is 25 years old," *The Dispatch*, October 24, 1986.

⁶³ Maurice Zolotow, "The Neem is on the Beam," *True Magazine* 16, no. 91 (December 1944), 59.

⁶⁴ Zolotow, 56.

inventing Jive. Nemo, who often called himself "The Neem," is credited with Jive's creation, originating terms like square, cat, in the groove, out of this world, bebop, solid and adding 'ville' to any word to create a new slang terminology.⁶⁵ Nemo is said to have created Jive in the 1930s when he was an out of work comedian and emcee hanging around swing musicians. By 1944, Jive was being spoken all over the world.⁶⁶

In his own words, Henry Nemo was "a happy monster on a powerful kick." To his friends, he was "the most effervescently original person on the main drag." He was talented enough and had been offered lucrative songwriting contracts if he would settle down, but Nemo was not interested in stability. He was wild, uninhibited, and impulsive.⁶⁷ He spoke with a harsh Brooklyn accent and wore heavy black-rimmed glasses that he considered part of his make-up.⁶⁸ Nemo did not take kindly to squares, "A square is a cockamamie type, he is a stale adventurer. He's a gesture taker, a discharge. He's not in my world. Someone parted his brain the wrong way. He's an undecided bring down. He's a sharpville-12. I'm sharpville-100. That's solid, paps."⁶⁹ Henry Nemo was a hipster.

When Norman Mailer wrote about hipsterism in his essay, "The White Negro," he could have been referring directly to Henry Nemo. Mailer wrote about hipsters who had a taste for "jazz, sex, drugs, and the slang and mores of black society," who believed that "the only life giving answer to tear oneself from the security of physical and spiritual certainty, to live for immediate pleasures rather than the postponement of gratification associated with 'work ethic.'"⁷⁰ Charles Reich described the mindset that drove hipsterism and the youth counterculture

⁶⁵ Earl Wilson, "Henry Nemo Jive," *The News and Observer*, November 13, 1959.

⁶⁶ Zolotow, 11.

⁶⁷ Zolotow, 56.

⁶⁸ Zolotow, 58.

⁶⁹ Zolotow, 11.

⁷⁰ Frank, 12.

it represented as a choice of liberation and self-direction from the mainstream's values and conformity.⁷¹

Hipsters were a product of the Beat Generation, a term coined by writer Jack Kerouac who defined the term for the Randomhouse dictionary as, “Members of the generation that came of age after WWII who supposedly, as a result of disillusionment stemming from the Cold War, espouse mystical detachment and relaxation of social and sexual tensions.”⁷² Beat Generation was the umbrella term to cover the range of people who identified with Kerouac's definition of such. Members of the Beat Generation were called both hipsters or simply the shorthand "beats." For this paper, "the beats" will be used in its strictest definition, meaning the group of writers that best captured the time's liberated soul, namely Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Herbert Huncke, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky.⁷³ Acclaimed sociologist Ted Polhemus noted that a hipster was defined by their rejection of the “straight lifestyle,” so “the beats” were hipsters based on their attitudes and their only distinction from the rest was their expression of this rebellion through literature.⁷⁴ Beat or hipster, the Beat Generation's unifying credo was a wholesale rejection of and rebellion against the "squares" and their mass-culture of the 1950s.⁷⁵

Ultimately it was the success of the beats that made the Beat Generation a countercultural phenomenon and one opened to cooptation by the very ideals they rebelled against. Allen Ginsberg divided the history of the Beat Generation into four phases; first, the beats met at Columbia University in the 1940s; next, they wrote their famous works, most notably Kerouac's

⁷¹ Frank, 14.

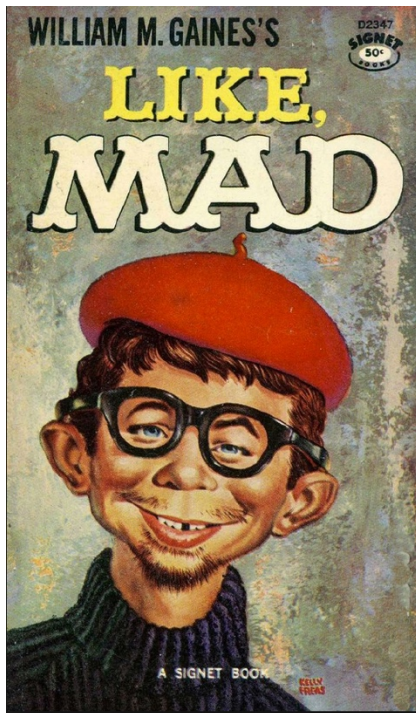
⁷² Steven Watson, *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, rebels, and hipsters, 1944-1960* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 5.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Jennifer Grayer Moore, *Street Style in America: An exploration* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2017), 176.

⁷⁵ Adam MacPharlain, “Beatniks,” in *Clothing and Fashion: American Fashion from Head to Toe*, ed. José F. Blanco (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 42.

On the Road and Ginsberg's *Howl*, the beats fought against censorship and won, which led to publication and renown.⁷⁶ After the release of *On the Road* in 1957, the term "beat" was spread through various media outlets, making it a buzzword of the late 1950s.⁷⁷ This put the Beat Generation under the media's microscope, eliciting think pieces that dissected what they wore, how they spoke, and what they called themselves. While merely mentioning a house party attended by members of the Beat Generation, Herb Caen of the *San Francisco Chronicle* coined the term "beatnik" by joining the words beat and Sputnik, comparing the partygoers as being as "far out" as the recently launched Russian satellite.⁷⁸ The media and capitalistic market latched onto the term beatnik and eventually created a bastardized version of the Beat Generation's hipsterism that could be packaged and sold to consumers.



Because the Beat Generation rejected mass culture, they wore their rebellion on their bodies by growing out their hair and adopting a more casual type of dress. These fashion choices were easily identifiable and were boiled down into a media stereotype.⁷⁹ The male beatnik wore all black, from his turtleneck sweater to his slacks, with dark glasses worn at all times, outside or indoors. He sported a goatee and wore a beret over his ungroomed shaggy hair. His accessories included bongo drums and poetry.⁸⁰ While the stereotype was rooted in truth, the sensationalized packaged version of the Beat

⁷⁶ Watson, 6-7.

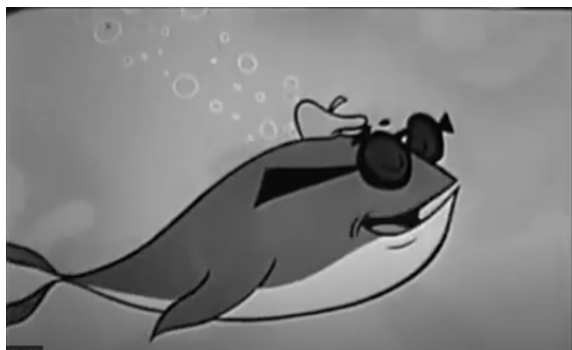
⁷⁷ Watson, 4.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ MacPharlain, 41.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Generation's culture was far more pervasive than the actual thing. The stereotype was replicated by fans of the beats who wanted to emulate their rebellious heroes, but it was also purchased, in the form of rent-a-beatnik businesses, by more mainstream consumers who wanted to vacation in an accessible version of hipsterism. The beatnik craze lasted from 1957 through 1960.⁸¹



Tom Rogers was given the assignment to create a new ad campaign for Star-Kist in 1960, just as the beatnik craze was dying down. By this point, the Beat Generation's cooptation had been completed, and was a verifiable successful

marketing tool. In 1959, Atlantic Records had dubbed themselves the label most "in-tune with the Beat Generation." Beatnik characters had started appearing on television, the most popular being Maynard G. Krebs, who sported a goatee and carried around bongo drums on *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*.⁸² A hipster tuna fish would fit right in with the times.

When Charlie the Tuna debuted in 1961, he had Henry Nemo's hipster persona, which equated to Nemo's harsh Brooklyn accent, voiced by Herschel Bernardi, and philosophy that "a little hustle could get you farther than hard work."⁸³ While Nemo was famous for his thick-rimmed black glasses, Charlie the Tuna debuted in dark sunglasses and a cap that looked very similar to a beret, a look that was straight out of beatnik central casting. The main premise of Charlie's advertising is that he is a fish with a singular mission, to be reeled in by a Star-Kist fishing boat. In his early commercials, Charlie comes off as wise-talking and overly confident

⁸¹ Watson, 260.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Buz Swerkstrom, "Charlie the Tuna owes his life to Balsam Lake Man," *Leader Telegram*, September 11, 1986.

that Star-Kist wants him, only to get the famous rejection, "Sorry, Charlie."⁸⁴ At face value, Charlie's rejection by Star-Kist speaks to the quality of their product because they only can the best fish. Culturally, there is much more being said to sell tuna. By making Charlie a hipster fish based on an actual hipster, with commercials written by a young creative, it imbues him with an authenticity that makes him appealing to young people. By rejecting Charlie, Star-Kist is also rejecting hipsterism by proxy, or at the very least making a values judgment that it is not up to



their high standards. This could be an appealing message for their more mainstream consumers who saw the counterculture as a threat. This having your hipster and hating it, too, worked out well for Star-Kist. Charlie's first year was such a success that

college fraternities adopted him as their mascot, and a letter writing campaign urged Star-Kist to accept Charlie.⁸⁵ The popularity transferred into an increase in sales that encouraged H.J. Heinz to purchase Star-Kist from the Bogdanovich family in 1963, making it a subsidiary of a national publicly traded corporation.

Thomas Frank said, "It was a sudden mass defection of Americans from square to hip that distinguished the culture of the 1960s."⁸⁶ Charlie the Tuna arrived in 1961, just in time to be its poster child. He was the brainchild of advertising's creative revolution, infused with the spirit of the man who coined the term square, and donned the accessories of a commodified culture. Charlie was too hip to be a Star-Kist tuna. Despite his counterculture pedigree, Charlie the Tuna was wholly owned and funded by Star-Kist Foods, Inc., a multi-million dollar corporation.

⁸⁴ TV Toy Memories, "Vintage 1962 Star Kist Commercial – Charlie wearing sunglasses," YouTube Video, 1:00, November 3, 2012, <https://youtu.be/ExXpfdhwdz8>.

⁸⁵ Star-Kist, 29.

⁸⁶ Frank, 13.

Charlie was so good at selling tuna for Star-Kist, that by 1984, the company surpassed Chicken of the Sea to become the number one tuna brand.⁸⁷ When Charlie celebrated his 25th birthday in 1986, he had helped double Star-Kist's market share from 18% to 36.4%.⁸⁸ This hybridity of being rooted in the counterculture while being a corporate skill is what firmly establishes Charlie the Tuna as America's most enduring counterculture capitalism icon.

⁸⁷ Leo Burnett, 2.

⁸⁸ John Weeks, "Happy Birthday Charlie!" *San Bernardino County Sun*, October 25, 1986.

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