

# GQ

JANUARY 2002

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TIME  
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# HORSING AROUND WITH HUGH JACKMAN

BY MAXIMILLIAN  
POTTER



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## THE BEBOP HAT

JAUNTY AND JAZZY, THE PORKPIE HAT SUGGESTS A ROUND-MIDNIGHT LIFESTYLE

**B**ACK IN THE DAY WHEN A JAZZMAN talked about flipping his lid for a cool chick, like as not the lid he was flipping was a porkpie hat. The classic porkpie is the antithesis of square, and not just because of its circular crown and trim brim. The suggestion of meat pastry comes from the shape of the top—mostly flat but bounded by a discreet crease that hints of distinctly uncrusty ideas bubbling beneath. And though the porkpie's simple, clean-lined silhouette seems thoroughly modern, its history throws a curve: It originated as a woman's hat in Victorian England. (Even then it had a raffish charm. One historical account refers to its wearers as fast young ladies.)

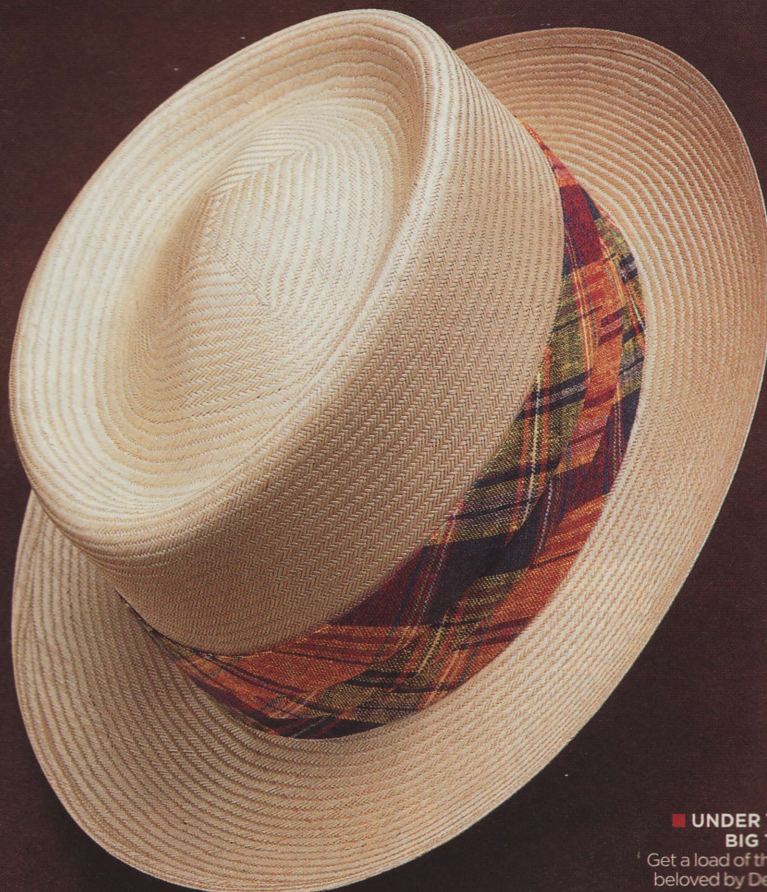
But for men, the porkpie has long been a dapper alternative to more staid chapeaus. Blending the fedora's urbanity and the boater's jaunty profile, it's an emblem of insouciant style. Just as the derby defined Charlie Chaplin, the porkpie was essential to the persona of silent comic Buster Keaton. When he sinks below water in *The Boat*, his hat floats forlornly until Keaton resurfaces with his usual stone-faced grace. Porkpies were popular with the college crowd in the '30s, when being part of the smart set involved more than making high marks.

At the same time, the hat's air of nonchalance made it the perfect topper for the brand of casually elegant resort wear—a tan tropical-weight suit, say, with an open-collar shirt—favored by stylish sorts from Palm Beach to Palm Springs. Men such as Fred Astaire and Cary Grant sported them, cementing the porkpie's fashionable status.

But what made the porkpie the ultimate dandy hat was its embrace by black musicians, for whom fashion has always been another chance to solo. Even when most American men favored fedoras in the 1940s and '50s, jazz legend Lester Young never abandoned his trademark porkpie. The brilliant tenor sax-

man influenced a generation of players with his airy, lyrical solos and hiply cryptic language. (Tellingly, he referred to women as hats: "I see you're wearing a new hat" meant "I see you've got a new girlfriend.") Adopted by Thelonious Monk, Dexter Gordon and other jazzmen, the porkpie became a symbol of the smoky after-hours jazz world, a badge of the bittersweet *vie bohème*. On hearing of Young's death in 1959, Charlie Mingus composed a wistful threnody, the now classic piece he titled "Good-bye, Porkpie Hat."

Hat sales were already in decline by 1961, when JFK broke with tradition by going hatless at his inauguration. But the trade got a boost from the Rat Pack, especially Frank Sinatra (try to remember the Chairman without a hat), who liked to golf in a porkpie. Meanwhile, Jamaica's cocksure rude boys were setting the sharp-suited style of American jazz and R&B groups to a rock-steady beat, the stingy-brim porkpie being the ideal capper in those predreadlock days; the look was quickly picked up in Britain by West Indian dudes and ska-mad mods. The old-school version (black, in wool or fur felt) has been joined by leather and straw models, with hats and bands available in a wide choice of colors. Whatever the recipe, the deep-dish silhouette evokes a worldly gaucho. It's what Zorro would choose if he moved to the city, lost the mask and traded his horse for a horn—a hat that's always one jump ahead of the crowd.—JEFF BOOK



■ UNDER THE BIG TOP  
Get a load of the lid beloved by Dexter Gordon, Fred Astaire, Thelonious Monk and the Jamaican rude boys.