

*Hats off to these three entrepreneurs, who give us the means to rise head and shoulders above the ordinary.*

# Mad Hatters of Tennessee

BELOW: Margareta Horn's cottage industry in Memphis has grown faster than the proverbial garden. In her cheerful home she creates magical hats for children.

**A** banker shoves on a Stetson and becomes a rancher. A shy woman puts on a pillbox and transforms into a femme fatale. A mischievous child wears a fairy-tale cap and converts into a cherub.

With a bit of straw, felt, or yarn, presto! We become someone else. Headgear makers understand this magic. And that's why they brave fashion whimsy, which changes faster than the stomp of a Mexican hat dancer. Meet three who follow the topsy call of this turvy profession.

## Margareta Horn: How Does Her Garden Grow?

Apples and pears crowd the kitchen table; watermelon and carrots line up in the dining room; pea pods and strawberries pack the sunroom. Produce abounds in Margareta Horn's home in Memphis. But don't chomp down on these fruits and vegetables. They're made of

yarn and end up on children's heads.

About five years ago, visiting her native Sweden, Margareta discovered a lovely knit hat, shaped like a strawberry. Loving a challenge, she returned to her Tennessee home and created a similar design. Her first success came when she sold the hat on consignment in the Woman's Exchange in Memphis, a nonprofit voluntary organization that specializes in handmade infants' and children's clothing, as well as other items. A blueberry hat followed, then her daughter suggested a watermelon pattern. From there, Margareta's challenge grew faster than tomatoes on the vine.

Soon, vegetables

FROM THE TOP:  
Margareta Horn,  
Ju Thorne, and  
Jim Cook.



also adorned children's heads.

"Knitting is a dying craft in America," Margareta sighs. "Grandmothers used to teach their children and grandchildren, but it is less common today."

Twelve female employees who work from their own houses help Margareta. "It offers them a chance to have a job but also to stay at home," she says, "whether it's to be with small children or another relative who needs them."

Twice a week, they bring about 25 finished projects to Margareta's home and pick up brown grocery bags to which new orders have been stapled.

And the hatmaker's ideas aren't just cute; they're moneymakers. Margareta sold about 9,000 hats in 1996 at an average price of \$35 each. She attends the annual children's international clothing shows and markets the hats in large stores and small shops around the country. They even sell in Russia. Though the knit-hat season is short in Memphis, the Woman's Exchange always keeps some on hand, as does Little Lambs & Ivy in Germantown.

Margareta began with wool hats, but scratched that idea in favor of hand-washable, 100%-cotton products because of the "itch" factor. Safety is her utmost concern. For example, on the pea pod hats the

Ju Thorne has made hats for 40 years. His wife, Gloria, takes orders and helps trim the dapper accessories.



peas are individually attached, then reinforced with double string.

Trains and trucks, even music boxes, embellish newer designs. A sailor's hat matches a baby blanket. Recently, Margareta began designing hats for teenagers with wilder colors and self-described odd designs to fulfill the "cool" factor.

Margareta knits, too, when she has time. "It's fun to carry around your work," she grins. "Not many jobs allow that." Besides knitting, she creates about 10 new designs each year, inspired and supported by her husband and four children.

She still completes all of her paperwork and invoices by hand, avoiding her husband's computer.

Where does Margareta see her garden growing? She may let the business

Color and a cornucopia of fruits and vegetables make Margareta Horn's caps delightful fairy-tale crowns for children.

"There's only one hat I can't make—that's an ugly hat."

—Ju Thorne

continue to expand and make adjustments, such as producing her own catalog. Or she may opt to keep the business at its current busy, but manageable, scale. No matter which direction she takes, Margareta will give her fruits and vegetables all the time and nurturing they need, in the tradition of any good gardener.

**Ju Thorne: Forty Years of Hatting**  
The sight of worn wood, the hiss of hot steam, and the touch of smooth felt fill your senses as you walk in





Ju's Hatters in Nashville. All of these are tools of Ju Thorne, whose 40 years of hatmaking are well known.

"Ju, that man from Holland called again," says his wife, Gloria. The hatmaker smiles as he pushes, pulls, and pivots felt into place over a wooden block.

Photos of hat-wearing customers as diverse as Cher and Grandpa Jones line one wall. A shoeshine stand occupies another part of the room. Unfinished straw and felt hat bodies form soft skyscrapers, ready to topple at an unguarded touch.

It's a place as friendly as its owner. A row of seats invites visitors to wait while Ju custom-makes a snap-brim fedora or a riverboat gambler just their size. Barbara Mandrell, Lamar Alexander, Albert Gore, Sr., Bill Monroe, Aaron Neville, and Waylon Jennings have all sported Ju's hats. Truthfully, customers enjoy the hatmaker's one-liners as much as they do his one-of-a-kind hats.

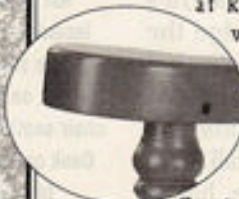
"There's only one hat I can't



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make—" quips Ju, "that's an ugly hat." He began by shining shoes at an establishment that also made hats. "I used to come up and shine shoes on Friday and Saturday when I was 8 or 9. I supported a bad habit," the Nashville native says solemnly. "Eating."

After 20 years of saving, he bought his employer's hatmaking equipment, some of it a century old, and opened his own place.

Ju now has arthritis, but his nimble fingers and muscular arms never slow as he forces the felt into place on wooden forms.

"I can fit any man from any land for any amount that he can carry," he singsongs. His creations start at \$60 and go up to . . . well, see if you can get the hatter to say. "The fanciest hat I have is 100x beaver," Ju says. "It sells for whatever I can get for it."

The hatmaker also works with



Ju Thorne of Nashville uses steam, force, and wooden forms to make his customized hats.

straw, explaining the popular name "Panama" is a misnomer. The straw passes through the Panama Canal on its way from Ecuador, thus the mistake. "My straw hats will last forever or until the end of the front porch," he says with his typical flair. "It depends on how you take care of them. But the felt hats, they'll just last. Hats come in here that I made when I was a teenager." He declines to say how long ago that was.

Women who are buying hats for their husbands gape in amazement at Ju's ability to judge the absent men's hat sizes. "They tell me what size clothes he wears, how tall he is, whether he has a block chin," Ju explains the art of sizing. Men who come

in themselves for a hat don't have to tell him their size. "I just look at them and I know." That ability distinguishes his hats from "store-bought," a description he uses as if it were a curse.

People who wear hats "care about how they look," Ju says. "They want to look like a gentleman or a lady." He adds, "You are not really dressed until you get a hat . . . and a shoeshine."

#### Jim Cook's Gigantic Hat Closet

Jim Cook's Hat Closet is to hats what McDonald's is to burgers. At his place in Nashville, 100,000 hats or "pieces," as he calls them, literally fill the rafters.

"We'll average about a half-million dollars retail," says the entrepreneur, who also wholesales. "There's no one in town that has the selection we do." Men's and women's dress, Western, and costume hats, ranging from less than \$10 to \$1,200, are available.

The businessman also designs hats—but not like Ju Thorne or Margareta Horn. He contacts man-

Almost every hat imaginable sells at The Hat Closet, including the blue shade (center, on the chair seat) Jim Cook created to match all denims.



ufacturers directly, giving them specifics—a 4-inch crown here, a 3-inch brim there—for a hat he might order by the thousands. A quarter of an inch can make a big difference. For instance, the original Indiana Jones hat that actor Harrison Ford wore was mass-produced as a version that "fit" more people.

Jim explains: "I can take the same hat and either turn the brim up or down, or change the trim so that the crown doesn't look so tall, and all of the sudden, that same basic hat looks equally good on different people.

"That's hard to do. Society does not know how to buy hats. Most people who sell hats don't even know. I learned I had a natural knack for doing that."

Overall build and face shape determine how much crown and brim are required. "Shorter people need as much hat as they can carry because it gives the illusion of height," the hatter says. "A big person wants to tone down." Hat colors should complement your coloration.

"People don't do it," he says rue-



fully. "They come in and they want a black hat because black goes with everything. But it may not go with you." Jim also works with hat colors, creating one fetching blue shade to match all variations of denim. "Nobody else in the country has it," he says.

The hatter provides some costume hats for Opryland. He's also worked with country singer Alan Jackson. If you've seen the video of Alan as he water-skis on the Chattahoochee, you've seen Jim's hats. Numerous duplicates replaced soggy versions during filming.

The businessman also worked with Reba McEntire for a show where the country singer wanted the look of a 1930s private detective. "They wanted to put her in a big gangster hat," Jim says. "She's too little. She'd look comical. So we did the same basic look with a bigger brim but a little lower crown."

He enjoys styling the customer, whether it's Reba or just someone who wanders in looking for a hat trick or two. "When you put a hat on, it's like costuming; you take on

a different character," Jim muses. "People learn that they enjoy that.

"I've gone to different functions with a dress hat on," he continues. "People say, 'Who is that?' I'm nobody, but they get the impression I must be somebody."

We beg to differ, Jim. You, Ju Thorne, and Margareta Horn are the makers of fantasy. We tip our hats to you.

*Carol Boker and  
Nancy Dorman-Hickson*

#### Hat Check

Margareta Horn  
8392 Silverthorn Cove  
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(901) 755-1133

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Nashville, TN 37203  
(615) 251-9785

The Hat Closet, Jim Cook  
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