



Barrington resident Paul Siracusa has made and sold more than two million hats.

Hat Trick

PAUL SIRACUSA COMBINED TALENT, TIMING, AND TENACITY TO BECOME HATMAKER TO THE STARS

Paul Siracusa turned to *Quintessential Barrington* to share highlights of the story behind the making of the famous “Smokey and the Bandit 2” hat worn by Burt Reynolds on the album cover for the original soundtrack of the same name. It was in 1980 when the call came for the custom hat to be made. Siracusa felt heavy pressure, but in two days, he was able to ship it off to Hollywood. In fact, the photoshoot for the album cover and its printing was put on hold until the hat—now nearly as famous as its wearer—arrived at the studio.

BARRINGTON RESIDENT Paul Siracusa felt it was time to share this personal story with others, some 39 years after the most iconic hat—while just one worn by numerous celebrities—was made, and made famous.

“I never gave it a great deal of thought until Burt passed away in September of 2018,” Siracusa said. “Up until that time, I was honored by the fact that the hat has been on display at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee. Little did I know back then that the hat I did for Burt

would turn out to be one of the most iconic hats that I ever designed.”

CRIPPLE CREEK HAT COMPANY

Paul Siracusa graduated from Barrington High School in 1970 and went to Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado. He graduated from college in 1974, and by 1975, Cripple Creek Hat Company was established in Woodstock, Illinois. The business was created with Siracusa, his late wife, Ellen, and musician Rick Boetel. He since moved back to the Barrington area in 2000.

The Midwestern-made custom hats were designed with colorful and interesting decorations—semi-precious stones like turquoise, snake skin, rhinestones, feathers, leather, even small animal skulls. Designs were mostly arranged onto custom-molded wool or straw hats.

Business partner Boetel’s connections to the music industry helped pave the way. When the rock group Chicago, whose members Boetel knew, played Alpine Valley, the Cripple Creek hats were an instant hit with the performers. “They freaked out; they loved them,” Boetel said. Having celebrities wearing their hats helped pave the way into retail sales at stores including North Beach Leather in Chicago.

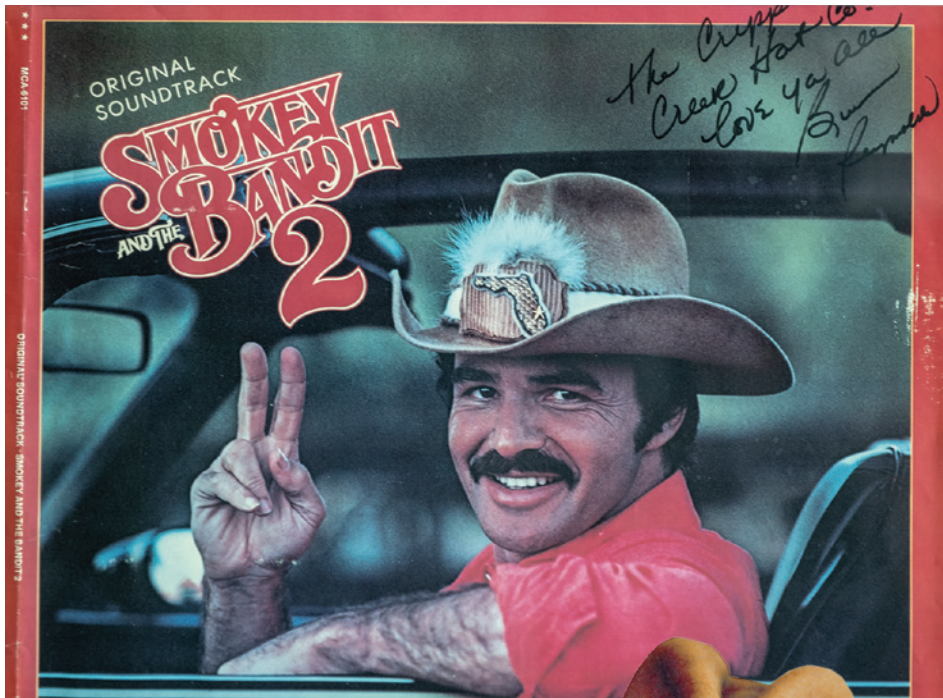
WHEN FAME COMES CALLING

“It all started with a business card given to me by John Robinson,” Siracusa says of the retail store owner in Chicago who carried his hats. “The name on the card was Snuff Garrett. He saw our hats in John’s store and expressed an interest. Snuff Garrett was a country music producer for MCA Records,” he said.

In a letter written to Siracusa by John Robinson, the western apparel store owner talks of how he met Snuff Garrett, which in turn led to a life-changing connection made between Garrett and Cripple Creek Hats:

It was during the time of Jimmy Carter’s presidency and the country was going cowboy—Western wear. I had opened my western store in Lincoln Park in September 1976. A few high-end boutiques began selling some western wear. I decided to shop one such store on the Gold Coast, Michigan Avenue. I see a customer in the store with four or five people dressed in boots and cowboy hats. I hear him say, “Snuff, this is not a western store!” I handed him one of my business cards telling him that mine is a real western store. The next day a limousine pulls up in front of my store, and four or five guys get out, he walks in, looks at me and says, “You SOB, now this is a western store.” It was Snuff Garrett, I later found out. He had spent \$1,800 in my store. Snuff saw some of the custom hats I carried, including Cripple Creek. I put him in touch with Paul and the rest is history.

Armed with a dozen hats to show around and Garrett’s business card, Cripple Creek’s Boetel headed to Los Angeles. At the time, Cripple Creek



Burt Reynolds wore Paul Siracusa's custom-made hat on the cover of the "Smokey and the Bandit 2" soundtrack album. The hat did not appear in either of the "Smokey" movies. Reynolds loved this hat and was seen wearing it often.

hats were atop many music stars' heads—Willie Nelson, Andrew Pope, Elton John, Ringo Starr—to name a few. Boetel met up with Garrett at his office and a lunch was arranged for the next day at the Hamburger Hamlet on Sunset Boulevard. Little did he know that Burt Reynolds would join them for lunch.

"Rick had brought our hats with him, and at lunch, Burt was trying them on," Siracusa said. "Snuff Garrett had mentioned that he was producing the music for the soundtrack to 'Smokey and the Bandit 2,' and that the music would be released soon. Garrett wanted Burt's image to cover the entire front of the album with a new hat. Each hat that we've ever done should mean something special to the person that wears it," he said of their one-of-a-kind designs.

As lunch progressed, Boetel asked Burt what was important to him. He thought for a moment and said 'Florida. "That's where everything started for me," Reynolds said. Reynolds drew a little map of Florida on the napkin and drew a star to mark Jupiter Beach. The color of the hat was to be light tan or gold, and Burt's hat size was noted.


"Rick called me with the exciting news later that day, having sung my praises as a terrific



Paul Siracusa took this photo of the hat he made for Burt Reynolds's before it was shipped to the star.

designer and that I would come through with exactly what Reynolds wanted," Siracusa said. "But there was a catch! I would have little time to do it. They were holding up the printing of the album so Burt could be photographed in his new hat." It took the designer two days to finish the hat and send it to Los Angeles.

Reynolds loved his new Cripple Creek hat and over time, both hat and wearer graced numerous magazine covers.

"Just imagine if John Robinson had not given me Snuff Garrett's business card, or if we delayed Rick Boetel's trip to L.A. by a couple of weeks. Well, none of this would had happened. Hard to imagine! I do think about it from time to time. In the end, it all came down to luck, and being at the right place at the right time." Siracusa said. 



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