

White Sox: Management of the Chicago White Sox, postcard, ca. 24 August 1973, and Roland A. Hemond, Vice President and General Manager, Chicago White Sox, letter, 17 September 1973.

Yankees: Marty Appel, Assistant Director, Public Relations, New York Yankees, letter, 30 August 1973.

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THE ORIGIN OF *BEATNIK*

Denis Grogan, of the College of Librarianship, Aberystwyth, Wales, includes a study of the word *beatnik* in his textbook *Case Studies in Reference Work* (London: Clive Bingley, 1967). Finding no agreement among dictionaries on the etymology of this word—either of its root *beat* ('exhausted' or 'jazz rhythm') or of its suffix *nik* (from *Sputnik* or the Russian-Polish-Yiddish suffix for 'person'), Grogan concludes: "One fact that some readers find unpalatable is that the derivation of many everyday words is simply not known. This applies not only to words whose origins are lost in the mists of antiquity, but perhaps surprisingly to many words coined in our own time."

As often happens in linguistic matters (usually for geographical reasons), what is obscure to one person seems perfectly clear to another. I was amused when I read Grogan's case study because I knew immediately how *beatnik* originated. Probably anyone living in San Francisco in the late 1950s would know what Grogan could not know. It is surprising that uncertainty still exists concerning the origin of a word which has received so much publicity and which to a large number of people in the San Francisco Bay Area can hardly be obscure; for *beatnik* was coined by Herb Caen in his popular column in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. (This fact was recorded by Raven I. McDavid, Jr., in his abridgment of Mencken's *American Language*, but has not been picked up by lexicographers.) Once he had coined it, Caen used the term repeatedly in his daily reporting of the "beatnik" scene, which was, after all, primarily a San Francisco scene.

It seemed perfectly obvious at the time, with the publicity surrounding the launching of several sputniks, that Caen had coined *beatnik* from *beat* and *sputnik*. Just to clarify the matter, however, I asked him for his recollection of how the word came to mind, and received the following reply, dated 12 February 1975:

Dear Mr. Rex:

"Beatnik" slipped out of my typewriter one day when I was writing about one or another of the Beat types—Kerouac, Ginsberg et al—who flourished here at the time.

Don't remember the exact date nor do I have a copy of that column nor yet a clerk to track it down. It was earlyish in 1958 and, correct, shortly after Sputnik arose. Word association, and I never did understand how "Beatnik" caught on. The suffix "nik" is, I believe, Yiddish, no?

Happy noodnik,
Herbnik

That the origin of *beatnik* was locally well known is illustrated by a passage in Ann Charters's biography, *Kerouac* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), p. 292: "At the height of Kerouac's success with *On the Road*, Herb Caen, a San Francisco journalist, had coined the word 'beatnik' in his column for the San Francisco *Chronicle*. (This was shortly after the Russian Sputnik was launched.) Caen himself didn't mean the word 'beatnik' in a pejorative sense (he tried to defend it to Kerouac, without success, in a San Francisco bar one night), but the word caught the public's imagination as a perfect putdown for what they considered the dirty, bearded, sandaled bohemians of North Beach and Greenwich Village, whose spokesman Jack Kerouac had to be, since his novels described 'beatnik' life." In spite of Miss Charters's assertion to the contrary, it will be apparent to anyone reading Caen's column that *beatnik* is used in a very pejorative sense indeed.

To complete this case study, it remains only to cite the exact date *beatnik* first appeared in print. On a recent visit to the San Francisco Public Library I spent a pleasant afternoon rereading Caen's column, "Bagdad-by-the-Bay," and found the first use of *beatnik* in a column for 2 April 1958: "Look magazine, preparing a picture spread on S.F.'s Beat Generation (oh, no, not AGAIN!), hosted a party in a No. Beach house for 50 Beatniks, and by the time word got around the sour grapevine, over 250 bearded cats and kits were on hand, slopping up Mike Cowles' free booze. They're only Beat, y'know, when it comes to work." This first use of *beatnik* shows that *beat*, at least by 1958, meant 'lazy' or 'listless.' The *Chronicle* used it consistently in this sense—never to connote enthusiasm for jazz. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (2d ed., 1965) is therefore in error when it states that the expressions *beatnik* and *beat generation* "reflect passion for jazz rather than despair at the state of the world." When "Big Daddy" Eric Nord (the "King of the Beats") was convicted, a year or two later, of contributing to the delinquency of minor girls, he was ordered by a San Francisco court to obtain gainful employment or go to jail. The attitude of the *Chronicle* toward the beatnik scene is characterized in its caption: "A FATE WORSE THAN DEATH."

Within three months after its coinage, *beatnik* had acquired national—even international—currency. Ten years later it was obsolete, having been superseded by a new word representing a new subculture. As for *hippie*, apparently originating in San Francisco in 1967, and presumably coined

with *hip* and *hipster* in mind, I can only join Denis Grogan in observing that the origin of many everyday words is simply not known. Herb Caen again?

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UP FROM OBSCENITY

At the Federal lavatory [prison mess] a two-word phrase was heard with . . . stridency.

When I first heard this phrase I was thoroughly shocked. In my Chicago newspaper days I thought I'd heard everything in the way of ejaculatory expletives of an obscene sort. . . . These men at the Federal commissary [prison mess] used it two and three times in one sentence, modifying everything from either male or female people to mountains, molehills, automobiles, houses; yet the implications of the phrase make it absolutely impossible to use it correctly except toward male human beings of the less admirable sort. I have even heard it used toward beautiful women—in *praise* of them. I deeply deplore the fact that I cannot give it here. . . . the only way you can find out for yourself is to get a rap at HAFH [prison]. And then nobody will believe you when you get out.

Thus Jack Woodford, the pseudonym of Josiah Pitts Woolfolk, wrote about his term in prison, in "Home Away From Home" (*Esquire* 55, no. 5, May 1961: 75–78, here 75–76). The references throughout the article to the "two-word phrase" clearly reveal it to be *mother fucking*, an expression not confined to prisons even then, although in prisons it may have reached ascendancy as an all-purpose intensive, much as the simple participle proliferated during World War II in the habitual use of politely raised draftees.

Although it is extremely doubtful that indecorous language originates generally in prison, it may be that Woodford's two-word phrase proved especially useful in that society, since it is one of the few obscenities unlikely ever to be used by one prisoner as a literal description of another. At any rate, the phrase appears to have escaped some of the limitations on its use at about the time Woodford's article was published, and now, in an innocuous disguise, it may be entering the mainstream of acceptable American slang. The transition period is hard to document, but the progress of the phrase appears to have been through the black communities of the cities and then into the sports world, particularly football, which features big, tough, black linemen and a need for jarring language.