

RAGS asked its crack team of correspondents around the country to check with department stores in their area and find out whether those stores felt that they were, in any way, in competition with boutiques. Ingeborg Day, in Chicago, called Carson, Pirie, Scott and spoke to Mrs. Grimm, the husky-voiced Divisional Vice President for Merchandising. After the preliminaries, the following conversation ensued:

Mrs. Grimm: Why are you calling Carson's?

Ingeborg Day: Well, as one of the city's largest . . .

MG: Who else did you ask?

ID: Pardon me?

II. The Competition

MG: Who else did you ask?

ID: I talked to several bou—

MG: No, what other department stores?

ID: Fields and Bonwit Teller.

MG: What did Fields say?

ID: (small embarrassed giggle, as she tries to think of something to say).

MG: Now, dear, of course I don't mean I want you to reveal any figures or anything confidential whatsoever. Just tell me what they said.

ID: Fields does not feel they are in competition with boutiques.

MG: Fields does not feel they are in competition with boutiques. Well, let me tell you, we at Carson's feel that we are in competition with every

quality store. As far as boutiques go, there are so many different meanings of the word, it's impossible to pin down.

ID: What does "boutique" mean to you?

MG: Well, now, dear, this is just too much of a discussion to get into. You must understand, after all, why should I define for you, for your magazine, for RAGS, what a boutique is? You do know, of course, that the word started out in France and originally meant little shops which accessorized eminent designers—Givenchy, Dior, etc. But this is really too much of a discussion to get into. I just cannot take the time to explain to you what a boutique is.

ID: Thank you very much, Mrs. Grimm.

MG: You are welcome, my dear. Any time. Any time.

RAGS invited a number of boutique operators to write about their experiences in the capitalism racket. Moe, who runs Before and After (5504 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, DC), won the sweepstakes. His letter follows.

Came back to D.C. in the summer of 1969 to look for a teaching job with pre-school children. Applied to the Teacher Corps and was offered a teaching job in Conway, Arkansas, where I could teach for two years and get my Masters while I was teaching.

Only one problem: they asked me to shave and I told them I would let them know.

A week later I was still in Washington, and a friend asked me if I wanted to open a clothing store. He said I'd have to remain in D.C. at least one year. We found another person and each came up with \$4000. Started with \$12,000.

My brother (who's in real estate) found us a place. He used to work for the company who leased the building. Got a lease drawn up and when I took it back to the realty company they freaked. After they saw me, they had to send the lease up to New York to the owner of the building to get an okay—and a new clause had to be added, stating that if I wanted to change the front of the store I had to

III. A Letter from Moe



Moe

get permission from the landlord. They also didn't want me to sell the *Free Press*, the underground paper.

Opened in December of 1969. My roommate made some six-foot candles and we were selling them with a \$3000 pricetag—and that got us some free publicity in the *Washington Post* and the *Evening Star*.

You asked who our customers are. It's 70-30 in favor of women. Black (and other) to white: 50-50. Blacks

are more into clothing than whites. Whites in Washington are too conservative in their dress. The whites have got to keep up a *good image*, whereas a black person (in general) wears something he likes no matter what other people think.

About heads. They're not into clothing either, just toking. They'll complain about papers and pipes being too high (15c and 20c and \$1 respectively) but go right out and spend \$15 and \$20 an oz. This blows my mind.

I'm not so sure what "hip capitalism" means. I'm still into capitalism in my shop but not like the other stores. Most store owners operate under the concept of "keystone." Meaning that if an item costs you \$10 you sell it for \$20. The manufacturers tell you the same thing. The thing that freaks me out is when I cut my prices—let's say, instead of selling an item at \$20 I sell it for \$15—if another store owner complains, saying my prices are lower, the manufacturer may stop shipping to me. In other words, when I lower my prices I get shafted. And they talk about inflation! Just because a wholesaler goes up, my prices must go up too. Well, I don't think that way and I don't need that much of a mark-up to exist, so I'll keep doing my thing until they close me down.

Hassles with the law? The first six months police used to come in and check out the store. And the neighbors complained about the music being too



loud and whatnot. The police have stopped, but the neighbors still complain about us driving our motorcycles into the store at 3 and 4 in the morning.

Rip-offs bother me a lot. My prices are lower than anybody else's and still I catch people ripping me off. When I do, instead of calling the police I tell them to go to Sears or May Co, because they can afford it.

Blacks are my most important customers. I was even thinking of running an ad announcing "20 Percent Discount to Black People Only" and watch the response from white people.

The customers I can't do without are musicians. I give them 25 percent discounts and clothe about 15-20 local bands.

Pants sell best. Blacks buy slacks, whites buy jeans. Price does make a difference. Blacks will spend more than whites any time. A lot of blacks who come in my store know my prices are cheaper, and instead of going back to a shop where they paid \$30 for the same shirt, they'll come to me.

One minute for fashions: I'm into big bells—the bigger the better. When I went to the last clothing show a few of the manufacturers I had previously

dealt with were pissed off at me for not stopping to look at their lines. One stopped me and I told him I was into big bells. He said that 90 percent of the nation is going to a flair and I reply, "Yeah, that's why I want big bells. I don't want to go along with the nation." He couldn't understand it.

Manufacturers got their idea for bells from seeing youth wear old Seafarer pants and they jumped on it. However, people in the business world couldn't make the change from Ivy to bell, so the manufacturers went to a flare. Big change. I said fuck them. I just keep ordering bells.

Later, Moe

IV. One Dozen Elusive Trips

We begin by finding The Lord, centerstage, moving in mysterious ways. He's in Boston, and Michael Sloane, owner of three distinctly different boutiques (Sebastian, Common Market and Headquarters) is telling us about it: "Dig it, my father-in-law went to work for me after 32 years in the kosher butcher business. Now he deals head stuff to heads. He wears freaky clothes. We turned him on to a new trip and he's having a ball. He hasn't compromised himself, though. For example, he'll still go out to the golf course on weekends over the summer. But he'll be wearing bells and a Mickey Mouse shirt. The other golfers freak. He loves turning straight people on."

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It's not all la dolce vita, however. There are, for instance, the Inevitable Frustrations of a Sense of Responsibility. Steve Starr of Steve Starr Studios (2854 N. Clark, Chicago) will get you into that: "I do everything myself. Once I had a girl in here, taking care of the place for only two days. It was a mess when I got back. She had put a broken piece in the window and left MacDonald's cokes all over the place. I should have kept it closed. When I got back it felt like coming home and finding out somebody has messed up your house."

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Or consider (if only for a moment) the problems encountered by the Jeanery in Austin, Tex. Listen to Bokie: "First the cops came around complaining about our red-white-and-blue truck. Then the guy across the street, who runs a Western clothing

store, complained because our red-white-and-blue building disturbed his view of the state capitol building."

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But by far the biggest problem is rip-offs. Not only do they cost the store money, they take up a great deal of time and energy. "It's so demoralizing you can't imagine," says Helene at Anastasia's in Sausalito, Calif. "Older women do it, even mother and daughter combinations and children of prominent people. They try to wear things out under their clothes, or stuff them in their purses." She tells of a recent incident where a girl who was apprehended shoplifting in the store tore the clothes off a salesgirl, punched another woman in the stomach and, before she was subdued and literally put in a cage by police, bit so many people so badly that Helene had to pay for \$75 worth of tetanus shots. "It's really so sad, at a time when good feelings are important and we need to trust each other. It's really a drag, but now I prosecute every one of them, so that people will get the idea that this is a bad place to steal from."

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Mike Snead at Phebus & McGee, a leather-goods firm in Eugene, Ore, has some more thoughts on the subject: "Listen, rip-offs KILL. Shoplifting is such a pain and I now sympathize with all the tricks to catch these muthas. But worse are the break-ins. This problem is ugliest in big cities and generally worse in the Midwest than on the Coast. . . . Get yourself together, rip-offs: smuggle smoke with your skills and do some good for the

community, but leave us little people alone."

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But many boutiques are at least as much predators as victims. Ingeborg Day, in Chicago, reports on a boutique there which sports the same name as that of a famous lover: "The dressing rooms are two portable shower stalls with tiger contact paper paneling and one wall plastered. There isn't a thing in the store that's remotely appetizing. Most women's clothes have no labels sewn inside, only a tag stapled to some area of the garment, stating size and price. Whenever labels do exist, they look grimy, as do the clothes. The prices are incredible: a terry-cloth type pink and rose top and pants—\$51. The set would be overpriced at \$15. Black jumpsuit in a stiff, pebbly fabric—\$43.50. One strange Sears 'Back To School' outfit, class of 1964—\$58.50."

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Boutiques are a direct alternative to department stores, but many boutique

Mike & Ricky Sloane (There.)



owners refuse to consider the subject, preferring to adopt a more languid, we're-just-common-folks-sittin'-here-doin'-Our-Thing pose. But a feisty minority dig the challenge. Ricky Sloane, who helps her husband Michael (Remember Michael? Up in the first paragraph. There.) run their three boutiques, throws down the glove: "We're a big threat to department stores. People would rather shop in boutiques. It's their store and their vibes. It's personalized. The boutique people can put you together. If you find a funky sweater, they'll find you a funky vest to go with it."

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Department store executives, on the other hand, tend to consider boutiques beneath contempt. They've been

about one thing: It's hard to make money when you're small. Many boutiques start out under-capitalized. Dakota Transit in New York City, for instance, opened with under \$1000 and, had it not been pulled to success by the sudden rage for its snakeskin garments and the celebrity of its customers (Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis), it might have disappeared long ago. Countless thousands have. The reason that most boutiques are started by young folks is that only people under 30 have the courage of their ignorance.

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And you've got to know your audience. Boutiques draw their customers mostly from street traffic, and the boutique owners have to know who's going to be walking by. In large cit-

tists) and Berkeley's Telegraph Ave. (students and heads).

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If there is an ideal boutique anywhere in the country, it is probably Opening Thursday, at 579A Bridge-way in Sausalito. Brenda, the owner, runs her boutique the same way she used to run her art gallery: if the clothes *knock her out*, the way good art does, she puts them in her boutique; if they don't knock her out, Brenda ain't interested. All her other operating principles follow from that. "There are girls who are just seamstresses, and then there are artists," says Brenda. "I'll always choose the artist." Except for a very few items Opening Thursday will not reproduce an item of clothing. If a dress or shirt doesn't fit someone who just has to have it, the customer is shown to the workroom and the purchase is carefully altered or re-tailored. Brenda estimates she loses three out of ten customers by her decision to stick to the customer's right to an exclusive.

Brenda definitely feels that handmade is the best, although her dresses, often made of spider-web-like antique fabrics, may not hold up as well or launder as easily as mass-produced items. (Some of her contributors' chief sources of fabrics are the attics of elderly ladies who make doll clothes). Brenda is, however, extremely careful about quality. "Some customers always expect something to be wrong with handmade things." She feels that "The people who create for this store are free. They're more concerned with the art of it than with just sewing a dress together."

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A final word from Michael Sloane (you remember Mike, surely) about origins and purposes: "There was nothing for me to do in this society, nothing made sense, so I had to do my own trip. I dropped in. There's no place else to go. I think of it like an oyster forming a pearl. The society is the oyster and it gets some sand in it and it tries to deal with the irritation. The irritation is the new heads, the freaks, and out of their interaction with society and the dues they pay and all the other bits of irritating sand comes a pearl Money is only a medium. So is business. Money is just a way to keep score in the game structure of business, and business, as I said, is only a medium."



JOHN BURKS

Brenda: An ideal

trained since their stockroom days that the only way to compete with a department store is to out-big it, and most boutiques would have trouble out-biggering an H. & R. Block office. Joe Simon, who is Secretary Treasurer and something Monstrously Important in Merchandising for Yaring's Department Store in Austin, expresses his feelings: "I don't think there is an appreciable future for any small operator anywhere. As far as Austin goes, the outlook for any small operator is very, very doubtful. I think these boutiques will disappear."

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God love him, Joe Simon is right

ies, that's primarily a matter of location. RAGS Contributing Editor Amie Hill explains the options in the San Francisco Bay Area: Downtown (tourists and the wealthy), North Beach (heads and arty types), Polk St. (gays, rich folks, heads), Union St. (stewardesses and ad agency executives), Mission District (Spanish-American, American Indians), Fillmore District (Afro-Americans, Spanish-Americans), Ghirardelli Square and the other renovated-warehouse complexes (tourists and the wealthy). Across the bridges, the best locations are Sausalito (relaxed and wealthy tourists, traveling entertainers and ar-



V. Hip Capitalism. Period. Dogma. Fanaticism.

Hip capitalism is the name of the game for American boutiques. It is a peculiar, dimly understood phenomenon, but Boston's RAGS correspondent Peter Beren has some thoughts about how it operates in his town.

There are over 50 colleges and universities in the Boston area, including some of the best (MIT, Harvard), so Boston used to export college grads like soybeans to the far corners of the nation. When things began to implode in the Sixties, the students, bohemians, old folkies, street people, runaways, etc. began to get together. First was the great refusal—middle class America, even with its swinging striped toothpaste, vaginal deodorant sex and money picnic, was bullshit. Hardly anybody wanted to go to the multiversity and get exported to General Motors in Detroit.

So they stayed in the city. Some graduated and stayed; others dropped out and stayed. Some came from other parts of the country, running away from Doris Day-Rock Hudson Land

and a bleak future of pumping gas and Friday night bowling. Everybody turned on—Leary started in Cambridge. They saw they could leave the nine-to-five produce-consume game and get in tune with their bodies and start caring about blacks and other poor people who were outsiders at the picnic they had been invited to. Some dropped out; others dropped in. They used the knowledge that white, middle-class America had given them and some ideas that they had picked up in the streets or the clouds and they began to do new things. Like hip capitalism.

At first they sold things they made on consignment in straight stores that ripped them off. Then their brothers, many of them had attended the sophisticated business school called "dealing dope," began to open their own stores to do business in a new, freshly-humanized way. There are lots of them now, and they're highly specialized. There's a freak Army Navy Store (Great Eastern Supply Corp.), freak sewing and other craft supplies stores (Terra Cotta), plus an entire range of freak boutiques, from high ticket to funky to bizarre.

The main head hassles the hip capitalists have are the people who are part of the revolutionary underground subsection of the counter-culture. They do not see any difference between hip and straight capitalism. Capitalism equals pig and oppression. With few exceptions, the counter-culture business heads get thrashed along with the Cambridge Bank and Trust. If you do it to make money, you're a pig. Period. Dogma. Fanaticism.

Straight society also lumps it all together. The revolutionary is the same as the hip capitalist. Hip capitalists get it from both sides. But also, in Boston, they know and generally help each other. Freak ad agencies like Just Words Or Music Promotions help freak businesses at lower cost than straight clients. The underground media—WCBM Radio. *The Phoenix*, *Boston After Dark*—help people know about each other and get together. And, despite the blizzard of rhetoric, most hip caps try to help the movement. In boutiques everywhere, there are donation cups for movement causes—the revolution, like everything else in the country, runs on money, and it has to come from somewhere.

VI. The Grand Old Lady

When Helene Robertson opened Anastasia's in Sausalito in 1962 it was the first boutique in Marin county. She blazed nearly all the trails for boutiques in the San Francisco principality. Helene was a true pioneer. Contributing RAGS Editor Amie Hill spoke with Helene about the early days and the circumstances that have led her (a) to control of five separate hip fashion lines, and (b) to close down her prototypical little waterfront boutique.

On \$1000 borrowed from her father and three months worth of time spent sewing with her mother, Helene opened the first Anastasia's in Mill Valley, near Sausalito. She had drastically underestimated the area's

appetite for good design—the store's entire stock sold out the first weekend of business. After a low-income period of learning the ropes of store-managing and merchandising, Anastasia's moved to the Sausalito location, where Mrs. Robertson still keeps an eye on the store and salesgirls while turning out miles of crocheted caps, scarves, and other high-hand fashions.

Somewhere along the line, Helene, a lovely gamin-faced lady, discovered that designs out of her own head looked and sold as well or better than any of the exclusives on the market, and the Anastasia's line waltzed into being, influenced by street fashion, *Vogue*, high and low camp, and one or two lucky accidents.

"I was looking for funky fabric patterns once, about three or four years ago, and I went into this place, Steve-co knits, or something like that. I asked them if they had any nice stretchy strong unbonded knit, and

they brought out all this material left over from the 1940's in Art Deco prints."

The same Art Deco prints made into comfortable-as-hell little dresses and pants outfits have been some of Helene's best sellers. "They're like hit records. I still make a little money from these designs." Another field which Helene has pioneered has been that of appliques, especially appliqued T shirts. After a hitchhiking friend was picked up by San Francisco tattooist Lyle Tuttle and turned Helene on to him, she designed a series of appliques based on his tattoos—stars, roses, and a flying eagle with a sunset framed between its wings.

A recent series features an idyllic rainbow-arched hunk of "pie-in-the-sky," a heroic flying hot dog, a tap-dancing hamburger with Betty Grable legs and ankle-strap wedgies, and future plans include fairy-tale cottages and castles in the air, all of which is conspiring, according to Helene, to





Helene & her heroic flying hot dog

JOHN BURKS

come and design for us, but you have to move to New York and show up at the office every day at 9:00.'

"People have tried to tell me; I tell them 'You'd have to let me to go to Europe as much as I want, and you'd never see me, I'd never report to the office.' They'll just have to give people total freedom."

Helen has heard all the radicals' arguments against the boutique as a "rip-off."

She says: "I hate the parasites that have sprung up over the past few years, the 'spare change' people. I play a lot, but when I work I really work to make sure my stuff won't rip apart, and that it's right. This same young cat comes up to one of the girls here every morning for weeks and asks her for a quarter, and she always tells him she hasn't got a quarter for him, and he says finally, 'you mean you work in that store and you don't have a quarter?' and she just said 'Man, I don't have a quarter for you.' I guess that's where it is."

Her designs are often influenced by street fashion, but she doesn't get rich on direct copies, except on basics like Wallace Beery undershirts (she uses a Spanish pattern), fisherman's pants, and basic T shirt patterns. Most of her copies come from European fashions not likely to be marketed in this country. "When I copy something," says Helene, "It usually comes out a little better than the original."

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According to Helene: "A boutique used to be where you could find something out of the ordinary, something that had a little attention given to it. I used to hand-pick everything for my store, and usually only stuff I'd wear myself."

"It's not that way anymore. There are too many boutiques. There's a glut on the market, but it'll probably separate the men from the boys. Even the department stores have gotten hip and have special boutique sections."

"Now somebody's got to go beyond it all somehow; either go entirely back to handmade stuff, or do a hip department store trip. There are places like it in London and Berkeley, The Great Gear Trading Co, and C. J.'s Old Garage, where they have clothes, health foods, craft supplies, and anybody with creative ideas can lease a stall by the month, and just do it."

Until that breakthrough, however, Helene is going to devote her full attention to design. She sold Anastasia's last month.

"blow the minds of people in this little applique factory in New York." She now designs for four other name-tags: Gemini Rising (Helene is, in fact, a double Gemini with Gemini rising), High Gear (leather), Revolution (T shirts, pants, other basics, the name inspired by London's Revolution club), and a kind of elevated street-funk line called Changes, the trademark of which is the "peace" hexagram from the I Ching. She chose that symbol as one which might work on the consciousness of the people who buy her clothes, and also to transmit the thought to them along the network that "there's somebody out there making clothes who's with them."

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One of Helene's chief problems in the designing end of her business is the fact that "people who make fabric and design prints are usually really out of it." Apparently there are few young hip designers in most fabric houses, and even rare attempts at innovation, like cartoon prints, are usually an awful watered-down version of a copy of a Disney character.

She prefers natural fabrics to synthetics, pays up to \$1.35 for an applique to go on a \$10 T shirt, puts a high grade of hardware and hammer pockets on her tailored-to-fit rose-appliqued corduroy overalls, and in general gives substantial value for the money with next-word design thrown in. This to her is reflected in the fact that many large straight houses are failing or on the brink, while her line has just celebrated its biggest month.

"There are a smaller number now who are really making it big. They're the ones who are giving people what they want—both function and flash. I really design a lot of stuff for humor's sake. People flip out now over anything that makes them smile. I get inspired by Maxfield Parrish drawings, and so do a lot of other people; all that clean light, fresh air and humor."

The combination of capitalism and hip appeals to Helene as a new creative freedom which works best for people who are loose, but responsible. "Most large concerns don't realize that you just can't say to some wild creative type: 'All right, we want you to

