

Meet the Valley's Own Master Hatter

Written by Lauren Grifol

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Jack of all trades, master of *hats*. It's official ladies and gents, the Valley has acquired one of the most highly respected hat makers in the country. Master hatter, Eric Watson of Watson's Hat Shop in Cave Creek, is a unique example of the magic that happens after you follow your passion. From the young age of 12, Watson had a fixation on hats and after focusing on other areas that sparked his interest, he returned to his original fascination and made a career out of it. Watson has created an array of hats for the main characters, Roy Goode, Mary Agnes and Alice Fletcher, of the big time production "Godless," a Netflix original. He has also created hats for big-name clients like Justin Timberlake and Kenny Chesney, which were worn on stage during their concerts around the Valley.

From fedoras to cowboy hats, this Valley man, alongside his wife and family members, can restore, fix, replicate and create any hat you dream up. He is a visionary with a passion and niche for history and authenticity; read on as he allows us the opportunity to enter his world.



AFM: What inspired you to become a hat maker?

EW: When I was a kid, I loved Indiana Jones. I couldn't afford or find a really good hat, so I found old hats to restore and make look like Indiana Jones' hat. I did that when I was about 10 or 11 years old. I had my mom take me to some antique shops around the area I grew up. In Ohio, back in the day, you could find an antique shop on almost any corner.

AFM: When did you open Watson's Hat Shop? Was that always a dream of yours?

EW: I went through college for eight years, and graduated with a degree in Aviation Technology and International Studies. I then completed my commercial pilot training and met my wife Emily at school. Hats were always a passion and fascination of mine, but I did not know I wanted to open my shop until later.

AFM: Tell me about how you started making hats for "Godless."

EW: The first hat they needed was for Roy Goode. They sent a really horribly beat up hat I think they found in the warehouse or something and they said 'this is kind of like what we want but make it look better and authentic.' So I just recreated what it would have looked like if it was done correctly. They needed it before the show aired for a photoshoot they were doing to promote the show. They needed it within a few days of telling me what they wanted, so I had to completely restore the hat in a couple of days. I ended up making one, and then they got it and they were like 'we can't distress this' and I was like 'what do you mean' and the woman on the phone said 'you don't understand, I have been doing this for 25 years, this hat is beautiful.' So I explained to her that it was authentic, and they asked for two more.

AFM: Did you create the hats out of your own vision, or did they give you an idea of what they wanted?

EW: Since they gave me the direction of making their beat-up hat look authentic, I guess you can say they had a concept, but they did not know fully what they wanted exactly. They had the idea of the time period, the 1800's, and had a designer work up an idea of what it should look like according to the time period. The costume director was pretty famous and had done "Batman Returns" and stuff like that, so she was pretty particular on making sure it was going to look like it was from that time period. You wouldn't want to get the wrong style of hat for the time period. They wanted my input, and I told them what looked authentic and was realistic for the 1800's. For example, the fact that we could only use certain colors because there were only a handful of dyes for felt hat making in the 1800's.

AFM: What materials do you use to make the hats?

EW: For 300 years, the best felt hats were made out of beaver fur. Since the 1800's was part of the time period that beaver fur was used, that is what we used to make the hats for 'Godless.' A lot of the equipment that we use in general comes from a hat shop that we purchased. This hat shop was one of the oldest in the country. It operated from 1860 to 1989. That hat shop was in Boston, was originally named Han the Hatter

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and had a great well-known reputation. So we used all of that same equipment today to manufacture our hats. And of course, we used all of the same equipment to manufacture the 'Godless' hats. So the hats were made from the same equipment they would have used in the 1800's. On Roy Goode's hat we used a special sewing machine from the 1880's too to do the bound ribbon edging that's on his hat. The only way that you can do that authentically is by using this sewing machine. So that was a special little thing I did for that hat.

AFM: What is so special about beaver fur?

EW: People don't realize that a beaver felt hat is actually very breathable. Ten times more breathable than any other felt making material out there. They are also pretty indestructible and lightweight, which is why they are so highly desired. It is just the nature of the beaver fur. It is not the leather or anything, it is just the fur. When they are vented for the summertime they are even great for even Arizona. We do this really pretty venting on the crown. Panamas are for extreme heat, which we do have in Arizona, so we do have and sell a lot of Panamas. The bodies of the Panama hat has been woven in Ecuador since 1840. We get the bodies in and then we can duplicate any sort of style of hat that the customer would like out of that cane. We have hundreds of hat blocks, I mean hundreds of the original wooden molds. I just purchased a rare early 1900's conformator to measure customer's heads and give them a perfect fit. If you are riding a horse for instance, and you go from zero to 30, you need a hat that is going to stay on your head. So that is what we do. We measure your head to give you a form-fitting hat to make sure it stays on. They are form fitting but not tight, so you won't have to worry about a migraine or anything.

AFM: Where do you purchase those materials?

EW: Everything is made in the U.S. Every single raw material that we use, except for the Panama bodies that are woven in Ecuador, down to the thread that we use is made in the United States. We buy the materials from older, raw materials companies. In order to keep them going, we keep buying from them. They are on the more expensive end, but it really reflects in the end product. We have a lot of special blends that a lot of other hat shops don't have. We have the beaver and mink fur blend, which is more dense and richer looking. It's very strong and is like a luxury item. We also have the ultra-rare silver beaver fur. Where the natural color is actually silver, there is no dye in it. We are one of two hat shops in the country to get that. So that is a really unique thing.



AFM: What is the most interesting hat you have created?

EW: The most recognizable pieces that I have created are the ones from 'Godless' because it was actually one of the largest western film budgets used in the last 25 years. It was a big, big deal. It had Jeff Daniels in it. They put a lot of money into that film. The film is broken down into a series, and if you were to binge watch it, it would take you like 12 hours to watch the whole thing through. I also do replica hats. I have done a few replica hats for this author that we work with, Michael F. Blake, who is also an actor and an Emmy-winning makeup artist. I made a couple hats for his book. When you open up the cover, it's the hat he is pictured in where it's talking about the author. I also made a replica of the Theodore Roosevelt hat. I also made a couple hats for Antwan Odem [a retired NFL defensive lineman for the Tennessee Titans]. He team ropes now, so I made a couple cowboy hats for him. We are also the official hat maker for the Arizona Quarter Horse Association, the Arizona Reining Horse Association and Arizona Cutting Horse Association. We are blessed to be busy and just want to keep getting busier and busier.

AFM: Since you have been so busy, who helps you?

EW: After I couldn't handle it anymore, I brought in my uncle, which has been working for me now for a few years now. My wife, Emily, has been here for almost two years now full time. She's very artistic too, so she does a lot of the fancy ribbon work on our Lady Watson collection. I taught her how to start the Panama hat making process, so she is getting really good at that. We have a couple other employees who help with hat restorations, but as for the custom hat-making side, as far as customer's custom hats, it's all family involved. So me, my uncle and my wife. It takes a really long time to learn all of this though. There are 64 steps for a custom, tailored hat from start to finish. Because we have multiple hat makers on staff, we have one of the best turnarounds in the country where people only have to wait about a week until we get that hat right out. If there is a hat emergency, then we get it back to them in 48 hours, which is kind of unheard of. We are here Monday to Saturday all day.

AFM: What are some of your favorite things to do in the Valley?

EW: Well, I do like to go hiking when the weather is nice. Emily and I are both commercial pilots so when we are able to rent an airplane we will go fly around the Valley, privately. We have flown up to the Grand Canyon and landed up there, out to the very west side of Arizona, like Bagdad. We have flown down to the Tucson area before. Just some local flying, it's super fun. To eat, I love going to Indigo Crow and Brugos, which are right here in Stagecoach Village. Bryant's Barbeque is really good barbecue and The Horny Toad. I love antiques. I do go out and look for old hat-making equipment. I just have a fascination with the authentic way that hats were built on the original machinery.

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Watson's Hat Shop will be hosting another book signing with Michael F. Blake on May 17. For more information on the event, click [here](#).