

Hello again, and welcome back. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. For today's program ...something a little different. We will travel across the United States to Los Angeles, California, to examine the latest in men's fashions. But we're not looking for new shirts or coats. We will be talking about something that more and more men seem to be doing to improve their looks.

And a little later, we'll leave the noisy big city in search of the quietest place on earth. Our guide is a man who thinks he may have only a short time to find what he is looking, and listening, for. The program is **As It Is**, a way to learn and improve your American English, courtesy of the Voice of America.

More American men these days are growing facial hair – beards and mustaches. For some of them, hair on their faces is more than a statement of fashion and style. Let's ask an expert.

Daniel Winter cuts hair for a living in California. He says the rugged, hairy look is growing in Los Angeles and other major cities. He says that look sometimes includes even body art.

“Bigger corporations, like huge companies, that are geared more towards fashion are now hiring models with beards and tattoos -- writings and drawings on the skin. They are going for a bit of a more alternative look. And it’s really starting to spill over into the general public.”

Mr. Winter has worn a beard for 10 years. He says that the growth of beards and mustaches is rooted in history.

“Facial hair was associated with masculinity, sexual vitality and overall awesomeness. You look at Greek mythology and almost every god had some sort of facial hair, whether it had been a full beard or some sort of goatee.”

Styling facial hair also has become popular. Just ask Nicholas Watsford. He manufactures a beard and mustache wax called Dubs Stache wax.

“If I want to do full curls or what not, I can do full curls.”

Mr. Watsford decided to create an organic wax after other products on the market harmed his skin. He says growing a beard in Los Angeles is not just a temporary happening. He says it is a lifestyle – a way of living.

“Your appearance and everything now...Just how you’re representing yourself, like a mane for a lion. It’s really in full effect.”

Thousands of men around the world were growing facial hair during November to bring attention to men’s health issues. But some people in Los Angeles take facial hair-awareness very seriously the year round. Nathan “Chops” Johnson has a huge handlebar mustache that reaches to his waist.

“I take care of this guy by myself. I don’t let anybody near it.”

The Los Angeles Facial Hair Society was started by two men and two women. Their goal was to unify California's community of people with beards and mustaches and those who love them. Alana Beck helped establish the organization.

"I only date guys that have beards. I don't do mustaches. There's a manliness to it that's very attractive."

Hair Society member Roberto Campos says facial hair brings people together."

"All of a sudden your Facebook friend number jumps to the thousands after meeting all these people."

Members like Roberto Campos and "Chops" Johnson like the friendly competition. They enjoy seeing who can grow the best beard and mustache. But they say the unique – the extremely unusual – family that they have formed is what is most important.

What? I Can't Hear You! There is Too Much Noise!

Our world is a noisy place, filled with the sounds of traffic, airplanes, machines and people. But quiet places remain, if you know where to look. Eight years ago, audio engineer Gordon Hempton identified the quietest place in the continental United States. He calls the place "One Square Inch of Silence." He has used this symbolic spot in a northwestern rain forest to campaign against noise pollution. But the self-described "Sound Tracker" is now going deaf. Steve Ember continues our story.

For Gordon Hempton, it started with an experience known to many people. He had to repeatedly ask "What? What did you say?" Then his hearing got worse.

"I was laying in bed in the springtime about a year ago. The sun was shining. The birds could be singing. They should be singing. And I was hearing none."

Hempton leaned over to his partner at their home in a wooded, rural neighborhood on Washington's Puget Sound.

"And I said, 'Kate, do you hear birdsong?' And she said yes. I knew my life was going to be different."

Hempton's eyes get watery as he describes the cruel irony of his situation. More than twenty years ago he trademarked his nickname as "The Sound Tracker." Sharp hearing defined his career as an Emmy award winning sound recordist. It also led to his activism against noise pollution.

He has circled the globe three times in search of the perfect sounds of nature.

Those are howler monkeys in a tropical rain forest in Belize. Closer to home, coyotes howl in an eastern Washington canyon.

He also found places so quiet that he could hear the soft sound of a hummingbird's wings.

Hempton says his hearing loss is quickly getting worse; creating what he says is a “real urgency” to finish his project.

“I'm not totally deaf. But I have lost most of my hearing. So I am running a race to finish the Quiet Planet collection.”

That's the title of a planned 19-volume set of nature recordings. The sound tracks could be licensed for use in movies, video games, exhibits, plays and the like.

Volunteer assistants now help Hempton review and edit sound files and identify imperfections.

“I miss it. I feel so connected when I can listen to the place I am. And the difference between hearing where you are and not is like the difference being awake and not.”

The exact cause of his hearing loss is not clear. Doctors say it may be the result of an infection, or a tumor or a combination of things. More tests are needed.

Hempton is self-employed. He says his health care plan does not pay for hearing loss treatment. So, for now, he's directing his attention to completing his "greatest hits" album.

"After I get Quiet Planet finished, out there and I have an economic cash flow to get my hearing back, then we're going to do it. That's the first thing on my to-do list."

The Sound Tracker says he's hopeful his hearing loss can be reversed. I'm Steve Ember.

Thank you, Steve. It is always a pleasure to have you drop by. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. It is time for me to step aside and make room for more Learning English programs, which are just a few seconds away. And, as always, we invite you to find out what is happening in the world by listening to a complete newscast at the top of the hour on the Voice of America.

