

# The Music Trades

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## Wild-Ass Suits Offer New Profit Opportunities

Clothier to stars, Chuck Navasky believes apparel is an untapped gold mine for music retailers

AS FIRST-TIME NAMM exhibitors go, Chuck Navasky already has a long story behind him. The owner of century-old clothing manufacturer Falcone Suits and the rock star-centric line Wild Ass Suits, Chuck has made clothing for Prince, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Weird Al Yankovic, and dozens of others over the past three decades. In his first NAMM show appearance this summer, he'll market his musicians' wear, sold up to now on a custom and direct-sales basis, to retailers for the first time. But that's not all you need to know about Chuck Navasky. He's also a longtime musician who's played alongside some of the biggest stars in the industry, and a cancer survivor who puts every cent of his Wild Ass Suit profits into his charitable foundation.

"I've asked myself why I've had the opportunities that I've had," says Chuck. "Why does a farm boy from central Pennsylvania get to jump off his tractor and make a high-fashion suit for Flavor Flav? I sort of look at it as fate, a calling to not just succeed in business but to use it to do good for people."

Chuck represents the fourth generation of his family to own Falcone Suits, which started out as a maker of fine menswear in 1893. Founded by Chuck's great-grandfather Charles Navasky in Brooklyn New York, Falcone Suits passed to Charles' son Bernie, who moved the company to Phillipsburg, Pennsylvania. In the 1960s, under

Bernie's son Ed, the straight-laced company reinvented itself as a provider of groovy, high-fashion apparel and expanded from 200 employees to 1,500.



*Chuck Navasky (left), owner of Falcone Suits and rock star line Wild Ass Suits, jams with Mark Slaughter, one of his closest friends in the industry and a supporter of his One Less Tear foundation for cancer patients.*

By 1979 Ed's son Chuck had enrolled in pattern school in New York City to learn the family trade. A musician since age ten, Chuck responded to a *Village Voice* ad for a bass player and ended up playing in a band behind front man and songwriter Mitch Albom, who later wrote the best-selling book *Tuesdays With Morrie*. Playing with the band

around Manhattan and Long Island, Chuck crossed paths with future stars, including the band that became Twisted Sister, while they were still scrounging for work in clubs. Putting his design background to work, he began making clothes for his musician friends to wear on their gigs.

After returning home to Pennsylvania, Chuck continued playing in bands as word of his clothing line spread and his client list grew to include top musicians and Hollywood actors. His rock 'n' roll apparel in edgy cuts and bold prints became the spin-off line Wild Ass Suits, which comprises both custom work and stock sales, all set at extremely accessible price points. (A selection of animal-print vests is listed on his website at \$39 a piece.)

When Chuck began having difficulty speaking and singing in 1998, he was initially diagnosed with vocal nodules, benign growths that are not unusual for singers who overstress their voices. Further investigation revealed that he actually had stage one throat cancer. After performing a surgery to remove the tumor, doctors assured Chuck that he was cancer-free and wouldn't need radiation or chemotherapy treatments. As it turns out, they were wrong. It wasn't long before the cancer returned, this time at stage 3. Chuck underwent a radical surgery that he describes as having half his throat cut out and was told he'd never

talk or sing again.

Through grueling chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and a long recovery, Chuck had the support of a who's-who list in popular music. Johnny and Donnie Van Zant (of Lynyrd Skynyrd and 38 Special, respectively) dedicated a song to him, "Alive," that inspired him to find his own way to help fellow cancer patients. "Over the years it had gotten to where I wasn't just making clothes for these guys I had met in the industry—we were friends," says Chuck. "I had so many pals who rallied around me, and I knew that if I got through this I had to find a way to give back somehow."

Chuck has since founded his own cancer foundation, One Less Tear. Recruiting music industry friends including the Van Zant Brothers, Michael McDonald, Mark Slaughter, and Vince Neil (Mötley Crüe), he assembled a CD of songs to inspire fellow cancer patients. Having defied doctors' predictions by retraining himself to speak and sing, Chuck himself sang on some of the tracks. Because several of the artists involved were under contract with record companies that wouldn't permit them to sell their music outside the label, Chuck gave the CDs away for free. More than 100,000 have now been distributed to cancer patients, while another 100,000 have been given out to U.S. troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Chuck and his One Less Tear all-star band, comprising contributors to his CD and other musician friends, went on to organize benefit concerts to raise money for the foundation. Chuck also dedicated



*Chuck Navasky performs with his One Less Tear band to raise money for his foundation for cancer patients.*

all profits from his Wild Ass Suits line to cancer charity work, usually in a form that provides immediate assistance to patients—such as covering expenses for those who need to travel for treatments. "Funding for research is also wonderful, and the world needs that too, but it doesn't really help the guy who's going through hell right now," says Chuck. "My thing is to do whatever I can to help patients right at this moment." Chuck's foundation also coordinates efforts with the American Cancer Society, Memorial Sloan-Kettering cancer center, and St. Jude's Children's Hospital.

At NAMM this summer, Chuck's company will be a relatively rare bird. In

comparison to apparel for athletes and even motorcycle enthusiasts (see the ever-present Adidas and Harley Davidson logos) clothing and accessories for performing musicians has largely flown under the radar. Chuck's booth, however, will not, as he promises a booth as flashy as his clothing line and appearances by rockers Mark Slaughter and Gunnar Nelson and country star Kevin Sharp. "It's going to be one heck of a booth," says Chuck. "I don't know how much I'll sell, but at the very least I'll use the exposure to get 5,000 CDs out to cancer patients, so it's a double opportunity."

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