

The Shocking Truth About Nikola Tesla

By Michael A. Stusser

The Cheat Sheet is designed to give readers a quick overview of sophisticated topics – making you look smart without all that annoying, studious effort. Use it as a conversation starter- all you gotta do is keep a straight face. “Go get ‘em, Einstein!”

Tesla: What do you get when you put a great, egotistical celibate Serbian mind in a room for too long with a bunch of pigeons? Only one of the greatest inventors of all time.

Namedropping:

Tesla, Nikola (1856-1943) (Pronounced: Nee-cola Tess-lah)

The Basics:

A contemporary of Edison and Westinghouse, Tesla, a Serbian inventor, was responsible for the first practical use of alternating current (AC) – the electrical current that constantly reverses direction and is the heart of electric power for most of the world. But that’s not all: our boy Tesla also invented generators and transmission lines, and what’s called the Tesla coil – a gadget still used in radio and television transmission. He also messed with early radar, neon, X-rays, aircraft design and really cool mobiles that made Calder look like a pre-schooler.

So, how come you’ve never heard of him? Partially, it’s because his rivals took credit for his ideas (Marconi and Edison were the Neuman to his Seinfeld), partially it’s because the genius didn’t bother to patent the majority of his work.

EXTRA CREDIT:

In 1943 the Supreme Court invalidated most the patents held by Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi for radio equipment and gave Tesla credit for the invention based on patents that predated Marconi’s. Little good it did him though, as by that time Marconi had already won fame, money and a Nobel for his “work.” (Don’t you just hate it when that happens...?) If it makes you feel any better, in 1888, Tesla sold his patents for AC generators, transformers and motors to George Westinghouse – and bought himself a fine pair of shoes. In 1884, Tesla moved to the US to work with Thomas Edison (no dummy himself), but left after a year when Edison showed little interest in AC generation. (Apparently, even geniuses are narrow-minded – AC can be transmitted for much greater distances than DC.) During one of their many arguments, Tesla suggested he could improve some

of Edison’s dynamos and save him efficiency as well as a ton of cash. “There’s \$50,000 in it for you if you can do it,” Edison replied. After working round the clock for months on end, Tesla made significant improvements by redesigning Edison’s systems and installing automatic controls. When the brash young inventor asked Edison to pay up, Edison replied, “Tesla, you don’t understand our American humor.” Neither do we.

Conversation Starters:

- A precocious child, by the age of 5, Tesla had already invented his own waterwheel, and forced himself to read the complete 100 volume set of Voltaire.
- Tesla would have been great fun at parties: at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 he sent 200,000 volts through his body. The man’s hair stood on end for a week. (We prefer a double espresso.)
- Friends with Mark Twain, Tesla once commented “Mr. Marconi is a donkey.”
- Tesla held over 100 patents, but didn’t bother to apply for patents for most his ideas.
- Runs in the blood? Though Tesla’s mother couldn’t read, she was a skillful inventor of several farm implements.

mental_floss presents:



- Not one for modesty, Tesla often signed his name with the letters G.I., short for Great Inventor.
- Celibate throughout his life, Tesla loved pigeons, feared dirt and round objects (goes along with the celibacy) and once said, “I do not think you can name many great inventions that have been made by the married man.”
- Tesla once predicted that, “The household’s daily newspaper will be printed ‘wirelessly’ in the home during the night.” Maybe the Supreme Court should give the guy credit for the Internet, too.
- Although famous and rich in the 1890’s, Tesla’s final years were spent in poverty in a series of New York hotels with only pigeons for friends. When he died he was working on a device that would photograph thoughts. Think fast: Cheese!