

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue button-down shirt and dark trousers, stands in the center of a room. He is surrounded by floor-to-ceiling wooden shelving units filled with vinyl records. The walls are decorated with numerous framed posters, including one that says "END OF A WORLD" and another with "BLUE BIRD". On top of the record shelves, there are various decorative items like a lamp, a figurine, and a collection of books. In the background, a doorway is covered with a patterned curtain, and a stereo system is visible on a table.

# SHELLAC ADDICT

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While he's known as a '60s counterculture icon for his raunchy yet brilliant comics, illustrator **Robert Crumb**'s heart lies in the '20s and '30s. His love of old 78s and the songs of the original bluesmen, rural string bands, and obscure jazz musicians makes Crumb one of the leading experts on early American music. He and a close-knit group of collectors obsess over the rarest and most expensive records ever, all while helping to catalog its musical history along the way.

by **Larry Jaffee**







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blues and jazz names that were forgotten, buried. At that time, there was no information, nothing written, about most of these performers from the 1920s. 'Troy' Parham and His Musicians, the Two Poor Boys, Saly Dog Sam—great music! Forgotten names.

He rattles off the names of labels from yesteryear that he collects: Paramount, Okeh, Columbia, Brunswick, Gennett, Romeo, Cameo, Vocalion, Champion, Supertone, and Challenge among them.

In the late 1950s, when I was fourteen or fifteen, it was the early era of rock and roll, some of which I liked. I also liked early 1930s movie soundtracks that I heard on television. There were very few releases of 1920s records on LP at the time but I discovered that 78s could be found in second-hand furniture stores cheap, and I started buying them. At first, it was totally experimental. I bought a lot of bad records, looking for the good ones. I learned a lot this way. In fact, this learning process never ends. I remember the first 78 I ever bought was a blues record, 'Down in the Cemetery' by Billy Bird. To my uninitiated ears, it sounded very strange. This record soon got broken and I've never been able to replace it with another copy. It's on Columbia circa 1928-'29, I guess it must be quite rare. At first, I mainly liked jazz and dance records, and then I branched out into blues, country music. Then I discovered greater Irish music, Eastern European, Polish, and Ukrainian music. That period of the 20s was the golden age of music from all over the world."

had a much bigger sound than LP," he says. The microgroove is for the latter, microgrooves with disdain for the latter, microgrooves. The microgroove is a very touchy, fragile technology. The 78—its a much more magical object. But, hey, I'm the first to admit that it's crazy to collect 78s. They take so much time, but they're very appealing as objects. Then you have only the three-minute side. Every time you want to listen to one song, you have to get up to put it on. Three minutes later, you have to get up to take it off, and decide what you want to listen to next. It forces you to be very involved in listening to the music. You can't listen to 78s as background music. It requires a lot of your attention."

Cash says he has an appreciation for how state-of-the-art restoration technology can improve a 78's sound on CD, which, by the way, he also prefers to the LP. "CDs, I think, are a much better format than the LP. I will sometimes listen to the CD if I don't have the original 78. But even if I have an inferior copy of a 78 record, I will listen to the 78s more rather than a good, cleaned-up restoration of the same record on a CD release. I'm hooked on the whole ritual of the 78s. The way they engage you...I know it's crazy, but I don't recommend it!"

Crumph has his record collection meticulously organized alphabetically and by artist and genre. "I know where everything is," he says. In the 1994 documentary *Crumph* by film director/fellow 78 collector Terry Zwiggoff, Crumh is seen packing up his collection from his home in rural California in anticipation of his move to southern France, where he has lived since 1991.

Follow 78 collector/musician John Heneghan and his wife-investor Chaz Crumb this past August. They've been friends for over a decade, partly because the better part of a decade, partly because Crumb knows Heneghan has the good stuff. When musicians ask Crumb to illustrate an album cover, he'll only do so if a rare-record trade is involved (he famously turned down the Rolling Stones)—and if he approves of the kind of music they play, which is generally pre-1930s. Lucky for Heneghan, his New York-based combo Eden and John's East River String Band is just the ticket. And Crumb has even sat in during Heneghan's no slouch on banjo.

"I've been lucky enough to have had audible access to Crumb's collection for about ten years now," writes Heneghan in an email from France.

"It's quite an honor to be in his record book, and every time I enter it, my mind is



blown. Not only is his collection so deep that I still hear records that I've never heard before and can hear nowhere else, but it's a collection where any music that is not of the highest caliber has been discarded. That's

something Robert taught me when I first met him. As an archeologist of old music, part of the job after one has absorbed and digested the records one finds is to weed through the muck and only hold on to the best of the best. This is something I do with my collection now as well. It's a treat and an honor every time Grunth plays records for me. I feel very fortunate to have heard what he's heard."

Last year, Henghan released the LP *Climpin' the Blues*, which contains a radio show originally broadcast in 2003 on the

Penn State radio station. It's nearly an hour of Crumb spinning records with fellow 78 collector Jerry Zolten, chatting in between sides. Heneghan promises, "More risqué releases coming this fall!"

Crumm explains how he is interested in all types of pre-war ethnic music, and he once asked his mother-in-law (who's Jewish) if the family had any old 78s of Jewish music. She told him, "Oh, no, then family never possessed such things. He later

found out from another relative that the family actually had owned hundreds of 78s, but that they had been thrown out when the old folks moved to Florida because no

one had shown any interest. Crumb was highly annoyed at his mother-in-law, and it's still a sore spot. "She didn't want to admit

how ethnic the family had once been." Even though he spends much time collecting and licensing to the output of the Paramount label, particularly its "race records" and "hillbilly music," Canine concludes that the label "did everything" on the cheap. They used such low-grade recording equipment. He muses that the 78s must have been composed of "beaten-up, broken pieces of coal or something. [The label is] gritty, grainy, it's awful."

Cranish is keenly aware of the obsessive-compulsive subculture in search of vintage recordings by the likes of blues legends Skip James or Son House, whose 78s turn up on rare occasions at flea markets or next to nothing, but can be then resold for thousands of dollars at auctions.



"In their day, they sold only to a small segment of the population. White people in the late 1920s and early 1930s knew nothing about Skip James or Charley Patton. Those artists were unknown country blues. White jazz enthusiasts of the time. The record-business people were mostly White. They saw it exclusively as a market for Black people. They didn't have any appreciation for it musically; from what I've read of those early A&R men like Ralph Peer, Frank Walker, et cetera, they didn't know what the hell it was."

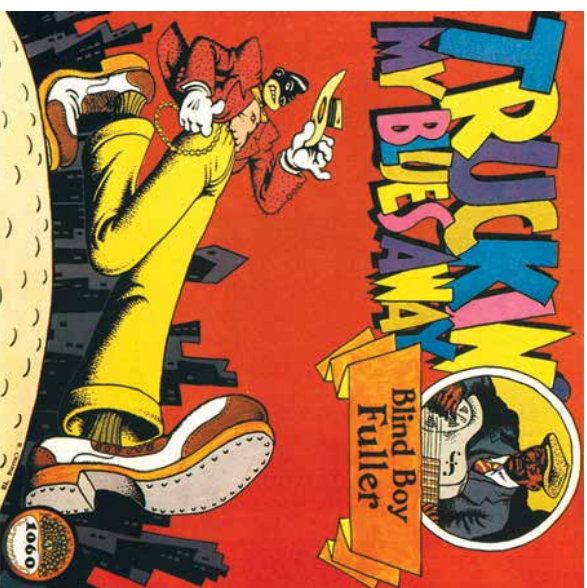
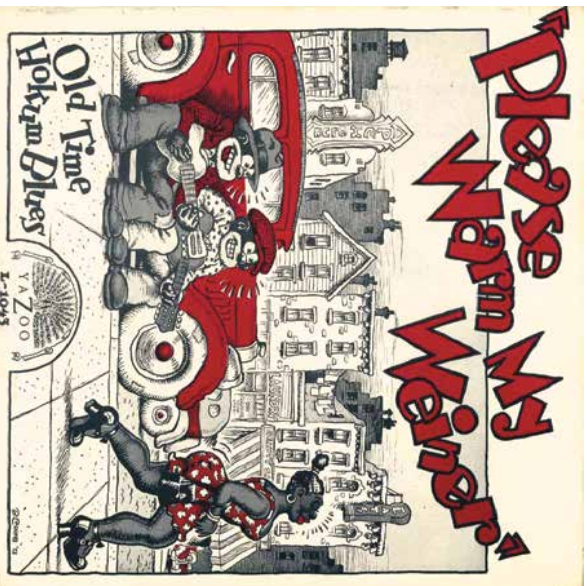
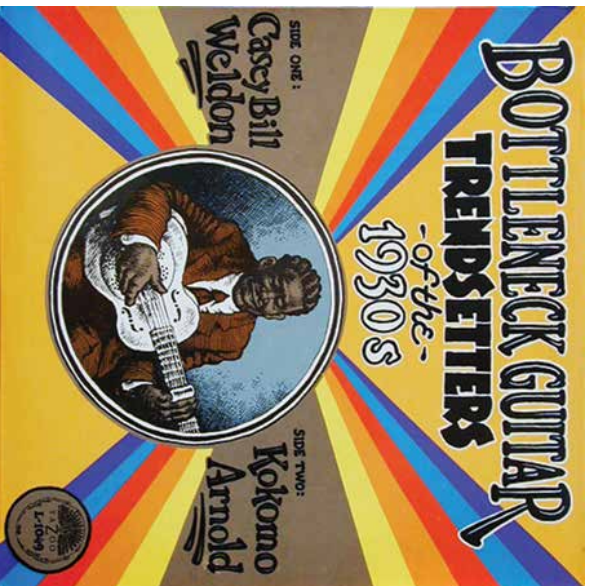
Crumb is bemused by the amounts that some collectors will pay for a rare record. "If somebody bids thousands of dollars, that doesn't necessarily mean that the record is worth that much money," he says. "It's a small world, these 78 collectors. They all pretty much know each other. There are a handful of high rollers in it who will pay many amounts of money for rare records that they must have. You know, collectors are a lot like drug addicts."

Rare-record dealer John Tettefleter, who is collaborating with Crumb on a book of vintage blues images, says that Crumb falls into the category of record collector who covets a particular disc as a cultural artifact and piece of music itself rather than how valuable it might be.

Tettefleter notes that Crumb's collection "is pretty much the same size it always was, about five thousand records. He has purged some and bought others, so it remains about the size it was when he left the Bay Area for France some years ago."

Crumb admits, "I've never bought anything in my life for its investment value, although a lot of stuff I've collected has gotten so valuable over the decades that it kind of scares me—old toys, comic books, records," says Crumb. "I used to be such a compulsive collector, but I always had an intrinsic love for the aesthetics of these objects. I just hope I have it together enough to unload all these things before I die, and not stick my surviving loved ones with the burden of it!"

Tettefleter, who's based in Oregon, managed to snare testimonial quotes from Crumb for his self-published calendar the past dozen years. *Classic Blues Artists from the 1920's* calendars include a CD and are adorned with reproductions of original advertisements for blues 78s, as well as Crumb's illustrations of the likes of Charley



Patton, Son House, Skip James, Tommy Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and others. Writes Crumb on the calendar: "These old blues ads are among the best music-related graphics ever produced. Fabulous graphics for great music—a powerful combination! I have often shamelessly used these old ads as a source for lettering and layouts in my own work, they're so doggone charming! Steal from the best, I always say!"

The decline of graphic design since the 1920s is a pet peeve of Crumb's. "I could rave all night about the terrible state of contemporary commercial design and how there was once a golden age in which even the smallest, most humble commercial products came attractively presented; a card of buttons, a book of matches, a can of beans, a bottle of hair tonic, a five-cent candy bar. Records' labels were things of beauty, gaudy or dignified. Covers of cheap pulp magazines were vivid, lurid, beautifully designed with powerful logos. Imaginative, attractive lettering was everywhere. Standards of layout and design were high everywhere, from the fanciest studios of New York to the itinerant sign painters in the smallest punktown towns. What went wrong? And now with computers, it seems to have only gotten worse!"

Although he loves the music contained within, Crumb even finds fault with the packaging of recent CD boxed sets, such as *Charlie Poole: You Ain't Talkin' to Me*, adorned by his own illustration of the musician, and the *Jelly Roll Morton: Complete Library of Congress Recordings*. "They come up with these ridiculous packaging ideas [like the cigar box for the Poole set, and the roll-out keyboard for the Morton set]. They think this is a clever way to make the CD stand out or something. There are very few people anymore who can really make a good layout. Lettering skills are no longer valued because a kid with a computer can do the job ten times cheaper, even though it looks like crap. But you know, how many people really care?"

EMI commissioned Crumb in 1999 to compile and design a CD of his favorite music as part of its limited-edition Songbook series, in which various artists were offered the opportunity to pick tracks for a compilation of music that they love. The resulting disc, *That's What I Call Sweet Music*, was recently seen on Amazon selling for \$194.98, although other used copies can be had for around forty dollars.



While Cunniff will chapscribe about the virtues of the 78, it's not completely blind to some of the format's negatives, such as an old 78 record player's "one arm weighs five pounds, it's so heavy that it'll kill records, even if you change the needle. It's bad for the surface. I'm not much of a technology guy. My knowledge of dealing with all that stuff is very limited. I have friends who can help me out. I have a friend who just helped me out with a new turntable. I had my other one for thirty-five years. The beatings were wearing out. A guy gave me the new one—a model from the 1960s or 1970s—for some records."

Among popular culture aficionados of the hippie era, Crumb is known for his bohemian, granddaddy-looking comic-book character called "Mr. Natural," who advises readers to "keep on truckin'—a character that was co-opted for a popular, unauthorized poster and for a song by the psychedelic rock group the Grateful Dead. "I always loved the Grateful Dead. There were always these myths that I hung with the Grateful Dead and even lived with them. It's not true; I had no association with them at all," Crumb says.

Shanachie has reissued on CD two records by Crumb's own band, the Cheap Suit Serenaders: *Singing in the Bathtub* (1993) and *Chasin' Rainbows* (2002), both originally released on the Blue Goose label in the 1970s. A Japanese compilation of Crumb's band was released on the

"[*Gloss Model*] is Terry's fantasy come true," Crumb says. "The newly recorded collector gets to have sex with a beautiful eighteen-year-old girl. He converts her to old music. That's completely unrealistic. It doesn't happen. If it does, it's really rare. It takes a long orientation process to get to like that kind of music."

Crumb sums up with a quote that's worthy of Groucho Marx's quip that he wouldn't belong to a club that would have him as a member: "Collectors are all creeps. Record collectors are creepier than creeps. Comic book collectors. There are some really paranoid characters; they're secretive and proprietary. They don't want to let you know their sources. It's a ridiculous thing to do—but it's an addiction." 🍷



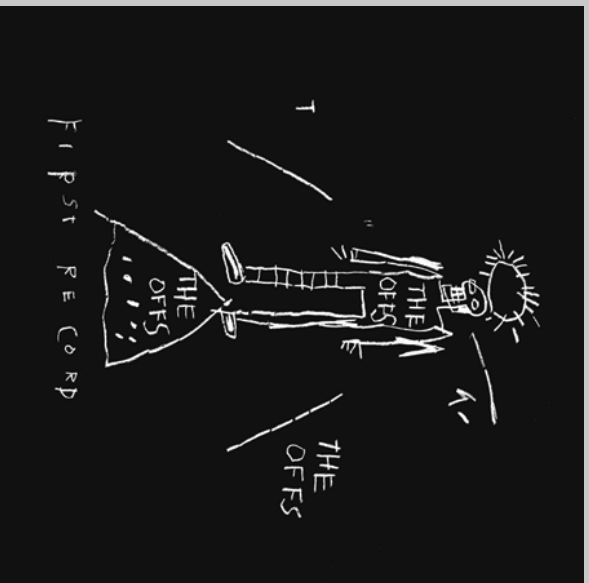
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## OUTRO

Cover: Jean-Michel Basquiat



*I am not a Black artist, I am an artist. - Jean-Michel Basquiat*



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