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**BY CORY
TURCZYN**

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Detail from "Railroad Town," 1951, a print made at Yee-Haw Industries of a Jim Flora woodcut once thought to be lost



PAINSTAKING DETAIL: Yee-Haw's Bryan Baker prepares two Jim Flora woodcuts for printing. "They all had a strange problem I couldn't even wrap my head around at first."

As far as blocks of wood go, this one is extraordinary. Perhaps a lifetime ago it had humble beginnings as, say, a leftover piece of scrap from a long-forgotten carpentry project; it probably should've ended up in somebody's fireplace. But now it is handled with the care and reverence normally reserved for ancient artifacts of lost civilizations. And perhaps it is just that.

At first glance, it doesn't look like much: a wood board about the size of an old movie-theater window card. The worn plank has the dark patina of age, as if it had been baking in someone's attic for a long, long time. One side is perfectly unremarkable. But once gingerly turned over, its other side spills out an entire world of bizarre imagery, a riot of hieroglyphs carved by an alien hand: humanoids with spidery bodies amid a landscape of rickety buildings and brutal machinery. What rituals are they enacting, what stories are they trying to tell? To find out, the board must be coated in ink, pressed against a clean sheet of paper, and printed.

It sounds like a simple procedure, but the printing experts here on the second floor of Yee-Haw Industries in downtown Knoxville are not a little awed. The block of wood is unlike any they've worked with before, created in Mexico over 50 years ago by the late artist Jim Flora and rediscovered just a few months previously. Its carvings are mysterious not only for the strange beings they portray, but also in their technique.

"His line quality, the manner in which he carved it, is really, really stunning. I can't even explain it," says Yee-Haw's Bryan Baker, the

printmaker charged with creating a new edition from the woodcut. "In all the other studios I've worked in, I've never seen another block carved this way. The depth is really strange, and the angles at which he would hold his knife are really unique. It's so pristine and so accurate, it's on a mad-scientist level."

Even Yee-Haw co-owner Kevin Bradley, whose own woodcuts have defined the well-known letterpress shop's esthetic, admits to having one thought upon seeing the Jim Flora block for the first time: "F-word!"

"There's just not a bad cut on the whole damn block, and that's pretty amazing," says Bradley. "I don't even know what kinds of tools he was using. Not even with an X-Acto knife can you make these cuts in wood without some history of the edges overlapping, but he has the cleanest edge on these little hairlines, straight lines, and curves that you'll ever see. It's very fascinating to try to figure out how he was doing it."

In fact, this woodcut is an irreplaceable piece of art history by a commercial illustrator and painter who, until only the past few years, was largely forgotten. The block also

probably hasn't been printed in half a century. Disaster could be just one print away.

"As soon as I saw it, I was floored, but I was also really scared—what

happens if something goes wrong while we're printing it, and the block cracks?" Baker recalls. "I was more careful than I've ever been before with any block in the proofing process. We started with the roller really high and we just [eased] it down very slowly until it started getting a good impression."

The result of Baker's painstaking work is "Railroad Town," a limited-edition relief print of



SELF-PORTRAIT: Jim Flora as he saw himself

50 copies, with proofs priced up to \$2,500. But more importantly, it is another reclamation of what was thought to be lost original art by Jim Flora. Striking in its complexity, detail, and pure juju, "Railroad Town" adds to the growing reputation of a humble man who had no idea that he'd someday be cited as a primary influence by almost every major artist in a movement that fuses pop-culture imagery and fine art: lowbrow. The story of how it landed in Knoxville is just as unexpected as a Flora woodcut.

Rwin Chusid describes himself as a "landmark preservationist," a trade he fell into by virtue of his fascination with discarded pieces of pop culture—and his ability to repackage them for modern audiences. He's the fellow who resuscitated the career of space-age pop bandleader Esquivel in the '90s with a compilation CD. He also wrote the book on "outsider music," celebrating the efforts of untraditional musicians—those without formal training, or (some would say) musical talent. Chusid's offbeat discoveries have won fans, and even sales, as with *The Langley Schools Music Project*, a collection of rock songs by a 60-member chorus of school children originally recorded in 1976.

But his current obsession/project—cataloging and popularizing the works of Jim Flora—is his biggest yet. He stumbled upon Flora's art years ago in the same places that so many current artists originally discovered it: thrift stores. In the 1940s and '50s, Flora drew utterly bizarre and magnetic album covers for Columbia and RCA Victor, mostly for jazz artists like Gene Krupa, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington. Childlike yet sinister, chaotic yet balanced, playful yet weird, Flora's illustrations were unique; they inspired many imitators at the time, though few could match his technique. Inevitably, this ephemeral art landed in used-record bins to be discovered by those drawn to its peculiar vibrations.

"I was collecting Flora covers before I ever realized there was such an artist as Jim Flora," says Chusid from his home in Hoboken, N.J. "I used to be a record collector in a



former life. Record collectors tend to be lower life forms, and I confess I was one of those groveling creatures. I had a couple of covers that I just bought at thrift stores or garage sales because I liked the cartoonish quality about them.”

Although certainly cartoonish and often absurd, Flora’s album covers also combine a variety of fine-art influences, from Picasso-style cubism to surrealism by way of Miro to modernism *à la* Kandinsky. Other pieces reflect an almost Mayan feel, and still others are impish, with comic figures like you might see in a children’s book. In Flora’s most famous album covers, he created his own visual style for jazz that expresses its energy and sense of cool—while still looking completely offbeat: *Mambo for Cats*, *Inside Sauter-Finegan*, *This Is Benny Goodman*, *Shorty Rogers Courts the Count*. It’s the kind of commercial art that refuses to be easily forgotten or disposed of; it has the soul of high art, if not the respect.

Flora (born in 1914) had actually started out with a fine-arts background, graduating from the Art Academy of Cincinnati in 1939. While still a student, he launched a letterpress with volatile writer Robert Lowry called Little Man Press, issuing limited-edition publications that unleashed his imagination for creative design. In 1942, Alex Steinweiss, art director

VINYL ART: Jim Flora’s illustrations for RCA Victor’s jazz albums in the ‘50s are now among his most popular works.

for Columbia Records and the designer credited with inventing the entire concept of illustrating album covers, came across one of these odd little magazines and offered Flora a job. Flora blossomed as a cover artist and the creator of Columbia’s promotional magazine, *Coda*. Flora was promoted to art director in 1943 after Steinweiss left for the Navy; he unhappily worked his way up the corporate ladder until he became so frustrated with company bureaucracy that he resigned in 1950.

After an artistic sojourn in Mexico, where he had moved with his wife, artist Jane Sinnicksen, and their two children, Flora returned to commercial work in 1951 as the art director of *Park East* magazine, where he published spot illustrations by a young artist named Andy Warhol. Later that decade, he produced some of his most revered album art for RCA Victor, drew storyboards for distinctive animation studio UPA, and began a new career as a children’s book author and illustrator, starting with *The Fabulous Firework Family* in 1955. In the ‘60s, Flora continued doing commercial illustration for magazines like *Fortune*, but he retired by the early ‘70s. He devoted himself to art once again, but changed his creative focus to decidedly un-hip nautical themes: paintings of boats.

In 1997, Chusid was visiting a friend, the illustrator J.D. King, whose work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, among other publications. Noticing some of the very same albums framed and hanging on

King’s wall, Chusid was curious: Why did he have these here? King explained his fascination with the little-known Flora, and Chusid’s curiosity was piqued.

“I could see that he liked some of the same painters as me, Stuart Davis, Paul Klee, Joan Miro,” says King of his affinity for Flora’s work. “But he injected that modernism with an energy that had more in common with the funny pages.”

This combination of high and low art was likewise mesmerizing other record-store-shopping artists who would buy these frayed albums for the inspiration of their covers. But Chusid didn’t just want to hunt for records—he wanted to *do* something with them, just like he had with other bits of cast-off pop culture that intrigued him. So he hunted down Jim Flora instead. He found him still living in Rowayton, Conn., his home for the past 50 years, and contacted him with the goal of getting Flora’s blessing to start a website devoted to his album cover art. But in early 1998, Flora was diagnosed with stomach cancer; Chusid arranged to visit him for an interview in May.

“He was a gentleman, very informative,” says Chusid. “I taped an interview, then he couldn’t talk anymore, he was tired. So we went downstairs to his studio. I remember looking around and the art that I saw on display didn’t grab me the way the album covers did. There were a lot of boats, and musician paintings that seemed like they were based on the early style but were nowhere near as interesting. So I came away from that with an interview, with a great respect for the man, and with a sense of tragedy that he was going to be passing away. I had a sense that he had done





OTHER WORLDS: Some examples of Flora's personal works from the 1960s.



these great album covers in the '40s and '50s and that there wasn't much else I was interested in."

But there was, in fact, much more to Jim Flora's art than album covers. Chusid launched jimflora.com after Flora's death, and soon got suggestions to turn the site's collection into a book; yet he wasn't sure whether he could really find enough material to justify one. Most art created for packaging or even magazines from the '30s,

'40s, and '50s was discarded, not considered worth saving. Plus, the albums Chusid had managed to collect were not in the best shape, reflecting decades of wear.

However, Chusid's girlfriend at the time, Barbara Economon, also became intrigued by Flora's work—and, being a digital-media technician at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, she put that fascination to work. She began making high-res scans of the covers and

cleaned them up, removing coffee stains and pen scribbles and cut corners, creating ideal versions. These formed the basis of *The Mischievous Art of Jim Flora*, published by Fantagraphics Books in 2004, which also collected pieces from Little Man Press and Flora's later commercial work for magazines. And while Chusid thought they could gather enough material for a second book, he wasn't sure if it would be as good as what they had already published. That was until original pieces of Flora art started appearing on eBay in 2005.

"I was shocked because they were great and they were early works," says Chusid. "And I found out that his family had this art and they had put it in storage. It seemed like they really didn't want to think about it or deal with it because they were busy raising families, had day jobs, and it was just something their father had

left to them. I don't think it was anything important to them. It was in storage, one of these climate-controlled, linoleum-tiled, fluorescently lit, steel-gated places—four floors of metal closets with padlocks on them.

"And I got to see the art; I couldn't believe what I was seeing. One of the most amazing days of my life. I spoke with Julia afterward, who is the daughter who manages the artistic estate, and I said 'You're sitting on this historic collection that's never been seen. I think this

collection is priceless, it's historic, there's so much that can be done with it. Please don't sell it piecemeal on eBay."

What Chusid saw that day in Norwalk, Conn. was a treasure trove of original artwork—and not just album covers, but paintings and sketch books as well; hundreds of pieces. The Flora family agreed to let Chusid catalog and record the works, as well as figure out how to merchandise them. Which is how he eventually ended up in Knoxville, nervously watching aged woodblocks being run through a letterpress and hoping they wouldn't splinter.

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COMING SOON: The next limited-edition Flora print will be "Jugglers," from 1957.

The WFMU Record and CD Fair in New York City is a touchstone event for record collectors, where exacting searches are conducted for the fetish objects of their music obsessions: 78s, 45s, LPs, and other rarities. Chusid, who also hosts his own radio show at WFMU, was at the 2006 convention when he ran across a booth labeled Yee-Haw Industries.

"I didn't know what Yee-Haw was, but they had all of these letterpress posters up there," recalls Chusid. "I looked at them and thought, 'Wow, they're really cool. And they're at the WFMU Record Fair, so they've got to be cool.' And I asked them if they'd ever heard of Jim Flora."

Baker was manning the booth at the time while co-owners Bradley and Julie Belcher were away. While

Baker had certainly seen Flora's work before, he wasn't familiar with the artist's name.

"Irwin came up to me and said 'Hey, I represent the Jim Flora estate,' but I just thought he was talking about himself and wanting to make an impression or get a deal on some posters," Baker says. "He showed me his card and said, 'I really want to do something with you.' So I gave the card to Julie when she got back, and she was like, 'Holy shit! Jim Flora!' She knew immediately, and it blew her mind. And as soon as I saw the images, I got up to speed real, real quick."

It's a recurring story: artists collect the albums, impressed by their unreal images, but don't know who the creator was. Record companies didn't often print artist credits on their

albums since they considered cover art to be just part of the packaging.

"I had seen his work on album covers for years and years, and never really knew who he was," says Belcher. "Going to flea markets and thrift stores, collecting old records—you don't know what the record is, you have no idea what the music is, you just want it for the art on the cover. I think that's what a lot of people have done over the years, not knowing who he is."

But all that record-collecting has resulted in a sort of subliminal influence on a new generation of popular artists often described as pop surrealists. Led by the example of California artist Robert Williams, who coined the term "lowbrow" to describe his work and who founded *Juxtapoz* magazine, the art movement dispenses with the strictures of art school for a style that revels in pop-culture imagery like hot rods, tiki totems, and cartoon characters. Leading artists like SHAG, Gary Baseman, and Tim Biskup all praise Flora's influence on their work in Chusid's book while King writes the forward to its 2007 sequel, *The Curiously Sinister Art of Jim Flora*.

"Flora had so many things to respect as an artist," says Joel Trussell, a Knoxville-based animator whose own style bears Flora-esque touches. "He seemed to push his composition, shapes and content right up to—and sometimes slightly beyond—the edge of what was acceptable by society at the time. I especially admire how he took cartoon illustration and used it to appeal to an adult audience by approaching subject matter on a

multi-dimensional plane rather than dealing with one dimension like 'cute' or 'whimsical' or 'funny' alone.

"For instance, many times his characters moved beyond stylization into full-blown abstraction, and the content or situations were often ambiguous. In this way I think his work moved beyond only decoration or illustration in many cases, and instead dealt with more complex issues that adults can relate to or appreciate."

Even a design expert as discerning as Steven Heller—former art director of the *New York Times Magazine* and currently lecturing at the School of Visual Arts in New York—sees a pattern of influence from Flora's curious art.

"He was one of the playful grotesques," Heller says. "His work was a blend of Paul Klee and Boris Artzybasheff, playful, satiric, sardonic, wild. Directly or not, he has a major influence. There definitely are many 40-50-something illustrators who borrowed elements of his work."

"At the time he was producing his best work he was not very significant,



but not insignificant either. His work was rather brutish for its time and therefore something of an anomaly. But he was also quite innovative, using almost childlike imagery for jazz. So in short, he became more significant over time.”

With Yee-Haw on board to reprint some of Flora’s work, Chusid only had to decide on which pieces would make for an appropriate match. The decision was made for him two weeks later when he got a call from one of Flora’s children, Joel.

“He had found a box in his attic that had eight or 10 woodcuts from the ’40s and ’50s,” says Flora, still amazed. “When I saw them, my first

its rich black ink on cream paper, one is struck by the solidity of even its finest lines and the firm impression of its images on the paper, a feeling that might get lost in a regular lithograph.

“It doesn’t matter in the real world—the image is the same and you can cognitively relate to it—but there’s an emotional response people have: ‘This was actually printed from the block that he carved,’” says Baker. “So that’s what’s so magic about it, and that’s why we’re doing it this way. It would’ve been a lot safer to make one proof of ‘Railroad Town’ instead of putting it through the press 50 times.”

The next woodcut to be editioned will be “Jugglers,” another prime example of Flora’s work. Chusid says reaction to “Railroad Town” has been



HOT! “Smoked,” an illustration from *Primer for Prophets*, a CBS TV network booklet from 1954

thought was, ‘Oh man, let’s bring these to Yee-Haw!’ I’d much rather do relief prints from woodcuts than do prints from digital images.”

Flora had learned wood cutting and engraving at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, and Chusid knew of maybe 30 prints of different works from roughly between the late ’30s and 1960. The existing print of “Railroad Town” had been mounted on artist’s board and was peeling away—“[I]t was not in great shape,” says Chusid.

Thus, after an initial trip to make some proofs from three of the blocks, Chusid arrived in Knoxville last May to oversee the first edition of “Railroad Town.” Flora had carved the piece in Mexico during his family’s creative sabbatical in Taxco in 1950.


“They stayed there 15 months, and the way Flora says it, for 15 months all they did was create art,” says Chusid. “And it seems like everything we can identify that’s from ’50 or ’51 is just an absolutely amazing work. It was really Flora at his peak in terms of being a fine artist, a stylist, and doing something so amazing and so striking and so absolutely absorbing.”

Seeing the print in person, with

gratifying, though he wishes he had more resources to market the prints and other Flora merchandise.

“It’s been very, very gratifying but I can’t say it’s been explosive because we are very limited in terms of our reach,” says Chusid. “We have two websites and we’ve got a blog. We don’t advertise, we don’t have unlimited funds at our disposal, we are not a corporation. When we release a new print, we’ll put it on eBay, we’ll put it on the blog and on the website, but that’s it. We know we’ve tapped into something; we just wish we could make the business grow, but that’s difficult.”

Business considerations aside, printing the Jim Flora woodblocks has helped bring new attention to a deserving artist, and has been an ideal project for the Yee-Haw crew, who typically collaborate with *living* artists on prints. But this was special.

“We’ve never really been just a printer for anyone, ever, but to work with the Flora estate and to do this was really special,” says Bradley. “It was like working with one of your all-time heroes, like playing golf with Tiger Woods. It was nice to be chosen to take part in it.” 



STEP BY STEP: Yee-Haw’s Kevin Bradley (top, left) and Bryan Baker set up the “Railroad Town” woodcut for its first proof. Jim Flora biographer Irwin Chusid (middle, left) oversees the process.