

Saving Jim Flora's Private Stash: An Interview with Irwin Chusid

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Irwin Chusid, the host of a free-form music and talk show on WFMU is also the author of *The Mischievous Art of Jim Flora*, the chronicle of a pioneer cover illustrator for jazz albums. Currently, Chusid is on a mission to archive Flora's extensive collection of original artifacts. In this interview, he talks about the need to preserve original design in a safe, accessible venue and the difficulties encountered along the way.

Heller: Why should we be interested in the work of Jim Flora?

Chusid: He was a well-known record album designer and children's book illustrator from the 1940s through the 1980s, but little is known about these lost works—"lost" in the sense that those familiar with his LP art and kids' books have never seen these bizarre creations.

Heller: What are these bizarre rarities?

Chusid: A lot of his work is cartoonish. [3] It's fun to look at, evocative of childhood nostalgia and dereliction of adult responsibility. There are clowns and kitty cats, grinning faces and beaming suns. But despite his later reputation for G-rated kid-lit, Flora, in many of these works, did not restrain himself from expressing darker impulses. There's no shortage of guns [5] and knives and fang-baring snakes. Muggers run amok, demons frolic with rouged harlots and Flora's characters suffer from severe disfigurement. These elements—the banal and the violent—often co-exist within inches of each other on the canvas.

One burlesque-tinged absurdity is entitled "The Rape of the Stationmaster's Daughter." [6] These humorous grotesqueries echoed, and in many cases foreshadowed, the 1950s Harvey Kurtzman-era MAD magazine, as well as the underground comix of the late 1960s. This is not to say that Flora influenced such descendents. His visible commercial art was necessarily milder, less beastly. The more macabre works remained largely out of the public eye.