



Jim Copp and His Things

Songs for children which are the quirky products of a real imagination—the surest antidote to Barney

ONE day I dropped my son at nursery school and went to do some errands in another town. After I had driven about twenty miles, I realized with horror that I had forgotten to eject my son's Raffi cassette from the car's tape player. For nearly thirty minutes I had been listening to "Baby Beluga" without a child present. A half hour of potential adult in-car listening enjoyment had been irretrievably lost! I felt angry and resentful. But I got over it after a while.

by David Owen

The characters shown here were created by Jim Copp and used on the cover of his first album, Jim Copp Tales (1958). Pictured above is Kate Higgins.

More recently I discovered some children's tapes that I actually play on purpose when I am alone in my car. What's more, my children like them as much as I do. The recordings were made from the late fifties to the early seventies by a man named Jim Copp, with the help of a friend of his, Ed Brown. Copp did all his own recording, on three Ampex portable tape recorders. His stories and songs are funny, sophisticated, uncondescending, and dark, and they ought to be rescued before they disappear.

When Copp's first record for children came out, in 1958, he was compared (in a brief notice in *The New Yorker*) to the young Walt Disney, but there is nothing

remotely Disneyish about him. His stories and songs—with titles such as "The Dog That Went to Yale," "The Hen With the Low I.Q.," and "Who Stole My Nose?"—are like those of no other children's performer I can think of, and certainly not like those of the creator of Mickey Mouse. If Copp reminds me of anyone, it is Preston Sturges, who had a similar ability to make intelligent jokes at which one actually laughed, as opposed to merely nodding smugly.

Copp's characters include a feeble-minded old man named Mr. Hippity, who believes that his chicken pull toy is dying; an eight-year-old bride named Jennie Saucepan, who wears her wedding cake on her head to make herself look taller; an unpleasant talking pancake, who persuades an inch-tall girl named Teenytiny to climb onto him while he is frying; a pair of bumpkins named Rik and Gik, who hold a picnic in the middle of a highway and argue about whether to rescue a woman who is sinking in quicksand; and the Glups, a poor Maine farming family whose misadventures fill two albums. The Glups are representative Copp creations. At the beginning of their first album they learn that they have inherited a thousand dollars and that they must travel to San Francisco immediately in order to collect it. They set out in their jalopy, taking with them their precocious two-year-old son, Glue, and their cow, Bossy, who rides in the front seat with Mr. Glup. Somewhere in Indiana the Glups lose Bossy. They push on to Chicago, where Mr. Glup suggests that they visit the stockyards. "What are stockyards, Papa?" asks young Glue. "Stockyards are where the animals go to be slaughtered, so we can eat them," Mrs. Glup replies cheerfully, and Mr. Glup adds, "Maybe it will take our minds off losing Bossy Cow."

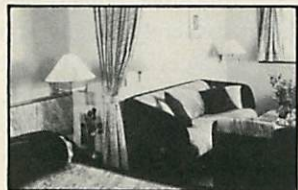
My children, who are eight and five, can now recite long stretches of Copp's recordings from memory, and so can I. Copp's song lyrics and stories in verse are deft and understated. In "Schoolmates" two children (played by Copp and Brown, it turns out) become embroiled in grade-school one-upmanship.

"Bet you don't speak French."

"I can, and two words in I-tal-ee-an."

"I had my tonsils out."

Hop a freighter to South America.



Sorry, this is not the freighter you see in old movies on the Late Show. Instead of the crew's mess, there's a dining salon with vintage wines, salmon en-croute and white glove service. Instead of bunk beds, there are spacious suites and staterooms with private baths and picture windows. Still, the M/V Americana is a freighter, carrying cargo and 88 passengers between the east coast of the United States and some of the most colorful ports in South America.

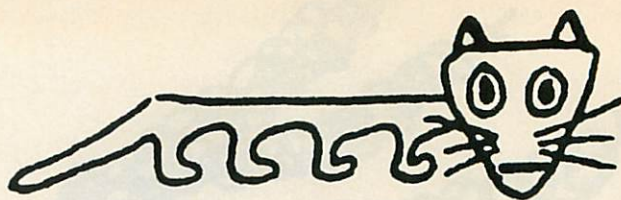
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KITTY CAT

"More lies."
 "And had the flu."
 "I've had it twice. I caught hayfever from a cow."
 "I've had the mumps."
 "I have them now."

In "Cloudy Afternoon," Copp tells of a childhood excursion to the park with a nanny named Zella,

she, waddling; and in the lead,
 me, on my velocipede.
 The clouds were fleecy white that day.
 The month was March—or was it May?
 And was I three? Or was I four?
 Or was I two? Or was I more?
 I pedaled on, and up ahead
 I saw the pond, and Zella said,
 "You must be tired, pedaling that.
 And here's a bench. Let's sit." She sat.

Zella falls asleep and begins to snore. The fleecy clouds turn black. The little boy anxiously lingers a while and then pedals through the park, is told to wipe his nose by some girls skipping rope, passes a fountain, is frightened by a katydid, visits the carousel, falls in the mud, and, in pouring rain, heads out into the busy streets of the city, where, terrified, he is nearly run over by a bus. Suddenly someone grabs him by the arm. It's Zella.

"Oh, saints preserve us, child," she said,
 "Your Zella is a blunderhead.
 Thank heavens—wicked child! That shirt!
 Where have you been, all mud and dirt?"
 She shook me. "Answer!—where'd you go?"
 But all I said was "I don't know."

Unlike many children's performers who allegedly appeal to adults, Copp is never coy or painfully clever; you don't get the feeling that he is winking at you over the heads of your children. When my wife and I went out to dinner with another couple recently, we played "East of Flumdidle" in the car on the way home from

the restaurant and ended up driving around in circles for half an hour so that we could hear the whole thing. At Christmas, I gave a

set of the tapes to my sister's children. They love them, and so does my sister, who listens to them on her way to work. Copp's recordings contain none of the creepy moralizing of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* or—I shudder even to type the name—Barney. His stories and songs don't sound like self-help seminars for tots. Like good stories for grown-ups, Copp's are woven through with conflict and death and folly and friendship and abandonment and loathing and love.

I WOULD know nothing at all about Jim Copp if not for my wife, who loved his records when she was a child. Last year her brother copied several of the old albums onto cassettes and sent them to my children. I despaired of ever finding any others, and assumed that Copp must be dead, until my wife came across a small advertisement for some of his recordings. When she called to order tapes, the phone was answered by a man who turned out to be Copp himself. I called him back later and asked why he hadn't made any records after *The Sea of Glup*, which came out in 1971.

"I made all those recordings in my parents' house, here in Los Angeles," he said. "I used the kitchen for the voices, and another room for the piano, and the bathroom for some of the sound effects, and so forth. When my father died, my sister wanted to sell the house, so we did, and I moved over to Ed Brown's house, and after that I didn't really have a place to record. Ed's house was all carpeted, so the sound wasn't live enough. And my tape recorders were all worn out, and I sold the microphone. I didn't want to make any more records at that point, but Ed did, and he probably would have



talked me into it if he had lived a little longer. He died on February 15, 1978. He had a pancreas thing. He left me his house, and that's where I live now."

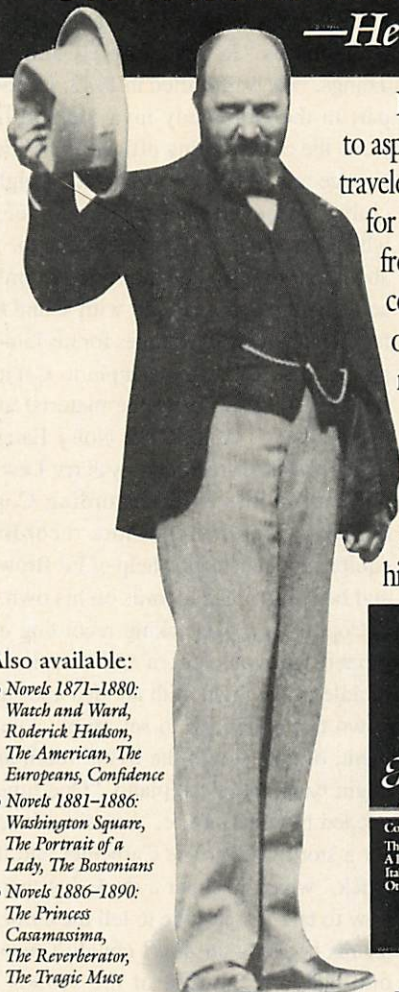
Copp is in his seventies. He was born in Los Angeles and grew up there, in Washington, D.C., and in Montgomery, Alabama. Something of a piano prodigy, he was invited to play a Mozart piano concerto with the Los Angeles Philharmonic when he was fourteen, but he was terrified by the idea and conveniently came down with pneumonia. He went to Stanford, where he edited the student humor magazine, and to Harvard graduate school, where he studied creative writing. In 1939, on a dare, he entered an amateur-talent competition at a hotel in Chicago, where he was visiting friends. He sang funny songs and told stories at the piano, and much to his surprise, he won. The next day he was hired by an orches-

MR. HIPPIITY



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—Henry James



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tra that was performing at the same hotel, and immediately he went off on tour.

Copp briefly was a nightclub sensation in New York, sharing billing with Lena Horne, Art Tatum, Teddy Wilson, Pete Johnson, and Billie Holiday, among others. He wore a tweed suit and was introduced as "James Copp III and His Things." He was drafted in 1942. He took part in the Normandy invasion and became the commanding officer of an intelligence unit. After the war, tired of nightclubs, he moved back to Los Angeles, where he wrote a newspaper column. At about that time he bought a wire recorder and began playing around with sound effects and humorous routines for his family and friends. He sent a sample to Capitol Records. Capitol loved the material and bought a story called "The Noisy Eater," which was later recorded by Jerry Lewis, but had no interest in recording Copp himself. Copp bought more recording equipment, enlisted the help of Ed Brown, and began to make records on his own.

Copp was a painstaking recording engineer. He would often wake up in the middle of the night with an idea and rush down to the kitchen to set up his equipment, or haul it into the living room and begin banging on the piano. "One time I needed to record a fire," he said. "It was for a story called 'The Carpenter and the Duck,' which is about a duck that learns how to talk just in time to tell the carpenter his house is on fire. I couldn't record out of doors, because of the sounds of traffic and so on, so I decided to build a fire in my shower stall. I got paper and kindling and sticks, and set them on fire, and then I climbed in with my microphone. The results weren't very sensational—just some crackling—but the sound you hear is the sound of a real fire."

Copp's records sold well, and he developed a loyal following. The *Saturday Review* said Copp "may have opened up a new medium of expression." *Time* described one of the records as "genuine magic on microgroove." The records were sold exclusively through F.A.O. Schwarz, I. Magnin, Bloomingdale's, and other fancy stores. With the proceeds Copp and Brown bought some property in Hawaii, among other things, and began spending part of each winter in Honolulu.

In 1971 Copp's father died, and Copp lost interest in making records. Seven years later Brown died. Copp had contin-

ued to sell records after his father's death, but when Brown died, he told all the stores that he was out of business. He worked down his inventory by filling a small number of mail orders from his house, but he did no promotion. Then, in 1991, he got a phone call from a young man named Ted Leyhe, who had been a fan as a child. After several months of searching Leyhe had managed to track Copp down through a local record store. Leyhe began promoting and advertising Copp's nine records (which are all now available on cassette); he will soon bring out a CD. Copp's sales picked up considerably, though they are still very small. (The address is Playhouse Records, Box 36061, Los Angeles, California 90036, and the telephone number is 213-935-4654.)

I asked Copp whether he was ever tempted to make another record. "Oh, no," he said. "Every so often I'll have an idea for something that I wish I had done, but it's too late for that now. I wish I hadn't sold my microphone, though. I had a friend, a younger fellow, who has since become very famous as a recording man. He bought all my equipment from me, but the thing he really wanted was the microphone. He later used it to record Frank Sinatra and people like that."

I asked him if he had ever made any records for adults. "Well, quite a bit of the material on the children's records is straight from the nightclub routines," he said. "There was a company back in the forties called Liberty Music Shops, and they made some seventy-eights for adults, but I found out they weren't paying me all the royalties they were supposed to. I told them I wouldn't sue them if they would turn the masters back over to me, and they did. I still have them someplace, although I don't know what kind of shape they're in. But, you know, I was never very interested in records just for adults. Back in those days the Hit Parade was very big, and the popular tunes of the week were very important to people, but those tunes didn't last very long. I had written all these things and I didn't want them to die right away. I knew if I put them out as popular songs, they wouldn't last a minute. But I thought that if I did them for children, they wouldn't be at the whim of people who go for the latest tune. I thought that potentially they might go on and on." 🐱

