

“Fairy Tales for Atom Kiddies”: James Copp, Ed Brown, and the Mid-century Playhouse Records Revolution

In 1958, Jim Copp and Ed Brown released *Jim Copp Tales*, an album of peculiar songs and stories for children and “sophisticated adults.” The duo created everything themselves: the music, art work, writing, voices, taping, and, notably, sound effects that conjured squawking birds, croaking frogs, and snoring children, using a host of musical instruments and equipment: Ampex tape machines, autoharps, ratchets, a celeste. Much like Ross Bagdasarian’s hit novelty songs “Witch Doctor” and “(Alvin and) the Chipmunks” released that same year, Copp pitch-shifted voices, speeding them up into the chipmunk-ish high register, slowing them down to render them bassy and rumbly.

In this paper, I will explore the way that Copp’s and Brown’s work brings together various strands of the nonsense tradition, including looping, squiggly drawings by Brown that resemble Edward Lear’s. I will also consider the way that, like Shel Silverstein, who was a roving cartoonist for *Playboy* for many years, Copp dabbled in the risqué and the off-color. (His nightclub act “James Copp the Third and His Things” was popular in New York before World War II.) In his children’s music, too, depictions of the body sometimes bump up against the bawdy--“Honk my hooter,” one number provocatively commands--but songs move quickly into frolicking rhythms and blipping sounds, with goofy characters that seem pulled straight from an amped-up version of Carl Sandburg’s *Rootabaga Stories*: Kitty Crump, Thomas Tuggs, Janet Hairbrush, and dozens more.

This kid-centric, carnivalesque world of Jim Copp and Ed Brown is filled with gentle, but palpable notes of rebellion, leading directly to musician Barry Louis Polisar (who, decades later, instructed us never to cook our sister in a frying pan) and to Daniel Pinkwater, who introduced many listeners to Copp’s music on NPR. This paper will trace that lineage of rebellion, emphasizing the way that the technical aspects of Copp’s work make it such a singular achievement.