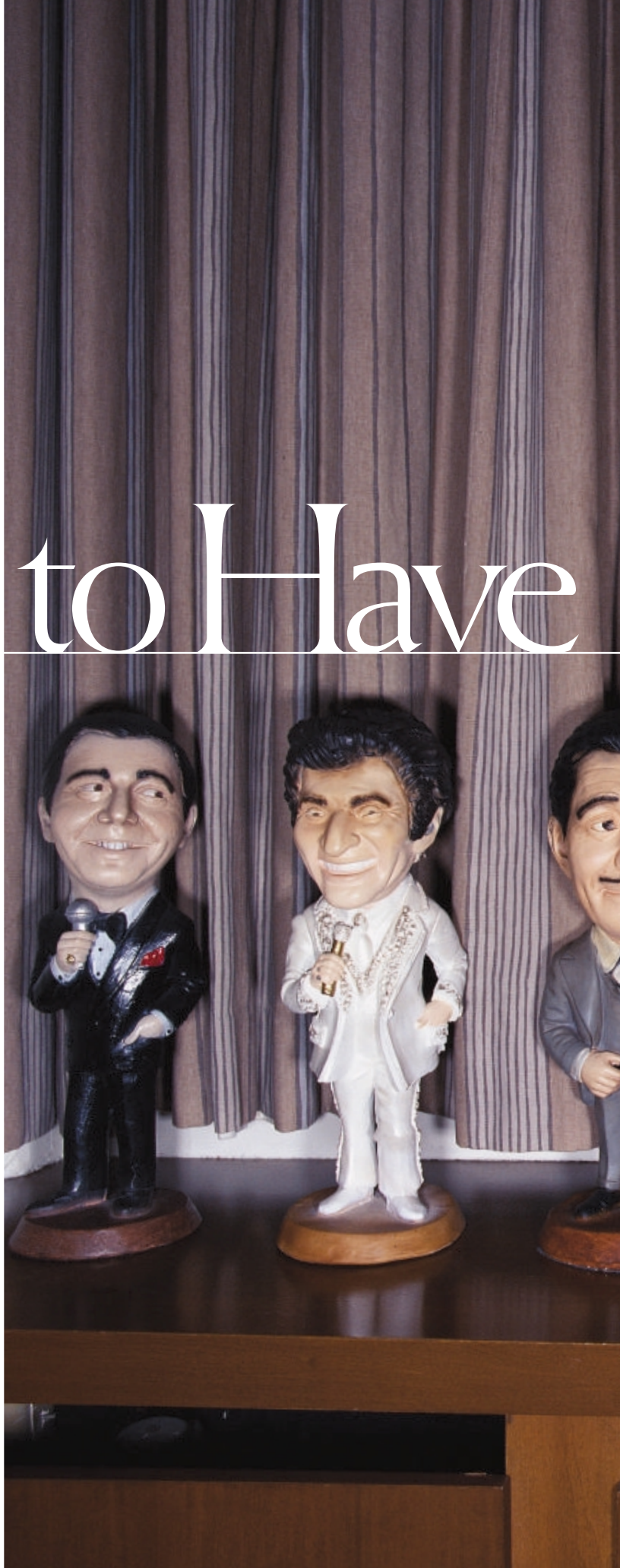


'I Need to Have

WHEN DOES COLLECTING BECOME AN OBSESSION? WHEN YOU'RE A COMPLETIST. AND OWNING 1,000 MESH PURSES OR 2,200 CALCULATORS OR 30,000 PIECES OF *STAR WARS* MEMORABILIA JUST ISN'T QUITE ENOUGH. HERE'S WHAT THESE ULTIMATE SCAVENGERS WILL DO TO MAKE THEIR COLLECTIONS WHOLE.

BY STEPHANIE WILLIAMS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID BARRY

STARSTRUCK: THANKS IN PART TO EBAY, CLAUDE LITTON NOW HAS A COMPLETE COLLECTION OF ESCO PLASTER STATUES.



Them All'



IT STARTED SO SIMPLY, THE OBSESSION THAT WOULD COST CLAUDE LITTON HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS AND EAT UP HOURS AND HOURS FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE.

About 15 years ago Litton, a movie buff, happened to spot an ad for an original poster from the 1947 Charlie Chan film *The Chinese Ring* in a magazine called *Movie Collector's World*. The ad got Litton thinking of all the afternoons he'd spent as a kid watching the black-and-white films featuring the great detective. So he sent away for the \$85 poster.

Once he received it, he started itching for more. And more and more and more.

Litton, you see, had been infected by completism—a condition that set him on a quest to obtain *all* of the posters from the 40 Chan movies he'd loved so much as a child.

For someone who's so competitive that he times himself while solving the *New York Times* crossword, finding these rare mementos became an irresistible puzzle, a giant case to crack. Litton, 67, a real estate executive and attorney in New York City, began devoting considerable chunks of time to traveling to antique shows and auction houses. He placed a permanent ad in *Movie Collector's World* saying he would "pay more than anybody else" for Chans. Every other week he'd pore over the tiny classified ads in the latest issue with a magnifying glass.

At first the search was a snap; Litton picked up a dozen or so posters a year. But once he'd acquired the more common ones, he found himself having to use all his powers of detection—and persuasion—to hunt down the others.

It took him more than a decade, for instance, to obtain the only known surviving poster from the 1931 Chan film *The Black Camel*. Around 1997, when Litton got on the Internet, he started peppering dealers across the country with e-mails. "Do you know who has it?" he'd ask. "Do you know where I can get it? Please call me collect." One day he got the e-mail he'd been waiting for. A dealer knew the whereabouts of *The Black Camel*. The hitch: He'd just sold it to a young businessman. "My heart dropped," Litton says. But he didn't give up.

Litton contacted his fellow Chan fan, invited him to lunch

and showed him around his office full of Chan "three-sheets," each almost 7 feet tall. He tried to show him that he was more than just some random collector. And when the romancing was finished, Litton popped the question: "What would it take to convince you to part with *The Black Camel*?"

No dice. The posters the collector wanted in return would have crippled Litton's collection. That hardly stopped Litton. He e-mailed and called his rival every month for the next two years before finally wearing the guy down with an offer of more than \$10,000, plus a two-year option to buy two of Litton's posters.

But if you think that's the end of the story, you're no completist.

Litton now owns 140 Chan posters, including everything from long, thin "inserts" to gargantuan "six-sheets," from 38 Chan movies. But remember, Litton's quest involves 40 films.

So every day when he gets to work at 5:25 a.m., the first thing he does is search eBay for posters from the two movies missing from his collection. (He refuses to say which ones. "It's too dangerous," he confides. He's convinced that if word gets out, he'll end up having to overpay for the posters he needs.)

Of course, even if he manages to get them, he won't have room to hang them. But no matter. "I am obsessive," Litton says. "I need to have them all."

SURE, THE URGE TO ASSEMBLE A COMPLETE SET OF SOMETHING is as old as the human race. Noah, that collector of all living things (in duplicate), was obsessed with possessing a few millennia ago. But now the all-or-nothing craze has once again reached biblical proportions. Some of the new disciples are on the prowl for every one of the nearly 700 Beanie Babies ever produced. Others must own all of the more than 1,000 editions of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or the 2,500 issues of *TV Guide* ever published. Stamp and coin enthusiasts spend their spare time frowning at the gaps in their collections; china collectors, at the holes in their table settings. Elitist completists try to acquire one of every Patek Philippe wristwatch or Lotus sports car. There are even completists (*several*, believe it or not) who are dead set on obtaining an air-sickness bag from every airline in the world.

What's turned the simple hobby of collecting into a compulsive chase after completism? E-mail, e-commerce and, most of all, eBay. In recent years they've made it much easier to have it all, so to speak. "The Internet has created more obsessively driven collectors, as opposed to people who just collect things," says Jerrold Pollak, Ph.D., a psychologist in Portsmouth, N.H.

"The worldwide community of collectors is so connected now. It's like, 'How did I ever get by without this?'" adds Duncan Jenkins, a 33-year-old chemist and *Star Wars* completist in Liberty, Mo. "Now as soon as anything comes out, it gets posted online, so everybody in the world knows that in Indonesia you

can get this *Star Wars* potato chip bag.”

What, exactly, is the appeal of owning everything *Star Wars*, or, for that matter, everything Springsteen, Superman or Shakespeare? For starters, it's a link to the past. And as more and more baby boomers get nostalgic and take advantage of the 24-hour-a-day *This Is Your Life* episode that is eBay, it's no wonder that the site's "collectibles" category has become the most popular by far (to the tune of 1,420,971 items for sale at a time).

But as most completists admit, at times they can also be a little obsessive-compulsive. "Underneath a lot of this behavior is the desire to reach some magical state of perfection," says Pollak. "To feel, *I've got it all.*" Which is why one sure way to tell a completist from a casual collector is to check for seeming redundancies in their collection. To a completist, the tiniest differences matter.

Consider the case of Mike Bodayle, a 46-year-old insurance company executive in Franklin, Tenn. He owns more than 1,000 CDs recorded by, produced by or somehow associated with Elvis Costello. (He also has a den full of paraphernalia, including an Elvis Costello gold record, an Elvis Costello dart board and an Elvis Costello knife promoting the 1979 album *Armed Forces.*) Look closely and you'll notice that Bodayle owns 46 copies of Costello's 1977 debut, *My Aim Is True*. But look even closer. No two are really the same. As Bodayle explains, they're different pressings from different countries, from Australia to Yugoslavia. You'll also find that there are 10 albums from Great Britain alone. But each one has a different color background on the back sleeve. Bodayle knows he's a victim of a marketing gimmick—he calls the record company "ruthless" for releasing so many versions—but he can't help it. "I want everything," he says.

But Duncan Jenkins wants even more. His goal: get one of every single piece of *Star Wars* merchandise. He has spent the past 23 years accumulating 30,000 items—from *Star Wars* hiking boots to Ewok Underoos to a life-size Han Solo made of carbonite. His house is fully Lucas-fied; he's eaten *Star Wars* bread and brushed his teeth with *Star Wars* toothpaste. Still he estimates that he's 70,000 pieces short of a complete collection.

To Jenkins, the Internet has been a mixed blessing. On a given day he might be faced with 32,877 *Star Wars* products on eBay. But such is the fate of a "supercompletist," a breed that indiscriminately looks to obtain everything on a given topic, not just, say, every poster or action figure. So while other *Star Wars* completists, daunted by the sheer number of products available online, have decided to specialize in one type of merchandise, the force remains strong in Jenkins. Wanting it all, he says, is as natural to him as breathing. "I never put a limitation on what I was interested in collecting, and I won't," he says.

While Jenkins's endeavor might seem entirely futile, he's actually performing a valuable service to society, says Dwight Blocker Bowers, a historian at the National Museum of American History. Without completists, he says, "a lot of things would vanish completely, particularly in pop culture, and all we'd have would be photographs of them." In fact, the Smithsonian often borrows from completists when designing exhibits. And many

completists end up writing guidebooks—on everything from egg beaters to corn shuckers—or finding creative ways to harness their expertise. Peggy Gallagher, of Burr Ridge, Ill., once ran up a \$2,300 monthly phone bill to compile not one, not two, but three complete sets of Beanie Babies. Now she's doing a booming business separating the genuine plush toys from the counterfeit. Every day she "authenticates" some 25 to 50 of them for fellow collectors at \$12 a pop.

AS MUCH AS EBAY HAS FUELED THE COMPLETIST CRAZE, SOME would say it's also irrevocably tainted it. "The Internet has changed everything," says Mike Miller, a 53-year-old salesman in Tuscola, Ill. Miller and his wife, Sherry, have spent much of the past 30 years taking weekend jaunts to antique shows in such places as Chicago, Indianapolis and Des Moines, often waking up at 5 a.m. to get the first crack at any Whiting & Davis mesh purses they don't have in their collection, which is already 1,000 strong. "You find the same bags on eBay today, so it doesn't take the type of commitment of time and energy to come up with a collection like we've got," Miller says. "It takes more *money.*"

Completism has always been a costly endeavor. To stay "complete," you have to buy things you wouldn't otherwise want or need. Plus, the truly rare pieces can kill you financially; all it takes is two collectors who absolutely must have something to drive the price through the roof (which is what makes Claude Litton so paranoid). And now that eBay's in the picture, the chances that completists will compete head-to-head are much greater. The Millers recently bid \$2,600 for a mesh bag; they

THE CASE OF THE MISSING POSTERS: LITTON HAS TURNED UP 140 CHARLIE CHAN POSTERS, BUT NEEDS TWO TO MAKE HIS COLLECTION COMPLETE.





WILD PITCH: EACH DAY PHILIP PAUL E-MAILS BASEBALL FANS SEARCHING FOR TICKET STUBS FROM GAMES WON BY DODGER PITCHER SANDY KOUFAX.

thought it was worth \$1,800, but they needed it for their collection. So did lots of other people. It went for \$3,828.

But while the Internet has certainly taken its toll on the pocketbooks of completists, it's also brought collectors together in new ways. Without the Internet, Philip Paul never would have come up with the idea of collecting ticket stubs from each of the 165 baseball games won by his favorite player, pitcher

Sandy Koufax. "It's something you can find, but it's tough, so it's very rewarding when you uncover one," says Paul, 51, a comptroller in West Chester, Pa.

For the past six years, he's sent 15 to 20 e-mails a day to people selling tickets or programs on eBay, and virtually all of them answer back to cheer him on. "It's remarkable; people really try to help you," he says. About 25 percent of people do have tickets, which Paul checks against his list of dates. "Every once in a while, I get a winner," he says. So far, Paul has found 107 out of the 165, for which he's paid an average of \$25 apiece.

Paul's interest in these ragged old pieces of paper just goes to show what Pam Danziger, president of Unity Marketing, a research firm specializing in consumer spending, and author of *Why People Buy Things They Don't Need*, suggests: "We tend to think about people buying products, and the noun—the item—is what we focus on. In reality, people are buying the verb. What's driving a completist is the experience."

Carolynn Johnson, for instance, says many of her best friends are fellow completists she met online. The 38-year-old mother from North Tazewell, Va., believes she's found the second coming of the Beanie Babies in the form of 4-inch cold-cast porcelain shoes, sculpted by an artist known only as Raine and retailing as part of the Just the Right Shoe line for about \$16 each. Johnson owns 222 shoes—the complete line. For the past two years, she has served as club manager of the JTRS Collectors Club (JCC), a devoted group of 2,000. Members of the JCC have been known to fly all over the country and stay in each others' homes in order to hunt down the more difficult-to-find shoes. The group also exchanges Christmas presents and even managed to throw an "online baby shower" for Johnson.

Of course, these same friends are the ones who bid against one another on eBay—sending the price of the "Victoria," a baby-blue slipper decorated with pearls, up to \$2,000—and who caused the server to crash when they all scrambled to get one of the 5,000 high-heeled "Red Hot and Black" shoes offered by the GoCollect Web site in mid-January. "I sat at my computer for upwards of five hours, hardly moving, until I knew I got one," says Johnson. "It makes your heart race." But what's a little competition among friends?

THE COMPLETE DREAM

What does it take to be a completist? Patience and money. Here's what these complete collections may run you.

Mint-condition first pressings of all the **Beatles** 25 original U.S. albums: \$5,000



Lincoln penny set, 1909 through 2002 (in good condition): \$1,165–\$1,375

Authentic autographs from each of the 43 **U.S. presidents**: \$50,000–\$70,000

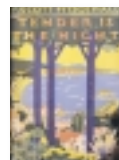
Château Mouton Rothschild wine, from 1945–1998: \$14,000–\$18,000



Authenticated collection of all 675 **Beanie Babies**: \$113,000

Mint-condition **X-Men** comic books from 1963 to present: \$30,000

First editions (with dust jackets) of **F. Scott Fitzgerald's** 10 books (including *The Great Gatsby*) in very good condition: \$185,000



All 450 **Pez dispensers**: \$100,000

Every known **Coca-Cola serving tray** made from 1897–1970: \$350,000

Life magazines, weekly from 1936 through 1972 (1,864 issues): \$10,000–\$12,500

—Sean Burke and Noah Rothbaum

SOURCES: GOLDMINE STANDARD CATALOG OF AMERICAN RECORDS, 1950–1975; COIN DEALER NEWSLETTER; ODYSSEY; CHRISTIE'S; BECKYANDBECKY.COM; NEW DIMENSION COMICS; BAUMAN RARE BOOKS; SHAWN PETERSON, AUTHOR, COLLECTORS GUIDE TO PEZ; PETRETTI COCA-COLA COLLECTIBLES PRICE GUIDE; PAST PAPER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RANDY ALLBRITTON/GETTY (PENNY); BOOK COURTESY BAUMAN RARE BOOKS; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE (ALBUM); GEOFF SPEAR (PEZ)

And there was no question that Johnson had to have the shoe. "I have to remain complete," she says brightly.

BUT HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN YOUR COLLECTION IS COMPLETE?

You'd think it would be easy, but completion is in the eye of the completist. Most people in the JCC, for instance, would think it enough to have one of each of the shoes. That's not good enough for Johnson. To her, "complete" means having the entire lines of jewelry and miniature chairs also created by Raine, as well as any Raine-related paperwork, such as posters and postcards.

While this urge to keep expanding a collection may stem, in part, from a desire for financial security—to ensure that your portfolio, so to speak, is as diversified as possible—a completist who needs to sell will likely be disappointed. Unloading a ready-made collection is hard enough; people want to experience the thrill of the chase for themselves. And by nature, completists acquire stuff that only other completists want. To recoup their investment requires finding a fellow collector who's desperate for the rarest pieces—and will buy a collection lock, stock and barrel to get them.

But who wants to sell? Or, for that matter, to complete? "Collectors don't really want to find that last item," says Danziger. "It's the eternal search for the holy grail. What would happen if you found the grail?"

It's a question that hangs heavy in the mind of one Guy Ball, a 47-year-old technical writer from Tustin, Calif., who fears he might already possess damn near every pocket calculator manufactured in the 1970s. (He has more than 2,200.) He fell in love with the things 15 years ago at a thrift store. "I saw this white Panasonic that had these blue numbers that glowed at you. I thought, *That's kind of neat*," he says. Before he knew it, he'd found 30, then 40, then a couple hundred at swap meets and garage sales. Through eBay he expanded his collection exponentially; every day he'd weed through 2,000 entries to find new models. It's a tough job—but Ball feels he just has to do it. He says that if he ever knew he indeed had everything, it would be "the worst day of my life."

Never fear, Guy: True completists don't ever let their collections die; they simply upgrade. Although he's far from the finish line, ticket-stub collector Paul is already looking for stubs in better condition. He also hopes to replace the general-admission stubs in his collection with more colorful box-seat tickets.

Nothing is ever perfect, of course, but completists will keep giving it their best shot.

Or they'll go after the next big adventure—as Claude Litton did. While he waits for his chance to score the elusive Charlie Chan posters, Litton has been trying to complete his 72-piece

collection of big-headed Esco plaster statues—those statues of movie stars, athletes and politicians you used to see at luncheonettes and tobacco stores. For an entire year, he's been looking for the last one, a bust of Lucille Ball.

One recent night Litton gets home from work and logs on to eBay. He searches for "Esco." Then "statue." Then "plaster statue." Then "chalkware." (He knows better than to search for "Lucille Ball," which would bring up thousands of items.) Then, finally, "bust." There it is—a "bust made of plaster" of "Lucy Ricardo."

"Oh my god!" Litton mutters. "I'm buying it!"



SHOE FETISH CAROYLN JOHNSON OWNS ALL 222 PORCELAIN SHOES RAINE HAS SCULPTED.

Long ago he mastered the art of the online auction. Rather than jumping in early and allowing rivals to "bid him up" bit by bit, he counts upon his ability to outsmart them by jumping in with a higher offer during the last 10 seconds. ("I have the timing down to a science," Litton says.) This time his bidding prowess pays off. When he sees that he's won the Lucy bust, Litton jumps up and yells to his wife, Rosalee, "I got it!" The statue was a steal at \$350, he says, because the seller listed it so imprecisely that neither Esco completists nor Lucy completists could find it. "She was stupid," Litton says.

It's a great moment, but hardly reason to stop and celebrate. Tomorrow morning Litton will be at his desk again at 5:25 a.m., looking for posters.

So if you're sitting on a rare Chan, for God's sake, give the man a break. He'll be waiting at CLShowroom@aol.com. 