

# COLLECTOR'S CORNER

## SPIN CYCLE

# THE BEAR NECESSITIES



**THREE BOXES. THIRTY DISCS.** And close to 1,000 rare singles drawn from the darkest archives of late '50s/early '60s Michigan, Florida and Texas. That's what awaits anybody investing in three new box sets from **Be! Sharp**, a German label which isn't simply distributed by the legendary **Bear Family** (and handled in this country by **MVD**), it also seems set on emulating its parent. Box sets this vast are scarcely the preserve of any other label.

The Bear Family story was told just recently on the Spin Cycle blog – but, for the benefit of those who prefer their reading in paper format, a brief recap. Launched in 1975 by German collector Richard Weize, Bear Family is best known in the U.S. for a succession of vast, career-devouring box sets that, quite frankly, make most other anthologies look like a couple of 45s and a newspaper clipping. Vintage rock 'n' roll, country, folk, bluegrass, blues, rockabilly; basically, if there's a "classic" genre to be explored, Bear Family has dipped at least one paw into the waters, and emerged, in many cases, with everything you ever wanted to hear. As it says on the label's website, "Bear Family probably did not invent the boxed CD compilation, but set defining standards worldwide."

Bear Family do not have exclusive rights to much of this material – you can probably find a lot of it elsewhere, on budget CDs and cheapo compilations, or even on sundry better-heeled compilations. But if you want more than the music the finest remastering, the best-researched liners, the most complete discographies and sessionographies, too; LP-sized boxes crammed with music and reading; terrific artwork and so on and so forth, you really shouldn't cut corners.

Bear Family boxes are not inexpensive. Even on the discount market, it's a sad fact that imported German boxes that weigh anything up to eight pounds a time are not going to turn up at pocket-money prices. But check out what you'll be getting.

You want to hear four CDs worth of songs celebrating, denigrating or poking fun at the atom bomb? Check out "Atomic Platters," six discs (the box includes a DVD and a spoken word set) of thermonuclear thrills. You need 195 different versions of "Lilli Marleen"? Ten discs of 1930s calypso, or 26 years worth of the country music chart hits?

You want the complete works of Gene Vincent? Roy Acuff? The Sons of Pioneers? Bill Haley? Remastered to perfection and boxed up with

a hardbound book that puts your coffee table's usual inhabitants to shame? Bear Family has been described elsewhere as the musical equivalent of the DVD world's Criterion Collection, but the analogy is flawed. You'd need a couple of shelves to hold Criterion's entire collection. You'd need a couple of houses to hold every Bear Family release, and a couple of lifetimes in which to listen to them all.

The Be! Sharp catalog is less far-reaching, but has made its mark regardless, largely via a collection of 20 LPs (or 10 CDs) worth of Nasty Rockabilly, disc after disc of skull-crunching obscurities, and each one resplendent in jackets that equally resourcefully mine the archive of vintage porn for their uncensored cover pics. Not for the faint-hearted! There's a collection of German garage punk, "Lost Illusions"; a disc full of early '60s guitar rockers, "Rockers"; and a slew of obscure jazz releases on the Be! Jazz sister label.

But there's nothing like this!

Three boxes, three states, and though the official word is that it's unlikely we'll be getting 47 more, still the prospect of building a collection of vintage rockabilly, rockers and wild instrumentals

by geographical location is not one to sneeze at. Particularly when, as the accompanying hardbound books make clear, attempting to duplicate the three collections on original indy-label vinyl would probably take the rest of your life and all of your savings, too.

All three boxes, and books, adopt the same format, 12-inch squares and vividly colorful. The focus, as the opening blurb explains, is on "the most essential recordings from all the tiny, obscure and oddball" labels in each state ... or at least, as many as will fit. More than 50 are profiled in the Michigan box, all but forgotten concerns like Fortune Records, Kountry Karavan, Fascination and Oasis and, through their auspices, music from Roy Rector, Jimmy Lee, The Lyonaires, The Mysterions, The Scavengers, The Tempos and Norm Allen and the Renegates.

It's underground rock 'n' countrybillybop heaven, and that's just the Michigan box. Add Texas and Florida (shown, above left), which mine their themes with equal attention to obscure detail, and you're looking at 36 hours locked almost exclusively into the three- or four-year span that marked the end of the '50s and dawn of the '60s - post-the first great rock 'n' roll boom, pre-British Invasion. From the Florida box, John Amory's version of Diddley's "Bad" is phenomenal; from Texas, Joyce Lee tears up Hank Williams' "Tore Up."

But you can't single out singles as being representative highlights. Individually and collectively, these boxes are nothing less than pure, unadulterated, good time party music, the sound of a 1,000 sock-hop garage dance halls, cheap beer, dark corners, bright beaches and not an ounce of parental supervision. It's music for getting into trouble to, even if you will be spending a lot of your time reading through the accompanying books, where every label is profiled, and every performer, too.

Photographs, ephemera and labels litter the pages, sidebars serve up basic collector info catalog and matrix numbers, release dates and market values (but not, strangely, B-sides), all of which reminds us that while you might be able to find some of these tracks racked up on cheaper collections, you'll never find the same amount of detail.

So, where next? California, Massachusetts, New York... there's a lot of states out there, and a lot of local scenes, too. Colorado, Georgia,