

BEAR FAMILY RECORDS CELEBRATES 40 YEARS

IT'S BEEN SAID that many artists would rather have a Bear Family box set than a Grammy. That's because for 40 years, the Bear Family catalog, now with 3,500 CDs, 500 LPs, 250 box sets and 50 DVDs in every imaginable genre, makes each release an event. It is the worldwide King Company of re-releases which, in some cases, date back to 1889. There's no skimping on artwork, booklets or hard covers inside each box. The attention to detail is the key. The company spares no expense to make it exactly right. "If you're going to do it," do it right," says the big bear himself, Richard Weize, who started the German company in 1975 on a prayer and a promise.

Every song on "40 Years: Bear Family Records" has been recorded anew for this project. "None of them have ever been available elsewhere — and never will be," promises Weize. The 72 songs, each with a bear theme, are on three CDs. A 30-minute Bear Family history on the first 35 years and 45-minutes of visual music are on the DVD. A lavish 308-page hardcover coffee-table book completes the package. Disc 3 is where most of the rocking occurs, and "Don't Be Afraid of The Bear" by Banana Seats is right up there with "Don't Fear The Reaper" in my book.

"These are some very high-power guys who drag 50,000 people into a German stadium. For America, the most important one is Ry Cooder, who wrote 'When I die, I want to be on Bear Family!'"

This reporter owns Bear Family boxes on Jerry Lee Lewis, Everly Brothers and Dean Martin. They are three of my most prized possessions. What other company would come out with a 10-CD "Jewish Music Of The Nazi Regime"? Weize says, "that's really a milestone of Jewish music. The records are very rare. A 300-page book came with it. When we unveiled it, we did it at Berlin's biggest temple."

In fact, Bear Family just one-upped my precious Killer box by unleashing an 18-CD "The Complete Jerry Lee Lewis On Sun" box earlier this year.

Back in '75, though, Weize was a total music nerd and collector of American country music, which was hard to find. "I had to depend on America's Armed Forces Radio Network to even hear country music at all at the time," Weize explains. "I also had a lot of friends who I exchanged tapes and records with. I had to go out of my way, and when one has to do that as the only way to find something, you treasure it more than if it comes to you. Unlike today when everything seems to be right on the back of your hand."

His personal stash of more than 100,000 singles, 30,000 LPs and 20,000 78s strong guides his principle — and mission statement — of if he likes it, so will his customers. "In the beginning, I thought to myself, 'this has to work! Now, if people don't like it, I say f*ck it. I can't help that. I can't conceive something that's only good enough for the customer. It has to be good enough for me. Then, if the customer likes it, that's good too. James Mangold, the director of "Walk The Line" once said, "I would not have made this movie if I had not come across the Johnny Cash box set released by Bear Family Records.'"

Weize cites his boxes on country singers Lefty Frizzell, Jim Reeves and Don Gibson as some of his best work. "There's so much good music," he enthuses. "We have a Vietnam War box. We have a box on the pride of the American public: the atom bomb. Every single box paid for

itself. Sometimes it took longer, that's all. You never know. Right now I'm working, for one of my last projects, on a 20-CD boxed set on the Louisiana Hayride (the long-running radio show where Elvis got his start).

"When country started commercially in the 1920s with The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers," he continues, "on through the 1950s and 1960s when you found a lot of younger artists recording Carter and Rodgers songs. Out of that came Lefty who sang Hank Williams songs, then 1970s artists who sang Lefty songs, so on and so forth until the 1980s when country started to really change to something that wasn't what I would even call country music. I mean, of course it's country, just not my kind of country. That persists until today. The people in the 1980s listened to the Stones and The Beatles. Certainly not Jimmie Rodgers. So that original spark of country faded more and more until today when "country" is just another (sub-genre) of pop music. It is not, as far as I am concerned, real country music."

"The first country music I ever heard was "Don't Take Your Guns To Town" by Johnny Cash in 1958. Before that, all I listened to was American rock 'n' roll and German music. So I started collecting country and by the late-1960s, I had left Germany for England and sold the collection. In 1970, I started again. Five years later, in 1975 back in Germany, with little money and no plans but with a wife and two children, I knew I desperately needed to make some money so thought a reissue label would work."

Today he's more of a figurehead and creative consultant. "I turned over the company to our board of directors recently because the music business today is going down the drain. There's not much profit in

it anymore. It's just not the way I like to issue records. I do want to finish work on a few more box sets which I've started. After that, I will be taking a rest. I want to just sit all day on my easy chair, feet on the table, listening to records, watching DVDs and reading books."

Highlights of the new box include "Did You Ever See A Bear Do The Boogie" by Swamp Dogg with Canned Heat (written ostensibly after they saw Weize try to dance); "Bear Cat" by Lesley Schatz & Mike Dunbar; "Bareback Ridin' Cowboy" by underground rockabilly legend Ray Campi; "Loaded For Bear" by Narvel Felts; "Frankie's Bear Song" by Frankie Miller; and a hot little instrumental called "Autumn Bears" by Ian Whitcomb. Then there's Båddat För Trubbel, Bob Woodruff, Johnny Trouble, Richard Bennett, Roland Heinrich, Jerry K. Green, Johnny Tillotson, Chip Taylor, Ry Cooder, Tom House, Mark Brine, The Stardust Ramblers, Chuck Mead, Bror Gunnar Jansson and Lynette & The LongShots, who all have stand-out tracks.

"Bärenjagd" by Bela B & Peta Devlin featuring Smokestack Lightnin' beats all though. It's a simple country ditty broken in half by guttural German to create an effect not unlike that of '50s beat poetry heard through a smog of cigarette smoke and sax. In other words, different from anything you've ever heard. Wait, no, my favorite is a roots-reverent interpretation of Elvis Presley's "Teddy Bear" (of course) by Paul Würges. That's just it, discovery is half the fun. Hearing each artist creatively use the bear theme is rather humorous, too. You can laugh while you dance.

Here's to another 40 years ...

— Mike Greenblatt

