

# DUKE OF EARL IS A KID AT HEART WITH A BENT FOR THE BIZARRE

By **Jim Spencer, Chicago Tribune**

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**A**s Barry Gottlieb moved into his new office a few months ago, he read the name of the previous tenant on the door: "Global Tire Company."

"Global," Gottlieb thought. "I like that word. Sounds international. I'll keep it."

So now, the inscription on the smoked-glass pane in the entryway reads:

Global

Mad Dog Productions, Inc.

Brat Records

Brat Music

353-ROCK

Suzy Saxon and the Anglos

259 Music

Liberator Music

Rock `n` Roll Detectives

Earl the Dead Cat

... and Mad Dog as the Beaver

If the strange verbiage isn't a tipoff, once inside Gottlieb's door, you immediately see an inner sanctum of a purebred iconoclast, an off-the-wall entrepreneur who makes his living peddling irreverence, most of it through the mail.

To the right are boxes filled with Gottlieb's "Silent Vigil" foam rubber wind chimes, to the left, a cabinet containing, among other things, sheets of his "Preptile" temporary skin tatoos, featuring stick-on pictures of live

and dead alligators. Earl the Dead Cat, the flattened, gray-coated stuffed toy that is Gottlieb`s latest creation, is everywhere, his eyes X`d over and his tiny red tongue stuck out to one side.

Further on, a bulletin board boasts bizarre bumper stickers, rock band publicity photos, whacko postcards and clippings of crazed newspaper stories. One of them, titled "Beaver guilty in death of trooper," bears Gottlieb`s handwritten notation, "Ward, please talk to the Beaver. June."

Beside the bulletin board is a large calendar marked with performance dates for the band Gottlieb manages, "Suzy Saxon and the Anglos." One of his four tiny record companies produced their latest album, "Guilt by Association," featuring the song "Get Out of My Stomach."

The title is no weirder than the rest of the office decor, which includes plastic pink flamingos, rubber Gumby and Pokey and a ceramic frog presiding over a personal computer, reel-to-reel tape recorder and a desk cluttered with mail orders for stuffed, dead cats.

"If you haven`t noticed, I like toys," Gottlieb says, zapping a visitor with a plastic gun that fires a sponge ball on a string.

Though he is 35 with a beard and handlebar mustache waxed to a pair of sharp points, he wears a sweatshirt that announces, "I`m a Toys `R Us Kid." And sure enough, his studio, an honest-to-God walk-in vault with a combination lock on its massive door, is equipped with squirt guns and a box of Crayolas. "I sign all correspondence `Mad Dog,` left-handed in crayon," he explains, "except legal documents."

Gottlieb knows plenty about letters of the law. He has been sued twice by companies aggrieved by his ability to make money lampooning their products. The makers of Izod Alligator sportswear filed the first legal challenge in 1982, after Gottlieb began raking in cash with his Croc-o-Shirt, which featured a dead crocodile on the breast. The folks from Ralph Lauren`s Polo collection followed suit in 1983, after Gottlieb introduced his Horse Shirt, embroidered with an image of a horse at full gallop dragging a polo player behind.

Both suits were dropped when Gottlieb agreed to quit selling his products. Before that happened, he sold 90,000 Croc-o-Shirts at \$14.45 a pop and 20,000 Horse Shirts for the same price.

Now, Gottlieb has landed on his feet with Earl. After slaving in the vault through several prototypes ("The first Earls looked more like possums," he confesses), he hit on the right shape with the right amount of stuffing.

Since he introduced the flattened feline last October, Gottlieb has sold 6,100 Earls at \$15.95, plus \$1 for postage and handling, and has ordered 6,000 more from a toy factory in Brooklyn. He appears once again to have hit the motherlode. Humane societies and SPCA`s across the country have lambasted Earl as tasteless, and a thick sheaf of hate mail from cat lovers is wedged in a clipboard that hangs on the wall of Gottlieb`s office. But with a new round of ads beginning to run on the East Coast, the Southwest and the Midwest

(including Chicago), orders for Earl are arriving at a rate of about 50 a day. Equally important, try as he might, Gottlieb can`t think of a legal challenge that will curb his latest mail-order juggernaut.

"The only thing I can come up with is a class-action suit by Garfield, Heathcliff, Hello Kitty and maybe Fritz the Cat," he says. "Somehow, I don't expect that."

As has been the case with most of his products, the idea for Earl grew out of a casual conversation. "Actually, Earl wasn't my idea," Gottlieb says. "I was sitting in a bar talking to somebody I had just met. We were talking about the stuff I do, and he said that something he had always wanted to do was a stuffed animal of a dead cat."

Like most people, this fellow had no intention of acting on his whim. That's what separates Gottlieb from the rank and file: Most folks dream up hare-brained schemes. Gottlieb dreams them up and acts them out.

Croc-o-Shirt grew from the preppie craze. Richmond, where Gottlieb migrated in 1971 after quitting college and working briefly as a technician in a New York recording studio, was "the heart of prepdom."

"First, there were Izod shirts," he says. "Then you were seeing the alligator on socks and pants and belts, just everywhere. One day I was sitting in a bar with my girlfriend, and I said, 'You know what I'd like, a shirt with a dead alligator on it.'"

What he settled on was a goofy looking upside down crocodile with its eyes closed. The response to his advertisements in Rolling Stone and National Lampoon magazines overwhelmed him. He quit his \$30,000-a-year job as financial manager of a popular Richmond fern bar. Eventually, he employed two full time and five part time workers to help him mail out the shirts. Then the lawsuit hit.

"We settled out of court after a year of haggling," he says. "They agreed to drop the suit, and I agreed to stop selling the shirts after a certain date."

While sales were still raging, Gottlieb introduced the Preptile skin transfers, hoping to seize on Croc-o-Shirt fever.

"They bombed," he says. "I just sold 20,000 sheets of them for \$50 salvage. It was dumb (to introduce them), but it's easy to get cocky when things are going well. You think, 'Hey, that'll work.'"

That's what he thought about the Horse Shirt, which was introduced at the end of 1982, after Polo supplanted Izod as the trademark of choice. "It did okay, not great. I wasn't losing money, but I had hoped for another Croc-o-Shirt."

When he didn't find it, he cut bait, wrapping up the Polo lawsuit quickly. In the meantime, however, he hit upon the idea for foam rubber wind chimes. It occurred naturally enough. During amateur hour on a local radio station, Gottlieb began a lampoon commercial for the recorded history of Gregorian chants.

"And now, all your favorite Gregorian chants on one album," he crooned into the mike as deep voices sang in the background. "But that's not all. Order now and receive, absolutely free, a bowling ball cleaner, the pharmaceutical of your choice, a set of foam rubber wind chimes, stainless steel steak knives ..."

"Afterwards, I said to myself, `Foam rubber wind chimes? Where did that come from? You know, you get on a roll and these things just come out."

Soon Gottlieb was hacking away with a knife on a block of foam rubber.

He never expected much, just a diversion until the next big idea hit. And that, of course, was Earl the Dead Cat.

"In putting Earl out there was a fine line between good and bad taste," Gottlieb says. "I didn't want him to be too realistic, because the idea was to be humorous and satirical. At one point I considered having tire tracks across his back, a toe tag, a zippered body bag and a coffin-shaped box. But I didn't do that because I didn't want him to be morbid."

He did, however, stick with a death certificate for each stuffed toy and an ad with an extrabold headline reading, "Goodbye Kitty." That was provocative enough to arouse hundreds of letters to go along with the thousands of orders. A psychologist in Toledo called Earl "inappropriate and damaging," while a mother in Pamona, Calif., bought Earl for her son and wrote to say "everyone just loves him."

Gottlieb catalogs his mail on clipboards under the labels "Good,"

"Bad" and "Ugly." Among the more virulent correspondents was a man in San Diego who suggested the introduction of "The Gottlieb Necktie" and drew a picture of a noose. An animal lover in Houston said Gottlieb should be shot. Someone else addressed their letter to "Sickly Sadistic Subhuman."

"I never said anything about hurting anyone," Gottlieb says. "The fact is, Earl was not and is not designed for kids primarily. It's an adult toy, as far as I'm concerned. Kids don't get it. People write in and say how horrible this thing is for kids. Kids don't know he's a dead cat unless you tell them."

So don't expect him to cease and desist.

But even if the humane societies and SPCA's succeed in getting his ads banned and his product removed from the market, there's more, much more, to come. Gottlieb slips a floppy disc into his computer and calls up a long list of ideas.

"Here's something I've always wanted to do," he says, gazing at the screen. "A line of underwear called either Underudes or Funderalls, imprinted with funny sayings. `Sanitized for your convenience` is the one I like best." He scrolls through the list, laughing. How do 3-D T-shirts grab you? What about a skull and crossbones sticker to be plastered over those obnoxious hearts on "I love" bumper stickers?

"Diversification is the future," Gottlieb proclaims, "though I'm not sure what the past was."

No matter. With his oddball notions and marketing genius Gottlieb will certainly earn his keep and live by the slogan emblazoned on his stationery.

"Mad Dog Productions, Inc.," it says, "Leave `em talking."

