Written by Rod Labbe
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“Hey, man, is Maine anywhere near Rhode Island?”

“Yeah, if you’re looking at a map of the United States. Why?”

“My band just finished up a tour, and we played Rhode Island

“Oh, really. What’s the name of your band?

“Metallica.”

So went the initial phone conversation between yours truly and Kirk Hammett, lead guitarist for Rock’s premiere metal group, Metallica, during the sweltering summer of 1987. I was running a comic book shop in Waterville, Maine, and Kirk had called to discuss my Comic Buyer’s Guide (a weekly newspaper circulated to comic shops and subscribers everywhere) advertisement.

“Nice vintage Aurora models you’re selling,” he commented. “Built-ups and never-removed-from-the-box. Hmmm.”

“Yes, indeedy,” I replied. “They are rather eclectic. Interested?”

Kirk was, and we did some “horror business” that summery day. Now, 25 years later, he and I are discussing TOO MUCH HORROR BUSINESS, his first deluxe “coffee table” book (224 profusely illustrated pages, co-written with Steffan Chirazi) devoted to what can only be described as an astonishing collection of horror, sci-fi and fantasy memorabilia.

There’s everything here, from movie posters, toys, and Aurora model kits, to film costumes, masks, comic books, original art and beyond. Heck, it’s a virtual cornucopia, all with a Baby Boomer bent, and all presented in blazing color. Are you drooling yet?

Our second chat flowed like the pleasant give and take between two old friends. Actually, I hesitate to use the word “old,” since Kirk has kept the kid within hale and hearty (my own inner juvenile monster is permanently frozen at age 12). Together, we ran down the paths of childhood, oohing and ahhing over toys, mementos, and cultural touchstones we eagerly spotted along the way. Too Much Horror Business? No way, it's never enough!

FANGORIA: When last we spoke, it was 1987 and you were on a quest for collectibles. Do you remember when we negotiated?

KIRK HAMMETT: Refresh my memory, Rod. This sounds vaguely familiar.

FANG: You’d answered my Comic Buyer’s Guide ad for model kits. James had broken his arm skateboarding…

HAMMETT: I do remember! That was the second time James broke his arm. We did a trade, right? For comics?

FANG: Right! Some early horrors; one with a famous Steve Ditko electric chair cover.

HAMMETT: STRANGE SUSPENSE STORIES #19, from 1954. Unforgettable cover. Ditko's the man.

FANG: And here we are, decades later, conducting more business…or should I say, talking about Too Much Horror Business!

HAMMETT: It's a strange world, isn't it? I'm always fascinated by how things turn out. Yep, here we are again!

FANG: What gave you the book idea?

HAMMETT: Well, one day I was walking through my immense collection, and it is rather immense [*laughs*], and suddenly, I realized: I'm on the brink of accomplishing my collecting goals! This might be a good opportunity to share what I've amassed with the world. Hence, TOO MUCH HORROR BUSINESS!

FANG: How long have you been navigating your epic collecting sojourn?

HAMMETT: 30 years or so, pretty much my entire adult life.

FANG: TMHB not only showcases a pop culture collection anyone would give their fangs for, but each glorious page allows us an intimate peek at the man himself.

HAMMETT: Cool, you got that! One of my intentions in putting a book together was to reveal the side of me most people are unaware of: my big monster kid side. I'd been threatening to do this for ten years, and no one believed me. Now, I can prove the naysayers wrong!

FANG: Considering the sheer enormity of it all, is one volume enough?

HAMMETT: I wouldn't mind doing a sequel, but that depends on how the first volume's received.

FANG: Why the interest in Baby Boomer collectibles?

HAMMETT: I'm 50 and right on the fringes of the baby boom. At 5, I became aware of my surroundings and the cultural explosion around me.

FANG: 1967/68. Peak of the 60s monster craze!

HAMMETT: Ah, the late 60s and early 70s. We had all these TV horror hosts and programs, like CREATURE FEATURE and SHOCK THEATER, and the whole Aurora monster model craze was in full swing. So many wonders to explore!

FANG: Were you into glow in the dark?

HAMMETT: Loved it; such a blast for me, especially the monster scenes.

FANG: What's the allure of Aurora, as opposed to other model manufacturers?

HAMMETT: Outside of nostalgia appeal, they had neat sculpting. Frankenstein looked like Karloff, Dracula looked like Bela, their bases were simple yet evocative, the instructions easy to follow, and the scales good. I ended up with multiple copies. As a kid, I'd build them and then concoct inventive ways of destroying my handiwork--firecrackers, fire, dropping them from the roof to the ground, you name it.

FANG: All of us were destructive little bastards!

HAMMETT: What we built, we felt compelled to destroy. Kinda like Dr. Frankenstein.

FANG: And there was plenty to fuel our twisted imaginations. PLANET OF THE APES, DARK SHADOWS, Vincent Price, Ray Harryhausen…

HAMMETT: The PLANET OF THE APES movies and Harryhausen? Fantastic! I was lucky to catch the tail end of everything. It slacked off in the late 70s. Baby boomers were busy shaking their booties at discos and putting quarters into video game machines. I'd also moved on. I started playing guitar at 15, and music was my primary focus. But once I had some disposable income, I jumped right back into the fray!

FANG: Must've been a heady time for you, affording to buy what you could only dream about before.

HAMMETT: Totally. I can still remember looking at the ads in Famous Monsters for Don Post monster masks. When you're six and seeing those masks, it's an out-of-body experience. Each one cost $36.95, but it might have well been 500 bucks!

FANG: What other baubles dazzled your youthful eye?

HAMMETT: Comic books! I loved EC comics and pre-code horror, but those were way out of my price league. I lived in San Francisco, and when I was six, I found a comic book shop and practically made it my second home from 6-12 years-old. You could find me there every day, reading comics and monster mags; whatever I could lay my hands on. Remember CRUMB, the movie?

FANG: About Robert Crumb, artist extraordinaire? Yeah. He's an underground comics' legend.

HAMMETT: Oh, my God, I met him at the shop when I was nine years-old! I met a lot of famous artists there; kind of mind-boggling. The place was Ground Zero for the entire underground comics' scene.

FANG: Not many avenues open for collectors, back in the day. Your little shop offered you a glimpse of the madness to come!

HAMMETT: It did. No eBay or Internet, so I networked like crazy. I'd track down a dealer and ask, 'what do you have? Can you get this, can you get that?' He'd say, 'yeah, I know a guy who knows a guy.' He'd either give you a phone number or act as middle man. After a while, I'd attend comic book conventions, which aren't at all like the ones now. Exclusively male; and everyone was armed with pocket protectors and calculators. Nerd central [*laughs*]! And then there were those rare instances where you'd walk into a second hand or antique store and stumble across a priceless collectible in some dusty corner.

FANG: I tried the collecting thing for a while, but not on your grand scale. A bit exhausting.

HAMMETT: Rod, I had this notebook, and the only things I'd ever write in it were names of dealers and friends. I negotiated with contacts and collectors over the phone, or I'd send letters. I always felt fortunate when I met a new collector, and if he lived less than 100 miles away, it was even better. The first time I met Glen Danzig, we hammered out a few deals. He's an avid collector.

FANG: You mentioned Famous Monsters. The monster kid bible!

HAMMETT: Oh, absolutely. My mom would give me a quarter a day—ten cents for donuts, and the other fifteen would go for a carton of milk. They'd sell milk and donuts in the morning at school. After about a week or so, I discovered FM. My first issue was # 58, the Karloff MUMMY cover. What I'd do is save up my quarters, and then, in four days, I had a whole dollar to spend.

FANG: Starving for your art. I dig it!

HAMMETT: FM was about 60 cents. I could buy one monster mag a month and a few comic books, too. Did that for only about a three month period, but it seemed like years.

FANG: Would you agree the 60s was a golden time for monster collecting?

HAMMETT: For sure! There's a small window in the late 50s when monster stuff was squeaking out, but the deluge didn't begin until the early 60s. By then, manufacturers had realized a youth market was waiting to be tapped.

FANG: You also fell under the spell of Forrest Ackerman?

HAMMETT: Oh, wow. Of course! Forry was like the uncle I'd heard about but never met. I would read FM and pour over every word. If there were pix of the Ackermansion, I'd study them for hours, just sitting and staring at a single photo! Wonderful.

FANG: Ever meet him face to face?

HAMMETT: Yes, in 1987, and I clammed up; I was completely awestruck. To this day, I

haven't lost my sense of childhood awe toward the man. I'd go down and see Forry once a year; when he came to our LA show in 2004, I told him beforehand what a huge influence he'd been on me, as much as Jimi Hendrix.

FANG: Forry taught us to embrace our inner Hydes.

HAMMETT: You and me and thousands of other kids who are now grown-up. He had a nice full ride, living well into his 90s. Still, this is a sadder world without him.

FANG: He's alive and well in TOO MUCH HORROR BUSINESS.

HAMMETT: Without a doubt. My book is a love letter to Uncle Forry, a heart-felt tribute. The greatest thing about him, besides boundless enthusiasm, was his kindness. He'd stop anywhere and talk to fans, young and old. I was so blown away by that aspect of his personality and always try to do the same.

FANG: Did you read Castle of Frankenstein? What a trip. The psychedelic cover blurb exclaimed, "it'll blow your mind!"

HAMMETT: Castle of Frankenstein covered movies FM forgot to or didn't want to. Forry had a playful sense of humor, with all those puns, whereas Calvin Beck took things very seriously. His editorials were more scholarly in tone. I loved Monster Times, too, though I didn't care for the newspaper format. It would've been better with a glossy cover. I'd put that in the middle of Castle of Frankenstein and FM.

FANG: Monster Times? Goofy!

HAMMETT: They reflected the free-wheeling 70s moment. Both COF and MT ran regular comic reviews, a big help to me.

FANG: You grew up on the cusp of AIP and Hammer. A fan?

HAMMETT: I love Hammer, I love AIP, I love horror movies, even the bad ones. I'll watch them for hours and hours. If the title intrigues me, I'll see it. And you?

FANG: I'm a tad older, so I saw quite a few AIP and Hammer films on the big screen. DRACULA, PRINCE OF DARKNESS sparked my writing career. After seeing it, I sat down and wrote my first short story; about vampires, natch.

HAMMETT: When was that?

FANG: Early 1966. Around April. I was in the seventh grade.

HAMMETT: There ya go. You were inspired! Horror films are events for me, even now. One of my guilty faves is DRACULA VS. FRANKENSTEIN. I also loved THE AMAZING TWO-HEADED TRANSPLANT and THE ALIEN FACTOR. So bad, they're good!

FANG: 80s horror and sci-fi, Fango led that charge!

HAMMETT: FANGORIA, hell, yeah. Required reading for 80's monster kids.

FANG: And now? With horrors like INSIDIOUS and PARANORMAL ACTIVITY, does the new millennium rock or what?

HAMMETT: It rocks hardcore! INSIDIOUS was kickass! I had goose bumps all the way through, and when the demon appeared, I just about jumped outta my skin. Gimme more!

FANG: Here's the 64,000 dollar question: do you have a holy grail in your collection?

HAMMETT: About two years ago, I was thumbing through an auction catalog and found what could qualify as a holy grail: an original costume worn by Boris Karloff in THE BLACK CAT. I placed a bid and couldn't believe my luck when I won! Once I got the thing in my filthy little paws. I put it on, and it fit me perfectly.

FANG: THE BLACK CAT is prime Universal horror!

HAMMETT: That movie has everything. Satanism, torture, incest, and an unreal ending: Lugosi flaying Karloff's skin! What more could you want for quality entertainment? A gem from Universal's golden era.

FANG: Anything in the pockets?

HAMMETT: Ha! I wish. A note written by Boris would've been an added treat. Another piece of my collection that's one of a kind is the Nebularium. Ever hear of that?

FANG: Nope. Explain!

HAMMETT: Bauche and Lomb made it in either 1929 or '30, an electrified concave mirror part of Kenneth Strickfadden's equipment. He's the guy who ran all the mad scientist laboratories from the old days of Cinema. You can see it clearly in the creation scenes from FRANKENSTEIN and BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN and footage from Karloff's THE MASK OF FU MANCHU.

FANG: Wait a minute! A concave mirror? I watched Bride last weekend and remember that! A bolt shoots into the mirror and dances all around inside it?

HAMMETT: You got it! The Nebularium has some serious screen time in the first two FRANKENSTEINs. Mel Brooks used it in YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN and I think it might've even been in THE MAN WITH TWO BRAINS, another favorite.

FANG: When did the collection go from merely an obsession to art?

HAMMETT: That happened about three years ago. I was pondering the book and had just acquired the Nebularium, some classic movie posters, and a few extraordinary '60s monster toys. One's a blow-mold Frankenstein, approximately two feet-high, and it's a bank.

FANG: Made of black plastic?

HAMMETT: Yes, black plastic with a green spray on the face and hands! What, you've seen it?

FANG: I had that thing. We set it on fire! All that cash, up in smoke. Sigh.

HAMMETT: Kids! And I also have a monster plaque from the 60s, two feet-high, in its original packaging. Really fine-looking. These pieces brought my collection to a whole new level. I thought, "maybe I can have items in this book that aren't instantly available on the Internet."

FANG: Your selection of FM covers is stunning.

HAMMETT: Thanks. My Famous Monsters cover collection totals 18 in all, the earliest being the iconic Chaney painting, #16. I love Gogos' 1970 Dracula Fearbook and his Amazing Colossal Beast from issue #23. They're both hanging on my wall. There's also the cover to #30, an evocative portrait of Bela as Dracula.

FANG: And #58? Since it's your first FM?

HAMMETT: I do own #58, and as you might expect, it means the most to me. The original painting's on a gold colored background with all these hieroglyphics. I printed the cover and the painting, so people can cross-reference the two. Yes, I am the geeky nerd [*laughs]* !

FANG: You display these treasures, correct?

HAMMETT: My available wall space is limited, which means circulating, putting up stuff while taking other things down and storing them. I'm always looking for better ways to display. I wish my place was like the circus in 7 FACES OF DR. LAO—as small as a port a-potty on the outside, and inside, it's like three miles long.

FANG: When you stand back and look at everything, are you transported to your childhood?

HAMMETT: Am I transported? Instantly! I undergo a whole range of emotions, including reliving good kid times. I'm also struck by the characters, their pathos, how they look and acted. Iconic imagery. Hey, ask me about my posters!

FANG: Ok, tell us about your posters!

HAMMETT: To me, the beauty of horror movie posters from the 20s and 30s is their approach: artists put as much effort into them as they did romance or cowboy films. I've one from FRANKENSTEIN that proclaims, "The monster is loose!" and it looks almost like an Andy Warhol print. There's a particular MUMMY poster that's also fascinating, made up of these gorgeous colors and washes.

FANG: The earlier pieces remind me of art deco. So 30s!

HAMMETT: They're slices of post-modern history. Honestly, Rod, to me, the true magic of all these collectibles is how they make me feel.

FANG: Speaking of historical significance, they highlighted those remarkable Jack Pierce make-ups!

HAMMETT: Jack Pierce was brilliant. His design of Frankenstein's monster is utter genius. He realized if someone's going to put together a human body, it would have a flat head, bolts holding down the top of its skull, and conduits for electrical currents. Jack's Bride of Frankenstein is another magnificent concept. It steals your breath away.

FANG: Are there any autographs peppering the Kirk Hammett collection?

HAMMETT: I collect autographs, yeah. The book features a striking Boris Karloff signed Mummy Portrait—one marvelous make-up! Boris sat in Jack Pierce's chair eight hours a day and still found energy enough to contribute an outstanding performance. Kudos!

FANG: You devote several chapters to your movie posters...

HAMMETT: That's because posters give me unbridled joy. It's no accident I keep a guitar and amp in the room where my movie posters are. They inspire me, as a muse inspires. Late at night, I'll look at them, open myself up and play.

FANG: These are museum pieces and obviously need careful treatment.

HAMMETT: It's important to use archival materials, like special acid-free backing and mats,

and glass that won't produce glare. Moisture's a real problem here in San Francisco. I temperature-control my place at a steady 65-68 dry degrees. The most fragile are the props and masks made out of latex; they degrade and turn into powder over time. Some are in hermetically-sealed cases.

FANG: You're big into modern pieces, post-1950--to me, the grooviest section of TMHB.

HAMMETT: The 50s was a fertile period for monsters! I bought two heads from Bud Westmore's estate: REVENGE OF THE CREATURE and THE MOLE PEOPLE. They're both exhibiting signs of decay. Remember the bat-like things in IT CONQUERED THE WORLD? I scooped one up not long ago. Another item I'm extremely proud of is from INVASION OF THE SAUCER MEN. The aliens wore these weird and beautiful collars, and I found one. Had to reproduce the head and hands and outfits to display it, but that's part of the fun.

FANG: Sum up your book for us, Kirk. What's it mean, down deep?

HAMMETT: On the surface and down deep, this book captures the charming, horrific things that color my life. No intellectual or philosophical statement intended. Instead, I want to emphasize the thrill, the intense satisfaction of collecting as a hobby or lifelong pursuit. It's a rewarding journey!

TOO MUCH HORROR BUSINESS is now available. For more, visit Kirk Hammett's official site .