

Superstar Collectors: Sinatra to Parton

by Jeff Figler

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Eric Clapton, Nicolas Cage, Billy Crystal, Frank Sinatra, Debbie Reynolds - even Bob Barker. All of these celebrities in the same sentence. What could they all have in common besides fame? You would think very little, but in fact, that is not true.

Considering my title as HOFN.com's collectibles editor, you probably already guessed it. All of these celebrities - and scores more - are avid collectors. And what these celebrities collect may be a surprise. Likewise, the sale of some of their memorabilia has resulted in millions of dollars to philanthropic causes around the world.

Let's take one of my all time favorite entertainers, Eric Clapton. This three-time inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (as a member of Cream, The Yardbirds, and as a solo artist) is regarded as one of the greatest guitarists of all time. His hit song "Layla," while he was a member of Derek and the Dominos, ranks among the highest selling singles.

Clapton has been a prolific philanthropist. Part of his collection of guitars has been auctioned to raise money for needy causes. For example, in a 1999 Christie's auction, more than 100 of his stage and studio guitars, including "Brownie," the 1956 Fender Stratocaster he used for the "Layla" sessions, raised more than \$5 million for the Crossroads Centre in Antigua, a charity which he founded in 1997 to treat drug dependency.



Rock & Roll Hall of Famer Eric Clapton jump started a drug treatment center with the sale of many of his prized collectibles.

Nicolas Cage the actor, director, and producer is also the nephew of Hollywood director Francis Ford Coppola. But he was a huge collector of comic books. Heritage Auction House sold his collection of 141 lots for \$1.68 million. Ironically, his stage name of Cage was taken from his favorite comic book hero, Luke Cage.

A few of his items that were in the Heritage Auction included a 1940 Detective #38 Comic, the debut issue of Batman's sidekick Robin; a 1940 All-Star Comic #3, debuting the Justice Society of America, the first comic to introduce a superhero team; and of course, the prized possession of every comic collector, Action Comics #1, the first appearance of Superman.

Another of Cage's passions includes collecting sports cars, including the likes of Ferraris, Bentleys, Lamborghinis, Corvettes, and others. He had a 1971 Lamborghini Miura SVJ, once owned by the Shah of Iran.

Actress and singer Debbie Reynolds collects Hollywood movie memorabilia. She was fortunate enough - and far-sighted as well - to acquire thousands of props, costumes, and other items, and is recognized as having the largest collection of Hollywood memorabilia owned by an individual. On occasion she has auctioned some of her items, including Elizabeth Taylor's headdress from the movie *Cleopatra*.

For the rest of us mortals, other celebrity collections do not quite have the same type of flair. The legendary host of "The Price is Right," Bob Barker, collects military figurines and Bradford plates. In total, he has collected roughly 175 pieces in all, which stemmed from his passion for military history. Although most of his collection is about the American Civil War, he also has figures from the Revolutionary War, as well as British, German, Spanish, and Swiss figures.

Billy Crystal, the actor, writer, comedian, producer, and film director, is a dedicated sports memorabilia collector. He has often said that if he were not acting or being a comedian, he would be playing baseball. Ironically, Crystal attended Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, on a baseball scholarship. He never played a game at Marshall because the baseball program was suspended during his freshman year. Among other items, Crystal has a Mickey Mantle baseball glove and bat, as well as a boxing glove given to him by Muhammad Ali, and a basketball from Michael Jordan.

In early 2008, Billy Crystal did what others can only dream about. On March 12, 2008 he signed a minor league baseball contract, and played for one day for the New York Yankees during spring training. He wore uniform number 60, to mark his 60th birthday. On March 13th, he led off a game against the Pittsburgh Pirates, and actually fouled off a pitch. He was released the next day.

Legendary performer Frank Sinatra was a train collector. His Palm Springs house was filled with miniature trains primarily of Lionel and LGB styles. The most unusual piece in his collection was an Italian wooden train made by the Elina Company, presented to him as a gift from the Vatican. His collection also included photographs of steam engines as well as framed paintings. His Palm Springs house, including his train collection was eventually sold to Canadian businessman Jim Pattison.



Country Music Hall of Famer Dolly Parton collects butterflies.

Other celebrities collect other type of items. Angelina Jolie collects knives; Rosie O'Donnell collects McDonald's toys; Dolly Parton, butterflies; John Travolta, aviation memorabilia; Demi Moore, dolls and vintage clothing; Barbara Mandrell, autographed books; Jay Leno, motorcycles and automobiles; Robin Leach, marine paperweights; Patty Duke, beanie babies; Johnny Depp, insects and rare books; Jamie Lee Curtis, photographs; Norm Crosby, elephant items; and Celine Dion, shoes.

And then you have some predictable collections. Dick Clark, the "World's Oldest Teenager," collects rock & roll memorabilia. Ivana Trump has a crystal collection, and Elvira collects Gothic items. One of Elvira's most unusual items is a bat skeleton given to her by Nicolas Cage.

Nearly everyone collects something, and celebrities are no different. Quite often they will help each other add to their collection. Take, for example, Richard Karn, from the television sitcom *Home Improvement*. Karn loves

to play golf, and as a result, collects celebrity-signed golf balls. He has golf balls signed by Bob Hope, Gerald Ford, and Arnold Palmer. One time he approached professional golfer Phil Mickelson to sign a golf ball. Mickelson refused to do so, but after being told by his wife that it was Karn who made the request, Mickelson ran up to Karn and signed the ball.

Sometimes it's wise to be nice to a celebrity.

Jots From Jeff...

Lionel Carter, one of the pioneer baseball card collectors of all time, died recently.

With baseball in its off-season, look for items in the next few months of Josh Hamilton, Carlos Zambrano, and Cliff Lee. With Rickey Henderson a sure bet to make the Hall of Fame next year, try to acquire some of his items as well.

Even though the economy is flat, auctions are enjoying record times. Collectors are not bidding on as many items, but paying more for the items they want.

Don't forget to stock up on political items. They are always in demand in years to come.

And then there is the case of a postal worker in Maine who was fined and given a suspended jail sentence for stealing a vintage Christy Christy Mathewson Cracker Jack card. The postal worker pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of theft of lost or mislaid property. His defense? He suffered from an addiction to baseball cards.