

The first time I spotted Bird's handiwork, it was this: painted on the brick interior of a Detroit car wash stood Woody from Toy Story and Bart Simpson shaking hands with knowing looks, while Spongebob Squarepants, Dora the Explorer, and an iced out Stewie Griffin sponged down a car with Betty Boop in the front seat. Off to the side, an Angry Bird and what might be the Grinch are hovering around, not quite sure of their roles in the production.

I was driving along Gratiot on the outskirts of the city, just north of the Better Made Snack Foods factory, an area mostly populated by liquor stores, auto-related businesses, a fast food chain here and there, and deserted buildings. I'd been documenting Detroit's built environment, particularly of the handpainted variety, for a couple years at this point, but never had I seen a scene quite like this.

Later, when I would meet and befriend the artist Bird, by way of explanation, he simply said, "Angry Birds had just come out, so I threw one of those in there."

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Bird, who turned 61 this year, was born and raised in Detroit. His real name is Lee Walker, but he's been called Bird ever since he was a little kid. "I used to be skinny," he told me with a laugh, skinny like the twigs of a bird's nest. He's been painting, actually, for as long as he's been called Bird. Born into a family of professional sign painters, Bird was taught the craft by his grandfather at a very young age. With seven sons and a whole mess of grandkids, everyone was involved in the business. His grandfather showed the kids how to paint walls in simple solid colors first. Bird's own children are also painters.

It wasn't until the 7th grade that Bird realized he had a knack for art, not just sign painting. "I'll put it like this: people started to notice," he says. He began to win contests. Eventually, while still in high school, he landed in prison and spent five years there. This is

where his craft turned from good to excellent. “I mastered everything in there,” he said. When he got out, Bird jumped right into sign painting, and business took off.

Since then, the city of Detroit has been Bird’s canvas. Commissioned jobs like the car wash, barbershops, auto repair places, and churches coexist alongside pieces thrown up on abandoned buildings in some of the city’s worst neighborhoods, Bird’s attempt to bring life to discarded corners. In the past decade, Bird has suffered multiple strokes and one heart attack. While he has bounced back each time, it’s become harder for him to get around, so he is no longer able to exhibit his latest visions on empty buildings. But at the height of his career, he would only hit the ones that he thought had no future. His goal was to beautify these areas and divert people from thinking about the decay of the city with vibrant, uplifting art instead.

One of Bird’s greatest pieces of this kind is splashed on an otherwise nondescript, decrepit brown building on Gratiot. In this especially eye-catching painting, Mickey and Minnie gaze out at us from inside their pink Cadillac, a tropical scene in pinks and purples enlivening the space around them. He put this one up about 15 years ago, and he’s touched it up only once since then. I drove him around the city to learn more about his work, and it was then that he discovered someone had slapped a bit of paint, a seemingly haphazard brown rectangle, right onto the center of the pink Cadillac. “Some asshole painted over it! Why? Now that’s just stupid,” Bird shook his head. “I can’t believe they did that. I’m gonna come back here to touch it up and I’m gonna take ALL these walls!”

Several years before I met Bird, his main hub was, of all things, a discount mattress shop run by family and friends. The shop, called the Mattress Station, served as Bird’s studio and gallery; his work would appear in between used mattresses, the faces of Tweety, Dora, and other cartoon characters mingling among Tupac, Moses, wild animals, and whatever else happened to

be on Bird's mind at the time. Bird even figured out how to cheaply make his own canvases using bed sheets wrapped around old bed frames.

Today, the Mattress Station is gone. It burned down to the ground and with it, Bird lost a great deal of his work – all the art as well as the building itself. When we met, he was living with his brother on a neglected street in one of Detroit's forgotten outer-ring east side neighborhoods, the kind of street with only five houses standing and only three of those habitable, with 79 canvases in storage at his sister's home. Now he lives with his son, his son's girlfriend, and a whole mess of cats and Chihuahuas underfoot, in another outer-ring neighborhood, this one with a higher rate of inhabitants. Bird is lucky to have a big family who can help him out when needed, as work is harder and harder to come by – “Everything is fucked up in Detroit” – and his health issues haven't exactly made it any easier.

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During that tour we took of his work, Bird pointed out buildings I already knew and loved at seemingly every corner: a Black Betty Boop on a long-gone barbershop, accompanied by Spiderman holding an electric shaver; the Asian Fisheries market with a total mish-mash of imagery including an inexplicable orca; an infinite loop of an Icee cup depicting Icee Bear holding an Icee cup, surfing on an ice floe alongside the words TOO COOL on an abandoned party store.

Much of his sign painting work has been at least partially preserved online thanks to the intrepid chronicling of the landscape via Google Maps. One such building that stands out in Bird's memory as a favorite is Eastside Check Cashing, a party store on McNichols that featured what Bird called a gangster scene, as well as a landscape of the city and – for some reason – former Detroit Lion Calvin Johnson.

Everywhere we stopped that day, everyone knew Bird and was excited to see him. At Uncle Rob's Auto Repair, where his subjects included the Smurfs and characters from the Pixar film *Cars*, the shop workers told him to smile for the photos. "I never smile," he said, but then laughed as he took me into the back office to meet Uncle Rob himself, a wiry little man who immediately told me, "Bird's one of the best. I got so much of his art here. He's been doing it for 23 years now. I don't let anybody else touch the building. I got too much pride in it. I'm an art lover, and I love his art!"

I love Bird's art, too. Sometimes I still can't believe I met the guy. I commission work from him as often as I can, so my home is just as filled with his work as Uncle Rob's shop is. But where Uncle Rob has Papa Smurf and Muhammad Ali, I have Eric Dolphy and Albert Ayler. My favorite Bird piece is the very first one I asked him to paint: a towering Sun Ra as he appears in *Space Is The Place*, surrounded by the psychedelic pink elephants from *Dumbo*, a delightful jazz version of the absurdist character-melding that drew me to him in the first place.