

GOODWILL HUNTING

Two Guys and an Ambulance On a Mission to Thrift

by Evan Ratliff



On a stretch of Arkansas highway last July, a patrolman pulled over an unmarked ambulance driven by two men in their late twenties wearing recently purchased secondhand clothes. The authorities were on high alert due to an FBI memo warning of terrorists acquiring emergency vehicles, and had been tipped off by an anonymous caller who'd spotted the men videotaping themselves at a gas station.

What the officer encountered were not a couple of would-be malefactors, but John Freyer and Christopher Wilcha, two thrift shop aficionados on a cross-country "research" trip. Neither was the back of the vehicle stocked with high-grade explosives, but a bonanza of secondhand-store and rummage-sale finds, including two basketballs autographed by Kareem Abdul-Jabar, that Freyer and Wilcha had scored during their travels. The ambulance, a 1976 Chevy—without air conditioning or radio, and purchased, sight unseen, on eBay—had already attracted the law in several states. "These cops would be like, 'What the fuck are you doing?'" Wilcha says. Eventually, the cops realized, as he puts it, "that we were these harmless dorks who were on our way to

THRIFT NATION: John Freyer and Christopher Wilcha took their eBay-bought ambulance on a tour of secondhand America, hitting yard sales and thrift stores from Brooklyn to the bayou.

Monica Kressman (top left): Courtesy of IMR



a giant garage sale. We would open up the truck and say, 'Look at all this crap we have!'

Freyer and Wilcha christened their trip Superannuate, and it served as the kickoff for the Washington, D.C., Institute for Adaptive Reuse, a "post-profit organization" dedicated to the pleasures of the preowned (Freyer, an artist, and Wilcha, a filmmaker, are listed as field officers on the IAR's pseudo-official Web site). The pair conceived the trip as a "self-realized grant" from the Institute: They would thrift along the way, document their journey, and then sell the booty, including the ambulance, to cover costs. "We wanted to see if we could make our way around the secondhand universe by second-hand means," Wilcha says. In just over two weeks they hit university surplus shops, small-town thrift stores, garage sales, even an unclaimed luggage repository in Scottsville, Alabama.

Freyer and Wilcha are no strangers to second-hand culture. In a previous project, a Web site called Allmylifeforsale, Freyer auctioned his belongings online, then hit the road to visit buyers. (His book about the experience will be published in November by Bloomsbury.) Wilcha's documentary *The Target Shoots First* took top prize at Slamdance, and he's currently working on a film about garage sales in New Jersey.

Superannuate—which, fittingly, means to declare obsolete—took the combination of thrift store impulse and object fetish to a new, clinical level. Freyer and Wilcha were interested in what Wilcha calls "that weird personal archeology," the anecdotal sediment that accumulates on the surface of owned things. "We found a whole framed case of Camp Scuffy ribbons for canoeing and soccer. You're getting an incredible snapshot of people's lives. And, of course, there is this ridiculous associative nostalgia that gets triggered."

Purchases included the usual pop-cult classics, like a MONDAYS SUCK bumper sticker and a Harlem Globetrotters T-shirt. But Freyer and Wilcha are more interested in stuff with a story to tell. At a garage sale in Charlotte, North Carolina, they encountered the Wobble Light—a prototype of a super-stable halogen lamp intended for road crews. The Wobble's owner, who let it go for \$50, had sunk a quarter of a million dollars into the company that originally designed it. "It was fairly obvious to Chris

and I that the lamp was a terrible idea," says Freyer. "This guy invested some \$250,000," adds Wilcha, "and all he had to show for it was this giant, phallic-looking lamp."

They got all of this on video, of course, and at the end of the trip, in Houston, held a swap meet, screening related films cut with footage edited en route (on a secondhand laptop, natch). The sell-off went well; scavengers snapped up everything but the ambulance (the Wobble Light went for \$150). To cap their adventures, Freyer and Wilcha filmed customers sitting in the rear of the vehicle describing what attracted them to their purchase.

Now the pair are weighing television and film offers and considering a follow-up trip that, Freyer offers, "might involve flying somewhere." The IAR, meanwhile, remains an elusive organization. Its founder declined to be interviewed, but the Web site (www.adaptivereuse.org) describes plans for future investigations, including a glove box-style map of secondhand outlets and a catalog of institute-acquired merchandise.

With so much in the wings, the IAR hopes to become the premier think tank of the American castoff. In a world where NASA trolls eBay for parts and the military hocks old weapons overseas, the institute is taking the wraps off a practice that extends beyond Lite-Brites and old golf bags. "There is this thriving shadow economy in the United States and elsewhere," Wilcha says, warming to the pundit role. "You can look at any current event through the lens of the secondhand." 📺

