

The Itinerant Printer

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This summer, a huge book documenting *Chris Fritton's* journey, 'tramping it' from one print shop to the next throughout the US and Canada, will be published. We spoke to him to try and discern why he took on this mammoth trek.



On his website, Chris describes himself as a “modern tramp printer,” which, after talking with him, you realise really means he likes to print everywhere. From 2015 to 2017, he spent his time producing prints at venues across the US and Canada using the equipment of each studio or workspace. In a nice interactive twist, prints produced were then sent back to followers of the project as postcards.

“The idea is based on a historical notion of itinerant printers – restless tramps that criss-crossed the nation with little more than a union card and the clothes on their backs in search of the next job, the next drink, and the next adventure,” Chris explains. “During the heyday of the International Typographical Union (from just after the American Civil War until around the 1960s), if you had a union card, you had a job. Tramp printers would work for a few weeks in one place, then move along to the next when the work dried up or they got bored,” he adds.

Chris goes on to explain that over the years these skills were forgotten, but that something of the adventure of the process appealed to him. The more he thought about it, the more he wanted to take a trip himself. “I modelled what I did on a mid-level touring band, and relied on the incredible generosity of printers and the community at large along the way,” he says.

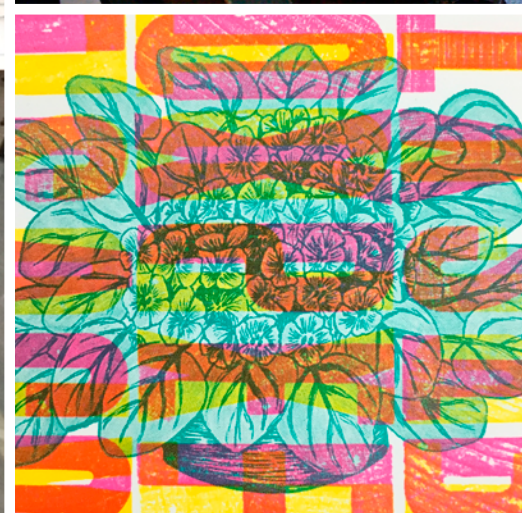
While out on the road, the only thing that Chris carried with him was his paper and ink. Naturally, this made for a variety of printing techniques and outcomes along the way. “I was working exclusively with what shops had in their collection. That meant I had to let the collection guide me, and never came in with a pre-conceived notion of what to print. I do love creativity within constraint though, and often when writing, I set arbitrary rules for myself, parameters to work within.”

Chris, as a long time printer, explains that he already had an initial list of printers to visit when he first considered the trip. “I had a number of people to reach out to – I basically said, ‘Hey, if I do this crazy thing, can I stop by your shop and print?’ The response was overwhelmingly positive, so after doing a little crowdfunding, I realised it was truly possible,” he explains.

However, it went even better than the adventurous printer could’ve expected. “Something happened after I hit the road. The project began to gather momentum and people started to contact me. They’d see I was headed to their city or state, and they’d invite me to drop by. At this point, it’s about 50% places I found and 50% places that invited me. Some of the coolest places that I’ve been are places that contacted me. Beyond that, it was all about creating a working itinerary – wrestling with people’s schedules, unforeseen circumstances and the sheer time it takes to get from place to place. I travelled by region, the whole Southeast, then the Southwest, then the West Coast and Northwest, and so on...”

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There were also more practical issues which Chris had to attend to. “One of the greatest restrictions was time. I was only in each place for a day or two – sometimes only a few hours. In that short space of time I’d have to set a forme, make a print, and determine a way to transport the still-wet prints. Also, life on the road also isn’t all it’s cracked up to be – people romanticise it, but the amount of sleep you get, the food you eat, the lack of privacy – all of it affects you and your work,” he admits.

Something that might seem a little odd about this journey (to anyone that has taken the time to set up their own print space), is how exactly you can print in such ad hoc situations, a different one every day. “I’ve never had my own space, so at least I had no shop to be homesick for. It’s simultaneously frustrating and liberating. When I visited community print shops, the level of disorganisation could sometimes make printing difficult, but when I visited private shops that were well-appointed and perfectly-kept, it could be just as troublesome because you don’t want to misstep or offend the proprietor with your own printing practices,” Chris says.

“It’s a strange dance, keeping everything in balance just so, but it’s one that made me deft, agile, adaptable, and versatile. It also made me one of the fastest printers that I know, because whether the shop looked like a bomb went off or a pristine still life painting, I still had to get my work done. I can say one thing for sure though – I always tried to leave spaces far cleaner than when I found them...”

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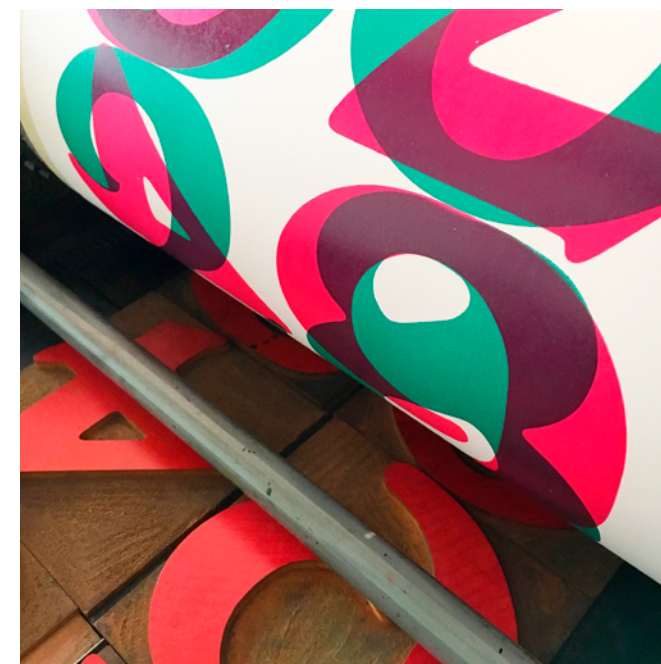
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As you pick further through Chris’s amazing story, individual print spaces and specific events start to emerge. “I printed at a place called Menagerie Press in Terlingua, Texas,” he recalls. “It’s a ghost town, an old mining town that went belly up, where decades later people started moving back and rebuilding the adobe buildings by hand. They’ve built this fantastic community of artists and outsiders. It’s in the Chihuahuan Desert, right beside the Chisos Mountains, just hours and hours from anywhere. I printed in an adobe building that the proprietor, Lauren Stedman, had rebuilt herself with a view of the incredible landscape right in front of me...”

Other locations were slightly more, shall we say, corporate. “I also printed at Facebook. Yes, that Facebook. In Menlo Park, California, they have a set up called the Facebook Analogue Research Lab where they do screenprinting, letterpress printing, sign painting, book arts, fabric arts, woodworking and all sorts of other handcraft. The idea is that solving analogue problems and engaging with analogue technologies renews your perspective on the digital world, so it’s like an in-house professional development scheme for their employees,” Chris recounts.

A third print shop also holds a special place in Chris memories of his travels. “The Sherwood Press in Olympia, Washington, which I think is the oldest continuously operating female-run print shop in the world. Started by Jocelyn Dohm in 1940, it’s now run by the intrepid Jami Heinricher. It’s like an elven cottage set high on a hillside among the huge trees of the Pacific Northwest – just epic.”

Throughout the trek, Chris reflects that some elements of printing – perhaps you could call them universal – rang true. “I’d have to say that printers share a love





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of problem solving. Every forme and print poses its own unique set of quandaries,” he says, adding: “If you aren’t the kind of person that loves to sort those things out and feel the triumph of overcoming an issue, you probably aren’t that heavily involved in printing. I’d also say most printers shared a love of machinery. Deep inside, all of them seem to have a fascination with simple machines and the complex jobs they do. Otherwise, it was a total cornucopia of things: different people, different personalities, different proclivities, different modus operandi...”

Add to that the many differences in printing techniques that Chris experienced – surprisingly location was an influence. “I found that there were a lot of regional differences. Many printers in the South don’t use Scotch tape for make ready, but that’s all we use up North,” Chris says. “Also, all the shops down south seemed to have baby wipes, quick easy ways to wipe down your hands without heading to the sink every five minutes. There were genius tips and tricks that I picked up everywhere, but it was interesting to see that many of them were regionally based. I got used to bringing Scotch tape to the shops down South and baby wipes to the shops up North. That’s one of the benefits of being an itinerant printer – you get to see them all, but you also get to carry them to the next place with you, like a Johnny Applesseed of information. That was always the case too, in all the older tramp printer accounts they discussed bringing along news, rumours, gossip, tips, techniques, and word of the latest technologies.”

Which brings us to Chris’s enticing new book, documenting the work and travels he made. “Right from the very beginning I realised that this trek would need to be catalogued in some way. I always imagined it as an immense coffee table book full of photos and stories, and that’s just what it’s become!” he beams. “As it stands, it’s 320 pages long, 12”x12”, with over



1,200 photos and 130,000 words. It was actually part of the crowdfunding campaign as well, along with postcards and posters from the road,” he adds.

There are some other keys figures which are just as impressive. “I had an almost unmanageable amount of data which took over a year of work to sift through, to curate the content for the book. All told, I covered over 47,000 miles in 45 states and four provinces, made over 15,000 prints using over 45,000 impressions, visited over 140 shops in 843 days, used over 40 different kinds of presses, sent over 2,100 packages, and took over 22,000 photos to index it all. I also got 17 parking tickets, and had the car towed twice...”

Now, safely back home, Chris not only has his eyes on promoting his new book – for which he is hugely proud (and grateful) – but also for possibly a second, wider-reaching volume. “I’d love to extend a heartfelt thank you to everyone who helped make *The Itinerant Printer* project a reality. It was made possible by their generosity and support. To all those who let me print in their shops, sleep on their couches, eat their food and pet their animals, I’m eternally grateful. After the book is released and I go on the road again, look for *The Itinerant Printer* to go global, visiting letterpress shops around the world, and, if all goes as planned, a second book!” **T**

Follow Chris’s journey and find out how his publishing empire is progressing at www.itinerantprinter.com

