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**HOUSE OF  
DOLLS**

EVERY DOLL HAS A STORY

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Jo Maeder — author, raconteur and doll merchant — holds the Rock and Roll Madame doll, her alter ego back in her radio days.



# HOUSE OF DOLLS

BY BRIAN CLAREY

It took Mama Jo a lifetime to amass these dolls — more than 700 of them, acquired in ones and twos and threes, discovered in rummage sales, sought after in collectible shops, accepted as gifts.

Her daughter, Jo Maeder of Oak Ridge, hopes it won't take as long to break them up.

They are at once treasured mementoes of a lost loved one and a valuable collection that makes the right kind of buyers drool.

And sometimes, to Jo the younger, they feel like an occupying army.

"I have definitely been held hostage by the dolls," she says. "If I didn't have them, I think I would have been out of here."

Every doll has a story, Jo's website at RubyLane.com attests — where it came from, how it was made, what it meant to Mama Jo — but the overarching tale behind the collection itself might be the most fascinating.

Maeder came to the Triad a decade ago to care for Mama Jo, her mother, from whom she had been estranged

for 30 years. The rekindling of that relationship became the grist for her acclaimed book, *When I Married My Mother*, published in 2009. And when Mama Jo passed in 2006, Maeder found herself the executor of her mother's massive doll collection, a job that came with a condition.

One of the last things Mama Jo said, Maeder recalls, was, "I hope they stay together."

"I had to keep them together, and so I did for six years," Maeder says. "Now they're together on the internet."

Jo Maeder is an unlikely doll merchant.

She is becoming known as an author — Maya Angelou said of *When I Married My Mother*, "This book is important to every mother and daughter, and to every woman who wants to be one." — but Maeder first found notoriety as the Rock and Roll Madame on New York City's K-Rock radio station, where she spun the newly christened genre of "classic rock" in the slot after Howard Stern had wrapped up his morning show. She's interviewed Bob Marley, James Brown, John Lee Hooker, Michael Jackson and more, and she was the host of K-Rock's Dylan-centric show "Knockin' on Dylan's Door."

But the dolls were always a part of her life. She is a fourth-generation doll person: Besides Mama Jo, Maeder's grandmother, Florence Dole, was a collector and doll-maker, as was her great-grandmother, Lillian Johnson. A great-aunt, Gladys MacDowell, was a wax doll-maker of some notoriety.

Some of these antiques make up the core of Mama Jo's collection; she began gathering them herself at a young age, and she tended them with her mother, making clothes and accessories, giving them names and stories.

"That's what you do when you're a one and only," Mama Jo, an only child, said to her daughter in a candid video moment, captured for posterity on YouTube.

"My mother anthropomorphized everything," Maeder says. "The trees, the flowers. She communicated with the cat, but not to the extent she did with the dolls."

"They do seem to have personalities," she continues, "an energy about them."

"Welcome to Mama Jo's House of Dolls," Maeder says grandly as she enters one of two rooms in her Oak Ridge home dedicated to the doll collection.



Clockwise from left: Shirley Temple, Charlie McCarthy and his magnificent wardrobe, a doll with real hair, a smirking doll, celebrity row and more Shirley Temple.



Photos by Katie Thompson

Hundreds of glass eyes stare at the center of the room. The kids from *The Sound of Music* gather in a corner. Various incarnations of Shirley Temple stand in another. A row of Barbie and Ken types line a shelf, still in their original packaging — Generation Girl, a Barbie knockoff named Blaine; Now Look Ken, with removable beard and sideburns; Barbie's friend Becki; Disco Wanda, the dance-floor queen of 1978; the Professor from "Gilligan's Island"; Sonny and Cher, with a modest yet spectacular wardrobe. Donnie and Marie Osmond are off in a corner, with a fold-out stage. A Julia doll, based on Diahann Carroll's TV character, wears a rare two-piece outfit and her hair has not yet oxidized.

There's a Little Ricky, too, made during the heyday of "I Love Lucy" — an infant in yellow lace; Maeder suspects the dolls were designed before the toymakers knew the sex of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz's child.

There are Kewpie Dolls, with tiny wings at their necks; Kokeshis, the small, wooden dolls of Japan; celebrity dolls; stuffed dolls; dolls of plastic, ceramic and wood; troll dolls, with big eyes and wild hair; baby dolls; teenage dolls; mass-produced souvenirs and handmade one-of-a-kinds.

She's positioned the antiques carefully in glass cabinets along one wall. Some of her great-aunt's wax dolls take up a shelf by the door. In another cabinet are the dolls her grandmother and great-grandmother made.

Every doll has a story.

"This is Mammy," Maeder says, made by her great-grandmother Lillian Johnson, with a coconut for a head and a tiny pair of leather, button-up shoes.

The shoes came flying out a window one afternoon in Arkansas, Maeder says, when her mother was walking down the street. She brought them home, and Johnson declared, "I'm gonna make a doll for these shoes."

Johnson had a Mammy during her childhood in Arkansas. And the two white babies she holds represent the twins Johnson lost shortly after their birth.

Charlie McCarthy, Edgar Bergen's famous ventriloquist dummy, stands in a wooden box atop one of the display cabinets. Maeder pulls him down to see what he's got in the drawers of his wardrobe, a plain, wooden box.

"I haven't figured out if he came with that or if they found the wardrobe and my grandmother made the clothes," Maeder says.

McCarthy looks dapper in his top hat, monocle and tails. In small drawers and on tiny wire hangers in the wardrobe he's got a white felt suit, two hounds-tooth suits, a straw hat, a loud necktie and a pair of pajamas with a sash.

"If I can go look at the quilts [my grandmother made], if I can find this fabric, we will have the mystery solved."

It took Maeder six years to get to the place where she felt comfortable breaking up the doll collection and selling the pieces individually.

"I couldn't go out and sell the dolls if I didn't feel it," she says.

She sold the dollhouses right off, and the Teddy bears and other stuffed animals, but she couldn't quite bring herself to part with the dolls themselves.

"There was something about their eyes," she says. "Their little faces."

It took time, introspection and therapy for her to realize that the dolls needed to be loved.

So she began cataloging them, cleaning them and washing their clothes, researching their histories, finding out their names and labeling each one. She's got about 60



of them up on her site now, not quite 10 percent of the total.

"It's a real bonding experience," she says. "I feel like it's an adoption service. I just want to find good homes — and at a fair price — for my mother's dolls."

The first doll she sold was a Sasha doll, a collectible made by Sasha Morgenthaler, who crafted multicultural figures of children in authentic garb that go for about \$150.

"The doll had this beautiful head of red hair," Maeder says. "A doctor in Portland, Maine had been given a doll — a blonde Sasha — when she was a girl in 1960. She said, 'She needed a friend, and the moment I saw your Sasha I knew that was it.'"

Every doll comes with a story. And every doll comes with a surprise — an extra item of clothing or an accessory from Mama Jo's collection. Maeder put a small, stuffed schnauzer in with the Sasha doll, and watched via Skype as the doctor opened the package.

"I said, 'Open your surprise,'" Maeder remembers, and when the woman saw the dog she gasped.

"She said, 'When I got my first Sasha, we had a schnauzer,'" Maeder says. "Isn't that wonderful?"

In the second doll room, Lucille Ball stands brazenly in a top hat, tails and stockings. Down the line are Humphrey Bogart, Groucho Marx, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, John Wayne, Mae West and Babe Ruth. On the shelf below them, Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Harry S. Truman, Teddy Roosevelt, George Washington, Mark Twain and Christopher Columbus keep company.

Rhett Butler stands with two Scarlett O'Haras on a

nightstand. And on another shelf a few incarnations of Elvis Presley make the much larger Harmony doll — a folk singer made in 1972, complete with a guitar and amplifier stack — swoon.

And there's a Kaiser Baby, a hideous newborn created to commemorate the birth of Kaiser Wilhelm II, ugly as a baboon but worth perhaps \$600.

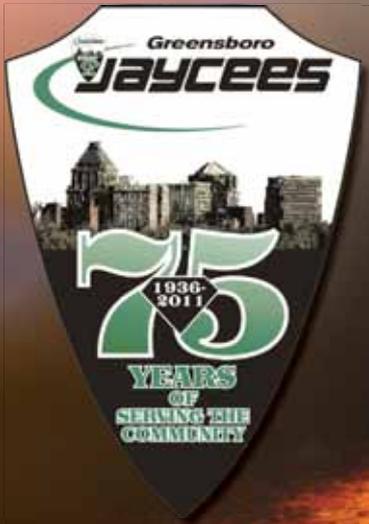
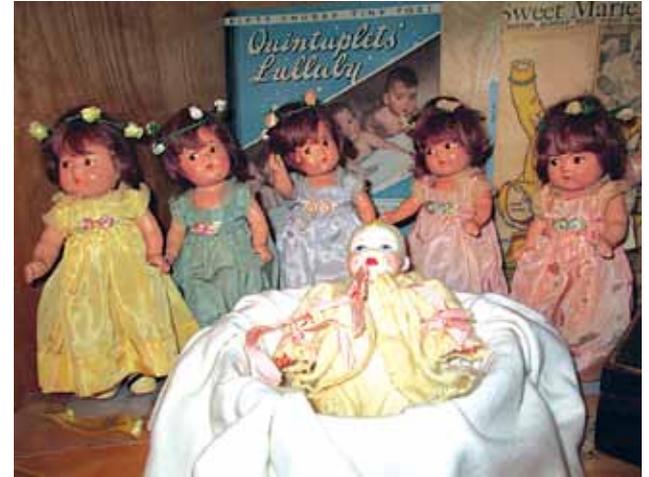
"They're together, but they're not being loved," Maeder says, "not being doted on the way they should be."

Some, she says, she'll keep — the ones her grandmother, great-grandmother and great-aunt made. The North African shoeshine boy given to her mother as a gift. Dana, in black vinyl slicker, white fishnets and go-go boots who Maeder says "looks like she stepped right out of Carnaby Street — I think I wanted to be her when I was her age." The Rock and Roll Madame doll, made to resemble Maeder herself when she reigned on the airwaves, with a black miniskirt, black shades, an animal-print blouse and black satin jacket.

There's another doll, with a rawhide-fringe jacket and cowgirl boots who looks like she could have shared the stage with an early-era Patsy Kline. That one, made by a Winston-Salem artist, is Mama Jo herself, copied from a photograph of her in her prime. It will stay, too.

But the rest must go — all 700 of them, one at a time, each with a story and a surprise. When the rooms are finally empty, this chapter in Jo Maeder's own story will finally be over.

"I don't know what's out there after all the dolls have found homes," Maeder says. "I don't know what's next. But... who does?"



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