

## ManSpace: This pinball collector's got game

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PHOTOS BY JEFF STECCATO

Vic Camp, who grew up in Newark and played pinball at a neighborhood candy store, puts a vintage machine through its paces.

The sounds that hit you as you walk through the back door of Vic Camp's Clifton home are instantly recognizable to anyone who has spent summer nights at a boardwalk arcade. The ding-ding-ding, mixed with the thuds of small steel balls caroming off rubber bumpers, can mean only one thing — pinball! The three connected spaces (including the garage) that make up Camp's "game room" accommodate 39 of the machines, mostly vintage.

Camp has been collecting the games for 30 years, but can fit only 39 in his house at one time. They line most of the wall space in his basement, leaving just enough room for a small bar; neon beer signs decorate the walls above. His garage holds six games, along with a workbench and a wall of shelves stocked with spare pinball parts.



Camp's basement ManSpace also features a working Seeburg jukebox from the 1950s. He said he has restored about two dozen jukeboxes over the years, but only has room to keep two.

"I started playing when I was five or six years old," Camp said. "When I was growing up, our house in Newark was 50 feet from a candy store that had a pinball machine. I would play all of the time. I love playing the games — I am a player before a collector."

### WILD FOR WEDGEHEADS

Camp's collection features all of the major manufacturers: Bally, Williams and Gottlieb. But Camp is a D. Gottlieb & Company guy, most of his machines produced by that now-defunct Chicago company. He explained that the Gottlieb machines are called "wedgeheads" because the backbox — the upright portion of the machine — has a slight wedge shape.

The coin-operated game industry switched to solid-state circuitry in the late 1970s, but all of Camp's treasures are old-style electromechanical models, using switches, wires, relays and electric motors. The games in the basement are arranged in a loose chronological order. They start in one corner with a 1961 model called "Showboat," a replica of one Camp's grandmother had in her house. Next to it stands a 1963 model called "Sweet Hearts," which his father bought him in 1969 for agreeing to attend Essex Catholic High School rather than public school. The machines progress in vintage up to 1979. Many are the same as he played at the candy store or in arcades down the shore.

"After a hard day at work, I'll come down here and turn on the games," Camp said. "Sometimes, I'll start playing and get a flashback to that candy store."

The garage houses his collection of Bingo pinball machines, which do not have flippers — to shoot the ball back into the playing field, the player must rely on strategy and touch. "They are a real game of skill," Camp said. "Flipper games are like checkers, but Bingo games are like chess." The oldest Bingo machine in his collection is a 1951 "Coney Island" model produced by Bally.

### A COLLECTORS' COLLECTOR

Pinball collectors, like collectors everywhere, want their "pins" or "pin games" in perfect condition. Camp decided early to concentrate on low-played machines in mint condition. Only two cabinets in his collection have been repainted; the rest have been cleaned up but not re-painted.

Camp estimates that over 150 pins have passed through his hands. To find machines, he trades with other collectors, but most come from homeowners who have one gathering dust in a basement or garage and want to get rid of it. According to pinballowners.com, a resource and database for collectors and owners, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania are fertile hunting grounds.

The community of collectors helps one another find machines, and Camp has repaired and refurbished games for others. "I talk to people all over the world," he said. "I know the machines so well, I can coach someone over the phone on how to fix them."

"In the old days, I would have three or four games open and be working on them," Camp added. "I was putting in 14-hour days on the weekends, just working on machines — I average about 100 hours per each. I do maintenance on each machine every year. Each game has an index card where I record all of the work I do on it."

While his schedule is less hectic these days, Camp does open up his game rooms to other pinball aficionados. He has hosted a friend's Boy Scout troop and invites collectors from the area for an annual party that draws a crowd.

Even though the first video games in the mid-1970s pushed traditional pinball into the background, the Internet now provides a platform for Camp to share his knowledge and expertise. He writes extensively about the games online and communicates with other collectors.

An elderly Clifton neighbor who found his name on the Web asked him to repair an old "Bank-a-Ball" machine — a twin of one in Camp's own collection. He spent 50 hours of his spare time refurbishing his neighbor's game and the two became friends.

"I love the electronics and the artwork of the machines," Camp said. "I was addicted to pinball as a kid, and it's still a pleasure to be a part of it. I love the camaraderie. You meet all types of people and get a chance to share and grow with other people."