

process of assembling these elements into a Rorschach tapestry is compelling.

Lish presents an astonishing, if revolting, book-length characterization of a madman from the inside looking out. By representing the narrator's thought patterns with twisting and jolting syntax, Lish gives even the simplest description a sinister spin: "For instance, for instance—speaking of the cellar, for instance—I once went down to our cellar with their dog once—I once went down into our cellar with Iris Lieblisch and her dog once—I went down there with her and with Sir once." Lish also creates an excruciating cumulative effect by piling odd detail on top of twisted observation until even unadorned sentences hit like hammer blows.

Though this is only his third book of

fiction, Lish, 52, is already an important character in American literature. For the past 10 years he has been an editor at the prestigious Alfred A. Knopf publishing house, and before that was the fiction editor of *Esquire* magazine for eight years. The bookshelves in his Knopf office are jammed with multiple copies of the books he has edited, including the work of such acclaimed writers as Barry Hannah and Roy Blount Jr. He's also an indefatigable teacher of writing, with continuing positions at Columbia and New York University and frequent appearances at workshops around the country. Of all these activities, teaching gives Lish the most satisfaction: "It's how I get my greatest pleasure and feel myself most usefully used."

Still, Lish has built a substantial critical

reputation with his first novel, "Dear Mr. Capote," and a collection of short stories, "What I Know So Far." In "Dear Mr. Capote" Lish also dealt with the interior mental state of a psychopath. Although he tried to avoid writing about the same general subject again, he says, "Every time I came to the page my impulse was running along these lines." In fact, Lish says he experienced a "psychotic episode" during his adolescence as a side effect of an experimental drug he was taking to clear up a skin disorder. Lish says he has never succeeded in translating the particulars of his experience into fiction, but it certainly has influenced what he writes and how he writes about it. And helps to account for the astonishing power of "Peru."

R. G.

UPDATE

Atlantic's Mother Lode of Golden Oldies

Nothing else in the music business suggests an air of mystery and hidden treasure like "the vault"—the place where record companies store old material that's faded from pop charts and aural memories. In reality, the vault is usually a warehouse somewhere in suburbia. The treasure, however, is real—and no one's cache can match the mother lode of golden oldies at Atlantic Records. Now Atlantic is sharing the wealth in a big way—with a monumental reissue of seven two-record sets called "Atlantic Rhythm and Blues 1947-1974." Together and separately, these albums vividly depict the history of R&B, and the music on them is guaranteed to make you shake your moneymaker.

Atlantic may not have invented R&B, but the label's artists and producers helped to perfect the form. Its roster reads like an R&B Hall of Fame: Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, the Drifters, the Coasters, Wilson Pickett, Sam and Dave, the Spinners, Roberta Flack and many more. The early Atlantic blend of blues-tinged vocals and swing-era instrumentation evolved into a potent and, just as important, popular combination. Within two

years of its founding in 1947, Atlantic began to produce very successful records—and the hits just kept on coming. From the early '50s through much of the '60s, Atlantic was the dominant record label for rhythm and blues.

In fact it's possible to trace the development of R&B by listening to the reissues in order. But the primary intent of this compilation is pleasure, say the project's two producers, Aziz Goksel and Bob Porter. "I don't think people are into education," says Porter. "If they can be informed while they're entertained, fine." The first two-record package (1947-1952) shows the nascent Atlantic sound: emotive singers, driving rhythm sections and fat, growly saxophones. Each set shows the tremendous imagination of Atlantic's

musicians, arrangers and producers. Working within the tradition, but creating distinctly different forms of magic, are such immortals as quicksilver Clyde McPhatter and earthy Ray Charles.

True grit: The songs are classic. While later hits—like Sam and Dave's "Soul Man" or the Spinners' "Could It Be I'm Falling in Love"—might be more familiar, the older oldies are just as wonderful. Listen to Big Joe Turner belting out 1952's "Sweet Sixteen" with a mighty horn section, or the dazzling vocal interplay on the Chords' 1954 "Sh-Boom." Wilson Pickett makes true grit a blessing on 1965's "In the Midnight Hour." And Redding's posthumous hit "(Sittin' on) The Dock of the Bay" from 1968 is a subdued heartbreaker.

An earthy R&B immortal: Ray Charles (1958)

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES



Respect: Aretha (c. 1965)

Many of the great Atlantic artists show up a number of times: for example, 15 Drifters' tunes—including "Money Honey," "Save the Last Dance for Me" and "Up on the Roof"—are scattered across the compilation. In a few instances, the set gives two different interpretations of the same song. Redding and Franklin both did "Respect," but their versions are very different and both astonishing. Inevitably, over the course of the nine-odd hours of music on "Atlantic Rhythm and Blues 1947-1974," there are some low points—the last two-record package (1969-1974) is a cut below the others—but all of the sets are worth your hard-earned money and careful attention. You will listen and laugh and dance and, finally, be awed.

R. G.