



PHOTOS BY JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

In his Jamaica Plain workshop, Michael Babcock demonstrated a 75-year-old Linotype Model 31, maybe the last hot-type press in Boston. Linotypes revolutionized the newspaper industry.

THE SOUL OF AN OLD MACHINE

Linotype that made modern newspapers possible labors on in Jamaica Plain

By Brian MacQuarrie
GLOBE STAFF

Michael Babcock flexes his fingers like a concert pianist as he slides in front of a clanking, sliding, synchronized conglomeration of mechanical arms and legs protruding from a hulking, 2-ton machine.

It has a searing pot of molten metal, adjustments made in 10,000ths of an inch, and a typewriter-like keyboard whose characters have been scrambled into a game of hide-and-seek for the uninitiated.

Babcock is serene, almost Zen-like, as he begins to type letters that soon will be cast on a horizontal slug of lead, tin, and antimony, an old-school process that embraces tradition in a digital age.

"I'm connected to history," Babcock says,

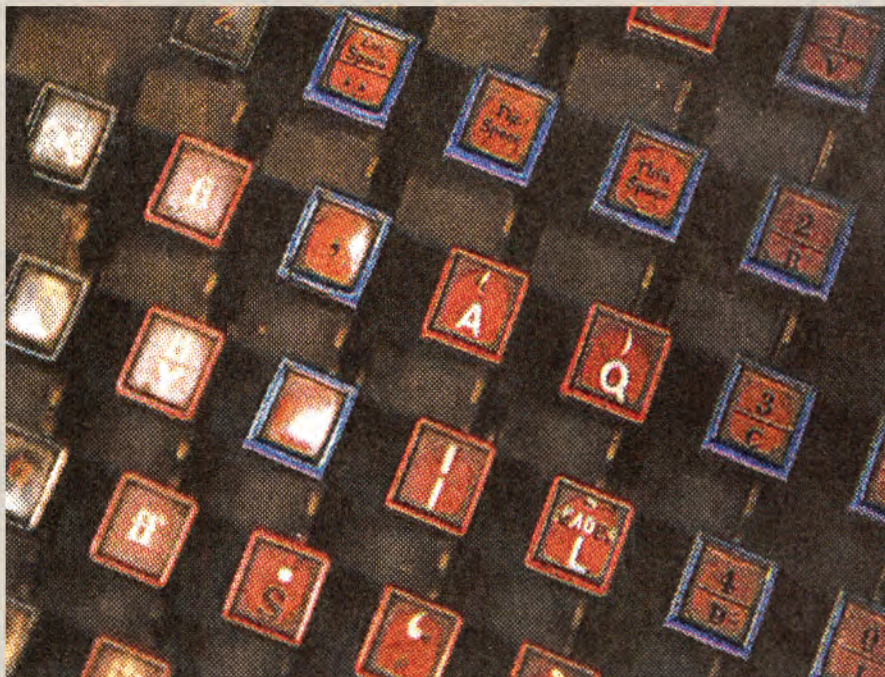
gazing at his inanimate partner, a 75-year-old Linotype Model 31. "I'm walking in the footsteps of greats. I've got one foot in the year 1450 and one foot in today."

On this recent afternoon, Babcock's feet are in a 20-by-16-foot workshop behind his house in Jamaica Plain. It's a crowded but tidy place, scented by sandalwood incense from Malaysia, and it's where Babcock cajoles and commands what is believed to be the last hot-type press in Boston.

It's a side gig for Babcock, who finally decided in the last few years that his Interrobang Press was not sustainable as a full-time, going concern.

Digital printing now dominates the market. As a result, craftspeople like Babcock who work in metal type are consigned to a niche business that caters to specialized customers enamored of the look and feel of physically imprinted letters.

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occurs.

"This made the 5-pound Sunday paper possible," Babcock said, nodding toward the Linotype that he paid a professional rigger \$4,000 to move here in 2018. "This made the morning and evening editions possible. This was the great efficiency."

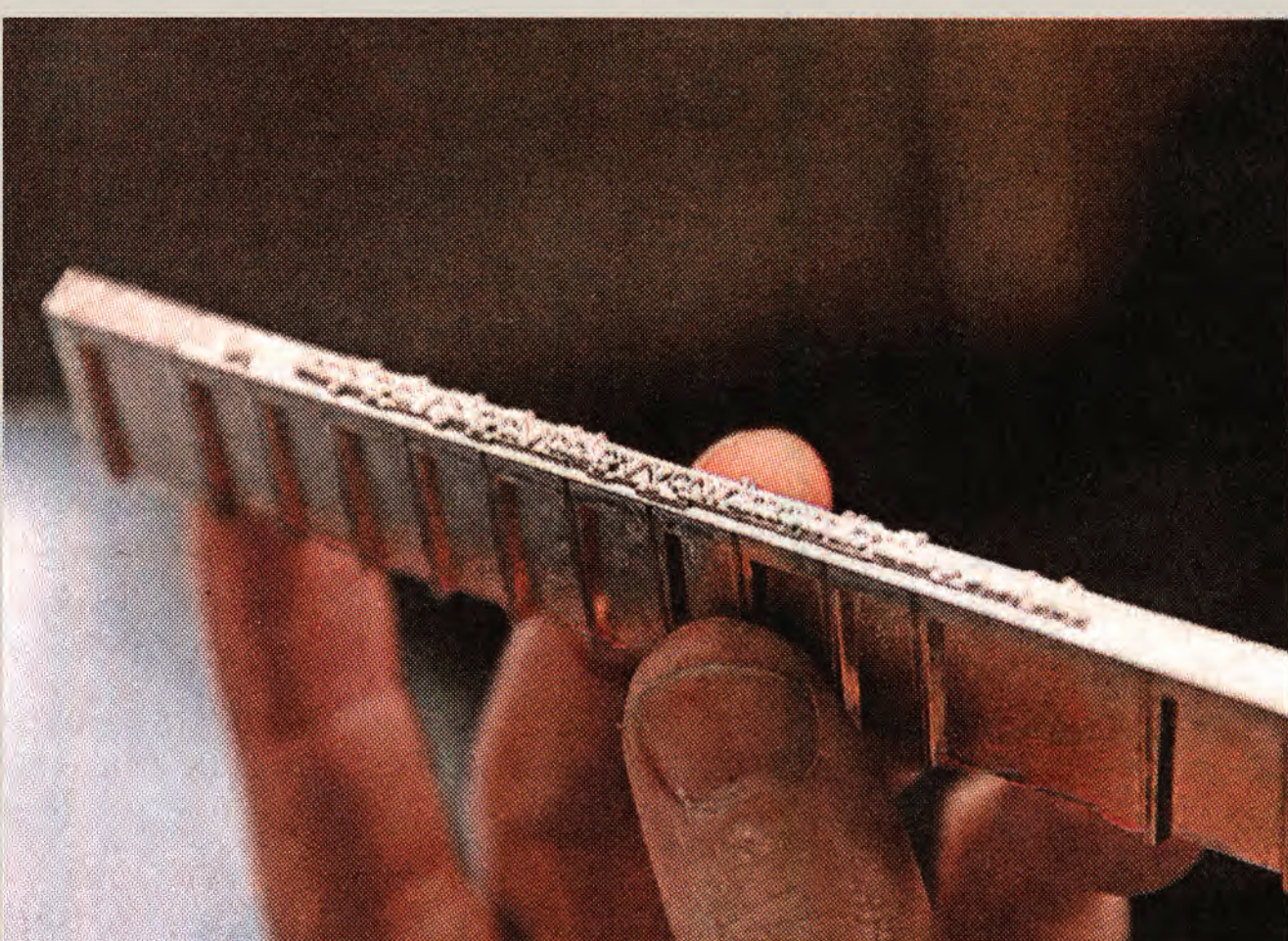
The Boston Globe abandoned the Linotype in the late 1970s. Its printed editions now are produced by technology that takes photographs of digitally generated pages and reproduces them on a press plate. It all starts with the push of a computer button.

Keith Cross, who teaches a letterpress workshop at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, said more students are showing an interest in working with their hands and "getting back to analog means to express themselves."

These young designers "now have had type in their hands and may one day, like Michael, have 'lead in their veins,'" Cross said.

Babcock certainly does. Not only is he steeped in the many minute variations in type, but he can take his clanking Linotype apart and put it back together. Man and machine clearly are in harmony in his workspace.

Babcock has the chemical symbols for lead, tin, and antimony — the three elements used in hot type — tattooed near his left shoulder. He is



wearing a T-shirt dedicated to Helvetica Neue typeface. And he has a big Led Zeppelin belt buckle, perhaps a nod to his days as a garage-band rocker.

Babcock acquired his Linotype free of charge from John Kristensen, a friend and mentor who owns Firefly Press, which has offices in Allston and does letterpress production in Buxton, Maine.

"I'm helping save the world, one wedding customer at a time," Kristensen said with a laugh. "Whether or not there is a commercial future in it, I don't know. What I do know is it's great fun. I wouldn't have been as happy doing anything else."

Kristensen shares Babcock's passion for the work and has a historian's appreciation of its roots.

"Letterpress is the authentic, is the original, is the primal

technology," Kristensen said. "There is always a little bit of texture to it, and people like that. It feels real in a way that other methods don't."

Babcock worked full time at Interrobang from 2010 to 2017, but the bottom line wasn't favorable or promising. He withdrew cash from his retirement account a few times, moved within Jamaica Plain because of gentrification pressure, and spent \$40,000 on type over the years — all for pennies on the dollar.

"It was complete hubris to think I was making a wise move," Babcock said with a widening smile. "It was madness."

But that move has attracted customers who appreciate his work.

"It's quality, it looks good, and it's professional," said George Kordan, a Roslindale

man for whom Babcock prints thank-you cards for his landscaping company, called Will Mow Lawn. "I'm able to have the work customized, and I like to support local business."

Kordan, who also uses digital printing, has visited Babcock's one-of-a-kind Boston workshop.

"It is nice machinery, and that's pretty neat," Kordan said. "Ultimately, I look at the final result, and I'm happy with it."

Babcock is happy with the results, too, and he has no intention of putting his press in wraps.

"I'm the best pressman in Boston, which is saying a lot and not saying anything at all," Babcock said with a slight shrug. "This is my life, and I'll do this until I die."

Contact Brian MacQuarrie at brian.macquarrie@globe.com.

Linotype work is a labor of love

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"It's inexplicable why people aren't banging down the door here," said Babcock, 56, the production and design manager at David R. Godine, an independent publisher in Boston. "But how do you convert people who have no idea what it is?"

What it is, Babcock said, is a labor of love. Not just for the printed word — although Babcock is smitten by that, too — but for the way those words are printed through a meticulous process that can be traced back to the end of the Middle Ages.

"I've built something pretty unique here," said Babcock, whose little shop prints wedding invitations, stationery, business cards, broadsides, and myriad other products.

His shop is a direct descendant of the game-changing technology that Johannes Gutenberg invented to create the printing press. The result was much faster production — "No more scribe at the copy board, copying and copying again," Babcock said — and the breakthrough made possible the broad distribution of the Bible, as well as a new era of learning that produced the Renaissance, the Reformation, and a revolution in science.

"The Chinese and Koreans might have scooped Gutenberg by a few centuries, but Gutenberg signed his work, so he gets the credit," Babcock said with a smile.

Babcock's work runs through his Linotype machine, built in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1944. Invented in 1886, the Linotype represented a quantum leap for printers by allowing them to create long lines of type — cast directly by the machine from hot metal — instead of setting individual characters by hand.

That led to an explosion in mass-circulation city newspapers, many of which remained wedded to the Linotype machine past the mid-20th century. In Babcock's hands, the machine's castings in Jamaica Plain are transferred to a nearby hand-fed machine called a letterpress, where the printing