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Chapter 1

A Brief History of Record Collecting

Some people are born collectors. Others have collecting thrust upon them. And some just wander into it without even thinking.

I can pinpoint my induction into the most honorable society of record collectors, crate diggers, and vinyl hounds to the very day — October 7, 1972. That was when I headed to my local record store to pick up the latest David Bowie single — a four-song collection of material he had recorded back in 1966, released in the UK the previous day.

It was titled *For the Collector — Early David Bowie* (see Figure 1-1), and the deal was done. Until that moment, I had never even thought of the dozen or so singles that I already owned as a “collection.” They were just a dozen or so singles. But there it was in black (or, more accurately, blue) and white. I was now a collector.

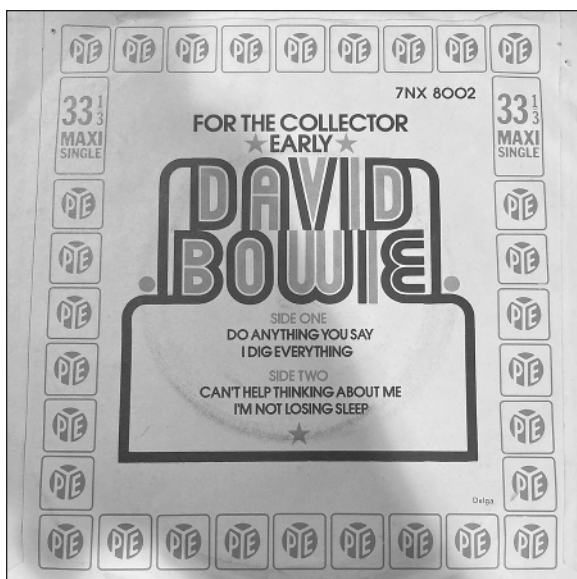


FIGURE 1-1: Now there is no turning back.

This wasn't such a bad thing. People had been collecting records for as long as there were records to collect. And before that, they collected wax cylinders, the first commercially available sound recordings ever released, back in 1889. Some people still do!

They Were Cylinders, and They Were Made of Wax

Wax cylinders are exactly what they say they are — wax cylinders about 4 inches tall, with the recorded sound etched into the wax. (See Figure 1-2.) Placed into the player, they could house up to three minutes of music or speech . . . not in especially high fidelity, even when they were new, but certainly sufficient to amaze audiences of the day when they first encountered this latest technological marvel.

The earliest wax cylinders were produced for nickelodeons (the very first jukeboxes!) and they were a common sight at fairgrounds and other public places even into the new (20th) century. Many, in fact, were owned by traveling showmen, who would load

the player and the cylinders into their automobile (itself a novelty in some parts of the country), and charge people a nickel apiece to experience the magic.

You can still find wax cylinders today, and they're not necessarily expensive either. Prices often start at under \$10 apiece — which, thanks to the wonders of inflation, is actually cheaper than their retail price when they were released. Fifty cents in 1890 would be around \$16 today.

There are a lot of cylinders to choose from. Thomas Edison, one of the inventors of the format (and certainly its best-known manufacturer), issued catalogs that sorted his company's releases by theme — children's stories, patriotic music, sacred songs, instrumentals, popular songs, spoken word.

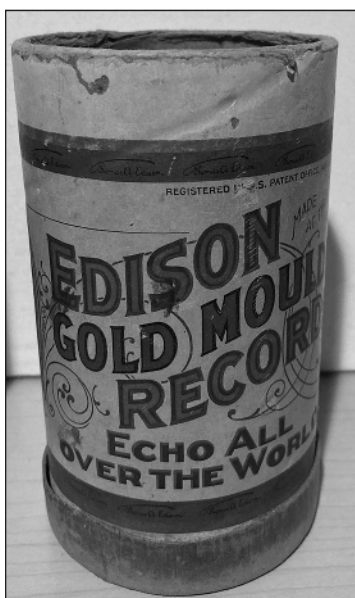


FIGURE 1-2: A cylinder full of sound.

Other companies specialized in recordings of political speeches and presidential addresses, or “Teach Yourself”-style language tutorials. (There was even a healthy market for risqué material, evidenced in 2007 by a CD released by Archeophone Recordings under the title *Actionable Offenses: Indecent Phonograph Recordings from the 1890s*.)

Still others marketed blank cylinders, because the players of the day not only played prerecorded cylinders, but also allowed the user to record their own. You could even record over older recordings, by carefully shaving the surface of the cylinder!



WARNING

There is a heartbreaking scene in director Maggie Greenwald's 2000 movie *Songcatcher*. Set in the 1910s, it is the story of a musician who visits the Appalachians specifically to hear, and record, the old folk songs that were still being sung in those parts at the time. She is accompanied by a mass of wax cylinders and a recording machine, only to lose her entire collection when the house where she is staying is burned down. We literally see her cylinders melting.

Neither did it take a catastrophe such as this to destroy a cylinder. Wax can melt at less than 100 degrees Fahrenheit (vinyl can withstand around 140 degrees before it will begin to warp). This means even a hot day could irreparably damage a collection, while the slightest bump or knock could likewise render a recording unplayable.

The First Records That Look Like Records

Cylinders were still rising in popularity when German-American inventor Emile Berliner perfected what he called the “gramophone plate” in the early 1890s — flat discs that were superior to wax cylinders in every respect and a lot more resilient too. His earliest discs were pressed on celluloid and rubber, before he switched to shellac — the same material being used in the telephones of the time — in 1894.

By the following year, Berliner had released around 100 “plates” that revolved on a hand-cranked “phonograph” (what we would call a record player) at speeds as high as 150 revolutions per minute (rpm). Further improvements would ultimately see this reduced to 78 rpm. In the meantime, however, Berliner also found the time, in 1898, to follow up his first record label, Berliner, with what remains one of the most successful and respected record companies in the world, Deutsche Grammophon.



REMEMBER

The beauty of Berliner's invention was its simplicity. Indeed, with only a handful of technical improvements, the shape and sound of the next 50 years of recorded music — that is, predominantly 10-inch discs, revolving at 78 rpm — was established while Berliner was still tinkering.

Everyone bowed down at the altar of Emile Berliner — everyone except Thomas Edison. In 1912, the man who had already given us the lightbulb, the fluoroscope (an early form of X-ray), the stock ticker, and the movie camera decided to improve upon Berliner's creation, in the form of what he modestly referred to as “Edison Diamond Discs.” The next section looks at Edison's contribution in greater detail.

Edison's flawed diamonds

On the surface, Diamond Discs look little different from their rivals. Yes, they were a lot thicker — a quarter of an inch thick — but they were round, they were black, and they were made of . . . oh! A viscous (and vicious — in its pure form, it can cause chemical burns) petroleum-based condensate called phenol, brushed or sprayed onto a celluloid base bonded to a wood-flour core.

Diamond Discs revolved at 80 rpm and, while the majority of releases were the standard 10-inch size, with occasional 7-inch and 12-inch releases, Edison was never bound by convention. Diamond Discs also appeared with diameters of 14, 16, and even 21 inches!

Plus you needed a special Edison phonograph, with its own patent needle, to play them on. All of which was worthwhile . . . why?

Because, as Edison (or one of his ad men) declared in a 1924 marketing pitch, his recordings alone guaranteed “true representations of vocal and instrumental music as produced by living artists. They are not mere shadows. They are the very substance of the living music, alive with all the emotions of the living artist.”



TIP

Think of them as the first audiophile discs (see Chapter 5) — if audiophile discs required their own fancy-pants player.

Collecting Edison discs

There was only ever going to be one victor in the ensuing tug of war. Edison alone made Edison discs and the machines

that were necessary to play them on. The sheer weight of the competition — that is, every other record company in the world — left Edison discs in the dust.

As has been proven on so many subsequent occasions — 8-track tapes versus cassettes, stereo versus quadraphonic sound (see Chapter 2) or mp3 versus just about any other recorded sound on earth, the general public simply wants to hear their favorite songs and they'll take the cheapest and most convenient means of doing so every time.

There were listeners who cared only for Edison discs, just as there are listeners today who solely purchase releases on modern audiophile labels. But collectors alone cannot sustain a major manufacturing business and, by 1929, Edison had ceased production — at around much the same time, ironically, as the first players capable of handling both his discs and regular 78s came onto the market.

Edison discs are relatively common today, although few dealers beyond true specialists ever bother separating them from “regular” 78s. It is a testament, however, to their durability that once, having myself purchased a quite magnificent Edison player from a local secondhand store, I visited a local record store and gestured towards the boxes of 78s that lay on the floor, and asked if there were likely to be any Edison discs in there.

The dealer's response remains hilarious. “Buy the whole lot and drop it out of a window. The Edisons will be the ones that don't shatter.”

Some Edison names to look out for

Altogether, Edison released some 25,000 different records and, as with his wax cylinder output, there's lots of variety to choose from. To make your search a tad easier, turn to any number of very attractive printed catalogs devoted to Edison discs and let your fingers do the walking.

Of particular interest to many collectors are the early jazz and blues recordings, delivered by names such as Eubie Blake and the Frisco Jass [sic] Band, Wilbur Sweatman's Brownies, Noble Sissle, and — most prized of all — Arthur F. Collins and Byron G. Harlan's “That Funny Jas Band From Dixieland,” dating from January of 1917 and renowned as the very first recorded reference to jazz music yet discovered.

Fans of early country are well catered to, most notably by the once best-selling singer Vernon Dalhart; elsewhere, the catalog glitters with vaudeville performers, Hawaiian guitarists, polka, pianists, comedians, and some very highly regarded classical performances. Composer Sergei Rachmaninov was a close friend of Edison's and such a keen supporter of the Edison disc that he personally recorded a number of pieces for the label.



TIP

If you want to “try before you buy,” the Naxos label has reissued many of Rachmaninov's Edison recordings on CD, while further extracts from the Edison catalog have been digitally archived by the National Park Services' Recorded Sound Archives website and (again on CD) by Document Records, among others.

Looking at costs

As with every other aspect of the record collecting hobby, final costs depend upon what you are looking for. As already remarked, Edison discs in general are so sufficiently overlooked that most dealers neither know nor care enough to price them individually, so they can often be picked up virtually wholesale. It is when you are pursuing specific discs or artists that you are most likely to run into more knowledgeable sellers, and if you're bidding at auction (on- or offline), knowledgeable rival collectors, too.

78s — Whatever You Do, Don't Drop Them

In terms of unbroken longevity, the 78 is the most successful musical delivery system ever developed, remaining in service from the mid-1890s until (in some countries) as late as the mid-1960s. Indeed, there are Beatles collectors who go to sleep every night to dream of finding a stash of that band's early singles, as released on 78 in India.

By comparison, the LP enjoyed less than 40 years of supremacy, the CD and cassette closer to 30. And, to put the 78's lifespan into even more vivid perspective, when the first flat disc appeared, “America the Beautiful” was a brand new song, composer Carl Orff was a newborn baby, and Dan W Quinn was Berliner's first, eponymous record label's biggest star. When the 45 finally supplanted the 78, John Lennon was there to wave it goodbye.

That said, the 78 did experience some turbulent times, and as early as the 1930s, efforts were being made to replace it. That was when both RCA and Columbia Records announced that they had perfected a long-playing disc that could hold some three times more music per side than a 78. And so they had. It just took them another near-20 years to find a way to stop their new invention from physically disintegrating after a handful of plays.

The Depression seriously depressed 78 sales; and while they bounced back (in 1938, over 13 million 78s were sold to jukebox stockists alone), World War II (1941–1945) brought problems of its own. Not only was there a major shellac shortage, but the industry also needed to contend with the government's Office of War Information's demand that musicians cease recording any music that did not directly contribute to the war effort. That particular request was largely ignored, but 1942 also saw the American Federation of Musicians declare an all-out recording strike in a row over royalty payments.

Then, just when things were getting back to normal, back came Columbia with their now-perfected long-playing disc; RCA followed through with the (comparatively) unbreakable 45, and the 78's days were numbered.

But what a reign it enjoyed.

How breakable are they?

Don't ask. But, since you have, imagine a scale of one through ten, with an antique filigree crystal dish at the low end, and a windowpane at the upper limit. The average 78 would fall a lot closer to the crystal than the window, and in so doing, it would more than likely shatter.

Even carrying them home from the store places them at a higher degree of risk than you can imagine; knocking one off the table is likely fatal. Mailing one without at least a couple of inches of reinforcement is effectively a death sentence, and if you leave one on, say, a chair, and someone should sit down on it, it won't matter how quickly they stand up again. You'll be picking splinters of shellac from the cushion (and the sitter's bottom) for days.

That's how breakable they are.

How collectible are they?

In general, sad to say, not very. Let's not talk value, as in dollars and cents. It is the significance of certain releases that is important. The active market for 78s is tiny by comparison with LPs and 45s, and the number of recordings released across those 60-some years is immense. Some of the songs we still sing today. But many are forgotten, and likewise the artists who recorded them.

Thus, it's fair to say that the majority of the most sought-after 78s are those that cross over into other areas that are themselves collectible. For example, all the big stars of the 1950s rock'n'roll explosion saw their first records released on 78, and the average (say) Gene Vincent fan probably wouldn't think twice about adding a 78 of "Be-Bop-A-Lula" (see Figure 1-3) to their collection, if they found one. If nothing else, it makes a fabulous anachronism.



FIGURE 1-3: Rock'n'roll looks so wrong on a 78.

A collector of presidential memorabilia might be thrilled to discover one of the handful of 78s recorded by Margaret Woodrow Wilson, daughter and, following the death of her mother, first lady of the 28th president, Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921). Indeed,

that collector might even find themselves in a bidding war with certain folk music aficionados — among Margaret’s earliest recordings was a version of “Leezie Lindsay” (see Figure 1-4), a traditional Scottish song that some readers might also recognize as one of the Child Ballads.

Collectors of theater might pursue 78 recordings of beloved standards, or forgotten space-fillers, those songs with which every musical filled the spaces between the surefire hits. Yes, a lot of this material now is available either on LP or CD. But how much more authentic does it feel to own it in its original form?



FIGURE 1-4: Sing along with the president’s daughter.

I got those old can’t find that record blues again, Mama

Probably the hottest of all 78s, however, are those recorded by the original blues and jazz performers in the 1920s and 1930s, much of which might have been lost forever were it not for the efforts of sundry dedicated collectors in the 1950s and 1960s.

In fact, it’s not an exaggeration to say that dozens of the blues numbers that today are reissued across so many compilation albums exist only because someone, somehow, came across

a solitary 78 of the song and was able to place it into circulation. And that same 78, in some cases, is the only one known to exist! Or, at least, the only one in anything approaching playable condition.

Stone-cold classics by Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, and Willie Brown, if they don't fall into this so-exclusive company, are at least close to it. A 78 of "Don't You Leave Me Here," by bluesmen Long Cleve Reed and Little Harvey Hull, on the Black Patti label, sold for over \$10,000 in 2015, and it genuinely was the only known copy in existence. Tommy Johnson's "Alcohol and Jake Blues" — at the time of writing the most expensive 78 ever sold (\$37,000) — is one of just two verified surviving copies.

Is it any wonder, then, that no newly unearthed collection of 78s, no matter how poorly it may be presented, is unlikely to remain unpicked over for long? Again, the aforementioned estate sales are an irresistible magnet for the hope-against-hopeful, as are yard sales, and even the box of old discs that someone dropped off at the local record store after finding it in the attic. Yes, the chances of striking gold are minimal. But they exist, nevertheless.

ADVENTURES IN RECORD COLLECTING

Some of the most thrilling stories about the lengths to which collectors will go are told of the doughty young blues enthusiasts of the 1950s who, by way of taking a vacation, would drive into the American South and devote their entire trip to knocking on people's doors to ask if they had any old records for sale. Because many times, they would and — depending upon the resident's age and the ethnic make-up of the area — many times those records would be early blues and jazz.

Well-known musicians such as Al Wilson (Canned Heat) and John Fahey devoted weeks at a time to such trips, and while they probably went to bed empty handed more often than not, still the thrill of the hunt itself was compulsive.

Remember, this was in the days before the internet invaded every home, before yard sales popped up on every street and antique malls

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on every other block. A time when old junk was viewed, literally, as old junk, and the only reason it was even kept around the house was because nobody had bothered to throw it out. And 78s, to many people, were just “old junk,” particularly if they’d recently invested in one of those newfangled LP record players and didn’t care for the old stuff anymore.

The offer of hard cash for unwanted trash was too good to turn away, and it was a fair trade because the young purchasers weren’t in this for material gain, either. They just wanted to hear these records, maybe learn them, maybe perform them. Everybody won.

Playing your 78s

So you took the plunge, did you? A trip to the thrift store, the junk store, wherever, and home you came with your first 78s . . . and then you realize your record player only has two speeds.

Now, perhaps you’ve already checked out Chapter 2, where I talk about setting up your listening equipment. Or you already have a record player . . . even if it is, as you have just discovered, the wrong one. Or maybe you even intend to collect only 78s, in which case I might as well cover this here.

Recommended modern turntables for the 78s enthusiast

There are no dedicated 78 rpm players on the market today. However, there are several that will at least allow you to switch to 78 rpm so you can listen to your discs, at price points that range from under \$50 on up (remembering that, with turntables as much as anything else, you get what you pay for).

In the mid-price range, both Denon and Audio-Technica offer very serviceable turntables that play three speeds, with the latter facilitating USB recording as well. Another good option is Pro-Ject’s Debut III, which, though a little pricier, comes with its own built-in pre-amp. (See Chapter 2 for why this can be important.) It is a little more fidgety, in that the user needs to manually change the drive belt when changing speeds (two different ones are supplied, as are full instructions), but overall it is a very satisfactory machine.

Vintage turntables

In an ideal world, working vintage 78 record players would be as plentiful as playable vintage 78s. Sadly, time, wear, and avid DIYers who strip the guts out of the original cabinet and replace them with bookshelves, wine racks, and the like have come close to placing such things on the endangered list.



TIP

Finding parts and effecting repairs can also be tricky. Working machines are out there, however, and any reasonable dealer will be happy to allow you to test drive their stock, so always remember to bring a disc or two along with you (unless, of course, the dealer already has some on site), and be prepared, too, for a very different sound experience.

Whether or not that's a good thing, naturally, is for the listener to decide. Some people find the sound produced by the older, hand-cranked players to be infinitely preferable to the electric, motorized ones that began appearing around the 1930s — plus there is more that can go wrong with the latter, including their penchant for emitting a horrific buzz and a range of unpleasant aromas.

Hand-cranked players, on the other hand, place no more obstacle between your ears and the music than the actual process of the needle reading the groove and transmitting it through the speaker — a wholly acoustic procedure. Of course, this also means that you cannot adjust the sound — there were no mono or treble controls to twiddle with, and none of the bells and whistles that we might normally associate with a turntable. But it's worth it.

Getting the (78) needle

Last but not least, playing 78s also demands a very specific stylus, and while that is true even of the modern players discussed above, those suitable for vintage players are an altogether different kind of beast.



REMEMBER

Because 78s have wider and slightly different-shaped grooves compared to 33s and 45s, the average stylus might well work, but will also sustain (and cause) damage in the process. Thankfully, a range of specialty 78 needles are still in production, with LP Gear's own name brand offering a very affordable entry-level example.

Older motorized turntables, however, have their own demands, but they can generally be fulfilled. Hand-cranked players, however, take you back to the dawn of time when a needle literally was a needle — a thick, sharp one, to be precise, sometimes known as a spear point. And the good news there is that they aren't simply plentiful, but they can be purchased in bulk from a variety of online sources. (See Figure 1-5.) You'll want to buy them in bulk, too. They wear down so quickly that many users replace their needle after each play.



FIGURE 1-5: The sharp end of record playing.

The Frantic World of 45s

The 45 — also known as the single, also known as the 7-inch — is the most powerful and influential development in the history of modern music. It supercharged the Top 40, and it was responsible for birthing almost every significant star of the 1950s and 1960s, and much of the 1970s as well. It established record collecting as a teenaged phenomenon, and it was responsible for pop music becoming both the biggest and the most volatile art form of the late 20th century — particularly if we expand the term's frontiers to the point where “art” includes rock, pop, country, reggae, and soul music. (Jazz, the blues, and classical music had less interest in the format; spoken word and soundtracks were, for obvious reasons, similarly uninterested.)

But in the places where it mattered, the 45 was king. It fueled the original rock'n'roll explosion and led the British Invasion; it propelled the Motown hit machine to glory; it nurtured the so-called teenybop stars of the early 1970s (the Osmonds, the Jackson 5, David Cassidy, the Bay City Rollers); it gave punk rock its violent immediacy; and even when its importance was supplanted by music videos following the birth of MTV in the early 1980s, it wasn't album tracks whose videos went into constant rotation. It was singles.

The birth of the legend

The 45 was launched on December 7, 1948, by RCA, in direct competition for the long-playing LPs being developed by Columbia. The two companies had worked side by side in the 1930s on the latter project (see 78s, above); now, however, when Columbia suggested the two companies join forces to market the new innovation, RCA opted to go it alone.

In truth, the company wasn't really sure what to do with the new 7-inch disc. In no way superior to 78s in terms of playing time, its biggest advantage was its smaller size and improved durability — vinyl is a lot harder to break than shellac. And this was important because it would effectively allow listeners to “shuffle” the songs that an LP would place in an inviolable running order.

And how, exactly, would they do that? By being marketed alongside a special new breed of turntable, featuring an extended central spindle, which could accommodate up to six singles at a time, held in place by a metal arm.

As soon as one single finished playing, and the tone arm returned to its rest, the next record in the pile would be released from the stack, and the tone arm would return to action. Over and over again until the stack was played through, then you'd flip the records over and begin again.

The official name for these new turntables was “autochangers” (see Figure 1-6), but I much prefer “stack'n'whack.” (See the nearby sidebar.) Pete Townshend, lead guitarist extraordinaire of the Who, remembers them quite fondly:

You had to have the regulation tin speaker record player, tin, not twin, housed artistically in a vinyl covered box under a lid with a

two-watt amplifier worthy only of use as a baby alarm, and a record deck on which the current top 20 singles could be stacked . . . for continuous dancing of the latest dance — which differed only from last week's in the tiniest possible hip-wagging details. A long sentence, but a single sentence. One sentence and you have the truth about singles. We made them tinny to sound tinny. If you made them hi-fi to sound tinny you were wasting your time, after all."

STACK'N'WHACK — THE GREATEST RECORD PLAYER EVER

Given how much attention is now paid to taking care of your records and preserving them from harm (see Chapters 10 and 11), it seems incredible that such a device was as popular as it was and for as long it was. But long after Columbia and RCA decided that there was room in the market for both LPs and singles, the stack'n'whack whacked on, through the '50s and '60s and well into the '70s, too. Around the same time, it might be mused, as the first record-collecting magazines came along, and started wittering on about grading and valuing your collection.

Not everybody adores the stack'n'whack. There are always those careful, cautious souls who instinctively realize that slamming a pile of 45s down upon one another, with no form of cushioning whatsoever, is not conducive to their long term well-being. Indeed, I only have to post a photograph of my own stack'n'whack on social media and I am deluged by concerned friends asking, "But what is it doing to your records?"

"Exactly what they were made to have done to them," I reply.

It's also true that, occasionally, one of the records might start to slip (that is, slow down and sound awful) as it plays. At which point, you'd scoop them all off the turntable, scraping them against one another as you did so, and so a few new scratches would be added as unstoppable platter met immovable disc. It probably didn't do the stylus any good either.

But there are times when you just don't care about such things. Home from a day at the record fair with your bag bulging with cheapo 45s, not one of which could be accused of being in "very good" condition and now you're looking at your hi-fi setup and cringing at the thought

of what might befall such an elegant beast should you suggest it try plowing through such jetsam. Plus, who wants to get up and change the record every three and a bit minutes? You're meant to be listening to music, not working out at the gym.

That is when stack'n'whack comes out of the closet. Because that's what it was for in the first place. Nonstop listening, nonstop partying, and when you've heard the A-sides one after another, flip 'em over and play the B-sides. So if you should ever spot one in a thrift store or buried in the attic, don't look down your nose at it and tut in disgust. Just dig out your scratchiest old 45s, and stack'n'whack the lot of them.



FIGURE 1-6: Dressed to kill and built to last, a late '60s stack'n'whack marches on.

The record collectors descend

There has always been a market for old records and there have always been people who buy them. Into the 1950s and beyond, street markets (see Figure 1-7) were a favorite haunt for buyers and sellers alike; few people, however, were convinced that they could actually earn a living selling nothing but used records.

That attitude started to change when the Jazz Record Center opened for business on Manhattan's West 47th Street in 1941. Initially established to allow owner Big Joe Clauberg to sell the mountain of ex-jukebox records he had picked up cheaply, the store rapidly found itself becoming the center of the New York record collecting world, a hitherto disparate crowd consisting of individuals who all likely believed themselves to be the only one of their kind in town.



Trinity Mirror/Alamy Stock Photo

FIGURE 1-7: Record collectors crowding an east London street market in 1955.

Of course it was all 78s in those days, but the store took off and others paid attention, especially once the advent of the 45 proved that record sales — new and old — were only going to escalate. Times Square Records, with its strict policy of only stocking records cut between 1953 and 1959, was one of the first truly devoted “oldies” shops in America, while Londoners of a certain age will fondly remember the Vintage Record Centre in Caledonian Road, with its own focus on '50s rock'n'roll and rockabilly (but much more besides), rows and rows of 45s arrayed in front of the counter.

There were plenty more like them, too, ranged across the US and Europe. And, when the first record price guides (see Chapter 9) were published, they cared most for 45s.

Albums, these learned tomes seemed to say, were okay if you wanted to sit down for hours on end, listening to the same band drone on about whatever it was they needed to say. And, in many ways, they were right about the droning part. A lot of artists made (and still make) a lot of albums that were little short of drivel. Singles were where the action was — short, sharp, and immediately gripping, the sound of tomorrow even when that was yesteryear.

They still hold that luster today.

The end of the line

For all their popularity, and for all the gifts they bestowed upon the industry, record companies often looked down upon the humble 7-inch, as though it were some kind of poor relation. And so it was, in many ways, at least in the world of rock and pop.

From the mid-1960s on, there appeared to be far more money earned from hit LPs than hit singles, and slowly the once universal trend of artists releasing a new 45 every few months — and then not even bothering to put it on an album — fell away. Now the format was looked at as a way of interesting people in the album itself, with many “progressive” bands admitting that it actually embarrassed them if a single was released in their name. Singles were for kids, they implied. Albums were for grown-ups.

It was nonsense, of course. But the single’s importance did slowly decline — the advent of 12-inch singles (see Chapter 3) made the 7-inch look somewhat stunted; music videos rendered them monochrome and static; cassette singles made them feel overpriced. By the time CD singles came along in the 1990s, and especially in the USA, new vinyl 45s were already dead and buried everywhere beyond the independent punk and rock undergrounds. (They thrived there, and still do.)

As “newies” fell from grace, however, “oldies” flourished — and continue to do so, despite all the modern music industry’s focus on LPs reissues. One day they might even start making stack’n’whacks again.

In for the Long Haul — Why We Love LPs

LPs — short for long players — are the heavyweights of the record world, 12 inches of music-packed vinyl that the industry thought had been killed off decades back, when CDs first appeared on the scene, but which possessed a resilience that nobody, not even its most devout supporters, ever dreamed of.

Launched in 1948, after an abortive start in the early 1930s (see above), and initially pressed across 10 inches of plastic (see Figure 1-8), before adopting their better-known 12-inch persona, the format did its best to retain some sense of continuity from the age of 78s. The very term “album,” which is now interchangeable with LP, derives from the old practice among 78 manufacturers of bunching multiple discs into a single bound book (an album, in other words) and selling it as a complete package. LPs simply streamlined the process.

The worlds of jazz and classical music took to the format the most naturally — understandably, given their love of extended pieces of music. Movie soundtracks and stage shows, too, welcomed its arrival.



FIGURE 1-8: The same size but four times the length. Long players defy simple physics.

Expanding horizons in music . . .

Pop and its relatives, on the other hand, saw albums more as a way of gathering up recent singles and their B-sides, then adding any other songs an artist had lying around. Few pop people ever consciously went into the studio with a full album actually planned out — at their most ambitious, they might simply record their live show without an audience.

Not until the mid-1960s did acts begin taking albums more seriously, viewing them as an open palette upon which anything could be spread. Bob Dylan, with such masterful releases as *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited* (both 1965), is often described as the father of the modern LP; the Beatles (*Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*), the Rolling Stones (*Aftermath*), and the Beach Boys (*Pet Sounds*) followed suit.

By the time Dylan released *Blonde on Blonde* (rock's first double album, in 1966) and the Beatles unveiled *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), albums had assumed an aura of seriousness from which they have never emerged. The advent of stereo (see Chapter 2), sporadically from the late 1950s and industry-wide beginning in 1967, added further dimensions to the album's appeal.

Concept albums affecting to tell whole stories in music (the Who's *Tommy*, Lou Reed's *Berlin*, Genesis's *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, and so many more); live albums replicating the excitement of a concert, spread across however many discs the gig lasted; collections of rarities that posed as new releases; expansive greatest hits and retrospective collections — the album is surely one of the most versatile art forms there is.

Yet that is only part of the reason for the format's continued (and now, revived) popularity. Regardless of whether or not one grew up on vinyl, there is something innately satisfying about the 40-minute-or-so time span of a single disc LP. Early into the CDs 1980s insurgence, acts took to expanding their vision to 60 or even 70 minutes of music, despite rarely possessing sufficient worthwhile material to make the extension worthwhile. The return of the LP certainly put an end to that.

The very structure of an LP, too, allows the artist freedoms that the CD never permitted, pacing the songs across side one, so that the final track presages a natural break in the listening

experience, and then repeating the process en route to the finale at the end of side two.

CDs, with their uninterrupted flow and the (again, increasingly prevalent) addition of so-called bonus tracks, completely obliterated the process — and on one of the few occasions when an artist, singer songwriter Matthew Sweet, tried to replicate the experience by placing a few seconds of crackly vinyl halfway through the disc (1991's *Girlfriend* album), people accused him of taping the CD from an LP, without there even being an LP to tape it from!

The passion of covers

Neither is music the only consideration. The 12-inch format permitted some truly adventurous artwork to be daubed across the canvas — James Brown was especially prone to catching the eye. (See Figure 1-9.) Jazz and classical records, too, began offering ever more vibrant artwork.

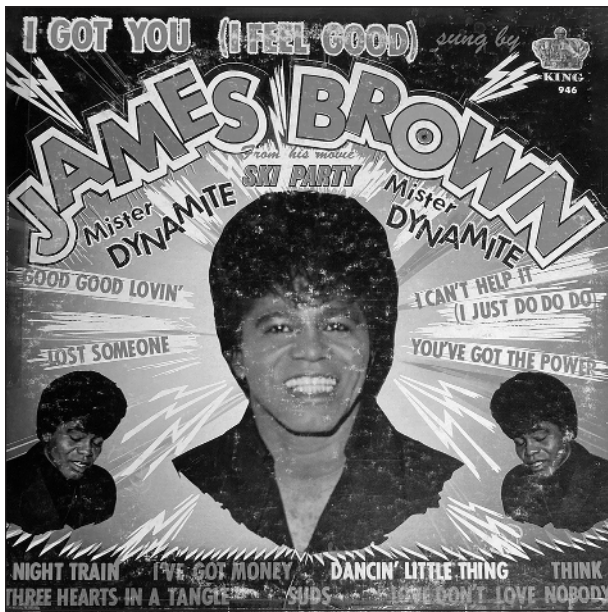


FIGURE 1-9: Brown is beautiful.

Early album sleeves were a single pocket only. Beginning in the late 1950s, however, more expansive gatefolds (that is, those that open out across 2 feet of space) began appearing. Elvis Presley's

1957 Christmas album (labeled, appropriately enough, *Elvis' Christmas Album*) and Mitch Miller and the Gang's *Sing Along with Mitch* discs were early pioneers, before the mid-1960s saw a veritable explosion of such extravagances.



Yes, this section is entitled “The passion for covers” and yet here I am talking about “sleeves” — and will continue to refer to “sleeves” throughout this book. As Jimi Hendrix used to say, “If a six turned out to be nine/I don’t mind, I don’t mind.” In other words, take it in stride. In the great wide world of vinyl record collecting — a world you’ll soon be joining if you haven’t joined already — the two terms are used interchangeably.

And then there is Hawkwind’s *Space Ritual* album, a 1973 live recording whose cover folded out across six psychedelic 12-inch panels, designed by the late Barney Bubbles. (See the nearby sidebar.) With the best will (and thickest booklet) in the world, there was no way a CD could replicate that, and if — as many people assert — the quality of album art declined as the popularity of CDs increased, then automatically we have another reason to praise the LP.

FORGET THE MUSIC, IT’S THE COVER I LIKE

And by artist, I mean the *artist* — the person who designed the cover. Whether it’s Peter Blake, co-creator (with Jann Haworth) of the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper*, or Roger Dean, famed for a run of genuinely fantastical Yes LP designs, and a host more acts besides. Whether we’re talking about Andy Warhol who, more than a decade before he burst onto the rock scene with the first Velvet Underground album, was making a living with jazz record sleeves, or Stanley Mouse, with the Grateful Dead and Journey, there are artists out there who changed for all time the function of an album cover.

No longer simply a protective wrapper with a pretty picture on it, now record sleeves were genuine works of art of a standard that, in any earlier age or other medium, would have more likely been found in a gallery than a store. And whose admirers treat their work as such, removing the record from its sleeve (into equally effective protection, of course) and framing the sleeves on their wall.

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A few examples:

- **Paul Whitehead**, whose work with early Genesis, Van der Graaf Generator, High Tide, and more was as expressive as the music it surrounded.
- **Barney Bubbles**, who emerged from the British underground of the late 1960s to decorate albums as musically far removed as Hawkwind and Elvis Costello, Michael Moorcock (the science fiction author cut a terrific LP in 1975), and the Psychedelic Furs. He was also in-house designer for Stiff Records (see Chapter 14), where he was responsible for the manifold sleeves available for Ian Dury's *Do It Yourself*.
- **Keef**, who oversaw the greatest triumphs of the Vertigo label. (See Chapter 14.)
- **Hipgnosis**, the design studio most renowned for every classic Pink Floyd cover from *Saucerful of Secrets* until *Animals* (and others thereafter), but whose greatest hits could, and already do, fill a book.
- **Banksy**, who was responsible for a strictly limited edition special cover for the Norwegian electronic outfit Röyksopp's 2001 debut album, *Melody AM*. Just 100 copies were pressed of a limited edition featuring sprayed-on stenciled artwork by the artist Banksy. The artist himself sold a copy and immediately smashed the record for the highest priced album sold on the site, an impressive \$10,256.

A deep emotional bond

These factors and more all play a part in the popularity of LPs as a focus for a record collection, but perhaps the greatest incentive is the feeling that you are purchasing something that is actually worth the amount of money it costs.

CDs, for all their claims to host superior sound, never seemed to offer real value for money — small enough to feel almost insignificant, they also appeared to actually diminish the importance of the music within, commodifying it within identical, and indistinguishable, plastic cases and demanding 20/20 eyesight to even read the spines when they were lined up on a shelf.

LPs, on the other hand, seem to swell to take up as much space as the music demands. How easy it is to go to the shelf and know instinctively where a particular disc is filed, as opposed to squinting your way along the row. I have even heard it said that the very physicality of LPs foster in their owners an emotional attachment, and whether that is fanciful nonsense or not, it is likely that many people reading this will nod their head in agreement.

This same attachment, however, is rarely expressed for other formats — not even singles, where it is either the song itself or sometimes a label design that resonates. And it is this that kept LP collecting alive even through the late 1990s–2000s era, during which production of new vinyl releases was at its most minimal. Used stores were just as picked over as they are today, record fairs were just as crowded, estate sales were just as busy. The only key difference was that prices were lower than they are today. A lot lower.

Collecting Records Today

It is a part of the language now, but still, if you describe the last few years as the age of “the vinyl revival,” there are a lot of collectors, young and old, who will scowl and ask how can something be revived when it never went away in the first place?

In terms of used records, that is true. But in terms of new vinyl releases and fresh pressings of old favorites, the record shelves are unrecognizable from even five years ago, as record companies of every size pump out new vinyl as though it’s going out of fashion. Which, at some point in the future, it may well do (again). Right now, however, it’s a great time to be collecting.

Vinyl or vinyls?

Records have even adopted a new nickname, and while “vinyls” is hardly grammatically correct (the plural of vinyl is . . . vinyl) and old-time collectors will huff their displeasure when they see or hear the word, it is scarcely the first time a format has entered the vernacular in linguistically mangled form — 8-track cartridges were once known as “carts,” cassettes as “tapes,” and 78s only became known as 78s once other speeds arrived on the market. Prior to that they were simply “records,” and sometimes “platters.”

So, in the words of the old Pink Floyd song, “leave those kids alone.” They can call long-playing gramophone records whatever they wish.

Record Store Day

A lot of the credit for the vinyl revival has been given to Record Store Day, an annual (and, latterly, biannual) event launched in April 2008 as a way of celebrating (and promoting) the 1,400 or so independent (or “mom and pop”) record stores around the United States.

And they needed it. Stores were closing at a frightening rate, as the cost of doing business soared and a financial crisis loomed at the same time as the amount of money people were willing to pay for all but the rarest records more or less stagnated.

When I took over as editor of *Goldmine* magazine’s series of record price guides in 2011 (see Chapter 9), I was shocked at how little movement there had been, in terms of prices, over the previous decade. A decade later, I was equally astonished by how much they had increased, and while Record Store Day cannot claim all the credit for that, it certainly helped.

After all, these one or two days of the year — the first in April, with a second, smaller, event following on Black Friday — are the times when independent record stores are guaranteed a line of customers at the door long before the store opens, many of whom might never have previously been aware of the store’s existence.

They are searching, of course, for just one or two choice items, not because they are record collectors per se, but because they collect absolutely anything related to a particular artist. And, sensibly, they would rather purchase it at retail price than wait around for copies to start appearing online, usually at a horrifically inflated price. (Record Store Day retailers are forbidden from offering items online themselves.)

Maybe they’ll have arrived in time to find what they are looking for, or maybe they haven’t managed that feat. But they’ll know now where to come for future purchases, whether or not it’s Record Store Day, and if other records should take their fancy while they’re on the premises, even better. Another customer is born.

What is an RSD release?

Record Store Day releases (known as RSDs) are exclusive limited editions, often featuring additional eye-catching gimmickry — colored, shaped, or picture disc vinyl (see Chapter 3), unusual sleeve variations, and so on. They will also be adorned with some reference to the day itself, a sticker for example or, as in Figure 1-10, a Westernized approximation of what collectors of Japanese pressings will immediately recognize as an “obi.” (See Chapter 5 for more on that term of art.)

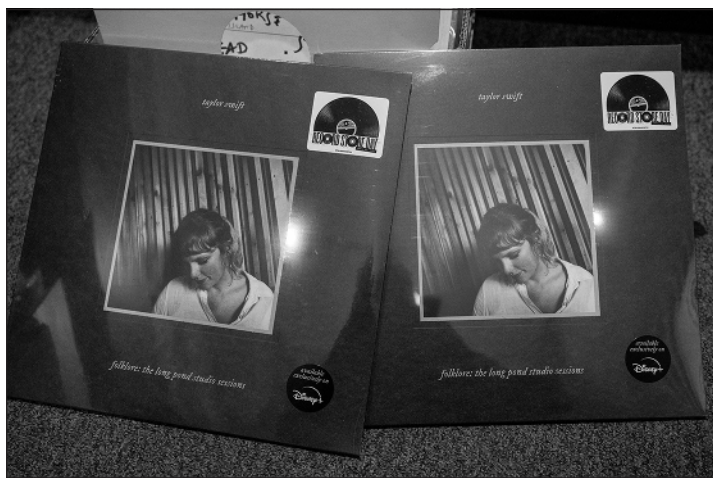
Occasionally, a forthcoming new release will be previewed with an exclusive RSD version, again in a different color or whatever. For the most part, however, RSD releases are strict one-offs, meaning there should never be another version of Taylor Swift’s 2023 *folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions* RSD exclusive (see Figure 1-11), or Type O Negative’s 2011 green vinyl box set *None More Negative*, no matter how loud the demand might be. Current online prices for both tell the rest of the story.



FIGURE 1-10: Going, going, Gong.

Others might *seem* as though they are going to prove hard to find, especially if they are already sold out at every store you visit on the day. But a few weeks later, you might well find copies being offered online for little more than the original retail price. Remember, stores are limited in the number of copies they receive of any given release, no matter how many they believe they can sell.

In those terms, RSD is an absolute godsend for collectors, an opportunity to pick up records that might become genuinely rare (or at least hard to find) at a fraction of the cost of buying later. But do not assume that every RSD release is going to one day break the bank. There are dozens at every event that seem to have been pressed in just the right quantities, or even too many.



Stephen Chung/Alamy Stock Photo

FIGURE 1-11: Even the swiftest Swifties needed to move fast to pick this up.

It is thus essentially a lottery, with winners and losers every time, and a lot of people — usually disappointed collectors — who regard it as little more than a cash-grab by record labels, record stores, and online sellers alike. But even the disappointed reap the benefits RSDs bring with them every time they do business with a record store or dealer who might have given up had it not been for an RSD-shaped shot in the arm.