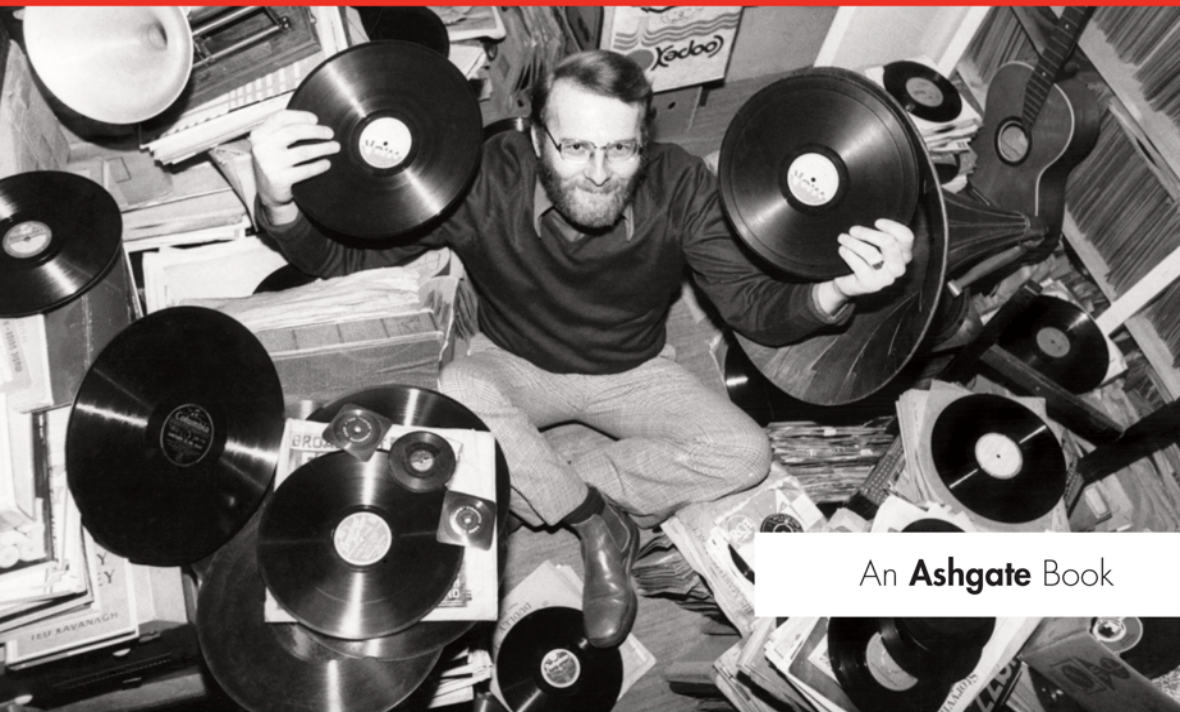


Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series

ROUTLEDGE

Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures: Record Collecting as a Social Practice



An **Ashgate** Book

Roy Shuker

WAX TRASH AND VINYL TREASURES:
RECORD COLLECTING AS A
SOCIAL PRACTICE



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Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures: Record Collecting as a Social Practice

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General Editor's Preface

The upheaval that occurred in musicology during the last two decades of the twentieth century created a new urgency for the study of popular music alongside the development of new critical and theoretical models. A relativistic outlook replaced the universal perspective of modernism (the international ambitions of the 12-note style); the grand narrative of the evolution and dissolution of tonality was challenged, and emphasis shifted to cultural context, reception and subject position. Together, these have conspired to eat away at the status of canonical composers and categories of high and low in music. A need has arisen, also, to recognize and address the emergence of crossovers, mixed and new genres, to engage in debates concerning the vexed problem of what constitutes authenticity in music, and to offer a critique of musical practice as the product of free, individual expression.

Popular musicology is a vital and exciting area of scholarship, and the *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* aims to present the best research in the field. Authors are concerned with locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context, and draw upon methodologies and theories developed in cultural studies, semiotics, poststructuralism, psychology and sociology. The series focuses on popular musics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is designed to embrace the world's popular musics from Acid Jazz to Zydeco, whether high tech or low tech, commercial or non-commercial, contemporary or traditional.

Derek B. Scott
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Acknowledgements

This study has had a lengthy gestation, and I am grateful for the patience of those interested in the topic, who have supported me along the way, and who have had a long wait. I initially became interested in undertaking an academic study of record collecting after reading the novel *High Fidelity* (1995) by Nick Hornby, and then seeing the feature film based on it (*High Fidelity*, 2000). As a collector myself, and with many friends who considered themselves collectors, I felt both the novel and the film tended to caricature the ‘record collector’. Accordingly, through 2001–02, I interviewed 67 record collectors (see Appendix 1 for details). The results of this survey were incorporated into: a circulated ‘Report’ to the interviewees; some preliminary presentations at several academic conferences; a contribution to the first volume of *The CONTINUUM Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World* (Shepherd et al., 2003); and an article, ‘Beyond the High Fidelity Stereotype’, published in *Popular Music* (Shuker, 2004).

The idea of a full-length book gradually emerged, and initial research on broader aspects of the topic, especially the historical development of record collecting, was undertaken during periods of research leave in 2002 and 2003. A number of developments then delayed and thwarted the project: in 2003 I took up a new and extremely demanding academic job, which also involved a family relocation and two house moves; I developed a serious health problem (now resolved!); and the collecting study was put on hold while I undertook other publishing commitments. In 2008–09 I returned to the project, ‘updating’ a number of the earlier interviews, adding others and revisiting the literature. To those who have periodically asked ‘where is the book at?’, here is my answer.

I am especially grateful to all those who took the time to complete my on-line survey, and respond to follow up questions, or were interviewed in person: Ray Alcock, Neil Ames, Malcolm Bancroft, Keith Beattie, Albert Bell, Michael Bollotin, John Book, Phillip Braithwaite, Marc Brennan, Catherine Brown, Norma Coates, Gregg Crossan, William Dart, Peter Dawson, Susan Fast, Michelle Flannery, Lee Ann Fullerton, Liz Giuffre, Matt Glesne, Barry Grant, Warren Green, Joel Hayward, Michelle Henry, Shane Homan, Hasse Huss, Jonathon Ibell, Tina Janering, Bruce Johnson, Anti-Ville Karja, Danny Keenan, Keir Keightley, Joe Kellich, Brett Loper, Colin McLeay, Steven Mallet, Lee Marshall, Jo Mason, Shawn Mawer, Allen Meek, Grant Mitchell, Tony Mitchell, Craig Morrison, Terry Newman, Andre Nuchelmans, Andrew Njsse, Paul Oliver, Shane Palmer, Gonny Pasaribu, Nick Plimmer, Aaron Regev, Motti Regev, Jane Roscoe, David Sanjek, Ian Shirley, Gary Shuker, Andrew Stafford, Geoff Stahl, Yngvar Steinbolt, Juliette Taylor, Mark Vanderdrift, Laura Vroomen, Steve Waksman, Oliver Wang,

Michelle Wauchope, Michael Weber, Martin Webster, Lisa Wheeler, Craig Wilson, Joel Wing and Brennon Wood.

One of the pleasures of the research has been eventually meeting a number of these collectors, in several cases, visiting them in their homes, viewing their collections and enjoying their hospitality.

Copies of their unpublished work on record collecting were generously supplied by Lee Marshall (his PhD study of bootleggers and tape traders), Ed Montano (his dissertation on collecting *The Shadows*; thanks also to David Horn for alerting me to it), Julie Bogle (her graduate paper on women record collectors; thanks also to Nabeel Zuberi for alerting me to this), Lee Ann Fullerton (her conference papers on women collectors and the independent record shop) and Jonathon Kelso (his graduate project on on-line record collecting).

The initial development of the project was shaped by informal chats with Henry Barnard, Tom Gati, Simon Hay, Peter McLennan, Allen Meek, and Dave Laing and John Shepherd. It was subsequently extended through discussions, in some cases on-going since 2002, with Peter Dawson, Susan Fast, Haase Huss, Craig Morrison, Andre Nuchelmans, Michael Pickering, Gary Shuker, Geoff Stahl, Simon Sweetman, Jim Urry and Tom Weber. Tim Anderson alerted me to the work of Robert Crumb and Harvey Pekar. Most recently, Gabor Valyi, Mikey Vallee and Johannes Brusila provided helpful references and insights on the history of vinyl and its current revival. Alan Lewis, the editor of *Record Collector*, was very helpful in clarifying my use of the magazine, and providing me with a personal perspective on his own collecting and career in the music press. Ian Shirley, the editor of the *Rare Record Price Guide 2010*, and writer of a regular column in *Record Collector*, provided extensive replies to my questions about the current state of record collecting.

Useful feedback on 'work in progress' was made by those attending my papers at IASPM (the International Association for the Study of Popular Music) conferences in Turku, Finland in June 2001, Montreal in 2003 and Wellington, New Zealand in 2006, and at seminars at Victoria University in 2006 and 2008 and Otago University in 2008. Helpful commentary on various early drafts of material has been provided by Keith Beattie, Ed Montano and Mary Jane Shuker.

At Ashgate, Derek Scott provided insightful comments on the initial proposal and Heidi Bishop proved extremely patient as I stumbled towards providing the final manuscript. My thanks also to Jonathan Hoare, for exemplary copy-editing.

Roy Shuker
Wellington, New Zealand

Introduction

This study examines the historical development of record collecting, its contemporary status, and the infrastructure within which it functions.¹ I refer to it as *a social practice* since the characteristics, motivations and practices exhibited by record collectors are social activities. I focus on the questions of *who* collects, and *why*, *what* is being collected and the *process* of collecting, including sites of acquisition, the thrill of the chase and the ‘find’. I also consider the context created by the music industry, especially the role of the music press and record companies in both shaping and responding to record collecting.

In considering these questions, I draw on the general literature on collecting, along with previous studies of record collecting, historical and contemporary profiles of record collectors, including a number of personal interviews (see Appendix 1), and other relevant secondary literature on popular music. In addition, I have utilized the music press, primarily the collector oriented publications. As a long-time collector (see Appendix 2), I also draw on my own experiences, in part through a ‘participant observer’ study of what can be termed sites of acquisition: record shops, record fairs, and thrift shops, and through the internet. Reflecting the location of the collectors I talked to, my coverage is restricted largely to record collecting in the United Kingdom and the United States, with some examples from Canada, Europe, Israel, Australia and New Zealand.

Let me begin with some indications of the scope of collecting popular music and the widespread interest in it, as both an economic and cultural commodity, during 2007–08:

- In early 2008, the ‘World’s Greatest Record Collection’ was offered for sale on eBay, with a starting bid of (US) \$3 million, and an estimated value of \$50 million. By the end of March 2008, more people had window-shopped the collection than any other item offered in eBay’s history. Consisting of an estimated six million recordings, it had been put together by its owner Paul Mawhinny, over some fifty years, and stored in his 16,000 square

¹ This is not a book about which records – and associated musical artefacts – are collectable, where to find these and how much they are worth. These topics are necessarily engaged with here, but extensive information on them is readily available from introductions such as Dave Thompson’s excellent *The Music Lover’s Guide to Record Collecting* (Backbeat, San Francisco, 2002), the various Record Price Guides, the main collector magazines, notably the UK-based *Record Collector* and, in the United States, *Goldmine* (see Chapter 6); and collector websites such as the Record Collectors Guild.

foot, climate controlled combination record shop and archive in Pittsburgh, United States.²

- The 10th edition of the *Rare Record Price Guide* was published, now a massive tome of 1,408 pages, and featuring colour illustrations. The rarest listings included the two-LP set *The Beatles* (Apple, 1968) at £5–7,000.³
- In 2008, the opening, due for 2009, of the Abba Museum in Stockholm was announced. Capitalizing on the continued fascination with the Swedish pop quartet, the most commercially successful group of the 1970s, the new museum will feature the gold and platinum discs of former band members.⁴
- Guinness Publications issued *California Dreaming: Memories and Visions of LA 1966–1975*, by photographer Henry Diltz, in a print run of 2,000 copies; the signed, handmade limited edition book was available for £225 (*Record Collector*, January 2008: 20).
- Auction house Christies, New York, November 2007 sale of rock'n'roll memorabilia included a signed copy of Jimi Hendrix's *Axis Bold as Love* vinyl album, along with related photos, which sold for US\$23,000.
- Long-established music fairs in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States attracted large numbers of collectors.
- Despite the continued decline of the record industry, the reissues labels were stronger than ever, with a plethora of individual reissues and boxed sets from record companies such as Ace, Cherry Red and Rhino (De Whalley, 2007).
- A week in the life of a collector, April 2008: I purchased a copy of Lester Bangs's extremely scarce book on Blondie, from local web auction site Trade Me (cost NZ\$10); obtained a June 2004 issue of *MOJO* – the Morrissey cover – needed to complete a run of the magazine, from a second hand bookstore (NZ\$2); and found a near-mint copy in a local thrift shop of Iron Butterfly's 1970 *Live* album (NZ\$3), featuring the extended version of the band's 'In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida', a catalyst in establishing 'progressive' FM radio programming.⁵

² <http://www.thegreatestmusiccollection.com>. The collection was not sold, and was subsequently purchased privately.

³ Often referred to as 'The White Album', it is the unique numbering system that makes this the most collectable UK album; the album was released with its sleeves numbered consecutively for the first 500,000 copies, each number embossed on the cover. This valuation was for copies numbered between 1 and 10 (*Rare Record Price Guide* 2010, 10th edition, published at the end of 2008). Number 00010 was sold at a Christies auction in 2001 for £6,000.

⁴ <http://www.abbathemuseum.com> (Abba broke up in 1982).

⁵ This illustrates the role of the search and 'the find', especially at a bargain price, as central to the enjoyment of collecting. All of these were obtainable on the web, but at greater cost.

As these examples suggest, I am using the term ‘record collecting’ as shorthand for a variety of distinct but related practices. ‘Record collecting’ can be pursued via the collection of particular formats, genres, performers, record labels, producers or some combination of these. It can also embrace the use of – and sometimes collecting of – related print materials: the music press generally, but especially the specialist collector magazines, fanzines, discographies and general guidebooks; the recording industry targeting of collectors (reissue labels; promotional releases, remixes, boxed sets); and dedicated sites of acquisition (record fairs, second-hand and specialist shops, eBay and high-profile auctions). The term ‘records’ is often used to refer to vinyl recordings, but here I use it to include sound recordings in any format, most notably shellac 78s, vinyl LPs and 45s, audiotapes, CDs and as digital downloads.

A brief history of record collecting

Record collecting has a now extensive, although largely unexplored history. During the mid-to-late nineteenth century, a mix of capitalism and consumerism, increased leisure time, disposable income and nostalgia made collecting a significant aspect of the social identity for the new middle classes of Europe, Britain and its colonies, and the United States. Record collecting as a social practice was a logical extension of such activities.

At the end of the nineteenth century sound became ‘a thing’, a material product for sale in the market (see the discussion in Chapter 1). Its subsequent reproduction as a cultural and economic artefact has produced the ‘sound recording’ in its various historical formats, along with related technology, memorabilia and literature. Record collectors who were active during the period 1903 to the 1950s and the advent of vinyl collected 78s and, in some cases, cylinders as well. This group established ‘record collecting’ as a major form of collecting, with its own set of practices and related literature. These early collectors were associated with the emergence of what can be termed a gramophone culture, which embraced a number of *sites*: physical and social spaces, and institutions which facilitated and shaped the production and consumption of recorded music. These included the early recording companies, record clubs and appreciation societies, music retail outlets and the second-hand market, and the music press. By the introduction of vinyl records in the 1950s, record collecting was already a well-established ‘hobby’.

Record collecting since the 1960s has seen the steady expansion of the overarching infrastructure within which the hobby was already embedded: the rise of record fairs, specialist record shops (independent and second hand), increased major label interest in reissues and their back catalogue, specialist reissue labels, and a collector press. Well documented in the United Kingdom and the United States, such developments are also evident internationally. Looking back in 1996, Peter Doggett observed:

As we discovered, there was no such thing as a pop or rock'n'roll collector until the 1960s. Only then did dealers start importing material from the US, and loyal R&B fans began to flood into places like Soho market in London every weekend, searching through piles of old 45s and 78s in the hopes of finding an obscure rockabilly or blues gem. (Doggett, 1996a: editorial)

From there, a small but dedicated collectors' network began to spread across the country.

By the early 1970s, there were specialist shops, mail order dealers, and a bunch of soul, rnb and r'n'r fanzines. Around the same time, the reissue market – which had always been a purely low budget affair – started very slowly to get off the ground. (Doggett, 1987: 16)

A key moment was the establishment of *Record Collector* magazine, in 1979, which provided a focus for collectors.

A similar pattern was evident in the United States:

What started as a small-time, largely underground hobby has expanded into a respected, full-fledged industry. In 1974, almost no one could make a living collecting music. Now [1994], with the advent of computer databases, new recording options and more, the hobby/industry is more efficient, lucrative and wide-reaching than it ever has been before. (Thompson, 1994)

The launch of *Goldmine* in 1974 did much to consolidate record collecting in North America.

The landscape of record collecting has changed dramatically in the past 15 to 20 years. The range of collectibles has increased, with promotional material and memorabilia more prominent. Record collecting has become more organized, more intense and, at times, more expensive. The internet has added a major new dimension to collecting, creating increased opportunity but also fuelling price rises. Reflecting such developments, the record collecting press has mushroomed, with a succession of ever-larger and more comprehensive magazines, guidebooks, price guides and discographies. Today, record collecting is a major form of collecting, with its own set of collecting practices.

Yet while record collecting is a significant social activity, it remains a relatively neglected aspect of the consumption of popular music. There is a plethora of guidebooks on record collecting, but these focus primarily on documenting artists and their collectable recordings, and their economic value, along with some attention to questions such as where to find records, the importance of condition and their care. In academia, general studies of music consumption, especially fandom, provide some insights, but more extended critical discussion is sparse. Accordingly, the topic is ripe for a fuller analysis, with particular attention to the

motivations and characteristics of collectors as well as their collecting practices and the context within which these take place.

The following sections introduce some of the relevant literature on collecting more generally and, then, record collecting in particular. The themes and concerns evident here are ones that will be returned to throughout this study.

Collecting

We can point to the development of a collecting sensibility, linked to possessive individualism, historically present since the Greeks, but more fully realized under contemporary capitalism. As social anthropologist James Clifford puts it, in the Western world, 'collecting has long been the strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture, and authenticity' (Clifford, 1988: 218). Today, as Pearce observes, 'the gathering together of chosen objects for purposes regarded as special is of great importance, as a social phenomenon, as a focus of personal emotion, and as an economic force' (Pearce, 1995: Preface).

Collecting is a very common activity: in the contemporary Western world around a quarter to a third of adults are willing to identify themselves as collectors, and this 'collecting disposition' cuts across class and gender boundaries (Belk, 2001; Pearce, 1995; 1998). The extensive Leicester Collecting Project amply demonstrated, with the exception of the financially very expensive collectibles (Old Master paintings and suchlike), that every kind of collection occurs in every kind of social background (Pearce, 1997). In examining the social location of collectors there has been very limited attention paid to the role of ethnicity and class, but the 'gendering' of collecting has attracted considerable attention. While there is convincing survey evidence that the majority of collectors are women, male collectors and their preferred collectibles usually are given more public prominence. The studies by Pearce, Belk and others show that most children collect, and both boys and girls are equally likely to be avid collectors before their teenage years. During adolescence collecting declines for both boys and girls, but especially for girls. There is a tendency for men to renew collecting in middle age – a trend not seen to the same extent among women. In general, women's emotional investment in the collecting process, and the nature of the artefacts collected, differs from that of men, with a greater emphasis on domestic-related collectibles, while men are more interested in the investment rationale of collecting. As Belk argues, 'collecting is most often a highly gendered activity with the greatest social sanction for those collections and collector traits that fit masculine sex-role stereotypes' (Belk, 2001: 99). Characteristic collector traits include those identified as 'masculine': aggressiveness, competitiveness, desire for mastery over a symbolic realm; and those seen as 'feminine': preservation, creativity and nurturance. These can, of course, be combined: collecting is one of the few socially sanctioned opportunities for men to be expressive, while at the same time being aggressive and competitive.

Given its social prominence, it is hardly surprising that collecting has been the subject of considerable theoretical speculation and empirical study, with major contributions from sociology, anthropology, history, social psychology, museum studies and market research, especially consumer studies. Most recently, collecting is an aspect of the study of material culture, which has defined itself as a distinct area of academic inquiry. Key questions addressed in this body of work include: In what ways do we interact with material things? How do material objects affect the way we relate to each other? What are the connections between material things and social processes? (See Miller, 1998; 2006; Tilley et al., 2006.)

The literature on collecting embraces a now fairly standard set of motifs and an associated vocabulary. Collectors and the collecting process are variously associated with: longing, desire and pleasure; ritualistic, near-sacred and repetitive acquisition; passionate and selective consumption; stewardship and cultural preservation; and obsession and linked pathologies such as completism, accumulation and a preoccupation with collection size. The collection exhibits a series of attributes: it is a source of pleasure; an economic investment; an exhibition of logic, unity and control; an indicator of cultural and social capital; and a socially sanctioned form of materialist and competitive consumption, consumer culture taken to excess. As shall be demonstrated later, all of these are present among record collectors and their collecting.

Record collecting

Belk provides a working definition of ‘collecting’, which is essentially compatible with others in the literature: ‘the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences’ (Belk, 2001: 67). This is essentially to distinguish collecting from acquisitiveness and accumulation, though elements of both may be part of the collector’s persona and collecting practices. However, elements of Belk’s definition of collecting are awkward in relation to record collecting. Sound recordings are largely mass-produced artefacts, and therefore hardly non-identical in that individual copies exist even if from the same master recording.⁶ Further, even when collected, recordings will frequently retain a strong element of use value – people will play them – thereby placing them not too distant from ‘ordinary’ use.

More useful for my purposes is the work of Pearce, who distinguishes three co-existing modes of the relationship of collectors to the collected object: souvenir, fetishistic and systematic. In souvenir collecting, ‘the individual creates a romantic life-history by selecting and arranging personal memorial material to create

⁶ It is, however, the exceptions to the mass-produced recordings that are often the most sought-after and valuable collectibles, such as unique album covers, promos, acetates and test pressings.

what ... might be called an object autobiography, where the objects are at the service of the autobiographer'. In contrast, in fetishistic collecting 'the objects are dominant and ... are allowed to create the self of the collector, who responds by obsessively collecting as many items as possible'. Thirdly, systematic collecting is characterized by an 'intellectual rationale', with the emphasis placed on the completeness of the collection (Pearce, 1995: 32). Pearce stresses that the three approaches are not exclusive, and can coexist in each collection. Each of these collecting modes are represented among record collectors, broadly corresponding to varying emphases: on recordings as part of identity formation and life history (souvenir collecting); accumulation and completism (fetishistic collecting); and discrimination and connoisseurship (systematic collecting).

Muesterberger, a psychoanalyst, claims, 'Collectors themselves – dedicated, serious, infatuated, beset – cannot explain or understand this all-consuming drive ... is it an obsession? An addiction? Is it a passion or urge, or perhaps a need to hold, or possess, to accumulate?' (Muesterberger, 1994: 3). This is an overstatement. While it is true that many collectors find it difficult to pinpoint the precise set of motivations that drive their collecting, they are frequently well aware of the various explanations offered for it (see, for example, the biographical accounts in Blom, 2002; Elsner and Cardinal, 1994). This was particularly evident among my record collectors, whose responses to two central questions covering self-definition and perceptions of collectors and the collecting process showed considerable awareness of the 'High Fidelity' stereotype, along with a concern to distance personal practice from this. As Chapter 2 shows, their responses suggest a range of characteristics associated with the label 'record collector', while demonstrating that the concept is far from a unitary one.

Given that record collectors can be regarded as a type of fan, the literature on fandom is relevant to a consideration of record collecting. The traditional view of fandom has situated it in terms of pathology and deviance, reserving the label 'fans' for teenagers who are generally presented as avidly and uncritically following the latest pop sensation. These fans have been unfairly denigrated in most writing on popular music and, indeed, by many other consumers. Their behaviour is often described as a form of pathology, and the terms applied to it have clear connotations of condemnation and undesirability: 'Beatlemania', 'teenyboppers', 'groupies' (Lewis, 1992). As Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity* (1995) suggests, a similar labelling process can be seen in the tendency to associate record collecting with paradigms of obsession and addiction, arrested adolescence and social awkwardness. This image of the record collector as anti- or a-social has been reinforced by the manner in which the phenomenon is treated in other popular texts, including the film *Ghost World*, and the cartoons by Robert Crumb and Harvey Pekar featuring record collectors.

The contributors to Lewis's classic study showed fandom to be a complex phenomenon, related to the formation of social identities, especially sexuality. This view of fandom as an active process has been confirmed by later studies, which essentially view fandom as a form of sustained affective consumption (Sandvoss,

2005; for accounts from fans themselves, see Aizelwood, 1994; Hunter, 2004; Smith, 1995). This approach is evident in several accounts of popular music fans, notably Cavicchi's detailed ethnography of Bruce Springsteen fans, whose collecting of Springsteen recordings, including bootlegs, was a significant aspect of many of their lives (Cavicchi, 1998). Such fandom offers its participants membership of a community not defined in traditional status terms.

We can usefully extend the term fan to embrace those who see themselves as 'serious' devotees or aficionados of particular musical styles or performers. These are fans in terms of the word's origins in 'fanatic', but their fanaticism is usually at more of an intellectual level and focused on the music *per se* rather than on the persona of the performer(s). Indeed, such individuals would often not describe themselves as 'fans', preferring instead to describe themselves as 'into' particular performers or genres, or as 'music lovers' or, indeed, as 'record collectors'. Adopting this distinction is not to perpetuate an aesthetically-based, discriminatory view of the former group (fans in the traditional sense). Both categories of fan engage in fandom as an active process, and both often display impressive knowledge of their preferred genres or performers. My argument is that their emotional and physical investments are different, as are the social consumption situations in which their fandom operates.

As Campbell observes, 'A record collection does not a record collector make' (Campbell, 2001). This is to make a central distinction between (simply) liking the music – in the sense of a fan, or music lover – and methodically seeking out and acquiring it. Consequently, possessing an abundance of records is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the self-recognition of a 'collector'. The central factor is the systematic approach to acquiring new material for the collection, a characteristic commonly seen as distinguishing collecting: 'In the collecting form of consumption, acquisition is a key process. Someone who possesses a collection is not necessarily a collector unless they continue to acquire additional things for the collection' (Belk, 2001: 66). While fans will collect records, record collectors are more often characterized by what can be termed 'secondary involvement' in music, activities beyond 'simply' listening to the music: the seeking out of rare releases, such as the picture discs and bootlegs; the reading of fanzines in addition to commercial music magazines; concert going; and an interest in record labels and producers as well as performers.

As this brief discussion has indicated, attempts to define (record) collecting and the (record) collector are fraught. Such concepts are far from unitary, and should be regarded as a set of motifs and social practices, themes that shall be returned to throughout this study.

Investigating the record collector

There are a small number of studies of record collectors and record collecting. The best known of these is Will Straw's contribution to *Sexing the Groove*. Drawing

on some of the considerable general literature on collecting and collectors, Straw usefully speculates on the psychology of record collecting as a social practice, especially its largely male character. He identifies several characteristics of record collecting 'which are more easily recuperable': hipness, connoisseurship, bohemianism and the adventurous hunter. These are related to the record collector's 'obscurantist interest in the marginal', a stance which clearly resonates with 'rock culture's mythic emphasis on oppositionality'. The valorizing of the obscure is linked to trash fandoms generally, and the consequent discourse surrounding these is a feature of the homosocial world of young men (Straw, 1997a).

While frequently convincing, Straw's analysis arguably lacks any systematic embedding in the views of the collectors themselves. Collectors feature more prominently in a number of recent academic studies: Hayes (2006) on young Canadian vinyl collectors in the digital age; Dougan (2006) on canon formation and blues record collecting; Hosokawa and Matsuoka's historical analysis (2004) of vinyl record collecting in Japan; and Marshall's study of bootleggers and tape traders (2005). Unpublished graduate research studies include Bogle (1999) on women who collect records; Kelso (2007) on digital collecting; and Montano (2003) on Cliff Richard record collectors. Other published accounts include *Incredibly Strange Music*, profiling collectors of exotica (Vale and Juno, 1993; 1994); Milano's study of well-known vinyl collectors (Milano, 2003); and Dean's account of 78 collector Joe Bussard (Dean, 2001). There is also an on-going series on individual collectors in the magazine *Record Collector*; and the documentaries *Vinyl*, by Canadian film-maker and collector Alan Zweig, and *Desperate Man Blues* (on Joe Bussard). An entertaining and informative account of the hunt aspect of record collecting is provided by Blecha (2005), and there are several accounts of 'digging in the crates' (for example, Schloss, 2004).⁷

In addition to the academic literature and popular journalism, the representation of record collectors and collecting in various popular culture texts has been important in establishing a stereotypical view. As already indicated, popular discourse around record collectors and collecting, in common with discussions of collecting generally, construct a dominant representation of record collectors as obsessive males, whose passion for collecting is often a substitute for 'real' social relationships, and who exhibit a 'trainspotting' mentality toward popular music, a concern with the details of recordings. This is very much the case in the best-known representation of record collectors, the novel *High Fidelity* (Hornby, 1995), and the subsequent film of the same name, directed by Stephen Frears and starring John Cusack, released in 2000.

With some reference to the above literature, this study draws primarily on 70 extensive 'interviews' with record collectors, mostly undertaken in 2002–03, with some follow ups and new interviewees in 2007–08 (see Appendix 1 for details).

⁷ In addition to this body of work in English, there is Robert Haagsma's *Vinylfanaten*, a study of 22 avid vinyl collectors from Holland and Belgium; see *Record Collector*, September 2007: 10–11.

My opportunity sample fell into two groups of record collectors, although with some overlap between them:

1. An older group (largely 40 plus) who collect rock and pop recordings, primarily within the period 1945 to 1980, with a marked preference for vinyl. This group is almost exclusively male. Their preferred genres include reggae, '60s guitar rock, psychedelia/garage, rockabilly and surf. While love of music is central to their collecting, there is some concern with the rarity and associated economic value of the recordings.
2. A younger group (under 40) who primarily collect popular music on CDs, although with some attention to vinyl. Their genre preferences at times include the 1950s through to and into the '70s, but their collecting focus is usually on genres of the last 20 years, especially non-mainstream styles such as punk, goth, new wave and rap. While males are still in the majority here, there are a number of women collectors within this group. While several of these collectors are aware of rarity and economic values, and may even spend considerable amounts on particular recordings, they are arguably more concerned with the aesthetic qualities of the recordings: the music as such.

The 'social practices' of both groups, shared by other record collectors, presents an interwoven narrative of desire and identification, alongside notions of cultural and economic value, which characterize many collectors' accounts of their passion.

Book structure

Chapter 1: The 78 era: creating a collector constituency

The chapter covers the early development of record collecting, following the advent of sound recording and the rise of a gramophone culture. It considers the early collectors of 78s, their motivations and collecting practices, and the context in which they collected: the role of record labels, record clubs and the music press, especially the collector magazines, and music retail. The chapter then sketches the post-1960 collecting of 78s.

Chapter 2: The contemporary collector: beyond the High Fidelity stereotype

Contemporary record collectors are shown to demonstrate a complex mix of characteristics: a love of music; obsessive-compulsive behaviour, accumulation and completism, selectivity and discrimination; and self-education and scholarship.

As a social practice, contemporary record collecting presents itself as a core component of individual social identity and a central part of the lifecycle, related

to issues of cultural consumption, social identity and ‘the construction of self’ in contemporary society.

Chapter 3: Formats, collectors and the music industry

The focus here is on the development of successive recording formats, along with the collecting of each. Individual collector preferences relate to an amalgam of the age of the collector and associated notions of nostalgia, historicism and authenticity; availability, collector ambition and cost; and aesthetics, in terms of preferred artists and genres, sound quality, and aspects such as album cover art. The chapter begins with an examination of the historical development of the various recording formats, moving from these to the collecting of each. It then considers the role of the music industry in both responding to and shaping the record collecting market.

Chapter 4: Taste, the canon and the collectable

This chapter considers the issues of taste and cultural capital, and what is ‘collectable’. Intersecting with personal taste is the key notion of ‘collectable’, with the collecting process and what is collectable shaped by considerations of demand and availability; condition and cost; aura and authenticity; and rarity and value. Taste and what is collectable are historically contingent, reflecting generational and demographic trends in collecting, and both engage with varying forms of cultural capital. The complex interaction of these various factors is illustrated through a consideration of collectable artists, genres and recent top-selling recordings. What is collectable can also be informed by a strong sense of discrimination, in part based on views of which artists, recordings and genres have musical/aesthetic value: a canon. There are also collectable fields which are not (necessarily) so informed by these collecting principles, but which are subsumed under the broad rubric of ‘record collecting’. Examples of these are the collecting of chart number 1 hits, compilations, bootlegs, memorabilia and music magazines; these are underpinned by different inflections of taste and collectability.

Chapter 5: Collecting practices

Hunting metaphors abound in the general literature on collecting, and collectors frequently refer to notions of pleasure and desire in the pursuit of items for their collection. This is a process involving competition, effort (as with visiting sites of acquisition and the physical act of sorting through records) and choice (between desired items, especially if budget is a consideration), underpinned by a strong element of compulsion. The chapter examines the collectors hunt for new material, and the various sites for its acquisition. Also considered are issues and

practices around the storage and cataloguing of the collection, whether or not to lend recordings, and the public and private display of the collection.

Chapter 6: Record collecting and the music press

The music press is a key part of the infrastructure of record collecting. Record collectors are among the readers of the music press in general, but also consume a number of publications aimed more specifically at them. These include general collecting guides, price guides, discographies, and magazines such as *Record Collector* and *Goldmine*. As the field of collecting has grown, there has been a proliferation of this literature, along with increased specialization among its titles. This chapter examines the historical development of these publications since 1970, their emphases and the use made of them by record collectors.

Chapter 7: Collector profiles

In ‘cut and pasting’ individual collectors across the various chapters and topics covered, rarely does a sense of ‘the whole collector’ – the individual voice – emerge. Accordingly, this last chapter includes a series of ten collector profiles. Most are collectors with whom I have had on-going contact over the past eight or nine years, in some cases, even longer. This time frame demonstrates the shifting physical and emotional investments made by collectors in the hobby, as their musical interests and life circumstances change. I have chosen them to represent a range of collecting interests, ages and geographic locations.

Conclusion

The conclusion to this study draws on the seven chapters to make some general observations on record collectors and their collecting practices and the context within which these take place. It also considers collecting in relation to the wider study of collecting. As the general discussion and the extended profiles (Chapter 7) show, it is difficult to sustain a unitary definition of the record collector and record collecting. Rather, given the different emphases and practices taken on over time by individual collectors, I argue that it makes more sense to speak of ‘a career’ in record collecting.

Chapter 1

The 78 era: creating a collector constituency

This chapter begins with the early development of record collecting, as the advent of recorded sound at the end of the nineteenth century created a new form of music collectible, associated with the emergence of what can be termed a gramophone culture. Record collectors active during the period 1903 to the 1950s and the advent of vinyl collected 78s and, in some cases, cylinders. This group established ‘record collecting’ as a major form of collecting, with its own set of practices, associated literature and appreciation societies. These collectors had a shared interest in sound recordings as both sources of listening pleasure and significant cultural artefacts, with associated notions of discrimination, musical canons and rarity. They also shared the dominant characteristics of collectors more generally, albeit with particular inflections of these: the thrill of the chase; obsession, linked to accumulation and completism; at times a preoccupation with rarity and economic value; and a concern for cultural preservation. The concern involved self-education and public, vernacular scholarship, drawing on the collection as a resource. These traits were subsumed into collecting as a significant aspect of social identity, involving the acquisition of cultural capital, overlaid with a patina of nostalgia.

Gramophone culture operated within a context that shaped the emergence and subsequent development of a collecting constituency and record collecting as a social practice. While there is frequent overlap between them, especially through their respective roles in shaping taste and discrimination (including canon formation), this context included a number of *sites*: physical and social spaces, practices and institutions which facilitated and shaped the production and consumption of recorded music and its collectors. These sites were:

- sites of production and promotion: the role of the early recording companies;
- sites of appreciation: record clubs and societies;
- sites of acquisition: music retail, and the second-hand market; and
- sites of mediation: the music press.

A consideration of these forms the second part of the chapter.

What I have termed the 78 era was over by 1960. The 78 was supplanted by vinyl during the 1950s, and the gramophone replaced by new forms of sound reproduction. But the passing of the 78 recording did not end interest in the era and its music. The recordings and the equipment used to play them have remained highly collectable. Since the 1960s, there has been a proliferation of interest in the