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Disc-world: inside the largest record fair on earth

Twice a year, Utrecht becomes a magnet for dealers, crate-diggers and vinyl completists



Try before you buy: a visitor to Utrecht record fair

Ben Thompson NOVEMBER 22, 2018

For three days in the autumn and spring of every year, the arrival of the world's largest record fair turns the usually sane and well-balanced Dutch city of Utrecht into a hotbed of vinyl fetishism. Last weekend, I joined the eager throng risking life and limb to drag their specially adapted luggage trolleys across the high-speed cycle lanes that ring the huge Jaarbeurs convention centre.

After some lean times at the start of this decade under pressure from online marketplaces such as Discogs, the same vinyl revival that has brought 12-inch records back into supermarkets has also turned things round for Utrecht. Once you've run the gauntlet of the food stalls selling sugar coma waffles and artery-clogging *kroketten*, the dizzying scale of the enterprise soon becomes apparent. In a vast, hangar-like space stand 600 stalls with an average of maybe 3,000 records each, which adds up to something like 2m potential purchases. That's almost too much choice.

Friday is dealers-only day, and the icy gusts of Low Countries wind blow in a compelling collection of characters: jet-lagged-looking Latin Americans, saturnine Russian metal-heads and speedy French Afrobeat specialists whisking out portable record players to test the condition of albums which in some instances look as if they've spent the past 60 years buried in someone's garden

Feedback

As I focus on one stall for a while to get my bearings, I watch its genial German custodian greet a regular customer making his first purchase of the day. “Hello Reggae Man, nice to see you.”

“I’ll just have this for now and be back for more later,” says Reggae Man, as he rushes off in search of his next hit. In the course of the day this crackling sense of urgency — a kind of acquisitive static — will become very familiar. I definitely see it in the eyes of the German collector who has driven six and a half hours from Nuremberg to pay €1,000 for a 1969 period piece called *Strictly From Hunger*, before getting back in his car to drive straight home again.

At the top end of this market lurks New York-based collector and dealer Johan Kugelberg, who is as likely to be selling archives to museums and academic institutions as bootlegs to music industry bottom-feeders. “I’ve been going to record fairs my whole life and this is the only one I truly love,” Kugelberg enthuses, citing the more inclusive and welcoming atmosphere of Utrecht, as compared with the notoriously macho and snobby moods of the biggest US and British fairs, in Austin and London’s Olympia respectively.

The stories swapped by thirsty groups of record-dealers in nearby hotel bars at the end of the day would supply plentiful material for an academic thesis on the pathology of the collector. The saga of a record shop owner being beaten up for denying a customer access to Perry Como is among the most disturbing.



Joy Division and New Order alumnus Peter Hook meets visitors to the fair

On day two of the fair the general public gets to join in, and the pace slackens appreciably as large

crowds shuffle down packed aisles of musical memory. The religious undertones of this vast yard-sale of precious relics would be hard to miss, even if Omega Auctions, which has brought former Joy Division and New Order bass-player Peter Hook here to hawk items that Ian Curtis might have touched, wasn't boasting of the amount of money (£23,000) it had made from selling one of John Lennon's teeth. "Hmm, sexy," quips a passing Dutchman at the dental photo display.

Saturday's increase in numbers does nothing to redress the event's male/female balance, which hovers uncomfortably around nine to one. The groups of efficient Italian women shifting dubious reissues of once rare Italian film soundtrack or acid folk titles provide a welcome bridgehead of female endeavour — albeit a potentially controversial one, given their merchandise.

Could flooding the market with budget-price replicas kill the geese that lay the golden eggs? "A real collector would only care about an original, never a reissue," insists Nick Saloman, aka British psychedelic magus The Bevis Frond, who is at Utrecht in his alternative professional capacity as proprietor of Bexhill's Platform One Records.

Even to someone as well versed in them as Saloman, the workings of this ecosystem remain essentially mysterious. "I still don't understand why there should be one record people go mad paying thousands for when another by a similar band which is just as good goes for 20 quid," he admits.

I'd expected the last day of the fair to be the most frenzied as prices tumble so that dealers won't have too much stock to carry home. In fact, a strange and merciful calm descends.

On my way out I approach a contented-looking Kugelberg to ask him whether the Utrecht record fair is an anachronism in the age of Spotify, or perhaps the embodiment of an opposing pole of human existence?

"All of these people looking at old records might seem like a sad, dead thing," he replies, "but to me it's intensely alive. Every nook and cranny of this room is packed with enormous amounts of human creativity — not just the musicians and the producers, but the sleeve-designers, the record company guys, even the family member who gave them a lift to band practice when they were a kid . . . once you can see that, why would you want to stop looking at it?"

I note that someone seems to have snapped up his \$3,000 copy of the only album made by legendary Christian rock oddities The New Creation. "Oh, I've taken quite a lot of money," Kugelberg confesses blithely, "and I've spent it all on a huge collection of Mexican punk."

Utrecht's next record fair will take place on April 13-14, recordplanet.nl

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