

A huge shed in Holland is record collecting heaven, says Dan Cairns

In adjoining, bustling, hangar-sized warehouses in the centre of Holland, the opening chords of the Sex Pistols' *Pretty Vacant* rip through the PA system. Welcome to the 45th Mega Record & CD Fair (MRCF), which takes place biannually in Utrecht and has a claim to be the biggest event of its kind in the world. I wander, in a state somewhere between deepening disorientation and light-headed elation, among the hundreds of stalls, with displays of both super-rare and car-boot vinyl albums and singles that pull at my heart strings and my wallet.

To my left, I spot Italian and Iranian pressings of Led Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love*, pristine in their original sleeves. In the distance, a stall touts a pressing of an early Stones single released in "Southern Rhodesia". To my right is a prized

promotional version of *Abbey Road*, created by Lancia in 1986 to launch a new car, a model of which sits front and centre on the album cover. The price tag says €2,000. "And someone will pay that, easily," says Bev Nipps, a British vinyl dealer who has been collecting — and selling — for 46 years. "It's the thrill of the chase. And once you've found the pearl, you're on to the next one."

When he's not doing brisk business on the stalls he mans at vinyl conventions throughout Europe, or cracking the appalling ba-boom-tish jokes for which he is justly celebrated, Nipps, an MRCF

stalwart, scours Britain and the Continent for those pearls. Described by his laconic colleague Steve as "like Ken Dodd on ecstasy" when he's moving in for the kill, Nipps, who opened the highly regarded Reading record shop the Sound Machine, delights in the increased presence of young people at events such as MRCF. Their mounting interest in vinyl has been noted, too, by the fair's co-founders, Cas Bosland and Marjolein Lubbers.

"That's been the real difference in the past five years or so," Bosland says. "Young people are coming here now. They've found a turntable in the attic, they've said to their parents 'What is this?', and their mum and dad have shown them their vinyl LPs. You know, 'Wow, there's music coming out of it.'"

Sales of vinyl in Britain in the first three months of this year were up 62% on the same period last year. In North America, vinyl is up 52% on 2014, generated more cash for the music industry in the first half of 2015 than Spotify (on its free service), YouTube and Vevo combined, and, while



Smells like teen vinyl

representing only 7% of market share, took 30% of all physical sales. Last weekend's MRCF coincided with Britain's annual Record Store Day, whose growing popularity among entry-level record-buyers lends weight to Bosland's assertion that descriptions of vinyl enthusiasts as anoraks and nerds are no longer accurate.

"It's so out of date. This is about passion — it's no longer about nostalgia. You can

pick up a copy of *Thriller* for €1 or buy 10 completely diverse albums for €10. For young people, that's an incredible way to broaden their tastes and start collecting."

"Collecting", of course, can mean different things to different people. An interesting statistic revealed recently that more than 40% of new vinyl purchases are never actually played. Neither Nipps nor Bosland seems surprised by this. For

Bosland (and, he says, many of his ilk), buying vinyl is as much about the aesthetic as it is about sound quality. "One thing I always find is that it's nice to smell an album," he says dreamily. "You can smell if one comes from the States, or from Holland. You can almost smell which particular plant it was pressed at."

Nipps's response is shaped by the absence of sentiment in his approach to

Treasure seekers Young fans at the Mega Record and CD Fair

collecting and dealing: the alternative, he says, would be financial ruin and mean the curdling of his passion. "I'm now at the stage where I'm detached. I enjoy the stories behind the records, I enjoy finding them, but when it comes to keeping them, you learn to be ruthless. I can't afford to be misty-eyed any more. I can understand why a buyer wouldn't actually play the thing they've bought. Just holding, looking at, a prized find is special in its own way."

Still, Nipps can wax lyrical about past triumphs, and the moment when the bug first bit him. A northern-soul nut whose teens were spent perfecting the moves, wearing the gear and hunting down the tunes that gave the genre its cachet, he started collecting singles at 14 "and ended up with 16,000 of them". A few years back, he bought a collection of 100,000 singles. "And in it were things people

dream of — singles such as Earth Angel by [the 1950s American doo-wop band] the Penguins, which can change hands for £2,000 or more. I held on to it — looked at it, loved it — for about two minutes, then it was, 'Right, that's it, move it on.'"

Other coups include the Beatles' *Lady Madonna* on its original acetate, a Queen single — one of only 100 pressed — and an Abba single on red vinyl, so rare it bordered on mythical. In each instance, Nipps pounced, paused, then offloaded the booty. "Part of the fun of crate-digging is the dream of finding the golden ticket. But the main thing is the possibility of discovering music you've never heard before. It all comes back to that."

Back at the fair, fighting through crowds of people wheeling trolleys and carry cases, I arrive, for the umpteenth time that day, at a stall selling an incredibly rare (and expensive) single by the Clash.

In a haze, I finally part with the money and take possession of the treasure. Will I play it? Are you joking? I'll frame it. And maybe smell it, too. **■**

The next MRCF takes place in Utrecht on Nov 12 and 13; recordplanet.nl



This is about passion, not nerds and anoraks