



# ALL SALES ARE VINYL

THE LP IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE LP.  
FLIPPING THROUGH THE CRATES AT  
THE WORLD'S BIGGEST RECORD FAIR.

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TITLE MEGA RECORD FAIR, UTRECHT

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The temperature is unseasonably warm outside as an ambitious spring sun shines down on Utrecht from a cloudless sky. It's a day that's tailor-made for cycling by the canals or strolling through the Dutch city's botanical gardens. So why will a couple of thousand people decide to spend this beautiful day shuffling around in a dim, half-lit, cavernous, dingy conference hall?

To those already in attendance, it's a no-brainer: "I would go pretty much anywhere in the world to get that one special record," says Hans Pokora, one of over 500 vendors set up and ready to go at the Mega Record & CD Fair at Utrecht's Jaarbeurs Convention Center.

He's obviously not the only one. Those who have forsaken the sun for the low fluorescent twilight of this huge hangar would appear to be just as committed to their own personal quests. With so many people streaming through the cramped corridors, one would expect to be met with a deafening roar and an almost frenzied atmosphere as the crowds swarm from stall to stall.

Instead, the steady stream of collectors trawling through the racks and stalls at Europe's largest record fair—which regularly challenges the likes of the Austin Record Convention in Texas for the title of "the Mecca of vinyl"—creates a low, rumbling hum. It's as if the collective concentration is creating the noise; a purring energy that resembles the sound of a distant rhythmic machine whirring



CAIO BERALDO,  
A DJ FROM BRAZIL



MARCUS REHMET,  
A COLLECTOR FROM GERMANY



LAURENT SABLAIROLLES,  
A DUTCH COLLECTOR



through an endless process. Whispered deals over steaming Styrofoam cups float on the air, mixing with the smell of percolator coffee, aging cardboard, and rising anticipation. Collectors flick through albums with the coordination of a production line: they finish one box, take a step to the side, and begin again, their vacated place soon inhabited by another patient customer.

Despite the hordes, movement is executed with a determined focus, and a near-organic ease; there is no barging, no struggle for space, even in the often-claustrophobic thoroughfares, where collectors already laden with trophies and personal sound systems somehow manage to negotiate the human traffic without collision.

Each person passes without hindrance through the flow of bodies as they pursue their own personal mission to find that

most sought-after piece of vinyl.

And there's the vinyl. Oh yes, how could we forget? It's all about the vinyl. There are those who love music; those who love bands; and then there are those who love the actual records. It's a longing, a desire—and, in most cases, an obsession. It's a habit that constantly needs feeding, an all-consuming craving for every aspect of the medium. It's a jones for the sound, the smell, the feel, and the sight of silky black vinyl spinning under a satisfied stylus.

And this is not just a monkey on the back of aging old-school collectors—a new generation of vinyl junkies is currently driving a renaissance in record collecting, spurred on by their search for the roots of the music they love, and finding them in the grooves of that most precious of acetates. And they're beginning to buy their new music on a

medium that is making a comeback, thanks to champions such as Jack White, who, along with an increasing number of artists, is releasing new material on vinyl weeks before issuing digital versions.

"Vinyl is the real deal," White said in a statement in support of this year's Record Store Day, the annual international celebration of grassroots record stores held on April 16. "I've always felt that until you buy the vinyl record, you just don't own the album. It's not just me, it's not just a little pet thing, it's not just some retro romantic thing from the past. It's still alive." White and his Third Man Records store have even invented the "triple-decker"—an innovation whereby a regular 12-inch-format record contains a 7-inch with an unreleased track embedded inside (basically, a vinyl record inside a vinyl record)—to entice fans back to the glossy black discs.

"A lot of bands today are getting smarter and making vinyl available as a special feature—a marketing tool," says Laurent Sablairolles, a Dutch collector and former record-store employee who already has a shopping caddy half-full of vinyl 30 minutes after the fair opens. "The bands are giving the kids what they want—their CD or download—but they're adding a vinyl pressing into the bundle. It's a way of introducing vinyl to kids who may never have played a record in their lives."

So what have the kids from the digital-only generation been missing out on?

"For me, it's always about the music," says Markus Rehmet, a '50s specialist and collector who's making one of his annual pilgrimages to Utrecht from Germany. "I listen to everything I buy. The sound—that deep, warm vibe—there's an essence to it that is not just about the song, but

"VINYL IS THE REAL DEAL—UNTIL YOU BUY THE RECORD, YOU JUST DON'T OWN THE ALBUM."

—JACK WHITE



**PURSuing VINYL CAN QUICKLY BECOME A LIFE'S WORK, FILLED WITH AS MUCH MYSTERY AND MYTH AS THE SEARCH FOR THE HOLY GRAIL—WHICH SOME LONG-LOST ALBUMS CAN BECOME.**

the whole production process and the era it was recorded in. I listen to it, and those '50s guys are doing their thing all over again for the first time. It's all there, that moment, in the vinyl." Rehmet has been a collector for over 30 years, and began pursuing rare rockabilly and rock 'n' roll records at a time when he had to cycle 25 miles to get to his nearest record shop just to order an album, which could then take an additional three weeks to arrive by mail order from the U.S.

"Funnily enough, these records were more available back then," he says. He spreads his arms out over the tightly packed boxes of singles in front of him before pointing to the albums hanging behind him, one of which—an early Buddy Holly album—has a \$218 price tag. "What you see here is everything I've got. With the stuff I love, the movement in the market is minimal these days.

"People are hoarding their collections,

No one's really selling. But it comes in waves. There may be a time soon where a couple of huge collections go up for sale and the records will start moving again."

Over at Pokora's stall, serious-looking customers are intensely flicking through cases of rare '60s psychedelia as Pokora—an engaging and laid-back Austrian dealer with a Gandalf air about him—reclines in a garden chair, sipping tea and appreciating the attention his records are getting. To his right, his assistant is explaining to a potential customer that the edition of British psych-rockers Tomorrow's eponymously titled 1968 album attached to the stall's backdrop is well worth its \$116 price tag as a rival store in the next row has one for twice that price in much worse condition.

"I don't know anyone who doesn't buy vinyl for the music," says Pokora, smiling serenely as another intense bartering transaction over an early seven-inch Kinks

begins to his left. "Okay, there's an aspect of investment for some; for others, the artwork is important, but it's really just plastic and card—it's what's pressed into it that's the most important, most beautiful thing."

Pokora admits that, with over 12,000 albums and 8,000 singles back home at his house in Vienna, he'll never be able to listen to all his records, but he's certainly going to try: "I know I have some really great music in my collection, but you know, I may never have heard it. At least, not yet."

To most collectors, cash is often no object when it comes to owning what's pressed into that inky, ribbed plastic. "Vinyl is only worth as much as someone is willing to pay for it, but the thing is, people are willing to pay big money for what they really want," explains Rehmet. "It's all about budget. If I have the cash, and I find that particular album I've been

searching for, then I'll spend it to get what I want." He adds, "There are some really obscure U.S. garage and psychobilly records from the late '50s on my wish list, and if I find them, then I may be walking home." Rehmet grins, but there's steely determination and honesty in his eyes. "I don't have an expensive car—it's a beat-up old Ford only worth about \$2,170—but if I found all those records in one place, I'd probably sell it to get them all. I may have enough left over for a taxi back to Germany!"

Listening to the dedication of the diehards, it's not hard to see how one record on a shelf can lead to whole rooms filled with albums and singles. As with collectors of any art—and records are certainly considered works of art here—pursuing vinyl can quickly become a life's work, filled with as much mystery and myth as the search for the Holy Grail—which some records can become. Indeed, legends of rare, long-lost albums pass from generation to generation, driving some collectors mad. Occasionally, these mythical albums actually surface—not through magic, but clever marketing.

"In one case I know of, one of these records actually came into existence because of the myth," says Sablairolles. "There was always talk about this album called 'Italian Assault' by Venom, the metal band. It was in their list, it had a catalog number, but no one had ever seen it. Then suddenly it started to appear because there was a great demand for it." Caio Beraldo's quest has brought him

**"EVERY RECORD IS A HISTORICAL TREASURE YOU DON'T GET THAT WITH CDS."**

—MARCUS REHMET

to Utrecht from Brazil via Barcelona. A DJ with a keen sense of what gets a crowd buzzing, he is hunting, among other genres, for obscure, Latin-influenced funk. Armed with his own portable turntable and determined to avoid the pitfalls of buying without trying.

"I came here especially from Barcelona looking for rare Brazilian jazz and fusion, '70s progressive and psychedelia, and hip-hop—stuff I can drop into my set," he says, explaining that tourists flocking to South America in the '90s are responsible for Europe becoming a treasure trove for rarities from his homeland. "The funky Brazilian stuff gets people up, especially the British, man. My shows in London have been wild. They get it, man, they know their stuff. But I only DJ with records because the quality can be 10 times better than MP3, and it's the closest you can get to the acoustic music itself."

You'd expect most record collectors to pick up burning torches and head for the nearest Apple store when the subject of digital music is brought up, but while the minority CD stallholders in Utrecht do have a certain edginess about them, the vinyl loyalists are sanguine about the

march of progress. "Every record is a historical treasure," Rehmet says. "The atmosphere, the culture of the time, it's all pressed into it. You don't get that with CDs or digital files. Plus, you lose the personal connection when buying files online. The debate and discussion about music during the sell is as much part of the process as the search and purchase," he explains. "Real music lovers need that interaction, and will never want to lose it."

Sablairolles concurs: "The dawn of CDs was actually a boom time for vinyl collectors. People were dumping their records to replace them with CDs, so I was buying hundreds at a time for silly money. I didn't have time to listen to them before there was a new collection available. It hasn't yet happened with digital downloads, but we'll see."

He adds, "If people are crazy enough to swap vinyl for computerized interpretations of the music, then collectors like me will be more than happy to take records off their hands."

Music's absorption into the cyberworld has more or less been accepted by record collectors, which has its advantages in many ways, but there are still enough disadvantages to keep a healthy level of suspicion simmering in the vinyl community.

As Sablairolles explains: "The Internet is okay if you're just wanting to fill a hole in your collection—one record to complete a back catalog—but there are risks. Quality is everything in this business," he emphasizes. "If the vinyl is scratched or the artwork damaged, then it's useless. You can never guarantee quality on the Web."

The effect online sales have had on the personal interaction Rehmet and others treasure so much has also compounded the struggle independent record stores have to survive, as highlighted by events such as Record Store Day. While many collectors experienced epiphanies in small-town stores and lament their current plight, they believe the stores may come and go, but vinyl will remain.

"The ebb and flow of record stores is just progress—it's evolution. But vinyl will never die," says Sablairolles.

Pokora agrees. "Record stores come and go, but fairs like this remain, and are keeping the flow of vinyl alive. Reissues are, to a certain extent, keeping stores on life support," he says, "and new stores dealing with certain labels and genres are starting up again. But for people who are after first editions or rarities, the fairs are where it's at, and always will be."

All the fun of the fair at [www.recordplanet.nl](http://www.recordplanet.nl)

**HANS POKORA, AN AUSTRIAN COLLECTOR**

