

# Crate Digging

AMBER YAN



---

*WRITER'S COMMENT: This piece was actually really difficult to write. As a student, my task was to simply shed light on the local record collecting culture and call it a day. But as an avid record collector, I felt obligated not only to do it justice, but to stay on task instead of getting distracted to record hunt myself, which for me was the hardest part. I ended up with pages of notes, three hours worth of recorded audio material, and four different drafts that I sat on for a week before merging them into a single final draft. Fortunately, the collectors I interviewed for this piece are friends and colleagues who were eager not only to share their love for records with me but to provide feedback as well, and I owe them all many thanks. But special thanks to my friend and former boss, Ben Johnson, whose help and support has been vital to this story, and to Paul Webb, who set our differences aside for one day to take me record hunting with him. Hopefully, readers will walk away from this piece not dismissing record collecting as a gimmick or waning fad for hipsters, but seeing it the way I do—as an interesting and thriving culture of its own.*

—Amber Yan

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Amber Yan built her informative and entertaining article "Crate Digging" one revision at a time. Over time, she added characters, scenes, and the names (and sometimes prices) of specific records various crate diggers come across. She ended up with four fascinating characters (three crate diggers and then, at the end, herself going crate digging), at least a dozen different record albums, numerous record artists, and several different locations with dramatic scenes where characters (and the reader) discover their would-be treasure: the sought-after collectible record in the crate. She writes with style and grace, so much so that the reader is likely not to notice the writing, instead focusing on the dramatic scenes of record collectors going crate digging.*

—John Boe, University Writing Program

THE SUNLIGHT GLAZED OVERHEAD AS BEN JOHNSON dug through a crate of used records outside of Armadillo Records. He paused for a moment to adjust the baseball cap that obscured his handsome features before jamming several records underarm. “There are some gems in here,” he said. “Sometimes you’ll find some really great ‘80s boogie B-sides that won’t be found anywhere other than the dollar bin. You just have to look.”

For Ben, former general manager at KDVS, the UC Davis campus radio station, record collecting has evolved from a hobby to a full-blown lifestyle. Having graduated from UC Davis in 2009, Ben now dedicates his Wednesday and Friday nights to DJing under the alias “Dogtones” in Woodland and Sacramento and prides himself at being the lead contributor to *Laserfunk*, a blog that pays tribute to the disco-funk and ‘80s post-disco gems he finds.

Ben calls his hobby “crate digging,” named after the physical act of digging through crates of records for rare finds. Crate digging isn’t for the casual record collector. “Sometimes it’s good to know what you’re looking for,” Ben said, pushing a copy of the Miles Davis classic, *Bitches Brew* under his arm. “But it’s pretty rewarding to find something unexpected—record hunting can be a pretty big exercise in the unknown.”

### **The Roots & Debate: Analog Versus Digital**

IN A WORLD OF IPODS AND SHRINKING MP3 PLAYERS, it’s difficult to understand why a twenty-two-year-old young man like Ben would dedicate himself to record collecting. Records are hulking, delicate objects that seem antiquated and primitive, even compared to CDs. Records require a conscientious eye to watch over, a delicate hand to operate, and they don’t hold up against any kind of elemental extremes: records become too brittle if it’s too cold and they warp if it’s too hot. For self-proclaimed audiophiles, though, vinyl is the only viable form of music.

An iPod can carry over 5,000 songs in the form of MP3s, whereas one side of a record can carry maybe six tracks at most. In terms of convenience, the iPod clearly wins a landslide victory. But to accept this argument is to ignore the function of the MP3. MP3 refers to the method of compressing audio into a digital file. By definition, “compressing” requires moving and removing things to make something more portable. The trouble is that by doing so, one must sacrifice something in the process: sound quality. Compressing any file into a sleek MP3 file will distort

the sound and degrade the audio quality. The lesson learned is that while an MP3 can save space on a hard drive, it will be a diluted and downgraded replica of the original audio file.

“There’s something really beautiful about a vinyl record,” Ben said. “It makes me feel really involved with music without having to play it. And it sounds as close to the original recording as possible so it’s close to what the artist wants it to sound like.”

## **The Thrill Of The Hunt**

WHEN BEN ISN’T DIGGING THROUGH the used record bins at Armadillo Records, he’s busy pricing used records at Records, a used record store in Sacramento. Records is a hole-in-the-wall joint, the kind of place you’d pass by but never walk in. Its location behind an R5 Records isn’t ideal for business either.

The records are ordered by genre then alphabetized, but even then it’s easy to get overwhelmed if you don’t know what you’re looking for. There are over one hundred thousand records in the store, none of which have been cataloged in a database of any kind, so it’s difficult to know what exactly you’ll find.

“Everything in stock is what people bring in to sell to the store,” said Shane Brock, a regular customer, DJ, and collector. “There are regulars that come in like clockwork to see what rolls in from day to day.”

Most of the regulars are dealers that come to Records to make a quick second income, picking up what they can find by combing through garage sales and record swaps. Most of them know exactly how much their records are worth and it’s Ben’s job to negotiate a suitable price. “If a guy comes in with a box of records, I can kind of eyeball a price based on what I recognize,” he said. “I try to be fair, but if it’s obvious that he doesn’t care about the records or inherited them from somewhere and wants to make a quick buck, he’ll be happy to take whatever price I’m offering.”

Several days before my visit, Records bought a box of jazz records from a man who simply inherited a box of records and was looking for a place to dispose of them. The store paid the man a few hundred dollars for the entire collection, only to discover later that it included *Vibes From The Tribe*, an incredibly rare and out of print jazz record by Phil Ranelin that sold for \$525. “A big sale like that happens here about once a month,” Ben said proudly, patting me on the shoulder.

There was a cardboard box of records that had been dropped off earlier in the day that other employees had already begun pricing. I found an assortment of titles, records that spanned a dozen different genres. Some were familiar, but there were many others I hadn't seen before and wasn't sure what to make of. I arbitrarily pulled a record from the box—"Surgery" by World Class Wreckin' Cru. Judging by the fluorescent pink cover art that depicts a cartoon surgeon operating on a turntable aided by two scantily clad nurses, I assumed it was another cheesy novelty electronic album, worth five bucks or less.

The flashy cover art caught Shane's eyes and his face immediately lit up as he gently pulled the record from my hands. "That's an original early Dr. Dre track!" he said excitedly, before carefully sliding the disc from the sleeve to examine the condition. Before Dr. Dre became an influential producer, rapper, and founding member of N.W.A., he was a DJ and member of the electro-hop group, World Class Wreckin' Cru. Though World Class Wreckin' Cru was only active in the mid-1980's and remains virtually unknown to younger *The Chronic*-era Dr Dre fans, they've garnered a following by DJs and old school hip hop fans alike. The going price for that particular twelve-inch single is anywhere from \$1 to \$50, depending on the condition. Given it had a couple minor scratches, Ben ended up pricing the record for \$45. "The condition of the record is everything," Ben explained. "This one looks like it's in great condition, especially since clean copies are almost impossible to find. Early Dre records are normally played to death by fans and DJs."

Unfortunately, that was the only valuable record in the box. Beneath "Surgery," I found several worn copies of *The Dark Side Of The Moon* by Pink Floyd, various David Bowie compilations, and *Rubber Soul* by The Beatles, all of which were reissues and which Ben assured me were a dime a dozen, or rather, worth anywhere from fifty cents to a few dollars. "Reissues typically aren't worth much," he said. "There are a lot of record collectors who won't even touch them. Those are the kinds of guys that are willing to drop thousands of dollars on original pressings."

It's sometimes easy to tell whether a record is an original copy based on little clues like the barcode or catalog number and date of the pressing. If the date listed doesn't match the original release date, the record is obviously a reissue. The 1966 original acetate test pressing of *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, for example, is estimated to be worth

around \$25,000 in mint condition, whereas the double LP reissue can be purchased at any record store for an affordable \$35.

But record stores tend to have an idea of who their clients are and price their used records as accurately as possible. It's hard to find a really good deal as a result, and you're unlikely to find a mis-priced original copy of *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. "I only go to record stores when I have something specific in mind or if there's a new release I have to get my hands on," Ben said.

## **The Players**

EACH SERIOUS RECORD COLLECTOR HAS A STRATEGY of his own. Some do their research ahead of time and only buy specific records, while others have much more unconventional approaches. Amir Moarefi, a biochemistry PhD candidate, is a more casual record collector who tends to buy what he recognizes and leaves the rest for the others without a second thought. "I just like digging through boxes of records," Amir said. "I'll look for something specific first, but afterward I'll just generally go through the box."

But even for more casual collectors, buying used records is a gamble. Many record collectors want to be exposed to new music and are willing to take a chance with an unfamiliar record, regardless of the likelihood of wasting money on a bad record. "If I really don't know, I'll buy a record based on the cover art," Amir admitted. "Like if the cover art looks cool, maybe it'll be a good record I don't know about. Sometimes it's great, but ninety percent of the time it sucks." Amir has accumulated close to a thousand records as a result, many of which he bought for five dollars or less at various record swaps or garage sales.

"But there've been a lot of times where I've found a record that was priced much lower than it was worth but I passed on it anyway and kicked myself later," Amir said. "Once I found *The Mollusk* by Ween for three dollars and I passed on it because I thought it was too much—later my roommate told me he would've paid a lot of money for it." Many record collectors prize early 1990s rock records because they were released during the transition from analog media like cassette tapes and vinyl records to digital media, like the MP3 files stored on a CD. As a result, vinyl copies were printed in extremely limited quantities and never reissued. "That's why early Red Hot Chili Peppers records like *Blood*

*Sugar Sex Magik* or even original Pavement records sell for like thirty bucks,” Amir said.

It’s a totally different story for serious record collectors and veteran crate diggers like Paul Webb. Paul is a native of Kentucky who relocated to Davis for school and never looked back. “There’s so much vinyl pouring in all the time; it’s nothing like it is back home,” Paul said. Paul is a tall, scrawny young man with piercing blue eyes and a lop-sided grin that spreads from ear to ear at the mention of the word “vinyl.” Record collecting is a full-time job for Paul, whose major source of income comes from his eBay account. He spends every morning combing sites such as Craigslist for listed record swaps or garage sales, hoping to score rare and valuable records that would make all his trouble worth the effort.

His strategy works like this: Paul goes to garage sales where he buys up entire boxes of records, based on the genre. He tends to buy up boxes of soul, funk, disco, and jazz as he sees fit and leaves the boxes of classic rock and opera behind. In the process, Paul typically checks to see what he recognizes and estimates a suitable price. But the game is the same for any serious record collector or DJ: you have to analyze the worth of what you recognize to determine the worth of what you don’t recognize.

“Unless you know a lot about music you won’t know the worth of those records,” Paul explained. “I bought this one box of records for a hundred bucks and sold one seven-inch record for eleven grand—I bet that guy had no idea what that was worth!”

The record in question was “God Save The Queen” by The Sex Pistols, originally released in 1977, before the band signed to EMI and re-released the single. Depending on the condition of the record and the original sleeve, it could be worth much more than the price Paul sold it for. “The cover was beat up,” Paul lamented. “It was falling apart, so I taped it back together like a fool.” Paul’s attempt to repair the sleeve devalued the record by at least three or four thousand dollars. “That’s like buying a collector’s Barbie doll with the box already opened and taped back up,” he explained.

Sometimes you get lucky and, like Paul, find a record worth the weight of the rest of the box, if not more. A more common scenario goes like this: you spend two hundred dollars or so for a box of records, take the box home, and then spend the rest of the day shuttling the records to a dump or pawning them off to any other record collector or store you can think of that might want them.

There are maybe two dozen worthless records for every one semi-valuable record per box, but to dig for valuable records is to miss the point of crate digging entirely: part of the fun comes from the experience of hunting and discovering new music, regardless of the net worth of what you find.

### **The Game Begins**

I GOT UP AT 8 AM ON A SUNDAY MORNING to get my hands dirty and do some crate digging of my own. We scouted out Craigslist the night before and found a local listing for a garage sale that doubled as a record swap—prime hunting ground for any avid record collector. Paul arrived at my apartment in a forest green Honda Element and seemed eager to demonstrate his knowledge as a record collector. On the car ride, I replayed an imaginary scenario in my head: the seller would offer me the entire box of records for five bucks and I would roll my eyes, complain about the weight of the box, and accept it unwillingly. I would haul the box home only to discover later a handful of valuable records: an original CBS pressing of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, estimated worth \$35,000; the 1966 pressing of *Yesterday and Today* by The Beatles, estimated at \$40,000; and the most valuable record of all: *Double Fantasy* by John Lennon & Yoko Ono, released by Geffen Records in 1980, autographed by Lennon before he was shot by Mark David Chapman, a copy of which sold in 2003 for \$525,000.

Once we got to the garage sale, it was easy to tell where the records were—there were half a dozen people hunched over several boxes, excitedly removing records to show one another. Garlands of old Christmas lights, bruised furniture, and boxes of defunct household electronics typical to any garage sale went unnoticed and were nearly trampled on by the inflow of record collectors.

They all have their niches and specific genres they're interested in. Some record collectors specialize in jazz and electronic, others, like Paul or Ben, specialize in hip hop and disco. Each seemed to be looking for a specific genre rather than record. Most of them were casual collectors who took their time as they flipped through the seller's extensive collection.

The garage sale is more like a competition for Paul, who seems obsessed with never letting the opportunity of snagging a valuable record pass him by, even if that means acquiring countless worthless records in the process. With the number of other record collectors at the sale,

Paul has to give himself an edge to ensure that the other collectors don't buy up every valuable record before he can get his hands on them. Paul flipped through a box of seventy-five records or so, and walked away with it for a hundred and fifty dollars.

"The minute I saw that Z-Factor record, I thought there might be something worthwhile in there that I just didn't know about," he said. For Paul, everything about the sale counts: from the attitude of the seller to the quality of the cover art. The titles tell Paul about the seller's music taste: if there's a lot of early house or electronic, Paul is more likely to buy up the entire box, whereas he is more likely to sift through boxes of hip hop records for the ones he wants in particular. Charged with being one of the first house songs in the history of music, the "I Am The DJ" twelve-inch single by Z-Factor was all the reason Paul needed to take the whole box.

We returned to Records where Ben and Paul sorted through the records they didn't recognize: twelve-inch singles by The Jonzun Crew, Man Parrish, and Donna Allen, among a handful of others—none of which were worth more than ten dollars. But if Paul was disappointed, he disguised it by putting a positive spin on every record. "The cover art seems cheesy," he said of the Donna Allen record. "But at least she looks foxy." He laughed half-heartedly, but his gaze was forlorn and fixed on the pile of records strewn across the countertop. He kept insisting that every record was worth *something to someone*, even if not to him.

And that's how I left him, filing through those records in a plastic crate. Maybe he lost. Maybe it was a draw. Ben says it'll take a week for him to put a price on everything.