

# Collectormania!

## I AM WOMAN... RECORD COLLECTOR

by Lisa Wheeler

**M**y name is Lisa, and I'm a record collector. Yes, I attend record shows, dive through dusty garage sale boxes and comb online auction sites in the quest of additional stash. I have a room with a full stereo system (yes, with a turntable), two victrolas and floor-to-ceiling shelves dedicated to a collection of thousands of pieces of vinyl and a couple thousand compact discs (not to mention a closet that is home to 20 long boxes of 45 rpm singles). Even with all of that time (and money) spent on my hobby, I am still considered somewhat of a freak in what is the mainly masculine pursuit of record collecting.

"I'm not trying to be rude, but record collecting has been kind of the boy's club," said Seth Hagstund, a German-based collector, whom I talked to at the 2006 spring Austin Record Convention. "I mean, how would you feel if I wanted to collect Barbie dolls? It would be a strange concept to you, I'm sure." He had me there. Not counting *The Simpsons'* Mr. Smithers' appreciation for Malibu Stacy, I didn't know any men who collected dolls. I have to give Hagstund props for being honest, but there had to be more to it than his discomfort with my non-stereotypical hobby choice. I continued to search the hall for answers when I spotted Sebastian Palmer, a U.K.-based Beatles collector. "To be honest, I really enjoy seeing women at record shows," he admitted. "I mean, who wants to see a room full of a bunch of sweaty old geezers all day, eh?" Oh well, at least the guy fancies gender diversity in the hobby, even if it's more on the level of aesthetics.

Meanwhile, located in a booth near the entrance to what is described as the "largest record show in the United States," Mary Tomlinson worked the crowd surrounding her vinyl offerings. Regulars to the Austin show know the Chicago-based dealer (Remake.Remodel Records) is an expert on pretty much anything you can put on a turntable. "I started collecting when I was about 14, when my godparents gave me *Alice Cooper's Greatest Hits...* accidentally," she said. Tomlinson admits she is a rarity — a woman who not only collects but is also a successful dealer. "Yeah, I know record collecting is often perceived as a male hobby, but I never really cared. I knew what I liked and what I wanted to do." Before moving to Chicago, she opened a record store in upstate New York. It's there she met her husband, David. "Her collection was better than mine," he said. "She's a human jukebox. She could tell you about the label, the date it was recorded and who was in the studio."

The fact is, and without generalizing too much, for the most part there are too few female record collectors. Although I'm not losing any sleep over this, nor am I screaming "Equality now!" it has always perplexed me as to why so few women collect records. Apparently I'm not the only one to wonder. "I always felt out of place in a male-dominated hobby. With never running into other female record collectors it had me thinking, 'Is there something wrong with me?'" said Gail Alfstad of Surrey, British Columbia, Canada, who started collecting in her teens. "A male record-collecting friend of my parents gave

me 500-600 45s, and that was it. I was hooked, and there was no turning back." She currently owns more than 10,000 45s, as well as 300 picture discs and 3,000 LPs.

"I think there are more female record collectors than we think," said Tanya Fitzgerald, of Atlanta, Ga. "But I think most of us are in the closet." She said although she has surrounded herself with a few other female collectors in the area, most don't feel comfortable going public with their hobby. "I readily admit I have felt intimidated going to record shows and talking about my collection with men, but to be honest, I think it's because they don't take me seriously," she admitted. "I'll give you a recent example. I went to a record show with my husband, and whenever we would browse through the boxes, the dealers would always ask him what he was looking for and never say a word to me. My husband doesn't even collect records!"

While there is certainly an emotional aspect to why many believe there were too few female record collectors, I was hoping that someone could explain it all on an intellectual level. Then I discovered Roy Shuker. "I have actually been researching this topic for about four years, and I'm currently working on a book," said Shuker, a professor of media studies at Victoria University in New Zealand. His book, tentatively titled *Record Collecting As A Social Practice*, features interviews with 67 collectors, including 11 women. In December 2005 the university held a four-day conference on Contemporary Music Studies, including a seminar titled "Gender And The Record Collector."

"Record collecting does appear to be a male-dominated practice," Shuker said. "However, there is convincing survey evidence that the majority of overall collectors are women." Among his findings, Shuker discovered that women's interests lie in the more "traditional" areas of collecting, with a greater emphasis on "domestic-related" collectibles. "This imbalance reinforces other depictions of record collecting as a male-dominated practice, and it is certainly widely perceived as such." Shuker cites documentaries such as Alan Zweig's *Vinyl*, which includes only five females among its 100 subjects, as well as fictional accounts of the hobby courtesy of Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity* and Rob Fleming's *Championship Vinyl*. "For male collectors, the social role of collecting appears to be a significant part of masculinity. In common with other forms of collecting, record collecting can represent a public display of male power and knowledge, serving as a form of cultural capital within the peer group."

What also apparently sets female record collectors apart from male enthusiasts, at least according to his research, is just how one defines collecting. "Several women collectors preferred the term 'music lovers' rather than record collector," Shuker said. "Mind you, quite a few males were also keen to distance themselves from the *High Fidelity* stereotype, but even then among the men there was often a distinction between 'use value,' those who purchase or acquire because they like the music and play the recordings, and 'commodity



Photo by Lisa Wheeler

**Nicole Makowski of Houston, Texas, at the Austin Record Convention. Makowski became interested in record collecting as a result of attending shows with her father.**

value,' with an emphasis on the economic, scarcity or rarity aspect of the recordings and keeps them in the original wrapping, unplayed."

"I'll buy that theory," said Mary Hardy, a self-described "Rolling Stones freak" from San Diego, Calif. "When I buy a record I want to play it and enjoy it. Most of the male Stones collectors that I know just want to covet the item, keep it sealed up and just bask in the fact that they own it."

"It seems to me that most females seem to collect what they like, a specific artist or genre," said Alfstad. "Not all, but many men seem to be very interested in the value of their collection, whereas value seems to be secondary for women. Men seem to have to have first pressings, specific labels. They snub their noses at greatest hits records, whereas I think they are great."

As for the future of women in record collecting? Most agree that it's up to the adults to introduce the younger generation, no matter what gender, to the love of collecting. "My father raised me on record shows," said Nicole Makowski, 39 of Houston. "I've never felt out of place. I just do my own thing. I'm lucky my father paved the way for me," she added.

"A couple weeks ago my daughter and I were walking through The Experience Music Project Museum in Seattle," said Alfstad. "While we were looking at some records she turned to me and said, 'You know, Mom, it really is cool that you collect records.' I thought that was very cool." In a future column, we'll introduce you to parents who are nurturing younger collectors.

Coming up next: Have you ever just wanted to trash your collection? Been so bored to tears that you wanted to haul it off to Goodwill without a second thought? It happens. We'll talk to collectors who have done just that and why. We'll also have some tips on how to avoid the doldrums of collecting.

Help Wanted: Do you have one of the largest collections of a particular artist or label known to man (or woman)? Is your collection taking over your house and home? Can't find the dog, yet you know where every single disc in your collection is systematically located? I want to talk to you. *Collectormania!* will be occasionally featuring these über collectors and their collections. Contact me at my Web site, [www.isleofwrite.com](http://www.isleofwrite.com). There you will also find an archive of past columns.