

Collectormania!

I AM, I SAID... A NEIL DIAMOND COLLECTOR

by Lisa Wheeler

What would possess someone to spend close to a lifetime, an almost unlimited amount of money and give up a good portion of his or her living space to collect the memorabilia of one singer or group? These are what I affectionately call uber collectors — people who will do whatever it takes to collect every recording, poster, magazine article and sweaty concert outfit from their favorite performers. These men and women are some of the most enthusiastic (some might say obsessed) fans out there, and we will be meeting them regularly in this column.

Ian Graham didn't start out as a Neil Diamond fan. As a kid growing up in Scotland, his passion was football (soccer). "I used to travel to Edinburgh to watch my favorite team," Graham said. "I was always in the stadium very early before the game, and whichever record was popular at the time was played over and over again on the public address system," he said. "In 1968, a novelty record by a singer called Whistling Jack Smith was popular, and they played it incessantly at the stadium. It used to drive me nuts." Then one day the PA operator changed things up and played a record from the hot new U.S. group, The Monkees. The song was "I'm A Believer." The operator, sensing an appreciation for diverse music, later added a tune by a U.S. singer/songwriter named Neil Diamond, "Solitary Man." "The announcer mentioned that Neil Diamond also had written The Monkees song. I became hooked on trying to find out more," said Graham. But it would take almost two months before the then 13-year-old convinced his local record shop to stock Neil Diamond records. "I finally managed to buy a U.K. release copy of Neil's album *The Feel Of Neil Diamond*," and things just went from there.

Occupying the loft in his home, which he shares with his "long suffering wife," Jenny, is the retired police officer's estimated 10,000 pieces of Neil Diamond memorabilia, including 1,000 45s, 600 LPs, 200 compact discs, as well as various eight-tracks, laser discs and reel-to-reels from 35 different countries. Graham has also started collecting Diamond's songs recorded by other artists. "I collect Neil Diamond 99 percent; the other 1 percent is cover songs that Neil wrote and others recorded. For example, I have vinyl 45s as diverse as Count Prince Miller & Tamashanter singing "Red Red Wine" and Frank Sinatra singing "Dry Your Eyes."

Graham's collection doesn't stop at recorded material. "I also own over 150 Neil Diamond posters, countless magazines, tour books, guitar picks, drum sticks, tour merchandise, clothing and one of Neil's stage shirts from 1986, and I try to keep a press-cuttings file for every year of his career from 1966 to now. It is impossible to list everything."

Professing to be the largest European collector of Diamond recordings, German-based Klaus Bruck hasn't turned his entire Rottenburg home into a museum of his favorite singer — only two rooms. "It looks like a record warehouse. I have some Neil Diamond gold awards hanging on the wall, but I also have pictures of my wife, Tina," said Bruck.

Collecting since 1978, Bruck has managed to amass more than 1,000 albums and an equal number of vinyl singles. He also estimated owning an impressive number of compact discs, "200 or 300, I'm not even sure." In fact, his collection is so large, he admitted that he has lost count of it all. "I never found time to list how much I have, really."

Diamond collectors will be the first to admit that emotion plays a big part in their affection for the singer and their related hobby. "He touched my heart," said Iris Gerhardt, from Independence, Mo. The retired math teacher saw Diamond in concert in 1982 and was so moved by his performance she began collecting everything she could find on the singer. She estimates her diverse collection amounts to "thousands" of pieces.

"Three rooms are pretty much all Neil, and I have records stored in various other places — lots in the

"I collect Neil Diamond 99 percent; the other 1 percent is cover songs that Neil wrote and others recorded."

— Neil Diamond super fan Ian Graham

basement," she said. "My family tolerates it." Her most-prized possession? A personal note sent to her from Diamond. In 1999, Gerhardt and two other Neil Diamond fans, Jean Scigliano and Eydie Ruth, unveiled the "I Am... I Said, A Fan Of Neil Diamond Message Board," www.iaisnd.com. The site has become the most dedicated, authoritative online resource for all things Neil Diamond.

While some Diamond fans profess their devotion inside their homes, others are quite public with theirs. Dublin-area collector Ambrose O'Shea has placed a sign on his home, proclaiming it "Diamondville" and created a Web site for his own massive collection at www.diamondville102.net.

"I have been a fan since 1970, when I first saw him on *The Johnny Cash Show*," O'Shea said. "He sang 'Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show,' and I was hooked then and there." His current collection, of more than 1,000 pieces, includes programs from every tour the singer has done as well as a copy of the single "Clown Town" (Columbia 42809/1963, estimated value \$500 NM).

How much are Diamond's super fans willing to spend for a prized possession of their hero? Collectors admit things can get out of hand. "I have spent a frightening amount over the years," said Graham. "It is easier now as I have a decent collection, but when I first started I would offer whatever a dealer or seller was asking as long as I had the funds. As you become more experienced you pick up duplicates and trade with other fans and learn to haggle with dealers. Probably now I spend less than £3,000 [around \$5,000] a year on my collection." Graham's most expensive items include a collection of eight Japanese-issue red vinyl 45s with picture sleeves, which cost more than \$2,500. "I also paid a lot of money for one of Neil's 1986 concert shirts, and that is probably the item that



Courtesy of MPI Home Video (Music Scene)

For some music memorabilia collectors, no star shines as brightly as Neil Diamond.

holds most value for me personally," he admitted. However, when Diamond is touring, money is almost no object when it comes to acquiring additional pieces to his ever-growing collection. And for the record, Graham has seen Diamond in concert an incredible 163 times.

While most of us never have the opportunity to come face to face with our favorite singer or band, Jamie Amengual is one of the lucky ones. In 2001, the now 34-year-old Cleveland, Ohio, office manager, was called on stage during a Diamond concert for a personal serenade by her idol.

"He sang 'Girl, You'll Be A Woman Soon,' and I also got a few kisses during the song," said Amengual. A "Diamondhead" since the tender age of 8, Amengual might take the prize for the most unique public display of Diamond affection. Within weeks of buying her new Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme, she had an artist airbrush a frog king (a reference to the lyrics "Did you ever read about a frog who dreamed of being a king," from the song "I Am, I Said") and the words "Diamond Girl" on the back of the vehicle. She also secured a one-of-a-kind vanity license plate, "DMNDFAN," to go with her plate frame, "Proud to be a Neil Diamond Fan." "Neil was performing in Columbus last year, and we all went to the hotel the next day to see him leave on the tour bus," she said. "I made sure I parked the car right in front of the bus. The bus had to drive around the car so I was hoping that someone showed it to Neil."

You might wonder what the artists think about these "super fans." Diamond is well aware of the lengths his fans go to proclaim their loyalty and often reaches out to thank them, in person. "My proudest moment was being photographed with him outside his hotel in 2002," said Graham. "He was in Scotland, and later that same night as the show was ending Neil called me forward to the front of the stage and shook my hand in front of 10,000 fans and thanked me for my support over the years. I should have been thanking him for all the joy he has given me and millions of others, but it was a truly special moment for me."

Coming up: There's something rotten in your CD player — your disc. We'll examine the gradual deterioration of the media, commonly called CD rot, and if it's causing most to shout, "Hype!" or frantically hyperventilate.

Have a topic you would like to see covered? Story ideas? Comments? Suggestions? You can reach me at Collectormania@isleofwrite.com or via the good ol' post office at Lisa Wheeler, Box 27633, Austin TX 78755.