

Positive Feedback

Going... going... gone: Ended eBay music auctions find afterlife on Popsike

Three years ago, Philipp Wegmueller was sifting through the countless pages of eBay, from his Zurich, Switzerland, home trying to find additions to his vast collection of prog and psych records.

"I have about 1,500 records in my collection, mostly from 1967-72," he said. "I am still looking for very rare records which have been on my want list for years." Although there was an abundance of current offerings to choose from, Wegmueller was having a hard time hunting down how much these particular recordings previously sold for. "It was always difficult to know the value of a record — to know how much my highest bid should be," he said. Since eBay saves previous auctions for only 15 days, he was often frustrated with the lack of information. So he decided to take matters into his own hands. He began stockpiling auction details, including descriptions and even pictures, from past eBay auctions into his own private database.

After months of accumulating a substantial amount of information, the 37-year-old software engineer began to wonder if he was the only person aggravated by the lack of past auction facts and figures. So he built a Web site to share his database with other collectors. He named his site Popsike. "It originally stood for 'pop + psych,' because pop and psych was and still is my core collecting field," he said. "I'm a German-speaking guy, so the name 'Popsike' sounded pretty cool."

The site was unveiled March 2004, with 10,000 past eBay music auctions accessible to visitors. It didn't take long before word of the site spread, and almost immediately Wegmueller was overwhelmed with as many as 4,000 visitors a day.

"I use this site regularly. It gives the user the ability to create their own actively running valuation system," said Toronto collector Benjamin Fanjoy.

Because there wasn't anything like it on the Web, Wegmueller quickly discovered that auction results weren't the only things people craved. "Every week I got e-mails from people who want to buy records which they found on Popsike.com," he admitted. "But on the other hand I receive many e-mails from grateful collectors who are using Popsike.com every day and have been waiting for something like that for years."

"I check prior sales [on Popsike] to see if I have the golden ticket, so to speak," said jazz and rock collector Paul Pelon IV, of Grand Rapids, Mich. But Wegmueller admitted, even with his immense database, there is still no rhyme or reason to determining a record's true value. "There is no fixed price for a second-hand record, no matter how rare it is," Wegmueller said. "The price of a rare record is purely determined by what people are prepared to pay for it."

In the early days of the site Wegmueller included only the auctions he was personal-



Courtesy of Warner Bros.

An unreleased single by Marc Bolan's former band, John's Children, sold for £6,150 (\$10,702) on eBay. It is currently the most expensive music item archived on popsike.com.

ly interested in, but the popularity of the resource forced him to rethink the purpose of the project. "Popsike.com is not really completely accurate anymore, genre-wise," he said. The process of sifting through thousands of auctions has also changed. Every day he hunts through hundreds of auctions, searching on key words, including the obvious "Beatles," "Hendrix" and "Rolling Stones," as well as formats such as "LP." From there, it's just a matter of what's hot and what's not. "Depending on these search strings, some records make the cut; others don't," he said. Every three months he'll then upload the results (server problems have forced him to take longer, on occasion). Currently there are close to 200,000 previous auctions detailed in his Web pages.

To help collectors further, he has added a newsletter to alert users of updates and has also included a select list of 25 of the most expensive music items sold on eBay (currently the top item archived is a 1967 never-released 45 single of "Midsummer Night's Scene" by Mark Bolan's former band, John's Children, which sold for £6,150 (or \$10,702). "With the help of online auctions, buying sought-after records is transparent — not like 10 years ago," said Wegmueller, who admitted that his database has its disadvantages, especially when there isn't a wi-fi connection around. "I hate to be at a record fair holding an expensive record in my hands and not being able to check the Internet to see if this specific record has been auctioned somewhere."

Do you have a favorite online auction site or resource? I'd love to know about it. Contact me via my Web site, www.isleofwrite.com, where you can also find archived stories from previous issues.

— Lisa Wheeler