

# SIZING UP RECORD COLLECTIONS

Gender and connoisseurship in  
rock music culture

Will Straw

For example, suppose we required a dense texture of classical allusion in all works that we called excellent. Then, the restriction of a formal classical education to men would have the effect of restricting authorship of excellent literature to men. Women would not have written excellent literature because social conditions hindered them. The reason, though gender-connected, would not be gender per se.

(Baym, 1985: 64-5)

I wish Riot Grrrl had inspired girls to be more curious about the great female musicians of yesteryear. Boys bond around discussing used records and obscure bands. With girls it's like every generation has to exhaust itself reinventing the wheel. So we end up with bands that are good but less original than they think they are.

(Vincentelli, 1994: 24)

You don't have to be a German genius to figure out that any pop combo is only as good as their record collection . . .

(Moore, 1993)

When I had almost finished writing this article, I was interviewed by the director of *Vinyl*, a documentary film-in-progress whose subject is record collecting. By the time shooting of the film is completed, its director told me, he will have interviewed almost 100 record collectors. Only five of these, he admitted, were women. He had tried (he claimed, convincingly) to find more female collectors, following up on every lead and making certain that his search was well publicised, but had met with no success. (In response to my own concern that my collection might not be spectacular enough, the director reassured me that some interview subjects had collections of only a few hundred records.) With the director of this film, as with everyone who has discussed the subject with me, there was easy and intuitive acceptance of the idea that record collecting, within Anglo-American cultures at least, is among the more predictably male-dominated of music-related practices.

The challenge, however, is to determine what might be said next. When people are pressed to account for the gendered, masculinist character of record collecting, the certainty that it is so gives way to hesitant and often contradictory explanations as to why. As I shall argue, this uncertainty is rooted in competing images of the collection as cultural monument and private haven. Record collections are seen as both public displays of power/knowledge and private refuges from the sexual or social world; as either structures of control or the by-products of irrational and fetishistic obsession; as material evidence of the homosocial information-mongering which is one underpinning of male power and compensatory undertakings by those unable to wield that power. Indeed, the confusion underlying these characterisations is such that, were one presented with statistical evidence that the typical record collector was female, one could easily invoke a set of stereotypically feminine attributes to explain why this was the case. One might note, for example, that collecting is about the elaboration of a domestic context for consumer goods; that, within collecting, the values of consumption come to assume priority over those of production; and that, in the collection, an immediate, affective relationship to the object takes precedence over collective, speculative forms of cultural involvement (for a discussion which explores some of these claims, see Belk and Wallendorf, 1994).

In the psychological literature on collecting, it is sometimes noted that males and females tend to accumulate objects with equal intensity. If men's accumulations of objects tend, more frequently, to be considered 'collections', one explanation is that this simply signals the higher prestige which has accrued, historically, to the sorts of objects amassed by men. Baekeland has suggested that this argument is not sufficient, and that, in

judgement. Were record collections merely graveyards for exhausted commodities, however, their connection to what Medovski has called the 'masculinist politics' which surround so much popular music might not be apparent (Medovski, 1984). As accumulations of material artefacts, record collections are carriers of the information whose arrangement and interpretation is part of the broader discourse about popular music. In a circular process, record collections, like sports statistics, provide the raw materials around which the rituals of homosocial interaction take shape. Just as ongoing conversation between men shapes the composition and extension of each man's collection, so each man finds, in the similarity of his points of reference to those of his peers, confirmation of a shared universe of critical

At the very least, we may say of record collecting, as of most practices of connoisseurship and systematic consumption, that it stands in an uncertain relationship to masculinity. As part of the material culture of music, records themselves participate in the gendering of cultural habits at a number of levels. From one perspective, records are merely the physical residues of processes of commodity turnover and stylistic change, and, as such, are part of the ongoing, unofficial relocation of objects from the public, commercial realm into the domestic environment. In this, they contribute to the differentiation of domestic spaces, and it is as an effect of the male collector's salvaging of popular cultural artefacts from the world outside that many of the distinctive or stereotypically resonant aspects of men's domestic space take shape. (The slovenly bachelor, his apartment collapsing into disorder amidst the chaos of clutter, is one such stereotype; the apartment which is little more than a compulsively ordered archive is another.) It is often in his relationship to his collections that a male's ideas about domestic stability or the organisation of a domestic environment find their fullest or most easily decipherable elaboration. (Writing of the 1950s, Keir Keightley (1966) has discussed the role of his equipment in nourishing a masculine ideal of the listening room as refuge from the noise and interruptions which come with married or family life.)

**TAXONOMIES OF MALE IDENTITY**

This vision of collecting leaves unanswered the reasons as to why it might be so. One explanation is that collecting works to displace the affective or corporeal aspects of particular practices (sports, music-listening) onto series and historical genealogies, in what might be seen as a fetishistic act of disavowal. Another might be the compulsion to contextualise to

trains are differentiated.)  
 all there is to be collected, ultimately, are the numbers through which flat, geometric structure of such systems themselves, and in the fact that systems offer the most perfect image of the collector's object, both in the action over a potentially infinite range of object domains. (In this, railroad-masculine collector's urge is that it lays a template of symbolic differentiation, the most satisfying (albeit under-theorised) explanation of the tated in consensual ways will become the focus of collective collecting. the object itself, the degree to which any corpus which may be differentiated in consensual ways will become the focus of collective collecting. Indeed, the most satisfying (albeit under-theorised) explanation of the masculine collector's urge is that it lays a template of symbolic differentiation over a potentially infinite range of object domains. (In this, railroad systems offer the most perfect image of the collector's object, both in the flat, geometric structure of such systems themselves, and in the fact that all there is to be collected, ultimately, are the numbers through which trains are differentiated.)

This opposition of 'people' to 'ideas', however, misses the extent to which it is an ideal of systematicity itself which typically grounds the masculinist inclination to collect. Images of the stamp collector as armchair traveller or the phonocart collector as folklorist miss, in their emphasis on the object itself, the degree to which any corpus which may be differentiated in consensual ways will become the focus of collective collecting. Indeed, the most satisfying (albeit under-theorised) explanation of the masculine collector's urge is that it lays a template of symbolic differentiation over a potentially infinite range of object domains. (In this, railroad systems offer the most perfect image of the collector's object, both in the flat, geometric structure of such systems themselves, and in the fact that all there is to be collected, ultimately, are the numbers through which trains are differentiated.)

(Bakeland, 1994: 207)

we should not forget that many women privately amass personal possessions far in excess of any practical need, without any thought of public exhibition other than adornment: we rarely think of accumulations of dress, shoes, perfumes, china and the like as collections. They consist of relatively intimate and transient objects intended directly to enhance their owners' self-images, to be used until they are worn out or broken, and then to be discarded. Men's collections, however, be they of stamps, cars, guns or art, tend to have clear-cut thematic emphases and standard, external reference points in public or private collections. Thus, women's collections tend to be personal and ahistorical, men's impersonal and historical, just as, traditionally, women have tended to have a relatively greater emotional investment in people than in ideas and men to some extent the reverse.

Bakeland cautions that:

fact, male practices of accumulation take shape in an ongoing relationship between the personal space of the collection and public, discursive systems of ordering or value. These public systems are no less arbitrary, of course, in their choice of objects or criteria of value, but they tie each male's collection to an ongoing, collective enterprise of cultural archaeology.



a mastery of the most social of codes, the sense that his persona is fit-  
 lous or deplorable, reducible to the surface on which this mastery is  
 displayed, is the frequent basis of his demigration. Inversely, the nerd is  
 noted for a mastery of knowledge whose common trait is that they are of  
 little use in navigating the terrains of social intercourse. (Indeed, nerdish  
 dispositions are marked by their ability to turn virtually any domain of  
 expertise into a series of numbers on a checklist.) Both the dandy and the  
 nerd are characterised by a relationship to knowledge which is semiotically  
 rich and easy material for parody. For the dandy, this is the result of a  
 labour which transforms cultivated knowledge into the basis of an ongo-  
 ing public performance. For the nerd, knowledge (or, more precisely, the  
 distraction which is its by-product) stands as the easily diagnosed cause of  
 performative social failure, blatantly indexed in the nerd's chaotic and  
 unmonitored self-presentation.

We might add to this taxonomy (if only as the marker of an extreme  
 position) the figure of the brute, the male persona characterised by a pure  
 and uncultivated instinctuality. The brute shares with the nerd an obli-  
 viousness to the rules of social comportment, and, as with the dandy, there  
 is a sense of explicitness, of little depth beyond the immediately visible.  
 What the brute most famously suggests, however, is a strength and mas-  
 tery independent of knowledge which originate and find value within the  
 social and the symbolic. In Western popular culture of the postwar period,  
 for the most part, the brute has not been a principal source of heroic or  
 appealing images of the male. (As Sharon Willis (1993/4) has noted,  
 with respect to the films of Quentin Tarantino, even the racist positioning of  
 certain African-American cultural figures as purely instinctual has seemed  
 to require the interpretive gaze of a cultivated white man who is able to  
 recontextualise such figures within popular cultural traditions.)

In popular music, ostensibly dependent upon the expression of raw,  
 erotic energy, we might expect the figure of the brute to be prominent,  
 but this has been the case only in isolated instances. Throughout most of  
 the recent history of that music, the privileged masculine stances have  
 been those which move between the immediacy of unfettered expression  
 and the acknowledgement that a tradition or genealogy is being reworked  
 or updated. (The postures of recent Britpop stars, marked by both libidi-  
 nous laddishness and knowing references to Burt Bacharach or Ray Davies,  
 are almost perfect examples of this ambiguity.) Indeed, an image of  
 instinctual strength which is not informed by an awareness of progenitors  
 or not anchored in the solidity of a canon and tradition risks appearing  
 naive (as has often been the case with Heavy Metal performers). It is from  
 the raw material of instinctuality, nevertheless, that the most appealing

images of a cool, hip masculinity within popular musical culture have been formed (e.g. Chris Isaac or Damon Albarn). Hipness almost always requires a knowledge which is more or less cultivated, but must repress any evidence that this knowledge is easily acquired in the mastery of lists or bookish sources. In this respect, as Andrew Ross suggests, hipness is one point in an economy which threatens to flounder on the opposed alternatives of being over- or under-informed (Ross, 1990: 83). What counts, however, is not simply the degree of knowledge but the amount of restraint with which it is deployed or guarded. The jazz musician quizzed at length about his influences by the eager fan will almost always insist that music is a question of an elusive 'feel,' even when, like Kirk Douglas in the film *Young Man With a Horn*, he carries his record collection with him from town to town. Similarly, it has long been common in the hipster circles of science fiction fandom to belittle as nerdy those who see that fandom as a cultural space in which to discuss science fiction. To actually introduce science fiction into conversation – to take the pretext for fanish intercourse as its ongoing focus – is to risk being denounced as 'sercon' (serious and conservative), someone unable to sustain effortless and generalised sociality. A familiarity with the symbolic universe of science fiction is a long-term necessity for a subcultural career within fandom, but this familiarity must be signalled in ways which do not show the marks

of contrived effort.

Hipness and nerdishness both begin with the mastery of a symbolic field; what the latter lacks is a controlled economy of revelation, a sense of when and how things are to be spoken of. Hipness maintains boundaries to entry by requiring that the possession of knowledge be made to seem less significant than the tactical sense of how and when it is made public. Cultivation of a corpus (of works, of facts) assumes the air of insincerity only when it is transformed into a set of gestures enacted across time. The stances of hip require that knowledge and judgement be incorporated into bodily self-presentation, where they settle into the postures of an elusive and enigmatic insincerity and may therefore be suggested even when they are not made blatantly manifest.

It is within social constructions of hipness that values we might call masculinist and strategies whose effect is to reproduce social stratification interweave in interesting ways. The male club disc jockey who refrains from discussing labels and producers with a fan avoids the dissipation of his power within meshes of trivial knowledge and is thus part of a line of descent that includes the silent but effective hero of western films. However, he is also, by insisting on the instinctual and uncultivated nature of his choices, limiting access to the set of practices which are his



In three recent novels, men whose lives and relationships to women are in crisis take refuge within intense (even obsessive) relationships to works of popular culture. In the most well-known of the three, Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, the protagonist's successful passage into middle age is marked by his renouncing the secure refuge of his record shop and the system of values and homosocial relations which has taken form around it (Hornby, 1995). In Tim Lucas's novel *Throat Sprockets*, the protagonist is driven

### ACQUISITION AND OBSESSION

own ticket to social mobility. If the worlds of club jockeys or rock would-be entrant, this functions not only to preserve the homosocial character of such worlds, but to block females from the social and economic advancement which they may offer.

In general terms, it might be said that most forms of collecting are devalorised within male peer groups. They are viewed as the sign of a retreat from those realms in which patriarchal power is most obviously deployed and enjoyed. At worst, collections are taken as evidence that blocked or thwarted sexual impulses have been sublimated into lifeless series of facts or objects. At best, the distraction which characterises the collector is seen as causing an obliviousness to the implicit rules of public presentation which govern dress, gesture and bodily comportment. Collecting is an important constituent of those male character formations, such as nerdism, which, while offering an alternative to a blatantly patriarchal masculinity, are rarely embraced as subversive challenges to it.

Record collecting, nevertheless, is almost never irredeemably nerdish. While canonical forms of nerdishness take shape around domains of knowledge (such as computer science) which may only in special circumstances emerge as heroic or eroticised, there are lines of flight which easily connect record collecting to a variety of stances which are more easily recuperable. These stances include hipness which, as discussed above, may draw sustenance from those skills which the cultivation of a collection may provide. Other such stances include the connoisseurship which furnishes historical depth to musical practice itself, and through which canons and terms of judgement take shape. Record collecting also converges with those anti-consumerist ethics which tie the collector's investment in the obscure to the bohemian's refusal of the blatantly commercial. Finally, with growing frequency, images of the collector circulate which cast him as adventurous hunter, seeking out examples of the forgotten or the illicit.



obsessively to see, over and over again, a low-budget porn film (itself entitled *Throat Sprockets*) and to seek out its makers (Lucas, 1994). In *Glimpses*, by Lewis Shiner, a troubled man on the verge of middle age imagines that he travels back in time to participate in the final completion of such legendary unfinished albums as the Beach Boys' *Smile* and Jimi Hendrix's *Church of the New Rising Sun* (Shiner, 1995).

At the conclusion of *High Fidelity*, the male protagonist learns that he is now able to visit middle-aged professionals with horribly middle-brow record collections (Peter Gabriel, Simply Red) and still finds reasons to value their friendship. He comes, as well, by novel's end, to organise club nights on which cover bands and disc jockeys play oldies for an ageing audience hopelessly out of touch with contemporary music. Both these transformations are meant to signal a (belated) coming of age, and the signs of this new maturity are a declining interest in policing other's tastes and the withering of the main character's commitment to anti-commercial, connoisseurist musical tastes. As it moves towards its conclusion, the novel becomes increasingly ironic. Changes described to us (in the protagonist's own voice) as logical adaptations to changing material or romantic circumstances are clearly, from our vantage-point as readers, an ageing male's strategies for survival in a cultural realm in which his place is no longer certain.

That these changes are both conservative (a capitulation to mass, unformed taste) and liberating (a release from structures of judgement which limit social and sexual opportunity) takes us to the heart of the male record collector's increasingly problematic political status. On the one hand, as Eric Weisbard suggests, the record collector's obscurantist interest in the marginal may be seen to be fully continuous with rock culture's myths of oppositionality (Weisbard, 1994b: 19). To collect the obscure is to refuse the mainstream, and, therefore, to participate in an ongoing fashion in what Lawrence Grossberg has called rock culture's processes of 'excorporation', operating at and reproducing the boundary between youth culture and the dominant culture' (Grossberg, 1984: 231). This sense of rock music culture as marked by a permanent division has always given the investment in the obscure and the margin a heroic edge, and made of it the very foundation of rock politics.

What *High Fidelity* suggests, however, is that the only real choice is between entry into an world of adult sexuality and responsibility and remaining within the immature, homosocial world of the record store where obscurantist tastes continue to appear political. Elsewhere, Eric Weisbard notes that the wave of female alternative rockers who emerged in the early 1990s offered 'the first version of punk we've had in ages that

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doesn't require owning a big record collection' (1994a: 24). One effect of new movements in rock music (initiated by women and queers), he suggests, is to reveal a 'consumption-based ethic of oppositionality' as not much more than the only readily accessible political stance for the white rock musician or fan (Weisbard, 1994b: 19). Elsewhere, writing of moves to render dance music 'militant', I suggested that when the militant credibility of a cultural group can no longer be grounded in a sense of itself as political agency, it will be installed as a set of constraints or expulsions set in place against the lure of vulgarity (Straw, 1995: 252). For some time, now, the status of collecting has been caught within the dilemma discussed here and thematised within High Fidelity. To collect is to valorise the obscure, and yet such valorisation increasingly stands revealed as dependent on the homosocial world of young men, a world in which boundaries between the acceptably collectable and the vulgar or commercial are strengthened and perpetuated as the only available and heroic basis for political claims.

Tim Lucas's novel *Throat Sprockets* is not about records, but in its emphasis on a degraded, obscure work of popular culture which becomes the focus of a intensely private obsession, it leads us to consider the libidinal dynamic of boy-dominated trash fandoms. These fan formations have been a persistent part of Anglo-American popular musical culture for some two decades, fixing their attention on the marginal spaces of garage psychedelia, surf music and, more recently, what has come to be called Space Age Bachelor Pad Music or loungecore. At one level, the impulses behind these fandoms are directed at activities of documentation and vernacular scholarship, producing ongoing series of compilation albums, discographies and fanzine reconstructions of performer careers and historical moments. At the same time, however, the dispositions of trash fandoms depart from those of an indie rock obscurantism in that, while both privilege a notion of the culturally marginal, the former often ties this to an idea of the illicit. In the spaces of trash culture, the implicit claim runs, one finds the purest glimpses of a sexual energy or a transgressive anti-conventionalism.

In their privileging of illicit, even abject texts (such as strip-club music) trash fandoms run the risk, as Bryan Bruce has noted, of an amorality which valorises transgression irrespective of its content or purpose (Bruce, 1990). Indeed, in the current easy listening revival, the most prominent dynamics are those which diverge from the more respectable and populist anti-rockism which was one of this revival's original impulses. In place of that impulse, one finds an ongoing move to rehabilitate ever more scandalous musical currents, from the soundtracks to German porn films

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through baroque orchestral versions of late Beatles songs. Here, as in trash fandoms more generally, collecting is refigured as anthropology, an expedition into the natural wilderness of discarded styles and eccentric musical deformations. Indeed, within the easy listening revival, the civilised sound of tinkling Martini glasses is counterbalanced by the image of intrepid explorers marching from one thrift store to another. As the editors of *Incredibly Strange Music II* note, admittedly with some irony:

In search of amazing endangered records as well as insights as to their genesis, we interviewed not just original musical innovators (who once experienced fame), but trail blazing collectors who, without benefit of discography or reference guide, went out into backwater flea markets and thrift stores to search through that which society has discarded. Experiencing the thrill and adventure of the hunt, they made their selections and then listened for hours to ferret out exceptional recordings.

(Juno and Vale, 1993: 3)

This evocative account may be seen as part of a broader history of moves which cast the spaces of popular music consumption as primitive and adventurous. Michael S. Kimmel has written about those transformations in American popular fiction which, after the turn of the century, presented the city as 'wilderness' or 'jungle' and the male inhabitant of such settings as mainly adventurer (Kimmel, 1994). In the 1950s, a prominent television genre joined private investigators and the world of the jazz club (for example, *77 Sunset Strip*), turning urbanised spaces of musical consumption into natural spaces of danger or illicit promise. Trash fandoms themselves perpetuate the sense that particular moments or spaces of popular culture (the mid-1960s, for example) will remain chaotic or unpacted, forever yielding up hitherto unimagined and possibly scandalous artefacts for the adventurer/collector. In this they depart from those fan/collector formations (such as those centring on jazz) which seek explicitly to bring order to a corpus and history of formidable scope.

In Lewis Shiner's *Glimpses*, the narrator's personal collection functions in a minor way as refuge, of the sort seen in *High Fidelity*, but the novel's more central concern is the canon, the virtual collection of unfinished albums by such masters as the Beach Boys, the Doors, Jimi Hendrix and the Beatles. Here, the narrator seeks release, not in the comfort of domestic accumulation, nor in the lure of the illicitly obscure text, but in a reassuring experience of rock history as a series of recognisable and, finally, completed monuments. Indeed, the central concern here is not

Just as I began writing this article, I was interviewed by the maker of a National Film Board of Canada documentary on 'nerds'. (I was chosen, the director assured me, as an 'expert' and not as a case study.) The film was

## CONCLUSION

simply the composition of this canon, but the sense that rock music is principally about that canon, about completing the unfinished history of the 1960s.

The gendering of musical consumption has, as one of its most sharply-drawn axes, the relationship of record collection to canon. Elizabeth Vincentelli's claim (quoted at the beginning of this article), that new female bands are not sufficiently aware of their predecessors, signals the problematic relationship, within rock music's history, between the idea of cyclical rupture and the critical investment in the idea of a stable canon. Histories of punk which foreground its origins in socio-cultural conditions (working-class anger or art world interventionism) on either side of the Atlantic have steadily lost ground to arguments which assert the continuity of a dissident tradition beginning in the USA and running through the New York Dolls and the Ramones. In part, such arguments are about empirically verifiable patterns of imitation and communication, but they centre, as well, on the manner in which punk was to be heard.

One way to hear punk, of course, was as the centre of new relationships between the cultural spaces of art, fashion and music, and to pursue these threads of dissemination and influence outwards to their respective destinations. As a means of building a context for punk, this road was highly likely to encounter female figures or feminist practices, and offer a diminished view of the importance of specifically musical ancestors. The other way meant being sent back to investigate a whole series of progenitors of punk, buying Velvet Underground or New York Dolls' albums and building a collection which embodied the transformed rock canon inaugurated in the late 1970s. This was the road mapped out, in the late 1970s, in such publications as *New York Rocker*. In a debate long posed as one between those who held to a theory of spontaneous working class uprising and others who held to the idea of a steady, imperceptible weaving of trans-Atlantic influences, the latter position would always seem more historically comfortable. Over time, nonetheless, the debate over the sources of punk has become a debate about influences (British pub rock versus downtown New York punk) rather than the status of specifically musical influences, each side offering its canon of forebears to be added to a representative record collection.

inspired, in part, by the sentiment that the nerds of youth are the Bill Gates of adulthood, and that, in the interests of long-term economic stability, the social pressures exercised upon the young should nourish nerdish sentiments rather than work to repress them. From a perspective which locates the most harmful forms of masculinist power in blatant displays of physical or technical prowess, the nerd may well seem an enlightened frog awaiting the kiss which will turn him into a cool and suave prince of the post-industrial economy.

And yet, it might be argued, the nerdish homosociality of those who collect popular music artefacts is as fundamental to the masculinism of popular music as the general valorisation of technical prowess and performative intensity more typically seen to be at its core. Eric Weisbard has noted, in connection with the rise of alternative rock after 1991, that '[r]ock stars no longer make a pageant of their power, as modesty and constant allusions to unknown underground bands become required decorum' (Weisbard, 1994b: 17). At one level, this suggests a historical change, as semiotic competence in reading the state of the musical field comes to assume greater importance, within musical culture, than the public display of technical mastery. At a more conspiratorial level, this account might be taken as describing the successful adaptation of rock music's masculinist impulses to an era of sampling or niche market obscurantism. Interviews with contemporary female rock musicians frequently describe how, having learned to play guitars and play them loud, women find that the lines of exclusion are now elsewhere. They emerge when the music is over, and the boys in the band go back to discussing their record collections.

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