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"To Renew the Old World": Record Collecting as Cultural Production

In 1931, German philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote an essay on one of his personal passions, book collecting. Titled "Unpacking My Library," it explored collecting both from Benjamin's own (existential) standpoint and as a larger process. Collecting, he wrote, is a passion that "borders on the chaos of memories," that exists in "a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order" (60). The collector, as he saw it, is engaged in a wrestling match with memory and significance. The collector's deepest desire, he wrote, is "to renew the old world" (61) – trying to bring meaning and coherence to a chaotic world by preserving and organizing some small corner of it. Benjamin loved his books for their uniqueness, jumping past their uses (he never discusses actually reading them) to see each as an individual object with its own special history, with the kind of "aura" usually shared by sacred objects.

Curiously, Benjamin never brought his thoughts on collecting together with those in his famous essay on "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in which he discussed how modern mass production undermined the aura of rare objects even as it opened them up to more uses. While this might have been a bit of lingering high-culture elitism, it is also possible that he misgauged the new forms aura could take in the modern world. Collecting scholar Russell Belk points out that, "if such mass-produced objects as books, even rare editions, lack an aura by themselves, their ardent pursuit, passionate acquisition, and worshipful possession in a collection can provide one" (61). And what about the fact that books, and many other kinds of mass-manufactured items, are not just objects, but also

bearers of meaning? Items such as books and phonograph records have a certain use-value built into them – reading, listening, documenting culture – that may in fact expand their possibilities as collectibles.

This article joins a growing scholarly discussion on collecting with several main goals in mind. Using some of Benjamin's thoughts as a jumping-off point, I want to add to the scholarship on popular collecting through case studies of collectors of a particular type of object, rare records. I am interested in Benjamin's thoughts about collecting, meaning, and time, but I also want to reframe them to consider the fact that records function not just as objects but also as cultural documents. And I am especially interested here in the meaning-making aspects of collecting, as a process that includes not only the consumption of objects but also the cultural production of meaning, as collectors find creative ways to renew their particular old worlds.

Collecting

For many years, Benjamin's "Unpacking My Library" was one of the few serious attempts to understand collecting. Collecting scholar Susan Pearce notes that while objects in collections have generated much interest for centuries, only since the 1990s has collecting itself been considered worthy of attention ("Collections and Collecting" 49). However, studies of collecting have begun to emerge from a variety of directions, often interpreting the topic in light of their own disciplinary assumptions, including psychology (Muensterberger), consumerism (Belk), and cultural identity formation both at the individual (Windsor) and social levels (Dilworth).

Whatever their differences, most of these viewpoints assume collecting as a kind of consumption activity – searching out and purchasing or otherwise gathering objects or experiences of some kind. While collecting is extremely varied, Belk offers a useful basic definition: "Collecting is the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences" (67). I will return to this definition below in relation to record collecting.

Even as collecting has grown in popularity, mainstream representations of collectors have paradoxically tended toward negative caricatures of obsessive, socially maladjusted oddballs in thrall to acquisitive drives.

However, Pearce's research shows that collectors as a group are quite average, socially speaking (*Collecting in Britain*), and Belk's research indicates that at least one in three people in the US collects something. He argues that these images of collectors likely serve as "an unwitting metaphor for our own fears of unbridled materialism in the marketplace. We escape blame ourselves by caricaturing the collector as being the silly nonrational consumer in comparison to our own equally obsessive but less focused consumption behavior" (ix).

Belk points out that some aspects of collecting are even antithetical to conventional notions of materialism, including "the collector's role as 'savior' of objects that few others appreciate" (ix). In a recent editorial, *Journal of Popular Culture* editor Gary Hoppenstand noted the crucial importance of collections for the study of popular culture. "Much of what was produced in the past, even the recent past," he observes, "does not survive today because it was not thought that this 'disposable culture' was important enough to save" (236). Collecting historian Frank Herrmann argues similarly that "The preservation of many of the world's greatest works of art in the face of deliberate destruction, contempt or neglect has been due to the collector's acquisitive urge, the quest for beauty, the indulgence of taste and the desire for association and continuity with the past" (22). Belk contrasts this kind of "heroic passionate" collector with the obsessive-compulsive type at the negative end of the collecting continuum, with most collectors falling somewhere in between (150).

As that suggests, motivations for collecting cover a broad spectrum, often relating to Benjamin's thoughts about time and meaning, be it personal or cultural. In her book *Museums, Objects, and Collections*, Pearce argues that collections tend to fall into three distinct but often overlapping modes. One of these she calls "souvenirs," items or objects that have significance primarily as reminders of an individual's or group's experiences (69). The second mode is what she calls "fetish objects" (conflating the anthropological and psychological senses of the term), relating primarily to the personality of the collector; the collector's own desires lead to the accumulation of objects that feed back into those desires, with the collection playing a central role in defining the personality of the collector, memorializing the development of a personal interest or passion (75).

The third mode, "systematics," has the broader goal of creating a set of objects that expresses some larger meaning. Systematic collecting involves a stronger element of consciously presenting an idea, seen from a particular point of view and expressed via the cultural world of objects. "Systematics draw a viewer into their frame," Pearce says. "They presuppose a two-way relationship between the collection, which has something public (not private) to say, and the audience, who may have something to learn or disagree with" (87). A systematic collection often involves a more pronounced cultural focus, with the collection serving as a statement about culture through documentation and juxtaposition of both objects and their cultural meanings.

Especially visible in this last mode, but also present in the other two, is another key factor – that collecting is really as much about production as it is consumption. "Collectors create, combine, classify, and curate the objects they acquire in such a way that a new product, the collection, emerges. More precisely, they participate in the process of socially reconstructing shared meanings for the objects they collect" (Belk 55). Pearce argues that "Collecting is usually a positive intellectual act designed to demonstrate a point" (*Museums, Objects* 87), and that this process of reconstruction can even take on a subversive cast, by highlighting lost or obscured objects and areas of society that have been marginalized or ignored by mainstream culture.

Many collecting scholars pick up on Benjamin's discussion of collecting as a kind of struggle with time. As collecting historian Philipp Blom says, "Every collection is a theatre of memories, a dramatization and a mise-en-scene of personal and collective pasts [...] The world beyond what we can touch is with us in and through them, and through communion with them it is possible to commune with it and become part of it" (191). This engagement with objects thus occurs in relation to larger cultural patterns of meaning. Collecting historian Krzysztof Pomian argues that a collection always mediates between the visible and invisible worlds, that it makes the invisible present through the selection and arrangement of tangible objects, with the invisible world involving both temporal and conceptual aspects – renewing an old world through its collection, organized to demonstrate its significance (7-44).

Thus any type of collection involves some meaning-making activity, and the meanings generated can be quite diverse. Museum curators and scholars have been conscious of this fact for some years now (see Genoways), and the recent explosion in popular collecting – from eBay to Antiques Roadshow and beyond – has also brought to public attention the question of the meaningfulness of objects. The corner of the expanding collecting world that I will focus on here involves a particular type of object, phonograph records.

Record collecting

If collecting in general is under-studied, record collecting is even more so, though a few popular assessments have provided interesting insights. Record collectors do occasionally show up in popular culture representations, usually as semi-comic exemplars of the negative stereotypes mentioned above, as in the film *Ghost World* (in which Steve Buscemi plays a middle-aged obsessive who lives with his mother and develops a strange relationship with a teenaged girl) and the novel and film *High Fidelity* (with John Cusack as a misfit record store owner whose record collection serves as a substitute for real human relationships). (Editor's note: Cf. Stalcup on *High Fidelity* in this journal's issue 30.2.) While extreme examples of human behavior exist in all areas of life, such exaggerations obscure as much as they reveal. In a popular survey of record collecting, Brett Milano concludes that for most record collectors, "their real lives are perfectly normal, with careers and families and the rest. It's only through their collecting that a more eccentric side of their personalities will come out" (168).

Most record collectors fit well within Belk's definition, passionately acquiring sets of records both as objects and cultural experiences. As with most types of collecting, the "thrill of the chase" is a major part of the experience, though Milano notes that the nature of that chase has changed significantly in recent years. Up until the 1970s, "it was necessary for any serious music fan to be something of a collector, since so many important albums […] were either out of print or available in truncated, shoddily packaged or badly mastered editions" (18). Today, with eBay and other online resources, the amount of time required for the hunt has been reduced, and collecting is also less of a face-to-face social activity since one can search

in private rather than actually traveling to find records. At the same time, "it's also made collectors even hungrier for the peak experience of finding something desirable tucked away in a box in someone's attic" (20), and it has greatly broadened the array of collectibles that the collector can access. Music writer Simon Reynolds notes that record collecting also "involves the accumulation of data as well as artifacts," a factor that can be seen in magazines devoted to record collecting such as *Goldmine* and *Record Collector*, and that has only increased as collecting has gone online (293).

In other ways, record collecting may diverge somewhat from Belk's conceptualization. Belk defines collecting as removing objects from their original use; however, items such as records and books may involve a more complex interrelationship between object and content. For instance, in spite of Benjamin's focus on books as unique relics, it remains true that those books can be and generally are read for their content. Blom argues that this object/content status makes book collecting especially diverse and ambiguous. Individual collectors might focus on everything from authors or topics, to special editions (especially first editions), to those from specific publishing houses, to those with particular object qualities (leather covers, types of cover art, etc.) (200).

These factors may be even stronger with records and other musical media; unlike some types of collectibles, Reynolds argues, records are necessarily "material with use value, whether that [use is] pleasure or research" (289). Collector and musician Jeff Connolly, known as Monoman for his singleminded devotion to old rock'n'roll singles, sees himself as an "archivist" as much as a collector; he believes record collecting is about "using the music": "There is no joy in ownership, the joy comes when you play the record" (Milano 13). In fact, most record collectors collect as much for the content as for the object: one is far less likely to find a collector whose collecting criteria is "records with yellow labels" than to find one whose focus is "west coast jazz" or "pre-war blues." Collectors might follow particular artists (Charlie Parker, the Sex Pistols), musical genres (reggae, soul, classical), records from certain cultural/geographic areas (New Orleans, South Africa), records from specific labels (Sun, Stax, Rough Trade), records for special types of use (sound effects, "library" music), records from a historical era (the 1960s), records with covers by particular graphic artists, special editions of records (first/original pressings are again popular), par-

ticular types of records (45s, LPs), records that embody memory on a more personal scale (those played by a favorite local DJ, or listened to in one's youth, etc.), and many more besides.

For many collectors, records' status as bearers of personal and/or collective meaning is most significant. Recording scholar Mark Katz points out that over and above object appeal, the significance of the sounds contained on records runs even deeper: "Record collecting represents a relationship with music that helps us [...] to articulate and, indeed, shape who we are" both individually and socially (11). For such collectors, records also function as a kind of cultural documentation; musician and collector Miriam Linna says that "A record is that object that you can hold and watch and learn from" (Milano 20). From that perspective, the cultural aspects of the record hold special fascination. Collector Thurston Moore, guitarist with the long-lived rock group Sonic Youth, notes that serious record collecting often goes beyond obvious mainstream material in searching out and discovering "bastions of unknown information" (Milano 117), creating order out of chaos in "gathering information that falls below the radar, so it becomes less ignored." This type of collecting often serves as an object critique of consensus cultural history. Says Moore, "I'm more interested in defending the cultural value of music that's not allowed into the mainstream. That's more of a renegade practice" (Milano 14), echoing Pearce's comments about the potential subversive aspects of collecting.

This kind of subversive goal, however framed, may provide an added dimension to the nature of the collecting process. On the one hand, the idea of "renewing an old world" might be seen simply as a personalized nostalgia, individual collectors surrounding themselves with memories of a time gone by, as a retreat from the contemporary world. However, the sort of collecting described by Moore, and enacted by the collectors discussed below, approaches the collection not as an end point but as a springboard to further creative action, and can potentially use the collection itself as support for an alternate view of culture both past and present. While there may be nostalgic elements to their individual interests in old music, these collectors are drawing on their collections, and the meanings they hold, to engage with the world around them by reimagining – or genuinely "re-new-ing" – some past.

With all of these factors in mind, in the remainder of this article I will discuss some collectors who engage with the cultural use-value of records and approach their collecting as a resource for creative activity: first, three individual collectors of 78 rpm records, followed by a comparison with an online collecting group specializing in 45s from the 1960s.

78 rpm Collectors

The three examples discussed in this section are legendary collectors whose renown has spread even beyond the record collecting community. They have been especially noted for their efforts to find and preserve old 78 rpm records manufactured from the 1910s to the 1940s, and also for their evangelical attitude toward the "lost" music contained on those records. In different ways, all three developed this passion for rare objects into a preservation and celebration of the culture contained in those objects, and as a launching pad for their own creative activities.

Harry Smith

Harry Smith (1923-1991) was a key figure in a range of areas of twentieth-century American culture. A painter and pioneer of avant-garde filmmaking, he was also an anthropologist and musicologist, and a philosopher and historian of various esoteric traditions. (For more on Smith see Igliori; Singh.) Underpinning all these activities was his status as a legendary collector, collecting everything from books (mostly on philosophy and mysticism) to Ukrainian painted eggs (used as inspiration for imagery in his painting and films) to the world's largest collection of paper airplanes (now housed at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum).

As a collector he was best known for his collection of pre-1940 78 rpm records, which he built during the 1940s even as those records were being thrown out or melted down (to reuse their chemicals) during wartime. Smith was a fan of the music contained therein, but he also recognized that a whole era of American popular culture documented on those records was in danger of being lost. Popular music forms such as blues, country, and

Cajun music were viewed as disposable ephemera at the time, and no official efforts were being made to preserve them.

He gradually assembled some 20,000 records covering every genre of popular American music of the time (much of which later ended up in the New York public library), and was by all accounts a particularly dedicated collector. Friend and fellow collector Luis Kemnitzer recalls that Smith was "immensely protective of the record collection and greedy about getting more records," yet he also "considered himself more the custodian than the owner of these records." Smith would generously lend out books and give away his art, "but once a record came into his room it never left" (31). He also became as much of an expert on them as possible, painstakingly researching the objects (record label, recording date), performers (often difficult given the nature of the recording industry – many musicians were poorly documented), and music (as drawn from folk ballad and other musical traditions).

In the early 1950s he convinced Folkways records to let him curate a series of compilations of this lost music on the new LP format, a project that became one of the major milestones in American musical history. Drawing on his own collection, Smith produced the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, a set of three double-LP collections of historically and musically important sounds (a fourth volume was planned at the time but not released until the year 2000, in the wake of the *Anthology*'s reissue). The *Anthology* became a major inspiration for the late 1950s/early 1960s folk revival, as both a repository of songs and as a broader statement about music and American culture. It continues to inspire musicians and folklorists today through a late-1990s compact disc box set reissue. Smith received official recognition of his work in the form of a Lifetime Grammy award in the early 1990s, shortly before his death. (For more on the *Anthology*'s significance, see Marcus; Weisbard.)

Smith's huge collection, and his in-depth knowledge of the music it contained, allowed him to make some surprising connections among both the individual tracks and the larger musical and cultural values they embodied. The records themselves were conceptualized as art objects: instead of arranging the music by standard musicological or sociological variables, Smith sequenced the songs thematically and conceptually, building the individual selections into a larger whole that involved commentaries on everything

from American history and culture to his own interests in religion and philosophy. On one level, the volumes were titled "Ballads" (older traditional songs), "Social Music" (from dance tunes to church music and sermons), and "Songs" (contemporary updates of older styles), an organizational scheme that allowed him to jump across accepted societal divisions and suggest larger patterns of cultural interconnection that undermined conventional expectations about everything from the derivation of musical styles to the racial backgrounds of the performers (a potentially radical move in the segregated 1950s). But Smith was also, as noted above, a collector of esoteric philosophy, and the *Anthology* was also arranged according to the alchemical idea of the four elements – Air, Water and Fire (Earth being the later fourth volume) – with the selection of songs in each volume juxtaposed in ways that symbolized key concepts from Western mysticism (covered in more detail in my "Collecting, Collage").

Given Smith's aesthetic background, the larger meaning of the collection was central; he said that "The whole *Anthology* was a collage. I thought of it as an art object" (Singh 81), with his collection as the basis for that collage. Cultural scholar Roger Cardinal argues that collecting and collage are closely related, bringing together a group of items "that manifests itself as a pattern or set, reconciling diverse origins within a collective discourse" (71). In a 1968 interview Smith highlighted the role of collecting, saying that his art "attempts to build up a series of objects that allow some sort of generalizations to be made" (Singh 97), with the series growing from and incipient in the collection from which it sprang. "The whole purpose," he said, "is to have some kind of a series of things" that expresses a deeper meaning (Singh 81).

In the 2006 documentary film *The Old, Weird America: Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music*, music writer Greil Marcus explains that Smith's vision of the past focused on deeper undercurrents and subterranean themes that would end up having much larger effects later. The world of the *Anthology*, Marcus says, is "old, it's weird, it's America. But the weirdness means that it isn't just old. The weirdness means that it's a story that people will always be trying to figure out, that will always be new, that will never be finished." Smith's collection gave him an in-depth understanding of "a vanished time that is just the day before yesterday, but now everything is different," and that Smith ended up with a body of "music that

tries to recreate a lost world" but is simultaneously "music that is pointing forward to a world that's yet to come" (*The Old, Weird America*). Smith himself was well aware of these factors, and his larger goal for the *Anthology* was one of cultural and social change. "I had the feeling that the essence that was heard in those types of music would become something that was really large and fantastic," he said in a 1968 interview. "In a sense, it did in [the countercultural rock music of the 1960s]. I imagine it having some kind of a social force for good" (Singh 83).

As a collector Smith was clearly working in the "systematic" mode here. Pearce says that the processes of organization and assembly are key for that approach, such that "specimens [...] are extracted from their context and put into relationships created by seriality" in the interests of expressing a larger point (*Museums, Objects* 87). For Smith the music itself was appealing, but more significant was the system of cultural meaning that he found in the records; his "essential interest in music was the patterning that occurs in it" rather than obsession with the records as objects per se (Singh 85). Smith's collecting passion was finding these fragments of lost information and knitting them back together, curating them with a consciousness toward the larger cultural system that emerged, with an eye toward how the reframing of the past could inspire new forms of creativity in the present.

Joe Bussard

Another important collector of rare 78s was Joe Bussard (b. 1936), who is legendary within collecting circles (often known as "the King of Record Collectors"), though his public profile has been less pronounced. While Smith viewed collecting from an aesthetic standpoint, Bussard has been much more of an archivist, a preservationist, and an encyclopedic expert; he is also a passionate fan and evangelist for the pre-War music he loves, which spans every known genre of that era and pretty much none that followed (since, as he argues, all good American music stopped around 1934). (For more on Bussard, see Dean; Wyatt.)

Like many early collectors of 78s, Maryland native Bussard acquired many of his rarities by the old-fashioned method of canvassing, going door-to-door asking if people had any old records they would be willing to

sell. Starting in his late teens, Bussard has collected records this way for more than fifty years, amassing a 25,000-strong library that many experts consider to be the most significant archive of music from that era. In the words of musician and collector Tom Hoskins, "Bussard's got shit that God don't have" (Dean).

Bussard is very clear on his role as preservationist. He estimates that "about 70-80% of the records I have collected would have been destroyed if I hadn't got them when I did. You can thank old time record collectors for the music that is left because the record companies didn't give a damn about any of that stuff. They threw all the stampers out" (Elder 5). But journalist Eddie Dean says that Bussard is important not just for his collection, but for what he does with it, describing his attitude as "a bizarre fusion of obsessive, almost pathological hoarding and an equally strong impulse for rampant dissemination. He's got to have this stuff, yes, but he wants the whole world to hear it, too" (Dean).

His sharing has taken a number of forms. In addition to his weekly old-time radio show, which has played on AM stations across the South for more than 35 years, he also welcomes interested parties (journalists, scholars, other collectors) into his home, playing records and regaling them with collecting tales. Joe's legendary basement full of music has been celebrated in *Down In the Basement*, a 2002 CD collection of music personally chosen by Bussard; and in the 2003 documentary film *Desperate Man Blues*, with some engaging segments of the irrepressible Bussard in action. Dean says that entering Bussard's basement for the first time is "like going into another world. Not only was the music loud, the smoke was thick, he was dancing… it was hard to even get a line on what was going on" as Bussard hopped around the room laughing, miming the instrumental parts of whatever record was playing, chomping on his ever-present cigar.

Bussard has also allowed his collection to serve as a resource for a number of record labels reissuing old music, as his copies are often the best ones known; Bussard's collection provided originals used in the Smithsonian Folkways reissue of the Smith *Anthology* discussed above. And perhaps most interestingly, he also opens his collection to individual collectors: For the cost of postage Joe will mail interested parties a list of every record in his collection, and then for 50 cents per song will make a customized tape of anything in the collection. Country music scholar Tony Russell describes

Joe's role as that of a "conduit" for the old music. "Wherever there are people who buy reissues of old-timey music and blues and jazz [...] Joe's hands have taken a record off a shelf and made it possible for them to hear" that music (*Desperate Man Blues*). Richard Nevins, head of the Yazoo and Shanachie record labels, says that Bussard has "preserved and popularized the music more than anyone," and "has disseminated the music more than anyone else on earth" (Dean).

Dean says that Joe is not merely an accumulator of rare objects, but that there is a "real aesthetic theory behind all that enthusiasm" (*Desperate Man Blues*). Bussard's underlying aesthetic comes from the fact that he is not just a collector, but also a musician, a DJ, and a former record label owner – an enthusiast who "loves everything about the recording process, the manufacturing process, and the performance of music," and that enthusiasm "informs everything he does" (Elder 2). Dean says that "Joe has a good musician's ear. Here's a guy who's self-taught, didn't go to college, and I think what he brings to it is a real musician's sense of what's going on in the music" (*Desperate Man Blues*). During the 1960s Joe's love for the record-making process led him to start his own label out of his home. Called Fonotone Records, it was modeled on classic labels of the 1920s and only released 78s of contemporary artists playing in old-time styles. Appropriately, these records are now also rare and collectible, with the cream of the label memorialized in a 2006 compact disc box set.

Bussard's collecting is an ideal example of the "heroic-passionate" type, renewing the old world of 1920s music through his own collecting and dissemination efforts. Belk could almost be describing Bussard specifically when he writes that, "Dedication and perseverance may be hallmarks of the work ethic, but saving lost objects through sacrifice and obsession is a romantic quest that speaks of selfless passion" (ix). Dean describes Bussard as an "independent," even compared to other collectors. "He doesn't believe in the Library of Congress or any of these places. [...] He figures it's more accessible there [in his collection] than it would be, as he describes it, 'boxed up in the basement of some library'" (*Desperate Man Blues*), since the goal after all is not simply to accumulate the old records but to let people hear them as widely as possible.

Robert Crumb

Another example of a collector of rare 78s who uses his collecting as a basis for creative work is artist and cartoonist Robert Crumb (b. 1943). Most famous for his era-defining underground comics of the 1960s, Crumb has more recently been recognized by the fine arts community as a social commentator on the level of Breughel or Goya. (For more on Crumb, see Burgess; Crumb and Poplaski; and the 1994 film biography *Crumb*.)

Crumb is also known as a serious 78 collector. His record-collecting passion began in the late 1950s, when he found some old records in a second hand store: "They radiated some kind of power – a magical aura [...]. At ten cents apiece, I bought a few of them." Seconds after dropping the needle, his passion was both ignited and focused: "I was thrilled to the core, overjoyed! This was the music I'd been searching for! It existed on old records! In that moment, I became a record collector for life!" (Crumb and Poplaski 398). More than Bussard or Smith, Crumb's attitude toward collecting echoes Benjamin's fascination with aura: "Somebody before you originally bought that 78 [...] and listened to it, and that record carries that aura from whoever else had handled and appreciated that object" (Milano 76).

Crumb does take an ambivalent attitude toward collecting. He was at least a partial basis for Steve Buscemi's collector caricature in Terry Zwigoff's film *Ghost World*, and is well aware of the potential excesses of collecting, noting that it can easily become "creepy" and "obsessive." But he also sees a larger constructive significance to the practice. "A true collector is more of a connoisseur – and that's the good thing about collecting. It creates a connoisseurship to sort out what's worthwhile in the culture and what isn't." Citing the role of art collectors in sifting and classifying art as a parallel example, he says, "If you're collecting a lot of objects of one particular kind, you develop a very acute sense of discrimination" (Milano 70).

Crumb's collecting has formed the basis for a significant portion of his creative output over the years, with his connoisseurship as the driving factor. He has written and drawn comic stories based on the lives of important musicians such as Charlie Patton, and on the topic of record collecting itself; he has created the cover art for a large number of LP and CD reissues of classic music, often for the Yazoo label; and he designed, researched,

and illustrated two sets of trading cards of early blues and country musicians, with original art on one side and biographical information on the other. Recently he created cover art and a special cartoon satirizing record-collecting for a Yazoo box set titled *The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of*, which compiles the rarest of rare old 78s in a salute to and gentle mockery of the collectors who found and preserved them, making collecting itself the theme of the compilation. (See Figure 1.)

As his comments on connoisseurship suggest, Crumb's primary focus as a collector comes back to the sounds in the grooves. In Zwigoff's 1994 documentary film *Crumb*, Robert Crumb speaks eloquently of the particular old world values embodied in the music documented on those records. "When I listen to old music, that's one of the few times I actually have a kind of a love for humanity," he says. "You hear the best part of the soul of the common people, you know, their way of expressing their connection to eternity, or whatever you want to call it. Modern music doesn't have that. It's a calamitous loss that people can't express themselves that way any more." His interest in old records is closely tied to their content, and to the values they express, values that he finds lacking in contemporary culture; and his creative work aimed at drawing people to the music can be seen as an effort to keep those values alive in the present.

These three collectors obviously have much in common: all collect the same type of objects, largely in Pearce's systematic mode, and all view their collecting as rescuing disappearing popular culture, renewing an old world they love, documenting much of what is known about the music of the era, and providing an implicit or explicit critique of some elements of contemporary culture. Further, all three share some of Benjamin's existential engagement with objects and meaning – individuals using their relationship with their collections as a basis to construct both personal and cultural identities, advanced to another level through their creative activities. In spite of that, their approaches end up quite different: Smith recombines the records themselves into a larger work of art, Bussard creates an archive and opens it to the public, and Crumb uses his connoisseurship as a basis for visual art designed to draw others to the music and the values it holds. In a range of different ways they all engage with that "invisible world" of meaning, extending the past into the future by assembling not just objects but also the values and ideas that accompany them.

Figure 1
Robert Crumb, Cartoon accompanying *The Stuff that Dreams Are Made Of* compact disk, Yazoo Records, 2006

U-SPACES – 1960s 45s Online

A final example of record collectors renewing an old world makes for an interesting comparison and contrast with the above, and illustrates the complexities of collecting practice even within so seemingly narrow an area as record collecting. This case study deals not with an individual collector, but with a community of collectors centered around an online forum called U-SPACES, an email listserv devoted to 1960s music. (More information on U-SPACES can be found at the list's appropriately eye-gouging website.)

U-SPACES began in 1997 as a way for fans of obscure 1960s psychedelic and garage rock to discuss their favorite music. As membership grew, it became clear that the group included a number of serious record collectors, and as they conversed online they realized that they were finding many old 45s that were long out of print and had never been reissued in any format. In 1999, one of the list members got the idea to combine their efforts and compile a CDR of the best songs, making it available for trade via the list. That disc, titled *Psychedelic Archaeology*, proved popular, and the collectors had fun doing it, so they continued that series and also branched out into others (with themes such as *Lost Sixties Delights* and *California Love-In*), assembling more than 40 CDRs in the past 9 years, a remarkable number given that all the music comes from 45s that were essentially "lost" before the collectors involved "rediscovered" them.

The stated goal of the group has always been to get the music back into circulation, ideally leading to proper reissues (which has happened several times). In their enthusiastic desire to share the music with the world at large, the group's approach perhaps most resembles that of Bussard. Unlike the other collectors discussed above, the overall U-SPACES attitude seems to have less to do with a critique of contemporary culture (many list members claim to be fans of current music too, though 1960s rock is their favorite) than with an attempt to broaden and complexify conventional consensus rock history. Through the excavation and re-presentation of lost artifacts, the group tries to expand both knowledge of the era's music and, potentially, understandings of the culture of the time period (the list has also seen extensive discussions of the "official" history of the 1960s as compared to some of some list members' personal experiences).

Though membership has changed and grown over the years (currently numbering around 550), the group's basic method has remained consistent. Various collectors share information about rare 45s they have dug up, and one member of the group (originally Ben Chaput, currently Ed Lynch) coordinates the findings, as others send him copies of the music from their singles. He sorts through the submissions for quality (both musical merit and listenability), then queries the larger list to determine which of the songs have never been reissued – a key factor, as the music cannot be available elsewhere – and for more information on the music and artists, which various members research (given the Internet, somewhat more easily than the painstaking efforts required by the 78 collectors). After the details are sorted, he compiles the songs onto a CDR, which is then distributed via a trading tree coordinated by another member of the group – this is also key, since the fact that discs are traded, not sold, gets around copyright restrictions. Meanwhile, other members of the group write liner notes based on the information they've learned; other members create cover graphics (sometimes basic, other times fairly elaborate); and both of these are made available for online download. Group members become involved at various stages of the process, with individual roles varying according to situation and interest. (I should note that I have been involved with the group at the trading end of the process.)

The U-SPACES collectors obviously have much in common with the 78 collectors discussed above, from their passion for music and their drive to renew the old world (in this case, the 1960s), to their creative output and their investigative efforts (reflexively noted in the "archeology" title). But U-SPACES also differs in some ways that may embody larger contemporary social and cultural developments. Collecting, as Belk points out, is often a competitive activity; collectors vie with one another to locate and acquire rare objects, with issues of social status, personal pride, and accomplishment as motivating factors (68), and traditionally this is certainly true of record collecting. However, while the status aspect may still hold for U-SPACES – each of their CDs lists the collectors who contributed rare recordings – it also is reframed, as the sense of individual competition becomes subsumed into more of a collective struggle against cultural loss and the joint creation and sharing of new meanings. Such a notion of group creativity and collaborative action may itself correlate with the ideals of the

era being collected, as the 1960s counterculture certainly emphasized such communitarian values.

However, it may also be a factor of the new possibilities created by digital media networking, as the group makes full use of new media technologies in its activities, and in fact would not be possible without them. Media theorist Pierre Levy calls this kind of group a "collective intelligence," a dispersed networked community that comes together around particular topics or projects, whose objective is to "negotiate the order of things […] the role of the individual, the identification and definition of objects, the reinterpretation of memory" (17) – a fair description of the group collecting efforts of U-SPACES. Cultural scholar Henry Jenkins notes that "What holds a collective intelligence together is not the possession of knowledge – which is relatively static, but the social process of acquiring knowledge – which is dynamic and participatory, continually testing and reaffirming the group's social ties" (54). Within this kind of knowledge community, traditional roles of creator and audience member, producers and consumers, tend to blend into a more amorphous circuit of culture, and the product of their work "will be what Levy calls a 'cultural attractor,' drawing together and creating common ground between diverse communities; we might also describe it as a cultural activator, setting into motion their decipherment, speculation, and elaboration" (Jenkins 95).Unlike an older paradigm of specialized knowledge and expertise, a collective intelligence "assumes that each person has something to contribute, even if they will only be called upon on an ad hoc basis" (Jenkins 53). For the U-SPACES community, the CDRs are the cultural attractor/activator that draws together the group, which produces and circulates new cultural products from its members' individual collections, in the process expanding the knowledge of the music they love and broadening the understanding of the era from which it came.

The collecting projects undertaken by the U-SPACES group may even be an indicator of new types of cultural and social activity. Gelber argues that the rise of stamp collecting in the mid-1800s was effectively a model of and response to broader changes brought about as new economic patterns restructured American life, including both the cultural status of objects and the social relations among those collecting them (743). For U-SPACES, the networked sharing of knowledge and collective meaning-making is central; in this kind of situation, as new media theorist David Weinberger says, "all the ways of organizing a collection can be made public. […] We can share

orderings and build on them. Each enhances the meaning of the whole" (233). If the collectors of 78s discussed above all approach collecting in ways expressive of Benjamin's existential-classic form, the U-SPACES group may signify changes in our relationships with objects and meaning in an era of digital media and a networked world.

Conclusion

One thing these examples indicate is that, even in such a seemingly circumscribed topic area as record collecting, enough variety exists to challenge overly sweeping generalizations about collecting or collectors. While all of the collectors discussed here share certain general interests – collecting old records – and goals – using their collecting to renew an old world as a response to a particular present – there are also enough differences among their attitudes to resist simple summary. They collect different types of records, they take different attitudes toward them, they work singly or together. As Pearce says, "Collecting seems to operate in that obscure zone between cultural ideas of value and the deepest levels of the individual personality" (*Museums, Objects* 35), and as such admits many variations. At the same time, these examples all share a focus on the meaning-making aspects of collecting, renewing that old world by doing something with it, producing something from it. The temporal dimension in all these collections is clear enough, with its dialectic of past and present; and all of the collectors discussed above choose not to retreat into the past end of that dialectic, but rather use their collections in a creative way, working in the present to do something new with this old material.

Is there something about recorded music that lends itself to this sort of collecting? It could be that records' dual levels of significance – objects themselves, and materializations of sound – make such types of activity more likely, that the status and possibilities of the object itself provide for

certain approaches to collecting it. This remains to be seen; more research is needed on other types of collecting before such conclusions can be reached, though certainly the era of mass production has seen popular collecting expand greatly, and the digital era should see even further changes. It could be that Benjamin's "aura" is not removed by modern technologies, but instead transformed. If the values that apply to any given collectible or collection are socially determined, it makes sense that popular collectibles in an age of mechanical reproduction are themselves mechanical reproductions; and also that, as Benjamin suggested, such a situation greatly expands the range of possibilities for individuals and groups to create new meanings and activities involving those items.

In light of that, it does seem fair to guess that the sort of collective collecting practiced by U-SPACES could become even more common as online collecting increases and networked communities expand. Jenkins argues that "The story of American arts in the twenty-first century might be told in terms of the public reemergence of grassroots creativity as everyday people take advantage of new technologies that enable them to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate" meanings and objects (137). In such a situation, the possibilities for renewing the old world should continue to grow, as individuals and groups explore their chaotic passions and find new and creative ways to share them with others.

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