

Collecting Rock Oldies— Records That Go Jingle



By STEVE DITLEA

The popular 45-rpm recording could well become the most collectible artifact of post-World War II America. Introduced by RCA Victor in March 1949 to rival the Columbia Records long-playing 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ -rpm disk, within a decade the doughnut-hole 45 became the standard format for all single commercial recordings issued in the U. S. As such, it can lay claim to being the most tangible and easily-stored memento of the popular culture of recent times.

Yet to be recognized by the auctioneers at Parke-Bernet and Sotheby's, 45 record collecting has already generated price increases which put the market in art and antiques to shame. Saucer-sized wafers of vinyl which not too long ago sold for under a dollar now fetch prices in the four figure range. Such high numbers shouldn't scare away potential collectors; most

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of the collectible 45's still sell in the \$2 to \$10 range and junk shops and rummage sales on occasion yield valuable records at a fraction of their original cost.

The first RCA Victor 45 release included such titles as "Ah Sweet Mystery of Life" by Nelson Eddy and Jeanette McDonald, "Carmen Fantaisie" by Jascha Heifetz, and "Because" by Perry Como, but given today's tastes, none of these holds much interest for the 45 collector. The most prized singles on the collectors' market bear the names of relatively obscure artists like The Five Sharps, The Vocaleers, and The Hide-A-Ways, or trend-setters like Elvis Presley and the Beatles; the music is almost invariably rock and roll and its antecedents (blues, rhythm and blues, rockabilly)—the music of those generations which have come of age to the sound of the seven-inch single.

"Forty-fives bring you back to when you were innocent and young," says "Bleecker Bob" Plotnik, a practicing attorney who, for the last 14 years, has also been one of the more prominent "oldies" dealers in Greenwich

Village. His private collection numbers over 15,000 singles. Like many 45 record hobbyists, he admits to his avocation being something of a compulsion ("deranged" is a word often used by avid collectors to describe one another). In addition to disks, he collects vintage comic books, baseball cards, and circa-1930 plastic table model radios.

Neither nostalgia nor fanaticism are prerequisites for admission to the ranks of collectors. "You have to like the music," insists Mr. Plotnik. "Collecting starts with your ears." To prove the point, in front of his new shop, Bleecker Bob's Golden Oldies (179 MacDougald Street), he introduces a passerby—15-year-old Lisa Carroll, who only collects material by Sparks, a post-1970 British rock band with a cult following. She has spent two years and "about \$100" collecting 10 of the group's dozen out-of-print singles. Why just Sparks? "Because there's nothing like them," she offers. "They're the first rock band I've ever enjoyed."

Like the records it enshrines, 45 collecting is a great phenomenon rich in personal history. Until 1959 it was strictly an underground pursuit; no one would have conceived of selling a 45 over a dollar. Old singles (the ones which hadn't been melted down and recycled or simply been thrown out in the garbage) turned up in second-hand stores for a nickel apiece. Then a Times Square porn shop operator named Irving Rose noticed he was selling more dusty 45's than dirty pictures. "Times Square Slim," as he was to be known, opened the first oldies collectors' shop in the subway arcade below Broadway and 42nd Street.

Times Square Records quickly became a mecca for fanciers of 1950's rhythm and blues — especially "doo-wops," singles of the 4- and 5-part vocal harmony groups which blossomed on street corners and were recorded by small local labels destined for extinction. Originally pressed in quantities of a few thousand or less, these records acquired tremendous scarcity value. Many of the rarer titles were reproduced in limited editions, but for the serious collector only a first edition would do.

The most prized single on today's collectors' market owes its desirability to the legend of Times Square Slim (he closed his store in the mid-1960's). In his heyday Slim sponsored an oldies radio show to which collectors would bring their treasures or air play. Enter the proud possessor of a disk called

"Stormy Weather" by The Five Sharps on the Jubilee label, only to have Slim's pet raccoon "Teddy" sit on the record and break it. That night Slim offered his radio audience the then unheard of sum of \$10 for a replacement copy. Week after week he upped the price until it reached \$500 in cash. By this time the shattered record's label alone sold for \$20.

A few years ago when a 78-rpm edition of "Stormy Weather" finally turned up (during the 1950's both 78's and 45's of the same title were often pressed), it was valued at \$1,500—despite an audible scratch running its entire length. According to Ralph Newman, owner of this one-of-a-kind disk, should a 45 ever be found (nobody is sure any exist), it would be worth \$2,500. Such a major investment should by all rights assure one of a classic performance, but says Mr. Newman, editor of 45 collectors' publication "Rock and Roll Music Magazine," based on this record, the Five Sharps certainly did not rate at the top.

Thus rarity has as much to do with setting the value of oldies as musical quality—perhaps more. How else do you explain the commerce in original picture sleeves which are often worth more than the 45 they once held? According to the Adam Smith economics of the 45 collectors market, changing tastes make for volatile price levels. Interest in doo-wops peaked several years ago at the time of the Rock 'n' Roll Revival concerts; today all but the rarest of the rare can be had for under \$20. Meanwhile a younger generation of collectors has created a rising demand for singles by the Beatles ("My Bonnie" by the Beat Brothers—The Beatles pre-Ringo—goes for around \$500) and other British rockers; Elvis Presley (his first record, "That's All Right," on the Memphis-based Sun label fetches \$300) and his rockabilly ilk; The Beach Boys ("Surfin'" on X Records is said to be worth \$70) and California surf music; The Monkees (due to reruns of their television series) and last, but far from least, the punk rock bands celebrating suburban teen defiance from 1965 to the present.

Lenny Kaye helped spark the collectibility of punk rock 45's with his compilation album, "Nuggets" (recently reissued by Sire Records). The former rock critic, whose collection of 1,500 singles of all genres is housed in two rooms of an aging West Side hotel, gained his expertise in obscure garage bands during a five year stint behind the counter of an oldies shop. These days his guitar playing is featured on the hottest item on the 45 collectors' market, a promotional single of Patti Smith singing "Hey Joe" on her own MER label. Most of 2,000 copies were given away; just 18 months later, offers for this disk range up to \$75. With so much of his time now devoted to backing up Miss

Smith. Lenny Kaye finds himself collecting less, yet still he searches for a copy of the first instrumental he ever learned to play, "Far From You" by a mediocre New Jersey band, The Driftwoods, on the DBS label.

Many of today's rock stars are also dedicated collectors. The Rolling Stones, it's said, started their careers by playing along to the sound of their favorite singles. Frank Zappa has been saving 45's since 1955. Members of Led Zeppelin are known to collect blues and rockabilly. And then there's rock's No. 1 fan, Elton John, who once had to move to a bigger house to accommodate a record collection grown out of control. At present his home in England contains 25,000 singles while his Bel-Air, California, retreat holds another 2,000. One reason given for his recent halt to touring is Elton John's desire to catch up with all the disks he's amassed but hasn't had the chance to hear.



"Rarity is as valuable as musical quality."

For the casual hobbyist, 45 collecting is often the result of uncovering a cache of records in a closet or basement. If properly stored in their paper sleeves and away from heat, singles are virtually immune to the effects of age. Any surface grime can be removed with alcohol and cotton. Wear from playing and mishandling is common; collectors make use of a five-step grading system (from "Mint" to "Poor") to rate the sound quality of a 45. A disk rated "Good"—one on which surface noise and scratches are audible throughout—is worth only about half as much as a "Mint" copy of the same title.

Until recently it was necessary to keep abreast of the collectors' market to learn the value of a single. Today's neophyte has the benefit of the first widely available catalogue of 45 rpm collectibles, the "Record Collector's Price Guide" by Jerry Osbone (O'Sullivan, Woodside, Phoenix, \$6.95). Though the prices listed tend to be on the low side and this oversized paperback only covers the years 1950 to 1965, the "Price Guide" is still an

invaluable reference work. Also helpful to the beginner are the artists' discographies contained in Steve Propes' "Those Oldies But Goodies—A Guide To 50's Record Collecting" (Collier, New York, \$1.95) and "Golden Oldies—A Guide to 60's Record Collecting" (Chiton, Radner, Pa. \$2.95).

Radio is the natural medium for getting acquainted with the sound of vintage 45's. Six years ago disk jockey Gus Gossert's oldies programs garnered the highest audience ratings in the history of FM radio and launched the latest wave of interest in collecting. He did his last show in New York in 1972. On Aug. 10 of this year, the self-styled "Curly-Headed Kid In The Second Row" was found dead in his car in Knoxville, Tennessee, with two bullets in his dead. Gus Gossert's rightful place in the annals of 45 collecting has since become a hot topic of debate. Among his successors in programming for collectors' tastes are "The Dog-Wop Shop" with Don K. Reed (Sundays 7:00-12:00 P.M., WCBS-FM), "The Night Train Show" (Sundays 6:00-10:00 P.M., WNBC), and "The Time Capsule Show" (Saturdays 4:00-6:00 P.M., WFUV).

Oldies fans support a half-dozen magazines dedicated to different eras of rock and roll history. Some of the fanzines are still largely devoted to the music of the 1950's, like "Record Exchanger" (P.O. Box 2144, Anaheim, Ca. 92804, \$6.00 a year) and "Time Barrie Express" (P.O. Box 1109, White Plains, N. Y. 10602, \$5.00 a year) while rock of the 1960's and 1970's is covered in "Who Put The Bomb" (P.O. Box 7112, Burbank, Ca. 91510, \$4.00 a year). British rock comes under the purview of "Trouser Press" (P.O. Box 2434, New York, N.Y. 10017, \$6.00 a year). In addition to performers' biographies and discographies, the fanzines feature collectors' ads and lists of their own oldies for sale to the highest bidder. The most extensive mail-order auctions are those conducted by "Record Exchanger" and "Songs and Records" (P.O. Box 863, Burbank, Ca. 91510, \$6.00 a year).

Ordering 45's by mail from "set price sale" lists is a service provided by oldie dealers like Val Shively R & B Records (Box B, Haverstown, Pa. 19083) and Rare Records Unlimited (1771 Lake Street, San Mateo, Ca. 94403) as well as New York's own House of Oldies (267 Bleecker Street). New York prices are the highest in the country for 45's, but canny collectors can still find good values on the more common oldies offered in local shops. Bargaining over prices is an accepted practice when business is slow. Other reliable oldies stores in the city include The Golden Disc (228 Bleecker Street), Downstairs Records (55 West 42nd Street, in the Sixth Avenue IND subway arcade), and Disco-Disc (71-59 Austin Street, Forest Hills, N. Y.)