



Research > MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH...

Memorabilia. Collecting Sounds with... is a podcast series that seeks to break through to unearth and reveal private collections of music and sound *memorabilia*. It is a historiography of sound collecting that reveals the unseen and passionate work of the amateur collector while reconstructing multiple parallel histories such as the evolution of recording formats, archival issues, the sound collecting market and the evolution of musical styles beyond the marketplace.

As a part of our research process, here we reproduce an email conversation with 78s record collector Peter Muldavin, which took place in Winter 2012.

PDF Contents:

- [01. Conversation with Peter Muldavin on his 78-rpm and 45-rpm children's record collection](#)
- [02. Acknowledgments](#)
- [03. Copyright note](#)

Peter Muldavin (also known as The Kiddie Rekord King) is acknowledged as the world's leading expert on vintage 78-rpm records. An avid collector since the early nineties, his 78-rpm and 45-rpm children's record collection is amongst the largest in the field and is mainly focused on nostalgic treasures. Muldavin is also the author of the book *The Complete Guide to Vintage Children's Records: Identification & Value Guid* (Collector Books, 2007). www.kiddierekordking.com

MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH...

Peter Muldavin

01. Conversation with Peter Muldavin on his 78-rpm and 45-rpm children's record collection

When and why did you start collecting music? What was the spark that drove you to start actively consuming music?

As a child growing up in the fifties, I had a moderate-sized kiddie record collection (maybe 50 discs) along with several other collections that kids my age liked to collect. These included comic books, coins, stamps, baseball cards, etc. All of those collections disappeared over time as our family went through a divorce and so on. But I was and always have been nostalgic for those childhood years. So when in 1990 I came across one of the records I had as a child in a used record store, it got me started trying to find the others that I remembered having. This was the 'spark' that got me going.

What led you to become a record collector? To what extent is your collection defined by or limited to one particular area of exploration?

Early on, after I found and reacquired that first record that I saw, I decided to look for more. They were very hard to find in used record stores so I placed advertisements ('wanted to buy') in collectors newsletters and magazines for 78-rpm children's records. Before long, I was being contacted by dozens of people who had saved all of these records in their attics and basements. At that time (the nineties) there was no organized collecting societies or similar for old children's records, so people didn't know what to do with them. They sold them to me for very little money.

My collection is primarily of children's 78-rpm records, however about 5% consists of 45-rpms. They started to be phased in as 78s were ending in the early sixties.

Is there any reason why it mainly focuses on 78-rpm and 45-rpm records?

That is an excellent question! In the nineties, when I first started 're-collecting' the records I had in childhood in the late forties and early fifties (1948-52), the reason that I wanted only 78s is that I was trying to find the exact same records that I had as a kid, which were all 78-rpms. In those years, 78s were the main format available for children's records.

From your perspective, how did the introduction of 33-rpms and LPs change the type of content and the approach of the industry?

The most obvious answer is that because both the fidelity of recordings and the amount of recorded material on a single side of the disc were greatly changed, the record industry could offer new and better products. Even though the first LPs (33s) were mono, stereo quickly followed – a dramatic audio improvement which was coupled with higher-end stereo players and speakers.

The recording time increased from 2 to 4 minutes per 78-rpm record side (on average) to 15 to 20 minutes on LPs. Longer symphonic and spoken word pieces could now be listened to without changing record sides. Additionally, LPs could accommodate 5 to 10 tracks per side with songs. The record industry could now produce and market entire anthologies such as 'the best hits of...'. This new technology, which started at the end of the forties, was in place until CDs came on the scene in the early eighties.



[A Trip To Slumberland, 1947, an extremely rare 12" Vogue Picture Record]

We are intrigued about the 5% of your collection that is 45-rpms. What type of material is it?

The material on my 45-rpms is, for the most part, reissues or concurrent issues of the same audio tracks which were also issued as 78-rpms. The only 45s in my collection are of labels which: A) initially issued a series of kiddie records on 78-rpm and then changed over to 45-rpms during the transition period in the late 1950s; or B) issued both 45s and 78s of the same records concurrently. In some cases where I haven't been able to locate the 78-rpm version, I have 'settled' for the 45-rpm version. In most cases, both the audio tracks and the cover artwork are identical.

I was wondering how this affected/changed the kiddie records industry (the storytelling, the themes...). If you could share some examples...

If you are asking how the advent of LPs and CDs affected the kiddie records industry, I don't really know specifics, since my focus is only on the earlier 78s. I can say that even though, as I previously mentioned, the newer technologies improved the audio quality of the product, and that more playing time per record (or CD) made it more convenient for the person listening, I don't feel that the quality of the storytelling and singing was any better. In fact, I really believe that the products produced during the 'Golden Age' of kiddie records (approximately 1946 to 1955) were of a higher standard. More money was invested in individual recordings (at least by the major labels such as RCA, Columbia, Decca, Capitol and Mercury, to name a few). By this I mean famous movie, recording and TV stars were hired to narrate; major orchestras were hired to play the music, etc. Stories such as *Alice In Wonderland* and *Peter & The Wolf* come to mind, as well as the earlier Disney classics.

You mentioned that after the forties the industry could offer new and better products, yet your 78s gave the audio and the aesthetics of the genre a certain quality that got you 'hooked'. As we discussed in a conversation with your colleague and fellow-collector Anki Toner, the concept of 'fidelity' is relative and quite often used as a commercial stunt. It is very interesting to see how playback technologies have shaped the aesthetics of many genres even up until today. What are your thoughts on this? What qualities do you appreciate most in the sound and behaviour of those 78s?

There are many record collectors who favour LPs over CDs, for example. But you would be hard pressed to find any who favour 78s over LPs. I think the aspects of 78s that were/are appealing are the actual content, not so much the audio technology.

Your collection in numbers

At last count, I had about 16,000 records, not including duplicates. Most are from the USA, but a few thousand are from other countries, mostly European.

Did the approach of the European industry differ from that of the American industry? I also wonder how the industry evolved through time and how it adapted to the attitudes/expectations of different generations. As ephemeral documents with a specific function, I guess the records also reflected the educational values of their time. What are some of the most significant examples, in your opinion? How universal were the values they tried to share?

Are you talking about the years immediately following World War II (which I refer to as the 'Golden age of kiddie 78s')? Not being versed in specific information about the European record companies' approaches, I can offer some general observations. For one thing, in the post war years the economy in the USA was booming. For most of the rest of the world, including Europe, society, including fiscal matters, was in shambles. Consumer items such as record players and records were a luxury. Hence, not that many were made, nor distributed, compared to the US. That is why my collection of non-American discs is so much smaller and difficult to build upon.

I believe children the world over enjoy fairy tales, nursery rhymes and the like equally. It's just that the medium of delivering this entertainment (in this case



[Sleeves of the 'set' of Walt Disney's *Silly Symphony Songs*, 1933, RCA Victor Records]

records and record players) was not equally available in all countries, mainly for economic reasons.

In recent times the world market and marketing strategy has been to produce all types of content and distribute it in multi-faceted media in virtually every country of the world. Most of the population has access to iTunes and iPods with the only limitation being the financial considerations of the individual consumer.

As Rick Prelinger brought to our attention, one of the most interesting things about ephemeral materials is how much they tell us about the society and period that they are manufactured for. Would it be too much to ask you to go over the main concerns and interests of your collection, from its beginnings to the nineties? I'm sure the educational values and the pedagogic strategies must have somehow evolved over time.

The simple response is that the content of entertainment which appeals to children below a certain age (usually 12 or younger) is universal. It may vary from one age group to the next, but the appeal crosses over from one generation to the next. Here is an excerpt from my book (*The Complete Guide To Vintage Children's Records*, pp. 6-7) which describes general content categories that appeal to different age groups:

What constitutes a 'children's' record?

For the purposes of this book, what first comes to mind is to determine which age groups fall into this category. There would be little or no dispute to include 2 thru 11 year olds. Over 12 years old there may be some debate, but I have included young adolescents (12-15). Following are some generally accepted age groupings:

- Age: up to 2-3 (toddlers)
- Age: 4-12 (children)
- Age: 13-15 (young adolescents)

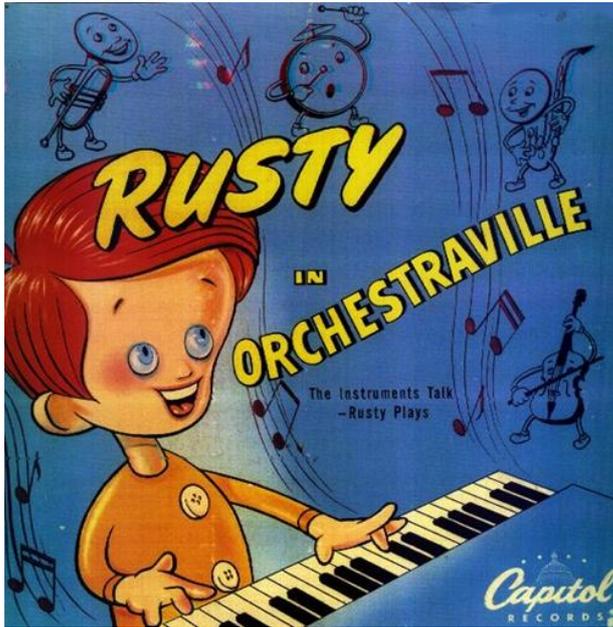
All of the above age ranges can be considered appropriate 'candidates' for kiddie records. One of the parents' magazines of the day offered a more detailed breakdown of the type of record content that would appeal to various children's age groups:

- Up to 2 years: likes strong rhythm-music with a beat
- 2 to 4 years: nursery rhymes; fairy tales; songs mirroring daily routine
- 4 to 6 years: fairy tales; records strong in sound effects
- 6 to 8 years: more advanced stories; songs about trains; cowboys and comedy appreciated
- 8 to 12 years: less childish fairy tales; cowboys; good habits

These age ranges are subject to minor variations, which may be influenced by determinants such as cultural and societal values.

Regarding the above 'definitions' of what a children's record is, although I am not a child educator or psychologist, I am confident that these generic values and categories are more or less timeless and universal. The specific type of language, depiction of people, etc., as mentioned at the end of the above excerpt, results in the storyteller taking note of 'political correctness' as well as the changing values of society. A couple of glaring examples in American culture come to mind: 1) the "N" word ("nigger") is a highly charged and offensive insult to just about everyone's ears in Western culture; however in the fifties and earlier it was frequently heard in children's recordings (the song 'Ten Little Niggers' comes to mind); 2) corporal punishment: there are countless stories in which little children are whipped, beaten, starved, etc. No one thought much about it back in the day, but it has been toned down quite a bit now.

Also, after our conversation with Anki Toner, we became aware that the kiddie records industry did experiment a lot with formats, and even exploited the medium creatively



[Rusty in Orchestraville, 1947, Capitol Records]

(i.e. introducing the concept of random playing). Do you have any examples of this that you'd like to share?

The best example that I can offer is a type of record called 'the magic record'. On the record, anywhere from two to as many as five record grooves are cut, each parallel to the other grooves and not intersecting. Thus, when one places the stylus on the record, depending on which groove it 'hits', a different audio track will play. The usual content is a story with several different possible outcomes. The person playing the record (usually a child) will not know which storyline he or she will hear until the record starts playing. An adult variation of this concept is the 'horse racing' record, in which a different horse 'wins' the race each time the record is played.

Yet you mentioned that you mainly specialise in 78-rpms and don't seem to be interested in the stranger formats that were also published in the same period, such as dolly records. Any specific reason?

My interest in 78-rpms only is related to my own personal nostalgia arising from my childhood record collection in which 78s were the only format of records available during the years that I would have been interested in having them. Dolly records, by the way, were all 78s or cylinders in that time frame (fifties and earlier).

Anki Toner asked me to ask you: were the 78-rpms also microgroove records?

Microgroove commonly refers to 33 1/3 rpm vinyl recordings and requires a smaller diameter stylus for correct playback than does a 78. (For a short time in the late fifties, a short-lived experimental format known as 16 2/3 rpm was produced, but never gained in popularity and quickly vanished.) Early disc recordings were produced in a variety of speeds ranging from 60 to 130-rpm, and a variety of sizes. Some 78s were produced with 'more playing time' per side, but the width of the groove was the same. It's just that the groove 'spiral' configuration was more tightly spaced.

Are you very meticulous with your sound collection? Do you collect second copies?

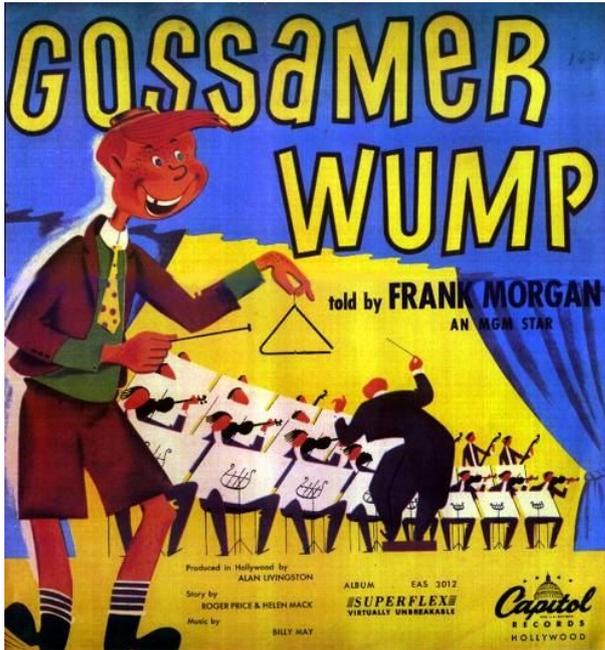
I do not actively collect second (duplicate) copies, as I am only a collector, not a dealer. However in order to get a particular record that I want, I often buy a few others along with it – records that I already have. I minimize these types of purchases now. I am a collector not a dealer, so I don't need extras.

What's the most valuable record you have and why? And your favourite?

If by valuable you mean the record that I paid the most for, then I can say it is a 12-inch (30,5 cm) Vogue picture disc for children: *A Trip to Slumberland* (1947). The most valuable 'set' of records is the RCA Victor 3-record black and white picture-disc set of Walt Disney's *Silly Symphony Songs* in their original sleeves (1933). My favourite kiddie record is an obscure Little Golden Record (#7) from 1948 called *The Funny Little Mouse*. This is the one I remember most fondly from my childhood. I guess I am giving away my age – LOL!

Have you experienced any 'El Dorado' moment, where you got hold of a large quantity of records of special value for you?

There are many instances that I can remember during the 20+ years that I have been actively collecting that fall into this category to one degree or another. 'special value' can apply to rarity, as well as to quantity and quality. For example, I was able to get 750 small kiddie picture discs, all of the same title, from a factory which had been closed down. They had never left the factory, let alone been distributed to stores, let alone been sold to customers. One time I was invited to look at and make an offer to buy a collection in a warehouse which had not been opened in 50+ years! The invitation was from the daughter of a deceased record store owner (six stores in Minneapolis, USA) who had closed the stores in 1955 and put six million records in storage, many 1000s of them childrens' records. They were virtually all 78-rpms. Unfortunately, I could never have availed myself of acquiring even a small fraction of this hoard, but it was exciting to just gaze over endless rooms and stacks full of gem mint factory-sealed albums.



[Gossamer Wump, 1949, Capitol Records]

I could probably list several other experiences, but time and space don't allow it.

Do you keep a data base? How do you keep your records?

Oh yes! I keep a well-maintained database on Excel. I have it backed up in the Cloud as well as on four separate hard drives. Most of it is accessible in a search engine on my Website (www.kiddierecordking.com). The database for my website is MySQL.

My physical record collection is organized by record label and by number order within the label. Small records, larger singles and multi-disc albums each have their own spaces – they are not all mixed together. All records are protected by vinyl sleeves and kept in cool dark closets for the most part.

Do the records or the record players need any special maintenance?

As I collect records only and not the players, I can only speak about that aspect. All of my records are stored in their original paper or cardboard sleeve, boxes, albums, covers, etc. Records which do not have original covers are in plain paper record covers. Each one is protected with clear polyethylene sleeves. I keep all of them in vertical position on reinforced book shelves. If a record is dirty, I will clean it gently with baby shampoo and lukewarm water, using a soft cloth. I wipe the record counter clockwise, following the record grooves. The record is placed in a dish drainer to air dry. Record cleaning of 78-rpms is not as precise or critical as it is for LPs.

What make of record player do you use? Do you use a coarse groove needle? Since most people haven't heard of this concept, could you also explain the specificities of the coarse groove?

I have only one record player (turntable). I don't have any preference for a specific manufacturer, as the playback of these old records (which were never made with particularly good audio quality) is just about the same across the board. In any case, the cartridge and stylus are very important, and the brand of these is separate and distinct from the turntable brand. Also, the tracking force and anti-skating adjustments must be correct, regardless of the make of the turntable.

My turntable is a standard 33/45 rpm machine which has been modified by the manufacturer to play at 78-rpm as well. I am not sure who the original manufacturer is, as the name has been removed by the person who modifies them. The size (radius) of my needle (stylus) is 2.5 mm. The shape is conical/spherical. Elliptical types are also made. Most 78rpm needles are in the 2.0 to 4.0 mm. By comparison, the most common radius size for LPs is .075 mm.

Do you think that the so-called 'digital revolution' is killing sound collecting? How do you imagine the future of sound collecting?

If by 'sound collecting' you mean the collecting of records, I would say 'yes'. The proliferation of MP3 downloads and more recently, just listening to streaming audio from the Cloud does not require a music lover to get the physical source material, such as a record, CD, etc. In my case, I only want the physical artefact of the record and original illustrated cover. The reason for this is to create an historical physical archive.

eBay and Discogs are also part of the digital revolution and have affected the sound collecting market. How have these tools changed sound collecting?

I can only speak about the collecting of the actual records themselves, as opposed to digital files such as MP3s. Among vintage record collectors, there used to be a serious debate about the pros and cons of eBay and other online auctions. That discussion has pretty much run its course. But in the early years of eBay there was a fear that eBay was artificially driving up prices of records that you could have purchased more cheaply at house/garage/flea market sales and the like. On the other hand, I have often found records listed on eBay that I might not see for years, if ever, if I just went to local sales.



[Bozo and his Rocket Ship, 1947, Capitol Records]

For people selling records on eBay, I am sure it has become much more difficult if the target audience of buyers is just as happy to download a file for less than \$1 from Amazon or iTunes, for example.

What's your relationship with other collectors exploring similar aesthetics or material?

One of the great joys of my collecting activity has been making contact and developing new friends from many, many countries around the world, including, of course, Anki Toner in Barcelona. To my knowledge, I am the only person who is actively trying to collect every kiddie 78-rpm made on every label from every country—a goal that will never be realized, naturally. There are many others who collect specific types of kiddie records (by label, by artist, by type, etc.), and eventually they will find me, often through my website.

Most of the sound collectors we've talked to acknowledge what we've come to describe as the 'thrill of the hunt', meaning that once they finally own what they were looking for, it kind of loses its value for them. Do you listen to all the material you own?

I know what you mean. This is one of the principal defining characteristics of a collector (as opposed to an accumulator or hoarder). I have actually listened to less than 10% of my collection. As you say, the thrill seems to be mostly in finding and acquiring the item.

For this series we also tried to talk to Robert Crumb, but unfortunately he was too busy to do an interview. However, he did share some insightful thoughts about his 78-rpm blues collection and he mentioned that he was well aware that his collection would be probably be sold when he passes away, given that his family doesn't share the collecting bug. He also said that this does not bother him too much. If you think about it, this is a common concern for many collectors: what to do with their collections in the future, since, in general, they are most valuable in the eyes of the collector himself.

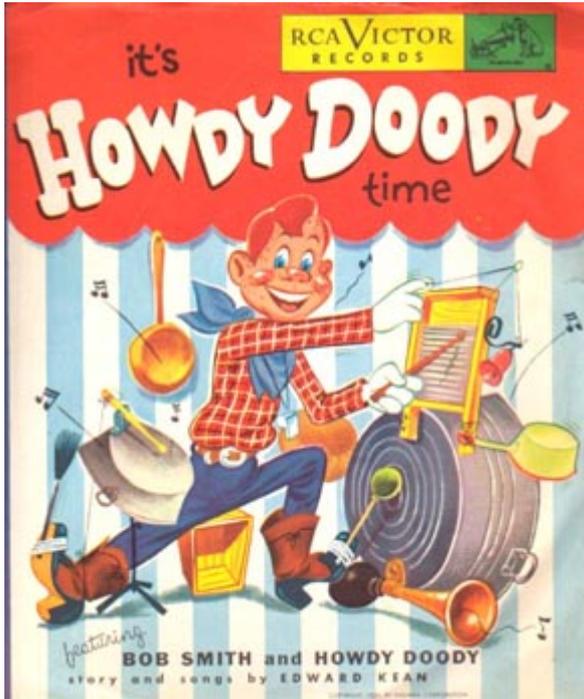
It's interesting to read about Robert Crumb. I knew him from my University days at Berkeley, California in the sixties. As with Robert, my family has no interest in my collection, which is the largest children's 78-rpm collection in the world. But unlike the common concern of other record collectors, I am lucky that I won't have any problems of this sort. I have willed my entire collection to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., our nation's library. They have very few of this genre of recordings, so they are delighted that they will eventually be housing my collection. And this makes me very happy, naturally. I am lucky that I do not have to be concerned about the future. My situation is rather unique in that my collection has no known similar in existence.

After a few of these conversations, it has become quite clear that one of the values of record collections is how they show the personal journeys of each collector, and how they become a mirror of their interests and obsessions.

I guess any collection, if you think about it, is a mirror of the personality and background of the individual collector. Perhaps one collects based on nostalgia for a part of their past (childhood, for example), especially if that childhood was a happy time. We are always drawn to remembering happier times. For others, collecting may be a financial investment in the future. Some may collect just for the sake of the love of the objects themselves. One must distinguish between a collector and an 'accumulator'. The latter doesn't really have an organized method with 'want lists', etc. And beyond being an accumulator, there are the 'hoarders'. That is another world entirely and is more of a personality disorder.

William Bennett said that 'The romance of sound collecting might be dead—not because of the music, but due to the loss of the personal human component of the process.' What do you think about that?

Everyone collects for his or her own reasons and to satisfy his or her own collecting goals. I think it is too simplistic to make this kind of statement.



[*Howdy Doody Time*, 1952, RCA Victor Records]

03. Acknowledgments

This email conversation between Peter Muldavin, Anna Ramos and Anki Toner took place between Winter 2012-Summer 2013.

04. Copyright note

This conversation is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

