

Why Downloading Doesn't Always Do It



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download central

Few things can match the pleasure of owning great vinyl album covers. You can touch them, see the pictures, admire the art work, read the notes

EVER SINCE last week when I first heard Pearl Jam's *Backspacer*, their newest album, I've been obsessively listening to it over and over again. It's a mighty fine album and if you read the review in last Saturday's *Rock 'n' Roll Circus* in *Hindustan Times* by my colleague Indrajit Hazra you'll know what I mean. *Backspacer* is a whopper; a cracker of an album from the band. Pearl Jam has been around for nearly 20 years, much longer than what many bands take to burn out or become their own stupid caricatures - I'm sure you know the ones I'm talking about.

Not so Pearl Jam. The ten albums that make up their main discography have mostly been great pieces of work (alright, I didn't quite get off on 1998's *Live on Two Legs*, but still). And I've got all of them. Not in downloaded formats; not mp3s that reside inside my iPod or storage disks but as CDs, complete with liner notes, pictures and what have you.

Some bands are like that. They make you obsessive about getting all their albums. I have every album of R.E.M. even though there are many in the band's 29-year and 15-album history that are really pathetic. Such as 2001's *Reveal* and 2004's *Around The Sun*. Of course, they made amends with last year's *Accelerate* - which is a kind of return to their past glory.

I know people who have hundreds of recordings, bootlegged or otherwise, of every Grateful Dead show that they could lay their hands on and I have heard hair-splitting debates about which version of *Dark Star* is the best or which *Drums>Space>The Other One* jam is the most mind-blowing. Likewise for the band that inherited the Dead's mantle, Phish. There are some who have downloaded every Phish concert in the band's history ever since the Vermont-based chaps started touring in 1983 till they took a hiatus in 2004. Now that they've reunited again, I'm sure the Phish-heads are again filling up their disk drives.

That though is digital amassing, which is very different from having a physical copy of an album that you can touch, read liner notes of and see the pictures. In the pre-cassette tape, pre-CD days, vinyl albums were a joy to possess. Albums such as The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) also came with urban legends surrounding them. Besides identifying the 70-odd famous people on the cover - including at least three Indian gurus - we heard how an image of Mahatma Gandhi was to have originally gone on the cover but was yanked at the last moment because EMI thought it would not be allowed to be printed in the Indian edition of the record.

Such trivia apart, vinyl album covers often came with excellent art work and/or reading material. I still read Ralph J Gleason's liner notes for Miles Davis's genre-bending masterpiece, *Bitches Brew*. Gleason, a noted music critic and a founding editor of *Rolling Stone* magazine, wrote the notes in 1969 and captured the essence of what



COLLECTOR'S ITEM

Iconic album covers: The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (top left), Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew* (top right) and Jethro Tull's *Thick As A Brick* (left)

Davis and his collaborators were doing on that historic album so well that I won't be surprised if hundreds of people got turned on to modern jazz because of it. I know I did. Here's how Gleason began the note: "There is so much to say about this music. I don't mean so much to explain about it because that's stupid, the music speaks for itself. What I mean is that so much flashes through my mind when I hear the tapes of this album that if I could I would write a novel about it full of life and scenes and people and blood and sweat and love..."

Some album art was intriguing. In the early 1970s, British band Jethro Tull released their concept album *Thick as a Brick* in a cover that was a spoof of a local newspaper, complete with news stories, crossword, photographs, etc. As school kids we didn't realise it then but later learnt that it was a kind of satire on provincial journalism. The cover also had lyrics of the seamless one-track album scattered through the "newspaper". Rolling Stone's *Sticky Fingers* (1971) came with a working fly zipper and British rock band Traffic's *Shootout At The Fantasy Factory* (1973) had the corners of the album cut to give it a 3D effect.

It's fairly easy to collect the complete works of some bands in CD form today. And although the size of the *Sgt Pepper's* CD makes it nearly impossible to recognise who is who on the cover, you still have it in physical form. That's precisely why I think the re-mastered complete Beatles box-set found millions of buyers. I know many people who have physical copies of either vinyls, cassettes or CDs of most of Bob Dylan's 30 plus studio albums (I myself have 15), although I must confess that rarely have I popped in the eminently forgettable ones such as *Saved*, *Shot of Love* or *Down In The Groove*. Still, I like to have them.

Besides the older stuff such as Dylan, The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Van Morrison and so on, I like collecting albums (CDs, usually) of many contemporary bands - those that I become very fond of. My current obsession is to try and buy every album by indie rockers Sonic Youth (they've released 16) that I can lay my hands on. And each of the 12 studio albums that lo-fi pioneers, Yo La Tengo, have issued. And you thought this column was about downloading music!

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