

Travels with music: How vinyl changed my life

A traveling DJ argues that buying LPs can lead to far more than a nice record collection

By [Chris Menist](#) (/author/chris-menist) 19 April, 2013



Chris Menist, DJ, journalist and vinyl obsessive, digging for treasure.

There's probably never been a time in history when so much music is accessible to so many.

The digital download has created a "printing press" step change in how we consume notes and lyrics.

But it's also, for my money, sabotaged that experience.

Nothing beats the personal interaction, as well as the potential for the unexpected, than a visit to a record store.

So, with [Record Store Day](http://www.recordstoreday.com/Home) (<http://www.recordstoreday.com/Home>) upon us (April 20), I want to highlight how my quest to dig out records in some of the world's dustiest, most faraway stores has also opened to me that other life-changing and lifelong hobby: travel.

I've discovered James Brown LPs in a local home in Myanmar, turned up a much sought reggae 45 in a specialist shop in Osaka and have spent literally hundreds of sweaty hours discovering Thailand through its records and record shops.



Digging around in stores like this is an experience, not just a transaction.

London's All Tones, possibly my favorite store of all time, had, at its peak, more the feel of a casino than a record shop.

Specializing in reggae (its owner, Dean, was the son of famed singer Alton Ellis), part of the fun was taking a punt on an unknown disc or overhearing a killer track blasting through the shop sound system.

On a Saturday, you'd line up in front of the counter as Dean took a record from everyone's pile in turn, playing a few precious seconds from which you had to decide to buy or not.

It was loud, raucous, sociable and fun.

I heard and experienced music at All Tones (now closed down) I'd never come across before, nor, in some cases, since.

Somehow the buzz isn't quite the same scanning through Amazon.

Social, not lonesome

Digging for vinyl is sometimes lampooned as a loner's pastime, but it's possible to replicate this social experience in almost any town.

"When you visit the local record store you find local reflections, local music and local people," says Sebastian Reier, an employee at Groove City in Hamburg.

“Original vinyl records breathe history, mentality and environment. If you're looking for ‘real local’ instead of ‘tourist local,’ you should start picking up records.”

“Record stores should be the first thing to check when you’re in a new place,” adds owner Marga Glanz.

This notion has been borne out by my own experiences.



Chris Menist's missions have taken him to some tiny record stores, like Lian's in Jakarta.

During a two-month stint in Yemen, I spent every hour I could trawling through the old city in Sana'a and turned up unique Arabic music.

It was played with a funky precision, as much influenced by the East African coast as the Arab Peninsula.

A series of Bollywood EPs in a shop in Aden illustrated the connections between this port town and the Indian subcontinent -- Britain had seized it as a fueling station to aid the then regular voyages undertaken by the East India Company.

Southern Yemen remained a British colony until 1967.

The local stringed lute, the qanbus, provided other clues.

Finding “gambus” LPs in Jakarta (which are heavily influenced by music from the Middle East) led to research into the strong links between the western part of Indonesia and Yemen, through trade, religion and cultural exchange.

All these curious undercurrents opened up to me purely through my vinyl curiosity.

Still plenty not online

“Not everything is on the Internet,” says Maft Sai, owner of the ZudRangMa HQ store in Bangkok. “Digging for records might be the only way to rediscover an old tune, which was too obscure at the time [to get digitized] because it wasn’t a hit.”

A case in point is “[Kuen Kuen Lueng Lueng](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=At8Zwo2myZc%20),” by Sroeng Santi, a rock pioneer from Thailand’s musical yesteryear.

I found it in a pile of terrible ballads in a place in Bangkok’s Chinatown, but as soon as the needle hit the groove I knew I was hearing something special.



You won't find these guys -- Thailand's The Impossibles from the 1970s -- on Spotify.

Based on the riff from Black Sabbath's “Iron Man,” the song is a witty commentary on the cost of living.

Drop it at any party and it’s a guaranteed head turner.

After hearing another obscure track, “[Ashsha Beywe](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8s5fr-WhDso),” by Ethiopian singer Abebe Tessema, I knew I'd found my Moby Dick, a record that would sit at the top of my wish list. The singer’s passionate, crazy delivery comes from the gut.

After fruitless searching for the record, I resigned myself to simply never owning this 45, until I finally found a copy at a London dealer’s house.

My happiness was replaced by disbelief when, much later, I was looking through a box in my house to discover I already owned a copy.

I'd made a trip to Addis Ababa years before, and had forgotten I'd already picked it up.

Music takes us on journeys, but it always brings us home.

Be it a focus on community, independence from corporations or just a celebration of music, Record Store Day serves as a reminder that this isn't merely about rose-tinted memories.

The art of physically looking for music is as relevant as ever.

“People gravitate to something they can relate to,” says James Thornington, co-owner of Kristina Records in London. “We do in-store performances as a way of promoting the shop as well as experiencing music we like, but also to give something back to customers.”

“That’s really important to us. You’re not going to get that personal touch from a chain store.”

10 of the best record stores for travelers

All Tones, London: For years my favorite store of all time and the place that effectively taught me about reggae music. It sadly closed a few years ago, but its spirit lives on in **The Music Temple**; Brixton Village, London, SW9 8PR.

Dusty Groove, Chicago: Vintage vinyl heavyweight; +1 773 342 5800; www.dustygroove.com (<http://www.dustygroove.com/>)

Passa Disco, Recife, Brazil: Representing all things northeast and beyond; ; +55 81 3268 0888; www.passadisco.com.br (<http://www.passadisco.com.br/>)

ZudRangMa, Bangkok: Only one of its kind in Southeast Asia, specializing in rare Thai vinyl, as well as regional obscurities; 7/1 Sukhumvit, Soi 51, Bangkok; +66 (0) 88 891 1314; www.zudrangmarecords.com (<http://www.zudrangmarecords.com/>)

Lian’s, Jakarta, Indonesia: Found about halfway down Jakarta’s infamous flea market, the knowledgeable Lian can lay his hands on Indonesian, English and American rarities without drawing breath; Jalan Surabaya, Jakarta (no number, ask around. Everyone knows Lian)

Other Music, New York: New York’s finest, for alternative and underground sounds; +1 212 477 8150; www.othermusic.com (<http://www.othermusic.com/>)

Drum & Bass, Osaka, Japan: There are some insanely good reggae shops in Japan, and this is one of the best. Regular shipments from Jamaica guarantee you’ll never leave this place empty-handed; 2-11-1 Nambanaka Naniwa-ku, Osaka; +81 6 6634 4141; www.drumandbass-rec.com (<http://www.drumandbass-rec.com/>)

Groove City, Hamburg, Germany: Whether it’s brand new music, or secondhand wax, this is the place to check for vintage jazz to bang up to date hip-hop; Marktstraße 114, 20357, Hamburg; +49 (0)40 430 21 49; www.groove-city.com (<http://www.groove-city.com/>)

Minton's, Buenos Aires, Argentina: Jazz specialist with its own wine range; +54 11 4371 2216; www.minton-s.blogspot.com.ar (<http://www.minton-s.blogspot.com.ar/>)

Kristina Records, London: One of London’s newest. Friendly vibes and an across the board selection from brand new dance 12s to obscure punk 45s; 44 Stoke Newington Road, London; +44 (0)20 7254 2130

Got your own favorite record stores, or have stories about hunting for tunes? Tell us about them below



Chris Menist is a writer, DJ and musician who has been based in South Asia since 2006. He is a regular contributor to Songlines magazine, as well as writing the 'Paradise Found' column for Bangkok 101. His writing has appeared in The Independent, The Observer, FACT and Straight No Chaser.

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