

The Record Collector

Fuelling an obsession



Sixty-two-year-old Nguyen Huu Tien eagerly pulls out Deep Purple’s *Machine Head* album from his collection. It’s instinctive, like how a magician might blindly pick a specific card out from a pack. “Do you know Ritchie Blackmore?” he asks with teenage enthusiasm.

At its peak, Tien’s collection of vinyl records swelled into the thousands. Nowadays, it’s settled at a more modest amount at just under one thousand. To fellow collectors in Saigon, he’s well known, and he’s been building up his impressive collection since he first got hold of a single from a band from Hong Kong during the early 1970s. His collection is mainly

composed of British and American LPs from the classic era of pop and rock. He has them all, from The Rolling Stones to Neil Young to The Carpenters and more.

Dangerous Obsession

His vinyl obsession was kick-started during the war when he struck up a friendship with an American GI who would sell him LPs for US\$1 each: “The first record I bought from him was a Johnny Winter record. I bought so many from him,” remembers Tien.

By the end of the war, his collection had grown to over 40 LPs. But following reunification in 1975, the authorities cracked down on things deemed “corrosive to the

revolution”, which included music from America. Many collectors destroyed their records.

“You couldn’t let [anyone] know. If they found you listening to US music, [you’d get in trouble]. It had to be a secret.

“There was a time when I was still going to school and they did not allow music, but I really liked the song *Starman* by David Bowie, but I could not listen to it. I caught it on the Philippines radio [picked up in Saigon] and I got to listen to the song. It was a happy moment.”

With the lack of vinyl available locally for collectors like Tien, he went abroad in search of his beloved wax discs to bring home.

“After the war, I went to Europe

and when I returned I just carried on collecting and playing. I went to East Germany and Slovakia and I brought records back with me to Vietnam."

Thrill of the Hunt

Five years ago he travelled to America and returned with boxes full of records to top up his collection. Any record collector will tell you that it's the hunt that is one of the joys of collecting, and the US is a treasure trove for collectors like Tien.

Tien's 21-year-old son, Hung, has grown up with records around the house, and he's proud of his dad's collection. He says: "I think it's really precious. I feel lucky I have a dad like mine. I'm going to keep collecting vinyl if I have the money, I'll never sell [his collection]. I want to keep it."

Hung is part of a new generation of youths in Vietnam who are turning to analogue forms. He says: "Many teenagers in Vietnam are starting to look into the past. They choose film, they collect vinyl. They like going back to the vintage style."

Vinyl has seen a worldwide resurgence in recent years and since 2008 there has been an impressive year-on-year increase in sales. Tien believes that digital platforms such as YouTube are fine, as long as they are seen as a preview to the authentic music experience, which to him, is unquestionably heard on a turntable.

Music is Life

Tien has spent his working life as an illustrator, and he's always had his records as physical reminders of a life lived. He's had to sell some of his collection in recent years due to financial difficulties, which Hung says was a tough blow for his dad to take: "I felt really sad. I felt sad for him."

"LPs to me mean several things," adds Tien. "They are my souvenirs and my childhood times. I feel the same about music as when I was 14."

"Sometimes I've had unfortunate family affairs and so many troubles in my life," he says. "I have to have music in my life. I'm still a lucky man now to be able to listen to rock."

— Thomas Barrett 

