

ON COLLECTIONS AND ADDICTIONS

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I have a confession to make. I am an addict and I am not ashamed of it. I admit that I will not be able to recover from this addiction, and it is my choice not to get well. The moment I seek help I know that I will just get worse. Intervention of any kind will destroy who I am as a person. This condition has been going on for decades and continues up to this day. Do not be afraid, because I am not. In fact, I am happy and proud of my addiction. This addiction started quite early; it began when I was still a baby.

My grandmother told me—so many times, that I have lost count—that whenever I heard music playing on the radio or on the record player, I would immediately get up from my crib, move my body up and down, shake it left and right. This was probably what dancing was for me at that time. My grandmother said that I would start crying when the radio or the record player was switched off. To put me to sleep at night, she would sing to me popular songs—not the lullabies usually sung to babies—and that my favorite was, “Those Were the Days” popularized by Mary Hopkin. When I listened to the song many years later on YouTube, I understood why I loved it as a child. It had an amazing hook and a catchy “Lay lay lay lay lay...” coda. My romance with music began with that particular song, and the rest, I say, is history. This love for music turned into a mad obsession. This confession will hopefully help you understand why I cannot ever let go of my addiction—music.

I grew up listening to all kinds of music. My mother bought 45 rpm records and long-playing albums when she liked a song she heard on the radio or when a singer sang it on television. Since my mother was a huge Beatles’ fan, I became one myself. My mother told me amazing stories about Beatlemania as if she were in some kind of trance, and how she dreamt of marrying, Paul McCartney, who for her was the most adorable Beatle. Personally, I thought, John Lennon, was better looking, but didn’t tell her so, because she was very much in love with Paul. Beatles’ records were played regularly in the house, which was the reason why I was able to memorize all their song lyrics, pre-Revolver era.

According to my mother, a few of those Beatles' albums got soaked for many hours in floodwater during the super typhoon, Didang, which my grandmother often referred to as "beinte otso de Mayo" as if it were a time marker for some major historical event, but to my surprise none of those records skipped when they were played. The only sign that they weren't in mint condition was that the hissing sound they made was much louder than that of brand new vinyl records. There was also the occasional "popping" sound which was a sign that the records were slightly damaged, but I hardly cared about those popping sounds as long as the records played without the occasional skipping.

Aside from the Beatles, I was also introduced to the funky music of The Temptations, The Jackson 5, and The Commodores; the polished covers of popular standards of Engelbert Humperdinck and Jack Jones; the upbeat tunes of Gary Lewis & The Playboys, and The Spiral Staircase; the lush MOR ballads of Neil Diamond and The Carpenters; Carole King and Neil Young's classic folk songs; and the soulful ditties of The Supremes and other artists under the Motown label.

There was no time of the day that I wasn't listening to music, so my mother decided to teach me how to operate the record player on my own. She gave me the freedom to choose the records I wanted to play, and while listening to music, we would have long talks about music and musicians, the ones we liked and the ones we didn't.

But one of the most memorable days of my childhood was when my mother bought me a royal blue portable record player with detachable speakers. These portable record players looked like fat briefcases. She told me that I could bring it to school if I wanted to. (Our school only had one phonograph that we could borrow from the library to play music during our free time and during meal breaks.) Attached to the portable record player was a 45 rpm record of Donna Summer's "I Feel Love," the first record I felt I really owned because it was given to me. My mother knew I loved that song very much because whenever the song played on the radio, I would get up and dance. I couldn't get the whipping sound towards the end of the song out of my head. Later, I learned that that sound was produced not by any instrument but by a machine called *synthesizer*, which at that time was said to be the future of music. That Donna Summer record was the start of my obsession with 45 rpm records.

As I was growing up, disco music became very popular, but many disco artists only had one or two hit songs: Anita Ward had “Ring My Bell,” Thelma Houston had “Don’t Leave Me This Way,” Foxy had “Get Off,” CJ & Company had “Devil’s Gun,” which was primarily the reason why I only bought and collected singles and not albums during my growing up years. Besides, long-playing albums were more expensive than 45 rpm records. A long-playing album cost PhP 24.00 while 45 rpm records were sold at Ph P 4.00 apiece in those days.

But the disco artists that I adored were those that had a string of massive hits such as Donna Summer and The Bee Gees. Whenever they released a new song, I would ask money from my mother and immediately go to the nearest record bar, Society Records, which was located inside Sta. Mesa Market (now SM City Santa Mesa) to buy their latest records. My mother discovered the Beatles, but I discovered Donna Summer and The Bee Gees. Life-size posters of my disco idols decorated my room. I would proudly take my portable record player and a few disco records to school for me and my classmates to dance to.

Record bars were a big part of my life. When my mother took me to the shopping mall,

usually on a weekend, I would get very excited. My heart would beat fast and my hands would become sweaty, and not because we were going to see a movie, or eat at a famous pizza parlor, or buy new clothes and a pair of shoes. Don’t get me wrong, I loved doing those things too. Those were the perks of being an only child for a very long time, but my excitement had to do with being able to pass by a record store. There was usually one in every shopping mall. Farmer’s Market in Cubao had two. Bookstores in those days, like National Bookstore and PECO, sold records as well, and so if a particular single was not available in one store, it would definitely be available in another.

My mother already knew that I would coax her into checking out the latest singles and albums. I remember holding her hand tightly and actually pulling her toward the place where the record bar was located, because I couldn’t wait to get my hands on the records I had been mooning over for days. The moment I heard loud music being played and saw the hundreds of long-playing albums neatly stacked on the shelves, the world around me would just stop and cease to exist. Maybe that was what Longinus and Immanuel Kant were talking about when they wrote about the sublime.

It was a feeling that I could not fully grasp. It was a sensation like no other. Seeing those round vinyl records and album jackets was enough to send chills up and down my spine. The sales clerks in record stores would greet us with a big smile on their faces because we were regular customers. They would inform us about the latest releases, and my mom and I would pore over the stacks of albums displayed on the shelves.

Since there was no Internet back then to search for the titles and lyrics of songs, my mom and I would sing the chorus of a song to the sales clerks, if we didn't know the title of the records we were looking for, so that they would know what record we wanted to purchase. We probably looked really silly, when I think about it now. One of my dreams was to own and actually run a record store. I imagined myself giving customers helpful information about music, the top picks for the week, juicy news about their favorite singers, and recommend to them albums that were worth buying.

One time my mom brought home a Jingle songbook which was a special Beatles issue. I flipped through its pages and saw the lyrics of Beatles' songs that were unfamiliar to me; Beatles' songs from their albums "Revolver," "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," "Magical Mystery Tour," "The White Album," "Abbey Road," "Hey Jude," and "Let It Be," I asked my mother about them and why she didn't have those albums. She said that someone borrowed her copy of "Revolver" and didn't return it, while the other albums she said she didn't have much interest in because the Beatles were no longer the cute, wholesome boys from Liverpool that she idolized; they had turned into hippies.

I didn't expect her to say those things because she was such a devoted fan. Deep inside, I had this strange feeling that my mom had betrayed her idols and I felt bad about it. It was like falling out of love, being disloyal to someone you had been pining over for years, and then dropping him/her like a hot potato. I realized that I was actually a bigger fan of the Beatles than my mom, and it made me sad. It was like the ties that bound us as fans of the fab four had been severed, and it was her fault. I just didn't want to let go. I just wasn't ready to accept it. I was left all alone as my mom just walked away and moved on. I kept flipping the pages of the Jingle songbook and I couldn't get the Beatles songs that I had just discovered off my mind.

When I look back now, I realize that it was my first bout of obsession. After a few days, I was able to muster enough courage to tell my mom that I wanted to buy the other studio albums of the Beatles to complete our

collection. To my surprise, she said that it was actually a good idea because she also wanted to listen to them. I was overjoyed because it meant that my mom was giving the Beatles a second chance and that was enough for me.

I have always felt that the relationship between fan and idol was more sacred than marriage. The kind of love a true-blooded fan feels for his idol whom he has not even seen or met in person is so pure and profound that no force of nature can break it. I have always felt that way about my idols. I know that, as a die-hard fan, I have a great responsibility to support everything my idols do.

One day when I came home from school, my mother handed me a plastic bag containing two long-playing albums by the Beatles. The first two long-playing albums that were going to be mine: "Revolver" and "Sgt. Pepper's..." The sheer delight that I felt was indescribable. I jumped for joy. I played the albums the whole week. My mother then bought the other Beatles' albums, including brand new copies of the old ones we owned, and every morning, I would look at the complete studio albums of the greatest band in the world, touch them, and feel in my hands the glossy texture of the special cardboard, the material used to make album jackets. It was my first collection. It was the beginning of an addiction. I felt happy and complete.

I tried fooling myself that collecting LPs was merely a hobby. My grandmother told me so, and I almost believed her. But it got worse through the years. When my family lost money, we had to cut back on our expenses. I had to transfer to a different school during my senior year in high school, because my mom could no longer afford to pay my tuition in an exclusive school for boys. But despite those setbacks, I managed to save some money from my allowance to buy records. The first album I bought with my allowance money was Sheena Easton's "Best Kept Secret," which was followed by the "Flashdance" and "Staying Alive" movie soundtracks, Abba's "Super Trouper" and "Greatest Hits Vol. 2," and Bonnie Tyler's "Faster Than the Speed of Night."

Before my mother passed away, a few weeks before my high school graduation, she and my dad were able to reconcile after being separated for fifteen years. Call it premonition. My mom called every relative she knew, in her efforts to track down my dad. My grandfather's brother, Lolo Terry, gave my mom my dad's contact details and told her that he was working at San Miguel Corporation as a beer salesman. To make a long story short, the two of them met, reconciled, and decided to give their marriage a second chance.

But none of that happened because my mom died on March 10, 1984, at the age of 33, due to blood poisoning caused by addiction to sleeping pills. But that's another story.

It was my dad who put me through college. My allowance at that time was 150 pesos a week. From my 25 peso-a-day allowance, I was able to save 5 pesos a day; the rest went to food and jeepney fare. My goal then was to buy at least one LP a month.

It was the 80s and I would listen to the weekly countdown show, American Top 40, hosted by Casey Kasem on the radio to know which songs and albums were doing well on the charts. The AT40 show became my ultimate guide in choosing which albums to buy. It was difficult because I could only buy one or two albums a month. From my allowance, I was able to accumulate more than a hundred albums. Others were given to me as birthday and Christmas presents since everyone knew that I collected LPs. I took care of my albums, wrapped them with new plastic covers, cleaned them regularly, and made sure that they didn't get scratches. I took care of them like a mother would take care of her newborn baby.

During this period that I fell in love with the music of new wave bands like Culture Club, Spandau Ballet, Thompson Twins, Duran Duran, The Cure, Depeche Mode, Pet Shop Boys, and Tears for Fears; the classic rock numbers of Prince, Van Halen, Bruce Springsteen, Bon Jovi, Bryan Adams, David Bowie, Roxy Music, Motley Crue, and Rick Springfield; the dance pop confections of Bananarama, Rick Astley, Jody Watley, Janet Jackson, and of course, my biggest idol, the one and only Queen of Pop, Madonna.

I was heartbroken when vinyl records were phased out in the late 80s and eventually replaced by compact discs. It was hard for me to accept the fact that vinyl records would just be part of the past, outdated and irrelevant. When I started working as a high school teacher, I began collecting cassette tapes, but they didn't have the same quality as vinyl records. (CDs were very expensive at PhP 450 apiece.) I was able to accumulate more than 500 cassette tapes which I bequeathed later to a student when I started collecting CDs in the year 2000.

When I was hired by UST in 1996 and my salary got higher, I bought myself a stereo component system and started collecting compact discs. The first two CDs I bought were Duncan Sheik's self-titled album and "Dig Your Own Hole" by Chemical Brothers. From 2000 to 2020, I have

accumulated a total of 2,771 CDs. I was heartbroken again when record bars shut down a few years ago due to the shift to the digital format and people were no longer buying physical copies of albums. But as an avid collector, I found online selling very rewarding. The excitement of finding CDs on the net just worsened my addiction.

My best friend and fellow-teacher, John Jack Wigley, was himself a collector of albums and we basically have the same CDs and practically the same taste in music. We would talk about music for hours. We even wrote to each other regularly, since he was based in Pampanga, and I was in San Juan, to update each other on the movies we had seen and the new albums we had bought. When he gave away his CDs a few years ago, I felt sad because, again; like my mother, he had moved on and totally embraced the craze that was Spotify, and I was left alone again refusing to embrace the new trend. I thought that we would be the last two men left standing, fighting for the cause of CD collectors, but I was wrong.

I do have a Spotify account, but honestly, I will never exchange the kind of high that I feel whenever I buy a new CD. I feel that the songs in Spotify belong to everyone and I don't like it. It does not signify any kind of ownership. It's the collector in me that refuses and resists this new technology. I don't blame people who prefer subscribing to Spotify to buying physical albums. I understand the convenience it provides, but when it comes to music, I don't care about convenience. I cherish the effort I put into searching for titles on the Internet, the joy of seeing them, and patiently waiting for the parcel to arrive on my doorstep. I have become more of a "completist" through the years. The urge to complete an artist's discography has become very intense.

When I was younger, people always told me that I would eventually outgrow my hobby. I never did. In fact, it has become worse. Listening to music is like a religion to me. I listen to every track on an album, never skipping a song. I give every song my full attention and concentration. I am not like casual listeners who treat music as something disposable and just a means to pass the time. I take music very, very seriously.

If I had to choose between happiness in romantic love or my CD collection, I know that there won't be any competition. I would definitely choose my collection over love without batting an eyelash. You might find that impractical or even strange. I don't. Don't I have enough with 2,771 CDs? The answer is no. I am actually just starting. Tomorrow is another day.