

# SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE

If you thought that the turntable was dead, think again. For 53-year old Mumbai resident Pilak Bhatt, the turntable is still spinning. Bhatt, one of the many avid LP record collectors in the country and around the world, has a passion for music and collecting LP records. Verus Ferreira explores this hobby and learns that despite the advancement in electronics with music available on your fingertips, there is nothing like the black vinyl LP spinning and producing music, which you can touch, feel and have full control over.

**P**ilak Bhatt began collecting records 40 years back, ever since he was a 14-year old. To date he has over one lakh LP records in his collection, stocked in his hall, bedroom, under the bed, in steel cupboards, behind cupboards, cabinets and in drawers. He has even intruded on his wife Ujawala's kitchen and made special drawers, racks, and cabinets that extend upto his house's ceiling to store his LPs.

Bhatt's devotion to his hobby has seen him quit his full time job and concentrate on pursuing his love for music. "At present I am devoting all my time arranging, organising and cataloguing my huge collection. I feel that unless you catalogue and arrange your records according to genre, artist or even alphabetically, it becomes extremely difficult to find records. So, music is my profession or rather vocation now," he says. Talk about living your dream!



## Building Up The Collection

Recalls Bhatt, "I grew up listening to The Beatles, Deep Purple, Santana, Pink Floyd, CCR and many more such artists. In those days, it was extremely difficult to get rock records like those of Black Sabbath, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, King Crimson, so I would request my family or friends who lived abroad to send LP records and spares like cartridges, stylus, record cleaners, and things I needed. There used to be an LP library called Stan's at Colaba and another one called Vibrations under the Kemp's Corner bridge that used to lend out LPs."

Bhatt has loads of rare LPs in his house. He says, "In 1877, Thomas Edison developed the phonograph and in 1880's Emile Berliner invented disc records. Up to 1950, Shellac records in 78RPM format were most common. I have very early and rare recordings of artists from the 1900s such as Gauhar Jaan. By the way, India's first disc had Gauhar Jaan, singing a khayal in Raag Jogiya, recorded on 2 November 1902, by Fred Gaisberg, an assistant to Emile Berliner, the father of gramophone records. She would round off her performances by announcing "My name is Gohar Jan". I also have Zohrabai's records, who was one of the most noted and influential singers of Hindustani classical music from the early 1900s. Along with Gauhar Jan, she marks the dying phase of the courtesan singing tradition in Indian classical music. In western classical, I have records of Enrico Caruso, an Italian tenor. Also, some records of early blues. Among the recent releases, I have limited edition triple album of 'Veer



Zaara' and a couple of reissues released by SAREGAMA." Bhatt owns five turntables, but prefers using his Audio Technica direct drive player, which is connected to his computer to listen to his favourite albums.

But why the passion of LP collecting, something that takes so much space, is mighty heavy to carry around and, lastly, needs a turntable that requires meticulous care? Bhatt has all the answers. "My LP collection is the result of my love and passion for music. And since I love all kinds of music the volume has increased tremendously. One can not set a target and say I want to have one lakh LPs, the numbers are not important—the journey is important and not the destination. Music transports you to a different level all together and the joy is undecipherable. Sometimes just a couple of notes shatter you. When you hear something so pure and beautiful you are overwhelmed and would like to cherish and preserve the recordings and share it with your friends and relatives and like minded music lovers."

### Music And Other Things

Another very important aspect that he shares in favour of record collecting is that the records have stood the test of time. Other formats like spools, cassettes, DATs, VCDs, DVDs have come and gone. "Their condition has deteriorated so much that even kabadiwalas refuse to take cassettes! Even CDs are on the verge of becoming extinct with cellphones and pen-drives taking over. But it's entirely different with records, you can still enjoy the natural fidelity of 100-year old records on an hand-wound gramophone player," smiles Bhatt.

When asked about the major things a budding record collector should look for apart from the quality of the recordings, he pointed out artwork as one thing of major importance. "Who can

forget the covers of Pink Floyd's 'Dark Side Of The Moon' done by Hipgnosis or Andy Warhol's artwork for Rolling Stone's 'Sticky Fingers', he asks. "Some of the western LPs sell at mind boggling prices on the internet because they have Andy Warhol artwork. LPs from the German label ECM also make great collector's items as they are visually very appealing," informs Bhatt, counting off names on the tips of his fingers. We have to agree that the joy of reading the album art cover, the detailed credits, the lyrics, the posters and all the other goodies that come with the LPs is invaluable. This physicality aspect is missing in other formats, feels Bhatt who was invited by Sahara TV for showcasing the LP records of the major music groups of the seventies.

So what are the problems faced by LP record lovers? "Turntables are expensive to import. A decent turntable can be bought for around for Rs 5,000-7,000 from the US, but the cost doubles when it lands in Mumbai. Also, the current price of Rs 800 upwards for an LP in India is beyond the reach of most music lovers. Friday markets like Waghari Bazaar and Chor Bazaar in Mumbai are drying up and one hardly finds decent lots surfacing at such places. Lastly, in a city like Mumbai where each square foot costs thousands, making space available for records becomes unviable," says the Gujarat-born collector who also has a small flat near his house in Kandivli that also houses a couple of thousand records.

### Priceless Collection

What price would his collection be worth, we ask him. But Bhatt does not want to put a price tag on the collection, which has been acquired with so much of devotion, dedication and passion. "They are priceless," he says, throwing up his hands. "I feel music should be preserved and passed on for posterity. It is our

culture, history and a reference point for any aspiring musician. Be it any upcoming guitarist to legends like Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, Santana, Stevie Ray Vaughan and many others. Similarly, one has to go deep and listen to Lataji, Ashaji, Rafisahab and in classical one could cue on Baba Allauddin, Ameer Khan, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan or Faiyaz Khan. They are the roots without which we would be like orphans. I have got so many records that are not available on any other formats like CDs and this needs to be properly researched, referenced, archived, catalogued and digitalised. I single-handedly cannot undertake this huge task and need assistance from institutions, NGOs, corporate bodies and government agencies."

Bhatt does have his most cherished LP records. He shows us the 78RPM records of The Beatles, which are very rare. Others that he pulls out include many rare records of top Bollywood music directors like RD Burman, Laxmikant Pyarelal, Shankar Jaikishan, etc. He also has several coloured discs in all three formats—78s, 45s and 33 1/3RPM. He proudly displays his rare records that contain speeches from Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Winston Churchill.

Though Pilak may have a who's who of music industry in his LP record collection, his meeting with his favourite Bollywood music director RD Burman is etched in his mind. Besides having a couple of autographed LPs of some artists including the great Noor Jehan, he yearns for the day he can have autographs of Lataji, Ashaji, Kishori Amonkar on his LPs. For the moment, Yash, Pilak's 12-year old son has already taken a liking to LP records. "Yes, he is going to get my collection after my demise," laughs Pilak.

### TIPS FOR TAKING CARE OF LP RECORDS

- Never touch the playing area, always hold the LP from the edge and the center hole.
- Always stack them vertically, never in a sleeping position.
- Never keep the tracking weight of the cartridge arm more than 0.003kgs, or else it will wear away the grooves on the record and it will deteriorate faster.
- Always keep your records in clean inner and outer sleeves.
- Always wash your records with a mild liquid soap before listening. Dirty records will not only give you scratchy sounds, but they will also harm your records and the turntable's stylus.
- Make sure to use anti-static solution from time to time. After spraying record cleaning solution on the records always wipe it in a circular motion clockwise with lint-free cloth or a velvet brush.

