

I have to admit at the outset that I can't recall the first record I bought. As a music fan, this ranks as the loss of one's musical virginity, and I'm embarrassed and a little disappointed that I can't now remember the moment. I don't think my mental blank comes down to a spot of retrospective shame about once loving some now ill thought of release; I'm still more than happy to admit an abiding enjoyment of quite a few of those. Take Lieutenant Pigeon's *Mouldy Old Dough*: my older sister must have bought the single several years before, but upon discovering it in a cupboard at the age of 6, I would entreat my family to play it over and over whilst I danced to its stomping beat in the front room...

Perhaps the problem was that, living as I did in a part of the world dubbed by the tourist board 'England's last wilderness', there simply weren't any decent record shops within easy traveling distance so I learnt to make do with what was already to be found at home. Hence, my earliest musical memories are of a motley collection of novelties and one-hit wonders including Napoleon XIV's *They're Coming To Take Me Away, Ha-Haa!* and Chris Montez's *Let's Dance*; a compilation of some sort about which I can recall little except that it had the glossiest red sleeve and contained Michael Jackson's cover of *Rockin' Robin*; a couple of Abba LP's and a large amount of country and western from the likes of Tammy Wynette, Waylon Jennings and Johnny Cash. *Jackson* was my favourite Cash track: I especially loved the line 'Hotter than a pepper sprout', which suggested something I couldn't picture with any certainty, but which always sounded exciting!

As I grew older and finally encountered John Peel's show across poor stereo reception that ebbed and hissed throughout the evening, I wanted so much to get hold of the records he played and to hear them without interference. But this was long before the internet made everything available, however remote one's address, and I was mystified as to where on earth such releases were to be found. They certainly weren't in the nearest Woolworths, a modest store stocking a few chart hits, so for years my only route to having on demand the music I loved was to resort to home-taping from the radio; even now, when I hear certain tracks on an actual album, I still expect them to segue into whatever would have followed on the tapes I so carefully assembled (hiss and all.)

When I eventually made it beyond the cultural wilderness to discover independent record shops, it was overwhelming: I would spend as long as I was able just handling the merchandise, reading the sleeve-notes and reveling in the reality that this stuff really existed. I didn't have much to spend excepting a little birthday or Christmas money and the meagre wages from my Saturday job in a village shop, so purchases had to be carefully made. Once the precious records were back home in my bedroom, I would scrutinize them still closer, examining their run out grooves for curious inscriptions and pondering arcane lyrics. I had so few records in my collection that they would be played over and over; every nuance was noted, each crackle and imperfection learnt and anticipated. These days, living in a town with many record shops (quite surprising in this digital era), and with access to a world of online retailers, it's no wonder that the intensity of a purchase is somewhat diminished. But each time I take something from the shelf or select a track for my ipod, there's a memory of those early days troubling my contemporary complacency: the times of musical famine created a hunger that will never be satisfied.