

When Val Shively says, "I don't fit into this world," he makes an inarguable claim.

In a two-hour phone call that ends just before midnight, Val, 74, has walked me through a timeline of record collecting so detailed that I consider the possibility of savantism at work. The precision of Val's recall is beyond the scope of fanaticism. The only detail that causes him hesitation is the list of musicians or celebrities who have visited his shop. "You really put me on the spot with this one," he says before a long pause. "Radiohead. Have you heard of them?"

Val's shop, R&B Records, opened in November of 1972 and sits just beyond the border of West Philadelphia in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania. R&B boasts a staggering four million records, mostly 45s by '50s and early '60s doo-wop artists. It's a trove that's garnered the distinction of "Oldies Capitol of the World." Though this alone constitutes an epic contribution to his home town of Philadelphia, Val's impact is not limited to the landmark he's created. The history of Val's record collecting reveals that his influence dates back to his earliest days of buying records, when he brought obscure Black R&B to Philadelphia, and that his level of obsessiveness has set the bar for anyone who claims he's into music. My father is in fact one of Val's disciples, working at R&B Records in junior high before starting a mail order catalogue (Bebop Records) at 16 and later opening a record store in Old City (AKA Music).

A sign outside R&B Records reads "DO NOT ENTER" in giant letters and "unless you know what you want" in ant writing. Throughout our conversation, Val skewers fellow collectors, customers, and former employers using, among other expletives, the distinctly Philadelphian parlance "friggin'." (Fittingly, George Carlin was a customer.) But for all of Val's bluntness he's both self-deprecating and totally devoid of ego. At one point during our conversation Val refers to his obsession with collecting records as a "sickness." And since the beginning, he's had zero interest in status, out-collecting anyone, or amassing money. "I never looked at record collecting as an investment. I bought records because I loved them." Even the narrowness of Val's taste in music exists without snobbishness. Though when he says, "I was never into that shit," referring to the Stones and the Beatles (and likely the McCoys record my father bought on his first day in business), there's no condemnation in his voice. Val simply "never cared about rock music." (It's worth admitting that music from the '80s onwards gets far less leniency).

It is in fact Val's confessed narrowness of taste that shaped his record collecting so it was of maximum influence on Philadelphia and beyond. Val's preferred genre is commonly referred to as doo-wop, though this is not exact enough for him. The 18-page history "R&B Records and Me" on Val's website clarifies that his preoccupation is with "group records," which is to say 45s that feature "vocal group harmonies." An excerpt reads: "I only collect 45s (no 78s or LPs) by male groups or female lead with male group backing. I also collect gospel groups...which got my attention around 1970...when I heard the Harmonizing Four on VeeJay and Sam Cooke/Soul Stirrers on

Specialty. I go from the early '50s to the early-to-mid '60s—stopping when soul starts.”

The first pop record Val ever purchased was Elvis' "Don't Be Cruel." "Elvis turned my world upside down. I listened to that record over and over and over again. I would crawl into the speaker and listen to it." The only presents Val wanted for Christmas that year (1956) were records. By the time he was 15 three years later, Val had over a thousand, and he and a friend from high school were cutting class and making the rounds at every record store in the phone book: Ham-mil Trading on Broad and Girard (a warehouse filled with radio station library dumps), Majestic Records in Clifton Heights, Gold Records on 60th Street, Paramount Records on South Street, the Record Museum on 10th and Chestnut, and even furniture stores in West Philadelphia that had record bins.

A seismic shift took place in 1960 when Val found R&B radio stations that played black artists who didn't make it onto pop stations. Jerry Blavat's radio show on WCAM in Camden, New Jersey, provided a significant introduction. This prompted Val to frequent record shops in predominately black neighborhoods that were not regularly patronized by skinny white teenagers. Val knew that most of Blavat's records came from New York, so when an employee at the Record Museum gave him a list of shops up there, he was off. "When I got to Times Square Records and I heard the groups they had I sold my whole collection for records by black doo-wop groups no one had ever heard of."

Thus began Val's effect on the local population: bringing unknown black artists to Philadelphia. Val already had a reputation in the city's record shops as a pushy, precocious teenager whose business acumen was somewhat mystifying. He had an innate sense of what records to buy, trade, and how to price them. But as he found his niche collecting music that was not terribly popular amidst the British Invasion and the advent of Motown, Val quickly became an authority. Within a few years he had reversed the flow and had collectors coming to him from New York. After circulating lists for several years, Val enlarged his presence with a mail order catalogue operated out of the back room at One Stop Records. (It sold 100,000 copies at \$3 apiece in its existence.) Val was known for bringing records to student-owned co-ops at local colleges and universities. And once he opened R&B, Val traded records for plugs with local radio DJs—to name just some of ways those records no one had ever heard of got out. "It was never about finding the hits for me. I always said, it's not the hits, it's the shits I want. That's the exciting thing." When an interest in doo-wop emerged in the '70s, Val was at the ready. He had ads in magazines running features on old groups.

In talking to Val, it's clear that his love of singers' voices on group records would not have led him to the place he's made for himself without the mania with which it's accompanied.

The night I interviewed Val, I sent my father a text message that read, "Forty minutes into our call, still in 1961. This is amazing." Val remembers exactly when and where

he purchased records 50 years ago. As he slowly worked his way from 1956 to the present, Val described the labor required at a time when record collecting was primitive by today's standards. "There were no books on what I was doing. It was all trial and error. In the beginning it was just go into stores and look through the racks. And then in time I knew what was good. I had good taste and people went along with it."

It was always in Val's nature to collect items he thought were interesting. His father had a stamp collection that Val took to, and as a paperboy he wouldn't give customers their change until he sifted through it, looking for rare coins. "With records, it's different. They're works of art. Even the stuff I don't like, someone made that, someone spent time writing the song and playing the melody. Since the beginning, I always loved records. They were hypnotizing. I remember watching the label going around in a circle and that was it."

When Val opened R&B Records he planned on only selling original R&B groups. It didn't take long for him to realize he would have

to sell the hits if he wanted to pay the rent. "Back then trading records could be almost like a drug deal. I remember driving out to Long Island in the middle of the night to meet some guy with Herman's Hermits records in a parking lot." Such undertakings are no longer necessary, though Val operates his store with the same fervor. His motivation has been uncomplicated since its inception. "I wanted to have the best collection in the world." Said by someone else, this could mean something quite different than it does coming from Val. The best collection in the world is the one that brings Val the greatest pleasure. Though it may indeed have the flash that's inherent in any variety of rare goods, I'm convinced that Val wants those records because of the way the music affects him. For all his treasures that have a five-figure price tag (the ones that are not up for sale, that is), Val maintains a peculiar amount of humility. "People tell me to get rid of some of this shit. That when I die, [my wife] Patty isn't going to get anything for my records. My best clients are dead or on life support. But I don't care. I'm not in this for the big bucks. This doesn't stop until I stop." 🎸

## Strummer Hoffston

Strummer Hoffston was born in Philadelphia in 1983. Soon after her birth, Joe Strummer gave an interview at a radio station off Rittenhouse Square. Her parents waited outside the station and when they introduced themselves to Joe they told him, "We named our kid after you." Joe Strummer rubbed her head and said, "Awww. Little Joe." "No," said her father, "it's a girl, Strummer." Strummer told this story to Joe in 2002 when the The Mescaleros played in Brooklyn. She gave him her drivers license to prove she was named after him and he died with it in his wallet. Strummer received a B.A. from New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. She is the recipient of fellowships from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she received an M.F.A. in Poetry. She taught Poetry Writing and Creative Writing and Pop Culture at the University of Iowa before returning to her longtime home, New York City.

## Tom Moon

Tom Moon contributes music reviews to NPR's "All Things Considered." He is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *1000 Recordings To Hear Before You Die*.

## John Szwed

John Szwed is an anthropologist, musician, and writer who has taught African American studies, film studies, music, anthropology, and performance studies at New York University, the University of Pennsylvania, Yale University, and Columbia University, where he was director of the Center for Jazz Studies from 2009 to 2014. His books include *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*; *So What: The Life of Miles Davis*; *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded*

*the World*; and *Billie Holiday: The Musician and the Myth*. Szwed is an adjunct senior research scholar at Columbia University.

## Diane Turner

Dr. Diane D. Turner is Curator of the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University Libraries. Dr. Turner holds three Temple University degrees. Her areas of specialization and research include Pennsylvania and Philadelphia history, African American labor, cultural and social history, Black music, jazz history in Philadelphia, images of Blacks in film (Independent Black Filmmakers and Africana Cinema), oral history and public history. She has taught African-American history at Northeastern University, Brown University, the University of South Florida, Rowan University, Camden County College and other institutions of higher education. She is the author of *My Name is Oney Judge* (2010), her first children's book, and *Feeding the Soul: Black Music, Black Thought* (2011). She has published articles in scholarly journals and essays in anthologies. Her forthcoming is *Our Grand Pop is a Montford Point Marine*, co-authored with Corporal Thomas S. Turner Sr. (Third World Press). She is president of the Montford Point Marines Association, Philadelphia Chapter, Ladies Auxiliary. Turner is currently working on a history of jazz in Philadelphia, entitled *Been Here All Along: Jazz in Philadelphia, PA*.