

# RC investigates

This month: Utrecht Record Fair

Most collectors have been to record fairs, but the world's biggest is another ballgame. Paul Bowler pitched up and went Dutch

By any stretch of the imagination, the Utrecht Jaarbeurs Mega Record & CD Fair is a massive, jaw-dropping enterprise, and an eye- and ear-opening experience. The world's biggest – and, by all accounts, best – record collectors' fair is held twice a year in a vast 12,500 sq ft hangar the size of two-and-a-half football pitches. A cursory walk along the seemingly endless rows of record stalls reveals dealers selling everything from Danish pop to krautrock, free jazz, speed-metal, prog-rock, bossa nova, Turkish funk, Korean psych, and many, many more. Visiting the fair is an electrifying experience for the first-timer like me; every record that you ever wanted is likely to be somewhere among the millions of discs on offer, and probably an awful lot that you never knew that you desired.

Founded in 1993, the Mega Record & CD Fair takes place each spring and autumn in the small, quaint Dutch university city of Utrecht, at the gargantuan Jaarbeurs exhibition centre, a short, half-hour hop on the train from Amsterdam's Schiphol airport and the city's main rail terminus. The event continues to increase in size every year, the statistics associated with it illuminating the immense scale of the operation. November 2018's incarnation (the 50th such event) saw some 400 dealers from 55-plus countries (South Korea, Turkey, Uruguay and El Salvador were four of the more recent additions to the roster) selling to 31,000-plus paying visitors.

Organiser Cas Bosland sees the fair's success as a reflection of the current healthy state of the vinyl market: "The demand for physical product has been growing for the last 10 years, ever since the economic banking crisis," he says. "Recently, we've had fewer and fewer CDs, and more and more vinyl. Young people are buying vinyl again – many of them don't even know what a CD is anymore."

There has been an increased diversity of attendees, too, with more nationalities joining the throng homing in on the Dutch city from across Europe, North America and Japan. According to Bosland: "This year we had groups of crate-diggers coming over from Mexico, Bolivia, Chile, United Arab Emirates and Russia." Many, he feels, are attracted by the sense of inclusivity and the lack of snobbery around the event, especially compared to some of the fairs in the UK and US. He sees Jaarbeurs' success as having as much to do with the fair's sociable atmosphere as the ticking-off of wants lists: "People come here to socialise," he posits. "Everybody knows different things and they swap expertise at the bar. You can have a Madonna fan standing next to a hip-hop fan and there's still an exchange of views about music. They'll help each other track things down, too. The Madonna fan will say, 'I saw some hip-hop over there.' Everybody is interested in physical product – that's the common ground."

The event runs over a weekend each April and November and, though it's only open to members of the public on the Saturday and Sunday of the fair weekend, you can pay extra for an early-bird ticket for entry to the 'Dealer's Day' on Friday. A lower level of footfall makes the Friday a less-harried browsing experience.

Additionally, various sideshows round the fair out, and 2018 saw a talk by the spiky but



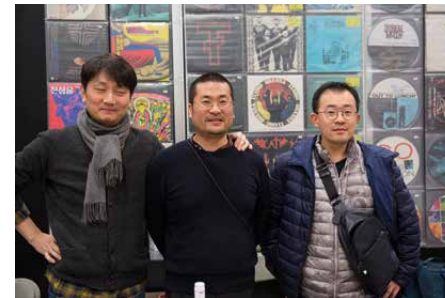
Crate-digging and a bit of haggling, and just part of the giant Jaarbeurs Hall record fair



engaging Joy Division bassist, Peter Hook (who regaled the audience with tales of being beaten up at a gig in Rotterdam); a collection of *Amazing Album Art* curated by American pop culture expert, Johan Kugelberg; a selection of rare 60s London UFO Club psychedelic posters by designer Nigel Waymouth; and assorted live performances, book launches and DJ sets. There's food and drink as well, of course, albeit of variable standard – think copious amounts of sugary waffles, alongside the infamous *kroketten*, and a bizarre Findus crispy pancake-like concoction containing mushrooms, which is the most popular option, alongside stalls selling Dutch and Belgian beers, and coffee.

For those wishing to try their luck at one of the auctions held during the event, specialist vinyl and music memorabilia auctioneers, Omega, of Newton-

le-Willows, UK, have a room on one side of the hall. Their auction of vinyl rarities takes place on the Saturday and, according to Omega's founding director, Paul Fairweather, "November's sale featured around 100 lots of rare records, including punk/post-punk, prog, psych, classic rock, and several Manchester-related rarities from the likes of The Smiths and Joy Division." Their offices also housed an exhibition of Joy Division-related memorabilia from Hook's private collection. As Fairweather notes, "The bassist popped by to meet fans and discuss the items from his collection that included his first guitars, rare gig posters, studio tape-recordings and rare records including a fully signed *Ideal For Living* EP that will be up for auction on 2 March 2019 at our premises in Newton-Le-Willows."



The Mega Record & CD Fair is combined on-site with a similarly huge and interesting antiques fair, which runs through the weekend simultaneously. Punters who enter the complex's hallowed gates first have to negotiate their way through a number of similarly-sized, vast hangars containing row upon row of Dutch bric-a-brac, before entering the area where the record fair is housed. Once the record fair vista opens up, the effect can be bewildering.

With some 550-plus stalls to get through, weaving your way among the throngs of wheelie-bag equipped punters in search of that rare Japanese pressing of Gong's *Magick Brother* can feel like looking for a needle in several haystacks. Furthermore, many asking prices can seem exorbitantly high at first glance; that UK Vertigo first pressing of Black Sabbath's debut will be at least 100 euros more than you know/hope that it should be. However, stick to some guidelines, and you should leave the fair wiser, and with a tidy stack of wax (and/or CDs, of which the fair still has a very sizable selection), along with plenty of memorable personal encounters.

While many dealers proffer eye-wateringly high prices (particularly for 'trophy items' displayed on their stall's backwall), there are always bargains to be had, with a few stalls featuring one-euro bargain bins and plenty advertising albums priced at 10 euros each or three for 25 euros. Don't forget, too, that those backwall-displayed rarities are often priced for a good haggle. And it's on the



More scenes from the fair, including try-before-you-buy (below-left) and Peter Hook and his gear (below-right)



Sunday that you're most likely to find the best bargains, particularly during the last few hours of the fair, when dealers are often prepared to cut their prices significantly before packing up their unsold wares and heading home.

A bit of pre-fair prep helps as well, not least in working out which stalls are likely to sell what you're after, which can save you a lot of time and aimless meandering. With genres clustered together, a bit of circling with a pen on the fair's illustrated map will soon pinpoint the areas of the hall most likely to stock items on your wants list. As Cas Bosland advises: "It's worth checking out the dealers' list on our website beforehand. That will tell you where everybody is in the hall, where they are from, and what they're selling – you can then point them out on the plan of the fair. We have three sections. One is for black music: hip-hop, house, soul, jazz and blues. The section in the middle used to be for 50s music, but now it's getting to be more and more 60s and 70s. On the other side you'll find punk, heavy metal and hardcore." He gives some sage advice on budgets, too: "Bring cash, but just a certain amount. Otherwise you might spend too much."

I enlisted UK label Finders Keepers' Doug Shipton, a seasoned fair veteran who combines running his imprint's stall with bouts of crate-digging, to show me the ropes. After explaining that I was looking for jazz sides, I was swiftly whisked across the hall and shown the best spots to dig in. I was introduced to a French dealer, who offered a wealth of recommendations for me to listen to. This perfectly captures what makes the fair such a great experience, as the label boss affirms: "There's so much knowledge present here. Talking to the stallholders and other fair-goers will lead you to so much new music. It's a community, at the end of the day. I've learned an incredible amount over the years that I've been coming here. That's worth more than any discount on that big want – though that's nice, too!"

Over the years, Shipton has developed a system for getting the most out of the fair: "It's not the game of cat-and-mouse that most people think it

has to be. Have a chat, and get involved. I don't understand the concept of stoney-faced back-and-forths between punters and sellers. Keep going back to stalls over the course of the fair and, on the last few hours of the Sunday, that 200-euro record could well go down to 100; that 150-euro record to 50."

Indeed, on the final day of the fair, the Sunday, I received a text from a Belgian friend who'd found a stall with a whole host of Japanese rarities that I've been after for years. I shuffled over to it, stocked away to the dealer and, before long, I'd walked off with yet more musical tips and several long-sought records under my arm, acquired at a knock-down price. I left the fair tired, footsore and exultant.

See you again in April, Utrecht!

For more on upcoming fairs at Utrecht, see [www.recordplanet.nl](http://www.recordplanet.nl).

## OMEGA AUCTIONS' TOP 5 REALISED PRICES

**Queen** *Bohemian Rhapsody* (7"), blue vinyl promo, EMI 2375, 1978, Ex+/Ex) **£3,500**

**Led Zeppelin** *Led Zeppelin* (LP, turquoise lettering sleeve/press pack, Atlantic 588171, 1968, Ex+/Ex+) **£3,000**

**Sex Pistols** *Never Mind The Bollocks* (UK Virgin SPOTS 001, 1977, sealed, Ex+) **£1,850**

**Joy Division** *Ideal For Living* EP (Enigma PSS 139, 1979, Ex+/Ex+) **£1,800**

**The Who** *Life House* (2LP acetate, unissued, 1970, no cat no, Ex) **£2,700**

