

ASA Member Collects, Appraises Rare Records and Music Memorabilia

Collecting the artifacts of recorded sound—78s, LPs, 45s, CDs and the like—has historically been regarded as a hobby by professional dealers and industry associations involved with property such as coins, stamps, jewelry and art. But that view is rapidly changing.



Braitman often trolls through the used record racks of local record stores not only to learn about the current state of the market, but also in hopes of finding a prize for his own collection.

With rare first-edition records now going for \$20,000, \$30,000 and more, a rush is on to professionalize this “hobby” into one with stricter grading condition, first pressing edition, historical provenance, cultural significance and other considerations.

Leading that rush is Stephen M.H. Braitman, a Candidate member of ASA.

Braitman fell in love with music as a kid, and he began to collect all kinds of music paraphernalia—records, CDs and cassettes; covers, jackets and sleeves; posters, flyers, hand bills and tickets; and programs, brochures, newspaper articles and other printed media. He started writing about music as a teenager in Los Angeles. Since then, he has reviewed and interviewed recording artists such as Joni Mitchell, Neil Young with Crazy Horse, Richard Pryor, The Who, The Band, B.B. King and Ritchie Havens.

Today, Braitman is a writer who has contributed on a freelance basis to publications such as the *San Francisco Focus*, *Antique Trader*, *The New York Times*, and *Goldmine* magazine. He is a major collector of records and music paraphernalia, owning tens of thousands of LPs, CDs, 45s, photographs, magazines and other memorabilia; and a music analyst for the digital music company Gracenote.



Although this Vee-Jay Beatles album from 1964 is a very common record, it is also widely counterfeited. What is not common is an authentic original first stereo pressing with the “ad back” (back cover is all advertisements for other

albums on Vee-Jay). Superb condition copies of this version have sold for \$15,000 and more.

And, Braitman is a music appraiser. Over the last four years, he has completed the POV and other courses to obtain Candidate Member status with the American Society of Appraisers.

What led to his interest in appraising? “It all started about four years ago when my wife, studying to be a real estate appraiser, told me I should have my music collection appraised for insurance purposes,” explains Braitman. “I started looking around for a music appraiser, but had no success. There were lots of knowledgeable dealers, but no one qualified to do a formal, legal, certified appraisal.”

That’s when Braitman discovered ASA. He joined the San Francisco Chapter, attended meetings and started taking ASA courses.

Now Braitman spends about 25 percent of his time providing two levels of review to clients: (1) an evaluation, which provides an informal view of whether or not the items have any real value; and (2) an appraisal, for those items that have been determined to have value and require documentation for insurance, family disbursement, estate planning, tax or other purposes.

At this point, the overwhelming majority of Braitman’s clients are individuals who have inherited a parent’s record collection and have no idea whether it’s worth \$5 or \$5 million. Two of his more memorable appraisals have been conducted in Texas and Canada. In the first case, he appraised a private record collection worth \$500,000, including a 1937 78 record by



label, about two-thirds of the way from the center hole.

Jazz albums from the 1950s and early 1960s can be very expensive in today’s white-hot collector market. Of particular interest are original “deep groove” Blue Note albums. These are first-pressing records in which there is a concentric groove in the



Music posters have increased in value exponentially over the past 10 years, as collectors have realized just how rare they are, unlike more durable and plentiful records and CDs.

legendary blues singer and song writer Robert Johnson. In the second case, he appraised a vast George Gershwin record and memorabilia collection that was included in the estate of a Canadian corporation owner.

Has the ASA affiliation been helpful to his business? “Very, very much,” responds Braitman. He says the training and education programs have helped him standardize his processes and methodology. And the contact with other ASA members has been great. He has also received a number of referrals from ASA members and has referred business to them. For instance, in a case where he was asked to appraise a collection of sheet music, the owner also had an old violin that he wanted appraised.

Braitman’s plans for 2008 include working to expand his business by reaching out to the corporate, insurance and legal communities to educate them on the value and availability of music appraisals.

In the HBO hit show “The Sopranos,” Tony Soprano’s sister Janice makes the case that she should be the one to inherit their mother’s extensive—and, she is sure, quite valuable—record collection. Music collecting certainly is no longer a hobby. It is a field fraught with appraisal needs and opportunities ... if not hit men. ▲

by Sally Mallison



Pictured is a very rare and expensive Robert Johnson 78 from 1936. Robert Johnson records remain the gold standard of country blues recordings.