

Tales from an Indiscriminate Record Collection

by Cynthia Hawkins

45s I've kept wrapped in newspaper in the attic. These are all mine. Some doubling up in sleeves. Some pushing tears in the seams. Unwrapped, they slide against each other in my hands, collectively bigger than my grip.

Here is the evidence, my small thumbprints still sitting ghostly across the grooves, of the films a young me had tried to re-imagine as I went to sleep and the needle came to a stop with a click.

Here is the evidence of being a generation or two behind, of fitting in, of deep contradiction.

The sticker on the back, stamped with a date, reveals that this record had been checked out of the church school library of my youth one time before I stole it. *The Imperials Greatest Hits*. Then the row where the dates should go is blank the rest of the way down.

Like a long, angry sigh.

Oh, the oxidized pages and pencil erasers and the sizzling filaments of a blinking bulb over the devotional aisle whispering *take it, take it*.

This isn't a matter of wrong or right. This is a matter of saxophones and man-chains.

We sat on folded legs on linoleum and rummaged through the milk crates shoved under a table strewn with second-hand pie plates and postcards and a macramé owl.

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"Which one do you like?" I asked her, my grandmother, somewhat slumping in a pink plaid shirt she'd sewn herself.

"Well," she began with a warm crackle of her voice as her fingers crawled to flip the albums in the crate one by one, "this one's a good one."

She handed me the soundtrack to *South Pacific*, a two-dollar sticker affixed to the corner.

My grandfather served in the Navy during WW II, stationed in the version of the Pacific without Mitzi Gainer. There was, however, a photograph of my grandmother taped on the inside cover of his pocket-sized Bible.

"You don't want to listen to this one," my then brother-in-law, a youth minister, said with a glass of Pepsi in one hand and a knob-jointed finger of the other trembling over the album cover of The Eagles' *Hotel California*. "See? Those are actual dead people sitting there. Victims of demonic ritual. It's all in the song."

I squinted at the placid, red-tinged faces near the back, arrayed like bloody fingerprints.

Ice clacked inside his glass as he turned away, whispering, "Every time you listen you let the devil in."

When my grandfather opened the closet door in the back room that housed his organ (the musical sort, of course, with its double row of keyboards and an inviting assortment of switches and pedals and pipes), he shook something loose and then caught only one of five sleeveless 78 records slipping free to wobble on the wooden floor. He looked down at his feet.

"I don't know why you'd want these," he said, turning the one in his hands. "They're in bad shape."

The Bay Rum Boys. Ben Light. Jan August.

When I play them now, the needle scabbling over the scratches, I can see my grandfather's own shoulder blades shrugging with the

beat as his sprawled fingers hold the organ's quivering notes in place like a shaman pinning a snake.

