



## Research > MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH...

*Memorabilia. Collecting Sounds with...* is a podcast series that seeks to break through to unearth and reveal private collections of music and sound *memorabilia*. It is a historiography of sound collecting that reveals the unseen and passionate work of the amateur collector while reconstructing multiple parallel histories such as the evolution of recording formats, archival issues, the sound collecting market and the evolution of musical styles beyond the marketplace.

As a part of our research process, here we reproduce an email conversation with Douglas McGowan, which took place in Winter 2012.

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Douglas McGowan is the proprietor of Yoga Records, specializing in vinyl reissues of twentieth century private press, and the author of *Nature of the Beast: A Graphic Novel*. He is also an avid collector of new age and folk music records and tapes. [yogarecords.com](http://yogarecords.com)

# MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH...

## Douglas McGowan

### 01. Conversation with Douglas McGowan on his record collection

#### When and why did you start collecting sound and music?

I was an MTV kid and I used to record *American Top 40* with Casey Kasem off the radio when I was like six or seven. I was a Columbia Music House member several times. My first record was Eurythmics' *Sweet Dreams* and my first concert was Duran Duran.

#### What led you to become a record/music collector and to what extent is your collection defined or limited to a particular area of exploration?

I destroyed a couple record needles early on by trying to scratch, which was sort of traumatic and kept me away from records for longer than I might have otherwise.

During my last year of high school, my friend Eugene Cho, who now leads the disco group Escort, made me a tape mix of Command Records / Stereo Action Series / lounge music type stuff. I noticed that my favorite band at the time, Stereolab, lifted the layout for their *Transient Random Noise Bursts with Announcements* back cover from Command, and the rest is history.

There's never been any limit to what I listen to and collect, other than the financial. The allegory of the bulls from the movie *Colors* basically sums up my philosophy of buying records.

#### I don't think I've seen the movie and now I'm curious: What's the allegory?

It's a story involving two bulls looking down from a hillside at a bunch of cows. The young bull wants to run down and have relations with one of the cows. The older bull says, no, let's walk down and have relations with all of them.

#### Interesting... I guess then that your collection covers all kinds of areas of interest.

I guess the most defined, both in terms of the collection and my personal understanding of it, would be new age and folk. Or you could say my real interest is in private press.

#### What would be your definition of new age and what drew your attention to that particular field?

You know it when you hear it. I think it all boils down to intention on the part of the artist. There's also examples of unintentional new age; I have an early sixties guided meditation record to help improve your bowling technique.

#### Can you share some other examples?

Environmental sound recordings, whale songs, yoga instructional records, classical piano music for children...

#### I'm also intrigued by the unintentional new age...

It speaks to the need to contain and classify that we're having this discussion, but yeah, I'd call it that because a whale song record serves much the same purpose as a Paul Horn flute record, which is great because there's actually a record of Paul Horn playing with a whale.



[Jordan de la Sierra *Gymnosphere: Song of the Rose*, 1977]

**An interesting aspect of new age music is that it has a particular function and aesthetic. What are your thoughts on this?**

It's very true that one of the things that defines new age is that it has some sort of utility – to help you relax, meditate, sleep, or to help you concentrate or learn something. And the artwork of new age records is undeniably more interesting than just about any other genre, with the possible exception of heavy metal.

**New age has had quite a bad press and has been quite often undervalued and misunderstood, as probably also happened with library music.**

It's a genre of largely self-published music with often self-taught musician-entrepreneurs pursuing a certain *goal*, of peace, of serenity, via music. There are lots of contradictions, there's a lot of schlock that can be very funny, and there is a small amount of it that is genuinely sublime. I consider that interesting, musically, visually, sociologically, philosophically...

**Do you know when the term was first used?**

According to Wikipedia, the first known instance of the term new age came from William Blake in 1809. If you mean when the term for music was settled on, that's harder to say, but I think it became somewhat official in 1975.

**Who was the target audience for the genre?**

White people with issues.

**It's quite interesting how the music borrowed ideas and concepts from eastern philosophy and spirituality, and yet it was consumed by and marketed for 'white people with issues.'**

I don't know how to tell you this, but white people have a history of co-opting things.

**This reminds me of the exploitation of World Music, International and similar labels, which we discussed some time ago with Mark Gergis. Mark found them quite problematic and argued that these labels were only used to market this material in the West. How does that apply to new age?**

The fact is that if you want to market something to a broad audience, you need a broad term. All these labels and groupings are useful, but obviously problematic as well. At least new age isn't offensive the way World Music sort of is.

**Can you explain how this music is normally distributed and where it can be found?**

When things were picking up in the mid seventies, new age bookstores and mail order via classifieds in magazines like *Yoga Journal* and *East West Journal* were the backbone of new age distribution. The earliest guide to the genre I know about is found in a cool directory called *Books for Inner Development: the Yes Guide* put out by the Yes! Bookshop in Washington DC. By the mid eighties there were probably a dozen distributors specializing in the genre. There was even a store in Los Angeles called Only New Age Music.

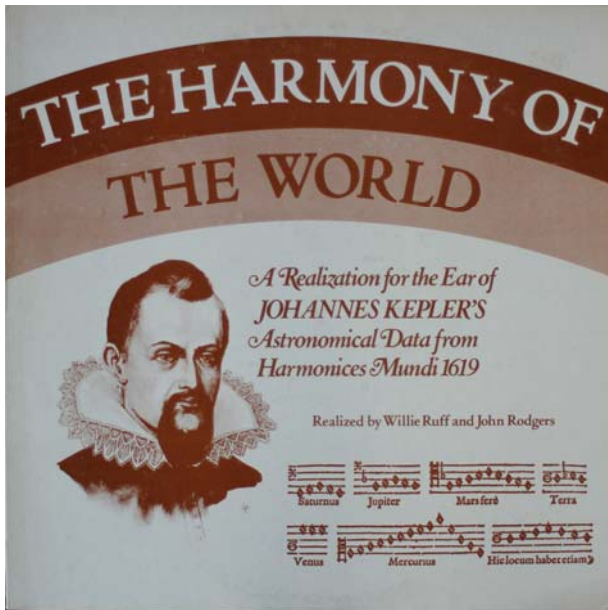
**And where do you buy your records?**

I got my best new age stuff from the distributors who closed in the nineties. I get records from thrift shops, record stores, eBay, discogs, trades with friends. Having a label means a certain amount of stuff finds its way to you.

**Do you have a wantlist? What's on it?**

One day I wrote up a small wantlist of maybe twenty titles, but I don't ever refer to it.

**What are your thoughts on the fact that you're collecting something that was probably conceived as a useful resource rather than an art form?**



[Willie Ruff / John Rodgers *The Harmony of the World*, 1979]

The early new age artists were pioneers and they were hustling. No one creating something truly new ever sits there and says to themselves, 'this is art.' Once a template forms, and people start thinking about it as art, a lot of the energy goes elsewhere. Nothing new about that.

**Did composers recognize a space for creativity and innovation? Where and how did this happen?**

When you talk to just about any musician working during the golden era from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties, Steven Halpern and lasos are the two names that keep coming up as influences and inspirations. Those are the guys who basically showed how big this could be, as music and as a line of work.

The elephant in the room in all of this is Brian Eno, whose records with Robert Fripp, particularly *Evening Star*, are one of the cornerstones of the whole thing. *Christening for Listening*, *Inter-Dimensional Music*, the first Windham Hill record, and *Evening Star* all happened in 1975. I'm actually surprised more people don't try to credit Eno with inventing the genre, but it would be completely misleading to claim that. In addition to being pioneering musicians, what these guys all have in common is that they were all savvy marketers.

**The genre name locked into place around the mid-seventies, but the precedents came from a number of directions. European electronic space music by Vangelis and Klaus Schulze would often show up in the bins as often as Paul Horn's *Inside the Taj Mahal* or the decidedly secular approach of Syntonic Research's *Environments* series of completely artificial field recordings. Even after the new age tag showed up, there was quite a bit of confusion as to what qualified; there's still a wide distance between R. Carlos Nakai records of Native American flute playing, and the artists that Stephen Hill would feature on his *Music from the Hearts of Space* program, which would situate those same flute sounds in a more synthetic context. Now that you've talked about what brought these artists together under the new age banner, can you share your thoughts on the variety and the differences that existed in the music that was grouped together in this way during the eighties?**

Well first of all, the *Environments* series are actual field recordings; what's bogus about them are the scientific claims that they're something more than that. You've got to love a title like *Psychologically Ultimate Seashore*, but waves are waves.

Anyway, you could say that the seventies represented a number of streams coming together from all around the world, from so many different places, and the eighties represented the time where a sort of world community had now formed under this banner, and most new members could be characterized by the way they attempted to fit in and make new age music. So now all of a sudden there were these templates.

**Why do you think the eighties and the nineties were new age, and what has changed since then?**

Windham Hill and Narada cornered the market and set the template for the dull elevator music most people know as new age today. Synths and recording went digital, and a bunch of wack imitators flooded the medium. Money and a lack of imagination corrupted the genre. The eighties were a terrible stain on human history and the music reflects this.

**Well, synths in the eighties also gave us a few very interesting moments, didn't they? At least in other fields such as dance music (disco, acid house, etc). I wonder if this change of direction could be related to the advent of CDs on the market and the need to release more titles to satisfy a wider audience. Probably the professionalization of the genre.**

I have nothing against the good eighties music, or synths. But rarely is the distinction between the smooth wave of an analog synth and the blocky nature of early digital more obvious than with new age.



[The Nothing Record]

One thing worth noting about CDs is that there aren't a lot of small press CDs from the eighties. Manufacturing prices didn't really come down, and the medium for private press didn't shift from tape to CD, until about the mid-nineties. This means that basically all the new age on CD in the eighties was from the major labels and a few indie artists with established fanbases, and that's it.

**Apparently, private press was, at least in the very beginning, one of the best ways to get things out there for new age artists. Where did their DIY approach to publishing come from?**

I could be totally wrong about this, but I think the basis of the early private press business as we know it today was recordings of high school orchestras and marching bands in the early sixties. As the social climate quickly changed and music suddenly became so much more interesting, individuals and garage bands started hiring the same services to manufacture their records. I don't get much sense that many artists turned to private pressing as anything other than their only choice for making their music available. The whole DIY thing would come much later, when the punks made it a badge of honor that largely continues to this day.

**What are your favorite new age composers/performers? What makes their approach and music so precious to you?**

It's tough, but if I had to name just a few I'd say Peter Davison, Swami Kriya Ramananda, Michael Stearns, Laraaji, and Joanna Brouk. If we're going to widen the scope to include artists who fit into the realm more by accident than design, add Enno Velthuys, Harold Budd, and Thomas E. Dimock to the list.

**And some of 'genuinely sublime' new age records in your collection?**

*Gymnosphere: Song of the Rose* by Jordan de la Sierra, *New Age of Earth* by Ashra, and *Journey to the Light* by Mark and Helen Banning are all genuinely sublime.

**You also mentioned that folk was also a strong interest in your collection. Any specific period of time? Why?**

I like folk from the time it stopped being primarily concerned with politics, when it became less about the collective and more about the self. (Disclaimer – selfishness is bad and humans should live in collective groups as we did for thousands of years.) I'm interested in the ways folk adapted to changing fashions. Buffy Sainte-Marie is a good example of this; in retrospect we can see that her seventies singer-songwriter type albums are way more compelling than the strident earlier stuff she tends to be known for.

**When did you realize you were becoming a collector? Did that realization change the way you bought and collected records?**

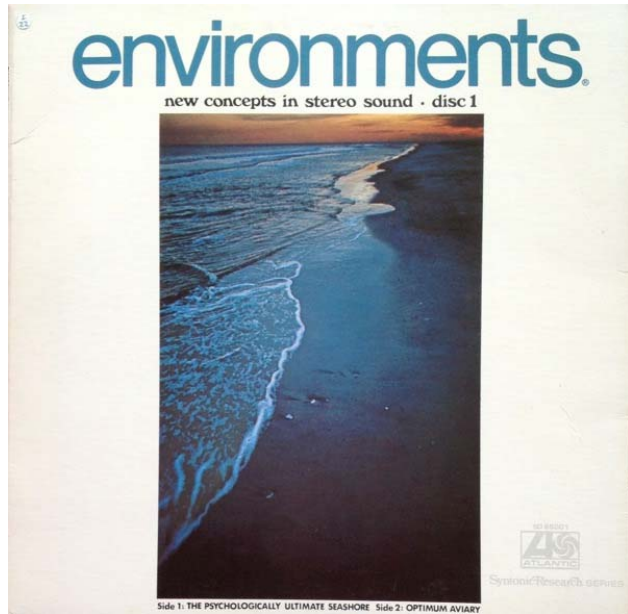
I thought I was mister cool record collector for about a decade. To my friends I was the music guy, and the best thing I did in film school was a musical to do with collecting records. In 2003 I went to San Francisco to write a movie about Wendy and Bonnie Flower that never got off the ground. While I was there I met a collector named Will Louviere and realized I was a dilettante, and that there was this whole international network of people deeper than I ever imagined.

**What was Will Louviere collecting?**

At the time he was looking for the strangest things he could find. He had a lot of handmade covers that would blow peoples' minds. He's going to be annoyed that I mentioned his name in the first place so I'll stop there.

**Your collection in numbers: approximately how many records do you own?**

I own maybe 1,500 records and 500 tapes. Ideally it would be more like 500 of everything, total. I think every record I own, with the exception of some of the new age, is really good. I have no interest in trophy records and I don't keep a lot of high dollar stuff around. The rarest and most interesting stuff to me is on tape.



[Irv Teibel *Environments (New Concepts in Stereo Sound)*, 1970]

**And how many of those records can be considered new age?**

Maybe 250.

**So what makes the tape stuff more interesting for you?**

It's doubtful that there are very many new age records left to discover, whereas I still find tapes I've never seen all the time. We're still a few years from having really sorted out the whole deal.

**Do you know how many copies were released or have an estimate of how many records/tapes were published in the Golden era?**

If I had to guess and we're just talking about music and excluding guided meditation stuff, which is a huge component of the thing, maybe 4,000 LPs and 10,000 new age tapes between 1975 and 1985, with a continual climb in the number produced each year.

**And are there any other books of reference on new age?**

There are several, but the only one I'd recommend is *Hearts of Space Guide: To Cosmic, Transcendent and Innerspace Music* by Anna Turner and Stephen Hill. It's a great reference guide and a notably beautiful example of new age book design.

**What do you look for in a new age record? What tickles your fancy and what do you dread?**

It's exciting to find anything from the early years that is private press that you haven't seen before, particularly if there's some handmade aspect to the package – handwritten liner notes, a paste-on cover. Anything with the human touch, which most definitely includes stuff that is less than professional or seemingly crazy. I'm always tickled to find nineties tapes with redeeming qualities.

What I dread most of all is an album called *C'est What?* I don't know what it is and I don't want to know.

**The cover art is one the most interesting assets of the genre. What are some of your favorite examples? Who was behind the design of all that crazy cover art?**

I love mandalas and airbrush painting and images of angels, crystals, sunsets and beaches, and new age has these things. Geoffrey Chandler is probably the greatest visionary artist I can think of off the top of my head, and I know he did a couple of cool covers. Anyone interested in this should check out the art section at [iasos.com](http://iasos.com).

**Are you very meticulous with your sound collection? Do you collect second copies?**

The only thing I'm a stamp collector about is new age, because I'd like to do a coffee table book of cover art someday soon. So for instance I have all three cover variations of *Peaceful Solutions*, and two of the three covers of the first Ojas record. I'm not exactly proud of it.

**Do you think the digital revolution, to give it a name, is killing sound collecting? How do you imagine the future of sound collecting?**

Louis CK said it best – 'Everything is amazing, and nobody's happy... We live in an amazing world and everything's wasted on the crappiest generation of spoiled idiots.' I couldn't agree more.

Do I miss being able to dig for records back before it was trendy? Of course. There's so much more competition for vinyl these days but let's face it, the internet showed us all how much more there is to look for than anyone realized in 1995 or whatever, so it's a trade off.



[Iasos *Angelic Music*, 1978]

I like the physical object. For me it's a crucial part of the experience. If I was a teenager now, I doubt I'd see the point of collecting records. There's virtually unlimited music online and there's no shame in not owning a lot of material possessions.

There is some shame in being someone who lives and breathes music and never puts any money down to support the folks who make it possible. Richard Buckner tweeted something I thought was pretty great – 'Music file sharing: A way of not saying thank you to artists without having to not say it.'

**eBay and Discogs are also part of the digital revolution and have affected the sound collecting market. How have these tools changed sound collecting in your experience?**

The main thing it's done for me is to make it possible to support myself selling records. I'm optimistic about discogs and I despise eBay for the way it's run at the expense of sellers, but without eBay I might have had to get a real job, which would not be a good thing in my case. Now that Yoga Records is actually turning a profit, I don't have to do as much flipping, which is a relief.

**What's your relationship with other collectors exploring similar aesthetics or material?**

Many of the coolest, kindest, smartest, most creative people I know are through records. I have access to rad records and places to crash all over the world thanks to collecting. It's a good deal.

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### 03. Acknowledgments

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### 04. Copyright note

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