

Dubai's vinyl revival?

As the region's main music retailer multiplies its vinyl range – and Dubai's biggest turntable night celebrates its second birthday – *Rob Garratt* looks at the rise of the record in the UAE and talks to **DJ Lobito**

There's no denying that vinyl records are cool. A lot of it's in the look. Rather than a sterile plastic box or the invisible click of digital download, the sheer size of a 12-inch record and its lavish artwork are a joy, a tangible monument to the music inside. And it's no myth that records sound better. There's a warmth and depth to vinyl that can't be created digitally, particularly apparent on pre-'80s releases: recorded, mixed and mastered on analogue equipment, they always sound better played in analogue. And then there's the DJ effect. All mixing, juggling and scratching was born on vinyl, and rightfully many DJs keep those highly-skilled traditions alive today.

Vinyl never took off in Dubai. Much of vinyl culture is based around the old and the obscure, thriving on the trade of second, third, fourth and ninth-hand records. In a city that grew out of the dust not too long before CDs became the dominant format, there aren't many attics overflowing with forgotten '60s and '70s classics. Likewise, records are a heavy luxury and in a place that many expats tend to stay for short periods, few fork out



Three cool vinyl releases out now:



Bob Dylan: *Original Mono Recordings* – the icon's first eight albums on nine LPs (Dhs930).

Frank Sinatra: *Come Fly With Me* – Ol' Blue Eyes's 1958 classic (Dhs150).

Various Artists: *Blue Note Trip; Sunday Morning* – Cool double LP of retro soul-jazz grooves (Dhs150).

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thousands to ship over weighty collections, this writer included.

But 64 years after the first LP went on sale – and 118 years after the first seven inch single – vinyl sales are peaking in Dubai. It's telling that as the region's largest music retailer, Virgin Megastore, is this month rolling out its record range. First introducing LPs to the emirate at Dubai Mall last September – which later spread to Mall of the Emirates – vinyl centres have now been installed at Mercato and Deira City Centre stores. Meanwhile the range of titles on offer will quadruple between now and September. It seems 28 years after the birth of the CD and 11 years after the first iPod, many Dubaisians are starting a record collection for the first time.

Virgin's head buyer for the MENA region says he is 'very, very surprised'

with how the format has taken off in less than a year. 'People come to buy a book, see a turntable and end up starting a collection,' says Mehdi Cherif. 'The experience is completely different to downloading a track or even buying a CD – vinyl feels more valuable, like a collector's item.'

Most interestingly, rather than mirroring the CD charts, it is classic artists such as Frank Sinatra and The Doors which rank among the best-selling 33-inches. This eclecticism is reflected in Dubai's largest vinyl night, Deep Crates, which celebrates its second birthday with a party on Thursday July 12. There are few people better placed to discuss the charms of the vinyl disc than the night's founder, break DJ Lobito, aka James De Valera.

The Spanish-Zimbabwean DJ started collecting records after moving

to London aged 18 to study. He spent his entire first year's student loan on turntables, and by the end of a three-year degree (in Arabic) he had collected more than 6,000 discs. 'I could not walk past a record shop without going in, and I'd spend three or four hours in each, minimum. I had a virus. I lost a couple of girlfriends for that,' says James, aged 30.

He may have lost women, but Lobito's obsession was rewarded with regular DJ gigs at top break-centric London clubs such as Brixton's Plan B and Mass. Having now collected around 20,000 records (spending an estimated Dhs700,000), he shifted a hefty chunk over to Dubai five years ago, and has since been named Rock Steady Crew's No 1 B-boy DJ in the Middle East, and been made a regional representative for Afrika Bambaataa's Universal Zulu Nation.

Two years ago Lobito decided to put his collection to use by founding Dubai's best-known vinyl-centric night. After trawling a copy of *Time Out* for potential venues, he convinced the management at Barsha's Casa Latina to ditch their house band and

install a DJ booth and arty projectors (a full year before Loaded utilised the venue's set-up) and, in collaboration with a number of other vinyl hoarders, the night known as Freshly Laced was born.

A change of personnel saw the night repackaged as Deep Crates (named after crates of vinyl) last autumn, but for Lobito, this week marks a second birthday in the venue. Naturally, there's a party to mark it – with free drinks, T-shirts and (ironically) CDs – but as the lights go up on the night, you can expect a few new converts to pick up their first black disc the morning after.

'I get people all the time who are fascinated by my vinyl, some even try to buy my decks there and then,' James says. 'It's the whole experience of it. Vinyl is moving into the collectable area – it's a product which feels valuable, something you want to keep. Sometimes the modification of something old, can be something new.' *The Deep Crates Cartel Second Year Anniversary takes places at Casa Latina, Ibis Al Barsha on Thursday July 12, 9pm-3am, free entry.*

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