

SLEEVE NOTES: Photography of Hand-Drawn Inner Record Sleeves

by Dominique Russell | Sep 15, 2025 | Articles

Introduction

A few years ago, my dad gave me some hand-drawn, fan-made record sleeves from the second-hand record shop where he works, Crazy Beat Records in Essex. I started to collect and photograph them, and he continued to save them for me until I gradually amassed a collection of over 300 sleeves.

I became fascinated by their aesthetic: while the style tends to be reliably scrappy, they have often been used to express teenage fandom or infatuation. Most display extensive creativity, using original design in felt tip, paint, pencil, biro, and typewritten text.

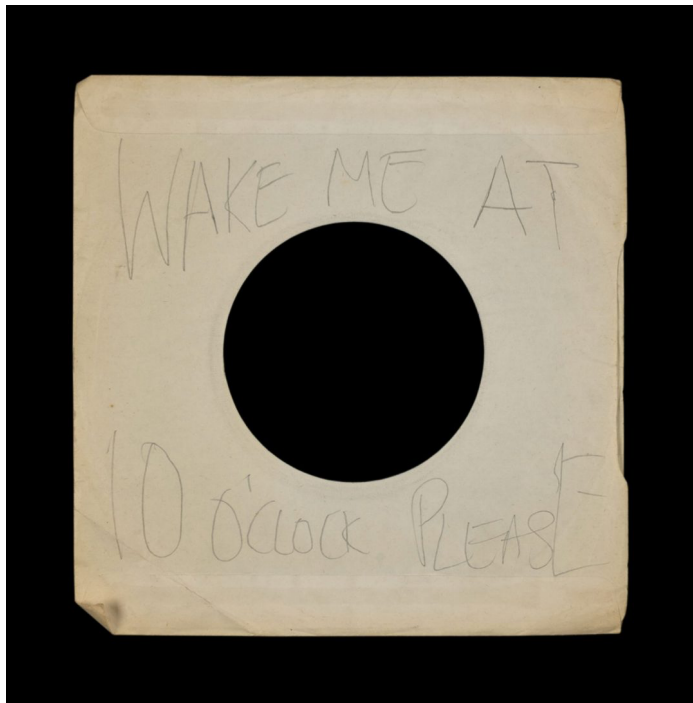
Some are elaborate, painstaking acts of devotion, multi-coloured frescos that sprawl out across the full expanse of the inner sleeve. Others are an array of scattered fragments of past lives lost to the ebb and flow of time. Sometimes, it's the owner sketching out an outfit to be worn at the next youth club function; in others, they're writing down a takeaway order. A favourite of mine reads, in all capitals: 'WAKE ME AT 10 O'CLOCK PLEASE'.



Revista editada por la Sociedad
Española de Documentación e
Información Científica

 Search

Suscríbete y recibe avisos de
publicación en tu email

 Email Address

Finding the Record Sleeves

The record sleeves date from the 1950s-2000s. What makes them even more poignant is that often the records make their way to the store because the owners have passed away, or are at a point in their lives where they can no longer afford to hang on to their music collections.

People come into Crazy Beat every day to sell records, giving great insight into all kinds of personally curated music collections. The walls of Crazy Beat are a vibrant collage of memorabilia, stickers, drawings, clippings, lists, and other curiosities you'd expect to find tucked inside old record sleeves. Like me, the staff see the importance of collecting and displaying this ephemeral material too. All sorts of things have been found inside sleeves, from love letters to paper money and concert tickets.

People's record collections offer a fascinating insight into the rich journeys they've taken, through music and life more generally. They can display a wealth of in-depth knowledge, often in one particular area, but sometimes in multiple genres that might appear very distant from one another – obviously, every collector walks their own path of discovery.



Photography of Record Sleeves

As a Heritage Photographer currently working at the British Library, I specialise in imaging flat works on paper, in books and fine art. I photograph adhering to International Imaging Standards, and the process of creating digital surrogates is something which I explore in my own artistic practice.

I had a natural urge to collect, catalogue, and photograph the sleeves, keeping the same high standards as I do for museums, libraries, and archives. I see great importance in collecting and preserving them physically and digitally; as a collection, they recall a pre-internet era of devotion, a time when music ownership was sealed with a fan's own handiwork.

Publication of *Sleeve Notes*

In May 2025 I published a book with CentreCentre with a selection of 150 fan-made inner record sleeves, called *Sleeve Notes*, celebrating the passion and creativity of music lovers. CentreCentre were a perfect fit, their forte being the creation of books from unexpected collections, making the invisible seen and the forgotten found.

I worked closely with Patrick Fry at CentreCentre. He found it very important to establish a flow of images that felt connected yet also contrasting, establishing a pace that keeps the viewer moving through the collection. This flow is bookended with front and backmatter that frame and establish the fun, DIY aesthetic and almost fanzine approach. *Sleeve Notes* opens with a black-and-white snap of the Crazy Beat Records shop, a piece of creative text reimagining a music-crazy, misunderstood teen encountering sleeveless records, and a foreword from my dad, Kevan Russell, offering insight into the journey and lifespan of the artworks enclosed.

The front cover is coloured a 1970s burnt orange. When it came to the title, Patrick wanted to evoke the many forms of hand-drawn bubble lettering inside the book.

The design brilliantly includes a hidden inner cover printed on contrasting blue paper, with a black centre hole – mimicking the record sleeves displayed within.



How Do Records Become Disassociated from Their Sleeves?

Many of these distinctive sleeves exist because the originals were lost, stolen, or damaged. The more blank sleeves there are in a collection, the longer it takes to find the right LP. When record shops carry out a stock check, they often find that they have many more records than sleeves – because of both misfiling and customer theft throughout the year. In the January sales, when the sleeveless records need to be sold to make way for new stock (usually at very low cost and a loss to the shop), it's not unusual to see a full rack of 'naked' LPs in plain sleeves, all divorced from their original partners.

For the young, the desperate, and the tight, purchasing an album without its sleeve represented a budget-friendly method of obtaining the sounds held within. Until the turn of the century, owning the physical object was the only way to hear a complete record – and the more records someone owned, the more kudos they earned within their community of music lovers.



Conclusion

In August 2025, I exhibited all 150 sleeves at Dále Zine art gallery in Miami, Florida. The curation mimicked a record shop, with sleeves stacked back-to-back, giving visitors the chance to see the intricacies of the works up close and discover hidden details for themselves.

These sleeves speak to a time when people felt a real connection to their music collections and wanted to claim ownership over their records. It resonates with what I loved doing when I was younger, burning CDs and then drawing artwork myself.

Of course, one day, these naked records may well return to the vinyl ecosystem, donated back to shops after years of attentive adoration. Thus, the circle of life – and the old records – continue to spin.



www.dominiquerussell.com

Sleeve Notes by Dominique Russell is published by [CentreCentre](#)



Dominique Russell

Heritage photographer and artist.

Her practice explores the overlooked and often fleeting world of ephemeral objects, DIY culture and kitsch. As a collector-artist, she recontextualises these objects through photography, revealing how they reflect societal values, trends, and personal narratives.

Article edited by: [Julia Ihnatowicz](#)