HONG KONG'S VINYL HERO



Paul Au, the self-proclaimed vinyl hero of Hong Kong, browsing through his vinyl collection. Photo by Vicky Wong.

By Vicky Wong

Oct 30, 2017 | 7:43pm Hong Kong time

Hidden behind a blockade of cardboard boxes and plastered with stickers and posters in the fifth-floor home of Hong Kong's "vinyl hero," Paul Au, is a 300-square foot room close to collapsing under the weight of 400,000 records.

Au calls it "paradise," and for vinyl aficionados, it's hard to disagree.

The 60 year old's Sham Shui Po apartment-cum-record shop has become a must-go for any Hongkonger with a penchant for records.

With 300,000 unique second-hand records for sale – not including the 100,000 in his own personal collection – the self-proclaimed hippy arguably has the largest collection of vinyl records of anyone in Hong Kong.

On a recent visit, Au opened the door barefoot, sporting mutton chops and wearing a baggy Guns'N'Roses t-shirt.

ADVERTISING



Learn More

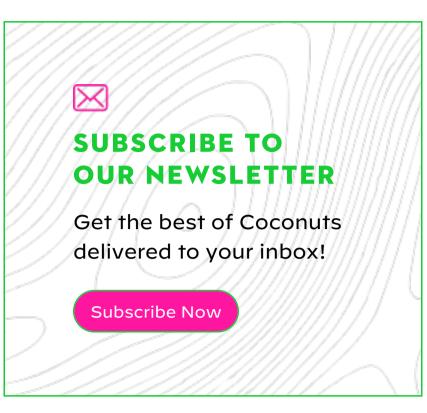
Behind Au's five-foot-tall frame, vinyl seemed to spill out of every possible nook and cranny available inside his apartment. Multiple turntables were stacked around the room, and a fan that sat atop a pile of old albums kept what space remained cool.

Bathroom access, explained Au, was sometimes difficult.

V Battersea Dogs & Cats Home - Sponsored

"There's so much vinyl blocking the bathroom door I sometimes have to use the public toilet," he laughed.





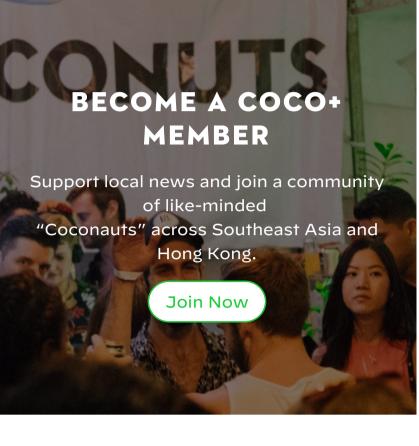




Photo by Vicky Wong. Early beginnings: Vietnam

The self-proclaimed "vinyl hero" has been collecting unwanted vinyl records in Hong Kong for 33 years, the first 20 of which were spent selling them on the city's streets.

But it was in his native Vietnam, amid the decades of war, where he first gained his love of music and began his album obsession.

Born to Chinese parents in Saigon in 1957, Au said he grew up listening to the tunes played by the American Forces Network and to the Vietnamese bands who covered US rockers like Jimi Hendrix and Iron Butterfly.

"I remember it was back in '72 when I was only 15, still in secondary school, and at the time we all had chopper bicycles. We all liked to ride these chopper bicycles looking for these Western records that American GIs left over, and that was how I got started," he recalled.

Every collection has to start somewhere, and for Au, the first record he ever owned was by Creedence Clearwater Revival. From that point on, he started building up a modest collection of popular '60s records — everything from originals left by American GIs to bootlegs from Taiwan. The songs became the soundtrack to his youth.

"It was like the happiest time of my life when I was a teenager; riding chopper bicycles and hunting records and going swimming, and hanging around with hippies."



Paul pulls out a Credence Clearwater Revival bootleg record. Photo by Vicky Wong.

But that all ended in 1975, as Ho Chi Minh's North Vietnamese communists began to close in on Saigon.

Just months shy of his 18th birthday, Au was smuggled out of Vietnam onto a cargo ship bound for Hong Kong to escape the war draft, leaving his family and vinyl collection behind.

His mother contacted some smugglers who hid Au in a farmhouse near the sea with a small group of about 10 people also looking to escape the draft.

"One night we just walked to the seaside just by moonlight – no lights, or flashlight or torch – and we were smuggled in sampans and then to fishing junks, and then fishing junks to the big cargo ship.

"And then finally we were on the cargo ship, I saw that in fact there were like 200, around 250 people, mostly Chinese."

New city, old records

Au arrived in Hong Kong as the city celebrated the fourth day of Chinese New Year that year.

He recalled the shock of arriving in a place that was culturally at odds with his hippy sentiments. He had left a world of hippies and entered a city full of yuppies.

"It was totally different, because Hong Kong is a very commercial city, it's a money city. People seem to be not very friendly because they care for money too much. Because space is tight, rent is expensive and people are crowded; they have a lot of money problems," he said.

In Hong Kong, Au worked in a number of odd jobs until 1983, when he moved to Sham Shui Po in Kowloon and discovered the Apliu Street flea market, a veritable vinyl gold mine of "good stuff" being tossed away.

From then on, Au made it his personal mission to save as many records as he could from the city's landfills, while also starting to sell records full-time on the streets to the "small majority" who shared his musical tastes.



Paul Au rifling through a pile of records from the '80s. Photo by Vicky Wong. "I discovered my favourite records that I had been dying to have or was looking for. They were all here, because at that time, Hong Kong people were kinda wasteful," he said.

"They were throwing out the good stuff of the '60s and '70s. In the '80s, they just threw away things; they like to throw away things even now.

"At that time it was like paradise. I could own anything I just could get my hands on, and it was mine."

But selling records on the streets during the '80s wasn't easy.

For many Hongkongers, the decade was a watershed moment in the city's music industry, as the Golden Age of Cantonese pop — or Cantopop — produced entertainers like Andy Lau, Leslie Cheung, Priscilla Leung and Anita Mui.

For Au, it was often a sad time, as he fought for space to peddle (shooing away the occasional junkie) and for relevance, as all anyone wanted to listen to was Cantopop, and no one cared for the music of the '60s anymore.

Although his one-man mission did gain some media attention during the late '80s, his mission to save Hong Kong's vinyl records often felt to be in vain, particularly as the new, digital era dawned.

"It was even worse in the '90s," he said.

"Because when I first arrived in the '80s, records were still popular; vinyl records were still popular. But people went for the '80s music, and they just threw away the '60s and '70s hippy music."

A New Home for Nostalgia

However, it's a different story today; after 20 years of selling on the streets, he finally got a flat a stone's throw away from where he started selling records and moved his collection there.

Today, nostalgia sells, vinyl is cool again, and a number of smaller record shops have emerged in Hong Kong.

Au no longer has to compete for space to sell his vinyl, and the internet has brought to him international customers who love, and want to buy his records, priced from about HK\$60 (US\$8) for popular music to HK\$200 (US\$26) for harder-to-find jazz records.

But it's still a tough gig. Vinyl may be cool, but not many people are buying into the lifestyle.



Photo by Vicky Wong.

Brand new turntables are expensive, costing HK\$8,000 (US\$1,026), and though secondhand models are available for as little as HK\$200, many people don't have space for a record player and vinyl collection in a city of high rents and small apartments.

"Sometimes I just want to hide," Au said, after finishing a phone call with his building's management reminding him to pay the management fee.

"The rent for here is around US\$1,500 every month, for such a small space. US\$1,500 is quite expensive."

Whilst Au's collection has everything from Elvis to Mozart, and from originals to bootlegs, it's the records from the '60s — most notably Creedence Clearwater Revival, the band whose album kickstarted it all — that take pride of place in his flat.

As I browsed the piles and boxes for something to bring home, Au put on one of his favorite tracks: CCR's Who'll Stop the Rain.

"Hong Kong has become less fun", lamented Au, as the song changed to the band's cover of I Heard it Through the Grapevine.

"I never want to grow up. I'm still living in the '70s, because I haven't had enough fun".

Nevertheless, like the music of his youth, Au said he remained optimistic.

"No I'm not worried, because I know that there are still a lot of people who love records and music."

Paul Au's vinyl shop is in Flat D, 5/F, Wai Hong Building, 239 Cheung Sha Wan Road, Sham Shui Po, Kowloon. Visitors should call ahead at 9841 7136 before visiting.

Topics: HONG KONG, FEATURES, INTERVIEWS

SHARE THIS POST:



JOIN THE COCONUTS CONVERSATION WITH A COMMENT.

HONG KONG OBSERVATORY ISSUES NO. **8 TYPHOON WARNING**

Tropical cyclone track of Nalgae. Photo: Hong Kong Observatory

By Coconuts Hong Kong Nov 2, 2022 | 2:52pm Hong Kong time

The Hong Kong Observatory issued the No. 8 typhoon warning this afternoon with tropical cyclone Nalgae approaching the city.

The No. 8 northwest gale or storm signal was issued at 1:40pm.

This means that winds with mean speeds of 63 kilometers per hour or more are expected from the northwest quarter.

"At 6pm, tropical storm Nalgae was centered about 120 kilometers south-southeast of Hong Kong and is forecast to move northwest at about 10 kilometers per hour edging closer to the vicinity of the Pearl River Estuary," said the city's meteorological agency.

"According to the latest forecast, Nalgae will edge closer to Hong Kong tonight as compared with the previous forecast and will skirt within 100 kilometers of Hong Kong."

Under the influence of the rainbands associated with Nalgae, showers over the territory are expected to become more frequent gradually tonight.

The No. 8 gale or storm signal will remain in force before 10pm tonight.

Nalgae will weaken further. Whether the No. 8 gale or storm signal is maintained thereafter depends on the degree of weakening of Nalgae. If Nalgae weakens further into a tropical depression, the observatory will issue a lower tropical cyclone warning signal.

Seas are very rough with swells. Members of the public are advised to stay away from the shoreline and not to engage in water sports.

Earlier in the day, the Education Bureau announced that classes at all schools are suspended today.

The Labour Department reminded employers to make work arrangements for staff during and after tropical cyclone and rainstorm warnings, including arrangements on reporting for duty, release from work, resumption of work and work from home (if applicable).

There are changes to public transport routes. Check out these links for the latest updates: MTR | KMB | Citybus and NWFB | Star Ferry

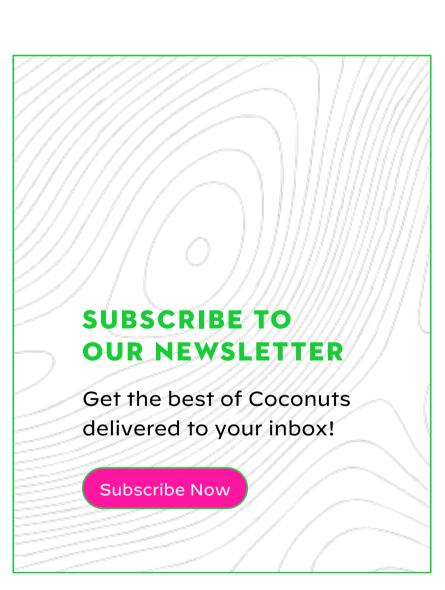
However, the Global Financial Leaders' Investment Summit organized by the Hong Kong Monetary Authority, which has been hyped by the government as proof that Hong Kong is "back", is continuing at the Four Seasons Hotel. The summit features around 200 financiers from around the world.

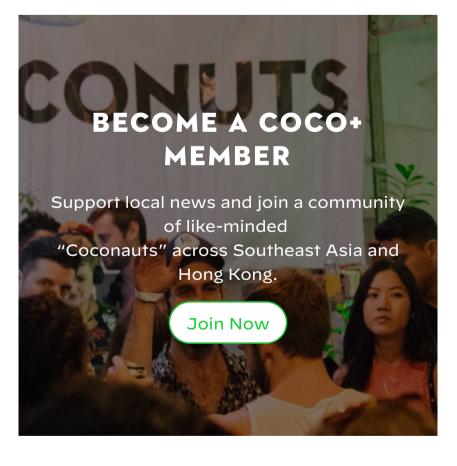
Editor's note: The story has been updated with weather information by the Hong Kong Observatory at 6pm.

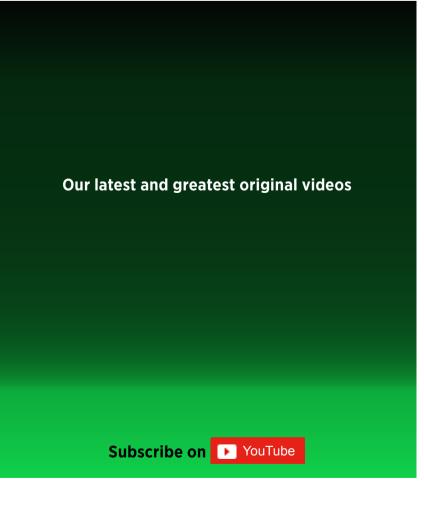
Topics: HONG KONG, NEWS, WEATHER

SHARE THIS POST:

in LinkedIn 🕓 WhatsApp Facebook 🕑 Twitter 🔽 Email JOIN THE COCONUTS CONVERSATION WITH A COMMENT. You must be logged in as a Coconuts User to comment.







Become a Patron Login

COMPANY

About Us Advertising Announcements Contact Us Directory

Editorial Policies Events Jobs Newsletters Grove: Coconuts Brand Studio



HONG KONG

5

JOIN COCO+

Pay what you want, starting at US\$5 / vear. \rightarrow

Copyright © 2023 Coconuts Media Limited. All Rights Reserved.

Terms Of Service Privacy Policy