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### Artist Rutherford Chang's "We Buy White Albums" and the origins of fandom

Posted by Miles Raymer on 02.18.13 at 03:41 PM

The blog [Dust & Grooves](#) has a new [interview with the artist Rutherford Chang](#), who currently has an exhibit showing at [Recess gallery](#) in New York called "We Buy White Albums." It consists of Chang's collection of nearly 700 copies of the Beatles' self-titled 1968 double LP, starting with his first one, which he picked up at a garage sale in California as a teenager. The show's set up like a record store devoted entirely to the *White Album*, with shelves of them sorted by the serial number printed on its original pressing (Chang only collects numbered copies, which he says, "[implies] that it is a limited edition, although one running in excess of 3 million"). Select specimens are displayed on a "staff picks" wall, and the album itself plays perpetually over the "store" stereo. True to the exhibition's title, Chang will buy any numbered copies of the *White Album* that you bring him.

The BEATLES

RECESS

The cradle of modern fandom

Chang's obsessively single-minded curatorship has turned up a few interesting facts about the record. For instance, his collection is entirely devoid of copies numbered between 2,700,00 and 2,800,00, which Chang says is "statistically unlikely" and suggests that something weird happened to 100,000 copies of the *White Album* to keep them off the market. He's also collected a large number of copies with sleeves decorated by their former owners, who seem to have taken Richard Hamilton's brutally minimalist cover art as an invitation to supply their own.

From what I can tell from the D&G post, most of the fan-drawn covers are of around a "[stoned doodle](#)" level of execution, but [this hand-painted one](#) has its own 70s-mellow charm, and the copy where the previous owner seems to have used it as [a kind of countercultural guest book](#) is fairly fascinating. And who can resist the folksy charms of this [lovingly rendered portrait of a roach clip](#)?

What's really interesting is how spontaneously emergent it is. If you wrap a Beatles record in a plain white sleeve, a certain percentage of listeners will naturally use it as the platform for their own visual interpretations. Humans raised in the modern media-rich environment seem to almost instinctively want to interact with the cultural artifacts that they love by creating more artifacts in various media. The extent of that drive is only recently becoming clear, as the Internet has begun connecting creatively minded devotees of specific cultural properties into the massive, noncanonical content-generating hive mind known collectively as "[fandom.](#)"

Modern-day fandom can be remarkably serious and sophisticated, not to mention strange. [Hatsune Miku](#), the computer-generated Japanese pop star, has intensely devoted groupies who write songs and choreograph dance moves for her, and others who design her outfits or create the Hatsune Miku-themed pornography that her owners seem remarkably OK with. And One Direction fan-fiction writers have created a romance between two of the boy-band members that, remarkably, has made the transition into the real world, [at least in the minds of some fans.](#)

The Japanese, who remain the gold standard for obsessive fandom, have a name for this: [niji sousaku](#), literally, "secondary creation." But the phenomenon isn't limited to the Japanese. It's cross-cultural, and may be a natural reaction of the human mind to the amount of information it's being fed in Internet-enabled societies. Maybe one day the drive to make *niji sousaku* will be considered just as much a part of the human condition as the need to make art in the first place. In that case these hand-decorated *White Albums* might be fandom's equivalent of the cave paintings of Lascaux.