

From The Sunday Times: November 11, 2007 Cool and collected by Richard Clayton

Do compilation albums have a place in the age of the download? Yes - just as long as they offer more than just the music

I can still remember doing the Locomotion to OMD's song of that name on Christmas Day, 1984. I was 11, and Santa had just brought me Now That's What I Call Music 3, my first compilation. Having the year's leading chart singles all together was ace and skill: pop world had come to rural Dorset. How quaint that sounds today. Not the preteen lingo, but how anyone could be so excited about a random collection of mainstream songs on one LP.

Compilations have since burgeoned.

Apart from greatest-hits packages, you can find best-of albums for every genre you've heard of, as well as plenty you haven't, a dog's life's worth of Ibiza annuals, those interminable chillout discs and dad-friendly bargains such as Music to Wash Cars By. But for how much longer?

Bog-standard compilations are on their last legs. Why would you ever need to buy them, when all the tracks are available to download? A good compilation is archival, even anthropological. The best ones (see my list of favourites, below) always give you extra: rarities and exclusive songs, replica sleeves, expert liner notes, even studio pranks. They are valuable things in their own right.

"The more effort you put into any compilation, the better," says David Shrigley. In 2005, the Glasgow-based artist released an "imaginary album". Illustrated with his spindly sketches, which look on the dark side of life, the lyrics brimmed with absurdist humour and arch observations. All that was missing was the music. Now Tomlab, a German label, has invited 39 acts to make these "conceptual" songs real. The result is Worried Noodles, the year's most wilfully uneven yet bizarrely rewarding mix album.

It's a strength of the project that the best-known names (David Byrne, Hot Chip, Franz Ferdinand) turn in some of the least involving contributions. With treatments ranging from future doo-wop (Dirty Projectors) to gabba techno (Liars), the tastiest tracks, to my ears, come from Psapp (cute ambient pop), James Chadwick (unashamed folk), Scout Niblett (PJ Harveyish obsequies) and Final Fantasy (violin-chuggy prog). The greatest juxtaposition, Shrigley says, between lyrical starting point and final song is Grizzly Bear's "Spinal Tap-like guitar ode to blackcurrant jam".

"This album had to be unedited," he explains. "You can't ask someone to do something, then not include it. I was overwhelmed by people taking the time to do their tracks, but it's like hearing someone pretending to be you. It feels slightly cringy, in a really hilarious way."

For Shrigley, the visual aspect of Worried Noodles is, of course, just as important as the music. "It had to be artwork-driven," he says. "CDs are the most coaster-like, rubbish objects. The most interesting compilations have something that transcends the music and glues it together. I bought one lately that used a comedian to introduce all the tracks and tell jokes in between."

The Worried Noodles double CD comes with a 106-page hardback booklet containing all Shrigley's handwritten lyrics and scabrous cartoons. It's a collectors' item: "The texts for the original songbook were printed on square pages and collaged, four to a page. What's in with the CD now is probably truer to my first drawings. Tomlab have made a nice job of it. The Germans, they're very good at these things." Commissioned compilations such as Worried Noodles will survive in the digital age, but if compilations in general have a physical future, it's what accompanies them, as much as their track listings, that counts. With its scrawled annotation and DIY design, Worried Noodles is a glorified mix tape. And that's what the indie-grime band Hadouken! have alluded to by calling their new EP, Not Here to Please You, a "mix tape". Released on a USB memory stick – the buzz format – it links to multimedia content, but the user interface replicates old-style cover art.

For anyone growing up in the 1980s and early 1990s, mix tapes were part of the social ritual. They were crucial to the gift economy that operated among kids who had only a fiver in pocket money, and essential to courtship, too. Making a mix tape was an act of love. "A girlfriend gave me one with a traffic-light collage on the cover," Shrigley recalls. "My friend Martin lettered all his with a typewriter and Tipp-Ex. I put tiny spoken-word segments between the tracks – and juvenile things, like belching mixed in with John Coltrane. All that died out with CD-burning; it's so easy."

Telling someone to download a cool track is even more clinical. If the days of felt-tipping inlay cards are gone, the ethos of personalised compilation-making may yet thrive online. Old-fashioned radio once provided much of its source material; audio streaming could be its new medium. Click on the "radio" button at www.davidbyrne.com to see what I mean. Each month, Byrne creates a themed playlist. Recently, it was a road trip from NYC to LA, via various musical points in between. Past themes have included "Back to School" and "Iceland: Beyond Björk". It might not be the same for home-taping veterans, but there's no risk of treasured cassettes getting chewed up. Go on, press play and record. Now that's what I call a compilation