

WILL VINYL RECORDS EVER DIE?

"vinyl Records are still here and have survived the introduction and proliferation of more advanced recording formats"

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Weinheim, GERMANY—While out running errands the other day, I spotted a T-shirt reading: "Vinyl will never die." A few telling characteristics (gelled hair, Day-Glo trousers, tiny backpack) suggested to me that its wearer was primarily concerned with the longevity of this antiquated medium as it relates to the house or techno music scene, but the declaration has an air of defiant truth regardless of one's preferred musical genre.

Even if we were to plug our ears to the bluster of its romantic champions or the sober head-shaking of its practical detractors, vinyl can still be said to have a sort of enduring magic to it, and it's hard to imagine records disappearing in the cold and passive way that the cassette was superseded by the compact disc, or the way that the CD is now slowly being supplanted by the Super Audio CD (SACD) and DVD-Audio (DVD-A).

This magic of vinyl is something that goes missing in today's sterile world of ones and zeroes, and perhaps this niggling lack explains—at least in part—why, for example, LPs are such sought-after items on eBay, and why the audiophile Mosaic label always releases its remastered jazz sets on high-quality vinyl in addition to CD, not to mention the fact that the vinyl pressing invariably sells out before the other. If the compact disc were truly superior in every way, it would be commercial suicide for a small company like Mosaic to put out a painstakingly remastered limited edition set on a delicate, restricted, outmoded medium. And only certifiable lunatics and incorrigible nostalgia buffs would waste time bidding for them online.

Over the past two weeks, during which time I made the coincidental sighting of the T-shirt, I've been engaged in the rather peculiar and time-consuming task of cleaning my records. This process involves the removing the dust from the record with a carbon fiber brush, spraying the disc with Windex, wiping it down with a soft

cloth, and then letting the stylus dig the remaining trapped oil and grime from the grooves. (With CDs I normally use a soft cloth and Pledge, if I do it at all.)

This means I have to play the records from start to finish for a thorough cleaning, which means I can't stray too far from my record player (sans automatic tone arm), which—not to put too fine a point on it—means I consider myself more or less bound to the seventy square meters of my apartment for the thirty minutes it takes for a side to finish. Which naturally begs the question: Why?

For starters, the cleaning process gives me a great excuse for listening to my entire collection of records one by one, especially those which have been gathering literal and figurative dust. Much of the time this results in discoveries and rediscoveries, like the nascent symphonic ideas that appear in Schubert's *Moments Musicaux* (Alfred Brendel playing), or the twisted nonsensically poetic lyrics ("freeze your blood and then stab it into me") on Modest Mouse's *Night on the Sun* EP, or just how stunning Antonio Carlos Jobim's overlooked *Stone Flower* can be, or how expertly Miles renders the "Saeta" on *Sketches of Spain*. Or that somebody somewhere surreptitiously switched my disc of the Philadelphia Orchestra/Ormandy performing Tchaikovsky with a disc of Haydn symphonies. Their loss.

Still, I suspect that the reason for my cleaning ritual is also one of the main reasons behind vinyl's decline in popularity. The format asks a lot more of its listener than CDs or even 8-tracks; wax cylinders notwithstanding, records are the physical manifestation of inconvenience. A mere slip of a fingernail while taking a record out of its slipcover can ruin it. So can a prematurely worn stylus or an out-of-balance tone arm. The playback apparatus even favors a handedness: southpaws like me have to learn to work with their right. Storage is a big issue too. A rise or drop of a few degrees in temperature can warp them irrevocably, and stacking LPs on top of one another is the same as slowly squeezing the music out of them.

The payoff, however, is that the responsibility of ownership makes the reward of listening all the greater. The medium enhances the music. The greater care and attention a record requires means that the work it contains takes on a special quality. In turn, every vinyl album I own, whether it's indie rock, classical or jazz, takes on the same fragile beauty as an Old Master painting or a Ming vase: for all

their sonic and emotive dynamism, those horns and guitars and drums can't withstand the force of a stray fingernail. A violin concerto can be destroyed by heat. Likewise, it suddenly becomes apparent how necessary each part of the music is to the pristine whole. Not a millisecond can be sacrificed to dirt or dust without losing something essential, just as a fleck of paint falling from a Vermeer will lose the fluid effect of pouring milk or the light shining off an earring. One of the things that makes art—all forms of art—so precious is its physical transience. The sheer durability and convenience of CDs causes us to forget that sometimes.

None of this philosophical approach to record collecting has prevented the medium from being regarded as passé. Not that I mind entirely. At a flea market recently, I came across some gum-chewing teenagers eager to clear out several milk crates of records. Lord knows how they got a hold of them, but it was a stack of pants-wetting finds—Ella singing in Berlin (the set where she forgets the words to “Mack the Knife”), von Karajan conducting Beethoven's Fifth, Placido Domingo in Verdi's Rigoletto (Guilini conducting)—in impeccable condition. They wondered if ten euros (\$12) was too much to ask. The speed with which I reached for my wallet assured them it wasn't.

Despite what the hardline pragmatists and technophiles might argue, I don't browse flea markets and eBay in search of records for reasons of nostalgia. Precisely the opposite. I buy them because the hand I have in a record's preservation brings me closer to the music; because they subtly prompt me to consider what goes into a work of art and what should be treated as such; and because ultimately this keeps the recordings fresh as well as timeless.

Contrary to the appealing slogan on that T-shirt, I know vinyl will die eventually. So will I. Everything around us will someday crumble and decay and vanish. But right now, when it matters most, vinyl is still here. It's survived the introduction and proliferation of more advanced recording formats, and I have a feeling it will continue to do so for the reasons I have just named (and many I've no doubt overlooked), all of which add up to some untranslatable allure. And the way to discover that allure is through a little extra care.

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