

The Vinyl Frontier

The unlikely resurrection of a beloved format

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Words: Chris Neal

1. PASSION PLAY

"I lived for music when I was a teenager," says Steve Young. As a British youth in the punk era, he idolized bands like the Buzzcocks. He delighted in going to his local record store, buying his favorite music on vinyl, bringing it home and immersing himself in the record-listening experience—sliding the record from its sleeve, placing it on the turntable, dropping the needle into its grooves and poring over the album art as it played. "It was a nice big slab of plastic, wasn't it?" he says with a chuckle. "And you could put the sleeve on the wall!"

Then, of course, the vinyl format fell into decline. First came the cassette tape, with its portability. Then the CD was introduced, with the promise of dynamic sound. Then there was the MP3, a format so compact that literally thousands of songs can fit onto a player that fits in your pocket. A method of sound reproduction that had endured since the 1800s seemed, finally, to have outlived its usefulness. Vinyl is relatively bulky, difficult to store, and must be properly cared for in a way that other formats don't demand—MP3s don't collect dust and can't be scratched, after all. So who needs it?

As it happens, a great many people. At the height of the CD era, in the early 1990s, vinyl seemed to be headed for certain oblivion. Most record labels were as uninterested in pressing it as most consumers were in buying it. Few new albums were ever pressed on vinyl at all. But the format quietly began making a comeback over the last several years, spurred on by advances in pressing technology and disillusionment with the sound quality and intangibility of digital music. In 2009, vinyl album sales totaled 2.5 million, a 33 percent increase over the previous year and the format's most successful year since Nielsen SoundScan began tracking sales in 1991. "We have seen continued growth in interest and sales of LPs for 20 years straight, and it continues to get stronger," says Marc Weinstein, co-founder of California record store chain Amoeba Music.

That growth has been aided by acolytes like Young, who in 2008 started the Vinyl 180 company to reissue the classic 1980s

postpunk he loved. As the manager for XTC's Andy Partridge, he was involved in renegotiating the group's contract with Virgin Records and secured the vinyl rights to the XTC back catalog. "Then I heard from Virgin saying, 'Would you like to do some of our



The Boxmasters

to the format in the last several years. When Warner Bros. Records General Manager Tom "Grover" Biery saw an opportunity to get the label back into the vinyl business a few years ago, he eagerly seized it. The label began pressing a few thousand copies of selected albums, and was stunned to see them selling out quickly. All 5,000 copies of Metallica's *Death Magnetic* vinyl box set were snapped up by fans—not a huge percentage of the album's sales, but enough to justify the cost of manufacturing.

"It was all a passion play," says Biery, who still visits local record stores in Los Angeles weekly and waxes rhapsodic about the seven-inch singles of his youth. "It wasn't a value proposition, it wasn't a branding proposition, it was about letting fans and bands know that even at our big record company there are people here that are passionate music fans. We like vinyl as well." Warner even started a vinyl-only sales website, becauseofsoundmatters.com, inspired by a talk with one of its longest-serving artists, vinyl fan Neil Young. "He was talking about sound, and how important sound is," Biery says. "About how when people are in the studio making music, there's something special going on."

2. SOUND MATTERS

The idea that vinyl actually has better sound quality than other formats is a counterintuitive one for people who grew up hearing that the compact disc's digital range was inherently superior. Supporters like Biery are having none of it. "I 100 percent think that

other stuff on vinyl?" he says. "It was sort of an afterthought." He agreed, and before long the new company was also preparing reissues of classic albums from the Beggars Banquet catalog, including records by Gary Numan, the Cure and Dead Can Dance. Young still recalls the joy of listening to the first copy of the company's first finished piece of vinyl. "I sat down and said, 'Oh my God, it sounds fantastic!'" he says. "I'd sold my record deck. I still had some of my collection, but I hadn't played a vinyl record for probably 10 years. It sounded absolutely stunning."

In addition to independent operators like Young, vinyl also turned out to have strong proponents inside the major labels—all of whom have made major commitments

The Black Keys. This is a twelve inch single by The Black Keys. The song on the A-side is called 'Tighten Up.' The song on the B-side is called 'Howlin' For You.' This is a twelve inch single by The Black Keys. This is a twelve inch single by The Black Keys.

vinyl sounds better," he says. "If I listen to the same exact thing on a CD, it doesn't sound as good. It has to do with the way that vinyl's created—the mastering of it, and the non-compression of it. In theory a CD *could* sound as good or better than vinyl, but everything gets so compressed to make it loud that it changes the experience."

That's because the analog mastering of vinyl generally precludes the kind of compression habitually applied to CD and digital formats. "The first 20 years of compact discs, they were just unlistenable, and got more and more unlistenable as time went on," says producer and artist T Bone Burnett. "They got more compressed and more bright and harder to listen to. MP3s are outrageous. An MP3 is like a JPEG [picture file]—if you receive a small JPEG file in your email and blow it up, it starts becoming pixelated and falls apart. It's the same with MP3s. If you put an MP3 on a big sound system where you really hear what's going on, you just hear a lot of static."

Today's vinyl is also of a higher quality than that of 20 or 30 years ago. New records are regularly pressed onto heavy 180-gram or 200-gram vinyl, a weight that in earlier days was reserved for niche audiophile releases. (Today's records are also accordingly priced



Blake Meint

AM



Danny Clinch

Drive-By Truckers

well higher than those of the past.) Many albums are split into several records, and some are designed to play at 45 RPM instead of the traditional 33 1/3 RPM. Amoeba's Weinstein uses visual art as a metaphor to explain what he believes is the format's audio superiority. "Vinyl is still the best print of a musical work there is," he says. "MP3s are like a postcard of an artwork, CDs are like an 8-by-10 inch print, and LPs are like a real lithograph or high-end reproduction." And for those who still want their music portable, many new vinyl releases also include a code to download a digital version.

Records today are also regularly housed in heavyweight cardboard, the better to showcase another of the format's most seductive lures: album art. The CD era shrank the album-cover canvas down to five square inches, and digital music doesn't necessarily require art at all. The days seemed past when covers like the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* could become as iconic as the music inside them. "Rock 'n' roll needs to be seen, touched, smelled and tasted just as much as heard," says Mooney Suzuki singer Sammy James Jr. "I want the tactile, visceral, physical guts of it all. I want to unroll the poster, open the gatefold, explore the cover art and the liner notes."

The resurgence of vinyl means that more and more acts are exploiting the expanded space for intriguing artwork. (See sidebar.) "Packaging of an album is a creative art form," says artist AM. "You can't get this experience on iTunes." So ardent is AM about the format that he recently started an online pledge drive to raise money to press his latest album, *Future Sons & Daughters*, on vinyl. And of course, as singer Shelby Lynne points out,

"You can't roll a joint on an iPod." Still, Biery admits that his company continues to be more focused on making album art work for CD. "Vinyl's still such a niche business," he says. "We're not sitting around saying, 'That would be cool for vinyl!'"

3. POPS & SCRATCHES

Another challenge for vinyl is the scarcity of pressing plants, many of which are currently operating at full capacity. "There's hardly any pressing plants in the U.K. for vinyl anymore," says Young, who uses major label EMI's plant for Vinyl 180 releases. Warner Bros. began by employing a California company, but soon the label's output grew so much it was forced to look overseas for pressing plants.

The vaunted sound quality of vinyl is also dependent on the quality of the turntables used to play them. Media technologist Paul Riismandel argues that part of the reason for vinyl's rapid decline two decades ago was the poor quality of the mostly plastic turntables commonly available at the time. Only committed audiophiles shelled out for the mostly metal turntables with quality tonearm and cartridges that produced truly superior sound and kept skipping to a minimum. "Now that vinyl is retro-popular again, it's ironic that people are flocking to the same sort of cheap plastic turntables that scared folks away from LPs twenty years ago," he writes at mediageek.com. "Within the last year the gadget landscape has been inundated with turntables that connect to your computer by USB, or are attached to CD burners, or which now even record your LPs as MP3s directly to a thumb drive. But almost every single one of these 'tables is pretty much a plastic late '80s design with some extra digital

electronics tacked on. I fear that for many new or revived record listeners, the thin fidelity of these retro-plastic wonders will cause them to tire of vinyl quickly, making LPs more of a novelty than anything else."

Vinyl still makes up only a tiny portion of music sales, and even its rapid growth continues to be vastly outpaced by the growth in digital sales. Most consumers simply don't care enough about issues of sound quality or packaging to pass up the unparalleled convenience digital music offers. There certainly seems to be no danger of vinyl ever again matching the sales of its peak year—1977, when 344 million long-playing records were sold. "Vinyl's going to always be a niche," says Biery. "It's never going to be anything more than a niche. But I do believe it's going to continue to grow."

4. ARTISTS' CHOICE

Artists have been some of vinyl's most ardent fans. In the 1990s and early 2000s, when the music industry had long since turned its back on the format, some acts were using their clout to ensure that their albums saw release on vinyl. Pearl Jam has always insisted on it, and has sent members of its fan club an exclusive seven-inch single every year since 1991. Lead singer Eddie Vedder has said the difference between MP3 and vinyl is "like the difference between making love to a real woman and a plastic one." He's far from alone. "We have a turntable on our tour bus and we go scouring for little indie record stores in every town," says Patterson Hood of Drive-By Truckers. "I still blow my whole per-diem on records."

The White Stripes' Jack White is perhaps the format's most visibly committed

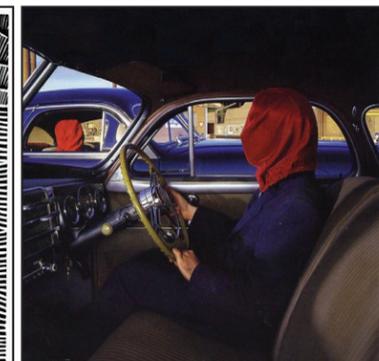


Jeff Kravitz

Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder on stage at Lollapalooza 2007

THE ART OF VINYL

One of the once seemingly lost pleasures of vinyl was the 12-inch-by-12-inch canvas an LP record sleeve offers for visual artists, photographers and graphic designers. The resurgence of the format has been accompanied by an increase in the creativity and grandiosity of modern album covers. Here are a few of our favorites from the past few years.

Feist *The Reminder* (2007)Jay-Z *The Black Album* (2009)Yeah Yeah Yeahs *It's Blitz!* (2009)Neko Case *Middle Cyclone* (2009)Thom Yorke *The Eraser* (2006)The Mars Volta *Frances the Mute* (2005)

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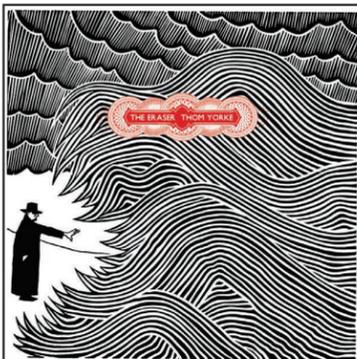
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MERLE HAGGARD
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