

## RIP Vinyl, We Hardly Knew Ye

This morning, a UHLC colleague sent around a note about how the Urban Outfitters stores carry vinyl records: <http://time.com/money/3430117/urban-outfitters-record-sales-hipster/> . His note prompted me on this Posse posting.

Vinyl records are a very small slice of the various ways we buy and sell music today, and Amazon.com has a Vinyl Department that sells them, which is why the Urban Outfitters stores selling them is probably a doomed enterprise over the long haul. (There is also a great resource with only vinyl, which features one special every day: [www.popmarket.com](http://www.popmarket.com).) However, UO stores do not carry the full range of opera and classical music, which is where the real use of vinyl has been consistent, but even this market is also falling off. (And if the demographics of opera goes is any indication, people like us are like the Shakers and the Jesuits—we're not making many of either, any more.) These stores and website are selling radio tubes, buggy whips, and incandescent light bulbs, in my view. If it were not for hip hop and rap, which make primordial use of vinyl and turntables, there would be even less of a market.

For two recent takes on this market and the consumer preference issues, see:

<http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2014/01/24/classical-music-vinyl>

<http://www.sinfinimusic.com/uk/features/other-features/whatever-happened-to-classical-vinyl-for-record-store-day>

To me, this issue is the musical equivalent of reading newspapers. Of course I prefer to hold them, read them, cut out the clippings, and then wash the ink off my fingers—especially on a Sunday morning with the Times and the Post and a cup of coffee. But I subscribe to the NY Times online, and read the daily version digitally, where I can cut and paste and email, and archive much better than I can do so with paper copies. I think that this is largely generational, as my nieces and neighbors do not believe anything if it is not online or on Jon Stewart, which they watch electronically. And I know I am contributing to the death of print newspapers, but the tradeoffs are too many for me to just let papers pile up because I cannot access them so easily as I can online.

I also believe that most people just like the music as they get it—not perfect fidelity, but pretty good. Many kids have never heard vinyl music, any more than we have ever heard wax cylinders. These less-than-perfect delivery modes are still quite good, and for most people, are good enough. And it is hard to find good record players for vinyl, or to find styluses for the older versions. (I bought one in a Santa Fe Target, largely as a backup, and because it was a discontinued brand, I got the whole deal for pennies on the dollar. It was the last record player they had in stock. And Radio Shack no longer carries them.) And sometimes the re-mastered versions are better than their vinyl counterparts. Listen to “Girl” by the Beatles on *Rubber Soul* on CDs today, and note the sharp intake of breath by John Lennon after he sings the chorus. It is sublime, and was never on the original vinyl versions—either the US or UK versions—where it was sweetened and removed.

The other difference is that the great cover art from albums is a dying cultural form. CDs are so small that you can barely read the print, and they are no longer the format of choice for great graphic artists. Many CDs, especially re-issued rock albums from major players, often include booklets that have commentary, lyrics, pictures, and the like. The Paul Simon reissued Collection I mentioned has a 50+ page booklet, and it is fascinating and useful for fans, but it is very small, and no one can really appreciate the artwork reproduced from the original vinyl releases. Bruce Springsteen’s Live/1975-85 box set also has a 50+ page booklet, as do most of the premium reissued albums. However, even the best covers (Sgt. Pepper’s, Let it Bleed, Abraxas, Revolver, etc) are not as exquisite when they are reduced to CD size. (And opening an LP did not require engineering and demolition skills, such as are required to pry those damned little wrappers and stickers around CDs.)

If you are still with me, I make one final point—the release last week of U2’s new CD (Songs of Innocence) for free on iTunes, which only a monster band can afford to do, will make great money for the group, even though they gave away the songs for free, even to iTunes subscribers who did not request it. The original release was only for that one group—iTunes members. Anyone else has to buy it as a whole or song by song as a download by the regular channels. And because the band has not toured recently or released an album in about half a dozen years, this clever marketing strategy was brilliant, as the sales of their deep catalog have increased, and so the overall band value has increased. See the story by Miriam Coleman, U2 Back Catalog Sees Massive Sales Bump After 'Songs of Innocence' Launch, RollingStone.com, September 14, 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/u2-back-catalog-sees-massive-sales-bump-after-songs-of-innocence-launch-20140914> :

An unprecedented number of U2's previous albums have now entered iTunes' album chart since the new record's launch. Earlier this week, 24 of the band's titles had reached the top 200, and the *U218* singles album struck the top 10 in 46 countries. *The Joshua Tree* from 1987, 1991's *Achtung Baby*, 1983's *War* and two versions of the singles collection are currently in the U.S. top 50, with 1988's *Rattle and Hum* and 1984's *The Unforgettable Fire* following close behind.

With all the new formats swirling around, there will be many such fresh strategies in evidence to get us all to pick one or the other. (Beyonce's newest CD was sold without any pre-release publicity, and its sales soared.) But as was the case with Betamax, the best technical delivery service does not always prevail in the cruel music marketplace, and I fear this will eventually converge on vinyl. RIP Vinyl, and we loved you well.

Michael