

My name is Simon and I am a record collector.

Although I have been buying music since I was seven years old I didn't consider myself a record collector until much later. It was the summer of 2007 that I made this confession to myself and within a year I had sold all of my CDs - approximately two thousand and put in a proposal to write a PhD in record collecting to Brunel University.

Since these moments of confession, definition and categorisation and the beginnings of my study of vinyl collecting, there has been considerable change in the perception and production of vinyl records and how they are valued by fans, musicians, labels and the press.

Much has been made over the last couple of years of the resurgence of interest in vinyl records. 'The Vinyl Revival' now regularly makes the headlines in the broadsheets as well as specialist magazines and web sources with even Radio 4 covering Record Store Day. Vinyl has also become more and more visible as a marker of 'cool' in advertising [slides] and editorial. Sales of vinyl have made steady increases over the last few years with 2013 showing a 35% increase and now stand at their highest since 1997 when Record collector magazine was pondering the question

**'just how long vinyl can hang on is open to debate, but it's safe to say that we'll probably be able to buy 7"s, 12"s and LPs up until the year 2000' (Gilbert, Doggett et al. 1995 p. 23).**

However this is only a partial picture of both vinyl sales and vinyl culture, much of which is yet to be researched thoroughly. outside of the **'the statistical, tabulatory, scientific irrefutability of the 'top 40''(Corbett 1990 p. 80)** the second hand market is enormous. At the time of writing there were approximately three million second hand records for sale on the electronic auction website ebay, two and a half million for sale on Discogs, five million for sale on Gemm and further unquantifiable sales on Amazon Market place and countless electronic sources. There are of course other second hand sales routes for vinyl, not least of all shops that increasingly have a mixture of new and second hand vinyl for sale in the racks.

So why, in an age where music is 'like water', listenable, saveable, downloadable, convenient, accessible and instant, do people still value vinyl records?

In January 2013 I sent out a link to an online qualitative survey through the social networking site twitter. I targeted the tweet to Record Collector Magazine, Record Store Day and Dust and Grooves. With forwards and retweets the reach was approximately eighty thousand twitter users. From this and within four days I had four hundred responses. Once incomplete surveys were removed I had three hundred and forty four responses to work with.

Twenty five questions were asked in total in five sections. The first section dealt with demographic information and some details about the collector's spending habits and collections. Further sections asked about their engagement with old records, their social lives, and their relationship with record collecting culture.

The respondents varied in age between 16 and 59. 45 between 16 and 20, 133 between 21 and 30, 99 between 31 and 40, 44 between 41 and 50, 3 between 51 and 60

Of those that completed the survey, 63 (approximately 18%) were female with the remaining 82% (281) being male. Within each age category women made up 31.1% of the 16-21 year olds, 17.29% of the 21-30 year olds, 12.12% of the 31-40 year olds, 15.9% of the 41-50 year olds and (fittingly) 33.3 % of the 51-60 year old.

The number of records that made up the respondents' collections varied between the five records - owned by a 28 year old female from Reno who had 'just started' to collect, to over 20,000 records owned by a 41 year old male from DC who used them in his DJ career. Some collectors knew exactly how many records they had, by format '400 (250 x 7", 15 x 10", 135 x 12")<sup>1</sup>' whilst others gave approximations such as, 'Conservative estimate: Over 5,000. I haven't counted them in years'. In total there were approximately 380,000 records in the respondent's collective collection. If redistributed equally amongst them this would equate to a mean of 1,116 records each. A median average, however situates the average lower at 300 records and a mode at 100 records. The amount of time the respondents had been collecting for also varied. From one month which had heroically resulted in 20 records<sup>2</sup> to '40+' years which had resulted in a collection consisting of '25000 x 7" 1500 x 12" singles 7000 x LPs'<sup>3</sup>. Some collectors had been collecting sporadically over the course of their lifetime with definite

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<sup>1</sup> Respondent 170 a 43 year old male from Olympia, Washington

<sup>2</sup> Respondent 279 a 39 year old male from Brighton

<sup>3</sup> Respondent 293 a 52 year old male from Glasgow

periods of 'collecting'. Or some respondents had, like me, moments of self definition where they said they had been collecting 'Actively the past 5 years; owned, listened and appreciated 20+', or others who admitted that 'Although I've owned vinyl records for over 25 years, it's only in the last ten years that I've collected'. Respondents came from twenty one countries. Austria, Argentina, Columbia, Denmark, Italy, Mexico, Poland and Turkey had one response each and the countries of North America dominated with two hundred and twenty five of the responses. The United Kingdom and Ireland contributed eighty one responses (UK 68), Germany and Australia - six, Belgium and Finland - four, New Zealand and The Netherlands - three, and Sweden, Spain and France - two each...

what I want to talk about here is the notion of value and how the respondents discussed value in number of ways.

Firstly in terms of how value relates to collecting

secondly in relation to the economic and cultural values of second-hand records as they appear to different collectors.

and thirdly how value relates to the condition and grading of records.

This notion of value is problematic in traditional notions of collecting where.

**If the predominant value of an object or idea for the person possessing it is intrinsic. i.e., if it is valued primarily for use, or purpose, or aesthetically pleasing quality, or other value inherent in the object or accruing to it by whatever circumstances of custom, training, or habit, *it is not a collection* (Durost in Pearce 1998 p. 2 my emphasis).**

This everyday use 'value' of vinyl records, which is a common thread through collecting literature, has prevented record collecting as being considered within the realms of collecting theory for many years. Susan Pearce has suggested that record collectors '**may, indeed, not fall into any useful collecting remit at all**' (1998 p.32).

if the collected object is valued and used in its intended function it cannot be included in collecting. the simplest example is a coin.

If a coin is taken out of circulation and is not being used as 'money' but displayed and arranged with similar items it can be a collection.

The money in your pocket is not.

However, I would challenge this theoretical dead end on two counts. Firstly and within the parameters of the theory I would suggest that vinyl is no longer everyday. its materiality is redundant - it is, in a digital world, archaic, fragile, cumbersome, hard to find, expensive a remnant of a bygone era - a heritage object - If one wants to listen to music functionally, one can access streaming services where the object - the tablet, laptop or phone - is, through its multi functionality - invisible and does not mediate the listening in a physically visible way. Vinyl is not everyday. It is through its fragility and effort representative of something else - a set of values that operate and give it another kind of functionality - this 'other' functionality was commented on by the respondents and what vinyl offered that other formats did not these qualities can be split into four areas.

The Haptic

The Artistic

The Slow

The Social

Firstly the tactile, the haptic, the physical engagement with vinyl which also includes the physical playing of the record

I like the tactile sense of holding a record. I have all the music I could ever want at my fingertips digitally, but there's something nice and satisfying about putting on a record that I don't get from Spotify.<sup>4</sup>

Their tactility; the 'presence' inherent in audio playback; the fact that each purchase is the culmination of a small but significant journey from learning about a release, visiting your record store, searching through crates/shelves, discovering some nugget about the band/music from the store assistant through to putting the needle on the groove. It's an involved process that has emotional heft in a way that

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<sup>4</sup> Respondent 42 a 25 year old male from Nashville

you don't get with digital releases.<sup>5</sup>

This was often positioned as ritualistic

the ritual of carefully handling a record - not to scratch it - and listening to a side. It demands more out of you like owning a cat.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly the notion of the large quality of the format in particular the artwork

I like having the record put out in a large format for proper scale of art (nice and visible, rather than small on CD or digital), as well as expansion of art. I like the idea of variants, creating a connection with the record and giving you a sense of ownership of the music<sup>7</sup>

I like the size of them - for the cover art but also because they are slightly impractical<sup>8</sup>

thirdly what I'm labelling the slow quality of vinyl

slowness in terms of the long term engaged listening process and also the slow processes in accumulating either individual new albums where visits to shops are involved and also the long wait and effort needed to find, track down and then own rare records

I like that records make you slow down and pay attention.<sup>9</sup>

Its a different type of listening experience - a 'slow' listening experience. <sup>10</sup>

There is also a slowness to records that I equate to the slow food movement to some extent. While of course you don't HAVE to listen to the whole side of the album, that's what happens - you don't just click the one song you like and leave it at that. You get a better sense of the artist/band and their range and abilities. Record production seems way more holistic.<sup>11</sup>

fourthly - the social value of vinyl. The ways in which vinyl is used to communicate with other collectors either competitively or collectively, and also the social connection to other times.

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<sup>5</sup> Respondent 32 a 38 year old male from Ireland.

<sup>6</sup> Respondent 59 a 36 year old male from Laurel Canyon

<sup>7</sup> Respondent 229 a 22 year old male from California

<sup>8</sup> Respondent 3 a 42 year old male from London

<sup>9</sup> Respondent 223 a 33 year old female from Scranton

<sup>10</sup> Respondent 279 a 39 year old male from Brighton

<sup>11</sup> Respondent 238 a 42 year old female from New Jersey

'Records from before I was born offer a material link to the past, like holding and listening to history'<sup>12</sup>

I really like the idea of physical music over digital and like that records are big and something that you could hold onto, and that you were forced to pay attention while you were listening. Plus it's fun tracking down and bragging about owning rare pieces.<sup>13</sup>

The second and third areas I want to touch upon in relation to value and vinyl are linked through the differing ways the same vinyl record can have or not have value dependent upon the eyes and hands of the beholder.

Firstly, and returning to collecting theory; Baudrillard makes the distinction between object and objet. where objects are ordinary and objet inspire passion. He suggests that objects, in his example a refrigerator, that offer a 'practical transaction' that have purely mechanistic properties can *not* be 'objet' and therefore cannot cause or be subject to passion. In these terms records are mechanistic in that they offer the means to access music itself through mechanical means (although the magical qualities of this sound reproduction should not be underestimated) and as such they are utilitarian objects comparable to Baudrillard's 'refrigerator' - common place factory produced objects of mass consumption. I'll read through Baudrillard's quote replacing refrigerator with record.

**[T]he fact that I make use of a [record] in order to [listen to] things, means that the [record] is defined in terms of a practical transaction: it is not an object so much as a [listening] mechanism. In this sense I cannot be said to possess it. Possession cannot apply to an implement, since the object I utilize always directs me back to the world. Rather it applies to that object once it is *divested of its function and made relative to a subject* (Baudrillard 1994 p. 7 original emphasis).**

Of course, not every record inspires passion in every collector. After all, to some extent all records are identical mass produced objects. twelve inches black vinyl discs housed in cardboard sleeves. Only the music contained in the microgrooves and the print on the card is the differentiation. This is where I'd like to combine Baudrillard's object/objet dichotomy - the

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<sup>12</sup> Respondent 72 a 22 year old male from London

<sup>13</sup> Respondent 115 a 23 year old male from Kansas city

functional and the inspiring - with Kristeva's notions of the abject. That unsettling in-between category that is both, in record collector terms priceless and worthless.

so whilst collecting theorists might suggest 'between including and excluding there can be no half measures' (Elsner and Cardinal 1994 p.1)

Kristeva might say 'the ambiguous, the in-between, what defies boundaries, a composite resistant to unity' (Ibid 1990 p. 160)

records have 'potentiality' of value

This unsettling quality can be attested to by any collector who at a car boot sale or charity shop has watched as the collector in front of them flicks through a box and hovers over a record that is on the waiting collector's wants list. If the flicking collector carries on leafing through the box the record remains worthless trash until the waiting collector removes the record from the box and it becomes priceless.

The final area I want to talk about regarding the value of vinyl is in relation to condition; in particular grading, economic value and the writing on sleeves. This was a rich and surprising area of the study that in some ways connects to nostalgia and the age of collectors. From coding the data a pattern emerged connected to the age of the collectors. Those collectors who were in approximately their mid to late thirties had a different attitude to the condition of vinyl than those who were younger. Those that were in the 30s plus group had grown up with vinyl as the primary carrier of music at some point in their lives and so there was a connection to their lived experience. Those who were younger had either less or no experience of vinyl as this everyday object and in that sense the vinyl record itself appeared much older to them - as an antique. As such they valued the writing on sleeves that the older collectors in general loathed.

Yes! I have a few records with sleeves that are so beat up & scratched & taped like man, this one's been through a lot, someone really loved it. I have a few with names written on the center label or with an old school sticker name tag. I have one that says "Christmas '69" in really nice handwriting. I wonder about it a lot.<sup>14</sup>

I always think of where the record came from, who owned it before and what connection the previous owner had with the record. I also enjoy finding old records with personal writing on

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<sup>14</sup> Respondent 43 a 20 year old female from Washington State

them because it just expands that previous life more although I would never do it to any of my new records.<sup>15</sup>

my introducing the beatles copy has a little girls hand writing identifying each member on the cover. makes me smile everytime<sup>16</sup>

I started out hating when someone would mark a record or it's packaging with their writing or name, but more recently I have come to like it more as sort of a historical document.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas the older collectors likened it to

drawing a mustache on the Mona Lisa.<sup>18</sup>

Sometimes I think about the journey of records from brand new shop bought to being passed around over the years, till they end up in my collection! Not keen on previous owners writing comments on sleeve/labels though!<sup>19</sup>

Yes, sometimes wonder about how come they've survived, especially if in excellent condition. Hate writing on sleeves and labels unless its a demo/acetate, but this is hypocritical as I just have to look at my writing on some of my teenage years purchases!<sup>20</sup>

this was a broad categorisation and not an exclusive one - one 43 year old collector said...

Absolutely. One of my favorite finds was a copy of Neil Young's decade LP (West German pressing) A US Serviceman used the paper sleeves to express his frustrations with military life in the mid 70's. I love objects with a history and a patina.

The notion of what patina is, or is not was something complex best likened to wear and tear. For those that liked records in mint condition patina is the absence of signs of ageing but perhaps with some wear. For the younger collectors patina was the demonstration of love or care for the music rather than the record

of course! I think it is neat if the previous owners write on the sleeves, like on a couple of mine my uncle actually owned and he was really into Zappa so on some of the records he just wrote 'zappa zappa zappa' and you just got to think why in the hell he would do that, you know? also

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<sup>15</sup> Respondent 64 a 23 year old male from New Jersey

<sup>16</sup> Respondent 218 a 26 year old male from the midwest

<sup>17</sup> Respondent 222 a 26 year old male from Elkton MD

<sup>18</sup> Respondent 195 A 34 year old male from St. Louis

<sup>19</sup> Respondent 320 a 39 year old male from Sheffield

<sup>20</sup> Respondent 118 a 53 year old female from UK

it is cool if people write their name on it. that way you know it was important to someone, that they would care if they lost it.<sup>21</sup>

to conclude - It was clear that no one record collecting culture emerged from the practices of the respondents, but a series of interconnected and differing values were ascribed and prescribed by collectors depending on a number of factors - not least of which was their age, their 'lived experience' of vinyl as a format.

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<sup>21</sup> Respondent 76 a 17 year old female from Ontario