

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 and begun to self-consciously wallow in vinyl nostalgia.

But is this nostalgia a conservative nostalgia - a desire to return to the high point of capitalist over production of vinyl, where gatekeepers told me what to buy and for how much and I went out and bought it? Or is record collecting a bohemian nostalgia, more akin to the traditional practices of post war subcultures where a rejection of the present - its politics, ideologies, its fashions and ephemera - leads to an embracing of materials from the past?

I am clearly not the only vinyl nostalgic - 'The Vinyl Revival' now regularly makes the headlines in the broadsheets as well as specialist magazines and web sources. 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

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'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).**

Second hand records 'persist and circulate' in a number of places - online, in shops and at car boot sales. Between eBay, Discogs and Gemm there are approximately nine million records for sale with a large proportion of them being second hand. The numbers of records in second

hand shops and at car boot sales is largely unmeasurable and the second hand market is woefully under researched.

The Data

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")¹' whilst others gave approximations such as, 'Conservative estimate: Over 5,000. I haven't counted them in years'. Some collectors had been collecting sporadically over the course of their lifetime with definite 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'.

what I want to talk about here is just one particular aspect of the research - How the practices and attitudes of collectors - particularly those that engage with second hand records - across

¹ Respondent 170 a 43 year old male from Olympia, Washington

this spectrum related to the past, to nostalgia and also how these nostalgias relate to the ways in which collectors felt about the condition of second hand records that came in to their collection and how they valued these records economically and culturally.

The notion of collecting records at all is problematic in traditional notions of collecting where one of the 'rules' of defining collecting suggests that...[slide]

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 that impact on the ways in which the respondents interact with records. [slide]

The Haptic

The Artistic

The Slow

The Social

What I want to talk about today cuts across each of these areas in terms of how collectors engage with the physicality of the second hand record... I like the size of them - for the cover art but also because they are slightly impractical²

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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.³

I want to explore for a moment, theoretically, 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. (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. [slide] twelve inches black vinyl discs housed in cardboard sleeves. Only the music contained in the microgrooves and the print on the card is

² Respondent 3 a 42 year old male from London

³ Respondent 59 a 36 year old male from Laurel Canyon

the differentiation. This is where I'd like to combine Baudrillard's object/objet dichotomy - the 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

[slide] 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.

So how do collectors make these decisions, what are the markers and even marks that lead to certain records being left in the racks and others coming home. This was a rich and surprising area of the study that 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. In terms of nostalgia [slide] This lived/unlived experience can be mapped against Svetlana Boym's model of nostalgia where she splits the pseudo-greek word into its constituent parts

Nostos - The return home and Algia - Pain

to suggest different kinds of nostalgia

Nostos can be linked to restorative nostalgia, patching up real memory gaps, rebuying records from one's school days perhaps or records from other periods of life that have been lost or sold along the way.

Algia - can be linked to reflective nostalgia, where 'home' can never be returned to. We may never have been there and our only link to it is the collection that points out that we cannot return.

this return to an actual place - a familiar place of comfort and a contrasting nostalgic experience for something we have not experienced may explain these two groups differing attitudes to the condition of second hand records [slide]

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.⁴

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 them because it just expands that previous life more although I would never do it to any of my new records.⁵

my introducing the beatles copy has a little girls hand writing identifying each member on the cover. makes me smile everytime⁶

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.⁷

Whereas the older collectors likened it to

drawing a mustache on the Mona Lisa.⁸

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!⁹

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!¹⁰

⁴ Respondent 43 a 20 year old female from Washington State

⁵ Respondent 64 a 23 year old male from New Jersey

⁶ Respondent 218 a 26 year old male from the midwest

⁷ Respondent 222 a 26 year old male from Elkton MD

⁸ Respondent 195 A 34 year old male from St. Louis

⁹ Respondent 320 a 39 year old male from Sheffield

¹⁰ Respondent 118 a 53 year old female from UK

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 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.¹¹

to conclude - It is clear that no one record collecting culture exists, at least not from the practices of the respondents. But there are a series of interconnected and differing values 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. This is before individual tastes and genre distinctions are brought in to explore the resurgence of vinyl.

¹¹ Respondent 76 a 17 year old female from Ontario