



# **The Vinyl Revival: Aura, Culture and Snobbery**

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**In an age of digital media, owning physical media is an indicator that marks you as being 'different'. But why is that?**

# Introduction

Vinyl records are a nightmare to use. They are fragile and expensive, but somehow vinyl has had a resurgence in recent years. What was once another example of physical media fading into obscurity alongside VHS and CD's has now been placed on a pedestal among music 'connoisseurs'. As someone who has over 400 vinyl records in my collection, I'm fully aware that I also fit this pretentious. But somehow, I don't care. My vinyl matters more. I'm not letting anything get between me and my copy of Hot Rats.

For this essay, I'll be looking at the "vinyl revival" with a focus on the perception that its consumers are connoisseurs of music. I'll be using the theories such as Pierre Bourdieu's Cultural Capital and Walter Benjamin's Aura as I believe these can explain the reasoning vinyl's elitist reputation. Before this however, I would like to talk more about the circumstances that saw vinyl return into popular music culture.

## How Music Distribution Has Changed

It's fascinating to see that vinyl has managed to thrive in modern times, especially within a climate alongside music streaming sites like Spotify and Apple Music. Even since the early days of streaming with sites such as Pandora (2005) and Last.fm (2002) it was only a matter of time before the music landscape was completely consumed. The selling point being able to listen to music wherever and whenever you want was unbeatable. Streaming heavily impacted physical media, with everything becoming accessible online, physical media looked obsolete. Streaming changed the way we consume media. Holt, Steirer and Petruska discussed this in their article '*The Expanding Landscape of Connected Viewing*' talking about how technology affects our way of consuming media:

*As the devices on which we consume content have changed, so too have the structures –affective, functional, and social – of media consumption itself. [...] the living room remains a hub for media consumption, but the growth of smart TVs, over-the-top boxes, and mobile devices have shattered taken-for-granted notions of how consumption takes place there. (Holt, Steirer and Petruska, 2016. p. 2)*

The writing was on the wall, traditional methods of consuming media had become relics of yesteryear. However, by some miracle, they started to make a comeback. The vinyl industry has seen an increase in popularity over the last decade. Vanessa Higgins CEO of Regent

Street Records, a current indie record label expressed her enjoyment in seeing the return of vinyl saying 'It's also wonderful to see the continued growth of vinyl [...] which shows fans still love a physical, tangible music artefact in their hands' (Higgins cited in BPI, 2020, online).

Higgins emphasis on vinyl being a 'physical, tangible music artefact' which leads me to believe that this must be significant in the reason for vinyl's resurgence. Vinyl is more than just a physical medium for music, it's also a cultural artefact, a piece of history. You could be holding an original copy of *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), or perhaps *Night at the Opera* (1975) the album that introduced the world to Bohemian Rhapsody. No matter the album, the very essence of its importance radiates from it, including a massive sense of nostalgia. Today, a majority of media is consumed via online streaming.

In 2019, Ofcom reported that approximately half of all households were subscribed to at least one subscription service they said:

*'The internet is massively increasing the choice available to UK viewers [...] Around half of UK households now subscribe to at least one subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) service (such as Netflix or Amazon Prime Video) and UK adults watch, on average, about half an hour of YouTube per day.'* (Ofcom, 2019. p. 4)

While Ofcom were referring to video streaming platforms, it still shows how popular streaming has become. Whether it be audio or visual, a platform will exist allowing the consumer to stream it. And with this brand-new technology arriving the ones that came before it will soon fading away into memory. This cycle has happened before, in August 1982 CD's were first released with music labels quickly abandoning the vinyl format for the next big thing. Vinyl looked outdated compared to CD's, see how Stephen A. Booth's, a journalist who worked for *Rolling Stone* magazine described CD's in comparison:

*'Don't look for grooves, or even feel for them. Sandwiched between two layers of clear plastic is the shiny playing surface [...] Instead of the squiggles that set a stylus vibrating on an LP, the spiral tracks of the Compact Disc are composed of microscopic 'pits' that are read by a laser beam.'* (Booths, cited in Chivers Yochim and Biddinger, 2008. p. 186)

CD's were described as if they were an invention of science fiction come to life, and with that vinyl began saw the start of its decline. But of course, technology is ever advancing, so when media started to move towards streaming it was only a matter of time until CD faced went the same downfall. This returns us to my original question, why has vinyl returned?

# The Aura of Vinyl – Walter Benjamin

Walter Benjamin is a German philosopher and cultural critic. In 1935, Benjamin wrote his acclaimed article 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in which Benjamin discusses the idea of objects having an 'aura' that radiates from them. As an example of what aura is, Benjamin describes it from the perspective of someone experiencing nature:

*'If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch.'* (Benjamin, 1969. p. 5)

Aura is the emotional feeling of an artefact, the security of being protected by the mountains, the warmth of holding a vinyl. Bourdieu goes on to explain that aura can be different depending on the intentions of the consumer. A person who grew up in the 70's will feel nostalgic towards vinyl as it reminds them of the warmth of their youth. On the other hand a much younger person, may see vinyl as a historical artefact, as they are hold an object that saw its heyday long before they were born. Benjamin further discusses how it's possible for objects to lose their aura after they have been reproduced.

*'Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmd eye. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction'* (Benjamin, 1969, p. 5 - 6)

I believe that this is another contributor to why vinyl has comeback. While almost any song can be listened to via streaming it's still a rerelease of the song and not in its original format. Until you have experienced music in its the original format, you haven't really heard how it's meant to sound. So for consumers who wish to truly experience their favourite album, they have no other alternative but to buy the original format.

In the world of vinyl this further extends to buying a vinyl from the first run of presses, these are believed to have superior sound compared to later rereleases. Of course, this means that first pressings can be worth a ludicrous amount of money, the most expensive being a copy of the *White Album* (1968) by *The Beatles* that was owned by Ringo Starr, it ultimately sold for \$790,000 at auction.

# Vinyl and Culture – Pierre Bourdieu

Consumers who indulge in vinyl can express ‘cultural capital’. But what is cultural capital? Created by theorist Pierre Bourdieu, it’s a sociology term explaining how the way a person is perceived by society is determined by characterises such as the way they dress, talk and speak. Nick Prior the professor of cultural sociology at the University of Edinburgh applies cultural capital to tastes in music discussing how a person’s upbringing can be a factor:

*‘Early attendance at classical music concerts is similarly the passing down of an aesthetic family heirloom dressed up as good grace, the ultimate effect of which is to turn objective structures (stratified inequalities) into embodied conduct (everyday actions).’ (Prior, 2015 p. 4)*

Picture a father playing his collection to his son at a young age, as the child grows older, they begin to share a unique bond with vinyl. Overtime this becomes an embodied practice in their life, they start going to record stores, searching through the endless assortment of music before picking out an album to experience.

This begins the process of turning becoming a connoisseur, years of listening to vinyl has conditioned them despising the more so called advanced media formats. With this newfound sense of cultural capital the average consumer then ascends to a higher rank of society placing themselves on a podium as they listen exclusively to vinyl the ‘clearly superior’ format unlike disposable music found on streaming devices. But why has cultural capital formed around vinyl?

Vinyl was never just about the music it was the experience, there’s a ritual that must be followed. First you select the album, a task that can take hours to complete on its own, once selected you take time to admire it while focusing on the cover art and admire all the intricate details. You carefully take the record out of its sleeve, avoiding any accidental scratches as you hold it gently without touching the grooves. Then comes the cleaning of the record to remove any dust, you place it onto your record player move the stylus and then... bliss. The journey leading up to actually listening to the album is just as important as the musical experience. The pride and accomplishment that a music connoisseur feels after completing their personal vinyl ritual is an euphoric experience.

# Conclusion

Vinyl has become the embodiment of musical connoisseurship, alongside the unique experience the format provides it also has been able to survive in a hostile streaming-based industry. To end this essay I would like to share a quote from ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons, as an avid vinyl collector Gibbons perfectly captures the feeling of listening to a record and how its unique quirks makes listening to it different from any other format:

*'The rawness and the richness of music on vinyl almost went away, but it still seems to be on a lot of people's radar, and for good reason. It does something different than more accessible means of music playing [...] You get in front of these archaic contraptions that go 'round and 'round. It's mesmerizing, not only to look at but to sit back and experience' (Gibbons, cited in Childers, 2012, online).*

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