

The Inconvenient Truth of Vinyl's Comeback in the United States

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Abstract

The recent resurgence of vinyl records can be attributed to the inconvenience of the format. As music technology continues to advance and grow more convenient, somehow the seemingly ancient technology of the record is showing its face. As the sound quality of newer formats like compact discs and streaming reaches levels that surpass records, some enthusiasts still choose vinyl. As the trend of music consumption continues on the path of digital streaming, an emerging counterculture of record collectors choose not to participate. I argue that the inconvenience of records, including size, price, fragility, lack of portability and physicality, evokes a truly unique listening experience that separates vinyl from the rest. The joys of vinyl, like reading liner notes or the big artwork, are inconvenient because the format is large and must be stored correctly, and the cracks and pops present in playback exist because dust collects in the grooves of records and is inconvenient to clean. All of the good things about the tangibility of vinyl are inherently bothersome.

Keywords: phonograph records, recorded music, resurgence

It was hot and the air was thick, and there I was sweating it out. No, I'm not referring to some sort of desert excursion, but rather the attic adventures of a fifteen year old me on a summer day to cure my boredom while the parents were at work. With nothing better to do, other than some lifeless summer reading assignment for my ninth grade English class due in the following months, I tried to find some adventure by doing a little exploring in our attic. As I scoured through old film reels, yearbooks, and artifacts from my parents' childhoods, I stumbled upon something that piqued my interest—a box of old records. As a kid who had grown up surrounded by music and playing music, records fascinated me. All of my heroes, who I would normally listen to on my phone or through my father's CD stereo system, were now in my hands stored inside large twelve by twelve sleeves on black plastic discs: The Rolling Stones, Steely Dan, Led Zeppelin, Cream, CSNY, Jimi Hendrix. From there on, a lifelong obsession with vinyl ensued, thanks to a little curiosity and a growing dislike of Charles Dickens.

This curiosity did not end when high school started. As I began purchasing a turntable, speakers, and records on my own, I wondered why records were popular again. Even Barnes & Noble is selling records now! Why are vinyl records making a comeback in the United States despite the inconveniences of the format? Vinyl records are coming back to popularity in America *because* of the format's inconveniences. All of the popular reasons why vinyl is increasing dramatically in sales can all be drawn back to its fragility, price, and its hands-on nature. Because music consumption has been increasing in convenience for decades, music is accessible to the point where it loses its once great meaning. When modern music is so readily available that you can access it within seconds, there is no emotional attachment, no effort being put into the listening experience. Music consumers are growing aware of this distance from the music they listen to; they long for a more meaningful experience. Vinyl's difficulty, coming from

its fragility, its lack of portability, and its nonexistent shuffling capability which the modern world has been increasingly overcome with, is what gives vinyl its meaning and is the engine that powers the vinyl revolution.

These findings are significant because it shows a reversal in music consumer culture. Over the course of our lives as music consumers, through the cassette era to the CD era to the streaming era of today, music technology is being marketed to us so that we can consume more and more of it, making music easier and easier to access. Some music consumers have taken it into their own hands in the quest for a more significant and immersive experience and subsequently reversed the clock, welcoming music technology of the past in the form of vinyl. Some might argue that the distinctive sound of vinyl—that euphony of warm crackles and hisses free of compression—is the sole reason for vinyl's comeback, but this is proven to be untrue. Although sonics may be part of the reason, inconveniences are far more substantial than sound quality alone. Rather, the reason vinyl sounds so unique is because of the inconvenience tied to its physicality. As vinyl's popularity continues to grow, outselling more recent formats like CDs and cassettes, so does vinyl's community in the form of counterculture. By rejecting societal norms of consuming music only through the newest in music tech, record collectors actively embrace rebelling against the corporate world of the music industry. Society continues its trend of increasing convenience, but vinyl enthusiasts accept the hardships of vinyl because it offers them a much more meaningful experience.

Convenience in the Music Industry

The music industry is constantly changing, including the technology we use to access music. Advances in music tech have allowed the act of listening to music to be easier and easier throughout history, like the past innovation of a portable CD player and the modern streaming services which allow someone to click their smartphone screen once and be engulfed in an overwhelmingly large and seemingly endless music library. I argue that this ever-advancing music tech drives the vinyl revival. The newfound ease and continuous improvement that comes with modern listening technology is a part of how technology makes life easier. Compared to decades before, the primary listening medium of vinyl forced consumers to actually get out of their chair to purchase, store, maintain, organize, and change the music at around 20-minute intervals per side, which contemporary streaming services have eliminated. These findings illustrate more broadly the music consumer's desired relationship with the music they listen to. Music enthusiasts who are disinterested with convenience are in need of a more meaningful relationship with music, which allows vinyl to fill that gap because of its inconveniences and its requirement of effort.

The ease of CD technology that first emerged in the early 80s contributes greatly to the recent rise in vinyl records because of the ease and convenience of the digital format, such as the discs' durability as well as passive listening encouragement from multiple-disc players and shuffling capabilities. Emily Chivers Yochim and Megan Biddinger, the two authors of "It Kind of Gives You that Vintage Feel": Vinyl Records and the Trope of Death," note that the technology of playing music, specifically with regards to compact discs, had advanced rapidly when CDs first hit the market. They explain that, with the new mobile CD players and machines that will play and shuffle multiple CDs at the same time, CDs were leaving vinyl in the dust. In

short, the quick advancement of music technology and the increasing convenience of it is what gave vinyl a shove downwards in sales (Chivers Yochim & Biddinger, 2008). The ever increasing ease of CD technology in the 80's is what made people switch from analog to digital; however, those same conveniences of CD technology and more recent formats are exactly why music consumers are starting to buy vinyl again. CD technology encourages passive listening with its shuffling capability that could include many CDs at once, which is something that vinyl can't do. When the act of listening to music becomes pressing a button and not having to interact with the technology for hours and hours, it encourages passive listening. As George Plasketes states in his article titled "Romancing the Record: The Vinyl De-Evolution and Subcultural Evolution," the listener doesn't have to pay attention to the music like they would with vinyl because there are no sides to flip and there is no hassle that comes with trying to skip songs by lifting the needle on a turntable and manually placing it between the grooves (Plasketes, 1992). This new convenience in the music listening experience makes it so that the listener isn't forced to be present when listening, but it actually distances consumers from the music they listen to. The fact that a press of a button shuffles 10 CDs at once encourages passive listening, which is directly related to a decrease in the significance of consumers' experiences of recorded music.

The ever-increasing ease of streaming technology makes listening more convenient through playlisting and shuffling, as well as its low price; it has also steered artists away from creating storied albums meant to be played from beginning to end and towards creating easily consumable, individual songs. Eric Barry, author of "Digilog Culture and the Vinyl Revival of the Early 21st Century" (2014), claims that digital music, like music accessed through streaming services, is becoming increasingly convenient. Now, an advantage streaming music has over CDs is that one can shuffle between an infinite number of albums or moods completely by chance.

Because of this, it could be said that the concept of an album is no longer relevant in today's society if consumers are going to primarily stream music and end up consuming its songs by shuffling or clicking through playlists. Barry's theory of the ease of streaming technology is extremely useful because it sheds light on the issue of the distance modern music consumers feel from the music they listen to, especially now in the popular streaming era. One's whole life can be found on their smartphones: bank information, work calls, social media, and more. Music used to be an escape from the bustle of everyday life, but now it is a part of it, thanks to user-friendly smartphone applications like Apple Music or Spotify. As Barry states, the way we listen to music nowadays has completely changed from the old way of listening to albums all the way through because of how modern streaming technology promotes playlisting, which is where you can basically make your own mix with different songs from multiple artists all in one place. Not only do you no longer have to listen to a single album all the way through or even shuffle a few albums at once, but now you can purposefully download individual songs off of an infinite number of digital albums, place them on a playlist, and then shuffle the songs. In this modern streaming era, music is made to be played song by song; contemporary artists' goals are no longer to make a grouping of songs that tells one whole story. They're not trying to make one large piece of music with an album, but rather they are trying to make individual songs that can be played on their own without the obligation of listening through the entire album to understand its context. The modern world is more about singles and hits than it is about albums, and this is directly because of how modern streaming technology has advanced. To popular music consumers, this shift isn't exactly an inconvenience per se, but it is far from the traditional experience of records. Clearly the increasing convenience of music technology changes how music is consumed—and is paid for. Before streaming music, you could shuffle multiple CDs at

once. This included purchasing CDs, typically at the standard \$14.99 a pop and running it through an expensive machine to shuffle many CDs at once. Now with streaming music, for just \$10 per month, you have unlimited access to virtually any piece of music that has ever existed.

The inconveniences of vinyl, such as its size, commitment, and participatory nature, are what make it the most meaningful medium of music technology. In “Take Those Old Records Off the Shelf”: Youth and Music Consumption in the Postmodern Age,” David Hayes asks eight young people within the ages of 14–19 who consume records why they enjoy them. The overwhelming response to that question was ultimately because of vinyl’s inconvenience. They enjoyed its large size, its sound, and especially the interactiveness and commitment that goes with it. In other words, it is more special than simply clicking a button on a smartphone (Hayes, 2006). The involvement of vinyl, including the physical act of taking the record out of its sleeve, placing it on the turntable, cleaning off the dust, lifting the tonearm, lowering it on the record and listening for about 25 minutes until the side is over (otherwise known as the “ritual,” among collectors) is what makes vinyl so special and meaningful. When listening to records, one really invests their time into the experience. Other formats such as streaming or even CDs can give you the same music but in a much more convenient way, but record collectors aren’t interested in convenience. Chivers Yochim and Biddinger (2008) would agree with the commitment of vinyl being the main reason for its return to popularity. They argue that the ritual is an experience that is totally unique to records; no other format comes close. They mention the joy of simply watching the record spin closer and closer to the center. I argue the same thing, that the participatory nature that vinyl has is completely unparalleled compared to other forms of music consumption technology. While record collectors may not view the ritual as an inconvenience, at the end of the day, it is. Even with collectors liking the large artwork and the commitment of

listening to an album all the way through, all of that is truly rooted in inconvenience. The large artwork on the sleeve is hard to store correctly, everytime they want to listen to music at home, they have to get out of their chair to turn on an expensive turntable and expensive speakers just to play about 25 minutes of music that they don't have the luxury of skipping if they don't like a particular song. This directly proves how vinyl is more meaningful than any other format. In an article titled "The Greater the Effort, the Sweeter the Reward (and the Harder the Loss)," Dr. Carrie Steckl finds that the human brain is wired so that when you put effort into something, it feels more rewarding. As you put more effort into something, anything for that matter, the intensity of the reward increases (Steckl, 2012). Putting on a record versus playing an album on your phone requires two different amounts of effort, and thus gives the listener two different levels of rewarding sensations, with that of records being significantly higher. To the layperson, this would seem like such a hassle. In the past, many traded their records for CDs, which is now mirrored in the present where many trade CDs in favor of streaming. For record collectors, however, the enjoyment is all in the inconvenience. These findings are wildly significant because they prove how convenience is not what everybody wants; it proves that music consumers sometimes prefer a little bit of inconvenience, even if they don't see it that way. The way that records make one actively listen and be present in the music is something distinct to vinyl alone.

Sonic Qualities Among Formats: Is Vinyl Supreme?

The discourse of the sound quality among various music mediums has been long debated. All of the vinyl snobs out there will be quick to tell you vinyl sounds best with its warmth and absence of compression, while the digital purists will wholeheartedly disagree, explaining that digital media lacks distortion and is closer to the true sound that the artist intended. Unfortunately, I am not going to answer this question, because there is simply no answer. Sound

quality is an extremely subjective topic; however, I will address the most widely accepted reason for vinyl's return to popularity—its sound. This is the most common answer to the inquiry of why vinyl is coming back, but it is not quite that simple. The eccentric sonic qualities of vinyl alone, which stem from its materiality and physical qualities, are not responsible for its comeback because that is far too narrow of a claim. When compared to the sound quality of CDs and streaming, vinyl is nothing short of unique in its sonic qualities, filled with life and distinction in the adored crackles and hisses. These beloved imperfections vinyl has regarding its sound are all rooted in its inconvenience. The cracks present in vinyl playback are caused by the record collecting dust either from the open air or from the paper sleeves they're stored in deteriorating; the cracks occur when the stylus glides between the grooves of the record and passes over the dust.

CDs are scientifically of higher quality than vinyl with regards to sound because of their lack of physical limitations, including their laser precision in reading a larger frequency spectrum than is possible on a record; however, the pursuit of digital sonic perfection adversely deters music enthusiasts from the technology. James Bullen, author of the article titled "Vinyl, Streaming and CDs: Maybe It's Not Just About the Audio Quality," touches on the scientific approach to sound quality, analyzing preciseness of soundwaves and using technology to measure frequencies. Bullen reports that CDs are a more precise medium of listening to music. Music on CDs is read by lasers that transfer very little to virtually no distortion at all during the playing process. Because of this, extreme high and low frequencies can be registered through CD technology, which is not the case for vinyl. Because of the physical limitations of vinyl, extreme frequencies cannot be reached without some level of distortion. Albums with heavy low frequencies often don't sound very good on vinyl because the lower frequencies require wider

grooves on the record which can make the needle skip or cause distortion (Bullen, 2017). I argue that it is this obsession with scientific perfection in audio quality concerning the CD format that turns people away from said technology. Music consumers recognize this and become aware that the improvement in sound is just that—improvement in sound quality alone. The obsession is on sound waves and frequency levels when it should really be simply how the music is experienced. This knowledge is important because it proves that even though perfection is out there, a lot of people would still rather go out of their way to experience vinyl. Music consumers are easily turned off with the obsession of technological advancement rather than the obsession with the music itself.

The sonics of streaming are scientifically better than vinyl and rival that of CDs, although the difference in the sound of streaming versus CDs often goes unnoticed. Adding to Bullen's argument, depending on the bitrate speed of streamed audio playback (higher bitrate speed equals higher quality), there is virtually zero difference in sound quality to the naked ear when comparing the sonics of streaming audio and CD playback (Bullen, 2017). With compounding knowledge that some streaming services, like Tidal, provide higher bitrate speeds than CDs, one might argue that some streamed audio might scientifically sound better than CDs, even though the difference is too miniscule to really notice. According to an article titled "Make Your Music Sound Better" on ConsumerReports.org, although digital music files might sound better with clearer highs and deeper lows, there is heavy compression present in streaming service files that take away dynamics and an overall human sound (2015). This compression of audio can worsen even more when played through a bluetooth speaker, which is extremely common and used frequently alongside streaming. In short, just because the range of frequency is higher through digital media does not mean greater quality of sound. I argue that streaming services, having

even higher convenience compared to CDs and a similarly crisp sound quality, further prove that the quest for audio perfection is something that most music consumers are uninterested in simply because it's all just statistics. Your ears can't hear the difference between CDs and streaming because they are both heavily compressed in the mastering process. This is commonplace in modern music production because the ongoing trend seems to be the louder the better. With that said, the compression present in streaming files is not present in vinyl. Without harsh compression, the music has a greater dynamic range. Compression does exactly what you would think to audio: compresses it, meaning it makes loud parts quiet and quiet parts loud to deliver one constant volume throughout a song. Records provide a unique audio experience stemming from their lack of compression, which by modern music standards, is of lesser quality than that of streaming. Because streamed music and CD music are virtually of the same quality, this further proves that perfection is so easily available, yet people still choose vinyl.

Record collectors actually enjoy the imperfections in playback of vinyl, which stem from the inconvenience of the format. Chivers Yochim and Beddinger (2008) would further argue that record collectors enjoy the cracks and hisses in the sound of vinyl. These hisses and cracks exist solely because of its inconvenience as a large plastic disc, collecting dust and static electricity. Being that vinyl is a large plastic disc, collecting dust is commonplace. From my own personal experience, vinyl's attribute of dust accumulation comes from either as it is spinning and exposed to the particulates in the air (if the turntable in use does not have a dust cover) or the fact that old records are stored in low quality paper sleeves that break down and can cause micro pieces of paper to settle in the grooves of a record. The effort of removing dust accumulation adds to the inconvenience of records and is only partially successful. No matter which way a record accumulates dust, they both produce the cracks that people seem to enjoy when listening

to a record. I argue that the distinct hisses that are present in vinyl contribute to its authenticity because of the simplicity in that there is no hiding it; other formats such as CDs and streaming strive to rid the music of these subtle imperfections. These sonic qualities and artifacts are extinct in streamed music, so they tend to be highly desirable, whether society considers it perfect or not.

The physicality of records, which attributes to the format's unique auditory features, naturally makes tangibility a substantial element in the experience of collecting and listening to records. In an article titled "Here's Why Music Lovers Are Turning to Vinyl and Dropping Digital" (2015), Megan Gibson interviews Jon Lloyd, a music genre specialist at an international online music store called Juno Records. Lloyd connects music consumer's desire for tangibility and meaning to that of books, saying that "People will buy a Kindle for convenience, but people still want to have a bookshelf [in their home]" (p. 2). This comparison between the music and book industries clearly exemplifies the preferences of music consumers: something tangible, which inherently is less convenient. Holding the physical music in your hands is a characteristic that does not exist for modern streaming services. The large artwork on the front of a record's sleeve paired with photos, art, or notes in the gatefold takes the act of listening to music and transforms it into a multisensory experience. The once solely auditory experience is now intertwined with the visuals of the artwork, the touching of the sleeves, the strangely comforting, indescribable smell similar to that of the pages of an old book. This evidence proves to be quite remarkable because, as many will argue that it's vinyl's sound quality alone that has fueled its comeback into the mainstream, this oversimplification for the entirety of the vinyl revival is far too broad. These inconveniences that come with vinyl's large size and material makeup generate the beloved qualities, so the inconveniences of vinyl fueling the comeback proves to be the better

answer.

The Aura of Vinyl's Counterculture: Powered by Welcomed Inconvenience

The growing counterculture surrounding vinyl is in complete opposition to modern social tendencies. Those who seek out a truly unique and personal musical experience happily invite all of the inconveniences attached, thereby joining this culture against the status quo of music consumption. With the contemporary expectation of consuming music through digital streaming services, vinyl collectors go a step further choosing to consume records. The loyal members of the vinyl movement are swimming against the mainstream to get away from overbearing digital media, to support their favorite artists, and to enjoy the sense of community that comes with being a record fanatic. By choosing to consume and listen to vinyl records, collectors greet inconvenience with open arms as vinyl provides them with so much more than digital music ever could.

Vinyl serves as a medium of counterculture as a relief from the overwhelmingly digital world we live in. In an article titled "Keeping What Real? Vinyl Records and the Future of Independent Culture" (2019), author Michael Palm details that vinyl records are "a reprieve from digital saturation" and "a sort of divergence culture in an era of media convergence" (p. 645). In brief, Palm recognizes the fact that today's society is filled with marketing campaigns of the latest and greatest gadgets that are going to make your life happier, easier, and most of all, more convenient. For music consumers, as a way of flipping the bird to the corporate music industry, buying records, especially used and from independent record stores, is the perfect way of doing so. When one purchases used records from small record stores, large record labels and entertainment executives are not able to exploit those sales for profit, which is contrary to the modern and highly profitable streaming trend. I argue that vinyl can ease the hustle and bustle of

today's society. Instead of keeping up with the current trend of buying the latest and greatest new technologies, some steer away from this and indulge in technologies of the past. The importance of these findings proves itself. As new age media is converging onto digital platforms, Palm says, the independent culture surrounding records proves to be deeply rooted in inconvenience. Record collectors fully know that the mainstream thing to do is to only consume music digitally through streaming services, but instead, they welcome the inconvenience of records because it allows for a break from the constant annoyance of advertisements of podcast promotions and recommendations of curated playlists.

Vinyl also allows its consumers to feel as if they are more directly supporting the artists through purchasing their records instead of just downloading and streaming their music. In a recent research article titled "Dealing With Digital: The Economic Organisation of Streamed Music," Ruth Towse analyses the digital music economy, highlighting the difficulties the streaming industry faces with regards to paying the artists. Because streaming services are so inexpensive and due to complicated copyright contracts and publishing deals, the actual act of paying artists and deciding how much to pay them has never been more challenging. With the majority of people getting their music through subscription services at \$10 a month to consume all the music they want, Towse keenly notes that consumers are not actually paying the specific artist for their plays, but rather the streaming service itself (Towse, 2020). I argue that it is this lack of transparency in artist payment of global streaming services that contributes to the revival of vinyl. Because artists get paid the streaming industry standard of fractions of a penny per stream, purchasing a \$25–\$30 dollar record supports the artist more than streaming their music (Towse, 2020). There is also the feeling that the consumer gains from getting a tangible item in return, which is far more rewarding than staring at the album cover on your small phone screen.

The knowledge of the injustice artists face of getting paid next to nothing from streaming services proves that vinyl collectors openly accept the tradeoff of convenience for the value they see in a record, which is a feeling of greater support for an artist they love.

Record collectors connect with their records so much that their collections act as an extension of their identities. David Hayes continues his findings that record collections can be great for social interaction, especially when comparing what records you own or found recently to other people's collections (Hayes, 2006). This is especially true for those whose personalities and identities are strongly correlated to being a music fanatic. There is undoubtedly a strong community among vinyl lovers, as detailed by George Plasketes. Over the years, little record shops have become hubs of local vinyl communities across the country (Plasketes, 1992). These shops became a space not only for vinyl collectors to purchase records, but also a place for them to meet, hang out, and talk music with each other. The underground nature of the vinyl community exists because of the format's inconvenience, mainly having to get in a car and drive to a physical location to spend money on records instead of conveniently streaming music online without the satisfaction of tangible collecting. Vinyl's inconvenience, however, allows for the thrill of the hunt. Not being able to find your holy grail in the crates after months or even years of searching for a particular or rare pressing is inherently inconvenient, but the satisfaction when that record is found makes it all worth it. These findings are noteworthy because it continues the proof of vinyl's inconvenience causing its comeback. Collectors whose identities and hobbies revolve around vinyl are fully welcoming this inconvenience because of the sense of community that comes with it.

A Spin Back and a Skip Forward

Vinyl is thriving once again into the spotlight of popularity because of its many inconveniences, such as its lack of portability, fragility, and the absence of shuffling technology. All of the reasons for vinyl's returning acclaim, including its unique sonic qualities and its size, can all be traced back to its inconvenience. The crackles and pops are directly results of its difficulty of keeping clean, and its size, while amazing in the realm of beautiful cover art and liner notes to read while listening, is precisely related to its difficulty of storage and its fragility. These findings challenge the popular opinion that sound quality alone was the reason for vinyl's comeback among a modern sea of digital media, as believed by Matador Records' CFO Patrick Armory, who observes that "vinyl is the true version" of the music because of "the better sound quality" (Barry, 2014). While sound quality is of course a large cause of vinyl's reappearance in popular culture, the answer is far too narrow. I have discovered an answer that encapsulates all of the common answers for the inquiry of vinyl's return. Inconvenience incorporates the sound quality argument, the tangibility argument, and the participatory nature of the vinyl "ritual" argument so that they can all be addressed and taken into account rather than just arguing one of those points.

This argument can only begin to explore the broader reason for vinyl's revival in the United States. Future research should go on to examine either larger or shorter scale studies to find why vinyl is popular, or unpopular, in different states, cities, countries, or even continents. What I have found in my research is only involving studies and findings in the broad scope of the United States as a whole to come to my conclusion. I purposefully did not take into account how research on music consumption is looked at regionally. Why is music consumption measured on the national scale? Do certain regions of the United States have more or less inconvenience in

accessing vinyl records? Do urban areas consume more vinyl than rural or suburban areas? These findings would not only be relevant in answering the question of why vinyl is coming back, but they would be significant in the broader domain of how humans interact with technology in the entertainment and music spheres. Why are people intentionally going backwards in consuming old technology when far more advanced technology is far more readily accessible? I sincerely hope my findings will aid in the pursuit of such inquiries.

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