

## MP3 generation discovering the virtues of vinyl

By Dan Haugen

Thursday, March 20, 2008

There's something almost ceremonial about lifting up a 12-inch-square piece of artwork and gingerly sliding a vinyl album from its sleeve. Something about placing the treasure onto a slowly spinning plate and watching a magic wand hover over the grooves. There's something to the ritual of gently lowering the needle and hearing that crackle and pop, and finally the music.

To the average music listener, myself included, vinyl records were already a dusty novelty when I first stepped foot in a real record store in the mid-1990s. I made the switch from cassettes to compact discs around the start of high school, and since college, digital downloads have displaced them as my primary mode of listening to music.

So I wouldn't have guessed that in 2008, the iPod would share top billing in my living room with my parents' old record player. I asked for it when my folks were tossing out their musty record collection. Some of the albums were a bit pungent, in scent and sound, but I've been salvaging the best finds including a couple Clash records, some Steve Earle, Bruce Springsteen, the Rolling Stones.

These records sit on a shelf with my own lightweight vinyl collection. The lure of 24-hour, instant-download music shopping still beckons, but for the releases that matter most, the ones I think I'm going to listen to straight through, repeatedly and for years to come, vinyl is my preferred format.

Just as people in their teens and 20s drove the music industry's switch to digital music, it appears some of us in the MP3 generation are now giving an unlikely boost to vinyl records. Sales of new vinyl were up 15 percent last year, according to SoundScan. Anecdotally, it seems much of it is coming from younger music fans in search of nostalgia and sound quality.



So far, only smaller independent stores and record labels have picked up on the trend, but in the Twin Cities vinyl and turntables are taking up more shelf space than they have in decades.

### **A huge shift**

"It's really starting to feel to us like the beginning of a huge shift," said Dan Cote, a manager at Treehouse Records in Minneapolis, where in December, for the first time in about 20 years, sales of new vinyl exceeded sales of new compact discs. "When we first saw that, we didn't know quite what to think," Cote said. The staff suspected it might have been a fluke caused by sales of a new vinyl-only release from local band Skoal Kodiak. When they did the books for January, though, the tilt came out the same.

At the Electric Fetus, the amount of space dedicated to vinyl has gone up eightfold in the last five years. The store plans to increase it by another 50 percent this month. Vinyl sales have grown steadily in recent years, but manager Bob Fuchs said the expansion also reflects the compact disc's decline and his staff's own listening preferences. "CD sales dropped and suddenly we had room," he said. "It's a survival tactic as much as a personal choice. It's win-win."

So who's buying? The age range has been broader than Fuchs would have guessed, including a surprising number of people younger than 25.

As he spoke, 18-year-old Rachle Hamilton was standing in front of the recent arrivals bin with a used Talking Heads record in hand.

"It's kind of a maybe," Hamilton said. She asked for and received a record player for Christmas and has been "obsessed" with vinyl ever since.

"There's just something fun about it that CDs don't have," she said.

At Hymie's Records on Lake Street, co-owner Auralee Likes said when compact discs first hit their prime, it was common for people to carry stacks of records into the store to sell off. These days, she seeing some of the same faces back in the store to buy back the records they used to own.

"It's funny to me," Likes said. "Now that they're cool again, they're buying back their old collections."

### **Artwork is part of the draw**

For college student Simon Blenski, 21, it's the larger, more interesting artwork that draws him to vinyl, as well as the price.

"You can walk in with \$10 and come out with five things," Blenski said. A recent new purchase he made was Cat Power's Jukebox album, released by Matador Records, a label that includes a free digital MP3 download with every vinyl purchase. New USB turntables also allow listeners to easily transfer songs from vinyl onto their MP3 players.

Others are digging old record players out of closets and basements. Steven Schaff, a salesman at HiFi Sound in downtown Minneapolis, said turntable repair is a steady business these days.

"There was a time, a number of years ago, where turntables did kind of fall off the face of the Earth, but we've seen a serious resurgence," Schaff said.

It's the same story at the Needle Doctor in Dinkytown, where manager Ken Bowers said the trend detected a few years ago is starting to snowball. (HiFi and the Needle Doctor also sell turntables. A limited selection is available at Target and Best Buy, but Circuit City doesn't carry them.)

"The public perception of vinyl is at the highest it's been in 20 years," said John Kass of Maplewood, who was the top salesman for vinyl at the largest distributor of new vinyl in the world, ADA Distribution, a Warner Bros. subsidiary based in Minneapolis. "I watched it organically happen from when there was absolutely no interest in vinyl whatsoever."

Kass quit his job with ADA in December to focus on selling records at his own online store, GoJohnnyGo.com. The major labels have been oblivious, if not clueless, Kass said, to a worldwide renewed interest in vinyl records. Instead, independent labels like Merge, Matador, Sub Pop,

and Touch and Go are behind the recent revival.

### **The CD slide**

Tom Loftus of northeast Minneapolis, who owns the Modern Radio Record Label, said vinyl is an increasingly appealing format, especially as it becomes more difficult to sell compact discs, which are stuck in the middle between more convenient MP3 files and more aesthetic vinyl records. "There's not really a good reason for people to buy CDs," Loftus said.

More people are reaching the same conclusion. One million Americans stopped buying CDs in 2007, according to a report last month by consumer research firm NPD Group. And half of U.S. teenagers didn't buy a single CD in 2007.

And why should they? To anyone with an iPod or other MP3 player, a CD becomes a plastic souvenir coaster after the songs have been legally transferred to a computer or device. My collection is boxed up in the basement.

For all the convenience of downloaded music, earlier this winter I started to miss the physical connection to music. And there's no more physical form of listening to music than vinyl records. It's partially an excuse to hang out at record stores again. But there's something calming about listening to vinyl, too, like reading a book or unfolding a newspaper, that digital media can't replace.

Here's hoping this is the beginning of a long B-side for vinyl.

*Dan Haugen is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer.*