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Vinyl Gets Its Groove Back

By KRISTINA DELL

Thursday, Jan. 10, 2008



ENLARGE PHOTO

Vinyl releases often come with photos and booklets that allow fans to feel more connected to a favorite artist

From college dorm rooms to high school sleepovers, an all-but-extinct music medium has been showing up lately. And we don't mean CDs. Vinyl records, especially the full-length LPs that helped define the golden era of rock in the 1960s and '70s, are suddenly cool again. Some of the new fans are baby boomers nostalgic for their youth. But to the surprise and delight of music executives, increasing numbers of the iPod generation are also purchasing turntables (or dusting off Dad's), buying long-playing vinyl records and giving them a spin.

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Like the comeback of Puma sneakers or vintage T shirts, vinyl's resurgence has benefited from its retro-rock aura. Many young listeners discovered LPs after they rifled through their parents' collections looking for oldies and found that they liked the warmer sound quality of records, the more elaborate album covers and liner notes that come with them, and the experience of putting one on and sharing it with friends, as opposed to plugging in some earbuds and listening alone. "Bad sound on an iPod has had an impact on a lot of people going back to vinyl," says David MacRunnel, a 15-year-old high school sophomore from Creve Coeur, Mo., who owns more than 1,000 records.

The music industry, hoping to find another revenue source that doesn't easily lend itself to illegal downloads, has happily jumped on the bandwagon. Contemporary artists like

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the Killers and Ryan Adams have begun issuing their new releases on vinyl in addition to the CD and MP3 formats. As an extra lure, many labels are including coupons for free audio downloads with their vinyl albums so that Generation Y music fans can get the best of both worlds: high-quality sound at home and iPod portability for the road. Also, vinyl's different shapes (hearts, triangles) and eye-catching designs (bright colors, sparkles) are created to appeal to a younger audience. While new records sell for about \$14, used LPs go for as little as a penny--perfect for a teenager's budget--or as much as \$2,400 for a collectible, autographed copy of Beck's Steve Threw Up.

Vinyl records are just a small scratch on the surface when it comes to total album sales--only about 0.2%, compared to 10% for digital downloads and 89.7% for CDs, according to Nielsen SoundScan--but these numbers may underrepresent the vinyl trend since they don't always include sales at smaller indie shops where vinyl does best. Still, 990,000 vinyl albums were sold in 2007, up 15.4% from the 858,000 units bought in 2006. Mike Dreese, CEO of Newbury Comics, a New England chain of independent music retailers that sells LPs and CDs, says his vinyl sales were up 37% last year, and Patrick Amory, general manager of indie label Matador Records, whose artists include Cat Power and the New Pornographers, claims, "We can't keep up with the demand."

Big players are starting to take notice too. "It's not a significant part of our business, but there is enough there for me to take someone and have half their time devoted to making vinyl a real business," says John Esposito, president and CEO of WEA Corp., the U.S. distribution company of Warner Music Group, which posted a 30% increase in LP sales last year. In October, Amazon.com introduced a vinyl-only store and increased its selection to 150,000 titles across 20 genres. Its biggest sellers? Alternative rock, followed by classic rock albums. "I'm not saying vinyl will become a mainstream format, just like gourmet eating is not going to take over from McDonald's," says Michael Fremer, senior contributing editor at Stereophile. "But there is a growing group of people who are going back to a high-resolution format." Here are some of the reasons they're doing it and why you might want to consider it:

Sound quality LPs generally exhibit a warmer, more nuanced sound than CDs and digital downloads. MP3 files tend to produce tinnier notes, especially if compressed into a lower-resolution format that pares down the sonic information. "Most things sound better on vinyl, even with the crackles and pops and hisses," says MacRunnel, the young Missouri record collector.

Album extras Large album covers with imaginative graphics, pullout photos (some even have full-size posters tucked in the sleeve) and liner notes are a big draw for young fans. "Alternative rock used to have 16-page booklets and album sleeves, but with iTunes there isn't anything collectible to show I own a piece of this artist," says Dreese of Newbury Comics. In a nod to modern technology, albums known as picture discs come with an image of the band or artist printed on the vinyl. "People who are used to CDs see the artwork and the colored vinyl, and they think it's really cool," says Jordan Yates, 15, a Nashville-based vinyl enthusiast. Some LP releases even come with bonus tracks not on the CD version, giving customers added value.

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discussing the foldout photos, even getting up to flip over a record makes vinyl a more socially interactive way to enjoy music. "As far as a communal experience, like with family and friends, it feels better to listen to vinyl," says Jason Bini, 24, a recent graduate of Fordham University. "It's definitely more social."

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