Vinyl goes from throwback to comeback

Young fans say analog records sound warmer and fuller than digital music

By Jonathan Perry
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Monica Morgan, an 18-year-old high school student from Jacksonville, Fla., is taking a breather from scouting prospective colleges in and around Boston. She is standing inside Newbury Comics in Cambridge, scouring the bins of new LP releases by artists such as Gnarls Barkley and Bjork. Rows of colorful album covers catch her eye.

"My dad just gave me a record player, so I mostly like to buy vinyl," says Morgan. A stash of records originally owned by her mother, and now bequeathed to her, led Morgan to her latest love. "I have some old Beatles records with my mom's maiden name on them," she says. "I just like the way they sound."

Almost any other decade, this scenario would have been ordinary. But the scene - a teenager perusing stacks of cumbersome vinyl in a sleek digital age that is gradually rendering the compact disc obsolete - was unfolding on a Friday afternoon in 2008. And it is one that is being replicated in small but growing numbers across the country. Although she may be an anomaly among her peers, Morgan and other young music fans are embracing the virtues of vinyl.

Mike Dreese, cofounder and chief executive of the New England music store chain Newbury Comics, says his company's vinyl sales, which had been increasing at an annual rate of about 20 percent over the past five years, are 80 percent higher than they were at this time last year.

"Right now, we're selling about $100,000 a month worth of vinyl," Dreese says.

But why vinyl and why now, especially when even CD sales have plummeted 40 percent since 2005? Dreese blames the sterility of technology. "I think there are a lot of people who are looking for some kind of a throwback to something that's tangible," he says. "The CD was a tremendous sonic package, but from a graphic standpoint, it was a disaster. People still want a connection to an artist, and vinyl connects them in a way that an erasable file doesn't."

Vinyl lovers insist that analog records sound warmer and fuller, as opposed to the brighter yet brittle digital experience of CDs. The compressed sound of MP3s, meanwhile, sacrifices both the highest and lowest ends of the sonic spectrum.

"It's unbelievable how much vinyl's coming out," says Josh Bizar, sales director for musicdirect, a company that specializes in analog products ranging from new and reissued vinyl to turntables. "We're seeing this explosion of young
people under 25 who never even saw an LP as a child running toward a format that was pronounced dead before they were even born. But if a title has any kind of mass appeal, it's coming out on vinyl today."

The new push for records is also coming from musicians. Elvis Costello issued his new album, "Momofuku," on vinyl two weeks before the CD and digital versions were released. And the Raconteurs, led by White Stripes frontman Jack White, recommended that listeners hear their new album, "Consolers of the Lonely," on vinyl (it is also available on CD and as a download).

"I prefer vinyl," says White, 32. "We talk about this backstage; as musicians it comes up a lot. It's a shame the new generation is missing out on albums - not just the sound quality, but the artwork, the experience of holding something tangible in your hands."

Scores of listeners have begun to follow White's example.

Bizar's firm, musicdirect, services 250 to 300 independent record and electronics stores worldwide and stocks CDs and MP3 players. But it is the company's analog-related inventory that is causing a stir: Sales of albums and accessories like needle cartridges and record cleaners have jumped 300 percent in each of the past four years, according to Bizar.

Sales of turntables, which can run anywhere from $150 to $24,000 (including models that can now transfer the sound on vinyl to a listener's portable player or computer) have spiked 500 percent annually during the same time span. Indeed, huge retail outlets such as Best Buy now stock an array of turntable brands and styles that reflect the surge in both technology and demand.

"They cannot make them fast enough," says Bizar. "Owning a record album is certainly a lot cooler than owning a digital subset of zeroes and ones on a computer. And the simple act of playing an LP takes a certain single-mindedness that seems to go beyond today's culture of multitasking. It's not as easy as just pushing a button."

Merge Records founder Mac McCaughan estimates that for every 10 albums his label puts out as a digital download or CD, eight get a vinyl release. "It's not going to come back and replace CDs or MP3s," he says. "But if you do it right and make the vinyl heavy and make the packaging nice, it's everything that people liked about music in the first place."

Then there's what Bizar calls "the collectibility issue." A limited-edition LP box set of Radiohead's 2007 album, "In Rainbows," which retail for about $80, sold out briskly. A recent search on eBay found the now out-of-print package selling for $300.

Music fan Nick Pioggia, 25, buys even more vinyl now than he did as a teenager. "I got into it because the [punk] music I was trying to find was only available in that format," says Pioggia, who also runs a small label called Painkiller Records in Boston. "No one cares about CDs anymore, but someone will still buy an album because it's got the huge artwork and is a limited pressing. That's the biggest draw."

New releases are typically being pressed on vinyl in quantities of about 10,000 per title. But when it comes to the demand for lavish reissues, that number can double or even triple. Bizar says his company saw 35,000 advance orders for the four-LP edition of Led Zeppelin's "Mothership," a career-spanning collection released this spring. While that is certainly a far cry from vinyl's
heyday of the 1970s, Bizar calls the demand for a bulky box set that retails for roughly $60 a pop "astonishing."

As an enticement for consumers to buy a record rather than a 99-cent download of a single, artists and record labels now usually include a CD version of the album with the LP package gratis, or enclose a secret code that allows listeners to download for free the album they just bought on vinyl.

The idea represents a compromise for convenience-minded consumers and artists who want their creative work to be something more substantive than a digital file. "If you're an artist," says Dreese, "you're like, 'What do I have to show my grandkids?' "

No one artist has released more records since the early 1990s than Robert Pollard, both solo and with his band, Guided By Voices.

"I have to have vinyl," says Pollard, who's issued dozens of records on labels large and small, including his own in-house imprint. "To me it's psychological. If it's not on an LP, it's not real. Anybody can make a CD, but as we used to say, 'Vinyl's final.' "

Evan Shore, singer-guitarist for the Boston band Muck & the Mires, recently announced that his band's next Extended Play would be a "vinyl-only release." With a European tour this summer, the reasoning was simple: "Vinyl is huge in Europe."

Geoff Chase, a 40-year-old "classic rock" fan from Watertown, says he stopped buying records because many older titles weren't available on LP to replace his worn copies. Until now.

"What got me back into it big time," says Chase, "was that one day I found an old [stereo] receiver on the sidewalk."

He took it home, hooked the receiver up to his turntable, and put on his copy of AC/DC's "Back in Black."

"I could not believe how good it sounded," Chase says. "I was blown away." © Copyright 2008 Globe Newspaper Company.
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