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English 3

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### **The Grooves That Make The Groove**

The smell of fresh wrapping plastic and cardboard permeates your nose, while overhead, Sonic Youth's newly remastered seven inch from 1987 plays with the shuffling of shoes on smooth concrete. All around you a vision of enrapturing colors and people, different worlds confined in twelve by twelve inch squares. You have entered the Zen Zone, a space of mystifying energy, a dimension ripe with seemingly infinite potential, all at the touch of your fingertips.

Or to put it more bluntly, you are in a record store.

While it may seem like a passé fad to the rest of the developing world, and despite various more instantaneous forms of media consumption, the record store has still been able to survive in our modern economy. To the surprise and delight of many consumers, these quaint little shops weren't wiped off the face of the earth during the dot com boom and still remain in pockets as functioning independent outlets for all forms of physical media.

The most popular of these, and what serves as the current fad among young music loving fans, is the vinyl record. For those who don't know, a record is a twelve inch disc of plastic with grooves etched into its surface. These grooves, when spun

through with a special cut needle, produce audible sound which has served as an outlet of expression for many musical artists over the past several decades. Is it primitive? Yes. But fascinatingly the vinyl record still lives on and has outlived many of its competitors, even beating most of them in sales. In 2018 alone, an estimated “7.6 million LPs were sold...a 19.2% increase from the same period in 2017,” (Hogan, Marc “16.8 million vinyl albums sold in 2018”) reports The Vinyl Factory, an online distributor and pressing plant for vinyl records everywhere. In comparison to the 23% drop in CD sales that the BBC’s Mark Savage reported in the same year (“Is this the end of owning music?”), it is pretty evident that vinyl has something that other forms of technically superior media don’t seem to carry.

“The vinyl resurgence has been very surprising to us, we’re seeing people come into our store that we used to see less of...there’s more of a young audience, we see more women coming in, it’s beginning to turn our record store into a more inclusive and diverse space,” comments Paige Brodsky, the head manager of Streetlight Records on Bascom Avenue. A modest establishment coated in a fine sheen of black and red paint and filled to the top with all kinds of physical product, Streetlight features rows of records, CDs and DVDs that line the various spread out bins in the store creating a claustrophobically entrancing sense of being surrounded by art. Similarly to a museum, the store’s stock spans decades of artistic expression, from the big bands of the 1910’s to the big beats of the 2010’s. “I definitely think that the record store is an inclusive space and we try to keep it that way... no matter your gender, race, or political views everyone is welcome in the record store,” Paige notes. “Unless you’re being mean to

the employees, then you can leave.” On our first trip in we certainly found her statement to be correct. Left and right we saw a prism of people, all walks of life bent over and madly shuffling through rows and rows of CD’s, peeling away at layers of vinyl records, searching for the perfect album.

“You never look out of place there because nobody looks the same, it’s very comforting knowing I can shop for records in peace.” This is Michael Smith, a freshman in college who began to collect records in March of 2018 along with his group of friends. “I’d just see pictures on discogs or reddit or something of...people showing off...what they bought at the record store. And I thought that looked cool, seemed like a fun way to spend my time!” Michael visits Streetlight records regularly to buy releases new and old from some of his favorite bands like Green Day, MGMT, Queens of the Stone Age, and Wavves. He also travels down Bascom avenue to Rasputin Records, a larger record establishment in the area that specializes in broader collections of Blu Rays and DVDs but which also holds a slew of CDs, records, and even books. “I kind of used to be unhappy with my life before I started listening to music...there’s just a very personal way that artists i like connect to me...records have given me a goal.” Michael’s collection is pretty large for a starting collector; in the one year where he began he amassed more than one hundred records on his shelves. We asked him why he continued to spend most of the money he worked for on things like CDs and records. “Before I started listening to music, I was in a pretty unhappy place...” he said, “not to act like music saved my life or anything but it just gets me in a good mood when I can listen to something that I can relate to.” He pulled out a freshly primed copy of Green Day’s 2004

album *American Idiot* and showed it to us. “This album really reflects my life and the changes I’ve been through, despite the fact that the band is also from San Francisco...when I was young I heard this playing on my brother’s old CD player and I was entranced. This was the first album that got me into listening to music that I wanted to...and not just music that my parents played, like The Beatles.”

An older collector, Curt Fukuda, who had been gathering all kinds of physical media since he was six in the 1950’s, gave us some insight on the new vinyl boom and what he feels like are the attributes that make records so desirable now to the younger generation. “When you hold a record and get a good look at it, you see the art it has and all of the work that went into it. In the old days they used to actually hire artists to design the album covers and to direct what the final product would look like. That’s something you just don’t get with streaming, something you don’t get by looking at the little images on your phone.” What he says resonates; records are mostly shown to be more popular among people who are more related to art and its scene. One can see this if they simply browse all of the various users showing off their collections on social media websites like Instagram and Imgur. “I feel like records are less appreciated now as a medium and more appreciated as art. Something cool to hang on your wall and show off, but it also plays music.” The entrancement of the record and all of the effort put into producing it seems to be a big appeal for its buyers. One can see it as the confluence between art, music, and science.

As Paige puts it in her own words, “It’s the neatest artistic statement because the band controls almost every aspect of the record making process. The music, the artwork, and where to press. That’s why they feel so...personal.”

Because of this vinyl resurgence, the economy of the record pressing plant has been revitalised and is beginning to see an uptick in numbers, all of this merely happening within the span of two years. “No one makes vinyl presses anymore, the market is slowly moving towards a halt” was the official statement of Billboard magazine in 2016 due to limited supplies of records being produced for the labels releasing them. But later they were forced to eat their words in February 2018 when annual record sales came in and they totaled up to more than 16 billion dollars worldwide. This revenue has helped kickstart many new independent record plants, most notably Third Man Records which was started by Jack White of the band The White Stripes. Third Man Records has been described as the “Willy Wonka of record plants” by Mythbusters Adam Savage due to its efficient pressing methods which has enabled it to record a live band, and only “twenty minutes afterwards” produce a live copy of the performance.

“Here we can have a band play live at our store stage and right after the performance we can have fresh record copies for the attendees to buy and listen to. It’s a dream come true!” remarks White in a youtube video about Third Man’s pressing process.

But this vinyl resurgence has not only helped stores and plants get back into business, local musicians are also seeing the effects of the trend impact their work for the better. Blues player Jim Dewrance from San Jose contacted us about the matter

and remarked that “...all of a sudden being a musician with a record out makes you quite popular whether you’re good or not!” He showed us the record he was on, a blues compilation by AJ Crowdaddy in which he plays the harmonica in the backing band. “Just being on this one record made me look more desirable to other people, and it’s not like I haven’t gotten work before, but I’ve gotten more work now actually as a blues musician because that one record shows how involved I can be.” Jim also remarked that “It’s easier to make music nowadays and get all of the royalties off of it...I have friends who only make music by themselves...at their house and they put out full albums of music that people buy.” So not only has physical media increased in popularity, but it also has helped local artists grow in popularity through influence on the internet due to their ties solely with physical music. This has been able to pay off the bills for a lot of hard working musicians especially those who sell their own product on websites like Amazon and especially Bandcamp. The vinyl market on the latter has been big enough for the website to start its own vinyl pressing service that will be active in the later half of the year 2019. The service is called “Bandcamp Vinyl” and is supposedly going to allow customization of record copies through “crowdfunding methods involving...fans.” (“Create Vinyl With Bandcamp”) Which means fans will pay for the pressing of the record and the artist can take a sizeable chunk of the sold product without having to pay for shipping or pressing of the vinyl record.

“I feel like as long as the community of music listeners keep getting something tangible from artists there will be a positive feedback for all people...” says Curt. “I feel like physical media is here to stay, even when we’re in the space age and we’re

colonized on Mars there will be people who still want the physical media from artists.” It certainly is a more validating sense of ownership when one is able to claim that they have the physical product over simply owning an easy to obtain digital file such as a pdf or a png. And it’s something the record stores want to encourage, as well as inclusivity. Paige summarizes it well with a movie quote from the film “Almost Famous”: “...you know, if you ever get lonely, you can just go down to the record store and see all your friends!” And that’s what the community of physical media collectors is slowly growing back into, one big friendship where people operate on the same principles as one another, but share their own unique tastes and senses of style such that talking to each one about music is different every time. A different set of bands for a diverse set of people. A new pair of grooves that play a new slew of grooves.

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