

Book Review: John Corbett, *Vinyl Freak: Love Letters to a Dying Medium*. Durham: Duke University Press Books. ISBN: 978-0822363668 (Paperback). 264 Pages. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Andrew R. McIntosh¹

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In 1992, Bronx based rapper KRS-ONE began his sixth album, *Sex and Violence*, screaming. Impersonating a dying DJ, KRS begged, “You’re killing us- stop! Please help me, I’m a DJ, I need vinyl, I can’t hold out much longer...” The insinuation was that the compact disc, the emerging popular music medium of choice in the 1990s, was going to usurp not only vinyl records in sales but undermine whole subcultures with it. The cutting and scratching hip hop vinyl DJ was KRS’ concern but for music consumers of all genres, a Faustian bargain was struck. The fidelity, searchability and portability of CDs was being greatly favored over the staticky, cumbersome and delicate format of the vinyl album. But at what cost?

Chicago based music critic, record producer, and curator, John Corbett, has lead the charge in preservation of the vinyl medium over the last two decades. He is not alone and the ranks are growing in number of those who have taken up this quixotic quest not simply as some sort of musical Antiques Roadshow but as a serious, even academic, avenue for cultural exploration. Last year, University of London’s Drs. Janet Borgerson and RIT’s Jonathan Schroeder explored American middle

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class post-war representation and discourse in *Designed for Hi-Fi Living: The Vinyl LP in Midcentury America*. In 2015, noted lecturer and program coordinator, Dr. Jennifer Otter Bickerdike, at the British and Irish Modern Music Institute, compiled *Why Vinyl Matters: A Manifesto from Musicians and Fans*. Amanda Petrusich, Professor of Music Criticism at NYU's Gallatin School, published *Do Not Sell At Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World's Rarest 78rpm Records*, a book that is as deeply personally, as it is analytical. And the beat goes on, indeed.

Hip to this idea two decades ago, the late scholar and activist, Dr. William Eric Perkins, concisely wrote, "a crate of records is like a history book." Any academic of communications and particularly popular music studies can attest to this. So, what to make of these recent publications that have embraced vinyl as a locus of cultural insight? In Corbett's case, *Vinyl Freak* makes the case that when technologies change, there is often little time to ask who authors (or programs) our collective memories. As a result, Corbett reflects "neglected material goes more distantly into obscurity, deeper into the vaults, further from the gates of the digital archive, virtually inaudible, having failed to move from one medium to another (8)." Corbett is particularly concerned with jazz obscurities, championing unknown musicians whose work had experienced little fanfare, or unearthing the well-known recording artists' lesser known but still relevant releases of their oeuvre.

Corbett accomplished this while writing a column for which the book is entitled for *DownBeat* magazine in the 1990s and 2000s, the go-to publication for jazz cats since 1934. This published book is a compilation of Corbett's record reviews and features, bound by introductions and conclusions, interspersed with chapter prefaces providing context to the evolving purposes of his column and his work. At their best, these reviews provide careful consideration of a jazz records production process and what it means for the development of jazz music. Consider this Marshall McLuhan at the Blue Note insight:

"The medium shapes the message. Bebop proclaimed: now's the time. But what of bebop time? It is, in no insignificant way, the same time as swing and early jazz. Two-and-a-half minute pieces. The 78-rpm single, two sides, an era of mentally strung together "Part 1" and- halt, lift, turn it over- "Part 2"... ...A common image of a given music derives from its recordings, from the limitations and opportunities of its medium, and it's arguable that jazz has proven responsive to the shifts in the prevalent mode of

representation. The revolutionary change instigated by the long-playing record offers a link between seemingly incongruous musics: [the 78-rpm singles of swing and be bop] and [the LP records of] hard bop and free improvised music.” (46-47)

The reviews also consider an artist’s or label’s purpose, and sometimes wayward intent. Describing a “beautifully recorded” 1959 clarinetist Tony Scott album with its cover featuring “a trite, *Playboy*-esque girlie-shot,” Corbett reminds the reader it is the music engraved on the vinyl inside that counts. “[Jazz] has been especially good at fitting profundities into goofy places,” Corbett exclaims (57). In other words, do not judge a recording by its record cover.

There are postscripts to the columns as well. While many of the records remain un-exhumed: “I remain perplexed at the number of key [Cecil] Taylor recordings commercially unavailable to the consuming public” (169); or the artists have passed away or faded far from the scene: “Bill Leslie died in 2003. Neither of these great worthy Argo releases has been released on CD” (56); dozens of these rare releases apparently find a second life via Corbett reviews. The publication of Corbett’s reviews spurned record labels’ interests in resurrecting the recordings. Sometimes Corbett himself networked artists and labels together, contributed liner notes or oversaw production of a reissue himself. These miniature epilogues are perhaps some of the most exciting moments of this read, as Corbett the passive critic of (jazz) vinyl culture develops into that of active guardian, helping to produce the possibility that the works and artists he is reviewing- particularly those of free jazz and improvisation- not only see the light of day but an opportunity to thrive in this brave old world of vinyl reissues. It gives a whole new twist to that of participant observer.

Amongst these scores of record reviews over the course of the book, the narrative or theoretical thread throughout *Vinyl Freak* is this: the record freak is a scholar or “a grassroots researcher, hunting information as much as material objects” (122). There’s a joy and clarity to Corbett’s observations and for this reviewer a confirmation and relief that the compulsive vinyl hunting community shares much in common in its obsessive behavior no matter the genre. But there’s a drawback from a book such as this or Petrusich’s *Do Not Sell At Any Price* for the general reader. Wrapped in the conceit that these forgotten recordings have significant cultural value, the authors demand a willingness to play trainspotting in their respective genres. But perhaps there’s a reason these records are now only found in the dusty record bins of music

history? It's not that they are not of value unto themselves but perhaps they have little meaning to most consumers in their original format. There's no accounting for taste, as they say.

In addition, the tragic notion records are a "dying medium," as the book's subtitle declares is simply wrong. The long-playing vinyl LP certainly vanished from retail and listeners' shelves in the 1990s, but vinyl as a format did not perish. Writing for Spin Magazine, Marc Hogan uses more than a half a dozen industry sources and statistics to explain vinyl LPs began to be lapped by CDs in the late 80s but still thrived in radio stations and dance club venues primarily as vinyl 12" *singles*. Vinyl's statistical nadir in the mid-00s was brief; by 2007, while still dwarfed by digital sales, vinyl purchases began to steadily grow. Sensing an opportunity, major and independent labels launched Record Store Day on 2008, creating artificial scarcity by pressing a limited number of "vinyl only" exclusive releases for the third Saturday release date in April. The yearly Record Store Day observation has become a lucrative celebration of the blossoming used vinyl store of the new millennium. In many ways, the change of popular music medium to CDs, digital downloads and eventually streaming music, has solidified the prestige of vinyl as a format *and* as a culture. Even Corbett admits with a wink, "If vinyl's dead, long may it die." (10)

As Corbett's book goes on, it becomes more personalized concluding with a dramatic story of literally unearthing legendary recordings and ephemera of the intergalactic saxophonist Sun-Ra. As Corbett describes his findings with bated breath, it begs the question- is this truly scholarship? Can Corbett's written work be used confidently as a source or in classroom discourse? I'd say it certainly has merits as being a starting point for such research, but more of an effort must be made to present the material in a verifiable manner. But I'm not sure it matters to Corbett who admits, "record fiends are just like junkies; they'd rather get a fix than eat or see a movie" (4). I cannot help but to feel authors, such as, Corbett, have forged such careers by developing elaborate rationalizations and presumptions to quench that thirst, to fuel their desire to excavate scarce recordings. These published works have established a new minor of anthropology and archeology: record crate digging. And honestly, as I write this surrounded by some two thousand odd of my own hip hop records, I am only disappointed they beat me to it.

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