



REVIEW | Vinyl Freak: Love Letters to a Dying Medium

John Corbett

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In some senses, this book is the flipside of John Corbett's classic 1990 essay on "listening pleasure and the popular music object" (79) and its discussion of "fetishistic audiophilia" (94). This less theoretical and more personal collection of writings consists primarily of entries in Corbett's *Vinyl Freak* column, which ran from 2000 to 2012 in the jazz magazine, *Downbeat*. Duke University Press has lovingly reproduced the cover art of albums and a few singles in full colour alongside Corbett's commentaries. These "missives to a mistress or a missus, dedicated to the most beloved" (5) give the impression of a Roland Barthes digging through his own crates for his most precious souvenirs.

For the column, Corbett chose records from his collection (mostly jazz, African, experimental music, and the occasional funk and reggae release) that were rare or out of print in the belief that "there's a more diverse range of works that should be available than what passes for the basic canon of world culture" (9). He provides helpful postscripts for most of the entries on reissues on vinyl or CD, relative rarity or deletion. These parts of the book are primarily for jazzheads, but also piquant dips into the players, instrumentation, and feel of these recordings that will charm curious readers, listeners, and collectors. Many of these short pieces also include some detail or happenstance in the life of the vinyl lover that doesn't depend on a fascination with the music. As with the browser in a record store, the visual aspect of the record is often the entrée into the discovery of its sound world. Initiated at a time in which vinyl seemed a dying medium, the column shares a curatorial affinity with the blossoming blogs of the millennium's first decade that wrote about and shared esoteric vinyl albums remediated as folders of MP3s. These websites were instrumental in energizing the reissue plans of archival record labels.

Readers that don't care for jazz may still be rewarded by the several mini-essays or "tracks" (like those of an album) that interrupt the column's entries. Records mark time but a haptic relationship with them also configures spaces. Corbett explains

how the years of the column coincided with the transition from impending death of the vinyl medium to its revival, summarizing the record's attractions and affordances as a physical object for visual display, the LP's convenient duration of about forty-five minutes, the playability of a worn record as opposed to a damaged CD, the ritual of listening to two sides, the nostalgia for those who have grown up with the medium and for younger newcomers who imagine the past through them. Corbett avoids some of the clichés of hyperbolic affection for the medium in the chapter entitled "Freak not Snob," a meditation on different formats and playback media. The CD is better for classical music, the MP3 for portability, vinyl too expensive. Corbett recounts his involvement with a jazz show on college radio at Brown University and listening back to these radio shows on cassette in the car, remembers that "in these polymorphous environs I came of age" (67).

"Brand new secondhand: Record collector subcultures" adds more of the autobiographical voice and includes an epigram that belongs on the wall of every scholar-vinyl freak: "Records are an excuse for research, for comparison and contrasts, the two most exciting things in life" (114). Corbett recalls working in a record store in Iowa City as a horny teenager, his hunting for records as adult and memorable encounters in record shops, including the time in one Indian store where a salesperson polishes 78s with *ghee* (clarified butter) before packing them for him. I'm sure I've been to the same unnamed LA store with the aggressive owner who has no prices marked on the records. Corbett also deals with the burden of a weighty music format that may have contributed to two hernias, as well as the angst and regret of parting with records. I haven't had a hernia (yet), but the similarities in our experiences as vinyl freaks became uncanny when Corbett describes purchasing funk and reggae records from a woman who had received them in a divorce settlement. Some of the 1970s Jamaican treasures in my own collection came cheaply in comparable circumstances at a record fair in Austin in the mid-90s, though, unlike Corbett, I felt no guilt or sympathy for the ex-husband.

The mini-essays rise to a pitch as Corbett's freakiness culminates and then calms with a vivid account of space jazz maestro Sun Ra's manager Alton Abraham's Chicago house being cleared out after his death and Corbett scavenging for recordings and other archival materials despite hernia pain. Corbett has extensively curated and published Sun Ra's work for at least the last decade, contributing to Ra's growing influence and the currency of Afrofuturism. The first printing of this book includes an orange flexi disc with a Sun Ra piano recording. Corbett's tale here reads like a short story that might make a great short film, as gripping as Hari Kunzru's novel *White Tears* (2017) about two young white men in desperate search for a particular vintage acoustic blues record.

This publication lies somewhere between the growing market of coffee-table photography books of records, record collections, and essential music guides on the one side, and a swelling academic scholarship on the other, as vinyl remains a viable if residual medium in the age of Spotification. The academic scholarship on vinyl, such as Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward's *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age* (2014) and Roy Shuker's *Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures: Record Collecting and Social Practice* (2015), has tended to downplay and work against the pathologies of the male record collector immortalized in Robert Crumb comics and films such as Alan Zweig's documentary *Vinyl* (2000). Corbett's graceful writing in confessional mode reminds us that the psychological drives underlying vinyl freakiness must be considered in tandem with more 'rationalist' perspectives that focus on the curating of archives and the production of knowledge about music. Vinyl pleasures fill personal lacks but also lubricate social lives and

friendships. These addictions come with their power relations. We need to continue critical work on the dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality in activities around music media as material culture. We should also develop the dialectic of consuming attachments and scholarly detachment for a more affectively rich popular music studies that is sensitive to what Shawn VanCour and Kyle Barnett describe as the “multisensory dimensions of recorded sound” (2017: 95).

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Videography

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