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**Authenticity and the Commodity:
Physical Music Media and the Independent Music Marketplace**



A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Social and Cultural Anthropology

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Abstract:

This thesis examines the circulation of physical music media (78rpm records, LPs, CDs, tape) in the independent music marketplace. It is based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork in Austin, Texas, amongst the producers of goods for the independent marketplace, independent music stores and consumers of these goods and services. Against prevailing constructivist interpretations, I will argue for the value of authenticity as an analytical anthropological concept because it unites what my research participants value about materiality, technology, and marketplace relationships. In the independent marketplace for physical music media, authenticity is a multi-local, multi-vocal phenomenon. A nexus of economic rationales, design, reproduction-technologies, histories and personal conduct interact in an ongoing process that authenticates music commodities and their marketplace. This means that particular commodities are sought out over others on account of the multi-local authenticities they anchor. The thesis firstly demonstrates how the independent music scene safeguards claims to authentic identities by constructing an opposition to the mainstream, drawing on discourses of ethical production and consumption, sound technologies, spaces of consumption and cultural production. Secondly, I will uncover how physical music media and sound-reproduction technologies are assessed as effective providers of authentic musical reproductions according to their historical contingencies and performative material capacities. Thirdly, I develop the notion of the scene (Shank 1994) from its previously genre-fixed perspective to encompass multiple musical styles operating within a common social network of producers, retailers and collectors. The pluralistic scene I describe utilises multiple musical genres and nuanced notions of materiality and authenticity to establish their complex hierarchy of sonic and technological experiences.

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Preface

Since the invention of the phonograph in 1877 by Thomas Edison enabled the first replayable recorded sound, the manner in which music is accessed and used has changed in seismic and pervasive ways. Initially, sound could only be captured on these seemingly antediluvian machines and reproduced in crude quality. Today, people can walk into a concert with a small digital audio machine and microphones the size of buttons, and record the musical performance in pristine, near-professional quality from their place in the auditorium. The recordings made by phonograph machines were captured on and reproduced from fragile wax cylinders, liable to damage and decay, with poor portability and capacities for reproduction. Now, a recording can be made straight to a digital file that is endlessly reproducible, can be disseminated around the globe via the Internet in an instant, and can take up an insignificant space on a handheld audio player no larger than a bar of chocolate. In the late 19th century, there was a fledgling recording industry that produced few recordings which were available only to the wealthy. At present, music retail is a multi-billion dollar industry catering to marketplaces all over the world. They face challenges as new technologies threaten industrial dominance over musical practice, musical recording, and the dissemination of recordings. If one knows where to look (and many do) music can be pirated for free on the Internet, and global social networks have been built online around these practices of sharing and discussing music¹.

¹ The rise of file-sharing website Napster at the turn of the new millennium is particularly instructive of this

Such change has had profound effects upon how recorded sound is used and sold. Technology has facilitated a renegotiation of consumers' relationships with the past, their consumables, and with each other. The changes in these everyday material artefacts have had direct and significant consequences in the real lived practices of music consumers, on music marketplaces, on social relationships, and society's relationship to the musical revenants and artefacts of its past, as well as new product. My work examines the significance and nature of these changes through analysis of the production, circulation and negotiation of commodities which are prized within the independent music marketplace.

The materials by which people access music are themselves charged with meaning and value, negotiated by those who choose to engage with them, altering audiences' experiences of music by proposing distinct material embodiments of recorded sound. My work examines these goods and their value for music consumers. Specifically, I examine consumers who actively purchase physical music products in the independent music sector, versus those who have increasingly digitised computer-mediated music engagements. Their practices of collecting and consumption are intimately wed with the activities of the producers of these goods (musicians, designers, sound engineers and record label staff) and the sites of exchange (often independently run record stores). The construction of value through these music commodities will be examined as one that involves all these multiple influences, from industry to sites of exchange and active processes of consumption, to better understand the ways in which goods in marketplaces act simultaneously as tools for distinction, recreation, profit, and aesthetic enjoyment.

change; see Geisler and Pohlmann 2003a and 2003b; Landes and Lichtman 2003; Taylor *et al* 2002.

This thesis is organised into five ethnographic chapters which in turn deal with key aspects of the research detailed in the introductory chapter. In keeping with the notion of a flow of materials, skills, music and ideas in the independent music marketplace, the structure of this thesis expresses this flow and interconnectivity between different activities in time and space. Therefore, each chapter's contents focus upon a specific aspect of the circulation of music commodities in the independent sector (from designing and producing products to their retail, purchase, usage and divestment), highlighting key debates that practices located in these activities raise, and in turn shedding light upon the multiple influences upon the conception, dispersal and appraisals of these commodities in their marketplace.

Chapter 1 – Introduction – In my introductory chapter, I introduce key themes in the debates about commercial music industries and the consumption of music goods, and critically assess the concepts of 'independent' and 'mainstream' music marketplaces to outline the research challenges that arise from this distinction (Strachan 2007; Williamson and Cloonan 2007; Negus 1992). This informs a critique of various theoretical conceptions of musical sociality (Shank 1994; Hesmondhalgh 2005) which identifies potential improvements that can be made to the concept of the scene. I draw upon literature from anthropology, culture studies and other social science disciplines to situate key debates about the cultural industries (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002; Garofalo 1986), media reception (Jenkins 1992; Shefrin 2004), materiality (Miller 2005; Ingold 2007), and consumption (Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Miller 1987; Trentmann 2006). I furthermore assess anthropological theories and approaches to evaluating the circulation of valuable goods (Appadurai 1986; Munn 1986; Weiner 1994). This chapter also

introduces the field site (Austin, Texas) and the methodology of this ethnography.

Chapter 2 – Producing Authenticity: Record Labels and the Independent Music Marketplace – The creation of desirable music commodities involves a confluence of efforts in terms of music-making, sound engineering, physical design and marketing strategies. Music is mediated by producers *en route* to its audience. In the independent music market, the consolidation of these efforts to create commodities that appeal to a discerning consumer body requires sympathetic judgments in taste and style from producers. This sympathy, it is argued, is born of the contingent scene which binds both the audience for physical media and the record labels that provide it. Both legitimise the voice of the other through a mutual understanding of the authentic (Jones 2010; Lindholm 2008; Orvell 1989) as integral to their shared cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Arsel and Thompson 2010). The binary between producers and consumers exists in the collective scene of collectors, enthusiasts and record labels united by common material goals and ideals of independent soft-capitalism within a proto-market (Toynbee 2000; Dunn 2012). Teasing out the separate remits of the mainstream and independent music markets provides an assessment of marketing strategies, target audiences and the role of genre in the interplay between music, corporate bodies and consumers (Negus 1999). This chapter details the image-producing tactics of record labels in their bid to claim authority and authenticity in the marketplace (Gerstin 1998; Lien 1997). In doing so, the state and status of the independent music market can be questioned in relation to other consumer cultures.

Chapter 3 – Housing Sound: Design and the Creation of the Commodity – Making music commercially available has historically involved the production of

physical products for the marketplace, and whilst digital music retail has impacted upon this association, many independent labels specialise in creating physically substantive commodities. How the history of design in physical media retail informs the value of commodities, both in terms of price and desirability, is examined from the perspective of the producers of these commodities. The challenges of mapping sound to tactile commodities and the physical mediation between consumers and recorded sound impacts upon the practices of producers and consumers of physical media in the independent music marketplace. Physical music media design frames music to inculcate desired notions of nostalgia, authenticity and independent aesthetics. How design has been theorised in anthropology as a practice ascribing and inculcating such meaning and value and sating consumer demand (Attfield 2000), is discussed in relation to a concentration on material agencies (Olsen 2007; Ingold 2007) to show how physical product design contributes to the material and technological taxonomies (Rowlands 2005; Shove *et al* 2007) central to notions of value and authenticity in the independent music marketplace.

Chapter 4 – *Pursuing Music: Record Stores, Music Retail & the Consumer Experience* – Music consumers centred on the independent music marketplace who purchase physical music commodities such as CDs and LPs frequent independent record stores. Independent record stores have been in decline since the rise of consumer tastes for the convenience of internet shopping and digital music files. Stores weathering these changing tastes provide crucial hubs in the independent marketplace for consumers who use these places as important sites for acquiring music, knowledge, and opportunities to socialise around music. This chapter examines the practice of shopping in independent retail environments outside mainstream outlets as a communal negotiation of space aimed

at challenging mainstream orthodoxies (Wright 2005; Jackson and Holbrook 1995; Miller *et al* 1998). The sociality of shopping in record stores, the vintage or ‘second-hand’ atmosphere inculcated in independent stores (Gregson and Crewe 2003), and the goods they carry make them meaningfully distinct from other types of music retail. This is argued to be intimately wed to the physicality of the goods involved, the urge for consumers to construct an alternate cultural space (Gupta and Ferguson 1992) from conventional retail environments, and the seeking of spaces redolent of the pre-history of retail before digital marketplaces.

Chapter 5 – *“It’s the only thing I do well”*: *Consumption, Collecting and Domestic Space* – Large collections of music commodities intimately affect the domestic environment. Storing and utilising vast collections of physical music products in the home is not just about listening to music, but also contextualising their physical imposition upon private space. These collections are prized in their entirety, groomed and curated according to the exacting needs of collectors in their efforts to become ‘good’ collectors rather than mere hoarders of objects (Shuker 2010; Clifford 1988; Belk 1995). This chapter draws upon fieldwork with collectors at home in Austin, showing how the collecting of music in physical formats is incorporated into the domestic sphere (Clarke 2001). This private space is challenged by external concerns regarding how others might view the collection, the desire for more goods, and fears and anxieties over loss and decay (Mosko 2000; Marcoux 2001). The domestic collection is understood therefore as a creation dependent upon conditions in the marketplace for collectables, sites of exchange and retail, and perceptions of the practices of other consumers and collectors. Given the latter concern, the sociality and cultural capital of collecting are understood to be

embodied by the usage of collected items to avoid negative stereotyping. These considerations affect the form and use of music collections in the home space, and play a role in dictating the purpose of collecting music in physical form versus in digital formats.

Chapter 6 – *Sound Issues: Technology and Musical Authenticity* – Collecting practices revolving around sound-reproduction media such as CDs and LPs are related to how technologies service sound, and how appreciations of audio-reproduction technologies are embedded in the consumer experience (Hosokawa and Matsuoka 2004; Milner 2009). Culturally-specific discourses on sound (such as that that analogue sound formats are preferable to digital variants), and the challenges and concessions presented to it by producers and consumers, are analysed to understand the relationship between the materiality and authenticity of sound-reproduction technologies. Discourses on technology (Lemonnier 1993; Pfaffenberger 1988) enrich and hinder appreciations of music and forge taste boundaries between different consumer groups. I argue that the appreciation of sound-reproduction technologies is a product and a constituent of the ideal of archiving original recordings (Weissman 2006; Seeger 1986), of dialogues over the properties of sound (Théberge 1997), and the history of sound-reproduction technologies as material entities (Sterne 2003; Shuker 2010). I argue that there exists an ontologising notion of the ‘original’ recording and its attendant technology. The authenticity of replicas is assessed according to the culturally-sanctioned nature of their technological mediation, which is informed by material and technological taxonomies (Shove *et al* 2007) of wide-reaching importance to notions of value and authenticity in the independent music marketplace.

Chapter 7 – This thesis has shown how, within a culture whose principle artefact

is the technologically-reproduced sound-object, hierarchical taxonomies of materials and technologies existing operate within a marketplace according to the guiding tenet of authenticity. The conclusion consolidates these findings and proposals. The independent music marketplace is shown to be a scene constructed in opposition to the mainstream according to discourses of ethical production and consumption (Dunn 2012; Strachan 2007; Friedberg 2003), sound technologies (Sterne 2003; Shuker 2010), materiality and spaces of consumption and cultural production (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Clarke 2001; Everts and Jackson 2009) to safeguard its claim to an authentic marketplace identity (Arsel and Thompson 2010). In doing so, I display authenticity as an analytical anthropological concept (Lindholm 2008; Jones 2010) in relation to the independent music market. Authenticity unites what my research participants value about materiality, technology, and marketplace relationships. It motivates and anchors the value of these marketplace relationships, and validates the products circulating within this marketplace as appropriate within the scene's material and technological hierarchies.

The introductory chapter that follows critically examines the key debates and literature relevant to this study of the independent music marketplace.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In this introductory chapter I outline key concepts which will be reflected upon throughout the thesis. I begin by overviewing work conducted upon the culture industries and critically assess the validity of the concept of an independent marketplace for music *vis-à-vis* a mainstream. The context of current retail in recorded music is then described with specific reference to the problems of piracy and the implications of new media to those producing music for commercial consumption. I then analyse various formulations of sociality pertaining to music consumption and production in order to suggest how my research participants form a distinct social group. Thereafter, I introduce anthropological literature pertaining to the concept of materiality in order to unpack the significance of different formulations of the physical and authentic in consumer culture. This leads on to a summary of anthropological approaches to value pertaining to commodities and material culture. The introduction finishes with a methodological outline for this research and an elaboration upon the fieldsite of Austin, Texas.

1.1 The Social Sciences and the

Cultural Industries

Popular culture and music consumption practices have been subjected to a history

of academic rigor that has cast them variously as trivial pursuits, deleterious phenomena, materials and practices for mass expression of cultural and societal values and idioms, and empowering tools for individuals to construct and enact their identities. A critical shift over the twentieth century saw the consumption of popular media and mass-produced commodities becoming less trivialised, instead attracting recognition as important communally and individually malleable cultural properties in peoples' lives in the twentieth century and into the new millennium.²

There existed a longstanding theoretical divide between the concepts of 'high' and 'low' culture, characterised by the work of such Frankfurt School theorists as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Refining the Marxist aphorism that religion is the opiate of the masses (wedding it to commodity fetishism and Gramscian hegemony), they proposed mass popular culture to be insincere, vacuous, and ultimately deleterious as an influence upon society (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1969]:94-136). Adorno also lambasted the "culture industry" wherein "the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves" (Adorno 1997:29). The 'low' culture industry was contrasted with an aesthetically legitimate 'high' culture. Adorno wrote extensively on music and its aesthetic value, reactions to modernism, and the strictures and ritual of performance and reception (i.e. Adorno 1992; 2002). His discussions are appreciative of high-art classical

² By "popular" media or culture, I mean those conglomerations of people which emanate from widely available and dispersed artefacts and practices – by engaging with music, art, literature, or games of any sort. Popular culture is therefore both those artefacts that act as the material around which people construct their shared practices and worldviews (such as media, performance, clothing or other material artefacts produced with an audience in mind) and the social activities of the people who engage with these materials themselves.

music over its popular counterparts, denigrating especially the commercial and supposedly passive reception of music as popular culture³.

Anthropologists studying material culture, globalisation and the culture industries have argued that objects and popular culture formats do not impede the creative potential of the receiver through their circulation, and that there exist critical engagements with mass-produced popular and material culture. Miller (1998a) evidences this creativity in Trinidad where the global commodity Coca-Cola is localised according to Trini notions of soft drinks and consumables; O'Hanlon (1996) displays how Western graphic designs from comic books become reconfigured as tools for self- and –community-expression in Papua New Guinean shield designs; and Wilk (1995) shows that the Western beauty pageant does not prescribe cultural values of beauty in Belize competitions, but rather acts as a site for locally-articulated appreciations and discourses over feminine beauty. Popular culture and global commodities are not received by audiences without critical faculties, but are instead “decoded” (cf. Hall 1980) in such a way that throughout popular culture’s processes of production and reception it may be subject to multiple interactions with and interpretations by its audience. The unilineal transmission of ideas from producers to consumers suggested by the Frankfurt theorists was contested in the 1970s by a growing number of scholars who recognised that reception was not a passive process, but that there was a *power* in receiving popular culture and media messages. This concept of active audiences helped level the more rhetorical elements of the Frankfurt School’s theories.

Focussing more specifically on research into the music industry, a similar trend from constructing academic discourse around a meaningful distinction between ‘high’

³ Jazz inspired Adorno’s rancour in particular – see Leppert 2002:470-505.

and ‘low’ culture towards a recognition of the inherent power in the act of audience reception is evident. Music journalists, writers and cultural critics sought to legitimate popular music by concentrating on the artistry involved, be it in relation to particular genres such as blues⁴, or the wider reach of music as popular culture, and the appeal of recordings especially⁵. Such attempts to situate popular culture and its audiences in context with broader notions of artistry, history and commercial life were occurring in academic circles. This being the case, early political economy research into the music industry was nonetheless noticeably pessimistic, and forecast grim cultural and artistic returns for the efforts of musicians and a general dumbing-down of audiences as intrinsic to the commercial enterprise of music production and commodification.

For example, the legacy of Adorno and Horkheimer shadows the suggestions made by Chapple and Garofalo’s analysis of the American music industry’s history (1977). They perceived the commodifying processes of the industrial production of music as having irrevocable effects upon the sound of music. Any ‘anti-materialist’ performances or material, they suggested, were doomed to subversion by an industry that was already entrenched in its ways, an industry that had established itself as and would remain “firmly part of the American corporate structure” (Chapple and Garofalo 1977:300). This corporate structure commodified and objectified music as product, distancing it from being an art form. Chapple and Garofalo suggested that the omnipotent presence of a centralised music industry would continue its stranglehold upon the choices

⁴ Early works that re-appraised blues as a poetic art and innovative, pervasively influential form include Charters 1975 [1959]; Oliver 1960; Gioia 2008 and Wald 2004 have done much to update these appraisals.

⁵ Marcus 2008 [1975] displays the pervasive influence of popular music across American culture; Bangs 1988 collates the late journalist’s impressionistic and influential work on the value and aesthetics of popular music; Gray 2000 [1972] adopts a scholarly and literary approach to analysing Bob Dylan’s songwriting, showcasing its wide-ranging influence and influences.

of musicians, producers and audiences under the commodifying logic of capitalist society in “late capitalism”.

As evidence of the re-evaluations of receiver agency and the re-envisioning of the concepts of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in the social sciences, Garofalo later published a rebuke of these pessimistic visions of the music industry and its audiences. Garofalo’s admission that “there is no point-to-point correlation between controlling the marketplace economically and controlling the form, content and meaning of music” (Garofalo 1986:83) evidences the key critical shifts in the study of popular culture and popular music – reader reception was reconsidered to be beyond the strict control of the producers of media texts⁶.

This theoretical shift highlights that in music retail there is not an elite hegemonic control over meaning. Rather, areas of contested meaning and interpretation sprout out between musicians, record companies, retailers and audiences, and within their respective practices. The utility of ethnographic and anthropological work about these industries is to rectify a key problem with the sociological work that has been conducted on these cultural arenas, in which political structure and economy are foregrounded over the individuals and material goods that constitute the system. Importantly, material culture approaches serve to suggest that the aesthetic value of music is itself not the sole vessel channelling value through the commodity chain, but also that the commodity forms of

⁶ Umberto Eco’s theory of the model reader (1979) suggests that readers both precondition the potential meaning of texts and actuate this potential through the reading process. Therefore, texts designed for a particular audience, and aimed at producing specific reactions from that audience according to their supposed profile, are always subjected to a process of creativity by the reader of the text. This active and dynamic process of reading involves creativity on behalf of the reader to make intelligible any aspects of the text that otherwise dialectically refuse to form a cogent narrative. Reading and reception therefore formulates meaning and lucidity on individual terms.

music themselves propagate notions of value and understandings of consumer autonomy⁷.

The Frankfurt School's terminology – namely their suggestion that there exists a 'culture industry' producing culture in a manner analogous with the industrial production of any ephemeral mass-produced commodity (cf. Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1969]) – nonetheless has continuing importance, for it suggests linkage between the worlds of arts and of industry and commerce. What is fallacious is the corresponding agenda that is pushed forward with this terminology. The 'assembly line' industrial analogy and subsequent claims that the standardised profit-driven 'mass culture' which existed as a consequence sorely lacked in originality or individuality is often undercut by more recent findings of research into commercial music worlds. The portable nature of music artefacts and their properties as cultural objects enable their independent production outside of the major labels, which are the sort of monoliths against whom the Frankfurt School gave their most vocal opposition. Now, given the rise of portable music players and Internet distributions, people can critically engage with music as they see fit using avenues such as the Internet as spaces for discussion, and remodel commercial musics to meaningfully fit their daily agendas.

The boundaries between studies of 'high' or 'low' culture, and the resulting stigmatism that popular culture suffered, have therefore been obfuscated by academic engagement with popular culture as an instrumental part of people's everyday construction of themselves and the world in which they live. Time-out for leisure and indulgence is not time-out from cultural forces or social realities. Popular culture, once

⁷ Works that have examined music media as inherently important to the appreciation, accessibility and mobility of music include Gelatt's 1956 history of the phonograph; Manuel's 1993 study of Indian 'cassette culture'; Garofalo's 1999 critical history of the music industry up to the emergence of the MP3; and Hosokawa and Matsuoka's 2004 paper on Japanese vinyl record collecting.

deemed to be a banal but deleterious social reality, has proven to be a prescient research topic in studies of globalisation in non-western societies (evidenced by the works of Hannerz 1987; Miller 1998a; Frith 1989; Manuel 1993) as well as a malleable, meaningful phenomenon in western cultures. For example, Lawrence W. Levine (1992) has shown how pervasive popular media was throughout North America in the early 20th century, demonstrating how pictures in the popular press, radio programmes and cinema impacted upon the moral codes of society, their perceptions of the world, and informed their daily routines. The impact of popular culture and its media were always scrutinised by audiences who did not passively receive media messages but instead typified Stuart Hall's notion of an 'active audience' (1980).

Popular culture's increasingly democratised production, especially through the rise of the Internet, has dramatically altered the authorship of media texts from the Frankfurt School's initial conception of a producer-audience dichotomy and the omnipotence of centralised production and distribution. Marxist theorists have long been interested in popular culture and the production of media texts as a result of this. Whilst recognising the potentially repressive use of media by the state (such as the Singaporean government's use of songbooks, TV and radio broadcasts to inculcate notions of national identity in the early 1990s – Kong 1996), neo-Marxist theorists have also identified the liberating qualities of the 'new media' and its potential "for mobilising masses to empower themselves" (Enzensberger 1970:13-36). The 'emancipatory' polemic of neo-Marxists is best tempered into an idea of positive local identity assertion, and their radicalism reconfigured into the following set of possible repressive and liberating uses of the media:

<i>Repressive Use of Media</i>	<i>Emancipatory Use Of Media</i>
Centrally controlled programme	Decentralised programme
One transmitter, many receivers	Each receiver and potential transmitter
Passive consumer behaviour	Interaction of those involved, feedback
Production by specialists	Collective production
Control by property owners of bureaucracy	Social control by self-organisation

Adapted from Enzensberger 1970:26 by Manuel 1993:4

An ‘emancipatory use of media’, theorised by Enzensberger according to the use of literature and radio control, has flowered with the advent of the Internet and considerable technological advances, coupled with the increasing affordability of these technologies for media production. These ‘new’ pluralist medias have proven to alter the way that people engage with popular culture and the media. This is especially true in popular music cultures, facilitated by social networking and the popularity of blogging on the Internet (Reed 2005; Shefrin 2004), the rise of piracy and filesharing (Taylor *et al* 2002; Geisler and Pohlmann 2003a and 2003b; Condry 2004; Leyshon 2003), and the ability for people to record and disseminate their own music (Lysloff 2003; Théberge 1997).

Further studies have also shown us that popular culture can affect gender distinctions, notions of class, spatial practices and be much more than simply what people

use to occupy their spare time. Rave culture, especially in the UK, has been studied in great detail to suggest how people are able to fix a “space of identity” which frees individuals from distinctions of race and gender, socio-political classifications and hierarchies, through the many signs, symbols and texts that accompany the music itself (McRobbie 1993:421-4). As Peter Manuel suggests, “popular music is inseparable from notions of social identity, and derives much of its appeal from the ways it embodies, however obliquely, encoded ideologies that may be all the more pervasive for their ambiguity and subtlety” (Manuel 1993:6).

1.3 Defining the ‘Music Industry’, Mainstream and Independent Marketplaces

The single most important development in modern music is making a business out of it.

Frank Zappa

In this section I will provide a clarification over my references to the music industry, and to the subsequent delineation between mainstream and independent⁸ markets. Where such terms as ‘music business’ or ‘music industry’ are employed, it is not intended for these to suggest that I am viewing the entire retail environment as a holistic and unified body. I am rather referring to those who are active in the various sectors of

⁸ Independent production has been summarised as “artistic creations produced outside the auspices of media conglomerates and distributed through small-scale and often localised channels (e.g. nonchain local retailers, art-house theatres, DIY channels such as Web sites and zines, and other small scale enterprises” (Arsel and Thompson 2010:792).

the music production and retail worlds – their vectors may overlap and intercede, but not as part of a monolithic or inevitable industry structure.

The problem with defining a music industry, and the exposition of the music retail environment as in fact being pluralistic and multivocal, is highlighted by Williamson and Cloonan (2007). They prefer the term ‘music industries’ in order to separate out the various economic and political pursuits around music-making and retail, recognising the mainstream and independent sectors, live music versus recorded, government funding, promotion, distribution, merchandising, and so on. My designation of the *independent music marketplace* is therefore contingent upon the music industry not being a monolithic, hegemonic entity, although many independent producers view the mainstream major labels⁹ as being a controlling force in their conception of a hegemonic capitalist political economy to which their marketplace offers an opposition or alternative. Kevin Dunn (2012) has argued that such “progressive cultural capital” is at play in the DIY punk labels of the USA, where their community-building exercises are predicated upon not going about the business of selling music in the same way as mainstream labels. Their ideological separatism is realised in terms of practicing a political economy distinct from their ideological opponents.

The conflict over ideology in the various streams of music retail has involved several ‘legitimising strategies’ (Strachan 2007). In particular for the independent music world this has involved positing their own practices and products as *authentic* versus an *inauthentic* hegemonic capitalist mainstream. Academics have offered evidence to debunk such stereotypes, such as with Keith Negus’ attempt to move away from

⁹ The major labels EMI’s dissolution in 2012 are Sony Music Entertainment, Universal Music Group, and Warner Music Group – see Negus (1999:35-45) and Gronow and Saunio 1998 (for) details about the history of major record labels.

portraying “the music business [i.e. the mainstream] as a series of bureaucratic boxes and cybernetic systems through which products are transmitted from producers to consumers” (Negus 1992:vii). In *Producing Pop*, Negus discusses the ‘critical phase’ of discovering and developing an artist, with a concentration upon business personnel rather than the musicians and their audiences. Those contributing to the producing and imaging of pop music are understood as ‘cultural intermediaries’ (cf. Bourdieu 1986) and Negus attempts to counter pathological fears and cynicisms over industry corruption and the “pessimistic laments of mechanical determinists and economic reductionists” (Negus 1992:vi). Negus proposes that major labels in the mainstream recognise the cachet of what the independents aspire to by investing not just in commercial ‘synthetic’ acts, but also in ‘organic’ acts, so that their artist rosters appeal to a wide range of consumers (Negus 1992:54-5). The successful ‘synthetic’ acts sold on their looks and personality can subsidise investments in the ‘authentic’ or ‘organic’ acts that help to validate the labels in the eyes of discerning listeners. Utilising authentic notions of the unaffected or homespun is a widespread tactic for multinational companies seeking to curry favour with consumers (for examples, see Lien 1997 with regard to the marketing of food; Holt 2006 for the marketing of Jack Daniels bourbon). Negus therefore displays how both ‘independent’ and ‘mainstream’ sectors show self-consciousness in their marketplace positioning and conduct their marketing and image-creation accordingly, with major labels utilising notions of the authentic from the independents as a means to promote their brand. Independents likewise mirror aspects of major labels’ business structures as a means to make their enterprises economically tenable, even though in doing so they try to distance themselves from major labels by utilising unorthodox approaches to contracts,

marketing and the music that they issue relative to the mainstream (Dunn 2012; Strachan 2007; Hesmondhalgh 1999).

Simon Frith has argued that “what we hear as authentic is already determined by the technological and economic conditions of its production: it does not exist in any sort of ideal or innocent state” (1988:130). I would suggest that it is important that this should not lead to the assumption that authenticity is deigned by hegemonic powers and received immutably as such by audiences (cf. creative audiences and ‘decoding’ of media texts – Jenkins 1992; Hall 1980). Those that deign themselves to be authentic might not be received as such by audiences. As Frith rightly argues elsewhere, “authentic sounds are only recognised by their place in a system of signs” (1988:91). Efforts to establish mainstream artistic credibility and authenticity have therefore been argued to have utilised recognisable signifiers of authenticity from the independent marketplace, although this is no guarantee of success in this process.

Alternative strategies as employed by the independent marketplace are therefore adopted by the major labels in efforts at both legitimising their ‘organic’ acts and their label identity. The interplay between mainstream and independent labels in terms of their mutual appropriations of signs of the authentic as legitimising strategies problematises the notion that they are discrete and alienable entities (Williamson and Cloonan 2007). Nonetheless such deterministic reductionism is apparent in the ideology of the independent music world that seeks to define itself in opposition to corporate hegemony.

Therefore, whilst recognising that there is no single music industry, I do not atomise my informants as being entirely distinct from the activities and prevailing narratives around the rest of the industry, as these are shaped and poised in relation to

these broader presences. Robert Strachan has argued that the small, DIY micro-independent record labels of the United Kingdom have created “images and myths of the mainstream music industry”, and that these are “used by DIY micro-labels to justify and make sense of their own identities” (2007:246). Small-scale cultural producers in this field “cannot be seen as autonomous from either the dominance of large-scale institutions or the larger field of power... because of the historical dominance of major labels, small-scale cultural production related to popular music is dialectically bound up with the aesthetics and discourses of large-scale cultural organisations” (*ibid.*:247). This dialectic creates a mainstream capitalism in relation to which small producers can self-consciously create their identities via a number of what Strachan calls “‘legitimising theories’ for commercial and creative action”. Posing one’s own cultural creativity as being opposed to a global corporate media has the function of actively redefining the scale and scope of the ambitions of small-scale cultural production (*ibid.*). This is evident in the DIY-punk labels of the USA that eschew formal contracts and operate more informal business procedures that would be anathema to the mainstream major labels (see Dunn 2012 and Negus 1999:63-4 for the contrasts between the DIY independents and the major labels with regard to this aspect of their business conduct). The concentration of high-profile research upon the major labels (Negus 1992, 1999; Burnett 1996) versus independent actors is certainly reflective of the influence and market share of the former – Nielsen Soundscan figures for 2012 suggest that independent labels accounted for a mere 12.1% of US market share, the rest taken up by the major labels with Universal Music Group alone taking up a 32.8% share of the market¹⁰. This perceived hegemony has engendered

¹⁰ <http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1510504/universal-music-still-market-top-dog-in-2012> (accessed 16.08.2013)

quite distinct realms of economic activity and cultural production outside the mainstream.

As noted, Strachan has argued that owners of small record labels create 'legitimising theories' to justify their small-scale cultural production. These theories are "most clearly illustrated by the way in which they position and identify themselves, commonly justify their involvement in popular music production, and judge success and failure" (Strachan 2007:250). Therefore, their engagement in music production often takes the form of a moral or political stance against hegemonic capitalist forces; an identification with competing labels as part of a collective trans-global scene of music production that eschews the goals of mainstream corporate production; and as producers who also identify as fans, thereby gaining reward not solely from financial recompense but also from a personal sense of achievement and of having well served the music they admire. Capitalism's pervasive influence upon the production and consumption of popular music in society is challenged by these labels actively engaging in musical forms and modes of production and distribution that act as critiques of the perceived hegemonic industry institutions. The success of a release here "is rationalised primarily through its value as a successful artistic artefact and how well it is received by the label owner's peer group rather than how financially successful it may be. Hence there is a heavy onus on the symbolic value of the text rather than its economic value" (Strachan 2007:257). There is a basic antagonism at play here between the economic reality that no label will keep producing work without sufficient financial remuneration, and the idea of a democratic cultural sector with independence from hegemonic forces that, as a virtue of its oppositional stance, will create the better art, the more true and authentic cultural products. The setting of low ambitions by small labels *vis-à-vis* the financial reward for

their products not only helps them to stake a claim as an opposing force to the perceived mainstream capitalist ideology, but also safeguards their feelings of failure should their ventures collapse without recouping losses.

Nevertheless, despite the legitimising strategies of DIY labels, there is evidence of strategic professionalisation and entrepreneurialism latent in the wishes many small-label owners have to make their labels profitable enough to be full-time enterprises. “Even in an era in the recording industry when major and independents were seen by fans, musicians and critics as polar opposites, in truth they were often linked in licensing, financing and distribution deals” (Hesmondhalgh 2007:176). The capitulation of many independent labels to larger labels to become ‘sublabels’ as part of the major’s portfolio (such as Sub-Pop’s licensing to Warner Records in 1994 and Island Records’ sale to Polygram in 1989) is evidence that there is more interplay between the two than is usually acknowledged, as is the perception of independent labels as ‘proving grounds’ for artists that are then cherry-picked for upward mobility into mainstream promotion and distribution networks. The parables of mainstream music industry excess and corporate narrow-sightedness are part of the very mythology of popular music (Knopper 2009; Yetnikov and Ritz 2004; Negus 1999:63-82) that contributes to the us-and-them mentality of the independents, placing one as noble outlaw and the other as corrupt corporate ogre. Negus recognises the perception of when “naïve acts [have] signed exploitative contracts” (1992:43) with major labels as indicative of the major labels being less artistically sympathetic than independent labels.

Negus suggested that for record labels “Markets are not simply out there in the world, forming as members of the public gravitate towards certain recordings and not

others. Markets have to be carefully constructed and maintained...” (1999:32). The creation of the independent record labels and their products requires there to be a system of distribution, and a context or methodology for articulation of difference from the mainstream market available for consumers and producers alike. That the creation of goods in the independent marketplace cannot be accounted for solely in terms of economic factors echoes Toynbee’s proposal that there exist “proto-markets” (2000:27), wherein there is not a total commodification of musical activity. What these suggestions most clearly lead to is the slipperiness of identifying ‘the music industry’, and the uncertain claim upon independent status that actors have in commercial music culture. The latter is a constant performance that actors need to engage with in order to distance and distinguish themselves from the hard capitalism of the mainstream – indeed the creation of a ‘proto-market’ versus a ‘real market’ is a legitimising strategy *par excellence*. The reason to do so is to legitimate themselves for their own satisfaction as well as to maintain some commercial viability amongst the audience that is self-consciously seeking (and thereby performing) an alternative to the mainstream culture industries.

1.4 The State of Music Retail:

Piracy and New Media

It is commonly suggested the retail of recorded music is in a state of crisis as a consequence of failing business models and the rise of music piracy since the advent of

online digital media. Piracy is not itself a new phenomenon, having existed ever since the introduction of reel-to-reel and cassette recorders which enabled consumers to copy music from others cheaply and with little technical difficulty. Since these became affordable in the late 1960s, the music industry has attempted to make clear to consumers the illegality of the practice, stressing that mass piracy compromises the financial feasibility of releasing music commercially (many cassettes and LPs from the 1970s through to the late 1980s bore the legend “Home Taping is Killing Music!”).

It is estimated that in 1990 the piracy of compact discs, LPs and cassettes cost the North American music industry over 400 million USD in lost revenue (Burnett 1996:88). Nevertheless, the industry was still booming in the early 1990s. In 1996, the value of the United Kingdom’s recording industry hit a new all-time high of £1.1 billion, and it was estimated that the trade in recordings in North America was worth as much as 12 billion USD (Shuker 1998:vii). This upward swing in revenue was achieved despite the persistence of widespread piracy, where people used cassettes and early CD-R burners to distribute music freely, or on illicit pirate markets.

The optimism and financial security within recorded music retail was troubled by the ascendancy of domestic Internet use. File-sharing on the Internet enabled the free distribution of MP3 files on peer-to-peer networks such as Napster, the sharing of huge collections of music using bittorrent software such as eMule, and the distribution of digital music files amongst bloggers and message-board users on specialist music websites. As the amount of free file-sharing has grown since the late 1990s, efforts amongst record companies to slow the tide of piracy have been largely unsuccessful, as evidenced by Bhattacharjee *et al* (2007) meticulously detailing the negative effects of

piracy upon the sales of albums and their subsequent profitability and durations in popular music charts. Reactions to piracy such as prosecuting users of the peer-to-peer programme Napster for downloading free music, and the ill-fated decision by Sony to copy-protect their CDs with hidden encryptions that make users' home computers more susceptible to attack from viruses, have been public relations disasters.

Major labels struggled to find credible online platforms for retailing music, and ultimately ended up capitulating online dominance to Apple's iTunes service in terms financially less-than-favourable to the record labels yet highly lucrative to Apple (Knopper 2009:177-82). Sales of digital downloads have been growing enormously from such online outlets – Apple's iTunes has sold billions of songs to consumers and now sells more music to the United States' consumers than any other outlet, including the retail giant WalMart¹¹. Music retail is therefore changing from prizing the physical product, and has turned its attention to the digital domain, competing with the pirates¹², as well as finding new revenue streams in computer games, commercials and TV shows (Knopper 2009:218-9).

These factors have combined to compromise the number of physical units

¹¹ “Market research company The NPD Group has released findings indicating that iTunes continues to dominate the digital music market, as well as all music purchases in the United States. In the second quarter of 2012, iTunes claimed 64% of the entire digital music market and 29% of all music sold at retail (including both digital and physical formats).” From <http://www.hypebot.com/hypebot/2012/09/itunes-dominates-music-sales-while-pandoras-footprint-soars-study.html> (accessed 18.06.2013).

¹² Many such ‘pirates’ are seen as underground heroes by consumers, such as the Swedish based operators of the PirateBay torrenting website. Many others sharing copyrighted music are doing so on personally curated blogs aimed at expanding the audiences for obscure, rare and out-of-print artists in the faith that people will then buy the music that they enjoy after having downloaded it. The ‘pirate’ designation’s negative connotations are hard to apply to these small-time enthusiasts who share music out the hope it will reach appreciative, new ears who would buy a re-issued or otherwise available copy of the music via legitimate avenues. This concept that music piracy is understood by file-sharers as a form of gifting amongst participants rather than an act of transgressive law-breaking is examined by both Geisler and Pohlmann (2003b) and Leyshon (2003).

being sold. CD sales in the USA in 2010 were down 50% from their highpoint in 2000¹³. That this correlates strongly with the advent of early filesharing softwares such as Napster and Gnutella, the rapid expansion of home computing and the subsequent boom in legitimate online retail of digital music files is not at all coincidental. Now the Internet offers scope for retail of new and second-hand physical goods, downloadable digital files, streaming audio, and pirated and bootleg materials. Internet radio provides round-the-clock services that are frequently available for users to download to their hard-drives. The rise of websites where music is available on demand such as YouTube, Pandora, Spotify and LastFM has been hand-in-hand with the increasing sophistication of portable technologies for accessing such services. Historically, aside from radio, physical music commodities have been the medium for obtaining sound. That is to say, people tangibly *owned* recordings and used their copies to experience and re-experience sound.

Now, rather than *owning* music, people have *access* to it in an unprecedented way such that music resources can be exploited and sound consumed in spite of the consumer not *owning* the recording in question. Authorship of media with the advent of blogging and the rise of peer-to-peer filesharing programmes have taken the mantle of production away from the traditional model where labels produced products for consumers and were a necessary mechanism for disseminating product. The communities of online file-sharers and the groundswell of consumers seeking new modes of technology, convenience and retail experience recast the landscape of music retail. Media technologies evidently have a role in “the imagination of new social vistas and the construction/maintenance of communities” (Askew 2002:7), and one could do much worse than cite the Internet’s effect upon music consumption to exemplify this.

¹³ http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/31/business/media/31bestbuy.html?_r=1 (accessed 01.06.2010)

Music piracy is therefore relevant to this study for a number of reasons. Firstly, it raises the question of why people buy music in the physical format rather than pirate it for free. Secondly, it suggests that there are qualitative differences between pirated digital media and purchased physical media, aside from their obvious difference in cost to the consumer. Thirdly, the widespread communication between consumers means that it is easier to spread not only pirated material (that which has been released by a company and is subject to copyright constraints that forbid unauthorised reproduction), but also to spread bootleg material¹⁴. Lastly, the very issue of music ownership, and thereby the ownership of any cultural materials, is questioned by the rise of piracy. The pluralism of media formats has indubitably facilitated this piracy explosion, from accessible vinyl pressing (Heylin 1995; Jamieson 1999) to cassette tapes (Manuel 1993; Garofalo 1999:340-41, 345-6) and MP3s (Condry 2004; Leyshon 2003; Garofalo 1999:349-51).

The participation of consumers in underground music markets has received scant attention from anthropologists, although some have turned their attention to music piracy on the Internet. For example, Ian Condry (2004) uncovered a distinction between American and Japanese Internet piracy that was related to the popularity of renting CDs in Japan. The Americans freely share copyright material on the Internet much more than the Japanese, who feel less like having stolen a CD that they have paid for (then subsequently copied) from a rental store. Ownership – or entitlement to a copy – is negotiated in different ways in the two cultures, suggesting that the processes or channels

¹⁴ Bootleg material is that which has not been commercially released, but is circulated via a free exchange of music between individuals or sold for profit by small specialist sellers at record fairs and market stalls. How such a trade in music affects the industry is unclear, as these recordings (often audience concert recordings or unissued studio performances) circulate only amongst those who have patience to listen through their often inadequate audio quality, and to find out how to acquire them. For more on the history of bootlegs, see Heylin 1995 and Shuker 2010:104-7; for an examination of bootleg tape trading amongst Bruce Springsteen fans, see Cavicchi 2003.

of acquisition engaged with (developed in this thesis in Chapters 4 and 5) affect the reception of media and influence attitudes towards illicit markets.

To date, the most comprehensive study of illicit music markets is still that compiled by Peter Manuel in 1993. His research in North India documents the enormity of the Indian pirate cassette market, and its unquestionable impact upon listening and consumption practices in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Piracy enabled a democratisation of otherwise expensive musical products, bringing people into contact with music that they would otherwise have been unable to acquire, from within India and from abroad. Manuel's study suggests that it was a technological innovation that enabled mass-cultural change in the way music was consumed and disseminated. The enthusiasm of the public for the benefits of this technological change furthered the effects of piracy upon music making and the industry (as many musicians self-made cassettes, bypassing record companies altogether) as well as personal consumption practice. Marshall McLuhan's dictum "the medium is the message" (1964) strikes a salient chord here – the format on which music was circulated facilitated the consumption process, and affected perceptions towards other formats of recorded music. Manuel shows that "socio-technological developments leading to new mass-medias with patterns of control, production, content and consumption different from previous forms" (1993:2) can have a significant impact upon media audiences and popular culture consumption.

So, what is striking about the demographic that buys physical music commodities is that they buy them at all. Why they feel compelled to pay for music that, to all intents and purposes, they could acquire free-of-charge, is initially puzzling¹⁵. That they buy

¹⁵ The knowledge that music is freely available on-line through piracy is widespread. Although some downloaders of copyrighted materials have been prosecuted for their crimes, and heavy penalties imposed

physical products rather than opt for the convenience of the digital files that have seduced so many among the music-purchasing demographic poses further questions. It could be hypothesised that there are a handful of factors that keep them paying for their music:

1. The products that they buy are individual, tactile, physical experiences as well as aural artefacts. Digital filesharing cannot compensate for the loss of the individual physical materials included in these collections.
2. Digitised music is most often in a compressed format, and therefore is often of inferior sound quality to that found of CDs, vinyl or DVD-audio (discussed at length in Chapter 6).
3. There is a loyalty to fringe artists and labels who exist outside of the mainstream and the marketplace in which they operate, and it is not an option to ‘cheat’ them out of what little money they might earn by pirating their releases. By purchasing music, and resisting the trend of piracy across mainstream music culture, consumers are trying to indicate that they are separate from those without such loyalties, are more interested in music than others, or that they take it more seriously.
4. Fans of music often form social networks to exchange news, reviews, opinions, discussions and other such literature about the music and

upon them, these legal proceedings have been public-relations disasters for the music industry. Instituting lawsuits against consumers by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) in 2003 caused a public furore (Condry 2004:343-4). Consumers assess that the risk of prosecution is minimal (Leyshon 2003:538-40), despite high-profile legislation in the UK aimed at removing the Internet connections of persistent broachers of copyright laws in 2008. The ease with which peer-to-peer filesharing software can be downloaded and utilised, as well as the ease of locating pirated material for download using a simple Google search, have contributed to the spread of piracy from a niche exploit (Leyshon 2003:542-45) to a major cultural phenomenon. That the motion picture industry is facing a massive problem with piracy online (Yar 2005) testifies to the pervasiveness and acceptability of such copyright infringement amongst consumers.

products that they are likely to be interested in. This sociality is heightened by detailed discussion of artefacts which can only come from having experienced the artefacts first-hand – no-one wants to feel left out¹⁶. The social capital gained through owning commodity objects compels consumers to buy them to maintain their abilities to interact with others.

5. People prefer to keep using technological interfaces with which they are familiar or have already substantially invested in. This suggests a technological allegiance to some forms of sound-reproduction and music acquisition over others.

These possible hypotheses raise intriguing questions. Piracy is a huge exchange practice in contemporary media exchange, and paying for music is becoming less a part of music consumers' lifestyles. Yet the broad hypothetical reasons for buying music sketched out above are contingent with each other because they suggest that there is a desire for material goods amongst consumers, *because of* the physical nature of the goods that they are purchasing.

Consumers are not isolated actors independent from the networks that distribute the cultural goods they prize. I therefore discuss in the next section the analytical models that have been used to theorise music and sociality in order to best conceive how my informants' social networks can be described.

¹⁶ Evidenced by the many consumers who post on video-sharing website YouTube with examples of their collections, recent acquisitions, and are shown unpacking large sets – see for example https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=record+collection&sm=3 (accessed 12.06.2011).

1.5 Music and Social Groupings

Academic traditions from sociology, cultural and popular music studies have theorised the formation of social groups around music and the role of music within social groups. There is a specific interest at present in re-theorising the social, and a consensus that “the copious socialities of music... necessitate a novel social analytics” (Born 2011:377). The principle concepts utilised to theorise popular musical sociality have been subculture, tribe and scene. These formulations have been especially influential, and I critically assess their utility to my own ethnography.

Applying these concepts solely to popular music is problematic, insofar as they may encompass myriad other consumption factors (i.e. clothing, film, literature, public spaces). That music is ever the primary reason for of focus of social groupings can always be contested (Shepherd 2003:69). For example, the first wave of Birmingham subcultural theorists (i.e. Hebdige 1979; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Willis 1978, 1990) primarily focussed upon youth in marginalised and dispossessed factions of society, and might actually have documented cultural groups formed for reasons other than musical affinity. Music was one tool amongst many that these various groups used by which to define themselves, but the centrality of music to the formation of social groups is stressed in all of the research detailed below and suggested to be important in the integrity of these socialities.

i) Subculture

A widely used term, both in popular and academic discourses concerning popular

music and identities founded around popular culture, is *subculture*. The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) greatly influenced subcultural theory through the work of Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Dick Hebdige in the 1970s and 1980s. Their conception of subculture has subsequently undergone thorough modification, criticism and revision.

The term arose from the study of supposedly deviant minority groups in sociology. In one early study, male working-class ‘delinquents’ were understood to be violating the norms of the middle-class culture, actively subverting its values by over-conforming to the values of their parents such as ‘toughness’ and overt masculinity (Miller 1958). In time, popular music in subcultural theory was characterised as the pre-occupation of youths, experienced in tandem with fashion and the formation of youth communities and stylised identities. Their minority groups congregating around shared beliefs, values, lifestyles, style and musical consumption were characterised as *subcultures*. As it became evident that ‘youth culture’ was a broad theoretical classification¹⁷, the term subculture became applied to describing the myriad teenage phenomena arising in post-war multicultural society. The assumption persisted that those who were part of subcultures (rather than those “respectable youth” who embody mainstream ideals and conform to dominant norms in society – Brake 1980:23) were undermining traditional values and actively opposing the dominant parent culture. Analyses of these minority youth groups made much of their conformity to new semiotically-charged conventions of dress, speech and lifestyle, and was extremely selective of the ‘subcultures’ it chose for study such as punks, mods and African-Caribbean males. These more conspicuous examples of youth behaviours were foregrounded over more mundane forms at the cost of recognising the

¹⁷ See Bucholtz 2002 for a history of understanding youth categories in the social sciences.

fluidity between such groups of youth. Indeed, the propensity for analysing *male* subcultural archetypes further skewed the scope of the analysis into such youth groups and of youth culture as a whole (McRobbie 1981; Wald 1998).

The implications of these early research interests into youth and music are still felt today¹⁸. To use the term subculture is to connote youth, social deviance, style, speech, resistance, and genre-bound musical consumption. Consequently the total abandonment of the concept of subculture has been called for by some commentators largely in response to a dissatisfaction with the CCCS's formulation, either seen to be fundamentally flawed in its overly neo-Marxist conception or simply an outmoded form of cultural category. The location of subculture as a phenomenon grounded in youth culture (from Hall and Jefferson 1976 through to Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004) has primarily proven to be most problematic. The commercial and discursive wedding of youth and popular music in the 1960s and 1970s was an historical association which affected CCCS theorising, but has not remained a valid conception of youth culture or popular music since then (Hesmondhalgh 2005:22). Participants in popular music range from pre-teens through to baby-boomers engaging with the same materials to forge their musical/cultural identities. The subcultural model might work for different cultures and musical engagements cutting across different age ranges, and it is therefore apparent that the focus upon youth as a guiding tenet for defining musical groups and their engagement with popular culture is misguided.

'Subculture' is frequently repudiated as rigid and unreflective of the mobile sociality and the fluid, flexible reality of cultural appropriations found in contemporary

¹⁸ Examples of youth-orientated subcultural analyses include Willis 1993; McRobbie 1993; Hodkinson 2002; Szmer 1989; Linder 2001.

Western societies. Hesmondhalgh (2005) has called against returning to the concept and attempting to fine-tune it to present day discussions, deeming the historical and theoretical baggage behind 'subculture' insurmountable, and proposing that other concepts need to be developed to understand cultural grouping around popular cultural phenomena. Such a revision attempts to reinvigorate theoretical stances on cultural consumption and social grouping with a sense of changeability and porousness, from tribes and neo-tribes to scenes, although as Hodkinson (2004) has argued regarding Goths in the United Kingdom, such a model of fluidity is not applicable in every circumstance. The Goth scene, as Hodkinson defines it, is still relatively bounded and resistant to the charge of hyper-fluidity that has come to define much post-subcultural theorising.

ii) Tribes

Andy Bennett (1999) most clearly articulates 'tribes' or 'neo-tribes' as an alternative to subcultural theory. This stemmed from both the increasingly contradictory uses of the term subculture in cultural theory, and the assumption of youth groups as rigid and coherent social structures, with subcultures as "subsets of society, or cultures within cultures" (Bennett 1999:605). Bennett identifies the instability of consumer cultures, and the temporality of group affiliations in society over their assumed permanence. Hesmondhalgh criticises this binary categorisation of instability and boundedness, for social activities create boundaries, the creation of which needs to be understood. It is not enough to accuse some social theory of being too rigid in its conceptions and merely to advocate a blurring of categories to rectify this flaw (Hesmondhalgh 2005:24). Determinism and social agency are too often classed as rigid structural opponents in

attempts to define the nature of musical collectives.

Bennett tries to conceive of tribes and lifestyle choices as being products of the seemingly endless freedom consumers have to appropriate commodities and cultural signifiers without having to conform to the structural strictures of social life, which are evident when taking into account limited spending power, gender roles, social marginalisation and so on. The uncritical empowerment of consumers to partake in multiple streams of commodification and mould them into new identities is a flaw in Bennett's argument. Hesmondhalgh contends that in reality social action has boundaries imposed upon it by the limited agency of social actors. He also criticises the way music is utilised to buttress theories of tribes and neo-tribes. Bennett defines musical taste (and lifestyle choice) as a "loosely defined sensibility" (Bennett 1999: 611), and counters the CCCS's subcultural theorising of limited and bounded musical appreciation within musical collectives by highlighting the confluence of genres appropriated during DJ sets in dance music culture. Hesmondhalgh's critique suggests this appreciation of multiple genres and the existence of a 'loosely defined' life-style choice as being insufficient for sustaining neo-tribalism as a coherent theory.

iii) Scenes

The concept of the scene has gained currency in the past twenty years of popular music studies. It was Barry Shank's main theoretical contribution in his 1994 ethnography of Austin's rock music¹⁹. For Shank,

The constitutive feature of local scenes of live musical performance is their evident display of

¹⁹ Shank first introduced the term 'scene' in a 1988 conference paper.

semiotic disruption, their potentially dangerous overproduction and exchange of musicalised signs of identity and community. Through this display of more than can be understood, encouraging the radical recombination of elements of the human in new structures of identification, local rock'n'roll scenes produce momentary transformations within dominant cultural meanings.

Shank 1994:122

Shank heavily emphasises Lacanian theories to describe these transformations within a localising strategy. Actors strive to define the self and master their surroundings but never attain this satisfaction. They need the reassurance of a scene to which they belong that ratifies their self-interest and momentary sense of identification, self-fulfillment and self-understanding via face-to-face interactions. The signifying community of the scene is a product of these modes of interaction that are utilised by actors for their own subjective identification as individuals and social beings.

Julian Gerstin uses the term scene from Will Straw's writing to denote social networks that are *intentional* in the Martinique musical tradition of bélé music (Gerstin 1998:388). Straw describes musical scenes as "cultural spaces" wherein "the building of musical alliances and the drawing of musical boundaries" (Straw 1991:373) denote those who are in or outside the group. Straw argues that scene-theory encompasses "the relationship between different musical practices unfolding within a given geographical space" (Straw 1991:373). He contrasted the notion of a music 'community' in a fixed geographical locale operating within its own bounded heritage and traditions with the 'scene' that is conscious of "processes of historical change occurring within a larger international music culture" (*ibid.*).²⁰

²⁰ The theoretical ramifications of much of the evidence garnered by cultural geography and anthropology

Straw argues that scene theory combats assumptions that communities are stably composed with geographically-fixed and -specific shared heritage that shapes the nature of musical practice. In metropolitan music scenes, Straw identifies a “cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilisation” (Straw 1991:373). Musical sociality, the imagined communities and “affective alliances” (*ibid.*:374) made around music, are not reducible to pre-given ontologies of the social, as immediate corporeal musical performance and the imagined alliances co-conspire. Whereas Shank places these practices in opposition to the ‘mainstream’, Straw’s scene conception formulates a field of cultural production (cf. Bourdieu 1993) where actors seek legitimisation and ownership or mastery over cultural prestige.

Georgina Born has suggested that conceiving of scenes evidences “how the socialities of performance catalyse music’s imagined communities, just as those imagined communities imbue the socialities of performance with collective emotion” (Born 2011:382). Sara Cohen, who has written extensively about music-making in Liverpool, situates her informants’ bands in scenes “to highlight the ‘scenic’ qualities of rock music in Liverpool, and to draw upon the dramatic sense of scene as public performance” (1997:17). Cohen stresses that scenes are not just constituted by performers and an audience, but also by actors in management, recording, publishing, manufacturing, music and instrument retail, merchandise, education, and advice and training.

The literature on scene theory has problems. Subcultural formulations of urban

are evident in the latter formulation that recognises the wide variety of diasporic cultural influences that create ‘the local’ (Cook and Crang 1996; Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1997).

engagements with music have been too restrictive, implying hermetic communities lacking the potential to change and adapt. The term ‘scene’ potentially over-problematizes cultural fixity and adherence to norms and tradition/heritage, when there are certainly cases in which such adherence to fixity is desired (Gerstin 1998; Hodkinson 2004). Scene theory and complicit concerns with locality or trans-locality are liable to creating a fundamental evasiveness in pinning down the boundaries of what is being studied and defined (Hesmondhalgh 2005:28-9).

As has been argued with regard to commitments made to localised consumption and production of music, the

celebration of the local becomes a form of fetishism, which disguises the translocal capital, global management, and the transnational relations of production that enables it... the degree to which “independent” non-mainstream musics, while clearly based upon local spaces, performances and experiences, are increasingly tied together by social networks, publications, trade groups and regional and national institutions in... locally dispersed formations.

Fenster 1995:83

A vital question when examining scenes is the degree to which local conditions have created the means by which music is produced and consumed, and consequentially how meaning is derived from it. The degree of ‘localising’ required when analysing different scenes varies, thus necessitating the need to “question the assumption that sound and location are in some way connected” (Street 1995:256). Importantly, most of this localising literature on scenes focusses on the making of music by bands and musicians in

an urban network of venues and studios, rather than the more widely dispersed scene-making activities detailed by Cohen (1997:17). In a critique of scene theory, Hesmondhalgh also displays this tendency in discussing how different proponents of the concept understand the politics of music making (2005:28-9). The overt focus upon these aspects of music marketplaces localises the discourse in a way that is problematic to a discussion of the retail of recordings trans-locally, and also limits the utility of scene theory as it is most often used when looking at other increasingly marginalised actors in the scene such as distributors, promoters, record labels and stores.

Furthermore, the focus on live performance is problematic. Shank characterises Austin's rock 'n' roll scene as being primarily constituted by live performances and their attendees, wherein the "physical expression of having a good time is an integral component of experience in the rock 'n' roll scene" (Shank 1994:125), and therefore the "necessary conditions for the development of a scene... [are] a situated swirling mass of transformative signs and sweating bodies" (*ibid.*:128). Cohen similarly proposes that live performance is "central to concepts of the scene, and it is in live performance that the scene is literally embodied and made more visible and real" (Cohen 1997:27). Being aware of venues and their live performances is centrally important to whether one can consider themselves to be *in* the scene or *out* of it (Shank 1994:120). This usage is at odds with the culture of people whose principle artefacts are technologically-reproduced sound-objects that are widely distributed, and are acquired and consumed in many diffuse locales, both public and private. Live music is part of the complex of music reception, and it is not universally the primary site for socialising and gaining information about music and musicians.

Furthermore, most research detailing a ‘scene’ uses a single genre of music and its audience as its starting point. Whilst issues such as the genre of music listened to²¹ and the canonical worth of music²² are important considerations for consumers, few of my research participants self-consciously identified themselves exclusively with a genre. Negating generic fixity was rather important to my participants’ sense of identity. Whilst Straw’s description of scenes offers a multi-sited model of localised infrastructures performing as overlaid circuits, wherein musical vernaculars of localities becomes nationally and globally reproduced “in relatively uniform ways” (Straw 1991:378), the caveat is that he is specifically talking about the “development of alternative-rock culture” or of electronic dance music. He typifies nascent dance music styles in the 1990s as being geographically bounded (Miami bass, Detroit techno etc. – Straw 1991:381) whilst countering this fixity by stressing a “cosmopolitan transcending of space” (Hesmondhalgh 2005:28). Just as Shank’s focus is on punk and indie-rock in Austin, a preponderance upon generic hermeticism is at play in much of the scene literature. This indicates a common homolog made between a ‘scene’ or ‘subculture’ and a specific genre of music. Jenß avoided the term ‘scene’ precisely because it tends to denote genre-bound sociality and consumption (2005:181). The focus upon a single genre when researching musical sociality has the methodological advantage of focusing attention upon a

²¹ Peter J. Martin identifies the key sociological questions with genres as being “such matters as when and where forms crystallise, who plays them, who listens to them, and who pays for them; how they develop and become culturally dominant forces (as in the case of classical music) or remain inchoate and marginal (as with the blues)” (Martin 1995:12). Negus (1999) displays the primacy of genre classification and subsequently the demarcation of audience types according to genre in the mainstream record industry; Peterson (1997) dissects the country music genre to detail the strictures demarcating authentic country music expressions; cultural historian Marybeth Hamilton (2007) has examined the cultivation of rural ‘country’ blues archetypes and taste hierarchies. Each of these works demonstrate the variegated influences that govern the construction of music genres in the marketplace, and how these music genres are used as tools for identity creation among groups of consumers. For more on these expressions, see Szmere 1989; Hodkinson 2002; Hesmondhalgh 1998; Gerstin 1998; Fox 1987.

²² See Dougan (2006), Hamilton (2007), Peterson (1997), Kärjä (2006) and Bohlman (1988) for work on canonisation of music recordings, eras, regions and artists.

manageable phenomenon and sample size. However this should not come at the expense of recognising musical socialities such as that which make up the present research, wherein multiple genres are actively integrated into the creation of social identities.

When different usages of the term scene denote a sense of local, communal music-engagement and simultaneously evoke a wider music marketplace and trans-local understanding, the definition of the scene under scrutiny can become confused. The wide vernacular usage of the word scene, either to denote the (primarily bohemian and urban) locality of musical engagement or the trans-local affections engendered by music, potentiates further confusion. The consumption detailed in my ethnography flits across genres, and a wide variety of domestic, performance and retail spaces. It is traversed upon by scenes that are the creation of other genre-bound consumers, rather than the creator of a specifically genre-bound 'scene'. To call collectors a 'scene' conflicts with how people use the term, for the word 'scenester' has the same pejorative connotations as 'hipster' in the vocabulary of many of my informants. Nevertheless, both groups – a) 'scenesters' engaging in mostly genre-bound socialising, listening and live performances and b) the collectors who listen widely, attend concerts of many genres and do not identify with one sole generic scene – are illumined by the scene concept's recognition of many streams of activity and trans-local influences upon social practices, and the porous nature of identity and commodity consumption in consumer culture.

Despite its promise of overcoming the reductionist fixity of the 'musical community', the methodological focus in the literature on scenes upon specific musical genres and centring upon live performance as the prime location of cultural expression and engagement is creating a corpus of work that fails to break free of these strictures

sufficiently. This commentary upon scene theory highlights shortcomings in the previous literature on scenes and suggests the need for more quasi-tribal reflections upon the multiple genres at play in musical sociality and the varied sites of cultural production and consumption, without reifying the live performance as the principal site of cultural allegiance. As there is much utility to considering the role of musical genre in musical sociality, I now examine the ramifications of genre upon musical groupings and argue that the scene concept's utility could be improved by a greater awareness of multi-genre socialities.

iv) *Genre*

Georgina Born has commented that “The notion of scene is important as an attempt to move beyond the idea that music (and culture) articulate only pre-existing identity formations. Rather, it is clear that music can become a primary vehicle of collective identification – even if this is traversed by other vectors of identity (race, class, identity, ethnicity, sexuality)” (Born 2011:382). These bifurcated mediations, wherein music produces novel idioms and spaces for identity creation, but also interacts with and occasionally changes extant social formations, are central tenets of scene theory. Born also proposes genre to be a key stratifying vector in the sociality of music, identifying a pivotal interaction “between wider social relations and systems of musical genre, where genre is taken to be the primary mechanism for the mutual articulation of musically imagined communities and social identities – communities that are often taken to derive from those social identities” (*ibid.*:383). Genre is not *the* determining mechanism of such mediation, in the sense that a single genre is required to form these alliances. Multiple

genres can be assessed simultaneously according to varying criteria, and these criteria cumulatively produce the imagined community of the record collecting scene²³.

Hesmondhalgh has suggested that genre is a more fruitful starting point for understanding musical styles and social groupings than subculture, tribe or scene (2005:32-35). He argues this in relation to a problem with subcultural theorising, namely the assumption of ‘homologies’ between the cultural materials deployed and the social grouping that uses them, between the social process and symbolic practices evident. Another concept Hesmondhalgh reviews more favourably is ‘articulation’, the temporal and context-specific unifying of two elements that is neither essential nor natural.

Toynbee acknowledges that genre can articulate some aspects of a musical community (especially regarding politics) although in other contexts “the fit between community and style is less direct, or genres can encompass huge areas of social and geographical space which can hardly be described as communities at all” (Toynbee 2000:114). The spread of different affiliations between people and cultural practices, the appropriation of genres of music among diverse peoples in distinctive and novel contexts, evidence proliferate modes of using music for the purposes of creating or reflecting social grouping. Social science research should recognise a “*differentiated* approach to musical collectivity” (Hesmondhalgh 2005:34) wherein “multiple articulations” are apparent in the understanding of how music relates with social practices. By formulating a concrescence of articulation and genre, Hesmondhalgh is aiming to overcome the limitations that these terms have themselves as theoretical determinants and/or

²³ For example, the plural materialities of music that Born mentions elsewhere (2011:377) are apparent in record collecting, such as artwork and the condition of records, the studios where they were mastered, the media by which they circulate, and the places from which they are procured, operating across genres.

descriptions for how and why people use music in social contexts²⁴.

The dominance of work that operates according to generic categories of music, consumers and marketplaces might well be influenced by the presumed importance that genre plays in the creation of individual and group identities both that a) the long history of subcultural theorists' genrefication of their topic of study, and b) the music industry's attempts to atomise their audience and to identify genre as a key facet dictating their organisation and commercial activity:

The construction of markets into discrete genres and lifestyle groupings is the result of a dual process. At some point these divisions are clearly an expression of lived social and cultural differences... At the same time, however, these cultural divisions are reinforced by the way in which the recording industry actively divides the audience in order to create identifiable markets.

Negus 1992:69

The pervasive genrefication of music and audiences might lead researchers to unwittingly reify this aspect of music consumption as more determining of social actions than practice bears out. My research participants utilise many different genres, but I do not argue on account of this wider listening that they are *genreless* or that genre is unimportant to their musical sociality. Each genre implies a canon of central works, knowledge of which are crucial to being able to claim proficiency in cultural discourses around these genres. Genres that are considered *outré* to the received wisdoms of 'good' music (i.e. disco, Christmas music) are defended and legitimised by those who include

²⁴ Hesmondhalgh's argument is formulated to specifically critique the historical preponderance for popular music theorists to focus upon youth as their main topic of study. He recognises that music is important to older demographics, and that many young people do not engage wholesale in popular culture but rather dip into it strategically or casually (2005:37).

them in their collections, eschewing irony (as this belittles the music and the investment in it that the collectors have made) in order to assert their legitimacy as collectors (see Chapter 5). My research shows that multiple genres can be flexibly utilised (the choice of and degree to which genres are invested in being a tactic for claiming one's individuality relative to other collectors and the genre-marketing of the mainstream) in the creation of a social grouping which bases itself around particular modes of retail and the consumption of certain types of goods and technologies to define a scene. A single genre need not prevail as the primary cultural material around which these social formations are made. The use of many genres in the catalogues of record labels and in collections is itself an articulation, bringing together multiple cultural elements in time and space to create new socialities and identity formulations neither essential nor natural. Bringing these elements together in a tangible sphere of circulation and ownership (the independent music marketplace) is a key signifier of the scene.

The scene concept shows promise is for widening the parameters for cultural engagement and sociality around music from the confines of a single geographically located 'community' to a trans-local network wherein different localities perform as overlaid circuits: "The ability of groups and records to circulate from one local scene to another, in a manner that requires little in the way of adaptation to local circumstances, is an index of the way in which a particularly stable set of musical languages and relationships between them has been reproduced within a variety of local circumstances" (Straw 1991:379). This is helpful as a repudiation of the community concept. Many different sites can receive goods flexibly within their different local markets, something long-established in cultural geographers' and anthropologists' accounts of consumption

and globalisation (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987; Cook and Crang 1996). But just as there is no one 'music industry' (Williamson and Cloonan 2007), the catch-all theorising of scenes, subcultures and tribes struggles to do justice to the proliferation of musical practices involved in the production and consumption of recorded music. The focus upon live music, single localities, or the affinities between musicians does not encompass the breadth of activities that constitute the network involved in producing and distributing a recording. What is required to refine the scene concept for this research into a scene built around a particular commodity culture is an awareness of multiple genres and the sites of cultural consumption and production in which they are articulated. I therefore utilise the scene concept as it is useful for recognising the trans-locality of urban musical sociality, but will do so with a recognition of multiple genres and an aversion to stressing a principal site for performance and engagement such as live performance venues.

1.6 The Creation, Negotiation and Transformation of Value in Commodity Exchange

It is logical in economic terms to get the music that you want for nothing, with great ease and little risk of punishment rather than to spend time and money hunting down material goods. However, it is far too simplistic to look at the economic benefits of piracy and suggest that this will determine people's habits of acquiring music. Douglas and Isherwood (1996 [1979]:3-10) critiqued economic theories of need and their assumptions about consumption and the consumer, wherein market relations were taken

for granted as motivations for acts of consumption. They suggested that the symbolic and performative dimensions of consumption were as much agents of desire as mere market relations. These market relations cannot be assumed to presuppose modern consumption behaviour. Miller similarly critiques the ‘virtualism’ of economic consumption theories, suggesting that economic theory disposes of the emotive, performative and social facets of consumption acts by instead creating a fictitious body of fetishised ‘virtual’ consumers moulded to suit rigid economic constructs of behaviour and desire. Purely economic analyses of consumption behaviours utilise a post-modern rhetoric “based on the homogenising ‘consumer society’ and ‘consumer culture’, that simply [stands] for the consumer” (Miller 1998b:209). The economic logic for piracy cannot therefore account for consumption behaviours based on broader notions of cultural and symbolic capital. The benefits of digitised music (portability, ease of sharing, space-saving) which have spurred sales in MP3 music and online piracy will not stop all customers from buying physical formats. As evidenced by Douglas and Isherwood and Miller, anthropology has long been attentive to these aspects of consumption study²⁵; consumer subjectivities and the broader social and political spheres of their activities are present in several anthropological works²⁶.

I precede the following discussion with recognition that theories of *capital*, *taste*

²⁵ These debates can be found not just in anthropology and economics, but also in the fields of history, sociology, media studies, geography and psychology which have led to inter-disciplinary publications on consumption and the consumer (Miller 1995; Trentmann 2006a; Trentmann and Brewer 2006). Historian Frank Trentmann suggests the need for “an attempt to reposition the field of consumption studies by moving an interest in purchase and the practical and symbolic use of *things* to ask about the *subjectivities* of ‘the consumer’” (2006b:2). In attempting to show the evolution of ‘the consumer’ in the modern world, Trentmann suggests that “much is to be gained from casting our view beyond the market and situating consumers within their broader social and political spheres” (*ibid.*:5). This increased attention to consumption and the consumer in other fields is playing catch-up with anthropological debates.

²⁶ For examples of studies placing consumption acts within their wider historical, social and political contexts, see Mort 1996; Orvell 1989; Wilk 1995; Miller 1998a.

and *distinction* fall upon any work on cultures of consumption and their systems of value. Veblen's formulations of conspicuous consumption (1925:68-101) and emulation (1925:22-34) suggest that consumption practices are not solely dictated by the utility of the products purchased, but also by competitive self-interest. Consumption for Veblen entails a display of class and taste that communicates one's ideal social status to others in an appreciable hierarchy of socially validating consumables. These themes are developed influentially in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Whilst Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) is hampered by its Eurocentrism and concentration on elite cultures in a particular class structure²⁷, it nonetheless informs many discussions of consumption cultures where critical judgment of practices, texts, objects and people are key facets of that culture's negotiation and value-hierarchy. "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make" (Bourdieu 1984:6). The "natural facility" or 'habitus' (*ibid.*:255) required to negotiate these cultures is predicated upon the possession of appropriate cultural capital and legitimate claims to status. Bourdieu's thesis (expanded upon in later writings i.e. Bourdieu 1990) is problematic for its predilection to framing taste and cultural capital as materials for competition, with actors constantly jostling for supremacy within a class-based hierarchy in a manner analogous to a game. Reading competition too hastily into consumer worlds might pre-emptively distort the nature and purpose of exchange value within that culture²⁸. For these reasons, whilst I value aspects of Bourdieu's discussions, I

²⁷ The following passage is indicative of how some of these concerns are manifest in *Distinction*:

"Nothing more clearly affirms one's "class", nothing more infallibly classifies than tastes in music. This is of course because, by virtue of the rarity of the conditions for acquiring the corresponding dispositions, there is no more "classificatory" practice than concert-going or playing a "noble" instrument." (Bourdieu 1984:18)

²⁸ Brown (1996) offers a constructive critique of a similar propensity for some anthropologists to uncritically view acts as embodying resistance or aggression wherever interaction occurs between actors of

approach him with critical caution in this work.

Considering valuable objects in society, Arjun Appadurai's 1986 essay *Commodities and the Politics of Value* argues that the Marxist value-from-labour approach is restrictive, for this type of value production is distinctly capitalist in nature in the sense that commodities could *only* exist in the capitalist sphere. Appadurai instead argues that the human desire for goods is what fuels value creation:

This means looking at the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things. It also means breaking significantly with the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity and focussing on the total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption.

Appadurai 1986:13

Appadurai sidesteps the societal totalities of Bourdieu's theories (notions of how meaning is structured in and by society). Rather, following Malinowski, the individual actors in a system and their desires have become the agents of value production and the focus for theory and research. Appadurai's essay considers objects as social entities with a "life history" (Appadurai 1986:5) which documents their traffic through various controlled "regimes of value" (*ibid.*:14-15), and negotiation through transformative "tournaments of value" (*ibid.*:20-22). Appadurai dismisses the existence of a gift/commodity distinction²⁹, suggesting that commodities could exist everywhere. The concept of a pre-capitalist gift society is re-imagined as a construct of past

unequal social or economic status.

²⁹ This distinction is classically articulated by Gregory (1982), where gift exchange involves inalienable objects being exchanged between interdependent transactors, and commodity exchange involves alienable objects exchanging between independent transactors.

anthropological discourses, rather than as a real cultural phenomenon. Gift and commodity exchange are neither mutually exclusive nor oppositional in nature, and neither can gift exchange be caricatured as innocent altruism and commodity exchange as instrumental and calculative (Parry 1989:65). An object's commodity value can transform in different contexts (evidenced by Nick Thomas' historical work into colonial material flows – 1991; 1999). Appadurai addresses the schism in the earliest anthropological literature on exchange value, essentially a Malinowski/Mauss divide. For Malinowski, exchange is a competitive act aimed at personal gain – creating need and exploiting that need as individual profit is the basis of exchange. Mauss (1967) argued to the contrary that the importance of the social contract of exchange motivates the flow of goods. The Malinowskian individualist is thus re-affirmed in Appadurai's work.

In *The Gender of the Gift* (1988) Marilyn Strathern's discussion of 'rights' and 'property' suggest some form of societal control or influence over value creation, and in this sense concurs with Bourdieu:

A vocabulary, which turns on the deprivation of 'rights' must entail premises about a specific form of property. To assert rights against others implies a type of legal ownership. Does the right to determine the value of one's product belong naturally to the producer?

Strathern 1988:142

However, the ability to assert rights by an individual must come from self-interest and agency. From her analysis of Gregory's abstractions (1982) of gift economies (where objects take on the roles and characteristics of people) and commodity economies (where peoples' roles in the economy objectify them), Strathern argues that her Melanesian

informants saw objects and their value as coming not from individuals but rather from the outcome of relationships. Melanesians, she argues, do not conceive objects and persons as independent entities that are involved in exchange. Identities are acquired from the relationships through which they are transacted or exchanged. The giver *becomes* the giver and gains his/her identity through exchange. The identities of people and objects are therefore forged from the identities of the people and objects that form the exchange relationships within which they exist. To Strathern, making visible the various potential guises that constitute a “partible person” is an act of giving value to them. This value is the meaning or importance that society ascribes to an object. This is a re-formulation of Saussurean structuralist value³⁰, where value is the meaningful difference between arbitrary signs in a set of categories. The larger constructs into which objects are compartmentalised, and by which accordingly their value is assessed, are the social relationships between people. Objects therefore have no implicit exchange value, but rather any value they acquire can be identified as having come from the relationships that they bridge or construct.

We can surmise that much of the literature on consumption is Saussurean in the nature of its construction of value – value is meaningful symbolic difference from other categories. Value is also, as suggested by Weiner, Munn and Strathern, rooted in social relationships. Additionally, value has been theorised to arise from personal relationships with objects (Hoskins 1998 shows this vis-à-vis the relationship between personal and object biographies), and to an extent value is an internalised and personal phenomenon. Anthropological study has stressed that value creation and transformation is continuous, dynamic, and resists fixity. This recognises the commodity potential and the sociality of

³⁰ For an overview of Ferdinand de Saussure’s work and influence, see Culler 1976.

objects everywhere. Therefore, it is useful to envisage a practice-situated process of value creation that allows for multiple meanings and formulations of an object's value to exist within the same circuit, where "symbolic densities differ radically even with objects that are physically alike" (Weiner 1994:394).

Such works on the relational aspects of exchange, and how these relationships constitute value, are problematic not only for the way in which they can focus wholeheartedly on structural principles at the expense of attending to individuals' practices. They often do not consider how the attributes of objects themselves contribute to their value, and to people's sense of their own personal value. These theories construct social appreciations of objects' value, rather than an appreciation of the value of exchange *through* the object. Some exceptions to this trend can be found in the work of Annette Weiner and Nancy Munn. A focus is therefore required upon the materiality of exchange goods and how this is implicated in the creation of exchange relationships and the performative capacities of exchanged goods.

1.7 Materiality

Material culture materialises identities, but it is also a medium for understanding the processes by means of which those identities are transmitted.

Tilley 2011:348

In this section I review anthropological discourse into material culture, and elaborate upon the concept of 'materiality'. I examine the material implications of music being accessed via different technological media, to elucidate the various types of materiality of sound and the technologies that deliver it. I demonstrate how the notion of

materiality is problematised according to a hierarchy of preferred material properties, and that the sonic properties of technologically-reproduced music are intimately related with these conceptions of the materiality of the objects and technologies that reproduce sound.

In discussing materiality, I am drawing upon the work of Annette Weiner (1992; 1994), who highlighted that the specific qualities of tactile objects and the substances from which they are made are crucial influences upon their use and the assessment of their value (her discussion of inalienable textiles in Melanesian societies is predicated upon the fraying and decay of these fabrics and how this quality embodies the paradoxes of social decay and permanence – 1992:58-9). She understands objects as having symbolic densities (1994:394) and “transcendent” or “absolute” value in the face of potential decay (*ibid.*:395-400). These conceptual properties find their expression in material goods.

Weiner argued (1985; 1992) that artefacts become valuable not just because of their uniqueness, as was suggested by Igor Kopytoff (1986), but because of their “inalienable” status as culturally dense artefacts derived from their specific histories (Weiner 1994). Kopytoff used the term “singularity” to describe unique objects, and suggested that there existed a gradient of categories between a singularised item on one extreme and a commodity on the other. Weiner suggests that an objects’ value may be “transcendent” or “absolute” – the original giver’s identity might be so attached to the object’s identity that circulation does not enhance value beyond a point. Preservation and maintaining an object’s eternal image creates value (Weiner 1994:395-400). Value becomes measured in the fear of loss as actors attempt to keep their valuables from circulating (articulated by Weiner as ‘keeping while giving’). Value is measured relative

to the marketplace, where there always exists the danger that these possessions could re-enter circulation. Culturally dense objects are to be kept pristine to enshrine their absolute value. Keeping objects especially liable to decay in pristine condition heightens the prestige of the owner. That these valuables do not circulate and cannot therefore be acquired increases their perceived value amongst others. This observation is relevant to collecting cultures and circuits of value amongst music communities.

Nancy Munn (1986) is also important for aligning a study of exchange networks with the material properties of the goods exchanged. Whereas Strathern starts her interrogation from social relationships, Munn examines “transformative actions” (Munn 1986:3) to locate value (or “transformational value”). Munn suggests that in the Melanesian example, value can be conceptualised as the “relative expansion of spacetime” (*ibid.*:9-20). These spatiotemporal transformations, according to how acts facilitate the extension of inter-subjective spacetime, create a “spacetime of self-other relationships formed in and through acts and practices” (*ibid.*:9) – the value of an act derives from that act’s relative ability to expand the capacities of the spacetime formed, or as Munn defines it the ‘potency’ of the act. The value of actions is what returns to givers rather than the value of the goods that they use in transactions. The objects in circulation between individuals become mediums for value, rather than being valuable in themselves, precisely because they are no longer static but are able to travel and thereby expand the spacetime of individual actors. How they facilitate the expansion of self in spacetime is inherently linked to the material properties of the objects involved. For example, food has a limited spacetime due to decay, and can only act to expand ‘fame’ in local exchange networks linked with hospitality. *Kula* shell valuables can travel further

and last longer, thereby enabling different historical and inter-island exchange networks. What both exchanges enable is the expansion of self in spacetime into the future by creating the groundwork for future exchange acts and encounters.

Music commodities are liable to different types of decay or limited circulation based upon the materials from which they are made, their scarcity and the spatial potential for their circulation. For example, the internet has enabled broader spheres of circulation to appear for commodities as more people are able to become aware of their existence and historical pedigree, and by purchasing goods from these marketplaces expand their potential distributions. What could be conjectured here is that musical commodities that become collectible items increase in value because of spatial and temporal dimensions. Resisting decay expands the space and time in which self exists. Such a given material entity might be viewed as a “condensed spacetime, and may be analysed in order to give a fuller account of the wider intersubjective spacetime in which it operates in a given case” (*ibid.*:10).

The value of goods and their ability to circulate within given networks is therefore explicitly related to their material properties. In discussing this, the difference between and the ongoing debates about materials and materiality needs to be clarified. UCL material anthropology highlights how human subjects give meaning to objects (*materiality*) and several archaeologically-focussed interrogations posit substances as having their own agency and effect upon social behaviours (*materials*). Work on ‘materiality’ is highlighted in a collection edited by Miller (2005) wherein Rowlands demonstrates the flexibility of notions of materiality by suggesting people of the Cameroon grassfields gradate materiality (in terms of ‘weightiness’ and ‘slightness’) and

that density/materiality can be acquired or gained through processes of circulation and contact with other dense things and persons (especially chief figureheads). Materiality is therefore a subjective quality defined in conjunction with immaterial properties. Materiality according to these discourses is not just an analysis of the structural integrity and properties of substances and made objects, but also the immaterial properties for which they stand and which they inform (such as Weiner's absolute value, Munn's fame, and Rowlands' weightiness). These properties are socially constructed, and the meaning of an object is predicated upon human actors ascribing this meaning.

Olsen has argued that the "'thingness' of the thing is... exiled" (2007:586) in such discourses. As material culture has often been neglected in the social sciences, many of the scholars who have aligned with material culture studies since the mid-1980s have been blighted by "a thing-hostile ontology... that since Kant, at least, denied any direct access to things, and which has since surfaced as a sceptical attitude in which the material is always treated with suspicion and never allowed more than a provisional or derivative existence" (*ibid.*:580). "The new study of things was to be a *social* concern" (*ibid.*:582), on account of which Olsen critiques Miller and the new material culture studies for retaining the very antagonism over studying 'just things' that has historically plagued notions of materiality. Therefore, by placing primacy upon the social contexts of materials, Olsen suggests that the re-emergence of material culture as the prime object of study retains a problematic distance from conceiving the agency of substances as crucial to the sociality of material culture.

Materiality in anthropological enquiry has attempted to refocus in the new millennium on the substances and raw materials of production and consumption, such as

stone (Tilley 2004; Ingold 2007) and plastics³¹. The material qualities of substances dictate the utility, permanence and interactive qualities of used objects, constantly changing through time. In effect, they have an agency affecting the social uses to which they might be put. Ingold attempts to re-configure the study of materiality in anthropological discourses by identifying “an academic perversion [that] leads us to speak not of *materials and their properties* but of *the materiality of objects...*” (2007:3). *Materials* such as stone, he argues, are given short shrift relative to concepts of *materiality* as culturally tangible differences. Debates about the materiality of objects, or “what makes things ‘thingly’” (*ibid.*:9) are argued to be the product of the consumption of made objects or found landscapes according to cultural predications. Analysing the *properties* of materials independently from the contexts in which they become socially motivated is Ingold’s key proposition: that an analytical clarity is obtained by separating or acknowledging a distinction between material properties and the materiality of objects.

Shove *et al* consider the “potential of a social science not only of ‘things’, but also of substances” (2007:94), because the “relation between materials and objects is co-constitutive and dynamic, and... it can and should be the subject of systemic social enquiry” (*ibid.*:98). By examining the design and subsequent use of plastic objects, they argue that “material identities are frequently defined in relation to rival or incumbent substances” (*ibid.*:103). Material taxonomies are shown to be “inherently dynamic”, for “new substances transform the relative standing of incumbent materials with sometimes ‘revolutionary’ consequences for manufacturing, production and practice” (*ibid.*:106). This means that “what materials ‘are’ and how they are seen depends, in large part, on

³¹ Clarke (1999) has demonstrated how the peculiar qualities of new plastic materials were instrumental to the boom in Tupperware sales in 1950s USA. The creation and exploitation of novel materials and commodities is further detailed in Campbell (1994) and Gronow (2009).

exactly what they are made into” (*ibid.*:114). The social capacities of objects are predicated upon the materials of which they are constituted.

Bennett offers a more philosophical approach to these issues as she seeks to alert materialist conceptions to “the agential powers of natural and artefactual things” (2004: 349) through the notion of ‘thing-power’, “a force exercised by that which is not specifically human (or even organic) upon humans” (*ibid.*:351). Objects can resist categorisation and act cumulatively in assemblages to affect wider attempts at ordering and understanding objects. Therefore, ‘thing-power’ materialism upsets the assumption that objects are strictly socially constituted, reiterating that instead of being subjects and objects we are an ‘ecology’ of “various materialities constantly engaged in a network of relations” (*ibid.*:354).

What is questionable about the proposals that stress the need for more focus on materials is whether or not the study of *materiality* in the sense of Miller and Rowlands really does downplay, ignore or find trouble integrating *materials* into their analysis (i.e. Banerjee and Miller 2003 examine the sari as material culture, paying close attention to cloth and its performative capacities). Furthermore, how anthropologists can investigate society from the perspective of material agents is conceptually problematic. The possibility for studying material culture in a society without giving recourse to social creations of objects and object-categories is limited. The suggestions of Ingold, Bennett and Olsen act better as a reminder to integrate the properties of substances into discussions of materiality to illuminate the limitations and potentials of both artefacts and resultant cultural expressions. These approaches are not wholly incommensurate and could serve to animate and complement each other. I therefore aim to approach

materiality as the performative capacities of substances and made objects, and the social relationships and cultural concepts they enact and embody. With this in mind, I detail below the materialities of sound and sound-reproduction technologies in order to better situate the objects in this research into the literature.

1.8 Sonic materiality

Musical sound, being a physical phenomenon, is undoubtedly a material presence, but one that is complicated by its diffuse modes of production, reception and technological reproduction. “Music has no material essence but a plural and distributed materiality. Its multiple simultaneous forms of existence – as sonic trace, discursive exegesis, notated score, technological prosthesis, social and embodied performance – indicate the necessity of conceiving of the musical object as a constellation of mediations” (Born 2011:377). Thus, some mediations and mediators are more important than others in different contexts. These mediations both include and exclude actors, objects, sounds, spaces and histories – a measure of music’s “bidirectional” mediation and of human and non-human agencies in general (*ibid.*:378). Born argues principally for the plurality of musical materiality to be recognised as concomitant with the diverse socialities of music. Her observations that “the socialities engendered by musical performance are traversed by broader social relations” (*ibid.*:379) and “music’s capacity to animate imagined communities, aggregating its adherents into virtual collectivities and publics based on musical and other identifications” (*ibid.*:381) are dependent upon the

material plurality of the musical object that functions in these diverse socialities³².

Sonic and technological materialities are complicit but problematically related. As Levin points out, the very term gramophone intimates the mediation of something materially unstable³³ into something materially permanent: “materialisations (*gramme*) of phenomenal events (*-phone*) which allegorise them in the process” (Levin 1990:42). In the 1934 essay *The Form of the Phonograph Record*, Adorno focused upon the thingness (*Dinglichkeit*) of the medium, as he deemed that “It is not in the play of the gramophone as a surrogate for music but rather in the phonograph record as a thing that its potential significance – and also its aesthetic significance – resides” (in Levin 1990:31).³⁴ The mode of sound-reproduction therefore has direct implications upon the reception of musical sound.

Levin suggests that Adorno anticipates Benjamin’s celebrated concept of reproduction technologies destroying artworks’ aura by recognising that recording changes the status of the acoustic event as “the latter cannot be turned on and repeated at will but is rather bound to its specific place and time” (1990:32). Recorded music thus becomes a form of writing to Adorno, with the tracing of the phonograph record an index of the acoustic event. “Adorno is concerned with something that is gained in the process:

³² Although Tilley, referring to Born’s article in his editorial to the volume in which it appears, suggests her discussion of music is an example of “the significance of immateriality in relation to a consideration of materiality” (2011:351), I surmise musical sound itself to be one of the plural materialities to which Born turns her attentions.

³³ This observation of sound as unstable might lead to positioning it erroneously as immaterial, especially given the notion that “An immaterial thing is less solid, less bounded, less complete, less ‘presentable’ than a thing. A ‘thing’ like a chair or a human body can more easily be ‘held together’ in one place, whereas an immaterial thing is, simply put, less coherent” (Meyer 2012:108-9).

³⁴ Adorno described the record “covered with curves, a delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing, which here and there forms more plastic figures for reasons that remain obscure to the layman upon listening”. Of course, whilst they cannot read the musical performance itself, for the collector there is much to read from gazing at this illegible screeed, as it notions towards the quality of the listening experience. Factors such as whether the record has retained its sheen, whether it is dusty and scratched, and how deep the grooves are etched into the record can all point towards the nature of the listening experience that the record will offer.

the nonarbitrariness of the acoustic groove produced by the indexical status of the recording” (*ibid.*:33). However, in order “to appreciate the gramophone record in its materiality one must extricate it from its instrumental role as a mere means to rephenomenalise a previous acoustic event... As a thing, however, it is a materialisation, a reification which transforms an acoustic-temporal event into a trace. It is, in short, a writing, but a writing... of a special, indexical text” (*ibid.*:39). The act of creating a recording (and subsequently a record) enacts a pluralisation of the music’s materiality, as both Adorno and Born suggest, with the subsequent caveat that the experience of the music recorded will be qualitatively different from its previous incarnation on account of the new technological context in which it circulates, and its new spatio-temporal potentials (cf. Munn 1986).

A clear implication of this is that the materiality of sound is related to the technological mediators enacting its reproduction. Théberge’s examination of technology and music-making proposes that musicians are prone to standardising their discourses on sound and the preference for different technologies. A relationship is espoused between the sound of a recording and the technology that has captured and reproduced it:

As musicians have developed an aesthetics of “sound”, a set of techniques and a vocabulary to describe them have evolved as well. Interestingly, even musicians who reject digital technology use the same vocabulary as *fat* and *thin*, *warm* and *cold*, to describe the characteristics of microphones and various analog [sic] recording devices, thus betraying their preoccupation with technologically reproduced sound.

Théberge 1997:213 [emphases added]

As Simon Frith has noted regarding the placement of a voice in a film soundtrack or the recording of a song, “what’s at issue isn’t a “natural” sound badly recorded, but an ideological acoustic hierarchy, in which some sounds are just “naturally” more important” (Frith 1996:230). This corroborates Théberge’s standardised discourses, Rowland’s weightiness and Weiner’s symbolic density by suggesting an ideological hierarchy of materiality. When Adorno elaborated upon the intervention of machines between the performance and the listener in his 1927 essay *The Curves of the Needle* he argued music is “compromised by a second-order presence, a technological filter whose effects, Adorno believes, may function only at the level of the unconscious” (Leppert 2002:219). Such second-order presence might be radio interference or the surface noise of a 78rpm record. What Adorno misses in creating a blanket category of ‘technological intervention’ is the true hierarchy of technologies and ideological acoustic hierarchies that exist, whose various second-order presences are accorded different aesthetic qualities by users of these technologies. With the reification of certain periods of performance, and the qualities of the recordings that document these performances, the appreciation of recorded sound by listeners suggests that “the distinction between the noise that is necessary and the noise that is unnecessary to an old recorded performance is an aesthetic as well as a technical judgement” (Frith 1996:235).

Sterne has argued that audile techniques³⁵ fundamentally affect the nature of acoustic spaces: “practices share the focus on detail, the notion of listening as a “separated” sense, where hearing did not have to correspond with other sensory

³⁵ Sterne defines audile technique as “a set of practices of listening that were articulated to science, reason, and instrumentation that encouraged the coding and rationalisation of what was heard” (Sterne 2003:23), with “*audile*” used “to connote hearing and listening as developed and specialised practices, rather than inherent capacities” (*ibid.*:96).

phenomena” (Sterne 2003:157). My reading of materiality in regards to sonic experiences corroborates these arguments, for sound is related to the entire sensory output of the objects by which it is accessed. To think of sound and acts of listening as devoid of influence from other senses is misleading to a full understanding of the cultures of consumption centering on physical music media. Considering a dialectical materialism rather than a vulgar cultural materialism (cf. Friedman 1974) that takes a deterministic stance towards the effects of materials upon cultural and social life and constructions, the body and its response to stimuli cannot be atomised according to individual senses³⁶, nor can stimuli be reduced to concepts that have singular and discreet effects upon the human body. Hence we find discourses of sound that incorporate descriptions of temperature, visual and physical texture to describe aural experiences, for the senses “are multiply related; we rarely if ever apprehend the world through one sense alone” (Connor 2004:153).³⁷

Discourses of sound are not solely about hearing, and audile technique is as much about conditioning the body and acoustic environment in ways that are appropriate to the technique that is being exercised. The intense bodily engagement of the punk-rock club described by Shank (1994) is different from the culturally expounded discourses on listening described in the concert hall by Christopher Small (1998) or Adorno³⁸. The very different material properties of sound in these instances (i.e. the loud volume of amplified electric instruments mixed in with the noise and movement of a club vs. the acoustic

³⁶ Ingold (2000) developed an interdisciplinary anthropology of perception based on a Heideggerian syncretism between nature and cultural life, suggesting that cultural variations in the perceptions of the environment are the product of different skills. Sensorial atomisation represents a particular ‘skill’ for orientating experience.

³⁷ The essays collected in Erlmann (2004) further investigate the multi-sensorial factors implicated in perceptions of sound and music.

³⁸ See Adorno’s essays *The Radio Symphony* (1941) and *Opera and the Long-Playing Record* (1969) – collected in Leppert 2002:251-70 and 283-88.

sounds of the concert hall surrounded by silently seated patrons) is echoed and facilitated by the different bodily and material engagements that actors and their acoustic spaces contribute to the experience of listening. Sterne's focus upon auscultation and telegraphy highlights the individuating potentials and ramifications of audile techniques, where (as with radio and other domestic consumption of sound) "listeners could *own* their own acoustic spaces through owning the material component of a technique of producing that auditory space – the "medium" that stands in for a whole set of framed practices. The space of the auditory field became a form of private property, a space for the individual to inhabit alone" (Sterne 2003:160). What was spread was not a new revolutionary form of listening, but the spread rather of audile techniques via the sound-reproduction technologies themselves.³⁹

If we understand music as a form of popular cultural heritage, as many participants profess, these objects take on "a deeply Heideggerian sense as having ontological and moral significance" (Tilley 2011:349) – there is a care and nourishment of culture in the act of preserving materials that relates to Weiner's symbolic density (1994). And as Rowlands has argued (2005), just as people are not equal, neither are objects in society. Rowlands argues that materialities are relative, some things are 'more material' than others. To talk of *a* materiality is to ignore the different ways material culture transforms, expresses and reproduces identities. This viewpoint mirrors the acoustic hierarchies proposed by Frith, Théberge and Sterne. The act of preservation – deigning an object to be a heritage item, the care of which becomes a homolog for the care of cultural values and the people who engender and use them – is the active

³⁹ The spread of such audile technique, however, did not constitute the spread of a new mass media. The industrialisation of the recording business would be required to spread sounds in such a way that people "could listen alone together" (Sterne 2003:177).

transformation of that object into a new category (from the mundane to the hallowed, the ephemeral to the conceptually permanent). It is the ascription of a new or different degree of materiality to that item, a conceptual shift that is explicitly at play in the way sound is prepared for heritage-minded consumers both as an auditory experience and as a tangible object. The ontology of sound that participants in my research subscribed to (a reification of master tapes, first-pressing vinyl, listening to music in the same way people did when it first appeared) places this origin of sound as central to their perception of audio authenticity, and thus influences their materialist conception of the object produced. These materialities (sound and sound carrier) are understood as concomitant and integral to authentic listening experiences. Materiality is articulated in culturally specific ways, and the delivering technology is relationally important to the physicality of sound – it implicates the grain and physicality of the music, and can act to legitimate the listening experience and consumption practice.

1.9 Methodology

Fieldwork for this research was conducted in Austin, Texas in 2009. Austin, Texas' State Capital, is a fashionable liberal city of over 1.7 million residents. It plays home to several prominent businesses including Whole Foods and Dell computers, in addition to the University of Texas which supports a large body of students and academics. Famed for its entertainment industry, Austin is informally known as 'The Live Music Capital of the World', a designation earned through copious live venues and the vibrant performing arts scenes in the city. Aware of its unique position in the otherwise

decidedly conservative state of Texas, and its reputation as a major music scene and liberal, artistic haven, the phrase ‘Keep Austin Weird’ is ubiquitous. Austin champions its local and independently run businesses, its reputation of liberal tolerance, and the atmosphere that makes it desirable as a living space for those who indulge and participate in these qualities of the city.

Texan music has been the subject of previous ethnographic studies. Chief among these are Aaron Fox’s 2004 ethnography of working-class engagement with country music in the town of Lockhart (c.25 miles south of Austin), and Barry Shank’s 1994 examination of the independent-rock scene in Austin. Shank’s book offers an excellent history up to its publication of Austin’s popular music and the changing musical landscape of the city. His ethnography focusses primarily upon the city’s indie-rock and punk music, which acts as a detriment to its applicability to the present study as I have researched consumers who engage with many genres of music and would not self-consciously describe themselves as strictly ‘rock’ or ‘punk’ fans, as Shank’s informants do regularly. Whilst the music venues at which this scene is enacted are related by Shank to the other musical activities in Austin, and more broadly to a notion of a USA punk-rock ‘scene’, the primary focus of the book is upon a genre-bound community of consumers and performers centred upon a core of live music venues. Likewise, Fox’s book is concerned with country music and working-class vernacular in one small town, relating this community to the broader American culture of country music (cf. Tichi 1994) and only with moderation to other genres and musical practices⁴⁰. Fox relates the

⁴⁰ Lockhart is shown by Fox to operate with wilful independence from the perceived hip and urbane Austin music scene, especially with regard to the more homespun musical production and less commercial interests of performers in the Lockhart community - overviews of Austin’s prominence in ‘outlaw’ and ‘alt-country’ styles can be found in Hinton 2003:103-10; Dawidoff 1997:291-307; Shank 1994:38-90.

issues of country music's authentic practice in Lockhart with the wider processes of circulation, such as radio. What Fox and Shank's work nonetheless supports is the formulation of Texan identity as self-consciously distinct from wider US culture, and the importance of localising forces to the production of musical behaviours and engagements. Tom Porcello's work on the sonaural properties of recordings made in Austin and Nashville (2002) complements these studies by showing how the recording process in each city's country/roots music is a product of a locally produced aesthetic preference (the polished, close-miked Nashville sound contrasts with the rougher, more live-sounding Austin sound). This concurs with aforementioned notions of independent marketplaces operating in self-consciously distinct ways from perceived mainstream culture (Dunn 2012; Strachan 2007).

Of great importance was the accessibility within Austin of multiple music industry workers, record stores and collectors. Austin is a major player in the United States' music industry, hosting the enormous South by South West festival (SXSW) and industry conference in the Spring of every year, and the Austin City Limits festival in the fall. The city has hosted many notable musical talents, among them Nanci Griffith, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Janis Joplin, Lucinda Williams, Pinetop Perkins, the Fabulous Thunderbirds, Daniel Johnston, and Willie Nelson. Hundreds of musical acts operate in Austin, and likewise there exist many independent record labels and record stores that all feed the appetite of a large body of music consumers.

As a site, Austin embodies the tensions between the worlds of independent retail, artistic production and self-identification, and their (supposed) mainstream antitheses. It supports a wealth of independent music production, and through the artists, record labels,

venues and festivals it hosts it is internationally famous. This highly visible independent presence could suggest that Austin is not representative of the wider scene for independent music, but if the scene concept described above is reflected upon it is predicated on exactly the interconnectedness that Austin exhibits. Austin is a privileged site of independent music production and consumption (in the sense of its long and influential history of independent production and continued influence through current acts and the SXSW festival), that is connected to other sites due to the distribution of recordings, touring musicians, and shared internet and paper press materials that are found in other sites of music consumption. It is not the only major centre for independent music production, but like New York, Chicago, Detroit and other American cities it is a highly visible part of the network of independent marketplace presence in the United States, and therefore is as representative of the marketplace as any other populous city supporting a sizable number of independent labels, venues and retail outlets. It therefore represents an ideal field-site for the study of music commodities in the independent marketplace.

Whereas initially in my conception of this research there were temptations to embrace George Marcus' multi-sited ethnographic approach (1995), the shortcomings of this methodology relative to my own research became apparent. Marcus suggests that where there exists an "explicit, posited logic of association or connection" (Marcus 1995:105) between the sites of an ethnographic project, these multiple sites can be utilised concomitantly to produce a unified ethnographic statement. In terms of the United States independent music industry, this might entail fieldwork in other hubs in independent activity such as New York, New Orleans, and Chicago. It might also suggest

travel among the multiple sites of the commodity chain, from factory floors to distribution offices in an attempt to form a total, holistic narrative of value and transformation across time and space (such approaches are described below). For various reasons, however, this was deemed to be an impractical and unnecessary stretching of the ethnographic process given the rich accessibility of multiple sites within Austin and the interconnectivity of the actors and commodities involved in the scene.

Other more practical concerns with multi-sited fieldwork practice are to be found in scholarly analyses of anthropological fieldwork. Matei Candea reflects on multi-sited ethnography as an idealistic proposition with unfulfillable promise: “Even in a small village in the north of Corsica, it is not multi-sitedness that is the problem, but sitedness. The problem... is not finding a diversity of leads to follow, but rather finding a way to contain this multiplicity” (Candea 2007:175). Many scholars have shown how the field-site is, rather than the bounded, fixed field of ‘proper’ anthropology, a fluid space entangled with its relationship to other sites (Clifford 1997; Bestor 2001; Smith 2003; Thomas 1991; Appadurai 1995). People, objects and ideas travel, imaginations are untethered, and the field site seems at first a restricted and restrictive construct that limits the potential of the study.

Candea’s point, however, is that this overly-enthusiastic boundary-breaking makes it difficult for ethnographers⁴¹ to reign in their object of study, to clarify research goals and insights, as over-extemporised field sites blur the correlation between people and places without some mode of abstraction for localising and delineating the field site. The commodities in question for this research may utilise recordings made in Europe, mastered in Portland, manufactured in New York and then eventually sold in Austin –

⁴¹ These concerns are especially of importance to first-time ethnographers, such as the author.

attempts to follow these streams of activity and material manifestations would only be achievable to the detriment of the research question. Austin, where many of these facets are brought together *en masse*, is a microcosmic yet wholly satisfying substitute for such a line of research, being as it is home to music makers, producers, retailers and consumers. Bounding off Austin as the field site is, as with Candea's Coriscan village, "precisely to highlight its fractures and incompleteness; it is to resist dissolving and resolving it into parts of wider holistic entities" (Candea 2007:179), whilst remaining sensitive to the factors and activities outside its borders that influence the practices within the city.

Going back to the work of Marcel Mauss (1967), anthropology has demonstrated how the paths of things and people are intertwined. The dualism between subject and object has been softened if not completely eradicated by those who have followed in his footsteps (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987). Analysing this flow of goods, people and culture has been tackled with several theoretical models. Often these approaches have been influenced by those formulated in other disciplines such as economics, geography and sociology. For example, commodity chain approaches have attempted to organise commodities into spatio-temporal systems that reveal the underlying social, political and economic processes of their circulation, and aims to re-connect the processes of production and consumption into a unified system (Leslie and Reimer 1999). Vertical approaches to the chain have frequently been used to analyse transnational commodity chains (such as Wilson and Zambrano's 1994 analysis of the global 'cocaine chain'). Typically, such research has focussed upon the power relations within global manufacturing industries with a preoccupation for identifying inequalities affecting

developing countries (Gibbon 2001 examines Tanzanian cotton and fishing production in this light) by examining the vertical movement of a single product through the chain in a macro-linear system of provisioning (Fine and Leopold 1993). Such an approach suffers from its propensity to naturalise the trade line and obfuscate the agency of actors in the chain. I aim therefore not to assume a causal linear narrative for music commodities from provisioning through to consumption, as this does much to detract from the previously mentioned agencies consumers enact upon commodities and assumes hegemonic control over cultural texts by producers.

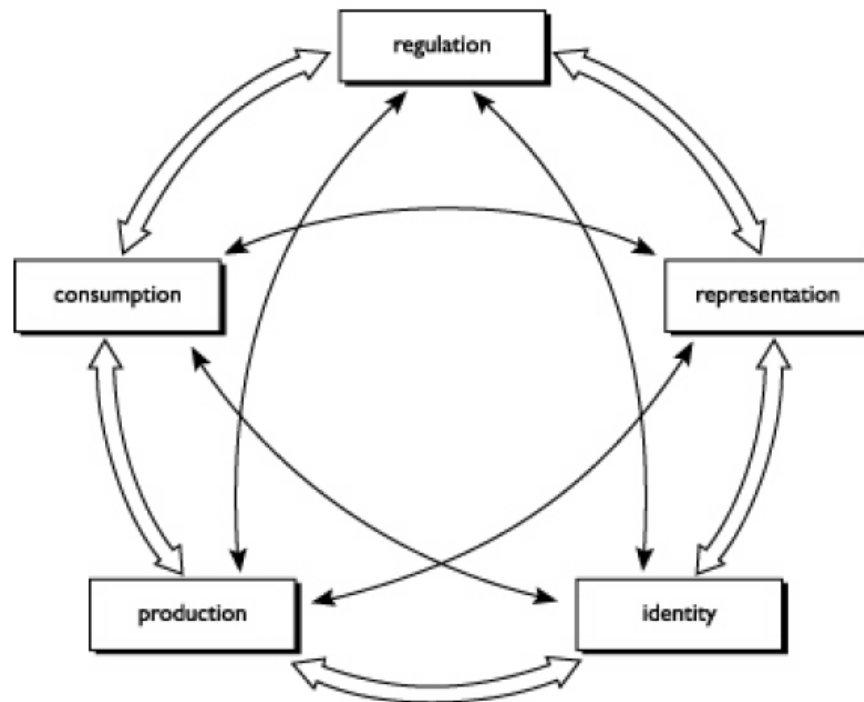


Fig 1.1 The circuit of culture (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus 1997)

The circuit of culture model is an alternative approach that developed following Stuart Hall's influential "Encoding/Decoding" essay (1980) to highlight the

interconnected cultural sites involved in the creation of meaning in the circulation of goods (du Gay *et al* 1997). The circuit identifies five main cultural processes of meaning creation: representation, production, consumption, identity and regulation (**Fig 1.1**). The strength of the model is apparent from its incorporation of lived experience and situational particulars in addition to the larger cultural practices in which the former are grounded. Indeed, the model suggests a dynamic interdependency between all of these five sites of meaning creation.

My concerns with utilising ‘circuit of culture’ models are their historical and contextual fixity. The constant need to revise the categories of the model is problematic for comparative analyses or for directly implementing previous incarnations of the model onto new fieldsites. As Stuart Hall recognised in one discussion, “If you’re going to work with the model, you have to change... and develop it” (Lewis 1994:272). Given the model’s constant need for revision in the light of technological and marketplace changes, and the context-driven relevance of the model to lived practices of production and consumption (Taylor *et al* 2002) I have not chosen to analyse the five areas as proposed by du Gay *et al* as distinct areas but have considered them throughout my discussions as mutually integral aspects of every part of the marketplace. Furthermore, problems arise concerning the distinction between first-cycle and second-cycle circulation of commodities which is so important in collecting cultures. In order to apply a relevant model to an investigation of collectible goods, it is important to recognise that the discourses involved in creating meaning in the second-hand market differ from those in first-cycle exchange, and that the two cycles of exchange influence each other and the other stages in the circuit (Gregson and Crewe 2003; Hillis *et al* 2006; Ellis and

Haywood 2006).

My thesis therefore does not strictly adhere to ‘circuit of culture’ and commodity chain approaches. Detailing the flow of an object must not become simply a list of sites, but a comprehensive interrogation of the affective practices that cause the object to acquire different representational and symbolic characteristics in and through these sites. This is not an ethnography of a commodity at a particular phase in its circulation, or a horizontal approach to commodity circuits (an example of this approach is Bestor’s examination of the moment that blue-fin tuna is purchased for trade in Japanese fish markets - 2001). Neither is this ethnography solely a description of a commodity’s travel through a vertical chain of prescribed stages from production to consumption (i.e. Fine and Leopold 1993). Such an approach would not identify the factors that affect the perceptions of multiple commodities and those participating in their circulation, and might be harmful for pre-supposing the affective categories that affect the value of services, spaces, commodities and consumption practices. Drawing on scene theory I therefore aim to show the dynamic interdependency between actors, sites and objects in this ethnography as suggested by the circuit of culture model, but eschewing the strict parameters of the above models to better express the multi-vocal mediations of authenticity, materiality and prestige as they are situated within the circulation of physical music media in the independent music marketplace.

Data collection was conducted in Austin over a six-month period. It was preceded by several months of pilot ethnography in London and Oxford at record stores, record fairs and talking to collectors to test interviewing and data-gathering methods. Prior to travelling to the fieldsite, I set up many contacts with those in the industry with whom I

wanted to spend time, and this pre-planning enabled me to build an extensive network of participants that was ready for consultation when I reached Austin. I rapidly acquired participants amongst consumers via industry contacts, advertising my research in record stores and through casually meeting people. Six months therefore provided an ample period of research activity in which to collect data for this thesis.

Contacting local labels through their websites, using contact details on promotional materials, and information proffered by record store employees helped grant access to those in the independent music business. Access could then be negotiated to other people through recommendations from previous participants in the research. Aligning my project and fieldwork with multiple record labels and companies, rather than sticking solely to the one record label, enabled me to better understand and utilise the interconnected nature of independent music retail, as detailed in Chapters 2 and 3 (regarding the producers of music commodities), and Chapter 4 (focussing upon the record store as site of exchange). Attending panel discussions at 2009's South by South West festival, and networking amongst those at the industry conference, further helped in gaining access to persons working in the music industry, running the whole gamut of independent professionals including sound engineers, archivists, restorers, distributors, designers and label heads.

For the purposes of fieldwork, Austin's record stores were useful locations in a number of ways. I spent much time in Austin's many independent music retailers to get a feel for their conventions and differences, to understand how people are negotiating these spaces and how commodities are placed and used in-store. The record stores also became ideal scouting grounds for participants. Consumers prove very generous with their

opinions on all aspects of music, and as such striking-up conversations in-store was a very accessible and fruitful route into collecting data. With the consent of record store owners, who also gave up their time for this research, I put up posters on the in-store pinboards, and many people subsequently contacted me eager to participate in my research project having come across my request for music collectors. I could then accompany these individuals in-store, at home, at shows and with friends to understand how they used the independent music scene in their lives. Interviews were conducted at home with these consumers, accompanied by stretches of participant observation accompanying them on music-related excursions and joining them at their homes.

Some of my encounters in record stores, at concerts, in bars and other socialising contexts yielded anecdotal data compared with repeat participant observation, so of the 80-90 distinct informants in this research, I have relied for ethnographic detail more upon in-depth interviews and participant observation work. This involved participant observation entailing multiple visits with over a dozen collectors, the many employees at Austin's record stores and interviews with approximately twenty-five record label employees.

Several figures acted as gatekeepers of sorts, who after contributing to the research themselves suggested other contacts or referred me directly to their colleagues and acquaintances in the industry. Such participants were cooperative in facilitating further introductions and their recommendations proved influential in obtaining further participants for this research. This led to some snowballing tendencies, where many colleagues or friends and acquaintances of particular informants precipitated due to their recommendations. This leads to potential problems with small groups of informants

articulating their bounded opinions and practices that might not be representative of wider attitudes and practices. I have therefore endeavoured to outline how informants are connected to one another through the ethnography, and multiple points of entry were utilised to avoid this research from suffering from a non-representative sampling of informants.

As for positioning in the field and sampling, there were those who chose not to participate in my research, whether they had been contacted by me or referred through other informants. The sociological makeup of my informants was overwhelmingly white⁴² and middle-class. No informants were aged less than eighteen years old, with the oldest in their mid-sixties. I was unaware during research of there being an untapped resource of Hispanic, African-American or Asian collectors, record stores or labels outside the African-American R&B and hip-hop music venues most often centred upon the lower-East side of the city. Visiting these areas to engage with participants proved unsuccessful, and ultimately was deemed superfluous to the scene identified elsewhere in the city, thus setting the parameters of my sampling to those that are involved in the same scene of record collecting.

The participants in record-collecting, music production and music consumption that I encountered were overwhelmingly male, although it should be noted that several research participants were female (a total of nine making the gender ratio roughly one-in-ten women to men). These women were involved not only in the production of products, but also in the consumption of the goods described.

A masculine bias towards collecting has been suggested by many scholars. For

⁴² Such a racial makeup typifies the informants in other investigations in Texan music scenes such as Fox (2004) and Shank (1994); research into African-American blues musicians (Gatchet 2012) represents the main disjuncture from this Caucasian focus.

example, Russell Belk argues that “collecting is most often a highly gendered activity with the greatest social sanction for those collections and collector traits that fit masculine sex-role stereotypes” (Belk 2001:99). Straw has also suggested a deeply engrained male involvement with the record collection that informs current consumption patterns and behaviours. He proposes a distinctly masculine tendency in rock music culture in particular, based upon connoisseurship and the tendency to amass information as a social tool in the form of the cultivation of the record collection and its manipulation (1997). Furthermore, Straw argues that “the cultivation of connoisseurship in rock culture – tracking down old albums, learning genealogical links between bands, and so on – has traditionally been one rite of passage through which the masculinisation of rock-music culture has been perpetuated” (1991:278).

With reference to the preponderance of male audiophiles, Keightley (1996) has argued that the co-opting of home audio and the masculine bias in home consumption of music has a long historical basis. Keightley focused his study upon post-war consumer culture to illuminate the development of hi-fi equipment as a masculine technology that subsequently engendered the audio realm as a masculine-dominated aspect of domestic space. This was formulated in opposition to the rise of television, and Keightley makes the argument that the latter stood for feminine mass-entertainment, whilst the masculinised hi-fidelity sound system became a focal point for men seeking to assert their individuality and opposition to “the synthetic conformity of a society brainwashed by mass advertising” (*ibid.*:157)⁴³.

Negus (1992:86-7) has also exposed misogyny and gender politics as endemic in

⁴³ This research on masculinised audio spaces contrasts with some other studies that identify use of music and radio in particular as strategies for feminising the domestic realm – see Anderson 2004 and Tacchi 1998.

the 1990s mainstream music business. Negus notes that in the culture of A&R departments “women are little represented, and tend to be found in secretarial roles” (Negus 1992:58). Sara Cohen has suggested that the local music scene in Liverpool has actively been produced as ‘male’, where “The ‘indie’ rock scene in Liverpool is dominated by men. The vast majority of musicians are men and most of the several hundred or so bands are all-male... Within the local scene audiences for indie rock bands are also predominantly male” (1997:17).⁴⁴ As both these studies and my fieldwork experiences suggest a higher proportion of male activity in independent music culture (and specifically in the realms of record collecting and the production of material music commodities) my sample is likely to be representative of the gender balance of the producers and consumers of independent music.

In my own leisure time, I listen to and collect various genres of music (psychedelic-folk, blues, jazz), and play a variety of instruments. As such I am well-versed in much of the nomenclature and jargon that might be unfamiliar to casual listeners which inevitably arose over the course of my fieldwork. Through my own previous work on American folk music and commercial exploitations of vintage archival recordings and rare commercially-released collectables⁴⁵, as well as my interests in music recording and the history of popular music, I came to the field not just endowed with an anthropological framework to help start my inquiries into the practices of the independent music market. I also brought to my fieldwork a wide knowledge of popular music genres, histories of music recording and market changes that enabled me to conduct solid, in-

⁴⁴ Many writers view female musicians with great fascination and exoticism, suggesting that the male-centric conception of popular music making is deeply engrained – for examples of female struggles for acceptance in the worlds of jazz and blues, see Wilmer 1977:189-209 and Kun 2005:86-112.

⁴⁵ A. Bowsher, MSc dissertation, Oxford University, 2007: “*Hand Me My Travelling Shoes*”: *The Legacy and Transformations of Black American Folk Music as Material Culture 1850-1940*

depth discussions about music with participants. Efforts were made prior to fieldwork to gain access to releases by labels that were prepared to talk with me. This knowledge was a great asset to my efforts to put at ease, engage with, and understand my participants. It further brought a relaxed air to many encounters. Rather than strictly limiting fieldwork encounters to formal interviews, my participants and I were able to build up rapiers over our mutual knowledges of music, music production and music retail. ‘Fitting in’ in the field was a challenge greatly reduced by these skills, and enabled many participants to enjoy ‘hanging out’ over the course of afternoons and evenings. Listening to music and discussing it in these contexts led to a certain social exchange between ethnographer and participant, a mutual relationship of knowledge-sharing and enjoyment discussing subject matters. Details of the practices of professionals in the industry and collectors were greatly aided by this ease of interaction. For these reasons, I favour the term *participants* over *informants* in this work, to denote the informality of (and pleasure taken in) much of the data collection.

In each interaction, absolute transparency on my part was a crucial ethical stance. Professionals discussed their businesses aware of the strictly academic intents to which the research was to be utilised, and they reserved the right without question to abstain any information requested of them. This was especially true regarding pecuniary matters – indeed, it is illuminating given the tension over money and notions of ‘soft’ capitalism amongst informants that such information was the most frequently guarded. Information about business procedures was not procured for any reason other than the research project – there was no “research partnership” of sharing information of skills involved (Park 1992). Participants’ thoughts and practices were revealed under the auspices of this

mutual understanding. For the sake of anonymity, some participants' surnames have been altered in the ensuing work at their request. Every effort was made to document fieldwork scenarios to ensure comments and behaviours are accurately and justly contextualised within the text of this work. A key awareness has been adopted in this instance to avoid any potentially embarrassing or discrediting referral to participants, whose words and actions have been supplemented with text designed to best contextualise their behaviours. The above noted mutual enjoyment of and camaraderie through fieldwork with participants encouraged a fairness of representation, the product and process of ethnography hopefully reflecting this mutual appreciation (Tedlock 1991). I was enthusiastically welcomed by the participants of this text, who enquired upon my work with keen interest, expressed pleasure at having contributed and were quick to offer future time when requested. Many also expressed interest in seeing this work when completed, a request with which I am happy to oblige.

This introduction has outlined key topics that inform the rest of this thesis. I have shown that the history of music as recorded sound is entangled with the commercial exploitation of those recordings. Anxieties over the changing marketplace for music include the loss of physical products with the emergence of the retail of digital audio files, and the contingent problems with these media formats as they facilitate piracy. In the independent music marketplace, understood as an ideological space of opposition to mainstream capitalist practices, these anxieties are articulated differently from the mainstream as the cultural capital of importance to the participants in the independent marketplace is qualitatively different. How value is constructed and negotiated in this

marketplace is different from how it is manifested in the mainstream, and the city of Austin acts as an ideal ethnographic field-site for understanding the independent music scene by virtue of its thriving music communities and the density of music professionals and consumers to which it is home. Therefore, what aspects of cultural practice, material culture and technological mediation are deemed valuable in the independent marketplace is analysed throughout the rest of this thesis to better understand the construction and articulation of cultural capital in this marketplace. The following chapter explicitly details these values and anxieties in relation to the producers of goods for the marketplace.

Chapter 2

Producing Authenticity: Record Labels and the Independent Music Marketplace

2.1 Introduction

Amongst many producers, retailers and consumers of music, there is a conception of a music market existing apart from the major labels, and separate from the corresponding mainstream sites of supermarket retail and blockbuster arena tours. This alternate, independent retail environment caters for a variety of consumers who include in their number a not insubstantial audience dedicated to physical music commodities. In referring to *physical music commodities* and *physical music media* I mean music objects such as 78s, tapes, CDs and vinyl records as opposed to MP3s and other digital files that require computer interfaces in order to be played, stored and exchanged. The consumers of physical music media represent a departure from the mainstream in the sounds they seek, the physical tangibility of the objects they consume, and the skills and knowledge they valorise as part of their scene. The producers of the commodities they consume come from this same cultural milieu and share the same conception of the ideal music marketplace. They construct and share fields of knowledge and capital in opposition to the mainstream as a scene bound by the marketplace they mutually engender through their contingent interests and desires.

I interrogate the conflicts between the quest for authenticity (by both producers and consumers) and the realities of the marketplace (commodification, marketing, monetary transaction) as a means to uncover how independence and commerce cohabit in the independent music scene. This debate is introduced by situating the independent producers in the music marketplace relative to their mainstream counterparts, and pursued by examining the criteria of the 'authentic' in the independent music market; how money flows and operates symbolically in this system; and the overarching quest to pose independent music retail in opposition to the negatively perceived orthodoxies of the mainstream. This distinction is made meaningful through producer identity, marketing strategies and economic practices.

2.2 Situating the independent producer

Independent record labels have been a part of the musical landscape since the advent of commercially-released sound recordings. Such labels released recordings by local recording stars, as well as recordings by (and largely for) minority populations whose musical interests were not reflected in the releases of other labels, such as poor rural populations outside the urban centres of the United States, or those migrating from the South to industrial hubs such as Chicago (see Kennedy and McNutt 1999 for a history of such early independent American record labels). Independent labels have therefore long been associated with nascent genres outside the mainstream, including blues (Black Patti, Paramount), rhythm-and-blues (Atlantic, Vee-Jay), reggae (Island, Trojan), rock 'n' roll (Sun, Chess), rap (Death Row) and electronica (Warp). The multiplicity of

independent labels and the lack of a core of major labels in the first half of the twentieth century meant that independent labels constituted a far larger proportion of sales relative to the major labels than they do today. Whereas previously independent labels had operated on a large scale in the USA during the 1950s and 1960s – accounting for roughly half of the songs on the Billboard Hot 100 from 1962-9 (**Fig 2.1**) and largely enjoying autonomy from major labels – by the early 1970s they were being bought up and brought under the auspices of major-label media empires. This concentration is currently under the ‘Big Three’ major labels that operate since EMI’s dissolution in 2012 – Universal, Warners and Sony – that have bought up many previously independent labels as part of their profiles⁴⁶.

Many independent labels forewent their autonomy under the expanding major labels, but major cultural shifts have occurred in their history such as the punk backlash which sought to re-establish label autonomy outside the major-label system (Reynolds 2005), with such famed D-I-Y enterprises as London’s Rough Trade Records (Young 2006; Taylor 2010) bringing forth musics alien from ‘Top 40’ pop music. Independent labels maintain the position in the music marketplace for exhibiting and sating desire for new music that goes against the grain of mainstream preferences. Independent labels have built devoted audiences that look to them for something other than what the mainstream music industry provides.

⁴⁶ The Association of Independent Music (AIM), a trade body established in 1998 to represent independent record labels in the UK, states in its constitution (<http://www.musicindie.com/resources/document-library/131> - accessed 03.09.2013) that a major label is a “multinational company which (together with the companies in its group) has more than 5% of the world market(s) for the sale of records and/or music videos... If a major owns 50% or more of the total shares in your company, you would (usually) be owned or controlled by that major”.

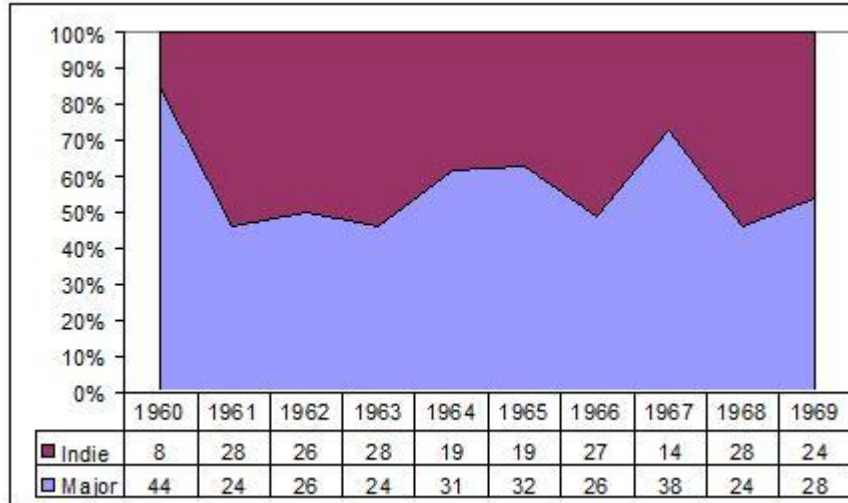


Fig 2.1 The share of major and independent labels' releases weeks spent in the Billboard Top 100⁴⁷

This allegiance to independent labels has taken several forms. For example, one sector outside the mainstream with strong ties to the independent music marketplace is the consumer market for collectables. Whilst mainstream releases can become especially collectable for high profile artists such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd, as Roy Shuker has noted the “repertoire and release strategies of major record companies are usually more focussed on the mainstream market, and historically they have at times been slow to recognise the commercial potential of niche/collector markets” (Shuker 2010:81). That is, they have rarely produced products with an eye to them satiating collector markets⁴⁸. Independent record labels on the other hand have long served the collector market, given that their releases are often in quantities smaller than what large mainstream companies would deem commercially viable, as cost of unit production

⁴⁷ <http://musicbusinessresearch.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/majors-and-indie-share-1960s.jpg> (accessed 07.09.2013)

⁴⁸ Since the fieldwork for this research was conducted in 2008-9, there has been a steady expansion of mainstream re-issues of ‘classic’ albums in ‘super-deluxe’ packages, often in oversized packaging with books and bonus audio and audiovisual materials, which indicates a change in approach from major labels as they look to re-purpose their back catalogues, concurring with Negus’ suggestion (1992) that major labels will poach approaches from the independent marketplace for their own uses.

decreases at pressing plants the more copies you have made. Independent labels often issue small runs of anywhere from fifty to a few thousand copies as a limited edition. The relationship between independent labels and collecting cultures of music consumption are further aligned to the fact that many independent labels' releases were hard to come by and required diligent efforts in order to be located and procured. This is especially true for 78rpm recordings (Pearson 1992; Wardlow 2000; Hamilton 2007; Shuker 2010:13-32) and 45rpm singles in the doo-wop, reggae and Northern Soul genres (Jamieson 1999). In the 1960s, imports of records and fanzines expanded interest in collecting music and specialist modes of collecting.

Another area in which the independent labels gained a foothold was the reissue market (a reissue being the re-release of materials no longer in print). In the early 1970s, the reissue market for releases collecting together rare and out-of-print materials took off, with such influential releases as Elektra Records' *Nuggets: Original Artyfacts from the First Psychedelic Era 1965-1968* and the output of labels such as Yazoo and Ace (specialising in American folk music and early rock 'n' roll respectively⁴⁹) as well as the emergence of bootleg recordings (Heylin 1994). Collectables and reissues still remain a vital part of independent label activity in the contemporary marketplace.⁵⁰

In this research, consumers primarily obtain physical copies of music from which it is unpacked, whilst others in the guise of independent record labels produce these commodities for these consumers. Producers, in this scene, are those who creatively instigate, design and manage the creation of music commodities that are then

⁴⁹ See Stubbs and Young (2006) for an overview of the Ace record label and their re-issue programmes.

⁵⁰ That mainstream labels are now increasingly savvy to collector demands is evidenced by Sony's Legacy label, which releases expanded re-issues of classic albums, and controls archival releases such as Miles Davis' unreleased archives, Bob Dylan's Bootleg Series (ten volumes have been released over the past two decades) and unreleased music licensed by the Jimi Hendrix estate.

manufactured in pressing plants and brought out to the market. These ‘project managers’ that head small record labels coordinate the efforts of graphic designers, sound engineers and other contributors (liner notes, photography, legal assistance, research etc.) to create the product. When I refer herein to producers, I mean these creative individuals involved in the preparation of a product for manufacture and retail. The independent producers of physical music commodities are important mediators between consumers and music, between the past and the present day, between the supposed alienated modernity of modern consumers and the empowering practices of creative consumption. They facilitate the ideals of independent consumption in the music marketplace.

Therefore, the producers aim for an ‘authentic’ claim to authorship of independent media texts by strongly identifying themselves with their consumers, taking efforts to create an audience of participatory fans (cf. Jenkins 1992). Those involved with the independent labels in this research repeatedly identified their task as chasing an entirely different type of capital from the perceived ‘money-hungry’ mainstream labels – the exercising of their knowledge and taste to best serve not only the music that they issue but also the consumers who purchase these commodities. The independent music marketplace is predicated on producers reassuring consumers that their business ventures are based on a love of music rather than an effort to exploit the music for large economic gain. To take an extreme example: whilst blockbuster television shows such as *X-Factor* and *American Idol* publicly manufacture pop stars for mainstream stardom as *product*, the independent sector maintains the belief that their efforts are rooted in a more pure and *authentic* well-spring of music and identity. Major label products are type-cast as ‘synthetic’ and independents as ‘organic’ (Negus 1992:54-5) – although this distinction is

blurred by the mainstream appeal and distribution through major labels of such ‘authentic’ acts as Miles Davis, The Beatles, Bob Dylan, and others, it is maintained within the scene that independent retail outside mainstream forces is the likely or rightful repository of the authentic artist⁵¹. Independent labels aim to present music in a manner that befits consumers’ notion of the authentic as part of the wider scene.

Arsel and Thompson (2010) investigated the protectionism of subscribers to ‘indie’ music and fashion⁵² in Madison, Wisconsin. Their protection of their marketplace identity is founded upon a negotiation of *marketplace myth*,

a threat to the value of their identity investments in a field of consumption (i.e. a network of interrelated consumption activities, brand and product constellations, an embedded social network). They use demythologising practices to protect these investments from devaluation and to distance and distinguish their field of consumption, and corresponding consumer identities, from these undesirable associations

Arsel and Thompson 2010:792

I argue that these constructions of opposition to undesirable cultural categories⁵³ are not just partaken by consumers, but also by producers of commodities in order to facilitate appropriate consumer relations and to achieve their aesthetic and capital goals.

⁵¹ Aligning with mainstream corporate strategy is typically referred to as ‘selling-out’.

⁵² ‘Indie’ here is representative of a certain genre-bound culture of independent consumption, and is not meant to be equated with or understood as an abbreviated term for the independent marketplace as referenced throughout this work. Rather, the ‘indie’ scene subscribed to among Arsel and Thompson’s informants is typified by guitar-based punk-derived rock music, popular among young people who often dress in similar style (skinny jeans, plaid work shirts, sneakers etc.) and frequent similar fashion outlets, themed club nights and concerts.

⁵³ This opposition to other cultural conventions as a part of independent retail markets is also found in retail sites that attempt to oppose the mainstream-as-imagined – Chapter 4 displays how this tendency is manifest in the independent music retail; Crewe *et al* 2003 detail retro-fashion retailers’ efforts to oppose mainstream retail conventions.

In the independent music market, this not only involves efforts to disassociate independent company practices from those found in the mainstream, but also to avoid the negative stigmatisation of fetishism (Ellen 1988) in their practices. The fetishism charge is “commonly regarded as something negative, a denial of an accepted reality or “normal” hierarchy of values, yet also is made to function within this normality in some way” (Pels 1998:92). This detachment from normal values posits the fetishist as aberrant (an especially important charge in a niche marketplace where many consumers are avid collectors who desire to be good collectors rather than deviant fetishists – Chapter 5 discusses these anxieties). Producers pursue identities that navigate away from harmful stereotyped associations in a manner similar to consumers seeking to “disentangle and distinguish their investments in a field of consumption from a devaluing marketplace myth” (Arsel and Thompson 2010:798). Bourdieu suggested that we might understand a cultural crisis as a struggle over rival systems of classification (1984:223-54). Whilst not exactly a ‘crisis’ as such, efforts are nonetheless made by the independent sector to retain and re-imagine their distance from the mainstream’s practices and classifications.

Douglas Holt, examining Jack Daniel’s whiskey as a case-in-point, argues that anti-conformist consumption fields attempt to distance themselves from the mainstream precisely via attempts to identify their brands with oppositional criteria. Jack Daniel’s whiskey “championed old-fashioned artisanal production over high-technology and mass production; and simple honest communication over slick glossy post-war media world” (Holt 2006:369). Their identity myth was nonetheless promulgated by media agents outside the firm’s control, such as rock stars and Hollywood films depicting the brand’s “outlaw” image (*ibid.*:372) – the brand’s image was constructed by pre-existing

marketplace categories and agents, rather than itself inventing its own identity myth. Independent labels could be seen to be re-enforcing some of their own marketplace myths by offering an historical continuity, or else subscribing to other myths in order to stake claim to their niches in the marketplace, and maintain their viability. What is clear is that to be outside the mainstream requires an identification between producer/product and certain markers of difference. These markers of difference need to be appropriately deployed in order to be effective in the given field.

Bourdieu (1990) stipulates that field-dependent cultural capital has to be exercised according to the rules of the field (whilst allowing for a small degree of improvisation within a given field). By conceptualising the field of cultural production as a game governed by such rules, individuals make legitimate claims to status (and adopt new statuses within the relative field) according to their appropriate assimilation and usage of the field's requisite materials of cultural capital. This cultural capital is conceived as being field-specific – dynamic and applicable in the context on one field, yet of limited or no use in another. This suggests that a marketplace identity is constructed actively and in opposition to other marketplace identities, for engaging with distinct notions of cultural capital unintelligible to others is inherently exclusional (Bourdieu 1984). In the independent music market the field of cultural production is not isolated from, but rather entangled with, the fields of consumption and exchange. Therefore, an application of Bourdieu's ideas must be predicated upon recognition of the multivalent entanglement of actors and objects not just between different music marketplaces, but also within the independent music marketplace.

Two observations precipitate from these discussions. Firstly, similar capital and status-enhancing features are desired and negotiated throughout the independent music marketplace; and secondly, these are in turn negotiated in opposition to the imagined mainstream orthodoxies to reinforce and legitimise the independent music marketplace. I argue that authenticity is a goal striven for within the independent music marketplace, and that this legitimates reputations and claims to status in that marketplace. The relative ‘oppositional’ category of the ‘inauthentic’ is posited in the mainstream, against which the field of the independent music marketplace seeks definition. Much has been made of the ability for consumers to manufacture, negotiate and deploy field-specific cultural capital, and the importance of performing such capital in the retail environment (Wright 2005 evidences this in the world of book retail; Crewe *et al* 2003 examine this with regard to second-hand consumption). I argue that such performance is also crucial to the arena of commodity production. In the case of the independent music marketplace, this means aligning with criteria oppositional to the mainstream, and creating a producer identity that is desirable for consumers.

This producer identity has often been referred to as *branding* in the literature. There is intense disagreement over quite what branding is or what it means as an analytical concept (Davis 2008), for discussions have questioned brand ownership, the branding of producers, consumer relationships to brands etc., without successfully linking these disparate discussions together (Manning 2010:34-5). Works such as George Ritzer’s thesis of “McDonaldisation” (1993) have type-cast the brand as an intrinsically global, cross-cultural phenomenon, which is hardly representative of how branding operates in smaller-scale economic scenarios. Mazzarella’s ethnography of Indian advertising neatly

captures the sense of divide in brand discussions by questioning whether brands cannot be read in multiple ways not only by different conceptual bodies of people (i.e. the consumers who purchase branded goods versus “the corporate client who ‘buys into’ the categories of marketing discourse” – 2003:186-7) but also by different people within conceptual groups (i.e. ‘aspirational’ brands being utilised for *different* motives and satiating different desires among consumer groups). I therefore err on the side of caution in my approach to brands as an analytical framework in this chapter. I instead examine how market presences and commodity forms become suffused with authentic cultural capital. I discuss how people gain and use these field-specific skills and knowledges in the marketplaces to establish presence in lieu of using branding as an explicit analytical tool. This presence I understand to be *reputation* in the marketplace.

Ethnomusicologist Julian Gerstin, discussing the Martinique musical tradition of bélé music, found a fluid and informal small-scale setting for the negotiation of reputation within a musical scene (cf. Straw 1991). The notion of reputation is more applicable to smaller-scale economic scenarios than the more hegemonic notions of ‘branding’ found in other literature (Arvidsson 2005; Manning 2010). Gerstin defines reputation as “the informal, consensual evaluations by which performers judge one another’s competence and relate to one another in a social network”, where the following social criteria are under constant scrutiny and evaluation: “aesthetics; social identity, or membership in various large-scale groups...; and alliances with one another within performance networks” (Gerstin 1998:387). Reputation in the bélé scene that Gerstin describes is based on *performing music*, yet I feel his construction is equally applicable to those ‘performing’ in the independent music market.

As Becker illustrates (1982:352-7) the propensity for reputation-building within a cultural sphere comes from an historical tradition of grading, assessment and evaluation of individuals and their works to find those among the many who are ‘special’ and worthy of the respect and attention of others. These reputations “develop through a process of consensus building in the relevant art world” (*ibid.*:359). Such works as Gerstin’s and Becker’s that focus on small-scale negotiation of reputation are useful alternatives to approaches that tend to focus on societal totalities at the expense of such intimate negotiations of status (i.e. Bourdieu 1984; Ritzer 1993; Manning 2010). Internet-based collecting on eBay makes clear that reputation and seller reliability earn the trust of collectors, and many people in the British trade in vintage radios are distrustful of people who lack a good reputation on eBay which is created through the consensus formed by customers’ feedback (Ellis and Haywood 2006). Rather therefore than discussing brand identities with their conceptual baggage of globalisation, mass marketing and cultural hegemony, I opt to analyse actors’ competencies in utilising the capital valued by others in their social network to produce their reputations. This is preferable when analysing marketplace presence in a relatively small marketplace such as that of independent music.

I now examine authenticity to better define the phenomenon I am examining in the field of cultural production as being of key importance to establishing such reputation. This discussion will frame the subsequent ethnographic interrogation of independent record labels, which will display the relevance of field-specific cultural capital and authenticity to the identification of producers within their marketplace.

2.3 Authenticity in the culture industries

Authenticity is a distinctly modern category, a product of rapid social, cultural and economic changes classically perceived to have eroded the nature of social interaction by fragmenting social cohesion and giving rise to a quest for experiences that plug the social and emotional gaps seeming to have been ruptured by these processes (Lindholm 2007:1-15). Therefore, “the evolving constellation of social relations in our complex society generates a need for authenticity, which leads people to cast around for cultural material on which to work out the obsession for distinction” (Spooner 1986:200). Emotive experiences with ‘real’, unfettered cultural entities are sought out to reintegrate the self with idealised, ‘meaningful’ cultural bodies that stand opposed to the artificial edifice of modernity.

Anxieties over modernity have largely centred on the uprooting of social relationships by industrialisation and the rationalisation of society as sketched by theorists such as Durkheim and Weber. The *anomie* (or erosion of societal norms) and uncertainty that ensues in modern society means that modernity or modernisation is not a clear path of progress, but one fraught with contradictions and upheavals. Pels rightly criticises classical conceptions of modernity as a singular path, for there is no sense “to talk of a singular modernity or of a unilinear process of modernization. Haunted by their own diagnoses of the process of modern development, even the classical theorists of ‘modernity’ acknowledge how much it was driven by contradiction, regression and paradox. A singular modernity was never an empirical, historical fact except as a

Eurocentric ideology of a universal teleology of the evolution of social systems, such as provided by modernisation theory” (Pels 2003:29).

Most theory agrees that ‘modernity’ is a subjective phenomenon that is temporally and spatially located and understood (see Lien 1997:6-11; Schein 1999:361-4; Thompson 1995 makes this explicit with regard to the development of the media). Western conceptions of modernity in consumer culture often revolve around romanticised notions that it has removed people from an ideal state, and that the cost of progress is the alienation of people and the search for authenticity is the act of disenfranchised modern consumers aiming to re-attain unalienated status. The commodification of culture (as with the use of paid musicians ‘sessioning’ in traditional Irish pubs for the benefit of tourists – Kaul 2007) effects alienation and thereby renders it inauthentic according to this narrative.

For museum studies and researchers of heritage sites, the relevance of ‘authenticity’ in the literature is sustained by questions of provenance and representation (Hetherington 1992; Hall 2006:71-7). The materialist perspective they have expounded has argued for authenticity to be objectively tangible in places and monuments with a known historical pedigree, wherein their materially concrete and indefatigable status as ‘the original’ renders their authenticity unarguable. Anthropology has been rather uneasy with this approach. Authenticity is most often critiqued as a product of cultural influences and discourses that produce authenticities that are only perceivable to certain observers possessing such conditioning or habitus. The cultural constructivist stance tends therefore to reduce authenticity to a product of other cultural forces, which are the cultural fragments worthy of study. ‘Authenticity’ itself is therein disregarded as a category – the forces that *constitute* and *create* that authenticity are instead deemed to be of more

importance. Many anthropologists are therefore reluctant to treat authenticity as a valid category of analysis. I counter-argue in favour of retaining and utilising the authentic as an analytic tool in anthropological discourse, predicated on the ethnographic reality of authenticity that this thesis details. My research exposes contingencies between the materials that are deemed authentic and the circuits in which they are deemed authentic. I seek to bring these circuits and materials into focus to utilise authenticity as a valid analytical category.

Erik Cohen, discussing the commodification of authenticity in tourism, questions the received wisdom that “Since modern society is inauthentic, those modern seekers who desire to overcome the opposition between their authenticity-seeking self and society have to look elsewhere for authentic life” (1988:373). Authentic experiences, cultural products and selves are believed therein to exist at the fringes of society, rather than in the modernised mainstream of industrial society. The former are uncompromised by the latter. Cohen also postulated that authenticity is a “negotiable” concept, socially constructed and implemented and liable to change over time (*ibid.*:374).

Cohen’s observations are useful for further interrogating ‘the authentic’. First, we see a clear historicisation of the issue of authenticity. It relates to a Western notion of time, of technological progress and the spread of homogenising Western ideologies leading towards modernisation. People and processes of historical depth become framed in the spatio-temporal envelope of the a-historical⁵⁴. Alienation from these romanticised pristine and ‘natural’ human states leads to an anxiety with the agenda of modernisation, or time eroding away this authentic purity, and a quest for people to re-acquaint themselves with

⁵⁴ See Fabian (1983) for a devastating critique of how such linear conceptions of time have related to anthropology’s creation and conception of its objects of study.

these idealised purities or authenticities through avenues as varied as tourism (Cohen 2002; MacCannell 1973; West and Carrier 2004), art (Brown 1998; Clifford 1988) and music consumption (McLeod 1999 displays the anxieties over Hip-Hop's authenticity being threatened by mainstream assimilation; country music fans' search for authentic singers and stylists is investigated in Jensen 1998 and Peterson 1997).

Sound recordings are especially challenging to notions of time and fixity. Unlike fixed images such as visual artworks, which constantly perform their function by emitting the image, sound is still fleeting and ephemeral even when afforded some degree of permanence through recording. A medium that is "at once futuristic and nostalgic, sound recording... shift[s] the felt nature of memory, time, and place, disrupting the naturalised chronotope of live performance and producing an epistemological divide between face-to-face and mediated communication" (Samuels *et al* 2010:332). Sound-reproduction technologies can articulate this spatial and temporal distance through physical wear and decay (Weiner 1994), design (Chapter 3) and aural indicators of age (Chapter 6). The "plural materialities" of music (Born 2011) and physical music media are potential vessels for authenticity. Material, technological and social authenticity are articulated in ways that can be unpacked from the reproduced media. The role of producers of physical music media is crucial here, as "the issue of authenticity is not so much about the way in which an act truthfully represents its 'real' origins, but about the way in which the affective relationship between artist and audience is articulated" (Negus 1992:72).

Second, we approach authenticity as a negotiable concept with its own contexts of culturally-specific articulation. The criteria for authenticity will be distinct in different cultural realms. Therefore, anxieties over the 'modern' can be re-framed as distinctly

Western concerns⁵⁵. Industrialisation and the market for mass consumer goods are contested in the West for their supposed lack of authenticity, as cultural historian Miles Orvell has suggested in the North American case. Some felt the need to solidify this schism between the “practical life of commerce and the spiritual pursuit of beauty” (Orvell 1989:152), the former harbouring both the nefarious stigma of dissolving and problematising social relations whilst on the other hand offering the potential for new vistas of communication, knowledge dissemination and aesthetic realities. Turn of the century artists, Orvell suggests, were engaged in the key quandary of having to confirm and actuate a contemporary authenticity that was free from the formulaic crutches of the nineteenth century, yet this authenticity needed to be free and separate from “the social and personal; distortions of business and commercial values” (Orvell 1989:154). Yet, in doing so, artists also needed to ally and identify their efforts with senses of American history, and a lineage “connecting with a past that seemed a source of stability and value” (*ibid.*).

Whilst some authors have suggested that the authentic is incompatible with commerce for commodification is classically theorised in exchange theory to effect alienation in the marketplace (Sahlins 2004 [1974]), the negotiable nature of the authentic has permeated discourses on such topics as tourism, tourist art and music (for example, Aubert 2004 identifies changeable notions of authenticity in the circulation of ‘world music’). Therefore, authenticity is not necessarily incompatible with the capitalist marketplace, in that commodification does not automatically mitigate any experience of

⁵⁵ Miller shows that modernity is not itself a bull-doing force for global cultural homogeneity in the Trinidadian context, where commodities that might be globally articulated such as Coca-Cola are re-articulated through the prism of the local in Trinidad (Miller 1994; 1998a). Rather than eroding Trini identity, these global products are used to project distinctly Trini identities in their new contexts of circulation.

the authentic. Nor can we expect the manifestations of the authentic in different goods and marketplaces to take the same form. Elizabeth Vann has shown that Vietnamese shoppers in Ho Chi Minh City break down the inauthentic into different categories – some of which are viable products for monetary exchange, some of which are not (Vann 2006:294). The use of ‘authenticity’ as an analytical tool in anthropology must recognise these proliferate manifestations of authenticity in practice. Therefore, some forms of authenticity and inauthenticity – the ‘real and the ‘fake’ – are fair-game for commodification, and some are not.

In this research, authenticity is a commercial phenomenon in the independent marketplace, a sacred ideal that can be exchanged in secular commodity transactions, despite actors’ antagonism with capitalist commerce. Indeed, this antagonism informs the creation of a marketplace wherein such transmissions can be effected. The appropriate negotiation of the marketplace to find the authentic producer, product and retail site is crucial in order to legitimately acquire the authentic through commercial transactions. Whilst some scholars of modernity, globalisation and consumer society construct a rigid dichotomy between commercial interests and ‘the real thing’, the distinction between the authentic (organic) and inauthentic (commodified) – “the peculiar but corollary assumption that culture could somehow be a finite resource, threatened with extinction by commodification” (Mazzarella 2003:44) – participants in the independent music marketplace manufacture and consume commodities and identities that satiate their desires for their own culturally specific brand of the authentic. Consumers discern which representation of the authentic they choose to consume, leading the ‘organic’ product of the independent labels to take precedence for informants in this research over the

synthesised product of the major labels (Negus 1992:54-5).

Participants in this research constantly referred to the ‘raw’, the ‘real’ and indeed the ‘authentic’ as categories of desire in their consumption and musical practices. The category of the ‘authentic’ is much valued in the independent music market, wherein certain key features of authenticity emerge:

- Music and music commodities are more authentic the less they are constrained by mainstream orthodoxy and adhere to the independent field – *purity*
- Money-hungry behaviour – ‘selling out’ – betrays inauthentic identities – *practice*
- Music formats ontologically ‘truer’ to the music (i.e. that re-create the experience of the music that was had by those who initially encountered it) are more authentic, such as listening to the Beatles on mono LPs rather than stereo CDs – *provenance*

These observations highlight key avenues for enquiry into the practices of producers in the independent music marketplace. What makes technological reproductions of music valuably authentic is the fact that authenticity is rooted in a network of people, places and things, not just the things themselves (Jones 2010). The rest of this chapter examines how these forms of authentication are undertaken by independent record labels to legitimate their roles as commercially-viable purveyors of authenticity.

2.4 Independent record labels:

Forging the authentic



Fig 2.2 A Revenant Records logo design, showcasing the artists that make up their catalogue

Austin-based Revenant Records' Dean Blackwood (a corporate lawyer in his late 30s⁵⁶) had been a dedicated music fan and collector since his youth: "I'd always had an interest in recordings and recorded sounds, seems like I had a different relation to it compared to my friends... I wasn't a fanatic, but was somewhat apart from everyone else". He became enamoured with and started collecting shellac 78rpm records in his early 20s. Dissatisfied with the CD format, Blackwood loved the labels, sleeves and "weighty" quality of the 78rpm record, which led him to resurrecting it as a mode for

⁵⁶ All ages stated in this thesis refer to research participants at the time of interaction during fieldwork (2009).

releasing contemporary music. He originally started out releasing 78rpm shellac records on his own private label. His major coup in this venture was managing to get the legendary late guitarist John Fahey to produce two 78s for his label. As Blackwood recalls, releasing music on 78rpm records appealed to “[Fahey’s] prankster mentality – the idea was that they would be indistinguishable from other 78 stock, and we thought that would be a source for some confusion and some fun, so he got in on that”.



Fig. 2.3 Revenant’s Dean Blackwood with a copy of the Revenant Records’ 2003 set *Screamin’ and Hollerin’ the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton*

Once the friendship with Fahey had been struck, he found Fahey – then an elder statesman of the underground music scene and enjoying an Indian Summer of critical appreciation for his back catalogue and avant-garde contemporary releases – pondering the same things as himself. Dean recalled that they both asked, “What was wrong with the state of ‘labeldom’ – why weren’t people paying attention to these unreleased or

unavailable recordings?” In the late 1950s, Fahey had instigated Takoma Records, among the first truly artist-run labels, to release his own recordings, contemporary guitarists and recordings of blues musicians that Fahey re-discovered after their slide into obscurity following the recording boom of the 20s and early 30s⁵⁷.

Revenant was initiated to resurrect musics that had fallen out-of-print, had never been consummately anthologised, or that had never been issued and were in danger of languishing in private archives for ever after. The relevance of these musics would be highlighted by a parallel run of releases on Revenant by contemporary musicians such as Jim O’Rourke and Salvador Kali who espoused a similar aesthetic. Fahey had inherited a small fortune after his father passed away in the mid-1990s, and “rather than invest it wisely”, as Dean recalls, they started the Revenant label. Aligning himself with Fahey gave Dean suitable economic and cultural capital to legitimise and facilitate his role as a producer in the marketplace.

After starting to work on projects in the summer of 1996, the label issued its first releases in 1997. ‘Raw musics’ became the label’s tagline, “the work of great, uncompromising artists, undiluted by commercial meddling” according to Revenant’s website. Clearly, the need to appeal to audiences with music that had not been pre-conditioned by mainstream orthodoxies of cultural production was important from the outset, as the mainstream was deemed a marker of inauthenticity *vis-à-vis* music’s potential ‘rawness’. The broad palette of sounds and styles that might fit this statement of intent are to be found across the Revenant catalogue, the product of a rapacious love for new sounds, “integrity”, “rawness” and the physicality of the music experience.

⁵⁷ John Fahey was instrumental in re-locating and re-animating the careers of two influential 1930s bluesmen: Mississippi-based Skip James and Memphis-based Bukka White.

Like many independent labels – especially those issuing archival materials such as Revenant – the perceived schism between the commercial world and the supposedly pure, unfettered ideal of passionately authentic musics was a driving force behind the creation of the label and its appeal. Dean recalled conversations with Fahey bemoaning that music they loved from outside the mainstream was not being paid its dues and serviced properly by labels. It was up to individuals to mobilise the music into the marketplace, and Fahey and Blackwood took it as their mission statement to bring into circulation everything from avant-garde rock, free jazz and bluegrass recordings that they deemed important and, importantly, authentic. In this sense, they and the other labels heads discussed in this ethnography act as cultural intermediaries. They have managed to gain rare and privileged access to source materials and the means by which they can be exposed to a wider audience, and they choose and filter according to their own aesthetic judgements. Brian Moeran’s 1997 study of a Japanese crafts co-operative is insightful here, as the intermediaries who bring the craftsmen’s works into a wider market are dictating their new aesthetic roles and conventions by deciding what will be available in the marketplace in much the same way that labels act when curating releases.

Blackwood recalls his convictions at the label’s inception that there must be people who would form an audience for these musics given that he and his friends had long indulged in these diverse genres. The label’s mission was also wedded to providing substantial and unprecedented packaging forms to bring the music to the marketplace. Part of this strategy was to bring people to these musics – in Dean’s words, to “bring the mountain to Muhammad” – through the power of the physical object, and so the label’s reputation for lavish packages crammed with attention-to-detail was born.

Tommy McCutcheon, who runs Austin-based reissue label Unseen Worlds, admits that running a label was “the product of serious amounts of collecting”, and a passionate urge to do something in the music business. He found himself coming up with a list of albums and recordings that he felt needed current editions to bring them “up with the times” and fill in the gaps with current digital reissues. The enthusiasm he has as a 25-year-old consumer of music, avidly searching for an outlet for his passion, led him to start his label:

For me it wasn't so much crate-digging⁵⁸ as cross-referencing. Most of my time was... [spent] reading interviews and gathering names and reading discographies, and picking up time periods that I thought were interesting, and the records that looked good or had good titles. I'd just want to hear everything by a certain artist because I love their stuff so much. And then finding that some of the best stuff is not the most popular, and being really curious to try and reintroduce that and see if people were willing to take it more seriously this time around.

As for deciding *what* to release, Tommy uses his own tastes as a guide. Via his record label, Tommy extends his fandom into a market presence. He indulges his interest with music as a consumer through Unseen Worlds by attempting to bring into the marketplace recordings that he feels deserve a new lease of life.

In addition to this, Tommy takes great pride in sourcing his materials (liner notes, recordings, artwork) directly from the artists and ensuring that they are aptly compensated for licensing their materials to Unseen Worlds. This marks a departure from the popularly-perceived practices of major labels, notorious for ripping-off artists by

⁵⁸ Crate-digging is a popular term for trawling through second-hand records in independent stores, second-hand stores and flea markets for obscurities and bargains.

engineering contracts and licensing agreements that leave them with little control over their released materials and a small share of the profits from these releases. Outside the mainstream market, there are also producers who do not compensate the artists or rights-holders for their releases. For example, opportunists frequently pirate or bootleg rare and out-of-print music in limited pressings without licensing these materials. As such, the artists receive no compensation for these releases.

Establishing an independent label that involves the consent and input of artists or their estates by properly licensing materials from them often carries the reward of sales and customer loyalty. Such practice also aids the likelihood of obtaining other music and materials for release in the future. For example, Dean Blackwood of Revenant chimed to readers at fansite The Radar Station (www.beefheart.com) that the release of the Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band box set *Grow Fins* (**Fig 2.4**) would see band members properly paid by a record label for the first time in decades. This involvement from ex-Magic Band members carried over to their supplying their own tapes for the project, as well as contributing to the sets' liner notes to create a package unprecedented in the history of the band. Reviews by fans on the Radar Station website identify their involvement as a key component of the set's success⁵⁹. Interest from labels in their material encourages artists to participate and lends credence to projects – “Most of the time”, Tommy McCutcheon chuckles, “it seems like they [the artists] have just been waiting for someone who gives a shit”.

⁵⁹ <http://www.beefheart.com/datharp/albums/official/growfins.htm> (accessed 03.09.2008)



Fig 2.4 Revenant Records' 1999 Captain Beefheart & the Magic Band 5CD box set *Grow Fins: Rarities 1965-82*

2.5 Ideals of shared cultural capital

Many founders of independent labels have come from listening to what Lance Ledbetter of Dust-to-Digital Records called “outsider musics”. Lance immersed himself in college radio, eventually becoming a DJ and thereby discovering the pre-war American and world musics that his label now predominantly deals in. Producers such as Lance have invested in music heavily as youths and young adults, and in finding music “from outside the box” that they could share with those few friends cohabiting their interests. They forged their listening tastes through explorations of the market they have ultimately come to cater for by trying to make available authentic sounds, objects, histories, attitudes and styles. That is to say, they are versed in the same field-specific cultural

capital (Bourdieu 1990) as their audiences. Prior to becoming producers of commodities, they have experienced the consumption of commodities in this market. The independent music audience produces its own producers who then cater for that audience as knowing insiders to their whims, preferences and passions. Dean Blackwood of Revenant posits a unifying characteristic of this audience as being the use of music listening “as a primary activity rather than a background to something else”. Many other participants in this research both as consumers and producers nominated this involved, studious participation in listening to music as a hallmark of their community. Tommy McCutcheon’s Austin-based label Unseen Worlds re-issues out-of-print avant-garde music. He wishes to expose this music to more people, although concedes that the music demands a certain approach from listeners in order for them to appreciate it:

...the hardest thing about [avant-garde music is that] you do generally have to sit down and *listen* to this stuff. I think that’s maybe the hardest thing to get across to people is music-dedicated listening experiences as opposed to something you get on MP3 blog [i.e. where just one song from an album – rather than the whole work – is posted for download]... if you just listen to that you lose the experience of the whole record, which is very much like a whole album, and that’s what it’s about too.

There are of course a host of contradictions inherent in the sphere of “outsider musics” of relevance to the creation and sustaining of this marketplace niche. It is not just consumers outside the mainstream who listen to ‘difficult’ music that analyse music media texts thoroughly, and treat them as something other than merely peripheral or background textures (see Atton 2012 for an analysis of avant-garde classic rock albums

and their reception by listeners). People who purchase the music of manufactured pop superstars include among their numbers those who listen intently and seriously to the music for aesthetic enjoyment. This has been shown to be similarly true for mainstream television shows that act as platforms for the performance of identification with others that comes from an intense engagement with the media to hand (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002). Intense scrutiny and understanding of the complexities of media texts is not alien to consumers of these mainstream media. Consumers of mass-produced mainstream media products see them not as the crass commercial fodder that cynical critics might think them to be, but rather as meaningful materials for creation of individual identities as well as identities that align themselves with larger communities of consumers. The fan participation in discussions with the directors of the *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* movie franchises are a case in point here (Shefrin 2004). These blockbuster products can integrate meaningfully with peoples' lives in dialogues with their everyday life, emotions and biographies: they are *interactive* phenomena rather than hegemonic and didactic products. Their wide-scale commercial circulation and objectives do not alienate them from people as emotive media texts that offer consumers the opportunity to creatively engage and identify with them. What is important is how these media are not only used by consumers to distinguish themselves from others through knowledge of meta-texts and communally-specific cultural capital, but also how producers enable and construct these engagements and facilitate the actuation of oppositions by groups from each other. For example, certain markers of practice by independent labels make their products of value to consumers. Aforementioned examples of these markers include the ethically proper licensing of music and the involvement of artists whose work is released

by labels in their products. These practices can be in turn utilised by consumers in their engagement with the media texts that are produced – they recognise these practices to be morally and ethically sound, to authenticate the products by bringing them closer to the source of the music, and thereby legitimate their engagement with producers through their commodities.

The independent music marketplace might pride itself in counteracting the market presence of the major labels, making otherwise unavailable music of interest accessible to people and offering a human face and community spirit to consumers, but the seemingly impermeable barrier of insider knowledge and cultural capital serves to exclude many neophytes from penetrating the independent marketplace's scene. It also establishes an anorak stereotyping of the independent music market⁶⁰, a marketplace myth (Arsel and Thompson 2010) that is combated to protect the investments in field-specific cultural capital made by producers and consumers. The paradox of trying to be all-inclusive and to listen to music without boundaries, whilst doing so in a community of conversant insiders privy to specialist knowledge, language and schemes of value/taste judgement, is endemic to the independent music market. Lance Ledbetter of Dust-to-Digital Records concedes that this barrier exists, but can be overcome by conceptualising the interaction between independent labels and their potential audiences as being a form of community and sharing.

I love everything that we put out. I consider myself to be this adventurous listener going back to when I was in high school with my friends, always looking for things and sharing with each

⁶⁰ Such cliquy obsession within the independent music marketplace is stereotyped in the popular imagination by the novel *High Fidelity* (Hornby 1995). Shuker (2004) provides an illuminating paper that investigates the validity of this stereotype as it might apply to record collectors.

other things we hadn't heard before, and I think there's a certain fan base for us that's sorta like that.

Tommy McCutcheon of Unseen Worlds also sees the interaction between producers and consumers in the small-scale independent marketplace as akin to a community: "It's more of a community thing, a community feeling. Some people do really get on the message boards and do their market research that way, I think for us it's more about listening to the music and seeing what people were liking, what we were liking, and finding a medium between that. I think it makes for a more unique experience with it all". Tommy concedes that his tastes are the main arbiter of what his label releases, which opens the door to anything from minimalist opera to experimental orchestral rock. It is a similar force that compels Matt Sullivan of Light in the Attic records. He states emphatically that he loves running his label – "I can't think of anything else I'd rather be doing with my life" – and feels that independent record labels, stores and consumers are more a united community than ever before.

The historically-rooted concept of an "imagined community" is important to consider here, as Benedict Anderson reflected upon the communal experience of texts by members of a population and the ability of this wide engagement to foster consumers' relationships in a "steady, anonymous, simultaneous experience" (Anderson 1983:31). The circulation of music commodities in the independent marketplace anchors the sharing amongst people of common ideas, fantasies and histories, common ways of being. These bind people through their experience of the aural and the tactile, and their shared knowledges and consensus over the value of these sounds and materials. Important to these shared medias is the way they exhibit and confer knowledge about music and the

marketplace. Producing these media is a display of knowledge that itself acts to perpetuate knowledge. Producers comb over the minutiae and metatexts of their releases to sate personal desires to produce products they would wish to consume themselves.

2.6 A case-study at 78rpm

I focus here upon one participant in the independent music marketplace who occupies a particular niche by dealing almost exclusively with reissues of 78rpm recordings. His involvement in multiple aspects of production – from sourcing and collecting materials (recordings and memorabilia), transferring audio, and producing releases – evidences the multiple authenticities that are simultaneously harnessed by producers as a way of anchoring and promulgating their reputations.

Chris King, a 37 year-old sound engineer and producer, has helped put together many of the acclaimed releases by Revenant Records and Atlanta's Dust-to-Digital label. A noted collector, King specialises in transferring audio from 78rpm records, and is well respected in his field. King works by day for Virginia's Charlottesville-based bluegrass label Rebel Records, and he produces and remasters reissue projects on a contract basis for other labels.

In the marketplace for releases that feature 78rpm recordings, knowledge about the production process is widespread yet the ability to co-ordinate these releases is rare. Such releases by-and-large sell to informed consumers who are well-versed in the historical, technical and discographical knowledges exercised in these releases. In other words, consumers have made investments in certain field-specific cultural capital –

knowledge, listening, opinions, reading, acquiring releases. But they lack the cultural capital required to actually put these releases together though they are aware of the processes that lead to this eventuality. As with the aforementioned sourcing of materials by Revenant Records, making these products requires knowledge of how to get the raw materials, and how to execute their subsequent replication and commodification. King represents an agent in the independent field of production who is knowledgeable of these processes, who has sufficient material assets (sound equipment and collected records), connections and reputation to manifest this authenticity in commodity form.

Introduced to the 78rpm record by his father, who collected them when he was a child, King moved into the world of collecting while still in high school. Whilst he was mesmerised by 78s and the music they contained, King also cultivated his interests in many other diverse musics. King defines the 78s he collects as “blues and hillbilly and ethnic and Cajun, but I guess the best overarching term is rural music”. Not all early 78s were of rural musics – swing band and music hall hits of the day were the biggest sellers in the first half of the twentieth century, and apart from a few hold-overs from the minstrelsy traditions these musics were most often urban in character. Whilst white America now holds acoustic blues, string-bands and Appalachian ballads as a core part of the modern music tradition, these records originally sold in mostly modest quantities to people from the same sorts of communities as the performers on the records. The “Race Records” market for blues, gospel and ragtime sold mainly to black Americans (Fahey 1970; Wardlow 2000), and ‘hillbilly’ records sold to rural white Americans⁶¹. In the intervening decades between their release in the 1920s and reappraisal in the 1950s, many

⁶¹ For more on the history of white American rural musics, the ‘hillbilly’ record industry and its audiences, see Peterson 1997; Wolfe 2001; Russell 2010.

of the records fell foul of the obsolescence of 78rpm record playing technology with the advent of the 45rpm single, the LP, radio and the rise of the jukebox, as well as audiences' changing stylistic taste. This, exacerbated by the fragility of the shellac used to produce 78s, means that today copies of pre-war American rural music 78s are scarce and highly prized. Many records known to have been issued are now thought to have disappeared altogether⁶², especially since the United States' government's drive for shellac during the Second World War for use in munitions production saw countless 78s donated to be melted down and recycled for various uses on the battlefield.

The efforts of collectors have salvaged a significant swathe of these records which now circulate largely in a small, cossetting network of just a handful of collectors, with many of the major collections of pre-war 78s having been consolidated over the years into the few collections today after previous collectors sold their materials on or passed away (King estimates for blues records this constitutes only about a dozen such collections). Through crate-digging in antique shops and flea markets, and subsequently trading amongst the higher echelons of collectors, King has acquired a host of sought-after and highly prized rural-music recordings and has become well-known in the circle of major-league collectors of early American rural musics. This makes his input into the projects of labels such as Revenant and Dust-to-Digital of great importance, as through his connections he is able to bring many scarce 78s into consideration. When I talked to Chris about the difficulties of getting other collectors to send their prized discs to him for transferring them, he told me "It's not hard because I'm in a very good position, I'm

⁶² For example, Delta blues musician Willie Brown recorded six sides for Paramount records in 1930 in Grafton, Wisconsin, but only two have been discovered (Paramount 13090 "M & O Blues" / "Future Blues", of which there are three known extant copies). The missing sides (Paramount 13001 "Grandma Blues" / "Sorry Blues" and Paramount 13099 "Window Blues" / "Kicking In My Sleep Blues") are Holy Grails of blues collecting. See Wardlow 1998:181-6.

actually very good friends with probably 99% of the big league collectors that are out there because I am a collector myself. There's only one or two that I don't really get along with or are difficult to get the stuff from, but the vast majority of these people will overwhelmingly lend what it is that you want – that's not a difficulty”.

Not only can he bring these rare source materials together, but he has an excellent reputation as a sound engineer for transferring these records for release.⁶³ He is well-known enough for the JSP label to proudly proclaim “Transfers by Chris King” on the front cover of their 2010 4-CD box set *Gennett Old Time Music: Classic Country Recordings 1927-34*. For those familiar with re-issues of 78rpm recordings, his name adds weight and authority to the release and goes some way to ensuring it will be a high-quality product worth investing in.

King has also curated his own box set, the acclaimed *People Take Warning: Murder Ballads and Disaster Songs 1913-1938* (**Fig 2.5**). The three CD, seventy song collection released in 2005 by Tompkins Square (with design input by Grammy Award winning Atlanta-based graphic designer Susan Archie) is packaged in a long book of five-by-twelve inches, drawing upon multiple musical genres to highlight how American folk musics comprise a significant oral history of events with both local and national importance, from the great dust-bowl disaster of the Depression-era Southern states and the sinking of the Titanic to train crashes and murders. King endeavoured to use the set to create a social history, complementing the texts of the oral tradition of traditional music with images and paraphernalia to enable modern listeners to better understand both the songs and the times in which they were created. The three discs are thematically arranged as ‘Man vs. Machine’, ‘Man vs. Nature’, and ‘Man vs. Man (and Woman too)’, with

⁶³ Chapter 6 details the tensions over the subjectivity of recorded sound and transfers of recordings.

sumptuous sleeve notes detailing performer biographies (when known), the historical information that informs the narratives of the songs themselves, and pictures that detail the tragedies and misdemeanours that the songs recount.

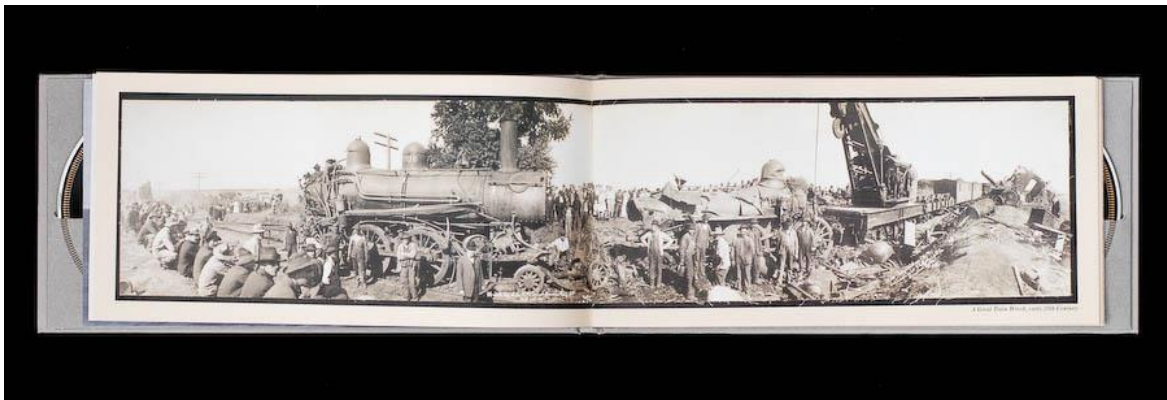
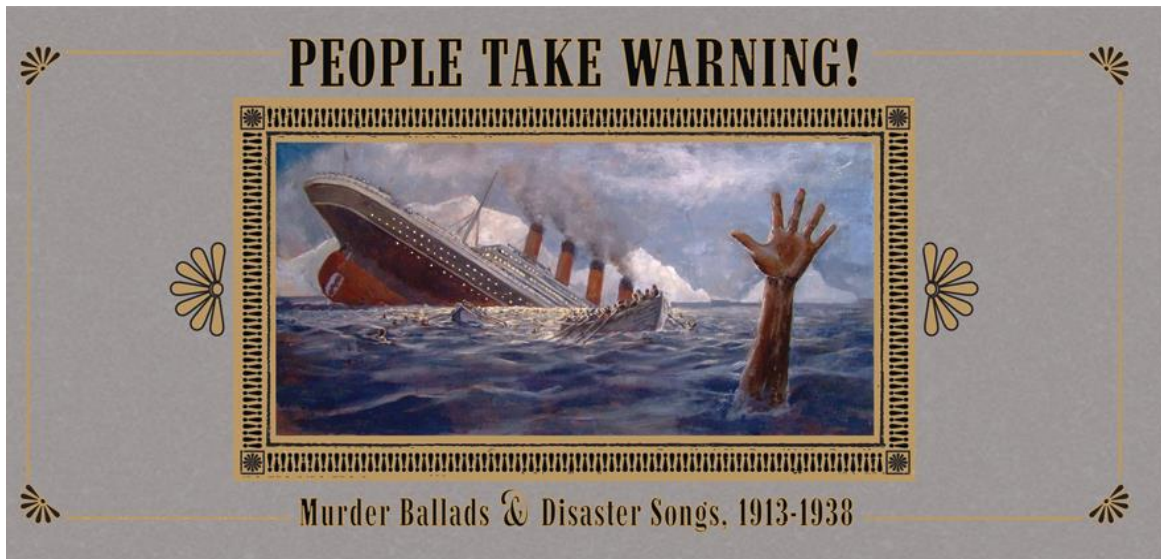


Fig 2.5 *People Take Warning: Murder Ballads & Disaster Songs, 1913-1938*

Tompkins Square, 2007

Discussing his work, King stated that his hobby has become his vocation. With this he feels that there is a weight of responsibility to represent people and their history accurately and informatively through these archival products. As a producer who issues

otherwise unavailable recordings he feels a duty to service the fans of pre-war music who wait with bated breath for recently surfaced records to be issued in the wider market. For example, when two previously missing Son House songs (*Mississippi County Farm Blues* and *Clarksdale Moan*) were slated to appear on Yazoo Records' 2000 release *The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of: Super Rarities & Unissued Gems of the 1920s & 30s*, it created a stir in the country blues audience. House's original recordings for Paramount Records in 1930 are regarded as seminal recordings in the country blues canon, and the two titles were one of the many pre-war recordings that had never been located, though they were known to have been issued by the record label.

2.7 Celebrity endorsement, publicity, and crossing-over

Preaching to the converted is not the sole aim for independent producers. Appealing to the base of adventurous music listeners in the marketplace is a goal for many producers convinced that such an audience exists. Tommy at Unseen Worlds wanted his label's catalogue to showcase accessible avant-garde music, which would not prove alienating or difficult to listeners that might be fearful of descending into decadent pretentiousness at the prospect of listening to the avant-garde. Tommy advocates the same intensive listening that Lance Ledbetter of Dust-to-Digital mentioned earlier in this chapter, but wishes for his efforts to expose avant-garde musics to people unacquainted with them in the same way as friends passing around music would introduce each other to new material.

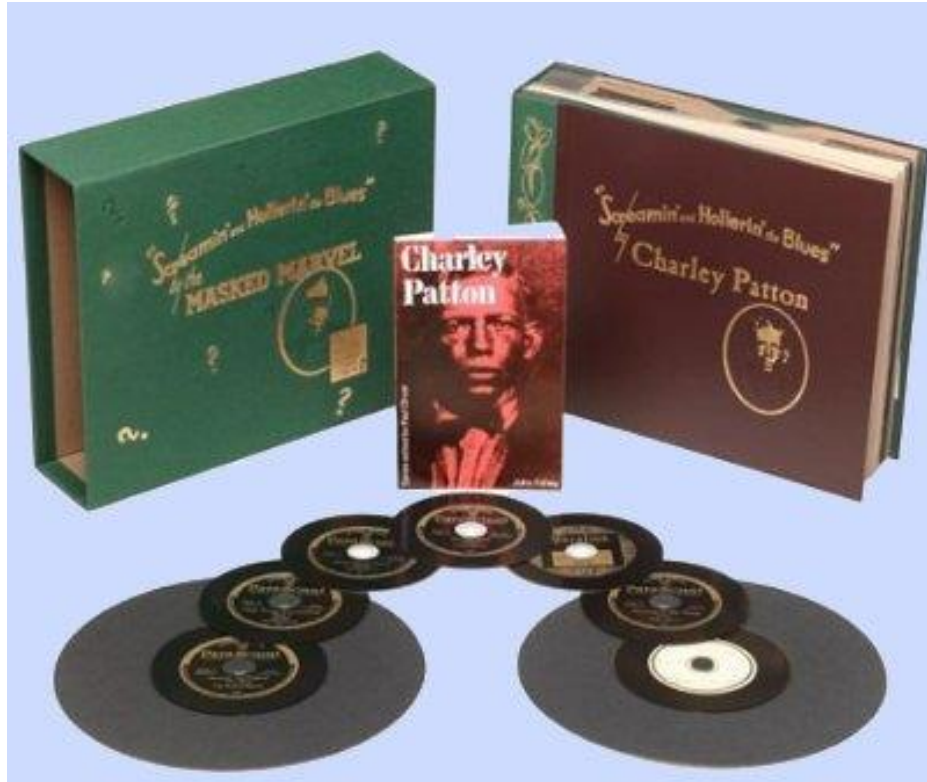


Fig 2.6 Revenant Records' Grammy Award winning box set *Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton*

Chris King recognises that one of Dean Blackwood's innovations at Revenant Records was to draw in audiences that otherwise would not purchase these pre-war recordings, with releases such as *American Primitive Vol. 1* and the Grammy-winning box set *The Worlds of Charley Patton*⁶⁴ (**Fig 2.6**). In spite of the existence of a niche audience for these early rural musics, it is therefore a lesson learned that packaging and

⁶⁴ Revenant's Charley Patton box set won 3 Grammy Awards in 2003 for Best Boxed Or Special Limited Edition Package, Best Album Notes and Best Historical Album

‘hipster cachet’⁶⁵ have their rewards in selling larger numbers of units and bringing the reward of exposing music to people previously unaware of its existence. Lavish or evocative packaging can draw attention in the physical music market, potentially reaching out from a niche audience to the wider ‘alternative’ music market. King sees Blackwood’s achievement as effective in articulating through packaging and image something which could “appealed to hipsters who may not necessarily have heard of Dock Boggs or Charley Patton or William Versey Smith but by their sort of necessary aesthetic orientation they were inclined to pick up or notice a package like what he put out and so therefore, kind of by accident, they stumbled across this great music”. When Spin magazine reviewed the Patton box set, they praised it as "Lavish. Akin to a perfect museum exhibition", something unprecedented in packaging CDs that led to heightened media interest in the release.

With Susan Archie designing the *People Take Warning* set (an Atlanta-based designer, Susan has produced many packages popular with critics and consumers, winning a Grammy for her design of Revenant’s *The Worlds of Charley Patton*), and King’s involvement with providing archival materials to complement the liner notes, King felt the physical impact of the set was assured. King also had the idea that another element could further the exposure and appeal of his set. With *People Take Warning*, King was able to get legendary American singer-songwriter Tom Waits to contribute a foreword to the booklet, which helped with the relative commercial success of the project. Waits is

⁶⁵ ‘Hipster’ is a word commonly used in the USA to describe a person who is popularly seen to be shallowly obsessed with their image and fashion-status, with a conceitedly ironic taste. Whilst they deign themselves to be individuals with tastes ‘alternative’ to the mainstream, hipsters are generally thought of as being susceptible to the same sort of conditioning by the marketplace as those in the mainstream, though they are thought of as being blind to this ‘reality’. Hipsters tend to be categorised loosely in opposition to those who ‘know better’ than to blindly follow current fashions and tastes in the pursuit of being ‘cool’, and therefore have more autonomy over their own fashion tastes and a more legitimate claim to autonomy and individuality.

well regarded as an uncompromising musician, who has fended off corporate efforts to utilise his music or image in advertising (resulting in successful, high profile lawsuits against those impinging on his stance against the corporate music industry). Signed to noted indie label ANTI, Waits has become a by-word for integrity in the music market. Waits's involvement in the project widened the press coverage and piqued the interest of many in the record buying public, as King is keenly aware.

I took it in a different direction with *People Take Warning* by asking Tom Waits to write about the stuff. The fact that Tom has hipster cachet ... he sort of like brought in a new demographic of people that never in a billion years would buy the set because they don't have knowledge of nor any interest in that period of music, but by the fact that he sort of like gave his blessing to the thing, it brought in a new species of people to listen to it.

It is not surprising given the coup of securing Waits' participation that the sticker on the front of the set boasts that it contains an "Introduction by Tom Waits". King describes *People Take Warning* as having done "very well" as a crossover set that endeared itself to a wider audience, and also as the set that "most effectively captured my ambitions". Reviews contemporaneous with the set's release made much of Waits' typically enigmatic foreword as a selling point of the set, and set the tone for the appreciation accorded the music in the set and its packaging.

I mean you have to be able to present it in such a way as to bring in this non-demographic, or rather this demographic that would not normally purchase this thing and at the same time not cheapen or make less or simplify the music that's contained within.

With these observations, King expresses an awareness that heightened sales could be deemed ‘selling-out’, and that the integrity or authenticity of a product and its music can be compromised by the tactics chosen to promote it in the marketplace. The addition of cult celebrity endorsement enabled King to create a more commercially viable product and simultaneously resist depreciating the music through its commodification. I have suggested that producers need to authenticate their right to authorship of commodities. This authorship is multivocal as many talents are implicated in the production of these commodity-artefacts. Engaging celebrity voices is a way to legitimise commodities by bringing that personality, however fleetingly, into the sphere of the commodity. It suggests that the product can bring the audience closer to that individual, and align the consumer with their venerated taste judgements and reputations. Some endorsements are more ‘niche’ than Waits’. For instance, Robert Crumb’s participation in the artwork for Yazoo’s 2000 release *The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of: Super Rarities & Unissued Gems of the 1920s & 30s* (Fig 2.7) adds legitimacy to the enterprise as Crumb is himself a noted collector of 78rpm recordings and has a valuable library of records. Many fans of pre-war rural American musics would see the alignment of this enigmatic personality to the project as an appropriate endorsement. He has ‘source credibility’ that is effective given his expert status and trustworthiness as an arbiter of good taste in such music⁶⁶. Other such examples in these record labels utilising enigmatic figures whose reputations in the marketplace legitimate their releases are Light in the Attic’s reissue of Karen Dalton’s *In My Own Time* which includes liner notes by Nick Cave, Lenny Kaye and Devandra Banhart; Revenant Records’ having been founded by late guitar legend John Fahey; and Unseen Worlds’ reissue of ‘Blue’ Gene Tyranny’s *Out Of The Blue* featuring

⁶⁶ ‘Source credibility’ comes from social psychology work – see Sternthal *et al* 1978.

new liner notes from Gene himself. The authenticity of the source elements and contributors are brought together in the commodity to make them desirable to consumers wishing to identify themselves with such authenticity.

Another example is Bill Bentley (ex-head of media relations for Warner Brothers) who curated a tribute to Skip Spence's 1969 album *Oar*. Entitled *More Oar* (1999, Birdman Records), the record featured newly-commissioned cover-versions of the entire original album. Bentley, utilising his wide-reaching industry connections, managed to garner contributions from established acts (Tom Waits, Robert Plant, Robyn Hitchcock) as well as newer or more obscure sources (Flying Saucer Attack, Outrageous Cherry) who shared Spence's psych-folk and avant-garde predilections to appeal to those already enamoured with *Oar*. The synergy between the contributing acts and Spence's own integrity was a key concern for Bentley.

Some celebrity endorsement can hinder products. Brian Moeran's account of a discredited celebrity impacting upon an advertising campaign by a Japanese agency evidences the "potential perils in the so-called 'synergy effect' created by the celebrity endorser between a corporation and its product" (2006:48). For Grant McCracken celebrities are endowed with carefully cultivated images and meanings that are imputed into the commodities that they endorse, which in turn transfer these values to the consumer. The "symbolic properties of the celebrity endorser" (McCracken 1989:310) have to be aligned carefully with the producer of the product, the commodity itself and the target audience for that commodity. "Celebrities "own" their meanings because they have created them on the public stage by dint of intense and repeated performance" (*ibid.*:315), but it can be difficult to negotiate around these meanings once they are so

tightly and widely aligned with a celebrity.

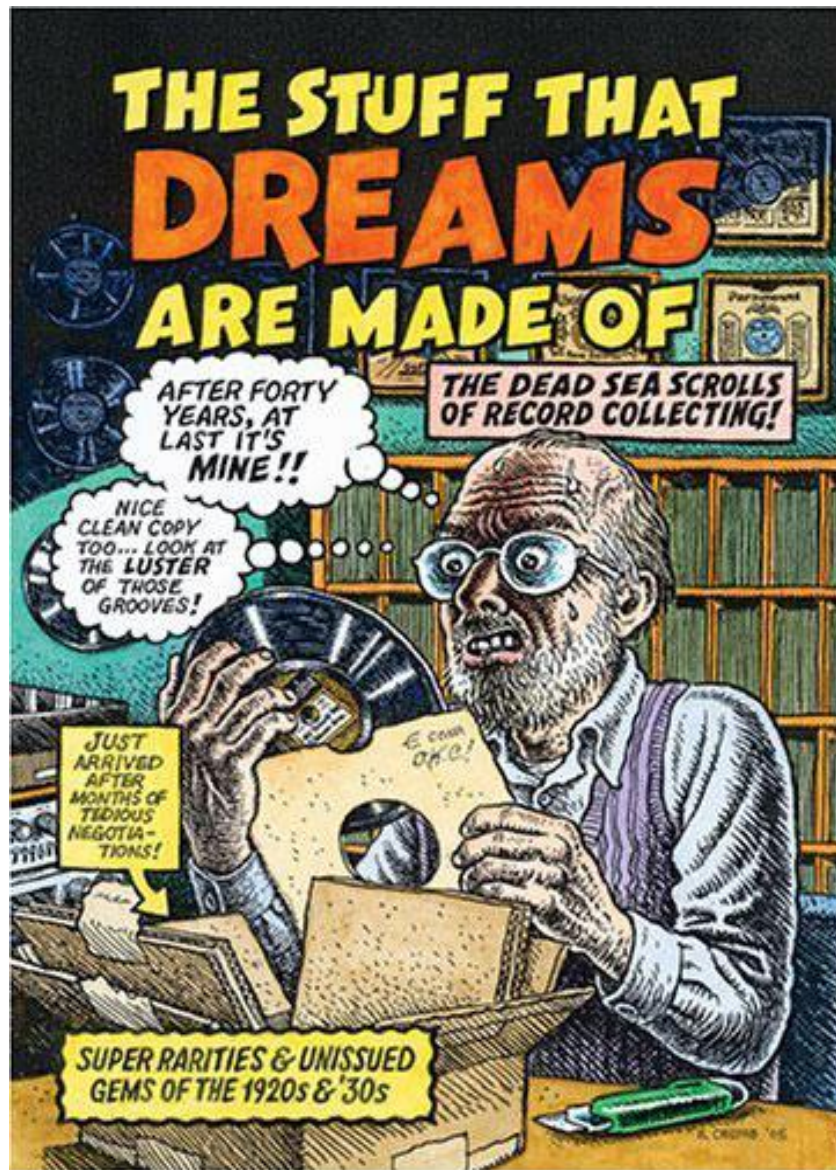


Fig 2.7 Yazoo Records' 2000 release *The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of: Super Rarities & Unissued Gems of the 1920s & 30s*, with cover artwork by underground comics legend (and 78 collector) Robert Crumb. The set delivered two previously unissued sides by seminal Mississippi Delta bluesman Son House.

For example, the singer Mick Hucknall, from the pop group Simply Red is not

especially highly regarded by music fans on account of the band's conservative pop music. But, as a dedicated fan of Jamaican reggae music, Hucknall has bankrolled Manchester-based label Blood & Fire. This has enabled them to license recordings, conduct in-depth research as part of their releases, fleshing out their packages with comprehensive liner notes and excellent audio mastering at London's famed Abbey Road studios. Hucknall's name is conspicuous in its absence from Blood & Fire's packages except on their final release before folding in 2010. Here the celebrity endorser might be a *coup* for the label's finances, but his image is not commensurate with the style and aesthetic of the label or its audience. On the other hand, the contributions of famed reggae scholar Steve Barrow are prominently credited on Blood & Fire's releases. Bourdieu suggested that literary legitimacy is sought by actors in the field of literary production (1993:42). This legitimacy not only relates to the work of that author, but also their authority to consecrate other authors' works. This is precisely what Waits and Crumb can exercise that Hucknall cannot, which I relate again to the notion of reputation as judged and supported by others in the field. In the independent marketplace where authenticity is valorised and the mainstream is deplored for lack of authenticity, the logic of such moves is contingent with what forms of cultural capital are ascribed value over others in the specific context of the independent music marketplace.

2.8 "Follow the money":

Capitalism and independent commerce

...if we want to understand how the advertising industry works, we need to find out how money is

circulated among the different players in that industry... 'follow the money' is a good principle for anybody trying to find out about the organisation and structure of any industry.

Moeran 2006:21

Presenting a company and its product to the world is a performative act. A certain style is adopted in order to convey to a target audience the sincerity or validity of the company and what it is selling. It is imperative therefore that the appropriate media channels are utilised in order to reach target audiences, and that the presentation of products is sympathetic to those people's tastes and desires.

In the independent music marketplace, products are not advertised with full-page spreads in mainstream national publications, blaring TV commercials or motorway billboards. The mode of advertising takes on understated, almost covert and cliquy forms. The advertising of independent releases is a small-scale operation geared towards consumer communities that focuses on the sites where information is gleaned about music by those consumers⁶⁷.

Specialist journals and fanzines, websites and record stores embody the bulk of advertising opportunities available to small labels with little in the way of finances to promote their products. That is to say that independent labels primarily use other independently-run outlets to advertise their products. In this sense, the scene of independent producers, retailers and consumers target these resources within the field.

Without market research, it would be unwise to attempt to turn these records into widely

⁶⁷ Advertising can in itself even become desirable as a commodity in music collecting circles: "An advertisement is itself a very particular kind of commodity, a commodity built on images, a commodity image..." (Mazzarella 2003:20). It is true that adverts can achieve commodity status in second-hand markets: In-store posters, promotional fliers, press-packages and promotional CDs and records are all ubiquitous presences on the second-hand market. Antones Record Store in North Austin features many such collectable pieces of memorabilia for sale, including an in-store life-size cut out of the Beatles, priced at over \$200.

distributed releases that might perish in the mainstream market. The realistically modest ambitions of independent producers mean that they anticipate selling primarily within the scene of independent consumers, with only limited chances for cross-over appeal. Furthermore, operating solely within the parameters of independent music whilst opposing supposed mainstream hegemony (“myths of the mainstream” – Strachan 2007:246) is a legitimising strategy (*ibid.*:247) aimed at fostering an ideologically distinct political economy of progressive cultural capital (Dunn 2012). Failure is safeguarded against by a redefinition of marketplace success according to the parameters of this novel political economy. As Bourdieu noted with regard to authors, “the relationship of mutual exclusion between material gratification and the sole legitimate profit (i.e. recognition by one’s peers) is increasingly asserted as the exclusive principle of evaluation as one moves down the hierarchy of economic gratifications” (1993:50).

These advertising avenues are striking in their understatement. As an antidote to the loud, brash world of commercial mainstream advertising (derided by Baudrillard 1998 [1970]), independent labels further the authentic aesthetic of their images by striking an opposition to mainstream advertising streams and their aesthetics. Knowing how best to reach consumers via these means is an important part of the knowledge set of independent producers. The authentic aesthetic here – of being in the business for the passion of making music available, for the love of art over the love of money – is sought after by consumers in the music and products that they consume. Record collector Chris W. (a 34 year-old office worker in Austin) thinks deeply about the intent and hard work that went into the records and CDs that he buys, and feels in a Marxist sense that it can enhance an object to see it as an item into which great care, effort and respect of the

music has fuelled the actualisation of a product over the desire to make a commercial product or make a “quick buck”.

...a lot of the labels that I support, they may have two people who make a moderately comfortable living, but they're not going to be rich and they don't give a shit about it. They're doing what they want to do, and that's really honourable.

Chris feels that this is evident in the way that labels advertise themselves, both in terms of the content of their publicity and the routes by which it reaches its audience. These labels then earn the ‘support’ of consumers via repeat custom. For example, Lance Ledbetter of Dust-to-Digital and his wife April still operate a stock room in their basement and send the mail orders out themselves. They know their most dedicated customers by name, including some who order everything the label puts out. Tommy at Unseen Worlds gets feedback from customers too, “from all over the world, including radio programmes writing in and doing specials on people we've put out, and people writing saying that they're following our things, lots of repeat customers. People who see what we're doing and are following it. That's encouraging even if it's not 1000 people doing it.”

Garnham suggested that creative labour in the culture industries, where independent ‘freelance’ workers proliferate, is typified by long hours of work for minimal financial reward: “workers themselves willingly don this yoke in the name of freedom” (1987:33). Rather than subsuming this observation under a Marxist rhetoric of capitalist triumph over the worker through industries’ unburdening of responsibility to their workers, Angela McRobbie’s investigation of the British fashion industry suggests that such

particular vocations in the culture industries are symbolically-charged life choices. It expresses a sort of “*cultural capitalism*” wherein workers “by and large express little, if any, real interest in the dynamics of wealth creation and business” (McRobbie 1998:177). McRobbie portrays workers in the fashion industry as working “according to a different set of principles which are about artistic integrity, creative success, recognition, approval by the art establishment, and then, also almost as an afterthought, sales and markets” (*ibid.*). Likewise, retailers in the world of retro-fashion perceive themselves as being in their trade not for large financial gain, but rather because they enjoy what they do (Crewe *et al* 2003:69). However, monetary transactions are necessary to keep their enterprises tenable.

Discussing the British men’s magazine *The Face*, which emerged in the 1980s amongst fashion-conscious young men, Frank Mort concurs in observing that “Despite low pay and chronic job insecurity, there was no shortage of recruits to this world”, where people aspired to gain a “sought-after accreditation in the list of the magazine’s contributing editors” (Mort 1996:34). A parallel exists with the world of the independent music market, where immense pride is taken in work that does not promise great financial reward. What is to be gained is reputation, the kudos of authenticity, of not ‘selling out’, and being able to participate in rewarding employment. Hesmondhalgh’s research into the 1990s Brit-pop and ‘indie’-rock scenes led him to conclude that independent labels’ collusion with major labels and making larger sums of money were no longer wrong-footings in terms of credibility in the independent music market: “Indie, then, represents the end of the post-punk vision of transforming the social relations of musical production via the medium of the small record company” (1999:57). Still, the

‘honourable’ thing to do in the contemporary independent labels of my own research is not to sell out by pursuing populist cash-cows and to retain autonomy from major labels. The status that is desired is attained by operating modest businesses that serve the independent music scene of producers, retailers and consumers and rebuke mainstream commercialism.

Tommy McCutcheon of Unseen Worlds admits to not budgeting for advertising with his label. He maintains a website and a blog chronicling new releases and items of interest for those interested and otherwise lets reviews on other blogs and fanzines spread the word about his releases. Furthermore, if record store owners are aware of your products and enjoy them, then they can do a good deal of work getting consumers to purchase copies in-store. When I mentioned to Jacob, an employee at Austin’s End of an Ear, that I would be talking to Tommy, he highly recommended the label’s release of Lubomyr Melnyk’s 1978 rarity *KMH, Piano Music in the Continuous Mode* and opened one of the sealed CDs for me to listen to in-store. Labels too appreciate the relationship with stores and the work they do promoting products for labels. Matt Sullivan of Light in the Attic expressed his fondness for Austin’s Waterloo Records and the work that they did to stock, sell and prominently display his label’s work.

Whilst he ideally would like to run larger advertising campaigns with in-store posters or more frequent press advertisements, Tommy is aware that this is not feasible and instead relies upon the quality of his releases to keep people coming back to his products and his brand. Tommy acknowledged that the only time he has paid for advertising for his label has been when small publications have run reviews of his work, as a gesture towards their help in featuring his label’s releases and as an expression of

community solidarity.

It's community in the fact that you understand each other. Some of the people are a lot closer and meet at, like, festivals and that sort of thing. I just don't have the money to do that. We don't lose money, but we don't make money either.

This community feeling is not just felt by a body of consumers, or as a dynamic between labels and their customers. It also exists between labels. It has already been noted that there is a sharing of skills between labels, insofar as certain people work on projects for many different labels (Revenant and Dust-to-Digital joined forces for a September 2011 release of Revenant founder John Fahey's entire early Fonotone Records recordings, an example of independent label collusion). Matt Sullivan of Light in the Attic exuded pride and enthusiasm recalling how his label conspired with others to create a special package for Record Store Day, a recently established annual event discussed in Chapter 4. The vinyl-only release involved nine other labels around the world, including Finders Keepers from Manchester, Jazzmen from London, Sublime Frequencies from Seattle, Newbroker from Chicago, Daftone from Brooklyn, Timmion from Finland, and Honest Jon's from London with each label submitting one track.

That was cool, I gotta say, as far as feeling there's a community out there and having something in common with people, that was like the first time I guess it hit home... I knew there were a lot of reissues out there and I'd connected with a lot of people over the years, but that was kind of the first time when we all came together where I was involved, and it was a really bonding experience, and we're hoping to do another one next year. That was a good time.

Matt furthered the sense of community and reciprocity amongst these labels by offering them all free advertising in his label's fanzine (produced and distributed exclusively for Record Store Day 2009). As he claims, "We're not all competing – when you have ten or fifteen of these labels out there and they're all meticulous about what they do, and they do a good job at it, it's all legally licensed stuff, paying the appropriate parties and promoting it... we're helping to push *everything* forward".

Discussing advertising agencies delivering services to large Japanese corporations, Moeran speaks of an "unformulated 'code of honour' among agencies who are otherwise in direct competition with one another for advertising business" (Moeran 2006:48). In the world of the independent music market, there is a similarly contingent 'code of honour' as referred to by Tommy and Matt above. Advertising is costly, but can be used as a vote of thanks to those who have made some contribution to your work's exposure. In a sense, this suggests the ideal that has been evidently chased after throughout this chapter's discussions – that capitalism can be commensurate with authenticity in the proto-market where financial rewards are inherently limited (Toynbee 2000:27). Money has to be used appropriately, supporting the independent market and its interests, in order for it to be legitimated in its circulation.

2.9 Conclusions

This chapter has explored the intimate relationships forged between producers and their projects, their audiences and each other. That producers are able to appeal directly to

their audiences in the independent music market is largely because producers are projecting the desires of the audience into the projects and subsequently onto the marketplace. Producers come from the same culture of collecting and music listening as their audiences. The authentic categories valorised by both consumers and producers are negotiated throughout the production and commercial birth of the commodity. Shared cultural capital is exercised in order for producers to legitimate their existence in the independent music scene in the eyes of their audience in the form of their reputations, “the informal, consensual evaluations by which performers judge one another’s competence and relate to one another in a social network”, where the social criteria of importance are “aesthetics; social identity, or membership in various large-scale groups... and alliances with one another within performance networks” (Gerstin 1998:387). The lack of market research by independent labels and their shared concerns and discourses over authenticity and purity attest to this shared scene of field-specific cultural capital and reputation-building that acts as a guide for producers.

This quest for the authentic is problematised by the very fact that it is situated in the context of monetised transactions and commercial interests. These are related to aspects in the mainstream industry to which the independent marketplace places itself in opposition, and by which it constructs its notion of the authentic. The task is to consolidate the aesthetics of independent music and commerce given this schism between the ideal and the reality of the independent music market.

The denigration of commodity capitalism is pervasive amongst those striving to align with authentic musical expression unsullied by corporate interests. When discussing any culture industry the role of money is a key concern, and how “the enormous cultural

variation in the way in which money is symbolised and in which this symbolism relates to culturally constructed notions of production, consumption, circulation and exchange” (Parry and Bloch 1989:1). The dualities of financial solvency and greed, provision and exploitation, authenticity and inauthenticity are inherent to concepts of capitalist marketplaces and the morality of transactions. The desire for ‘soft’ capitalism and the promulgation of ‘legitimising strategies’ (Strachan 2007) detailed in Chapter 1 are brought to the fore by actors in the independent marketplace’s ‘proto-market’ (Toynbee 2000:27) to authenticate their practices and the necessary commodification entailed.

Where Chris Gregory (1982) purported the distinction between gift exchange (inalienable objects between interdependent transactors) and commodity exchange (alienable objects between independent transactors), other scholars have broken down these distinctions. They evidence the alienable qualities of gifts (Parry 1986) and the reality that inalienable value need not be restricted to rare or elite activities but can rather constitute part of the everyday consumer experience (Miller 2001). The notion of commodification and alienation existing in opposition to an Aristotlean natural, morally-sound self-sufficiency is problematised by the scholarly refutation of the neat distinction between types of exchange, types of exchange artefacts or the specific institutional role of money in exchange. Still, as Parry and Bloch suggest “It seems to be that *for us* [i.e. developed Western economies] money signifies a sphere of ‘economic’ relationships, which are inherently impersonal, transitory, amoral and calculating” (1989:9). The economic transactions in the independent music marketplace are reasoned to escape this pitfall on the basis of the inherent authenticity of the producers and products purveyed. This authenticity involves a territorialisation of the independent music scene away from

an ideologically antagonised mainstream marketplace. The challenge to this argument is that ideological discourses often obfuscate lived practices. Wilk's edited volume on the 'slow food' phenomenon (2006), and Friedberg's article on ethical food markets (2003) evidence that the desired authenticity of experiences is often compromised by the realities of the inequalities of markets. My ethnography asserts that consumers' knowledge of the marketplace and their assessment of producers qualifies the designation of the independent music marketplace as a proto-market due to a lesser degree of commodification (or 'soft capitalism') having affected the marketplace. This lesser degree of commodification is itself an authentic expression under the aegis of the independent scene. It is assessed as such by consumers who wish to buy into the cachet of authenticity and display savvy musical and cultural taste by choosing to spend their money on its products. Those unable to enact this discretion are deemed to be spoon-fed the 'synthetic' product of the mainstream major labels, spending money in different oppositional contexts and are thus considered outside the scene of independent consumption.

In modernised consumer societies, the spending of money is not a standard, homogenised and homogenising practice. Just as consumption is an active and dialectic process (Miller 1987; Jenkins 1992), the spending of money is a similarly "dynamic, complex social and cultural activity" (Zelizer 1994:200). Rather than acting as a totem of greed, money and commercial success can serve to indicate fair reward for dutiful and noble enterprising. Where money is earned via practices ordained by the consumer audience as creative, or devoid of deception and greedy motives, the transaction of money from consumer to producer is not the disembodiment of the relationship as one of

cultural producer on the one hand and the exploited consumer on the other. “The forms of monetary transfers mark the equality or inequality of the parties just as they mark their degree of intimacy and the durability of their relationship” (Zelizer 1994:210). It is not only money that is *gifted* that might act as a marker of intimacy between transactors. Understanding money semiotically and materially requires an understanding of the value and meaning of other objects that circulate (Keane 2001). In this case there are qualitative and quantitative differences between the mainstream and independent marketplaces in terms of both how money travels and the type of goods in circulation. Digital media and online retail juxtaposes with the retail environment of independent labels’ physical products in physical spaces with a face-to-face transaction. For independent music fans and producers, money circulating in the latter context acts as an expression of this intimacy via the communion achieved around physical music media. They act around a commodified area of cultural and social life which understands money to fit the social relationship between the producer and the consumer. This chimes with a recent paper by Ailsa Craig on the private publication of poetry chapbooks, where “To buy the poetry is to affirm either that one wants to read the poems again, or is to lend support to the efforts of the poet *or poetry in general* through the acknowledgment of purchase” (Craig 2011:59).

By spending money on independent products via independent outlets, consumers and producers alike can collectively sustain the solvency of independent music production. Authentic attributes are only superficially subjected to “metonymic freezing” (Clifford 1997:24) for they are changeable and context driven. Lindholm is correct to argue that “the challenges of modernity also offer avenues for creation of a different kind

of authentic reality” (Lindholm 2002:37), evidenced by the economic rationale of the independent music marketplace. And, if Miller is right to argue that it is "because culture is knowingly forged with a sense of struggle and fragility, a sense that it could be otherwise and a constant fear that it is otherwise, that makes it a modern culture" (Miller 1994:321-3), the independent market becomes a site of struggle to maintain its economic viability, authenticity, and the validity of its cultural capital investments by forging its own legitimising strategies (Strachan 2007) according to which its brand of capitalism becomes acceptable as ‘less commodified’ than other modes of exchange (cf. ‘the proto-market – Toynbee 2000).

In the next chapter I discuss how the physical product and its design act as a fulcrum for commerce and authenticity, the simulacrum and the original, the producer and the consumer. I examine these commodities to show how the materialities of physical music media are utilised in the independent music scene to make manifest independence, taste and authenticity. Music commodities are shown to be constituent, conspicuous markers of these acumen in the independent music marketplace.

Chapter 3

Housing Sound: Design and the Creation of the Commodity

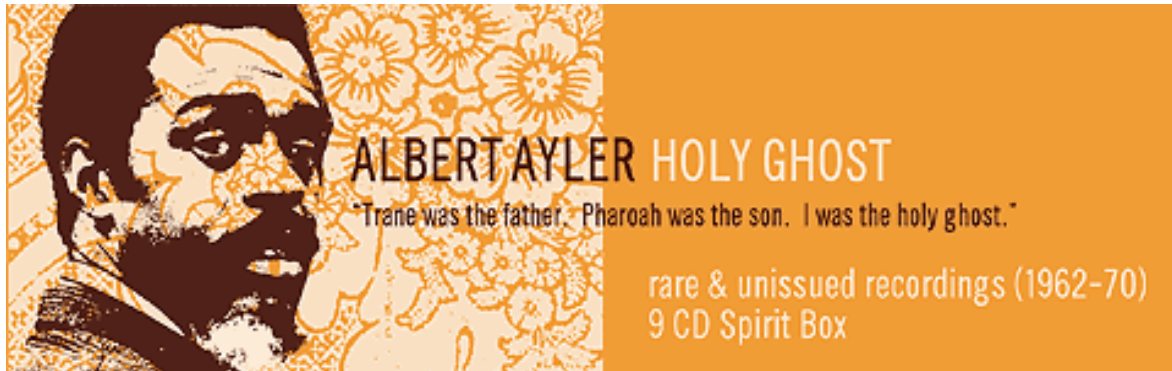


Fig 3.1 Banner⁶⁸ showcasing Revenant Records’ box set *Albert Ayler: Holy Ghost*. The website reads: “Albert Ayler: heard ABOUT more than heard. But that’s all about to change”.

3.1 Introduction

I did want Revenant to be a showcase of music that we were really passionate about, and not just the sound but also the form, the presentation of it was really important, because it seemed a shame to sell the music short by surrounding it with material that didn’t quite match its brilliance... we didn’t always achieve that, but we tried to have it be like an event around the launch of the music to the listener.

Dean Blackwood, Revenant Records

⁶⁸ From <http://www.revenantrecords.com/ayler/> (accessed 13.03.2008)

The previous chapter has situated the independent sector of the music marketplace as constructed relative to the existence of the mainstream sector. The present chapter focuses upon the importance of the physical music products that are produced for this marketplace. Specifically, I focus upon the design of the music packages that ultimately enter circulation as commodities. Their design and exploitation of materials reinforces the independent status identified as being crucial to marketplace presence in the previous chapter. This is a historically-rooted endeavour, which simultaneously pays homage to and plays with previous conventions of packaging and design.

Historically, making music commercially available has involved the production of physical products for the marketplace – shellac and vinyl records, tapes and CDs. Whilst digital formats have altered the historic association between music retail and physical formats, many independent labels specialise in creating physically substantive commodities. As Chapter 2 has shown, the cultivation of independent record labels' identities as opposing the mainstream is an effective strategy, and the distinction of aligning oneself as a producer with physical formats in the face of digital enterprise is another vector for opposition. This chapter shows how this identity is negotiated via the physical products that are produced.

Firstly, I present a brief history of music packaging to show how different music formats have delivered different potentials for packaging and design. This acts to show the lineage from which contemporary music commodities have emerged, and illuminates why physical commodities in the current marketplace take the forms that they do. This leads on to a theoretical overview of design in anthropology, making use of the previously discussed historical overview in order to situate the packaging of music in the

literature. The ethnographic accounts that follow utilise the input of those employed in the independent music market, from label heads to graphic designers, to contextualise why design of physical goods is an important proving-ground for independent label's identities, and how this is effected in the marketplace.

3.2 A brief history of music packaging design



Fig 3.2 A wax cylinder and protective cardboard casing, circa 1904

Early music recordings were made on and reproduced for sale as wax cylinders. Entering the marketplace in the 1880s, these cylinders (10 cm in length and 5.5 cm in

diameter) were sold in protective cardboard tubes that were labelled to display the audio contents of the cylinder (**Fig 3.2**). These labels consisted not merely of descriptive text, but featured graphic designs in full-colour printing. These recordings were, much like the playback machines at the time, expensive consumer luxuries, a fact neatly displayed by the lush graphics employed on these small objects.

The flat shellac 78rpm record was invented by Emile Berliner in 1908 and introduced several cherished features of music design for many subsequent collectors of records in shellac and vinyl formats. The ‘label’ of a flat record⁶⁹ is a printed circular paper label at the record’s centre, in the middle of which lies the spindle-hole through which the spindle on the turntable is placed to ensure the record stays firmly in place during play-back. Typically, these labels prominently display the name and logo of the record label that produced the record. Many record labels have produced distinctive label designs for their record releases, which have subsequently achieved legendary status for consumers ; the pink-rim label for Island Records’ releases; the pre-WWII label Paramount’s eagle design (**Fig 3.3**); Fly Records’ distinct graphic of a housefly; Jamieson (1999:4-6) details the importance of these labels for collectors of Northern Soul 45s. The label on 78rpm records was primarily informative, showing the artist and track title, catalogue number and record label. The condition of these labels on shellac and vinyl releases have subsequently become factored in to the monetary value of records in the second-hand market. They are often featured prominently in CD re-issues of music originally issued on 78rpm records (Revenant Records’ *The Worlds of Charley Patton* 7CD box set features reproductions of every single label of each record included in the set as extractable stickers) or 45rpm vinyl (much classic reggae was released on the

⁶⁹ Such as a 78, or a vinyl record (7”, 10” or 12”).

format, and CD reissues often dedicate several pages of their liner notes to reproductions of the original 45rpm records' labels). The reissue label Yazoo (founded in the 1970s) went as far as to base their label design upon that of the Black Patti label that issued original recordings of African-American music in the 1920s (**Fig 3.4**) to make explicit the label's affinity for 78rpm records.

Another packaging feature for flat records was the record sleeve. For 78rpm records and 7" 45rpm vinyl records, paper sleeves were produced that further extended the amount of space for printed material to accompany releases. Again, these sleeves might prominently feature the label's graphic logo, or adverts for their releases.



Fig 3.3 A Paramount Records release with distinctive label and record sleeve.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_b37s9Nv7Y1Q/Si2BNvLpCfi/AAAAAAAAAKA/i30HWAPd_D4/s1600-h/Paramount-with-paper-sleeve.jpg (accessed 03.12.2010)



Fig 3.4 Comparison to demonstrate how reissue label Yazoo has copied design from the 1920s label Black Patti for its own record labels, re-enforcing the suggestion that such labels are important design features for label identity.

78rpm records were also often packaged in ‘albums’, so named because they resembled photo albums, in which several records could be sold at once, such as a series of discs by the same artist or the entirety of a classical music composition. These releases provided further scope for printed materials, and expanded the size of the music package considerably from single-disc releases. This enabled full-colour printed jackets of thick card to enter the marketplace, which would become the standard packaging for vinyl 10” and 12” records to the present day.

Therefore, consumer relationships with music and record labels’ identities have long been entwined with graphic design and tactile novelty. From cylinders to flat records with labels, sleeves and jackets, music commodities constantly changed form and developed expanded repertoires of materials for their presentation and for communication with audiences. The delivery mechanism itself became augmented with other materials,

such that a record became not just the vinyl or shellac, but entangled with and inseparable from the materials in which it is packaged. In particular, long-play 12” vinyl records have a rich and varied history across genres of design innovations lending releases presence and desirability in the marketplace and consumer consciousness. In LP design, iconic sleeves have not just been innovations with two-dimensional graphics, such as the bold photo manipulation and typography evidenced in the catalogue of jazz label Blue Note (Fig 3.5), an acknowledged paragon for early stylishness in LP design. The designs helped create a distinctive and consistent image for the label across their many releases⁷¹.

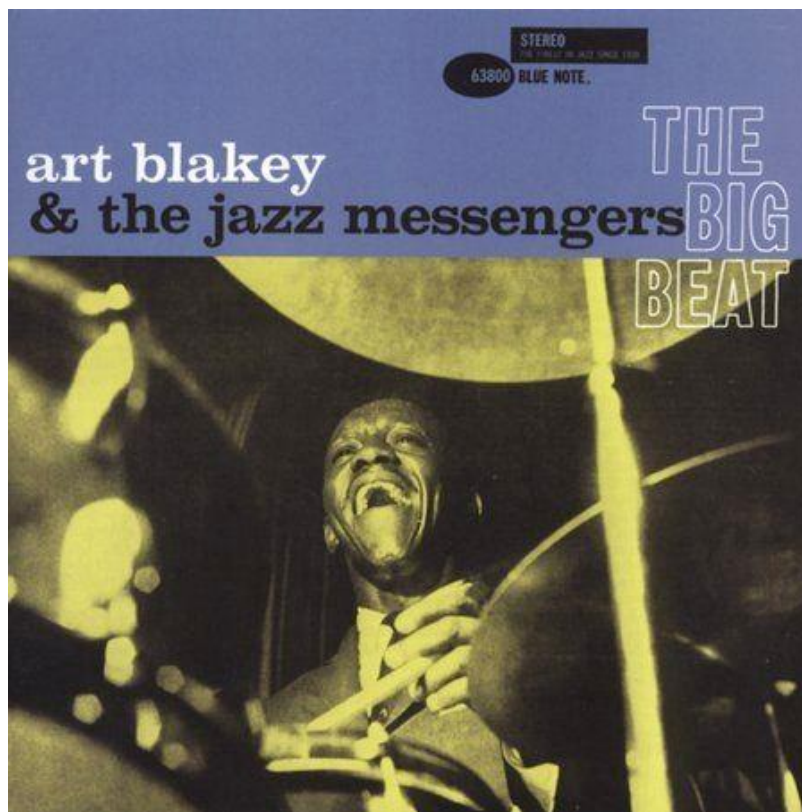


Fig 3.5 An example of Reid Miles’ groundbreaking album design work for Blue Note Records, utilising stylish typography and photo manipulation.

⁷¹ Reid Miles’ designs for Blue Note were lauded for their relationship with stylish, modernist design appearing in furniture, architecture and graphic design in other areas of American life in the 1950s. Marsh and Callingham 2010 provide an excellent overview of Reid Miles’ work.

In addition to innovative two-dimensional designs, three-dimensional remodelling of LP design has lent many albums an iconic status (and commensurately hefty price-tags) in collectors' markets. Examples include pop-artist Andy Warhol's designs for the Rolling Stones' 1972 album *Sticky Fingers* (featuring a real fly-zipper on the cover depiction of Mick Jagger's crotch – **Fig 3.6**), and for the Velvet Underground's 1967 debut *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (the decal of a pop-art style, garishly bright yellow banana is annotated with the instruction 'peel slowly and see' – beneath the sticker famously lurks a curiously phallic pink fruit – **Fig 3.7**). Similarly, inserts including booklets, pullouts such as the Sgt. Pepper fancy-dress kit included in the Beatles 1967 album *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (**Fig 3.8**), coloured or picture-disc vinyl (a classic example being Albert Ayler's 1965 *Bells* album for ESP-Disc' featuring clear vinyl with one playable side, the other bearing silk-screened artwork – **Fig 3.9**), and the violation of many conventions in album presentation such as having few or illegible credits and track-listings all point to the flexibility, the wilful inventiveness in music design that permeated the LP dominated age before the advent of CDs.

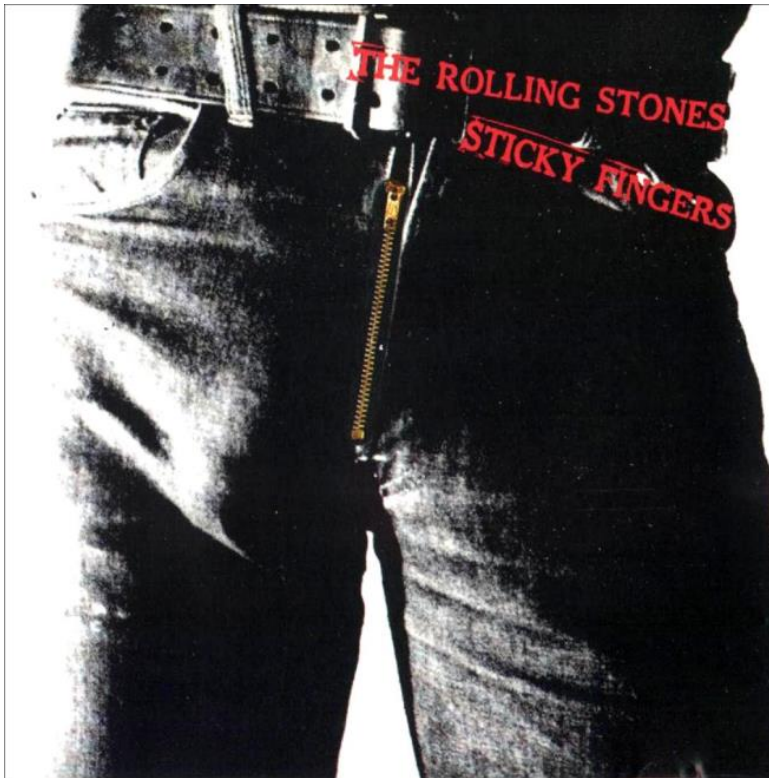


Fig 3.6 The zippered crotch on the cover of The Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* LP

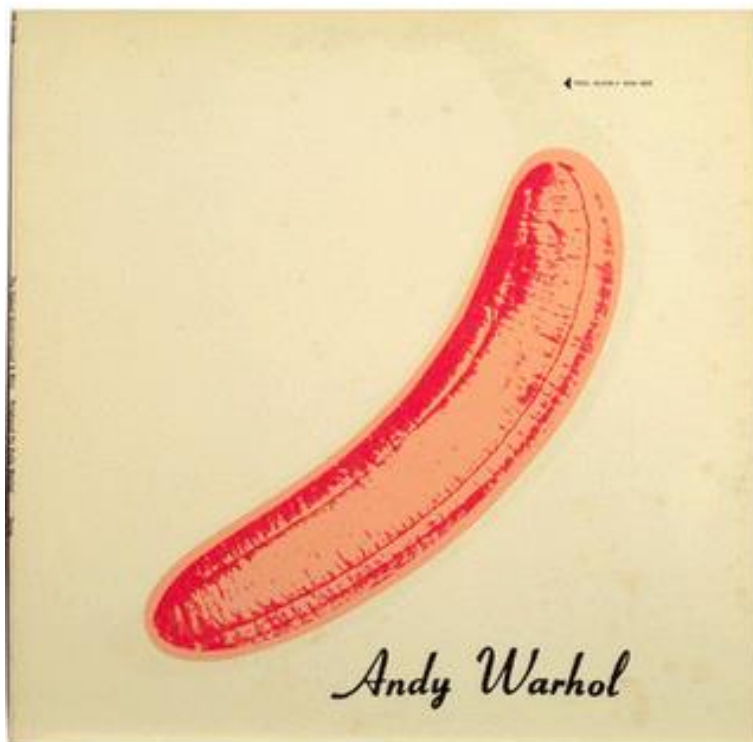


Fig 3.7 Andy Warhol's cover for *The Velvet Underground and Nico* – sans sticker

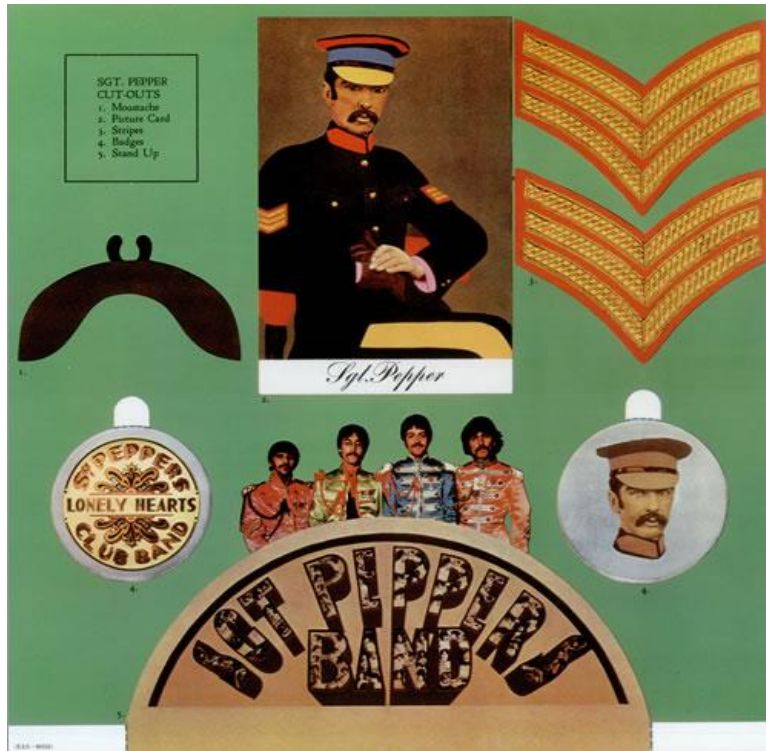


Fig 3.8 The insert included with The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*



Fig 3.9 The silkscreened artwork on ESP-Disc's release of Albert Ayler's *Bells*

This history of design innovations informs the work of designers today, and highlights not only the potential playfulness that can be employed in music packaging but also that consumers relate with these packaging quirks as desirable and meaningful contributions to the value of the music they house. Jeff Hunt, a graphic designer and owner of Table of the Elements Records, noted his admiration for those managing to break the mould with album artwork, “[people who] did so in sort of two-dimensional graphic design, like Blue Note with photography and typography. At the time it was the most hi-tech they could do with the technology that they had access to. It was like Hipgnosis⁷² y’know and all the stuff they did with photo manipulation – back then [photo manipulation] was this insanely labour-intensive thing that you did by hand with scissors and some glue, y’know (laughs)”.

CDs dominated the music marketplace within ten years of their introduction in the 1980s. Early CDs were released in longboxes (**Fig 3.10**) – their dimensions of approximately 12 inches by 5 inches were designed so that record stores would not have to re-install their shelving units to accommodate the new format. Originally square LP artwork fit somewhat clumsily with the new card long box, and many consumers felt the extra dimensions in the packaging of single CDs superfluous. David Byrne of Talking Heads, among others, included stickers over his releases on the longbox package which read "THIS IS GARBAGE" to highlight the wastefulness of longbox design. The longbox was officially phased out of production from April 1st 1993. In their place, plastic ‘jewel’ cases persisted as the standard form of CD packaging (**Fig 3.11**). These are typically made of clear plastic with laminated paper inserts, and hinges to swing the package open

⁷² Hipgnosis was a graphic design company that ran from 1968 to 1983 founded by Storm Thorgerson and Aubrey Powell, and was responsible for such album artwork as The Trees’ *On The Shore*, Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon*, Syd Barrett’s *The Madcap Laughs* and Led Zeppelin’s *Houses of the Holy*.

to reveal the CD and inserts. These design changes were welcomed for being more space-efficient, although they also had their drawbacks. The plastic jewel cases scuffed, scratched and broke easily, and LP artwork – previously on the 12”-square canvas – was routinely shrunk to the 5”-square window of the jewel case, and often poorly reproduced and printed in the process on low-grade paper stock.

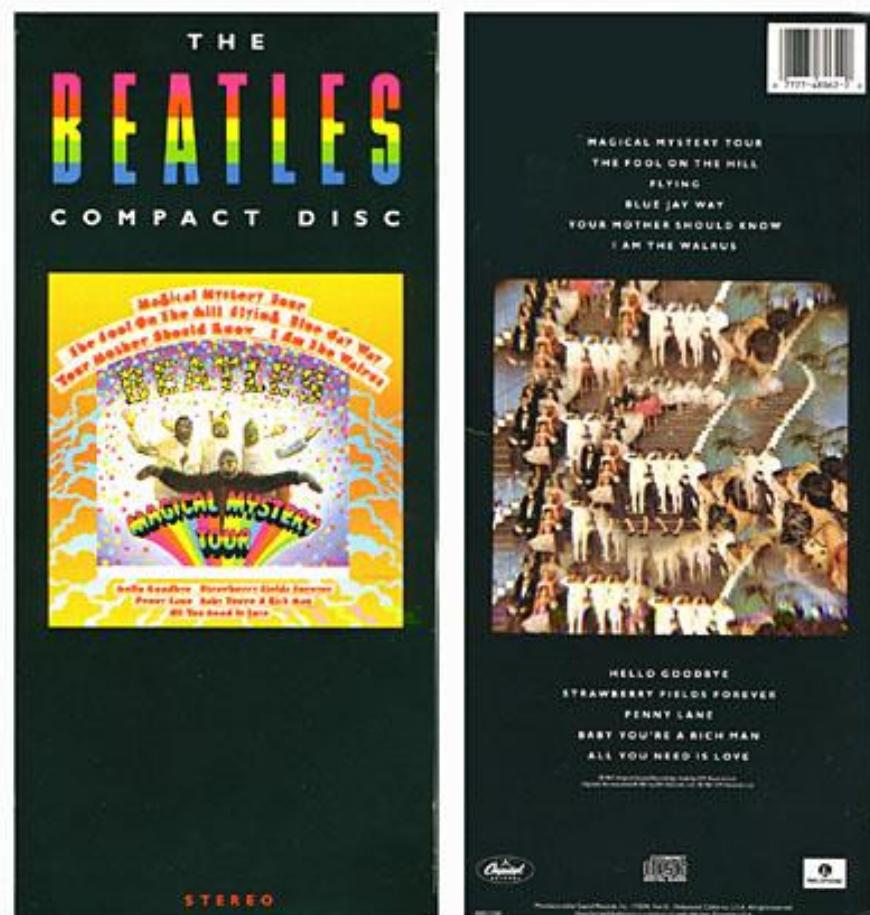


Fig 3.10 An example of early CD longbox design, showing how ill-fitted the format was to displaying original album artwork⁷³

⁷³ <http://www.rarebeatles.com/photospg/mmtjpg/mmtcdusl.jpg> (accessed 15.03.2010)



Fig 3.11 A CD jewel case

It must be noted here that the above history has largely been informed by the perspective of the independent music market and the niche examined in this thesis that esteems physical formats. Therefore, other narratives could be sketched for the history of music commodities' packaging and design. For example, many consumers, with the onset of CDs, disposed of their vinyl records and turntables and turned instead to CDs as their prime form of music consumption without harbouring any of the discontents detailed above (Straw 2000). In the independent marketplace examined in this work, however, subsequent developments in CD design have attempted to redress these issues and re-instate consumer faith in the format, a process of label practice discussed throughout the rest of the present chapter.

The history of music packaging informs current practices of design and production, and has informed consumer demands and desires. The precedents set by the

products of the past are creatively utilised in the present to create commodities that are sold to consumers in the contemporary marketplace. The primacy of the physical product is therefore a key aspect of the market's dynamic, and of the forging of record labels' identity and economic viability. Before discussing the ethnographic research that informs this chapter, I offer a review of design in anthropology with reference to the above history of packaging and music commodities. This examination will lay the framework for the subsequent discussion of product design in the independent music market.

3.3 Design and anthropology

The material-cultural turn of anthropology in the 1980s (exemplified by Appadurai 1986 and Miller 1987 – see Hicks 2010) led to increased interest in consumption practices and the roles of marketplace commodities in people's social and private lives. This increased interest in consumption came at a detriment to interest in processes of production (Ingold 2007:9). The vigour with which researchers turned their attentions to the liberating and creative aspects of contemporary consumption practices would be re-assessed with an emerging literature on technology and design (Lemonnier 1993; Attfield 2000), coinciding with a growing consideration of material culture and how materials themselves are culturally pliable realities that inform the use and reception of goods by their consumers (Weiner 1992; Clarke 1999; Shove *et al* 2007). The inescapability of “the ‘thingness’ of things” (Attfield 2000:34) led scholars to develop a more integrated discourse of commodities and consumer societies. Processes of production were thereby accorded due importance in the formation of consumer cultures,

and the goods in the marketplace were themselves scrutinised as much as the social relationships and realities they informed. The historicisation of ‘the consumer’ (Carrier 1995; Trentmann 2006b, 2007) and the goods they consume has enabled a potentially more dynamic field of scholarship which realises that histories of consumer goods charge certain materials and modes of production with culturally specific semiotic and performative potentials. It is for this reason that I focus in this chapter upon the design of physically substantive consumer goods for the independent music market as a fulcrum for creating value and status in the marketplace. The creation of these goods both informs and is informed by consumers’ concepts of the value of materials and processes of production and consumption.

Attfield suggests that *design*, whilst implicated in the substantiation of every human-created or modified artefact, is an activity that is conventionally set apart from the everyday. Everyday things are contextually opposed with more explicitly designed things, conspicuous for their design, which she refers to as “things with attitude” (Attfield 2000:11-44). ‘Design’ therefore becomes a practice accorded a hierarchical status above the mundane world of the everyday and the objects that constitute that world. Design as such is felt and observed apart from the everyday in designed objects that announce their desirability and improved function conspicuously apart from the everyday. Design is reified as a professional activity, where communities of professionals control the judgement of ‘good’ design “along the conventions of modernist ideals of ‘form follows function’” (*ibid.*:11). Attfield proposes a re-thinking of conventional design studies approaches, wherein ‘good’ design can be judged according to the final product’s ability to affect the world, whether that is in order to “fulfil a particular task, to make a statement,

to objectify moral values, or to express individual or group identity, to denote status or demonstrate technological prowess, to exercise social control or to flaunt political power” (*ibid.*:2000:12). Design is therefore not just about creating objects for a utilitarian function. Creating commodities for a consumer group involves a knowledge of that group’s preferences for materials and design aesthetics, which can be played upon to create products that go beyond mere function (such as protecting music media from damage and stating their contents). Design also informs distinctions between different types of goods and users of goods, as well as different creators of artefacts.

Shove *et al* (2007) question whether or not there exists a co-evolution between materials and practices. They interest themselves with the problem of whether new technologies are assimilated into, and thus stabilised by, pre-existing practices and concepts, or whether they serve to rupture and redefine these notions of everyday practices (2007:8). Particularly they take issue with processes and concepts of design, where they note that “[i]ronically, designers’ efforts to understand the user have been framed in such a way that they obscure the crucial point that rather than simply meeting needs, artefacts are actively implicated in creating new practices and with them new patterns of demand” (Shove *et al* 2007:10). Miller’s pioneering work on consumption, materiality and capitalism (1987) explicitly stated the power of everyday artefacts to situate experiences, which is built upon by such theory.

In the field of design studies, there have been increasing attempts to place the user at the centre of discourses of design and the usage of ‘designed’ objects (Overboeke *et al* 2002). Users of commodities refigure them to their own contexts – to echo Shove *et al* these reconfigurations can either assimilate new designs into existing practices or forge

new syntheses in practice. In the world of music technologies, these syntheses have been made apparent by scholarly work on portable cassette players (Bull 2000, 2002), portable MP3 players (De Nora 2000; Bergh and De Nora 2009; DeNicola 2010), MIDI-based music-making communities (Théberge 1997:131-54; Lysloff 2003), CDs and CD-copying software (Condry 2004), and Internet-based sharing of MP3s (Leyshon 2003; Geisler and Pohlmann 2003b; Sterne 2006). Through their design and physicality, these technologies facilitate new modes of behaviour, new ways for interacting with music as a private individual and a social being, and engender new expectations amongst consumers. They can also alienate consumers and reinforce their own technologically-rooted practices by positing those in opposition to the other practice-changing technologies in the marketplace⁷⁴. These forge different communities who require different field-specific skills to navigate their specific technologies, skills which are often non-transferable to other communities (cf. Bourdieu 1990) and technologies. Music technologies serve to act according to both assumptions posed in Shove *et al's* questioning. New designs for music technologies and media formats not only change practices among some consumer groups, but also reinforce or subordinate other groups' pre-existing modes of practice.

The design of physical music commodities implicates notions of materiality and materials. As Ingold strives to understand the study of materials (2007), the specific properties and agencies of different materials (plastic, wood, vinyl, shellac etc.) affects their usage and the semiotic properties with which they can be bestowed. This is inherent to the difference between shellac 78s, vinyl records and CDs, as well as to different modes of packaging them. Changing materials are intrinsic differentiators between

⁷⁴ Other anthropological examples where incumbent technologies persist despite new forms emerging include Guille-Escuret (1993) and Ingold (1993).

different sound-reproduction technologies. Furthermore, different materials used for housing these delivery mechanisms cause differentiations to be drawn between goods. For example, as the jewel case has become *de rigour* for packaging CDs, using materials other than plastics for packaging CDs is strategy for setting those CDs apart from the majority of products available. “The many concepts of performance of which a material is composed – and to which it contributes – are relative, provisional and inherently precarious. This is in part because novel substances forge and fracture relationships between existing materials, and in doing so disrupt the taxonomies and the symbolic and practical repertoires which define and constitute the wider ‘culture’ of materials” (Shove *et al* 2007:104). Even with commonly used substances, these materials are not “static entities with diagnostic attributes”, but have historically-constructed usages that change with time as their potentials are uncovered (Ingold 2012:434).

With sound-reproducing technologies, the very fact that 12” and 7” records are commonly referred to as ‘vinyl’ is itself a statement of the importance of materials to the envisaging of the technology. These media are implicated in a dialogue of value and semiotics in part directly affected by their constituent materials. The materials are directly involved in their sound quality, tactile qualities, and ultimately notions of value ascribed to portability, durability and so forth. As the history of packaging design makes clear, each of these formats is associated with certain auxiliary elements of packaging and design, from large record jackets and labels to CD trays and electronic gadgets. Design clearly enables these commodities to play towards different consumers according to how they present and use materials to either conform with or disrupt the material “taxonomies” Shove *et al* propose above.

Attfield's challenge to orthodoxies in the study of design is to examine design as practiced, within its wider social and cultural implications and contexts, rather than just as a professional discipline. Design is therefore observed "as a particular type of practice objectifying sociality rather than reduced to a particular type of artefact in a recognisable style" (Attfield 2000:32). Through an examination of the design and materiality of music commodities' packaging, this chapter proves further how these designs are responses to and implicated within wider social and cultural discourses.

With the persistent assumption that the CD is on a gradual slide into obsolescence as a commodity for selling music⁷⁵, the role of the MP3 as a carrier mechanism for music and as an effective and desirable interface between consumers and producers deserves consideration. The MP3 throws down the gauntlet to the CD, for CDs – previously marketed for their convenience compared with the LP – have been trumped as the most portable, space-saving format for consumers and the cheapest delivery mechanism for producers. CDs seriously wounded the vinyl marketplace in the mainstream (the potential eradication of vinyl in the marketplace by CDs was contemplated by Laing 1992) as well as the market for cassettes, although these formats have consistently held audiences and the attentions of producers in the independent music sector. MP3s have hurt CD sales partly because CDs are now stuck uncomfortably as the format in the middle of the spectrum. They do not have the same dedicated audience as LPs, and the shift towards computer-based gadgets for MP3-

⁷⁵ Data from Nielsen Soundscan and Billboard show that CD album sales in the USA declined by 13.5% from 2011-12 to 193m units. Over the same period, digital album sales increased by 14.1% to 118m units and vinyl by 17.7% to 4.6m units. So, whilst CDs still account for the largest share of sales over this period, their decline relative to the ascendancy of digital units sold has promulgated the belief that they are already obsolete among many consumers, even though the facts contradict this assessment of their redundant commercial viability. (<http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20130104005149/en/Nielsen-Company-Billboard%E2%80%99s-2012-Music-Industry-Report> – accessed 03.09.2013).

playback have made them, and the portable CD player, appear cumbersome and outdated. Considered neither the ultimate in luxury nor the ultimate in convenience, the CD has been hurt by these changes in the marketplace. Matt Sullivan of Portland's Light in the Attic Records echoes these sentiments – releasing music on CD requires a fight against the tide of apathy or hostility towards the format, and a re-imagining its role in the marketplace:

We do our best to put some energy back into them [CDs], but I definitely think it's a dying format... we put a lot of effort into making CDs worth it for the people who do care about them today, y'know – foil stamping on the digipaks⁷⁶, or if it's an old folk record have some kinda grainy matt paper, or if it's something more glossy – some 70s funk music maybe – make it more heavier gloss stock, or it comes with a full CD booklet of y'know 30 pages with tons of photos, pictures and liner notes... a lot of people aren't thinking whether to get the CD or the vinyl. It's more “am I gonna buy the CD or download this for free?”... so for us it's giving them something extra.

Revenant Records' Dean Blackwood certainly represents more hostile or distrustful attitude to the CD compared with many of his contemporaries. Some of these, such as Susan Archie of anARCHIE who designed many of the Revenant releases as well as many other CDs projects, see the CD as a liberating format for designers. By working with a small format, the possibility of creating large 'grand' designs for releases is more practicable than with LPs both economically and in terms of design potential. Jeff Hunt of Table of the Elements⁷⁷ takes a similar view, that CDs hold more interesting design

⁷⁶ Digipaks are card-crafted CD cases reminiscent of the jewel case design but without the plastic casing. The liability of the latter to cracking and scuffing is often a source of grievance among consumers.

⁷⁷ Jeff Hunt has also worked as an artistic director for several other labels on specific releases. The projects

potential for producers because of the smaller scale of the music-carrying object. With Revenant, Blackwood felt that it was necessary to “throw everything and the kitchen sink” at the CD in order to help it overcome its limitations as a format and the apathy that many consumers felt towards them (especially when spending large sums on box sets of CDs), although the prime gripes he has with the format raised far deeper concerns for his ambitions with the label:

I certainly did question how wedded our mission was in each of the projects to the CD as a format, I just felt very uncomfortable with that. When you look at a great first edition hardcover book that was printed in 1870, there’s nothing that makes it somehow obsolete technologically, other than the fact it’s sat on the shelf for some time, it still has words in it that you can read.

For Blackwood, whilst the delivery mechanism for music remains the same small digital disc, the packaging around it seeks to elevate the medium above and beyond its limitations and negative stigma. The role of packaging therefore becomes not just a functional casing (as was the case with the jewel case), but an expressive act in itself, where booklets, printed paraphernalia and other tactile additions to the package are intimate extensions of the music as commodity form. Rupturing the perceived orthodox taxonomy of materials with which to design music commodities could create, in Attfield’s sense, “things with attitude” (2000) for the marketplace.

he has worked on are detailed in an e-book entitled *Soundgazing: 15 Years of Aural Graphics by Jeff Hunt* he created in collaboration with photographer Bradley Brown (Dollar, Hunt and Brown 2009).

3.4 The implications of ‘bad’ design

Behind the objects that circulate in the consumer world is a circulation of skills and craftsmanship that often utilises the same people in many different circumstances. Often, the same distributors are used to help gain wide circulation for music commodities by many varied labels and artists (such as Forced Exposure). Sound engineers, audio restorers and studios are also found to shuffle around multiple projects for various labels (evidenced in my research and by the example of Austin recording engineer Stuart Sullivan in Shank 1994:176-81). The same is true for the field of design, where several designers have come to the forefront of the field and their services have become highly prized and in-demand.

To highlight the importance of good design in the marketplace, it must be noted how functionally ineffective or aesthetically unsympathetic design hampers the desirability of physical products. Fan reactions to poorly-crafted products can be passionately infuriated, exhibiting grievances at the disrespect that poorly-produced products display towards consumers and the artists presented in the products’ contents. Sony-owned label Legacy released the complete recordings that jazz trumpet legend Miles Davis made for the label exclusively through Amazon websites to much critical and media fanfare on November 23rd 2009. The collection contains 53 albums spread across 71 CDs housed in a custom longbox, with each CD encased in a card replica of the original LP sleeve (**Fig 3.12**). Such a wealth of music and packaging commanded a similarly large investment for anyone wishing to own the set – at \$364 (approximately £230) the set was obviously aimed at a collector market, sating the completist and at the

same time offering the music in a new context from any previous incarnations. Fans were quick to vocalise their grievances with the set, where the ‘sloppily’ produced card sleeves left glue marks on the CDs (rendering them unplayable) and the longbox provoked heated criticism:

A fair number of discs show what appear to be residual glue marks from what I assume to be from the glue that's used to construct the replica cardboard sleeves that house the discs... As a consequence, I've arranged to return the set back to Amazon for a refund. What should of [sic] been the reissue of the year has been spoiled by the poor construction of the replica sleeves packaging. I'm terribly disappointed.

About 25 of the discs arrived with scratches range for pin-head size [sic] to 1.5 cm long and deep enough to cause skipping. The scratches where [sic] all in the same general location about 2 cm from the outer edge of the disc.

About a third of the albums have glue on the discs and about 20 of the albums have covers that are falling apart. This was supposed to have been fixed. Amazon are still sending out a shockingly put together product. They should be ashamed of themselves. Why treat their customers so badly?

Excerpts from reviews on the Amazon.co.uk website⁷⁸

⁷⁸http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/B002EOF7U8/ref=cm_cr_dp_synop?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending#R1N3ENYGM05NNU accessed 15.01.2010



Fig 3.12 Amazon's limited edition box set of Miles Davis' complete Columbia Records catalogue, which has come under fire from fans for poor design and faulty packaging

Poor execution and problems with designs are likely to be greeted with similarly heated criticism as the Miles Davis box set above. The internet has opened up new avenues for consumers to share opinions on releases, to praise them or voice their discontent. Blog posts and online reviews sometimes recommend people download releases rather than spend their money on the physical package, and such words are often not taken lightly by their readers. As Chapters 4 and 5 show, the same holds true for information gathered face-to-face in both the record store and when socialising with friends.

For independent record labels, the labour-of-love involved in organising and realising projects is a passionate, almost obsessive process. As many professed in the

previous chapter, they consider their vocation to be an extension of their fandom. Failure in a project is not just measured in terms of sales, but it is taken very personally by producers – they are in the business of music production because they love the music and want to create packages *they* would wish to buy too. Dean Blackwood’s assertion that Revenant’s releases be a “monument in sound” to the artists featured on their releases is a testament to the very personal nature of independent record production. I now examine how these desires are enacted and designed, and how producers attempt to create objects that are desirable to consumers.

3.5 “Monuments in sound”: Designing desire

Independent record labels catering for non-mainstream audiences often play upon the love that many consumers have for serialisation and collectability. Creating such a line of products encourages consumers to seek fulfilment by completing these series and create profitable lines of products with devoted audiences. This can be done in obvious or more subtle ways. Releases such as the 27-volume *Ethiopiquest* series of Ethiopian pop music (released by Parisian label Buda Musique) play on the same theme throughout their many releases, and the numbering of individual releases as sequential volumes makes it apparent to people purchasing this music that there exist kindred releases of the same material in the marketplace. Less obvious aspects of collectability can be found, for example, in the releases of labels such as Table of the Elements. Eschewing the convention of catalogue numbers for releases in their catalogue, the label releases CDs and LPs which are identified by a chemical element’s sign present on the

sleeve and CD, going through the periodic table sequentially from lightest to heaviest elements. Jeff Hunt explained the rationale behind this as follows:

Record collectors love gimmicks and they love series and they love limited edition things and they love to sort of fetishise, and the idea behind Table of the Elements was that each release would be a sign, instead of a catalogue number it'd be an element and we'd go through them sequentially. And when we were done with elements – we went through the periodic table – that was it.

Other labels or series become favoured collector items at least partly through other aspects of their design sensibility, from the foil-stamping and metallic inks of the bulk of the Revenant catalogue, or the iconic orange and black spines on records in the Impulse! catalogue. One collector who participated in my research kept his collections of magazines and books about music alongside his LPs and CDs. One particular book that drew comment from Daniel (a mid-40s freelance journalist who lives in Austin with his wife and two young sons) was a book about the Impulse! record label (Kahn 2006). Impulse! Records, which operated in the 1960s and early 1970s, were notable not just for the pioneering jazz, soul and blues music that they issued, but also for their packaging aesthetic. The records were presented in thick cardboard gatefold sleeves with copious documentation of the sessions and liner notes by noted contemporary jazz writers. It is perhaps the thick spines of the records that have achieved the most iconic status amongst music fans – the bottom half of the spine is black, the top half orange, enabling the spines to stand out prominently amongst other records, making the Impulse! brand easily identifiable. Kahn's book mirrors the design of an Impulse record in its choice of spine

(as shown in **Fig 3.13**).



Fig.3.13 Comparison of Kahn’s *The House That Trane Built* and a spine from an Impulse! Records Release

Daniel told me how much he likes the Impulse! Records’ spines, for “you can spot them from a mile off, [it] gets you excited before you even get down to the music, investigating what it is”. Daniel was quick to praise the book and its visual aesthetic. This example highlights that the aesthetics of music collecting and appreciation go beyond the music itself and into the material culture pertaining to it. One of the most recurring fascinations among collectors in my research is with record labels. It should firstly be

noted that a trusted record label was one that not only issued quality music (complemented by high fidelity recordings with sympathetic mastering jobs), or made high quality pressings of their vinyl or CDs. Trusted and desirable labels were also responsible for creating an aura about them that is conveyed through the packaging. In the annals of jazz history, Impulse! would safely rank as a great label for issuing iconic, musically and historically important releases by the likes of John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, Ray Charles, Archie Shepp and Oliver Nelson. The packaging aesthetics have taken on a life in tandem with the music. As Kahn's book explains, the orange and black spines are evocative to listeners of a similar radicalism and assertion of black identity as the strident caterwauling sounds of the 'New Thing' in free jazz with which the label became synonymous. Common design elements are able to relate these different commodities to each other by stating their contingent origin of production, and relating them with producers of repute. Consumers utilise a field-specific knowledge of signs and appropriate decoding of texts in order to facilitate this ordering of commodities, enabling different commodities by the same producer to become linked to their identity and reputation according to consistencies in design aesthetics.

Other ways of separating music products from others in the marketplace is by creating mixed-media releases, such as the many examples that ally music with printed materials. From Dean Blackwood's perspective, his label "In some ways... tried to exercise some frustrated love of books and unite it with music". This analogy between physical music media and books is intriguing in that it is shared by several of my research participants. Both consumers and producers alike related the experience of physical music media to that of books. It could be stipulated that this connection is part of a

material bias or a hierarchy of materiality amongst this consumer group, in that people who purchase physical music commodities are also likely to buy physical books rather than use portable electronic reading devices. The dictates of the mainstream marketplace are eschewed in much the same way as consumers who feel an ideological opposition to hegemonic capitalism seek alternative marketplaces to procure goods. The relationship between these different categories of commodities is forged by their materiality and historical depth relative to the emergent digital/computerised interfaces against which they are contrasted in the marketplace⁷⁹.

Lance Ledbetter – head of Atlanta-based label Dust-to-Digital – succinctly distilled his idea of the connection between physical music media and books when I asked him about the way he tries to connect different media together in a single package:

To me, CDs are taking a hit right now, because they used to be marketed for convenience. Now everyone's saying an i-Pod is more convenient than a box of CDs... but I think CDs still sound good, and what it allows for versus an LP or an MP3 [is that] it allows for a different style of packaging than LPs do or MP3s do. Y'know, I love books, I've always loved books, the shape, the size and all that, and CDs fit much better in books than LPs do. An MP3 is virtual... with a physical object, you've got to make a decision, am I going to archive this, am I going to get rid of this... MP3s are much more disposable and much more transient than CDs are.

The products Lance produces are designed with their permanence in mind – their physicality is manifested in a way that he hopes will make them less “disposable”

⁷⁹ Further comparisons were drawn by participants in this research between independent record stores and independent book-stores. These are detailed in Chapter 4, where the second-hand aesthetic (Crewe *et al* 2003) and creation of retail spaces compatible with the field-specific capital and knowledges in the independent record store are shown to echo that of independent book retail (see Wright 2005 for more on these facets of book retail).

than other commodity forms. Their claim to longevity will enhance their value as material objects in a way that is implicitly related to the materials from which they are made (cf. Munn 1986; Weiner 1994; Ingold 2005).



Fig 3.14 *Victrola Favourites: Artefacts from a Bygone Era, Dust-to-Digital*

Lance took the book/physical music-media relationship to an extreme in one particular Dust-to-Digital set entitled *Victrola Favourites: Artefacts from a Bygone Era* (Fig 3.14). This 2CD set of world music 78s from the collections of Rob Millis and Jeffrey Taylor of the experimental band Climax Golden Twins houses the discs in a cloth-bound hardback book, and in a sense the book is more the focus of the project than the music. Very little annotation is provided concerning the music and the book instead places a heavy pictorial emphasis on the paraphernalia of 78rpm record collecting – sleeves, adverts, needles, victrolas and record labels.

Different releases engender their own challenges and offer new opportunities for creating unique items. Whilst Lance feels his gospel-music box set *Goodbye Babylon* “focuses on scholarship”, *Victrola Favourites* is “heavy on imagery and light on scholarship, it’s more of a boutique item focusing on record ephemera”. Whilst these two releases are “pretty geometrically opposed” in terms of presentation, this is what he feels adds to their appeal and expands the oeuvre of the label. *Victrola Favourites*, by concentrating on the collecting process and the materials that surround the pursuit of 78rpm records, offers a new way for contextualising the music on offer on the CDs by departing from the formula of “miles of liner notes”. Lance admits that the project would have been very different had this visual emphasis and the hardback book format not been utilised. The different perspectives Lance attributes to his label’s different releases regarding their presentation evidences his efforts to make a varied catalogue – not only in terms of the music issued, but also in the physical nature of the commodity. Lance believes this eclecticism in both design and music keeps his label’s audience consuming his goods, anticipating new perspectives on CD design and new platforms from which to

experience music. That Dust-to-Digital has continued producing books about musicians as part of its catalogue is instructive of this observation.

Why the CD should be packaged in such out-of-context ways therefore seems to do with overcoming the stigma felt by many against its properties as a platform from which to experience music. The CD itself, in Dean Blackwood's perspective, can never be such an aura-filled object or an important cultural artefact. He describes the CD solely as a "delivery mechanism" which lacks some crucial authenticity in comparison with the analogue formats that preceded it. The lavish production values on many Revenant releases are for Dean an attempt not only to compliment the music with descriptive notes, information and relevant pictures to create a mini-museum about the music, but also to overcome the CD's deficiencies as a music format. This idealised view of one format over the other is not universal in the independent music market, but it is nonetheless widely shared. Blackwood's project was not to "exalt the CD in any way", but to overcome it. The nagging concern for him is the imminent obsolescence of the format into which so much of his time and effort has been invested with the company:

...obviously [CDs are] the mechanism, the repository for the music being delivered, but I'm uncomfortable with the idea of these elaborate packages sitting on the shelf and having these formats that are obsolete. It's one thing to be obsolete and retain your power to engage with people who are so inclined, like the 78 – it's got a physical quality to it, it's got so many different ways that it's a wonderful object – it's weighty, it's hefty, it's got this tactile quality, a heavy weighty tactile quality, there's things etched into it. Even the process of etching the music into its grooves is a physical one, they've got these great labels... so many things that make it something that you engage with it physically,... no-one is particularly attached to the CD, it just happens to be the format that caught on, so I

always did have a little discomfort about that.

Dean's sentiments are echoed by many consumers who find CDs to contrast with LPs as ephemeral items that lack durability and have less auratic power. That said, for producers working with the CD medium the changing marketplace is a fertile ground for innovation in how people interact with music, and an artistic challenge with the potential to reap critical and economic benefits through novel enterprises. Grammy-winning graphic designer Susan Archie's work at her anARCHIE company is primarily concerned with CD-based projects, and for the possibilities of packaging the CD for consumers is a stimulating and exciting challenge:

I think you can make a CD do anything you want it to do – I mean a jewel case kinda gets a little tight, but we've done so many other things aside from jewel boxes and we've done some pretty stunning jewel cases. It's art. It's like art versus entertainment. We wanna do something new instead of just repeating what works for the industry at large.

Such design aspects as the insertion of raw cotton in Dust-to-Digital's *Goodbye Babylon* box set (**Fig 3.15**) and the dried dogwood flower in Revenant's *Holy Ghost* (**Fig 3.16**) are touches which charge the packages with curious emotional resonances for consumers and certainly represent a departure from "what works for the industry at large". In part, this is pure novelty, an element of surprise catching consumers off-guard. Some research participants (who opted for anonymity with their comments) felt that these aspects of product design were detracting from the value of the commodity, that the designs were overblown and might create objects for fetishistic veneration that

complicates the process of unpacking music and detaching it from romanticisation.



Fig 3.15 *Goodbye Babylon*, Dust-to-Digital 2003

However, the aforementioned packaging features have been included in two sets on which Susan worked with the aim of creating a more enduring bond between commodity and consumer, to elicit a response to CD packaging that many feel is simply not attainable with CDs. To keep the sets cost-efficient, Dust-to-Digital founder Lance Ledbetter took a trip to Gay, Georgia, to buy a bale of cotton for the *Goodbye Babylon* sets produced (Lance and his wife April still operate a stock room in their basement, packing the raw cotton and CDs into the wooden boxes for *Goodbye Babylon*, and send the mail orders out themselves), and the dogwood flowers were sourced from a pot-purée factory in Alabama (according to Susan, the plastic sleeves that house the flowers cost

more than the flowers themselves). These elements suggest hand-crafting rather than industrialised production, and as such ally with observations from the study of tourist's souvenirs (McGuckin 1997 and O'Neill 1999 detail the reception of Tibeto-Nepalese carpets as being predicated on their 'traditional' methods of production) and fair-trade commodities (Freidberg 2003 examines the fetishisation of ethical standards in British consumption of food imports). Awareness of the mode of production of commodities is important to how consumers receive them and legitimate their consumption. Design elements that confuse the notion of the product being industrially produced endear the product to those who value commodities that are authentic by virtue of their distinction apart from mass-produced commodities. Flowers and cotton upset the material hierarchy of physical music media as they are not considered commonplace materials – their insertion in these releases demands new practices of relating to music commodities (Shove *et al* 2007).

To further detail one of these box sets, Revenant's *Holy Ghost: Rare and Unissued Recordings 1962-1970* celebrates the late free-jazz musician Albert Ayler. Ayler was an innovative free-jazz saxophonist in the 1960s, influencing many musicians but also earning consternation from critics who deemed his music to be 'anti-jazz'. His themes were simple, folk-like or marching-band melodies, played with a massive pathos-filled saxophone sound, and he pioneered many abstract and *avant-garde* approaches to playing the saxophone. Never a commercial star in his lifetime, Ayler presumably committed suicide overwhelmed by a sense of personal and artistic failure, his body found floating near the Statue of Liberty in November 1970.

Revenant's Albert Ayler box set contains hours of rough, sonically turgid

recordings made by audience members at concerts – the tapes distort, overload with sound, bathe the music in hiss, render some instruments inaudible and make the already daunting task of listening to free-jazz even more unsettling. It may come as a surprise therefore that these recordings were lauded by press and public alike, with many reviews commenting on the candid nature of these fleeting glimpses at a life in music. Accompanying this music is the box itself, and the other materials contained therein, which were mentioned favourably in many reviews of the set. The list below details the contents and design of the Albert Ayler box set *Holy Ghost: Rare and Unissued Recordings*, released by Revenant in October 2004 (RVN 213):

- A black dye-cast of an original wooden hand-carved spirit box houses the set's contents
- Eight CDs of music and two CDs worth of interviews, each housed in individual coloured and florally patterned paper slips, except for one CD which is in a cardboard slip. The exterior of this slip replicates the original tape box that the music it contains has been stored in since it was recorded in September 1960 (Ayler's earliest extant recordings)
- A 208 page hardback book, containing essays by Ayler's sidemen, associates and jazz/African-American scholars including Val Wilmer and Amiri Baraka (né Leroi Jones). The book contains a large number of photos, several of which have never before been published, including some from Ayler's father's own collection. One section provides extensive information on the recordings and biographies of all of the musicians who play with Ayler on the recordings in the box set. A section of

eyewitness accounts of Ayler's performances and personal encounters is followed finally by a sixteen page appendix (entitled 'Sightings') which lists every known performance and studio session of Ayler's career in chronological order

- A facsimile of a booklet authored by Paul Haines that accompanied the early copies of Ayler's infamous and highly-regarded 1964 album *Spiritual Unity*, in the same dimensions as the original booklet
- A reprint of a 1969 copy of Amiri Baraka's journal *The Cricket*, which contains a review of Ayler's *New Grass* album, and a letter from Ayler entitled *To Mr. Jones – I Had A Vision*
- A copy of a flier advertising the Albert Ayler Quintet's September 1965 residency at a club called *Slugs* in New York City, where some of the set's musical content was recorded
- A reproduced photo of Albert as a 12 year old boy, playing an alto saxophone
- A copy of a note written by Albert Ayler to Paul Karting on Swedish hotel stationary in spring 1964
- A dried, pressed dogwood flower

In order to get to the CDs, the other paraphernalia included in the set have to be removed, and some fans have commented that this makes the process of getting to the music like opening a scrap book, a collection of items that have been stowed away for years and kept in pristine condition.

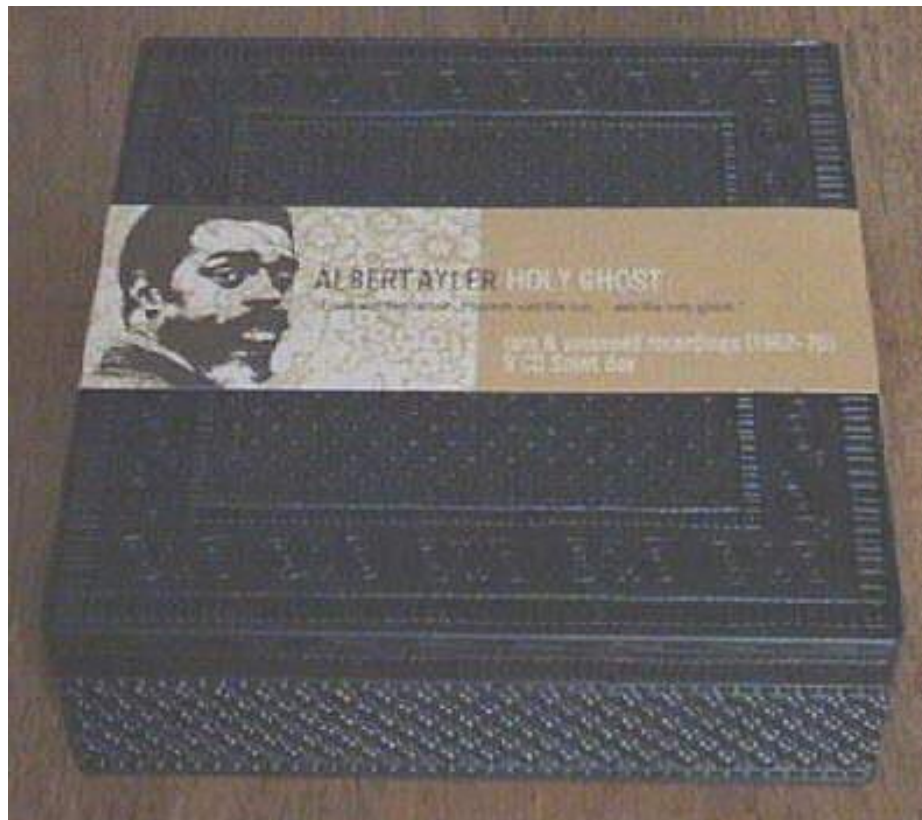


Fig 3.16 Revenant Records' 2004 box set *Albert Ayler: Rare and Unissued Recordings 1962-1970*

The dogwood flower (**Fig 3.17**) is especially intriguing for it gives the impression, more than any other item in the box set, that this set is not meant to be viewed as a *product*, but rather as an *homage*, with the flower representing something about the fervent admiration and respect for Ayler required to create this labour of love, this ‘monument in sound’ to his memory. The rest of the product is factory-produced, but the flower is a singular and singularising presence (cf. Kopytoff 1986). The significance of the flower is illuminated by the blurb that accompanies Revenant’s website promoting the box set:

Holy Ghost is the first comprehensive attempt to build a monument in sound to Albert Ayler. The settings -- radio and TV sessions, studio demos, private recordings, live concert footage -- find his music at its most liberated. And with the sponsorship and assistance of Ayler's family, friends, and colleagues, Holy Ghost documents his never-before-heard first and last recordings, bookending rare and unissued music from every stage of his career.

Albert Ayler: heard ABOUT more than heard. But that's all about to change.⁸⁰

These unorthodox design elements, as Susan Archie explained to me, are aimed at emboldening the relationship between consumers and CD commodities:

[The dogwood flower] is very personal, it’s very unexpected, it’s moving. Like the cotton [**Fig 3.15**], people were stunned that the box actually had cotton in it. The thing about Revenant and Dust-to-Digital, it’s more like a memory box, it’s more like a museum than just the music. It’s about more than just the music. These things just go beyond... I’ve seen other boxes where

⁸⁰ <http://www.revenantrecords.com/ayler/> (accessed 05.05.2008)

they'll put like stickers or whatever – have you seen the Patton box [Figs. 2.2, 2.6]?... [Dean Blackwood] sorta started the trend by putting the paperback book in it and the stickers, y'know, why do we need a record label sticker? What's up with that? Same with the posters, they're all nice touches, but I don't think anyone pulled those posters out or stuck the stickers anywhere, but that was kind of the beginning of it. And then I think the flower and the cotton go beyond that. The Fonotone box I did for Dust-to-Digital [Fig 3.18], we put like actual postcard set and a bottle-opener! It's these unexpected things that just take it up a level.



Fig 3.17 Inserts from Revenant's Albert Ayler box set, with dried dogwood flower



Fig 3.18 Dust to Digital's Fonotone box set – housed in a cigar box, complete with bottle opener

Whilst the history of music packaging has largely involved auxiliary packaging elements such as inserts and booklets, these designs are attempts to expand what constitutes music packaging beyond such established conventions. The music commodities of labels such as Dust-to-Digital and Revenant might be exceptional cases rather than the standard trend in packaging and design, but what these commodities reiterate is that for producers and consumers of physical music media a purchase is not just for an isolated disc or delivery mechanism ('just' the music). Rather, it is for an assemblage of objects that collectively constitute the commodity form. Attempts to create digitally interactive extras with MP3 download purchases such as i-Phone 'apps'⁸¹ and 'digital LPs' are holdovers from the history of physical music retail, and again display the deep-rooted association between music media and visual/tactile extras.

⁸¹ 'Apps' are applications that can be used on Apple's popular i-Phone. Album art, videos, text and film can be displayed and interacted with whilst music plays with these 'apps'.

The pseudo-museological thoroughness of such projects with their dense annotations and replica memorabilia sates the desires of designers and consumers to bring value to the CD, to make singular and enduring ‘monuments in sound’ to music. These sets typify Attfield’s “things with attitude” (2000). If collectors will react more enthusiastically to original items rather than reproductions according to an ontologising conception of musical and technological authenticity (detailed in Chapter 6), tactile pullouts and paraphernalia blur the boundary between contemporary manufacture and the supposed ‘original’. Dean Blackwood of Revenant spoke fondly of the effect that the flower in the Ayler box set had upon people: “It’s making people wonder, ‘Is this what all of them are like? Is this one just for me?’” If the original rather than a subsequent copy – even of a mass-produced commodity such as an LP – has the power of singularity about it, and is considered authentic, how do you make people react to new products in consumer cultures as singular, authentic, powerful, and desirable?

Industrial production is a necessity for creating many physical products that can be widely distributed and sold. In the context of cultural malaise with modernity and capitalist practices of consumption and production (i.e. Klein 1999), it becomes a necessary compromise that designers of specific goods often attempt to obscure the industrial process that creates goods by giving them artisan or craft-like signifiers. If we turn to Kopytoff’s notion of a gradient of commodification, from the extreme of object-as-absolute-commodity to object-as-singularised-entity (1986), we find in certain independent productions an urge to create commodities that already signify themselves as singularised to some degree. The products are pre-conditioned to be received less like industrial products and more like singular craft products.

A suitable example of such pre-conditioning is the pre-aging and distressing of denim in jeans production to create a lived-in product – not a pristine, evidently mass-produced commodity, but something that has already lived a life beyond its (crude, undesired) commodity status and thus achieved a degree of singularity amongst the mass of other commodities (Miller 2009). It is not the intensity of wear that jeans acquire and their appearance of having been worn that is considered important; “it [is] much more that in doing so they [become] intensely personal” (Miller and Woodward 2007:344). In other words, using materials that are taxonomically redolent of authenticity, and making them appear more authentic through such processes as artificial aging, aims to precondition people to receiving the finished product as a singular item rather than an alienated industrially-produced commodity.

In the production of music commodities, this can be sought by injecting craft-like signifiers into the industrial process to obscure the otherwise obvious status of the commodity as a product of the industrial process. Typography, paper stocks, unusual materials and unorthodox binding or dimensions are tools for designers seeking to distinguish their projects from the standard jewel-cased CD, for example. Susan Archie’s design work has often involved pre-distressing and creating markers of age. Whilst such features as raw cotton and flowers are the hallmark of only a few releases, Susan spends much time and effort locating the best paper or card stocks for digipaks and inserts as a way of sympathetically aligning contemporary design with the often vintage music contained on the CD. She suggests it is important to make the package look “like it didn’t come out of a computer, but I don’t think that that works for me, y’know – you know it’s come out of a computer. It would be nice to make it look like it came off a letterpress...”

In effect, this is a form of mimetic authenticity – the consumer knows they are getting a representation of the original and that modern production tools such as computers will be involved in the creation of the good, but it is received as authentic for being the correct or acceptable form of representation of that original. Eschewing jewel cases for certain card stocks and letterpress typographies create this acceptable form of representation of the original.

Discussing the then-recently re-issued Revenant collection *American Primitive Volume 1: Raw Pre War Gospel* (Fig 3.19), Susan felt that the goal of creating a tactile impression of age or “timelessness” had been achieved in this product design. Making products that are less obviously contemporary industrial products, and rebuking trends for slickness in favour of something earthy, grungy and singular, is important to Susan when designing packaging for this music:

They’re soft covers made of paper and they really were run on a letterpress. That’s kind of what we’re after – making it feel and look like it came off a letterpress rather than an 8-colour lithography, that’s kind of our whole thing about using spot colours rather than CNYK⁸², all of the Revenant releases were spot colour until Ayler – that was the only one that was 4 colour. We’re going for a look, a feel of primitive press rather than high-end pressing.

⁸² CNYK stands for the 4 inks used in printing – cayenne, magenta, yellow, black. In the printing process, 4 little dots of colour make up a big dot coloured by the CNYK constituents. Spot colour is a process where the ink used is already coloured to the desired tone, and no mixture in the printing process is required. Inks such as day-glo or metallic inks are already mixed so that each ink is its own pre-determined colour. Jeff Hunt of Table of the Elements was an innovator in the use of such inks and printing methods in music packaging design.

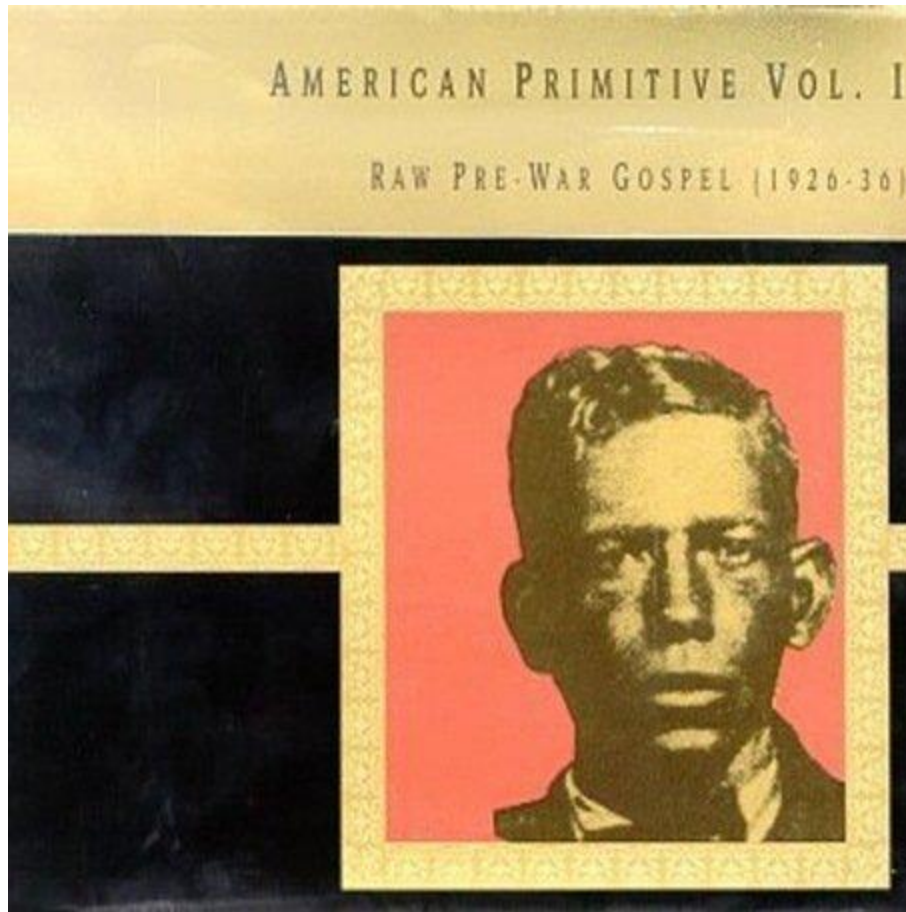


Fig 3.19 *American Primitive Volume 1: Raw Pre-War Gospel*

The goal aimed at is to design packaging aesthetically and historically sympathetic to the music. The simplicity of this approach is here summed up by Matt Sullivan of Light in the Attic Records:

We tried as best we can to give the packaging the look of what it sounds like. The Serge [Gainsbourg], the Betty Davis, they're gonna have more foil stamping or embossing because it's that kind of music, and Karen Dalton [is] more dirty and folky – not to say Betty and Serge aren't organic, but it's *different*.

Others who work with CDs as the principle format for presentation of their projects are just grateful that there are still opportunities to present what Dean Blackwood called a “frustrated love of books” as a way to disseminate knowledge, to elevate and celebrate musicians through physical media, regardless of any threat to CDs as functional objects. Lance Ledbetter of Dust-to-Digital, in a conversation about the threat of romanticising history, its people and their music via packaging and design, came to the following conclusion as to the challenges of presenting historic recordings physically in the contemporary marketplace:

I think with most if not all of our titles in the Dust-to-Digital catalogue – this is one of the reasons we haven’t gone the i-Tunes Store route or anything like this – I think, there is the music but there’s also the scholarship that goes into the notes, there’s the photography research that goes into the images, there’s the packaging design. The music is part of this experience – for me I enjoy the overall experience and when you’re thinking about music recorded ninety years ago, you’re thinking “how do you bring someone” – [i.e.] the average music fan, because I’m converted, I’m an extremist – “how do you get them back to 1925?” And I think it takes the imagery, the packaging, the scholarship to make this time machine – if that makes it romantic then I guess I’m guilty. For me, that’s what I enjoy, and that’s the way we try to present our stuff.

For all of these efforts to redecorate the CD via the framing used for the format, Tommy McCutcheon of the Unseen Worlds label still sees people as being receptive to CDs without such trimmings. His label’s releases are packaged in jewel cases with restrained artwork, typography and informative liner notes, and whilst he recognises the slide in the CD’s fortunes as the ideal commodity, Tommy points to the value –

economically speaking – that people are ready to place on CDs as evidence of their utility.

If they want to track down the original record, they can. The [online] market's so big, it's made these things even more accessible... I have noticed these things popping up more, like when they buy the CD [from Unseen Worlds] they're getting rid of their original one [the LP]. I track the internet preference of these things after I've started, and what's funny is our most recent CD recently went on eBay for 50 bucks, [people maybe] think it's more rare than it is... it's just funny because you can go to our website and get it for 12 dollars. Even the CDs can be worth something to people still.

It is true that rare CDs sometimes command more than their LP counterparts – for example, Rhino's CD reissues of Tim Buckley's 1970 *Blue Afternoon* and *Starsailor* albums in 1990 can command more on eBay than the original records due to their relative scarcity. To suggest that apathy towards the CD is universal is not true, but it might be more fitting to suggest that it is an increasingly standardised discourse of consumers, producers and the media⁸³. A faction of the record collecting culture valorises the LP, analogue warmth (detailed in Chapter 6), packaging and scholarly notes, whilst many others choose either to buy the CD, MP3 or just download the album for free – then of course, there's a mixture of all three. But for the producers profiled in this chapter, it is the more attractive business model to try to get people reigned in through the physical object, to aim at the community in the marketplace that will respond to tactile music media and purchase their product.

⁸³ Despite reporting on a Nielsen Soundscan report that showed CDs made the largest share of the music units sold in the USA from 2011-12, Huffington Post nonetheless declared that the figures showed that "CDs are dead" (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/09/music-sales-2012-digital-physical_n_2440380.html - accessed 03.09.2013).

Tommy has considered releasing the Unseen Worlds catalogue on vinyl, but feels that the expense incurs significant risks. He wanted to resurrect forgotten music he is passionate about to “fill in the gaps” in the digital catalogue and for him getting the music out into the marketplace on CD and MP3 has done that (he offers MP3 downloads of all Unseen Worlds releases on his website). Furthermore, Tommy outsources printing and audio restoration but otherwise runs the label as a small-scale collaboration with a friend in Seattle. On a tight budget with a small team, outsourcing in order to bolster the physical medium is not always an option. For others, releases are often produced on both vinyl and CD, with the vinyl often a limited edition release of the CD set. The limited edition run aids in assuring the product sells out as consumers snap up the item before it becomes an expensive out-of-print collector rarity, and other enticements such as pressing on heavyweight or clear vinyl (a hallmark of Revenant vinyl releases) further ensures the success of a vinyl run. Dust-to-Digital opened a new branch of its operations (Parlortone) to create vinyl-only releases to appeal to the expanding market in new vinyl releases. Appealing to and cultivating audiences through such diversity of media is a viable business strategy for many labels.

Also, the apathy towards the CD expressed by my research participants should not be taken to imply that MP3s are roundly embraced by music’s consumers and producers as a satisfactory alternative. The MP3 does nevertheless have champions in the marketplace, who speculate the possibility that the MP3 has not yet come of age as a tactile and interactive format, just as CDs took time to be reinvigorated by designers as desirable physical media through box set packaging.

MP3s pose a challenge to the materiality of music that has been explored so far

for having no sense of ‘thingness’ about them outside of their playback technologies. That is to say that the materiality of the MP3 is qualitatively different from a CD or LP in terms of its relative materiality according to culturally legitimated hierarchies and taxonomies of materials (cf. Rowlands 2005; Shove *et al* 2007). Materiality is relational and processual, with the usage of objects an interface for enacting roles, sociality and for expressing or restricting the expression of the self⁸⁴. MP3s may not feel or smell of anything, or decorate shelving, but they offer up a multitude of interactive possibilities given advances in computing, portable devices, and high-speed internet. Aside from the music that they encode, their materiality is actuated by the interactive technologies that reproduce them. These technologies that can be utilised to give MP3s new performative and processual capabilities as evidenced by the portable MP3 player (Bergh and DeNora 2009; Bull 2007) or the Internet (Leyshon 2003; Sterne 2006). A possibility given the rate of advancements in consumer computing technologies and the pervasiveness of computer literacy is that the coming of age for digital music files as physically desirable artefacts is just a matter of time as new interfaces and design innovations emerge⁸⁵. Table of the Elements’ Jeff Hunt sees the MP3 as a wholly necessary creative challenge for the music industry, one where innovation can render the package as desirable even if it is not physically substantive:

It has to be, I mean... the pragmatic reality is that this hand-crafted tactile aspect... comes out from the real wellspring from where the creativity is going on and then it works its way upward

⁸⁴ For example, see Banjeree and Miller 2003 for an analysis of saris and the implications they have for both expressing and facilitating femininity and also restricting the body and thus prescribing movement and social display.

⁸⁵ Ruecker has detailed similar challenges in the design of electronic books to show that attempts to add functionality to e-readers must for consumers be balanced “without loss to either the existing functionality or [the] significant range of pleasures” (2002:135) users associate with books and book culture.

to the surface and the mainstream. But if you can't sell CDs (laughs) and they're no longer a viable way of getting your music out I think what you're gonna see is there's just a new generation of kids that're going to be as creative digitally with what they do and what they wrap their music in. Maybe it's going to be different from what Dean or Susan Archie or Lance Ledbetter and I have done. Maybe it's as different as what we in the 1990s did is from Blue Note. I think you'll still see the same commitment and care as if people who want to make their packaging be this sort of obsessive cloak around their music, they're gonna do good work and they're gonna be inventive. So I don't think it's all as dismal and grim as some people do, y'know? Like this future of like how we're going to swaddle music in the next couple of generations. I think it will be done really well, it just... all the people who are griping about it ... as the music industry quivers and crumbles and tries to figure out what it's going to do, that's not the people who are going to come up with the good ideas.

Hunt's opinions serve as a reminder that sound-reproduction technologies and their contingent authenticities are given historical and historicising assessments. Neglecting the MP3 and reifying other materialities of music delivery is a product of and an allegiance to one notion of authenticity that is not permanent, nor shared universally. The effort required to keep a marketplace for physical media afloat – what Hunt describes as an “obsessive cloak” – is found in the designs this chapter has detailed, an impassioned effort to keep one cultural process viable (the production of physical music media) with the recognition that this model is not permanent but as inherently unstable as any technological or cultural tradition. The creation of new social vistas by new technological frameworks could engender shifts in consumption and production practices in the independent music marketplace as Hunt contends. Old practices could therefore pass into history like any other cultural form. Similarly cherished allegiances to digital media are just as liable to emerge, persevere, or ultimately take their place.

3.7 Concluding remarks

When I asked Lance Ledbetter of Dust-to-Digital why he feels physical music media will always have an audience, he framed his response by referring to his label's box set *Goodbye Babylon* (Fig 3.15). Whilst people may download music or books, he says, "I've yet to see anyone download a cedar box". Unpacking the implications of this view, we find that it is not just mere physicality that is desired in physical music commodities (as shown by the implications of poor design and manufacture on consumer reactions to commodities in this chapter) but a more complex notion of materiality. The real experience of music once it has been collated and released as a physical product is to obtain that product and attend to the accompanying design and notations, rather than just to hear the music disembodied from its physical manifestation. It is design that creates these objects and contributes to this schism.

Design can be conceptualised as a route to fulfilling social and commercial ambitions (Sparke 1987:205). Therefore design of physical music media is used to add value to music in terms of cultural capital, as well as price and desirability. Material forms frame music to inculcate notions of nostalgia, authenticity and taste, producing a physical mediation between consumers and the producers of music commodities by mapping sound to tactile commodities. What this chapter's discussions show is the centrality of design to the interaction between producers and consumers. Firstly, it is necessary to produce *physical* music commodities for this marketplace that desires them in order to instigate this relationship. Secondly, it is crucial to understand the demands upon physical media when they move within this particular marketplace. These demands

are not just about the substantiveness of these commodities relative to digital media files, but also about the properties of the materials from which they are made. Ingold (2007) proposed that materiality in anthropology has become a metaphysical and philosophical object of study rather than one about real substances and their performative qualities. He supposes that the concentration on the relational aspects of material culture (the social relations that they facilitate and which create them) has come to the detriment of understanding how humans interact with distinct substances and their agential properties.

Not only are physical music media able as objects to act as “ciphers for social relations” (Knappett 2007:23) but the materials that constitute them are crucial to the performances of these commodities and the relationships that people have with them and their producers. It is the design of these objects and the choice of materials that in turn facilitates their abilities to anchor social relationships (between consumers, between producers, and between consumers and producers) and the self-expression of actors in the music marketplace. My ethnography proposes that an increased concentration on materials proposed by Ingold, Shove *et al* (2007) and Olsen (2007) helps to explain the nature of value in the circulation of physical music media, where the materials from which circulated goods are made dictate their ability to circulate and their interactive potentials with consumers (cf. Munn 1986; Weiner 1994). These materials operate within a hierarchy or taxonomy of materials that is both historically formed as the overview of music packaging that opened this chapter highlights, but which can be reconfigured by new materials and assemblages of materials that enter circulation through the design of new commodities. What record labels such as Revenant and Dust-to-Digital provide is an extreme case of using novel substances in packaging (such as wood and cloth, cotton and

flowers) in order to suggest that the commodity is more than just a functional vessel for carrying music by reconfiguring these historical hierarchies and taxonomies of materials. They are explicitly designed in Attfield's sense (2000) and seek differentiation from everyday objects in the marketplace (such as jewel-case CD packages). The novelty of the materials integrated into their designs sets them apart from these everyday items.

It is reasonable to deduce the possibility for companies to seek ways to "make new markets and meanings by exploiting specific features of the object-material relation" (Shove *et al* 2007:107), as indeed independent record companies do through a multitude of avenues such as by producing vinyl records, or by utilising the CD as part of large and elaborate material packages. The consumers in turn legitimate or dismiss aspects of the "object-material relation", and help forge the development of the marketplace for different types of goods. Therefore things, people and practices, when viewed as mutually constitutive parts of a whole (Shove *et al* 2007:22-3), illuminate the roles of goods as semiotic and performative entities. They are agents, receptacles and vehicles for cultural capital and infrastructure (Jenß 2005:186) rather than just *functional* items that are *needed* to perform their function.

Campbell asked why people "prefer the new to the familiar and hence desire new products" (Campbell 1994:48), identifying the 'new' as being that characterised as being either freshly created, improved or innovative, or unfamiliar and novel (*ibid.*:52-7). Discussing kitchen renewal, Shove *et al* posit the desire for the new as a way to use the home for self-expression and identification, aligning the home-owner within changing matrices of "symbolic significance" (2007:24). The everyday of the kitchen is shown to be changing constantly, as new standards for aesthetics and performance enter the

marketplace and are adopted by others. The emergence of 'the new', therefore, becomes a competitive ground for harnessing emergent cultural and material forms by correctly deploying them in a manner that others will recognise and aspire towards.

However, new cultural forms can be conceived as undesirable disjunctures from cherished past practices, especially where they involve the dissolution of material forms and spaces that are integral parts of group and personal identities. Retaining the physicality of music commodities is therefore a denial that new cultural forms and modes of practice are inherently good, suggesting instead that they have the capacity to antagonise pre-existing forms and provoke retaliation. This retaliation is not solely embodied by a continuation of past practice, but of innovative design efforts to assimilate new cultural forms into pre-existing ones.

The design of CD packages to make them desirable to aficionados of older forms of design and material taxonomies itself provokes the suggestion that design practices in the independent music market act to maintain and mediate difference between taxonomies of objects. The most obvious is the distinction between the MP3 and the materials of physical music media. A more nuanced distinction exists between functional plastic jewel cases and elaborate packages employing multiple materials. Clearly, different raw design materials are embraced and resisted in the marketplace. Sheer physical substantiveness is not the sole arbiter of authenticity in the commodity, but the ability to singularise the commodity through design and material novelty separates it from the mundane taxonomies of materials that struggle for aura (the jewel case; cheap paper stock; orthodox ink printing). Some such as the LP and 78 are so redolent with historical aura and authentic legitimacy in this marketplace, their very materials (vinyl,

shellac) are synonyms for material authenticity and proper practice in the marketplace. Therefore, the materials and the materiality of artefacts do not exist in opposition or in a schismatic relationship but are integral to each other and the design process. I argue that their methodological integration through design is important for assessing the circulation and transformation of value and reputations in the independent marketplace for physical music products.

The following chapter examines the particular retail environment of the independent record store, where products such as those examined in the present chapter circulate in primary and secondary exchange cycles. The importance of these physical products to the cultural capital of the independent music marketplace is shown to be tightly allied to the social spaces that their exchange facilitates. How retailers employ physical music products to authenticate their sites of exchange according to conventions that are oppositionally constructed relative to the mainstream, and how these sites simultaneously authenticate the products they sell, will be discussed to display how important processes of acquiring goods are to sustaining the independent music economy and the cultural capital that runs through the marketplace.

Chapter 4

Pursuing Music: Record Stores, Music Retail, and the Consumer Experience



Fig 4.1 End of an Ear, Austin, Texas

Bringing you the best in indie, pop, experimental, obscure, prog, psych, jazz, techno, folk, french pop, soul, funk, punk, lounge, reggae, hip-hop, techno and other sounds. We also have a large selection of used records and CDs. We hope to become the record store you've always dreamed about.

From End of an Ear's website⁸⁶

⁸⁶ www.endofanear.com (accessed 15.02.2009)

4.1 Introduction

The rewards of collecting music do not begin or climax with the act of listening to music. Prior to the listening experience, and the unpacking of commodities at home, there are several stages of acquisition that constitute the pursuit of new music, and the practice of collecting. To solely examine the practices of music consumers in the domestic sphere, where they are engaging in a relationship with the collection that they have already amassed, is to neglect a host of spaces and relationships that motivate and satiate the habit and process of purchasing and collecting music.

The independent record store is an important part of the scene for music consumers outside of the mainstream. It is here that the ‘hunt’ for a gem is enacted that many scholars have detailed as an intrinsic part of consumption practices.⁸⁷ Aesthetic desires are sated and materialised not just in terms of music that enters the domestic sphere, but also in an alternative realm of consumption enabling consumers and retailers to create a space that rejects perceived mainstream retail conventions. The independent record store is a key site for commodities, consumers and retailers where the authentic projection of the independent music marketplace is spatialised, enacted and sustained.

Firstly, this chapter examines the proliferation of independent record stores in Austin. This discussion leads to an exploration of the marketplace of the independent record store and how it has persevered and courted its clientele over time. I then examine the record store as a conceptual space for the fulfilment of consumers’ desires by

⁸⁷ For example, Gregson and Crewe (2002) relate similar desires from their work on British charity shops; Reno (2009) details the search for treasures and salvageable disposed-of goods by workers at Michigan’s Four Corners landfill site; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010) explore eBay as a similar site where attempts to discover desirable objects are practices grounded through a sorting-through of mainly undesired items that in turn heighten desire for other dreamed-of objects.

examining the conventions of independent record store retail through the spatial arrangement of commodities, the creation of atmosphere and a special site of exchange. How record store owners imbue these spaces with these qualities, and the desired effects that this will have upon consumers is also discussed. Thereafter this chapter examines the social practice of shopping, and how consumers synthesise relationships within the space of the record store, with staff, other shoppers, and ultimately with the stores' stock to inform meaningful consumption practices. This chapter shows how music shopping as social practice engenders a relationship between consumer, retailer, space and commodity that forms a key component of engagement with independent music as an opposition to mainstream orthodoxies.

The notion of 'space' must firstly be unpacked to clarify these discussions. The anthropological literature has long struggled to clearly define 'space'; as a global or local phenomenon (Hannerz 1987; Ritzer 1993); as a politicised interpretation of ownership and entitlement (Appadurai 1995; Anderson 1983); as a methodological framework (Marcus 1995; Candea 2007); a phenomenon lacking fixity, constantly re-negotiated and "reterritorialised in the contemporary world" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:20). Space, first conceptualised by anthropologists as the fieldsite wherein culture itself is contained and defined, has proven to be a more fluid and nebulous concept given the rise of transnational media⁸⁸ and the phenomena of globalisation⁸⁹ and travel (Clifford 1998; Cohen 1988; Carrier 2006). The travel of people, ideas and objects has become incorporated into anthropological thought on space, such that physical geographies can

⁸⁸ Spitulnik 1993 provides an excellent overview of anthropological approaches to mass media, showing how they have demanded new approaches to space in the discipline.

⁸⁹ Especially through the expansion of commodities and businesses around the world – see Ritzer 1993; Pieterse 1995; Allison 2006; Hannerz 1987; Miller 1998.

now be interrogated as places of flux, with boundaries ripe with the potential for redefinition and contested symbolic meaning⁹⁰. The rise of anthropological interest in landscape from the 1980s onwards further suggests that spatial categories are constantly reworked, appropriated and contested, and inform culturally-specific phenomenological and cosmological perspectives on space (Bender 1993; Tilley 1994; Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995).

Gupta and Ferguson famously argued that concepts of spatialisation need to be elaborated to limit the effects of reductionist approaches to people and space. Physically demarcating analyses and concepts should be “replaced by multiple grids that enable us to see that connection and contiguity – more generally the representation of territory – vary considerably by factors such as class, gender, race, and sexuality, and are differently available to those in different locations in the field of power” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:20). Furthermore, claims to spaces and usage of spaces contiguously affect performance of identity, a reality to which Frank Mort’s study of London males’ consumption of fashion attests (1989) wherein ideas of being gay are centred upon the specific site of London’s Soho district.

Studies such as Mort’s⁹¹, and Miller *et al*’s work on Brent Cross and Wood Green’s shopping malls (1998) display how notions of *commercial space* can become deftly incorporated into ethnographic study. Their work benefits from the aforementioned appreciations of spaces as lacking innate fixity, harbouring the potential to accommodate

⁹⁰ Physical sites also contain potential for the simultaneous harbouring of multiple, contested notions of boundary and symbolic meaning, highlighted by Barbara Bender’s analysis of the conflicting politics of ‘contested landscapes’ such as the Stonehenge monument (1998: 97-131)

⁹¹ Mort extensively developed these themes of masculinity and consumption through the prism of urban space and locality in his book *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Twentieth Century Britain* (1996).

multiple interpretations, and for aspects of these meanings and interpretations to travel between and influence other different spaces.

In enacting identity in particular places, some other potential identities that exist ‘elsewhere’ are excluded. However, appropriate elements from other spaces can be brought into play due to the porous nature of space and the circulation of people, ideas and things. The space in which the desired identity is to be performed can therefore be made ‘fit for purpose’ by creative acts of appropriation, avoidance and physical engagement. The specificity of the other places, agents, ideas, symbolic interpretations and objects that are actively brought to play upon independent record stores, therefore, is greatly important to the performative potentials of these spaces. Austin’s independent record stores are argued to be commensurate spaces for their mutual adherence to and creation of retail environments that bear similar physical properties, attract the same consumers, and cradle similar performative acts. Each of these is constructed relative to various ‘others’, the most pertinent of which is the mainstream music retail market. As detailed in Chapter 2, independent record labels maintain an ideological and oppositional distance from their major-label counterparts. These differences, apparent in physical products’ designs (as shown in Chapter 3) are also apparent in the retail sites where their products are sold.

4.2 Austin and the local importance of being ‘independent’

Austin, Texas, is a city that prides itself on being “the live music capital of the

United States". Indeed, many bars, restaurants and record stores in the city at some point host live music in their schedules. The city is highly regarded in the American music industry, in part because of the sheer number of live venues and bands fighting for recognition in locally and the significant talents that have emerged from Austin in the last few decades, but also because of the fiercely 'independent' character of Austin and its music scene.

The volume of local independent artists, record labels and record stores in Austin are considered integral to the city's character. The fear that this localised identity is threatened by the upper-middle class and the infringement upon local values by corporate entities moving into the area is manifested in the ubiquity of 'Keep Austin Weird' bumper stickers and T-shirts. Austin hosts a large liberal middle-class sphere (largely alien to the rest of the state of Texas) which is keen to retain Austin's independent character. The purchasing of concert tickets at independent store Waterloo Records over using major Internet outlets such as Ticketmaster is one of many examples of ways in which the consumers try to support the local scene at every stage of consumption. Many local artists are recorded locally, their records issued on local labels promoted by record launches in local stores and music venues, all of which reaches the Austin audience through in-store advertising and coverage in the local free paper, *The Austin Chronicle*⁹².

The sound and character of such local music is widely recognised as defining Austin and promulgating its liberal reputation. From 2000 to 2006, Austin was the third-

⁹² Established in 1981, *The Austin Chronicle* was established as a publication dedicated to Austin's arts and entertainment. See Shank 1994:194-6.

fastest-growing city in the USA⁹³, and it is clear that many who move to the city from around the United States (California and Florida licence plates are very common sights around Austin) are young people attracted by its liberal and artistic reputation. Locals display pride in this status, evidenced by the crowds drawn downtown or to suburban bars and theatres most nights of the week for live music, cinema and other performing arts in the city. By keeping things ‘independent’, Austinites feel they are able to flexibly define the city – and themselves – on their own terms, something that is deemed special and worthy of preservation and nurturing.

This facet of Austin is apparent in its many theatres, cinemas, art-exhibitions, classes, bookstores and independently run shops. It is exemplified by the many independent record stores that still flourish in the city. The rise of digital piracy, online retail and legal downloading has significantly changed wider consumer habits and contributed to a reduction in the number of independent record stores across the United States, and yet still Austin boasts a dozen or so such stores. Only three had suffered closure in the seven years of decline in the marketplace prior to the conclusion of my fieldwork in 2009.

End of an Ear (**Fig 4.1**) is one such store that has successfully kept afloat. It is located south of the Columbia River on South 1st Street, in an area of the city that hosts a large number of kitsch boutiques, antique and thrift stores, vintage clothing and furniture dealers, alternative book stores and independent record stores. Record shops in Austin vaguely tie-in with other shops selling vintage apparel and clothing. Both styles of shop have their own ‘around town’ leaflets, informing the curious and devoted where else in Austin they can buy vinyl and vintage materials. Vinyl, therefore, is tied-in with vintage

⁹³ http://money.cnn.com/2007/06/27/real_estate/fastest_growing_cities/ (accessed 02.02.2011)

clothing because both vinyl and clothing are seen to imbue similar auras⁹⁴, and are linked with similar circulations of value in the second-hand market. This is made more apparent in record stores such as Antone's and Backspin with their walls festooned with vintage posters, radios and record players from the 30s through to the early 60s.

Second-hand markets offer consumers a great deal of opportunity to personalise objects, and through this practice to create a meaningful distinction between themselves and other people by virtue of the unique objects at their disposal. This form of retail distinction is apparent in other sites such bookshops, wherein David Wright has observed that "the talk of bookshop workers and managers about the place of books and reading in the context of other activities and other similar retail trades also suggests the existence of an enduring hierarchy of value in which the bookshop exists as a place where cultural capital is both exchanged and legitimated" (Wright 2005:311). The type of object exchanged and the space in which it is exchanged are mutually constitutive in creating the value of the exchange act.

For another example, Gregson & Crewe (2003) detail the sphere of British second-hand consumption as enabling the acquisition of products unavailable in high-street chain stores that by rote set their new owners apart from other consumers. This is not just due to the products acquired, but also the spaces utilised in shopping. Palmer and Clark's edited volume on second-hand fashion (2005) posits the second-hand retail environment as offering goods and services distinct from other outlets, where a connoisseur's eye for detail and quality enable skilful negotiation of second-hand stock to create new and challenging assemblages of style: "The quest for originality and the one-

⁹⁴ Heike Jenß's work on 1960s retro scenes in Germany makes explicit the link between fashion and music in a 'vintage' scene – at 1960s conventions, vinyl records are sold alongside garments from the same time period (2005:183)

off [through second-hand consumption] is, in part, a reaction to the globalisation of enormous fashion chains at all price levels” (*ibid.*:174). Ina Merkel excellently displays how the re-appropriation of second-hand GDR-era commodities in former East Germany emboldens consumption acts as politically substantial gestures, “a new positioning act that provides people with a favourable or at least a sceptical and resistant image of their past” (Merkel 2006:263). In this context, the ubiquity of Austin’s ‘vintage vibe’ ties in with the longstanding local preference of all things independent over those deemed to be corporate and homogenising, as well as suggesting that the spaces of consumption and exchange in the independent music market act as charged sites for opposing other retail conventions. These spaces therefore come to symbolise much more than merely the exchange of goods.

4.3 Critical Reflections on Independent Retail Environments

Gregson *et al* (2002), through their ethnographic work on British charity shops, make important points concerning the ways in which shopping space is conceptualised by consumers. Whilst citing the work of Daniel Miller (1998’s *A Theory of Shopping*) as exemplary of a genre of work on shopping that examines discrete entities in the retail landscape (either focusing specifically upon one particular outlet or generic form of retail space such as a mall or car boot sales), Gregson *et al* argue that “accounts that focus on shopping as practised demonstrate that shopping space is more appropriately

conceptualised as a tapestry of differentiated spaces, woven together to comprise personal, accumulated shopping geographies that are routinely reproduced, and extended, through practice” (2002:613). The construction of differentiated spaces, they continue, means that consumers will cognate shopping spaces in relation to how they understand other retail spaces. This leads to the creation, in their research, of “different sets of shopping practices in different retail spaces, as evident in the continual comparative reference to ‘proper shops’, ‘ordinary shops’, and ‘normal shops’, in charity shoppers’ talk” (*ibid.*:614). Such language has similar homologs in this discussion to succinctly delineate the difference between the independent store and the high street retailer.

Part of the desirable construct of shopping space (independent, characterful, engaging staff and products) is made through oppositional contrasts with other related shopping sites (corporate chains, impersonal, bland). Everts and Jackson (2009) historicise this experience of differentiated shopping spaces through an examination of food shopping which posits the modern space of the supermarket and the ‘pre-modern’ space of the small grocery store or market stall in opposition to one another. Adopting a practice theory approach, they engage with how consumers use these different food shopping spaces to conclude that “the way places are used creates and follows, at the same time, everyday understandings of what are seen as ‘traditional’ and ‘modernising’ ways of socialising” (Everts and Jackson 2009:931). People create these conceptual spaces by the way they interact with them, affecting the meanings associated with the different shopping spaces through the enacting of the space. In the enactment of these spaces, “the supermarket is experienced as modern because of the simultaneous existence of the corner shop and vice versa” (*ibid.*:932). David Wright further argues that in the

case of bookshops there exists “an association with a distinctive style of ‘soft capitalism’ in which the commodity exchange is merely the means to a more romantic end” (Wright 2005:304). Notions of appropriate consumption and appropriate retail sites converge in a nexus that is actively created by retailers and consumers to legitimise the goods being transacted, and the concomitant systems of value and identity that they are used to create. Therefore, consumers and retailers create shopping spaces by acting upon them, to foster conventions of interaction on multiple levels, be it between consumers, between consumers and shop staff, between staff and products, or between consumers and products.

Geographers Jonathan Everts and Peter Jackson have suggested that modernity is itself a “performative work”, and used this to explore how “the ways particular consumption places are understood have a decisive impact on how they are enacted, how place-specific consumption practices emerge and are tied to specific historical understandings” (Everts and Jackson 2009:917). The nature of the historical understandings that come to bear upon how shopping practices are performed is a crucial part of teasing out how and why spaces such as record stores are used in the way that they are. It should come as perhaps no surprise that apart from the popular depictions of record collectors in novels such as Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity* and films such as *Ghost World*⁹⁵, that there also exists a popular discourse on record collecting and the usage of record stores, in recent volumes such as the 2008 pictorial travelogue *Old Rare New: The Independent Record Shop* and music journalist Brett Milano’s series of character studies collected in 2003’s *Vinyl Junkies: Adventures in Record Collecting*, as well as countless magazine, fanzine and online articles. Together, they help form a confluence of

⁹⁵ *Ghost World* (2001, Dir. Terry Zwigoff) features a character who collects blues 78s.

knowledge and idioms that form a standard view of the record store in the mind of the public and the store owners themselves. This exists as an opposition to the retail consolidation of large chains such as HMV and the now-defunct Tower Records, as well as supermarket outlets such as Target and Wal-Mart. The record store is a similar oppositional adjunct to large retail chains as Everts and Jackson argue the small grocery store to be from the supermarket chain. These ideas about ideal shopping environments are pervasive in the British context as described by Daniel Miller, wherein “the ideal of street life [is] based around the pubs and shops that remain paramount sites for the imagination of sociality and community” (2001b:67). The local independent corner shop in this context is idealised as possessing an “integrative role” (*ibid.*:69) which is not in practice utilised and actualised by many who nonetheless hold this notion of the store’s centrality in local social life. However, the record store *is* used as a social space by many shoppers, either for talking with staff and other shoppers, visiting with a friend, or for going to in-store events such as DJs or live bands. In-store events are also part of mainstream record stores (just as major book chains host book signings), but in Austin the bands appearing are less famous than those who frequent the mainstream chains, from local acts trying to break through (such as local indie-rock trio Brazos who played End of an Ear during Record Store Day 2009, or folk group The Hudsons who played regular in-store appearances at Waterloo Records from 2004-8) to more seasoned cult acts (such as Arizona punk band the Meat Puppets who played Waterloo Records on 25th May 2009). The romanticising of the local grocery store that Miller contends with is enacted by music consumers choosing to oppose the mainstream. In effect, the independent stores embody a resistance as self-consciously ‘alternative’ sites of exchange compared with the large

retail chains. By indulging in vinyl, obscure music and an ‘alternative’, second-hand retail environment consumers are creating, sustaining and embodying the differences that the independent record store is aimed at representing.

4.4 The Independent Record Store and its Place in Music Retail

Independent record stores that are not part of nationwide high-street chains can come across to many more casual music consumers as peculiar places. It says much about their popular perception that the first image that comes to many people’s minds when they think of a record store is that from Nick Hornby’s novel *High Fidelity* (1995, re-made as a film in 2000). The novel portrays a group of men approaching middle-age working in a London record store, idly standing by their stock quipping about the eccentricities of their customers whilst blissfully unaware of their own idiosyncrasies, obsessing over what seems to most readers as an arcane world of superfluous details and cliquy elitists. Hornby’s novel affectionately portrays these characters as comedic stereotypes, though many people do harbour the belief that the world of the independent record store is one of strange, exclusive middle-aged men becoming flushed with excitement over typographic errors on record labels and other arcana⁹⁶. Whilst this public perception of record-collecting culture is somewhat distorted, it does acknowledge a schism between the retail sites frequented by casual music listeners and those that form

⁹⁶ See Roy Shuker’s 2004 article “Beyond the ‘high fidelity’ stereotype: defining the (contemporary) record collector” for an examination of the pervasiveness, inherent irony and ultimate inaccuracy of this stereotype.

the basis of this research, a practical separation of one type of consumer from the other that creates distinct types of retail environment.

There exists a gradation within music collecting culture worth noting here. Most collectors use independent stores to source materials. There exist other sites for acquisition for these collectors, from Goodwill stores to record fairs⁹⁷, online retail and auction sites, and buying directly from artists and record labels. The independent record store acts as a useful hub for these extra endeavours, as it is located conveniently within the city, frequented regularly by consumers, and advertises extra events such as record fairs and garage sales in-store. At a more intense and competitive point on this continuum exist those such as the collectors of pre-WWII 78rpm records and artist memorabilia. 78rpm sourcing was famously conducted by ‘canvassing’ neighbourhoods (usually in the American South), knocking on doors and asking if the household had any ‘old records’.⁹⁸ Now, collectors of 78s mostly trade among each other, sharing an elite knowledge of and access to records, right down to knowing who among other collectors own particular 78s, and each of these records’ trade lineages and genealogies. Some crate-diggers find such prestige goods outside these elite trading communities by searching through market stalls, garage sales and charity shops. The most famous recent discovery of this nature was Portland-based record store and label owner Warren Hill discovering a unique acetate test-pressing of The Velvet Underground’s influential debut album in a Chelsea, New York flea market for seventy-five cents. The record was subsequently sold for \$25,200.

⁹⁷ Austin hosts the largest record fair in the United States annually, usually tying in with the aftermath of the South By South West festival. Over 300 traders and many thousands of consumers descend upon the North Austin Event Centre for the convention, with customers ranging from high-end collectors to the merely curious or less fanatical collectors looking for a bargain.

⁹⁸ Gayle Dean Wardlow, a prominent collector and blues historian, even trained as a pest control exterminator to legitimate a young white man roaming around African-American districts knocking on doors (Wardlow 2000).

Rarely, finds emerge on internet auction sites such as eBay – a recently unearthed 78rpm single by Mississippi-bluesman Tommy Johnson (*Alcohol and Jake Blues c/w Riding Horse*) was sold on eBay in 2013 for \$37,100 to become the most expensive 78 in history. The record was bought by John Tefteller⁹⁹, a noted collector who already owns the only other extant copy of *Alcohol and Jake Blues*.

The competition for these types of rarities is intense, due to their unknown whereabouts and their scarcity. The independent store offers a more consistent diet of recent releases and reissues, dependable stocks of canonical second-hand albums¹⁰⁰, as well as some genuine obscurities and collectibles. Here, the stakes are less high than in elite trading circles, yet the ‘hunt’ for goods is still a motivating process – to methodically and patiently discover something of value for the consumer and their collection.

When most consumers buy music they tend not to seek out independent stores, and have instead shopped at such nationwide chains as Tower, Virgin, HMV, in supermarkets, or major on-line retailers such as Amazon and i-Tunes. However, it is telling that of the four major high-street chains just mentioned only HMV still exists on the UK high-street¹⁰¹. This damage to high-street music retail has been attributed to varying degrees to the increase in piracy and the proliferation of online retail sites, with their more competitive pricing and broad choice available at the click of a button.

If the effects of these changes upon high street chain-store retail have been hard, the effect upon the independent record stores has been similarly difficult. Thousands such

⁹⁹ http://www.tefteller.com/html/rarest_78_record.html (accessed 15.11.2013).

¹⁰⁰ The notion of ‘canon-formation’ in music is analysed by Bohlman in relation to folk-music (1988) Dougan in relation to the blues (2006), and Kärjä (2006) in relation to popular music.

¹⁰¹ Even HMV, virtually unchallenged as a music retailer on the high street, is experiencing problems however, with the news in 2011 that out of over 300 outlets in the UK, 60 would be closing with slumping sales. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12118619> (accessed 07.01.2011).

stores in the United States and United Kingdom have closed their doors. In 2003, according to the Entertainment Retailers Association (ERA), the body that represents record shops, there were 948 independent and privately-owned small chains selling music in the UK.¹⁰² By 2007 this number was down to 408, equal to a rate of store closure of one record shop every 2.7 days (Jones 2009). Between 2003 and 2007, more than 3,000 record stores closed in the United States, with independent record shops accounting for nearly half the losses¹⁰³. By missing out on passing trade from casual consumers and losing many customers to the appeals of Internet retail and piracy, the independent sector has contracted into a smaller network of stores serving a more modest but still-devoted consumer-base. That the casual consumer trade is now picked up largely by supermarkets and department stores who can buy up mainstream releases at subsidised prices for retail, leaving many consumers to feel they are being overcharged in independent stores that do not benefit from these deals, is yet another marketplace pressure that has forced hundreds of independent stores to cease trading.

In 2009, Austin hosted a number of independent record stores (fourteen are listed in the free flier found in most vinyl stores and vintage clothing boutiques) and there were no major high-street music retail chains. Many Austinites consider independent music as integral to the city's international identity, and an expression in many ways of Austin's liberal contrast with the rest of conservative Texas.¹⁰⁴ Local figures such as Willie Nelson

¹⁰² When I started my undergraduate studies in Oxford in 2003, there were four independent stores in the city – a little over four years later, all were gone due to declining sales.

¹⁰³ These figures are from the marketing firm Almighty Institute of Music Retail – <http://www.almightyretail.com/design/newpress.php?incpage=latimes4>, accessed 02.02.2010

¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, some satellite communities do not take kindly to Austin's liberal reputation and claims to musical authenticity. Aaron Fox's ethnography of working-class country music in the town of Lockhart some 25 miles south of Texas reveals informants who felt that Austin was a cosmopolitan centre removed from their authentic practices, and saw the city's expansion as a threat to their community and musical practices (2004:63-5).

and Guy Clark – key players in the 1970s ‘outlaw’ country music style that helped set independent Austin apart from the commercial hub of country music making in Nashville, Tennessee – vehemently support local music and play regularly in and around the city, as do many local luminaries such as Jimmie Vaughan, Gary Clark Jnr, Pinetop Perkins (1913-2011), Explosions in the Sky, Double Trouble, Jose Escavado and many more. In this Mecca of liberalism in the American south, the independent record store thrives as an embodiment of anti-capitalist, anti-corporate sentiments found throughout the city with its impassioned consumer support for local businesses and artists. Such antagonisms with American capitalism and the pervasiveness of homogenising consumer cultures are widespread (Klein 1999 popularly articulated these concerns), and highly visible in the USA through the Freetrade and Occupy campaigns. Austin embodies this ideological malaise through its local live music scenes, proliferation of independently-owned businesses and stores, and free press (*The Austin Chronicle*).

So, whilst a few independent stores have fallen by the wayside and ceased trading in the last few years of music-industry malaise and economic recession, many of Austin’s current independent record stores are seeing an upturn in trade, especially for vinyl records. End of an Ear co-owner Daniel Plunkett has a relatively upbeat assessment of his store’s performance in the past year:

It’s definitely increasing, our numbers are 75% [up] on last year, it’s really grown. CD sales for us, because we’re still growing, have kinda been flat or low. Our sales are going up... but the CDs aren’t growing. I think most stores here are reporting 12 to 15% [of total sales are] CD sales.

Sales of vinyl were up 89% in the USA over 2008¹⁰⁵, and the upward trend increased in 2009 as more people became aware of the plight of the independent record store, qualms over digital sound quality, and the statement of alterity in purchasing physical media in the face of a growing digital download sector acquired currency in the music media¹⁰⁶. Austin's independent music stores collude with each other to produce the aforementioned 'Vinyl Around Austin' flier (**Fig 4.2**) which aims to help consumers navigate the city's record stores and keep these local businesses valid. Whenever you purchase vinyl in Austin, the flier is a ubiquitous presence on the shop counter, and customers often end up with a copy slipped into their bag with their purchases.

It is apparent that shopping independently is a loaded symbolic gesture, as well as a practical one. The ethic of independence in Austin, of keeping Austin 'Weird' and refusing to relent to the imagined homogenising corporate face of the 'other' America cultivates and supports these independent stores, but then so too does the individual assertion by consumers that they too have this freedom and independence of spirit. Collecting music can be done in front of a computer, but by going out of their way to shop in local independent stores and procure physical music media collectors are asserting an identity for themselves, as well as giving an identity to their collection that they can respond to in a way that is meaningful to them. The staff at the record stores in Austin care greatly about this independence too and the sense of ownership and

¹⁰⁵ <http://arstechnica.com/media/news/2009/01/music-sales-up-10-in-2008-thanks-to-downloads-and-vinyl.ars> (accessed 03.12.2009)

¹⁰⁶ The 'vinyl revival' is further documented in a Nielsen Soundscan/billboard report for 2011-12 in the USA, showing that vinyl sales increased by 17.7% to 4.6m units. The British Phonograph Industry has also reported that UK vinyl sales in 2013 were the highest they had been for a decade, though they still only account for 0.8% of albums sold. (<http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20130104005149/en/Nielsen-Company-Billboard%E2%80%99s-2012-Music-Industry-Report> and <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d9c4894a-372b-11e3-b42e-00144feab7de.html#axzz2n553bhy6> - accessed 10.12.2013).

curatorship that comes with their employment. For example, when Antone's of Austin was threatened with closure after owner and local music impresario Clifford Antone died in May 2006 the store's staff successfully bid to take over the store and keep its 'authentic' independent character intact.



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CD's, DVD's, LP's, games
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New & used CD's, DVD's, posters, vinyl 45's,
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Always buying / 12 - 9 Tues - Sun
www.backspinrecords.net
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106 E. North Loop, Austin, TX
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Mon - Sat 11-9
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LP's, 7", CD's, magazines, t-shirts
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Open most afternoons - some evenings
Austin's eclectic used record store since 1971
Lg. classical stock, LP's, 78's, CD's, all genres - pre 1980.
West of Lamar, East of Mopac, Between Oakhurst & Harris.
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10 - 10 Mon - Sat
11 - 8 Sun
Austin's largest selection of quality used vinyl, LP's, 45, 78, etc.
Since 1987.
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Albums, 45's, CD's, DVD's, T-shirts, New & Used
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Fig 4.2 The free *Vinyl Around Austin* flier



Fig 4.3 Antone's Records, Austin.

The importance of this independent sector of music retail for consumers is highlighted in many respects by how distinct it remains from the high street retail. Not only are independent stores located away from Austin's high street locations such as Congress Avenue (a common feature of record stores is their being concentrated away

from these places, such as Notting Hill in London). They also display difference in the stock provided, the clientele, the staff's knowledge and customer care, and the presentation and atmosphere of a store which conspire to create this distinction, creating independent arenas for consumers wishing to assert their own independence through their consumption practices. There is no collector without a collection, no collection without the act of collecting, and each of these stages of acquisition enables the expression of individual and community values and ideals, as is evident on the record shop floor. The following discussion builds upon the ideas of independence and opposition to the mainstream marketplace to examine firstly how record stores are used by consumers and arranged by their owners and staff, and subsequently how the practices therein shape the identity of these spaces and the people who use them.

4.5 Shopping in Practice:

Using Austin's Independent Record Stores

If an object is discovered by a buyer in what is thought to be its original or 'natural' setting it is presumed to be closer to the context of its creation or use and therefore less likely to be inauthentic or fake... The very process and act of discovery generally confirms the collector's sense of good taste... the more difficult the search the more authentic the find.

Steiner 1995:152



Fig 4.4 Waterloo Records, Austin

The preceding discussion has clarified that a distinction is made by consumers and retailers between the independent and mainstream worlds, and how this distinction exists in general terms of separate retail environments and urban character. Independent record stores are physical sites of retail that consciously aim to distance themselves from the spectre of the commercial and a concept of sanitised modernity, a modernity that divorces the individual from established contexts idealised as stable, immutable and natural into a world where identities are uprooted, fractured and subsumed by 'the modern' (Lien 1997:6-11).

Russell Belk observed that "In the collecting form of consumption, acquisition is a key process. Someone who possesses a collection is not necessarily a collector unless they continue to acquire additional things for the collection" (2001:66). In this, Belk implies that it is not solely acquisition *per se* that dictates the value of collecting, but the

wider practices in which that acquisition is entangled. In this chapter I too place importance upon these wider practices in which mere ‘alienated’ economic transaction of commodities takes place (Carrier 1995:11), and suggest that the ability and privilege to negotiate the right sort of spaces as part of the acquiring of music goods is crucial to the independent music scene. The primacy of the practice of shopping to the creation of these retail spaces, and the enactment of consumer, product and retail environment identities through shopping is highlighted in the subsequent discussion, which draws upon practice theory and the work of cultural geographers as well as anthropologists to clarify *how* and *why* independent record stores become nexuses for products and shoppers. The employment of these consumer spaces to create and substantiate a difference from the perceived reductive modernity of the digital consumer age and chain-store capitalism is given voice by the consumers and retailers who use and create these retail spaces in Austin.

Consumers of musics outside the mainstream marketplace who still prize material music commodities acquire their goods in many ways. Practices of consumption – the “specific dynamics of consumption, as opposed to its generalities” (Mort 1996:181) – reveal that the record store is a site of consumption created in relation to the wider context of music retail. Independent record stores are spaces of leisure and sociality as well as sites of exchange. Even when money is lean, collectors feel compelled to enter the record store to slake their habit, and also to look up new stock to buy. Many collectors only half jokingly talked about whether they would buy food or records as being a real dilemma for them. Mark is a 53 year old employed as a bank cashier who visits record stores in central Austin every week and occasionally takes trip to other stores and to San

Antonio on days off work. He purchases, by his own estimation, some 100 records a year across multiple music genres from these stores, in addition to attending shows in Austin. Music therefore is the prime focus of his recreational spending. He explained that this has always been the case:

...when I look back in the late 70s – gaslines and all of that, hard times and all that – I still went out and got my records (laughs) and I remember being broke and having like \$5. It’s like well, I can go and eat or I can drop by and get the new Buzzcocks single, and it’s like I’d go and get the Buzzcocks single. And they’re little treasures, they’re not *that* expensive.

‘Dropping by’ record stores for several hours every week is not just about getting that precious single, however – there’s obviously more to the experience of buying music than asserting mere ownership over objects. It is a chance to enter a realm where similar people chase similar aesthetic goals, where browsing and purchasing exercise and refine personal tastes and individualities, a familiar, ritualised space that stabilises and offers routine to the flow of the everyday. The shopping experience is built into the regular ebb-and-flow of many people’s times. Not a single participant defined visiting record stores as a ‘treat’ in the sense that the visit itself would be unusual. Purchases might occasionally be ‘treats’ in terms of the amount of money spent either in one visit or on a particular item. Visits tended, however, to be part of the fabric of the rhythm of everyday life. David, a 43 year old engineer, frequented the Waterloo happy hour every Tuesday evening, when records were discounted 10%. Still, it is hard for him to restrict himself to just one visit in a week: “It’s a social thing, it’s nice walking into a record shop. To me it’s like a magnetic pull, if I’m walking by Waterloo I just have to go in and see what has come out”.

Jacob, a 35 year old employee at End of an Ear, would spend spare afternoons scouting other record stores in Austin. Many took advantage of the typically late opening hours of record stores (often open past 9p.m.) to drop in after work, or en route to evening engagements. T-Kay (an archivist in her mid-20s) exemplifies the importance to consumers of record stores as familiar, habitually acquainted spaces in the city. She had just moved to Austin from Los Angeles when we met. She wanted to “get to know the city” soon after arriving, and chose to do so by visiting the cities’ record stores.

One particularly important feature about the independent record store is the atmosphere and décor, the unifying aesthetic one finds in record stores with the familiar sight of people hunched over stacks of records and CDs patiently flipping through them, the smell of aging card and vinyl, the obscure music playing over the stereo, the small talk between browsers and staff. This image of the independent record store is a contrast to consumers’ image of high street music stores as bright, sharp, loud and clinical. As Chris W, an avid record collector from Georgetown (north of Austin) explained:

I’ve always felt comfortable in record stores. When most people travel... if they go to NYC they go to Times Square, Broadway, expensive restaurants. I go to the record stores. That’s the first place I go to wherever the hell I go. I feel comfortable in them. But the *independents* – not the ones that are glassy and shiny... I like them a little dingy and they smell good I think. And I really feel comfortable there. And I really think it’s some kind of community... and I like what they have to offer, there’s always knowledge there, things, records that really interest me.

The music played in independent record stores is another deviation from their mainstream counterparts. Whilst many high-street retailers are obliged to channel

particular radio stations into their stores (replete with advertisements, and DJs imploring the value of the product being played on-air), the independent record store presents a different flow of sound by simply allowing records to play in their entirety (these are often displayed on the till to alert browsing customers to what they are hearing and its availability for purchase in-store). Other factors contribute to this sense of atmosphere. Light, for example, has been proposed as a pliable entity for creating social spaces and inculcating intimacy and inclusion, or ‘cosiness’¹⁰⁷ (Bille and Sørensen 2007). Light – as with the “texture” of sound (Tacchi 1998; Revill 2000; Samuels *et al* 2010) – has a materiality that can be deployed to facilitate the creation of (and distinction between) spaces. Therefore, the particular music and lighting of the independent record store which Chris noted above as different from that found in the mainstream retail sector is of potential importance to the manufacture of a space where certain identities are fit for enactment. In turn, acting in these spaces builds or re-enforces individual consumers’ identities which can then be exported out from these public spaces into the home.

¹⁰⁷ The Danish word *hygge* is explicitly related with both lighting and ‘cosiness’ – the dim light brings people huddling together in an intimate space that is “private and exclusive to the individuals participating in the social gathering” (Bille and Sørensen 2007:276). In terms of independent record store retail, this lower-level lighting could be posited as serving a similar function between people and the objects that they are grooming and inspecting in-store, as well as creating another point of departure between these retail sites and those in the mainstream high-street, where high-level lighting is ubiquitous.

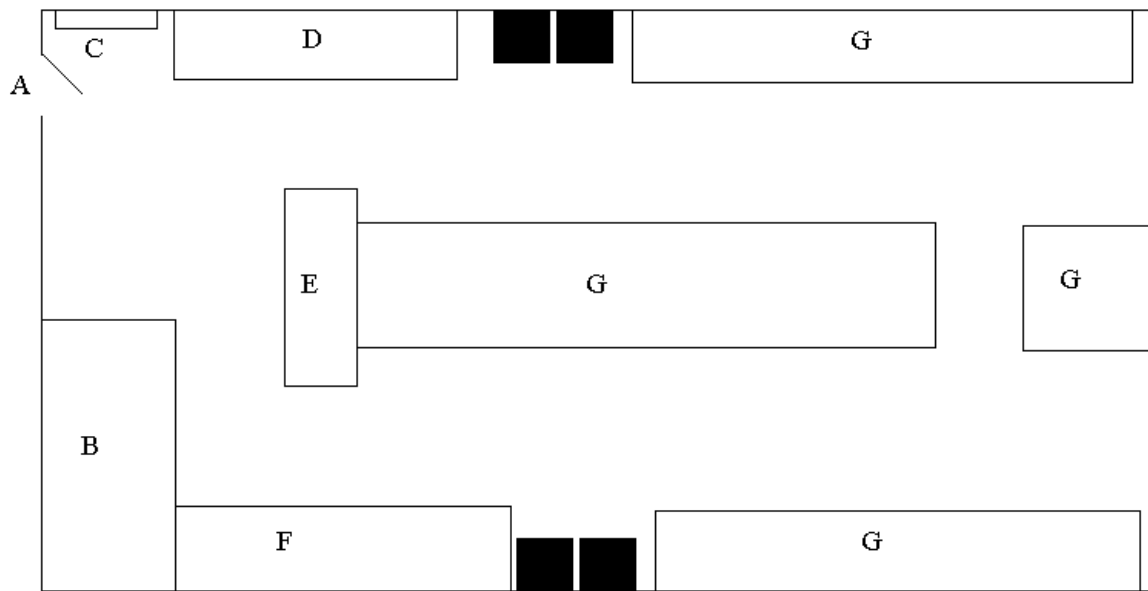


Fig 4.5 Plan of Backspin Records, Austin

- Key:
- A – Front entrance
 - B – Magazines, books and music DVDs by storefront window
 - C – Pin board for posters, personal advertisements and fliers
 - D – Till
 - E – New arrivals vinyl stock
 - F – CDs
 - G – Vinyl stock, with shelving above to display special items
 - – CD and vinyl listening stations

Independent record stores are by and large remarkably similar in terms of their layout and stock presentation (**Fig 4.5** shows the layout of Backspin, one of the independent record stores in Austin). Stores have various specialities, such as large stocks of 45rpm singles, generic focuses such as classical music or blues, and some stores carry more records geared towards the D.J. market. Many disc jockeys prefer to work with

vinyl, both for its sound quality and the ease with which records can be physically manipulated (changing their tempo, ‘scratching’ and reversing them) to aid the flow of a D.J. set (for more on DJs and vinyl, see Shuker 2010:166-70, 177-80; Farrugia and Swiss 2005). Furthermore, getting vinyl oddities that are unknown to the wider community and reworking them in the dance music context offers an edge to DJs over their contemporaries¹⁰⁸. Backspin Records in the north end of Austin is one such store, although like many stores in spite of being specialised towards offering DJ records they also have large stocks of CDs, rock, jazz and folk and other music to make their business viable. Furthermore, their store layout betrays traits familiar from other stores.



Fig 4.6 Antone's Records, Austin.

¹⁰⁸ Jamieson (1999) offers other examples of DJ competitiveness in vinyl collecting circles surrounding the Northern Soul scene. Here, rare records unknown to or unobtainable by other DJs are highly prized slices of cultural capital. See also Shuker 2010:110-12 for DJs' accounts of hunting elusive records.

One of the first ports-of-call for many record shop regulars is the racks of ‘New Arrivals’. Instead of navigating the same records as on the previous visit customers can browse through fresh stock and purchase in-demand records before others get a chance to see them. Much of this stock is second-hand, as new arrivals that have been bought in new from distributors usually have their own section or are placed immediately in the stacks for people to find them. Through the Internet¹⁰⁹, radio, friends’ recommendations, in-store advertising or magazines and fanzines consumers will often know about new releases of interest to them and come in-store specifically to purchase such releases. Some consumers carry with them (mentally or physically) lists of records that they are searching for and repeatedly check stores to find out if any of those items have arrived. To aid the selection processes, stores usually set aside a rack for ‘staff recommendations’ that detail the desirability of particular releases to coax consumers into purchasing or sampling these releases. These unique selections contribute to each stores individual character relative to other stores.

Throughout the shopping process, consumers are encouraged to receive certain records in a particular way by the record store layout: new releases, exceptionally valuable or collectable records and box sets are those that are most likely to be set aside in store displays as being particularly special or valuable. The value of records in this context operates in manifold ways, which record stores are able to play upon in order to reinforce or instil value into these commodities. Placing records behind the store counter, or in a glass case under the till, reinforces what might be considered special about the records by distancing them from the rest of the stock as well as the consumer. Daniel

¹⁰⁹ Internet sources include emails from artists, labels or record stores; online magazines; blogs; discussion sites or forums; and artist or label websites.

Plunkett of End of an Ear motioned me towards a glass case for rare, sought after 1970s bootleg LPs as an example of how he sets certain objects apart from others in the store – “Putting things there really shows them off and puts them in a different category of object from the other items in store”. He employs the same tactics with box sets such as those featured in Chapter 3, giving them their own set of shelving, regardless of their genre, to show them off as unique items. As Daniel puts it, “Some of them are like art objects, because you’re not going to sell a lot of them”. Stock stored in crates beneath the main storage units are similarly considered to be of a lesser value than those accorded higher and more prominent in-store displays.

Stock is sourced by record stores from a number of different avenues (a process of multi-sited sourcing that equates with other retailers in the second-hand marketplace such as retro and car-boot traders – Gregson and Crewe 2003:130). Primarily, if new factory-pressed stock is bought and sold, it is done so through distributors such as Forced Exposure, but sometimes this is done directly with labels with whom staff often build friendly working relationships. Other second-hand stock comes from private collections – either collectors ridding themselves of small quantities of unwanted items, or via bulk-buying larger collections. Sometimes, as an employee at Friends of Sound confided to me, this can be a very unreliable and anxiety-fuelling avenue for obtaining stock, with a paucity of new materials coming in-store over a several-week period not uncommon when large collections do not make themselves available for purchase. Decisions of what to stock can therefore sometimes be hampered by availability – this is true also with new stock bought from distributors, as limited edition items might become unavailable and other catalogue items might become deleted. Staff at stores endeavour to find stock for

customers when they have specific requests for items deigned to be 'out-of-print' by scouring distribution websites in order to track down these rogue items. Otherwise, store owners and staff order in items that they are confident they will be able to sell and work as well as they can with the unpredictable array of second-hand items that find their way in-store.

The stock then placed in store is acted upon by shoppers, but placement and store layout certainly aim to inculcate judgements over the value and desirability of certain goods. I argue that a hierarchy of value is established by the spatial arrangement of different stock items. The communally accepted value of certain records is exemplified by an example from Antone's Records in Austin, which carried a notorious collectible Beatles record, the infamous 'butcher cover' for their 1966 USA-only release *Yesterday & Today*, positioning it dead centre behind the till away from other stock, with a price tag of \$280.

Collectability and pecuniary value are not the only criteria that lead some records to be separated from the rest of the stock in a record store. Record store owners and employees are mostly collectors themselves, with their own specific music tastes. Employees therefore frequently put records up on the wall as their own recommendations. Whilst items such as the Beatles' 'butcher cover' are well known collectables that would understandably be displayed apart from other stock on the basis of their fame and monetary value, these staff recommendations are taste judgements that come to be emblematic of the store in question. They are framed by their presentation apart from the rest of the stock as being valuable even though this value is not necessarily because of their inflated cost.

Internet retail prices only marginally influence cost in stores, although these spheres of value are only spatially and ideologically distinct. Results of auctions at online auction sites such as eBay are collated on websites¹¹⁰ as a guide for collectors as to how much records can be worth, but the ratcheting up of prices through online auctions¹¹¹ is felt by record store owners to be artificial and an unfair indicator of what to charge in-store for products. An employee at Waterloo Records explained that he felt stores that arranged their pricing according to eBay auctions were “cheating” their customers, because it took away from the thrill of looking through record stores for good-value records and collectibles that had “slipped through the cracks”. Customer Mark praised Austin’s independent record stores for “not just hiking up the price because some eBay auction told them too”. Fair pricing tends to be dictated by price guides (Shuker 2010:145-49; Hosokawa and Matsuoka 2004:161) or negotiated by employees in-store, as prohibitively high pricing is felt to discourage customers from frequenting the stores and frequently buying product. Such practices also help to maintain a distinction between the independent record store and other sites of retail where pricing is considered more arbitrary and geared towards excessive profiteering.

Record stores frequently install ‘bargain bins’ filled with records often sold for as little as one dollar, frequently with deals such as “Buy 10 get 10 free!” (Fig 4.7). This enables the store to shift low-quality stock quickly, but it also makes for a great reward for people when they manage to track down a rare or desired record in these bins. Collector Chris W enthused with me about getting a rare copy of Mike Auldridge’s 1970

¹¹⁰ <http://www.popsike.com> is an example of a website that acts as a resource of end-of-auction Internet sale prices for specific records.

¹¹¹ An extreme example of online auction hysteria is the notorious auction of a grilled cheese sandwich bearing the face of Jesus (Paasonen 2006).

Takoma Records release *Dobro* from MusicMania in Austin for just a dollar, when copies usually command twenty dollars or more. Making time to flip through these ‘bargain bins’ is demanding as they contain hundreds of records of which only a few may rise above the general stock of undesirable pop, easy listening, novelty and Christmas records, but offers its own reward with enough effort. Stores do not ‘bait’ these dollar-bins with ‘good’ albums to entice people to rummage through them – Chris’ example above offers proof however that these selections can yield rewards for those who put in the effort. A rare copy of Keith Jarrett’s Impulse Records release *Byablue* containing tracks that were left off the album’s CD re-issue were a welcome find for another shopper I encountered rummaging through the dollar bins of End of an Ear.

Consumers are evidently able to use record stores in many ways; to purchase specific releases; to browse through a specific genre; to browse through the bargain bins or go directly to high-end and high-costing products; to walk unexpectedly into something new. The flexible nature of browsing, and the many uses to which consumers can put the record store, is evidence of a multifaceted consumer relationship with the space and its contents.



Fig 4.7 The dollar bins at End of an Ear

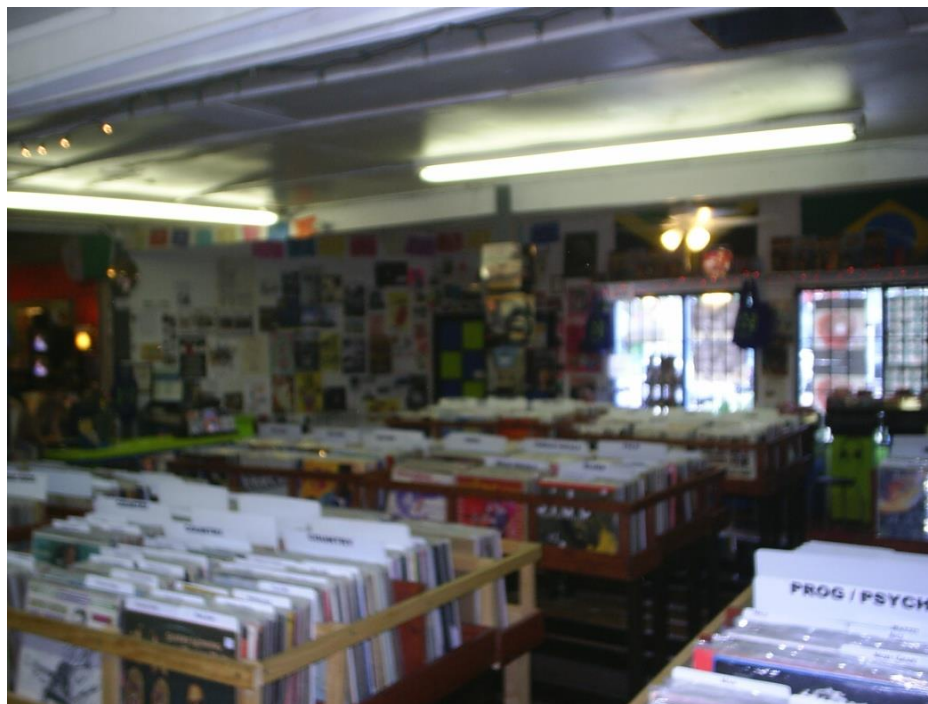


Fig 4.8 The shop floor at End of an Ear, Austin



Fig 4.9 – The front of End of an Ear, showing displays advertising a new Sonic Youth record and a re-issue on Light in the Attic Records of Rodriguez’ *Coming From Reality*

Whilst most record stores follow the same conventions of display, the individual character of a particular record store is cultivated by staff’s taste judgements, and consumers can grow to appreciate and welcome these aspects of particular stores. End of an Ear champions freak-folk, 20th Century classical, early electronica, and progressive or psychedelic rock music; Waterloo Records foregrounds Americana and indie rock; Breakaway promotes soul, funk and contemporary electronica, and so on. So, a store such as End of an Ear will highlight the new arrivals in store, staff recommendations (i.e. Jacob loves Ultravox and rare disco, so if any such LPs come in they go straight up on the wall for all to see, or fellow employee Blake will put up reggae), all of the valuable collector records go on the same wall as a good strategy for

people coming into the store, they will gravitate instinctually towards the part of the store that caters to their needs. Many people wouldn't consider the ultra-rare and expensive titles, but they are given their own space to enable those who are keen and interested to examine them.

These characteristics invite people to see each record store they come to as having personality, individual relevance and credence compared with other stores. This contrasts with the perceived homogeneity of the 'bright' and 'shiny' mainstream retailers. If a consumer is particularly enamoured with a certain record store, then they will likely take note of these endorsements hoping that they will be as rewarding to investigate as other recommendations they have come across in the same store. At the same time, the community of record stores – expressed through the 'Vinyl Around Austin' flier, the informal recommendations of other record stores in Austin by record store staff, and Record Store Day (discussed later in this chapter) – demonstrate clearly that record stores are of a kind, that they share clientele, mutual respect and to a large extent similar aesthetics and conventions of display. Part of this contingency comes through the common audiences for these stores, and their practices of exploring space and expressing aesthetic desires through shopping.

4.6 Purchase and In-store Grooming

We just wanted to be a store that we would love, and we're still working on that. I wanna have a store that if I walked into it, I'd say "I want to stay here"... that's the goal. Like a great bookstore – "when you walk into that it makes you wanna buy books".

Daniel Plunkett, End of an Ear

When browsing through stock in record stores, consumers often stop to pick a record out and inspect it more closely. It could be because it is a record they have been trying to find for some time, because it is by a favourite artist, because it is a record they already own and wish to compare it with their own copy, or simply because the cover appeals to them and has commanded their attentions. There then frequently follows a process of grooming the record. Whilst there is not a prescribed way of doing this (although some stores go as far as post these ‘house-rules’ above the racks or at their listening stations), there are certain conventions that crate-digging consumers follow; an etiquette for keeping records and CDs in as pristine condition as possible, such as not touching the playing surfaces and handling them by the rims and labels, and taking care not to scuff records when replacing and removing them to and from their paper sleeves.

Items of interest are picked up and examined visually; the artwork is scrutinised, tracklisting and liner notes are read, and the record removed from its sleeve to examine the condition of the vinyl. Otherwise, the record is taken to one of the listening stations that most record stores have so that the music can be listened to on headphones to check, among other things, what the music is like and how the visual condition of the vinyl matches with the sound quality when the record is played. CDs are also subjected to such grooming by customers. Throughout this process, consumers might discuss with friends or other shoppers what they are thinking about the record. It is a common sight to see a shopper walking through the store with an armful of records *en route* to the listening station to evaluate the hoard that has been picked up while browsing.

The in-store grooming process not only makes some objects desirable, as it can also hinder a customer’s propensity to buy a record. This is because ‘face-to-face’

interaction with an object makes all too plain to some consumers what kind of money they are spending, and exactly what they are getting for that price. Daniel Plunkett proposes that

On eBay, money seems a little bit... well, not like money! So people will spend \$100 on a record, but then they can walk in here and see the same record for \$75, but \$75 in a store just seems like a lot more money, they'll stop themselves. We've done that, I mean taken records that have been in-store for a couple of months, we'll throw it on eBay and it'll go for double, and that's weird. And sometimes it's sold to a guy in town!

The transience of the Internet as a resource for acquiring music does benefit some on-line retailers when consumers are not handing over cash for their purchases, and are less inclined to hold-back from spending their money on expensive items. Online currency is evidently qualitatively different in the minds of consumers from money that is spent in-store, where different tactics of thrift and rationalising purchases is demanded¹¹².

Jacob is a staff member at End of an Ear for whom music shopping is a regular habit, even though by working in store he deals with hundreds of records and CDs on a daily basis. He works in what he calls his favourite store in the city, with Backspin being another favourite place in town – “It’s a little bit of everything even though they’re a little more geared towards DJ stuff”. He regularly uses time on his days off work to go to Waterloo or Cheapo to look through used bins for a while, not really with anything in mind but “just because you never know what you might find there”. Otherwise, as a staff member at End of an Ear he is able to make first call on stock as it comes into the store at

¹¹² See Zelizer for discussions of the ways in which people “personalise and differentiate monies” – 1994:201.

a discounted price. Nevertheless, he cannot break from making the rounds of other stores in the city looking for other items:

End of an Ear doesn't get a lot of mainstream stuff... if I want to get an import record or say a metal CD, I know we're not going to have it so I just go and see if it's used at that store. For the most part I'm just flipping through, when I go to Waterloo because it's a bigger store, if we couldn't get something in because we've got it on back order, like there's this band called Naja that're kinda like doom metal, or a really pretty metal band, if they have it there I'll get it even if we have it on back-order at End of an Ear and we might get it in soon, I'll just get it there, and then maybe trade it later if we get it in at the store... they just made 1000 of these and it's a CD but I just like it and care about the music so much. And I go and look through their dub [reggae], they get a fair amount of used CDs but of course they get picked over by their employees thoroughly.

Visiting record stores is greatly aided by having knowledge about their stock and a strategy for navigating it. Such knowledge enables collectors to fulfil their needs more quickly and with less fuss, and also helps to develop viable and rewarding routines of browsing and shopping. A large part of this involves a grooming over of items once they have been located to assess whether they are in a fit state to be played, and also whether they fulfil the collectors' aesthetic desires. Jacob explained one of these desires, and how it led him to buying Parliament's 1974 album *The Clones of Dr Funkenstein* on vinyl as a reaction to confronting the physical object:

Sometimes packaging I find a little bit superfluous y'know, even though I am impressed by the art and everything and that's partly why I wanted to have that Parliament album but not on CD, on vinyl, and I want the large version of that photo because of how wild he looks – like what's

he thinking in that photo?!? And why on the back is he holding not just one crow – a fake one on his arm, there’s another one painted on his shoulder!

Getting such satisfaction from purchasing the record, through the sheer surprise of its appearance having not encountered the record sleeve before, indicates how grooming and analysing records in-store can instil singularity in the record once it has been purchased.

4.7 Shopping and Sociality

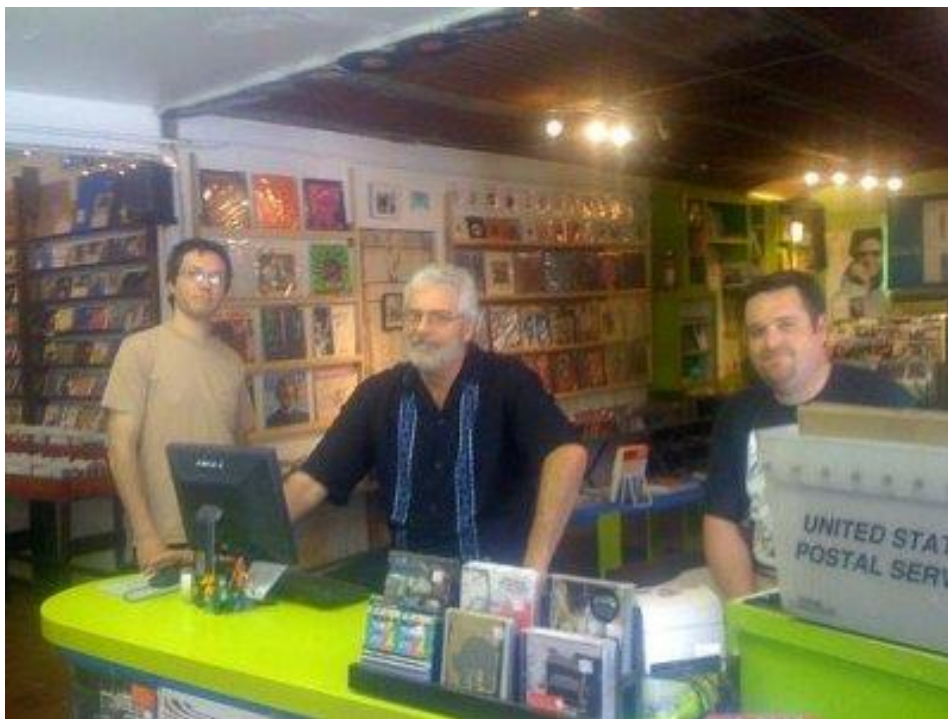


Fig 4.10 End of an Ear’s Jacob, Daniel (owner) and Blake (owner)

I think Austin has a good music scene; there are bands that shop in here and their fans. Our customer base, they trust us, and then there’s new people coming in, like this one kid came in and said “Hey, you turned me on to this band Caravan, what else is there?” And you can say,

well if you like getting into that stuff then there's this, this and this. I was the same way when I was a kid – I was into David Bowie and I'd listen to Kraftwerk and I'd wonder "What other German stuff is there?" and the guy at the record store would say well here's Faust, and here's Neu!... I think that continues. You can do a lot [of that] on the computer but it just doesn't seem as *real*.

Daniel Plunkett, End of an Ear owner

The Saturday of April 18th 2009 saw the second annual Record Store Day across the United States. The nationwide event aims to raise the profile of the independent sector, and bring a much needed burst of capital into the marketplace. In the run up to the event independent record stores heavily promoted the occasion. In Austin, Record Store Day was an unquestionable success, as it coincided with Austin Reggae Festival at the Auditorium Shores outdoor arena and brought in crowds of customers to the city's record stores. In many cases, there seemed barely to be any elbow room in-store, with people cramming in around crates of records furiously browsing, and taking in several of the city's stores over the course of the day. To lure customers in-store, many promotional items were being offered free with purchases such as posters, CDs, badges and stickers; a number of limited edition vinyl singles and albums were offered exclusively through these independent stores for the day; discounts were offered with any receipt proving the customer had bought another item from one of the other participating stores; Bob Dylan's album *Together Through Life* was previewed a week in advance of its official release; vast numbers of vinyl albums were offered for a dollar per record; raffles were drawn and prizes given away; and many popular local bands performed in-store. The combined result of these efforts was plain to see, as great numbers of people filled

the independent stores of Austin and many left with their arms full of promotional posters, CDs and vinyl.

Record Store Day certainly brought a lot of people into record stores that might frequent them only irregularly, but it also brought the usual music enthusiasts and collectors in their droves. With such a mass of people crowding into the city's stores, they were abuzz with the sound of chatter and laughter, as people caught up with each other and talked about the records through which they were browsing. Record Store Day was exceptionally busy, but in essence it did not represent for the regular consumers much of a change from the usual rigmarole of visiting record stores. This re-enforces a point raised by Brendan Toller's independent documentary *I Need That Record!* (2008) that record stores are not just retail sites, but social hubs, where people meet other collectors and enthusiasts.

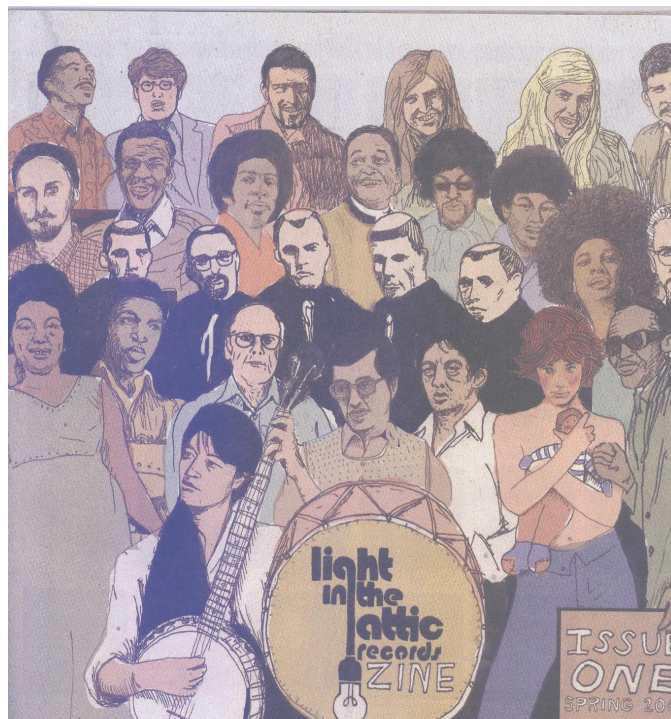


Fig 4.11 A free fanzine produced by the Light in the Attic record label for Record Store Day 2009. Label owner Matt Sullivan said he wanted the fanzine to be ‘dirty, old-fashioned’.

People are often supremely approachable when they are record shopping – indeed, they often instigate conversations, asking people what they know or think about a certain record they have come across, giving opinions on things that others have found, and generally discussing music, recent concerts they have seen and records they have heard or bought. The sociality of the collecting practice extends far and wide, from sharing opinions and recommendations on the internet to engaging with magazines and fanzines¹¹³, sharing words with people at record stores and conventions, and listening to music with friends. David Q (early 40s, engineer) regularly has friends over to indulge in listening sessions, where new finds are cross-examined and discussed as a springboard for the evening. There is therefore a slight challenge to keeping up with those who are finding unheard-of music that everyone in the group enjoys, and adds a lightly competitive but convivial and rewarding element to collecting.

People often shop with friends, become acquainted and friendly with staff and other browsers, and can then display, discuss and bond with others over these purchases outside of the record store. Many people will not buy exclusively from record stores, but will also make internet purchases, be they of physical media, MP3 downloads or pirated material. Nonetheless if the record store plays a part in the process of acquisition, it is most often one kept apart from other avenues of acquisition by consumers. They are understood as special places where a different type of browsing and musical voyaging can occur than in any other situation, and a large part of this is the social quality of being

¹¹³ Magazines and fanzines differ in that fanzines are low-circulation publications put out by fans that tend to get distributed solely to independent music stores and bookshops, unlike magazines which have wider, more pervasive distribution systems. For more on this alternative realm of publishing see Duncombe (1997) and a recent article by Alisa Craig (2011) on privately-published poetry *chapbooks* and how they contribute to forging and maintaining poetry communities.

in-store and mingling with other shoppers and staff. Another aspect of this is the relationship that consumers have with records while they are browsing, as it is an altogether different relationship than that which can be forged with a record for sale on the Internet. The real-time feedback that consumers enjoy from each other and record-store staff cannot be matched by Internet-based consumption. It has been suggested that when clothes shopping, “Individuals are frequently too anxious about the choices to be made [when shopping] to proceed without various forms of support and reassurance” (Clarke and Miller 2002:209). Such anxiety is eased in the context of the independent record store by the ordaining of genres, artists, albums and labels by friends, fellow collectors and customers in-store and the presence of ‘staff picks’ recommending releases in most record stores. The social potential of record stores is made apparent as one shopper in his early 30s I met at Waterloo asked me to provide him with a ‘shopping list’ suggesting releases he may enjoy tracking down in Austin after talking for just a quarter of an hour.

For many people, however, coming to the record store is a chance to browse – to cap off the working day¹¹⁴, to while away an afternoon off work or as part of a trip in the city on a weekend. Many stores are open until eight to ten o’clock at night to offer consumers a large array of browsing options. Coming in-store to browse has been described by some of my research’s participants as therapeutic, a distraction from any qualms in life that shows its reward in the form of newly acquired music, and the ability to indulge in it at home. It also can be frustrating for consumers to have to choose what

¹¹⁴ Waterloo Records’ 7-9pm Tuesday ‘happy hour’ featuring a 10% discount on all vinyl records is aimed primarily at this type of consumer, but also attracts extra business from those who come in-store on a Tuesday, which is the day in the week in the USA when newly released records go on sale – in the UK, this day is Monday.

they will but, as they walk about the store clutching several CDs, cassettes or records and trying to decide which they can afford to buy and which will have to wait until another time.

Spending many hours in record stores, I became friendly with many of the record store staff, and felt increasingly at home in the stores that I regularly visited, recognising and greeting many familiar faces that I had met either about the city or in record stores. People browsing would come across something that intrigued them, look at it, and make a comment out loud so as to invite opinion on what they were examining. Sometimes shoppers asked for opinions, and other times they gave them.

On the topic of staff as facilitators of retail space, sociologist David Wright identified a particular importance within UK book retail as to how staff are chosen and expected to act. Wright argues that knowledgeable staff are crucial to the image and workings of bookstores. In particular, he highlights “the importance of the place of relationships between workers and the things that they sell in understanding the retail workplace” (Wright 2005:296). A certain ‘type’ of person is required to manage the relationship between consumers and retail space. In Wright’s example these are people with a knowledge of books, a specific orientation towards the goods being sold. This concurs with other work such as Lynne Pettinger’s suggestion with reference to fashion retail that branded stores can produce branded workers (Pettinger 2004). Workers are important intermediaries, and as this chapter shows the workers in record stores are uniformly enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their trade. Pettinger suggests that the branding of workers according to the stores in which they work reflects “aspects of the marketing of the stores they worked in” (Pettinger 2004:179). In contrast, Wright

suggests that in the context of the bookstore “the relationship to the product is not formed by marketing or management, but by the pre-existing beliefs in the value of the things being sold that workers bring to their roles” (Wright 2005:297).

Wright’s insights are pertinent here. As Crewe *et al* (2003) have suggested regarding ‘retro’ fashion retail, the goods exploited in retail environments orientate workers and consumers relative to a symbolic marketplace of goods and services. The real and ‘authentic’ retro goods and retailers are contrasted with high-street mainstream retail “as-imagined” (Crewe *et al* 2003:78-9)¹¹⁵, and the goods exchanged legitimate the independent enterprise in their difference from those offered by the mainstream. The attentive retail staff in the independent record store are dealing with goods that are different from those in the mainstream stores, being as they are often second-hand, formats that the mainstream music retailers do not stock (such as vinyl and cassettes) or the products of producers whose goods are not distributed to mainstream outlets. In accordance with the workers in Wright’s examination of the bookstore, they come to their work with an appreciation of the value of the goods that are stocked. In Wright’s work, “the process of recruitment also involves a degree of aesthetic judgement based upon the ability of potential recruits to articulate their enthusiasm for products in the right sort of ways” (Wright 2005:305). In the record store, recruitment follows similar criteria. Jacob was recruited to End of an Ear because he shopped there regularly and showed knowledge of jazz and disco records – his orientation towards the products made him desirable as an employee. This orientation towards the products (knowledge and appreciation of their value) helps consumers navigate the space, and dictates its form as

¹¹⁵ Crewe *et al* (2003) note that the appropriation of retro by mainstream retail outlets such as the TopShop/TopMan franchises constitutes the imagined mainstream against which the ‘real’ authentic retro consumers and retailers create their oppositional retail spaces and consumption practices.

seen with the aforementioned display of employees' recommended releases in-store. I expand on Wright and Pettinger's arguments by suggesting this cultural capital is crucial to the creation of a social space, and that the common goals of employees and consumers relative to the products exchanged (knowledge and appreciation of value) facilitate a sociality that is crucial to distinguishing the independent record store from other types of music retail outlets. This sociality, in turn, is paramount to what makes consumers loyally returning to these spaces within the scene of record collecting.

I encountered many examples of such camaraderie on record shop floors throughout Austin. One employee at Breakaway Records – a dank, funky store on Austin's lower east side – welcomed two regular customers by presenting them with a large box of 1940s R&B and jump-blues records that he had acquired in the 78rpm format to browse through, knowing that they would appreciate the gesture and likely spend money on the records contained. At End of an Ear, Jacob would play LPs over the sound system for me and others rather than have us hunch over the portable turntables in the listening corner on headphones. Also, as a fan of modal jazz music I received a call from Jacob at End of an Ear one day as he ran by me a list of newly-received stock by the likes of Yusef Lateef, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Pharaoh Sanders and Alice Coltrane – apparently a standard practice with people who spend enough time in-store for the employees to know the consumers' tastes.

Also at End of an Ear, as one customer in his early sixties browsed next to me in the used CD section, another customer poked their head over his shoulder and commended him on having picked up a great album. The CD in question was Alexander 'Skip' Spence's 1969 cult-classic *Oar*, reissued with many tracks of unreleased music

from the album's original sessions by New York's Sundazed Records in 1999¹¹⁶. A conversation was struck up that lasted almost fifteen minutes, with the two men talking enthusiastically about Spence, Sundazed, and moving onto other recommendations from the late 1960s San Francisco music scene.

In a slightly more off-beat example of the relationships made at record stores, the staff at Friends of Sound jokingly goaded one of their customers picking up 1960s garage bands for always being after "shit that sounds the same", with no malice intended but rather knowing that such light-hearted baiting expressed familiarity and friendliness between the store and their customer. Even where the customers are not regulars, however, there are clear efforts made by retailers to engage with them and draw them into the stock and make them comfortable. Some store owners in the Austin Record Convention could be overheard actively congratulating customers on their purchases and directing them towards other stock at the stall that they may like. Norman, a 36 year-old sales representative for a computing firm, pursued some of the recommendations he was given at one stall after a lengthy discussion, and received a discount on the extra stock that he purchased as a gesture of good-will.

Were the staff at these stores not knowledgeable of their stock in this way, they would not be able to foster these forms of sociality. Were the consumers lacking similar knowledges, they would not interact with each other in the ways described. The sociality of record stores – and their uniqueness as retail sites – is predicated not just on their very specific nature of the goods involved but on the cultural capital that staff and clientele share as a social glue. The scene of such music retail involves a great deal of skill to

¹¹⁶ Incidentally, the record was Columbia Records' worst-selling LP of 1969, and was deleted from its catalogue and unavailable in legitimate copies for thirty years.

navigate it successfully, and this can act to exclude some people who feel uncomfortable for lacking the field-specific skills required. Those consumers who are invested with these skills can however foster intense affection towards independent stores. Clear indications of the affection with which record stores are held by their clientele are the products they sell bearing their own brand. Items such as tote bags, postcards, T-Shirts and coffee mugs bearing a store's graphic are commonplace. Many of Austin's older stores – Waterloo Records and Antone's – have become cherished local institutions. Hudson, a 28-year old musician who plays in a local folk band (The Hudsons), wears a Waterloo Records T-shirt to show his appreciation for the store where he buys most of his records and CDs, and where his band have performed several in-store shows. Record store shopping clearly is an act of identification between producer, retailer, product and consumer where acts of browsing, being seen, socialising, purchasing and listening all factor into the rubric of 'shopping'. Shopping becomes not just a means to acquiring product, but to nurturing and expressing identification with sounds and sentiments shared with other people, and an alignment with the promises of these identities.



Fig 4.12 A promotional sticker for Friends of Sound, given away with each purchase.

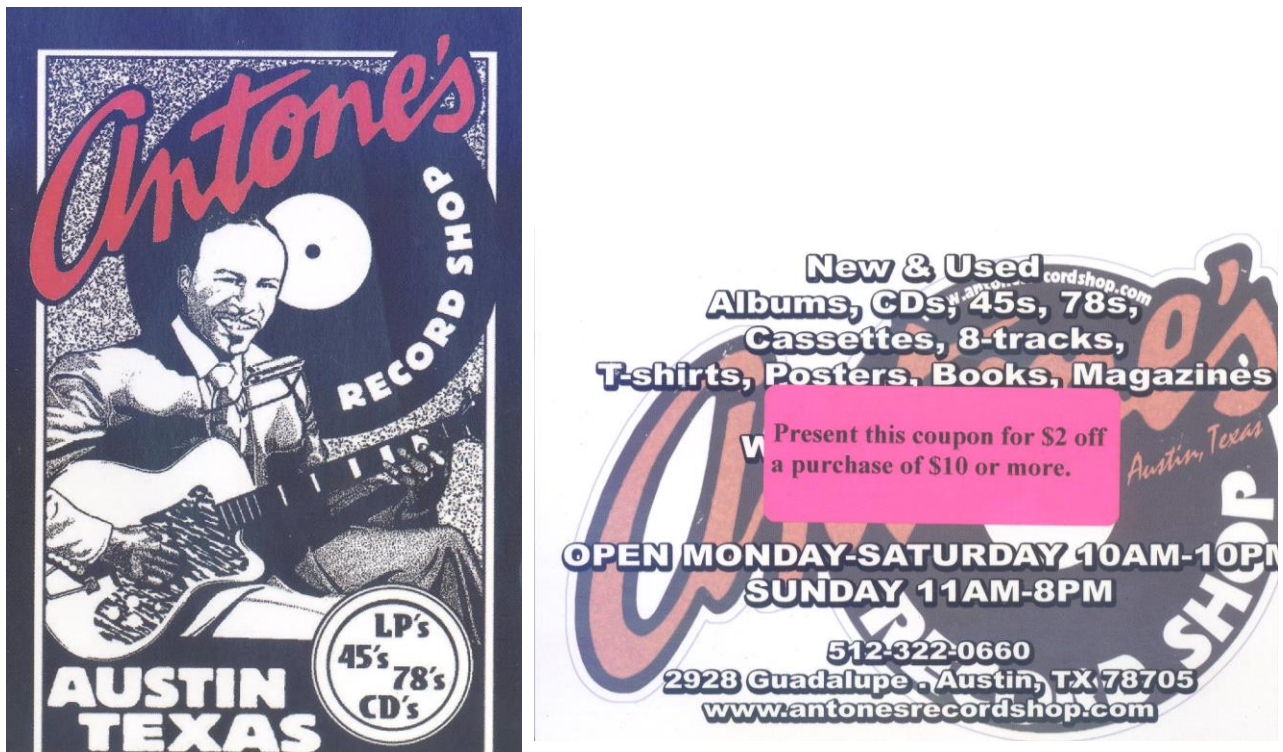


Fig 4.13 A promotional postcard from Antone's that doubles up as a \$2 coupon



Fig 4.14 End of an Ear's promotional postcard. The logo can be found on T-Shirts, coffee mugs, badges and tote-bags.

4.8 Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated that sites of independent music retail in Austin are in keeping with wider issues of authenticity in the music marketplace; of the city's widespread sense and embrace of its distinctive character, especially as a hub of independent and innovative musical enterprise; of anxieties over capitalist alienation, consumer alienation and its impinging effects upon social cohesion and individuality; of the desire for historically-rooted and familiar retail forms in the face of the rise of new technologies in the music marketplace. The following concluding remarks focus these observations through the prism of practice theory and demonstrate the dynamic, active process of shopping as being integral to the creation of sites of independent music retail.

The scholarly engagement with shopping should resist from viewing it solely as the isolated, temporally exact act of acquisition, and should engage with the complex and contested processes that constitute the consumer experience in practice (Woodruffe-Burton *et al* 2001). The multiplicity of meanings inherent in acts of shopping mean contemporary shopping practices can take many forms and contend with many issues. Shopping is a display of skill (Gregson *et al* 2002), a socially situated activity, with consumers actively pursuing, creating and exploring pleasures and anxieties in their shopping behaviours (Jackson and Holbrook 1995). Crewe *et al* argue that for retailers of retro fashions, "it is their cultural capital which provides the scope and site for their creativity and, unlike most other people who work in the creative industries, not their artistic capacities expressed in self-authored commodities" (Crewe *et al* 2003:63). Shopping therefore is not just a creative use of products in the marketplace, but also of

spaces (their creation *and* navigation) and the knowledges that are brought to act in and on those spaces and products.

The place and context of consumer markets are crucial to any understanding of them, as highlighted by Frank Mort's work on young men's engagements with fashion and consumption in 1980s-90s London, where "Definite zones of the metropolis were privileged sites at which a number of important cultural rituals were played out" (Mort 1996:181). The commercial regimes that consumers deal with, and within which they situate themselves in everyday practice, do not just operate from the obvious sites of the products themselves and their symbolic imageries, but they substantiate themselves into the very tapestry of everyday life (de Certeau 1988:xii). These are partly but still significantly spatial in their organisation, as Mort contends, but also historical and/or historicising (Miller 2001b:67-69). Diverse and plural engagements with and manifestations of the consumer space might theoretically create uneasy taste communities, yet the independent record store is able to house diverse music tastes and cater for consumers from many social and economic backgrounds. It is the binding force of an appreciation of 'authentic' record stores that display second-hand aesthetics and the very reification of pluralist musical tastes that creates a world of practice that sustains these stores – not just sustaining independent record stores as economically viable enterprises, but also sustaining their spatial organisation, their aesthetics and the modes of interaction between staff, shoppers and products that constitute the independent store.

In using the word 'practice', it is my intention to recognise the disjunctures that exist between *discourses* on the one hand and actual *practices* on the other. Practices can show that discourses have truthful manifestations in social life, but also that the

discourses fall short of describing the full range of actuated behaviours observable in everyday life (Lave 1993). Practices manifest discursive and non-discursive elements in patterns of behaviour which standardise and make routine the desires, knowledge and understanding that they facilitate. To utilise an observation of the practices constituting social life elicits fruitful data about how consumers conceptualise different retail spaces and create them through practice performance, rather than these places existing as pre-formed teleologies.

A further point from Everts and Jackson which concurs with this research is that “vernacular understandings and contemporary assessments of shopping are *historicized* rather than historical” (2009:932). This is certainly true with the rejection of the bright, slick presentation of high street retailers in favour of one that is meant to be more authentic in its character, commensurate with a space that deals in the personal rather than the impersonal, the significant over the ephemeral, the authentic over the inauthentic. This chimes with the broader concern in the independent music world with creating an oppositional environment and code-of-practice relative to the mainstream (Strachan 2007; Dunn 2012; Williamson and Cloonan 2007). Crewe *et al*’s research participants in the field of retro fashion retail were noted to remark upon “the dilutions present within contemporary trading and contrast this with a purer form of earlier trading” (2003:77). This talk about the dilution of trading environments emphasises how the self-styled alternative retail spaces of the independent music market shun mainstream retail conventions to create distinct spaces according to notions of community, individual expression, and historical continuity. In effect, these retail spaces are key constituents of the scene of independent music, being as they are trans-locally interconnected,

semiotically overproductive markers of difference that are utilised by consumers to express their affinity with other individuals (Shank 1994; Straw 1991).

What keeps people coming back to these places is precisely that they spatially materialise and embody consumer ideals (products, atmosphere, cultural capital) that are absent from other retail sites, and the ability to socialise with like-minded people around physical media is central to this. As with the punk-rock shows in Shank's ethnography of Austin's rock scene, they offer sites of face-to-face identification that are absent elsewhere.

Record stores offer an arena not just for people to create their taste distinctions, but also to display them through interactions with others and through their own purchases in-store. The sociality of the record store is tied to a wider concern of historical continuity and contingent rituals of space and performance in the independent music scene. The atmosphere of the store and the wealth and breadth of information on-hand in the form of physical objects, books and magazines, posters, staff and other consumers, make it a social hub. Here, field-specific cultural capital is paramount (Arsel and Thompson 2010). It can be built-upon, nurtured through interaction with objects, space and people, and appreciated by others. These social acts are uniquely available to collectors in the independent retail environment, and bolster the relationship between them, their practices and the retail space. That this sociality is fostered around particular products brings Chapters 2 and 3 into focus. The spaces of retail are understood in relation to the wider marketplace in which they are situated, and it is the presence of products that people are willing to spend money on by virtue of the authentic reputations of their producers and their physically substantive properties that goes towards authenticating the independent

record store as an appropriate site for exchange.

In the process of enacting shopping spaces, consumers construct relational retail environments. The spaces are not preordained, but are created through consumer practice. Such practices in the contexts of consumer behaviour “should be understood as *social accomplishments* rather than as choices made by sovereign individuals” (Jackson et al 2006:48). They involve cumulative structuring of different spaces and consumers into differentiated categories which are reinforced by continued practice according to these created distinctions. Within these remits of behaviour and practice, individuals acting as constituent members of a particular ‘community of practice’ (Lave 1993) can exercise knowledge and skill. Whilst it has been observed that objects facilitate the creation of common practices and enable the construction of specific forms of social order (Preda 1999), evidently place is a constitutive factor in these creations as well.

In shopping, things, spaces, people and practices are mutually constitutive. Consumer goods are semiotically charged and performative vehicles for cultural capital (Shove *et al* 2007:22-3). In just the same way, the spaces they inhabit are symbolic, performative, and created through practice. The following chapter utilises this recognition of how people, objects and places are mutually constituted to examine the domestic sphere of consumption, where the goods and practices of the independent record store are brought home.

Chapter 5

“It’s the only thing I do well”:

Consumption, Collecting and Domestic Space



Fig 5.1 A detail from collector Chris W’s music room

... this is my only talent or skill, well I don’t know if it’s a skill, but it’s the only thing I do well.
I’m my own personal curator of my own private collection.

Chris W, Record Collector

5.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, the record shop was explored as a social hub, a space for cultivating desires and enacting them, attaining knowledge and executing it, parading one's "(sub)cultural capital" (Jenß 2005:182) in an appreciative environment. I showed how practices centring upon the acquisition of music in this independent retail environment are constructed in opposition to mainstream notions of retail space and musical taste, to form an aspect of the wider cosmology of independence, materiality and aesthetic value of the music marketplace. This chapter brings these discussions through to consumers' homes, where these acquisitions and practices are embedded in the regular ebb-and-flow of everyday life.

The music commodities acquired in the independent retail environment have a sizeable impact upon peoples' homes, and their conception of domestic space. Entering the home is a stage in commodities' social lives (Appadurai 1986); a process in the continuum of consumption practices that enables a transformation of the object into the routines of time and space of the everyday (Shove 2009), altering the object's status as a detached and distant 'commodity' into one more personalised, charged with intimacy and 'singularity' by effecting ownership (Kopytoff 1986; Carrier 1995). Consumption and collecting are processes that do not terminate in the home – disposal, trading, gifting and other forms of loss enable commodities to travel further in their social lives than the home of their consumers¹¹⁷. It is therefore fruitful, when examining collecting and its role

¹¹⁷ For further work on divesting goods from the home, and the understanding of disposal as a 'life-stage' rather than a terminal break for objects, see Thompson 1979; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Reno 2009; Daniels 2009.

in or impact upon domestic spaces, to see the collection and its constituent parts in their wider context – how their value and meaning is affected by continuing change and flow in the broader marketplace. External factors influence the meanings and desirability of different commodities in the home across time. The technological changes that rendered CDs as the industry standard over vinyl records, and subsequently caused CDs and vinyl to appear cumbersome and inelegant next to the MP3 and its associated interfaces, exemplify this process. In James Clifford’s opinion, “collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture, and authenticity” (1988:218). This truism becomes apparent through the homes of my research participants.

In the home, the music collection offers opportunities for display, for creative engagement with commodities and space to define the self, and to create an environment commensurate with that identification. In this chapter, through ethnography conducted with participants in their homes in Austin, I expose common concerns relating to collecting and the domestic space, which bear clear influences from the world of retail. In the lives of these avid consumers and collectors of music, Alison Clarke’s assertion that “The house objectifies the vision the occupants have of themselves in the eyes of others and as such it becomes an entity and process to live up to, give time to, show off to” (Clarke 2001:42) will be interrogated through the use of and relation to the sound objects brought home from the independent retail environment.

5.2 Bringing it all back home: music collections and domestic space

...My point is I'll discover music – discovering music is like a journey for me. I don't necessarily want [anyone] to tell me [what to listen to], I don't want to be force-fed, I want to do it myself. It's trial and error, but I've got it to the point now where 85% of the time I'm right on. And it took me a while to get there... and so that's what I do!

Chris W, music collector

The gregarious nature of music fans was a great asset for this ethnography. For participants in this research, to sit at home with their music collections, and have me – a captive audience at the mercy of their tastes in music – talking to them about their collections and their relationship with music was obviously pleasurable. Each encounter normally included getting a bite to eat, a cool beverage in the Austin heat, and ample time to sit and chat, but this talk seemed hardly to veer away from music for any length of time. My participants, at home with their collections, were eager to engage an interested party in the workings of their musical lives. Chris W (office worker for a water company, 34, single) was but one of these participants, talking with infectious energy and enthusiasm, tempered by occasionally bashful admissions of the excesses to which he had taken his collecting. Daniel Plunkett, the owner of End of an Ear (a record store on South Congress), told me as I came in to his store one day that Chris had seen a stack of my fliers on the counter, and immediately said “Music fan? That’s me!”, pocketing a flier on his way out from the store. Chris’ example provides an ideal starting point for discussing how consumers who negotiate the marketplace of physical music commodities come to

create collections that demand a renegotiation of domestic space through both their physical size and their centrality to participants' recreational practices and self-definition. By detailing expenditures – in terms of time, finances, and leisure practices – this chapter takes up key themes about the role of collections within the home, illuminating issues with other ethnographic examples of participants' domestic engagements with music to engender insights into how consumption practices dictate these spaces' forms and complexities.

After arranging to meet up, Chris would collect me and drive me out to where he lived, a few miles north of the city in Georgetown. Chris was eager to know more about my research, but not out of suspicion as to my motives. He was evidently thrilled at the prospect of being able to talk shop about music and record buying, especially with someone from Europe (many participants took great pleasure in finding out what the marketplace was like in Europe, and how certain American artists and labels including those local to Austin were perceived there). Chris' conversations about music were not limited to nor disproportionately represented by discussions of musical aesthetics and what was 'good' music. Our conversations on the drives out to his home revolved around the best places to buy records in Austin, our experiences in record stores around the world, how we had been spending our time and what had excited us on our ventures into these stores. As I was spending a great deal of time in record stores as part of my fieldwork, and it seemed that Chris was never happier than spending his spare time scouting about stores in Austin, we always had much to talk about, and Chris was very generous in contributing his time not only towards the study, but towards sharing information with me about what he had found, what he had heard about upcoming releases, and so forth.

Concluding one of our meetings, he gave me an LP as a gift to mark our times together and to indulge in a bit of more concrete sharing than the sharing of information on records and stores in Austin¹¹⁸.

Once we arrived at Chris' home, attentions turned immediately to the items he had amassed through an almost twenty year recreational career as a collector. These included new acquisitions, old favourites, rediscovered items, titbits of information and news about music. What intrigued me about these discussions is that they never happened in Chris' living room or porch – they routinely occurred ensconced in a room at the back of his home, a space perhaps eight-by-fifteen feet that was a testament to what Chris considered the rewards of his collecting (**Fig 5.1** and **Fig. 5.2**).

Such is the collection that Chris has accumulated from scouring record stores, he has little option but to pragmatically set aside space to house these personal archives, where he can become lost in these items and, as he put it, “at one” with the collection. Setting aside space is not, however, solely a practical issue for housing thousands of music commodities – it is also, as I suggest, an active process of home-making and creating the ideal aesthetic environment, bringing back home not only the records and CDs themselves but also the aura and funky, grungy atmosphere of the record store encountered in Chapter 4, distilling these commercial qualities into something personal, readily accessible, and ultimately homely.

¹¹⁸ The record in question was a mint condition, unplayed copy of *Lonelyville* by Dave Dudley, what Chris assured me was “bad-ass country” – a record he in fact already had two copies of to begin with.

5.3 Setting aside space



Fig 5.2 Chris W's music room

When I met Chris, he had been a resident in Austin for around two years, and had set up his home a few miles outside of the Austin city centre in an area known as Georgetown, one of the satellite communities in the Austin catchment area. His house was, from entering it, not obviously the home of a dedicated record collector, for its homely comforts were not impinged upon with music memorabilia, or shelves of books, records and CDs. He instead enshrined all of these things in a single room in his house. Many other participants, as I will show, had a similar set-up for their collections. The

room in which Chris kept his music was around the back of his house, through the kitchen area, a converted garage that had been completely overhauled to become what Chris called his “centrepiece”. Shelving dominated the walls, and these shelves burst with the spines of thousands of books, CDs, records and other memorabilia.

This is the only thing I’ve really put money and energy into – I collect a lot of other stuff, like I collect books, I don’t like books or DVDs like I like records though... not like this. This has always been, since 1990, what I liked and what I like to do.

All of the music in Chris’ collection is arranged by genre, with alphabetic subdivisions in each genre category. There’s more he wants to do with his collection along these lines, for one of Chris’ favourite spaces in the world is the record store, and to create a personal space that gives Chris access to this environment in his own home is a part of Chris’ leisure-time, and reward from the efforts to collect materials:

There is a pleasure to organising it too, it’s fun work. This is my centrepiece, it’s my favourite room. Notice there’s no windows... it was a garage... I like that feeling. To me it’s like a basement, it’s *not* but it *feels* like it. All this was built in, all this shelving. So I was looking for a house two years ago, and when I saw this house I thought “I don’t want a garage, I don’t give a crap about my car”... it’s a waste of space for me, but it was perfect for conversion and it had all this [motions towards shelving on which he keeps his hi-fi equipment], and instantly when I saw this, it was like ‘shit!’, y’know? I’m mean *d’uh*, that’s gonna hold DVDs and all my crap, like this is now my DJ table.



Fig 5.3 Chris' "DJ table"

This "centrepiece" room is a source of pride for Chris in his house, an area where he can indulge his love for music and create an environment that accords his passion for collecting with order, discipline, *and* a relaxed air. It was typical of collectors to set aside rooms in their homes where the focal point became the hi-fi, and the predominant *décor* the shelves of CDs, records and books. The small slender room has little space to navigate around the walls of shelving, bookcases and desks cluttered with papers, magazines, CDs, electronic equipment and other music-related items. There is no escaping the morass of colour that banks the walls from floor to ceiling, although Chris asserted that this was not overwhelming, but reassuring, even comforting. For the music fanatic, he thought, there could not be a better thing to have than to be surrounded by

music. As his music room testifies, banks of CDs and LPs, the material manifestations of music, are as important to the collector as the music itself.

Sound, and music in particular, can set a tone and mood in domestic space, and be utilised by consumers as an apparatus for home-making (see Tacchi 1999 on use of radio as a determinant of domestic space and routine); to affect mood and inculcate memories (Anderson 2004 and DeNora 2000:46-74 discuss the ability of music to explicitly or accidentally affect emotions and conjure memories); to facilitate imagination and escapist daydreams (Aubert 2007:1-7 details the local/global connotations that listeners can create through appropriating music in imaginative processes). Whilst the use of sound in consumers' lives and the unpacking of music from commodities is detailed in Chapter 6, what we find in this chapter is the ability for consumers to use musical material culture to create space, where music as it is physically represented (in CDs, tapes and records, hi-fi equipment, books and other paraphernalia) is itself instrumental in defining the domestic. In doing so, the consumer/home-maker is drawing upon wider contexts of circulation and the collecting of others to enable these objects to resituate the purpose and aesthetics of domestic space.

For Chris, his music room is a utilitarian space in his home, the place where his music lives. The bulging shelves and tables full of magazines in this room are important not only to help Chris let the rest of his house take on a more uncluttered air, but also to enable him to enjoy his music in an ideal setting.

I like it, I couldn't do it any other way. I mean I clean, every once in a while, and then it just ends up like this, so as long as it's somewhat usable... I'm a pack-rat and a clutter freak... When I'm here by myself, I can do what I want and I'm real comfortable, and I experiment

too.

The room at the back of the house becomes a place of many activities – the work of cataloguing and filing the collection, the absorption into the music, for contemplation, for daydreaming. It is not strictly an idle space for escapism, and mindless activity. Chris continually refers to the excitement that he gets from this room, and from thinking about it and its contents, and what might yet be added to the collection.

5.4 Stereo Systems and Hi-Fi:

Technology as décor

Walls and shelving full of records and CDs are not the only features of these rooms that impart a special, hallowed air to consumers of the value of their endeavours. The technology of music playback systems also feeds into the ambience and functionality of the collection and its place in the home.

The technology of stereo systems has been a constant source of enjoyment for music consumers since the ‘talking machine’ first appeared commercially at the end of the 19th century. Technologies for the playback and recording of sound have been constantly re-designed and re-branded, with a strong market for ‘audiophile’ quality home systems that mirrors, for example, the production of audiophile-grade vinyl records¹¹⁹. The highest possible quality of sound-reproduction in the home is not the sole

¹¹⁹ ‘Audiophile’ products are concerned with producing the best possible sound reproduction. Vinyl meets audiophile grade typically when it is made from virgin (i.e. non-recycled) vinyl, and is pressed as a heavyweight record (180g, 200g or 220g). For more on consumers and audiophile audio equipment, see

motive for purchasing stereo equipment. Partly, equipment is desirable for its visual appearance. Early phonograph machines were designed to appear as furniture – that is, they were housed in carved wooden cases to appear as conventional pieces of furniture, a design revolutionised by the Victrola record player in the early 20th Century, and familiar to millions as a basic design through to the 1960s when stereo systems were housed in sideboard-style furnishing. These designs obscured the electronics and mechanics of the record player in favour of making objects more akin to other everyday furniture – the record player was a status symbol and high-end audio equipment much prized (Keightley 1996), but it was desired as much for its unobtrusive display as for its audio properties¹²⁰.

In the last twenty years, as digital media formats became *de rigueur*, sleek and minimalist modern designs have become the norm for home stereo systems, as they save space and can fit unobtrusively in living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms. This echoes the older chameleonic furniture designs – stereos in the marketplace for home electronics are for the most part designed to be discreet and unostentatious, blending into the home rather than acting as a centrepiece.

My participants invariably had large and bulky stereo equipment that contravened this trend for inconspicuous machinery. Often, the stereo equipment used in the home was bought second-hand, or handed-down by family. Older stereo equipment still has a strong demand in the second-hand marketplace. For example, many record stores buy and sell old equipment¹²¹. These older stereos were usually made up of multiple components,

Milner 2009:3-11.

¹²⁰ Adorno lamented in his essay *The Curves of the Needle* that the apparatus for domestic music listening of the 1920s-30s had lost their utilitarian technological appearance for “the pretence of bourgeois furniture” (Levin 1990:30).

¹²¹ Internet sites such as Craigslist and eBay have also long been sites of exchange for older sound-reproduction equipment. For more on the sale of vintage electronics on eBay, see Ellis and Haywood 2006.

such as a turntable, cassette deck, CD player and radio tuner all feeding into a power amplifier which then delivers these signals to stand-alone speakers. They were large items that commanded space and attention in the rooms in which they were installed. Rather than being hidden away with other furnishings flanking and obscuring them, they had pride-of-place in the household. As with talking about records and their collections, collectors often reminisced about their older stereo equipment and discussed the merits or failures of their current set-ups. T-Kay (27, archivist) lamented that her home set-up meant that in her room she had to listen to vinyl on headphones using a small portable machine, as the stereo she owned was so bulky it had to reside in the living room (**Fig 5.4**).



Fig 5.4 T-Kay's stereo system in her living room

Clearly, as with the records themselves, the equipment participants used to playback audio was charged with multiple narratives. Stereo equipment elicited discussions about past purchases and set-ups, of homes and histories, as well as of future aspirations for an ideal set-up. Nonetheless, most were extremely happy with their currently installed equipment. David Q, a 43 year old engineer and English émigré from Yorkshire, was particularly pleased with his equipment, its various components having come from around the world, with advice and guidance from an acquaintance in a local audio-equipment retailer. His pleasure with his equipment was mediated through a discussion of his past equipment, to a point where his current domestic set-up acted as an end point in the narrative, having achieved exactly the sonic set-up he had previously only dreamed about:

When I was at school I had a really crappy record player, and then when I was eighteen my parents bought me a Panasonic combined record player and cassette deck that I cranked for my eighteenth birthday party and blew the speakers...

When I moved over here [to the USA from England] I had a boombox, dual cassette deck... then I got a basic Technics CD player, that got stolen, ...

I have more money to spend now, and I'll spend it on one of my favourite things which is listening to music. I bought this and it's gonna last a lifetime, it's really heavy-duty stuff, it's not going to go anywhere, it's not going to break, and it just sounds phenomenal.

David's listening room is minimalist, with low couches and wall hangings – then, along two walls run his music collection, and right in the middle of one separate wall stands the stereo, a large black tower of components, with two speakers on custom stands, all facing the low-level seating opposite. The stereo itself defines this room, for around it

everything else has to negotiate its own space. Sitting in languid comfort across the room from it is for David the best way to take in the atmosphere of his music. He took great pleasure in pulling out CDs and records, turning the sound up to an exhilarating volume, and talking about the sounds we were hearing. Listening to Dub-step artist Burial's 2007 album *Untrue* in such repose, David spoke about how his stereo showed off the quality of the music to a degree his previous stereos had never approached, telling me about the response he was able to get to music through his home set-up.

Burial makes everything sound like it was recorded underwater. To me it sounds like South London singing... it's murky kind of, er, *underwatery* kind of sound. I like a lot of records that sound like they were recorded underwater, ... I have quite aquatic tastes with music (laughter).

The collections owned by these consumers are served by equipment that acts to bring out their full potentials as sound-carrying objects, whilst simultaneously adding to the visual and tactile depth of the collection in the home. Functional though they are, the pleasures begat by hi-fi systems and stereo equipment are also decorative and physically interactive in nature. The interaction with spaces in the home that are set aside for the pursuit and experience of music are wedded to these technologies. The physically substantive charms of CD and vinyl packages so beloved by these collectors are manifest too in the attention paid to these technologies that serve to unlock the music in these discs.

Jacob, a 35 year old employee at End of an Ear Records in Austin, has a similar arrangement in his ground-floor apartment to Chris and David, where one room is completely taken over by music (**Fig 5.5**). Not only are his hundreds of cassette tapes and

thousands of CDs and LPs housed in this room – a converted garage space – but Jacob also keeps his equipment for making music in this space, being an accomplished bass player and budding keyboardist in an experimental four-piece band. His band regularly rehearses in this space, and he records their sessions here. Thus, his music room has a dual function, but both are of course related as musical endeavours. It is in a small living area at the back of his apartment where Jacob reclines on a couch opposite his main stereo system, which serves not only for playing music from LPs and CDs but also for playing back recordings of his band that he has put onto his computer, and to amplify the signal from his television set. Two four-foot high speakers and a stack of hi-fi components are prominent, towering presences in the room, but ensconced in this room with low-level lighting and music pumping out the speaker cabinets, Jacob's demeanour is languorous and relaxed. The imposing stereo equipment is able to transform this space into a relaxed environment where Jacob socialises and soaks up his collection.

T-Kay, a 27-year old working at the University of Austin as a sound archivist, had recently moved to Austin from Los Angeles, and had not been able to bring her entire collection with her. She was therefore able, for the time being, to assimilate her physical music media into her more general shelving space in her bedroom alongside books, DVDs and mementoes. Space in her one bedroom apartment was at a premium, but the records were still given pride-of-place in her shelving space (**Fig 5.6**), and she described their presence as “welcoming... it's just great to know that they are there when you come in the room”.

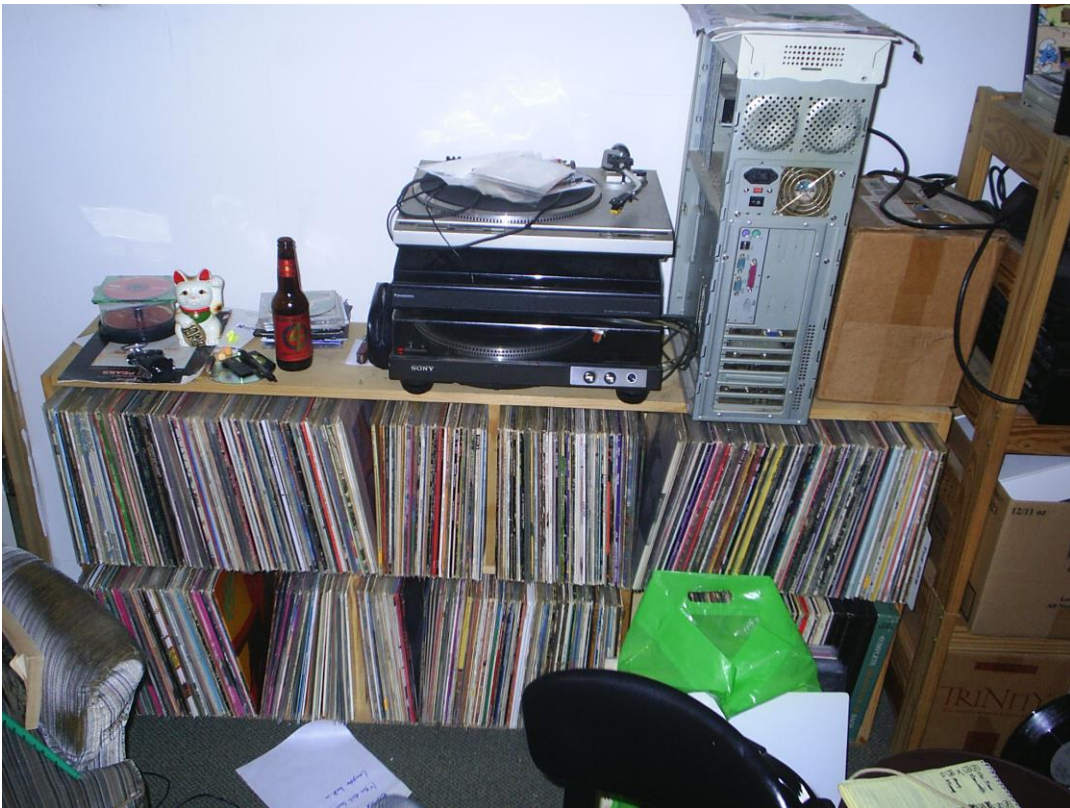


Fig 5.5 Details from Jacob's music room



Fig 5.6 Some of T-Kay's records assimilated into her storage space

Significantly, computers were largely absent from these spaces. Jacob used his computer to playback recordings of his band and to digitise records (often for people who paid him for the service), but most others reasoned that they spent enough time looking at screens in their jobs – doing the same for leisure held no appeal.

These rooms can at first seem quite preposterous rather than prepossessing, with

their cluttered array of objects and music. Yet these spaces are, for the people living with them, sources of comfort and play. There was nary a participant who could not put their hand in an instant upon an item they sought amidst the clutter. Items that had entered into the orbit of the collection went through a process of assimilation into this space that led to their exact location being easily mustered.

5.5 A Process of Assimilation

These are my new records, meaning the last 2 or 3 months, that I haven't, I mean I still gotta check 'em out, so usually I am just picking out a bunch and checking 'em out... I mean, I've got 20 CDs there, maybe 40 records there, there's no way I can listen to all of that shit in one night! I try to work through it slowly, but I overwhelm myself, I get too excited.

The new additions to Chris W's collection enter first into a sort of purgatory. They are stacked separately from the rest of the collection on shelving near the CD and record players, and only when they have been listened to and digested are they allowed to gravitate towards their places in the main collection, amidst the myriad of items arranged alphabetically and by genre. It is a way for Chris to keep track of what he has got – and to keep an eye on his expenditures, which he admits can sometimes get out of hand; as he put it, he has spent “a lot of money on it, I haven't eaten because of it, it's silly but, y'know... If I lived in Austin [rather than Georgetown], I would be in deep shit. 'Cause I'd be spending even more than I do”.

Chris not only has ideas about how he consumes in the home, and rituals such

as the filing of records apart from the main collection before they move through an initial process of listening and evaluating. He also attempts to prescribe order to how he shops and searches for records by relating these desires to the collection he has already amassed, although often spontaneity and Chris' heat-of-the-moment excitability disrupts the neat order that he would ideally impose upon his shopping habits. He takes lists to control spending, and ensure he checks for all that he currently wants, but he is able to remember this without the list, as he showed recounting a recent expedition:

...like when I went to End of an Ear last week, Balmoray has a new CD, actually I bought the record and I wanted the CD – same thing, so I have the CD and the record! [I] remembered that, then I remembered the Mercedes, bought that, but that's it, everything else was just looking through stuff. Oh, and I remembered Big Youth, this reggae guy, really bad-ass, awesome dude. Yeah, then I just look through stuff.

This process of 'looking through stuff' is generally referred to amongst record enthusiasts as 'crate digging' – pouring through masses of records, often including many that are completely unknown to the browser, in the hope of finding one or two that stand out for a variety of possible reasons. Artwork, the name of the producer or a certain musician, the record label issuing the music, and a myriad of other possible features of a record can make it suddenly jump out and appeal to a crate digging consumer.

It's funny – what does attract me... like artwork will attract me, certain record labels will attract me like Revenant – they don't put out anything that's bad, like, everything they do is good. Same for like Sundazed, which is a reissue label also – they really do good shit, I can't really argue with them. Artwork, really is a big thing – and the more humble it is the more it

appeals to me... Art... will just attract me to something...

The way that Chris chooses records is echoed by other participants. The multiple factors of record shop recommendations, artwork, production credits, reliable record labels, longstanding wishlists and favourite artists cultivate inquisitiveness regarding individual commodities. These are considered desirable to the consumer in relation to their collection at home. The negotiation of shopping spaces examined in the last chapter can be seen to be dictated by what is required in the collection at home, whether it be music that would add to the breadth and diversity of the collection, complements other materials, or act as ‘centrepiece’ items. Then, once in the home, these factors can all be unpacked and deployed in the collection. For example, Chris’ favourite album is Terry Allen’s 1979 2-LP art-country masterpiece *Lubbock (On Everything)*, and it is present in *three* different copies in his collection. Two are for playing, and another – a rare promotional copy – is framed on the wall of his music room. The artwork on music packaging thus can become installed in the home as decoration expressive of this love for music in ways that deviate from the intuitively pragmatic and utilitarian display in shelving. This is particularly true when the items on display such as Chris’ promotional copy of *Lubbock (On Everything)* are individual items that act as “showcase” pieces for the rest of the collection (Shuker 2010:51).

How the collection impacts upon the home is therefore carefully ruminated upon and constructed by collectors to suit their idea of how best to incorporate music commodities as aesthetic contributors to domestic space. Gwendolyn (age 30, sales assistant), who regularly attends punk rock gigs and sports t-shirts adorned with her favourite bands, decorates her flat with posters from concerts and reproduction album art

as she adores alternative rock music's visual aesthetic as well as how it sounds. As she shares her apartment with another woman, she has to make compromises in what gets displayed in the living area, but her bedroom is overflowing with these musical visuals. So enamoured is Gwendolyn with the imagery of album artwork, she places her vinyl collection to sit in boxes with the full face of LP sleeves visible in the room, rather than having only the spines visible side-on. She shuffles the records at the front of the boxes in order to have different LPs in display on rotation, depending on what she wishes to look at.

Scott, a late-40s graphic designer and artist who has a claim to fame as a founding member of legendary punk band The Butthole Surfers, is a large fan of Alice Cooper and has amassed a great amount of paraphernalia and memorabilia including everything from records and box-sets to signed items and lunchboxes. He has also created artwork that he places around his home in South Austin featuring images of Cooper. His home – a minor tourist spot on the *Keep Austin Weird* trail thanks to his back yard decorated with all manner of disposed items from doll parts to old golf clubs – is saturated with images drawn from his love for the macabre and humorously self-effacing image that Cooper projects in his own work.



Fig 5.8 Scott with his fan-art of Alice Cooper

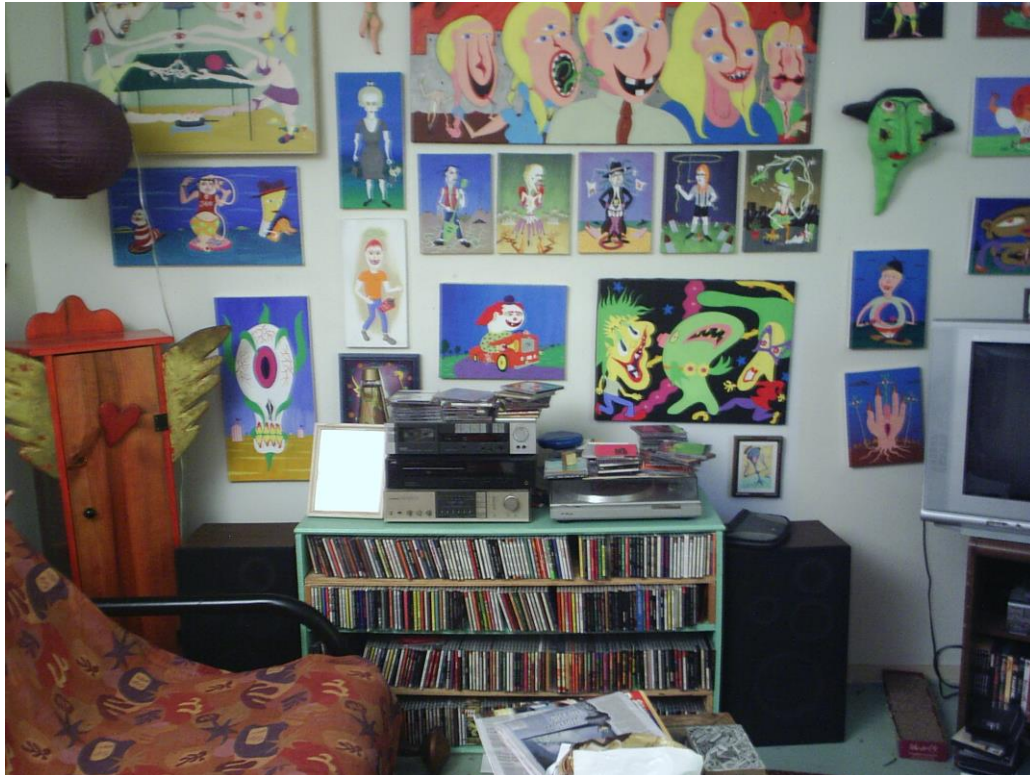


Fig 5.9 Scott's hi-fi system and living room

Scott's dedication to one artist over others does not mean he has a slender music collection of other artists and genres. He listens widely through his collection, local radio and regularly attending concerts to a variety of musics, yet he admits that Cooper's visual style is one that has expanded to have a life of its own in his home. The impact of collecting upon his home-space is suggestive of the role that collecting has in wider social and recreational practices. The collection can be confined to a room, as with Chris, but the enjoyment of physical music media and its imagery affects wider engagements with popular culture and the home. Scott favours satirical, quirky and surreal facets of human expression, from literature to cinema and painting to music, which he believes he was introduced to through his interest in Cooper's work. Bringing the collection home is therefore not just about 'housing sound', but also 'sounding the house' by expanding upon and liberating its physical, tactile qualities and creatively assimilated these into the domestic space.

For Jacob, the record store employee, and Matt L (38, married, teacher) the record store owner-in-waiting (Matt anticipates opening his own store in the near future), the junky second-hand clutter of the record store is seized upon as an inspiration for their music collections' expressive qualities in the home. Others, such as Scott and Gwendolyn, use their collections as inspirations for decorating their domestic spaces according to the visual elements they cherish most about these music commodities.

The multiple engagements with collections-as-domestic-space highlighted thusfar in this chapter are testament to the creative engagements of fans with media (Peterson 2003; Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002), and for the possibilities for collections to be instructive of the distribution and flavour of domestic space. This latter insight contradicts a notion

that the collection's role and distribution would be dictated by pre-existing norms of domestic composition and layout. The engagement with physical music media can be seized upon by consumers to inform their domestic environment, to form a 'centrepiece' of expression in the home.

In these cases where large amounts of physical music are collected, and peripheral memorabilia too is savoured and accumulated, consumers are aware of social stigma that see this sort of behaviour as aberrant, detached from everyday normality. To sequester oneself away in the pursuit of objects has long been associated with excess, and this sort of 'anti-materialism' is historically a large part of modern Western consumer-culture thinking, that rampant consumerism of this sort is a negation of other 'normal' social responsibilities, something akin to an ailment rather than an achievement (Belk 1995). This stereotyping is acknowledged by collectors; but they consider that living with the spoils of their pursuits is creative and contextually sound if it is kept in check and not given free-reign to run riot in their lives. There exists therefore a dialectic of anxiety in the practice of collecting music, where one must forge a balance between proper and improper conduct, excess and necessary satiation of desire, whereby collectors come to construct themselves relative to the extremes of the 'good' and the 'bad' collector. Whilst 'rarity' is considered the high to the low of the 'fetish', what links the two concepts is essentially their status as "the 'others' of the commodity" (Pels 1998:92). Therefore collecting has to negotiate the precarious relationship between that which is socially sanctioned and that which is classed as aberrant in dealing with the 'others' of consumption.

5.6 Inadequate or Excessive?:

The *Ideal* Collector

I actually told myself that because I spend too much money on music because I love music, I actually told myself that with vinyl each record gets a total thorough listen before I go out and buy more. Like right now I've told myself I'll buy one new piece of vinyl a week, though it'll probably end up being 2 or 3. I've told myself I'm not going to buy things just to fill out a collection or because of that commodity fetishism – I'm actually gonna sit down and give each of them a listen.

David Q

Chris W, like many other collectors I met in Austin, maintained a modesty about his collection throughout the time I spent with him, and the first thing he said to me as we first entered his music room was “I bet you’ve met some people with proper collections though, right?” Whilst his collection is not like, for example, legendary Maryland collector Joe Bussard’s bunker of 25,000 scarce and valuable 78rpm records¹²², Chris seems to feel that his collection operates in a world apart from these collectors and as such might be inferior to them. Yet he insists that the collection is where he is most comfortable, and that he doesn’t strive to be “*that kind*” of collector, a semi-fictional hoarding character, detached from reality. When End of an Ear employee and avid collector Jacob met up with me on one occasion, he confessed that at first he was apprehensive about meeting to discuss his collection. He told me that he wondered if he was the kind of collector I might be looking for (something he construed as being the obsessive fetishist), and felt uncomfortable that he might thus be identifying himself as

¹²² Bussard’s collection of 78rpm records has been the subject of a 2006 documentary by Dust-to-Digital Records (*Desperate Man Blues*), and he has repeatedly provided records for use in re-issues by companies such as Dust-to-Digital, Revenant and Tompkins Square, including many of their sets featured in Chapters 2 and 3.

such by acting as a participant in my research. Many participants disparaged the hermit-like fetishist, tucked away from the world with their obscenely valuable and rare records, and sought instead to present themselves as good collectors who did not unduly obsess over and fetishise the commodities that served their collections. The discomforts they felt with such a possible definition of their own practices were palpable.

Many types of collectors who have been studied display a fear of appearing amateur, ineffectual and unorthodox in their collecting, or on the other extreme of being fetishistic and self-indulgent. These fears over how others perceive the individual collector can be attributed to the generalisation that “Collecting is consumption writ large” (Belk 1995:1). Collecting has been defined as a pursuit of inessential luxury goods, and a continuing quest for a self-completion within the marketplace, such that personal collecting is intimately tied with the marketplace. It can have what Belk perceives to be the negative effect of disengaging the individual from the wider consumer marketplace, as they myopically hone in on inessential goods, severing them from their normal utilitarian purposes to serve the collector and his or her whims.

The assumption Belk supports – that collections comprise of items that are uprooted from their rational and utilitarian everyday uses – has not found favour with others investigating collecting. Gregson and Crewe (2003:187) show through their research into collectors who scour second-hand stores for treasures that “the relation between individual collecting practices and consumption-as-is is rather messier and altogether more blurred” than Belk suggests. Commodities procured for function, leisure and recreation might end up becoming part of a collection that has a practical use-value in everyday life rather than solely having value as a non-utilitarian collection.

Furthermore, the decorative display of collected objects is itself a form of usage rather than an act of uprooting objects from having a function in society, inasmuch as the collection “continues to be embedded in everyday consumption practices” (*ibid.*). This relates with Chapter 3 wherein explicitly designed objects are considered apart from other objects (Attfield 2000) which might lead them to be displayed and appreciated on the basis of their design. Many objects that are sought out and acquired by collectors are resurrected from being cheap curios in sites of second-hand exchange into being singularised, ‘aura’-filled items. This singularisation is achieved through the regulated purchasing habits of the collector, elevating the item from being something that has outlived its use in someone else’s life.

Many collections are ‘used’ in the sense that they are part of the household and therefore by rote part of the everyday interaction with the home of the collector. However, collections may consist of items frequently used by the collector, and the music collection is surely an example *par excellence*. Belk highlights figures that have collected beer cans, nutcrackers, and other such items to show how collection disrupts the normal everyday use of objects, but with the music fan, their collection of music is a living part of their world and is most certainly a part of their everyday life. Most important here is the fact that the music collection is one that is an active presence in the life of the collector, whose objects are used according to their expected societal function.

Music collections are not just collections of music-playing media, but often consist too of other material products that surround the music-carriers themselves. Of course, there are the record sleeves, inserts, booklets and boxes, fanzines, magazines and reference books, but other collectors can find other aspects of music ephemera worth

collecting as part of what is otherwise a collection of utilitarian items. Scott's Alice Cooper collection extends to such memorabilia as action figures and lunch boxes, not used for their intended purposes but kept as a material archive of Scott's affections for the artist and his music.



Fig 5.10 An Alice Cooper lunchbox from Scott's Collection

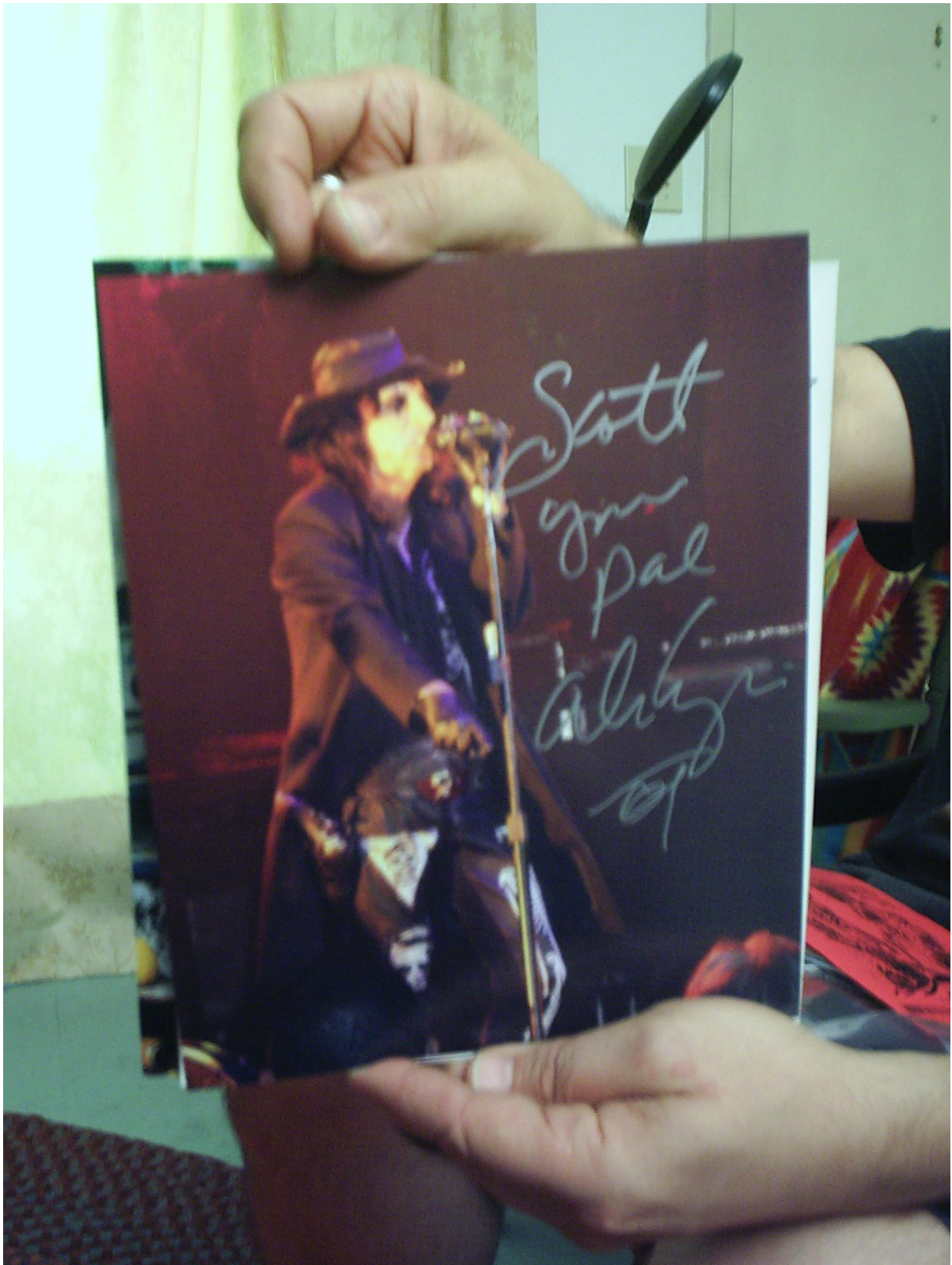


Fig 5.11 A photo personally signed for Scott by Alice Cooper

Participants occasionally became visibly embarrassed as they related some of their quirks concerning items they collected outside of just music media. There was a fear, evident in their responses, that these quirks could be construed as indications that they had strayed from the path of reasonable, normative collecting and consumption into the more dissident arenas of fetishism and abstraction from reality. David Q even went so far as to explicitly state his prime directive in collecting is to oppose the fetishising of marketplace goods: “I’ve told myself I’m not going to buy things just to fill out a collection or because of that commodity fetishism – I’m actually gonna sit down and give each of them a listen”. Others had a more awkward time disentangling their practices from the spheres of excess. This was especially true for Matt L (in his late 30s, Matt provides freelance production assistance to record labels on their releases in addition to teaching English literature), who confided that when some people saw his collection their impression of the collection, and consequently of Matt, made him feel alienated by its size:

...my friend Mike came into my house once and he said, he went upstairs to where I had the music, somehow I managed to fit it all into one room. And he saw it, and he said, “When I walk into this room, it makes me feel like I’ve just discovered where you hide the bodies” (pause) Um, so I laughed, uncomfortably, and I never forgot it. And it became a realisation just how alien I really am to him, by having this. (**Fig 5.12**)

Matt started off almost immediately the first time we talked by stating that he was not a ‘serious collector’¹²³ – a statement that might be hard to swallow for some

¹²³ Miller (1998c:67-8) found similar anxieties amongst shoppers in his ethnography based on households

observers looking in at a man with such a sizeable music collection (by his own estimation, Matt has amassed “probably 12,000 CDs and probably, I don’t know, 7,000 LPs and 2,000 78s, there’s probably 1,000 cassettes and other things... not to mention collections of fanzines and magazines”). These records have been acquired from a great multitude of sources, and it is safe to say that the collecting process has come to define Matt’s domestic environment and, shortly, his employment: “I’m pretty all over the map, to be honest. I buy records at shows, I order directly from the labels, I am in fact going to be moving to Cleveland and will be setting up a record store in my basement, so I’ll be buying from distributors soon. But I realise that I’m acting like a record store in the collecting of my records, so why not buy three copies and sell the other two to fund my disease?”

The “disease”¹²⁴ is acknowledged in spite of Matt stating he is not a ‘good’ collector. Matt is a friend of Chris King, whose work is detailed in Chapters 3 and 4 as a producer and engineer working on transfers of pre-war 78rpm recordings for commercial release. Both men collect 78rpm records, but King owns “the right ones” in Matt’s opinion, placing him further up the hierarchy of collectors¹²⁵. To Matt, his own collecting is located “at the scavenger end of collecting, and Chris King is at the elite end of collecting. Y’know, I will probably find more bargains in a year, [but] he’s willing to put his money and his trading collection where his mouth is, and will then turn more good records into more good records into *more* good records, by trading with the top

in a London street and their shopping habits. His shoppers contested that they weren’t “real” shoppers, insisting that others were more appropriate for study. Miller felt that these persons were distancing themselves from an imaginary other “engaged in pure self-indulgence following the dictates of individualised hedonism...” (*ibid.*:96).

¹²⁴ Roy Shuker notes in his study of record collecting that many of his interviewees used similar pathological metaphors for collecting desires – 2010:43.

¹²⁵ Dougan (2006) and Hamilton (2007) detail the formation of the canon of blues records and the collectors who were instrumental in establishing the early hierarchy of 78rpm record collectors.

collectors”.

There is an apprehensiveness concerning Matt’s cognition of the legitimacy of his collection. Although I was introduced to Matt through his collecting of vintage 78rpm records, he asserted that he is “as voracious as a listener can be” and that his tastes were not solely restricted to rural folk musics. This signifies the return of a recurring theme amongst participants; that they do not wish for their musical identity to be bound to a specific genre or subculture. Rather, they see their music listening as an opportunity to come to the world with open ears and an open mind, to indulge in many different types of musical engagement, and to build a collection that encompasses as wide a scope of music genres as possible. Being part of the scene open to new music, and displaying that through the consumption and domestication of objects, is important to Matt’s image of himself as a music collector.

Wide-ranging listening, articulated by many genres in the domestic collection, is a key feature of collectors in the independent marketplace. Genre is something many collectors attempt to embrace in playful yet reverential ways, to espouse polyphony and variety over strict adherence to genre-bound marketing and listening that has been seen to be the domain of the mainstream industry. Absorbing many genres allows for greater individuality for a consumer compared with being genre bound (like the indie-rock ‘hipsters’ mentioned in the preceding three chapters and analysed by Arsel and Thompson 2010). Frith proposes that genrefication is implicitly related to marketplace manoeuvring and manipulation:

Genres are used by record companies as a way of integrating a conception of music (what does it sound like?) with a notion of the market (who will buy it?). Musician and audience are considered

simultaneously, as a way of ‘defining music in its market’ and ‘the market in its music’.

Frith 1996:76

This is another indicator as to why people listen widely – the broader their tastes, the less likely they are to have been conditioned or to be manipulated by corporate interests, and the more autonomy they embody as independent actors. As such, the adoption of music and marketing identities outside from the mainstream such as a varied and polyphonic roster of musical genres has become a signature of independent music labels and consumers. For consumers, this openness to genres is articulated in their collections, listening habits and concert attendance. As Matt L explained to me: “I was just listening to Dusty Springfield, but y’know I went to a noise rock show with these kids from San Francisco who came through, I know absolutely nothing about them, and they had handmade cassettes and CD-Rs that they were selling, y’know they were playing like broken electronics really loudly with much enthusiasm. So I’m pretty much all over the map.” These statements are brought in as if to try to pacify the accusations that Matt would otherwise level at himself as an “alienated” individual; a search to legitimise his collection by situating it in other more social practices. Genred listening would be a limit to this sociality if it involved solely meeting people into one type of music, but listening to multiple music genres acts as a broad set of launching pads for social encounters and aesthetic rewards.

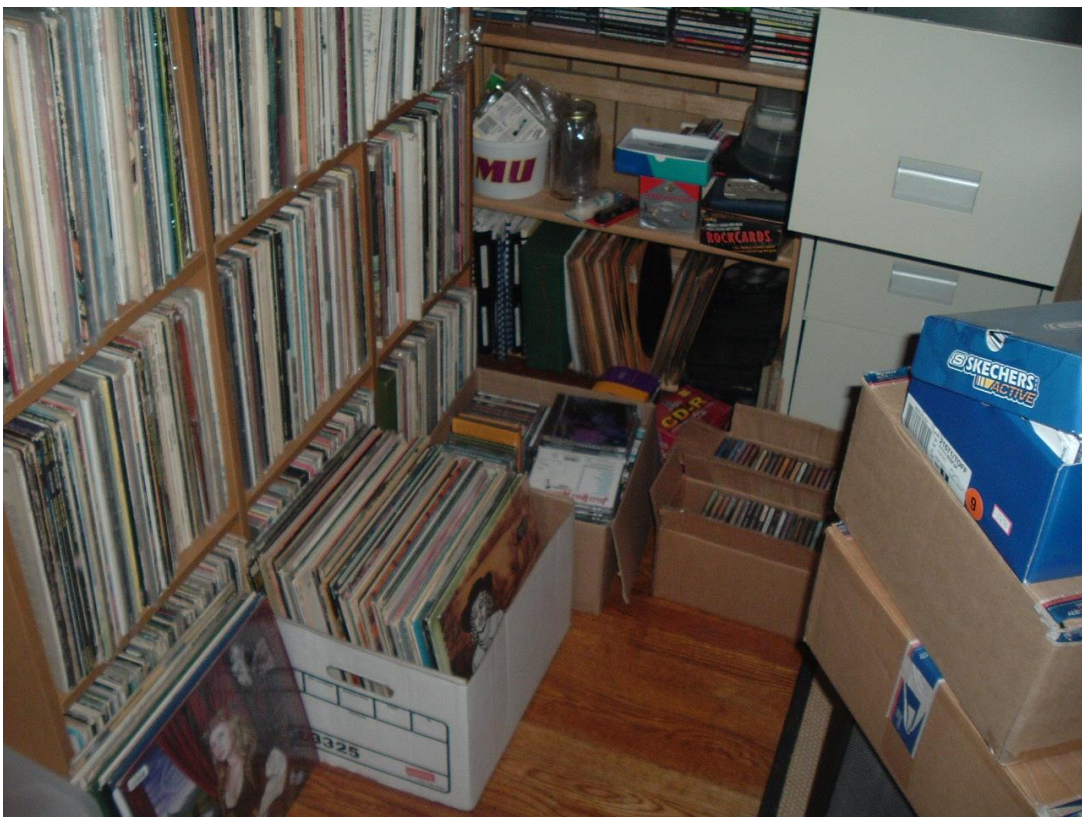


Fig 5.12 – “Where the bodies are hidden” – Matt L’s collection

Another noticeable sense of unease came from Chris W, where in his music room there were several A4 sheets of paper at the back of the room on a cluttered table, onto which were stuck the long thin plastic sticker-labels that are used to seal the top ridges of CD cases (**Fig 5.13**). These exhibit, typically, the barcode, catalogue number, artist, title and label issuing the CD. There were several sheets of paper onto which Chris had stuck these seals, for what purpose he seemed at a loss to explain. But it was apparent that these too were a part of his collection as he envisioned it – they were proof to Chris that he owned the items in question, and another way of engaging with the items that entered his home.

In a way, this quirk exposed a greater truth about the relationship between the collector and their collection. Chris occupied himself with his collection in a variety of ways aside from just using the records and CDs as functional, utilitarian items to be heard for their musical content. He savoured the smell of the records, pored over their covers, acclimatised them to his collection by moving them through a chain of spaces, looked at the rows of spines facing out from the shelving, catalogued his collection on his computer using spreadsheet software – the retaining of such packaging ephemera as the spine seals fits into this extended performance of grooming and habituating items into his personal space. The collecting of plastic seals highlighted his love for many aspects of collecting and label-related materials. Several of the seals on these A4 sheets, for instance, bore the graphic for Arhoolie Records, one of Chris’s favourite record labels. That these plastic stickers are ephemeral packaging items that Chris has hung onto is not without logic, although Chris kept chuckling to himself saying “I do these things... don’t ask me why!... that’s what it is, it’s a testament to my excess.”



Fig 5.13 A sheet of Chris' collection of stickers from CD packaging

Recorded music is grounded in and surrounded by material culture, from packaging to advertisements, promotional items and different pressings, artist-related memorabilia to press reviews. All of these items are collectable, and can add value to the records to which they pertain, although the same cannot be said for Chris' habitual retention of these plastic seals. There is no marketplace for these – they exist for Chris as a part of his collection that serve his personal whims and tastes, although he struggled to come to terms with why it makes sense to him to collect them at all. Walter Benjamin recognised in his essay *Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting* that such peripheral objects can become part of the collection: “There is no living library that does

not harbour a number of booklike [sic] creations from fringe areas. They need not be stick-in albums or family albums, autograph books or portfolios containing pamphlets or religious tracts; some people become attached to leaflets and prospectuses, others to handwriting facsimiles or typewritten copies of unattainable books; and certainly periodicals can form the prismatic fringes of a library” (1968:68).

Chris’ music room is not a social hub for all of his friends. It is only those who share his passion for music that socialise with him in this space, listening to music and chatting. Unlike his living room where other guests are entertained, the back room is more private and set apart for the function of musicking, to borrow from Christopher Small (1998). It is therefore a semi-private space where he finds time to regale himself with the fruits of his collecting, and it is not, as he puts it, a collection to impress others or pander to their tastes. He is aware of the outside marketplace, and what is considered cool or desirable for music listeners at the present time, and he has regular contact with other people in the marketplace. Many of his friends also collect records, and he chats often with staff at record stores. This collection, however, is a part of Chris’ domestic space that has to be how he wants it. He asserts that even though visitors often come into his music room, he has not set up the room with anyone other than himself in mind. For example, in discussing when people come over and are brought through to listen to or select some music, Chris and I talked about how his records were arranged. He has a good enough spatial knowledge of this room and its contents to know where things are, and is able to navigate the records without being strict about their sub-organisation.

If someone comes over [and they’re browsing], I’d like them to have a good enough thing where they can find stuff... but I’m really not thinking about them, I’m thinking about myself.

This collection is completely for me.

This last statement neatly defines the collection – it is a personally constructed entity for Chris and Chris alone. In the confines of this room, in his own home, surrounded by the yields of his collecting, he is rewarded in a way that affects him and brings comfort into his life. The wider scene of tastemaking and reissues guides the process of creating a collection, but this collection is a unique assemblage of artefacts and the curatorial control over it ultimately rests with the individual collector. It is not made for others to use – “it is completely for me”.

Making themselves the “curators” of their own collections, record collectors are free to interact with the music around them by concocting their own editorial styles, and to privately engage with music in a way that others might find unorthodox. David Q’s collection is kept on shelving alphabetically, with all genres mixed together, with movie soundtracks in this collection arranged by first letter, and only compilations are set aside in a separate section. Most collections are arranged according to genres of music, something that David feels pigeon-holes music too stringently, and grates with his visions of ideal musical practice. He has even entertained some strikingly unorthodox methods of display and storage:

Most of my friends have them by genre, and I didn’t understand why, I’ve had them by genre before and I’ve also had them by what I listen to most often... But at the end of the day, it all goes alphabetical because that’s the only way I can find stuff. I did toy with the idea one time of arranging them all by the colour of their spines, like in a rainbow, because I figured that if I thought about it hard enough I can remember what the colour of the spine is for every record I have. Which is weird because, yeah, I can remember the

cover, but it doesn't always translate into the same colour on the spine. But I figured I could always remember, y'know for Island records, they always have the Island Records logo up at the top... I figured I'd be able to find things pretty quickly if I had them arranged by spine colour (laughs), but that would be, like, a massive project to do.

As mentioned previously, Chris W passes new recordings through a period of transience before they are amalgamated into the larger collection (**Fig 5.14**). David Q too passes new arrivals to his collection through a space of habituation before they are filed alongside the bulk of the collection: "New stuff I tend to kind of rack separately, to the rack to the left, because it's still current and I'm still listening to it a lot and I know where to find it quickly".

For Chris, the new arrivals (200 to 250 CDs and 80 or so LPs) have been acquired in the previous three months or so, but when Chris comes in to listen to music he often has a very clear idea of the music he wishes to listen to at that time, and consequently the new arrivals can be glossed over in favour of other items in the collection for months. Many of these recordings are second-hand, but there are dozens of others that are brand new, still factory-sealed in their shrink-wrap, waiting to be opened when the moment comes to take them in.

Chris explained that there was a reason for having a stock of brand-new discs awaiting their time to be played:

All of them are stuff I wanna listen to. They're not just shit. There's a reason for it – it's a bizarre reason, but there is a reason for it. The mentality is, if I ever get in a situation where I cannot get any new music, I'll have this as a backup, so if I'm just burned and I can't buy any new music – part of the thing for me is buying, like I have this, and I can open it, listen to it,

smell it, touch the new disc.

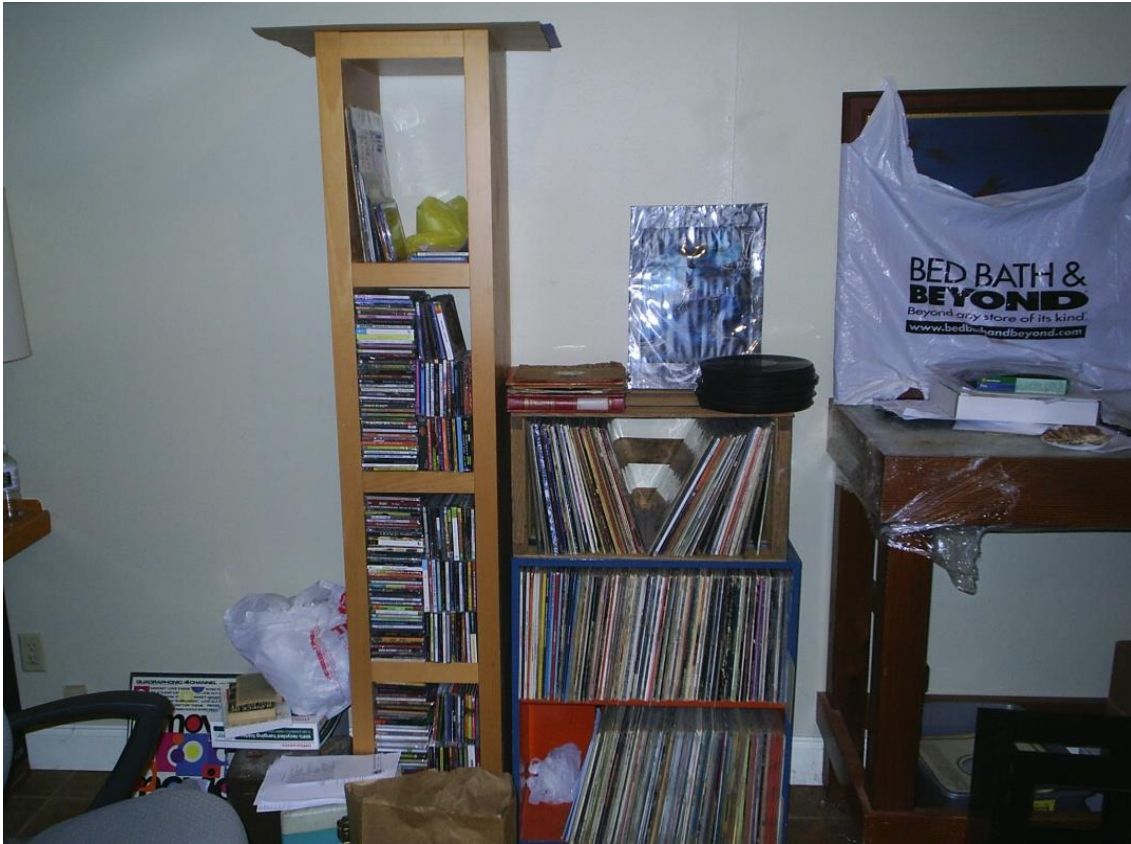


Fig 5.14 Chris' new arrivals shelves

Thinking about this, I later asked Chris about what it feels like for him to purchase records, and we came back to these unopened discs:

Oh yes, it's exciting to buy this stuff... the actual, well, it's kinda like a new discovery maybe... like the Big Youth I was talking about. Now this is in my home, and this could be 30, 34 tracks of bad-ass-ness, of just amazing music that I did not have before and it might be 24 tracks of just great dance tracks and party music, and it's something that I really think it is worth me spending money on, and I want to spend money on it. And it excites me to have this in my house, and in my collection.

Jacob too unearthed a few still-sealed items in his collection that caused pangs of embarrassment, but he reasoned with one LP of African high-life music that its market value was increasing while he held onto a scarce copy of the LP in still-sealed mint condition (from the \$20 he paid for it to \$200 when we discussed the record). Therefore, holding onto it still-sealed was a sound investment, yet with other still-sealed items he expressed an urge to remedy the situation at the earliest possible convenience so that he could listen to the music, and liberate it from its present defunct state.

These collectors invest considerable amounts of time and money acquiring music in great quantity at low prices, rather than splurging a lot of money on a single recording. There's the thrill of pawing through the \$1 racks in record stores and coming out with several recordings that all promise to be new discoveries – and if they prove underwhelming, consumers don't feel like they have lost out. But given the amount of time that Chris spends digging through crates of records at stores such as End of an Ear, Waterloo, and MusicMania, he is confident with his ability to choose many good records and few that end up being disappointments. With the brand new material that is waiting to be opened, Chris can bring home with him the thrill of the chase, the point of purchase being stretched out to when he can engage with the music by peeling back the packaging and taking in the music – and the overall package – later.

At one time, Chris and I were talking about these still sealed records and taking a look through them, and chatting about the music. A new release by legendary jazz bassist Charlie Haden, *Rambling Boy* on Decca, caught my eye. In spite of being known as a jazz player, Chris told me that Haden came 'straight from an Appalachian bluegrass background', something of which I was never aware, and that the record was an *homage*

to his parents and the bluegrass and country musics with which he was raised. As we talked about the record Chris became very enthusiastic about it, and it took me a little while before I realised the record in question was still sealed, unopened, unlistened to, yet Chris knew the music inside.

“Oh yeah, but I have the CD that’s opened!” said Chris, followed by a hearty laugh. “But I will get around to listening to it on vinyl”.

5.7 Postscript: Life after the Collection

In this chapter’s introduction, I suggested that the domestic space is not itself the end-point for commodities. Processes of divestment, disposal and gifting offer paths for commodities to travel as postscripts to their time with any given consumer. Music collecting is intimately tied with second-hand spaces – many releases are acquired as second-hand items, and independent music retail spaces impart a certain fusty, dilapidated air that is appropriated by consumers as the desired atmosphere for their own collections¹²⁶. It is therefore understood by collectors that their music collections will be circulated again in the second-hand cycle of consumption. This may be a practical issue when space-saving becomes a prerogative, such as when moving house (the bother with having to relocate box after box of records, CDs and books when moving house was repeatedly commented upon by participants). Certain items in the collection might have outstayed their welcome and become no longer desired, and others might have been

¹²⁶ Refer to Chapter 4 for a discussion of the record store as a space of second-hand retail, and a discussion of second-hand aesthetics in the music marketplace. For more on second-hand retail, see Gregson & Crewe 2003; Gregson, Crewe and Brooks 2002; Palmer and Clark 2005; Palmer 2005; Straw 2000

superseded by superior copies. Here, music is re-routed back into the second-hand arena for others to browse, be it in thrift stores or as stock sold to record stores. In other instances, duplicates or undesired items are passed on as gifts, such as when Chris gave me an LP of which he had two copies.

David Q's collection of LPs has become a permanent fixture in his décor, a welcoming and homely sight that he does not wish to diminish by ridding himself of any of his records. "I would never sell them", he told me, "they look cool, just all lined up like that". His collection is sizeable – hundreds of LPs and thousands of CDs – and it is having this collection as a distinctive aesthetic space in the home that precludes his ability to rid the collection of its undesirable elements. Amongst these are records he holds onto for nostalgic reasons, such as those he picked up in his youth in the 1970s, and others that he keeps for 'reference' purposes – releases deemed to be 'essential' amongst critics and the wider audience¹²⁷, which David holds onto solely to have and know them rather than to enjoy them. As he put it, "I've been buying things not because I want to listen to them but because they're things I think I should have".

David at one time owned a great many cassette tapes for the sake of their portability during a time in his life that was dominated by travelling, but once he settled in Austin he found himself able to get rid of them in a way he finds extremely difficult with CDs and LPs: "I've never sold albums – I think I sold my cassettes because I knew that I was done with that format and was never gonna play cassettes again... but the cassettes, it felt like I didn't have any kind of emotional connection to that format. I feel like I have more of an emotional connection to CDs than I had to cassettes, but I have way more of an emotional connection to albums [LPs]."

¹²⁷ See Kärjä (2006) for an analysis of popular music canon formation.

The physical properties of these commodities dictates to a large extent the emotional resonance that David perceives in them. The material properties of music commodities dictate their durability and functionality, as well as their market and emotional value to consumers. David's reminiscences led him to conclude that "[cassettes] were kind of disposable. They felt cheap and plasticity, and like, just toss them away. But tape will get messed sometimes, stretched and whatever. They were ugly little things. Those little plastic cases were worse than CDs, weren't they?"

As well as being a self-confessed "pack rat", Chris knows that he cannot absorb everything that comes into his collection, and that some recordings are not worth hanging onto. He told me that if a record "really sucks" he puts it aside with others that he is unsure about, and then they end up in a local thriftstore as he feels they would not be suitable stock for dedicated record stores to attempt to re-sell.

Chris also has a firm idea of what it is he would like to happen to his collection after his life with it is over:

But, I don't think of it as an investment for my financial future. I think of it as a different kind of investment – I want to give it eventually to a radio station somewhere, like in a... a radio station where they'd need it, not a KUT or a, not a station in Austin or in New York, not a station with a million records. Give it all up to some place, pick a town in the middle of Idaho, y'know with like 10,000 people – that's the kind of town that needs it. Or an Indian reservation or a, y'know, something. That's the investment that I think of it as, I'm thinking of it as – at some point some place is gonna have a pretty good record collection, and it's gonna be musicians and DJs and more than likely they'll take care of it.

The special investment that Chris has made in his record collection – in terms of

time, money spent, setting aside space for it, emotional currency – haunts his vision of its future. Embedded in his collecting practice is a distinct notion of time; that one day he would like to complete a series of records he’s been collecting; that certain albums being released soon are going to be bought and enter into his collection; that hitherto unattended items will be listened to and experienced thoroughly. Time, clearly, also conspires with loss and decay. This example highlights how, with loss, there are still efforts to prevent decay. Chris reasoned that if he gave his collection to a public library it would not be cared for by those who curated it or borrowed items (as he colourfully described it, “people treat shit like crap in the library”). To entrust his collection to people who would not invest a similar emotional attachment to it that he has, and would by implication not take the same meticulous care over his collection, does not sit well with Chris. He reasons, however, that a radio station would be grateful for and protective of his collection, for “You don’t go into D-J-ing music if you don’t care for music”. This “care for music” is evidently not just about appreciating sounds and listening, but also attending to the physical music media appropriately, and respecting the will of the original collector whose efforts have incubated the collection.

...[the collection] will have a life after mine. Absolutely. Take care of it and this stuff will last for who knows how long? Records... they’ll play if you just take care of them and clean the needle, clean the records, take care of everything and they’ll last for a long time. That’s how I view it as an investment.

Chris has ruminated upon the ‘social death’ (Mosko 2000) of his collection. It is clear that Chris does not want his hard work and personal investment to go to waste. By

gifting his collection, Chris can enact a sort of ‘auto-ancestralisation’ (Marcoux 2001:231) whereby his achievements as a collector can be re-situated into another context, an awareness of the temporality of ownership and the durability of the objects and their association with Chris, an urge perhaps to impart his own personality into these objects in the future (Weiner 1985; 1994). The materials he has amassed are such a unified collection – an extension of himself and his own efforts – that he cannot bring himself to see the materials broken up, and wishes to donate his collection in its entirety. His collection is made up of many different categories of items; different formats; different genres; collected works of artists and record labels; second-hand, bought as new and (as previously discussed) still-sealed, unopened items. But *together* they are a *unit*, a single entity in Chris’ mind, an entire room in his home. All the items that enter his collection are accorded a role, a place and an identity in the collection, whether it be to complement his near-complete collection of Nonesuch’s Explorer record series¹²⁸, or to sit idle in their factory-sealing until Chris has time to open them.

¹²⁸ Nonesuch’s Explorer series is a pioneering series of records issued from the late 1960s to the early 1980s of ninety-two titles featuring music from around the globe, packaged with similar, simple yet eye-catching and evocative artwork and representing the first significant “world music” series to be available to the American public. The earlier releases in Moses Asch’s Folkways catalogue, while purporting to contain many records of interest to those searching for world musics, were mostly compilations of world music styles being performed by professional American folk musicians such as Pete Seeger. As such, they do not represent the kind of pioneering step-forward that was taken by the Nonesuch label in this field.



Fig 5.15 Chris' collection of Nonesuch Explorer Records: "god-damn I want this whole series, it's such a fantastic series and I have to have it all. It's such a fabulous series, I just wanted it to have its own section."

Beyond these present-day categories through which the items in his collection flow, there is another time and place beyond their life with Chris that he has thought it fit to think about, as if he owes it to himself, to his collection, and to others, to have a plan for what should happen to this music when he disposes of it. The suggestion that “[o]bsolescence is where the future meets the past in the dying body of the commodity” (Taussig 1993:232) is challenged by the very persistence of these objects through time, their value increasing through the resistance of decay (Weiner 1994), and their accumulation together heightening their strength as value-goods.

The investments in the collections’ divestments made by their owners – the clear plan of their ownership, and the arc of these commodities’ existences post-ownership – must be seen to be bound with the second-hand world that most record collectors negotiate. Whereas “In an ideal world an object would reach zero value and zero expected life-span at the same instant, and then disappear into dust... in reality, it usually does not do this; it just continues to exist in a timeless and valueless limbo where at some later date it has the chance of being discovered” (Thompson 1979:9-10). Many items that enter collections are second-hand to begin with, semiotically reconfigured for the time being as part of an active collection, but then there is always the possibility of these items returning to the second-hand spheres – alternate value regimes to those of domestic ownership. Disposal is less about consigning artefacts to the rubbish bin and more about a re-negotiation of their social capacity and arena of circulation (Hetherington 2004). The true fluidity between the home and the second-hand is encountered here, where commodities flow between the two realms, and the aesthetics and atmosphere of the second-hand marketplace become fixtures in the home. These objects – skirting between

the opposites of inalienable sacredness and total disposal or destruction, transient and enduring value (Thompson 1979) – create domesticity and narratives of the everyday through their flux and permanence, evident in participants’ affirmations of their ownership of these collections, their personal relationships with them, and their anxieties over their ultimate cleavage from these domestic pillars.

5.8 Conclusions

When I look at the wall of LPs and I’m browsing through looking for the Pharoah Sanders record or whatever, this is in some ways a thing of wonder to me still. I look at it and I say “this is *it*”... y’know, ever since I was in high school, I have wanted to have access to an enormous range and an enormous quantity of music, I wanted to have it at my fingers.

Matt L., music collector

...for a collector – and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be – ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.

Benjamin 1968:69

This chapter has examined the peculiarities of living with sizeable collections of music commodities; how these collections shape the domestic environment; how objects are assimilated into collections and the home; and the anxieties of consumers who find that their chosen pursuits are ripe for stigmatisation and prejudice. This discussion has

taken as a starting point the view that the home represents but a stage in the “life-cycle” of commodities, and indeed that collections situated at home are but a part of the mosaic of interactions that collectors and consumers have with music commodities and the independent music marketplace.

By concentrating on *the collection* rather than *listening practices* – that is, the impact of music objects upon the home and the collector rather than how music is listened to and unpacked from these commodities – this chapter has argued for the primacy of material culture approaches to music collecting to become foregrounded in future research. Research on collecting might in the past have taken a preference for examining eccentric types of collecting, from nut-crackers to Pepsi cans, as a way to highlight how the collecting of objects is symptomatic of (and conflated by) rampant consumer cultures spiralling out of control (Belk 1995; McCracken 1988). These concerns are countered in this discussion, where the utility of objects is a concern for music collectors as they fear any demarcation of their practices as aberrant or unhealthy.

Whilst non-utilitarian items might be included as part of a music collection (such as unused lunch boxes, ephemeral plastic wrapping or still-sealed recordings), collectors contextualise these items within their collections and their homes. The utility of items in a collection must be critiqued in relation not only to the wider circulations of these objects (for still-sealed recordings are worthy investments yet plastic packaging is not of monetary value), but also in relation to the home and the collection of which these items are constituent parts. Collections are personal achievements which are governed to a degree by outside factors such as the atmosphere of record stores, the perceptions of good and bad collectors, and the availability of items that are desired for the collection.

James Clifford has suggested that the “good” collector “is tasteful and reflective. Accumulation unfolds in a pedagogical, edifying manner. The collection itself – its taxonomic, aesthetic structure – is valued, and any private fixation on single objects is negatively marked as fetishism” (1988:54). Living with a collection involves such attempts to place structure and discipline upon material goods. This is not just regarding the items that enter the collection, but where the collection is kept, and how it comes to define or re-situate space within the home.

Furthermore, we find ownership to be a powerful tool for self-creation. Home-building requires raw materials (tools, appliances, decorations) that are utilised by consumers to create their own built environment. Starting from an interest in music, we find whole rooms given over to spaces for keeping these acquisitions, and in the case of Scott and Gwendolyn complete design schemes built up from the precedent set by their music collections and their contingent visual aesthetics. The collecting process itself is therefore a route to home-making, a way of creating spaces that appeal to consumers whilst also providing tactile and useful prized objects for their attention. Looking at this relationship between ‘having’ and ‘doing’ (Shove *et al* 2007:25-7 discuss this notion with relation to consumers upgrading and re-imagining their kitchen spaces), it is evident that *having* a collection of music not only enables the *doing* of listening, but also the *doing* of creating space, of living up to the ideal of the good collector, of actively creating through collecting an identity that is physically tangible and can be negotiated through the everyday practice of home-making. Whilst Belk defines collecting as “the process of actively, selectively and passionately acquiring things and removing them from ordinary use” (Belk 2001:67), my research shows that collectors of physical music commodities

use their collected items not only for their intended use (playback and listening) but also in creative ways that are integral facets of collecting practice. Forms of ownership might exude symbolic importance, of course, even when goods are stored away or rarely consulted and used, such as with mementoes or gifts (Sullivan and Gershuny 2004; Daniels 2009). But collecting is a type of ownership qualitatively different from others, and intents need to be clarified and validated by the usage of these masses of objects. Roy Shuker suggests in his study of record collecting that “use can function as a defensive screen for less socially sanctioned reasons for collecting” (2010:41). I argue that usage of collected music commodities is not a conscious attempt to “screen” against accusations of deviousness – rather, it is an inherent part of the thrill and value of collecting these objects.

Harrison (2002) argues that shared cultural symbolism can give rise to competition over the deployment and ownership of these aspects of culture, and that people’s proprietary identities (those aspects of social identity which can suffer mimetic injury) are guarded to protect those identities and cultural symbols. Collecting can suffer from being associated with deviant hoarding, but it is the distancing from these devaluing myths (Arsel and Thompson 2010:798) via usage that helps collectors of music commodities to protect and validate their investments. The collecting of physical music media integrates the collector with a larger social scene wherein that community values particular cultural capital investments. The act of collecting ‘properly’ in the independent music marketplace is a substantive claim to authenticating these investments, and the collector’s part in that scene.

The 'doing' of collecting has thusfar encompassed acquiring knowledge, 'crate-digging' and 'grooming' of products in-store, and accommodating objects into the home. Linking these practices together, they evidence several different types of appropriation acting to create the collection and the collector's image of themselves within the scene. Appropriation of commodities (Carrier 1995) transforms them into possessions, rather than just objects displaced from the marketplace. Rather than a sole act of appropriation, the acquisition of music commodities entails several processes that lead towards appropriation. Divestment and loss are also factored into these processes and concepts of ownership, suggesting that the concept needs to be refined to reflect these multiple stages and degrees of ownership and loss.

In the next chapter, the music commodities that have featured in the preceding chapters are unpacked. The ways in which consumers relate to sound is shown to be inherently wed to the physical properties of the formats and technologies that they use to playback music. The very materiality of musical sound is explicitly implicated in the materiality that has been seen in this chapter to have such a powerful effect upon peoples' homes, and as such upon their very notions of everyday life.

Chapter 6

Sound Issues: Technology and Musical Authenticity

6.1 Introduction

...listening, just as much as singing or playing, is an embodied performance that is powerful, that is historically constituted, and that changes over time. Listening makes music too. The manner in which listeners go about deciphering, classifying, and assimilating sound is also a performance – one that itself provides clues to what listening, performing, musically saturated societies were and are all about.

Smith 2003:634

In the previous chapter, the collecting of music commodities was explored through the home to suggest the importance of the materials of music consumption to creating domestic space. Consumer practices revolving around physical music media such as CDs and LPs should not be misconstrued as exercises solely in the fetishisation and accumulation of objects. This neglects the sociality of collecting, as well as the ways in which different media formats service sound, and how appreciations of audio-reproduction technologies are embedded in the consumer experience¹²⁹. This chapter

¹²⁹ Ethnomusicologist John Blacking, in his seminal *How Musical Is Man?* (1973) suggested the existence of broad theoretical concerns over technology as a “means” of production versus technology as a “mode” of production although he does not follow up these musings substantially in the book. The difference

concerns itself with the very technology of sound-reproduction and the implications of this technology to the way music can be experienced.

The concern that typified discussion in twentieth-century communication and cultural theory was the relationship between an original and a copy as mediated by intervening sound-reproduction technologies and their implications for the media and the nature of artworks in mass-media culture. The technological mediation of sound was often supposed to have a direct and insurmountable effect upon the immediacy and ‘realness’ of performance, with any evidence of technological mediation obscuring or defacing the performance (cf. Frankfurt School theorists Adorno and Benjamin). The ideal and authentic experience of sound is one where the presence of a mediator is therefore supposed to be invisible or inaudible. My argument is that given the inherently material implications of music listening and engaging with sound-reproduction media, the mode of reproduction becomes crucial. The form of mediation that people choose to engage with between the original and the copy is an important element of cultural capital, creation of the self and the mediation and enjoyment of history and the hierarchy of sounds created by an awareness of the materiality of sound and its attendant technologies. Far from being invisible, the mediators of music are themselves social-technical nexuses and their presence is a key signification of allegiance and enabler of particular audio-material experiences.

I therefore argue that aligning with an experience of sound (the matrix of

between technologies and media can be argued as follows: “a technology is simply a machine that performs a function; a medium is a network of repeatable relations” (Sterne 2003:210):

“A medium is a recurring set of contingent social relations and social practices, and contingency is key here. As the larger fields of economic and cultural relations around a technology or technique extend, repeat, and mutate, they become recognisable to users as a medium. A medium is therefore the social basis that allows a set of technologies to stand out as a unified thing with clearly defined functions.

Sterne 2003:182

technologies and mediators that enable specific modes of sound-reproduction) is part of consumers' process of identification as individuals within the scene. Accessing sound engages consumers with the materiality of media formats and playback technologies as well as the materiality of sound itself. It is an aspect of identification that has been largely given primacy in dialogues of music consumption by the rise of digital sound formats and the technology that houses and plays them. The discourse on technology, as such, often takes the form of a stance *for* analogue media and *against* digital media¹³⁰. Many collectors ardently uphold the view that analogue sound is preferable to digital, whilst others express ambivalence over the debate and acknowledge differently-nuanced views on sound-reproduction technologies. One of the central contentions for analogue aficionados is that, regarding music, "technology is somehow false or falsifying" (Frith 1986:265). In other words, music as an organic and authentic entity is obfuscated and distanced from its audience by technological factors.

Eschewing the simple dialectics of the virtual 'false digital' and physical 'real world' has been a *modus operandi* for many engaging with digital cultures (Slater and Miller 2000; Horst and Miller 2012). By placing the digital realm as a mode for reconfiguring social spaces and relationships, as well as a set of technologies for promulgating narratives about one's identity, the distinction has been tempered in the academy. However, there are still people either not engaging with the digital (out of choice or lack of access) or for whom the digital does not conjure the same emancipatory or empowering polemic that many researchers have identified. Such a mindset is apparent

¹³⁰ Digital files come in an array of formats, such as the MP3 (Motion Picture Expert Group Audio Layer 3), AAC, MP4, FLAC and WAV files. Some can achieve higher quality reproduction than others, but the majority necessarily involve a compression of an original signal that reduces the dynamic range and quality of the sound reproduced.

among many informants in my research, for whom the digital conjures up notions of lacking, idiosyncrasy and falsification versus a pure and authentic analogue alternative. The exposition of this divide reveals however a more complex ideologically weighted phenomenon than a simple binary divide, with consumers and producers in the music marketplace negotiating many factors that create or impoverish the authenticity of music according to its delivery mechanism and mode of reproduction. The reasons and ramifications for this conceptual schism will be detailed in relation to the technologies for sound-reproduction, suggesting that the conception of aural authenticity is not a simple analogue/digital divide, but one dependent upon notions of technological history, fidelity¹³¹ and verisimilitude, and a materialised hierarchy of objects, technologies and sonic textures.

Rothenbuhler and Peters (1997) attribute a fundamentally ontological distinction between the analogue and digital to contemporary issues of mediation, wherein analogue sound's reproduction technologies are more fundamentally causally-related to the sound produced than the 1's and 0's of digital binary code. Jonathan Sterne takes an historical approach to this conundrum, recasting the very issue of mediation as a cultural problem, historically manifested as only one of many approaches to sound reproduction:

the "original" sound recording embedded in the recording – regardless of whether the process is "continuous" – certainly bears a causal relation with the reproduction, but *only* because the

¹³¹ Fidelity and authenticity are not interchangeable terms. Fidelity refers to the exactitude or otherwise of a replication. Authenticity is the assessment of the value of this reproduction procedure, such that an imprecise replication is of low-fidelity but can nonetheless be deemed authentic. Or, two identical-fidelity sound reproductions might be accorded different authenticities depending upon factors auxiliary to the sonic verisimilitude that they share. This social aspect of authenticity, wherein identical objects or experiences are not necessarily accorded the same authenticities, is an example of mimetic rather than material authenticity.

original is itself an artefact of the process of reproduction. Without the technology of reproduction, the copies do not exist, but, then, neither would the originals. A philosophy of mediation ontologises sound reproduction too quickly. Therefore, a notion of sound fidelity based on a fundamental distinction between original and copy will most likely bracket the question of what constitutes the originality itself. In emphasising the products of production, it effaces the process.

Sterne 2003:219

So, whilst the medium for sound reproduction can precede the technology itself as Sterne argues (2003:179-214), the medium is not unswervingly responsible for a subsequent philosophy of mediation. The products of reproduction (the original and the copy) are not separate from the process of reproduction. The act of reproduction creates the ‘original’ and the ‘copy’, and they are therefore a product of the medium of sound-reproduction, for “reproduced sounds are not simply mediated versions of unmediated original sounds. Sound reproduction is a social process. The possibility of sound reproduction precedes the fact.” (*ibid.*:219).

On this issue of the transformation of sound-reproducing technologies into a mass media, Sterne further proposes “that the distinguishing characteristic of sound media is... [its] plasticity or malleability” (2003:182). Sterne’s argument centres not upon an interrogation of sound media’s specific forms, but with an appreciation of the very plasticity of their forms. This refusal of technological determinism chimes with my proposal of the specific uses to which sound technologies are put for the purposes of listening experiences by consumers of physical music media. Sterne further recognises the important role of the political economy of sound in contributing to the final form and function these media take. As part of a wider marketplace, different sound-reproduction

technologies are mutually implicated in the same institutional and economic concerns. Sound media are not isolated phenomena, but integrated technological, social and historical fields.

Sound-reproduction then is a relationship, a nexus of people, machines, sounds and practices. Its very conception is the result of these social negotiations. With social negotiations occurring in different cultural contexts, it follows that concepts of the original and copy, and the various ontological problems and questions of authenticity deemed applicable and important in each such context-specific discourse will vary. The context by which sound-reproduction arises therefore affects the nature of authenticity and originality. This has been argued to be true in other contexts where the reproduction of cultural materials is involved.¹³² Reproduction dictates new forms of producing cultural goods, and it is then a matter of cultural discourse what shape the nature of the 'original' or authentic takes as a result. There exists therefore a potential shift from forms of material authenticity, where objects have an absolute aura that is unreproducible, towards a performative or mimetic authenticity. The latter relates to the authenticity of experience, where consumers strive for a particular representation of the original that meets preconditioned needs or expectations. The 'real thing' becomes less the object of desire than does the idealised representation of the thing, manifest in a particular culturally-ordained technological form.

In order to have the discourse at all, of course, a reproduction has to be made. In the case of sound-reproduction what is particularly striking are the many different forms

¹³² Examples of anthropological research into clothing repeatedly evidence this social construction of 'fake' reproductions as authentic. Vietnamese shoppers have no qualms with 'fake' branded clothing (Vann 2006); Romanian and Turkish consumers and retailers of counterfeit branded fashion can make authentic positions for themselves in and through fake objects (Craciun 2013); and Pinheiro-Machado (2010) reveals the social construction of fake goods made in China and consumed in Brazil as authentic.

that the copy can take, and the varying attitudes towards the technologies that utilise these reproductions, the relative stance of the original vis-à-vis these copies, and the grading of specific categories pertaining to the copy (audio resolution, vinyl weight, sleeve condition etc.).¹³³

The criteria for grading technologies and sounds and forging audio-material hierarchies around sound-reproduction technologies are therefore social productions that can be ratified by institutional powers or cultural tastemakers. An influential analysis of society's artistic taste-making is Howard S. Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982). Becker argues that artworks, collectors, teachers and schools (in the sense of 'method-actors' as opposed to academic schools) are capable of achieving reputation, which ultimately leads them to have authority over other objects, persons and practitioners. Becker also argues that artistic mediums build reputations. For example, oil painting can be more easily categorised as art compared with other media such as glassblowing which fall foul of the consensus of reputation. These valorisations of materials and processes are always relevant relative to the certain time and place that they occupy. That this view of the value of artistic materials will persist is constantly open to revision as other mediums emerge and older ones become reassessed (influentially evidenced in the visual arts by Berger 1972).

That Becker suggests the media themselves are pliable in the world of reputation is important, for it evidences conceptual clues as to why vinyl is so highly prized a format to so many producers, retailers and consumers compared with the CD or the MP3. It has a

¹³³ The conventional grading of records is widely standardised by Record Collector magazine's Rare Record Price Guide (published bi-annually in a print edition – Shirley 2012), ranging from Mint to Poor condition, with attendant intermediate grades such as Fair, Very Good and Excellent. For details of the grading system, consult <http://www.rarerecordpriceguide.com/condition-rating> (accessed 13.10.2013).

history that has led it to become the ‘proper’ way to release music, and to consume it – “the reputation of the medium is a judgement as to the possibility of doing serious, important, or great art in it” (Becker 1982:359).

There is evidently a social and historical contingency at play which affects what people choose to hear, and how they choose to hear it. These decisions are inherently technological with regard to sound-reproduction. The authentication of musical sound and sound-reproduction technologies I therefore see to relate with an ontologically verified notion of authenticity. Conceiving where sound is coming from validates the music experience and the investment made in procuring it. Believing that there is a pure and authentic material, technological and historical trajectory upon which sound should be delivered therefore means that some presentations of music are avoided or derided for their lack of authenticity. Chris King, a sound engineer who specialises in transferring 78rpm records for commercial release, expressed this view succinctly by telling me:

It’s like a crime against the intellect to take these things that are pure analogue – because that’s really what they are, they’re *pure analogue*, the people were pure analogue, the music was pure analogue – and then to compress them and to squeeze them into some sort of digital signal that has no context whatsoever... it’s just absurd.

The manipulation or re-translation of music according to new technological means, according to this philosophy, perverts that music – in terms of a Kantian notion of aesthetics, the purity of form becomes the arbiter of pleasure and authenticity. The ontologising of sound that Sterne identifies and critiques is a part of the ideological fabric of musical listening, especially regarding the pro-analogue discourse espoused above by

King. Taking music out of its pure state (i.e. the analogue) and re-positioning it in another, anachronistic state (i.e. the digital) damages the aesthetic pleasure ‘inherent’ in the original form. This translation is not just sonic, but has wider material implications in terms of the technologies utilised as the delivery mechanisms for the musical experience: the commodity sold and the playback mechanism. As Simon Frith has argued:

[Recording] transforms the material experience of music; it can now be heard anywhere; it is mobile across previous barriers of time and space; it becomes a commodity, a possession. And yet ideologically – as a matter of interpretation and fantasy – the old values remain (presence, performance, intensity, event), and listening to recorded music becomes contradictory: it is at once public and private, static and dynamic, an experience of both present and past. In the world of recordings there is a new valorisation of “the original”.

Frith 1996:22

With changes to technology “Recording perfection ceased to refer to a specific performance (a *faithful* sound) and came to refer... to a constructed performance (an *ideal* sound). The “original”, in short, ceased to be an event and became an idea” (*ibid.*:234). So, whereas Sterne is correct to identify a philosophical chain of logic wherein the reproduction of sound *creates the potential but not the certainty* of an ontological reification of the original, it can be postulated that the collectors of music commodities in this thesis operate with such a divide defining their analytic categorisation of and ideological investment in music commodities, their sound and attendant technologies.

I detail below how differences in the sound of recording and sound-reproduction technologies assume importance for consumers and are of significance to their identities.

I relate the materiality of sound with that of its delivery mechanism, to display the contingencies between the two and the effects this has upon notions of authentic audio experiences which play a part in ideologically separating the independent music marketplace I have researched from other commercial music cultures. I now examine the cultural discourses and “embedded social behaviours and meanings” (Pfaffenberger 1988:241) surrounding sound-reproduction technologies, and survey why older technologies persist as valued conduits for sound in spite of the onslaught of new technologies that could have completely replaced them. In doing so I draw upon the conceptions of materiality detailed in Chapter One (pp. 60-73).

6.2 Technology and society

Like any culture industry in a market economy, the role of the music business is fundamentally to transform its cultural products into financial rewards. This process... has been significantly influenced by the technological advances that have determined the production, dissemination, and reception of music.

Garofalo 1999:318

Considering the pitfalls of technological determinism, Keith Negus has noted that “musical meanings and practices at any one time cannot be separated from their realisation in and through particular technologies, and the way in which specific groups and individuals have struggled to exert control over the use and control of these technologies” (Negus 1992:20). His insight serves to highlight that music-making can generally be seen as a technological process (or at least one involving technologies), and

an understanding of technological approaches in society benefits the interrogation of music. Arguably nowhere is the technological mediation of music more apparent than in the sphere of sound-reproduction technologies, which is why I consider below a variety of approaches to technology from philosophy, sociology and anthropology.

Philosopher Langdon Winner makes the case for technologies' abilities to alter how people live their lives, expanding upon the popularised notion that the medium is the message (cf. McLuhan 1964). Firstly, technologies can solve community-specific issues; secondly, they can support or engender arrangements of power and authority in social relationships (Winner 1980:123). Technological artefacts are theorised by Winner to politically inhabit two distinct categories: "instances in which the invention, design, or arrangement of a specific technical device or system becomes a way of settling an issue in the affairs of a political community", and "'inherently political technologies', man-made systems that appear to require or be strongly compatible with particular kinds of political relationships" (Winner 1986:22). Therefore, the introduction of new technologies has implications for pre-existing cultural categories, either to reinforce or fundamentally change them; to be assimilated into pre-existing categories or to be utilised in the creation of new ones.

Pfaffenberger identified two long-standing and problematic tendencies among social scientists to view technology a) as having no great importance to cultural analyses, being "morally and ethically 'neutral'" and unproblematic in nature (Pfaffenberger 1988:238); or conversely b) according to a deterministic agenda, where "all of history seems to have been dictated by a chain of technological events in which people have been little more than helpless spectators" (*ibid.*:239). To reconcile this dichotomy,

Pfaffenberger observes that technology should be better observed “as a system, not just of tools, but also of related social behaviours and techniques... Technology... is *essentially* social, not ‘technical’. When one examines the ‘impact’ of a technology on society, therefore, one is obliged to examine the impact of the technology’s embedded social behaviours and meanings” (*ibid.*:241). If technology *is* indeed a social phenomenon, rather than a fetishistic product of determinism or somnambulism, then the processes of its adoption and use by people must inform this study.

Lemonnier (1993) further clarifies the intricacies of technological changes and adoptions, suggesting that technology is a social phenomenon whose use and selection is arbitrary, and is not based on technical performance alone. Ingold reaffirms this insight in his ethnography of Finnish reindeer capture and herding using *lassos*. Lassos persevere despite the existence of snares and shotguns, and even among lassos the easier to use ‘pole-lassos’ have not displaced the original, more difficult to use lassos. The expressions inherent in skilful lasso use are “a subtle index... of the social relations, affiliations and identities of the users... [and the] choice of technical means is dictated as much by considerations of who he is as it is by the mechanical effect he desires to achieve” (Ingold 1993:124). That is to say, the deployment of certain technologies is as much an attempt to claim belonging to a community or to define oneself in society as it is an attempt to perform tasks (in opposition to the ‘de-skilling’ of technologies noted by Attfield – 2000:46). The negation of technologies that are perhaps more practical (i.e. MP3s) and achieve the desired end (listening to music) at the least cost (online piracy) in favour of other technologies that are anachronistic in their persistence (i.e. vinyl LPs) is to attempt to express a social allegiance *via* technology as much as a technical allegiance *per se*. “To

construct a technology is not merely to deploy materials and techniques: it is also to construct social and economic alliances, to invent new legal principles for social relations, and to provide powerful new vehicles for culturally-provided myths” (Pfaffenberger 1988:249). In turn, to use a technology is to construct the world in relation to that technology – not just in terms of how it changes the world, but also how the world views that technology.

Another important observation is Guille-Escuret’s (1993) recognition that artefacts in themselves do not bear sole responsibility for demarcating social status, but rather groups of technical processes can bestow identity on persons and things. Old-fashioned techniques for cultivating and harvesting vineyards in Southern France persist to promulgate local social cohesions as well as wider market-place identities – the multiple processes of tilling the land and harvesting are all complicit in this identification. I argue similarly that multiple technologies and processes also operate in music marketplaces to inform particular identities. The analogue recordings pressed on vinyl and unpacked via a turntable all coalesce in the identity of the consumer who consumes according to this complex of processes. In turn, those facilitating these technologies (sound engineers, record labels, retail sites) forged identities in relation to this matrix of technologies and the nexus they form.

Ultimately, improved technological specifications are relatively graded, and do not unanimously curry favour with audiences. A pertinent example is the revival or persistent usage of vintage analogue technologies in the face of the so-called digital revolution (Sterne 2003:277; Hosokawa and Matsuoka 2004; Milano 2003), whilst Manuel (1993) showed that Indian consumers preferred the sound of their cheaply

produced cassettes to which they are accustomed as much as some younger consumers today find the fizz and compression of MP3s and modern mastering techniques more exciting than alternative ‘hi-fi’ technologies¹³⁴.

Théberge identifies a paradox with music and technological change, wherein scepticism over technology contrasts with “a compulsive need to adopt and make use of the latest musical gear available” (Théberge 1997:2). Théberge raises this point with reference to instruments, recording and the practice of music *making*, rather than the technologies of *dissemination* and *reproduction* with which this chapter is concerned, yet his contention retains validity. Throughout the history of recorded sound, technologies of sound-reproduction have been scrutinised, criticised, adopted and discarded by professional engineers through to consumers (Milner 2009; Millard 1995; Brady 1999; Frith 1988). Companies producing these technologies are quick to capitalise on the novelty and ‘newness’ of their products (Gelatt 1955; Campbell 1994; Gronow 2009), and demand can escalate for new, vital products that identify consumers (and musicians) as cutting edge, ahead of the curve, or fashionable. For example, Sarah Thornton (1996) cites a craving for new trends in rave culture (such as music, dance and fashion) as a key constituent of that field’s ‘subcultural capital’ – being up-to-date with the cutting-edge is a key component of status within the scene. Others, of course, will seek to buck the trend and stick to older ways of offering and experiencing sounds, sidestepping crazes for ‘the latest thing’.

Théberge’s study displays how *musicians* are aware “that their musical practice

¹³⁴ Jonathan Berger, Professor of Music at Stanford University, has evidenced this over an eight-year study of his students’ preferences for music in different audio formats which showed increasing preference for the sound of MP3 audio – see http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/personal_tech/article5847674.ece (accessed 18.06.2013).

has become deeply implicated with a particular version of the notion of technological ‘progress’” (1997:5)¹³⁵. The present chapter however concerns itself with the awareness of music *consumers* to the changes in technology that affect the goods they purchase, and how and why they seek products that provide different audio-material experiences. These experiences, I suggest, relate to the broader concern with materiality discussed elsewhere in this work – the search for authentic products, means and modes of production (Chapter 2); the design of physical products (Chapter 3); the sociality and practices of shopping and searching through physical retail spaces (Chapter 4); the impact of physical collections on the home and everyday life (Chapter 5). Music listening therefore emerges as part of these wider marketplace processes of acquisition, searching, encountering people, places and objects that constitute the consumption of physical music media.

Sterne provides a historical narrative in *The Audible Past* (2003), in which his most influential contribution to the burgeoning literature on sound studies is to argue that “Our most cherished pieties about sound-reproduction technologies – for instance, that they separated sounds from their sources or that sound recording allows us to hear the voices of the dead – were not and are not innocent empirical descriptions of the technologies’ impact. They were wishes that people grafted onto sound reproduction technologies – wishes that became programmes for innovation and use” (Sterne 2003:8). Sterne attempts to reverse a historical fallacy, for “the objectification and abstraction of hearing and sound, their construction as bounded and coherent objects, was a prior condition for the construction of sound-reproduction technologies; the objectification of

¹³⁵ The anxieties that musicians and music professionals have over digital methods of music production and recording often centre around efforts to ‘humanise’ the digital by attempting to re-inject analogue and real-time performative qualities into new technologies that are often interpreted as rigid and clinical. Musicians discourses over these issues are further detailed in Osertag 2002; Brown, Bischoff and Perkis 1996; Riddell 2001; Cascone 2000.

sound was not a simple “effect” or result of sound-reproduction technologies” (*ibid.*:23).

Sterne elaborates how legitimate source materials from which sound could or should emanate were re-imagined to create new idealised and ideological materials and interfaces. Building upon Marcel Mauss’ “body techniques” (*Les Techniques du Corp* 1935, wherein humans learn to use and experience their bodies as technical means, thereby making it a communication technology from whence techniques emerge), Sterne adds an auditory element, stressing the physicality of listening and learning how to listen appropriately via what he calls “audile technique” – “a set of practices of listening that were articulated to science, reason, and instrumentation that encouraged the coding and rationalisation of what was heard” (Sterne 2003:23), with “*audile*” used “to connote hearing and listening as developed and specialised practices, rather than inherent capacities” (*ibid.*:96). This articulation is “the process by which different phenomena with no necessary relation to one another (such as hearing and reason) are connected in meaning and/or practice” (*ibid.*:24). Sterne considers these changes through the examples of the development of the stethoscope and auscultation as key methodologies in medicine, and the development of the selective audile techniques employed by telegrapher’s message taking through head pieces, where “exterior” noises to those being sought (heart beats and telegraph code) are mediated by the receiver. Therefore, before being applied to the appreciation of musical recordings, audile techniques were manifest in medicine and telegraphy as markers of professional prestige. This led to concomitant changes in practical acoustic spaces: “listening became more directional and directed, more orientated toward constructs of private space and private property. The construct of acoustic space as private space in turn made it possible for sound to become a

commodity” (*ibid.*). Sterne argues that as a consequence audile techniques accrued not in public or communal spaces but in the privacy of discreet, atomised acoustic spaces – “To capitalise and commodify sound, sound media industries deployed a pre-existing notion of sonic space as private property” (*ibid.*:95). What emerges are three especially important facets of the history of sound-reproduction technologies and audile techniques: “...the separation and idealisation of technicised hearing; the construction of a private acoustic space; and the subsequent commodification and collectivisation of individuated hearing” (*ibid.*:155).

Another tenet of Sterne’s argument is that “While some authors argued that sound-reproduction technologies made novel use of hearing”, he suggests that “their novelty was in the innovation of longer-standing cultural practice rather than in creating new modes of listening from scratch” (*ibid.*:138). Therefore, “The growth of the early sound-reproducing technologies would be better characterised as further disseminating previously localised practices than as “revolutionising” hearing as such” (*ibid.*:154).

The culturally coded/standardised discourse on sound, and the challenges and concessions presented to it by producers and consumers is analysed to understand the multi-faceted appreciation of physical music medias as valued commodities. How different sound technologies are conceptualised as enriching and hindering appreciation of music, and how taste boundaries are forged between different consumers, suggests that the properties of sound deserve consideration as part of the dynamic that creates desirability in music commodities, rather than listening itself being the endpoint of the search for music commodities. Listening is a mediated practice, where technologies and their attendant social stigma are appropriated by consumers to inform their own private

and public identities. This active sourcing of sound legitimates the products consumed and the way they are consumed, and serves to exclude others. In short, “Technologies of sound and their use appear to disclose something about both the user and the culture from which they come” (Bull 2002:84). Technology is of vital importance for signifying cultural capital and social allegiances. As Bruno Latour has argued, technologies are “in large part the stuff out of which socialness is made” (2000:113). Not only do technologies such as the mobile phone and the Internet facilitate interaction between people, but technologies also act as common interests and fulcra for deploying shared information and social skills.

6.3 Technology and the narrative of convenience

In the preceding chapters, discussion has dealt largely with the importance of the materials of music consumption as physical commodities that inhabit a plethora of roles and relationships with people – and other objects – in contexts ranging from production studios to record shops and private collections. It has not been neglected throughout these discussions however that this material presence is a representation of the aural experience, and that the act of listening to music and unpacking these commodities is inherent in their power and aura as physical commodities and affects the way the music contained is heard. In many instances, the taste judgement to involve oneself with physical media creates a distinctive gulf between the consumer and digital technologies that require computers or media players such as the iPod to playback the digitally-encoded music. There undoubtedly exists a multifaceted relationship between music and

the format of its presentation, and whilst artefactual materiality is a substantial factor in this interplay between consumers and recordings, the importance of *sound* is significant as a material entity in itself that exists in tandem with the delivery mechanism to which it is allied.

Théberge notes how the International MIDI Association – an Internet-based user group of enthusiasts for MIDI music production¹³⁶ who share codes and compositions online – are a group whose practices are “loaded with both an appeal to personal and artistic potential, and an idealistic rhetoric of political democracy... Indeed it is the conflation of these two sets of ideals that makes the allure of new technology so powerful” (1997:152). The MP3 has provided similar opportunities for consumers to disseminate and share music, to curate digital collections (DeNicola displays how playlist functions on iPods are changing the ways in which people routinise their music listening repertoires – 2010), and liberate music previously statically consumed in the home into other spaces.

Many argue that in CD and MP3 audio, sound quality and the ensuing ‘warmth’ and ‘presence’ in recordings has been compromised by the compression required to create a digital signal. However, it would surely be to miss the point about digital sound if what it was marketed for in the first place were not considered. An LP is large, its cover can get damaged, and it can scratch. CDs can fit in your coat pocket, and an MP3 player can clip onto your lapel. CDs were marketed as items of convenience relative to the LP – they were more portable and easy to care for. This convenience became archaic when the new

¹³⁶ MIDI technology involves programming computer-generated sounds to create music, rather than playing instruments or utilizing pre-recorded sounds. This proved especially popular for musicians prior to high-speed internet connections for sharing compositions and musical notations as the programmed music takes up very little hard-drive space on computers.

medium of the MP3 emerged in the late 1990s, when online peer-to-peer sharing software Napster hosted millions of songs on hundreds of thousands of consumers' computers, and "mass access to a once 'underground' gift economy" (Leysdon 2003:534) of illegal file sharers brought the MP3 from the online underground into the mainstream music marketplace. Elizabeth Shove suggests that the innovation of a new technology is a *system of innovation*, where "processes of invention and use are at the same time processes involving the redefinition of normal conditions of comfort... and normal approaches to individual and collective scheduling" (Shove 2003:202). The new technology reconfigures possibilities, patterns and practices of listening through the merits of comfort and convenience.

Comfort and convenience, however, are relative terms. Lance Ledbetter of record label Dust-to-Digital perceives that people unpacking music from a digital source will not listen to, or value, music in the same way as music that comes from a physical object:

To me, CDs are taking a hit right now, because they used to be marketed for convenience. Now everyone's saying an iPod is more convenient than a box of CDs... but I think CDs still sound good, and what it allows for versus an LP or an MP3 – it allows for a different style of packaging than LPs do or MP3s do. Y'know, I love books, I've always loved books, the shape, the size and all that, and CDs fit much better in books than LPs do¹³⁷. [The] MP3 is virtual... with a physical object, you've got to make a decision, am I going to archive this, am I going to get rid of this. MP3s are much more disposable and much more transient than CDs are.

¹³⁷ Chapter 3 examines several examples of how Lance's label Dust-to-Digital have wed music media and books together in their products.

Lance's line of thinking is certainly persistent in this ethnography, but some participants in this research identified with the MP3 as an effective medium on account of its convenience overriding reservations over sound quality. T-Kay, a 27 year old DJ and archivist, represents those who embrace the MP3 and downloading as useful mediums that work in tandem with the collecting of physical music products. T-Kay came to Austin from Los Angeles where she participates in a DJ collective called DubLab, and as such requires a wide range of music (and a steady influx of new music) that she could not afford on her salary. The downloaded MP3 works for T-Kay as a useful tool for DJ work, where she requires a host of music at her disposal which would be too bulky to transport on a regular basis to and from radio stations and club venues. Especially important to her view of the MP3 are these issues of practicality – the MP3 serves a function as a utilitarian alternative to bulky objects when music needs to be regularly acquired and transported for professional use. For her “the iPod is just pure convenience and portability, that's the main thing”. She does fear however that without LPs in her live DJ work that her sets would be considered inauthentic, as the LP retains authority as the preferred or ideal medium for live DJ work (Farrugia and Swiss 2005).

Furthermore, for T-Kay the MP3 has liberated some music that otherwise would be nigh on impossible to find in its original form, such as the 78rpm record:

You can find so much music that you just can't find physically, like 78s – places just don't have them or they're not in good condition, so I don't think one should replace the other...

[At present] I don't buy a lot of physical stuff because I download a lot of stuff online... I go through blogs mostly, I download most of my music on the internet or just have friends pass me

whatever is on their iPod, whatever they're listening to at the moment. One of the reasons I actually decided to start going to record stores here [in Austin] is because I had to go back to LA last week to do a radio show and there's only like one iPod hookup, so I thought 'shit I'm gonna need some actual stuff to play', and I thought it would be a good way to see the city.

In tandem with this primarily digital network of acquisition, T-Kay has collected several hundred LPs and CDs both for home listening and DJ work. She lived in Brazil for a period of two years, and she "bought a bunch of records [there], some of them are pretty rare". She feels attached to them although she still feels, especially having just moved to Austin from Los Angeles, that they are cumbersome items to have to haul around regularly, and she would rather the convenience of the digital files in part for this reason. The convenience of the MP3 is such that she even disparages LPs for being difficult to play: "I don't listen to records that much when I'm at home because you have to turn them over and I get lazy sometimes". Different formats limit the way people can listen to music, such as having to have a break mid-way when playing an album on vinyl, but they also offer new ways for listeners to engage with music. Judith Attfield has suggested that deskilling is "the corollary of modernisation... deskilling of design and craft enables the non-specialist to gain a greater sense of agency through direct involvement in the physical construction of the material world" (2000:46). Therefore, some technologies enable people to interact with music via processes some might deem negatively to be de-skilled – the knowledge so crucial to navigating the marketplace of physical goods is negated by the convenience of internet searches and the ease of operation of technologies. To those who value this convenience however, the deskilling of technologies is a valuable way to reconfigure usage of technology and access to media in everyday life.

Consider, for example, how the iPod's shuffle function, and the sale of individual tracks as MP3s rather than the sale of albums, has affected listening practices. McCourt (2005) suggests that the malleable and less-pre-ordained shuffle function, as well as the huge variety of tracks available for immediate sequencing and playback through digital devices, is indelibly changing consumption practices as convenience and portability become in general more important to consumers than physicality and fidelity. Daniel Guberman has suggested that after the high watermark for hi-fidelity in the marketplace subsided in the 1990s, the majority of consumers ceased to demand improvements in sound fidelity, and instead looked for improvements "in other aspects of their products, such as in the quantity and accessibility of music, or even in the visual aesthetics of players and system components" (Guberman 2011:431). High fidelity therefore ceased to be *the* driving force for choosing products, but became merely one consideration amongst many in a 'post-fidelity' marketplace.

T-Kay recently had cause to ruminate upon this change in her listening practices, and found that through the MP3 she had been missing an old method of listening:

...the iPod shuffle function has really altered the way I listen to music, I didn't consciously realise that until recently I was at my boyfriend's house and he had all these CDs... the act of going through the CDs and picking one and listening to the whole thing was like "wow, I haven't done this in a couple of years". It's kinda weird! (laughs)

Among supposedly die-hard vinyl enthusiasts in my research, digital media kept making appearances on account of its convenience for certain circumstances relative to vinyl. For instance, owning the same album on two separate formats was not uncommon.

Heather-Jo (a mid-40s software programmer who frequented local concerts and described her record collection as her most prized possession) had two copies of The Beatles' *Revolver*. After first explaining "well, it is my favourite Beatles album!", she elaborated on how she felt compelled to buy the CD so she could listen to the album in her car, no longer having a cassette deck from which she could play a dub of the LP. Collector Chris W of Georgetown had a similar need for convenience which vinyl couldn't always sate:

...at work I've got a CD player and to go onto road trips and whatnot it's just difficult to bring records around. I'm keeping my options open. And I do burn a lot of records, or at least songs, I copy them and make digital files out of them too so then I can make them portable. But vinyl man, I love vinyl. It's big!

David Q, a collector in Austin, was talking about his favourite records and enthusing how he would love to own them all on vinyl for the sound quality and the aura of the object, yet he said this in spite of owning the CDs of many of these records. Again, the CD would be destined to become an item of convenience in contrast to vinyl, yet superseded by the vinyl copy as the main port-of-call when that album would be required for listening: "I don't mind going back and buying them again on vinyl, but I'll keep the CDs 'cause I want to listen to them in my car sometimes. I don't see myself selling any of these CDs, I'll get like two bucks each for them down at Waterloo [record store in Austin]... well, what's the point, I might as well just hang onto them. I'd rather just give them away than sell them".

Shove *et al* (2007:69-92) discuss digital photography in relation to analogue counterparts in ways that illuminate a core concern in the present debate over digital

audio: "...digital technologies are not only or simply 'domesticated' by different sorts of user. They [are] at the same time drawn into and defined by a framework of expectations and conventions established by an incumbent practice-as-entity: i.e. by various genres of popular film photography" (Shove *et al* 2007:92). The "incumbent practice-as-entity" in this case would be analogue precursors to digital technology. Portability and convenience are the frameworks by which the "expectations and conventions" of digital medias might be established, and how consumers therefore legitimate their usage versus the static setting of listening to vinyl. The MP3 can therefore be understood as distinct from incumbent technological forms on account of its increased portability and convenience. Bull (2000; 2002) describes the liberating effects of portable music devices, and specifically the Walkman cassette player, in helping consumers to "construct their own privatised space of reception between themselves and the sounds of their Walkman" (Bull 2002:89). My participants' discussions of sound in the home nonetheless suggest that a "privatised space of reception" is not the sole property of the Walkman users who re-aestheticise urban spaces according to their preferences. The home is clearly able to provide these 'centrepiece' sanctuaries of sounds, privatised and constructed according to the preferences and whims of the individual consumer (evidenced at length in Chapter 5).

What is key is that the material and sonic properties of vinyl are statically experienced and non-transferable to the world of mobile music listening. The materialised constraints of a vinyl record that must be played on a level, stationary turntable in order to experience the sound it contains forges particular constraints upon a consumer. This in turn creates distinct aesthetic spaces and procedures for music listening intrinsic to the technological matrix that consumers deploy. These spaces and practices

are necessary consequences of an allegiance to particular sonic experiences and technological appreciations. In the next section of this Chapter, I elaborate further on this link between the material sound of different sound-reproduction media and their artefactual material qualities to display their mutual importance to creating authentic commodities and listening experiences.

6.4 Audio fidelity, materiality and sonic authenticity

...but I like the sound of records better, they have better bass, and they don't sound so compressed, they have a little more openness in the sound, and I just like that background, even on a clean record you can hear it [the surface noise] a little bit but I just love that sound, it's kinda warm, it reminds me of a fireplace.

Chris W, collector

Subjective assessments of listening experiences tend to involve a) a reference to the process of listening (unpacking the sound-reproduction media, enabling playback, the act of listening) and b) reference to the sonic experience and the quality of sound. The latter includes statements pertaining to extra-musical factors that are materially inherent to the objects utilised as playback media such as the surface noise of a record. This chimes with Ingold's call to consider the very materials objects are made of and relate them to the practical and social implications of their usage (Ingold 2007). It also serves to problematise the hierarchy of internal/external listening (Sterne 2005; Adorno 1927) as extra-musical sounds theorised to be extraneous are found to be intrinsic to the aesthetic pleasure of that particular medium. Furthermore, assessments often abound with

statements about the verisimilitude of the reproduced audio to the original recording. Even though the original recording is an ideal construct that the overwhelming majority of consumers do not have access to (i.e. original 78rpm records, 2-track tape mixdown masters) there is an assumed *feel* for reproduced sound having accuracy, and not sounding degraded or falsified by the technological interference of reproduction.

Fidelity implies a faithfulness to the original sound that can be achieved through the means of reproduction. The standards by which fidelity has been judged to be adequate, let alone perfect, have varied over time. “Ultimately, this would lead to a conflicted aesthetic of reproduced sound, where the ideal state for the technology as vanishing mediator would continually be set in conflict with the reality that sound-reproduction technologies had their own sonic character” (Sterne 2003:225). It is too simple however to suggest that the conflict is only concerned with the degree to which sound is *more apparent* and the mediator is *less apparent*, for the mediator itself can be a fashion statement (especially with regards to the Ghetto-blaster, the Walkman in the 1980s and the iPod today which were especially conspicuous portable mediators – see Bull 2000, 2007; Bergh and DeNora 2009) and a prestige item that is displayed and appreciated as a conspicuous mediator for sound-reproductions, as Chapter 5 has shown. The networks of technologies and people are especially important in this respect for overcoming deterministic or over-simplified conceptions of technology in society. Preferences for different sound fidelities are often framed not as being predicated upon the exact verisimilitude between the original sound and the reproduction. The very nature of the reproduction introduces qualities to the reproduced sound, be it the sound of a needle in the grooves of a vinyl record or the compression of an MP3. It also demands a

certain performance from the user of a technology, such as the static listening to an LP versus the more mobile experiences that radio, cassettes, CDs and MP3s have enabled. Audile technique is apparent with each different technology – appropriate modes of listening and material engagements are necessary in order to listen satisfactorily to a particular sound-reproduction technology.

Sterne discusses reproduced sound's "fidelity" to its source via a historicisation of "acousmatic" understandings of sound-reproduction technologies, namely the notion that they fundamentally separate sound from its source. Such "acousmatic" readings of sound-reproduction technologies are predicated upon, firstly, the idea that audile techniques hierarchically rated the sounds that were necessary ("interior") and those that were to be ignored and overcome as part of the listening experience ("exterior"). Secondly, there is a necessity for sound-reproduction technologies to be embedded in wider social and technical networks. Thirdly, "acousmatic" histories assume "the representation of these techniques and networks as purely natural, instrumental, or transparent conduits for sound" (Sterne 2003:25). Sterne argues that these ideas are not natural histories, but are the products of forces both commercial and cultural. Sterne's conclusion is that "sound-reproduction technologies are inseparable from the "sources" of reproduced sound... the social organisation of sound-reproduction technologies conditioned the possibility for both "original" and "copy" sounds" (*ibid.*:26). His work acts as a manifesto to "move away from presuming and then attempting to adjudicate the widely variable relations among different sounds (original/copy; reality/representation) to a consideration of the social, cultural, and technical mechanisms that open up the questions of those relations in the first place" (*ibid.*:84).

For collector David Q, it is first and foremost “fun to stick on a record”, where the division between different sides of vinyl and the need to flip the record over “keeps you engaged, you’re not just gonna drift off or fall asleep to it”. But furthermore, he feels that CDs themselves have “undermined the quality of music” as an artistic medium. Firstly, David believes that the 80 minute capacity of a CD (versus the 45 minute capacity of a vinyl record) made musicians and producers less inclined to exercise restraint in recording albums, such that they became over-long with superfluous material.¹³⁸ Secondly, David feels strongly about the sound engineering practices that are routine in contemporary CD manufacture such as “brick-walling” compression (popularly referred to in online and print discourse as ‘the loudness wars’) and how it affects the sound of music:

...when albums started getting remixed to put in a CD format, to digitalise them, the compression factor and the way everything was overamplified – so that every channel was overamplified so that whereas on vinyl the bass might have been loud and the vocal was quieter, that was done for a reason, but when it’s remixed onto CDs everything was maxed out on top volume. It makes it harder to listen to. And I think it’s a bit of an insult to the composer...

The LP’s commercial and cultural longevity are significantly wed to such concerns with fidelity and audio processing, and there are several articles and blog posts on the Internet authored by consumers that point out the deficiency of the CDs and MP3s in comparison with the warmth of analogue sound. **Fig 6.2** is a wave analysis of the CD

¹³⁸ Trezise (2009:198-199) details the limitations imposed on early jazz recordings made for the Gennett label, which were the products of both limited recording times and problems with early recording techniques. These greatly altered the nature of performances. The rest of Trezise’s paper suggests that similar limitations exist to differing degrees with many different recording scenarios.

and LP signals of Bob Dylan's 2006 album *Modern Times* posted by one internet blogger to highlight the compression of the CD edition of the album compared with the more open and nuanced signal of the album's vinyl edition.

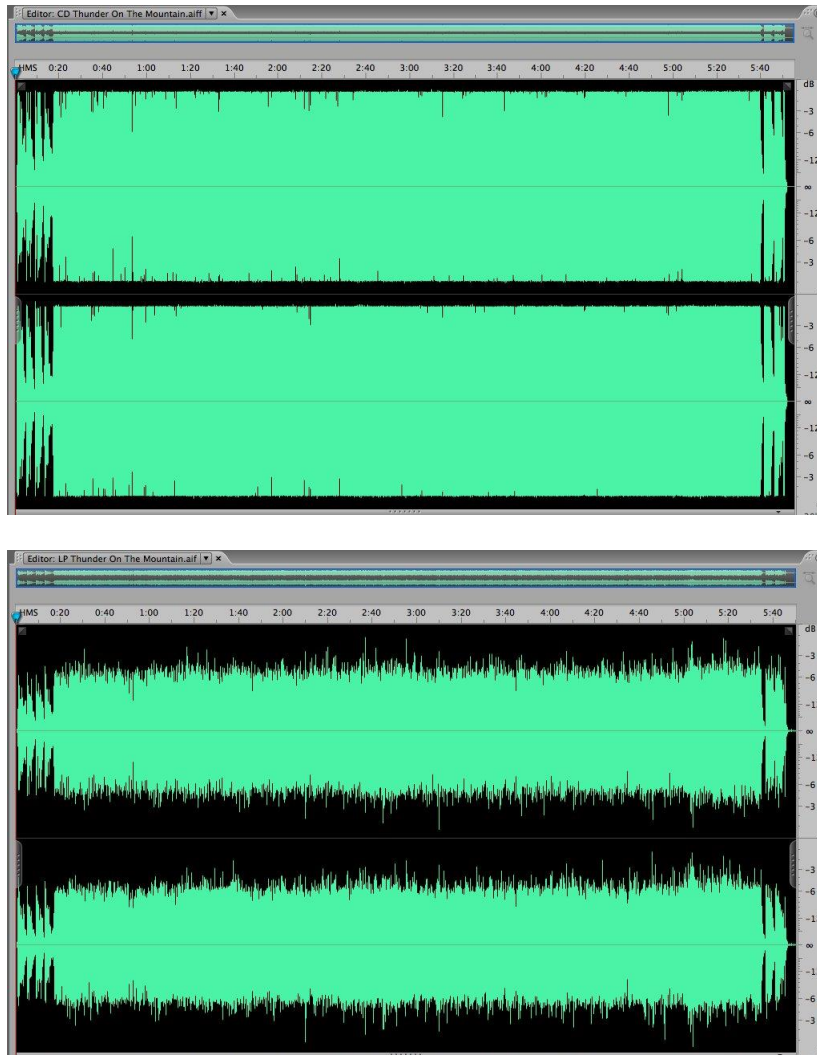


Fig 6.2 Spectral wave analysis of the CD (top) and LP (bottom) of Bob Dylan's *Modern Times* (2006), posted by a blogger to demonstrate the wider dynamic range of the LP versus the CD editions of the album.¹³⁹

That said, David uses different formats and mediums for different musical styles,

¹³⁹ <http://floweringtoilet.blogspot.com/2008/07/mountain-on-thunder.html> accessed 23.03.2009

as he feels that the sound properties of different formats fit different musics better than others. Reflecting on similar comparisons conducted with his friends, David felt that the variation presented by different formats in the ways they colour and represent musical sound have merit in how they suit different instruments and musical styles:

If I was going to be listening to techno or super-electronic music or something [like that] I'll get it on CD, but if it's acoustic or small ensemble or live or jazz, anything with more traditional instrumentation I'll go for on vinyl, or anything choral I'll get it on vinyl. We did several tests with the same music, and the bass was warmer on vinyl, the vocals are less shrill, the drums are less harsh and it's easier on the ears. It's easier to listen to loud, it doesn't tire your ears out so much and you can listen to it longer, just because of that warmth and the ambience of it. I've decided that now pretty much everything I get is gonna be on vinyl.

Certain genres of music are associated with certain aesthetics, sounds and modes of recording and aural presentation. Computer-based media players often have pre-set equaliser patterns that are meant to enhance the playback of certain genres of music, for example. But even rock music – the fundamentals of which can be summarised as “rhythm and noise” (Gracyk 1996) – seems to divide opinion. David is content with English rock band Radiohead on CD, for example, whilst Neil Young takes issue with the CD version of his 1969 album *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*, stating “Listening to the CD is like looking through a screen window... It's an insult to the brain and the heart and feelings to have to listen to this and think its music” (in Gracyk 1996:22).

One thing David does on occasion when he has friends over or goes to their homes to listen to music is compare the CD and vinyl of the same music to examine the

difference between the two formats (an ‘A/B comparison’). In my company, David performed an A/B/C comparison as we talked at his home in east Austin, comparing three different sources for the Jimi Hendrix Experience’s 1968 album *Electric Ladyland*. David placed his 1970s European vinyl pressing on the turntable, and queued up the 1993 CD reissue overseen by Warner Brothers records in the CD deck. Starting both to play the track *Gypsy Eyes* at the same time, David flicked the audio source back and forth to compare the differences between the two in real time. We both agreed that while the LP had more punchy drums, in general there was a warmth shared by the two editions of the album; a large bass-heavy presence that did not interfere with the more subtle nuances of the guitar work throughout the track. David then queued up MCA’s 1997 CD release, and comparing this with the vinyl on the same track it became evident we were dealing with a representation of the same music that had a totally different sound. The warmth of the 1993 CD was replaced with brittleness, a thinner and “less inviting” sound when compared with the LP than the older CD had achieved. The same music, yet in three different experiences.

Sound engineer Chris King’s efforts in remastering 78rpm records testify to the perceived value of retaining analogue originals in spite of their proliferation as digital replicas. King describes his transfer process as “almost 99.9% analogue”, and his reputation depends on bridging the gap between the original and the digital by providing true-to-life replicas in the digital world. This means little in the way of processing and manipulation, but plenty by means of keeping the signal as analogue as possible – “if everything is conveyed via analogue up until the very last stage, you’ve done your very best to preserve the analogue dynamics”. These analogue dynamics (material properties

of sound that are experienced by ear) are compromised by the translation to a non-analogue reproduction technology (material presences that legitimise the audio experience).

There are other factors that affect the reproduction of analogue audio that producers attend to in order to make reproduced audio alluring to collectors. New LP records frequently come with stickers on their cellophane wrapping that announce that they were made with ‘180g virgin vinyl’. When properly cut, heavier vinyl produces better stereo imaging and less surface noise than thinner vinyl pressings, and as such vinyl of up to 220g weight is produced for the audiophile market. Jacob, a record store employee in Austin, revealed this affinity for heavyweight vinyl when we discussed Annette Peacock’s cult classic 1973 album *I’m The One*, which was issued by RCA Victor on their infamous Dynaflex records which weighed a paltry 125g and were constituted by a large proportion of recycled vinyl that caused clips and sonic deficiencies during playback. “Someone has to reissue his shit on heavyweight vinyl” he told me, showing how lightweight his original copy was by wobbling it between his palms. Whilst he admitted that he would not part with his original record, he would nonetheless purchase the heavyweight record as an upgrade should it become available, thereby coming to own two vinyl copies of the same record – one with significant biographical importance to him, the other a more practical and rewarding copy for playback purposes.

‘Good’ sound processing is nevertheless subjective. Removing the wool and fog of surface noise and distortion from poor-quality recordings creates for some people vast improvement over the limitations of an original source. For others, removing the patina that belies the origins of the music is a stripping down of audio character, a cleaning up

of something already in its perfect state to create an imperfect version of it for the digital age.¹⁴⁰ Musical sound therefore can be ‘cleaned-up’ too much for many consumers.

In other instances, it is a struggle to make an acceptable reproduction of a damaged original master. Tommy of Unseen World records described a particularly arduous procedure on one of his label’s releases to get the extant tape – in poor condition – to appear in the best possible sound on CD:

One of the records we had, the piano record¹⁴¹, was so damaged, the tape itself was degrading, that we actually combined pieces of the tape with pieces of the vinyl, filled in the gaps when it was too bad, and that was an expensive ordeal (laughs) and time consuming. We work with this one friend of ours, an engineer in Nevada – I just never knew that, you don’t think about it, your record player doesn’t play at the same speed as the tape machine does, at least not exactly enough to satisfy an engineer... in a way it’s reassuring that that is the best possible, like it sounds better than it [the degrading tape] would’ve in five or ten years

Similarly, working on Revenant Records’ *American Primitive Volume 2* project, Chris King received a record for transferring that is described as SCO, or ‘single-copy only’ as it is the sole extant original 78, in this case *Eagles on the Half* by Mississippi blues singer Geeshie Wiley. A torrid wall of static and surface noise submerged the music when the record was played, and there seemed little hope that the record was salvageable for the project in any better sound quality. King came up with an ingenious solution to the

¹⁴⁰ With the earliest Hollywood motion picture featuring sound, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the sound suffered when the restored audio was played through modern high-spec audio equipment. Early speakers would not have reproduced the distortions, hiss and rumble that we associate with such early films today, as they lacked the capacity to reproduce those high and low frequencies – they were, in essence, problems with early technology that early technology itself silenced, whereas new playback systems create a distorted representation of how the film originally sounded (Verscheure 1995:265).

¹⁴¹ Lubomyr Melnyk’s 1978 solo piano album *KMH*, reissued as UW02 in 2007.

challenge that this record posed. Often when people had run out of or could not afford new stylus needles for their record players, they would resort to inserting other items as substitute needles, anything from sewing needles to splinters of wood. In doing so, the improvised needles would gouge away the indentations in the grooves of the record and leave it severely damaged and practically unplayable. It seemed obvious that this malady must have befallen this sole copy of *Eagles on the Half*. Inspecting the record, however, King surmised that the record had not been played on a level surface when it was damaged, tilted just a few degrees on the turntable so that the needle badly affected only one side of the groove. By placing the record on an uneven surface a few degrees to the opposite direction, King dropped the needle onto the record and extracted the cleaner, undamaged signal from the other side of the groove, thus rescuing the music from its battered and seemingly unsalvageable analogue master.

The notion that analogue forms of technologically-mediated listening are superior to digital mediations is clearly problematised by the functional realities of analogue sound. The inherent instabilities of the materials that deliver analogue sound inevitably contribute to the texture of the sound produced, which these listeners prefer. Similarly, in the deterioration or decrepitude both of the original recordings and the reproductions produced there are demands placed upon owners of these materials to maintain them in playable condition. Restoring decayed masters for general consumption is plagued with the same potential for impregnating them with unwanted technological signatures as translating them into compressed digital signals. Perfecting sound is not an objective process, but one that is attempted in order to suit auditory biases and discourses over technology that befit the audience for whom the sound is being prepared.

An aspect of the restoring of sound is the location of the best-sounding or cleanest master recording available, then utilising this for remastering and issue to the marketplace. This archival legitimacy – the ability for the producers to gain access to these singular recordings, and the conferment of that archival authenticity onto the product produced – places consumers closer to the ‘original’ by creating a reproduction of high fidelity to that original, and interrupted by as few technological mediations as possible. I elaborate on this notion of authenticity to detail how ontologising notions of the authentic are implicated in the aesthetics and legitimacy of sound-reproduction technologies.

6.5 The authenticity of musical sound and reproduction technologies

Sound-reproduction and music retail are historical and historicised phenomena. This realisation is crucial to an understanding of the importance that consumers place upon fidelity, technologically-mediated sound and the authenticity of musical experiences. If servicing ‘original sounds’ properly via the mode of their technological reproduction is a paramount concern, then the nature of the original as the arbiter of authenticity must be interrogated. I herein detail the notion of an original recording, its trajectory from original-to-reproduction, and the relationship that people have with this conception of authenticity as manifested in a reproduced audio artefact and the technology utilised for its playback.

Practices of archiving and of subsequently making archives accessible are

complex engagements with peoples, objects and their histories. Several scholars have investigated such issues, including Liam Buckley (2005) who argues in relation to colonial-era photographs in postcolonial Gambian archives that “decay – as well as the right to allow for decay – is central to the cultural practice of archiving. The desire to preserve the national heritage in these material remains signals the transformation of the former colony [of Gambia] into a modern nation and the national attainment of a specific sign of being modern” (Buckley 2005:250). In a not dissimilar sense, the preservation of commercial musics is a product of the shift towards viewing these materials as a social and cultural history that should be preserved for future generations (and, in the case of popular music archives, commercial repurposing and exploitation).

What is particularly interesting when one considers the provocative value of decay that Buckley proposes is how decay can be valued differently in relation to distinct categories of objects. Being able to protect against loss of materials liable to decay is an empowering assertion of ‘modern’ status in the Gambian case. However, permanence is only reified for particular types of commodities. For example, MP3 files might be at risk of decay by becoming corrupted on a hard-drive, but they are not made more valuable for their vintage, as they are essentially fungible entities given the fact they can be endlessly replicated. By their very definition as endlessly replicable and transferable files, they are never *rare* and the ‘hunt’ enacted by consumers looking for physical product is qualitatively distinct from such online practice. Several participants in the research refer to their disposable nature as opposed to the permanence of artefactual reproductions such as CDs and vinyl. As record collector Daniel opined, “You can’t take your MP3s back to a store and get a refund for them, or give them to a Goodwill store... they’re worthless

because they don't even exist" (the US Supreme Court ruled that re-selling MP3s as second-hand goods was illegal in 2013¹⁴²).

Vinyl on the other hand gains more value over time in part because of its material liability to decay and wearing-out. Still, Appadurai suggests a distinction regarding "the dilemma of distinguishing wear from tear. That is while in many cases wear is a sign of the right sort of duration in the social life of things, sheer disrepair or decrepitude is not" (Appadurai 1996:75). The urge to preserve ratchets in intensity in the face of objects so liable to decay and damage.¹⁴³

As with Buckley's Gambian photos, commercial music archives are accessible to a restricted few. Furthermore, not all music is centralised in an archive. Many loose ends remain scattered amongst private collections and in peoples' homes. Roy Shuker writes of the early 78rpm record collectors operating from the 1940s through to the 1960s that their pursuit to collect vanishing records was wedded to "a concern for *cultural preservation*" (Shuker 2010:13 – emphasis added¹⁴⁴). Their scattered efforts produced vast private archives of commercially issued records from the USA that are unrivalled by any single institution. "The culture of the record collector as an archivist and cultural preserver has been an ongoing and influential one" (*ibid.*:30), clearly evidenced by collectors such as Chris King and Joe Bussard whose private collections have since become the raw materials for releases precisely predicated upon the scarcity of the records involved. Weissman (2006:17-35) describes how the early American collecting of folk songs (and

¹⁴² <http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2013/03/20/174751680/is-it-legal-to-sell-your-old-mp3s> (accessed 21.03.2013).

¹⁴³ Clayton (1996) showcases how the tangled history of London's National Sound Archive acquisitions and the problems inherent in liberating ethnographic wax cylinder recordings for wider access via digitisation are instructive of these problems.

¹⁴⁴ See Wardlow 2000 for first-hand accounts of this 'canvassing' aspect of record collecting, and for accounts of how these records ended up as re-issues influencing the American folk-music revival see Weissman 2006; Eyerman and Baretta 1996.

the image of the folklorist that this engendered) has had lasting influence upon and served as a precedent for contemporary perceptions of music collectors and archivists, both in academic settings and as private collectors.¹⁴⁵ Notions of lay music archivists have been longstanding, from the example of John Fahey rediscovering and recording both ‘lost’ Mississippi bluesman Skip James and Memphis blues legend Bukka White; legendary polymath Harry Smith who exploited his vast personal collection of pre-war 78rpm records to create the influential 1952 Folkways Records release *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Skinner 2006); and amateur folklorist Art Rosenbaum’s private recordings of thousands of performances of traditional American folk music as collated by Dust-to-Digital for their two multi-disc volumes of *The Art of Field Recording: 50 Years of Traditional American Music Documented by Art Rosenbaum*.

In my own research, different actors in the music industry have been able to gain access to original recordings through various routes. The following is a brief listing of some of these avenues to the archive, with short descriptions to give a sense of the scope of the archiving mission and the importance of the endeavour for those involved:

1. Tommy at Unseen Worlds went straight to the artists to gather audio master tapes for several releases, including his label’s re-issue of Lubomyr Melnyk’s 1978 solo piano album *KMH*. The tapes were damaged and required extensive doctoring for release.
2. Dean Blackwood of Revenant canvassed collectors at fansite www.beefheart.com for specific recordings to be used in Captain Beefheart &

¹⁴⁵ Kay Shelemay (1996) has evidenced in ethnomusicology how recording and the distribution of recordings can serve to sustain or even resurrect musical traditions.

the Magic Band rarities box set *Grow Fins*. Among those contacted included Magic Band members, who contributed recordings. Many fans provided upgrades to low-fidelity bootleg tracks from their private collections.

3. Matt Sullivan's Light in the Attic records contacted the estates of Serge Gainsburg and Karen Dalton to license their recordings. In the latter case, the masters were still in the possession of former Sunshine Records owner, Michael Lang (who produced the 1969 Woodstock Festival). For a project on Seattle funk music, the original artists were contacted for copies of their discs where master tapes could not be located.
4. Chris King contacted other 78rpm record collectors to obtain their rare original discs for transfer onto his Tompkins Square project, *People Take Warning*.
5. Bob Irwin at Sundazed Records has scored a major *coup* for being able to license recordings from Columbia Records (owned by Sony). Sundazed's engineers are granted access to these master reels for mastering for 'audiophile' vinyl reissues.
6. Bill Rush worked for 15 years as Feature Mastering & Research Manager at Warner Brothers on restoration of films, including the 40th anniversary edition of the Woodstock concert film. Source credibility was crucial to the project's success, but was not just limited to using master tapes for audio and film transfers – Eddie Kramer, who originally recorded the festival, re-mixed and engineered the original multitrack recordings.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ There were other great legal and logistical challenges to licensing the materials appropriately. Some acts were therefore unwilling or unable to contribute bonus material to the reissue. In the former sense, some

The quality of the listening experience and the appreciation of the commodity form is evidently intimately wed with the archiving of audio, and access to materials as close to the source or master recording as possible¹⁴⁷. Access to these recordings is facilitated by reputation in the market place (detailed in Chapter 2), for not just anyone can request these materials and expect to be granted access. But getting to the master tapes (or at least the best circulating copy of a recording) serves to legitimate labels and their products, confirm and bolster their reputations for good practice, and authenticate investing in the commodity and the listening experience for consumers. This works in part to validate Walter Benjamin's thesis that the "presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (1968:222). Benjamin argued for the inherent inferiority of duplicates and the harmful effects this poses for the "authority" of the original object, but in the present case the mechanical reproduction that uses the master copy as its source is superior to other replicas that do not come from the original recording. This is especially true when reproductions are made using technologies similar to that which made the original recording, such as an all-analogue transfer. Reissued albums frequently bear stickers on their front stating proudly that the album has been reissued from the original master tapes, testifying for the importance of provenance for aural authenticity.

acts demanded exorbitant fees in return for footage of them being used; in the latter sense, representatives of artist's estates could not be contacted. Rush lamented that this meant that footage of Tim Hardin, one of his favourite artists of whom there exists scant visual documentation, could not be included as his son Damien could not be contacted at the time. Leaving out certain footage not only negated the threat of potentially costly legal challenges, but also Rush noted that audiences were increasingly aware of the rights of artists and their proper compensation.

¹⁴⁷ Recordings that are repeatedly copied from one tape to another suffer from increased hiss and lack of definition as the tape generation increases. Therefore, access to the master is most often sought in order to ensure the best possible fidelity for recordings.

Problematizing Benjamin's thesis, the replication of music does not mean a lessening of the aura in the original. These originals – archived tapes and 78s, first pressings of albums – are still sought after by collectors despite the availability of replicas. Some of these have exemplary lineages and histories that are assessed and disseminated among collectors¹⁴⁸, in accordance with Benjamin's stipulation that "changes of ownership are subject to a tradition which must be traced from the situation of the original" (Benjamin 1968:222). Benjamin provocatively argued that "The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and of course, not only technical – reproducibility. Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so *vis à vis* technical reproduction" (*ibid.*). I argue to the contrary that the nature of the replica becomes of auratic importance itself, and the sourcing of ideologically accurate or authentic replicas suggests that mechanical reproduction according to a variety of technological means creates a hierarchy of reproductions, and accessing the correct form of reproduction is enough to legitimate its ownership and the experience of its playback as 'authentic'.

Therefore, access to archives and original recordings lends three qualities to producers, their goods and consumers' listening experience:

1. It proclaims authenticity by being close to the 'authorative' original object;

¹⁴⁸ This is especially true of blues 78s, but also of more contemporary records. There are only two known copies of Track 2408101 – a misprinted red vinyl edition of Jimi Hendrix's *Cry of Love* album. The label has a misprint, for the second side of the record has the label for side A of *The Best of Bert Kaempfert* on Polydor Records in place of the 'Side B' label for the Hendrix album. There exist thorough documentations of the records' whereabouts and ownership over the last 40 years. Auctioned on eBay in 2003, one of the records sold for £1,951, and it would be possible to hypothesise that the records' value come as much from its history as its scarcity, or its unique and slightly banal peculiarities. Being able to own such a storied object and keep it demonstrates power as a collector and as a fan, and it is valuable because of the status that it accords as a prestige good.

2. It legitimises reproduced sound via its relationship to a romanticised archive and its perceived (semi-institutional) authority, relative to other copies that do not come from such sources; and
3. Copies sourced from original tapes are perceived to service sound better (according to issues of fidelity) and result in as close an approximation to the experience of the original sound as possible.

These processes are brought into focus by utilising archived and collected audio sources of the highest possible quality sound from various locations, and situating them in the identities of producers, their products and consumers who access these replicas. The notion of the original and an original experience that can ideally be approximated by engaging with audio reproductions is inherently historicised as the original recording and its reproduction are necessarily temporally distanced events and artefacts. This historicised notion of appropriate technological interfaces affects the desirability of different technologies and materials for consuming music from the past, and can inform nostalgic tendencies.

Collector David Q admitted “I think there is a nostalgia in it after all” when reflecting upon the records he has kept since his youth in the 70s and 80s, and ruminating upon his own preference for vinyl as a format. Many other participants made similar observations about the inherent historicisation of listening practices. Daniel Plunkett who runs the End of an Ear record store in Austin talked about the appreciation for “old-school” ways of buying music as supporting demand for vinyl and independent stores like his own, whilst former senior vice-president of media relations at Warner Brothers

Records Bill Bentley (who now runs a website, SonicBoomers, dedicated to the music of the 60s and 70s) felt there was a resurgence of interest in vinyl in order to get into music “properly... like people did in the old days”. Bentley added “I am a print man to the bitter end” whilst suggesting that historicised notions of the correct way to consume media permeate many different sorts of consumption practices.

The value of a music format is not solely aural in nature. As a delivery mechanism for music each format carries narratives and historical auras and has its own properties, advantageous and detrimental, sonic and tactile, according to specific cultural criteria. Jeff Hunt of record label Table of the Elements feels uneasy about pinning the responsibility for vinyl’s persistence in the marketplace solely or even substantially upon its sonaural qualities. For him, “music is so subjective” that there have to be personal reasons for preferring the format that surpass in importance the dictates of sound quality. “It’s easy to get nostalgic and sentimental about your music and especially when it’s something so directly tied into peoples’ youths. Really” he challenged, in a sardonic tone, “are we going to get nostalgic over CDs? Or like kids who have this sort of quant fetish for audio cassettes, I mean *really*? Ok, I guess so, whatever”. The prevailing historicised reification of specific material-technological taxonomies is stifling to Hunt, who elsewhere in this thesis details a determination to create MP3 packages that attain the same status as the older formats. These insights illuminate the subjectivity of material-technological taxonomies, their impermanence, and the cultural and commercial pressures that inform them. History has informed current habits and preferences for sounds, technologies and materials, and these allegiances are likely to be further reconfigured over time.

Light in the Attic Records' Matt Sullivan shares this awareness of historical authenticity and nostalgia facilitating the resurgence of vinyl. Whilst sound quality is evidently a factor as collectors in this research have shown, there are other reasons why the format's fortunes have changed:

It's interesting, we've been doing vinyl since day one and I think vinyl's had a come-back due to people... everything now is so digital, and it's instant gratification, and it's text messaging, and it's not physical interaction. Even doing business people prefer to email rather than talk on the phone... vinyl's had a comeback with people fighting a lot of the digital things in our lives that don't have a lot of personality or character to them. A vinyl record – it's got a lot of heart and soul.

Matt further elaborated his concerns about his labels' releases, and his preferences as a producer for how best music should be experienced:

...for me eight out of ten times I'm into vinyl, it's not disposable like a CD is, it's interactive in a way, the way you put the needle on the turntable, flip it over, it sounds much better, I love the 12-by-12 big canvas, it takes me back to listening to music as a kid and staring at those covers, even though when I was a kid they were mostly CDs or cassettes, but with CDs most of that's been lost. I like digital music, go online and download these albums instantly, and exploit the web to find new music but I do find it really unfortunate that a lot of people when they search online for the Serge Gainsburg record we did¹⁴⁹, like, well, you missed out on a 40 page CD booklet with all these beautiful hand-drawn images or a really interesting interview – the only time Serge talked about the album in depth and we translated it to English and all the lyrics are there

¹⁴⁹ Serge Gainsbourg, *Histoire de Melody Nelson*, LITA 040

translated... I think that's really important... less people checking that out day-by-day is a bummer in my mind, but at least they're still listening to music, y'know! [laughs]

The efforts of producers to exact the best sounding products for discerning consumers is demonstrative of the existence in the music marketplace of audiophile consumers, but also of yearnings for an authentic and somewhat nostalgic relationship with the music and technologies in question. Many re-issued recordings originally entered the marketplace on vinyl. Therefore, consumers feel that this engagement with the vinyl record is somehow wedded with and closer to the original intentions of the artist who produced them. This phenomenon recalls Benjamin's ontological stipulation that authenticity is wedded to the notion of an original, and that being closer to the source of this original means greater authenticity. Consumers share with those producing records a recognition that the sound quality benefits of vinyl are complimentary to the other benefits to be gleaned from collecting physical objects rather than digital copies of music. Collector Matt L felt this held a special part of the allure of records for the newer generation coming into collecting culture:

One thing that is really apparent is that there are a number of young people around at the moment who really want to get into music like people did in 'the old days' and actually own objects, and get the music in better quality with artwork and that sort of thing, it's almost like a nostalgic thing to go back to how things should be, how music 'should be listened to', to actually own a collection they can see.

Still, the audiophile ear is manifest to some degree in his argument, and is complemented by Chris King's views on why he collects rare original 78rpm records

rather than satisfying himself solely with digital copies of these musics:

...ultimately I'm compelled towards collecting because it makes me feel closer to the artistry and to the artist and the time that produced it. You know, it's one thing to listen to it on CD, but it's a completely different experience to have the actual 78 and drop it on the turntable and drop the tone arm on it – it's almost like they're in the room communicating with you.

So, whilst there are aesthetic differences between analogue and digital sound files at the purely auditory level which can act as grounds for stating a preference for one or the other, the preferences for sound and for *particular sound-reproducing objects and technologies* are communally created and negotiated. It is extremely problematic to divorce sound from its physically substantiated presence as a package or playback media, but looking at responses to sound and the preferences for certain sound properties over others reveals how they have also driven the marketplace for physical media in the face of that for digital files. The valorising of vinyl, for example, is therefore simultaneously part of a wider dynamic of nostalgia and authenticity of objects and practices as well as of analogue sound. Shuker's study of record collectors links the allure and value of media formats with "notions of nostalgia, aura and authenticity" (2010:67) over fidelity, whilst I understand fidelity to be explicitly related to nostalgia, aura and authenticity. They are all wedded into a discourse of distinction, where the ability to hear correctly and to appropriately valorise technologies is alien to other consumer groups.

6.6 Conclusions

Just as technology is always revealing nature from a new perspective, so also, as it impinges upon human beings, it constantly makes for variations in their most primordial passions, fears, and images of longing.

Benjamin 1999:392-3

Technologies are facilitators of sociality (Sterne 2006; Latour 2000), and allegiances to different technologies are tools for people to express their social and cultural connections with others (Guille-Escuret 1993; Ingold 1993). When different technologies serve to replicate an ‘original’ in different ways, they present consumers with multiple ways of identifying with that original. I argue that different sound-reproduction technologies have facilitated the formation of cultural groups according to the technology utilised to access music. The discourses of analogue preference are largely alien to commercial mainstream audiences, and are used to articulate difference by the independent music marketplace as well as to maintain their own cohesion. This is true even where the alternatives available might seem more practical in terms of their ease-of-use and performance (Lemonnier 1993; Shove 2003).

Technology is therefore neither neutral nor progressing in a naturalised, linear chain of progress (Pfaffenberger 1988). I have demonstrated that where music is listened to as technologically mediated, the technologies utilised are symbolically charged. Aligning oneself with music that has been replicated from the original source recording and is unpacked using culturally-condoned technologies is a facet of the cultural capital of the independent music marketplace. Therefore, different replicas have different

capacities for embodying authenticity and retaining the aura of the original recording. This authenticity is manifest sonically and artefactually, and these two aspects of the commodities sought after by participants in my research are mutually and materially implicated in each other's performance. The striving for an authentic product is related to the history of commercially available sound-reproduction technologies, and as such there is an ontologised conception of authenticity that is at the heart of these constructions of music listening and technological engagement.

In light of Langdon Winner's insights, we can see that technology is used to solve community-specific issues such as how best to circulate and commodify original recordings. Winner also stipulated that technologies can support or engender arrangements of power and authority in social relationships (Winner 1980:123; 1986:22). The cultural capital of producers is evidently related to their access to the original recordings and their ability (as with engineer Chris King) to effectively reproduce these recordings. Therefore, the authority of producers in the marketplace has a distinctly aural facet, for how they utilise technologies of sound-reproduction legitimates their marketplace presence and bolsters their reputation and the desirability of their products. This is one possible cultural capital 'victory' in the marketplace – namely, the ability to obtain 'original' recordings and actualise their appropriate reproduction, earning actors the prestige of producing artefacts of authentic material and technological specifications.

Access to the archive is part of this validation of the replicated sound document. This validation has a technological component, for using original copies of recordings enables reproductions of higher fidelity, without the decrease in sound quality associated with high tape generations. There exists an historical component to this validation by

which the archive confers authenticity. Accessing archives and original recordings is an expression of social capital (*who you know*) and sensitivity to the concerns of the audience consuming the finished commodities. This is tied in with the romanticisation of private collectors and archivists who have kept the original recordings from decay and disposal (Skinner 2006; Shuker 2010:13; Weissman 2006:17-35). These master recordings that have resisted decay and wider dissemination as commodities gain value over time as symbolically dense, inalienable objects (Weiner 1992; 1994). When they are liberated from the archives as commodities via the appropriate technologies by producers with reputations for good practice in the marketplace, replicas are created that embody authenticity to consumers in spite of the technical nature of its reproduction – or rather, on account of their distinctive modes of technical reproduction.

It is important in this recapitulation to stress Sterne's argument that the notion of an original or a copy are products of the process of reproduction. Therefore, "Philosophies of sound reproduction that reference a prior authenticity that is neither reproduced nor reproducible are untenable since their point of reference – an authentic original untainted by reproduction – is at best a false idol" (Sterne 2003:241).

In this research, the very act of reproduction and the relationship between the original and the copy in terms of its sound, artefactual nature, sphere of circulation, and the processes necessary to perform playback are fundamental in the scene producing and consuming physical music media in the independent music marketplace. The concerns and distinctions/gradations of authenticity grounded in the existence of an original and the correct mode of its reproduction as a technological encounter inform the production and consumption of music. The 'false idol' of the authentic original is an ideal striven for

in the creation and consumption of music commodities. Bull has written in relation to the Walkman that “despite [the] routinisation of sound in consumer culture it retains a largely ‘utopian’ place in consumer desire. It does so because sound appears to deliver what consumers want. Mediated sound reproduction enables consumers to create intimate, manageable and aestheticised spaces in which they are increasingly able to, and desire to, live” (Bull 2002:82). An important related point is that the nature of the mediation and the form of the mediator are key to the aesthetic pleasure of recorded music. The wedding together of these two phenomena – the music and the mediator – which were previously estranged in discourses about sound and reproduction technologies (cf. Adorno 1934; Benjamin 1968) is vital to an understanding of technologically-mediated musical consumption. When people wish to live with tangible collections of music, and unpack them via the ritualised machinations of playback media, they are making conscious allegiances to a notion of authenticity that is as much rooted in the technology and the history of the media format as it is with the music itself.

Sterne recognises that authenticity “does not disappear altogether, though it does change” in the above account, such as “*this* notion of authenticity refers more to an intensity or consistency of the listening experience. It is a claim about affect and effect, rather than a claim about degrees of truth or presence in a reproduced sound” (Sterne 203:241). Furthermore, in attacking the ontological certainty of ‘the original’ sound, Sterne suggests that “The very idea that a reproduced sound could be faithful to an original sound was an artefact of the allure and history of sound reproduction. Copies could not exist without reproduction, *but neither would their originals*. Sound fidelity was a story about sound reproduction that proved useful for selling machines and

amenable to thinking of the medium through a philosophy of mediation” (Sterne 2003:282). The shift required is from considering the product at the end-point of reproduction, towards considering the very process of reproduction in order to illuminate what reproducibility is and what it accomplishes. I believe that the recognition of the absence of a copy/original distinction without an act of reproduction immediately binds the debate over the shift in recordings as philosophical, phenomenological and material artefacts with that over the salience of authenticity in social science research. Sterne might argue that “theories of mediation posit sound reproduction as a failure, a sham, and a debasement of a more fundamental live presence. Accounts of reproduction that presuppose an ontological split between original and copy offer only a negative theory of sound’s reproducibility, where reproduction can reference only that which is not reproduced. Like advertising, philosophy promised a synthesis that the thing itself could never deliver” (Sterne 2003:286). But a negatively preconceived notion of copy versus original need not resolve itself purely as the binary separation of categories that Sterne alludes to – the very spread of possible modes of reproduction (and thereafter of reception) confuse such a strict separation, as evidenced in this research.

In the concluding chapter that follows, the multiple interests of producers, retailers and consumers are consolidated with the marketplace forces of monetary transactions, reputation and authenticity. The main arguments of this thesis are brought into focus and utilised to make proposals for future research.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have produced an ethnographic analysis of the independent music marketplace by primarily focussing upon the objects that circulate in this marketplace. I have provided a novel ethnographic example of the production and circulation of valuable objects within a consumer culture by focussing upon the material culture of the independent music marketplace. I argue that the authenticity deigned to reside in certain materials, technologies, modes of production and consumption is key to the creation of this value system. With the recent rise of interest in the debate over the nature of materiality in cultural discourses, and the history and philosophy of sound-reproduction technologies, these themes make for a pertinent discussion.

I have demonstrated the complicity between musical sound, its physical commodity forms, modes of production, exchange cycles and consumer base. Situating the dynamics of this circulation in the independent music market as experienced in Austin, Texas proved to be a fruitful contextualisation. The entanglement of the phenomena discussed in this thesis is locally articulated in Austin on a scale that enabled the minutiae of the independent music market to be unpacked within a manageable fieldsite (previously evidenced by Shank 1994). Focussing upon the more modestly-scaled operations of the independent marketplace over the major-label, mainstream market for music commodities (whilst simultaneously contextualising the independent marketplace *vis-à-vis* the mainstream marketplace) further concentrated the scope of this thesis.

If I had conducted my research in a different North American urban centre, the scenic qualities of the independent music marketplace would very likely have led to many of the same conclusions being reached. By this I mean that the trans-local nature of the scene, interlocking hubs of independent music retailers, labels and consumers would have been able to distribute the same goods across these spaces, and the shared hierarchies of sounds, materials and technologies amongst producers and consumers would have provided similar ethnographic material. Austin benefits from having many such labels, consumers and sites of retail in a manageable 'sited' location.

My thesis helps redress the paucity of work on music markets' material culture in anthropological literature¹⁵⁰. The focus upon material commodities over the economic systems of goods is rooted in Appadurai's influential *Social Life of Things* collection (1986), where material culture is prioritised over the economies in which it is situated¹⁵¹. My intention has been to situate physical music media in their economic contexts whilst incorporating discussions of their specific material and performative qualities to create a balanced account of the influences upon their creation, circulation and consumption.

Throughout this thesis I have shown that producers and high-level collectors engaged in the exchange of singular and unique items are held in esteem by other consumers. They are hierarchically 'above' the other collectors in terms of their amassed

¹⁵⁰ For all the promise of its 'material turn' in the 1980s, anthropology has yet to approach music commodities as material culture with the same rigor it has brought to other commodities such as food (Wilk 2006; Bestor 2001); clothing (Miller 2010; Woodward 2005; Palmer and Clark 2005); souvenirs such as Tibeto-Nepalese carpets (O'Neill 1999; McGuckin 1997); the visual arts (Gell 1998; Geismar 2001); and many other examples. Rather, semiotic discussions of music making and musical texts, ethnomusicological investigations of localised music-making or attempts to redress the ocular-bias in Western phenomenology (Samuels *et al* 2010; Attali 1985; Erlmann 2004) have existed in lieu of a study of the material culture of physical music media.

¹⁵¹ This can be traced to that collection's desire to break down the gift/commodity distinction canonised in several previous anthropological works (Gregory 1982), wherein authors focussed upon the economies and marketplaces in which objects were situated.

cultural capital, power to affect what other consumers are able to acquire in the marketplace, and their sense of fulfilment in the marketplace.

I have argued that the necessity to appropriately acquire, materialise, commodify and embody cultural capital is of key importance in the independent music marketplace. The objects that circulate (both in first and second cycles of exchange) are not the only things that objectify the cultural capital of the independent music market. Chapter 4 displays how public spaces embody this capital with record stores as communally-created and -sustained spaces for enacting and acquiring cultural capital, whilst Chapter 5 makes the case for private spaces embodying the same. In Chapter 6, I showed how this cultural capital has distinct aural and technological facets. These are shown to be linked by discourses of authenticity that permeate the independent music marketplace.

The competition over cultural capital in this field has enabled some to amass collections that are the envy of others. Being in possession of unique items places people in a sphere where they can engage in tournaments of value, as defined by Appadurai (1986:21). Those who collect, for example, rare pre-war 78s (such as participants Dean Blackwood and Chris King) are therefore able to participate in rarefied exchange with other collectors possessing similar materials that other consumers do not possess. These *originals* are the “central tokens of value” (*ibid.*) to be found in the independent music marketplace. Their appropriate reproduction and circulation creates value for the actors in the independent music market by enabling those people to exercise the cultural capitals of musical taste, materiality, collecting abilities, spatial negotiations, knowledge and social contacts. They become producers by being able to access these originals and facilitate their release. By producing, they are able to expand the spatio-temporal potentials of

original recordings (Munn 1986). In doing so, they also create reputations for themselves by displaying their cultural capital credentials in making products available in the most appropriate material form (Chapter 3), technological specification and sound quality (Chapter 6). Places that exchange these goods (Chapter 4) and those that choose to acquire them (Chapter 5) are similarly rewarded with the value that has passed from that original.

I have noted that this hierarchy is discursively framed largely in non-competitive terms. This contrasts with the constant interrogation and assessment of the relative importance of different sounds, objects, technologies and spaces relative to each other. Bourdieu interprets fields of cultural capital and cultural production as being inherently competitive. Discourses of collecting and acquiring knowledge in this thesis largely concern localised acceptance from others sharing and valorising similar field-specific cultural capital within the scene. Many of those who are 'low' in this hierarchy are not striving to become producers. They might recognise such a role as desirable yet not have the ambition or feel the ability given their circumstances to chase such a career path. For people who invest so heavily in acquiring music and knowing information pertaining to it, to be able to remove oneself from your non-musical day-job holds considerable allure. This is substantiated by the satisfaction many working in this marketplace expressed in their work throughout this thesis and the esteem in which consumers hold them and their positions. Rather than striving to become producers, the betterment most consumers seek is a fulfilment of their place in the field by acquiring collections that are methodically and aesthetically contingent with the ideals of the marketplace.

I have shown in this work that collecting is related to wider concerns about value

and status; that it is a social act and not a pathologically myopic pursuit of inessential goods. The processes of collecting are not merely acts of acquisition and hoarding. They are processes of accumulating knowledge, exercising taste and discretion which are clearly social in their practices and ramifications. Collecting is an act of harnessing the cultural capital in the scene, which enables collectors to socialise or become involved in the production of new commodities. This insight contests the claim that “Collecting records... is a solitary practice, based on an exclusive and exclusionary relationship between subject and object”, and that music collectors “are connected only through the objects they possess and those they seek to possess” (Hosokawa and Matsuoka 2004:164). Collecting is not just a consumer activity, but feeds into the production of music commodities, as collections are re-sourced for use in commercial releases. Far from being socially alienating, the collection is potentially an asset to social and cultural mobility and defining the self in the social world of the independent music marketplace.

Research participants’ rhetoric in this thesis suggests that in more mainstream areas of the music business, where ‘stardom’ and the lure of large financial rewards act as incentives for becoming part of the upper echelons of the hierarchy, these struggles for prominence might be more explicit. For the independent music marketplace and its participants however, discourses about ‘keeping it real’ and being in it for the music supersede notions of chasing money and corporate prestige (Strachan 2007; Dunn 2012; Arsel and Thompson 2010).

The independent music scene takes an ideologically oppositional stance against the mainstream music industry and its perceived practices of profiteering, dubious creative credentials and cynical attitude towards the consumer body. The types of

commodities produced articulate this opposition through their technological, sonic and designed material properties as well as through the music that they replicate. Money exchanged within the independent marketplace is not perceived as an alienating, depersonalising instrument for interaction between socially distant actors engaging in commodity exchange (as generalised by Marshall Sahlins 2004 [1974]). I have argued that the independent music marketplace is a proto-market wherein the degree of commodification is not complete, and “the level of activity cannot be explained by economic factors alone” (Toynbee 2000:27) on account of the minimal profits accrued. Purchasing independently-produced music commodities offers the facilitation of a communion between like-minded individuals, and sustains the field in which their cultural capital is invested. Accessing music via independent labels, artists and record stores sustains the independent marketplace. Spending money with communal social goals in mind legitimates monetary transactions that might otherwise prove problematic. To purchase music made by an independent label from an independent record store is to support the scene by contributing to the sustenance of its social sites of exchange and the longevity and viability of its producers (the material on Record Store Day 2009 discussed in Chapter 4 corroborates this suggestion). By creating an ideological opposition against the alienating corporate capitalism of mainstream markets in the smaller-scale economic circumstances of the independent music marketplace, consumers can conceive of themselves as closer to the producers of goods, with fewer obfuscating factors degrading the authenticity of the experience they are purchasing.

Against prevailing constructivist interpretations, I have argued that authenticity has value as an analytical anthropological concept because it unites what my research

participants value about materiality, technology, and marketplace relationships. The gradation of cultural capital in this scene is synergistic with the gradation of authenticity. The performance and consumption of authenticity, and the resistance and rejection of people and things that are “faking it” (Barker and Taylor 2007) informs attitudes towards commodities, sounds, musicians, media formats, record labels and consumer identities. I have detailed key concerns within anthropological discussions of authenticity, namely the divide between materialist and constructivist approaches to the authentic and the historicisation of authentic ‘originals’ versus the replicas and forgeries of modernity.

Walter Benjamin’s key text on artworks and technology (*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1968) stipulated that the reproductions of artworks are distanced from the aura of the original artwork which is itself the prerequisite for any notion of authenticity. I have contended that not all artworks lose singularity or endurance through their mechanical reproduction and commodification. My research demonstrates that replicas themselves can become considered ‘originals’ depending upon the origin of that particular replica, the technological process of its reproduction, and the materiality of the sonic and tactile interface this enables. The loss and fragmentation Benjamin predicted from industrialisation are rather shown to afford new types of enchantment via technology, precisely due to the process of reproduction having created the notion of an ‘original’ and a ‘copy’ (cf. Sterne 2003). Hierarchical taxonomies of materials and technologies existing within a culture whose principle artefact is the technologically-reproduced sound-object have created a marketplace where particular replicas are sought out over others. They in turn become highly-valued benchmark artefacts with both source and mimetic credibility against which other reproductions are assessed. These

reproductions do not question the authority of the original artefacts of which they are copies. They rather serve to distribute and heighten the fame of the original object (by expanding its potential spatio-temporal reputation – Munn 1986). The original's restricted circulation in turn adds to its value due to the ability for other commodities to circulate more readily and make its status as a singular, circulation-resisting object more apparent (Weiner 1994).

What makes technological reproductions of music valuably authentic is the fact that their authenticity is rooted in a network of people, places and things, not just the things themselves (Jones 2010). The authenticity of the reproduction is something that is worked for and inculcated into the new commodity by those who manufacture and distribute it by focussing upon original sound-sources, product design, technological specifications and retail avenues. The authentic reproduction is not considered a pale imitation. It is itself a valued object because of the people and histories it connects, the tactile and sonic material platform it enables, and the scene it sustains.

Authenticity does not come forth solely from a single well-spring of cultural integrity (the historically-validated original), but is a multi-vocal interplay between objects and peoples' social networks around these objects. The authentic objects – with their technological, historical and cultural validity – are entangled with the notions of personal and commercial authenticity by which actors in the independent music marketplace seek to define themselves. Consumers validate their personal authenticity as outside the mainstream by investing in products of authentic origin, technological/material specifications, and that link them with other authentic sites and actors.

Authenticity exists in opposition to the inauthentic, that which is unreal, sullyng and deceiving. The construction of an independent music marketplace identity in opposition to the mainstream music marketplace requires the field-specific cultural capital of the independent music marketplace to oppose that of the mainstream. This involves utilising different technologies for accessing music, critical and knowledgeable engagement with music and the marketplace, and the inhabiting of different spaces of consumption. Such cultural capital consists of materials, relationships and performances that are authentic, and is indeed field-specific as it does not bring forth the same rewards when deployed in the mainstream. This is true despite the attempts of the mainstream to appropriate 'organic' signifiers from the independent marketplace for their own means.

My ethnography shows that the culturally-specific facets of authenticity need to be thought of holistically and related to the networks of materials, actions and relationships that purvey and deign authenticity in a social group. Authenticity is the anchor of this cultural capital. I have argued that authenticity is not simply the claim to a unique provenance, manifest in historical originals, singular reified items and sites of heritage. I have argued that it is a multi-local and multi-vocal social phenomenon that can be harnessed by and embodied in material and corporeal agents. Knowing the parameters of authenticity, appropriately engaging with its materials and de-polluting their marketplace of inauthenticity is of paramount importance to the actors and the community in which they are investing. Otherwise, one might conclude that the act of listening to vinyl is the sole arbiter of authenticity, or that being authentic is solely an attribute of old recordings that have been kept in pristine condition. Research investigating concepts of 'the authentic' in commercial cultures must recognise how

multiple streams of economic rationales, design, technological reproduction, histories and personal conduct are united by the common concern of authenticity.

My ethnography of the independent music marketplace has demonstrated that there are people of all generations who are placing value not just upon physical music media but also the marketplace, social relationships and cultural capital that they promise. They are doing so in a time of mass technological and cultural change in the way music is recorded, accessed, listened to and perceived of as a cultural commodity. As the full implications of these changes for physical music media are far from conclusive, they will likely continue to provide fruitful and compelling sources of anthropological enquiry.

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