

Viva vinyl!

Viva books!

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There is no escape! Cell-phones, television and plasma screens, the Internet, Facebook, tweets, downloads and, of course, Brocade . . . digital technology is everywhere. Even those clocking devices we use at work are digital. Our lives are being progressively invaded and modified by intrusive beeping sounds and puerile ring-tones at every turn. We hardly ever get a chance to unglue our eyes from a monitor of some description . . . and soon we'll all be curling up in bed with lovely little e-books. Convenience and connectedness are the great myths of the Brave New World.



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And so the debate about the future of books in the traditional format rages on. Librarians and writers everywhere fret about how the new digital technology will affect us and our professions. But, there are alternative ways of looking at the dilemmas we now face. Surely the new can operate side-by-side with the old. Why discard older technologies that have proven effectiveness, just because the whole world is going digital?

Recently I started researching online the so-called 'Vinyl Revival'. As I have worked for many years in the music department at Wynberg Library, which still houses over 10,000 LP records, this subject interests me a great deal. The 'Vinyl Revival' calls into question the way in which new technologies are assimilated into societies and cultures and eventually end up superseding the older technologies.

Since the early 1990s when we stopped purchasing new recordings on LP, the usage of the original collection at Wynberg Library has plummeted as all the new sound recordings coming in to the library have been on compact disc only. Therefore, our borrowers, for the most part, have been forced to switch to the new format. Millions of fantastic, high-quality

LP collections worldwide have been discarded and trashed since then because of this trend.

It is not clear, however, that the users actually prefer CDs. In fact, I know that many of the more discerning music-lovers still prefer the older format. There is still a core of LP borrowers who swear by vinyl and rue the fact that new music is not available on vinyl in libraries or music shops. Will this be the future for books as well? Will public libraries also trash their collections of books?

As far as I know, Wynberg Library is the only library in Cape Town, if not in South Africa, that still houses its original collection of LP records. All other collections have been either auctioned off or trashed and I think that this is a great pity, particularly in the light of the new trend in the United States of America and the United Kingdom.

Yes people, believe it or not, there has been a huge increase in the sales of vinyl in the Western world over the last decade. In the January 2012 edition of *MOJO*, the music magazine, the following was reported: 'It's not quite 1975 with 91.6 million platters sold, but UK vinyl sales are booming: 240,000 in the first



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10 months of 2011, up 40 per cent on 2010.' I have also researched this subject extensively on the Internet and I have found many sources that back this up, such as an article entitled *The Vinyl Revival and the resurrection of sound* by Robert Benson on www.digitaldreamdoor.com. He reports: 'Yes, vinyl records, left for dead with the advent of the "digital age" are selling again. In fact, in 2008, it's reported that 1,88 million vinyl albums were purchased, which is the highest number since Nielsen Soundscan began tracking LP sales in 1991. In comparison, CD sales have nosedived over the past 3 years, from 553,4 million in 2006 to 360,6 million in 2008. More people purchased vinyl records in 2008 than they have in almost 20 years, according to the Recording Industry Association of America.'

What makes this phenomenon all the more remarkable is that the renewed interest in vinyl is not being driven primarily by old-fashioned audiophiles and deejays, but by a much younger set of teenagers and twenty-somethings – the very demographic group that you might expect to be obsessed with digital information and technology. These people are discovering what millions of audiophiles and deejays have maintained all along – that vinyl always sounded better, while compact discs

and MP3s carry sound information that has been compressed and digitised to be unnaturally clean.

In the same January 2012 article in *MOJO*, so-called 'design-supremo' Stanley Donwood said this of CDs: 'They are atrocious. Human invention has made some serious errors, the private motor vehicle being chief among them. Compact discs are not in the same league, but they are still extremely annoying. In a few years they'll all be landfill.' Okay, so that's maybe a little over-stated, but he makes a very good point – that new technologies are not necessarily superior, or even preferable, and are often developed because of their commercial potential rather than their intrinsic quality.

If the 'Vinyl Revival' is not just a fad, then it will be all very ironic, because 'long playing records' (which are analogue information) will probably outlive compact discs as digital information is not dependant on the CD format anymore. Witness the burgeoning sales of downloads from the Internet. Since the advent of compact discs in the mid-1980s millions have moved over to the digital format but some people, such as audiophiles and some deejays, held on to their vinyl collections and claim that LPs are, in fact, superior to CDs for two main reasons:

Firstly, they say that the sound of analogue is warmer, more organic and natural sounding, because it has not been compressed into ones and noughts as is the case with the digital information you hear on a CD. Of course, there are some hiss and other noises such as the odd crackle and pop, but they feel that is a small price to pay for superior sound. Secondly, the packaging of LPs allows more space for text and artwork. CD packaging with its miniature text and frustratingly small graphic content just does not compare. (At Wynberg Library we often still get patrons who borrow LPs purely for the information contained on the cover sleeves).

The very thing that many people criticise the format for, such as its bulkiness and the fact that it takes up more space in

homes and libraries, also turns out to be one of the LPs most enduring and appealing features. It is more appealing visually and the new users in the UK and US get this. The need to turn an LP over after every 20 to 25 minutes also turns out to be a positive feature for them. Sure, you don't get sixty minutes of uninterrupted music, but they don't see this as a nuisance, in fact, they appreciate that an LP record demands greater involvement. There is also more of a sense of ritual. All of which translates into a more fulfilling listening experience. Not everything is about convenience, it seems.

Another common criticism of vinyl is that it is easy to damage as the LPs can be scratched if not cared for properly and tend to warp when exposed to high temperatures. Well, let me just point out that compact discs are equally prone to scratching, cracking and other kinds of damage – anybody who has worked in a library with CDs can attest to that. I would say that the LP collection at Wynberg Library is in as good a state after 40 years as is the CD collection which is less than 20 years old ... and that's about the best you can expect in a public library.



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Because of the nature of the older technology, the users of LPs are generally much more aware of how to care for them. One sees the record turning on the turntable ... the arm moves across ... drops the needle onto the record surface ... and voila ... sound! CD users by comparison seem to have little idea of how the sound is generated and how fragile they are and therefore often treat them carelessly. To compound the problem, the media and industry continue to portray and market CDs as being 'virtually indestructible'. Millions still believe this even though this is so completely untrue. Not only are the discs themselves prone to damage, but the brittle plastic trays and cases they come in also crack and break. The hardy cardboard LP covers/sleeves are much more durable in comparison.

Inevitably, some public libraries in the USA and the UK (such as the New York Public Library and Grandview Heights Public Library) have begun collecting new vinyl again. The technology is once again being given the credit it deserves. And while the classical music world seems to have sold its soul to digitalisation years ago, a few current Rock and Pop bands, such as the British rock group Radiohead, are now releasing new recordings on vinyl.

Yet another potentially revolutionary (excuse the pun) development is that of the so-called 'laser turntable'. This is a turntable that does not operate using the traditional arm and stylus, but plays records optically. It uses lasers to read the grooves of a record and, therefore, there is no wear and tear from a needle scratching across the surface of the record. Makes you think, hey!

In preparation for this article I got out my old turntable and listened to a selection of LPs from my record collection. What a pleasure! Why did I ever stop listening to them in the first place? And when did CDs start to take precedence? I guess it just became more and more difficult to get new recordings on vinyl and the parts for the turntables as well. Don't get me wrong, I do still appreciate CDs, in

fact, the technology has improved greatly over the last two decades and you can get amazing sound out of a CD player. But, I do think that the industry saw a new way of making lots of lovely lolly by selling us all a new technology and its related products.

The 'Vinyl Revival' will probably take a lot longer to catch on here in South Africa, but librarians should be aware of this and

be aware that new technologies are not always improvements, or add real value to our lives. Thirty years after the advent of compact discs, the jury is still out about the relative merits of analogue versus digital music.

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▲ Striking covers of albums available from Wynberg Library

▼ The album cover of **The basement tapes** by Bob Dylan. It is a folk-rock classic and has a fantastic cover - a good example of how effective LP covers are in comparison with the miniature CD versions



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