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An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience

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Noise Over Signal

Phonography Culture as Participatory

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Abstract

While participatory culture has been of special interest to scholars for nearly three decades, much of the focus has centered on digitally networked contexts. The digital age has indeed transformed our approaches to listening to music and how we operate as fans of music; these approaches can weave together the new and the old, and are enacted among a variety of spaces, objects, and relationships. We explore how the re-emergence of one such object in the digital age — the LP — has produced social arrangements that perhaps excavate older listening practices but do so in ways that have been affected by the mediascape more generally. We offer the concept of phonography culture: a term that emphasizes the social practices of those who not only curate and collect vinyl records but communicate through them in participatory activities including listening parties, vinyl nights at local bars, Facebook groups, and sites of e-commerce. We share the case study of Record Nite, a semi-regular gathering of phonography culture participants, who take turns playing one side of an LP on a given theme, revealing in their fandom and reveling in and encouraging that of others. Over the course of an evening, ten to twenty friends connect over their own “noise” — their experiences, histories, and knowledge of artists, albums, and genres—while simultaneously listening to LPs together. These phonographic, cultural interactions are revelatory because they draw our attention away from individualized and digital listening, which isolate signal, and make space for social and aural noise. That noise is infused with fandom and participation, as well as elements of memory, meaning making, and nostalgia.

Introduction

Fandom and participatory culture have been of special interest to scholars for nearly three decades and for much of that time their focus has generally skewed towards cultural production in digitally networked contexts (Delwiche and Jacobs Henderson, 2013). Research on user participation in music and auditory culture in particular have explored digital formats like MP3s (Sterne, 2012), platforms like Spotify (Morris, 2017), and practices like remixing (Bennett, 2018) and ways these objects and practices affect social relations in the 21st century. However, as Duffet (2014) argues, while the digital age has transformed music fandom, it has also extended some of its predigital participatory practices — publishing, filking, collecting, cosplaying, to name a few — and made them more visible through digital media. Often making use of old and new media, contemporary music fans offer complex declarations of obsession that “can center on a number of different practices and a variety of different objects” (p. 8), which often combine in unexpected and fascinating ways.

In our case, we explore how the re-emergence of one such object in the digital age — the LP — has produced social arrangements that perhaps excavate older

listening practices but do so in ways that have been affected by the mediascape more generally. In response to these changing arrangements, we offer the concept of *phonography culture*. While terms like “record culture” or “phonograph cultures” (Smith, 2011) are useful for understanding the role that certain music formats play in socialization through collection and taste, we use phonography culture to emphasize those participatory, social practices when people use records as an occasion for collectivization, identification, and communication. Exploring participatory sites of exchange — listening parties, vinyl nights at local bars, Facebook groups, sites of e-commerce — participants co-create new relationships to music, culture, and among each other.

We discuss the case study of Record Nite, a semi-regular gathering of music lovers, who take turns playing one side of an LP they have selected based on a generative theme. Over the course of an evening, ten to twenty friends connect over their own “noise” — their experiences, histories, and knowledge of artists, albums, and genres—while simultaneously listening to LPs together. The themes, sides, and participants were documented on Tumblr, featuring links to YouTube playlists and Discogs.com pages for release notes, which served as a collective memory for the group. While most participants make use of streaming services, earbuds, or significant iTunes libraries, we suggest that Record Nite insists on the participatory nature of analog noise (Krukowski, 2017); that is, records and their tactile accoutrements, along with the spaces and conversations that surround them, can provide a shared sense of craft, history, and process valuable to contemporary auditory culture.

That Record Nite and similar mutual co-listening activities such as “Bring Your Own Vinyl” nights (Santiago, 2016) or browsable, playable open vinyl collections (Haber, n.d.) at bars and restaurants, have emerged concurrently with increases in digital and solitary music experiences is notable, as is the recent resurgence in production and marketing of vinyl records. We argue that phonography culture offers affordances to community through the objects and practices collecting and listening to music in analog formats involves. The LPs, the sleeves, liner notes, and traces of their current and former owners provide an opportunity for co-present explorations—dialogue, pedagogy, and audience participation—that are more capacious than contemporary solitary digital listening practices encourage.

The Return of Analog in Participatory Culture

Delwiche and Jacobs Henderson (2013) argue that participatory-culture studies developed through four phases, beginning with its initial emergence in the mid-1980s. This earliest era was marked most significantly by the work of Henry Jenkins (1992) and his landmark book on fandom, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. *Textual Poachers* and similar texts from that period (Bacon-Smith,

1991; Radway, 1984) characterize popular and mass media as polysemous, where fan culture is predicated on identity and networked via the production and swapping of fan-made artifacts. Indeed, *Textual Poachers* provides not only an early glimpse into studies of participatory culture and fandom but *defined* it as a narrowing of the distance between producers and consumers through the making of zines, newsletters, paintings, remixed VHS tapes, and audio cassettes. While Jenkins briefly examines online discussion groups (“computer nets,” in the parlance of the text), digital spaces like alt.tv.twinpeaks were used mostly for communication and not typically creative production.¹

As subsequent studies of participatory culture have documented, digital technologies have played an increasingly inseparable role in fan production and circulation, beginning in the mid-to-late 1990s with the birth of peer-to-peer networks like Napster and Limewire and the publishing of mp3 blogs like *Fluxblog* and *Said the Gramophone*. Nearly 15 years after *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins served as lead author on an influential white paper that centered these digital technologies, arguing that the digital divide was about more than simply *access* to new tools but what one could do with them in a growing participatory culture (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006).

While the authors of the white paper linked digital participation to politically desirable goals like citizenship, Barney, Coleman, Ross, and Sterne (2016) have argued that users’ deep immersion in participatory culture has led us to a *participatory condition*, a normative state of action made so by the promise that our involvement in networks and new media will somehow lead us to agency, a promise consistently left unfilled and often exploited. Two decades into the 21st century, this condition has turned some fans back toward the same kinds of artifacts Jenkins (1992) originally studied. Such doubling back is reflected in their very vocabulary. Sterne (2016) shows how the two-decade ascent of digital and networked technologies in the 1980s and 90s led to the gradual proliferation of the word “analog” (and “analogue”) — words that were previously reserved for a technical process but thereafter served as a “useful rhetorical tool for both promotional and critical discussion of digital technology” (p. 32). Analog, as an adjective, did not exist until we were surrounded by the digital.

Both uses of analog are embraced in David Sax’s (2016) *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*, where he explains how the recent popularity of physical commodities like books, board games, and records have created a “postdigital economy that looks toward the future of technology, without forgetting its past” (xviii). Whether the material is fabric, plastic, paper, film, or cardboard, the inefficiency of these products has become their primary affordance, satisfying a tactile pleasure, a “haptic satisfaction” (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015a) and deep desire that can get lost in digitally saturated environments. Along with increases in vinyl record

sales that began in 2007, recent literature has accumulated regarding older audio formats (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015a; Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015b), the LP in popular culture (Austin, 2017; Borgerson & Schroeder, 2017), analog production and distribution (Palm, 2017; Winters, 2016), and vinyl LP collecting (Moist, 2013; Shuker, 2010).

While record collecting objectively increased in the 2010s, collecting also just became a more visible activity through the publication of mass-market nonfiction books (Paz, 2015; Petrusich, 2014; Reynolds, 2012; Spitznagel, 2016). As these books attest, the vinyl revival includes a range of record formats — cylinders, LPs, 45s, and 78s — as well as a variety of equipment necessary for finding, playing, storing, and maintaining them. We are interested in how this revival has led fans of these formats to create new social arrangements that respond to the more isolating tendencies of what Hagood (2019) calls “orphic media,” media that help us affectively control our immediate sensory environments through devices like headphones and personal stereos, and thus also cutting off our ability to be affected. However, we must first briefly unpack some of the ways a multivalent, mixed-media soundscape — made up of a scattered mix of audio devices, formats, interfaces, and platforms — has affected the already-contested terms and assumptions for those who study participatory culture generally and music fandom specifically.

Participatory Entanglements

Mixed-media environments complicate the processes and the range of practices that fans or fan communities exhibit — some of which are tacit or private, and therefore difficult or even impossible for researchers to see. Rhiannon Bury (2018), for this reason, has argued for replacing the binary between non-participatory (i.e. bystanders) and participatory fans with a continuum that includes less visible practices like information seeking and listening on one end and the creation and circulation of fan works on the other (p. 125). Music fans might participate at their most passive, for example, by reading reviews of an album or track on sites like *Stereogum* or *Pitchfork*, obtaining and playing that album enthusiastically at a party, or, on the other end of the continuum, by publishing a print music zine. While we understand participatory culture to be ultimately social and socially organized, fans participate in liminal activities and smaller practices that take place privately and publicly, and by manipulating and range of physical and digital objects.

These practices, moreover, need not be transformative to be participatory. Hills (2014), for example, addresses yet another binary — that between textual and material production, offering the term *mimetic fandom* for those who craft replicas — such as Daft Punk helmets — as a kind of affirmational fandom. As fans and fan communities scuttle between different kinds of media, they produce text and mate-

rial, using images found via Google to create zines or making mix CDs from downloaded mp3s. Facebook groups such as “Now Playing” and “Vinyle Archéologie” — each including tens of thousands of members — feature a stream of fan-shared images of sleeves and turntables and welcome comment and debates about other fans’ tastes, collecting habits, and gear. As spaces like these proliferate, methods for tracking and interpreting participatory practices are also adjusting, borrowing from fields like museum studies (Hoebink, Reijnders, & Waysdorf, 2014), using more object-oriented approaches (Rehak, 2014), or revisiting ethnographic methods from first-wave fandom studies that are more attentive to intermediaries (Coppa, 2014).

Movement between media calls attention to the “lack of absoluteness in one’s experience” (Palm, 2017) highlighting, especially, the political motives and consequences of participatory cultures. In this sense, concepts like “platform fandom” (Morris, 2017) usefully explain how user-generated content affects music fandom as streaming services like Spotify collect and deploy user data, compounding processes as they become the default for the majority of music consumers. Morris (2017) explains:

It is a process that shifts classical understandings of music fandom from the study of a song or artist and toward something more nebulous and recursive: an unending stream of activities and contexts in which music fans are hailed to incorporate sound into their daily lives to generate more data about fans’ everyday use of music. (p. 361)

Scholars have also documented the increasing exploitation of fandom via digital entanglements (Coppa, 2014; Duffett, 2013; Keltie, 2017; Stanfill, 2019). Duffett (2013) shows how the culture industry uses Twitter as “drive-by media,” while Keltie (2017) suggests how “authorised participation” arranges fans in such a way that they must continuously negotiate power with the intermediaries in which and by which they engage under the liberatory ruse of user-generated content.

Thus, fans of vinyl records or cassettes are drawn to physical formats, in part, to relieve or supplement such streams, gravitating toward these more embodied experiences of music as “the cultural and political *other* to digitalisation and corporate mass production” (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015a, p. 16).

The scale at which corporate digitization is built through these platforms affect more than just consumers. Sharing his experiences in the influential slowcore band Galaxie 500, Damon Krukowski (2017) describes how the system for distributing royalties on Spotify or Pandora is skewed against DIY artists, requiring tens or even hundreds of thousands of plays before an artist’s revenue matches the sale of a single record.²

Indeed, Krukowski’s book, *The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World* (2017), sketches the broader cultural, political, and economic consequences of losing analog sound in the digital age. Users who embrace streaming apps listen to

what they want whenever they want; however, as Krukowski persuasively argues, because analog captures sound in all its continuity — that is, it does not isolate signal as digital recording does — it can't help but include noise, however minimally. Unlike digital recordings, where engineers may work to eliminate as much noise as possible, analog necessarily captures and documents both. For Krukowski, “*noise is communicative as signal*” (p. 11) and thus presents the elimination of noise as not only technical, but political: “The power to define signal may well be a fundamental struggle in the digital age. So too the power to control signal, once it has been isolated” (p. 198).

This is not to say that fans who embrace analog sound via physical formats are immune to commercialization, nor are digital ones inherently corporate. Much of Sax's book traces the emerging markets and innovative marketers of physical formats such as the recent impressive annual growth rates of not only LPs, but entry-level turntables. While the proliferation of the LP format might seem like good news to fans, it is not without its share of problems. As Palm (2017) explains, Amazon and Urban Outfitters are vinyl's largest purveyors. Further, he outlines the contradictions of Record Store Day (RSD), an international event held annually, supposedly to promote and celebrate independent records stores through the release and sale of limited issue, highly collectable, vinyl-only editions. Such releases reflect the extent to which “major labels have colonized the event and adopted its rhetoric of independence as a pernicious marketing ploy” (p. 7). The hype around RSD means already-taxed pressing plants, for instance, delay the pressings of lesser-known artists or small batch releases in favor of those churned out for RSD (Palm, 2017).

Conversely, as Sterne (2012) has argued, the widespread circulation of mp3s meant the end of artificial scarcity of recording commodities, presenting new political arrangements for listeners and therefore an opportunity to consider “what music is for — and by extension what culture is for” (p. 226). Music piracy sites like the now defunct What.CD illustrate the capacity for fan communities to create digital spaces to, in part, redress their own exploitation. Although carefully cloaked through private torrent trackers and vetting processes, such sites present a threat to corporate intermediaries of all stripes. At the time it was shuttered by French authorities in 2016, What.CD claimed 200,000 users sharing more than 3 million torrents, many of which included audiophile-quality vinyl rips from rare pressings (Bancal, 2016). In short, it represented one of the largest, most thorough, and subversive digital archives of recorded music in the world.

We therefore take a relational rather than divisive approach to formats in this article. The truth is that many fans of vinyl not only happily consume music via streaming technologies but collect digital formats for mixing and remixing, and share their fandom via social media, collective hubs like Discogs.com (where users can track their own record collections as well make purchases from other users),

and in-real-life record fairs and vinyl-focused events like Record Nite, which we detail below.³ Yet we also make the case that phonography culture embraces opportunities to socialize over shared listening experiences in its pursuit of noise. As Krukowski argues:

I see the digital disruption of our cultural life as an opportunity to rethink the analog/digital divide and reexamine what we've discarded—not in order to clean it up and put it back to use exactly as it was, but to understand what was thrown away that we still need. (p. 12)

This is a departure, as we detail below, from how records and their collectors have been commonly treated by scholars.

Participating in Phonography Culture

While much has been written about music fandom and the sociological aspects of record collecting, only a handful of scholars have investigated the relationship between them. In the follow-up essay to a book-length study of collectors (Shuker, 2010), Shuker (2014) argues that while collecting is a form of fandom, it is a particular kind, “a more focused and intellectually rationalized activity” (p. 166). That is, both fans and collectors are active — after all, fans of music also buy records — but more traditional fans participate in a range of other activities: attending concerts, consuming merchandise, writing to artists, and so on. Collectors, for Shuker (2014), are a particular set as they approach buying records through a systemic process that exhibits fanaticism — obsessive about collection size, accumulation, completion, or distinction — but less interested in participating in the life of the artist. Collectors, for him, are more physically and intellectually invested in the collection process itself and increasingly into the capital (derived from culture and the commodity) of rare recordings, presumably as consumers take increased interest in vinyl records. Put more simply: fans love artists; collectors love formats.

We want to suggest a third perspective: that fans can, and often do, love formats as well. This perspective would suggest the resurgence of vinyl is not so much predicated on the drive to collect; rather, participants' investments are often “intellectually rationalized” (Shuker, 2014) around objects, as material culture scholars have long contended. While there are certainly many who are interested in monetary value, collection size, scarcity, and more, we focus on what is missed when the record format-as-commodity is afforded too much regard. As Sterne (2012) notes, “[f]ormat denotes a whole range of decisions that affect the look, feel, experience, and workings of a medium” (p. 7). The embodiment of physical audio formats, then, place them in time and space with listeners where context, conversation, and the distractions of “noise” allow for the activities set apart from individualized listen-

ing — where the look, feel, experience, and workings of the phonograph can be shared. We thus offer the term *phonography culture* as a subset of material culture, a way of understanding the ways record formats — and the stories, people, and things that surround them — provide occasions for participants to identify not so much with the goals of collecting, but with learning about music and its aesthetics, histories, technologies, and their personal connections to it. Though exchange value certainly plays a role in its socialization, phonography culture above all uses the affordances of the record format to emphasize the pedagogical functions of material objects and the people who share them.

Densely Layered Objects

While it may be a cliché assertion that vinyl just sounds better, the embodied aspects of its formats encourage a listening experience that directs attention to more than just sound. Indeed, we are arguing that vinyl records, and phonography culture, provide an experience of listening that is decisively less lossy than individualized and digital listening experiences typically are, in terms of both signal and noise. This is so in the sense that the audio signal is uncompressed, and in the sense that listeners are aware of the music in space and alongside its other listeners and accompanying objects. In this sense we align with Bartmanski and Woodward's (2015a) argument that records are “aura laden *objects* connected to constellations of other non-human entities that facilitate a series of emotionally charged rituals and experiences on which various communities thrive” (p. 7). They contend that the LP “is materially designed for the *idea* of the album as a listening experience” including its “dramatic pause introduced by the side division” (p. 8) where one has to be “conscious of the medium's presence” (p. 19). For this reason, the phonograph means something different from compact discs and cassettes, where in the former is not usually side-divided and the latter doubles as a blank medium. More importantly, the phonograph, as the first mass-marketed commodity for recorded sound, carries historical weight in similar ways to book culture.⁴

Likewise, Grønstad and Vågnes (2010) call attention to the way a record is a “composite medium, made up not solely of the music itself but also of graphic material and printed text” (p. 11). As a format that shows its age and imperfections, LPs wrap the signal of the music pressed into them in layers of noise: their weight, the character and color of the vinyl, their labels and covers and printed sleeves, the notched spines or cut corners identifying them as unwanted at some point in their histories; with time even more noise is imprinted on them in the form of marks, dents, inscriptions, and stickers, and the pops and crackles of literal surface noise. This kind of metadata is more personal than the kinds available via streaming services. As Krukowski (2017) notes:

Digital streaming services treat the data on the back of an LP—the historical constraints of time, place, and people that created the music—as so much noise. The music alone is filtered through as signal, seeming always in the present. (p. 180)

All of this noise provides listeners with an array of questions and answers, and, most importantly, densely layered objects with which to share space during a listening experience.

Case Study: Record Nite

Our university town is a smaller city comprised of many academic transplants; getting one's bearings as a new resident can be difficult. When Patrick and his partner arrived from a larger metropolitan area they were eager to find friends and to understand the city. As a Librarian, Patrick sees his role as being a connector, and as a record collector, he is always looking to connect with others who see that “obsolete” interest as a way to find new (and new-to-him) music to appreciate and as a means for moving through a city and understanding its culture, musical and otherwise. Eventually, he connected over records with a neighbor, a graduate student who had recently acquired a trove of records. Knowing Patrick had formerly worked as a DJ, the neighbor asked that he help find a turntable so he could enjoy this new collection. Over the course of a few weeks, they decided to get together to listen to a pile of records—often for the first time—as a way of getting to know each other, each others' partners, and a few other friends. Eventually other people arrived, the piles got bigger, and they saw an opportunity to organize things a little more.



Kelly, reflecting on drawing people together with LPs. Recorded February 8, 2019.

After that original record party, Patrick invited those he'd met over the past two years who had interest in music or in collecting LPs to an event in which everyone would play a single side⁵ of a record they brought, distributing DJ responsibilities among the group and allowing everyone a glimpse into each other's musical interests. Another party followed a month later, with more guests as word-of-mouth grew. At that second event, now officially dubbed “Record Nite,” a structure for the parties emerged. Co-host and participant Kelly remembers Record Nite as “an intentional way of getting people together, so the record was really just the thing to get us in the room together” (personal communication, February 18, 2019). People began arriving for snacks and drinks, and once the majority of guests were in attendance, an order for participants was determined (an order often subverted by people who needed to leave early, or when children in attendance, like Jason's, wanted to play

their selections before bedtime) and the first side was played. Participants included those with long-standing collections of LPs, those who were getting into LPs thanks in part to the resurgence of the vinyl, those who had some records around but had few opportunities to listen to them, and those who were music fans, but not vinyl collectors, who acquired LPs for the purpose of participating in Record Nite.



Travis, describing how participants organized themselves during Record Nite. Recorded February 16, 2019.

Record Nite participant Travis⁶ observed a few types of Record Nite attendees, “[t]he first group of people tend to listen to the albums more closely; another group sort of is around the records and listens, but also does more socializing probably, and then there’s a third group I think that comes and generally socializes and tends to treat it more as kind of a party” (personal communication, February 16, 2019). Indeed, while groups usually commingled throughout the evening, they used various spaces of a host’s home for different activities, with the kitchen being the unspoken dedicated space for general socializing while the living room was reserved for more concentrated listening and record-related conversation.⁷

Record sleeves were often passed around in the living room and usually the guest who chose the record would speak briefly about it or answer questions as it played. For the twenty-or-so minutes each side occupied, attention was paid to the music, the sleeve and liner notes, the guest’s reflections of the record, and even the price paid for it. While technical in intent, Krukowski’s (2017) observation that “spatial hearing is dependent on the *presence of noise as well as signal*” (p. 50) feels connected to the ways in which participants attuned themselves to the signal (the music) and the noise (the materialities, stories, and social contexts surrounding it) at different times during the events. In *Beyond Unwanted Sound*, Marie Thompson acknowledges the inaudible, visual, and multisensory aspects of noise, extending the reach of the sonic involving more than sound as “it is entangled with and constituted by a nexus of audible and inaudible processes, relations, and inter- and intra-actions” (Thompson, 2017 p. 7). It is among these processes, relations, and inter- and intra-actions that we see productive attention to the physical noise of Record Nite taking place.

The group decided at the end of the evening to choose a theme for the next party. Participants wrote potential themes on slips of paper which of which one was chosen at random, and the selected theme for the third event was “Magical Realism.” Each subsequent party had a theme chosen at the previous Record Nite. Kelly notes “I think that was what was cool about the themes, that you didn’t have to be really literal, and pretty much anything could work for any theme. In fact, it was more of an opportunity for me to play a record that I wanted everybody else to hear” (personal communication, February 18, 2019). The themes took a variety of

forms, including geographical (Minneapolis, Detroit), descriptive (Pastoralia, Clapping!), genre or format related (Metal, Soundtracks), and personal (First Albums, Un/Underappreciated), or abstract (Nautical, Ventanas). These themes provided structure and guidance to participants' choices, and often led to crate digging or online shopping in between events. As frequent guest and participant Sean saw the theme "Un/Underappreciated" as emblematic of Record Nite, but lamented that his particular fan interest was left unexplored, despite many attempts: "I put in psychedelia as a theme and it never got picked and that was a great disappointment to myself and I think to several other people" (personal communication, February 8, 2019). A notable challenge of Record Nite was its transitory nature; coordinating dates was difficult, so in some cases participants didn't get to attend when their chosen themes were in play; other times those in attendance had missed prior discussion of the theme when selected.



Sean, discussing Record Nite Themes. Recorded February 8, 2019.



Kelly, discussing Record Nite Themes. Recorded February 18, 2019.

Record Nite customs and practices eventually developed. Upon arrival, most participants chose to hide their selected records (in a bag, behind furniture) to maximize surprise. Some participants often brought several choices, intending to decide their play based on the feeling in the room. Sean noticed a variety of motivations for the selections: "I think that sometimes people wanted to kind of play music for each other, but sometimes they also wanted to kind of play the hits so that they could enjoy something that they knew that everybody was going to like" (personal communication, February 8, 2019). While a non-competitive space, participants took their selections seriously hoping to surprise or delight the group.



Sean, discussing what motivated participants' selections. Recorded February 8, 2019.

Eventually, practices surrounding and supporting Record Nite extended well outside the parties themselves. As we spent more time immersed in music together we began to know and respect each other's taste in music and got to know each other better through our musical interactions. Recaps sent out via email in the early days were eventually replaced by RecordNite.com, a Tumblr blog that served to document what was played during these evenings. Despite the Tumblr platform's interactive affordances, Record Nite participants treated the blog as more of a static

point of reference — a log of titles to refer to when they were planning to expand their personal collections based on what was played during previous evenings.

As more people joined the group, we exchanged advice about where to find stereo equipment and purchase records in our region, often taking trips to businesses and other sites together. Many crate digging excursions were arranged, and the size of our group often opened up opportunities to explore basements, garages, estate sales, and other troves of used records individual collectors could not access, located via Craigslist or other connections. In many of these cases, we were shopping as a team, recommending records to each other or picking up titles for Record Nite guests who didn't come along.



Manan, reflecting on shopping for Record Nite. Recorded February 8, 2019.

Participants occupied the time in between Record Nites grappling with themes and shopping and listening in preparation for the next one. Manan, who participated in early Record Nites, remembered “I’d go to Books & Melodies or Soundgarden and look for a record. Actually, sometimes it would also be connected to traveling elsewhere, going to a new record shop and trying to find something” (personal communication, February 8, 2019). Sean remembers a kind of rehearsal process for his selections in advance, “I’d also sometimes find myself kind of thinking through the theme to figure out what I wanted to bring and spending a week or so listening to different records trying to figure out which one would be the right one” (personal communication, February 8, 2019). Sometimes, pursuit of “the right one,” became obsessive, as Kelly observed: “I remembered looking so hard for that Phillip Bailey record, so I also fell into that trap. I wanted to get something that fit the theme—I don’t even remember what the theme was for “Easy Lover” but I had to play it” (personal communication, February 18, 2019).



Sean, on auditioning selections in advance. Recorded February 8, 2019.



Kelly, reflecting on seeking a specific Record Nite selection. Recorded February 18, 2019.

Participants recall the embodied elements of Record Nite, citing the physical and spatial aspects of the events and the impact it had on their own listening and collecting. Most notably, participants placed focus on handling the sleeves and ephemera accompanying the records, and the conditions they created.

- Travis: “I like being in the space where the music is playing and I like when folks pass the sleeves around, reading liner notes, looking at who produced things, who plays on a record especially if it’s something I’m sort of tangentially aware of or that I’m maybe familiar with the artist or the backing band or something like that” (personal communication, February 16, 2019).



Travis, on the materiality of LPs at Record Nite. Recorded February 16, 2019.

- Kelly: “The one custom I think I liked the best about Record Nite is that whenever somebody was playing their record, that we would pass around the sleeve and so it gave everybody an opportunity to read the record sleeve and the liner notes which is something that I would normally not do if I was just at a party and someone was playing records, so that was always kind of fun. And then in that part, just talking with all the other people about why they chose their record and explaining the themes” (personal communication, February 18, 2019).



Kelly, on the materiality of LPs at Record Nite. Recorded February 18, 2019.

- Sean: “Sometimes there’s posters inside and you know all kinds of things that could be shoved into a record, kind of like when you go to a bookstore and you find somebody’s old bookmark or a tag — occasionally there would be things like that shoved into the records and people would pull them out” (personal communication, February 8, 2019).



Sean, on the materiality of LPs at Record Nite. Recorded February 8, 2019.

- Manan: “We would all study it or pretend to study it... I think that that was an important part of the ritual of Record Nite” (personal communication, February 8, 2019).



Manan, on the materiality of LPs at Record Nite. Recorded February 8, 2019.

These phonographic, cultural interactions are revelatory because they draw attention away from the “only signal” approach to individualized and digital listening, and make space for even more noise than the recordings alone bring. That noise is infused with fandom and participatory culture, as well as elements of memory, meaning making, and nostalgia. And not necessarily in lamentation of an audio format’s obsolescence, but an interest in reclaiming a lost listening practice. As Sean recalls, “Listening to music together I think is something that, I don’t know if it was

just me and my friends who did it a lot when I was younger, when I was in college especially, but I don't know how often people really do it anymore, and to me, that was part of the fun of it, just listening to music together, I really looked forward to it" (personal communication, February 8, 2019).



Sean, reflecting on listening together. Recorded February 8, 2019.

Discussion

For us Record Nite represents an example of phonography culture in which signal and noise are stitched together in a network of conversation, recontextualization, and meaning making. As participants in listening together, we notice, we learn, and we invent. In our co-presence, we make use of noise to articulate themes, genres, and geographies and create a memorable phonography cultural experience, even if that memory serves each of us in different ways. Record Nite allowed us to participate at various positions in Bury's (2018) continuum of fan activity, revealing our own fandom and reveling in and encouraging that of others, employing our choices of theme to underscore our aesthetic preferences and to make intentional space for displays of fandom. Yet, aside from creating a document of our selections via Tumblr, Record Nite's practices were not transformative as much as they were affirmational (Hills, 2014), affective, and pedagogical, allowing participants to express their fandom without fronting about methods of collection or having to make something new; rather phonography culture primarily organized via the composite medium itself (Grønstad & Vågnes, 2010) — and the pleasures that come from using it to learn about sound and music.

In that way, Record Nite influenced our own music consumption practices, shifting focus from the collector's goal of optimization to a socially-driven mode of selecting albums, either for the attention of others by digging in the crates leading up to the evening, or for pleasure, tracking down torrents the next morning to re-hear songs missing from a personal collection. There is emphasis on the pleasure of the analog as Sax (2016) suggests, but also a tacit politics that uses an older audio format to foster embodied, communal listening and DIY modes of communication and to encourage secondhand consumption by purchasing used records and equipment rather than the highest fidelity, audiophile device. Furthermore, the act of creating opportunities for exposure and new appreciation within certain themes provided a framework for listening — both with and to one another — as we negotiated our identities and built community. Krukowski (2017) connects noise with individual and collective agency, describing how noise has value: "It communicates location, proximity, and depth. It tests the limits of our individual perception, and binds us together in shared time." (p. 207). Such practices of listening enable and

afford this agency, most palpably by surrounding us in pleasurable and productive noise.

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Notes

- 1 The closest is perhaps when Jenkins notes that a fan of *Twin Peaks* “built a library of digitalized sounds from the series” (p. 79).
- 2 Interestingly, some artists have orchestrated participatory hacks to exploit this system. Morris (2017) shares the example of how the funk band Vulfpeck released a collection of short songs on an album *Sleepify* and implored its fans to play it on repeat each night as they slept, earning them \$20,000 before it was pulled (p. 361).
- 3 In 2018, Discogs.com boasted more than 8 million LP sales facilitated through the site and more than half a million LP database submissions during the year (The State of Discogs 2018, 2019).
- 4 This is one reason why our guiding term is “phonography culture” rather than “record culture.”
- 5 Participants choose a single side for both practical reasons (to maximize the mix of different LPs over the evening) and thematic (to force participants to choose which side to play and which to leave unheard).

- 6 The authors invited Record Nite participants, via email, to record a brief audio reflection on Record Nite considering the following guiding questions:
- How would you describe Record Nite?
 - Can you talk a little about how you addressed/prepared for a particular theme?
 - What do you consider to be the customs of Record Nite?
 - How did participation in Record Nite affect your music consumption behaviors outside of the RN events?
 - What is an ideal/unexplored RN theme?
 - To what extent do the LPs, sleeves, and other material contribute to the RN experience?
- Of the sixteen participants invited to respond; the four who submitted responses were early and frequent participants over several years.
- 7 This is congruent with how hi-fi audio systems have historically been situated in the living room, especially in the years after the Second World War. As Sterne (2012) shows, these home systems were often sold as sophisticated technologies, offering a means for “transcendence through contemplative listening” (p. 238); what appears to be transcendence, he suggests, is really nostalgia in contemporary living room contexts.