

APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: Renaissance Records: The Communities and Material Culture Behind the Revival of Vinyl Records from the 1980s to 2010s

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ABSTRACT

Title of Document: RENAISSANCE RECORDS: THE
COMMUNITIES AND MATERIAL CULTURE
BEHIND THE REVIVAL OF VINYL
RECORDS FROM THE 1980s TO 2010s

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The current revival of vinyl records in popular culture, specifically surrounding their commercial availability and popularity, is not a coincidence. This study focuses on factors such as the presence of listening communities and material culture responsible for the persistence and resurgence of vinyl record culture in the 2010s. Beginning with the formative years of Bronx hip-hop and Baltimore Club music in the 1980s, this study argues that the same factors which enabled vinyl to endure two music industry transformations designed to render records obsolete are the same factors responsible for its resurgence in the 2010s. In 1982, the Compact Disc (CD) became commercially available and served as the new mainstream medium for listening to music. Following the CD and later music-listening technologies such as MP3 files and online streaming services, vinyl records seemingly disappeared only to experience a contemporary revitalization in popular culture. This study contends that factors of materiality such as tangibility and nostalgia exhibited by the hip-hop and Club listening communities during the shift from analog to digital listening accurately explain vinyl's re-emergence as a popular listening medium in the modern age.

RENAISSANCE RECORDS:
THE COMMUNITIES AND MATERIAL CULTURE BEHIND THE REVIVAL OF
VINYL RECORDS FROM THE 1980s TO 2010s

By

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Studies

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Introduction

“Vinyl is the real deal. I’ve always felt like, until you buy the vinyl record, you don’t really own the album. And it’s not just me or a little pet thing or some kind of retro romantic thing from the past. It is still alive.”

-Jack White (The White Stripes)

The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) marked the end of 2017 by publishing its year-end revenue report, a common practice since the organization’s formation in 1952. This particular report was extraordinary in its findings: for the first time since 2011, physical albums outsold digital music sales, raking in \$1.5 billion for the industry to digital’s \$1.3 billion.¹ Even more exceptional, the breakdown of the “physical sales” category revealed a 6.5% drop in CD sales from the previous year. How could this be? Digital music dominated the music industry since its development in the early 1980s. The answer lies in a more detailed breakdown of the physical sales category. While CD sales fell, the industry boasted a 9% increase in sales of another medium for music listening: vinyl records.

The Compact Disc (CD) became available for commercial use in 1982 and was designed to kickstart a new era of digital music. Over the next three decades, the CD reigned supreme, appealing to those tired of rewinding cassette tapes. Furthermore, the new format boasted a wider dynamic range for listening, attracting laypeople and audiophiles alike. Its portability enabled listeners to carry over one hundred different albums in a convenient carrying case. Replication of an entire album could be completed

¹ See Friedlander, Joshua P., “News and Notes on 2017 RIAA Revenue Statistics” (Recording Industry Association of America, n.d.), <https://www.riaa.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/RIAA-Year-End-2017-News-and-Notes.pdf>.

by the average consumer at home on their personal computer. However, time demonstrated that uploading the disc's contents to that personal computer provided a more worthwhile investment to listeners. By all accounts, the CD appeared superior in every sense of the word.

In recent years, digital music has evolved even further. The expansion of the internet led to further development of digital audio, specifically the compression of large audio files into MP3's, which could be shared across the globe. Apple Inc. invented the iPod, an MP3 player, to profit from the new trend. Today, virtually any song or album is available for purchase online through software such as iTunes. Additionally, technologically savvy risk-takers can choose more illegal download methods through means of digital piracy. However, modern consumers are more likely subscribers to one of several streaming services. Spotify, Pandora, Apple Music; these services provide users with an internet-backed database of commercial music available for free in limited quantities, or in their entirety for a fee. Truly, the accessibility of music has surpassed all imaginable expectations.

Amidst this comprehensive archive of digital music, vinyl records have re-emerged in recent years as a popular medium for music listening. Today, consumers can visit local record shops as well as major retailers to purchase their favorite albums pressed to vinyl. What started as a niche market in select cities has grown into a national trend backed by music listeners and artists alike.² The result has been a shift in consumer

² In 2007, owners of local record stores in markets like Portland MN, Baltimore MD, Atlanta GA, Raleigh NC and more joined forces to develop what is now known as Record Store Day, a national music "holiday" celebrated by exclusive independent and major-label releases of vinyl in record stores. This was created to help boost vinyl sales and regenerate interest in playing records, and has since grown into an international movement.

behavior which the music industry has not seen since vinyl's inception.³ Though seemingly obsolete in the modern era, vinyl records and the accompanying technologies required to play them provided the American record industry with arguably its most significant commercial anomaly. To whom did they owe credit for vinyl's revival in the twenty-first century? The economic trends surrounding vinyl's longevity and increased commercial interest are indeed compelling indicators of its revitalization in the modern age. In order to understand the state of vinyl consumption in the present, this study will follow the trends of recorded sound consumption beginning with vinyl's decline in the 1970s.

Historical Significance

This study intends to approach vinyl's persistence from two angles. First, it will explore the culture of American recorded sound consumption from the late 1970s through the early 2010s. Studying the shift in how Americans listened to music during the industry shift from analog to digital sound will provide an understanding of vinyl's persistence through this period. Specifically, this study will focus on the prominent musical subcultures of Bronx hip-hop and Baltimore Club present along the United States' east coast during these years. Utilizing these cities as a case study for American record consumption at large will shed light on the particular communities responsible for sustaining vinyl culture. The Bronx hip-hop and Baltimore Club scenes relied heavily on the use of vinyl records to bring about their success. Though sonically distinct, both

³ The RIAA Sales Database displays an interactive graph that charts the music industry's revenue by format on a yearly basis. While the CD dwarfed the percentage of total industry revenue held by vinyl LP's, each year since roughly 2009 indicates that LP's have exponentially taken back control of total revenue. In 2019, vinyl made up 44.7% to CD's 55.3%. See the full data set at <https://www.riaa.com/u-s-sales-database/>

scenes were integral components of the larger hip-hop culture that gained traction throughout the east and west coast in the 1980s and 90s. More importantly, they shared an identical association with vinyl records: the DJ. By focusing on the disc jockeys responsible for the continued use of records, this study will follow vinyl's trajectory into the uncharted waters of the digital era.

In addition to shifts in sound consumption, this study will also explore twenty-first century consumers' decision to embrace vinyl records instead of more technologically advanced options. This study follows the trajectory of American vinyl record consumption from the 1980s to the 2010s. Specifically, it explores the communities and material factors responsible for vinyl's perseverance through an era characterized by the proliferation of technologies designed to render records obsolete. By examining the shift in the ways people *consumed* music from the 1980s to the early twenty-first century, this study will argue that the same factors which enabled vinyl's persistence through this period are largely responsible for its resurgence in the 2010s. This study will demonstrate the necessity of vinyl records for 1980s hip-hop and Club DJs to construct their respective music scenes, as well as the intentional choice of these DJs and consumers to continue using vinyl in the early 2010s. Additionally, my work will assess the materiality of vinyl in an increasingly digital world: its *physicality* as an object, its *use and function* by people, the *associated objects* that accompany it (like a turntable, record sleeve, etc.), as well as the *meaning* given to it by music listeners. By analyzing the uses and materiality of vinyl record culture, this study will explain how vinyl endured a consumer decline in its consumption as well as demonstrate how the same factors contribute to vinyl's continued use among music listeners today. These

factors will most notably include vinyl's association with a listener's expression of *nostalgia*. My work will explain how studying an object that music listeners can physically engage with allows us to raise questions about *how* they are expressing nostalgia. Why are music listeners increasingly turning to vinyl when they could be streaming music from a smartphone? What is it about vinyl that gives listeners a sense of self-expression? If records allow users to escape to another time, *to what/when* are they returning? Answering these questions will explain how vinyl record consumption persevered through its seemingly inevitable demise. Additionally, it will demonstrate how records prove to be a viable option for modern American consumers as well as a competitor in the commercial race for physical music sales.

Literature Review

The historiography of vinyl's persistence through the digital age is scarce, though it exists obliquely through multi-disciplinary means. Moreover, the contemporary nature of this topic ultimately leaves a meager pool of scholarly literature regarding the present state of vinyl records, save for short articles from various news outlets. My work will formally link American mid-Atlantic music listening communities in the New York and Baltimore areas to the ebb and flow in vinyl consumption from the 1980s into the digital age. Additionally, it will uniquely explain the relation of vinyl's materiality to this journey, offering further insight into future vinyl consumption. To accomplish this, I will utilize literature from a multitude of disciplines including material culture studies, ethnographic studies of Baltimore Club and Bronx hip-hop, the history of hip-hop disc jockey (DJ) culture, and the largely unexplored era of American recording industry history from the 1970s and 80s.

The first chapter of this study examines the role of vinyl records and the communities of listeners and consumers who utilized them during the music industry-shift toward CD's. Despite the success of musical recording and record sales beginning with the inception of Edison's phonograph followed by a surge between the 1940s- 60s, vinyl record consumption in the United States began its steep decline in the early 1980s.⁴ Prior to this, historians note that the recorded music industry largely gained traction in American popular culture during the post-World War II era. While the 1950s and 60s recorded television industry, namely film and broadcast television, sought to get closer to audiences through live broadcast, the recorded *music* industry aimed to leave its live presence behind.⁵ By creating a virtually flawless experience often irreproducible in a live setting, the music industry distanced the listener from experiencing an artist in the same way they would hear a performance in the same room.

The shift from vinyl to CD consumption of music took place concurrently during the formative years of hip-hop music in the United States. Vinyl's presence during the genre's early years remains a focus of historians exploring modern DJ culture. While many of these historians compare 1970s and 80s DJs with their twenty-first century counterparts, they fall short in explaining how these men and women helped vinyl record culture endure the shift from analog to digital production and consumption. Additionally, resources covering how music listeners actually *engaged* with vinyl records played by

⁴ See Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era*. (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁵ See Tim Anderson, *Making Easy Listening: Material Culture and Postwar American Recording*. (Commerce and Mass Culture Series. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2006. Anderson acknowledges the gap between the "live" and "recorded" sound, and further notes that the industry sought to close it by adding vocal effects that create an echo such as reverb to give listeners a more "life-like" representation of sound. Also see Schmidt Horning, Susan Schmidt Horning, *Chasing Sound: Technology, Culture, and the Art of Studio Recording from Edison to the LP*.

DJs are limited. In the case of two communities that uniquely used vinyl, New York's hip-hop and Baltimore's Club communities, studies often focus on the development of the hip-hop scene as a whole. In doing so, these studies maintain a clear distinction between the sub-genres without fully addressing their respective links to vinyl's endurance at this time. Furthermore, the popularity and larger commercial success of hip-hop led to a larger pool of sources to draw from compared to the smaller, local Club scene. Nevertheless, the existing scholarship on Club and hip-hop can help fill in the gaps posed by works that otherwise omit the role of vinyl records in this conversation.

From listeners and dancers, concert-goers and the actual jockeys themselves, we can gain an understanding of the people continuing to use vinyl as the music industry was abandoning it. The success of scenes like Bronx hip-hop and Baltimore Club is largely attributed to a thriving community-based experience.⁶ As a result, much of the testimony on these genres comes from first-hand accounts of musicians and patrons of live performance. Both scenes revolved around the practice of DJs spinning vinyl and utilized records in their own respective way. Publications like SPIN Magazine chronicled Club and hip-hop's development, though even this non-academic source was based out of (and focused on) the larger New York scene. Jeff Chang corroborates the community-driven methodology to hip-hop in *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (2005), his work that chronicles the genre's roots in racial and political solidarity.⁷

⁶ See Andrew Devereaux, "What Chew Know About Down the Hill?": Baltimore Club Music, Subgenre Crossover, and the New Subcultural Capital of Race and Space." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 19 (4): 2007, 311–41. Devereaux highlights the Baltimore Club scene "extreme local" mindset that encompassed the production, distribution, and consumption of Club in neighborhoods. Like hip-hop, Devereaux argues that the ability of DJs to highlight geographic "hood" concerns as well as give shout-outs to local neighborhoods helped fuel the music scene on a local level.

⁷ See Chang, Jeff. 2005, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, (New York: Picador), 94.

Chang discusses thoroughly the internal and external factors that helped the genre form in a community ravaged by socio-economic hardship. In doing so, he speaks to the grass-roots approach by early hip-hop artists as well as the various supporting roles like B-boys (break dancers) and graffiti artists that breathed life into hip-hop in its infancy. Similarly, Joseph Ewoodzie's monograph *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years* (2017) details the early years of the hip-hop community and its reliance on vinyl records in the pivotal time of 1975-1979.⁸ Both Chang and Ewoodzie provide this study with a multitude of first-hand accounts regarding hip-hop's formation, providing depth to this study's discussion of the genre's role in vinyl's persistence.⁹

Although this study will not speak exhaustively on the technological side of DJ culture or vinyl records in general, knowledge of the history of DJ culture will be required to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the professionals tasked with preserving vinyl amidst the music industry's move from analog to digital. In addition to the discussion of how listeners engaged with vinyl records, an equally important discussion of how and why DJs chose to use vinyl illustrates the ways in which vinyl managed to stay relevant, even during its low point in the early 2000s. Historians generally point to a two-pronged answer to the question of how disc jockeys came into existence: radio and dance clubs. Beginning with broadcast radio, disc jockeys were seen as intermediaries between the artist and consumer. Club and hip-hop DJs however, unlike

⁸ See Ewoodzie, Joseph C. 2017. *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press). Ewoodzie's sociological approach to the 1975-1979 period of the genre's formation "opens up the story" to include the hundreds of lesser-known contributors to Bronx hip-hop in what he calls a "people's history of hip-hop".

⁹ See also Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade*, (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002).

their radio-aired counterparts, relied for the first time on people's willingness to dance to pre-recorded music.¹⁰ A lack of live musicians attributed to the need for manpower in the Second World War left listeners of music without a tune to dance to. Tim Anderson furthers this discussion in his study of the 20th century music recording industry, *Making Easy Listening: Material Culture and Post-War American Recording* (2006). He cites the two recorded music bans by the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) that ultimately backfired in their attempts to protect artists from the dangers of recorded music.¹¹

Fast-forwarding to the latter part of the twentieth century, DJs looked a lot different. While radio jockeys still existed, 1980s DJs had a much tougher battle to fight: the battle for continued relevance in an ever-changing industry. The most significant scholarly voice in this conversation is that of University of North Carolina's Mark Katz, who has written several books and articles on DJ culture as well as the technology of recorded sound. His first book *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (2004) highlights the birth of hip-hop and the DJ's "weapon of choice" in the turntable to prove their chops during hip-hop's early years. This was practiced in the form of "battles" between DJs. Beyond simply "spinning" records with a turntable, DJs developed an entire lexicon of terms and routines that became a second language to those serious enough to dual on stage including repertoires of "chirps, twiddles, transforms,

¹⁰ See Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life the History of the Disc Jockey* (New York: Grove Press, 2014)

¹¹ Anderson largely focuses on the macro-approach to how the years during and after the Second Great War shaped the American recording industry. Specifically he cites the 1942 and 1948 bans by the American Federation of Musicians in helping ensure the demise of the pre-war music business. He largely credits these bans as a factor in the creation of money-saving employees at radio stations known as disc jockeys to act as the "expert" on the music business regarding what tunes were popular enough to be played on the air.

orbits, crabs, stabs, tears and flares”.¹² This movement became large enough to warrant an entire underground economy and set of best practices, as DJs turned into crate-diggers for second-hand records to capture the exact secret ingredient needed for their routines.¹³ Mark Katz’ second book, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (2012) confirms this unwavering loyalty of DJs to vinyl culture, even as the 1987 development of the digital audio tape (DAT) threatened vinyl’s existence. Even as the overall consumer demand for records began to decline, DJs continued to utilize records that they could get their hands on.¹⁴ Regarding the anonymity and protection of their routines, authors note that DJs went as far as actually removing the original manufacturers’ tracking information stamped into the center hole, or “dead wax” portion of records.¹⁵

More recently, scholars have emphasized the ways in which technological advancement into the digital age affects the modern DJ. Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton’s *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey* (2000) notes the vocabulary shift from “DJ” to “turntablists”, as these record spinners saw themselves as instrumentalists rather than a person who merely hit “play”.¹⁶ Published interviews are

¹² See Felicia Miyakawa, “Turntablature: Notation, Legitimization, and the Art of the Hip-Hop DJ.” *American Music* 25 (1): 2007. 81–105.

¹³ See Richard Osborne, *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record*, (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014)

¹⁴ See Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 100. See again Osborne’s *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record* (2014) which points out the shift of the recording industry in producing twelve-inch singles, rather than A and B sides to records. As the industry began to move away from records as a whole, these singles became quick, accessible tools to DJs to spin on turntables.

¹⁵ See Nick Farmer, “Please Please Me- Fixing a Hole”, *Record Collector*, May 2012: 74-80. *Record Collector Magazine* is available in its entirety online through the site’s archive, its issues spanning 1979 to the present.

¹⁶ Mark Katz weighs in here as well with a chapter included in the work “Rethinking American Music” (2019) edited by Tara Browner and Thomas L. Riis. His chapter, “Authorship in the Age of Configurable Music” compares and contrasts the self-proclaimed “turntablists” versus “mashup artists” in the digital era. He concludes that “turntablists” see themselves as artists, while “mashup artists” distance themselves from authorship.

also available to gain understanding on the motivations of hip-hop DJs who pushed the turntable beyond its original perceived limits. *The Record Players: DJ Revolutionaries* (2010), also by Brewster and Broughton, includes a vast collection of interviews with DJs that witnessed the early years as well as the transition to digital. The pair discusses the manner in which technological advancement affected these DJs, explaining the transition of the profession into present day. Other notable interviews that highlight these DJs include Todd Souvengnier's "The World of DJs and Turntable Culture" (2003), as well as Shadrach Kabango's excellent 2016 documentary series *Hip-Hop Evolution*.¹⁷

The second chapter of this study focuses on the presence of vinyl records amidst the transition to the digital era. Specifically, this chapter aims to explain vinyl's existence during an era characterized by the birth of the internet and digital music. I argue that this transition manifested in two waves of digitization by the music industry. The first wave began with the introduction of CDs in the 1980s and lasted until the late 2000s. The second wave began with the implementation of compressed MP3 files and has developed into the present state of music listeners streaming those files on devices like smartphones. Accomplishing this requires a broad survey of literature spanning from communication studies to the history of recording technologies. Two core references regarding vinyl's existence in these periods include Paul Winters' *Vinyl Records and Analog Culture in the Digital Age: Pressing Matters* (2016) and *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age* (2015) by Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward. Often citing each other as authorities

¹⁷ Available on Netflix. Interviewees include a comprehensive list of early hip-hop DJs and rappers such as Grandmaster Flash, The Furious Five, Afrika Bambaataa, Kurtis Blow, The Sugarhill Gang, and more. Also, see PBS Documentary series *Soundbreaking*(2016) that highlights hip-hop in the larger discussion of music recording from its infancy to the present.

on the subject of vinyl resurgence, Winters and Bartmanski/Woodward trace the causes of vinyl's resurgence to its tangibility in the face of a digital world. While their studies acknowledge the presence of material culture in peoples' motives to purchase records today, they ultimately miss the opportunity to address the presence of communities responsible for helping the resurgence of vinyl culture. This study aims to highlight these communities, helping to assert vinyl's relevance in the twenty-first century.

To understand vinyl's role amidst the music industry shift toward digital, one must understand how people listened to music between the 1990s and 2010s. Lawrence Lessig's work *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (2008) as well as Steve Knopper's *Appetite for Self-Destruction* (2009) lead the conversation on actually understanding the *business* behind the music industry during the early 2000s, noting the wrestling of control away from record companies and into the hands of corporations like Rhapsody and Apple Music.¹⁸ Mark Katz' work is again useful here in understanding how technological changes affected the way people consume music in the early days of the internet.¹⁹ Studies like Katz' "Authorship in the Age of Configurable Music" prove that to be a disc jockey in the twenty-first century, one must be willing to adapt to a seemingly endless barrage of technological advancement controlled by consumer demand. What works like Katz' omit from the conversation, however, is the driving force *behind* that consumer demand in the information age. To study it from a business perspective like Eriksson does not tell the whole story. Perhaps the most

¹⁸ See also David Sarpong et al. "'Vinyl Never Say Die': The Re-Incarnation, Adoption and Diffusion of Retro-Technologies," *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, no. 103 (November 29, 2015). Sarpong charts vinyl sales from 2006 to 2013 using Nielsen Soundscan data published in *Billboard Magazine*.

¹⁹ Katz' second edition of "Capturing Sound", updated in 2010, covers the use of technological advancements in auto-tune and the basics of how file-sharing affected the industry as a whole.

significant difference in people's engagement with music into the twenty-first century was music's reproducibility, offering consumers the ability to purchase or pirate music of virtually endless proportions online.²⁰ Paul Winters speaks to this point as well, devoting an entire chapter to the audio quality (fidelity) of analog-recorded sound versus digitally recorded sound. Ultimately, he confirms the notion that the recording industry's search for "perfect" quality found positive and negative results in digitally recorded audio.²¹ A large body of scholarship discussing the technological side of audio recording exists, though questions about record fidelity will not be addressed in this study.²²

More recently, literature on the current state of the music business focuses on the business model of the streaming services, such as Apple Music, Spotify, and Pandora. Understanding the structure of these services can even help explain current behaviors of today's music listeners (like how often and when they skip to the next song in their playlist).²³ Most importantly, it can give us a more comprehensive view of the effects of these services on the industry at large, both from the perspectives of the artist and consumer. Eriksson et al.'s "Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music" (2019) and Raphaël Nowak's "Networked Music Cultures: Contemporary Approaches, Emerging Issues (Pop Music, Culture and Identity)" (2016) evaluate the

²⁰ See Stephen Witt, *How Music Got Free: The End of an Industry, the Turn of the Century, and the Patient Zero of Piracy* (New York: Viking, 2015). Witt connects the behaviors of consumers to the business executives that allowed for the explosion of the market for digital music.

²¹ As mentioned previously, Tim Anderson's 2006 "Making Easy Listening" corroborates the point that the music business sought to differentiate albums from live performances, creating a more "cinematic" experience for the listener.

²² See Hi Fidelity Magazine, a publication devoted to the audio quality of recorded music. The Magazine was published from 1951 through 1989, the entire corpus of which can be found online at <https://worldradiohistory.com/Archive-All-Audio/High-Fidelity-Magazine.htm>

²³ See Nicola Montecchio, et al., "The Skipping Behavior of Users of Music Streaming Services and Its Relation to Musical Structure," ed. Jichang Zhao, no. 9 (September 30, 2020)

modern music industry by approaching it more like a set of data instead of an artistic endeavor.²⁴ The significance of these studies comes from their illustration of the distancing between the music business and the actual music being created.

The third and final chapter of this study will use principles of material culture studies to further address the manner in which vinyl culture reemerged in the 2010s. Specifically, it will explain how vinyl's materiality and association with corresponding items offered records an enduring pathway through the hip-hop and Club communities discussed throughout the study. Additionally, it will introduce the interdependent relationship between analog and digital technologies formed during the 2010s. The shift of humans from analog to digital technologies changed how historians and material culture scholars analyze the impact of an object like vinyl on music listeners. Regarding the consumption of recorded sound, many of the aforementioned works from chapter 2 offer answers to these material culture questions as well.

The present state of music consumption has not varied much over the last decade with regard to technological advancement. As a result, the literature covering this period emphasizes a material culture-based approach to answer the question of vinyl's endurance into the twenty-first century. Scholars note that the most significant factor regarding vinyl's resurgence in the modern era comes from its materiality. In other words, music listeners find comfort in a commodity that they can *experience* (not just hear, but *feel, smell, etc.*) in an otherwise digital world.

²⁴ Nowak also utilizes a multi-disciplinary approach in quantitatively analyzing digital music from the legacy of Napster to the present data from streaming services. See also Wikström, Patrik. 2013. *The Music Industry: Music in the Cloud*. 2nd edition. Digital Media and Society Series. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. Wikström argues the industry's shift to streaming singles instead of buying albums largely restructured the music business.

Paul Winters and the Bartmanski/Woodward duo remain integral to the conversation on material culture, largely pointing out vinyl's tangibility during an era typified by streaming services.²⁵ Their idea that an object's materiality makes it unique is shared by several scholars, who demonstrate the trend in society at large. Journalist David Sax' excellent work *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (2016) points to similarities regarding objects like paper, film, and even board games.²⁶ In addition to vinyl's physicality, studies point to a record's association with *other* items as a factor contributing to its appeal. For example, one needs more than simply the vinyl record to actually *hear* that record. A listener requires at the very least a turntable, and in many cases external speakers to plug into said turntable. Further, accessories to the turntable like an operable stylus (the needle that sits in the groove of the records) may be required over time. This principle of complementary artifacts is covered in Laurel Ulrich's study *Tangible Things* (2015). Her work argues that the value placed on any artifact, past or present, comes from its use by human beings over the course of human history. In other words, people's use of an item *assigns* the power ultimately given to that object. Using Ulrich's *Tangible Things* as a guide, I will argue in this section that vinyl's association with complementary materials like turntables and speakers set it apart from other mediums of recorded sound. While Ulrich's study focuses on various everyday

²⁵ See Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward. 2015. "Vinyl: The Analogue Medium in the Age of Digital Reproduction." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 15 (1): 3–27. The duo notes the average modern music listener as one who utilizes Spotify or Apple Music streaming services via their smartphone. Winters argues that vinyl can actually satisfy virtually all consumers in the music market, from mainstream listeners to the niche vinyl collector- something digital music files cannot do.

²⁶ Sax makes a case for the largely abandoned physical objects forgotten and rediscovered by humans amidst what he calls the "digital utopia". Objects as well as places (like brick-and-mortar stores) are the focus of what he believes is a resurgence of "real" things in the wake of society's digitization.

items like glass jars, pestles, teapots and quilts, none of the items discussed in her work share in the cultural resurgence currently experienced by vinyl records.²⁷

I contend that this has to do with vinyl's association with other objects. For example, Ulrich's study of a girl's field hockey uniform circa 1925 discusses all the inferences a historian could make based on studying it: the intricacies of collegiate extracurricular activities available to students based on gender, women's fashion in the 1920s, etc. However, historians cannot assert that women in 2000 began to wear 1920s uniforms again because their range of motion in conjunction with a field hockey stick allowed for new techniques to advance the game. This study of the vinyl record, however, argues that people during the 1980s chose to spin records because of their association with the turntable. Thus, these DJs created new styles of consumable music that a simple transition to CD's would not have permitted.

By studying the relationship between objects and their use by humans, one can infer quite a lot about that object's significance to society at large. The existing body of material culture scholarship helps make sense of vinyl's impact in the wake of increasing digital influence on music listeners. Similar to the study by Ulrich et al., editors Jules Prown and Kenneth Haltman point out the larger questions posed by everyday artifacts. What does it *mean* that music listeners are increasingly shifting their music library to vinyl? What is it about vinyl culture that appeals so much to modern listeners? If nostalgia is a factor in vinyl's modern relevance, *when or what* is the listener trying to

²⁷ Ulrich et al. follow the story of objects dug out of closets in Harvard University collections, in which they allow people to sort them based on their own understanding of the artifacts. For a fairer comparison of artifacts that

return to?²⁸ This study will use these questions to argue that vinyl records offer their listeners a sense of *nostalgia* that returns listeners to a period of comfort/happiness/security. Elodie Roy speaks on the point of nostalgia through her case study of three British independent (Indie) record labels in her book *Media, Materiality, and Memory: Grounding the Groove* (2020). Through her study, Roy concludes that unlike digital media, complementary objects like the turn-table commodify records, almost forcing listeners to turn into *collectors* of vinyl.²⁹ Collector culture, like vinyl consumption at large, declined throughout the transition to the digital era only to be reinvigorated by the modern music listener. Roy links nostalgia to the drive of collectors to continually curate vinyl record libraries, and states that “the typical...music collector of the 1980s cannot be strictly compared to the typical collector of the early 2000s”. Further, she argues that the two may be equally enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the music they treasure, but that “vinyl collectors today recognize the newly gained aura of historicity” not seen when records were the popular medium of sound consumption.³⁰ She calls vinyl collectors “armchair archeologists” who collect history and/or culture subjectively worthy of preservation.³¹ In other words, music listeners can engage objects like records in a way that no amount of *digital*, intangible music could replicate.³²

²⁸ See Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman, eds. 2000. *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press. The pair examines everyday artifacts like teapots, quilts, even lava lamps. They argue that by viewing commodities (like vinyl records) through their past and present, historians can define the meaning associated with these objects.

²⁹ See Elodie Roy, *Media, Materiality and Memory: Grounding the Groove* (S.L.: Routledge, 2020), 116.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 02.

³¹ *Ibid*, 22.

³² See Brett Milano, *Vinyl Junkies: Adventures in Record Collecting*, 1st ed (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003).

Several authors from various disciplines corroborate this claim, linking the elements of physicality, nostalgia, and collectability of vinyl records.³³

Overall, the consensus remains that vinyl's materiality is its most significant selling point. While the works of Ulrich and Roy explain the appeal to listen on vinyl, they do not fully explain vinyl's significance as a physical object on the historiography of recorded sound consumption. This study will explain how the same factors of materiality, like a record's tangibility and its associations with complementary objects that listeners use to express nostalgia, helped vinyl endure the transition to the twenty-first century as well as re-emerge as a cultural icon today.

Methodology

The current and continual evolution of technological advancement makes the task of charting its impact on society a tough one. The recent nature of vinyl's decline and seeming reemergence forces this study to rely on fields of study outside traditional history. Furthermore, this study does not intend to speak on the future of vinyl or assert any predictions on what the past three decades can tell us about vinyl's stamina as a continued medium for music listeners. However, this study will make claims regarding vinyl's presence over the last approximately thirty years to explain its impact on consumers in the present. Specifically, I will argue that the materiality of vinyl in the form of its tangibility, use by music listeners, and its association with other objects enabled records to endure the decline in their consumption in the 1980s. Further, I will

³³ See Ben Sisario's various *New York Times* articles. His 2013 piece "Records are Dying? Not Here" as well as "Vinyl LP Frenzy Brings Record-Pressing Machines Back to Life" (2015), where he discusses Independent Record Pressing, a pressing plant opened specifically for independent (indie) labels whose initial order lists included bands Vampire Weekend, Pavement, the XX, Mac Demarco, etc. He also references Fat Possum, an indie label in Memphis, TN that opened its own plant for small labels. Links to articles can be found here: [Records are Dying? Not Here](#); [Vinyl LP Frenzy](#)

explain how that same materiality applies to vinyl's reemergence in the twenty-first century and offer insight on vinyl's continued use by music listeners in the present.

The scope of this study depends upon a combination of primary and secondary sources ranging from various disciplines, including but not limited to the history of recorded sound, musicology and ethnomusicology, communication studies, sociology, anthropology, and material culture studies. The *history* of vinyl record consumption post 1970 does not have a broad record of scholarship. Because of this, answering questions regarding *how* vinyl endured the final years of the twentieth century and found its way back to cultural relevance in recent times is an interdisciplinary project.

This study will explain the change experienced by music listeners from the 1980s to the 2010s regarding how music was actually listened to by consumers. I will use the history of music consumption and recorded sound to illustrate the “top-down” view of society's shift from analog to digital music. Much of the academic scholarship on the history of the music industry is written by authors in the United Kingdom (UK). While this literature will be helpful to a degree, it will be used in conjunction with primary sources like those belonging to collections found in Stanford University's Archive of Recorded Sound.³⁴ My goal in demonstrating the transformation of the music industry during this period is to highlight the unpopular choice of *specific* music consumers (namely, fans of hip-hop and the complicated umbrella of this genre that houses styles

³⁴ The Archive of Recorded Sound (ARS) includes a collection of phonographs dating from the 1890s up to 1925. Additionally, the Ken Ackerman collection consists of broadcast recordings of live 1950s-60s American jazz performances. Additionally, their Judith Rosen collection of unpublished classical recordings offer insight on twentieth century composition and female composers during this time. Lastly, ARS houses a collection of commercially-recorded LP's and 78-RPM records are available, some digitally but many in-person. Though the archive remains closed for COVID-19, they boast helpful staff ready to help with digital and by-phone access.

like Club and hip-hop) who committed to the use of vinyl records amidst this first industry shift.

To accurately determine how American music scenes like those in Baltimore and New York helped vinyl endure through a decline in consumption, I will depend on sources that exemplify the unconventional decision to commit to vinyl, using a more “bottom-up” approach. I will utilize sources found in collections like the Harvard University Hip-Hop Archive and Research Institute to illustrate the perspective of those attending shows and parties.³⁵ Furthermore, I will include oral histories from interviews conducted in various music publications, as well as documentaries like Tim Moreau’s *Baltimore Where You At?* (2014) and Shadrach Kabango’s *Hip-Hop Evolution* (2016) to demonstrate the rationale of DJs continuing to spin records. Understanding the logic behind these communities to depend on vinyl as the medium to preserve their community’s musical heritage will help make the case for its impact on similar communities across the nation.³⁶ Here, I will depend on collections of actual hip-hop and Club recordings like the ones found in Harvard University’s “Classic Crates” archive as well as digitally remastered Baltimore Club mixes found in online archives like Discogs.³⁷

³⁵ A comprehensive collection of scholarship and a timeline of DJ culture can be found at the Hip-Hop Archives and Research Institute at Harvard University. Specifically, their “Classic Crates” collection highlights the connection of DJs and consumers to vinyl records amidst the mainstream shift to digital music.

³⁶ Similarly, Devereaux’s work on Baltimore Club speaks to this notion of tightly knit “superlocal” communities

³⁷ Discogs is an online database of released music recordings, both physical and digital. The database will place me in contact with owners of record stores and labels like Deco Records, a Baltimore label responsible for the production and distribution of much of Baltimore’s Club music.

In order to highlight the music industry's change from analog to digital, I will utilize primary publications and interviews to complement the experts in the field of recorded sound mentioned in the above literature review, such as Katz, Horning, Bartmanski and Woodward. In comparing the DJs of the 1980s to those in the early 2000s, I will similarly explore the motives of the artists continuing to utilize vinyl records in the MP3 era. Exploring twenty-first century DJs like the ones interviewed by Felicia Miyakawa and *Record Collector's* Nick Farmer will help me compare and contrast the respective music scenes and communities that developed during the early years of the internet age. Additionally, interviews with DJs comparing first-wave "vinyl-only" jockeys to modern digital "turntablists" like the ones highlighted in Ed Montano's "You're Not a Real DJ Unless You Play Vinyl" will demonstrate the loyalty of some artists to vinyl while others shifted toward a more progressive approach.³⁸ In a similar method applied to the original DJs of the 1980s, this exploration will offer additional understanding of twenty-first century consumers. I expect that while the music itself may differ, people's reasons to engage vinyl will be similar.³⁹

Comparing 80s DJs to 2000s DJs like the ones interviewed by Montano and Miyakawa demonstrates why artists hold their views on authorship of their craft, but does not explain vinyl's renewed accessibility and presence in the modern era which *allows* the posing of that question in the first place. This study will illustrate how the reasons

³⁸ See Tim Moreau's documentary, *Baltimore Where You At?* (2014) for insight on Baltimore Club during this era of digitalization.

³⁹ By explaining that consumers will still arrive at the same justification to use vinyl records whether it's 1980, 2003, or 2020, this will set up the parallels between the periods discussed in chapters 1-2 and the present day.

used to explain peoples' material interest in vinyl can also be applied to this period in order to more fully understand the music industry's move from analog to digital.

This study relies on material culture principles to understand the transition of the American music industry shift from analog to digitally consumed music, and in doing so, will draw parallels to provide explanation for vinyl's current re-emergence. First, my work will use consumers' engagement with vinyl from 1980 to the early 2000s to explain the cultural narrative surrounding records themselves. In other words, the section covering the American public's move *away* from vinyl and *toward* digital technologies will provide examples of how consumers ultimately deemed vinyl a musical commodity amidst the mainstream choice to move away from it. Taking a cue from Roy's *Media, Materiality and Memory*, the focus here will be on the east coast Club and hip-hop scenes to demonstrate the community-based support of vinyl as a medium. Here, I will argue that these communities relied on the *materiality* of vinyl during the periods covered in chapters one and two. In the 1980s, this reliance took the form of DJs using vinyl to develop their respective hip-hop scenes. In the early 2000s, it took the form of DJs continued vinyl use as well as consumer-driven vinyl commerce (including trading, collecting, and sales).

A second element of vinyl's material significance that this work will address is its association with other objects. Again, I will utilize examples offered by the 1980s-90s Club and hip-hop communities to explain vinyl's endurance through this period and draw parallels to vinyl's re-emergence in the present. The interviews of DJs by Montano, Moreau, Miyakawa and others mentioned previously will offer insight on how these music scenes simply could not exist without the presence of records, and thus, their

associated objects like a turntable. More simply, DJs could not spin records and manipulate their musical limits to create new sounds (breakbeats, song samples, etc.) if turntables did not simultaneously exist and offer them the opportunity.

The final principle of material culture this study will address is one echoed by much of the literature on vinyl in the digital age. Several scholars listed in the previous section note vinyl's propensity for *nostalgia* among peoples' motivations to spin records. I will corroborate this claim by again drawing parallels from the 1980s-90s and the present day. Primary publications like *SPIN*, *Billboard*, and *Hi-Fidelity* will help explain vinyl's appeal to consumers in the latter part of the 20th century. While some music listeners cite audio quality as the primary factor in choosing to consume vinyl, a closer examination will demonstrate vinyl's appeal to these consumers in its expression of nostalgia, allowing them to "return" to moments in their past. Even the argument of audio quality can indirectly bring the listener to the same conclusion, that new technologies like CD's "don't sound as good as they *used to*". Using these publications in conjunction with quantitative data from *Nielsen Soundscan*, *Billboard* charts, and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) this study collects data on which genres of music had the highest sales of vinyl in the 1980s and 90s. In doing so, I will make the argument that the same nostalgic appeal that returned consumers to vinyl in the 1980s continued into the twenty-first century. By studying the desires of people to return to moments of happiness/comfort, I can then answer the question, *to what or when* exactly do they want to return?

The ultimate goal of this study is to prove that vinyl's materiality (and its subsequent cultural significance) can be used to explain the recent history of vinyl's

decline and re-emergence in the twenty-first century. To do so, this section must adequately demonstrate the ways that physical archives of vinyl (through DJs' crates, consumers' collections, and second-hand stores) intersect with newer digital music. It is my hope that the result will be a more comprehensive understanding of records' impact on consumers willing to cling to tangible artifacts in the increasingly digital world.

Chapter Summary

Chapter one of my study will provide a history of vinyl record consumption in conjunction with the music industry's shift toward digital music beginning with cassette tapes and later CD's. This chapter will highlight the decline of mainstream vinyl record consumption through the 1980s into the 1990s. Simultaneously, it will explore the music scenes developed by Baltimore Club and Bronx Hip-Hop music. Here, the chapter will examine how and why these communities *engaged* with vinyl, from DJs using it to produce new music to consumers listening and distributing that music. Here, I hope to learn the degree to which vinyl impacted these communities and developed as an integral part of the larger national hip-hop movement, all the while persisting and maintaining the relevance of vinyl records.

In chapter two, I will focus on the music industry during the late 1990s and early 2000s and examine the transformation of the industry during the formative years of the internet era. Here, I will further investigate the Club and hip-hop communities to gain understanding of how they navigated this industry shift. Specifically, I will raise questions such as how these communities successfully transitioned into an era where vinyl was not the mainstream medium for music listening. Additionally, I will compare the shift of consumers toward digital formats of music consumption such as iTunes and

Napster while exploring the choice of twenty-first century DJs in whether to utilize vinyl. From this chapter I hope to find out *what* exactly DJs did with their vinyl collections during this time. Ultimately, this chapter aims to discover where vinyl was hiding during its apparent absence.

In the final chapter, I will address the transformation of the music industry in the 2010s to draw conclusions on why vinyl records persevered through this shift. By focusing on the resurgence of vinyl amidst the world of music streaming technologies, this chapter will examine factors of vinyl's materiality such as its tangibility, association with complementary artifacts, and propensity for nostalgia. Additionally, I will examine the role of digital communities that utilize the internet to help restore vinyl's relevance. In doing so, I hope to explain in this chapter how these factors allowed for the *resurgence* of vinyl records through communities of modern vinyl users like collectors and mainstream music listeners.

Chapter One: Last Night a DJ Saved My Life

*“It was secretive, and competitive, and it was expensive as f*ck, too. But you knew you could possibly find that next record that could change your career.”*

-Pharoahe Monch on the Roosevelt Hotel Record Convention (1993)

America began the first week of the 1980s exuding a wave of precariousness not experienced for several decades. Following the tumultuous economic landscape created during the 1970s, Americans witnessed the consumer price index increasing at an exponential rate while simultaneously watching the value of the dollar fall.⁴⁰ In urban landscapes, this trend felt even more deadly. By 1980, the poverty rate in New York City climbed to twenty percent, compared to only fourteen percent ten years prior.⁴¹ Amidst this new chapter taking shape for the United States, the nation witnessed a cultural first. On January 5th, 1980, break-out group the Sugarhill Gang achieved new status when their song “Rapper’s Delight” became the first hip-hop single to reach *Billboard’s Top 40*.⁴² The success of the song was unparalleled, serving as the spark with which the flames of hip-hop music would spread like a forest fire across the sonic highways of the United States.

While several historians regard “Rapper’s Delight” as the mainstream starting point for hip-hop’s development, I argue that it serves as another significant bookmark. Indeed, the song paved the way for future hip-hop endeavors. Inadvertently, it inspired a

⁴⁰ See U.S. Dept of Commerce. “Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1980.” *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, no. 101 (December 1980): 475–620.

⁴¹ See Maxwell Austensen et. al. “Poverty in New York City.” *The State of New York City’s Housing and Neighborhoods Report*, 2016, 1–20.

⁴² See *Billboard Magazine* “The Hot 100”. Week of January 5, 1980. Retrieved digitally at <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/1980-01-05>

new generation of young artists outside of hip-hop's New York City epicenter and simultaneously developed a series of best practices for the genre. While hip-hop historians like Joseph Ewoodzie and Jeff Chang note that the Sugarhill Gang is far from the *first* successful hip-hop crew, they agree that Rapper's Delight brought Bronx hip-hop out from behind the curtain and into the national spotlight. In doing so, associated cogs in the hip-hop machine like B-boys (break-dancers) and MC's ("masters of ceremony", rappers) also became staples in the genre's lexicon. The most important piece to the puzzle for this study was the genre's association and necessity for vinyl records.

The 1980s brought a substantial decline to the consumption of vinyl "long-playing" (LP) records, even before the development of the CD. After reaching peak consumption in 1981, vinyl simply could not compete with new digital technologies, and began to fizzle out. Prior to this, records were the mainstream medium through which consumers heard recorded sound. The shift of the music industry away from vinyl and toward mediums like cassette tapes and CD's is very much a microcosm of American industry reflected during this same era.

In the years following the Second World War and more recently the Cold War, the United States saw itself challenged with regard to global economic supremacy. 1980s America witnessed an industrial slump that saw "apparent losses of competitive advantage in manufactures" thanks to "increasing specialization on narrow product varieties and outsourcing".⁴³ Economist Richard Hernandez attributes this decline in American industry to the failure of the United States to compete with Chinese (as well as other nations') imports, and what he calls a "skills mismatch"- a gap between the skills

⁴³ See J. David Richardson. "U.S. Trade Policy in the 1980s: Turns-And Roads Not Taken." In *American Economic Policy in the 1980s*, 2nd ed., 627-58. University of Chicago Press, 1995.

workers have and the skills employers need.⁴⁴ During the late twentieth century, job vacancies in the manufacturing sector remained unfilled for longer periods of time, as many entry-level workers did not have the skills required for these positions. Rather than investing in the training programs needed to onboard these new workers, many American corporations realized that they could save their bottom line by engaging in business *outside* the United States. The case was nearly identical for the makers of vinyl records. Major players in the music industry that owned “eighty percent of the global market” looked to maximize revenue amidst the digital world on the horizon, and ultimately made the decision to replace vinyl records with CD’s.⁴⁵ As a result, the number of American vinyl pressing plants diminished beginning in the late 1980s, and those that remained put out an inferior product. In the meantime, those corporations in charge of the market share enjoyed “mega-growth and super profits” from sales of cheaper-to-produce CDs in the United States, Europe, and the “Tiger economies” of Asia.⁴⁶ By the 1990s, record companies managed to take their costs of production (\$3-\$4 per disk to make) and reduce them to a more manageable level (\$0.75-\$1.25 per disk). As a result, the profit margin rose tremendously on discs being sold in retail stores for roughly \$11-15 per album.⁴⁷

Though the business side of the music industry touted new digital formats like CDs, music listeners and producers further bolstered the claim that vinyl was simply the music medium of the past. The advent of digital music production enabled musicians to

⁴⁴ See Richard Hernandez. “The Fall of Employment in the Manufacturing Sector.” *Monthly Labor Review* 7, no. 1 (August 2018): 1–2.

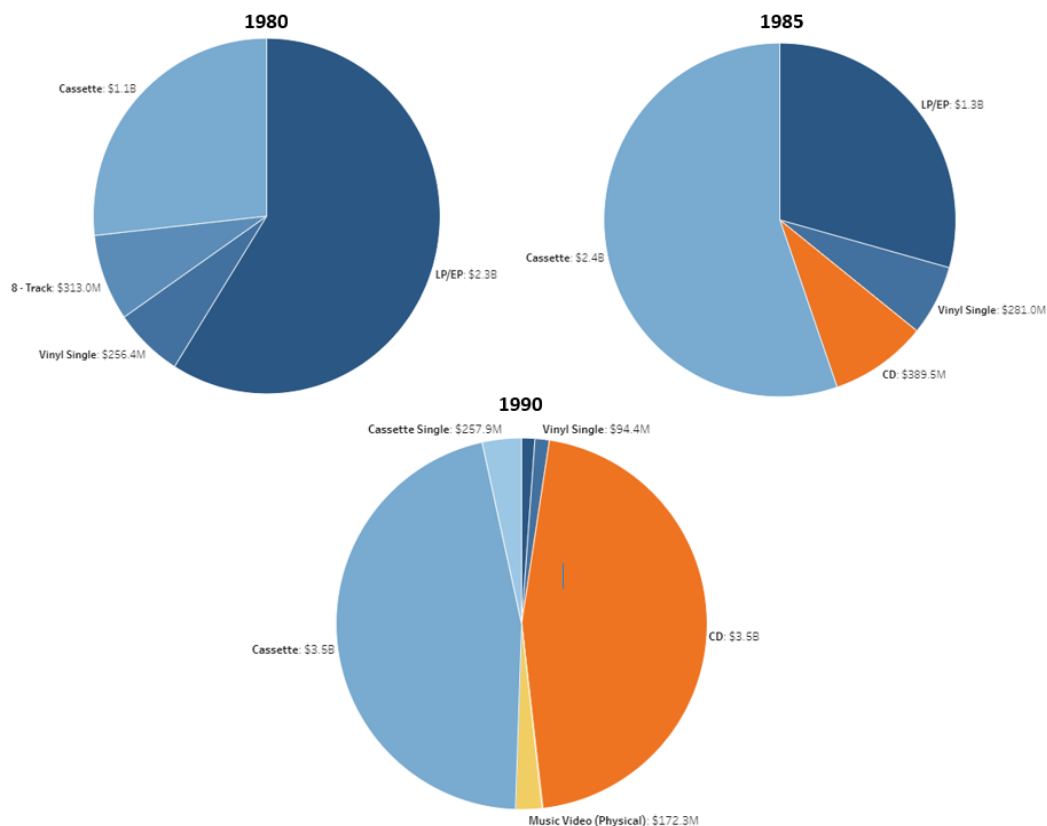
⁴⁵ See Dave Laing. “The World Record Industry in 1997.” *Popular Music* 17, no. 3 (October 1998): 328–29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 329.

⁴⁷ See Neil Strauss, “Pennies That Add Up to \$16.98: Why CD’s Cost So Much.” *The New York Times*, July 5, 1995, sec. Arts. <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/05/arts/pennies-that-add-up-to-16.98-why-cd-s-cost-so-much.html>.

create entire albums using a multitude of new equipment like computers, synthesizers, samplers, sequencers. Artist Trent Reznor (Nine Inch Nails) recalls this time period as one where “...now you can record audio into the computer, manipulating it in ways we couldn’t have done on tape before.”⁴⁸ As a result, digitally-produced music became the norm in American listening communities. With almost no distinct differences based on genre, artists began utilizing studios that put out digitally-produced records consumed by the masses.

Figure 1.1: U.S. Recorded Music Revenues by Format⁴⁹



⁴⁸ See Dave Grohl, *Sound City*. Documentary. Roswell Films, 2013. In an interview with Grohl, Reznor and other artists recall the period of the late 1970s and early 80s where digital production began to replace traditional analog music creation.

⁴⁹ A comprehensive revenue guide can be found using the database found through the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) with breakdowns by year and format. Please see <https://www.riaa.com/u-s-sales-database/>.

Apart from the economic realm of the music industry, cassette tapes and CDs boasted the additional advantage of portability- something records have always lacked. Beginning with the 1979 debut of Sony's iconic Walkman portable cassette player, music listeners could take their favorite songs with them when they travelled. Paul Du Gay et al. describe the transformation caused by this device as a major cultural disruption, as it allowed for "privatized pleasure" to be taken to the "public domain".⁵⁰ To consumers, this revolutionized the entire practice of music listening. Gone were the days of sedentary, at-home enjoyment of your favorite albums. LP sales numbers corroborate this claim, as shown in Figure 1.1 above. With each passing year, vinyl exponentially lost users amidst the proliferation of advanced technologies. Vinyl first fell victim to the cassette tape, waiting only a few years to succumb to the same fate as the compact disc.

High Fidelity, a consumer audio and music magazine, published monthly issues from 1951 to 1989 on the latest and greatest gear for music lovers. Their 1984 Holiday issue included an advertisement from perhaps one of the largest profiteers of the CD- Sony. Unveiling their newest addition to the seemingly endless list of advantages for the compact disc, the ad reads "Please accept Sony's sincerest apology for making all car stereos obsolete." Above this quote, you can see an unidentified motorist's hand, placing a shiny new CD into their woodgrain-paneled center console, housing the gorgeous new "Sony Car Compact Disc Player".⁵¹ The already-portable, digitally-mastered medium for

⁵⁰ See Paul Du Gay, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, Second edition (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2013) 113. Du Gay notes that the Walkman represented both the best and the worst of technological innovation, as some people saw it as the "destroyer of public life and community values" while others maintained that it was a productive, helpful innovation for modern society.

⁵¹ High Fidelity Magazine, the entire corpus of which can be found online, can be viewed digitally in full detail at <https://worldradiohistory.com/Archive-All-Audio/High-Fidelity-Magazine.htm>

your music needs could now be played in your car. This was effectively the nail in the coffin for vinyl records. However, a new musical phenomenon was simultaneously building, unbeknownst to the executives at Sony. In New York City, a new genre called hip-hop was in its formative years, and its birth was contingent on a special ingredient: vinyl records.

The Man with the Master Plan

If someone asked how and why hip-hop started, they would undoubtedly receive a litany of explanations surrounding topics like the South Bronx, gang culture, politics, economic turmoil, perhaps even the genre's "four elements": DJing, B-Boying, MCing, and Graffiti.⁵² Although the history of the genre's formation is complex, it cannot be recounted without including the founders' reliance on vinyl records. The setting in which hip-hop formed existed thanks to a landscape carved by the racial politics emblazoned by the likes of Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Black Panthers, and many more. In the years that followed the deaths of Malcolm X and Dr. King, neighborhoods like the South Bronx lie dormant and distraught, a pile of ash that served as a defaced monument to the fallen giants. Here, hip-hop would emerge the phoenix; angry and triumphant, it sparked a rebirth of black culture in the American mainstream and took the music industry by storm.

Hip-hop, like any other musical genre, did not formulate in a vacuum. It is not as if one day several artists came together with turntables, big speakers, crates packed with records, and proclaimed the genre's inception. Like any other musical form, hip-hop

⁵² See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador [u.a.], 2005), xi.

began out of a need for expression. The aforementioned scene of the post-civil rights era Bronx provided a natural incubator for someone to kickstart this artistic endeavor. That someone was Clive Campbell, more commonly known as DJ Kool Herc (or simply, Herc).⁵³ He and his sister Cindy hosted a party on August 11, 1973, that has since become the focal point of hip-hop origins lore. This party, originally hosted to make some back-to-school money for Cindy, became the catalyst for Herc's role as the "father" of hip-hop.⁵⁴ As a result, Herc earned a following in his neighborhood while setting the groundwork for up-and-coming hip-hop pioneers. Perhaps unknowingly, he also single-handedly ignited a community-wide attempt to get their hands on fresh records. But how did Herc transcend from a young man with a sound system to celestial hip-hop status? The answer lied in his choice of music. Herc's audiences consisted of primarily black and Latino youth. In the late 1970s, the only commercially successful black/Latino music was Disco, a style that these young Bronx natives generally disdained as it was made inaccessible to them.⁵⁵ Because Disco was played in white Manhattan clubs, young people of color did not identify with it, and therefore rejected it.⁵⁶ Further, popular culture historian Nelson George contends that the genre's redundant drum patterns, rigid

⁵³ See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 75-76. Chang notes that Campbell was known for his large, bullish stature on the basketball court. Originally, his peers referred to him as "Hercules", which he understood but did not appreciate. Eventually he told his friends to "...leave off the 'les', just call me 'Herc'.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 66.

⁵⁵ See Joseph C Ewoodzie, *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years*, 45. Ewoodzie cites Nelson George who describes Disco as a genre that "did not appeal to them as it was played in venues they could not enter."

⁵⁶ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 471.

formula, and “moronic lyrics” represented a more diluted version of old R&B classics, thus giving way to the popular narrative that “Disco sucked”.⁵⁷

Herc’s solution was to play music for *this* working-class crowd of color, music that was “at once, familiar and new”. By playing nostalgic soul and funk records that these young people heard through the speakers of their own parents’ stereos, his audiences reclaimed their parents’ music as their own.⁵⁸ This decision by Herc should not be overlooked, as it presents an important element woven throughout music consumption. In his choice to carefully curate music to the preferences of young black and Latino listeners, Herc highlighted an unspoken racial division in consumption of genres like Disco. While white listeners generally embraced Disco’s style, listeners of color viewed it as exploitative and chose to instead consume music with which they could identify.⁵⁹ This notion undoubtedly contributed to these listeners’ willingness to abandon it in pursuit of a more authentically relatable musical genre.

DJ Kool Herc’s new-found local fame brought several attempts by his peers to replicate his success. The records spun at his parties were carefully chosen due to their up-tempo beats. In order to maintain his trade secrets, he soaked off the labels of each record. Recalling his ideology, Herc explained that “My father said ‘Hide the name of your records because that’s how you get your rep. That’s how you get your clientele.’

⁵⁷ See Joseph C Ewoodzie, *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop’s Early Years*, 45.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ See Gary Waleik. “Forty Years Later, Disagreement About Disco Demolition Night.” WBUR News, July 12, 2019. <https://www.wbur.org/onlyagame/2019/07/12/disco-demolition-dahl-veeck-chicago-white-sox>. Waleik speaks on the Disco Demolition Night held at the Chicago White Sox’ Comiskey Park on July 12, 1979. He notes that some spectators acted in a primal, destructive manner and held racial tensions amidst what was originally designed to be a promotional tool.

You don't want the same people to have your same record down the block".⁶⁰ The search for a competitive edge fueled the developing genre to go even bigger, and soon brought even more DJs on the scene.

Girls Love the Way He Spins

After dee-jaying (DJing) gained traction outside the South Bronx, entertainers hosted parties in Brooklyn, Queens, even in nearby cities such as Philadelphia.⁶¹ Hip-hop was evolving, taking various forms on a regional basis. While some hip-hop historians believe that this regionality created differences in the choices of records played by DJs, Joseph Ewoodzie rebukes this claim noting that the difference lay in *the way* those records were played. He clarifies that Kool Herc called his set the "Merry-go-round", a process where he would back-cue two copies of the same record, focusing on the same break in a given song. As one break came to an end, he would begin the other several times in succession. On the other hand, DJs in Brooklyn and Queens played the song's break without scratching or cutting the record, but playing it in its original state.⁶² This notion of engaging in the same practice through different means based on a person's interaction with their environment relies on what sociological theorist Andrew Abbot

⁶⁰ See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 79. Chang notes that Herc started searching for songs based on consistent factors. They were often black soul and white rock records with an up-tempo, "often Afro-Latinized backbeat". Examples included The Incredible Bongo Band's "Apache" and "Bongo Rock", James Brown's live version of "Give it Up Turn it Loose", and Johnny Pate's theme to *Shaft in Africa*.

⁶¹ See Interview with DJ Plummer. Interview by Troy Smith. Verbal, Summer 2010. <http://www.oldschoolhiphop.com/interviews/djplummer.htm>. Plummer supports the claim of regional differences in DJing in the late seventies, noting that he played a mix of disco, soul and funk.

⁶² See Joseph C Ewoodzie, *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years*, 74. Ewoodzie corroborates the claim of Mark Skillz that South Bronx DJs were notorious for further manipulation of the record during a set through practices like scratching or cutting. He further notes that this was not as successful in the mainstream, thus Bronx DJs did not make as much money for gigs.

calls “sites of difference”.⁶³ These “differences” will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, though they help explain the local cultural effects of a person’s environment on the way they *engage* with something- in this case, vinyl records.

Although several people experimented with the manipulation of an already-spinning record, the technique did not become a staple on hip hop’s list of “best practices” until the emergence of Joseph Saddler Jr.- better known as Grandmaster Flash. A young fan of DJ Kool Herc, Flash was intrigued by the commandeering presence of a DJ over a crowd of party-goers. Further, he noticed DJs’ practice of switching from record to record mid-set. Sometimes the beats-per-minute (BPM) would align so closely that the tempo of record one almost identically matched the tempo of record two. In this scenario, the party would continue and the dancers literally wouldn’t miss a beat. More often than not however, the records’ tempos would *not* match up, leaving an awkward moment that was not ideal for dancers.

Flash’s solution came from what he called the “Quick Mix Theory”, through which he extended one record’s break by physically reversing its rotation with his hand while simultaneously “scratching” the other record at the same BPM. ⁶⁴ While Saddler was not the first DJ to utilize two records in unison, he pioneered a system that required no extra tools or technology. Rather, his vision for how to take *existing* technology and

⁶³ See Andrew Abbott, “Things of Boundaries.” *Social Research* 62, no. 4 (1995): 857–82. Ewoodzie cites Abbot’s work and further lists additional “sites of difference” in locations of DJs’ parties (whether indoor or outdoor), the decision to use a sound system, as well as the amount of pay a DJ would receive for their show in the Bronx versus a neighborhood like Brooklyn or Queens.

⁶⁴ See Joseph C Ewoodzie, *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop’s Early Years*, 64-65. Ewoodzie continues that after Flash’s first public attempt at his “Quick Mix” or “Clock” Theory, dancers and party-goers could not focus on the lack of interruption from record breaks as they were too busy noticing Flash’s novel techniques. Its distracting nature was not received well at first, though with some encouragement Flash became a respected part of the Bronx scene.

manipulate it to the will of the DJ completely revolutionized hip-hop's formation. In a fashion similar to the addition of the saxophone to Jazz or the innovation of the *electric* guitar, Flash took part in what Nelson George calls the "tradition of great Black music" by turning the turntable into an instrument.⁶⁵

After months of perfecting his craft, Flash was ready to take his talent out to the public. In the summer of 1975, he debuted his new techniques to an unsuspecting audience that stopped dancing mid-song. Hundreds of people stood and stared in disbelief, as an anticlimactic wave fell over the party. Flash couldn't believe it, but this new style did not win over the crowd. "It was a lesson. You could be smart, you could be good, you could be scientific, but being smart and good and scientific wasn't going to rock a party all by itself", Flash recalled.⁶⁶ Despite his technical prowess, he needed one last piece of the puzzle: vocal backup. Once his live shows transformed from one-man acts to "Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five", crowd sizes grew in tandem with his reputation. MCs like Melvin "Melle Mel" Glover and his brother Nathaniel "Kid Creole" became integral pieces of Flash's regular crew. Together, this team sampled and breathed new life into classics by Shirley Ellis, The Last Poets, and Lightnin' Rod's "Hustler's Convention".⁶⁷ Just as Grandmaster Flash had escalated Kool Herc's hip-hop game with technical innovations, the introduction of MCs completely transformed hip-hop. This caused the genre's roots to expand further outward and created yet another byproduct of hip-hop's reliance on vinyl records: crate digging.

⁶⁵ See Shadrach Kabango, *Hip Hop Evolution*. Documentary. 4 vols. Banger Films, 2016. Season 1, Ep. 1. <https://www.netflix.com/title/80141782>. See Interview with author Nelson George on Grandmaster Flash.

⁶⁶ See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 113.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Searching for the Perfect Record

While hip-hop began as a local scene in the Bronx, it developed into a much larger cultural phenomenon by the 1980s. Once the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" hit the airwaves early that year, the genre's appeal extended far beyond the bounds of New York City. Becoming the best twelve-inch single to ever be pressed to vinyl, it sold 75,000 weekly copies at the peak of its success in attempts to keep up with demand.⁶⁸ To the music industry, the Sugarhill Gang was an overnight sensation, a commercial abnormality. To Bronx-loyal MCs and DJs, the success of "Rapper's Delight" was not a genuine representation of hip-hop because for them, hip-hop's roots were live. The genre relied on improvisation of talented wordsmiths to produce lyrics on the fly. It required carefully-built routines and a crew that could truly absorb the energy of an active audience during call-and-response. Moreover, it required a sense of relatability for the average urban listener. Compare for example two 1980s songs. First, a verse from 1984 hip-hop track "Sucker MCs" by Run-DMC:

*"One of a kind and for your people's delight
And for you sucker MC, you just ain't right
Because you're bitin all your life, you're cheatin on your wife
You're walkin round town like a hoodlum with a knife
You're hangin on the ave, chillin with the crew
And everybody know what you've been through"*

Second, a verse from 1980 R&B hit "Celebration" by Kool & the Gang.

⁶⁸ See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 131.

*“Let's celebrate
There's a party going on right here
A celebration to last throughout the years
So bring your good times and your laughter too
We gonna celebrate your party with you, come on
Celebration”*

Clearly, the sentiment expressed in hip-hop as expressed in these particular tracks spoke to a drastically different world than what Funk or R&B offered to music listeners of color. The relatability and accessibility of hip-hop for its initial urban audiences was more than a simple repackaging of R&B, something that could not be said for Disco.

Why did “Rapper’s Delight” deserve such unanimous success? The answer lies in the popular recording medium of the moment, the vinyl record. Sugarhill Gang, who never had a DJ and was “assembled in a New Jersey afternoon”, was a studio creation perfectly accessible to folks who had never heard of rap or hip-hop or the Bronx.⁶⁹ Once their hit became mainstream, the Sugarhill Gang influenced a new wave of rappers practicing their craft in front of live crowds to place those rhymes onto vinyl for an even bigger audience. In other words, the fact that “Rapper’s Delight” was recorded and pressed to vinyl did not make it significant. However, the track’s influence on a new genre which fully developed around an integration of vinyl culture made it extraordinary.

The mass-popularization of hip-hop spelled big money for label executives that could seek out diamonds in the rough. Uncoincidentally, the 1980s saw the proliferation of hip-hop greats such as Run D.M.C., Rakim, Beastie Boys, Public Enemy, and

⁶⁹ See Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 113.

eventually west-coast breakout sensation N.W.A. However, if an MC or DJ dreamt of success, they needed great music. By the late 1980s, a practice known as “digging” or “crate digging” became a staple for artists that wanted a unique sound. For a DJ to “sample”, or audibly reproduce a portion of another artist’s song, they needed a vast array of records. While many sought out funk and soul records the likes of James Brown, producers like Q-Tip and Large Professor gravitated toward sounds emitted from an upright bass or Rhodes pianos not integral in 1980s music production.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the implementation of electronic drum machines and samplers like the E-MU SP1200 offered artists a way to digitally store and recreate these song segments.

In 1993, a young entrepreneur named Dexter Campbell held the inaugural New York City Record Convention at New York’s iconic Roosevelt Hotel specifically designed for hip-hop artists. Taking cues from similar conventions around the country, Campbell put on the first of many Roosevelt Hotel Record Conventions on Sunday, December 5th, 1993.⁷¹ Here, artists could shuffle through hundreds of dusty crates full of vinyl records in search of rare and obscure tracks. The convention soon became the “who’s who” of 1990s New York hip-hop, attracting DJs, MCs, and producers from far and wide. Their goal was simple. Find any and all records with unique sounds to sample on your own mix. This was generally decided based on a complex balance of exciting sounds and relative obscurity. In other words, DJs would dig for records that included whatever sound they were looking for, whether that was a big bass line or a funky inclusion of big brass horns. However, diggers also prided themselves on maintaining an

⁷⁰ See Brian Ellis, “The Diggin’ Culture.” *Hip Hop Archive and Research Institute*, n.d. Accessed February 18, 2021. <http://hiphoparchive.org/projects/classic-crates/diggin>

⁷¹ See Shane Ryu, “Straight from the Dungeons of Rap: An Exploration and Oral History of ‘Illmatic.’” *Central Sauce* (blog), December 20, 2018. <https://centralsauce.com/illmatic-nas-oral-history>.

inconspicuous nature in their picked albums. To the question of *what* albums were actually sought out at the Roosevelt Convention, producer Pete Rock recalled that “there’s something on everything, it depends on how you hear it and how you’re layin’ it down with the beat.”⁷² Though the convention was a great networking opportunity, it did not lack a competitive nature. Some attendees like DJ/Producer Kid Capri even booked a room at the Roosevelt in order to emerge downstairs at 6:00 AM, the very first in line.⁷³ Artists knew that finding the right tracks to sample could ultimately jumpstart your career. The most important factor was, of course, finding the right records.

Records in Baltimore Club

Just over two hundred miles south of the Bronx, another music scene came to life during the 1980s and 90s. In Baltimore, Maryland, a new sub-genre of dance music known as Baltimore Club (sometimes referred to as BMore Club, or just “Club”) emerged after Chicago House music disseminated across the United States in the late 1970s.⁷⁴ House music emerged as the 1980s successor to Disco, characterized by digitized drum machines, samplers, and synthesizers. Even early hip-hop pioneers such as Afrika Bambaataa acted as integral components in House’s development, using electro and dance sounds to spread dance music’s popularity across the globe.⁷⁵ In a similar

⁷² See Shadrach Kabango, *Hip Hop Evolution*. Documentary. 4 vols. Banger Films, 2016. Season 2, Ep. 1. <https://www.netflix.com/title/80141782>. See Interview with producer Pete Rock. When Kabango comes out and plainly asks “which records were largely sought out at the Roosevelt Convention?”, Rock responds emphatically “I can’t tell you! I can’t tell you that!”

⁷³ Ibid, See Interview with DJ Kid Capri.

⁷⁴ See Andrew Devereaux, “What Chew Know About Down the Hill?”: Baltimore Club Music, Subgenre Crossover, and the New Subcultural Capital of Race and Space.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 19, no. 4 (December 6, 2007), 314.

⁷⁵ See Rickey Vincent, *Funk: The Music, The People, and the Rhythm of the One*, 1st St. Martin's Griffin ed (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996) 289. Vincent notes that Bambaataa’s “Planet Rock” helped transition the popularity of Chicago House and other dance music into the streets of New York as well as onto the international stage.

manner to hip-hop's success, House (and therefore, its sub-genre, Club) grew out of a disdain for Disco's exclusivity. Like hip-hop, Club relied on big beats combined with rap vocals to produce popular dance music for party-goers. Furthermore, it began as a local, underground music scene predominantly made up of the black and LGBT communities.⁷⁶ In the context of this study, however, the most important similarity between these two genres comes from Club's reliance on vinyl records. Like their hip-hop counterparts, Club DJs sampled segments of classic funk and soul records to find the perfect breaks to pump up live audiences. Club grew in popularity thanks to Baltimore DJ Frank Ski, who sampled soul, funk and even disco records on his tracks.⁷⁷ Much like Kool Herc's influence on the foundations of New York hip-hop, Ski laid the blueprint for Club's formation over the course of the next decade. The stripped down, non-bassline format that played at approximately 130 beats per minute (BPM) became the formula for Club hits in Charm City.⁷⁸ It is important to note that like hip-hop, Baltimore Club formed out of necessity for expression during a time characterized by completely different trends in mainstream culture. Namely, rock and pop artists dominated the national music spotlight, earning Billboard's "Top Album" year after year. New, digitally produced albums like those for REO Speedwagon, Michael Jackson, and Asia took control of radio broadcasts around the nation. Baltimore's need for identity required something all at once familiar and new; it required vinyl record culture.

⁷⁶ See Andrew Devereaux, "What Chew Know About Down the Hill?", 314. Devereaux notes that like House, Club began as a predominantly "black and queer" movement. This stemmed from both genres' inclusivity for marginalized communities.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 315. Ski's tracks were made popular thanks to hit soul songs like Lyn Collins' "Think". Drum samples from "Think" were used in the legendary track "It Takes Two" by Rob Base and DJ E-Z Rock (1988) which gained notoriety thanks to its mainstream radio play.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Like hip-hop, Club music appeals to its listeners in part due to its emphasis on space and locality. The rhythm and lyrics of rap used in both genres are what Murray Foreman refers to as “sonic samples in the reproduction of the aural textures of the urban environment”.⁷⁹ In other words, hip-hop and Club culture are reflective of what the music producer and listener experience on a daily basis in their given environment. As a result, artists draw inspiration from their regional affiliations in a manner coined by Foreman as the “extreme local”.⁸⁰ Much like R&B and Blues artists who traditionally cited their cities or regions, DJs and MCs pointed to more hyper-specified neighborhoods, street names or even telephone area codes.⁸¹ This sense of “extreme local” is quite visible in Club music, even today. During the genre’s formation, however, spatial recognition influenced the formula with which classic Club tracks were made.

If hip-hop tracks generally focused on the “this happened to me here” narrative, Baltimore club instead offered a method that substituted verses for chanted refrains of “here/here/here/here”.⁸² In practice, this meant that the songs engaged in less story-telling, focusing instead on the breaks and danceability of the tracks. These refrains were often as simple as MCs shouting out names of neighborhoods, streets, even people during live performances. A prime example of this comes from the track “How U Wanna Carry It” by Club icon Miss Tony (aka. Big Tony), in which the name of a person or place was followed by the repeated refrain of “...said how you wanna’ carry it”.⁸³ Miss Tony, a

⁷⁹ See Murray Forman, *The 'hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Music/Culture, (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2002) xviii.

⁸⁰ Ibid, xvii.

⁸¹ “St. Louis Blues”, a blues track originally composed by W.C. Handy before being covered by various artists, demonstrates this with lyrics like “Got them Saint Louis blues, just as blue as I can be.”

⁸² See Andrew Devereaux, ““What Chew Know About Down the Hill?””, 319.

⁸³ See Brandon Soderberg, “Joy, Riots, Resilience: The Life of Baltimore Club Legend Miss Tony and the Death of Freddie Gray.” *Fact Mag*, May 17, 2016. In “How U Wanna Carry It”, Tony first repeats several

fictional stage character dressed in drag whose real name was Anthony M. Boston, was a larger-than-life Club MC who often hosted parties and radio shows alongside Frank Ski. Tony truly embodied the extreme local mindset, and would often even receive payments from party-goers that wanted their name or neighborhood shouted out live at parties.⁸⁴ The significance of Miss Tony to the Club scene revolved around his ability to reclaim space for Baltimore listeners. While Club lyrics did not include as many verses as hip-hop tracks, the House-inspired style (often referred to as hip-house) still offered party-goers the opportunity to engage their community through means not offered by mainstream music.

While hip-hop music could be initially characterized as a male-driven, often misogynistic and sometimes even homophobic style of music, Club (and its predecessors in House and Disco) leaned into LGBT culture during its formation. While neighborhood anthems made up a large portion of the genre's catalog, Club also relied on sexuality as a dominant theme. In the same way that Miss Tony offered Club listeners a method to express their reclamation of space, he and other members of Baltimore's LGBT community reclaimed otherwise heterosexual rap lyrics for the homosexual audience. For example, rapper Juvenile's 1998 track "Back That Ass Up" is a commonly sampled loop for Club tracks, though its lyrics are associated generally in a heterosexual context. Baltimore's LGBT community however leaned into hooks like this to further the genre

chants of "Miss Tony says how you wanna carry it" before following with names of neighborhoods like "Cherry Hill says how you wanna carry it" and "Somerset says how you wanna carry it".
<https://www.factmag.com/2016/05/17/miss-tony-freddie-gray-baltimore-club-joy-riots-resilience/>.

⁸⁴ See Tim Moreau, *Baltimore Where You At?* Pictanova, 2014. <https://vimeo.com/84112209>. In an interview with Moreau, MC Jimmy Jones and DJ Booman recall their experiences with Miss Tony.

despite its lack of nuanced storytelling.⁸⁵ It is worth noting that while sexuality remained a major theme in Club, the scene ironically formed barriers of exclusivity for the LGBT community. Similar to New York's Ballroom scene, Baltimore contained its own drag subculture, made evident by drag queen director Divine, an inspiration of early John Waters films.⁸⁶ As a result of the ties between communities, Club found a home in several LGBT nightclubs like The Hippo, Paradox, and later Grand Central Station in addition to Baltimore's more mainstream clubs and bars.⁸⁷

For the Record: Hip-hop and Club Significance in the Twentieth Century

Though hip-hop and Club began as two separate scenes with distinct sonic differences, they offer a shared significance in their persistence of vinyl records in the late twentieth century as well as the re-emergence of records in the twenty-first century. This section of the chapter breaks down this logic through the lens of material culture.

First and foremost, it is important to note that both hip-hop and Club could not have formed without the presence of vinyl records. Material culture historians Laurel Ulrich et al. state that categorizations of "things", whatever their inherent characteristics may be, are the result of their uses by humans.⁸⁸ In the context of vinyl, this means that music listeners utilized records as the mainstream medium for listening to music for

⁸⁵ See Al Shipley, "Sex in This Club: Gender and Sexuality in Baltimore Club Music," *Words. Beats. Life: The Global Journal of Hip-Hop Culture* 4, no. 3 (2010), 42. Shipley notes that Miss Tony was the largest challenger to Baltimore's traditional gender roles. He cites producer Al McLaran who worked on tracks with Miss Tony in his recollection of an instance where Tony ridiculed the macho poses of straight men in the club, at which point Tony asks "You see all these thugs and players? They look like stone cold men, don't they? Don't be fooled, they ain't butch. They're all little bitches!"

⁸⁶ See Al Shipley, "Sex in This Club: Gender and Sexuality in Baltimore Club Music", 46- 47.

⁸⁷ See Brandon Soderberg, "Joy, Riots, Resilience: The Life of Baltimore Club Legend Miss Tony and the Death of Freddie Gray", 2016.

⁸⁸ See Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 78.

decades before DJs began scratching them on hip-hop tracks. Why then did DJs and MCs utilize records during a period characterized by digital innovations like cassettes and CDs? The answer comes in part from the state of music technology in the 1970s and 80s. While the cassette tape and compact disc were both commercially available in the mid 1980s during hip-hop's formative years, their technological constraints did not allow DJs to physically manipulate them in the same way one could scratch a record. Though the CD claimed to be technologically superior, it did not fit into the cultural context of the 1970s-80s Bronx, or 1980s Baltimore.

To examine the Bronx in the late 1970s is to acknowledge the socio-economic factors woven into the neighborhood's fabric. BAMA I, a New York City graffiti artist of this era, recalled that in the 1970s, "...a lot'a tension was still happening..." and that "...I had to put up with certain things. I still have problems getting a good education. I still get drugs thrown at me. I mean people was walking up to me in the streets showing me how to use a syringe."⁸⁹ This recollection represents an unfortunate trend present in 1970s New York. For many impoverished residents, the sale of illegal substances often provided the only slim chance at economic stability. In 1975, the number of welfare recipients in the Bronx increased to 284,322, jumping up 29.4% from a decade earlier.⁹⁰ By the fall of 1979, unemployment in the city climbed above ten percent.⁹¹ Young people were not exempt from adversity. Several school districts lacked funds to fix broken windows, smashed doorknobs, or graffiti-strewn facilities, let alone new textbooks. Dena

⁸⁹ See Donald Janson, special to the *New York Times*, "Spray Paint Adds to Graffiti Damage." *New York Times*, July 25, 1971. <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/25/archives/spray-paint-adds-to-graffiti-damage.html>.

⁹⁰ See "Wrong Neighborhoods Got Funds On Poverty, Goldin Audit Charges." *New York Times*. 1977.

⁹¹ See Damon Stetson, "New York City Continues to Show A Rise in Its Unemployment Rate: Sample Is Small Strong Growth in State." *New York Times*. 1979, sec. Metropolitan Report.

Kleiman's February 1980 *New York Times* article addressed the question of just what was in store for the futures of young Brooklyn attendees of the city's twenty third school district.

"District 23 is a community with no movie theater, no restaurant, no bank. It is the kind of place, many agree, that anyone who possibly can, leaves...But where do youngsters in District 23 go? For many, the answer is simple: nowhere."⁹² Perhaps uncoincidentally, DJing became popular in the 1970s as a way to replace gang culture and offered young people, specifically men, a way to earn social status that gang leaders previously enjoyed.⁹³

Where did records fit into all this? They acted as a versatile golden ticket to status in the streets. In other words, hip-hop as a genre was formed during a moment in recorded music history where all other genres continued in step with the technological advancement of the CD. The advent of the hip-hop DJ, on the other hand, provided a unique experience in which someone was using a record as an *instrument* or *tool*, rather than simply as a music medium. This does not suggest that all other musical genres suddenly stopped releasing vinyl LPs and switched to CDs, though it does represent a significant pivot on the part of hip-hop pioneers in their choice to embrace vinyl culture.

If young people could get their hands on fresh records and prove themselves as a self-respecting DJ, they gained clout and supported themselves financially all at once.⁹⁴

⁹² See Dena Kleiman, "Reading in Two Districts: The Best and the Worst: District 26 in Queens Maintains Quality Despite Problems Queens School District Strives to Maintain Quality Problems Despite Successes A Diary of Suggestions A Look at the Future Brooklyn District 23 Struggling to Rise Above Handicaps Necessities of Existence Brooklyn District Is Facing Handicaps Alternative Hiring Plan." *New York Times*. 1980, sec. Metropolitan Report.

⁹³ See Joseph C. Ewoodzie, *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years*, 43.

⁹⁴ The same principle applies to Baltimore, in that a lack of economic opportunity and the presence of street drug culture affected entire neighborhoods in a catastrophic way.

MC Coke La Rock noted that when he began playing shows with Kool Herc, he knew that if he “left the drugs alone and got into this [DJing], I could settle for at least \$5,000 a week”.⁹⁵ There was no question that if a DJ hustled, the sky was the limit. It is useful here to include Judy Attfield’s definition of material culture as it alludes to the aforementioned example. Attfield viewed material culture as “a way of looking at a non-verbal manifestation of how people make sense of the world through their use of objects.”⁹⁶ Thus, Bronx and Baltimore natives turned an otherwise worthless commodity into a tool for a self-sustaining career of artistry.

Like any musical performance, hip-hop and Club music acts as a two-way conversation between performer and audience. Thus, the same significance offered by record use by DJs applies to their use by party-goers as well. Hip-hop and Club demonstrate that vinyl was the preferred medium for hip-hop *artists*, and raise the question of what the genres can tell us about how *listeners* engaged with vinyl. What can the implementation of vinyl culture in hip-hop and Club tell us about the tastes and preferences of Bronx hip-hop heads in the 1970s and 80s? What can it tell us about Baltimoreans in the 1980s and 90s? As previously mentioned in this chapter, DJ Kool Herc made a conscious decision to play records that were culturally accepted by his audiences. In his choice to spin artists like James Brown, Marvin Gaye, the Incredible Bongo Band, and Baby Huey, Herc attracted the attention of his crowds with music that

⁹⁵ See Joseph C. Ewoodzie, *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop’s Early Years*, 102.

⁹⁶ See Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. Materializing Culture, (Oxford New York: Berg, 2000) 135. Attfield notes that a study of musical artifacts does not seek to separate or “hierarchize” objects, but rather to see how they illuminate and transform each other into processes of creation and consumption. For example, one could not claim that a vinyl record was any more or less crucial to sound consumption than the turntable on which it was played.

was carefully curated just for them.⁹⁷ Furthermore it is again important to refer to the historical context of the Bronx to explain why listeners gravitated toward early hip-hop. Herc's friend and early follower Disco Wiz explained that "People attended Herc's parties for different reasons. Some went because little else was happening in the neighborhood. There was no movie theatre- everything we did was like something just to make a little bit of excitement."⁹⁸ Clearly, hip-hop became an outlet not just for DJs and MCs to express their creativity, but for crowds of music-listeners that needed a reprieve from the struggles of daily life. Naturally, dancing acted as an avenue for audience members to take part in hip-hop's excitement. Ethnomusicologist Joseph Schloss corroborates that Kool Herc's crowds were already accustomed to dancing in the streets, as his shows took place on the same sidewalks in which street drumming occurred. Further, he notes that the practice of dancing to break beats was not at all unfamiliar to the "musics of the African diaspora" like salsa and mambo.⁹⁹

Hip-hop's unique style provided an outlet for audience members to actually take part in performances, usually through the implementation of b-boying (breakdancing). By the mid-1970s, b-boying became integral to Bronx hip-hop to a degree that allowed boys too young to enter the club to take part in outdoor jams.¹⁰⁰ In this sense, hip-hop b-boys engaged with vinyl culture in a way that not even DJs could. On the contrary, they worked in unison with each other. Just as DJs were respected and revered for their ability

⁹⁷ See Joseph C. Ewoodzie, *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years*, 42.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ See Joseph Schloss, *Foundation: B-Boys, b-Girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 19-20.

¹⁰⁰ See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 115. Chang cites DJ Jazzy Jay's explanation that prior to DJing, he was a b-boy that developed a crew who battled others in the Bronx for street cred-and of course, to impress young women.

to select and implement records into their sets, b-boys gained notoriety for pushing the limits of their breakdances. Once a b-boy earned enough respect cutting their teeth against rival crews, he simply moved up the ladder to challenge the next. Breakdancing became a rite of passage and a relatively safe method for young men (and women) to compete in the urban environment.¹⁰¹

Hip-hop and Club demonstrate several examples of what Andrew Abbott refers to as “sites of difference”, previously mentioned in this chapter. Abbott notes that sites of difference are used to distinguish what he calls “proto-boundaries” like job titles on the basis of race, color, gender, etc. in a certain context.¹⁰² These sites of difference apply to regional discrepancies in Bronx hip-hop and Baltimore Club in their own right, and can also be used to illustrate general sites of difference between the two genres.

In the case of hip-hop, sites of difference included the choice of records actually played by DJs and *how* those records were played, as previously mentioned in this chapter.¹⁰³ Additionally, the narrative of hip-hop’s formation requires the mention of graffiti artists from New York City and Philadelphia, gang members from various neighborhoods in New York City, and audience members that interacted based on the

¹⁰¹ See Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 115. Jorge “Popmaster Fabel” Pabon, a Zulu King and hip-hop historian notes in this chapter that b-boys were aggressive, on a mission to “terrorize the dance-floor and to make a reputation, ghetto celebrity status.”

¹⁰² See Andrew Abbott, “Things Of Boundaries.” *Social Research* 62, no. 4 (1995), 867. Abbott references the example of 1970s-80s Information Technology (IT) to explain sites of difference. In his example, some companies referred to their professionals as “systems analysts” while others deemed their employees “programmers”, even though they ultimately did almost identical work. The same can be said for the field of 1970s psychiatry, where men were deemed “psychiatrists” and women were known as “psychiatric social workers”.

¹⁰³ DJs in Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx all played records that were specially selected for those audiences. Furthermore, the method in which they actually played those records differed along regional lines.

performance of DJs and MCs.¹⁰⁴ B-boys represent a site of difference in their choice of routine, something that fully depended on the records chosen by DJs to play and *how* they played them. Even members of various gangs in New York represented a site of difference in their role as aggressor or peacekeepers during parties and shows.¹⁰⁵ From the DJ down to the seemingly insignificant audience member, vinyl culture had a major influence in the development of hip-hop.

In Baltimore, Club music maintained its own regional sites of difference in spatial signifiers like hood refrains mentioned previously in this chapter, as well as its own socio-economic pitfalls. The city saw a drastic increase in the number of abandoned houses in the latter part of the twentieth century, with numbers climbing from seven thousand in 1970 up to forty thousand in 1998.¹⁰⁶ Like the Bronx, Baltimore suffered (and continues to suffer) its own moments of economic hardship and civil unrest, decimating opportunity in certain neighborhoods.¹⁰⁷ By the end of the 1980s, nearly a quarter of city residents were officially living in poverty with incomes below \$12,674 for a family of four.¹⁰⁸ Because of these turbulent times, some viewed DJing as one of the

¹⁰⁴ See Joseph C. Ewoodzie, *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years*, 207. Ewoodzie includes an expansive list of additional sites of difference in hip-hop, including party promoters, flier makers, security crews, club owners, neighborhood hustlers, family members, radio DJs, record company executives and even local political figures.

¹⁰⁵ See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 102. In parts of the city abandoned by authorities, various gangs were tasked with crowd control. Grandmaster Flash for example travelled with the Casanovas, and Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation served as protectors of Bronx River.

¹⁰⁶ See Andrew Devereaux, "'What Chew Know About Down the Hill?'. Devereaux additionally cites former Johns Hopkins professor David Harvey to understand the problem of gentrification in various neighborhoods, something Harvey refers to as "feeding the downtown monster".

¹⁰⁷ See Health Department, Baltimore City. "2017 Neighborhood Health Profile." *Baltimore City Health Department*, June 9, 2017, 1–38. Sandtown-Winchester, the home of Miss Tony for example, held a roughly 20% unemployment rate from 2010-2015 in conjunction with less than 70% adult attainment of a high school degree.

¹⁰⁸ See James Bock, "During 1980s, Affluence Found a New Home along the Fringes Gap between Rich, Poor Areas Grew." *The Baltimore Sun*. October 4, 1992. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1992-10-04-1992278037-story.html>.

only feasible (and legal) methods of producing income on a consistent basis. MC Scottie B explains that “...in the 1980s, we didn’t have family and we didn’t have cars. All we had was record store jobs and DJ gigs.”¹⁰⁹ In Baltimore, these sites of difference, like those in hip-hop, are largely reflected by how records were implemented into the music scene. DJs represented sites of difference like their hip-hop counterparts regarding *which* records were chosen and *how* they were played. Parameters were set even specifying which *breaks* made a track “true Bmore Club”.¹¹⁰ DJ Booman explains that in Club’s formative years, several DJs set out to make dance music and simply called it “Club”, though it was not a true representation at the time. On the contrary, the way DJs *played* the records, specifically the stylistic manipulation of those records in the signature “looping” of a song’s core sampled break classified it as Club.¹¹¹

Sexuality represented a site of difference more routinely experienced in Baltimore’s Club when compared to hip-hop. On the basis of gender, Club was similar to hip-hop in that it was predominantly a man’s game. Similarly, sometimes the Club scene actively worked to separate LGBT and heterosexual listeners. The irony here comes from the scene’s reliance (and often public embrace) of the LGBT community, despite some listeners’ homophobia. Veteran Club producer Ron “Dukeyman” Hall demonstrated this, stating in a 2006 interview that “Club music was made for clubs; very provocative and nasty and perverted. That’s what it was. ‘Faggy music’, whatever you wanna call it.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ See Tim Moreau, *Baltimore Where You At?*

¹¹⁰ Ibid, Scottie B and DJ King Tutt corroborate that songs were not technically considered Baltimore Club tracks unless they included a portion of either Lyn Collins’ 1972 R&B track “Think About It” or Gaz’ 1978 “Sing Sing”.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² See Al Shipley, *Sex in This Club: Gender and Sexuality in Baltimore Club Music*, 45. Shipley notes in his interview with Hall that his tone reflected a “dry self-deprecating” statement, rather than something truly coarse or homophobic. Shipley continues in the article by explaining that of all connections between

Despite the fact that Hall is a straight man who has spent several years creating Club music, he recognized that even Baltimore, a city with a thriving LGBT community, had social struggles to overcome within the scene.

1980s and 90s Baltimore audiences consumed Club live, though it was generally indoors in someone's private home or in a nightclub. Regarding audience participation, Club audiences shared similarities with hip-hop, though they more closely resembled Chicago House crowds. Even compared to 1990s rave culture, a scene dominated by more middle-class white listeners, Club remained a distant relative.¹¹³ Another significant agent in assembling Club listeners were DJs *not* playing house parties or underground clubs, but instead gaining traction on the local radio station. Attfield's definition of material culture again helps explain this example of engagement by Club listeners. Club tracks produced in the 1980s and 1990s sampled vinyl records from years or even decades prior. In addition to DJs *creating* the track using beat-filled vinyl sampled digitally, they proceeded to press *new* vinyl of the Club track to pass along to local radio DJs like those at 92.3 WERQ (more commonly known as 92Q).¹¹⁴ These "test presses" were referred to as "white labels" because they did not yet include the album's artwork, just a white label with nothing written on it. DJ Booman notes that "if you had white labels, you were considered an "A-lister" and garnered heavy radio play. This resulted in

the LGBT community and Club, none stood out more than Miss Tony, who was widely accepted by the majority of Club listeners.

¹¹³ See Andrew Devereaux, "'What Chew Know About Down the Hill?'," 315. Devereaux notes that amidst white rave culture's decline, Club existed "in its own bubble" at home and did not sonically separate itself from House music overnight.

¹¹⁴ See Casey Embert, "We Made All This Shit! The History of Unruly Records, Which Just Celebrated 20 Years, Tells the History of Baltimore Club Music." *The Baltimore Sun*, June 21, 2016. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/citypaper/bcp-062216-feature-unruly-records-20160621-story.html>.

popular tracks so well known that by the time the record *did* hit local record stores, it flew off the shelves.¹¹⁵

The end of the twentieth century brought a changing tide for the music industry, particularly for vinyl records. Each year, trends pointed to increased promise in digital technologies for music producers and listeners alike. The increased implementation of CDs and digital sampling technologies left a bleak future for vinyl, resulting in a large-scale abandonment of its production. Furthermore, the mainstream development of the internet effectively meant that the days of traditional music production were numbered. The twenty-first century saw a new era of artistry and consumption, characterized by digital production and dissemination of music. Vinyl appeared to be on its deathbed, though it would not succumb to its seemingly inevitable extinction. The same innovators that helped maintain vinyl's relevance in the 1980s and 90s would breathe new life into the medium in the coming decades.

¹¹⁵ See Casey Embert, "We Made All This Shit! The History of Unruly Records, Which Just Celebrated 20 Years, Tells the History of Baltimore Club Music." *The Baltimore Sun*, June 21, 2016. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/citypaper/bcp-062216-feature-unruly-records-20160621-story.html>

Chapter Two: From Greatest Heroes to Ones and Zeroes

“The internet is two-dimensional... helpful and entertaining, but no replacement for face-to-face interaction with a human being...There’s no romance in a mouse click.”

-Jack White on the significance of Record Store Day (2013)¹¹⁶

By the 1990s, Americans largely became dependent upon the increasingly popular technology of computers. While computers offered increased productivity, people’s reliance on them became challenged when the thought of losing all “real”, tangible data stored digitally came to fruition. Many Americans believed that a glitch existed in a computer’s logistical method of storing dates (formerly in two-digit increments, not four) convincing many that within the inaugural seconds of the twenty-first century, January 01, 2000, computers would lose everything from classified government documents to their grandmother’s bank account. While this notion bred reluctance for personal computer users, many still enjoyed the new fruits of the digital world. Particularly, the internet offered users a new method of acquiring data from across the globe. In theory, any files on the internet could be extracted, or “downloaded” from a personal computer onto a library of the user. The process took tedious time and effort, though many who became proficient replaced several of their physical goods with newer, digital copies. When it came to music listeners, this phenomenon was quite useful. In theory, the advent of the world wide web had just emerged as the newest contender to the brick-and-mortar record store.

¹¹⁶ See “Record Store Day Ambassador Jack White: ‘There’s No Romance in a Mouse Click,’” *NME* (blog), February 22, 2013, <https://www.nme.com/news/music/jack-white-156-1249356>.

While the previous chapter highlighted the reliance of DJs and MCs on vinyl records during the formative years of hip-hop and Club music, this chapter focuses on the methods used by these same artists to navigate the industry shift to digital music. Particularly, it will address the whereabouts of DJs and their vinyl records during this period of the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is important to note here that this study refers to two distinct waves of “digitalization” that occurred during the late twentieth century. These terms are borrowed from Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward’s work *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age*, and refer to the two major technological shifts in the music industry. The first wave of digitalization occurred during the industry shift to the CD, the second wave during the move to MP3 files.¹¹⁷

The Dawn of a New Age

The end of the twentieth century saw a remarkable shift in the music industry, offering an undoubtedly exciting time for consumers. After the successful inception of the CD and the seemingly endless possibilities offered by the proliferation of the world wide web, several companies sought to win the race to digitize audio and video content. In order to develop consistency in these various attempts, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) developed a team in 1998 known as the Moving Pictures Experts Group, or MPEG.¹¹⁸ This team based their efforts to create a common digital audio format on the scientific research of German electrical engineer Karlheinz

¹¹⁷ See Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) Bartmanski and Woodward’s work serves as a core reference on vinyl records during the age of digital media.

¹¹⁸ See Kendall Bartsch, “The Napster Moment: Access and Innovation in Academic Publishing,” ed. Bonnie Lawlor, *Information Services & Use* 37, no. 3 (November 7, 2017), 343-344. ISO began in Geneva, Switzerland immediately following the end of the Second World War, and has since developed into an international body of non-governmental experts to promote technical standards and consistency on a global level.

Brandenburg, who discovered that large music files could actually be compressed in size in order to be more easily transmitted over the internet.¹¹⁹ Taking a cue from Brandenburg's breakthrough, MPEG developed audio files with low-enough bitrates to disseminate across cyberspace while maintaining their superior sound quality. These files would only constitute approximately 4 megabytes (MB) of data, as opposed to their original 40-50 MB form.¹²⁰ Thus, these files were deemed Moving Pictures Experts Group Audio Layer 3, more commonly referred to as MP3 files.¹²¹

The establishment of MP3s led to entire libraries of music newly available in this format. What once constituted decades of album collecting and copious amounts of money could now be translated into a seemingly endless compilation stored on the average computer hard drive. Certainly, the early days of the internet proved fruitful for anyone savvy enough to transition toward the novel form of music listening. In a 2001 issue of *CNN Money*, columnist Borzou Daragahi explains that while he was skeptical of the new medium at first, "... a friend bought me a portable MP3 player around the time I got a high-speed internet line at home...I stumbled upon tiny, relatively inexpensive gadgets that can store hours of music. I learned how to copy songs from my CD collection and record them onto blank disks."¹²² The late 1990s and early 2000s represented the dawn of a new era in music listening. Before the music industry could

¹¹⁹ See Kendall Bartsch, "The Napster Moment: Access and Innovation in Academic Publishing," ed. Bonnie Lawlor, *Information Services & Use* 37, no. 3 (November 7, 2017), 344. Bartsch notes that Brandenburg was tasked as a PhD student to find a way to transmit music over ISDN phone lines. In 1982, while studying at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, he discovered that a process utilizing an element of human hearing known as "auditory masking" allowed for certain inaudible sounds to be removed from music files, thus, decreasing their size.

¹²⁰ See Borzou Daragahi, "Digital Music Comes of Age," *CNN Money* 30, no. 13 (December 2001): 191.

¹²¹ See Kendall Bartsch, "The Napster Moment", 344.

¹²² See Borzou Daragahi, "Digital Music Comes of Age", 191.

catch up, it experienced a new disruption in the form of peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing.

Unlike its predecessors, MP3s did not diminish in quality after each replication. With the simple click of a button, a file the size of one song or an entire album could be entirely duplicated and ready to disseminate to several other listeners. This represented a unique problem for the music industry, in that anyone with the right set of skills could plunder unknown amounts of money in stolen music. This came to light in 1998, when partners Shawn Fanning and Sean Parker developed a new file-sharing software that disrupted the entire music industry. Their project was named Napster.¹²³

Honor Among Thieves

In November 1998, Shawn Fanning's dream of creating an online hub of decentralized music libraries came to life.¹²⁴ A self-trained teen who grew up in the formative years of the internet, Fanning enlisted the help of several other computer programmers (self-proclaimed "hackers", in many cases) through chat-based online communities in order to get his program up and running.¹²⁵ Though his initial attempt was unsuccessful, his online peers encouraged and aided his follow-up efforts bringing Napster to fruition.

Fanning's program completely revolutionized mainstream music listening upon its inception and left a severe impact on the music industry at large. Prior to the evolution of the internet and further development of the digital world, the music industry structured itself around a business model focused largely on record labels and artists. Chris

¹²³ See Kendall Bartsch, "The Napster Moment", 344-345.

¹²⁴ A Massachusetts native, Fanning attended Northeastern University when he left school to pursue Napster in San Mateo California with partner Sean Parker.

¹²⁵ See Alex Winter, *Downloaded*, Documentary (Trouper Productions, 2013), <http://watch.downloadedthemovie.com/>. Winter's film includes various interviews with Fanning and other Napster associates, and is available for purchase online.

Blackwell, founder of Island Records explains that “The 1950s was a singles business, and the mid-60s was when albums really started to become important... and before that, a hit single to an artist was a hit promotion. It wasn’t a source of revenue; the source of revenue came from the fact that if they had a hit they could get a couple thousands of dollars a night more [from live performances].”¹²⁶

Fast forwarding through the 1980s and 90s, the music industry experienced permanent effects by the onset of the digital world. Major record labels, all of which began as phonograph record companies, were forced to restructure their business models to fit the new, modern industry framework. RCA Victor began as the Victor Talking Machine Company; EMI started as the Gramophone Company; Columbia initially operated as the Columbia Phonograph Company.¹²⁷ By the end of the twentieth century, these industry juggernauts experienced not one, but two major reorganizations of how listeners consumed music. During a period of only fifteen to twenty years, record companies shifted first from vinyl records to CDs, and then from CDs to MP3s. The irony in this shift came from the evident power struggle over which party stood at the helm. To the consumer, these labels controlled the narrative regarding music put out to the masses as well as the mediums through which this music was distributed. The labels on the other hand, felt that they were at the mercy of advancing technologies.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, advancements in technology were used as commercial opportunities for the music industry to resell or “rebrand” their catalogs.

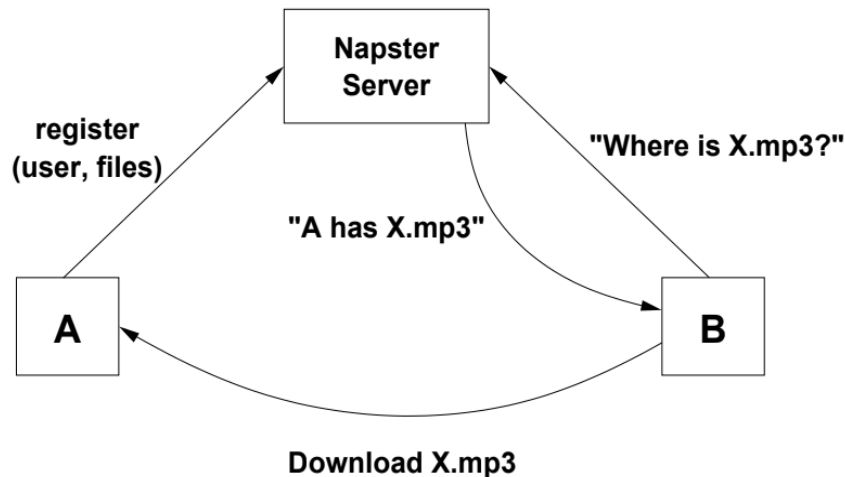
¹²⁶ See Alex Winter, *Downloaded*. Blackwell continues in his interview that he sees record labels from his perspective as a sort of “filter” that told a listener if an artist was worth listening to. He provides an example of Jazz label, Blue Note Records, stating that “if Blue Note signed an artist, that was an artist worth listening to because it was on Blue Note, and Blue Note made great records.”

¹²⁷ Ibid, see interview with Seymour Stein, President of Sire Records.

For example, when the industry norm shifted from 78 revolutions-per-minute (RPM) records (78s) to 33 ⅓ RPM records (LPs), labels could sell “all new” music again. When records stepped aside for the use of CDs, labels could again sell music that was all at once familiar and “brand new”.¹²⁸ This enabled the industry to profit from the sale of “new” records while simultaneously generating revenue from the sale of new equipment required to generate a new listening experience for older releases. This same trend emerged in the wake of new digital libraries. The only problem came from consumers like Sean Fanning beating the music industry to the punch.

Napster functioned as an online server that connected people from across the globe with the common goal of obtaining and disseminating music files in the MP3 format. The figure shown below illustrates exactly how Napster worked.

Figure 2.1: Interaction within Napster Server¹²⁹



¹²⁸ See Alex Winter, *Downloaded*). See interview with Chris Blackwell.

¹²⁹ See Karl Aberer and Manfred Hauswirth, “An Overview on Peer-to-Peer Information Systems” (Switzerland, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (EPFL), 2002), <https://www.cs.rutgers.edu/~rmartin/teaching/fall04/cs552/readings/aber02.pdf>.

If an internet-searching music listener (“User B” in the above illustration) wished to download a single song, or even an entire album, they might log into Napster’s database after having downloaded the software onto their local personal computer (PC). In this example, User B might have searched for the track “I Disappear”, by heavy-metal band Metallica.¹³⁰ By exploring the track’s name and artist information (“X” in the above illustration) in Napster’s search engine, the user commanded the software to search any and all Napster users broadcasting this track in the form of an MP3 file. Upon finding an online “host” (“User A” in the above illustration) Napster connected Users A and B and thus enabled the two internet users to transfer or “share” the song digitally.

The eve of the twenty-first century presented a new challenge. Here, the digital world exhibited a new frontier in which the consumer wrestled back control of music’s creation, development, marketing, promotion, and distribution. At its peak, Napster offered music listeners an experience unlike anything ever witnessed before the internet age. The combination of Napster’s application and the MP3 file format allowed listeners a seemingly “perfect” scenario: all the music you can find, at the right price of \$0.00. Once MP3s became a commodity, the only question revolved around exactly how to play these files. When Diamond Multimedia Systems introduced their 1998 debut MP3 player, the *Rio PMP300*, this question was answered. While the Rio was not the first MP3 player, it became the first commercially successful player used by consumers. Its initial

¹³⁰ See “Case Study: A&M Records, Inc. v. Napster, Inc. - Blog | @WashULaw,” August 1, 2013, <https://onlinelaw.wustl.edu/blog/case-study-am-records-inc-v-napster-inc/>. Metallica’s track was widely circulated on Napster’s database before its official commercial release on their record label. The resulting lawsuit was one of several filed by artists claiming that Napster allowed for “repeated and exploitative” copying of songs protected by copyright.

32 megabytes (MB) of internal memory, enough to store approximately ten songs at a time, was entirely groundbreaking and warranted an MSRP of \$200.00 at launch.¹³¹

The Rio player acted as the missing piece of the music-download puzzle, providing music listeners with a proverbial pickaxe with which to extract the countless music files from the “wild west” internet of the new millennium. However, the proliferation of MP3 players represented something much more significant than portable, “free” music. Rather, this technology with the help of software like Napster fundamentally changed the structure of music-listening communities.

P2P file-sharing represented the first true sense of globalization for music listeners. Where digital technologies like CDs helped increase the portability and accessibility of music for mainstream listeners, MP3s democratized the ears of listeners around the world. For example, local music scenes created regionally in places like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, etc. felt the effects of what Bartmanski and Woodward refer to as the “first wave of digitalization” upon the entrance of the CD. Specifically, it enabled listeners to take their music with them on the subway, their cars, even in portable “Discman” personal CD players. However, the creation of the CD did not inherently add any new artists to their local music stores. Listeners still bore the responsibility for walking into their local shop, carefully selecting music to listen to, and purchasing a hard copy.

The development of MP3s and more specifically the increased popularity of file sharing sites like Napster effectively brought the music store into listeners’ homes. Even more incredibly, it allowed listeners from all corners of the earth to share music from

¹³¹ See Peter Ha, “All-Time 100 Gadgets - TIME,” *Time Magazine*, October 25, 2010. http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2023689_2023681_2023678,00.html.

everywhere regardless of location. This allowed music listeners various opportunities to uncover rare tracks previously unavailable to them in their local record stores. Suddenly, new communities invisible to the eye developed around the practice of finding obscure tracks through this novel digital database of music fans. The best part? Napster didn't charge listeners a dime.

The End of an Era

Like any gold rush, the glory days of digital music plundering did not endure the test of time. In 1999, the RIAA coordinated one of several attacks on the new issue of online music piracy. Representing roughly half a dozen major record companies and their associated artists that controlled almost ninety percent of commercially distributed music in the United States, the RIAA asserted that Diamond's Rio player did not meet the requirements for digital audio recording devices under the Audio Home Recording Act (AHRA) of 1992.¹³² Referencing the precedent set by landmark 1984 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Sony Corporation of America v. Universal City Studios Inc.*, the court ruled in favor of Diamond, claiming that internet users have the right to "space-shift", or make additional copies of lawfully-obtained music files in order to listen to them remotely.¹³³ The same principle that enabled Sony to continue producing their "Betamax" home tape recorder which allowed consumers to record television programs for later

¹³² See *Recording Industry Association of America v. Diamond Multimedia Systems INC.*, 1999 U.S. Court of Appeals, FindLaw No. 98-56727, retrieved from <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-9th-circuit/1054784.html>

¹³³ See Carl S. Kaplan, "In Court's View, MP3 Player Is Just a 'Space Shifter,'" *New York Times*, July 9, 1999, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/tech/99/07/cyber/cyberlaw/09law.html>. The commonly referred to "Betamax case" set the stage for the copyright law in the remaining years of the twentieth century. In a 5-4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that there was a significant likelihood that copyright holders (production companies) would not object to having their broadcasts "time-shifted" by private viewers who could not access their program at the originally aired time. This set the standard for "fair use" by private parties, an umbrella under which the Rio was protected in the 1999 RIAA case.

viewing protected Diamond's Rio from the RIAA's allegations of copyright infringement.

This legal shield hoisted by the 'Betamax Case' did not protect online music opportunists forever, as Napster's reign came to an end shortly after its inception. In the 2001 case heard by the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, *A&M Records, Inc. v. Napster, Inc.*, record labels took a different approach in stifling online piracy. By attacking the file-sharing giant directly, the labels' legal teams found that Napster's model for P2P sharing discouraged the actual purchase of a song downloaded through the software, even if the original host of that MP3 file purchased it legally.¹³⁴ While Napster's demise represented a victory for the music industry, the real winners emerged in the form of a struggling tech company in the middle of restructuring its business model. The same year that Napster's reign ended, Apple Inc. officially rebounded from its close encounter with potential bankruptcy in the late 1990s, launching a legal version of Napster's model: iTunes.¹³⁵ For consumers, this took the form of a new line of MP3 software and hardware on the horizon. For the music business, this once again meant a potential for big profits.

The digitization of music via the MP3 player fundamentally altered the way in which people experienced music. As stated previously, the development of the internet and file sharing technologies democratized the entire process of listeners accessing music from across the globe. This phenomenon took place during a period sometimes dubbed an

¹³⁴ See *A&M Records, Inc. v. Napster, Inc.*, 2001 U.S. Court of Appeals, FindLaw No. 00-16401, retrieved from <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-9th-circuit/1047162.html>

¹³⁵ See James Daly, "101 Ways to Save Apple," *Wired Magazine*, June 1, 1997, <https://www.wired.com/1997/06/apple-3/>. Daly's opinion piece for *Wired Magazine* offers the tech company several different methods to save themselves from financial ruin amidst their re-hiring of Steve Jobs as CEO.

era of “dematerialization”. Dematerialization suggests that an artifact or object is reduced to a version of itself that exists strictly via electronic information.¹³⁶ For example, if you were a rock music fan in 1977, chances are you might have owned a copy of Fleetwood Mac’s hit album *Rumors* after its February debut. That same physical record you owned in 1977 now exists as an intangible file that you can access in perpetuity and requires no set of hands to carry it. Overall, the era of dematerialization enabled listeners to access different genres and artists simply unavailable to them before the onset of the digital world. While some consumers felt that the digital world merely represented a fad which would not last the test of time, trends rapidly pushed consumers to ditch their physical albums for new digital ones. Artist Neil Young personified this dismay for new digital music, stating that “we live in the digital age, and unfortunately it’s degrading our music, not improving.”¹³⁷ Dematerialization ultimately represented an exciting time for consumers, offering access to a seemingly infinite array of choices not just musically, but for almost anything.

An Endangered Species

While mainstream music culture marched on to the beat of new digital drum machines and MP3 software, vinyl records survived in the underground. Just as DJs and MCs relied on novel digital technologies like samplers and computer programs during the infancy of Club and Hip-Hop, the new generation of electronic dance music further depended upon innovation. Although records did not make their whereabouts known to

¹³⁶ See Paolo Magaudda, “When Materiality ‘Bites Back’: Digital Music Consumption Practices in the Age of Dematerialization,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 11, no. 1, March 2011, 16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540510390499>.

¹³⁷ See Michael Calore, “Why Neil Young Hates MP3 — And What You Can Do About It,” *Wired Magazine*, accessed June 19, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/2012/02/why-neil-young-hates-mp3-and-what-you-can-do-about-it/>.

the general public, their presence remained crucial for DJs and hip-hop producers. While the average music listener no longer purchased LPs for use on their home turntables (which had admittedly already begun collecting dust in local thrift stores), the late 1990s saw twelve-inch singles and seven-inch “45’s” become integral components for the DJ of the new millennium.¹³⁸ Although the identical size of a standard LP, twelve-inch singles included only one song making them functionally easier for DJs to manipulate. Regardless of genre, DJs of the late twentieth century demonstrated that artistry did not strictly revolve around those who played formal musical instruments. On the contrary, the same grassroots “do-it-yourself” innovation that birthed hip-hop and Club proved that DJs were also musicians, not unskilled laborers simply placing discs on a record player. Once again the use of records created a new artist. The modern DJ acted as a bricoleur of sampled sounds that, with proper mixing, developed a timeless connection between past and present.

A New World for the Taking

Throughout the 1990s, “New York Hip-Hop” evolved into a much larger “Hip-Hop Nation”. The competitive nature between East Coast and West Coast rap that began in the late 1980s enveloped the entire United States by the century’s end. The natural byproduct of such widespread national attention came in the form of a diversified roster of artists, producers and especially audience members. Notably, unexpected leaders began to emerge in the rap industry who were “whites comfortable and conversant with a

¹³⁸ See Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 22. Seven-inch 45’s spin at a rate of 45 revolutions per minute (RPM). These records pre-date the long-playing (LP) records and served an original purpose of playing as singles in jukeboxes.

nonwhite world.”¹³⁹ Monica Lynch, an ex-go-go dancer who co-piloted operations at New York’s Tommy Boy Records helped bring new acts to the genre. Dave “Funken” Klein, a former columnist for revered hip-hop magazine *The Source* and promoter at Def Jam Records moved to the west coast to found the label Hollywood/BASIC, signing new artists outside the borders of the United States.¹⁴⁰ Dante Ross, a white boy from the Lower East Side, apprenticed under Russell Simmons and became the first artist and repertoire (A&R) hire for Tommy Boy Records, signing talent the likes of De La Soul, Digital Underground and Queen Latifah.¹⁴¹ Even the legendary Def Jam Records was founded by white college student Rick Rubin, whose young resume already included work with white hip-hop group Beastie Boys when he was approached by producer Russell Simmons.¹⁴² The genre born and bred by and for people of color suddenly experienced an influx of white voices. However, this phenomenon was not unique to the 1990s. Just as white listeners gravitated to Jazz, Blues, Rock, and even Rhythm & Blues over the course of the twentieth century, they grew exponentially conversant with hip-hop. And like the aforementioned musical genres, hip-hop became more commercialized and mainstream as a result. Hip-hop was growing, and the music industry struggled to keep up.

¹³⁹ See Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 418.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ See The Unkut Interview with Uptown, February 26, 2013. Full transcript between Unkut’s Robbie and Uptown available at <https://www.unkut.com/2013/02/uptown-the-unkut-interview/>. Rapper Uptown corroborates that he was signed to Tommy Boy by Ross, at the same time acts such as Digital Underground and Queen Latifah were brought to the label.

¹⁴² See Shadrach Kabango, *Hip Hop Evolution*. Documentary. 4 vols. Banger Films, 2016. Season 1, Ep. 3. <https://www.netflix.com/title/80141782>. See interviews with DJ Jazzy Jay and Russell Simmons. Jazzy Jay is credited with introducing Rubin to Simmons, and corroborates that Simmons sought out Rubin after hearing his production on *It’s Yours* (1984) by Jazzy Jay and T La Rock. Simmons could not believe Rubin was white after hearing the record and began working with Rubin after Jay’s introduction.

What did all of this reformation of the music industry mean for the DJs themselves? Perhaps the most significant difference between DJs' before and after the waves of digitalization lies in their choice whether to use vinyl. Second only to this point is their determination of where exactly they retrieved their records. The practice of searching for secondhand records, otherwise known as "digging" or "crate digging" was commonplace.

The previous chapter noted the importance of crate digging to early DJs, specifically in the context of events like the Roosevelt Record Convention beginning in 1993. However, by the late 1990s and early 2000s vinyl LPs worth sampling could only be found in used condition, making them even more valuable to music producers. As hip-hop's popularity grew, the pool from which to sample hit-worthy sounds became smaller. It only made sense that once James Brown "had been sampled to within an inch of his pompadour", DJs and producers turned their attention to any and all records that could produce innovative sounds, particularly funk 45's.¹⁴³

By the 1990s, the practice of DJs and MCs sampling elements of another artist's song in order to incorporate the sound into their own original work engrained itself deep into hip-hop's blueprint. Though commonplace, this practice did not come without costs. The "anything-goes" era of sampling came to an end through the precedent-setting court case, *Grand Upright Music v. Warner Bros. Records, Inc. (1991)*, more commonly referred to as the "Biz Markie case".

¹⁴³ See Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey*, (New York: Grove Press, 2012), 285. Brewster and Broughton speak on the DJs of the 2000s, noting that "these days, anything is fair game, from Turkish pop records to Indian Disco, etc."

Though its details are not particularly extraordinary, the case permanently changed the landscape upon which artists were allowed to sample elements of another artist's work. In Markie's case, his 1991 album *I Need a Haircut* included a song titled "Alone Again". Markie sampled a few bars of a piano riff from Gilbert O'Sullivan's 1972 hit "Alone Again (Naturally)".¹⁴⁴ Upon O'Sullivan's suit, Judge Kevin Duffy found Markie guilty of infringing O'Sullivan's copyright, ordered the rapper to pay \$250,000 in damages, barred Warner Bros. from continuing to sell the album, and even referred the action to criminal court, beginning his opinion with scripture- "Thou shalt not steal".¹⁴⁵

Ultimately, while the Markie case did not remove the practice of sampling from the music industry, it shook the foundation of one of hip-hop's most integral components. Since Markie's case, major labels began dedicating additional staff to ensure that clearance was obtained for samples used in records put out by their artists.¹⁴⁶ However, the shadowy grey-area of legal niceties surrounding the issue created an even more common byproduct. In the years since the Markie case, DJs and MCs that did not obtain clearance for sampled work chose to fall into one of two general camps. First, an artist could simply elect to not obtain clearance for sampled work, hoping to evade the authorities. The other option however, utilized further manipulation of the sampled piece (again a piano riff for example). Artists, especially ones lacking in fame or notoriety, could digitally alter the sample in a way that rendered it just different enough for use.

¹⁴⁴See Daphne Keller, "The Musician as Thief: Digital Culture and Copyright Law," In *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture*, edited by Paul D. Miller (The MIT Press, 2008) 135–50

¹⁴⁵ See Oliver Wang, "20 Years Ago Biz Markie Got The Last Laugh," *NPR*, May 6, 2013. <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2013/05/01/180375856/20-years-ago-biz-markie-got-the-last-laugh>. Daphne Keller's chapter further explains Markie's case, specifically citing Duffy's use of scripture.

¹⁴⁶ See Oliver Wang, "20 Years Ago Biz Markie Got The Last Laugh," *NPR*, May 6, 2013.

Regardless of which option artists chose, the lawless era of free-for-all sampling was over.

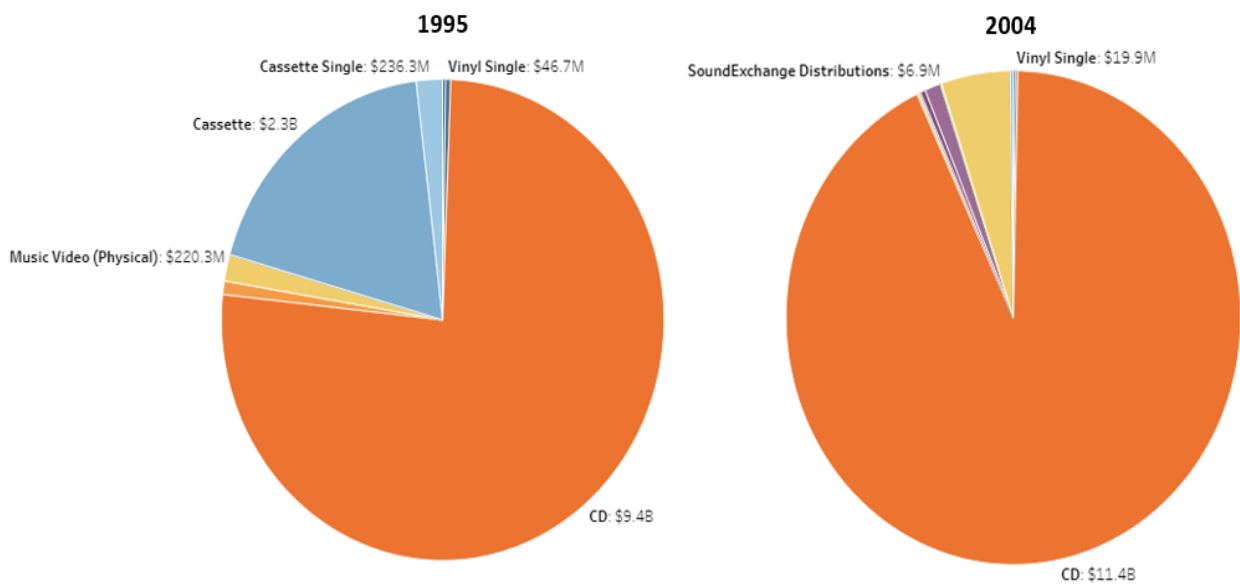
Conflicts over intellectual property such as the Biz Markie case represented a larger issue for artists during the infancy of the digital sampling era. DJs and MCs who for decades had spent hours and countless amounts of money digging through crates of records in basements and stores were now being reprimanded (at least in Markie's case) for an act they themselves did not deem criminal. Further, this represented a problem for the various individuals who contributed to these sampled tracks. For example, sound engineers and producers also missed out on royalties whenever a song they helped produce fell victim to illegitimate sampling. Artists' opinions varied on the practice, as sampling represented an unprecedented digital chapter in a decades-long component of the music industry. Steven Stein, half of hip-hop producing duo Double Dee and Steinski, explains that "music, and especially jazz, has always been referential, saying, 'I'll take a piece of that or I'll take a little piece of this'" ... he continues that he finds creativity in the process of sampling, as sampled pieces of tracks are a "building block" used to help advance the art form. "Now, whether that's legitimate, whether that is an art form, whether that is even creative-that's going to be left, unfortunately, to the courts."¹⁴⁷

Over the course of the 1990s, this trend became even more arduous for authorities to enforce thanks to the proliferation of shared mixtapes, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Further difficulties regulating stemmed from attempts at regulating P2P file sharing technology, as it granted artists virtually unlimited access to a digital version of

¹⁴⁷ See "Steinski Gives A Sampling History Lesson," NPR.org, accessed June 19, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93844583>. Stein and his partner Doug DiFranco were early pioneers of sampling in the 1980s, and ultimately view the practice as artistic and creative.

any song from any period. The shift toward digital acquisition of music coincided with the same practice seen by commercial mainstream listeners' growth of their personal music libraries. As a result, vinyl sales continued to plummet. As made evident in Figure 2.2 below, vinyl sales diminished by the mid 1990s, accounting for only 0.4% of all U.S. recorded music revenues by 1995. This figure decreased to a level virtually nonexistent, 0.2% by 2000. Finally, LP sales hit an all-time-low of 0.1% of recorded music revenue in 2006. This trend begs the question: Where did the vinyl go?

Figure 1.1: U.S. Recorded Music Revenues by Format¹⁴⁸



Diamonds in the Rough

As hip-hop artists elevated to mainstream superstar status, the record industry changed before their eyes. Before long, early hip-hop record labels that were once

¹⁴⁸ A comprehensive revenue guide can be found using the database found through the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) with breakdowns by year and format. Please see <https://www.riaa.com/u-s-sales-database/>.

independently owned found themselves bought up, squeezed out or rolled right over.¹⁴⁹ Jeff Chang explains that in 1996, independent record labels (indies) had peaked, noting that for the first and last time, indies as a whole actually outsold the major labels with regard to hip-hop records. This was short lived, as the conglomeration of big businesses grew in true monopolistic fashion. By the end of the twentieth century, ten companies controlled almost all aspects of United States media. This number was down from 50 in 1983.¹⁵⁰ At the start of the new millennium, five of these corporations, AOL Time Warner, Vivendi Universal, Sony, EMI, and Bertelsmann owned roughly eighty percent of the music industry.¹⁵¹ Public Enemy's Chuck D put it this way: "You got five corporations that control retail. You got four who are the dominant record labels. Then you got three radio outlets who own all the stations. You got two television networks and you got one video outlet. I call it 5-4-3-2-1. Boom!"¹⁵² The new emergence of hundreds of new independent hip-hop artists created a power vacuum for talent and street cred, with major labels licking their chops at potential profits. As hip-hop crossed over into mainstream culture, its competitive nature increased, changing key dynamics of the genre. However, to understand the location of vinyl during this period, one must first peek into its thriving presence in the underground.

¹⁴⁹ See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 443.

¹⁵⁰ See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 443. Chang notes that this included music, movies, magazines, television, video games and the internet.

¹⁵¹ See Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 5th ed (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), xiii. Bagdikian has since authored a revised version of this book, titled the *The New Media Monopoly*, where he compares the monopolistic nature of these broadcast companies to the power held by twentieth century dictators, noting that the five corporations and their leaders have "more communications power than was exercised by any despot or dictatorship in history."

¹⁵² See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 443. Chang notes specifically that the leader in indie sales was Eazy-E's Ruthless Records, the label he formed to put out records by NWA, as well as his own.

Despite its new rivalry with Los Angeles, New York in the early 1990s still reigned supreme as the mecca of hip-hop. During this time, small independent labels produced the majority of hip-hop records. And despite the industry lingo that accompanied (and continues to accompany) the creation of an album, which is often referred to as an artist's *record*, these labels generally put out these tracks on vinyl. The labels' success came from the grassroots, boots-on-the-ground approach to working with New York DJs and MCs. In other words, they were local companies operated by and for *local* artists. Select, Profile, Wild Pitch, Tommy Boy, Cold Chillin', and Def Jam bore responsibility for the majority of underground records produced at this time.¹⁵³

Indie labels' use of vinyl records was one of necessity; a twelve-inch single put out by a label could be personally handed over to DJ in a nightclub or at a radio station. When Rick Rubin began Def Jam out of his New York University (NYU) dorm room in the mid 1980s, his measure of success depended on how many twelve-inches he could sell to his friends, in hopes that he might have enough money to create another.¹⁵⁴ Rubin's friends at NYU even acted as unpaid interns for college credits, manning the phones to promote records to local hip-hop radio stations and even delivering twelve-inches to club DJs at nights. Rubin notes on several occasions that his initial motivation to make hip-hop records began after he witnessed hip-hop clubs in college. He explained that purchasing a hip-hop record and actually visiting a hip-hop club were two totally

¹⁵³ See Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop* (New York: New American Library, 2010), 269. Charnas is a hip-hop journalist, and actually helped build Profile Records. He notes that these labels not only produced records, but also helped promote and distribute them locally and regionally during this time.

¹⁵⁴ See Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons, Back & Forth: Russell Simmons X Rick Rubin On the Birth of Def Jam Recordings, Noisey: Music by Vice, accessed April 22, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66qdVgEIRcw>. Rubin explains that his early music business know-how was limited, and thus measured his success by his ability to make enough money to create another record.

different things. He wanted to make records that “actually sounded like hip-hop”, not just records that were “actually R&B records with an MC rapping on it”. Further, he claimed that actually visiting a club would prove that hip-hop was actually “more about the DJ” than anything else.¹⁵⁵

To say that independent labels depended upon vinyl is an understatement. The late 80s-early 90s New York hip-hop scene, even amidst the proliferation of cassette and CD technologies, relied on a personal network of human beings acting as a self-sustaining ecosystem perpetuating the genre. In fact, it was this very independence that allowed the labels to compete against major labels. While major labels had seemingly endless amounts of money and promoted their records to influential radio stations and program directors around the nation, independents crafted personal relationships with the weekend local mix jocks that helped generate hype for new local records.¹⁵⁶ The major labels may have carried powerful weapons, but the indies fought back like guerrillas with an insider knowledge on the community in which they served. Despite major labels’ efforts to find talent, New York’s local hip-hop scene helped ensure their failure to sign early artists.

The late 1980s-early 1990s underground hip-hop scene largely represented a group of artists tirelessly working to perfect their craft through means resulting in recognition of their efforts. It is important to note that while twelve-inch records could help an artist achieve this goal, many DJs and MCs also turned to a more cost-effective alternative- the mixtape cassette. “A mixtape, at its core, is rapping over other artists’

¹⁵⁵ See Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons, *Back & Forth*.

¹⁵⁶ See Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*, 269. Charnas adds that while major labels had direct relationships with MTB, independent labels fed smaller, syndicated local video shows like *Video Music Box*, that still had sizable and loyal audiences.

beats that's already out and known," claims Styles P, a member of 90s hip-hop group The LOX.¹⁵⁷ He continues by noting that a mixtape is a free project, as you do not charge for it and it's not technically original music. In reality, however, these tapes *were* for sale, and constituted messy legal battles as a result. Originally, mixtapes were intended to perform the same function as a twelve-inch record- building buzz in the streets. MCs began shifting from twelve-inch promotional records to mixtapes as they were more convenient both in terms of cost and accessibility. Anyone with a cassette player/recorder could essentially showcase their talents overtop the music of another artist.

Mixtapes too walked a tightrope of legality with regard to copyright infringement as most of these underground DJs and MCs did not obtain clearance from the original artist. The quick fix on the part of these artists came from the application of a sticker on the tapes that read "NOT FOR SALE", a thin veil to shield the otherwise obvious reality.¹⁵⁸ Overall, the underground mixtape market was tough for authorities to pin down, even as some labels helped finance the tapes while simultaneously investigating the litigation tactics to protect their interests.¹⁵⁹ By the twenty-first century, groups like the RIAA focused their efforts more on digital file sharing and piracy than on the distribution of underground tapes. The mixtape further reinforced the novelty of hip-hop's "anything-goes" era with regard to sampling, and further represented the genre's various attempts at remaining a local scene.

¹⁵⁷ See Dan Rys, "Mixtapes & Money: Inside the Mainstreaming of Hip-Hop's Shadow Economy," *Billboard Magazine*, January 26, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7669109/mixtapes-money-hip-hop-shadow-economy-mainstream/B>.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, "Mixtapes & Money: Inside the Mainstreaming of Hip-Hop's Shadow Economy,".

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, An indie label executive explains that "People retired off that sh*t," further corroborating the lack of regulation overall during the 1990s sampling era.

While relationships with local radio and club DJs helped indies fend off the major label poachers for a time, it was not their only tool to keep hip-hop and its vinyl roots secure. When it came to actually selling records, labels like Tommy Boy knew that a little marketing and distribution prowess could make all the difference. The label's expertise in unconventional marketing helped them promote and sell records in ways that a major label simply did not. To promote Digital Underground's 1990 album *Sex Packets*, Tommy Boy actually mass-produced thousands of black, vacuum-sealed "sex packets" with a candy wafer inside for the Oakland-based group.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, Tommy Boy head of sales Steve Knutson successfully instituted a deal that most independent labels could not- direct distribution with major record retailers like Musicland and Sam Goody.¹⁶¹ Further, Tommy Boy's success grew after partnering, as several New York labels did, with rising journalistic hip-hop chronicler, *The Source* magazine.

While major labels had ties to publicists and newspapers and major magazines like *Rolling Stone*, independent labels cultivated a relationship with *The Source*, a publication created by former-Harvard students David Mays and Jonathan Shecter.¹⁶² In a fashion similar to record labels themselves, *The Source* had something that major outlets like *Rolling Stone* did not: knowledge of hip-hop. Because of this, the independent labels

¹⁶⁰ See Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*, 271. Charnas continues to speak on Tommy Boy's marketing strategy, explaining that Queen Latifah's mother, Rita Ownes, helped promote the label when she appeared in a full-page ad in *Billboard* magazine that promoted De La Soul (also on Tommy Boy). She wore a sweater and pearls, holding a copy of De La Soul's *3 Feet High and Rising*, while the caption above her read "I came in for Patti LaBelle. I came out with De La Soul". Charnas notes that Tommy Boy was the first hip-hop label to challenge the bigoted preconceptions of programmers and advertisers in such a creative and forthright fashion.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 270. Tommy Boy's increased autonomy after securing such deals with record retailers helped fuel what Charnas calls Tommy Boy's "creative renaissance" that allowed them to focus on artist acquisition- notably their signing of Stetsasonic, whose DJ Prince Paul introduced them to their soon-to-be newest act, De La Soul.

¹⁶² Ibid, 257. Mays and Shecter began *The Source* as sophomores at Harvard University, initially to promote their college radio show WHRB 95.3FM.

often worked in tandem with the magazine, recognizing the similar struggle shared in the wake of the mainstream's slow comprehension of hip-hop.¹⁶³ Shecter's magazine offered significance to the hip-hop community at this time due to its allegiance to the local. *The Source* served the 1990s scene with a significance that matched any independent label, specifically through its aid in promotion, distribution, and discovery of New York artists.

The era of independent label success came to an end by the end of the 1990s, with major corporate influence sending the final nails in the coffin. By 1995, the two remaining national independents, INDI and Alliance, were forced to merge. Shortly after, national independents went extinct.¹⁶⁴ Next, regional and local indies fell to corporate giants due to what Chang calls a "massive shakeout" in music retail. Major distributors offered chain record stores steep discounts and incentives at the expense of independent labels and retailers.

The corporatization of hip hop could be seen even through the shrinking lens of vinyl record production, as mergers and buy-outs plagued pressing plants and forced them to convert to digital music production or shut down completely. One plant in particular, Specialty Records Corporation, experienced several transitions as the twentieth century came to an end. Specialty, located about two hours west of New York City in Olyphant, Pennsylvania pressed some of the most iconic hip hop records of the

¹⁶³ See Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*, 256. Charnas notes that a handful of publications existed that mentioned hip-hop briefly in their columns, though none specifically covered the genre. A small rap magazine "Hip-Hop Hit List" dissolved after one year. Lastly, he notes that publications that took pop music seriously like *Rolling Stone* or *The New York Times* ignored hip-hop.

¹⁶⁴ See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 444. Chang continues that Alliance filed for bankruptcy, owing hundreds of millions immediately following a period of great success.

1990s.¹⁶⁵ However, it changed hands on several occasions after being purchased by Warner Communications Inc. in 1978. It also began pressing CDs in addition to vinyl beginning in 1986, and officially changed its name to WEA Mfg. Olyphant in 1996. By 2003 it was sold to Cinram, who operated the plant until 2015 as part of their take-over of WEA Manufacturing.¹⁶⁶ At every stage of hip-hop's production, monopolistic outsiders began to overtake the industry. During this time, producers and consumers of Club music in Baltimore experienced their own transitions, further cementing the digital shift in the music business.

Club Enters the New Age

By the late 1990s, Baltimore's Club music scene found its stride in its bass-rich backbeats with DJs continuing to push the envelope for the genre. In a period of roughly ten years, Baltimore's best kept secret turned into a trademark of cultural expression for the city's musicians. While the scene remained (and continues to remain) much more local than hip-hop, Club too found itself influenced by mainstream music's shift toward digitalization. The tone set by influential DJ Frank Ski on Baltimore's V-103 (WXYV FM) rapidly grew Club's popularity, even outside of Baltimore. Further, his personality and style took what originated as an LGBT scene and packaged it to a widely accessible heterosexual crowd.¹⁶⁷ In 1991, Ski released his breakout debut "Doo Doo Brown" thus

¹⁶⁵ See Discogs online record industry database, found online at <https://www.discogs.com/label/27576-Specialty-Records-Corporation>. Specialty pressed albums such as Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*, Snoop Dogg's *Doggystyle*, Wu-Tang Clan's *Protect Ya Neck*, M.C. Hammer's *U Can't Touch This*, Digital Underground's *Sex Packets*, and more.

¹⁶⁶ See Discogs online record industry database, found online at <https://www.discogs.com/label/27576-Specialty-Records-Corporation>.

¹⁶⁷ See SH Fernando, "Dance the Pain Away," *SPIN Magazine*, December 3, 2005, <https://www.spin.com/2005/12/dance-pain-away/>. Fernando quotes DJ Scottie B, attesting that "Frank made it cool to be into house", despite the genre's tough beginnings being shunned by the "macho rap" crowd.

creating the blueprint for Club's rhythm and style.¹⁶⁸ Ski's track, a remix of a 1989 edit of "C'mon Babe" by rap group 2 Live Crew, became the foundation of everything from Club's tempo to its overall style. "When Frank dropped that, it pretty much set the tone for what was gonna be goin' on as far as Club music," says Grant Burley, otherwise known as Club producer "Booman".¹⁶⁹ Not long after this release, DJs Scottie B and Caesar teamed up with Miss Tony, a local Baltimore Club staple mentioned in the previous chapter. This team recorded and released a twelve-inch single of Tony's "Whatz Up? Whatz Up?/ How You Wanna Carry It" in 1993, a record on which Tony chants "unruly, unruly, get busy".¹⁷⁰ This repetitive passage became associated with producers Scottie B and Shawn Caesar, thus helping popularize their business endeavor, Baltimore's first Club label, Unruly Records.¹⁷¹

While Unruly is significant in this achievement, it is even more noteworthy to this study in its continued production of singles on twelve-inch records. Between 1993 and '97, Unruly released over forty twelve-inches by local talent the likes of KW Griff, Jimmy Jones, Karizma, DJ Technics, and more.¹⁷² Discogs' online database notes that Unruly's latest record pressed to vinyl served as a compilation of several of the label's artists, pressed in 2009.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ "Doo Doo Brown" was released by Ski under the name of his group 2 Hyped Brothers & A Dog. Club artists note that while Club was formally developing in the late 1980s, Ski's track officially set the tone for future tracks that would define the genre.

¹⁶⁹ See SH Fernando, "Dance the Pain Away," *SPIN Magazine*, December 3, 2005.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ See Discogs online record industry database, found online at https://www.discogs.com/label/2150-Unruly-Records?sort=format&sort_order=asc.

¹⁷² See SH Fernando, "Dance the Pain Away."

¹⁷³ See Various, *My Crew Be Unruly 2*, Unruly Records, 2009, vinyl record (12"). Found online through Discogs database at <https://www.discogs.com/Various-My-Crew-Be-Unruly-2/release/1992844>

Like hip-hop, Baltimore Club relied heavily on vinyl's manipulability in order to use it in the clubs or on the radio. Club's "extreme local" mindset, mentioned in Chapter 1, also plays an important role here. Although Club never managed to achieve the same mainstream commercial success as hip-hop, it echoed the strategy used by hip-hop indie in New York to protect and preserve their local musical culture. Specifically, Club DJs and producers relied on people behind the scenes to advance the scene without sacrificing artistic integrity.

DJ Scottie B puts it this way. "The best feeling is when a record never hit, and it got old. And then a DJ made people like it, and you couldn't get it no more."¹⁷⁴ Scottie B speaks from experience, referencing his early days of DJing during Club's infancy. In the early 1990s, Scottie worked in record stores full time in conjunction with his nightly DJ sets. This served as a fairly useful combination, as it allowed Scottie to utilize the record store as his cultural filter for what his audiences wanted to hear.¹⁷⁵ An even greater perk came from his ability to personally curate which records made it onto the shelves, as well as the ones that made their way into hiding for his own DJ needs. He recalled that if "you (a DJ) had something that was on the down-low, you know we always hid that record. And we always didn't order another one. Or we might put a few of 'em in the back and

¹⁷⁴ See Tracy Stevens, Baltimore Basics: Interview with Scottie B, 2019, accessed on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXX4Y_xX0p4. Stevens is the owner of a local Baltimore business, Stray Ink LLC. Stevens put together a two-part series of interviews with DJ Scottie B, where he offers insight on his early days of Baltimore Club.

¹⁷⁵ See Tracy Stevens, Baltimore Basics: Interview with Scottie B. Scottie notes that he worked in several record stores, though the most influential distributor was Metro Stereo in Mondawmin Mall. Scottie B references Wu-Tang Clan's 1993 *Protect Ya Neck* as a record that was immediately popular within the hip-hop and Club communities, and that DJs were using it at the club regularly. He states that during his tenure of making orders for the record store, he first ordered ten, and they sold out instantly. Next, he ordered twenty-five. After they sold out, he realized that this was a special record that already integrated quickly into Baltimore night clubs.

hope that the owner of the record store didn't make the sweep."¹⁷⁶ The longer a mainstream record stayed unavailable to opposing DJs, the more opportunities presented themselves for a jockey that held onto that rare record to sample it on their own mixes.

Passing the Torch

By the late 1990s, Club experienced a troubling shift in its narrative, as the nature of Baltimore's music scene came into question. In an interview with online music magazine, *Pitchfork*, DJ Scottie B explains that by the shift of the new millennium, Club experienced a brief period of limbo in which the older generations did not enjoy it because it was being played on the radio, something that did not occur when Club began years earlier.¹⁷⁷ Scottie B continues that during the early days of Club, the music was "fresh" enough to come out for, and that people over twenty one would party with younger fans because the scene was so vibrant. As the years continued, Club became a marginal, obligatory 7:00pm slot on local station 92 Q (92.3FM). Much like hip-hop, the "mainstream effect" experienced by original Club tunes created a sense of irrelevance for listeners as major radio stations began to cycle the plateaued genre. At the turn of the millennium, however, a young up-and-coming Randallstown DJ surfaced to revive the scene.

Khia Edgerton, more popularly known as DJ K-Swift, emerged in the early 2000s after growing up immersed in Club culture. Before becoming known as the "Club Queen" known by seemingly all of Baltimore, Edgerton spent her formative years interning at

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ See "Standing Still: The Stagnant Life of Baltimore Club," *Pitchfork Magazine*, May 29, 2014, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/354-standing-still-the-stagnant-life-of-baltimore-club/>.

local hip-hop station 92.3FM, more commonly known as “92-Q”.¹⁷⁸ Upon K-Swift’s entrance to the Club scene, news of older Club fans’ detachment from the nightclub scene inspired her to repackaging the genre. Her solution came in the creation of a younger fanbase. Specifically high school-age children became Swift’s target audience, while simultaneously she attracted outsider attention from beyond city limits.

Swift represented a new class of Baltimore DJ, one that took Club out of crowded nightclubs and into the digital frontier. Edgerton shook the dust off of Club, forming her own company, Club Queen Entertainment, all the while demanding respect and ownership of her music. Party promoter Buck Jones recalled his early days with Swift, explaining that every week she would say to him “Make sure you pump my name up” due to people believing that it wasn’t truly her behind the turntables.¹⁷⁹ As mentioned in Chapter One, Swift’s gender acted as a significant factor in the Club scene. The irony of the genre made popular by the LGBT crowd amidst a largely male, homophobic audience is significant. For K-Swift, however, she remained steadfast regarding her rightful place on the throne.

The Club renaissance during K-Swift’s reign seemed to be at its peak, as she welcomed larger crowds and even went on to play larger venues in the city.¹⁸⁰ In 2008 however, the Baltimore Club scene experienced an immeasurable loss following her

¹⁷⁸ See Al Shipley, “Sex in This Club: Gender and Sexuality in Baltimore Club Music,” *Words. Beats. Life: The Global Journal of Hip-Hop Culture* 4, no. 3 (2010): 44.

¹⁷⁹ See Al Shipley, “Sex in This Club: Gender and Sexuality in Baltimore Club Music,” *Words. Beats. Life: The Global Journal of Hip-Hop Culture* 4, no. 3 (2010): 45. Jones worked with Edgerton on so many occasions that people frequently thought *he* was K-Swift, not the woman in the DJ-booth.

¹⁸⁰ See “Standing Still: The Stagnant Life of Baltimore Club.” Local DJ and party promoter corroborates Swift’s growing popularity, and attributes it largely to Swift playing with Portland-based DJ Jason Urick, better known as “Thrill Jockey”. Cullen notes that Swift’s popularity grew as she began playing in front of “white, Indie crowds”.

untimely death. At just twenty-nine years old, Khia Edgerton died in a tragic accident at her home in which she dove head-first into her pool during a party, incurring neck injuries that caused her to drown.¹⁸¹ Certainly catastrophic in its own right, this event represented an even larger loss to Club as it occurred just hours after she headlined Baltimore's Artscape Festival, making history by performing with international DJ Diplo.¹⁸²

The death of K-Swift created a cloud under which Baltimore and its Club culture remained. In the years following Swift's death, Baltimore witnessed local talent like DJ Blaqstarr and Rye Rye take up the mantle, even working with Diplo and his wife, artist M.I.A.¹⁸³ The genre developed into an even more digital-friendly style, and even includes more sampling of sounds not traditionally noted as "Club".¹⁸⁴ In the years since, Blaqstarr moved from locally-owned and operated Unruly Records (the same label that put out K-Swift's first records) to Diplo's *Mad Decent*. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, he continued to make records, though they were released as CDs, mix-tape CDs, or MP3 files.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ See Sam Sessa, "DJ K-Swift Is Dead," *The Baltimore Sun*, July 21, 2008, https://www.baltimoresun.com/bs-mtblog-2008-07-dj_kswift_is_dead-story.html.

¹⁸² See Brittany Britto and Wesley Case, "Still the Club Queen: Baltimore DJ K-Swift's Legacy Lives on, 10 Years after Her Death," *The Baltimore Sun*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/music/bs-fe-k-swift-10-years-later-20180712-htmlstory.html>.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ See Brittany Britto and Wesley Case, "Still the Club Queen: Baltimore DJ K-Swift's Legacy Lives on, 10 Years after Her Death," *The Baltimore Sun*, July 20, 2018. DJ Blaqstarr notes that in developing the genre further, he wanted to "stay open so that I could do all that I imagined I could do. Club music isn't limited. I can play a harp or a guitar to Club without having it seen as sampling a cartoon or a snare and kick."

¹⁸⁵ See Discogs online record industry database, found online at <https://www.discogs.com/artist/466983-Blaqstarr>

According to this database, the first and last twelve inch put out by Blaqstarr was his 2006 self-titled debut for Unruly.

For the Record: Hip-Hop and Club Significance in the Digital Age

The music industry during the 1990s-2000s saw a tremendous shift in how average listeners consumed music. Unlike the 1980s when the industry witnessed its first wave of digitalization, this period witnessed an even wider gap between analog technologies and mainstream music consumers. The significance of vinyl culture during the 1990s and 2000s revolves around its physicality, not unlike the decade that preceded this period. However, while vinyl's use in the 1980s can be attributed to the reliance of new genres of music during their formative years, the same cannot be said for the transition into the new millennium.

The aforementioned shift of the music industry from CDs to MP3 file sharing at the end of the twentieth century represented a monumental change in how people listened to and consumed music. While consumers shifted from vinyl records to cassette tapes and CDs during what Bartmanski and Woodward call the "first wave of digitalization", this shift did not fundamentally change how people obtained their music. Essentially, consumers still visited a music store, or an even larger "chain" department store to browse and purchase a physical good. While the format changed, the materiality of a physical commodity used to listen to music did not. This first wave of changes affected a listener's *portability* of their goods, though ultimately many other factors remained constant.

The key element in the second "wave of digitalization" comes from music's transformation from a physical commodity toward an intangible good. This is visible in almost every stage of music production during the digital age through a lack of *ritual*, or

reproductive function.¹⁸⁶ Regarding a material's ritual, whether you are a music listener, producer, distributor, etc. does not matter. The substance comes from vinyl's role in human enjoyment from the manipulability of the good- in this case, a vinyl record. For example, a DJ's set traditionally includes a careful curation and selection of records to play in a particular environment. This DJ knows exactly which records are useful in this environment, and further, how to manipulate them physically (and digitally) in order to solicit the best response from an audience. Every action taken by the DJ from this point is part of a ritual: the selection and placement in a crate with other records to removing each record at the proper time, physically dropping the needle onto the record, manipulating the record via engagement with its rotation on the turntable, handling the mixer to adjust the placement of faders. The entire process reveals a behavior second nature to the jockey, one that German DJ Wolfgang Voigt compares to a more daily ritual. He notes that "...you don't want to download your food," offering his perspective on why he prefers vinyl when playing a set.¹⁸⁷

Bartmanski and Woodward note that an artifact's ritual, particularly in the case of vinyl, is not judged by its portability or practicality, but rather its aesthetics and entwinements as an object. In other words, an object's ease of access might actually affect its value and meaning in a negative way.¹⁸⁸ For example, the ritual experienced by

¹⁸⁶ See Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 29. The pair actually go as far as comparing the use of vinyl by music listeners and DJs to a sexual experience, in that your muscle memory and knowledge of a familiar practice result in a "pleasurable act".

¹⁸⁷ See Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age*, 30. Voigt claims that vinyl has the most "sexual credibility, if you like. It's touchy, warm, it has the biggest, most impressive history in pop music." He continues by stating that "...as far as MP3, I think it will never have a history, not for me."

¹⁸⁸ See Dominik Bartmanski, Ian Woodward, "Vinyl Record: A Cultural Icon," *Consumption Markets and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2018) 173.

DJs begins with the practice of digging for vinyl, carefully incorporating the proper tracks into a desired set, and then implementing that set record into the set where he/she will manipulate the physical record based on the needs of the audience for which the DJ performs. This notion is corroborated by several DJs in the digital age who choose to utilize vinyl amidst the accessibility of advanced technology. Sydney, Australia DJ John Devecchis claims that “...It’s almost like the art of DJing has changed to engineering, and you’ll be an engineer DJing, and that for me is not using your ear to pick the tracks to play...it’s engineering to a crowd.”¹⁸⁹ While almost all jockeys agree that the use of CDs and MP3’s played through a laptop is more accessible, the idea of “laptop” sets did not appeal to all. Robert Gorham, better known as DJ Rob da Bank, confirms this notion. Gorham, who also founded UK festival “Bestival”, states that DJs increasingly request vinyl decks to perform at the festival each year. He even claimed to be incorporating “vinyl-only” sets into the festival’s future, stating that DJs often forget “all the things you can do with vinyl”.¹⁹⁰ This claim is corroborated by Felicia Miyakawa who argues that even before the digital era, DJs fought for respect as “turntablists”, or musicians that use turntables and records as their instrument. This ultimately came from a desire to be recognized as legitimate musicians, avant-garde trailblazers in the face of traditional art.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ See Ed Montano, “‘You’re Not A Real DJ Unless You Play Vinyl’ – Technology And Formats – The Progression Of Dance Music And DJ Culture,” *Journal on the Art of Record Production*, no. 03 (November 2008), available at <http://arpjournal.com/%E2%80%98you%E2%80%99re-not-a-real-dj-unless-you-play-vinyl%E2%80%99%E2%80%93-technology-and-formats-%E2%80%93-the-progression-of-dance-music-and-dj-culture/>.

¹⁹⁰ See Jennifer Otter Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, 2017, 84.

¹⁹¹ See Felicia Miyakawa, “Turntablature: Notation Legitimization and the Art of the Hip Hop DJ,” *American Music* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 82. Miyakawa notes in her study that DJs often rely on written notations and actual names for DJ techniques like the “crab” or “flare”.

When analyzing vinyl's material culture significance through the specific lens of New York hip-hop and Baltimore Club, it is clear that both communities used record culture as a way to hold onto their own local identity amidst the mainstream's seizure of talented artists. 1990s and early 2000s hip-hop and Club artists aforementioned in this chapter used vinyl and its associated culture as a way to maintain ties within their communities. Not unlike the Bronx natives who turned to hip-hop as a way to reclaim their space and culture, New Yorkers and Baltimoreans largely felt compelled during this second wave of digitalization to safeguard their talents from corporate interests. By investing in vinyl culture, these artists made music representative *of* their communities and distributed it to people *in* those communities. Coast rapper XCel, half of hip-hop duo Blackalicious, puts it this way. "No matter what happens with technology, there will always be a record that you do not have. I can go to a warehouse somewhere in Florida and go 'Damn, this church made this private pressing of two hundred records just for their congregation.' For me, that's what drives the thrill of discovery. It's finding those things that never got gobbled up by the conglomerates."¹⁹²

When big business became interested in hip-hop, or as Jeff Chang puts it, "climbed aboard the urban, multi-cultural gravy train", it sent a warning signal to people of color who felt hip-hop's exploitation was inevitable.¹⁹³ The practice of continuing to embrace vinyl culture during a period of major industry transformation served a dual-purpose. First, it kept hip-hop and Club's process pure. The relatively young lifespan of both genres allowed DJs and artists to maintain practices like digging for records and

¹⁹² See Jennifer Otter Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, 2017, 57.

¹⁹³ See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, 443. Chang notes that during this time, historian Robin D.G. Kelley and Vijay Prashad believed that the idea of "multiculturalism" had been co-opted by the state and capitalism at large.

spinning vinyl, even pressing new singles into twelve-inch records to play at nightclubs or on the radio. Second, it kept hip-hop and Club “invitation-only” events. In other words, despite the rising commercial success, hip-hop and Club DJs could express their cultural ingenuity without fear of being taken over by outsiders.

Though the dawn of the twenty-first century brought significant tribulations for the music industry, it further solidified people’s need for constant access to immense libraries of music. As the second wave of digitalization transformed into what this study will conveniently refer to as a “third wave”, physical music sales hit an all-time low. The era of music streaming beginning in the late 2000s brought forth an age of which consumers always dreamed- unlimited access to seemingly infinite libraries of music. Somehow vinyl records managed to resurface in a way no one thought possible. By the early 2000s, the same material factors responsible for vinyl’s survival during the shift to the digital age paved the way for its triumphant revival.

Chapter Three: Renaissance Records

“I’m listening to Spotify all the time and pulling in different things. I might find an artist or a song that I like and I’ll pull that into playlists and then you’ll find related artists. But I like an album as a nostalgic thing; I remember buying albums and getting into the whole thing. So I guess, just don’t fight it.”

- Greg Kurstin on streaming versus vinyl (2014)

The twenty-first century digital revolution shattered expectations regarding human consumption. If a program like Napster or its subsequent legal successor, iTunes, taught the music industry anything, it was this: The digital world created a new type of consumer that wanted goods immediately, even if it meant not paying for them. By 2002, upon Napster’s termination, Swedish entrepreneur Daniel Ek claimed that “I realized that you can never legislate away from piracy. Laws can definitely help, but it doesn’t take away the problem”.¹⁹⁴ Surely enough, Ek was right. According to a report conducted for the RIAA by the Institute for Policy Innovation (IPI), the music industry lost \$5.3 billion dollars as a result of piracy in 2005.¹⁹⁵ When Ek thought more about the issue, he believed that the only way to truly prevent piracy was to create an experience that consumers felt was better than piracy, while at the same time compensating the music industry. By 2006, he imagined a way to fulfill both of these requirements. He incorporated a technology company with a new business associate, former co-founder of Swedish company TradeDoubler, Martin Lorentzon.¹⁹⁶ The pair worked together in 2008

¹⁹⁴ See Rupert Neate, “Daniel Ek: ‘Spotify Will Be Worth Tens of Billions,’” *The Daily Telegraph*, February 17, 2010, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/mediatechnologyandtelecoms/media/7259509/Daniel-Ek-profile-Spotify-will-be-worth-tens-of-billions.html>.

¹⁹⁵ See Stephen Siwek, “The True Cost of Sound Recording Piracy to the U.S. Economy,” *Institute for Policy Innovation* 188 (August 2007)

¹⁹⁶ See Reuters, “Spotify Subscriptions Boost Revenue But Operating Loss Widens,” *Fortune*, May 24, 2016, <https://fortune.com/2016/05/24/spotify-revenue-up-operating-loss-widens/>.

to convince music industry executives of their new business model, one where labels would make their valuable music available for rent, rather than for purchase. Though cautious, several of these executives agreed. By October of 2008, the first public version of the program launched in Europe under the name “Spotify”.¹⁹⁷

Slyer than Pirates

While chapters one and two traced the persistence of vinyl records through the music industry shift toward digital technologies, this chapter focuses again on vinyl’s persistence amidst shifts in the music industry. More notably, however, it focuses on vinyl’s *resurgence*, or ability to return after virtual extinction, in the 2010s amidst the rising popularity of new digital mediums. Specifically, this chapter explores the factors responsible for vinyl’s return to cultural relevance during this period, as made evident by increased sales of vinyl records. Additionally, this chapter raises the additional question of whether vinyl’s resurgence differed from its persistence, as discussed in Chapters One and Two. Again, this question becomes easier to answer by first analyzing the two communities who helped exemplify vinyl’s persistence into the twenty-first century: the hip-hop and Club music scenes.

Once again utilizing terms coined by Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward’s work *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age*, this chapter discusses vinyl’s whereabouts in the second “wave of digitalization”. This wave is characterized by the proliferation of increased digital music sales, followed by another industry transition toward subscription-based music streaming services. This chapter argues that the

¹⁹⁷ See Maria Eriksson et al., *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 45.

development of these new digital subscription services served as the driving force behind vinyl's resurgence in the twenty-first century. Additionally, this chapter will return to the hip-hop and Club communities amidst their global success to demonstrate how the scenes' cyclical nature further contributed to DJs spinning vinyl in a digital world.

Spotify initially developed its brand under the pretense that it could reel the music industry back from its newest fad- the digital single. Before discussing Spotify or music streaming, it is important to first understand the context in which Ek's platform existed. Beginning in April 2003, technology behemoth Apple introduced its iTunes Music Store. The digital marketplace served as the legal solution to the question everyone asked following the aftermath of the 2001 Napster suit- "Where do we download music now?"

In the months leading up to iTunes' release, Apple CEO Steve Jobs pitched an idea not unlike the aforementioned concept posed to label executives by Spotify's Daniel Ek. He persisted tirelessly in his efforts to convince labels to license their massive music catalogs for online use, even telling cynical executives that their heads were "stuck up their asses" when not in agreement with his vision.¹⁹⁸ His crusade ended with Apple initially offering their catalog of music to anyone willing to purchase songs. Of course, iTunes paired seamlessly with Apple's proprietary music listening device, the iPod. For ten dollars, a listener could purchase an entire album of music to play on their iPod. However, the more popular option manifested in the option to purchase a single off of

¹⁹⁸ See Steve Knopper, "Steve Jobs' Music Vision," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, October 7, 2011, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/steve-jobs-music-vision-235915/>. Knopper elaborates that Time Warner vice president Kevin Gage visited Jobs at Apple's Cupertino, California location and attempted to convince him that digital songs needed some sort of a "virtual lock" that would make Jobs' vision more feasible, thus ending in Jobs' tirade.

that album for ninety-nine cents.¹⁹⁹ With the music industry in tow, Apple was certain to make a fortune.

From its inception in 2001, the iPod served as a major asset for Apple. Once it paired with the iTunes digital marketplace in 2003, Apple became synonymous with music. The company's stocks sky-rocketed, and by all accounts, economists could project a big boom for the music industry. Unfortunately, while times were excellent for Apple, the music industry witnessed a less-than-favorable experience during this period. Where Walkmans resulted in the industry sale of tens of millions of tapes, or Sony's Discman resulted in the sales of tens of millions of CDs, Apple's iPod did not bear such profitable fruit. Author Stephen Witt puts it this way. "...doing the math, the success of the MP3 player should have meant tens, no hundreds of millions in sales of MP3s. In fact, ten million iPods sold in stores should have meant ten billion songs sold through iTunes."²⁰⁰ The problem for the industry, Witt continues, is that Apple's iPod became popularly used as a device to harbor pirated songs. Furthermore, the legal precedent set by the aforementioned 1999 *RIAA v. Diamond* decision offered the industry no relief. By the standard set in this case, the iPod was not a recording device, but rather a glorified hard drive in which listeners could pack hundreds of songs to take with them anywhere.²⁰¹ Nevertheless, the iPod fundamentally altered the way in which people consumed music, taking what was once underground and making it mainstream.

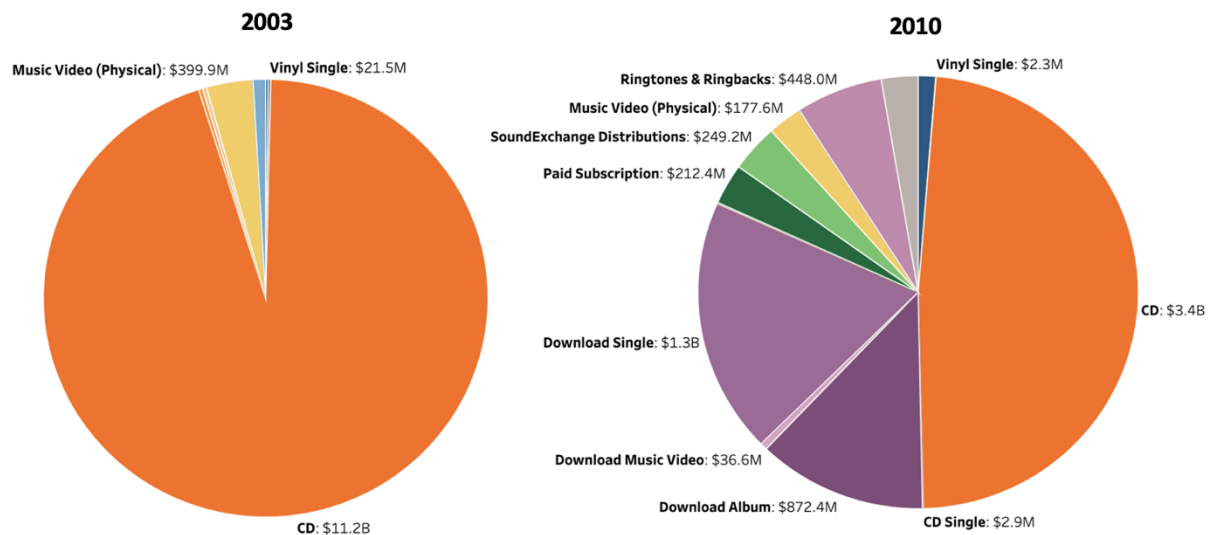
¹⁹⁹ See Adrian Covert, "A Decade of iTunes Singles Killed the Music Industry," *CNN Money*, April 25, 2013, <https://money.cnn.com/2013/04/25/technology/itunes-music-decline/index.html>.

²⁰⁰ See Stephen Witt, *How Music Got Free: The End of an Industry, the Turn of the Century, and the Patient Zero of Piracy* (New York: Viking, 2015) 192.

²⁰¹ Ibid, Witt continues that Universal Music executive Doug Morris, who signed off on the licensing deal to bring Universal's catalog to Apple, later publicly cursed the agreement and publicly vented that he'd received the short end of the deal.

Witt's claim that Apple's iPod vastly underperformed with regard to music sales can be corroborated by RIAA sales data from this period. As made evident in Figure 3.1 below, a drastic shift in music sales took place in a fairly short amount of time. Beginning in 2003 with the launch of iTunes, physical music sales still dominated the industry, accounting for \$11.2 billion in sales, or 94.8% of total industry revenue. By 2010, the music industry witnessed a major diversification of formats regarding mediums through which to listen to music. At this time, downloaded singles and albums combined to constitute \$2.17 billion in sales, a meager 31.5% of total industry revenue.

Figure 3.1: U.S. Recorded Music Revenues by Format²⁰²



²⁰² A comprehensive revenue guide can be found using the database found through the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) with breakdowns by year and format. Please see <https://www.riaa.com/u-s-sales-database/>.

It is important to note that by Witt's logic, digital music sales should have far exceeded the figures noted above. In fact, iPod sales peaked in 2008 with a record high 54.8 million units sold, constituting roughly 25% of Apple's total revenue that year.²⁰³ Why then, did the music industry not experience similar success? The answer came in the iPod's user-friendly ability to store songs not purchased through iTunes. In the years following Apple's successful venture into digital music, several stakeholders wondered if the music industry was beyond repair. After all, iTunes and its complimentary hardware certainly benefited Apple, but what about the artists? What about the label executives? What did the future of the industry really look like? To answer this question, we return to the creation of Ek's new company, Spotify.

The Right Place at the Right Time

Although Daniel Ek claimed Spotify would solve the crisis of digital music piracy, the company did not execute perfectly from its inception. Maria Eriksson et. al argue in their comprehensive exploration of Spotify that the service is not a company "guided by entrepreneurial vision" with regard to linear development. Instead, they refer to the company as a "shape-shifting" service...that constantly adjusted, if not entirely changed its main strategies and goals".²⁰⁴ In other words, Spotify acted as a chameleon, taking on whatever form was required in order to garner success in the music world. To Daniel Ek, a subscription-based service stood as the only potential competitor to the

²⁰³ See Felix Richter, "Infographic: Apple iPod's Contribution To The Company's Revenue Since 2002," *International Business Times*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.ibtimes.com/infographic-apple-ipods-contribution-companys-revenue-2002-2796171>. IBT explains using a graphic generated by Statista that while 2008 represented Apple's record for units sold, iPods represented the largest share of total revenue in the year 2006, when they constituted roughly 40% of the company's total revenue.

²⁰⁴ See Maria Eriksson et al., *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019)

digital singles market created by iTunes. In 2012, iTunes constituted 64% of all digital music sales and 29% of all music sold at retail.²⁰⁵ What made Apple so formidable to outsiders trying to cash in on digital music? The answer indeed involved the company's innovative success, though in its hardware rather than the iTunes program itself. Once iTunes arrived at consumers' fingertips, Apple already had an army of loyalists waiting to engage the new program. The result manifested in the iPod's massive commercial profitability, followed by the previously mentioned issue of digital piracy.

Despite Apple's success, it did not exist uncontested. In fact, their largest competition actually came from Spotify's precursors, streaming services Rhapsody and Pandora. Adrian Covert argues that Rhapsody largely attempted to compete with iTunes, though simply at the wrong time. "Crucially, their files weren't designed for use on the iPod, let alone most other MP3 players."²⁰⁶ He continues that without the iPod, digital music stores were seemingly innocuous. He even argues that had digital singles existed ten years earlier, the entire trajectory of the music industry almost certainly would have shifted. However, the timeliness of Apple's "... magical combination of buying a song and instantly taking it with you anywhere gave music lovers a good reason to ditch the CD."²⁰⁷

The triumph of Apple's iPod presents an interesting chapter in the story of vinyl's resurgence in the 2010s. While the company itself had nothing to do with the early signs

²⁰⁵ See National Purchase Diary Panel Inc, "iTunes Continues To Dominate Music Retailing, But Nearly 60 Percent of iTunes Music Buyers Also Use Pandora," News release, September 18, 2012. <https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-releases/itunes-continues-to-dominate-music-retailing-but-nearly-60-percent-of-itunes-music-buyers-also-use-pandora/>

²⁰⁶ See Adrian Covert, "A Decade of iTunes Singles Killed the Music Industry," *CNN Money*, April 25, 2013, <https://money.cnn.com/2013/04/25/technology/itunes-music-decline/index.html>.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

of a comeback for records, it inadvertently set the stage through enough implementation of the Apple iTunes store. By the late 2000s and early 2010s, iPods were synonymous with music to the degree that various home stereos and even alarm clocks were manufactured with docks specifically to fit the device. The unintended consequences of Apple's labor came in the form of masses of consumers willing to purchase sometimes multiple iPods based on how much music they believed they could pirate from the internet.²⁰⁸ Ultimately, I contend that music pirates at this time constituted one of the first digital listening *communities* responsible for the resurgence of vinyl, mentioned later in this chapter.

To imagine an alternate history in which streaming services like Rhapsody or Pandora (which entered the consumer market in 2001 and 2004 respectively) could have commercially contended with the likes of Apple's iTunes is not the purpose of this study, though the “what-if” opportunities are enticing. The most significant implication from this moment in the music industry, however, comes from its technological causes and effects. Apple's iPod effectively served as a vessel upon which the music industry travelled across a river. On one side of the river lay the tangible industry, ripe with commercially superior CDs that cost almost nothing to produce and generated billions for the industry. On the other side of the river lived intangible music, with MP3 files infinitely duplicable though rough on profits. From its inception, the music industry of the 2010s looked foreign to all parties- consumers, producers, and distributors. The

²⁰⁸ See Tin Cheuk Leung, “Music Piracy: Bad for Record Sales But Good for the iPod?”, *Information Economics and Policy* 31 (June 2015): 7-12, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoecopol.2015.04.001>. Leung conducted a survey of students in which he offered them the choice of purchasing songs or illegally downloading through a P2P network. His findings included enough revenue generated solely in iPod sales that he even suggested the implementation of an iPod sales tax of 6.5% to recover musicians' lost revenue due to piracy.

industry most certainly had turned upside down. Strangest of all, this period represented the first consistent increase in sales of vinyl records since 1977.²⁰⁹

Although the first public version of Spotify launched in 2008, the service already existed in a beta-mode, or “invite-only” operation for associates of the founders. Interestingly enough, this service that Ek created to combat digital piracy did not actually possess any music licenses during this time. This meant that in many cases, the music listened to by these initial users originated through various sites, ironically from file-sharing networks like The Pirate Bay.²¹⁰ In other words, the “launch” of Spotify was not really a launch at all, but rather a “legalization” of the service since its transition from the beta phase. The result of this shift came in the form of users losing several of the songs carefully added to their personal playlists through the program. Spotify was forced during this time to remove any songs for which the program did not have the proper license.²¹¹ Naturally, Spotify’s “launch” quickly turned into an effort to monetize the service Ek previously claimed would be free for listeners.

Spotify’s development over the following year proved formative not only for the company, but for the culture surrounding how people would consume goods by the 2010s. The company itself did not create music, but rather depended upon labels and artists to provide the art for Spotify to curate and distribute. In an October 2009 post on Spotify’s official blog, Ek reflected on this idea by writing the following: “I care more than most about figuring out a revenue model that doesn’t devalue music...” He humbly

²⁰⁹See again the database found through the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) with breakdowns by year and format found online at <https://www.riaa.com/u-s-sales-database/>.

²¹⁰ See Maria Eriksson et al., *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music*, 45.

²¹¹ Ibid. Some record companies went even further, passing county-specific listening restrictions on certain parts of the world.

continues, noting that “I would say the biggest mistake I’ve made [since Spotify’s inception] is that Spotify, unlike any of the other businesses I’ve been a part of, depends on our partners (artists, composers, labels, etc.) and I haven’t always acted with this fact at the forefront of my mind.”²¹² By the next year, Spotify dialed into the rhythm of the music industry amidst its discovery of a business model capable of surviving the so-called “Great Recession” of 2008-2009. The new model included a subscription for seemingly infinite amounts of any product, and proved through television services like Netflix that they were bear-market-proof.²¹³ Despite Ek’s original claims regarding Spotify’s nature and significance, the company morphed into what author Nick Srnicek calls a *product platform*. In other words, Spotify became a company that generates revenue by transforming a traditional good [music] into a service for which it collects a fee or subscription.²¹⁴

Over the course of the 2010s, Spotify’s popularity grew at an exponential rate as the music-streaming company morphed into an entire platform complete with Google and

²¹² See Maria Eriksson et al., *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music*, 49. Eriksson notes that Ek’s post “should not be read as a personal blog post directed at a general audience”, but rather served as a public demonstration of remorse in a tactical move following a discussion with investors who just agreed to provide Spotify with a second round of capital to stay afloat.

²¹³ See Hosch, W. L. “Netflix.” Encyclopedia Britannica, November 9, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Netflix-Inc>. Hosch notes that after Netflix was founded in 1999, the company experienced several changes to its platform before settling on its current status as a streaming-only site for movies and television shows. Initially generating revenue as a company that rented out physical DVD movies and video games, Netflix transitioned to a streaming-only model first in Canada and Latin America in 2010, and in the United States by 2012.

²¹⁴ See Nick Srnicek and Laurent De Sutter, *Platform Capitalism, Theory Redux* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 49. Srnicek and De Sutter break down modern business into what they deem five “platforms”. These include advertising, cloud, industrial, product, and lean platforms. Despite their claims that Spotify is a product platform, I believe the company also fits, at least in part, into their description of an advertising platform, which they define as one that extracts information on users, undertakes hours of labor analysis, and uses this data to sell ad space. Depending on how you define “ad space”, one could argue that Spotify’s curation of playlists based on listeners’ habits generates “ad space” in that listeners are more susceptible to listen to, and perhaps purchase, work from a previously unknown artist.

Facebook integration. By July 2011, Spotify garnered enough attention (and capital) to launch in the United States.²¹⁵ After comparison to veteran streaming service Pandora, which generated randomized playlists based on similar artists, Spotify began implementing music recommendations through its platform. By 2015, the platform posed a large enough threat to the music industry to force tech-giant Apple to found its own service, Apple Music.²¹⁶ However, from the perspective of the producers and artists responsible for the music, this new industry did not seem as profitable as the pre-streaming days.

Though Spotify's platform felt new and exciting, artists like Taylor Swift, Adele, and several others actively condemned streaming as they felt their art was being devalued.²¹⁷ As a result, these artists initially withheld the rights to their music, instead encouraging the sale of their *physical* albums, particularly CDs and vinyl.²¹⁸ Swift explained that the music industry "changed so quickly that everything new, like Spotify, feels like a grand experiment...that I don't feel fairly compensates the writers, producers, artists, and creators of this music."²¹⁹ While Spotify proved intensely convenient for consumers during the 2010s, the reality of its revenue stream did not directly benefit artists or even record labels. For example, the contract signed between Spotify and Sony

²¹⁵ See Mike Butcher, "Breaking: Spotify Announces Impending US Launch (Really)," *Tech Crunch*, July 6, 2011, <https://techcrunch.com/2011/07/06/breaking-spotify-announces-impending-us-launch-really/>.

²¹⁶ See Brian X. Chen, "Apple Music Is Unveiled, Along With Operating System Upgrades," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2015, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/09/technology/apple-wwdc-2015.html>.

²¹⁷ See Charlotte Hassan, "Reasons Why Some Artists Absolutely Hate Spotify...," *Digital Music News* (blog), March 21, 2016, <https://www.digitalmusicnews.com/2016/03/21/why-artists-pull-their-music-from-spotify-but-not-youtube/>.

²¹⁸ Taylor Swift, for example, withheld her music from streaming platforms from 2014 to 2017.

²¹⁹ Chris Willman, "Taylor Swift on Being Pop's Instantly Platinum Wonder... And Why She's Paddling Against the Streams," *Yahoo! Music* (blog), November 6, 2014, [Taylor Swift on Being Pop's Instantly Platinum Wonder... And Why She's Paddling Against the Streams](#). In an interview with Willman, Taylor Swift

Music in 2011 allowed Spotify to pay a minimum of \$0.00225 per stream of a Sony-owned track.²²⁰ For major acts like Taylor Swift, she and her record label enjoyed a larger profit from physical sales, as their price reflects production, manufacturing, packaging, distribution, etc.

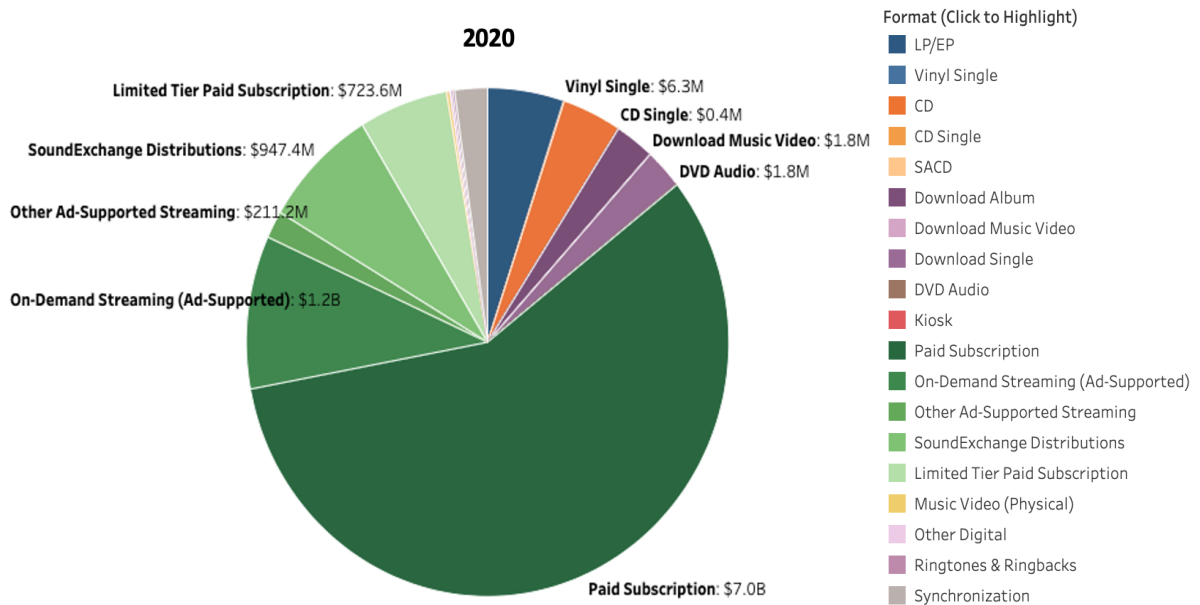
By the decade's midpoint, music listeners held access to a virtually endless catalog of songs in the palm of their hands. To the average consumer, music became another integrated subscription in the newly saturated market of digital commodities. Spotify, which originally prided itself on helping users explore new music, began implementing new features called "Discover Weekly" and "Release Radar" on Mondays and Fridays respectively. These features pushed out new weekly playlists of artists and songs based on new data-driven algorithms and listening habits. By this time, even music discovery became a schedule-specific, data-based act.²²¹ In just a few short years, Spotify single-handedly disrupted the music industry in that consumers no longer had to seek out music based on their tastes. Instead, personalized playlists and recommendations emerged as the new normal for listeners. It is worth noting in Figure 3.2 below that at the time of this study (Spring 2021), paid music subscriptions constitute seven billion dollars, or 57.7% of total revenue, for the music industry.²²² This does not account for the limited-tier paid subscriptions or free versions (sometimes referred to as "free-mium" subscription models) that only allow limited use of the platform until a listener upgrades to the paid version.

²²⁰ See Ramadan Aly-Tovar et al., "Why Would Artists Favor Free Streaming?," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 44, no. 2 (June 2020): 261, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-019-09358-z>.

²²¹ See Maria Eriksson et al., *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music*, 67.

²²² Based on 2020 data, the most current data set at the time of this publication.

Figure 3.2: U.S. Recorded Music Revenues by Format²²³



The numbers shown in the figure above represent the current status of the music industry, and further raises the essential question of vinyl’s persistence and resurgence throughout yet another music industry transformation into the new world of paid subscription services. To adequately answer this question, one can again return to the hip-hop and Club music scenes to assess their role in this phenomenon. Both communities impacted the state of the twenty-first century music business through various means, both commercially and artistically. As a result, increasing numbers of music listeners decided to engage in a medium thought to be obsolete for decades, ultimately setting the stage for a vinyl record renaissance.

²²³ A comprehensive revenue guide can be found using the database found through the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) with breakdowns by year and format. Please see <https://www.riaa.com/u-s-sales-database/>.

What Goes Around Comes Around

By the 2010s, both hip-hop and Club music transcended the regional boundaries drawn during their formative years. Hip-hop, which began as a local “fad” dismissed by naysayers, suddenly bore the responsibility of the definitive trailblazer in pop culture. Club caught the attention of international superstar DJs, who utilized its blueprint to achieve global success. The parties responsible for bestowing rap’s first-ever Grammy Award upon DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince for their 1989 hit “Parents Just Don’t Understand” watched as Queens native LL Cool J hosted the ceremony for the second-highest-rated Grammys ceremony in telecast history in 2012.²²⁴ Five years later, LL Cool J became the Kennedy Center’s first hip-hop honoree in 2017.²²⁵ Clearly, hip-hop transformed from a regional expression of culture into a centralized pillar of American music and popular culture. A microcosm of the music industry itself, hip-hop and Club in the 2010s represented a new digital, limitless world order.

The 2017 Nielsen Soundscan year-end report revealed a major milestone, announcing that beginning in July, hip-hop became music’s most-consumed genre for the remainder of the year.²²⁶ This year’s report held additional significance, as it represented

²²⁴ See Soren Baker, “The 2010s: Another Decade of Hip-Hop Dominance,” *Flood Magazine*, November 26, 2019, <https://floodmagazine.com/71765/the-2010s-another-decade-of-hip-hop-dominance/> and Los Angeles Times Staff, “Grammys History and Winners through the Years,” *latimes.com*, January 28, 2015. <http://timelines.latimes.com/grammy-awards/>. It is worth noting that in 2005, Queen Latifah served as hip-hop’s first Grammy host during the 47th Annual Grammy Awards, and that LL Cool J continued to host the awards from 2012 to 2016.

²²⁵ See The Kennedy Center artist profile for LL Cool J, found online at <https://www.kennedy-center.org/artists/c/co-cz/ll-cool-j/>.

²²⁶ See Nielsen Music, “2017 Year-End Music Report” (Nielsen, 2017), 9. <https://www.nielsen.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/04/2017-year-end-music-report-us.pdf>. Nielsen Soundscan offers a downloadable, digital report of its year-end statistics and data through its website, available online through the “Insights” tab.

another shifting trend in the music industry. For the twelfth consecutive year, vinyl records experienced sales growth, and even comprised 14% of all physical album sales, an all-time Nielsen high. These numbers, while significant in their own right, represented a direct relationship between vinyl records and the communities surrounding Club and hip-hop music. The same factors which helped the culture of vinyl persist through three waves of digitalization are the same factors responsible for vinyl records' resurgence in the 2010s. Further, the very communities responsible for vinyl's persistence, the Club and hip-hop communities, bear a significant amount of responsibility for that resurgence.

The aforementioned growth of hip-hop beginning at the turn of the twenty-first century can largely be attributed to its commercialization beginning in the 1990s. The monopolization of media outlets, as well as further innovations in telecasting and the internet broadcasted hip-hop to a larger audience. Beginning with the first hip-hop song ever featured on MTV, Run-DMC's 1984 hit "Rock Box", America progressively gravitated toward hip-hop and other aspects of black music and culture.²²⁷ This progress certainly did not happen quickly, as MTV for example tended to neglect the feature of black artists until their hands were forced by popular demand in 1983 following Michael Jackson's *Thriller* music video.²²⁸ However, by the 2010s rap and hip-hop dominated the music industry, often teaming up with pop musicians to develop chart-topping hits on a

²²⁷ See Mimi Adams, *Vh1 Rock Docs: Yo! The Story of Yo! MTV Raps*, Television Film (Vh1 Productions, 2012). Hip-hop journalist Dan Charnas is prominently featured in this film and argues that the only way Rock Box even appeared on MTV was because of its satirical nature toward rock and roll, involving heavy mimicking of the genre.

²²⁸ See Andy Greene, "Flashback: David Bowie Rips Into MTV for Not Spotlighting Black Artists," *Rolling Stone* (blog), June 14, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/david-bowie-rips-into-mtv-for-not-spotlighting-black-artists-62335/>. In a televised interview with MTV representative Mark Goodman, David Bowie outwardly asks why the program does not feature black artists in prime time. While Michael Jackson's name is not explicitly mentioned in this interview, this was the same year he released music videos for "Thriller" and "Billie Jean", an act that many have claimed broke the "color barrier" for the television program.

regular basis. Data found in the previously mentioned 2017 Nielsen Soundscan report supports this claim. Seven of the “Top Ten Artists” included hip-hop acts such as Drake, Kendrick Lamar, Future, Eminem, Lil Uzi Vert, The Weeknd, and Post Malone. The top ten artists ranked by “On-Demand streams” only included one artist *not* under the hip-hop umbrella.²²⁹ Clearly hip-hop reached new heights acting as the newest cash cow for the music industry.

While the argument that hip-hop reached a level of influence with which no other genre contended seems hyperbolic, the trends present in the 2010s music industry are indeed telling. Additionally, another set of data from the same 2017 Nielsen report offered notable findings. While the “Top Ten Digital Albums” of 2017 included works from artists like Kendrick Lamar, Drake, and Jay-Z, the list of “Top Ten Vinyl LP Albums” consisted of very different music. The best-selling LP of 2017 went to The Beatles’ hit 1967 record *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, coming in at 72,000 units sold. Second went to another Beatles album, the 1969 classic *Abbey Road*.²³⁰ The list of 2017’s best-selling vinyl LPs included a majority of albums from the twentieth century, with some exceptions for albums by Ed Sheeran and Amy Winehouse, as well as two film soundtracks.²³¹ However, the fact that the same list included Prince’s 1984 *Purple Rain*, Pink Floyd’s 1973 *Dark Side of the Moon*, and Michael Jackson’s 1982 *Thriller* suggested that listeners held a significant sense of nostalgia for a different era of American music.

²²⁹ See Nielsen Music, “2017 Year-End Music Report” (Nielsen, 2017), 24-25.

²³⁰ Ibid, 27.

²³¹ It is worth noting that one of the two film soundtracks was for 2014 film *Guardians of the Galaxy*, made up of tracks exclusively from the twentieth century.

What do these figures suggest about the music industry in the 2010s, or about vinyl records in general? I contend that this information offers a glimpse into the two core factors of vinyl's resurgence in this period. The same elements that hooked a previous generation of young people of color on hip-hop through the late 1970s and early 1980s applied to this moment in American music history. Discussed previously in Chapter One, these included various aspects of vinyl's materiality such as *tangibility* as well as its propensity for experiencing *nostalgia*.

To clearly define how these factors apply to records in the 2010s, it is important to recall historian Judy Attfield's definition of material culture provided in Chapter One. Attfield states that an item's materiality is described as "a way of looking at a non-verbal manifestation of how people make sense of the world through their use of objects."²³² Regarding vinyl records in the 2010s, this meant that their materiality appealed to music listeners on various levels that will be specifically discussed further in this chapter.

To better understand vinyl's nostalgic value, an example from the origins of hip hop's popularity helps explain the sudden twenty-first century revival in vinyl purchases. Just as Clive Campbell (otherwise known as DJ Kool Herc) discovered in the late 1970s, Bronx natives began to reject popular mainstream Disco tunes as they felt detached from the genre on account of its over-commercialized misrepresentation of black culture. Instead, listeners gravitated toward hip-hop, drawn in by Herc's ability to incorporate funk and soul records with a new twist of methodology and craftsmanship as a DJ. Just as Bronx audiences reclaimed their parents' music in the development of hip-hop, twenty-

²³² See Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. Materializing Culture (Oxford New York: Berg, 2000) 135.

first century listeners too experienced a feeling of ownership over the sounds and listening mediums of their predecessors, at once familiar and new.

It Takes a Village

A consistent theme throughout this study remains the idea of the music-listening community. It is important to reiterate that during the 2010s, hip-hop became the largest dominating force in the music industry. Club, though still a primarily regional scene in Baltimore, inspired a new generation of twenty-first century electronic dance music that permeated international borders. Both of these musical genres embraced the coming of the limitless digital world, and are pivotal in understanding the new community landscape for music-listeners in the twenty-first century.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, portions of both the hip-hop and Club communities resisted the commercial exploitation of major labels by engaging in practices that helped safeguard their artistic integrity and maintain a sense of “grass-roots, local effort. By the 2010s, these practices seemed null and void thanks to further innovation of the internet. This was especially visible in the Club scene from the mid- 2000s to the 2010s, following the death of Baltimore Club Queen DJ K-Swift.

Following the death of Khia Edgerton (DJ K-Swift), Baltimore’s major cultural export hung in limbo. On the day that Edgerton tragically passed, she performed alongside international DJ sensation Diplo, a self-proclaimed fan of Baltimore Club. The pair had even discussed going on tour together, all for naught.²³³ The next phase of Club

²³³ See Brittany Britto and Wesley Case, “Still the Club Queen: Baltimore DJ K-Swift’s Legacy Lives on, 10 Years after Her Death,” *The Baltimore Sun*, July 20, 2018.

seemed to be characterized by growing interest by listeners and artists outside of Baltimore.

DJ Blaqstarr asserts that “if it weren’t for Diplo, another non-Baltimorean would have likely found their way into the culture...its’ a part of growth and wanting to expand.”²³⁴ Amidst the mourning and stagnation following Edgerton’s passing, DJs emerged from all directions to forage whatever elements of Club they could utilize back to their hometowns. Diplo, for example, combined Club into a larger mix of numerous genres while DJing sets as part of the duo Hollertronix, a group formed with partner Low Budget.²³⁵ Rather than feeling discouraged, however, some Baltimore DJs leaned into the interest of outsiders and even encouraged the homage paid by out-of-towners. For example, local radio host DJ Angel Baby’s mixtape *Get Pumped Vol. 2* (2014) includes artists from Philadelphia, DJ Sega, as well as New Jersey native Nadus in addition to Baltimore Club DJs. Regarding his decision to include artists from outside Baltimore, he stated that “even if club DJs outside of Baltimore don’t say it’s Baltimore Club, we know where it comes from.”²³⁶ During this period, Club found its scene naturally polarized between two key groups. Simply put, the scene began to split into “old school” and “new school”. Producer and DJ Marquis Gasque, more commonly known as “Mighty Mark” put it this way. “There’s like the ‘Dox [The Paradox Nightclub] club scene, and the

²³⁴ See Pitchfork, “Standing Still: The Stagnant Life of Baltimore Club,” *Pitchfork Magazine*, May 29, 2014, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/354-standing-still-the-stagnant-life-of-baltimore-club/>.

²³⁵ See Andrew Devereaux, ““What Chew Know About Down the Hill?”: Baltimore Club Music, Subgenre Crossover, and the New Subcultural Capital of Race and Space.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 19, no. 4 (December 6, 2007), 316. The duo chose genres that were signature cultural cornerstones of various regions that did not necessarily get played outside of those regions. For example, they incorporated Grime from East London, Screw from Houston, Bhangra from Punjab, and Baile Funk from Rio de Janeiro among others into their sets.

²³⁶ Ibid, DJ Angel Baby’s mixtape *Get Pumped Vol. 2* can be found online through SoundCloud at <https://soundcloud.com/djangelbabymusic/getpumpedvol2>.

Ottobar scene,” says Gasque, referring to two new Club cultures in the 2010s.²³⁷ The “old school” in this scenario took the form of Club-goers at famed night club, the Paradox. The “new school”, on the other hand, involved the general “indie-leaning new Club culture” that found its way onto an international, more mainstream stage.

The gap between old school and new school Baltimore Club represented a microcosm of the music industry in the 2010s, as well as Club’s never-ending struggle for identity. To veteran DJs from Club’s height in the 1990s, the scene’s glory days lived in the Friday night Club spot on 92.3FM (92Q).²³⁸ However, Gasque notes that the scene needed more than radio-play. In fact, he contends that Club ultimately placed itself in a bit of a “catch twenty-two” situation at this time. “The new-school cats who push Club out of state don’t get too much play here”, and the legends whose new tracks get played here don’t really circulate too much out of state because other DJs can’t get ‘em out of state”, he notes.²³⁹ Veteran DJ and co-founder of Unruly Records Scottie B corroborates this claim, noting that new Club music was made with a “different purpose” than original tracks and further “comes from a different place” than their predecessors.²⁴⁰ This resulted in a local depiction of the new trends present in the previously mentioned 2017 Nielsen report. Plainly, Baltimore now questioned the status of Club’s representation. Would it come from classic tracks distributed originally via twelve-inch singles and cassette tapes

²³⁷ See Michael Byrne, “The Torchbearer for Club Music’s New Generation Is Just Getting Started,” *The Baltimore Sun*, March 21, 2012, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/citypaper/bcp-cms-1-1288242-migrated-story-cp-20120321-featu-20120321-story.html>. At the time of Gasque’s interview, he went by stage name “Murder Mark”, a name he developed in high school at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute. Earning his reputation as a battle rapper, his peers claimed that “he be murderin’ em”, referencing his skills. In the years since this interview, Gasque has shifted to a new identity, “Mighty Mark”.

²³⁸ See Michael Byrne, “The Torchbearer for Club Music’s New Generation Is Just Getting Started,” *The Baltimore Sun*, March 21, 2012.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ See Tracy Stevens, Baltimore Basics: Interview with Scottie B Part II, 2019, accessed on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKHQt5_FxVM

for night clubs, now played on local radio? Or had Club's identity shifted to new tracks downloaded internationally as MP3s by DJs through online distribution services like SoundCloud, where Gasque claims they're played everywhere *except* Baltimore?²⁴¹ This question points out an integral population that must be considered when exploring modern music listening: the online community.

Although Diplo (and his aforementioned DJ duo Hollertronix) helped reinvigorate Club's popularity in the modern world, they relied heavily on the burgeoning online music-listening community which resulted in the fast-paced growth of the internet. Diplo credits much of the group's rise to stardom to Turntablelab.com (or "Turntable Lab"), a groundbreaking retail site for DJ equipment and gear.²⁴² Diplo explains that Turntable Lab was "really into" the duo's mixtape "Never Scared", despite the fact that the pair was simply selling it out of their car with "*Kinko's* cut-outs".²⁴³ The fact that Turntable Lab was (and is) a retail site for products and *not* a music-streaming site is significant, as it illustrates the shift in the sense of what defined a listening community by the 2010s. When compared with the previously mentioned community of digital pirates stealing music for play on their Apple iPods, Turntable Lab certainly appears more wholesome and legitimate.

In the twentieth century, Club listeners gathered and took part in a musical genre largely characterized by its geography and the associated cultural representations with that region. In the twenty-first century, the new digital listening community became

²⁴¹ See Michael Byrne, "The Torchbearer for Club Music's New Generation Is Just Getting Started", 2012.

²⁴² See Andrew Devereaux, "What Chew Know About Down the Hill?", 316.

²⁴³ See David Drake, "Diplo: The Stylus Interview," *Stylus Magazine*, October 2004, http://stylusmagazine.com/feature_ID_1269.html. Diplo continues by noting that "Never Scared" was mutually beneficial for Hollertronix and Turntable Lab, as the site was going through the process of creating their own record label.

characterized by a seemingly smaller world in which people had new access to previously unexplored or forgotten music through unseen sonic highways. As this chapter will further explain, this interconnected nature of online communities would result in burgeoning sales of *physical* music.

Hip-Hop Worldwide

The presence of new online listening communities posed a question to mainstream hip-hop listeners similar to the one posed to the Club community. How did the global, digital landscape of the new music industry affect the genre's roots? Further, what significance can be found from a hip-hop community that spanned continents? Finally, how did this new online community contribute to the resurgence of vinyl record culture?

Though hip-hop began as a genre rooted in African American culture, its unabated spread across racial and socio-economic lines travelled beyond even American borders. By the 2010s, hip-hop served as a ubiquitous component of popular culture. To understand the context of hip-hop in this moment is to further examine its presence in the digital world. Much like hip-hop's exploitation in the 1990s by major-label executives, the late 2000s also proved the genre to be commercially fruitful. The previously mentioned music industry trends helped assert that on a national level, hip-hop shifted from being a component of mainstream popular culture to simply *being* mainstream popular culture. Interestingly enough, this new "always on", constantly-connected culture served (at least in part) as the catalyst for the return of vinyl records in the digital age.

The assertion that hip-hop as a singular genre solely helped generate interest by music-listeners in reviving vinyl records as a listening medium cannot be made

definitively. However, if one examines hip-hop's role in permeating and guiding the cultural landscape of the 2010s, the notion becomes more clear. Just as blues and jazz birthed an America infatuated with rock music in the mid-twentieth century, hip-hop's position as a pop-culture compass in the 2010s helped guide listeners across the new digital landscape of the music industry. Jeremy Wade Morris reinforces this idea, stating that the music industry acted as the "canary in the coal mine of digitization".²⁴⁴ In other words, the music industry acted as a cultural litmus test for the status of almost all goods in the internet era. Further, the early days of the internet era were characterized by material limits such as bandwidth and technological availability. Therefore, despite the presence of several websites devoted to file-sharing of text and images, commodities were rarely available in their entirety with the exception of music.²⁴⁵ Once technology caught up to the demand of consumers, everything suddenly appeared available for internet-based consumption. Hip-hop served as a driving force behind musical media in the 2010s and further helped shift consumers into the digitally saturated world of algorithmic, internet-based streams on services like Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube.

Hip-hop's exponential growth into a globally renowned phenomenon helped fan the flames of one of 2010s popular culture's largest byproducts, nostalgia. Author Mark Katz attributes hip-hop's global appeal to its powerful mythos, including its "potent origin story" that has since developed into a globally influential industry and way of

²⁴⁴ See Jeremy Wade Morris, *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 198. Morris argues that the data-limits set by early days of the internet era helped allow physical goods to compete with digital goods. For example, although MP3 files were compressed, internet-based books or television shows weren't always available in their entirety thanks to the material limitations of bandwidth at the time.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 198.

life.²⁴⁶ He continues with a quote by a twenty-year-old white Croatian dancer, Iva, who knew the story of hip-hop like the back of her hand.

“[Hip hop] began in the Bronx...but right now, OK, with the economy and our situation politically, we feel the same way they felt in the early ‘80s and ‘70s...It’s really hard to live as an artist. You really have to bleed for that status. Rock Steady didn’t have the money. They didn’t have studios. They just had their own imaginations that got them through dark times. And that’s how we feel here.”²⁴⁷

Katz notes in his interview with Iva that a “rapper from the United States could well have told this story”, implying that hip-hop’s new global status was ubiquitous regardless of your location. Clearly, the genre’s influence inspired listeners in the twenty-first century to channel the rugged, creative spirit responsible for hip-hop’s own development. The 2010s music industry embraced this nostalgic reimagining of days past, both commercially and artistically. Further, globally-connected audiences utilized the internet to expedite the trend. Suddenly, the nostalgic reassociation of popular culture spread like wildfire. Mainstream pop artists, even those with no association to hip-hop culture, began sampling and/or referencing generations-old hip-hop music into their tracks. Artists at this time learned an ability to graft together scraps of bygone popular culture to turn it into a hybrid type, which is both modernist and backward-looking.²⁴⁸ This method essentially acted as the modern version of hip-hop’s age-old practice of sampling an artist from a previous generation. For an example of this, examine the chorus of 2015 track “New Americana” by Halsey.

²⁴⁶ See Mark Katz, *Build: The Power of Hip-Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 11. Katz’ study revolves around hip-hop’s international influence in the twenty-first century.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 12

²⁴⁸ See Maël Guesdon and Philippe Le Guem, “Retromania: Crisis of the Progressive Ideal and Pop Music Spectrality,” in *Media and Nostalgia*, ed. Katharina Niemeyer (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 77, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137375889_5.

“We are the new Americana
High on legal marijuana
Raised on Biggie and Nirvana
We are the new Americana”

It is worth noting that this track additionally features another, less conspicuous nod to 90s hip-hop legend Christopher Wallace (otherwise known as Biggie Smalls or Notorious B.I.G.). This came in the form of the bridge on Halsey’s track, which she sings in an identical fashion in terms of melody and cadence to vocalist Faith Evans’ alternative chorus on Biggie’s 1994 hit, “Juicy”.²⁴⁹ While this song represents just one example, it further exemplifies the ubiquitous nature of hip-hop in 2010s popular culture.

For the Record: What Hip-Hop and Club Mean for Vinyl’s Resurgence

To understand the resurgence of vinyl records during the 2010s is to acknowledge three key components present throughout this study’s entirety. First, the presence of *community* developed during the formative years of hip-hop and Club holds true through the 2010s. Though it took on various forms, the notion of the music-listening community that ultimately allowed vinyl culture to persist through various music industry variations also encouraged the return of vinyl through means further discussed in this section. The additional two factors responsible for vinyl’s resurgence both stem from an object’s materiality, and likewise made appearances throughout the phases of hip-hop and Club’s formation. These factors, specifically *tangibility* and *nostalgia*, ultimately steered certain

²⁴⁹ In “New Americana”, the bridge reads “We know very well who we are, so we hold it down when summer starts. What kind of dough have you been spending? What kind of bubblegum have you been blowing lately? In “Juicy”, Evans’ alternative chorus reads “You know very well who you are, don’t let ‘em hold you down, reach for the stars. You had a goal but not that many, cause you’re the only one, I’ll give you good and plenty.”

music-listeners in the 2010s away from digital mediums like streaming services and back toward vinyl records. These three factors worked in unison throughout the end of the twentieth century to aid in vinyl's endurance through transformative periods in music-listening and allowed for vinyl's return to cultural relevance in the digital age in the 2010s.

Despite technological and cultural advancement, the listening community remained a cornerstone of vinyl's persistence through its resurgence in the 2010s. To declare music listeners of any region or status a *community* is to imply their solidarity regarding a common cultural goal. Historian Benedict Anderson further defines a community in his study *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, in which he contends that the concept of a "nation" can better be described as an "imagined community" on the basis of their "deep, horizontal comradeship" and fraternity amidst inequality and exploitation.²⁵⁰ While Anderson's definition of a community is used to classify citizens into the social construct of a "nation", the underlying concept in his term applies to this study in that it defines a community similarly. This study classifies music-listening communities on the basis of their allegiance to a particular genre, medium, or to music in general.

Throughout this study, listening communities propelled forward the genres of hip-hop and Club through means previously deemed successful. Beginning in New York and Baltimore respectively, these communities formed on the basis of several factors,

²⁵⁰ See Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (London New York: Verso, 2016), 7. Anderson further notes that communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. In the context of this study, the community of music listeners transcends all other imagined communities within that definition. For example, a black man from the Bronx and a white woman from Seattle who both listen to hip-hop would both fall under the umbrella of the "hip-hop community".

principally along lines of region, race, and socio-economic status. By the 2010s, these communities both exploded into massive, digitally-linked users from across the globe, connected by their continued perpetuation of these genres. It is important to note that during the 2010s, the presence of internet-based communities enabled the growth and connectivity of all communities, not just musical ones. Nevertheless, the increasing online presence and availability of streaming services allowed listeners of Club and hip-hop to connect in real time through various sites, forums, and other online means regardless of whether they ever met in person.

The significance of new online music-listening communities during the 2010s manifests in these groups' utilization of the aforementioned internet connectivity to help revitalize an otherwise-forgotten object, the vinyl record. In other words, the 2010s were characterized by various online communities using the perks of *new* technology (i.e., smartphones, web-based streaming services, blogs, collectors' forums, social media, etc.) to help renew interest and often create commercial opportunities for *old* technology (i.e., vinyl records, among other things). I argue that during the 2010s, the digital landscape provided to music listeners became largely homogenous due to the seemingly endless availability of music streamed through services like Spotify and Apple Music. During this period, music transformed from a commodity to a renewable subscription. For a quantitative example, consider that in 2017, music streamed through digital means made up 63.7% of all revenue for the RIAA. By 2020, this number increased to 81.2%.²⁵¹

²⁵¹ Please see the RIAA guide found at <https://www.riaa.com/u-s-sales-database/>. Formats used to calculate these figures included associated formats of music streaming, such as "Paid Subscription", "On-Demand Streaming (Ad-Supported)", "Other Ad-Supported Streaming" and "Limited Tier Paid Subscription".

Throughout this same period, however, volume and revenue of vinyl record sales increased exponentially. In 2017, vinyl LPs constituted \$388.5 million in revenue, or 4.6% of total revenue that year. In 2020, this increased to 619.6 million, or 5.1%.²⁵² While these numbers are dwarfed by the previously mentioned streaming figures, they offer insight into the role of the music-listening *community* involved with vinyl's resurgence. This does not suggest that perhaps there are a minute few of listeners who solely listen to vinyl records and further boycott the use of the internet for music-listening. On the contrary, I contend that digital music-listening actually enhanced and increased the numbers of vinyl-listeners. More specifically, the aforementioned statistics indicate that music listeners are using the worldwide web to *create* new communities around the collection and curation of vinyl, namely a community of record collectors. Lucas MacFadden, better known as DJ Cut Chemist, explains that "...it's actually become easier to buy [records] online. Not to say that I buy online exclusively. I do a lot more now that I used to, partly as I have a lot less time to hit the pavement."²⁵³

Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward assert in *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age* that vinyl is distributed across space and time as an objectual medium. In other words, they claim that vinyl as an object moves about physically, not digitally. Because of this, they argue that "locating and buying vinyl is largely not an element of virtual sociality".²⁵⁴ However, I challenge that by the 2010s (and continually in the present) the existence of virtual "crate-digging" apps such as Discogs.com and iCrates further increased the number of vinyl-listeners through the creation of *collector*

²⁵² See the RIAA guide found at <https://www.riaa.com/u-s-sales-database/>.

²⁵³ See Jennifer Otter Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, 63.

²⁵⁴ See Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age*, 37.

communities.²⁵⁵ It is worth noting that both Discogs and iCrates retrieve their information through user-submissions, and for the purpose of this study act as communities through which people buy, sell, trade, or relay information regarding vinyl records. Bartmanski and Woodward acknowledge the presence of apps like Discogs and iCrates, though they contend that vinyl is ultimately discovered in neighborhoods and through extensive in-person searching.²⁵⁶ While I agree with their notion that record collectors rely first on physical digging, I maintain that virtual communities of collectors served as the byproduct of the new always-connected digital world embraced by the music-industry.

Before the internet age, a music-listener found and purchased music through their local music store. Consumers were limited in terms of their store's available selection, as well as by the knowledge and preferences of the staff working in said store. By the 2010s, music-listeners received recommendations based on an algorithm through streaming-services, carefully created to both support their listening trends as well as branch out toward new ones. Further, a listener who decided to actually purchase an artist's music could rely on their fellow vinyl-listeners present in online communities like Discogs to help recommend artists, review albums, and even locate an exact retailer selling the record.²⁵⁷ Not to mention, beyond the traditional vinyl-specific sites like Discogs,

²⁵⁵ See Anton Spice, "The Best Online Tools for Record Collectors," *The Vinyl Factory*, August 19, 2016, <https://thevinylfactory.com/features/online-tools-for-record-collectors/>. In addition to Discogs and iCrates, online communities surfaced around vinyl commerce through sites such as Analog Planet, Vinyl Hub, YouTube, and forums such as Reddit.

²⁵⁶ Bartmanski and Woodward take a cue from Tim Ingold's 2004 study "Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived Through the Feet" to argue that vinyl remains a commodity that is best explored "through the feet, through the fingers, and through corporeal immersion within vinyl marketplaces."

²⁵⁷ See David Broman and Stefan Söderlindh, "How the Internet Facilitates the Activity within a Consumer Culture - A Study of the Online Vinyl Record Network," Uppsala University, June 2, 2009, 5. Broman and Söderlindh describe virtual communities as "E-tribes", who act "not only as sources of information, but also influence what decisions consumers make and how they make them."

communities on traditionally non-music sites such as YouTube, eBay and Reddit emerged too as new havens for listeners of vinyl.

The hip-hop and Club communities offer insight on communities created around vinyl in that the internet enabled all of these entities to extend beyond their traditional boundaries and return to cultural relevance in some fashion. Hip-hop morphed from a regional genre into a trailblazer that figuratively became the face of the music industry. Thus, a genre founded in the underground as a representation of counterculture transformed into a cultural giant by the twenty-first century. By the 2010s, an increase in internet-based technologies inspired a community of artists to take a more do-it-yourself approach to hip-hop through means of laptop computers in bedroom recording studios. As a result, a new generation of hip-hop stars challenged the notion of concentrated major-label success characterized during the previous two decades. A similar story can be applied to the vinyl record and its associated culture. Despite advancements in music-listening technologies, a growing community of listeners chose to utilize the connective power of the internet to revive interest and eventually commerce in a seemingly obsolete music medium. Further, this community actually translated from a virtual one to a physical one, considering that vinyl's revival actually prompted many entrepreneurs to open hundreds of *physical* record stores across the United States in the 2010s alone.²⁵⁸

While the return of physical record stores certainly points to a renewed sense of relevance for vinyl culture, it further exemplified the influence of digital communities

²⁵⁸ See Tyler Sonnichsen, "Emotional Landscapes and the Evolution of Vinyl Record Retail: A Case Study of Highland Park, Los Angeles," in *The Production and Consumption of Music in the Digital Age* (Taylor & Francis, 2016). Sonnichsen notes that the brick-and-mortar record store increase during the 2010s is not a coincidence, but that it represented a larger trend in which case these stores act as a subcultural marker where people congregate to further this sense of community.

and marketplaces on its revival. Beginning on April 19, 2008, listeners celebrated as Metallica performed at independent record store Rasputin Music in Berkeley, California to celebrate the first-ever unofficial holiday, Record Store Day.²⁵⁹ Seven months prior, founders Michael Kurtz, Carrie Colliton, Eric Levin and Michael Bunnell met in the basement of The Sound Garden, a record store in Baltimore, to formulate an idea in which participating owners of record stores coordinated with major labels in the music industry to offer Record Store Day (RSD) exclusives that could only be purchased on one day of the year.²⁶⁰ These individuals who admittedly worked to revive business in physical stores inadvertently helped spawn even further excitement around vinyl record culture. After a decade of Record Store Day's influence, the celebration already garnered participation from roughly 1,400 American record stores, in addition to another two thousand internationally.²⁶¹

An unintended byproduct of RSD releases came in the form of “flippers” who purchased exclusives only to then sell at an inflated price online (often through marketplaces like Discogs. Nevertheless, the significance of Record Store Day offers yet another visible insight on the reliance of vinyl communities on the ever-connected world of the internet. Stephen Godfroy co-owns independent record retailer Rough Trade, a store that has since expanded from London and Nottingham in the United Kingdom to

²⁵⁹ See Lyndsey Havens, “Record Store Day Turns 10: Founders Break Down Its Past, Present and Future,” *Billboard Magazine*, April 21, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/7767699/record-store-day-2017-founders-10th-anniversary-vinyl/>. The official website for Record Store Day can be found here,

²⁶⁰ See David Sax, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), 11.

²⁶¹ See Lyndsey Havens, “Record Store Day Turns 10: Founders Break Down Its Past, Present and Future.” While Record Store Day engages customers online via their website that houses a catalog of releases and locations where consumers can find records, all participating retailers sign a “Record Store Day Pledge” which states that they will sell commercial RSD releases to physical customers and not hold product back to later sell online.

New York City in the United States. Additionally, Rough Trade operates a global online store. When asked simply why vinyl has returned in the modern era, Godfroy explains that vinyl has “emerged as one of the first consumer products to prove its post-digital worth in a digitally distracted world”, and that “digital natives are no longer satisfied with music access alone.”²⁶² He continues that the modern age is effectively teaching listeners about the “disposable ubiquity” of digital products, and further, about the personal identity and experience that comes with owning a material collection.

In addition to community, the resurgence of vinyl record culture in the 2010s can largely be attributed to its materiality. More specifically, two key components of its materiality take shape in records’ tangibility and propensity for nostalgia. Though these factors distinctly differ in their contribution to vinyl’s resurgence in the 2010s, they work in unison under the umbrella of material culture. Music once more became somehow even less tangible by the 2010s amidst the proliferation of streaming services. Material culture historian Elodie Roy notes that during this period, the endlessly unquantifiable collections of made-digital and born-digital music objects helped people to lose, in part, their cultural memory.²⁶³ In other words, human beings have for the entirety of recorded history kept physical records (through archives or other means) of culture. At the time of this study, music has not been available in a digitally-playable format for a full three decades. Thus, I contend that vinyl records re-emerged in the 2010s in part due to a need for something *tangible* that humans can hold in their hands.

²⁶² See Jennifer Otter Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters* (Acc Art Books, 2017) 206.

²⁶³ See Elodie Roy, *Media, Materiality and Memory: Grounding the Groove*. (S.l.: Routledge, 2020) 196.

Co-founder of Record Store Day and owner of Music Millennium in Portland, Oregon, Terry Currier explains that the revival of vinyl is often dismissed as a trend. He contends, however, that records are here to stay. On vinyl's tangibility, he relishes in the experience vinyl has offered him in allowing him to witness young people actually engaging in the ritual of physically examining records before purchasing them.

“As they go through their vinyl experience...they start looking at album covers. And they go ‘I’m going to try this out, this looks pretty cool and it’s four dollars.’ And they get home and it’s a blues record...it is getting kids to try other genres of music they might not be familiar with, or may have never ever looked at online or even talked about in a chat room.”²⁶⁴

Though Currier speaks to the importance of a record's tactile properties, his contention is corroborated by the presence of liner notes and photographs often included in record sleeves that simply cannot be replicated in a digital manner. Liner notes and other printed extras included with a record create an experience of a souvenir for the consumer. Further, the inclusion of these notes inherently offers “substance to the narrative that the owner of the record attaches to it”.²⁶⁵

While the streaming phenomenon of the 2010s offered music-listeners greater access to a virtually infinite pool of music on a seemingly instantaneous basis, it did not appeal to the material needs of humans to interact with a tangible object. Just as downloadable MP3 files of the 2000s did not allow for the same user engagement as physical albums, streamable files through services like Spotify and Apple Music widened the gap between the listener and the music. However, a key difference exists in that these

²⁶⁴ See Jennifer Otter Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters* (Acc Art Books, 2017) 200.

²⁶⁵ See Elodie Roy, *Media, Materiality and Memory: Grounding the Groove*, 132. Roy additionally explains that the narrative associated with the record by listeners is strengthened by the nostalgia which it triggers. Further, such nostalgia “expresses a longing for the vague past” the desire for a legend or tale rather than historical authenticity.

services evolved into algorithmically-curated databases that recommended new music to listeners. Artists like Peter Buck of R.E.M. claim that having someone “curate a [digital] store made it easy to acquire records that you might never have heard about otherwise...”, yet the aforementioned RIAA sales trends indicate that many listeners presumably used streaming services as a springboard to then purchase a *physical* album.²⁶⁶ In other words, I assert that vinyl consumers were very likely introduced to music via streaming and then chose to purchase physical copies of their preferential findings.

Take for example the previously mentioned decision of Taylor Swift to withhold her music from streaming platforms from 2014 to 2017. An artist of her caliber felt that streaming would not garner an appropriate amount of revenue in exchange for releasing the entire corpus of her work online. Lesser-known artists, however, appropriately utilized the hybrid nature of streaming to attract fans toward their physical music. For example, Ben Berry, a member of Detroit-based band Moke Hill, explains that “with no marketing, PR or label support, Spotify has exposed [our band] to an audience who otherwise have little chance of finding us.”²⁶⁷

The 2010s represented an embrace of both digital *and* analog mediums, as opposed to one or the other. In their 2017 study, Thorén et al. explain that this period represented an era no longer so easily distinguishable between analog and digital. Instead, they argue that consumers are better served by “finding legitimacy in hybridized

²⁶⁶ See Gary Calamar and Phil Gallo, *Record Store Days: From Vinyl to Digital and Back Again* (New York; Lewes: Sterling ; GMC Distribution, 2012). x.

²⁶⁷ See Ramadan Aly-Tovar et al., “Why Would Artists Favor Free Streaming?,” *Journal of Cultural Economics* 44, no. 2 (June 2020) 261, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-019-09358-z>.

technological solutions rather than in the either-or of the digital divide”.²⁶⁸ This is crucial to understanding the *compatibility* of streaming and vinyl, as opposed to the divide between the two mediums. A clear example of this can be seen through apps like Discogs, which helped point users to another facet of vinyl’s tangibility in its rarity/exclusivity. This meant that a vinyl collector (or average music listener) could search online via the Discogs database to see how many pressings of a particular record existed, and even where to find them.

The symbiotic relationship of the digital and analog realms can also be viewed through the incorporation of hybrid record players, which became commercially available during the 2010s. Manufacturers like Crosley and Sony began selling “newly designed turntables with USB ports and Bluetooth” to both incorporate the hybridized model of digital and analog, as well as to address the other obvious issue of listeners needing a functional turntable on which they could listen to records.²⁶⁹ This further reinforces the idea that listeners who wanted tactile relief from culture stored in the cloud could easily incorporate both mediums of listening into daily life. Newly available turntables reinforced a critical component of material culture in that they allowed 2010s music listeners to engage with a medium associated with *other* objects. Even elite DJs at this time embraced digital technology for their daily business and media-incorporated world

²⁶⁸ See Claes Thorén et al., “The Hipster’s Dilemma: What Is Analogue or Digital in the Post-Digital Society?,” *Convergence* 25, no. 2 (April 1, 2019): 336, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517713139>. The authors playfully refer to the blurring of this dichotomy as “the hipster’s dilemma”, though their claims resonate the idea that vinyl’s tangibility is actually complimented by digital technologies.

²⁶⁹ See Michael Palm, “Analog Backlog: Pressing Records During the Vinyl Revival,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29, no. 4 (December 2017): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12247>. Palm continues that these companies have even further broadened their base for commercial appeal with affordable options as well as kid-friendly models.

while simultaneously acknowledging and utilizing vinyl on account of its “mesmerizing” qualities.²⁷⁰

This hybridization between analog and digital mediums did not confine itself to the underground. On the contrary, the popularity (and potential profitability) of vinyl grew enough to warrant dedicated sales sections in department stores like Wal-Mart and Target, something the indie-minded founders of Record Store Day hoped to avoid.²⁷¹ By the end of the 2010s, Wal-Mart even offered special promotions like “Wal-Mart Exclusive” colored-vinyl and store-wide discounts on every record in store. Not to mention, the online presence of these big-box stores further enhanced record sales.²⁷²

While vinyl’s materiality enticed consumers via its tangibility amidst a seemingly touch-starved world, it further appealed to listeners due to its propensity for nostalgia. A cultural practice that enables people to generate meaning in the present through selective visions of the past, nostalgia acted as an integral factor in vinyl’s cultural resurgence during the 2010s.²⁷³ Take for example the previously mentioned figures from the 2017 Nielsen Soundscan report. The cultural blending of old and new that enabled albums by

²⁷⁰ See Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, *The Record Players: DJ Revolutionaries* (New York: Black Cat, 2010), 433-434.

²⁷¹ See Eric Harvey, “Siding with Vinyl: Record Store Day and the Branding of Independent Music,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (November 1, 2017): 586., <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877915582105>,

²⁷² See Keith Caulfield, “U.S. Vinyl Album Sales Score Best Week of 2020, Thanks to Walmart Sale,” *Billboard*, November 25, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/chart-beat/9490422/walmart-us-vinyl-album-sales-best-week-2020>. Caulfield notes in this 2020 article that the previous record for overall U.S. vinyl album sales came in holiday week ending on December 26, 2019, when volume hit 1.24 million sold- the largest week for vinyl sales in the Nielsen Music/MRC Data era.

²⁷³ See Ray Cashman, “Critical Nostalgia and Material Culture in Northern Ireland,” *Journal of American Folklore* 119, no. 472 (2006): 137–60, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaf.2006.0016>. Cashman is an ethnomusicologist that studies objects rendered obsolete in Northern Ireland for the purpose of inspiring critical thought to evoke positive social change.

Ed Sheeran and Pink Floyd to be featured on the same “Top Ten” list clearly reflected a yearning for elements of popular culture’s past.

The notion of popular culture that is simultaneously “old and new” can be seen throughout various stages of music-industry history. Previously mentioned in this study, the concept that artists and DJs borrowed, nodded, and sampled sounds from generations past did not suddenly manifest by the 2010s. However, a key difference during this period revolves around hip-hop’s dominance of mainstream popular culture. Specifically, the difference came in the *audience* of hip-hop’s already-popular sample culture.

When hip-hop and Club were smaller, regionally based genres, listeners that experienced those nods to the past generally belonged to a homogenous group. By the 2010s, nods to generations-old music became seemingly ubiquitous in mainstream pop music under the umbrella of hip-hop or electronic dance music. Often these references remained unknown to the average listener, while some artists and DJs cashed in on their popularity by trying to replicate these sought-after sounds. Detroit-based DJ Theo Parrish speaks on this, stating that “now you have the technology to allow you to emulate any sound that anyone ever created. I watch whole labels pop up that live off the whole Chicago house sound.”²⁷⁴ While modern technologies offered a novel, though seemingly exploitative ability to recreate “classic” sounds, some listeners and artists like Parrish condemned the practice of cashing in on the nostalgia craze. Parrish continues that

“I lived through the ‘88 shit, no, you’re not doing that shit, you know why? Because you’re not dealing with the conditions and the reasons and the intentions why they made that music. You weren’t dealing with the idea that it’s a

²⁷⁴ See Alex Nagshineh, Interview with Theo Parrish, Bonafide Magazine, November 16, 2014, <http://www.bonafidemag.com/theo-parrish-interview/>. Parrish further reinforces the idea that internet technologies have changed the music-industry with regard to marketing, and ultimately helps determine who people view as musically relevant based on media interest.

cultural movement, not just music. You weren't dealing with the idea that there weren't any white people listening to this; it was black music."

The sentiment expressed by Parrish poses questions regarding what truly determines legitimacy during an era seemingly characterized by clashes between old and new, both in terms of technology and culture. Notably, his quote raises the question of potential limits to an object's resurgence. Aside from cultural legitimacy, what did vinyl's comeback in the 2010s mean for all music listeners? Economically, did every community of music-listeners have the same opportunity to participate or profit from the nostalgia-craze associated with vinyl?

It is important to note that this question raises additional quandaries regarding the unattractive side of consumer-based nostalgia. Particularly, the presence of a class component in vinyl culture's nostalgic revival begs the question; who gets to experience vinyl's revitalization? This question can be analyzed through various perspectives, from the select *artists* who experience new pressings of their old albums, to *consumers* who have the opportunities (and disposable income) to engage in vinyl consumption again. Plainly, vinyl culture's return in the present symbolizes several elements of culture. One of those is a fashion statement. What does it suggest if only specific consumers may participate in this cultural revival? What significance can be found in *which* records from the past actually experience new life in the present? How can this nostalgic phenomenon help predict the *future* for consumed culture, like music? These questions will not be answered in this study, though they can hopefully be addressed in future works.

In his 2017 study, *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism*, Gary Cross addresses various forms of nostalgia and characterizes the revitalization of

commodities like vinyl records into what he calls “consumed nostalgia”. In defining this new form of nostalgia, he notes that what makes consumed nostalgia different “...is not primarily its materiality or even its celebration of the time-fixed commodity”, but rather its origins in what he dubs “fast capitalism”.²⁷⁵ Further, he cites Svetlana Boym to help explain how consumed nostalgia affects everyday consumers, noting that it ultimately causes people to “part ways and put an end to mutual understanding”. Thus, Cross notes, we “invent traditions to connect ourselves with a ‘past’ that never was, and more darkly, we fantasize conspiracies against our imagined heritage and home...”²⁷⁶ To the aforementioned point made by Theo Parrish, Cross’ assertion suggests that consumers’ willingness to spend money on records pressed forty years earlier or to attempt replication of a style or genre from a bygone musical era might be an attempt at romanticizing or fantasizing a different version of our past selves. While this notion does not fully answer the question of exclusivity with regard to the nostalgia movement, it offers an excellent springboard for future studies.²⁷⁷

The 2010s represented truly uncharted waters for the music industry. For the first time in its history, physical music sales proved a worthy contender to digital music consumption in ways quantifiably unpredictable. The unprecedented growth of hip-hop and Club created a world in which genres previously classified as “niche” or regional suddenly began setting trends for all of popular culture. During this time, the music

²⁷⁵ See Gary Cross, *Consumed Nostalgia - Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017) 11-12.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 13. Also see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

²⁷⁷ Elodie Roy’s study *Media, Materiality and Memory: Grounding the Groove* provides another starting point for this conversation, as she cites Michael Thompson’s 1979 study *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. She references Thompson’s theory on what causes an object’s status to change from a neglected artifact (or rubbish) to a collector’s item (p. 34). Ultimately, she argues that it starts with discourse surrounding that item. As she puts it, “redemption begins with words of redemption”.

industry witnessed a proliferation of streaming technologies that unintentionally helped revive a seemingly forgotten medium. Through vinyl's sense of community and materiality, it persisted and re-emerged culturally relevant. The second decade of the new millennium bore witness as elements that previously spelled the death of physical goods suddenly contributed to the return of the "king" format, the vinyl record.

Conclusion

“...digital helped save the very analog record it nearly killed.”

-David Sax, author of *The Revenge of Analog* (2016)

The revitalized consumer interest in vinyl record culture in the twenty-first century represents a note-worthy milestone in the music industry, and further exhibits a fascinating intersection of histories including musicology, material culture, sociology, and several additional disciplines. While vinyl cannot claim to be the only historical artifact with renewed cultural interest after the height of its popularity, it offers valuable insight into what some refer to as an “analog renaissance” in the digital age.

Vinyl’s narrative offers considerable significance not only with regard to music history, but to the history of material culture at large. The chronology of vinyl records’ use by music listeners serves as a litmus test for a larger array of objects in which humans find significance amidst the digital world. Further, this study demonstrates the relatively short time (roughly four decades) in which a sense of community can turn a multi-billion-dollar industry on its head.

To the average modern music consumer, vinyl records seemingly returned to cultural prominence from oblivion overnight, a notion supported by their sale in national chains like Wal-Mart and Target. In actuality, mainstream music-listening communities largely abandoned vinyl culture in pursuit of newer, digital technologies. As this study demonstrates, vinyl relied on the sense of community fostered in developing underground scenes like hip-hop and Club to persist through various transformations in the music industry. These communities embraced vinyl records’ materiality, and further utilized

them to construct their own musical genres that went on to completely reshape the music industry.

While this study does not definitively answer every question regarding the revitalization of vinyl record culture in the twenty-first century, it serves as a foundation for further discussion on the relationship between music listeners and the mediums they use to make and play music. Additionally, this study offers insight regarding the effects of nostalgia on American popular culture and how consumers find identity and meaning in objects associated with music. The communities formed by hip-hop and Club artists and listeners exemplify the degree to which an entity the size of the American recorded music industry can shift in only a few short decades. What began as regional expressions of counterculture developed into trailblazing staples of American music that expanded even further beyond national borders.

Currently this study continues to prove its relevance as the contemporary nature of the topics discussed are still being witnessed by consumers all over the world. At the time of this study, online streaming through services like Spotify, Apple Music and SoundCloud are primary methods of listening to music. The music industry at present seems to have embraced the hybrid nature of combining analog and digital technologies. However, there is no telling what sort of changes could force the industry's hand into shifting to new mediums as technology rapidly progresses. Regarding musical artists and producers, the current revenue model of the industry seems stacked against them. For up-and-coming musicians, this study proves useful in its suggestion that a steadfast adoption of solely analog or digital production might not prove fruitful. While streaming

technologies allow listeners the endless opportunities of discovery, vinyl records offer listeners an authentic material experience that cannot be lost in HTML code.

This study also helps further the scholarly conversation around the resurgence of analog technologies in general. While vinyl provided the focus of this study, it offers further implications to the analog technologies mentioned by David Sax, such as film and paper. Humans have approached a technological point often thought unreachable throughout the entirety of human history. Unsurprisingly, not all people are quite ready to abandon the tools that enabled us to survive thousands of years prior to the advent of computers. When considering the world since March 2020 amidst the outbreak of a novel Coronavirus (COVID 19), this study seems even more significant. Humans watched as the promise of digital technologies saved some industries from collapse, while other facets of life struggled immensely. While many school-age students struggled to intellectually and emotionally connect to their teachers and peers through online means, this study might offer insight on the limits of digital technologies and further benefits of physical connection to the surrounding world.

The history of recorded sound has transformed immensely over the last hundred years and continues to shift daily. Further, the desire for music mediums of decades past invokes a sense of nostalgia in the average music listener. People feel connected to their history, in part, through music. Whether it reminds them of their younger years or evokes a sense of connection to a world in which they have never lived, vinyl records offer people an opportunity to experience history that is palpable. It is my hope that this study can offer guidance or help inspire others to explore and embrace the tangible experience of music amidst an increasingly digital world.

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