

Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record. By Richard Osborne. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. (Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series.) 213 pp. ISBN: 9781409440284.

Richard Osborne, who is the programme leader for popular music studies at Middlesex University, has been researching and writing about the vinyl record for much of the past decade. Using trade and consumer magazines as well as published interviews and other secondary sources, he looks at the vinyl record “anatomically.” Breaking the disc up into its component parts (needle, groove, disc, label, etc.) allows Osborne to trace the history of the record through each component. He teases changes of meaning and cultural significance out of a mass of comment from amateurs and professionals alike. This recognizes the fact that the value of vinyl today has just as much to do with the social aspects of record production and collection as with its supposed sonic superiority. There is nothing objective about the significance of the vinyl record. Its significance is socially constituted, just like that of the printed book, which in recent years has also benefited from an “anatomical” dissection.

What is interesting about this approach is the tracing of the link between the object and the artistic work, and the distinct but inextricable cultural significance of both. Other inventions, such as radio and television, have delivered content and have taken on deep cultural significance, but none has become as profoundly identified with its content as the record. In Osborne’s view, vinyl not only contains and delivers a work of art, it is a work of art in itself. Unlike the cassette, the CD, or the mp3, the vinyl record is indistinguishable from its content due to the nature of the recording: the legible groove which is a direct index of the recorded sound. There is nothing “virtual” about the sound contained in a vinyl record; its physicality is bound up with its aesthetic content.

Osborne maintains that the use of the long-play record by pop and rock artists in the 1960s was the high water mark of the format being identical with the work (“the album”), due in part to the increased playing-time, which allowed for more expansive artistic statements than the shorter 45 and 78 rpm discs. Yet, his discussion of the earliest classical recordings also shows that the record companies sought to equate the record with the work from the beginning. Osborne explores the ramifications of this business strategy as best he can, given the limited space of a general interest monograph.

The focus on the physical components of the vinyl disc allows Osborne to keep the fact of industrialization constantly in view. The ability to store and reproduce sound may have been a lofty scientific goal, but mass production of cylinders, discs, and related technologies cannot be separated from advances in heavy industry, technology, and marketing. The flourishing of the recorded music industry in the “age of mechanical reproduction” was the focus of two of the early twentieth century’s foremost cultural critics, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Osborne mentions Adorno and Benjamin in his discussion of the industrialization of music, but he is satisfied with a few quotes to illustrate the connection between the industrial production of both records and songs. As a result, the connection seems tenuous, and it is difficult to tell whether Osborne believes that the Frankfurt School view is borne out by the history of popular music and the recording industry. Indeed, the chief weakness of this very good book is its lack of a guiding theoretical principle. Osborne’s “anatomical” approach

separates the record into its component parts, but it also would have been useful to put them back together again.

For example, when Osborne looks at “race” and “hillbilly” recordings and their cultural context, he shows an awareness of the important categories of vinyl records beyond those with a more clearly defined historical value, such as early spoken-word and classical records. But the larger questions of race and class, and how they both helped define and were defined by new record labelling strategies, are only superficially addressed. The same is true of the development of the 12-inch dance-music single and the deconstruction of the record itself in the punk and new wave period, when the compact disc began to overshadow vinyl. Both of these subcultures (disco and punk) were oriented around particular kinds of music and attitudes to recordings, and while Osborne does mention this, his analysis could have gone much deeper. A discussion of the extent to which the Frankfurt School conception of social class might apply to these subcultures and their relationship to mass-reproduction would have helped to tie the book together. As it is, Adorno and Benjamin are brought in to provide a theoretical explanation for the industrialization of art, but are then ignored, except for the occasional brief mention.

Adorno especially would have been a useful critic to invoke in the second half of the book, which explores the connection between specific kinds of music with different vinyl formats. Just as the LP fostered the development of the album (and especially the rock album), the 45 became the preserve of the pop-single. By the 1970s, the 12-inch single became the mainstay of the dance and DJ market. In the 1980s, many of these clear-cut categories were being challenged, and it is in these discussions that Osborne’s familiarity with later musics (i.e. from the late 1970s on) is most informative. Even if Adorno’s hardline view of the degradation of culture under capitalist production goes too far, it would nevertheless have been interesting to engage with his ideas on “the culture industry.”

Osborne leaves perhaps the most studied element of the vinyl disc until the end. The record sleeve, like the title pages of books, quickly became more than simply a means of identifying a particular object. By the 1960s album covers had become works of art in their own right. Osborne’s British focus allows him to go into detail about the classic Beatles and Rolling Stones sleeves, but his discussion of classic American sleeves and the experimental disc designs of the 1970s and 80s is also interesting and valuable.

Richard Osborne has produced a concise, readable, and well-researched historical study of the vinyl record. The text is not overloaded with scholarly apparatus, although Osborne supports his argument with quotations from primary sources. On the whole, the book is addressed to a general rather than a specialized audience. Even the latter, however, will find that the narrative is lively, thought-provoking, and full of fascinating, little-known details. *Vinyl* would be an excellent addition to large public libraries as well as academic institutions that teach popular music and the history of recorded music.

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