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## “Why is it that we can’t let go of the vinyl record?”

Richard OSBORNE’s Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record

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premiers ouvrages à documenter aussi précisément la pratique des collectifs fondateurs du mouvement de l'improvisation libre tout en situant cette pratique dans un cadre esthétique fécond ; et ce n'est pas le moindre de ses mérites que d'ouvrir ainsi de nouvelles pistes pour la musicologie de l'improvisation.

Clément CANONNE

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### Richard Osborne, *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012.

If one were to try to summarize Richard Osborne's *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record*, we might describe it as an endeavour to discover what makes the vinyl disc record such a key medium in the determination of twentieth-century music by sound recording. As the author makes clear from the outset:

"Although vinyl lost its status as Britain's leading albums format as long ago as 1985 and thus looked set for a permanent decline, sales of vinyl LPs rose year on year by 43.7 per cent in 2011. In the US the success of the format was better still [...] And yet this wasn't the first of vinyl's revivals [...] Why is it that we can't let go of the vinyl record? This book is part of this phenomenon but it is also an attempt to explain it" (1-2).

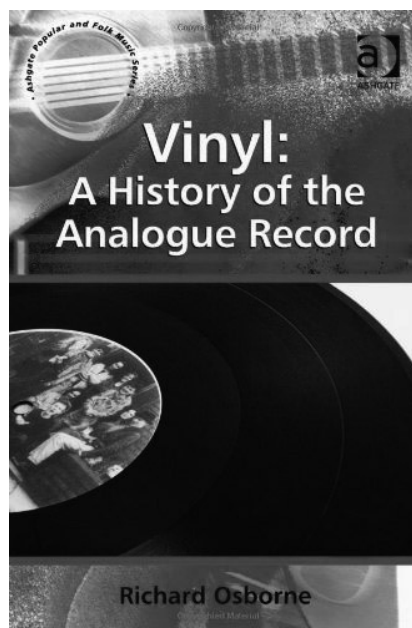
To do so, Osborne uses what I think is a truly brilliant idea: he takes the features that define the vinyl disc as a sound reproduction, a sound storage or a distribution medium (the groove, the disc shape, the paper record label, etc.) and he uses them as so many points of entry into the history of recorded music.

As an example, Chapter 1 ("The Groove") focuses on the development of sound recording technologies. Osborne begins by mentioning early inventions such as Edouard-Léon Scott de Martinville's 1856 Phonograph, noting that such machines only aimed at representing sound *visually*. Then he observes that it was actually Edison's "considering the mechanical reproduction, rather than the transcrip-

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tion, of visualized sound" (10) that led him to opt for grooved recording, before the groove itself began to influence music-making in the age of hip-hop DJing and turntablism. Similarly, Chapter 2 addresses an issue that has plagued many writers and researchers since Roland Gelatt's seminal work on the history of the phonograph (1955): how did the disc become the dominant medium for recorded music despite its being what Dave Laing once called "the limited 'playback' variant over the cylinder that could also be used to record" (35-36)? Here, Osborne comes up with a rather surprising (though well-argued) answer: "Ultimately, the triumph of the disc over the cylinder was a capitalist ploy" (42).

Amongst the remaining chapters, Chapter 3 approaches the vinyl record from the angle of its label and the evolution of the information featured on the latter piece of paper reflecting industry-related issues such as the changing relationships between artists and record companies, the development of so-called "label identity" ("the clearest outcome of labelling [lying] in the fact that the term 'record label' became a synonym for 'record company,'" 45), not forgetting record companies' strategies with regard to the development of particular markets and submarkets whose rise would eventually give birth to rock'n'roll. The following chapter extends the issue by analyzing vinyl's connections with the development of an industrial approach to "record production" (in all senses of the term), but it also uses that material as a pretext to get into more technical considerations in terms of sound reproduction. Chapter 5 then examines the development of the long-playing format (a format that was originally meant to accommodate for the needs of



classical musicians, and that finally turned out to have a greater influence on popular music as some artists favouring it "helped the separate divisions of 'pop' and 'rock' to emerge," 87), before Chapter 6 does the same with what was originally regarded as the LP's popular music counterpart: the 45-rpm single. In Chapter 7, the B-side and the 12-inch single offer new perspectives on how the vinyl disc helped shape the history of popular music (even though they were originally developed to "[expand] the analogue single," those formats eventually "fostered new forms of music" as artists began "creat[ing] "b-side material and mix[ing] 12" versions of their songs," 143). Finally, Chapter 8 traces the evolution of the record sleeve and explores

its altering the way in which records were perceived from the days of the Kraft paper sleeve to "the real fillip for record sleeve design [that] came with the introduction of the LP" (164). In this respect, it would be difficult to disagree with the comment that "[i]f there is an accepted golden era of LP sleeve design it is the period of the late 1960s to the mid 1970s. During this period the LP came to closest to being a stand-alone object, divorced from single releases and their attendant broadcast media" (174). To put it differently, the aforementioned fillip did not actually confine to record sleeve design: as the author seems to imply throughout the chapter's pages, it also represented the final step towards the crowning of the vinyl disc as the ultimate artifact in the history of sound recording.

By the end of the conclusion, Osborne recapitulates his three aims when he started the book: "to detail the history of the vinyl record; to outline the format's relationship with music; and to account for vinyl's continued popularity." He also notes that, "in effect, these aims have merged" (186). And in fact they did as,

by approaching one and the same object from such different yet interrelated angles, those eight chapters do help the reader develop a thorough understanding of how the vinyl disc came to embody the history of sound recording, the history of popular music or even that of the recording industry while shaping those histories at the same time. Given this clever and engaging formal scheme, and considering it helps organize an argument that is particularly well researched and documented while providing an overall pleasant and stimulating reading experience, I believe Osborne's book to be one of the best recent contributions to what Amanda Bayley described, back in 2009, as "the increasingly diverse research currently being undertaken in the field of recorded music" (2009: 2). For these reasons, I am certain *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record* will soon feature prominently on many bookshelves, alongside such classics as Andre Millard's *America on Record* (1995) or Mark Katz's *Capturing Sound* (2004).

Olivier JULIEN

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