

Vinyl is back, at least when it comes to phonograph records

Contributed by Cassandra Lizaire
Tuesday, 27 May 2008

Record shops are dying out and CD purchases are dwindling, but the love for old-fashioned records is still alive - and the market is thriving.

The business of buying and selling vinyl, even making new records, appeals to a select but growing group of audiophiles.

About five years ago, the singer and jazz guitarist George Benson strolled into Record-Rama Sound Archives in Pittsburgh, Pa., with his confident swagger, in a big fur coat.

A Pittsburgh native, Benson was in town, among other reasons, to buy copies of his own records.

He'd been producing music since the late 1950s and many of his records were out of print and hard to find.

Before Benson left, he turned to ask something of Record-Rama owner Paul Mawhinney but hesitated.

"Nah, you won't have it," Benson said.

"I know what you're going to ask," Mawhinney replied, as he went in the back room and found a record in the archived catalog.

Sure enough, Mawhinney brought out the 45 of "Lover's Prayer," a doo-wop record from 1959.

"George just burst out in tears," said Mawhinney.

It was the first song Benson had ever recorded and he wanted a copy for his mother.

Most people don't know that back then, Benson sang as part of Pittsburgh high school sensation, The Altairs.

Mawhinney, 68, a record enthusiast and collector for more than 40 years, is not like most people.

His veritable music museum includes three million vinyl records and CDs—among them gems such as ZZ Top's first recording and a never-released album of Rolling Stones singles—as well as a million-song archive that Mawhinney has been cataloging since 1968.

He's now trying to sell Record Rama itself - on eBay.

It has attracted several bids in the \$3 million range.

"As I could see the business disappearing in the last 10 years, I had to figure out how to pass the collection on to the next generation," said Mawhinney.

Yet even as stores like Record-Rama and Strangeland Records in Annandale, Va., and community shops like the Harlem Record Shack in New York City are being driven out of business by high overhead costs and discounters, vinyl records are gaining in popularity.

Last year, the sale of vinyl grew by 13 percent to 990,000 even as CD sales have continued to fall, according to Nielsen SoundScan figures.

And even though digital music accounted for 23 percent of music purchases in 2007, according to Nielsen SoundScan, a format that dates to the early 1800s continues to be a viable source of music entertainment.

Vinyl appeals to the die hard classic record enthusiasts as well as to a younger generation of music lovers who are unearthing the "plastic gold" from their parents' collections.

"Records are my most prized possessions," says Sarah Chrosniak, 23, of Nashville Tenn.

A college student, Chrosniak began collecting vinyls six years ago, jump-starting her career as the hip-hop turntabale artist DJ Eticut.

Chrosniak enjoys vinyls for their gritty sound and cover artwork.

When it comes to eclectic vinyls, "the art of digging is really important," she said.

"I also find really abstract music I don't feel I'd ever find looking at CDs."

"Vinyl is still the king of the music formats," says Wes Bender, a photographer from Brooklyn, N.Y.

Bender, 43, also works in high end audio.

He said the combination of a powerful system and quality vinyl make for a sensual and moving experience.

"CD is a very sterile kind of format," said Bender.

"It's like listening in a vacuum.

Vinyl is more intimate; the diamond stylus is cutting through the vinyl and you hear everything."

While the reign of iPods has undercut the CD market, it has seemed to have the opposite impact on vinyl.

The wider market for vinyl also includes people who use a special turntable to convert vinyl into CDs, DJ's who buy 12 inch singles to scratch at clubs, and collectible stores.

"Decrease is a misnomer," said Scott Neuman, founder of ForeverVinyl.com, an online record store specializing in collectible vinyl and music.

"Vinyl still sells."

Of late, Neuman said, punk rock records from the '70s and '80s have increased in popularity.

And Northern Soul, a category of lesser-known soul music from the '60s and '70s once popular in New England, is also seeing more sales.

Northern Soul Albums by artists like The Impressions of Motown Records can be worth \$1,000.

"People like the packaging" of vinyl, said Neuman, who has seen traffic to his Web site peak in the last two years.

"We'd take the record out of the sleeve and smell it.

People would listen with friends, share the listening experience and read the lyric notes that came with most albums.”

Current artists are paying homage.

Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band's 2007 album "Magic" came out on vinyl, as did this year's re-release of Michael Jackson's 1983 classic "Thriller." Newer groups like Radiohead have also released several vinyl LPs.

"Kids are listening to iPods hanging on their heads, but if you put a vinyl record on and played it next to one of those crazy things, it would be a whole different sound," said Mawhinney.

"The quality of a vinyl record is superior to the mp3 sound from compact files because when they record on mp3s, the base and high sound is eliminated, and low sounds are compressed."

There is one thing that the vinyl industry can't change: size matters.

"The biggest problem is that people don't have time to listen to music anymore," Neuman said.

"iPods you can take with you anywhere but you can't do that with records."

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