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From the record store to MySpace: sharing and creating music with records and mp3s

The way music is produced, circulated, accessed and consumed has undergone a fundamental change as digital storage has become both the industry and the individual's standard. It is now easier to access new music thanks to the Internet and the mp3 format. It has also become increasingly easy to create, mix, record and produce your own music thanks to both this storage format and the wide variety of easily accessible music computer programs. It would appear that the modern music experience (listening, accessing, creating, producing) is an example of the democratization of technology.

This paper takes a closer look at this supposition and its implications by attempting to gain a deeper understanding of the value consumers and producers place on two very different storage formats: the vinyl record and the mp3. One format is tangible, bulky, breakable; the other is intangible, modifiable, ephemeral. We were curious to know whether the disassociation of the object and the sound it traditionally contains lessens the value of mp3s? This format is easy to access and easy to exchange, does this then mean it is more disposable and therefore less valuable than a vinyl record? MP3s, however, are more easily modified, or mashed, to create unique, exclusive products that are potentially more valuable than a vinyl record.

Three main reasons compelled us to choose to compare these two formats. Firstly, by comparing vinyls and mp3s, we hoped to target a specific type of consumer and identify the behavior patterns associated with these two storage formats. Vinyl records have steadily declined in popularity as cheaper and less bulky formats have been introduced. That said the vinyl format still remains popular amongst certain groups of consumers. Because the vinyl record is no longer the industry standard, those who go out of their way to purchase this object must do so for specific reasons. We argue that vinyl record buyers are more motivated and have greater specialized music knowledge than the average music consumer; ie. the person who purchases a few CDs a year. The mp3 format, on the other hand, is ubiquitous. We therefore wanted to know if there was any overlap between consumer behaviors related to these two formats and why, or why not.

A second reason for focusing on these two storage formats is their relationship with a

specific music genre in France: *musique électronique*, loosely translated as electronica¹. Small labels specialized in the various sub-genres of electronica continue to press vinyls, sometimes releasing albums only in this format. As the name indicates, electronica has a strong relationship with technology. MP3s therefore play an important role in the circulation of this genre of music.

The third reason for our choice is the important role these formats play in the electronica DJ's production activity. There are those DJs who use only vinyls, those who have abandoned "old school" methods and use only mp3s and those who use both. Since DJs are one of our target groups, these two formats were well adapted to this analysis.

Methods

Our investigation into the current musical landscape draws upon both qualitative and quantitative methods. This paper presents our preliminary findings which are predominantly qualitative, however we are in the process of collecting further data that will allow us to undertake quantitative analyses. Combining these two methods will allow us to build a more complete picture of the behaviors we are studying (Crossley, 2008).

Since our aim is to understand the value music consumers place on vinyl records and mp3s, we created a questionnaire with both open and closed questions in order to elucidate the consumer's listening, purchasing downloading, sharing behaviors as well as any production activity they may participate in related to these two formats. To further our understanding of certain behaviors, we also did in depth interviews. Who we interviewed depended on the willingness of the responder as well as their responses to the questionnaire.

We also did a textual analysis of two specialized music magazines: *Trax* and *Tsugi*. Both are monthly magazines dedicated to electronica and are published in France. We had access to *Trax* since 1999. *Tsugi*² is a newer publication and we had access to volumes published since 2007. Both magazines publish multiple interviews with DJs and the DJ's

¹ In France, the term *musique électronique* includes a number of different styles such as house, techno, jungle, trance, hardcore and dubstep. Electronica is a separate genre in France. It appeared in the 1990s and is a form of experimental music. Some of the artists usually classified in this genre are Aphex Twin, Autechre and Prefuse 73.

² TRAX was bought by TECHNIKART in July 2007. Following this, some members of the TRAX editorial team decided to launch TSUGI, an independent publication dedicated to *musique électronique*.

use of mp3s and vinyls is a frequent question. We also analyzed any articles where these formats were mentioned. The use of textual analysis allowed us to track certain behaviors over time and gave us access to professional DJs' opinions. That said, interest in mp3s is a recent phenomenon and DJs were rarely asked their opinion on this subject prior to 2006.

Our goal is to do a cross-cultural comparative study of French and American music consumers' behaviors and production activities. At the moment, we have results only for France. While the majority of our results in France come from people who consider themselves to be part of the electronica music scene due to where we conducted our initial research, we do not plan on limiting ourselves to this genre. Vinyl records continue to be popular amongst a number of music scenes. In the United States, electronica does not have the same status as in France and we foresee American responders to be part of different music scenes. It will be interesting to see whether this hypothesis holds true, or not and for what reasons.

Consumer behaviors

1. Vinyl records

People who are more casual music consumers are sometimes surprised to learn that it is still possible to buy vinyl records. And, it is true that most major French music store chains do not have a wide selection of records. The bins are hidden in a corner, or mixed in with other items. There are, however, a number of independent music stores that specialize in vinyls. And, the vast majority of people in our study who purchase vinyl records do so at specialized stores (80%), or from specialized websites (47%). Vinyl record consumers are collectors. They have a lot of records and are able to give an accurate count of their vinyls. The object (67%) rather than the sound quality (47%) is what appeals to record consumers most. Few people share their records, or choose who they lend them to carefully, because these objects are delicate and need to be treated with care. A number of people explained that they had, once upon a time, lent records to friends and either never got them back, or they were returned in awful shape—scratched, or misshapen. Unlike an mp3, these objects are not easily replaced. Record owners value these objects as illustrated by both their attitude towards sharing and their representation of the record as a collectible item. Records are both private and public objects, since a number of people interviewed also DJ-ed professionally. Listening to a record is not always a private experience, either. Although record consumers prefer not to lend the object, they do share the listening experience, either while shopping in specialized stores, in their homes, or in clubs.

2. MP3s

Of those questioned, most also listen to music in mp3 format. A small number of people did not have a way of accessing this format and one person did not listen to mp3s, because of the poor sound quality. This overlap is not surprising given the popularity of the mp3 format in general and its role in music discovery.

Those who collect vinyls also tend to have large numbers of mp3s. Unlike their vinyl collection, however no one was able to give us an exact number of the mp3s they had. There are a number of reasons for this difference: mp3s are free, or far less expensive than records and therefore people pay less attention to the number they are accumulating; because mp3s are not tangible in the same way as vinyls, cognitively people have a more difficult time calculating the number they have; mp3s are less valuable than records and therefore less important to the music consumer.

Most people asked mentioned downloading more mp3s than they can listen to. In fact, a common behavior seems to be hoarding mp3s. Very few of our responders ever deleted mp3s, even those they no longer listened to. We wonder whether this population has transposed their consumption behavior from one format to another, or whether this is frequent with mp3s since they are so accessible and therefore easy to accumulate.

Another interesting point concerns the pros and cons of mp3s. Those who we could qualify as digital natives had to think about this question whereas, digital migrants had ready responses. After some thought, digital natives were able to give a few pros and cons, but our observations led us to believe that they may never have thought about this before perhaps, because they have less distance from the format having grown up with it. While some digital natives may prefer vinyl records for their sound quality, they had seemingly never compared the quality of a record and an mp3. This may be, because digital natives have less experience with records than digital migrants. This leads us to believe that there may be other reasons why young adults collect vinyl records, such as reputation.

Sharing mp3s proved more popular than sharing records. About half of our responders shared their mp3s with others. Sharing mp3s is also bi-directional, something that was not present with records. About a quarter of our responders said that they received mp3s from friends and family members. The most popular way our responders shared their mp3s were CD burning, instant messaging and participation in peer to peer networks. This last behavior is also one of the more popular ways people procure mp3s,

ie. illegal downloading. Legal and legal downloading were the main ways people chose to find mp3s.

3. Illegal downloading

We were not interested in entering the public debate on illegal downloading; however, we thought it was important to know where people stood on this subject considering the latest legal developments in France. President Sarkozy's administration has taken a tough stance against illegal downloading, or pirating as it is called in both the media and legal documents, and proposed a controversial law that was recently debated in the National Assembly. The law set up a 3 step process to target illegal downloaders. First, downloaders would receive a cease and desist email from the government followed by a registered mail letter. If, despite these two warnings the person continued to download illegally, his internet service would be cut off from anywhere between two months to a year. The European Parliament responded by passing a law stating that it was illegal to cut off anyone's internet service. And, the National Assembly voted down the law. The general public and the media have come out strongly against this law. Despite the negative publicity it has received, it is going to be sent back to the National Assembly for further debates.

We wanted to know whether people would continue to download illegally if this law was passed. The response was overwhelmingly positive. This response may have something to do with the president's negative image, as well as the fact that music consumers' behaviors have changed for better, or for worse. Despite the prevalence of illegal downloading, when people encounter an artist that they like many do purchase the mp3 in another format (46%).

Circulating knowledge

Music consumers continue to consume because they learn about new musical events—bands, genres, artists, mixes, edits, shows. For those people for whom music is an important part of their lives, they are part of networks, or music scenes, that circulate musical knowledge (Crossley, 2008; Shiga, 2007; Wendel, 2008). We set out to discover how people keep up with the latest music news.

Prior to the Internet, there were already established ways in which music knowledge circulated such as specialized publications, radio and TV shows, word of mouth, concerts and clubs, music stores. All of these still exist and continue to provide spaces for the circulation and sharing of music knowledge. We found that the employees at specialized

stores were one of the major sources people turned to for recommendations, advice and general conversations. Word of mouth, friends and family, and concerts also proved popular, as did specialized magazines and newspapers. The networks already in place continue to provide a wealth of information for music consumers. In the small specialized stores we visited, employees knew many of their clients by name and took the time to talk with them and offer suggestions.

Nowadays, the internet is also a rich source of music knowledge. 80% of the people in this study turn to the Internet to learn about new artists and to listen to music. MySpace was the most popular website mentioned, but Deezer, LastFM and other specialized streaming sites were also mentioned frequently. Most people, however, used the internet to listen to music they had read about, been recommended or heard on a radio station. The internet was not necessarily the first place they turned to for music knowledge, but was rather used like a listening booth.

The internet networks have been integrated into the pre-existing networks. Both are richer for it. The internet is less location bound, whereas the sales staff at specialized stores grounds the knowledge in a specific location. We are curious to see whether, or not the American networks used to circulate music knowledge are structured similarly to those we discovered in France.

DJ behaviors

The second part of this paper looks at how DJs situate themselves in relation to vinyls and mp3s. The last decade has been a surge in the development of programs and specialized technologies targeted to DJs. In some cases, DJs participate in the development of software packages. We were therefore interested in seeing how the evolution of software coupled with the arrival of mp3s may have modified the DJ's approach to her job.

1. Tool and software

The tools DJs use have evolved from the original setup of two turntables and a mixer. The first CD turntables were commercialized in the early 1990s which allowed the DJ to use a greater number of songs. But, mixing with CD turntables truly became popular in the early years of this century with wide spread adoption of the mp3 format. Mixing with CDs (either original albums, or specially burned CDs of mp3s or other digital formats) offers new technical possibilities such as the "point cue", which allows you to determine

a specific point in a song where you want to start mixing as well as the ability to create loops. Both of these are impossible with vinyl records.

Some DJs have taken advantage of the new technologies on offer and have completely abandoned turntables, be they for vinyls or CDs, and mix only on laptops. This type of mixing allows you to access thousands of tracks on your hard drive which opens up creative possibilities. But, it can be a problem if your computer crashes.

Hybrid solutions also exist which combine the advantages of the different technologies and mixing formats currently available. Tork (2006) is an example of this hybridization. One or two turn tables (vinyl or CD) and a mixer can be plugged into its Audio USB interface. The Tork software can also run independently, without external turntables. The possibilities offered by this type of installation are numerous such as, simple tempo synchronization, use of VST (external effects such as echoes, delay, distortion³), compatibility with iTunes and synchronization of multiple digital formats. Serato Scratch Live is a similar type of tool that is very popular amongst professional DJs.

Over time, DJs have added instruments to their sets, like drum machines and effects. The music they now play has become more and more personalized.

2. The vinyl/MP3 debate

There are a number of reasons why professional DJs have abandoned vinyl records. There are pragmatic arguments: "C'est cool, j'aime bien les CDs. C'est un bon moyen de voyager sans stress, car on n'a plus peur d'égarer ses galettes » (Trax # 111) ; "(le vinyle) s'abîme, il prend beaucoup de place (...) » (Trax # 110) [It's cool, I like CDs. It's a good to travel without stress, because you're no longer afraid of losing your records. [Vinyl records] are easily damaged, they take up a lot of space (...)] Another reason for this change in behavior is the easy access to mp3s. One DJ said "C'est fantastique. Depuis que le mp3 s'est répandu dans les clubs, j'ai laissé tomber les vinyles, je ne joue plus que des CD. Ce qu'il y a de génial, c'est que tu peux télécharger un morceau n'importe où dans le monde, ce qui est très pratique en tournée." (Trax #117) [It's fantastic. Since the mp3 has appeared in clubs, I've dropped records and only play CDs. What's great is that you can download tracks anywhere in the world, which is very practical when you're on tour.]

³ VST stands for Virtual Studio Technology. It was developed by the German firm Steinberg. These external programs and plug ins work with a host in most cases, although there are some stand alone versions.

The whole music sector has been in upheaval since the early 2000s. Legal and illegal downloading which led to an increase in mp3 mixing is one of the elements that caused record sales to fall. As Gildas, co-founder of the Franco-Japanese label Kitsuné explains, "on en produit encore par passion et par fétichisme mais je me demande pour combien de temps. Ces six derniers mois, les ventes de vinyles ont été divisées par cinq. Je ne sais pas où cela va s'arrêter. Clairement, le vinyle n'a plus de sens, économiquement parlant en tout cas. Même les DJ's n'en jouent plus. Cela reste un très bel objet. On a longtemps dit "le vinyle ne mourra jamais". Mais là, je pense qu'on y est. Les blogs ont tué le vinyle. » (Tsugi # 13) [we still produce records out of passion or fetishism, but I wonder how long this will continue. Over the last six months record sales have been divided by five. I don't know where this is going to stop. Clearly, the vinyl record no longer makes economic sense. Even DJs no longer play them. Records remain a very beautiful object. For a long time, we said the 'vinyl record will never die.' But, I think we're at the end. Blogs have killed records.]

That said, not all professional DJs have abandoned vinyls. Elisa Do Brasil declares, "J'aime le son du vinyle, voir le sillon qui change et qui défile devant mes yeux, j'aime faire ma sélection avant de partir mixer." (Trax # 101) [I love the sound, to watch the grooves spin in front of my eyes, I love to select records before I go mix.] There is a real attachment to the object for DJs who continue to use this format, as Manu le Malin explains "J'aime les vinyles, j'aime leur odeur, j'aime les manipuler. Je les annote parce que je ne connais aucun titre ou presque. T'imagines si je devais jouer des mp3 ? Quand je prépare mon bac pour les week-end c'est l'impro, le feeling d'un moment précis." (Trax # 109) [I love records, I love their smell, I like manipulating them. I annotate them because I don't know any titles. Can you imagine if I had to play mp3s? When I prepare my case for the week end, my selection is based on improvisation, a feeling at a specific moment.]

3. The democratization of technology

The advent of computer programs has democratized mixing. Even if the number of programs remains limited, there are affordable versions targeted to the general public. Furthermore, professional versions are easily accessible thanks to illegal downloading. Anyone can therefore be considered to have the potential to become a DJ, thanks to the democratization of technology. That said, this revolution can be considered a mirage. The problems are similar to those encountered with programs for musical composition and home studios. Just because access has become easier does not mean that the product produced will be of quality. These preoccupations are present in interviews with professional DJs.

A journalist asked The Hacker in late 2006 if he "was pessimistic about his future in deejaying [given] the decrease of record sales and the simultaneous increase of programs that simulate the DJs *savoir faire*." (DJ Style, 2006) For the DJ "Quoi qu'il arrive, l'humain aura toujours un rôle à jouer. Si le DJ n'a pas une culture musicale, un style à lui, dans la façon de sélectionner et agencer les disques, tu peux avoir la meilleure technologie du monde, ça ne servira à rien. En revanche, si on a les deux, il n'y a quasiment plus de limites. Je trouve que la culture musicale reste la clé d'un bon DJ en plus de sa capacité à écouter le public et à répondre à ses attentes. » [Regardless of what happens, the human will always have a role to play. If the DJ doesn't have music knowledge, his own style, in the way he selects and combines tracks, you can have the best technology in the world, it will be worthless. That said, if you have both, there are practically no limits. I find that music knowledge is still the key to being a good DJ as well as his capacity to listen to the public and respond to their desires.] Dave Clarke takes a similar stance. "[L]es nouveaux logiciels facilitent la tâche des DJs et les libèrent d'une pression inutile. Mais, ils ne peuvent se substituer ni à l'inspiration, ni à la créativité de quelqu'un qui sent véritablement la musique. Le numérique ne donnera jamais du talent aux 'mauvais DJs'.» (Trax # 109) [The new programs make the DJ's job easier and free him from useless stress. But, they cannot replace the inspiration and the creativity of someone who truly feels music. Anything digital will never give 'bad DJs' talent.]

Even if DJs do not necessarily agree on whether it is best to use records of mp3s, they do not see their creative process as limited by a storage format. Being a DJ is more than just being able to use software, or spin a record. That said, DJs are not closed off, they too take advantage of new technological developments and new formats to feed their creative process and make their jobs easier. As Richie Hawkins says, "Moi aussi, je suis fasciné par le vinyle. Mais il faut savoir apprécier les avantages offerts par la technologie. Le vinyle (...) a beaucoup de défauts. Il s'abîme, il prend beaucoup de place (...) Il ne faut pas refuser ces avancées. Le mouvement Techno est basé sur la technologie, il ne peut évoluer qu'en la suivant. » (Trax #110) [I'm also fascinated by vinyls. But, you have to know how to appreciate the advantages offered by technology. Vinyls (...) have lots of bad points. They are easily damaged, they take up a lot of space. You can't refuse these advances. The Techno movement is based on technology and can only evolve by following it.]

Conclusion

The conclusions that we can draw at this point are suggestive rather than concrete, since we are still awaiting data. That said, it is possible to see that consumer behaviors are different depending on the format. Music consumers appear to value vinyls more than mp3s mainly because the vinyl is an object in and of itself with a history and it represents a collective musical memory. One of the behaviors we hope to understand more fully is what compels young adults to begin and continue buying vinyls—is it because of the reputation they gain, the mythology of the object, what they do with the object?

There are certain similarities in the way people relate to vinyls and mp3s. Although some networks have been moved online, the circulation of music knowledge online and off is complimentary. We will be looking more deeply into how people make sense of these two formats in terms of the continuity and rupture of certain behaviors and processes. What we can say at this point is that downloading has become an accepted behavior and that if laws are passed limiting this, people will not necessarily revert to previous behaviors. CD sales, for example, will not necessarily bounce back to pre-illegal downloading numbers.

One of our hypotheses is that the use of technology and the preferred format of those who DJ is not dependent on age. This is visible in the interviews quoted above. One of the areas we would like to develop is a comparison of professional and amateur DJs' behaviors.

Since our goal is to do a cross-cultural comparative study, we are interested in seeing how Americans relate to these two formats, whether the vinyl record is specific to a certain genre, given that French and American musical cultures are different. We are also curious to see whether or not Americans download tracks by non-American artists given that the Internet gives access to music around the world.

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