

## EXHIBITION ESSAY

### Revolutions Per Minute

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When I started to develop tastes in music, I started to buy records. That was in the early and mid-eighties when twelve-inch LP records were the standard medium for storage and playback. Over a period during which I moved frequently and then worked a traveling job, tired of lugging several crates of records around with me, I stored the crates with friends and stopped buying more. That period happened to coincide with the ascent of compact discs as the standard commercial medium. When I resumed purchasing records around 1994, I stuck with buying the vinyl LPs, since they were still available in the better stores, and were often cheaper than CDs. As other people unloaded their old LPs, used record stores seemed to have better selections than ever.

But something definitely had changed. New vinyl releases typically were issued on a strictly limited basis, and, after a period of dual format release, most new records were no longer issued in twelve-inch form at all. By continuing to purchase LPs, I seemed to have become, without really trying, a record collector. This had nothing to do with the size of my collection (I still only have about six hundred LPs, a very modest bunch compared to the people I've known who have thousands, though I've probably lost, thrown out, wrecked, and sold or traded at least a couple hundred more) and everything to do with the mentality of acquisition. The same consumer activity which I had practiced all through high school and college and then had lately resumed—namely, shopping for and buying LP records—was no longer a matter governed purely by considerations of taste. Buying had become fraught by the reality of scarcity, such that purchases were now based as much on calculations of opportunity as on taste. In other words, buying a record was no longer simply about the music. The values governing the activity had shifted around me.

The evolution of popular music itself added to my increasingly complex view of the twelve-inch LP. The emergence of hip hop in particular tells of the then-changing contours surrounding the LP format from another angle. Traced to the ghettos of late seventies New York, hip hop is said to have been invented by young, urban black people partly in response to cuts in public school funding for arts and music. In a classic demonstration of resourcefulness, members of these local scenes utilized the turntable and record collection as an instrument in itself. By mimicking and then taking further the tricks of a few local radio disc jockeys, a new breed of DJ crafted a repertoire of scratching, mixing, looping, and sampling. Within five years of its appearance, hip hop DJ-ing was well on its way to becoming a sophisticated artistic practice in its own right.

By exploiting what were then non-standard ways of conducting the playback of an LP, artists discovered, invented, and conventionalized an entire palette of previously unheard or altered sounds. They did so by experimenting with turntable technology that was pretty much the same as a radio disc jockey's decks, which were themselves not much different from the average end user's set up multiplied by two—the same home system that was then in the process of being shed by capitalist production in anticipation of its eventual extinction. The forces which finally

rendered me a "collector" also provided the setting for an intriguing theme by which to interpret the formation of hip hop: the linking of a marginalized population of cultural workers to the utilization of what became a marginalized technology. By the time the vinyl LP began receding from the commercial horizon, a specific subcultural population already had launched an aggressive redefinition of what turntable and LP technology could be made to do, and in the process helped to pave the way for how the vinyl format would further evolve. As I navigated the changed retail terrain of vinyl and at the same time observed hip hop permeate the pop cultural landscape, I came to see hip hop as a complicated example of an art form which returns a technology to its specificity as it becomes outmoded by capitalism. As standard vinyl LPs became individual signifiers of relative rarity, so did my generic consumer behavior become "collecting." As the CD became what one "plays," a vinyl record became what one "scratches" or "mixes."

If hip hop DJs established the sample as a basic element in one genre's musical vocabulary, then house, techno, and other dance DJs created entirely new galaxies of sound across their dozens of genres and sub-genres. They did so by using the whole spectrum of turntable manipulations plus digital processing that together now make up the basic skills of DJ-ing. While the conventional narrative locates the birth of modern dance music in Detroit and Chicago, the precursors of what, at times, were essentially noise experiments, range from Stockhausen to Lee "Scratch" Perry to Brian Eno. When considered in the context of such diverse lineages, the great thirst for sounds in the world of electronic music and rave culture is not surprising. This demand produced an equalization of sorts among technological platforms. Digitally generated tracks were pressed up as vinyl so as to lend "turntable-ability" even while DJs obsessively searched the used record bins for odd sounds to be filtered through samplers and sequencers and bought new tracks by the armful for remixing. The observable result to me, the remnant vinyl consumer, is that the world of new vinyl has been transformed largely into a market aimed at satisfying the DJs unquenchable need. The records themselves are twelve-inch single tracks meant to be mixed in the studio and in live DJ sets, and are basically of no interest to a listener of conventional LPs. This is vinyl as raw, unfinished material. The art and craft of DJ-ing required that a DJ become a collector of vinyl, but a collector who shops not for what they want to listen to but rather for what they can make out of it.

To conclude this brief reflection, it is interesting to note that electronic music, more than anything else, has introduced the first significant crack in my commitment to buying primarily LPs since resuming collecting. The playback of electronic music lends itself to the CD, with its capacity for extended continuous play, a potential which was never genuinely relevant to pop/rock-centered music, or even to jazz, and if anything, made possible too many unnecessarily long records. In electronic music, there finally seems to be reason for me to buy CDs from the standpoint of wanting to preserve the integrity of the listening experience. Club DJ sets are tracks mixed, morphed, and segued one into the other; a recorded presentation of the music ought to duplicate that seamlessness. CDs can do that, LPs cannot. More than any debate about sound quality or cover art, it is this difference that to my mind makes the case for CDs. It has come full circle, in a way: when I buy CDs, I am back to being just a music fan and consumer because the condition of scarcity does not exist. Not yet, at least. A future of nothing but file sharing and streamed music may yet render me a collector in two formats. And if that happens, the only thing I wonder about is, what will the music sound like then?

**Dan S. Wang is an artist and writer living in Chicago who loves having to get up to flip the record.**