Patina of Sound

Valuing Vinyl Records as Relics of Aged Interaction

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In *Things: In Touch with the Past* (2019), Carolyn Korsmeyer builds on her earlier work in which she argues that our tactile interactions with objects connect us to the past, enriching our aesthetic experiences and imbuing artifacts with deeper meaning. Building on these insights, our paper addresses the puzzle of why some individuals prefer vinyl records despite the availability of music in sonically superior and cheaper digital formats. We argue that the physical act of handling records with care, being in touch with objects with unique histories, the traces of use and age that manifest in how they sound, and the extra effort involved in playing them contribute aesthetic dimensions to the experience of listening to music on vinyl that digital formats lack, which accounts for vinyl's unique appeal. | *Keywords: Vinyl, Appreciative Practices, Touch, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Philosophy of Music, Rituals, Age Value*

1. Introduction

In *Things: In Touch with the Past* (2019), Carolyn Korsmeyer builds on her earlier work in which she argues that our tactile interactions with objects connect us to the past, enriching our aesthetic experiences and imbuing artifacts with deeper meaning. In this paper, we extend Korsmeyer's insights on touch to help explain a particular puzzle about music listening preferences: namely, why certain individuals prefer vinyl records when most of the music they listen to is more readily and cheaply available in digital forms that reproduce the music with greater sonic clarity. We will argue that the physicality of vinyl records, combined with their historical and tactile qualities, contributes to a richer aesthetic experience than listening to music on digital formats. This experience is not just about the sound of the record; it is also about the special form of engagement that playing and collecting vinyl records offers. The physical act of handling records with care, being in touch with objects with unique histories, the visual appeal of the covers' aged surfaces, and the rituals involved in playing them all contribute to their aesthetic value.

We proceed in several stages. First, we explore the resurgence of vinyl and offer some initial observations in response to our puzzle of why people prefer cumbersome LPs with lower sonic clarity over CDs and high-quality digital audio files. Second, using Korsmeyer's notion of the transitivity of touch, we explain how the particular histories of these artifacts impact our aesthetic experience of vinyl. Third, we explore the role that agedness plays in the experience of music on vinyl. We value records for their sonic agedness, attending to aural imperfections gained through time. Additionally, their age value is present visually and through touch, making them unique objects of multisensory attention. Finally, we examine the ritual aspect of listening to vinyl, emphasising how these practices enhance the overall aesthetic experience.

2. Wax and Wane

Part of vinyl's appeal is that it is an outmoded technology with a longer history than digital formats. For most of the twentieth century, phonograph records were the dominant means by which people listened to recorded music. They were originally shellac discs, but have been vinyl discs since the 1940s. In 1948, Columbia Records introduced the twelve-inch "long-play" record, or LP, and it has been the industry standard for music on vinyl ever since. However, the vinyl LP was dethroned as the best-selling format in 1982 by cassette tapes, which were in turn displaced by compact discs in 1993 (Breckenridge and Tsitsos, 2017, p. 72).

Rather than mourning vinyl's demise, most listeners welcomed it. Vinyl records are cumbersome compared to CDs and other high-quality digital formats. To play a record properly takes special care, as a particular set of skills are needed to operate the equipment without damaging the record. (This will be our focus in Section 5 below.) And whereas digital formats are portable, allowing you to listen to music on the go, vinyl records are necessarily stationary. Further, music played through decent speakers on high-quality digital formats is as clear as can be. In contrast, vinyl records always suffer to some degree from both the crackle caused by the stylus touching the groove and from the pops and clicks caused by static, dust, and physical defects that result from ordinary use over time. In short, music on vinyl requires more care and effort – not to mention it is usually more expensive – and yet pays us back with less sonic clarity than many digital formats.

In light of these significant drawbacks, it may seem peculiar that vinyl has recently seen a major resurgence. In the United States, for instance, sales of vinyl LPs have grown considerably, increasing from fewer than a million copies in 2006 to nearly 17 million in 2018 (Archer, 2019), and to over 49.6 million in 2023 (McIntyre, 2024). Vinyl records overtook CDs as the top-selling physical format in 2020, and now generate over $1 billion for the music industry annually (Levine, 2023). One factor contributing to vinyl's resurgence is certainly nostalgia on the part of collectors who grew up with the format. Another is individuals aiming to increase their social standing by associating themselves with an outmoded technology. Indeed, nearly half of all young

people who buy vinyl records, who are the demographic most responsible for the format's resurgence (Palmerino, 2015), don't even own record players and thus don't actually listen to the records they own (Lepa and Tritakis, 2016, p. 19). Sceptics may think that these overly-romantic nostalgiacs and status-seeking hipsters fully explain vinyl's present-day appeal. However, many people who buy and listen to vinyl records don't fall into either category. In what follows, we will offer an account that makes better sense of why many music consumers prefer the format than this sceptical way of thinking does.[1]

One potential response to our proposed puzzle would be to argue that these individuals prefer vinyl because it affords a superior aural experience compared to digital formats. Vinyl differs significantly from digital formats in how it stores and plays back music. With vinyl, sound waves are mechanically converted into microscopic bumps that are physically pressed into grooves on the record's surface. When a record plays back the audio information stored in its grooves, the resulting sound waves *match* the original source. With digital formats, sound waves are converted into a series of ones and zeros. When a CD or other digital format plays, the resulting sound waves don't match but instead *approximate* the original source. Some individuals prefer vinyl to digital because, in their minds, a format that merely approximates a sound source cannot reproduce it authentically and will always sound worse as a result.

Yet, there are good reasons to be sceptical of this response. First, while low bit-rate digital recordings certainly lose a good deal of the audio information from the original source, resulting in an anaemic sound when played back, the same is not true of so-called "lossless" formats like WAVs (which are encoded on CDs) and FLAC files. It is unclear that the human ear can actually detect that these high-quality formats merely approximate rather than fully match their sources.[2] Second, many audiophiles actually *prefer* these digital formats over vinyl precisely because they consider them to have unsurpassed playback (Hales, 2017, p. 205). Lossless digital formats do, indeed, sound crystal clear compared to vinyl. The fact that many die-hard audiophiles, who care just as much about how music sounds as vinyl enthusiasts do, prefer digital to vinyl should give us another reason to doubt that vinyl necessarily reproduces a sound source better, and thereby affords a superior aural experience, than digital formats.

Having dismissed the idea that music sounds inherently better on vinyl records than it does on its digital rivals, an account for why some individuals – particularly, those not in the thrall of nostalgia or desirous of social status –

1 For further responses to these sorts of scepticism, see Polite and Meskin (2025).

2 Related to this, nearly all vinyl pressings from the past few decades are cut from digital masters. Indeed, fully analogue releases – from the recording, mixing, mastering, and pressing stages – have been rare since the 1980s. As a result, recent releases and reissues from the 1990s forward will rarely sound better, and will often sound *worse*, on vinyl than they will on CD or other lossless digital formats. This can help to account for the collecting practices of the typical Gen-Zer who purchases, say, the latest Taylor Swift album or a digitally transferred Nirvana reissue on vinyl. Since they don't even own record players, it doesn't matter to them how the records they collect sound; they just want the record as a physical artifact that can bestow social value.

prefer vinyl is still needed. Drawing on the concept of the transitivity of touch and the importance of the tactile nature of handling and playing music on vinyl, we believe one place to begin is by examining the differences in how each format stores audio information. Since digital formats store music as digital data, they can be endlessly copied and transferred with little effort in ways that vinyl records cannot be. The act of copying results in digital artifacts that are exact duplicates of the copied data source. The "original" object, the thing copied, loses its significance under these circumstances (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015, p. 11). As a result, to hold or listen to *this* copy of a CD rather than another doesn't usually impact our musical experience. In contrast, vinyl records, with their unique physical and historical qualities, offer a distinct aesthetic experience that we will explore in the following sections.

Borrowing from Walter Benjamin, Korsmeyer uses the term *aura* to characterize the experience of being in the presence of a genuine object that we value. She persuasively argues that genuine artifacts possess an aura that replicas and digital copies lack. This aura is tied to the object's history, which can evoke a deeper aesthetic response in those who interact with it (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 15). Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that many of us feel that CDs lack this auratic quality. And this further indicates that the preference for vinyl might stem not only from its sound quality but also from the medium's capacity to invoke an aura of genuineness, facilitated through the nature of its physicality (its size, weight, etc.), which enhances the overall aesthetic experience. Records invite touch, and as we will explain more below, touch – and the transitivity of touch – aids this experience of aura.

Korsmeyer invokes the concept of genuineness as a property attached to the notion of aura (*Ibid*). She argues that while genuineness is imperceptible, it is no less a real property. Touch (both literal and metaphorical) is important to the experience of genuineness. She introduces the concept of the transitivity of touch, suggesting that the possibility of physical contact with an object that has been touched by its creators adds to its value. She states, "[t]ouch seems to recognize an implicit continuity, a temporal chain that includes the touch that fashioned the original object, the touch of those who lived with it in the past, and the touch of those who discover and continue to value its being" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 45). Part of her argument relies on the psychology of contagion, where qualities of an object are believed to be transmitted through touch. Replicas, although perhaps visually or otherwise indistinguishable from the original, do not have the same historical or emotional connections as genuine objects. Thus, genuineness, as a property of what Korsmeyer throughout the book calls *Real Things*, provides a unique experience that replicas cannot replicate, and genuineness is appropriately attached to the notion of aura.

While we believe records have auratic qualities, we are not arguing that they put us in touch with their creators (either the people in the factory who pressed them or those who made the music contained in them), but rather with those who once owned these albums, functioning almost as relics. We will argue that, in contrast to CDs, vinyl records carry their histories with them in

ways that make the transitivity of touch important and that the agedness of their analogue sound helps to distinguish one copy of an LP from another.

3. Valuing History in Collecting Vinyl

Unlike CDs or digital files, owning *this* specific copy of an LP rather than another often seems to hold particular significance. We believe there are compelling reasons for this. In what follows, we explore two of these reasons. In this section, we examine the unique history of vinyl through Korsmeyer's concept of the transitivity of touch – the idea being that a record can carry traces of its past interactions and owners. In the next section, we extend Korsmeyer's account of age value to account for the value that many vinyl enthusiasts assign to the patina of agedness that vinyl records develop over time, reflected in their tactile feel, visual appearance, and auditory character. These qualities imbue vinyl with a distinct individuality that other music formats lack.

The significance of vinyl's materiality and history gains additional meaning when viewed through the lens of collecting. As Benjamin argues, the act of collecting transforms objects into extensions of the self, a process familiar to most vinyl enthusiasts. In his view, "ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects" (Benjamin, 1968a, p. 67). This relationship is so intimate, he contends, because we come to "live in" the objects we collect (*Ibid*). That is, we invest not just our time, energy, and money but also a part of ourselves into our collections. Central to this intimacy, as we discuss further below, is the tactile experience of handling the objects we collect, as touch fosters a physical connection that reinforces the emotional and personal bond between collector and collection.

While Benjamin's attitude toward collecting may seem overly romantic, it makes sense for at least two reasons. The first is that, as Kevin Melchionne (1999, p. 152) argues, "[one's] collection is the embodiment of [one's] taste". Collecting objects like vinyl records is one way that we cultivate our aesthetic sensibilities, and, through our collections, we reveal to others this fundamental part of who we are (Melchionne, 1999, pp. 154–155). For a collector to hold one of their records in their hands is thus, both literally and figuratively, to be in touch with a part of who they are. Benjamin's attitude also makes sense due to the role collecting plays within one's personal history. Each object one collects comes with a story. Statements such as "I got this record at Amoeba Music in Los Angeles two summers ago," or "I found this rare, near-mint condition first-pressing at a garage sale last week," are personally significant for many record collectors for at least some of the records in their collection. These stories help anchor collectors in time and space in a way that the consumer goods one merely purchases hardly ever do.

There is an important distinction to make here between valuing records personally and valuing them historically.[3] A record is *personally valuable*

[3] This distinction parallels the central distinction Shen-yi Liao explores with respect to food between "personal" and "historical" nostalgia. Personally nostalgic foods are from one's autobiographical past, anchored in personally important experiences, whereas historically

because of how it connects to your autobiographical past – it's a record you have a sentimental attachment to because it's either the specific record from your past or else a copy of a significant album from your past. A record is *historically valuable* not because it's from *your* past, but rather because it's from *the* past – it's a historically significant album or a rare pressing, or at the very least it has withstood the test of time in relatively good condition. In both cases, we are specifically talking about old albums, not new pressings or recent reissues.[4]

A record could be personally valuable because it is a direct physical remnant from your past. Many collectors own records that are intimately tied to their specific histories, as in "This is the first record I bought when I was ten." However, acquiring an original pressing of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1982) would also be personally valuable for someone who grew up loving the album but, say, had never owned it on vinyl or else their parents sold their copy with the family's entire record collection in the early 1990s. While either copy of the album would be personally valuable, and might very well serve as sentimental attachments to one's past, there is a certain type of what Joseph Raz calls "logical uniqueness" in the exact album from your childhood (Raz, 2001, pp. 24–26). You and that particular object have a common history and, as such, it is in a real sense irreplaceable. Even if you were to find a perceptually identical copy of the record, you would strongly prefer your copy to it.

For example, imagine inheriting your father's record collection (something both authors have experience with). No amount of hunting for an original pressing of the Beatles' *White Album* (1968) could ever replace the copy your father bought when it came out, listened to, and passed along to you. You also wouldn't trade his copy for a more pristine one – although you might (and probably should!) buy a second copy so as not to completely wear out his. This is because the record is not merely a reminder of your father and his musical taste, but, as Korsmeyer would put it, the record "embodies – carries the past in its very being" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 64). But why is this so?

The reason is that records *from* our past serve as records *of* our past. In our tactile engagement with these records, we position ourselves in contact with both our own personal histories and the histories of these unique objects. This is what, for Korsmeyer, lies at the heart of the transitivity of touch:

> It is the relation of embodiment that sustains the transitivity of touch, the impression of physical contact with the past and the histories that an object lived. Strictly speaking, of course, objects do not live at all, but this context seems to demand anthropomorphic terms: lived, endured, suffered. (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 64)

nostalgic foods evoke "the way things were," which could refer to a historical period, developmental stage, or particular cultural background (Liao, 2021, p. 2). While nostalgia absolutely can figure into the personal or historical value that a record collector ascribes to particular records, we believe that it need not do so.

[4] Our Gen-Z collector – the one who collects records but does not have a record player – might not value the records they collect either personally or historically, and thus are arguably engaging in a distinct valuing practice from the one typical record collectors, who engage with records sonically, are engaged in.

When we inherit any object from a loved one, we value that object in part because it belonged to that person. The transitivity of touch puts us in proximity to them, or to their memory. Possessing a record from your past – whether it's the particular copy that you've continually owned or else a copy you acquired later in life – might thereby also put you in touch with the person you were at that time: the little kid who would wear one glove around the house (as one of the authors did) or who made their mom buy them a red pleather jacket and was so excited to show off the "Thriller" dance on the playground (as the other author did). But why would this be the case for a record more than a CD?

We believe there are multiple reasons vinyl is more conducive to this experience of the transitivity of touch. First, records are physically larger objects with more varied tactile surfaces. This might seem obvious, but it is also important. The larger surface area certainly makes them harder to store, but it also means that they take up more space in your presence. This larger surface area allowed owners to write their names on the cover – a practice not done as much with CDs. The surfaces are also varied – from the cardboard sleeve, to the grooves of the pressed vinyl. Moreover, as we will discuss further below, we spend more time touching records than we do CDs in terms of physically putting them on the turntable and attending to their care. The mere fact that we have to attend to them to make them work – and work well – forces us to interact tactically with them. However, vinyl records engage more than just touch. Records also engage our sense of smell because their covers pick up odours. Because the material of the covers is porous, like books, they often collect the smell of what's around them. This also puts you in communion with those who came immediately before – if they were a heavy smoker, wore a lot of perfume, or lived in a musty or dusty house, you can smell this on the record. But while the smell of old records is not something that collectors actually seek out or attempt to preserve, it does give them a personal character that CDs usually lack.

Having established that records surpass CDs as memory aids, we can now focus on the deeper significance of the transitivity of touch to the aesthetic appeal of vinyl: these objects don't merely remind us of loved ones and our younger selves but also carry "the past in [their] very being" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 64). This quality stems from their materiality and the ways in which they invite interaction. Used records, with their larger size and varied textures, feel more substantial and unique in our hands compared to CDs. And while a CD might carry the past with it, because of its smaller size, its lack of interesting textures, its nonporous material that doesn't pick up odours, and its relative uniformity with other CDs owned by other people, CDs lack the personality that allow us to feel, see, smell, and hear that history. (We will explore how we *hear* a record's history in the next section.)

These considerations extend past the personal value records hold for collectors to their historical value. Not every vinyl record in one's collection will have come from one's own past and thus be personally valuable in the sense we've articulated above. For many collectors, the value of a given

record won't be personal but historical, stemming specifically from its function as a tangible link to the past. This historical connection often drives collectors to explore music outside their past experiences, drawing them to albums that represent key moments in music history. For example, I might develop an interest in a subgenre of music later in life, such as ambient music. This could lead me to want to collect Brian Eno's seminal 1978 album, *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. This album captures the essence of the late 70s and early 80s experimental movement, evoking a particular moment in popular music history. While I could purchase a new re-release of *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*, a serious collector would prefer an original pressing from the late 70s. This preference might puzzle some, as re-releases are often sonically superior to original pressings – particularly if they're transferred from the analogue masters. New pressings are free of the nicks, scratches, scuffs, and other forms of wear that inevitably accumulate on old records and impact how they sound. Moreover, re-releases are frequently remastered with new technology that not only enhances the original recordings but also tailors them to sound their best on contemporary stereo systems. Even in cases where remastering isn't involved, the absence of physical imperfections on new pressings will result in a more pristine sound compared to aged records. So our puzzle of why someone would prefer music that sounds less pristine remains.

Korsmeyer's work suggests a solution to this puzzle: record collectors value objects that have a past. In *Things*, Korsmeyer states that "encounters with artifacts of great age or special rarity possess an aesthetic dimension that no substitute or replica can possess. […] [W]ith this piece that we hold in our hand the past is gathered into an aesthetically perceptible present" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 23). Record collectors prize the physical object, sometimes because of its perseverance through time, sometimes for its special rarity. They are valued for their history, and a re-issue does not have this history.[5] This brings us back to genuineness, a property Korsmeyer believes is both descriptive and evaluative. Even when we do not have perceptual or cognitive data about the history of the object, our belief that it has this history informs our experience of it. Thus, even when perceptually identical, serious collectors would still prefer the vintage vinyl over the new reissue. We value objects that have endured the past, and enjoy connections made through the transitivity of touch. However, as we will argue in the next section, we also believe record collectors often value perceptible age in listening to vinyl.

5 Record labels can manufacture rarity by releasing limited runs of particular pressings. One type of serious collector aims to obtain every version of an album or every release by a particular artist or band. These *completist* collectors would pursue newly released limited editions not for their historical value, but merely to fill gaps in their collections. Indeed, limited pressings seem designed with completists in mind, intending to capitalize on their collecting habits for financial gain. Similar to our Gen-Z collector who doesn't own a record player, the completist is engaged in a collecting practice that in some sense fetishizes records as physical artifacts. Unlike our Gen-Z collector, though, many completists really do care about the music contained in the records they collect, as different pressings will sometimes sound subtly different from one another due to the fact that final mastering is typically done in pressing plants. For more on completist record collectors, see Shuker (2010, pp. 46–48).

At the same time that a record becomes a part of the collector's history, the collector often imagines herself as becoming a part of the record's history. When holding a second-hand record, it is easy to imagine yourself as both being in touch with the past and helping to maintain it.[6] To hold such a record – to feel its heft, to run your fingers along its grooves, to see the signs of its age – invites you to imagine yourself as in touch with the past in a way that a digital copy of the same album rarely, if ever, does (Yochim and Biddinger, 2008, p. 190). Due to the histories they call to mind, we believe that the activities of collecting and listening to vinyl records have a special quality that deepens one's aesthetic experience of the music in a way that is seldom occasioned by listening to music digitally.[7] We now turn to the experience of listening to records.

4. Valuing Sonic Imperfection

People who prefer vinyl also value two of the main reasons that so many listeners abandoned it: its sonic imperfections and its comparative difficulty of use. We focus on the first in this section and the second in the next section.

A record gains imperfections because it changes each time it plays, as the stylus imperceptibly deforms its grooves. The physical wear and tear that a record suffers as a result of ordinary use, which becomes gradually noticeable in the loss of surface sheen, wear on the grooves, scratches, and other such defects, also gradually manifests in how it sounds. The more a record is played, the more background noise, pops, and clicks it gains; moreover, it will increasingly lose treble frequencies, resulting in a muddier playback quality. In contrast, digital copies of the same album won't deteriorate in this way. Of course, the worse shape a record is in, the less clearly it will play the music back to us, and at a certain point of deterioration a record becomes unlistenable. But when a record's wear doesn't severely impact its playback, record collectors are able to not merely *tolerate* but actually *relish* its sonic defects. Similar to how the slightly frayed cover and yellowed pages reveal a book's age, a record's sonic imperfections indicate its age.

Alois Riegl, in *Modern Cult of Monuments*, distinguishes between age value and historical value. He states, "Age value manifests itself immediately, through visual perception and appeal directly to our emotions" (Riegl, 1928, p. 33; quoted in Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 81). Historical value, in contrast, need not be perceptible but values a "stage of cultural creativity" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 80). As discussed in the previous section, collectors who value early pressings of records appreciate their historical value. In contrast, relishing sonic defects is a form of age value appreciation. Thus, through collecting and through listening, appreciating old vinyl records is appreciating both age and historical value. The vast majority of discussion around Riegl's concept of age value focuses on visible signs of age. Korsmeyer rightfully extends the notion of age

6 As Benjamin (1968a, p. 61) writes, "To renew the old world – that is the collector's deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things".

7 This also helps to explain why collectors value first pressing so highly compared to later pressings or reissues.

value to touch. We believe that Riegl's and Korsmeyer's arguments can be fruitfully extended to *sound*. Record enthusiasts relish sonic age value. The pops and clicks on the record are analogous to the patina of grime a painting acquires, or to the nicks and scores on the old church's walls. These objects (paintings and historic buildings) are often perceived as more beautiful in their aged form. The yellow patina of Renaissance paintings, their slight cracking of paint, can add a depth and charm that is more captivating than a perfectly restored painting. In sum, we can come to appreciate aged objects that wear their age on their perceptible surfaces.

The pops and clicks a record acquires over time are technically defects caused by damage; yet, along with the crackle of static from the stylus moving along the grooves, they can add richness to the experience of listening to an old record. Music scholar Richard Osborne (2012, p. 24) writes, "As the patina of the analogue recording began to disappear [with the rise of digital music formats] it also began to be appreciated. It was soon being worn as a badge of honour, held up as something that was missing from digital recordings". This shift reflected a growing recognition of the aesthetic value inherent in analogue imperfections. Where digital formats offered clarity and precision, they also removed the traces of wear and time that many listeners came to associate with genuineness and individuality. Vinyl's sonic patina, once dismissed as a mere limitation of the format, was reimagined as a feature rather than a flaw, its presence evoking a sense of history. Indeed, as Osborne further notes, for many listeners "the patina is part of the musical experience," continuing:

> [F]or them, the 'heavy winter coat' of analogue recording contributes to vinyl's alleged 'warmth'. Here the increased surface noise of the raised run-in groove, occasioned by its distorted shape, provides an anticipatory frame for the sound recording. This is followed by the pleasure of the steady crackle when the music is underway. The appreciation of background noise became obvious when artists began to sample worn vinyl records, a practice that rose in direct proportion to the dominance of the CD. (Osborne, 2012, p. 25)[8]

As Osborne suggests, the embrace of vinyl's perceived warmth by many listeners reflects a broader resistance to the pristine sound of digital formats – a preference for an experience that feels embodied and temporally anchored. In this way, the imperfections of analogue recordings contribute not just to their charm but to their unique identity as artifacts of a musical and technological past.

In the same way that we can imagine what architectural ruins looked like in their original form, we can imagine how the record once sounded without these imperfections – or even recall having heard a pristine digital version – while still preferring the record as it sounds now. As Korsmeyer states in *Things* (2019, p. 179), age value "summons an awareness of transience". Old records sound old, and many record enthusiasts and serious collectors value that richness of sound. While Korsmeyer is focusing on the digital reconstruction of

[8] The aesthetic implications of sampled surface noise are explored in Adams (2018).

physical ancient sites, like Palmyra, she warns us against the lure of digital reconstruction. She states,

> With the advent of digital recording of ancient things, reconstructing the look of sites and artifacts is becoming easier, but only their look. I take touch in its various manifestations seriously as a mode of apprehension that affords encounters with the past, which means that wholesale resurrections, no matter how accurate their appearance, do not sustain the value of the real thing. Digital recreations are a wonder, and what they preserve for the unraveling future of material artifacts is invaluable. They are marvelous, but they are not things of the same kind as that to which they refer. [...] They do not carry the past into the present. (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 197)

Sonically, the same can be said for records. Remastered, reissued, pristine LPs offer us much. Bands often want their music out in the world in this way. But these reissues are not the "real" thing in the same way as a vintage record. They have not persisted and survived the vagaries of changing media and consumer caprice, lingering in wood-panelled basements waiting for rediscovery – in short, they lack genuineness. Nor have they been lovingly played and replayed, being cared for along the way. The normal signs of wear indicate not only a record's age, but also that it has been well loved, which is something that can never become perceptible in a digital copy, as a scuffed or scratched CD could indicate neglect or clumsiness as much as love. It thus makes sense that record collectors would assign the crackle, pops, and clicks positive value, since they really do seem to imbue the music with an aesthetic richness and depth that digital formats lack.

We acknowledge that there are several obvious objections to the account of the beauty of sonic agedness we have just provided. First, there is the issue of damage. If there are too many pops and clicks, or if there is too much surface noise, we might think the recording is too far gone to be appreciated positively. Here, the analogy to ruins is helpful. A ruin is a fragment of a whole, one which does not (obviously) invite restoration to be appreciated. As a fragment, we can still imagine what the architectural structure looked like in its pre-ruinated form (Korsmeyer, 2014; Bicknell, 2014). When an architectural ruin is too far in its ruination process, however, this imaginative reconstruction becomes difficult to impossible. The same can be said for sonic agedness. If the record is too degraded, it is difficult to appreciate and sonically reconstruct in imagination. Thus, we acknowledge that sonic agedness exists on a continuum and there will be a point where the record will have lost most of its value. However, this loss does not negate the broader appeal of sonic agedness as a concept; rather, it highlights the delicate balance between degradation and preservation that makes these artifacts so compelling. This balance invites us to reflect on the interplay between imperfection and meaning, where the sonic traces of time can enhance aesthetic appreciation up to a point, but beyond that, they risk obscuring the music to its detriment.

Yuriko Saito's work addresses the importance of imperfection in aesthetics. She artfully argues that both Western and non-Western aesthetics have a history of valuing imperfection. This is shown by 18th-century picturesque

landscapes, which prize the complex, irregular, and asymmetrical over the formal gardens of the past. It is also shown in Japanese *wabi* aesthetics, which "celebrates irregularity, rough surfaces, asymmetry, and defects in tea bowls" (Saito, 2017). Although she warns against indiscriminately preferring the imperfect, she argues that cultivating an aesthetic sensibility that values imperfection can enrich our aesthetic experiences in everyday life by acknowledging the transient nature of objects and our lives. Vinyl enthusiasts embody this very approach, cultivating an attitude that enhances their aesthetic appreciation of records.

Second, the fact that some of the most prized, sought after, and thus expensive records are ones that are in mint or near mint condition might work against our account. Many record collectors want an original pressing of a record, but they want one with the least amount of physical and sonic agedness. This seems like an obvious objection to our account.[9] Of course, many collectors own doubles or triples of their favourite albums. They will not often play the rarest or highest quality ones, perhaps only on special occasions, since doing so will degrade their quality and thus economic value. This is a common practice among collectors of many stripes. Book and comic book collectors will often have a "to-read" copy and one they keep in pristine condition. The read copy shows the love and wear on its many turned pages, while the pristine copy has a spine that has never been cracked. Similarly, action figure collectors will often keep one toy (and perhaps more) in the box and one out of the box ready to be played with. In all of these cases, one object is kept pristine to retain its rarity, whereas the other kept for the joy of use.

This brings us to our final objection. As we discussed above, vinyl enthusiasts treat vinyl records as though they have auratic qualities. These qualities lead them to believe that used records put them in touch with the past, which adds considerable depth to their listening experiences. But artifacts possessing auras, according to Benjamin's seminal view, are objects such as religious relics and ruins, which are one-of-a-kind, have stood the test of time, and can be traced to historically significant persons or events (Benjamin 1968b, 220ff). As such, they warrant our awe and reverence. Vinyl records, in contrast, are mass-produced consumer products that first went out of fashion only a few decades ago. A quick visit to Discogs, eBay, and elsewhere online will turn up dozens if not hundreds of decent used copies of most any album you're looking for – usually for under $40. As a result, the fact that the record you're listening to is old, signified through its sonic patina, simply doesn't seem special enough to make the past palpable in the way that relics and ruins do. The awe and reverence collectors may sometimes feel while listening to old records consequently appears to be unwarranted – the likely result of an imaginative projection of auratic qualities onto objects that don't literally possess them.

In response to this objection, the fact that vinyl records possess auratic qualities is commonplace within the literature on vinyl (Yochim and Biddinger, 2008, p. 187; Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015, pp. 8–9, 19–21; Lepa and

[9] We would like to thank Theodore Gracyk for drawing our attention to this objection.

Tritakis, 2016, 19–20; Ellis, 2017, §1). One reason for this, as we discussed above, is that a record's audio signal becomes richer and more complex as it ages in a way that simply cannot happen for digital music. As a result, a record acquires an individual sonic character as a consequence of aging in the particular way it does, and this serves to differentiate it from every other copy of that record.[10]

This fact is highlighted in artist Rutherford Chang's work *We Buy White Albums* (2013). In an interview at the time of the work's exhibition, Chang claimed to have 3,417 copies of the Beatles' White Album: "I collect numbered copies of the White Album in any condition. In fact I often find the 'poorer' condition albums more interesting" (Paz , 2013). These albums show their age value in multiple ways. Displayed next to one another, the record's covers have noticeable visual differences: water stains, writing and artwork on the faces, dirt, debris, etc.[11] The fact that the White Album's cover is a blank canvas helps accentuate these differences. But further, and more to our point, Chang's work also explores the aural difference between the albums. At the end of the original exhibition of the work, Chang played 100 copies of the White Album simultaneously, "each scratched and warped in its own way," pressing the resultant album into its own LP (*Ibid*). In a review for the *New York Times*, Allan Kozinn remarks on the agedness of the individual albums and sonic variety:

> The albums, as it turns out, have also aged with some variety. Some played cleanly, others had scratches, noise from embedded dirt, or vinyl wear. And though the recordings are identical, variations in the pressings, and natural fluctuations in the speed of Mr. Chang's analogue turntable, meant that the 100 recordings slowly moved out of sync, in the manner of an early Steve Reich piece: the opening of "Back in the U.S.S.R." [the album's first track] is entirely unified, but at the start of "Dear Prudence" [track 2], you hear the first line echoing several times, and by "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" [track 7] the track is a nearly unrecognizable roar. (Kozinn, 2013)

The differences in the condition of the White Albums reflect the passage of time, emphasizing how the aging process imparts individuality to each record. Sonically, the layered playback of the 100 copies highlights how degradation produces unique auditory experiences, transforming identical recordings into something entirely new.[12] This interplay between uniformity and variation underscores the aesthetic and historical value of agedness, showing how physical and sonic imperfections can deepen our engagement with vinyl records.

Chang's work illuminates the fact that while a particular vinyl record, as a mass-produced product, may not be one-of-a-kind in the way a relic or ruin is, it can still come to possess the quality of rarity. In our consumer age in which we consider the objects we buy to be inherently disposable and replaceable, decent vintage records are quite rare – especially when compared

10 No matter how many times you play a CD (or mp3) its audio signal will remain the same.

11 You can view all (or nearly all) of the covers on the We Buy White Albums Instagram (*We Buy White Albums* (no date).

12 You can listen to Chang's work on Elion Paz's (aka, dustandgrooves) SoundCloud site (Chang, 2013).

to the ubiquity of digital music. And since vintage records in decent condition are older, rarer, and more valuable than digital copies typically are, this imbues them with auratic qualities that digital copies lack (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015, p. 11). Thus, although records may have far less of an aura than most any relic or ruin, they all but certainly have more of an aura than most any CD and certainly mp3 or other purely digital file.

Korsmeyer offers further support for this claim. According to her, the belief that one is in the presence of a sufficiently rare and valuable object penetrates one's perceptual experience of that object, occasioning an aesthetic experience that would be deeper and richer than if one were in the presence of a qualitatively identical replica of that object (Korsmeyer, 2012, p. 375). "There is a palpable difference," she writes, "between the experience of a replica of an item of historical moment or rarity, and the experience of the thing itself" (Korsmeyer, 2012, p. 367). There is also a palpable difference between the experience of a copy of an album that is genuinely connected to the past and relatively rare, and one that is not. As a result, even if a used record and a digital copy of the same album were sonically indistinguishable, one's aesthetic experience of the digital copy would be appreciably lacking in comparison to that of the record. It consequently makes sense that those who recognize vinyl's auratic qualities would prefer it to digital. In this way, the auratic qualities of vinyl records – while different in degree from those of, say, ruins or religious relics – are sufficient to justify the aesthetic and emotional significance that enthusiasts ascribe to them. The preference for vinyl, therefore, rather than being purely nostalgic or sentimental, is often grounded in a genuine aesthetic response to the rarity, uniqueness, and histories that vinyl records embody.

In her book, *Making Sense of Taste* (1999), Korsmeyer argues that a good meal is a holistic experience. It involves taste sensations on the tongue, the perception of odours, and the tactile experience of texture and temperature. Beyond these direct sensory inputs, the setting, visual presentation, and even the sounds contribute to the overall enjoyment. As Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (a gastronome Korsmeyer references) suggests, a taste experience comprises direct, complete, and reflective sensations, which create a multi-layered appreciation. In sum, a good meal requires a harmonious interplay of senses. The same can be said for engaging with records. We have discussed the tactile, visual, and aural qualities of vinyl. We now turn to activities that unify them and lend the experience of listening to music on vinyl the richness and depth that vinyl enthusiasts savour.

5. Valuing Ritual

In addition to valuing vinyl more than digital because of its sonic imperfections, collectors also value its comparative difficulty of use. This is in large part because the effort required to play vinyl makes the listener a more active participant in the experience, adding an aesthetic dimension that digital music usually lacks.

Records and record players are cumbersome compared to music on other formats. They are not portable in the way that CDs, cassettes, and digital music files are.

As a result, record collectors typically have special places in their homes for their records and stereo systems. Sometimes whole rooms are dedicated, but at the very least they create "listening spaces." They may have special chairs in those spaces and they are often decorated with other special objects, such as photos and mementos. These spaces are akin to shrines devoted to the activity of listening to their record collections. Records themselves require care and attention. They are more sensitive to light, heat, and humidity than their digital counterparts, needing to be stored in a relatively cool, dark, and dry space. Unlike CDs or cassettes, they need to be stored upright to prevent warping from pressure. Storing records upright also prevents them from moulding due to moisture. Additionally, records need to be cleared of dust and debris each time before they're played to achieve the best sound quality. They should also be deep cleaned with special equipment and cleaning solutions at least annually – and more often for albums that are played more frequently.

To listen to a record from one's collection thus requires proper preparation – rituals of care, with skills honed through repetition, which are undertaken to ensure one doesn't unnecessarily damage the record.[13] As Korsmeyer notes, touching a genuine object evokes "a kind of communion with an object" (Korsmeyer, 2012, p. 372). While the object maintains a continuity over time, we are now a part of its history – adding to the wear and tear of its life. Handling the object with reverence and care respects this special relationship.

Such respect for the object's history finds expression in the rituals involved in playing a record. Before the stylus touches a groove, the collector first removes the record from its sleeve, taking care not to touch the grooves and leaving behind an oily residue from their fingers or palms that will negatively impact playback. They next inspect the record for any new scuffs and scratches, and, using a special carbon fibre brush, carefully remove any dust and debris. Finally, they unlock the tonearm and delicately place the stylus into the groove of whichever track they wish to listen to. Placing the stylus just right, so that you don't start a few seconds into the track or at the end of the previous one, is a skill that requires practice and patience – and often results in a palpable sense of achievement, especially for the novice.

Once the music starts, the collector usually sits and listens with attention.[14] Sometimes, the listening experience is augmented by looking at the cover art, or by reading the liner notes or lyric sheets that came with the record, or simply by watching it rotate as the stylus follows its path along the grooves. When the first side has finished (which, for a standard LP, will be after about twenty minutes), they then slowly lift the tonearm and return it to its holder, flip the record over, and inspect the other side for new imperfections. They then carefully remove any dust before placing the stylus in the appropriate groove and settling in to listen once again.

[13] For further discussion of the special actions required to play vinyl records, see Lepa and Tritakis (2016, p. 17).

[14] They will sometimes put on a record while doing the dishes or some such activity. But they will just as often exclusively be focused on the act of listening.

As a result of performing these ritualised actions that the technology (i.e., the turntable) forces one to perform, one becomes deeply immersed in the music (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015, pp. 19–20). The devotional nature of the experience, together with the habits of thought and action that call it into being, further contribute to the collector's preference for vinyl, as their resulting aesthetic experiences are of a richer, deeper, and more meaningful sort than the ones digital music formats typically afford us (Yochim and Biddinger, 2008, pp. 190–191).[15] This engagement contrasts sharply with the immediacy and disposability often associated with digital music formats, and especially music played on streaming services, where ease of access and convenience can dilute the ritualistic and immersive qualities of listening. By demanding time, care, and attention, vinyl creates a space for contemplation and deeper appreciation, including of our own actions, which allows collectors to form a more significant bond with the music and the format itself. This bond, rooted in both the effort required and the sensory richness of the experience, underscores why many collectors view vinyl as more than a format – it becomes an integral part of how they live with and value music.[16]

Along with the records themselves, turntables also require special care. Again, in our consumer culture, CD players are cheaply replaced, and digital files are played through whichever computer, smartphone, or other device you happen to own at the time. In contrast, turntables are mended. As Yuriko Saito observed in her *Aesthetics of Care: Practice in Everyday Life* (2022, p. 141), "The problem is that today, at least in the developed nations, our lives are flooded with things we buy, incentivized consumerism, and they typically end up not being cared for or kept. Their longevity as an object of use tends to be rather short". Saito invokes Peter-Paul Verbeek's concept of the "psychological lifetime" of objects, emphasizing that design strategy should include "transparency," enabling laypeople to understand and repair objects (*Ibid*). Unlike CD players, smartphones, or even many computers, turntables are designed for repairability. Parts such as cartridges, styluses, and belts wear out over time with ordinary use and are made to be replaced, and many owners handle these repairs themselves. The same is true of the components of analogue stereo receivers, as well as for the woofers and tweeters of analogue speaker systems which record players were run through prior to the rise and eventual dominance of digital stereo systems. It isn't uncommon for people to use fifty-year-old record players and stereo systems, attending to their repair and care over decades. It's also not unusual for younger collectors who didn't grow up with vinyl to seek out older equipment to play their records on.

In addition to keeping old record players alive, collectors play a crucial role in sustaining the historical practices associated with vinyl records, including the

15 As Evan Eisenberg (2005, p. 43) writes about playing records, "There is something soul satisfying about a ritual that separates music from noise, culture from chaos".

16 This is not to say that artists and appreciators who engage with digital formats cannot have ritualistic activities with those formats. Rather, our claim is that the nature of vinyl records – and the steps it takes to access the music on them – lends itself, almost as a design feature, to these forms of ritualistic care more readily than digital formats do.

tactile and immersive experiences of listening to and shopping for music on vinyl. As discussed above, listening to records invites a deliberate engagement with music, where flipping through album covers, placing the record on the turntable, and hearing the occasional crackle of the stylus all contribute to the experience. This practice not only preserves a unique mode of interaction with music but also connects contemporary listeners to the habits and culture of past generations.[17] Through their dedication to the format, collectors provide vital support to the ecosystem that sustains vinyl culture. By purchasing new albums and reissues on vinyl, they bolster vinyl pressing plants, which have seen a major resurgence in the past several years.[18] Similarly, record shops, which have historically served as cultural hubs for music enthusiasts, rely on collectors of new and second-hand vintage records to keep their doors open. These stores are not only retail spaces but also places where music knowledge is shared, communities are built, and new artists are discovered, as well as affording aesthetic delights of their own.[19] In this way, collectors do more than preserve the past; they actively contribute to the continuance of vinyl culture.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the resurgence of vinyl records in the digital age highlights the unique aesthetic experiences vinyl provides. Drawing on Carolyn Korsmeyer's insights on the importance of touch to our aesthetic lives, we have explored how the physicality, historical connections, and ritualistic practices of vinyl collecting and listening contribute to their enduring appeal. The intimacy a collector feels when listening to records from their own collection, the sense that they are in touch with the past, the richness and complexity that vinyl's sonic imperfections lend the experience, and the rituals involved in caring for and playing music on vinyl, all clearly enhance their musical experiences. These qualities create a multisensory experience that digital formants simply cannot replicate.

As a result of these added dimensions, the music sounds warmer, richer, and more alive to their ears than it would be if its source were digital. And these added layers of sonic and aesthetic complexity result from the way the artifact (record) and the technology (turntable) structures how one interacts with the music, which, even if it doesn't entail the superiority of vinyl to digital formats, nevertheless explains the preference for vinyl more than its sound quality alone does – especially since, as we have argued, how we relate to and interact with vinyl plays a significant role in determining how it sounds to us. If vinyl records hadn't gone out of fashion, if they didn't age and wear down in the way that they do, and if they didn't require special care and attention to play them, then our experience of an album on vinyl would be

17 For more on the preservation and conservation of tangible heritage (e.g., records) and intangible heritage (e.g., rituals of performance and communities of care), see Matthes (2024).

18 In North America, for instance, dozens of new pressing plants have been built in the past decade to try to meet demand (Sharp, 2022); and the number of plants in Australia has tripled since 2020 (Roberts, 2024).

19 For more on the aesthetic character and value of record shops, see Polite and Meskin (2025).

indistinguishable from and thus no more special than the experience of the same album on a digital format. Yet, if our argument in this paper has been sound, then vinyl records really do offer enthusiasts and collectors special experiences of music – ones that are worth seeking out.

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