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Book Review

Vinyl Freak: Love Letters to a Dying Medium

John Corbett
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250 pages

Reviewed by Mischa van Kan

For this book, musician, music critic, curator, author (and so forth) John Corbett has compiled over eighty columns that he wrote about rare and hard-to-find records over the period of some thirteen years for the American jazz magazine *DownBeat*. As he describes, by the time he started his column in the early 2000s, vinyl was thought to be a dead medium. However, as he continued to write the column, vinyl experienced a surprising revival. *Vinyl Freak: Love Letters to a Dying Medium* fits well into his work, through which he likes to introduce new music and promote unknown jazz and improvised music artists to his readers.

For *Vinyl Freak*, Corbett's journalistic work is ordered chronologically and alternates with freshly-written and more reflective sections (which he calls "tracks," thereby even turning the book itself into an LP). These additions allow him to tell more personal stories that put the columns focusing on individual records into a wider context of record collecting. In this way, the book adds to the individual columns, since the reader gets to know a bit more about Corbett's background and how he got hooked on records. Furthermore, the interstitial "tracks" chapters function as interludes between the different sections of collected columns, allowing for more elaborate discussions that add wider perspectives to the columns focusing on single records.

To complement the republished columns, Corbett has selected just over a hundred free improvisation and creative music records from his private collection that he wants to bring into the limelight (including some records that had been included in earlier columns). As Corbett explains, these curated records were issued in low quantities and, because they have been economically impractical to reissue, it has been hard to access the music. By directing attention to these records, he wants to prevent this music from being lost and forgotten. The selection comes with short descriptions and mini-reviews and includes not just American, but also (mainly Western) European and Japanese records.

Most of the columns discussing a particular record have received a postscript that discusses the afterlife of the record and assesses whether the record has since become available, and, if so, which record company or companies have reissued the music. Sometimes the postscript even discusses if the record store in which he found the album is still in business. The discussions balance Corbett pleading about the necessity of this music's public availability with celebrating the hunt after music that is difficult—or close to impossible—to find.

The interstitial "tracks" focus more on how Corbett got into collecting and how he has built his collection. In the sixth "track," Corbett describes the excitement of finding unknown music, such as his discovery of a great array of Sun Ra-related materials in the abandoned house of his former producer Alton Abraham. This search turns into a testimony of the ways in which material objects related to music and musicians connect people and can have considerable importance. People who have not met before can bond almost instantly by sharing their passion of musical objects like vinyl records: "We had chummed around talking nonsense as if we'd been buddies . . . I sensed a longing for camaraderie that might not be so alien to the predisposed loner" (Corbett 223). Here the camaraderie seems to be based on the

agreement that the abandoned objects that all other people deemed uninteresting and not valuable actually hold a distinct importance that “square” people cannot see. Among these items were unused record covers and the original colour separations—as Corbett notes, “all hand-painted on velum” (233)—for *Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth* and *Super-Sonic Jazz*, which aptly illustrate this clash in valuating niche objects and mark the author and like-minded collectors as different from the rest of the world.

Already in the first “track,” the reader gets the ultimate proof that Corbett himself has been an avid collector (worthy of the title “Vinyl Freak”) when he describes the mindset of a “proper” record collector: “The bulk of my identity as a collector was done forming by the time I had my first full-time job. The primary excitement I felt at those initial paychecks, naturally, was because they meant I could buy more records” (4). The columns that Corbett has written are aimed at an audience consisting of cognoscenti who share his values on jazz, vinyl records, and record collecting as a hobby—or even a lifestyle. This traditionally male-dominated readership knows (or is assumed to know) what is important when it comes to collecting vinyl records and understands that the ultimate goal is finding “rare” records rather than records that are widely available.

The book, however, is not primarily about giving in to the urge to build ever-growing collections of vinyl, but rather about appreciating the vinyl records themselves. As Corbett explains his personal relationship to vinyl, records are not merely artefacts that represent a final stage in a production process originating from the work done by musicians, record companies, and a variety of freelancers along the way. The author himself describes his interest as follows: “I think the thing that’s always fascinated me about records is the play between understanding them as objects of solitary attention and as the focal point of social interaction” (Corbett 114). Based on this understanding, Corbett’s book serves as an acknowledgement of the many afterlives of records after being bought for the first time: ending up in record stores specializing in used vinyl, changing hands several times, and connecting different people at various stages in the medium’s life and (almost) death.

In that sense—focusing on vinyl as a historical document—it is different from the attention that vinyl records have received in an academic context. Scholars from various backgrounds (ranging from musicology to sociology) have tended toward discussing vinyl primarily in terms of its resurgence (see Bartmanski & Woodward), describing the medium as rising from the land of the dead during the rise of music streaming services whilst overtaking the CD as the dominating physical medium for contemporary music. Thereby, a majority of the research has focused on vinyl as a medium for newly issued music rather than used vinyl records that are of primary interest in Corbett’s book. Though there is definitely a scholarly interest in record collecting (see Shuker), *Vinyl Freak* reminds us—in a less scholarly tone—of the importance that these objects have for humans, not only when being sold new, but also in their afterlives as found objects after being forgotten, neglected, or lost.

Corbett’s discussions are by no means meant as academic in the sense that they aim to theorize record collecting as an activity or phenomenon. For a start, his columns are primarily written from the perspective of his experience digging up rare finds. The author describes his “hunting” technique and warns for the risk of “overlooking” special records at first glance when searching for records in a big store. When the focus turns to the record he has dug up, he further displays his knowledge of the selected records and he points out record cover designers like LeRoy Winbush, making clear why they are important.

Vinyl Freak does not follow a methodology in the way it deals with vinyl records; it can discuss the cover, the musicians collaborating on the record, the music on it, or its liner notes. But it does display the potential and richness of vinyl records as an object of academic study. Therefore, I think that this book should not be seen as a direct contribution to academic debates concerning vinyl records, but rather as a means for relaying stories of the

ways in which humans interact with used vinyl records. In that sense, it could provide inspiration for scholars to include vinyl records into their empirical material.

Corbett's focus thus gives room for the personal stories connected to records in a collection. They relate to the material aspects of records as the state they are in also testifies to the fact that the vinyl records discussed in the book have a (hi)story. Records are acquired in a particular way: they might have been gifts from close partners and been listened to over and over again. For collectors, the challenge is to "hunt" for the best possible item, a record "forgotten" by its first owner or rejected after one listen. A record is never just a record: it is a record in a specific state and with a specific story that makes it unique, and a story that can be very idiosyncratic but at the same time connect like-minded people and mark an individual's identity of having good taste and being hip and "in-the-know."

The search for obscure records also comes with the risk of exoticizing the music that Corbett discussed in his columns. It is great to see a book spotlighting records that have not received exposure elsewhere, but at the same time it is striking to see that the selection is lacking in certain forms of diversity: it is male-dominated and focused on the US, Western Europe, and Japan. Corbett does discuss some obscure African productions in the book (of which it would have been great to see more), but overall, he stays close to the kind of records collectors like him appreciate, rather than shedding some critical light on the record collectors' scene as a male-dominated world of insiders. Looking for uncommon sounds, Corbett finds "orientalist" elements that make non-American records interesting (19), and, in general, he fails to show awareness of ethical issues related to releasing ethnographic recordings into the global marketplace (134–35). This does not mean that Corbett's selection lacks in diversity—in part, this is exactly what he is looking for and finds in many records, such as Dick Wetmore's, about which Corbett comments: "It's not every day you hear modern jazz performed by a violin-led quartet" (148). But the focus on vinyl records as objects to be found and cherished means there is not much attention paid toward what music got a chance to be recorded in the first place and the ways in which record companies' and producers' target audiences have influenced the music that gets recorded and physically reproduced.

It is mostly in the "interludes" of *Vinyl Freak* where there is some space for critical reflection. In the third "interlude," Corbett discusses the vinyl record as a medium and reflects on the way the technologies that reproduce the music on the records have been of importance for record collectors. He shows a critical approach to the ever-ongoing discussion of vinyl's qualities as "'warmer' and more natural than digital" (62) and argues that some vinyl fanatics idealize the medium and fail to see the drawbacks that will persist, even if vinyl is played on the fanciest sound system. Instead, he argues: "If you keep yourself open in terms of playback devices, you're more likely to come out with the right stuff to hear" (62). In the end, Corbett's reflections are primarily expressions of his love for the medium rather than a critical investigation of its limitations or the individuals who collect them.

By embracing vinyl's shortcomings and distancing himself from the focus on hi-fi equipment, Corbett distinguishes a vinyl *snob* from a vinyl *freak*, with Corbett obviously falling into the latter category. "I have a relatively good stereo setup," he explains. "By audiophile standards, it's decent. It sounds great, but my turntable doesn't look like a glass building from the city of the future, and I have not dominated the living room with giant, towering speakers" (63). In part, this allows Corbett to argue that record collecting does not necessarily come with the maniacal, non-conformist, and hyper-masculine characteristics often associated with it. He informs the reader that, for a vinyl *freak*, audio equipment should have good audio quality without unnecessarily sacrificing an entire room (and possibly the other people living there). Corbett simultaneously offers a discussion of how the medium's limitations have influenced the music. For instance, the book discusses the "running time" of an LP consisting of twenty minutes per side, which the author qualifies as "ideal."

Corbett's discussion of vinyl might not be academic, but he does have great experience with various formats of the medium and he does have interesting points to make, demonstrating critical perspectives while narrating personal stories. A relevant observation he makes is that the fanaticalness of some record collectors has meant there are vinyl records that have become very expensive and thereby only available to a small selection of people: "I doubt that the record revival has been as democratic as vinyl once was" (64). Corbett argues that collecting is not about money, but about the process of searching for records itself, which is closely linked to the ways in which music is mediated: "Music continues to function in a similar way, but when records were the primary medium, it was somehow different. They were precious, were hard to find, required diligence, and that made owning them special" (64). Here, the reader might also reflect on the ways in which these processes are now challenged by online search engines (e.g. Google) and platforms like Discogs that change the character of the search for records, making the process a lot quicker and easier. Perhaps it is not the medium that is dying, but rather the type of collector who is willing to spend every spare hour of their time devoted to the search of that single mint copy of that long-forgotten LP by an artist whose name we cannot remember.

In considering *Vinyl Freak's* presentation, it's worth noting that the printed version of the book lacks the characteristics of the many coffee table books that reproduce record covers or the theoretical and methodological approach of strictly academic literature. The aim of this book is different: it does not want to reproduce the vinyl records as objects or theorize them, it wants to understand them as stories. The format also allows the personal stories to get carried away about details that seem irrelevant by those not "in-the-know," as it is primarily aimed at record collectors themselves—at least, the nerdy, masculine stereotype of a record collector (see Keightley). The book even includes a "Limited Collector's Edition" flexi disc with unreleased material from Sun Ra—the story behind which the readers have been introduced to—making the book appeal primarily to the same audience that would enjoy nothing better than to roam stacks and crates of used vinyl records in search of something they did not know they were looking for.

The read is both interesting and entertaining, as Corbett displays that he is able to not take himself too seriously as a "vinyl freak." This is illustrated when he discusses one of the many dilemmas that record collectors face: to trade or not to trade. "If I make the trade," Corbett explains about a particular record in his collection, "I will lose one of my favorite punch lines. Asked by someone I'm giving a tour which of my records is the rarest in my collection, I was able to boast: *This LP was made in an edition of two; I have both of them.* That this is ridiculous is obvious, and that's what I've always liked about it" (245).

As Corbett shows in this book, vinyl is not a dying medium. Even if most music today is only available in streaming formats—despite the resurgence of vinyl in the last decade—the old media like vinyl records are still out there for freaks, snobs, and other enthusiasts to find and save from being lost and forgotten.

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