book reviews

Vinyl renaissance: yesterday celebrated in book form

Has there ever been a media format so romanticised in popular culture as vinyl? **Larry Jaffee** looks at two books that delve deeper into the personal stories behind music: *Old Rare New: The Independent Record Shop* and *Jazz Covers*

NEARLY 30 YEARS AFTER RETAILERS STARTED clearing out their 12-inch bins, these round black plastic artefacts of yesteryear now show up in popular culture and general merchandise store windows, and occupy increasing floor space in the remaining music retailers.

Despite being supplanted by CDs as the physical format of choice, records never really went away, according to a new book, Old Rare New: The Independent Record Shop (Black Dog Publishing, 2008).

Thirty shop owners, musicians, producers and journalists in the US and UK explain when and why they caught the vinyl bug, as they jar memories to come up with the first record they bought and what has fulfilled their habits over the years. They collectively represent a unique subculture.

About half of the participants are interviewed in the Q&A format. Others write essays of varying lengths. The writing/editing is spotty, with some of the contributors exhibiting a better grasp of the English language than others, but occasionally a passage hits to the heart of why vinyl still matters. One such extract is this insight offered by David Lashmar, proprietor/founder of the now-closed UK second-hand record shop Beanos.

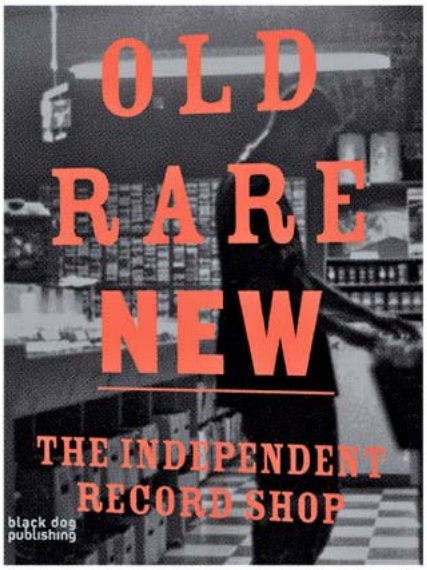
Writes Lashmar so descriptively of why the Napster generation could be missing out on a ritual that might provide a more pleasurable listening experience than the immediate gratification of downloading: "They will never know the joy of flicking through a rack of records, being captivated by cover artwork and reading the sleeve notes; of getting the record home, sliding it reverentially out of its cover and then out of its inner sleeve, marvelling at the lustre of the grooves...

"The day you bought the record, where you were, what you were wearing and who was in your heart, will be etched into your soul, as well defined as the grooves that are pressed into your record."

As the owner of some 4,000 LPs, and someone who just recently became reacquainted with said collection thanks to the purchase of a $150 Teac turntable-to-USB recorder/CD player/built-in radio, let me say that Lashmar could not have put it any better.

Also included is a useful four-page directory of record stores, including phone numbers, street addresses and website URLs.

For anyone who's ever relished being in a record store, you will want to read this book, which offers numerous photographs of inside and outside record stores. My one complaint with Old Rare New is that the photos, while always interesting, do not pop off the page, and appear washed out and grainy. The surprisingly poor print job is very uncharacteristic of Black Dog, whose coffee table art-related books usually set the bar for design and graphics reproduction.



Thirty shop owners, musicians, producers and journalists in the US and UK explain their attraction to vinyl

The stories behind iconic album covers are explained

Taschen's excellent new book Jazz Covers focuses on just that, and its more than 650 meticulously printed covers from the 1940s through the 1990s put Old Rare New's to shame. This book provides stories behind the covers – many iconic – of major and obscure jazz musicians, included in alphabetical order, providing the releases' art director, illustrator, and photographer credits.

The book's Portuguese author, Joaquim Paulo, opens with half a dozen interviews with jazz experts, including an art director, label owner, retail specialist, journalist, recording engineer and reissue producer, all of whom explain how they immersed themselves in the genre and offer some insight into jazz packaging. Leading jazz DJs also pick their top 10 favourite records.

Nine pages are devoted to trumpeter Miles Davis, whose 1950 album Birth of the Cool, observes Paulo, is not only a landmark recording but adorned with a cover that was a 'design revelation' at the time of its release.

Davis often took an active role in what went on his covers, notes One to One contributor George Cole, who authored the book The Last Miles: The Music of Miles Davis 1980-1991. He is impressed with Jazz Covers.

"In the early 1960s, Miles started to take a greater interest in his album covers and began to dictate his wishes to Columbia," comments Cole. "It was on Someday My Prince Will Come that he started demanding that Columbia use black women on his album covers."

The model? His first wife, Frances Taylor, who also appeared on ESP (1965).

Paulo notes that Taylor told a Davis biographer her husband went into a jealous rage right after that photo shoot, and she soon fled for her life.

Davis used his second wife Betty Mabry on the cover of Filles de Kilimanjaro and third wife Cicely Tyson on the cover of Sorcerer. Another black girlfriend (and mother of his third son), Marguerite Eskridge, appeared on the cover of Live At Fillmore.

Both Cole and Paulo note that the musician also helped former roommate, artist Corky McCoy, who he commissioned to draw the artwork for On The Corner (1972). Columbia balked at the ensuing street scene that included pimps, hustlers and other street characters.

"But Miles was calling the shots," points out Cole. "Miles said, 'If you made an album of Chinese music, you'd put Chinese people on the record cover – so he was having black people on On The Corner. In fact, McCoy's work would appear on three more of Miles's albums."

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