

Music Retail in the Age of Streaming

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Research Question

How are the changes in the way people consume music impacting music-related retail labour?

Argument

The rise of digital music has, on the one hand, significantly diminished big-box music retail, while on the other, given rise to a new niche market driven by authenticity.

Methodology

- Conducted four hours of participant observation at the Record Centre, an independent and local record store.
- Interviewed two former HMV employees and the manager of the Record Centre.

Major Themes

1. Demise of big-box stores

Before we went corporate, we'd never had mystery shoppers. That was really a shock to the gut. – Former HMV employee

- HMV became a publicly-owned corporation in the early 2000s, in conjunction with the rise of online file-sharing.
- As an attempt to counteract plummeting sales, auditing and standardization were implemented – much to the dismay of employees – which fits in with larger neoliberal trends.

2. Rise of niche vinyl market

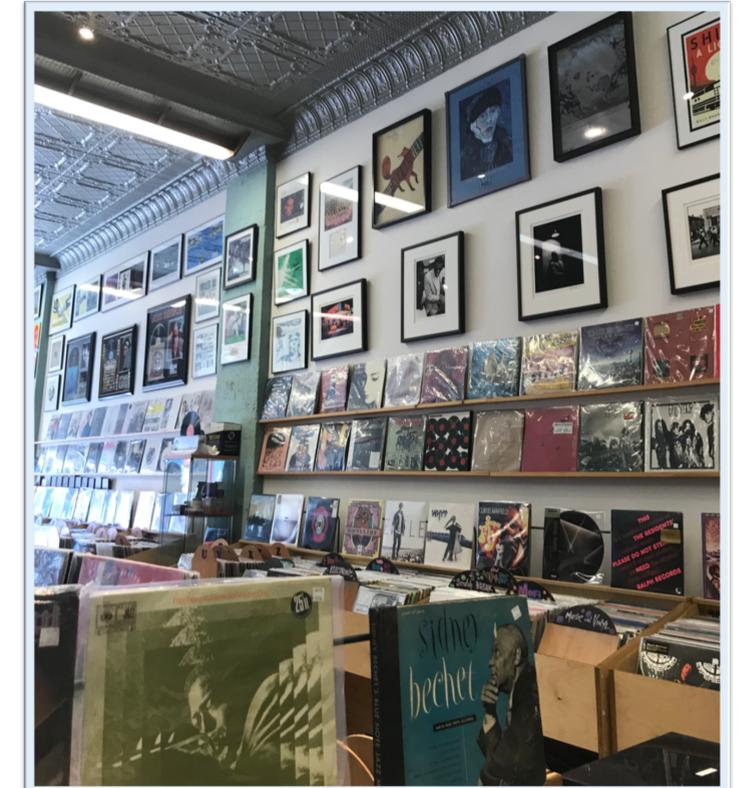
- The identity-forming practices of music lovers in the era of online streaming led to the formation of a niche group who opt to consume music in its analogue form.
- Vinyl is imbued with an “aura”, a form of authenticity associated with the physicality and originality of art.

3. Music labour & consumption as markers of identity

- Music retail employees expressed a love for music as the baseline reason for their choosing such employment.
- Working at the music store corroborated with identity-making processes outside of work (writing & performing music).
- In line with post-Fordist understandings, consuming music acted as a potent marker of identity.

Conclusions

- The demise of big-box music retail fits in with the larger trend of “retail apocalypse”.
- The authenticity associated with vinyl enabled the emergence of a niche group of supporters, for whom vinyl consumption is a marker of identity.
- In the case of HMV, bankruptcy was preceded by continuous pressure on employees through auditing and standardization.



The Record Centre, Ottawa, ON

Selected Bibliography

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- Harvey, David. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.