What can popular music studies learn from the bits and parts of vinyl records and their players? The groove of the record is one such bit, a useful starting point to think through this question. The groove is both everything and nothing for vinyl records. It is literally the recording; more precisely, a material instantiation of recorded sound, the waveform re-presented. But a groove is also nothing insofar as it cannot sound itself. It is just one part of a complex of bits and pieces that come together to make sound happen. The groove, encoded information, gets turned into sound in a decoding process that requires configuring instruments in just the right way—turning vinyl into music.

Focusing on these articulations—the way things come together, how they configure, how they are configured—is one way to address this question.\(^1\) The groove comes into contact with the stylus, which generates an electric current, which feeds into an amplifier, which converts the current into the sound that emanates from our speakers. But these configurations, the work of a very careful calibration of the myriad parts of the record player, aren’t simply mechanical. They are historical and social. Media involves more than its “gear,” given the web of social relations in which these machines are embedded.

Audiophiles offer a useful example of this in the care and knowledge they bring to records and their players. This includes awareness of the way grooves work, how to care for them, and how to optimize their sound with the right setup. As Marc Perlman (2003, 2004) shows, audiophiles have distinct vocabulary and media, forming their own niche communities. But to move beyond a subcultural framework, it helps to think of audiophilia as a way of listening. Audiophiles listen first to their gear, noting in precise, minute detail how their machines sound—how the stylus runs along the groove, which type of stylus is best, how to manage surface noise and problems of distortion, and so on. A

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discussion from a thread on the online forum Steve Hoffman Audiophile Mastering helps give a sense of the level of care that audiophiles assume:

[It is] likely groove damage. Take a look closely at the lead in groove and the runout. Do you see lots of tiny marks? Couple that with spindle marks on the label and those are telltale signs of a record that’s been played hard and groove worn. Not much to do other than find a better copy or experiment with stylus profiles.²

Someone else responds on the same thread with the following advice:

You can also try playback with various stylus profiles including a conical stylus, which many prefer for mono LPs of that vintage, or the polar opposite, a MicroLine stylus to see if that rides beneath the groove damage.³

Audiophiles tinker with equipment. They might literally get into the groove to repair them.⁴ They curate their sound systems and their records in ways that are simultaneously technical, intuitive, and personal.

There are other examples to consider. DJs and turntablists, for instance, play with the groove at the granular, minute level by scratching, beat juggling, needle dropping, and so on. DJs have an intuitive and tactile knowledge of their records that manifests in the real time of performance.⁵ Another example, the so-called vinyl revival, compels us to take seriously the experiential aspects of playing and collecting vinyl records, especially the haptic, visual, and even olfactory ways we come to know our records. I recently came across a CD player that advertises itself this way: "Long Time No See portable CD player allows you, once again, to simultaneously experience the auditory, tactile, and visual aspects of listening to a CD."⁶ The player looks like a miniature vinyl turntable but is entirely digital and intended for digital players. For vinyl enthusiasts, the “auditory, tactile, and visual aspects” are a given: to see the grooves spiraling, to hold the record in your hands, to hear the touch of the stylus running along the groove, with its distinct analog "feel," explains a big part of vinyl’s appeal. The ad only makes sense to people with an ingrained bodily memory of the visceral pleasures of handling vinyl records and CDs.

For most listeners, though, engagement with the bits and parts is far more generalized. The record player fades in the background—perhaps literally—so that all that’s left is the music. We only tend to notice the groove when it isn’t working right—it skips, it’s

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³ Ibid.
⁶ This is for a CD player called Long Time No See—Bluetooth 5.0 Portable CD Player, made by NINM Lab. I came across the CD player for sale in a store in Hong Kong in May 2021, and the above quote is from the outer packaging of the box of the player. You can read more about it online on the company’s Kickstarter page, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/ninmlab/long-time-no-see-bluetooth-50-portable-cd-player, accessed 1 May 2021.
scratched, it’s dirty. The bits and parts of the machine otherwise don’t concern us. This recalls Tim Ingold’s point that “It is through the transformation of threads into traces . . . that surfaces are brought into being. And conversely, it is through the transformation of traces into threads that surfaces are dissolved.” The groove is one such trace, an inscription of the recorded event. As it runs its course, the groove is turned into threads—into the electric signals that run through the wires and cables of the player. Here, the record and its player dissolve into sound. One could say that the history of the phonograph has been exactly this endeavor—an effort to erase the medium itself so that all we’re left with is sound. This is partly the logic of high-fidelity, but it manifests in how record players are designed to be interacted with, how they are designed for domestic spaces. Following Ingold, we might consider the ways these varying lines coalesce and entangle. These lines may be material, in the case of the groove or with the wires and cables of our record players, or conceptual, the unique paths and trajectories that things and people assume over time. To follow these lines, even at the most granular levels of detail is to take seriously music’s things—and their bits and parts—in their historical, social, and cultural specificities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
