

Revolution

Revolution (*n., v.*)—in the context of vinyl records, it indicates the measure of the speed at which the discs are played. But the acronym $33\frac{1}{3}$ rpm (revolutions per minute), found on most vinyl labels, can be read as more than a technological marker, indicating that LPs are cultural artefacts particularly rich in meaning, connotation and function. While their rise to prominence as the main medium for recorded music fell in the 1930s, it was in the 1960s that vinyl's popularity coincided with the social, cultural and political turmoil of the era as well as with the growing ambitions of artists willing to create longer and more complex compositions. All of these contexts invite a consideration of long-playing records as more than mere innovation. The significance of LPs also transgresses the status of a purely material artefact of a bygone era as, apart from registering the turbulent zeitgeist in the form of recorded music, it could also transform the audiences' consciousness and behavior, thus, exerting effects that go beyond the very materiality of the record.

The Oxford English Dictionary lists both noun and verb forms for the word revolution. It points to etymological origins in French and Latin and indicates a set of meanings connected with movement, time and politics. Virtually all of these are reflected in the relationship with vinyl records. The range of cognates is pretty broad, however, and encompasses, among others, forms of rebellion or taking up the fight (Lat. *bellum*) against authorities. This, in turn, may connote feelings of antipathy (revolt, revolting) towards those in power, or suggest more historically specific political revolutions. In musical terms, such subversive sentiments might have been expressed within a host of protest songs or otherwise groundbreaking popular albums etched in vinyl. In this sense, LPs certainly served as a vehicle for transmitting revolutionary messages of social discord packed into an accessible yet potentially dangerous musical frame.¹

Nowadays revolution is most likely to be a marker for technological innovation or a stand-in for change (the next big thing), bringing to mind the once experimental, cutting-edge quality of records, such as the Beatles' *Revolver* (1966). Symptomatically, its cultural impact on the day of publication would reverberate over time, demonstrating that revolution does not have to be strictly connected with any specifically political,

1. Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute. A History of Protest Songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

instantaneous upheavals or rapid breaks with the past (as suggested by Lat. *revolvere*). Instead, it may describe a circular, flowy motion—a continuous, or even repeated, movement; just like the one of a vinyl record revolving on the turntable. Nicholas Royle’s understanding of literature as *Veering*² allows us to view music records from a similar perspective: as a material stepping-stone that occasions a time-bending immersion provided by the recorded content. The French root of the verb “to veer” (Fr. *virer*) points to the activities of turning and spinning—precisely the ones which LPs perform on the record players—but it may also mean swerving or changing direction, which gestures towards the revolutionary changes brought about by the material listened to on vinyl. Recorded music may well indicate immersive sonic explorations of the self (e.g., psychedelia), but it can also tap into much broader contexts. With politically charged songs and whole albums seen as cultural texts capable of instigating transformations in the social reality, LPs can connote the soundtrack to actual revolutions in the streets.

Corresponding to the role of print and the very materiality of the words in literature and in reading, the REVolutionary motion marked by 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm is evocative of an immersive experience set up by the material elements of the vinyl record: a gatefold sleeve, inserts, the picture disc or other elements of graphic artwork accompanying the musical message.³ Consequently, listening can be seen as a process of effecting a synesthetic experience that takes the audience out of the present moment. This does not necessarily have to be specifically related to drug-induced sensations, although “together, psychedelics and music achieve a stunning synergy because music, too, is felt as something very near to us and at the same time as a world that is quite distinct from the world mapped by vision and touch”.⁴ The immersive effect of the fusion of words and music recorded on an LP may consequently produce a sort of “bending in time-space continuum,” or in the enVIRonment (another veering cognate), which transports the listener away from the here-and-now. When it comes to LPs, the force of immersion understood in this way was also heightened by the common practice of the past—the lack of lyrics accompanying the albums. This would certainly encourage repeated interaction with the musical text in the era before Internet search engines.

The recent upsurge of interest in the medium of vinyl also demands a reconsideration of the retro poetics present in contemporary popular culture. In *The Revenge of Analog*, David Sax⁵ identifies a link between the rise of popularity of LPs (among other material objects recently invading our present, like board games or paper notebooks) and a contemporary yearning for haptic experiences in a world largely dominated by the virtual domain. These nostalgic impulses are, nonetheless, subject to capitalist practices, for instance, on the part of the record publishers issuing various pricy boxed sets and

2. Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

3. Tymon Adamczewski, “Listening to Images, Reading the Records: The Inclusive Experience in British Progressive Rock of the 1960s and 1970s,” *NJES. Nordic Journal of English Studies* 17, no. 1 (2018): 181–96; DOI: <http://doi.org/10.35360/njes.428>

4. Nick Bromell, *Tomorrow Never Knows. Rock and Psychedelics in the 1960s* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 72.

5. David Sax, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

anniversary editions of the most popular albums, which effectively blunt and commodify their once subversive edge. Apart from emphasizing the materiality of the very records, such processes feed on the contemporary need for a sensory concentration on the present moment, which can be pitted against the immediacy of current media-based digital society. Nevertheless, while the revolutionary potential of vinyl seems questionable, the veering quality of recorded music listened to from an LP may still remain, in many ways, effective. ■