

Vinyl Revival

Vinyl revival refers to the growth of vinyl record sales in the twenty-first century. Initially thought to be a short-term trend when first reported in 2008 and 2009, the popularity of LPs among music consumers has since become a perennial talking point for music industry observers, particularly as CD sales have steadily declined (figs. 1 and 2). Observers have typically contextualized popular music revivals within ideas of nostalgia, roots, and authenticity, and indeed those discourses are present in this ongoing revival, often deployed alongside notions of material fetishization and the superiority of records' tactility and analog sound (over digital music formats) to explain their attraction. The vinyl revival is significant, however, not because it mobilizes these contested concepts but rather because its perpetual growth frustrates accepted logic—both that revivals are short-term fads and that physical formats have no future in the increasingly digital record industries. Indeed, now that LPs outsell CDs (as of 2020), vinyl is the first recording format to return to dominance from near-extinction.

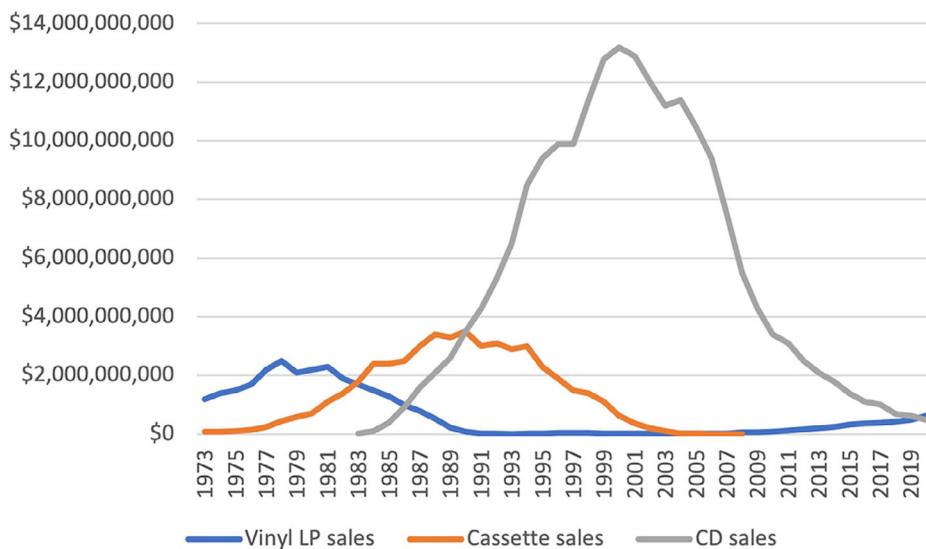


FIGURE 1. Vinyl LP, Cassette, and CD Sales Revenue (1973–2020)

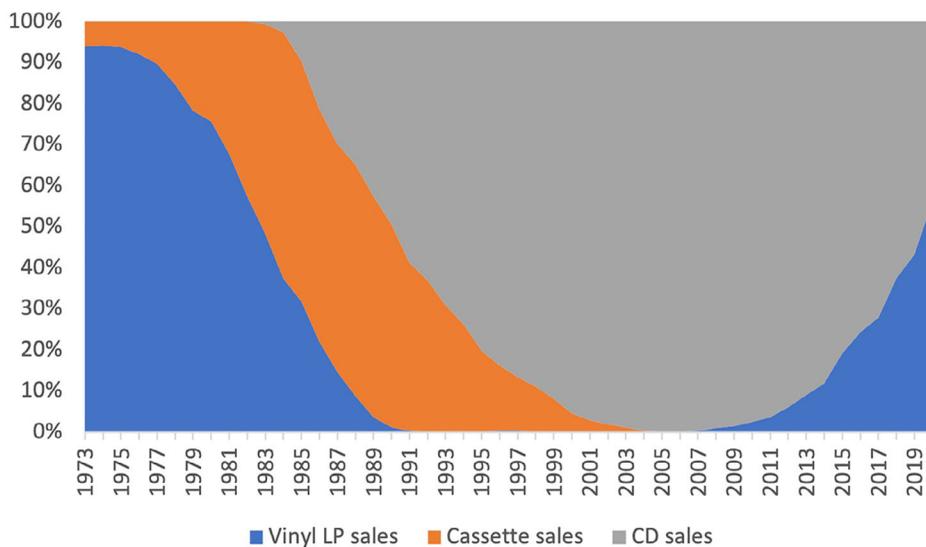


FIGURE 2. Vinyl LP, Cassette, and CD Sales as a Percentage of Total Revenue (1973–2020)

According to sales data provided by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), vinyl LP sales in the United States peaked at \$2.5 billion in 1978.¹ LP sales fell as cassette sales increased, overtaking LPs in 1983. CDs were introduced in late 1982, growing to outsell LPs by 1987 (\$1.6 billion to \$793.1 million) and cassettes by 1991 (\$4.3 billion to \$3.0 billion; figs. 1 and 2).² The CD reached meteoric sales heights throughout the 1990s: spurred by reissues and the major record labels’ marketing campaign for consumers to replace their record collections with the newer format, sales peaked at \$13.2 billion in 2000, the driving force behind the RIAA’s cumulative \$14.6 billion revenue peak in 1999. LPs remained largely forgotten, bottoming out at \$10.6 million in 1993 and routinely selling in the tens of millions of dollars (compared to the multiple billions of dollars of CD sales from 1988 onwards).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, vinyl records remained a steady if insubstantial component of recorded music revenue, largely sustained by otherwise unrelated niche markets catering to club DJs, high-end analog audiophiles, and the DIY indie underground.³ A side effect of the major labels’ very successful CD replacement campaign was the massive glut of used LPs that flooded the secondary market, as most consumers got rid of their records. This huge cache of low-priced vinyl catalyzed the growth of record

1. All RIAA data cited herein is available through the “U.S. Sales Database,” <https://www.riaa.com/u-s-sales-database/>. Monetary values (fig. 1) are not exact but calculated via recommended list price for retail sale and not adjusted for inflation. Although the years of sales peaks are different if we use the RIAA’s measurements of sales volume instead of sales revenue, the general trends remain unchanged.

2. Cassette sales peaked at \$3.5 billion in 1990, on par with CDs, but declined thereafter. The RIAA stopped tracking cassette sales as a separate category after 2008. In their annual year-end revenue statistics since then, cassette sales are included in the category “other physical” with vinyl singles, CD singles, and other specialized formats (SACD, DVD audio, etc.).

3. On audiophile culture, see Marc Perlman, “Golden Ears and Meter Readers: The Contest for Epistemic Authority in Audiophilia,” *Social Studies of Science* 34, no. 5 (2004): 783–807.

collecting among remaining collectors, younger collectors new to vinyl (such as myself, who started buying LPs for a dime apiece at garage sales in the 1990s), and sample-based music producers. In popular culture, record collectors were parodied as eccentric and introverted in works such as Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World*, and the feature films based on both.⁴ Music journalists such as Brett Milano and Amanda Petrusich tended to take a more sympathetic approach to their portraits of record collectors (wary, perhaps, of the similarities they shared); photographer Eilon Paz has profiled many collectors for his website *Dust & Grooves*, documenting the diversity of the record collecting community.⁵ Scholarly perspectives have included Will Straw's depiction of record collecting as a masculine pursuit of connoisseurship, Roy Shuker's more nuanced discussion of a mix of characteristics among collectors, Marion Leonard's discussion of record collecting's potential to decenter canons in popular music's institutionalized histories, and Sophia Maalsen and Jessica McLean's analysis of record collecting's lack of gender diversity (in which women's collecting is framed as that of "consumers," in contrast to men's "serious, authentic record collecting") both reflecting and reproducing that of the music industries.⁶

In short, there was a lot to say about the continued vitality of vinyl LPs and record collecting culture throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Nevertheless, music industry observers followed the industries' lead and instead attended to the narratives of capital. After the heights of the 1990s, sales of CDs started declining steadily in 2001 in a seemingly unstoppable slide the RIAA attributed to digital piracy.⁷ A decade after CD sales peaked in 2000, they had declined 74% to \$3.4 billion (fig. 1).⁸ This decline had the makings of another format shift, albeit one neither planned nor promoted by the major record labels. The transition to individual digital files (mostly compressed .mp3 files, but also including many other formats) was instead driven by consumers, supported and exploited by technology companies (such as Apple), and only grudgingly (and belatedly, following and overlapping with a period of resistance) accepted by the major record labels.

4. Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995); Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 1998).

5. Brett Milano, *Vinyl Junkies: Adventures in Record Collecting* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003); Amanda Petrusich, *Do Not Sell At Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World's Rarest 78rpm Records* (New York: Scribner, 2014); <https://dustandgrooves.com>; Eilon Paz, *Dust & Grooves: Adventures in Record Collecting* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2015).

6. Will Straw, "Sizing Up Record Collectors: Gender and Connoisseurship in Rock Music Culture," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1997), 3–16; Roy Shuker, "Beyond the 'High Fidelity' Stereotype: Defining the (Contemporary) Record Collector," *Popular Music* 23, no. 3 (2004): 311–30; Marion Leonard, "Constructing Histories through Material Culture: Popular Music, Museums and Collecting," *Popular Music History* 2, no. 2 (2007): 147–67; Sophia Maalsen and Jessica McLean, "Record Collections as Musical Archives: Gender, Record Collecting, and Whose Music Is Heard," *Journal of Material Culture* 23, no. 1 (2018): 54.

7. See, e.g., Steve Knopper, *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age* (New York: Free Press, 2009); Greg Kot, *Ripped: How the Wired Generation Revolutionized Music* (New York: Scribner, 2009); Lee Marshall, "The Recording Industry in the Twenty-First Century," in *The International Recording Industries, ed. Lee Marshall* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 53–74; Stephen Witt, *How Music Got Free: The End of an Industry, the Turn of the Century, and the Patient Zero of Piracy* (New York: Viking, 2015).

8. By comparison, LP sales dropped almost 79% to \$532.2 million in the decade following the format's sales peak in 1978 (fig. 1).

But then a funny thing happened: while CD sales shrank as a result of this format shift, vinyl sales started increasing. By 2010, LP sales reached \$88.9 million—a revenue level not seen in twenty years. Journalists thought this newsworthy, reporting on the vinyl revival as a quirky fad driven by a nostalgic fetishization of the supposedly extinct format.⁹ “Don’t call it a comeback,” Jay-Z might have admonished; indeed, LPs have only experienced a revival if one ignores the passionate collectors, indie record labels, and DJs who kept the format afloat during the intervening two decades. And yet, vinyl’s commercial revival reignited popular attention to LPs and showed no signs of abating throughout the 2010s. The few remaining record pressing plants added a third shift to keep up with increased demand, and new ones opened; record stores, whose decline paralleled that of CDs, rebounded by prioritizing LPs over CDs; turntable sales grew; new books and documentary films celebrated vinyl culture; used record fairs attracted collectors willing to pay premium prices for now-rare commodities; customers queued up on sidewalks for hours on Record Store Day.

LP sales topped \$619.6 million in 2020, outselling CDs for the first time since 1986.¹⁰ Indeed, from 2010 to 2020 CD sales decreased by 85% while LP sales increased by almost 600% (figs. 1 and 2). In 2021, vinyl’s commercial success is passé; discussing it as a revival seems almost quaint. Younger consumers, after all, have barely known a world in which vinyl was nearly extinct, and the rest of us are no longer surprised nor dismayed by its staying power. LP sales revenue overtaking that of CDs was all but a foregone conclusion and barely remarked upon. Indeed, the discussions about why vinyl sales are increasing have all but disappeared, even if the reasons themselves still resonate with many collectors: nostalgia, the importance of material traces in an increasingly digital world, a belief in vinyl’s superior sound, a desire to support artists monetarily, and the materiality of fandoms (particularly when live concerts have all but ceased during the COVID-19 pandemic), among others. In 2021, however, vinyl’s continued commercial growth reflects its return to status as a mass market commodity more than any of these other reasons: as the major labels expand their vinyl production and big box retailers increasingly stock records, LP sales by major label artists (including catalog reissues) outpace those within the niche genre and audiophile markets that sustained the format for almost two decades. The vinyl revival, it seems, is here to stay. ■

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10. The RIAA reported \$483.3 million CD sales revenue in 2020 (fig.1).

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