

## 4 'Organized Disorder':

### The Changing Space of the Record Shop

**Will Straw**

In 1872, just before opening le Bon Marché, his newly-acquired Parisian department store, Aristide Boucicault hurriedly rearranged its layout. In Boucicault's reasons for this reordering, Rachel Bowlby (1985) has suggested, we may glimpse the birth of a distinctly modern conception of commerce and shopping. What is necessary, Boucicault wrote, speaking of his customers:

is that they walk around for hours, that they get lost. First of all, they will seem more numerous. Secondly . . . the store will seem larger to them. And lastly, it would really be too much if, as they wander around in organized disorder, lost, driven crazy, they don't set foot in some departments where they had no intention of going, and if they don't succumb at the sight of things which grab them on the way.

Part of the original appeal of the department store, Rachel Bowlby has argued, rested on the fact that in entering it one did not directly encounter the proprietor or salesperson. There was no sense of obligation to buy something, little risk that one would be asked what one was looking for. The moral equation between entering a shop and making a purchase, typical of earlier forms of commerce, had been broken. The customer's relationship to goods on offer was now marked by an individual, touristic compulsion to explore, rather than an obligation rooted in interpersonal contact.

This sense of wandering around in 'organized disorder' may be said to mark the present-day experience of stores specializing in recorded music. The small or mid-sized chain stores of a decade ago are gradually disappearing within North America and elsewhere, giving way to sprawling superstores

with their segregated sections, multiple floors and careful construction of architectural confusion. This combination of confusion and enticing promise reaches almost caricatural levels in the HMV Superstore on Yonge Street in Toronto. Here, on entering, one immediately confronts two sets of stairs, each leading to another floor whose precise function is not obvious to the first-time visitor. At the downtown Sam The Record Man outlet in Montreal, the upper levels are organized as a set of interconnected garrets, through which even experienced customers are likely to stumble, confused, in their search for a way out. On my last visit there, I noticed a new sign inviting customers to seek directions if they were lost.

In 1995, in what seemed a frenzied rush to gargantuan monumentality, global retail chains specializing in home entertainment software leapfrogged over each other in their efforts to construct the world's largest store. In May, the US-based Tower Record chain claimed that its Tokyo store, at 52,000 square feet, was the world's biggest. It encompassed, the trade press reported, 'seven floors of merchandise, another floor for events, and three basements, one of which contains a cafe' (Jeffrey, 1995). The HMV outlet on Oxford Street in London, which the *Guinness Book of Records* had designated as the world's largest record store (at 36,000 square feet) was itself dwarfed on 1 June by the new Virgin Megastore, only 200 yards away, which (at 67,718 square feet) claimed the title of 'world's largest home entertainment store' (Clark-Meads, 1995). In Las Vegas, in August, a merging of the Tower record outlet and a store belonging to the Good Guys! electronics chain produced Wow! The Multimedia Superstore, which sprawled over some 60,000 square feet (Fitzpatrick, 1995).

Few spatial environments crystallize so perfectly an emergent set of cultural and commercial relations as does the contemporary record superstore. As the most visible piece of the material culture in which popular music is embedded, the superstore has emerged concurrently with two ideas whose validity it appears to undermine. One of these is the claim that commerce in a post-Fordist age will find its expression in the boutique rather than the democratically expansive stores of the past, in narrowly specialized and niche-targeted retail outlets whose inventories are regularly remade in response to rapidly shifting tastes. The abundance and pluralism of the record superstore, in which may be found much of the accumulated history of recorded sound, would seem the symmetrical opposite of the post-Fordist boutique. Another set of ideas has turned on the prediction that the sound recording as physical object – as embodied in the vinyl album, compact disc or cassette – is on the verge of disappearance, to be replaced by bits of data downloaded into the home via the Internet or other channels. For this scenario to be convincing, we must believe that, like the dinosaur, the record store has grown to its greatest size just before the moment of its extinction. The record superstore is the product of several observable socioeconomic

trends. One such trend is the ascendant popularity of mammoth, warehouse retail outlets across a number of industries (most notably, in North America, in the office supply and pharmaceutical products industries). Another is the move towards concentration within the recorded music industries (in particular, within distribution). As the number of distribution entities has shrunk, the ability of any one of these to deal with major retail chains and reach store shelves has grown, expanding the range of titles offered by such chains. More broadly, the replication of monumental superstore structures has come with the revitalization of city core economies, in which both museums and those shopping sites which seem museum-like have come to play a prominent role.

At the same time, the record superstore is an architectural expression of the broader reordering which has gone on within the culture of popular music – one through which musical tastes and consumption habits have come to be fragmented, distributed across an expanding array of niches. Once oriented towards producing a limited number of blockbuster successes, record companies are more and more the exploiters of accumulated back catalogues or infinitely differentiated niche markets. For the most optimistic of industry observers, their market has come to be characterized by a new, stable predictability: jazz reissues, classical compilations and alternative rock albums now sell in numbers which lend themselves more easily to procedures of rational calculation. For other analysts, however, the sprawling pluralism of the contemporary record store threatens a dispersion of the market into anarchic confusion. As tastes fragment and few records attain the sales levels of a *Thriller* or a *Purple Rain*, consumer choices no longer manifest themselves as broad, collective swings towards this album or that. Instead, they are spread among thousands of choices from repertoires accumulated over fifty or sixty years. As the sections within superstores proliferate, and with them the number of titles for offer, marketing experts begin to speak of 'selection stress': the 'anxiety [of] a music buyer faced with the enormous selection in most stores', as Josh Kaplan, founder of the marketing firm Intouch, argues (Rothman, 1993). A whole range of technologies, subsidiary media and marketing strategies are now marshalled to reduce this stress, to direct the buyer comfortably and confidently to specified titles.

### The Swing Vote and the Comfort Level

Over the last twenty years, a prominent theme of record industry discourse has been the need to reduce the intimidation seen as endemic to the environment of the record store. This intimidation is itself traced to two features of popular musical culture: the existence of sounds which are oppressive and knowledges which are unevenly distributed. Paul du Gay has written of the

retail revolution which, since the 1960s, has appeared to empower customers by making them, rather than salespeople, the bearer of knowledges about goods on offer. '[S]elf-service', he suggests, 'has functioned as a "technique of individuation" for consumers, constituting them as self-regulating, autonomous individual subjects exercising choice in a world of goods' (du Gay, 1993). In the record retail industry, this same self-regulation had led to large segments of the population viewing the record store as an alien, humbling experience.

In the late 1970s, in the midst of the record industry's economic slump, the trade press was saturated with rhetoric about the need to win back adult record buyers. Demographic studies showed a long-term shrinking of the primary audience for rock recordings (males aged 18–24); wooing back the older, so-called casual buyer was instituted as the challenge of the 1980s. The diagnosis of why North American adults had ceased buying records in significant numbers throughout the 1970s focused, for a time, on the spatial environment of the shopping mall chain store. Narrow and deep, the chain store confronted middle-aged shoppers with young, frighteningly subcultural sales clerks and heavy metal music blasting from an entrance which was itself blocked by displays of unrecognizable (to these shoppers) current recordings. Prominent in the folklore of the record industry during this period were stories of adults entering a record store, asking for records by Perry Como or Bing Crosby, and meeting blank stares of non-recognition from sales clerks.

In the context of declining sales, the industry's salvation, it was believed, required turning away from rock, and toward so-called non-perishable classes of product, such as children's music, easy listening, classical music and reissues from the past. 'Non-perishable' meant that these forms did not rise and fall with the rhythms of fashion; stores could maintain titles in inventory for long periods of time. The ideal purchaser of these non-perishable recordings, industry discourse suggested, was the young adult woman. '[S]he's uncommitted,' industry executive Michael Kapp of Warner Special Products described this kind of consumer: 'She isn't really into music, doesn't read hip music magazines, doesn't go to concerts, but [she] reads shopper guide columns and is about ready to hook up with cable tv or buy a video game.'

One of the most famously effective means of reaching these buyers involved campaigns which encouraged young adult women to buy recordings as gifts (presumably for men.) The 'Give The Gift of Music' campaign of the early 1980s was targeted precisely at so-called casual buyers. These were not to be found in record stores themselves, but, rather, 'walking up and down the aisles of your customers' chain, discount or department store'. Females aged 30–9, whom research found to spend 25 per cent of all gift dollars, were designated the 'swing vote' within industry discourse, those who could make the difference between a record's profitability or failure.

During this period, as well, labels producing so-called Middle of the Road recordings explored what were termed non-traditional sales outlets for recordings – liquor stores, perfume stores and gift shops – bypassing a record retail sector considered inhospitable to their target audiences.

The recording industry's construction of a 'casual buyer' has typically conflated the ageing adult and the female. Both are seen as slow in their response to shifting trends, and much less involved in the circulation of music-related knowledges than is the male consumer in his late teens or early twenties. Each of these consumer groups, according to the industry's understanding, nevertheless possesses specific virtues. The 'casual buyer' has no prior inclination to purchase records; once convinced to do so, however, she is easily swayed by advertising strategies. In this, she is diametrically opposed to the 'core' male buyer, who is always willing to buy records, but notoriously selective in his buying decisions. The wooing of the largely female, 'casual' buyer is regularly painted in the terms of chivalrous guidance. Having defined musical recordings as appropriate gifts, the industry will offer benevolent instruction as to which recordings are suitable for that purpose.

If the compact disc has emerged as one of the most dazzlingly effective of commodity forms, this has little to do with its technical superiority to the vinyl record (which we no longer remember to notice.) Rather, this effectiveness has to do with its status as the perfect crossover consumer object. As a cutting-edge audiophile invention, it seduced the technophilic, connoisseurist males who typically buy new sound equipment and quickly build collections of recordings. (Indeed, by the late 1980s, and because of the CD, the proportion of males within the US record-buying audience had reached peak levels.) At the same time, its visual refinement and high price rapidly rendered it legitimate as a gift. In this, the CD has found a wide audience among the population of casual record buyers.

These audiences, distinct and opposed in a variety of ways, find a partial convergence within the reissue strategies of record companies. The jazz or classic rock connoisseur seeks and now finds the range of titles which archiving impulses require. The casual buyer, establishing a collection which is likely to remain limited, finds titles catering to an implicit demand for canonical representativity. For the record companies and the retail sector, the significant challenge of the near future is that of delivering information. Means must be developed to inform connoisseurs of ongoing reissue programmes; at the same time, the anxiety of casual buyers about their lack of expertise must be overcome.

In this context, there is a preponderance of moralizing exhortations, directed at those within the record retail industry, to increase the level of comfort of those browsing in their stores. Classical, jazz and alternative rock music are regularly characterized as 'intimidating', in that they present the would-be buyer with the horrifying possibility of making a wrong choice.

In the marketing of jazz, a principal means of anxiety reduction is the release of recordings in series marked with prestigious trademarks and guaranteeing a continuity between titles. (An overinvestment in the trademarks of defunct companies and other signs of originary authenticity characterizes CD reissues overall.)

The strains within this moralizing are most visible in discussions of the popularizing of classical music. Guided by the conviction that 'ageing baby-boomers are looking for something new and mellow to listen to', labels have sought to render classical music friendly and populist, promoting it on television during basketball games, through movie soundtracks or via tie-ins to Martha Stewart cookbooks (Cox, 1992). In the experience of one distributor of classical music, 'racks that highlight chart successes and include recommendations of titles made the consumer "more comfortable"', as *Billboard* put it in 1991. For traditional classical labels, such as Deutsche Grammophon, this is frequently seen as shameless pandering, a squandering of the prestige capital accumulated by these labels or by the orchestras and composers they have presented.

If record stores have become larger, it is in part to accommodate all customers: the casual *and* the legendary 'core' buyer of records. The latter, obviously, can wallow in the archival inclusiveness of the superstore. For the casual buyer, the sprawling abundance of the superstore – its mixing of historical times and endless subdivision of tastes and genres – although likely to intimidate, is just as likely to comfort. Just as it suggests an endless set of knowledges not yet mastered, its flattened sense of equivalency means that none stands more privileged than another.

### Space and Stasis

The effects of the CD on the layout of the record store are easily traceable, but they must be seen against the background of a larger audience fragmentation of which they are both a cause and an effect. The predominance of the CD has grown during a period when radio has come to play a much less significant role in stimulating record sales than in the past. In North America, this has come as the majority of radio stations have moved away from playing current music. The declining promotional role of radio has encouraged the turn towards reissues, just as this turn itself has weakened the link between the records put on sale and what is heard on radio. Record companies, to remain profitable, have come to depend on the tighter but more predictable profits which accrue from the sales of thousands of back catalogue titles. While current recordings obviously continue to be released, they do so within a context of increased audience fragmentation. (One can own two albums on today's *Billboard* Top 10 without ever having heard most of the

others.) In this context, the processes by which consumers come to know about and seek out records are increasingly differentiated, grounded in the everyday minutiae of word-of-mouth or highly specialized magazines. Seeking to influence sales, record companies have extended the hand of chivalrous and polite guidance to all buyers.

To benefit from massive reissue programmes and from the pluralism of current product, record stores themselves have had to enlarge their physical space so as to offer an enormous range of titles. (They can no longer sacrifice the revenues from marginal forms, such as alternative rock, to speciality stores.) This requires extensive capitalization, both to expand and subdivide the physical space of the retail store, and to maintain large, slow-moving inventories over long periods of time. This requirement, more than any broader economic trend, may serve to explain the recent disappearance within Canada of the A&A and Discus chains, both of which lacked the resources necessary to maintain and expand inventories.

The important tension within the record retail sector presently is that between the offering of a potentially chaotic abundance and the marshalling of a variety of means for focusing consumer choice and producing order from amidst this chaos. The changing architecture of the record store over the last half decade reveals the new importance of consumer information and its delivery. The rise of in-store listening booths, give-away magazines and label display racks is a direct result of the declining role of radio as a force in stimulating record sales. These forms and technologies all presume a redefinition of record buying as an activity stimulated by discovery, previewing and experimentation, rather than repeated exposure or peer group reinforcement. They are meant, in other words, to contain the epidemic of 'selection stress'.

In this context, the industry's conceptualization of buyer behaviour has shifted considerably. This is no longer imagined in causal terms, as the effect of particular promotional media on collective buying decisions. Rather, it is perceived as a set of coherences which link the observed purchase of one title to the possible or probable purchase of another, along a calculated series. Here, the acquisition of information on individual buying habits has become embedded within new technologies which create buyer profiles and guide their choices. The most discussed of these, offered by Intouch of San Francisco, involves listening stations in record stores, for the use of which identification cards are required. A customer who samples any pop/dance record is offered a sneak preview of the new album by another pop/dance artist; later, he or she is mailed information on upcoming albums of similar style. Record companies, in turn, receive data on which cuts the customer listened to while using the machine. This is combined with demographic information supplied when the customer applied for a card.

The emergence of these information systems and technologies has been

embedded within an ongoing campaign against waste, against the failure to use the most trivial sorts of information. One effect of this preoccupation with data has been the diminished presence, within North American record stores, of deletes or 'cut-outs'. As cash registers are linked to inventory control systems, and these to record companies and their pressing plants, the risks of overpressing and ordering have been reduced. Slow-selling stock is reallocated to other branches; best-selling titles are printed as they are needed. The effect, for long-time browsers like myself, is a redefinition of the record store's promise of discovery. Once, a decade ago, it was based on the enticing likelihood of stumbling across bins of cheap, failed albums or overruns. Now, the pleasure of discovery has been directed towards tastefully packaged reissues selling at catalogue prices.

These changes, like so many others reshaping our cultural landscape, may leave us with a paralysing ambivalence. In an age when in-store giveaway magazines build credibility by running negative reviews, or when listening posts invite us to test the latest alternative rock obscurity, traditional critiques of record industry hype or shrinking choice seem quaintly inappropriate. Longstanding concerns about the neglect of once-marginal forms or performers are disarmed as major firms rush to reissue their back catalogues in lovingly designed collections. Complaints about the élitism implicit in CD pricing policies wither when attractive soul reissues on compact disc sell for less than a current 12" vinyl dance single.

What has withered as well, amidst the new fragmentation of musical tastes, is music's role in producing and registering disruptive shifts of popular attention. As musical tastes divide, they appear to be more purist: industrial rock, rap or country albums now reach the Top 10 without the obvious signs of compromise or hybridization. The rationalization of distribution, sales and promotion has helped to transform the market for records into segregated blocks of loyal core buyers rather than a site for crossover or collective re-direction. In this context, successful records seem more authentic, more faithful to their generic traditions, than at any point in recent history. 'There is an increasing proliferation of street-edge music,' record label executive Barry Weiss of Jive Records said recently, and 'the old rules don't apply as much'. Under the new rules, a Nine Inch Nails album makes the *Billboard* Top 10 in its first week of release.

With so much that seems positive in these changes, we may overlook the new segregations of taste and audience which have resulted. Few collective gatherings are as racially and socially homogeneous as a Green Day concert, for example, and a mid-1990s Pink Floyd show in New York was, by all accounts, one of the most exclusively white events in that city's recent history. As record superstores beckon with their pluralist abundance, magazines, radio formats and the broader logics of social differentiation have circumscribed tastes and buying patterns within predictable clusters. What



has been lost, arguably, are those (politically ambiguous) moments of crossover or convergence which regularly undermined music's usual tendency to reinforce social and racial insularity. Stumbling around the record superstore, 'lost, driven crazy', the paths we follow are likely, nevertheless, to map the stubborn lines of social division.

### References

- Bowlby, Rachel (1985) *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, London: Methuen.
- Clark-Meads, Jeff (1995) 'London stores set world standards: with HMV, revamped Megastore enters record book', *Billboard*, 17 June.
- Cox, Meg (1992) 'Classical labels tune in new listeners', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 April.
- Du Gay, Paul (1993) "'Number and souls": retailing and the de-differentiation of economy and culture', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 44, no. 4.
- Fitzpatrick, Eileen (1995) 'Vegas is 1st to be Wow!ed by Superstore', *Billboard*, 19 August.
- Jeffrey, Don (1995) 'Tower's Solomon weight expansion, stock offering', *Billboard* 27 May.
- Rothman, Mark (1993) 'A new music retailing technology says "Listen here"', *Billboard*, 19 August.