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Streaming Won't Kill the Vinyl Stars: "Millenials" Boost Both in Digital Age

JANUARY 6, 2016 BY [ANALISE PRUNI](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

The needle dropped into the grooves of track one of Journey's 1981 album "Escape." An E note, then an F#, to a G#, then a B, the iconic melody of "Don't Stop Believing" warbles out of silver speakers on a teal, dashboard style radio face of a cherry red Crosley record player.

"Could you flip the record?" I asked my friend when the needle scratched to the end amidst white noise.

"I don't know how," he replied, and proceeded to plug in a playlist through Google Play.

Ninety-Three percent of Americans listen to music in some form. With internet radio stations like Pandora and iHeart radio using technology like the Music Genome Project to tailor playlists to things we might like to hear, and on-demand services like Spotify and Rhapsody providing free streaming and playlists of our hand-chosen favorites, the listening landscape of music has shifted drastically.

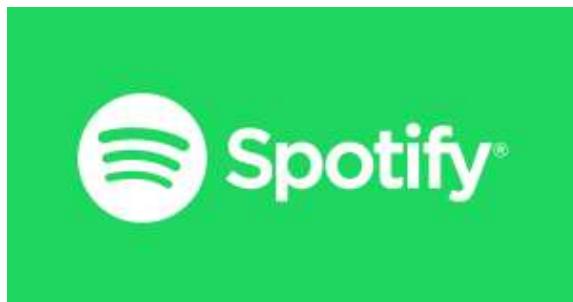
Or has it?

According to the Recording Institute Association of America, vinyl sales in the U.S are up 52.1% in just the first half of 2015. While online streaming is seemingly the dominant digital music force of late, the sudden uprising of vinyl has folks dusting off their turntables. Call it a come-back and college age people seem to span the gap between the media the most. This new market looks

vastly different and the way it got that way can be broken down into three parts: streaming, downloads, and physical sales.

So vinyl is on the rise, but online streaming is generating continued hype and expanding their services.

The streaming front runners share some listening traits, but differ in methods and music. Pandora is classified as internet radio, which appeals to people for some of the same reasons traditional radio does. It saves time and effort picking songs, yet unlike traditional road-trip radio these services fine tune your station to your specific personal preferences.



Spotify is one of the many online music streaming services offered today.

Photo courtesy of Spotify

Spotify is an on-demand service, which provides specific songs that you have handpicked to your liking. In terms of volume, Spotify mountainously overshadows Pandora with around twenty million songs to Pandora's roughly one million. Yet Pandora offers a selection of live version tracks and caters to niche artists that appeal to the less mainstream crowd.

In the industry, Spotify is running the board with over 75 million users, operating in over fifty countries. In the first half of 2015, Spotify has brought in upwards of 160 million in free ad based programs and over 477 million in premium paid subscriptions. With 250 million registered users, 80 million currently active, Pandora operates only in parts of North America, Australia, and New Zealand.

Similar services like iTunes and Google Play continue to generate streaming profits, but each service harnesses its own following.

"I can tell you why Apple music is better than Spotify, one reason." Said Manda Gill, an iTunes supporter. "Taylor Swift."

Swift felt that services like Spotify, which pay royalties only as a fraction of revenue, don't give artist's their fair dues. Her music remained on Pandora, which pays royalties on a per performance basis.

"These numbers belie the actual size of the markets in which the respective digital music companies compete. On demand services generate higher average revenue per user (ARPU) through primarily subscriptions, but address a smaller market; radio services generate lower

ARPU through primarily advertising, but address a larger market," according to Forbes Magazine. That said, in their respective markets, Spotify is the more lucrative and larger service, but Pandora continues to be king of the hill in the U.S. With both services offer free versions, it is hard to imagine costly, old-school vinyl keeping up with the times.

These "old school" rock n' roll hippies alongside dedicated hipsters are driving a vinyl revival amidst the digital streaming takeover. Jake Morrow got his first record player when he was 17, but it took several years for him to take up the cause and appreciate the crates of records his parents gave him.

"There's a reason why they made an album like this, not just to skip through and pick songs." He said.

His father loves the Eagles. Morrow unsuccessfully suppressed a smile, speaking of the album art on his dad's favorite record: The band members "rippin cigs and holding glasses of scotch." Album art started Morrow's, and many before him, love affair with vinyl.

The American paradigm for our first college dorm room or apartment should come with a starter kit; guide on how to successfully launder clothes, a pizza delivery book and the Beatles "Abbey Road" Album art that has built a home above headboards for decades.

"Good cover art brings good money," said Linda Allen. At age 73, drawing on years in the antique business and having lived through many of these industry changes. She still flips a record now and then; at a yard sale or on her turntable.

In the first half of 2015, vinyl sales have brought in around 226 million dollars. These sales largely represent new pressings of LP's, not just good old vintage. For those collections rooted in love worn hand-me-downs of our parents, to those started more recently in Urban Outfitters, each is aiding the uprising. One of the former, Michael Purpora, owns a vintage Panasonic that spins mostly 70's rock; Zeppelin, Floyd, The Beatles and The Who, it's all too familiar friends.



Vinyls

Photo taken Analise Pruni

"I think I might like vinyl for almost the same reasons I like film," he said. "The imperfections and the flaws."

College age and our slightly younger generation have been deemed "millennials" in this battle and are the key consumers of vinyl. Millennials often take two approaches to the vinyl industry. One group maintains a "hipster" ideology, a subculture who values independent thinking, counter culture, progressive politics and an appreciation of art and indie-rock, according to Urban Dictionary. They are often sporting "vintage looking" trendy apparel, non-prescription eye glasses and edgy, multi-colored locks.

The second are essentially old schoolers. Hippies and rock n' rollers, paralleled to the traditional, often anti-establishment die-hards who still read the liner notes inside an album and appreciate a good discography in full. The pop-culture stereotypes of these groups and their listening preferences are rooted in their reasoning for the unexpected vinyl come-back. One of the more controversial societal paradigms has argued that the hipster subculture values vinyl for mostly aesthetics and that "cool kid factor." Both sides, however, repeatedly argue that "vinyl just sounds better" justifying the continued trend.



Robby Ellicson shows off a REO Speedwagon vinyl record.

Photo taken by Analise Pruni

The pin in the donkey's tail is just that; the perpetual sound battle of analog versus digital. Does it really sound better? Owner at Spinn Doctors Entertainment and fourth generation showbiz performer, Robby Ellicson, has watched the industry transform.

Ellicson owns an impressive collection of 33's, 45's and even some rare 78's, some from his childhood, and others from years of being in the business. "The Nutcracker", Julie Andrews "Christmas Carols" and other yuletide favorites line the shelved displays along his hallway, swapped out from the classics generally out for show.

"The music I remember being in the stack of records right next to the record player was John Mayall and the Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton, and Bo Diddley," he said. Records weren't

expensive while he was growing up. You could walk out with a handful, four or five, as a kid, and it wouldn't "break him" or others with a fragile weekly allowance.

By the time he was in high school, personal music systems in the form of Walkmans outdated

vinyl with cassette tapes. However, cassettes and potentially CD's shall soon be a vague remembrance among millennials, in a dark corner gathering dust with floppy discs and dial-up internet. Ellicson grew up in the vinyl age; but he operates in a digital world.

"I think it's a total fad," he said. "Records were replaced for a reason. They break, they don't last as long, and they don't sound as good. From a listening to music standpoint it's one of the worst ways you can listen to music."

The history from analog to digital is easy to follow, but the mechanics get lost in translation, creating the raging sound quality debate. Larger labels switched to digital in the 70's, yet smaller labels who couldn't afford the transition stuck with analog. Aside from the cost, certain genres such as the 70's punk movement stuck with analog for the old school feel. They represented the anti-establishment sentiment that is still evident in music sales today, else why bother with the ancient technology?

"When it comes to recording music, you will get a different type of depth from vinyl than you will from digital," Ellicson said. "People say digital is flat. It depends on how it is listened to." Breaking down the sound quality argument might just separate the hippies from the hipsters for good.

Today vinyl is, for the most part, produced in digital format. Traditional analog records played on a record player produce a sound that has not been compressed into digital format, retaining what some would call more depth, in the music. The imperfections hold listeners like a long lost lover. Quiet scratches in a worn favorite or a few varied flat notes on a warped record hold an irresistible magnetism for some.

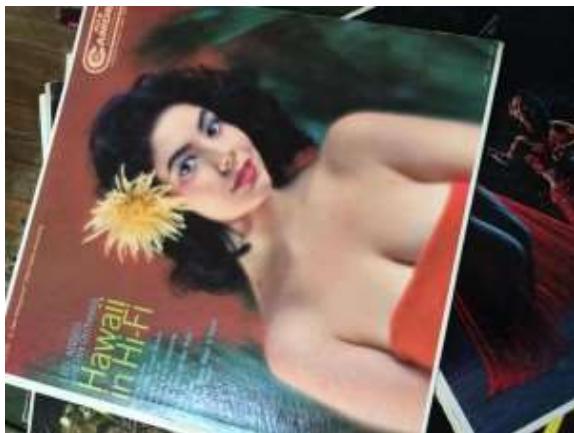
"Imperfections are beautiful in anything, in art, in people, in music. That's probably the most beautiful thing about the world," said Ellicson. He holds the vinyl era in high regards, yet as a DJ, national instructor and speaker on karaoke and music entertainment, relies on digital for his livelihood.

Again, it comes down to what you're listening on. A CD read by a CD player has about as much oomph as a pocket calculator, he compared. When music is compressed, the layers are smashed together, leading many to believe that sound quality is lost. MP3 players made a short-lived appearance in the digital market, long enough to cast them



Vinyls on display.
Photo taken by Analise Pruni

aside as obsolete. Earbuds and small operating systems simply don't have enough power to access and project the compressed layers as they would've been heard in the original recordings. However, when "opened up" on a better system, speakers, or sound system, the layers are "rediscovered" and most of the full listening content is restored.



Vinyls

Photo taken by Analise Pruni

Ergo, analog vinyl versus digitally produced vinyl, streamed songs and downloads, potentially deliver much of the same sound quality, depending on the output of what you're listening on, rendering the sound war...purely subjective. On some levels, vinyl really is just "cool." Millennials can duke out their takes on music format, but the resulting heat only enflames and solidifies the re-rise of records, in the digital age.

Ellicson ventured into his storage room in pursuit of white string lights and carefully bubble-wrapped ornaments. He paused near a different box, rummaging through then thumbing one album in particular. A 1968 copy of Glen Campbell's "That Christmas Feeling.". He and his sister listened to that album every Christmas as children. This copy he had picked up at Goodwill.

He went as far as to pull the album out, blow off the dust, remembered a few jolly holidays past. He closed the box, snagged the lights, and cranked an iTunes Christmas playlist on shuffle through every speaker in his home.

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