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We Are the Forgotten Lot

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We Are the Forgotten Lot

Craig E. Ryder

We are the forgotten lot. Freezing in the shed alongside soiled camping gear and deconstructed boxes from the last move. The detritus of a nomadic millennial.

We are 400 shiny discs, mainly albums, complete with fractured plastic cases and dogeared inlay cards. We were once cutting edge, even worth up to £15 apiece, although you usually waited for the '3 for £20' sale at HMV. Far lighter, smaller and cheaper than vinyl, we proliferated: into bedrooms, cars, Walkman's. Collections like us were the embodiment of the bloated capitalism that was 'The Music Industry' in the 1990s.¹

What did we mean to you? Everything. We were your very own subculture.² You weren't a Goth or Emo, Garage-Head or Junglist. You were all of those things at once because we were all of those things together. You were proudly genre-fluid, long before 'fluidity' represented the latest bastion of tolerance.

Some might say the album is the symbol of a 'rockist' tradition, but that's lazy pigeonholing.³ The album is the manifestation of an artist's complete message; a year's worth of endeavour! Enjoying a long-player requires commitment and discernment, not just the ability to pick out a sound-system-banger. Or a slow one for the 'erection-section'. No, albums include all the nuts and bolts, such as the hidden track thirteen or the song the artist is actually proud of, but the label said, 'It will never sell'.

The good old days were us up on the shelves, high above the bed and later out in the lounge of The Brighton Flat. We loved it when you used to spend a whole weekend rearranging us: sometimes artist A-Z (like the shops), sometimes chronological. Do you remember when you ordered us by colour? Everyone came around and admired. We always enjoyed getting plucked out of our cases as the drinks went down and the volume went up. We were the physical evidence of so much of you: how fun you were,

¹ See Frith (2001) for a critical history of the economic underbelly that drove popular music production through the second half of the twentieth century.

² Hebdige (1979) argued musical subcultures, epitomised by the punks and skinheads of the late 1970s, were outlets for resistance against British conservatism.

³ The belief that rock music trumps all other musical genres, evidenced through its commercial success and global expansion, is 'rockist' (Sanneh, 2004).

your intelligence, and what fantastic taste you had. For a geezer from Essex, you had class; one could say, ‘distinction’.⁴

Then, mp3 happened. Unlike Caspar Melville,⁵ you bought a seemingly innocent iPod in the mid-noughties and started diligently compressing us all into lesser versions of ourselves.⁶ It wasn’t your fault. Who knew that squeezing 300 hours of (paid) music into 100 GBs of ether was a form of cultural genocide? You also started toying with torrents, but luckily Limewire was very bug-heavy, so you continued to buy the albums you *really* wanted.

Five years later, streaming arrived, and once you succumbed to Spotify’s subscription service, we felt impotent. For £9.99 a month, you get all the music you’ve ever wanted, plus a galaxy of other shit you never will. The marketing guff on their website goes, ‘Choose what you want to listen to, or let Spotify surprise you’. We never told you *what* to listen to! Doubtless, the doyens of the Frankfurt School would be sick to their stomach with your ‘bloated pleasure apparatus’.⁷

What does it all mean? How do we know? We are the forgotten lot.

⁴ In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1979) argued that cultural capital, earned through an appreciation of the arts, is a significant force of how power permeates through society.

⁵ The ethnomusicologist’s article *Hell is other iPods* (2006) is a call for resistance against contemporary music’s insidious shift from collaborative artform to personalised media.

⁶ See Sterne (2006) for an evocative dissection of what *is* an MP3 file.

⁷ From Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1998[1944]) scratching critic of the Hollywood movie industry.

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