

THE VINYL COUNTDOWN



THE ALBUM FROM LP TO IPOD AND BACK AGAIN

TRAVIS ELBOROUGH

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`Highly entertaining' Independent

`Illuminating' Irish Times

`Lovingly researched ... But the prevailing tone is one of critical affection: Elborough skilfully traces the emergence of the album as predominant musical format of the twentieth century' Times Literary Supplement

`Elborough gently mourns the passing of the LP . . . lively, irreverent and pacey' New Statesman

`An engaging elegy to the long-player . . . Elborough is a storyteller who wears his knowledge lightly' Sunday Herald

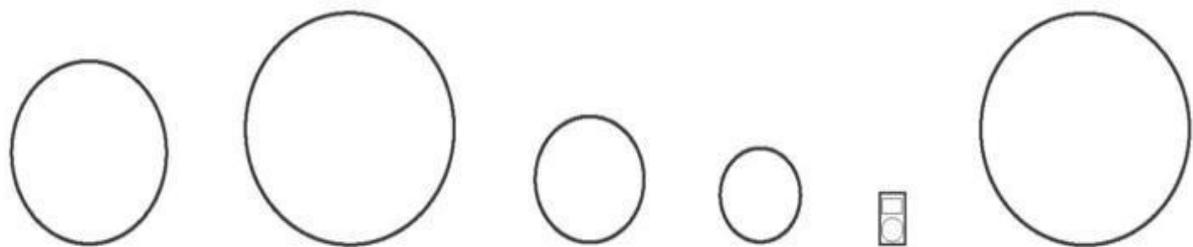
`Essential reading for the iPod generation' London Metro

`This is a remarkable book' Morning Star

`Elborough turns his obsessive's eye to the LP, expertly telling its history. His dry wit identifies and illustrates the LPs' historical highlights' Record Collector

`Affectionate and informative look back over six decades of the album . . . packed with little pub-expert nuggets of musical history. Some of them you will know if you're seriously into your LPs, some of them you'll half-know, and some will be completely new - and that's the delight of this hook. It manages to be a supremely easy read, totally gripping, and hugely informative' What Hi-Fi?

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SOFT SKULL PRESS BROOKLYN

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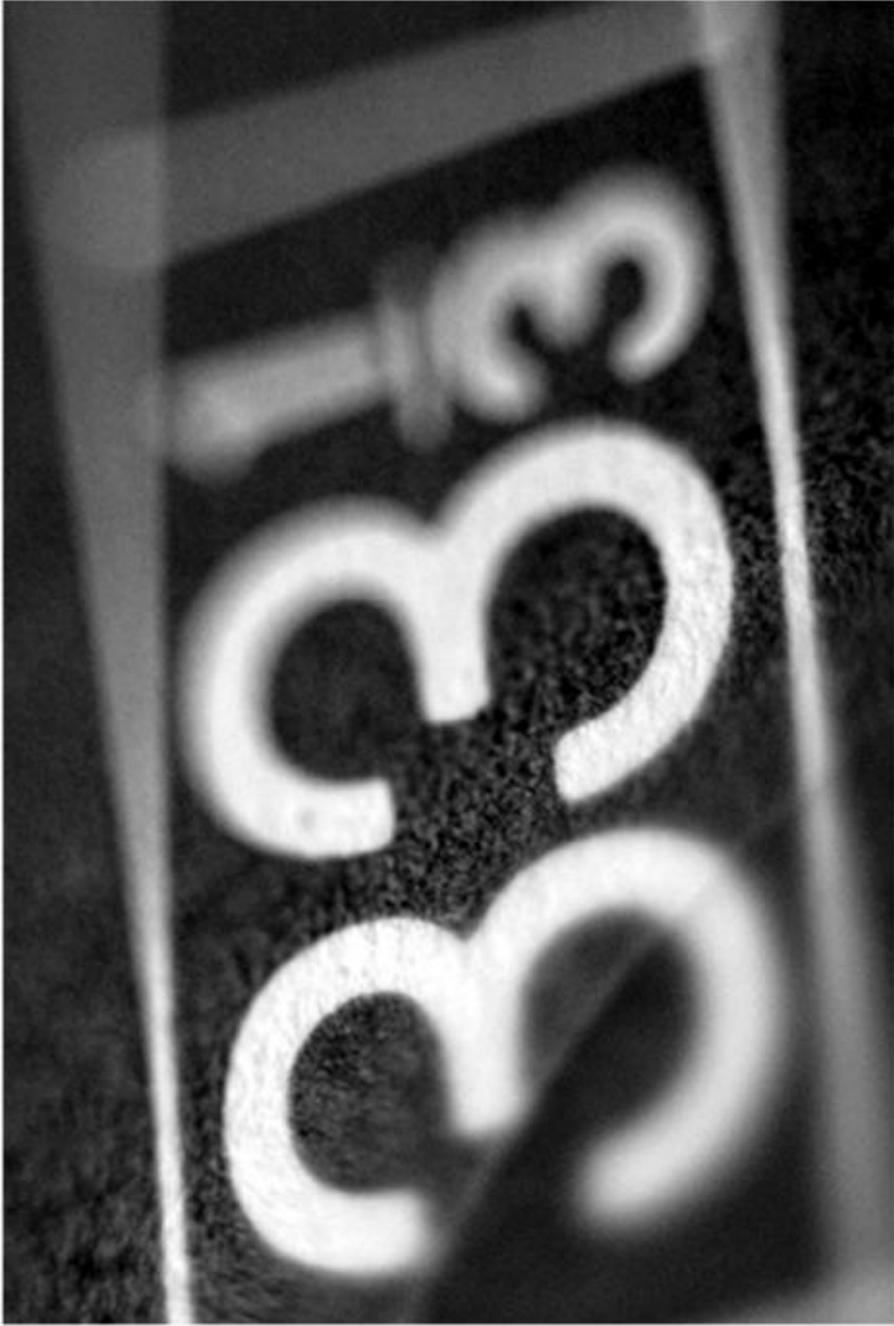
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For Emily



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On the inner sleeve of his 1979 LP *Exposure*, Robert Fripp declared himself 'indebted to all those who took part in the hazardous series of events culminating in this record, and several who do not appear but helped determine the final shape.' And faced with this blank page, I feel much the same about this book. In an ideal world, the acknowledgements, aping the dedications that appear on another album cover (The Chocolate Watchband's *The Inner Mystique*) would probably give the Yellow Pages a run for their money. But in the interest of brevity, and to conserve valuable paper for the unruly narrative and, on occasions, jolly pictures that follow, I'll try to be succinct.

First off, I'd like to thank the can men of Clissold Park, who inadvertently helped to inspire this book. Their seemingly unwavering devotion to frighteningly strong lager and The Waterboys' folk rock opus *Fisherman's Blues*, an album that over the course of one summer a year or three back they played, tirelessly, over and over again on a portable boom box, set in motion a few thoughts about the LP. These thoughts (something along the lines of, 'God, what would it actually be like to have just the one album?') were hardly any more profound than clutching a handful of those salmon-coloured 500 quid bills during a game of Monopoly and saying, 'imagine if this was real', but my everpatient agent, Nicola Barr, felt there was something in them. And so, to our immense gratitude, did Helen Coyle at Sceptre, whose enthusiasm for the book and forbearance during a missed deadline or two, and a, not insubstantial, manuscript and research depleting harddrive failure, has been unsurpassed throughout. I'd also like to thank Henry Jeffreys, Brett Woods, and, really, everyone else at Sceptre and Hodder for their work on the book without whom, etc .. .

I am also immensely grateful to all the people, from fellow giggoers and record bin browsers to journalists and musicians, whose opinions I sought while writing this hook. And Louis Barfe in particular, for kindly passing on a transcript of his interview with Hugh Mendl.

Much of the groundwork for this book occurred in the racks of record shops, and while my wallet would possibly have been fatter, this volume would have been much thinner without the aid of Flashback and Haggles on Essex Road, Ni; On the Beat on Hanway Street, WIT; Beans of Croydon; Records aka Collections in Lewisham and Waxfactor in Brighton. And in fond memory of Reckless Records and Totem Records. Needles and Spins in cyberia, <http://www.needles-and-spins.co.uk>, assisted in keeping the turntables turning.

The staff at the British Library in St Pancras and in Colindale more than amply helped me in my quest to avoid writing the actual book by spending any allotted time reading back issues of *Gramophone*, *Billboard*, *Music Week*, *High Fidelity*, *Disc*, *Downbeat*, *Melody Maker*, *NME*, *Record Mirror*, *Vox* and what have you and raiding their sound archive on the grounds that it was 'research'. The staff at the London Library in St James, similarly, kept me supplied with books on the folk revival and a

wifi friendly googling environment.

I have tried hard to avoid lists in this book but turning to personal notes of thanks to friends, colleagues, and souls who have been nice along the way, I see no other option than to just pile in with a few names and seek forgiveness from anyone I have inadvertently missed out. So here goes: Ian Jack, Andrew Martin, Sukhdev Sandu, Ian Sansom, Steve Jelbert, Andrew Holgate, Eithne Farry, Frances Wilson, Chris Roberts, Andy Miller, Declan Clarke, Rachel Bailey, Essie Cousins, Gwendolen MacKeith, Catherine Taylor, Katrina Dixon, Senay Sargut, Michael Knight, Donna Blackburn, Simon Hughes, Eugene Wolstenholme, Guadalupe Nunez-Fernandez, Pam Berry, Stephen Trousse, John Noi, Dusty Miller, Louise Campbell, Nick Rennison, Nick Tucker, Paula Byerly Croxon, Angela Penhaligon, Ashley Biles, Gail Lynch, Richard Boon, Sarah Wasley and Karen McLeod and, breaking with that for a hit, special extra thanks are due to Gail O'Hara who took my author shot, and Mike Jones who produced some of the excellent photos inside. And Lauren Wright, Alex Mayor, Nick Parker and Josh Lacey, for listening, reading and generally enduring more of my rambling nonsense than is good for any sane person.

Which leaves space, just about, to thank my folks for being my folks and for buying a stereogram way back when, and Emily Bick, whose beauty, astonishing mind and love I am honoured by every day.

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Introduction

SLEEVE NOTES

A man would simply have to be as mad as a hatter
To try to change the world with a plastic platter

- Todd Rundgren, *An Elpee's Worth Of Toons*

Most artists, I tell you, grateful for an LP, cos a 45 like little slug from a gun, but the LP like a rocket launched, longdistance missile that shoot far.

- Dillinger, quoted in the *Rough Guide to Reggae*

Parents should always be careful what they say. `Try not to scratch the surface of the LP,' mine advised. And like its near siblings, `don't run in corridors', `always look both ways before crossing the road', `never accept sweets from strangers', `eat the meat' and (a little later) `have a half and make it last', to this day it remains lodged in my brain.

I can picture the scene now. I am about four and poised before the stereogram, the hulky wooden box resembling a coffin that dominated our lounge. The soundtrack from *Oliver!*, odds on, is clasped in my overeager hands. ('Please, sir, I want some more ...')

`Try not to scratch the surface of the LP,' my mother gently but firmly states, once again.

Loading the disc on to the spindle. Triggering the autochanger so that it lets out a spud-gun ping. And waiting, patiently (very impatiently, actually), while the tone arm jerks into life and, shuddering like a clockwork marionette, deposits itself on the edge of the disc with a biscuit-crunch bump. These simple procedures, her admonishment implies, are fraught with possible dangers. Spinning this wheel is a game of chance. Nothing is entirely certain. One false move and it could all go horribly wrong.

Was it any surprise, then, that in my childish imagination, putting on an album was soon equated with conducting major heart surgery, defusing a bomb or cracking an exceptionally fiendish safe? So overdeveloped were my fantasies that sometimes it came almost as a surprise (and a disappointment) that a black disc, sleek and shiny as liquorice, opted to play Shirley Bassey's `I Capricorn' rather than spontaneously explode.

But, in a way, nearly anything seemed possible, probable even. These LPs possessed strange magical powers (as well as an irrepressibly pixyish ability to skip and generally misbehave). Two parts Darth Vader to one part Tupperware, they looked foreboding and yet comfortingly domesticated. Their snug cardboard sleeves, hearing cheery images of woolly-jumper-wearing groups, car-coat-clad crooners and be-hatted cockney flower girls, cloaked the mysterious dark arts of sound. Just how did so much stuff ... so much noise ... fit into those tiny, tiny grooves? The enchantment was instantaneous. This scratch was an itch that was never going to go away.

Lolling about on the fibrous purple carpet, repeatedly playing album after album, my imaginary friends Benson and Hedges beside me, I'd idle away hours enraptured by the witchcraft of it all. Attempting to decipher the hieroglyphic codes contained on their covers, matching faces to voices and songs to the typed lists on the back, were games that easily bested such trivial pursuits as Happy Families and dull old Snap.

In comparison with the handful of tawdry singles we had (Boots Randolph's 'The Shadow of Your Smile', anyone?), most dressed in tatty, pictureless, paper singlets, LPs gave you ... well, more of everything really. More to hear. More to look at. More to enjoy. (More to be annoyed by, if you were that way inclined.) But more, even, than the sum of their individual parts.

As a matter of fact, my parents owned only a dozen or so LPs. And all of those were stored away in a slot inside the stereogram-a compartment that was so diminutive that it tacitly said, *you'll-notbe-wanting-more-than-twenty-of-these-fellers-now-will-ya?* Accordingly, new albums arrived with the infrequency of comets. Their appearances normally coincided with birthdays, wedding anniversaries and religious festivals and generated equally brief flurries of excitement. Like the greetings cards that often accompanied them, they vanished surprisingly quickly. I almost considered it my duty to resurrect these seemingly forgotten discs from the stereogram's crypt, this land of the audio undead. Looking back on it now, I can see that what I took for neglect was possibly closer to respect. My parents merely saved them, as with Sunday best, for special occasions. And the last thing they really needed was for me to ruin what precious few discs they had. I didn't, and my enthusiasms were indulged, but like most children I wanted it to be Christmas or a birthday - exciting, essentially - every day of the week. I couldn't understand why anyone wouldn't want to play their LPs every single day. I still can't, perhaps.

At friends' and relatives' homes and at school, I was gradually made aware of the mean gruel I'd been subsisting on, as doors, usually made of smoky grey glass and attached to steely hi-fi cabinets, opened to reveal LPs of previously unimagined oddness and sophistication. Records whose sleeves were bewildering, disturbing enough on their own. What did a skull need with oxygen or oxygene? How on earth could a band of eighteenthcentury fops acquire electric guitars and headphones? This man shaking hands was obviously on fire, why had no one dialled 999? And, to make it worse, a bloke on the back in a bowler hat was missing his face ... and sections of his limbs ... LPs of singing wallet-swipers were eventually abandoned and never

spoken of again. Soon enough there would be other fish to fry, but the wonder and that sense of preciousness would not fade.

All of this came swimming back to me only the other day, as I sat on a bus next to a young girl. Glancing over, I saw Lilliputian album sleeve after album sleeve whizzing by on the screen of her iPod. Here was what previously would have been the collection of a lifetime for many, housed in something little larger than a fag packet. The distance travelled from the cumbersome lounge furniture of my youth to the nano-technological present suddenly seemed painfully large and tremendously exciting.

Even typing these words now on a laptop that itself holds several thousand songs (and is effectively a mini-recording studio and pressing plant), the rigidity of that recent past and the paucity of its options are hard to avoid.² I grew up obsessed with music, spending whatever spare money I had on albums. When I was younger, these records owned me as much as I owned them. They shaped (skewed?) every aspect of my life, from the friends I had and the clothes I wore to some of the books and films I sought out. (The sight of the sunburst orange of a CBS label, the tangerine of RCA, the vermilion of Polydor, or the rather sickly lemon yellow and grotty green of Harvest are enough to bring forth eidetic memories of cider- and weak lagerlaced teenage gatherings and a hundred languid wet afternoons in rented rooms long vacated.) I gave up smoking only after calculating that I could afford another album a week with the money I'd save. But most people I knew back then, avid muso types included (Hello Aldan! Hello Steve! Hello Phil! Hello Sue!), probably possessed less music than can currently be stored on your average mobile phone. The idea of actually making and releasing an album, while not entirely unthinkable, still seemed a distant prospect in the extreme. Less might have been more, but it was also less. But what now looks like limitation was once, of course, liberty. Before the LP arrived, the longest record you could buy or make lasted just over four minutes, wore out after around seventy plays, shattered if dropped, and subsequently went on to spend much of its retirement `voicing' that snapping sound in chocolate-bar adverts.

This book is an attempt to step back and consider -to remember, to celebrate - just how radical the LP was in its day. Because the long-playing vinyl record really did change ... everything. Forget iPods, MySpace and the Internet, for a moment, anyway.

The LP revolutionised the way music was produced, packaged, marketed, sold, purchased, listened to and performed.

It offered unsurpassed levels - and lengths - of recorded sound.

It gave punters more music per dollar than had ever been offered before.

It put complete classical symphonies, collections of songs, shows, film scores, plays and field recordings within easy reach of millions.

It persuaded musicians of all stripes to forge sustained artistic statements that continue to be cherished soundtracks to everyday lives.

It provided a canvas for an entirely new visual language to blossom.

It inadvertently spawned the 7-inch single.

It encouraged a legion of enthusiastic amateurs to enter the record game.

It ushered in life-shattering experiences in sound.

It supplied the obsessive with something to obsess about.

It forced you to buy a handful of tracks you didn't really want . . . but, hey, what were you going to gripe about otherwise? House prices?

It allowed levels of indulgence practically unequalled in any other artistic discipline. (You make that sound like a bad thing?)

It brought back music from the dead and the dormant.

It supplied the twentieth century with a social and cultural record that is the equal of the movie camera.

It tempted millions to try drugs, sleep with strangers, sport weird hairstyles and abandon perfectly good college courses and careers to embark on non-conformist journeys of selfdiscovery.

It speeded up divorces, ended relationships, split families and estranged friends, siblings, parents and children.

It has given some remarkably talentless people long and financially remunerative careers.

It has led to madness, deafness, premature baldness and incontinency . . . probably.

All the same, it may not be long before we say goodbye. Because right now we stand at a pivotal juncture with the LP and what it bequeathed: our understanding of the album. In a relatively short period of time, what was until recently the unquestioned moneymaking - and creative engine of the music industry has in essence broken down. Its obituary has already been penned in some quarters.

Having lasted for sixty years, the long-player can at least take comfort from being astoundingly, if at the time rather lazily, well named. This is a book about the LP and those years, if you like.

Think about what's happened in the last six decades. When the LP was born in 1948, the average life expectancy of a working man was fifty-seven. Sliced bread was only bettered by Bing Crosby and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* was quite the daring new thing at the cinema. The LP arrived at the point when post-war austerity was giving way to affluence and an era of unprecedented leisure and technological advancement - the

kind of technological advancement that we largely take for granted - beckoned.

The LP survived, and sometimes thrived on, huge emerging shifts in social mores. God was lost, and television, frozen food, drugs, more reliable contraceptives and holidays abroad were found. Sexual, political and musical revolutions were sent spinning. And such innovations as the 7-inch single, multi-track recording, stereo sound, the eight-track cartridge, modern jazz, easy listening, rock 'n' roll, soul, progressive rock, funk, reggae, punk and techno all came barrelling along. The album has weathered the cassette, the compact disc and the fall of communism in turn.

These days, the songs and covers of some LPs are so familiar they feel practically arc welded into our collective consciousnesses. Peter Blake's collage for The Beatles' Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band recently took its place beside Concorde and the Spitfire in the BBC's Great British Design Quest. The sleeve of Abbey Road has been parodied almost as frequently as the songs on it have been covered, while the group's so called White Album formed the basis for a play staged at Nottingham's Playhouse Theatre. Less reverentially, in 2004 Danger Mouse treated the LP to a 'mash-up' with Jay-Z's Black Album.

Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon, itself the recipient of a speaker-rumbling reggae tribute LP (Dub Side of the Moon by the Easy Star All Stars), became the first album to spend a total of 1500 weeks on the American Billboard chart. To date the album is believed to have sold in excess of 40 million copies worldwide. And new entrants seem to be inducted into a burgeoning pantheon of 'classic albums' all the time. The BBC and VH1 continue to broadcast programmes charting the creation of such supposedly seminal long-players as Disraeli Gears and, erm, Stars by Simply Red. Meanwhile, the press and Internet message boards all hum with opinions about new releases and reappraisals of lost masterpieces and unfairly neglected gems.

In a move that has clear parallels with the rise of the 'director's cut' phenomenon in film, established recording stars have also shown a greater willingness to return to past albums and 'restore' them in line with their original intentions; however dimly remembered those might be after years of unresolved artistic enmity, narcotic abuse and critically derided forays into poetry. Failing to heed its title, Paul McCartney remade Let It Be, stripping it of the lavish Phil Spector overdubs that simultaneously cloaked and glaringly drew attention to the bitter infighting that dogged the album's protracted creation in 1969.

Finally, though, MP3s, downloads and iPods have cracked open any notion of the album as a linear, (awkwardly) unalterable whole. The domestic listener is currently freed from the physical constraints, the existential thingy-ness of the album as an object. The ability to accrue a ragbag of different songs on our computers and iPods has -much as the LP itself once did irrevocably altered how we think about, acquire and listen to music. And how in turn music in the future will be composed and consumed.

The LP, lest we forget, was developed as a commercial property first and foremost.

The album would not have lasted without a money-paying audience who remained as enamoured of the medium as the musicians, engineers, entrepreneurs, record companies and outright crooks were keen to continue exploring (and exploiting) its possibilities. At quite an astonishing rate of knots, digital downloading has, of course, turned much of that on its head.

For the time being, the semantics of the LP remain: people still talk about making albums, regardless of whether they are really only referring to uploading a clump of tracks to a website. The album continues to represent a creative benchmark to which millions aspire. One to which the public, having provided X Factor star Leona Lewis with the fastest selling debut album in the UK in November 2007, can still buy into. For the moment, at least ...

But online music sites have been very good at being able to offer instant and cheap (if not free) aural gratification. These days, we can have an album beamed to our computers or phone within seconds of its release (if not earlier). And rather like junk food, such easy fodder leaves us ever peckish for more. While this has led to people discovering hundreds, thousands, of new albums and artists they might never have found otherwise, the more general tendency, encouraged by iPod playlists and per song pricing, has been for albums to be consumed in the manner of small children nibbling away at sandwiches and leaving the crusts. Instead of being gobbled up/suffered in their entirety, albums are snacked upon and filleted for a handful of tracks.

[Lou Reed can sternly huff and puff \(as he once did on the rear sleeve of his 1989 outing New York\) that his album is 'MEANT TO BE LISTENED TO IN ONE 58-MINUTE \(14 SONGS!\) SITTING AS THOUGH IT WERE A BOOK OR A MOVIE' until he is blue in the face. Jocular exclamation marks and block capitals will do him little good. His missive doesn't appear on the iTunes blurb for the LP and each one of those 14 SONGS! can be popped out individually, like a pill from a pack, for just 79p a go.](#)³

[In this savage new dog-eat-dud-track audio jungle, nothing is truly sacred. And why should it be? No one needs to pretend to enjoy all \(any?\) of Trout Mask Replica ever again. But if iPod users are following the example set by Dylan 'Bye, Bye Ringo' Jones in his book iPod, Therefore I Am, then Starr's vocal contributions to The Beatles' catalogue are likely to be proving expendable, which seems more of a shame.](#)⁴

Asked recently about downloading, the musician David Byrne commented that, 'The sad part is, I guess, a lot of songs don't grab you right off the hat. But they grow on you, and you don't have a chance for that to happen if you're only going to download the things with the big hooks. Sometimes, the quieter or the subtle song is the one that gives the counterbalance to the loud and brassy one that preceded it. There's a balance. There are shadings of personality that this band is coming forward with. Life isn't just about parties.'

But the trend is now well advanced and in March 2007, the New York Times noted

that 'sales of albums, in either disc or digital form' had 'dropped more than 16 percent' while 'individual songs, sold principally through iTunes, continued to rise'. One industry insider told the paper, 'I think the album is going to die. Consumers who have had iPods since they were in the single digits are going to increasingly gravitate toward artists who embrace singles'.

Later in the year, Ash was one such group that announced it had committed itself to a 'singles only' record deal. And both Prince and Ray Davies chose to give copies of their new albums away with newspapers while Radiohead opted for a pay-whatyou-like download for their latest opus discovering, in the process, that paying nothing at all was many people's preferred option. (Though they profited handsomely from those who did.)

In some respects, things have almost gone full circle to the preLP era when people collected individual songs and did much of their listening via the radio; spinning from station to station until they found something to their taste. The earliest albums were simply sets of 78s stored, like photographs, in binders - the term was first applied to a four-disc package of Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite in 1909. The phrase rather nicely conveys the idea that these were keepsakes, things you might cherish. And like a photograph, a record is really a little sliver of the past we get to enjoy again, one that accordingly becomes irreversibly entwined in our own memories.

Looking at a family photograph album, only a month or so back, I was struck by how few snaps were there and how had many of them were. They'd been taken and, even if dreadfully out of focus, kept to remember the occasion. Now, of course, with digital cameras and mobile phones, we take pictures all the time, load them up to flickr and email them round. The glut can make individual shots seem less essential than when we only used one roll of twenty-four in a year. But who can go back to that?

Music is in much the same situation. In 1973, only around 5,000 albums were released; in 2005 it was in excess of 44,000. Everyone has more music than ever before but it's valued very, very differently. When our options were fewer, our grooves were deeper but narrower too. With three television channels, the radio, the record shop, music papers and local library as the main sources of information, our commitments were more intense. Clannish even. Perhaps sometimes a little blinkered.

For a while in the early Noughties, advertisers and politicians frequently alluded to an iPod generation in press releases and speeches. Presumably this was to appear 'with it' and in the hope that some of the iPod's apparent 'nowness' would rub off on them or their products. Nevertheless, as a reflection of a consumerist era of political consensus rather than ideological tribal loyalties, where eclecticism continues to be valued over the specific, the focus group and the blog over the expert, the iPod was a remarkably neat fit. It offers soundscapes shrivelled to palatable soundbites and allows musical tastes to be presented with a 'whatever' twirl of the dial akin to a judgement deflecting rising inflection. The enormous appeal of all of this to the audio addict and the dilettante are clear enough: the avid collector can have everything at their fingertips;

the not-really-bothered don't have to bother with the stuff they don't like.

With an iPod, iTunes, eBay and so on, we are free to thumb through music's back pages, helping ourselves to what takes our fancy with gay abandon. We have been released from the tyranny of critics and the mocking sneer of the rock-snob record-shop till jockeys. Internet sites like MySpace have encouraged us to have a go ourselves. Despite this, one of the first scientific studies on downloaders conducted by Dr Adrian North at the University of Leicester concluded that the sheer ease of obtaining music these days was making us, if anything, more apathetic about it. The report found that 'the accessibility of music has meant it is taken for granted and does not require a deep emotional commitment once associated with music appreciation'. Dr North declared that for his subjects at least, music had 'lost its aura' and was 'seen as a commodity'.

In the face of these advances, to purposely listen to LPs on vinyl could seem dangerously close to an act of deliberate historical re-enactment, like putting on a stovepipe hat and pretending to be a Parliamentarian pike carrier at weekends. But what if less really is more? The sheer ubiquity of semidisposable music has started to produce some peculiar rearguard actions. Sales of vinyl LPs have, for instance, been growing. In October 2007, even the Internet retailer Amazon.com began selling vinyl albums and a range of record players. Though, tellingly, consumers are often having it both ways. The independent record label Matador is not alone in supplying a coupon for MP3 downloads with every new 180-gram vinyl LP they sell.

Live performances too, have caught a dose of LPitis. Where performers might spend months or years, decades in a few instances, diligently perfecting an album in the studio, it was extremely unusual, impossible sometimes, for a group to present an LP in full on the road. The 'gig' was, and continues to be, prized for its variety and spontaneity, that je ne sais quoi blend of something old, desperate attempts to try out new material on the punters and a couple of influence-acknowledging or vaguely ironic 'something borrowed's for good measure. A formula so winning that it provided artists and record companies with lucrative spin-off live LPs and for decades kept a nefarious industry in bootlegs afloat. And, as album sales have dipped and illegal downloads flourished, it has become a far more reliable and financially rewarding stream of income than recordings for many artists hence Prince's willingness to loose his new disc to the Daily Mail in 2007.

But the live concert has also recently become an acknowledged vehicle for acts to mount symphonic performances of their 'classics'. The Stooges, Dinosaur Jr, Sonic Youth and Belle and Sebastian have all dusted down Funhouse, Bug, Daydream Nation and If You're Feeling Sinister respectively over the last couple of years - with Belle and Sebastian and Sonic Youth subsequently making recordings of their performances available. (The devoted can, therefore, effectively buy LPs of LPs, as it were.)

Jolly as these concerts are, they too appear to prove that we can no longer be trusted

with our own albums any more. To be assured we won't fiddle with running order, bands seem to have to physically play the LP for us. Artists and audiences at these concerts all appear locked into mutual bouts of nostalgia for the days when everyone felt a greater obligation to listen to every track at home an obligation that iTunes and chums have helped to dash. In this light, these gigs appear more like wakes, or gatherings of speakers of some soon-to-be extinct tongue that their own offspring might never learn, than anything else.

* * *

LPs, books, films and plays are often described as iconic. But of all these cultural commodities, this seems particularly true of albums, where millions were bought literally as representations of (usually) secular musical saints. Like a piece of the true cross, the album could be an object of veneration for the believer, a physical instantiation of one's faith. The catechism of the vinyl LP involved a complex series of rituals over sleeves, sides played, needles, fluff and cloths, that were only enhanced by the scents of the record (rather waxy) and cardboard (woodlouse dampish, if anything) that mingled with the actions like incense.

This book, accordingly, comes to praise, rather than bury, the album. It is an unashamedly rhapsodic, if highly partial tour of the LP's life and times, from a lifelong fan who accepts, in principle, that it may not be around for ever. (Albums in whatever format will survive as long we want them and as long as people are prepared to make them. But the cultural and commercial forces that for decades sanctioned their ongoing creation do at this juncture appear severely imperilled.) It nevertheless looks back to the days when there was literally everything to play for, and people were still taking note of these newfangled sleeves. An era when we took the time to listen with pleasure all the way through - even if that was only because there was bugger all else to do and flipping between songs was trickier.

The LP was as arbitrary a construction as any. It was often less than what we expected. Or, worse, sometimes more than we needed. Yet the sense of cohesion the format alone bestowed is, or was, enormously appealing. However illusory it might be, we crave order, along with a sense of purpose, in our everyday lives. No less so in art or commerce. LPs were a chance to commune with and express our commitment to someone else's imagination, no matter how tawdry, for a while. Just as we yearn to read novels that take us out of ourselves, or that speak to us directly, an album was a chance to become entangled in a narrative.

LPs are bound up not just with history but with so many of our own histories. We all make our own record collections as we move through life. Paul Williams, reviewing *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society* LP for *Rolling Stone* in 1969, wrote: 'I've played it twice since it arrived here this afternoon, and already the songs are slipping into my mind, each new hearing is a combined joy of renewal and discovery. Such a joy, to make new friends!' Who hasn't thought of songs on a particular album as a set of companions, at some time or other? And LPs can be rather like friends. We fall out with them. We grow up and move on. We lose contact and