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KEEPING IT REAL?

Vinyl Records,
Digital Media,
and the
Future of
Independent Culture

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Feedback loops abound between digital media and contemporary vinyl culture. The majority of record sales occur online, the download code is a familiar feature of new vinyl releases, and turntables outfitted with USB ports and Bluetooth are outselling traditional models. The manufacture of records cannot be digitized; however, as with most commercial culture today, vinyl traffic is driven by algorithms and thrives on social media. Furthermore, the ascent of streaming over the past five years has boosted

record sales, creating both-and markets for “flow” and “publication” media, distinguished by Raymond Williams as being accessed or acquired by consumers. Contemporary vinyl culture demonstrates how digital media can play a vital role in any community organized around a shared appreciation for cultural forms and formats, analog or otherwise.

Eschewing nostalgia for records as (merely) a reprieve from digital saturation, in this talk Palm argues that scholars and supporters of independent culture should decouple the digital from the corporate. No doubt, the digitization of popular music has become a largely corporatized affair; however, for many independent labels and merchants the recent re-embrace of vinyl by major labels and chain stores has become as overbearing as the corporate stranglehold on digital distribution. To combat the glutting of a niche market, some independent labels are vertically integrating and beginning to manufacture as well as distribute and sell their own records. The stakes of vinyl's future involve the viability of an independent supply chain for popular music and the implications therein for cultural production in a digital age.

Michael Palm is Associate Professor of Media and Technology Studies in the Department of Communication at UNC-Chapel Hill and Affiliated Faculty in the Department of American Studies. His research and teaching focus on the history of everyday technology and the politics and economics of popular culture. His current book project is a cultural studies account of vinyl records' revived popularity, informed by labor ethnography along records' contemporary supply chain. His book *Technologies of Consumer Labor: A History of Self-Service* was published by Routledge in 2017. He is also co-editor of *The University Against Itself: The NYU Strike and the Future of the Academic Workplace* (Temple, 2008), and his most recent articles have been published in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies* and *Cultural Studies*. He serves as Diversity Liaison for the Department of Communication at UNC-Chapel Hill and is on the editorial board of the *Journal of Cultural Economy*.

