

It's a turntable turnaround as vinyl gets back in the groove

a 1300 word feature

by

Tom Mackay

All is not well in chartland. The manager of Blur, Chris Morrison, believes the band's latest single, *Coffee and TV*, lost 40 per cent of its sales figures due to a computer error which failed to register returns from Virgin Megastores and Our Price.

Given the volatile nature of the singles market, his anger at what was essentially a minor administrative cock-up is understandable. However, Morrison should consider himself fortunate that there is still a singles chart to worry about. This year sees the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the seven-inch single on these shores, but it is an uneasy jubilee.

Dave McAleer, of *Guinness British Hit Singles*, explains: "The term 'chart climber' is now almost as archaic as 'seven-inch single'. More than 40 per cent of the records that have gone straight in at No 1 since 1952 have done so during the last two years. Record company marketing strategies are so geared towards the first seven days of release that the odds are stacked against any single climbing higher than its debut position."

Ah, it was all so different then, when the words "seven-inch single" presaged a three minute blast of energy and excitement. Developed in America, after it was discovered that 45s were less prone to breakage than 78s when they were being shipped out to the troops during the Second World War, the first seven-inch vinyl single to be released in Britain was the RCA Victor 1949 version of, "The Waltz you Saved For Me" by Wayne King (a name which should have launched a thousand quips but seems to have bypassed contemporary punsters).

In Britain, the conservative nature of the record industry at the time meant that seven-inch singles were not readily available initially.

Two things changed all that: the invention of the Dansette, and the birth of the UK singles chart. The Dansette was the ghetto blaster of its day. Compared to the radiogram - the coffin in the living room - the Dansette meant teenagers could rebel in the comfort of their own bedrooms. And they could all keep tabs on the chart in the *New Musical Express* which published the first singles chart in 1952 (for the record, *Here in my Heart* by Al Martino was the top of the pops). A generation grew up with it. I was thrown out of my science class after spontaneously celebrating the fact that Slade had gone straight in at No 1 with *Cum on Feel the Noize* with a loud whoop.

It was too good to last. Cassettes were the first sign of trouble in the Sixties. Constant improvement in quality, with the Dolby noise reduction system, metal tapes, and the Sony Walkman meant that by the end of 1985 cassettes were outselling records. By 1991 even the new-fangled 12-inch singles, first introduced in 1975 were outselling the seven-inchers. In the meantime, the shiny modern CD had crept up on all the other formats.

The birth of the CD in the Eighties was met with scepticism, initially. They weren't nearly as cuddly and for generations weaned on vinyl there was a reluctance to touch the surface, despite reassurances from *Tomorrow's World* and *Blue Peter* that it was perfectly safe to do so. But as a format it was unstoppable.

At the same time the very idea of the singles chart as the barometer of popular taste began to waver. The number of sales required to get into the charts fell away and the kudos associated with entering the chart at No 1, once confined to the true greats, had been devalued. In 1998, 27 of the 31 UK chart-toppers entered at No. 1.

It's all a far cry from the heady days of '70s' punk singles with their Xeroxed sleeves, coloured vinyl and scratched messages in the run out groove.

But vinyl isn't finished yet. The fightback began even before the first death notices had been issued as 'scratching' hip-hop artists started to grow in popularity in the Eighties. To many vinyl lovers this sacrilege was akin to a bibliophile's horror at book defacement. Little did these audiophiles realise that scratchers were to be saviours of the format.

"Some shops deal exclusively in 12" singles," explains Andrew Watters, the owner of 'Vinyl Villains', an Edinburgh record store which deals in second hand and collectable records. "Dance music is the major place for vinyl, although recently they've started to press classic jazz LPs again. Jazz people like vinyl."

The comeback of plastic is not confined to the new beatniks or drum and bass fraternity, however. The Grunge scene in the Nineties kept it going. While most record companies actively phased out vinyl, a few independent firms held on proudly to the wonders of wax. Seattle's SubPop label retained a commitment to "sevens" through its "Singles Club". Other small American record companies followed suit including Portland's T/K Records whose T-shirts defiantly proclaimed: "Keep Vinyl Alive."

Watters says: "Grunge was a second wind for vinyl, but it didn't last long. The seven-inch single is practically dead. Out of the top 40 singles there's only about five that'll be released on limited edition of, say, 1,000 on vinyl. It's mostly smaller independent artists who still bring out their stuff on seven-inch, but it's only about 1 per cent of the entire market."

For some rock bands, vinyl is the ultimate cool recording medium.

On a recent edition of STV's 'Artery' programme, Roddy Frame, ex frontman of Aztec Camera, waxed lyrical on the beauty of the form:

"It's the crackle they make. I like that explosion you get right at the start. I think at least once a year you have to dig out your old punk singles and play them at high

volume. It's like your box of medals; it's like, 'I was there, I was brave, I was on the front line, I used to be adventurous.'"

Then there is the physicality of the vinyl record - the fact that you can actually see where the quiet and loud bits are. And "the crackle they make" is an integral part of their sound.

This may be an age thang, but the revival of the old "45" amongst the rock underground suggests its former iconic clout remains, along with a love for fizz and crackle.

Vinyl still only accounts for only 25 per cent of Vinyl Villains' market. Even so, Watters managed to avoid buying his own CD player until last year: "I knew I'd end up getting one. I'm not much of a romantic about vinyl, for me it's purely business. But sometimes you need a magnifying glass to read the writing on CD cases. Dealing with CDs you feel like you're in a factory working on an assembly line. With vinyl you feel like you're doing something interesting."

So who is buying all this plastic? According to Watters the answer lies in visitors from countries where vinyl is no longer on sale. "Even Americans, which is surprising, considering they killed it off," he says. "American tourists lap it up. I don't know if it's for nostalgic reasons. You just can't get vinyl in America anymore."

Eagerly flipping through the Vinyl Villains record racks, Andy Roberts, a welder from Prestonpans, sums it up : “You lose the roughness with CDs. Too many bands want to sound perfect these days. Where’s the fun in that?”

There may be a limited future for vinyl and the aura of the electrifying single might be a warped romantic construct, but there will always be room for imperfection. Anarchy in the CD:UK anyone?

ENDS