PREFACE

Vinyl Theory is a book about the intersection of vinyl records with critical theory. It is the product of a writer who grew up with vinyl records and holds a deep appreciation for them. It is also the intervention of a scholar deeply committed to expanding the range of thought associated with literary and cultural theory into areas where it has not enjoyed a great deal of speculation. Vinyl theory is one of these areas. It is my hope that it encourages other theorists and vinylists to use it to continue a dialogue about vinyl theory. Below is an overview of the path that brought me to write this book and an outline of the major questions it pursues.

Vinyl record fever hit me early in life. In junior high, I had a friend whose father owned all of the jukeboxes in town. My friend would let me browse through boxes of “decommissioned” 45 rpm records and buy what I wanted for a nickel each. I played them on my parent’s huge stereo record cabinet. On the top side of the cabinet were two sliding pieces of wood. Sliding one to the right revealed a storage area for vinyl records. Sliding one to the left revealed an AM/FM radio set next to a record player upon which you could
stack albums or 45s on a spindle that released one after the other for “continuous” playback.

It always makes me a little bit envious to read about musicians who say that their parent’s record collection was solely classical or blues or jazz and to learn that they would wear the grooves down repeatedly playing early Hot Five Armstrong or Mozart symphonies. The records in our cabinet were nothing like this, though I too wore down the grooves of all of them. Moreover, to say that my parents had a record “collection” is only true in the minimal sense of the term: there were a dozen or so albums in the cabinet but after the movie soundtracks and children’s music—stuff like the soundtracks to the 1967 film Doctor Dolittle and the 1969 film Easy Rider and children’s favorites like Christmas with the Chipmunks (1962)—the collection consisted of a handful of albums. Lucky for me each of them was a classic: Bob Dylan’s Greatest Hits (March 1967), Led Zeppelin’s first album (January 1969), Janis Joplin’s Pearl (January 1971), and two albums by The Beatles, Rubber Soul (December 1965) and Meet the Beatles (January 1964).

Aside from singing or playing on ukulele or recorder as a class at least a couple of the songs from the Dylan album like “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “The Times They Are a-Changin’” in elementary school, there was very little connection between the vinyl in our cabinet and my primary school education. Although we learned as a class to sing and play many protest songs, we never really talked about them either musically or philosophically. It would not be until high school and college that courses in music theory would start to open up the wonders of the vinyl world to me. Still, when it was finally opened, it quickly led me away from the vinyl in our cabinet to the worlds of classical music and jazz as they were widely regarded the proper subject of music theory.

In junior high, some of my friends dressed up in costumes and makeup and put on a KISS “concert” for the school. They took to the stage one Saturday evening in full KISS regalia complete with a huge PA system and flashy guitars and drums and played an entire
set of KISS music note for note. I know it might be hard to believe, but they pretty much fooled the whole school into believing that they were actually playing the music as opposed to lip-synching and playing air guitar to the 1975 KISS album Alive! In fact, I am sure that some of the kids who went to the concert that night still believe that they sang and played all of those songs—and still don’t realize that it was really an amplified record. It was only in high school that the story started to leak among the musicians that this was not a “real” concert. Or was it?

Needless to say, as an aspiring young guitar player, the event made a big impression on me and led to my first album purchase: KISS's 1976 album Rock and Roll Over. Along with my stack of decommissioned 45s, this record was added to my parent’s stereo cabinet. Later that year, a kind family friend bought me a copy of one of his favorite records, Engelbert Humperdinck’s 1976 album After the Lovin’. But it was not my cup of tea, so I asked my parents if I could return it to the store and exchange it for an album that I liked. They agreed, and soon I added my second album to the cabinet: Alice Cooper Goes to Hell—another “treasure” from 1976. The final addition to my junior high album collection was Steve Miller Band’s Fly Like an Eagle (1976), which holds up better than the Alice Cooper and KISS albums but nowhere close to the Dylan, Beatles, Zeppelin, and Joplin records already in the cabinet.

In high school, I managed to scrape up enough money for my own stereo, which I kept in my room along with my records. But as luck would have it, just as I came of age as a viable consumer of vinyl records, they gave way to eight-track tapes. And then when I started college, eight-tracks were being eclipsed by cassette tapes. To make material matters of musical reproduction even worse, by the time I graduated from college, compact discs were starting to take root as the best way to listen to music without “noise.”

Additionally, I also had some recorded music on reel-to-reel tape. This was mainly because as a guitar player, I enjoyed messing around with “Frippertronics,” that is, the technique developed by
the guitarist Robert Fripp wherein two reel-to-reel tape players are connected together allowing one to overdub multiple guitar parts live to create a sort of symphony (or, if you will, a cacophony) of sounds. At the time, reel-to-reel recorded music was considered by many as the most authentic and best sounding source of recorded music.

As the years passed, vinyl records started to become regarded as an antiquated means of listening to music. Folks started to liquidate their record collections in favor of compact discs, and when downloadable MP3 music became commonplace, compact discs started to go the way of eight-track tapes and vinyl. Not only did record stores, new and used, become more rare, so too did stores that sold compact discs. When Tower Records filed for bankruptcy and liquidation in 2006, and this franchise of record stores established in 1960 shuttered their doors for good, the era of vinyl records appeared to have come to a close.

Nevertheless, the changes in the music industry were not done in a vacuum. Similar changes were also occurring in the book industry. Namely, brick-and-mortar bookstores were closing, and there was a wave of digital book euphoria that commenced in 2007, when Amazon first introduced their Kindle reader. By the time Borders Books closed their four hundred remaining stores in 2011, the bookstore appeared to be going the route of the record store—and the era of digital reading and listening was officially in full swing.

But something strange happened along the way. Not only are printed books and brick-and-mortar bookstores enjoying a renaissance of late, so too are vinyl records. According to a 2017 report, vinyl album sales have increased more than 100 percent over the past ten years. Moreover, sales of vinyl records have grown for a twelfth consecutive year in 2017, and 14 percent of all album sales were on vinyl. But here is the real kicker: in spite of R&B/hip-hop becoming in 2017 for the first time the most dominant genre in music, with seven of the top ten albums coming from the genre,
powered by a 72 percent increase in on-demand audio streaming, 
the top-selling vinyl LP of the year was not R&B/hip-hop. Rather, 
the top-selling vinyl LP of 2017 was the re-release of an album from 
a band in my parent’s record collection: the Beatle’s 1967 classic, 
*Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.*

Moreover, in spite of the rise in on-demand audio streaming 
and the relatively low number of vinyl LPs sold today, it has been 
reported that “artists will make as much from the sale of 100 vinyl 
albums as they can from the 368,000 Spotify streams or 2.3 mil-

Consider this along with the fact that some 
contemporary artists, such as Daft Punk, Vampire Weekend, and 
Queens of the Stone Age, have first-week vinyl sales of 15,000 to 
30,000 albums and that 70,000 to 80,000 copies of Jack White’s 
*Blunderbuss* (2012) LP were pressed creates a demand now for more 
record plants, which currently sit at around thirty total in the 
United States.

Oddly enough, even though vinyl has enjoyed a resurgence over 
the past dozen years, I had no interest in increasing my record 
collection until a few years ago. I decided in the summer of 1997, 
after lugging my collection around in a move to a new city, that 
I would no longer purchase any more vinyl records or cassettes. 
Compact discs not only held more music, and were easy to find 
and inexpensive to purchase, but also didn’t get eaten up in your 
player like cassette tapes and weren’t heavy and bulky like records 
to store and transport. So I primarily acquired new music on com-
pact disc and downsized both my record and cassette collections. 
Although I kept some vinyl around to spin, it was done more as an 
occasional homage to my listening past than an everyday practice 
of my listening present. Plus, many of my favorite LP records had 
been replaced by compact discs in my music library, so there was 
no reason to go back to vinyl—that is, until a few years ago.

The story here though begins in November of 2007, when I 
began writing regular essays on book culture for *American Book 
Review*. As fate would have it, I began my journey in writing on
book culture the exact month that the first Kindle readers were released by Amazon—and sold out in just four and one-half hours. Just as vinyl record devotees believe the day that the first compact disc was pressed—August 17, 1982—was the beginning of the end of vinyl, I have explored the idea for a number of years that November 19, 2007—the day that the first Kindle readers were released—was the beginning of the end of the printed book.

These thoughts are primarily developed in two books, *Turning the Page: Book Culture in the Digital Age* (2014) and *The End of American Literature: Essays from the Late Age of Print* (2019). The general thesis of each is that book culture is transitioning from a print to a digital age. The essays in both focus on the political economy of books in this period of transition with regard to writers, readers, and publishers. But upon the completion of *The End of American Literature* in 2017, I began to notice that the transition from print to digital had lost some of its momentum. Prognostications of a digital utopia of books were losing steam, and printed books and even bookstores seemed to be enjoying a renaissance of sorts after being left for dead by the digital book euphoria of the early new millennium.

Nonetheless, as I noted above, since 2007, vinyl records have seen a resurgence. How could that be when even more so than printed books, vinyl records had virtually been abandoned by the consumer public twenty-five years earlier? So, while writing on and researching the transitions in the book industry and the philosophy of the book that underlies much of that discussion, I became interested in exploring parallel transitions in the record industry and the underlying philosophy of the record.

*Vinyl Theory* is the result of these explorations—although its central theses may be surprising to readers not familiar with the philosophy of the record and the political economy of music as established by critical theory. Unlike my work in *Turning the Page* and *The End of American Literature*, there is no writing through the present with regard to the vinyl record in this book. I note a few industry figures above regarding vinyl record and download sales.
to support the notion that vinyl records are making a comeback but do not prove it through an analysis of industry data.

Also, I ignore the commonplace argument that the return to vinyl is about nostalgia; for example, old-timers like me now have the disposable income to purchase all of that vinyl they could not afford in their youth. While sales figures can surely establish this point, the nostalgia argument does not lead to very interesting theoretical arguments about vinyl. Or, if it does, then a psychoanalytic account is probably the best direction here. I’d suggest a Lacanian approach, following through on Friedrich Kittler’s idea of relating phonography, cinematography, and typing to Lacan’s axiomatic registers of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. Its technological determinism may be appealing to some.\cite{8}

In fact, although I have read and watched a number of entertaining accounts of the decline and/or resurgence of vinyl—most of which are largely centered on anecdotal comments by collectors, musicians, and record store owners and employees—none has really connected in any intriguing way the specificities of the material medium to our current political economy, that is, what is commonly termed late capitalism or neoliberalism.\cite{9} Vinyl Theory is thus an effort to begin to bridge this gap.

The first chapter, “Late Capitalism on Vinyl,” argues that we might view the fall and resurrection of vinyl over the course of the last twenty-five years as evidence of the resiliency of neoliberalism. It accomplishes this by examining the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacques Attali on music through the lens of Michel Foucault’s biopolitics, that is, the politics of life itself. The general aim of the chapter is to lay the groundwork for a twenty-first century biopolitics of music. It is a journey that begins in the late nineteenth century with Nietzsche and is extended from the same period through the work of Attali right through the late-seventies. It concludes with some observations as to how Attali’s work understood as a pioneering work on biopolitics and the political economy of music contributes to our present concerns about the fall and resurrection of vinyl.
The second chapter, “The Curve of the Needle,” focuses on Theodor W. Adorno’s reflections on the phonographic record. As we shall see, Adorno’s reflections on the phonographic record cover a wide range of topics including the listening habits of those who play records, the general character of the music put to vinyl and the record as a product of the culture industry. However, while these sociological observations on vinyl are certainly interesting and debatable ones, they are not the primary focus of this chapter. Rather, focus is placed here on Adorno’s much deeper philosophical and phenomenological reflections on the phonograph, most of which were completed well before the advent of the long-playing record and the electric phonograph, namely, in the age of the short-playing (78 rpm) record and the spring-driven non-electric gramophone.

My thesis in chapter 2 is that while the young Adorno was coming to philosophical terms with the “mechanized sound” of the gramophone, he was also reacting to the work of composers like Igor Stravinsky whose style of musical modernism he found reactionary and who also embraced both mechanical music and the phonographic record. These and other factors contributed to a lifelong disparagement of the phonograph, one that would continue unchanged even after major “improvements” were made to phonographic technology—a position he seemed to establish in advance of later changes in the technology. Nevertheless, in the year of his death, after a lifetime of sociological and philosophical dismissal of vinyl, he published a statement that would mark a surprising change in attitude toward vinyl.

Adorno is an important figure in vinyl theory because his critical theory coupled with his copious writing on music makes him our most prolific critical theorist of music. However, in spite of his many contributions to critical music theory, his theses regarding the biopolitics of music leave something to be desired compared to the work of Attali and others discussed in chapter 1. Still, as you will see, music cabinets like the one my parents had play an
important role in his reflections on the sociology of the phonograph. So too do the jukebox records I bought in junior high.

Chapter 3, “It Might Get Loud,” brings together Attali’s theses about the role of sound control in social and political power and Adorno’s concerns with the phonograph record to provide the setting for a unique role for sound control in the neoliberal economy: namely, the invention of high fidelity as a means of sustaining the political economy of music established by Attali. If Attali is right that what we call the “new economy”—late capitalism or neoliberalism—grew in strength along with the development of the record industry, then the invention of “high fidelity” was necessary to ensure that the authenticity issues alluded to by Adorno did not stunt the growth of both the record industry and neoliberalism.

I argue here that the recording studio became, in effect, “the control room” of neoliberalism. Spike Lee’s film Do the Right Thing is used to show how resisting sound control—that is, “the control room”—has the potential to bring about social and political justice, but because there is a correlative relationship between sound control and economic control, the emancipatory potential of sound is limited. I conclude that if the illusion of high fidelity keeps the neoliberal economy chugging along, then the continuing practice of noise control protects it against failure, and only when it becomes loud, will we have a definitive sign that the neoliberal economy is in decline.

One of the things that I discovered in writing this chapter is that the authenticity issues I had at that KISS concert I saw in junior high have a long history in recorded music. Early ads for the phonograph reveal that tricking a live audience into believing that they were hearing live musicians rather than a phonograph was the gold standard of establishing the veracity of phonograph records. It is also, as I discuss in the chapter, linked to the invention of live music (and thus paving the way for albums like KISS’s breakthrough 1975 album Alive!) by the record industry.

The final chapter, “Selling Out,” employs the notion of selling
out in the record industry to make some observations about the “theory industry.” I argue that all theoretical sell outs are not the same: those who sell out theory through critique are doing the highest work of theory, whereas those who sell out theory as a means to personal, professional, or financial gain by sacrificing their critical integrity in an effort to become popular or successful, and forgetting their roots, are doing the lowest work of theory. The latter are so-called uncritical or neoliberal sell-outs, whereas the former are critical sell-outs. I use the Who’s 1967 album The Who Sell Out to draw a parallel with the way Jacques Derrida sells out Western metaphysics in his 1967 theoretical trilogy, arguing that doing so posits a very high musical and theoretical bar for selling out.

In chapter 4, I argue that the basic moves of selling out music are similar to selling out theory. This argument is possible if we regard albums as comparable to books, articles to singles, and the classroom to a live performance. Cross-comparison of this sort allows for the development of a dialogue between the music industry and its academic counterpart. It is a dialogue that provides more clarity regarding both industries, especially when it comes to efforts to understand how, when, and why we sell out as theorists in particular and academics in general.

Vinyl Theory opens up some new directions for understanding the fall and resurrection of vinyl records. It also argues that the very existence of vinyl records may be central to understanding the resiliency of neoliberalism. The idea of writing this book came to me a few years ago when I could not believe that records were making a comeback. As I started listening to them more frequently again, I wondered how the political economy of music might be connected with the philosophy of the record. Literature on the latter topic is sparse though reaches its highest point in the work of Adorno, and speculation on the former is best represented by the work of Attali. What happens then when they are placed in dialogue in an effort to work toward a biopolitics of vinyl? This book is the result of the pursuit of these questions.