

Why I don't go to record stores any more

Eric Blair

20 October 2004

I buy all of my music online now, partly because I'm lazy and partly because record stores depress me.

The first thing that depresses me about record stores is that there is so much there that I will never hear. At the bookstore, you can fool yourself into thinking that you can read that painfully thick novel or that algebraic topology treatise in a few hours and then move on to the next book, but to listen to a 60 minute record will take you a full hour, no matter how fast your brain works. Your average used CD bin is maybe three days' worth of music. The entire store, especially the ones that call themselves megastores, may literally be more than a lifetime. And so, every time I walk into Tower records, I am reminded of my mortality.

The other thing, which I'm sure most of you are thinking right now, is that even though there's so much out there, most of it is complete crap. There's the bargain bin, with Moth and the Dandelions and the Axis Y. These guys were convinced enough that they had something special that they put months into composing, rehearsing, and recording—and still further, the producers were convinced enough that they put tens of thousands of dollars of effort into it, hiring the studio, engineers, cover artists, et cetera. I can buy the culmination of all that effort for a quarter.

Some record stores have the congenital problem that they file records by genre. This sucks for a few dozen reasons. At different record stores, I have found Arto Lindsay, my fave beyond faves who does experimental bossa nova, in Dance, Pop, Rock, International, and The Outer Limits. So for those of us who come in with a specific musician in mind, we have to ask the counter guy, thus defeating the purpose of sorting things.

The other type would be the browsing customer. First, browsing in a record store, on top of the depressingness, is frustrating. Here's a random album, say Roxy Music's *Country Life*. I know the band is all boys, but the folks on the cover are clearly female. There's foliage. All of this tells me absolutely nothing about the music, and the instinctual flipping-of-the-box to check the track listings tells me nothing as well (except that 'More than this' isn't on the album). So I can't understand people who haphazardly browse for music to begin with, but say that people really are likely to buy a CD alphabetically near their favorite musician; I don't understand how breaking things down by

genre can really help. If I like Roxy Music, am I destined to not like Al Green? If the answer is no, then they shouldn't be in different parts of the store.

Which brings us to one more problem of genre-sorting. It perpetuates bad race relations. The categorization works like this: if it's a white lead singer, it's pop/rock; if it's a black lead singer, it's R&B/hip-hop (aka Urban, implying that pop/rock should be synonymous with Country). Yes, there are exceptions, which I know you can list for me, but this works for the vast majority, and it doesn't help anything in any way.

Even classical music, I'd contend, should not be ghettoized. First, there are still a dozen composers who are cross-category (Gershwin is the standard example; or how about the Low symphony? [BUY!]). As noted above, I'm really dubious that many people actually buy much music just based on the cover and the musician's name, but if they do, then there's all the benefit in the world from mixing genres. Pop/R&B lovers stand to benefit from not segregating classical, since they all recognize names like Beethoven, but classical listeners may recognize popsters-with-string-sections like Bjork as well. If we class classical as 'any instrumental with a string section' then pop fans are happy to buy it in the form of movie soundtracks, so why underestimate their Beethoven-buying abilities.

Now, one way in which it would all make sense is if people only select their music as a fashion statement. Their only interest in Mozart is that only pseudointellectuals listen to it, and their only interest in Bjork is that she's so darn quirky (and hot). Then the current system works great: they come in and look at pictures of stuff, and buy whatever visual most fits their self-image. Categorizing by type of fashion statement only makes the search more efficient. Which brings us to the core of my frustration (which I guess I've mentioned in a previous entry): records stores, and the bulk of the record industry itself, is entirely built around people who are in search of the most appealing fashion statement. There's no moral reason why that's a bad way to do it, and those who buy music as a fashion accessory are free to do so, but it's not how I search for new music, and in some ways like store layout and assorted marketing and funding issues which I leave to the reader to sort out, pandering to the fashionistas is an impediment to the rest of us.