

## **Waiting for the Playback: Searching for the Recording Industry's Future in its Past**

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My response for this media industries/media studies panel, like my current research, focuses on the recording industry. Unlike other media industries, the recording business has garnered little contemporary research and even less media history. Meanwhile, most popular music research has been slavishly focused on the contemporary, which has led to little comparative understanding of industry patterns, technological debates, or cultural formations. What better time to examine an industry's history in what appears to be an unprecedented moment of crisis? Can we find clues to its current undoing? Can we discern patterns that help explain the industry's contemporary challenges?

At the moment, little seems sure in the recording industry, as digital technology has outmoded traditional retail methods and time honored operational strategies. An incomplete list of contemporary dynamics might include:

- 1) US consumers' increased preference for audio files over compact discs continues to reshape the recording industry as it struggles to find equilibrium. iTunes did not exist before 2001 and is now one of the two largest retailers of music in the United States. Wal-Mart, the other big retailer, is putting pressure on recording companies by reducing shelf space for CDs in its stores.

- 2) As CD sales fall and audio file sales have yet to make up the difference, companies have turned to video game and cell phone ring tone licensing for new revenue sources.
- 3) In 2007 year-end shipping statistics, CDs to retailers showed another annual loss, this time by over 17% as the market continues to shrink.
- 4) In the last year, vinyl records made yet another unlikely reappearance. 2007 Recording Industry Association of America statistics showed that vinyl shipments had increased by 36%.

While some of my peers consider these events as unique to a media business in a fight for its life, why do these changes remind me of nothing more than the recording industry's transformation in the catastrophic first years of the Great Depression? While substantive differences exist, I can't help feeling that the industry has been in this situation before. In the early 1930s, the recording industry was on the verge of collapse as consumers chose radio over phonographs in economic hard times. In 1932, *American Mercury* published an article by Dane Yorke in which he recounts "The Rise and Fall of the Phonograph," as if the record industry's fall was a *fait accompli* (it surely must have seemed so). But the same business responsible for the recording industry's supposed irrelevance--the broadcasting industry--would help in its resurgence.

Much of this narrative should seem familiar to us because it is: format battles, corporate mergers, breath-taking changes in fortune – and the possibility of rebirth by those technologies that are currently to blame for the recording industry's supposed demise. The often-ahistorical nature of popular music studies

allows us to ignore the cyclical nature of media industries and what may be learned with the various cultural formations over time.

A case in point is the aforementioned resurgence of vinyl records. The phonograph record that journalist Yorke eulogized in 1932 showed signs of resurgence by the end of that decade. As compact disc sales continue to drop in the present day, some music companies are now turning solely to digital downloads and vinyl releases. Admittedly a niche format, vinyl's comeback to serve an audiophile niche nevertheless points out the persistence of sound recording as a medium amidst ongoing changes in delivery technologies. It also reflects changing functionalities for both industry and audience, as we oscillate between concerns over audio quality and increased technological mobility. The recording industry's low barrier to entry and regular changes in technological formats over time has led to its role as canary in a coal mine (which is why the film industry fears increased downloading, seeing the recording industry as a cautionary tale). But the great amount of volatility often rooted in technological change also points to a persistence that suggests (with apologies to Mark Twain) that rumors of the recording industry's demise have once again been greatly exaggerated.