CLASSICAL MUSIC INDY

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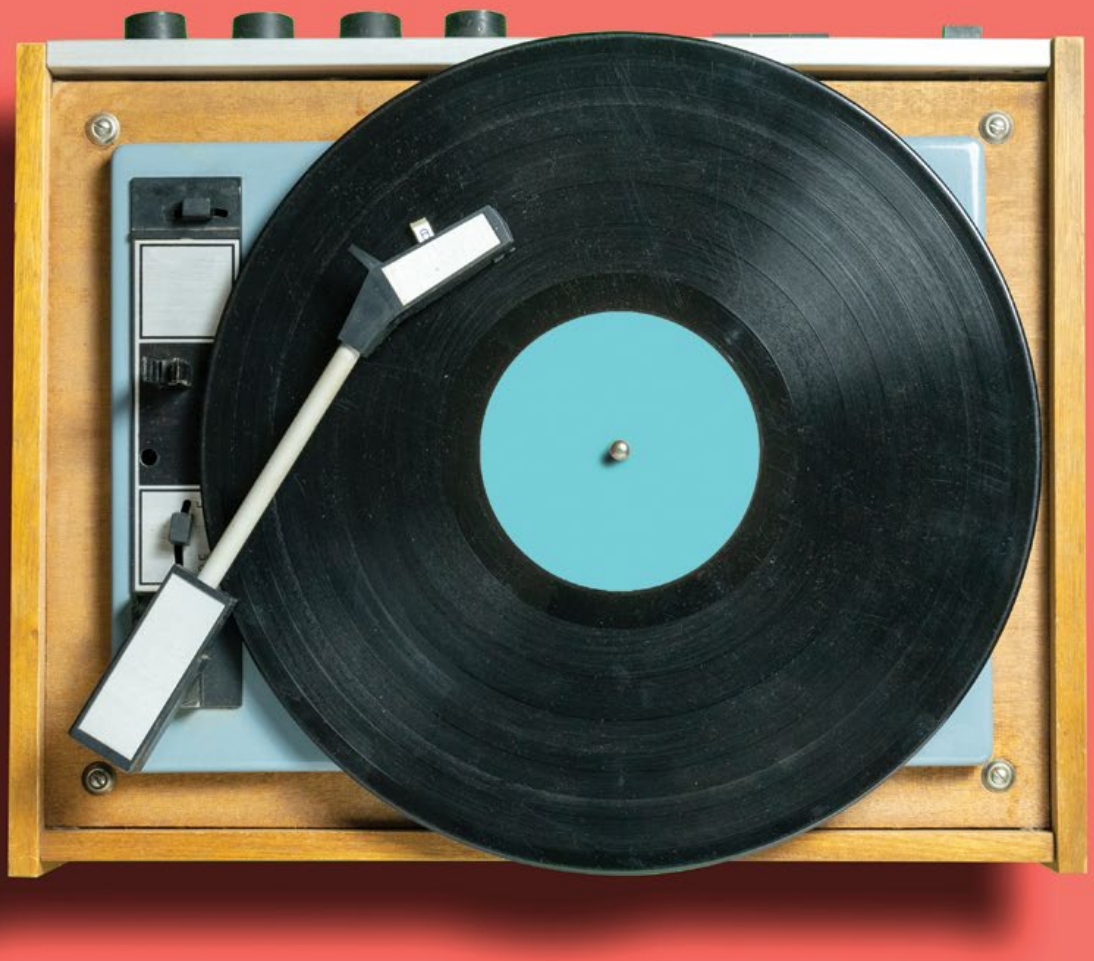

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The Vinyl Revival

Contributors

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MICHAEL TOULOUSE has worked in broadcasting for nearly three decades, sharing classical music with radio audiences throughout Indiana. As an experienced interviewer and program host, he is known for immersing himself in a subject to highlight the fascinating details that often go unnoticed.

The Vinyl Revival

SPECIAL THANKS TO NOTE MAGAZINE COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD AND CONTRIBUTING STAFF:

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Dear Classical Music Fans and Friends,

What's in your vinyl collection? I have fond memories of growing up, watching my family's stereo twirl LPs, especially the record that introduced me to classical music: ***Beethoven's Symphony No. 6***, also known as the "Pastoral Symphony." With vinyl returning as a sound experience of choice, we asked experts to explain its distinctions.

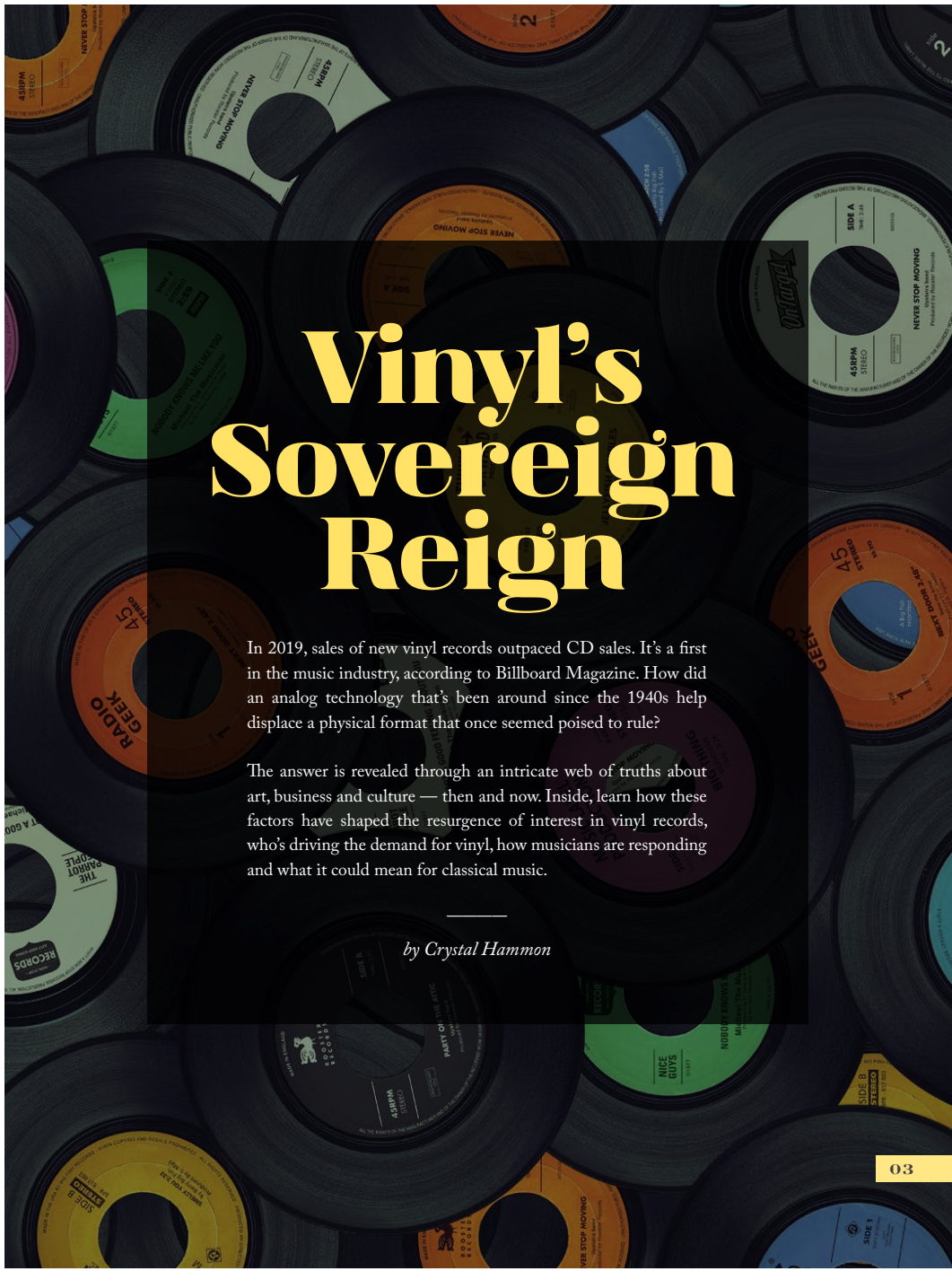
I love movies, so I was thrilled to learn that Butler University has commissioned a new work from Michael Abels, the composer for the scores of the recent films ***Get Out*** and ***Us***. Turn to page 22 to learn more about this world-premiere collaboration with internationally-acclaimed choreographer Patrick de Bana.

You know Classical Music Indy as the premier classical music syndicator in Central Indiana, and now, we are also the producers of a new classical music streaming service, which launches December 3. Visit our website to hear two channels: ***Local Classical*** features Indiana artists you know alongside those you have yet to meet; and ***New Classical*** highlights living composers, genre-bending work and fresh interpretations of works you love. These 24/7 music streaming services are made possible through the generous support of the Allen Whitehill Clowes Charitable Foundation.

Many readers mourn the loss of two Indianapolis champions of classical music: P.E. MacAllister and Maestro Raymond Leppard. P.E. was among the co-founders of the Fine Arts Society of Indianapolis (now Classical Music Indy) and was one of our most generous supporters. Maestro Leppard served on Classical Music Indy's Advisory Board, and we are honored that he and Michael Toulouse met for an interview published in the previous issue of NOTE magazine. We cherish the time we shared with these two extraordinary arts icons.

Classically yours,

Jenny Burch
President & CEO

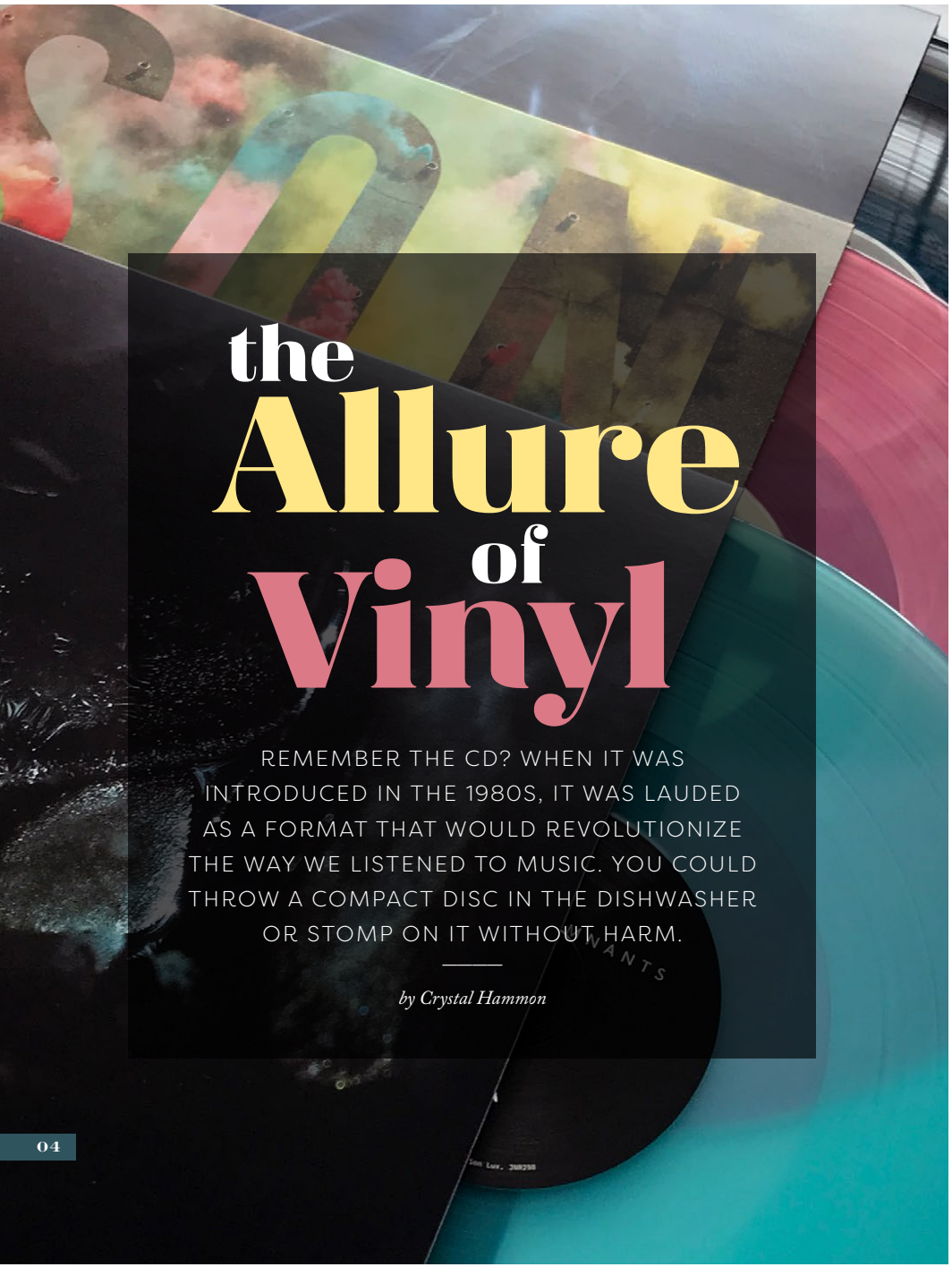


Vinyl's Sovereign Reign

In 2019, sales of new vinyl records outpaced CD sales. It's a first in the music industry, according to Billboard Magazine. How did an analog technology that's been around since the 1940s help displace a physical format that once seemed poised to rule?

The answer is revealed through an intricate web of truths about art, business and culture — then and now. Inside, learn how these factors have shaped the resurgence of interest in vinyl records, who's driving the demand for vinyl, how musicians are responding and what it could mean for classical music.

by Crystal Hammon



the Allure of Vinyl

REMEMBER THE CD? WHEN IT WAS INTRODUCED IN THE 1980S, IT WAS LAUDED AS A FORMAT THAT WOULD REVOLUTIONIZE THE WAY WE LISTENED TO MUSIC. YOU COULD THROW A COMPACT DISC IN THE DISHWASHER OR STOMP ON IT WITHOUT HARM.

by Crystal Hammon

Swayed by the CD's so-called indestructibility and superior sound, many audiophiles ditched their vinyl collections and replaced them with CDs. Ironically, the physical format once embraced for its longevity is effectively dead, quickly unseated by streaming music and a distant cousin from the analog era: vinyl.

Ask any vinyl aficionado why they love it and you'll hear a common refrain, especially among people born in the 1960s or before. "Oh, it sounds so warm," they'll say, explaining their unique, better-felt-than-told experience of listening to a vinyl recording.

Ardent fans may praise vinyl's many virtues, but they inadvertently lapse into describing one of its fundamental weaknesses when they mention a favorite, worn-out record. Each time a vinyl record is played, it degrades a little. And, technically speaking, vinyl recordings are inferior to digital recordings available via streaming services like Spotify or Pandora, not to mention the high-resolution audio files a devout audiophile can download from websites like HDtracks.com and others.

There's a nuanced reason for the contradiction between vinyl's allure and its obvious shortcomings, according to Mark Hornsby, vice president of operations and senior producer/engineer at Fort Wayne-based Sweetwater, the largest online music retailer in the United States. "When you're exposed to that sound at a young age and you grow up on it, that's subconsciously what you gravitate toward as your compass," says Hornsby. "That's north. That's what you think sounds good." A music producer and audio engineer who began his career during the 1980s in Nashville, Hornsby says the warmth listeners attribute to vinyl stems partially from distortion — a term used to describe the surface noise that occurs when you play a vinyl record.

Patrick Feaster

Photo by Ronda L. Seward

Patrick Feaster, an audio historian who works at Indiana University's Media Digitization and Preservation Initiative, draws a similar conclusion. He compares vinyl's distinctive sound to the traits that make analog movies popular. "There's a familiar warmth associated with watching film as opposed to something shot with a digital camera, which often looks cold and surgical," Feaster says. "It's probably similar for audio."

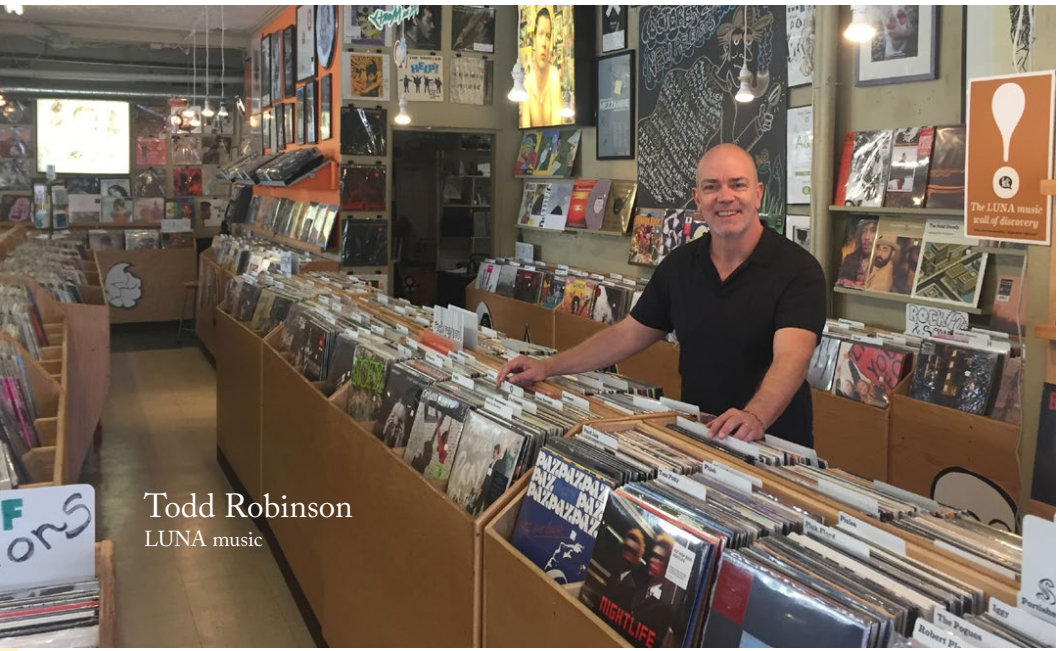
Audio that's recorded and mastered digitally with today's high-fidelity technology may be precise, but to some ears, it's also very unfamiliar. "Vinyl is like a warm fuzzy blanket — one that you're used to and like," Feaster says.

In other words, vinyl is an aesthetic choice. Whether it sounds good or bad depends entirely on the listener.

THE VINYL CRAZE TRANSCENDS AGE.

Aesthetics may explain why people of a certain age prefer vinyl, but what about the tsunami of interest among younger demographics raised on the pristine recordings that followed vinyl?

Todd Robinson, owner of LUNA music, a local vinyl, CD and cassette store that celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, has an informed opinion



Todd Robinson
LUNA music

about vinyl's popularity with young people who have far more convenient ways of listening to music. "Everything in the music business is cyclic — whether it's the format or the style," Robinson says. "Every generation wants to codify and do their own thing, so it's very much about 'My parents did this. I want to do something different.'"

During the early 2000s, Robinson says sales of CDs began to decline. As file swapping and access to free music became "a thing," people began to miss interacting with a physical artifact. Independent and major record labels took note and began to embrace the new-old format. Vinyl's popularity grew exponentially.

"I think a lot of people's interest in vinyl is that it is tangible, and it is directly correlated to the music itself," he says. "The nature of how you play vinyl — flipping each side over, picking your favorite song, dropping the needle — you're forced to interact with it. That's a lot different than turning on a streaming platform or turning on your laptop and listening to whatever music you have on your hard drive."

It turns out that vinyl's 12-inch format makes a divine canvas. In a world that's increasingly visual, the layout of the album cover, the packaging and the vinyl itself are just as important as the music. Our culture's preoccupation with beauty paved a path for music businesses such as Romanus Records and Joyful Noise, two local record labels that transform vinyl into a new form of art.

How far can the human imagination travel past a round slice of black vinyl? Pretty far, judging by the novel formats that make today's vinyl so interesting — holograms etched inside vinyl's runout grooves, hidden songs under record labels, clear vinyl filled with gold, or beer, or toys.

"I've never heard of anyone framing their CD covers and putting them on the wall, but we sell a fair amount of LP frames and albums simply to have them hang as artwork," Robinson says. "I think it's just one more facet of buying, playing and loving vinyl that you get to interact with it as an art piece."

THE MUSIC INDUSTRY, LIKE ANY OTHER, IS PROFIT DRIVEN.

Beneath vinyl's revival, there are also economic principles at work. "Vinyl has made a resurgence not because it's superior, but because it's something people will pay for," Hornsby says. Touring bands and independent musicians make money from two sources: live performances and merchandise, including T-shirts, CDs and vinyl records. Most vinyl records come with a digital download card, so when you buy vinyl, you get something attractive to display plus a download — two products for the price of one.

A vinyl record may cost a music fan twice as much as a CD, but the cost of manufacturing it is about the same. Vinyl's profit margins are better than other physical formats — a big deal in an industry decimated by the world leader in music consumption, YouTube. To wit: millennials don't typically own CD players. They either listen to music digitally or they have a record player. "You charge more for [vinyl] because you can," Hornsby says.

To some extent, making music available on vinyl is a no-brainer for artists like Mike Adams, a Bloomington, Ind. musician and founder of At His Honest Weight, an indie rock band. "For whatever reason, it's what people want," he says. "If people like what you do, they will buy it."

Adams has been a vinyl fan since the 1990s, when he began searching for underground music, rare pressings and people making music in smaller circles. "When people buy my albums, they are acknowledging that we have some common ground," Adams says. "It's a connected feeling of, 'Oh, you like this thing that I made because I like it.'"

Now in his late 30s, Adams says he noticed a shift in the demand for vinyl about a decade ago. "The point wasn't that it was ironic, campy or retro," he says. "It became something people actually want now, which is what makes it feel modern — not like we are reaching back." Adams points to sales

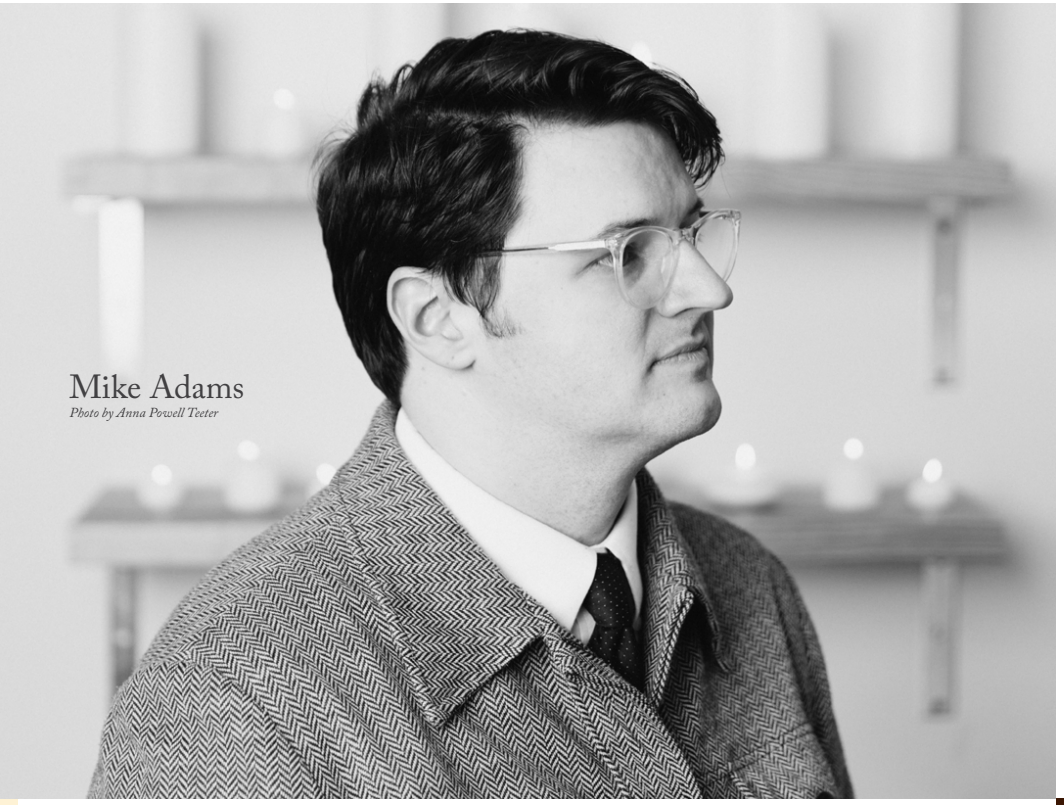
THE COLLECTORS

Will Sibley

Will Sibley got hooked on collecting vinyl as a sixth grader growing up in Spokane, Washington. He bought his first record in 1978. "I rode my bicycle to the record store and bought the Beatles album, ***Revolver***," Sibley says. On the ride home, the album got caught in the bike spokes. "I still have the album with the corners all dog-eared."

A lifelong musician himself, Sibley says it means a lot to him to support the artists and bands he loves by purchasing new vinyl recordings. The 52-year-old Ben Davis University High School history teacher enjoys scouring the globe for vintage albums on family vacations. Among his most cherished albums: an original 1970 German pressing of ***Let it Be***, a Beatles boxed set that came with a book. Sibley snagged it at an auction for $35. The set's value is estimated at $600.

As much as he enjoys music, Sibley also values vinyl records as historic markers. "Whether you're listening to The Who or Chuck Berry, that music is a placeholder for what was going on, not only in the United States, but in our shared history around the world," he says. Reflecting on the bone recordings and bootlegged rock 'n' roll industrious music fans smuggled into censored China and Russia, Sibley is reverent. "How desperate were those kids in Russia to be a part of this phenomenon, to be a part of this wave of culture that was spreading all over the world? Not even a totalitarian state could keep the music out of those kids' hands."



Mike Adams
Photo by Anna Powell Teeter

of a vinyl LP he produced with Joyful Noise in 2016 as evidence of supply and demand. "They disappeared," he says. "And I never heard that we were even close to selling out the CDs."

COULD VINYL RECRUIT THE NEXT GENERATION OF CLASSICAL MUSIC LOVERS?

Mark Hornsby says the popularity of vinyl has huge implications for orchestras with an interest in spreading enthusiasm for classical music and improving their business results. "One of the best things symphonies could do for themselves and for classical music is hop on the train," he says.

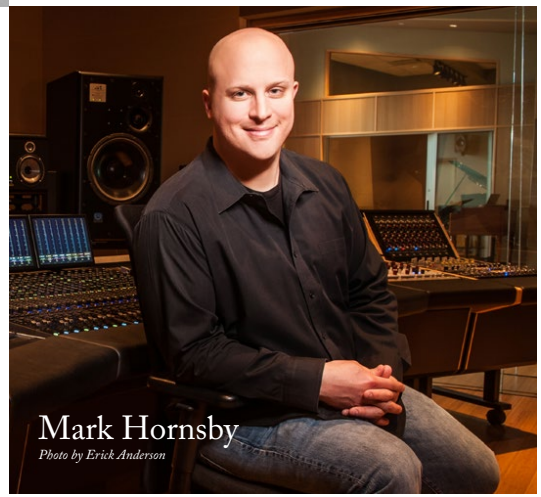
Making a high-quality orchestral recording isn't difficult or expensive, but it isn't just the economics that should make sense to orchestras. Hornsby says vinyl also has the cachet to make classical music more accessible and to improve classical music's hip factor among young people.

"Remember what people do with these things," he says. "Suppose you're a season ticket holder for XYZ orchestra, and they give you (or you purchase) a vinyl record with a great photo of the orchestra in the beautiful 100-year-old hall they perform in. You take that to work and put it on your desk. One of your coworkers might walk up and say 'Wow, let me see that. This is our orchestra?'"

Hornsby sees vinyl as a magnet for audiences that might never have gone to a concert on their own initiative. "This piece of merchandise, designed to be sold, also becomes a marketing tool for said orchestra," he says. "That's how it works in the music industry."

Robinson agrees that renewed interest in vinyl has the potential to give classical music a boost. Driven by customer demand, his store, LUNA music, carries more vinyl records than CDs. Their classical vinyl collection focuses mainly on famous composers and artists, including forgotten, out-of-print and small-run titles, some of which are being reissued for the first time in decades. "I can't help but think there's going to be a nice market for someone who may say, 'Hey, I like Phillip Glass. I'd love to have some of his classical pieces in my collection,'" Robinson says. "That could be a gateway for someone getting turned on to classical music."

In previous decades, Time-Life and other vintage record series introduced listeners to classical music and composers. Today, that introduction could be made by local musicians. "I hope to see more local, classical musicians put some stuff out," Robinson says. "I think that would be fantastic. That's the beautiful thing about music in general; it's all interrelated." ■



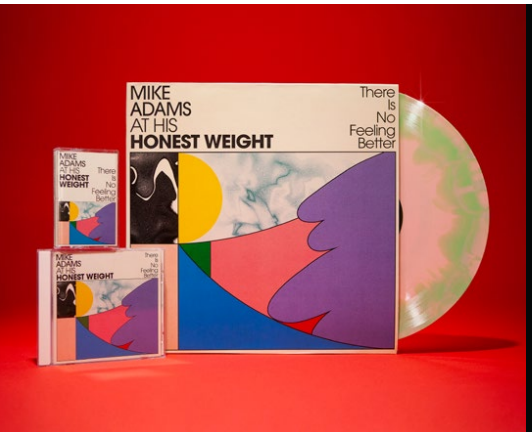
Mark Hornsby
Photo by Erick Anderson

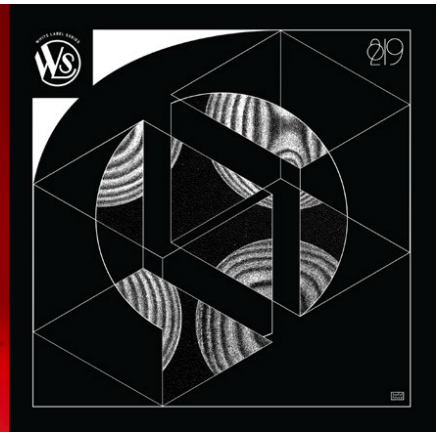
THE COLLECTORS

Ben Lamb

In the 1990s, Ben Lamb was a middle school student turned off by popular music. He found an alternative among racks of discarded LPs at Goodwill. Drawn by cover art from the 1950s and 1960s, Lamb frequently stumbled across classical recordings, which he played on an old record player that belonged to his mother. "The kind of thing that gets sent to Goodwill is really poor-quality classical music," he says. "It was just fun to have."

Lamb drifted away from collecting old records during college, but returned to it a decade ago after a hard-drive failure. "All my CDs were in a box somewhere — I have no idea where," he says. "I started buying new records as well, and I've been doing that ever since." Now in his mid-30s, Lamb plays LPs on an old stereo credenza given to him by his grandmother. "I think what's great about [vinyl] is that it's tactile," he says. "Part of the reason I like records is you get this big, beautiful piece of art."





Interactive Vinyl

by Crystal Hammon

Karl Hofstetter, founder of Joyful Noise, an Indianapolis-based independent record label, is clear about one thing: making vinyl records for the latest generation of music lovers has nothing to do with practicality or convenience. In fact, the more elaborate the vinyl record or its packaging, the better chance it has of selling. "We find that making a physical product that's really tactile and engaging makes it much more likely that people will get excited about the record and delve into the music," Hofstetter says.

Joyful Noise is a magnet for a listening demographic that has always had access to music through cell phones and computers. "They gravitate toward unique physical items," he says. "Seeing music come from moving parts is a fascination for people who've grown up during the digital age." Hofstetter says many customers still use streaming music to sample music or as a companion for daily activities; vinyl is reserved for listening to music they've already decided upon.

These superfans may not listen to vinyl often, but when they do, they expect it to be a worthwhile experience. Joyful Noise caters to this segment of the population by pushing vinyl's outer boundaries in the most improbable ways.

Think in terms of a 12-sided record with six spindle holes. To listen, you pick up the record and place it on a different spindle hole for each song. Joyful Noise made 127 copies of this innovative format, which sold out within five minutes of its release. "People paid $100 for less than five minutes of music on this incredibly impractical record because of the tactile, playful nature of it," he says. "People like to be involved in the culture of their music, and collecting vinyl is a way for them to engage."

In an era that allows anyone to release music on Bandcamp or Sound Cloud, the vinyl format also raises the threshold on what constitutes an album, according to Hofstetter. "It's not a real album unless it's on vinyl," he says. "It's the format that is historically legitimate." Hofstetter estimates that vinyl accounts for 90 percent of the music sales among the experimental, indie rock bands and artists Joyful Noise represents. ■

Chris Banta has built a business by making collectible vinyl

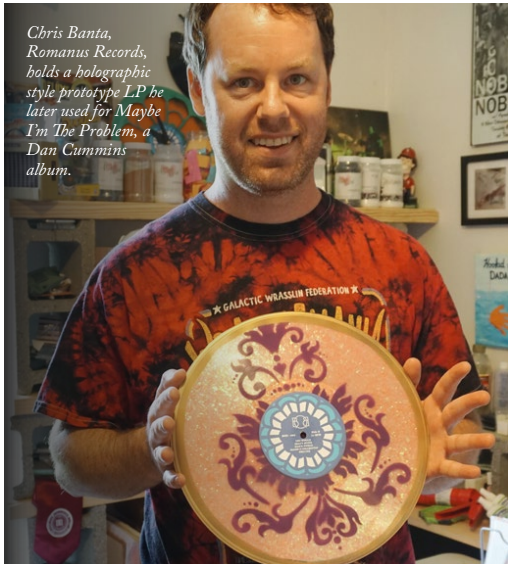
Words and Photo by Crystal Hammon

Like so many entrepreneurs who've gone before him, Chris Banta has achieved success by failing over and over again. The 33-year-old musician and artist founded Romanus Records with partner Warner Swope in 2016 after his first project, an online sale of 60 custom-made vinyl records for their band, Brother O' Brother. Within three minutes, all 60 records were gone. "Sixty records at $60 a pop," Banta says.

Wowed by the response, Banta began experimenting with what he calls insertion vinyl — highly-collectible, limited-edition albums that are artfully made and often filled with toys, candy, sand, gunpowder, razor blades and other novel objects that move inside while the record spins.

Not all of his experiments were successful, but Banta eventually settled on a handful of well-honed, proprietary processes. Music fans may pay $20 to $100 for a limited-edition record made by the label. "I never want to price anybody out," says Banta, who grew up in modest circumstances with eight siblings. "It was very important to me to think about 16-year-old me who worked at Wendy's, and if I had a favorite band with a crazy, cool record coming out, maybe I could scrape together enough money to buy it."

During the past three years, the Indianapolis-based record label has released custom albums for 20 bands and artists and shipped product all over the world. Romanus Records now occupies more of Banta's time than Brother 'O Brother, which plays 80 to 100 days a year.



Chris Banta, Romanus Records, holds a holographic style prototype LP he later used for Maybe I'm The Problem, a Dan Cummins album.

At first, Banta courted every client. As the label's reputation grew in the music industry, unbidden business started to flow their way. Banta says Romanus Records is still small, but the label continues to grow by helping up-and-coming bands prosper. "Our biggest passion is working with mid-level, national bands that are touring and working hard," he says. "These customs sell out so fast that it helps everybody make some money right away. That's attractive to bands."

Banta maintains an artist's eye, scouring his environment for imaginative ideas for the physical format. "These aren't just art records," he says. "They all play. It would be pointless to make these beautiful records and not be able to play them."

Owning a band's limited-edition record and displaying it with pride is evidence of the intense loyalty that helps bands thrive. "It shows the power of music and caring about a band," Banta says. ■