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## Vinyl Noise and Narrative in CD-era Indiewood

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Mason (Ellar Coltrane), the protagonist of Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* (2014), is, like his sister Samantha (Lorelei Linklater), a digital native. The film begins in 2002, with Mason aged six, following his development over twelve years. Stage-by-stage, Mason and Samantha are shown interacting with the digital technologies of the time: in terms of music, they are seen listening to an iPod via headphones, docked on a portable speaker, and listening through a mobile phone. Even their father (Ethan Hawke), a lover of the 'analogue' genres of blues and country rock, becomes a digital convert, selling his vintage car, the in-built cassette player of which is highlighted as a key feature, and presenting Mason with a homemade CD, authored from a computer.

The film is focalized predominantly through Mason, favouring everyday detail over major dramatic contrivance. As such, it is appropriate that he and his family are associated with music-playing technologies that a child of his age would use and encounter, at the particular time and place (Texas) within which the narrative is set. In this context, it is unsurprising that the dominant music format of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the record, is treated as obsolete media. A record player *is* seen in the background when Mason's father takes his kids back to the apartment he shares with his guitarist flatmate, Jimmy (Charlie Sexton). This amounts to no more than a glimpse: the player is not heard and, given that it is only brought into view by the father's solitary movement into a backroom, there is no indication that it is registered by Mason.

In the era immediately preceding the film's starting point, however, record playing was a significant trope of films produced in the same Indiewood context as *Boyhood*, that is to say an 'independent' arena dominated, from the early to mid-90s, by the specialty divisions

of major studios (King, 2009, p. 4). In the 90s and at the very turn of the millennium, vinyl listening was becoming an ever more specialist activity, but at a point that was still pre-iTunes and the iPod. The dominant format making vinyl obsolete in this period was the CD rather than digital downloads and, in this chapter, I argue this is an influential context for the representation of vinyl listening in some of the movies of the time. To recognize particular tendencies in the films' depiction of record playing, I focus on three high-profile Indiewood films: *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Wes Anderson, 2001); *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994); and *Ghost World* (Terry Zwigoff, 2000).

The recurrence of vinyl in films of this era has not gone unnoticed.<sup>1</sup> Robynn Stilwell (2006) and Tim J Anderson (2008) have both focused on record playing in (predominantly) American films of the period, with a particular crossover in their analysis of *Ghost World*. Reflection on their commentary on this film is helpful in defining the contribution my chapter makes. Stilwell studies girls' rites-of-passage films that feature record playing as an aspect of identity building for the female protagonists, within a cultural context that characterizes record collecting predominantly as male. Her commentary on *Ghost World* focuses on teenage protagonist Enid's (Thora Birch) playing of Skip James' 1931 recording 'Devil Got My Woman', passed on to her by obsessive record collector Seymour (Steve Buscemi). Stilwell concentrates on the way Enid uses the song to realize her identity through deflection, via 'a voice that comes from someplace entirely *other*' (2006, p.159). Anderson's interest is similarly in identity building, this time in relation to an argument about the debilitating effects of nostalgia. He suggests that Enid's and Seymour's different relationships to vinyl recordings demonstrate the distinction between them as characters, Enid representing a figure who 'is able to move forward through the use of these records in a manner that Seymour never does' (2008, p.69).

In both cases, the critical attention is on the characters' *act of* playing the records (and, in Seymour's case, his collection of them). There is very little focus on the quality of sound used to represent the records when they are played. Stilwell does claim that the 'materiality of the record matters' (Stilwell, 2006, p.158), but the aspects she emphasizes, in terms of the argument being made about characterization, are visual ones. The privileging of the visual is also a feature of McNelis' and Boschi's study of visible playback technology in film, which analyses characters' uses of on-screen record players, amongst other types of music media (2013).

An original feature of this chapter is its attention to the sound of vinyl in the films under review. This does not entail a retreat from the narrative and character analysis employed by Stilwell, Anderson, McNelis and Boschi. Rather it involves a consideration of the contribution of noise to such matters, a critical approach that is distinctive within the wider study of pop music in film. Indeed, this constitutes a new avenue in my own investigations of the pop soundtrack, which have tended to prioritize attention to the choices made in the selection of specific songs to soundtrack particular film moments (for example, Garwood, 2000, 2006, 2009). By contrast, this chapter foregrounds choices in sound design that are format- rather than song-specific, whilst still relating these to individual narrative scenarios.

What are the sounds of vinyl? Each film defines them in their own way, but each is also drawing on then-contemporary cultural assumptions about the sounds that sought to distinguish records from other music formats. Discussing vinylphiles' valorization of the record over the CD specifically, John D. Davis highlights the following aural qualities:

For vinylphiles, the sacred element surrounding vinyl is connected to the format's *authenticity* ... the vinyl record is the quintessential recorded-music format,

providing a more authentic listening experience than the CD. The listening experience includes ... the sound of the vinyl record, from its scratches and pops to the perception of its more-extensive bass range. (2008, p.404)

Emily Yochim and Megan Biddinger, again analysing vinylphilic statements, suggest that signs of fallibility, such as scratches and pops, are prized because they bestow upon the format a 'mortality' that connotes the sound's possession of human qualities such as 'warmth' and being 'alive' (2008, p.183; p.188). They note that vinyl imperfections only become valued in the context of other music media and, in particular, in relation to the CD, a format that, upon its introduction in the 1980s, was marketed aggressively in terms of its 'perfect fidelity and infinite durability' (p. 184), that is to say, its infallibility and immortality.

The films under review appear at a point when these qualities of vinyl sound had become increasingly fetishized, in the face of the overwhelming dominance of the CD within the commercial market. Davis identifies 1989 as a key turning point for the vinyl format, with the seven major US labels significantly downscaling their support of new vinyl releases and unloading their back catalogue at reduced prices (p. 399). This consolidated the CD as the mainstream music industry's format of choice. In this context, as Davis also notes, adherence to the vinyl format became a matter of subcultural affiliation (p. 399).

The vinyl aficionado becomes, therefore, a more keenly defined cultural figure in the 90s, and, as such, more readily available for reference as a 'type' within films of the period, particularly those with an indie sensibility. As Michael Z. Newman argues, the term 'indie' identifies a taste culture, in which affiliation to certain types of cultural objects and practices mutually reinforce one another (2009). As adherence to vinyl became a niche option, defined against the mainstream movement to CDs, it followed that this would become available as the

sign of an indie sensibility that differentiated itself from mainstream values. In their work in the 1990s and early 2000s, the following key names on the American independent scene all made at least one reference to vinyl in their films: Quentin Tarantino, Hal Hartley, Jim Jarmusch, Richard Linklater, Wes Anderson, Whit Stillman, Allison Anders, Spike Lee, Sofia Coppola, David Lynch, Todd Haynes, the Coen brothers...

Amidst a myriad of choices, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *Pulp Fiction* and *Ghost World* have been selected for closer study because they all pay particular attention to vinyl's distinctive aural signature, as it became understood in the CD era. Each film audibly references the signs of vinyl's fallibility – its surface noise, scratches, crackles and pop – to establish its status within the film's fictional world. CD sound's positioning as vinyl's 'other' is relevant, in more or less explicit ways, to all of these examples and the case studies are sequenced according to the extent to which vinyl is allowed an expressive weight, in terms of narrative commentary and characterization, against this backdrop.

### **Squeezing out the Vinyl: *The Royal Tenenbaums***

Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* focuses on the lives of the titular family, which includes troubled tennis pro Richie (Luke Wilson) and his adoptive sister Margot (Gwyneth Paltrow). The film spans a number of years, revealing early on that Richie and Margot share an unrequited love. In the present-day narrative, Margot is married to a neurologist (Bill Murray), whose suspicions lead to him teaming up with Richie to hire a private detective to investigate her. After Richie hears the detective's report, detailing Margot's involvement in a string of affairs, he attempts suicide. Checking himself out of hospital, he returns to the family house, where Margot is hiding out in his childhood tent, listening to records on *her* childhood record player. The sequence covering Richie's journey and his subsequent encounter with Margot includes three songs, each connected somehow with the record player.

However, the sound of the music is only intermittently attributed to the sound of vinyl. This leads to a squeezed quality in the representation of vinyl and its sounds, which is in keeping with the inhibited view of Margot offered overall.

After Richie discharges himself from hospital, he catches a bus, whereupon Nick Drake's 1970 song 'Fly' begins, mixing with engine noise. His estranged father, Royal (Gene Hackman), witnesses this and he is then seen commenting on Richie's condition, his dialogue overlaying the introductory passage of the song. Drake starts singing and there follows a minute-long passage, covering the first verse, in which other sounds are subdued and the film cuts between Richie on the bus, Royal in a taxi, and Richie disembarking and climbing into the family home via a window. In a surprising twist, the quality of musical sound then changes, as 'Fly' becomes characterized as a song Margot is playing on her record player from within the tent.

Despite not being introduced as a vinyl recording, the aural movement at the beginning of the song from 'music plus competing sound' to 'music dominance' aligns with a common practice in films' handling of record-playing moments. Tim J Anderson notes:

records are often loaded with large reserves of social memory, able to spark affections and release intense mnemonic charges. In many cases this aspect is intentionally amplified through supra-diegetic mixing techniques that quickly dispose of any strict concerns of 'cinematic realism'. In the quest to sensually reveal the emotional importance we deposit on these objects, the result is a privileged point of audition wherein the 'clarity' of the record's details are often much clearer for the auditor than the discernible perspective offered to the on-screen listener. (2008, p. 60)

Retrospectively, it becomes clear that the record playing of 'Fly' by Margot has been subject to this kind of supra-diegetic mixing, attributing it a privileged point of audition. On first listen, however, the assumption is that the song is playing out non-diegetically to lend emotional resonance to Richie's situation. The normal formula of moving 'quickly' from realist diegetic vinyl sound to privileged audio clarity has been reversed.

If, as Anderson argues, this rapid movement to audio clarity works sensuously to enhance the recording's affective charge, how is the reversal of the effect experienced? Firstly, the twist is teased out, the film revealing the diegetic status of the song through a change in sound quality, without moving into the tent to show its exact source. Instead the camera follows Richie's exploration of the room, with the music eventually being stopped with an offscreen click.

It is only after hearing this sound that the viewer is allowed to see inside the tent, where Margot sits, record cover on her lap and record player behind her. To reinforce that we have been listening to vinyl, Richie asks 'what are you doing in my tent?', to which Margot replies, 'just listening to some records'.

Shortly afterwards, Margot lifts the record sleeve and turns towards the player. As it proceeds, however, this movement is blocked from view by Richie who has entered the tent. At the very end of this shot, a click is heard, followed by an overhead view of the record player, with a disc spinning and Margot's hand lifting the needle onto a groove towards the middle of the record. Crackle is heard before being drowned out by the organ intro of the song, The Rolling Stones' 'She Smiled Sweetly'. An intimate conversation follows, in which Richie confronts Margot about what he has learned of her past, they confess their love for each other, kiss and then reflect on Richie's suicide attempt, which he admits was triggered by his feelings for Margot, to her evident distress.

The overhead shot of the record player and its accompanying sounds attribute a special status to vinyl that has been suppressed by the previous cues offered in the sequence. The square shape of the record player is precisely centred within the frame. This contrasts with the preceding visualization of Richie's and Margot's interactions, in which the camerawork prioritizes Richie's movements. The sound of the moment is fetishistic, featuring aural cues associated with record playing.

The attribution of the music to Margot may suggest it speaks for her in some way, fulfilling the 'identity-building' function explored by Anderson and Stilwell. However, any sense of agency in Margot's playing of 'She Smiled Sweetly' is compromised. The 'needle-drop' moment is isolated from its surroundings, partly due to the disparity between the moment's concentrated vinyl-centricity and the quite lengthy obfuscation of the music's vinyl origins that precedes it. The continuity of the overhead view of the record player with Margot's actions towards it is also disrupted. This is partly because her movement to the record player becomes blocked by Richie's body entering the tent, so that the film performs a conventional 'cut-on-action' (Margot lifting her hand towards the player) without the viewer gaining full view of the action to which the editing is choreographed.

The sense of dislocation is reinforced by the implausibility of this record now being on the turntable. Once onscreen, Margot is not shown taking the Nick Drake record off the player and she would not have been able to do so in the time that elapses between her stopping it offscreen and Richie's entrance. These continuity issues may seem trivial, but attention is drawn towards them due to the initial decision to hide, for almost two minutes, any visual and aural markers of vinyl, only then to suggest that this is how 'Fly' is actually being heard.

This contributes to a feeling that Margot is not truly attached to the music with which she is diegetically associated. The details of the needle-drop moment are, on the one hand,

scrupulously authentic. Conversely, Margot's physical interaction with the record and player is effaced. The moment follows a whole passage which attaches 'Fly' to Margot's diegetic listening as an afterthought, following a substantial sequence in which it has leant an emotional charge to Richie's actions.

The compromising of the needle-drop moment as a way of characterizing Margot is cemented by the manner in which the scene ends. After Richie confesses his suicide attempt was linked to his feelings for Margot, the song comes to a 'natural' stop. At this point, Margot asks, 'you're not going to do it again are you?', to which Richie says, 'I doubt it'. This equivocal response is very distressing to Margot who starts crying. The Rolling Stones' 'Goodbye Ruby Tuesday' then begins.

Without knowledge of the running order of 'Between the Buttons', the album playing on the record player, the viewer could assume that this is simply the next song on the album, as the pause between tracks mimics what would be expected from an LP. However, the sonic profiling of 'Goodbye Ruby Tuesday' disabuses this notion immediately and further isolates the needle-drop moment from the musical representation that surrounds it. The song is heard with the same clarity associated with the initial non-diegetic airing of 'Fly'. This reinforces the diegetic playing of 'She Smiled Sweetly' as an isolated moment of vinyl signification, with all the visual and aural signifiers of its vinyl status crammed into the overtly stylized overhead shot of the record player. This is sandwiched between two instances of songs being emphasized in the sound mix without any diegetic or vinyl markings.

'Goodbye Ruby Tuesday' *does* begin by soundtracking Margot's crying, her decision to walk out of the tent and her declaration to Richie that they can only remain secretly in love. In this sense, it appears to be attached to the agency of Margot, lending emotional resonance to her actions. However, this, too, is momentary. The song reaches full affective power with the raising of volume (just after Margot's words) exactly as it reaches its famous

chorus. This accompanies the insertion of one of the film's title cards, featuring a hand-drawn picture of Richie and a few lines of prose that describe what Richie did the next morning (which we then see, with the music continuing powerfully).

At its most sonically emphatic, 'Goodbye Ruby Tuesday' becomes attached to Richie's response to Margot's actions, just as 'Fly' is initially presented as a song connected to Richie, even though it is 'really' Margot's music. This corresponds to a theme in the film whereby the association of Margot with vinyl recordings is consistently 'squeezed'. For example, when the private detective reveals his findings about Margot to her husband and Richie, these are visualized in a montage accompanied by the Ramones' 'Judy is a Punk'. The recording bursts in after a low-key affirmation from Margot's scholarly husband that he would like to see the contents of the file. The song possesses the vitality associated with the 1970s punk single, a quintessentially vinyl format. It is allowed to play for almost a minute, with no competing sound, but is then cut off mid-line as the film returns to Margot's husband, who has evidently read enough. The abrupt introduction and sudden silencing of the vinyl is of a piece with the 'sandwiching' effect described in relation to the needle-drop moment in the tent, whereby Margot's association with vinyl is squeezed between longer and more sonically emphatic musical moments attached to Richie. Here the 'awkward fit' is between the bursting-at-the-seams vitality of the song and the languid aura of near silence that surrounds it.

Arved Ashby argues that the 'Judy is a Punk' scene 'fills out a depressive and hitherto one-sided character, and our seeing it proves salutary' (2013, p. 196). This becomes harder to accept if it is understood as part of a general tendency to bestow upon Margot a special connection with vinyl sound, only for that to be treated as something that has to fit within another character's script. This is, after all, a sequence visualizing a report on Margot that has been made without her consent, and the song is switched on and off at her husband's behest.

Instead, the scene chimes with the co-opting of Margot's record playing in the tent for the purposes of characterizing Richie, a process in which choices in sound design play a major part.

### **Vinyl and the CD: Fantasies of Co-Existence in *Pulp Fiction***

The record player is the only music playing technology diegetically present in *The Royal Tenenbaums*. It is brought to attention only to highlight vinyl's marginal position, the difficulty it has 'fitting in' with the dominant emphatically heard non-diegetic musical soundtrack. As such, the cultural obsolescence of vinyl is alluded to in a deflected manner, the pristine audio values of more contemporary musical media suggested by the clarity of the non-diegetic soundtrack, rather than represented directly. The two remaining examples discussed in this chapter tackle the relationship between vinyl and other musical formats head-on, referencing other musical media, including the CD, alongside the record player, within their diegetic worlds.

Ken Garner discusses the 'vinyl-centricity' of Quentin Tarantino's films from *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003) as a unique turn in his soundtrack style (Garner, 2013). I will return to his observations on these later films, but, for now, I want to suggest that there is more to say about the representation of vinyl, aurally and visually, in his 1990s films, as exemplified by *Pulp Fiction*.

The record-playing moment in the film occurs when the mob contract killer Vincent (John Travolta) arrives to collect his boss' wife Mia (Uma Thurman), a scene accompanied by Dusty Springfield's 'Son of a Preacher Man'. Garner analyses this moment in an earlier piece of writing on Tarantino's musical choices. Consistent with the argument he develops later, Garner focuses on the situational aspects of the moment. For example, Garner notes that the scene:

foreground[s] the central female character's music selection and control of the aural environment, by featuring extreme close-ups on her music technology; the needle lifting from the groove of Mia's copy of the *Dusty in Memphis* LP ...

Tarantino's original script had the Dusty album more plausibly being played from a CD (Tarantino 1994a: 45), but the stopping-and-starting of a CD's internal laser cannot be shown as a physical, fetishized act. (Garner, 2001, p. 200)

Garner suggests that the switch from CD in the script to a vinyl recording in the film is motivated by the desire to show Mia exercising agency in the scene, through her control of the record player's tone arm. Garner does not consider the aural qualities of this scene. In addressing this element, I want to suggest that the CD player imagined in the script is still a presence on the soundtrack, and is also insinuated visually.

The scene occurs half an hour in, at the beginning of a music-laden passage featuring Vincent and Mia, culminating in Mia's overdose from cocaine use. Garner recognizes this as a turning point in the film's scoring practices, a sequence that marks the high-point of the film's overloaded musical sensibilities, from which it then steps back: '[j]ust as Mia is snapped out of drug-induced coma, so is the audience rudely awakened from its musical haze' (2001, p. 201). This is an astute observation, but, in relation to the 'Son of the Preacher Man' scene, his attention to the specific connotations of the song mean that other elements that contribute to this 'overdosing' quality are overlooked, in particular around sound design.

The sequence establishes a principle of aural eclecticism on its non-musical soundtrack. Vincent approaches Mia's house and finds a note written on white paper stuck to the door, which is displayed in close-up as Vincent holds it: 'Hi Vincent, I'm getting dressed. The doors open. Come inside and make yourself a drink. Mia'. The viewer requires no more

information to understand what is being asked of Vincent, and, yet, the film still elects to supply a voiceover from Mia (the first time we have heard her), reiterating the writing in a clear, conversational tone. This is heard centrally in the stereo mix, cushioned between insect sounds in the left and right channels that indicate the heady climate of the setting.

The voiceover is narratively redundant, existing solely to introduce Mia's voice in a lustrous setting. The sensation of being bathed in sound is also represented visually as a burst of white light covers the cut to Vincent walking into the open-plan building. It is in this moment of pure light that the musical intro of 'Son of a Preacher Man' emerges emphatically, dominating the soundtrack and acting as a continuation of the lustrous aural qualities just established, as well as a complement to the visual ones.

Springfield's opening singing is heard without competing sound, meaning that her celebrated soulful voice is allowed maximum exposure. By the second line, the film has cut to Mia in the control room, from which she is watching Vincent's movements through a range of monitors. There is an intercom microphone in front of her which she speaks through in an extreme close-up that features the head of the chrome mic, light bouncing off its top-side, and Mia's painted-red lips as close as they can be without touching it. As a piece of technology specifically associated with the vocal and as the body part that projects the voice, the two elements continue to connote a lustrous representation of sound, reinforced by the continuation of the song.

Mia says 'Vincent' into the mic and the sound design of its rendition is significant. It is mostly heard clearly to give the viewer the ideal audition of the word that issues from Mia's lips. However, there is a cut, at the very end of the word, that takes the viewer back to Vincent and that represents Mia's voice as it is heard through the downstairs intercom. This results in a phased effect on the closing 't'. She repeats his name, in a more drawn-out

fashion this time, and this allows the full word to be heard projected into the large open-plan space via the small speaker of the intercom, with a reduction in clarity faithfully reproduced.

Although we have only seen glimpses of Mia, by this point we have heard her voice technologically mediated in three different ways: as closely-miked non-diegetic voiceover, as clearly relayed diegetic sound, and as sound subjected to diegetic technological interference. In this context, the unrelentingly pristine quality of the song becomes an example of one option, amongst many, of how sound can be conveyed in films.

The cut to Vincent downstairs does not just reveal a new dimension to the sound quality associated with Mia's voice. It also exhibits a new part of the diegetic space, which houses different types of music technology. Specifically, we now see that the apartment holds a reel-to-reel tape recorder, which sits upon a hi-fi unit housing, presumably, other types of music playing systems: it is clear that there are other slots on the machine and it is also apparent that a record player is not present. The implication that the system also includes a CD player is reinforced by the stack of CDs that are positioned on the shelf below.

Up until this moment, there has been no indication that the song is being played diegetically. The revelation of the music equipment gives the song a possible diegetic source, the most plausible being that we are hearing a CD (as the reel-to-reel is not turning, there is no record player in view and there is a stack of CDs on the shelf).

After a relatively lengthy segment in which the song is allowed to be heard without competing aural elements, the music, and the sequence, is brought to an end in a surprising way. A close up of Mia's bare feet walking across the ground floor space indicates that she has moved out of the control room. The next shot is a close-up of the tone arm being lifted from a record, framed so tightly that no hand is visible operating the mechanism. The music stops, there is a cut to Mia's bare feet and we hear her voice saying 'let's go'. The scene ends.

It is impossible to place the tone arm, and the record player it represents, within the geography of the space. This is surprising, given how much of the open-plan ground floor we have seen, due to Vincent's exploration of it. The withholding of a full view of Mia's body and the exclusion of a hand in the shot of the tone arm lifting also makes it impossible to say for sure that Mia is responsible for stopping the record. This ambiguity is exacerbated by the surprise that 'Son of a Preacher Man' was playing diegetically on a record player at all.

To counter-balance the ambiguity, there is a simultaneous overload of inferential cues to persuade the viewer that Mia's actions and the performance of the song are all centred around a diegetically located record player at this point: we see Mia walking toward something, we hear music stopping as the tone arm is lifted (presumably what Mia was walking to) and we then hear Mia saying it is time to go, as if she has put a stop to the music in order to facilitate this. At this point, we even see Mia lifting one foot and then setting it down, as if to mimic the action of lifting and setting down the tone arm she has just performed.

However, a detail in sound design works to unsettle the viewer's acceptance of these highly concentrated inferences. The lifting of the tone arm is accompanied by a concise 'thwipp', so concise, in fact, that it hits the ear as a library effect rather than a naturalistically rendered sound. The sense of contrivance around the moment is exacerbated by the fact that the song has already halted before the needle is raised. Springfield is singing a declamatory 'oh yes she was' in a call-and-response section of the song. The music is halted on 'was' just before the needle is lifted, but still makes its presence felt over this action due to the use of reverb to 'round out' the moment of its cessation.

A needle-lifting, rather than more conventional needle-drop moment, the uncanny appearance of vinyl into this scene suggests the sequence as aural fantasy, controlled equally by a diegetic figure (Mia) and an authorial one (Tarantino and his sound crew), who stages a

scene that showcases the diverse qualities of sound that can be achieved in film. Like Margot in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, Mia's relationship with record playing technology is made strange through the construction of discontinuities in performance and the deliberate exclusion from sight of certain physical actions relating to the characters' handling of the technology.

However, the consequences this has for the viewers' understanding of the characters is quite distinct. In her opening scene, Mia acts as a magical presence, orchestrating different types of sound from within the diegesis, as a complement to the authorial manipulation of sound that is also being foregrounded. The result is a scene of aural decadence, in which all shades of sound are allowed to mingle, including CD clarity with vinyl aura. The overdosing of sensory stimulus this involves cannot be sustained, as Garner suggests, but the attribution of consequences is a matter for a later scene.

### **Surface Noise and Deep Characterization in *Ghost World***

A more conventional needle-drop moment occurs in Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1998), when the titular protagonist (Pam Grier) invites her bail bondman (Robert Forster) into her home. She plays the Delfonics' 'Didn't I Blow Your Mind' on her turntable, as the couple have an exchange about the fate (and value) of vinyl in the face of the 'CD revolution'.

This is an example of the CD versus vinyl debate coming to the narrative surface of an Indiewood film of the era, rather than being alluded to through different forms of deflection, as occurs in *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *Pulp Fiction*. A version of this discussion also occurs in *Ghost World*. Enid has persuaded her friend Rebecca (Scarlett Johansson) to attend a 78s collectors' party, involving her new record-collecting acquaintance, Seymour. The scene is introduced by the following exchange, between two subsidiary characters:

JEROME

There are some records I will pay

serious money for, provided they're a sincere V plus. Other than that I'd prefer to just have them on CD.

STEVEN

CDs will never have the presence of an original 78.

JEROME

WRR-ONG! A digital transfer adequately mastered will sound identical to the original. Do you have a decent equalizer?

STEVEN

I have a Klipsch 2B3.

JEROME

Obviously the problem! You expect a ten-band equalizer to impart state of-the-art sound? Dream a little dream, it's never going to happen (LAUGHS)

For a 78s collector, Jerome is surprisingly liberal-minded about the virtues of the CD, but the comedy stems from his ability to still articulate a technological condescension, through his comments about equalization. Despite the comic tone, this passage, played out by two characters who are not otherwise featured, acts as a keynote for understanding the manner in which the sound of records are represented in the film. The 78s are not, as might be expected, attributed aural qualities in opposition to the perceived cleanness of the CD: they are actually the cleanest sounding records played in the film. The 'presence' to which Steven refers, that is to say the supposedly 'human' qualities of vinyl sound (rather than the technical definition Jerome imposes on the term 'presence'), are much more apparent in the 33 1/3s and 45s played in the film. Whereas the playing of records in the previous case studies is marked by either restriction (*The Royal Tenenbaums*) or unsustainable intensity (*Pulp Fiction*), the representation of records in *Ghost World* is much more sustained, allowing for the construction of a micro-system of vinyl and, in the case of the 78s, shellac sounds.

Seymour is the only protagonist with a record player that can play 78s, so all of these scenes take place in his house. 78s are played during the party scene, on a later occasion when Enid and Seymour talk in his record room, and during the scene in which Enid and Seymour kiss.

Considering that Seymour is identified so strongly as a collector of old records, very little attention is given to the way they are played. There are no needle-drop moments in these scenes: in all three, we join the action *in (music) media res*, each time with a shot of a record already spinning on a turntable. Even though each scene features a change of record, the viewer never sees this process being enacted.

With no special attention given to the act of playing the records, the 78s generally function as conventional underscoring, providing an appropriate yet unobtrusive musical backdrop. The tracks are purely instrumental and this adds to the sense they are functioning like a composed score. The usual aural signifiers of old records are generally notable by their absence. There is some surface noise audible in the opening shots of the first two record-playing scenes, but, in both cases, this is not generally a feature of their aural presentation as they settle into the background.

There is one point during these scenes that surface noise is made more apparent. As Lionel Belasco's 'Venezuela' plays in the background, Enid discovers that Seymour owns an old poster advertising the chicken franchise for which he works. The poster is clearly racist, featuring a cartoon caricaturing the features of a smiling African-American man. Seymour explains that he has collected it as a historical curiosity and he shows Enid a folder that documents the history of the fast food chain. On the cut to a close-up of the folder, whose pages are being turned by Enid, the volume of 'Venezuela' becomes louder and the surface noise much more present. A pause in dialogue allows the now markedly 'old' music to be heard in tandem with a view of racist memorabilia. As Enid reaches a page that documents

the franchise's more modern, less obviously racist, era, the conversation picks up again, with the music receding to its earlier background position.

Enid asks to borrow the poster from Seymour and, in the next scene, we see that she has co-opted it as a piece of 'found art' to present to her summer school art class. The increased 'presence' of the music as she looks through the folder is significant as it attaches this quality of the music to Enid rather than its ostensible owner, Seymour: this is a moment where Enid sees a way of making use of Seymour's collection for her own purposes and it is to this realization that the momentary heightening of the music's auratic qualities refers.

Surface noise is, therefore, connected to Enid's subjectivity, rather than presented as an intrinsic property of an old record or as a quality that illuminates the character of Seymour. This idea is pursued consistently across the film, with Enid's own playing of records registering as a notably more 'noisy' affair than Seymour's.

In the key moment Stilwell analyses, Enid has an evidently revelatory experience listening to Skip James' 'Devil Got My Woman', which is featured on a compilation album she has bought in a boot sale from Seymour, in their first face-to-face encounter. The album is a standard 33 1/3. Playing the album for the first time on her record player in her bedroom, we initially hear the opening seconds of the first track, 'Let's Go Riding' by Mr. Freddie. The viewer sees Enid putting the disc onto the turntable and lifting the tone arm onto it, but this is represented in long shot, rather than fetishistically. Enid walks away from the record player to get on with colouring her hair. The song is heard quite emphatically (there is little competing sound) with some audible crackle, but fades out quickly as Enid closes her bathroom cabinet door onto the camera, creating a 'natural' fade to black.

To put on the record, Enid has made a choice to turn off a cassette recording of the more contemporary (but still retro) Buzzcocks' track, 'What Do I Get?'. The crackle on 'Let's Go Riding' does mark out the song as belonging to a different age and format to the

Buzzcocks' cassette, but the difference is not registered emphatically. However, when the image returns after the fade to black, it reveals a different depiction of the record. The album has now arrived at the narratively key track, 'Devil Got My Woman', the sound rolling in towards the end of the musical intro, accompanied by a close-up at turntable level of the needle on the spinning disc, which is quite badly warped. The surface noise for this track is much more pronounced than was the case for 'Let's Go Riding'. A cut to Enid at her sink, now with black hair, shows her turning, intrigued, towards the source of the sound. The scene then plays out visually in the way Stilwell describes it, with the camera gesturing towards a circular movement around Enid, who is standing transfixed, that complements the close-ups of the warped disc spinning on the turntable (2006, pp.158-9).

There is a dissolve from a close-up of the needle to a later point in the evening, with Enid lying on a beanbag, still captivated by the song, which, magically, continues undisturbed by the passage of time that has elapsed. This dissolve is covered aurally by a phase where there is no singing and a relative lull in the attack of the music. This means that surface noise is the main aural element covering the dissolve, a visual/narrative cue that is important in conveying the extent of Enid's immersion in the song. Surface noise becomes, therefore, a key aural indicator of the song's hypnotic effect on Enid. When it comes to an end, all the viewer can hear is the crackle of the needle playing out in the groove between songs. Enid immediately lifts the needle and places it back on the groove at the start of the song, producing a click. At the end of this pivotal record-playing scene, the viewer is made to hear as much pure surface noise as they are music.

Enid's response to the song leads her into a relationship with Seymour that eventually ends in a misguided sexual encounter. At the same time, Enid has grown distanced from her friend Rebecca, although she holds onto their plan to move in together. In the course of packing her belongings to take over to the new apartment, Enid comes across an old record of

her own – this time a 45. She puts it on her record player but drops the needle on the turntable, rather than disc, resulting in a scraping noise. When she does place the needle correctly, ‘A Smile and a Ribbon’, a tinkly children’s tune from the 1950s, sounds out in a fashion both tinny and crackly. During the song, Enid’s body language indicates that hearing it, in the process of going through her old things, has made her introspective. As the song comes to an end, she stops what she is doing, stands for a moment and then slumps onto her bed. This is accompanied by ten seconds of pure surface noise as the run-out groove of the disc continues to spin under the needle.

It is unclear what Enid is thinking at this moment or what the song means to her. It is apparent, however, that record surface noise is connected with key moments of insight for her character: the broadening of her horizons represented by her first encounter with ‘Devil Got My Woman’; the realization that she can make use of Seymour’s collecting obsessions for her own ends; and the revelation that the way forward may lie in reflecting on her own cultural memories (the childhood record found in a box) rather than relying on someone else’s (Seymour’s collection). Soon after listening to ‘A Smile and a Ribbon’, Enid makes her peace with Seymour and then takes the bus out of town.

As such, the surface noise of the records Enid listens to gets noisier the more her character develops a sense of the path that lies ahead. This plays on the term ‘presence’ used by Steven in the opening exchange of the party scene. Through the course of the film, ‘presence’ comes to mean not only the particularly fallible and mortal sound made by the records associated with Enid, but also takes on a more literal sense. Surface noise becomes attached to the concept of ‘being present’, a sonic signifier of the ability to use music to move forward that Tim J Anderson identifies as the defining difference between Enid and Seymour (2008, p. 69).

## **Conclusion: Vinyl Representation in Film in the Age of the Digital Download**

Characters are still playing records in films. The movies of the 1990s and early 2000s do not have the monopoly on such representations, although I have suggested that the films under review were drawing on an understanding of vinyl sound that was developed quite particularly during the era of CD dominance. Nevertheless, the contrasts in meanings attributed to vinyl in the three films I have discussed should caution against regarding movies as direct conveyors of a musical zeitgeist. Just as there is always the potential for specific pop songs to act as a type of dramatic film music when they are applied to fictional film scenarios, it is also true that less particular music format noises, like vinyl crackle and pop, can take on a narrational role. This means that the significance of such noises in films can only be fully assessed on a case-by-case basis, an attempt I have made in this chapter.

That said, there may be a general point of distinction to be made between the vinyl-related films of the 1990s and millennial turn and those ‘born digital’ in the music download and streaming era that has followed. As Davis notes:

In this age of digital media, the vinyl record format *is* obsolete, in the technological sense. *Obsolescence*, as used here, reflects both a formal status of technical incompatibility with popular and widely used digital media such as CDs, iPods, and various PC-based media systems, but also a symbolic status. (2008, p. 400)

Davis’ italicisation of ‘is’ is significant. It represents a definitive distinction between the overwhelmingly digital musical environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the obsolete analogue format of vinyl; by contrast, in the 1990s, vinyl was not at this radical stage of obsolescence. It was also competing with formats that were material in their own right, in contrast to the

immateriality that is often attributed to the digital music file (e.g. cassettes are attributed material sonic imperfections like hiss, akin to the crackle of vinyl, and CDs are still objects to be handled, like records).

In the contemporary context, featuring record playing scenes in films becomes an even more anachronistic or niche choice than it was in the 1990s. On the other hand, the ability of the digital domain to act as a repository for all previous music formats offers new possibilities in representation. Digital technology can store, or create from scratch, the imperfect sounds that were previously only possible through the tactile operation of vinyl on a record player. The possibility of listening to vinyl sound without the presence of records or the need to lift a tone arm provides a new context with which filmmakers can choose to engage.

It is the 'disembodied' representation of vinyl sound that Ken Garner laments in his appraisal of Quentin Tarantino's move away from 'character-based selection of music within the diegesis' to a more diffuse use of 'vinyl surface noise, scratches, and soundtrack wear and tear' (2013, p. 175). Garner attributes a nostalgic impulse to this development in Tarantino's sound aesthetic, the director deploying such sounds to ensure 'that we are conscious of the authentic physicality of the sound' and to underline 'the historical audio experience that we are going to get' (p. 175). However, my analysis of *Ghost World* demonstrated that, even in a film that does depict characters using old-fashioned record playing technology, there is not an intrinsic link between a particular device and a specific sound: the intensity of surface noise at different points in the film is an externalization of Enid's consciousness, rather than the result of distinctions between the playback qualities of different types of records. It could be that Tarantino's less situational use of vinyl noise in his more recent films is not purely backward-looking. Rather it may be responding to a new situation, in which digital

technology has liberated the requirement that vinyl sound must be seen to issue from a particular material source.

For a whistle-stop tour of many examples of record-playing moments in American Independent Cinema, see my audiovisual essay 'Indy Vinyl: Close Ups, Needle Drops, Aerial Shots – Records in US Independent Cinema 1987 – 2015': <https://vimeo.com/162847038>

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<sup>i</sup> For a whistle-stop tour of many examples of record-playing moments in American Independent Cinema, see my audiovisual essay ‘Indy Vinyl: Close Ups, Needle Drops, Aerial Shots – Records in US Independent Cinema 1987 – 2015’: <https://vimeo.com/162847038>