

Feeling my way.

Although record shopping is ostensibly all about gathering stuff for the ears, I've come to realise that for me the actual experience is one that involves the whole body. For a start there's all the bending and stretching required: being a bit of a short arse means I struggle to reach those tricky upper racks, and despite pushing myself on to tiptoes - when I might be able to *touch* the stock - often I simply can't see it well enough to make my selection. At other times, especially in stores with used stock, there are boxes set below the racking, and though I suspect that they will be full of crap, there is always the need to check them out *just in case* they contain an elusive thing for which I have spent years searching. (This does, of course, require that I can remember what I am after, as record shops frequently have the peculiar effect of causing me instant and complete amnesia of anything on my wish list...) So, I squat down and shuffle along the boxes, trying to avoid being knocked out by other punter's bags, or getting too close to socks and trousers that wouldn't be able to recall the last time they saw a washing machine.

Smell is a surprisingly important component of my record shopping. Right from the beginning, as a teenager, I remember haunting dim little shops tucked away in half-empty arcades, places where I often had to dodge the low-flying pigeons that roosted there. These shops would be pervaded with the competing reek of patchouli from nearby shops selling 'hippy' clothes and silver bangles, and the stink of chip fat from a cheap caff across the way. These days, smell is a key signifier as to whether the shop is doing ok or not: I try to avoid those that have the tell-tale fustiness of old stock, grime and odoriferous punters. There may be bargains to be had, as the shop tries to shift its bloated stock with increasingly desperate mark-downs, but my hands are soon too grubby and my nose unpleasantly full of the dust from decrepit vinyl. When I escape such places, I'm quick to scrub my hands, not only to rid myself of the grime, but mainly to erase the terrible melancholia that has accrued.

So, sometimes the tactile aspect of record shops is unpleasant, but usually this isn't the case. I love, for example, the soft fuzz of scuffed cardboard on the corners of slightly dog-eared sleeves, across which I sometime trace a tender finger and I like to handle the thick plastic sleeves that second-hand dealers slide protectively over album covers; it's the sort of plastic that craves the satisfying imprint of a fingernail or pen (which makes me think of that line from a Half-Man Half-Biscuit track, about there being nothing better in life than drawing on the sole of your slipper with a biro...) I know some people fetishise the tight shrink-wrap that keeps vinyl new and virginal, but I don't recall anyone getting too excited over the slithery plastic of cd wrappers. I struggle to open them and feel myself quickly becoming murderous with scissors, trying desperately to get a purchase under a seam in order to rip apart the package: I guess my technique lacks a certain finesse. I do, however, enjoy the satisfying clack of cds against one another as I use my middle and forefingers alternately to riffle rhythmically through a selection.

I don't like huge record shops: I reckon it's something about the apparently excessive choice, which ultimately means that I am unable to make my mind up about anything. But equally, those very tiny places trying to carry more stock than space really allows stress me out: the racks are as tight as if they'd been vacuum-packed. I end up trying to extract sheaves of stock in order to see what's there, and then juggling it awkwardly in my arms whilst attempting not to nudge the person next to me who is probably having the same struggle; or else they are soon frustrated with me because I am getting in the way of their browsing, trying to rest my selection atop other stock that they are waiting to view.

Sometimes I find myself scrutinising the actual racking itself: some are bog-standard corporate fittings and some custom-made: I don't really trust those places that put too much weight upon installing swanky designer fittings - I suspect that there will literally be a price to pay, as fashionability adds its cost to my purchase. This thrifty streak probably explains my interest in people being resourceful, and at record fairs I love to see the diverse approaches to transporting and displaying records, particularly when the traders bastardise unlikely cardboard boxes or adapt crates that were originally designed to do something completely different. I'm not fond of the aluminium flight cases, which are always rather too shiny and in your face, but being a huge fan of plywood, which is I know, a rather curious thing to admit, I have a little frisson at the selection of purpose-designed ply cases with their edges smoothed by use and their neat hinges, clasps and handles reminding me of the joys of old-fashioned hardware stores or my dad's workshop.

The visual dimension of record shop labelling offers yet another aesthetic experience. I enjoy the idiosyncracies of second-hand dealers' displays: one trader I know uses words cannibalised from newspaper or magazine headlines to top his category dividers, mixing up typographic styles with carefree abandon in order to spell out the names of bands or particular genres. I have become used to the handwriting of particular stores, and can't help conducting a little graphological analysis as to the personality of the owner, manager or staff as a result... In my regular record shopping destinations, I look out for certain label writers, having come to trust their annotated recommendations: I'm amused by the way this annotation sometimes starts on one sticky label, and digresses onto two or three more, as if the writer got wonderfully over-excited about the music they were trying to describe.

Stores specialising in 'urban' music tend to prefer the white sticker/black marker pen combo to price and describe their wares, each hand-written label flourished with the assertive confidence of a street tag: visually speaking, it's a little like being repeatedly shouted at, and I can only take so much before I need respite. The complete antithesis of this is probably those shops with a more 'experimental' stock, where very little is done to sell the goods, it being assumed, I suppose, that anyone who has actually made it to the shop will already know what they are looking at or for... In one such shop with minimal shelving and a small but very carefully selected stock, the owner's dog was the only aspect that was at all 'forward', coming out of his basket to rub himself fondly against my legs, whilst the owner simply smiled and turned back to her computer as I browsed.

With the apparently downloadable future at hand, I'm not sure what will become of the aesthetic experiences I've described. Despite the occasionally *trying* aspects of real-world shopping, there seems something a bit etiolated and thin about the virtual alternative. I suppose I've come to understand that my listening is merely one part of my sensory pleasure: just as I go to the shops to select bread or fruit and I use the evidence of my eyes and *nose* to determine whether this thing I want to *taste* will be any good, I want to use my whole body to help me select a record. I can't yet imagine a time when I sit at home merely relying wholly upon the evidence of my ears in sampled snippets of the music I'm considering purchasing. For me, record shopping verges on the synaesthetic, it's the mixing and conflation of my senses that makes the experience richer than the sum of its parts: music isn't just for the ears.