

Arts, Etc.

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Page 8

CD *versus* Vinyl

By Brian Gallagher
ARTS, ETC. ASSISTANT EDITOR

Whether or not free downloading is to blame for the slipping sales of CDs, there is no doubt that record sales are falling and falling hard. But record stores and corporations alike are witnessing the resurgence of an old format, vinyl.

At the beginning of this year, the industry watched weekly CD sales fall more than 20 percent from the same time last year. Even sales of digital downloads cooled in 2006 after peaking around \$150 million in the first quarter, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

The resurgence of vinyl is a curious footnote to the age of digital distribution, a footnote that creates business for local record shops like Harvest Records. The West Asheville music shop's vinyl sales have only increased since they opened on Haywood road three years ago.

"What we've seen a lot of in the past couple years is college-age kids, high school kids and twenty-somethings coming in and never touching CDs," said Mark Capon, co-owner of Harvest Records. "They are buying vinyl, and if they want it digitally, they are going to download it."

Other Asheville shops witnessed the same development, and the trend is popular among more than just college students, according to Loyal Lawrence, owner and operator of the Audio Service Company. Lawrence repairs and sells new and used audio equipment for a customer base that is rediscovering vinyl.

"I've sold more turntables and record-playing accessories in the last couple years than I did the previous ten years," Lawrence said. "It's really been amazing how popular they are right now."

The question of audio quality

The first commercial CD resulted from the development of several technologies by Sony and Phillips and public response was dramatic.

"When CDs came on the stage, a lot of people abandoned their vinyl because of the convenience," Lawrence said. "A lot of people felt the CD had wider dynamic range and wider frequency response."

Much of the debate surrounding the sound quality of CDs and vinyl deals with dynamic range and frequency response. Dynamic range deals with the volume difference in a given recording. Frequency response denotes the ability of medium to accurately reproduce a range of frequencies.

"It is true that CDs do have an advantage on frequency response and dynamic range," Larry said. "There are no pops or clicks or audible distortions, providing that you recorded digitally."

CDs technically provide advantages in these areas, but they also digitize the voltage changes which determine every sound you hear while record players rely on needles which ride the exact sound wave imprinted on vinyl. Detractors say there is something missing.

"The digital records are so pure there isn't that extra element that maybe true, but I think there is also an argument to be made that the analog has some of the harmonic frequencies and overtones that are lost in the digitizing of the music," Lawrence said. "That



CLINT LATHINGHOUSE - A GOD AMONG MEN

maybe considered distortion, but for whatever reason it has just a warmer, more natural sound. CDs are perhaps synthetic and too pure."

While the subjective experience and the artwork that comes with larger vinyl format play important parts for some listeners, the audio quality of CDs is superior and new audio DVD technologies are pushing the limits, according to Dr. Wayne Kirby, chair and professor of the music department and a recording artist who began in analog recording in the early 1960s.

"There is something to be said about the current sampling rate and bit rate of CDs and there are some artifacts and a slight bit of harshness that people claim to hear and it is there. But I'd take a CD anytime. There is no wow and flutter. There is no surface noise. There is no snap, crackle and pop."

The vibrations created by sound waves in microphones are sampled. The intensity, frequency and amplitude are digitally quantified and stored on CDs. Those stored numbers are converted back into a voltage, which moves the speaker appropriately. The sampling rate of CD is approximately 40,000 to 44,000 Hz. The human ear can detect up to 20,000 Hz and sometimes, much less as a person ages.

"You could approximate analog recording sound easily enough (on CDs) but you have a more stable medium. That's going to get better as soon as the audio DVD comes out," Kirby said. "If that becomes the medium of choice, the sampling rate is going to be so high that no one I know is going to be able to detect a harshness."

Crackles, hisses and hums of vinyl

Although CDs currently corner the market on technical audio quality, many of the mistakes and limitations of vinyl are ironically widely loved, according to Lawrence.

"People actually comment that they like the pops and clicks, and that's something I always thought was a real annoyance. When I bought an album, no matter how frequently I cleaned or how much care I took, it would inevitably develop that pop or click," Lawrence said. "To most people that is just part of the vinyl sound and the experience of listening to an album. They don't mind it and in some cases seem to enjoy it."

CDs fail to deliver the full emotional impact in the accelerating world of commercial music, according to Capon.

"I think since CDs came out a lot of people lost that kind of connection with actually putting on and experiencing an album," Capon said. "We are in a day and age, where people experience singles, videos and everything is so fast."

The aesthetic appeal and "experience" of vinyl led Harvest Records owners to begin Harvest Recordings, a side business which has proved profitable for the store and for their first vinyl release, "Since We Have Fallen," by Hush Arbors. The store pressed 500 copies of the album and sold every copy to a worldwide customer base. Because limited pressings are rare by nature and often sell out, they become collectors' items for avid fans.

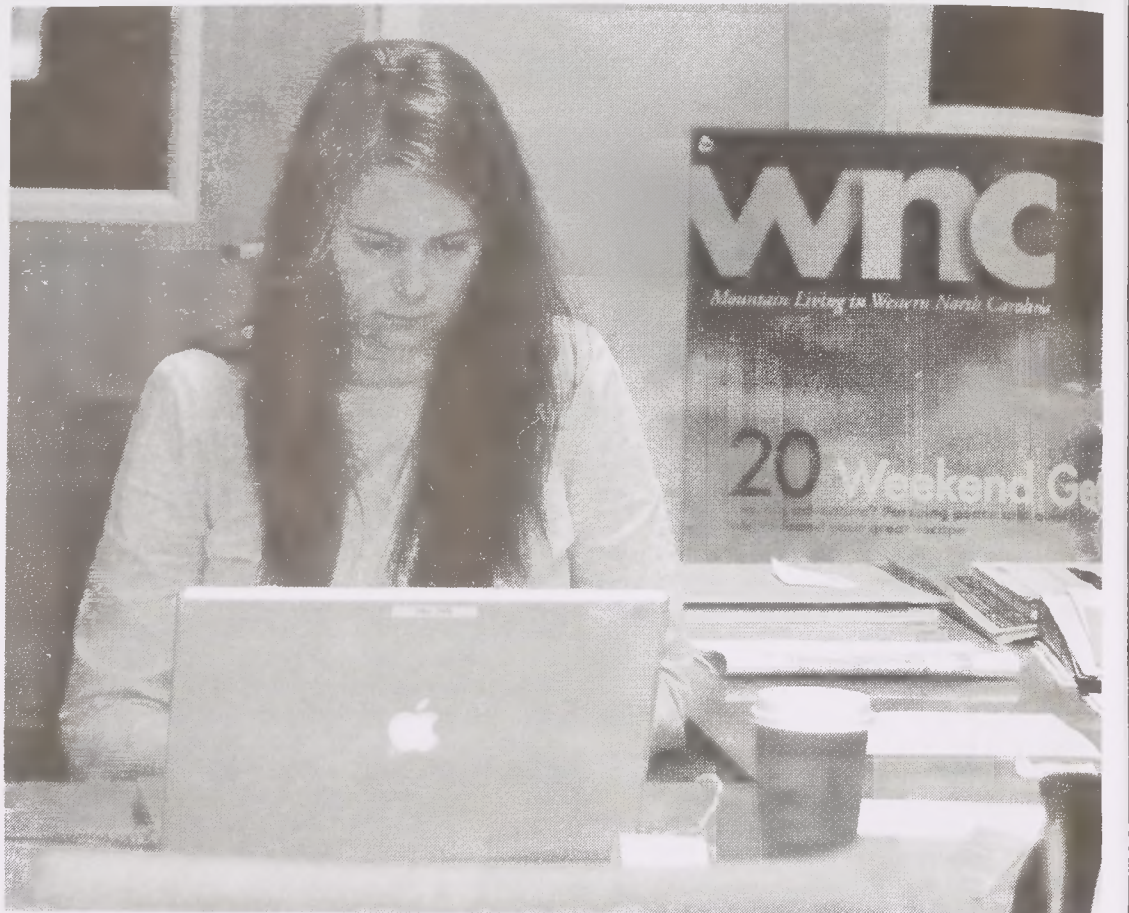
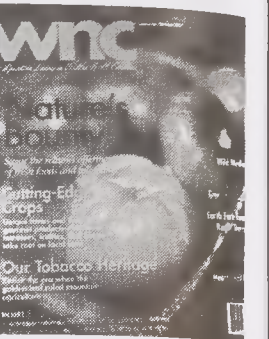
"We'll always keep vinyl around because it will always be a collectors' item and always be a medium that people prefer to listen to as an experience," Capon said. "An experience meaning: you bring the record out of the sleeve, you put it on and it's all very personal."

The answer to the question of vinyl versus CD rests on subjective experience and not necessarily measurable audio quality, according to Capon.

"Everyone's different obviously and everyone will experience things differently," Capon said. "As far as our store goes, we'll never stop selling records."

Mountain living with

WNC MAGAZINE



EMILY GRAY - STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Rita Larkin, managing editor for WNC Magazine works diligently at her computer.

A small staff in downtown utilizes local resources to cover issues across the mountains

By Tiffany Narron
STAFF WRITER

Local publication WNC magazine encompasses all of Western North Carolina, and focuses on the culture, history, fun outdoor activities and the lifestyle that makes the mountainous region so unique.

"All of the stories and everything that we do has something to do with Western North Carolina," said Associate Editor Melissa Smith. "It's a lifestyle magazine so it encompasses not just the people but the culture, history and all of the places in Western North Carolina."

Stemming from the magazine's parent publication in Charleston, WNC Magazine is fashioned after the Charleston magazine, a lifestyle publication encompassing the culture of its people.

Seeing the need for an all embracing view of the highly diversified culture in the N.C. mountains, they opened an office in Asheville and produced the first issue in March, according to Smith.

"The goal is for us to be an independent magazine working out of Asheville, just under the headline of Gulfstream Communications, our publisher," Smith said.

While the magazine is just getting underway with only six issues produced thus far, it tackles a diverse range of topics such as agricultural issues, outdoor sports and activities, gardening insights and profiles of hardworking, talented people here in Western N.C.

Each issue has a different theme and most of the articles are centered around that topic. The latest issue entitled "Nature's Bounty" gave the reader insight into the bold areas of farming heirloom tomatoes, truffles and caviar.

"We get e-mails and press releases from Florida and all over," Smith said. "But unless it has anything to do with WNC, we don't cover it."

The magazine covers everything from seasonal brews to kayaking adventures on the river. One issue that is lightly touched is that of politics.

Each edition does contain a focus on one political problem facing the mountain population and that particular tie with a point and counterpoint column. However, the writer is asked to keep the piece fairly neutral to the subject, according to Smith.

"We don't focus so much on political things," Smith said. "When you get outside of Asheville, there is a very conservative WNC and we hear about all this stuff. People actually fill out those little cards in each issue. We get good comments and we get bad ones."

The last issue featured a story on alternative energy sources and the controversy surrounding Blowing Rock and the planning and construction of windmills according to Smith.

Blowing Rock planning board recently passed an ordinance banning windmills, because of their possible detriment to Parkway views and tourism.

The magazine manages to give their politically diverse readers a little taste of everything.

"I know that there was a lot of skepticism when we first started out," said Chief Editor Eric Seeger. "There were a few glossy regional magazines that came and went before us but I think we came into this with a solid business plan, which was to cover this region without preference to a particular market segment while delivering quality writing and photography."

Local businesses feature many of their handcrafted works such as beech wood coffee tables, hand spun tea pots and delicately knitted lingerie in the publication.

Several restaurants and local deli-style shops display their goods in the food and drink section along with helpful cooking tips and unique recipes.

"We're getting to the point where we're pretty much selling out," said Ad Sales Director Jackie Byrd. "We're definitely growing around the area because people are calling us to get their businesses in here which is obviously what we want."

Currently WNC works with

Charleston Magazine, taking their art-related stories from them. Still in the baby stages, they are in the process of hiring an art department to complete their team, according to Smith. Right now the WNC staff consists of only nine people.

"It's pretty amazing that we're able to put out such a nice magazine without having an in-house art department and such a small staff," Smith said.

The magazine features articles written by local freelance writers and pictures by area photographers as well.

Three of their writers are students at UNC Asheville and some will be working as interns for them in the upcoming year.

"We're working on building an internship program here," Smith said. "Charleston has an army of interns down there so I'm responsible for building that here which is why we're at the job fair passing out magazines to students and information about the internship programs were trying to offer. We publish in 35 states around the country, so it's good exposure for writers and photographers and it's a really good experience."

WNC strives to include all of Western North Carolina, from Cherokee to Alleghany County, according to Smith.

"A lot of people try to compare us to other magazines around the area," Byrd said, "but their really isn't another publication that covers all of the 23 counties that we do."

The magazine is published bi-monthly and prints 31,500 copies of each issue. Of those, 3,300 are mailed to subscribers, 7,000 go to newsstands, 6,000 are put in local hotels and 1,200 in doctor's offices and waiting rooms.

"This is a big area and there's no way the average resident can know what's going on from Cherokee to Alleghany Counties," Seeger said. "We want to give our readers a good sampling of everything the region has to offer from history and art to uplifting people and the issues facing them."

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