Value and Velocity: The 12-inch Single as Medium and Artefact? (1)

At the end of 1999, Elton John's single "Candle in the Wind" still remained near the top of Canada's Top Ten singles chart. Released in 1997, the single had long since disappeared from sales charts elsewhere in the world. By late 1999, it sold only 600 copies per week in Canada, but in a country where few singles are domestically released and very few are bought, 600 was sufficient to keep "Candle in the Wind" near the top of popularity charts ('Candle' Still burning on Canada's Chart" (1999).) While the singles charts in other countries might still convey a sense of turbulent excitement, Canada's has been marked, for many years, by a sense of stagnation and meaninglessness. Exchange rates, free trade agreements, and a relatively small market have stopped the domestic production of singles, and made those which are imported seem unappealingly expensive. Those which show any movement whatsoever in the national market thus come to play a distorted role within measures of popularity and change. Their immobility within music retail stores, where they accumulate in obscure corners, is striking.

This example is a trivial one, but it is full of lessons about the ways in which commodities, and their circulation, shape the character of national cultural life. The movement of musical recordings gives national musical cultures their distinct sense of speed and change. It may turn regions within such cultures into dead ends, filled with artefacts which arrive too late, or with too little promotional push. Alternately, it may make national cultural markets effective conduits within the international movement of objects and influences.

In arguments which continue to inspire me, the folklorist Orvar Lofgren suggests two lines of development for the cultural study of artefacts (Lofgren, 1997). The first requires commitment to the study of objects as *things*, postponing a consideration of them as texts, meanings and messages (the common fate of artefacts within cultural analysis.) We must pursue an analysis of materiality, but not because this is somehow more "materialist." In the movement of objects across and between cultures, we may map those lines of movement and processes of sedimentation which anchor and constrain other cultural processes. The sense that consumption is only ever a struggle over meaning has long been central to the study of popular music, and to cultural studies more generally. By privileging (and circumscribing) the encounter between consuming subject and cultural artefact, this sense of things has blocked attention to the ways in which cultural resources move, accumulate and are unevenly distributed across the world.

In any given cultural space, the provenance of punk singles, price of American alternative rock CDs, availability of 12-inch vinyl dance singles and access to information surrounding new musical commodities will shape the contours of regional/national musical cultures. Objects arrive at destinations bearing meanings which the distance of their travel and the manner of their acquisition have inscribed upon them. The second of Lofgren's directions for analysis takes us towards what he calls "the everyday workings, the cultural thinkenings of . . . belonging." We need, he suggests, an analysis of "the nationalization of trivialities, the ways in which national differences become embedded in the materialities of everyday life, found not only in the rhetoric of flag-waving and public rituals, but also in the national trajectories of commodities" (Lofgren,

1997: 106).

The Twelve-Inch Single as Artefact

This essay is concerned with one such "triviality," the twelve-inch vinyl single, and with the circumstances of its emergence within one national culture (that of the United States) during the years 1975-1977. We will treat the 12-inch single as one example of the material culture of music -- as a tool, artefact, commodity and medium. Musical styles and movements take shape across a multitude of practices and locations, and there is more to the histories of hip-hop or house music than the recording configurations in which these histories are embedded. Nevertheless, we will limit ourselves here to an analysis of the 12-inch single as a particular kind of object. As objects, twelve-inch singles moved across music markets and cultural spaces at speeds distinct from those of other recording configurations. In doing so, they produced lines of fracture within musical culture, as parts of that culture came to change at rates which challenged the ability of other parts to profit from that change. As an object which was characterized, much of the time, by its scarcity, the 12-inch single highlighted inequities of access between centre and periphery, and, more broadly, between the U.S. market and national musical markets elsewhere. As the focus of highly speculative investment, the twelve-inch single's value, to consumers and fans, moved between two extremes. At one, it was a precious, hoarded insider's tool; at another, it stood for wasteful over-production and the miscalculation of demand. Virtually all these features of the 12-inch single became quickly evident in the three years which followed its introduction.

Origins

> "Long cuts with complex Latin-style percussion underpinning seem particularly effective with the discotheque market" ("Firm to Service Discotheques With New Disks" (1974)).

In 2000, the twelve-inch vinyl single, used by disc jockeys in dance clubs throughout the world, marked a quarter century as an legitimate "configuration" within the music industries. This anniversary was rarely noted, though the 12-inch single itself is venerated within the recent wave of books on club culture, dj practice and raves. Confusion over the twelve-inch single's date of birth is compounded by its slippery status in the mind of consumers of recorded music. For North American consumers in particular the 12-inch was, for many years, one more option amidst the messy array of EPs, remix albums, medleys and other textual forms which have served as carriers for dance music culture since the 1960s. The history of disc jockey practice, elaborated across these recent books, has focussed more on the mixing of fragments from vinyl albums or other raw materials than on the development of the 12-inch single itself. This has made histories of dance club music more heroic, but it has pushed to the side the more mundane ways in which the 12-inch single entered into the lives and labours of night club disc jockeys and music consumers in the mid-1970s.

Recent histories of dance club culture have reached only partial agreement about the sequence of events through which the 12-inch single was introduced. Controversy surrounds the three moments presumed to mark this introduction: (1) the production of the first 45 r.p.m.

record on which a single song was extended across a twelve-inch vinyl disk; (2) the first official release of a 12-inch single as a promotional device distributed to dance club disc jockeys exclusively; and (3) the first release of a 12-inch single intended for the commercial retail market. These events, which mark the movement of the 12-inch single from underground to public musical culture, unfolded in the United States between 1974 and 1976.

Brewster and Broughton claim that New York DJ Tom Moulton produced the first 12-inch single, a remix of "So Much for Love" by Moment of Truth (2000: 178). The date of this single seems to be unknown, but one can assume it was released in the very early months of 1975. (No one has claimed that 12-inch singles were released before 1975.) "So Much For Love" was distributed informally, as a test pressing, to a small group of club Djs; for that reason, it is not considered an official release. There are competing claims as to the first "official" 12-inch single released for promotional purposes by a record label. The long-held belief that this was RCA's "Dance, Dance, Dance," by Calhoon (sent as a promotional tool to disc jockeys in the spring of 1975) has been challenged in recent years, as a wave of oral histories, internet-based disco chronologies and on-line record markets have produced new candidates (2). A 1975 **Billboard** article claimed that Doug Riddick, head of Atlantic Records' disco divison, had " introduced the first 12 inch, 33 1/3 disco disc," though the article provided no title for this release, and may simply have been referring to the first 12" single to use the 33 1/3 speed. (Calhoon's "Dance Dance Dance" was released at 45 r.p.m..) Tom Moulton himself, in an on-line interview, claimed that "Free Man" by the Southshore Commission (on Scepter/Wand Records) was the first promotional 12-inch single; a website devoted to disco history lists "Call

Me Your Anything Man" by Bobby Moore on Scepter Records as the first ("Tommy Moulton Tribute" website; "Disco Music History" website). There is general agreement that"Ten Percent" by Double Exposure (Salsoul Records, June 1976) was the first 12-inch single released to the general retail market.

Disagreement about these various events is unsurprising, given the compressed time period in which they ocurred. This uncertainty is symptomatic, as well, of the hazy distinction between limited-run "test pressings," produced for local disc jockeys, and full-fledged promotional copies produced as part of the larger release strategy for a disco single. Histories of the 12-inch single have been troubled by the overlapping of experimental prototypes and official releases, something common in the case of those industries (like that producing computer software) for whom professional insiders constitute an important market. The claim, by Brewster and Broughton (2000: 180), that "the 12-inch is the only format of recorded music introduced as a result of consumer demand rather than record company marketing guile" risks confusing the promotional activism of small-labels with the consumer demand of disc jockeys during this period.

Like other media histories, that of the 12-inch has spawned one set of narratives fixated on a moment of punctual discovery and others which recount minor mutations from within a set of possibilities. In an oft-repeated account of the twelve-inch's birth, Tom Moulton described his collaboration with an engineer on the mastering of a 7-inch dance single which Moulton had remixed. The engineer had run out of 7-inch blanks for cutting the master disk, and proposed

using the 12-inch masters which remained on site. Against Moulton's skepticism, the engineer suggested spreading the grooves, which were intended for a 7-inch record, across the span of the 12-inch. "[W]hen I heard it I almost died," Moulton remembered, in an interview with Brewster and Broughton (2000: 178). The wider grooves made possible in the 12-inch format lent themselves strikingly to the demands of superior dance club sound systems, and low-end frequencies could be heard with greater clarity.

On a website devoted to the 12-inch single, this birth narrative is extended across two stages, from the contingent use of 10-inch masters through the deliberate choice, in a later mastering exercise, to embrace the 12-inch form. Here, Tom Moulton recounts the process of discovery as follows:

> "So, the thing is -one day I went in there to José -[mastering engineer] José Rodriguez -and I had "I'll be holding on" by Al Downing and I said; "José, I could really need some acetates." And he said; "Just Tom, I don't have any more 7" blanks. All I have is like the 10"." And I said; "Well, if that's the only thing -we're gonna do it, what difference does it make?". So he cut one, I said; "It looks so ridiculous, this little tiny band on this huge thing. What happens if we just like... can we just like, you know, make it bigger?". He goes; "You mean, like spread the grooves?" and I said; "Yeah!". He goes; "Then I've got to rise the level." I said; "Well, Go ahead -rise the level." And so he cut it like at +6. Oh, when I heard it I almost died. I said; "Oh my God, It's so much louder and listen to it. Oh! I like that -why don't we cut a few more?". So it was by accident, that's how it was

created.

> But for the next song we cut, we went for the 12" format instead of the 10" and the song was "So much for love" by Moment of Truth. That was the birth of the 12" single. ("Tom Moulton Tribute" website.)

By this point, in fact, record companies had already experimented with albums featuring songs extended across an entire side, 7-inch singles recorded at 33 1/3 pm to expand their length and sound frequencies, two-sided 45 r.p.m. singles (with distinct, club-oriented versions of songs on one side), album-length, segued medleys of dance music, and most other imaginable variations of playback speed, song format and disk size. If the 12-inch single was discovered in a stereotypical instance of accidental invention, it was clearly, as well, the result of ongoing experimentation with a variety of options. Sarah Thornton's **Club Cultures** (1995) discusses many of these options in her detailed historical account of the use of records in dance clubs over several decades. (Further detail on developments in the the 1970s may be found in Brewster and Broughton (2000) and Fikentscher (2000).) The 12-inch single assumed importance as an efficient resolution of technical problems facing dance club disc jockeys. Just as importantly, however, it became the object of an inter-institutional consensus which lasted several years, and which compelled disc jockeys, record companies, record retail outlets and other players in the dance music industries to confront the problems caused by their shared commitment to its fate.

Displaced Practices

Prior to 1974, disc jockeys drew on a variety of musical forms in their practice. Reggae, afro-funk, old and new soul and other forms were pulled into the repertory of dance clubs; the constant difficulty of finding these recordings was bemoaned in various press accounts of disc jockey work. The few retail outlets which serviced disc jockeys, in the early 1970s, assembled repertories of club music out of African or Jamaican imports, old records bought on the second-hand market, bootleg pressings of out-of-print titles, and contemporary releases judged suitable. Record companies like Motown and Mercury regularly reissued old titles as demand for them on the part of disco jockeys promised a renewal of their commercial value. Many of the early tools of disco jockey practice moved in and out of legality, as cherished singles were bootlegged or tapes circulated between clubs and individuals (see "'Disco Tech'" Drive Launched by Motown" (1975); "Discotheque Wave Spreads To Campus, Dealers' Bins" (1974).)

Two aspects of disc jockey practice during this period would wither with the widespread dissemination of the twelve-inch single, after 1975. One was the regular recourse to rediscovered records from the past, and the sense of an available repertory whose origins spanned several years but whose suitability for dance club play remained relatively stable. The other was the extent to which disc jockey practice, before 1975, presumed the existence of autonomous fields of musical production (such as that of soul music) as the primary source for records to be played in clubs. The original sense of disco records, as those which "crossed over" from other musical fields, would diminish as the process of crossing over became inscribed in the texts of records pre-destined for the disco market, like the disco versions of soul, pop, rock, Broadway and classical pieces which continued through the late 1970s. Records from the past, or from

previously distinct musical fields, would persist in DJ practice primarily as the source of beats, breaks, or idiosyncratic effects.

Over time, the 12-inch single took part in the displacement of older modes of listening, in the home and in clubs. In its early years, the lack of a standardized speed for 12-inch singles (which were released in either 33 1/3 and 45 r.p.m. versions) was seen as causing problems for those who listened to records by stacking them on their record players at home. For a musical form associated with parties, and with an unbroken stream of rhythmic music, this seemed a genuine problem, though stackable turntables were already disappearing in an age of component home stereo systems. In Japan, the extended duration of the 12-inch single, and its invitation to segue from one track to another, seemed incompatible with national traditions of deejaying, in which Djs typically spoke between songs and derived much of their popularity from this patter. More generally, around the 12-inch single, minor but controversial modifications of listening practice took shape. The 12-inch single helped make listeners accustomed to the idea that a record might contain much more than would typically be heard. It also nourished that ongoing search for variant versions which is central to present-day record collecting ("N.Y. Retailer Relies on Specialization" (1977); "12-Inchers Pose Problem in Club, Retail Exposure" (1977); "Rocky Road For 12-Inch Singles in Japan; Future Dim" (1977).)

Aligning the disco industries

In its October, 1977 issue, the **Journal of Marketing** published the article "Disco: Birth of a New Marketing System" (Stibal, 1977). There is no reason to assume this article was read widely within the music industries, but the system for marketing disco music which it described had become entrenched within those industries over the previous two years. The model outlined an efficient sequence in the promotion of new recordings, from dance club to album sales. Under this system, record companies would deliver 12-inch single versions of new singles to dance club disc jockeys. Disc jockeys, in turn, would report back to record companies on the apparent success or failure of these records with dance club audiences; a favourable response by club-goers would lead to purchases of the 7-inch, commercial single in music retail outlets. These sales, in turn, would stimulate the addition of records to radio playlists, leading to further sales of the single and, ultimately, success of the album from which it was taken. At each sign of momentum, promotional resources could be marshalled to extend a record's commercial lifecycle, taking a song from the 12-inch promotional single on which it first appeared through success as a 7-inch single and, ultimately, high sales in album form.

Trade press accounts of the disco industry in 1974 show signs of a move towards this sort of integration of that industry's various components. **Billboard's** disco columnist, Tom Moulton, mediated between the New York City-based, underground components of that culture and a variety of activities transpiring across the nation. As a remixer who reported on the introduction of new recording formats, and whose column recounted the efforts of record companies to service disc jockeys with promotional product, Moulton (and **Billboard** magazine more generally) magnified local developments into national events within a rapidly expanding

industrial dynamic (3). In 1974, record labels such as Mercury and London began to systematize their relationship with nightclubs, drawing up lists of clubs and disc jockeys, and providing free copies of records for play in discotheques. Other labels would follow suit over the next 18 months. ("Discotheques Keyed in Mercury Service," 1974; "Labels Eye Discos as Hot Spots To Break r&b Product" (1974).)

Since the 1960s, it had been common for record labels to supply promotional copies of dance records to discothèques. Through the 1970s, it became established practice to distribute them to disc jockeys themselves (see, for example, "Discotheques Keyed in Mercury Service," 1974). Nightclubs were notoriously short-lived, and the residencies of disc jockeys unstable -- both these factors led record companies to see the dance club industries as chaotic fields resistant to the effective coordination of promotional activity. The choice of disc jockeys themselves as the appropriate recipients of free records sprung in part from ongoing lobbying by disc jockeys. It was rooted, as well, in the recognition that disc jockeys were important sources of feedback to record companies and thus more useful points of contact. In the years 1974-75, two sorts of organization would emerge or evolve to play mediating roles in the process of disseminating promotional 12-inch singles. One was the independent promotion company, which could compile lists of disc jockeys and discothèques and undertake the complicated labour of reaching each of these with promotional copies of new records. Firms such as Provocative Promotions offered record companies their ability to produce credible lists of disc jockeys and interact with them in an effective manner. The second, and more novel organizational form was the deejay pool, a locally-based organization of disc jockeys formed for the purpose of facilitating a

smoother flow of recordings from record companies. Disc jockeys in New York City formed a pool in June of 1975, and other cities or regions followed (Los Angeles in December, 1975; Florida in July, 1976; Chicago in February, 1977, and so on.)

Very quickly, the barriers between various institutions within the disco industries would be blurred and roles condensed, as the fact of occupying a strategic role within the flow of information and recordings encouraged a variety of other activities. While disco pools seemed, in part, to displace independent promotion firms in 1975, many managers of pools had turned their pools into promotion and distribution centres by 1977. Many pool managers owned specialty record stores, or the “one-stop” distribution outlets which served independent stores. With time, it might be argued, this looseness of roles would contribute to the unravelling of the industry structure on which the commercial success of disco seemed to depend. The integration of disc jockeys within the promotion, distribution and (eventually) remixing and production of disco records ensured a smooth flow of technical expertise and information throughout the whole system. Increasingly, however, this integration removed any lingering advantages held by large-scale labels in the production or distribution of disco music. New networks of deejay-mixers, small labels and clubs could easily produce and disseminate much of the music which these networks required. By the 1980s, the infrastructure of DJ pools, newsletters, specialty record stores and distribution networks, which major labels had viewed as one level within a broader industry system, would serve to support the musical styles and commodities of a smaller, much more insular musical subculture.

As a token of exchange, the history of the twelve-inch single is bound up with the sorts of institutions and practices which, at various points in its history, it has served to interconnect. In 1974-77, this interconnection seemed at its most efficient and expansive. The unfolding lifecycle of a 12-inch single traced lines of passage from the locally-based realm of the nightclub through the institutions of music retail, broadcasting and mainstream commercial success. Already, by 1977, however, blockages and short-cuts in this sequence had become apparent. As large numbers of consumers began to buy 12-inch singles and neglect the albums on which their songs appeared, the translation of a 12-inch's success into that of the more mainstream album format slowed. Successful twelve-inch singles pre-empted the sales of albums, and those which failed (and which had little value as "cut-outs") were seen to litter the marketplace with worthless commodities. The lifecycles of twelve-inch singles were either too long (12-inches lingered after they were intended to retreat, to give way to albums) or too short (12-inches disappeared from the playlists of status-conscious disc jockey before audiences had grown attached to them.) By 1977, as well, the rise and temporary success of disco radio formats in the United States had weakened the role of nightclub deejays in launching new records. Disc jockeys were meant to play pivotal roles in that process of selection by which, from among the hundreds of records released each year, several dozen would be chosen for exposure in nightclubs and the most successful of those adopted by radio stations. When record companies began servicing radio stations directly, as they did in the late 1970s, this sequence would unravel. ((See, for accounts of these problems, among many other articles, "Disco Radio Challenges Clubs As Hitmaker" (1979); "Disco rules, but where are the big disk sales?" (1979).)

Brian Winston has argued that one crucial dynamic in technological development leads to the supression of innovation's radical potential (e.g., Winston, 1998, usefully discussed in Schaap, 2001). The fate of the 12-inch single is a useful parable in evaluting this claim. Very quickly, in the year which followed its introduction, it served to focus industrial processes of "crossover" -- processes designed to pull marginal musical forms into the commercial mainstream. Each 12-inch single carried musical information through which the stylistic development of disco was communicated; most 12-inches, in the years 1975-77, initiated industrial processes meant to result in the sale of long-playing albums. This brought dance records above ground, rendering them one artefact in a promotional sequence. Almost as quickly, however, the 12-inch set in place a logic of differentiation, whereby the institutions of dance music, intimately interconnected as they had become, began to diverge from those of the larger music industries. As an artefact which spawned new formats for making music and new circuits for its dissemination, the12-inch single ultimately served to transform the underground club culture of the early 1970s into an internationally interconnected set of dance music undergrounds which persist through the present. The major label's involvement in disco music, in the mid-1970s, served principally to mould the dispersed elements of dance music culture (deejays, 12-inch singles, remixes, pools, and so on) into a relatively efficient professional subculture.

Secrecy and Identification

For record companies, the effectiveness of disc jockeys and discotheques as promotional

channels for new recordings presumed that the patrons of nightclubs could learn the titles and artists of the music they heard. As Gitelman notes, the question of how sound recordings might be identified to their listeners goes back as far as 1891, when it was common to speak a record's title into the recording apparatus as the process of recording began (Gitelman, 1999: 156). The principle at work here -- that the medium of identification (in this case, sound) should be the same as that of the principal text itself -- would later be realized in the radio announcer's identification of songs and in the practice of those club djs who still spoke between bits of music. By the mid 1970s, however, as djs almost invariably segued from one record to another, there was no obvious means to convey the identification of a song to those who had just heard it. Articles in Billboard addressed this problem regularly, as in the following:

> [Izzy, Atlantic disco promotion director] Sanchez feels that a deejay's need for concentration, and the rigors of the job, or rules of his club which prevent him from speaking over his record, is a retardant to efforts to enlist his aid in promotions.
>
> "However, we do encourage him to display the jacket of the disk he is playing as a means of informing his audience what's on the turntable," he states. ("Disco Radio Challenges Clubs As Hitmaker" (1979)

This silence of concentration, of course, would be received in dance club culture as the sign of cool diffidence, such that disc jockey patter would be consigned to the denigrated realm of mobile disc jockeys (those who played weddings and private parties) or absorbed within the

textuality of hip-hop dj practice. One result of the disco deejay's silence was a proliferation of forms of written, public identification designed to compensate for the identificatory silence of the record itself. Casablanca Records, in 1977, introduced a "disco awareness program" involving "cocktail napkins designed with artists names, coasters with label information, posters, T-shirts, album jacket display holders and other in-club displays " ("Disco III Reaffirms Industry's Maturity" , 1977) The Record Depot, a store in Los Angeles, distributed copies of its business card to disk jockies in the area. When customers at discotheques asked for the title of a record being played, they would be handed back one such card, with the title handwritten on its back, and encouraged to purchase the recording from The Record Depot. Similar arrangements were worked out between the "Dogs of War" disc jockey pool in Chicago and local disco record retailers ("Disco Disks Hypo Store Gross 50%," 1976; "Chi Patrons 'Talk' Direct to Labels," 1977.)

The gimmickry of these modes of identification ensured their failure. The sense that records went by too fast for their titles to be noted would come to seem symptomatic of broader divergences between the velocities of disco culture and those of the consumers and institutions disco records were meant to win over. The problem of identifying records heard in clubs was, for large numbers of consumers, compounded by the difficulty of finding them in retail stores. Many companies releasing 12-inch singles issued these in standard jackets which contained only the name of the recording firm. These jackets were manufactured in large quantities, and used for a wide range of different titles ("A New 12-Inch 45 Salsoul Disco Label" (1976) By 1978, in response to the problems of identification discussed here, many companies had turned to the use

of distinctive "picture sleeves" (similar to those in which albums were packaged) for each 12-inch single released ("45s Victims Of Production Jam" (1978)). The difficulties of marketing 12-inch singles to the broader record-buying public were the regular focus of discussions at industry trade conferences:

> Panelists reviewed a number of problems involved in merchandising disco 12-inch singles at the retail level: that simple sleeves are not conductive to display; that many retailers still don't have separate disco sections, if they stock the product at all, and that disco 12-inchers are most often purchased by singles buyers, who are just learning the business. ("12-Inchers Pose Problem in Club, Retail Exposure" (1977)).

In 1977, the Long Island DJ Association announced publication of the Long Island Disco Timetable, which would make available, to the general public, the schedule of forthcoming disco record releases ("Long Island Djs Swing With Retailers & Consumers" (1977).) Here, as in other attempts to broaden public familiarity with disco recordings, the challenge was seen as that of making record releases seem punctual, public events, rather than secret processes unfolding according to obscure logics. Problems of secrecy and identification intensified as disco became more popular after 1977 (and following the success of the movie **Saturday Night Fever**). As the number of new releases grew significantly, the distinctive identify of each was harder to convey.

In turn, competition among disc jockeys had led to a growing use of imported 12-inch singles, from such places as Montreal or Munich. The provenance and identity of these were

often jealously guarded by disc jockeys; their status as imports, in any case, made them even harder for club patrons to find in retail stores. At the same time, because imported records were unlikely to receive radio airplay, they did not figure on the radio playlists which retail stores typically used in determining their buying of inventory. In countries like Canada, where imports had always been a primary source of material for disco deejays, these problems were compounded. Local subsidiaries of record companies could not usually supply promotional copies of imported singles fast enough to meet disc jockey demand, and stores typically lagged behind disc jockeys in their access to new, imported releases. As disco music became more regionalized, in the late 1970s, with important innovations coming from Europe and Canada, the sense that the records played in clubs were of obscure origin and unavailable to ordinary patrons increased. ("Imported Disco Disks Spur License Rivalry" (1977); "Disco Disks Go Regional" (1977) ; Canadian Labels Miss Disco Boat" (1975)).

By the late 1970s, with discotheques popular throughout much of the world, disco records would appear in most countries as imports, typically played in clubs before local recording industries had moved to release them domestically. In small markets, like that of Canada, a semblance of equity between domestic supply and public demand lasted only a couple of years, between 1975 and 1977. Thereafter, as in many countries outside the U.S.-U.K. axis, disco records would veer between the extremes of rarity and over-production, as the industry's basic difficulty in calculating release times was compounded by the difficulty of international rights negotiation and competition from import sales. The continued (and increased) reliance of disc jockeys in most countries on imported titles has compounded the obscurity and secrecy which

surround dance records for most consumers. Since the mid-1970s, as well, this dependence on imports has weakened the links between disc jockeys in most countries and their domestic recording or radio industries.

Space, Time and the 12-Inch Single

Their time will not be the time of enduring tradition but rather that of technique. (Stamps, 1999: 62.)

As a technology, the 12-inch single represented the accomodation of dance music recording to the new demands of super club sound systems and enlarged club spaces that were often converted from industrial use. As a medium, the 12-inch single became the central form through which innovation within dance music was communicated between the various components of dance music culture. While each 12-inch single typically carried relatively minor instances of transformation on its own, the rapid accumulation of these marks of change, across an ongoing series of 12-inch releases, produced the sense of dynamism which has marked dance music culture over the past quarter-century. As a commodity, the twelve-inch single regularly perplexed industry personnel, who were compelled to calculate the desirable ratios of free promotional copies to expected sales, to anticipate the fading of a single's value and convert its appeal into that of albums.

As a cultural form, the 12-inch single is light, in the sense that it travels quickly and its commercial and cultural lifecycles are typically brief. With few exceptions, individual 12-inch singles are influential, less for the significant marking of historical change provided by any single title than because their ongoing succession serves to maintain relationships across space. This succession holds in place (or slowly transforms) relations between a set of institutions and practices which are internationally dispersed and, typically, small-scale but numerous.

The compact disc reissue draws its authority from slowly-elaborated processes of canonical judgement; it enters the marketplace accompanied by the presumption that its lifecycle will endure. The 12-inch single, like other single formats before it, poses much more obviously the problem of technique: of how to efficiently coordinate the fragile set of interconnecting events which will ensure its popularity across a broadly dispersed musical culture. These are, arguably, time-biased and space-biased media, in the sense given these terms by the Canadian historian Harold Innis (See, for a discussion, Innis, 1995: 317; and Stamp, 1999: 61.) When the events of the 12-inch single's life are not effectively coordinated, the material artefactuality of the twelve-inch is foregrounded. It will become unavailable and, thus, precious, or remain in the marketplace as cultural waste (sold off, as they were in Montreal in the late 1970s, at the rate of five for a dollar.)

Conclusions:

The history of the 12-inch dance is rich with evidence about the role played secrecy, scarcity and uneven access in the disseminaton of musical forms and styles. By the early 1990s, the absence of any vinyl pressing facility in Canada meant that all 12-inch vinyl singles for the club market were imported (4).. Until major Canadian labels began releasing single-artist or dj-remixed dance CDs in significant numbers in the late 1990s, dance music culture in Canada was shaped by an economy which operated at two extremes: between the connoisseurist culture of import 12" singles and independent record stores, at one end, and the market for domestically-pressed CD compilations of pop-house, at the other. There were few of the mediating institutions and little of the artefactual production which would sustain fine gradations of taste and connoisseurship between these two extremes: no locally pressed vinyl 12" singles anymore, no dance singles to be found in major record stores and a market for CD singles which continued to be weak and under-developed. This gulf exaggerated the fetishistically connoisseurist character of underground dance music just as it nourished the perception of the rest as abject and degraded. When all twelve-inches are imported, however, and thus equally expensive, their prices do not vary with their distance from a musical and industrial mainstream. In these circumstances, the styles and genres of dance club music will multiply and their audiences fragment, as each such style or place of origin comes to seem equally exotic or precious.

More broadly, the 12-inch vinyl single sits, in the year 2001, in a contradictory relationship to scarcity and abundance. On the one hand, the production of masters has become incresingly artisanal, more and more undertaken with inexpensive, desktop equipment which is widely available. On the other hand, manufacture of the 12-inch single requires a material basis

(that of vinyl pressing) which is slowly disappearing from the world. Reproduction of 12-inch singles is centralized within a few national economies, such as those of the US and UK -- countries which remain at the centre of influence and innovation within the dance music field. At at a time when new global structures within the mainstream recording industry have evened out differences in the availability of most popular musical titles, the availability of vinyl has become one of the important ways in which national musical cultures remain differentiated.

Notes

1.This essay draws on research initially undertaken for my doctoral thesis, then supplemented over the past decade by ongoing research in trade magazines and other sources. Many thanks to Jessica Wurster, Aleksandra Tomic and others who have assisted with this research along the way. This is part of a larger project on the material culture of popular music over the past twenty-five years.

2. The claim that the first "official" twelve-inch was probably "Dance Dance Dance" by Calhoon can be found in Brewster and Broughton (2000: 179) and Harvey and Patricia Bates (1993). Researching of these claims is made difficult by the fact that the group's name is sometimes (as in Brewster and Broughton) spelled "Calhoun" and, at other times, "Calhoon." "Calhoon" is the proper spelling.

3. Histories of disco rely heavily on **Billboard** magazine from this period. The magazine's role in pulling the various elements of disco's unfolding history into a relatively unitary chronology cannot be over-estimated. **Billboard** announced the formation of disc jockey pools (and the meetings to organize them) in different cities, organized symposia for disco industry personnel and, perhaps most importantly, published the charts which -- until the fragmentation of dance music culture in the late 1970s -- held some authority.

4. By 1994, the last vinyl pressing plants had closed in Canada. In that year, Stickman Records, a

small, club-oriented label, bought a small vinyl pressing apparatus in the US and imported it to Canada. See "Wait! Wait! Wait!" (1994).

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