

ARTS



Padraic Gilligan reflects on why LP records are making a come-back amongst old and young alike.



Two years ago I received a turntable for my birthday. It took me back forty years as I re-indulged in the almost forgotten carnal delights of handling long playing records – the visual excitement of the artwork, the cerebral pleasure of digesting the layers of information printed on the covers, the olfactory stimulation of the slightly musty cardboard sleeve, the cold, sleek touch of the vinyl as you remove it carefully from the inner sleeve, your middle finger in the centre, the web of your thumb at the edge. And the sound, the spacious, warm, uncompressed sound of the needle in the groove taking you effortlessly to places you'd never been, to a corner in Winslow, Arizona, to a town in North Ontario, to Dublin in the rare 'oul' times.

The only music in my 1960s childhood were 'party pieces' performed by my Mom's siblings at family events and songs played on RTE, Ireland's national broadcaster. So I grew up knowing the words to 'If I had a hammer', 'The banks of the Ohio' and a fair selection of Irish 'come-all-yes'. But I recall, too, the altogether different but distant melodies from behind the locked door of my much-older brother's bedroom on those rare occasions when he was at home and I was awake (he was a chef and worked shifts).

Then, in the late 60s, when my brother returned to Ireland following a stint in Australia, things changed dramatically. There was a month or two before he re-entered the workforce when he became visible around our home and, much to my delight, relaxed the outright ban on entering his room. And that's when I really discovered music.

My brother was a tidy-freak and that extended to

The warm, crackly feel of vinyl

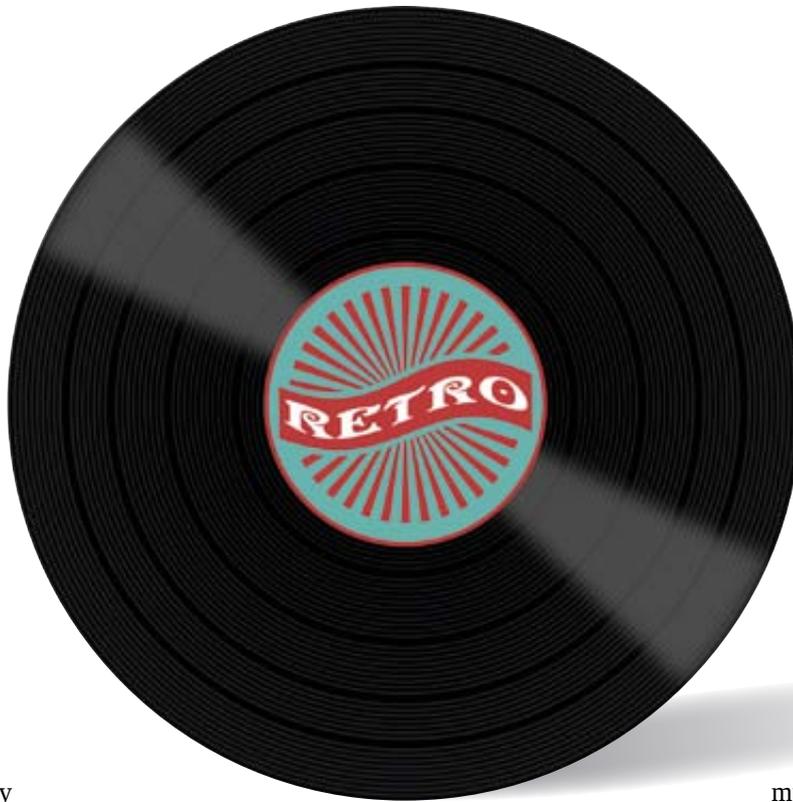
his immense record collection which was meticulously categorised and alphabetised. Born in 1946, he danced in the 60s to Irish Showbands doing rock'n'roll covers but wasn't particularly into pop, gravitating more to singer-songwriters like Bob Dylan, James Taylor and Leonard Cohen.

Having drilled me in the delicate art of holding a vinyl record, he allowed me into his room to 'play records'. On wet winter afternoons when no-one ventured outdoors for street soccer, I took up residence in his musical Aladdin's cave and encountered exotic characters such as Mr Bojangles, Leonard Cohen's Suzanne and Peter Sarstedt's Marie-Clair.

Exiled

My brother loved the Beatles too and I recall vividly when he purchased 'Let it be' in early 1970 when I was ten years old. His purchase of this album, was, in fact, my undoing. Being a real Beatles nerd, he bought the deluxe boxed edition that included a beautifully produced 160 page full colour photo book. One idle afternoon while listening to the album, I took the scissors and cut out portraits of John, Paul, George and Ringo which I appended to the wall of my room. I left the clippings on the floor of his room and, horror of horrors, forgot to replace the record in its inner sleeve as I had been trained to do. Needless to say, I never darkened the door of that bedroom again until, two years later, when my brother got married and moved out.

During the years of my banishment, however, I managed to buy my own record player and start my own vinyl collection. Amongst my first purchases were



'Love grows (where my Rosemary goes)' by Edison Lighthouse (1970) and consecutive singles by T. Rex starting with 'Get it on' (71). By 1972 I was buying LPs and by the time I finished secondary school in 1977 had amassed a decent collection of some 150 'albums'.

New technologies

The four decades since then have brought epic changes to the music industry, to how music is recorded, distributed and monetised. We've seen vinyl yield to other 'tangible' formats such as 8 track, cassette tapes, CD, mini-disc and all of them, in turn, fall by the wayside as digital formats colonised the eco-system and turned the entire music industry upside down. In the era of Spotify where instant gratification is a given – you read an album review then, as you're reading, go on-line to verify whether you like the song – I find the principle of the swinging pendulum pulling me back to simpler times and places.

I find myself missing the ritual of how we accessed music all those years ago: reading the interviews in which a new release is mooted, listening to teaser tracks on the radio, checking the record shop for a release date, saving for the purchase, buying the album,

bringing it home, pouring over the data on the outer sleeve. Then removing the vinyl from the inner sleeve as instructed by my brother, catching the shine of the vinyl against the light, placing it carefully on the turntable ...

The joy of vinyl

This paean to vinyl records is offered as a reminder to myself that I'll probably never love any of the albums I listened to in 2017 as much as I'll love *Abbey road* or *The Pretender*, *Born to run*, *Avalon* or even *October*, U2's 'difficult' second album. That's because, mostly, I've never held them in my hand, never spent time pouring over the credits, never been intrigued by the artwork. That's also because I – and now millions of others – predominantly access music via digital platforms – mainly Spotify – and while that has allowed me to access more new music than I ever thought possible, my listening – probably – is inattentive, rushed and random.

The older I get the more I seek out the musical sounds of my younger years. But not just the tunes and the songs. I also want that pent-up sense of anticipation, that sense of patience being finally rewarded, that full sensory assault and, of course, the warm crackly feel of vinyl. 🍷