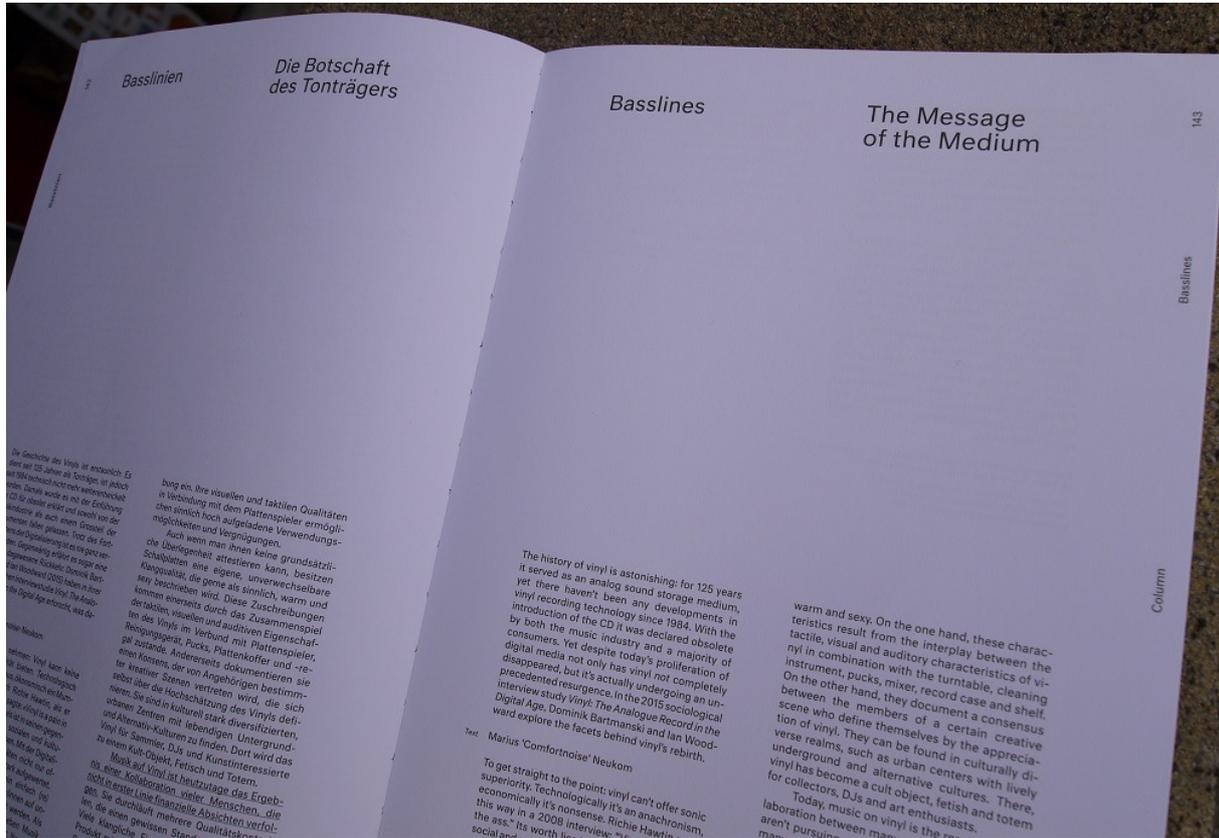


# Basslines 3: The Message of the Medium

Column in the zweikommasieben Magazin #13, 2015 ([www.zweikommasieben.ch](http://www.zweikommasieben.ch))  
Annotated version with sound and text references

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*The history of vinyl is astonishing: for 125 years it served as an analog sound storage medium, yet there haven't been any developments in vinyl recording technology since 1984.<sup>1</sup> With the introduction of the CD it was declared obsolete by both the music industry and a majority of consumers. Yet despite today's proliferation of digital media not only has vinyl not completely disappeared, but it's actually undergoing an unprecedented resurgence.<sup>2</sup> In the 2015 sociological interview study Vinyl. The Analogue Record the Digital Age, Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward explored the facets behind vinyl's rebirth.*

<sup>1</sup> Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> „Vinyl has a socially broader renaissance exactly at the time when the digital revolution seemed complete“ (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015, p. 233). Critical voices warn that the simultaneous renaissance of the commercial interest is threatening the vinyl culture because the few remaining pressing plants are overburdened as a result of the questionable repressing of classical Stones and Beatles albums. We believe however that these fears are groundless. Commercial interests will be withdrawn as soon as crowding out starts and prices and already low returns will drop. Incidentally, the field of electronic music in particular has always been prone to overproduction, which is why a certain quantity restriction will not do any harm.

To get straight to the point: Vinyl can't offer sonic superiority. Technologically it's an anachronism, economically it's nonsense. Richie Hawtin put it this way in a 2008 interview: „Vinyl is a pain in the ass.“<sup>3</sup> Its worth lies in its physical, aesthetic, social and cultural characteristics. Thanks to digital media these qualities are not only more apparent, but have also become greatly revalued.

Audio files are easy to (re)produce and distribute and can be played on innumerable devices, but hardly lend themselves to contain other types of data. Their existence as collections of ones and zeroes make them abstract entities. In contrast the rotating record is a highly-aestheticized object. In its sleeve it's often the centerpiece of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. As a multi-sensory object it demands specific competencies when handling, and its visual and tactile qualities in connection with a turntable allow highly-charged sensory pleasures and uses.

Even though they're not fundamentally superior, records do have their own distinctive sound qualities, often described as sensual, warm and sexy.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, these characteristics result from the interplay between the tactile, visual and auditory characteristics of vinyl in combination with the turntable, cleaning instrument, pucks, mixer, record case and shelf. On the other hand, they document a consensus between the members of a certain creative scene who define themselves by the appreciation of vinyl. They can be found in culturally diverse realms, such as urban centers with lively underground and alternative cultures. There, vinyl has become a cult object, fetish<sup>5</sup> and totem<sup>6</sup> for collectors, DJs and art-enthusiasts.

Today, music on vinyl is the result of a collaboration between many people who primarily aren't pursuing economic gain. It's run through many quality controls to guarantee a particular standard. Many of the product's sonic characteristics can be read with the naked eye and when played the sound becomes directly tangible. Even when one takes good care of vinyl, every use leaves behind a trace. Its longevity makes vinyl a recording medium that makes its own story visible and audible (sometimes worn records sound better than new ones). Vinyl is music materialized, visualized and sculpted.<sup>7</sup>

A well-stocked record collection requires a considerable investment in time, space and money. It's visible proof of stylistic command, seriousness, credibility and historical awareness. The same goes for the DJ who spins records before an audience. In the age of digitalization records are a commitment to our musical legacy. Take it

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.techno-documentaries.com/minus-records-slices-dvd](http://www.techno-documentaries.com/minus-records-slices-dvd) from minute 12:05. A clipping of this interview part can also be found on Youtube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNiJPOY6y-E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNiJPOY6y-E).

<sup>4</sup> Acoustically, vinyl is particularly suitable for electronically produced bassy music because the pressing process causes specific distortions that transform the tendentially sterile and inanimate sound into warmth and liveliness: The low-pitched sounds generate a vibration and swinging. Sharp claps turn into an organic „tcharack“ (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015, p. 92). Mid-range sounds may be disregarded. However, the medium lends itself less to classical music as the mentioned distortions in connection with the sound of the analogue instruments are perceived as bothering. Additionally, the play time of records makes them best suitable for pieces of music shorter than 10 minutes.

<sup>5</sup> Bartmanski & Woodward (2015, p. 193) describe vinyl as a „positive fetish“ that „mobilizes cultural effervescence, dedication and personal commitment.“

<sup>6</sup> As a totem, vinyl gathers people in a specific urban environment and gives rise to scenes and (underground) cultures: „vinylscapes“ (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015, p. 228ff.).

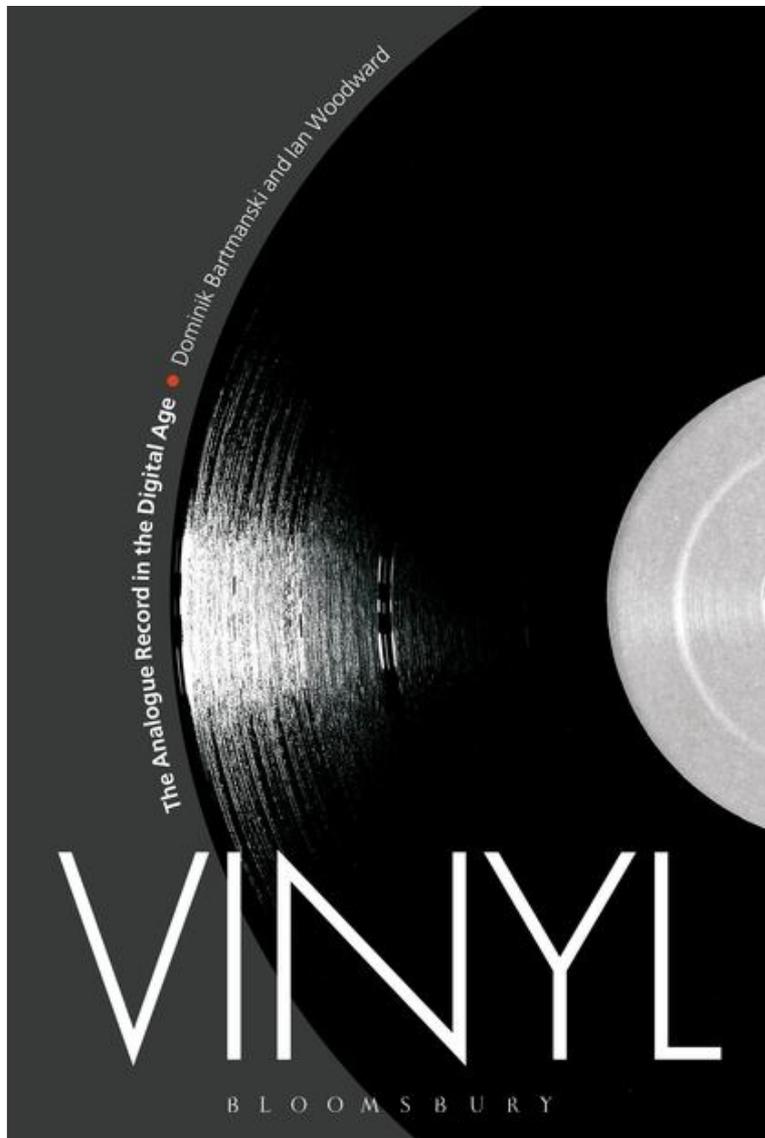
<sup>7</sup> Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015, p. 67.

again from Richie Hawtin, who despite his provocative verdict above, still pressed vinyl records at their absolute trough: „I can't turn my back on where I came from.”<sup>8</sup>

The often-heard assumption that music is music, regardless of what medium it's played on, is evidence of modest cultural understanding. Cassettes, CDs, audio files and their playback devices each possess their own specific qualities. They can coexist and be used selectively because each carries its own message. For Bartmanski and Woodward, the choice of vinyl implies a sense of aesthetics, engagement, passion, exertion, collaboration, sensuality, coolness, care, selectivity, deceleration, limitation, permanence, ritual and not least of all a specific auditory experience.<sup>9</sup>

### Literature

Bartmanski, Dominik & Woodward, Ian (2015). *Vinyl. The Analogue Record in the Digital Age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.



<sup>8</sup> See [www.techno-documentaries.com/minus-records-slices-dvd](http://www.techno-documentaries.com/minus-records-slices-dvd) from minute 12:28.

<sup>9</sup> Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015, pp. 77 and 236.

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