

Analog Techno

The use of analog media in digital times within the techno scene

Expose for Master Thesis at Audio Communication Group Berlin

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Abstract

In the mid 2000s we have seen a revival of the vinyl record which was caused by multiple reasons and quickly caused the publication of numerous research papers. We can observe a similar development in the area of analog synthesizers, although this revival was neither noticed nor of interest by many researchers. This thesis will conduct research on why this is the case. An extensive research about the theories of the revival of vinyl will be made and confirmed by empirical research. I will then see if the same mechanisms also apply to music production hardware. To sharpen the scope of this thesis I will focus on the scene of Techno music which has a long tradition with the use of analog media.

Motivation & Questions

In times of the so called digital revolution, new technologies and standards arise while rendering former ones obsolete. Thus it is no surprise that the revival of older standards causes excitement among various scientific areas as happened with the rise of the vinyl record as medium for storing music. Being the main medium for commercial distribution of music from the 1950s for around 4 decades, many believed vinyl was gone after the invention of cassettes and CDs. While the CD is in decline after the introduction of digital file formats like MP3 and streaming services with the rise of the internet, vinyl sales started to rise again rapidly beginning in the mid 2000s (RIAA). Around the same time we can observe a similar development in the market of synthesizers, so this phenomenon doesn't seem to be exclusive to the medium vinyl but is also applying in the area of music production. While digital technologies took over in the mid 1980s and pushed analog synthesizers to their extinction we see a rise of product releases beginning with the Moog Voyager by Moog in 2002 or the Prophet 08 from Dave Smith Instruments in 2007. Since then, every year more and more so called analog synthesizers are being thrown onto the market by a rising amount of vendors so today customers face a variety of products unseen before at the same time being more affordable than ever. Discontinued products such as the TB-303, TR-808 or TR-909 by the Japanese Cooperation Roland were affordable for young music producers as their mass production was not successful on the commercial market thus being available for little money on the second hand market. Ironically these products became so popular in this scene that their prices on the second hand market are in the thousands nowadays. As the demands are

high companies like Behringer, xOxBox or Acidlabs started to produce clones and replicas again.

While both, vinyls and analog synthesizers, seem to be dead on the surface they were always present in certain music scenes, specifically within the electronic music genre of house and techno which I will refer to as the Techno scene. Vinyl for a long time was the only medium for DJs to playback music in clubs while analog synthesizer themselves were responsible for the invention and rise of genres being played such as Acid House (Collins et al. 2013, p. 106). Because the history and development of media is closely linked to specific music genres and their subcultural scenes I will focus on a specific one, being electronic dance music, as the scope of this thesis would be too broad and a topic itself to research different scenes, their values, how they interact and differentiate from each other. This will include analyzing whether the development of the markets within the scene is linked to the overall market situation. Prior to narrowing down the scene to be analyzed it is also required to find a definition of the medium itself which might be obvious for vinyl but is not so for synthesizers as there exists many different products which often combine features and properties of both, the analog and the digital world.

Vinyl as a medium for DJs also faces competition with digital file formats which seem to slowly take over. For both media the digital alternatives seem to outplay their analog counterparts in various categories, still both are being used today. Why this is the case will be a central question being answered in my thesis. This will allow me to draw parallels and to find out about the similarities and differences between these media, which seem to share not only their history but also a lot of common properties.

State of the Art

The revival of Vinyl already caused a lot of publications within the scientific scene [Bartmanski] [Osborn] [Winters] but the rise on analog synthesizers seems not to be recognized and / or of interest. This might be the case because the Vinyl record is accessible to a larger audience and market while some of us share a biographic experience with this medium, which is obviously not the case for music production and its tools. I will find out if the theories about the rebirth of Vinyl do also apply for synthesizers.

Before that it is necessary to gain knowledge about the phenomenon of the so-called Vinyl rebirth. The published sales statistics which are the basis for this term usually only cover the whole market and it is obvious that those sales are mainly driven by re-issues or releases by

the so called major labels like EMI, Sony Music Entertainment, Universal Music Group, and Warner Music Group (Ainsley 2019). This makes it hard to assess the situation of the Vinyl record within a subcultural scene if a revival happened at all because it seems the record was never really ‘dead’ in the first place.

Based on the theories about the vinyl revival and other sources we already see a variety of possible categories which might have an influence on the choice on what medium to use which result in several hypotheses:

- Sound: sonic attributes and characteristics, described as warm and organic (Mantione 2017; Lepas and Tritakis, p. 26) resulting in
 - H1.1: Analog media is being used because it sounds different
 - H1.2: Analog media is being used because sounds better
- Haptic and virtuosity: physical interactions with objects, the need to touch and perform (Styvén 2010, p. 1088; Lepas and Tritakis, p. 26) resulting in
 - H2.1: Analog media is being used because it is tangible (able to touch)
 - H2.2: Analog media is harder to use and thus more rewarding when mastering
- Materialism: prestige and passion of collecting and accumulating material as opposite to ‘electronic immaterialization’, culture of digging (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015, p. 168) resulting in
 - H3.1: Analog media is being used because it is possible to collect and possess it
 - H3.1: Analog media is being used because they are being perceived as being more valuable because of increased price
- Limitation: minimalism and resignation over excessive digital demands and nearly endless possibilities (O’Hagan 2011) resulting in
 - H4.1: Analog media is preferred because it is not a computer and/or screen
 - H4.2: Analog media is being used because it is limiting and thus a driver for creativity
- Retromania: term introduced by Siman Reynolds which ‘refers to a self-conscious fetish for period stylisation’ (Reynolds 2013, xii) resulting in
 - H5.1. Analog media is preferred as it is a symbol for older times (retromania)

- H5.2. Analog media is preferred as it relates to one's past (nostalgia)
- Social constraints: following hypes and trends, trying to copy successful DJs / producers (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015, p. 26) resulting in
 - H6.1: Analog media is being used because it is also being used by role models, industry leaders and / or friends
 - H6.2: Analog media is being used when it is available (e.g. through local infrastructure)

As I will focus on the usage within the Techno scene it is necessary to analyze this scene.

There is already plenty of literature available to work with especially from the area of sociologic research. With its rise in the 1990s techno emerged in Europe with roots from North America (Chicago & Detroit) and influences from other styles such as Disco/ItaloDisco or EBM/New-Wave. It was closely linked to the rise of a new youth culture which manifested itself in Dance events, called Raves, which happened in clubs, warehouses or in open air spaces.

Especially Berlin played an important role as the fall of the Berlin Wall opened up a huge potential of abandoned houses which were turned into clubs. These were upon the first to support and sign important Acts from America like Underground Resistance from Detroit, which released their X-10x-Series on the Berlin label Tresor Records in 1991 (discogs.com). Later on events like the Loveparade attracted more than a million people on its peak in 1999 which sparked interest in pop cultural and sociological studies.

There were also other hotspots within Europe, such as the United Kingdom so it comes of no surprise that there are theories and analyses available for both the German and the English scene. We can see different approaches between German and British researches but it is clear that both agree that people are striving for a sense of live in creating new social spaces while identifying each other as part of the scene (Kühn 2017, p. 23) . People within a scene share a set of unwritten rules and norms which is another reason to focus on one particular scene in order to find out about the influence of social constraints.

Both vinyl records and analog synthesizers played an important role within the Techno scene as this kind of electronic music was made using these machines which is later on being pressed on a record and played back by the DJ. This makes the choice of the 'right' medium an integral part within the development of a personal artistic profile.

Methods

The Foundation of this work will be the collection and combination of different theories about analog media which results from different disciplines such media theory, sociology, economics and the study of subcultural aesthetics. As mentioned in the prior chapter these will be combined into categories and groups which will result in several hypotheses.

Because of the lack of data about the situation of Vinyl in the Techno-Scene it will be necessary to conduct a small qualitative research among industry actors which will result in an evaluation of Vinyl for the Techno-Scene. This is necessary in order to find out if there is such a thing as a Vinyl-revival at all or if this is just a product of the major labels which usually don't interfere with such counter cultural markets. This qualitative questionnaire will ask about the development of unit sales within the last decade, the current situation and the projected outlook. The target group will consist of distributors, shops and label management services which should have the best insights about this highly unregulated, diverse and hard-to-track market.

Afterwards, the hypotheses will be tested against of use digital and analog media (dependent variable) within the user group of DJs and Producers. I will use a non-probability sampling method, as I will only be able to reach certain parts of the scene in proximity to Berlin and as the survey will be voluntarily this results in a voluntary response sample model. The data sample will be the result of an online survey which will be sent out to DJs and Producers who identify themselves as part of the Techno-scene and will be reached via multiple online channels such as forums, social networks or personal connections into the scene.

There will be a part of the questionnaire referring to DJs and another part referring to Producers (while some people who do both will fill out both) which will reference the same hypotheses with slightly adjusted questions where needed. This will be the basis for comparing Vinyl and Synthesizers in order to answer the questions if there are similarities between those media groups. In addition to the questions resulting from the hypotheses there will be also more general questions such as age, gender, preferred style etc. which can be used as moderation variables or covariates. These will be used in a linear regression model and most likely in multiple ordinal regressions as the dependent variable will be most likely not result in a normal distribution.

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