

Jewel-Box Heroes:

Why the CD Revival Is Finally Here

Compact discs never had the romance of vinyl or the convenience of MP3s. But they're still the ideal format for getting lost inside your music collection

Rob Sheffield - Rolling Stone, January 19, 2022



In 2021, CD sales increased for the first time in 17 years. For some die-hards, the format has never gone out of style. Elenathewise/stock.adobe.com

In 2021, CD sales increased for the first time in 17 years. That's [mostly because of Adele](#), whose new album sold 898,000 of those shiny little discs. The last time CDs were this hot, Usher, Ashlee Simpson, and Hoobastank were the ones selling them. Now it's [Adele, BTS, and Taylor Swift](#). It's part of an overall revival for physical media — vinyl is [booming even bigger](#). But for those of us who love the humble compact disc, it's a question worth pondering: Are we finally seeing the CD revival? Why are music fans falling back in love with the gadget that once promised “perfect sound forever”?

[Compact discs](#) were never about romance — they were about function. They just worked. They were less glamorous than vinyl, less cool, less tactile, less sexy, less magical. They didn't have the aura that we fans crave. You didn't necessarily get sentimental over your CDs, the way you fetishized your scratchy old vinyl, hearing your life story etched into the nicks and crackles. Your copy of Spice World or Life After Death sounded the same as everyone else's.

But CDs work. They just do. You pop in the disc, press play, music booms out. They delivered the grooves so efficiently, they became the most popular format ever. If you're looking to focus on something cool for an hour, without getting up to flip sides

every 20 minutes, the compact disc has what you want, bigger and louder. It gives you room to get lost inside the music.

Ever since they arrived in the Eighties, experts complained about them. (So soulless! So cold!) But fans loved those spiffy discs, packing 70-plus minutes in one place. It was less fuss and muss than vinyl, a huge plus for casual fans who didn't want to worry about styluses or tone-arm resonance. You could program your player to skip the duds. (Astral Weeks is just better without "The Way Young Lovers Do," don't @ me.) You could blast hip-hop faves without the skits. You could customize your own version of any album. The Beatles' Revolver? Glad you asked! Program it 9, 13, 7, 4, 14, 5, 3, 12, 10, 1, 8, 2, 11, 6, then back to repeat 9 and 14. Trust me, a whole new experience.

I've always loved CDs, and I never junked my collection, even when the format fell off a cliff in the 2000s. I cherish all noise-making gear, from cassettes to vinyl to streams. But the CD has its unique charms, especially for longer, deeper listening. No format has ever been kinder to music that takes time. It was the CD that turned Pet Sounds and Another Green World and Heart of the Congos and Astral Weeks into widely beloved classics, as opposed to cult items; it was the format that finally made Lee "Scratch" Perry a mainstream hero. An already-famous LP like Kind of Blue became a whole new phenomenon on disc. The quintessential classics of the jewel-box era — D'Angelo's Voodoo, Radiohead's Kid A, Missy's Supa Dupa Fly — would have flopped as streams.

I spent much of the summer of 2021 listening to my dad's CDs on his old Discman — it was a tangible way to remember him. It became a ritual for me to spin his copy of Willie Nelson's Red Headed Stranger on his cheap Sony D-F200. My shelves spillover with box sets, bootlegs, mixes from friends old and new, young bands whose albums I buy from the merch table at live shows. Any disc still works the way it did in 1986 or 1994 or 2007 — no software updates needed, just push a button and go.

But the CD took a tumble in the post-[Napster](#) years. MP3s sounded tinny by comparison, but they were convenient and (usually) free. Yet a funny thing happened: Those downloads got lost in the shuffle of data migration. This is the era that Esquire's Dave Holmes [memorably summed up](#) as the "Deleted Years." As Holmes wrote, "Everything you bought from 2003 to 2009 is stuck on a dusty iPod for which a charger can no longer be found, or on a MacBook that's three MacBooks ago. Whether you bought that whole first Kaiser Chiefs album or just plunked down the 99 cents for 'I Predict A Riot,' you don't have it anymore."

If people are discovering the joys of physical media, it's partly because there's something ephemeral about streaming culture, where any music you "have" is at the mercy of corporate whims. A couple of years ago, MySpace accidentally erased all the music ever uploaded to the site, with one push of a button. Your photos are probably next. It's like Chris Rock's joke on SNL about still owning CDs: "When the government shuts down the cloud, I'm-a have Luther!"

Physical media also involves the artists getting paid. And here's where discs have an edge over other formats: They're cheaper and faster to produce, a major issue in the [Great Vinyl Famine](#) of our time. These days, there just aren't enough pressing plants to keep up with consumer demand for the LP. (Please forgive me if I'd rather gnaw off my fingers at the knuckle than say "vinyls" or "a vinyl." Just can't.) Independent artists pioneered the analog resurgence, but now they often get trapped in the vinyl bottleneck, waiting a year or more for their albums to get released, because they're stuck waiting for a plant to slot them in between major-label hits.

In the 2000s, the U.K.'s *New Musical Express* had a questionnaire every week, asking the latest buzz band, "Vinyl, CD, or MP3?" It was a running joke that nobody ever picked CD — the split was about 90/10 in favor of vinyl. I think it was only the dude from Art Brut who stuck up for CDs, even though he admitted, "I realize this is like choosing George Lazenby as your favorite James Bond."

But it's an inarguable fact that music sales reached their all-time peak when the CD was king. No audio device did a sharper job of separating fans from their 20-dollar bills. People loved to buy those digital discs, in numbers that look crazy now. We all spent the Nineties going to the "record store" ("CD stores" never existed, even though most record stores had no vinyl), browsing the racks, taking something weird home, listening all the way through. You invested time and emotional energy, instead of giving up quick as you do with streams. The disc encouraged you to turn off your "meh" reflex and let yourself hear whatever weird shit was going on. It got fans hooked on German psychedelia, Japanese prog, West African soukous, Kingston dub.

Don't even get me started on the CD box set — the best format ever invented to explore artists or genres with a long history. Ray Charles' *The Birth of Soul*? The 1998 *Nuggets* box? The *Anthology of American Folk Music*? The 1994 Rhino doo-wop box that finally made it easy and accessible for my folks to dance around the living room to their college-sweetheart faves, with one touch of a button? The Dylan bootleg box I coveted for years, collecting all his 1966 live shows, which I finally grabbed after ogling it for years behind the counter at Bleecker Street Records?

People still loved to rave about how vinyl was hipper, even if, behind closed doors, they did their actual listening on disc. Pearl Jam sang "[Spin the Black Circle](#)" in 1994, when it was silver circles that made them the world's biggest band. "I'm still

listening to wax, I'm not using the CD!," the Beastie Boys boasted a couple minutes into their classic *Ill Communication*, an album they knew virtually nobody would hear on wax.

The CD era peaked in Y2K, when 'NSync shattered all sales records by selling 2.4 million copies of *No Strings Attached* in its first week. But that turned out to be a bye-bye-bye kiss. Just a few years later, Justin Timberlake was in a movie playing Napster co-founder Sean Parker, [sneering](#), "You wanna buy a Tower Records, Eduardo?"

Napster was the file-sharing iceberg out there waiting to sink the five-inch Titanic. But it's worth noting that the two guys who invented Napster, Parker and Shawn Fanning, were avid consumers who constantly bought CDs, mostly electronic trance and trip-hop. I spent time with them in early 2000 for a *Rolling Stone* profile and their bachelor pad was crammed ceiling to floor with discs. They sure didn't listen to MP3s — they saw Napster as a way to discover new albums worth buying. What they didn't see coming — nobody did — is that people would actually settle for MP3s. ZShare, Megaupload, Gnutella — all those people, all those lives, where are they now?

True, there was always plenty to complain about with CDs. The packaging was a mess, with those wasteful plastic jewel boxes. Tearing the gummy tape off the top was a nightmare. They originally came in packaged in the "longbox," a 12-by-6" cardboard slab that served no purpose except making them harder to shoplift. People rightly complained, to the point where EMI president Sal Licata wrote a comedy-classic 1989 *Billboard* [op-ed](#), "Why We Should Keep the CD Longbox." The longbox was such a joke that Spinal Tap released their 1992 album in the 18-inch "Extra-Long Box," [calling it](#) "an environmentally conscious product which utilizes more of our precious recycled resources than any other compact disc package!" But how the tables have turned — now if you buy an LP online, it's shipped in a package that's basically six longboxes.

You might well ask, "Why should '70 minutes of music in one place' mean a damn thing, compared to streaming?" The answer might be that streaming is not a "place," but a barrage of constant options that many fans find less optimal when you're in the mood to actually concentrate and listen. You're probably also streaming on a device that's nagging you about messages you need to answer right now. Like the physical book, the physical disc just transports you deeper into the story.

Look, CDs will never be as sexy as vinyl albums. I get that. They never even got a groovy nickname, like how record fiends talk about "platters" and "white labels" and "stacks of wax." If you're merely looking for fan merch to display on your shelf, a 12-inch LP sleeve has more style. Really, there's only one thing CDs have ever done right, which is make music. They get the job done, which is why they're still around

— the Hyman Roth of audio formats. And that's why, for some of us, the CD has a special 70-minute place in our heart that nothing else can fill.