

A Library's Listening Lab

written by Chad Mairn and Joe Terrana

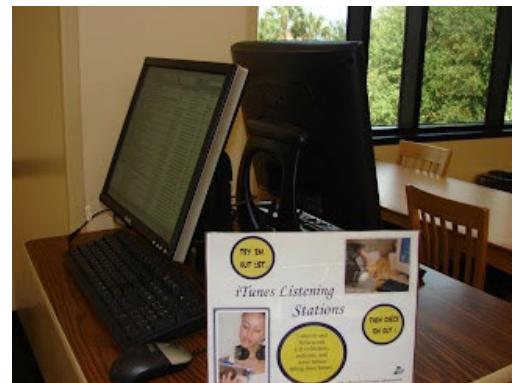




Back in 2008, I wrote this blog post introducing my library's iTunes listening stations. Why? Well, first off, we didn't have millions of music recordings instantaneously available thanks to streaming services like Spotify. Second, after years of visiting mainstream book and music stores that offered opportunities to listen to any track on a CD before making a purchasing decision was quite a luxury that I used often; and, as a result, I discovered some great music this way! And third, there was a

beat-up filing cabinet in the library that was difficult to open; this is where all the library's CDs were stored. It was like the hidden chambers at the tomb of Tutankhamun. The cries of many library users were loud and clear to me when they became so frustrated when trying to find a CD in this monstrosity. Once a user finally found a CD, it had another layer of difficulty attached to it. These CDs had stickers and other "library stuff" stuck all over them and the covers were unidentifiable. Most of the time, a user couldn't even read the song titles or musician and producer credits. Plus, it didn't help that these CDs were tightly squeezed into this filing cabinet, so users couldn't really browse the collection; instead, they had to know the call number to find a particular recording. This was far from ideal. At the time, libraries didn't usually have a mechanism to allow for easy music discovery, so I figured it was time to roll up my sleeves and get something to work like the way the above-mentioned stores did it.

So, I wanted to open the library's CD collection for people to browse and listen to music before they decided to check anything out of the library. Luckily, I was able to get my hands on two old PCs and set them up to become the library's music listening stations powered by iTunes. There were over 2,100 songs digitized at the West St. Petersburg Community Library at St. Petersburg College. I also created a web page based on the XML data that iTunes created so links to the songs would open within the iTunes application. That way, users who were not on campus could at least listen to a 30 second clip from anywhere if they had an Internet connection. Call number links were added to the iTunes library and the plan was to also add them to the library catalog, but that never happened. Having links to samples of music inside the library's catalog would have been a very cool addition. This idea is still on the backburner, though.





Sooner or later, everything old is new again. The annual Record Store Day event celebrates brick-and-mortar record stores from all over the United States with special release vinyl, live music, and much more. The hype surrounding this old school

audio format isn't just another fad, however. According to the Recording Industry Association of America, vinyl record sales rose to \$419.2 million in 2018. Check this out: "vinyl revenues grew 61% to \$1 billion in 2021 and vinyl accounted for 63% of revenues from physical formats, and 7% of total music revenues." That is incredible! While streaming may be the future of music listening, it hasn't stopped good, old-fashioned vinyl records from making a comeback. Thanks to a wonderful donation by Dr. Lewis and Family from Pasadena, Florida, we are now embracing this comeback with a vinyl collection housing over 2,000 LP's and professional audio equipment.

Our vinyl collection is now housed inside Retro Joe's located upstairs in the library, so users can now enjoy a growing collection of wide-ranging music. The donation contains over 2,000 LP's and hundreds of 45s. We are also adding essential vinyl acquisitions to this collection. The Listening Lab was able to secure funding to add two Audio-Technica LP120USB Direct Drive Professional DJ Turntables, two M6 USB 4-Channel USB DJ Mixers, two Sony MDR7506 Professional Large Diaphragm Headphones, two Audio-Technica AT95E Dual Magnet 1/2" Mount Phonograph Cartridges, a Denon DN-C630 deck, and a Denon DN-C550R CD player/recorder.



The collection contains a wide variety of genres including a sizable assortment of jazz, featuring classics by Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, and Miles Davis. Students can also experience musical vibes from the late 1970's and early 1980's, with

albums from Fleetwood Mac, Frank Zappa, Neil Young & Crazy Horse, Talking Heads, Peter Gabriel, and much more. Contemporary releases are also being added, including recordings by the BATTLES, Panic at the Disco, Vampire Weekend, Portishead, Neutral Milk Hotel, Radiohead, Jawbreaker, Flying Lotus, and many more. Students can even experience a little local history with recordings from the Madrigalians, the SPC Clearwater campus music ensemble from 1969! Experimental music, as well as local band recordings, are also being added to this library collection.



Each album that is cataloged can be checked out from the library for a period of seven days. You can take it home to listen to, sample it, and even make a mixed cassette tape. But you don't need to check out the records to enjoy them since there are turntables with high-quality stereo mixers and headphones available inside the Listening Lab. Just browse a bit, pick something interesting, enjoy letting the needle touch the

record, and listen to analog music in all its uncompressed glory.

Instructions on how to properly handle vinyl, as well as best practices when using turntables are clearly visible for curious users who may be inexperienced with the format but who want to learn how to enjoy it. There is a QR code that connects the user to a video highlighting how to handle and play vinyl properly. Before the COVID pandemic, workshops were offered to users who wanted to learn more about vinyl, the turntables, mixing boards and the other equipment. There are plans to bring these workshops back soon.

Handling and Playing Vinyl

1. Handle with care:

- * Do not touch the record's playable surface.
- * Hold the record by the edge or by the label.
- * Return records to the bin when finished listening.
- * Store records horizontally and not too tightly.

2. Respect the turntable:

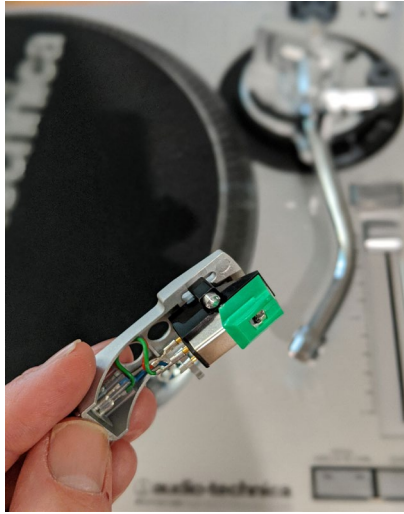
- * Press the Start button.
- * Select proper platter speed [33 RPM or 45 RPM]
- * Ask for help if it is 78 RPM.
- * Use the tone arm lever.
- * Gently place the stylus on/off the record.
- * Press the Stop button when finished.

3. Keep things clean:

- * SPC Staff will keep records and stylus clean.
- * Let us know if a record needs cleaning.
- * If you have a question, just ask!
- * Contact Chad Malrn, malrn.chad@spcollege.edu

Scan the QR code to watch a short video on handling/playing records. <https://goo.gl/9YMaLa>





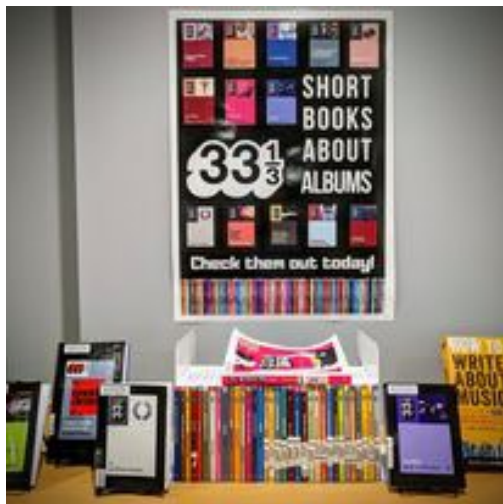
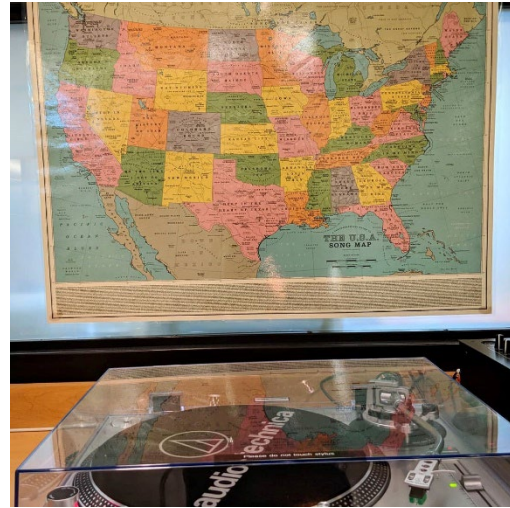
The turntables have had some damage, unfortunately. Both cartridges have broken, and replacements are coming soon. There is a small label on each turntable that states "please do not touch the stylus" but perhaps users don't know what a stylus is. So, we'll change the terminology to say "needle" to hopefully lessen damage to the equipment. The turntables' tone arm weights have been adjusted by users, and this will cause serious issues with the stylus skipping over the record and will damage both the stylus and the record. We are working on ways to eliminate this problem. One potential solution was a 3D printed part that blocks the tone arm weight, but it didn't work; however, 45RPM adapters were designed

and successfully 3D printed in the Innovation Lab. Anyway, many record stores simply add tape over the tone arm weight so people don't adjust it. Let's hope that simple solution will work once we get the cartridges re-installed and the tone arm weights re-balanced. We did discover that the tone arm weight has a screw that can be tightened to lock the dial in place, and this should help keep it balanced. Nonetheless, we will add another message on the turntable that asks users not to adjust the tone arm weights. There have been discussions to see if the power cable or some vital part of the turntable can sit behind the Circulation Desk so a user would need to check it out before using our equipment. That way, a librarian can assist with using the turntable and other equipment correctly.



A key component to enjoying vinyl in the library or your own home is the fact that this format isn't portable, but it does allow the listener to slow down and pay closer attention to the music as an active participant. Obviously, records can't be placed on your arm while jogging or played as background music for the train ride into work. Not that digital music is bad per se. In fact, digital music has revolutionized how we listen to and store our music. We also have the USA Song Map on display that is a map of the United States made up entirely from the titles of over 1,000 songs that will "take you on a musical journey around the U.S. via the titles of songs that reference states, cities, rivers,

mountains and landmarks.” There is an accompanying [Spotify playlist](#) for this map, too! But the rise of vinyl record sales and new turntables points to a different type of more engaged listening. The listener must take the time to place the record on the turntable, choose the time to listen, and turn it over when the album reaches the end of a side. And there is a certain magic about knowing that a tiny valley on a flat piece of plastic can create such beautiful music. Going further, the artwork on a record’s front and back covers and the liner notes inside are so much more rewarding to explore while listening to the music. This is completely lost with streaming services like Spotify and others.

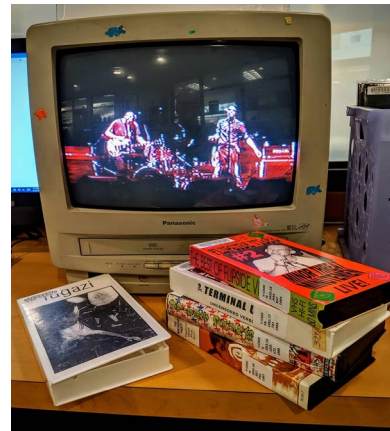


For those interested in reading more about important albums, the pocket-sized publications “33 1/3” are also available for perusing and check-out. Each issue covers a single album, including detailed writings on Led Zeppelin, DEVO, The Velvet Underground, Nirvana, Jimi Hendrix’s “Electric Ladyland”, Beastie Boys, and many more. [Here are all](#) the 33 1/3 series titles that are available to check out. Other books on music are also available in the Listening Lab and are usually on display so people can browse while hanging out in the Listening Lab.

A few years ago, we received a large donation of an assortment of Zines including popular titles like [FactSheet 5](#), [Half-Truth](#), [Flatter](#), and others that we have included in the Listening Lab for browsing. According to Wikipedia, a zine is a “small-circulation self-published work of original or appropriated texts and images, usually reproduced via a copy machine” produced by a single person or a small group. These will be a bit challenging to catalog, so we are still debating whether it is a good idea to add them to our library catalog. Stay tuned!



Going a step further into nostalgia, a batch of VHS tapes, were donated by librarian and STEM guru Colleen Graves and are now cataloged and ready to be checked out! Before YouTube, people would watch concerts via bootlegged VHS tapes, and it is cool to see them in our space for our younger users to get a feel for what that retro format was like back in the day. Also, there is a plan to add 8-tracks and cassettes to this library collection. Wait ... is that Fugazi live at the Electric Factory (Philadelphia, 5/5/97) in that super 4-head VHS/TV combo deck?! Yes! Why yes, it is.



I occasionally will write an “On the Turntable” post that will go into more detail explaining why I think that particular album is worth listening to. Here is an example of “An Electric Storm” by White Noise, which was released in 1969 on Island Records, just a few months before mainstream availability of keyboard-based synthesizers were on the market. It is an amazing record that will “blow your mind” and as the record states in its liner notes “many sounds have never been heard – by humans: some sound waves you don’t hear, but they reach you” and it really does hit you as a listener because the “emotional intensity is at a maximum.” The plan is to get our users to write similar reviews about their favorite recordings found in the Listening Lab.



So, I am a bit crazy and I play drums in three local bands: Low Season, It Will Flood, and Slinky. Plus, I am an avid music collector and decided to donate over 1,000 CD’s from my and my wife’s personal collection to expand the Listening Lab’s offerings even more. Here is a link that shows the “Mairn Collection” CD donation in our library catalog. There are still several hundred CDs that need to be cataloged. The Mairn Collection is eclectic and has CDs ranging from punk rock and metal to avant-garde and popular music.

Joe Terrana, an accomplished musician who has toured Europe, has been busy cataloging the vinyl and CDs so that they can be checked out of the library. Joe and I also started a radio program titled “Unshushable: Music from the Vault” where we uncover hidden gems from the ever-growing and popular music collection found in the Listening Lab with songs ranging widely across genres, and showcasing music not

heard in the mainstream. It is our hope that we will open one's ears to what the library has to offer.



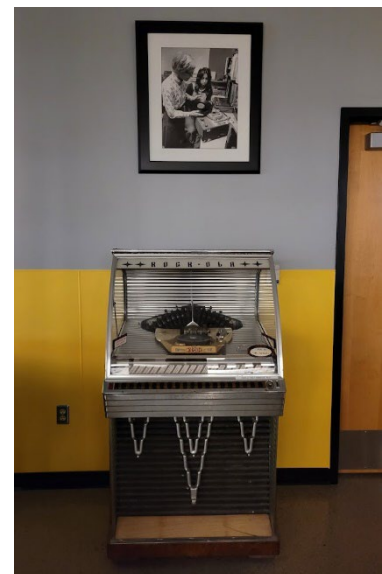
Again, way back in 2008 I created the iTunes listening stations in our library, so users could have easy access to much of the library's CD collection. I envisioned this new space to be like a record store, where people could easily browse for new music and listen to it before they take it home. While a student at the University of South Florida, I fell in love

with their library and spent countless hours flipping through bins of vinyl and discovering music that I would have never discovered otherwise. I hope the same thing will happen for our students in the Listening Lab. You can see here that one student is sampling music from a jazz record and the other is just listening and learning! These photos are music to my ears, and it is a great feeling when you see a space like this being used the way it was envisioned.



Some future plans for the Listening Lab include adding our music collection to Discogs; hosting BYOV (Bring Your Own Vinyl) sharing events; producing more college radio programming inside the Listening Lab to highlight the collection; offering free “Lunchtime Live” intimate concerts similar to NPR’s Tiny Desk Concerts; continue outreach to the Music Industry Recording Arts (MIRA) program and help with their critical listening and audio sampling classes; promoting local shows; offering self-publishing Zine

workshops, adding more instruments to the room so people can jam (we have tabla now), updating security cameras; and to continue brainstorming other ideas that will bring more visibility to this space while giving opportunities for users to discover new music. One idea that excites us is repurposing our 1955 Rock-Ola jukebox to include a QR code or a touch screen that will allow users to access a Spotify-esque music player to play music via the vintage speakers.





Ultimately, libraries are all about discovery! Thank you to Dr. Lewis and Family for their generous donation, and to Damon Dougherty, Corey Chambers, and Joe Terrana who helped get the Listening Lab setup and who continue to help it flourish. Follow the Listening Lab on [Facebook](#).

For more information, please check out [How to Repurpose Library Space: Listening Lab Edition](#) (webinar presented in 2018 for [Florida Library Webinars](#)).



A promotional video highlighting the Listening Lab was produced by the [Tampa Bay Library Consortium](#) and can be [viewed here](#). The soundtrack to this video was written by Randy Riggs, a local musician.

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