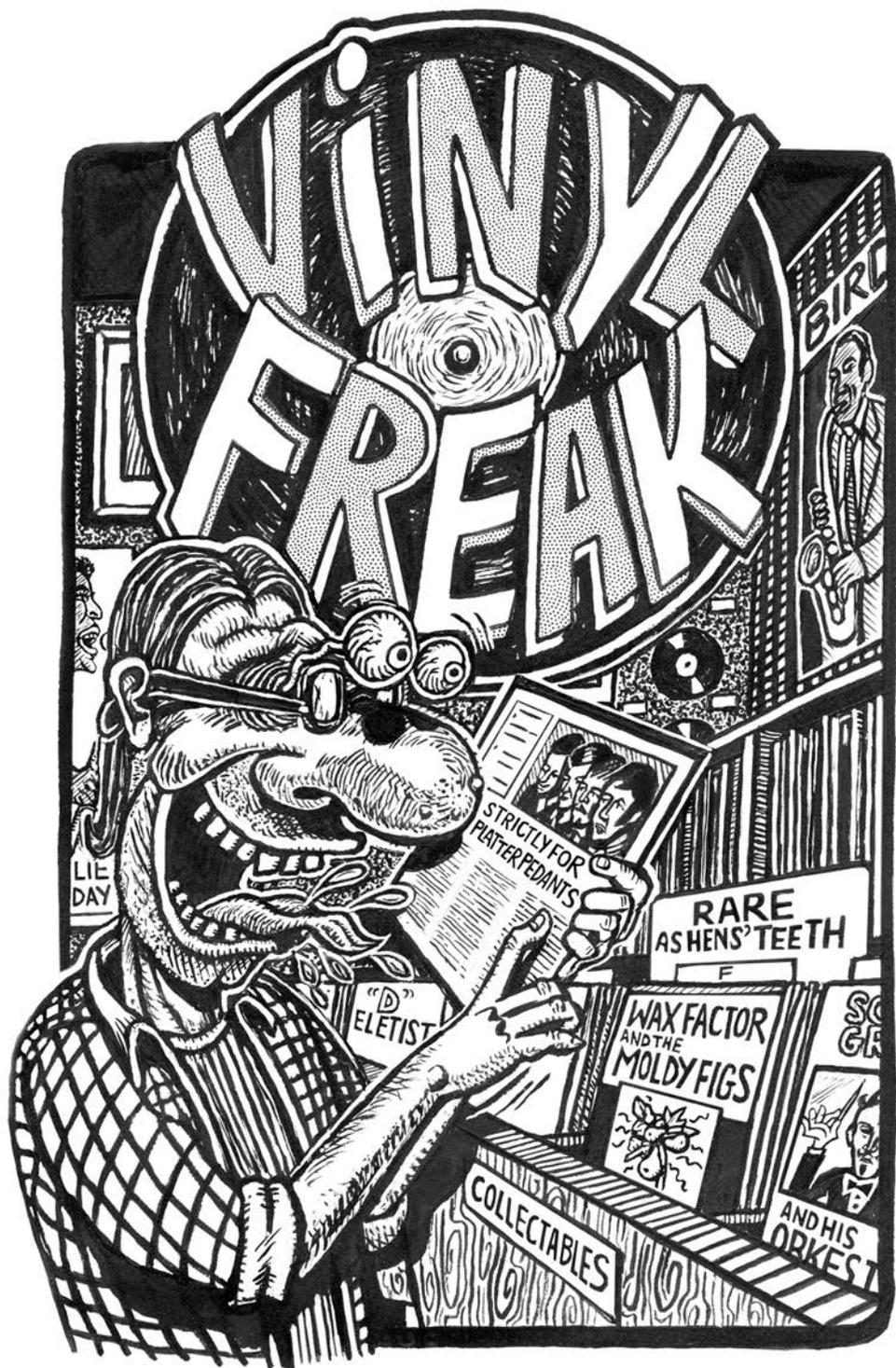
A black and white photograph of a hand holding a silver fork. The fork is holding a vinyl record, which is tilted. The background is dark and textured. The title 'VINYL FIREAK' is overlaid in large, white, stylized letters.

VINYL FIREAK

Love Letters
to a Dying
Medium

John
Corbett

Vinyl Freak



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Vinyl Freak

**Love Letters
to a Dying
Medium**

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS Durham + London 2017

**John
Corbett**

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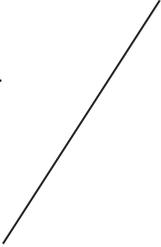
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My roots are in my record player.

—Evan Parker



Before gas came along, if you traded in whale blubber, you were the richest man on earth. Then gas came along and you'd be stuck with your whale blubber. Sorry mate—history's moving along. Recorded music equals whale blubber. Eventually, something else will replace it.

—Brian Eno

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TRACK ONE

Formation of a Freak

A Day in the Life of a Dinosaur was my first taste of vinyl. I was three. I remember listening to it, holding the bright red gatefold sleeve, studying the cartoon reptile, my special friend who multiple times a day would crawl into my ears. Soon thereafter I was given a *Batman & Robin* LP, my first encounter with Sun Ra, who worked as a session musician on the recording. I was a bit young to see the Arkestra in the mid-1960s, but because of records I could listen to the uncredited band playing the Batman theme, probably planting a seed that would be harvested forty years later. What did I know? I was just out of diapers.

I loved my records, even if I was rough on them. My parents tried to show me how to care for them, and I took their instruction to heart as best a drooling, uncoordinated little kid can, avoiding contact with the grooves, holding them between two flattened hands, learning to flip them by making a fulcrum in each palm, sliding them in and out of the inner sleeve, always putting it back in with the opening at the top so that the outer sleeve keeps the disc from slipping out. Habits that are now second nature.

At five I was listening to a Peter Rabbit record that had a big impact. Peter expresses confusion about why he sometimes misbehaves, singing: “Why do I do it, what can it be . . . ?” The way he phrased it, I heard “do it” as one word. “What does *doyt* mean?” I asked my mother. She tried to explain that it was two words, but I was adamant. If I relax my rational brain, I still wonder what he meant. When I trace my interest in sound poetry, I think this is its origin.

My folks had diverse taste in records, nothing too strange but some jazz, classical, folk, and pretty early on Beatles records. Babysitters were impressed at that. Maybe most interesting to me was an LP by Flanders & Swann, a

British comedy team. I learned to recite the routines by heart, listening to them repeatedly. Snippets made their way into daily life, a gag from the track about a dinner party at a cannibal's house transformed into a little premeal mantra: "A chorus of yums ran round the table—roast leg of insurance salesman!" I can hear my father reciting this punch line incessantly.

Comedy records were especially formative. My mom's brother, Uncle Tim, turned me on to George Carlin, total linguistics revelation, probably why I am a writer. Neighborhood friends played Richard Pryor, another epiphany, and Monty Python's Flying Circus. On the latter, a slip groove—two grooves running in parallel so that any play might equally get one or the other—completely astonished me and brought my attention directly to the technology of the record album and its status as an object. Like any kid growing up when I did, Cheech & Chong were essential; later on Steve Martin assumed the position of a nerdy high priest with his hilarious first LP. An early girlfriend, when I was about thirteen, played Firesign Theater for me. The side-long track "The Further Adventures of Nick Danger, Third Eye" became a talisman, with submerged drug and sex references that I didn't fully understand for decades, all secreted within a self-referential narrative that set me up to read Donald Barthelme and John Barth.

I recall vividly my first experience purchasing records. It was at the mall, of course, right next to the Spencer Gifts, where I bought my velvet black light poster of a swooping owl and felt the inexplicable draw of a pet rock. I had enough money saved to purchase two LPs. After much consideration, I narrowed it down to Elton John's *Greatest Hits* and *Honey* by the Ohio Players. My best friend, Scooter Johns, and I loved Elton, so the music was the motivating force in that case, but with the Ohio Players, while I dug the record's hit "Love Rollercoaster," I must confess ulterior motives for buying the record, which sported a soft-core cover of a beautiful nude woman drizzling herself with honey. Already, it was not only the music that attracted me to vinyl but the whole package. The cover was a vehicle for other kinds of information and imagery, a springboard for fantasy. Also, I was an adolescent. I took sexy stuff anywhere I could find it. I remember the electric feeling that came with putting the record on the counter and giving the clerk some cash. It was a jolt that I came to crave, perhaps some kind of sublimated sexual thing. In any case, it never went away.

By this time I was already a seasoned collector. I was born with the genetic collecting disposition. I collected butterflies, chloroforming them and pinning them to mounts, and I was good at capturing very rare ones. I also

collected live animals, mostly amphibians and reptiles. Uncle Tim bought me some stamps, and I got the philatelic bug, collected them seriously for a while; I was drawn to weirder specimens, like some beautiful triangular ones from Albania that were rarer if they had been canceled, a flip on the normal search for mint uncanceled ones. I managed to get a copy of the first stamp, the British Penny Black, and I invested in a bunch of sheets of the world's first self-adhesive stamp, thinking it would be valuable one day and not realizing that the glue backing was acidic and would burn through to the front. Next in the queue were baseball cards. I distinguished myself from my classmates by seeking older cards, buying weird black-and-white ones from the '30s and the tall, thin tobacco cards from even earlier. I would show them off, and my friends would scoff, holding out the dozen contemporary copies of a Hank Aaron card that they had extracted from hundreds of bubblegum packages. Again, the weirder and more arcane objects were fascinating to me. What my buddies did, I figured, was not collecting. It was *amassing*. A collector must hunt, and to hunt you have to have elusive prey. Anyone could amass, but it took something more to collect.

Record collecting started with those first two LPs and was always inextricably linked with a kind of connoisseurship, looking for new experiences in music, adding to my understanding of the world by way of sound. I eventually grew to see myself as a record collector, and by 1976, when I left Philadelphia, the town where I'd started the collection, I had already begun shopping at used record shops, acquiring such essential releases as the debut LPs by Starz and Dust (the latter sporting a Frank Frazzetta painting that caught my numbskull eye), Ted Nugent's *Cat Scratch Fever*, and several Pink Floyd releases, which were considered so weird in my circle of friends that I might well have been listening to musique concrète or field recordings of frogs. Good thing they didn't know about my small collection of . . . frog pond records. I remember the feeling of ill ease going into the used record shop, the wooden bins full of things I didn't recognize, acres of jazz records, classical avant-garde, bluegrass and hillbilly and rockabilly and surf. These terms I could not yet decipher. Deeply meaningful labels that meant nothing yet. It felt the same as walking into an R-rated film, recognizing that there was a parallel universe of significance as yet unyielding of its secrets, a mute realm that was nonetheless uncontrollably seductive. I bought things indiscriminately, experimentally, sometimes foolishly, often led by the cover. Other times I researched like a hound, mapping webs of association, connecting the dots, plotting musical genealogies like I was charting a family tree.

The more immersed I grew, the more I discovered that the universe of records was one of exploration. I wrote the essay for my college application about how records had made me interested in world culture. It was true, if by world culture you mean the streets of 1970s London, but most of all records made me interested in more records. When I went away to school, I took my complete collection, totaling eight hundred LPs. Somehow, by the end of school, I had managed to push that to four thousand. How I did so on my nonexistent college kid budget is a mystery. But record fiends are just like junkies; they'd rather get a fix than eat or see a movie. Or pay their phone bill. I was studying film, so going to movies was covered, and I ate at the cafeteria, so hey, let them turn off the electricity. I get all the power I need from my new Cecil Taylor box set!

The bulk of my identity as a collector was done forming by the time I had my first full-time job. The primary excitement I felt at those initial paychecks, naturally, was because they meant I could buy more records. And the collection bulged helplessly in my twenties, through canceled credit cards and innumerable domestic battles, with new musician friends whose passion was as fierce as mine, and finally until I decided that I'd probably acquired enough, or better that I'd devoted enough time to building the collection, and I all but stopped adding to it. That's where I am now, a collector who's only barely collecting. Now and then, I buy for other folks, a different kind of vicarious thrill. Whenever I feel the urge to add to my own pile, I go into the basement and pretend it's a record shop. Truthfully, I have never been in a store that good. That's a nice feeling. I smile and hit the stacks, pulling out things I've forgotten that I have, sometimes realizing I've got a duplicate copy of this or that, putting it aside to trade, refiling the stray records, admiring them and then taking a few upstairs to the stereo to do what they were made to do.