

# UCLA

## UCLA Previously Published Works

### Title

Eat what you hear: Gustasonic discourses and the material culture of commercial sound recording

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2hh949zx>

### Journal

Journal of Material Culture, 22(1)

### ISSN

1359-1835

### Authors

VanCour, Shawn  
Barnett, Kyle

### Publication Date

2017-03-01

### DOI

10.1177/1359183516679186

Peer reviewed

Article

# Eat what you hear: Gustasonic discourses and the material culture of commercial sound recording

**Shawn VanCour**

University of California, Los Angeles, USA

**Kyle Barnett**

Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, USA

## **Abstract**

This article analyzes discursive linkages between acts of listening and eating within a combined multisensory regime that the authors label the gustasonic. Including both marketing discourses mobilized by the commercial music industry and representations of record consumption in popular media texts, gustasonic discourses have shaped forms and experiences of recorded sound culture from the gramophone era to the present. The authors examine three prominent modalities of gustasonic discourse: (1) discourses that position records as edible objects for physical ingestion;

(2) discourses that preserve linkages between listening and eating but incorporate musical recordings into the packaging of other foodstuffs; and (3) discourses of gustasonic distinction that position the listener as someone with discriminating taste. While the gustasonic on one hand serves as an aid to consumerism, it can also cultivate a countervailing collecting impulse that resists music's commodity status and inscribes sound recording within alternative systems of culture value.

## **Keywords**

collecting, eating, gustasonic, music, sound

The 2013 American Express advertisement, 'Pathways', features an unlikely vehicle for its consumerist message: indie rocker and *Portlandia* star Carrie Brownstein, who proudly brandishes her Amex card in a series of character roles ranging from spend-happy businesswoman to penny-pinching mom. Most striking among these roles is a *Portlandia*-style hipster, dressed in a jean jacket and knit cap, who browses through a stack of used records at a local vinyl shop. This record-buyer quickly reveals herself to be no ordinary

consumer. Flipping disinterestedly through the stack, she dismisses the first few discs, proclaiming, 'Yeah, have it' and 'this one's a reissue', then pauses over a final item, exclaiming 'Oh my gosh, I've never even see this record, only read about it in books!' After handing her credit card to the cashier, she removes the record from its sleeve to reveal a bright blue disc, then leaning over for a tentative sniff, closes her mouth around the lip of the record and takes a bite. Purchase consummated and product quality approved, the segment closes and the advertisement moves through Brownstein's remaining impersonations to its final end slate (American Express, 2013).

While serving in Amex's advertisement as a visual gag, images of record eating hold a prominent place in the history of music listening that warrants serious scholarly attention, revealing an important dimension of modern media culture neglected in existing histories of commercial sound media. From the opening decades of the phonograph's existence to the present-day vinyl resurgence, consuming recordings and consuming food have been linked within a trans-sensorial discursive regime that we label the *gustasonic*. Gustasonic discourses as we treat them here include both marketing discourses mobilized by the commercial music industry and representations of record consumption in popular media texts. These discourses, we argue, have had a profound impact on the material culture of both modern sound recording and modern listening. In their most direct and basic form, gustasonic discourses have shaped the material design of phonography for over a century, from edible chocolate novelty discs to special-issue collectors' vinyl molded in colorful lollipop swirls. These discourses have also informed representations of record consumption in a wide range of other media, from print advertisements to popular film and television programming, providing interpretive frameworks that have structured expectations for, engagements with, and meanings of commercial sound culture for more than a century.

Tracing manifestations of the gustasonic from the early gramophone era to the present, we offer a three-part typology that delineates its defining modalities and role in promoting consumption and collecting of music as a material commodity. For our first modality, we address discourses that position the recorded sound object as something that may be literally ingested, whether in the form of edible food discs or through consumption of actual shellac or vinyl records. Our second modality of the gustasonic does not present the sound recording itself as an edible object but continues to link listening with food consumption by incorporating the record into the physical packaging of commercial food products, from cereal boxes to related foodstuffs. The final modality consists of what we call discourses of gustasonic distinction. From advertisements for stereo equipment to special-issue indie releases and promotions for small-batch vinyl production, the gustasonic here serves to generate signs of product quality and affirm the discriminating taste of the consumer. While we treat these three modalities in isolation, we do not wish to suggest them as mutually exclusive nor as necessarily an exhaustive mapping of the phenomenon at hand; the co-presence of multiple modalities or alternations

between them are conceivable, and further scrutiny may reveal additional forms of the gustasonic beyond those discussed here. Moreover, while our analysis focuses on discursive linkages between the aural and gustatory, linkages with other sensory appeals are also common; among these, the visual and tactile appeals of music media are undeniable and widely recognized. Seeking similar recognition for the gustasonic dimensions of material sound culture, we argue that examples such as our opening Amex advertisement are by no means isolated, but instead form a prominent and persistent part of the history of sound media from the beginning of commercial phonography to the present.

## **Making sense of material sound culture**

Our approach to the gustasonic draws together three core areas of scholarship. A growing body of work in sensory studies offers valuable tools for grappling with the multisensory dimensions of recorded sound, while scholarship on the recording industry and consumer culture illuminates the commercial imperatives driving gustasonic discourses on the market side. To understand the gustasonic's role in shaping regimes of consumption, we in turn draw on theories of collecting. While the collecting impulse can be harnessed for commercial gain, it can also move at odds with profit imperatives, spurring desires for new products but also countervailing desires to free sound recording from its entrapment in circuits of capitalist exchange.

Mapping the mutual interpenetration of two seemingly discrete realms of sensory experience, our analysis of the gustasonic builds on a larger 'sensory turn' in the humanities (Howes, 2013; Lauwrens, 2012) whose proponents have increasingly foregrounded the multisensory qualities of cultural experience. In their work on 'sensory anthropology', David Howes and Constance Classen (1991) urge consideration of ways that 'other senses [may] be involved in the coding, or essential to the decoding, of representations that appear primarily visual or auditory', from 'auditory imagery' in painting to 'sensory significance beyond the auditory' in music. These sensory crossings have been addressed by Classen (1993) in greater detail in her own work on the history of the senses and have also formed the subject of numerous works by media and cultural studies scholars. Richard Leppert's (1993) study of representations of music in painting, for instance, challenges the latter's status as a purportedly 'visual' medium, while Jacob Smith's (2012) work on 'visualized phonography' and Philip Auslander's (2004) musings on 'looking at records' highlight the visual dimensions of sound recording. In the field of film studies, Laura Marks (2000, 2002) has argued film's capacity to cultivate a 'haptic vision', while Steven Connor (2013) has similarly addressed the tactile qualities of film sound and further elaborated on this 'sound-touch relationship' in his ruminations (Connor, 2004) on near-deaf inventor Thomas Edison's habit of biting his phonograph machine to sample its sonic output. As Jonathan Sterne (2008) notes in his critique of what he calls the 'audiovisual litany', while media theorists have commonly drawn sharp distinctions between 'visual' or 'sonic' media, most media when viewed historically are multisensory in their qualities and

appeals. Analyzing gustasonic discourses in music marketing and popular media representations, we argue, illustrates the multisensory dimensions of commercial recording throughout its long history, restoring a neglected aspect of recorded sound culture lost to more reductive accounts that treat sound recordings as strictly aural objects.

Commercial sound recording arose as part of a larger formation of 20th-century consumer capitalism that left indelible marks on modern media culture. As Charles McGovern (2006: 3) explains, consumer capitalism's success depended on two key strategies of subjugation: (1) inculcating a ceaseless desire for new products, and (2) training consumers to discriminate subtle differences in products by competing manufacturers. An emergent sound recording industry fueled both of these tendencies. While initially designed as a read-write technology, commercial phonography focused on read-only equipment (Gitelman, 1999; Read and Welch, 1959), spawning an entire industry devoted to production of recorded sound content. This industry's success depended on both ceaseless production of new recordings and artists and corresponding production of audience demand for that material through carefully orchestrated marketing campaigns using the combined resources of radio, vaudeville and film, which in turn incorporated sound recordings as raw material for their own productions (Spring, 2013; Suisman, 2012). Governed by a logic of overproduction, the recorded sound industry achieves product differentiation through promotion in neighboring media outlets that create consumer awareness of and desire for new releases (Anderson, 2013; Hirsch, 1991; Taylor, 2012). Likewise, for equipment manufacturing, Sterne (2008) has shown the importance of what he calls 'audile technique' – a close, detail-oriented listening that grew widespread in the first part of the 20th century – for successful sales of sound equipment and the proliferation of modern audio formats, while Anderson (2006) similarly addresses the importance of consumer ear-training for the success of the hi-fi movement in the second half of the century and beyond. Gustasonic discourses, we argue, fueled rising markets for both sound recordings and playback equipment in the first part of the 20th century and remain a vital tool of the recording industry today, stimulating demand for new products and rewarding listeners with discriminating ears.

While gustasonic discourses have played an historically important role in promoting consumption of commercial sound recordings, many of the examples we discuss below also cater to a collector mentality that bears a conflicted relationship with commercial consumption, resisting music's reduction to mere exchange value. Although gustasonic discourses liken listening to eating, recordings, unlike food, commonly survive their moment of initial consumption, remaining available for repeated playback. This persistence of the consumed object invites attention to what Will Straw (1999) calls the 'thingishness of things', or that in the object which exceeds its immediate use value or economic worth and enables the production of new forms of value. The materiality of sound recording was on the one hand the condition for music's successful commodification in the 20th century; inscribed within a physical recording medium, music became an object bought and sold (Chanan, 1995; Eisenberg, 2005).

However, music's status as recorded sound made it not only something that could be purchased and consumed, but also available for inscription within a countervailing logic of collecting. As Russell Belk (1995: 65–66) explains, while entailing acts of product purchase, 'collecting is a special type of consuming' that requires 'actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences'. Collecting, as Walter Benjamin (1969) observes, re-auraticizes products of mass culture, giving them a singular meaning and value that transcends their status as commodities with

interchangeable market value. Applying Benjamin's insights in his own history of music recording, Evan Eisenberg (2005: 15) suggests the record collector as someone who exemplifies modern capitalism's discriminating consumer but also seeks to rescue the object from its entrapment within a system of capitalist production and exchange, forming both 'the true hero of consumption' and 'a rebel against consumption'. Gustasonic discourses that cater to a collector mentality, we argue, frequently demonstrate this conflicted attitude toward music's commodity status, producing model consumers who also resist music's reduction to exchange value and seek to reinscribe sound recording within alternative systems of cultural value.

### **First modality: Record eating**

The first and most straightforward form of the gustasonic positions sound recordings as objects that may be physically ingested; recorded sound is here not just for listening but also for eating. This modality of the gustasonic includes examples of edible phonography, with discs made of edible materials, as well as consumption of traditional shellac or vinyl discs. The category of edible phonography may be further subdivided into cases that (1) encourage or depict the actual eating of the record (in marketing campaigns targeted mainly at children or representations strongly linked to themes of childlike whimsy); or (2) cater to a more mature collecting impulse that divorces the record from its use value (neither played nor eaten, it is instead positioned as a collectible). Cases involving consumption of traditional shellac or vinyl records are for their part similarly split between those that (1) infantilize the record eater as indulging in childish or primitive behavior; or (2) position the record eater as a collector seeking consummate musical possession by means of bodily incorporation. The line between consumption and collecting should not be construed as a firm one here; rather, collecting remains a particular form of consumption (its resistance to commodification of the object predicated on acts of product purchase) and examples catering to more naïve forms of consumption exist on a spectrum with those catering to collecting-oriented modes of consumption.

Edible phonography is particularly prominent in sound recordings targeted at children and should be understood within the larger 'market-culture of childhood' (Cook, 2004) whose ascendancy in the 20th century has been addressed by a variety of scholars (Calvert, 1994; Jenkins, 1998; Lears, 1994). As Lisa Jacobson (2005: 2) notes, marketing discourses targeted at children typically place heavy

'emphasis on pleasure and self-fulfillment', making the gustatory pleasures of edible phonography particularly compatible with this market. As early as 1903, edible gramophone discs were designed and sold by Germany's Stollwerck Chocolate Company, a multinational purveyor of handmade chocolates that partnered with a German clock company to develop small, toy phonographs driven by clock motors designed to play back molded chocolate records by means of a tiny glass stylus (Rondeau, 2002). Once the recordings' use value for music listening was exhausted, their secondary value as a food item could still be enjoyed, with advertisements assuring consumers: 'When a song no longer pleases, oh well! Savor the disc like a simple snack, and eat it' (Rondeau, 2002). Similar gustatory appeals in the children's market may be found throughout the second half of the 20th century and beyond, both in edible discs for commercial sale and in popular representations of record

listening. In 1964, the Clevedon Confectionery Company in Blackpool, England, released a series of 4-inch flat licorice discs labeled as 'long-eating records'. While not technically playable, these confectioneries offered gustasonic fantasies of music consumption through corresponding acts of food consumption, tapping into the period's Beatlemania craze with printed pictures of the Beatles on the 'record sleeves' next to hit titles such as 'Can't Buy Me Love' and 'Taste of Honey' (Beatles Incredible Edibles, 2016). Edible phonography has also been linked to childhood fantasies of gustatory wish fulfillment in popular media representations. The 2001 film *Amélie* (dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet) follows an opening segment introducing viewers to protagonist Amélie Poulain's tragicomic childhood circumstances with a short breakfast scene showing her ensuing flight into a world of imaginative fancy, with voiceover narration proclaiming, 'In [Amélie's] world, LPs are made like pancakes', as a crepe maker spreads the 'record' across the griddle and sticks a label in its center to the sound of a needle touching vinyl. As with Stollwerck's chocolate discs and Clevedon's long-playing licorice records, edible phonography is here linked to scenes of childhood fantasy that promise the simultaneous indulgence of both aural and gustatory desire.

Not all examples of edible phonography are child-centered, and those catering to more mature consumers typically lack inducements to actually consume the object. The inventors' website *Instructables*, for instance, published a 2015 entry on how to 'Make a Working Playable Tortilla Record with a Laser Cutter' (UpgradeTech, 2015), with detailed instructions for securing the highest quality reproduction possible. Inspired by a faked video (Kyle, 2015) 'featuring a tortilla jammed on top of a record player' with 'pip[ed] in music . . . in the background', the creator of the working playable tortilla documented proof of concept through a series of demonstration videos but expressed doubts that his discs would make popular food items since 'the tortillas . . . taste rather burnt where the laser has [etched them]' (UpgradeTech, 2015). Recent years have also witnessed renewed interest in chocolate discs as collectors' items. Experimental Scottish rock band Found (2011a) issued a limited edition 7-inch chocolate disc of their single, 'Anti Climb Paint', while France's DJ Breakbot (2012) released 120 copies of

his *By Your Side* album in a special dark chocolate edition, with the music video for Found's single (Found, 2011b) featuring the band in chef costumes hand-prepping their chocolate albums and the promotional video for Breakbot's album (Ed Bangor Records, 2012) showing a chef carefully ladling liquid chocolate into prepared record molds. Unlike Stollwerck's earlier promotions that offered inducements to indulge desires for a simple snack, these images serve instead as signs of the musicians' own artisanal craftsmanship. This use of edible phonography to connote musical quality is also evident in popular representations of record culture, from a 1955 episode of late-night New York City television program *Count Sheep* that showed model Nancy Berg sticking her finger through a pizza pie then putting it on a record platter to savour the ensuing strains of Dean Martin's 'That's Amore' (Horton and Wohl, 1956: 225), to the album cover for the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed* (1969), showing band members perched atop a layer cake on a record spindle above a 12-inch *Let It Bleed* disc. Such representations do not depict the actual eating of the record but rather use the linkage of record and food to produce promissory signs of listening enjoyment.

While less common than examples of records as foodstuffs, depictions of consumers eating traditional shellac or vinyl records may also be found dating back to the early 20th century. Among the most famous scenes in Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) is a visit by its titular Inuit character to a Western trading post where the trader plays him a record on a hand-cranked gramophone machine; once the song has finished, Nanook raises the disc to his lips and attempts to bite it. However, unlike Brownstein's record aficionado from our opening Amex example, the record eater in Flaherty's film is positioned not as a discriminating collector but instead as a naïve primitive unfamiliar with modern recording technology – the gustasonic thus abetting what sound scholars have shown to be a long history of problematic linkages between audio recording and colonialist ethnographic practices (Brady, 1999; Sterne, 2008). A 1939 Associated Press piece offers a further example of tendencies to infantilize the record eater, featuring a photo of University of Chicago freshman John Patrick biting into a pile of shellac discs in what the accompanying report explained was a 'fad' launched in response to the period's popular goldfish-swallowing craze (Associated Press, 1939; *Washington Post*, 1939: 16). Here the gustasonic is coded as a moment of youthful folly, a passing craze of reckless college students operating beyond their parents' watchful gaze. Other examples of record eating, however, tie it to the more mature practices of the serious collector. Writing for the Bay-area *Bohemian* on his unusual decision to ingest a copy of Superchunk's 7-inch B-side 'On the Mouth', reporter Gabe Meline (2005) explained that:

It isn't the most kick-ass record in the world, I know. But I used to have it a long time ago and I lost it, and there's nothing like losing a record to make you want it again all the more. Eating it just seems like the best way to get it back – you know, for good.

A similar logic informs the logo for the Los Angeles-based hip hop



record company Delicious Vinyl (Delicious Vinyl, 2016), which features a cartoon character taking a bite out of a vinyl disc, with musical notes drifting up from the latter. While Belk (1988) notes that possessions serve as extensions of the collector's self, here there is not an extension of the self into the world of objects, but rather a possession of the object through its physical incorporation into the consuming subject, bringing the external world of things and the inner world of the self into full correspondence. For the serious collector, record eating moves beyond mere ingestion, offering a means of consummate and permanent possession.

## **Second modality: Gustasonic packaging**

In the second modality of the gustasonic, linkages between listening and food consumption remain strong, but the emphasis shifts from record eating to cross-promotional tie-ins between recordings and more conventional foodstuffs. This modality posits a more figurative connection between eating and listening by incorporating music into the packaging of other foods, in strategies that have historically taken one of two main forms: (1) proof-of-purchase campaigns, which encouraged consumers to cut out and mail in portions of food containers in exchange for special promotional records; and (2) recordings

incorporated into the actual packaging of selected food items, such as cereal box records or similar products. Many of the examples in these categories cater to the children's market, building on the 'kidisk' craze that began during the post-World War II period (Bonner, 2008; Smith, 2011) and continuing through the era of 'bubble-gum pop' in the 1960s-1970s (Simpson, 2011), though more recent examples also indicate an extension of musical packaging into the adult market. As with their other modalities, gustasonic discourses in food packaging remain split between inducements to more naïve forms of consumption and appeals to a more complex collector's mentality.

Proof-of-purchase campaigns positioned eating as a means to listening by promising records in exchange for mailed-in proofs of purchase. Acts of food consumption in this way produced an anticipatory listening, enabling subsequent, corresponding forms of sound consumption: one had to eat (or at least buy) to listen. As Kyle Asquith (2015) notes in his history of prewar box-top promotions, food advertisers throughout the first half of the 20th century marketed heavily to children through mail-in offers. These strategies continued well into the postwar era and frequently featured record tie-ins. During the 1940s, Bing Crosby's Phonocard Company manufactured cardboard records for Borden's Cottage Cheese with songs and nursery rhymes like 'Home on the Range' and 'A Tisket a Tasket' (Borden's, c. 1940s), while Post's ToyTime record and picture book series offered retellings of *Sleeping Beauty*, *William Tell*, *The Golden Goose*, and other stories on vinyl 78s, with accompanying picture books to let children follow along (Muldavin, 2006: 92-92, 352). H-O Instant Oatmeal joined the game in the 1950s, advertising mail-in offers for picture-discs with tips from major league baseball players on how to improve your ball game (of which eating a healthy

breakfast was but one), with record tie-ins by other food manufacturers during the postwar decade including brands ranging from E-Z Pop Popcorn, Minute Maid Orange Juice, Bosco Chocolate Syrup, and Wall's Ice Cream, to Curtiss Candy, Peter Pan Peanut Butter, French's Mustard, and Jolly Green Giant vegetables (Muldavin, 2006: 51, 227, 427-429) .

If this mail-order regime of the gustasonic linked acts of eating and listening but imposed a temporal separation between the two, the incorporation of records into food packaging brought the pleasures of these twin forms of consumption into full temporal coincidence. As with the mail-in regime, this strategy focused largely on the children's market, with cardboard records featuring popular youth music pressed into cereal boxes that made the recording part of the packaging, literally wrapping the food in sound. General Mills, which had offered a prewar line of Wheaties Red Records on shellac featuring songs like 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' and 'Clementine', partnered with Walt Disney in the 1950s to present a series of Mouseketeer records pressed into the cardboard cereal box itself (Mickey Mouse, 1956; Muldavin, 2006: 100). Moving into the 'bubblegum pop' era of the 1960s-1970s (Simpson, 2011: 17-54), Post sought to expand its youth market with on-the-box records featuring new bands based on popular cereal brands such as the Sugar Bears (Simpson, 2013), as well as established teen stars such as Bobby Sherman and The Jackson Five, with boxes labeled 'Ready to Play!' or 'One Record Right On This Box!' (Cereal Box Records, 2014). As Roland Barthes (2013) notes, food always serves both a functional value as nutrition and symbolic value as a cultural product. Use of music as packaging enhances the symbolic value of the enclosed foodstuff, endowing it with communicative powers of speech and song to aid in the creation of

brand identities and attract consumer subjects whose own identities become synonymous with the brands they consume (Borgerson, 2005).

Recognizing music's power in the formation of brand identities, other manufacturers have recently sought to extend the musical packaging strategy in appeals to adult consumers. In 2013, Beck's beer released 'the world's first playable beer bottle', with a single by New Zealand indie band Ghost Wave etched into the glass using a modified Edison cylinder machine and specialized tracking software (Shine Limited, 2013). Making the gustasonic appeals of their 'Edison Bottle' explicit, Beck's creative agency, Shine Limited, explained that, 'Considering how beer has influenced recorded music . . .

. this physical collaboration was very appropriate and long overdue' (Russell, 2013). More recently, Coca-Cola announced the launch of its summer 2016 'Share a Coke and a Song' campaign in the US, in which the company explained, 'more than 70 genre-spanning lyrics - from classic hits to recent chart-toppers - will be featured on ... [selected bottles and cans] of all four Trademark Coke brands' (Moye, 2016). As a write-up in *Advertising Age* elaborated, the campaign was first launched in China in 2014 and in its US iteration would also include a series of 'music-themed TV spots', summer concert tours by participating musicians, and a mobile media component allowing use of the Shazam app 'to scan specially marked . . . bottles' and record a

15-second 'digital lip-sync video' of the featured song to share on social media with the #ShareaCoke hashtag (Schultz, 2016). Substituting a mobile app for a phonograph machine to convert the product's musical packaging back into sound, this strategy also transformed Coca-Cola consumers into active promoters of both their music and the larger Coke brand.

As with other modalities of the gustasonic, use of musical tie-ins by food companies for branding purposes can reveal deeper contradictions between consuming and collecting. Merchandising tie-ins between food companies and record companies targeted at child consumers, for instance, often train children in the more 'selective' mode of consumption that Belk (1995: 66-67) associates with collecting, or 'forming what is seen as a set of things' valued for their rarity and finitude. Continuing the cereal box record's own emphasis on collectible musical packaging, the Amurrol Company launched a line of novelty Chu Bops bubble gum in the 1980s, molded in the shape of a record and packaged in miniature album covers representing artists from Elvis and The Beatles to The Cars, Blondie, and Gary Numan (Smith, 2014). Deepening fans' engagement with their favorite bands through lyrics and related liner notes, this musical packaging was also explicitly pitched as collectors' items, sold in nine separate series for display in a 'Collector's Album' available through separate purchase (Smith, 2014). Likewise, Beck's Edison Bottle, though promoting consumption of Ghost Wave and Beck's beer, also remains unplayable on any commercial machine, designed as a one-off production for playback on proprietary equipment developed by Auckland firm Gyro Constructivists (Russell, 2013); while consumers may have their fill of music and alcohol, the Edison Bottle itself remains a consummate collectible, a mass commodity transformed into a quintessentially rare object. Coke's song bottles, though more readily available, are also limited-release items, with consumers encouraged to collect as many different lyrics as possible while supplies last. Whether targeted at children or adult consumers, musical packaging in these examples harnesses the gustasonic to move beyond more naïve modes of consumption and cultivate a collecting mentality predicated on but distinct from acts of basic product purchase.

### **Third modality: Gustasonic distinction**

Our final form of the gustasonic are discourses of gustasonic distinction. In his analysis of postwar hi-fi culture, Keir Keightley (1996: 156) argues that male audiophiles embraced hi-fi stereo equipment during the postwar period not simply for audio enhancement, but as a means 'of escaping [the] feminine mass mediocrity' of postwar consumer culture and accruing signs of cultural distinction. The gustasonic has played an important role in generating these signs of distinction throughout the past century, helping to set the music lover and audiophile apart from the everyday listener. Upholding Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) principle of the homology of the fields, discourses of gustasonic distinction work to align musical taste with the discriminating palette of the connoisseur who appreciates the value of fine cuisine. This modality of the gustasonic spans three core domains: (1) advertisements and product reviews for audio equipment that invoke claims of sound fidelity; (2)

promotion and reception of special-edition novelty records released in conjunction with recent Record Store Day campaigns; and (3) a rhetoric of 'small-batch' production that links record listening to the gustatory pleasures of the craft food movement. While all three domains cater to a discriminating consumer and offer signs of audio connoisseurship, the second and third strongly favor the collector who sees in sound recording a value exceeding that of monetary exchange.

Marketing campaigns for 20th-century commercial sound recording technologies, Sterne (2008: 267) argues, encouraged detail-oriented forms of listening by exhorting consumers to 'hone their audile technique [and] become connoisseurs of the various shades of perfection in tone'. These campaigns, however, did not limit their appeals to the ear alone, frequently couching claims of audio fidelity within broader discourses of gustasonic distinction. The Radio Corporation of America (1940), for instance, advertised its 1940 Duo-Cone Loudspeaker to the public as the 'music-lovers' "horn of plenty", showing musicians spilling out of an exposed cornucopia-shaped speaker cone with the promise of 'faithfully reproduc[ing] every overtone', while Warner Brothers (1959) promoted its new line of stereo LPs in 1959 with an advertisement showing a seductive woman in fancy dress with a caption reading:

Look at her and you know . . . . She dines at Le Pavillon her choice in fine wines is Chateau Mouton Rothschild '39 and she attracts the kind of man who always buys Warner Bros stereo records.

Catering to the discriminating consumer, this advertisement equated discernment of subtle sonic differences with a refined culinary palette and gustatory pleasures as good as sex. Similar discourses have also surrounded tape and digital audio formats. *Modern Recording*, the self-described magazine 'Serving Today's Music/Recording-Conscious Society', featured advertisements by Ithaca-based Man-O-Mann Productions (1979) promoting its 'Reel Meals' recording and transfer services, encouraging clients to 'call or write for our free menu' of 'complete entrées of Teac, Tascam, Otari, Studiomaster and other delectable studio packages', with 'side orders of Ampex and 3M tape'. More recently, advertisements for music equipment manufacturer Behringer (2009) promoted their home studio software as a 'tasty digital audio workstation' with 'a smorgasbord of features' and 'deliciously radical approach to recording' that forms the 'perfect side dish'

to their USB mixers, while a review of vibration-damping platforms on music blogging site *6 Moons* (Kramer, 2005) reminded 'audiophiles and music lovers in pursuit of blissful fidelity' that vibration control for CD players would produce cleaner sound separation for 'the cream on a scrumptiously tasty audio pie.' Whether for those simply listening or pursuing home recording, these discourses surrounding high fidelity audio equipment invoke signs of gustasonic distinction to flatter the audiophile as a discriminating consumer with a finely honed audile technique.

Discourses of gustasonic distinction also figure prominently in the marketing and reception of limited edition novelty records. These

special editions are a central promotional strategy for the music industry's annual Record Store Day, with *Billboard* reporting 350 releases for Record Store Day 2016 alone (Zlatopolsky, 2016). Gustasonic appeals are reflected in the physical design of novelty vinyl, from Swedish band Shout Out Loud's 2012 'Blue Ice' single released on 10 limited-edition ice records (Geere, 2012), to King Kung Foo Records' trademarked 'Sandwich Record', debuted in 2012 with a 7-inch single of Belgian group Ronny & Renzo's 'Taboo' sandwiched inside a larger 10-inch Ronny & Renzo remix of Coz/Mes's 'Naruto' (Cos Mes/Ronny & Renzo, 2012). Liquid-filled records have proven another popular format, often hand-crafted by local artisans (Mondo Reveal, 2016). For Record Store Day 2012, Jack White's Third Man Records used its YouTube channel to promote a special release of his song 'Sixteen Saltines', filled with blue water, as well as a solid 'milk and honey swirl-colored' release of Karen Elson's 'Milk and Honey' introduced by TMR spokesman Ben Blackwell with the warning, 'Don't eat it' (Third Man Records, 2012). In reviews on collecting sites such as *Discogs*, fans caution that these good-enough-to-eat special releases are not only not for eating but also not for listening, for fear of damaging the disc or lessening its value as a collectible. As one reviewer noted in comments on White's single, 'Would love to own one, but not play it' (Asger, 2012). Divorced from their use value, special edition vinyl function as objects that in Straw's (1999) words, '[enter] into an economy of scarcity and legitimacy' in which they are '[rendered] cherished and precious.' As Belk (1995: 88) notes, a 'benefit sought by most collectors is the chance to stand out . . . by virtue of possessing rare, valued, and unique possessions.' Special releases that incorporate gustasonic appeals operate within this logic of distinction, targeted at the collector who can appreciate their value as rare objects to be preserved and saved, not eaten or played.

Discourses of gustasonic distinction are equally central to an ascendant rhetoric of 'small-batch' recording. In a 2012 article on 'The secrets of a high-quality vinyl record', *The New York Times* reported that, unlike earlier eras of mass market vinyl when audiophiles had to 'seek out a boutique label that made special high-fidelity recordings', today 'practically all vinyl records . . . are small-batch boutique pressings', forming a new 'hipster essential, like cocktails with artisan bitters' (Furghott, 2012). The affinities between small-batch record production and craft foods are not lost on supporters, who regularly pair their vinyl consumption with sampling of rare drinks and eats. Local groups such as San Francisco's Small Batch Vinyl Club promote their organization as one devoted to small-batch bourbon and rare records, with a motto of 'Music Tastes Good' and mission to 'Sit, sip, listen and enjoy' (Bottkol, 2013). Adopting a similar rhetoric in a press release promoting a November 2014 'Vinyl Night' at Nashville's Fat

Bottom Brewery, Third Man Records explained that TMR staff would be 'spin[ning] rare gems and sweet sounds from their personal collections', while 'Fat Bottom'll be slingin' small batch brews', and Third Man's Rolling Record Store – itself a converted food truck – selling 'all the limited, exclusive merchandise you've come to expect' (Third Man Records, 2014). As Dominik Barmanski and Ian Woodward (2015: 114) note in their study of the vinyl resurgence,

'the logic of small-batch production is economic, but is also supported by cultural meanings', offering signs of 'authenticity, commitment to artistic values . . . ahead of profits, and . . . the distinction of being . . . consumed by a small group.' Employing manufactured scarcity as a bulwark against music's massification, small-batch production represents an effort to rescue music from the perceived abuses of a profit-driven sound industry, in a strategy homologous to that of the craft food movement. However, as Eisenberg (2005: 20) explains, such efforts to wrest music from its inscription within circuits of commodity exchange are of dubious efficacy, since whether I aim to consume my music or save it, 'my money has already heard it.' While invoking signs of countercultural distinction, small-batch production remains a conflicted, capital-friendly cure to commercialism – one that, when paired with craft food consumption, perversely multiplies points of purchase for even grander displays of consumerism than those against which it purportedly rebels.

## **Conclusion: Gustasonic redux**

While occupying a prominent place in recorded sound culture, from marketing discourses to popular representations of sound consumption in other media, gustasonic discourses have suffered scholarly neglect. As music and sound historians increasingly engage with non-aural dimensions of sound culture, from the visual to the tactile, we have sought to highlight the gustatory dimensions of sound culture as an area equally worthy of attention. Gustasonic discourses that link sound consumption with food consumption, or hearing with taste, have played an important role in both marketing strategies for the commercial sound industry and popular media representations of listening and sound culture. Discourses are not innocent forms of cultural expression but perform a vital ideological work, informing material cultural practices by structuring ways of thinking and knowing the world. In showing the prominence of gustasonic discourses throughout the past century, we have tried to suggest their importance for shaping broader cultural expectations for, meanings of, and engagement with recorded sound from the gramophone era to the present.

Our analysis has identified three distinct modalities of gustasonic discourse. The first positions records as edible objects that may be physically ingested, whether through cases of edible phonography made of various foodstuffs or cases involving eating of traditional vinyl and shellac records. Not all edible phonography is intended for actual consumption, with some serving instead as collectibles, while eating of traditional records likewise ranges from naïve consumption by infantilized individuals to collectors seeking consummate forms of musical possession. The second modality preserves linkages between listening and eating by incorporating musical recordings into the packaging of other foodstuffs. Here, too, we have observed competing tendencies between the inculcation of a general consumerist ethos and cultivation of a more selective collector's

mentality that favors bounded consumption of items within a finite set. The third modality offers listeners signs of gustasonic distinction through appeals to sonic fidelity that position the

consumer as one with a discriminating ear, good-enough-to-eat novelty records marketed to serious vinyl collectors who recognize their rarity and value, and small-batch recordings whose pleasures are likened to those of the craft food movement. Throughout this final modality, distinction is achieved by elevating the listener above commercial mass culture, through appeals to more rarified forms of consumption and discourses of authenticity (whether at the level of the sound reproducing apparatus itself

- i.e. promises of audio fidelity - or in the music played back on it, i.e. craftsmanship over profit). While these three modalities should not be construed as exhausting the gustatory's rich and varied historical manifestations, we hope the preceding analysis might begin to make sense of this discursive regime's more prominent forms and functions as it has operated throughout the course of the past century.

## Acknowledgements

We benefited from comments on earlier versions of this article at the US chapter of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music's 2014 annual meeting in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and at the Experience Music Project's 2015 Pop Conference in Seattle, Washington. Thanks also to children's record collector Peter Muldavin, to friends and family for their additional examples, and to *Journal of Material Culture* editors and readers for their helpful suggestions.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## References

- Amélie (2001) Film, dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet. France/Germany: Miramax/Zoë.
- American Express: *Pathways* (2013) Television advertisement, dir. Stacy Wall. Ogilvy & Mather, New York.
- Anderson T (2006) *Making Easy Listening: Material Culture and Postwar American Recording*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Anderson T (2013) From background music to above-the-line actor: The rise of the music supervisor in converging televisual environments. *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 25(3): 371-388.
- Asger (2012) Review of Jack White, 'Sixteen Saltines'. *Discogs*, 13 May. Available at: <https://www.discogs.com/Jack-White-Sixteen-Saltines/release/3556751> (accessed 25 April 2016).
- Asquith K (2015) Knowing the child consumer through box tops: Data collection, measurement, and advertising to children. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 1920-1945* 32(2): 112-127.
- Associated Press (1939) College fads, 31 March. Available at: <http://bigstory.ap.org/content/college-fads> (accessed 5 June 2015).
- Auslander P (2004) Looking at records. In: Drobnick J (ed.) *Aural Cultures*. Banff: YYZ Books.
- Barmanski D and Woodward I (2015) *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Barthes R (2013) Toward a psychosociology of contemporary food consumption. In: Counihan C, Esterik PV (eds) *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 3rd edn. New York: Routledge.

- Beatles Incredible Edibles: Illustrated Price Guide. *Rare Beatles*. Available at: <http://www.rare-beatles.com/photopg2/eatthe.htm> (accessed 1 May 2016).
- Behringer Music Group (2009) Advertisement: Hot mixer, tasty digital audio workstation pro-gram. *Music Planet* 1(2): 60.
- Belk R (1988) Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research* 15(2): 139–168. Belk R (1995) *Collecting in a Consumer Society*. New York: Routledge.
- Benjamin W (1969) Unpacking my library: A talk about book collecting. In: Arendt H (ed.) *Illuminations*, trans. H Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 59–67.
- Bonner D (2008) *Revolutionizing Children's Records, 1946–1977*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press. Borden's Cottage Cheese (c. 1940s) Cardboard audio recording. *The Internet Museum of Flexi/ Cardboard/Oddity Records*. Available at: <http://www.wfmu.org/MACrec/borden.html> (accessed 26 May 2015).
- Borgerson J (2005) Materiality, agency, and the constitution of consuming subjects: Insights for consumer research. *Advances in Consumer Research* 32: 439–443.
- Bottkol M (2013) And so it begins. In: *Small Batch Vinyl Club* (blog), 23 April. Available at: <http://smallbatchvinylclub.blogspot.com/2013/04/we-have-looko.html> (accessed 20 March 2015).
- Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brady E (1999) *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press.
- Breakbot (2012) *By Your Side* (12-inch LP). Paris: Ed Banger Records.
- Calvert K (1994) *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600–1900*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Cereal Box Records (2014) eBay seller images. Available at: <http://www.ebay.com/bhp/cereal-box-records> (accessed 6 June 2014).
- Chanan M (1995) *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and Its Effects on Music*. New York: New Left Books.
- Classen C (1993) *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*. London: Routledge.
- Connor S (2004) Edison's teeth: Touching hearing. In: Erlmann V (ed.) *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*. Oxford: Berg.
- Connor S (2013) Sounding out film. In: Richardson J et al. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cook D (2004) *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Cos Mes/Ronny & Renzo: Naruto Ronny & Renzo Takotsubo Take Ten/Taboo (2012). *Phonica Records Review*. Available at: <http://www.phonicarecords.com/product/cos-mes-ronny-renzo-naruto-ronny-renzo-takotsubo-king-kung-foo-records/104122> (accessed 25 April 2016).
- Delicious Vinyl (logo). Available at: <http://deliciousvinyl.com/> (accessed 2 May 2016).
- Ed Banger Records (2012) *Breakbot's 'By Your Side' Chocolate Vinyl is Available Today!* (promotional video). Available at: <https://youtu.be/5bte5jzPD3c> (accessed 8 May 2015).
- Eisenberg E (2005) *The Recording Angel: Music, Records, and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa*, 2nd edn. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Found (2011a) *Anti Climb Paint* (7-inch single). Glasgow: Chemikal Records.
- Found (2011b) *Anti Climb Paint* (music video, dir. Andy Brown). Glasgow:



- Chemical Records. Furgott R (2012) The secrets of a high-quality record. *New York Times*, 31 May: F6.
- Geere D (2012) Shout Out Louds release single on record made of ice. *Wired UK*, 29 December. Available at: <http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2012-12/29/ice-record> (accessed 26 April 2016).
- Gitelman L (1999) *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hirsch P (1991) Processing fads and fashions: An organization-set analysis of cultural industry systems. In: Mukerji C, Schudson M (eds) *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 313-334.
- Horton D and Wohl RR (1956) Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry* 19(3): 215-229.
- Howes D (2013) The expanding field of sensory studies. *Sensory Studies*. Available at: <http://www.sensorystudies.org/sensorial-investigations/the-expanding-field-of-sensory-studies> (accessed 22 December 2016).
- Howes D and Classen C (1991) Sounding sensory profiles. In: Howes D (ed.) *The Varieties of Sensory Experience*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Jacobson L (2005) *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jenkins H (ed.) (1998) *The Children's Culture Reader*. New York: NYU Press.
- Keightley K (1996) 'Turn it down,' she shrieked: Gender, domestic space, and high fidelity, 1948- 59. *Popular Music* 15(2): 149-177.
- Kramer E (2005) Bright Star Audio: IsoRock 3 reference (review). *6Moons Audio Reviews*. Available at: <http://www.6moons.com/audioreviews/bsa/isorock.html> (accessed 26 April 2016)
- Kyle (2015) *Limited Edition Tortilla Vinyl* (web video). Available at: <https://youtu.be/U1SiveWVllo> (accessed 25 April 2016).
- Lauwrens J (2012) Welcome to the revolution: The sensory turn and art history. *Journal of Art Historiography* 7: 1-17.
- Lears J (1994) *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*. New York: Basic Books/Harper Collins.
- Leppert R (1993) *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Man-O-Mann Productions (1979) Reel meals (classified advertisement). *Modern Recording* 4(10): 126.
- Marks L (2000) *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Marks L (2002) *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McGovern C (2006) *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Meline G (2005) Swallow that: In which our wayward reporter eats an entire record album. *Metroactive*, 19 January. Available at: <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/sonoma/01.19.05/dining-0503.html> (accessed 10 June 2014).
- Mickey Mouse (1956) Happy Mouse (5-inch 78 rpm cereal box disc). Los Angeles: Walt Disney's Mouseketeer Records.
- Mondo reveal making of new liquid-filled record (2016) *The Vinyl Factory*, 26 April. Available at: <http://www.thevinylfactory.com/vinyl-factory-news/mondo-making-of>

liquid-filled-record/ (accessed 26 April 2016).

Moye J (2016) Share a Coke and a Song: Summer campaign to feature lyrics on packaging. *Coca Cola Journey* (online press release), 31 March. Available at: <http://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/share-a-coke-and-a-song-summer-campaign-to-feature-music-lyrics-on-packaging/> (accessed 30 April 2016).

Muldavin P (2006) *The Complete Guide to Vintage Children's Records: Identification and Value Guide*. Paducah, KY: Collector Books.

*Nanook of the North* (1922) Film, dir. Robert J Flaherty. USA: Pathé Films.

Radio Corporation of America (1940) Music lovers' 'horn of plenty' (print advertisement). Wilmington, DE: David Sarnoff Library Digital Archive, Hagley Museum and Library, Available at: <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16038coll11/id/12863/rec/1> (accessed 26 April 2016).

Read O and Welch W (1959) *From Tin Foil to Stereo: The Evolution of the Phonograph*.

Indianapolis: Howard W Sams.

Rolling Stones (1969) *Let It Bleed* (12-inch LP). London: Decca Records.

Rondeau R (2002) Sweet music: Stollwerck phonographs play chocolate records. *Journal of Mechanical Music* 48(2): 18-22.

Russell M (2013) Beck's Edison Bottle. *Ethnomusicology Review* 18 (Sounding Board web feature, 12 June). Available at: <http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/content/becks-edison-bottle-first-playable-beer> (accessed 15 April 2016).

Schultz EJ (2016) Coke slaps more than 70 song lyrics on cans and bottles: Next phase of 'Share a Coke' has a musical bent. *Advertising Age*, 31 March. Available at: <http://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/coke-slaps-70-song-lyrics-cans-bottles/303337/> (accessed 30 April 2016).

Shine Limited (2013) *The Beck's Edison Beer Bottle* (promotional video). Available at: <https://vimeo.com/68007497> (accessed 30 April 2016).

Simpson K (2011) *Early 70s Radio: The American Format Revolution*. New York: Continuum. Simpson K (2013) The Sugar Bears' cereal box hit. In: *Early 70s AM Radio* (blog), August.

Available at: <http://www.early70sradio.com/2013/08/the-sugar-bears-cereal-box-hit.html> (accessed 20 March 2016).

Smith J (2011) *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Smith J (2012) Phonograph toys and early sound cartoons: Towards a history of visualized phonography. *Animation* 7(2): 151-174.

Smith N (2014) Chu-Bops - miniature vinyl record album covers with bubble gum inside. In: *Stuff We Collect* (blog), 26 February. Available at: <http://stuffwecollect.com/chu-bops-miniature-vinyl-record-album-covers-with-bubble-gum-inside> (accessed 20 June 2015).

Spring K (2013) *Saying It with Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to Hollywood Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sterne J (2008) *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Straw W (1999) The thingishness of things. In: *Visible Culture* 2: np. Available at: [www.rochester.edu/in\\_visible\\_culture/issue2/issue2.htm](http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/issue2/issue2.htm) (accessed 12 June 2014).

Suisman D (2012) *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Taylor T (2012) *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Third Man Records (2012) *Third Man Records - Record Store Day 2012* (promotional video).

Available at: <https://youtu.be/qtOtNKHbBNY> (accessed 6 June 2014).

- Third Man Records (2014) First weekly WRLT DJ night at Fat Bottom Brewery. *Third Man Records: News* (press release), 3 November. Available at: <http://thirdmanrecords.com/news/> first-monthly-wrlt-dj-night-at-fat-bottom-brewery (accessed 10 May 2015).
- UpgradeTech (2015) Make a working playable tortilla record with a laser cutter. In: *Instructables: Share What You Make* (blog), June. Available at: <http://www.instructables.com/id/Make-a-Working-Playable-Tortilla-Record-with-a-Las> (accessed 25 April 2016).
- Warner Bros. Records (1959) Look at her and you know (print advertisement). *High Fidelity*, January: 69.

*Washington Post* (1939) Untitled photo with caption, 2 April: 16.

Zlatopolsky A (2016). Record Store Day's hottest special releases – from David Bowie to vintage Madonna. *Billboard*, 8 April. Available at: <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/magazine-feature/7326220/record-store-days-hottest-special-releases-david-bowie-madonna-metallica-johnny-cash> (accessed 20 April 2016).

## Author biographies

Shawn VanCour is Assistant Professor of Media Archival Studies in UCLA's Department of Information Studies. He has published in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *Media, Culture & Society*, *Modernist Cultures*, and numerous anthologies, as well as contributing columns to *Flow*, *Sounding Out*, and *Antenna*. His work explores the development of radio and television in the US and the history of 20th-century sound culture.

Kyle Barnett is an Associate Professor in Media Studies at Bellarmine University's School of Communication. He has published in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*, and several anthologies. He has contributed columns to *Flow*, *Antenna*, and *In Media Res*, and co-edited a special issue of *Creative Industries Journal*. Barnett's research focuses on media history, material culture, cultural industries, and sound across media.