

# Side 1:

## What Revolves but Does Not Circulate?

**by Martha Sutherland**  
Adult Services Library Assistant,  
Eugene Public Library  
[MSutherland@Eugene-OR.gov](mailto:MSutherland@Eugene-OR.gov)



An analog girl in a digital world, MARTHA SUTHERLAND aims to bring engaging musical experiences to the patrons of the Eugene Public Library. Her work as a Library Assistant in Adult Services includes planning monthly record listening programs, staffing public desks, access services, Book a Librarian, and scheduling for her department. Outside of work she enjoys hanging out at the House of Records with her husband, thrift and antique shopping with her teenage daughter, karaoke night with colleagues, and reading true crime.

In May of 2019, the Eugene Public Library purchased a 1971 Panasonic record player and a collection of 30 vinyl records spanning many genres of music. Our Tech Services team cataloged and tagged each record. We planned to offer them to the public for in-house use and an immersive listening experience. With this in mind, we created a Record Listening Station. Any person who walks through our doors, with or without a library card, is welcome to sit back and listen to records through library headphones. We also offer a headphone splitter so patrons can listen with a friend. At the core of this endeavor were two priorities: our library's commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and the goal of building community through the collection.

The process of building community begins with communication. There are many ways of discovering what patrons want and what they think. A blue binder at the Record Listening Station serves as an interactive User's Guide so patrons can contribute ideas. Our DIY Guide includes everything from simple instructions on how to use the turntable to magazine ads from 1971 featuring our vintage record player. Patrons can also find concise album reviews for most of the albums in the collection and blank space for them to write their own reviews. A handy purchase suggestion sheet was how we ended up with a headphone splitter and many new albums. So far, patrons have made more than forty album recommendations and one has written a review. I included the patron review on our Record Listening Station LibGuide to enhance community participation.

Having worked in a record store for 16 years, I am interested in connecting people to music. In the early days of the Record Listening Station, I regularly scheduled myself at the reference desk where I could easily monitor the turntable and the collection. Many patrons seeing the records and turntable for the first time expressed surprise. "Wow! I haven't seen one of these in years," one patron marveled. When I saw people struggling to make sense of the equipment, I darted over and offered assistance. I continue to see patrons standing at a distance from the record player and crate of records as if viewing a museum piece. So, I invite them to pick out a record and show them how to play it. One patron commented, "I'm surprised such old technology still has great quality audio compared to modern tech." Another person said, "I love it. Got any Oingo Boingo?" The diversity of the collection appeals to a variety of listeners. Young adults tend to queue up rock or hip-hop. Older patrons



lean towards jazz, classical and easy listening. The collection, which has doubled in size in seven months, has something for all ears.



Our record listening station has undergone many changes. This handy book truck allows for outward facing album covers and books to attract potential listeners.

Several times a month an elderly man nestles into the chair at the listening station and queues up the same record, *Our Raw Heart*, by a Eugene-based metal band called Yob. The man sits back with headphones, closes his eyes, and appears to drift into a dream. After his third or fourth visit, I approached him as he was again queuing up the Yob album. I greeted him quietly, mentioned that I see him frequently using the record player and asked what he thought of it. He told me that he loves listening to records and that he hadn't done it for a long time. I pried further, pointing to the crate of albums, and asked if he had any favorites. He held up the Yob cover. "I like this one," he said smiling. When I asked what he liked about it, he paused and spoke slowly. "It has a medieval quality that reminds me of sword fights in dark green forests. Sometimes it sounds like Sci-Fi—something from another world."



Making time for interactions like the one with the elderly Yob fan, offering a sort of “listener’s advisory” service, or even simply helping someone operate the equipment are all inconspicuous ways of building community. These simple acts of providing information, making a recommendation, showing interest, and reaching out make people feel welcome and involved. The records and the turntable are recreational resources for the enjoyment of the community.

The development of the collection and the creation of the listening space has never been a one-person effort. In addition to inviting patron participation, I also reached out to my colleagues. I asked them to recommend albums for purchase. When the albums arrived, I then asked them to write reviews for the LibGuide, adding a variety of voices and insights to our special collection. So far, an employee from nearly every department of the library has contributed an album review. I also offered to instruct every library employee how to operate the record player so that everyone feels empowered to assist with the technology and interact with our patrons in a different way.

### **Side 2: A Small but Steadfast Following**

The library is a place where individuals gather to experience, explore, and interact. At the Eugene Public Library, we host book groups, game nights, and movie screenings as part of our rich offering of participatory programming. With the introduction of the record player and records, I initiated a monthly series of listening programs partnering with a local record store, the House of Records. The intention is to engage people and build community around music. We’ve had five of these programs so far and have acquired a small, but steadfast following.

Before every program, I transform an otherwise sterile meeting room into a cozy living room atmosphere. I wheel in plants from the far reaches of the library, bring in a variety of lamps, throw rugs, tapestries, colored lights and decorative statuary. In addition, I hang posters, print out band photos from the Internet, and provide table activities for those with idle hands: a jigsaw puzzle, a word search, a button maker. On one table, I set out a variety of materials from our collection that are relevant to the event. At the end of that table I display a crate of records released in the same year as the album featured in the program to provide a historical context. Welcome to our living room.

The first program featured *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which drew a crowd of 33. I invited Greg Sutherland, the manager of House of Records, to host. Greg was the ideal choice for this pilot. An enthusiastic and knowledgeable fan of The Beatles, he came prepared to offer a brief but enlightening introduction to the album, chuckle-inducing information about the “Paul is Dead” conspiracy, and interesting facts about the production of the album and the relationship between the Beatles at the time. Never did his presentation feel like a lecture. Rather, he turned his introduction and wrap-up into highly engaging conversations, asking open-ended questions and inviting people to talk. Audience participation is a great way to gauge the success of a program and in the first ten minutes before the needle dropped, the number of raised hands and spurts of laughter assured me this program was a good idea.

Imagine a room full of people sitting quietly and listening to a record from start to finish. I choose albums that run 40 minutes to one hour, giving plenty of time before and after to open the floor to discussion. And this is where the magic of building community happens. At every program, people come prepared to listen, learn, and talk. Before and after the record





Our first Record Listening Party at the Eugene Public Library featured a British pressing of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band by The Beatles. The program was well-attended by listeners ages 8 to 80. It is certain that everyone enjoyed the show.

plays, people wander and mingle. Greg is a familiar face to many who attend and his presence brings House of Records customers to the library for the shared experience of listening to music. At one program I overheard a patron ask another, “Hey, didn’t we play guitar together once at a party?” Building community and making connections happens at every listening. A campus radio deejay and die-hard Beach Boys fan came to a listening because he had never heard a mono pressing of *Pet Sounds* played on a mono player. He found himself in the company of other fanatics and the rapport between them was a delight to witness.

Our second listening drew a crowd of 45, most of whom I had never seen in the library. While I anticipated a fair turnout, I hadn’t expected so many new faces. I had invited Dave Allen, original bassist for the English band Gang of Four to host a listening of the band’s seminal post-punk classic, *Entertainment!* This program drew folks largely from the University of Oregon and from the local music scene. It was a highly social event and everyone wanted to talk to Dave. I was approached by musicians who inquired about playing at the library and asked about getting their band’s album in the collection. The program ran almost an hour past its scheduled time and it was challenging ushering people out of the library at closing.

The three following programs, *Pet Sounds* by the Beach Boys, *Hejira* by Joni Mitchell, and *There’s a Riot Goin’ On* by Sly and the Family Stone drew smaller, intimate crowds. Each program brought in new faces and the conversations that arose were stimulating and inclusive. At the Joni Mitchell listening, one woman remarked that she had only listened to the album alone or with a friend and that she never thought to listen to records in a group. She explained that she appreciated hearing different insights about the music and the lyrics. Out of that listening came another connection that I learned about only recently. One of the attendees wandered into the House of Records sometime after the program. She and Greg reconnected and formed a friendship. The next time she returned she showed Greg a website she had designed for the store.

One patron who has attended every record listening program commented, “The quality of presentation and knowledge that is shared is top notch.” She further explained that a listening program offers an, “opportunity for people in the community to rub elbows and talk about records. What is better at bringing people together than music?”





Two friends listen to Trout Mask Replica by Captain Beefheart, an album that is as difficult to comprehend as it is to find.

Like any collection in the library, records require attention and maintenance. A record player, no matter its vintage, is a delicate piece of machinery. I've replaced the needle twice in 7 months due to mishandling and at the end of every month I clean each record in the collection. Cleaning records is a task I perform while staffing the Reference desk and it takes me just over one hour to complete. Examining and cleaning each record reveals which ones get the most play and is a good indicator of what the community likes. I look forward to cleaning day every month and wonder what new scratches and fingerprints await. Sometimes new marks and gouges warrant a quick listen at the turntable and I am always astounded at how durable the vinyl medium is. While the cleaning of records may seem like tedious work, I like the attention it brings. Patrons see me with my cleaning rags and a stack of records and they ask about them. The simple act of caring for the collection out in the open is another opportunity to attract interest in the collection and build community.

The sequence of last month's *OLA Quarterly* focusing on EDI to this month's theme of *Building Community through Special Collections* is smooth like a musical segue. At the heart of EDI is the goal of free and open access to information, services, and resources to everyone in the community. Unearthing or creating a special collection, like records and listening programs, opens a door to so many possibilities. You may find new faces in your library who wander in, because you've opened this treasure box and invited the community to partake. 🐾

