

MUSIC

# What Record Store Day Should Really Be About

An open letter to Amy and Brian about their lost Lionel Richie album.

BY ERIC SPITZNAGEL

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**D**ear Amy and Brian,  
Are you missing a **Lionel Richie** record?

I'm talking about a very specific record. It's a well-worn copy of Richie's eponymous solo debut that I'm pretty sure was very important to you once. It may very well have been the soundtrack for your relationship.

How do I know this? Well, on the track listing on the record sleeve's back, the song "My Love" is underlined—it's underlined *several times*, with extreme prejudice—and an arrow points to the song, along with the names "Amy + Brian." That's a pretty clear declaration of romantic intent. Back in the late 20th century, long before Facebook, it was the only way to announce your relationship status to the world. Carve your name into an album cover next to a song like "My Love" and you're making a serious commitment. It's there *forever*. You might as well be married.

Well, I have some good news for you, Amy and Brian. I have your record! I bought it for \$2 at a Chicago record store a year ago.

Here's the really bizarre part. I bought it on Record Store Day, the annual countrywide celebration of independent stores that still sell vinyl records, in which young people born after vinyl ceased to be a dominant medium wait for the chance to buy limited-edition recordings that would be utterly worthless outside of social circles where people wait in line on Record Store Day. (This year's edition of the spring rite is **Saturday**.)

I remember everything about the day I found your record: I was standing in a crowd of about two dozen people, a veritable sea of bleached hair and indie-band T-shirts and handlebar mustaches. I remember wondering if any of them, with their detailed lists of limited releases and special box sets and Bulgarian split EPs that they absolutely **HAD TO BUY TODAY**, would still feel the same way about these records in another 10 years. When the Record Store Day-only special edition lost some of its special newness and started gathering dust on their shelves and was replaced with something else, something newer and more rare and collectible, would they forget? Or would it still be something they needed, literally *needed*, to stay alive, like oxygen? If it wasn't, well, then what was the fucking point? It was too early to be groggily awake on a weekend; they should go home and crawl back into bed like a normal person.

I remember a homeless guy strolled past the line. He paused for a moment and stared at us. He looked at the record store, and then the crowd, and then back at the store. His face contorted as he tried to make sense of what was happening.

"What are you guys, D.J.s?" he asked. Nobody looked at him. They stared at their phones or at their feet. "You're all damn fools," he said, getting legitimately upset. "This is not living. *This is not living!*"

I agreed with him, but I was in no position to sneer at anybody else's questionable music purchases. I may not have been standing out on the street for the chance to buy a limited-edition five-LP live recording or a seven-inch collection of outer-space sounds, but I was on a mission that was equally as weird and (debatably) stupid: I was looking for my old records. My *exact* records. The ones I'd sold or given away decades ago, like a damn fool.

Let's not rub it in, O.K.? I'm aware that mistakes were made. Prior to unloading it, my collection included around 2,000 albums, spanning everything from Midwestern punk that changed my DNA, to cringe-worthy pop that I secretly loved, to music I just pretended to enjoy because I thought it made me look cool. I shouldn't have let them go, but these things happen. If you came of age in the early 1990s, you knew two things to be absolutely true: One, with the end of communism, the U.S. would never again have another global nemesis. And two, CDs were the future.

**B**ut things changed. I'm older now and ostensibly wiser. I want the original vinyl artifacts from my past; the specific ones I gave away two decades ago: The Bon Jovi record with my first girlfriend's phone number scrawled on the front sleeve. The *Kiss Alive II* I once co-owned with my little brother (which he defaced with the warning "Hands off!"). The Replacements' *Let It Be* that I'm pretty sure, 30 years later, still smells like weed.

So I went out looking for them. And I found, well . . . it's a long story. You can read about the whole insane journey in my new memoir, *Old Records Never Die*. But that's what I was doing at that record store on Record Store Day, which I fully admit was a ridiculous time to be looking for old records. I was like the guy in line for the new Apple Watch who was actually there to see if they had any old Sony Walkmen for sale.

In a way, I came out not in spite of the long lines, but *because* of them. I just wanted to see people standing outside of record stores again. The last time I'd seen something like that was in the late 80s, when I waited outside a record store in suburban Chicago to buy U2's *The Joshua Tree*. I actually almost got elbowed in the face by a guy at least 20 years older than me, who I guess was worried that I might get a copy of *Joshua Tree* with a less desirable serial number.

When I got into the store on Record Store Day, I immediately went to the used section. I was the only one in the throng looking for used records, which made no sense to me. I'm all for superior sound quality, but vinyl made after 2000 is fundamentally different from vinyl made in the 20th century. It smells different; it feels different. I assume it's made from the same materials, but it's like comparing turkey and tofurkey. The vinyl copy of the Pixies' *Doolittle* I purchased in 1990 is only tangentially related to the "reissue" vinyl copy being sold for \$19.99; it's not necessarily different in terms of its cover art or price or sound, but its DNA is different. It's different in such a subtle way that only people of a certain age can recognize it. We see the differences like dogs can hear high-frequency screeching.



I didn't find any of my records in that store. But I did find a certain Lionel Richie record that I couldn't stop staring at—and not because I especially like Lionel Richie. To be honest, I was never a fan. But Amy and Brian, when I saw your names on that album, it felt like finding antique pottery in an archaeological dig. It was a document of your tumultuous relationship on a Lionel Richie canvas. It gave me an emotional investment in ways that slow dancing to “Truly” never did.

I saw your names on that album, it felt like finding antique pottery in an archaeological dig. It was a document of your tumultuous relationship on a Lionel Richie canvas. It gave me an emotional investment in ways that slow dancing to “Truly” never did.

I'm just guessing about the “tumultuous” part. Maybe it wasn't that bad, but there were other signs, other markings on the record that hinted of trouble in paradise. In the gatefold, somebody drew a gigantic and pretty realistic penis. Was that you, Brian? Dude, not cool.

Or maybe it was you, Amy. Were you trying to express your admiration for Brian's love tool? Then maybe you shouldn't have included the speech balloon next to Lionel's face, with the words “Kevin Bee Is Cute.” Who the hell is Kevin Bee, Amy? Is this how Brian and I had to find out that the relationship was over? Don't try to blame it on Lionel. It's so obviously your handwriting. If you were cheating on Brian, just come out and say it, don't make Lionel be the bearer of your bad news.

Are you guys still together? I hope you're still together, but I'm guessing your relationship didn't survive the Kevin Bee incident. But maybe it did! Maybe you found a way to reconcile and all the nastiness that played out on a Lionel Richie record cover seems like a lifetime ago.

Are you happy, Amy and Brian? Does the other person's love still blow your mind all the time? Is your love so strong that you know where you belong? Have you not heard that song in, like, forever? You should get the album back and listen to it and slow dance or something, and remember when your feelings for each other were so new and uncomplicated that they could be summed up perfectly by a Lionel Richie song.

That's not an insult. We all want emotions that are Lionel Richie simple. Every time I hear one of his songs, I'm instantly transported back to junior high, where true love was all about kissing girls with RC Cola breath and trying to cop a feel over thick sweaters. It's a nice memory. The music is bland pop gibberish, but there's something pleasantly Pavlovian about it.

But let's say, hypothetically, that things didn't work out for you. You only had Lionel Richie feelings for each other for a few months, and then everything fell apart. Maybe it was that bastard Kevin Bee's fault. Or maybe you just fell out of love. Hey, it happens. But that doesn't mean you don't want your record back.



A backseat rendezvous with Liane Skye and John Cusack in *Say Anything*, 1989.

Remember that scene in the **John Cusack** movie *Say Anything*, when he's in the backseat of a car with his girlfriend, or the girl he wants to be his girlfriend, and they've just had sex for the first time, and they're listening to **Peter Gabriel** and shivering? I always thought that he was as much in love with the music as he was with the girl. Because the music captured his emotions at that exact moment he was feeling them and reflected them back to him perfectly. That kind of connection happens so rarely (almost never between two human beings, and only occasionally between a person and a song). You can't really wrap your head around what you're feeling, but then a song comes on and you're like, "That's it!"

Cusack's character in *Say Anything* is going to remember that moment for the rest of his life. He may not remember the girl—he probably lost touch with her, or he's Facebook friends with her—and he may not even remember her name anymore. But he remembers that night in the rainstorm, listening to Peter Gabriel in the backseat of a car, holding on to a girl and shivering because he was so overcome with feelings that Peter Gabriel helped him feel a little more beautifully.

Whatever happened between you two, I have the record if you want to hear it again, Amy and Brian. I'll bring it to you. I seriously will. I'll get in my car today and drive to wherever you live and hand deliver the album to you.

**I**'ll do it because it's Record Store Day, and that's what Record Store Day should really be about.

It shouldn't be about paying obscene prices for deluxe editions of music that are only special because they're rare and expensive and you'll just forget about them tomorrow. Record Store Day should be about remembering that records *matter*.

When you owned a piece of music on vinyl, those songs bore witness to your milestones. They held your proverbial hand when life got shitty, or gave you a danceable beat when there was something to celebrate. The songs, yes, but more significantly, the physical object that was with you, that you touched and held on to and watched spin around and around as you listened to it make the music that felt like it might be the only thing keeping you alive. It wasn't just the messenger. It was your companion. It was an *accomplice*.

If you're out there, Amy and Brian, and you want your record back, I'll make sure you get it. Listen to it again, either together or separately, and remember those old feelings, and get choked up by Lionel Richie's terrible but perfect poetry.

Maybe, just maybe, you'll remember that you never have to worry. Oh baby, anymore, anymore.

Happy Record Store Day!

Sincerely,

Eric

*Eric Spitznagel is an executive writer at Men's Health, and a frequent contributor to magazines like Playboy, Esquire, Rolling Stone, and the New York Times Magazine. **Old Records Never Die: One Man's Quest for His Vinyl and His Past** is available now.*

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