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VINYL LP FILE

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By Vinylphile staff



Editorial



It seems that some things never change. Back in the 1980s, when I was growing up in England, the British Phonographic Industry (BPI) mounted a campaign to discourage people from recording the records they'd purchased onto cassettes (sound familiar?). Many inner record sleeves featured the logo, which had the headline "Home Taping is Killing Music" and the tag line "And it's illegal". Although I am not a lawyer (nor do I play one on TV), I think that copyright laws' fair use provisions render the latter inaccurate. But it's the former assertion that I'd like to talk about here.

The BPI's position (and, I assume, that of the RIAA also) was that people recording copies of their records were thieves, depriving artists of their royalties, and that the reduction in royalties would deter musicians from releasing their work commercially. I don't mind admitting that I've made

copies of records I own for my own use (e.g., in the car), and that I've received copies of records I didn't own. Perhaps I am in the minority here, but my only reason for the latter was to experiment with new music. If I liked the album, I purchased a copy; I like supporting artists, and like looking at cover art.

So, I don't think that home taping (or these days, recording) is killing music.



I think what is killing music is a combination of two things: crappy music performed by untalented artists, and compression.

The first of these is arguably a generational taste issue, so I'll leave it at that (besides, there are many example of great modern music). But the second issue is more serious.

There are actually two types of compression, both of which are killing music. The first (dynamic compression) happens in the recording studio, usually at the behest of misguided artists or

producers; you may have heard of the loudness wars. In an effort to make their material “stand out”, artists want their music to sound louder. The only way to do that is to reduce the dynamic range, which is the difference between the quietest and loudest parts of a track. Dynamics are an important part of music, and in my opinion, reducing them to this degree is criminal.

The second type of compression (data compression) is that used by iPods and the like, and again there are two types: lossy and lossless. Both reduce the amount of space needed by a song, but achieve it in different ways. With lossy compression—of which the most common example is MP3—musical data is literally thrown away: it is irretrievably lost. With lossless compression (examples of which are FLAC and Apple’s proprietary ALAC), the music files are compressed in a manner that does not lose musical information. While I’m on the subject, don’t kid yourself that higher bit rate MP3s are an acceptable alternative to lossless or uncompressed audio: yes, they’re better than low bit rate MP3s, but that’s a bit like saying that having two fingers cut off is better than losing your whole hand, when one of the alternatives is to not have *anything* cut off!

A few years ago when disk space was at a premium, compression enabled one to fit much more music onto one’s portable music player. These days,

portable devices have so much more space for music that compression is arguably unnecessary. Given that pretty much all today’s portable music devices support lossless compression, the scourge that is MP3 (and other forms of lossy compression) should be history.

If people could hear their music in better quality—i.e., uncompressed or with lossless compression—they’d enjoy it more as a main activity as well as for background music when doing other things. The more people enjoy their music, the more music they’re likely to purchase. Everyone wins: consumers get more music which they enjoy more because it is better quality, artists sell more records and earn more royalties, and the record companies earn more money too. Even high-end audio companies will benefit: once people hear what music can really sound like on a system where sound quality is important, they’re going to want to have that same experience in their own homes.

If you love music (and if you’re reading this, it’s not an unreasonable supposition!), eschew lossy audio compression like MP3, and petition record companies to stop the loudness wars nonsense. (While we’re at it, let’s petition Apple to add FLAC support to iTunes: it’s free and unencumbered by patents, so there’s no technical reason why they couldn’t, and places like HDtracks.com use FLAC for their

highest quality content.) Enjoy your music like it was supposed to be enjoyed!

As I write this, the Salon Son & Image show in Montreal is fast approaching. I’ll be there to check out all the neat audio gear; I love meeting new people, so if you see me, please stop me and say hi!

Enjoy this issue of Vinyphile, and as always, thanks for reading!



Dealer Spotlight

Definitive Audio

By Rich Teer

I was in Seattle last November, and while I was there I decided to visit a couple of the area's many audio stores. One of the stores I visited was Definitive Audio; Showroom Manager, Ron Paternoster, and Marketing Manager, Jennifer Griffin, were kind enough to take time out of their busy schedules (at short notice, no less!) to play hosts. After a tour of their showroom, I had a conversation with Ron and Jennifer about life at Definitive and audio in general.

What's your background? Tell us a bit about yourself (both the company and personally).

The company was founded in 1975 by Jim Croft and two other investors. Jim's

background is acoustical engineering and all three were audio enthusiasts.

As an enthusiastic audiophile, having recently graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in business,

our current President, Mark Ormiston, joined the company in the early 1980s, right after Definitive moved into a larger facility, and bought out one of the original investors.

In 1990s, with a new partner/investor, they



Jennifer Griffin and Ron Paternoster flank a Wilson Audio MAXX Series 3 speaker.

formulated the plan for Definitive to become the company that it is today, and it took off from there. They went from being a small operation that just did really high-end two-channel audio and some home theatre, to being this hybrid of doing high performance music, home theatre, and custom installation that's done from a bricks and mortar showroom, which is really the unique thing that Definitive has done.

While a lot of the high-end dealers went to being a "by appointment only" custom show room that was maybe in their house, Mark decided that it was really critically important for customers to come see, hear, and be able to compare products if they were going to build high performance home theatres and two channel systems. In the mid-1990s that approach had sort of disappeared.

During the 1990s the company continued to grow. We built a second facility in Bellevue, and then just last year we bought the place down in Tacoma, Advanced Audio, which is owned by Curtis Havens. If you look across our sales staff, we've collected talent from all over the country: people have come here to work for Definitive and we're pretty pleased with the staff we have. Most of these guys have been here for years: I've been here for 16 years, John's been here the same time, Craig has been here 18 years. Most of our core people have been here a long, long time because we enjoy

working in this environment where we just don't do ultra high-end stuff, we service the whole range of customer needs and we've got a whole palette of everything to work with. We don't suffer unhappy people. We basically have the resources at our disposal to ensure that our customers are absolutely thrilled with what they buy.

Speaking personally, from where did you get your love of hi-fi?

My first taste of hi-fi was when I was eight or nine years old. I heard a pair of Dahlquist DQ-10s at an audio store in the mall called Shock Electronics in Rochester, Minnesota. Then when I went to college I started working in a hi-fi shop. I worked for a gentleman called Jim Ingadella who really taught me the craftsmanship of hi-fi: how to set up speakers and turntables, and how to tune a hi-fi. He started my life-long obsession with Linn. He was a big fan of Linn and taught me how to listen, told me what to listen for, and how to compare hi-fi components. Eventually he said, "It's time for you to go out into the world and work for big hi-fi company, one that's got more customers that are more interested in these types of products". He recommended about three different places; I interviewed with them and this was the obvious place to be, so I moved out here from Wisconsin and I've worked for these guys ever since.

How important is it to have a great relationship with the manufacturers of the products you represent?

It's absolutely invaluable. I'm here ultimately in service to the client; I think that being relevant in whatever you do makes it easier to get things done. Several of our manufacturers come to us with design questions, we see prototypes, we get asked, "what kind of products do you want to see us make", and we get to beta test almost everything our manufacturers make. So it's nice for a lot of reasons and very good for our clients, I think.

Do you sell used gear in addition to new, and if so, roughly what percentage of your business comes from buyers of used gear?

We used to sell used gear in the store. Tom, who's been here more than 20 years, has always been active on line, building his own hi-fi and selling used equipment via Audiogon. We have a consignment service that he runs that's very effective, so if clients want to do an upgrade or they're downsizing their home and want to move a portion of their system, Tom handles everything from photography to putting it online to dealing with it. The unique thing about that is that most things on Audiogon are really inconvenient. We've got all the things like Visa and Mastercard that they don't normally have. We're pretty effective at moving product, and we do it on a sliding scale based on whether

upgrades are going to happen. So we'll take a much smaller cut if the customer is going to do a significant enough upgrade. If it's a straight up sale, we'll take a cut that makes it worth his and Definitive's time.

How has the global economic slowdown affected your business?

From a retail perspective, there's a lot less door swings. I think that any retailer you talk to will have a lot fewer people coming through the door. Through the years I've been here, advertising has never been a big priority for us. We've always worked off word of mouth referral. We believe that with an experienced sales staff that builds relationships with customers, we don't have to depend so much on people coming in and buying a box.

We touched on this a bit earlier, but what are the benefits of buying from Definitive Audio?

Even our least experienced guy here, Jesse who's 26 years old, is a master speaker set up guy. When you buy a pair of speakers from Definitive, you get... We don't just sell them to you, we go out to your house and set them up.

The same thing applies to our installation crews. We've got guys with 15, 20 years of experience, and some even more than that. We do everything with attention to quality and detail. I won't say that we're the cheapest. We

probably never have been the cheapest, but at the end of the day, when you avoid follow-up visits because it's done right and you're pleased with what you got, we actually end up being the cheaper option.

But I think what really makes us different is the level of experience we've got. You can buy B&W speakers up the road, but they've only had them a few months. We've had them for 35 years and I know every model they ever made, and I know what the older Matrix series work with, because they're nothing like the current offering. We don't just sell stuff. We build relationships with people that last a life time. We are their hi-fi guy, or their theatre guy; it's one facet of your life, like when you trust your doctor, there's no reason to worry about your health because you can make a phone call to your doctor. We're their electronics guy. That's our goal: to have a life-long relationship that's good for both of us.

How would you describe your average customer, and roughly what proportion of your customers are new (as opposed to repeat business)?

I would describe our typical customer as an aficionado. At this time, the guy that comes through our door is not here by mistake. He's got an interest in what we do, usually is a performance enthusiast to some degree—it could be video or audio. I'd say other customers are the very discerning, luxury buyers. We have a great deal of those clients who

have very high expectations and want to own the very best. The percentage of new versus old, I'd say... We have a very, very strong repeat business, and I'd have to look at the numbers to tell you, but far more than 50% of our customers are repeat customers and I'd say maybe even 70% or more are people that we continue to do new homes for or that add onto their system.

Roughly what proportion of your clients have analogue sources, and how has that trend changed over the last few years?

I would say that it's maybe 20% to 25%, and that's increased sharply over the last few years. There's been a lot of LP12s coming out of closets and getting refurbished in the last couple of years! I really noticed a spike... We did an LP12 clinic, which we've been doing for years, about three years ago when some the new upgrades came out, and we had 18 people, 16 of which I'd never seen before in my life, bring in LP12s to get worked on. Some of those LP12s were 35 years or more old, they were early 1970s LP12s. The thing that's really exciting is that we're right by the University of Washington: we're 15 blocks away. Of the walk-in traffic, I would say that in a week if we have a hundred people walk through the door, ten of them have questions about turntables. And many of them are young, so the Pro-Ject products that we sell and also for guys who are on their second life with analogue, that

VPI Classic has been a godsend. You know, a lot of them don't want to make the jump to a super 'table like a big Linn or an SME or an HRX, that 'table, at \$2,750, has been a real solid choice for a lot of them. So between that and computer audio, they dominate the conversations in the store every day, and our focus too.

Do you host any after-hours events, and if so, what impact do they have on your business, especially from new customers?

We do, I would say, on average about one per month. Our Director of Performance Audio, Craig Finer, does nothing but set up hi-fis, tune theatres, and also run events that are vendor related. Last month we did a catered Magnepan event, the month before he did a seminar called *Tips and Techniques*, and in September we had a Linn evening. So we do one almost every month after hours. I would say the clientele is a lot of repeat folks, but a few new people based on what the focus is. When we did computer audio we

had some new faces I hadn't seen from over on the East side. We'll be doing an LP12 one here with Alan Williams from Linn on the second, and the next week we have a Meridian event with Norm Stunky and Ken Forsyth coming from Atlanta to do a demonstration of the 808.3 and the Sooloos integration.

Two times per year we do very large events. We do a home theatre event typically in the third week of June. It's a big budget, non-sales evening, where we would typically have the likes of David Wilson, Bob Stuart, and other big heavy hitters come in. We convert our entire Bellevue show room to a display of new home theatre technology. Many, many things are shown for the first time ever there, for example, the Sophia 3s were shown for the first time anywhere at our home theatre event in June. That was the first time the trade or consumers saw them. We've been doing this for eighteen years now, I think, maybe more.

We've always attributed that to a strong surge in sales and interest in home theatres. It's never been a selling event—in fact, it's always prominently spoken about not being a sales event—it's simply a way for customers to see the new products. It's for fun, for people to come and enjoy what we do and what our industry does. But we do notice an increase in sales. I mean, people having exposure to the likes of David Wilson, they're going to be excited about this stuff, which is the whole goal!



VPI turntable, Audio Research amplification, and Wilson Audio speakers: vinyl is very much alive and well at Definitive Audio!

Then here in Seattle, in February we do an event called *Music Matters*. It's a one evening event, and last year we had about 500 people in the store, maybe more. It was pretty crazy! [2011's Music Matters event was attended by more than 400 people in five hours, and featured companies like Wilson Audio, Audio Research, Transparent Cable, B&W, and Meridian.] Everyone who owns these companies was here to answer questions and do two-channel demonstrations. We basically convert the entire store, we take everything out of it and make listening rooms that we do half an hour to an hour demonstrations in. Again, people can hear a bunch of world premiere products.

Last year we world premiered the Sasha, and of most interest to a vinyl guy, we had one of the coolest things I've ever experienced which was the Audio Research Reference Phono 2 with the SME 30/2 and a Lyra Olympos. Serial number 1 Olympos; it belonged to Allen Perkins. So that was a pretty neat treat. I don't think I'll ever get to hear an Olympos again!

All these events... I think a lot of retailers crawled into a shell whereas we've continued to do them because we think what we do is awesome, and we think that the more people that are exposed to it are going to enjoy it and want to be part of it. So even though these are non-selling events, I think all of them have a positive impact on our business and

are one of the reasons we're... we're not thriving, but we're not dying. We're working really hard and we think that once the economy straightens itself out, we'll be in an even better position.

How do you decide whether to take on a new line?

[Laughs] We're extremely cautious about it. It's not because we're picky—well, we are picky because what we represent to our customers is important—but we look at it from two perspectives: what can we do for our manufacturers, and how is it relevant to solving problems for our customers or making their lives better or more exciting.

The easy part is listening: we could say, "That's a great sounding preamp"; we have this to reference it against and here's where it stands, what we think of it. That's very easy. What's not very easy is "What's going to happen in 20 years?", because if you have a 20 year old Audio Research preamp, I want to make sure I can take care of it for you. A lot of these manufacturers just aren't going to be around. So the test of time isn't something that we measure with our ears, but it is very important for our clients to have these companies that are based in reality and their engineering is solid and all the products they make are great.

For example, take Ayre Acoustics. It took us seven years to bring them on. We eventually landed on Ayre because of their great sound quality—there's no one that listens to Ayre and doesn't say there's something really good going on here—but what really got us was the way they take care of their customers. It took us that long to watch them to realise that we wanted to forge a long term relationship with the company, that takes care of people like we do.

Talking of manufacturers, what are some of the brands you represent?

In two channel, our big daddies in terms of electronics are Ayre Acoustics, Audio Research, and Classé Audio. We're also a Linn and Meridian dealer who we feel very strongly about, maybe in a little bit of a different way, sort of systems of their own. Our primary speaker manufacturers are Wilson Audio, B&W, and Magnepan. Linn is certainly a big player, and we're very excited to have just brought on PSB and we're super excited about their sound quality at a very affordable price point. For cables we have Transparent Audio and Audioquest. As for cartridges, we sell a lot of Linn cartridges and a lot of Lyra cartridges. We also do a lot of business with Benz, some Clearaudio. The Goldfingers, have you heard one of those?

I've not heard one, but I've heard of them. Actually, thinking about

it, I think I heard one at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest.

So with cartridges, it's whatever is right for the job. We work on a lot of record players here. John, the tall fellow you see there, really knows VPI and SME. He's an extremely detailed, precision orientated kind of guy. We own a Fozgometer, an oscilloscope, microscopes; just about any of the analogue tools you can think of, we have here in house.

What's the best demo session you can remember? And the worst?

One the things that comes immediately to mind is that I was helping Josh Clark from Transparent Audio set up the Sashas for the first time with the new Audio Research DS450 solid state amplifier and the Reference 5, and the aforementioned SME 30/2 with the Olymos on it. It was a unique set up of Sashas that I'd never seen—I've been setting up Wilsons for going on 20 years. Josh—who I think is an absolutely brilliant guy, I was more his mule during this process! [laughs]—he set them up, and that was one of the most stunning set ups I've ever heard.

As for the worst, this happened to me more than once in my career, especially early on. Setting up Linn active systems, I've actually hooked up the midrange and tweeter wrong, and while demonstrating to a customer his new speakers, blowing up the tweeters! I

think I've done that not once, but twice in my career! [Laughs] Fortunately I had no problem fixing the tweeters, but yes, embarrassingly so, I have done that. If you've seen some of the Linn systems that have six different sets of drivers and six amplifier channels on them, it's not that difficult to do if you're not paying attention. I get pretty excited about hi-fi and I get to plugging in too quickly, and that was the result! [Laughs] That would definitely have to rank up there!

As a specialist audio dealer, you presumably have access to pretty much whatever gear you want. What's currently in your home system?

A full blown Linn LP12 turntable and a Linn active system. Right now I'm using a Meridian preamp because I have a dual-purpose system: it's a theatre and it's a sitting room. I've always owned Linn systems for twenty odd years. You probably picked the most unexciting guy in the store to ask, 'cause every one of them could tell you what I have in my house! [Laughs] But there's some variety now, there's a Meridian processor in there right now, but typically I've owned Linn active systems and vinyl is my primary listening source.

That leads my nicely into my next question: how much time to you get to spend listening to music at home, and what are your favourite records?

I don't get to spend a ton of time listening to records at home, but I'm a child of the 1980s and 1990s. I like Indie or college rock, and I've always been a big fan of bands like Sonic Youth and Pavement and I have all their LPs. If I was forced to pick an LP, I guess it would be a Yo La Tengo or Sonic Youth album that I would end up putting on.

Presumably, you've become friends with many of your clients over the years?

Yes. Many, many of them I would include amongst my best of friends.

What's next for Definitive?

I think we'll continue to do what we've been doing. We think our model of having a retail showroom with salesmen with all the resources that a custom outfit would have is really the way that is most enjoyable for our clients to buy hi-fi. We'll continue to be performance orientated, I don't think we'll ever be much bigger than we are now. We're at a point where we have talent in every position. We'll continue to consolidate that and we're happy with how our showroom looks. Growth can happen within the structure we've built and that's good.

But we're not going to change what we do; none of us could stomach offering components to you we wouldn't want to own ourselves. Hopefully the industry will follow suit. It's been a disheartening

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few years with some of our manufacturers having gone out of business, some of the products that we've had for years and years are not exclusive to us any longer, so hopefully more people will look at it like Sandy Gross is looking at it: I want to do business with these little guys who take care of people.

It's really heartening hearing people say the same things we've been saying for years. We do think that people won't buy this stuff unless they can hear it and touch it and see it. You can't sell Audio Research without people... I don't covet things that I can't see or can't hear or can't touch! Hopefully, the model we've got will be viral, that people will believe that it's the right way to buy things.

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Annie's Audio Adventures

Van den Hul MC Silver Interconnects

By Annie St. Jean

The problem with these reviews is that I fall in love, again, just about every month! Fortunately, hubby doesn't mind, because I'm only in love with more audio stuff! So this month, hubby borrowed some more cables for me to listen to. Cables. Again! I thought I was done after the purple Nordost Frey ones! Now, he brings me some happy partners for them!

So let's start with the box: no plastic! It's made out of wood, and it's pretty! The environmentalist in me is already happy! Then, there's the fact that they are made in Europe, so I believe the people who work at making them have a nice life. Then there's the writing on the box. Kind of classic, kind of old fashioned barber shop ads-looking. The kind of writing you see on The Vinyl Café CDs, you know, Dave and Morley from CBC. I forgot, you are in cyberspace, maybe somewhere far, far, away... Worth opening, I think.

So hubby plugs the wires in between the preamp and the amps of our friend's Marantz system (I'm soooooo happy

his renovations are taking longer than planned and that we're still baby sitting!). The purple Freys are still connecting the CD player to the pre amp. C'est l'amour! They really complete them beautifully! Clarity without loss of depth, details like I hadn't heard yet. The Marantz is still set on Filter 2, my personal favourite because it keeps everything warm, full and round. So here I go for another fun session of listening to my staple songs. Love at first hear. Again! Why do cables have to make such a big difference??? The other problem with writing these reviews, is that my real job doesn't allow me to be able to afford all this awesome equipment! At over \$3,000 for a pair of interconnects, I need to win the lottery soon! See, aren't you happy the woman in your life likes shopping for shoes instead! Oh well! A few hours of pure bliss are definitely better than nothing!

The verdict? Well, you guessed it: I love them! I just wish I could listen to them on the Marantz with a turntable!

Can I ask you a favour? Someone who is close to us at the magazine recently lost his wife to cancer. Yeah, the damn C-word. So, wherever you may be in cyber space, could you please take a moment, the next time you listen to good music, and send a bit of positive energy to our friend C.? Thank you ever so much!

Happy listening!

Product Details

Van den Hul MC Silver IT MK III
Balanced interconnects
Price CAD \$3,799 for 1.2m

Bluebird Music

120 Wicksteed Avenue, Unit B-1001
Toronto
ON M4G 2G7
Canada
(416) 638-8207
www.bluebirdmusic.com

Simaudio Moon 310LP

Phono Stage

By Rich Teer



Canadian audio manufacturer, Simaudio, hardly needs an introduction as they've been part of the high-end audio scene for more than three decades. They offer numerous products in two ranges (the cost-no-object Moon Evolution Series, and the more affordable Moon Series), including integrated amplifiers, pre- and power amplifiers, DACs, transports, and phono stages. All of Simaudio's products are designed and manufactured in-house.

There are two phono stages in Simaudio's current product line up: the Moon 310LP, and its little sibling,

the Moon 110LP. An optional external power supply, designated the Moon 320S, can be used with the 310LP. The 320S is an option that the user may either purchase at the same time as the 310LP, or at a later date. I think this is a good idea in principle, because it allows users to upgrade more easily as funds allow.

I requested a sample of the 310LP and the 320S and evaluated the 310LP both with and without the 320S.

Technical Description

The Moon 310LP is a relatively compact solid state phono stage. Replacing the previous generation's Moon LP5.3, the 310LP has one pair of single-end inputs, a pair of single-ended outputs, and a pair of balanced outputs. It has user-selectable gain, input resistance loading, and input capacitance loading. Unusually for a phono stage in this price range, the 310LP also has user-selectable equalisation curves: both RIAA and IEC are available (above 20 Hz the curves are the same, but the IEC curve specifies a subsonic filter below that frequency).

The rear panel contains the signal input and output sockets (all of which are gold plated), a gold plated grounding post, an IEC mains socket, and a four-pin XLR socket to which the umbilical cord from the optional external power supply is attached. By fitting an IEC socket (rather than using a captive cable), Simaudio gives 310LP owners the ability to use after market AC cables should they desire to do so. The 310LP is intended to be permanently powered, so there is no main power switch.

The front panel, which is made from a 9 mm thick sheet of machined aluminum, is available in either a silver or black anodised finish. It houses the blue LED power indicator.

Inside, there are two circuit boards: one for the phono stage electronics, and the other for the isolated power supply. The latter uses an ultra low noise toroidal transformer and boasts a reasonably generous 14,000 μF of capacitance. The phono stage circuitry uses high quality components in a dual-mono configuration, and features several

sets of jumpers for each channel. It is these jumpers that enable the user to select the gain, the equalisation curve, the load capacitance, and the load resistance. A larger set of gold-plated jumpers are used to select between the internal power supply and the optional external one. The 320LP ships with the jumpers selecting the internal power supply, so they must be changed before connecting the 320S. One minor

criticism I'd like to mention at this juncture is this: the jumpers used to select the gain etc. are not gold plated. I'd like to see this addressed because the jumpers are right in the very sensitive signal path, and gold plated jumpers would be less susceptible to corrosion. (Simaudio informs me that the jumpers are made from a highly conductive non-corrosive alloy, so

my—admittedly small—reservations in this respect might be unfounded.)

The Moon 320S is the 320LP's optional dedicated external power supply. It is housed in a chassis identical to the one used for the 310LP, except for the rear panel connections. The 320S' rear panel contains an IEC mains socket, a four-pin XLR socket to which the umbilical cord connecting the 320S to its accompanying 310LP is attached, and the main power switch (even though Simaudio recommends leaving the 320S powered semi-permanently).

Inside the power supply's case we find more high quality components, including a larger ultra low noise toroidal transformer, a pair

of 200 mH chokes, and a total of more than 35,000 μF of capacitance.

Setup and Listening

As mentioned previously in the technical description, the Moon 310LP has user-adjustable settings for gain, load capacitance, and load resistance.



After some experimentation, I decided to use the maximum gain (66 dB in my single-ended system), and values of 0 pF and 100 Ω for the load capacitance and resistance respectively.

For best performance, Simaudio recommend leaving the 310LP powered up at all times (unless one is going away for an extended period). I followed this advice, so the 310LP was powered up for nearly the entire review period. After several dozen hours of informal listening, I started my formal evaluation: first with the Moon 310LP on its own, and then later with in conjunction with the Moon 320S power supply.

One of the first things I noticed about the 310LP was its very strong bass performance—so much so that I not entirely convinced that it doesn't emphasise the lower bass just a touch. I'm not talking about the awful, overblown, one-note bass that afflicts those car boom boxes that plague many a suburban setting (why so many people with such equipment feel the need to inflict their questionable musical taste on the rest of us by playing it at ear-shatteringly loud volumes is beyond me). The effect I'm describing is much more subtle than that.

I also wouldn't describe it as a gross colouration. In fact, the more I think about it, the less I think that I'm hearing a problem and the more convinced I am that what I hear is a testimony of the 310LP's wide bandwidth design and

(perhaps) the better cartridge loading 100 Ω provides for the Lyra Parnassus. Two tracks which really illustrate what I'm talking about are *Who Were You Talking To* (from South African a cappella group Ladysmith Black Mambazo's 1987 album, *Shaka Zulu* [WEA 925 582-1]) and *The Great Gate of Kiev* from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (specifically, the version on *The Power of the Orchestra* [Analogue Productions AAPC 2659-45]). In the former, the group members stomp their feet towards the end of the song. In addition to the initial stomp, the reverberation from the hall can be heard and felt. This effect is even more pronounced in the latter track, where a bass drum is periodically thwacked. Not only can the initial boom be heard and felt, but the sense of space and movement of air engendered by the hall's acoustics is also very satisfyingly reproduced.

The Moon 310LP's midrange reproduction also doesn't disappoint. Although it is perhaps a touch on the dark side, male voices (like those from Ladysmith Black Mambazo) are well portrayed, and do not suffer from any chestiness. Female voices, for example, Dusty Springfield's rendition of *The Look of Love* from the *Casino Royale* OST [Colgems COSO 5005-45], are also beautiful.

Another example of how well the 310LP fares with the mids and highs is the celeste from the second movement of

Fritz Reiner's reading of Prokofiev's *Lt. Kije* [Classic Records/RCA Victor LSC-2150]. The sound the hammer makes as it strikes the metal plates is clearly discernible. With lesser phono stages, the initial hammer strike tend to be lost in the ensuing chime. As good as it is, the 310LP's treble doesn't have quite the sparkle and air of the very best phono stages, but I consider this to be a relatively minor shortcoming. The bells and piano from opening minutes of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* [Virgin Records V2001] illustrate this quite well.

The 310LP handles dynamic contrasts very well. The finale of the first part of *Tubular Bells* gets very busy, but the 310LP manages to keep up just fine: there's no congestion here. Even though a lot is going on, it is easy to follow the individual instruments.

When it comes to revealing little details buried in the mix, the 310LP does a very good, but not spectacular, job. Compared to the (admittedly much more expensive) reference level phono stage I had on hand, some grit and grain hides some fine details. The effect is pretty subtle, fortunately, so I don't consider this to be a major fault.

Imaging was, on the whole, pretty good, but not a razor sharp as it could be. For example, the arch of the members of Ladysmith Black Mambazo was a little diffuse, making it a bit difficult to place the individual singers. The same applies to *Tubular Bells*' Nasal Choir: although

the members weren't congealed into one big homogenous image (a good thing), their individual positions were hard to pin down exactly.

Related to imaging is the soundstage, which the 310LP supplies in abundance. The soundstage is wide and deep (although I have heard wider and deeper in my system), extending beyond the edges of my speakers.

The preceding description applies to the 310LP without the optional Moon 320S external power supply; adding the 320S catapults the 310LP's already good performance onto an even higher level. When the 310LP is used with the 320S power supply, grain is reduced (enabling fine details to be more clearly heard), transients are better defined, and harmonic overtones are improved (for example, the glockenspiel in *Tubular Bells*). There is slightly more air around instruments, and image specificity is also improved somewhat. As one would expect, noise is reduced: what was a very quiet phono stage is rendered even quieter by the addition of the 320S.

Verdict

The Moon 310LP is a very good phono stage. With one or two relatively minor reservations, it has a strong audio performance and is well built. Fit and finish are very fine, and the ability to adjust the gain, load capacitance and

resistance, and the equalisation curve is very welcome and makes for a very flexible phono stage. It would have been nice if the adjustable parameters could be changed without opening the case, but the additional front panel switches would have added substantially to the parts cost, so it is an understandable decision (especially when one considers how infrequently most users would want to fiddle with these adjustments).

As good as it is on its own, adding the Moon 320S power supply improves the performance quite substantially. The fact that the 320S can be added so easily by the end user means that the cost of the two units can be spread out over time, making them more accessible.

With good sound quality and adjustability that's almost unheard of at this price point, I highly recommend a personal audition of the 310LP if you're in the market for a new phono stage. The 320S is also highly recommended. The great thing is that because you can add the latter at a later date, if the choice is "cheaper cartridge plus the 310LP + 320S combo" or "more expensive cartridge plus just the 310LP", I'd be more inclined to go the second route with the proviso that a 320S would be next on my shopping list. If you already have a great cartridge (and funds permit), then buying the 310LP and 320S together would make more sense.

Specifications

Description Solid state phono stage with optional external power supply.

Frequency response 20 Hz to 20,000 Hz ± 0.5 dB.

Crosstalk -100 dB (1k Hz).

Gain 40, 54, 60, and 66 dB (single-ended outputs); 46, 60, 66, and 72 dB (balanced outputs).

Distortion < 0.001% THD (20 Hz to 20,000 Hz).

Input impedance 47, 100, 470, 1k, and 47k Ω .

Input capacitance 0, 100, and 470 pF.

Output impedance 50 Ω (single-ended), 100 Ω (balanced).

Phono equalisation RIAA and IEC.

Maximum input voltage (@ 40 dB gain) 58 mV RMS.

Maximum input voltage (@ 54 dB gain) 11 mV RMS.

Maximum input voltage (@ 60 dB gain) 6 mV RMS.

Maximum input voltage (@ 66 dB gain) 3 mV RMS.

Signal to noise ratio (@ 40 dB gain) 110 dB, 114 dB with 320S.

Signal to noise ratio (@ 66 dB gain) 88 dB, 92 dB with 320S.

Dimensions (hwd) 80 mm x 190 mm x 285 mm.

Weight 3 kg (310LP), 3.5 kg (320S).

Finishes Silver and black anodised aluminum.

Serial number of units reviewed L579998 (310LP), L5510074 (320S).

Price \$1,800 (310LP), \$1,400 (320S).

Warranty One year non-transferable (ten years with registration).

Simaudio

1345 Newton Road
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(450) 449-2212
www.simaudio.com

Associated Equipment

Analogue source Forsell Air Reference Mk 2 turntable and arm.

Phono cartridge Lyra Parnassus.

Phono stage Allnic Audio Labs H-3000.

Preamps Allnic Audio Labs L-3000, Audio Research SP-9 Mk 2.

Power amplifiers Allnic Audio Labs M-3000s, PrimaLuna ProLogue Sevens.

Speakers MartinLogan Spire.

Cables Phono: Nordost Frey. Interconnects: Nordost Frey. Speaker: Nordost Frey. AC: stock.

Accessories Target and SolidSteel equipment stands; Mission Isoplat; Furman Elite 15-PFi power conditioner; Audio Physic cartridge demagnetiser; Acoustech carbon fibre brush; Last record and stylus cleaning products; The Cartridge Man stylus tracking force gauge.

Spin Clean Mk 2

Record Cleaning Machine

By Rich Teer

I have a small confession to make: despite being a music lover all my life with vinyl being my medium of choice, I have never owned a record cleaning machine. The first machines I heard of—one of the Nitty Gritties if memory serves, or maybe it was the Keith Monks one—were beyond my financial means in those days, and the thought of hand washing my precious vinyl gave me the

willies (to be totally honest, it still does)! So, with the exception of a flirtation with Last Record Preserver, I have never washed my records. I am, however, extremely fastidious with them: I never touch the playing surfaces (handling the record by the label and edge only), I always keep them in anti-static sleeves, and I never lend them to anyone.

When I buy used records, I give them a thorough examination to make sure they're in good condition (or at least, visibly clean).

In the last year or so I started hearing about more affordable alternatives to the



vacuum record cleaning machines, and at last year's RMAF I met Mark Mawhinney, Spin Clean International's head honcho. Spin Clean has been making record cleaning machines since 1975; when I heard that the base package (consisting of the cleaning machine itself, a pair of brushes, a pair of rollers, two washable drying cloths, and a 4 oz bottle of cleaning fluid) retailed for a very reasonable \$80, I had to give the Spin Clean a, err, spin. A month or two later, Mawhinney sent me a package containing the complete Spin Clean Record Washer system. In addition to the base package, the complete system also comes with a 32 oz bottle of cleaning fluid, an extra pair of brushes, and five extra drying cloths. The complete system costs \$125, a saving of \$25 compared to buying the items separately.

Technical Description

The Spin Clean Record Washer is a deceptively simple contraption consisting of a bright yellow plastic washer basin and lid (as well as screaming "Look at me!", the yellow case was chosen so that dirt and debris from the records being cleaned would show up more clearly, enabling one to better judge when to change the fluid). In the base are a pair of slots for the felt cleaning brushes, and three pairs of slots for the rollers. The outermost pair of slots is used when cleaning 12" LPs and singles, the middle pair are used

when cleaning 10" records (be they 10" singles, EPs, or 78 RPM discs), and the innermost pair are used when cleaning 7" singles.

The rollers are made from plastic with a rubber ring around the centre to provide a better grip on the records being cleaned. The two brushes are covered with felt; because there are two of them, both sides of the record are cleaned simultaneously. Replacement parts and extra bottles of cleaning fluid are available from Spin Clean.

A year or two ago, the Mark 2 version of the Spin Clean was released. This review is of the Mk 2, and there are several differences between it and the original: the basin and lid are stronger and UV resistant; the rollers have been totally redesigned; the brush foam and fabric are improved; the unit has new feet; there's a new owner's manual; there are new drying cloths; and finally, the cleaning solution has been improved.

Setup and Listening

I set up the Spin Clean on a towel-covered table, filled the base up to the line with distilled water (the manual states that tap water can be used, but I advise against it; water that's perfectly fine to drink may contain dissolved solids that you don't want anywhere near your precious vinyl!), and poured three capfuls of the cleaning fluid over

the brushes. I selected a few records to test (at least one of each size). In each case I cleaned the record with a carbon fibre brush and played it before cleaning it in the Spin Clean. After cleaning the record I visually inspected it and then re-played it to compare the before and after sound quality.

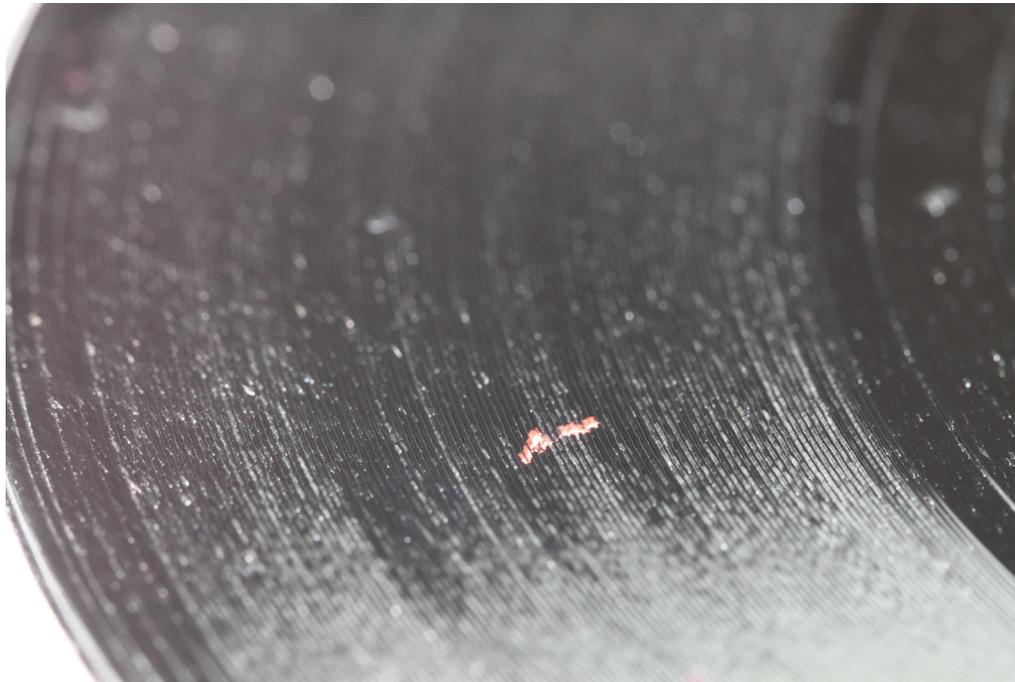
The cleaning process is simple, if a little tedious after a while: place the record between the two brushes (after putting the rollers in the correct place, of course!) and rotate it clockwise for three or so revolutions; rotate it anti-clockwise for another three or revolutions; carefully remove the record from the cleaner, letting excess water drip back into the base; and very carefully dry the record using one of the towels. Once the record is dry, place it back into its sleeve, or if it's a new record, replace the sleeve with an anti-static one. At all times, touch only the record's label and outer edge (especially when rotating it in the Spin Clean: use your palms rather than your fingers). Do not touch the playing surfaces, even the lead-in groove!

Spin Clean suggest that one can clean as many as 50 records with one batch of solution. I recommended changing the fluid more frequently than that, say every 20 to 30 records, depending on how dirty they are. If the water looks dirty at any time, it's time to change it!

So far so good, but how well does the Spin Clean actually work? To get right to the point, it works very well! Even

records that looked pretty clean to the naked eye looked noticeably cleaner after their Spin Clean bath. The effect was even more dramatic on old, not-so-pristine used records: finger prints and smudges left by previous careless owners were removed without a trace!

I could go on for paragraph after paragraph extolling the Spin Clean's virtues, but I think photographs will do the job far more eloquently than I. Here are a few "before and after" pictures. The first pair is from an old second hand 7" single, the second pair is from an old second hand LP, and the final pair is from a brand new LP I've owned for just a few weeks.



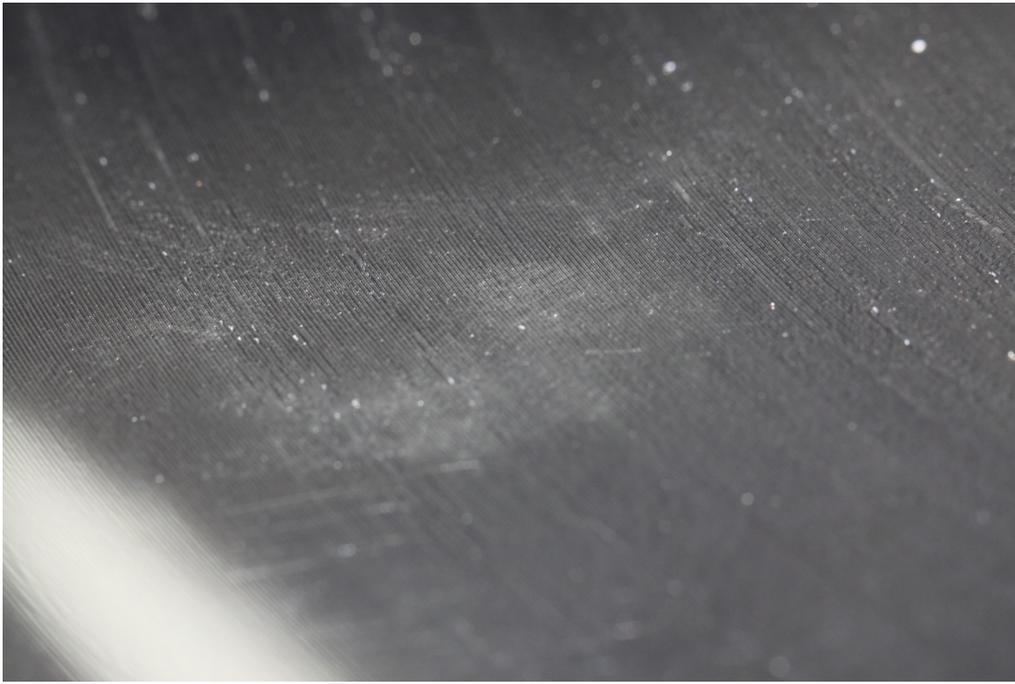
Example 1: pre-owned 7" single, before cleaning.

In this first example, the record's surface is filthy, looking like a rock-littered moonscape (the red mark is a contaminant impregnated in the vinyl; fortunately it doesn't effect the playback). Remember, I took the "before" photos after cleaning the record with an anti-static brush and playing it. The picture on the right, taken after a Spin Clean cleaning session speaks for itself. Although the impregnated red stuff is still there, the record's surface is much cleaner. Upon re-playing it, the record was noticeably quieter too. Prior to cleaning the record sounded like (if you'll excuse the British metaphor) a chip shop frier, with many tics and pops—exactly the sort of crap that vinyl neophytes have been taught to expect from vinyl.



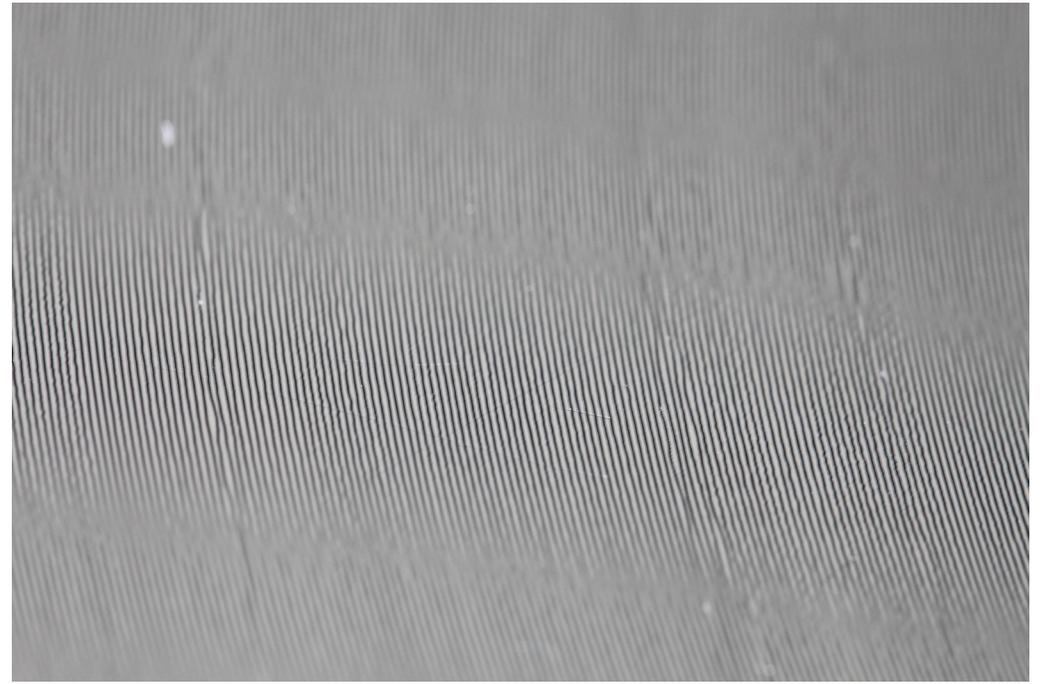
Example 1: pre-owned 7" single, after cleaning.

After cleaning, the crackling of the chip shop frier was all but gone, as were most (like, 80% to 90%) of the tics and pops. Unfortunately, this record suffers some groove damage due to the abuse it suffered from its previous owners. No amount of cleaning will help here!



Example 2: pre-owned LP, before cleaning.

This second example is also littered with dust boulders, but the record also has a big smear that looks like a scuff mark. A few minutes later, after a dip in the Spin Clean, the same



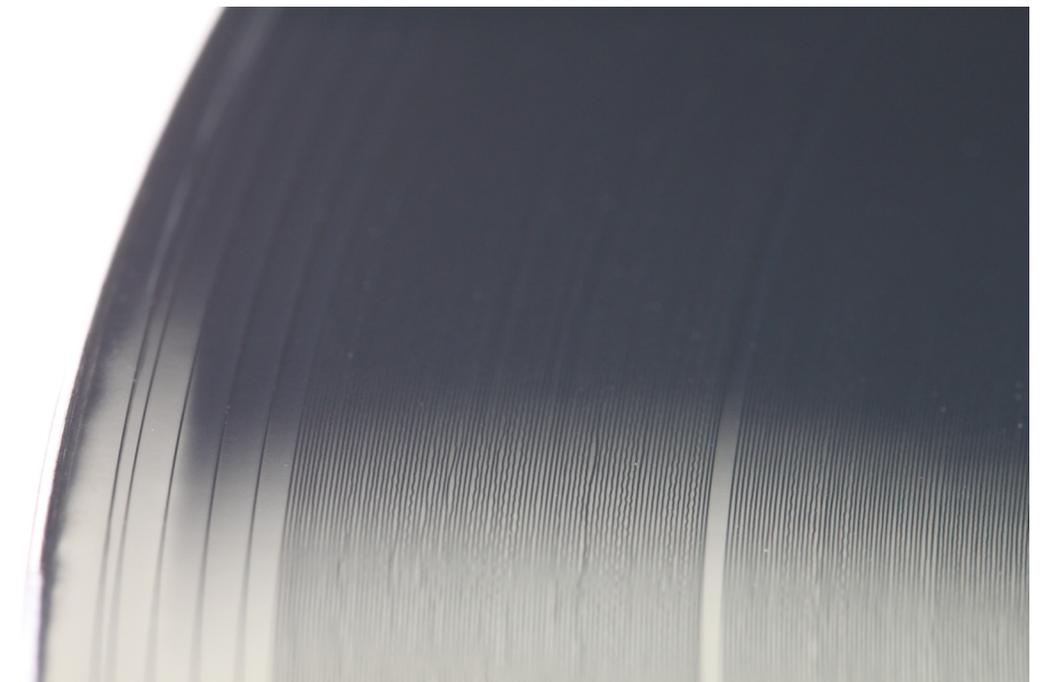
Example 2: pre-owned LP, after cleaning.

section of the record is unrecognisable! The scuff-like smear is all but gone, as is the dust debris field.



Example 3: new LP, before cleaning.

As you can see from the final set of pictures, even a brand new record from a well-known audiophile label isn't completely



Example 3: new LP, after cleaning.

dust free and benefits from a cleaning session in the Spin Clean.

Apart from the quieter surfaces and blacker backgrounds, I couldn't really detect any change in the sound quality of cleaned records compared to uncleaned ones. That said, the reduction of surface noise etc. is a welcome improvement! (Most of my records are free from ticks and pops, but a reduction in surface noise—even when one's records are virtually silent anyway—is always welcome.)

Verdict

Being a manual cleaner, the Spin Clean has the advantage of silent operation, and zero power use. The flip side to this is that cleaning more than a dozen or so records at one time gets old very quickly, and drying my records by hand makes me a little nervous. These caveats notwithstanding, the important question is “Does the Spin Clean Record Washer work?”, and the answer to that is easy: as the preceding photos show, the Spin Clean not only works, it works very well. I don't doubt that a vacuum record cleaning machine would be less tedious and more efficacious, but the cost difference (at least several hundred dollars) is considerable.

The bottom line is this: the Spin Clean Record Washer easily earns my highest recommendation. If you have any number of records and can't justify the not insignificant price jump for a vacuum record cleaning machine, you *need* one of these.

Specifications

Description Manual record cleaning machine.

Supported record sizes 7”, 10”, and 12”.

Dimensions (hwd) 138 mm x 370 mm x 154 mm.

Weight 720 g.

Finishes Yellow plastic.

Serial number of unit reviewed N/A.

Price \$80 (base package), \$125 (complete system).

Warranty Limited lifetime transferable.

Spin Clean International

PO Box 15200

Pittsburgh PA 15237-0200

USA

(800) 931-5850

www.spincleanrecordwasher.com

Associated Equipment

Analogue source Forsell Air Reference Mk 2 turntable and arm.

Phono cartridge Lyra Parnassus.

Phono stage Allnic Audio Labs H-3000.

Preamps Allnic Audio Labs L-3000, Audio Research SP-9 Mk 2.

Power amplifiers Allnic Audio Labs M-3000s, PrimaLuna ProLogue Sevens.

Speakers MartinLogan Spire.

Cables Phono: Nordost Frey. Interconnects: Nordost Frey. Speaker: Nordost Frey. AC: stock.

Accessories Target and SolidSteel equipment stands; Mission Isoplat; Furman Elite 15-PFi power conditioner; Audio Physic cartridge demagnetiser; Acoustech carbon fibre brush; Last record and stylus cleaning products; The Cartridge Man stylus tracking force gauge.

NAD PP 3i

Phono Stage

By Rich Teer

NAD has been associated with inexpensive, high-value audio electronics for about as long as I can remember (their 3120 integrated amp was a staple component of many recommended budget systems back in the late 1980s). A notch or two above the mass-market dreck most consumers are subjected to in the big box stores, NAD is, in my opinion, one of the epitomes of entry-level high-end. That is, their gear is designed—albeit to a budget—with audio performance a priority, and priced so as not to induce sticker shock in potential buyers.

NAD sell two phono stages: the PP 2i and the more expensive PP 3i (in both cases, the “i” means improved); it is the

latter that is the subject of this review. The two phono stages are essentially the same, except the PP 3i features an on-board analogue to digital converter (ADC) and a USB interface.



Technical Description

The PP 3i is a diminutive solid state phono stage. The PP 3i has three pairs of single-end inputs (one for MM cartridges, one for MC cartridges, and

another for line level sources), and a pair of single-ended outputs. The PP 3i also contains a built-in ADC, enabling one to make digital recordings of one's records. (I despise the term “needledrop”

because it promulgates the use of the archaic term “needle” rather than the correct one, which is “stylus”. Needles are an anachronism left over from the time of the wind up gramophones, and have no place in modern record playing!)

The rear panel contains the signal input and output sockets (all of which are gold plated, a pleasant surprise at this price level), a grounding post, pair of switches, and a miniature socket into which the cable from the external power supply is plugged. The PP 3i's

consumption is very small and it is intended to be left turned on semi-permanently; there is therefore no power switch. One of the two switches enables the user to select between MM and MC cartridges; the other selects either the phono input or the line input.

The front panel is utilitarian, housing just a Type B USB socket and a pair of LEDs: a green one to indicate that power is applied, and an amber one indicating that the USB interface is powered (by the external device to which it is connected).

The case is made from black-painted folded steel. Fit and finish are good. The external power supply is of “wall wart” variety. I’m not a fan of wall warts, but I can understand

why NAD chose to use one here. It keeps the noisy power source away from the sensitive electronics in an economical and space-saving manner.

As mentioned previously, the PP 3i is also an ADC. The audio signal is sampled and output as 16-bit linear PCM at 48 kHz via the USB port; I did not test this aspect of the PP 3i’s performance. The PP 3i is supplied with a CD containing a copy of AlpineSoft’s *VinylStudio Lite*

to facilitate digitising one’s records. Unfortunately, it is supplied on a mini CD, which doesn’t work with slot fed drives. The good news is that one can download the software—which is available for Mac OS X and Windows—for free from AlpineSoft’s web site, www.alpinesoft.co.uk.

Setup and Listening

Setting up the PP 3i was a breeze: I set the input switch to Phono, selected



MC operation, connected the audio leads, and powered it up (I left the PP 3i powered for the entire evaluation period). As usual, after several dozen hours of burn in time and informal listening, I started my formal evaluation.

I should warn you that what you’re about to read may sound overly critical, but that isn’t my intent. My job is to describe what I hear, so it should come as no surprise that a review of a \$200

phono stage isn’t as effusive as one of a \$2,000 phono stage.

OK, with the caveats out of the way, here’s what I heard when I listened to the PP 3i in my system.

The first thing I noticed with the PP 3i was that of a rolled off treble. This, together with the poor resolution of fine details—details which I know are on the record—gives the impression of a cloth sack being placed over the speakers. For an example of this, consider the

glockenspiel in Mike Oldfield’s *Tubular Bells* [Virgin Records V2001]. With more expensive phono stages, not only is the transient “ding” clearly audible, but the resonant overtones of the metal plates are faithfully reproduced.

With the PP 3i, the initial ding is there, but many of the metal plates’ overtones are diminished or missing.

Somewhat related to the mids and higher frequencies, the PP 3i has a slight tendency to exaggerate sibilances. The first few lines of *Will You?* from Hazel O’Connor’s *Breaking Glass* OST [A&M Records AMLH 64820] are a good example of this. (Actually this particular track is a good sibilance test, period.)

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The news is a bit better with bass reproduction: although it doesn't go particularly deep, the PP 3i's bass reasonably tuneful and rhythmic. It is not bloated, nor does it suffer from "onenoteitis" (a term I like to use to describe the condition where most bass notes sound the same, regardless of their actual intended frequency). The problems I hear with the PP 3i's are best described as errors of omission rather than commission; the former being the lesser of the two evils. It is nearly always better to have more tuneful bass of limited extension than it is to have subterranean bass that is poorly defined and bloated.

Another area I found the PP 3i to be wanting was dynamics, which are quite constrained and compressed. Take, for example, the bass drum whacks in *The Great Gate of Kiev* from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* on *The Power of the Orchestra* [Analogue Productions AAPC 2659-45]). Although the drum can be heard, the sense of air being moved is missing. Similarly, the foot stomping parts in *Ladysmith*

Black Mambazo's *Who Were You Talking To* (from Shaka Zulu [WEA 925 582-1]) are audible, but lack dynamic impact. In fact, they almost sound like hand claps rather than foot stomps.

Finally, we come to imaging and soundstage size. While not vast, the image size presented by the PP 3i was pretty good, if somewhat flat. It (just) extended beyond my speakers, but had very little depth: the image was very two dimensional so hall acoustics (for example) aren't very well reproduced. Image specificity was fine for simpler pieces of music, but loses precision in more complex works (for example, the Nasal Chorus bit in *Tubular Bells*) such that separate instruments and voices are presented as a homogenous lump, rather than a group of distinct individuals.

Verdict

Upon reading my description of the PP 3i's sound quality, it may appear that I'm slamming it, but I'm not. Yes, the PP 3i has several serious shortcomings in its audio performance, but let's not forget that this is a \$200 phono stage. (If this was a review of a \$2,000 stage then yes, it could be considered a slam.) I'm not very familiar (yet) with the entry-level phono stage market, so I don't know if the PP 3i's performance is typical for this price bracket or atypical. But given NAD's justifiably good reputation, I'm prepared to give them the benefit of

the doubt and assume that the PP 3i's performance is typical of \$200 phono stages.

Let's also not forget the context in which the PP 3i will most likely be used. I evaluated it in a high resolution system, one that ruthlessly exposes shortcomings in the gear I listen to. What's more likely in practice is that the PP 3i will be used in a system that has less resolving power than mine, where the other components are likely to have their own serious sonic flaws. It could also be that my Lyra Parnassus and the PP 3i are a poor match.

On the positive side, the PP 3i is well made and has a very useful feature set. Not only does the inclusion of an ADC allow one to make copies of one's records for mobile or music server use, it also (somewhat unusually for a phono stage at this price point) has an MC-capable input. The latter helps protect the end user's investment should they desire to upgrade to an MC cartridge because they can still use their current phono stage. With all this in mind, I'd say that the PP 3i is at least worth considering if you're in the market for an entry-level phono stage, especially if making digital copies of your records is of interest.

Specifications

Description Solid state phono stage with external power supply.

Frequency response RIAA ± 0.3 dB.

Gain 35 dB (MM); 58 dB (MC).

Distortion < 0.03% THD (20 Hz to 20,000 Hz).

Input impedance 47k Ω (MM), 100 Ω (MC).

Input capacitance 200 pF (MM), 180 pF (MC).

Phono equalisation RIAA.

Maximum input voltage (@ 1 kHz) 100 mV RMS (MM), 6.5 mV RMS (MC).

Signal to noise ratio 76 dB (MM), 78 dB (MC).

Dimensions (hwd) 43 mm x 135 mm x 72 mm.

Weight 400 g.

Finish Black painted steel.

Serial number of unit reviewed H07PP3IG15525.

Price \$199.

Warranty Two years non-transferable.

NAD Electronics

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Associated Equipment

Analogue source Forsell Air Reference Mk 2 turntable and arm.

Phono cartridge Lyra Parnassus.

Phono stage Allnic Audio Labs H-3000.

Preamps Allnic Audio Labs L-3000, Audio Research SP-9 Mk 2.

Power amplifiers Allnic Audio Labs M-3000s, PrimaLuna ProLogue Sevens.

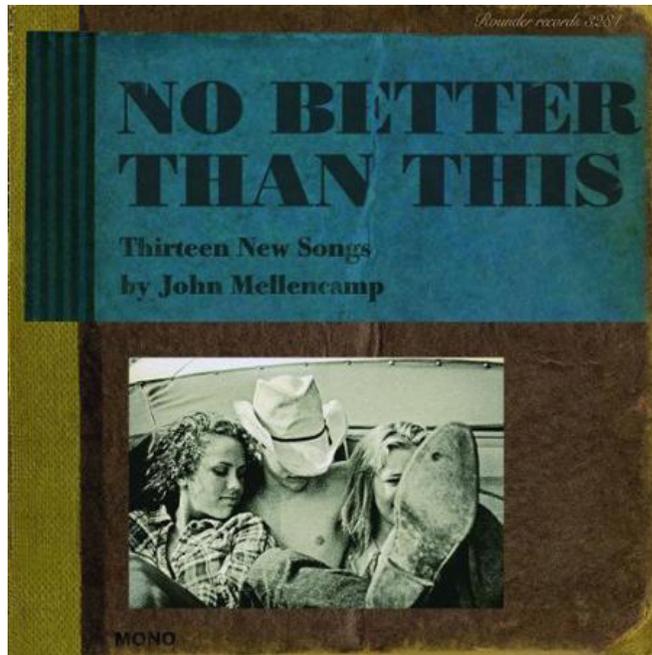
Speakers MartinLogan Spire.

Cables Phono: Nordost Frey. Interconnects: Nordost Frey. Speaker: Nordost Frey. AC: stock.

Accessories Target and SolidSteel equipment stands; Mission Isoplat; Furman Elite 15-PFi power conditioner; Audio Physic cartridge demagnetiser; Acoustech carbon fibre brush; Last record and stylus cleaning products; The Cartridge Man stylus tracking force gauge.

Record Reviews

By Vinylphile Staff



John Mellencamp

No Better Than This

Rounder Records (two 33-RPM 180g LPs)

11661-3284-1

John Mellencamp was born on October 7, 1951 in Seymour, IN, and the release of this recording represents his 25th album. Previously known as Johnny Cougar, John Cougar, and John Cougar Mellencamp, this prolific recording artist and painter is also one of the founding members of Farm-Aid (Willie Nelson and Neil Young are the others). He has scored dozens of hits over the course of his career, and is mostly known for his heartland rock sound and style. He turns away from that somewhat with this release, as I thought it represented

a more country folk, folk ballad, and gospel influenced effort. None of which is surprising considering how and where John and producer/performer T-Bone Burnett wanted the album created.

No Better Than This was recorded in mono using a 1955 Ampex 601 1/4" reel to reel recorder and a single RCA microphone (see LP liner notes for details). The album was recorded in various locations of historic musical significance, such as Room 414 of the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio, TX, where the legendary Robert Johnson first recorded. The other two locations were the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, and the studio in Memphis where Sam Phillips first recorded Elvis Presley. It was also the first mono recording to hit the Top 10 since James Brown's *Pure Dynamite! Live At The Royal* in April of 1964. The album has received a significant amount of critical acclaim, and if you're a Mellencamp fan, this most definitely should be in your collection.

Admittedly, I am not very familiar with mono recordings and what they are supposed to sound like, but this album gave me a feeling of Mellencamp

playing right in front of me. It had a really live feel to it that I thoroughly enjoyed. There isn't any soundstage to speak of, but the imaging (depth and placement) were clearly evident and very well done. If this is what mono is supposed to sound like, then I'm all for encouraging artists to try it. The writing is, as usual, a strong part of Mellencamp's appeal and there are some beauties on here. *Love At First Sight* is a wonderful ballad about love and separation, and John's raspy voice (I can hear Bob Dylan) is perfectly suited for it.

Rounder Records has created a wonderfully clean, clear, and quiet product considering this is not an audiophile pressing. The outside edge of the LP is a little rough and almost has a square edge to it, as opposed to being rounded. It doesn't have any effect on the recording, but more care in manufacturing would have been appreciated. The gatefold cover is outstanding with its matte finish, and the liner notes get an A+ for going back to days of yore, when details such as lyrics, contributing artists, locations, mastering, engineering and other credits abounded.

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In summary, I liked this record quite a bit, and I truly enjoyed its mono sound and live feel. It may not be an album that I'll cue up weekly, but it has honestly earned a place in my collection. I applaud John Mellencamp and T-Bone Burnett for following their dream in wanting to create something out of the mainstream. Well done! **John Adrian Spijkers**





Margaret Noble

Frakture

Self-published (33-RPM LP)

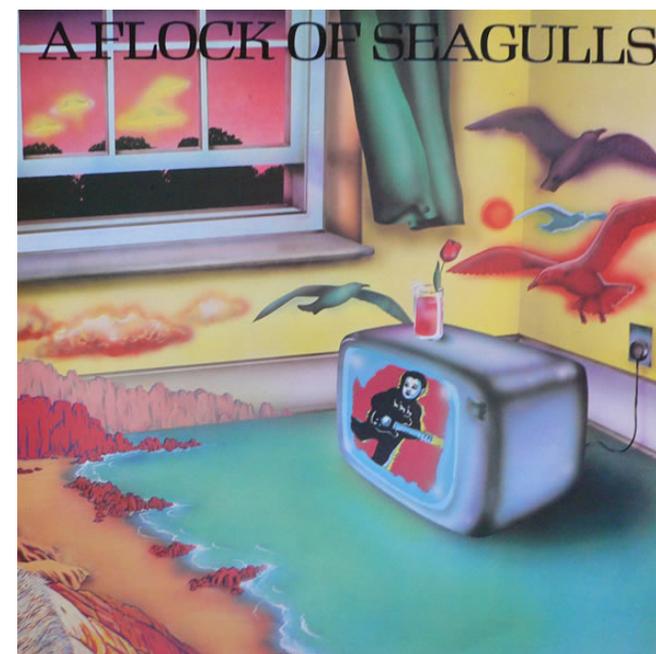
I recently received a copy of San Diego based musician (or as she prefers, sound artist), Margaret Noble's, latest album, *Frakture*. Inspired by *1984*, George Orwell's classic novel about a society controlled through surveillance, censorship, infringement of civil liberties, and violence in the name of security. (One might argue that with political correctness being taken to ridiculous extremes, TSA screening abuses in an effort to put on a show about airport security, and so on that Orwell wasn't too far off the mark...)

Containing eight tracks, the album, which is thoughtful and somewhat industrial in nature, uses analogue synthesizers, acoustic drums, and numerous samples (including excerpts from *1984*) to paint its sonic canvas. I've nothing negative to say about the sound quality, nor the pressing which is

nice and flat. I'm not sure whether the album was pressed on 180g vinyl (my guess is nearer 160g), but the important thing is that the surfaces are quiet.

The packaging is a nice heavy cardboard sleeve (although it is a little tight; another millimetre or two on each side would help in the removal and replacement of the record), and for extra value purchasers of the vinyl record get instant access to a free digital download (in multiple formats) of the album.

This is a good album from an independent artist (and I'm all for supporting independent artists), so I strongly encourage you to buy a copy of *Frakture*—but hurry because only 300 copies will be pressed on vinyl! Incidentally, all proceeds from the sale of this record will be donated to Amnesty International, so there's another good reason to buy it. **Rich Teer**



A Flock of Seagulls

A Flock of Seagulls

Jive Records (33-RPM LP)

HOP 201

A Flock of Seagulls was (and technically still are, albeit with a very low profile and only one original band member still in the line up) a British synthpop band from the early 1980s, and this is their eponymously-titled debut LP (they had previously released an EP called *Modern Love is Automatic*).

Originally released in 1982, *A Flock of Seagulls* contains 11 tracks, including the four singles *I Ran (So Far Away)*, *Telecommunication*, *Modern Love is Automatic*, and *D.N.A.* The group won a Grammy award for Best Rock Instrumental Performance in 1983 for the latter, while the former was the album's biggest seller.

The sound quality is typical for the era: nothing special, but not too bad either. As for the music, I have to be honest

and come clean: I love all synthpop stuff! If you find a clean copy, give it a spin! **RT**



Peter Gabriel

1

Classic Records/Real World Records
(four single-sided 45-RPM 200g LPs)
PG 1-45

Originally released in 1977, this is Peter Gabriel's first solo studio album. The first four Gabriel albums were simply titled *Peter Gabriel*, so this one is often referred to as *Car* or (less often) *Rain* after the raindrop-covered car pictured on the cover. The album is most famous for the single, *Solsbury Hill*, a song which describes Gabriel's departure from progressive rock band, Genesis.

The album features nine tracks, including the previously-mentioned *Solsbury Hill* and the somewhat anthemic *Here Comes the Flood*. There are apparently two versions of the side two opener, *Slowburn*, the usual version (which opens with a piano and is about 4:30 long), and a longer version with an extended intro. The latter apparently has only ever appeared on one version

of this album, released through Direct Disk Labs; alas, it is the shorter rendition that is on this version of the album.

The sound quality is as good as one would expect, i.e., very good. Pressed on Classic Records' Clarity vinyl, the single-sided records are pancake flat with silent surfaces. The music is great too!

Packaged in the usual Clarity style, a heavy duty box with the contents protected by bubble wrap, this is a record that you should try to get your hands on (these Clarity records are becoming increasingly hard to find). Doubly so if you're a Peter Gabriel fan!

RT



White Orange

...And This is Why I Speak to You in Parables

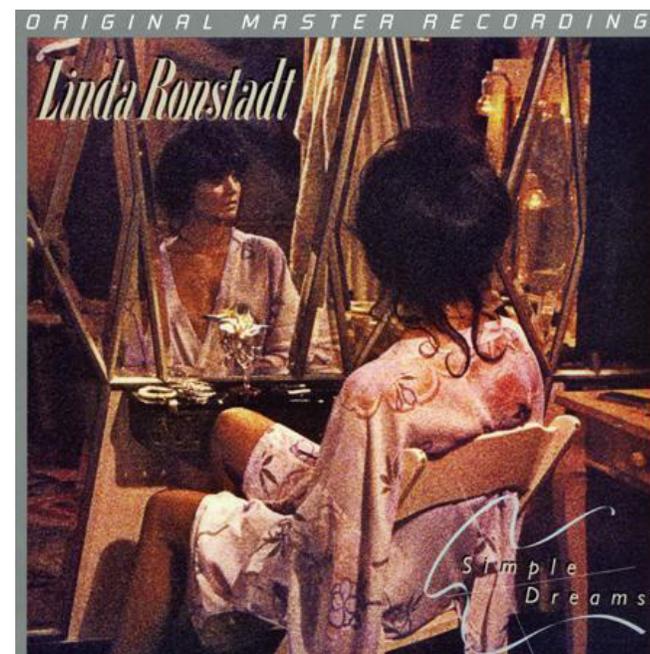
Made in China Records (33-RPM 180g 12" single)
MICR 002

I'm always interested in trying new music, so when I was offered the chance to listen to White Orange's current 12" single, *...And This is Why I Speak to You in Parables*, I leapt at it. White Orange is a band based in Portland, Oregon, and I would describe their music as sort of psychedelic progressive rock.

Containing just two tracks (the 13-minute title track is backed with *Middle of the Riddle*), this 12" single is a limited edition (of only 500 copies) picture disc. As suits this type of material, the bass, drums, and electric guitars are up front in the mix, with the bass and drums being particularly prominent (but not in a negative way).

Because it's a picture disk, there's a sort of vinyl rush that's particularly audible on the lead in groove (I think I'm right in stating that all the picture discs I have suffer from this minor problem to some extent), but the good news is that the surfaces are free from other anomalies (i.e., ticks and pops) and the pressing is flat.

The heavy cardboard sleeve is nice to see (although it is just a little tight; another millimetre or two on each side would make removing and replacing the record easier—but I quibble!), and for extra value a download code is included with the record. The digital download is available in several formats—including FLAC—and I think the band is to be applauded for this. This is a good record and independent bands need our support, so give this one a try! **RT**



Linda Ronstadt

Simple Dreams

Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab/Elektra Entertainment (33-RPM 180g LP)
MFSL 1-321

I remember hearing two of the tracks from this album years ago, when I was a kid. The two tracks were Ronstadt's cover of the Buddy Holly track, *It's So Easy*, and *Poor Poor Pitiful Me*. It was only relatively recently that I discovered that those tracks were from the same album (as a rule I prefer not to buy "best of" collections), so after living with a used copy I found somewhere, I was pleased to discover that Mobile Fidelity had released a remastered version of *Simple Dreams*.

The album was Ronstadt's fifth consecutive million-seller, and contains a mixture of light rock and country songs. The sound quality is pretty good, presumably at least partially due to

the relatively simple production. Being pressed on thick, silent vinyl doesn't hurt, either!

The packaging is up to MFSL's usual high standards: the record itself is stored in one of MFSL's trademark anti-static sleeves, and the whole shebang is stored in a heavy cardboard gatefold sleeve.

Recommended if you're a Ronstadt fan; if you're interested in exploring her work, this album is as good a place as any to start! **RT**



Pink Floyd

The Dark Side of the Moon

Harvest Records (33-RPM 180g LP)

SHVL 804

This multi-million selling record from 1973 hardly needs an introduction, but given that there are so many younger people getting into vinyl for the first time, it's possible that some of them haven't heard this ground-breaking record yet (especially on vinyl). My most memorable introduction to *The Dark Side of the Moon* was at my first hi-fi show in England, back in the early 1990s. Many of the exhibitors were using the album in their demos, a favourite track being *Time*. (I kick myself even to this day for not picking up a copy or two of Mobile Fidelity's UHQR version of this album, which was plentifully available at the time!)

Considering its vintage, the sound quality on the album is great. Actually, scratch that. The sound quality on this album is great, period. This is no

doubt a testimony to the skill and care the producer, Alan Parsons, put into the project. The bass, when needed to be, is thunderously deep. For example, check out the opening heartbeat, the aforementioned *Time*, and side two's opening track, *Money*. The latter is also a good example of how to capture the air and decay around clock gongs and chimes. And if your system is really up to it, you'll hear some very deep bass playing in the background.

The 30th Anniversary Edition under review here is pressed on thick, flat, virgin vinyl, and comes in a sumptuous heavy cardboard gatefold sleeve. Also included in the package are three posters and some stickers.

Very highly recommended, I'd go as far to say that *The Dark Side of the Moon* is an essential part of any record collection. **RT**



Rickie Lee Jones

Pop Pop

Original Recordings Group/Geffen Records (two 33-RPM 180g LPs)
ORG 007

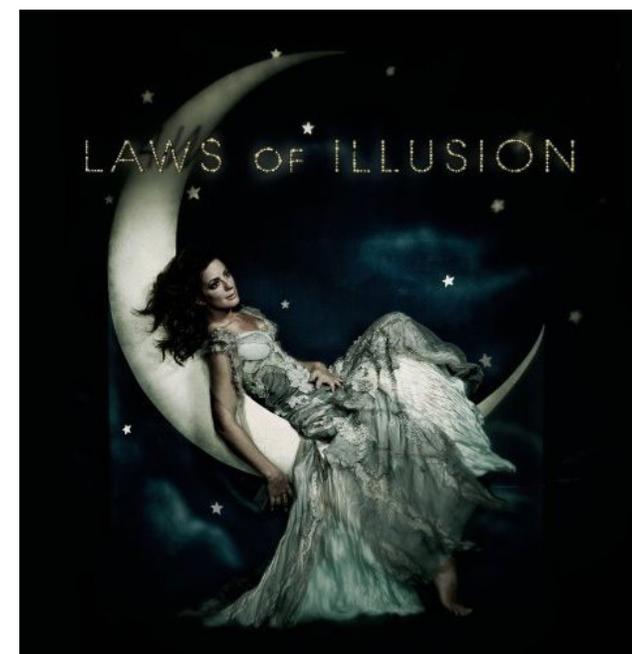
Originally released in 1991, *Pop Pop* was Rickie Lee Jones' sixth album, consisting of 12 covers. Although they are performed in Jones' usual style, various genres are represented on this album, ranging from jazz and blues to Jimi Hendrix.

The arrangements are typically very simple—often just Jones' singing accompanied by bass and acoustic guitar, although most songs have another instrument or two in the mix.

The sound quality is very good, no doubt aided by ORG's decision to spread the 12 songs over four sides of very nicely pressed vinyl, which is both flat and thick (many of ORG's releases are actually cut at 45-RPM, but *Pop Pop* is one of the few that aren't). The

packaging is also of a high standard, being made from thick cardboard.

While not perhaps up to the high musical standards set by Jones' earlier albums, I recommended this one for its good sound quality, and it's a must if you're a fan of Ms. Jones! **RT**



Sarah McLachlan

Laws of Illusion

Arista Records (33-RPM LP)
88697-73963-1

Laws of Illusion is the Canadian singer-songwriter's seventh studio album, and was released last year (2010). The vinyl version of the album contains ten tracks, including the single, *Loving You is Easy*. The CD version contains an addition three tracks, but unfortunately neither version includes McLachlan's song *One Dream*, which was written for the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games.

A mixture of folk-pop and new age, McLachlan's music is easy on the ear, and soothing to listen to. This isn't a record if you're in the mood for bopping around your room or head bingin'!

The sound quality is OK but rather two-dimensional, and the soundstage isn't particularly large. Although ticks and pops were very few and far between,

there was a bit surface noise on my copy (fortunately, the surface noise doesn't intrude too much while the songs are playing). I'm also mildly disappointed that the record wasn't pressed on 180g vinyl. On a positive note, at least it's not a paper-thin Dynaflex pressing!

Worth checking out, and of course, vinyl-loving McLachlan fans will want a copy! **RT**



Meat Loaf

Bat Out of Hell

Friday Music/Epic Records (33-RPM
180g LP)

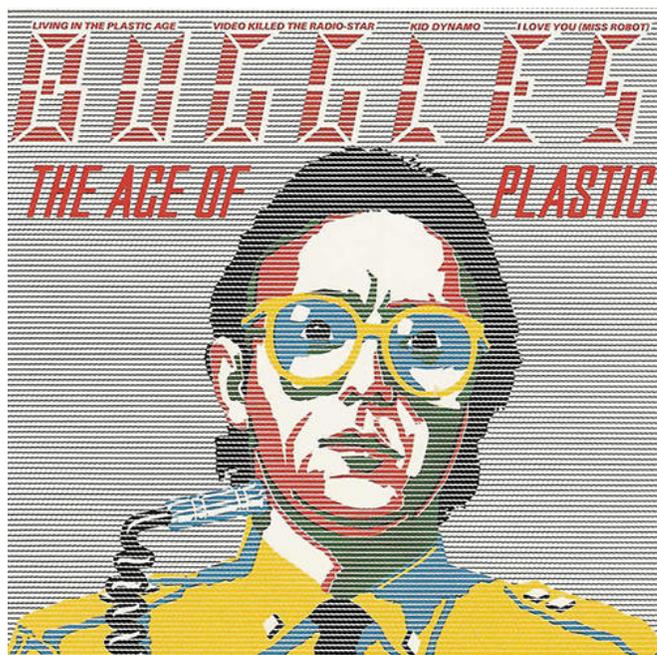
FRM 34974

It seems totally strange now, but back in the mid 1970s Jim Steinman and Michael Aday (better known to the world as Meat Loaf) had great difficulty finding a record company willing to publish Meat Loaf's second studio album, *Bat Out of Hell*. Three decades and millions of copies later, *Bat Out of Hell* has been remastered from the original tapes by Joe Reagoso and Kevin Gray at RTI/AcouSTech.

The album consists of only seven songs, but most of them exceed five minutes playing time, including the nearly-ten-minute title track, which opens the album. Four of the tracks (*You Took the Words Right Out of My Mouth*, *Paradise by the Dashboard Light*, *Two Out of Three Ain't Bad*, and *Bat Out of Hell*), were released as singles.

The sound quality is reasonably good if two rather two dimensional. And the soundstage could be bigger. Sounds like cymbals decay nicely without sounding too splashy; thankfully this record was recorded decades before the so-called loudness wars crushed just about all of the dynamic range out of many records. The packaging is also first rate, featuring a heavy cardboard gatefold sleeve.

Very highly recommended, I think that *Bat Out of Hell* is an essential part of any record collection! **RT**



The Buggles

The Age of Plastic

Island Records (33-RPM LP)

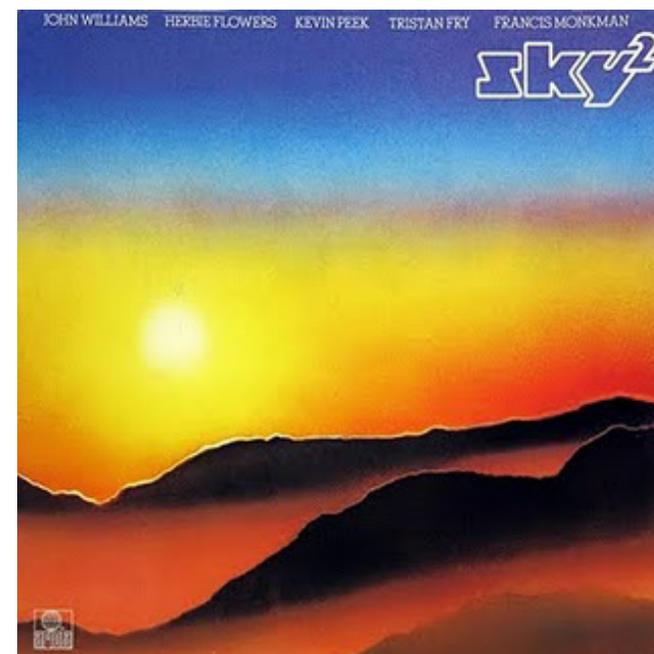
ILPS 9585

The Age of Plastic was the first of only two albums from UK synthpop group, The Buggles. The album was recorded as a result of the success of their first single, *Video Killed the Radio Star*, which topped the charts in several countries (including their native Britain). The video for *Video Killed the Radio Star* was the first (and later, the one millionth) to be shown on MTV. The song was more recently parodied in the ironically titled *Internet Killed the Video Star*.

Originally released in 1980, the album itself contains eight tracks, four of which were released as singles: *Living in the Plastic Age*, *Clean Clean*, *Elstree*, and the aforementioned *Video Killed the Radio Star*.

The sound quality is middle of the road—not fantastic, but not terrible either—which is about what we can hope for. Tonally fine, the imaging is somewhat two dimensional although the soundstage is of a fair size.

Overall, this album merits a recommendation, mostly for the music but also for the sound quality. Add this one to your collection! **RT**



Sky

Sky 2

Ariola Records (two 33-RPM LPs)

AD SKY 2

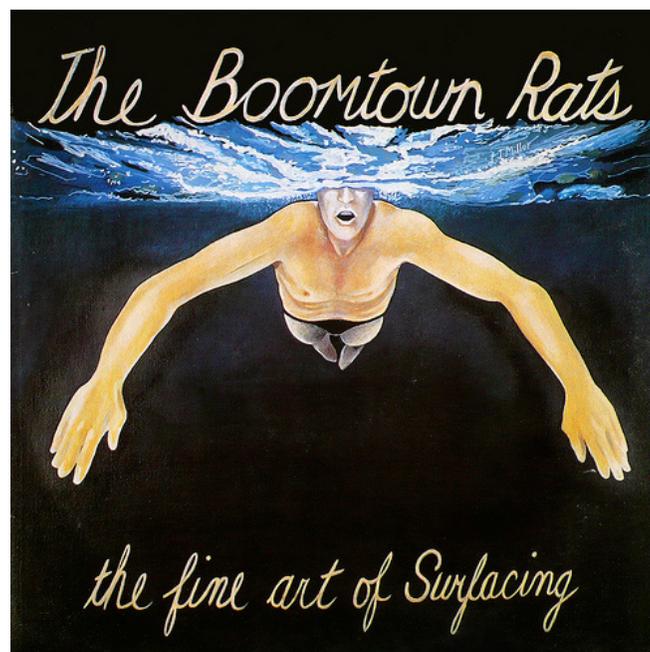
Sky were a British instrumental group, formed in the late 1970s. Band members included classical guitarist, John Williams, Herbie Flowers, Tristan Fry, and Francis Monkman. This double album from 1980 first caught my attention at around that time due to the single, *Toccata*, Sky's rendition of Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* (if you think classical music is boring, you need to listen to this track!). The single was backed with *Vivaldi*, another great piece of classically inspired rock.

The album's sound quality is pretty good, although the treble can be a little splashy at times. Stereo separation is good, as is the imaging: on a well set up system, you can hear the position of the different tom-toms Fry plays

towards the end of the drum solo in *Toccata*.

A long-time favourite of mine, *Sky 2* merits a strong recommendation. The sleeve notes for one of the tracks on this record exhort the listener to “Turn this one up loud”. I couldn’t agree more!

RT



The Boomtown Rats

The Fine Art of Surfacing

Ensign Records (33-RPM LP)

ENROX 11

Originally released in 1979, *The Fine Art of Surfacing* is the third album by Irish punk rock band, The Boomtown Rats. It contains ten tracks, including the three singles *Diamond Smiles*, *Someone's Looking at You*, and the most famous (or should that be infamous?), *I Don't Like Mondays*, which was inspired by a teenage shooting spree in San Diego in which two adults were killed and eight children and a police officer were injured. The perpetrator's only explanation for her actions was “I don't like Mondays; this livens up the day”.

The sound quality on this album is surprisingly good, especially the bass which is deep and warm, without being over done. Of course, the sound is a little two dimensional, but the soundstage is pretty wide. An interesting side note is that the dead wax of side one has a

locked groove: the last parts of *Sleep* (*Fingers' Lullaby*) repeat ad infinitum.

Highly recommended for great music and above average sound quality! **RT**

Final Words

Well, that wraps up another issue of Vinylphile! We hope you enjoy reading the magazine as much as we do putting it together.

We'll be making some little changes to the magazine over the next few issues—don't worry, we're not going to go all digital on you!—and we'd love hear your feedback.

Talking of feedback, please feel free to send us an email. Also, why not subscribe to our announcement mailing list or follow us on Twitter (or both!)?

Until next time, happy listening!

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