

Subjective Sounds

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HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink'. I'm reminded of the Coleridge quotation while standing in Rough Trade Records in Bristol, taken aback by the sheer quantity of new vinyl on sale. Brand new releases by trendy young bands, classic rock, jazz, soundtracks (nothing classical that I could find though), all beautifully displayed on racks and across the walls. And there are even turntables for sale, majoring on the £99 USB record player.

I'm also reminded of the opening of the Rough Trade East branch in London's Brick Lane 11 years earlier. Except back then record shops were piling up CDs, experiencing a decline in even those sales, and LPs had all but vanished. Now in Bristol in 2018 I'd estimate more than half the shop floor is taken up by vinyl. For any music lover still playing records, it should be a sight for sore eyes, all these shiny new pressings. Even though there will be exceptions, for me it'll be more a case of sore ears.

A life-long love of records has had its quieter moments. My first fling with CDs came in the mid-80s, fizzing out when I realised that not only was my favourite music not available on CD, but the 'perfect sound' marketing was audibly contrary to fact.

Record collecting slowed again in the mid-90s when my job loaned me a Linn *Karik* CD player, boosting my CD purchases; a similar 'digital spike' came at the turn of the century, after testing dCS convertors resulted in my buying the kit and enjoying the best sound from CD at the time. The most recent digital distraction came when the first USB DACs were combined with availability of DSD and 24-bit PCM files.

Discovering certain holes in my LP collection caused by buying CDs, I've recently tried to fill the gaps. Finding such LPs turned out to be easy enough, thanks to a plethora of brand-new recordings and older re-releases, typically broadcasting '180g audiophile vinyl' across the jacket. To date though, I've yet to find any recent pressings that can stand up to the originals. Although there may be some exceptions, today's pressings often sound to me opaque and murky, or else edgy, dynamically flat and two-dimensional. Many sound no better than a CD played on a midrange player.

Think about the vinyl production chain of 2018, and it's not surprising there's something seriously amiss. Practically all music today is recorded and mixed digitally, typically at 24/48 or occasionally 24/96. The final assets given to the mastering studio will be delivered in these forms if we're lucky, but it could as easily be a 16/44.1 CD master. This file will be played from an audio workstation PC into a studio rack-mount DAC, thence to the disc-cutting lathe. The final sound on new LPs sold in today's record shops will never exceed the sound out of that DAC, and imperfect digital will then be compounded by analogue flaws.

So what's inspired the sudden mainstream interest in vinyl? It can hardly be sound quality, but many young listeners, won't even have experienced the sound of an averagely good DAC playing lossless digital. The sound that's inspiring hipsters to invest in new vinyl is perhaps as much about trading up to the sound of uncompressed CD, replacing the earache of MP3, OGG and AAC!

My suggestion for a newcomer wanting the best sound would be don't bother with new LP pressings, just play the available PCM without data compression. Better yet, sup from the vast repository of vinyl LPs pressed in the decades before digital transfers were the norm...