

## An Analog Stereo Revival Part Three

By Paul DiComo

In [Part Two](#) of this story I showed you how you could acquire record-playing hardware for a reasonable amount of money. In this article I'll discuss the records themselves: the different varieties and where to buy them.

### Types of Records

Before you go on any LP buying binges you should familiarize yourself with the various types of records available for sale and their relative strengths and weaknesses.

*Standard original issue commercial pressings* – These are the records of your bygone youth (or your parents' bygone youth), mass produced, lightweight, flexible black vinyl. This is mostly what you'll most often find on the used vinyl market, and occasionally new. The principle advantages of "standard" vinyl are low cost and abundance. The downside is variability of sound quality. Records are made by pressing vinyl with hot metal molds. As the mold wears from use, the sound quality gets progressively worse. If you got the last pressing of a mold's life, you got a bad sounding record.

Absolute unit to unit consistency is an advantage of CDs and a potential disadvantage of LP. But don't let that put you off vinyl; in most cases you'll get better sound from an LP than a CD. Think of it this way: you'll get perfect consistency from every McDonald's. With a locally owned mom & pop restaurant you may not know exactly what you're going to get in advance, but 9 out of 10 times it will beat the daylights out of a Big Mac.



*Are you sure you want to eat this?*

In many cases a standard pressing is the only kind of record you'll be able to find for a given piece of music. And that's OK; I have dozens of superb sounding Plain Jane mass produced LPs in my collection. And unlike "audiophile" reissue pressings, standard pressings (particularly used ones) are inexpensive.

*Virgin Vinyl Pressings* – Virgin vinyl records are those made with vinyl that has almost no impurities. As a result a virgin vinyl pressing will have noticeably lower surface noise than standard pressings. The only companies that would bother to use costly virgin vinyl are the ones that care about sound quality so you are virtually assured that the rest of the production process was handled with care and a genuine concern for the music. Virgin vinyl pressings will usually be advertised as such. To check whether a pressing is "virgin" hold the record up to a strong light, with a virgin vinyl disc you'll be able to see the light whereas non-virgin vinyl (slutty vinyl?) LPs are totally opaque.

*Reissues* – After the major record companies gave up on pressing vinyl, other companies looking to serve the audiophile niche bought the rights to produce vinyl copies of old popular LPs by artists such as Crosby Stills & Nash, Santana, Miles Davis, Cream, etc. The most famous of the reissue vinyl producers is *Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs* who pioneered the concept of re-mastering the music and pressing it on heavy high quality vinyl in limited quantities to ensure that every copy was a good copy. Since then companies like *Classic Records*, *4 Men with Beards*, *Legacy* and others have joined Mobile Fidelity in producing high quality reissues, usually on heavy 180 – 200 gram vinyl. Looking to cash in on the vinyl revival, even major labels such as *Warner/Elecktra/Atlantic*, *Capital* and *EMI* have joined the fray with their own vinyl reissues, including some off the biggest names in popular and jazz music.



*A Mobile Fidelity Reissue*

There is some dissent as to whether reissues, particularly the re-mastered/re-mixed variety, sound better or worse than the original issues. But for most of us the matter is moot. If you want a pristine copy of Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks* the only way you're going to get one is to spend dozens of hours finding a perfect used copy (not bloody likely) or just buy the reissue. In this particular case the reissue is a good bet because it happens to sound excellent. By and large I've been very happy with the reissues I've purchased although I did get a bad pressing of CSN&Y. Had I discovered the flaw earlier (I waited 2 years to open and play the record – don't ask, it's a long story) I would have gone back to the record company for a new copy. And so should you. Reissues and audiophile pressings are very expensive (\$20 - \$100) and you should expect to get an absolutely quiet pressing for that kind of money.

*Imports* – These are records pressed outside of the USA and *generally* sound better than the domestic versions. I've found that Japanese pressings are usually outstanding—very low in surface noise, clean and clear sounding. Some of my most treasured records are Japanese pressings. British and German pressings are also usually very good. But just like wine and automobiles, import doesn't always mean better than domestic. I have an import pressing of *Revolver* that sounds awful.

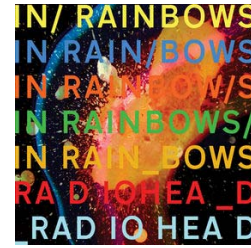


*Can you tell if this is an import? Can you guess the country of origin? I knew you could.*

*Used* – This is where the fun and the bargains can be found. There is a huge inventory of used records out there in the world, sitting in people's basements, attics and shelves—unused and unloved. One day an owner of a record collection decides to de-clutter the house or raise a little cash or just up and die. Their loss is your gain. Many of these records are in sorry shape and are beyond hope. Some have been very well cared for, and most just need a good cleaning to come alive. There is

risk in buying used records as so many of them are in poor condition. But the price is right, the variety is endless and there is fun to be had in the hunting.

*New Releases* – With all this talk of reissues and used records you'd think that vinyl LPs were relics of the past with no present and no future. That just ain't so. Lots of modern bands are releasing their music on LP. Bands such as Modest Mouse, Coldplay, The Decembrists, Brian Wilson (OK he's old but he has a new album), The Heartless Bastards, Green Day and especially Radiohead have embraced vinyl. Radiohead stands out for having released a deluxe set of their most recent album *In*



*The Crane Wife*

*Rainbows* that contains 2 CDs and two 12-inch 45 RPM LPs which sound absurdly excellent. I've noticed that the new release LPs are generally pressed on heavy vinyl and sound really good. The Decembrists' *The Crane Wife* and Green Day's *American Idiot* along with *In Rainbows* stand out as particularly excellent sounding LPs as well as being musically brilliant. I guess the performers and record labels that care enough about good sound to put out vinyl make the extra effort to deliver really good vinyl.

For you Hip Hop fans out there, almost all Hip Hop is available on vinyl because of the strong DJ influence in that genre.

If you want to know which reissue and new release vinyl LPs are worthwhile buys, an impeccable source of critical opinion is Michael Fremer's [MusicAngle.com](http://MusicAngle.com). Michael's musical knowledge is encyclopedic, his tastes range across almost every musical genre and Mike knows good sound. You'll find lots of record reviews and fascinating articles about of vinyl production, care and playback.



*The Absolute Sound* and *Playback* magazines are other reliable judge of music and recording quality. I particularly recommend Bob Gendron and Wayne Garcia's *Great & Great Sounding Rock LPs* article in the [April '08 issue of Playback](#) (jump to page 56).

## Where to Find Records to Buy

*Stores* –I love browsing through stacks of things, be they records, CDs or books. There is something satisfying about touching them and looking at the front and back covers. In the case of used records visual inspection of the record surface will help identify ones that are in very bad condition. For these reasons stores are my preferred places to shop for used records and there are more of them around than you might think, you just have to look for them. I'll describe ones that I know for the benefit of those of you who live in the Mid-Atlantic states; the rest of you can find vinyl stores in your area by using the phonebook and Google.

Richmond, VA – My college student son (aka: the parasite) turned me on to [Plan 9 Music](#) on W. Cary Street. This place is paradise. They have plenty of new and



used rock/popular vinyl with a healthy selection of \$1 used LPs. At a buck a pop you should just buy anything that strikes your fancy. If only one out of five is worthwhile music and in decent shape you've won big time. I had better luck than that and found some real gems for a buck, like a Brian Auger LP. I also scored an obscure Richard Thompson LP in excellent condition for \$5. They also have rare LPs segregated from the stacks and prominently displayed, albeit at much higher prices than \$1. There is a listening station with a

turntable so you can try out used records that look suspect for wear and scratches. Plan 9 earns a 4 star rating on the 5-star DiComo scale—the selection is outstanding, the prices more than fair and it is within easy walking distance of the CanCan Brasserie French restaurant where you can treat yourself to a nice lunch and a glass of wine after buying a stack o' records.

Baltimore MD area – **Record & Tape Traders** carries a small number of new and used rock/pop LPs. I've found a few good records there and as it is local I stop by often to see what's new, but the limited selection rates only 2 stars.



*Record & Tape Trader's modest LP selection costs them some points*

Hoboken NJ – **Tunes** is a real gem of a store with new LPs and thousands of used records at reasonable prices along with friendly staff

right across the Hudson from Manhattan. I've only been there once but the next time I am in northern NJ, I will definitely go back to Tunes. Tunes gets a 3.5 star rating. I swear it appears to me that there are more Sushi restaurants per square mile in Hoboken than anywhere outside of Japan. Don't ask me why.

Princeton NJ – [Princeton Record Exchange](#) has been recommended to me by several people who have serious analog credentials but I have not yet had a chance to visit. PREX claims a selection of over 60,000 LPs of all genres except for classical. Based on reputation alone they get 4 stars

Pittsburgh PA – If Plan 9 is paradise, [Jerry's Records](#) has got to be the 7<sup>th</sup> level of Nirvana. (My apologies in advance to any theologians or religions I may have offended with my bad analogy). Where Princeton and Plan 9 talk about thousands or even tens of thousands of used LPs, Jerry's has more than *One Million* records.



*Just the tip of Jerry's iceberg*

This is it people, the ultimate place to shop for used vinyl, especially if you are looking for 45s, Classical, R&B, Spoken Word, Country, Western, Country *and* Western, Bluegrass and other exotic genres. And yes there's lots of Rock and popular music as well. Jerry's prides itself on selling only records that are in decent condition and claims to clean them all before offering them for sale. The average price for an LP is \$3 but rare, extra clean, virgin vinyl or other special stuff is priced higher. I picked up an extra clean, virgin vinyl Duke Robillard LP for the bargain price of \$6. My wife and I walked out with a big stack of records for a measly \$80 and I think there were only 2 or three that turned out to be disappointing. If I lived in Pittsburgh I would always be broke and/or divorced. No question about it: 5 stars.

If you think I'm kidding about vinyl stores being more common than you think, yesterday as we were driving through the small town of Lakewood in southern NJ, I spotted a local record store with a sign in the window that said "We buy and sell vinyl." I screamed "STOP, a vinyl sighting!" but my wife was driving and she hit the accelerator hard. Tears rolled down my cheeks as the store shrank in the side view mirror.

### **Record Conventions (aka: Record Shows)**

These are periodic (typically monthly) gatherings of record dealers in hotels, fire halls, bingo halls and the like. Dealers set up tables with bins of used and sometimes new



records. Yes there are bargains to be had but it is easy to overspend as well. My advice is to go in with a set budget, a wish list of records you'd really like to have and most of all lots of patience. First timers often get carried away buying everything in sight. Take your time, survey all of the tables, hone in on a few dealers that seem to specialize in what

you like. Examine the records and jackets carefully for damage. Severely worn jackets are a good indicator of a poorly cared for record. Look for (and avoid) deep scratches on the record that you can feel with your finger and the presence of lots of fingerprints. Don't worry about dust, which can be cleaned off. Once you've spotted your prey don't hesitate to haggle over the price, particularly if you are buying several records from one dealer.



I've had mixed results at Record Shows but have come away with some great buys, particularly at the \$1 bins. One such coup was a solo LP by King Crimson's front-man Robert Fripp that apparently had been played once and never listened to again.

*A bargain Fripp*

To find a record show or convention in your area, use the power of the Internet or ask at music stores and audio dealers; someone is bound to know where and when to find one. A quick Google search revealed these shows and many more:

NJ [http://www.izzymusic.com/record\\_shows.htm](http://www.izzymusic.com/record_shows.htm)

Austin, TX <http://www.austinrecords.com/>

Eastern PA: <http://www.surroundsoundproductions.com/>

Boston: [http://monkeyhouseentertainment.com/sgg/m9\\_1.htm](http://monkeyhouseentertainment.com/sgg/m9_1.htm)

Lancaster PA: <http://www.recordcollectors.org/>

Minneapolis: [http://www.mnrecordshow.com/record\\_show\\_main/the\\_record\\_show.html](http://www.mnrecordshow.com/record_show_main/the_record_show.html)

NYC: <http://www.musiccollecting.com/page103.html>

Orange County, CA [http://www.asavinyl.com/record\\_show.htm](http://www.asavinyl.com/record_show.htm)

### On Line

Too busy to browse through thousands of records? E-commerce may be for you. You'll find more new vinyl on-line than you will in stores and it is so darn convenient. I buy 90% of my new vinyl on-line. While [Music Direct.com](http://www.musicdirect.com) is my vinyl E-tailer of choice, there are several others that also offer large selections at competitive prices such as: [Acoustic Sounds](http://www.acoustic-sounds.com), [Elusive Disc](http://www.elusive-disc.com), [Sound Stage Direct](http://www.sound-stage-direct.com) and several others.



There are many ways to buy used records on-line as well. There is always eBay but my experience with private eBay sellers is that they over state the condition of their records and over value them as a result. I'm sure there are exceptions but I've had bad experiences and vastly prefer seeing used records first hand before I buy. For serious record collectors who are after the most rare and elusive titles there are on-line auctions run by used record experts such as [Jerry's Records](http://www.jerryrecords.com) and [Record Finders](http://www.recordfinders.com) (owners of Plan 9).

### Dumpster Diving, Estate Sales, Flea Markets and Yard Sales

A well known audiophile, writer and record collector got a tip from a friend that there was a dumpster full of records in Manhattan. Within hours he was there with a mini van loading up on an astounding collection of first rate Classical LPs. Therein lies a lesson—make sure everyone you know is aware that you buy and listen to vinyl. My cousins threw away my late uncle's jazz LP collection after my aunt passed away. They had no idea that I listen to records, and it never occurred to ask their been-working-in-the-audio-business-for-35-years-cousin if I would be interested. My error. I should have let everyone in my family know of my vinyl affliction.

Keep a sharp eye for estate sale notices in your local paper as these can be great sources of records. The surviving kin are usually just happy to get rid of the "clutter" so you can

expect to get a great deal. If you're bored on a weekend drive around and look for garage and yard sales; every once in a while you may hit a vinyl mother-load. Flea markets are another potential source of cheap used records. Although I have not had much luck with flea markets you may fare better.

### **See You Next Month**

Originally I conceived of this article as a three part affair, but the monster has grown and I have a full time job that needs attention. [Part Four](#) will cover how to care for the records you buy. See you then.

*Paul DiComo is Definitive's VP of Marketing who listens to his vinyl with the incomparable Mythos ST loudspeaker. Feel free to contact Paul with questions and comments by emailing [info@definitivetech.com](mailto:info@definitivetech.com) with "Attention Paul" in the subject line.*