

VINYL RECORDINGS – BACK IN THE GROOVE

by Stewart Hendrickson



In the 1960s I built a beautiful walnut stereo cabinet, complete with turntable, amplifier, storage for LP records, and state-of-art Advent speakers. Then when CDs arrived in the 1980s I bought my first CD player and started buying CDs instead. The stereo system fell into disuse and became just a nice piece of furniture. I recently downsized into a condo and was happy to find that the old stereo cabinet just fit in the living room – I didn't have to get rid of it. The old CD player in the cabinet quit working, so I resurrected the old vinyl system. I still had a large collection of LPs, which I had resisted throwing out, and started playing them after years of disuse. The result was astounding! I discovered sound vastly superior to that of CDs, and the joy of really listening to music.

Back in the “vinyl days” it took a big effort to remove the disk from its sleeve (something you need to do with two hands), place it on the turntable, clean it, and carefully lower the needle into the groove. After all that trouble it was worthwhile to relax, sit back, and just enjoy the music. CDs, and more recently streaming mp3s, have made it so easy that we seldom really listen to the music, but use it as background sound. In the process we have become used to the crappy, digital CD sound and don't remember – if you are that old – the beautiful sound of real music. Even at live concerts we often hear music played through electronic equipment that distorts the real sound of unamplified music played in an acoustic hall.

Producing a vinyl record recorded from reel-to-reel tape is a totally analog process – all the information that comes into the recorder comes out on the record. Producing a CD involves breaking the information into discrete bits and then discarding some of the bits in order to get most of the important information onto the disc. This compression, called “lossy,” is necessary to get 50-60 minutes of music onto one disc. Another type of compression is dynamic, where the loud and soft notes are digitally adjusted down or up for better listening, particularly in a noisy environment. Early CDs sounded particularly bad, although later computing techniques have greatly improved their quality. Still, in my opinion, this is nothing like the quality of analog sound.

I have to point out that a new vinyl record might not be all that better than a CD. If the record was produced from a CD master you still have the “lossy” and perhaps dynamic compressions. Good quality vinyl records need to be produced from reel-to-reel tapes to gain the advantage of vinyl. You can hear that difference from listening to old vinyl recordings made before the era of CDs.

The other advantage of listening to a vinyl recording is the environment in which the music is played. In those “vinyl days” we were more interested in enjoying the music, taking the time to set it up, and seriously listening to it. That was a different way of listening to music, which most of us have lost. It was comforting, but it did take time, something of which we now have little. Yet another advantage of vinyl is the large format – both the cover and insert – with larger pictures, lyrics and comments, which you can hold with both hands.

I recently discovered there are music stores that deal mainly in vinyl recordings. Near where I live in Ballard (Seattle) is [Sonic Boom Records](#) and [Bop Street Records](#). Much of their inventory is now new rather than used vinyl. Many artists are now recording on vinyl in-addition-to or rather-than CDs. In my first perusal of Sonic Boom Records I purchased a new vinyl recording (2 LPs) by my favorite artist, Rhiannon Giddens – **There Is No Other** – and I was blown away by the great sound as well as her great music. I have also played some of my old LPs, both classical and folk, and have enjoyed being reintroduced to some great old music. I am a new convert to vinyl.

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