

stereophile

A SECOND IMPRESSION

FOLLOW-UP by FRED KAPLAN & JOHN ATKINSON

THIS ISSUE: FK cleans his records and JA measures the B.M.C. Phono MCCI.

Audio Desk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner

In his June 2012 “Analog Corner,” Michael Fremer hailed the German-made Audio Desk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner as “the best record-cleaning machine in the world” (see www.analogplanet.com/content/worlds-best-record-cleaning-machine). Then came the punch line: it cost \$3995. That just seemed silly!

In June 2013, the machine was on display at the New York Hi-Fi Show, and I asked its importer, Robert Stein of Ultra Systems, Inc., what the big deal was. I’d just bought a two-LP 45rpm album, Rickie Lee Jones’s *It’s Like This* (Artemis/Acoustic Sounds AAPP 51056). Stein offered to clean one of the records; when I got home, I could compare the cleaned with the uncleaned. I accepted the challenge.

Back home, I listened to track 1 of the cleaned record: sounded great. Then track 1 of the uncleaned: it sounded very good, but Jones’s voice seemed recessed and a bit muffled; the background instruments were one-dimensional. I thought, *WTF?! I did the same with each record’s second and third tracks, and so on. Same results. Could the two sides of the original album have been recorded differently? Could the two slabs of vinyl have been pressed differently?* *Stereophile’s* editor, John Atkinson, suggested that I ask for a review sample of the Vinyl Cleaner and report on the results.

As soon as I got it and set it up (idiot-proof simple), my first task was to clean the other Rickie Lee Jones record. Result: The two slabs of vinyl now sounded the same.

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of truly *cleaning* a record, which the Audio Desk does like no other record cleaner I’ve come across. It doesn’t just remove the dust; it clears out gunk from deep within the grooves—gunk we may not have known existed—so that the stylus can track the groove with greater accuracy and less strain. As a result, the silence of the music’s backdrop is deepened; this clears, improves, and in some cases transforms the sound. Keep in mind, the Jones set

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US distributor: Ultra Systems, 127 Union Square, New Hope, PA 18938. Tel: (800) 724-3305, (215) 862-6570. Fax: (215) 862-4871. Web: www.ultrasystem.com.

2 FK’s system: VPI Classic turntable and arm, Nagra BPS phono preamp, Krell Cipher SACD/CD player, Simaudio Moon Evolution 700i integrated amplifier, Revel Ultima Studio 2 loudspeakers, Nirvana cables and interconnects.

wasn't some dirty old record bought at a garage sale; it was a brand-new album, pressed on HQ-180 vinyl for Acoustic Sounds. Before getting the Audio Desk Systeme, I'd put the uncleaned Jones disc through my VPI HW-16 record cleaner: It made no sonic difference.

I performed before-and-after comparisons with *lots* of albums that I know very well: old, new, dirty, clean. In some cases, the improvement was small; in some cases, it was huge; in every case, there was improvement. Bass instruments *always* sounded much better—not so much deeper as more musical. I could hear (and, if I had perfect pitch, I could have transcribed) the value of each note. I was stunned to learn that I'd never really *heard* some of Scott LaFaro's solos on Bill Evans's *Waltz for Debby* (LP, Riverside/Analogue Productions AAPJ 09). I could hear more of the wood (if it was a double bass) or brass (if it was, say, a tuba or trombone). I could also hear more of the ambience around instruments, if the original recording had captured that. Voices were almost always more articulate and up-front. The music was more lifelike; the musicians were more *there*.

Generally, the better-recorded the album, the better still it sounded after a spin in the Audio Desk Systeme². Classic Records' four-disc single-sided 45rpm pressings of Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*

(Columbia/Classic TCCS 81631-45-I) sounded pretty awesome before the cleaning. Afterward, I could hear more of Miles's lips on his mouthpiece, more of Coltrane's breath whooshing through his tenor sax, more of the rhythms-within-rhythms of Jimmy Cobb's brushstrokes, and more of Paul Chambers's fingerwork on the bass (and more of the wood on that bass, too). This wasn't just me, the audiophile. My wife, who tends to be skeptical about such things, heard it clearly, as did a neighbor who has some familiarity with high-end stereos but doesn't own one himself.

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Joni Mitchell's *Wild Things Run Fast* (Geffen) had always struck me as a great-sounding album except for a bit of compression: the instruments always sounded a bit shmooshed together, a bit homogenized. Not so after a trip to the Audio Desk. They were all dynamic, distinct, and rounded. In one of the before/after comparisons I ran for my neighbor, I played a 180gm pressing of Bonnie Raitt's

Nick of Time (LP, Capitol/DCC Compact Classics 2025). It already sounded great—I figured the cleaning would have only a marginal effect. Nope, the difference was significant: Raitt's voice was clearer, more up-front; guitar twangs were twangier, their overtones bloomier; the drums were more percussive, the bass more plucky.

I could go on. In the interest of saving space, I refer you to Freme's review, which explains how the machine works.

A few caveats: Sometimes I had to tap the record gently to get it to start spinning in the Vinyl Cleaner. On three occasions, the machine, which usually segued instantly from wash phase to drying phase, stopped after the wash; I had to start the process over again. (The second time, it always worked fine.) And the Audio Desk did not silence the pops and ticks caused by scratches or old, baked-in dust.

Finally, we return to the big road bump along this trip: that \$3995 price. Look at it this way: Consider the Audio Desk not an accessory but a component. If I'd heard the most stunning of my before/after tests and someone had told me that the improvement was caused by a \$3995 component, I'd think it a bit pricey but not at all out of line by high-end standards. If your stereo system cost tens of thousands of dollars and you play a lot of vinyl, you need to check this thing out.

—Fred Kaplan ■



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