



Three audiophiles come together  
to wax philosophical over vintage and  
modern LPs spun on a high-end system.



By Mike Mettler  
Photos by Edward Smith





**Belt driven:** "The VPI turntable is very 'manual' in design," said Listening Club turntable maestro Micah Sheveloff. "In order to play back 45-rpm records, which we did during our session, you have to change the platter-drive belt from one pulley to another, resulting in a faster rotation speed."

*Planet Waves*, Bonnie Raitt's *Green Light*, Keith Richards's Jamaican-tinged side project *Wingless Angels*) expressed his desire to sit in, I decided the time was right to open up the circle and call for a super-session sonic summit. And thus the **S&V Vinyl Listening Club** was born.

On a crisp late-February Friday morning, I picked up Rob at his home in Connecticut and drove to Micah's with a black Amoeba Records shoulder bag full of vinyl in tow. After swapping some recording-studio stories, we hunkered down in the listening room's sweet spot and I called out to Micah to cue up the first selection: Eric Clapton's "Hello Old Friend," the first track on Side 4 of the *Complete Clapton* four-LP box set (Reprise, 2007). "Friend" originally comes from Clapton's 1976 Polydor effort *No Reason to Cry*, produced by, you guessed it, Mr. Fraboni. The song was a mild FM hit, driven by E.C.'s sing-songy/seesaw guitar line, Richard Manuel's keyboards, and a cheerful chorus. Right off the bat, however, we knew something was up. "This

Sooner or later, I knew I would once again feel the need to heed the calling of the almighty LP. Like many, I put vinyl records aside when the CD became the dominant music-playback format, I eagerly amassed shelves full of shiny discs that would rival the inventory at a Columbia House fulfillment center. But I could never truly let go of my record collection. Sure, I had thinned it out somewhat, but in recent years I found myself sifting through record bins and scouring eBay for those special finds. American Blues' 1968 debut *Do Their Thing*, featuring a pre-ZZ Top Dusty Hill and Frank Beard, on Uni? *Check*. The self-titled *Dream Syndicate* EP from 1982, the opening salvo from the paisley-underground pioneers, on Down There? *Check*. Porcupine Tree's 1993 acid-prog opus *Up the Downstair*, an English import on Delirium? *Check*. Simply Vinyl's 1998 double-LP 180-gram virgin-vinyl pressing of the Who's seminal 1969 rock opera *Tommy*? *Check*.

Hunting and gathering these wax gems made it harder and harder to ignore that constant nagging voice in the back of my head. It kept gnawing at me like, well, a broken record. "Back to vinyl," it whispered in a breathy, echoey tone suspiciously like Roger Waters's on Pink Floyd's "Careful with That Axe, Eugene." "Back to vinyl. *Back to vinyl*." I could ignore my calling no more. In my "Track One" editorial in the July/August 2007 issue, I declared: "My name is Mike. I am a vinyl addict." We ran three turntable reviews in that issue, and have two on tap in this issue (see pages 64 and 66), not to mention two LP reviews under the "Vetting Vinyl" banner in the Music section on page 81 and Michael Trei's setup primer, "Mysteries of the Turntable Explained," on page 48.

Last summer, fellow audiophile and CE industry vet Micah Sheveloff and I decided to commence the "Vinyl Sessions," for which I would regularly drive 205 miles roundtrip to his humble abode in Connecticut in order to indulge in our analog tendencies. (You can find some of these sessions detailed in the archives of the **S&V Bitstream** blog on our Web site.) As word spread about our summits, others wanted to join in our vinyl reindeer games. Finally, when noted record producer Rob Fraboni (Bob Dylan's

## SET ME UP

Handling and cleaning LPs is a ritual not unlike decanting a great port wine.

Micah Sheveloff reports: Collectors take great pride in how carefully we preserve our collections. But, yes, I do actually *play* my records. My vinyl is here to be enjoyed, not revered from a distance. In the photo sequence below, I'm preparing a record for an official spin for the **S&V Vinyl Listening Club**. Here's how I did it.

At left: A clean stylus (a.k.a. the "needle") is mandatory. I use Last Power Cleaner (lastfactory.com) and a Last microfiber brush (like the ones used to apply nail polish) to remove any foreign material. I clean the needle before each play. Other accessories I've used and liked include Onzow Zerodust stylus cleaner (needdoctor.com/Onzow-Zerodust), Gruv Glide anti-static record cleaner (gruvglide.com), and the Discwasher D4 kit (needdoctor.com/Discwasher-D4-Kit).

Middle: I apply a misted blend of water and alcohol to the surface of every LP I buy before playing it, and I use the powerful VPI record vacuum (vpiindustries.com) to clean out whatever lurks deep within the grooves. This helps reduce the overall noise floor as well as the dreaded, infamous "pops and clicks" while listening. A clean record is usually a quiet record!

At right: Admiration time. Looking at a record made from virgin vinyl using a strong backlight, you can see right through the material, even heavy premium-grade pressings, because it's not clouded by impurities. Typically, records made from virgin vinyl are quieter and exhibit better separation, greater dynamics, and an even tonal balance.







"new vinyl is taken from digital tapes," Rob noted. "It's a bit harsh, but very accurate and very active in the midrange. The graininess I heard on the high end wasn't there originally, though."

As a counterpoint, Rob pulled out one of his selections: *Joe Farrell Quartet* (CTI, 1970), on which the titular hard-bop saxophonist joins forces with an all-star lineup: keyboardist Chick Corea, guitarist John McLaughlin, bassist Dave Holland, and drummer Jack DeJohnette. As the needle hit the groove on Side 1's opening track, "Follow Your Heart," we immediately knew we were hearing something special. "This is how analog should feel," asserted Rob. "This is luscious, this recording. You can really hear the dynamics and the reverb. There's none of that graininess." Minutes passed as the three of us stopped talking and simply connected with the music. Rob was the first to chime in after the song came to a close: "Wow. I had my eyes closed. I was just taken away. I feel like it's 1970. I mean, I was *gone*." Observed Micah, "There was unbelievable dynamic resolution between the soft and loud passages. You just don't hear that on modern recordings." Fraboni agreed: "When things are right, it's quiet and loud simultaneously. And we totally got that here."

We were in the zone now. I made the next call: the title track of Steely Dan's *Aja*, from the limited-edition 180-gram 30th-anniversary 2007 release by Cisco Music. Rob loved it from the get-go: "That is good. That is *sick* analog. It's as close as you can get to what it sounds like in the studio." He should know, as he logged plenty of production time at Village Recorders in West Los Angeles, where *Aja* was cut. Joe Sample's Fender Rhodes electric piano and Victor Feldman's percussion were particularly revealing here. Concluded Rob after we marveled at the intensity of Steve Gadd's drum solo: "There are things I never heard before on this recording. It's so evident that this record was pressed with extreme care."

We pulled out the original 1977 MCA vinyl release from



**Benz-Micro phono cartridge**

**VPI HW-19 MK-3 turntable**

**VPI record vacuum**

**Sumiko Premier MMT tonearm**

**StraightWire LSI tonearm cable**

**AudioQuest carbon-fiber record brush**

**Conrad-Johnson PV-5 preamplifier** ("A very euphoric-sounding component," marveled Sheveloff, "and one of my all-time favorite pieces of audio gear. It delivers a sweetness of tone and a huge soundstage, and although it's 21 years old, I have no plans to part with it.")

**Krell FPB 200 amplifier**

**Thiel SCS4 loudspeakers**

**Thiel SS2 subwoofer**

**Alpha-Core Goertz interconnects and speaker wire**


**NAD M55 multiformat digital-disc player (CD, DVD-V, DVD-A, SACD, MP3)**

**Tascam CD recorder**

**MICAH'S  
EQUIPMENT  
PACK**

Micah's shelves for comparison. No contest. "The noise floor isn't as good as on the 180-gram," confirmed Rob after the track had gotten underway. "The surface noise is low here, but the other one is better."

Before we broke for lunch, we enjoyed the clear, silky harmonies on Linda Ronstadt's intense take on "You're No Good," culled from a Japanese import reissue of her 1976 *Greatest Hits* collection on Warner-Pioneer, plucked on a whim from Micah's ever-bulging shelves.

After lunch, I figured it was time to unsleeve another LP Rob had a stake in: the Beach Boys' *Holland* (Brother/Warner Bros., 1973). It's one of Micah's all-time favorite records, and until today, he had never met its producer, let alone knew he shared a home state with him. (See, there's always a method to my madness.) The track of choice could only be the hit piano-driven harmonic gem "Sail On Sailor." Ricky Fataar's drums — recorded in the same room as the aforementioned *Aja* — are dead, and that's a good thing. Rob was clearly moved. "I got goosebumps," he said. "There's something about the immediacy of Carl Wilson's voice that makes you feel like you're in the room. In the pre-chorus, you can discern the spatial relationship between the guitar lick that wraps around Carl's background-vocal answer lines. On the CD, they're down in volume — not intentionally, but because that dimensional information and intimacy just get lost. It sounds like he's behind a piece of glass. Every time I've listened to this song on CD, I've thought, 'Those vocals aren't loud enough.' I hadn't heard the vinyl in ages, and it made me think, 'This is how I remember it sounding.' It makes me feel proud." Noted Micah, "That's why we're here. To feel that kind of magic." 

**Turn it up, with care:** Noted Micah, "It's critical to find that 'sweet spot' with the volume knob — lending enough kick and impact to the music without saturating the room, overwhelming the listeners, or overdriving the system. I'm quite sensitive to any form of distortion, so I always seek to maintain levels just below that point."





We wound things down by spinning a few modern recordings: Radiohead's *In Rainbows* (the deluxe megabuck self-issued two-LP 45-rpm package from late 2007) and Porcupine Tree's *Deadwing* (Gates of Dawn, 2005). The Clubbers quickly found that there was virtually no difference between the *In Rainbows* LP and CD — "Digital is digital," shrugged Rob. But the Tree vinyl had a bit more oomph to it, and Rob was impressed by the shifting dynamics on "Halo," a testament to the production skills of Tree's mastermind, Steven Wilson.

The Club could have easily spun long and deep into the night,

**Vinyl Lounge:** At left, Rob Fraboni studies the sleeve for the Rolling Stones' *Bridges to Babylon* LP (Virgin, 1997); on it, he engineered and produced its three Keith Richards tracks. Chuckled Rob, "Charlie Watts commented, 'Those are the only ones worth listening to anymore.'" At right, four of albums spun at the Listening Club.

but other duties called to us all. We regrettably closed down the summit, and Rob and I went on our way. As I dropped him off at the foot of his driveway, Rob turned to me and grinned. "This was very cool," he declared. "When's the next listening session?" As soon as that nagging voice in my head resurfaces, you'll be my first call, old friend.

**S&V**

**CUT BY CUT**

## Micah Sheveloff and Rob Fraboni share their post-listening session impressions.

**SHEVELOFF** (below, right): I think the most dramatic revelations to emerge from this Listening Club session can be broken down into three areas. These conclusions come from my perspective both as a musician and from playing instruments for most of my life.

The first area is **dynamics**. You can say what you want about noise floor when using an LP record, but the dynamic changes on everything we heard, from Radiohead's *In Rainbows* to the Beach Boys' *Holland*, were much closer to real instrumentation than their digital counterparts. In reality, it may have less to do with the advantages of analog and more to do with the overuse of compression in mastering the CDs, but the difference was astonishing.

**FRABONI** (below, left): I agree that the dynamics are compromised on the digital CDs. This is probably due to the overuse of compression. But if the source material was analog and the vinyl represents a transfer directly from analog, the digital counterpart will have a slightly altered dynamic range that occurs when converting from analog to digital. The relationship between peak and RMS will change by as much as 4 dB.

**SHEVELOFF:** The second area is **staging**. I can't explain to you why the dimensionality of an LP highlights a sense of space better than the digital versions of the same recordings, but I do know that when mastering my own recordings, I've found that an overuse of compression had a detrimental effect on reverb and instrument decay. Maybe a portion of the explanation lies there. Whatever the cause or causes, the LPs staged dramatically better than CDs. It's not even close.

**FRABONI:** This again is due to analog-to-digital conversion and the spatial information that's lost or compromised in the conversion. The better the A-to-D converter, the less loss occurs, but there's always some loss of dimensional qualities. With vinyl, the better the pressing and the phono cartridge, the better the spatial reproduction.

I have to say that I don't feel compression is really the culprit here.

**SHEVELOFF:** The third area is **instrument tone**. On acoustic reproduction of sax solos, human voice, drum hits, and cymbal decay, the LP versions of each sample recording sounded much more like the genuine article than an electronically reproduced facsimile. The electronic instruments suffer less in this regard, but the LPs seem to give the listener a more intimate sense for the ensemble and a realness for the players and their performances.

**FRABONI:** This would be related very closely to the above. Complex tonal characteristics are usually closely related to spatial characteristics. One should remember that the word "analog" is derived from analogous, and that's where digital differs significantly, in that there are actual gaps between the samples that are larger as the frequency increases. There are only 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> samples per cycle at 20 kHz, while at 100 Hz, there are 441 samples per cycle. The duration of the samples is constant throughout the audio spectrum.

**SHEVELOFF:** I think when you combine the subtleties of each of these attributes, it's easy to imagine why many experienced listeners prefer analog. It seems to be a medium much more closely related to the organic world of playing a musical instrument or singing in a performance hall. It's almost as if the spirit of the performer simply refuses to be converted into digital data and join the Good Vibrations on a microchip!

