

The VPI Scout turntable reviewed

When Tim Neely reviewed ELP's laser turntable earlier this year (March 4, 2005, #642), it was the first of a series on what's happening in the world of record players. I'm guessing many *Goldmine* readers have been playing music on turntables that are 10, 20 or even 30 years old. There's nothing wrong with that, but if you're like me you're interested in getting the most sound out of the records on your shelves. That means squeezing as much nuance and detail from the grooves, even if you don't know they are there. Trust me, there's music on those LPs and 45s that you've probably never heard. VPI's Scout turntable made me a believer.

Parts and setup

I've read about how difficult some turntables are to set up — many require special tools and calibrating that those of us who grew up using fully automatic systems have never dealt with. The day the Scout arrived was a particularly hectic day, and by the time I arrived home I had little enthusiasm for spending hours getting the thing up and running. To my delight, the Scout comes with easy-to-follow instructions that make setup simple.

The Scout weighs in at a beefy 32 pounds and is composed of four main parts: plinth (base), platter, motor and tonearm. The "table" part of the Scout is a piece of 1&1/8-inch thick medium density fiberboard (MDF), which has been shaped with rounded edges and painted in a semi-glossy black finish. Underneath the MDF is a 12-gauge steel plate attached by screws (the plate serves to enhance stability and dissipate vibrations). Above is a 1/4-inch thick acrylic platter that sits on an inverted Teflon bearing on a hardened shaft.

The plinth rests on four aluminum cone feet with stainless steel ball bearings on the ends. The cones are threaded to make leveling the Scout as simple as turning the cones with two fingers until the plinth is level — all without having to lift anything.

The platter is driven by a separate 600 rpm AC asynchronous motor, which is cased in steel and sits in a rectangular cutout on the left side of the 'table, somewhere between 3/32- to 1/8-inch away from the chassis. A detachable power cord brings juice to the motor. VPI's instructions note "The motor will make some low-level noise." It's low-level indeed, because I heard little if any noise, even if I pressed my ear to the motor while it was engaged.

A belt, made of fused vinyl hyperlon, is attached to a pulley on the motor and around the platter.

The pulley is tapered with grooves — the narrower upper section is designed for 33&1/3 play, while the lower part is wider and designed for 45s. A center groove in each section is the factory-correct speed, but the belt can be adjusted by setting it against the grooves, either higher or lower,



if the center groove placement runs the system too fast or slow.

The JMW-9 unipivot tonearm features a machined cup on one end that rests upon a super-sharp tungsten-carbide point — sort of like balancing on the head of a pin. It works great and makes it a breeze to exchange arms if you like experimenting.

An RCA junction box, which accepts any interconnects with RCA terminations, sits to the left of the tonearm. The tonearm also comes with a wire and connector (Lemo) that lines up a red dot on a receptacle on the junction box. Align the Lemo connector, connect it and the cables to a pre-amp or receiver and you're in business.

Just push play

Playing records on the Scout is as simple as placing a record on the platter (a washer rests on the bottom of the spindle), screwing the supplied clamp down (helps keep record flat and creates a partial vacuum between the record and platter), pressing the motor's power button, lifting the tonearm and lowering it onto the record. At first it seems that the tonearm would not land where I wanted it to — the arm has a bit of wobble because of the unipivot design — but it placed the stylus exactly where I wanted it to.

Listen to the music

I couldn't help it. I intended my first session with the Scout to be short, but soon I had a stack of albums out and was going from LP to LP as if I'd never heard them before. In some ways I hadn't.

The Scout revealed subtleties that I had never heard on many of my favorite old warhorses. This kind of listening is addictive, and four hours later I had to pull myself away shaking my head and wondering what else I've been missing all these years.

First on the 'table was Yes' "Awaken," from their 1977 album, *Going For The One*. I thought I knew this piece inside and out, but I was wrong. Every instrument was clearer and better defined, like I had removed some age-old grime from the album. Many of Rick Wakeman's keyboard flourishes and Steve Howe's guitar notes were brand-new to me.

Dire Straits' *Love Over Gold* is one of my faves on vinyl: The instruments have incredible sound and depth, and Mark Knopfler's voice is as craggy as an old mountain. "Telegraph Road" and "Private Investigations" alternately whisper more quietly and explode with more bombast on the Scout.

Todd Rundgren's *Something Anything* is a quirky gem, with great songs and lots of studio tomfoolery. My Mobile Fidelity 200-gram pressing has never sounded better than on the Scout. The backing vocals on "Dust In The Wind" take on new urgency and passion, like a congregation singing for redemption.

One of my guilty pleasures is The Godz' 1978 self-titled release on Millennium Records. It's 4/4 guitar-heavy hard-rock with more clichés than a Friday-night sitcom. The Scout gives this one a nice boost in the mid-range.

ELO's instrumental "The Whale," from *Out Of The Blue*, took on an almost surround-sound quality, as the synthesizers zigzagged from speaker to speaker. It was also even more apparent how unpleasantly dry Bev Bevan's drums were recorded.

Lively is a word I'd use to describe the Scout, and when I put on Foreigner's "Long Long Way From Home," the short acoustic guitar intro flew off the grooves in more detail than I could believe. And the youthful energy in Lou Gramm's voice was undeniable.

One of this year's rock 'n' roll casualties was Foghat's Rod Price. His slide guitar solo on the band's 1978 single "Stone Blue" is one of his greatest. The Scout lets the notes ring through, but it's Dave Peverett's rhythm guitar that gains stature.

Danny Kirwan's "Sunny Side Of Heaven," from Fleetwood Mac's *Bare Trees*, has a dreamy richness with its heavily reverbed guitars. But it's Mick Fleetwood's quicksilver touch on the drums that takes on new life.

Sundazed's terrific collection of Byrds alternate takes from 1966-67 on *Another Dimension* includes the band's achingly gorgeous version of "Wild Mountain Thyme" (here without strings). Roger McGuinn's and David Crosby's vocals become almost as

one as delicate guitar arpeggios underscore this pastoral gem.

Rhino's 200-gram vinyl pressing of *Brian Wilson Presents SMiLE* (2004) is astounding. On the Scout, listening to Wilson and cowriter Van Dyke Parks' "Surf's Up" is like entering a house of mirrors, as the multi-layered harmonies emerge and disappear.

Impressions

After several weeks listening to records on the Scout, one thought kept coming to me: "This turntable makes records sound even more 'analog,'" if that makes sense. The smoothness and richness that characterizes the best vinyl recordings seems to emerge effortlessly from this turntable. I spent hours and hours listening to one LP after another and never got the tinny ear fatigue that I always get after listening to CDs in the car, for instance. I always want to listen to music, but the VPI Scout made me want to listen to music more. Here, too much of a good thing is still a good thing.

The best way I can characterize VPI's Scout is that it makes the music come off the record — rushing out as if there were no other choice. Many turntables seem content playing it safe and letting only the big picture emerge; the Scout goes deep into the grooves and finds the little extras that lie hidden. Then, it grabs and exposes them.

The separation of instruments and timing is excellent, and there is an overall neutrality to its sound that lets each part come through in the mix. The Scout is also very quiet — the music does the talking.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, I have to ask whether the price of the turntable is worth the return in investment. The retail price of the Scout (\$900) and the JMW-9 tonearm (\$700) bring the package price to \$1,600 — not an inconsiderable amount of money. In the audiophile world, where products costing as much as cars (even houses) are routinely viewed with a yawn, the price of a Scout is a pittance. For many, though, spending \$1,600 on *anything* is a serious matter. Is the Scout 10 times better than a \$160 turntable? I don't have a definitive answer. I do know that I haven't enjoyed playing and listening to my records this much in many, many years. I can't put a price on that, and considering what else I *have* to spend my money on (things that offer me no enjoyment — car insurance for one) then the Scout has to be viewed as a bargain. Think of it as a long-term investment and a way to give your vinyl collection new life.

If listening to vinyl is important (I'm assuming it is), and you're considering upgrading from an old turntable, then the Scout is an easy-to-recommend player. Heck, it's easy to recommend anyway.

— Todd Whitesel