

»» Converting vinyl to digital

ANALOGUE REINVENTED

When vinyl first started making way for digital, a lot of folk simply sold or ditched their turntables, deeming them eternally obsolete. Record collections were flogged, given them away, or even just trashed.

You may be one of the astute ones that, at the very least, kept your most prized vinyl records. Or, you may be a more recent convert to the allure of the Shiny Black Disc, buying a mix of new and used discs as and when they become available.

Either way, you may now end up with music that you can only enjoy at home, and not while you're on the move, for instance, because it's on vinyl. In other words, in its native form, vinyl-based music can't travel like a CD or a music file can.

The answer to this dilemma is pretty straightforward. In the analogue days of yore, you'd record a copy of the album onto compact cassette, and then listen to the music on the move, either using an in-car cassette deck, or Sony's original, trend-setting Walkman.

Today, digitising the analogue music on the two sides of an LP is the way to go if you want to listen to the music without trying to mount a record player on the dashboard. However, to do it well requires patience, practice and the right gear.

Under the latter heading, the obvious prerequisite is a turntable, and a phono pre-amp (also known as a phono stage) to boost the low-gain signal. You may also want to invest in a record cleaning machine to ensure the vinyl you're about to digitise is in as good a nick as possible.

From here, it gets a little trickier. Ideally, you need a combined analogue-to-digital converter and a phono stage to capture the incoming, analogue signal of the turntable and to digitise it into a

predetermined digital format before committing it to the hard disc of a Windows computer, or a Mac, via USB.

There are several devices such as the ADL Stratos, and these days, some turntables even offer a USB output, thanks to an on-board phono stage and A/D converter that does all the conversion work for your and allows the digital signal to be outputted directly.

AlpineSoft's VinylStudio is one of the most popular software packages for editing digitised vinyl, because it's intuitive to use, can save the recorded audio to a vast array of file types (all the way from MP3 to double-DSD) and provides the tools needed to clean up all those snaps,

crackles and pops so typical of vinyl.

You can store the recorded files on disc, or burn them to CD. And you can metatag the recorded data, adding artist, title and track names, for instance. Saving the files on a USB flash drive makes them easily accessible and portable, too.

But remember, creating those files is a time-consuming

process, especially if you want the final result to be perfect. So, digitising a vinyl collection of several hundred albums is a daunting task. Instead, focussing on prized, out-of-print albums — at least initially — is probably the way to go.

However, the results can be startlingly good: a meticulously recorded copy of a decent LP, stored as a high-resolution DSD file (also known as SACD standard) will reveal a combination of musicality, detail and emotional impact that is quite astonishing.

As with all things hi-fi, though, the results are also dependent on the hardware employed. Record decks offering USB outputs that allow direct-to-computer recording won't necessarily achieve the same quality as a good standalone A/D converter and phono stage.

Remember, the end result will only be as good as the weakest link in the recording chain: an average cartridge, basic record player and rudimentary A/D converter will only yield average results.

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