

We're Loyal to You, Masters

Re-Mastered AUDIOPHILE RECORDINGS

BY BYRON LAURSEN

Ring the door at Sweet Thunder and Vinyl yelps. Later, Vinyl accepts a pat on the head and commences to chew Mr. Duck.

Sweet Thunder is a new entrant in the half-speed re-mastered audiophile disc business. All those expensive albums that look like regular albums — but don't *sound* like regular albums. Vinyl is a black cocker spaniel who lives in Sweet Thunder's Hollywood offices. Mr. Duck is a little yellow rubber toy.

Company mavens Howard Lowell and Russell Palmer, after introducing a visitor to Vinyl, like to point out a framed letter from Aaron Copland, whose recording of *Billy the Kid and Statements for Orchestra* was among the first of Sweet Thunder's projects. Copland, one of America's most distinguished living composers, calls the record "... a true achievement in the sense that it represents more realistically the composer's thought." Citing "The clarity and brilliance of sonic mixtures," Copland concludes that the new recordings "pack more of a whallop, and keep the separate lines more distinct and more true to the live sound."

Crucial to what Sweet Thunder and the slightly older Mobile Fidelity Labs and Nautilus Recordings companies do are two things: virgin vinyl and half-speed mastering.

The former, supplied either as JVC Supervinyl from Japan or Teldec Vinyl from West Germany, is refined totally. Anti-pollution regulations prevent such thoroughgoing refinement in the United States. Half-speed mastering, a technique pioneered by the Japanese in the days of Quadrophonic, means just what it would seem to mean. The master disc is cut at half of its intended playing speed, so the cutting heads have more time to respond to the signals sent them from the master tape. As a result, the subtler sounds are more vividly drawn and the recording sounds more "live" than a conventional disc.

Though the field is relatively new (Mobile began in 1978, Nautilus in 1979 and Sweet Thunder in 1981!), expansion has been remarkable. Larger companies, already established in the record business, have come forward with their own competitive "audiophile" pressings. Some observers feel

that the giants are too mass-production conscious to ever equal the independents in quality, however.

Initially, a company must select an LP they think will perform well (sonically and commercially) as a re-mastered edition. Then they strike a business agreement with the company owning the original, check the master recording for flaws and (if none are present) put the original through a meticulous copying process, using the aforementioned virgin vinyl and half-speed mastering. The results tend to be exquisite. They're also expensive. Re-mastered editions cost more than twice as much as conventional discs. They are for lovers — of a given piece of music or of their own stereo systems — only.

There are other components to this better quality product — individual hand-checking of each disc off the assembly line, magnetic filtration systems at the top of the vinyl delivery hopper and use of loose-fitting wrap instead of platter-bending, strangulating shrink wrap.

Interestingly, nearly as many audiophile recordings are sold in stereo shops as in normal record stores. Part of the appeal seems to be wringing the most out of a top-of-the-line stereo system. But, as the audiophile record companies like to assert, any system will produce better music if it's playing a better record.

Also, any music will sound better. Product availability in re-mastered audiophile discs runs from classics to Creedence Clearwater, from jazz to Joe Cocker, from funk to Peter Frampton.

The "Royal Treatment" AUDIOPHILE CONTEST

- 1st prize:** *The Beatles/The Collection* from Mobile Fidelity. 13 albums on 14 discs (because the *White Album* was a double, of course). Retail value about \$325.
- 2-3-4-5th:** One album from Nautilus and one from Sweet Thunder, to be chosen by the winners from each company's catalog. Retail value: \$36-40.

A few years back, when the "audiophile" record began to make big news in the music world, an outfit called Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab had an idea so obvious it probably required genius to figure it out: get licensing agreements for "classic" albums, refurbish them with top-grade vinyl and reissue them in versions whose sound quality would put the big commercial outfits to shame.

Their process necessitated prices several times those of the "regular" versions. But they have sold respectably. Other companies, from fledglings to giants like RCA, CBS and MCA, have rushed into the audiophile market.

Now, *Ampersand* asks the musical question "What LP would you most like to see get the royal treatment?" What great, perhaps overlooked, record of the past (or present) would most please you in an even greater version — all the highs sweeter, the lows fuller and rounder and the harmonic overtones clearer? To motivate response we're offering some delicious prizes from the vaults of the audiophile companies.

Here, as an example, is one contributor's idea of a prime candidate:

Rhapsody

Leopold Stokowski: Music of Liszt, Enesco & Smetana (RCA)

Back in the early Sixties, Stokie got together one of his periodic gatherings of New York free-lance musicians and led them in renditions of four pieces that audiences the world over are sick to death of: the Liszt *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*, Enesco's *Rumanian Rhapsody No. 1*, and Smetana's *The Moldau* and *Bartered Bride* overture. The orchestra was dubbed the RCA Victor Symphony, the record was entitled *Rhapsody*, and it remained in RCA's main catalogue for nearly 20 years (it was recently reissued on their Gold Seal label), primarily because the old master conducted the darned thing as if the ink was still wet on the score.

The problem is that, at least in recent pressings, the sound, clean and well-balanced in soft passages, becomes impossibly ugly and distorted in the loud ones. As far as I'm concerned, canonization is not good enough for the mastering engineer who can rescue this one.

Sol Louis Siegel

Got the idea? Any favorite album is fair game. The five most convincing and clever (also witty, intelligent, persuasive and grammatically correct—we didn't say it would be easy) will be published in our February issue, and paid at the same generous rates that already cause freelance writers 'round the globe to roll their eyes to heaven at the mention of our name. That's 12 cents a word. All entries must be received by November 15, 1982. Naturally, all entries become the property of *Ampersand* and will be judged by our fair, thoughtful and only occasionally vicious editors. Keep it to a couple of double-spaced paragraphs on a single page. May the best music-mad *Ampersand* readers win!

Send your entries to: Royal Treatment, c/o *Ampersand*, 1680 North Vine, Suite 900, Hollywood, CA 90028.

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The album for the Animation Generation.



Stephen Dees/Pete Hewlett/Carlos Rios/Michael Shrieve
"The Animation Generation," the new album
from Novo Combo.



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