

Column Renzo van Riemsdijk (Masterenzo):

Does vinyl sound better?

Vinyl is back from never being gone.

The vinyl record has a long history going all the way back to the beginning of the twentieth century. These were the 78 rpm shellac records made of secretion from lice(!)

Before the era of the 78 rpm record others records were made with various playback speeds but in this column I'll leave them aside.

With the arrival of digital audio back in the eighties, the market share of vinyl got smaller and smaller and the vinyl record seemed doomed to extinction.

Until the dance scene discovered the sonic advantages of vinyl and its user friendliness.

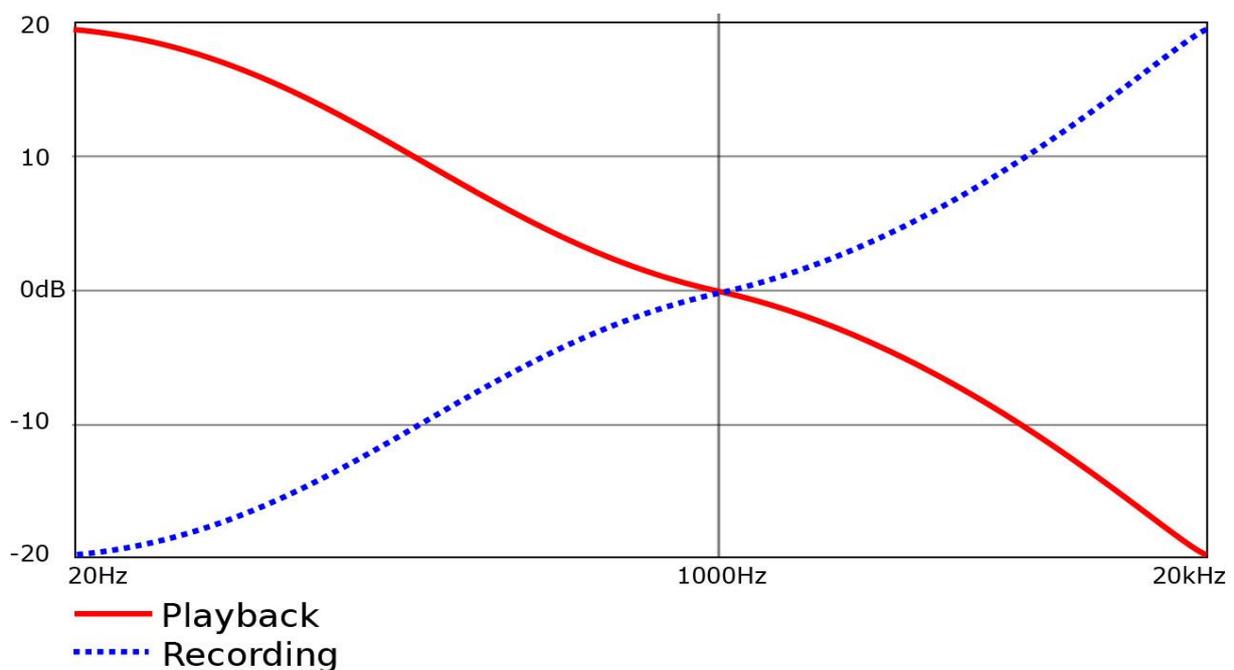
User friendly for professionals that is. I've once tried it, but getting the tempo of two tracks aligned to make a transition proved to be a sheer impossible task for me.

Bits of technique

There are no bass tones on a vinyl record. The technique behind vinyl cutting doesn't physically allow for those tones to be cut on a record. If you want to play a record, you'll be needing a phono preamp or make use of a special phono input on your amplifier.

The preamp compensates for the lack of bass. Also the higher frequencies are compensated but in the opposite direction (high frequencies are cut, see the image below).

This allows for a nice three-dimensional soundstage when a record is played on a decent HiFi set, resulting in a completely analogue listening experience.



The RIAA-curve. When both curves are combined the result is a flat line. Both high and low frequencies are compensated by the phono preamplifier.

The secret of the sound of vinyl lies in the phono preamp. A well-built and good sounding phono preamp compensates the highs and lows of a vinyl record in such a way that it translates perfectly to the outside world. You can compare it with the use of a mic preamp. A good preamp will elevate the sound of a mic. That same principle applies for vinyl and its phono preamplifier.

When hooked onto a big PA system the great sound of vinyl is amplified right across the dance floor (or football or soccer field) and there you have it: a rave is born. It's a bit of a simplistic comparison but it definitely shows the power and impact vinyl is capable of.

The same goes for spinning vinyl in a living room. You'll need to relax and to sit down to enjoy a good vinyl record. It's a medium that needs a little attention (especially after 20 minutes or so), but you'll be rewarded with a beautiful three-dimensional listening experience.

There's one "if" however. You'll need a decent record player with a proper stylus. There are portable record players on the market, equipped with a stylus that can be easily used to put a tattoo on somebody's arm. They are very much capable of doing serious harm to your precious record collection! In short: don't buy those things or change the cartridge immediately for a better sounding and less harmful one.

So, does vinyl sound better? The answer to this is not an easy one. It greatly depends on what you compare it with and how critically you listen. There are people that have a hard time distinguishing the differences between a 64kbps mp3 (a very low quality setting) and an uncompressed (lossless) 24 bit wave file, while others claim to hear the differences between 16 and 24 bit (both lossless wave files).

You know what? I'll take another month to think it over. First things first: let's play a couple of vinyl records. In next month's column the definitive answer to the question: does vinyl sound better?

Renzo

Renzo (Masterenzo) is a Rotterdam based Dutch mastering engineer. He has worked for Bart Voncken, The Legendary Orchestra Of Love and the John F Klaver Band. More info about mastering and about Masterenzo can be found on his [website](#).