

The VPI Traveler Turntable

By Jerold O'Brien



My analog journey has encountered numerous VPI turntables through the years, and they have always provided satisfying sounds and steadfast mechanical reliability, beginning with the HW-19, now out of production. The company's current Classic-series turntables are enjoying rave reviews around the world—our publisher is certainly enjoying his. After I spent some time with the Traveler at this year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (RMAF), it became clear that VPI has not merely created an entry-level table with a VPI badge; the Cliffwood, N.J.-based manufacturer has built a reasonably priced table with the same solid engineering and build quality that goes into the rest of its lineup.

With the resurgence of vinyl underway, there are more and more turntables being offered in the entry-level arena. But to be honest, I have not been that impressed with many of the sub-\$1,500 offerings. Maybe it's just the audio dinosaur in me, but many of them seem a bit spindly. Sure, I've gotten them to make nice music, but I always seem to find myself left with an incomplete feeling telling me all is not right in Recordsville.



The VPI Traveler hits a different chord at this price point. Unpacking its heavy shipping container tells you there's more than a toy packed within. And packed well it is. I can't foresee even the most ham-fisted shipper damaging the Traveler during shipping.

Parts unpackaged, the assembly process goes off without a hitch. Those experienced with turntable setup will find Traveler's setup a breeze. In less than forty-five minutes, this turntable was making great sound in my listening room, with no need to tweak things further. Beginners will find the instruction manual clear and detailed. A little focus and Jedi patience will have you spinning your favorite LPs in no time.

High Points

This table's level of fit and finish is of a very high order. Machined-metal parts are smooth and polished, the paint on the plinth's top plate is high grade and

the platter feels like it's machined from billet. In fact, it's made from aluminum damped by stainless steel, a great way to break up any resonances that may occur. Spinning the platter reveals a high-quality spindle-to-bearing interface, indicating top-notch machine work. It seems to continue spinning forever when you shut the power off. The non-removable platter mat is made of neoprene rubber and provides additional damping.

This philosophy continues with the plinth, which is an aluminum top plate bonded to a thick acrylic base—impressive compared to the usual machined MDF or plastic that is typically used for plinths in this price category. A set of rubber tipped cones allow for leveling the Traveler. Combined with the solid plinth is a 10-inch tonearm instead of the ubiquitous 9-incher on most other tables, which gives the Traveler a leg up by minimizing tracking angle distortion. *(continued)*



The next thing one notices is the Traveler's gimbaled design, a departure from the VPI norm, as the company usually makes unipivot tonearms. However, VPI claims that the Traveler's friction levels are nearly as low as the brand's more expensive unipivot designs. The Traveler's arm moves smoothly and freely in both the lateral and vertical directions. The counterweight and tracking-force adjustment is another finely machined affair and easy to operate during setup. The tonearm is equipped with a VTA on-the-fly adjustment that works beautifully and without fuss. Finally, the signal goes from the arm through a pro-

prietary connector feeding a pair of RCA jacks fitted to the rear of the plinth.

VPI does not supply a dedicated tonearm cable with the Traveler, so users are free to experiment with cabling options between the turntable and phono stage. I advise caution here, because the wrong type of cable can seriously compromise the sonic results. If possible, try one of the current tonearm cables on the market available with RCA jacks on both ends; these cables usually make an extra effort to minimize cable capacitance, resulting in better transference of the delicate phono signal. *(continued)*

Taking Care of Business

Sticking with the winning formula in *TONE-Audio's* RMAF room, listening began with the \$599 Ortofon Rondo Red low-output MC cartridge, which brings the combination of turntable and cartridge to \$1,900—not exactly spare beer money, but a fine investment nevertheless. I tried two different interconnect cables with excellent results: the AudioQuest King Cobra (\$249/pair) and, for the more budget-minded, the KAB Jazz (\$33/pair). In the end, I preferred the AQ cable on most material, but the KAB is a well-made product, providing great shielding from RF and decent audio performance.

First up was Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (Mercury Living Presence, London Symphony Orchestra, Antal Dorati conducting). The Traveler/Rondo Red combination provides a convincing sense of hall ambiance, while simultaneously placing the sections of the orchestra firmly in place. Once the music reaches full gallop, the Traveler delivers the music's swell and crescendo with the requisite delicacy and impact, with the woodwinds sounding exceptionally natural.

Next up, in a more delicate vein, is Trio Galanterie's *Eighteenth-Century Music For Lute and Strings* on AudioQuest records. The Traveler captures the interplay of the cello, lute and violin on this recording with complete intimacy, like a concert for one. The Traveler presents the fundamentals and overtones in a harmonically rich fashion, with strummed, plucked and bowed instruments—not an easy task, but one that is performed exceptionally well here.

Changing genres, the latest Charlie Hunter recording, *Not Getting Behind Is The New Getting Ahead*, is a self-released limited-edition album featuring Hunter on seven-string guitar and Scott Amendola on drums. This live-in-the-studio outing will challenge any arm-cartridge combination with its dynamic close-miked drum sound, biting guitar and punchy, resonant bass. Again, the Traveler/Rondo combination turns in an ace performance. (*continued*)

REVIEW

Ralph Towner's "Piscean Dance," from his *Solstice* album, is another studio jam/duel possessing great dynamic swings. The crystalline but completely natural sound of cymbals and snare drum, while Towner's signature twelve-string guitar weaves in and out of Christensen's rhythmic patterns, underlines how well this modestly priced table handles complex music without losing its soul.

Both Eric Bibb's *Friends* and John Mayall's *The Turning Point* underscore the Traveler's ability to combine bass weight with fundamental mid-range body and tonality. The Traveler's rock-solid pace gives a sense of presence rarely accomplished by an analog front end at this price.

Past Meets Present

Fully impressed with the Traveler so far, I decide it's time to try something off the beaten path. A NOS Acutex 412 STR cartridge would put any tonearm to task, as this high-compliance cartridge usually works best with ultra-low-mass tonearms.

Set to 1.5 grams, the combination sailed through the most-difficult passages at my disposal, proving what great all-around performance the Traveler offers: It should be just right for most MM or MC cartridges.

So Take a Trip to Your VPI Dealer!

Combining robust construction, a high level of fit and finish and an excellent sonic presentation, the VPI Traveler establishes a new benchmark for its price. VPI left no stone unturned, from getting the basic record-playing ability right to employing clever engineering. And you can order it in a variety of colors (for an extra hundred bucks). Whether you are just getting into the world of vinyl, adding a second turntable to the stable or are replacing a turntable that has left you wondering if there's more to be had for your money, I highly recommend the Traveler. Have a few less lattes per month, or perhaps even skimp on record purchases for a few months, to make the very reasonable leap for this remarkable table. *(continued)*



Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

I was equally curious to see how much of the essence of VPI's more-expensive Classic One could be incorporated into the Traveler. The Classic One is a linear step up in the VPI range and its roots are readily apparent. The Traveler resembles the Classic much more so than it does the Scout/Scoutmaster series. Using both tables side by side through the Audio Research REF Phono 2 SE, with matching Dynavector DV-20X2L cartridges (\$850), the main differences between the two are in bass weight and low-level detail retrieval.

Listening to the biting guitars on the anniversary remaster of the Smashing Pumpkins' *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* reveals more punch from the Classic, but the Traveler is no slouch for the price. Comparing the Traveler to my late-1980s LP12 is like getting out of a Triumph TR6 and getting into a Porsche Boxster: Everything feels much crisper and more defined overall.

The overall tonality of the Traveler is remarkably similar to the Classic, and when not playing records with ultra-wide dynamic swings, one might be easily fooled. The DV-20X2L is an excellent match for this table, for those looking to take their analog experience a step further. I had equally good results with the Sumiko Blackbird high-output MC, another favorite of mine in the \$800-to-\$1,200 range, proving that this table is not embarrassed in the least by a cartridge costing almost as much as the table. This level of performance makes the Traveler an excellent *long-term* turntable choice.

We not only recommend the Traveler highly, we have purchased the review sample. It will become a reference component in gear editor Bailey Barnard's new system, so we can indoctrinate him in the ways of the LP. ●



**The VPI Traveler
Turntable**
MSRP: \$1,299

MANUFACTURER
VPI Industries

CONTACT
www.vpiindustries.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier Coffman Labs CO-1 (phonostage included)

Power Amplifier Pass Labs Aleph 3

Speakers Harbeth Monitor 40.1

Cable Audience Au24

Power Audience