



YOU WANT TO ANNOY AN AUDIOPHILE? You know you do. It's a fun game the whole family can play. Goes like this. Find a sucker who just spent a pile of money on a DAC and then burble about that new LP you just bought. You might have to drop the phrase "superior sonics of vinyl" at least once to get him past that initial shock of disbelief, but, don't worry, your victim will soon do one of the following Very Entertaining Things:

- A. stop talking.
- B. leave the room.
- C. Perform an impression of the guy from *Scanners* whose head explodes. Obviously, option C gets you bonus points.

Let me let you in on a little secret. Ready? LPs are fun. It's true! There is *something* about vinyl that is addictive in a way that digital just isn't. Maybe it's the big discs and the smell of vinyl, or maybe it's the simple act of *involvement*—you have to get up and actually, physically, change the record—but whatever it is, something is missing with my usual, digitally-mediated collision with music.

I had this sense of magic as a kid, stealing into my big brother's room while all his friends were lounging around, listening to albums. He even let me hang out, once or twice. But by the time I was a teenager, everything was "mixed tapes." Admittedly, they were copied *from* LPs, but by that point those LPs weren't mine—my brother had moved out, taking them (and his turntable) with him (don't ask). Anyway, my buddy's dad had this great big collection of Classic Rock, so we'd skip class to go back to his place to make tapes from his dad's hi-fi. When CDs became widely available, his dad bought a player and tons of discs. This was awesome for me, because dubbing from CD was way easier. Twenty years passed before I bought my next LP.



VPI Scout 1.1

In the meantime, I've been all about computer audio. I thought Napster was awesome (though I never inhaled...ahem). I loved iTunes when it came out—and still do! I have a stack of old iPods and most of them still work. My first truly “audiophile” rig was fronted by one of the earliest USB DACs. Being a kid who cut his teeth on mixed tapes, the flexibility of playlist-driven audio was (and still is) intoxicating. But until I bought my first turntable, a beat-up and remaindered Pro-Ject that I scored a huge discount on, I couldn't tell you the last time I'd actually listened to an album all the way through. That is, *on purpose*, and not because I wasn't paying attention. Vinyl is a different thing. I'm not sure I really care why, but it is.

Before my time with my much-abused and much-loved Pro-Ject turntable, I hadn't really given the *table* much thought. I mean, a turntable is a turntable, right? Its job is to spin records. How hard could that be? I know. I can hear you chuckling from over here. We all start somewhere, and I, at least, started from a place of ignorant appreciation, but not necessarily admiration.

The first *turntable* that truly amazed me, that caught my eye and fired my imagination, was a German machine from a company called TW-Acoustic. The Raven turntable was chunky and elegant, with an industrial sense of purpose that I found fascinating. I eventually bought one. And I've been a happy little vinylophile ever since.

Now, I was aware of VPI at this time, but for whatever reason I had never actually *seen* one of its products. I know; I've lived a sheltered life. Anyway, it wasn't until *way*late in my audiophile life that I finally caught a clue and tuned in.

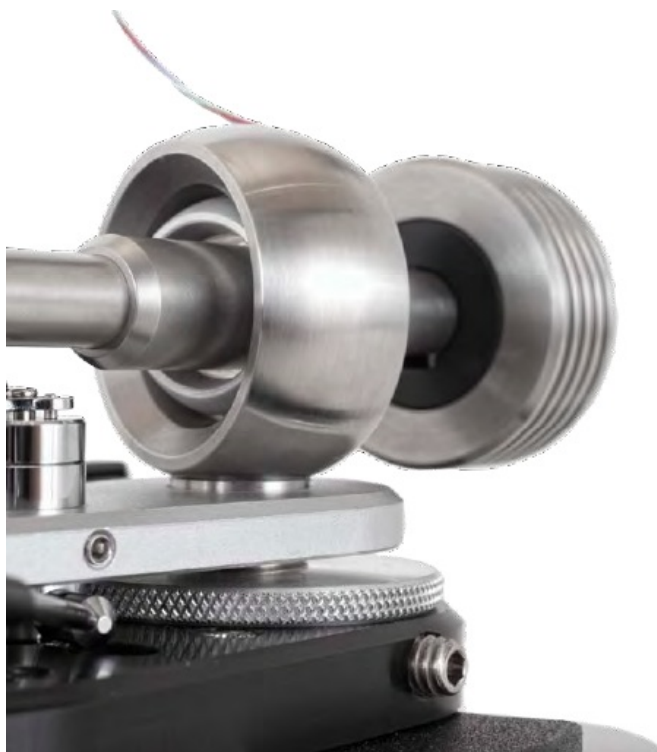


The story I heard was amazing, though I'm sure it's all old news to you. But about the time I was blowing my allowance on Rush and Boston LPs that my brother later appropriated, Harry and Sheila Weisfeld were hanging a shingle as VPI. Over the last 35 years, Team Weisfeld has focused on vinyl reproduction with an intensity that's remarkable. In the face of all the fat heads happily chirping about the death of the LP, and now the death of the CD, the Weisfelds kept introducing newer and better anachronisms. The scout, for example, is about as old as the iPod. And here, more than a decade on, vinyl sales are the highest they've been in, well, decades. Weird.

VPI introduced a very successful “Classic Line” of turntables just five years ago that now includes four separate levels of fitment, with a fifth—possibly called the “Classic Direct”—to debut this summer. In 2011, shortly after the passing of co-founder Sheila Weisfeld, son Mat joined his father at the company and the two of them collaborated to create a tribute, called the “Traveler,” in honor of one of Sheila’s abiding passions. It’s a hot little turntable, and their least expensive on offer. I never had the pleasure of meeting Sheila, but the turntable she inspired has been on my radar since it first hit the market—it’s slick, compact, elegant, and built to a price point that actually seems *reasonable*. And this is where *mystery* with VPI really starts. You see, I met Mat at an audio show, and I’ve been pestering him about a review ever since. Ahem. Anyway, sales are brisk. Reviews are positive. I, however, have gotten a whole lot of nuttin’.

But then, Mat (finally!) called. “Hey,” says he, *sotto voce*, “Wanna see somethin’ new?”

What eventually showed up was not a Traveler, but a scout, the ‘table that started shipping a little over a decade ago. But this one was a little different.



VPI Scout 1.1

Descriptions

If the Traveler is a roadster, a stripped down go-cart of a car with nothing but a windscreen, a bucket seat, tires, and a steering wheel, the new scout is more of a muscle car. It’s a little bigger. A little badder. A bit more features and lot more menace. And oh so very *black*.

But like the Traveler, the scout is a rather simple affair. There’s a slab of a plinth, a metal platter... and then things diverge. The scout has its motor in a separate chassis, one that snuggles into a cutout on the side of the plinth. It’s a belt-driven design, so there’s something that links the platter to the motor. The tonearm slips into a pre-drilled mount, and there’s a little black box on the back of the plinth where the wires from the tonearm plug in. And that’s about it. Simple. Elegant. Industrial. *Purposeful*.

Compared with the last scout, the plinth is still a 1-1/8th-inch thick slab of MDF, still reinforced with a steel plate, creating a dense, armor-like constrained-layer board. The footers and the faceplate are unremarkably similar to the outgoing model. The motor is the same 600-rpm Hurst 5.5-watt model that VPI has been using for the last 30-some years. Oh, and did I mention it’s still black?

The first thing that’s obviously *different* is the platter. This one is *not* acrylic and to hear Harry tell it, acrylic platters at VPI are a thing of the past. It’s simply easier to machine metal to tighter tolerances, and the fact that they sound better ices that cake. The platter here is a disc of 1-3/8"-thick 6061-aluminum, differentially damped via a solid-steel plate glued into it. It’s a bit smaller than the 2"-thick Classic platter than ships on the Classic turntables (and the Scout II).



The bearing is also different. The mechanism used on the old scout was an inverted bearing. Worked great. No problems. But when the decision was made to move to metal platters, there *was* a problem, or at least a potential one: rocking. The metal platter suitable for this price point was too thin to support a short bearing shaft like that used in an inverted bearing. There wasn't enough room. So, the inverted bearing was ditched in favor of an oil-bath bearing—interestingly, the very same bearing used in the very first turntables VPI shipped back in the stone Age (I think I just called Harry “old”— whoops), the HW-19. Graphite-impregnated brass bushings hold the shaft upright, and a few drops of 40-weight motor oil keep things spinning freely. Since there's no real heat being generated here, that lube should be good for years of worry-free use.

The shaft itself is casehardened tool-steel, and when I say “hard,” I mean a hardness measured to 60 on the Rockwell scale. For reference, this is quite a bit harder than your average kitchen knife, which is really hard. Harry says to watch out, if you drop the shaft, it'll likely chip your floor. This shaft sits in the well on the plinth, on a steel ball sitting on a thrust-plate made of PEEK.

And that's the bearing. Interestingly, this is also the bearing used on the Traveler turntable.

The bearing and platter meet at the shaft in a #2 Jacobs Taper, and the two fit together tight, solid and strong. Dropping the platter onto the shaft only takes it so far; with a stiff push, the platter will *thunk* into place, and, for what it's worth, there's *zero* play. In fact, I have *no* idea how I'm going to get that thing off again for shipping back to the factory. Uh, oh.

The tonearm in my kit was also something of a surprise. It's not a unipivot JMW-9! That venerable gent has been something of a legend at VPI and, from what I gather, folks seem to either love it or hate it. As of this writing, it's still an option on this 'table, but now there's another.

What I got was a brand new model—a gimbaled tonearm that probably started out destined for a Traveler. That is, before it got all hopped up on steroids. I had no idea that this was a problem at VPI, but apparently, it's like the Island of Doctor Moreau over there lately and gear is getting tweaked all the time. They're in a creative phase! Anyway, this new 'arm will be called the scout Tonearm, and unlike mine, the shipping version will have “SCOUT” stenciled across the top of the headshell. The 'arm is the same size as the one found on the Traveler, differing mainly in the micro-ball bearings being used. These spring-loaded bearings are made of ABEC5, the same material used in the SME IV tonearm, and are significantly more robust than the sapphires on the Traveler.

In related news, both the Traveler and the new scout 'arms will soon feature a new finger-lift, one that will screw down with the same mounting screws used to fasten the cartridge to the headshell. This is a great development as the finger-lift on the old 'arm design is a bit flimsy and prone to break.

Bought separately, the scout Tonearm will run \$1000, a \$200 premium over the Traveler Tonearm.

The 'arm connects to the plinth by way of a small armboard and is secured with the same set-screw you use to set VTA/sRA. A knurled knob at the base of the 'arm mount will lock it in and give you a bit more flexibility with height adjustments. Azimuth isn't adjustable on the scout/Traveler 'arms, which is the biggest limitation I found, but can generally be worked around by fiddling with the mounting of the cartridge itself. There is an included install template, made of stamped metal, but I relied on my Protractor from Dr. Feickert.



The tonearm cable is a thin, looping twisted braid, continuous from headshell through to the small adapter that you snap into the connector-box mounted on the rear of the plinth. From there, single-ended interconnects of your choice head off to your phono preamplifier. Two other wires come off the tonearm, one for grounding, which is also clamped to the connector box by screws on either end; the other is for anti-skating. Loop the end of the attached fishing-line over the counter-weighted anti-skate lever, balance, and you're done.

My turntable came pre-mounted with a Grado Gold cartridge (a \$200 option), but soon VPI will be offering a new, highly tweaked version of this cartridge. Improvements include reducing the output from 5.0mV to 1.5mV, which will also significantly lower the inductance. The old thick aluminum cantilever and elliptical stylus will be replaced with a tapered cantilever and a micro-ridge fine-line diamond stylus borrowed from Grado's upscale wood-bodied stablemates. All this should improve speed and clarity. Last, but not least, the cart will gain an aluminum top-plate, which will damp it significantly and add mass. Mounting will be simpler, too, and will not require the additional mounting nuts needed today. Cost will be \$600.

Setup

Setup was pretty straightforward. I unpacked the turntable, set it somewhere flat and firm, pulled the platter out, and not-so-gently pushed it onto the bearing shaft until the two locked together. The motor slipped into the bay opposite the armboard—the platter overhangs it by about a half-inch. The belt is a rather simple tubular rubber thingie. I looped it over the platter, relying on the grooves on the platter's sides to keep it in place while I looped the end over the motor pulley. This is trickier than it sounds, and it took me half a dozen tries before I got the hang of it.

Speaking of which, changing speeds the Scout looks to be pretty simple as there are two discreet "levels" on the motor pulley. The top one, the narrower of the two, is the 33rpm setting. Want to play 33rpm? Make sure the belt is on this part of the pulley. Want to play 45rpm? Stop the motor and move the belt down to the wider part of the pulley. And watch the belt pop off the platter.

The problem, I thought, was that the motor has enough torque to deform the belt as it spins the platter from full stop. This creates some irregular tension, at least until the platter gets to speed, then the belt evens out, settles down, and Bob's your uncle. But if the belt level is mismatched between the motor and the platter, *pop!* There it goes again.

Mismatched? Yes—and here's another trick. The pulley on the motor is grooved. Rather, each section of the motor's pulley has several distinct tracks that the belt can run in. If the track isn't at the same level as the groove carved into the side of the platter, the belt on the platter will adjust until it is, and by "adjust," I mean "slip." Of course, it's round, so once it starts to move, it wants to *continue* to move, and *pop!* There it goes again. Moving on.

On the platter, 33rpm had me on the third groove from the bottom. 45rpm settled on the bottom-most groove. I found that sticking something under the motor housing, something thin, like cardboard, gave me just enough more room for the belt to feel comfy enough to want to remain in place. Well, more regularly, anyway.



I mentioned this to Mat Weisfeld, who outright laughed at me, but then proceeded to tell me what was going on. Apparently, the belt *used* to ship from VPI in little bags of baby powder, which completely eliminated any unwanted grippiness that the material, called Hyperlon, might develop. You can imagine, I'm sure, exactly how thrilled folks were with receiving little bags of white powder in their big VPI packages, especially after 9/11. Homeland security wasn't amused, and now, the belts ship powder-free and Big Brother is happy. Anyway, feel free to powder your belt.

Another little bit about the belt and positioning. When I first strobed the platter to check speed and drift, I was disappointed to see that neither 33rpm nor 45rpm were stable. Unfortunately, the motor has exactly one button—the on/off one. No motor controls! Ah, well. What can you do?

During one of the many conversations I had with the Weisfelds, I somehow remembered to mention the speed control issue. Harry, very patiently, pointed out that the grooves on the motor drive pulley (not the platter, the *pulley*) are not all the same. That is, on either speed setting, there are several different grooves/tracks on the pulley for the belt to settle into. Each one runs the platter at a slightly different speed—each groove is precisely 1.5 degrees wider (i.e., runs slower) than the groove above it. Some quick experimentation, and I found that the second groove from the bottom on the pulley produced rock-solid 45rpms all day long. Likewise, I nailed a stable 33rpm with a groove in the middle of that speed setting. Pretty friggin' clever. Having found my sweet spots, I was ready to play.

Okay, not quite, I still needed to set up the tonearm.

Popped into the mount, the setup was pretty quick. Using one of the three included hex wrenches, I tightened the set screw enough to hold the 'arm in place while I spun the knurled knob down to keep it there. With my 10x jeweler's loupe, I eyeballed the SRA setting to as close as I could get to the Michael Fremer approved 92° and locked that in. Then out came the Protractor, and some fiddling later, I was satisfied with the position of the cartridge on the 'arm. My stylus-force gauge helped me dial in tracking force. I plugged in the motor, connected the turntable to my phono preamp, and *then* I was off.

Some other stuff I noticed:

The tonearm lift has a really gentle touchdown onto the record. It's the slowest, softest lowering mechanism I have on any of my turntables, or any turntable I've seen. No concern with skips or hops, here. By contrast, my Pro-Ject Debut Carbon doesn't quite drop the needle with an audible *kerplunk*, but it's close. The TW-Acoustic Raven tonearm is far more graceful, but it's all a bit more straight-ahead than the scout Tonearm. The Raven goes ... down down down... and we're off. The scout, on the other hand, takes a bit of holiday. using the lever to drop the needle, I had time to get back to my seat, settle in, settle in a bit more, wonder if I'd muted the amp by accident, get up, check it, go sit back down, balance my checkbook, clip my nails, *and* get in some quality yodeling before the music started.

Sound

That first day with the Scout was *fun*. That "quick listen" blew five hours off the clock. But while it was emotionally engaging, sonically, I found the playback to be a bit soft and fuzzy. Images were well centered, but the layering wasn't on par with my reference. I chalked the gap up to only average levels of detail retrieval, a bit of smoothing, and a slightly polite top-end. Bass, however, boogied. Not as deep as what my reference was capable of dishing up, but still very satisfying.

The next day, I decided to start things off with a switch-out. Off came the factory- installed Grado Gold and on went an Ortofon Rondo Bronze. This cartridge is far closer to the sound of my reference Ortofon Windfeld, but at \$1150 it's still only just over half the cost of the scout/scout Tonearm combo (and a third of the cost of my reference cart). Out came the Protractor and my force-gauge. Some fiddling later, I dropped the needle again.



From that first record, a MoFi issue of Bob Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home*, the sound I heard coming from my system was very definitely different. No head scratching. No, "Yeah, I *think* so." This was better. Gone was the slightly soft sound. The treble stood up and stretched. Detail filled in the soundstage and images became layered. While still not as precise as my reference, I honestly no longer cared. The Gold, at \$200, is a really nice cart. The Rondo Bronze, at six times that, is an *excellent* cart. I was in for a *great* day and I knew it.

I think I played twenty different album sides that day. I danced to *Shout* from Tears For Fears (another MoFi release). My kids, having magically materialized after a full day at school (thank you, honey), danced to Fleetwood Mac's *Fleetwood Mac* on 45rpm.

Nat King Cole's *The Nat King Cole Story* was breathtaking. I discovered that I owned two pristine copies of Louis Armstrong & Duke Ellington *Recording Together For The First Time*. I played Elvis, Muddy Waters, lightning Hopkins, Art Blakey, and yes, Miles Davis. I played Zeppelin, CCR, and the Beatles. I discovered that my kids like The Beatles but prefer The Beach Boys. I had a *ball*.

I tried the scout with a variety of mats. The mat that came with the scout is the same as on the Traveler, a black foam-rubber mesh, reminiscent of what you line your cupboards with. It's not the most elegant thing in the world, but with the mat, the sound was more solid than without. A note—don't leave your LPs on it. I did, overnight, and now I have an odd grid-pattern marking my copy of *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*. Sounds fine, though. Anyway, run naked, the sound was more energetic, but I preferred the planted solidity of the soundstage with the mat on the platter.

The included clamp is a screw-down affair, made entirely of Delrin, and used with the optional rubber washer (sits between the platter and the LP), it creates a mild "reflex action" that is very useful for at least partially flattening out some of my more creatively surfaced records. I used it with and without, but my recommendation is to use it. Flatter records play better. Also, if you forgo the mat, the clamp will keep the platter from slipping against the LP during spin-up and making that I'm-grinding-away-at-your-LP noise.

Comparisons

I'd had the turntable up and running for over a week, but getting a real sense of what the *turntable* was contributing meant some comparative listening. I didn't have armboards that would let me mount any single 'arm on all turntables, but I did what I could, and chose a single cartridge, in this case the Rondo Bronze, and mounted it on each 'table in turn.

Compared to my two references, the scout clearly bettered one and made me ask uncomfortable questions about the other. More on that later, but on the budget end of the scale is a Pro-ject Debut Carbon, which retails for \$399. Like the scout, this 'table comes with a tonearm. Unlike the scout, it also comes standard with a cartridge, a pre-mounted Ortofon Red moving magnet (but, as I mentioned, the Grado Gold is an option on the scout). The Debut Carbon is a real "just add water" component, and I think it's a solid entry-level move. It's hilariously good for the money and I've cheerfully recommended it to just about anyone taking that first step. With that in mind, I bought one for my wife's office setup.



My second reference turntable, the Raven AC-3 from TW-Acoustic, is a \$20,000 *tour-de-force* that I lovingly call “The Mothership,” having stolen that description from *Stereo Mojo*. The name fits—the turntable “array” just *looks* like some kind of alien vessel, which is appropriate, because when it is kit- ted out the sound is out of this world. With the matching Raven tonearm (\$5500) and an Ortofon Windfeld cartridge (\$3899), the total on that system is just shy of \$30,000. I get chest pains just thinking about that. And, yes, this is the ‘table the scout was taking aim at.

I’ve probably given it away by now, but the biggest performance delta was clearly between the Debut Carbon and the scout. The scout brought a soundstage that was far more precisely defined. Bass was tighter, with less mud and boom. Treble was more extended and detail retrieval was clearly superior. Music, which was very entertaining and listenable on the Debut Carbon, simply sounded *clear* on the scout. Insert your favorite cliché about “veil removal” and “inky-black backgrounds,” but that’s what it sounded like.

To take an unobvious example, the climax of “Tamacun” from Rodrigo y Gabriela’s self-titled second album, is stuffed full of percussion, all of which is actually hand- strikes on the body of a guitar. All of that pounding comes through on the Debut Carbon just fine and dandy, but on the Scout, you can tell that the performers are pounding on hollow, wooden *classical* guitars. Their fingertips sounded hard as they *scratch* across the strings. That’s the kind of thing I’m talking about. lost on the Debut Carbon and clear on the scout.

Moving from the scout to the Raven was, in some important ways, less satisfying. And yes, that’s a good thing—for the scout. There were differences, to be sure, but they seemed to be more of a difference in *scale* than in *kind*. Soundstage with the scout was well delineated, but not quite as deep. Said another way, imaging with the Raven was fully 3-D; with the Scout, instrumental placement, while well defined, lacked the eerie accuracy I heard with the Mothership. The clearest difference came from the down-low, where the bass reached deeper and hit harder on the bigger, more expensive ‘table.

Value

My favorite recommendation, to anyone upgrading a digital source—that is, replacing a CD player or a DAC with another—is to go buy a turntable. That’s because I’m ornery and contrary by nature. But there is a point—why get more of the same when that same money can get you something altogether new, good, and different? Sure, a new CD player or DAC might bring you a performance jump, and that’s probably laudable and worthwhile. But I suppose I prefer a kaleidoscope to a microscope, especially if the point is to escape, relax, and/or enjoy the music. Once you’ve gotten all the avenues open, you can worry about trash removal.

This is an American-made machine. And that’s a little odd, because the expected premium somehow didn’t make it to the price tag. Now, I’m not saying that \$2100 for a turntable and tonearm is cheap. It’s not. It’s a huge jump from my Debut Carbon, for example, and I fully understand that that means it’ll stay out of reach for many. But on the scale of absurdity that is pricing in audio’s high end, this offer is a little alarming. In fact, it’s almost an indictment. Probably because I have no sense of self- preservation I asked Harry if he ever got the memo on how to price things in the U.S. market, and why he wasn’t following it. He laughed. “someone once said that it was impossible to offer what VPI does and have it made in the USA,” he said, “I told him, ‘It’s not made in the USA, it’s made in Jersey.’” And there you go.

Let me say it plain: the scout 1.1 is great turntable and an obvious, *solid* recommendation. While I can’t really see this as an entry-level product, I *can* see it as the object of lust *after* that first turntable. I think that for the majority of audiophiles, acquiring a scout means they can pretty much hang it up. Yes, you can get a better cart, a better tonearm, or a beefier platter. And you probably will, because you’re an

audiophile and that's what you do. Fine; whenever you get around to it, VPI can help you with an upgrade path. The scout can handle all of that stuff, and you'll still have a lot of room left over before an actual upgrade of the turntable itself is warranted. I think that's the message here: value. I think this 'table, expensive though it may be, marks very good value. You can, and probably will (at some point) spend far more and get less. The challenge you'll find, however, is to spend more—and actually get a significantly better-sounding turntable. It's not as easy as it sounds. Good luck.

SPECS

Supported speeds: 33rpm and 45rpm

Dimensions: 19" x 13" x 4"

Weight: 42lbs

Price: \$2095

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