



VPI Scout Master Record Player

by Roy Gregory

In case you haven't noticed, record players have been quietly changing over the last few years. Once was, you couldn't sell a turntable without a three-point suspended sub-chassis, at least in the UK. Pretenders came and fell by the wayside as the philosophical hegemony rolled steadily on towards an infinite horizon. Until the wheel came off: or rather, CD arrived. In some respects the little silver disc was the best thing that ever happened to record players – at least as far as development is concerned. With their declining market share the powers that were slackened their iron grip, allowing 15 years of stagnation to ebb away. Suddenly, new players started to arrive from abroad and the old checklist of desirable features evaporated along with the rules that went with it.

Ironically, the first cracks appeared from within, the Rega arm forcing people to reassess their confidently held beliefs. But it was rigid plinths with separate motors that really did the damage. Not only did they deliver excellent sonic results with good speed stability (always a weakness with suspended decks) they were inherently simple and stable too; A happy coincidence given the return (with a vengeance) of uni-pivot tonearms. Suddenly the whole cost equation that had ruled the record player market for years was turned on its head. It was acceptable to use a thousand pound cartridge mounted in an RB300, fitted to a really very basic deck. It even made some sort of sense! But you could take the logic further with an even better arm, which is exactly what Harry Weisfeld did

by combining a chopped down version of his JMW uni-pivot with a textbook solid plinth and separate motor.

When I reviewed the VPI Scout back in Issue 16, I was ill prepared for the results. No player at this price should deliver this much music. Mind you, there were a few interesting wrinkles in the design. By using a thick, acrylic platter rather than his previous mass loaded designs, coupled to an inverted bearing Weisfeld was able to employ a teflon thrust pad. This seemingly trivial change generated benefits out of all proportion with its cost and simplicity.

Until you hear a truly quiet bearing it's hard to credit just how intrusive the mechanical noise they generate can be. It's the real lesson to be learnt from air bearings, and whilst Harry's new design can't match the ghostly quiet and pure musical flow of such exotica, it's not far off and it's a fraction of the price (or trouble). The low noise and stable platform allowed the simplified JMW 9.0 arm to show its true qualities – to stunning musical effect. Still, the suspicion remained, just how good could the arm sound on an even better motor unit. The Nordic Concept went some way to demonstrate, and now we have the Weisfeld response, in the shape of the amusingly titled Scout Master.

The basic ingredients remain the same – just beefed up a bit all round. The platter comes from the top of the range HRX, as does the optional

peripheral clamp and record weight. The main bearing has been lengthened to accommodate the thicker platter, and remains threaded, just in case you opt to use VPI's screw down centre clamp.

The whole thing is bolted to a sandwich plinth assembled from two layers of MDF bonded either side of a thick steel plate to form a constrained layer. The result is a stable and very dead structure. The conical feet still stand on imbedded ball bearings although an additional level of mechanical isolation is provided by foam rubber discs between the feet and the spacers on the plinth. The motor housing is bigger and heavier, having come from the TNT Hot-Rod, except that in this case it's painted black rather than brushed and polished. The motor inside is a 300 RPM model (rather than the original Scout's 600 RPM version) which lowers the drive system's resonance well below that of the arm/cartridge. However, why the motor cut-out couldn't have been round I'm really not sure, as it would certainly have

looked neater. There again, you can't actually see it once the platter's in place so what the hell. All things considered, the end result is Clydesdale to the Scout's Arab pony. The JMW 9.0 is essentially unchanged,

although the intervening months have seen considerable refinement in terms of both mechanics and finish. The VTA adjustment collar works far more smoothly and precisely than before, while the threaded counterweight stub, a relic of its beginnings as a the 12.5 fitted to the Hot-Rod, has also gone, making tracking force far easier to adjust. The low-rider weights on the



► azimuth ring are now blind bolted into place, which is far neater, while the bearing pivot is now far finer. The virtual bias arrangement (applied through a twist in the lead-out wires which also apply a modicum of damping to the arm's motion) and the rear mounted termination box remain the same, except that the box is now also painted black. Personally, I'm not sure that's a step in



the right direction, but once again, it's pretty much out of sight so...

Final part of the jigsaw is the SDS speed controller, another optional extra that regenerates the motor's mains supply. Like most such devices it's worth every penny and if you can't afford it initially you should certainly plan on its subsequent acquisition at the earliest possible opportunity. So, at least one of the old wives' tales still holds true.

Set up is about as straight-forward as it gets. The deck simply needs putting down whilst the alignment protractor and instructions regarding VTA and azimuth are simplicity itself to optimize. You should get the best from whatever cartridge you fit, even if it's the first time you've done it. Just take a little bit of time and be methodical about it. Aside from that, it's a case of providing a nice level, well damped surface, a decent phono-stage and a set of proper lead-out cables (Incognito or Cardas probably offer the most cost effective options – or Audioplan Super X Wire if you can find it). The rest of the system was either the Groove/Vibe combination or the Vitus units, each feeding the RADIA amp and either the latest Living Voice OBX-Rs or

the Alon Lotus Elite SEs. Cabling was all Nordost Valhalla, apart from the arm-cable where I finally settled on Discovery Plus Four, which seemed to work especially well with the Vitus.

Now, please note that in both the above systems the phono-stage costs more than the record player driving it. This is no accident and

no, I never for a moment felt short-changed; The Scout Master really is that good.

Arriving immediately after the Blue Pearl JEM was never going to be easy for any deck, but the VPI took it in its stride, partly because it offers the same basic strengths – albeit to a lesser degree. Compare and contrast the two designs and their similarities become obvious: Minimal mechanical interface in the main bearing; stand alone motor assembly; stable motor to platter relationship; sophisticated electronic speed control. Don't get carried away – there's a world of difference between the two decks too, but it's interesting that we seem to be arriving at a new status quo nonetheless.

What made the Scout so special was its silky fluidity and sense of musical flow. Hearing it for the first time you might dismiss it as overly smooth, but comparison with other sources, analogue or digital, quickly demon-

strated that what you were really hearing was its astonishing confidence and sure footed grace. Music happened with such an unflustered and natural sense of progress and pace (fast or slow) that you simply didn't worry about it. It wasn't perfect, but boy was it fun to listen to.

Well, not surprisingly, the Scout Master builds on that same easy confidence but what it adds to the party makes it very special indeed. Here you'll find wider dynamic range and an even quieter background, allied to rock-like stability. In fact, exactly the virtues you'd expect from adding the SDS, a heavier platter and better isolation (in the shape of the heavier motor housing and decoupling rings between the feet and the chassis). If I was going to point a finger at the Scout (which seems churlish at the price) then its greatest weakness was a grey-ness to its musical background. Well, the Scout Master sorts that out in no uncertain terms, the performance emerging from a velvety black space that stands rock steady behind and beyond the speakers. It comes from a combination of a lower noise floor and the wider dynamic



range, which as well as delivering bigger and faster dynamic jumps, also brings better micro dynamic life and the instrumental colours that go with it.

Listen to the mix of electric and acoustic instruments that back

► Alison Krauss on her album *Forget About It*. Her voice is beautifully stable and separated, but so too are the instruments. Yet with so much going on, the deliberately measured tempo of 'Stay' is never hurried, the pace of the track totally dictated by the phrasing of the vocal line. Each instrument is clearly separated in space and instantly identifiable, yet also a coherent part of the whole. Not bad when you consider that you're dealing with two voices, guitar, mandolin and dobro. The potential for confusion is enormous but the Scout Master keeps things cool, uncluttered and calm. It also effortlessly up-shifts for the faster tempo and urgent playing of the title track. Unforced is the word that springs to mind,



with the music happening just as quickly as the musicians make it – something that's astonishingly rare in systems that are supposed to represent high-fidelity, yet is essential to a real range of emotional and musical expression. Along the way you get the shape of notes and lyrics, the texture of hands on strings, the cascade of brushes on cymbals, all of which minutiae animate the musical event, emphasising the human over the mechanical. They stand testament to the VPI's superb levels of transparency.

But detail and definition stand for nothing unless they are not just integrated into a coherent whole, but that whole is balanced and in proportion. The real strength of the Scout Master is that it has built on the

virtues of its cheaper sibling without bending them out of shape. When Scott LaFaro embarks on the meandering bass solo that winds up 'My Man's Gone Now' (*Bill Evans Trio Live at the Village Vanguard* – Alto AE004) then the agility and articulation of the playing matches the stabbed runs and fluidity of the piano. Notes happen fast or slow, just as he dictates, with shape and attack, enduring no softening or slurring at the hands of the system. And it's that way whether he's playing solo or providing the foundation for Evans' commanding keyboard. That evenness of pace and energy irrespective of frequency is the VPI's real

hallmark. It's what welds everything else together into such a believable whole. Its perspective is natural, as is its tonal balance; combine them with equally natural pace and energy levels and the result is extremely convincing. Not the sense of reality that you get from the Pearl of course, but an easy acceptance that leaves you enjoying the music rather than questioning the recording. And don't underestimate the importance of the deck's stability in this. It's very difficult to accept the truth of any musical performance if it wanders between the speakers or steps front and centre every time things get loud or busy. The Scout Master convinces in no small part because of its combination of iron hand and velvet glove – it might have a steady grip, but you simply enjoy the absence of movement rather than remarking on how tightly its held.

Searching back through the aural memory for a point of comparison, the

one that surfaces is the Well Tempered Record Player. The Scout Master shares the same grace and total absence of grain that set that turntable, in all its various guises, apart from the crowd. But the VPI adds greater air and focus, and better high frequency extension, all without the complexity and eclecticism of silicon baths. With its mix of virtues grafted so seamlessly to real musical authority the Scout Master establishes an enviable benchmark for vinyl replay. Not the nicest to look at, nor the easiest to upgrade, the deck might well respond "Well, why would you want to?" It's got a point. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Rigid record player with separate motor
Speeds:	33/45 with optional SDS electronic supply
Platter:	Acrylic
Clamps:	Option of peripheral mass ring with or without record weight
Lid:	None
Tonearm –	
Type:	Undamped uni-pivot
Effective Length:	230mm
Effective Mass:	8.7g
Geometry:	Rega
Dimensions (WxHxD): 483x228x330mm	
Prices –	
Turntable and Tonearm:	£2095
SDS Power Supply:	£950
Peripheral Clamp:	£450
Record Weight:	£145

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