

A Pressing Problem... With LPs

With the continued growth in vinyl sales, existing pressing plants are now having difficulty in keeping up with demand. Neville Roberts looks at the new pressing plants that are sprouting up across the globe and examines the challenges they face.

By Neville Roberts

Due to the growing market for records back in 2017, the ageing pressing plants around the world became increasingly unable to keep up with the mounting numbers of orders. Now, with demand for vinyl at a 25-year high and news that vinyl is on track to becoming a billion-dollar industry, we are seeing a new breed of pressing plants springing up, which is certainly great news for vinyl devotees. However, this also brings new challenges—not only

to keep up with the orders flooding in but, also, to maintain the quality of the LPs.

Many of us will remember the low point for vinyl LPs in the late seventies and early eighties. In an effort to cut costs, pressing plants started using increased amounts of recycled vinyl, which resulted in an increase in background noise. Furthermore, they made LPs so thin that they were nearly as flexible as the record sleeves in which they were stored. When the vinyl revival started just over ten years ago, new record production focused on the audiophile market and factories began

producing high-quality 180g pressings on virgin vinyl, thinking that it would be a niche market. However, as more and more people discovered the sonic benefits of a well-made LP, combined with the pleasures of a physical medium, the demand for records has continued to increase and shows no sign of dwindling again.

As a result of this increase in demand, we are seeing new pressing plants popping up everywhere. A former Dutch prison located in Leeuwarden in the north of Holland that was used during the Second World War, has had two new presses installed by a company called Deepgrooves. Eastern Canada's Prince Edward Island is the unlikely location of the new Kaneshii Vinyl Press.

Machang Music and Pictures has opened a new, two-machine, pressing plant in Seoul, South Korea. Third Man Records in the US has opened a long-planned vinyl pressing plant in Detroit. The Jamaican company Tuff Gong, located in Kingston and founded by Bob Marley in 1965, relaunched its vinyl manufacturing services in 2017, thanks to a new partnership with US company Sunpress Vinyl. This means that Jamaica has started pressing records again after years of inactivity. Last year, Sony Music restarted producing vinyl records in-house for the first time since ceasing its production in 1989.

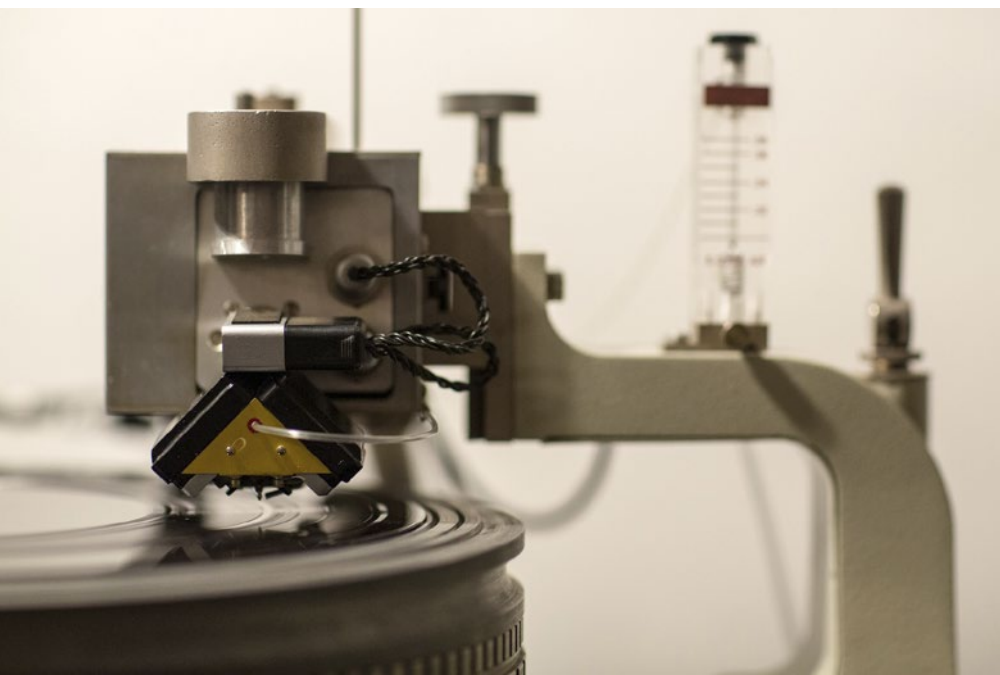
In the UK, a new vinyl factory opened last year in Ireland's capital. Appropriately named Dublin Vinyl, the plant is housed in a former steelworks and focuses on pressing high-quality vinyl records, both in 180g and 140g weights. In London, The Vinyl Factory Group that was established in 2001 now encompasses a record label, a record shop, a music magazine and a vinyl pressing plant. The list goes on...

All this seems fantastic news for vinyl-holics, but the rapid rise in the number of new plants has uncovered some real challenges for the industry. For companies that are still using antiquated machinery to cater for the growing demand for vinyl, where do you go to find experienced engineers who understand the equipment's idiosyncrasies? For example, The Vinyl Factory uses the former EMI Records vinyl pressing equipment, but where do they go to find operators who know how to operate the 50-year-old EMI 1400 presses? On a more general front, pressing an LP requires highly skilled staff who understand the intricacies of getting the balance right between temperature, pressing pressure and subsequent cooling of the finished record.

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and more uniform. Although this blending effectively makes the signal mono below a certain frequency, this does not pose a problem for bass signals. At the other end of the audio spectrum, excessive high frequencies can result in cooking the cutting head. Add to this the obvious need to get the groove spacing correct and deal with the swarf that is produced while the record is being cut, it is not difficult to see why it can take many years to acquire the experience needed to do a good job. Apprenticeships are once again being offered, but are there enough experienced people around today to be able to train them?

Despite these challenges, I for one hope that the pressing plants will continue to focus on quality. Modern developments in vinyl, coupled with new production techniques, will hopefully support the year-on-year increase in vinyl sales—providing the record industry doesn't take its eye off the quality ball. *—Neville Roberts*

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its Tokyo studio with a cutting lathe, Sony is struggling to find experienced mastering engineers who know how to cut master lacquers. Having chatted to the mastering engineer at AIR Studios in London on a number of occasions, and having seen him in action, I am well aware of many of the complexities of cutting a master LP. For example, if there is too much out-of-phase information between the left and right channels, the cutting head will attempt to cut a very deep groove, which could make the final record impossible to press and also damage the cutting stylus. To manage this, mastering engineers sometimes have to subtly blend the left and right signals together in order to make the cut less deep