

THE LONG PLAYER by ken kessler

PLAYS ON

Thanks to the success of both downloading and streaming – and a new generation’s lack of reverence for physical formats – there are reports on a regular basis that Compact Discs’ days are numbered. Fittingly, the very format that CD was meant to kill off is enjoying a new lease on life: the black vinyl record.



● EAT FORTE MAKASSAR



● **SME**



● **PRO-JECT DEBUT
CARBON-WHITE**



● **CONTINUUM CALIBURN
TURNTABLE**



It's not just those now-nearing-retirement "Baby Boomers" nor die-hard audiophiles who are keeping the LP alive – nostalgia is only one part of the formula.

It never actually went away, although CD relegated the LP to cult status by the start of the 1990s. But slowly, inexorably, the LP is enjoying annual growth as the CD declines.

Attribute the LP's desirability to whatever mix of qualities you care to combine: the retro/cool aspect, the superior sound quality, a size and shape that encourages wonderful sleeve art (and liner notes big enough to read). It's not just those now-nearing-retirement "Baby Boomers" nor die-hard audiophiles who are keeping the LP alive – nostalgia is only one part of the formula. Many new bands regard the LP as a sign of hipness, a rock'n'roll "merit badge" that tells the fans that the artist cares about the music.

From remastered classic LPs to vinyl editions of the latest works – yes, you can buy Adele's albums on vinyl – the 12-inch analogue disc is reclaiming space in the record shops. It's also inspiring online music vendors from amazon.com (no stranger to downloads) to Music Direct to Acoustic Sounds to stock selections that range from new pressings of Nat "King" Cole and Foreigner and Tony Bennett and the Kinks, to the Shins, the Kings of Leon, Michael Bublé, Shelby Lynne and many, many more.


What's needed to play these, though, are turntables, tonearms and cartridges, as well as "phono stages" in one's amplifier or receiver able to handle the lower output signal of a record playing system, compared to the "line level" output of most other devices. Because the hi-fi industry never lost its love for the allure of analogue, the current situation for new hardware matches the selection of new vinyl software.

It's fitting that the manufacturer of the most successful tonearm of all time – the UK-made SME 3009 – continues to play a key role with its superb line-up of record decks. They range from the space-saving SME Model 10 – not much larger a footprint than the LP itself – to the world-class Model 30/12, with its 12-inch tonearm for reduced tracking error. In-between are the Model 20/3 and the Model 30/2, with 10-inch arms, and the Model 20/12, fitted with the longer arm. Common to all SME turntables are stealthy, no-nonsense styling, total

user adjustability for ultra-precise set-up, and build quality said by one watchmaker to rival that of the Swiss.

Enjoying the continued health of the LP is Heinz Lichtenegger, whose brand Pro-ject, is now the largest turntable manufacturer in the business. A long-time importer of fine audio products into Austria, Heinz recognised a need for affordable turntables 20 years ago, when the major brands were leaving the fold. His 23-strong model line-up now includes entry-level units for a few hundred dollars, up to limited editions costing many thousands. Pro-ject also develops and produces turntables for other hi-fi manufacturers.

Recently, Heinz' wife Jozefina, already known to audiophiles for her range of hand-selected and tested audio valves, launched a range of high-end turntables noted for using two motors and two belts to provide superior speed control and reduced resonance. Sold under the European Audio Team banner, the EAT decks include the Forte and the E-Flat, with its distinctive flat tonearm.

Avid, Clearaudio, Rega, Thorens, Music Hall, Denon, Walker, Merrill, VPI, EAR, Roksan, Michell, Transcriptors, Origin Live, SOTA, Wilson Benesch – there are hundreds of turntables from which to choose. But the current “king of the hill” is the Continuum Caliburn, notorious for a six-figure price tag and complexity that extends to a vacuum holding the LP securely on the platter. It resides in its own dedicated tower stand, as imperious a construct as the world's most acclaimed deck should be. If anything attests to the possibility that the black vinyl LP will be the “last physical music format,” outliving the upstart CD, the Continuum is a monument-in-waiting. 

● PRO-JECT RPM 1.3



● EATE-FLAT



● EAT FORTE MAKASSAR

