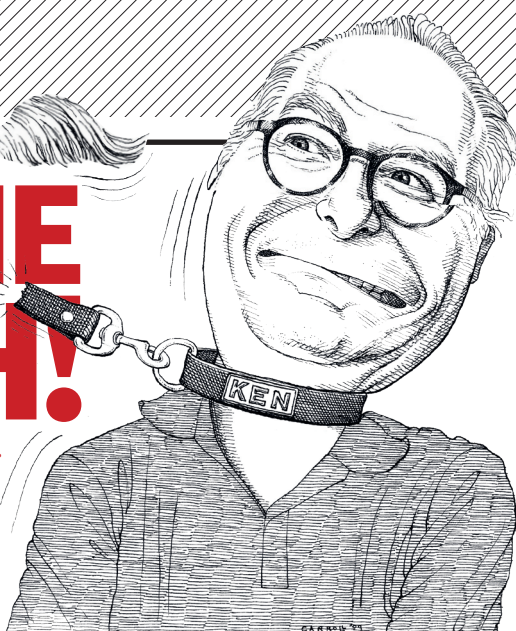


LAST WORD

OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Ken Kessler reckons he's finally found the perfect record cleaning machine, even if it comes at a price



Amongst the audio 'good housekeeping' habits that I have not practiced is record cleaning with a machine. I always found it tedious and inconvenient, and – more relevant to my lack of enthusiasm – I don't own a hoard of used LPs of dubious former ownership. Yes, there are rare treasures that would benefit, but let's just say I'm too lazy to bother with it.

When necessary, I fire up my old Moth cleaner – similar to an early Nitty Gritty – but it is very basic, although at circa £500 it remains a bargain for collectors on a budget. The VPIs are admirable, too, but I'm not fond of the legendary Keith Monks because I find it so Heath Robinsonian. Yet, I hasten to add, I know many who swear by it as *the* salvation for the inveterate LP collector. The similar Loricraft machine also has its adherents, and I'm a great admirer of vinyl expert Martina Schoener, who advises them on myriad details, not least being the cleaning fluids.

PERFECT MACHINE?

What finally convinced me that there is, indeed, a perfect machine for me (I repeat: for me) was a demonstration by Robert Suchy of Clearaudio's newly 'optimised' version of the company's double-sided record cleaning machine, the Double Matrix

Professional. Without fail, it addresses every single issue I have about record cleaning machines, and even possesses non-essential qualities such as looks and build quality worthy of a fine turntable. Yes, I admit to being seduced by aesthetics and perceived value, and yes, I admit that they say nothing about a product's efficacy, but that's why Ferraris don't look like Daewoos.

OUT ON SHOW

If you're familiar with Clearaudio turntables, you'll recognise the workmanship and robustness of the aluminium chassis, with the same matte finish the company uses on certain of its decks and components such as phono stages. Unlike nearly every other record cleaning machine, this is not one you'll feel compelled to hide away because of prosaic, or even ugly styling. It looks the business, period.

And it *does* the business, too. Without having measured the noise levels of its rivals I

can't attest to the Double Matrix Professional being any quieter than the others, but it didn't make me wish it came with road workers' ear protectors. Nothing about it looks like an afterthought. It operates as sexily and smoothly as the controls on a Japanese direct-drive from the 1970s.

What I love about the Clearaudio (and the Moth) is the lack of a platter – why put

a clean A-side on a surface that was just in contact with a dirty B-side? This enables the machine to clean both sides at once. User controls include continuously adjustable rotation speed, direction change with the press of a button to ensure even cleaning, the presence of an anti-static brush should the LP need it and mess-free automatic fluid application. Depending on whether you choose a long, slow clean for seriously soiled LPs, or a quicker one for new-ish LPs in need of light cleaning, the average cleaning cycle is one minute. The vacuum engine is also equipped with an overheat sensor.

Clearaudio's flagship cleaner – there's a simpler, single-side version available for just under £1000 – stands 405x380x180mm (wdh) or 280mm tall including the record clamp and weighs 16.5kg, so accommodating it is like having another turntable. The kicker is that it costs £2600, so the most sensible way to acquire one might be to 'time-share' with a couple of friends, each partner supplying his or her own cleaning materials.

ALCOHOL WITH THAT?

Only one caveat: you have to decide which 'camp' you belong to, being that of whether or not LP cleaning fluid should contain alcohol. I follow the argument of Mike Harris at Moth: the alcohol has been diluted to so few parts per thousand, and makes contact with the record for so short a period, that damage is unlikely. 'Maybe,' he posits, 'you'd see damage if you left an LP immersed in pure alcohol for a year...' So you might wish to try Martina's fluid from Loricraft, LAST Powerclean or others.

As has been said before, addressing an opportunity now amplified by the robust health of the used vinyl market, surviving record stores or hi-fi shops could install one and charge £2 per cleaning, with a fresh inner sleeve included. If that sounds excessive, it will cover staff time, the cost of the fluid and the sleeve, and wear-and-tear; a record shop would wear out a machine a lot more quickly than would a private user. Think of what it will do for a rare LP you finally found after five years of searching and which cost you £30. And besides: £2 won't even pay for a coffee at Starbucks. ☺

'The most sensible way to acquire the Clearaudio might be to "time-share"'

Sept 22nd JUL
issue on sale

ON TEST:

- Group Test: Perking up your pick-up
- Exclusive: Magico Q3 loudspeakers
- Exclusive: Oracle Paris turntable
- Exclusive: Chord QBD76 outboard DAC
- Exclusive: AMR CD-777 CD processor

PLUS:

- Investigation: Barry Fox on the future of radio
- Vintage Review: Pioneer D-9601 96kHz DAT
- Vinyl Frontier: Latest LP releases
- Audio Milestones: The Pink Triangle turntable
- Vinyl Icons: Elvis Costello *Armed Forces*