

**So you're
feeling
groovy?**

**Young punters'
guide to
affordable
record playing.**

By Neal Vaughan

Spinning records is back but it means you have to part with some of the cash you've saved on pirate music streaming sites – here's a guide to spending it smartly.

After a lifetime loving vinyl and selling vintage turntables online for a couple of years I decided I write this to help all you Generation Y and earlier hipsters get your groove right. You've got the youth, the looks, the abs and apps. Now you want to nick the only thing us dad jokers have over you. You've come for our turntables and early 70's rock records. But there are some hidden traps for new analogue converts buying old players. Stuff ups that lead to post purchase dissonance rather than the sonic nirvana you were hoping to impress your next date with.

Your phonographic dictionary.

It's a new old school language here's a guide.

Phonographic = original term for records and record players - hence 'phono'.

Record player = turntable =deck =phonograph - all the same thing.

Stylus = needle - but doesn't equal cartridge.

Cartridge = the bit that houses the stylus – they are separate yet inseparable. Specific cartridges house specific styli (that's the plural)

Headshell = end of the tone arm and this where the cartridge lives.

Tonearm = arm - usually 9inch tube that pivots and tracks the stylus on the record

Tracking = stylus in the record groove making noise. Poor tracking means it's not always in the groove at the correct angle, which distorts the sound or makes it jump.

Tracking weight = the downwards pressure or weight - usually .75 – 2.5 gms – that the tone arm places on the stylus to keep it tracking correctly.

Counterbalance Weight = counterweight –big round or cylindrical weight at the pivot end of the tone arm

Platter = the round bit that spins and you put the record on.

Motor = the electric motor that drives the platter.

Belt = most of the better decks use a rubber belt to drive the platter.

Spindle = the centre spindle where the hole on the record goes.

Pulley = Round thing on the top of the motor usually machined with two different sizes one for 45 one for 33.3.

Phono stage = phono pre-amplifier = a little mini amp always used to be found within main amplifiers back in the day. You need one if your new amp doesn't have one.

Direct Drive = the term for turntables where the motor directly drives the platter.

45 = 45revolutions per minute = seven inch single usually.

33 = 33 (actually 33.3) revolutions per minute – a twelve-inch album usually.

78 = 78 revolutions pre minute = old 50's and earlier records= you need a special stylus for these. Many turntables do not do 78.

How much to get started?

Vintage/retro is 'in' so it's no longer super cheap but with smart shopping you can still put a good sounding complete 'working' vintage system and some records together for around \$600 – that's record deck, quality cartridge/stylus, phono stage or amp and maybe speakers –if needed.

Under this amount you are a great shopper, lucky, or you're happy with very questionable sound quality. Of course, you may already have speakers and an amp that are fine so you could just get a record deck couldn't you? Well, here's trap number one.

Trap No 1

You need more than a record player to play records.

The thing that makes records sound so amazingly fat, sweet and beautifully real compared to that indescribable thing you've got stuck in your ear all the time isn't just the record player.

A quick lesson in how the sound gets from the record groove to your brain.

There's a small casual afternoon gathering of components needed to get the music out of those vinyl grooves and into your brain's much neglected aural receptors.

First the stylus vibrating in the record groove, analogue style, is turned into an electronic pulse by the cartridge (the bit the stylus lives in). This pulse travels down super thin wires in the tone-arm and out through the RCA leads to your amplifier via a phono pre-amplifier. It's hi-fi not wi-fi.

The next trap for beginners.

The phono-stage/phono amp

If you plug your shiny old vintage deck into the aux or CD input of your modern amp you'll get a faint ghostlike impression of the music and a general sense of all round disappointment. The electrical pulse created by the stylus and cartridge is very weak compared to a CD player or Mp3 player so it has to be 'pre-amplified' and generally sorted out in a phono pre-amplifier to make it listenable. To avoid this you need an amp with phono marked on the input selector or -

- a.** A nice vintage amp with built in phono-stage – they all had one (\$100 to \$200 up)
- b.** A separate phono-stage - they start at \$30, but that's too cheap and sounds it, spend \$100 up.
- c.** A turntable with a built in phono-stage (mostly new decks and \$450 up)

The most important part – the stylus/cartridge

Despite all that phono stage carry on, the key and most often neglected part of the whole process is the smallest – the needle or stylus and the cartridge that houses it.

The quality of the stylus/cartridge determines the quality of the musical information gained from the record. It's the deal breaker when it comes to vinyl sounding great. So make sure you get the best stylus cartridge combo you can afford. Easy. Sort of.

Your turntable's tone arm needs to be up to the task of housing and tracking a quality cartridge. Some cheaper – new and vintage decks – only work with the cartridge they come with which is usually bad news for good sound.

Quality not price matters most.

It's like everything in this process there's a basic quality level that you need to maintain at each step – you don't have to spend heaps you just have to spend wisely and think about it for five minutes. Easy answer is to stick with the proven combinations. Basically a decent new Shure or Ortofon or Audio Technica stylus/ cartridge for around \$50 to \$100 will sound OK to good.

If you buy a quality vintage deck it may well have a good vintage cartridge. You can find a new

replacement stylus if needed on ebay or your local hi-fi store – if you still have one.

**So finally the cool bit -
what record player to get.**

**Choose your record player like a
musical instrument, because it is.**

If you only occasionally turn your lounge room into a musical laundrorama then anything will do – so long as it looks right. But like everything in life, good looks cost extra and are no guarantee of satisfaction. And if you're spending on the music why not spend a little extra to make it sound good.

**Different record players sound
different, and bad ones sound awful**

**Wow and flutter,
rumble and harmonic feedback**

Remember the all-important stylus - it picks up all the vibrations in the groove. Not just the music. The record deck itself adds it's own faint, or not so faint, set of vibrations that feed into the stylus too. A good deck minimizes these and only an audio Nazi will notice them. A bad or poorly functioning deck will have little fluctuations called wow and flutter will wreck the sound for anyone. It'll sound wowsy.

Then there's rumble from poor motor vibration damping and worn bearings which muffles low down definition – ie the bass guitar. Other things like

suspension springs, flimsy wooden plinths and cheap or worn tone arm bearings create their own vibrations too. Get a half decent or well cared for deck and all this is largely sorted - with new records at \$25 and up an extra \$100 or so on the player is well worth it.

So can't I just get one of those \$150 new retro things?

No. Leave the room now if you think this. Those retro looking new \$150 decks you see at Jaycar or Big W or online are actually complete rubbish and really they look awful too.

So what to spend and what should you get?

Under \$150 - nothing much, you may get lucky or pick up the mostly ugly early eighties Japanese decks –Akai, Sansui, Rotel, JVC maybe Pioneer, Yamaha, Marantz – these will do the job while looking a bit plastic greyish and eighties. New decks under \$250 are awful avoid.

\$150 - \$250 – you may well find a decent 70's Japanese vintage deck - Pioneer, Sansui, Yamaha, Akai maybe Micro Seiki or Technics and you'll be doing everyone's ears a favour. But the nice looking well-built early 70's decks all real teak veneer and stainless steel are going above this now – everyone wants them.

\$250 - \$350 - you can get something good off ebay or gumtree for this, in tidy cosmetic condition and with good cartridge, everything working smoothly. Vintage hi-fi specialists have entry level decks at this price

with 3-month warranties but you're paying their margin of course. You may find a second hand modern era Rega or Project too.

\$350-\$450 - Gets you the best of the classic 70's Japanese decks and some of the good lower level European stuff - like German made Thorens 150,160, 145 or Dual 505 or B&O for all you Danish design fans. (B&O can be great or complete disaster - always make sure it's all working)

Also Rega and Project second hand or if adventurous and manually minded AR (American, simple and great) and the Aussie made JH -usually with a bespoke Japanese Grace arm also very good though a bit specialized.

\$500 up - stick to ebay or gumtree and you will get something great for this money. Even the high priced vintage sellers have good stuff. Maybe a higher end Thorens say a 125 or 166 or a nice original Rega Planar or go for it with Linn LP 12 around \$800up but you may need to get an arm too – not for beginners. Also plenty of new decks for this money.

new or vintage?

If you've got a spare \$450 to \$500 plus – you can just head down to one of the few remaining hi-fi stores, or go online, and buy a perfectly decent brand new turntable with cartridge fitted and phono stage built in – Rega and Project make good entry-level decks with smart colours at this price. Not as much fun as digging up a vintage deck at around half the money. The advantage is they don't go wrong. But decks aren't that complex. Generally if they're already working they run almost forever with a few drops of sewing machine oil and proper care.

The golden rule of vintage.

Unless you plan on servicing or repairing the deck yourself the golden rule for buying vintage is find something that's already in regular use and go listen to it, listen for wow and flutter, rumble, and watch it in action. Buying remote off ebay is asking for trouble – not least because decks hate being sent in the post without the right packing . Vintage dealers are now found in most cities – easy way to go but you can pay double or even more.

Another golden rule of vintage – lubrication

Turntables are simple with few moving parts but the parts that spin seize up when they sit unused in a loft or garage – the motors, spindles and platter bearings have industrial grease or oil that dries up through lack of use and regular care. Check everything is running smoothly and freely.

Affordable fixes.

Most issues with most decks are fairly easy to fix with a good service. But two hours of anyone's time is going to cost you \$100 up, plus any parts if they can be found. Complex fully automatic decks can become uneconomical to fix for all but the enthusiasts. Hence the golden rules above.

Vintage buyers watch out.

1. Is the platter rotating freely? – with the belt removed spin the platter it should whizz around for at least five to ten seconds without starting to slow. This check can't be done on some automatic decks, hence the golden rule.
2. Is the motor spinning freely is the speed correct?
3. Are all the thin cartridge and arm wires unbroken and properly connected? Can you hear all the music? That golden rule test again.

4. If automatic, does the whole auto sequence operate correctly and if there is an issue, can you use the deck manually instead? If so haggle and get yourself a cheaper deck to use manual only.
5. Is the start capacitor, where fitted, working? Particularly on Automatic decks. The big clue is there is no sound.

Styles and types of turntable:

Manual - like a car you do all the work - DJ Style. With practice anyone can do this – go impress your friends go manual.

Manual with Auto Stop or Auto Return

As above but it automatically stops the deck and most often returns the arm to its start position. Very handy for late night 'listening'.

Automatic - Does much or all of the work for you. There are degrees of 'automaticness' and some early decks are very complex at making life simple.

Which is best?

The purists want it all manual – this means less components and interference with the tone arm for the purest sound. Also simple to fix. But if you're not used to handling vinyl an automatic deck is so much easier and the sound difference on a decent one is negligible

Turntable Types

Basically all decks except those wind up 78 things use an electric motor to spin the platter. There are however a number of ways to get the spinning electric motor to spin the platter.

Belt Drive - The most commonly accepted and usually best performing. A thin rubber belt stretched around the 'inner platter' and the 'pulley' of the electric motor. Helps also isolates the motor vibration from the platter which is good for the sound or musicality

Direct Drive - The most obvious solution - the spindle of the electric motor is the centre spindle of the platter so spins it directly like a plane propeller. Advantages are no belt to change and DJ's love easy speed control. Disadvantages expensive or impossible to repair and speed control goes haywire - listen carefully is the speed right? Avoid unless really cheap or really good -ie Luxman or Technics.

Idler or Rim Drive - Until the early 60's this was how record players worked. A rubber wheel sits on a pivoted arm between the spindle of the electric motor and the inside of the platter. Simple but complex at the same time When worn out or cheap they are awful but audiophiles cherish the best idler drive decks – Thorens TD 124, Garrard 303, Lenco L75.

Setting up your turntable

Tip. People like you can easily break the stylus and other things so ask someone who knows – dad maybe. There are also enough hi-fi places selling decks in the capital cities who can help – but ask how much first, some unscrupulous nameless ones charge \$80 for many ten minute jobs - but don't expect it for free everyone's got to make the rent.

Anyone for a gram or two?

Tracking weight.

Setting the tracking weight is like playing at being coke dealer for a few minutes except you won't get rich or jailed. Everything is measured in very small amounts and the tone arm is the scale with the cartridge one end, the counterweight the other.

To set the tracking weight get the cartridge end, with stylus removed, to float or waft around neither up or down. This will be near as damn it zero. Then use the scale or slider on the counter weight to add half a gram, and then a quarter or less at a time until you're within the recommended tracking weight for the cartridge stylus.

Tip: Vintage cartridge/stylus combinations nearly always track between 1 or 1.25 to 2 gms or 2.5gms max. Generally go for just under 2gms and your safe. Cheap cartridges and arms may use more than 2.5 gms to track properly this chews through records fast – don't buy cheap

Tip: If your stylus it won't track properly maybe the stylus is broken – a common trap.

Tip: Tracking weight effects the sound performance, want a bit more bass add a quarter of gram, if the high end lacks detail back the weight off a bit.

Changing speeds and belts.

Many modern decks actually need you to lift the platter off and move the belt on the motor pulley to change speeds. Changing the speed on most vintage decks is simpler, usually a lever or button. If you don't need move the belt to replace it or change speed SWITCH OFF AT MAINS before you do it, in fact anytime you go under the platter turn it all off.

Placing your turntable

Avoid directly placing on a wooden floor, straight on top of the amp or on top of a speaker or in front of one - you'll set up a low end vibration loop. A solid table or cabinet or bookshelf is fine. I won't go into all the audiophile tricks look them up if you're that bothered.

Tip: Don't forget the earth lead

Old decks and amps often have a separate earth wire/lead – it will be a single thin wire that's not the RCA connector leads. This will need to be screwed or plugged on to the earth connection on the amp.

Record and Turntable Care

You'll need a dust cleaning cloth or anti static brush. A fine soft little stylus cleaning brush. A couple of mini screwdrivers.

finally.

How to handle a record.

They are precious and easily damaged. Always keep your sweaty fingers off the playing surface and don't stack them out of their covers. That's it. Lift them with the tips of your fingers at the edge and if needed press only on the centre label.

At last the records! Buying vinyl and building a collection.

If you are not after specific records and are happy to just buy good records in the genres you like you could have a mini vinyl collection of 15 to 25 records started over a couple of weekends for about a couple of hundred bucks if you shop wisely.

Generally mid sixties to late seventies and early eighties classic rock, pop, folk, blues, country, reggae, jazz, metal, disco albums that were popular (ie not too rare) but have some kind of 'cool' factor can be found in good playable condition for around \$10 - \$20 each - though search and you'll do better. The best places to look are actually not garage sales and vintage stores - where selection is limited, looking is tiring, condition is often not good and prices have risen. Sure if you hunt you'll find good '\$2' buys - but the vinyl record stores that also do second hand, which is most, are your best bet.

Sydney as about 15 scattered through the city, trendy inner suburbs and beyond - just check out digginsydney.com or google you can find them. They have a bigger range, better condition vinyl and have plenty of \$10 and under records they want to shift. Also they're the most fun places to find music. You can go on line of course, ebay and discogs are great for finding just what you but postage tends to dull the bargain edge - so buy a few from on place at time and only deal with people who have trusted feedback.

Prices

Over \$20 is a lot for second hand, it needs to be a special record to go for over \$15 really. Under \$10 is cheap, under \$5 unusual except in the clearout bins 60's and 70's get the most money. The much unloved though coming back 80's is cheaper – unless it's rare post punk, house, hip-hop techno or something similar.

Some of the most expensive stuff is early 90's simply because CD's had taken over by then, and great records the grunge and hip hop era can fetch hundreds of dollars because only a few records were ever pressed – even on that horrid flimsy 90's vinyl they're valuable.

The mid late nineties through to the naughties are slim pickings as vinyl was in the dustbin of history though there's a whole DJ and dance scene to factor in here. And of course the last five years or so has seen the big comeback with many, now even most, bands releasing new stuff on vinyl so there's a regular second hand market appearing for more contemporary releases and these can be cheap.

Rare/beware

Rare records have always been expensive. Some mid sixties garage 45 that only had 50 pressings and is considered the best something or other can fetch ten grand. 50's rock'n'roll or blues or country 45's can also fetch huge money. As can late 60's early 70's psychedelic and folk rock or rare original late 70's punk and new wave even newer hip hop or the latest record store day limited edition. It's like art and vintage cars collectors will pay a fortune for precisely the right rare thing.

Condition is everything

Those crazy prices for rare records are totally condition dependent. They have to be mint to get the money. A slightly damaged sleeve a couple of small scratches halves the price and anything that's well worn or worn and scuffed about gets only a fifth of the headline prices. Check the pressing too - first pressings are valuable, re-issues usually aren't.

Tip: a lot of 60's and 70's classics were actually pressed and repackaged here in Australia. Record companies were forced to manufacture here by the taxes on imports. Often the sleeves and actual vinyl, it was usually thinner, and pressing quality of Australian releases are often thought inferior. Also they are more common here. So a USA pressed can be worth \$20 more than the same Australian release though it make look on first impression exactly the same. Conversely an Australian released Hendrix record with different cover art than in the UK may actually be rarer and more valuable.

New Records

Of course you can get brand new records by brand new bands and often they're cheaper or as cheap as old second hand stuff. On the opposite end of the money scale vinyl is seen as the luxury edition so limited edition special boxes, coloured vinyl, magazine sized booklets all up the prices. If you love the band go for it and spend all day playing with your new toy, otherwise save for another day

Tip: Sometimes the re-issues are cheaper than collectible originals so you can get great old records at a half sensible price. Remember, if you're building a collection focus on the most records for your buck.

Tip: Genre compilations are a good way to get a whole load of different old stuff without needing to buy a hundred records.

Tip: Basically shop around the same used records can vary \$10 to \$15 depending on where you go. New ones can vary \$5 to \$10.

Tip: Some shops will run old records through a professional record cleaner it makes a big difference to poorly cared for records.

Have fun!

