

AUDIO  
AUTHORITY  
1962  
—  
2012

CELEBRATING OUR FIRST **50 YEARS**

# stereophile

NOVEMBER 2012



## MOVING MUSIC *from VPI'S* **TRAVELER TURNTABLE**

SEE PAGE 66

### **ULTIMATE PREAMP**

The Audio Research Reference 5SE

### **ULTIMATE ANALOG**

Spiral Groove's amazing turntable & tonearm

### **CLASSIC TUBES FROM A START-UP**

Rogers' EHF-100 comes out on top

### **4 GREAT-VALUE LOUDSPEAKERS**

Best buys from DefTech, Harbeth, Klipsch, Tannoy

Guitar man Albert Lee's surround-sound experiment

**MUSIC BEAT** and legendary crooner  
CS&N's Graham Nash at 70

Online authority:  
[www.stereophile.com](http://www.stereophile.com)

A SOURCE INTERLINK MEDIA PUBLICATION

STEPHEN MEJIAS

# VPI Industries Traveler

## TURNTABLE

**O**n May 21, 2008, five months after purchasing my very first turntable (a Rega Research P3-24), I decided that my obsession with LPs had grown to the extent that I could no longer function without a good record-cleaning machine. I'd done some research and found that the device best suited to my life and wallet was VPI's time-honored HW-16.5. I was certain, anxious, determined. But that morning, when I gave VPI a call, the line was busy. When I called again in the afternoon, the line was busy. When I called again in the evening, the line was busy.

When someone finally answered my call, I was surprised—partly because I'd grown so accustomed to hearing that busy signal, but mostly because the person on the other end of the line sounded so familiar. She was kind, candid, and her tone almost immediately took on the warm, concerned, slightly overbearing touch of a *mom*—my favorite kind of person. This was Sheila Weisfeld—cofounder, with her husband, Harry, of VPI Industries. We talked and talked. After a while, I wondered if Sheila was more interested in sharing stories about her sons than in selling me a record-cleaning machine.

Turned out that her first, Jonathan, had been killed in a car accident 13 years earlier. Jonathan and I would have been about the same age; like me, he'd wanted to be a musician. After Jonathan's death, VPI shut its doors for a month. Sheila dedicated herself to promoting safety-awareness programs and to helping her younger son, Mathew, find his way through the family's loss. Harry holed up in the basement for two years, perfecting a design that he and Jonathan had started together: a tonearm that, in honor of Jonathan, would be named the JMW Memorial. In our January 1997 issue, Michael Fremer called the tonearm "a triumph of industrial design" with a sound that was "intoxicating, almost magical."

Loss had inspired beauty.

Sheila, I figured, had taken a liking to me. (I'm great with moms.) But before we said goodbye, she expressed her displeasure with my choice of turntable. She was gentle, diplomatic, and unambiguous. "Perhaps you'd like me to loan you a turntable? Your call!"

*My call?* I was reminded of my own mom, always offering more of my favorite meal: I was too full to accept, but couldn't bear insulting her. I explained to Sheila, as tactfully as I could, that while I'd always been fascinated by and attracted to VPI's turntables, they were out of my price range. Plus, I had no idea how to set up a turntable. The Rega made setup relatively easy, but a 'table like VPI's entry-level Scout (\$1800, with JMW-9T tonearm) was too intimidating.

"Can I take you up on the offer in a few months? By this fall, I might be able to give a VPI the attention it deserves." "Whatever makes you happy."

*Whatever makes me happy?* I could almost see her smile.

When my conversation with Sheila was over, I immediately missed her. After speaking with her for just a few minutes, I felt I'd known her all my life. This was Sheila's effect on people. It's no surprise that her line was so often busy.

Days passed, spring turned to fall, one winter blurred into another, and I never again called Sheila. I figured we'd renew our discussion in person, at a Consumer Electronics Show or some other event.

In June 2011, when Sheila Weisfeld was diagnosed with stage-four pancreatic cancer, the doctors told her she had three months to live. She responded by going on long trips to Australia and to Texas; travel made her happy. Having surpassed the doctors' expectations, Sheila next planned to attend the January 2012 CES, where she would say goodbye to friends and colleagues and accept *Stereophile's* award for Analog Source Component of 2011, for VPI's Classic 3

### SPECIFICATIONS

**Description** Belt-driven turntable with tonearm. Speeds: 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ , 45rpm. Wow & flutter: <0.2%. Rumble: >-80dB. Speed accuracy: 40.1%.

**Dimensions** 16.5" (425mm)

W by 5" (130mm) H by 12" (310mm) D. Weight: 24 lbs (10.9kg).

**Serial Number of Unit**

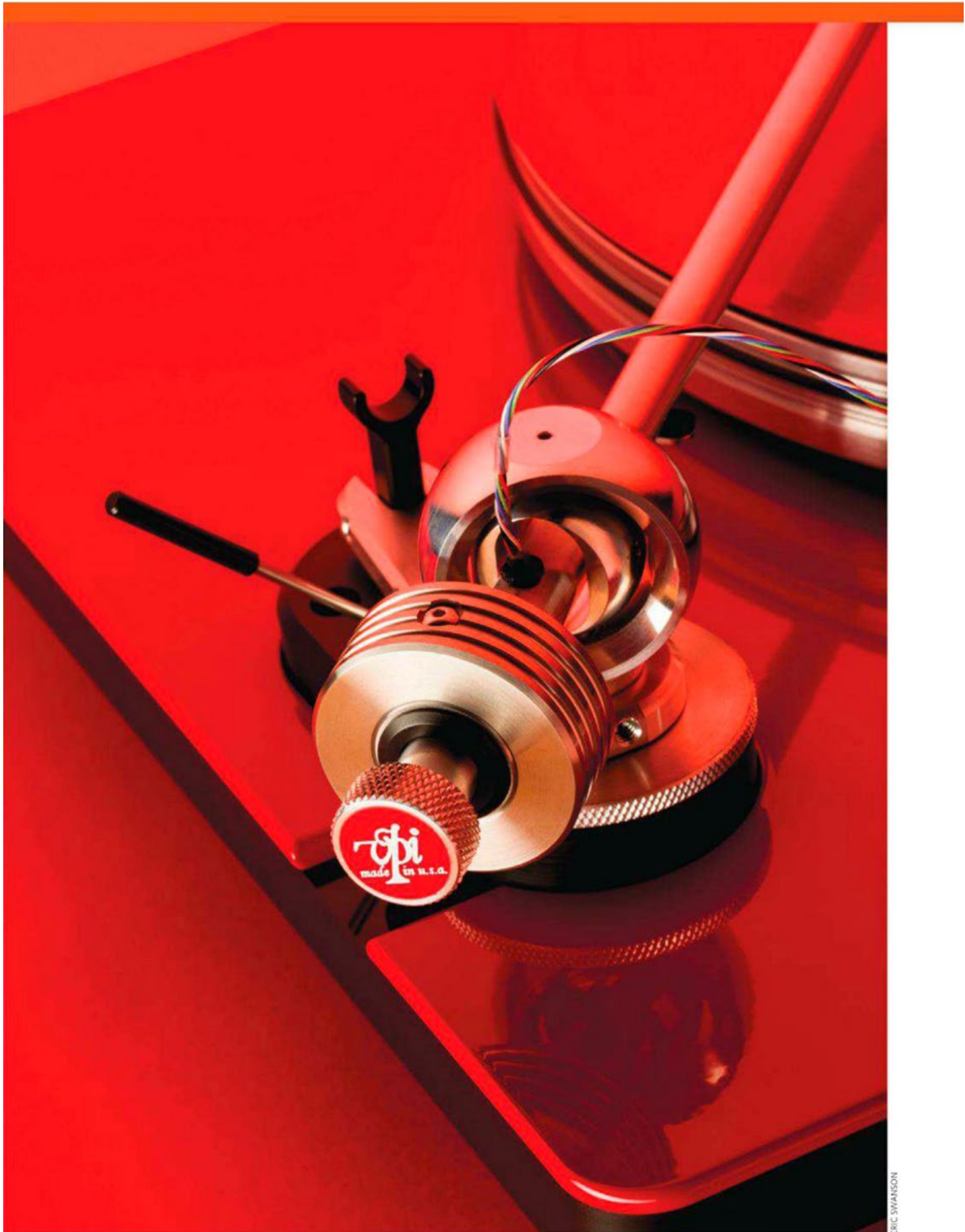
**Reviewed** T1-05071202.

**Finish** Black, Red, White, or Blue.

**Price** \$1299 in Basic Black finish with tonearm. Red, White, and Blue finishes add \$100. Grado Gold phono cartridge adds \$200. Approximate number of dealers: >60.

#### Manufacturer

VPI Industries, Inc.,  
77 Cliffwood Avenue #3B,  
Cliffwood, NJ 07721-1087.  
Tel: (732) 583-6895.  
Fax: (732) 946-8578.  
[www.vpiindustries.com](http://www.vpiindustries.com).



ERIC SWANSON



Dynavector's 10X5 phono cartridge was a great match for the VPI Traveler; mounting the cartridge was as easy as pie. (See this issue's "The Entry Level.")

turntable. She didn't make it. On December 17, 2011, Sheila Weisfeld passed away. I never got to meet her.

At CES, I handed our award to Mathew Weisfeld, who mentioned that he'd be taking on more responsibility at VPI. In April, at the New York Audio & AV Show, Mathew handed me a business card, explained that he was leaving his teaching job to work full-time with his dad, and introduced VPI's newest turntable, the Traveler. Dedicated to Sheila Weisfeld and meant to appeal to a younger generation of music lovers, the Traveler was designed for easy setup, would be available in a range of fun colors, and would cost \$1299 without phono cartridge—almost exactly the price of my Rega P3-24 without phono cartridge.

#### The VPI Traveler

On the flight home from the 2012 CES, 27-year-old Mathew Weisfeld reached into the pocket on the seat back in front of him, pulled out a paper bag, and sketched a design for an attractive, user-friendly turntable that even his friends could afford. The table's size and shape would be very important. It would have to be sleek, small enough to fit on a standard equipment rack, and at least somewhat portable.

With a footprint of about 16.5" wide by 12" deep, the Traveler easily fit on the top shelf of my Polycrystal equipment rack, and left room for my VPI Crosscheck turntable level and Hunt EDA record-cleaning brush. Mathew Weisfeld boasts that he carried an early-production sample of the Traveler to the recent Newport Beach Show in his luggage. But at a hefty 24 lbs and standing about 5" tall, the Traveler is significantly heavier and bulkier than my Rega. While I wouldn't think twice about schlepping the Rega over to Uncle Omar's house for a listening session, I doubt I'd be able to tuck the Traveler under one arm and go.

The Traveler's chassis is made of 3/16"-thick aluminum and 1/2"-thick Delrin, the latter a commercial name for polyoxymethylene (POM), a thermoplastic attractive for its high rigidity, low friction, and outstanding dimensional stability. Harry Weisfeld explained that, in the Traveler, this combination of aluminum and Delrin creates a very quiet, self-damping structure while allowing all parts of the turntable to be perfectly aligned for smooth, controlled operation. The table's aluminum top plate extends just beyond the Delrin foundation, and comes in a range of colors that includes red, white, blue, and silver. (Other

options may be available in the future; photos on VPI's website show Travelers in pink and gold.) My sample came in VPI's standard black finish and exhibited some cosmetic imperfections on the chassis' underside—due perhaps to being hauled around in luggage, or to the usual strains of shipping. The instruction manual recommends using the Panel Magic or Stainless Steel Magic cleaning products to eliminate any odd markings from the Traveler's surface.

The Traveler's machined aluminum platter is damped with a stainless-steel disc and has an integral cloth mat. As in the VPI Classic, the Traveler's motor is built into the chassis. While it might seem counterintuitive to place a vibration-inducing motor in direct contact with a vibration-sensitive chassis, VPI believes that a properly integrated motor provides steadier and more efficient speed control. Unlike my Rega and many

low-cost turntables driven by DC motors, the Traveler's AC synchronous motor runs on the stable 60Hz line frequency, and is said to be immune to voltage variances. I asked Harry Weisfeld to explain.

"An AC motor knows where it is. A DC motor knows where it was."

I asked Harry Weisfeld to explain.

"An AC synchronous motor reads the line frequency coming from the wall, which, in the US, will always be 60Hz. The motor's rotational speed (600rpm, in the case of the Traveler) is set by the line frequency. You can vary the voltage from 70 to

140V, and the speed will still be 600rpm. If you slow the platter down with your finger, the motor will fight you to get back to the correct speed of 600rpm—it's a known, fixed item."

**VPI believes that a properly integrated motor provides steadier and more efficient speed control.**

Using a record brush on a spinning LP, I noticed that the Traveler paid little attention to the downward pressure exerted on its platter, but continued to run smoothly, unperturbed. This is not at all

the case with my Rega, which can be slowed to a near stop with the slightest touch. According to Weisfeld, AC motors are more sensitive to music's timing and, therefore, sound more dynamic and compelling.

And DC motors?

"A DC motor is very quiet, very easy to integrate into a turntable, passes CE and UL regulations with no problem, and is cost-effective. But what speed does it run at? [A DC motor] needs a feedback loop to maintain speed accuracy, and that causes a time delay when the [rotational] speed is changed by groove velocity."

The Traveler's main platter bearing comprises a high-tolerance Thomson shaft, a chrome-hardened steel ball, and a thrust plate of polyetheretherketone (PEEK), an extremely durable thermoplastic with outstanding creep resistance—perfect for high-stress applications. Hinting at a potential upgrade, Weisfeld claims that the Traveler's motor and bearing assembly can easily handle the Classic 3's substantial 20-lb platter.

Though Weisfeld had wanted to equip the Traveler with a unipivot tonearm like the JMW Memorial, doing so would

have significantly increased the turntable's price. Instead, he devised a 10"-long, spring-loaded tonearm with a gimbal bearing. Aluminum, stainless steel, and Delrin are used "in the right places" for strength and rigidity. Pins of hardened steel fit into V-shaped bearings of sapphire, permitting motion in the vertical and horizontal planes, while springs maintain tension on the bearings during play; according to Weisfeld, there is essentially *no* motion in the audible range. While the gimbal bearings are cost effective, they nevertheless allowed Weisfeld to design a tonearm that would be accurate, quiet, easy to use, and exhibit outstanding manufacturing consistency—every arm, he says, is exactly the same. Lastly, Weisfeld feels that a 10" arm produces less skating force and less tracking distortion than the typical 9" design.

Like VPI's popular Scout turntable, the Traveler stands on four aluminum cones, but trades the Scout's steel-ball tips for rubber-compound surface contacts. A small name badge is applied to the Traveler's low front panel. I would prefer a more discreet screen-printed or etched design on the top of the plinth; as it is now, the badge seems an afterthought that I was often tempted to peel off. Otherwise, the Traveler has a solid, no-nonsense appearance. It looks like a machine.

Like all VPI products, the Traveler is manufactured in the US, using as many US-made parts as possible. Even better, it's made in *New Jersey*—just like me.

### Setup

The Traveler comes packed with everything you'll need to successfully set it up and mount a cartridge on it: two drive belts (one is a spare), two sizes of hex key, a spanner wrench, three sizes of cartridge-mounting screws with washers, a cartridge-alignment jig, and a Shure SFG-2 stylus-force gauge.

Nevertheless, *my* first attempt at setting up the Traveler was *not* entirely successful. Following the instruction manual, I placed the Traveler atop my Polycrystal equipment rack, made sure the table was level, placed the platter on the bearing shaft, screwed the aluminum spindle into the shaft, tightened the spindle with the wrench, fitted the rubber drive belt around the platter and motor pulley, connected the supplied AC cord to the Traveler's rear socket, and gently slid the tonearm assembly into place. All that took about two minutes. Then I got to the part about mounting the cartridge. Which is when I got scared and decided to take a break.

I spent the next few weeks learning how to properly mount a Dynavector DV 10X5 moving-coil cartridge on my Rega P3-24. (Read all about it in this issue's "The Entry Level.") When I'd mastered that fine art, I brought my newfound skills to the Traveler. Working leisurely and deliberately, I disassembled the Traveler, started over, and managed to have the table ready to go in almost exactly one hour. It wasn't at all difficult, and I feel certain I could now complete the job in about half that time. The Traveler's manual is written in clear, simple English, includes helpful illustrations, and offers encouraging little asides such as this: "Time is better spent listening to records than setting anti-skate on a 10" tonearm." Wise words.

Once I had the Traveler set up, all I had to do was to run a pair of interconnects from the table's RCA outputs to the Parasound Zphono•USB phono preamp's inputs. My first choice of interconnect was Kimber Kable's PBJ, but with the PBJs in



The Traveler's 10"-long, spring-loaded tonearm uses a gimbal bearing.

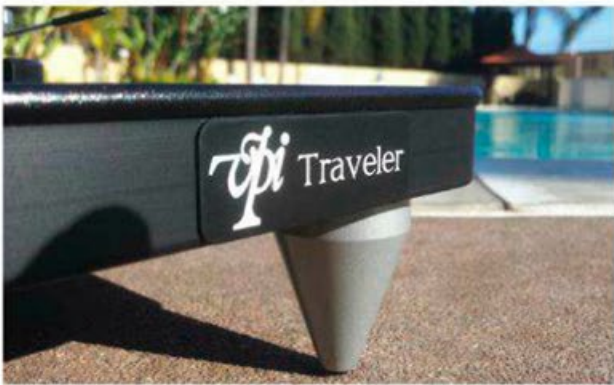
STEPHEN MEDIAS

place and the volume control of my NAD C 316BEE integrated amplifier set at a normal listening level, I heard very strong radio-frequency interference. The unshielded PBJ can be particularly susceptible to RFI, so I tried Kimber's more expensive, more conventionally shielded Hero interconnect. With the Heros in place, the RFI was less prominent but still far too strong to ignore. I tried XLO's pretty, purple UltraPlus interconnect. No dice. Then I tried AudioQuest's Sidewinder. This reduced RFI to a level I could stand, but I still wasn't *happy*. Finally, I ran a length of cheap RadioShack Megacable speaker wire (catalog #278-1273, \$24.99/50') between the Traveler's and the Parasound's ground terminals. Now, with the AudioQuests in place, my system was dead quiet; I did all of my listening with the Sidewinders. Later, for a laugh, I removed the ground cable and tried using RadioShack's stereo patch cables (catalog #42-487, \$6.99/3' pair) to connect VPI to Parasound. Worked like a charm. Go figure.

### Listening to records

I had used Drake's *Take Care* (LP, Cash Money/Universal Republic B0016280-01) to adjust the Traveler's arm height during setup. Since that record was already on the platter, I decided to begin my listening with its title track. Right away, I noticed several interesting things. First, the song's opening piano parts sounded far more delicate, natural, and controlled than I'd ever heard. Rihanna's voice shared that delicacy, had impressive texture, and was large and solidly placed at the center of the soundstage. While the LP's normal surface noise was as audible as ever, that noise was noticeably distinct from the music, as if the Traveler were somehow brushing it aside to the edges of my listening room, leaving more space for pure, clean sound between my speakers. Bass was more forceful than I'd anticipated, but never intruded on the rest of the music. And, at around 3:15, I was *shocked* by the amount of space surrounding Gil Scott-Heron's overdubbed vocals and their accompanying reverb trails.

I listened to *Take Care* from beginning to end, all the while astonished by how something so familiar could sound so new. The finger snaps that keep time throughout "Shot for Me" were crazily present, forceful, distinct, and fun to follow. In "Make Me Proud," the starts and stops of Nicki Minaj's rapid-fire rapping had eye-blinking impact and precision. In "Marvin's Room," the clarity of such low-level details as subtle breaths, pauses, and sighs allowed me to more easily sense the sadness and desperation in Drake's tone. Similarly, the Traveler's outstanding low-end control and awesomely silent



The Traveler's name badge is affixed to the turntable's front panel.

backgrounds helped make sense of the rumbling synthesized bass and warbling electronics in "We'll Be Fine," turning into music what I'd previously heard as mere sound.

I shook my head, reached for my cell phone, and began sending delirious text messages to audiophile friends. And while I was wary of too quickly jumping to conclusions, sharing my thoughts allowed me to focus on an aspect of the Traveler's sound that would persist throughout the review period: It had the confident, relaxed *fluidity* of open-reel tape.

Whenever I've heard reel-to-reel tape, I've been impressed by the format's drama, impact, immediacy, presence, and, most of all, its seamless fluidity. Music simply flows into the listening room undisturbed, with no hint of mechanical edge or artifice. The expense of restoring an old tape deck and building an entirely new music library has always been enough to erase any thoughts of experiencing that same sound in my home. But with the VPI Traveler leading my system, I wouldn't need a open-reel player: I could get a taste of that smooth, easy fluidity right from my LPs.

"Intoxicating, almost magical." Indeed.

#### Against the Regas

Initially, I compared the Traveler with my Rega P3-24, both tables equipped with a Dynavector DV 10X5 moving-coil cartridge (\$450). That comparison didn't last long: The Rega was no match. Compared to the Traveler, my dear old Rega (\$1270 without cartridge; now discontinued) seemed little more than an expensive toy, sounding small, distant, and vague. The Rega conveyed all of Drake's words but not his desperation. And while I'd always appreciated the P3-24's warm bottom end, that warmth now sounded soft and dull when compared to the Traveler's clarity and control. Through the Rega, "Pablo's Heart," from Four Tet's *There Is Love in You* (LP, Domino WIGLP 254), sounded loose, ragged, and frenzied, as if the table had to struggle to keep the highs and lows moving together in time.

Next, I compared the VPI-Dynavector combo with Rega's new RP3, equipped with its standard Elys 2 moving-magnet cartridge (\$1095). The RP3 sounded significantly cleaner, leaner, and more engaging than my P3-24, but still lacked the VPI's clarity, presence, and authority. Replacing the Elys 2 with the Dynavector DV 10X5 enhanced the Rega's scale, immediacy, and impact, but not quite enough to match the VPI.

Through the Traveler, "Woman Left Lonely," from Cat Power's *Jukebox* (LP, Matador OLE-10793), was easily the best reproduction of that recording I've heard: spacious, open, silky smooth, and well controlled, voices and instruments occupying distinct spaces on a wide, deep soundstage. Musical

timing and flow were also excellent. There's a brief passage in this song when the voices, guitars, and keyboards drop out, allowing the drums and bass to gently sway together. If the timing isn't right, the passage can sound a bit confused or disjointed; the drums and bass stretch too far apart and the melody is lost. The VPI, however, kept time perfectly, held strong to the melody, and allowed the song to roll along smoothly and confidently.

For its part, the Rega-Dynavector combo sounded just a bit faster and hurried, less at ease. And while the Rega did a fine job of distinguishing voices and instruments within its shallower, narrower soundstage, the VPI-Dynavector did a better job of infusing those voices and instruments with purpose, meaning, and life. Chan Marshall was brought more clearly into my listening room [*swoon!*], and images in general were rounder, fuller, more three-dimensional. Interestingly, the Rega consistently produced the more aggressive, more precise imaging, with seemingly faster transients, for an overall sound that was snappy and exciting. But the Traveler's more leisurely, deliberate way of making music—its smooth, easy sound and steady, confident pace—kept me listening longer, wanting and *needing* to listen to LP after LP after LP.

#### Whatever makes you happy

Too often we're afraid of doing what makes us happiest, afraid of even spending the time to figure out what would make us happy. And that's a shame. We fail to realize that, by making *ourselves* happy, we make those closest to us happy. Love can be a selfish thing.

From time to time, I'm drawn into boring conversations about the relative sonic merits of CDs and LPs. To me, it's never been about sound. I prefer LPs because they make me happy. A part of me wishes I had accepted Sheila Weisfeld's offer, back in 2008, to listen to a VPI turntable, but another part of me is glad I waited until now. I can't imagine a happier way of listening to LPs than with the VPI Traveler. At \$1299, the Traveler isn't merely reasonably priced—it's a remarkable bargain, built to last a lifetime. And it's made with love, right here in the US.

At least 10% of Traveler profits will go to Girl Scouts of the USA, and to the Lustgarten Foundation for research into a cure for pancreatic cancer.

Happiness breeds happiness. Loss has again inspired beauty. ■

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

**Analog Sources** Rega Research P3-24 & RP3 turntables with RB301 and RB303 tonearms, respectively; Dynavector DV 10X5, Rega Research Elys 2 phono cartridges.

**Preamplification** Parasound Zphono+USB phono preamplifier.

**Integrated amplifier** NAD C 316BEE.

**Loudspeakers** PSB Alpha B1, DeVore Fidelity Gibbon 3.

**Cables** Interconnect: AudioQuest Sidewinder, Kimber Kable Hero & PBJ, RadioShack, XLO UltraPlus. Speaker: AudioQuest Rocket 33, Kimber Kable 8VS, RadioShack Megacable (used as ground wire).

**Accessories** Furutech e-TP60 power distributor; Polycrystal equipment rack; Audio Additives, Shure SFG-2 stylus-force gauges; Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab Geo-Disc cartridge-alignment tool; Hunt EDA record-cleaning brush; VPI HW-16.5 record-cleaning machine; a little flashlight, a little rum, a lot of ice cream.—Stephen Mejias