

Mindfulness and Playing an LP

Shôn Ellerton, August 31, 2022

4,000 words to describe the simple action of playing an LP?



I'm yearning to listen to a little music from one of my hundreds of vinyl LPs. But why take the effort to put on an LP when I already have a vast collection of high-resolution electronic files which, arguably, probably sound better anyway? The answer? Because, on this occasion, I want to connect mindfulness in its most granular and atomic form with the ritual of putting on a record. In short, I want to practice the art of describing as many details and emotions as possible that spring to mind when doing something regular or trivial.

First, what record to select? What genre of music should I go for this evening? A bit of 80s classic rock or some hardcore electronica from the early 2000s? I know what springs to mind! Kraftwerk's double-LP [*Tour de France Soundtracks*](#), their last complete piece of work hailing from 2003, although the Tour De France single originates from 1983, a fact I didn't know until writing this very article. I seem to remember that I was given this record as a present from my sister when I came to visit her in Austin during Christmas 2003. I remember this album being so velvety and deep with a low punching bass. Sublime.

The most important thing prior to listening is to set up my listening space. This is when I get into obsessive compulsion syndrome by making *absolutely* certain that my chair is situated in an apex of an equilateral triangle, the other two being the loudspeakers. They're not terribly fussy these speakers, being Shahinian Obelisks, a speaker that looks rather like a wooden pyramid on castors, but they

can sure throw one hell of a punch with astonishing clarity and imagery when driven by my beefy Dynavector amps. It's just too awesome for words.

Now I've got to test the seating position. Are the speakers angled in *exactly* to face me? Not sure about that one on the left, so I better get up and rotate just a touch so that when I sit down in the chair, I have both speakers precisely firing my way so I can't see the sides of the speakers. This may be an iterative process and repeated several times.

All good. *Except* I'm not one-hundred percent certain that the cables are nice and tight under the loudspeaker. Get up again and inspect the cables. Make sure the cable is tightened properly and the cable is snaking nicely without any tangles. Could compromise the sound you know! And now that the speakers have moved, I must do the whole alignment exercise again. What a nuisance!

The sun is setting, so I want to close the blinds and get some decent background lighting going. Is it 'wine time'? Yes, it is! What do we have? Shiraz, Cab Sav, Merlot? Let's live it large and go for a drop of that peaty whisky I've been keeping.

I want clean sound, so let's ensure there are no washing machines or driers going. Close unnecessary doors so that the sound doesn't 'escape'. I must change that electric fireplace grill as well. It rattles during the low notes, so in the interim period, I'll have to take the grill off. Remember to put it back on afterwards!

Go to the pantry and decant a decent-sized shot of Laphroaig into a crystal tumbler and set it on the side table next to the chair I will be sitting in. Pop over to the turntable, a Rega Planar 25 fitted with an Audio Technica OC9 cartridge, one of the best in its class. With both hands, gently raise the clear moulded thick acrylic cover and set it gently aside against the wall. There, underneath, lies a chunky perfectly round and heavy glass platter with a black felt cover, cut to the same shape as the platter. To re-assure myself that this is a work of quality engineering, I remove the felt cover and lift the glass platter off the centre spindle enjoying the weighty opulence it majestically owns. The glass is beautifully bevelled not unlike one of those little Polo mints. There is nothing as precise or more divine as the circular shape of the Polo mint I assure you. Much like the great pyramids of Giza, the inner wall of a Polo mint is geometry and perfection incarnate.

After gently settling the platter and felt mat in their rightful places over the spindle, I make my way to the large Ikea Expamet multi-shelving unit with five rows and five columns containing hundreds of vinyl records, all alphabetised by artist, followed by compilation and classical albums. I admire the strength and durability of this nearly-twenty-year-old piece of furniture from Ikea which I got on sale for a hundred quid. It's been assembled and disassembled more than twelve times in its illustrious lifetime in the UK and Australia. Ikea's Expamet successor, the Kallax, is a distinctively more lightweight piece of kit using lower-quality materials. The progress of cost cutting I suppose.

Likewise, I've had to pack up and then unpack hundreds of LPs with each new home found for the unit. I've learned to pack them in such a way to avoid the tedious task of sorting them out alphabetically. Which is no mean feat by the way. This involves piling records face down on an open bit of floor stacked according to a portion of the alphabet. Most of having an extensive music collection will, no doubt, learn that the Ds, Ms and the Ss of the alphabet may have to be subdivided into several stacks! I will say here that alphabetising one's LP collection is not an act of OCD, but rather one of necessity. I challenge those to find a record in a large unalphabetised collection.

Every one of my LPs are lovingly protected by a meaty 400g polyurethane protector. Not one of those flimsy plastic covers which squash into destruction when the record is being inserted back into the shelving units. These covers *exude* quality and purpose of function. The records ease back into their place beautifully. My sister, who lives in the United States, often showed her frustration that the Americans simply do not know about the heavier-gauge ones extensively used in the UK. I will also add that during the winter season of '97 in Ashford, Kent, where I used to live, the pipes froze releasing a flood of water whilst I was away on holiday. On my return, I was delighted to find that those sleeves protected *every* record. What is it with the British and their odd system of header tanks in loft spaces?

Anyone possessing hundreds of vinyl records will appreciate the vast weight of piled LPs, especially with one of those heavy-gauge polyurethane sleeves. I've nearly put out my back on several occasions whilst carrying crates of LPs from place to place, an experience many these days will never encounter. Possibly a good thing! We won't digress into the art of carrying CDs without damaging jewel covers along with the brittle rose and petals supporting the core of the CD which invariably perish at some point or another rendering the CD loose and

prone to scratching by sliding within its cover. But what weight those LPs possess. Each one of the 25 'cells' in my Ikea unit can accommodate around 80 LPs or so when not too tightly packed. The satisfaction of grabbing around twenty to thirty LPs at a time and easing them into their rightful place knowing that that poor item of furniture (and floor) is going to have to withstand some real tonnage. Clever Swedes, low-cost materials, and geometry can go a very long way!

Back to my beautifully organised collection of LPs, I then need to hunt down that Kraftwerk LP. I have a rough idea where the Ks are and then I recognise some of the spines of my Led Zeppelin collection, yes, that must be *The Houses of the Holy!* I run my fingers over the top edges of the rigid polyurethane sleeves. They're surprisingly sharp to the touch. I find Kraftwerk, one of my all-time electronica favourite artists first being introduced to me by a somewhat delinquent friend of a friend during my teenage years who played that track, *Numbers*, a track so many times sampled by other artists in later years. Subsequently, Kraftwerk's *Computer World* was my second album I purchased after Foreigner's *4* with its testosterone-driven rock classic, *Urgent*, a track played exceptionally loudly whilst being driven by my friend's older brother on the streets of Colorado Springs, always on the lookout for new girlfriends.

I find the Kraftwerk LP I'm looking for which is lying next to *Electric Café*, distinguished by its dark blue cover with computer-drawn heads using vector art. There it is. *Tour de France Soundtracks*. A heavy double-LP on 180g excellent quality vinyl. I do find the title of the album a little strange. What's with the 'soundtracks' bit? Pulling it out from the shelf, one can feel the weightiness of it, as if what you purchased is what it's worth in weight or more. I'm holding the album in my hands, but I want to pull the LP out of its polyurethane protective sleeve. There's no reason to do so as I could just pull the inner sleeve out; however, I want to admire the record in its near mint condition, which it, most assuredly is. I tilt the record and gently pull the whole thing out of the polyurethane sleeve. The surface of the record cover is so clean and has a sort of satin finish so when pulling it out, it has that glorious sensation when the record slightly 'sticks' to the cover but slides out leaving a weak vacuum sensation.

And there it is. The record in full exposed view, and the polyurethane cover resting near the acrylic lid of the turntable. The colours are red, white, and blue to represent France and its famous cycling event. The artwork is in the hallmark

style of Kraftwerk. Text in a bold clear font, TOUR DE FRANCE SOUNDTRACKS, with a black-and-white sketch of four cyclists in motion fitted out with lycra and helmets, I suppose representing the four members of the band, who I doubt have any real-life participation in cycling. KRAFTWERK is spelled out in its own horizontal band at the top in a very clean sans serif font spaced apart as much as possible, like the cosmetics brand, Maybelline. It speaks boldness, of factories, industry, Bauhaus and Art Deco. Almost brutalist in nature. Very Teutonic and German.

As this has been going on, I've been sitting on the wooden floor cross-legged Indian style, as if I had just transported myself straight from the 70s. Near to me, at eye-height is the side table propping up my whisky glittering gold in a crystal tumbler waiting for the master to return. I rotate the satisfying heavy LP and admire the perfect squareness of it. I run my eye down its horizontal plane against the light of the lamp near the turntable. It is perfectly flat with neither a crease, crown, nor dimple in sight. Tilting the record to the left supporting the spine of the record in my left hand, I use my two fingers to widen the opening thus revealing two inner sleeves containing the records. I pull one out. The inner sleeve is beautiful in its own way. It is thick and glossy and contains simple pop-art type artwork on one side with red arrows and pictorial clipart overview images of cyclists (four of them), and on the other side is a black and white photo of four cyclists on the road. I have my reservations on the use of hard inner sleeves, but on a closer examination, I run my finger inside the sleeve and note that it is soft and silky so as not to scratch the record. Just at this moment, I am thinking of Monty Python and its sketch about the Tobacconists shop and the Hungarian phrasebook. *'I will not buy this record. It is scratched!'*, says John Cleese to Terry Jones in a thick Hungarian accent.

As with the main record cover, I tilt the bottom of the inner sleeve up a bit on to my left palm and, gravity assisting, the inky black arc of the LP tantalisingly emerges from its hiding place into my right hand at a somewhat lower position. Taking great care not to touch the sacred black surface of the vinyl, I rest the edge of the disc on the fatty flesh just below my right thumb, while my third and fourth fingers are 'safely' on the cover of the inner sleeve near the core of the record. Continuing the sliding motion to reveal more of the arc slowly feeding the inner cover ensuring that the third and fourth fingers rest in the centre of the record, where the label is.

I carefully stash the inner sleeve next to the record cover. At this point, I transfer all my fingers to the outer rim of the record and rotate the label in the middle so that I can read it. The label in the middle is, again, red, white, and blue, with a picture of an Eiffel Tower on it emitting radio waves. It is quite an elegant design with the names of the tracks on each side in stark thin sans serif capital letters. There's not a scratch and hardly a speck of dust visible on the stygian deeply black surface of the vinyl. I can see the light reflecting deep within revealing three distinct tracks. I can see the loud and quiet passages by looking at the amount of glossiness there is. The shiny glossy bits are the quiet passages while the more matt areas are the louder bits. Unlike a CD or an electronic file, one can visualise the dynamics almost just by looking at the surface of the vinyl. Then I remembered why the glossy bits are quiet. It's quite simple to understand. When the master acetate record is being cut, the cutting needle oscillates more in amplitude to achieve a greater volume of sound while the quiet bits are not nearly so wavy. Many records use a special technique called RIAA Equalisation to gain extra space on the side of a record by reducing the gaps between the grooves during the quiet passages. Squeezing too much on one side of a record is bad news and this is evident by the thin and tinny sound quality often resulting from it. Many compilation albums of yesteryear suffered badly from this practice. Technically, there is only one groove on each side of the record as it's basically one very long spiral.

Another interesting aspect of any record is what's written on the centre lead-out section where the stylus just goes round and round until someone lifts it off. This is called the run-out matrix number and is either stamped with a stencil or handwritten into the vinyl. I need a magnifying glass to distinguish the numbers, but it is useful because it identifies precisely what pressing the record is and who made it. I can look up in [discogs.com](https://www.discogs.com) and identify exactly which record I've got, and it will tell me how much it could be worth in the market, should I wish to sell it. At this point, I noticed that I pulled out the second piece of vinyl, so I put it back and pull out the first one. Side A is just one long track, the feature piece, covering the entirety of one side of the record.

Now the fun begins when I shuffle over to the turntable poised with the record. One thing I forgot to mention is that I had already switched on the turntable which is done by pressing a rocker switch on the plinth of the turntable. When in use, the turntable is not meant to be switched on and off as this would place undue stress on the little rubber belt which spins the heavy glass platter. Most

audiophile turntables are belt-driven; however, there are some quite good quality direct-drive turntables which can spin up almost instantly, much like some of the iconic Pioneer turntables so popular with DJs.

I position the record centrally over the rotating spindle and let it gently drop onto the felt mat. Now if I was setting up my turntable for the first time, I would get my trusty little Mantra Acoustics turntable level and plonk it onto the centre spindle. This is a little polished steel cylinder with a hole for the spindle and a bubble on top to ascertain if the plinth is level. The low table for the turntable has, in turn, four screwable spikes on the leg which can be adjusted for any difference in level. It's worth mentioning that most audiophile equipment is isolated as much from possible from the ground by the use of spikes to minimise contact; however, my loudspeakers are peculiar in that they can be pushed around on castors.

The record is now rotating nicely on the turntable and, despite not seeing any dust, I pull out my carbon fibre brush and press lightly on the turning vinyl to pick up any 'invisible' dust. I admire the tonearm (the RB600), the tapering arm which supports the cartridge, which in turn, houses the stylus that makes contact with the moving vinyl. It is simple in shape but meaty and elegant. A matt silver tapering one-piece tube with a compact and extremely satisfying weighty tungsten counterweight now replaced with larger stainless-steel ones on cheaper versions. When removing the counterweight, one appreciates just how heavy tungsten is, notwithstanding its also extremely high melting point. For safety, the tonearm is clipped into place onto its tonearm rest, so I release that. The cartridge is, itself, a supreme piece of beauty. An Audio Technica OC9 moving coil cartridge. A shiny black and gold chunky block of metal armed with a diamond stylus. Looking through a magnifying glass, I can see the pleasantly clean tip of the stylus, which hasn't had a great amount of use judging by the condition of it. Sadly, the whole cartridge must be replaced when the stylus wears away which it will after a few thousand plays. Noteworthy of attention is that those cheap and horrible turntables with nuclear-proof cartridges may have styluses that last forever, but they are also damaging your records at the same time. Think of those multi-stack drop-down automatic turntables so prevalent back in the 70s. I had one as a kid and I knew right away that my records were being mauled.

One might be curious to know what the difference between a moving magnet (MM) and a moving coil (MC) cartridge is. Here's some technical knowledge

you can impress your friends with. A moving magnet cartridge generates electrical current with the stem of the stylus attached to a magnet which moves in the field of a static coil whereas the moving coil cartridge does so with a coil attached to the stem of the stylus in the field of a large magnet surrounding it. Generally, moving coil cartridges are often used in high-end audio design due to its generally better sound quality; however, it comes at a cost on three accounts. First, they require much more step-up voltage, nearly ten times as much, than a MM cartridge, which means a far more expensive phono pre-amplifier. Second, because of its inherently low voltage, it is more prone to electrical interference and earthing issues, and third, the stylus cannot be removed from the cartridge and exchanged, like your typical DJ-style Stanton cartridge. Exceptions do apply as with Rega's great collection of MM cartridges, the styluses of which cannot be simply removed and exchanged. And there you have it. In toto, moving coil cartridges tend to be a much more expensive outlay but they do, in general, sound superior.

Ensuring that the amplifier input selection is correct and the volume not too loud, I now perform the *second* trickiest bit of this whole performance. Kneeling on the floor, I very carefully take the second finger (my index finger) and gently lift the tonearm off its rest and very carefully lower it down on to the outermost leading track. Vinyl enthusiasts know too well of the little 'wall' on the outside rim in which the stylus drops into place into the groove making that all-too-familiar 'perr-lunk' sound. I observe how the stylus is travelling into the groove with smoothness and grace. A couple of faint clicks and pops; nothing offensive or untoward, but gentle, to remind oneself that an LP is being played. As a child, I used to just sit there watching the progress of the stylus as it made its way towards the centre of the disc. It was mesmerising watching the needle track through the visibly loud and quiet bits just by looking at the surface of the vinyl. For many these days, it is an enjoyment lost; although, I have indoctrinated my seven-year-old son into LPs.

Just a side note on the journey of listening to an LP. One is encouraged to listen to the whole LP, or at least, one side of it in its entirety. With electronic media, it is too easy to cut to another piece of music whereas with an LP, one can savour the feel and atmosphere of the whole work. Pink Floyd, for example, would have failed in the world of electronic media because most of its music really depends on the listener enjoying the LP in its entirety. Prog rock of the 70s could not have possibly survived either. Imagine Yes's [*Close To The Edge*](#)

being produced today. Which leads me on to another thing. The artwork of LPs. The surprises one might find inside. For example, I got myself a secondhand copy of Gary Numan's *Telekon* back in the early 90s and was surprised to find a full-size poster of Gary Numan fitted with his garish red and black pop-arty tight-fitting space-age uniform. Looking back at it, those early 80s fashion designs in the pop world all seemed just a little camp.

I sit back in my chair poised with my Dynavector L300 pre-amplifier remote control, which in turn harnesses the power of a Dynavector HX1.2 power amp, a big heat-sinked beast that can drive any set of speakers into submission with utter control. Purists may dispense with the idea of having remote controls built in with their pre-amplifiers on the basis that any additional circuitry might degrade the sound. Sorry. I can't live without my volume and input selectors being remote-controlled! I crank up the volume, and the first waves of soft electro beat flood into the room. The sound doesn't seem to come from the loudspeakers but coming from centre stage. The first track is a long track and takes up the whole side of the first record, about twenty minutes or so. I sip my whisky in ecstasy.

At the end of the side, it's time to get up out of my lazy chair and flip the record over. Now, earlier, I did mention the *second* trickiest thing to do with playing records. Naturally, the trickiest of all is to accurately lift up the stylus midway through the record or at the end. Unfortunately, the little lever which lowers the stylus to the surface is not adjusted properly and falls short of lifting high enough off the surface. This means, that I, very carefully, have to steady myself and lift the stylus vertically and swiftly without making any scratching noises and return the tonearm to its resting position. I then flip over the record and repeat the process.

At the end of my listening session, it's time to pack up. I lower the volume. I return the record to its protective inner sleeve which is then inserted back into the record cover. I switch off the turntable and carefully place the top acrylic lid back into place. Finally, I stash the record where it belongs in the shelf. Oh yes, put that protective grill back on the electric fireplace!