



Off the Record

A few weeks ago I wrote about audio equipment in one of these stories, how Sadako was clearing out and giving away some speakers and other audio components. As part of that general cleanup, she also disposed of a number of old LP records. She didn't just throw them away, as she knows that to some people, such items are not considered 'garbage' at all. And indeed, she had no trouble finding somebody who would come and pick them up ... after all - 'one man's junk is another man's treasure'.

I was over there when the young man came to pick up the records, along with one of the large turntables she was discarding, and was a bit curious about why he was interested in these items. When I asked, he explained that he felt the sound of LP records was far superior to modern compact discs. It was interesting to hear this, because my own view is pretty much just the other way around. I can clearly remember my reaction when I first heard a CD - on a demonstration unit in Akihabara in the early 1980's; I could not believe how clear the sound was. Surely, this was the ultimate in fidelity; nothing could be better than this!

But as the two of us talked, I realized that there was a major difference in our experiences with audio systems; when I was a little boy, we had 78's at home, then our family got a 'stereo' system which played LP records. Later on I had a cassette player, and then finally - after moving to Japan in the mid-80's, I bought my first CD player. So over a time span of more than 40 years, my experience with audio equipment has been one of ever-increasing quality and fidelity. But this young man had no such experience - his first audio system had been a CD player!

So for him - when he later had a chance to hear high-quality LP records played on good equipment, it was not a 'step backwards', but merely an exposure to a different kind of sound. He feels that the older analog equipment produces a 'warmer' more 'real' sound, and that modern digital equipment is too 'clean', and produces a sound that is basically too 'empty'.

Now of course, all this is personal preference - there is no final answer as to which of the two types is 'better', but as the two of us sat and chatted about these things, I became aware of an interesting analogy to my own printmaking work.

Each time I finish making a new woodblock print, I prepare a photograph of it, and upload this to my website, so that people around the world can enjoy seeing my work. That image - a digital reproduction of an analog product - is very clean, and does indeed provide a basically clear image of the original print, but is - of course - completely 'empty' when compared with the real object, which has wonderful depth and texture.

It is because of this difference, that I have no hesitation about putting my work freely up on the internet. Anybody can download it; anybody can copy it; anybody can print it out on their own desktop printer. This doesn't bother me at all, because what they are copying is a mere shell of the original print. If somebody wants to see the real beauty of these objects, it's no good looking at the digital reproduction - they have to come to me for the real thing - the analog original.

Talking about this reminds me that down in my own storage room in the basement here, there is ... yes, you guessed it ... a very nice turntable, and a number of boxes of LP records ... Maybe this evening before I start printing work, I'll plug it in and listen to a few of them. Will it really seem like a step backwards?

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