

Pressing Issue: Surface Noise

By Carl Bernstein

If you are a habitual buyer of long-playing records, the scenario is, no doubt, all too familiar: After cutting your finger in an attempt to slit an album's plastic membrane, you remove the new disc, put it on the turntable, sit back and prepare to be warmed by the glow of music, be it Donizetti or Derek and the Dominoes. And . . .

Instead of Lucia, the thing sounds like Rice Krispies, snap, crackle, pop.

By the end of the overture, you have already twice risen in unsuccessful attempts to rid the disc of what seems like enough static electricity to turn a good-sized generator. Then . . .

Joan Sutherland, who is not known for stuttering, keeps repeating herself inanely as the needle falls into a plastic gorge that, to a stylus, must look like the Grand Canyon.

Inside the album sleeve is a little sticker attesting that No. 1357, who must be blind and deaf and the consumer of at least four martinis for lunch, has inspected this package.

What I am suggesting is that the quality of American record pressings—not to speak of engineering—is often atrocious. Things have gotten so bad that when I buy a record that makes it through the first side without some sort of extraneous belch, I regard it as near-miraculous.

Indeed, many American records come from the pressing plant covered with so much schmutzik, that it takes the cosmetological skills of an embalmer to make them playable.

There is, however, sometimes an alternative—if you are willing to pay a bit more money, needless to say.

Buy European records, and European pressings of American records (forget the balance of payments; those truffles on the White House menu don't come from Ohio).

European records, I have learned through long experience, come from the factory not only clean, but make it across the ocean in better shape than the stuff that's stamped off the presses in Camden, N.J., like so many

hot dogs. And not only are European records usually free of dust, dirt, grime, thumbprints and potholes (they are protected by plastic inner-sleeves, instead of the usual American paper), but—most of the time—their engineering is superior to American pressings.

I first learned of the better quality of European record pressings when, years ago, I bought the British version of the Beatles' "Rubber Soul." I bought it because the U.K. version contained 14 songs, as opposed to the 12 on Capitol's American release (another advantage of many European records, at least in rock). I have just finished listening to 20 works released in "Soul," I discovered that both American and European editions—the same extra cuts: In "I'm Looking Through You," I listened to performances by the same artists; only the labels and quality of the sound are different. I couldn't even hear the music ranged from the same song on the Capitol disc. All the songs on the Barenboim/Klemperer disc were crisp and clear, the guitars more energetic, the vocals clearer, than on the American release. And there was no background noise in the European releases. British version, whereas the Capitol release sounded as if it were recorded in a gravel quarry somewhere.

The situation since then has, if anything, gotten worse. Almost all of the American pressings required some kind of treatment (either a dust bug or a Preener) to rid them of static charges, whereas the European editions requiring it were very few. Two of the 10 American records were damaged with deep scratches that produced clicking sounds as the record revolved. None of the European records was similarly marred. Significantly, even European releases of works observed in the United States are much stricter than the American pressing factories. According to audio engineers, the general superiority of European records for instance, also related to the sheer volume of records pressed in the United States. These records are usually most notable as the ing fewer discs of each release, the engineers say, the record—unfortunately,



The new Dynaflex record, a disc that even

when bent, it returns to its original flatness. A work and thus loud and doubly bothersome. The result is a squashed, blurred sound in which instruments seem squeezed together and cannot be individually recognized. And a buzzy character.

The Barenboim/Klemperer set (on Angel in the States, EMI in Europe) is particularly instructive. Not only does the Angel version have a hissy background throughout that is not found on the EMI release, but the cadenzas on Angel (especially in the Emperor) sometimes sound as if Barenboim is seated at a saw, not a piano.

Apparently, a few American companies are beginning to get the message. Releases from Elektra, long technically superior to most American labels, are now as finely engineered and pressed as perhaps any European label. Vanguard's quality is consistently high. Some American London's operas sound as good as their English Decca counterparts, though the Stones are still infinitely more exciting on the latter.

And RCA, whose rock releases often sound like someone is sandpapering behind the Jefferson Airplane, has begun using a new, thinner disc that the company claims reduces background and surface noise. (I have only heard a few of these new Dynaflex discs and am still reserving final judgment, though they seem initially to offer a slight improvement.

Meanwhile, many record stores are increasing their stock of imports, offering not only better sound but, often, catalog entries that are not usually available in the States. Try them.