

VARIOUS ARTISTS

True Analogue: The Best Of Groove Note

Groove Note GRV 1300-45-1S 2x45rpm AAA One-Step LPs

Subtitled "25th Anniversary 1997-2022", this double LP might come as a surprise to many of you for a rather simple – no, make that obvious – reason: Groove Note Records is the most low-key of audiophile labels. Unlike Mobile Fidelity, Acoustic Sounds/Analogue Productions, Reference, *et al*, Groove Note almost wilfully seems to shy away from publicity. And yet ... the fact that this set celebrates a quarter-century of vinyl and SACD production tells you it is no *arriviste* label.

In an historical context, Groove Note arrived at the tail-end of what might be dubbed the First Age of the Audiophile Album. By the time it was launched, all but Mobile Fidelity, Analogue Productions and one or two others had pretty much disappeared. Of the great labels which comprised the audiophile sector from the 1970s, such as Crystal Clear, M&K, Nautilus, Telarc, Sheffield Lab, *et al*, the majority had either succumbed to the destruction of CD, wound down, failed to persevere with vinyl, or in some cases, simply vanished altogether.

By this time, too, the major labels which had dabbled in audiophile pressings, e.g, A&M, JVC Japan, etc, had ceased production of their superior pressings. There is an irony which is not lost on this vinyl collector: one of 2023's bombshells was the launch of Rhino's High Fidelity range of audiophile vinyl pressings, while Universal's Mastered At Abbey Road half-speed-mastered LPs have been around for at least a decade. The majors, then are reaping what the audiophiles sowed.

Groove Note Records itself is the direct descendant of one of the very best of the audiophile labels, Classic Records. This, like the Chesky Brothers' label, might be deemed appropriately as "Audiophile Label 2.0", following the originators such as Sheffield Lab by a decade or so. Founder Ying Tan was one of Classic's co-founders, the other being Michael Hobson, the pair setting up the company in 1994. (Classic was acquired by Acoustic Sounds a few years ago.) After leaving Classic, Ying Tan

established Groove Note, the main difference being that Classic was a reissue label, with titles from the Who, Led Zeppelin, Neil Young and other giants, while Groove Note generates new releases on SACD and vinyl.

True Analogue: The Best of Groove Note Records (25th Anniversary Edition) shows that the label specialises in jazz, blues, and smooth vocals. While this might sound like a recipe for disaster, given that so many releases from the First Age of the Audiophile Album were examples of great-sound-a-shame-about-the-music, Groove Note's output is of such a high standard that even non-audiophiles might find much to admire. This celebratory anthology is no mere conceit.

Not to be confused with the label's True Audiophile and Best Of series on SACD, this double LP has a fresh track listing with cuts found on the SACDs but also selections from recent releases by Vanessa Fernandez and Jacintha, who dominate the album. The other artists represented are the late blues guitarist Roy Gaines, saxophonist Bennie Wallace and jazz guitarist Anthony Wilson, with one track apiece.

Before we get to the content, we must deal with the label's *raison d'être*, whether we or Ying Tan like it or not: sound quality. Let's be blunt, here. If the major record labels truly gave a damn about absolute sonic merit, the audiophile labels would not exist. Rhino Records clearly recognises this, and I must admit that the high-end release of the Cars' eponymous debut is spectacular. The question begged is why they haven't always made records to those standards, and that's half the reason for buying a Groove Note title. The other half is, of course, the carefully-curated music, which is a far cry from the often-stilted audiophile fare of yore.

This wonderful commemorative anthology contains 12 tracks on two 45rpm LPs, with three songs per side. Along with Mobile Fidelity, Acoustic Sounds/Analogue Productions and Impex, the company has opted for the One Step process for this release, its heavyweight, 180g slabs pressed by RTI. The hype sticker states that the album is "AAA", which is code for all-analogue: all 12 tracks, both those from the Groove Note archives and the more recent ones, are cut from the original 30ips

analogue master tapes by Bernie Grundman.

Grundman assembled all of the 12 individual tracks from the different masters before cutting, and crucially no intermediate production dub was used for the master of this double LP with its fresh track selections. A production dub is the normal procedure when assembling a compilation of tracks from assorted sessions, albums, eras or even from different record labels, and it explains why tracks heard on compilations often do not sound as good as they do on the original albums or singles. Moreover, Grundman cut the albums using a recently-installed and upgraded diamond cutting tool. This promises a lower noise floor, and the proof was in the listening: it's one of the quietest pressings I have ever heard.

Then there's the music. For the most part, aside from the pure blues of Roy Gaines' superb "Stormy Monday Blues", this is a jazz set, with the vocal tracks, too, more jazz than pop. While the veteran enthusiasts among you might be wondering if that isn't a description of the audiophile LPs of the past, these are a cut above, and I have to admit to finding the most unlikely of reinterpretations as charming. Given that 55 years ago José Feliciano successfully turned the Doors' "Light My Fire" into a ballad that bore no resemblance whatsoever to the original, Jacintha's sublime version is no less valid.

This album's improbable covers alone are enough to pique one's curiosity. What, you will wonder, does Vanessa Fernandez do with Led Zeppelin's "When the Levee Breaks" and "Whole Lotta Love"? Is there any reason for Jacintha to reinterpret "The Look of Love", which had been rendered perfect by Dusty Springfield, or the equally-flawless "Fire & Rain, which made James Taylor a singer-songwriter deity? Let's just say that I am not being unnecessarily generous when I propose that these cover versions are worth hearing, however flawless the originals.

There is but one complaint to make about *True Analogue: The Best of Groove Note Records (25th Anniversary Edition)*, but it is in keeping with the personality of Ying Tan, who I think fancies himself a man of mystery. There is absolutely no excuse

whatsoever for a set as lavish as this, and which clearly has a purpose in getting you to explore the rest of the Groove Note catalogue, in providing NOT ONE F*****G WORD in the way of liner notes. Nada. Rien. Niente. Except for the track listings with composer credits, and images of the album covers from which the tracks were chosen, there is nothing about the recording technology, the monitoring hardware, the LP dates, or anything else which info-hungry enthusiasts crave to near-OCD levels. Even visiting www.groovenote.com takes you to an effing Facebook page.

That, however, should not discourage you from acquiring this magnificent showcase for your sound system. What it will not do, and where it magnificently fails to emulate in so many of those audiophile LPs from a lifetime ago, is put you to sleep.

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