



Pro-Ject

Debut III USB turntable

For purist audiophiles, converting precious analog records into a digital format has about as much appeal as drinking a fine Cabernet on the rocks. Yet many of us with large collections of vinyl LPs want to be able to appreciate these treasures even when we're away from our fancy rigs. Once a record has been saved as a digital file, you can burn it onto a CD, transfer it to an iPod, or stream it to different parts of the house over a home network. The trick has always been in making that move from analog to digital without having to jump through too many hoops.

Traditionally, the most common method for doing this has been to copy the LP to CD using a standalone CD recorder, and then rip it to a computer's hard disk using its CD drive. I've done this myself for many years with excellent results, although it *is* time-consuming and cumbersome. What if you could remove that intermediary step? There are a few turntables on the market with a USB output to connect directly to a computer, but the performance of most of these is pretty iffy.

Not surprisingly, they're aimed at listeners who aren't going to nitpick too much about the sound quality of the transfer.

Regular **S&V** readers may recall that last year I checked out the standard version of Pro-Ject's Debut III turntable (July/August 2007, available on our Web site), which I described as "a tremendous bargain" that gets "all of the basics right." The Debut III USB is essentially the same model, but with an analog phono stage and a digital-to-analog converter attached that will run you an additional \$150.

SETUP

Just in case you missed that earlier review, the Debut III is a simple but well-engineered manual two-speed turntable that comes with an Ortofon OM 5 E cartridge already installed. This means that anyone can get the turntable up and running in just a few minutes with a minimum of fuss. All you need to do is remove the two screws that hold the motor in place for shipping, install the belt and platter, and then attach and adjust the counterweight and anti-skating weight, and you're ready

to go. A small switch under the front left corner turns the motor on, and you can change the speed from 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ to 45 rpm by moving the belt to a larger step on the motor pulley.

In the 'table's USB configuration, a box holding the phono stage and the digital converter is slung under the back of the plinth, and it switches on and off with the motor. The signal from the tonearm is fed directly into this box, which includes line-level analog and USB digital outputs. The analog signal can be connected to any component with an appropriate input by using the included cable, and Pro-Ject throws in an RCA-to-3.5mm minijack adapter so you can connect it to devices like table radios or computer speakers with iPod-friendly minijack inputs.

The Debut III doesn't come with recording software, but Pro-Ject recommends Audacity, a free cross-platform audio editor (audacity.sourceforge.net). While Audacity is easy to download and use, interactive tech support is pretty much nonexistent with freeware like this. But a good resource is audacityteam.org, which features an Audacity users' forum, Wiki, and plug-ins.

Once you have the Audacity software loaded, simply connect the turntable to

The Short Form

Snapshot

The Debut III USB provides an excellent (if time-consuming) solution for moving your precious vinyl treasures into the digital domain

Plus

- ⚡ Easy to set up and get running
- ⚡ Excellent transfer quality
- ⚡ Recommended Audacity recording software works well

Minus

- ⚡ Unlike with CDs, analog transfers happen in real time
- ⚡ Editing and track naming have to be done manually

Price \$449

PHOTOS BY TONY CORROZZA



any available USB port on your computer, and the correct driver will install automatically. I used my laptop running Windows XP Pro, but Pro-Ject says the Debut III USB will also work fine using Mac OS X or Linux. With Audacity up and running, you'll need to make a few adjustments from the default settings to set it up for a 2-channel input, but once configured, the software is pretty easy to navigate. The default setting records at CD quality (44.1-kHz sampling rate with 16-bit resolution), but this setting is widely adjustable.

For people who are used to ripping digital music files from a CD in a few seconds, it will probably feel incredibly unwieldy and tedious to copy files in the analog domain. Since this process happens in real time, the only way to "rip" an entire album to your hard drive using the Debut III USB is to play it at actual speed all the way through. And even then, your work isn't done. When you rip a CD to your computer, an online database like Gracenote can recognize your digital files and tag them with song title, artist, and other information commonly known as metadata. But a vinyl LP doesn't allow for automatic metadata tagging. To make the digital copies useful, you'll need to go through and split the file at the song breaks, manually type in the songs' information, and insert cover art that you locate somewhere online. Of course, if your plan is to simply burn a CD, you can probably get away with just inserting the song breaks. Still, between the transfer, editing, and manual tagging, you should probably allow for about 1 to 1½ hours per record.

Other features of Audacity include an adjustable click remover, which seems to work pretty well (although there's always a danger of overdoing it with this type of tool). More interesting is the equalizer, which has several presets, as well as manually adjustable EQ settings for different types of 78-rpm discs. A standard

Debut III USB can't play 78s, but a pulley adapter and an electronic speed-adjustment box are available as options. And the good news here is that a 2.5mm-wide-groove plug-in stylus is also available for the Ortofon OM 5 E cartridge.

PERFORMANCE

The sound quality of my digital transfers depended primarily on the condition of the source records. The CDs I made sounded excellent played over my car stereo or through computer speakers, although when compared directly to the LPs over my reference system, they lost a little of their immediacy and dimensionality. Still, in many ways the copies carried a good measure of the analog magic that audiophiles crave. Files transferred to my iPod as high-bit-rate MP3s also sounded very good, although the CAT-scan-like clarity of my Ultimate Ears Custom UE 10 Pro in-ear monitors revealed far more surface noise than the other playback methods.

BOTTOM LINE

Bridging the gap between the old analog world and today's digital one, where files can be moved around and transferred with ease, has never been simple. While the prospect of squeezing a large collection of vinyl LPs onto an iPod might sound appealing, the time-consuming work involved means that it's best left for transferring a few precious, irreplaceable records that you can't get in digital form. For that purpose, the Pro-Ject Debut III USB gets much better results than any other similar product I'm aware of. And remember, with its analog output, this turntable can also provide excellent sound when simply playing one of your precious records on your regular stereo system.

S&V

Key Features

- Built-in phono stage and digital converter
- Factory-aligned Ortofon cartridge
- Matte black finish
- 16½ x 12½ x 4½ in; 15 lb

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