

Pristine Vinyl ViVac RCS2 Record Cleaning System

by Alan Sircom

The clues to the pros and cons of a Record Cleaning Machine are lodged in the name. The record cleaner part is increasingly vitally important, because as people buy up 'mint' albums from eBay (which turn out to be nothing of the sort) and from second-hand dealers at ever-increasing costs, a record cleaner does much to turn the clock back, making that LP sound as best it can. On the other hand, the 'machine' part means most record cleaners are big, noisy cubes that should be housed in a garage or a machine shop, and definitely not a listening room.

The Pristine Vinyl ViVac cleaner goes some way to address the needs of the home user, by making the cleaner small enough, good looking enough, and quiet enough to make its way into the listening room. OK, so in use it vibrates and hums a little, so no listening to a record while you are cleaning another, but turn the Pristine off and it's smaller than most record decks, and represents just another shelf in your system. By bringing the cleaner into the listening room, and by not making it sound like you are trying to start a tractor with a howitzer, it means you are more likely to clean a record. By making the process quick (when you get adept and the ViVac is primed and ready to go, cleaning takes about a minute and change per side), it means you are likely to clean more records, too. The logic is if it's in the room where the records live and where the records are played, it will get used, but using your record cleaning machine means dragging a bunch of records into the basement like some kind of hipster dungeon master, you'll give up the cleaning schedule after a few goes.

This dichotomy between 'record cleaning' and 'machine' is not trivial. Most of us keep our records (or at least most of our records) in the listening room. This is ideal, because the journey from shelf to platter is only a few feet. However, putting a RCM into the equation often throws this delicate ecosystem out of balance, because you either need to move the big, heavy, and often ugly box of noise into the listening room, or move the records to be cleaned into another room. What usually happens is either an orgy of record cleaning once or twice a year, or the records simply don't get cleaned, and sooner or later the RCM ends up being attic fodder.

There are, in fact two ViVac models: the RCS1 where the cleaning fluid is applied with a squeeze bottle and the RCS2 (tested here) where the cleaning fluid is applied by an electric pump and swing arm. The base model will be upgradable. It comes in some nice shades of tree, along with matt black and white, with other funky colour schemes to order.

There is no great reinventing the wheel here. Keen eyed followers of all things RCM will notice some similarities between this design and a Keith Monks, although this shows some increased refinement in terms of getting fluid onto the record (using a push button connected to a small dialysis pump, rather than a hand-operated dispenser) and improved cleaner arm and platter bearings. It also goes for a manually operated brush, rather than a combined fluid dispenser/brush arrangement seen in the Monks designs. This is a good idea, because it allows more accurate dispersion of the cleaning fluid, but it means if there's a few weeks of inactivity, you should prime the brush with a small squeeze bottle of fluid. Pristine supplies its own fluid – using a vegetable-based anti-static cleaning agent combined with distilled water. Or, you can roll your own using something like Iffotol or Kodak anti-static wetting agent, again heavily diluted.

There's another thing common to both the Pristine and KM – the 'cotton' reel that is commonly considered to pick up the dirt from the LP and wick it away to the gunk tank. This is wrong on two counts. It's not cotton – cotton would expand in the fluid, so it's a reel of nylon thread. This should last for about 1,000 albums before it needs replacing. More importantly though, it's not there to collect gunk; the thread is designed to give the vacuum pump space to operate. Think of the nozzle on a domestic vacuum cleaner: if you cover that nozzle with your hand, all it does is latch itself to your hand, stay immobile, and eventually overheat, but with a small air gap, the vacuum still sucks dust away, but can move more freely. Of course, in the process the thread does end up getting dirty and collecting dust and dirt; a small amount of thread (around a centimetre) is pulled off each time you move the vacuum arm across to the centre of the record. This thread is then sucked into the waste container when the vacuum arm drops off of the record after a cleaning sweep.



All this Keith Monks homage is very much 'a good thing'. The KM has been road tested extensively in its time. Practically every British record library of note that has an 'archive' has a Keith Monks, and dozens of the machines were used day-in, day-out in more up-market record and hi-fi stores for decades. Some of them are still in use today, despite many being built more than 40 years ago.

It's extremely difficult to determine levels of record cleaning (beyond a surface inspection) because even the most basic cleaner will remove years of crud, rendering that LP not entirely worthy for subsequent testing. However, experience suggests the amount of before vs. after difference in grunge around the instruments in the mix and background vinyl noise is directly proportional to the level of deep cleaning, and this is a transferrable listening skill. The Pristine Vinyl lived up to its name. Records lift off the platter in pristine condition, both on the surface and deep in the grooves. I used a crinkly late 1960s of Rachmaninov's Concerto No 2 in C Minor [Anievas, New PO, EMI] which is not a particularly stellar copy of an excellent rendition, and the Pristine Vinyl cleaner wiped away many of the intervening 47 years. It couldn't do anything about the scratches, but many of the more minor pops and crackles simply disappeared while others diminished significantly. I repeated that with some 1980s pop I am seriously not proud of still having in my collection, and it repeated the same cleaning, even if it couldn't make the music listenable again.

I would suggest that ultrasonic cleaners deliver an even deeper clean and remove yet more of that background noise on an LP, but do so at significantly increased cost, noise, and pet angst. This is more than a 'good enough' solution though; the Pristine Vinyl cleans very deep - the ultrasonic solutions are for those with archival application on their minds or record collections that stretch into the high tens of thousands.

In fact, the Pristine Vinyl makes the record cleaning process so easy and direct, that two observations spring to mind. First, it could be a test for scrupulousness: vinyl-loving



dealers with their own record cleaning services may try to dissuade you from investing in the Pristine Vinyl, because they will lose you as a regular record-cleaning client. And second, because record cleaning becomes so trivial a project, you may be tempted to put the record straight back in its original sleeve. Instead, buy some modern antistatic sleeves and keep the newly cleaned records cleaner for longer.

The Pristine Vinyl is more than just another RCM. It brings record cleaning into the listening room without making the listening room look ugly and without making jet engine noises. It will make you clean records more often, and that will make you enjoy them all the more. Highly recommended! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: £1,995 (RCS2 as tested), £1,795 (RCS1)

RCS1-RCS2 Upgrade: Expected to cost around £350

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