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EMG Model 10B Acoustic Gramophone (1936)

From Hi-Fi World - February 1998 issue
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E.M.G. Model 10B Acoustic Gramophone (1936)

Bearing in mind that he is listening to hi-fi technology that is over a hundred years old, Haden Boardman is suprised to discover how good the old, purely acoustic method of sound reproduction can sound.

Looking back at the history of hi-fi, it's hard not to notice one or two conflicts. In recent times we have seen the valve versus transistor debate, CD versus LP, Moving Magnet cartridges versus Moving Coil, and whether to use a head amp or a transformer to amplify the latter. But back in the 1930s, when hi-fi pioneers were cutting the first all-electric recordings and playing them back on the first all-electric gramophones, arguments raged as to whether electrical or purely acoustic methods offered higher fidelity.



Joe Winstanley beside his E.M.G 10B gramophone

In these times, when someone listening to vinyl is considered anachronistic, the idea of tracking a shellac groove at speeds of around 78rpm with a wooden needle coupled to a completely acoustic amplifying system in the form of a huge horn seems downright potty. And yet some enthusiasts still swear by the fidelity of the reproduction of old horn gramophones. One such person is Joe Winstanley, an expert on acoustic gramophones and 78rpm records.

FRONT PAGE

» [Home](#)

REVIEWS

- » [Vinyl LP](#)
- » [CD, DVD, Blu-ray](#)
- » [Amplifiers](#)
- » [Loudspeakers](#)
- » [Internet Audio](#)
- » [Radio/Tuners](#)
- » [AV receivers](#)

FEATURES

- » [Music Reviews](#)
- » [Letters](#)
- » [Olde Worlde](#)
- » [World Favourites](#)
- » [World Audio Design](#)

[Contact](#)

Joe kindly invited me over to listen to his 1936 E.M.G. model 10B player. This was then and still is now considered one of the finest acoustic gramophones ever made and is valued today at over £5,000.

Muddying the waters around E.M.G. is the fact that one of the directors (by the name of Mr E.M. Ginn) split from the company in the early 1930s to establish E.M. Ginn Gramophones. His product was very similar in concept to the lavish E.M.G. but went under the name E.M. Ginn "Expert" Gramophone.

The main reason for owning one of these old units, if you collect early 78s, is that it's considered essential to play the recordings back on something of the same vintage. Joe points out that diamond, sapphire and even steel styli ruin these old shellac discs, and he himself will only play his collection with a thorn needle. Nimbus Records, when transcribing old 78s to CD (on the Prima Voce series) had purpose-built a replica of an old acoustic gramophone, placed it in a suitable room and then recorded it with their Ambisonic process.



Joe's other hi-fi system. A second gramophone dominates the foreground while a group of new-fangled all-electrical components occupies the background.

Joe told me about how he bought his E.M.G. in the 1950s. Apparently the seller was so pleased it was going to an enthusiast he delivered it to Joe in Lancashire despite living in Surrey.

This monster device completely dominates the Winstanleys' front room - it is absolutely enormous thanks to that papier-maché horn with its 30in. diameter mouth. The turntable, a Garrard model 201 (predecessor to the famous 301 and 401) is actually electric in this version of the E.M.G., although it could be purchased in either electric or spring-powered variants.

I must admit to thinking it was probably going to be a load of nonsense as I drove over to hear this old gramophone. I mean, I'm fond of pre-War hi-fi but this was getting silly; technology over 100 years old?

Joe started the platter turning under a simple violin and piano piece recorded in the early electric period (post-1927 and the rapid development of electric record cutting in this country by our old friend Voigt).

With a dull hiss as the freshly sharpened needle hit the record, the instruments burst through into the room. Being an analytical sort, it was easy for me to point out the restricted range and bandwidth akin to what you'd find on an AM radio set.



Joe's newly-made thorn polishing tool is based on an original design

But what totally knocked me over was the unbelievable presence, the absolute solidity of the reproduction. I am convinced most of this is down to the horn; with such a long path from the sound-box, and such a wide mouth, the sound really fills a room. Joe told me he has used the E.M.G. for filling concert halls in the past.

Joe has a massive collection of early acoustic recordings, dating from this century and the last. Not only is he familiar with the different technical developments and when they were implemented, he can also tell you about the recording artists themselves.

He showed me rare copies of records made in the first decade of this century, single-sided like a CD, and demonstrated how better quality stampers made from the wax master in 1903 gave superior sound quality.

I heard Carusos, unheard of (and unpronounceable by me) Italian solos, through to all kinds of Classical work. Organ was impressive but, because of the limited horn mouth area, somewhat lacking in the bass and power this grand instrument deserves. It's vocals that these gramophones thrive on; solo voice had real intimacy and amazing presence, something that few modern hi-fi systems can achieve.

This may sound like a bit of a sweeping statement - a gramophone made in the 1930s and based on technology from the 1800s matching and even surpassing some elements of hi-fi today. Well, those of us fortunate to have listened to a proper full-range horn

system in the style of an Altec Voice Of The Theatre, or a Klipschorn, or an old Vitavox will know this feeling of intimacy and power. For these systems all owe their existence to horn gramophones, and would not exist today if it were not for the ground-work laid down by companies such as Western Electric in the 1920s.



To keep your 78s free from dirt you could use an early 'buffing' pad like this.

With an acoustic gram, you are listening as direct to the singer as is physically possible in recorded media. It's true these systems are very coloured, pretty noisy (and not just the thorn needle pick-up; the mechanical racket coming off the old pre-War Garrard was quite astonishing) and somewhat limited dynamically. There is no electronic processing at all - the singer sang into a 'trumpet' at one end of the recording chain and the sound waves were cut direct to wax, and from this the records were stamped.



I personally could not live day-to-day with the compromises, but I was surprised by how good this old, purely-acoustic method of reproduction can sound.

Joe Winstanley is interested in anything and everything to do with early 78rpm recording and, if you can help him with his collection please email: classifieds@hi-fiworld.co.uk and we'll pass the information on to him.

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