

## .MUSIC

# Play it as it lathes

How Toronto mastering studio Lacquer Channel became ground zero for Canada's vinyl renaissance. **BY LUC RINALDI**



Lacquer Channel mastering masters Noah Mintz (left) and Kevin Park.

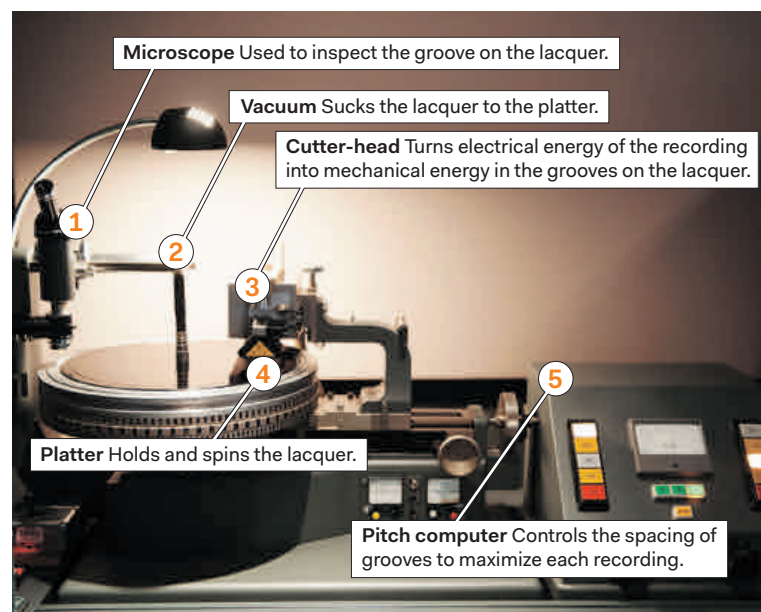
Inside the windowed walls of a small recording studio, Kevin Park pushes a button, and the space is suddenly filled with the sounds of the Grateful Dead. As the music plays, the mastering engineer turns a knob on a fridge-sized cabinet of blinking electronics and studies audio wavelengths on a glowing monitor. He moves to the corner of the room, where he hovers over a lathe, a massive piece of machinery that looks like a cross between a pottery wheel and an industrial sewing machine lifted from the bridge of the USS Enterprise. It carves a single groove that slowly spirals towards the centre of a blank LP lookalike until, finally, the music cuts out. Park inspects the groove under a microscope before he manually etches a catalogue number into the disc—an aluminum saucer coated with malleable, nitrocellulose lacquer—the last step before it can be shipped off to a pressing plant, where it will be used as a master to create vinyl records.

Watching the process unfold through a floor-to-ceiling pane of glass at Lacquer Channel Mastering in north Toronto is a bit like visiting the zoo. Park, the lathe, the lacquer: they're endangered species. The newly installed lathe is the only operational machine of its kind in the country—Canada was without one after

Lacquer Channel stopped cutting in 2009—and Park is just about the only person who knows how to work it. With LP sales up 33 per cent over the past year in the U.S., Lacquer Channel's decision to start cutting lacquer again isn't just a return to its roots. It's Toronto's—and Canada's—entrée into the modern vinyl resurgence.

The lathe wasn't always the studio's prized possession, though. It was once the instrument of the competition. In the early 2000s, Park used the lathe, which he'd purchased in London in the late '90s, to cut local house and techno music under his own imprint. But in 2005, his business foundered and the lathe went into storage. When Park tried to convince Noah Mintz, then a partial owner of Lacquer Channel, to help him get the machine running again, Mintz told him to sell it. "That was the end of our conversation," says Mintz. "But when I took over the studio, Kevin was one of the first people I talked to: 'I hope you didn't take my advice.'" After a lengthy restoration (unsurprisingly, only a handful of people on the continent know how to fix a lathe), Mintz and Park returned the machine to working condition.

As Park works in the studio, Mintz sits in Lacquer Channel's lobby, a cozy room with racks of vinyl bookended by vintage recording equipment, a coffee table



1 Microscope Used to inspect the groove on the lacquer.

2 Vacuum Sucks the lacquer to the platter.

3 Cutter-head Turns electrical energy of the recording into mechanical energy in the grooves on the lacquer.

4 Platter Holds and spins the lacquer.

5 Pitch computer Controls the spacing of grooves to maximize each recording.

covered with audio engineering magazines, and an old-school Atari console for good measure. He alternates between his laptop, where he's typing up a blog post about an iPhone app that represents the demise of mastering, and talking shop with the other engineers. They compare the merits of different software and grimly joke about what they'll do if their California-based lacquer-disc supplier goes out of business; the only other option is in Japan. The recent renaissance notwithstanding, almost every facet of the vinyl industry is dying out.

Nevertheless, Mintz is unapologetically zealous about his craft—if you've listened to Canadian indie rock, you've probably heard something he's mastered—and adopts an almost philosophical tone when talking about it. "Mastering is supposed to be transparent; if it's done correctly, you don't hear it," he says as he explains the process of optimizing audio for its final medium, whether that's vinyl or iTunes. "If something's poorly mastered, you don't even know why you don't like listening to it."

To him, vinyl's renewed popularity is a rebuttal to the intangibility of MP3s and the widespread devaluation of music. "It's not just the audio quality. You're getting a package, artwork, an insert, something you can physically hold. You listen and you can't do much else because you have to be there to change sides. Records force you to be engaged. It becomes a whole experience. And that's what music is about. Why do you go see a concert?"

On an evening in early November, Mintz delivered a similar jeremiad to a captive, cross-legged audience in his living room. "This is how they used to record 30 or 40 years ago," he said with one hand on an analog tape recorder as he introduced the first act in an intimate, low-key show. Later in the night, Broken Social Scene's Brendan Canning—Mintz's former hHead bandmate—played a pair of songs. As Canning strummed an acoustic guitar, Mintz's dog raced through the crowd and nearly knocked down a microphone, forcing the room to break into laughter halfway through the song. That's why you go see a concert. ■

**\$40**

Cost of a blank lacquer disc.

—

**\$125**

Cost to cut a 7" lacquer master side at Lacquer Channel.

—

**\$190**

Cost to cut a 12" lacquer master side at Lacquer Channel.

—

**\$14,000**

Price of the lathe's cutter-head.

## .SLIDING SCALE

## Cop-outs

In this week's *Ride Along*, Ice Cube plays a police officer...again. But he's not the only notorious cop-hating musician who occasionally portrays a law-enforcement officer onscreen.—Chris Bilton

CADET

**Dr. Dre**

The production mastermind behind N.W.A insisted he's "still not loving police."  
**Credits** *Training Day* (2001).



**Ice Cube**

The O.G. rapper brought us "Fuck tha Police" and considers it a good day when the cops roll right past him.  
**Credits** *Rampart* (2011), *21 Jump Street* (2012), *Ride Along* (2014).



**Ice T**

The rapper incited an intense First Amendment debate with the song "Cop Killer" on his 1992 album, *Body Count*.  
**Credits** *Sonic Impact* (1999), *The Alternate* (2000), *Tracks* (2005), *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (2000–present).



**Henry Rollins**

The former Black Flag frontman screamed about the "pigs who take the rights away from all the kids."  
**Credits** *The Chase* (1994), *Lost Highway* (1997), *The New Guy* (2002), *Bad Boys II* (2003).

COMMISSIONER

**i** *Ride Along* opens on Jan. 17.