

SA Guilty Pleasures

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An Interview With Bob Witrak, Owner of HDTT

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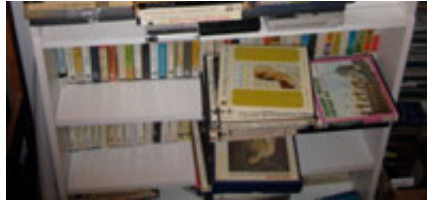


Recently, I mentioned **High Definition Tape Transfers** (HDTT) in a piece that I wrote on my views regarding the current state of affairs in the music industry. Bob Witrak, owner of HDTT, sells high definition digital transfers of out of print classical music, sourced from old open reel tapes. These tapes are consumer releases, not the master tapes, and yet sound incredible. The more I listened to my purchases, which I downloaded from the HDTT website, the more curious I became about Bob's operation. I really encourage our readers to check out HDTT — the recordings Bob offers are truly special. I decided to ask Bob some questions, and share the answers with our readers.

NF: Tell us a bit about you and how you came up with the idea of selling very high quality digital transfers of old reel to reel tapes.

BW: What happened was I got into reels about seven years ago I was always a big vinyl guy and I started to hear attributes I wasn't hearing in vinyl, like the strings on reels just sound "right" to me, as I was collecting more and more tapes I noticed many reels contained

forgotten performances of historical importance, with unusually good sound quality. Then I started to make copies for my own enjoyment and people in the high-end audio industry heard them and convinced me to sell them to the public.



NF: Most of the recordings you offer are copies of 50+ year old tapes. Are there any special challenges these tapes present as far as working with them (brittleness or oxide shedding?)

BW: The one thing you do not want to do is rewind or fast forward the tape and then stop in the middle of the tape: it will break almost all the time. You really have to invest in a very good tape deck. Our reference deck is a Studer 810, which has the ability to FF or Rewind at a 1/3 of the speed. This really helps tremendously as far as breakage. The Studer is a great tool for the archivists I also have a Nagra 4 which is also very easy on tape, and its mechanism is a work art.

As for brittleness, you just have to handle the tapes with a little TLC. Shedding really isn't an issue, the sticky back tape syndrome didn't happen until the late 70's and early 80's, the tapes I use were made way before that era.



NF: Right now I am listening to Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*, which your website states is from a 1956 performance. While I guess Stravinsky isn't my "thing" musically, sonically this recording is awesome. Headphone users will really be amazed. This is one of the best stereo recordings I have ever heard. I always thought stereo came out in 1958, was it released earlier on open reel?

BW: The Stravinsky is without a doubt one of the best stereo recordings period, also the recording took place at the "old" Carnegie Hall which should tell you why the recording is so special. I believe if I'm not mistaken that the first Stereo Release was on a RCA 2-track tape in 1954 it Reiner's *Ein Heldenleben*, I have a copy and it's still a tremendous recording minimally mic'ed and very natural sounding.

NF: When I think back to when I bought my first cassette deck in the late 1970s, I remember that I could make far superior quality tapes at home by using LPs as the source. With the exception of Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs and their real time copies from the original master tapes made on specially modified JVC decks, prerecorded tapes just were

not very good. It is not unlike the difference today between a CD and an MP3 or, to some, CDs and LPs. Your offerings are copies of commercially available tapes. Why do these recordings sound so good?

BW: All the equipment we use in our mastering process from the electronics to the cables, digital conversion right down to vibration control. (Vibration control is super critical, and a special shout out to Peter Bizlewicz of Symposium Acoustics who has helped out with HDTT from the outset. Also, his vibration control devices are the best in the industry.) All of the equipment has been matched and tested for the best sound quality possible for reel transfers.

As for the all important analog to digital conversion, this a very critical part of my releases. I use Weiss digital components we have found them to be the most accurate and transparent electronics for digital conversion. (As a side note Daniel Weiss owner of Weiss Digital is one of the nicest guys you can meet in the pro audio world and has really helped me in achieving great sound.)

NF: Can you explain how these recordings are so quiet (no hiss) and have really good dynamic range when they were made long before any type of noise reduction was available?

BW: This has all to do with the choices I made and the long experimenting that was done with selecting the right components in the mastering chain, most of the big commercial mastering houses don't pay any mind to audiophile techniques such as cabling, power conditioning, vibration control etc. Pro audio people think audiophiles practice voodoo and most of what we do to achieve audiophile sound is dubious.

Many audio reviewers have been delighted with our releases because of the clean, transparent musical sound we get from

our sources we have been told that are releases are the most analog sounding digital they have heard. And this is all due to using audiophile practices.

NF: These recordings sound to me like a perfectly quiet LP played upon a very high quality analog front end. Is this due to your specially modified playback and digital conversion gear? How close could a hobbyist with a nice open reel deck, say a Revox B77 or a Teac X2000R, come to achieving this result with open reel tape at home?

BW: I think it would be difficult to achieve high quality sound with a deck using the stock electronics that are in consumer or pro audio decks it would be advisable to use an external tape pre-amp like you would use in a high end vinyl setup and as always vibration control and cabling is always critical.

As for the digital conversion this is the expensive part, lower end digital converters are usually not up to the task in making high quality transfers. Unfortunately, to make high quality transfers, the digital end can get extremely pricey.

NF: Listening to Beethoven's 4th Symphony, from 1962 four-track tape, I am amazed at the quality. This one, for me, is a winner all around both musically and sonically. This 46 year old recording makes me wonder if the older recording engineers have forgotten more than most of the engineers today will ever know. What are your thoughts?

BW: I personally prefer the older engineers, having said that there are some recordings made today that are very good, but overall I prefer the older recordings the older engineers kept it simple and basically were interested more in capturing the event in a more natural perspective.

NF: You don't offer all of your releases as downloads: some are only available as physical media. You state that all of your physical media is burned, not stamped, for superior quality. Why does it make a difference?

BW: We now offer about 90 percent of our releases as 24/96 downloads. The CD and DVD blanks are extremely critical for sound quality there is a *huge* difference in the quality of blanks. The reason for this has to do with many different variables such as the



dye used the metal used and also the roundness of the blank, also the close tolerances that are used in the manufacturing process. We have auditioned many different blanks from many different manufacturers and I feel we have found the best for music reproduction, of course we are always on the lookout for even better blanks. Also the burning process is super critical and also the burner used.

We also have announced a new product called HQCD (High Quality CD) which is a very high quality blank that is made special for the burner we use (which is a special pro audio burner made to make masters) the CD-R has extremely low jitter characteristics and each release is burned at 1x speed, it sounds excellent and is the best CD blanks we have heard, readers can check it out at our website.

NF: How many customers are downloading as opposed to buying physical media?

BW: It's around a 60-40 split, with downloads ahead, CD

and DVD orders are still very strong and I anticipate it to be similar in the future.

NF: Many USB DACs today are capable of 24-bit/48kHz maximum decoding. While your recordings sound fantastic at this resolution, how much is a customer missing by not being able to decode to 24/96?

BW: Of course it is always better to playback at the highest resolution as possible and there is a difference between 24/48 and 24/96, but listening to our recordings at lower resolution you will probably hear about 80 to 90 percent of the 24/96 playback. And, as usual, the quality of the electronics plays a major part in this.

NF: How do you decide what recordings to offer?

BW: We scour through many recordings, check for renewal of copyrights, and if they have exceptional sound and are also favorable renditions of that particular piece it might make it for release. It takes a lot of auditioning. Another thing I'd like to mention is that we really try to offer recordings that haven't been released or haven't been released for a long time, we are not in competition with the big commercial labels. As our ads say we offer "rare recordings in audiophile sound."



NF: Understood, but is there any possibility of releasing Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* or *Night on Bald Mountain*?

BW: If one comes along that makes the grade of course!!

NF: Thanks for your time and efforts.

BW: Thanks, Nels for giving me the opportunity to introduce your readers to HDTT