



The Entry Level #3

Okki Nokki Record Cleaner

By Stephen Mejias • Posted: Mar 17, 2011



As sleep slowly withdrew from my coiled body, I noticed the strange words *Don't disturb me while I'm dreaming* playing over and over in my mind. *Where had these words come from?* I wondered. I had little time to ponder their origin before they were gone with the retreating night, and I was left with the sudden sting of loneliness. There are days when I feel a million miles away from everyone I've ever cared about or loved. My younger brothers and sisters, ex-girlfriends, teachers, old classmates, roommates, bandmates, even casual acquaintances—I miss and long for them all. This, a cold, gray Saturday, promised to be one of those days, perfect for steeping in melancholy. But I had too much work to do and could not allow myself to dwell on silly inner things. A vacant pillow laid pointlessly beside me coerced me from bed.

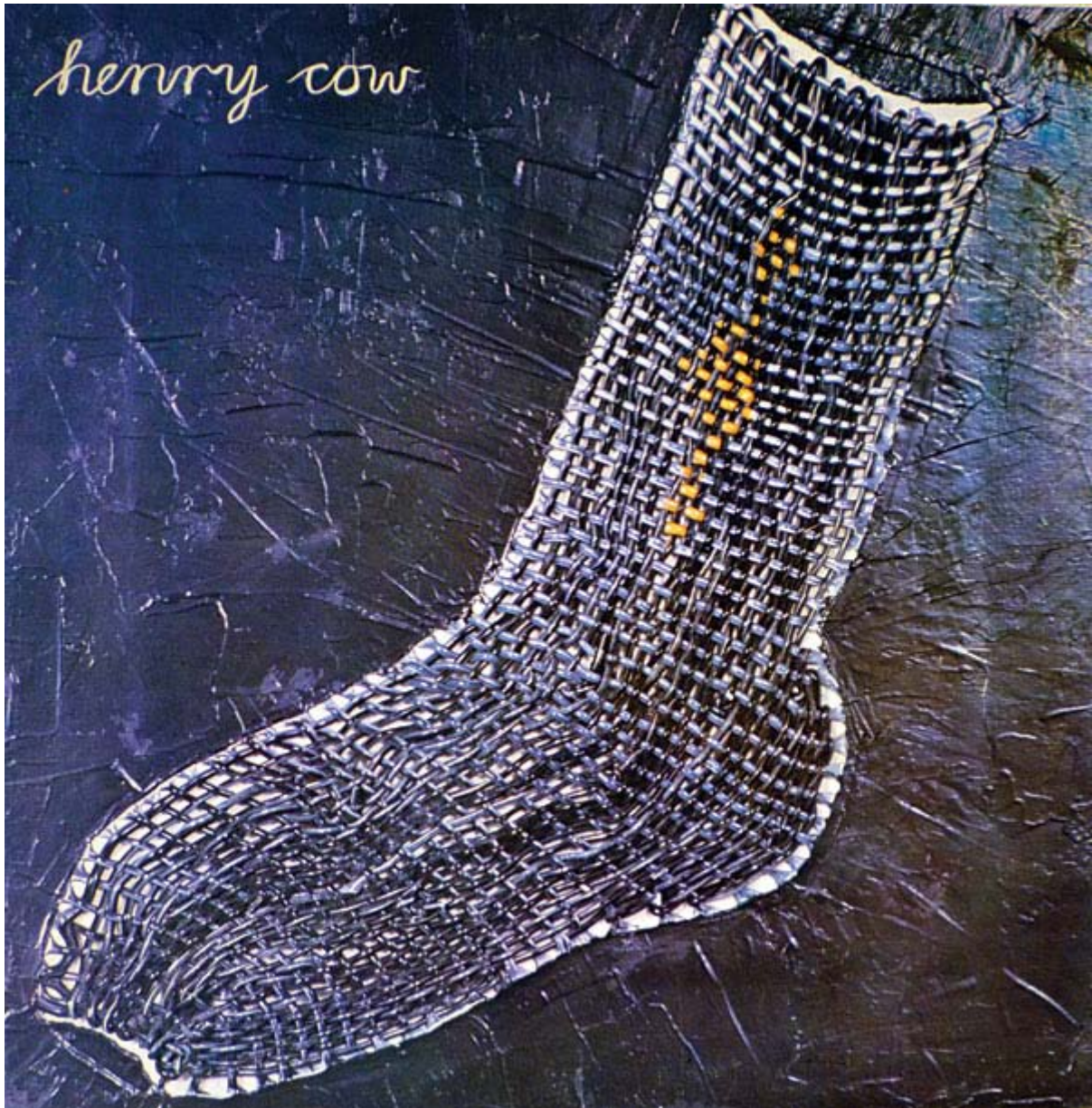
As I prepared for the day ahead, I cued up Wyatt/Atzmon/Stephen's *For the Ghosts Within*, this issue's "[Recording of the Month](#)," and was soon smiling with the happy-sad sounds of Ros Stephen's syrupy strings, Gilad Atzmon's honeyed clarinet, and Robert Wyatt's special voice. Once showered and dressed, I did a little dance to "Where Are They Now?," then sealed myself under

many layers of warmth, picked up my keys, and left my old apartment, locking the music inside with the cracked walls and the drafty windows.

When feeling especially alone, I like to spend time in used-record shops, where something good always happens. I don't even have to buy anything—sometimes it's enough to simply flip through the covers, open the gatefolds, read the liner notes, smell the past, dirty my fingers with the memories embedded in the records' spines. With this in mind, I walked the 287 steps from my front door to the green gates of Iris Records at 114 Brunswick Street, Jersey City, New Jersey. Along the way, six complete strangers wished me a good morning. What luck! Was the universe looking out for me, leading the way, scattering kindnesses along my path? I could only assume that these gentle neighbors could see in my eyes the sweetness of Robert Wyatt's music, and so felt compelled to greet me. What a wonderful world, indeed. When I arrived at Iris Records, I softly knocked three times. The store's owner, Steve Gritzan, opened the door and welcomed me with a great smile. "Come in! Look at the floors!" Behind the counter, Christine shook her head and laughed.

Gritzan had just reopened his little shop after a few months of selling his used LPs, CDs, and books exclusively at street fairs and over the Internet. He'd cleaned the place up quite a bit. I was appreciative: "The floors—they're beautiful!" Before it became Iris Records, the shop had been an apothecary, and Gritzan has kept many of that store's charms: Old beakers and faded bottles of Coca-Cola are displayed alongside Sonic Youth posters, Technics turntables, books of poetry, torn-out pages of the *New York Daily News*, headlines about the New York Mets. I feel at home here.

I chatted with Steve and Christine a bit before burying my head in the New Arrivals section. Roky Erickson sang something about love and pain.



Because I'd been on such a Robert Wyatt trip, I was hoping to find records by Wyatt's first band, the Soft Machine—research, I told myself—and, to my great delight, there among the other New Arrivals was Soft Machine's *Volume Two*. The jacket had a small tear along its spine but was otherwise in fine condition. The inner sleeve was yellowed and frayed, the vinyl itself dusty but unscratched. It would be mine. A few records later I came across another album that captured my curiosity, *Unrest*, from a band I'd never encountered, Henry Cow. I pulled the very clean jacket from its outer sleeve, opened the gatefold, and read the liner notes: Tim Hodgkinson on organ, alto sax, clarinet, and piano; Fred Frith on stereo guitar, violin, xylophone, and piano; John Greaves on bass, piano, and voice; Chris Cutler on drums; and Lindsay Cooper on bassoon, oboe, recorder, and voice. Recording engineers: Phil Becque with Andy Morris; parts of "Ruins" by Mike Oldfield. And finally, the most important bit: "Produced by Henry Cow and dedicated to Robert Wyatt and Uli Trepte." Obviously, this was a sign: This album, too, would be mine.

In all, I spent two hours and \$100 in Iris Records that morning. In addition to the Soft Machine and Henry Cow discs I picked up old, dirty copies of Moondog's second disc, *2: Madrigals: Rounds and Canons*, Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark*, the soundtrack to the Jamaican crime film, *The Harder*

They Come, Leo Kottke's live *12-String Blues*, Jane Birkin and Serge Gainsbourg's *Je T'aime (Beautiful Love)*, John Prine's self-titled debut, and a few gifts for friends. I said goodbye to Steve and Christine and walked out of Iris, feeling both lighter and heavier than when I'd walked in.

Back at home, it was time to get to work. I would restore these old, dirty records to something like their original beauty, while hopefully retaining at least some of the charms of age and use. In a corner of my kitchen, with a stack of other boxes waiting to be opened, was the Okki Nokki record-cleaning machine, made in Germany by Audio Classics and newly imported into the US by Sumiko. At its price (\$499 in black or white; dustcover adds \$50), the Okki Nokki puts itself in direct competition with record-cleaning's time-honored standard, a device often found in record shops, radio stations, libraries, and homes around the world: VPI's HW-16.5 (\$549). How would the smart-looking Okki Nokki compare with such a classic? How could *any* product at this price compare? What could be done better, or even differently?

Let's have a look.

With its rounded edges and low profile, the Audio Classics Okki Nokki is sleeker, slightly smaller, and lighter than the VPI HW-16.5, measuring 13.25" W by 8" H by 13.25" D (vs the VPI's 15.5" W by 9" H by 14" D), and weighing 15.5 lbs (vs the VPI's 28 lbs). The Okki Nokki better lends itself to the furnishings of an apartment or home—you won't need, or want, to hide it in a corner or a closet. Whereas the VPI looks like an industrial tool designed for a single purpose, the Okki Nokki's finished look might lead houseguests to wonder: Is it an iPod dock? A turntable? In addition, at some 13', the Okki Nokki's power cord is usefully long—and *twice* as long as the VPI's.



My review sample came equipped with three sturdy, aluminum vacuum tubes (for 7", 10", and 12" records), a small (50ml) squirt bottle of record-cleaning concentrate, and a slim brush with a single row of 20 bunches of goat-hair bristles. I was at first impressed by the construction of the Okki Nokki's brush—it felt more comfortable in my hand than the VPI brush, and its bristles had a more organic appearance than the VPI's synthetic bristles—but running a forefinger across the Okki Nokki's bristles sent up a small cloud of dust and let loose several strands of hair. Not a good first impression, I thought—a record brush should *remove* debris from valuable LPs, not add debris to them. I continued to run my finger across the bristles until all signs of dust and loose hair were gone. As a measure of insurance, I rinsed the brush in purified water.

Like the VPI, the Okki Nokki has a drainage tube that extends from a small opening in the lower right hand corner of the machine's rear panel. The VPI's drainage tube, however, is significantly larger in diameter and hangs free of the HW-16.5's case at all times; the Okki Nokki's tube remains discreetly stored within. To drain the Okki Nokki of any used fluid, you gently pull the tube from the body of the machine until resistance is met. (From the manual: "Do not force it. When you encounter resistance—STOP!!") I found that I could extend the tube to about 10" before reaching a point where I thought I might damage the machine and void the warranty. VPI mates its drainage tube with a simple plastic clamp: Engage the clamp to prevent fluid from escaping the tube, release the clamp to let used fluid drain away. For this function, the Okki Nokki's tube has a very small, red endcap. The manual: "Always replace the red cap on the drainage tube and make sure it is secured and closed. Failure to do so will nullify your warranty!!"

Okay, but the red endcap was missing when I unpacked the unit. Luckily, after reading the manual, I found the cap hidden among the packing materials (the Okki Nokki came very well packed). I was glad I knew what it was; otherwise, I might have considered it excess and tossed it into the trash, thus NULLIFYING THE WARRANTY. So be careful. Compared to VPI's clamp, the Okki Nokki's red endcap is a pain. Both removing and inserting it are fiddly operations, and I can easily imagine dropping the little thing and losing it forever. If your endcap goes MIA, a dab of Blu-Tac or Silly Putty—or, hey, a small, plastic clamp—might be a viable alternative.

Unlike the VPI, the Okki Nokki lacks a reservoir under its platter, which means that excess fluid can easily spill over the machine's sides—you'll want to place a towel under it. And about that fluid: Add all of the Okki Nokki's record-cleaning concentrate to 1 liter of purified water and mix well. The resulting concoction is slightly opaque and slightly bubbly, and emits a strange, fragrant odor more earthy than chemical; it's not at all unpleasant, but you don't want to bathe in it. And, unless you *do* bathe in it, one liter of record cleaning fluid should last a very long time.

My first real disappointment: The diameter of the Okki Nokki's spindle is a good bit smaller than that of an LP's spindle hole. Records can easily shift around the Okki's spindle, which means you'll never be confident that you've precisely aligned a record to the platter. I had to eyeball it—it was like playing a 45rpm single without a 45rpm adapter—which could easily have resulted in eccentric rotation and thus an incomplete bath. Chances of misalignment should be somewhat alleviated by installing the Okki Nokki's record clamp. However, the record clamp included with my sample didn't thread smoothly onto the spindle, but wobbled all the way down. I checked to make sure I hadn't cross-threaded the spindle, but the error wasn't mine. Perhaps my sample is an aberration—but whatever happened to meticulous European engineering?

With an LP in place, I set the platter spinning in its forward direction, squirted a few drops of the fluid solution on the record's surface, and, with the brush, spread the fluid evenly across it. After a few forward revolutions, I set the platter spinning in reverse—a nice feature the VPI lacks. The fluid

coated the LP without ever pooling up against the brush or spilling off the side of the platter. Excellent.

Now I was ready to vacuum up the excess fluid, but this, too, proved trickier than necessary. The Okki Nokki's aluminum vacuum arm fits into a hole at the front right-hand corner of the machine's top surface that the manual calls the arm holder. You have to swivel the arm so that it hovers above the LP and points directly at the record spindle, and the small black lugs on the short vertical section of the arm are directly above the corresponding cutouts in the arm holder. With the platter spinning forward, you gently push the arm down into the arm holder so that the lugs fall into the cutouts. As you do that, you flip the switch that activates the vacuum motor. If you misalign the arm, it will pull out of place and skid along your rotating LP. So be careful—you'll want to be sober for this. If properly aligned, the arm will mate with the record and the vacuum will suck up the fluid and dirt and, a few revolutions later, you'll have one clean side. When you turn off the vacuum, the arm pops up. You then swivel the arm to the rear of the machine and switch off the platter. Your newly shiny LP will meet your gaze with a smile, begging to be played. Fit that clean LP record with a Mobile Fidelity Original Master Sleeve, protect the jacket with a 4-mil outer sleeve, and cherish the thing forever and ever. Ah.

The degree of pleasure I take in restoring neglected LPs is ridiculous and irrational. What's it all about? Some people make things, some people fix things, some people merely consume—each is an attempt to forge a stronger connection with the material world, and to make peace with ourselves. If only I could cleanse my soul as easily as I can clean my dirty records . . .

But seriously: The Okki Nokki's motor runs significantly quieter than the VPI's—it won't scare away children, pets, or girlfriends. But because the Okki Nokki is so light, and because it uses rocker switches instead of the sort of toggles found on the VPI, it's possible to accidentally push the entire machine backward while engaging the platter or vacuum.

Technicalities aside, the Sumiko Okki Nokki cleaned the living crap out of my records. I don't know if it was that strange, fragrant fluid, that soft-bristled brush, or what, but the Okki Nokki seemed more efficient at cleaning records than my VPI, restoring my filthiest records to like-new condition with just a couple of revolutions. Take, for instance, James White and the Blacks' *Off White* (LP, Island ILPS-7008), the dirtiest record I hope to ever see. This particular copy had been abandoned, under a leaking roof, in a corner of my Uncle Jack's woodshop in the sandy town of Aguadilla, Puerto Rico. Filthy with what I could only guess was a combination of sawdust and clay, the record looked beyond repair. Pulling it from its sleeve was a delicate operation—I could hear years' worth of grit and neglect rubbing against the rotting paper. But after one quick session on the Okki Nokki, the LP looked and sounded almost new. And played on the Rega RP-1, *Off White* was impressively quiet, with big, bold images, and only the slightest hint of surface noise. It was a miracle.

I spent the rest of that Saturday afternoon in front of the Okki Nokki, restoring abused and neglected records. As its platter spun and its motor whirred, I stared into the shiny, black pool of record-cleaning fluid and saw the smiles of family members, the faces of friends, memories of summer nights in backyards with impossibly beautiful women. I missed them all.

During one of these silent reveries, I was disturbed by the sound of my cell phone. It was Nicole.

"What are you doing, Stephen?"

"Cleaning records."

"Again?"

"Yeah."

"Well, Natalie and I are cooking dinner at home tonight. Wanna stop by?"

I thought about it. "Absolutely."

"Great. Be here at eight."

I ended the call and took a look at the clock: It was 5pm. Perfect. Dinner with a couple of sweet friends after a long, quiet session of record-cleaning would put a fine end to this cold, gray Saturday, and would leave me with time enough to do some serious listening . . .