

OPEN REEL TAPE VERSUS DIRECT-CUT VINYL: TWO VERSIONS OF CHASING THE DRAGON'S SUPERB 'A TRIBUTE TO ELLA FITZGERALD' GO HEAD TO HEAD

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Audiophile record label Chasing the Dragon has been causing quite a stir with its superb quality direct-cut vinyl albums. Earlier this year, the label also began to release master tape versions of those albums, taken from simultaneous recordings of the exact same live studio performances. As a lover of both vinyl and tape, I couldn't wait to compare them – providing the perfect excuse for another reel-to-reel ramble....

In mid-2016, Mike Valentine's UK audiophile record label Chasing The Dragon produced the third of its small-but-growing collection of direct-to-disc vinyl recordings. The album, 'A Tribute to Ella Fitzgerald' features eight of Ella's much-loved classics performed by celebrated jazz singer and Radio 2 broadcaster [Clare Teal](#) and the legendary [Syd Lawrence Orchestra](#). I bought a copy and loved it, in terms of both the music and the recording's sound quality. In fact the sound quality was so darned fabulous that it became one of my go-to records for audio system demonstrations. And yet, as incredible as the direct-cut vinyl album was, I still wasn't quite satisfied. You see, I was hankering after something else....



The Studer A820 in question

Yep, you got it in one – the reel-to-reel tape. But there was no tape. At least not one that was available to the public as yet. But a master tape was recorded, at 30ips onto ½" tape using a top-of-range Studer A820.

Making a nuisance of myself

Like I said, Chasing The Dragon has earned an enviable reputation for its direct-cut vinyl albums and the label's small but stunningly-produced range of titles is also available on CD, digital download and as binaural recordings. Something for everyone, then. Even so, I'd been badgering Mike Valentine for a while about releasing copies of his master tapes to the discerning public, but thus far all I'd had was a "maybe". Fair shout, really. Mike was open to releasing his albums on tape if enough interest was shown by the audiophile market but one could hardly consider me jumping up and down and waving my arms about as 'enough interest'. Didn't stop me though.

The thing is, it was Mike who'd turned me on to open reel tape in the first place. Hearing one of Chasing the Dragon's earlier albums on tape, which was the first time I'd ever heard master tape, just about blew me over and altered the course of my audio life forever. I was entranced, hooked, irredeemably in love. So I wasn't about to stop jumping up and down until Mike gave me more!

To my great delight he eventually did, releasing several of Chasing the Dragon's albums on tape earlier this year. (I'm not taking any credit for that by the way – I'm sure the decision was sensibly guided by the growing demand for open reel tape rather than by my nagging).

I'll write more on the story of Mike's role in my near-religious tape conversion in a separate ramble. I've made a few notes already but I'm not sure whether to call it 'All hail Mike Valentine' or 'Mike Valentine is to blame'....



Mike and his two A820s

Anyhow, back to the matter at hand, 'A Tribute to Ella Fitzgerald'. Now at last I have the chance to compare what must surely be one of the best quality vinyl recordings

out there – the superb direct-cut album – with a directly analogous (pun fully intended) version on tape – unequivocally comparing like for like since both were recorded side by side at the same performance.

But before we dive in, a bit of the background story to the recording. I don't call these reel-to-reel *ramblings* for nothing y'know! Cue ramble... (stick with me though, it's interesting stuff).

Clare sings Ella: it'll be all right on the day

Recording an album direct-to-disc is no easy feat. Each side has to be captured in one long single take. From the opening note of the first track on each side to the last sound before the run-out groove, everything is captured in one, as is, in the moment – no multitracks, no overdubs, no edits, no cuts – nothing.

Obviously the quality and professionalism of your artists is paramount. They have to perform the whole side faultlessly with no breaks and with just a couple of seconds between each track. Frankly this can go one of two ways. Either the artists are so nervous of making a mistake and messing the whole thing up that their performance ends up being rather unexciting, or, knowing that there's no post-production touching-up or polishing to follow, they give it their all.



Getting ready before the take

Clare Teal and the Syd Lawrence Orchestra are definitely in the latter camp. 'A Tribute to Ella Fitzgerald' was rehearsed, performed, recorded, mixed and cut in just one day, with just two takes for each side. And they absolutely gave it their all.

So how did Valentine manage to bag such high-profile artists? Well, his last recording before this one, 'Big Band Spectacular' was made with the Syd Lawrence

Orchestra, led by trombonist Chris Dean. Dean told Valentine that fans of the orchestra had long been asking when they were going to produce an album on vinyl, so the timing seemed spot-on. Following the album's release, Mike Valentine and Chris Dean appeared on Clare Teal's Radio 2 Big Band Show to chat about the recording. Teal seemed very interested and so Mike ended up going into quite some detail about the whole process of direct-cut recording. After the show she said to the pair, "Why don't we all work on an album together?". With Mike hardly believing his luck, diaries and studio availability were checked and, once again, the timing seemed perfect and everything lined up. All that remained was the decision about what to record – which became easy once the realization dawned that 2017 would be the centenary of Ella Fitzgerald's birth.



Talking tactics: Clare Teal with Mike Valentine

28th June 2016 was the day of reckoning. Several members of the hi-fi and music press were invited along to the recording at London's world famous Air Studios (set up by the eminent producer Sir George Martin). Hi-Fi Pig's Janine Elliot was among them – check out [her report of the event](#).

Head to head: direct-cut vinyl versus master tape

Now, as it happens, Janine Elliot was also present at the recording of the aforementioned previous album, 'Big Band Spectacular'. In a fascinating and revealing experiment, that album was released as a double. One disc was produced from the direct-cut master while the other was made from a master reel-to-reel tape which, again, was recorded simultaneously. So listeners could directly compare the two. "The direct cut disc (which omits the master 'tape' stage) was for me and everyone else who listened by far the better quality," reported Elliot – and I had to agree.

But now came, for me, the even more interesting comparison. How would the sound

quality of the direct-cut vinyl compare with the reel-to-reel master tape?

Where I say 'master tape' I'm not using the term loosely, since what Mike sells are what I'd call genuine master copies. In this case his process was this... First, while still in Air Studios' lab, he made a ½" back-up/safety/working copy of his precious original 30ips master, as is standard practice so that if any damage or wear occurs, then the original master is still intact. From this ½" 'working' master, Mike then personally makes each ¼" 15ips copy, one at a time, in real time, listening to each one to make sure everything's as it should be. Being the perfectionist that he is, he carefully cleans the tape heads between each and every copy and demagnetizes when necessary.



Hand-made master copies

And so it was with great anticipation that I finally sat down to listen.

I certainly wasn't disappointed but I sure did have my work cut out for me, by which I mean that the comparison between the two versions of this album was not as simple to make as with most 'vinyl versus tape' reviews, since in this case the direct-cut vinyl is so damn good. Actually it's staggering. Incredibly dynamic, hugely open, utterly enthralling, compelling... eight songs of catchy, foot-tappetty, dance-inducing (and I'm not generally much of a dancer) wonderment. In fact, it's so dynamically wide open that it required me to reduce my phonostage gain by around 4dB to avoid overload distortions! In other words, compared with the thousands (literally) of LPs I have, this one squeezes about another 4dB out of the groove, which is quite some achievement.



Inspecting the lacquer



Record cutting lathe

Boy, did the tape have a lot to beat! But, as tends to be the way with tape, for me it pulled it off. I found it even more dynamic. As staggering as the vinyl's dynamics are (and they really are), the fact that the tape had even more to give became particularly apparent on drum beats and horn blasts. Let's face it, if a vinyl record could equal the dynamic slam of the big bass drum on master tape, it'd probably eject the poor stylus from its groove!

I also found the tape to be even more spacious than the vinyl. In hi-fi we talk a lot about the desirability of an 'inky black' silence or space behind the music and between the performers, which serves as a 'pure' canvas against which every nuance of the sound can be perceived. But the more I listen to tape, the more I discover something interesting, and this became even more clear to me here: I'm starting to associate that 'blackness' with the sound of listening to hi-fi. Because

when I listen to superb-quality live recordings on tape, it disappears and what I get instead is more like air. My sense is that the spaces between the performers is not black but air-filled, as it would be in a live performance, and it's as if I can hear or feel that air, charged not with noise or interference but with energy, music and life. So there may be a tiny hint of one instrument's sound leaking into another's microphone, or the soft rustle of the pages of a musical score being turned. It's utterly electrifying and transports you to that hallowed 'just like being there' experience like nothing else!



Being there: the recording in progress



"Yes!" Mike gets a good take

Getting into tangibles, let's talk about bass. Tape can do bass like nothing else so I was very excited to hear what would happen here. I wasn't disappointed. On this album, Mike has recorded bass that sounds more real than I recall having heard anywhere else. The bass isn't just better than the vinyl album, it's *uncannily* real. Without being overblown, boomy or woolly in any way at all, it somehow manages to carry a similar level of detail, transient attack and natural decay as the rest of the frequency range. Incredible. It's also beautifully transparent, not coloured at all.



A finely nuanced balance

What else stood out? Well, nothing and everything – which I mean in the best possible way. For example, in a big band performance you might expect the brass to stand out, but it didn't *jump* out in an in-your-face kind of way because everything else was equally outstanding and so each element held its own in a wondrous finely-nuanced balance.

There's something about the body of the overall sound that seems more real and natural on tape. There's an incredible accuracy of leading edge attack (not hardened or clipped) and an exquisite decay of every single note – piano notes decay exactly as they do in real life, as do the brass sounds. For me, this combination of natural body and peerless realism of attack and decay is what describes the major difference to my ears.

The whole thing sounds so life-like and life-sized. Imagine you've spent much of your life looking at scale models of railways and then you get on a real train. That's the effect. The performance is as clear and as natural at the lowest frequencies as it is at the top-end. Trombones sound like trombones, trumpets like trumpets, clarinets like clarinets. Everything has its own natural timbre, yet each also has a vast array of expression.

Think of the last time you went to a really good classical concert and recall the way the composer (and conductor) use a variety of instruments playing together to create a particular composite sound in any given moment – say, a piccolo adding a high harmonic to a ‘chord’ that might be composed of brass, strings and woodwind. In a good venue with a great orchestra, you might hear that piccolo adding its voice, but you’ll rarely notice such a thing when listening to an album on vinyl or digital. But if you’ve got a very good system and are playing master tape, then you may very well do. That’s the level we’re talking about here.

The last word: among the very best

Would I recommend the album? Emphatically, yes, whatever your choice of format.

Would I suggest the tape or the vinyl version? Again, that’s an easy one. If you have a suitable tape recorder then for heaven’s sakes do yourself a favour and get the tape. Whether you’re a jazz/Ella fan or not, you have to hear this. It ranks alongside the very best of what’s commercially available on tape and much of that is, believe me, astoundingly good.

If you don’t have an open reel tape machine, then buy the LP. Again, it ranks among the very best and is highly likely to be the best-sounding record in your collection.

I sincerely hope that both versions sell like hotcakes. They certainly deserve to. Clare Teal, the Syd Lawrence Orchestra and Mike Valentine make one hell of a combination. And it’s a combination that seems made to produce, among many other things, spine-tingling renditions of the songs made great by Ella Fitzgerald.



“I’ll drink to that!”: Clare Teal mid-recording

So now I might have to start badgering Mike again. Sorry Mike, but this album’s just begging for a sequel...

*A Tribute to Ella Fitzgerald –
Clare Teal with the Syd Lawrence
Orchestra, Leader Chris Dean
Produced by Mike Valentine, Chasing
the Dragon*

www.chasingthedragon.co.uk

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