

JAPAN'S VINYL REVOLUTION

Anyone who believes the humble long-playing record has had its day should head to Tokyo, where a new breed of vinyl obsessives is studiously keeping the art alive

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Masamitsu Kunugi is sitting in a silent exam room on the seventh floor of a Tokyo tower block on the campus of one of the city's most respected universities. Pencils freshly sharpened and lined up on the table, he is anxiously flicking through a

heavyweight textbook. It is 10 minutes before the exam starts. Pausing for a moment from his 11th-hour cramming, he looks up and smiles weakly: "I'm a little nervous. I don't really know what to expect. But I've been studying hard so – hopefully I'll pass." Kunugi is no fresh-faced student. He is a 52-year-old salaryman who, along with more than 100

other people (a motley selection of office workers, pensioners and young clubbers), is sitting Japan's first university 100-question, multiple choice examination devoted to the most unlikely of academic subjects – vinyl records. From the physical mechanics of vinyl pressing to the intricacies of Sixties Afro-Cuban jazz movements via the most iconic

Japanese record sleeve art, the new annual examination (the first was in Tokyo last October) covers a rainbow spectrum of all things vinyl related. (Sample question: Which Japanese artist designed the album jacket for Santana's 1973 live *Lotus* LP? Answer: Tadanori Yokoo.) "It may seem a bit strange sitting an exam on vinyl," Kunugi admits.

Spin doctor Yasushi Takeshima, organiser of the Record Kentei vinyl exam, left; a master being analysed at Toyo Kasei, below; and 'Oyoge! Taiyaki-kun', the biggest selling record in the plant's history

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refuses to die, vinyl is clearly a survivor. It defied doom-laden warnings of its demise in the Eighties as the CD shot into prominence – and is now entitled to have the last laugh as sales of its old rival are in freefall having been knocked off its number one spot by downloads. And slowly but surely, there are signs of growth. Last year, vinyl sales rose by 33 per cent in the United States with

vinyl examination. Immaculately clad in a dandyish black hat, bow tie and suit, Takeshima explains its motives: "Using downloads or CDs is like wearing Western clothes. But listening to a vinyl record is like wearing a kimono. It may not be as convenient but it is very special. In fact, the inconvenience makes it special." "There are many vinyl fans around the world but they may feel overlooked. This examination aims to create a connection between them."

It is an innovative – and perhaps vital – step for Toyo Kasei. The company, set up in 1959, produced more than 70 million records in its Seventies heyday, a figure that by last year had shrunk to a mere 400,000. But despite the challenges, it's determined to bring records back into fashion. Today among a workforce of 120, there are only seven craftsmen devoted to making vinyl – four of whom are over 60.

One of the company's more recent recruits is the fresh-faced 28-year-old Yoshinori Kobayashi, a former DJ and self-confessed vinyl obsessive, who is now in charge of Toyo Kasei's vinyl promotion. "It's my dream job because I love vinyl, but it's a tough task," he says. "Bringing records back into fashion is a challenge. But compared to falling CD sales, things are not quite so bad for records."

The company currently produces records for around 120 independent labels, mostly across Asia but also for a small number in Europe, including Italy's classical label Fone. It is Japan's reputation for top-quality craftsmanship along with cutting-edge technology that has kept Toyo Kasei in demand among independent labels at a time when larger music companies are cutting budgets.

On a Friday morning at the Toyo Kasei factory, located in the quiet Tsurumi neighbourhood of Yokohama city, just outside Tokyo, the vinyl department is busy at work.

The starting point for making a record, it transpires, is not an industrial space filled with machinery but a dimly lit studio, complete with a bright scarlet sofa. Jazz cascades through invisible speakers and a solitary



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"But I've been a big fan of vinyl records for over 30 years and thought it would be good way to put my knowledge to the test."

Vinyl. The word may bring to mind nostalgic memories of childhood record players and piles of records sitting in dusty boxes in the attic. Or perhaps it evokes slightly headier memories of dancing all night to DJs spinning house and techno on the decks.

Whatever the association, vinyl is today on the brink of a new chapter. Last year, more than six million vinyl albums were bought around the world. The figure, needless to say, is instantly dwarfed in the context of the indomitable rise of the digital download.

But as a musical form that

record lovers buying 2.5 million albums – compared to a rise of only 8.3 per cent in digital track sales (albeit at the more massive figure of 1.5 billion sales).

And there are few better places that illustrate a vinyl industry's attempt to fight back than Japan – currently home to the third biggest market for vinyl sales after the United States and Germany (the UK is fifth), and to the most devoted vinyl fans imaginable.

An unpalatable cocktail of financial crises combined with CD dominance and the rise of digital music has today led to the death of all but one pressing plant in the country. Toyo Kasei, Japan's sole surviving vinyl manufacturer, is now behind a number of imaginative initiatives aimed at reviving the nation's interest in vinyl – including the new "vinyl knowledge" examination at Meiji University in Tokyo.

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record spins under a spotlight on a large metal contraption.

Our arrival is greeted with a “shhhhhh” mouthed by a grey-haired man who proceeds to fiddle with buttons on a panel that would not look out of place on the Starship Enterprise. Finally, the track (by the saxophonist Ted Brown) comes to a close and he turns around to greet us. Kazumi Tezuka is the man in charge of “cutting” the master record – the first crucial stage of transferring music from CD or audiotapes onto vinyl by cutting grooves into a lacquer-covered disc with a tiny ruby.

With the help of countless scribbled drawings and a magnifying glass, Tezuka embarks on an erratic explanation of how his Seventies Georg Neumann equipment transfers the sound from the original music provided by the artist into the grooves of a record.

“The most crucial part is making sure there is no background noise or disturbance at all and that the sound is identical to the original sent to me,” he says. “Records are a very simple but effective way of recording music. What I love is that you can still listen to the sound preserved by records after 50 or 100 years.”

Cutting completed, next stop is the factory floor, where a cast of the master record is made three times using a silver coating procedure in order to create a strong cast for pressing.

Wandering past a bright room filled with bustling staff and whirring printers (the company today boosts its income printing DVDs and CDs), a door then opens onto the vinyl department – a silent room with a row of vintage-looking plating machines switched off. The atmosphere is almost churchlike.

Around the corner several staff are in the process of pressing records in pea green machines which clank out one record pressed by a 200-ton weight every 30 seconds. Standing next to the last vinyl pressing machine in Japan is uniform-clad craftsman Haruo Awano. Now 58, he has worked at the factory

for 40 years, witnessing the vinyl industry when it was at its busiest – and quietest.

“Things have changed a lot over the years,” he says. “When I started in 1970, we were so busy. We would work day and night, shifts around the clock, to keep up with demand.” Glancing around the near empty space, Haruo laughs: “Things are a bit easier today.”

The Toyo Kasei of 2011 emphasises quality, not quantity. The plant is famous the world over for being one of the last remaining factories to press, cut and label each record by hand, and

the business running,” he says. “But I feel there is an added mission. If we leave the industry, it will disappear.”

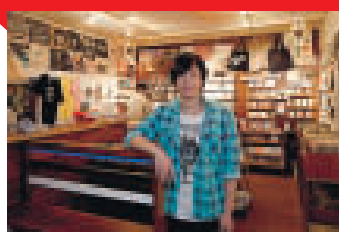
On the streets of Tokyo, the vinyl industry seems to be in surprisingly rude health. The HMV chain may be on the endangered list in Britain, but here, from trend-triggering teen hive Harajuku to the backstreets of neon-lit Shibuya, as well as in countless more local neighbourhoods, it does not take long to discover a surprising quantity of vinyl stores.

One haven for vinyl lovers is Shimokitazawa, a bohemian area



Vinyl exams From left: Hitoshi Ishimaru, floor manager of the Toyo Kasei record plant; Masaaki Matsuura (right) and Gikyo Nakamura of Jetset Records; a customer at Escalator vinyl store

A door opens onto the vinyl room, where we spy row upon row of silent plating machines. It's rather like being in a church



it's used by everyone from the small indie band wanting 100 copies of their seven-inch single to major labels putting out limited edition vinyl reissues (a recent example being Universal's lavish vinyl pressing of *Zenyatta Mondatta*, by the Police). The company's biggest hit to date is *Oyoge! Taiyaki-kun*, a single by singer Masato Shimon that sold over four million copies in 1975.

The company's Eiji Hirata admits that times are tough, but there's too much at stake to give up. “We are at the stage where we can make enough profit to keep



just west of Shibuya, with a famously low-key local vibe that has long been a magnet for musicians and artists alike. Among its legendary music stores is Flash Disc Ranch, whose entrance is marked by a makeshift mobile of fluoro records strung together at the bottom of a wooden staircase.

Inside the first-floor, attic-style space, more than 20,000 second-hand records of an eclectic array of musical preferences – from the Ramones to Jacques Brel – are bursting from record boxes. Step inside and you could be in New York or London, except that those cities don't really have anything like this any more.

Masao Tsubaki, a charismatic owner with long grey hair, explains: “My customers range from early twenties to fifties.

They're not necessarily hard-core vinyl fanatics but just regular music lovers. Gradually young people are discovering that vinyl sounds better than anything else.”

A clue to the future possible survival of the record industry can be found stuck to the record sleeves of many newly released albums – stickers highlighting that the cost of the record also includes free MP3 downloads of the same music. It turns out that this is a growing trend: labels are eschewing CDs altogether and simply opting for vinyl, plus a digital copy.

Nearby is another vinyl haven – Jet Set records. House music plays loudly as staff organise piles of records in the urban concrete and glass space. “Record lovers are loyal,” says merchandising manager Masaaki Matsuura. Many customers who started buying records when they were DJing a decade or so ago have become salarymen or fathers but they still come here to buy records. “CDs and digital music may be more convenient but the music is just data. It doesn't exist. People who

appreciate music as a physical thing will always come back to vinyl. The vinyl world may not get much bigger but I don't think record lovers here would ever let it disappear completely,” Matsuura says. Jet Set is not alone in its faith in vinyl's endurance, as evidenced by the

swiftly growing number of record stores that are ditching CDs altogether in favour of other “physical” music.

Among them is Escalator, a popular underground record shop that releases indie music on its Big Love label. Set up 10 years ago, the company today puts out 90 per cent of its music on vinyl and late last year released an album by the group Nite Jewel in a form that will be music to vinyl-lovers' ears: it's only available on cassette.

Sitting at a wobbly wooden table, Masashi Naka of Escalator attempts to find words that do justice to his passion. “Why do people love vinyl?” he asks.

“It's like a pair of Levi 501s. People always come back to the classics. You can try different things and follow trends, but you cannot beat the classics.” 