



# Paper Trail Publishing



## TIME

## FOR VINYL

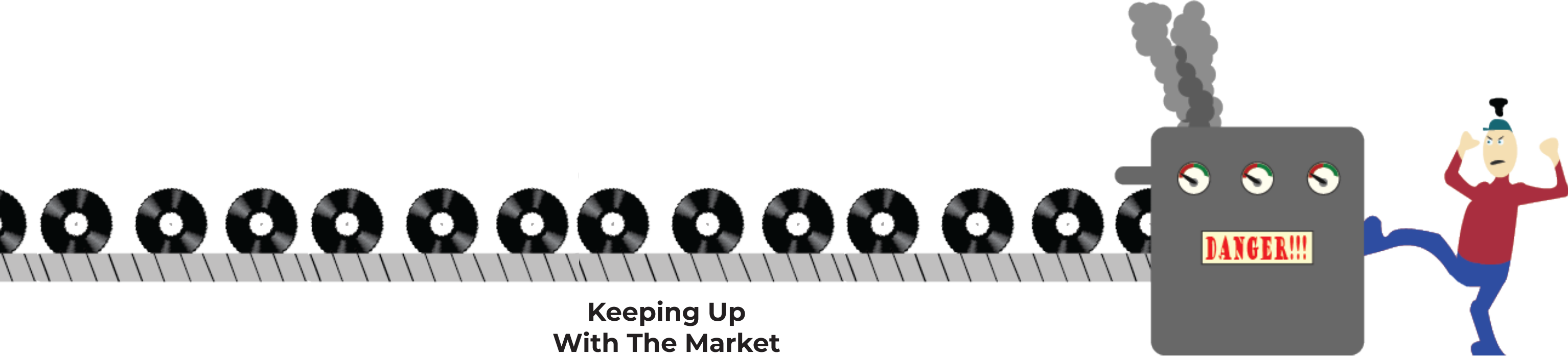
### Pressing plants feel the strain with vinyl records back in the groove

By Mark Guarino

The commercial revival of vinyl records is a good thing for many people: Record labels, recording artists, audiophile collectors, independent record shops — all for whom the increase in sales each year is considered a jolt of life in what otherwise is considered a growing public disinterest in owning tangible music. But for Matt Earley, more people wanting more vinyl records presents a problem: The six presses that make his

records at Gotta Groove Records in Cleveland are more than 40 years old, which means extra shifts and increased production is a recipe for potential disaster, especially when orders are lined up for months. “It keeps me up at night,” he says. “My biggest worry is what is going to break when, not if it will break. Everything breaks.” So Earley prepares by budgeting heavily, which he says is just the reality of operating a record-pressing plant. His is one of only about a dozen or so left in the United States that face similar challenges. Despite the increased public demand for vinyl records, spanning mass reissue campaigns of premium-quality vinyl by classic bands such as Pink Floyd to small seven-inch runs by local bands to sell at gigs, press operators say that profit margins are narrowing because of the





increased costs involved in locating, refurbishing, installing, operating, and ultimately repairing machines that are no longer made but are pushed harder and faster than they were in their heyday.

“That old machinery will continue to run if you change the parts, but at what cost? If you run a press 24 hours, six or seven days a week, there is one rule of thumb: You are wearing the machine out twice as fast,” says Bob Roczynski, president of Record Products of America, a 38-year-old company in Hamden, Conn. that is one of the last in the United States that supplies machine parts to the existing plants in operation today. He says the current refurbished machine stock was originally designed to run eight to 10 hours each day for one shift. Today, many plants report that demand is forcing their machines to run more than...

...three shifts up to six days each week.

“What’ll happen is companies will continue to push them as long as they are getting the volume of records they need and they’re making money,” he says. “They’re just going to have to keep putting money to keep those things running if they want to keep their doors open.”



-Vinyl Machinery being overworked

## Keeping Up With The Market

This is a boom time for vinyl, so the doors are off their hinges. Between 2006 and 2020, U.S. vinyl sales increased more than 2,500 percent to 23.3 million units, according to SoundScan, and that doesn’t include overseas demand, or sales made directly from record-label Web sites. While CD and digital music sales still factor into music sales, both have taken massive hits due to streaming. Though more CDs were sold than vinyl LPs in 2020, the revenue from vinyl surpassed that from CDs for the first time since the 1980s.

At Third Man Records in Nashville, vinyl is all they sell. In fact, “Lazaretto,” the current solo album by founder Jack White, set the U.S. record for the biggest-selling vinyl record of any year since Pearl Jam in 1994. The album’s sales hit 40,000 in just seven days in June. Ben Blackwell, in charge of...

...overseeing Third Man’s vinyl production and distribution, says combined U.S. and overseas pressings have already topped 100,000 copies.

“The thing will not stop selling,” he says. “That record has been on the press since the beginning of May and it hasn’t come off the press since.”

White is an avowed vinyl fetishist: Most Third Man records receive special colored, or multicolored pressings; his newest is the ultimate feat. It includes two hidden tracks beneath the label that play at different speeds, one side plays from the inside to the outer rim, and it also features a hologram that appears when the needle is placed in the “dead wax” area.

To make that happen, the label tapped United Record Pressing in Nashville, one of the oldest record plants in the United States, dating...

...back to 1949 — Vee Jay Records and Motown were among its earliest clients — and now the largest. This summer, the company announced a \$5.5 million expansion, adding 16 to its current stock of 22 presses, which are currently running 24 hours a day, six days a week, producing up to 40,000 records per day. A new building had to be acquired to get the additional presses installed and operational, and once that happens — “as soon as possible,” promises Jay Millar, United’s marketing director — the company will double its production.

“Market demand” is why United is investing in the plant, Millar says, as the company typically deals with a backlog of orders that can stretch back several months. “Right now we’re so bogged down and trying to keep everybody happy, so it was the only way we could keep up,” he says.

## A Delicate Balance

Once the machines are in place, learning how to operate and maintain them often requires coaxing older mechanics and engineers out of retirement for several months or more as consultants who can then transfer decades of experience to younger workers. Lack of apprenticeship in the early days of record pressing has led to this problem, as has the overall lack of skilled labor. However, most plants say once they find workers who can commit to the significant learning curve, they tend to stay.

“The majority of our [23] employees have been with us since the beginning,” says Earley, whose plant presses the ongoing catalog of Guided By Voices, the vinyl-centric Ohio band...

...“You have to find the right type of people who care about what they are doing and can go through many months of learning to try and do it right.”

The balance between increasing product demand and the bullwhipping of antiquated machinery is precarious and many say it is not yet known what impact vinyl's popularity in future years will make on the ability of the plants to manufacture them.

“There’s a tipping point at some point, but I’m not sure who decides where that tipping point is,” says Blackwell.



-Crowded Vinyl store

“There’s a tipping point at some point, but I’m not sure who decides where that tipping point is,” says Blackwell. In the meantime, most plant operators say they enjoy showing off their facilities because of a renewed interest by the public to see records roll off the presses. United, for example, holds Friday tours and bands often perform, or conduct photo shoots, on the plant floor. “We are fans,” Kassem says...

...of the appeal of his operation in Kansas. “I started this as a hobby and it’s still a hobby. We just tell people we’re storytellers.”

## Vinyl Record Sales In The U.S. (in millions of units)

2006	0.9
2007	1
2008	1.8
2009	2.5
2010	2.8
2011	3.9
2012	4.6
2013	6.1
2014	9.2
2015	11.9
2016	13.1
2017	14.3
2018	16.8
2019	18.8
2020	23.3
2021	41.7

SOURCE: Nielsen  
Soundscan

## Popular Albums Found on Vinyl

