The Biggest Music Comeback of 2014: Vinyl Records

Sales of LPs Surge 49% but Aging Factories Struggle to Keep Pace

Vinyl records hang on the wall at Quality Record Pressings, part of Acoustic Sounds, in Salina, Kan. In November. Acoustic Sounds ...
By **NEIL SHAH**  
Dec. 11, 2014 1:38 p.m. ET

Nearly eight million old-fashioned vinyl records have been sold this year, up 49% from the same period last year, industry data show. Younger people, especially indie-rock fans, are buying records in greater numbers, attracted to the perceived superior sound quality of vinyl and the ritual of putting needle to groove.

But while new LPs hit stores each week, the creaky machines that make them haven’t been manufactured for decades, and just one company supplies an estimated 90% of the raw vinyl that the industry needs. As such, the nation’s 15 or so still-running factories that press records face daily challenges with breakdowns and supply shortages.

Their efforts point to a problem now bedeviling a curious corner of the music industry. The record-making business is stirring to life—but it’s still on its last legs.

Robert Roczynski’s dozen employees work overtime at a small factory in Hamden, Conn., to make parts for U.S. record makers struggling to keep abreast of the revived interest in LPs. Mr. Roczynski’s firm says orders for steel molds, which give records their flat, round shape, have tripled since 2008.

“They’re trying to bring the industry back, but the era has gone by,” says Mr. Roczynski, 67 years old, president of Record Products of America Inc., one of the country’s few suppliers of parts for the industry.
Many producers, including the largest, United Record Pressing in Nashville, Tenn., are adding presses, but there has yet to be a big move by entrepreneurs to inject capital and confidence into this largely artisanal industry. Investors aren’t interested in sinking serious cash into an industry that represents 2% of U.S. music sales.

Record labels are waiting months for orders that used to get filled in weeks. That is because pressing machines spit out only around 125 records an hour. To boost production, record factories are running their machines so hard—sometimes around the clock—they have to shell out increasing sums for maintenance and repairs.

Large orders from superstars create bottlenecks, while music fans search the bins in vain for new releases by The War on Drugs, a Philadelphia indie group, or French electronic duo Daft Punk. More requests for novelty LPs—multi-colored, scented, glow-in-the-dark—gum things up further.

Nick Blandford, managing director of Secretly Group, a family of independent labels, in Bloomington, Ind., is putting in orders now to make sure his artists’ LPs are in stores for next year’s “Record Store Day” in April.

To get more machines, record-plant owners have been scouring the globe for mothballed presses, snapping them up for $15,000 to $30,000, and plunking down even more to refurbish them.

Ryan Raffaelli, an assistant professor at Harvard Business School who studies what he calls “technology re-emergence,” is familiar with this industrial netherworld.
Swiss mechanical watches, fountain pens and independent bookstores all re-emerged from the doldrums by reinventing themselves for consumers and then attracting investment from entrepreneurs, he says.

“The question is whether there’s enough demand for vinyl to make this jump. And it’s too soon to tell,” Mr. Raffaelli says.

There are lots of hurdles in the way of any such reinvention.

Just one company, Thai Plastic & Chemicals, which has a three-person shop in Long Beach, Calif., supplies the vast majority—as much as 90%, the firm says—of the raw polyvinyl chloride compound needed to make records across the country.

Jack Cicerello, TPC manager for North America, says after his old company, Keyser Century, closed in the mid-2000s, there were no suppliers of raw vinyl left in the U.S.

Thai Plastic & Chemicals, a Thai maker of plastic products, tapped Mr. Cicerello to expand its presence in North America, and he and some colleagues proposed launching a side business of shuttling Thai-made raw vinyl to American record-pressing plants.
But things can easily go awry. In October, a truck carrying raw vinyl to Quality Record Pressings, a plant in Salina, Kan., broke down just as the plant was ramping up production for Black Friday. “We almost ran out of vinyl,” says Gary Salstrom, QRP’s general manager.

Another step early in the record-making process—making the “master” record from which copies are made—is even more archaic.

Len Horowitz, 62, is one of a handful of people who know how to fix sensitive electronic components involved in record mastering. In September, one mastering firm’s cutting lathe—used to engrave music from an analog tape or digital file onto a blank disc that becomes the master—broke down. It took weeks to come back online.

“It’s one thing to be short presses, or short capacity,” Mr. Horowitz says. “If you can’t cut anything, everything stops—a real panic begins.”

The actual process of pressing records is surprisingly labor-intensive. During a visit to Brooklynphono, a smaller plant in New York City, the pressing machines required constant monitoring. Minor things kept going wrong, requiring workers to make adjustments.
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“Things fall apart,” says Thomas Bernich, who runs the plant with his wife Fern. “I get lots of butterflies.” He could make a new machine, but that would cost him upwards of $250,000, which is prohibitively expensive.

Once the equipment is in place, technicians are needed to train younger staff. But maintaining the industry’s human capital as veterans like Mr. Roczynski retire is another big challenge.

Mr. Roczynski has been in the business since age 16, when he began working at his father’s company. In 1946, Mr. Roczynski’s father, Stanley, was tapped by CBS Records, which pressed records at America’s first LP plant in Bridgeport, Conn., to design equipment. The elder Mr. Roczynski eventually made record equipment the main focus of his factory.

Some 50 years later, Mr. Roczynski is acting as an equipment broker to connect people seeking old machines to those unloading them, for a fee—though it is getting harder to find anything usable. Since Mr. Roczynski has no one to pass Record Products to, he’ll probably sell when he retires—but he says he wants to stay on as a consultant for a while.

“We’ve done all the work,” he says. “Why throw it away?”