

# Spinning it again and recording on the gold standard

Over the past few years I have transferred many LPs to CD for friends. When they learned that I could take their beloved vinyl and make copies to play in the car or elsewhere, I became very popular and very busy. It wasn't because I had a monopoly on the technology — most of them had computers with sound cards and turntables, but they were too befuddled by the technology to attempt the projects themselves.

Admittedly, some of the early programs designed for audio transfer were daunting, requiring a knowledge of electronics that many music lovers lack. Some software just offered too many options. What was needed was a straightforward program that a complete beginner could use without making a dozen calls to technical support.

## Enter the software

Acoustica's Spin It Again is a nifty piece of software that takes the guesswork out of transferring music from LPs, 45s, 78s, cassettes or other analog sources to compact disc. Unlike many such programs, Spin It Again assumes the user is a complete beginner and relies on the software to do the work. (The program is compatible with Microsoft Windows only).

I spent part of a Saturday getting familiar with the program, which is incredibly user-friendly. A setup wizard takes one step-by-step through each process as screenshots show exactly how to connect audio sources to the computer. Those needing some extra assurance can follow along with the voice on the setup wizard. It's nearly impossible to go wrong by following the directions.

Depending on your computer, you'll likely need either a male RCA to eighth-inch mini stereo cable (two RCA connectors on one end and a mini-jack connector on the other; run from receiver or amplifier "recording out" to computer soundcard), a standard RCA cable (two RCA connectors on each end connected to a mini-jack stereo adapter; runs from receiver/amp to the soundcard). If you have a laptop without a line-in connection to the soundcard, you'll need a USB soundcard to connect to the laptop's USB port.

After making all connections, the recording level wizard can optimize levels before starting. From there, it's as simple as deciding whether to record a vinyl LP, record a cassette tape or load a sound file. To record an LP, set the needle on the record and click the record tab on the software. Doing so opens two waveform displays that track the levels of the sound as it's recorded.

Once one side of an album is finished playing, the software pauses, allowing time to flip the record and begin recording side two. After a complete album is recorded, the program can be used to automatically detect tracks and split them into individual songs prior to burning. The default settings work fine most of the time. However, if you're transferring audio from a live album or from a record whose songs flow into the next without delay, it's best to manually assign the tracks for accuracy.

Lastly, recordings that suffer from surface noise can be "cleaned" using a variety of tools such as "vinyl declick & decrackle," "light clean and eq" or "clean anything"! From there, it's easy to create MP3, Ogg Vorbis, Wave or Windows Media Audio files to store on a computer, transfer to a player or burn to a CD. In this case, I wanted to burn a CD so I saved my projects as Wave files, set CD burner settings and unleashed the laser!

## The hardware

I have several LPs (either out-of-print on CD or audiophile copies) that I've wanted to transfer to CD. Given my druthers, I'll play the vinyl versions at home, but I also want backup copies as well as something to play in my vehicle or a portable stereo.

If I'm going to take the time to transfer audio, I want to



do it right the first time. This was the perfect opportunity to test another product that's intrigued me: Mobile Fidelity's Ultradisc CD-R. The discs have a photosensitive dye that is designed to improve the burning process as well as a reinforced coating for improved scratch resistance. These 24-karat gold discs are designed for archival recording (reported to last for 300 years) and can't be burned at speeds higher than 12X. Although it's tempting to let the CD drive do its business at the highest speed possible, the best results come from burning in real time (1X). Doing so reduces the chances of errors and gives the laser time to form proper pits on the disc. If you've ever burned a CD-R and then had it "hang up" or mistrack in a player, chances are it was from burning error. Also, there is a nasty thing called buffer underrun error that can result when the computer can't transfer data to the recorder fast enough to keep the recorder's internal memory or "buffer" full. If the speed falters, the writing or burn stops and the disc is toast. Anyone who has burned a few CD-Rs has probably experienced this.

However, burning in real time is often easier said than done. Although many professional stand-alone burners are designed to burn at 1x, many home computers will default to a 4x, 8x or "fastest" setting when burning CDs. Spin It Again comes with Goldenhawk burning software, which allows users to manually choose a speed, including 1x.

## The results

I chose three albums and two cassettes to test the software and CD-Rs: Atlanta Rhythm Section, *Champagne Jam* (MFSL 1-038), Styx, *Pieces Of Eight* (Nautilus NR-15), Phil Lynott, *Solo In Soho* (Warner Bros., WB M5 3405, cassette), Planet P Project, *Planet P* (Geffen, M5G 4000, cassette), Emerson, Lake & Palmer (Earmark, EAR 4205LP, 180-gram vinyl).

My MoFi copy of *Champagne Jam* sounds great when playing the songs, but there is surface crackle between every track. After recording, I ran the file through the "vinyl declick & decrackle" setting. The result: All of the between-track noise was eliminated without mashing up the music. A burn at 1x on the Ultradisc yielded an excellent copy, retaining the rich swampy groove of the LP. Playing the CD-R copy back and comparing it to the vinyl, it was very difficult to say which was which.

My copy of *Pieces Of Eight* plays flawlessly for the most part. On the end of side two, as the final song, "Aku-Aku," trails off, there is some very noticeable crackle. I didn't want to prematurely end the track at some arbitrary time simply to remove the problem, so I let the software take over. Using the "light clean and eq" setting, I was able to eliminate any hint of the offending noise. The result was a CD that sounds very close to analog. I was particularly pleased to hear the clarity with which drummer John Panozzo's sticking on the bell of the ride cymbal during "Renegade" comes through. A very convincing copy of the LP.

I've labeled many of the CDs I've burned in the past with a permanent black-ink marker. However, the UltraDiscs, like MoFi's other gold CDs, feature a black surface. MoFi recommends Zig Memory System's Imm opaque writers. The pens

are acid-free, lightfast, waterproof, fade-proof, non-bleeding, odorless and non-smearing once dry. They also come in white, silver or gold, any of which would work fine.

I picked up Planet P Project's 1983 *Planet P* on cassette a while back for a buck. The cartridge features two bonus tracks that didn't make it on the original LP and plays without a hitch. I recorded the first side, flipped the tape over and recorded side two and began the steps to burn the audio to CD. First off, the program asked if I wanted to let it find tracks and make splits, which I did. The program "found" 15 tracks; in reality there are only 12, but that is easily remedied. One nice feature of the program is its "preview" function, which plays a sample from the beginning and end of each "track." I listened to these snippets to determine where the extra three tracks were — two songs have low-volume fade-in and -outs that threw the program for a loop. But knowing that track one and track two were really just one track, I could correct it by right-clicking within the track two box and selecting "merge left" in the commands. With a simple mouse click the two sections were brought together as one. Then I repeated the process to bring the other track's estranged sections together. Done!

The program has another cool function that really makes things easy when creating a whole album from two sides of a tape or LP. There is an inevitable delay created when you flip a tape from side one to side two. On the waveform screen this shows up as a silent section between the final track on side one and the first track on side two. Obviously I didn't want a 15- or 20-second delay on my CD when I burned it, but it was not a problem. The program just ignores the blank "track" and brings everything together neatly, inserting the same space between all tracks.

The late, great Phil Lynott's first solo release, *Solo In Soho*, is one of the forgotten gems in the Thin Lizzy frontman's catalog. Like the Planet P release, *Soho* features 12 songs. Again I let Spin It Again take a shot at picking the tracks. This time the software nailed them, and all that was left was to let the program do a light clean on the recording before burning. Perfect.

Lastly, I had to get my reissue of ELP's first album onto gold disc. This Earmark reissue packs a sonic wallop that must be heard to be believed. The music seems to leap off the album, and on cuts such as the thunderous "Knife Edge," one can almost hear Greg Lake breathing between lyrics. It's when transferring audio from LPs such as this one that the CD-Rs really shine. The copy faithfully captures that "melt in your mouth richness while your ears bleed" duality of the vinyl pressing.

If you've got a stack of LPs or tapes you've been wanting to transfer to CD but thought you'd need a degree in audio engineering to do it, Spin It Again is the program for you. Install the program, follow the directions and you'll be making great copies of your records and tapes in no time. Burn them on MoFi's Ultradiscs and you'll have copies that not only look great but sound great, too. This is a winning combination.

— Todd Whitesel

{System requirements: Pentium 700 Mhz processor, Windows 95/98/NT/2K/ME/XP, 256 MB RAM and soundcard. A trial download is available at [www.acoustica.com/spinitagain.com](http://www.acoustica.com/spinitagain.com).}

