

Disc Revolution

though; if the bottom layer of plastic (the side from which the disc is "read") is scratched, it can interfere with the laser beam, causing an audible 'skip' in the program. With proper care, however, a CD will last forever. The standard storage case is called a jewel box. Also made of plastic, it provides a much more durable storage facility than a cardboard LP jacket.

Perhaps it is the "forever" aspect of CDs that has facilitated their rapid acceptance by the public. Imagine passing on your treasured collection of music to your children or grandchildren — still in mint condition for them to enjoy and do likewise.

The proliferation of CDs has been so rapid that some retailers in Edmonton (which is not

higher.

Sound quality of the discs themselves can vary as widely as prices. A new digitally recorded release is going to sound better than a CD reissue of something recorded in monaural in 1964; the main advantage in buying the reissue is that its not going to wear out.

In order to give consumers some idea of what to expect, CD manufacturers and record companies have adopted a three letter SPARS code, which identifies the recording under one of three designations: 1) DDD - digital tape recorder used during session recording, mixing and mastering, 2) ADD - analog tape recorder used during session recording, digital used during subsequent

ents are still in the testing stage."

exactly the CD capital of the world) report doing up to 40 per cent of their dollar sales in CDs.

Since CDs cost about twice as much as LPs, or between \$20 and \$24, this figure represents a lower percentage of actual units, but the market share of CDs continues to increase steadily.

Supply/Demand

Record companies willingly predict that the days of the LP format are numbered. And if it were not for supply problems that have plagued the fledgling CD industry, it is safe to state that their market share would be even

mixing and mastering, or 3) AAD - analog tape recorder used during session recording and mixing, digital used during mastering. These codes don't tell the whole story, such as whether or not the original analog recording was crapola, but they at least give some idea to us poor, bewildered buyers.

The area of supply warrants considerable further discussion, because it is the area in which CD player owners have encountered frustration with since the introduction of the CD format.

Basically the supply of CDs is not keeping up with exponentially growing demand, which has consistently outstripped even the industry's most optimistic projections. CDs are difficult to produce compared with records and tapes; manufacturing conditions

are stringent, and to date most of the plants in operation are in either Japan or Europe.

One plant in Canada recently opened in the Toronto area and more are planned (possibly including one in Grande Prairie), but these are apparently already committed to export production, a rather ironic situation since any CD currently available in Canada is imported, whether or not it is designated (and priced) thus.

Despite these supply problems, the good news is that the CD market in Canada is actually in better shape than in many other countries. We have some of the lowest prices on CDs in the world, comparing favourably with virtually everyone except Japan and the U.S.A. Retailers generally take only half the margin they do on records and tapes; this means lower profit against a higher inventory cost, another reason that prices are unlikely to drop unless wholesale prices come down significantly.

CD's designated as imports are more expensive, ranging from \$26 to as high as \$36. Whether a disc is sold as a domestic or import depends on which channels of distribution it enters the country by. In any case, retailers' general advice to buyers of CD's is to pick it up when you have the chance, because you might not see that elusive title again for awhile.

Indeed, demand is such that many titles listed in record company catalogues simply aren't available. The record companies, who are currently forced to buy production time at a limited number of facilities, must pick and choose which titles to produce and even then a limited run of each title is manufactured. This maxim also means that alternative artists and independent label releases are, for the time being at least, next to impossible to find on CD.

As for the future of prices, a popular gambit among audio dealers is to tell prospective buyers of CD players that, yes, those prices are coming down, down, down. This won't happen until the supply catches up to the demand, in fact, most retailers feel that we can expect a short term increase of \$1 to \$3 per disc over the next year or so. This increase reflects the falling Canadian dollar against the Japanese yen and European currencies, the supply and demand situation, and also the pending renegotiation of artists' royalties on CDs. To date, these royalties have actually been lower than those paid on LP and cassette sales, the rationale being to give the companies a chance to adjust to the CD market. Artists feel that their share of CD sales should comprise the same percentage that they receive for LP and cassette sales, therefore a higher royalty for CDs. Frank Zappa (that well-known eloquent statesman and musician) is currently arguing this case in court concerning his own recordings.

In the long term, the prognosis for CD prices is some sort of decrease, but no one knows for certain when it will take place and how much it will be. So, the message here is, if you've been waiting for that mythical price decrease before jumping in, you might as well go ahead and invest now.

Digital/Analog

One exciting aspect of the CD format that the record companies are slowly catching on to is the time capacity of the discs. A CD will hold up to 75 minutes of music, compared to an optimum of about 40 for an LP, which will hold more though with a corresponding loss in signal strength and quality.

The 75 minute limit has been taken advantage of widely with classical music releases since day one, but labels have been slower to catch on with pop issues. This may be because the traditional length of a rock album has always been 40 minutes or less. With the impending domination of CDs (and cassettes, which can hold even more than CDs), this limit becomes arbitrary, giving artists the opportunity to release more of their work without saddling consumers with the cost of a double LP.

A few record companies have taken advantage of already, releasing CD-only compilations that utilize the time capacity of the disc. In the U.S., for instance, Motown has released a series of CD's featuring two complete albums per disc by some of their more popular artists. Joe Jackson's latest release, *Big World*, is another good example. Released as a three-sided album on two LPs, it easily fits onto one CD or cassette.

To digress briefly on the subject of cassettes, record companies have been luring music buyers away from LPs with extra tracks on cassettes for years now, since cassettes are cheaper to manufacture than LPs. The culmination of this practice must

surely be the recent Cure compilation, *Standing On The Beach*, which contains 12, count 'em, extra selections on the cassette (all the non-LP B-sides from the singles). It is also interesting to note that the CD issue of *Standing On the Beach*, rather than the B-sides, contains five previously unreleased live versions of songs.

The Bruce Springsteen album *Born In The U.S.A.* makes a good case for the regular inclusion of previously unreleased B-sides on CD issues. In this case, each of the seven singles from the album had an unreleased B-side. As a Springsteen completist, you had to shell out regular price for the CD PLUS another seven times \$2.49 to get the extra seven tracks on singles. An awakening on the part of record companies in this respect would be most welcome!

Future now

Finally, what about the future of CD? The possible applications are still being discovered and developed, but by the 1990's you can expect CD's to carry video as well as audio information, contain computer programs interfaceable with other systems and, who knows, maybe they'll get those food processing attachments straightened out after all.

So, having read this far, you've become a knowledgeable CD consumer, ready to laugh in the face of audio salesmen when they tell you that CD prices are coming down next week, ready to grin in the face of record store clerks who tell you that the new R.E.M. disc will be out sometime this decade, and ready to enjoy a lifetime of listening free of clicks, pops, scratches, skips, tape hiss, surface noise, rumble . . .

A word of warning though: You must be careful to avoid the "CD-snob syndrome", prevalent mainly among former "audio-snobs". This happens to people who, upon hearing their first CD, decide that they can't stand listening to LPs any longer, and henceforth pity those poor souls who remain the helpless victims of tracking error. And remember, a CD is a perfect mirror of sound, so you might just find out that your favourite diva has actually been singing off-key all these years!

Buying guide

Following is a basic guide to buying (or selling) CD software in Edmonton:

- 1) Any suburban (mall) record store will carry a basic current best seller and catalogue selection, including the various A & A's, Mister Sound, Sound Savings, Music World, et al.
- 2) **Auracle Records**, 10808 82 Avenue, carries a slightly more alternative selection than average, also import and domestic LPs, cassettes, dance EPs, etc.
- 3) **Fantasia Classical Records**, 10020 103 Street, features one of the city's best classical selections with some items you might not find elsewhere.
- 4) **Marquee**, 10702 101 Street, has one of the better overall selections in Edmonton, all types of music.
- 5) **R.O.W. Entertainment**, West Edmonton Mall Phase 3, has an average selection but generally holds the line on prices at \$19.99.
- 6) **Sam The Record Man**, West Edmonton Mall Phase 3, has a good overall selection including some imports you might not see elsewhere.
- 7) **Sound Connection**, 10744 101 Street, stocks a basic selection of CDs, also pays \$7 for used CDs and resells for \$14, also new and used LPs, cassettes, imports, collectibles.
- 8) **SU Records**, HUB Mall, currently only carries classical CDs but will likely be expanding into jazz and pop in time for the holiday season.

Publications: There are three magazines catering to CD buyers. *Digital Audio and Compact Disc Review* is an American publication focusing on all types of music, reviewing all new CD issues (including reissues of older LPs) on a 10 point system for sound quality and performance, plus features on equipment and performers, catalogue listings, etc. *Gramophone* is an ironically titled British magazine devoted to classical music. *Which Compact Disc?* is another British magazine covering all types of music, same rating system as *Digital Audio* but possibly a little more objective, equipment features, etc. It should be pointed out that all three of these magazines are heavily advertising orientated, much like general audio magazines or, indeed, any other magazine that focuses on a specialized interest.

