Subject: Re: Analog vs Digital
Posted by Wayne Parham on Wed, 27 Apr 2011 21:50:20 GMT
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Honestly, I think once a person gets past the level of mid-fi, when their system is capable of good high-fidelity sound, the biggest problems with source material are actually at the mastering and post-production level, not so much in the distribution media. Now, this of course, assumes that the source equipment, amplifiers and speakers are very good and the distribution format/media is too. You can't really compare a scratched or worn vinyl album with a CD, for example. But if the source media is in good shape and the system components are good, I think the biggest differences in sound quality are in the master sources.

Think about how many times you've listened to a really clear CD or record album. One that has no tape hiss and where the instruments and vocals are clear. It sounds great whether on CD or vinyl. Now think about the times when you've heard an older recording that had tape hiss and reduced top-octave "sparkle". Or where the mix is compressed and pushed to the point of distortion. I've heard these kinds of recordings on both vinyl and CD. It kind of doesn't matter what the distribution media is - If the source master is poor, there's nothing going to help that sound better.

But back to the really good stuff. When I hear a recording that has been done well, it has very black silent passages with no hiss. It has smooth vocals without breakup. It has bass note progressions that are powerful but also clear. The top-octave has sparkle and air without sounding etched or artificial. I can listen to it on certain vinyl pressings (like half-speed masters) and it sounds perfect. Or on a digital copy that is uncompressed, it also sounds perfect.

What sounds less than perfect are the cheaper vinyl pressings and sometimes CDs. They just sound slightly artificial. Some MPEGS and audio streams are even worse. They're like listening to FM radio. Compressed dynamic range, bandwidth limited, who knows what all else.

On the other hand, one new format I'm really liking is BluRay. Some of those have stunning audio quality. You can hear the difference right away. It's a lossless digital format, and when combined with good mastering and post-production, the sound quality is excellent. I'm wondering just how close they can come to those thousand dollar tapes.