

# RC investigates

Most record collectors want to keep their virgin vinyl in a pristine state and use protective inner sleeves to store records inside their card outer sleeve. But what type of inner is best? RC's news editor Tim Jones got the inside track...

## Inner sense

Presuming that you don't leave all your vinyl albums sealed and unplayed inside their card sleeves or "jacket", then, as a player of records, you'll be aware that most are housed in an inner sleeve or 'bag', within the album's picture sleeve. And once you've decided that you're going to actually play your vinyl, even if only on the odd occasion, you'll expose your beloved disc to potential adulteration by dust, static electricity and, God forbid, finger-marks or spittle. Hence, after you've had your sonic fill, you'll be obliged to clean your vinyl and then store it in an inner sleeve, safely isolated from all the pollutants the world outside the sleeve is heir to. But what's the best way to keep your precious platter in fine fettle? The generic paper sleeve provided by the record company, or one produced by a specialist manufacturer of protective sheaths? (Surely an opportunity for Richard Branson.)

Stock paper inner sleeves are usually made from plain white paper and, even if it is acid-free, the removal and re-placing of your vinyl, in and out of the sleeve, leaves the record prone to marking or scratching, as well as the vinyl itself potentially degrading the paper over time, so that it sheds paper dust onto the surface of the LP. Hence, some record companies use clear or matt polyethylene inner sleeves, ranging from 1mm to 3mm thick, often with rounded corners to make the handling, extraction and insertion of the long-player easier. Then again, poly-lined paper sleeves combine the best of both worlds, the paper making it easier to hold and then take out and replace the vinyl, while the poly lining cuts out static electricity and reduces wear and tear in the handling of the disc, as well as being resistant to solvents, bases, acids and oxidants. Additionally, some specialist audiophile labels like US Mobile Fidelity sell "archival grade" (HDPE, High Density Polyethylene) sleeves, making for ultra-easy placement of the record into and out of its outer sleeve.

Polyethylene was invented in Germany in 1898, and Neoplastik of Braunschweig, Germany, appears to be the sole remaining manufacturer of HDPE inner sleeves in Europe. RC spoke to its proprietor, Dr Thomas Licht, who took over the company in 2012, and asked him to explain Neoplastik's position as the last man standing in the field.

"I took over Neoplastik to run its polyethylene packaging business, but when I went to the factory, I found that there was an old Beasley-French machine, made in the UK in the 60s, that sat in the corner and was used every once in a while to produce record inner sleeves. In 1985, it was producing 400 sleeves a minute, when the market was much bigger. But I couldn't get an agreement with the unions on how to keep the whole plant going, so the company went into insolvency in mid-2013. However, I did a lot of research on the internet into who the company supplied inner sleeves to, and if there were any alternative suppliers in Europe. I couldn't find any. So, that July, I decided to continue supplying vinyl pressing plants that had been customers, such as Record Industry, Pallas, Celebrate, GZ, Optimal,



Classic 60s technology, still producing quality inner sleeves. They don't make them like this any more, more's the pity... A gap in the market for *Dragon's Den*, perhaps?

Delga, The Vinyl Factory – all the main plants in Europe and the UK. And I found that some of the plants in the US buy from the European plants – indirectly they get their sleeves from us. By the end of 2013, we were turning over a good profit and so we're expanding as vinyl sales increase. I realised that 90 per cent of albums come in a paper bag, and you can get paper bags from east Germany. But the inner sleeves sold by many record shops and internet traders are ours, or Nagaoka sleeves from Japan.

"HDPE sleeves have major advantages over paper inners. Paper ones have one smooth side but one rough side, so that they can be printed on, and this means that they are more prone to marking the vinyl. Furthermore, a lot of collectors are unaware of the fact that a HDPE bag should have paper that looks old, not bright white. Pristine paper is more expensive and naturally yellower, ash-free and unrecycled, while bright white HDPE has optical enhancers, costs a third less, but is lower quality and, with continuous usage, will shed particles and leave paper dust on the vinyl. We've also sourced black-dyed paper from Spain in grades from 60g to 120g that's equal to the best cream paper.

As for the poly inner itself, you need to ensure that it's not PVC – you can tell by its smell, which is produced by artificial softeners. Polyethylene has no softeners, which can leach into paper or onto the vinyl, and though low-grade polyethylene can produce a white dust, HDPE sleeves will not, and they have the bonus of an anti-static additive that prevents vinyl from sticking to them. Static electricity attracts dust and you need to minimise its presence. Also, HDPE has a melting point of around 130C, so it's stable in most heating conditions and it copes with humidity very well. Unlike a paper sleeve, there's no hole in the centre and so there's no access for humidity or dust. I should also point out another small but important

point to collectors, that the HDPE sleeve is actually fractionally longer at the rear than the front of the sleeve. You may think that it's a manufacturing fault, but it's actually designed like that to make it easier to slide the record in and out of the sleeve".

Neoplastik is hoping to expand its production from 12" to other sizes and is seeking more Beasley-French machines, though Dr Licht thinks the plant's other machines may have ended up in north Africa or Russia. If you see one, that's a collectable worth picking up!

If you know of the location of any machines, let us know via [rceditorial@metropolis.co.uk](mailto:rceditorial@metropolis.co.uk).

**It's a black and white issue. HDPE inner sleeves are the bag we're into...**

