

## ANALOG CORNER

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### Down to the Nitty Gritty

#### Nitty Gritty's faith-based 2.5Fi-XP record-cleaning machine

Three American companies make velvet-lipped record-cleaning machines: Nitty Gritty, SOTA, and VPI. Two use full-size record platters; Nitty Gritty does not. Instead, a grooved rubber idler wheel on a sprung pivot spins the record, which rests on a round, label-sized piece of hard plastic, topped by a grippy puck of hard, foamy material that fits over the spindle.

Nitty Gritty has been making and upgrading such record-cleaning machines since the early 1980s. Their latest model, the 2.5Fi-XP (\$899), adds the convenience of two separate fluid chambers and hand pumps, and has a new venting system that permits the cleaning of more records before the motor gets too hot and needs to cool down.

One advantage touted by Nitty Gritty for its platterless system is that you don't lay a dirty LP on a platter, clean the side, then turn it over and lay the cleaned side down on a platter just dirtied by the still-uncleaned side 2.

True enough, but let's not get carried away. When I use VPI's HW-17F or Loricraft's PRC4 Deluxe record-cleaning machines, I keep a "dirty" mat handy: That's what goes on the platter when I clean side 1 of a dirty record, and I remove it before I place the LP's clean side on the clean platter. End of problem.

The other advantage of Nitty Gritty's system is its compactness. No machine with a platter saves as much space—the 2.5Fi-XP is easy to store, and easy to lift onto a table when you want to clean some records.



Nitty Gritty 2.5Fi-XP LP-cleaning machine

**Two! Two! Two Pumps in One!** With the 2.5Fi-XP's two pumps, you can put purified water in one reservoir and, in the other, Nitty Gritty's own new PUREnzyme+ fluid, for example. Or you can put *your* choice of fluid in one and water in the other, or a different cleaning fluid in each reservoir, or whatever. And having two reservoirs is particularly useful when you're using an enzymatic or other fluid, such as Disc Doctor's, that requires a follow-up water rinse.

With but one reservoir and pump, you do a lot of record flipping: You apply fluid to the record's underside, vacuum it dry, turn it over, rinse it with water, flip it over and dry, then flip it over again to repeat the entire process. True, you *could* apply fluid to side 1, dry, flip, apply fluid to side 2, dry, rinse side 2, flip, dry, apply fluid to the other side, flip, and dry. But either way, that's a lot of flipping compared to how you'd do it with a record cleaner with two reservoirs and two pumps.

I call the 2.5Fi-XP a faith-based system because, for starters, unless you want to bend over and look under the record to be sure the fluid has been spread evenly across its underside, then again to see that it's been entirely vacuumed off, you have to rely on faith. Having faith is better for your back.

You also have to believe that the reservoirs aren't empty and you're

not just pumping air. Nitty Gritty should supply dipsticks, but you can make your own. (I use pipe cleaners, which I carefully wipe off.) Another good idea would be a window gauge in the reservoir, but that would add to the price.

On the other hand, you can feel when the well has run dry by the diminished pressure it takes to depress the pump's plunger—but by then, can you be sure that the last record you cleaned got a full dose of fluid or water? That will keep some faithless obsessives bending and peering.

**Using the 2.5Fi-XP:** Nitty Gritty's PUREnzyme+ cleaning fluid went in one reservoir, Audio Intelligent's Ultra-Pure water in the other. If you don't want to spend \$20 for a quart of Ultra-Pure, you can use Aquafina bottled water ([www.aquafina.com](http://www.aquafina.com))—it might not be quite as pure, but it's *pretty* pure! Just don't use Dasani bottled water—after purifying it, they add minerals back in.

Nitty Gritty supplies some round colored labels so that you don't have to remember what you've put in which reservoir. They also supply a small squeeze bottle and an applicator brush so that, while you're applying fluid with the pump to the LP's down side, you can simultaneously apply fluid by hand to the up side. Good idea, but don't apply too much force to the up side—held only between a spindle and a hard place, the record isn't exactly

stable. Even a light amount of brush pressure will bend the record down. This is where a clamp or a nice, heavy weight comes in handy.

You put the record on as described, top it with a weight, apply fluid to the auxiliary applicator, push the rocker switch to start the record turning, then depress the fluid pump's button four or five times with one hand while, with the other, applying fluid to the exposed upper side. Flip the rocker switch the other way to start the vacuum pump; the record should be dry in fewer than three revolutions. Then flip the switch back the other way to spin the record without the vacuum engaged and pump the water reservoir. After a few spins, flip the rocker switch the other way to vacuum up the water. You've already wet the top side, so just flip the record over, vacuum, then repeat with water.

*Much* easier than with just one reservoir. But what if you don't want to use enzymatic cleaning fluid for every record? No big deal: You just use another applicator to apply fluid by hand to the top side first, etc. (Never use a brush for multiple fluids unless, between fluids, you rinse the brush in purified water and then carefully dry it.)

**How Well Does It Work?** You have to have faith here, too. I've always been a bit queasy about Nitty Gritty's velvet-lipped systems: Fluid is pumped up to wet the cleaner's two lips, and as the record spins, the lips spread the fluid on the record. The

same lips that do the spreading of the fluid then vacuum it up. Can that really be sanitary?

An album pressed on transparent vinyl—Jenny and Johnny's *I'm Having Fun Now* (Warner Bros. 525076-1)—exposed just how the fluid spreads. It comes up through a series of small holes arrayed across the *trailing* lip, and during the LP's first revolution appears on its surface as concentric rings

when not in use. I used an oblong Glad food container.

Unlike all the velvet-lipped competition, Nitty Gritty's design positions the vacuum suction directly under the lips, which produces strong, uniform suction across the entire lip surface. That's probably why their system, which in some ways seems counter-intuitive, works so well: The record dries quickly, as do the lips.

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## FOR A MONTH OR SO, I PUT AWAY MY LORICRAFT PRC4 AND VPI HW-17F MACHINES AND CLEANED MY LPS EXCLUSIVELY WITH THE NITTY GRITTY 2.5FI-XP. **TWO WET THUMBS UP!**

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of fluid. The revolution spreads the fluid, but still not evenly or completely across the entire surface. Yet when you switch on the vacuum pump, the liquid appears to be simultaneously spread evenly *and* sucked back up.

A very dirty record (the Pogues' *Poguetry in Motion* EP) that would *not* have "dry-vacuumed" clean was pristine at the end of the 2.5Fi-XP's rinse cycle. What's more, the lips themselves were dry and looked clean. Still, I'd follow Nitty Gritty's advice: If you haven't used the 2.5Fi-XP to clean any records for a while and its lips are completely dry, brush them with the supplied cleaning brush. It also makes sense to cover the lips with plastic

Those who think that vacuuming a record sucks chips of vinyl from the groove won't buy any of this, but that's their problem. For a month or so, I put away my Loricraft PRC4 and VPI HW-17F machines and cleaned my LPs exclusively with the Nitty Gritty 2.5Fi-XP. Two wet thumbs up!

And Nitty Gritty's new PUREnzyme+ enzymatic cleaner? It did a very good job on some really dirty garage-sale LPs excavated from a record shelf I hadn't explored in at least a decade. Better than Audio Intelligent's Enzymatic Formula? I can't say. I will say this, though: We're fortunate to have so many companies providing for our fluid needs. ■■

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### Manufacturer's Comment

Just a few notes regarding the 2.5Fi-XP: The price quoted is from 2009 .. the current price is \$1025. Also, the 'venting system' mentioned, as well as the applicator brush (and 'squeeze bottle'), are *options*, available with any Nitty Gritty model. They are NOT standard on the XP!