

Cutting edge

by Gillian - Tuesday, December 24, 2013

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Vinyl records are big... yeah, we know. But how about x-ray, picnic plate and chocolate ones? We meet a Tucson newcomer who is making it his business to cut records with a difference. By Gillian Drummond.

Photo by Of Us Giants

There are certain things you just never expect to do. Like looking at a single made out of a picnic plate. Or listening to a record made out of chocolate.

But then the world of Mike Dixon and his record label, [PIAPTK Recordings](#), and side business

LatheCuts.com, is unexpected. It's also trippy and fantastical and fun.

Mike, a lifetime record lover, will cut records out of almost anything. He's cut them on X-rays and mirrors, strips of wood laminate flooring, even plastic picnic plates. He's made them see-through. He's put sprinkles of gold dust inside them for extra novelty. Most of the time, though, he sticks to squares of plexiglass (not only are square-shaped singles more of a novelty, they're less costly for Mike). His customers? Bands who want records in very small numbers, and who don't necessarily want to make money. They're more interested in a document of their work, a souvenir of sorts. "They're people that want their music on vinyl," says Mike.

Mike Dixon at work. Photo by Whitney Ford-Terry

(And, for the record, the chocolate one only lasted one play. It trashed the needle, the record itself broke, and Mike and his pal ate it. But it was fun while it lasted, and ended up as a [video on YouTube](#).)

In a messy room in his University area house, one where machinery shares space with packing materials, debris, and a poster of Kris Kristofferson, Mike works three lathe machines. Music is uploaded to his iPod, which is then fed into a computer that feeds into a cutter head. The sound vibrations, or electrical energy, send signals to the stylus of the cutter head and as it vibrates it cuts grooves into the record surface, moving in concentric circles towards its center.

Inside Mike's home studio. Photo by Mike Dixon

Lathe cutting records is nothing new; it's how all master cuts of records are made. What's different about Mike's company is that, instead of sending the 'master lacquer' copy to be pressed in a plant, he cuts each individual record himself.

It's laborious, lasting as long as the record lasts. But it's a process that has propelled Mike to the forefront of lathe cutting records. His might be a tiny satellite of the music industry, but this is a guy who is making his mark. Not only has he issued hundreds of records, he's developed different strands to his business. There is the record cutting business, through LatheCuts.com; a record label, PIAPTK & Soild Gold Recordings; and a mobile record cutting business, MobileVinylRecorders.com, which last year he took to the Coachella and Pitchfork music festivals.

One of Mike's records featured gold dust sealed into a see-through disc. Photo by Mike Dixon

Late last year, actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt got wind of Mike's work and asked him to cut records at a party the actor is throwing at this month's Sundance Film Festival, to launch a TV show version of [HitRecord](#), Gordon-Levitt's collaborative film and music production project. Mike and Kris Dorr, his partner in [MobileVinylRecorders.com](#), will cut 500 records ahead of time, and another 50 or 60 at the party itself.

This year will see him at the [South by Southwest festival](#) in Austin, Texas. There is also talk of a possible party at the Grammys.

Mike Dixon's love of vinyl, and his penchant for country-influenced music, began in his childhood.

Growing up in Texas, he would go through his parents' record collection. His dad listened to The Doors, and on the radio in his truck there was always a country music channel playing. To this day, hearing Glen Campbell, C. W. McCall and the soundtrack to *Every Which Way But Loose* puts Mike back in that truck and rewinds his life two and a half decades.

Then came junior high and punk rock, high school and college, and playing drums in various bands. While he was at college (he has a degree in marketing) one of those bands wanted to put their music out on vinyl. 'You had to order so many, like 300 or 400 copies," says Mike. He discovered a guy in New Zealand, Peter King, who had been doing limited run vinyl - as low as 20 records - since the 1980s.

Mike taking his mobile cutting business on the road. Photo by Caleb Condit

Mike worked with Peter King, whose credits include The Beastie Boys and Pavement. After he graduated college, Mike realized he could do a similar thing in the USA. He still holds King in high esteem ("The guy's a genius. He's the pioneer of this type of record.") but with years of production now under his belt, and continuous improvements, Mike believes he may be catching up. "The better the results I got, the more I wanted better results," he explains of his quest for a better quality.

Recently, for example, he stumbled on the idea of using lighter fluid to soften the record's plastic. Lighter fluid is less messy than the turtle wax Mike had been using, and it extends a needle's life. He used to get just 10 to 15 records from one needle (bought from an experimental hobbyist in Tennessee). Now he gets 50 to 60.

A picnic plate record. Photo courtesy of Mike Dixon

"A lot of bands want their records on vinyl but can't sell hundreds of records," reasons Mike. "These are hand-made. They're unique, rare, there are maybe only 30 of these made." In addition to novelty records, he produces high-impact packaging, using silk screening and letter pressing.

Says Tucson musician [Andrew Collberg](#): "In a world where music releases have become pretty dull and sterile, Mike does quite the opposite. He puts out albums with the goal of making it hard for people to listen to music; cutting records to picnic plates, X-rays, odd shapes, or anything that could work. I think this forces people to give a shit, because it's gone from being just a music project into being something completely different, an art project."

Today, apart from the requisite turntable in his home office, Mike has a record turntable at close hand in the living room of his home. "I like the physical interaction that you have," he says of handling vinyl. "And I'm really into the visual stuff [that accompanies the record]. You have to go over here and open this thing up. There's the nostalgia, and the pop and crackle, and the warmth of the sound." Added to that is the pleasure of putting out quirky products; an album he issued by Tucson band Golden Boots, on blue/black vinyl, comes with a warning: "This record has peculiar qualities". Side A has double grooves that run parallel to each other, and Side B plays from the inside out.

Ryen Eggleston, one half of Golden Boots, describes Mike as "very driven and creative". He adds: "He offered some great ideas up to us for vinyl and we just went with it."

Photo courtesy of Mike Dixon

For his PIAPTK record label (it stands for People In A Position To Know Vinyl), he prefers to lathe cut only singles, because lathe cutting albums would take up way too much time. Albums are sent to a pressing plant. The bands are obscure, their descriptions amusing: "freak folk", "hush folk", "psych pop" and lounge pop. He has also issued, as lathe-cut singles, what he calls The Trust Series; customers don't know what's on the record, they just trust in Mike's taste in music.

Mike not only has alt-country band [Golden BooTs](#) on his label, he manages them too. He met the band while they were on tour, playing in Olympia, Washington, where Mike and his wife Beth lived at the time. They met again a year or so later, and the next day Mike recorded them live to his 1930's wire recorder, a predecessor to reel-to-reel tape machines, which records sound onto hair-thin stainless steel wire. The recordings were later released on a 7" single with three other artists.

The friendship grew, and the band members - Ryen Eggleston and Dimitri Manos - persuaded Mike and Beth to move to Tucson last summer. He resigned his job teaching business in high school and resolved to make his living cutting and selling records.

So far, so good. Lathe Cuts has stopped taking orders; that's how busy he is. And after next week's Sundance gig, we're betting Mike and his love of vinyl spreads even further.