

LP Gear

AT95VL cartridge

AUDIO-TECHNICA'S AT95E IS the Honda Civic of cartridges. There are better ones, there are worse ones, but you always know what you're getting – a quality product that does the job you bought it for. It's not flashy, nor is it particularly fun, but it is capable, surprisingly refined and fine value for money. For this reason it has been in production for decades, getting fractionally more expensive every year. It now sells for the modest sum of £35.

Its bigger brother – the AT110E, now discontinued – was always the better buy, offering a good deal more refinement for just a few quid more. Its smaller brother – the AT93 became something of a cult. It formed the basis of the Linn Basik cartridge, the main modification being that Linn glued the stylus in place, for extra rigidity. It sounded like a crude mod, but actually improved things noticeably.

Mods and rockers

Now, US-based LP Gear has decided to modify the AT95E. The chassis is well able to stand a better stylus, and so that is precisely what the company has fitted. The sum of \$99.95 (£65 plus carriage) buys you a 'Vivid Line Contact' diamond tip with a quoted size of 6/75µm, that has been exclusively crafted in the cartridge's native land of Japan. The new stylus is carefully mounted on a thin wall Zualum tubular cantilever.

The standard AT95 body is retained, and there's nothing wrong with that – at the price. It puts out a quoted 3.5mV (@ 1kHz, 5cm/sec), which isn't as good as some more modern moving magnets but is still perfectly fine for today's moving magnet phono stages. It is said to have a channel balance within 2dB, separation at 1kHz of better than 20dB, plus a dynamic compliance of 6.5 (x10⁻⁶ cm/dyne) and static compliance of 20. This puts the cartridge firmly in the middle; it's not weird, hard to match or a tricky load (at 47kohm and 100-200pf). Most arms will track it happily



between 1.5 and 2.5g and at 6.6g it's not a difficult fit. I find it tracks impeccably at 2g in the arm of my Rega RP3.

Before we consider the AT95VL, a quick look back at the stock Audio-Technica AT95E. In a good tonearm you get a detailed, smooth and quite musical sound. It has a good turn of speed, has pleasingly crisp and extended treble and a reasonably supple bass. The downside is that it is too opaque. Everything is a little out of focus, rather tonally homogenous, too vague to be a truly enjoyable cartridge. It's not a criticism, because you can do a lot worse at the price; it's just that it always leaves me yearning for more.

More is what the LP Gear version gives you. Indeed it's fascinating to see what the new stylus brings to the party, because you soon realise the difference is quite profound. That slightly misty, foggy feel of the standard cartridge goes to a great extent, and suddenly everything becomes a good deal more finely etched. It seems like the standard cartridge ploughs its way through the record groove like a heavy goods vehicle, whereas the Vivid Line Contact of the AT95VL is more of a sports motorbike, lithely tracing the contours of the highway! There is so

much more information; totally unexpected given the relatively modest (£30 + P&P) price difference between the two.

Spot the difference

Tonally, little changes; the AT95 isn't the world's most rich or euphonic cartridge, and the new stylus doesn't do much to change this. There's still that slightly well-lit midband, which casts a broad white light across drums, vocals and strings, but the bass seems fractionally fuller and more impactful; perhaps this is mostly the better speed and dexterity. The treble is a revelation; the original cartridge just doesn't have the fine filigree detail you would want and this really detracts from the overall experience. Not so with the LP Gear, which seems softer but more finely finessed and there's a good deal more air and space to proceedings too. This has implications for the midband, bringing a better sense of focus to the stereo soundstage, and lending more depth. Overall, it's an all-round win for this little cartridge; the modestly priced upgrade pushes it forward substantially. Oh, and if you have already got an AT95E, you can upgrade it with the LP Gear ATN95VL for a modest fee. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£65

WEBSITE
lpgear.com

OUR VERDICT

