The vinyl resurgence is fuelling more than just the LP market — turntables are also doing very well, thank you. Longterm manufacturers are releasing new models, those who abandoned vinyl are returning (Sony, Technics), and total newcomers are trying their arms with new designs.

Few have tried more radically than the Chicago-based team behind Gramovox, this vertical turntable described as “floating” because the record revolves without any visible means of support. Vertical turntables were around in vinyl’s heyday, of course, but most were fully enclosed within ‘ghettoblasters’ or were solid units which could be wall-hung — the Technics linear-tracking SL-V5 is perhaps the most renowned (and still sought-after secondhand). Sony’s PS-F5 from 1983 was a real standalone vertical player, another linear tracker which held the disc from below (see picture overleaf), looking rather more like a disc cleaner than a player.

Gramovox started life crowdfunding on Kickstarter, where the Chicago team had previously tried its luck with a Bluetooth...
turntable, then hit gold with the Floating Turntable, persuading 4218 backers to pledge $1,575,976 and bring the project to life. The result was only released to backers in January, so we were surprised to be offered a review sample at the same time so far away here in Australia.

Over here this unusual source component comes from an unusual source — it has been brought to Australia by the team at Universal Music. This is, they tell us, their first ever hardware product, and perhaps not coincidentally it arrives roughly simultaneous to the launch of Universal’s online vinyl store thesoundofvinyl.com.au (well worth checking out — we would always direct you first to your local record store, but sadly many people no longer have such a local temple in which to worship).

**Equipment**

The Gramovox is a weird combo of a vinyl player, because it has its own little speakers, a pair of two-inch drivers with neodymium magnets behind grilles on each side of the ported base cabinet, with 20W of power of unspecified quality to drive them. So it can be used standalone, which we reckon very handy for the youth market, just as many of our older readers may have started their vinyl habit with a standalone player in their bedrooms. There’s even a headphone output on the back of the Gramovox. Much as the design looks kinda gimmicky, the designers were keen to deliver a turntable that was also a high-quality music machine. So the arm is carbon-fibre, the cartridge a respectable Audio-Technica AT-95E. The base is solid MDF with a nice veneer of walnut or maple; it has almost a Swedish sheen.

“We treat vinyl as the artform it is,” says CEO Pavan Bapu, “and we’re proud that we spared no resources in ensuring the engineering was sound, so it plays flawlessly in a vertical format.”

‘But why vertical?’ asked one of our Facebook correspondents when we posted a video of the Gramovox doing its stuff. The answer is that Bapu “always felt that seeing the record go round was part of the experience”, and found himself standing over his conventional deck absorbed in the rotation. If it was vertical, he thought, he could watch it from afar...

**Performance**

Remarkably, almost no set-up is required. The tracking force is “dynamically set” not by the usual counter-weights, which obviously wouldn’t work in a vertical format, but via a spring at the bottom which applies 2g of tracking force, ideal for the AT95E cartridge, and this can be adjusted should you change to a different stylus. There is a counterweight at the end of the arm, but here this is for anti-skating, radially balancing the arm around its main pivot bearing. No hanging antiskate weight to thread, hallelujah.

The belt fitted easily around the platter using the turn and feed method, and changes from 33⅓ to 45 by moving the belt between the small and large grooves on the pulley. A spare belt and centre spider are included.

Why don’t the records fall off? (This was the second most common question we were asked while having the unit in residence, after ‘Is it a gimmick?’) The answer is that a small clamp is supplied to screw the record firmly in place — it’s effective, as our measurements confirmed, though when playing singles there’s nothing to stop the felt mat riding up at the edges, so things can appear pretty wobbly at the rim when running at 45rpm. But there’s no sonic penalty.

We hit three issues. Firstly we found only about one in five of our LPs fitted over the spindle, which was clearly over regulation size (it measured at 7.33mm diameter). We communicated this to Universal, who heard back from Chicago that we were not the first to discover the problem, and a replacement platter and spindle were rapidly airfreighted to us (7.14mm diameter) — impressive service, though quite how this wasn’t picked up earlier is hard to comprehend.
The second issue was getting a loud crack through our connected music system whenever we started or stopped the platter spinning. This requires turning the volume knob from or to its far left position (when you listen through a connected system, you leave volume knob at minimum to avoid hearing sound through the integrated speakers). But the system powers on and off entirely when you do this, delivering that crack through its audio output — it’s not dangerously loud, but high enough that it should have been eliminated with DC blocking.

Lastly, while the tracking and antiskate forces worked admirably, it was possible (and we did it accidentally) to twist the entire headshell on the arm, thereby burghering the azimuth, the vertical angle of the needle in the groove. This really requires resetting using a test-tone and crosstalk analyser (which we did before making our measurements), since merely getting the cartridge parallel to the record surface by eye can give dodgy results if the stylus is itself not perpendicular to the cartridge base.

But you know what? It sounded pretty good, and by far at its best when plugged into our reference hi-fi. The unit’s built-in speakers deliver a listenable result over the first three-quarters of their volume — the stereo spread is effective in a small or medium room, and we found ourselves singing along to a spinning Hollies compilation, always a good sign. But it’s a slightly boxy sound, with the bass much curtailed and no real richness to the presentation. So while we applaud the versatility of standalone operation, listening on the integrated speakers wastes many of the reproductive abilities of the Gramovox, which are best appreciated by connecting its line-level output to an existing music system.

Thus connected, even straight out of the box, this was definitely hi-fi, well-defined detail, well separated stereo, and enjoyably musical. We ran through some new vinyl releases, enjoying the punchy output with the recent Led Zeppelin remasters, while second-hand vinyl (cleaned with our trusty SpinClean Record Washer) could reveal a slightly high level of surface noise compared with pricier decks, but certainly par for its price level.

Not everything is perfect — our measurements showed it was running slightly fast, with a 3000Hz test tone emerging at 3025Hz at 33⅓rpm and 3013Hz at 45rpm, an average 0.6% inaccuracy… close enough for rock’n’roll, as they say. You might think the vertical orientation would have its most severe effect on wow and flutter, but this measured at 0.13% RMS unweighted (Australian standard, combined) — a comparably priced Audio-Technica turntable (the AT-LP5 at $799) recently measured at 0.09%, which counted as an excellent result, so the Gramovox is a little behind but no duffer at the price.

Should you spend more? Our answer at this level of turntabledom is invariably yes, if you can, since doubling your spend is likely to far more than double your quality return. We had the Gramovox sitting side by side with the Thorens TD 203 which won a Sound+Image 2016 award, and the vertical player couldn’t begin to compete with that, the Thorens delivering from the same LPs lower surface noise, far more depth to bass and detail, lower distortion and a proper ‘being there’ analogue sound that left the Gramovox boxy and light in direct comparison. But of course the Thorens is boringly horizontal, requires a phono stage and is more than double the price — the Gramovox performed perfectly well for its price, broadly comparable to others at the price that spin on the flat. Comparing measurements with that Audio-Technica turntable (reviewed recently by our sister magazine Australian Hi-Fi), there seemed only a small penalty in choosing this entertaining vertical design.

Conclusion
We were disappointed to find that this deck is only available via mail order through Universal’s online vinyl store The Sound of Vinyl — this is a shame, as we always advise listening to hi-fi before buying it. But we do reckon Gramovox has been successful in its goal of honouring the art of vinyl replay while delivering something different, this upstanding deck able to play through a full system or be used as a standalone device with its own speakers — and even on headphones.

As for our Facebook friend who asked ‘But why?’, our reply is… ‘Why not?’ Jez Ford +

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**SPECs**

**Gramovox Floating Record**

- **vertical turntable $669**
- **Cartridge:** Audio-Technica AT95E
- **Internal speakers:** 2 x 51mm
- **Output:** RCA line-level
- **Speed change:** manual 33⅓/45
- **Finishes:** walnut, maple
- **Contact:** Universal Music
- **Web:** www.thesoundofvinyl.com.au