

THE STRAIGHT DOPE

EDITOR'S NOTE: Beginning with this issue, we are presenting a new feature in the Voice called "The Straight Dope". Syndicated from the Chicago Reader, the Straight Dope is not a column about the latest offerings from Colombia. It's a trivia column that will attempt to answer almost any question you may have about anything—especially the common, day-to-day things that we take for granted.

We invite you to check out *The Straight Dope* each issue and send along any questions you may have.

Over the years, you have discussed many matters of major import, such as sex, drugs, politics, history... now for a real toughie. Why does a 45-rpm record contain a larger hole than a 33, or the late, great 78? And by the way, whatever happened to the 16 2/3 speed? — N.G., Chicago

Your letter is admirably timed, N., since it gives me the chance to fulminate once again on the never-ending perfidy of the record companies, which, as you've no doubt heard, have raised the price of albums another buck. The irritating use of two spindle sizes dates back to the so-called "war of the speeds" between the two record industry giants of the late 40s, Columbia and RCA Victor. In June 1948, Columbia introduced its new LP (long play) Microgroove Record, a 12-inch 33 1/3-rpm vinyl disc that offered 23 minutes of music per side, as opposed to four minutes with the old 10-inch shellac 78s then in use. LPs had to be played on a special record player with a lightweight tone arm, the technology for all of which Columbia offered to other manufacturers under a presumably profitable licensing arrangement. Rather than accept Columbia's offer, though, RCA decided to come out with its own vinyl



Illustration: Suzy Sigler/mo

record, a 7-inch 45-rpm disc with a big hole that also required a special record player, which RCA just happened to make. In presenting the 45, RCA came up with buckets of shameless drivel about how 45 rpm was the optimum speed for sound reproduction, but in fact it was revealed that RCA had told its engineers to come up with any old speed so long as it wasn't compatible with Columbia's system. The big hole was apparently supposed to make the two types of records even more incompatible.

45s offered little advantage over the old 78s, since they had about the same playing time, so most of the smaller manufacturers opted for the Columbia system. RCA, though, held out for 18 months, during which time industry sales volume dropped about 25 percent as consumers waited for the giants to fight it out between themselves. Finally, in January 1950, RCA capitulated—sort of. It began making 33 1/3 records using the Columbia system, but it didn't discontinue the 45. Instead, it spent \$5 million advertising 45 rpm as the preferred speed for popular music. In reality, of course, it didn't make any difference; a 7-inch record was simply cheaper to make than a 12-inch one. Nonetheless, this time RCA was successful, and in February 1951 Columbia began making 45s too. Thus we are stuck today with two speeds and two spindle sizes. Still another excellent reason for taping yer toons off the air.

16 2/3 discs, incidentally, are still used for relatively low-fidelity voice recordings, such as "talking books" for the deaf.

—CECIL ADAMS

Is there something you need to get straight? Cecil Adams can deliver the Straight Dope on any topic. Write Cecil Adams, *The Flint Voice*, 5005 Lapeer Rd., Burton, MI 48509.

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Theodore "Ted" Thrower
MCC Board of Trustees
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