

Sunday Morning May 9, 2004

A Weekly Column By Mike Johnston

Good morning! I'm pleased to announce that "THE SUNDAY MORNING PHOTOGRAPHER" is now being translated into German, for the convenience of readers in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, and for German-speakers elsewhere. The site is <http://fotohall.de>. The link is just below the copyright notice. My thanks to translator Robert Otthall.

Also, the column two weeks ago reached a new record readership at the Polish-language site fotopolis.pl, where 4,852 people read the most recent column. That's up from an average of 2,500 just last fall. My compliments to translator Lukasz Kacperczyk, and my thanks to all the photographers who read fotopolis.

FINDING THE BEST CD-Rs



WHAT'S THE MOST ARCHIVAL CD-R BLANK MEDIA FOR STORING IMAGE FILES?

I recently wrote an article for *Black & White Photography* magazine about the best CD-R blank media for photographers. The article was based entirely on research and collating anecdotal reports, not on original experimentation or testing.

In the article I included a number of general recommendations as to how to evaluate available options, what to buy, and where to find it.

Most important, though, is that it really does matter. There have been numerous reports in the news media recently about CD media not being as archival as we once imagined. It's like anything else: some of the cheapest options are really bad, and you have to choose wisely if you want to find something that's reliably good.

There's not really one "best" type of disc. There are several good ones. The problem is, how do you know what you're buying? Most CD-R blanks that are available in most stores are only marked with the brand name (which is irrelevant — I'll get to that in a minute) and the country of origin (this can be marginally helpful, as most "Made in Japan" discs are Taiyo Yuden, a dependably good factory. But it's not much to go on).

The CD-R blanks I ended up recommending most highly in the article are MAM-A Gold Archival manufactured in Colorado Springs, Colorado. These are the same blanks that were formerly developed and manufactured by MITSUI. In June, 2003, Mitsui Tokyo divested majority share of its media business to Computer Support Italcad s.r.l. (CSI) of Italy, which now runs the plant in Colorado (now known as MAM-A, which originally stood for "Mitsui Advanced Media America," <http://www.mam-a.com>), and in Alsace, France (MAM-E, formerly "Mitsui Advanced Media Europe," <http://www.mam-e.com>). Technically speaking, "Mitsui" disks are no longer available, but MAM-A discs are the same product made in the same factory.

Gold Archival are simply the highest-spec batches of Gold, which. This is the best product in a range that is specifically designed and manufactured for archival storage purposes.

MAM-A Gold Archival discs may not be the absolute best for you or for your burner; and they may not have the 300-year archival life span that is claimed for them. The advantage of buying this brand is that it's positively identifiable, and you can depend on what you're getting.

Americans can buy directly at this link: <http://store.mam-a-store.com/standard---archive-gold.html>

Buying in the Dark

The market for CD-R blank media is price-driven and seriously cutthroat, with incomplete and insufficient information available to consumers. This makes it difficult for manufacturers of quality products to remain profitable and for the market (i.e., consumers) to make intelligent choices: CD-R blanks are usually either generic, or of generic manufacture sold under known brandnames. The brand label means nothing. According to CDFreaks, you need to know the factory where the disc was made to know anything about it, and the only way you can find that out is with the ATIP code, which you need a special application to read. Another problem (with CD-R at least) is that there's no way to tell the difference between cyanine-based discs and metalized-cyanine-based discs, which is unfortunate because the former aren't very permanent and the latter are much more so. Taiyo-Yuden discs are metalized cyanine, but again, you can't identify those at the store.

This brings to mind a theoretical economic problem — if the "free market" is supposed to work when consumers choose what they want, then what does it mean when consumers are ignorant and marketers aren't informing them? They then have no basis by which to choose. When anybody walks into an Office Depot, the choices they have are a) brand name, which is irrelevant, and b) price. So of course the market will be driven to the cheapest possible alternative, which everyone will say is inevitable. "The market has spoken."

But I think that if all discs were marked in the store on an A to F scale for permanence, the market might speak differently.

If we want to continue to have high-quality archival CD-R media available to us, I think it's a good idea for us to spread the word amongst ourselves and patronize the companies that are making the products we want and need for picture storage. HELP SPREAD THE WORD! Copy this link and e-mail it to your digital photographer friends.

I have no affiliation whatsoever with any company.

— Mike Johnston