

TONEAudio.

The e-journal of analog
and digital sound.

no.19

2008

VINYL RULES!

THE SPIRAL GROOVE
SG-2 TURNTABLE

SUPER SPEAKERS:

MARTIN LOGAN CLX
MERIDIAN DSP7200

TUBE SHOPPING IN CHINA

RANDY WELLS ON COLLECTING
THE BEATLES

DOES MILES STILL MATTER?

KEN KESSLER

TAKES US TO AN AUDIOJUMBLE
IN THE UK

MORE GEAR, MORE MUSIC!

METALLICA

Death Magnetic Live

TONEAudio

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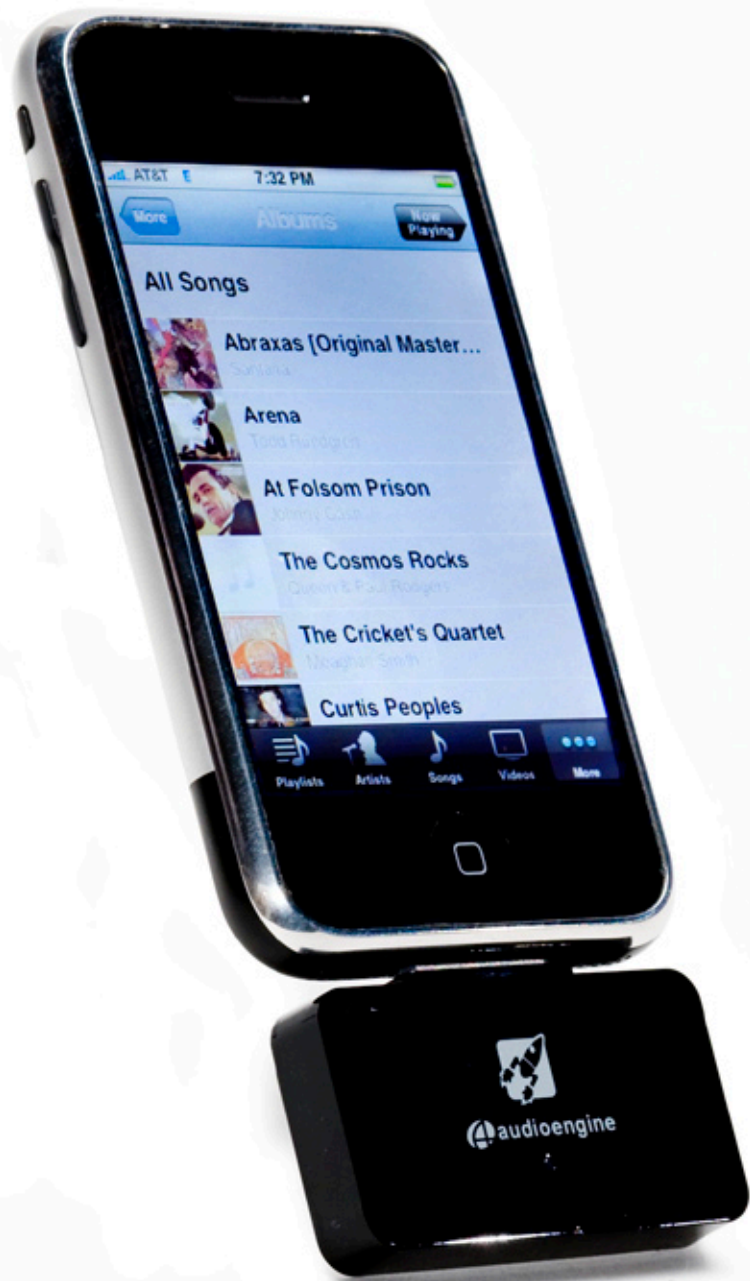
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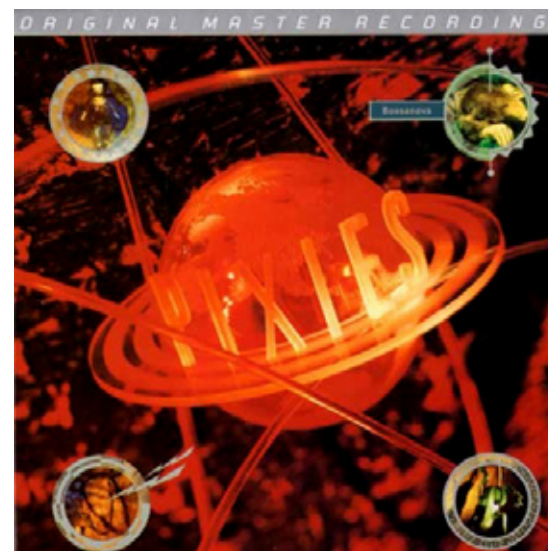
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CONTRIBUTORS

new in tone this issue

BILLY TOMPKINS

Billy Tompkins has been shooting music, celebrity and editorial for 22 years. His music images are represented by the agency RETNA which is both London and New York based.

His work has been published in The New York Times, Rolling Stone, Italian ZOOM, Playboy, Playgirl, Spin, Revolver, Guitar Player, Guitar World, Women Who Rock, Vanity Fair, Allure, GQ, The New York Daily News, The New York Post HOY, Classic Drummer, Latin Billboard etc.

Images have been used for album and cd covers, liners and tour booklets.

He has had 8 gallery showings of his music work. Permanent pieces reside in galleries in New York and Sante Fe. Images also reside in the New York City Police Museum. One piece has been displayed in the New York City Museum of Modern Art(1992)

You can see more of Billy's extensive portfolio at www.billytompkins.com



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RUTH DAVID

Ruth David is a professional portrait and event photographer working primarily in and around the Washington DC metro-area. The owner of R. David Original Photography, her award-winning portrait and editorial work has been seen in local and national publications. In addition to her regular portrait and event work, Ms. David photographed the Obama campaign in the Mid-Atlantic region as a volunteer photographer in 2007 and 2008. To see more, visit www.rdavidphotography.com

We look forward to seeing more of both of these talented photographers' work in TONEAudio in the months to come.

new on the web

Look to TONEAudio's website for bonus content not in the issue. We are constantly adding new product reviews, music reviews and concert coverage, so check back often.



AWARDS

Announcing our Product of The Year Awards and Exceptional Value Awards for 2008.

Check out the new awards section on our website to see the winners!

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

The Emperors' New Clothes

As this year comes to a close, I'll be curious to see what the RIAA comes up with for vinyl sales this year. I'm sure it's going to be higher than last year, but I'm more curious as to how long it's going to stick.

Yes, yes, we've had this great vinyl "resurgence" and it's brought some treasures in hardware and software for analog lovers old and new, but it's also brought a lot of crap along with it. Seems like every indie label is pressing vinyl now and there are quite a few new audiophile labels that didn't exist even a few years ago. Should be all good, but unfortunately what this has done is drive the price of used records through the stratosphere and made new records pretty spendy as well.

Good economy or bad, it's hard enough to get people to shell out 16 bucks for a CD, but \$40 for an album is getting crazy. I just bought the recent Nine Inch Nails record and *Chinese Democracy* by Guns and Roses for 40 bucks a pop. They are both great albums, but one sounded great and the other one sucked.

I don't have a problem with specialty manufacturers such as MoFi, Speakers Corner or any of the other audiophile labels charging \$30 to \$40 for an expertly handled remaster of one of my favorite discs so that I don't have to spend \$1,000 for a "hot stamper." But for the majors to charge us \$40 for off the rack vinyl is nuts; especially when over half of it has substandard sound quality.

Take a peek on Ebay. Everyone with a lousy copy of *Don't Look Back* wants \$20 for it, when that record would have been hard-pressed to fetch \$2 a couple of years ago. And I like Boston, so that has nothing to do with it.

What I'm saying here is that in order to maintain the vinyl resurgence, let's not get greedy and screw it up or it's going to be 1991 all over again. And while I'm on my soapbox ranting, here's my other point to ponder for the audiophile labels:

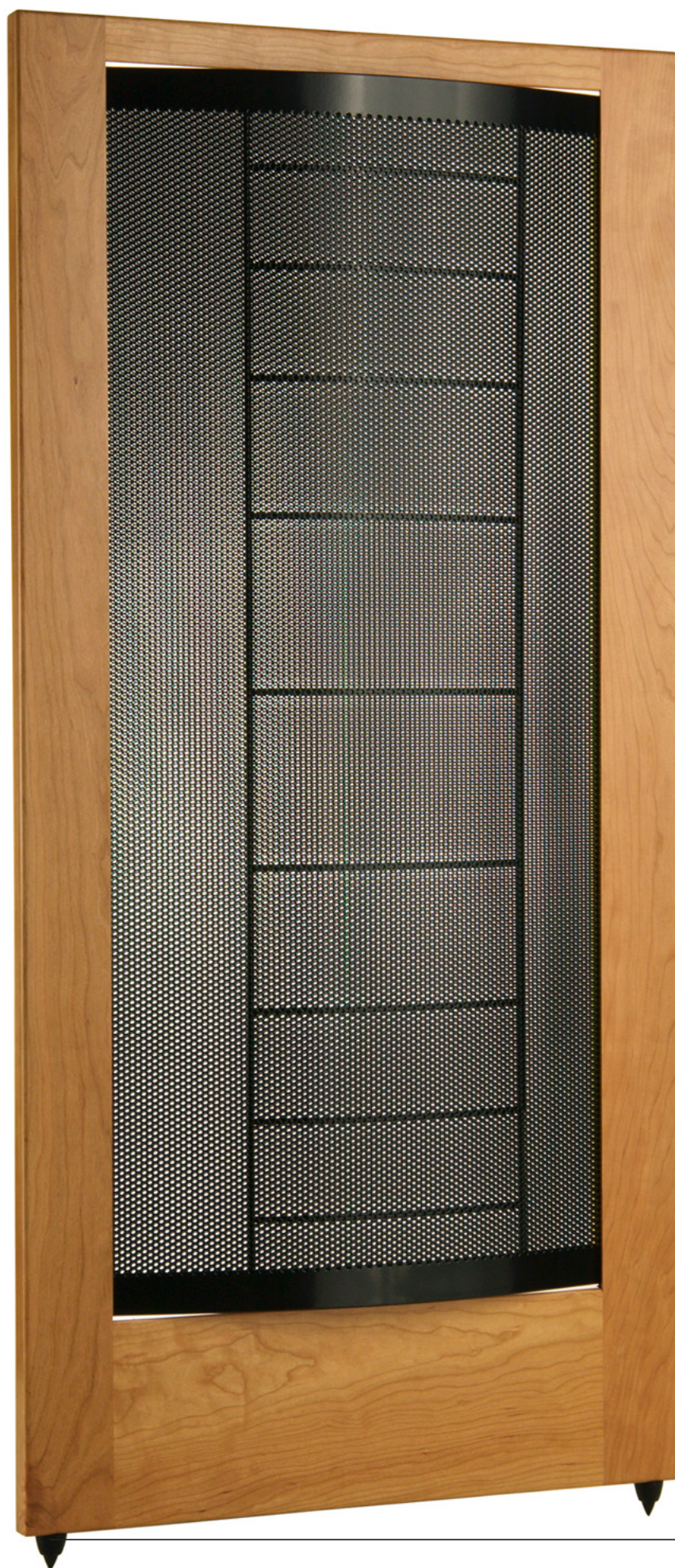
Can we please have some music from another era besides the 60's and 70's?

At least the guys from Mofi have been remastering some more current stuff. Every 20-something I've talked to has said the same thing: "Who cares about *Who's Next*?" If you want to get the kids buying records, do some stellar remastered versions of their music, too. I'm gonna go postal if I see one more remaster of *Pet Sounds*.





*"Bob thinks dropping some weight should be our new year's resolution,
I told him he could start with his amplifier!"*



Girls, Shoes and Speakers

The MartinLogan CLS

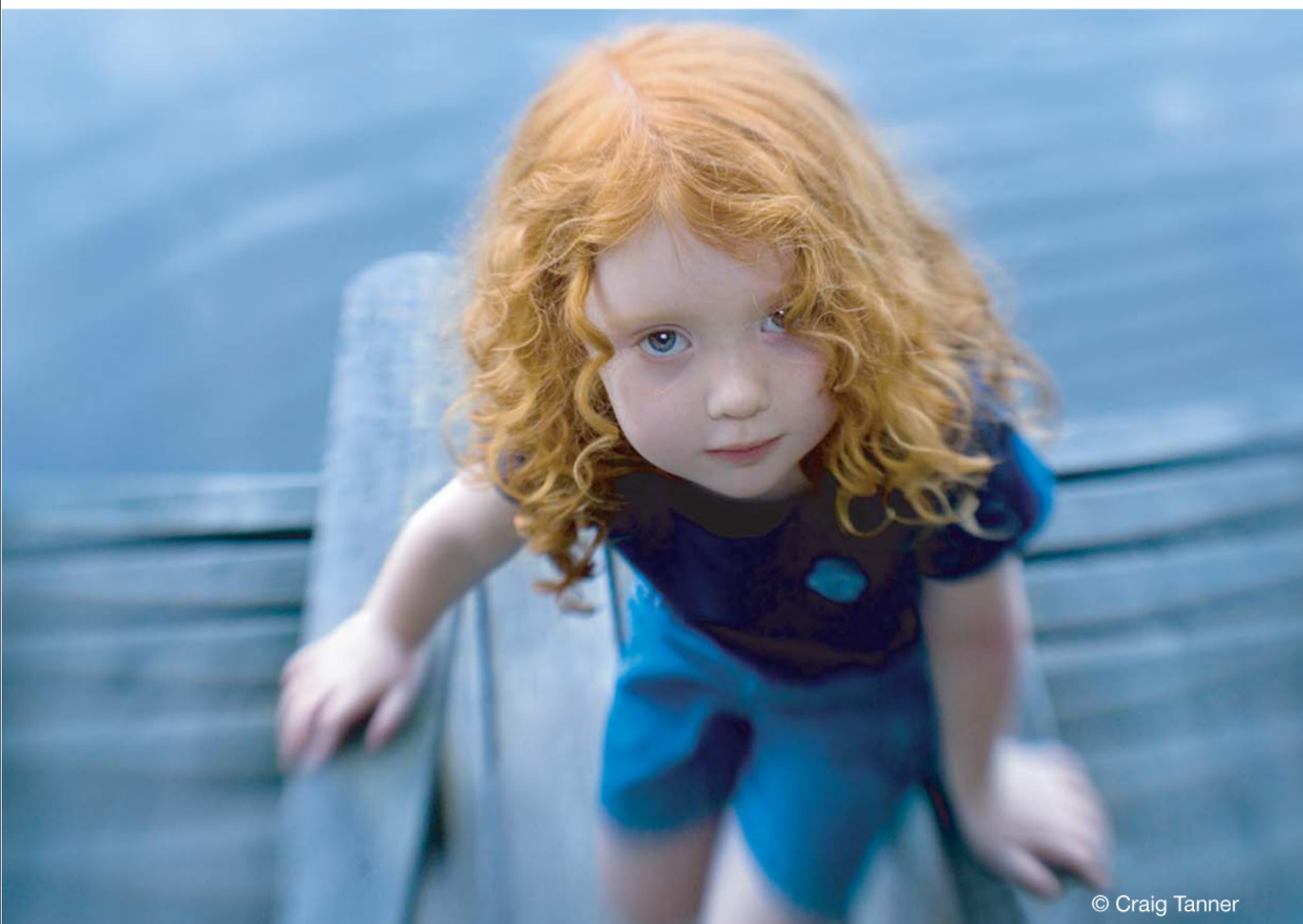
By Jeff Dorgay

I have spent the last couple of years immersed in MartinLogan speakers. I started with the Vantage, moved up to the Summit, made a sidestep to the new Spire and now have their flagship, the CLX, in my listening room. But my enthusiasm for MartinLogan started many years ago with their other famous flagship, the CLS. It began in a shopping mall in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with a girlfriend who wanted to go shoe shopping. As I still complained while being dragged into the targeted shoe shop, I spied a HiFi store in the corner of my field of vision and my viewpoint suddenly changed.

“Take as much time as you need, babe...”

I can't remember the name of the store, but I remember those speakers. In the upstairs loft where they kept the good stuff, were a complete Levinson system with an Oracle turntable. They were having a slow day and the salesman took pity after my narrow escape from shoe shopping. “My girlfriend goes in there and I'm done, man!” he said as we traded evil girlfriend stories. He dropped *Synchronicity* on the Oracle, and about five seconds into “Tea in the Sahara,” I was under their spell. An Acoustat 2+2 owner at the time, I was blown away by how open these speakers were compared with mine. Shortly after returning home, I had a pair of CLS's of my own. But I had an advanced case of *audiophile nervosa* and after about a year, I sold them to move on to a giant pair of ProAcs. After all, I could always get another pair, right?

See in a new way.



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Wrong

For whatever reason, my local dealer never seemed to have a pair in stock and everyone who had a pair of CLS's held on to them for dear life or wanted about double what retail used to be. So I went back to my dealer and picked up a pair of ML's newest speaker, the Aerius. **"I told you not to get rid of the CLS," the salesman said as I peeled off the hundred-dollar bills.**

The Aerius' were great speakers, but the CLS was something special. After the Aeriuses went away, my new, non-evil girlfriend (now my wife) would quip as I agonized over the latest speaker du jour, "I really liked the sound of those MartinLogans. Why don't we get another pair of those?" And by this time, I didn't even have a great room for panel speakers.

I used to rationalize my lack of insight by saying such things as "They weren't that great." Or, "They didn't have enough bass." Or, "I can't play Zeppelin on them really loud." You've been there. But you know what it's like to let that one special thing get away; it always gnaws at you.

All Good Things Come Back Around, Eventually

The Vantage rekindled my interest in MartinLogan speakers and after moving up the line to the Summit and a little sideways to the Spire, I knew the CLX was also going to be just as special. As you will see from my review on page [97](#), these are indeed phenomenal speakers. However, out of respect for MartinLogan and the CLS, I had to go back and revisit the former classic. *(continued)*

Going back to something you once really loved can be a mixed bag. It's like going to your high school reunion to see if your old girlfriend is still hot. Chances are high that you will end up disappointed. This time it would be a good meeting, though.

Thanks to Rich Kent from the MartinLogan Owners forum, a pristine pair of CLS's were only a couple of hours north on the I-5. Rich let me have a Sunday to listen to his system and get reacquainted with these old friends.

They still won't play Zeppelin super loud, but neither will my LS3/5a's. That's not the point. Rich has his mated with a MartinLogan Descent sub and it is a sweet combination. After some serious listening, I knew they were everything I remembered and then some. That signature transparency and upper bass clarity that comes from a full range panel is there in spades, and the CLS throws a very wide and deep soundstage. The CLS was not quite the one-person speaker as I once thought (chalk some of this up to Rich's setup abilities), but you still would never mistake them for cone speakers.

These days if you can find a pair of CLS's for sale, they are right around \$2,000 for a pair. As Rich said, "Hey, I bought these for 1,500 bucks and got a new pair of panels from MartinLogan for another \$900. Where are you going to get sound like this for \$2,400?" I couldn't agree with him more. The one comparison I would draw between the CLS and the CLX is that the CLS feels as if you were about 15 rows from the stage and the CLX is much more immediate and dynamic, as if you were in row 3. But the virtues of a big, transparent sound are still there with the CLS, and this is a speaker that I could live with very easily. You would never guess that this design is 25 years old.

CLS's are rare on the used-speaker market, partially because this speaker was so far ahead of its time and because MartinLogan still supports the CLS, so again, no one wants to get rid of them. That's right, you can still buy replacement panels for a pair of CLS's. Try that with your favorite speaker from a boutique builder.

The CLS started out in production in 1984, with a number of product changes from the II, to the II a, finishing with the IIz that ran until late 2002.

There were a number of incremental changes along the way, but the majority of them were aimed at making the speaker easier to drive, as the first ones had an impedance perilously close to one ohm. Personally, I think reports of amplifiers going up in flames were overblown; I used a Krell KSA-50 with mine and had excellent luck. MSRP went from \$2,995 for the first models to \$4,595 for the final CLS IIz Anniversary Editions that went out the door.

When you find a decent pair that someone wants to get rid of, they usually are going for somewhere between \$1,500 and \$2,500. The electrostatic panel had a life of about 10 years, so should your panels need replacement, they are available and cost about \$1,000 with shipping. If you have an amplifier that is up to the task, these are still quite amazing speakers. ●

After some serious listening, I knew they were everything I remembered and then some.



Another Classic From ACI

The Emerald XL

By Jeff Dorgay

I have been having so much fun listening to these little speakers for the better part of the year that I got behind on the reviewing duties of my job. With more and more people asking for great compact speakers to fit on a desktop or small room, the Emerald is a hot commodity at just \$800 a pair.

If you are new to our magazine, we gave the ACI Sapphire XL (\$1,700 a pair) one of our Exceptional Value awards back in 2006, and I've used them as one of my small reference speakers ever since. The Sapphire was such an amazing speaker for the price, I was anxious to see what ACI founder Mike Dzurko could do for 800 bucks.





At first glance with the grilles off, you might mistake this for a down-sized Sapphire XL with a smaller woofer. Mike revealed that even though the 1-inch soft-dome tweeters look almost identical, the Emerald uses a Seas tweeter, where the Sapphire uses a Scan Speak that “costs a whole lot more.”

This little two-way with its 4-inch woofer is claimed to have a lower limit of 70hz (+/- 3db), so a subwoofer is necessary even in a small room or on your desktop.

To blend seamlessly with these small woofers, I'd suggest something like ACI's Force XL subwoofer, if you want to stay with all ACI speakers, or one of the excellent 8-inch subwoofers on the market.

I split the review time with and without subwoofer to get the full effect of the Emeralds. I matched them up with the new Bravus 8 from Aperion and the TS 8 from Tannoy, both with excellent results. The TS 8 is bargain priced at \$399, giving you an \$1,100 system that is outstanding.

Small Room...

I had a great time with these speakers while using them in my small third bedroom that is just 9 x 12 feet. Sitting on top of a pair of the stylish stands from Wentworth Design that were in our last issue, the black carbon fiber of the 24-inch-high Wentworth stands was the perfect compliment to the piano-black finish on the Emeralds. I ended up with the tweeters about 20 inches from the rear wall with no toe-in, about 4 feet apart.

Amplification was provided by the outstanding Mystere ia11 EL34 powered integrated along with a PrimaLuna ProLogue 8 tube CD player. DH Labs Q-10 speaker cables and Revelation interconnects were used to give all this tubeyness some extra zip, working perfectly together. *(continued)*

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This combination offered a tremendous amount of musicality and a much bigger soundstage than you would expect from such small speakers. Because small speakers can only move so much air in a small room, don't expect to play "Ride of the Valkyries" or anything by Megadeth at killer sound-pressure levels. That's not a fair test. But if your taste in music is slightly mellower, you will be happy with the Emeralds' capabilities with modestly priced gear.

I listened to a lot of solo vocals and acoustic music and was enthused at how close the Emeralds, played in the small room, compared with the Sapphires out in my living room.

When you listen closely on better recordings, you can hear the big difference that tweeter makes. The Sapphires have a smoother presentation and resolve more fine detail, but remember that they are more than twice the price.

Or Nearfield?

The next move was to my desktop system. Perched on some delrin spikes, elevated about 3 inches above my desktop and right between my Apple 30-inch Cinema Display, this made for a completely different presentation. Powered by the Luxman L-590A II integrated amplifier, Luxman D-7i universal player and the SOTA Sapphire/RB1000 arm and Lyra Skala combination, I brought a big dose of horsepower to the mix. *(continued)*

I realize that most people won't be pairing up a set of \$800 mini monitors with a \$10,000 amplifier, but the Emeralds weren't embarrassed and it gave me a chance to listen to some high-resolution music (as in vinyl) through these little jewels. It also gave me a chance to compare them to my favorite desktop speakers, the Stirling Broadcast LS3/5a's, which cost almost \$2,000 a pair.

I was also impressed with the wide soundstage the Emerald XL's threw both on stands and on my desktop.

While the legendary LS3/5a's win the competition in the magic midrange department, the ACI's had a bit more to offer in terms of a more extended treble response. While the LS3/5a has a slight mid-bass bump that sounds pleasing without a subwoofer, I prefer the ACI's when using a subwoofer, especially in a desktop system. Both speakers require a fairly high-current amplifier to give their best, but the ACI's were able to play quite a bit louder without compression than their British competition.

They strike a good balance tonally, though I found the Emerald XL slightly more laid back than the Sapphires when played in a room on stands, which perhaps lends them a bit more to nearfield listening. I had a ton of fun on my desktop system spinning my favorite rock records much louder than I probably should have. The good news is that when I gave the new 50th Anniversary *Kind of Blue* LP for a spin; they did an equally great job with acoustic instruments.

I was also impressed with the wide soundstage the Emerald XL's threw both on stands and on my desktop. I have to acknowledge that the Luxman gear was part of that, but if the speakers won't deliver, it doesn't matter how good the source components are. On the right recordings, it felt like I had on an enormous pair of headphones!

Solid Performance

ACI has built a tremendous reputation for more than 25 years by offering solid products with excellent customer service. The Emerald XL upholds this tradition and is an excellent value for \$800 per pair, especially if you are trying to build a high quality system for a small space. ●

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THE VINYL ANACHRONIST: Old Cartridges Never Die...

By Marc Phillips

Old cartridges never die, they just screw up your records.

Don't get me wrong; I really dig vintage audio equipment. Seeing a beautifully restored Thorens TD-124 or Garrard 301 sends shivers down my spine. Those who have followed my writings over the years know I have a soft spot for '70s receivers from Marantz, Luxman, McIntosh, Kenwood and Sansui. I even owned a beautifully restored Scott 299B just a few years ago and made it a part of my reference system. But a vintage cartridge, in my opinion, has never been a good idea.



I'm not talking about rebuilding services such as Stanalog Imports and Soundsmith, which can bring back to life those classic cartridges from van den Hul, Koetsu, Fidelity Research and Kiseki. Those companies grab a high-powered microscope and ensure that every facet of that cartridge is perfect, and that your record collection will be protected against an errant cantilever or chipped stylus. No, I'm talking about that old Audio-Technica or Shure cartridge that's been mounted on your old AR or Technics or Pioneer table for the past 35 years. Sure, the stylus

I'm talking about that old Audio-Technica or Shure cartridge that's been mounted on your old AR or Technics or Pioneer table for the past 35 years.

was fine the last time you played a record on it (wasn't it the new Dexy's *Midnight Runners* album?), and you carefully stored the whole rig in its original box, where it has safely resided in your garage or attic ever since. What could go wrong?

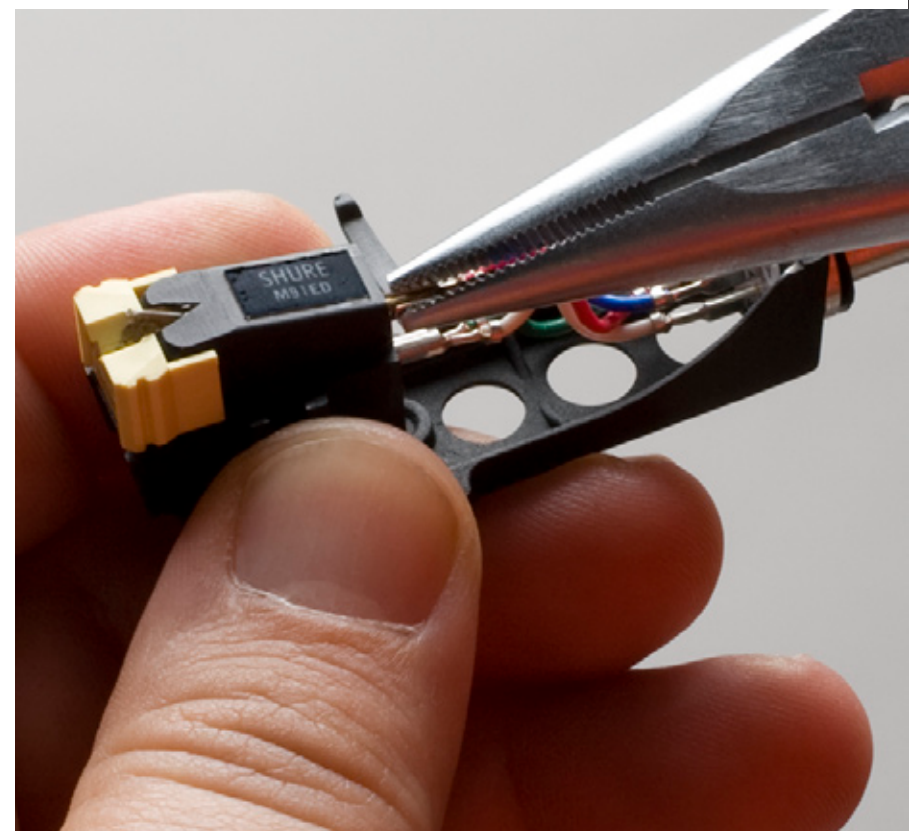
I can't say that I speak from experience since I never stopped listening to LPs. I've never stored a turntable in an attic or garage for any length of time. I did find an old Rega Bias cartridge packed away in a box a few weeks ago, but the cantilever was bent at a distressing angle. I can't bear to simply throw it away, but it most likely will never play another record. My current crop of cartridges (Koetsu Rosewood Standard, Zu DL-103, Ortofon 2M Blue) are played and rotated on a fairly regular basis.

With an old cartridge, however, you have to worry about more than stylus wear. The suspension can dry out and become stiff. The cantilever can become brittle. Tiny cracks can develop within the body. The whole assembly can get filled with dust and goo. Still, I keep getting emails from people who want to retrieve their old tables out of storage and start playing records again. A few of them have reported no problems with their antique cartridges. So I wondered: is it still a bad idea to use an old cartridge even if the stylus appears to be fine?

Calling Mr. Wizard...

I needed to get a couple of older cartridges on eBay to test this theory. I was able to procure a

Shure M91 for \$40 and an Empire 999 SE/X for \$30. Both had new styli installed (you can get replacement styli for both of these models from Garage-a-Records.com). I also kept the Shure M97xe from my last column for comparison. I used my Technics SL-1200 for the experiment, mostly because it has a removeable headshell. I simply bought several of the highly-recommended 1200 headshells from Sumiko (I got these on eBay for \$10 each), and mounted and aligned each cartridge in advance.



Just to extract every bit of information from these cartridges (or pickups, as they were called in their heyday), I used the super-duper system at TONE headquarters for the experiment. While I used the modest Dynavector P-75 mk. II phono stage, the rest of the playback chain included the Nagra PL-L preamp, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350 amplifier and the astounding new Martin-Logan CLX electrostatics, which were augmented by two Martin-Logan Descent subwoofers. I was leaving nothing to chance.

(continued)

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FEATURE

Choosing the right LPs was more difficult. I wanted stellar recordings, yet I didn't want to subject any treasured vinyl to these potentially hazardous circumstances. I finally settled on a few Mobile Fidelity pressings that were duplicates in my collection, including Steely Dan's *Aja*, the Doors' first album and a few others.

Since the Shure M97xe was still mounted on the 1200, I used this as a control cartridge.

It's a current-production '97 with less than 200 hours on it. While my main complaint on this combo was a small, dull sound that really didn't engage me on any level, I do have to admit that the big CLXs were able to make this combination sound much bigger than ever before. It didn't match the scope of more expensive turntables lurking on the other racks, but still imaged nicely. The most noticeable flaw in the presentation was distinctly muddy bass, something I found surprising since many 1200 fans feel that solid bass performance is one of the Technics' strongest points. I also felt that the Shure raised the level of surface noise to uncomfortably high levels.

...Or Maybe Just Mythbusters?

After playing a few records, it was time to install the vintage cartridges. First up was the Shure M91, which seemed like a logical choice after listening to the M97xe. For the first few minutes, I actually preferred the sound of this cartridge to its big brother. You know those beer commercials where they talk about "drinkability"? *(continued)*

At first this sounds like a meaningless advertising word, but I think I know what they're talking about. When you drink this beer, it goes down smooth, you don't cringe at the after-taste and you don't spend the next two hours barfing into a urinal at TGI Friday's.

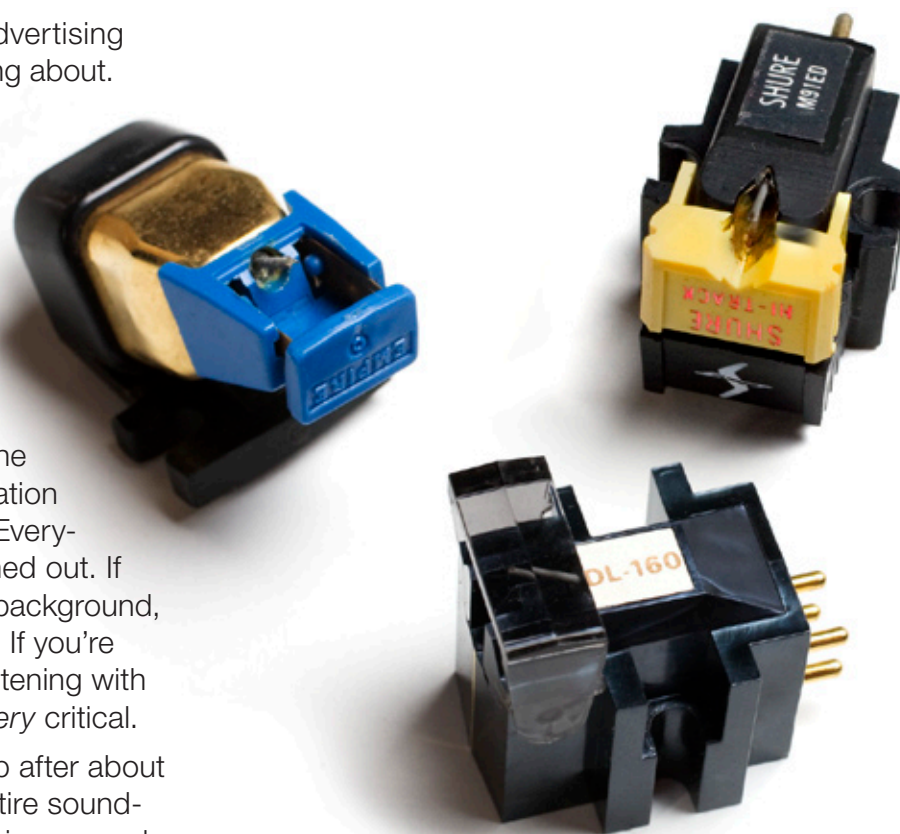
Well, the M91 has "listenability." It's very smooth, likable and free from any harshness. After a few songs, though, I started to notice that this was at the cost of any trace of inner detail. The M91 simply didn't extract enough information from the grooves to be a viable choice. Everything sounded distant and soft and washed out. If

While an exploding cartridge doesn't sound nearly as devastating as exploding tubes on a vintage amp, the M91 was immediately 86ed.

you're listening to music in the background, the M91 is relatively inoffensive. If you're sitting down for some critical listening with the M91, you'll wind up being very critical.

Another problem popped up after about 20 minutes of listening. The entire soundstage started lifting up and moving around between the speakers. It would leap forward and then jump back. It sounded as if the cartridge would go completely out of phase for a few seconds and then return to normal. This electrical instability reminded me of why I wound up selling that Scott 299B amp a couple of years ago. After more than two hours of playing, the Scott would start to smell funny and the imaging would become jumpy and unstable. It wasn't the kind of amplifier I wanted around my kids and pets. The M91 exhibited that same sense of imminent catastrophe. While an exploding cartridge doesn't sound nearly as devastating as exploding tubes on a vintage amp, the M91 was immediately 86ed.

The Empire 999 was even worse. It took only a few seconds to realize this was a complete bust. My Tivoli Audio clock radio offers a bigger soundstage and better imaging. It's fairly disconcerting to look at the giant electrostatic panels of the CLX and see a tiny little sound come out of them. The entire soundstage was maybe three feet across. I felt like personally apologizing to every hard-working member of the Martin-Logan team for subjecting their wonderful creation to such torture.



Dan Babineau, our technical editor, likes to say "What have we learned?" Well, I suppose I can say that my suspicions about old cartridges were confirmed. My admonishments in the past were based upon advice from knowledgeable people. I wasn't about to question them and then proceed to ruin several valuable LPs. I know that a sample size of two isn't quite enough to damn every old cartridge out there, but a little common sense can occasionally be more useful than the Scientific Method. I've done my homework, in other words.

One Last Cartridge...

After my last column on the 1200, I received two emails. The first was from a member of the 1200 Army who asked, "Why are you still trying cartridges? Just get the KAB mods already! Stock 1200s suck even with decent cartridges!" The second email was a little more sedate and came from a more authoritative source. It was from Clark Williams of Acoustic Sounds who told me that I should try the Denon DL-160 on the 1200, stating that it was his favorite choice for the Technics. *(continued)*

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He also recommended the Sumiko headshells. Since Clark is one of the top guys in the country when it comes to turntable set-up, I replied, "Send me one, dude!"

Well, Clark may be right. The Denon DL-160 nearly equals my Zu DL-103 in terms of making the 1200 listenable. The 160 wasn't able to cure the muddy bass or slightly dull presentation, but it did make the 1200 sound bigger and more dynamic than ever before. It didn't match the midrange accuracy or warmth of the Zu, but it started to bring the 1200 closer to the light, energetic presentation of decent belt-drive tables from Rega and Pro-Ject. The only caveat is that the Sumiko headshell is extremely light, and so is the 160. I needed to place a little weight on the headshell to get the right tracking force, which is never a good idea. Then again, the Sumiko helped with the 14-gram Zu, which has the opposite problem.

I'm sorry to say that the Denon DL-160 eventually wore out its welcome.

**I was listening to
"Light My Fire" and
suddenly thought,
"Enough!"**

I'm just too spoiled with the good stuff. Good analog sound is never fatiguing. Bottom line: forget about the vintage cartridge and invest in something new before you start spinning (and possibly screwing up) records again. ●

Tube Rolling In China

By Jerold O'Brien
Photos by Keith Hill



Being the staff hermit, it takes a lot to get me off the couch, much less on an airplane. But when my good friend Keith (who wrote the Monogamous Audiophile column in Issue One of TONEAudio) invited me to go tube shopping with him in Hong Kong, I was intrigued. A quick call to my boss telling him that it was way too long since I had visited the Hong Kong office, and I was on my way to the airport.



There are advantages and disadvantages to living the ex-pat life in China. One key advantage is a pay grade that allows for a high-end audio habit and a wine collection. The down side is when you blow a tube during a late Friday night listening session, and that's just what happened to us...

There we were having a pleasant evening rocking out when somewhere near midnight I heard something in the right channel that set the alarm bells off. I informed my gracious host he was losing a tube; a few songs and a little denial later, we took a closer look at his BAT VK-75SE and sure enough, there was trouble. One of the 6C33C-B output tubes was crapping out and needed replacement, pronto.

Early Saturday morning brought clearer thinking and a plan.

We threw together a quick overnight to Hong Kong and boarded the MTR in Shenzhen. In Hong Kong, our first stop was to Ernst Audio Ltd. in Central, an awesome shop with first-class service, where Keith purchased his VPI table. We took in the sounds of the Rockport Aquila speakers pushed by a Wave Stream V8 amp, Wave Stream Deluxe Line Stage and Deluxe Phono Preamp with a Clear Audio Statement turntable front end, while Tseng Wai Ming and owner Cathy Lau tracked down the 6C33C-B tubes for us. Wow, what a sound!

The best place to get tubes in Hong Kong is called Wi Wi Trading Company, also in Central. Keith and I hoofed it over to Wi Wi and were completely blown away by what we saw. Display case after display case of beautiful NOS tubes, old tube equipment and old tube radios. I was in heaven! There they all were, Mullard, Amprex, Bugle Boy, Siemens, Phillips, RCA, you name it, Wi Wi had it. *(continued)*

Lorenz Tang, the owner of Wi Wi, told us that he had found most of these treasures in Vietnam, left over from the war years, and had tracked down a mother lode of Telefunken tubes in the middle of Africa. The price for the tubes was very reasonable, but he had to commission two airplanes, trucks and drivers to get them out. What a great place for a tube lover! *(continued)*



In addition to the necessary power tube, Lorenz set Keith up with a full set of NOS tubes for his power amplifier and his matching VK-52SE preamp. Everything is working well again and Keith is the happiest guaylow in China right now.

If you are in Hong Kong and love tubes, visit Ernest Audio and Wi Wi Trading. Tell them the guys from TONEAudio sent you. ●

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METALLICA

The Rose Garden

Portland, Oregon

November 1, 2008

Article and Photos by Jeff Dorgay

The cost of four floor tickets to see Metallica: \$380. James Hetfield dedicating the concert to you on your 13th birthday: priceless. That's exactly what happened to Brian, who was holding up a small card at the front of the security barrier that said "I'm Brian - It's my 13th birthday!" His mom said that they had been "waiting outside all day to be the first in the door."

Their diligence paid off when the lights came back up after Metallica stormed the Rose Garden stage with "That Was Just Your Life" from the current album, *Death Magnetic*. Hetfield bent down to read Brian's card and then announced the birthday boy to the crowd saying **"You've got a cool Mom, we're dedicating this show to you."**

The Rose Garden was configured to give the audience a stage in the round presentation and Metallica delivered the goods for nearly three hours. Their level of intensity reminded me of the ferociousness I'd seen in them when they were in their twenties.



Hetfield and guitarist Kirk Hammett both did their share of soloing and were joined by bassist Robert Trujillo for some extended jams through “And Justice For All” and “Master of Puppets.”

Metallica played a wide cross-section of their huge catalog, providing something for fans new and old. They finished with “Seek and Destroy” from *Kill em All*.

Metallica is at their pinnacle on the *Death Magnetic* tour. The stage show is worthy of a museum installation, with amazing lighting, props and pyrotechnics. But for all the fame and success they’ve achieved, these guys played their asses off like a new band still trying to earn it. At concert’s end, they released about a hundred giant black rubber balls (about four feet in diameter) with the Metallica logo on them from the ceiling out into the audience. On stage, Hetfield grinned ear to ear. I hope Brian managed to snag one as a souvenir.



Flobots

Webster Hall

New York, New York

November 3, 2008

Article by Brian Hughes Photo by Billy Tompkins

Music fans who are Democrats would have been hard pressed to find a better band to hang out with on the eve of election night than the rap-rock juggernaut Flobots, who were at Webster Hall. Having played the Democratic National Convention to acclaim in August with Rage Against The Machine, both the band and the audience were feeling the sweeping change of the guard and were playing with even more moxie than they had a few months earlier when I caught them at The Bowery Ballroom.

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by Ben Fong-Torres
(former senior editor at Rolling Stone)

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I had thought that the Bowery couldn't contain the power of this band. I felt the same way in Webster Hall, even though it is considerably larger.

Lead singer Brer Rabbit says at the opening of their album *Fight With Tools*, "There's a war going on for your mind." Flobots are out to prove that there is a conspiracy behind our dubious foreign policies, and that we can change the world together. Combining their conviction on and off the stage, the power of their lyrics, and the sometimes foreboding and chilling viola playing by Mackenzie Roberts, Flobots creates a feeling of intense immediacy, that both the show – and the time – is now.

Highlights of the evening were the funky "Jetpack," which showcases Brer Rabbit's robotic and soulfully athletic dancing skills, as well as the song "Iraq" which cleverly uses a rhyme scheme of I, R, Q, and A with the backronym "It's Really A Quagmire" as the main chorus for the song. This type of clever songwriting is a Flobots trademark, for this is a band rap-rocking about important issues like racism, war, ignorance and love, and not about thug-life, whores, jewelry and narcissism.

The set went almost two hours and finished with the two singles from the album "Rise" and "Handlebars," which manages to surmise man's ingenuity and utter horror through history in a little over three minutes. It's a genius song that builds into a nightmarish totalitarian holocaust. The last song of the evening was a cover of Europe's "The Final Countdown" and the irony was not lost on the crowd, with Bush's days now numbered.

That's the kind of band Flobots are; funny, serious and in on the joke.



Greg Laswell

The Mission Theater

Portland, Oregon

November 8, 2008

Article and Photo by Devin Dahlgren

Greg Laswell, the multi-faceted singer-songwriter from San Diego, was in town supporting his new album "Three Flights From Alto Nido". Even if you don't think you are familiar with his work, you've heard it on *Grey's Anatomy* and *Smallville*.

The music I had heard on the TV shows and his MySpace page were instrumental productions, so I was surprised to just see a piano on the stage. Laswell came out accompanied by a rhythm guitar player and performed most of the songs from the current album with a very mellow and intimate feel.

Laswell's sense of humor and connection with the audience made it feel more like an evening of chilling out with some close friends, rather than attending a concert. He took us through a clever rendition of Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" and stretched out with a few guitar and piano solos that had the crowd up on their feet. Greg Laswell is a great party host.

Black Eyes & Neckties and The Whore Moans

Plan B

Portland, Oregon

November 21, 2008

Article by Marc Phillips Photos by Jeff Dorgay

With band members named Bradley Horror, Ryan Cadaver, Davey Crypt, Brenda Grimm and Josh Homicide, I wondered if we were going to see a band with a graveyard aesthetic, or the crew that worked on the latest "Treehouse of Horror" episode for *The Simpsons*.

Black Eyes and Neckties are from the musical town of Bellingham, Washington (Death Cab For Cutie, Jenni Potts) and refer to themselves as a horror rock/dark garage punk band, meaning they are way too manic and intense to merely be labeled goth.



While placing all six members on a relatively tiny stage did limit the band's energy and aggression (they're known for covering themselves with fake blood and then shaking it off onto the audience), more space was made when Grimm, a petite and unusually fetching Mistress of the Dark, sat on top of her small Farfisa organ while she played. The organ stand wobbled precariously, but it was clear she's done this before. Guitarist Josh Homicide was literally forced off the stage by either a fellow band member or excessive alcohol consumption,

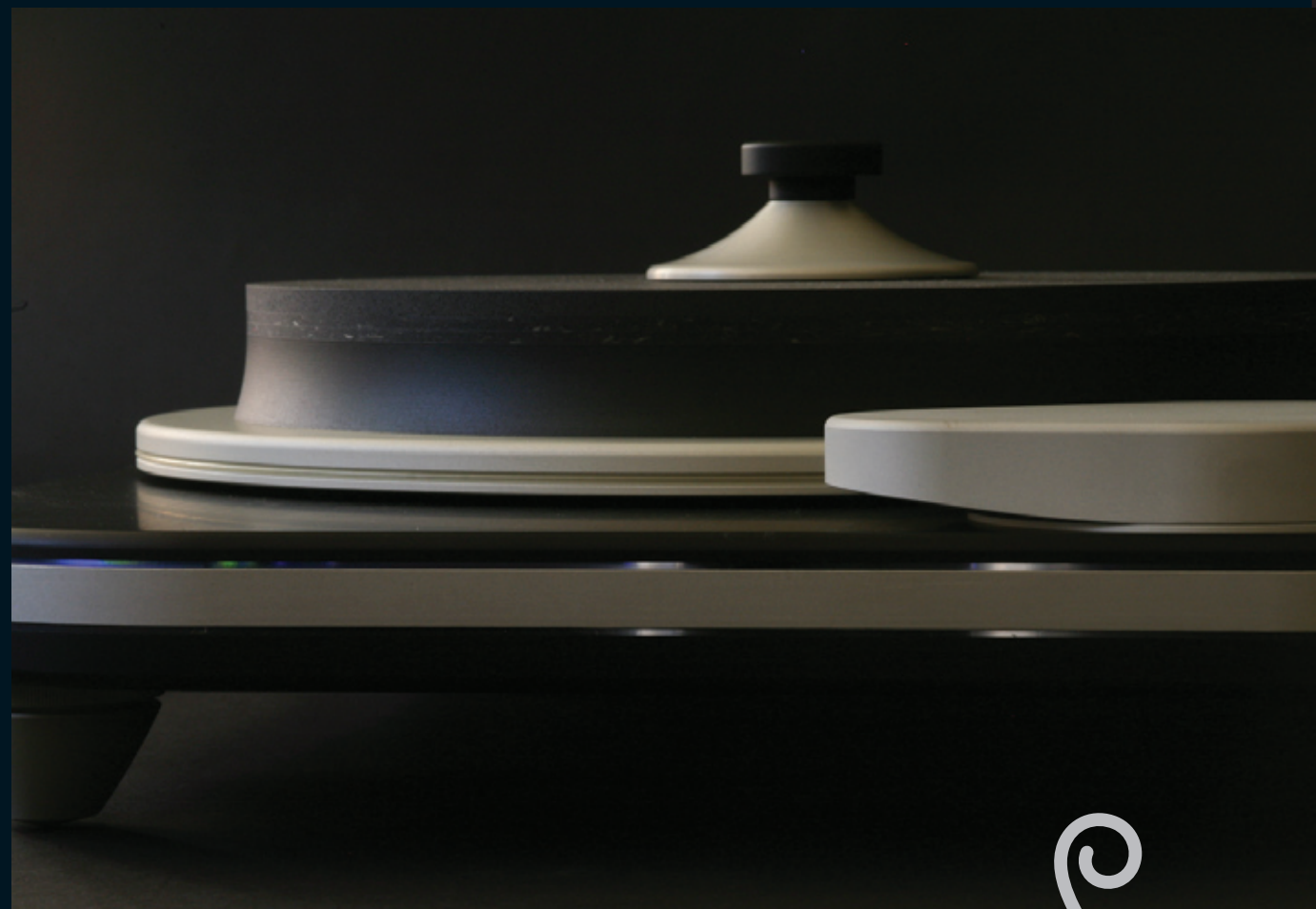
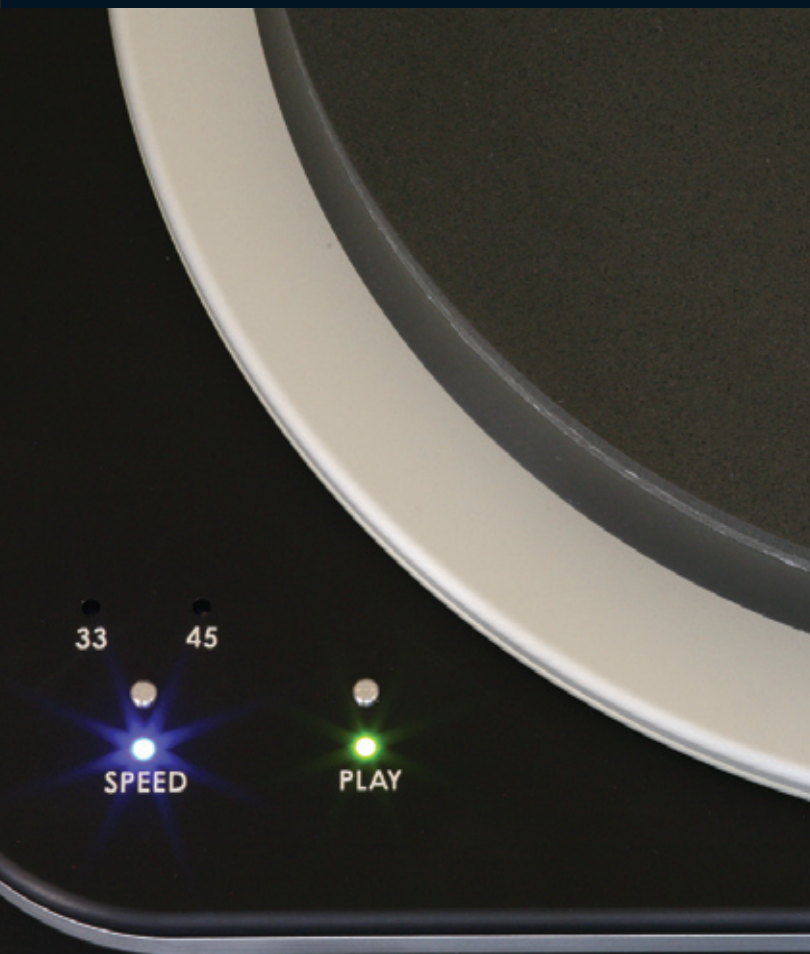
and started playing feverishly while lying on the floor in front of the mosh pit.

Horror, the singer, didn't actually sing. He shouted the menacing lyrics with a singular anger as well as a singular key. Rather than standing at the front edge of the stage, he lurked among the other band members and often distanced himself from the crowd. While all of this sounds rather odd and cartoonish, this was a high-energy set delivered with conviction and focus. It was also full of humor--the dark kind, of course. *(continued)*

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SPIRAL GROOVE

The Whore Moans, the opening act, were also full of energy. It can't be easy to pack up your gear and drive your tour van three hours from Seattle to Portland to play a half-hour set for 20 people, but that's rock 'n' roll. They made the trip out to Plan B to celebrate the release of their new CD, *Hello From the Radio Wasteland!*, and impressed me with their gritty post-punk energy (which bordered on old-school) and their general goofiness. Begging the audience to draw nearer—they promised everyone they wouldn't bite—the band cajoled the few who braved the cold and rainy night to clap and dance along with them.

Some of the hipsters in the crowd resisted, while others were totally perplexed by the Alejandro Jodorowsky film that played on the screen behind the band, but I enjoyed the intimate yet caustic performances of both bands. Black Eyes and Neckties possessed a bit more polish, but The Whore Moans were the rare opening act that stuck with me through the night and made me want to check out their MySpace page <http://www.myspace.com/thewhoremoanssuck> first thing in the morning.



The Herbaliser

Doug Fir Lounge

Portland, Oregon

November 29, 2008

Article by Scott Tetzlaff

Photo by Jeff Dorgay

On tour in the U.S. for the first time in ten years, The Herbaliser couldn't have picked a better place to begin than Portland. (Actually, the tour started in Seattle the night before, but who's counting?) They made themselves right at home in the atomic punk/ski lodge atmosphere of the Doug Fir, opening with "Same as it Never Was" and "Amores Bongo" from their current album *Same as it Never Was*.

Now that this duo has expanded into a seven-piece act, they have added a '70s R&B feel to the show that had the crowd up on their feet mobbing the stage instantly. By the time vocalist Jessica Darling took the stage to belt out "Can't Help This Feeling", the crowd was fully energized. This 22 year old singer seemed to be channeling Tina Turner; even the security guys were dancing around.

Most of the tunes were from the new album, but they did manage to mix in some Herbaliser classics. The two-hour set came to an end much too soon, but Jessica and the boys came back out for an electrifying rendition of the Black Crowes' "Hard to Handle," "The Blend" and "On Your Knees." They may just have to re-hang the doors on the Doug Fir Lounge after this show.



The Rose Garden

Portland Oregon

December 7, 2008

Article and Photos by Jeff Dorgay

Trent Reznor has been called many things throughout his career, ranging from egomaniacal maniac to genius, but I suggest you don't pass judgment on him until you see him live, as this is a dish best served fresh. He hit the stage full blast, opening with "999,000" and "1,000,000" from the album *The Slip* and putting the crowd into an instant frenzy. This was the only show I've photographed all year that got me nervous about being trampled. It didn't exactly help when the head of security told me, **"Be careful on this next tune; this is where he usually kicks a keyboard off the stage."**

The almost three-hour set seemed to last about fifteen minutes, with everyone screaming for more at the end. But after two encores the lights came up and we had to call it an evening. Reznor was like a lightning bolt for the whole show, barely taking a breath between songs. If you had to sum him up in two words, they would be raw energy.

There were three distinct mood changes throughout the set, with the first being the most frantic, with the second set having a slower, more ethereal mood, with the lighting changing to reflect that and the final third of the show racheting the tempo back up to the maximum again. Reznor finished the encore with "In This Twilight" from *Year Zero*, ending the show on a somber note, even for NIN.

Nine Inch Nails



If you would like a peek at what you are going to miss if you don't see NIN on this tour, click this link from the *Wired* site:

www.wired.com/entertainment/music/news/2008/09/nin_show

The article goes into great detail, covering the technical and aesthetic aspects of the show, along with some great comments by Reznor.

The current NIN show features the most stunning and ambitious light show I've ever experienced, with almost half of the show programmed by the band in real time during the show. As a result, everyone that experiences this tour will get a unique performance, with no two nights being exactly alike.

Reznor claims that there won't be "another production of this proportion for a long time".

Even if Nine Inch Nails is not at the top of your list you need to see this tour. It's an experience of light, music and energy that pushes technology to the limits of its capabilities. In an era of bands letting media photographers shoot for the first three songs only, Reznor has made the bands performances remarkably accessible. "Bring your cameras and camcorders, shoot whatever you want and share."

After all of the effort he's put into this show, I can understand why he's proud of his work. There is more great live footage available on the Nine Inch Nails site, **www.nin.com**.

But did the audience get it? Great art can go to waste if the audience doesn't connect. When I asked one of the screaming fans in the front row if she was having a good time and she replied, "I'm having a fucking great time!"



Duran Duran

MGM Grand Foxwoods Casino

Mashantucket, Connecticut

December 12, 2008

Article by Brian Hughes Photos by Ruth David

From reports of the South American and Southern U.S. leg of their worldwide Red Carpet Massacre Tour, with cancellations of some dates, because of a flu bug that bit the band, one would have expected Duran Duran to stumble into the MGM Grand Casino at Foxwoods in Connecticut. That is, if they showed up at all.

But they did, and the ravenous, sellout crowd was not disappointed. The legendary band from Birmingham, UK, with 70 million records sold to date, showed up ready to play, blazing through material both old and new, and eager to continue this extraordinary chapter in the life of the band.



You'd be hard pressed to find a band of the modern era who could close a performance with as many hits as this band did.

The band took the stage to the ominous strains of Wendy Carlos' title theme to *A Clockwork Orange*. Standing still and powerful, with screams (females mostly) cascading over the band, Duran Duran kicked the concert off with perhaps their strongest show opener to date, "The Valley," from their latest Epic studio release *Red Carpet Massacre*. Driven by the electronic, disco/rock rhythm of Roger Taylor's drums and John Taylor's flawless funky bass, the song set the tone for the rest of the evening, charging at you as if you were a red cape in Pamplona. Duran Duran wasted no time getting right into the classics – "Planet Earth" was followed by "Hungry Like The Wolf," as Le Bon asked "Is anybody hungry?" Simon, as alluring as ever, teased, danced and toyed with the audience, gaining energy and strength as the show carried on.

Other highlights included the smooth and breezy "Save A Prayer," "Falling Down" (their extremely underrated single) and the highest charting James Bond theme to date, "A View to a Kill." Both "Prayer" and "Kill" showcased the synth wizardry of Nick Rhodes, who like Robert Johnson, must have made a deal with the devil, for he seems to defy age. Simon's highlight, for this reviewer, was his always poignant delivery of "Ordinary World" – a song for which he still hits the high notes effortlessly.

The energy level soared with the crowd friendly "White Lines," from their album of cover songs, *Thank You*. You'd be hard pressed to find a band of the modern era who could close a performance with as many hits as this band did, with songs such as "Sunrise," "Wild Boys," "Girls On Film" and the indomitable "Rio." ●

Why Miles Still Matters

By Anne Farnsworth



Image Courtesy of Sony

In historical circles, the Great Man theory has fallen out of vogue in favor of the more egalitarian “rising tide” of human progress. Conflating the two theories is probably closer to the truth. The exceptional individual blessed with the spark of genius, formed by education and environment, becomes a polestar for similarly gifted contemporaries, leading a phalanx that advances the zeitgeist into uncharted territory.

Great man or no, it is difficult to resist triangulating the progress of 20th century jazz into the achievements of three men – Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker and Miles Davis.

Miles Davis was a restless soul. Constantly searching, never satisfied, his quest for the New, the Next, reinvented the sound of jazz via new approaches to harmony and improvisation, catapulting the young talent he mentored into their own creative orbits.

In 1945, the teenaged Davis left East St. Louis, Illinois, for New York City, ostensibly to study at Juilliard. But his real mission was to track down Parker and his colleague, Dizzy Gillespie, players he had met during a brief but life-altering stint in Billy Eckstine's band. The older rising stars of bebop, the new sound of jazz, took Davis under their wing, taking him to jam sessions, introducing him around, and bestowing instant credential-by-association.

Charlie "Bird" Parker's drug and alcohol problems kept him constantly scuffling for cash, and the weekly allowance sent to Davis by his wealthy father may have factored into Parker's interest in mentoring the teenager. But Bird, when lucid, was known for a generosity of spirit toward the young acolytes who gravitated around him, and he no doubt recognized the potential in Davis.

Miles worked hard to master the virtuosic demands of Bop, succeeding enough to stand side by side with Bird, replacing the departed Gillespie who'd grown weary of Bird's irresponsible personal behavior. But Davis wasn't content to blend into the crowd of high-achieving instrumentalists in a golden age of jazz - another prince in a hall of kings.

"I have to change. It's like a curse."

By 1948, the 22-year-old Davis had left Parker's group, started his own band and was under contract to Columbia Records. Searching for a new sound, he enlisted composer and arranger Gil Evans. The result, *Birth of the Cool*, was astonishing in its departure from Bop sensibility, both in substance and style.

Expanding on the arranging motifs Evans developed with the Claude Thornhill Orchestra, Evans and Davis conceived a darker, mellower sound, adding French horn, tuba and baritone sax to the usual front line of saxophone, trumpet and trombone. (*continued*)

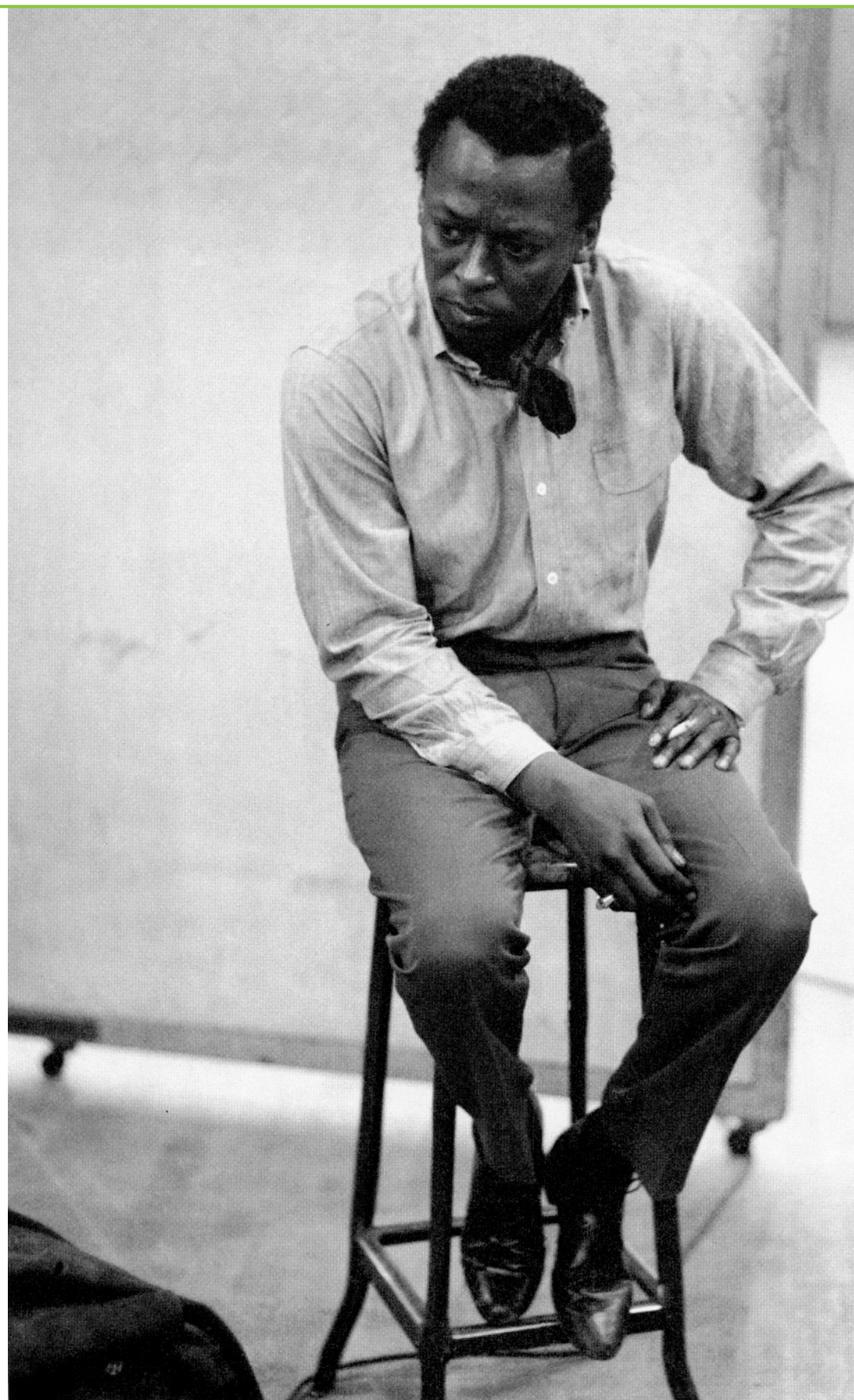


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The texture was smooth, lower in register and volume and nearly vibrato-free. Thematically, the relaxed quality of the melodic lines played over slower tempi was a repudiation of the emotionalism and high drama of bop.

Birth of the Cool did indeed birth the new Cool period of jazz. The ensuing decade found Miles' star rising steadily as he became a successful, internationally known artist. But, ever restless, he moved on. Influenced by the harmonic methodology of composer George Russell, Davis refined Cool's sensibilities into what became known as modal jazz. *Kind Of Blue*, released in 1959, is recognized as the culmination of this style.

Basing improvisation on scales or modes rather than spelling out complex harmonic progressions created a streamlined sound. Miles began playing shorter phrases broken by longer periods of silence, an approach that was at odds with some of his sidemen. John Coltrane, who replaced Sonny Rollins in his quintet, was developing his voluble, almost obsessively garrulous style. One night, he asked Miles for advice on how to end his multi-chorus melodically dense solos.

"Try taking the horn out of your mouth."

Where the bop players were laboring over technique to increase the speed and density of their melodies, Miles was paring down his solos in content and volume. His lines consisted of meticulously chosen notes, often left hanging in the air to enhance their lyricism and contrast over the underlying harmony. *(continued)*



Image Courtesy of Sony

He was also using a Harmon mute almost exclusively, softening his sound to a whisper that matched his famously damaged speaking voice.

Miles brought this laconic style of playing into the next decade; in the late '60's, he again developed a new genre, arguably the last great innovation in jazz: Jazz-rock fusion.

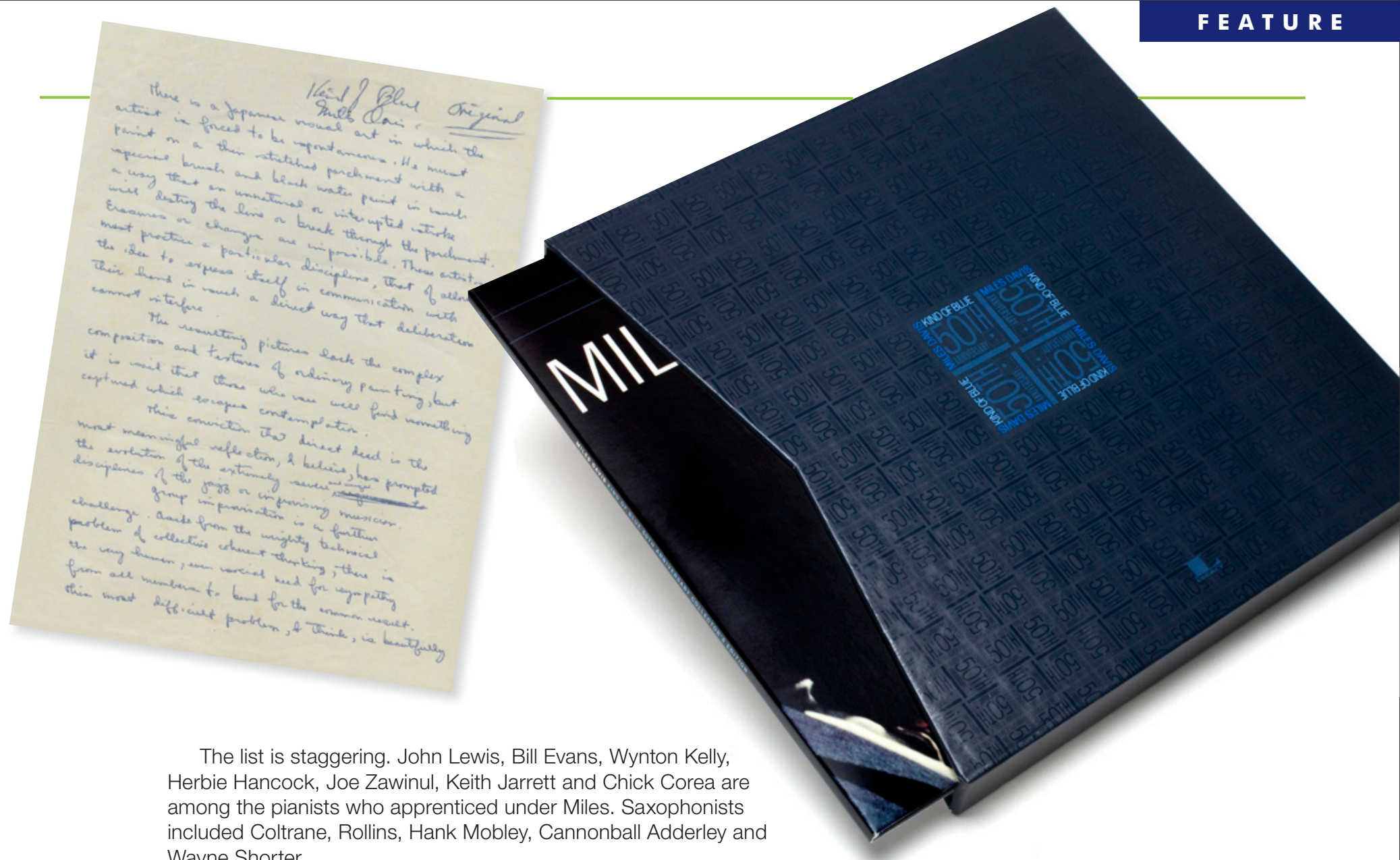
The recordings he produced during that time, *In A Silent Way*, *Filles De Kilimanjaro* and *Bitches Brew*, are considered to be the first full-blown fusion records. Merging the improvisatory element of jazz with the instrumentation, rhythmic feel and volume level of rock created a hybrid that infuriated almost as many jazz fans as it thrilled. But Miles brought jazz to a new generation, filling arenas in the process.

“My gift [was] having the ability to put certain guys together... and then letting them go; letting them play what they knew, and above it.”

Although the statement is uncharacteristically modest, Miles nails an element of his influence that is equally as important as his musical innovations.

Many film directors say casting is the most critical element of a movie's success. Miles' supernatural horse sense when it came to picking sidemen not only helped him realize his own artistic vision, but also affected the musical concepts of all who came after him.

He was called a “leader of leaders,” and most of the young men he hired would go on to become important bandleaders themselves, driving forces advancing the progress of jazz.
(continued)



The list is staggering. John Lewis, Bill Evans, Wynton Kelly, Herbie Hancock, Joe Zawinul, Keith Jarrett and Chick Corea are among the pianists who apprenticed under Miles. Saxophonists included Coltrane, Rollins, Hank Mobley, Cannonball Adderley and Wayne Shorter.

As we observe the 50th anniversary of *Kind Of Blue*, all jazz musicians of the last half-decade step in Miles' footprints. In addition to being on the vanguard of every important genre in the second half of the 20th century and guiding the talents of some of our greatest stars, more than 50 of his compositions are standard material in the jazz repertoire.

Less easily measured, but no less important, are the spirit and dedication Miles brought to the music. During a *60 Minutes* broadcast, interviewer Harry Reasoner asked Miles if he heard music all the time. "All the time," he replied, tapping his temple. "I'm hearing it now!"

His greatest fear was that jazz would become irrelevant museum fodder, of interest only to scholars. As Dr. Thom Mason, chair of the Jazz Studies department at the University of Southern California, says, "Perhaps, more than anything else, Miles showed us that jazz, to have meaning, must reflect the world in which it exists or else it becomes mere historical artifact. Miles looked at jazz with new eyes, seeking to find alternative ways to express through his music what was happening around him." ●

He was called a "leader of leaders," and most of the young men he hired would go on to become important bandleaders themselves, driving forces advancing the progress of jazz.

Current Releases

By the TONEAudio Staff



Snow Patrol

A Hundred Million Suns
Fiction, CD

The fifth album from this Irish-Scottish power pop band takes a while to hit its stride. The first three tunes, including the radio single, “Take Back the City,” seem to be designed as big, slightly bland touchstones for fans of 2003’s *Final Straw*. This is the same dense, sweeping sound that bands such as Coldplay and Oasis have exploited for the last decade or so, the kind of music that sounds warm and pleasing while relegated to the background but doesn’t quite hold up to close scrutiny.

Amazingly enough, the songs improve as they become more intimate and the band veers away from its comfort zone. “Lifeboats” has an easy yet propulsive feel to it even though it’s hamstrung by the opening line, “Hold on, hold on...let me get the words out before I burst.” (I always feel cheated when artistic processes are passed off as actual content.) “The Golden Floor” is moodier and more poetic, with lyrics that leave more to the imagination.

The final cut, an ambitious 16-minute three-part suite titled “The Lightning Strike,” ends *A Hundred Million Suns* on a somewhat ambivalent note. While the sections are connected by the storm theme, the suite could have easily been separated into three distinct songs without the fanfare. Snow Patrol has the basic ingredients of a noteworthy band, but they need to lighten up and stop trying to change the world with their music. Sometimes a gentle tap on the shoulder is just as compelling as a stroke from a sledgehammer. — **Marc Phillips**



Tom Jones

24 Hours
EMI, CD

Damn, I wish I could be 10 percent as cool as Tom Jones. I caught his show last year in Vegas and he still has the energy of a 25 year-old guy on stage. (And, yes, women still throw their underwear at him.) While many of his peers have gone on to sing variations of the American Songbook, Jones is still moving to his own, up beat.

The record starts with an amped up cover of Tommy James' "I'm Alive" with a *big* R&B sound. The next three cuts have more of a traditional 70's Tom Jones feel, only to blast off again with "In Style and Rhythm," in which he offers good advice when checking out someone of the opposite sex; "don't concentrate on the lips, just keep your eyes on those hips." He slows it down on the reflective "Seasons," but then comes right back with "Never," which has an epic Vegas show feel, with a heavy dose of synth beats thrown in. And you'd swear his cover of Springsteen's "The Hitter" was taken from a time capsule of old Tom Jones television specials.

The key here is versatility. Tom Jones refuses to stand still, combining what he does best with today's A-list performers on both sides of the mixing board to stay at the top of his game. (Bono and The Edge join him on "Sugar Daddy.") Producer Future Cut (Lily Allen) helps *24 Hours* to achieve a perfect blend of classic and current material along with a heavy dose of personality. The result is a record that is sure to put a big smile on your face. — **Jeff Dorgay**



The Whispertown 2000

Swim
Acony, CD

Singer-songwriter Morgan Nagler has musical ties to Jenny Lewis and Rilo Kiley, and her new band reflects some of these alliances. The Whispertown 2000 (formerly known as Vagtown 2000) offers a hearty dose of slightly drugged-out Americana that combines Nagler's LA roots with traditional folk. It comes as no surprise that *Swim* was recorded in both Los Angeles and Nashville. Blake Sennett, also from Rilo Kiley, joins Lewis and Johnathan Rice for additional support.

Nagler's voice is a naked and weary thing, especially when she sings with minimal accompaniment on the songs "No Dope" and "Atlantis." When the rest of her band joins in, her offhanded and cool delivery may remind you of the great, unappreciated alt-country chanteuse Edith Frost minus the psychedelic touches. Guitarist Tod Adrian Wisenbaker, drummer Vanesa Corbala, and bassist Casey Wisenbaker keep the sound simple, while suggesting that maybe there's more in-between the lines.

Nagler's lyrics are equally spare and impressionistic on "Old Times," when she sings, "Nothing's gonna get me like the old times," or "We stick to our own like skin to bone, and so we end up all alone," from the album's most ambitious and satisfying song, "Erase the Lines." If this all sounds a little sad and forlorn, then you're ignoring the more joyful aspects of the album. The Whispertown 2000 isn't a challenging listen, nor is it completely devoid of faith and divine inspiration. Nagler often sounds like a former Sunday school pupil who has suddenly found herself hungover and otherwise compromised a few short years down the road, and she's wondering exactly when she lost control of the wheel. I don't know about you, but I get it. Highly recommended. — **Marc Phillips**



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The Herbaliser

Same as it Never Was
K7, LP and CD

A long-time staple of the venerable Ninja Tune label, The Herbaliser has moved to K7 records with a change of musical style to go along with the change of address.

Evolving from their trip hop roots, the former duo (Jake Wheey and Ollie Teeba) is moving further into their current funkified R&B sound. This bigger sound has resulted in a bigger group, as they've added members of the Easy Access orchestra, Ralph Limb and Andy Ross, along with London vocalist Jessica Darling up front and center, and other friends from the London DJ scene.

The resulting sound is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Longtime Herbaliser friends will feel right at home, and new converts checking out their back catalog as a result of this record won't be confused. Hard core audiophiles should take note: the sound quality is a little rough and crunchy, so if you can't put your party hat on, it might be wise to pass on this CD, We'll wait to pass final judgement until we hear the vinyl. Everyone else, turn it up and enjoy. – **Scott Tetzlaff**

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Brad Paisley

Play – The Guitar Album
Arista, CD

CMA Male Vocalist of the Year Brad Paisley has Nashville by the tail. When he decided that he wanted to record a largely instrumental CD, the folks at Arista didn't argue with him. And it succeeds brilliantly.

Many people familiar with his singing don't realize that he's one of Nashville's best guitarists. On *Play – The Guitar Album*, Paisley shows that he can cover just about any style on his Tele, paying homage to influences as disparate as Dick Dale ("Turf's Up") and Eric Johnson ("Cliffs of Rock City"), while showing his country roots on a cover of Buck Owens' "Come on In," with the late Owens himself playing mandolin and dobro.

Trading licks with Keith Urban, B.B. King, James Burton and other legendary pickers, Paisley shows why he has such a great guitar rep. Paisley's purpose here is to show why it's called "playing" the guitar, with a spirit of youth and joyfulness.

The CD closes with Paisley and Andy Griffith singing/speaking a version of Paisley's hit "Waitin' on a Woman," with an extended guitar solo. This is a great recording for fans of good Tele pickin', and for those who just love the idea of somebody successfully bucking the current Nashville pop trend.

– Rick Moore

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Mezzanine de l'Alcazar Volume 6 Defected, CD

The Parisian Bar/Restaurant's sixth entry in the series is also the tenth anniversary of this popular group of remixes that is only rivaled by the Hotel Costes discs. I almost passed this one by, thinking it was a "best of" series, but this is all fresh material. And good stuff, too.

Like the other releases in the series, this two disc set is split between "dinner" and "dance," with the dinner platter featuring more vocal tracks and the dance disc more beat-driven. Both are wildly eclectic, mixing up electro, nu-jazz, funk, soul and house; it all works very well together.

I prefer the dinner disc, but that may be because of some old favorites by Kruder & Dorfmeister, Grace Jones, and Jazznova. The good news is that you can start your adventure with the Mezzanine de l'Alcazar series here and work your way back.

- Scott Tetzlaff



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Dr. Dog

Fate

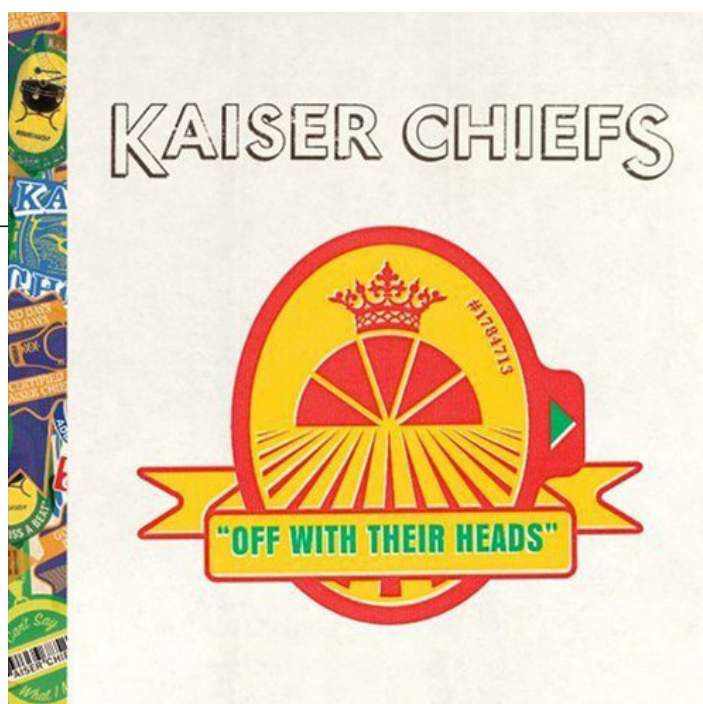
Park The Van Records, CD and LP

I hear a lot of latter-day Beatles and solo John Lennon in the latest release from Philadelphia's Dr. Dog, a five-piece group that features tracks that are fun and quirky while remaining tuneful as hell. *Fate* is a catchy album that grabs you right from the start with "The Breeze" sounding like something from an outtakes reel from *Imagine*.

The second track, "Hang On," is an odd tune with a driving piano hook and vocals – "Why you think we need amazing grace, Just to tell it like it is" – that will roll around in your head for days. Scott McMicken's emphatic delivery on tracks like "Army of Ancients" and "From" remind me of late-era Paul and John, while the guitar arrangements on "The Ark," along with co-band-leader Toby Leaman's vocals, recall Fleetwood Mac.

Much like *Plants & Animals*, Dr. Dog takes a large helping of '70s American rock band style and a big side dish of The Beatles/Beach Boys vocals, and blends in a healthy amount of Arcade Fire, Pavement and The Shins to create something that is new, raw, and free wheeling. This is one of my favorite releases of the year.

– **Sandy Greene**



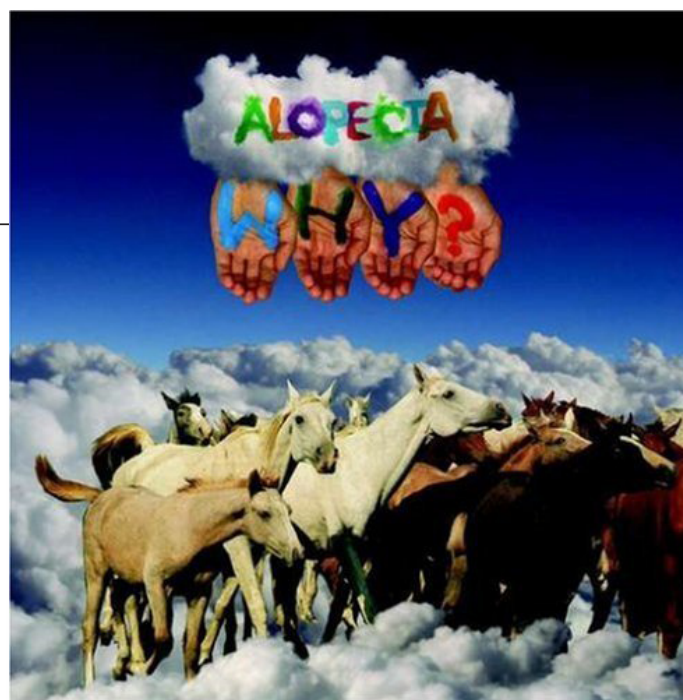
Kaiser Chiefs

Off With Their Heads
Universal Motown, CD

If you are in your late forties or early fifties, I'll bet you've had countless conversations with your friends about whether *real* rock and roll is still being made. I'd say yes, with the stipulation that the best music is still yet to come. For now, the songs on *Off With Their Heads* definitely qualify as solid rock. Simple and straightforward, these eleven songs would feel as equally at home in 1978 as they do in 2008.

That's not to say that these songs are as retro-minded or purposely dated as most of indie pop is these days. Though there are few surprises on this record, that's not a bad thing. The opening cut, "Spanish Metal," combines the growling guitars of Cheap Trick with glockenspiel-tinged verses that invoke the hyper quirkiness of Sweet. Other songs, such as "Like It Too Much," cross the bridge into newer strains of Brit-pop and sound like lost classics from Blondie or XTC, whose vocalist Ricky Wilson sounds a lot like Andy Partridge. Not even Lily Allen, who sings backing vocals on the single "Never Miss a Beat," can dislodge this music from its early '80s moorings.

In other words, this is the perfect album to ruin for your kids by playing it at your next party, especially when your next-door neighbor tells you, "Say, Bob...this really rocks! This is the stuff kids are listening to these days? Bitchin'!" The youngsters may feign hipness and reluctantly drop this CD into the trash can after seeing you and other parents dance to it, but don't be surprised if they fish it out later when you aren't looking. — **Marc Phillips**



Why?

Alopecia
Anticon, CD

I'm flabbergasted at the sheer inventiveness of Jonathan "Yoni" Wolf's free-form poetry. Sometimes poignant – "Even though I haven't seen you in years/Yours is the funeral I'd fly to from anywhere;" sometimes angry – "I curse the last six months I've been hiding behind a mustache/And to those last ten years I've been howling at a paper moon...fuck you!" – his ramblings combine the wry and distant delivery of Cake's John McCrea with an R-rated version of They Might Be Giants. It's funny stuff that's occasionally frightening.

It's almost impossible to discuss these floating, stream-of-consciousness lines in the context of the actual songs. Yes, there are actual verses and choruses here, but the ideas leap out at you and follow you around for days. You may be able to ascribe the opening lines of the album – "I'm not a ladies' man/I'm a landmine/Filming my own fake death" – to the opening song, "The Vowels Pt. 2," but after that you're on your own. If you're a lover of words and a good turn of a phrase, this album is a feast, albeit one that reminds me of my favorite line from *The Accidental Tourist*: "Is this the Thanksgiving we all die?"

The musical arrangements are complex and sometimes unruly, which undermines the identity of the band itself. You might even find yourself exhausted from the verbal avalanche that conceals some pretty literate ideas, smothered in nervous energy and cold sweat as they are. There's a lot of content to absorb here, and *Alopecia* is one of those rare modern recordings that practically begs you to listen to it with headphones, so that you'll get every last agitated drop. — **Marc Phillips**


Jazzanova

Of All the Things
Verve, CD

German jazz collective Jazzanova has returned with a new studio album. The ensemble is known for being innovative, and this disc might shock some fans at the first casual listen. Their last few discs tend to pick a theme and stick with it, but this one has a much broader palette.

The first three tracks of this disc sound like 70's Motown, but then it changes gears. Track four, "Lie," has a distinct Ben Folds vibe, while

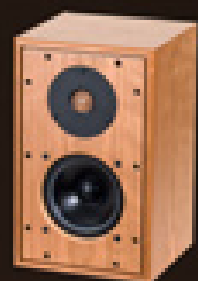
track five, "Little Bird," spins into a sparse piano man feel. There're still eight tracks to go, with still more changes, as Jazzanova mixes in some tasty Brazilian beats thrown in with some light rapping at the end.

With a considerable variation in recording quality between the tracks, this may be another disc *not* to put under your favorite audiophile's tree or Hannukah bush. About half of this CD has an open, airy feel, while the rest is compressed pretty hard. But it does sound great in the car.

– **Scott Tetzlaff**

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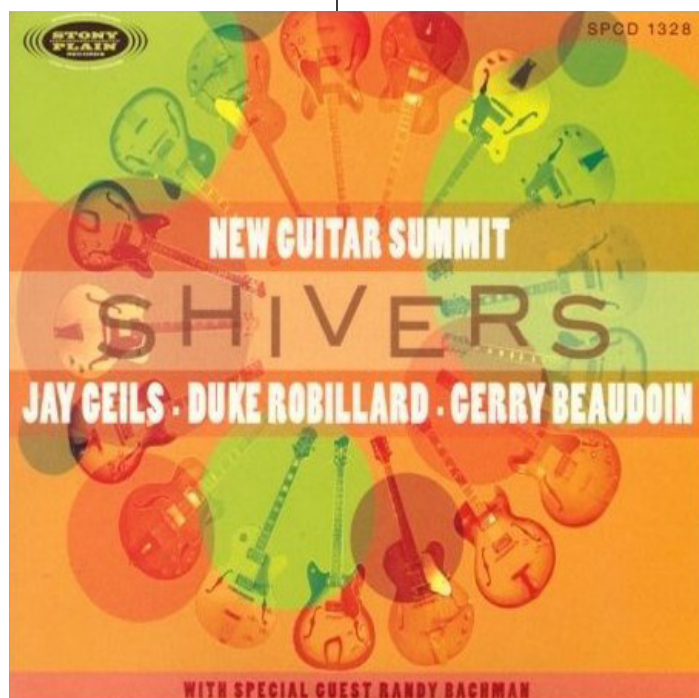
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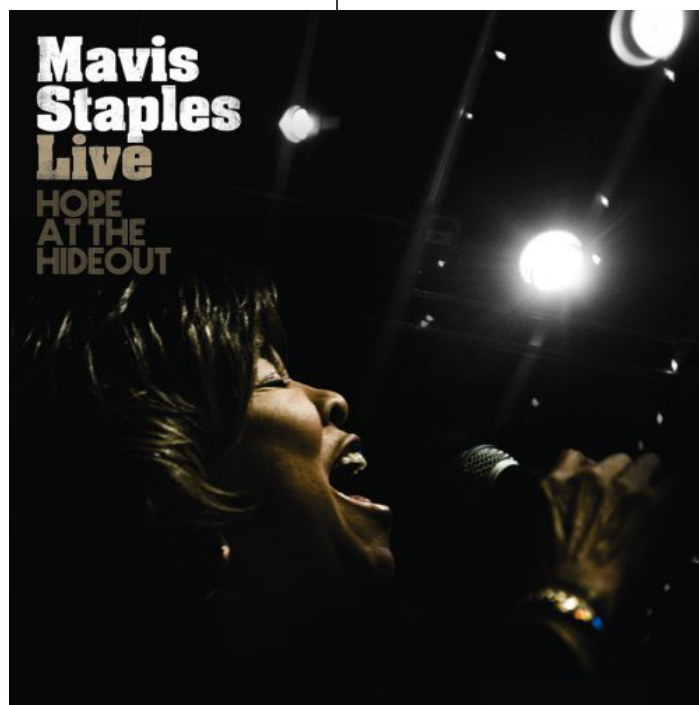
Stony Plain, CD

I bought Duke Robillard's 1984 album, *Duke Robillard and the Pleasure Kings*, simply because of its cover, showing a rather paunchy guy holding a Fender Stratocaster, with a look on his face that said "I wish I was anywhere but here, posing for this stupid photo." Later, I realized that this fellow was an important blues guitarist who had worked with Bob Dylan, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, Tom Waits and Pinetop Perkins. The album revealed a guitar master, and I learned not to judge an LP by its cover.

On this new album, Robillard is joined by two fellow blues/jazz/swing guitar masters, Jay Geils and Gerry Beaudoin, to form The New Guitar Summit. This offering is pretty tame and laid-back overall. Even Peter North's liner notes place the music "in a world where many of us are exhausted...with the endless search for the next big thing..."

Backed by accomplished musicians John Turner, Bob Nieske, Les Harris Jr. and Gordon Grottenthaler, the New Guitar Summit are allowed to trade off and interweave on both original songs and classics such as "Honeysuckle Rose" and "Broadway." Randy Bachman, sounding surprisingly youthful, sings the blues on a couple of tracks as well.

Recorded beautifully by Timm Kelleher at WellSpring Sound in Massachusetts, and mastered by Kelleher and Geils, this record possesses a warm and spacious sound, allowing the listener to really burrow deep into these relaxed yet intricate guitar lines. If you're looking for an album that stretches the boundaries of jazz and the blues, this isn't it. But if you can tell the difference between a Gibson and a Benedetto jazz guitar, you'll find plenty to enjoy. – **Marc Phillips**



Mavis Staples

Live: Hope at the Hideout

Anti, CD

It's always refreshing to hear someone singing for themselves, someone who isn't worried about chart position or building a rep. That's what makes Mavis Staples' *Live: Hope at the Hideout* so enjoyable. Now nearly 70, Staples clearly sings for the love of it. Recorded at a small, funky rock/blues venue in Staples' hometown of Chicago, *Live: Hope at the Hideout* opens with a cover of Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" that seems a little weak. But it's a protest song, and protest and human rights have been a big part of Staples' life since her family's friendship with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., nearly half a century ago.

The set consists largely of songs of the civil rights era (her father Roebuck "Pops" Staples' "Freedom Highway") and songs reflecting her faith ("Will the Circle Be Unbroken"). Guitarist Rick Holmstrom finds a nice swampy sound and delicious groove somewhere between "Pops" and John Fogerty throughout.

This record doesn't offer anything we haven't already heard from Staples during her long career. But it is recommended if you're a fan of Staples', or of performers who are still doing it for the right reason: because they love to sing. – **Rick Moore**

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You Am I

Dilettantes
EMI, CD

The eighth studio album from this veteran Australian band has a big, loose-limbed sound that goes hand-in-hand with their reputation for being a great live band. While the first few cuts may stymie long-time fans with mid-tempo structures and heavy doses of acoustic guitars, the album shifts into party mode about halfway through when frontman Tim Rogers pops open a big can of Foster's and sounds like a slightly soused Paul Westerburg in the song "Wankers" and the single "Givin' Up and Getting Fat."

If *Dilettantes* doesn't quite catch on here in the States, it won't be for lack of trying. The band plays energetically enough, and some of Rogers' lyrics are unusually provocative such as when he asks the fairer sex in the title track, "If three wishes fell in your plate/would you stay high or would you stay safe/There's your religion, there's your fiction." Sometimes being a solid band isn't enough, even after nearly 20 years of playing. Whether or not these songs stick in your brain will depend on your definition of adventure.

Then again, I'm not an Aussie, and I can easily imagine *Dilettantes* making a much larger impact at home. I imagine that every song here would be more than welcomed at a Bondi Beach Christmas party. While I personally think this album is smarter than that, maybe that's the point.

— Marc Phillips



Various Artists

Eccentric Soul—The Young Disciples
Numero Group, CD

Allan Merry, a producer who worked with Chuck Berry, Josephine Baker and Miles Davis, had a secret first love—the city of East St. Louis. In 1967, Merry created the Young Disciples program through the South End Community Center to get troubled youths off the streets and into the recording studio. Over the years, nearly 80 kids from East St. Louis were able to record as solo singers, duos, groups, horn sections and even as a troupe of African dancers. While names such as LaVel Moore, The Georgettes, The Debonettes and the DeDe Turner Happening may not be household names, they should be. Every one of these recordings sounds like a lost R&B classic.

Merry clearly steered many of these performers into a more professional model of musicianship. Moore, for instance, croons like one of the Delfonics, and the Young Disciples Co. are the Junior Achievement version of James Brown's Orchestra. Yet it's much more than kids mimicking idols. When I'm listening to these songs I can easily picture the thrilled looks on the faces of these kids while they performed, and again when they heard the playbacks in the booth.

It's said in the liner notes that the Young Disciples program "changed, if not saved, lives." While it's a little disappointing that most of these talented young people never became more recognized, or enjoyed successful careers, it's uplifting to hear these recordings preserved, available to inspire today and tomorrow's street kids trying to find a way out. — **Marc Phillips**



Feral Children

Second to the Last Frontier
Sarathan, CD

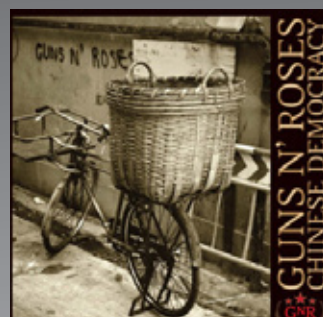
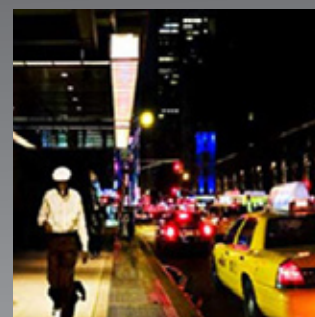
The definition of goth music seems to have blurred and blended with emo for the newest generation of alternative music fans. Just watch a recent episode of *South Park* to see what I mean. I've seen lots of black eyeliner, dark longcoats and ominous songs about death and decay over the last few months. At first listen, Feral Children may seem to have all ten feet planted in the world of goth with their dense keyboard work, nervous vocals and frantic percussion provided by two drummers. Taking more than a cursory look beyond the barely suppressed rage, you'll find the full beards and plaid shirts that are pretty typical of bands from the Pacific Northwest.

So why do FC sound so different than most bands from the area? Part of the reason is that all five members are from Maple Valley, Washington (i.e. rural) and stubbornly refuse to be part of the "Seattle Sound." In their debut album, *Second to the Last Frontier*, this quintet creates a sound that is more jumpy and tinged with violence than the average laid-back PNW group, a by-product of growing up poor and frustrated. Songs like "Lost in the Woods" and "Jaundice Giraffe" convey the feeling of being faced with impersonal and volatile forces of nature, and even relatively upbeat songs such as "Baby Joseph Stalin" are laced with menace and danger.

I'm fairly sure that the band would balk at the goth label, as they prefer to describe themselves as experimental indie-rock, which covers a lot of ground. I'm going out on a limb with the comparison because this music is so evocative of walking past graveyards at night, or walking through a particularly old and vacant house that protests and creaks with every step. This is dark stuff; feel free to call it whatever you want. — **Marc Phillips**

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Taj Mahal

Maestro

Heads Up, CD

It's a beautiful thing to see Taj Mahal still in action. In *Maestro*, his first domestic release in five years, Mahal offers up no real surprises, but does continue to play his kind of blues with the same joy and verve that have marked his recordings for 40 years.

Mahal's brand of (most always positive) blues, blended with sounds of world music he heard as a boy in Harlem, have made him a favorite of fans of all types of music, especially on the concert circuit.

Maestro, which opens with a smokin' cover of Otis Redding's "Scratch My Back," features a number of guest stars whose careers have followed the trail of individuality and independence Mahal blazed. Jack Johnson shares vocals with Mahal on a version of "Further On Down the Road," a tune penned by Mahal and the late guitarist Jesse Ed Davis in the 1960s. And the members of Los Lobos appear on a track featuring Mahal's daughter Deva, as well as on an Elmore James-inspired remake of Willie Turner's "TV Mama."

Other guests like Ziggy Marley and Ben Harper are also invited to the party. But in the end, it's Mahal who outshines them all. — **Rick Moore**



Boz Scaggs

Speak Low

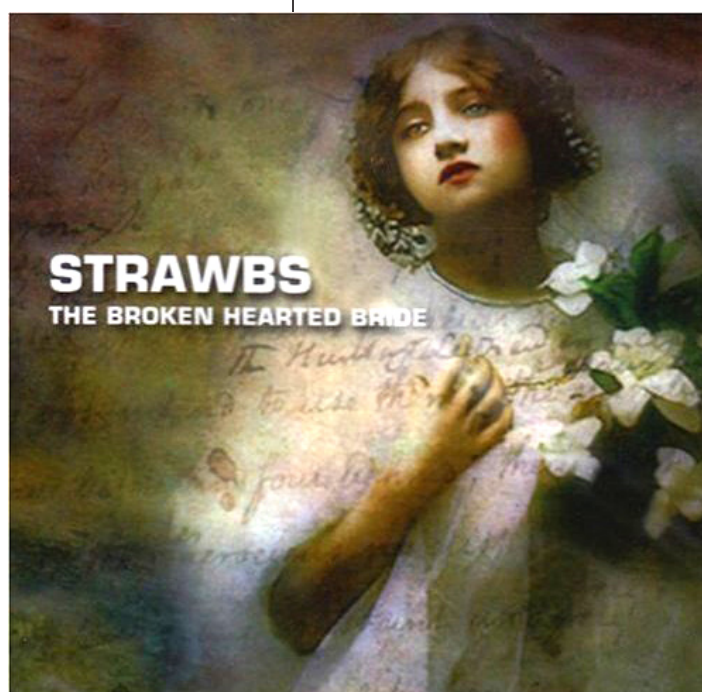
Decca, CD and LP

On his recent tour, Boz Scaggs decided to stick to the hits that his audience knew well, but now that I've heard *Speak Low*, I wish he would have done a mini set of this material as well.

In the liner notes, Scaggs says that he tends to sing breathing in rather than out and that some of these tracks were just recorded under candlelight in the studio at Skywalker Sound. Mastered by Bob Ludwig, the double LP set is cut to vinyl with a lot of bandwidth. With only three songs on each side, you can feel the airiness that was present in the studio when they were making this record; analog fanatics will love the reach out and touch it quality of this record.

The songs on *Speak Low* are all jazz classics, but Scaggs does such a good job with the arrangements that you could be fooled into thinking that he wrote some of them. In *Speak Low*, the songs, whatever their sources, belong to Boz.

– Jeff Dorgay



Strawbs

The Broken Hearted Bride

Witchwood Media, CD

Strawbs have been around since 1964, first playing bluegrass as The Strawberry Hill Boys, and they've dabbled in folk, glam rock and progressive rock in the ensuing decades. These four men are now well into their sixties, and they've been actively touring over the last few years. *The Broken Hearted Bride* is their first studio album of new material since 2004, and while it is alternately heavy handed and intriguing, it proves that guys in their sixties can still rock – as long as it's the kind of rocking that was considered mainstream 25 years ago.

The near-epic opener, "The Call to Action," is rife with Middle Eastern violin themes that sound decidedly modern until frontman David Cousins starts singing about "darkened blades and shrouded hoods" as well as The Promised Land, which I think is somewhere near Coral Gables. (Springsteen used to live there back in the '80s, I think.) When he asks "Will you heed the call?" Your answer might be, "What, with my bursitis?" The rest of the songs refer to pirate ships on the Barbary Coast, Greek mythology and the poetry of Robert Burns, with Cousins' voice sounding unusually urgent, but not quite convincing. Scott Walker was able to reinvent himself after his voice started to go; perhaps Cousins should listen to *Tilt* once or twice for some tips.

It may seem unfair to pick on musicians who still have a loyal following after so many years, but *The Broken Hearted Bride* is so mired in rock clichés that it sounds like Tenacious D took a stab at this material first and decided that it wasn't funny enough. After seeing the Rolling Stones deliver such an amazing performance in Scorsese's *Shine a Light*, I'm convinced that a group of musicians can still rock 40 years down the road. But when you sound this tired and bereft of ideas, maybe it's better to pick up a golf club than an electric guitar. – Marc Phillips

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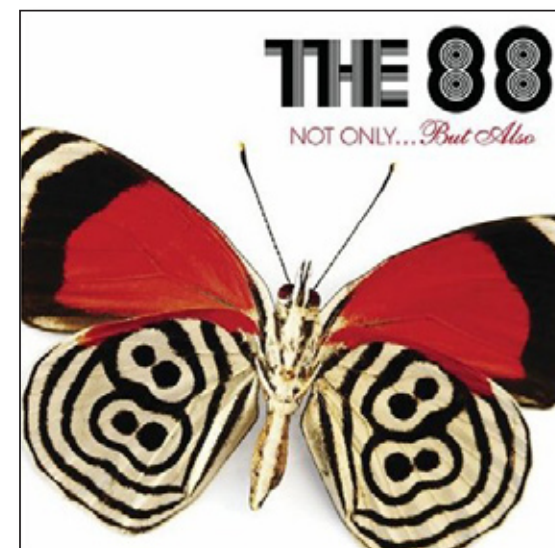
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The 88
Not Only...But Also
Island, CD

It may be easy to dismiss The 88 based upon their calculated and almost legendary exposure in TV, film and advertising. The first single from this album, "Coming Home," is already an anthem of sorts for several NASCAR and NHRA commercials and cable programs. To make matters worse, *Not Only...But Also* was produced by a couple of guys famous for recording Madonna, Fall Out Boy and Maroon 5. If you're a music snob, this sounds like a recipe for disaster.

There's a lot to be said, however, for power pop that can be memorable and fairly original without resorting to superfluous quirks. While the opening song, "Go Go Go," borrows heavily and frenetically from classic glam, the band slows the pace with songs that are built mostly around the piano of Adam Merrin and the romantic yearnings of singer Keith Slette-dahl, who isn't above singing a chorus full of "la-la-la's" or whispering "No one loves you like I do" to a tentative lover.

It all goes down much easier than it sounds, and The 88 seem to understand that being commercially viable is not synonymous with selling out. This is a smooth, perfectly crafted collection of three-minute pop songs for mass audiences. – **Marc Phillips**



The Fireman

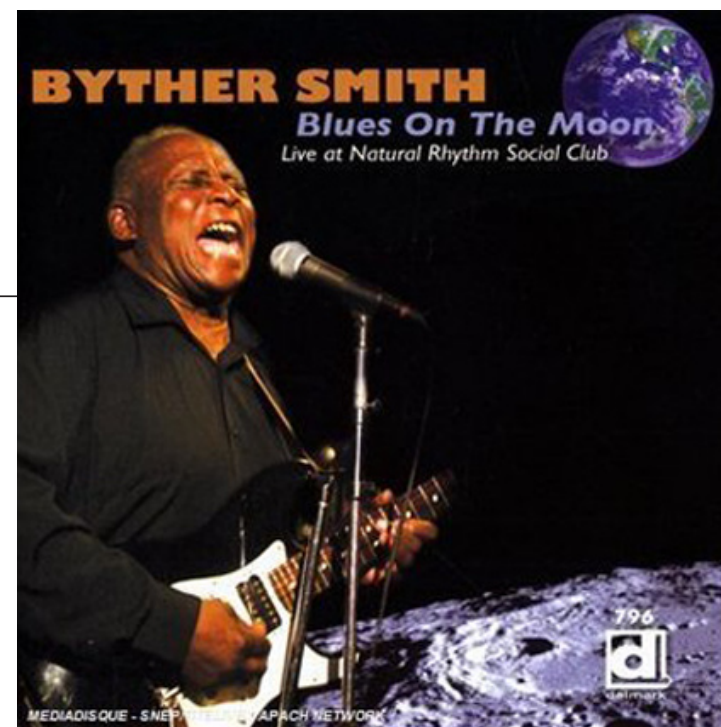
Electric Arguments

Ato, CD

Even Paul McCartney doesn't want to be Paul McCartney every day. The Fireman, the side project McCartney started with producer Youth in the mid-90s, was designed to indulge and express his interest in electronica without challenging the musical sensibilities of the Starbucks crowd. *Electric Arguments*, the duo's third outing, starts out by avoiding ambient music entirely with "Nothing Too Much Just Out of Sight," a heavy blues number that sounds like Howlin' Wolf taking a shot at "Helter Skelter." For a minute it seems like McCartney is determined to forget about the last dozen albums or so, and to prove he can still scream like a rock star, even when he's well past 64.

The next few songs skate around a more typical McCartney sound that demonstrates why he probably shouldn't use that unmistakable singing voice if he wants to be create more of a low profile as a collaborator. "Highway," for instance, is a mid-tempo rocker that would certainly fit in his discography. Toward the end of the album, however, he relinquishes control and the songs become more ambient in nature, and the duo uses lots of multi-voiced synthesized choirs that may remind you of Klaus Schulze and Popol Vuh.

I like the fact that a musical icon such as McCartney is still productive enough to require side projects to explore different facets of his talents and tastes. (I'm reminded of Stephen King during his "Richard Bachman" days.) But while it's fun to hear his experimental side, it's also a little tame for those are deeply devoted to electronica. In other words, it's not really that edgy—just edgy for Paul. But I'll take this spirited and sloppy album over the submissive and elegiac "Memory Almost Full" any day. — **Marc Phillips**



Blyther Smith

Blues on the Moon

Delmark, CD/DVD

Most of the original Chicago bluesmen are dead, and the younger players who are carrying on the tradition are, shall we say, offering a somewhat watered-down version of the real thing. So thank God Blyther Smith is still kickin' it.

Smith has never enjoyed the acclaim of many of his contemporaries, mostly because he spent much of his adult life working day jobs to raise a large family. But for the past decade or so he has been building a following as one of the last true practitioners of Chicago blues.

A cousin of legendary bluesman and songwriter J.B. Lenoir, Smith did stints in the bands of Otis Rush and Junior Wells, and is going strong in his seventies. On the live *Blues on the Moon*, which Delmark has issued as both a CD and a DVD, Smith is in as good a form as any musician his age, especially considering that blues players often aren't models of innovation or perfect intonation.

Smith covers a couple of blues standards here (Big Boy Crudup's "Rock Me Baby," Sonny Boy Williamson's "Don't Start Me Talkin'"), but most of the tunes are Smith originals, and stand up with almost anything written by his mentors. His vocals are passionate and his guitar playing is on the money. — **Rick Moore**


Mark Olson and Gary Louris
Ready for the Flood

New West Records, Inc., CD

Mark Olson and Gary Louris, like their old alt-country band the Jayhawks and others of the upper-Midwest ilk (the Replacements, Soul Asylum), are an acquired taste. The duo's *Ready for the Flood*, produced by Black Crowes frontman Chris Robinson, is a mostly-acoustic affair, with Robinson knowing how to bring out the rawness in the duo's performance. The near-constant harmonies aren't always particularly tight but are in the moment. And the production is quite simple, with occasional electric guitar effects and out-board equipment echo settings that evoke Daniel Lanois.

Olson and Louris show musical growth with the use of some unusual chord progressions (for them at least), from the unexpected use of a sweet major 7 on "My Gospel Song for You" to the occasional dissonance of "When the Wind Comes Up." But none of the songs really stand out; perhaps the best thing about the CD is the aforementioned vocals, as each vocalist sings a harmony part that could stand on its own as a melody. While the sound is familiar and almost reassuring, no significant new ground is broken here. — Rick Moore

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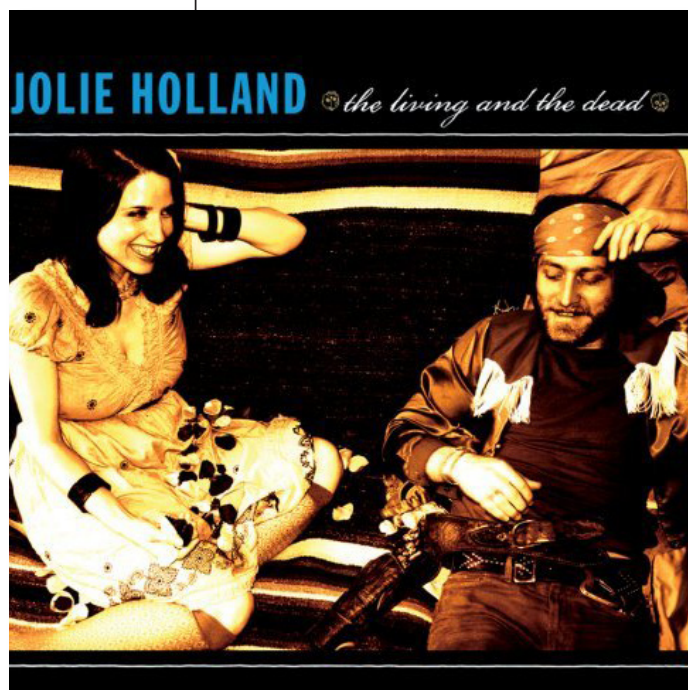
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Jolie Holland*The Living and the Dead*

Anti, CD



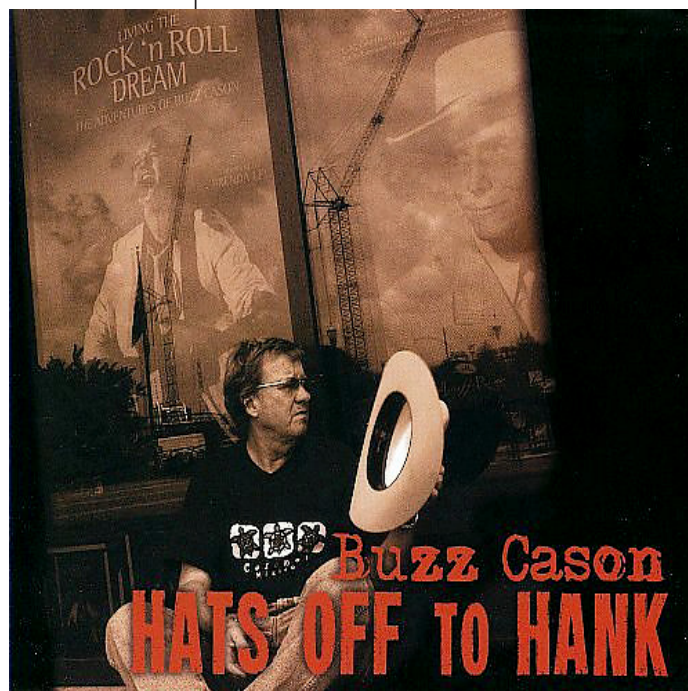
The Texas music scene is so fertile that it's easy to become overwhelmed when trying to listen to all of it. I'm especially impressed with many of the women singer-songwriters coming out of the Lone Star state these days who seem influenced by the candor of artists like Lucinda Williams, providing the perfect earthy antidote to the manufactured divas that haunt the Top 40. Jolie Holland is yet another intriguing example of this type of performer, a woman who is more interested in conveying honest emotions than hitting those high notes and breaking those champagne glasses.

The Living and the Dead is her third studio album, and she leans more heavily into rock music than ever before. Holland explains this new direction, stating, "I love rock and roll, but I think it was hard for me to trust its motives until now." Enlisting support from such guests as Marc Ribot and M. Ward (who seems to be *everywhere* lately), Holland isn't quite ready to sport crispy bangs and a unitard on stage. She's still relentlessly intimate and fragile and introspective, but she's able to back up these frailties with a little more conviction. "Your Big Hands" may look like traditional country on paper, but a growling guitar riff and raucous final section throws this song right out of the honkytonk on its ass.

Still, the quiet songs are perhaps the most rewarding. "Fox In Its Hole" is moody, dreamy and morose in the way that Chris Isaak used to be, and "Love Henry" sounds like the perfect song to listen to over and over while you're lamenting a failed relationship. The album closes with a wan and tentative version of the classic "Enjoy Yourself (It's Later Than You Think)" that's more Woody Guthrie than Guy Lombardo. It's not too late to enjoy Holland, however. She's just hitting her stride with this haunting, distinctive album. — **Marc Phillips**

Buzz Cason*Hats off to Hank*

Palo Duro, CD



Only one Nashville songwriter can claim to have had a song ("Everlasting Love") covered by both the Beatles and U2, and that's Buzz Cason. In his half-century in the music biz, Cason but has led one helluva life, as chronicled in his autobiography *Living the Rock 'n' Roll Dream: The Adventures of Buzz Cason*.

So Cason's latest CD, *Hats off to Hank*, finds a successful career songwriter just having a good time. Vocally he can be compared to Shaver and Dylan on this disc, with both the production and the ubiquitous harmonica making that last comparison inevitable. But the recording falls a bit flat; it's as if Cason picked a batch of songs out of his catalog to make a CD just because he could.

Using a cadre of fine Nashville musicians, Cason sings about Southern living — "I Love the South," God — "Hooked Up with The Man," and Hank Williams — "Hats off to Hank." That one is the CD's most enjoyable cut. Production and recording quality are adequate. But there is no "Everlasting Love" here, or anything as good as Cason's tunes that have been cut by such country heavyweights as Martina McBride and Gary Allan.

Admittedly, you can't argue with someone who's made money writing songs for half a century. But unless you're a fan of the man himself, you probably won't care much about this CD. — **Rick Moore**



extraordinary
+
synergy

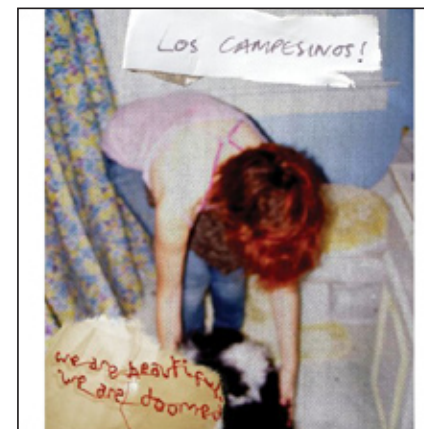
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Los Campesinos!

We Are Beautiful, We Are Doomed
Arts & Crafts, CD

Every member of this Welsh septet has the same last name (not just Campesino, but Campesino!), but before you write them off as just another gimmicky indie band you should take a listen to this funny, slightly grimy “extended” EP. Coming just a few months after their debut album *Hold On Now, Youngster...*, the band has said that this isn’t just a hastily-assembled collection of outtakes and B-sides but, rather, ten completely new songs that clock in at just over 32 minutes, which used to be a full LP. In addition, the band has announced that none of these songs will be released as singles.

These songs slip over to the ugly side with recurring themes of drunkenness, violence and unbridled hatred of past loves. The act of vomiting is described more than once, but in a fairly upbeat and funny way. Gareth Campesino! constantly wails in a British post-punk yelp, yet strings and glockenspiels temper the din in a crazy, manic, yet highly entertaining manner.

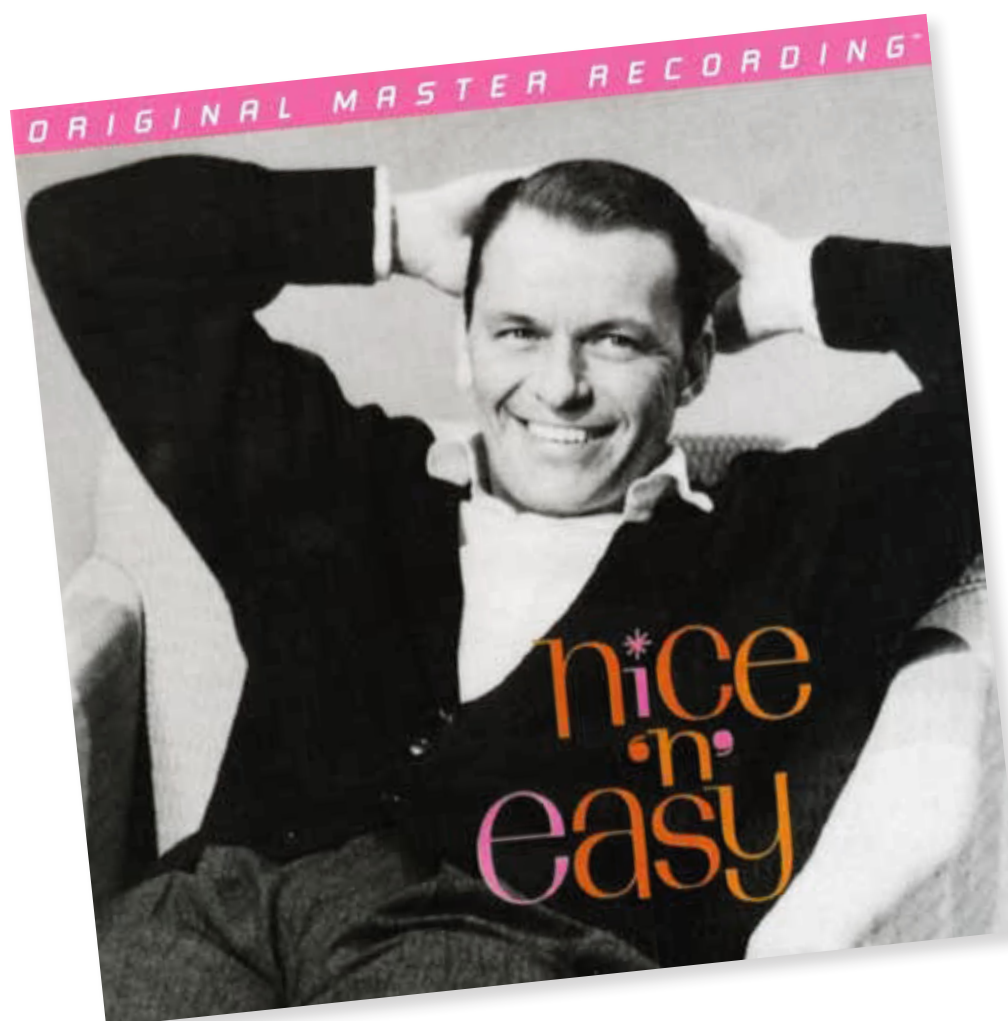
Recorded in Seattle, far away from their home in Wales, *WABWAD* is resolutely anti-romantic, and tales of drunk dialing and narcissism abound. The songs can also be a bit lewd, such as when Gareth proclaims that “I love the look of lust between your thighs” in “All Your Kayfabe Friends.” But these University of Cardiff cast-offs have effectively preserved the disgust and anger of the classic punk movement while turning their heads and winking impishly to the stagehands. You may just find yourself laughing more than wincing. — Marc Phillips ●

Audiophile Recordings

By Marc Phillips

Presented By Acoustic Sounds

If you would like to purchase any of the recordings featured in this section, just click on the album art and it will take you directly to the Acoustic Sounds website.



Frank Sinatra

Nice 'N' Easy

Sings for Only the Lonely

Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs, LP

These two albums were my official introduction to Frank Sinatra oh so many years ago, so it's a pleasant surprise that I get to revisit them now. These two MFSL pressings are unbelievable warm, realistic and dynamic and perfectly convey the relaxed charm and unwavering confidence of Sinatra. In fact, they both sound so good that I can easily imagine using them as references for my next 50 or 60 equipment reviews.

We reviewed the CD version of 1960's *Nice 'N' Easy* for last issue's column, and were mightily impressed. I was able to compare the LP to the CD, and noted that the two formats were very close in overall balance. I'm giving the LP the blue ribbon, however, since the warmth of the bass and the smooth highs captured a better sense of time and place. The difference wasn't huge, but it confirmed why I love analog.



Only the Lonely is the earlier recording by two years, and it's not quite as spectacular as *NNE*. Nelson Riddle's orchestra can be overwhelmed by Frank's powerful delivery, and the sense that all of the performers are sharing the stage is less persuasive. Still, this was Sinatra's personal favorite of his recordings, and the sheer drama in his voice in this MFSL pressing is bigger than life. If you really want to climb inside his voice and see it from all angles, this is the recording.

If you're a huge Sinatra fan, or if these two titles whet your appetite to hear more, consider indulging yourself and buying the original MFSL 16-LP box set. Mobile Fidelity has always excelled at capturing the mood and the essence of his performances and the records in this set still stand up. While sealed copies sold on eBay are still pretty spendy, a gently used set is well within your reach in the \$350 - \$500 range. And you get a Geo-Disc inside!



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Johnny Cash

Johnny Cash at San Quentin

Columbia/Speakers Corner, LP

This 180 gram mono pressing of Cash's legendary performance at San Quentin in 1969 isn't quite as soothing as those Sinatra titles, but it does give a clear window into the appeal of this performance and the unique way he could connect with audiences of all stripes (pun intended). You might find yourself lowering the volume every time the crowd cheers—it's the very definition of cacophony—but once Cash and his band starts playing you'll be reaching for the remote once again.

While it's clear that state-of-the-art recording techniques weren't used on this album (how many cartons of cigarettes can you get for a first-rate mixing board?), this Speakers Corner pressing is almost perfectly quiet and preserves the immediacy and tension of the performance.

Pixies

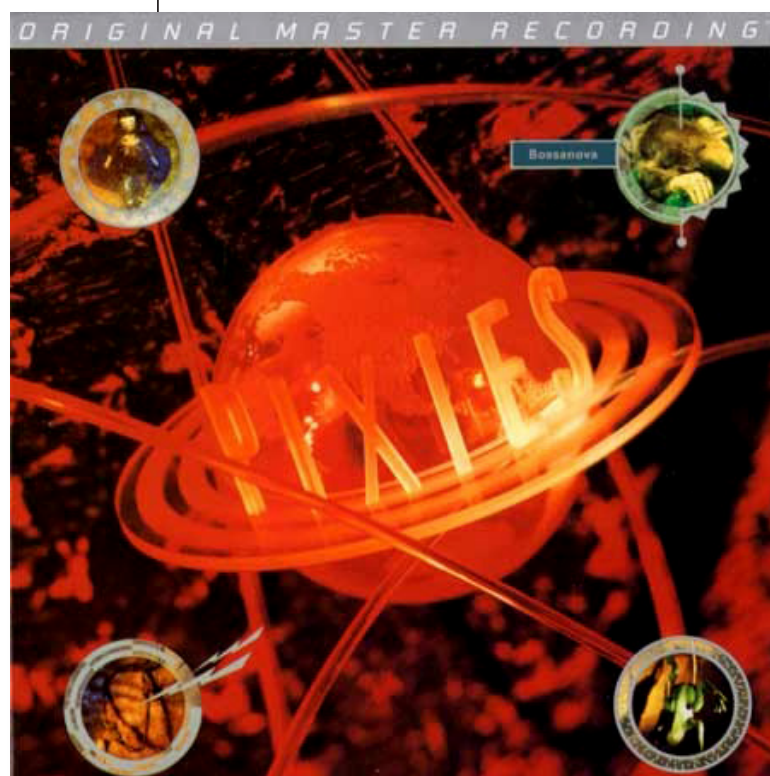
Bossanova

Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs, SACD/CD

As an unabashed Pixies fan, I was delighted when MFSL started remastering their entire catalog and I'll be over the moon when the LPs start rolling out. *Bossanova* is the latest SACD/CD to get the Mobile Fidelity treatment. This album received mixed reviews when it came out in 1990, mostly because it was the follow-up to their masterpiece *Doolittle*, but I've always enjoyed the album's harder, more mainstream edge, especially in songs such as "Velouria," "Hang Wire" and the howling and harrowing "Rock Music."

Compared to my original CD, the CD-layer of the MFSL sounded less metallic and thin. Both Kim Deal's bass and David Lovering's kick drum had more impact, especially on more sedate songs like "Is She Weird" and "Ana," and the more air and space could be heard between the musicians. The somewhat steely sound didn't vanish, since that's what's in the recording. The SACD layer pushed the feeling of depth and separation even further and sounded a bit smoother overall. I didn't quite notice the night-and-day difference I heard on the MFSL version of *Surfer Rosa*, which remains one of my favorite remasters of all time, but I was still impressed with the added clarity.

Pub note: The SACD layer is awesome! – JD

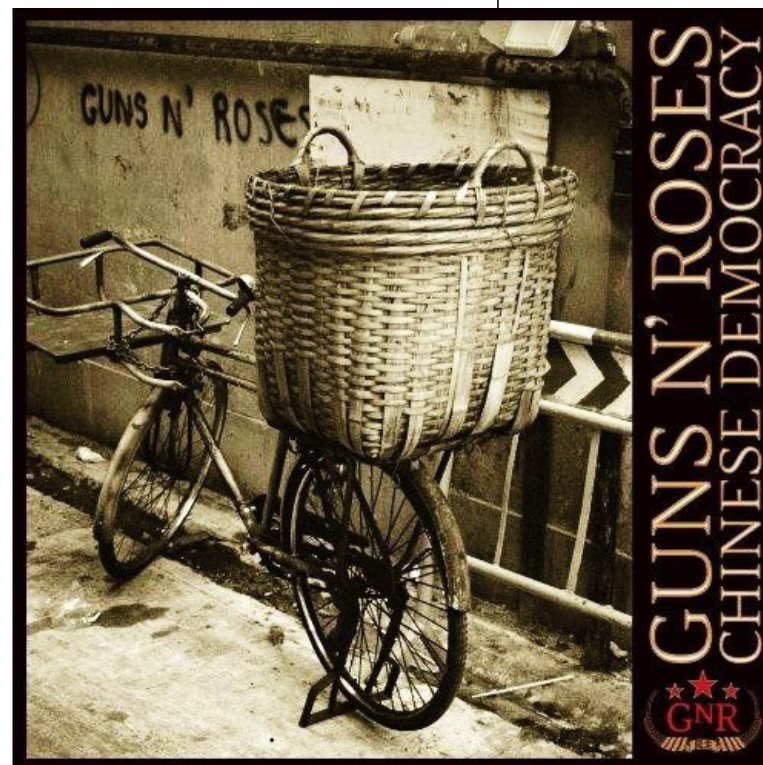


Guns N' Roses

Chinese Democracy
Black Frog/Geffen, LP

I found this 180 gram 2-LP pressing at Fred Meyer, a local grocery chain here in the Pacific Northwest, wondering if it would sound better than the CD. I'm firmly in the camp that believes that GNR made just one good album and self-destructed shortly afterward, so when I first heard *Chinese Democracy* I agreed that this album sounded over-produced and sterile, but basically just okay. After a 14-year delay, this album definitely suffered from the "too many cooks" syndrome. After hearing this LP, however, I'm starting to change my mind.

The LP sounded more spacious, detailed and intriguing than the CD. Surface noise was minimal, and the shorter sides indicates that someone respects the vinyl crowd and their aversion to inner-groove distortion. Could Axl be a secret audiophile? At any rate, if you're trying to decide between the LP and the CD, I'd say give the former a try first.

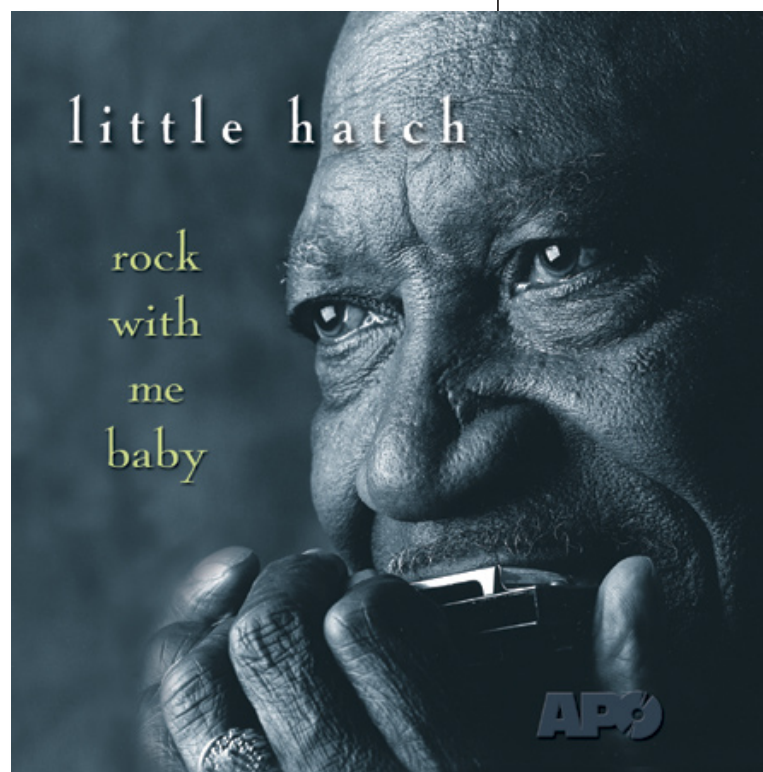


Little Hatch

Rock With Me Baby
Analogue Productions, LP

If you're a blues aficionado and an audiophile, you're already familiar with the amazing results Chad Kassem gets while recording at his Blue Heaven Studios. In this release from singer/harmonica player Little Hatch, recorded back in 1999, Kassem and his team (co-producer Jimmy D. Lane and recording engineer Katsuhiko Naito) have created an intimate and pristine performance that's fairly typical of Blue Heaven performances—a stripped-down ensemble recording in a large space (Blue Heaven used to be an old church). The genius of this setting is that it merely suggests this space without sacrificing the directness of Little Hatch's clear and energetic delivery.

Kevin Gray mastered this 45 RPM 2-LP set at AcousTech Mastering, and big helpings of his signature warmth and air are plentiful. It's satisfying to hear the sound Little Hatch's harmonica leap into your lap whenever the spirit moves him, and the guitars of Lane and Ron Edwards provide a solid foundation and the sound of Lane's dobro is particularly realistic. Chad is assembling an impressive and consistent legacy with his blues catalog, and this is easily one of his best efforts. ●



Rubber Soul— An Overview

By Randy Wells



What's the difference between a music lover and a music collector? Does one believe a piece of music can be experienced completely in one recording and the other accepts their destiny as never being completely satisfied? Is it only a matter of available shelf space, or is there some deeper motivation that creates the collector mentality? Perhaps it's just intellectual curiosity, or a primordial hunter/gatherer instinct, or maybe it's obsessive compulsiveness gone crazy. Whatever the reason, saying "enough's enough" seems beyond the capability of many collectors.

I've been hoarding (I mean collecting) LPs since I was a kid. I still own the first record in my collection, *The Beatles Second Album*, purchased new when it was first released in 1964. Years later, I understand the collector mindset and the vigilance it requires; I now have perfectly cataloged multiple versions of my favorite records. Fortunately, I've learned some discipline along the way and will try to guide you through some great pressings from the 60's and 70's.

It's Still Personal Choice in the End

Choosing a best sounding pressing for any album is always a personal choice, as well as being system and listening room dependent. For our exploration of *Rubber Soul*, I have a short list of three favorites at different price points, along with what you can expect in terms of sonic performance at each level.

(continued)



Released in December 1965 in time for Christmas, *Rubber Soul* presented an evolved sound to the world that was closely associated with the American folk rock of Bob Dylan and The Byrds. It's well documented that UK pressings of the Beatles LPs are among the better sounding examples, being the most authentic. In the United States, Capitol records was busy manipulating the Beatles catalog for different releases. The records released from their factories were cut from EMI copy tapes and in some cases had way too much echo added. Capitol's version of *Rubber Soul* also succumbed to this treatment. While some prefer the track sequence and selection of the Capitol version, the addition of "I've Just Seen a Face" and "It's Only Love" from the UK album *Help*, and the deletion of upbeat tracks like "Drive My Car", "Nowhere Man", "If I Needed Someone", and "What Goes On" changed The Beatles' intentions.

Don't forget, mono LP's were still popular at this point in time and I still take the purist position that the mono version is the jewel. I feel the stereo mix of *Rubber Soul* is an experiment gone wrong, with the lead vocals panned hard right, and most of the musical instruments placed hard left. So I'd recommend

concentrating on the mono version, unless you are into Karaoke or playing rhythm guitar along with the Beatles.

It's Down to the Numbers

Originally engineered by Norman Smith (assisted by Ken Scott) at Abbey Road studios and cut by Henry T. Moss at EMI, the UK Rubber Soul LPs were created from the mixes that The Beatles and their producer George Martin approved. There were at least four different lacquers used for these records and the lower numbers were stamped earlier in the production cycle.

While it is often assumed in the collector's world that the earlier pressing is superior sounding, this is not always the case. The very first 1965 pressings released on the famous yellow and black Parlophone label came with a -1 lacquer number on both sides and were often referred to as "the loud cut" because of the compression on this pressing. (*continued*)

While it is often assumed in the collector's world that the earlier pressing is superior sounding, it is not always the case.





While still listenable, the midrange on this version is squashed and muddy sounding compared to later pressings. EMI very quickly replaced the –1 lacquer with a –4 lacquer and then a –5, which is the number showing up on many of the 1982 UK mono reissues of *Rubber Soul*. These reissues have a label that looks similar to the original but has the word “MONO” placed above Parlophone as shown in the photo. There also exists a –6 lacquer number for *Rubber Soul* (for Side 1 of some of the 1982 UK mono reissues) that is reportedly cut using later solid-state lathes. For the stereo UK *Rubber Soul* album, the earliest pressed lacquer numbers are –2 and –3. Like the early –1, –4 and –5 mono cuts, the early –2 and –3 stereo cuts were produced using tubes.

These reissues have a label that looks similar to the original but has the word “MONO” placed above Parlophone.

By the time a –4 stereo lacquer was cut, the stereo labels had changed to a silver and black “two EMI box” style and solid-state cutting lathes were being used. In general, the solid-state cuts sound more detailed and dynamic but a bit cooler overall compared to those that were cut using tubes. If your system has an overall warm tonal balance, you may prefer the records cut with the solid-state lathe.

Top Shelf Pressings

The flip back version of the original mono UK *Rubber Soul* album (PMC-1267) is a piece of art to behold, and the first time the group name does not appear on a Beatles cover. Sliding a heavyweight Y/B Parlophone labeled record out of its Emitex lined inner sleeve is a welcome ritual, and listening to a –4 tube cut mono LP on a high-resolution system is a wonderful experience.

I feel the centered lead guitar and strong vocal tracks of the mono mix provide a stronger connection to the music than the stereo mix. The mono mix also has a great overall tonal balance that is very rich in texture. “Norwegian Wood” is especially well rendered with realistic sitar and guitars that ring out with convincing natural reverberation. This pressing also shines on more complicated tracks like “Think For Yourself” with its layered vocals and distorted Rickenbacker bass lines. Although you may come across an excellent condition copy of a mono Y/B Parlophone *Rubber Soul* pressing in your local record store, chances are that today you will need to search an online service like EBay to snag one. With the dollar getting stronger, this is a good time to be shopping for vinyl in the UK and an excellent condition copy should be able to be found for around \$150. This is my recommendation for those who can afford it.
(continued)

IF WE DON'T HOLD ONTO THEIR DREAMS,
WHO WILL?

If you insist on stereo, another alternative is an early Y/B Parlophone stereo pressing; (PCS-1267) has a rich and tonally correct midrange that will sound good on any system. Acoustic guitars, tambourines, and percussive instruments all feature strongly on *Rubber Soul* and this LP gets them right. About \$150 should fetch an excellent copy.

A Bit More Restraint

Even though it does not feature a heavily laminated cover, the 1982 UK mono reissue with a -6 Side 1 cut really rocks. It cleanly reproduces percussive instruments and lends more energy to "Drive My Car" and the harmonically complex "Nowhere Man". It also reveals more detail in songs that need it, like "The Word". Punchy yet balanced, with a well-reproduced bass, it can be a great alternate, especially for those with a few vacuum tubes in their system.

Be aware that when considering the purchase of any original UK *Rubber Soul* vinyl, the last song on Side 1, "Michelle", will have the greatest chance of exhibiting audible groove wear.

Unfortunately not many of the early mono copies escaped the ravages of time due to primitive phono cartridges and high tracking forces.

You should be able to get your hands on a clean pressing of a 1982 UK *Rubber Soul* pressing for about \$60-100. A 1982 red vinyl mono Japanese pressing (EAS-70135) is another very nice if sometimes bright mono alternative at the \$80 level.
(continued)



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For \$80, you get may get lucky and find a 1969-1970 “one EMI box” silver and black Parlophone labeled pressing which came with the early tube cut lacquers on both sides.

Bargains

Later “two EMI box” label stereo LPs, like those found in the 1978 UK Beatles BC 13 blue box, are the bargain choice in the stereo *Rubber Soul* category, at less than \$30. When I listened to one of these with -5/-3 lacquer numbers, Side 2 sounded very similar to an early heavyweight Y/B Parlophone, with both sharing the same tube cut lacquer. The solid-state cut on Side 1 exhibited a slightly cooler overall presentation, with sweet tracks like “What Goes On” sounding more dynamic and difficult tracks like “Think For Yourself” edging towards brightness, but this is still a great listen overall. Neglected, perhaps unfairly because it was a later pressing, done in stereo, this copy will satisfy all but the most rabid Beatlemaniacs.

Marginal

Unfortunately, when it comes to looking for mono *Rubber Soul* LPs at a lower price point, “inexpensive” and “audiophile” are not two words that go together. You may be able to find a Capitol Rubber Soul mono LP (T 2442) in excellent condition for less than \$30, and while it has that great line up of songs starting with “I’ve Just Seen A Face”, sonically it can’t hold a candle to the best UK and Japanese mono pressings. It’s unfortunate there isn’t a better sounding vinyl pressing for this mix, which is the one many baby boomers grew up with.

When it comes to looking for mono Rubber Soul LPs at a lower price point, “inexpensive” and “audiophile” are not two words that go together.

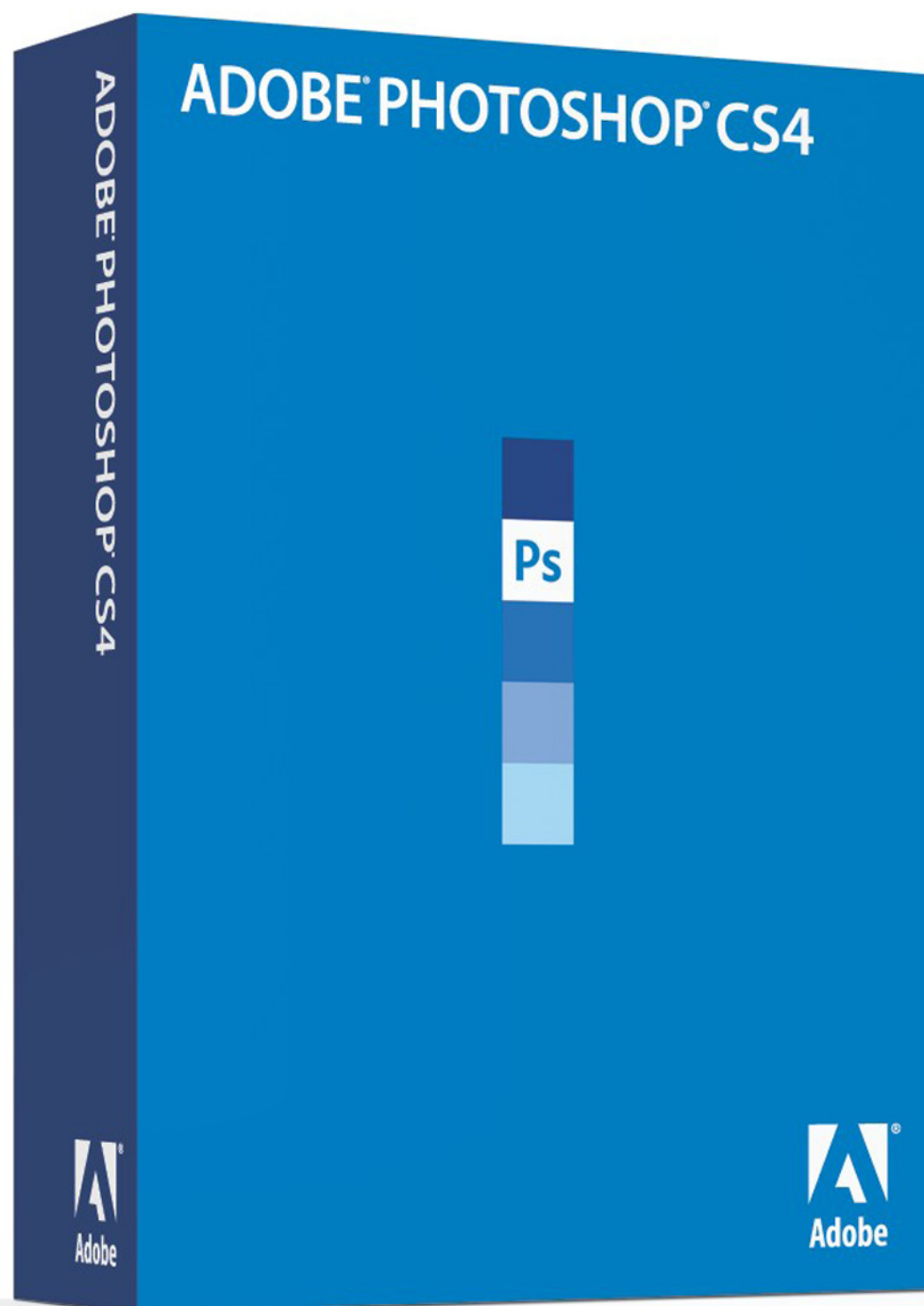
Beyond the questionable dual-mono mix, are there any *Rubber Soul* stereo pressings to avoid because of poor sound? Some of this will depend on the overall character of your system. The 1976 Japanese stereo pressing (EAS-80555) has a lot of detail, perhaps too much for a bright system. The MFSL pressing of *Rubber Soul* (MFSL 1-106) comes off sounding dull in the upper midrange on a warm system, so keep that in mind.

More to Come

In a future Collector column I’ll be listing my preferred pressings of *The Beatles*, or as it’s more commonly called, the *White Album*. This is one of the hardest Beatles albums to find a great sounding LP of for various reasons, which I will explain. In the meantime, Happy Listening!

Note: For those of you that are more complete collectors, fear not. I have an extended version of this article that investigates all the minute variations on the remaining pressings of this classic album. It will be posted on the TONEAudio website shortly. ●

No cars this issue, but it's not for lack of trying. The new Aston Martin isn't in the United States yet with the latest B&O system, but we're promised a test drive/listen when it finally comes available. However, we do have a few goodies for the music and technical minded.



Photoshop CS4

Adobe Systems
www.adobe.com
 \$199-\$999

Adobe's Photoshop is now at release 11 and has become the ubiquitous application for editing photos by almost every pro photographer in the world. I've been using it since before it was a commercial release, when it came on three floppy discs. Remember those?

It's always an exciting time to rip the shrinkwrap off the new Photoshop to see what the geniuses at Adobe have come up with next. Every year, they outdo themselves, coming up with something that a working pro just can't live without, but not this time folks. There is no compelling reason to buy Photoshop CS4. There aren't many new features that will make you a more productive photographer, or any new effects that will take your creativity to the next level.

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Porsche recommends **Mobil 1**

porscheusa.com/technology



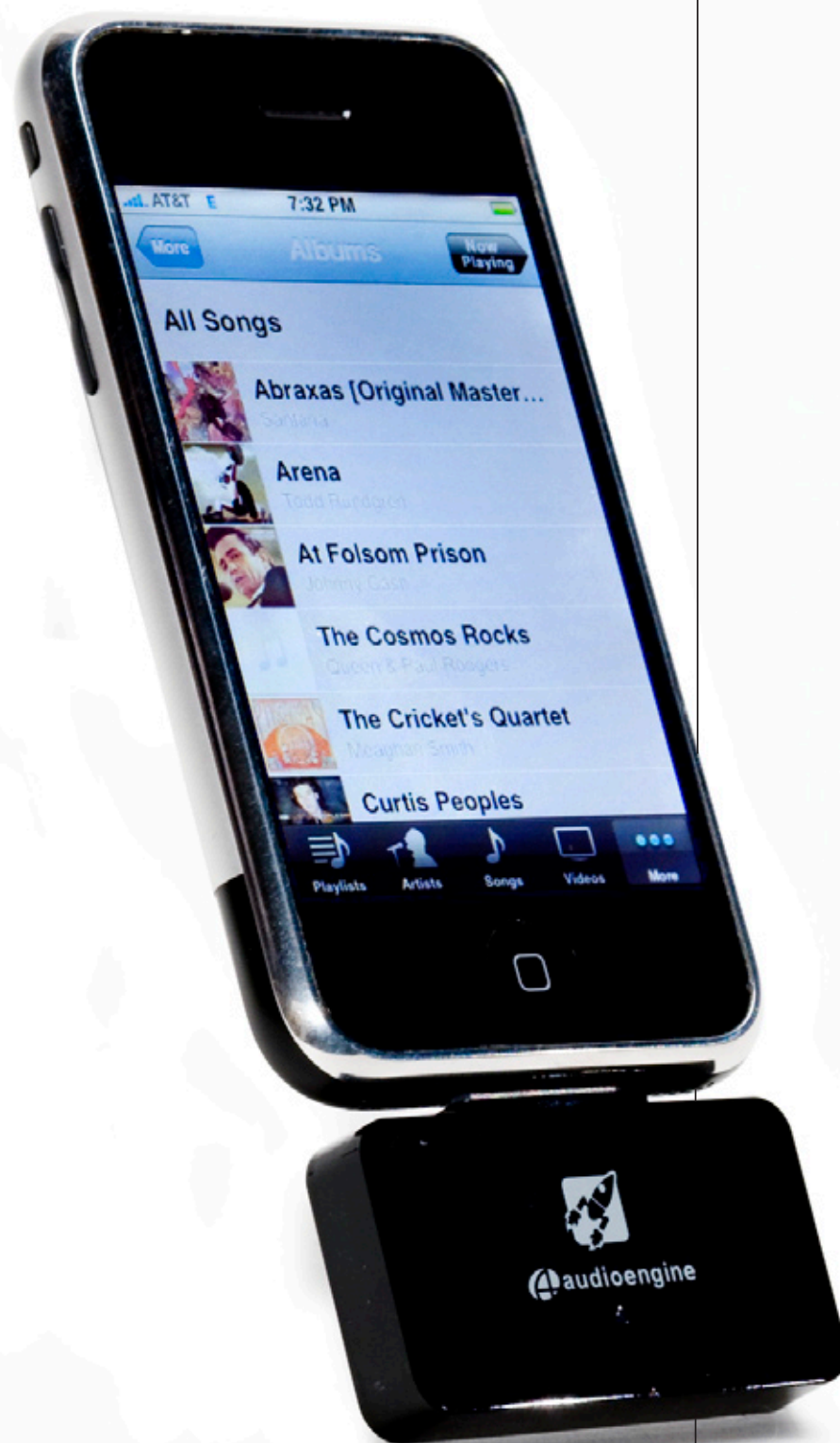
PORSCHE

A few years ago when Photoshop became the Adobe Creative Suite, Adobe gave most people an offer they couldn't refuse: to bundle Photoshop with their other popular design and video editing programs (Illustrator, InDesign, etc.) But, now if you've been roped into the world of CS, you can't just update Photoshop, you have to buy the whole suite.

Where this really blows chunks is when you are perfectly happy with the Photoshop you own now, but you decide to upgrade your camera. If you take advantage of a big bucks DSLR and shoot in RAW format, the raw capture plug-in doesn't work with your old copy of Photoshop. Bingo. Now you have to buy a couple hundred to possibly a \$1,000 upgrade just to use the darn thing.

Bottom line, unless you need the raw plug in, this is highway robbery on Adobe's part.

I bought it because I earn my living with Photoshop, but for all the semi-pro/amateur photographers in the audience, I think this is unconscionable. If you don't use most of the functionality that Photoshop has to offer, scrap it and start over with Photoshop Elements. It's become surprisingly powerful and will only set you back \$79 when your newest camera no longer works with it.



AudioEngine W2

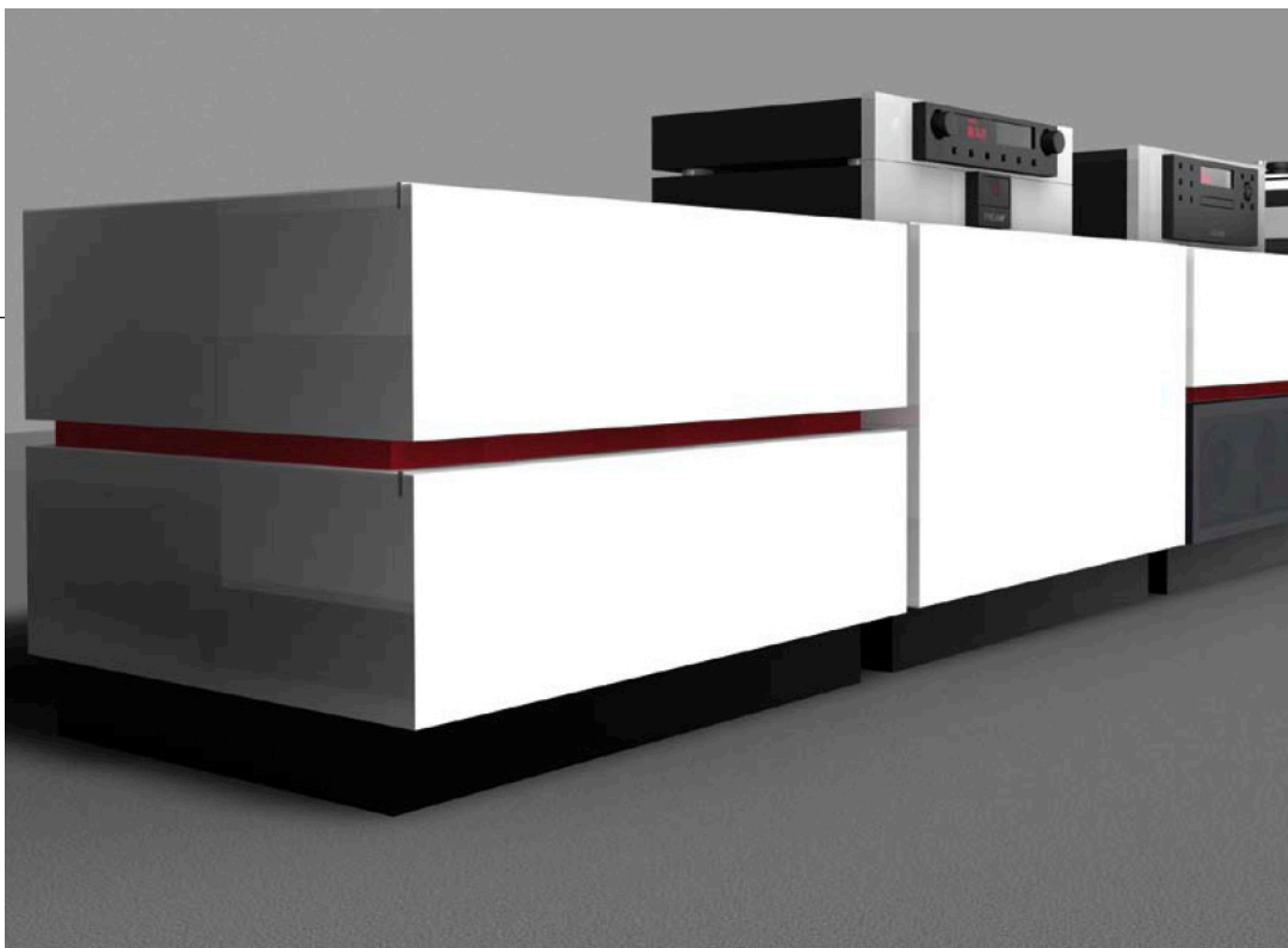
AudioEngine USA
www.audioengineusa.com
 \$169

This is a cool toy!

If you want the ultimate party music machine, load some tunes in Apple Lossless to your iPhone or iPod, plug the little adapter into the bottom and the tiny remote box into a free pair of inputs on your stereo. If you are using an iPhone or iPod Touch, it's like having a mini Sooloos music server in the palm of your hand. Or plug it into a pair of powered speakers such as the MartinLogan Purities (currently in my living room) and you have the world's coolest high-performance compact music system.

No batteries are necessary; it runs from the power in your iPod. It's completely plug and play because no drivers are required either. Thirty seconds after you have it out of the box, you are ready to roll.

Sound quality is as good as you would expect from the analog outputs of your current iPod, which is surprisingly good these days, especially if you save your tunes in Apple Lossless or uncompressed.



Modul Furniture

Finite Elemente
www.immediasound.com
 \$6,000 - \$21,000

A casual walk through any HiFi show usually reveals quite a few rooms full of Finite Elemente Pagode racks. They are functional, easy to set up and have an understated aesthetic matched by few others that I've seen. But a rack is still a rack, no matter how attractive, and there are those who still want a more furniture-like approach to things.

The Modul system from Finite Elemente brings a very sleek solution to your stereo storage needs. Say that 10 times as fast as you can. While these seem expensive at first, they are built to custom in-wall cabinet quality levels, and this means you can take them with you when you move.

The individual cabinets can be configured to store LP's, CD's/DVD's and even wine bottles. All of your treasures tuck away nicely, so if you have a room that leans more in the direction of modern aesthetics, it is a great solution. They even offer some modular speakers in the same motif.



DVDI 10

Primare

www.soundorg.com

\$2,499

As popular as the massive home-theater concept has become over the years, there are still plenty of people that would just like a nice 2.1 system. The problem is that there haven't been many great one box solutions.

Primare solves this problem with a tidy solution at a very reasonable price. The DVDI 10 has a CD/DVD transport on board along with a great AM/FM tuner and a 75 watt per channel amplifier. There are outputs for HDMI and composite video as well as a mini headphone jack on the front panel. There are also digital outputs, a set of variable RCA analog outputs and a subwoofer output. The DVDI 10 has excellent input flexibility as well, with three analog RCA inputs on the rear panel, one mini plug on the front and a separate cable that allows you to connect an iPod dock.

If you want better TV sound in one package that combines tasteful good looks, ease of use and high performance (with a reasonable price), look no further. Watch for a full review in early 2009.



Sphere

Gunnar Optics
www.gunnaroptics.com
 \$99-179

If you want to have the newest hip glasses that Bono doesn't yet have, Gunnar is your ticket. These can also help you be practical as well as stylish. Gunnar's patented i-Amp lenses help reduce eyestrain while working in front of a computer monitor for hours on end, which nowadays most of us do.

A quick peek at their website reveals all of the technical information and they can also be ordered with your prescription from your favorite optometrist. Part of the secret is in the slight yellow tint, which also helps tremendously if you live in a cloudy climate like the Pacific Northwest, so they can double as driving glasses too.

One caveat for computer users in critical color applications, the yellow tint will throw you off a bit, but for everyone else, these new glasses from Gunnar will make your life in front of a computer screen easier.



iPod and iPhone Storage

Otterbox
www.otterbox.com
 \$19-49

As stylish as the iPod is, its appearance can become pretty knackered in a hurry. The Otterbox solutions will do a great job at protecting your favorite portables. Though the Defender series cases you see here will not allow you to take your iPod or iPhone underwater, they do provide good protection against casual dampness.

The high-impact polycarbonate shell covered by a silicone skin offers great protection against the occasional fumble fingers or things being piled upon your iPod when on your desk. Functionality when used with the iPhone is not compromised at all. You can still access all of the buttons, and the Defender Case does not add to the form factor of the iPhone in a negative way at all. A belt clip is included for the nerds in the crowd.

While the clear membrane front screen protects the iPhone, it also makes the screen harder to read. Those with older eyes may forgo the additional protection of the membrane and remove it.





Style and Performance

The Meridian DSP7200 Speakers And 808.2i CD Player

By Jeff Dorgay

TONEAudio
Magazine
2008
Product of the Year
Award

Walking from room to room through the high-performance audio section of the Consumer Electronics show, you will see a plethora of monstrous power cables, speaker cables, isolation devices and other intricacies that help a great HiFi system sound its best.

However, when I walked into the Meridian room, things were different indeed. They had a pair of the DSP7200 speakers on display plugged into the wall with standard power cords, and a couple of RJ-45 cables between their 808.2 CD player and the two speakers. The 808.2 was not placed on top of a \$10,000 equipment rack, but on the spindly little table that was part of the room furniture.

Bob Stuart, the head of Meridan Audio, walked over and said, "How does it sound?" When I told him it sounded very good, he said,

**"Is that US good or UK good."
I enthusiastically replied, "UK good!"**

For those of you not getting the joke, the British tend to be a little more understated when they talk about their creations.

In keeping with my philosophy that there are plenty of people who want great sound but do not want to become audiophiles with racks of gear and large cables that resemble giant reptiles on their living room floors, Meridian offers nirvana in a rather tidy fashion.

Now You Can Have It All

That's right. The combination of Meridian's new 808.2 player and their DSP7200 powered speakers offer up some of the most musically satisfying sound I've ever lived with, and you can hook it up in five minutes. A quick trip to your local electronics store for a pair of RJ45 cables that one would normally use to hook up an ethernet router is all you will need. It was pretty exciting to spend \$30 on cable at Best Buy to outfit my entire system. The only other thing required is a strong back or a few strong friends to help with setup, as the DSP7200's weigh 121 pounds each. *(continued)*

My test pair of DSP7200's came in a gorgeous light-silver metallic that was the equal of anything I've seen from Wilson or any other premium loudspeaker manufacturer. You can order custom colors if the standard black, silver or wood finishes won't suffice, but I really appreciated the silver. With the black speaker grilles, they blended into my living room as well as a pair of 43-inch tall speakers can.

There are some sweeping heatsink fins on the rear face of the DSP7200's where the four individual 100-watt power amplifiers are located. These are traditional amplifiers, not ICE modules, class T, etc. and I'm sure that is a big part of what contributes to the sound (and weight) of the DSP 7200's, but the sound is worth it.

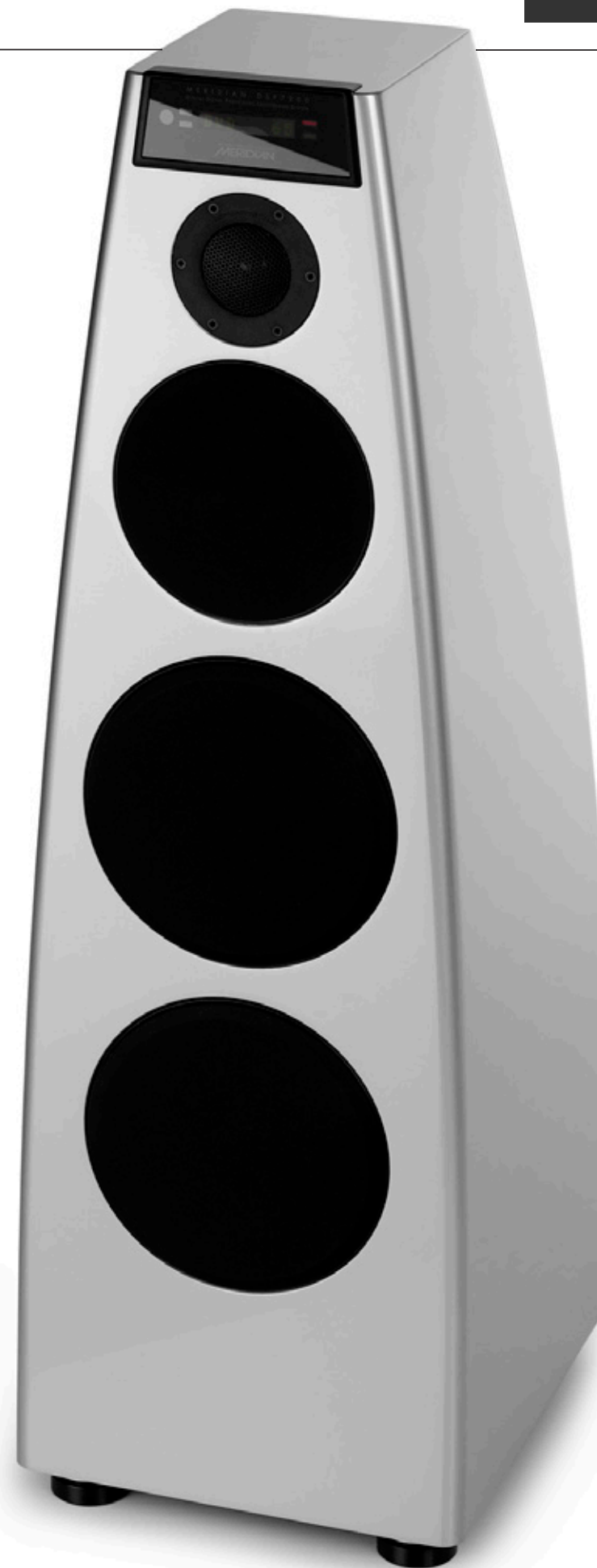
Way down on the bottom of the speakers is a small finned cover held on by Torx screws for accessing the IEC socket for the AC cords and the inputs. Meridian thoughtfully encloses a tool for you to accomplish this along with a comprehensive instruction manual and that great, backlit remote for which Meridian is famous.



Setup

This is the shortest setup section you will ever read in a TONEAudio review. Uncrate the speakers and remove the small, machined plates on the bottom of the speakers. Using Meridian's "Speaker Link" technology, new on the 7200 but easily retrofitted to past Meridian active speakers, you run the appropriate length of RJ-45 (standard Ethernet cable) between the speaker marked "master" and the other marked "left." Run one more cable from the 808.2 to the input of the master speaker. Power up the speakers and power up the 808.2.

Done. That's it. Grab the remote and start listening to music. You can probably spend another half hour fine-tuning the speaker position, but I'd wait about 50 hours or so until the electronics and speakers are fully broken in. If you place the DSP7200's about 2 feet from the rear wall and anywhere from 5-10 feet apart, you'll be in the ballpark. *(continued)*



What does *ne plus ultra* mean?

ne plus ultra \nay-plus-UL-truh; noun:

1. The highest point, as of excellence or achievement; the acme; the pinnacle; the ultimate.
2. The most profound degree of a quality or condition.

As more and more audio retailers around the country embrace convenience, control, and gadgetry over audio and video performance, they effectively abandon the music and film lovers who desire a real experience from their systems at home.

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Shunyata Research

T + A

Transparent Audio

Wilson Audio

Wilson-Benesch

To keep in the spirit of this product, I spent most of my time playing the DSP7200/808.2 combination with the stock power cables and no line conditioning of any kind, just the way I saw it demonstrated at CES. Because all of my reference gear plays through Running Springs Line conditioners and a mixture of Running Springs and Shunyata power cords, I did explore this option after I was thoroughly familiar with the system. As in any mega high-performance system, attention to this detail will result in wringing the last bit of performance the Meridian gear is capable of, but you will be 97 percent of the way there right out of the shipping cartons.

You can also set the electronic equivalent of adjusting the rake (or time alignment) of the speakers and, last but not least, there are bass, treble and balance controls.

Which brings us to my only complaint about this system: The balance control is difficult to access. My only suggestion would be to reprogram the remote so that the balance control is right by the volume control. Ok, one more idea: perhaps a valet remote to access only basic functions (power on, volume, balance, source), as the system remote is somewhat daunting to casual users.

A Great Case For Active Speakers

That's the short version of the setup procedure. The DSP processing inside the 7200's allows you to custom tune the speakers to your environment. There are four settings that let you tailor the bass response to your room, depending on where the speakers are placed. *(continued)*

Our Reference Listening Studio Three at *ne plus ultra* features the Wilson Audio Alexandria X-2 Loudspeaker.



There are options for close-to-the-wall placement, two for corner placement and one for the speakers being further out in the room. This worked wonders in my living room because I have limited placement options. The corner-placement setting worked like a charm. Every other floorstanding speaker that I have tried to use in my living room always has delivered too much bass.

Moving the speakers out into my main listening environment, with a fully treated room and the luxury of moving the speakers well into the room, only required resetting the DSP after initial placement. This feature makes the DSP7200's a great candidate for a long-term HiFi purchase because you will be able to adapt them to your next listening room as well.

Most of my friends who are accustomed to the mad-scientist lair in my studio, with all those giant cables, were astonished to find only two diminutive cables in my living room with the Meridian system. It usually took a few minutes for them to ask, "Where did all the cables go?" Quite a few wives commented that they would let their husbands buy a system like this, "with no wires." A few balked at the price tag, but keep in mind that Meridian does offer a number of active speakers ranging in price from about \$5,000 a pair, so this technology is within the reach of any music lover.

When you consider that you are getting speakers, amplifier, preamplifier and a DAC in one package, as well as eliminating a number of pricey interconnects, speaker cables and an expensive equipment rack, the DSP7200 actually is quite a bargain.

A Few More Thoughts on Setup

Remember the DSP7200's have a full 24 bit 128x up-sampling DAC inside, so you don't have to have an 808.2 as a program source, although you will benefit from the additional digital filtering present in the 808.2. This combination offers the most for which the DSP7200's are capable. The other advantage to using an 808.2 as a control center is the flexibility that it gives your HiFi system, with six analog inputs and three more digital inputs.

While the 808.2 will give the highest quality digital reproduction mated with the DSP7200's, I had excellent luck with a few other digital sources. Both the Sooloos music server and the Wadia 170i dock were fantastic when used as source components, with the Wadia providing the ultimate in a high-performance, low-profile music system. (*continued*)

The other advantage to using an 808.2 as a control center is the flexibility that it gives your HiFi system, with six analog inputs and three more digital inputs.



Note: As we were a week away from our publish date, Meridan announced that they have just acquired Sooloos. Bob Stuart was tight-lipped about future Sooloos products, though he did assure me that Sooloos and Meridian are an excellent fit for both parties and that we can expect even greater synergy between these two product lines.

Another great combination was using the digital output of the Meridan F80. This certainly got the nod from everyone that experienced it as the most fashionable implementation of a full Meridian system. Perhaps Meridian will introduce a version of the F80 that is a transport to be used specifically with their digital speakers?

Should you still have a vinyl collection, you will not be disappointed with the 808.2 when using a turntable and proper phono stage. Thanks to the high-quality DSP's in the Meridian speakers and the fact that they use discrete power amplifiers instead of ICE modules (or other class D variants) the resulting sound is much more natural. While I did spend 95 percent of my time with just the 808.2 and the DSP 7200's, I had to spend a little time with my Rega P9 and Rega los phono stage along with a Lyra Skala cartridge, just to see how it would sound. The Meridian system is the *only* DSP-based active speakers with which I can use an analog front end and still be delighted. Suffice to say that if you purchase this system, you will not want to dispose of your analog media.

The Meridian system is the *only* DSP-based active speakers with which I can use an analog front end and still be delighted.

Dynamics and More

Once the Meridian system had a few days to warm up after being tucked away in shipping cartons, I was immediately struck by the dynamic presentation of these speakers. Lovers of classical or rock music will be pleased with how effortlessly these speakers will play your favorites. With such incredible sound in my living room, I was going out to the studio less and less.

The DSP7200's have a very wide dispersion pattern, which makes them easy to be enjoyed by all. Even when lying horizontal on the couch, the presentation is still excellent. When the speakers were in my listening room, the sweet spot was huge, allowing three people to easily get comfy and enjoy the show.

While these speakers will work incredibly well in the average living room, a feat that many other audiophile speakers cannot achieve, should you have the luxury of using them in a controlled acoustic environment, they will impress even further.

One of the benefits of an active speaker is the ability to match the amplification to the drivers more carefully and to implement somewhat more accurate and complex crossover designs in the digital domain, which may not be achievable with capacitors and inductors. Being a panel guy, this is one of my hot buttons, and the DSP7200 exhibits some of the most seamless driver integration I have ever heard with a cone speaker at any price. *(continued)*

Actually, you CAN have it both ways.

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Dynamics and coherence are worthless if tonality is not up to task. Again, these speakers passed with flying colors. Solo piano and violin are reproduced with uncanny accuracy, yet all of the acoustic music I played had the right amount of body and decay. The DSP7200's are the first speakers with DSP's inside that I have heard get this critical part of acoustic-instrument tonality and resonance correct on both ends of the frequency spectrum.

I was also impressed with the ability of these speakers to reproduce dynamic contrasts in large-scale classical music as well as fairly dense rock music, being a firm believer that if a system can handle this, it will do a smashing job with your favorite solo vocalist, string quartet or jazz group. When I played the DSP7200's loud, the image did not collapse and it was still easy to pick out minute details in the presentation. This made for many extended listening sessions that were fatigue free.

While the DSP7200's were almost too much speaker for my small living room, out in the main listening room they were able to open up further and provide a wide and deep soundstage.

Thanks to the DSP correction, I was able to move the speakers far enough out into the room (52 inches was the optimum from the rear wall) that I could take full advantage of the imaging capabilities without losing the bass response.

Meridian claims that these speakers extend to 30hz, and I have no reason to doubt that claim. *(continued)*

conrad-johnson It just sounds right.

2733 Merrilee Dr • Fairfax, VA 22031 • phone: 703-698-8581, fax: 703-560-5360 • www.conradjohnson.com

The dual-powered 200mm (7.85-inch) woofers are powerful and well-controlled. Those having a bigger room and needing more bass output will have to step up to a pair of Meridian's flagship DSP8000 speakers. Most rooms and budgets will do just fine with the 7200's; they are definitely a full-range speaker system.

While the sound of this system probably will not be warm enough for the audiophile who craves an all-vacuum-tube system, it does not sound at all dry or thin and probably would not be mistaken for solid state on a casual listen. Neutral is the word here.

Criticism

Other than wanting the balance control more readily available, I have nothing but praise for the DSP7200/808.2 system. This combination from Meridian offers up everything I enjoy in a high-performance music system: freedom from tonal coloration, wide dynamic range and full frequency response.

If you want to be set free from audiophile nervosa once and for all, zoom down to your Meridian dealer and buy these components right now. It took me over a year to assemble the system I have in my dedicated listening room and only about an hour to completely dial in the Meridian system in either of my rooms, both with spectacular results.

The obvious question on the tip of many people's tongues is "just how much better is the new model?"

Whether you are the true music lover who does not want to be bothered with becoming an audiophile, or the seasoned audiophile that has had enough of equipment swapping, the combination of the DSP7200 and 808.2 is the most exciting solution I've yet to hear.

This is why I am happy to award the Meridian DSP7200/808.2 system our Product of the Year award. It offers high-performance, engineering excellence and impeccable style from one of the industry's finest audio companies.



That Extra .2

The obvious question on the tip of many people's tongues is "just how much better is the new model?"

This has to be the most difficult thing for any manufacturer because, while you want to sell your customer your latest work of audio art, you don't want to alienate the loyal customer that owns the current hardware. This agony only gets worse near a new product's launch date because the customer who bought within a year of the new product could get grumpy.

David Allen from MartinLogan put it best. "People don't get pissed at Lexus, wanting their money back when a new model comes out next year. Why do they get mad at us for trying to make our products better?" Much like MartinLogan or Porsche, Meridian has always been a company that follows a path of constant evolution.

The Showdown

Fortunately, with my own 808 on hand for a reference, I did not have to rely on what I thought it sounded like. *(continued)*

We cued up both players and just switched between input one and two on my CJ ACT2/ Series 2 preamplifier.

Identical conditions made it easy to compare the two players. Both were inserted in my reference system with identical RSA Mon-goose power cords and 1-meter lengths of Cardas golden reference interconnects. Our friends at Mobile Fidelity provided us with duplicate copies of a number of their recent discs and I burned dual copies of a few of my favorite discs onto MoFi 24-carat gold blanks.

I let both players run for 24 hours on repeat so that the system would be well warmed-up and stable. Ken

Forsythe at Meridian US told me that the differences between the two would be “readily apparent.” He feels that the 808.2 had substantial upgrades in the DSP circuitry as well as the digital filtering.

While it’s his job to tell me the new widget is much better than the old one, I must agree that I, too, could hear the difference right away. I could cite references forever, but chances are good, they aren’t the 20 CD’s you like to use for reference material.

Making a long story short, the 808.2 has a more open sound than the 808 from top to bottom. There is quite a bit more air and depth to the presentation, and you don’t realize the slight bit of cloudiness in the original 808 until you switch between the two players while listening to the exact same music.

Listening to spatial cues and reverb/hall decay, everything fades out with a finer gradation before it goes to black on the 808.2. The soundstage appears somewhat bigger and wider, almost as if I moved the speakers another foot apart.

I hate to make the comparison for those of you that aren’t major automobile aficionados, but the difference between the 808 and the 808.2 is like the difference between the last year of the Porsche 996 and the new 997.

I love the 996, but the 997 is more capable in every way and feels a bit more crisp overall. But the difference isn’t brought into focus until you climb out of one and jump right into the other.

And The Winner Is...

To answer your question, yes the 808.2 reveals more music than the 808. If you do not have a statement-level CD player, this one is well worth its asking price. I’ve lived with the last version 808 for two years and it remains a stellar performer. The only dilemma would be for anyone owning a large collection of DVD-a discs. The 808.2 will not play them.

The tough question is whether the happy 808 owners in the crowd are going to want to throw down their VISA cards to make the trade up. Only your own obsession can make that call, but if you do have the room in this year’s budget, you won’t be disappointed. ●

The Meridian 808.2i and DSP7200

MSRP: \$34,995 - DSP7200

\$16,995 - 808.2i

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Meridian America Inc.

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Analog Source:

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RB1000 with Rega los phono
stage and Lyra Skala cartridge

Cable: Belden RG-45 cables,
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power cords



The Musical Surroundings Phenomena II

By Todd Sageser

What would you think if you received a box with a Phenomena inside? One meaning of the word phenomenon is “a remarkable thing,” so with the varied spelling, maybe this is something remarkable in a phonograph preamplifier. Being in the plural makes sense when delving a little deeper into the manufacturer, Musical Surroundings and Michael Yee. Yee is a highly respected designer of phono stages, and this is the second incarnation of the simplest of three Phenomena models.

PHENOMENA II
Phonograph Preamplifier



I was immediately impressed by how solid this little box is: 8 x 5 inches and only 2 inches tall, made of metal with a black matte-textured finish.

Retail cost of the Phonomena II is \$600. Sharing the same circuitry with their NOVA phono preamplifier, the less-expensive Phonomena II uses a wall-wart power supply instead of the more sophisticated (and quieter) battery supply from the NOVA.

I was immediately impressed by how solid this little box is: 8 x 5 inches and only 2 inches tall, made of metal with a black matte-textured finish. The front panel is simple but elegant with a power LED and clear plastic front panel with polished edges. The rear panel has a pair of gold-plated RCA jacks for the input and output along with a bank of DIP switches for gain and cartridge loading, two for each channel.

A Plethora of Adjustment

The four-switch bank lets you adjust gain from 40db to 60db, with 13 settings. Seven of the eight switches on the next bank set cartridge loading from 30 ohms to 100k ohms. The last switch offers two capacitive loading options, 200pf or 300pF. The manual offers good descriptions of how all these settings affect the sound and how to adjust them. If you are a seasoned analog fan, you might skip this section, but those new to the game can glean a bit here.

It will help to have handy the data sheet for your cartridge to know where to begin with the settings. My Sumiko Blackbird is a high-output moving coil (2.5mv), so I used the lowest gain setting (40db) first, with the loading set to 50k ohms, the suggested setting from the manufacturer. Capacitance changes don't affect moving coil cartridges, but if you have a moving magnet cartridge, higher capacitance will roll off the treble response somewhat. Think of it as a tone control, offering a slight treble trim.

After a couple of days of background play, I got down to some serious listening. My analog rig consists of a tried-and-true Technics SP10 MkII that has performed flawlessly since I bought it in 1976. A few other more expensive tables have come and gone over the years, but the SP10 has been the rock of my system. Who knew these tables would be fashionable again in the 21st century?

My first session started with an off-the-wall favorite from the 80s, Thomas Dolby's "May the Cube Be With You." Supported by an all-star cast ranging from the Brecker Brothers to George Clinton, the tune includes some great Ampeg SVT bass lines and, of course, great horn licks, along with Dolby's synths and samples. I immediately noticed the stage width going out past the boundaries of my MartinLogan Summits. The samples and little add-ins that Dolby does so well were jumping out and very clear, but not edgy. The vocals also seemed to be very present, but not too far forward.

Staying with Thomas Dolby for one more track, "Mulu and the Rain Forest," from *The Flat Earth*, the crickets at the beginning of the song were wide and clear with the "swipe" sounds quite striking. The samples floated and the bass was distinct, without any mud or haze, and the upright bass going into the bridge was almost eerie. This song has been one of my benchmarks since it came out in 1984, and I have auditioned a lot of analog gear with this record.

The next disc was *New Baby*, by Don Randi and Quest on Sheffield Labs. I think this record was done as much to show off the direct-to-disc process as the music, but its dynamics and clarity make it a great disc for evaluating analog performance. *(continued)*

Trumpets and percussion are hard-panned to opposite sides. The piano was fairly wide and recorded without the customary reverb found in a lot of pop production. The instruments were all distinct, with no hard edges (a good thing). Overall, it was a very pleasant surprise from an album I hadn't heard in a while.

After a quick spin of "The Tempest" on a 45 rpm Reference Recordings LP, I was impressed at how well this modest phono pre-amp did with reproducing the size and textures of the acoustic instruments while maintaining excellent dynamics throughout. Pretty incredible for a \$600 phono stage.

I ended this listening session with *Synchronicity* from the Police, paying careful attention to how well the layers of Andy Summers' guitars were separated, without Stuart Copeland's drumming getting lost in the mix. The guitars appeared in their proper places in the stereo image, with Sting's voice having plenty of bite. Right in the pocket, if you will.

At the end of every listening session, I came away pleased with this phono stage.

While it lacks the resolution of my classic (and highly upgraded) Mark Levinson ML-1, it does a great job with the basics. It also lacks the depth and height that the big boys do, but at this price, I was amazed at how well the Phenomena did with musical fundamentals.

I guess you could qualify this Phenomena II as a phenomenon, when you consider the cost and compare it to other preamps costing many times the price. This unit offers a lot of musical satisfaction for the analog lover on a tight budget. *(continued)*



www.ZuAudio.com



Second Opinion

By Jeff Dorgay

We have been listening to a lot of phono stages in the \$600 – \$1,500 range this year and it's exciting to see how much is available, considering how many phono stages there are that cost 10 times that much. There are a lot of analog lovers out there with Technics SL-1200's, Rega P1/2/3's and VPI Scouts (to name a few options) who are going to drop a few hundred bucks on a new cartridge and call it a day.

I made it a point to use the Phonomena II for a couple of weeks before sending it off to Todd, so it would be fully broken in and I could try it with a pile of budget cartridges that I had on hand.

The Phonomena worked very well with MM and MC cartridges and was easy to set up. As Todd mentioned, the noise floor was low, and as much as I love vacuum tubes, I prefer the quiet of a solid-state unit in a budget phono stage.

Trying to stay within the boundaries of what sort of system would likely be used with Phonomena, I matched it up with my Rega Elicit integrated amplifier, Technics SL1200 and a pair of Harbeth Compact 7ES-3's. Shure M97 owners take note: thanks to the 100k setting, the Phonomena offered up the best sound I've ever heard from this budget cartridge, which otherwise has never done much for me.

Moving up the line to the Grado Master at \$500 and the Clearaudio Maestro Wood (also reviewed in this issue), the Phonomena II still made a fine showing. With an equal balance of tonality and dynamics, the Phonomena II is a lot like a pair of Vandersteen 1C's. It does such a great job with the basics, you don't notice what it doesn't do, yet having enough resolution that you get a good feel for what the excitement is really all about for analog.

For \$600, the Musical Surroundings Phonomena II is at the top of the heap in its class and one that I will be recommending highly to anyone asking me for a great budget phono stage. ●

The Musical Surroundings Phonomena II
MSRP: \$600

MANUFACTURER

Musical Surroundings

5662 Shattuck Ave.
Oakland, CA 94609
510-547-5006

PERIPHERALS

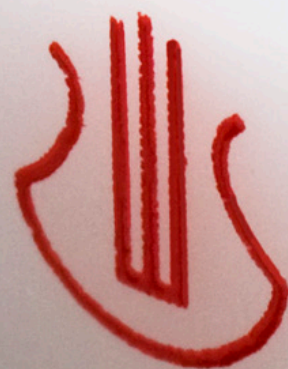
Analog Sources: Technics SP10mk II, Technics SL1200 w/Sumiko Blackbird, Shure M97, Grado Master, Grado Statement, Clearaudio Maestro Wood, Lyra Argo-i

Electronics: Mark Levinson ML-1 (updated and modified), Acoustat TNT, Rega Elicit

Speakers: MartinLogan Summits, Harbeth Compact 7ES-3

Cable: Cardas Golden Reference, Tetra Artet, Shunyata Aries and Orion

Accessories: Running Springs Haley and Mongoose power cords, Furutech Demag-1



SKALA

A Choice Of Character

Lyra Skala Moving Coil Cartridge

By Randy Wells

Choosing a phono cartridge is a lot like choosing a dance partner. What one person finds enthralling, another person might find tiresome. The reality is that no matter how “neutral” a cartridge measures, each of these music transducers has its own sonic signature, subtle or not. And while a phono stage can modify this character somewhat, it cannot change it completely.

Most vinyl buffs tend to keep higher-end cartridges in their systems until they wear out, and the lifespan of a cartridge can be as long as five years, depending on record wear and cantilever durability. Since it is the first link in the analog chain, it will have a large effect on your vinyl listening pleasure over a long period of time. Because a cartridge is the one component in your system that usually cannot be auditioned in your system before you buy it, careful investigation is required. So began my investigation of the Lyra Skala.

My record collection has been built up over about 40 years, running wide and deep with the artists I enjoy. In the jazz department, I have everything from original Blue Notes to the latest reissues, but the majority of the records I listen to most are first-pressing, country-of-origin Rock LP's from the 60's and 70's.

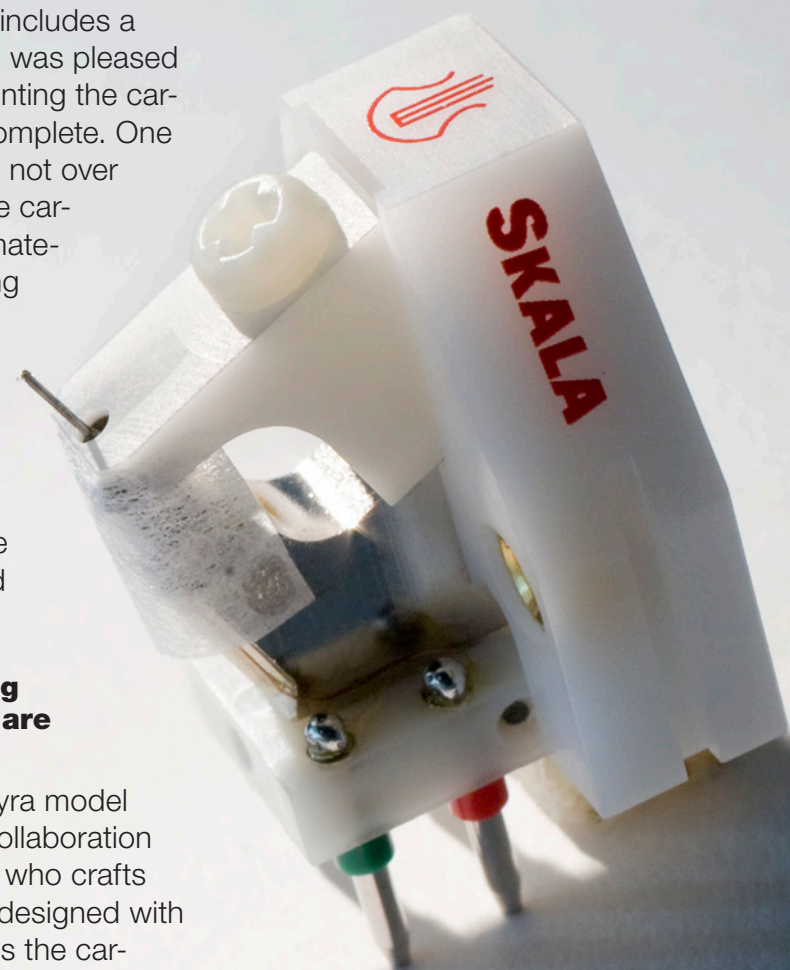
With some of these being in less-than-perfect condition, my cartridge of choice has been the Koetsu Rosewood Standard because I find it somewhat on the romantic side of neutral, and it is very quiet in the groove. The combination of the Koetsu with a Rega P9/RB1000 and the Cary PH302 tube phono stage has proven to be an excellent choice for my favorite records and the rest of my system.

As I have spent a fair amount of time optimizing the setup on my P9, our publisher suggested that I borrow his P9 to mount the Skala so that I have a proper comparison, with the only difference being the cartridge. Lurking in the trunk of his car was a Rega los phono stage for me to play with later, so we let the games begin.

The Skala comes in an elegant well-packaged box with mounting hardware and the appropriate Allen wrench. Lyra thoughtfully includes a stylus brush and stylus treatment. I was pleased to find that the instructions for mounting the cartridge were well thought out and complete. One warning of note was to take care in not over tightening the supplied screws - the cartridge base is made of a polymer material with inserted metal nuts. Bearing this in mind, I soon had the Skala mounted to the RB1000 arm with proper overhang and azimuth per Lyra's instructions. No spacer was required with the Rega tonearm to achieve proper vertical tracking angle, and I set the tracking force to the recommended 1.7 grams.

Lyra is well-known for producing world-class MC cartridges that are open, vibrant and detailed.

Manufactured in Japan, each Lyra model is conceived by Jonathan Carr in collaboration with Yoshinori Mishima, the artisan who crafts each piece. The Skala cartridge is designed with a one-piece metal blade that carries the cartridge's cantilever assembly, magnets and output pins. This is clamped to the tonearm's headshell via the previously mentioned non-conductive polymer base, which is designed to compress slightly under pressure of the mounting screws. This produces a smaller than normal footprint with which the blade makes contact with the headshell. In what Lyra terms a “knife-edge” design, the Skala transfers vibrational energy from the cartridge to the tonearm as directly and efficiently as possible. *(continued)*



series 7

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By optimizing transmission through the select use of materials and mechanics, Lyra claims an increase in dynamic contrast and greater clarity. Since the Skala is a moving coil cartridge of medium compliance, internal impedance of 5.5 ohms, and a generous output voltage of 0.5mV; it will work with pretty much any tonearm and MC phono stage. The Skala weighs 9gm, incorporates a solid-boron cantilever, and has a low mass, line-contact stylus of natural diamond. At \$3,200 it is not the cheapest nor the most expensive moving coil out there – it slots right into the \$2,500 to \$4,000 price point occupied by several worthy contenders.

While waiting for the Skala to break in, I inserted the Rega los phono stage into my system.

I started by setting input loading at 100 ohms and gain at 64 dB, which are very close in value to my Cary phono stage. Even at this early listening stage, the Skala/Rega los partnership was significantly more open, dynamic and detailed compared to the Rosewood/Cary PH302 combination. Eager to determine if it was the cartridge or phono stage lending this character to the proceedings, I switched the P9 with the Skala over to the Cary PH302. While the differences were less pronounced, they were still there. The Skala was already earning high marks.

After 50 hours of break in, the Skala's treble reproduction became sweeter and more extended, and backgrounds became blacker. Midrange tonality was spot on, being both harmonically rich and engaging. (continued)

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The noise floor from the Skala/los combo was so low that I was startled when the sound of seagulls appeared out of a velvety darkness.

Sibilants were natural, and bass was extremely well reproduced, being even deeper and tighter than with my Koetsu Rosewood. Micro and macro dynamics were startlingly good, and all the transient speed that Lyras are known for was there in spades, including wonderful pace, rhythm and timing. In addition, the soundstage reproduced was somewhat more expansive and three-dimensional than I'm accustomed to. And while the noise floor was extremely low with the Skala, groove noise (when present) was a bit more prominent than what could be achieved with the Koetsu, regardless of phono stage used.

Thankfully, the Skala has just a hint of warmth to its neutral tonal signature, which proved to be perfectly in balance with its ability to render details distinctly without spotlighting them. With my most-quiet pressings lined up, the late night sessions had my listening-room floor looking like a scene from the movie *High Fidelity*.

First up was Procol Harum's *A Salty Dog* on the original UK Regal Zonophone label (SLRZ 1009). With the stylus protruding well out from the Skala's body, it was easy to accurately place in the lead-in groove. The noise floor from the Skala/los combo was so low that I was startled when the sound of seagulls appeared out of a velvety darkness. Appearing there in front of me was the band and orchestra floating on a three-dimensional soundstage. Each instrument was portrayed with timbral accuracy and occupied its own distinct space surrounded by air.

Dumbfounded, I dared not move in case the spell was broken.

Without exaggerating, I can honestly say that I had no idea this recording could sound this good; there was an astonishing transparency and palpability to low-level inner details, and the thunderous climaxes on this title cut were presented dynamically and convincingly without any hint of hardness. Wow.

Discovering previously unknown music in familiar records is always a good sign when auditioning a new component. When I sat down to compare an original pressing of Art Pepper + 11 (Contemporary S 7568) with its Acoustic Sounds/Analogue Productions 45RPM reissue, I was struck by how tactile and nimble Joe Mondragon's snappy bass line was. It was as if I were hearing his instrument on this monumental jazz record for the first time. As mentioned previously, midrange tonality is a strong suit of this cartridge and its superb musicality is the beneficiary. Trumpets, stringed instruments and piano were all rendered with convincing body and texture. Transient attacks rocketed out of reedy saxophones and subtle decays lingered from shimmering cymbals. If I didn't know better, I would have said that Art and the gang were in my listening room. *(continued)*



Vaughn Williams' "The Wasps" from *A Sea Symphony* UK box set with Adrian Boult conducting (EMI SLS 780) is a favorite Classical LP of mine, and the Skala skillfully unraveled the intricacies of this opulent recording. In revelatory fashion, it portrayed a sense of scale without sounding oversized, and the harmonically complex final movement was rendered effortlessly with both impact and control.

Tracking was also exceptional with the Skala – never once did I experience any hint of distortion as a result of this cartridge.

Finding a really clean copy of Traffic's *John Barleycorn Must Die* on the original UK Pink Label Island label (ILPS 9116) can be difficult. It took me years before I eventually found one. At least that's what I thought until I played it with the Skala. Under this cartridge's ruthless eye, I ended up making two more EBay purchases until I finally acquired a super quiet pressing with all the high frequencies intact. The benefit being that this somewhat "boxy" sounding recording was cleanly and seamlessly translated in a more realistic and spatially convincing way than I had heard before. Winwood and Capaldi's "Freedom Rider" and "Empty Pages" never sounded so good.

Want to hear vocals reproduced in all their sonic splendor? Try the Skala on Johnny Hartman's *Once in Every Life* on Beehive Jazz Records (BH 7012). How about a macro dynamics acid test? Spin the Talking Heads 12-inch single of "Burning Down the House" at 45 RPM (PRO A-2057) and that should convince you. This cartridge does it all. *(continued)*



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– Jeff Dorgay, *TONEAudio Magazine*, Issue 18



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If I were to narrow down the Skala cartridge's sonic strengths to only one it would be resolving power.

Subtle spatial clues are rendered in all their complexity while musical flow is kept cohesively intact. Different masterings of the same album were easily discernible as uniquely distinct from one another. This cartridge will unearth all the subtleties contained in the grooves of your favorite LPs, without going over the top and becoming irritatingly detailed. The truth is, being both liquid and focused is not an easy accomplishment for any audio component. While it might be argued that the Koetsu has a more fundamentally coherent (albeit lush) presentation, the Lyra exhibits greater immediacy without sounding mechanical or overly analytical. It really comes down to a personal choice of character after all – with neither cartridge being the lesser for it.

There is a “big” sound from the Skala that reminds me of what I heard from the more expensive Dynavector XV-1S when it was mated to a Continuum Criterion turntable during the TONE review. In my experience, this ability to reproduce an organic roundness within distinct and easily discernible layers across an expansive soundstage is fundamental to transporting the listener to audio nirvana. The more of this character I discover in a product, the greater is my appreciation for that component's facility to impart this virtue without calling attention to itself.

In two months of listening, I never tired of the Skala's magical power to effortlessly reveal the essence of a great recording. As much as I enjoy my Koetsu Rosewood (especially with worn records), the Skala has a bit more of everything moving coil cartridges are known for.



If your system is up to the task, this cartridge will musically resolve hidden details in your records and smoothly lay them out for you to appreciate, maybe for the very first time.

While no one can really call any component the “best”, the Skala was certainly the most enjoyable cartridge I have heard in this price range and is on my must-buy list. To say that I was smitten with the Skala would be an accurate assessment, and maybe even understating the obvious. Like a great dancing partner who inspires you to improve your moves to better match their performance, this cartridge will have you searching for even better copies of your favorite pressings to experience all that is possible. Who said this hobby was easy? ●

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Other Cartridge: Koetsu Rosewood

Phono Stages: Rega Ios, Cary PH302

Digital Source: Linn Unidisk 1.1

Interconnects: Audience Au24, Harmonic Technology Magic Link One, Grover SC

Speaker Cables: Transparent Audio Musicwave Ultra MM

Power Cords: Running Springs Audio Mongoose, Black Sand Chromium, Violet and Reference


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The Stunning CLX From MartinLogan

By Jeff Dorgay





By now, you have probably heard about MartinLogan's new flagship speaker, the CLX. Premiering at the Munich HiFi show in May, it was an over-the-top success in more ways than one. Not only was it a visually stunning speaker, it also won honors for best product at the show by the majority of the audiophile press, something that just doesn't happen these days in our highly opinionated subculture.

I knew something was up last year when I took delivery of their Descent i subwoofer.

When I opened the top panel to start making the initial adjustments, I noticed a setting that said "CLX." So I called Devin Zell at MartinLogan to point out the typo: "It should say CLS." I got a somewhat hushed response. "It's not a typo, we (cough, cough) kind of have something new on the back burner, but I can't talk about it yet." Yeah, yeah. More X Files stuff. But as 2007 came to an end, we had a few more conversations and I had to swear on my Grandfather's grave before they would confirm that the CLX was real.

If you are not a fan of electrostatic speakers, you might be wondering what all the bother is about. But there is a certain group of MartinLogan customers who hold their original CLS speakers in very high regard, mainly because it was a full-range electrostatic speaker. While it could not handle the lowest bass frequencies, the sound throughout the rest of the range was quite spectacular and earned ML a solid spot in electrostatic-speaker history along with the legendary speakers from Quad, Acoustat and Sound Labs. *(continued)*

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So when the rumors started flying that MartinLogan would produce another full-range electrostatic speaker, chatter on the various audio message boards and especially the MartinLogan Owners Club heated up in a hurry. After the Munich show, it took a few weeks for the CLX to show up in America.

Confirming all the fanfare surrounding the speakers, an initial listening session in Seattle proved the accolades were justified.

This was a fantastic speaker. The next call to Devin was to get on the list for a pair. The first 100 pairs, designated as "25th Anniversary" models, were nearly all sold by the end of the Munich show.

A Flagship Speaker On Your Terms

When you visit the MartinLogan website, whether you are surfing with Internet Explorer or Firefox, you can visit their custom shop at <http://configurator.martinlogan.com/default.asp> and have your CLX's personalized. The base price of the CLX is \$22,066 and you have the option to choose clear or stainless binding posts, the standard linear frame or the curved "Art Frame," LED color in the ML and CLX logos (red, blue or green). I think it's nice to know that at this price level you are getting something a bit special and not exactly like every one else coming off the line.

Choosing the Art Frame bumps the cost of a pair up to \$30,000. During the wood-shop tour, I made it a point to ask about the difference between the two.
(continued)



Obviously, the curved pieces of the art frame require a lot more wood work, more than just the straight cuts on the linear frame, and there is a lot more that goes into the finish of the art frame as well, with plenty of custom colors available. Applying an automotive finish to wood always takes a lot more prep, sanding, etc., so you really are paying for all of the additional labor costs.

If you would still like a pair of 25th anniversary CLX's, with a black or clear anodized-aluminum frame (about 60 pounds heavier, each), call your local ML dealer right now. There are still a couple pairs left, but once they are gone, that's it!

Seeing a large batch of CLX frames in various stages of assembly, I was impressed by the great care that the ML designers took in hiding all of the fasteners required to put the frame together. It is an extremely clean design when you finally see them up close.

Another cool touch on the CLX is that inside the goodie box that comes with them are a pair of very nice power cords, so you won't need to drop another thousand bucks on power cords. Impressive.
(continued)



Marrying Art, Science, Technology and Environmental Concerns

Moving around to the rear of the CLX, there's a black frame that acts as a waveguide for the lower frequencies. This waveguide is made of a new material developed by ML and Klip Bio Technologies called EcoSound. It possesses better damping characteristics than MDF and is far more stable in temperature and humidity extremes.

An added bonus, EcoSound's surface has good scratch resistance (which I will *not* be testing any time soon) and will not fade from exposure to UV. "EcoSound is considerably more expensive than conventional speaker building materials

and many hardwoods," David Allen added as we watched CLX parts being finished. Best of all, it is made from 100 percent earth-friendly materials.

Specific Setup

My past three pairs of MartinLogans have responded well to careful setup. Using the Leica Disto laser measuring device, I've always taken the time to get them within about a half inch of each other in terms of placement from the back and side wall. This will pay dividends with any speaker, but panel speakers seem to benefit even more, responding with a more solid soundstage. *(continued)*

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It was a different story with the CLX. The big gain is really in the bass response. When these speakers were set within a few inches of each other, the bass response diminished significantly, to the point where I felt as if they had the equivalent of my LS3/5a mini monitors. I'd also like to mention that getting these speakers perfectly level and fixing an identical rake level on each is a must.

Once optimized, you will be surprised at how much bass energy they have without the sub-woofer.

The CLX requires more attention to detail in setup than any other MartinLogan speaker I've used, but it also provides a bigger reward once done correctly. Should you be considering buying a pair, plan on spending an hour or two optimizing placement before you pass judgment on the sound. My listening room is 16 x 24 feet and after living with these speakers for some time, I can't imagine having any less room than this. These speakers would probably support a larger room quite easily.

Tube or Not To Be?

On any given day, there is a good chance you will find a spirited discussion about using tube amplifiers with various MartinLogan models. Having used numerous amplifiers with MartinLogan speakers over the years, I believe it is a case-by-case kind of thing. While I have had excellent results with tubes and my CLS and Aeries, I still prefer solid-state amplification with Vantage, Summit, Spire and CLX. My Conrad Johnson Premier 350, on a dedicated line with a Running Springs Jaco power conditioner and Shunyata 20 amp Anaconda power cord never ran out of juice no matter how hard I pushed the system.

I did have good results with the BAT VK-55SE tube amplifier and the new Prima Luna Dialog monoblocks. My McIntosh MC275 was somewhat rolled off on the high end for my taste, while the solid state MC252 was more to my liking, having a lot more punch without harshness. I am sure that the reason the BAT and PL amplifiers did so well with the CLX was because of their low impedance taps. While the MC275 only has a four-ohm tap, the BAT goes down to three ohms and the Prima Luna, two. *(continued)*

The CLX requires more attention to detail in setup than any other MartinLogan speaker I've used, but it also provides a bigger reward once done correctly.





The CLX has only a single pair of binding posts on the back, so your speaker cable choices should be easy.

One of my favorite combinations for the CLX, though it did not have the ultimate dynamics of the big CJ or Mac amps, was my 30-watt Class-A L-590A II integrated amplifier from Luxman. This integrated weighs almost 100 pounds and has a massive power supply. The combination of Class-A warmth, with the control of its high current power supply, offered up a very musical presentation for the CLX lover who doesn't want a rack full of gear, or who needs to play them at concert hall levels.

The CLX has only a single pair of binding posts on the back, so your speaker cable choices should be easy. I had excellent luck with the Shunyata Orion cables that have served as my reference for the year and which worked equally well with Vantage, Summit and Spire models.

Sans Subwoofers

I'd like to first discuss the CLX on its own, without subwoofers as a semi-full-range speaker. They are about a foot taller than the MartinLogan Spire or Summit and twice as wide. At 70 x 26 x 15 inches, they have a commanding presence in the room, indeed. The main difference is instantly apparent; unlike the CLS with one big curved panel or the slender Summit with its two 10-inch woofers, the CLX has a large curved panel next to another flat panel with a crossover at 360hz. *(continued)*

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Flat panel you say? While MartinLogan has built their reputation on their curved ESL panels, the woofer in the CLX is indeed flat. It's also quite different from their curved panels because they have actually rolled two panels into one with their new "dual force" woofer panel.

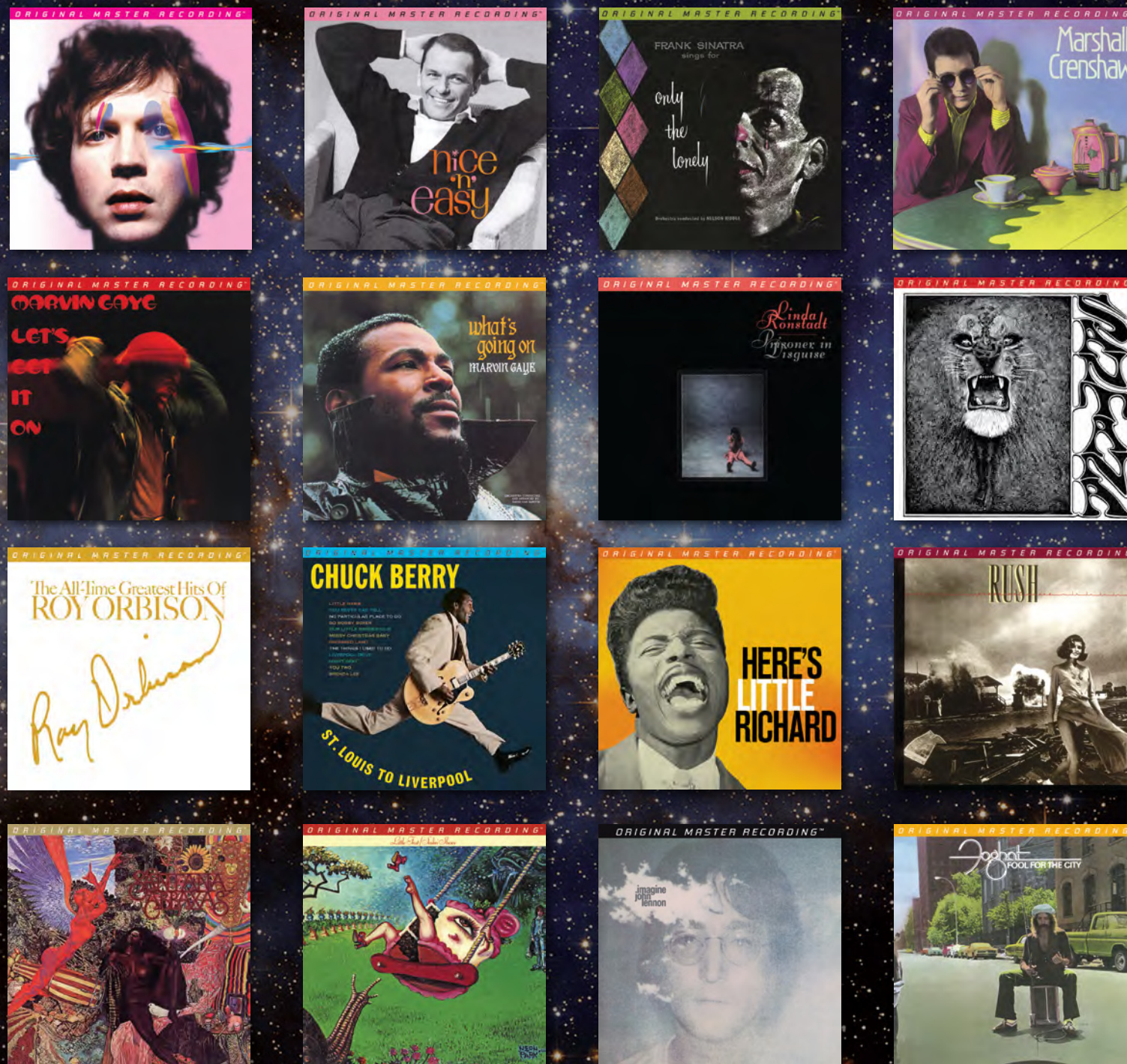
The outer and inner panels have a positive charge, which aid the pistonic movement of the panel.

MartinLogan specifies the frequency response to be 56-23,000hz, +/- 3db. From the time I spent in their test chamber and here in my room with test tones, I would call this spec slightly optimistic (on the good side, actually) as I was getting pretty solid response playing 50hz tones, but definitely a solid drop in output at 40hz, though there was still useable bass information.

I've always been somewhat envious of the Magnepan's ability to nail upper bass detail in a way that my current reference, the ML Summit can't quite attain. As the one on the TONE staff that probably has the widest range of musical taste, it's been an easy tradeoff to give up a little bit of upper bass detail for the slam and lower bass output that the Summit offers over the Magnepan. But now with the CLX, I can have it all.

While you can't play Snoop Dogg, Pink Floyd or your favorite pipe-organ discs without subwoofers, I was surprised at the fantastic job they do with music that has somewhat limited LF content. If your taste in music leans more towards jazz or chamber music, perhaps rock music that is more acoustic in nature, you may not even need a sub with the CLX.

(continued)



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The speed and quality of the bass they produce is so fast and lifelike, you will be bowled over.

The panels took about 100 hours of continuous play to really get into the groove, but because both woofer and mid/tweeter were panels, they broke in at the same rate. The hybrid MartinLogan speakers featuring cone woofers take longer for their dynamic woofers to break in all the way. So for the first couple of hundred hours, you can hear the woofer lagging behind the panel. If you are graduating from a hybrid MartinLogan speaker to the CLX, you will notice the speakers gradually opening up and becoming more transparent over the first 100 hours, mostly happening in the first 30 or 40.

Staying on the path of music without frequency extremes, I started my critical listening with our recording of the year, Frank Sinatra's *Nice and Easy* on LP from Mobile Fidelity. This is a prime example of a great system fooling you into thinking you are hearing the real thing, with Sinatra's voice just coming right up out of the middle of the mix and floating about five feet in front of my listening chair. Perfection!

With Subwoofer(s)

Flipping through the usual suspects of male and female vocalists, along with some of my favorite Blue Notes, I continued to be impressed with how easily these fairly large speakers just disappeared in the room like a pair of tiny monitor speakers. This is "walk through" sound at it's best, and much like my Summits, a number of guests asked me where the center and surround speakers were located.

There was a tiny box on top of the palette that contained the CLX crossover board update for my Descent i, so when I was ready to start playing music that was more full range in nature, it was time to get the big gun ready. The swap can be performed in about 15 minutes and involves taking the top panel off the Descent i, removing about 10 screws and adding a small daughter card. If you have no nerd DNA at all, I'm sure your dealer will help, but this one has a degree of difficulty of about 1, so anyone should be able to handle it. Once installed, you must attach the cool "CLX Enabled" sticker on your control panel so that everyone will know that this is no longer an ordinary Descent i.



The daughter card allows you to dial in a crossover slope that is specifically designed to mate the Descent i or Depth i subwoofers to the CLX. It works perfectly, making as seamless a sub/satellite match as I've ever heard. But there are some options to consider.

Using the CLX's with a single sub was a lot better, with full range rock, hip-hop, electronic and orchestral music. The Descent i does a great job keeping up with the pace of the CLX, but with music going way down low, you can still feel the sound coming from the Descent i localized.

When local ML rep Harvey Gilbert came over to assist with fine-tuning the CLX's and the Descent i, he said "You need a second one! Not so much for more bass output, but to even out the pressure in the room." Never one to argue with the concept of more power, a second Descent i was dispatched from ML. (continued)

Once installed, you must attach the cool "CLX Enabled" sticker on your control panel so that everyone will know that this is no longer an ordinary Descent i.

Review the Reviews...

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That's the Shizzle

You've probably read a few other reviews about the CLX by now, and they all say pretty much the same thing: It's an outstanding speaker, building on the success of the CLS, but it needs more oomph on the bottom end. I hate to dismiss my peers, but they missed the point completely. The CLX is not a \$22,000 pair of speakers that need a subwoofer but a \$30,000 speaker system (with a pair of MartinLogan Descent i subwoofers) that holds its own against any of the six-figure speakers on the market. And yes, I've heard most of them.

Though I had spent a lot of time with the CLX, with and without a Descent i, adding that second sub took the presentation past 11.

This is a serious loudspeaker system indeed. No matter what kind of music you enjoy, this combination can handle it effortlessly if you have electronics that are up to the task.

The first disc I reached for was Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* and went directly to track seven for "No Quarter." I was able to turn the volume up until we could barely scream at each other on the couch and the CLX's took it in stride, offering a huge, powerful presentation with no trace of acoustic compression.

(continued)



Next up, the 24-bit/96khz version of Nine Inch Nails *The Slip*. The second track, "1,000,000" features some incredibly low-frequency synth bass riffs throughout that will rattle everything in your room that is not secured. This is why you need 2,000 watts of power and six 10-inch drivers, so that you can feel the performance instead of just hearing it. Having seen Trent Reznor perform this song recently, I know this is the kind of bass energy you need to do it justice!

Ninety percent of the time, you'll never need the heft of those subwoofers, but once you've had the experience, there's no turning back. Even at the end of Frank Sinatra's "Nice and Easy," there is a slight drum thwack that feels thin without the subs, but with them on, it punches you in the chest.

Keep in mind that while the CLX is never harsh, it will reveal the quality or lack thereof in whatever is placed behind it. While they will offer respectable sound with any decent high-current amplifier, you won't get transported to nirvana if you don't have a great system.

Keep in mind that while the CLX is never harsh, it will reveal the quality or lack thereof in whatever is placed behind it.

One Last Word About Bass

Though it's not in the owners' manual, there is an internal setting for the CLX to slightly tip up the mid bass response by a db or two to further adjust the speakers to your room, with the default setting being flat. I've found most people to be highly opinionated about their bass presentation, so if you do not take the subwoofer option, this can give the CLX a bit more bump in the lower mid bass and be all that you need. Another tip for the wooferless crowd, without resorting to taking the covers off of your CLX is to stick with the rounded rubber feet instead of the spikes. If you find the bass slightly thin, this minor adjustment may be all you need to get the sound you want.

But all recordings are not created equal, contributing to the phenomena of why only 10 records sound great on your mega high-end system. Here's my solution: rather than take the speakers apart and fiddle with jumpers, a bit of trial and error revealed that using the 35hz setting on the Descent (the one right above the CLX setting) gave me a bit too much midbass on pristine recordings, but on a fair share of my mid 70's and 80's rock records that were somewhat thin, this was just what the doctor ordered. This ends up being a rather nice tone control, allowing you to enjoy more of your favorite music that isn't necessarily the best recording. *(continued)*



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What Else Do You Get For Your \$30k?

Having lived with MartinLogans three other ESL hybrids during the past two years, I could live happily with either of them. While the Summit and Spire provide the best dynamics I've heard from an ESL speaker, the CLX takes it a lot further on two levels, and this is what makes them worth the extra money.

In addition to giving the presentation more oomph, the extra panel area does an even better job than previous models at recreating that all-important dimension of size and rendering of spatial cues.

If you are able to place the CLX more than the two feet away from the sidewalls, you will be rewarded with a soundstage extending way beyond the speaker boundaries.

Put on your favorite Blue Note recording and you can start to hear a jazz group unfold in front of you instead of just hearing a stereo system.

This is where the classical music lovers in the audience will get a big thrill. The biggest detraction to listening to classical on a HiFi system is the lack of space. Here the CLX still pales in comparison to the real thing, because a large symphony can span 50 feet across on a big stage, but it certainly goes a long way at bringing a substantial helping of that spaciousness left to right into your listening room.

Most importantly, the CLX does a fantastic job of revealing height in the musical presentation. Panel lovers know that electrostatic speakers can offer a great deal of transparency and an open sound, but this magic is usually only a concert performed for an audience of one.

(continued)



Move over on the couch a bit, or stand up and the magic is gone. The CLX produces a gigantic soundfield that is both tall and wide. Granted, the sweet spot is still in the center of the couch, but the CLX is much closer to being a three-person speaker, where my Summits were about a one-and-a-half person speaker. The view from either side of the sweet spot is still good.

While all MartinLogan speakers use the same diaphragm material, the sophistication in the CLX crossover makes for a far cleaner presentation that is entirely free of grain. You don't notice this with Spire and Summit until you experience CLX. I hate to defer to the car refer-

ence for those of you that aren't auto enthusiasts,

The extra level of resolution provided by the CLX brings you so much closer to the music, providing an immersive field of sound that takes you somewhere special.

but it's like going from an eight-cylinder car to a V-12 model. Both have way more power than you need to get the job done and while you think the extra power is frivolous, the 12 is so effortless and smooth that it's intoxicating. The extra level of resolution provided by the CLX brings you so much closer to the music, providing an immersive field of sound that takes you somewhere special. Which is precisely what a piece of audio gear at this price point *should* do.

And that's the sound of the CLX/Descent i combination – intoxicating. Once you get these speakers set up in the right room with great gear, you won't want to leave your listening chair. This is one of those rare musical experiences that until now I've only had with speakers in the six-figure range.

(continued)





Engineering Excellence

Much like Apple Computer, Leica or Porsche, MartinLogan is a company based on engineering and process. During a visit to the factory to see my pair of CLX's being built, I was impressed with the level of organization and process control there. It reminded me of spending time in the Formula 1 pits; everyone knew their job as well as the three guys who worked next to them. The CLX has a build manual that is almost 100 pages long.

I saw every aspect of speaker assembly from cabinet making to ESL panel assembly.

But was told that once I entered the area where the panels were made, I had to put my camera away. I was able to watch them stretch my woofer panels and attach the clear "spars" that you see as translucent strips on the clear panel. But the area where ML vacuum bonds the panels was covered up and off limits.

There are a quite a few different areas at ML that address the various aspects of speaker construction. Once the various subassemblies are complete, they converge on the final assembly area on a large cart, with a build order and all the parts necessary for whatever model is being built. Keith Riley, Vice President of Manufacturing and Operations at ML, demonstrated how all of their electrostatic speakers are QC'd 100 percent during each stage of production. *(continued)*



I came back in contact with my CLX's as the electronics were being attached to the panels and Keith let me screw in a few of the bolts that attach the panel to the interface.

Should anything not be up to spec, it is remedied immediately so that when they get to final inspection before shipping, all the ducks are in a row.

I came back in contact with my CLX's as the electronics were being attached to the panels and Keith let me screw in a few of the bolts that attach the panel to the interface. Then they were off to the measurement room, where every CLX is measured to make sure that it matches the target specs for frequency response and impedance curve. While I wasn't the least bit worried, it was nice to see my speakers pass on the first go.

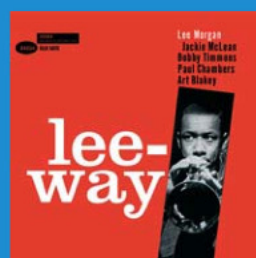
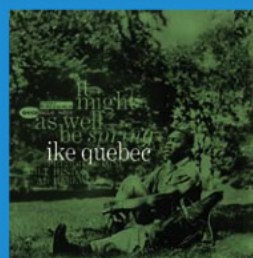
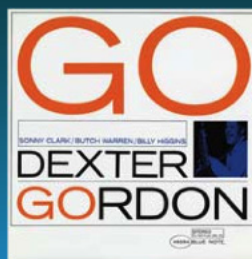
After another final visual check, they are carefully loaded into their cartons and shipped to the MartinLogan dealer network. Riley told me, "Believe it or not, one of the biggest challenges with the CLX was to get the packaging right. We spent a few months with our carton supplier before we settled on the final design."

It doesn't end there. While talking to David Allen, Senior VP of Product Development, and many of the workers in the factory, it was very apparent that ML is constantly working with their staff and materials suppliers to improve the technology that goes into their speakers to make them sound better and boost reliability. When you are shipping six-foot tall speakers, the last thing you want is to see is them come back for warranty repairs.

MartinLogan has come a long way since the first speakers rolled off the assembly line, and they continuously refine their product design and all aspects of their construction. The design staff told me that more than 20 pairs of CLX prototypes were built before they settled on the final. This fanatical attention to detail is what makes MartinLogan customers so loyal to the brand. ●

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Digital Sources Naim CD555 w/
PS555, Wadia 581SE i, Meridian 808.2

Analog Sources TW Acoustic Raven
Two with SME 309 arm and SME iV.Vi
arm, Rega P9 with RB 1000 arm, Spiral
Groove SG-2 with Triplanar mk. VIII arm

Phono Cartridges Dynavector XV-
1s, Lyra Olympos, Lyra Skala, Grado
Statement, Clearaudio Maestro Wood

Phono Preamplifiers Nagra VPS,
Naim Superline w/SuperCap power
supply, Rega Ios, with Furutech AG-12
Phono cables

Preamplifier Conrad Johnson ACT2/
Series 2, Nagra PL-L, BAT VK-32SE,
NAT Plasma

Power Amplifier Conrad Johnson
Premier 350, Nagra PSA, BAT VK-
55SE, Clayton S-40, McIntosh MC252,
McIntosh MC275 and Luxman L-590A
II (integrated)

Interconnects Cardas Golden
Reference, Furutech Audio Reference
III-N1, Shunyata Antares, Audioquest
Sub3 (subwoofers only)

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cords, Shunyata Anaconda and
Python power cords

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Pagode Signature racks and amp
stand, Composite Products CF1000
rack, Finite Cerapucs and Ceraballs

Accessories Manley Massive
Passive Mastering Equalizer, Shunyata
Dark Field Cable Elevators, Furutech
Demag-1

Room Treatment GIK Tri-Traps,
GIK 242 panels, Sonex Classic

The PS AUDIO Digital Link III Dac

By Sandy Greene

The history of PS Audio is interesting to read and it's up on their web site: psaudio.com. After about a month of unbiased listening to their new Digital Link III digital-to-analog converter, I decided to learn a little more about PS Audio. I nodded my head in a moment of "ah" when I read that PS Audio's first product was actually a phono preamp and that their move to digital was with the goal of allowing the new CD players (then Sony and Philips) to reproduce music as well as analog replay.





PS Audio introduced the first D/A process in the late 1980's. It was called the "Digital Link." What's sitting in my rack now is their newest DAC, the Digital Link III.

The DLIII measures a half-rack wide at 8.5 inches. The unit is pretty deep at 13 inches, and the attractively curved aluminum faceplate stands 2 inches tall. The unit itself is straightforward to set up and use. The manual serves as more of a promotional piece than an instructional one. There is no remote control.

Simple is as Simple Does

The DLIII does one thing and does it very well. It takes a digital signal of either optical, S/PDIF or USB, upsamples it to either 96kHz or 192kHz, and outputs an analog signal via either unbalanced RCA's or balanced XLR's. The output level is fixed and quite high, especially through the balanced outs at 5.5V. My own DAC, a Bel Canto Dac3, has an output of 4.5V and the listening adjustment can be quite jarring if your other sources have a lower output, but that's my only gripe with the DLIII. This 5.5v output level was too high to use with the pass through outputs of my preamp to powered speakers in another room.

Use and set up is simple. The DLIII will automatically choose the source from which it's receiving data. There's also a button on the front face to manually choose the input source. The other button is to choose an upsample rate of either 96 or 192kHz.

You can switch between either upsample rate on the fly, but without remote control, you'll most likely set it once and leave it that way. I ended up sticking with 96kHz after a bunch of listening. The more time I spent with the DLIII, I felt a remote might be a good addition for the user that will make this the hub of their music system, and perhaps a volume control too, like PS Audio offers on their current phono stage?

The difference between 96kHz and 192kHz is quite obvious. The 192 rate is more airy and crisp. The soundstage is much wider, deeper and fills the room with an almost omnidirectional effect. Sounds emanate from all sorts of spots up, down, left, right, in front and even behind. It can be downright creepy sometimes. Remember "Q Sound" from Sting's, *The Soul Cages*? It's that kind of effect. If you have the CD, pull it out and you'll get what I mean right away. I auditioned the much-lauded Cambridge Audio 840 CD player about a year ago, and it also upsamples to 192kHz with the same effect. Fun, but not all that realistic.

The 96kHz rate is much more true to life. The sound stays within and around the speakers while creating a more believable and defined sound stage. While the 192 rate tends to put a little shimmer on the sound, the 96kHz lives up to PS Audio's aspiration of good analog reproduction. I found the frequencies to be more neutral at 96 versus 192. *(continued)*

While the 192 rate tends to put a little shimmer on the sound, the 96kHz lives up to PS Audio's aspiration of good analog reproduction.

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The overall feel is more natural and involving at 96kHz. At 192, I felt I was listening to something reproduced. At 96, I felt much closer to the musical event.

In Practice

Two very different recordings that cemented my observations were Teddy Thompson's, *Up Front and Down Low* and Miracle Fortress' *Five Roses*. The Miracle Fortress recording is heavily processed and multi-layered and was quite fun to hear at the 192 rate. On the track "Hold Your Secrets to Your Heart," The layers of guitars wash around your body and inside your head. When the synths come in, you are transported to another world. The low end is slightly more robust at 192kHz as well. The sound is overall warmer, smoother and tubelike at 192.

The characteristics at the 192 rate don't work as well with Teddy Thompson's "Touching Home" from *Up Front and Down Low*. The brushed cymbal wash at the top of the track is almost synthetic at 192. I much preferred 96kHz for this recording, which captures a natural acoustic space with realistic instrumental and vocal timbres.

There's one huge benefit to these sonic differences. They come from one box that costs under a grand.

Basically with the PS Audio Digital Link III and its two choices of up-sampling, you essentially get the equivalent of two devices in one. The sound is distinct enough that it's not unlike switching between a turntable and a CD player with the same recording.

As a matter of base-lining, I've been able to compare the PS Audio DLIII to my Bel Canto Dac3.
(continued)



I've been living with the Bel Canto for well over a year and have grown accustomed to its sound. The PS Audio DLIII was an exciting change of pace. The DLIII creates the feeling of greater dynamic punch and faster pace. The Bel Canto sounds almost slow after a quick change.

The Bel Canto delivers a more textural and subtle experience. The acoustic guitar on "Touching Home" is more defined and natural sounding, and Teddy's delivery is more meaningful. On the Miracle Fortress track, the psychedelic "Shoegaze" is more trippy through the Bel Canto. In contrast, the PS Audio delivers a tight, exciting and more-energetic sound. As with any piece of gear, it boils down to what will work in your specific system and with your own musical tastes.

Fantastic Buy

The PS Audio Digital Link III is a fantastic buy. It's well-built, elegant in physical design and super simple to use. Just plug in your sources and decide which upsampled frequency you prefer; when you want to experience a recording in a new way, it's simply a push button away. Without a doubt, the PS Audio DLIII improves the sound of most digital sources under its price point, adding life and excitement to the proceedings.

Second Opinion — By Jeff Dorgay

If you didn't notice, we revisited the original PS Audio Digital Link in our Old School column last issue and I am still pretty impressed with the sound. Interestingly enough, almost 30 years after the original, PS Audio has a much improved product for the same cost: a thousand bucks.

While I tried the Digital Link III with my Power Book, I went a different direction for sources to the Wadia i170 iDock and my old Proceed transport, which I borrowed back from staff writer Jerold O'Brien. I even hooked up my super budget Pioneer 563 that I bought on EBay for \$50 to see what kind of improvements were available with an extreme budget deck.

Bottom line: when comparing this to a number of current CD players in the \$2,000 range, the Digital Link definitely held its own. So if you have an older CD player that still works well, you can get a big improvement in sound for a minor investment and have the flexibility of USB and Optical inputs along with RCA and XLR outputs.

I found the correlation between 96khz and 192khz upsampling to be somewhat more random. I made it a point to try it with quite a few discs, but never decisively preferred one overall, so it's fun to explore!

The key word for the Digital Link III is versatility. Even if you are a vinyl lover, using this DAC as a digital hub is great because you can now switch between your digital sources, essentially giving your preamp a few extra inputs in the process.

I agree with Sandy, this one's a winner. ●



"The best CD playback under \$5k... for \$1799!"

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"For starters, the 840C doesn't sound like anything in its price range. It had a resolution, refinement, ease, grace, and musicality that were instantly recognizable as being different from every other product in the category. (...) Not only is the 840C easily the greatest value in digital sources in my experience, it must be considered one of the greatest bargains in all of high-end audio."

"In fact, I could easily live with the 840C at the front end of my \$100K reference system – it's that good."

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PERIPHERALS

Power Amplifiers: Bel Canto M300's, Gamut SI100

Digital Sources: 12" Apple PowerBook G4, iTunes, Apple Lossless compression

Analog Sources: Transrotor Leonardo 25/25/60 turntable w/Rega RB600 arm and Exact cartridge. Heed Audio Quasar phono stage

Speakers: Audio Note An/E-Lx, Gamut Phi7

Cables: Straightwire and Audio Note speaker cables, Van Den Hul and Cardas interconnects, Shunyata power cords

The Shunyata Hydra V-Ray

By Jerold O'Brien



When it comes to power-conditioning products, most audiophiles fall into two camps: those who swear by them and the ones who swear that they don't work. After all, the power travels miles through lousy wire, so how much difference can a power-line conditioner and a fire-hose-sized power cord change the sound of your equipment?

The answer is plenty, and now I have been converted to the former camp.

For the techie people in the crowd, click on this link to read about all of the technology behind the Shunyata Hydra power conditioners:

<http://www.shunyata.com/Content/technical-PowerDist.html>

I need to first warn you that Shunyata has a second generation V-Ray that is going to be released in the first part of the new year, so I will have a follow-up review as soon as I get my hands on one. Shunyata tends to be an evolutionary company, so those of you buying the current model will have an upgrade path. Stay tuned to the Shunyata website for complete details.

Built Like A Tank

The V-Ray is pretty hefty, weighing about 40 pounds. Don't be surprised when you pick it up and something that sounds like sand shifts around inside. Grant Samuelson from Shunyata told our publisher that this is their FeSi 1000 noise-reduction compound.

A power conditioner has a pretty thankless existence in your system, with no fancy buttons, meters or casework. If it's doing its job, you won't notice it. Looking around the back of the V-Ray there are four of Shunyata's SR-Z1 duplex outlets, built by Hubbell to Shunyata specs and then cryogenically treated along with the rest of the V-Ray's innards. *(continued)*





Half the country owns an iPod.

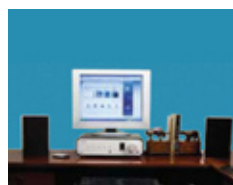
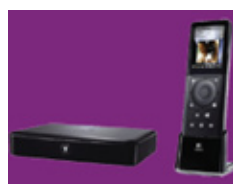
Now you can hear how good digital music can sound.

The Peachtree Audio Decco is a compact powerhouse that works equally well with analog or digital sources. Its robust 50 watt per channel amplifier gives you a wide range of speakers to choose from, or you can use the built-in headphone jack for private listening sessions.

With optical, coaxial and USB inputs it can interface with any digital source. Products like the Apple TV, Sonos ZP-80, Slim Devices, Squeezebox and the Wadia iTransport are natural combinations, as well as your desktop or laptop computer. A traditional analog input makes it easy to connect your iPod with the standard Apple dock.

The internal digital to analog converter in the Decco offers a significant upgrade to the typical computer soundcard, making it the anchor for the perfect desktop audio system.

But the Decco isn't limited to your office. Its attractive styling will make it right at home anywhere you would like a compact, yet high performance music system.



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In addition to the outlets, there is a power switch, circuit breaker and a 20A IEC socket on the rear panel. Shunyata was kind enough to supply us with their top-of the line Anaconda Alpha 20A power cord, which adds roughly \$1,995 to the price. Should you be a little more budget conscious, Shunyata offers a few different power cords at price points starting at \$99 each.

I was able to try a few different cords and decided that if you have the dough, go for the Python; it will offer a cleaner and quieter sound overall. While many will argue about the cost of a power cord in this league, I'm assuming that if you have the budget for a V-Ray, you have a system that is equally resolving and will be able to hear the difference. Our publisher uses a couple of Pythons in his reference system and digs them.

An often overlooked fact with a good power-line conditioner is the protection it offers your equipment in case of big power spikes.

I did not get a chance to test this directly, but from what I read in the V-Ray data sheet, Shunyata goes to great lengths to protect your gear as well as help it sound its best. They use a high quality circuit breaker as well as their thermally insulated MOV's (metal oxide varistors) to keep a handle on voltage spikes.

Another Myth, Busted

If I had a dollar for every time I read a thread on an internet audio forum someone said, "I live way out in the country and the power is clean, so don't need a power conditioner," *(continued)*

I'd probably have enough money to buy a V-Ray and a few Pythons to go with it. I *do* live way out in the country and the power is still dirty.

When we were rewiring my current digs, I made sure that I had a couple of spare 20 amp circuits for the HiFi room, but it's still coming from the same power panel. While it's a good idea to have a dedicated circuit or two for your system, it's not going to offer much cleaner power than anywhere else in the house. If someone is using a welder out in the garage or a sewing machine, there will still be noise on the line. That's where good line conditioning comes in handy.

A Solid Connection

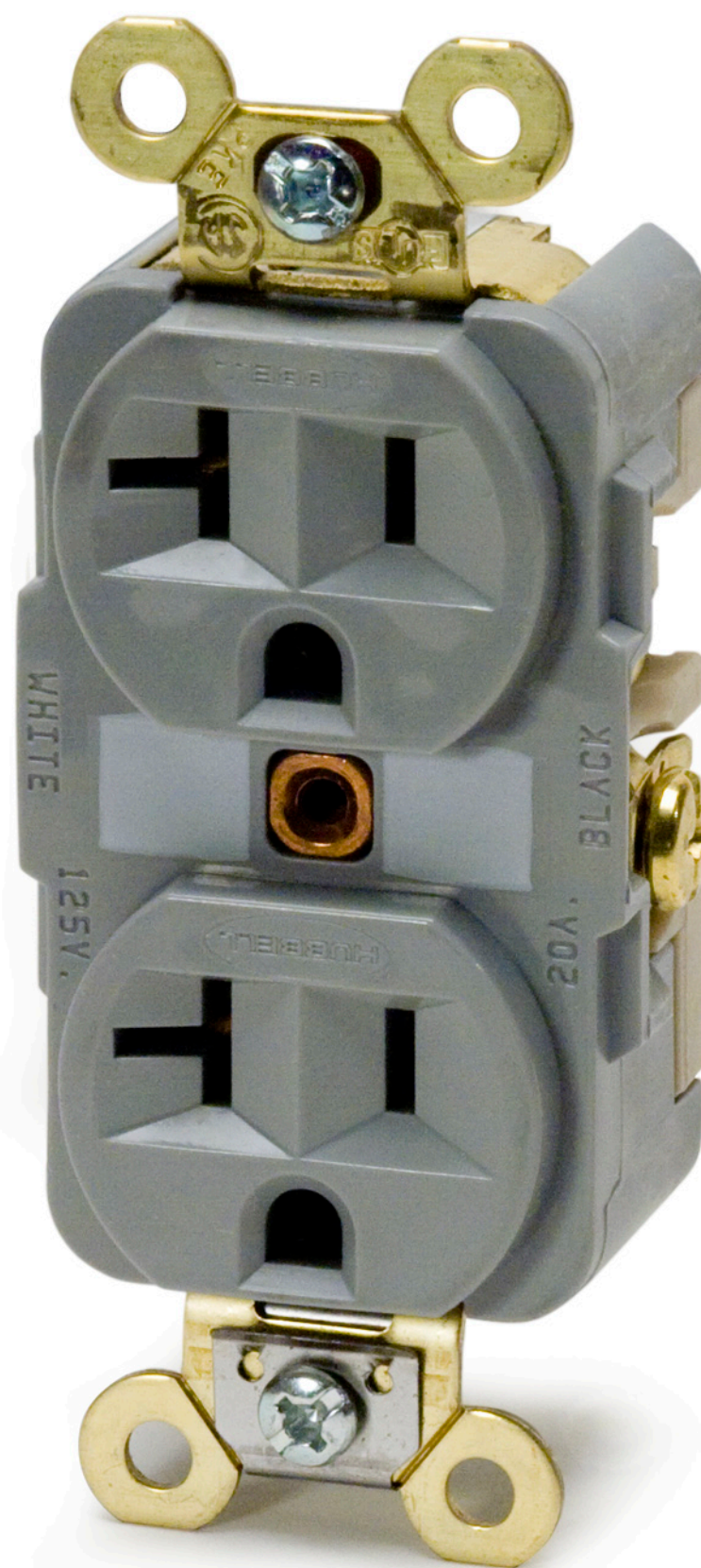
I'd like to mention one other good addition to your system while you are going down the power-conditioning path. Good outlets. While many people like to use the "medical grade" outlets from their favorite electrical supply vendor, this is a step in the right direction, but I made it a point to install a Shunyata SR-Z1 outlet in the wall too. At \$75 each, these probably cost two to three times what you'd pay for a premium outlet at Home Depot, but not crazy money. And besides, these are cryo treated, too, so why not? The peace of mind knowing I was getting the best possible interface with the mega power cord made perfect sense to me.

I made it a point to install a Shunyata SR-Z1 outlet in the wall

Night and Day

When the V-Ray entered my system, I was editing the monster McIntosh integrated amplifier review from our previous issue. This solid-state behemoth puts out 250 watts per channel and I could tell the minute I plugged in the V-Ray that the presentation became much smoother and less grainy. Mac solid-state amps are not harsh to begin with, but there was a definite ease to the presentation that was not there before.

Once I had a handle on the newfound cleanliness, I worked my way backwards to see how much difference I could hear between the various cords. As I mentioned, the Python offered the most open sound but it was more apparent at higher volumes than low with the McIntosh amplifier. I would say adding the V-Ray to the mix provided about 80 percent of the improvement and the Python the other 20 percent. It was much easier to hear the difference between the cords when the V-Ray was in the system; again confirming its effect on the overall presentation. *(continued)*





While I wasn't expecting a huge improvement with the Mac amp because it's already so quiet, there was enough of an immediate improvement that I no longer want to be without a V-Ray. But the big test was yet to come – tubes.

I'm the vintage tube nut on the staff and I'm always futzing around with tube amplifiers, some older than me. One of the biggest problems with these older amplifiers is that they had pretty primitive power supplies and tend to be noisier than today's designs. SET amps are even worse. With low power and high efficiency speakers, you get a lot of background noise in the best of situations.

When you find out what your system sounds like with clean power, you'll never want to go back.

This was what blew me away. I've just recently acquired a set of Klipsorns and I love them in my SET setup, with a Pacific Creek 300B amplifier. But noise has always been something of an issue with this setup, and plugging the 300B amplifier into the V-Ray was a revelation. All of those random tube noises disappeared. It was like having a brand new (and much better) system.

Going through my group of vintage Dynaco and HK tube amplifiers had the same effect. The performance of each amplifier was increased significantly, with lower overall background noise and more air to the presentation, with everything taking on more of the three-dimensional, holographic effect for which tubes are famous. When I unplugged the V-Ray, my amplifiers sounded like they had old tubes in them!

Definitely A Convert

My experience with the Shunyata V-Ray was an excellent one. This is a product I would highly recommend to anyone, regardless of where they live on the power grid. I would also suggest going with the complete Shunyata system (outlets, power cords and V-Ray) as soon as your budget allows. When you find out what your system sounds like with clean power, you'll never want to go back. ●

The Shunyata Hydra V-Ray
MSRP: \$3,995

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Rega P3-24 with TT-PSU and Rega Apheta cartridge, JLTi phono stage

Digital Source Proceed PDT transport, PS Audio Digital Link III DAC, McIntosh MS 300 music server

Preamplifier Conrad Johnson Premier 17LS, ARC-SP3 (restored and modded), Dynaco PAS-3(highly modified)

Amplifier Conrad Johnson MV-55, Dynaco Mark III monoblocks, PrimaLuna Prologue Seven Monoblocks, Pacific Creek 300B integrated, McIntosh MA7000 integrated

Speakers AV123 Strata Mini, Harbeth Compact 7-2, Klipsorns

Interconnect Cardas Golden Presence

Speaker Cable Cardas Golden Presence

The Essence of Analog

The Spiral Groove SG-2

By Jeff Dorgay

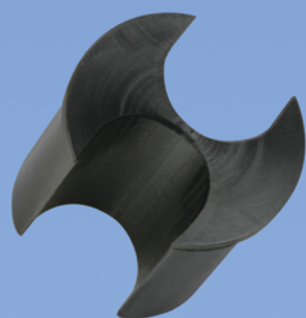


I loved the ending of the recent *Iron Man* movie, when Tony Stark declared in the press conference, “Yeah, I’m Iron Man,” and the crowd went wild. While it might not drive a press conference into frenzy, I’m going to tip my hat right now and tell you that the SG-2 is the finest turntable I’ve ever had the pleasure to listen to in my system. There’s still a few high rollers on the list that I haven’t experienced yet, such as the SME30 (which I have heard a number of times but not in my system), and a few others in the \$100K and higher category. But let’s face it, most of us aren’t buying 100 thousand dollar turntables. Even a five-figure table such as the SG-2 is a luxury, but one that some of us can afford. For the price of a tricked-out WaveRunner, you can have analog bliss. I know which I’d rather have.



When I first heard the flagship SG-1 at the Immedia offices earlier this year, I was immediately impressed. Fortunately, designer Allen Perkins had a complement of gear in his listening room with which I am familiar, so it wasn’t just a bunch of audio parlor tricks; this is a very *musical* sounding table. The main differences between the \$25k SG-1 and the \$15k SG-2 are that the SG-1 uses a few more exotic materials in the plinth; stainless steel in the SG-1 is replaced with aluminum in the SG-2. The SG-1 weighs 70 pounds, while the SG-2 is only 50. Both tables feature the same motor, speed control/power supply and bearing, along with a finely machined record clamp. The material making up the platter is the same in both tables, but the outer ring in the SG-1 is stainless, where the SG-2’s is aluminum.

The SG-1 features a removable arm-board that bayonets out like an SLR camera lens. Perkins told me that this was inspired by his Leica cameras and made in house by SG. This feature allows multiple tonearm configurations as the mood strikes, while the SG-2 has a standard, albeit removable armboard. Sharing Allen Perkins’ passion for photography, I thought this was an exquisite touch. Retail price for the Spiral Groove SG-2 without arm is \$15,000, while the current Tri-Planar mk. VII is \$4,995. Come on, this is way more interesting than a WaveRunner and you don’t need a wetsuit to use it. (*continued*)



Cardas Clear

Every surface on the SG-2 is beautifully finished, and as far as tables go, I put it up on par with the SME's in terms of build quality and understated excellence. The Continuum is a Dodge Challenger with a blower sticking out of the hood, jacked up with tires about three sizes too big sticking out of the wheel wells, while the SG-2 is an Audi S8 — elegant, understated and much more capable the minute you get into the first turn. Should you be someone who wants a turntable based on the high zoot factor, the SG-2 may not be for you. But if your primary measuring stick is musical performance, and timeless style like an Eames Chair, read on.

Getting Out of My Comfort Zone

Most of my recent analog experience has been with SME and Rega tonearms, but Perkins suggested that my current reference, the iV.Vi would not be a mechanical fit for the SG-2 or the SG-1. "There's nothing wrong with the SME arm, it's just the oval-shaped base that the SME mount uses is too big to work with the oversized platter on the Spiral Groove tables; the pivot to spindle distance would be too great. The 12-inch SME arms, would probably work just fine, though." I'm guessing this also will eliminate the Graham arms as possible contenders. Perkins should have his arm complete soon, which he was quite excited about offering as the perfect match with the SG tables. Having heard the prototype in January of this year, I felt he was on to something very good, so watch for a follow-up review when they become available. *(continued)*



So for now, we went with the Tri-Planar mk. VIII. I've always been intrigued with the Tri-Planar, and this provided an excellent opportunity to break some new ground. One of the virtues of the Tri-Planar is its almost infinite adjustability, which can be a blessing for some and maddening for others, who may feel they have never gotten it just right.

If you have some records of varying thickness, the Tri-Planar is quite handy, with its large dial indicator on the back of the arm. You can find settings for 140, 180 and 200-gram records, with a little practice, and then return to those settings when you play those records again. Or, if you are like me, you can just set the arm up for whatever you have the most of and go from there. I'm of the mind that constant fiddling is bad for the cartridge suspension, and as I seem to get long life out of my cartridges, I might be on to something. The good news is that with the Tri-Planar, you can have it your way.

Incredibly Easy Setup

I'm a huge fan of Rega and SME because they are easy to set up and once set up, tend to stay that way. So the SG-2 put a big smile on my face; it's a marvel of simplicity. After carefully unpacking the table and its external power supply, I merely had to remove a few spacers holding the platter up off the base and I was ready to mount the arm. Underneath the plinth is a set of three cone-shaped feet that in addition to damping vibration make it easy to level the SG-2.

The SG-2 put a big smile on my face; it's a marvel of simplicity.

Being a newcomer to the Tri-Planar, it took about an hour and a half to complete initial setup with the help of my Acoustic Sounds test record, Acoustic Sounds protractor and trusty Fluke Multimeter. Fortunately for me, the SG-2's speed was spot on right out of the box, saving another step.

Fine tuning the Lyra Skala took about another hour of careful listening, and I ended up settling on a final tracking weight of 1.62 grams, a bit on the light side as the data sheet suggests 1.65-1.75 grams.

I zeroed in on the Skala for the review period because it has a sound I am very familiar with and I happen to have a pair of them. This always makes it easy to perform a direct comparison between my reference Raven Two turntable with an SME iV.Vi and whatever else I'm evaluating. I was able to keep everything else the same except for tonearm cables. The Tri-Planar comes with its own cable, so there may have been a slight difference between it and the Furutech cables I normally use on my other tonearms. *(continued)*



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REVIEW

Regardless, it was easy to get a good feel for the inherent differences between the Raven/SME combination and the SG-2/Tri-Planar combination.

To investigate a few other possibly good combinations, I also had excellent luck with my other reference cartridges, the Dynavector XV-1s and the Grado Statement. I would also like to mention that the combination of the SG-2 and the Tri-Planar has offered the best performance the Grado has ever exhibited in my system.

My initial comparisons were with the Nagra VPS phono stage, and once I had a good feel for the combination, I also used the SG-2/Tri-Planar/Skala combination to evaluate the stellar Naim Stageline phono preamplifier with the HighCap2 and SuperCap power supplies, but that's for another review.

This is what analog is all about folks

I might be a little crazy, but I believe great analog should sound really analog. Smooth and natural (not rounded off) with an organic sound that is convincingly realistic enough that on the right recording, it takes you to that place where you get fooled into thinking the musicians are actually playing in your listening room. I understand that you can't put a full symphony orchestra or Snow Patrol with a wall of Marshall amps in your living room. But you can get damn close with a solo vocalist, a small string quartet or a few musicians playing acoustic instruments if your room and system are up to the task. *(continued)*

If you are a newcomer to the world of analog, you might not realize just how difficult this balance is to achieve. I've been chasing it for decades. While thousands of pages have been written trying to describe this, if you have listened to your fair share of music, you know instantly when it's right, yet it can drive you to madness when it's not. Even at the beginning of the setup phase, the minute I lowered the tonearm onto the record I knew the SG-2 was an analog gem. It just got better as the final adjustments were made.

This may not be scientific, but the SG-2 was one of those rare components that would not allow me to do any multi-tasking whatsoever. Whenever I put a record on this table and tried to work at the same time, I just couldn't do it. I'd shut my laptop and hours would go by, playing one record after another and pretty soon, the better part of the day had evaporated before my eyes.

The more unobtrusive the table becomes, the more it can get out of the way and reveal the music present on the discs being played.

So much of achieving this rightness has to do with timbral accuracy, while part of it is the ability of a turntable, arm and cartridge to achieve high resolution without harshness. The mechanical aspects of a turntable at this level also are a major contributor to the dynamic range of the analog system, going hand in hand with the resolution aspect. The more unobtrusive the table becomes, the more it can get out of the way and reveal the music present on the discs being played.

Keeping It Real

Rather than go on and on about different records that I played, let's suffice to say I played a lot of them. Here's what I feel are the most important points about this fine record playing system:

First, nuance. It is always a great experience to listen to your favorite records and hear small details that weren't present before, or as clear. The SG-2 was a master of this, whether offering up a little more texture as a bow was drawn across the violin strings, or revealing more echo at the end of Black Sabbath's "Iron Man." No matter what kind of music you enjoy, this will grab you immediately with an SG-2. Perkins feels that the detail his tables offer has much to do with the platter design and the materials used, forming an excellent record-to-platter interface.

Next, quiet. Thanks to a well-designed drive system, the SG-2 could form the textbook definition of the classic audiophile cliché, "velvety black backgrounds." Not a molecule of rumble or other mechanical noise, which gives you CD quiet out of your highest quality pressings. The bearing in the SG-2 is not directly attached to the spindle, an approach taken by only a few other tables. *(continued)*



Big sound. Did I say big? I meant HUGE. As I've mentioned in past articles, I tend to listen to music spatially and interpret the sound field that my system produces as a cube. My Raven Two produces a very large sound field, but moving to the SG-2, the sound field expanded in all three dimensions. If you've ever had the opportunity to listen to a properly setup pair of MBL speakers in a good room, it feels as if someone poured out a room full of sound and you can just concentrate on the music.

According to most engineers I've spoken with, a big part of that big sound comes from drive accuracy and stability. The oversized platters on the SG-1 and SG-2 help reduce mechanical error, and the extra mass helps maintain inertia, smoothing things out further.

The only other turntables I've experienced that have this kind of "bigness" have been the Continuum Criterion and the SME30. But those tables cost \$55,000 and \$45,000, respectively. On an overall balance, I can honestly say I prefer the sound of the SG-2 to the Continuum after living with it for quite some time. The Continuum is still the master of ultimate bass slam and texture, but the overall rightness of the SG-2 kept drawing me back in.

It's like comparing Kodachrome with Ektachrome. The Continuum has more contrast, like Ektachrome, which grabs you at first and feels like a lot of fun. Some might even prefer its presentation. But like Kodachrome, my favorite film, the SG-2 has a tonality that just goes on forever. Acoustic instruments have the perfect amount of texture; drumheads sound correct, piano decay sounds correct, with the proper attack, decay and most of all, texture, with nothing muffled or truncated.

The bonus here is the SG-2's amazing resolution, another Kodachrome hallmark.

Some gear that I've heard that is wonderfully tuneful does it at the expense of resolution; not so with this table. For those who have pristine record collections, consisting of early edition pressings and high-quality audiophile remasters, you will really be in for a treat. Again, the Skala cartridge seemed to be a phenomenal match for this arm-and-table combination, with the Dynavector right behind.

I won't use the B-word, but...

The Spiral Groove SG-2 provides the most musically involving presentation I've yet to hear in my system. If I were to commission someone to create a custom turntable for me, this would be the result. The audio performance is beyond reproach, build quality exquisite, and it is aesthetically elegant. The kicker is that this is truly an affordable reference. Not in a Rega P3 kind of way, mind you, but if you are a music lover/collector/audiophile that has been at this for a while and are looking for a statement table that doesn't cost as much as a Porsche, I can't think of anything better.

Consider the SG-2 as the thinking man's \$100,000 turntable.

With that in mind, I am proud to present the Spiral Groove SG-2/TriPlanar combination our Product of the Year award in the analog category. Don't write the check for anything else until you hear this turntable. ●





*I sat there transfixed...
the soundstage was literally wall-to-wall...*

— Jim Hannon, *The Absolute Sound*, October 2007



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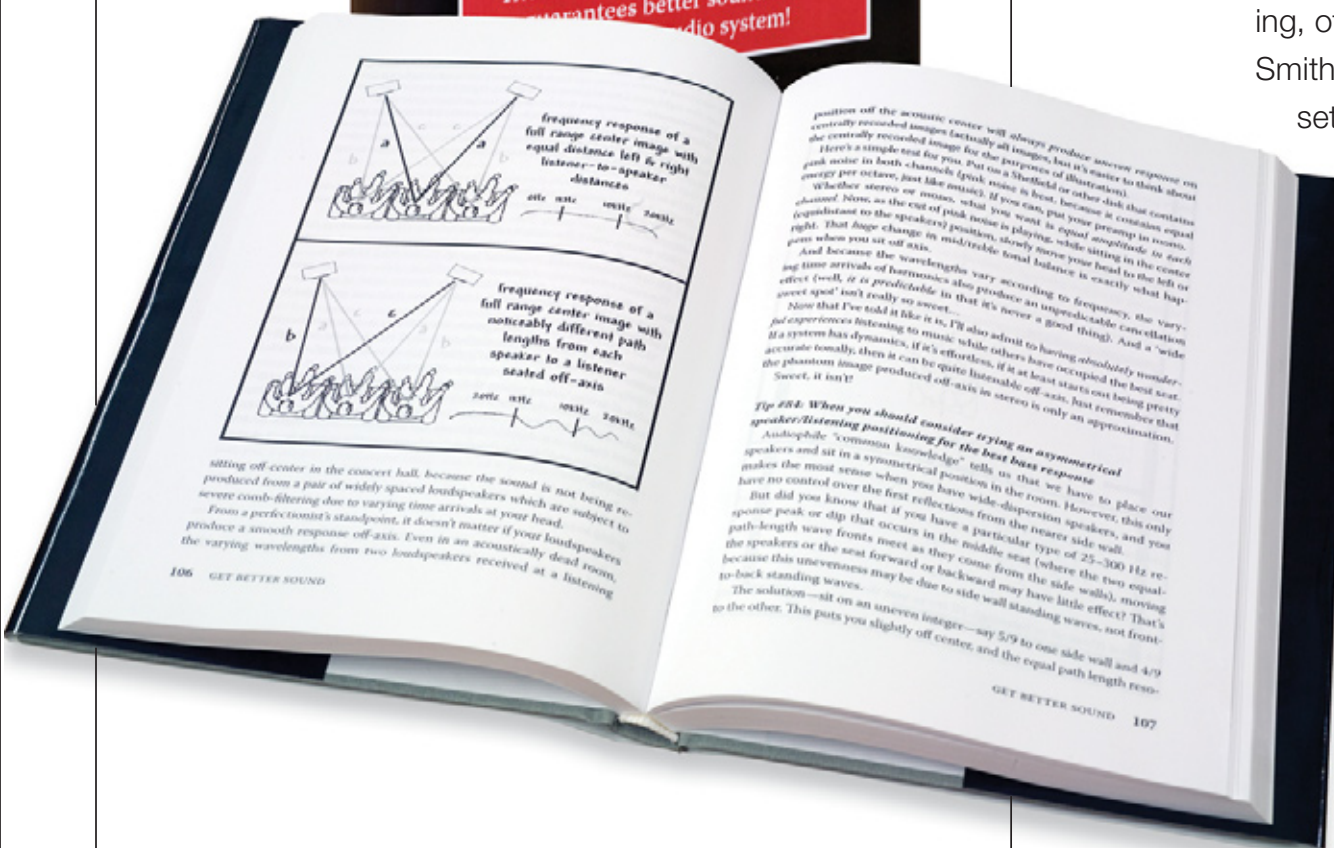
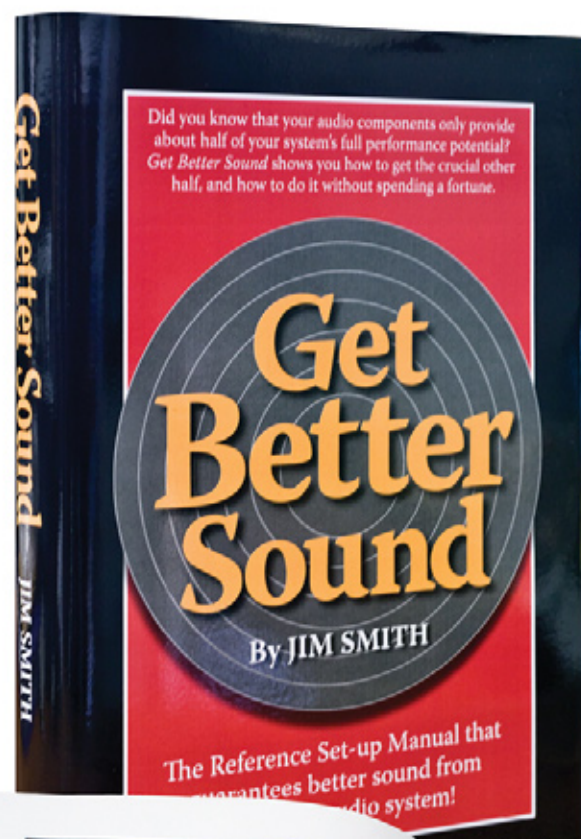
Room Treatment GIK
TriTraps, 242 panels and
Sonex Classic

The One Audio Accessory You Need

By Marc Phillips

There have been many helpful audio guides over the years—Laura Dearborn's *Good Sound* comes to mind—but few of them have consistently emphasized the most important component in the audio chain. I'm talking, of course, about your listening room. Jim Smith, considered by many to be the preeminent set-up man in the industry, wants to talk about

your listening room as well. In his new book, *Get Better Sound*, Jim stresses the fact that proper room set up will yield far more satisfying results than upgrading components (a more popular solution among many audiophiles). "I've walked into clients' houses where they have over-the-top systems, meaning more than \$100,000," Jim told me over the phone. "I could have walked in there with a pair of old Advents, a '70s Marantz receiver and a Philips turntable and gotten better sound."



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Get Better Sound is devoted to helping you get the best possible sound from your existing system through detailed, practical and relatively simple set-up techniques. Jim has expanded on his now famous booklet, *31 Secrets to Better Sound*, which he sent to over 15,000 audiophiles and musical lovers while he was the distributor for Avantgarde Acoustics. This new book offers 202 tips for getting better sound that range from the purely emotional (making listening sessions "special events") to fairly technical (adjusting the spectral balance of an electronic crossover) while wisely avoiding overly technical language. There are very few tips in this book that require even a modicum of technical knowledge or monetary investment, which makes *Get Better Sound* by far the most valuable \$45 tweak on the market.

There's very little that I disagree with (I have been able to get good results with an equipment rack between and slightly behind the speakers, though I generally try to avoid it), and far more that I find absolutely on the nose. I love his tip regarding professional audio reviewers which closely mirrors my own philosophy--we're not here to tell you what to buy, just to point you in the right direction so you can listen for yourself. He's also included advice that goes against the grain, such as preferring two subwoofers to one and never using center-speakers that are horizontally-aligned in a mid-tweeter-mid configuration. *(continued)*

NEW PRODUCT

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All signal cables have a characteristic resistance and reactance (capacitive and inductive), which is essentially a simple type of filter. Resistance is a linear function and simply reduces signal level while reactance is much more destructive to signal integrity in that it is frequency dependent. It skews amplitude and phase as frequency increases.

Conventional cable geometries dictate that a cable must be either capacitive or inductive, if one is reduced the other increases and vice-versa. By all accounts, the ideal cable would have virtually zero resistance, zero inductance and zero capacitance — which of course is impossible to achieve, but it should be the design goal. No cable should be designed to be either capacitive or inductive.

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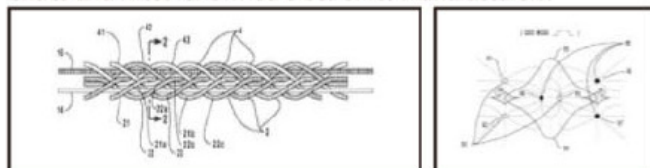
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I also appreciate someone taking the time to mention the sonic effects of wireless routers (turn them off) and eyeglasses (take them off).

Unlike those other audio guides, Jim includes a guarantee with his book. If his tips don't provide a bigger improvement for far less than the price of a new audio component, he'll refund the price of *Get Better Sound* as well as the shipping. (Those replacing Bose 901s with a pair of GamuT L-9 loudspeakers need not apply, in other words.)

If you do keep the book and use it, you may be entitled to even more value for your \$45. "This is a project that never ends," Jim said. On his website (www.getbetersound.com), readers and industry experts offer comments on Jim's tips as well as their own set-up secrets, making the book a truly interactive experience. **Jim plans to expand the content of the book via updates on his website in a series of "Quarter Notes."** He will also introduce new tips related to the constant stream of innovations in the audio world. "I could stay in touch with my readers that way. I've already developed personal relationships with many of them."

I receive so many emails from readers who ask me about which component to upgrade, or where they can put their money in order to yield the most noticeable improvements. From now on, my answer will be *Get Better Sound* more often than not. ●

Make Mine MM

THE CLEARAUDIO MAESTRO WOOD

By Jeff Dorgay

Most vinyl enthusiasts like to remember when they made the transition to a moving coil cartridge and stepped into the *big leagues* of HiFi. That's all well and good, but making that jump usually requires an upgrade to your phono stage in the process. Meanwhile a few companies have been refining their moving magnet designs.

Clearaudio, the manufacturer of the amazing Goldfinger MC cartridge that now tips the scale at about \$10k, hasn't forgotten the entry-level customer, and that's commendable. Their line of moving magnet cartridges start out with the Aurum Classic at just \$275, but we are talking about the top of their MM range with the Maestro Wood, retailing for \$1,000.



DeVORE FIDELITY



The Nines

A thousand bucks isn't pocket change and many will argue that there are a number of great MC cartridges at this price point. That's true, but there's that argument about needing the extra muscle in the phono preamplifier department. If that's not the issue, some just prefer the sound of an MM to an MC.

The Maestro Wood weighs a fairly light 7.0 grams and has an output of 3.6mv, which should not tax any phono preamplifier in which it is plugged. Like most other MM cartridges, the standard loading is 47k ohms, with no capacitance loading spec and tracking force is suggested between the range of 2.0 and 2.5 grams. Very straightforward.

It Is Different

After going through my Shure V15VxMR phase, I thought I was done with MM cartridges for good. Just too dull and lifeless for me. I know there are tons of people who swear by this cartridge, but it was not the least bit interesting. The Grado Statement brought me back around to consider a cartridge that was not MC, but this being a moving iron design and 2,500 bucks still had me on the hunt. Though now my intrigue factor was piqued.

Having heard nothing but great things about the Maestro Wood, this seemed like the perfect spot, and I've been completely tickled with this cartridge. It does not have quite the delicacy of some of my higher-priced MC cartridges, but it has an overall organic presentation that is extremely musical and which I really enjoy. *(continued)*

Setup

The Maestro Wood spent virtually all of its time on the second tonearm of my TW-Acoustic Raven Two, an SME 309 with Furutech tonearm cable. The phono stages that I used were my reference Nagra VPS and the Naim Superline with HiCap2 power supply. (My other reference phono stage, the Rega los does not support MM cartridges.)

After mounting, a quick run-through with the Acoustic Sounds test record, and I was in the ballpark. A little additional diddling ended up with tracking force at 2.4 grams, and everything was ready for analog goodness. I would like to note that this cartridge was easy to set up and dial in, so if you are relatively new to the wacky world of analog or aren't of the tweakazoid mindset, you can put the Maestro Wood at the top of your list right now.

The Sound

I would describe the Maestro Wood as slightly warm and romantic overall, not terribly unlike the sound of the entry level Koetsus. However, this cartridge has more overall grip and depth than many of the other MM cartridges I've heard and definitely has some great dynamics to boot. Not to mention that you can save a few bucks by taking the Clearaudio route.

It's always toss up as to what record to play on a new cartridge for the first time: new favorites or old. This time, Joni Mitchell won out with the excellent Speakers Corner pressing of *Hissing Of Summer Lawns*, my favorite Joni record.

The SC record immediately revealed the excellent overall tonal balance of the cartridge, with nothing over-emphasized and nothing falling off into the darkness. It also did an excellent job of picking up the very faint synth riffs that weave their way through "The Jungle Line." Switching to my old, trashed copy of this recording, I noticed that the Maestro did a great job of minimizing groove noise, too.

Moving back to the 21st century, I pulled out the Fleet Foxes album to reveal another great virtue of this cartridge: it has a few drops of romance, which is not at all a bad thing. The Fleet Foxes album sounds somewhat dry on LP compared with the excellent mix on CD. Sorry, this is one of those instances where I'd rather spin the silver disc, but that little bit of warmth provided by the Maestro transformed this listening into a great experience.

This cartridge can rock with the best of them, delivering some real bass grunt.

That touch of warmth will bring a smile to your face if you listen to a lot of jazz and female vocal records, rounding out the presentation in a way that you'll feel as if your analog front end is a lot better than it really is at times. This little bit of warmth also helps if you have a lot of records from the 60's and 70's that you love but are somewhat poorly mastered.

Toward the end of the review period, the promo copy of the new Guns & Roses album, *Chinese Democracy*, arrived and I was curious to see how the Maestro would handle the dynamics and synth bass present on this record. Definitely a winner, folks. This cartridge can rock with the best of them, delivering some real bass grunt.

Limitations

For the price, the Maestro doesn't have any. This is one of the most balanced cartridges I've heard at any price, not sacrificing any one aspect of analog performance at the expense of the other parameters. It has a healthy dose of all the stuff you love about analog with none of the fussiness that comes along with the high-dollar cartridges. I was impressed at how well this cartridge responded to a couple of very good tables that were more expensive than what the average Maestro customer might mate it with.

(continued)



audience



"The Adept Response made a phenomenal difference in my system. Fundamentally, it improved the clarity of recordings by eliminating a previously undetected lack of definition, without introducing any brightness or most importantly any coloration. That is worth repeating. I did not hear any coloration from the Adept Response or any obscuring of the rhythm of the music. The Adept Response just made every recording I listened to more natural and in turn more musically engaging." **The Absolute Sound - Max Shepherd - June '06**



While the Maestro will give a reputable performance with, say, a Technics SL-1200 or Rega P3, if you can go up a bit on the analog food chain, it won't be money wasted. So this is a cartridge you can grow with if you are at the early part of your analog journey.

Whether you are considering the Maestro an upgrade to your current cartridge or an addition to your stable, it is one I can recommend highly if you prize the sonic attributes I've mentioned here. ●

The Clearaudio Maestro Wood
MSRP: \$1000

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Room Treatment GIK 242 panels, GIK Tri Traps, Sonex Classic

Vibration Control Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks, Composite Products CF-1000 rack, Finite Cerapucs and Ceraballs

Accessories Furutech record flattner, Furutech Demag-1, Clearaudio Simple Matrix record cleaner

Tune In, Turn On!

Pro-Ject Tuner Box

By Marc Phillips

When I told a fellow audiophile buddy that I was trying to decide between a vintage McIntosh or current Magnum Dynalab tuner, he bluntly told me “FM is dead.” In a few years all of those McIntosh MR-78s and Kenwood L02s and Marantz 10bs will be nothing more than pretty paperweights. Terrestrial radio will be gone in a couple of years.” Well, that couple of years has passed, and my interest in Sirius and XM have waned mostly due to poor sound quality and spotty reception. (I do agree that the programming is off the charts, however.) These days, I still find myself listening to FM stations for at least a few hours per week.





The new Pro-Ject Tuner Box is perfect for a guy like me, someone who just wants to listen to FM's death rattle through a decent-sounding but inexpensive piece of gear. The Pro-Ject is tiny, not much bigger than a metal Band-Aid tin, but it packs plenty of features including manual and automatic program search, 8 programmable resets, automatic frequency control, adaptive noise cancellation, meters for fine tuning and signal strength. If you have other Pro-Ject components, it will take advantage of their remote control. It comes with a 16V outboard power supply and a simple 75 ohm antenna.

This is an awful lot of tuner for just \$249 and is available with a black or silver front panel.



The Tuner Box had no trouble with either of my favorite local stations and the high-resolution OLED display is fairly intuitive in its display of signal strength. Roaming up and down the dial, revealed a slight bit of static, indicating less than perfect muting, but nothing out of the ordinary and certainly much better than my car's radio or my Tivoli in the other room.

While old-school tuner aficionados might cry for a YAGI, fetching my old Magnum/Dynalab whip antenna from storage took care of the noise quite well. *(continued)*

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Slummin'

By Ken Kessler

Pub. note: While I'm usually the dumpster dog, contributor Ken Kessler gives us a different take on bargain hunting from across the pond. I'm jealous!

Times may be tough, but that didn't stop a few thousand of the audio hardcore from visiting John Howes' semi-annual flea market in Tonbridge, Kent, in Southeastern England, in mid-October. So successful were his annual February events that stall-holders implored him to run another one in October as well. And it pulled 'em in, even during the worst week of the current financial crisis.

As with earlier events, John's show offered around 100 tables' worth of used hi-fi equipment, used vinyl, new vinyl, tubes, tape decks, pre-recorded and blank reel-to-reel tapes, accessories, old magazines and books, cables, spare parts – you name it. And there were genuine bargains to be had, plus a plethora of classics that command market value. One stallholder sold an SME 12in arm for £400 (\$690), while a well-worn Scott 200B went for £160 (\$275).

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It's like this: Howes knows that the trade visitors and the fire-breathers want first crack at the choice pieces, so a lot of trading goes on before the 10am opening time. The stallholders sniff around from 8am, while early entry for a premium ticket gives you entry an hour before the crowds. Without fail, any Nagra tape decks, Radford amps, LS3/5A loudspeakers, or SME tonearms will be snapped up instantly. Recent shows found one scavenger unearthing a matched, unused pair of military-spec 211 tubes for \$80, and a Nagra SN went for under £100. Luck of the draw...

How does Howes do it? Plenty of publicity, an ideal hall for the event, and a guaranteed good vibe. Of course, the bulk of the products on offer is vintage British equipment – this is not the place to look for Dynaco or McIntosh or Marantz tube gear – but that means more collectible Leak, Lowther, Garrard, Tannoy, Rogers, and Quad than you can handle.

Howes' next show is in early 2009, so if you're in the UK on Sunday, the 8th of February, don't miss it. You might walk away with a mint Grace tonearm, a Decca Gold, a Zeta... [www.audiojumble.co.uk/Next Event.htm](http://www.audiojumble.co.uk/Next%20Event.htm)



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