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No.27 February 2010

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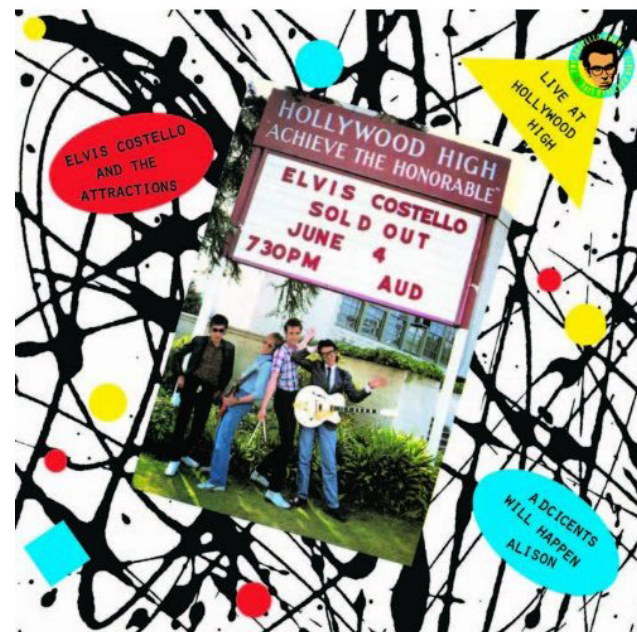
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# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

While working on the review of Ringo's latest album *Y Not*, one of his favorite phrases kept coming to mind, something about "getting by with a little help from my friends." I thought about that a lot while putting together this issue. So, I would really like to dedicate this issue, which marks our new format, to our friends.

Even though I spend most of my waking moments immersed in music and HiFi, I can't be everywhere. Our readers often tip us off about new things that we've missed at shows, or about the current buzz on various internet forums. This often leads to a review or interview because if that many people are excited about something, we want to find out why. Sometimes our readers let us know about music that is off the beaten path, which almost always leads to a positive, new experience.

But for this issue, our friends went above and beyond the usual goodwill. I'd like to thank Ken Mercereau for taking care of covering the Steve Earle concert. I just had some oral surgery and had to leave the show early after a major headache set in. To make matters worse, Earle's management would not allow any photographs taken at the show. So I thought we were washed up. But staff member (and walking musical encyclopedia) Terry Currier happened to be sitting in the front row with his wife, Karen, who grabbed a few shots with her point-and-shoot to save the day.

Assistant music editor Bob Gendron went all the way to Toronto to cover Guns N'Roses, only to be told the morning of the show that no photo access would be granted. But loyal fan Andy Choe snuck a camera into the show and shot the outstanding photos you see on page 27. Ahhh, reminds me of the good old days when I used to sneak cameras into concerts.

The major development you'll notice right away is the change in our layout, from the square format we've used since Issue 1 to the more standard vertical rectangle. We've made the switch for two reasons: to accommodate laptop users who will now be able to read the PDF in landscape (horizontal) format, having the two page spread fill your screen, and to be ready for Apple's new iPad, which is due out at the end of March. By the iPad launch, we will have an eBook version of TONEAudio that will read perfectly on the device. So you could take TONEAudio with you wherever you go. As soon as we work out the logistics with Apple, you should be able to pick up our magazine from the iBook store as well.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank staff cartoonist, Liza Donnelly for producing this issue's cartoon in color. This will be a permanent update as well.

I hope you enjoy the new look of TONEAudio. And again, I can't thank you all enough for helping us get by this issue.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Liza Donnelly'. The signature is stylized and cursive.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

### Lou Brooks

We are honored to feature the work of master illustrator Lou Brooks on our cover this issue. His work has appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, on MTV and too many other places to mention. He even redesigned Uncle Pennybags and the Monopoly logo for Parker Brothers in the 80s!

An east coast native and one time race car driver, Brooks has retired the race car and relocated to California, but he hasn't retired his wacky sense of humor.

### Richard Colburn

Richard has been in the world of high end audio since the early '70s, working for Mirage, Audioquest and KEF to name a few. Known to play some monstrous bass riffs in his spare time, his extensive knowledge of jazz and prog music will be an asset to our music coverage.

Colburn joined our music section last issue with his coverage of the Stanley Clarke/Chick Corea/Lenny White concert and takes his game to the next degree of difficulty with a few of ECM's latest this issue.

### Eliza Harrigan

Eliza braved the crowds and grumpy security to get the shots of City and Colour for us this issue.

She majored in art history but always held on to an interest in photography gleaned from her father. A native of the north Chicago suburbs, Harrigan enjoys outdoor activities, remains active in amateur sports, and refuses to settle for anything less than a quality craft beer. While modest, she possesses a learned knowledge of music and can carry a tune. She also knows her way around a piano.

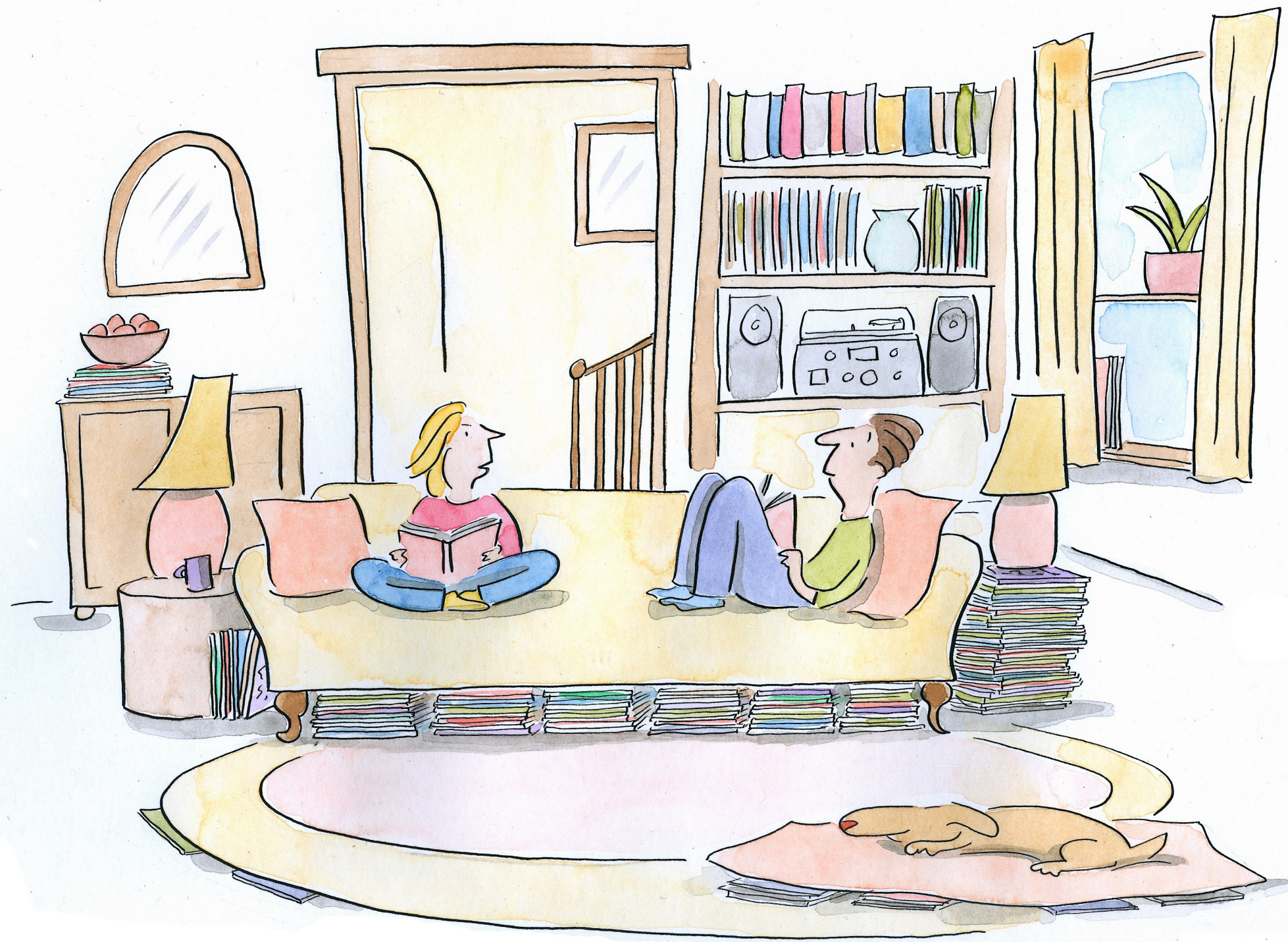
### Ken Mersereau

Portland resident Mersereau is responsible for the Steve Earle review on page 36, but his musical taste goes beyond that. He and his son Grant can often be found banging their heads at a Slayer concert when no one is looking.

Mersereau can always be depended on to find the best microbrews and curry in town, as well as having a keen eye for budget vinyl.



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*“Are you sneaking in records again?”*

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# The Spica TC-50

By Jeff Dorgay

When I first heard the Spica TC-50's in 1985, they had already been on the market for some time. I was impressed but I ignored them because I was a panel guy. Being the proud owner of a gigantic pair of Acoustat 2+2's, I wasn't going to put those tiny box speakers in my listening room. Even so, I had become somewhat enamored with the Rogers LS3/5a's, thanks to one of my neighbors.

But two years later, when I decided to abandon the Midwest for good and head to Arizona, I wasn't all that excited about packing up an eight-foot-tall pair of speakers. That was how I became a TC-50 fan after all. I was amazed at how much of the midrange transparency and three-dimensional imaging these tiny speakers were able to nail for \$500 a pair. I walked out of Quintessence Audio in Naperville, Illinois, with a demo pair of Spicas under my arm for \$450 and left them boxed until I arrived at my new digs in Scottsdale, AZ, a week later.

I was amazed at how much of the midrange transparency and three-dimensional imaging these tiny speakers were able to nail for \$500 a pair.





Those little speakers served me well for the next four years while high-end audio had to take a back seat to getting established in a new city. But I actually found myself listening to music more. They were a pleasure to live with and worked well in my small apartment. While I swore off the audiophile scene for a while, it wasn't long before the NAD 3020 that made the trip with me was replaced with a CJ PV-10 preamplifier and MV-50 power amplifier. The relatively flat impedance curve made the small speakers easy to drive with a favorite tube amp; just start with the 4-ohm tap.

This took the sound from good to glorious, and I even managed to find the matching Spica eight-inch subwoofer at a local retailer in their used department.

"This little thing doesn't make any bass, who would call this a subwoofer anyway?" the salesman smugly told me. I gave him \$50 and hauled ass out of there before he figured out what he had actually sold me. It turned out to be the missing piece I needed, especially after moving to a larger space.

You can still pick up a nice, clean used pair of TC-50's for about \$200 if you keep your eyes peeled. Make sure the owner hasn't done any mods or swapped drivers, as there are no exact replacements for the tweeters. G-R Research offers a Spica "upgrade," so this might be an option for some of you. But it will sound different from the originals.

The key to this speaker was the extraordinary care taken in matching the drivers and crossover networks.

We listen to companies like Wilson Audio brag about matching their crossovers and drivers to .5 db tolerances, but Spica was doing this almost 30 years ago with their \$500 per pair speakers! Pretty impressive.

The unconventional (for the time) triangle shape kept the 6 1/2-inch woofer time aligned with the one-inch dome tweeter; both drivers were made by Audax in France. The woofer has a rubber surround, so there is no worry about the driver decomposing, but the tweeters are fragile. They always were fragile and now there are no more, so this is not a speaker to rock out with. A little too frisky with the volume control and silence. The TC-50 doesn't give you a bit of warning.

"This little thing doesn't make any bass, who would call this a subwoofer anyway?" the salesman smugly told me. I gave him \$50 and hauled ass out of there before he figured out what he had actually sold me.

Because the drivers were so tightly matched to the crossovers, your chance of just popping in another driver from another speaker is slim to none. Should you really like the TC-50's, it's probably not a bad idea to have a second pair for spare tweeters. Madisound claims to now have an exact replacement tweeter for the TC-50, but I'm not sure how well this would work without being able to measure and match them. I'd err on the side of caution for now.

Massive stands are a must with the TC-50 to get a modest amount of bass and to get the pinpoint imaging for which these speakers are capable. *(continued)*

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## B&W Music Club

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### FEATURE

Thanks to the resolution of the TC-50's, I suggest better-than-budget cable as well. Attention to the small details will be greatly rewarded.

I got a very friendly note from John Bau, the creator of the TC-50, on Facebook a few months ago, and he seemed genuinely pleased at the love that is still out there for his speakers. "Just replace those electrolytic caps in the crossover and they'll play for another 20 years," he said.

In my reference system, everyone that stopped by was impressed at how well the TC-50 design has held up. Only slightly

grainy compared to modern offerings, this is still a speaker I could easily live with, especially with a decent small subwoofer. Staff member Jerald O'Brien commented on the exemplary bass performance of the TC-50's just as I remembered that the JL Audio Gotham was still on. My bad.

When I shut off the Gotham, he remarked, "That's exactly how I remember them..." By far, the Spica TC-50 was one of my favorite memories of the '80's. High-end audio definitely needs another speaker like this, offering a huge helping of tonal accuracy and transparency in a small package. Who knows, maybe John will come out of retirement someday... ●



# The Naim Stageline: A Solid Performer

By Jeff Dorgay

have been listening to Naim's flagship phono preamplifier, the Superline, for quite some time, and I've concluded that and with their SuperCap power supply, it's one of the most dynamic MC phono preamplifiers I've ever experienced. But it's not inexpensive. The Superline/SuperCap combo costs about \$10,000, so it's not exactly the jumping off point for the person new to vinyl or on a tight budget.

Because the Superline can be powered with anything from the Naim FlatCap all the way up to the SuperCap, they essentially have a regular, large and super-size option for the analog lover. For those who want an entry-level Naim phono stage, the Stageline fits in right behind these three options. And just like all Naim products, it has a few different power-supply options as well. That's one of my favorite aspects of Naim gear; you can keep it in the family as your system improves by swapping out the power supply. There is always another Naim enthusiast who's looking to do the same, so it's easy to make a move when you are ready to upgrade.

You can power the Stageline from one of the power sockets on a Naim integrated amplifier, or else use an external supply.

The I-Supply is the easiest way to get started with the Stageline if you are not plugging into a Naim integrated. Or you could jump up to a FlatCap. Used FlatCap supplies are usually available in the \$600-700 range and a new FlatCap2 is \$1,295. As this is the "budget" column, I'll be concentrating primarily on using the Stageline as a standalone phono preamplifier with the I-Supply.

The Stageline is tiny, only about five x 7.5 x two inches, but it is built to the same high standards as Naim's other products at their factory in Salisbury, England. Featuring a solid aluminum box, the circuit board floats on a suspension, just as it does in all of the top-line Naim gear to minimize interaction with their physical environment. *(continued)*



My only regret is that it has only a small lime-green LED; no familiar Naim logo on the front.

The Stageline comes either with a standard Naim Snaic 5 cable to connect it to a suitable Naim integrated amplifier or line-level preamplifier, or to an external I-Supply and a DIN 4-5 interconnect for standalone use. For those using the Stageline in a non-Naim system, you will need a Din 4 to RCA cable so it can be used with one of your line-level inputs. For this review in my reference system, I used a one-meter length of Chord Anthem 2 cable with excellent results.

### Which one do you need?

The Stageline is available in four separate versions: the S model has 470 ohm input loading and is meant for low-output moving-coil cartridges; the K model is a 560-ohm version with a similar sensitivity to the S model; the E model is a 400-ohm version and is meant for medium-output moving-coil cartridges; and the N model has a standard 47k ohm loading to be used with moving-magnet cartridges.

Dave Dever from Naim Inc. put some historical spin on the meaning behind the letter designations. The N model was originally designed to mate with the Nagaoka cartridges, the K model for Linn cartridges, the E for EMT and the S for Supex cartridges.

The N model has a slightly different circuit with lower gain than the moving-coil versions. The three MC models share an identical circuit, the only difference being input loading. If you change cartridges, you can bring your Stageline into your Naim dealer to have a different loading resistor installed. Or if you need a custom value, that can be taken care of as well. You will be tested at the end of the review on all of this.

### Let's Spin Some Records

Now that we have the correct configuration, let's play some music, shall we? We recently paired the Stageline with the Naim Uniti, reviewed back in October in the Spotlight section of our website, so I was anxious to see how it would perform as a standalone component in a non-Naim system. It would be interesting to compare it side-by-side with the Superline phono stage in my reference system.

Starting with the TW-Acoustic Raven Two turntable and Clearaudio DaVinci cartridge mounted on an SME iV.Vi arm, I played a few tracks from the Cisco pressing of Steely Dan's *Aja*. The soundstage shrunk in all three directions but the overall tonality of the larger Naim phono preamp was still there, with a substantial helping of weight to the presentation. An impressive performance. *(continued)*

series 1

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The 170iTransport is the first component specifically designed to transform your iPod into a high-resolution audio/video media server.

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The next configuration was in a more realistic system, consisting of the Rega Elicit integrated amplifier, a pair of Magnepan 1.6 speakers and my Technics SL-1200 with Sound HiFi mods and a Lyra Dorian moving-coil cartridge. I can't think of a better match for a system at this price point than the Stageline, your favorite turntable and cartridge of choice in the \$500 to \$1,000 range. The Stageline worked well with the Shelter 501 II and the Audio Technica AT33EV cartridges, their slightly warm overall tonal character a perfect fit in my system.

Some grain is to be expected in a sub-\$500 phono stage, but the Stageline excelled here, too. Solo acoustic instruments had realistic but not embellished timbre. When switching back to the Superline, the remaining body could be heard. But the Stageline (at one-tenth the price) was respectable indeed. The other surprise with the Stageline was its ability to extract low-level detail, thanks to its very low noise floor.

Going through some of my favorite 70's rock favorites, I was consistently impressed by the Stageline's ability to capture the essence of the music. Naim gear has a great reputation for solid pace and timing, and the Stageline is no slouch in this department, especially with more complex music that has multiple layers of information. When listening to the first Van Halen album, Eddie's guitar held its own space, as did his background vocals (along with Michael Anthony), not getting lost in the mix. This is not one of the world's best recordings, and with a number of "budget" phono stages I've reviewed, the sound just flattens out into one plane. Remember, you aren't going to get it all for \$500.

What stood out most with the Stageline was its rock-solid bass performance.

I was surprised that a phono stage at this price could convey so much weight, along with some detail in the lower registers. Listening to some of my favorite records from Peter Gabriel, Genesis and Pink Floyd revealed a lot of grunt from this tiny unit.

#### Worthy of Our First Award of the Year

Regardless of whether you have an all-Naim system or not, the Stageline phono preamplifier gives you a much better than average helping of analog magic for a modest price. It is easily configured to the cartridge of your choice and takes up almost no space on your equipment rack. I am very pleased to give the Stageline our first Exceptional Value Award of 2010. ●

**The Naim Stageline MSRP: \$475**

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**Naim Inc. (US)**  
[www.naiminc.com](http://www.naiminc.com)

#### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Sources** Technics SL-1200 turntable w/Sound HiFi mods, SME 309 tonearm and Lyra Dorian cartridge, TW-Acoustic Raven One turntable w/SME iV.Vi tonearm and Clearaudio DaVinci cartridge

**Amplification** Naim Uniti integrated amplifier, Rega Elicit integrated amplifier, Burmester 011 preamp/911mk. 3 power amplifier

**Speakers** Harbeth Monitor 40.1, Gamut S-7, Magnepan 1.6

**Power** Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim Power Conditioner, RSA HZ and Mongoose power cords

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LIVE MUSIC: FEATURE

# Blame Canada: Guns N' Roses Do It Their Way

**Air Canada Centre**  
Toronto, Ontario

**January 28, 2010**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Andy Choe



“I said what I meant  
and I never pretended  
Like so many others do  
intending just to please”

– Guns N’ Roses, “Don’t Damn Me,” 1991

**W**ELCOME TO THE ROCK SHOW.

Surrounded by a blitz of concussion bombs, fireballs, fireworks, mobile light trestles, and a three-tiered stage, Guns N’ Roses harkened back to arena rock’s heyday at a near-capacity Air Canada Centre on a cold late January night in Toronto, delivering a 155-minute performance that found the restructured band in its best form since the original lineup dissolved in the mid-’90s.

Much has been made about vocalist and co-founder Axl Rose’s decision to keep the group’s name despite the fact that he’s the only remaining original member. And it’s taken the mercurial leader several attempts to get things right, or as close to perfect as possible. Infamous not only for overthinking the most publicized and delayed album in history (*Chinese Democracy*), Rose’s unpredictable temperament, prima donna behavior, and questionable decisions have alienated many fans of what was once the biggest band in the world. After emerging from a nearly decade-long slumber, the reclusive front man staged a disastrous 2002 tour that began in Vancouver with a small-scale riot and ended prematurely after a no-show in Philadelphia. On that very trek, Rose seemed mentally unstable—distracted, disillusioned, dispirited, an out-of-shape Master of Ceremonies of a patchwork freak show that included a masked guitarist wearing a chicken bucket on his noggin and several other mercenaries short on chemistry.



Sporting cornrows and disguising his bulked-up physique with wide hockey jerseys, Rose often came off as a parody of the legend he was from 1987 through 1993, the leader of the fictitious rock n’ roll band mentioned in Guns N’ Roses’ 1991 song “Pretty Tied Up.”

A second attempt during 2006-2007 fared better. While still braiding his hair, Rose seemed renewed, looking less pudgy and with his voice reawakened, even if his reshuffled mates lacked consistency as well as an actual album to support. Yet the momentum soon died. The commercial letdown that followed the release of *Chinese Democracy* in 2008 did little to help Guns N’ Roses’ status. As if on a mission to quash good will, Rose refused all interview requests, battled with and switched management companies, and ignored

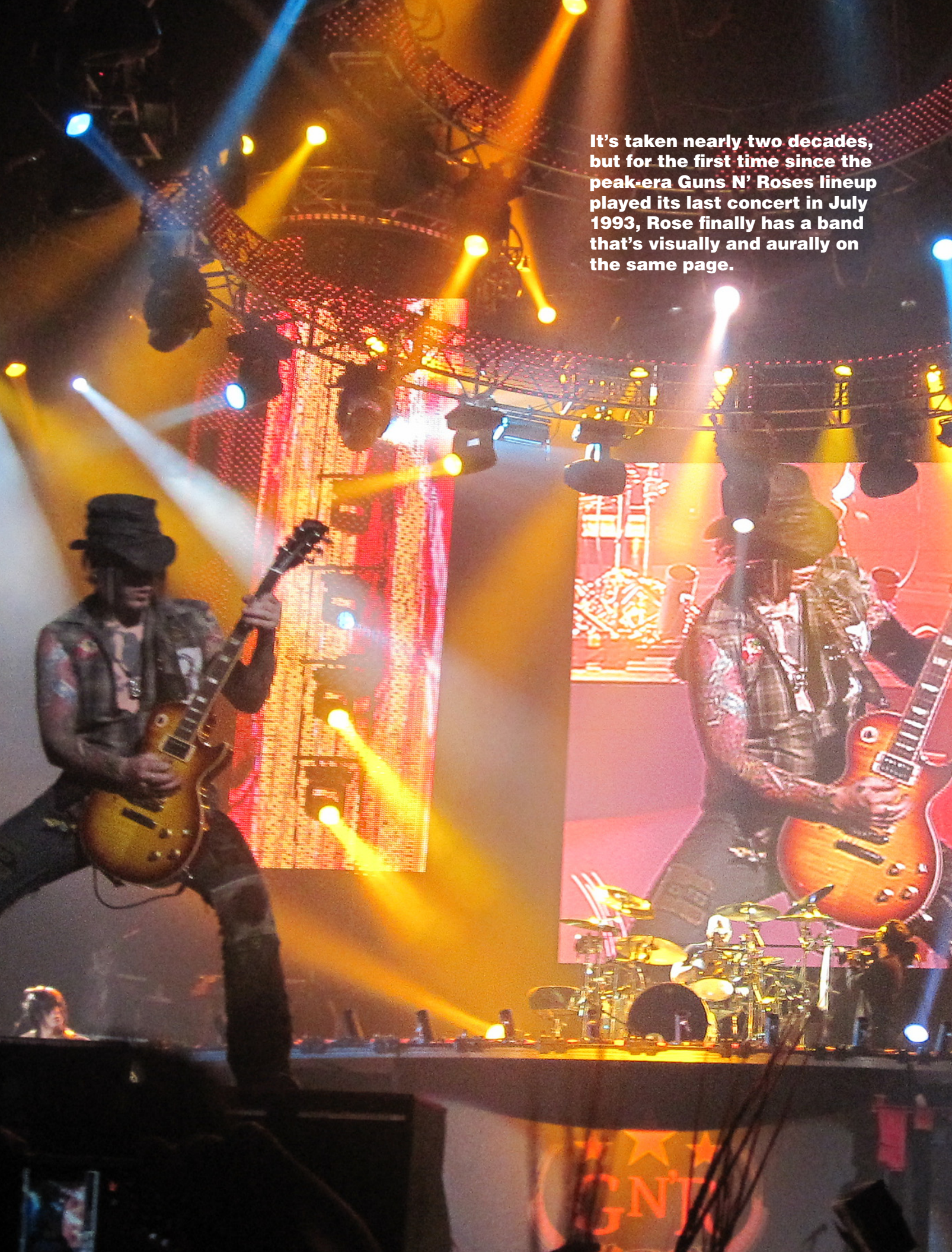
promotion. Long a target of media and audience criticism, he became an even easier foil, a once-proud star out of touch with the industry and cruel to those who still kept the faith. Few artists have been easier to dislike. Yet throughout his career, Rose has always done things his way—consequences, responsibilities, and opinions be damned.

Limitless rhetoric is exchanged about rock n’ roll’s rebelliousness, its punk nature, but most of it lacks substance and examples. Most *artistes* kowtow when necessary, putting on a front that appears anti-establishment but which, in reality, is little more than a façade. He is prone to arriving onstage when he feels like it, and in Toronto, the band began at 11:30 p.m., an hour later than expected. Rose isn’t above such self-serving measures. It’s just one reason he is so despised and mocked.

However, complaints and shortcomings aside, no other rock contemporary constantly proves themselves more “punk”—if one abides by the definition of rebelliousness, independence, and fuck-all attitude. It’s an approach that can be maddening and perturbing—how apropos is it that, 22 years ago, Rose first suggested, “All we need is just a little patience”—but it’s also eminently respectable in that rock is meant to cut against the grain, violate the rules, and embrace chaotic freedom. To be certain, Rose is a full-on eccentric—his multiple changes of shirts, capacity to play the victim, and photophobic ways confirm it—yet he’s also a daring original, a bold musician who will meet his—and only his—terms. Offering no one any apologies or views into what makes him tick, he’s the last of a breed that the modern music industry, reality television, and instant gratification have destroyed. Perhaps that’s why his fur coats and facial hair—a handlebar mustache that, on this night, fittingly evoked that of former Toronto Blue Jays pitcher Dennis Lamp—shout the late 1970’s, not 2010.

And in Toronto, as on the bulk of the band’s current tour (which is still without any U.S. dates), Rose recaptured the vigor, personality, fun, bombast, and transcendent emotion that allowed him to grab the world by the balls and hold them hostage. Not for nothing does he still elicit fiery reactions on both sides of the fence; curse him or not, Rose’s brand of patience-rattling creativity resonates because it’s honest. Even if those tempted to watch the potential train wreck stay away due to prior incidents—a necessary casualty and result of Rose’s insular way of life—they still feel drawn to the spectacle. Why? (*continued*)

**In Toronto, Rose recaptured the vigor, personality, fun, bombast, and transcendent emotion that allowed him to grab the world by the balls and hold them hostage.**



**It's taken nearly two decades, but for the first time since the peak-era Guns N' Roses lineup played its last concert in July 1993, Rose finally has a band that's visually and aurally on the same page.**

For starters, Guns N' Roses remains one of the last groups that offer up a level of excitement few can match. Its concerts beg the question: What will happen? And with Rose, anything—fight, riot, tantrum, brilliance, confusion is possible. Vegas oddsmakers could take note: there should be an over-and-under on the group's shows.

It's taken nearly two decades, but for the first time since the peak-era Guns N' Roses lineup played its last concert in July 1993, Rose finally has a band that's visually and aurally on the same page. Ron "Bumblefoot" Thal, a virtuosic guitarist who can handle complex jazz runs as easily he does rapid-fire hard-rock fills, no longer sticks out as an oddball with custom-designed instruments and out-of-place solos. He now impresses with the familiar *Pink Panther* theme rather than ostentatious experimental bursts that the audiences didn't comprehend or enjoy. Similarly, newest member DJ Ashba, a tattoo-covered axeman whose scroungy appearance echoes the band's glam origins, fits in much better than the departed industrial-leaning Robin Finck. Ashba also plays with more authority, and soul. The other members—bassist (and former Replacement) Tommy Stinson, drummer Frank Ferrer, keyboardist Dizzy Reed, electronics wizard Chris Pitman, and guitarist Richard Fortus—have all jelled, forming a highly talented collective that's less a covers band and more its own entity infused with an orchestral sweep and wall-of-sound heft, even if it still can't muster the slouch-and-sway of the original crew.

Granted, fans still long for Slash, but what's forgotten amidst such nostalgic daydreaming is that Guns N' Roses were prone to sloppiness due to the top-hatted one's drug habits and original bassist Duff McKagan's perpetual drunkenness. Admittedly, the current version is slicker and more professional, and play without some of the rhythmic gestures and bluesy tones of the original. But anyone who still thinks that a reunion (which will never happen) would bring back the magic is fooling themselves,

or hasn't noted Slash's mediocrity over the past decade (Fergie and Velvet Revolver, anyone?). Guns N' Roses is a universe away from the angry, starved, wasted miscreants that crawled up from Los Angeles' gutters and singlehandedly injected authenticity, danger, and grit into a landscape dominated by plastic pop music and phony video heroes in the late '80s. In many ways, a reunion would be the falsest move Rose could make; it would strictly constitute a cash grab, and, again, love or hate him, the Indiana native isn't swayed by fortune as much as he's motivated by control, autonomy, and the element of surprise. Don't forget that Guns N' Roses used to take the stage to the strains of the Sex Pistols' cover of Frank Sinatra's "My Way." Is there any doubt about who the "my" referred to in the song?

Perhaps Rose's minor triumphs over such logistical and historical hurdles accounted for the confidence, swagger, and happiness he brought to the Air Canada Centre stage, performing old favorites with the same amount of conviction he attached to recent material. Guns N' Roses is at last making a strong case for *Chinese Democracy*. Live, the newer songs, stripped of their layers and belabored sonics, both demanded and warranted attention. Unlike on the 2002 and 2006 tours, Rose attacked the recent tunes with the primal ferocity of a caged animal, leaving nothing to spare, and secure in realizing that the crowd wasn't completely unfamiliar with what it heard. Rather than receiving temperate reactions, songs such as the assertive "Shackler's Revenge" and funky "If the World"—a blend of porn-music grist and '70s James Bond film-song theatricality, not that there's a huge separation between the two—invigorated the senses, and prompted Rose to take hard-earned and graceful bows. He and his mates seemed relieved of the burden of having to almost entirely fall back on material from the timeless *Appetite for Destruction* and *Use Your Illusion* albums, taking pleasure in putting its stamp on eight *Chinese Democracy* numbers that, technicalities aside, are actually their songs. *(continued)*

**Guns N' Roses remains one of the last groups that offer up a level of excitement few can match. Its concerts beg the question: What will happen? And with Rose, anything—fight, riot, tantrum, brilliance, confusion is possible.**



**All of the collective's strengths came together on a spiritual re-working of the uplifting yet somber "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," proof that Rose's vocal control, nasally notes, and throaty timbre were in fine form.**

The set was better served by this approach, permitting Guns N' Roses to come off not as a group living in the glory days of a faded past but a contemporary band mixing the past, present, and future.

Of course, all would be for naught if Rose's vocals and presence fell short. Just like the return of his shoulder-length hair, provocative shirts, wardrobe changes, and talkative demeanor, the 47-year-old was in classic form, sparing nothing, his range and trademark screeches, screams, and wails almost impossibly intact, and his mood warm and giving. Not that age hasn't eroded some of his lung power. As a crutch, Rose relied on mixing-board tricks and reverb effects on the highs of a handful of songs that would've been better without the aids.

But there are few singers that could pull off the demands of the power ballad "This I Love," a song that, at its beginning, is nearly performed a capella, leaving Rose naked and alone with just his voice, thoughts, and passion. And how. Rose's rawness transformed the song from a syrupy, string-laden Andrew Lloyd Webber-esque composition on record to a moving centerpiece, the song burning with honesty, heartache, and personal sentiment. Herein lies Rose's magnetic appeal. For all of his machismo, he isn't afraid to expose his internal emotions in song. And for all of its apparent violence and crash-and-burn recklessness, many of the group's finest performances ("Sweet Child O' Mine," "Street of Dreams," "Live and Let Die," "Paradise City")

negotiated the treacherous gap between pleasure and trauma, sweetness and sourness, desire and fulfillment, sadness and celebration, and loss and gain, with the verdict seldom falling in overwhelmingly positive territories.

Sitting at the piano, Rose sang like a haunted romantic consumed by the feeling of knowing he'd never completely find what he's looking for during a beautifully epic "November Rain," the topics of unrequited love and estrangement devouring his soul. Even when pouring gasoline on hedonistic hard-rock fare such as the shuffling "Mr. Brownstone," stomping "It's So Easy," and hostile "Nightrain," a rave-up the current lineup band plays better than any prior configuration, desperation and bloodletting boiled underneath. Cathartic stabs at venting anger, led by a searing "You Could Be Mine," vicious "Welcome to the Jungle," and a vehement "Better," raged yet didn't fully dissipate the inner turmoil that's become as much a part of the confrontational Rose as the sincere tenderness and aching pain that he can't conceal—traits never more evident than on the coda to "Rocket Queen," played with gusto, shot through with contrasts, and expertly splitting the divide between strip-club sleaze and button-downed class.

Ironically, the band's tardy start forced it to pare down the set in order to finish by the mandated 2 a.m. quitting time, meaning that "Patience" got skipped. One could've done

without one of the extraneous solos (Reed's springs to mind) and one of the slower songs ("Sorry" dragged), though they seemed to exist as proof of each member's importance as much as excuses for Rose to suck down oxygen backstage. And the vocalist made up for shortcomings by bouncing around like a pinball, constantly moving from one side of the stage to the other as if in pursuit of an elusive shadow.

in some of Rose's one-liners. Regarding his 11:30 start time: "Sorry about the time delay. I got a little carried away jumping off a bunch of shit last night. Getting ready for the show, I was like, 'What the fuck?' Anyway, we're here now." Then; "A DJ on the radio told people to show up at 2 a.m. because that's when we'd start. So I'm early." And, about the trials of being a rock band on the road: "There were a lot of problems in

## Rose's animated motions and youthful energy reflected his investment in the music, and in turn, his band.

Twirling the microphone stand, blindly shifting the mic from one hand to the other, propelling himself backward by kicking his left leg like a stubborn horse intent on busting down a stall, strutting and swaying, showing off serpentine dance moves, using hand gestures to outline images attached to words, and waving his arms in sync with the beats—Rose's animated motions and youthful energy reflected his investment in the music, and in turn, his band.

No surprise, then, that all of the collective's strengths came together on a spiritual re-working of the uplifting yet somber "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," proof that Rose's vocal control, nasally notes, and throaty timbre were in fine form. Perfect? No, but perfection would suggest the absence of spontaneity, vulnerability, and grit, qualities in abundance on this night. They were even evident

getting this tour together, a lot of disagreements. We pretty much went to Asia without management and shit—pretty much this tour itself. One of the big areas of contention was that we really wanted to fucking play here." In another life, Rose might've been a Philadelphia lawyer.

The singer's awareness also carried over to his dedication of the seldom-played "Catcher in the Rye" to J.D. Salinger, who died earlier in the day. Akin to the confrontational rocker, Salinger became legend for creating a defining work and then choosing to shut out the world, a recluse who abided by his own rules. Rose, of course, ultimately took a bigger risk than Salinger, choosing to release *Chinese Democracy* rather than keep it to himself. As he did onstage, it serves notice that, for Rose, yearning to be delivered to the elusive "Paradise City" still involves much more than just a little patience. ●



# Chris Botti

Sometimes the weather can make all the difference. Chris Botti returned to his native Portland in early February to play a sold-out Schnitzer Hall, a date that stood in contrast to his previous appearance in December 2008. According to Carl Herko, VP of public relations for the Portland symphony, “Last year with the snowstorm, only about a third of the crowd made it here, but they were treated to a fantastic show.” This time out, the musical lineup consisted of Botti and a band that featured Billy Childs on piano, Billy Kilson on drums, Tim Lefebvre on bass, Geoffrey Keezer on keyboards, and Mark Whitfield on guitar.

Botti greeted the crowd right on time. While thanking them for attending and joking about the weather being much better, he also mentioned growing up in Portland and sneaking in the Schnitzer as a kid to see Tower of Power.

Best known as a smooth jazz artist, Botti actually played a much more traditional jazz set than his recent performance on *Chris Botti, Live in Boston* would suggest. The trumpeter defied expectations and stuck to a Miles Davis/John Coltrane groove for a majority of the concert. Aided by Childs’ gentle touch on the piano, his rendition of Davis’ “Flamenco Sketches” was outstanding. As Led Zeppelin is to rock, Davis is holy ground in the jazz world. But Botti stood his ground with his interpretation, playing with enough variation and expression to make the piece his own.

Midway through the set, Botti veered back towards smooth jazz. He brought out guest violinist Caroline Campbell to perform the theme song from the movie *Cinema Paradiso* and vocalist Sy Smith for her take on “The Look of Love.” While the somewhat older crowd seemed to gravitate towards the safer parts of the program, Botti was clearly at his best when wailing. His passion for playing and instrumental mastery is as obvious as his respect for the true jazz greats.

Botti ended the show unplugged. For an encore, he jumped off the stage into the audience to perform Sinatra’s “One For My Baby” without the help of the PA system. Accompanied only by Childs’ piano, he gave everyone a chance to hear what he really sounds like, sans amplification. Here’s hoping we hear more of Botti in this type of setting.

LIVE MUSIC

**Arlene Schnitzer Hall**  
Portland, Oregon

**February 4, 2010**

Text and Photo  
By Jeff Dorgay



# Steve Earle



**Two and a half hours of acoustic guitar and harmonica can only take you so far. Even if you're Steve Earle.**

Arriving at the tail end of a lengthy international tour, Earle recently played back-to-back nights in front of sold-out crowds at Portland's Aladdin Theater. The so-called Hard Core Troubadour was touring in support of his latest album *Townes*, which pays homage to his late friend, hero, and teacher, Townes Van Zandt, the brilliant and underappreciated Texas singer-songwriter. The duo's relationship might best be thought of as the folk/alt-country version of the Toxic Twins. In 1997, Townes passed away at the age of 52 from health problems stemming from years of substance abuse. Thankfully, Earle pulled himself out of a similar nose dive.

Earle strolled out to the stage in standard Texas workin' man's garb and strapped on his signature Martin acoustic guitar. But even then, not everyone in the audience knew about Earle's plans for a solo, all-acoustic performance.

The conversational front-man addressed fans in his trademark gruff manner, telling them about his relationship with Townes and the process that led him to select songs for inclusion on the tribute album.

Not surprisingly, the set drew heavily from Townes, with older selections occasionally sprinkled into the mix. Similarly, most of the evening's discussions centered around Earle's connection with Van Zandt. And while "Where I Lead Me" and "Brand New Companion" resonated with contagious energy, Earle's rendition of Van Zandt's biggest hit, "Poncho and Lefty," disappointed. It wasn't the only letdown. Earle concluded with a bare-bones, foot-stomping version of "Copperhead Road," a song that begs to be played through a big stack of Vox tube amplifiers. Stripped of its hard-rocking core, it lost some of its appeal.

As did the headliner, who turned in a performance that was competent, but nothing more. Hard-core Earle and Van Zandt fans will probably enjoy this tour more than newer converts looking for a broader sampling of Earle's original work. Consider yourself warned.

LIVE MUSIC

**Aladdin Theater**  
Portland, Oregon

**January 19, 2010**

By Ken Mercereau

Photos by Karen Currier



# City and Colour



## **Metro**

Chicago, Illinois

**January 15, 2010**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Eliza Harrigan

**D**allas Green doesn't look like the type of artist that steps up to the microphone armed only with an acoustic guitar and a fragile, sensitive voice that has more in common with that of a crooner than a rock frontman slathered in tattoos. Never mind his long-sleeve polo shirt and geeky glasses. With his hands, arms, fingers, and neck adorned with colorful ink, Green resembles someone you'd run into at a loud punk bar tossing back a few pints and engaging in a friendly debate over the finer points of Converge's newest album.

And yet, on a mid-January Friday evening at a capacity Metro in Chicago, there he was, finishing a low-key 85-minute concert by singing a mellow a capella rendition of Son House's "Grinnin' in Your Face," reveling in the blues standard's hopeful message and spiritual vibe.

It was a far cry from Green's role in the Canadian hardcore band Alexisonfire, an aggressive outlet that prompted him to make quiet acoustic music under the guise of City and Colour (a moniker that references Green's name, which is, literally, a city and a color). While the 30-year-old Toronto resident never intended for City and Colour to be heard outside his home base, word of the singer/guitarist's side project spread through fan sites and file-sharing services. Over the course of the past two-and-a-half years, Green has won a Juno Award, played multiple sold-out tours, and experienced an upsurge in popularity that continues to grow.

**Green personified meditative contemplation, playing as if standing in front of his bedroom mirror, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings or any worries about vulnerability.**

Accompanied by a backing trio, which on occasion dropped to a duo on several tunes, and, during others, vacated the stage, Green found solace and redemption in an irresistible batch of introspective songs distinguished by muted tones, subtle rhythms, and rise-and-fall tempos. While plugging in for a majority of the set, City and Colour rarely allowed volume to swell, preferring instead to focus on humble arrangements that prized intimacy, space, and patience. All the better to allow Green's personal lyrics to waft, seep in, and resonate with deep-seeded emotion and brazen sincerity. To further underscore the narratives' importance, the band refrained from busy solos or lengthy fills. Methodical albeit loose strumming patterns and steady beats punctuated the songs, ranging in style from country-leaning weepers (an untitled new track) to singing folk ("Waiting to Die") to foot-stomping pleas ("Sleeping Sickness").

Only on "Bring Me Your Love," accented with a touch of garage-rock reverb and crunchy texture, did City and Colour flirt with noise.

Not that Green needed feedback or gritty effects to communicate. His tender singing—a combination flutter, murmur, and whisper that effortlessly floated above the gentle instrumental backgrounds—split time between an achy falsetto and semi-sweet hum. Left alone for the stripped-down "Day Old Hate" and soul-searching blues "Body in a Box," Green personified meditative contemplation, playing as if standing in front of his bedroom mirror, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings or any worries

about vulnerability. Such openness—and the thematic occupation with mortality, betterment, loss, and identity—lent an unmistakable earnestness to the confessionals, which avoided the common pratfalls of self-pity, irony, and repetition. When needed, slight rhythmic turbulence mirrored the darker thoughts. Yet, in most situations, Green drifted in guardedly optimistic directions. The vocalist's honesty and simplicity gave way to a romanticism that peaked on the beautiful "The Girl."

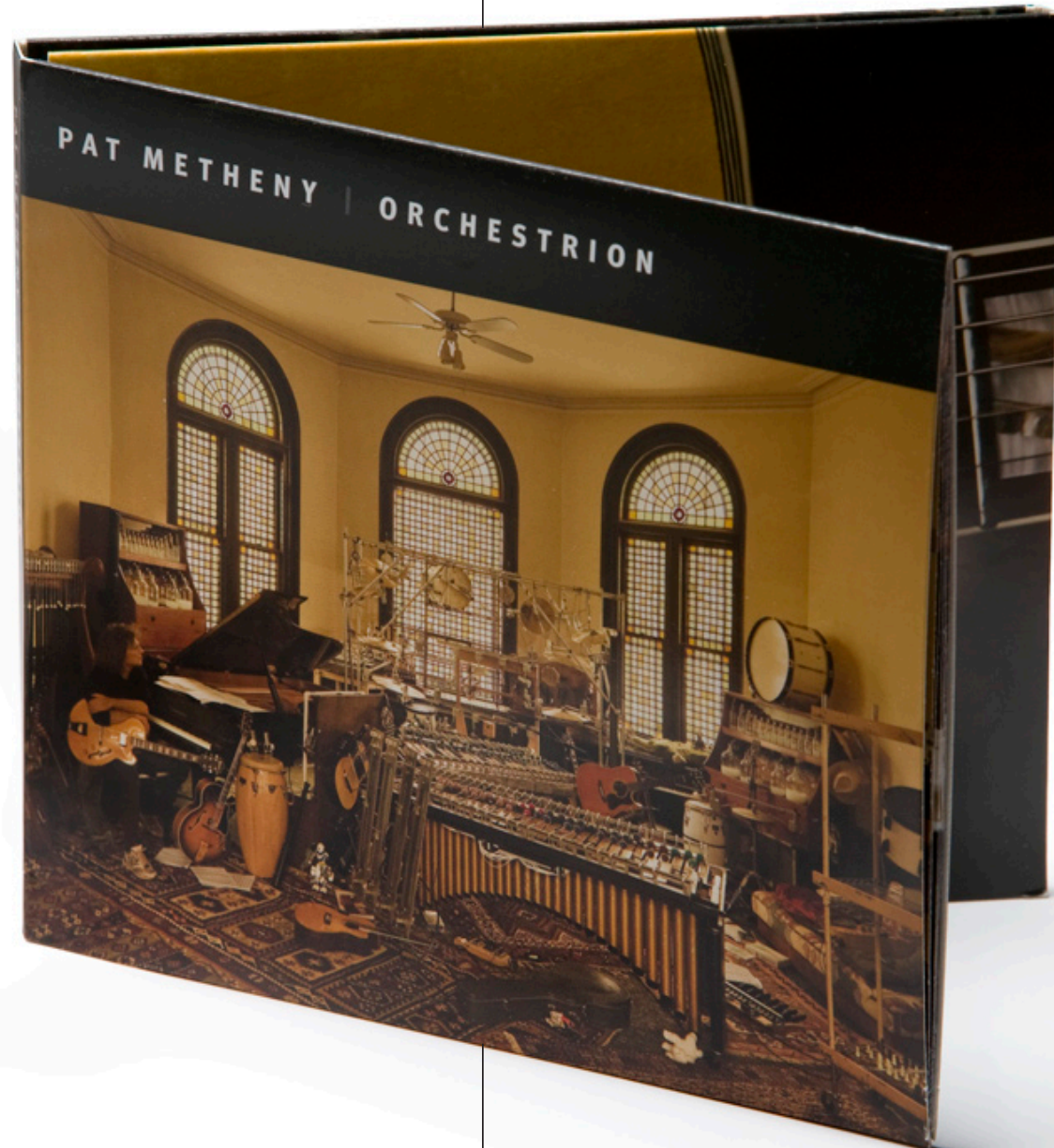
Beginning the song as a devotional ballad, City and Colour paused midway, doubled the pace, and turned the soft hymn into an uplifting promise that in the span of a few brief verses and harmonic refrains captured what separates Green from a countless heap of singer-songwriters—heart-melting poignancy, delicate melodies, and the courage to chase his dreams and wear his heart on his sleeve, all trends, consequences, and rules be damned. ●



# Current Releases

By the TONE Staff

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## Pat Metheny

*Orchestrion*  
Nonesuch, CD

**O***rchestrion*, multiple Grammy-winning guitarist Pat Metheny's latest release, is vintage Metheny: complex, ethereal and soothing. But it's also fresh and contemporary, giving it standout status in this era of reissues and tribute albums.

Also new was the size of the band, considering Metheny rarely has used anything larger than a quartet. It sounded like an octet at least, with a percussionist assisting the drummer and vibes reminiscent of Metheny's many collaborations with Gary Burton. Wrong. Reading the liner notes, I learned that this is a solo project. Not the standard multi-track studio overdubs that preclude live performances, but a Rube Goldberg-meets-Jules Verne collection of robots, pulleys, solenoids and bottles that allows Metheny to play all of the instruments at once and alone. Steampunkers take note: he's touring this spring in support of this release.

The dictionary defines an orchestrion as "a large mechanical musical instrument designed to imitate the sound of an orchestra." The height of Victorian-era technology, it was essentially a souped-up player piano, using the same pin-holed metal cylinder machinery to operate not only the keyboard, but also pipes, tambourines, cymbals and kettledrums.

It was a player piano in his musician grandfather's Wisconsin basement that sparked the imagination of the nine-year-old Metheny.

Fascinated by the mechanics, as an adult he always had its modern-age potential in the back of his mind. A few years ago, he commissioned engineers and inventors to create the instruments used in this project, essentially expanding the orchestrion to an assortment of machines that fill a fairly large rehearsal space and collectively weigh a reported eight and a half tons.

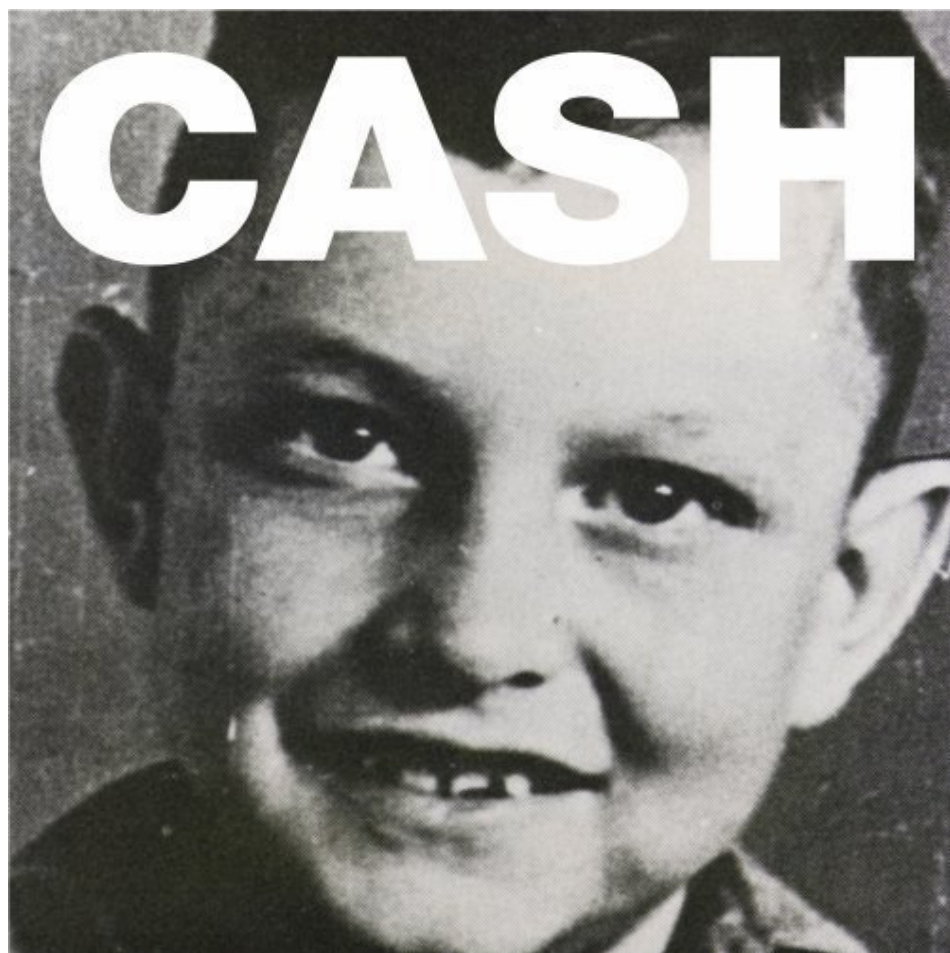
Most of the equipment was created by Rob Singer, an engineer/musician who heads a group called Lemur (League of Electronic Musical Urban Robots). His guitar-bots join a percussion ensemble consisting of mechanical mallets playing vibes and drumset, a pneumatic electric bass and a cabinet of differently sized empty bottles that have air blown into them to create pitch.

There's a reason the appeal of player pianos faded in the face of recording technology. Records allow the listener to hear the music breathe with the nuance of rhythm, especially the subtle syncopation of swing. Metheny spent months with the equipment, testing each piece's timing reaction and making adjustments to the software he was using as a controller.

The results are amazing. I have heard more than my share of music, and I never guessed that I was listening to anything other than a live band. The five long selections combine in suite-like fashion, connected by melodic and stylistic themes. Far from a gimmicky experiment, it's solid music created by one of the most fascinating creative artists working today. As Metheny's brother Mike told TONE, "Grandpa would be proud."

— Anne Farnsworth

**...this is a solo project. Not the standard multi-track studio overdubs that preclude live performances, but a collection of robots, pulleys, solenoids and bottles that allows Metheny to play all of the instruments at once and alone.**



### Johnny Cash

*American VI: Ain't No Grave*  
American/Lost Highway, CD or LP

**R**eligion and pop music make for strange bedfellows. With rare exception, artists who incorporate God, beliefs, and the like into their songs not only risk alienating audiences but often come across as heavy handed, as if they're encumbered and weighted down by the magnitude of their subject matter. Moreover, attempts at disguising or concealing obvious theological sentiments often stultify the music with a dogmatic vision that no melody can save.

Johnny Cash never hid his faith. The singer recorded several gospel albums over the course of his career, going as far as releasing a spoken-word compilation on which he recites the entire New Testament. Yet Cash weaved religion into his material without being preachy or altogether obvious. Akin to U2, he utilized metaphor and allusion to maintain a universal perspective while simultaneously serving his own devotional purposes. Comprised of recordings the peerless country icon made between the completion of 2002's *American IV: Solitary Man* and his passing in September 2003—a period during which his beloved wife June Carter Cash died—the thematically unified *American VI: Ain't No Grave* revolves around Cash's unshakable faith and how it allowed him to come to terms with impending death. The last chapter of one of the most fruitful collaborations in history (he and producer Rick Rubin found a poignancy that goes above and beyond common language), the record is intimate, personal, sobering, and profoundly reflective. Yet its greatest asset relates to an emotional transcendence that flies in the face of and even challenges the worries linked to mortality.

This concise, ten-song set, featuring nine covers and one original, is no place for any listener who is relatively new to Cash's work to begin studying the man. But it's essential for those interested in what made Cash tick, and in the thoughts that raced through his head as he dealt with failing health and heartbreaking bereavement.

A bookend to *American V: A Hundred Highways*, which revolved around loss, pain, and farewells, *American VI* again finds Cash's voice weakened, his once-marble-solid baritone weathered by age. Cracks appear on its surface, erosion eats away at the timbre, and blemishes temper the beauty of how he once sounded.

But by no means does Cash sound defeated or unpleasant to hear. Contrary to its 2006 predecessor, this final statement is the dogged sound of contentment, acceptance, and peace, with Cash taking comfort in the knowledge that he's ready to meet his maker and reap his rewards. To be certain, these are heavy issues, even for non-believers. The songs, and the moving emotion that Cash brings to them, confront uncomfortable topics and answer hard questions. Not for nothing does death rank as Americans' number one fear. Here is the courageous sound of a man not only conquering that concern, but seemingly welcoming its arrival. Cash's meekness, balance, tenacity, and calm assume a Biblical tone.

So does his choice of material. "The wealthiest person is a pauper at times," Cash affirms on a low-key rendition of Sheryl Crow's "Redemption Day," which akin to his "I Corinthians 15:55," reads like scripture. Similarly, the version of Bob Nolan's "Cool Water" parallels Biblical teachings, in which water is a symbol of deliverance, and Cash cautions against sinful temptation, instead encouraging a path of patience and penitence, facets that will lead to genuine deliverance.

Nearly every tune concerns death, goodbyes, and/or humanity. But the mood isn't dour. "It Don't Hurt Anymore" is a determined declaration of personal victory, of triumph over grief, Cash's steady vocals and stance invested with bulletproof sincerity. And nowhere is Cash more resolute than on a chain-rattling take of the traditional title track, a ready-made farewell that reveals the artist prepared for what lies ahead.

Added after Cash's vocal takes, contributions from Heartbreakers Mike Campbell and Benmont Tench, guitarists Smokey Hormel and Matt Sweeney, and more than a dozen other musicians decorate the songs' near-perfect arrangements with stripped-down and elegantly minimalist instrumentals. Subtle string accents and spare piano notes augment the acoustic motifs, lending effective slow-build drama to "Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream" and bright-dark contrasts to the budding optimism of "Redemption Day." Hawaiian slide-guitar accents inform "Aloha Oe," a loving ode that sends the album out on an unmistakably cheerful high. Kudos to Rubin for the expert sequencing, and for tailoring an album equally bonded by spirit, theme, and sound.

As expected, the production is superb. Guitars are set to the left and right, surrounding Cash's voice like golden halos. The gentle sweep, textural shades, and fragile qualities of the singer's voice are cleanly captured by close miking that brings him right into the room, the imaging dead-center and loaded with detail, definition, and realism.

And as *American VI* again proves, legends don't come any more real than Cash. A rebel in life and in death, Cash's conviction, humanity, and poise are as much a part of his legacy as his black wardrobe, attitude, and faith.  
— Bob Gendron

**The thematically unified *American VI: Ain't No Grave* revolves around Cash's unshakable faith and how it allowed him to come to terms with impending death.**

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## Elvis Costello and the Attractions

*Live At Hollywood High*  
Hip-O Records, CD and LP

**E**lvis Costello was 23 years old when he recorded *Live at Hollywood High* on June 4, 1978, but the complete album didn't see the light of day until January, 2010. Sure, we've heard bits and pieces of it since 1979, when four *Hollywood High* tunes debuted on the EP that came with Costello's third LP, *Armed Forces*. In 2002 the Rhino Records *Armed Forces* reissue added another six tunes. Now, we're getting another ten tunes from the show, and they're all stellar. Sound quality is no better than the previous versions, but it's decent enough.



Listening to *Live At Hollywood High*, you can't help but feel Elvis Costello and the Attractions were a band of equals; Steve Nieve on keyboards; Bruce Thomas, bass; and Pete Thomas, drums were a tight little unit. Sure, most of the songs are played faster than the studio versions, but the frenzied performances feel right. The band plays with fast-slow, loud-soft dynamics on most of the songs, and the 20 tunes' sequencing never falters.

Standout "new" tunes include "(I Don't Want To Go To) Chelsea" for its focused jam, on which Costello takes a stinging guitar solo, interrupted by Nieve's woozy organ slides. They're at it again on "Waiting For the End of the World," with Costello's staccato guitar jabs and stabs sounding downright menacing. "Radio Radio" and "Pump It Up" are played straight, although Nieve sounds like he's been listening to a lot of Doors records. As for Pete and Bruce Thomas: they're driving this hell-bent train at breakneck speed and they never let up.

Costello was still a few years away from his creative peak, but he never sounded better onstage. You can't beat a bunch of super-talented twenty-somethings playing rock and roll as if their lives depended on it.

THIS RECORD SHOULD BE PLAYED LOUD!

— Steve Guttenberg





### Drive-By Truckers

*The Big To-Do*  
ATO Records, CD or 2LP

**N**ew label, old approach. Having departed New West after four studio albums, the Drive-By Truckers make their debut on ATO Records a memorable occasion. Moving away from the expansive kitchen sink approach taken on 2008's compelling but inconsistent, sprawling, and overly long *Brighter Than Creation's Dark*, the sextet has returned to the concise, cut-and-dry rock and roll sound that defined *Southern Rock Opera*, *The Dirty South*, and *Decoration Day*—a successive trio of records as good as any released in this or any decade.

While *The Big To-Do* doesn't quite reach the level of those masterworks, it's an absorbing hunk of smart, crunchy, guitar-driven music shot through with the band's vivid narratives, balanced storytelling, barroom punch, and Southern accents. It's a set that portrays desperate people trying to survive in these ever more desperate times, with the Truckers' joyous pride and spirited attitude warding off any bitter aftertaste.

Several songs are sad, and at times depressing, but the moods always point up. As it is for Bruce Springsteen, this blue-collar band not only believes in but preaches rock as salvation, and their iron-clad conviction suggests they won't have it any other way. We're better for it, as the 13-track album inspires, awakens, and acts as a barometer of our collective strengths and weaknesses.

Primarily devised on the road, the Truckers' tenth studio album begins with "Daddy Learned to Fly," about a boy pining for his deceased dad, and concludes with a tune (the acoustic lullaby "Eyes Like Glue") about a father thinking about his kids. Loss is a prevailing topic, no surprise given the album's dedication to Atlantic Records honcho Jerry Wexler and legendary producer Jim Dickinson,

who passed away during its development. Yet, as has long been their hallmark, the Truckers recognize that death, deprivation, and crisis can be life-affirming. Accordingly, they turn hard-knock themes into opportunities to gaze upon the healing power that comes with realization, mourning, and moving on. Wisely refraining from taking sides or preaching, lead songwriters Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley draw slice-of-life characters whose episodes, dispositions, needs, and mistakes reach deeply into and mirror the human conscience.

Rotating around a greasy slide-guitar riff, "The Fourth Night of My Drinking" comes on as a step-by-step prologue to Alcoholics Anonymous, with guns, booze, cops, delusions, and violence sending the drunken protagonist on a hell-bent path. Similarly, Hood's "Drag the Lake Charlie," sung in a lazy drawl wound around a groove that winds and spins like a top, revolves around a figure who apparently has a penchant for teenage girls. A murderous tale of vengeance and violence in which the best option is death, the song's hand-clap beats and saucy organ reinforce its outlandish but plausible lyrical fate. The underlying message? Not all is what it seems to be.

Hence, "The Wig He Made Her Wear," relaying the trials and tribulations of a woman who murdered her prominent preacher husband in Selmer, Tennessee. Lurching forward in an ominous manner that foreshadows the surprise ending, the nonfiction tale avenges the wife, who in court produced heinous outfits her partner forced her to wear before sex. The Truckers

remain undisputed at capturing and understanding the social culture of small-town America, and how certain events shake their core foundations. At a time when music has forsaken much of its colloquial dialect, the Truckers unconditionally embrace their heritage, playing songs that give a clear sense of where they—and their creators—come from.

Fueled by brilliantly colorful phrases such as "I'm tired of you uglying up my house" and "Put your face in someone's that ain't mine," Cooley's full-throttle boogie "Get Downtown" addresses the unemployment blues by way of country twang, honky-tonk swagger, and raggedy inertia. The tune is as much a product of the South as biscuits and gravy. And so goes the swampy sway behind "Birthday Boy"—told from a stripper's perspective that offsets underlying sadness with catchy momentum. It's one of many moments on *The Big To-Do* that are preoccupied with getting by and surviving to see another day. Even if survival means entertaining fickle audiences in dives (the mean, scraping "After the Scene Dies," which sweats and bleeds like the walls in a humid club) or working a dead-end job to pay the bills ("This Fucking Job"). These are real songs about and for real people.

And nothing is more genuine than the gorgeous "You Got Another," a slow-build piano ballad sung by bassist Shonna Tucker. Her spurned voice is the sound of a woman tormented by ache,

shattered by abandonment, and faced with the lonesomeness of sleeping in a cold bed once occupied by two. Hood's spare backing vocals shade toward gospel tones while clean, swirling feedback progressively stabs and twists, functioning as a knife in the back. Loss comes in many forms. But so does relief, a lesson the Truckers reinforce throughout as they survey a rough landscape and still manage to make the listener feel better for being pulled along for the ride.



Reflecting the grounded nature of the music, the sonics are produced yet raw, with guitars echoing, drums possessing good weight, and the songs coming across with an airiness and grit indicative of the material being recorded live in the studio. Given Hood's obsession with vinyl, and the format's immersive, room-spanning sound, the Truckers and resident producer David Barbe wouldn't accept anything less.

—Bob Gendron



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### Ringo

*Y Not*

Hip-O Records, CD and LP

**R**ingo Starr's All Star Band has always been somewhat of a musical wapatula, including everyone from Rod Argent to Edgar Winter over the years. *Y Not* continues that recipe, with Benmont Tench, Don Was, Richard Marx and Dave Stewart, to name a few. Though only listed on a couple of tracks as a guitar player, Stewart seems to have a very heavy influence on the texture of *Y Not*, with a feel reminiscent of Stewart's 1994 solo record, *Greetings From the Gutter*.

Paul McCartney makes a guest appearance adding backing vocals to "Walk With You" (co-authored by Starr and Van Dyke Parks) and playing bass on "Peace Dream," which comes off as a loose tribute to John Lennon.

*Y Not* has an overall feel-good, party flavor to it. While some critics have said this record was "Ringo's most personal," it sounds like Ringo hanging out with his mates and yukking it up a bit. Nothing terribly serious or deep here, and that's how a Ringo album should be. After all, he was always the fun Beatle, right? The only deviance from the formula is the last track on the album sung (and co-written) with Joss Stone. "Who's Your Daddy?" finds Stone bantering with Starr throughout the song, adding a harder edge than the rest of the material.

Thanks to the heavy dose of all star talent on both sides of the mixing board, *Y Not* is nothing if not polished. While breaking new musical ground may not come easy to Ringo, he does an excellent job at what he does best. Goof on Ringo all you want, the man knows how to make a great sounding record. It helps that he enlisted mastering engineer Chris Bellman (the talent behind the recent Neil Young remasters) at Bernie Grundman's studio.

— Jeff Dorgay



### Jeff Beck

*Emotion & Commotion*  
Rhino, CD and LP

**G**uitar powerhouse Jeff Beck begins his first studio album in seven years on a mellow note—actually a very mellow note—with a cover of Jeff Buckley’s “Corpus Christi Carol.” But don’t panic. The Jeff Beck you know and love is back in full force by the second track, “Hammerhead.” The song builds slowly with some expressive wah-wah effects and blasts into action about 40 seconds in, with Beck soloing over some subterranean bass riffs courtesy of Tal Wilkenfield, who has been part of his touring band for the last year and a half.

*Emotion & Commotion* is produced by Trevor Horn (Yes, Art of Noise), and employs a 64-piece orchestra. Fortunately, the orchestral bits are incorporated very subtly into the mix, and we aren’t subjected to another overblown “rock guitarist plays over the top of symphony orchestra” exercise.

As inferred by the album’s title, there’s plenty of emotion on this record, and Beck’s playing is as focused as ever, as he’d just come off an incredibly successful two-year tour. However, there’s not that much commotion, and that might turn off some hard-core fans. When on tour, Beck digs deep into the *Blow By Blow* and *Wired* songbooks, tearing up the stage with the same intensity he did in his 20s, barely breaking a sweat in the process. There’s precious little of that here.

But there are guest singers. Throughout his career, Beck has been known to incorporate vocal talents ever since Rod Stewart left his band in 1969. This time around, he’s added Imelda May, Olivia Safe, and Joss Stone. The first two of the four vocal songs (“Lilac Wine” and “I Put a Spell On You”) are forgettable, but Stone is on fire during every second of “There’s No Other Me,” with Beck wailing at full intensity in front of and behind her.

The operatic “Elegy for Dunkirk,” sung by Safe, closes the record, ending as it began, on a very calm, mellow note. No one deserves the right to get out of their comfort zone more than Beck, but this set may be a little too subdued for some. However, it will be interesting to see how much of this material will be performed on the current tour, especially in that Beck has again rejiggered the lineup. — **Jeff Dorgay**

### High on Fire

*Snakes for the Divine*  
E1 Music, CD or LP

**N**OBODY IS MORE “METAL” THAN MATT PIKE. The High on Fire leader wears skull rings as a badge of honor, lives for the rush of speakers turned to dizzying levels, and remains obsessed with making the heaviest music on the planet. He seems to sweat smoke, breathe fire, and emit the charm of a musty old Ford Econoline van worn down from too many years of touring duties. And he’s nothing if not consistent, with every High on Fire release coming on with the thunder of a raging moose herd running roughshod over craggy terrain, stampeding anything and anyone in its way.

So it goes on *Snakes for the Divine*, a cranium-crushing exercise in volume, speed, and aggression. While the record shows High on Fire hitting faster tempos than ever before, the core values remain the same. And for guitarist Pike, it’s all about the mighty riff, and few axemen are more adept at creating and sustaining novel, swinging, bull-in-a-China-shop clusters than the former Sleep member. Combined with his hoary shouts and strangulating war commands, his stronger-than-thou fretwork functions as what one would expect to hear on the front lines of an epic battle.



Bassist Jeff Matz and longtime drummer Des Kensel provide massive rhythmic support for Pike’s towering riff architecture. The thrill of each song comes from hearing how melodies somehow seep into the equation, and how long they can stand before the capital-P power trio knocks them down—as if songs are ancient temples under siege. As it’s always been with High on Fire, damned civilizations, warrior kingdoms, and eviscerating disasters dominate the narratives.

“Welcome to world extinction!” Pike bellows like an executioner handing down a sentence on “Fire Flood and Plague,” and the rampage continues unabated, as if toughness is the only means to survival. The song titles—“Frost Hammer,” “Bastard Samurai,” “Holy Flames of the Firespitter”—are indicative of the savage sonic and lyrical characteristics. But don’t mistake this for Dungeons & Dragons metal fare. At a time when few groups are doing little else than recycling past hard-rock glories, High on Fire bravely charges forward. Pike and company’s performance on the invigorating (and catchy) title track alone is evidence of their creative superiority.

Unlike the band’s first few records, *Snakes for the Divine* has muscular and spacious production that matches the musical brawn. Greg Fidelman (Slayer, Johnny Cash, Metallica) ensures the low end receives as much attention as the important midrange, and leaves enough room for Matz’ bass to emerge, like the flickering fingers of a burning hot flame, amidst the head-banging combustion. It all makes for a beast of an album.

— **Bob Gendron**

“Welcome to world extinction!” Pike bellows like an executioner handing down a sentence...



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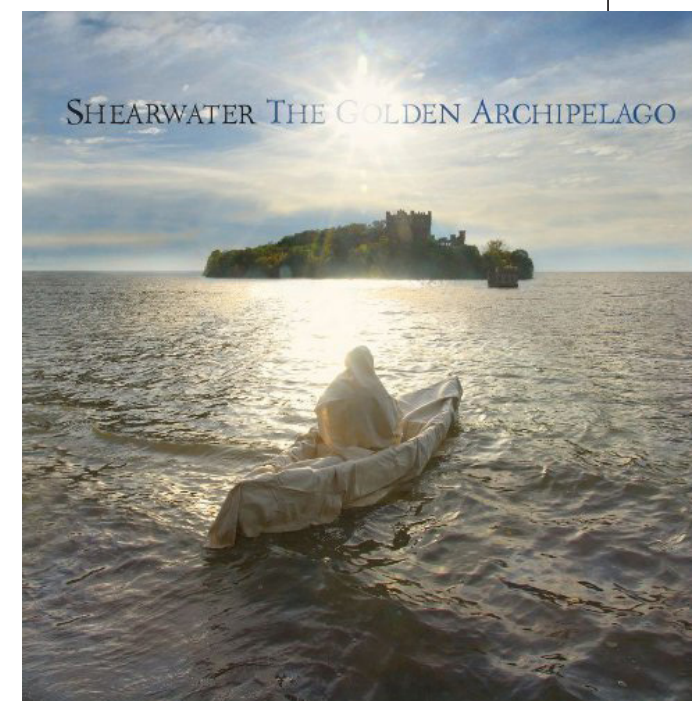
### Shearwater

*The Golden Archipelago*  
Matador, CD or 2LP

**A**T ITS SIMPLEST, SHEARWATER'S hauntingly gorgeous and accessibly complex *The Golden Archipelago* is island music. Not the perky, steel drum, umbrella-in-a-drink fare associated with the likes of Jimmy Buffett. Rather, the quintet's sweeping album is inspired by actual isolated islands, each of its tracks associated with a different hidden world, with the themes of man's effects on nature and environmental decay playing out in the deliberate arrangements and leader Jonathan Meiburg's arched singing.

A scientific researcher, Meiburg spent time visiting outposts such as the Falklands, Tierra del Fuego, Galapagos, and Madagascar. He chronicled his findings and impressions not only in song but in a photographic and literary dossier that accompanies select CD and LP versions. Grand, ambitious, and supremely executed, *The Golden Archipelago* is more than a record; it's a concept, a call to awareness, a piece of art that inspires and challenges. Meiburg's vocal performance is by itself otherworldly. It all makes one wonder how much longer Shearwater, authors of 2008's excellent *Rook*, will stay under the mainstream radar.

Ranging from majestic ballads to galloping chamber rock, Shearwater's songs are heavily shaded with drama, melancholy, fragility, and contrasts. Meiburg's often precious crooning gives off whiffs of English folk, as do the peaceful strings and spacious rhythms. A slow-build intensity washes over the material, as on the shivering epic "God Made Me," and the beckoning orchestral pop of "Black Eyes." Atmospheric touches heighten the connection between the geographic vistas and Shearwater's sonic interpretations.



Gently clanging metal, hovering synthesizers, acoustic guitar strains, and spare piano notes depict a beautiful portrait of undisturbed scenery on "Landscape at Speed." Similarly, the introduction to "Meridian" features the anthem of Bikini Atoll chanted by Bikinians forced into exile due to atomic testing that ravaged their homeland. An eerie mood that pits harmless solitude against violent destruction pervades the record. The feeling hovers over the emotionally riveting "Castaways," which seemingly pleads to get as far away from civilization as a song—and human voice—possibly can.

After investing months in the production, Shearwater achieved an album that sounds anything but "indie." Adorned with microdynamics, subtle textures, and colorful accents that range from mallet percussion to burrished cellos that mimic the patter of water droplets, *The Golden Archipelago* intoxicates from all angles. Close your eyes and it's aural cinema for the mind, body, and spirit.— **Bob Gendron**

**Grand, ambitious, and supremely executed, *The Golden Archipelago* is more than a record; it's a concept, a call to awareness, a piece of art that inspires and challenges.**



**Retribution Gospel Choir**

2  
Sub Pop, CD or LP

**L**ED BY GUITARIST/VOCALIST ALAN SPARHAWK and bassist Steve Garrington, Retribution Gospel Choir can be seen simply as a noisy extension of the duo's revered Duluth band, Low. Since the early '90s, that trio has refracted minimalist structures, quiet tension, and understated melodies into an art form on the level of a Dale Chihuly glass sculpture, mesmerizing audiences not only with vibrant colors but also with musical gorgeousness hidden in enduring fragility.

On its second album, and its first for Sub Pop, Sparhawk's "other" trio picks up on the promise of its 2008 debut. Clinging to a fundamental desire that's often too rare in today's musical landscape—indie, mainstream, or otherwise—2 kicks out the jams, twists amplifier volume knobs to ten, and lets rip with guitar-driven delight. Not that the group abandons its pop pedigree. Rather, members straddle the best of both worlds. Nearly every track is moored to a catchy hook

or contagious groove. And the set's concise nature reflects the band's get in, get out attitude. The total running time is less than 34 minutes, and that's with the aptly titled jam "Electric Guitar" accounting for nearly a quarter of that number.

With little or no space left between the songs, 2 hits with the sudden intensity of a fever dream, a feeling supported by Sparhawk's stargazing guitar ventures. Blending pop, prog, and psychedelic disciplines, he uses tunes such as the shimmering "Hide It Away" and hearty "White Wolf" as excuses to milk massive, muscular sounds from his guitar, which

wiggles its way through arrangements like a pipe cleaner navigating a clogged drain. In addition to its penchant for controlled freakouts and atmospheric folk-rock drifts (the band emerges from "Poor Man's Daughter" in an ethereal manner in which it becomes the ghosts discussed in the narrative), Retribution Gospel Choir channels the undeniable appeal of fist-pumping 70s arena rock. "Your Bird" explodes with a bombast reminiscent of a Fourth of July fireworks display, the hollow cavity of Sparhawk's voice adding to the wonderment.

So does the production, expertly handled by Matt

Beckley, who captures everything from the pitter-patter of sticks tickling the drum skins to the distorted crackle of a stray plug to vocal decay. He maintains wonderful instrumental separation and generates a smoothness that doesn't rob the music of its raw, visceral qualities. The treatment of "Something's Going to Break," on which the trio is muted and seemingly underground before suddenly busting through the foggy ether in a fashion that's akin to a burrowing drillbit re-surfacing above land, exemplifies the sonic thrills that are possible when the artist and engineer are of the same mind. — **Bob Gendron**

**In addition to its penchant for controlled freakouts and atmospheric folk-rock drifts, Retribution Gospel Choir channels the undeniable appeal of fist-pumping 70s arena rock.**

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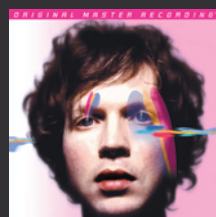
Marvin Gaye  
*What's Going On*



The Cars *The Cars*



Santana *Abraxas*



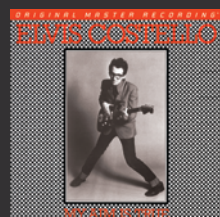
Beck *Sea Change*



Marshall Crenshaw  
*Marshall Crenshaw*



Pixies *Surfer Rosa*



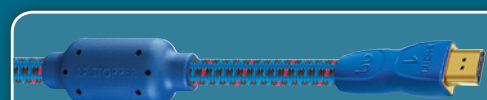
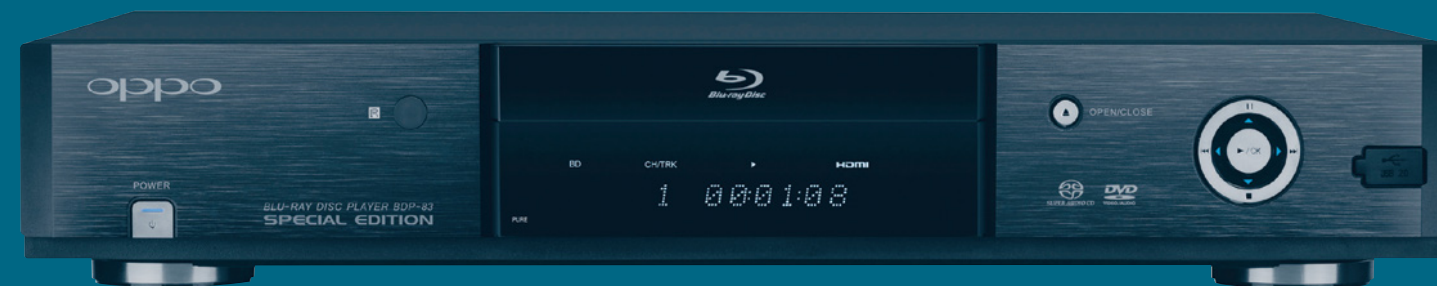
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# Four Beauties from ECM

By Richard Colburn

**W**hile audiophiles have always loved ECM recordings for their pristine sound quality, I've always had reservations about the level of bass on the label's albums. But after listening to ECM's latest efforts, things seem to have changed for the better. In the past, it seemed like the double bass was actually outside the studio, and in another room. Now, the bass appears to be right in the room along with the other instruments, where it belongs.

Past ECM recordings treated the drummers slightly better, and yet again, there is a wholesale improvement in this area as well. These discs have some of the most natural cymbal sounds I've heard on CD; they will definitely give your tweeters a workout. Want to know if you've got screaming tweeters? Here's your chance.

If this is the new recording direction that ECM is taking, I'm all for it. There's simply more flesh on the bone. As for the music:

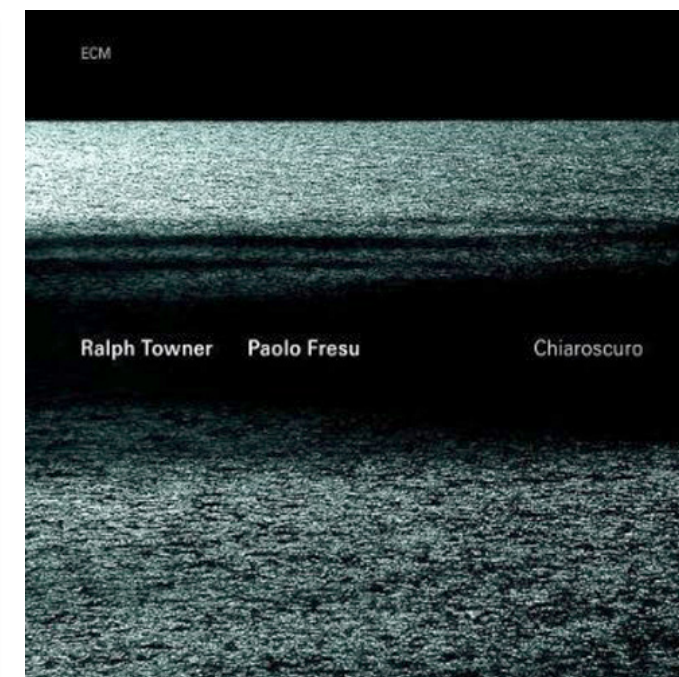


**Tomasz Stanko Quintet**  
*Dark Eyes*

**A**fter three albums of trio work, Polish trumpeter Stanko weighs in with a new cast of Danish and Finnish musicians. And what a lineup it is. The album is filled with mystery and smoke, and adds the occasional bop flourish. The rhythm section (drummer Olavi Louhivuori and electric bassist Anders Christensen) provides a muscle and propulsiveness absent on previous Stanko recordings. Electric guitarist Jakob Bro and pianist Alexi Roumarila round out this very promising band.

*Dark Eyes* takes you on a trancelike journey with pieces like "Terminal 7" and "Grand Central." The album's centerpiece is "The Dark Eyes Of Martha Hirsch," a tune inspired by Stanko's viewing of the Oskar Kokoschka painting of the same name. The composition bears witness to compositional prowess. Starting off slow and cool before building into a free-swinging melodic romp, it leaves us wondering about the mystery within the muse's dark eyes.

If ever a recording suited alert late-night listening, this is it.



**Ralph Towner/ Paolo Fresu**  
*Chiaroscuro*

**G**uitarist Ralph Towner is no stranger to ECM. He was an essential member of the group Oregon and headed Solstice for several years. Towner also recorded duos with Gary Burton and John Abercrombie. What's new here is the unusual pairing of his acoustic guitar with Italian Fresu's trumpet. It's a combination that pays off handsomely.

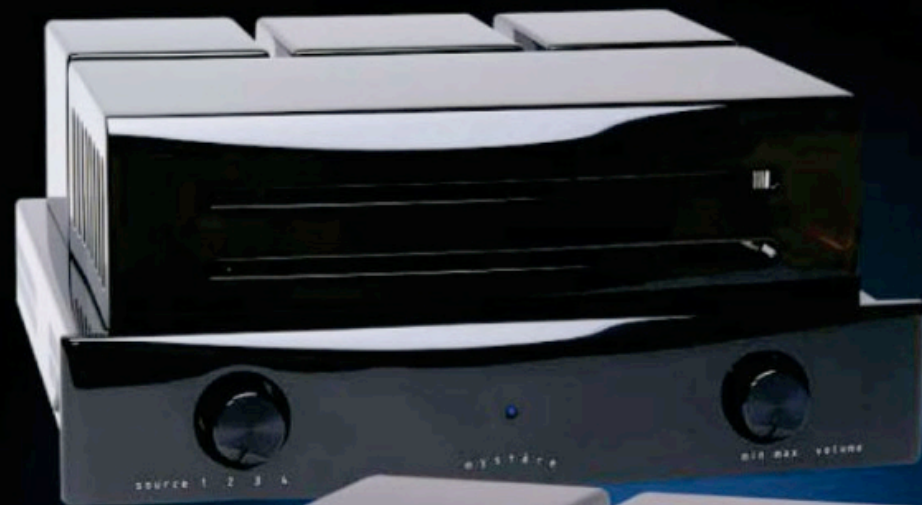
Chiaroscuro is an art technique that uses light and shade to create the illusion of depth. On the title cut, Towner and Fresu create much more than a mere illusion of depth. By and large, most pieces on this set are friendly and inviting. However, on "Punta Gara," we're taken into a jazz vein in which Fresu's double-tracked flugelhorn's warmth is offset by the clarity of Towner's guitar. The exchange is magical.

And so, what initially seems to be unconventional ultimately provides a surprisingly melodic and more intriguing dynamic than one might have expected.

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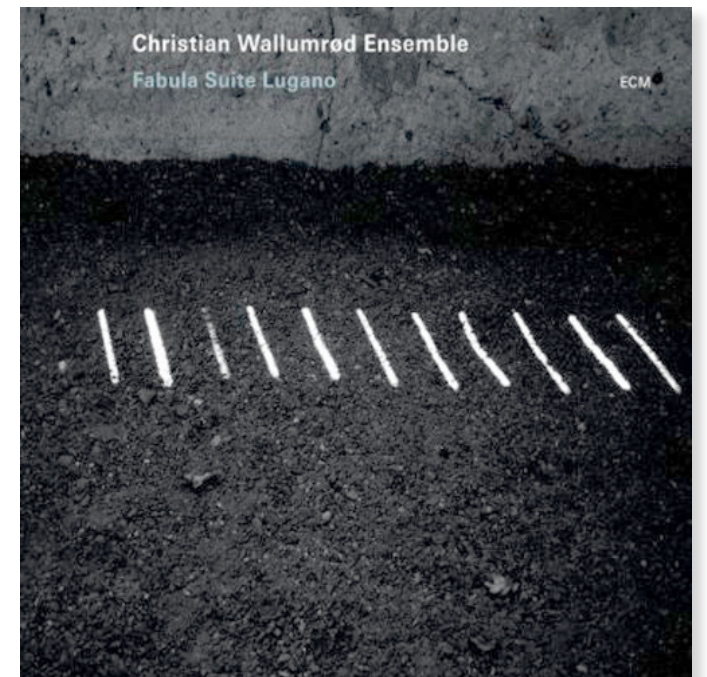
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**Tord Gustavsen Ensemble**  
*Restored, Returned*

**P**ianist Gustavsen returns here with a quintet instead of his familiar trio. He brings back drummer Jarle Vespestad but adds Mats Eilersten on bass, Tore Brunborg on saxophones, and singer Kristin Asbjornsen.

As usual, Gustavsen impresses with what he doesn't do. His playing is spare and expressive, never resorting to flashiness to state a case. The band is also warmer than the reputation typically afforded with Nordic musicians. As such, an engaging intimacy extends into compositions like "Spiral Songs" and the beautiful "The Gaze." Asbjornsen's vocals are showcased on "Lay Your Sleeping, My Love" and "Left Over Lullaby No. 2." The result: Gustavsen is presented in an appealing, songlike setting.



**Christian Wallumrod Ensemble**  
*Fabula Suite Lugano*

**F**abula Suite Lugano is not for the casual listener. Pianist/composer Christian Wallumrod and his ensemble challenge, test, and engage the senses. Playing instruments such as toy piano, harmonium, trumpet, cello, and dardanger fiddle, the collective explores melodic vistas, upsetting dissonant themes, and mournful harmonic structures. Some of the song titles—"The Gloom And The Best Man" and "Solem Mosquitoes"—hint at humor. But you'd be mistaken if you think any of these compositions are meant to merely entertain. This ambitious work is new music in the best sense.

# Another Rare Pearl from Marantz:

## The PM-KI Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

If you read our review of the Marantz Pearl SA-KI SACD player last year, you know I was very excited about not only the extraordinary performance of this player, but the stylish “silk-black” finish that Marantz offers on these components. Just like the SA-KI, the PM-KI will be limited to a production run of 500 units.







**The PM-KI is a “factory hot rod” with all critical components auditioned by Marantz designer Ken Ishiwata.**

This integrated amplifier has a retail price of \$3,599 and packed with everything you need; it even has a great MM/MC phono stage built in. I spent a fair amount of time with both Pearl components in my living room along with a pair of Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 speakers and a Rega P5 turntable with a Clearaudio Maestro Wood cartridge.

The PM-KI is all solid state and robustly built. Following the same styling cues as the rest of the Marantz line, it has the curved front panel with the round function window in the center, homage to the great Marantz amplifiers of the 60’s. Along with an input selector and a button to switch the speakers off when listening with headphones, there is a MM/MC switch for the phono stage *and* a pair of tone controls that can be switched out of the circuit. I did not make much use of these with my speakers, but they were fantastic while using headphones.

### Tough and Versatile

Weighing about 45 pounds (20kg), the PM-KI is robustly built, with a massive power transformer and a copper-plated chassis. The built-in MC stage has 100-ohm loading, which should work just fine with most MC cartridges.

While most of my listening was done with the Clearaudio Maestro Wood, an MM cartridge, I also substituted my Technics SL-1200/Lyra Dorian with excellent results. If you have a MC cartridge in the \$300 - \$1,000 range, you should be able to live happily with the phono preamplifier built in to the PM-KI.

Two sets of fixed and variable level outputs are available, so the PM-KI can be used with a powered subwoofer or as part of a multiple amplifier system. This amplifier is rated at 90 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load and 140 watts per channel into a 4-ohm load.

Of course, it had no problem pushing my Harbeth Compact 7’s or Harbeth Monitor 40.1’s, and did an outstanding job with my Magnepan 1.6 speakers as well.

The PM-KI was easy to set up and start listening. The manual is

comprehensive and spends a fair amount of time explaining how to integrate it into a multichannel system. The remote is the same as the one that came with the SA-KI SACD player, so you can leave it shrink wrapped for the day that something unfortunate happens to this one.

As we mentioned in our SA-KI review, the PM-KI is a “factory hot rod” with all critical components auditioned by Marantz designer Ken Ishiwata, who spent many hours of listening to the choices made. The PM-KI is a significant step above a standard Marantz reference component. You can read more about the KI-Pearl series and its creator here:

<http://www.marantz.eu/kipearl/>

### The sound

Much like the larger Marantz preamplifier and monoblock power amplifiers we reviewed in Issue 20, the lineage is evident. *(continued)*



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While the integrated does not possess the ultimate slam and dynamics of the 300-watt-per-channel monoblocks, the presentation is very similar at less-than concert-hall levels. If you are a fan of the top-of-the-line Marantz reference separates but have a smaller room (or budget), the PM-KI is an excellent choice.

Now that I have spent time with a number of Marantz reference components, I would describe the sound as “slightly warm.” Not quite as warm as my Luxman L-590A pure class-A integrated, but not the typical solid-state sound by any means. The combination of the Marantz integrated and the Harbeth speakers was incredibly engaging, and at times slightly embellished the sound of less-than-stellar recordings. But always in a good way.

The combination brought back the memories of my Marantz 2245 receiver and JBL L-166 speakers.

So to make sure I wasn't dreaming, I stopped by staff writer Jerold O'Brien's house to visit my L166's and 2245. Turns out, I was dreaming a bit. My trusty 2245 was a lot grainier sounding than I remembered, and when we replaced it in the system with the PM-KI, the JBL's really rocked. But there was a much cleaner, more-dynamic sound overall. Still, the 2245 in its day had a tonal quality that was unmatched by any other Japanese receivers and in many ways rivaled the McIntosh receivers of the same time period.

Returning to my house after the history lesson, I was impressed with the PM-KI no matter which speakers I used. The amplifier had a very dynamic sound, which was revealing of its substantial power supply. Playing my favorite hard-rock CD's from AC/DC, Deep Purple and the latest Audio Fidelity remaster of the Judas Priest classic, *Hell Bent For Leather*, I was able to rattle the living room windows rather handily. *(continued)*



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Moving along to the current XRCD re-masters of the Blue Note catalog, I was impressed with the big soundfield that the PM-KI possessed both in width and depth. The combination with the SA-KI SACD player was sublime, and the amount of subtlety this combination was able to deliver constantly amazed me. Sonny Clark's piano on *Cool Struttin'* had the right amount of resonance and sustain, while Philly Joe Jones floated right into the mix on saxophone.

But the biggest surprise was when using this amplifier with my Magnepan 1.6's, now with updated Skiing Ninja crossovers. The 1.6 is probably my favorite pair of Magnepans because they don't cost an arm and a leg, but they do need a very high-quality amplifier to drive them or they just sound flat and lifeless. Typically, they need more than 100 watts per channel to drive them, and the only other amplifier with fewer than 100 watts per channel has been my Luxman, but this is a \$10,000 integrated.

A pair of the 1.6's along with the two Pearl components *and* a turntable should still keep the price tag under \$10k, even if you buy a couple of decent power cords and a good pair of interconnects to go between the SACD player and amplifier.

The PM-KI gripped the 1.6's, offering plenty of bass control and a delicacy that usually requires a much more expensive amplifier. The soundstage here was quite expansive, giving the "panel magic" more than lip service, with sound extending about three feet beyond the speaker boundaries. And thanks to the preamp outputs, I was able to add my MartinLogan Grotto i subwoofer, taking this system even further.

Listening to Johnny Cash on his final album *American VI*, Rick Rubin's stripped down, minimalist production really shone through loud and clear, with Cash's voice having a real delicacy to it. Of course, roaming through the usual cache of female vocals was equally satisfying. *(continued)*

**The combination with the SA-KI SACD player was sublime, and the amount of subtlety this combination was able to deliver constantly amazed me.**

# JOURNEYMAN AUDIOPHILE:



The care spent by Mr. Ishiwata in the design of the PM-KI has really paid off. The real key to this amplifier is the delicacy and refinement it offers combined with some serious drive. The PM-KI sounds like a much bigger amplifier than it is. While it did an admirable job driving the Magnepans, with a more traditional speaker that has a sensitivity of around 88db or better, you will have a difficult time pushing it to its limits.

#### Conclusion

It's easy to get carried away with the sound of cost-no-object components. I'm often asked for suggestions at this price point for a real-world system. I can't think of a better choice than the Marantz Pearl components. They bring home the essence of the world's best gear in an affordable package that looks as great as it sounds. We are happy to award it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2010. ●

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#### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Source** Marantz SA-KI  
SACD player, Naim CD555

**Analog Source** Rega P5 w/  
Clearaudio Maestro Wood cartridge

**Speakers** Harbeth Compact 7ES-3,  
Harbeth Monitor 40.1, PMC fact.8,  
Magnepan 1.6 (with Skiing Ninja  
upgraded crossovers), Zu Essence

**Power** Shunyata V-Ray, Shunyata  
Python CX power cords

**Cable** Audioquest Columbia  
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# Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay

## The Bad Plus

*For All I Care*

Heads Up, 2 180g LPs

Although this record was previously released on CD a year ago, it's just being issued on vinyl now. And if you aren't familiar with this Midwestern trio, don't fret. They've had a number of labels put on them that attempt to describe their sound (avant-garde, progressive, postmodern, etc.) but none does an adequate job. Suffice to say, the Bad Plus mix it up, effortlessly bouncing from genre to genre. Like a box of Cap'n Crunch cereal, every album has a surprise inside.

The Bad Plus' last album, *Prog*, was their most straightforward, with somewhat arty renditions of pop songs you've heard before—Tears For Fears' "Everybody Wants to Rule The World," Bowie's "Life on Mars"—not sounding quite as bizarre as the way the Kronos Quartet might handle the task. *For All I Care* welcomes guest vocalist Wendy Lewis to the quirky mix, and marks the first time the trio has used a vocalist. A quick peek at the song list reveals peculiarities (Yes, Nirvana, The Bee Gees, Igor Stravinsky, and Heart on one record!), but it works. Lewis brings an atonal, disconnected (think Julee Cruise on *Quaaludes*) vibe to a series of arrangements that change time signatures so fast, it makes you wonder if the band is channeling Frank Zappa.

This release also signifies the first time the band has released an album on vinyl. Mastered by Bob Ludwig at Gateway Mastering, the overall tonal balance is slightly forward. But a quick perusal of the album notes reveals a lot of discussion concerning which Neuman mikes were used, etc. Definitely an audiophile recording, though not likely something you will hear at a hi-fi show any time soon. And that's a shame. Why?

Lewis' rendition of Heart's "Barracuda" is delightfully trippy, the Bee Gees' "How Deep is Your Love" sounds like it could be an outtake from the *Twin Peaks* soundtrack, and the lyrics to Nirvana's "Lithium" are finally intelligible

Sound like fun? Then put *For All I Care* in heavy rotation now.

The Bad Plus mix it up, effortlessly bouncing from genre to genre. Like a box of Cap'n Crunch cereal, every album has a surprise inside.

The amount of information available on these old tapes and Bernie Grundman's stellar mastering continue to amaze.

### Johnny Hartman

*John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman*  
*I Just Dropped by to Say Hello*  
 ORG, 2 LP, 45-rpm sets

Without arguing jazz minutiae with the purists, it's relatively safe to say that Johnny Hartman's career got a major boost after teaming up with John Coltrane, producing what many consider definitive performances of "My One and Only Love" and "Lush Life" on *John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman*. Originally recorded in 1963, this record features McCoy Tyner on piano, Jimmy Garrison on bass, and Elvin Jones on drums.

The mood changes on *I Just Dropped by to Say Hello*, featuring Kenny Burrell and Jim Hall on guitar. The six-stringed instruments are a welcome addition to the strictly horn based-production of the *Coltrane* set. And while both guitarists turn in excellent performances, Burrell steals the show by showcasing the more delicate touch of the two masters.

While we can discuss these records' relative merits and significance until the cows come home, there's no question that both are exquisitely produced, just like everything else in ORG's Impulse series. Still, the amount of information available on these old tapes and Bernie Grundman's stellar mastering continue to amaze. Moreover, all of the vinyl is pressed at Pallas in Germany, and the finished product is, so far at least, flawless.

These records feature wonderful tonality, and the music finally has serious dynamic range. Jones' drum kit not only has slam and impact, but the soft touch of his brushwork is sublime. Illinois Jacquet's tenor sax blasts out of the right side of the soundstage, as if he's right there in the room, and Hartman's voice is four feet in front of you. Our resident vinyl collector, Tom Caselli commented, "The original pressings of these records sound crackly, like Rice Crispies!" Not these. The ORG pressings are dead quiet, with the music gently creeping up out of the background in a way that digital never does.

It's also worth noting that ORG stepped up its game even further with the printing of the record jackets, which retain the thick cardboard shell but now also feature a high-gloss laminate on the outside (a look that's very similar to what Music Matters is doing with its Blue Note series), making these limited-edition LPs that much more desirable. Fans of Hartman, take note: ORG is releasing *The Voice That Is!* as part of its Impulse series in the near future.



### The Flaming Lips

*Embryonic*

WB, 2-LP set (with bonus CD)

Nothing puts a bigger smile on my face (at least when it comes to hi-fi) than colored vinyl. I love watching colored albums spin around on my turntable. “We can finally do colored vinyl right, so that it will last,” said Warner Brothers’ Rick Gershon, when I recently reached him by phone. So rest assured that you’ll still be spinning this record with pride in the years to come.

*Embryonic* is recorded hot, so when you first drop the stylus on the record, the garbled electronic percussion is still distorted (though not as badly) as it is on the CD, but the LP has more depth and is not congested through the mids. The songs benefit from the analog format as well. A lot more happens beyond the boundaries of the speakers, and there’s more detail in the LP’s nooks and crannies. On the second track, “Evil,” you can easily hear the background vocal tracks, where on the CD, they just fall into the noise floor. The electronic ambient sounds on “The Sparrow Looks Up at The Machine” have the same enhanced effect on the LP, with a spacier overall presentation.

The instrumental track “Aquarius Sabotage,” recorded at a lower level than the majority of the record, gives us a glimpse of what *Embryonic* might have been if the producers utilized a gentler touch on the gain control during recording sessions. Who knows? Perhaps adding too big of a dose of audiophile sensibilities to a Flaming Lips record would ruin it?

Offering a big step up in fidelity from the CD, *Embryonic* still makes a good case for hearing contemporary music on vinyl. And to WB’s credit, the label is keeping the price reasonable. \$24.99 gets you the 2-LP set along with a full CD. There’s even a 2-CD set with bonus DVD-A, recorded in 24/96, albeit at the higher cost of \$32.99.

Offering a big step up in fidelity from the CD, *Embryonic* still makes a good case for hearing contemporary music on vinyl.



This version of *Popular Songs* has a more spacious presentation than the original CD, with the mids and vocals possessing a lot more separation.

### Yo La Tengo

*Popular Songs*

Matador Records, 2-LP set

**A**ttention record labels: Can we please have more of this kind of thing, rather than another remaster of *Who's Next*? Not only has there been a lot of decent music produced after 1975, a fair amount of it sounds pretty good, too, and we're never going to maintain the vinyl resurgence unless more of it sees the light of day on LP.

In this case, I suspect a digital master tape was used because of the 2009 production date and slight congestion of the uppermost frequencies. However, this version of *Popular Songs* (pressed at RTI on 180g vinyl, with Greg Calbi given mastering credit) has a more spacious presentation than the original CD, with the mids and vocals possessing a lot more separation. There's more of everything everywhere: A couple more layers of guitars are spotted throughout; the keyboard riffs are much easier to pick out of the mix and no longer lurk in the background; and the vocals have more noticeable body.

Okay, so it's not as pristine of a recording as Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat*. But who wants to listen to that anyway? Here's hoping Matador sends us more of its catalog on LP in the months ahead.





**Grant Green***Matador*

Music Matters, 2-45rpm LPs

**M***atador* was one of a handful of this brilliant guitarist's albums that didn't appear until years after its initial recording. Produced in the summer of 1964, it remained unreleased until 1979 in Japan and 2000 in the US, on CD. Unfortunately, Green had already died, passing away very early in his career (at age 47) after a long battle with drug abuse.

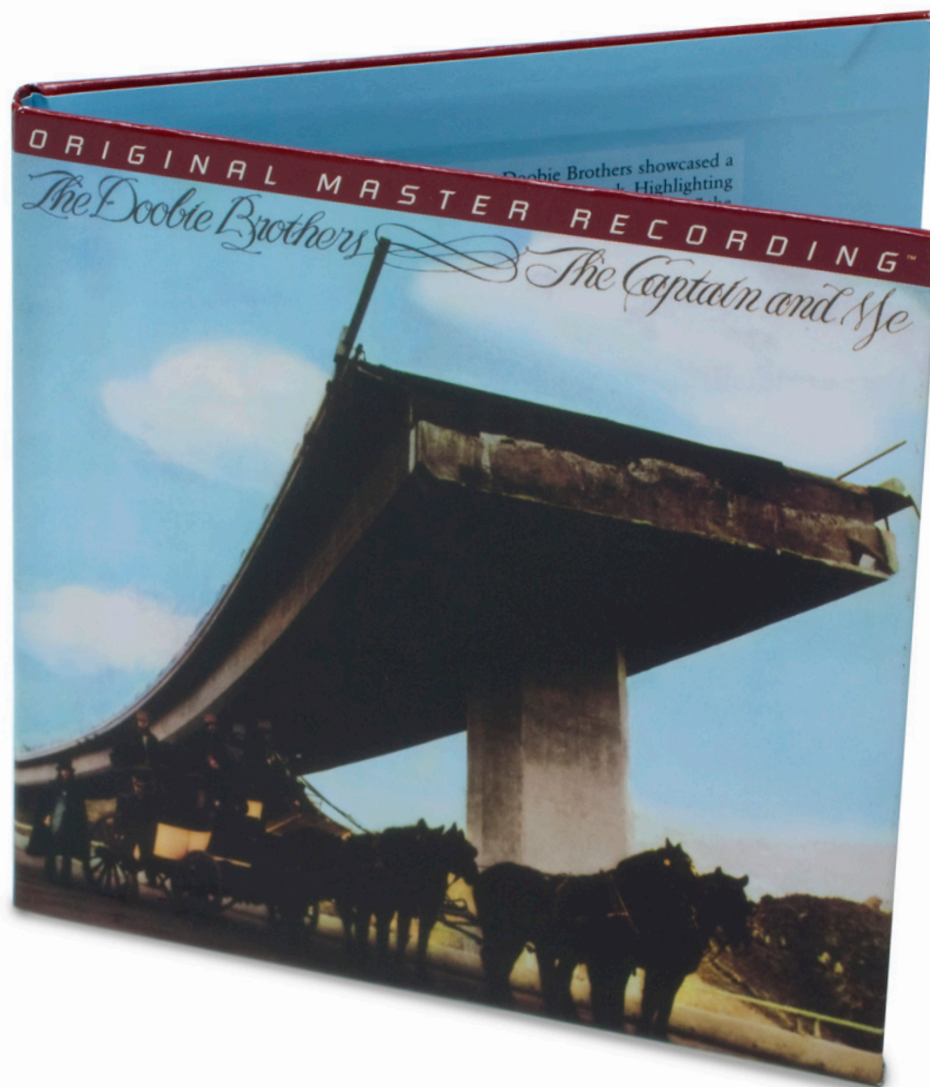
On this set, Green uses two of John Coltrane's top sidemen, drummer Elvin Jones and pianist McCoy Tyner. Yet the group carves out its own unique groove, giving "My Favorite Things" a much different feel, with Green's electric guitar supplanting the saxophone as the lead instrument. Interestingly, this is the song on which Green stretches out the most. But he never plays a note more than necessary to get the point across.

It's hard to believe that the Music Matters team can keep raising the bar on these 50-year-old records, but the sound presented here is phenomenal. The stereo image is typical Blue Note stereo, with Green fixed right in the centerline of the left speaker. Tyner's piano is just behind him, perhaps just one step closer to the center of the stereo image, with the drum kit mostly in the right channel, and the bass line diffusely centered. The depth and transient attack on this record are outstanding, thanks to one track per side of vinyl—definitely a worthwhile indulgence.

Music Matters also continues to set the standard for record packaging. To make this release even more unique, the label redesigned the cover of *Matador*. In place of the original blue and yellow illustration, the updated version features a shot of Green in a red/black duotone with a bold lettering scheme. It takes big balls to mess with the Blue Note catalog, but the end result is fantastic.

**It's hard to believe that the Music Matters team can keep raising the bar on these 50-year-old records, but the sound presented here is phenomenal.**





**The Doobie Brothers**  
*The Captain and Me*  
 MoFi, SACD

**T**he crew at MoFi has been on fire for the last few years, proving they can produce some of the best-quality remastered recordings and, just as importantly, demonstrate the artistic sensibility to choose titles that we *haven't* seen a million times before and would actually want to purchase.

A high percentage of crazed audiophiles claim that the DVD-A version of this 1973 Doobie Brothers album is by far the most musically natural version of this classic recording. Granted, in this sense, MoFi went back to the trough to get a well-known chestnut. However, I'm happy to let the label off the hook for two reasons. First, it is in the process of procuring an entire series of Doobie releases, so it makes sense to include this record in the batch. And second, the DVD-A is becoming scarce and often fetches upwards of \$150 on eBay. Not to mention the dwindling number of decent DVD-A players.

In a direct listening comparison performed on the highly respected Ayre CX-5eMP player, the MoFi disc gave no quarter to the DVD-A, with the hybrid SACD having a warmer and more inviting midrange and the DVD-A disc a wider soundstage. I could live happily with either edition. Surprisingly, playing the CD layer on my reference Naim CD555 player provided the best overall tonality and most bass slam. So yes, there's still a lot to be said for well-executed 16/44 playback.

Bottom line: This disc is a winner.

**Unless you're that guy sitting in the front row studying the bass player's technique, this record grows tedious after about 90 seconds.**



#### Dean Peer

*Airborne*  
 ILS Records,  
 24/96 recording on memory chip

**I**f you aren't a bass player or bass geek, pass on *Airborne*. As a matter of fact, run away screaming. This record is the most self-indulgent piece of rubbish I've heard in years, and it's not cheap, either. Thirty bucks buys you a memory chip that fits in the USB slot of your computer, though not in any apparent manner. It comes attached to a credit card-sized holder, with a fold-out USB tab that fits in the USB slot in either direction, though it will only work in one. A standard USB flash drive would have been much easier.

While a cursory search of the Internet reveals some zealots deeming Peer a "God" and "master of bass harmonics," the same search

doesn't reveal him to have played on any albums of any note—or with anybody of note. *Airborne* has nine tracks of bass solos, with some drums and percussion mixed in. That's it.

Unless you're that guy sitting in the front row studying the bass player's technique, this record grows tedious after about 90 seconds. To its credit, it is extremely

well recorded and perhaps, in small doses, could be used as a tool for subwoofer setup. Seeing that Guantanamo Bay isn't closed yet, *Airborne* could also be used as an interrogation tool. Government officials could play Nine Inch Nails at brain-damaging volumes all day long and I'd never crack. But put on three minutes of this record, and I'll tell you anything you want to know.

# Taking Custom To a New Level

By Jeff Dorgay

Perhaps you've noticed the tab marked "custom shop" on the MartinLogan website as part of their recent redesign and was curious to what lurked there. MartinLogan's tagline is "you dream it, we build it." They won't build you a custom-sized ESL panel, but they *will* take any of the existing models on their list (Vista, Vantage, Spire, Summit X and CLX as well as the Stage center channel and Depth i and Descent i subwoofers) and fully customize the finish of the wood and metal surfaces to your taste.

This started three years ago with the original Summit and according to MartinLogan's advertising and promotions manager Devin Zell, the Custom Shop customers have been very happy. "It's a pretty passionate customer that takes the time to select all of the parameters of their speaker so that it blends with their environment. Our guys always go above and beyond their already high level of craftsmanship on these special creations."

The range of people that have taken advantage of the Custom Shop is quite wide and even includes some pretty high profile people that choose to remain in the shadows... Having toured the MartinLogan factory back in 2008 to watch my CLX's be built, I can vouch for the craftsmanship that takes place there, even on the standard issue speakers.

Thanks to the wealth of experience in the MartinLogan factory in Lawrence Kansas, they know how to do it right. Though I only asked the custom shop to change the color of the LED's in my CLX's, they were mentioning a pair of CLX's that they were about to start work on that were "really special, over and above anything they'd ever done so far."



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## TO NE STYLE

### Let's Call Him Brian

Because this particular gentleman is also a fairly high profile individual and doesn't necessarily want everyone to know where his half-million dollar HiFi system is located, we'll just call him Brian for the sake of this article. (No, he's not in the witness protection program...)

Brian is a gentleman in his early fifties that has always been a music lover, but wanted an "over the top" system. Music was always a big part of his life, and he had always possessed a good system, one day he decided to really jump off the cliff. When perusing some big speakers at his local dealer, they had just installed the CLX's in

one of their showrooms. After auditioning a number of much more expensive speakers, he loved the sound of the CLX the most, but wanted something "more unique" in the visual department.

Typically, when ordering a custom pair of MartinLogan speakers, a trip to the website's "3D configurator" is all that's required. Unfortunately, this only works on the Windows platform, so if you are a Mac user, you'll have to go to a friend's house to custom spec your speakers.

Once in the configurator, the model is chosen and you are given the retail price in the upper right corner. Standard finishes of the

various parts are shown and you can see the custom choices available for the wood and metal surfaces. You can even choose leather coverings for the wood if you so desire. Don't laugh, I saw a pair of Summits for sale on Audiogon that were covered in red leather, so I know they've made a couple of pretty wacky speakers at the ML custom shop!

Brian wanted something beyond the typical custom order. "I knew the black Eco sound wouldn't work in my living room, so I suggested that we make the rear portion of the speaker and the enclosure for the electronics from hardwood. *(continued)*





My dealer had contacted MartinLogan and they assured me this could be done, so I wrote an order for the speakers in April of 2008. Little did I know it would be a while before I had the speakers."

Shopping for hardwood, Brian found an exceptional 145" L x 42" W x 4", 106 board foot slab of Bubinga. When he decided that the *whole speaker* should be made from bubinga, he was put in contact with CLX designer David Allen, Senior VP of MartinLogan Design and Product Development. "David is a true visionary and he was very responsive to my requests for this project." Everyone involved was treading in somewhat unknown territory. First, this piece of exotic collector grade wood had to be milled into the actual lumber to make the speaker parts. Brian had also decided on a pair of MartinLogan Depth i subwoofers to compliment his CLX's, so a pair of hardwood tops had to be cut to match as well. This had never been attempted with Bubinga, but the team at ML felt they could accomplish this.

### Beyond the Beyond

Once the slab was milled into lumber form, the individual pieces were arranged so that they could be cut to maintain matching grain figure on every speaker part. Brian said that the craftsmen in the ML cabinet shop were amazed at the quality of the wood he delivered. They made a few sets of test speakers out of other hardwood first to make sure they could make the necessary cuts as efficiently as possible, as there would be little room for error with the bubinga.



Another hurdle to overcome was the high build, high gloss finish that Brian requested. This had never been done before, which required some more testing. When everything was in place and they were ready to proceed, the bubinga was machined with fresh carbide blades and drill bits, so there would be no splintering.

Again, the results were beyond Brian's expectations. "As you can see from the photos, the grain pattern on these speakers is completely book matched, with each speaker being a mirror twin for the other." MartinLogan finisher Rick Carr even went in over the Christmas 2008 holiday to put a few extra-coats on the pieces, so they would be ready when work began in January.

The CLX is shipped in a very elaborate, multi-piece carton, but even this detail was not left to chance. Once packed, the cardboard cartons were put in custom, foam lined wooden crates and air freighted to Brian. He jokes, "They kind of look like sarcophaguses, but the speakers arrived in perfect shape."

### Reflections

Almost a year later, Brian remains thrilled with his purchase. "The folks at MartinLogan went out of their way to make sure the speakers were flawless. I feel my custom pair of CLX's gave their master craftsmen a chance to shine and show what they were truly capable of. *(continued)*



Who takes the time in this day and age to make something with this amount of care? They all went the distance to produce something very special for me."

The results speak for themselves. I've gotten pretty used to having a pair of cherry CLX's in my listening room, so the size isn't an issue. I wasn't prepared for just how stunning these speakers look in real life. Visiting Brian's home was a real treat, not only visually but the sound is breathtaking.

The custom made, three component wide Burmester rack was also veneered in Bubinga to match the speakers and subwoofers. Brian commented, "We had to go with veneer on the rack surfaces for rigidity. There was just no way that the hardwood boards would hold the weight of three Burmester components without bowing."

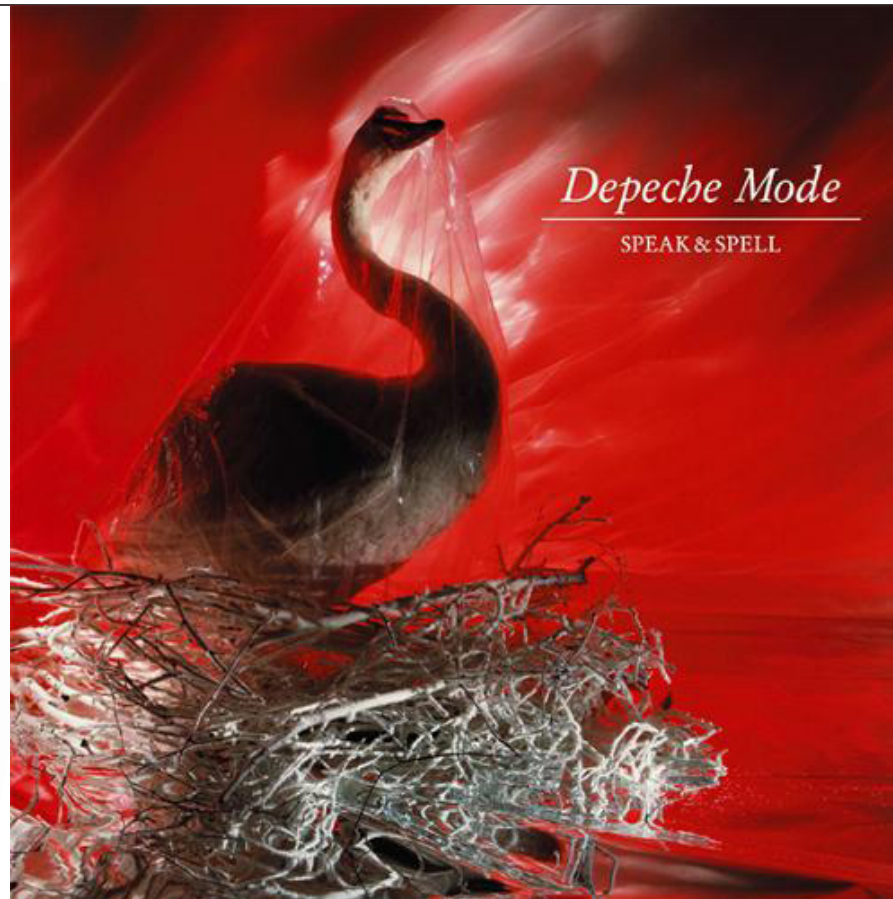
The system is powered by a pair of 911MK.3 amplifiers, with the 808 MK.5 preamplifier and 069 CD player. A Clearaudio Reference table and Goldfinger cartridge takes care of the analog duties. "I'm still searching for the icing on the cake, that perfect phono preamplifier. I've got a few things in mind, but we'll see what the New Year holds."

No attention to detail has been spared. The room has dedicated power, a pair of Burmester power conditioners and a full compliment of Transparent cable, along with room treatments from Auralex that integrate into the room stealthily. As I have a single 911 MK.3 in my system powering my CLX's, the sound was very familiar, yet the second power amp and Burmester's flagship CD player took even the sound I'm familiar with to another level.

It's always a pleasure to meet someone this passionate about music, gear and aesthetics, with a system that truly delivers the goods. So if you've got a wacky idea for a pair of MartinLogan speakers, give them a call. I'm confident they can turn your dream into reality as well. Maybe carbon fiber, hmmm. ●



*MartinLogan's custom shop crew.*



# Fight Cancer, Buy a Watch!

By Jeff Dorgay

Depeche Mode has teamed up with masters of style Hublot, to create a series of 12 watches that coincides with each one of their 12 studio albums, incorporating art from each on the front and back faces. Each watch is a one off creation from Hublot and will be available by bid only from these three websites:

- [www.depechemode.com](http://www.depechemode.com)
- [www.hublot.com](http://www.hublot.com)
- [www.teenagecancertrust.com](http://www.teenagecancertrust.com)

All proceeds from the watch auction will go directly to the Teenage Cancer Trust and each recipient will receive a box set along with the watch that will contain some very exclusive goodies that will include a deluxe vinyl version of the album matching the watch. There will also be a USB Key containing a digital version of the album as well as documentary footage covering the making of the album.

So now you can have a piece of music history that you can wear wherever you go and help the fight against cancer while you're at it. The Auction has just begun and continues through February 24, with the proceeds will be donated to the Teenage Cancer Trust on February 26, during Depeche Mode's Dusseldorf concert, part of their "Sounds of the Universe" tour.



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TO NE STYLE

# From McDonald's to Mick Jagger: The Art of Jeff Ham

By Jeff Dorgay



Jerry 64x57





Green Bull Rider 62x66

**J**eff Ham has traveled a long way from Chicago, where his commercial-art career started in the late '70s, to his current fine-art studio in St. George, Utah. He started drawing around age five, when his father – a commercial illustrator with studios in the U.S. and Europe – helped him hone his talent.

“Yeah, Dad would see me drawing and critique my stuff even then,” Ham recalled recently. “He’d tell me my perspective was a little off or something, and then he’d show me how to do it correctly. He’s always been a huge supporter of my work.”



Cash 51x40

He was soon helping his dad in the studio and building his knowledge base. Before he entered high school, his dad was already giving him spot illustration jobs. “I used to get \$75 apiece for those. It was pretty cool.” By 19, he had established himself as a major commercial illustrator in the Chicago area, working for McDonald’s, Budweiser, Keebler and many others. He used to lie about his age because some of the art directors couldn’t believe that someone so young had such an advanced technique.

A road trip to Phoenix, Arizona, when he was 18 years old, ignited the spark that would eventually lead him to a permanent residence in the Southwest.

Around age 30, the pace of the advertising world was getting tedious and Ham decided to take a few years off to play music and plan his next move. While playing guitar and mandolin, he was considered by many as a top-notch singer/songwriter and often compared with the likes of Steve Earle. He completed a number of music projects and was offered a fairly solid business proposition from the world of Nashville, but it would have required extensive touring to support his music. Ham had a young child, so he decided to quit music and start painting.

“I knew there would be a few years’ worth of getting up to speed, though,” Ham laughs, looking back on the start of his current career. Around 2006, he decided to make the move from his studio, then in Michigan City, Ind., to St. George where he now lives. Ham always felt that the Southwest produced a sense of déjà vu, remembering the times he spent watching the famous westerns *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Jeremiah Johnson* and *Electric Horseman*. (continued)

### Influence and Technique

When asked about the influence of the Southwestern color palette on his own, Ham chalks it up to something more modern. “Even in the illustration world, I was always known for my use of bright color. Two of my biggest influences were Dr. Seuss and Peter Max. I continue to be impressed and inspired by them.”

Though he still plays music to relax, Ham is not an audiophile. “I do watch a lot of movies, though I’m pretty much an art guy. Often when I get stuck and need a bit of inspiration, I’ll take a few hours off and just play guitar. That usually does a great job at freeing up my creativity.”

Much like Eddie Van Halen recording a lead solo, Ham does his paintings in one or two takes, with many of his paintings coming to life in about two days, once he’s explored the final inspiration. The velocity of the work comes about in part from so much commercial training and experience. The first solid day of painting is to lay down the image, just releasing the idea. “This is the essence of painting, to take that first swipe. Then I walk away from the piece, and come back later to tweak it and bring the image into focus. At this point, it is very important not to force the imagery.”

Ham says that he often has an image floating around in his head for a while. The Dylan piece shown here was exactly that type of thing, part of Ham’s thought process for almost two years. About to start a commission for another client, the Dylan piece “just had to come out. My wife came down to the studio and asked what I was doing ... but I was finally ready to roll with Dylan, and today was the day.”



Dylan 73x58

Most of Ham’s pieces are large, many about four-by-six-feet in size. The originals are acrylic on canvas, which range in price from \$5,000 to about \$15,000, with commissioned works higher. For those interested, he also prints a small number of giclée prints on photo paper and canvas. Slightly torn on digital printing, he likes the prints to be done on photo paper for their wider color gamut, but he also likes printing on canvas so that he can embellish the prints to the point that they look “very close” to the original paintings. His prints are available for \$700 to about \$2,300, somewhat dependent on size. He has an equally enthusiastic following in the United States as well as in Europe.



Stones 54x76

### Going forward

Often working around the clock for days on end, he takes to the road to deliver his paintings to the galleries in which he shows, the road trips offering relaxation and further inspiration. However, business has been strong enough that he soon may not have time to deliver everything in person, a good problem to have.

While the transition from commercial illustrator to full-time fine artist has been very successful, it’s still a work in progress. “Though I have years of training, I’m still not where I want to be yet. I’m getting better at just letting the images flow.” ●

**“Though I have years of training, I’m still not where I want to be yet. I’m getting better at just letting the images flow.”**

You can find more out about Jeff Ham and where to purchase his work at: [www.jeffham.net](http://www.jeffham.net)

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TONE STYLE



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# The Waterfall Iguascu EVO

## Stellar French Beauty

By Jeff Dorgay

**Waterfall's designer, Cedric Aubriot, has been an audiophile, building his own speakers since his childhood and has always "dreamed of building a see-through speaker."**

though relatively unknown in the U.S. until recently, Waterfall Audio has been selling speakers in Europe since late 1999. Their unique, all-glass design is sure to please the audiophile who requires a healthy dose of style to go along with the music.

Hard-core audiophiles might wonder at first how the all-glass enclosures could work properly, but after a short listen, you can see that Waterfall has done a fantastic job in conquering glass as a cabinet material. In case you are wondering, each of the speakers is named after a famous waterfall somewhere in the world. Very stylish indeed.

As Nadine Dewell from Waterfall explained to me, "When making cabinets from wood, you have a slight room for error when cutting the cabinet pieces. But with glass, everything has to be perfectly true or the edges become uneven." Running your fingers across the surfaces of the Iguascu's, you immediately notice the flawless execution of their design. She told me that Waterfall's designer, Cedric Aubriot, has been an audiophile, building his own speakers since his childhood and has always "dreamed of building a see-through speaker."



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**TONE STYLE**

Once the pieces of glass are water-jet cut to a 150-micron tolerance, they are bonded together with an adhesive that is cured by ultraviolet light. Dewell explained that this is also a painstaking process that requires "just the right amount of glue." You can see more of the production process here:

[www.waterfallaudio.com/About\\_Us.html](http://www.waterfallaudio.com/About_Us.html)

The secret to getting an untreated glass cabinet to work without acoustic cancellation is Waterfall's Acoustic Dampening Tube that fits behind the bass/midrange driver. Coupled with the eight-inch passive radiator at the bottom of the enclosure, this gives the Iguascu's tight, controlled bass.

The Iguascu's have an MSRP of \$4,495 per pair, USD, and the columns are a manageable 10-by-10 inches, only 34 inches tall and weigh 31 pounds each. The footprint is similar to that of a pair of small mini-monitors on stands. They use a six-inch woofer and a .8-inch silk-dome tweeter; the French company Atohm produces both drivers.

**I must admit that the "wow" factor on these speakers is high: they are gorgeous.**

The Iguascu's came meticulously packaged and were a snap to set up thanks to their light weight, but I would highly suggest using cotton gloves for moving them around as the glass fingerprints easily. I must admit that the "wow" factor on these speakers is high: they are gorgeous. The Iguascu's received high praise from every one of my friend's wives who saw them. These speakers look particularly cool in a more contemporary setting because you can set your living/listening room's lighting to shine through them.

Once unpacked, the speakers were very easy to set up. I ended up with speaker placement closer together than I might normally use for small floor-standing speakers, with almost a mini-monitor-on-stands-style placement. I had the best luck in my listening room with the tweeter centers about six feet apart and about three feet from the rear wall, with only a few degrees of toe-in. I experimented with the speakers on carpets of various depths and I would advise against putting them on an extremely dense or fluffy rug without using the supplied spikes, because it will interfere with the travel of the passive woofer. *(continued)*



The quality of the bass response can be varied somewhat by attaching the yellow weights to the passive radiator. More weight will give you a weightier yet slower and more-rounded bass response, and less or no weight will give you faster, punchier bass. This should come in handy if you have a somewhat over- or underdamped listening room, making the Iguascu's very versatile in a wide range of locations.

Though the Iguascu's have a rated sensitivity of 88db, I found them easy to drive with the lower-powered amplifiers that I had on hand, the Naim Uniti (50wpc/solid state) and the Octave S40 (40wpc, vacuum tubes). Running through a series of test tones, I was able to hear solid output at 45hz, confirming the published spec of 48hz. But after 45 hz, the low-frequency response cuts off quickly.

### The Sound

I spent equal amounts of time with the Iguascu's in my smaller living-room system and in my main listening room, and I was equally impressed. Break in was relatively short; the speakers sounded good right out of the box and within a few days of continuous play were completely up to speed.

To stay in the French groove, I began my critical listening with Jean-Michel Jarre's *Oxygene* on Mobile Fidelity. I've had a sealed copy of this LP for years and have been waiting for a special occasion to break it open. What could be better than this? I started with my favorite track on the disc, "Oxygene 3," which has some spacey synthesizer riffs over the top of a gentle beat. While not possessing anything for judging tonality due to the all-electronic instruments, it does give a great spatial perspective to what a system can muster. So far, so good.

Moving right along to the remastered Beatles Mono Box set, I spent more than a few hours listening to a majority of my favorite Beatles tracks and was quite satisfied with what I was hearing. The Iguascu's did a great job of creating a large soundstage, even with a mono source. It's almost like seeing if a color video monitor does a great job with monochrome reproduction.

Back to the MoFi catalog for a while, I got into a late '70s mood, listening to John Klemmer's *Touch*. While not a favorite of jazz purists, the echoplex applied to Klemmer's saxophone is a good reference for large soundstaging and in many ways is not unlike the wide soundscapes that Jarre paints. Again, the Iguascu's passed this with flying colors, so I raised the degree of difficulty and put one of the new Blue Note reissues on the turntable and was very happy with the tonality and dynamics of *Sonny Rollins, Vol.1* that will be out by the time you read this. Rollins' sax exploded out of the speakers, and the drum kit in the background was spot on.

Various vocal tracks were also excellent, with great tonality and a very natural quality to both female and male voices. Johnny Cash and Tom Waits had the required amount of weight, while Ella Fitzgerald and Peggy Lee were light and airy without sounding nasal or tipped up in any way. I had equally good luck with light chamber music and wind pieces, so if your musical taste (and normal listening level) is slightly more to the mellow side, the Iguascu's will be excellent listening companions.

The only place these glass speakers fell a bit short was when I punished them with very loud rock music. When blasting Led Zeppelin and Korn at ridiculous volumes, the soundstage collapsed somewhat with details becoming smeared. *(continued)*

**The Iguascu's did a great job of creating a large soundstage, even with a mono source. It's almost like seeing if a color video monitor does a great job with monochrome reproduction.**



## STONE STYLE

So if you like to play this kind of music at very high volumes, the Iguascu's may not be for you. But keep in mind, this was somewhat cruel and unusual punishment.

Do you want a mere box or a work of art?

If aesthetics mean little to you, the chance of achieving this level of performance for a slightly lower cost is a distinct possibility. But I can't think of anything combining this level of performance in such an attractive container. If you have held off on putting speakers in your living room because you don't want a pair of square wooden boxes sitting near your Noguchi table, your search is over. The Waterfall Iguascu's are truly a work of fine art that sound great as well. ●

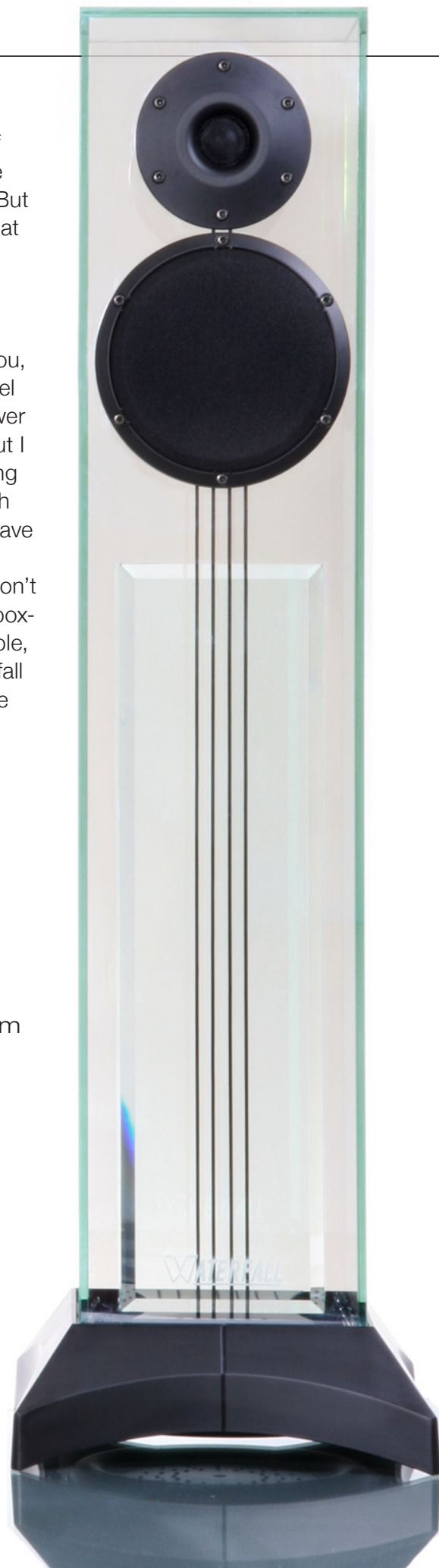
**The Waterfall Iguascu EVO**  
MSRP: \$4,495/pair

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## ONE STYLE

Media Decor offers a few different options to accomplish this. Their entry-level product, The Art Lift is a framed piece of art that uses a motorized lift to hoist the picture up and above your TV when watching. These products range from \$3,800 to about \$11,000 depending on complexity. They also produce a version with a mirrored surface that starts at \$2,800.

If your space requirements are somewhat more limited, their "Moving Art" option is the way to go. This allows the art to roll up inside the frame, clearing the window for your television. And of course it is remote controlled from the comfort of your couch. You can see a great example of how easy this works (and how easy it is to install) at the Media Decor website:

[www.mediadecor.com/video.htm](http://www.mediadecor.com/video.htm)

As you can see, this is very easy to accomplish, and according to Media Decor this is their most popular product. Your screen size and choice of art will determine the lead time to get your frame. Typically, these are taking 2-8 weeks to complete.

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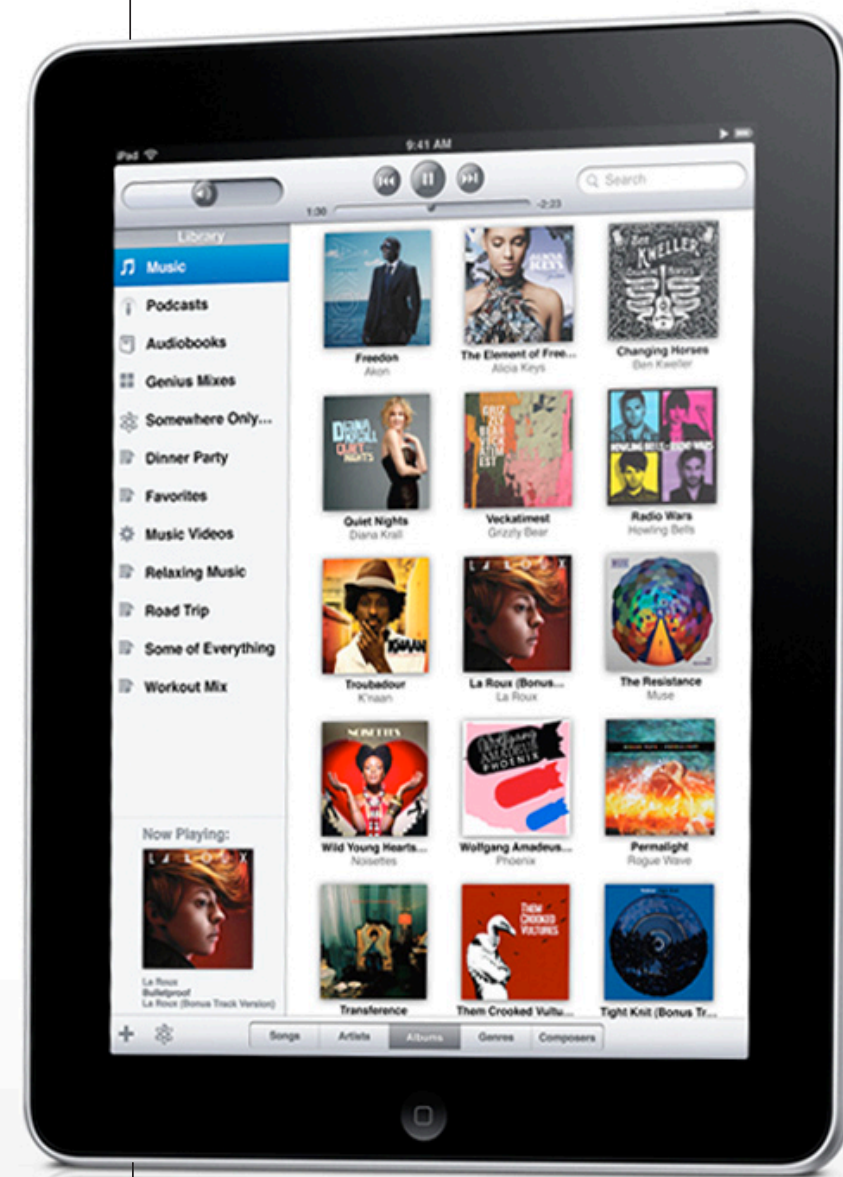
# Apple's iPad

\$499-\$829  
[www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com)

Say what you want, Apple's new iPad is about to start a new revolution, just as Apple has in the past with photography, graphic design and music. A lot of the 20-somethings buzzing about on the web are sniping that Steve Jobs' latest creation isn't a capable laptop, while others are complaining that it's too big to put in a pocket.

Unfortunately, they are all missing the big picture. The iPad looks to be a primo multimedia device. Now you *can* read your digital magazines anywhere, and hopefully with added multimedia functionality. (Look for an enhanced version of TONEAudio this summer) How about running iTunes in Cover Flow mode on a controller you can actually read?

The possibilities are mind boggling if you look at the iPad as an uber-Kindle rather than a laptop that won't multitask or run Word. At least for now. Though we've been Apple junkies since that famous Super Bowl ad and have sworn off the early adopter thing, this one is a must. We'll have a full report as soon as we can get our hot little hands on one.



# MartinLogan Motion

\$500/pair  
www.martinlogan.com

**M**artinLogan has incorporated the legendary Air Motion Transformer technology in their latest compact speaker. For \$500 a pair you won't believe how big and open these tiny speakers are *and* how much useable bass they produce. Combine them with a wireless Dynamo 500 subwoofer (\$495) to create a killer system that offers limitless placement options. Add Naim's new UnitiQute and you've got it all for a few pennies under the \$3,000 mark. Either way you look at it, that's extreme value. Review in progress.



## ZYX Omega X Phono Cartridge

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**T**he Omega - X takes advantage of a 1 gram "lapis ball" that they install at the cartridges' peak vibration point to fully damp the cartridge. A unique approach to be sure, but this is certainly a big, open, dynamic sounding MC cartridge. Expensive, gorgeous and exotic; as a great cartridge should be. Full report in issue #28

# The J-Corder Technics 1500

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www.j-corder.com

**W**hile many people are still involved in the analog revival, if you want to be taken seriously as a hard-core analog enthusiast these days, you need a serious tape recorder, with big reels. We can argue all day long about the validity of The Tape Project, but if you've got a big vinyl collection (especially a lot of 45 r.p.m. remasters) the J-Corder will not only come in handy, but it will cut down wear and tear on your ZYX or other suitably priced phono cartridge.

Want to listen to those rare, first stamper LP's at parties, but don't want your friends anywhere near your turntable? Put your favorites on tape; with the reels spinning away at 15 i.p.s. all but the fussiest audiophiles will have a tough time telling the difference.

Jeff Jacobs, the J in J-Corder brings over 35 years worth of technical expertise to the table to fully restore these decks. He strips them down to the bare faceplate, removing everything and then rebuilding the deck from the ground up. Anything that needs repair or replacement is fully sorted out so the final deck is better than new.

Review in progress, but this is an essential part of your system if you've got a lot of rare vinyl. ●



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The Absolute Sound,  
Issue 193



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- Jeff Dorgay,  
TONE Audio  
Magazine,  
Issue 18



running springs audio

# One to Buy, Two to Toss

By Jeff Dorgay

While we all share an equal enthusiasm for 'phones here at TONEAudio, I always have a good time when I visit Headphone Planet. It forces me to get out of my rut with the same four headphones that I use on a regular basis. This time, we investigate relative newcomer on the headphone scene, Lawton Audio. While their motto is slightly over-enthusiastic – “To produce the world’s finest headphones” – they certainly get an A for effort on their Denon Mods.



## Lawton Audio

Denon D-7000's (modified)  
\$799 plus your Denon 7000's  
[www.lawtonaudio.com](http://www.lawtonaudio.com)

**L**awton started the way many headphone modders do, hanging out on the various internet forums, then taking a pair of favorite phones and tinkering with them until they sounded better. After producing a small number successfully, he made Lawton Audio into a business and scaled up his operation.

Many headphone lovers don't realize that most headphones in the \$500 - \$1,500 range still have limitations, especially in the area of the cables and various mechanical issues surrounding the headphones to mass-produce them. Most of the majors put the bulk of the R&D funds into the actual drivers, so the modders have quite a bit of room for improvement. The Denon's here are no different.

Lawton starts by heavily damping the chassis with special materials in a 2.5 hour process, resulting tighter, more resolute bass and more focused mids. But it doesn't end there. Next, they remove the relatively chintzy stock wire with full cabling from Jena Labs and a high quality ¼-inch plug from Furutech. Finally, Lawton and crew remove the stock wooden driver enclosures and machine their own, giving the driver more enclosure space, which enhances the phones' ability to throw a larger soundstage, and improves the phone's overall tone. In all, these mods provide a huge improvement from stock.

The final touch, which you don't notice until you place the stock version next to the Lawton version, is an ear pad that is about a half-inch thicker, increasing the ear-to-driver distance inside the phones. This is the crowning touch on the Lawton phones that presents a much more lifelike sound.

If you are someone who doesn't enjoy listening to headphones because the sound seems to be coming right out of the middle of your head, you will love these; that extra space makes a world of difference.

#### Garbage in, garbage out

My first listen with the Lawton phones was through a couple of inexpensive headphone amplifiers that shall remain nameless. The sound was so harsh and bright that I couldn't stand more than about 10 minutes with these on my head. So I immediately switched to the headphone amplifier in my Red Wine Audio Isabella, and was greatly relieved. I also tried the headphone amplifier in my Burmester 011 pre-amplifier and was pleased with the sound there. The bottom line: if you have a budget headphone amp, the Lawton's will expose every flaw. But if you have a great headphone amplifier, you will be greatly rewarded.

After spending hundreds of hours with the Lawton phones, I'd say they are the closest things I've heard to electrostatic headphones. They have a level of resolution that I've only experienced a few times and always for a lot more money. Considering that Amazon and a few other outlets are selling brand new Denon 7000's for \$799, you can have a completely modded set for about \$1,600. Considering the cost of the latest offerings from Grado and Sennheiser (which both still need cable upgrades), this is a good deal.

Much as I liked the resolution of the Lawtons, I was most impressed with the bass response. One of my favorite test tracks for bass response is "Pimp" by the Tubes, from their *Young and Rich* album. The opening bass riffs were solid, tight and defined, with a level of weight that I've never heard with headphones so far. This led me down a wacky path of every CD I had with major bass riffs to investigate further. There are definitely times when having over 5,000 CD's at your disposal is a bad thing. Suffice to say, the Lawton phones have awesome bass response.

#### Space, the final frontier

As I swapped back and forth between the stock Denon's and the modded ones, the effect of the thicker earpads became more evident. It reminded me a lot of the Meier headphone amplifier we tested last year that offered a circuit that mixed the left and right channels slightly, which actually makes the stereo image seem more realistic. With the modded phones, I always felt that I was listening to music; with the stock ones, I always felt that I was listening to headphones.

Spinning some vinyl with the latest Blue Note releases from Music Matters, I was impressed with the dynamics of the Lawton phones. Again, that extra ear space, allowed acoustic instruments a more natural sense of decay. Again, not so "headphone like."

Near the end of the review, I broke down and listened to some female vocals. This was the final test that the Lawton phones passed with flying colors. On the sixth track of Anja Garbarek's *Smiling and Waving*, "Really Big Mouth," when she sings "I've got a really big mouth," it sounded as if she was about four feet in front of me. Almost creepy realism, but cool.

#### About those bigger cups

I only have one gripe about the Lawton phones. The wood grain on their upgraded cups is gorgeous, but I'd love to see about 20 more coats of clear on these babies. While the stock cups are smaller, they are beautifully finished. The Lawton phones feature wood with a very porous grain structure and looked too much like a wood shop project for my taste. At they sit now, A+ for sound, B for fit and finish. (Ed. Note: at the end of the review, during the fact checking process, Mark Lawton commented that they will be offering a smooth finish version of their wooden cups for an additional \$79, so if you'd like your Lawton's to look more like the stock Denon phones, this will now be possible.)

If you want the sound of electrostatics without the bother, these are the phones for you. Highly recommended.



## Kidz Gear Phones

**\$19.99 (wired)**  
**\$34.99 (wireless)**  
[www.gearforkidz.com](http://www.gearforkidz.com)

Though a set of headphones aimed strictly at kids *seemed* like a great idea and the price was right, I suggest passing on the Kidz Gear phones, at least for now. My 16 year old is way too grown up for anything that says "Kidz," so I passed them on to staff writer Jerold O'Brien's two nieces, age 7 and 11. (Who are very careful with things ...) After a tertiary listen, I was fairly underwhelmed with the sound, but I wanted to see if they could be put past the kidz.

Uncle Jerold is raising the kids right, only putting uncompressed music on their iPods. Older niece Katy said, "These sound really tinny" as she listened to The Beatles *Love* on her iPod touch. I tried to convince them that the headphones just needed some break in, but they weren't having it. So I agreed to leave them there for next week's road trip with Mom & Dad to Seattle.

Upon return, I found out that the phones had broken by the third use, and I have to stress that these are not destructo kids. The wireless pair faired a little better, but I found out later that because

the sound quality was not enough to keep niece No. 2 engaged, they didn't get enough use to get broken.

Just so you think I haven't violated child labor laws and jobbed all the hard work out to a bunch of 11 year olds, I listened to the second pair that was sent. Not good. Personally, I'd suggest buying your kids a pair of Sennheiser HD201's for \$29.95 and calling it a day.

Here's hoping Kidz Gear can step up their game. Katie summed it up perfectly when she handed the phones back to me: "The people who made these must not have kids." ●



ph. 800.449.8333  
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# Mighty Mites!

## The Snell K-7

By Jerold O'Brien

One of audio's great names is back at the forefront. Many of you may remember Snell Acoustics from the early days of THX sound, but you might need to roll the clock back even further. When our publisher and I were causing trouble in our high school electronics class and reading *Stereo Review* instead of doing our homework, Peter Snell had introduced the Type A, which was a monster that weighed almost a hundred pounds when small bookshelves were all the rage.

We made a pilgrimage to our local HiFi dealer to hear them and after 10 minutes, the "audio consultant" escorted us to the door, knowing he'd never sell a pair of \$1,500 speakers to a couple of high school kids. We thought \$2,000 was insanity for a pair of speakers in 1976. You could buy a nice clean '69 Z-28 for that kind of money.

Thirty-five years later, the Camaro costs \$40,000 and \$1,500 buys you the compact Snell K-7's you see here. That's progress, dude. And just like the reborn Camaro, the original man is not in the driver's seat at Snell. But the guy now calling the shots, Dr. Joe D'Appolito, is a top speaker designer in his own right; he's the man responsible for the famous D'Appolito array configuration, with a tweeter placed in the middle of a pair of mid-range drivers. He's been with Snell since 2002 and is now in charge of design full time.

It's worth noting that the K-7's are hand built here in the U.S. for that price. I've tried some pretty cheesy speakers from some major players in the audio industry at this price

point that all have "Made in China" stickers on the back. The K7's are a pair of serious speakers that you can be proud to own. They are available in basic cherry or black painted walnut with perforated black metal grilles.

### Setup

Because of their small size, the K-7's are probably more suited to a small room, but they have a very cool feature that makes them more versatile: a "boundary compensation" switch that optimizes the woofer output for mid-room or corner placement. There is



Snell

a pair of port plugs included in case you need to filter the bass at 80hz for use in a surround sound system. This should make the K-7's useful in a wide range of applications, and to increase their versatility, they are also available as the IW-K7 for in wall use or IC-K7 for custom installation. Snell claims that there are no performance compromises in either application. *(continued)*



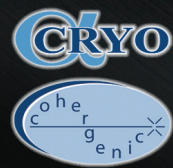
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I used the K-7's in my main listening room, which is about 16 x 20 feet, about three feet from the rear wall and six feet apart on 24-inch Sound Anchor stands. I tried a pair of the cool carbon-fiber Whitworth stands that are on hand at our main office, but I prefer the extra bass grunt resulting from the beefier, albeit less attractive Sound Anchors.

The K-7's come with jumpers but can be run bi-wired as well. I ran them single wired for the duration of the review with Audioquest's latest Wild Blue Yonder cable. Don't laugh; their new cable, which we have in for review, is named after snack treats. I love those guys.

I began my listening sessions with the vintage ARC SP-9 we featured a few issues ago along with a gorgeous ARC D-76 that I've just restored, so I could see how the speakers would do with a tube amplifier. I finished the review with our publisher's Luxman L-590A II solid-state integrated amplifier. When the speakers were at the TONE studio for their hour in front of the camera, I made it a point to hook them up to the pair of McIntosh MC 1.2KW's that lurk there just to see how much punishment they could take. In some ways, nothing has changed since high school. And I still get kicked out of the HiFi shop. But seriously, even though these speakers have a modest sensitivity rating of 87db/1watt, they are equally at home with tubes or transistors, and they are easy to drive with an amplifier in the 35-50 watt range.

#### Don't Let the Size Fool You

The minute you take these out of the box, you can feel the quality that goes inside. Rather hefty at 17 pounds each, the K-7's continue the Snell tradition of individually matching the crossover network and drivers to .5 db of the reference pair of speakers.

That kind of fanaticism is commonplace in a \$70,000 pair of Wilson Maxx 3's, but it's pretty much unheard of in a \$1,500 pair of mini monitors.

Featuring a one-inch Seas silk-dome tweeter and Seas 5.25-inch woofer, and a 2.5 khz crossover frequency, everything looks pretty straightforward on the spec sheet until you begin to play music. These tiny speakers – 12 inches high, seven inches wide and 10.5 inches deep – rock out in a major way! Even with them out in the middle of the room, I was surprised at the solid bass response.

*(continued)*

**The minute you take these out of the box, you can feel the quality that goes inside.**



First up, "Bloody Well Right" from Supertramp's *Crime of the Century*. Immediately, you know these speakers can rock, with a weight to the lead guitar and bass that just makes you do a double take. A few friends who happened to be hanging out when I fired up the K-7's for the first time just shook their heads in disbelief. One asked me where the subwoofer was.

This has to be one of the mightiest little rock 'n roll speakers I've ever had the pleasure of listening to. Thanks to the extra expense that was spent on the drivers and crossover components, plus time on the test bench matching tolerances, these speakers have a lot of finesse.

After a healthy set of '70s rock, I moved along to another classic favorite, Pat Metheny's *American Garage*. My favorite track on this record is "Airstream," featuring some heavy interplay between Metheny on guitar and Lyle Mays on piano. This was the beginning of Metheny's signature sound, without much overdubbing or processing, and it has a light overall feel.

The wide dynamic range of the K-7's along with their clean midrange really did justice to the piano while maintaining a soundstage that extended well beyond the speaker boundaries. Staying in that groove, next on the list was Joni Mitchell's "Talk to Me" from *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. Again, the K-7's did not disappoint, rendering all of Mitchell's layered vocals cleanly across the room.

Even after extended listening sessions, the K-7's were never fatiguing regardless of the program material. While they seemed equally compatible with tubes or solid-state electronics, there was a slight preference for tubes, especially in a small room. This is one of those special little speakers that produces music way beyond what you'd expect for the money, when combined with the slight warmth and the moderate dose of mid-bass boost that usually comes along with budget tube gear.



The biggest mistake made by many fledgling audiophiles is putting too big a speaker in too small a room. The K-7 and a great amplifier will set you free. And if you just have to have more grunt on the bottom, add a modestly priced subwoofer to round out the package. But I'd spend a fair amount of time with speaker placement options before you do. You might be very surprised.

#### The Little Speaker That Can

As is common here, other reviewers often borrow smaller speakers during a review so that we can all compare notes.

The best compliment I can give the Snell K-7's is that no one wanted to give them back. It took a call from Sally Goff at McIntosh (who also handles marketing for Snell) saying they *had* to go to another reviewer for us to finally box them up.

If you are looking for a high-performance speaker in a small package, put the Snell K-7 at the top of your list. They feature top-notch build quality and stunning attention to detail. This is one of the most enjoyable small speakers I've spent time with in recent months. ●

**Even after extended listening sessions, the K-7's were never fatiguing regardless of the program material.**

The Snell K7 speakers  
MSRP: \$1,500/pr.

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# The YG Acoustics Anat II Studio

## A Wealth of Information

By Jeff Dorgay

There are probably about 20 or so serious speakers in the \$70,000 - \$200,000 range that receive the most attention in the HiFi press, and these could be accurately described as “destination” speakers. I think the chances are good that if you are flying in this rarefied air, these speakers could very well be the last set of speakers you buy. I know we’ve all told our wives that story, but when you get to this level, you should get it all – big dynamics, spot-on tonality and resolution in spades. In short, a mega speaker should take you somewhere you’ve never been.

Even if you’ve only paid attention to the mega-speaker world peripherally for the past few years, you’ve probably seen the ads proclaiming YG Acoustics to be “the world’s best speakers.” How many times have we heard this before?

Their flagship Anat II Professional carries a \$107,000 pricetag, but the model we’re reviewing here is the Studio, priced at \$70,000 per pair. The difference between the Studio and the Professional is the addition of a second powered woofer cabinet in the Professional, with an additional 400 watts worth of amplifier power. YG claims that both speakers have a very similar frequency response, but the larger speaker is intended for a larger room and slightly higher ultimate SPL.

I’ve chosen to concentrate on the Studio version, as the Professional already has had substantial coverage and probably is too large for most rooms. I also feel that combining the Studio with a great amplifier and source will produce a pretty amazing system for slightly more than the price of a pair of Professionals. But hey, if you’ve got a big room, and room on your AmEx Black Card, go all the way.

### Off to the Factory

Last March, I made a pilgrimage to the YG factory in Arvada, Colorado, to see what they were up to and to have a cursory listen of their product. The sound I’d heard at the various HiFi shows had always been quite good, but never what I would have come away calling the “world’s best.” In all fairness to YG, I’ve never heard *anything* at a HiFi show that I’d consider the “world’s best,” and that puts most of these speaker manufacturers at a disadvantage. *(continued)*

**The speaker cabinets are machined from billet sheets of aircraft aluminum, and the front panels, which are about two inches thick, are machined from “ballistic-grade” aluminum.**

People come to the shows to be wowed, and it's very difficult in that environment. However, I was very curious to meet the man who made these claims.

I was indeed impressed with what I saw (and heard). YG is one of the few manufacturers in North America to possess a five-axis CNC milling machine, so it has the necessary hardware to build their all-aluminum cabinets in house. A quick trip to the YG website reveals an extensive tour of the factory and assembly of the speakers.

Company principal Yoav Geva has an interesting past. As well as having a strong electronics background, he's always been a machinist as well. “I always felt that if I combined two areas of expertise, I would be much more marketable when I entered the workforce,” he told me over lunch at our first meeting.

The speaker cabinets are machined from billet sheets of aircraft aluminum, and the front panels, which are about two inches thick, are machined from “ballistic-grade” aluminum. Geva explained that this material is used on the nose cones of missiles and is even more rigid than the stuff making up the rest of the cabinet. A slight knuckle rap on the front or the side reveals an incredibly inert cabinet.

The speakers are available in silver or black anodized finish, with custom colors available upon request. Our test pair came in silver, which I found attractive and understated. All drivers are covered with spider-like grilles that stay in place magnetically. You'll either love or hate these, and I was in the latter camp. Take the grilles off, gorgeous. Fit and finish on the test speakers were exceptional, with all the edges smooth and tight. Most visitors to my studio really enjoyed the stark, industrial design of the Anat's; even the wives of a few friends commented on how well the YG's matched the aesthetic of my Burmester gear.



### Setup

Despite the speakers weighing about 270 pounds each, thanks to the woofer and mid/tweeter modules being separate, they are much easier to setup than the spec sheet might suggest. I used a set of thick nylon pads under each speaker to move them around to the optimum position. When sales manager Dick Diamond arrived, he confirmed that I had indeed found the sweet spot.

The Anat's come packaged with two sets of spikes, a large pair that elevates the speakers about three inches off the ground and a set that elevates them only about an inch off the ground. After some experimentation, we decided on the shorter spikes on the supplied nylon pucks. This brought the last percentage of image focus and bass tightness to the presentation.

Because the woofers are powered, you will need to run one pair of speaker cables from your power amplifier to the mid/tweeter cabinet and a pair of interconnects (RCA or XLR) to the woofer cabinet. *(continued)*

This will require that you have a preamplifier with a second set of variable level outputs. My Burmester 011 offers a set of balanced XLR outputs and a pair of RCA outputs which have 6db lower gain than the balanced outputs, which required cranking up the levels on the Anat's woofers almost to their maximum.

When I switched this combination with my other reference power amplifiers that have RCA inputs (using the higher output XLR connection to the Anat's), I was able to move the level control back to the middle of the range. For those of you with a Burmester 911 power amplifier, a quick call to the factory revealed that there is an internal setting on the 911 to adjust the gain and optimize it for use in a situation like this.

The remaining adjustments on the back of the woofer cabinet control crossover frequency, level, phase and EQ to fine-tune the woofers to your system and room.

Overall, the YG's were easy to set up and only required minimal adjustments to dial in completely. Thanks to the wide dispersion of the speakers, they will provide great results even when not perfectly optimized. This is not a fussy speaker. All of the Anat speakers are accompanied by a visit from a trained YG representative, so that they are optimally set up. This is a nice touch, as it should be when making this level of purchase.

#### How do we define the best?

If you've read any of the charts and graphs that YG and Stereophile have produced, you know

the Anat's certainly measure up well. Geva has developed an algorithm that has allowed him to optimize his crossover network for flat frequency response and phase coherence, which he feels is the key to the heart of all YG speakers. The drivers are sourced from

## I was constantly surprised when listening to familiar recordings at the extra layer of detail that was present.

Scan Speak, built to his proprietary specs. The engineering time spent on the bench certainly contributes to the highly natural sound of these speakers.

On one level, the world's best speaker might be the one that reveals the most music in the most natural fashion, and if this were our only criterion, then the YG Anat may well be one of the world's best speakers. It does a number of things very right. Geva and company definitely achieved their goal in terms of midrange clarity and an immersive soundstage. As someone who loves the panel sound, I must admit that this is the first speaker I've had the opportunity to audition that offers the gigantic, walkthrough soundfield that my reference MartinLogan CLX speakers provide, albeit at three times the price.

The Anat also does an excellent job of providing lifelike dynamics, which I feel is an essential part of creating a musical experience. Thanks to their relatively high-sensitivity and powered woofers, you won't need a huge amplifier to achieve high sound-pressure lev-

els. The Studio was a perfect fit for my 16 x 20 room and would play as loud and deep as I needed them to go without using my Gotham subwoofer. Those of you needing even more output can step up to the Professional with its additional powered woofer cabinet. This is

also a handy option in case you find yourself in a larger room at some point, just add another pair of woofers.

#### The Sound

From the first time you press play on your CD player or drop the needle on the turntable, you'll be plenty impressed with the Anats, as I was. They offer a big sound and have exceptional resolution. This was what grabbed me instantly about the speakers: they seemed to reproduce more fine detail than anything I've ever experienced. Cymbals faded out a little further, the bass had just a little bit more texture, etc., etc. The Anat really does a great job of offering this much detail without being harsh, grainy or feeling like the HF response is "tipped up" to get the detail.

As I mentioned earlier, the Anat's threw a huge soundstage in all three dimensions, almost to the point of sounding like a good 5.1 system, but with only two speakers. I was constantly surprised when listening to familiar recordings at the extra layer of detail that was present.

Tonality was excellent throughout, and I felt the Anats did not embellish or subtract from anything I listened to, whether the music was electronic or acoustic. Mids were gorgeous, highs very detailed without crossing the line of harshness, and the bass was extended and powerful. At the factory settings, the bass was slightly overdamped for my taste, but a little experimentation with the subwoofer controls allowed me the freedom to adjust the bass to taste. However, it's important to note that I tend to like bass a little bit more on the rich side of the spectrum, so this is more personal preference. A number of audiophile buddies that listened to the Anat's preferred the bass performance at the factory settings.

In the end, being a panel sound junkie, the three-dimensionality and the clarity of these speakers was what kept me so intrigued. I could easily write another page describing specific passages from a long list of records. But suffice to say, everything I played, and especially records I've heard a lot over the years, offered up some new sonic treats.

#### But is it too much?

A quick poll of the audiophile buddies revealed that they only listen to their systems in one- or two-hour sessions, a few times per week. My conclusion after hundreds of hours listening is that I think the Anats are probably better than a lot of the software that's available. My only observation of the Anats that may or may not be cause for alarm is their level of resolution.

Because they have so much resolution, it's like drinking a case of Red Bull when you listen to them. It's so intense and exciting, when I switched from the best recordings in my collection to the average ones, I wanted that buzz again! And the buzz is exactly their charm; it is an exciting experience. Granted, these speakers revealed more information on lesser recordings, but the dynamics and clarity of the good stuff was unmistakable. *(continued)*



## REVIEW

After a couple of hours, I wasn't fatigued from harshness. But the level of detail that these speakers revealed was so exciting that I found myself somewhat exhausted from my brain processing so much information. Excited but exhausted. Much like a Ducati Desmosedici RR motorcycle, (another great way to spend \$70,000), the Anat's are a thrill ride that can take you to places you've never been. But it can also rattle your kidneys on the way to lunch on a less-than-perfect road. It took a few long listening sessions to get used to the extra information at my disposal, and again like a very high performance vehicle, I soon became acclimated to the resolution these speakers were capable of.

This extra helping of resolution made it easy to use the Anat's to evaluate other components. I could stick a wad of chewing gum underneath the shelf that holds my CD player and hear the difference. So these speakers are an excellent tool in that sense. Much like with the recordings, the price you pay is that the YG's will only give their best when paired with the world's best electronics. But I'm guessing that if you have 70 large to spend on a pair of speakers, you have a room and system to match, so this would be a moot point.

Even though the Anat's possess a high (92db/1watt) sensitivity, they are not terribly tube friendly, at least not friendly to modestly powered tube amplifiers. I tried my usual compliment of amplifiers from ARC, McIntosh, CJ and Prima Luna with not terribly good results; in most cases I got weak, rolled-off treble. The Prima Luna Dialogue 7 monoblocks did the best with their two-ohm taps, but they just didn't have enough resolution to make me happy. The sound was warm and romantic, but at this point, you're throwing out most of the resolution offered by the Anat's. I did not have a chance to use any higher-powered tube amplifiers during the review period. If you are a tube lover, I would suggest a demo with your amplifier specifically before making the purchase. *(continued)*



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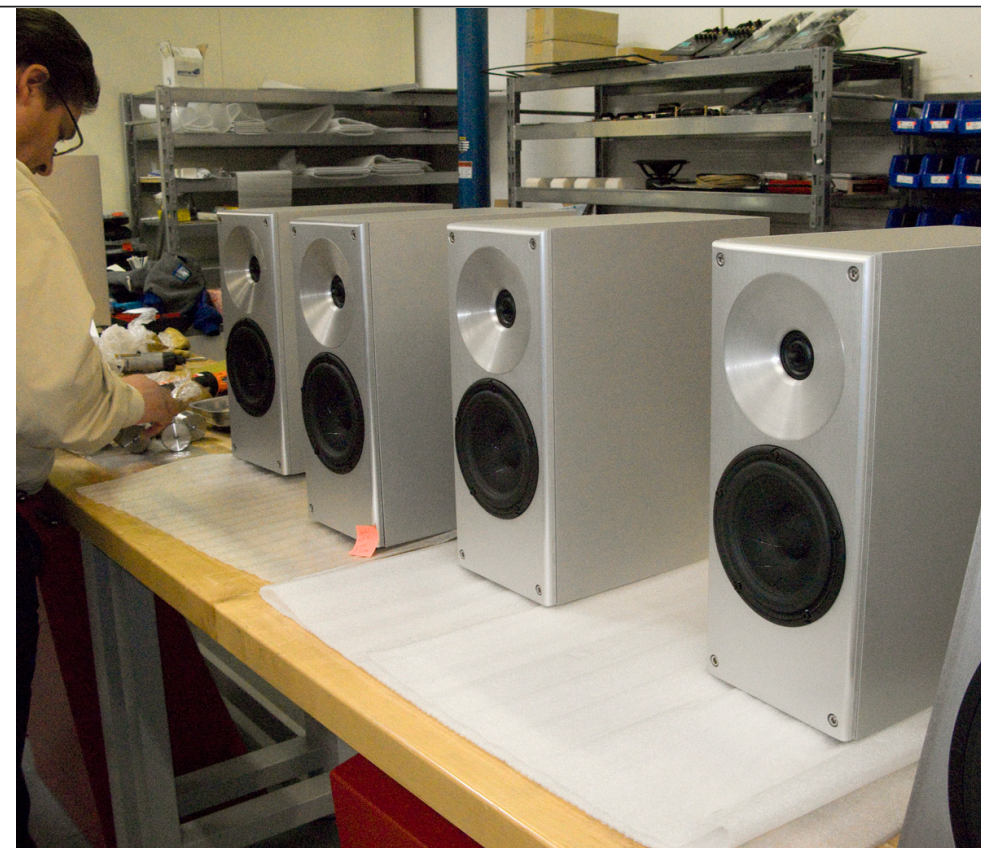
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REVIEW

The YG Acoustics Anat Studio  
 MSRP: \$70,000/pr.

**MANUFACTURER**  
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**PERIPHERALS**

**Analog Sources** Spiral Groove SG-2 w/Triplanar arm and Lyra Skala cartridge, TW-Acoustic Raven Two w/SME iV.Vi arm and Clearaudio DaVinci cartridge, SME iV.Vi arm and Dynavector XV-1s cartridge

**Digital Sources** Naim CD555, Wadia 781 SE, Simaudio Moon 750, Sooloos Music server

**Preamplifier** Burmester 011

**Power Amplifier** Bumester 911MK.3, McIntosh MC 1.2KW's, Simaudio W-7M's, darTZeel CTH-8550

**Cable** Shunyata Aurora interconnects, Shunyata Stratos SP speaker cable

**Power** Running Springs Maxim and Dmitri power conditioner, RSA HZ power cords, RSA Mongoose power cords, Shunyata Python CX power cords

**The \$70,000 Question**

This is usually the point in the review where the reviewer makes the statement, "Are these speakers worth 70 thousand dollars? I don't know because I can't afford 70 thousand dollar speakers." Though I actually own a six-figure HiFi system, it's still hard to talk about value at this level. The YG Acoustics Anat Studio is certainly built to the same level of quality as their competition with the same – and sometimes much higher – pricetag, so on that level, they are definitely worth the price asked.

While I haven't heard every pair of \$40,000 of speakers on the market, I've heard quite a few and in my experience, I haven't heard a \$40,000 speaker offer up the level of resolution that the Anat's do, so in this respect, I feel the pricetag is justified.

The remaining questions would be: do you like the aluminum finish, and do you have a system worthy of speakers that can deliver this level of performance? If the answers to these two questions are yes, the YG Anats are a must-listen. ●

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# The KEF xQ-20

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## UNA VOCE

By Jerold O'Brien

KEF HAS A LONG TRADITION OF ENGINEERING EXCELLENCE. Since their very beginnings under Raymond Cooke's guidance and technical know how, the company has proven time and again that rigorous acoustics research and properly applied engineering techniques pay off in the accurate reproduction of recorded sound. Look no further than such models as the 104aB, 105, 107, 103.2, 104/2 and the latest Reference Models and you'll see that unbroken tradition. Also remember that numerous British speaker manufacturers used KEF drivers in their pioneering designs. Notably, Linn and IMF used KEF drivers to great effectiveness in their products. The famous Rogers LS3/5A BBC field monitor is the most notable example.

### UNI-Q Defined

For the past 20 years, KEF has been using its patented Uni-Q drivers in virtually all of its main-line products. To my ear, the earliest efforts of this technology worked well after a fashion but never quite pushed the right buttons. These early models always seemed just a bit off. Not so with the latest Reference Series and the amazing Muon. Or, I'm assuming, with the new Concept Blade. It just goes to show that with continual development, a good concept can be made great.

I've heard many dismiss the Uni-Q as simply a coax driver or

a dual concentric driver, but they couldn't be more wrong. The Uni-Q is quite complicated to build, but when properly implemented, it works as advertised. Simply stated, the Uni-Q driver places the tweeter in the precise acoustic center of the bass/mid-range driver so that the whole frequency spectrum comes from a single time-aligned point source. In addition, the directivity of the tweeter is determined by the curvature of the bass driver, which determines the directivity of low and mid frequencies.

*(continued)*



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This matched directivity supposedly gives more uniform tonal balance in both the horizontal and vertical axis. Engineers often refer to directivity as Q. This design unifies the Q of both drivers, hence the name Uni-Q. The promise of the driver is to deliver precise and steady images and a much larger sweet spot so as to avoid head-in-a-vise listening.

Excluding the Concept Blade, the xQ-20 on hand for review features the latest Uni-Q driver from KEF. It is a 6.5-inch bass/mid driver with a .75-inch elliptical aluminum tweeter. Covering the tweeter is a "tangerine" wave guide. This device helps maintain uniform HF dispersion and extension up to very high frequencies.

The bass/mid unit has a great-looking titanium finish over the poly cone. The spec for this handsome speaker is a conservative 52Hz-55kHz +/- 3dB. *(continued)*

**Covering the tweeter is a "tangerine" wave guide. This device helps maintain uniform HF dispersion and extension up to very high frequencies.**





Styling and build quality on the xQ-20 are superb. This pair came in a gorgeous Khaya Mahogany gloss finish. Birdseye Maple and Piano Black are also available. The front baffle is black anodized extruded aluminum bolted to the cabinet via four recessed hex bolts. The driver is mounted to the back of the baffle so no mounting screws are visible. The enclosure itself has curved sides, bottom and top.

#### Setup

A curved enclosure is inherently more rigid than a flat one and dissipates internal standing waves more effectively. A curved bottom could be problematic, but KEF offers two options for situating the speaker.

There are three screw-on feet for shelf placement and there are curved rubber pads that enable stand-mount operation. I used Whitworth Design Pulse speaker stands for this review. You can bi-wire these speakers, but I single wired them and used jumpers.

It is important to note that if your current speaker cables have spade lugs, you will have to make adjustments to use the XQ's. Unless you have banana plugs, the posts are almost unusable. The full diameter of the post is covered by plastic. The only way to use your spades (provided your speaker cables are able to be used in a bi-wire configuration) is to insert one tine of the spade lug into the hole where the jumpers used to go. I used some Shunyata banana to spade adapters, but this is not an optimum configuration. Memo to KEF and all other speaker manufacturers: quarter-inch or 5/16-inch binding posts or don't bother.

I set the speakers about two feet out from the back wall on the Whitworth stands. At my listening position, that put the tweeter a bit high for normal listening, although one nice feature that the curved bottom affords a listener is the ability to rock the speaker either backward or forward in its rubber cradle. I tilted them down a bit so that the tweeters were aimed to ear level.

After shakedown listening, I ended up toeing them in ever so slightly for maximum soundstage focus.

Make no mistake, Uni-Q works and it works well. The integration of the two drivers is as seamless as I've ever heard from a dynamic loudspeaker. The crossover network is audibly invisible as the two drivers operate in concert. Try as I might, I could not detect any "coax" sound whatsoever. As a matter of fact the more I listened, the more I became enamored of this design. Isn't this what we audio nuts have been asking about for years? A point source semi-full-range speaker? Look no further; this design grants that wish and then some.

#### Running the Gamut With the XQ

I started my listening with some female vocal tracks. Whether I was listening to Laurie Lewis sing "The Mill," Lizz Wright sing "Get Together" or Holly Cole perform "Jersey Girl," the voices were always front and center without any trace of strain or glare. Moreover, the air around the vocals was plainly evident along with a believable sense of dimension. Male vocals were presented without any chestiness or hollowness. I ran through Frank Sinatra, Peter Cincotti, Bobby Caldwell and numbers by The Fairfield Four without ever noticing that the KEFs imposing any sort of coloration on or exaggeration of the voices.

KEF states that the -3dB point for low frequencies is 52Hz. But after putting on a couple of stand-by bass tracks, I suspect that that figure is a mite conservative by a few Hz. On Brian Bromberg's ingenious version of "Teen Town" on Jaco, his tribute album to Jaco Pastorius, the double-tracked acoustic and electric bases can tend to sound muddy and confused.

What pleased me most with the KEF's were their ability to create really steady images, a big sweet spot and a three-D sound stage.

The xQ-20s sailed through the cut presenting the full, round fundamentals of the acoustic instrument while keeping the percussive nature of the electric one in steady focus. They don't go way down but they do show at least a believable hint of the lowest registers.

On live jazz recordings, the KEFs were readily able to capture room ambiance and room size exceedingly well. On Peter Erskine's *Live At Rocco*, the presentation was to scale and you could hear audience rustlings and whispers plain as day. On Medeski, from Martin & Woods' *Tonic*, the speaker's ability to capture the room acoustics almost puts you in the audience and lets you thoroughly enjoy the interplay among the musicians.

Where many a fine small speaker falls down is on orchestral works. Some do a fine job on jazz and vocal recordings but many just can't give you the large hall experience in a convincing manner while playing orchestral recordings. In spite of their diminutive size, the KEFs do a pretty good job of giving you a big picture with symphonic pieces. With the Rachminoff *Symphonic Dances* recording

of the Minnesota Orchestra with Eiji Oue conducting, the xQ-20s paint a fairly large picture of what is going on in that particular hall. While not sounding absolutely convincing, they don't fall too far shy.

At this point in the review, I needed to know if the KEFs could rock. And although you might find that using a drum solo off a jazz LP is a strange way to see if a speaker can rock, but bear with me. One of my acid tests as to a speaker's ability to show dynamics is to use Steve Jordan's drum solo on the title cut from Steve Khan's *Casa Loco* LP. Keep in mind that my heavily modded Dynaco MK.III's have gone bye-bye and a pair of Audio Research REF 210T mono-blocks are now in the system. *(continued)*

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## REVIEW

What I did miss was bass extension, cleaner and sweeter high-frequency reproduction and a level of transparency or see-through capability that my JM's offer. What pleased me most with the KEF's were their ability to create really steady images, a big sweet spot and a three-D sound stage. A few times, the mid-treble seemed to want to sparkle more than necessary, but they never really went there.

### Conclusion

As I stated earlier, I became enamored of the performance of the Uni-Q driver as the review progressed. I am now an official fan of this technology. No question about it, it works as advertised. And when you consider the overall fit and finish, build quality and gorgeous cosmetics that this speaker offers, then it should appear on your short list of contenders in this or an even higher-price category. When you think about it, we didn't evolve with two mouths, the one we have and another small one in our forehead. Bass and treble voice if you will. We only have one mouth from which issues one voice. The KEF's emulate that model perfectly, they speak *una voce*. ●

**The KEF XQ 20 speakers**  
MSRP: \$2,000 per pair

### MANUFACTURER

KEF US  
KEF UK  
[www.kef.com](http://www.kef.com)

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** Oracle Delphi V w/SME V arm, Lyra Skala cartridge

**Digital Source** Wadia 581i

**Preamplifier** ARC REF 3, SP-17

**Power Amplifier** ARC REF 210T, D76

**Cable** Shunyata Aurora

**Power** Shunyata Hydra 2, Shunyata Python CX power cords



And while 200 watt amps might seem like overkill driving a pair of bookshelf speakers, the headroom now available allowed me to play the xQ-20s at a really loud level. Only at the highest levels was I able to hear any sort of compression from the KEFs. Yes, these speakers can rock.

A few times while listening to the xQ-20s, I missed my regular speakers. Now it's not really fair to compare them with speakers that cost six times as much, and I had to keep that in mind when offering any sort of critique of the KEF's performance.

# Mark & Daniel

## Maximus Diamond + Speakers

By Mark Marcantonio

In every manufacturing category there exist the traditionalists, the bargain builders and the rebels. Audio is no different. In the past decade, upstart designers have stepped forward with both fresh and forgotten ideas that force the audio community to once again acknowledge that there is more than one way to execute fine musical reproduction.

Mark & Daniel engineers addressed both concepts: first with the usage of Compound Artificial Marble, a material with twice the density of MDF particleboard; and second, in adopting a recent version of the Heil air-motion transformer they call the DREAMS driver.





Mark & Daniel speakers start with a seamless manmade marble cabinet. The 22 pounds of each enclosure is a reminder that the Diamond+'s require both arms to move about. A quick knuckle rap yields a non-resonant "thunk." The rear face of the speaker contains a pair of horizontally placed ports. The white review pair with its angled beveled edges is quite handsome, giving a visual impression of a marquis diamond cut.

The Diamond+ is available in pale yellow, white or black for \$2,650 per pair (without stands) and have six custom colors available at a "slightly higher cost." You can view the alternate color choices here:

[http://www.mark-daniel.com/Pro\\_En.asp?ProID=28](http://www.mark-daniel.com/Pro_En.asp?ProID=28)

From the beginning, Mark & Daniel speakers have been created using the Heil design. Mark and Daniel states that the DREAMS driver, "Is a pleated type of ribbon module that creates sound waves by *squeezing* the air instead of having a cone, planar, or dome-shaped diaphragm *pushing* the air." The folds allow for greater area by which sounds can be reproduced.

An interesting fact is that the crossover point to the woofer is set at 700Hz for the Diamond+'s. Placing my ear up next to the ribbon reveals how much more music is coming through the tweeter of the Diamond + compared with my reference Eficion F200's, which employ a more conventional ribbon tweeter.

### Setup

The Diamond + speakers have a relatively low rated sensitivity of 83.5db/1 watt, so a higher-powered amplifier is a must to achieve a realistic dynamic range. I found these speakers particularly well suited to the 150 watts per channel of my Simaudio Moon i-7 integrated amplifier. When stepping down to a 60-watts-per-channel Rotel integrated from a previous review, the speakers did not really launch the way they did with the i-7.

By experimenting with a number of different positions, I was able to achieve the best balance of imaging depth and bass performance with the speakers about 30 inches from the back wall and 44 inches from the side walls, with just a hint of toe in, in my 16 x 20-foot living room. As the review pair came straight from the Mark & Daniel HQ in Tuscon, Arizona, with a fair amount of hours on the clock, I went straight into critical listening mode.

### Detail is the Name of the Game

The DREAMS driver is a definite success, one that I would describe as very natural overall, especially with acoustic music, yet still possessing the airiness that I've heard with other ribbon drivers without becoming clinical or overly etched. This driver also exhibited a very fast, clean transient attack, lending itself well to piano and acoustic guitar. *(continued)*

**The DREAMS driver is a definite success, one that I would describe as very natural overall, especially with acoustic music...**



I spent quite a bit of time going through my favorites from Keith Jarrett and George Winston and was consistently impressed at how natural the piano sounded. The quick, punchy dynamic performance of these speakers lent themselves to salsa and fusion jazz; my Spirogyra CD's never sounded better.

Compared to my Totem Rainmakers, James Taylor's voice on *October Road* went from a warmer tenor feel to a younger, drier Midwestern accent. The Diamond+ exhibited a whole new level of detail, revealing nuance that I hadn't heard on this collection of tunes before. Taylor's picking on *October Road*, came through quick, clear and defined, with his guitar sounding reminiscent of *Sweet Baby James*, relaxed and effortless.

With this recording as well as a few others, acoustic guitar had just the right balance of space, resonance and decay. Violins and violas had a natural texture without sounding harsh, and I was very impressed with a spin of the new Jung Trio disc on Groove Note. If you are a fan of acoustic music, you will be right at home with the Diamond +.

The Diamond+'s also impressed me with their ability to retrieve low-level detail, causing me to focus more on the percussion section of familiar recordings from Joe Jackson and Steely Dan than I had in previous listening sessions. The subtle details of a drum stick on the rim of a snare drum now seemed more integrated with the overall sound than before. And the triangle on

Steely Dan's "Rikki Don't Lose That Number" came through in a much more realistic way, with more of a three-dimensional quality than is typical with two-way monitors in this price category.

While the Diamond+'s will extend down to 42hz as specified, compression starts to set in quickly as the SPL meter approaches 100db. The 5.5-inch SX low-frequency driver uses a large magnet structure and overhung voice coil, but a small speaker can only move so much air. Again, the speaker did a highly admirable job for its size.

The mesh grille hides the woofer movement, but if you look closely, you can see the woofer's excursion. Under most circumstances in a modest-sized room, you will probably not feel the need for a subwoofer unless you are playing music incredibly loud, or selections with extreme bass extension.

**The Diamond+'s also impressed me with their ability to retrieve low-level detail, causing me to focus more on the percussion section of familiar recordings ...**

In many ways, the Diamond+'s sound reminded me of the ACI Emerald XL's that I had reviewed earlier this year for another publication. While not capable of playing AC/DC at concert-hall levels, they always put a smile on my face when not pushing the speakers beyond what they were capable of. Large-scale orchestral music was pushing it, but smaller ensemble music worked very well. *(continued)*

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- Multi-touch gestures for common functions
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- Control different rooms from anywhere in the house



### Wi-Fi to Infrared

Communication from iPhone or iPod touch to RedEye device via Wi-Fi, and RedEye device to entertainment gear via infrared



A hardware device and a free App available on iTunes turn the iPhone and iPod touch into a remote control

[redeyere.com](http://redeyere.com)

Much like the smaller Magnepans, the Diamond+ excelled at low-level detail retrieval, but they were not a champion at pinpoint imaging. Though this did not change much with different speaker placement options, the upside was a very wide sweet spot and great off-axis performance, something you can't get with a planar.

### A Few Variations on the Theme

Towards the end of my review, as I felt familiar with the speakers, I branched out to a few different amplification choices. A PS Audio Trio C-100 integrated amplifier was on hand, but even my Jolida CD player's vacuum-tube output stage didn't offer enough warmth and body for me. Class D amplifiers tend to be very speaker specific, so be sure to get an audition first if you are thinking of adding the Diamond+ to a system built around this type of amplifier.

Switching to the Vista Audio tube amplifier that was awaiting shipment back to the manufacturer was another less-than-satisfactory combination. Perhaps for short listening sessions at low volume, but in the end, the Diamond+ needs a high power/high current solid-state amplifier to deliver everything it is capable of. And thanks to the high resolution of these speakers, you will definitely be rewarded the better the amplifier you pair them with. I would seriously consider 100 watts per channel as a minimum.

### Best When Playing to Their Strengths

I found the Diamond+'s most intriguing when playing music that catered to their strengths. These small, stout monitors offer great dynamic range and quick transient speed, offering up a level of clarity rarely present at this price point. Match them with the right amplifier and they will definitely punch above their weight category.

Their wide dispersion and small size should make them easy to place in almost any room with good results, and their contemporary finish should allow them to blend with any style decor.

Overall, a very impressive pair of small speakers. ●

**The Mark & Daniel  
Diamond + v.2**  
MSRP: \$2,650 per pair

### MANUFACTURER

**Mark & Daniel  
Audio Labs of North  
America**  
800-781-6843  
[www.mark-daniel.com](http://www.mark-daniel.com)

### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Source** McIntosh MS750 music server  
**Amplifier** Simaudio Moon i-7  
**Cable** Audioquest  
**Power Cords** Shunyata Venom

# Penaudio Rebel 3

Penaudio's most affordable speaker is full of surprises

By Steve Guttenberg

**B**ig, expensive speakers get a lot of attention nowadays, but I've always had a weakness for overachieving little ones. The best of them give up only two things to large speakers: small speakers can't play really loud, and they make a lot less bass.

A pair of sweet-sounding Rogers LS3/5a speakers rocked my world in the late '70s. In the mid '80s, I had a dalliance with the original ProAc Tablette, and its resolution and speed took me to another place. A few years later, the Acoustic Energy AE1 was the first mini to unleash rip-roaring dynamics. Now along comes the Penaudio Rebel 3, and I gotta tell you, this bad boy rekindled my fascination with mini-monitors.





## REVIEW

How mini is it? Just 5.5 inches wide, 9.25 inches high and 11.25 inches deep. Viewed from the front, it's actually a little smaller than the old ProAc but a couple of inches deeper. I'm not about to compare the Penaudio's sound with my decades-old memories of the Rogers, ProAcs or AEs, and yet I can't help but think giant strides have been made. Then again, I haven't heard any of the latest versions of these landmark speakers, though I'd like to.

It's interesting to note that instead of the usual medium-density fiberboard cabinet, the Rebel 3's enclosure is fashioned from nine-layer Finnish birch plywood. You can get your Rebel 3s decked out in birch, cherry, oak or walnut real-wood veneers. The Rebel 3 may be Penaudio's most affordable speaker, but its fit 'n finish are excellent.

Wrap your knuckles against the 14-pound cabinet and you'll know it isn't one of those densely constructed beasts. It's actually on the lively side, but you'd never know it from the Rebel 3's sound. Low-level resolution and ambience retrieval are really, really fine.

Its 0.8-inch textile dome tweeter and 4.75-inch treated paper woofer are both SEAS designs; the new woofer is what primarily distinguishes the Rebel 3 from the Rebel 2.

'Around back, WBT binding posts handily accept even burly connectors. Internal wiring is by Jorma Design Cables, noteworthy for its Teflon dielectric and copper conductors that use a special ceramic glass "filler."

I'm not sure what that does for the sound, but Mr. Penaudio himself, Sami Penttila, is completely sold on Jorma Design Cables. That's good enough for me.

Another unusual feature I noted right away was the nicely finished inset metal port tube on the Rebel 3's rear panel. It probably doesn't produce any real sonic benefit over a plastic tube, but I don't want to see any plastic in a \$2,500 speaker.

Setup proceeded without a hitch. I had them on 28-inch stands, and spent some time moving the Rebel 3s to and fro. By Day Two, I settled on keeping the speakers closer together than usual in my room, about five feet apart with no toe-in, and three feet from the wall behind them. I slightly preferred the sound with the perforated metal grilles removed.

With a lowish 85dB /1m/ 2.83V sensitivity spec, you can assume the Rebel 3 needs some current to really sing. My 400-watt JC 1 Parasound monoblocks didn't have any trouble, but I'm sure any well-designed 50-watt tube or solid-state amp would be fine. However, the Rebel 3 will reveal weaknesses further up the chain, so don't scrimp on cables or your front end.

With really small speakers like this, I guess the big question is, "Can they make any bass?" Deep bass is MIA, but the Rebel 3 doesn't sound thin. In my large room, bass started rolling off around 80 Hertz, although it was still going strong in the mid 50s! *(continued)*



It's interesting to note that instead of the usual medium-density fiberboard cabinet, the Rebel 3's enclosure is fashioned from nine-layer Finnish birch plywood.

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Sure, some small speakers may sound like they generate more deep bass, but that's because they "cheat" by producing a bass bulge around 80-100 Hertz. I prefer the Rebel 3's flatter balance, and if you need more bass, it's easy to add a subwoofer.

All on its own the Rebel 3's low-end poise is pretty amazing for a speaker of its size. Likewise, stand up basses' pluck, tone color and woodiness, without any thickening or bloat, result in a more realistic portrayal acoustic basses than many larger and more expensive speakers. The Rebel 3's bass definition is superb.

Treble? Living with Magnepan 3.6 panel speakers boasting 55-inch tall ribbon tweeters, I'm used to high-resolution sound. But I still made an easy transition to the Rebel 3s. Few speakers with bona-fide high-end street cred boast such lifestyle friendly dimensions. The Rebel 3's tweeter is extended, open and very easy to listen to.

Full-boogie, high-impact, feel-it-in-your-chest sound may not be in the cards for the Rebel 3 or any pint-sized monitor I know of, but its lively, contrasty micro dynamics are exceptional. Milt Jackson's sweetly shimmering vibes on my Modern Jazz Quartet CDs and LPs took my breath away. Wider dynamic swings from the Dizzy Gillespie All-Star Big Band CD, *Dizzy's Business*, were something else again. Whoa, few little speakers handle uncompressed, swinging brass sections with this kind of élan, without even a hint of congestion or bite. (continued)

Few speakers with bona-fide high-end street cred boast such lifestyle friendly dimensions.



I wasn't sure the Rebel 3s could rock out, but the White Stripes' *Icky Thump* CD demonstrated the little speakers' wilder side.

Sticking with jazz, Abbey Lincoln's CD, *Abbey Sings Billie Volume 2*, a live 1987 recording had me reeling. Lincoln's whisper-to-a-scream vocals were fully present and totally alive. Again, the Rebel 3's immediacy was remarkable, and not in any sense forward or forced. Not one bit. Lincoln's soulful, utterly human presence was a thing of wonder. The Rebel 3's midrange tone, or voicing, was spot-on.

I wasn't sure the Rebel 3s could rock out, but the White Stripes' *Icky Thump* CD demonstrated the little speakers' wilder side. Meg White's thumpin' bass drum was surprisingly visceral, and Jack White's gloriously distorted guitars plastered a big smile on my face. Nudging the volume higher and higher, the sound held together up to a fairly loud volume. But I don't want to overstate its abilities. The Rebel 3's can't compete with larger bookshelf speakers or towers for brute force slam, but it's not afraid to party.

Giving voice to Morphine's CD, *The Night*, the wee speaker's full-bodied midrange was satisfying in ways few mini-monitors ever muster. Mark Sandman's deep-chested vocals and Dana Colley's baritone sax had lives of their own. The sound was magical in the way it combined warmth without loss of fine detail.

I used the Rebel 3s in my two-channel theater to good effect as I watched a couple of DVDs. With the lights turned low, I didn't think about the speakers' size. Then again, if I were going to use the Rebel 3 for home theater over the long term, I'd add a powered subwoofer. *(continued)*

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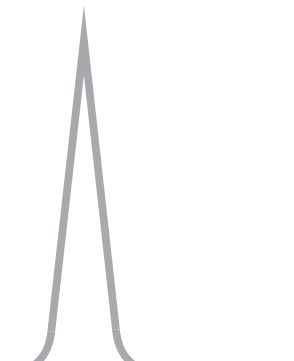


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Penaudio doesn't currently offer one, but I'd recommend using an acoustic suspension (sealed-box) subwoofer so it could better keep up with the Rebel 3's nimble woofer. Atlantic Technology's 224 SB or 334 SB subs might be good places to start.

I have to interrupt this rave to point out that late- night Rebel 3 listening sessions, with the volume turned down low, were less satisfying. Tone color was the first to go; the sound thinned out and the bass went south. But that didn't stop me from racking up late- night listening hours. The Rebel 3s' innate clarity never failed to pull me in. But the speaker comes alive with some volume.

Assessing value is another matter, the Rebel 3 goes for \$2,500 a pair, and for that kind of money you can buy more bass, better dynamics, and volume capabilities. But those speakers would be a lot bigger than the Rebel 3. Judged as a compact, high-resolution monitor, the Penaudio Rebel 3 is a winner. ●

**Penaudio Rebel 3 Speaker**  
MSRP: \$2,500 a pair

### MANUFACTURER

[www.penaudio.fi](http://www.penaudio.fi)

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** VPI Classic turntable with a van den Hul Frog cartridge

**Digital Sources** Ayre C-5xe MP Universal Player, Panasonic DMP-BD 60 Blu-ray player

**Electronics** Parasound JC 1 preamp, JC 2 power amp, Whest 2.0 phono preamp

**Speakers** Dynaudio C-1, Mangepan MG 3.6/R

**Cable** Zu interconnects, speaker cable, and XLO Signature-3 power cords





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Designed by Yoav Geva (Gonczarowski)

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E-mail: info@yg-acoustics.com Web: www.yg-acoustics.com

### Technology

Carmel incorporates the same technologies that make YG Acoustics' Anat Reference II Professional the best loudspeaker on Earth: YG's DualCoherent™ crossovers produce the best frequency response and relative phase available today; Carmel's enclosure is milled using 4-axis technology as opposed to the competition's 3-axis milling, which avoids the parallel internal surfaces common in other so-called "complex enclosure" designs.

### Detail

Carmel utilizes Scan-Speak drivers, modified to YG Acoustics specifications, with the tweeter assembled in-house. The unique enclosure design keeps mechanical losses lower than any competing speaker<sup>1</sup>, by combining the minimized turbulence of a sealed design with the low friction otherwise associated with enclosure-free concepts. All this is made possible through extremely tight manufacturing tolerances, and vibration-free pressurized assembly of the precision-ground and hardened CNC-machined enclosure panels<sup>2</sup>.

### Sound

The end-result is a speaker of remarkable refinement. Carmel is ultra-transparent, and presents a huge yet precise soundstage, with the neutrality and warmth of a live performance that YG Acoustics is famous for. This is all presented in a speaker with elegant lines and a shape that invites inclusion in the finest home environments.

### Reviews

Neil Gader from The Absolute Sound reporting on CES 2010

**"Best Sound:  
the new and smaller two-way YG Carmel."**

Robert Harley from The Absolute Sound, January 2010 (issue 199)

**"...the Kipod was capable of an enormously appealing and captivating sound. It disappeared in the sense that it was a transparent window on the music, with extremely low coloration. ...the Kipod Studio achieved its lifelike vitality by imposing so little of itself on the music."**

**"This quality was, I concluded, not just the result of the Kipod's lack of tonal colorations in the midband, but of its transient quickness and coherence. Leading edges of notes seemed to jump out of the presentation with startling speed... Transient information had a coherence that was world-class..."**

**"This quality is the Kipod Studio's greatest strength – the ability to sound highly resolving and alive without a trace of fatigue-inducing etch. ...its resolution was musically authentic..."**

Wes Phillips from Stereophile, March 2009

**"But most of all, the YGs were so adept at presenting dynamic details that, instead of simply making the music come alive, they presented living, breathing musicians making music in my living room."**

**"Wow – a speaker that makes me reevaluate an entire instrument's capabilities."**

Adam Goldfine from Positive-Feedback, Issue 45

**"...goose bump inducing realism..."**



<sup>1</sup> See YG Acoustics' ad titled Reason #3 for measurements of mechanical losses.

<sup>2</sup> YG Acoustics is unique in the industry in having in-house CNC precision-grinding equipment in addition to CNC milling machines.

# Era Design 5 Mini-Monitors

## Good Things Come in Small Packages

By Rich Kent

**B**ack in the '50s and '60's, no true audiophile would be caught dead with speakers smaller than a large Samsonite suitcase. The bigger the better was the motto of the day, which is why the original Klipshorn was so popular if you had enough space and could get spousal approval. These speakers possessed high efficiency, so low-powered tube amplifiers got the job done. But as the first solid-state amplifiers hit the market and 60 watts per channel was commonplace, and 200 watts per channel became available, the acoustic suspension designs of AR and KLH changed our perception of what a high-performance speaker needed to look like. The next step was the mini monitor, probably made most famous by the legendary LS3/5a. Now you could be an audiophile and still have compact speakers.



### Present Day

The Era Design 5 speakers from Signal Path International measure a modest 11 inches by seven inches by 10 inches and weighs in at a modest 15.8 pounds. The solid cabinet constructed of three-quarter-inch thick MDF has a wedge shape, narrowing to the rear of the cabinet where you will find large, five-way binding posts. The review samples arrived in Cherry with a smooth polished-satin finish that should pass muster with any interior designer. Michael Kelly is the engineer behind the Era Design 5's rear-port speaker design, which consists of a five-inch driver and a one-inch silk-dome tweeter. MSRP on a pair of ERA 5's is \$995 per pair.

Thanks to a claimed LF limit of 50hz (+/- 3db), these speakers can be used without a subwoofer in small rooms fairly easy. Their somewhat low sensitivity of 85db will require more-than-modest amplifier power, so the ERA's will not be the optimum match for low-powered tube systems. David Solomon from Signal Path said, "We have the port tuned to 40hz, so there aren't any phase shift problems associated with it."

**The D5's offered up a two-to-three-person-wide sweet spot, and thanks to their wide dispersion sounded almost as good when the listener is standing up as sitting on the couch.**

### Location Location Location

Because of the strong bass response of the D5's, these speakers do much better about two of three feet from back and side walls, giving the best balance of soundstage width and freedom from mid-bass boom. Avoid corner placement, as this will reinforce the bass too much.

The D5's offered up a two-to-three-person-wide sweet spot, and thanks to their wide dispersion sounded almost as good when the listener is standing up as sitting on the couch. Very impressive. As always with mini monitors, the more-massive stands you can find, the better.

### Break-in Necessary

The initial audition of The Era 5 was done on 40-inch stands, three feet from the rear wall and four feet from either corner just inside of my reference Martin Logan CLS speakers. I had thought of David and Goliath as I noted the size difference between the D5 and my CLS speakers.

"Coyote" from Joni Mitchell's *Hejira* album is one of my favorite tracks, with clean crisp staccato guitar introductions and Joni Mitchell's easily recognized voice. But I was stunned at how bright, shallow and irritating she sounded on the Era Design 5's. Having equally dismal luck with the next few CD's, I put a hundred more hours on the speakers in the spare bedroom before returning them to critical listening.

After about 100 hours, the metamorphosis was complete.

Upon listening to "Coyote" again, I had a much more satisfying experience. The bass response had tightened up somewhat, too, but there was still a bit of a hole in the upper mid-bass region. I'm assuming that this was a necessary design trade-off that had to be made to get the lower bass output of these speakers.

### Listening to a Wide Range of Material

Though Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* has been played too much over the years, I chose this next because of my familiarity with the record, and because I've never heard it on small speakers. This is a demanding soundtrack that can bring many a speaker to its knees when driven hard. The first track, "Speak to Me," with the metric beating heart introduction displays a speaker's capability to separate the heart beat from the mixture of deep and upper bass tones. The D5 did well in the lower bass tones but had trouble discerning the upper bass detail, delivering a somewhat one-note bass. While this is no substitute for a full-range floorstanding speaker system, it was very impressive for such a small speaker.

The fourth track, "Time," with the multiple ticking clocks and alarms presented a wide and defined soundstage lacking only in depth. The D5's upper midrange and treble range have the ability to resolve the different size clock ticks so well that you can almost visualize the moving gears and levers in front of you. *(continued)*



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One has to hear the dynamic capability of this small speaker to believe the size and quality of sound it puts out in relation to its size.

Staying in the '70s, Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* was my next choice. The initial harmonica rip at the beginning of "Just Like A Woman" startled me, thanks to the realism that the Era D5's were able to deliver. Dylan's voice was spot on in terms of timbre and phrasing as well. With the right music, these little speakers could really cook.

Barbara Streisand was the second-to-last stop on my musical journey with the Era D5's, and she ended up being the ultimate torture test. Her latest album, *Love is the Answer*, has an interesting combination of orchestral and small-quartet arrangements that feature Diana Krall on piano for the quartet pieces. Her tone control, vibrato and lyrical phrasing are tough to nail on a big speaker and, alas, the D5's struggled here, failing to produce the realistic three-dimensional image I'm used to on my reference speakers.

These failings were also apparent when listening to large-scale orchestral pieces, with the upper-bass thinness actually making these speakers sound worse than they are. So if your taste is primarily classical, the D5's should probably be avoided.

#### The Sub Experiment

I did not have any better luck pairing the D5's with my MartinLogan Descent sub, no matter how much I adjusted crossover frequencies and phase settings. The sound-stage actually shrunk and there was no coherence at all. I'm sure that pairing the D5's up with the Era Sub would be much better. However, our publisher did comment that the D5's worked very well with his much smaller MartinLogan Grotto i subwoofer and the Tannoy TS 8, which seems to be his workhorse subwoofer for mini-monitors. Bottom line, if you aren't going to keep your speaker system all Era, careful subwoofer selection will be in order. *(continued)*



**One has to hear the dynamic capability of this small speaker to believe the size and quality of sound it puts out in relation to its size.**



I could have easily sold two or three pairs of them that night.

A properly broken-in D5 projects the illusion of a much-larger monitor speaker, which will have most listeners shaking their heads in disbelief. This \$995 speaker has the potential of having a large musical presence in any size room without an overwhelming physical presence. A huge sound for a bargain price and pleasing aesthetics that allow the Era D5 to fit into any décor, and with a build quality that is second to none.

If you once thought it was impossible to get big sound from your small space, this is one speaker you have to audition. Good things definitely can come in small packages. ●

**The ERA D5 speakers**  
MSRP: \$995/pair

#### MANUFACTURER

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#### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** Linn LP 12 w/Shelter 501ll cartridge

**Digital Source** Krell KPS-20i CD player, Cambridge 740

**Preamplifier** McIntosh C2200

**Power Amplifier** McIntosh MC275, Cambridge Azur 760

**CABLE** MIT

#### Comparisons

For a quick comparison, I brought the D5's over to a friend's house, who was using a pair of Focal 706S bookshelf speakers with a Cambridge Azur 760 amplifier and 740 CD player in a much smaller room than mine. This particular room is only 10-by-16 feet and though it has carpet on the floor, it still sounds more live than my listening room.

It was an interesting comparison. The Focal speakers sounded more laid back and smooth in contrast to the D5's, which sounded slightly faster overall. While the D5's had a "bigger" overall sound than the Focal's, the Focal speakers had more refinement and less grain throughout the frequency range. Either way, the little D5's made a great showing for their price point.

It's a toss up when considering amplification choices for the D5's. The solid-state Cambridge had a better overall grip on the lower frequencies, and the 50-watt per channel class D amplifier in my Sonos was passable. But in the end, I still preferred the overall smoothness when the D5's were connected to my McIntosh MC275.

#### Tons of fun

The D5's have an addictive quality that makes you just want to get up and move to the music. At a recent holiday party gathering, Lady Gaga's "Poker Face" was blasting through the crowd and had everyone dancing. Everyone was fooled into thinking the "big" (CLS's) speakers were playing, and they were in awe that the small D5's were the sound source.



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## Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

### The Garrard Zero 100C

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Maybe I can't have all of the vintage cars from when I was a kid, but collecting the vintage turntables of my youth seems to be a much better idea as far as storage space and financial commitment goes. I'm on the hunt for a clean Shure V15 type III to go along with this eventually, so it's just as I remember it when I walked in the door of Allied Radio in 1973, with a \$189 pricetag. The cartridge was a then unheard of \$49.95 but you could add a Shure M91ED for just \$10 more. Pretty amazing, when you realize how far vinyl has come...

A little sniffing on the web reveals mixed feelings on the Zero 100. Many claim that it was a design that was ahead of its time, with some serious flaws, especially the plastic, two-piece headshell. Others still swear by it and claim it is much better than "the junk you can buy these days."

Sound like a familiar argument? Stay tuned to the TONEAudio Blog and we'll keep you posted once a plinth is built and this vintage classic is up and spinning records. ●



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