TONEAudio
Music.Gear.Style.
No.29 May 2010

GIANT MUSIC ISSUE

CONCERT COVERAGE:
Tegan and Sara, Pat Metheny, Ratt, Shelby Lynne, Jonsi, Peter Gabriel and More...

We talk to Peter Frampton about Music, Hi-Rez Audio and The Simpsons

Gwyneth Herbert Discusses Her New Tour and Album

New Music from Pantera, Bettye LaVette, The Black Keys, Graham Parker, Judas Priest and More!

Bob Gendron Reviews THE ROLLING STONES: Exile On Main Street Box

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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Don't Talk, Watch!

As the band Mastodon so eloquently put it in the song, "Cut You Up With a Linoleum Knife": don't talk, watch. While this message was intended for those in the audience watching the *Aqua Teen Hunger Force Movie*, it applies to live music as well.

I've noticed a disturbing trend in the live music scene over the past few years, and it appears to be getting worse. It's bad enough that people can't stop texting and eating during a show, but they have to leave their seats repeatedly to get more snacks and then inevitably make yet another trip to the restroom.

Back in the early '80s when I attended a Rickie Lee Jones performance at Milwaukee's Performing Arts Center, Ms. Jones stopped the show and railed on a guy for going to the lobby. She said if "anyone else got out of their chair for the rest of the evening, the show was cancelled." At the time, I thought she was a raving bitch (although I did fight the urge to pee until the end of the show), but now I think she had the right idea.

You're going to a concert to escape reality in the first place, right? So can't you turn off all that stuff and zip it for two hours? It might actually do you some good, and I know I'll have a much better time if I have to sit nearby and you're *not* texting someone on your Blackberry during the guitar solo.

Let's have some manners people, and show the artists some respect while you're at it. I'm sure they hate your fidgeting as much as I do.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Adrian Goldsmith

Adrian is a very enthusiastic music fan, living just outside of London after returning from a spell of sunny weather, living "down under." By day he earns his living in the world of "corporate finance" but in his spare time he is devoted to discovering and listening to new music from around the world.

His tastes are very broad but Adrian has a particular fondness for European Jazz, music from the ECM Record label and some occasional good old fashioned English Prog Rock! True to his nature, Adrian covered Peter Gabriel's show at London's 02 Arena on page 28.

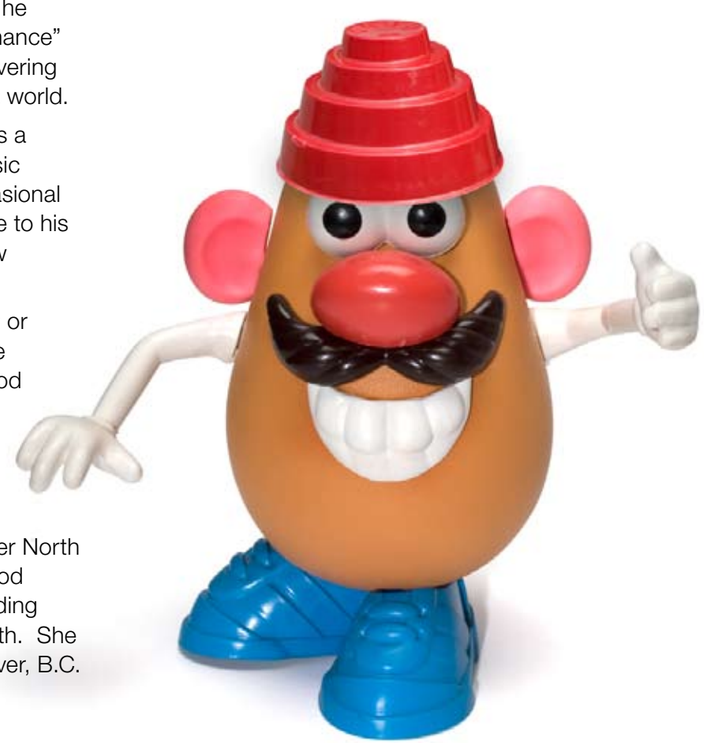
When not attending live music concerts or listening to music Adrian likes to spend time indulging his other "boy toy" interests of good Hi-Fi, photography and mountain biking.

Carling Hind

The communications manager for Burmester North America, Carling Hind has a passion for good music and good sound. She will be expanding our music coverage to the Great White North. She covered the Miike Snow concert in Vancouver, B.C. on page 33.

David Thai

David has been taking pictures since he was a little boy. Experimenting with his father's Canon before his father was tired of fighting over the camera and bought David his own Polaroid at a garage sale. Nowadays you can find David in the photo pit of concerts and festivals or riding his BMX and shooting anything that catches his eye. He rocks both a Nikon D90 with an array of lenses and a Fujifilm Instax 210. David provided the image for the Miike Snow article and we expect to be seeing more of him in our upcoming issues. You can view more of his work at www.mrdavidthai.com



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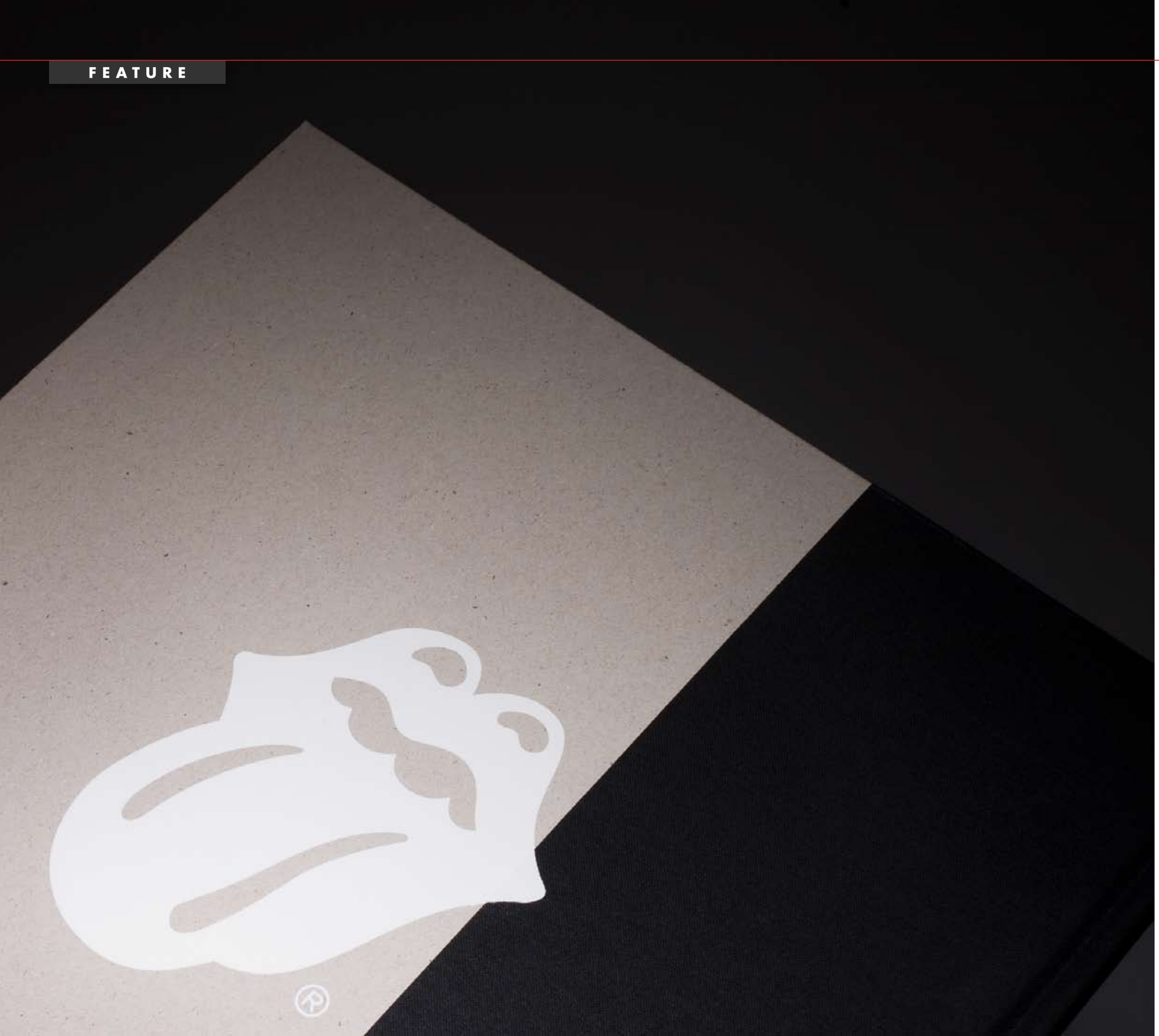
f any record ever deserved the deluxe reissue treatment, it's the Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main Street*. Given mixed reviews upon release in 1972, the double album has deservedly assumed an immortal place in music history. Commonly viewed as the English band's greatest effort, it is often cited as one of (if not the) best rock records ever made. Evidence of the iconic 18-track set's greatness is supported by the fact that few ever argue its merit. While the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band,* Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*, and Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*—all commonly cited as among the gold standard in pop lore—inspire debate, *Exile on Main Street* rarely fields any detractors.

The Rolling Stones

Exile on Main Street: Super Deluxe Edition

By Bob Gendron
Photos by Jeff Dorgay



Let it Bleed

Mastered from the original tapes and experienced on both vinyl and digital via Universal's Super Deluxe reissue, the album has never sounded so vital, loose, transparent, present, or alive. And none of the trademark dirt, rawness, and swagger have been sacrificed. Casual fans that don't want to shell out $179 (list) for the gorgeous box can enjoy the peerless record on either remastered CD (complete with a bonus disc) or standalone LP. Those that spend the extra money get both formats, a book, and a 30-minute DVD with snippets from the *Cocksucker Blues, Ladies and Gentlemen…The Rolling Stones*, and *Stones In Exile* documentaries. The footage of the Stones creating and milling about guitarist Keith Richards' French mansion in Nellcote is invaluable; it's too bad we're not given more. Ditto the live footage from the 1972 tour. For the price, listeners deserve all of the treasures that can be unearthed.

A 64-page hardcover book gets it right. Outstanding period photos function as windows into the sessions and the infamous vibes and parties that surrounded the Stones' 1971 summer in exile in Southern France; the visual reproduction quality is excellent. Current recollections from the Stones are mixed in with older statements to supply perspective. Anthony DeCurtis' short essay brings the album's situational context (the Stones fled England due to unpaid taxes stemming from poor management) into focus, as well as the unique manner in which it was recorded—via a mobile truck parked out front the mansion's basement that, akin to Woodstock's Big Pink, served as the unlikely albeit character-rich setting for some of the most legendary sounds ever put on tape.

Aftermath

However, anyone expecting to learn about the mysteries and myths that have long pervaded *Exile on Main Street* are bound to be slightly dismayed. Richards and company's vague allusions to the non-stop parties that occurred on the mansion's upstairs areas, the liquor- and drug-fueled environments, the all-night performance sessions, and the impromptu mix-and-match lineups that saw Richards occasionally sit in on bass and horn players Bobby Keys and Jim Price play random instruments serve only to deepen the intrigue. What exactly happened? How, in the midst of such chaos, did the songs get written? How did Richards' preference for spontaneous activity jibe with singer Mick Jagger's structured demeanor?
(continued)

Did “Tumbling Dice” arrive as quickly as “Happy” (penned and recorded in just a few hours) or “Ventilator Blues,” the latter developed on the spot as a reaction to the basement’s suffocating humidity, inferior ventilation, and jungle-level heat? To paraphrase a hanger-on who recalls the sessions on the DVD: How in the hell did the Stones and their friends operate in such conditions and, quite simply, get it all done?

The ten previously unreleased bonus tracks (not available on LP) don’t provide any definitive answers. Nonetheless, the songs are fantastic, easily topping anything the Stones have released in decades—not a huge surprise. The sleazy “Good Time Women” (a precursor to “Tumbling Dice”), ragged “I’m Not Signifying,” soulful “Plundered My Soul,” and vehement kiss-off “So Divine (Aladdin’s Story)” join alternate takes of “Soul Survivor” and “Loving Cup” as mandatory fare. As does the beautiful, forlorn piano ballad “Follow the River.” Yet, most of these tracks come with an historical asterisk. Rather than present them in as-is condition, Jagger elected to overdub vocals on a majority of songs, and in spots, added guitar, percussion, and harmonica. The results are strong but not genuinely representative of the *Exile* recording.

Still in Exile

At every juncture, it seems the Stones willfully suppress anything that would shed too much light on the process. The absence of plentiful bonus material—scour the bootleg market to get an idea of just how much is available, especially given that the tapes were said to be continually rolling—fuels the notion that the group is intent on keeping many secrets despite the fact that such revelations would boost *Exile*’s status, lore, and enjoyment. Unfortunately, unlike lavish box sets such as The Stooges’ *Complete Funhouse Sessions* that allow music lovers to literally trace songs’ development and origins, the *Exile on Main Street* reissue teases when it comes to breadth and scope.

Does the lack of more meaningful knowledge matter? Or, does it actually enhance the original music so expertly arrayed across four sides of vinyl? If anything, the reissue makes stronger any case for arguing *Exile on Main Street* as the penultimate rock n’ roll album. And why not, given that it’s a decidedly British take filtered through a thick, rootsy American lens. Never again did the Stones draw so extensively from the American South—or dig down so deep. *(continued)*

FEATURE

FEATURE

Organized so that songs are cohesively bunched together according to style—uninhibited boogie, dusty country, haunting blues, and redemptive gospel, all of which are tethered to early rock n' roll and spirited soul foundations—the album is a roundhouse of swinging rhythms, off-the-cuff arrangements, ghostly atmospherics, and communal grit. As DeCurtis observes in his liner notes, every song is firmly connected to the one that proceeds and follows it; skipping ahead to a certain track on the record robs the music of some of its impeccable allure.

Thematically, much has always been made of the Stones' ability to move beyond the 60s' hippie dreaminess and into an edgier, seamier territory that nonetheless doesn't close the doors to salvation. The transition isn't only due to the era (and the band's direct involvement at Altamont), but the tax problems that forced the band to relocate and the sticky confines in which the music was recorded.

Let it Loose

And it's this murky, dark, dank sense of place that Universal's multimedia reissue excels at producing, as the remastered sonics reveal just how much grime, sweat, and dampness cling to the grooves. The full-time availability of a horn section—a benefit of the living quarters and haphazard work schedules—is reflected in its appearance on a bulk of the album. Jagger's vocals are kept low in the mix (which, thankfully, wasn't touched on the remaster), putting him on equal footing with music that's more about feel than punch, dynamics, or pop appeal. Rock, and the Stones, would never be the same again.

Maybe one day the full story will be told and heard. Until then, *Exile on Main Street: Super Deluxe Edition* gets us a little closer to that dirty Nellcote basement but no nearer to the conversations, exchanges, and festivities that took place during that long, hot summer. ●

The Rolling Stones
Exile on Main Street: Super Deluxe Edition
Universal 2 180g LPs + 2 CDs + DVD + book.

Publisher's note: *We would like to thank Josh Bizar at Music Direct for getting us the Stones set before street date to facilitate this article.*

BUDGET GEAR:

The Shunyata Hydra 2

True High-end Performance

By Jeff Dorgay

Power conditioning plays an important part in getting the maximum out of your HiFi system, but a great power conditioner is generally a pretty expensive undertaking. Audiophiles with entry-level systems can't reap the benefit of a top-shelf power conditioner and usually resort to something more like a computer surge protector instead, and their system suffers for it. These are very primitive devices, and while they will provide surge protection of last resort, they always add grain and harshness to the musical presentation. It's not uncommon to read audio-forum posts where after trying one of these products and living with it for a few months, the user one day unplugs the system from the wall and notices that everything sounds better without the surge protector.

FEATURE

If you would like to hear a major upgrade in your system's sound on a tight budget, I suggest the Shunyata Hydra 2. There's even a few other places you can use one, but more on that later. The Hydra 2 retails for $395 and features one of Shunyata's SR-Z1 cryogenically treated dual outlets, allowing you to provide clean power to two devices.

This is as simple as it gets for increasing your system's performance. There is a 20-amp IEC plug on the back side of the Hydra 2 and two AC outlets on the front. Shunyata suggests (and I concur) that you should use the highest-quality cord from the wall to the Hydra and, if you have to, lesser-quality cords to your two components. While I must admit that I got improved results using a $1,200 Shunyata Python CX cord going from the wall to the Hydra, over my $125 Shunyata Venom power cord, this would somewhat defeat the "budget" nature of this column.

To keep it real, almost all of my listening was done using a 20-amp Venom cord from the wall to the Hydra and one 15-amp Venom each to the Naim HDX music server and Prima Luna ProLogue One power amplifier that make up my living-room system.

(continued)

BUDGET GEAR:

Instant improvement

While the Hydra 2 is only about the size of three cassette-tape boxes, the improvement it made to my living-room system was huge. Precisely because the ProLogue One is a modestly priced, low-power tube amplifier, it does not have as sophisticated a power supply as say a big McIntosh or ARC tube amplifier, so it responds incredibly well to cleaner power. I used the Hydra 2 with a few of my favorite budget integrated amplifiers, both tube and solid-state, with excellent and repeatable results.

As with any good power product, the improvement allows your equipment to deliver more of what it was designed to do. *Everyone* has dirty AC power, no matter what the message-board guy in outer Slobovia claims.

Upon plugging the Hydra 2 into my system, I immediately noticed the music having a darker background overall, with better image focus and less grain in the upper registers. Starting from no Hydra 2 and stock power cords, I went to a pair of Venom cords and noticed some improvement. But I would say adding the Hydra was about 80 percent of the improvement provided by the cords and conditioner combination.

To make the transition easier to hear, play some of your favorite music that has a certain amount of airiness and decay. Cymbals will fade out with more gradation between loud and quiet, and acoustic instruments will sound more natural. Though I did notice a better presentation with tube and solid-state amplifiers, I felt that the group of tube amplifiers that I used seemed to benefit more than the solid-state amplifiers. So budget HiFi enthusiasts take note: if you're running some classic tube gear, it will really benefit from adding a Hydra 2 to your system.

Other Opportunities

I'm a confessed nerdtron who likes to experiment, so I tried the Hydra 2 a few other places to see what the improvement might be, if any. Plugging my 42-inch Panasonic plasma TV into the Hydra 2 also yielded great results, with more snap to the bright colors and less overall noise to the picture, almost as if the picture had a slight haze before adding the conditioner. Ditto with the 30-inch Apple Cinema Monitor that I use for producing TONEAudio and the 27-inch iMac it plugs into.

Power-line noise is the enemy of digital sound and images. Scans made when plugged into the Hydra 2 exhibited less digital artifacts when highly enlarged. So if you still use a flatbed or film scanner in your digital-imaging workflow, you'll find it worthwhile to plug it into a Hydra 2 as well.

A Definite Winner

Shunyata's Hydra 2 is the only budget-priced power-conditioning product I've used that offers true high-end performance. I think you will find that it will provide an improvement way beyond the modest price tag, and I am happy to award the Hydra 2 one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2010. I suggest contacting your Shunyata dealer for an audition. ●

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Peter Gabriel

O2 Arena
London, UK
March 27, 2010

Text and photo by
Adrian Goldsmith

LIVE MUSIC

Peter Gabriel fans know to expect something new, different, and challenging when he performs. Billed as "No Drums, No Guitars, Orchestra," his recent show at London's 02 Arena proved no exception to this unstated rule.

Backed by a strictly orchestral intro of his famed "Sledgehammer," Gabriel took the stage hidden behind a huge screen of red light before breaking into David Bowie's "Heroes." Anyone in the audience hoping for an evening of greatest hits were probably taken off guard, as he proceeded to perform his new covers album *Scratch my Back* in its entirety. Live, the record's songs came across even better. And the singer had plenty of help.

The New Blood Orchestra played brilliantly, adding power and drama to Gabriel's voice at every opportunity. In addition, impressive sound quality and a respectful audience contributed to the ideal atmosphere. You could have heard a pin drop. Gabriel responded positively to the change of pace.

Instead of running around playing multiple instruments, he focused on his voice and spent most of his time at center stage. As one of rock's elder statesmen, the 60-year-old's pipes are as strong now as they were 30 years ago. Similarly, Gabriel's penchant for striking visuals remains in tact. Whether wearing bizarre costumes in Genesis' early days, or wearing makeup on his 80s tours, he's always displayed a love for colorful flair. These days, he's utilizing digital technology to accent the music.

Recognizing fans' desires, Gabriel rolled out the hits during the second half of the program. By adding depth to the mix and some slightly updated arrangements, the orchestra helped reinvigorate the artist's back catalog. "Mercy Street", "San Jacinto," and "Signal to Noise" were particularly stunning on a night on which everything was perfect.

Shelby Lynne

The Doug Fir Lounge
Portland, Oregon
April 26, 2010
Text and photos by Jeff Dorgay

Shelby Lynne didn't need long to warm up on her current tour promoting her new *Tears, Lies and Alibis*. Sure, she thanked the Portland audience for "letting me work out the bugs on this set," but on just the fourth stop of her current trek, the singer's presentation was as close to flawless as can be imagined. Stripped down to a minimal musical complement that counted Brian Harrison on bass and John Jackson on electric guitar, Lynne stunned with intimacy and emotion. She also injected plenty of her own spirited acoustic guitar playing into the mix.

Throughout the set, Lynne was a picture of an independent artist on a mission. After running through six consecutive songs from her recent album, Lynne took a breath to show her lighter side, confessing that she had no idea where her songs came from. "They just kind of fall out of my head and I make sure to write them down," joked the Virginia native. But Lynne isn't one to soften up for long. Hence, it was all business on a tribute to her hero Johnny Cash, "Johnny Met June," one of the highlights she performed from her rich back catalog.

While Lynne has always been at the top of many audiophile's lists because of her exquisite voice and great-sounding recordings, seeing her live brings new levels of meaning to her work. Her voice possessed impossibly deep shades of delicacy, with phrasing that conveyed more heartache than the best tape machine could ever hope to capture. No wonder that, for the encore, most of the crowd left its seats to get up as close as it could to the wonder that is Shelby Lynne.

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Miike Snow

The Commodore Ballroom
Vancouver, BC, Canada
April 12, 2010

Text by Carling Hind
Photo by David Thai

Miike Snow knows how to make an entrance. Three white masks appeared out of a blue fog as lead singer Andrew Wyatt entered the stage. Joined by Swedish producers Christian Karlsson and Pontus Winnberg (Bloodshy & Avant), the group taunted the crowd with textured beats that added to the intrigue. With the sense of mystery established, the opening "Cult Logic" set the pace for the forthcoming hour, the crowd bouncing in sync to music from the band's self-titled album.

The group maintained a secretive approach throughout, keeping audience interaction to a minimum and the tunes flowing. Thanks to Wyatt's multi-instrumental prowess, a feeling of mystique persisted even after the members' masks were removed. The bandleader repeatedly jumped from keyboard to guitar while Karlsson and Winnberg managed the electronics. Additional musicians contributed drums and percussion.

To close, the group performed a chilled-out version of "In Search Of." As the rhythms slowly built to an explosive finish, Miike Snow left as it had arrived: in a big, blue cloud of smoke.

SHORT TAKE

Jonsi

Jonsi kept a low profile as he brought his solo act to Portland's Roseland Theater on April 13, barely saying a word to the sold-out crowd's screams.

Photo by Jeff Dorgay

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Ratt

The Key Club
Los Angeles, California
April 20, 2010

Text and photos by
Jeff Dorgay

Hollywood couldn't have written a better script. Legendary metal band Ratt kicked off its anticipated comeback by launching its tour on LA's Sunset Strip and opening its set with "Round and Round," the signature tune befitting a band that's definitely come full circle since first honing its trade in the iconic area during the mid 80s. Now comprised of original members Stephen Pearcy (lead vocals), Warren DeMartini (lead guitar), and Bobby Blotzer (drums), plus new members Carlos Cavazo playing the other lead guitar and Robbie Crane on bass, the group played to a maniacal crowd that recalled its peak era.

Fans packed the main floor as tightly as security would allow. Though many made the trip from San Diego to pledge allegiance to their favorite hometown band, one couple ventured all the way from New York to see the group's rebirth. Fists and cellphone cameras waved in the air the second that Stephen Pearcy took the stage. And Ratt made it clear to those who were there when the quintet initially conquered the Sunset Strip in 1983—as well as to anybody seeing the band live for the first time—that this was the way concerts are *supposed* to be done: Big. Yes, Ratt still has big hair and a bigger sound. Even in the relatively small Key Club, Blotzer sat high upon a massive drum kit, and both guitarists played through a wall of Marshall cabinets.

A half an hour into the set, and right after playing "Lack of Communication," Pearcy announced that "it was time for a little *Infestation*," and moved into "Eat Me Up Alive," the first single from the said new album. A mixture of Ratt's greatest hits and several new cuts paced the 90-minute show.

Has this band really been on hiatus for nearly 15 years? Ratt didn't show any signs of rust, playing with a level of intensity that matched its early performances. DeMartini and Cavazo traded riffs with equal fervor and even though Pearcy's singing was more than up to the task, Cavazo and Crane's backing vocals gave Ratt a fuller sound than it formerly possessed.

You have hereby been notified: Ratt N' Roll is back, and in perfect form.

LIVE MUSIC

Pat Metheny

The Aladdin Theater
Portland, Oregon
April 28, 2010
Text and photos by Jeff Dorgay

With so many artists using drum machines, tape loops, and other forms of sampling, Pat Metheny decided to tackle self-accompaniment from a more novel angle. Comprised of actual instruments built into one hybrid unit, and expanding on a 19th century concept, Metheny's all-analog Orchestrion approach actually works brilliantly.

It also makes for an exciting visual display. A wide range of keyboards, vibes, and what appeared to be percussion instruments that looked as if they had been stolen from a mad scientist's laboratory littered the Aladdin's stage. To the rear stood a huge wall of drums that remained isolated until later in the performance.

Metheny started slowly, playing a few solo acoustic pieces from his new album as well as "Unity Villiage" from his debut, *Bright Size Life*. Upon taking his first break, he asked how many people remembered the tune and seemed surprised by the enthusiastic response. "That's about twice as many people who originally bought the record," he cracked.

(continued)

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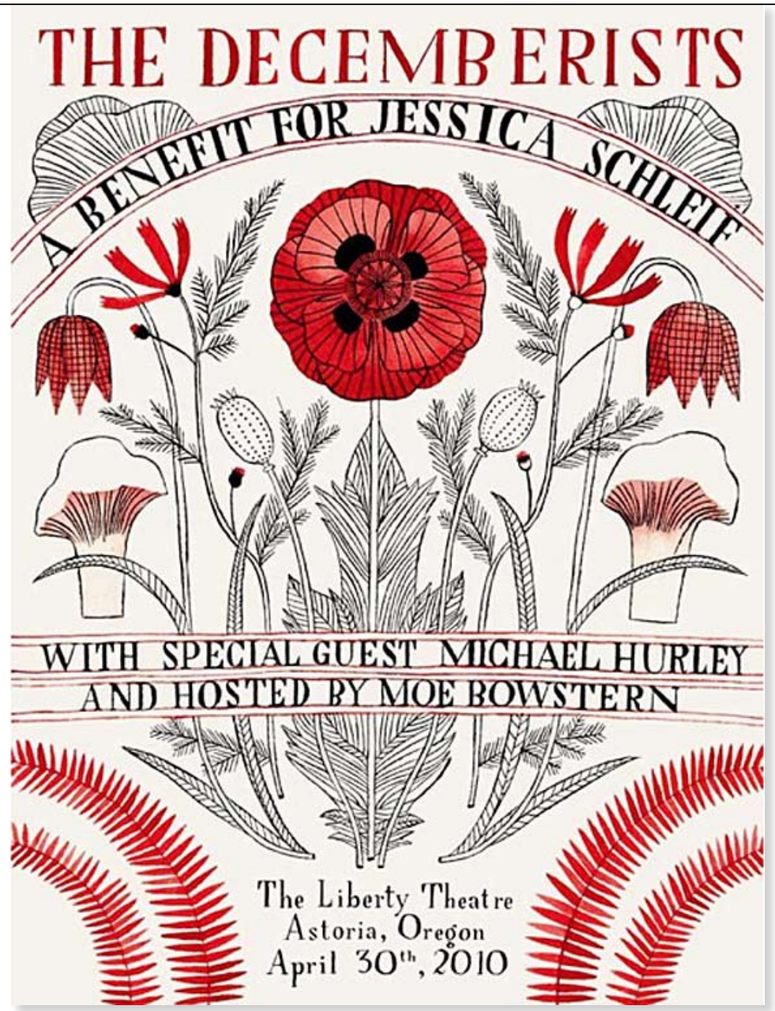
Later, he returned to the *Orchestrion* material and ramped up the tempo, adding minor percussion elements before unveiling the wall of drums with a big grin on his face. The level of sound increased dramatically as Metheny, backed by a mechanical orchestra, came across as a sonic inventor eager to bring his robotic Frankenstein to life. As such, his live interactions with the contraption titled toward the rambunctious side. Not that he neglected his signature device. A six-string virtuoso, Metheny intensely zoned in on the guitar, his serious focus leading to bouts of improvisational genius and trademark onstage hops.

Metheny also did his best to explain his fascination with the inner workings of the Orchestrion. However, he did not reveal the true secret (and ghost) of the machinery. While the album's liner notes suggest that it's pre-programmed—with Metheny playing over the top of the mix—there were moments during which it seemed as if he manually triggered parts of the Orchestrion like a gigantic guitar synthesizer. Yet this one had a mind of its own. On a few occasions, the machine overpowered even Metheny's enthusiasm, with waves of sound effects overwhelming the venue's acoustic boundaries. At worst, the voluminous results placed an interesting twist on his music.

Though many will still prefer Metheny as the leader of the Pat Metheny Group, the level of musical and technical excellence he's bringing to the *Orchestrion* tour is fantastic. And as he experiments with a concept that has fascinated him since childhood, his labor of love is clearly evident and rewarding to all fortunate enough to witness it.

The level of sound increased dramatically as Metheny, backed by a mechanical orchestra, came across as a sonic inventor eager to bring his robotic Frankenstein to life.



The Decemberists

Liberty Theater
Astoria, Oregon
April 30, 2010

By Ken Mersereau
Photos by Jeff Dorgay

While working on their yet-untitled new album, the Decemberists have gone into the health-care business—albeit on a micro level. The band's sole concert to date in 2010 was billed as "A Benefit for Jessica Schleif," with the proceeds going to help a friend's spiraling medical costs.

As expected, a sold-out crowd packed the exquisitely remodeled Liberty Theater for what was indeed a special event. Local artist Moe Bowstern hosted and special guest Michael Hurley, later declared "a living legend" by Decemberists vocalist Colin Meloy, served as the opener. Meloy also made a few comments about single payer health plans and the recent direction of healthcare reform, humorously noting "I'm all for redistributing the wealth, I've got enough money." Fortunately, he kept such comments brief, and the show never took on a political tone. Instead, the band put the focus where it belonged—on the music. *(continued)*

Displaying no signs of rust, the Decemberists played a lively mix of literary folk-rock songs instilled with bits of musical theater. Starting with “Oceanside,” the group drew from its ample back catalog to comprise a set masterfully arranged with the right balance of recent and old material. In contrast to the trendy full-album show concepts many bands have recently adopted, this evening was all about career-spanning diversity.

The overall vibe took a dramatic turn three songs in when a small cadre of audience members formed an impromptu dance troupe in front of the stage during “The Crane Wife.” Within minutes, the throng of fans snowballed and filled the space between the stage and first row of seats, forcing the rest of the crowd to stay on its feet for the remainder of the evening. The Decemberists added to the collective enthusiasm.

Even though Meloy admitted he was coming down with a cold, the singer remained energetic until the very end, where he trimmed the encore to just one song (“The Mariners Revenge Song”) from the three that were initially planned. After imploring the audience to “scream like you’re being swallowed by a whale” during the part of the narrative when a whale attacks the ship, Meloy and company finished the tune lying on the floor as they brought the festivities to an exciting, hoarse conclusion.

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SHORT TAKE

Tegan and Sara

Tegan and Sara thank the audience at Portland's Keller Theater just as they bid the audience good evening after a 24-song set.

Photo by Shawn Beckman

Current Releases

By the TONE Staff

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Bettye LaVette
Interpretations: The British Rock Songbook.
Anti. CD and LP

Bettye LaVette has always made her living covering other artists' songs with a sense of passion, grit, and courage that's almost unparalleled in today's plastic pop world. It's just that not many people know about the Detroit native's abilities. And until recently, her career remained mired in a confluence of bad luck and even worse timing.

After Atlantic Records inexplicably shelved her planned 1972 debut, the soul singer spent the next three decades in relative obscurity, toiling in small bars and traveling the festival circuit. A potential break came in 2005, when hip imprint Anti Records released *I've Got My Own Hell to Raise.* Produced by Joe Henry, the determined set found LaVette putting her signature on songs from female artists ranging from Sinead O'Connor to Joan Armatrading. The album's momentum carried over. In 2007, she paired with the Drive-By Truckers and upped the urgency on the outstanding *The Scene of the Crime.*

Yet despite critical accolades and transcendent concerts, fame has largely proven out of reach for the 64-year-old vocalist. At the 2008 Kennedy Center Honors ceremony, a majority of attendees didn't seem to recognize her as she strolled onstage and brought down the house (and tears down Pete Townshend's face) with an arresting version of The Who's "Love Reign O'er Me." That performance served as the impetus behind the new *Interpretations: The British Rock Songbook.* Included as a bonus track, the live take is also the undisputed highlight on a record that begs to be liked but that, at times, feels disappointingly forced.

Just as Mary Blige's recent rendition of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" has drawn the ire of purists, LaVette's moldings of staples such as Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" and Paul McCartney's "Maybe I'm Amazed" are likely to produce similar reactions. While risky, messing with a classic is justifiable if the new version breathes new life into the original or, in one way or another, brings out previously undetected shades and meanings. And there's no doubting LaVette's conviction. As always, her voice is thick with emotion—founts of melancholy, happiness, moodiness, reflection, consternation, admiration, and devotion spring from her throat. Few singers register such a spectrum of feelings, and fewer still lay bare their soul in a manner that seems so natural. Her personal investment stems from the fact that she literally and figuratively makes songs her own.

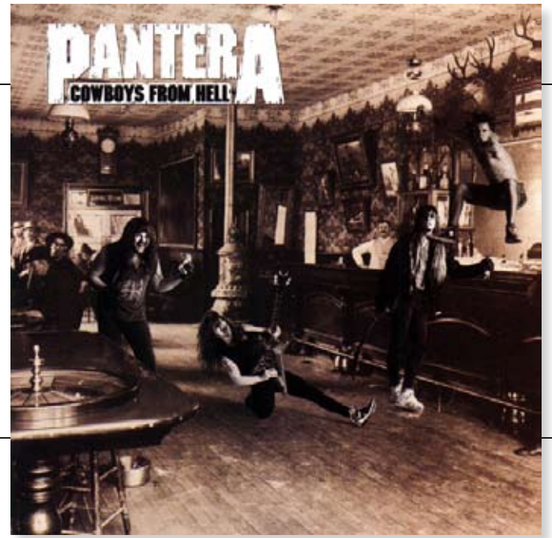
The trouble with *Interpretations* isn't a perceived disconnect but an apparent attempt to put LaVette, who struts around in stilettos and proudly wears small cocktail dresses, into fancy slippers and a silky ballroom gown. She's at her best when displaying her confidence, attitude, and swagger. A funked-up take on the Beatles' "The Word," complete with sassy horns and backing gospel vocals, and a demanding "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" join the greasy "Why Does Love Got to Be So Sad" as trademark LaVette. No, there's nothing at all wrong with her singing, phrasing, or inflection. She knows well what it is to moan (and live) the blues.

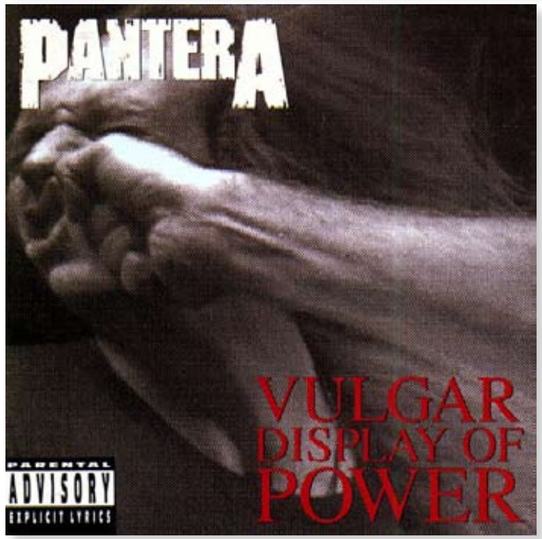
What's bothersome are the arrangements, which gussy up the tracks and rob LaVette of the raw sensibilities that make her so unique. Not surprisingly, *Interpretations* marks the first time she worked with an arranger. Hopefully, it will be the last. Orchestrated strings and formal pianos adorn a majority of the fare, resulting in a sameness and staidness that serve to restrain and confine. The album sorely misses the loose grooves and dramatic heat of LaVette's prior work, whether with the Truckers or back on 1962's hit single "My Man – He's a Lovin' Man."

Largely devoid of the live-band approach, LaVette is instead outfitted with a polished professionalism that isn't her style. The vulnerability she expresses on "No Time to Live" drowns under slow tempos and heightened strings. The changes afforded "Wish You Were Here" don't translate.

Embellishments on "Maybe I'm Amazed" obstruct an otherwise terrific vocal reading. By and large, LaVette is shackled, a prisoner of having to hold to sleepy music that often feels suited for a pristine lounge environment. And this tough-skinned woman is no shrinking violet. It's a shame that too much of *Interpretations* presents her as one.
– **Bob Gendron**

PANTERA





As far as tragic musician deaths go, none is stranger or sadder than that of Pantera guitarist Dimebag Darrell, slain onstage by a deranged fan while performing with Damageplan in 2004. While Darrell's distinctive shredding immediately gained the attention of international metal fans in the early 90s, the fatal incident renewed interest in his former band's music and resulted in a windfall of appreciation from many who initially overlooked his innovative playing. Society's obsession with posthumous celebration also contributed to front-page news coverage of a bigger-than-life character that most mainstream outlets (particularly radio) ignored during his career.

Given that a certain extent of capitalization is almost always involved with any artist's passing, Darrell's death also spiked talks about a long-awaited and -rumored Pantera box set, still more of a fantasy than reality. Incredibly, not a single note of previously unreleased Pantera (or Damageplan) material has been issued since Darrell's murder. Pantera's catalog—long out of print on vinyl—remained accessible only on CDs that have forever sounded flat, pinched, and, primarily, lifeless. Even 2003's *The Best of Pantera* compilation lacks remastering.

A pleasant shock, then, that Rhino recently remastered from the original high-definition tapes the quartet's best studio records—1990's breakthrough *Cowboys From Hell*, 1992's landmark *Vulgar Display of Power,* and 1994's victory lap *Far Beyond Driven*—and pressed them on 180g vinyl. What's more, each 2LP set features a gatefold sleeve and full-size artwork. For those unfamiliar, Pantera is a band whose album covers deserve to be experienced on something larger than a postage stamp. Rhino even restored the original obscene cover to *Far Beyond Driven,* still the heaviest album to ever debut at Number One on the *Billboard* charts.

As for the sonics? The improvements are tenfold. Songs are airier, punchier, and more immediate. The soundstage boasts deeper grooves and better instrumental separation, which adds to the overall musical impact as Pantera's brief pauses serve to amplify and augment the aggressive passages. Vinny Paul's bruising percussion booms, the snare and bass drum coming across with muscularity and presence. Granted, the bass is still hidden in most of the mixes, but it's a minor quibble considering the other upgrades. Particularly in that they allow Darrell's playing to shine like never before.

Somewhat deflated on the frequency-squeezed digital discs, Darrell's riffs and solos come into clearer focus—as does the advanced degree of his diversity. Instead of simply relying on raw speed and intensity, Darrell champions nuance, a facet now made more plainly evident in his arsenal of grind, thrash, speed, sludge, blues, and blue-collar hard rock. He fires off notes with the accuracy of a sharpshooter picking off plastic ducks at a shooting gallery. Tonally, his guitar mimics an array of noises and motions—a stone skipping across water, a buzzing hornet's nest, voltage surging with overloaded current.

Time has also proven Pantera's mettle. Everything from Philip Anselmo's take-on-all-comers vocals—heavily inspired by punk and thrash—to the feelings of confidence, determination, pride, toughness, and power bestowed by the music and lyrics still come across like a swift punch to the face. While the hostile *Far Beyond Driven* doesn't quite live up to its two predecessors, the effort holds its own when approached from a contextual perspective. By 1994, every leading metal band had gone soft or briefly lost its way, and there's nothing weak about "I'm Broken" or "Shedding Skin." Courtesy of the long-deserved remastering, Pantera's definitive works have, to paraphrase one the group's trademark songs, achieved a new level.
– **Bob Gendron**

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Vulgar Display of Power
Far Beyond Driven

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The Dead Weather
Sea of Cowards
Third Man/Warner Bros. CD or LP

Jack White makes records at a clip that recalls the mid-1970s, when bands often cranked out two LPs within the span of a year. Bouncing around between the Raconteurs and the Dead Weather, the Detroit native also finds time run a label in Nashville (Third Man) and produce artists ranging from country legend Wanda Jackson to modern rockabilly favorites the Dex Romweber Duo. As for his main outlet? By all indications, the on-hiatus White Stripes are cooked.

While most musicians struggle to find a new outlet and fresh voice after the dissolution of their first marriage, White continues to thrive. Arriving just nine months after its uneven debut, the Dead Weather's *Sea of Cowards* expands the quartet's fascination with get-in, get-out songwriting and restless tempos. The band members also seem looser and more comfortable. Kills vocalist Alison Mosshart steps up her role as a formidable vocal foil. Queens of the Stone Age member Dean Fertita handles a majority of the guitar work as White again steps behind the drums. And a number of tunes—the sleazy blues "Die By the Drop," a showcase for White and Mosshart's vocal fireworks and the electro-throb thump of the emotionally conflicted "The Difference Between Us"—come across as put-together songs. Yet *Sea of Cowards* is all about fascinating sounds; memorable arrangements be damned. *(continued)*

White's obsession with sonics pays dividends, as the record explodes with energy, dynamics, immediacy, and liveliness.

Largely impromptu, the album blows by like a go-for-broke basement jam session that prizes bold noisemaking and ostentatious embellishment. The Dead Weather isn't out to satisfy those looking for hummable melodies or well-crafted songs. However, provided one overlooks the rush-job writing, the group turns in clamorous thrill rides of epic proportions. A surfeit of crazed one-liners and gonzo refrains support a go-for-broke strategy that hasn't any need for rules or pauses.

It's nearly impossible to tell where one song ends and another ends. Funky electronics and interrupted rhythms punctuate "Blue Blood Blues," which segues into the staccato organ grind of "Hustle and Cuss." Screeching distortion that comes across like a hot-wired Speak & Spell toy marinates "I'm Mad," which, despite all of the action, is just an excuse to engage in feverish bluster. And that's the basic philosophy that drives *Sea of Cowards*. Take away the feedback and noise, and the emperor becomes undressed. Vocally, Mosshart and White play the role of a couple that want to hook up but, for kicks, exchange back-and-forth jabs while refusing the other's advances. In this case, the lyrical shortcomings are easy to forgive because of the compelling nature of the damaged sounds and oscillating frequencies. Then there's the production.

In the liner notes, detailed engineering information is provided for each track. Indeed, White's obsession with sonics pays dividends, as the record explodes with energy, dynamics, immediacy, and liveliness. All the better to experience keyboards that evoke a baby ostrich's cries and swampy distortion filtered through Delta silt.
– **Bob Gendron**

The Black Keys
Brothers
Nonesuch CD or 2 LP

Like the music within, the cover of the Black Keys' sixth full-length is strictly no-frills. Against a black backdrop made to look like a faded LP sleeve, a simple epithet is printed: "This is an album by the Black Keys. The name of this album is Brothers."

Subtly harkening back to Howlin' Wolf's 1969 effort, *This Is Howlin' Wolf's New Album* (whose cover featured the album's title alongside the words "He doesn't like it. He didn't like his electric guitar at first either."), *Brothers'* artwork provides a perfect accompaniment to the no-nonsense, psychedelic blues that dominate the Akron, Ohio duo's latest effort.

Over the course of 55 minutes, singer-guitarist Dan Auerbach and drummer Patrick Carney draw on everything from the Cadet Concept work of bluesmen Wolf and Muddy Waters to the late 1960s recordings of Albert King and the soul music of Muscle Shoals (fitting, since the set was recorded at the famed studio in August 2009).

But before delving into the Delta, the pair makes a brief, cross-Atlantic detour with slinky opener "Everlasting Light," a track that sounds like a long-lost B-side from T. Rex's *The Slider*. "Tighten Up," the lone *Brothers* track helmed by *Attack & Release* producer Danger Mouse, does exactly as its title claims, tightening down the screws on the Keys' scruffy sound.
(continued)

It's also catchy as hell, piling on carefree whistling, Hendrix-worthy guitar effects, squiggles of soul organ, and a drum break reminiscent of Roots percussionist ?uestlove at his funkiest.

Elsewhere, the duo weaves its way through shattered soul ("I'm Not the One"), swampy rockers ("She's Long Gone"), and bluesy revenge tales that sound like Chitlin' Circuit holdovers ("Ten Cent Pistol"). The shaggy-voiced Auerbach, who seems to sport three-days growth on his larynx, inhabits a host of flawed characters throughout; "That's me, the boy with the broken halo," he sings on a percussive, loose-limbed "Sinister Kid." Displaying improved vocal range (dig that falsetto on "Everlasting Light"), the frontman imbues the album's slower cuts with palpable world-weariness. "My gears they grind, more and more each day," he sings over a spiked organ on "Too Afraid to Love You." "And I feel like they're gonna grind away."

Sure, Auerbach has sounded older than his years since the group debuted, but there's a depth to the writing here that could only be gained through life experience. Though only in their early 30s, the two bandmates' lives have undergone massive changes since they started jamming together in an Ohio basement nearly a decade ago. In the years since, the two have collectively experienced painful breakups, marriage, fatherhood, and death. These events bring real-world perspective to the music. Witness both the heartfelt "Unknown Brother," which Auerbach wrote in memory of his wife's brother, who died of cancer in his 20s, and the desperate, on-bended-knee pleas of soul throwback "Never Give You Up."
– **Andy Downing**

Delta Spirit
History From Below
Rounder CD or LP

Young bands with something to prove often bear similarities to rookie athletes that get an opportunity to play in big games. Those that come through in the spotlight gain the chance to make a name for themselves. Conversely, those that fail seldom are heard from again.

At last summer's Lollapalooza festival, the Delta Spirit transcended an unfavorable early time slot on a big stage by turning in an inspired performance that stood as one of the event's breakout showings. Nearly a year later, the quintet has made good on its promise with *History From Below*. The sophomore album isn't likely to put the group on everyone's radar, but the organic effort further advances a pleasing, loosely ragged sound grounded in Americana, folk rock, and Northern soul. Solid from start to finish, *History From Below* outclasses several recent higher-profile releases from Delta Spirit's indie brethren.

Led by frontman Matt Vazquez's ramshackle voice and soulful cries, the San Diego ensemble revels in songs of love and longing—and the blurry emotions that fall in between. Vazquez surveys the reasons behind pining, desperation, and frustration, tossing in existential questions all the while assuming the bruised disposition of someone broken but not defeated. A handful of clever one-liners and juxtapositions frame the pondering lyrics. "My love is strong but my heart is weak, after all," he confesses, summing up his conflicted state.

Yet Delta Spirit's best strengths reside in acoustic-based songwriting that possesses a tight connection to roots traditions. Rushing guitar chords and searing organs inform midtempo tunes such as "Bushwick Blues" and the bounding, delirious "911." The Western-themed outlaw tale "St. Francis" includes Texicali guitar lines and harmonica passages that blow like desert-strewn tumbleweeds. Hopped up on country accents and rave-up rhythms, "Golden State" echoes No Depression-era Wilco.

The slower songs are even stronger. Delicately fingerpicked, the balladic "Scarecrow" serves as a touching farewell to romance. Blues riffs and catchy melodies make "White Table" comfortably trot. Fundamental approaches rule. Save for the overwrought closer "Ballad of Vitaly," Delta Spirit avoids unnecessary complexity and remains focused on retro earthiness. The well-wishing "Devil Knows You're Dead" complements Bob Dylan's "Forever Young" and is one of the many songs here on which the Bard's mid-60s influence is keenly felt. In fact, on much of the record, Delta Spirit seems to be seeking shelter from storms.

Nowhere does the quintet better achieve such respite than on the bittersweet "Vivian," a gorgeous gospel-laden tribute adorned with spacious reverb and shivering harmonies. It resonates with unforced poignancy and serves as an example of the rootsy allure Delta Spirit displays throughout.
– **Bob Gendron**

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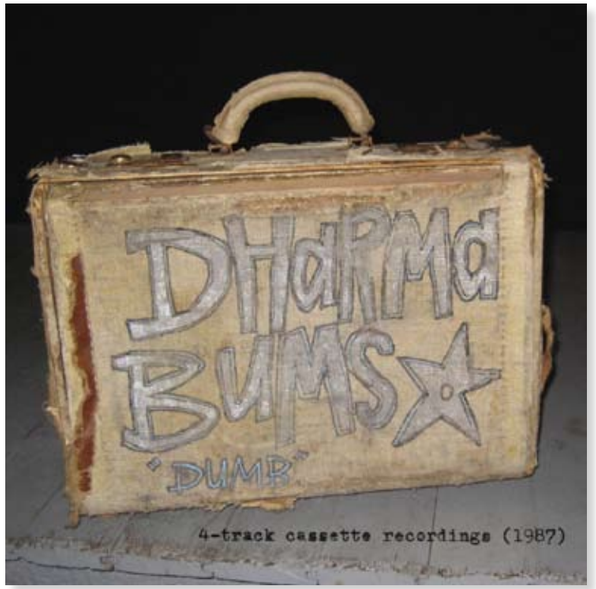


Dharma Bums
Dumb: 4 Track Cassette Recordings 1987
Mother Found Out Music CD

According to Portland lore, Decemberists vocalist Colin Meloy once had his glasses smashed at a Dharma Bums show. The experience opened his eyes to what indie rock was all about. For the last five years, DB drummer John Moen has been fulfilling those duties for the Decemberists, so it's a long strange trip after all. But *Dumb* sounds more like a cross between the Meatmen and the Yahoos, albeit with a stronger lead vocalist.

Taken from a 4-track cassette tape recorded by Eric Lovre (guitar and vocals) on incredibly primitive equipment, *Dumb* sounds fantastic nonetheless. Slightly compressed, but great, with gigantic wall-of-sound vocal effects thanks to recording in mono with a single Radio Shack microphone, around which all of the other instruments were captured.

The record starts with a cover of Van Morrison's "I Can Only Give You Everything," feeling like an early Kinks rough cut, with machine-gun drumming and slippery, distorted guitars feeding back over a tambourine. The band proceeds to shift into top gear, racing through 15 more songs that each hover around two-and-a-half minutes in length. The Bums serve up "Let's Dance" (not Bowie's version) with lead singer Jeremy Wilson singing, "Come on baby, take off your pants, come on baby let's dance" with a cheekiness that works perfectly. And you can bet that many a pissed-off Portland teenager drove home from work listening to "I Can't Quit Now...,", with a chorus that screams "I can't quit now because you fired me first." Classic stuff.

The songs run the thematic gamut, dealing with life in the emergency room on "I.C.U," smarmy situations in "Cockroach Au-Go-Go," mortality in "Too Many Days Gone," and just plain being in-your-face on "Annoying You," where the band yells in unison, "Oy am I annoying, am I annoying you?" The magic lies in the group's ability to maintain a balance of winking at your left eye while simultaneously spitting in your right, keeping your attention all the while.

The Dharma Bums prove that angst always triumphs over slick production. One can only wonder what would have happened to these four young men from Portland if the order had been reversed and they received the call instead of Nirvana, often their opening act.
– **Jeff Dorgay**

John Prine
In Person and On Stage
Oh Boy CD

Songwriters don't come much more automatic than John Prine. On the verge of entering his fourth decade as a recording artist after spending a few formative years gigging around Chicago folk clubs—and the honoree of a new tribute disc featuring the likes of Drive-By Truckers, My Morning Jacket, and Bon Iver—the former mailman continues to play music that's as consistent as it is engaging.

Prine's studio albums usually have a few minor holes, yet the presence of a good six or eight songs that force the listener to unconsciously state "I wish I would have written that" always compensate for any deficiencies.

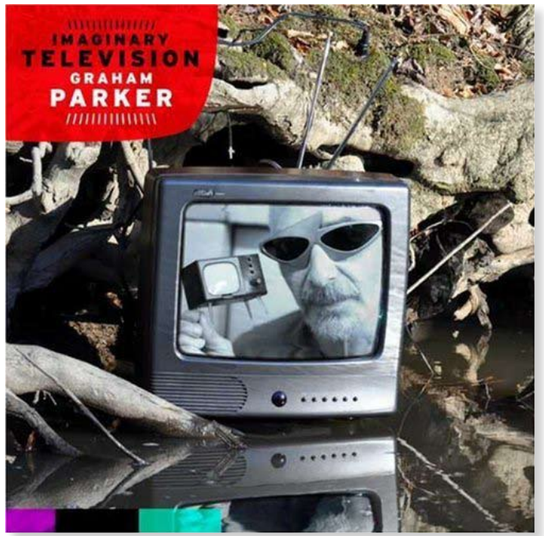
Shortcomings are few on *In Person and On Stage*, a relatively straightforward and warm-sounding live set Prine recorded with longtime bassist Dave Jacques and guitar wizard Jason Wilber. Guests Iris DeMent ("In Spite of Ourselves," "Unwed Fathers"), Sara Watkins ("The Late John Garfield Blues"), and the impeccably pure-voiced Emmylou Harris ("Angel From Montgomery") add to the allure, but they're just bonus points. Prine's performances stand on their own merit.

Part of the charm is hearing the 63-year-old crack jokes and spin tales between the songs. As he does when penning lyrics, Prine possesses a knack for knowing when to enter and exit a situation, and how to time phrasing and punch lines so that everything falls into the right place.

Clever banter aside, however, it's the tunes that matter, and each of the 14 tracks here is a gem.

With his voice deeper and grittier due to a battle with throat cancer that ultimately led to surgery, Prine sounds more authoritative and at home than ever before. And his crack band is more than up to the task. Whether delving into a traditional A-A-B blues on the jaunty "She Is My Everything" or covering the Carter Family standard on "Bear Creek Blues," Prine and company demonstrate the amazing staying power that's possible with fundamental arrangements of guitar, bass, and fine storytelling. It doesn't hurt that his fingerpicking prowess remains razor sharp or that he makes everything sound so damn easy.

Absorb the faded glories of "Paradise" (complete with mandolin and fiddle support, and a climactic finish that improves upon the studio version) or carefree humor on "Spanish Pipedream" and try not smile. As always, Prine probes the heart of what makes living worthwhile, and sketches characters and situations that cause us to blush, hope, and care. Be prepared to fall in love with these songs in the same way that an engrossing novel drives you to sit and relax by the fireplace. – **Bob Gendron**



Graham Parker
Imaginary Television
Bloodshot Records CD

Reminiscent of Ry Cooder's *I Flathead,* Graham Parker's latest effort is a group of songs wrapped around an imaginary story, which, in this case, is a listing of events that resembles *TV Guide* in layout and presentation. The booklet attempts to give a back story of episodes that the songs loosely chronicle, complete with faux quotes from major magazines. It's a concept album in the best 70s tradition, if somewhat kitchy.

Underneath the clever *TV Guide* exterior, the world chronicled in *Imaginary Television* is somewhat sad and defeated. Parker grabs us with a familiar melody on "It's My Party (But I Won't Cry)" but gets cynical in a hurry, singing, "It's my party, but I won't cry, It's my funeral, but I won't die." In the next tune, he declares, "I don't feel comfortable in my own skin, it doesn't seem to hold everything in." A few remaining tracks—"You're Not Where You Think You Are" and "More Questions Than Answers"—convey all you need to know about the album's tone. Fortunately, Parker doesn't completely lose his sense of humor on clever tunes such as "See Things My Way."

The record's folksy vibe comes on with a sound that evokes John Hiatt playing skiffle music. Unfortunately, the mediocre recording doesn't do justice to the first-class playing. These days, Parker is just as grouchy as Hiatt, but he needs to follow the latter's lead when it comes to sonic details. – **Jeff Dorgay**

Joan Jett and the Blackhearts
Greatest Hits
Blackheart Records CD

Joan Jett's *Greatest Hits* has been strategically released to coincide with the current biopic chronicling the career of her first band, The Runaways. Though billed as a "Greatest Hits" record, Jett really only had three hits. Her seventh (!) compilation, the set includes seven of the songs from the movie soundtrack and just one unreleased track, "Backlash," co-written in 1991 with Paul Westerberg. The rest you've heard countless times before.

And while the music on this collection has been "remastered" by Greg Calbi at Sterling Sound, it is the worst misuse of the term. Jett's recordings were never sonic masterpieces to begin with, and now, whatever life may have been left in these songs has been squashed by compression. Unless you are stuck in the middle of nowhere on a road trip, and this is the only rock CD on the local Wal-Mart shelf, pass. – **Jeff Dorgay**

Nachtmystium
Addicts: Black Meddle Part 2
Century Media CD and LP

Blake Judd isn't one to mince words. Since founding Nachtmystium in high school, the singer/guitarist has seemingly managed to piss off and alienate more people than well-traveled baseball outfielder Milton Bradley. Yet however controversial Judd's moves, he's always justified his actions by heightening the creativity and quality on each successive album. What began nearly a decade ago as a crude, semi-amateur black metal project between Judd and long-departed partner Pat McCormick has evolved into one of the world's visionary bands.

Following a series of independent releases on tiny labels, and a fully realized LP on his own Battle Kommand imprint, Judd and company upped the ante on 2008's *Assassins: Black Meddle Part 1*. Released on mid-major Century Media, the groundbreaking effort drew as much from Burzum as it did from Pink Floyd. (The 'meddle' in the title refers to the English rock legends' 1971 opus as well as Judd's desire to continually subvert expectations.) The experimental set closes with a three-part suite that mimics the experience of drowning. Its ambitious scope and sprawling focus begged listeners to ask: What could Nachtmystium do for an encore?

While not a concept record or directly connected to its predecessor, *Addicts: Black Meddle Part 2* finds the Chicago-based collective again innovating and eviscerating boundaries in thrilling new ways. Darker and bleaker than its twin, the album embraces rock and post-punk elements that the ensemble only previously skimmed. Augmented by yet another new cast (including Leviathan leader Wrest on drums), Judd throws in beats that pass as dancefloor-ready on the surprisingly pop-molded "Ruined Life Continuum"

and "No Funeral," a pulsing track underpinned by a swimmy synth bass. Ambient Moog waves flicker throughout "Then Fires," a slow mood piece on which the melancholic lead-guitar playing references that of one of Judd's heroes, David Gilmour. "The End Is Eternal" oozes like the residue of a recurring nightmare, with tarnished industrial rhythms welded to slithering psychedelia. There are certainly ghosts in this machine.

At its core, Nachtmystium's music retains its harsh, raw, and aggressive foundations. Sanford Parker again pulls double duties as an instrumentalist and producer, his sonic expertise affording the compositions a depth, texture, and atmosphere absent most metal projects. Akin to Parker's unconventional approach behind the boards, songs blur styles as they annihilate preconceptions. Judd's mangled, overly distorted gavel of a voice and seething anger remain constants. He uses effects to filter his singing and echo narrations, sounding threatening whether taking his time or exploding with world-burning venom on the roaring "High on Hate." The latter's apocalypse-now gallop will doubtlessly please traditionalists, but it's the only slice of pure black metal on an album that dares to do more—and succeeds brilliantly in doing so.

Addicts owes much of its uncompromising cohesiveness to Judd's direct connections to what he sings about. Few bands produce a better sense of what it feels like to loathe, dread, and suffer from emotional malaise. Ugliness looms. Addictions fester. Curses rage. Death is viewed as a welcome relief.

"N-O-T-H-I-N-G H-U-R-T-S M-O-R-E T-H-A-N B-E-I-N-G B-O-R-N," Judd whispers on the opening "Intro," eerily speaking each letter rather reciting the complete sentence, a tact that draws instant attention. Like many of the band's lyrical themes, the statement functions as a rebuttal of life, suggesting that man's existence is futile. Self-destruction, isolation, misery, agony, decline, social ills—they all fascinate and inspire Judd, who, if there is any irony to Nachtmystium, sounds anything but defeated. No matter. The band's newest songs qualify as "gospel sermons of abuse," a line spouted on the title track.

Not surprisingly, drug references abound. Nachtmystium—whose unofficial slogan, "Never Stop the Madness," is placed next to an illustration of a syringe on a band-authorized hoodie—doesn't shy away from the harmful vices and tortured environments portrayed in its tunes. Its members also look the part; their grimaced faces, tattered clothes, and scummy appearances are not for show. Neither is their appetite for risk. Another group shirt touts the mantra "White Powder Not White Power" and features a grim reaper snorting cocaine off of a coffin. The design references Nachtmystium's longtime battle with unfounded (and repeatedly denied) associations with racist organizations.

Such provocation and darkness rise to a boil on *Addicts*. Never have the band's own living-on-the-edge habits come so closely intersected with the dim subject matter. On the epic "Every Last Drop," Judd comes on like a fiend scarred, seared, and conquered by his obsessions but just too hooked to quit. The song unravels into a downward spiral until it finally abets, much like the consciousness of a junkie after he gets his temporary fix. Sometimes the only flight from a painful reality is to retreat. Nachtmystium offers an escape like few others. – **Bob Gendron**

Twilight
Monument to Time End
Southern Lord CD and LP

In the underground world of black metal, Twilight is the equivalent of the Crooked Vultures—an ensemble whose members draw from related albeit different disciplines and full-time bands, and whose characteristics brand them with the proverbial "supergroup" tag. Five years ago, when Twilight originally convened, the gathering was largely seen as a one-time affair. No tour followed. No follow-up plans were made. Blake Judd (Nachtmystium), Scott Conner (Xasthur), Neill Jameson (Kreig), Jef Whitehead (Leviathan), and Tim Lehi (Draugur) simply convened, used their adopted pseudonyms, and created what became a cult classic.

In recent years, Judd hinted at the possibility of a new collaboration. The rumors proved unfounded until, when in January 2009, Whitehead came to Chicago for work and began writing with Judd. Soon after, Jameson was approached about resurrecting the band, and, with producer Sanford Parker's studio less than a mile away from Judd's residence, Twilight became a foursome. Two other recruits—Isis' Aaron Turner and the Atlas Moth's Stravos Giannopoulous—round out the new lineup.

As one might expect from such heavy hitters, *Monument to Time End* is a tortured, scorch-earthed slab of dramatic violence, emotional despair, and psychedelic digression. While the record is laden with its share of furnace-blast riffs, toxic noises, and volcanic tempos, there's more than meets the ear. Emphasis is on expression rather than sheer mayhem. Ferociousness coincides with subtlety. And voices mainly exist to add extra layers of contrast and texture. Hence, it's generous to qualify Jameson's vocal contributions as singing. His haunted garble is a highly distorted combination of shrieks, bellows, gurgles, and asides. A reference point? Imagine the unanswered pleas of a man drowning in quicksand while spitting debris out of his mouth—or the sound of Golum belching up a meal. Nonetheless, despite an affinity for jarring music and raw tones, Twilight places a premium on melody.

Acoustic guitars on the opening to the twisting "The Catastrophe Exhibition" spring up like a tangle of weeds in an industrial wasteland. As the album's secret weapon, Parker adds shades of light and dark with his space-rock Moog playing. There's plenty of opportunity for such synthetic sonic gristle, given that most compositions stretch beyond the six-minute mark and remain impressively spacious. Time signatures and riff structures stay in a constant state of complex flux, particularly on "The Cryptic Ascension," one of several songs on which Turner's atmospheric quotient both expands upon Twilight's previous territory and reiterates overwhelming sadness. The moody breaks and stark changes on "Fall Behind Eternity" answer to prog-rock themes. Surprises abound.

At a period when U.S. black metal seems to be slumbering, *Monument to Time End* is an engaging reminder of what's possible. It rewards (and demands) repeated listening.
– **Bob Gendron**

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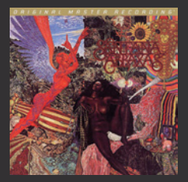
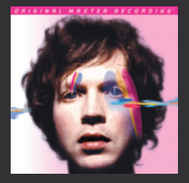

Santana ***Abraxas***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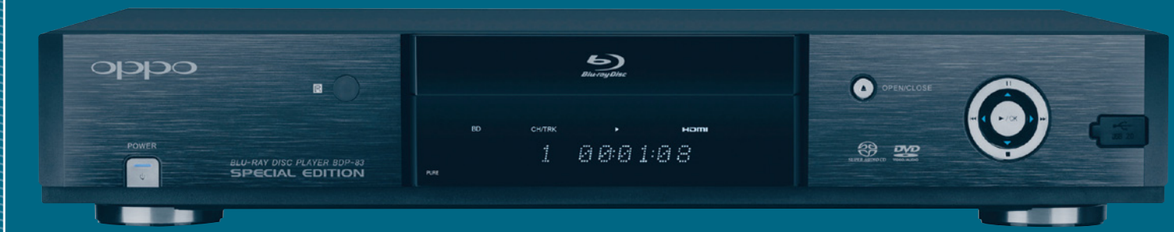

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Judas Priest
British Steel: 30th Anniversary Special Edition
Legacy 2CD + DVD

Debates about which Judas Priest record best represents the band typically surround five albums. Purists defend the bluesy *Sad Wings of Destiny* for its then-novel combination of complex technicality, gothic sensibility, and adventurous structures. 1978's *Stained Class* and 1979's *Hell Bent for Leather* are often more popular choices, each set bringing into sharp relief the band's twin-guitar melodies, compact songwriting, lyrical focus, and singer Rob Halford's piercing wails. And while usually picked by a minority of fans, 1990's *Painkiller*—as brutal, determined, hungry, and deadly as Priest ever sounded—cannot be overlooked.

Yet the consensus among music polls and critics lists usually leans in favor of *British Steel*, a crossover effort that witnessed the group hone its trademark skills into a polished, commercial-ready attack. It yielded the staples "Living After Midnight" and "Breaking the Law," along with excellent deep cuts such as the Godzilla-sized "Metal Gods" and staccato-stacked "Rapid Fire." Already reissued on vinyl, the 1980 record has recently been canonized as a 30th Anniversary Special Edition complete with a bonus CD and DVD. (A standard 30th Anniversary Edition without the bonus CD is also available.)

Abetted with two extra tracks (the mediocre outtake "Red, White & Blue" and a live version of "Grinder," both previously released), the *British Steel: 30th Anniversary Special Edition* features the same remastering it was afforded when the group's catalog was overhauled in 2001. So what's new? A DVD featuring the quintet's complete show from Hollywood, Florida in August 2009, taken from the tour on which Priest performed *British Steel* in its entirety. Seven other tracks—including noteworthy takes on "Hell Patrol" and "Diamonds And Rust"—complete the setlist. The video program is replicated on the bonus CD. Is it worth the investment?

For those that absolutely love the record, perhaps. The band gives the material extra bite and edge onstage, and Halford's voice remains relatively strong, though the absence of vocally demanding songs such as "Painkiller" on the live disc confirm that he's lost some of his high range to time. And, as a whole, *British Steel* holds up magnificently well, despite the fact that "United" still sounds like a vacant attempt at leading a silly cheerleading chant among mullet heads. The concert recording boasts average sonics and the DVD includes a 30-minute making-of documentary with the original band members.

However, one wishes that more content—specifically, more unique content—rounded out this relatively thin package. The studio album is just 36 minutes, and certain obvious opportunities go ignored. Why not provide diehards a period live show from the *British Steel* tour on CD? What about throwing in a handful of *British Steel* demos? There's no question that the 1980 album deserves celebration. It just seems that, akin to 2009's unexciting *A Touch of Evil*, a live record that mines several songs already available on the *Rising in the East* DVD, this Anniversary Edition sells fans a bit short. And that's not very metal at all.
– **Bob Gendron**

Music Mastering:
The Art of the Transfer

Mastering engineer Dave McNair unravels the mysteries of analog, digital, and the sound of vinyl

By Steve Guttenberg

Dave McNair has been playing, recording, mixing, producing, and mastering music for more than 30 years. We met long before he started working with the likes of Los Lobos, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Patti Smith, Miles Davis, Willie Nelson, and Angelique Kidjo. McNair loves the sound of analog tape and LPs, and he's striving to get a bit of analog magic in the sound of his digital projects. He is currently plying his trade at New York City's top mastering house, Sterling Sound.

Steve Guttenberg: Mastering is a mysterious art. What exactly do you do?

Dave McNair: I've always been fascinated by mastering, but it seemed a little too one-dimensional for a career. I loved the idea of sitting in a room with a great playback system listening to new music all the time, but it didn't seem all that creative. Time was the mastering engineer had one EQ, maybe a compressor, and that's it. Fast forward twenty years, and now we have all sorts of tone-sculpting options.

SG: Tone sculpting, that sounds interesting.

DM: When they were cutting records from analog masters, mastering engineers were the caretakers of rather fragile analog signals. It wasn't an easy thing, trying to get from Point A to Point B without losing the music. Back then, the mastering engineer didn't compress or limit the signal all that much. They wanted the end user to hear all of the music's punch and leading-edge dynamics. But now that things are so clean on the recording end, mastering is a bridge from mixing to the duplication process. You might be adding colors that used to come from analog processors or mixing consoles.

SG: Sweetening?

DM: I'm chasing this idea. I want to make CDs sound like LPs.

SG: Let me get this right: You're going to do this by adding distortion?

DM: Not always, but sometimes. I'd like to get more of the effortless sound of vinyl on CD. Just inserting Tim de Paravicini's EAR tube EQs in the path, without even applying EQ, there is something about the way the transformers and tubes worked like a very intelligent limiter.

SG: Tone sculpting, without applying EQ. That's cool.

DM: The EARs gracefully chop off the hard-edged elements in the music. I love what they do. So I started talking to Phil (Sztenderowicz), one of our engineers here at Sterling, about building some kind of box with those attributes, and making them adjustable with acceleration limiters. We also talked about the box adding uncorrelated noise. I'm going to experiment and cut a few songs on lacquers and critically A/B the lacquers with the digital files to figure out what's so pleasing about the sound of a stylus tracing a groove.

SG: It's pretty complex. But I agree: Analog distortions can sound more musical than super-clean digital, even high-res digital.

DM: Right, distortion adds flavor, texture, and harmonics, but I'm not speaking for all mastering engineers. Many still use a very simple path and stay away from enhancements.

SG: Like compression, you guys love compression. But the music's compressed during tracking and mixing. Why would you compress it again?

DM: That's not always true. Maybe twenty percent of the time I get stuff that's not compressed enough. That's only because there's so many more new-to-the-game, semi-amateur engineers making records these days. They're recording some really great, artistically valid bands, but it can wind up sounding like a documentary style of recording. They leave it to the mastering guy to make it work, so I need to make the sound denser, and glue elements together.

SG: I'm guessing that 99 percent of the stuff you master is going to be listened to on iTunes or MP3s over $20 computer speakers, crappy earbuds, or car audio systems. You have to make music sound good for the real world.

DM: I have never consciously made an audio decision thinking this would sound better on MP3 or a small speaker.

Somebody figured out a long time ago that if you judge the overall EQ, dynamics, and the things you can alter in mastering over a really full-range, low-coloration system, the music will naturally sound better in a wide variety of systems. I occasionally monitor over headphones, just to hear the music from another perspective. And I might listen to things I'm working on in my car, to see how the bass sounds. But I don't ever really tweak it that much based on what I hear in the car. *(continued)*

"I'm chasing this idea. I want to make CDs sound like LPs."

SG: And the audiophiles, what about us?

DM: Production teams wants to make their music sound as exciting as possible. It's not about, "How irritating will this be for the .0001 percent of audiophile listeners in the world?" That's not on the radar for them. That's why so many records are too loud, too compromised; they'll sound fine on the radio and small, limited resolution systems.

SG: And that applies to musicians going for a more, shall we say, mature audience? Neil Young? John Fogerty? Bob Dylan?

DM: Make no mistake about it. In their minds, they're competing for an ever-shrinking group of people who actually spend some of their hard-earned money on music. So they're very, very aware of the competition. Buddy Miller's record has to be as loud as Wilco's, and Wilco is smashing the fuck out of their stuff just like everybody else. But I think their records sound pretty good. They are doing [compression] in a way that's a little more elegant or palatable. If the compromises are carefully done, it takes very little away from the enjoyment of the recording.

SG: I agree, and some pretty sophisticated audiophiles mistake compression for dynamics, and complain that truly dynamic recordings aren't loud enough!

DM: Right. People regularly misuse the term "dynamic" to describe when the bass and drums have impact and really move the woofers. That's actually a clever use of compression, and it's satisfying! Dynamic is more about the ratio of soft-to-loud parts, and very few people really want that. It frustrates them; the level going up and down is an annoyance.

SG: What about Nirvana's soft-loud tunes? How big of a level difference is in those tunes?

DM: Not that much. There's a difference between what the meter reads and what your ears tell you. It was probably seven or eight dB, and in pop or rock music that's pretty healthy. A lot of records have just three or four dB difference, and they can still feel louder in the choruses because the sound gets harmonically dense or the singer starts to scream.

SG: Mastering engineers have the final say in how a recording sounds. So they better have the best ears.

DM: In a way that's true, but only because that's where you are in the chain. I've been a recording engineer, and that job is more about knowing what to listen for than having great ears. I'm positive I can't hear as well as I did fifteen or twenty years ago, but now I think I know what to listen for.

SG: Experience counts for a lot.

DM: You listen in a different way when you're mixing or recording. You're listening for unintentional distortion, and you want the sound to be true to the nature of the project, whether it's highly manipulated or very natural. You're more of a quality control person at the recording end; you're just trying to not make any massive mistakes and capture the best performance. Even though it's a demanding job, the recording engineer is, unfortunately, at the bottom of the food chain. He's paid a fraction of what the higher ups get. You can't really make a living as a recording engineer anymore. It's sad.

SG: So the mix engineer creates the "sound" of the record?

DM: Yes, along with the producer, whether it's a documentary-style recording trying to capture a moment, or, at the other extreme, a 100-track layered pop masterpiece where the producer runs the whole show. The producer can be a facilitator or a creator, or anything in between.

SG: And the mixer?

DM: He can't make a great performance out of nothing, but he can make an average performance sound more engaging than it really is. Sometimes all the elements are great and have a strong direction. So you just make the vocal and band sound good, plus tweak a few little things, and you're done. And then there are times where you know there's a cool song in there, but you need to give it some life. That might mean turning things off, leaving stuff out. You might be selecting from 15 or 20 vocal performances other than the keeper take.

(continued)

"There are times where you know there's a cool song in there, but you need to give it some life."

SG: So after the mixer has fine-tuned the sound to the nth degree, what's left for the mastering engineer to do?

DM: There might be three or four mix engineers working on a record. The mastering engineer unifies the sound across the whole record. One might have had a heavy hand on compression, and the others a lighter touch. I can't undo compression, so I might have to make the other songs a little denser sounding. The mastering engineer might also use equalization and other tools to enrich the sound of one particular song, and make the sound more vivid and compensate for how the mixers shaped the overall frequency content based on their listening to different speakers.

> "In the end, I only feel good about the mastering if the client is really happy with it. I can be happy with a wide variety of scenarios."

SG: How do you decide what sounds good?

DM: I'm still figuring that out! Seriously, I have a pretty good idea of that now, but it took a long time to feel comfortable with that concept. With mastering, you may want to do a lot or virtually nothing. You may get something that sounds really dark—maybe the mixers' monitor speakers were bright, and they didn't know what was going on—so you brighten it up a little bit. When you give it back to them, one of two things will happen. They'll either say, "Wow, that sounds great," or, "You completely screwed this up, we wanted this really dark, moody sound." Experienced mastering engineers get better at intuitively figuring out what's right. Ultimately, you have to rely on the feedback of the people involved in the project. It's their record, and they're intimately involved in it.

SG: But unless you have a history with the band you may not really know what they want.

DM: Right, you can ask a million questions, but it's even money that what they want is exactly the opposite of what they're telling you! That's part of what makes mastering so interesting. Sometimes they just want you to tell them no. In the end, I only feel good about the mastering if the client is really happy with it. I can be happy with a wide variety of scenarios.

SG: Can you turn off your analytical side and listen to music for pleasure?

DM: Only when I'm listening on low-resolution systems, and at home for me, that winds up being WFUV on a table radio or the jambox in the kitchen. I can only love the Decemberists on that jambox. Not that it doesn't sound good. But the music works best for me in the kitchen or car. Those are very inviting places to listen to music. Once it's on a nice system, I'm listening to the compressors and stuff. ●

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Club Mix

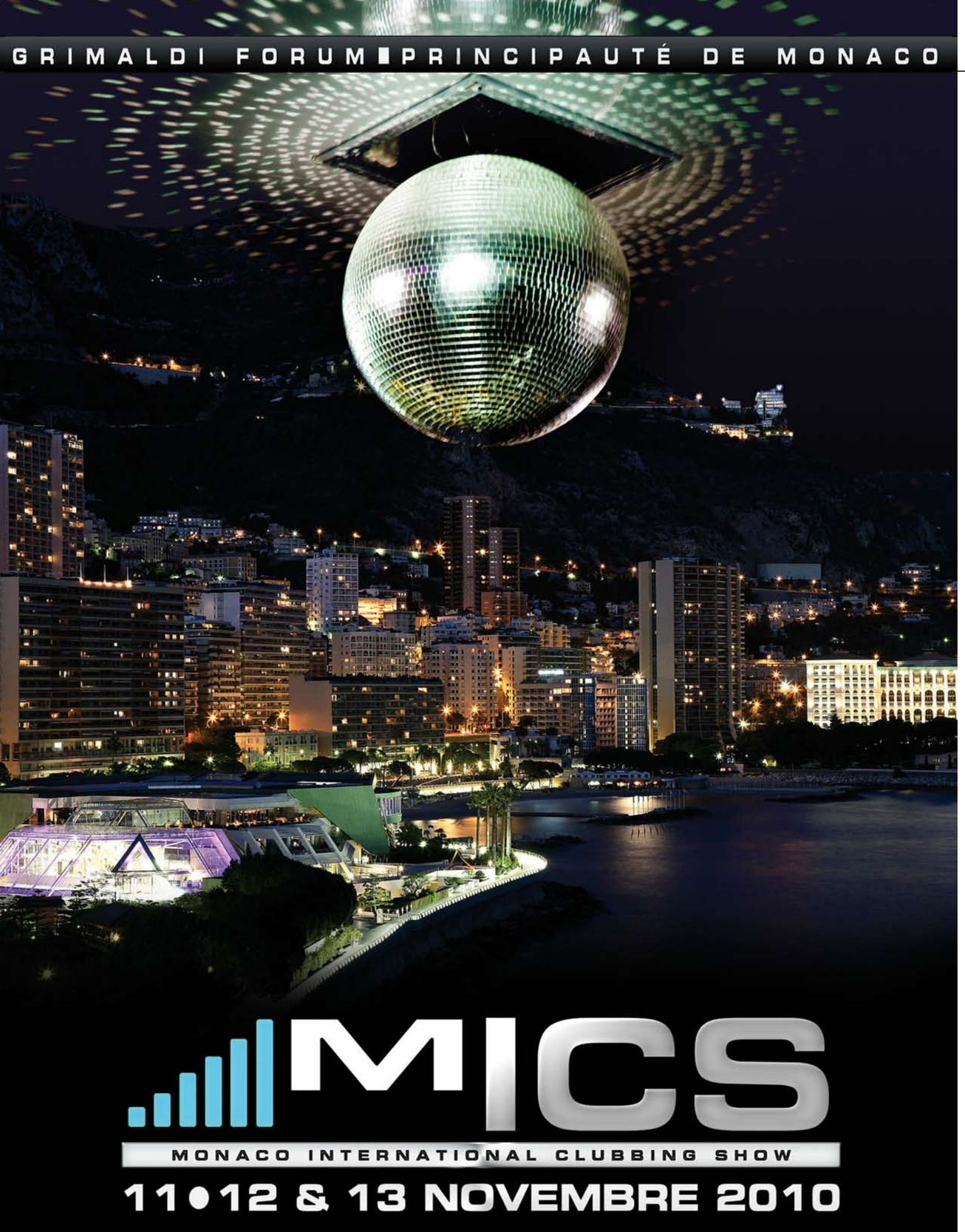
By Scott Tetzlaff

Over the last month, the flow of fresh tunes in the Club Mix world has ebbed. Was everyone watching "American Idol" instead of making real music? No, the brief respite just turned out to be a lull. So roll up your sleeves and plug in your headphones. A bevy of quality new releases awaits.

The Cinematic Orchestra
Late Nite Tales
Late Night Tales UK, CD

Active since the 1990s, the Cinematic Orchestra has released lush music that you've probably heard in movies and TV shows. A collection of jazz and electronic musicians fronted by Jason Swinscoe, the ensemble's *Late Nite Tales* series are compilations selected, mixed, and tweaked by DJs, producers, and musicians. (The earliest volumes are called *Another Late Night*.) Part of the formula involves the inclusion of a spoken-word work at the end of each disc. And with the Cinematic Orchestra being, well, cinematic, this record shifts from mood to mood. Sometimes the fare is light; sometimes it's a little heavy. Cue it up when having a deep conversation with a friend over drinks—or maybe during a yoga session.

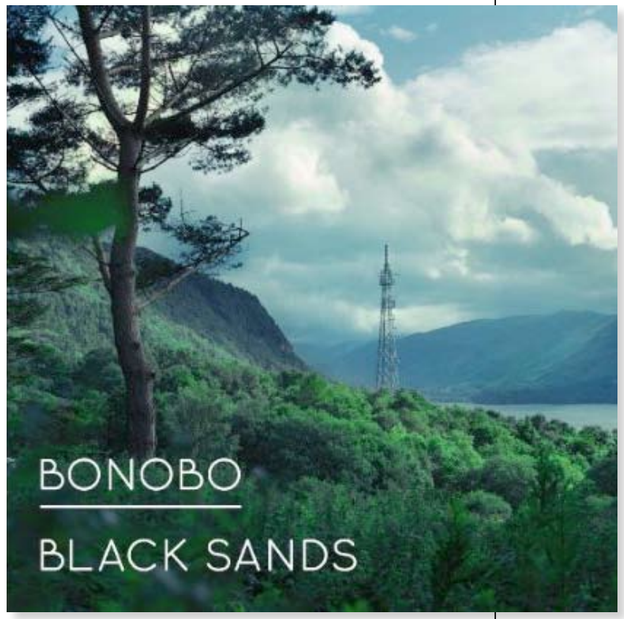
Tracks include revisions of songs from Nick Drake ("Three Hours"), Bjork ("Joga"), Burial ("Dog Shelter"), and Burt Bacharach ("South American Gateway"). The diversity makes the shuffle button redundant. And yet, there's a beautiful flow to experiencing *Late Night Tales* from beginning to end in the order in which its creators intended. A word of caution: The 57 minute spoken-word piece is slightly racy—and weird. Send grandma and the kids out of the room. If you're looking for an intriguing new listen, you've found it.



Goldfrapp
Head First
Mute U.S. CD and LP

Goldfrapp continues to surprise and delight. Legacy listeners might be more familiar with the cold, brooding sounds made famous on the duo's first album, *Felt Mountain*, but *Head First* is more akin to a modern day Jem and the Holograms soundtrack.

While the sugar-coated collection of upbeat, synth-pop might send diabetics into a coma, this record engages with big waves of shimmery synthesizers, great hooks, and smooth transitions. Maybe it's the old-school feel, the positive lyrics, or the adorable voices. But who can resist the allure of Goldfrapp purring, "I want to get alive again tonight" over such fascinating beats? Moreover, the darker "Head First" and "Hunt" conjure up the best of 80s Euro pop. Splendid stuff, all around.



Bonobo
Black Sands
Ninja Tune, CD and LP

Bonobo (a.k.a. DJ Simon Green from the U.K.) has been making great downtempo records for years. Known for an eclectic variety of sampling, smooth bass lines, and jazz sensibilities, Bonobo delivers again.

The opening tracks on the artist's fourth EP tip their proverbial hats to Chinese classical music before morphing into a full electronic groove. Continuing in that vein, vocalist Andreya Triana adds her warm voice to "Eyes Down," "The Keeper," and "Stay the Same." No filler; all killer. This is music that's simple, stunning, and beautiful.

Gotan Project
Tango 3.0
XL Recording, CD and LP

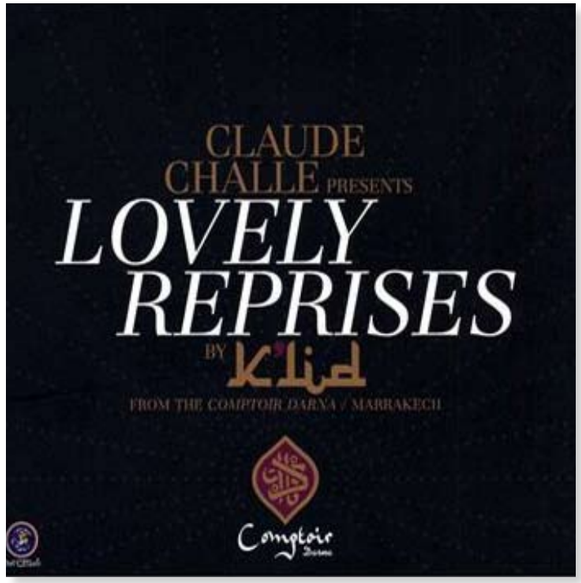
Phillipe Cohen Solal (France), Eduardo Markaroff (Argentina), and Christoph H. Muller (Switzerland) combine their wide range of cultural diversity in the Gotan Project, an electronic tango group whose fourth studio album continues where its predecessors left off.

Akin to the collective's more accessible debut, *Revancha Del Tango, Tango 3.0* offers solid tango tracks backed by fine accordion playing and electronic effects. Indeed, differences between Gotan Project albums are subtle. Standout tracks here comprise the guitar-tinged opener "Tango Square," traditional tango "Peligro," and echo-laden "Mil Malone." But that's not all. International listeners might experience an "a-ha" moment the next time they watch Fox Broadcasting commercials in Portugal or their favorite episode of "Top Gear" in the U.K. These guys are everywhere.

King Britt
The Intricate Beauty
Nervous Records, CD

The Intricate Beauty finds ex-Philadelphian King Britt expanding on his trademark electro-jazz fusion. Having worked with Digable Planets and Scuba, the veteran's sound comes off like a version of Soul to Soul subtly blended in with dashes of 70s disco.

Britt gets off to a smooth and sexy start, with a danceable upbeat house track that's seemingly destined to become a party favorite. "Love What You Have" serves up slinky vocals from Rucyl Mills and "Nightlife" features Kim English. And "Try Love" will have you looking around the corner, waiting for Grace Jones to arrive. The pace picks up midway through, and complements Afro-Cuban flavors that take a decidedly retro turn on the closing hour-long epic "Unknown." A great disc to spin while mixing drinks.



K'lid
Lovely Reprises
Phantasm Imports, CD

While musing together at the Comptoir Darna in Marrakech, Buddha Bar's Claude Challe and K'lid (AKA DJ Khalid) came to the conclusion that the millennium sound hasn't yet really come to fruition and that music from the last five decades remains extremely pertinent. Enlisting the help of music stylist Beatrice Ardisson, they assembled a selection of rearranged and remixed classics.

As such, *Lovely Reprises* features a dizzying array of music from different time periods. After opening with James Brown's "(It's a Man's Man's) Man's World," the record later segues into a salsa version of Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall, Pt.2." Never overly jarring, the feast of compelling arrangements keep *Lovely Reprises* from becoming another random collection; keep the remote control and fast-forward button at bay.

Favorites include an orchestrated Middle Eastern-themed rendition of R.E.M.'s "Losing My Religion" by Dolapdere Big Gang and a reggae version of Procol Harum's "Whiter Shade of Pale" by Pat Kelly. A must for Challe fans—and a great place for the uninitiated to start their education.

Groove Armada
Black Light
OM Records, CD

Groove Armada's long history of creativity and re-invention keep fans off-balance, as no one ever knows what the duo will do next. The aptly titled *Black Light* boasts a vintage glam rock, electro synth sound. Still, the overall effect feels new, as if Groove Armada taps into the 80s from an alternate future.

Partners Andy Cato and Tom Findlay again team with top-level collaborators, which here count Nick Littlemore (Empire of the Sun) and Bryan Ferry. Sample "History" for a quick blast to the past, Ferry's ballad "Shameless," or the heavily synth-laden pop hooks of "Paper Romance." The more you listen, the more sonic artifacts emerge. Think of *Black Light* as a musical Where's Waldo.

STILL BITCHIN' AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

The PrimaLuna ProLogue One

By Jeff Dorgay

IT IS WELL-KNOWN THAT I'M A BIG FAN OF PRIMALUNA. They are one of the few HiFi companies that have done Chinese manufacturing right, without sacrificing quality to meet a price point. I have a warm fuzzy spot in particular for the ProLogue One because it launched my career as an audio reviewer.

About seven years ago, when I was about to write my first review for *The Absolute Sound* involving an integrated amplifier from NAD, I received a call from Robert Harley that the NAD review was being shelved because the company wasn't comfortable with the "new guy" writing about their amplifier. But he did have a tube amplifier from a new company called PrimaLuna, and he would give me my first shot at that. Honestly, I didn't really want to review the NAD anyway, hoping my first review for TAS would be a little more edgy. If I had only known...

For those of you that didn't read my original review in TAS, back in their December 2004 issue, I summed it up by saying, "How does it sound, it sounds bitchin'." Indeed, the ProLogue was a great little integrated amplifier, and for $1,095 with a full compliment of EL-34 output tubes. Seven years later, the price has gone up somewhat, with the ProLogue One now having an MSRP of $1,595. Considering that a gallon of gas has gone from $1.39 a gallon to $3.25 in my neighborhood, this amplifier is still a bargain for what it offers.

Built like a tank

Removing the bottom plate of the ProLogue reveals point-to-point wiring, meticulously done, much like the legendary Marantz or McIntosh tube amplifiers. PrimaLuna has kept a tight reign on its factory, and it's paid off in almost zero field failures. I purchased that original ProLogue One back in the fall of 2003, and while it's moved on to a former staff member's house, it's been playing music non-stop. It's also worth mentioning that the original set of tubes are working fine, so if you are curious about tube life, I think it's safe to say after seven years that the PrimaLuna amplifiers are easy on tubes.

The rest of the amplifier is equally well-built, with a thick chassis that features a quarter-inch front faceplate and a metal chassis that is coated with a deep-blue metallic finish (almost, but not quite black) that is polished to a high gloss. It is also available with a silver face plate should all-black not be your cup of tea. Separate speaker terminals are offered for 4- and 8-ohm speakers, and regardless of what your speakers have as a rated impedance, I would suggest experimenting with both taps. Listen for the combination that has the most open presentation and plays the loudest with ease; that's when you'll know you have it right.

Simplicity is the essence of the ProLogue One, with a volume control on the left and a four-position input selector on the right. The large toggle power switch is just on the left face of the chassis. While this amplifier is very compact, taking up only an 11-inch wide space on your equipment rack (15 inches deep and 7.5 inches high), it is hefty, weighing almost 40 pounds. PrimaLuna didn't scrimp on the transformers, so the ProLogue One feels like a vintage tube amplifier as well.

The ProLogue One ships with a cover for the vacuum tubes, but unless you have small children or pets, I highly suggest leaving it off so you can bask in the glow of the tubes when listening.

FEATURE

PrimaLuna didn't scrimp on the transformers, so the ProLogue One feels like a vintage tube amplifier as well.

Nothing added.
Nothing subtracted.

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The Tin Pan - Central Park, New York - Sunday morning

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Nothing added. Nothing subtracted.

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Easy to integrate into any system

On the rear panel of the ProLogue One, there are four sets of high-level inputs that are all identical electrically, though you can purchase an optional MM phono stage for $199. Only basic soldering skills are required, so you should be able to install one in about half an hour. For those with a modest analog front end, this is definitely a great option, easily the equivalent of outboard phono stages I've heard in the $400 range *and* there is no need for an extra pair of interconnects or a power cord.

Thanks to the PrimaLuna's *Adaptive Auto Bias* system, this amplifier does not require any adjustments or fiddling to enjoy tube sound. Most amplifiers require you to adjust a group of controls, or worse yet, adjust controls and use a multimeter to adjust bias. If not done correctly, too much bias voltage will eat up the tubes prematurely; not enough will flatten out the sound of the amplifier and increase distortion.

The autobias system not only allows you the comfort of not worrying about this aspect of operation, it frees you from having to buy power tubes as a matched pair or matched quad, saving a few bucks should the day come that you do need to retube the ProLogue One. An added benefit of autobias is that it also allows the use of different output tubes. While most of you will probably be more than happy with the stock EL-34 tubes, you can experiment with 6550/KT88's, 6L6 tubes as well as a few others.

For those not familiar with the "tube rolling" hobby: different tubes have different tonal qualities. Guitar players have been rolling tubes for years to get exactly the sound they want. You can do this to some extent in the ProLogue One. Briefly, the EL-34 tube is known for a lush midrange, while the 6550/KT88 tubes are more extended at the upper and lower end of the frequency range, sounding slightly more "modern." *(continued)*

Thanks to the PrimaLuna's *Adaptive Auto Bias* system, this amplifier does not require any adjustments or fiddling to enjoy tube sound.

The ProLogue One will probably seduce you straight away, leaving you to wonder how music can sound this good at this price point, and that's the Prima Luna magic.

The 6L6 offers an even warmer tonal perspective, reminiscent of the older McIntosh tube amplifiers that use this tube, albeit with a few less watts per channel.

Swapping the output tubes in your ProLogue One will either allow you to fine tune your system's sound to perfection or drive you to madness. Investigate at your own risk! After coming full circle, I've ended up preferring the sound of the stock EL-34's more often than not, and it's much easier. But wasn't there a set of vintage EL-34 Bugle Boy's out there on Audiogon. Hmmm...

Tonal quality

Having used a number of EL-34 style amplifiers over the years from Dynaco, Marantz, Conrad Johnson and others, the ProLogue One still remains one of my favorite medium-powered tube amplifiers, and I've had the opportunities to compare it to quite a few. While it doesn't have quite the exquisite tonality of my Marantz 8B, it is head and shoulders above the Dynaco stuff, even those heavily modified and upgraded.

In the world of digital imaging and magazine production, when trying to achieve the proper tonal quality and color balance of images for reproduction, there is a saying that any Photoshop jockey or press operator knows – "pleasing color." Not perfectly exact color, usually slightly on the warm side, but a reproduction that almost everyone will find agreeable. Much like music, most people like their color just slightly on the warm side rather than cool, it makes everyone look healthier.

The ProLogue One offers the same thing in regards to its sound. It's not syrupy and lush like a Dynaco Stereo 70 or perhaps a vintage Scott or Fisher, but it's not as refined and neutral as, say, a piece of ARC Ref gear. For most of you just getting into the audiophile world, it's going to take you a long way because most of your music is going to sound great played through the ProLogue One; that splash of warmth and body will go a long way when paired up with a modest CD player or analog front end.

Plenty of power for most speakers

While you can't move mountains with 35 watts per channel, if your speakers have a sensitivity of at least about 88dB/1watt, you might be pleasantly surprised at just how well you can get by with this kind of power.

Most of this review was conducted with Verity Audio's newest floorstander, The Finn. It has a sensitivity rating of 91dB/1watt and allowed the ProLogue One to play incredibly loud without distortion in my somewhat small (11 x 17 foot) living room. A few other big favorites with the ProLogue One have been the B&W 805S and the new 805D, the Harbeth Compact 7 and the Penaudio Rebel 3, to name a few.

The ProLogue One doesn't have the rock-solid grip of my reference solid-state amplifiers, but it does a better job controlling the woofer cone than any of my vintage tube amplifiers. The bass provided goes deep as well. If you've been living with moderately priced solid-state amplification for any length of time, the ProLogue One will probably seduce you straight away, leaving you to wonder how music can sound this good at this price point, and that's the Prima Luna magic.

It's still bitchin'

I've had the privilege of reviewing a lot of the world's best amplifiers during the past seven years, and the ProLogue One is still the one I always suggest to my friends that want to put together a modestly priced yet highly musical audio system. It remains one of the most musically fun components produced, and it now has the track record to back it up.

Grab your favorite pair of speakers, add a CD player (or perhaps a new Squeezbox Touch) and you should have great sound for about $3,000 - $4,000, less if you grab a few used bits. But don't expect to find a ProLogue One for sale used. Most people keep them forever.

Because of its stellar reputation and high performance for the dollar, we award the Prima Luna ProLogue One one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2010. I can't recommend it highly enough. ●

Ed. Note: Upon completion of this review, Herman van den Dungen told me that when the present stock of ProLogue One and Two amplifiers (the ProLogue One with upgraded bits and KT88 tubes) are gone, they will be replaced by the new PrimaLuna ProLogue Classic, which features the upgraded parts of the Two, a newly designed adaptive bias board and some other goodies. If you just want the basics, I'd suggest grabbing a ProLogue One while they are still available.

The PrimaLuna ProLogue One
MSRP: $1,599

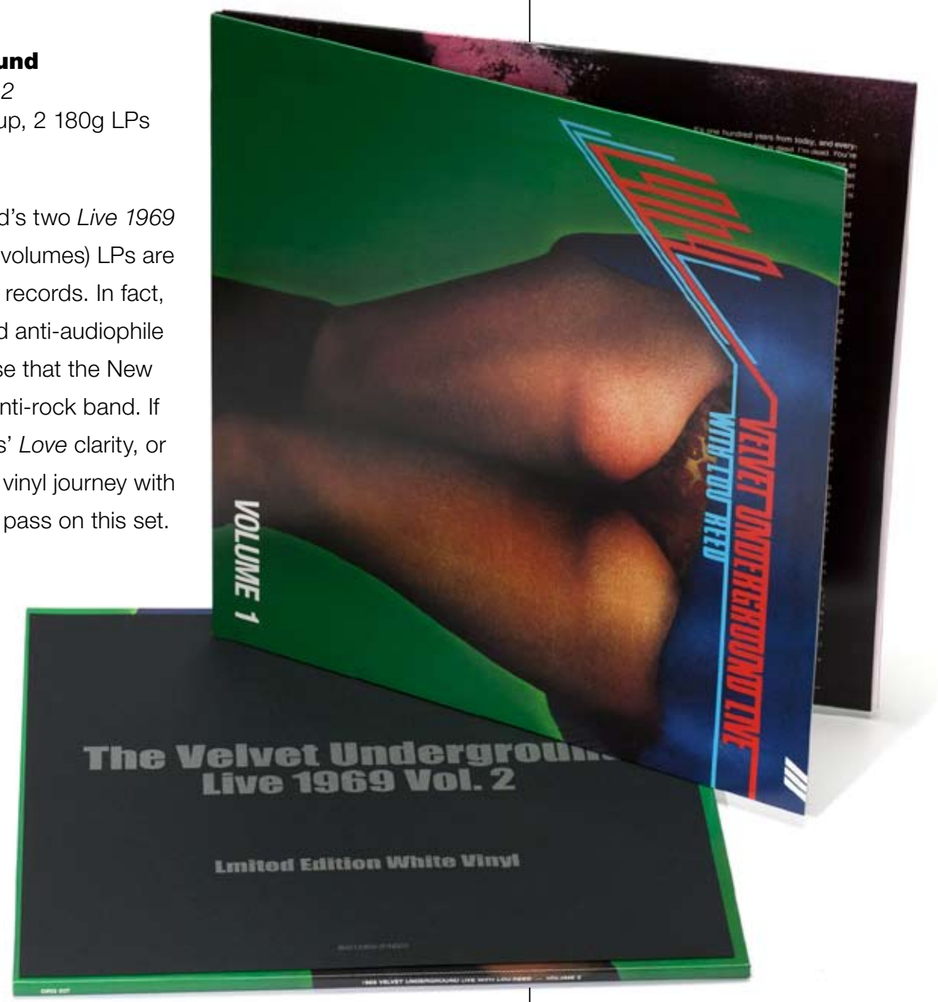
www.upscaleaudio.com/ProLogue-Series_c_96.html

Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay

The Velvet Underground
Live 1969 Volume 1 and 2
Original Recordings Group, 2 180g LPs

The Velvet Underground's two *Live 1969* (available as separate volumes) LPs are not traditional audiophile records. In fact, they could be considered anti-audiophile albums in the same sense that the New York ensemble was an anti-rock band. If you're looking for Beatles' *Love* clarity, or even the place to start a vinyl journey with the Velvet Underground, pass on this set.



However, if you'd like the closest thing you can get to a time machine, jump in with both feet. Many consider 1969 the peak of the Velvet Underground's career, and these two slabs of vinyl capture the group's pioneering essence in an untouched manner that, now, would probably never be allowed to see the light of day in our pitch-corrected world.

If you're a huge VU fan, you likely know about the intimate details that comprise these albums, taken from live recordings made at the End of Cole Avenue in Dallas in October 1969 and San Francisco's Matrix in November. There's a definite difference between the two sources, with the San Francisco sessions coming closer to any kind of dynamics. But both are equally valid.

Bernie Grundman and his team at ORG carefully dusted off the source material and nothing more. To get a true feel for what the engineers accomplished with these reissues, listen to the old CD version—it's dreadful, and completely lifeless. With all of today's tools at their disposal, Grundman and company had to be tempted to make efforts to nip and tuck, much like Mick Jagger did to the rarities tracks on the recent reissue of *Exile on Main Street.* But they didn't, and that's what makes these LPs precious and vital to any true rock aficionado. These could quite possibly be the two most honest-sounding records in my collection.

Yes
The Yes Album
MoFi, 24kt. Ultradisc II CD

Anticipation begins as soon as Chris Squire's first bass riff explodes just seven seconds into MoFi's remaster of this classic prog title, and it only builds from there. A marvelous reissue, *The Yes Album* is now full of detail, with myriad sonic improvements. Just behold "Yours Is No Disgrace," as Steve Howe's guitar solo bounces back and forth between the speakers approximately five minutes into the track. It's a wonderful thing.

Compared to the early U.S. LP I have in my collection, MoFi's CD is superior in every way, most noticeably in low-level detail. While the record has always been famous for ample left-to-right separation, it's also always been flat in terms of depth. No more. Depth is present in spades on the new disc and, even better, each member occupies their own distinct space in the mix. On every song, Squire's background vocals finally take on a life of their own, where in the past, he's always sounded buried.

A thorough listen will not disappoint. Granted, Internet debates about the disc's merits flared just days after its release and remain as heated as an Icelandic volcano. Some have compared it to unobtainable LP pressings and various CD masterings; some love it, some hate it. Sure, if you already own a few copies, you might not be prompted to purchase yet *another.* But completists, diehards, and newbies should immediately opt for this edition.

MoFi's version of *The Yes Album* is the blueprint of how classic rock remasters should be handled. It strips away the all the grime, leaving the record's essence perfectly intact, and sounds better than 95% of what you will find on the record-store shelf for anywhere near a reasonable price. Put me in the love category.

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The Meatmen
War of the Superbikes
Drastic Plastic, LP

If you're reading this, your thoughts likely echo those of the guy at my local record store, who said to me, "You don't really listen to this shit, do you? I thought you ran an *audiophile* magazine." While the Meatmen's second album may not exactly qualify as audiophile fodder (and I've got a hundred-dollar bill for the first guy at this year's CES that dares to play a full side of the LP in their room), it is: A. Remastered; B: On vinyl; and C: Better-sounding than the original that happens to be sitting in my record rack right next to *We're the Meatmen and You Suck.*

Lead singer Tesco Vee keeps the Meatmen on track, singing about fast motorcycles, inspecting cadavers, and relationships gone wrong, all the while bagging on Abba and Joan Jett all over a wall of distorted guitars. And that's what makes the Meatmen great. Fortunately, the quality of this pressing allows the liberating frenzy of both guitarists to shine through. Much like Judas Priest—or maybe not.

Granted, *War of the Superbikes* is still a bit on the compressed side, but it sounds killer on my SL1200 and the pressing quality is excellent, free of the random clicks that adorned the original copy ever since the day I pulled it out of the sleeve. So, if you've been longing for a pristine copy of this classic from Lansing, Michigan's favorite punk band, break out your wallet. It's only $13.99. A bargain that beats all.

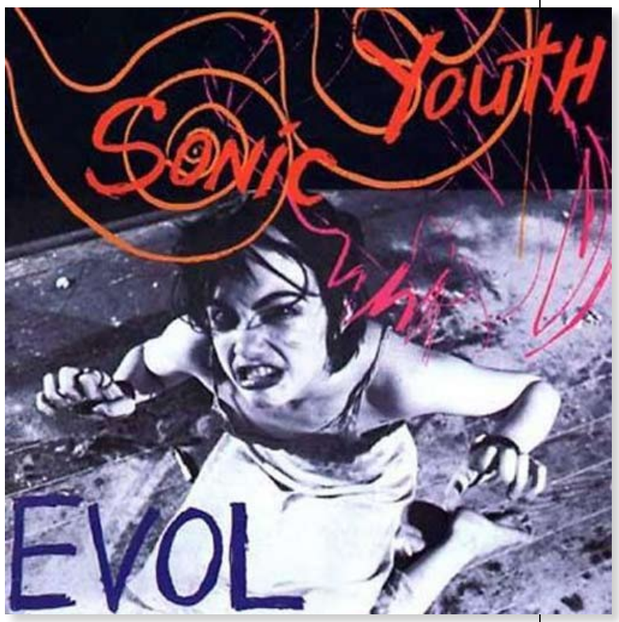
Alice in Chains
Jar of Flies/SAP
Sony, 180g 2LP

It always seems bizarre to weigh in on a hard-rock record as if it were a precious Patricia Barber set. Somehow, reflecting on the additional midrange palpability of an Alice in Chains album just seems wussy. Perhaps it's best to leave well enough alone.

Compared to the original U.S. CD version of *Jar of Flies,* there's no question that these two slabs of vinyl reveal more information and detail than the original, yet the improvements come at a cost of dynamic contrast. Which would be fine if we were talking about *Bridge Over Troubled Water,* but we aren't.

This reissue is a toss up. On slower tracks, the additional air and detail are welcome, giving the record an intimate *MTV Unplugged* feel. However, on more aggressive tracks like "Stay Away" and "No Excuses," digital is the way to go if you really want to rock out.

The net result? The LP remaster is the winner by a narrow margin. Pressing quality and jacket are top-notch, and the bonus EP *SAP* is a welcome addition. Still, it's a shame that *SAP* wasn't spread out over both sides of the blue disc and afforded some nice, wide grooves so you could crank the hell out of it. Remember, this *is* Alice In Chains.



Sonic Youth
Confusion is Sex and *Evol*
Original Records Group, 180g LP

If the hi-fi industry has any future hopes of getting anyone under 60 years old to buy gear and listen to music seriously, we need *a lot* more of this kind of thing. Not only did ORG remaster a pair of Sonic Youth albums, the label chose two of the New York band's most pivotal efforts. Bravo.

While many might argue that Sonic Youth's 24-minute self-titled release is the ensemble's first "official" album, *Confusion is Sex* certainly captures enough of the band's original free-form feel, underground aesthetic, and experimental ambition. This was mind-blowing stuff when it came around the first time, but unfortunately, it was mind-blowing stuff that sounded pretty damn awful. That didn't stop Sonic Youth from becoming noise-rock icons and attaining legions of fans.

Mastered by John Golden (I just can't picture Bernie Grundman doing these titles) and pressed at RTI, 1983's *Confusion Is Sex* and 1986's groundbreaking *Evol* sound fantastic. Yes, there are moments when both records come across like bonafide audiophile albums, which again reinforces how much music can be captured with extremely basic equipment. For anyone worried that a little tidying ruined the punk-inspired perspective, have no fear. When bassist/vocalist Kim Gordon roars the chorus of "Freezer Burn/ I Wanna be Your Dog" on *Sex Is Confusion*, the distortion is so heavy, you can practically see it in the grooves with a naked eye.

Most importantly, both albums were treated with the care and respect they deserve. You've never heard Sonic Youth like this.

Curtis Mayfield
Curtis
MoFi, 24kt Ultradisc II CD

So much has already been said about the musical and thematic content of this crucial soul/funk LP that there really isn't much to add to the discussion. Curtis Mayfield's self-titled debut often gets overshadowed by Marvin Gaye's *Let's Get It On* and *What's Goin' On* (both also on MoFi and of equally stellar quality), but the 1970 set is of similar merit.

Back at their California offices, MoFi engineers Shawn Britton and Rob LoVerde must own an industrial-sized bottle of liquid funk that they sprayed all over these discs. This remaster just oozes passion, feeling, and yes, soul. It has a big, warm fat sound, with Mayfield's vocals ringing out loud and clear, much better than you remember, with orchestral elements floating all across the soundstage. When Mayfield yells, "Sisters, Niggas, Whiteys, Jews, Crackers!" over the distorted bass line that opens the record, the effect will make you want to hit the floor in anticipation of The Man breaking through the door at any second. The album's lower register is restored as well. Most LPs from this era feature a rolled-off bottom end, but on *Curtis*, it sounds strong, and adds to the overall funkiness.

Do your favorite teenager or nephew a favor and turn off Justin Bieber. Have them listen to *Curtis*. They'll thank you for it one day. ●

When Mayfield yells, "Sisters, Niggas, Whiteys, Jews, Crackers!" over the distorted bass line that opens the record, the effect will make you want to hit the floor in anticipation of The Man breaking through the door at any second.

New Section!

Downloads

By Jeff Dorgay

To acknowledge the growth in high-resolution downloads, *Tone* is expanding the "Audiophile Pressings" to a section that focuses solely on downloads. At present, the major players are HDTracks.com, Linn, and the Naim Label, with more on the way.

In this issue, we wrap record reviews with interviews to give you a broad picture of what's going on—namely, chatting with U.K. singer Gwyneth Herbert about her latest release on the Naim Label and legendary guitarist Peter Frampton about his latest release on Universal, available via high-resolution 24/96 download from HDTracks.com. Frampton has also made his classic *Frampton Comes Alive* available at HDTracks.com.

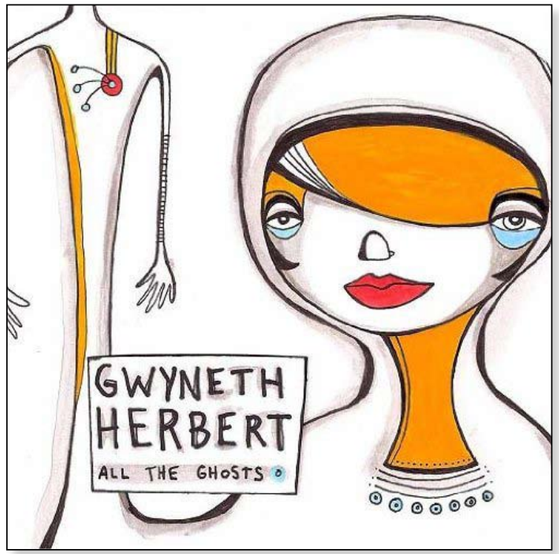
Gwyneth Herbert

Gwyneth Herbert
All The Ghosts
24/44 file, $24.99

For those of you not familiar with British vocalist Gwyneth Herbert, she's been making records since 2003, and in 2007, became the first English artist signed to Blue Note in 20 years.

Her current *All The Ghosts* started as a project with Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios as part of B&W's Society of Sound. Last summer, when I talked to Simon Drake, General Manager of the Naim Label, he said, "We basically had most of this in the can and just had to master it."

Available in Europe for some time, the record was just made available on the Naim Label for download last month, and for analog fans in the audience, will be available on LP in June.



Herbert has a style that's tough to pin down. And that's a good thing. Too many contemporary female vocalists fall into the Diana Krall wannabe trough and stay there.

Such variety is really makes the record stand out. It starts out pop with "So Worn Out" and immediately switches gears for the second track, "Annie's Yellow Bag," with a much more sparse, jazzy arrangement before changing the tempo yet again on "Lorelei," which is very reminiscent of Anya Garbarek's work. There are seven more tracks to discover, including a wrenching version of David Bowie's "Rock and Roll Suicide." The Naim Label bio compares Herbert to Lennon and McCartney, but her strength of tone and powerful sustain is reminiscent of that of Annie Lennox.

The recording quality is outstanding, Herbert's voice is right up front with a lush, breathy quality spread out over a huge soundstage. It's always a pleasure to hear an "audiophile" recording that gives the material and the recording equal footing. If you live in New York, Herbert will perform five shows in Rochester June 18, 19. and 20.

When reached on the phone, Herbert was funny and relaxed. We talked about the record, upcoming performances, and a few of her guilty pleasures. While she does not listen to Def Leppard while showering, she does like Canteloop and enjoys singing "80s cheddar, loving every reverb-drenched, wind-in-the-hair, air-guitar moment of it."

TONE: *Is this your first time in the U.S.?*

GH: No, about four years ago, I had a two-week gig at the Algonquin in Manhattan. It was a great place to perform and a wonderful way to see the city. I even took a pottery workshop in the East Village. I fell in love with the city.

Did you decide on New York to minimize logistics between here and the U.K.?

Definitely. I've got the three dates in Rochester confirmed and I am trying to get a couple more in the city proper.

If all goes well, will we see more of you in the U.S.?

I certainly hope so. We're starting small and working into it. If we can generate enough interest, we'll set up a proper tour for later in the year.

Do you enjoy touring, or are you more of a recluse?

I love touring very much. I enjoy the writing process and get a lot done on the road. Playing live is the best thing to spark my creativity. I love the band I'm working with; we have a great dialog. I feel it's just as important to have that communication with the audience as well. You want to be a good communicator. Every night it's a slightly different show.

Will the band join you for the New York shows or will it be a solo acoustic set?

All but the percussionist, he can't make it. So I'm looking for someone Stateside to help us out.

Let's chat about your past three record labels. Is the Naim Label handling you for this record?

(Laughs) We absolutely should talk about the Naim Label. I'm a big fan so far. Simon Drake at Naim was the one that won me over. I was bowled over by his enthusiasm. He doesn't talk to you like a label guy. He talks to you like a music guy. That was very important to me.

What Naim lacks in finances right now, they make up in enthusiasm. It's a joy working with Simon.

As a result, you seem much more at ease on this record.

Yes, that is completely accurate. The first albums were great, but I didn't have a totally coherent perspective as to what I wanted to accomplish. I almost felt like a guest vocalist!

How did you make the jump to Blue Note?

Once I made *Between Me And The Wardrobe*, which took three days, I found my feet. We had just intended it to be something we sold at gigs, but it got into the hands of Blue Note and they picked it up.

How long have you been with the current lineup?

Almost five years. When I write, I definitely think in the context of writing for that sound. This feels like my first strong statement of where I want to be.

Your music is available in multiple formats now. Are you starting to see high-resolution downloads as the beginning of a viable revenue stream?

You'll have to ask Simon about the particulars, but I know the record is not in the red anymore! It's nice to see the royalties coming in.

Any chance it will get released on vinyl?

Yes, I went to Abbey Road to watch them do the mastering and cutting. The fellow that cut my record was one of the crew that worked on the Beatles' remasters, so it was very exciting. I think it should be in record stores by June.

"My Mini and Me" is brilliant. Are you a Mini owner? New or old?

I've got a *real* Mini, a 1981. It's been a love affair for about six years, but I've had to forgo her for a while in favor of a much more boring but highly functional Nissan Micra that I know will get me to the gigs on time. I used to have to leave about two hours early to make sure I got there. It was highly stressful, but worth every minute of it.

Seems like most of us have had a love like that.

Exactly. ●

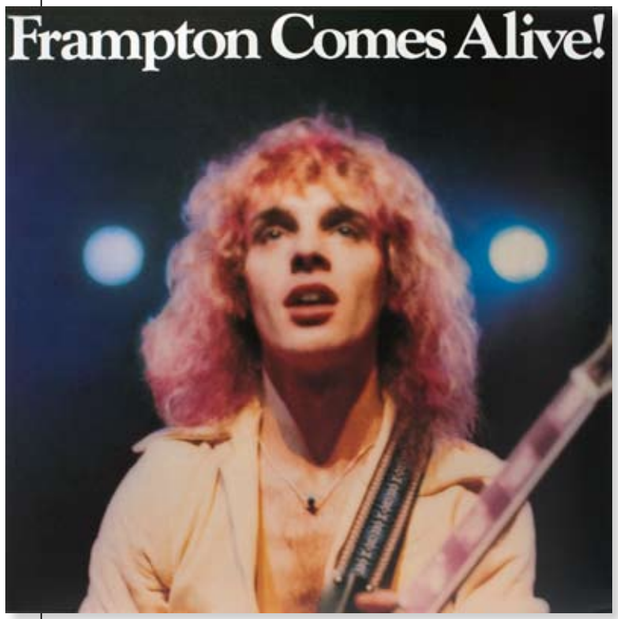
DOWNLOADS

Peter Frampton
Frampton Comes Alive
Thank You, Mr. Churchill
24/96 high-res download, HDTracks.com

Interview by Jaan Uhelszki

Peter Frampton has always stayed on top of guitar and recording technology. So it seems apt that he not only release his latest album, *Thank You Mr. Churchill*, on 180-gram double LP, but also give cutting-edge audiophiles a treat with a 24/96 download straight from the master tape, courtesy of HDTracks.com. As a further display of confidence in the digital format, he also just issued his classic live set *Frampton Comes Alive* in 24/96.

Both records are fantastic, and fulfill the promise of high-resolution digital. The new record, mastered by Bernie Grundman, is a stellar pressing, with 11 songs stretched out over two 180-gram LPs so that dynamics are not compromised. It's as good as a rock recording gets in analog. But the high-res download is even better. It features an extra dose of dynamic range, and is completely devoid of harshness. Every track sounds cleaner, letting you peer more deeply into the music. Moreover, while the LP retails for $35, the high-res version from HDTracks.com costs just $17.99. (If you click on the album cover in this article, a link will take you directly to HDTracks.com to purchase it.)



Frampton Comes Alive has long been considered one of rock's highest-quality live recordings. These days, a half-speed mastered Mobile Fidelity copy often fetches upwards of $400 while the DVD-Audio edition commands half as much—provided you can find one.

Both Frampton and David Chesky, one of the founders of HDTracks.com, realize that if popular rock records aren't made available in high resolution, there won't be anything left but MP3s. As Frampton admitted to me on the phone, "We all know the CD is going away someday. We have to be prepared."

And prepared he is. Despite the fact that the recent Nashville floods wiped out his entire guitar rig in advance of an upcoming tour, Frampton proved a gracious host while answering our questions about the move to HDTracks.com and what he sees for the future.

TONE: *Why did you move to Ohio?*

PF: Mostly to be close to my wife's family. We also have a place in Los Angeles, as my 14-year-old daughter Mia is acting now. She just finished her first major movie with Ed Harris and she's definitely got the passion for it. When you see the passion, you have to get out of the way.

Well, we both started our careers early. If anyone had stood in the way, you have to do it. Look where it's brought you.

Exactly. My daughter has the passion for acting and my son definitely has it for music. He's on the new record and has done a great job.

How did your parents respond to your early career move?

[My mother] used to say, "You can't stop Niagara..." My parents were not stage parents, but they were always encouraging. I was the first one in the family to go into the business. My wife Tina and I are the antithesis of stage parents because we know.

You always speak of yourself as a Type A personality, yet you don't personify that. Yet there is an arc of nature that defines your career.

I'm Type A because I have to be in control of things. I'm an addict with whatever I'm doing. Luckily, I've been sober for seven years now, and loving every minute. But my wife knows I'm an addict. Now I'm addicted to Facebook. I've had to fall back on that.

I don't want you Twitting on me...

We try to keep our sense of humor; it's crazy. But I still have the passion for what I'm doing. I always get back up stronger after getting knocked down. Sometimes it takes a little while but I always return.

So what have you learned from this journey?

I learned a lot from reading Bob Dylan's book. When I found out that even the great one has writing blocks (laughs) it was nice to hear. Sometimes you're on input and sometimes you're on output. Even he was in a funk for a couple of years; he [later] sat down and wrote 20 pieces of music. It calmed me down a lot.

Of course when it happens to you, it feels like you're the only one.

I really used to panic. There are cycles, but there are things that come along to give you a lift. *Fingerprints* was the thing that gave me a lift and took me out of the norm. I got to work with an incredible array of musicians that I looked up to over the span of my career. It was the first project after my "new birthday" as it was. It was very enjoyable to do, and it was nice to get the little nod at the end.

(continued)

Actually, very large nod.

(Laughing) Right, *very* large nod, actually. It was great to have Larry Carlton come up and congratulate me right afterwards. Those two things in one day were enough to keep me going for the next 50 years. It was phenomenal. I realized that I'm not following a giant anything anymore and the giant 800-pound gorilla has left the room.

But was the 800-pound gorilla your addiction or that monster hit record? Or the fact that you were the biggest rock star around for a certain period?

It was definitely a Rubik's Cube. In the long run, though, you don't see many Rubik's Cube's around but you still see copies of *Frampton Comes Alive* on people's shelves. At the time, it was so many people and then nobody wanted to hear another Peter Frampton record for a while. It's the truth. It became too much.

You don't see many Rubik's Cube's around but you still see copies of *Frampton Comes Alive* on people's shelves.

At the time, did you have the fear or the awareness of this, or were you able to live in the moment and just enjoy it?

I had an imminent fear of something, but I didn't know what. The bigger it got, the bigger the fear: How was I going to come out with something to top this? It was an awful feeling. I'm not whining, but it was like having all my dreams come true in one night with *Frampton Comes Alive*. I got all my birthday and Christmas presents at once. Yes it was a good record, and yes it deserved to be Number One. But did it deserve to be as big as it got, I don't know.

Do you still think about that?

Absolutely. That record really captured the passion I have for performing live. And believe me, when Frampton drops dead, I'll still be thinking about it.

Would you trade the blockbuster fame for a slow and steady relationship with the public?

I would have much preferred that, but we take what we're dealt. I'd much rather be number two, because while number one is in the limelight, number two can hang out at the bar, have a few drinks, and pick up all the chicks. That was [in] the old days, mind you.

Speaking of that era, can you dispel the rock myth about the party for Elton John where he wouldn't come out of the bathroom until you arrived? Is that true?

It was a private party actually. I don't know if he was actually in the bathroom. Let's just say we were both there, that much is true.

So it was somewhat imagined?

Well, there were other things involved. (laughing)

What about the more light-hearted story about The Who dangling you out of a window?

That I *can* attest to. When they dangled me out the window, girls three floors below were screaming.

Was this during the Humble Pie days?

Earlier, with the Herd.

Give me some background.

It was the Herd's very first hit on "Top of the Pops." We were on the bottom of the totem pole, touring with The Who. The Kinks and Traffic were there. It was an action-packed tour. We closed the first half, but we were [finished] early on in the night. It was great because I was such a big Who fan. But then who isn't? I hit it off with the guys and Keith Moon invited me to travel with them, so I got to join them on the road in their Bentley. Being the teenybopper craze of the moment, I got hung out the window like Vanilla Ice. *(continued)*

Photo © Getty Images/Gabriel Bouys

But didn't he get hung out of a window for a different reason? I was the original. I trusted them like an idiot but they never let me go. They always got a good scream hanging me out the window. It was all in good fun.

You were the "Face of '68" after all. Do you feel the looks were a hindrance or your secret weapon?

I know it opened a door, but honestly, when the Herd was signed, I was the third-tier singer. But our management wanted me to sing on the singles. At that point I was doing strictly backups, "shoo be doos" and what have you. It has been a hindrance throughout my career. People don't take you seriously as a serious musician if you've got too much of a look.

But in the late 60s early 70s you didn't get as much cache if you didn't have the look. You were the template.

But it really overshadowed my talent as a guitar player. The shirtless thing was all wrong. The photographer (Scavullo) says at the end of the shoot, "Come on, open up that shirt for me, just one shot" and that's the look they all want. I made terrible mistakes because I was so naive. I didn't know that would change the perspective on my career. It made my audience unbalanced.

With Humble Pie, you seemed to have a completely male audience. I went to your gig in Detroit, and there weren't many women in the audience when you played Cobo Hall.

It all ended up being my Achilles heel.

You have come through it all with a good sense of humor. Didn't you wear the Frampton wig at a show at one point?

Tommy Shaw had a solo album out and his solo band was opening for us. They decided to come out on stage as KISS, so I decided that I had to do something. I got in touch with a local hairdresser to get a wig and some platforms so that I could do the encore as "the old me." My bass player, John Regan, said that when I came out with the hair, the whole audience moved three or four feet forward. The camera flashes went off like they did in the 70s. It was like the real Peter Frampton that everyone expected had arrived. I only did it that once, but I enjoyed the heck out of it.

Let's fast forward a bit. Do you think that your part in Almost Famous *as the road manager put your current career back on track as who you are now?*

I don't know. It was a day's work, one of the few days I'd worked as an actor. I spent the entire summer with Cameron Crowe as a behind-the-camera consultant.

What do you think was your greatest contribution to the film?

Cameron and I had often talked about how we hated rock movies because they weren't authentic.

DOWNLOADS

They always had the wrong guitars, the wrong gear. So when he called to tell me that he was doing a rock movie, I said, "No you're not, we hate rock movies." He said that's why he was hiring me to keep it authentic. And so when Stillwater opened for Black Sabbath, I remembered opening for Black Sabbath in that time period, so I could say, "This goes here, this goes there." I kept the continuity right. One of the things I did with Billy's character was to keep his fingers on the right frets and the right strings and look up to the sky. When he did that, Cameron and I gave each other a high five.

What did he tell you about your acting?

After I smiled in a scene that I couldn't re-do, he said, "Next time you'll know."

Wow, tough love.

(Laughs) Yeah! But he was very helpful. I thought it came out pretty well.

Let's fast forward to today. You've just done a major redesign on your Web site to correlate with the new album. Great stuff with the big tubes behind your house, the gigantic guitar pickup in the pickup truck. Very playful.

Ah yes, the "pickup in the pickup." I found the guys that did work for the White Stripes and some others. I really admired their work and figured it was time to get into the future with the Web site design. The designers asked me what I was into, and I told them I was a gadget freak: old amps, tubes, that sort of thing.

After the first few things, I told them to run with it. The next round was great and I freaked out when I saw the pickup in the pickup.

How early did your obsession begin?

When I started playing guitar when I was around 11 years old, I knew I needed something to record on, so I bought a reel-to-reel deck. And of course, then I needed a second one. (laughs) I started sound on sound without anyone's help, recording one track on the first deck and then moving its speaker next to my guitar amp and recording that as I played along.

> I might never get knighted, but I was on "The Simpsons"!

No fancy line-in stuff then! I used to use the bathroom as my echo chamber with a crystal mike on the windowsill. I recorded from a bare speaker, no cabinet. It sounded great.

And now you produce the Frampton line of guitar accessories. Does that pay the mortgage or just something you do for sheer enjoyment?

It's a boutique company, but it does cover its cost. Richie Sambora is one of our best clients and he's the only one that's blown one up!

It gets in your blood, doesn't it?

Yeah, I've had a home studio as long as I can remember. Now I've got the Frampton Motown downstairs.

Any 4 a.m. sessions where you wake up with a riff in your head and run down to the studio?

I have done a few solos with the robe on!

After playing live all these years, how has your hearing held up?

Remarkably well, actually. I just had my ears tested and I'm doing fine, but I have a slight dip in the 3-5k range on the left side.

What is your typical listening environment at home?

I've got a few modest systems around the house, but I do my critical listening downstairs. I do feel it's important to do a fair amount of listening on modest gear though, so I can see how it translates for everyone else. Haven't got my turntable out yet. That's another story.

For curiosity's sake, how did you get the gigs with "The Simpsons" and "Family Guy"?

Actually, they came to me. Bonita Pietila from casting called one day and popped the question for "The Simpsons," and a few years later I got the call from the "Family Guy" people.

Tom Petty said once that his kids weren't impressed with him getting into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, but they were impressed that he was on "The Simpsons."

There you go. I might never get knighted, but I was on "The Simpsons"! ●

Jeff Dorgay contributed to this article.

FEATURE

Cassettes Are Still Pretty Cool

By Jeff Dorgay

While some audiophiles complain about the high cost of components in the 21st Century, back in 1981 when Nakamichi introduced the ZX-7, it had a retail price of $1,250. That's right, $1,250 for a cassette deck. The first generation of CD players had just hit the market and they sounded dreadful, and reel-to-reel tape recorders were headed out the door as well. Much like any technology, the cassette deck was discontinued just as it had reached the peak of its development.

OLD SCHOOL:

Featuring a discrete three-head design, you could monitor your recordings right from the tape just like an open-reel deck, and the ZX-7 also featured the industry standard Dolby B and the newer Dolby C noise reduction. While Dolby C offered an additional 6 dB higher level of noise reduction than Dolby B, it was more susceptible to problems with head alignment and caused serious "fluttering" in the playback if not perfectly aligned.

Adjustments Galore

The ZX-7's claim to fame was its multiple adjustments for standard type I tape, type II (chrome) and type IV (metal) tapes, allowing the user to adjust record azimuth, bias, EQ and record level/balance. The ability to fine tune these adjustments was a big part of what gave the flagship Nakamichi decks their ability to capture so much musical information on that tiny strip of tape, often putting lesser open-reel decks to shame, albeit at a much higher price.

Right around this time, you could still purchase a TEAC 2300 for about $600, so this was pretty stratospheric pricing.

Once the deck was set for your tape of choice, you were ready to start recording! Along with all the adjustments, the deck had a full logic transport that was like butter. The tapes were handled with the utmost of care.

Fond Memories

Using a ZX-7 back in the mid-1980s, I found it to be a great deck to save wear and tear on my record collection and indispensable at parties when everyone had had a drink or two. I'm sure the Nak paid for itself in phono cartridges *not* destroyed back then.

But the best part was the sound. This deck truly did have many of the attributes of an open-reel deck with a frequency response that extended out to 22kHz with metal tape, which retailed for about $50 for a case of 10 TDK 90-minute tapes. The uber-cool ones with metal and see-through acrylic housings were about $10 each! They didn't sound that much better than the standard plastic ones, but they looked serious. Today, if you can find them in the shrink wrap, they can fetch $75-$125 each. Crazy.

I recently found a mint ZX-7 at my local HiFi shop, Echo Audio in Portland, Oregon, and I couldn't resist doing the time warp again. I had a mint 600 series II in for a tune up at the time and the shop owner made it very easy for me to get out of the 600 and into the ZX-7.
A quick market check reveals that these decks in perfect shape can run about $500. If you have a local tape-deck expert, expect to pay about $125-$175 to have the deck thoroughly cleaned and adjusted properly. Just like when buying a vintage sports car, buy the best deck you possibly can; you don't want to start doing major repairs on one of these. *(continued)*

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Lives Up to Its Legacy

It's pretty wacky inserting a vintage cassette deck into a six-figure reference system, but the ZX-7 still delivers the goods after all these years. And I still managed to have a couple of TDK MA-R's in my private stash ready to go (because I rarely get rid of *anything*, especially if it's a discontinued audio format).

Cuing up the Raven TWO, I put together a mix tape of some of my favorite MoFi records from the same time period and it was a great blast from the past. With the additional resolution of today's HiFi gear, it's easier to see where the Nakamichi's limitations are. Even though the metal tape offers up great high-frequency extension, there is a modest loss in dynamics and image focus that gives the tape away.

But when heard through a more-vintage system, consisting of a Marantz 2275 receiver, Technics SL-1200/Shure V15 table and a pair of JBL L-100's, even the chrome bias tapes that I made with the ZX-7 are indistinguishable from the vinyl playback. That's what made the ZX-7 so highly coveted in its day.

If a full-blown reel-to-reel deck frightens you, think about a high-performance cassette deck. They are a ton of fun and for now, parts are plentiful. Should you go down the Nakamichi path, you can get more background information at: **www.naks.com**

Keeping the Ship Afloat – Phoenix Tape Company

Larry Mellette remains the ultimate tape-deck enthusiast. Along with his other website, tapeheads.net, he started manufacturing cassette tapes. "It started with a company I was working with; they had enough metal tape stock to make about 3,500 tapes, so I bought it all." He also has a line of two different chrome tapes and the shells are loaded to order, so this is a labor of love, not the second coming of Maxell.

But that's great news for those of us who haven't turned our back on our cassette decks. While he won't reveal his source for tape stock, Mellette said, "You'd be surprised if I told you who made the tape." He's sold 3,000 tapes so far, with a dealer in the UK (Tapeline), Australia (Gamve) and tapes.com here in the US.

Following in the footsteps of those who have been bringing reel-to-reel tape decks back to the forefront of audiophilia, Mellette is working on a cassette deck of his own. The design is not finalized yet, but he thinks the first deck will be playback only.

If you still love your cassette deck, join the forum at tapeheads.net. It's a great group of enthusiasts with a large cache of information on tape decks of all formats, as well as a buying/trading area. ●

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Jazz & Blues

By Richard Colburn

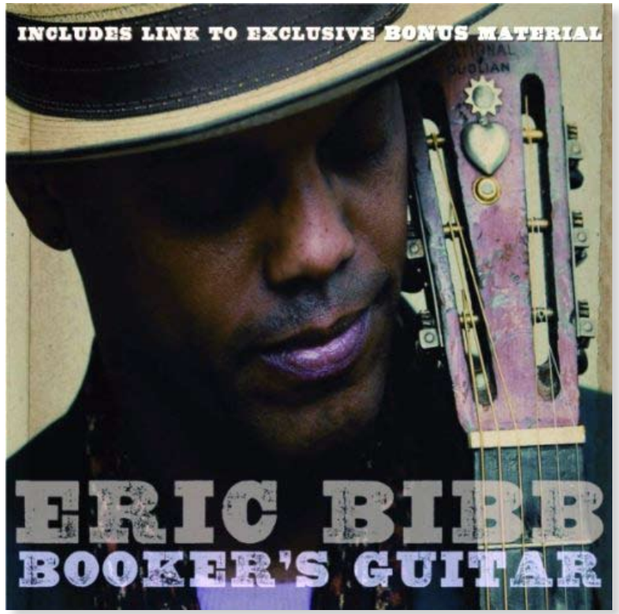
Anais Mitchell
Hadestown
Righteous Babe CD

We've all heard of rock operas. But a folk opera? And one based on the Orpheus myth? As unlikely as it seems, the evidence here is undeniable—and undeniably great.

Hadestown is a terrific song suite that follows Eurydice (Anais Mitchell), Orpheus, Persephone (Ani diFranco), Hermes, Hades, and the Fates across a post-apocalyptic America. In essence, Hadestown is a representation of the Greek Hades myth wherein Hades is the god of the underworld of the same name—the ancient version of our modern hell.

No matter how ambitious and challenging, the songs are beautifully performed by a cast that makes light of the heavy lifting. Even better, the primarily acoustic production shines. String sound is superb, vocals are stunningly natural, and the staging is wide and deep.

Highly recommended, particularly for opera lovers seeking something fresh and original.



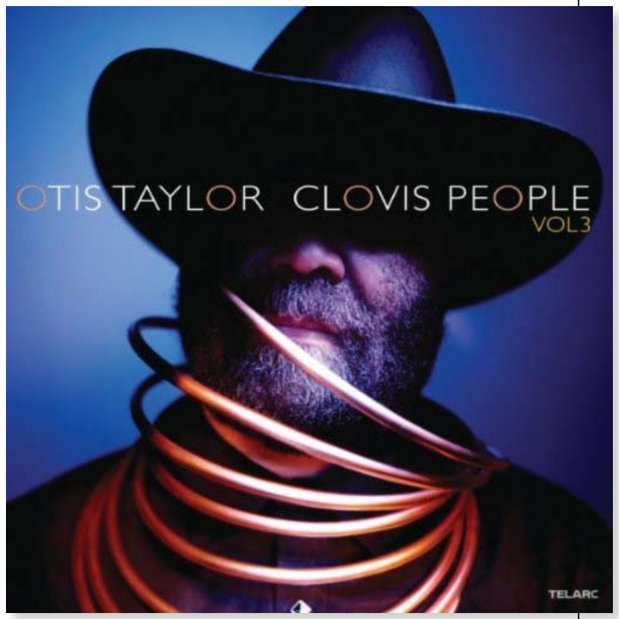
Eric Bibb
Booker's Guitar
Telarc CD

Inspired by a chance encounter, *Booker's Guitar* came about after a fan offered Eric Bibb the chance to play a National Duolian guitar that once belonged to Mississippi Delta legend Bukka White. The experience led Bibb to a musical epiphany. No wonder that the cover art depicts the modern bluesman lovingly holding that beautiful National instrument.

Not surprisingly, all of the album's songs hone to a folk blues tradition yet speak to modern issues. Partly spoken and partly sung, several tunes also showcase Grant Dermody's fine harmonica accents.

Listeners that prefer stripped-down, basic blues should love this outing. Haunting and penetrating, the songs sound authentic, and the stories they tell are equally genuine. Most are Bibb originals; a handful stem from blues icons such as Blind Willie Johnson.

Sonics are superb. Bibb's voice is front, center, and extremely natural. The guitar and harp are well positioned, and provide natural acoustics and gorgeous overtones. Close your eyes and Bibb stands in the room, singing to you.



Otis Taylor
Clovis People Vol.3
Telarc CD

The self-proclaimed innovator of "trance blues," Otis Taylor brings us *Clovis People Vol. 3* despite the fact that there isn't a preceding volume 1 or 2. The back story? Taylor derived inspiration from an archeological find located approximately 100 yards from his Boulder home. And yes, the unexpected discovery involved the remains of Clovis people, a group that roamed North America 13,000 years ago before it mysteriously disappeared. The experience and history prompted Taylor to visit his musical past on a disc that preserves blues' traditional flavors while pushing the genre forward.

While the production is slicker than one might expect to hear on such stripped-down and basic music, it works quite well. In addition, several first-rate musicians provide colorful touches and enhance the thematic scope. Gary Moore adds gritty guitar flourishes on several tunes while horns embellish others. And Campbell Brothers member Chuck Campbell provides distinctive, sacred-steel slide-guitar fills to a number of songs.

What's more, the recording quality is top notch. Taylor's vocals are front, center, and openly transparent. And the manner in which instruments are placed in space is thoroughly convincing, replete with appropriate width and depth.

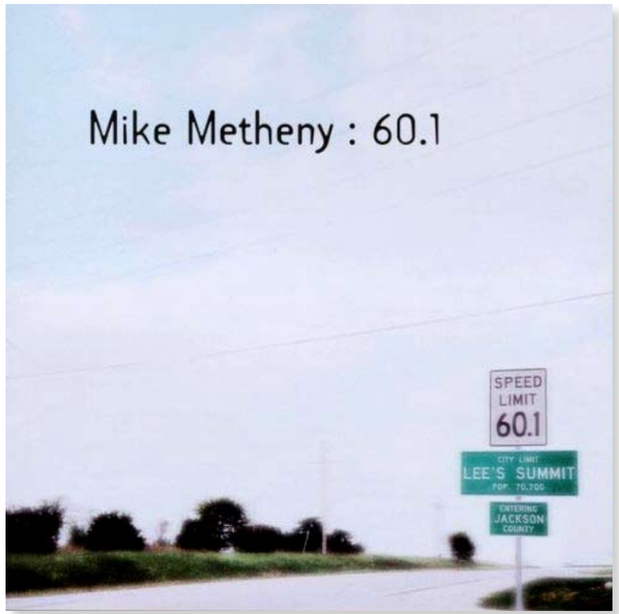
Marco Benevento
Between The Needles And Nightfall
Royal Potato Family CD

With roots in indie rock, pop, and jazz, Marco Benevento's third full-length is a sonic treat. What can be loosely described as a genre-bending exercise in melodic statements, *Between The Needles And Nightfall* consistently demands the listener's attention.

Throughout, Benevento's inventive keyboard work is embellished with various effects—ranging from guitar pickups on a baby grand piano to the use of Moog and mellotron instruments. He even uses an Optigan (an optical disc playing organ) to contribute to a colorful palette of sounds.

Fans of late-era Charlie Hunter or Brad Mehldau will be comfortable with this excellent trio's diverse ideas. The energy is infectious; bassist Reed Mathis and drummer/percussionist Andrew Barr clearly have a joyous time playing the material. Most compositions feature insistent chord progressions and a majestic bent. And each thematic statement builds to a truly lofty conclusion.

Due to the myriad processing, the sound is short of audiophile quality. But it's decent nonetheless, and the processing never detracts from the enjoyment, curiosity, or delightfulness. And that's what matters. Guaranteed to put a smile on your face.



Mike Metheny
60.1
3 Valve Music CD

Yep, Mike Metheny is the brother of the *other* Metheny, Pat. And a talented trumpet player and composer, to boot. While trumpet is Mike Metheny's primary instrument, he's equally adept at flugelhorn and keyboards. On this outing, he's accompanied by Bob Bowman on acoustic bass, the young Brandon Draper on drums, and Roger Wilder on acoustic and electric piano.

Although most would file *60.1* under "jazz," the content goes beyond any simple classifications. After the opening "Dubious Melody," a circus-like tune that establishes a free-form mood, the fusion-inspired title cut arrives as another surprise. Then comes the gorgeous ballad, "Laurie." Three songs—and three completely different music landscapes.

But Metheny isn't done. With a dreamlike melody and driving rhythm section, "Syncomation" could've come from any number of resident ECM artists. Want more variation? "C.C. And Water" is a straight-ahead trio effort and the most traditional jazz piece here. In addition, the take showcases Bowman's bass prowess, which will prompt many feet to tap.

On a few selections, Metheny plays an EVI—or, electronic valve instrument, a wind instrument/synthesizer with a MIDI output. It yields an interesting sound and, when used sparingly, tastefully spices the sonic landscapes. Unfortunately, a few Joe Zawinul-like noodling sessions detract from a number of compositions.

The sound is generally good. On the acoustic pieces, the soundstage is nicely layered and instruments cleanly placed within its wide dimensions. On the MIDI and processed pieces, the stage is more shallow and cluttered. Sonically, call it a mixed bag. Musically, however, it's a savory success. ●

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It seems as if there is always another iPod dock somewhere, but here's one that you should put at the top of your list – the Zeppelin Mini from B&W, creators of the original Zeppelin. While the standard-size Zeppelin has an MSRP of $599.95 and takes up a substantial amount of shelf space, the Mini is only about a foot wide and eight inches tall, with a lower price tag of $399.95.

Retaining the Zeppelin-esque shape, the smaller Mini uses an 18-watt-per-channel amplifier and a pair of three-inch full-range speakers with B&W's Flowport technology to extend the bass response, common to their flagship 800 series. There have been a few useful advances in the design of the Mini over the original Zeppelin; it now accesses the digital bit stream directly from your iPod so the audiophile purists in the audience with lossless or uncompressed files loaded can enjoy the increased fidelity that these provide.

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"Well there you have it: The best digital sources I've yet heard" – The Absolute Sound

"The Scarlatti Upsampler and DAC are proof that *dCS* still knows how to make products that are both world-beating and life-enhancing" – HiFi News

dCS

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While having nothing to do with fidelity yet equally handy is the docking clamp's ability to turn horizontal, allowing you to use your iPod Touch/iPhone in cover-flow mode, making for a compact yet highly functional music server. The Mini's egg-like remote handles all of the iPod functions so you can control it from the comfort of your chair. The USB port on the back allows your laptop to utilize the internal DAC, making the Mini even more versatile.

Rolling the Mini through its paces

Thanks to thoughtful design and a great instruction manual, the Mini will be up and rocking in about a minute. The red LED behind the front grille glows red when the Mini is in standby mode, switching to blue when powered up.

The difference between lossless and 256kb/sec MP3 files downloaded from the B&W Society of Sound site was clear even at modest volume levels, so those thinking that they need a mega system to hear the advantage need look no further. Peter Gabriel's recent disc, *Scratch my Back*, made for a perfect set of test tracks to hear the delicacy that the Mini was able to deliver. If you aren't a member of the Society of Sound, I would highly suggest joining. There are some great files to download. *(continued)*

Taking it to the limit, a quick superset of Iron Maiden and Pantera (not available on the Society of Sound website) proved that the Mini was capable of giving the maximum when pushed hard. But to get the most bass grip on your favorite metal tracks, I suggest placing it slightly closer to the wall, as the Mini does not allow tonal adjustments as does the full-size Zeppelin.

Obviously, no one expects a pair of three-inch speakers to have the play-back quality of, say, a pair of $5,000 B&W 805D's (that we just happen to have in for review), but the Mini gets the midrange right and provides a pleasing sound. Highs are smooth and the bass response is fantastic for something at this size and price point. This is one of the main advantages to such a product as this made by a company with so much engineering depth.

High Style and Great Sound

Anyone wanting a portable music system built around an iPod/iPhone or laptop should put the Zeppelin Mini at the top of the shopping list. It is solidly built and offers great sound in a stylish package that should work in any decor. Best of all, it is easy to set up and operate, which is critical with a device that is not designed for hard-core audiophiles who are already familiar with cables, connectors and the like.

The original Zeppelin has been a hit here, playing nonstop in my daughter's room since we purchased the review sample two years ago, so I have no question that the Mini will follow in its footsteps. My search for a great compact music system for the bedroom has ended; I'll be writing a check for this one as well. Highly recommended.

– **Jeff Dorgay**

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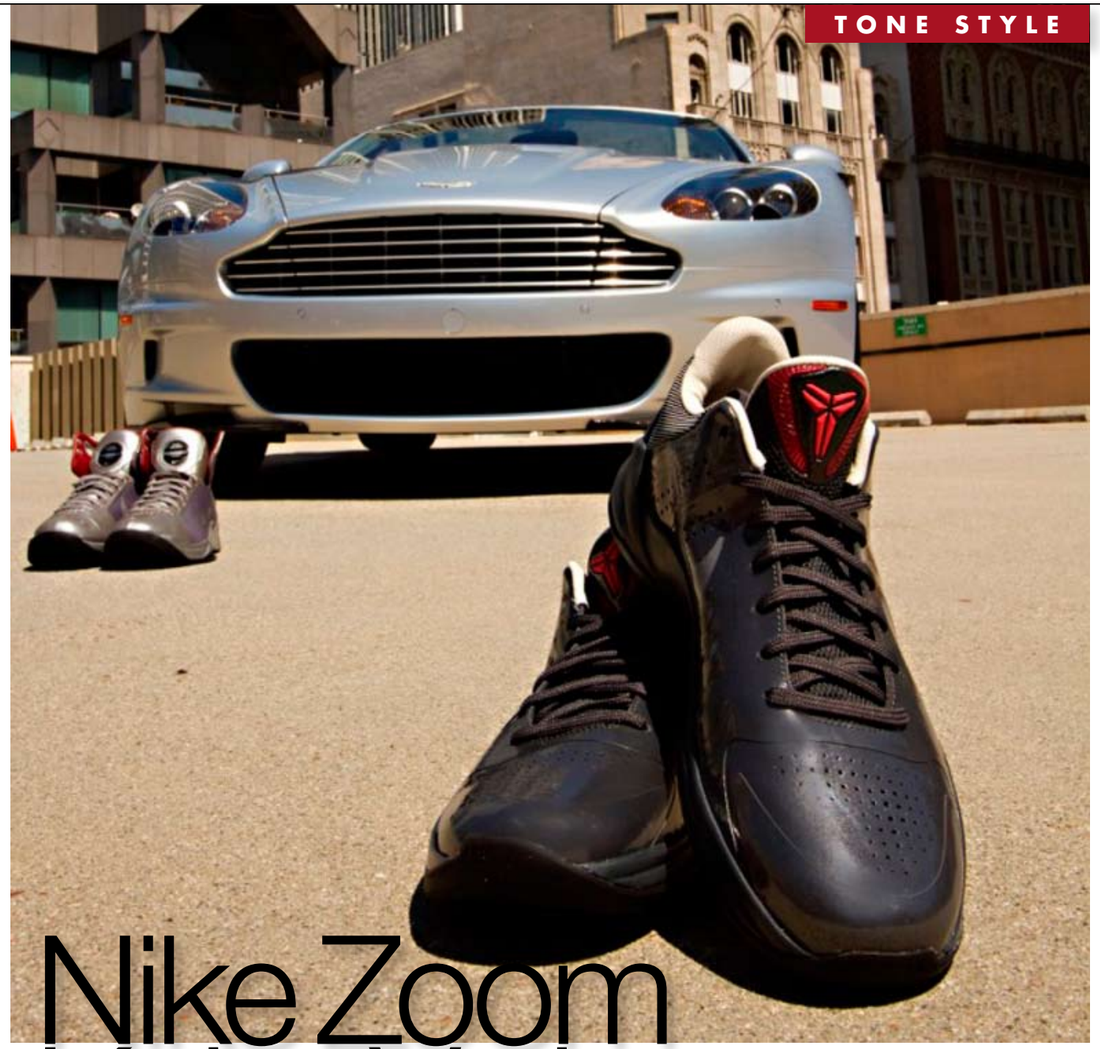

Nike Zoom Kobe V shoes

www.nike.com $79.95

No, you can't jump over an Aston Martin DB9, but you can buy the shoes inspired by the ones that Kobe Bryant wore while he did. If you want to see why Kobe is really worth the big, big money, a quick Google search will show the master in action. As Mars used to say, "Is it the shoes?" And to keep the legal department happy, TONEAudio suggests that you do NOT try to jump over a moving Aston Martin.
– **Jeff Dorgay**

Leica's V-Lux 20

The perfect point-and-shoot for professional results on the go

www.leica-camera.com $700

Travelers would be remiss not to include Leica's newest compact model on their packing lists for capturing this summer's memorable adventures. The V-Lux 20 takes digital photos with the level of quality that Leica users have come to expect from the brand, but it makes attaining professional results simple and intuitive, and it offers a few fun bells and whistles as well. Able to capture images with a 12-megapixel resolution, the V-Lux 20 boasts a 12x zoom lens for crystal-clear, high-rez close-ups and 25- to 300-mm focal lengths. Such versatility applies not only to digital stills but also to movies, which the V-Lux 20 is able to capture in 720p resolution.

The German manufacturer also took the liberty of incorporating into this nifty little point-and-shoot an integrated GPS function that will tag photos with the location at which they were shot and will identify 500,000 of the world's sightseeing points of interest – two firsts in the Leica model lineup. The V-Lux 20 offers automatic functions for easily capturing professional-grade images, but it also provides the standard manual operation options for photographers looking for a higher level of control. With a three-inch LCD image display, a weight of just over a half a pound and an optional sleek-leather carrying case ($175), the $700 V-Lux 20 is the ideal companion for traveling this summer.

– **Bailey S. Barnard**

Shown: LTX 500 Projector

AVM 50v audio/video processor

+

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www.anthemAV.com

Watch Us Work It T-Shirt

www.clubdevo.com $19.99

Show off the latest album art (from the recent 12" single released on Record Store Day) on your chest. It won't matter if your chest is big or small, as everyone will admire the artwork.

New, Improved! Blue Devo Energy Domes

www.clubdevo.com $32

Here's three reasons why you should spend $32 on a piece of plastic:

1. It's made in America. Don't believe me, go to the Club Devo website and watch the video...

2. It's blue. Not just any blue, 100% Cyan. Focus group approved and a step up from that red energy dome you've been wearing for the past 30 years.

3. It's from DEVO! Seriously, that's the *only* reason you need. Buy some merch, my favorite spuds have mortgages to pay.

The Flip Mino*HD*™ Video Recorder

www.theflip.com $199 or $229

Whether you want to rule YouTube or become the next Spielberg, a Flip is the place to start. First introduced in 2006, the Flip has come a long way from its humble 640 x 480 pixel beginnings. Like most other high-tech goods, performance goes up and the price comes down. In this case, the price went up slightly (from $149 in the original) but the performance has increased exponentially. Now the Mino*HD*™ sports 1280 x 720 resolution at 30fps.

High Performance, Low Profile

Both versions of the camera offer the same picture quality, with the price difference between the two equating to increased recording time. The 4GB model costs $199 with one hour of recording time, and the 8GB model costs $229 with twice as much time. For 30 bucks, I'd opt for the larger capacity model because playing with the Flip can get fairly addictive. And you don't want to run out of footage when you're in the middle of a mosh pit or space aliens land on your neighbor's garage roof.

The Flip captures in standard MP4 format, so you can edit your masterpieces with the enclosed FlipShare software or move your footage to a simple editor such as Adobe Premier Elements or iVideo (on the Mac). A quick capture comparison between my $200 Nikon point and shoot and the $800 Olympus E-P1 puts the Flip closer to the Olympus in picture quality, but lacking the adjustable ISO capability and zoom lens.

Anyone Can Use It

The Flip rules because you don't need to read the instructions. Turn it on, push the red record button and point it at your subject. When you've finished, pop the built-in USB plug, insert it into your computer and transfer the files. While I appreciate that you don't need to buy a USB cable with this device, I would suggest that if you use the Flip a lot, purchase an outboard USB cord to reduce wear and tear on your computer's internal USB socket. The memory is not removable as it is in a DSLR camera. *(continued)*

Burmester

ART FOR THE EAR

Since 1977, musician and engineer Dieter Burmester has been overwhelmed with awards. Always striving for perfection to reach sensational sound characteristics, superior technical features and unsurpassed manufacturing qualities he has lead the company to become the German high-end system manufacturer, always setting the highest standards in music reproduction.

Burmester would like to extend an invitation to experience the new members of the Top Line family: 089 CD Player with Burmester's renowned belt-drive technology. The 088 Preamplifier with the newest generation of Burmester X-Amp2 technology.
Combined with the world patented 948 Power Conditioner, the legendary 911 MK 3 solid-state Amplifiers and the aesthetically appealing B 50 loudspeakers - drive to perfection.

For those who seek a musical experience that can be felt during every single note – Experience Burmester's philosophy: Art for the Ear.

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The lens has a field of view just slightly wider than the standard 50mm lens on a 35mm camera, so you can't shoot in extremely tight spots. Thanks to an f2.4 lens and a very sensitive chip (>1.4v/lux-sec), you can shoot in relatively low light and still achieve acceptable results. The key to getting the best quality with the Flip is to keep it in the sweet spot of its performance curve. Use it in fairly bright light, try to keep the contrast down if possible, and either practice having a steady hand or get one of those tiny tripods. You'll be amazed at what you can come up with.

The Flip's tiny size allows you to take one with you wherever you go, and it will work in less-than-optimum light without the picture getting too grainy. So the art of chronicling your life just got a lot easier. The Flip Mino*HD*™ has become my new favorite toy.
– **Jeff Dorgay**

Lexar's Latest

Lexar 600x 8GB Compact Flash Card

Lexar Pro UDMA CF Reader $75 Card $129
www.amazon.com

As a long-term veteran of the digital-imaging world, it wasn't so long ago that 8GB Compact Flash cards didn't even exist, and when they hit the scene, they had four-figure price tags. Hard to imagine, now that they are about 50 bucks at the checkout counter at Safeway.

But for those who need to stay right at the edge of high performance in the digital world, whether it be photographic images or large sound files, here's a new toy to give you a speed fix: Lexar's latest 600x Professional CF cards. If you've just purchased a new DSLR that happens to shoot HD video, this card's high transfer rate should also be of interest to you, as the cards in this series (8, 16 and 32GB capacity) all work with the UDMA standard for maximum transfer speed.

And just how fast is it? Normally, downloading a 2GB batch of 160 raw photo files taken with my Canon EOS 5D takes three minutes and 50 seconds with a standard 8GB card, purchased two years ago with my Radio Shack USB 2.0 card reader. There was no speed boost using the Lexar card with this reader at all, so the USB bus is definitely a big part of the speed bottleneck.

Moving the same files with the Lexar reader that plugs into the FireWire 800 port on my new iMac took only one minute and 30 seconds, a substantial jump. So even upgrading your card reader, should you not want to bail on your current library of CF cards, is a step in the right direction. However, the big speed boost came when using the new card with the FW reader – the test batch of files took only 23 seconds. Impressive. Where this really comes in handy is when you fill up the entire card and it takes just over a minute to download; the old card/reader combination takes around 15 minutes.

Few of you will actually benefit that much from saving five minutes every time you download the card in your digital camera, but you will save a lot of time and aggravation *not* having jumped frames in your video or glitches in your audio capture, potentially missing an important moment that can't be recaptured.

If you have a need for speed, I can't suggest this pair from Lexar highly enough. – **Jerold O'Brien**

Star Wars Cookie Cutters

www.williamssonoma.com $19.95

Let the icing be with you. Next time you're in a baking mood, use these to make cookie cutouts of your favorite Star Wars characters. Darth Vader, Yoda and the Storm Troopers are well represented along with a recipe to make Imperial Icing to decorate them with. I'd pass on coloring the Yoda cookies green though, that just sounds icky.

And thanks to our friends at Gizmodo.com for turning us on to these. – **Jean Dorgay**

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Earbuds or Ear Duds?

By Bailey S. Barnard

There are a lot of earbuds out there. Many claim to be the ultimate pair, but most fall short. While single-driver models from the majority of manufacturers will easily trump Apple's generic iPod earbuds, there are few that provide audio-reproduction quality approaching that which audiophile ears demand.

The primary challenge earbud engineers face is to integrate a small yet potent driver into the design such that the buds will be lightweight and comfortable to wear, but will still reproduce audio with a high level of fidelity. Another engineering hurdle lies in the ergonomics of buds' external design, which when paired with the proper tips, ideally fits unobtrusively in the ear while maintaining a seal tight enough to minimize outside interference.

With this in mind, buyers seeking out the ultimate earbud need search no further: here are a few great examples for your consideration.

Monster's 2009 foray into the earbud market sprung out of its partnership with rapper and music industry magnate Dr. Dre.

Monster Turbine Pro Copper Edition

www.monstercable.com $399

Monster Cable, believe it or not, lies at the forefront of power in the earbud industry, and the 31-year-old manufacturer based just south of San Francisco refers to its models as "in-ear speakers" for good reason. The dynamic drivers employed in its range of earbuds models, especially the top-of-the-line Turbine Pro Copper Edition, deliver a powerful response throughout all frequency ranges, though listeners will be most impressed by the punch on the low-end. This is likely due to the fact that Monster's 2009 foray into the earbud market sprung out of its partnership with rapper and music industry magnate Dr. Dre, who undoubtedly encouraged the company's engineers to develop its earbud models to have a staunch low-end output able to accurately reproduce bass-heavy rap and hip-hop tracks.

Taking full advantage of such a wide-bandwidth driver requires delivering a pure signal, which Monster has done by employing its expertise in cable and connector production. The 24-karat gold corrosion-resistant contacts ensure the purity of the signal transfer from the source, while Monster's patented Magnetic FluxTube cabling, the same technology implemented throughout the brand's lines of speaker cables, delivers the signal to the drivers at maximum strength.

The durability of the Turbine Pro Copper Editions are best exemplified in its all-metal driver housings—made of copper, of course—which give the buds a very sturdy feel and serve to minimize internal resonance. This sense of stability, however, is also the Turbine Pros greatest downfall. These earbuds tip the scales at 20.5 grams, making them monstrous in terms of weight and, thus, they may not provide the on-the-go comfort that the majority of earbud wearers seek.

Monster does compensate for this by offering a variety of ear tips, including what the brand calls SuperTips, which are composed of a silicon composite material that creates a superb seal to deliver a very high-level of noise isolation. Monster also includes a pair of convenient cases for its Turbine earbuds—one with a nifty snap-open mouth for extra ear tips and Monster's weighty quarter-inch converter, the other a durable pouch with a magnetic-button-clad flap for the earbuds themselves.

Monster obviously went the extra mile and spared no expense to create the Turbine Pro Copper Editions, and while they certainly produce sound appropriate to Monster's labeling of them as in-ear speakers, most users are looking for earbuds that don't feel like loudspeakers in their ears.

Klipsch Image X10

www.klipsch.com $349

HEADPHONE PLANET

The newest pair of earbuds from Indianapolis-based manufacturer Klipsch resides at the opposite end of the spectrum—and weigh about half as much. The Image X10 headphones are a feather-light 10.5 grams (or about one third of an ounce), which gives them an absolutely unobtrusive feel. After a few minutes of listening, users may forget altogether that there's something sitting in their ears delivering music to their ear drums.

Klipsch also offers these models with a mini-microphone and three-button remote incorporated into the cable design so that wearers can adjust volume levels and, if their media device also doubles as a cell phone, take calls while wearing the buds. Klipsch has indeed created the X10s to be the ultimate in terms of comfort, but truly discerning listeners may detect a slight abatement of audio reproduction quality.

This is most perceptible on the low-ends and in the overall sound stage; tracks exploring the full frequency spectrum will sound a bit washed with the X10s. These shortcomings, however, are minor and buyers seeking lightweight earbuds should not be discouraged. Klipsch took advantage of its 64 years of experience engineering speakers and drivers to create the X10s, which, considering their extraordinarily svelte design, deliver remarkable quality.

This is thanks to Klipsch's full-range KG 926 armature drive component, which is among the most powerful drivers on the market for its size. Klipsch placed this armature in an aluminum chassis that is literally pencil thin and further contributes to the lack of obtrusion in the ears of the wearer. Klipsch includes with the X10s a simple desktop box for accessories and for storing the phones when not on the go, as well as a small travel-convenient faux-leather box with a magnetically sealing flap.

The X10s are versatile in design and, though perhaps lacking a bit in the power department, they still reproduce audio with precision and clarity that will not disappoint listeners.

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VPI Classic

Benchmark DAC1-Pre

Peachtree iDECCO Integrated Tube Amp/DAC

Sennheiser HD-800

Luxman L-505u Integrated Amp

Musical Fidelity V-DAC

Shure SE310

Wadia iTransport

Benz Micro Ace

Marantz
SA-KI CD/SACD player

HDtracks.com

HDtracks welcomes the Verve Music Group in 96/24!

The transfer of these Verve 96K masters was done using a combination of the best new and vintage equipment available. The carefully chosen original analog masters were played back on vintage Studer 820 tape machines. These machines provide the most stable transport for handling these priceless analog tapes. The analog masters were converted to the digital domain using classic DCS 972 and Lavry analog to digital converters, recorded directly onto a SoundBlade Workstation with minimal processing, in order to allow the music to be formatted for digital distribution. The shortest signal path and highest quality cabling was used to prevent any signal loss, or additional noise to be introduced into the transfer. The entire digital process was driven by the Antelope Audio Atomic Clock, the industry leader in digital clocking technology. It enables the entire digital process to reference the same highly regulated clock master, preventing any loss in the digital signal due to jitter and clock degradation.

The Verve Music Group

Herbie Hancock
River: The Joni Letters

John Coltrane
A Love Supreme

Chick Corea
Light as a Feather

Billie Holiday
Lady Sings the Blues

Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong
Ella and Louis

Stan Getz and João Gilberto
Getz/Gilberto

Diana Krall
Quiet Nights

Oscar Peterson
Night Train

Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown
Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown

www.hdtracks.com

Grado GR8

www.gradolabs.com $299

Presenting the best of both worlds, Grado Labs introduced its GR8 models for listeners seeking both power and comfort, and hats off to Grado's engineers for producing these remarkable earbuds. The GR8s are extremely lightweight at 12.5 grams (Grado's website claims that they weigh just 9 grams) and the design is very conducive to a seamless fit. Virtually oxygen-free copper wiring paired with a gold-coated brass mini-plug connector will deliver a pure signal, and Grado provides three silicon-rubber composite eartip options to provide comfort to a variety of ear shapes. For additional convenience, Grado has placed a raised dot on the left bud so that users can be sure that they're wearing the correct bud in the correct ear even in the dark.

While Grado is better known for its large circumaural headphones, the GR8's provide true top-notch performance, and like its over-ear phones, these earbuds deliver the same warm, full-bodied tones that enthusiasts have come to expect from this brand.

The GR8s give sensational clarity to vocals and present even the very highest register frequencies with precision and plenty of headroom. Per typical Grado fidelity, rock, pop, and soul tracks are rich with expressiveness and emotion, and even classical tracks radiate through the frequency spectrum.

The GR8s are indeed a very well-rounded pair of earbuds, providing a very high level of comfort and power.

In the end...

Now, impressions of such gear as earbuds are always an individualistic experience. While a Goldilocks reviewer may have run through the above models and said to herself, "The Monsters are too hard; the Klipschs are too soft; but the Grado's are just right," this is not the case for all listeners. As previously mentioned, there are a lot of earbud models out there that claim to be the ultimate pair, but each model will present a different experience to each user. There are a few, including the above models, that achieve the high echelon of quality that serious headphone users require regardless of listener preferences. ●

The SimAudio Moon 750

$11,995
www.simaudio.com

SimAudio's latest attempt at building a "take no prisoners" DAC definitely hits the mark. With the world's first true 32-bit asynchronous DAC under the hood, comprised of eight of the latest Sabre ESS DAC chips per channel.

On every level the 750 succeeds, smashingly. SimAudio has done it right, offering a world-class piece of digital hardware, no matter what your listening preferences are. If you don't think that a music server is for you (but you will cave sooner or later) the 750 stands on it's own merit as a CD player at the price point. And if you are a lover of hard drive based music, you won't feel cheated using the 750 as a DAC that just happens to have a transport mechanism as well.

The best news? The rear panel socket that will accommodate an upgraded power supply. This is due out later this year and promises to take the 750 to an even higher level of performance. Review in issue 30.

The Naim HDX

$7,850
www.naim-audio.com

Naim continues to push the envelope in digital design with the HDX music server. Having been a reference component here for some time, we will be taking an in-depth view of its performance on all levels. And yes, we will compare it directly to the Sooloos and a few other servers we've been able to spend an extended length of time with.

Like other Naim products, the HDX can be used in standalone mode, or can be upgraded with a larger power supply, or even the external Naim DAC (also with an external supply for the Naim fanatics).

Either way you configure the HDX, the resulting sound quality is fantastic. This is the one that realizes the promise of playing music from a hard drive.

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The Squeezebox Touch

$299
www.logitech.com

For the not so maniacal, the Squeezebox Touch is a great bit of kit. Now that it displays album art, the Squeezebox is much more useful to access your music collection. The internal electronics have been upgraded as well, and this has become a very useful device.

Relying on external storage to work its magic, the Squeezebox Touch can access the iTunes library from your computer, an external NAS or you can connect a large hard drive via the onboard USB port. It's tough to beat for the price.

dmitri

The new RSA Dmitri is the ultimate evolution of our work in power line conditioning technology. Utilizing our new RSA platinum series capacitors and proprietary inductors, the Dmitri takes power line conditioning to the next level and beyond.

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- New carbon fiber resonance vibration control
- Significantly lower noise floor and improved dynamics

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The Dmitri can be ordered as a stand alone unit, (without 20A power cord), with our world famous Mongoose power cord or with our new flagship PC, the HZ Crown Jewel, for ultimate performance. Stop by your Running Springs Audio dealer and audition the future of power line conditioning.

the absolute sound 2009 EDITORS' CHOICE AWARD

the absolute sound 2009 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARDS

"...my new reference in AC conditioners."

– Robert Harley,
The Absolute Sound,
Issue 193

TONEAudio Magazine 2008 Product of the Year Award

"The Dmitri represents the state of the art in power line conditioning."

– Jeff Dorgay,
TONEAudio
Magazine,
Issue 18

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running springs audio

Rock Solid

The Clearaudio Innovation Wood Turntable and the Clearaudio TT-2 Tonearm

By Jeff Dorgay

While wading through post-audio-show pictures, I always notice that the Clearaudio rooms stand out because they usually have almost every turntable they make on display. It's heaven for analog lovers. Clearaudio's latest offering is the Innovation Wood, which carries an MSRP of $11,995, without tonearm.

The turntable features a cutaway plinth design that Clearaudio claims to eliminate unwanted vibration and resonance by reducing the surface area under the platter. This plinth is made up of a sandwich of stainless and wood that is CNC machined, borrowing heavily from the technology in their Master Reference series. The Innovation uses Clearaudio's CMB (ceramic magnetic) bearing along with a composite platter that is about 2.5 inches thick. Underneath the platter is a thick stainless-steel subplatter that is about a half inch thick. The platter itself has magnetic shielding built in to protect the delicate cartridge windings from the magnetic surface.

This belt drive table is driven by a DC motor and has 33 1/3, 45 and 78 rpm speeds. It can accommodate two tonearms, making it handy for a serious collector to have a second arm specifically for playing mono records, 78's or whatever other configuration you'd like to address. I feel that once a table has a five-figure price tag, provision for a second arm is a must.

Along with the other improvements in the table, Clearaudio claims a higher level of speed accuracy with their new optical speed control, which features a "precision reflection scale" to go along with the infrared sensor. While we don't measure this spec, when using the Clearaudio portable strobe light and test disc, the image under the strobe did not visually wobble in the slightest bit. When observing a 1000 Hz test tone played back on my digital multimeter, the amount of fluctuation away from 1000 Hz was infinitesimal.

Setup

Garth Leerer, the US importer for Clearaudio, sent the table with all of the accessories as well. Their outer ring clamp machined out of stainless steel (similar to the one available from VPI) is an additional $1,249, but it works wonders on even marginal, warped records. The only caveat here is that when using it with a Clearaudio cartridge, or any other cartridge with a nude cantilever design, you must lower the tonearm with extreme care or you could damage the cartridge.

Leerer also used the full suite of Clearaudio tools that we mentioned in Issue 25: their test record, which is calibrated for 33 1/3, 45 and 78 rpm as well as 50 and 60 Hz power, their portable strobe light, and the Weight Watcher stylus force gauge.

(continued)

REVIEW

He had the Innovation set up with the Clearaudio DaVinci cartridge, which became one of my references in about an hour. We now use all of the Clearaudio tools to set up every turntable that we review.

Once initial setup was complete, it only took a few tweaks to fine-tune tracking force and VTA. While the Innovation might look daunting, it is relatively easy to set up. The tonearm has its own high-quality cable permanently attached, so this is an accessory you will not have to fuss over later.

Most of my listening was done with my two reference phono preamplifiers: the Nagra VPS/VFS system and the Naim Superline with the SuperCap power supply. While the Nagra had a slightly warmer presentation than the Naim, both combinations were well up to the task of resolving the amount of detail that the Innovation had to offer. Once thoroughly familiar with the sound of this component through my reference pieces, I switched to the Manley Steelhead RC, with which I am very familiar having just finished the review.

Keeping on the Straight and Narrow

While Clearaudio has a number of conventional tonearms in their product lineup, I was the most intrigued with their TT-2 linear tracking arm with an MSRP of $9,495. Having had excellent luck years ago with the Eminent Technology ET2.5, there is an unmistakable sound delivered by a linear tracking arm.

Because of its design, there is no tracking error to work around and no null points to worry about. There are endless arguments on the internet about which set of measurements to use when setting up a conventional tonearm, but the fact remains that there will be only two points on your record that have no tracking error; the rest is a compromise. The linear track arm plays the record tangentially, just the way it was cut.

One of the first tracks we listened to was Joe Sample's *The Three*. This is a great jazz disc from the late 70's pressed by JVC and cut with the direct-to-disc format. For those not familiar with the record, this is just three guys playing straight-ahead jazz on acoustic bass, drums and piano. Immediately, the Innovation showed its character. The lack of tracing distortion from the TT-2 gave the record a quality of sound not unlike analog tape. *(continued)*

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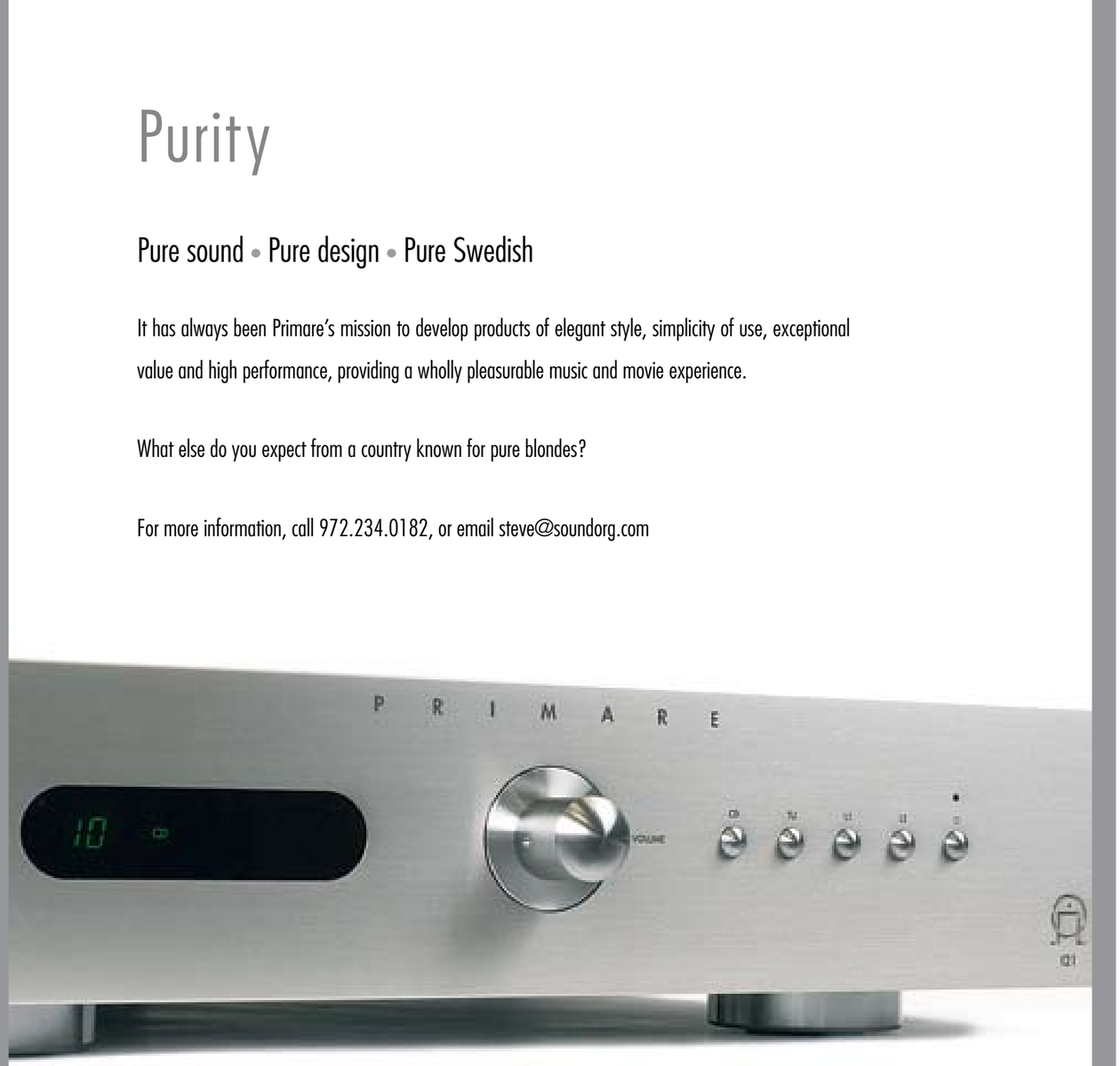

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My old Eminent Technology arm did not like warped records, and while the TT-2 is a more-refined concept (which does not require an air bearing or air pump), it still has some difficulty with warped records. Unless you have perfectly flat records or opt to purchase a second, conventional tonearm, the ring clamp is a must for getting the maximum performance from the Innovation.

A Weighty Performance Indeed

The first thing I noticed about the Innovation Wood/TT-2 combination was the level of dynamic punch possessed by this combination. The amount of bass weight and control reminded me of the $60k Continuum Criterion that we reviewed last year. Spinning a few more direct-to-disc pressings from Nautilus and Sheffield Labs before moving on to other records reinforced my opinion of the big sound available from this table. The MartinLogan CLX speakers' strengths is the gigantic, walk-through soundfield that they offer up, so any source not highly resolving will be a disappointment. The more I listened to the Innovation, the more I was pulled in.

As I mentioned earlier, the most seductive part of the Innovation's presentation is the lack of tracking-error-induced distortions. If you've ever had the opportunity to listen to master tapes, or some of the Tape Project tapes, there is a certain smoothness to the sound that at first might feel the slightest bit dull, at least until you pay closer attention. Then you notice that you are hearing further into the recording than you did before. That's the magic of the Innovation/TT-2 combo; it offers the clarity of digital with the body of analog. *(continued)*

This all-Clearaudio combination worked wonders with a good percentage of my record collection, but as I mentioned in my review of the DaVinci, its tonal balance is very accurate and detailed. But because of this, any records you have that might have a slightly tipped treble response may be too much of a good thing. The Innovation worked equally well with the Dynavector XV-1s and the Lyra Skala cartridges, so whatever presentation you prefer should work well with this table. Just for laughs, I mounted my Shure M75 to see how a $90 cartridge would perform, and the budget Shure sounded better than I've ever heard it sound before. Impressive.

Minutiae Revealed

I'm guessing that most of you will be bowled over by the initial contrast and slam that this turntable and arm offer, especially if you are moving a cartridge with which you are already familiar to the Clearaudio. Any of your favorite orchestral pieces will take on a new sense of realism and power, and head bangers in the crowd will appreciate it just as much for what it does to their favorite music. Listening to the first few blasts of Sonny Rollins on "Saxophone Colossus" or John Klemmer on *Straight From the Heart* (another direct to disc) would be intoxicating for dynamics junkies.

This table throws you back in your seat with its ability to not only capture the leading-edge transients but stop fast enough to avoid overshoot and the accompanying fatigue. Because of this, I found this combination easy to listen to for many extended sessions.

But the Clearaudio isn't all power without finesse, and that's what makes it so special. One of the most fun parts of evaluating a new analog front end is that it's like getting a new (or at least different) record collection. Going back to records I've played hundreds of times over the years was a real treat because of the amount of low level detail that this combination was providing, which brought me a new perspective on many of my favorites. Thanks to the super-quiet bearing and the lack of tracking distortion, the soundstage presented by the Clearaudio was not only detailed but very precise.

Should you purchase one of these, you'll immediately hear sounds fading out further and more gently. This is the analog magic at its finest, especially with acoustic instruments. The following day, after Leerer returned home, my copy of Neil Young's *Live at Massey Hall* on 200-gram vinyl arrived, and that was a treat. The Clearaudio did a great job at conveying the depth of the hall, but it also revealed the tiniest bits of Young's breathing as well as his fingers sliding up and down the neck of his acoustic guitar. After already hearing this so many times on CD, the analog presentation was breathtaking.

What impressed me the most about the Clearaudio arm, table and cartridge was its ability to drag more information out of some of my less-than-average pressings. While it was always superlative on my best recordings, I was almost more excited by the way I could hear more happening on some relatively awful records. Some of my favorite music from Elvis Costello, The Who and Todd Rundgren, to name a few, are poorly recorded. While the Clearaudio Innovation won't make them sound like audiophile pressings, it will make your worst pressings more palatable, and that's a big plus. That's the kind of results you *should* get from an expensive audio component.

A Top Contender

Having heard quite a few tables in the $15,000 - $25,000 range, I'd put the Clearaudio Innovation Wood and TT-2 tonearm at the top of my list. The Clearaudio combination embodies the best of German precision. It is easy to set up and performs like a fine sports car; much like a Porsche 911, it is not finicky. The turntable is purpose-built for high performance and built to last an eternity. It is an aural and visual work of art. ●

The Clearaudio
Innovation Wood Turntable and TT-2 Tonearm

MSRP: $11,995 (table) $9,495 (tonearm)

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PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier Burmester 011

Phono Preamplifier Nagra VPS/VFS, Naim Superline/SuperCap

Power Amplifier Burmester 911 mk.3

Cartridges Clearaudio DaVinci, Dynavector XV-1s, Lyra Skala

Speakers MartinLogan CLX with (2) JLAudio F110 subwoofers, GamuT S-7

Cable Shunyata Aurora interconnects, Shunyata Stratos SP speaker cables

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

Accessories Furutech DeMag, Shunyata Dark Field Cable elevators

A Powerful Pair From Hegel

By Jeff Dorgay

Norwegian audio manufacturer Hegel may be new to the United States, but they have been operating for about 15 years in Europe. Their products are understated with a very interesting design, having a slightly curved front panel. The functionality is also very simple with no unnecessary buttons; just what you need to get the job done.

Reviewed here is their H100 integrated amplifier, which has a retail price of $3,000 and the matching CDP2A mk2 CD player with a retail price of $2,650. Combining these two pieces with your favorite pair of speakers in the $2,000 -$5,000 range and adding a few accessories (component rack, cables, etc.) should make for an excellent system in the $10k-$12k range, especially if you don't require a turntable.

The Hegel components are fully balanced, and when I met with Bent Holter at this year's CES, he explained that this is the way they prefer to make all of their components. This is not only because of the advantages they feel that the balanced configuration offers but to allow long cable runs if necessary to fit into a room's decor. Also worth noting: all of Hegel's components are built in their factory in Norway.

Setup

Keeping with the ethos of this system, I used the Hegel components on a Quadraspire EVO4 rack, a set of Audioquest Columbia interconnects a pair of Audioquest Meteor Speaker cables (OK, so went a little over budget there) and a pair of Shunyata Venom power cords. A handful of speakers were used including the ZU Audio Essence, Penaudio Rebel 3's, Verity Audio Finn, the Harbeth Monitor 40.1's and of course, a little torture testing with my Magnepan 1.6's. More about that later.

There's often a great synergy between components from the same manufacturer, and the Hegel pair proved to be excellent. Much like my other two favorites in this category, Naim and Rega, it's almost easier if you are starting from scratch to just buy it all in one place. In addition to great sound, it looks fantastic when put together.

Both pieces feel very substantial when you take them out of the box, and they each feature a metal remote that is quite a bit higher quality that what is usually supplied with products at this price point. Another nice touch.

Simple, Yet Versatile

The H100 has a number of interesting points in its favor. First, it uses an active preamplifier stage instead of just tacking a passive volume control onto a power amplifier. This will ultimately make the H100 much more versatile should you decide to mate it with other than Hegel sources. If I have to admit a bias of mine, I'm not a fan of passive volume controls – more often than not, they sound dull in the dynamics department – kudos to Hegel for taking the high road.

Around back, there are four sets of RCA inputs and one set of balanced XLR inputs. This is probably my only complaint about the H100. I think after going through the extra trouble to create a balanced amplifier, why not offer at least two XLR inputs? Not a reason to shy away, but considering how many great phono preamplifiers are now reasonably priced and offer balanced outputs, I hope Hegel doesn't overlook this in the next upgrade of the H100.

The redeeming factor is the onboard USB DAC included with the H100. Again, I'm sure there are a number of people that would love to see an SPDIF input as well, but with more and more people using laptops and Mac Minis as music servers (the newest version of the QSonix music server also uses a USB output), this is not a bad choice. For the duration of the test, I used a Mac Mini with iTunes and Amarra to play a combination of uncompressed, Apple Lossless and MP3 files.

The internal DAC has a 16 bit/48kHz configuration, so while it works well, it is probably more suited to the basic iTunes user or perhaps an iPod with Wadia 170I user. I tried both as well as streaming music from Rhapsody with excellent luck.

Those wanting a higher performance DAC could either invest in the Hegel HD10 (review coming in Issue 29 of TONEAudio), which has, full 24/192 capabilities, or add the DAC of your choice. If you don't have a high-resolution digital music collection, this could be a great way to get into incorporating a computer into your music listening.

While some might complain that a higher resolution DAC was not included with the H100, I think it's a moot point. The more complicated the DAC, the more likely it will become obsolete at some point. Much like other amplifier manufacturers that include a basic phono stage for those wanting to dip their toe in the analog water, consider the DAC contained inside the Hegel the same way. *(continued)*

There's often a great synergy between components from the same manufacturer, and the Hegel pair proved to be excellent.

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It's a fantastic convenience for the iPod/Rhapsody crowd and a great way to embrace the computer audiophile who might have bought a DAC in the $300-$500 range. The performance of the internal DAC in the H100 is easily as good as what I've heard from the outboard units in this range.

As mentioned earlier, the H100 is rated at 120 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load and 220 per channel into 4 ohms. With this kind of power on tap, I thought "Magnepan" right away, and it proved to be an excellent choice. Though the 1.6's are a relatively inexpensive speaker, they are very resolving and need a lot of power to sound their best. I would say that the H100 has done a better job of driving these speakers than anything else I've had the opportunity to sample at this price point.

And thanks to a set of variable level outputs, I could use the 1.6's with my favorite small subwoofer, the MartinLogan Grotto i, which is a fantastic match for the Magnepans. This made for a killer system in my main listening room, which is 16 x 24 feet. Even when driving the 1.6's to fairly high levels, the H100 didn't get overly warm. Their patented "SoundEngine" technology, which works to minimize crossover distortion, gave itself a great showing here.

The Magnepans will usually pose a terrifying load to a mid-priced integrated, either resulting in a lot of distortion, low output level or both. Some integrateds at this price point won't even drive the Maggies, period. But the Hegel amplifier was fantastic. The good news here is that if an amplifier will drive the Magnepans, it will have no problem with anything else. I was able to enjoy the H100 no matter what speakers I chose to use, making this a very versatile amplifier indeed.

The CDP2A

Hegel's CD player features a pair of 24 bit/192 kHz DAC's and it upsamples everything; it only operates in this mode and also uses Hegel's SuperClock circuit. While some will argue for or against upsampling, I felt the CDP2A was very natural for a player at this price point.

Much like phono cartridges, as much as everyone would like to say "bits are bits," every CD player I've heard has a signature sound of its own just like a phono cartridge. The CDP2A sounds slightly on the warm side of neutral, very similar to the Rega Saturn and makes a perfect companion to the H100 amplifier, which is very natural sounding. *(continued)*

Perhaps some of this is a result of the 24/192 oversampling, which I have noticed with my Nagra LB digital recorder and reference dCS Paganini stack, which can also upsample to 24/192. While this could start a war on any internet site: I tend to prefer the sound of upsampling for this very reason. I have too many CD's that err on the thin side of tonality, and this almost always sounds preferable.

Combined with the H100, the CDP2A has great dynamic swing and throws a wide stereo image. Listening to a few of my old favorites, I was impressed at how well it played some recent CD transfers that I did from LP at 16/44 with the Nagra, particularly when enjoying Steve Morse's guitar work on "Bloodsucking Leeches" from the Dregs' *Industry Standard*.

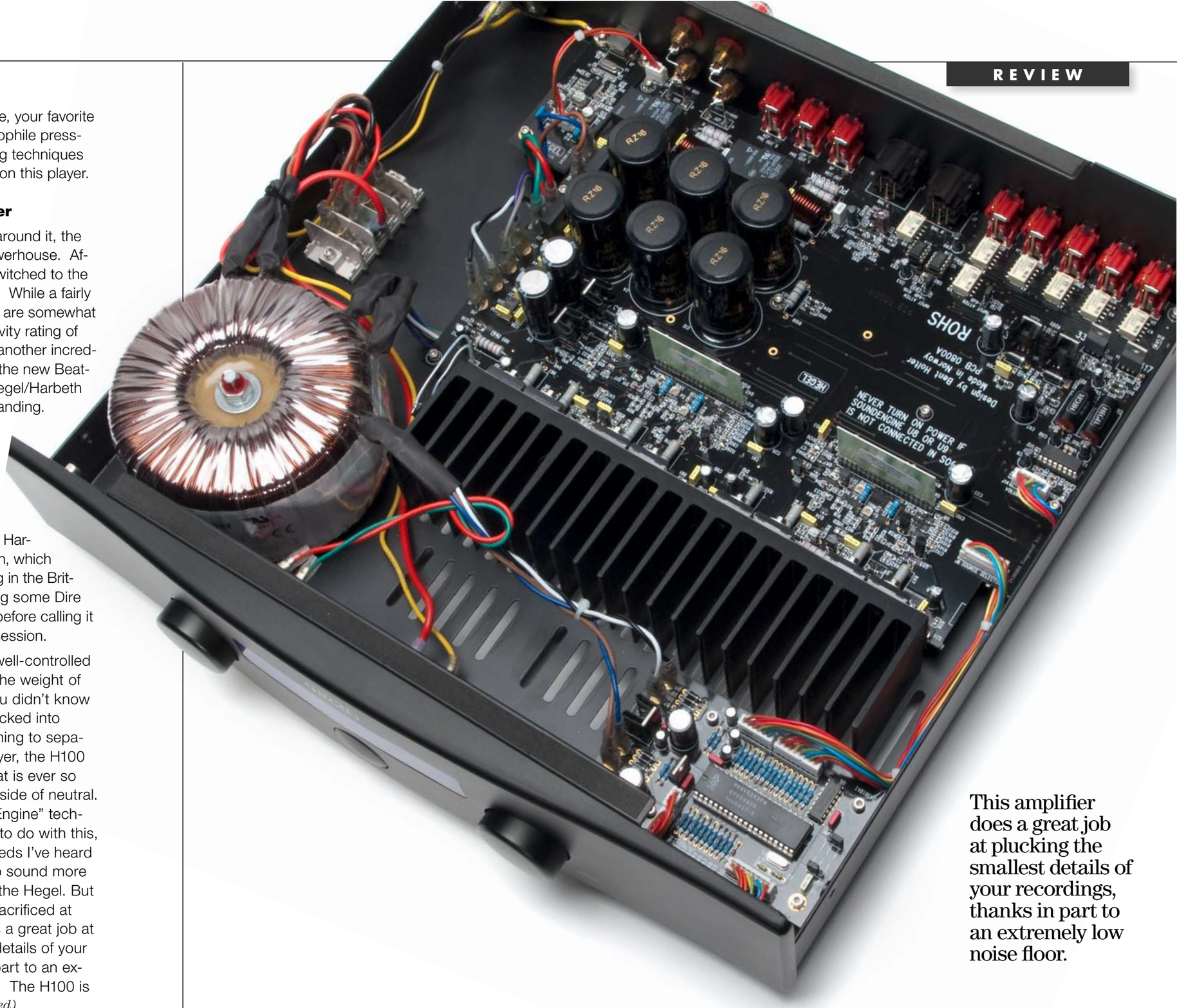
This player's strength is its ability to resolve enough detail to bring life to your discs, yet it has that touch of warmth and body where even the worst-sounding discs in your collection still sound very palatable. CD players on the more analytical side of the fence can sound more exciting with exquisitely mastered discs, but they fall short when asked to play the run-of-the-mill stuff, of which we all have plenty.

A perfect example of this kind of disc is Todd Rundgren's *Something/Anything*. Even the MoFi remaster is lacking in body and you'd never mistake this for one of Joe Harley's Audioquest Blues CD's. Again I was impressed with the way the Hegel played my favorite Todd songs from this classic album, making it sound more lifelike than you might expect at this price point. You won't mistake any player in the $3,000 range for analog, but a few do better than most of the rest, and I'd put the Hegel CDP2A at the top of this category. And of course, your favorite solo vocalists and audiophile pressings with minimal miking techniques will sound outstanding on this player.

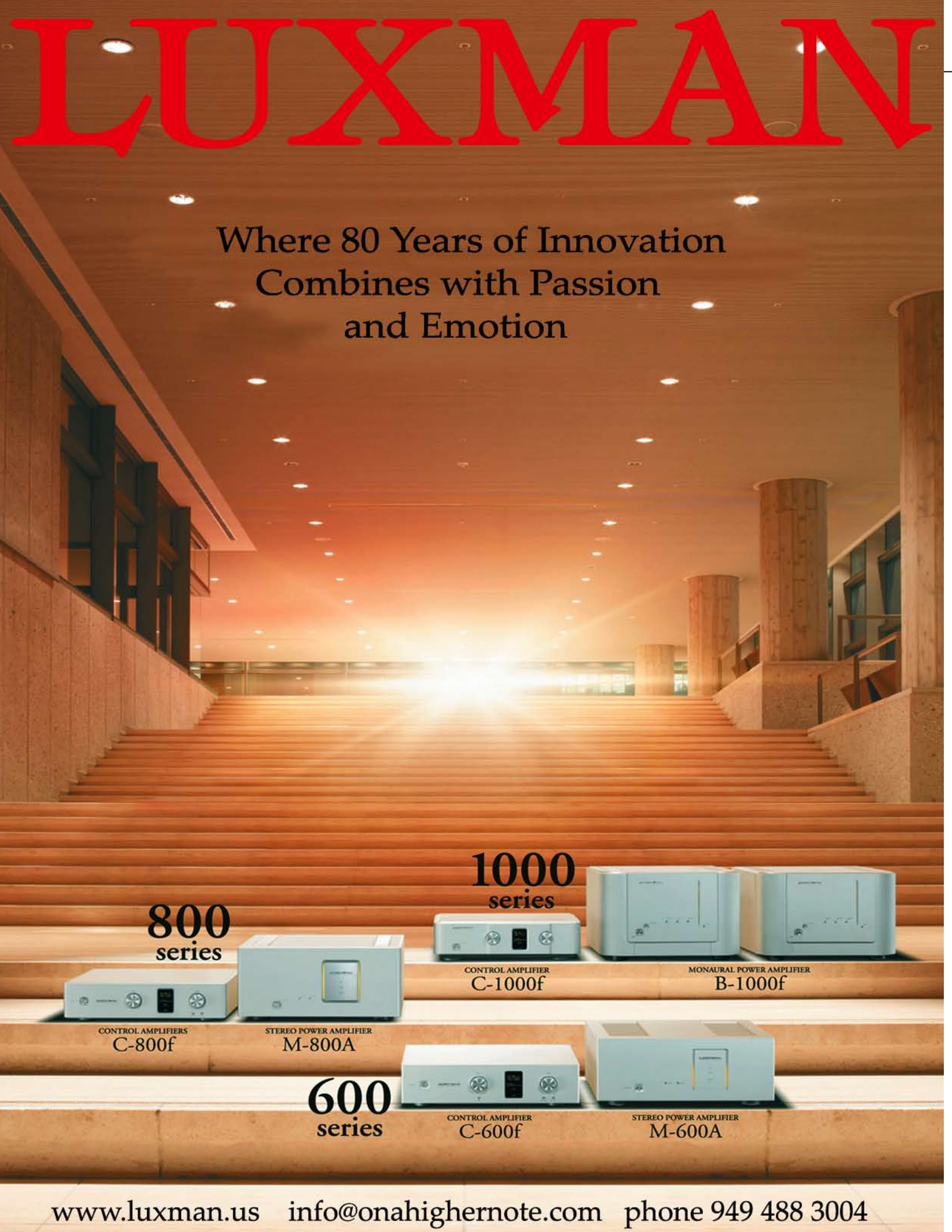
Back to the Amplifier

There's no getting around it, the H100 is a compact powerhouse. After the Magnepans, I switched to the Harbeth Monitor 40.1's. While a fairly easy load to drive, they are somewhat inefficient with a sensitivity rating of 84db/1watt. This was another incredible match, listening to the new Beatles remasters on the Hegel/Harbeth combination was outstanding. "Maxwell's Silver Hammer" had a wonderful tonality about it, with the Fab Four spread out on the soundstage in all their glory. And I could play the big Harbeths *loud* without strain, which was a ton of fun, staying in the British sound vein, spinning some Dire Straits and Pink Floyd before calling it a day on this listening session.

Bass is deep and well-controlled with the H100. It has the weight of a bigger amplifier; if you didn't know better, you could be tricked into thinking you were listening to separates. Like the CD player, the H100 has a tonal balance that is ever so slightly on the warmer side of neutral. I'm sure their "Sound Engine" technology has something to do with this, as most of the integrateds I've heard in this category tend to sound more harsh and grainy than the Hegel. But low-level detail is not sacrificed at all. This amplifier does a great job at plucking the smallest details of your recordings, thanks in part to an extremely low noise floor. The H100 is quiet indeed. *(continued)*



This amplifier does a great job at plucking the smallest details of your recordings, thanks in part to an extremely low noise floor.



With such a good showing listening to digital files, investigating analog seemed to make a lot of sense. Should you have a decent analog front end, you will be happy with the H100. However, if you have a phono preamplifier with balanced output, you may be at odds as to which source to use the balanced input.

I tried two excellent phono preamplifiers with the H100: the Simaudio Moon LP5.3 (which *does* have balanced outputs) and the EAR 834P (which does not). With a personal preference towards the warmer side of the spectrum, I loved the EAR phono stage with my Technics SL1200, which features the Sound HiFi mods, SME 309 tonearm and Lyra Dorian cartridge. I spun quite a few MoFi's as well as the outstanding Bill Evans box set from Analogue Productions. Not only was this a great combination, it showed the strength of the H100, which easily had enough resolution to easily distinguish the difference between analog and digital.

Definitely an Exceptional Value

I'm happy to give these Hegel products one of our Exceptional Value awards for 2010. These two offer everything that we value in a great HiFi component: great sound, functional ease and pleasing aesthetics. It is a strong testament to their design that they sounded just as at home with reasonably priced speakers as with considerably more-expensive models. This is truly a pair of components that could be the basis for building a great system and upgrade your speakers later, or add a high-quality analog front end to without requiring another amplifier upgrade.

Here's to seeing more of Hegel in the U.S. in the years to come. ●

The Hegel D100 Amplifier and CDP2A CD player

MSRP: (Amp) $3,000
(CD Player) $2,650

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Speakers Magnepan 1.6, Harbeth Monitor 40.1, ZU Essence, Penaudio Rebel 3, Verity Audio Finn

Reel to Reel at its Finest:

The J-Corder RS-1500

By Jeff Dorgay

I must confess that I've always wanted a Technics RS-1500 reel-to-reel tape deck. Little did I know it would take more than 30 years to get my hands on one. Whether you are buying $500-a-pop tapes from The Tape Project, collecting vintage pre-recorded tapes or rolling your own, open-reel tape is definitely the fringe element of the analog revival. As cool as turntables are, nothing beats a pair of 10-and-a-half inch reels full of tape with big VU meters bouncing in the darkness.

There are a few major players in the analog revival, and they all take their own approach to implementing a deck. As with almost everything in the wacky world of audiophilia, you can find a few opposing camps that are bringing these classic workhorses back to their glory. While a few of the other companies specialize in upgrading the electronics, the J-Corder philosophy stays much closer to giving you what came from the Technics factory, concentrating instead on *completely* refurbishing the deck from top to bottom. A completed deck takes about 40 hours from start to finish.

Originally started as a hobby, Jeff Jacobs discovered that once the word got out about J-Corder four years ago at the Consumer Electronics show, he had a full-fledged business on his hands. "We continue to have decks in quite a few rooms at the major shows now, and they get a lot of attention," Jacobs said. His decks range in price from just under $4,000 to slightly over $8,000, depending on the level of cosmetics you desire and whether you want a straight rebuild or some upgrades performed on the electronics. The model reviewed here is a basic version.

The Rebuild Process

I was fortunate enough to spend an afternoon with Jacobs, watching him strip a Technics deck down to its respective parts and front panel with the care of a surgeon. In the middle of his HiFi career, Jacobs spent a number of years performing frame-off restorations of vintage Pontiacs. He approaches an RS-1500 the same way, carefully disassembling the deck, sorting all of the parts into various bins, and taking notice what will need to be repaired, refurbished or discarded. Jacobs is adamant about his process: "There's no short cut; the decks have to be stripped all the way and you start fresh from there."

He smiles as he takes this particular deck apart, noticing that all the original cable ties and harnesses are perfectly intact, indicating that the machine has never been serviced. "I get nervous when this stuff is missing. It usually indicates that someone has screwed with the deck at some point."

Once the deck is completely stripped to the front plate, it is bead blasted and refinished to the color scheme of the customer's choice. You can choose any combination of custom colors or stick with the standard Technics color scheme. There are actually three different originals shades: light, medium and dark bronze, depending on which of the three factories the decks were originally built. Jacobs also will refinish a deck with carbon-fiber or wood surfaces. Of course, these do increase the cost, but the results are beautiful. *(continued)*

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When rebuilding the decks, Jacobs surveys the machine to identify any problem electrical spots or any mechanical areas that have been worn and need attention. The circuit boards are cleaned up so they look like new again. When Jacobs was knee deep into the disassembly process, I asked him why he decided to go with the Technics machines. "When I had my HiFi shop, at least 50 percent of the Teac's we sold always came back for repair before the warranty was up."

The Technics were overbuilt and used a direct-drive transport, so the problems that plagued other decks didn't happen to them. "We were confident that when a 1500 went out the door, it wasn't coming back," Jacobs said. As we look inside, he adds, "Look at that reel motor; you could probably turn a car wheel with that. I've never seen a motor failure with one of these. That's an *ass-kicking* motor."

Operational Perfection

All the work Jacobs puts into his Technics rebuilds is evident the minute you turn one on. Everything works flawlessly. It feels like a brand-new machine, and because of all the care the J-Corder receives, it's probably *better* than the day it rolled off the assembly line at the Technics factory. Each deck is individually adjusted and calibrated every step of the way. All of the controls have silkiness to them, and the transport is a model of mechanical excellence. Even when fast-forwarding through a reel, the tape packs evenly. The brakes operate in a slow and predictable manner. This deck is worth every penny.

When questioning Jacobs about head wear, he mentions that every deck has had its head block serviced by JRF Magnetics and if the heads are worn more than 30 percent from original, they will not use them. "If the heads have only worn about 20 percent since these decks were introduced 30 years ago, chances are they will outlive you unless you are using your deck day in and day out in a studio," Jacobs says with a smile as he shows me a perfect set of heads just taken out of a machine purchased for spare parts.

Jacobs has a massive cache of parts for the 1500-series decks, and he is constantly purchasing decks from all over the world to add to the supply. "I've got about 70 decks in stock as donors right now, and I'm always interested in another clean one." In addition to offering a one-year warranty on newly refurbished machines, he is equipped to service your machine in the years to come should it ever need repair. Thanks to the RS-1500 decks using direct-drive reel and capstan motors, there will never be any belts to adjust or replace.

Making the First Tape

Whether you are recording for the first time or it's just been a very long time, here are a few basic points to remember before proceeding. Wherever possible, start with fresh tape, especially if this is a recording with wide dynamic range. It's a lot more expensive these days, but even the best erase heads will leave some residual information on the tape when re-recording over it. New tape will avoid this problem. All J-Corder decks are set up for ATR tape at 15 inches per second. *(continued)*

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Be sure to locate the loudest passage of your record and optimize levels for that point. I can't stress strongly enough that you record at 15 ips for your absolute favorite recordings. The extra dynamic range will bring you a lot closer to your original, and you can run the VU meters up a little higher than you can on the slower speeds without degrading the final sound quality.

Don't forget to clean the record you are going to record to the best of your ability. Especially with the advent of the CD, no one wants to waste a $50 reel of tape on a record that's full of clicks and pops. Our recent web article on record cleaning offers some good tips on keeping those vinyl treasures as clean as possible:

http://www.tonepublications.com/gear/record-cleaning-for-fanatics/

To run the J-Corder through its paces, I launched its maiden voyage with a pristine copy of MoFi's UHQR version of Cat Steven's *Tea For the Tillerman*. The analog front end used to copy the disc consisted of the TW Acustic Raven Two turntable, fitted with the SME iV.Vi and the ZYX Omega X cartridge and playing through the new Boulder 1008 phono stage. For comparison, I also made a duplicate recording with my Technics SL-1200 table with Sound HiFi Mods, SME 309 tonearm and Clearaudio Maestro Wood MM cartridge, playing through the EAR 834P phono preamplifier.

A third setup was used for "remastering" troubled recordings. While I make no claims at making a run at Bernie Grundman's job, there are a lot of poor recordings from all eras and I've found that judicious use of a studio equalizer can go a long way toward making your favorite recordings more palatable. *(continued)*

My tool of choice is the Manley Massive Passive (Mastering Edition) equalizer. This four-band parametric EQ offers such a wide range of frequencies and adjustments that if you take the time to fully familiarize yourself with its controls, it can remedy most sins.

Along with its extensive filtering and frequency controls, you can tame an overly bright or dull recording, as well as bringing out those buried vocal tracks to front and center. Often times, a dB or two can make the difference between a $5 album from the used bin and one that costs $200. If you buy a lot of records, that Manley EQ can pay for itself in a hurry, eliminating most of these differences and the tube buffer just gives everything a groovier sound going to tape.

Push Play, I Mean Record!

Once you have your setup optimized, you're ready to make a tape and evaluate the results. If you've been fastidious in your record-cleaning operation and taken care to optimize recording levels, the results should be very impressive. It will also give you some insight into what mastering engineers have to deal with. It's not that easy to make a *great* tape, is it? But that's part of the fun.

I was very impressed with the tapes I made with the J-Corder, even when playing them back on my full reference system. What I did notice, though, was a slight fattening of the mid bass. So to get closer to perfection, I did my LP captures with the Clearaudio DaVinci, which errs on the side of being ever-so-slightly over-detailed. I do the same thing with my Nagra LB digital recorder. It is just a few molecules to the analytical side, but I've been getting more tonally neutral captures with the ZYX Omega.

If you don't have access to a Manley Massive Passive, I'm guessing that almost everything you capture with the J-Corder, while not 100 percent accurate to the original, is going to sound very pleasing. However, keep in mind that the deck reviewed here is the standard model 1506, in four-track mode with two-track playback capability. If you are the ultimate purist, you can order a two-track recorder that will play back 2 and 4 track tapes.

Though the Technics deck only has a published signal to noise ratio spec of 60db, when using clean records as a source, it is incredibly quiet, especially when recording at 15 ips. There is something very special about the playback from analog tape; it has a Kodachrome-like smoothness that often reminds me of a linear track tonearm.

While I was able to match the tonality very closely between the Nagra digital recorder and the Technics, I have to give tape the nod when reproducing a three-dimensional soundstage; the tape deck is more believable there. When listening to John Klemmer's *Straight From The Heart*, which is a direct-to-disc album (with an abundance of dynamic range), the playback on tape was remarkably close to the feel of the original. *(continued)*

When I incorporated the J-Corder into my second system, consisting of the Audio Research SP-17 preamplifier, Moscode 402au power amplifier and Harbeth Monitor 40.1 speakers, with the above-mentioned Technics table configuration, there was virtually no difference between the recording and the original LP. In most cases, that drop of midbass warmth produced recordings that were preferred by my non-audiophile buddies to the originals. It doesn't get any better than this.

I really enjoyed listening to my collection of vintage pre-recorded tapes on the J-Corder, my favorite use was making copies of my best 45-rpm audiophile remasters and other rare pressings. For those of you in the audience with a Clearaudio Goldfinger, or any other cartridge in the $5,000 - $10,000 range, tapes made at 15 ips sound close enough to the originals that you can minimize the wear and tear on your cartridge and rare records, which would recoup your investment in short order. And it's really nice on those Blue Note reissues to listen to the album from start to finish without flipping a record every eight minutes.

Get in line for a J-Corder of your very own

If this sounds like a ton of fun to you, give Jeff a call. He usually has a deck or two ready to go, but he is always willing to build the deck of your dreams. Whether you'd like to play your pre-recorded tape collection, get a subscription to the Tape Project or record your favorite LP's, the J-Corder will make a fantastic addition to your system. ●

The J-Corder Technics RS-1500
MSRP: $4,000 - $8,500

MANUFACTURER

J-Corder
www.j-corder.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier Burmester 011, Audio Research SP-17, McIntosh C500

Power Amplifier Burmester 911, Moscode 402au, McIntosh MC1.2KW

Analog Source Acoustic Signature Analog 1 w/SME iV.Vi tonearm and ZYX Omega cartridge, TW Acustic Raven TWO with Triplanar VII arm and Lyra Skala Cartridge

Phono Preamplifier Nagra VPS w/VFS Platform and Red Wine Audio Black Lightning power supply, Boulder 1008, EAR 834P

Speakers Gamut S-9, Harbeth Monitor 40.1

Cable Shunyata Aurora interconnects, Shunyata Stratos SP speaker cable, Audioquest SKY interconnects

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim power conditioners, RSA HZ power cords and Shunyata Python CX power cords

The Electrocompaniet EMP-1M

A NORWEGIAN MASTERPIECE

By Jerold O'Brien

About 35 years ago, a small Norwegian company named Electrocompaniet arrived on the HiFi scene with a new approach to amplifier design that concentrated on minimizing TIM (Transient Intermodulation Distortion). In case you aren't familiar with TIM, it was first pointed out by Finnish engineer Dr. Matti Otala, who has a pretty amazing background in electronics and telecommunications.

Electrocompaniet's first amplifier was a 25-watt per channel solid-state model, featuring a stark, black front panel with the logo on the front. It wasn't much to look at, but along with the Mark Levinson ML-2 monoblocks and early Threshold amplifiers, it became part of an elite class of solid-state amplifiers that sounded musical for the first time. They extended this design philosophy to preamplifiers and eventually CD players, while they enjoyed a tremendous amount of success worldwide. About five years ago, however, they left the US market.

This fall, thanks to the help of U.S. importer Peder Beckman, Electrocompaniet is back and is doing well. The company's dedication to high performance with minimalist casework is still intact, with a number of their models still in the current lineup. When our publisher had a chance to chat with him, Beckman said, "Electrocompaniet does not produce new models just for the sense of fashion." It is worth noting, though, that the sparse, machined aluminum front panel has been replaced by a thick Plexiglas front panel (though still black) that is very sexy in an understated way. It's tough not to be highly impressed by the build quality in this player as soon as you take it out of the box.

Setup, etc.

The EMP-1/S is straightforward to unpack and set up. It features five balanced XLR outputs (no RCA's), an SPDIF output, outputs for composite video and HDMI. The remote guides you through a quick setup menu so you can adjust the usual parameters.

Though I'm not a video expert by any means, I did just take possession of a new 55-inch Samsung LED TV, and I must say that I was impressed with the DVD video quality of the EMP-1M. I can't imagine you could wring more performance out of these legacy discs, and the multichannel audio performance was excellent. The EMP-1M is certainly a great way to maximize your enjoyment with an existing DVD collection if you weren't feeling the pressure to upgrade to blu ray just yet.

The Sound

If you have a large collection of CD's and SACD's and don't require video or multichannel playback, the EMP-1/S might be the perfect player. Should your needs change, it can be updated to the EMP-1M. Currently, the EMP-1M has an MSRP of $9,990 while the EMP-1/S costs $8,250, making it an even better bargain, considering the level of sound quality offered is the same for both decks.

Listening very carefully to the SimAudio 750 player that I also am currently writing about created an interesting comparison. The Sim has slightly more inner detail and dynamic slam (and can be used as a DAC, which is a big bonus for those requiring that functionality), but I kept coming back to the natural presentation of the EMP-1M. It reminded me a lot of a great solid state class-A solid-state amplifier, which just happens to be what Electrocompaniet specializes in.

As my reference system is slightly on the warm/lush side of the tonal scale, with a pair of Vandersteen 5's driven by a pair of Audio Research Ref 210T's, the EMP-1M was a perfect compliment to my system and taste in sound. If your musical taste runs more to solo vocalists and singer/songwriter style, it will be easy to be fooled into thinking you are listening to analog with the best source material.

The EMP-1M makes a great case for saving the SACD format. Listening to The Jung Trio's current SACD, *Piano Trio in F Minor, Op.65*, was a fantastic experience. This player has a subtlety and lack of grain that really puts it in the big league. The Groove Note recording is exquisite, the amount of detail and decay of the piano and violin is reproduced in a very convincing way, these being two of the toughest instruments to nail.

Spending some more time with acoustic music, I listened to a fair share of the Stones' and Dylan catalogues on SACD as well, both being great examples of the medium. Again, I was able to hear further into these rock recordings than I am used to with my current reference player, with Dylan's voice taking on a further level of raspiness and phrasing.

While the EMP-1M did a great job with all of the audiophile standards, it was a ton of fun with my favorite rock recordings, possessing more than enough punch to play my favorites from the '60s and '70s. Actually, the slight bit of warmth this player adds to the presentation made these discs sound much less digital, and that's a good thing. If you are someone who never invested in the analog side of the fence or got rid of your LP collection a long time ago, this player could keep you from going back. It's that good.

Conclusion

So to recap, The EMP-1M is by far the most musical digital disc player I've had the pleasure to listen to in my system. It easily exceeded my reference Ayre C-5xeMP by a considerable margin in every category, with more bass slam, a more natural upper register and better low-level detail resolution. In short, more analog-like in every way, with a tonal balance that is slightly on the warm side of neutral, but in such an unobtrusive way that it was always pleasing.

The biggest question that potential buyers will have to ask themselves before writing the $9,990 check for the EMP-1M is whether they can live without blu ray capability. While it uses Faroudja technology to scale up to 1080i, it's still not blue ray. The good news is that even if you don't plan on using the EMP-1M for video, you can purchase the EMP-1/S. Though I'm not much of a videophile, I do love multichannel audio and I would have liked to see this excellent multichannel player work with DVD-a discs as well. Most of the multichannel enthusiasts I know have a hefty collection of DVD-a discs, so this would be a deal breaker for that crowd.

Regardless of whether you choose the EMP-1M or the EMP-1/S, you will be rewarded with superb audio performance and rock solid build quality from a company that has a 35-year reputation for building great gear.

Second Opinion:
How does it stack up to the big boys?

By Jeff Dorgay

Having a few top-line CD players on hand from Naim (The CD555), Wadia (781 SE), SimAudio (Moon 750) and a full Paganini stack from dCS, I was curious to see how much of the cost-is-no-object performance was available from the EMP-1M.

The player is beautifully built and would be a visual compliment to the rest of the gear on which it shares rack space. The remote control is a plastic unit not quite in keeping with the high level of fit and finish that the player presents, but as US importer Peder Beckman told me, "We are introducing a deluxe remote soon, that will be optional. The basic remote keeps the cost down for the customer that does not want to pay for it." I love fancy remotes, but feel the thought process is sound. And you can always add it later.

Jerold's description of the EMP-1M is spot on in terms of tonality. It has the slightest touch of warmth to the presentation, which I found very attractive and made for extremely long listening sessions – not always easy to do with digital. I'd go as far to say that if you don't have a superlative analog front end (or a large collection of records), you could easily do without it and just listen to the EMP-1M.

In my reference system, the Naim and dCS players had a clear edge in terms of the level of detail they could resolve. Both these players offer more dynamic contrast as well, but again, this is playing music on a relatively cost-is- no-object system. When compared with the Sim and Wadia players, it became more of a question of which flavor of reproduction one prefers. Either way, the EMP-1M more than held its own in terms of tonality and musicality. When I reconfigured my system to a more reasonable setup (Harbeth 40.1's, ARC SP-17 pre and Moscode 402au power amplifier), the differences between the $30k-$60k players and the Electrocompaniet were greatly minimized.

Though I'm a newcomer to the world of multichannel and high performance video, I would strongly recommend the EMP-1M if it is compatible with your disc collection. Otherwise, I'd go for the EMP-1/S (featuring identical sonics, but only two channels of output and no video capability) as one of the best players in its class. Your music and video library will determine which one of these two players is right for you, but the sound quality is a home run out of the park, regardless of which one you choose. ●

The Electrocompaniet EMP-1M Multichannel player

MSRP: $9,990
(EMP-1/S, 2ch playback only - $8,250)

www.electrocompaniet.com

PERIPHERALS (JD and JO)

Digital Sources Naim CD555, dCS Paganini, Ayre C5-MPxe, Wadia 781, SimAudio Moon 750

Preamplifiers ARC Ref 5, Burmester 011, McIntosh C500, ARC SP-17

Power Amplifiers ARC Ref 210T's, Burmester 911MK.3, McIntosh MC1.2KW, Moscode 402au

Speakers Vandersteen 5A, GamuT S-9, Harbeth Monitor 40.1, Verity Audio Finn

Cable Shunyata Aurora, Shunyata Stratos SP, Cardas Golden Reference

Power Running Springs Jaco, Dmitri and Maxim power conditioners, RSA Mongoose and HZ power cords, Shunyata Python CX power cords

ransport you to an extremely enjoyable place that few speakers can. I'd sa
he name is very appropriate."— Jeff Dorgay TONEAudio Issue 22

If your hairs don't stand up, it's all for nothing. Transmission of th
ncoded energy is key and deliverance rides on pure timing and hef
he Essence nails both. While more 'modern' leaner designs focus o
reater apparent detail retrieval, Zu sh on rhythm
oherence and mass." — Srajan Ebaen 6moons

The Zu Essence is not a hair-shirt product, in which surpasse
t least half the high-efficiency loudspeakers in the c ce. Inasmu
s it's among the more affordable choices—expor cases—it ha
urpassed many of the rest. The Essence is somethi With its ve
ood bass extension, superb musicality, lack c al coloration
nd impressive spatial performance, the Zu Essence st loudspeak
've heard that combines genuinely high efficie of audiophi
erformance for which no excuse needs to be m mpressed wi
he Essence—and, yes, I could happily live wi that good
– Art Dudley Stereophile October 2009

True tone, real bass, and explosive dynamics for "HD" music reproduction on reasonable budgets

Our new critically acclaimed Essence loudspeaker, formerly starting at $5,000 per pair in retail stores now starts at $3,495 per pair—its new price direct from Zu!

Essence is as useful for uncompromised home theater systems as for audiophile stereo. It delivers inimitable intimacy for solo voice or violin, with the convincing emotion only possible with our full-range driver's extraordinary tone density, while jumping to life for jazz, rock, blues, country, folk... and the challenging power of a full symphony orchestra. And Essence will do all of this with everything from vintage 70s receivers to flea-power triode exotica, to the latest solid state amplification. Its amp-friendly impedance, crossoverless design, and high power efficiency makes any amplifier sound good.

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More than a pretty face:

Naim's UnitiQute

By Jeff Dorgay

It couldn't have been scripted better: while I was unpacking the UnitiQute, my daughter remarked, "It's so cute!" But this compact marvel is much more than cute. It's a high-performance music system in a package the size of a Steven King novel. We awarded the Naim Uniti our Product of the Year-Overall award in 2009 because it packed so much versatility into a compact package, squeezing a CD player, integrated amplifier, DAC, FM tuner and internet radio tuner all into a standard Naim enclosure.

The Uniti has been flying off dealer's shelves worldwide, but there are a lot of new-generation music lovers who just aren't that into physical media anymore. If you fit that description and can get by with 30 watts per channel instead of the Uniti's 50 watts per channel, the Qute is the one you want. And here's another reason to buy the Qute: though it has less power than its big brother, the sound is even more refined.

At only $1,995, the Qute offers all of the functionality of the standard Uniti, minus the CD player, and it comes in a box half the size. A sleek little black box, the Qute has no front panel controls (though you can mute the sound by touching the front screen), just a large alphanumeric display, mini-sized AUX input, a mini headphone input and a USB port. All the rest of the connections are around back, featuring four digital inputs (2 RCA and 2 optical), an analog input (also via RCA), a BNC digital output and a preamplifier output. A wireless internet antenna is also included as well as a standard RJ-45 port, should you want to hardwire your ethernet network to the Qute. *(continued)*

Small Enough to Fit Anywhere

The Qute is eight inches wide, three inches tall and 11 inches deep (207mm x 87mm x 314mm), so you should be able to find a shelf that will accommodate it. As my test sample arrived with plenty of hours on the clock, I had no way of gauging a proper break in, though the full-size Uniti took about 100 hours to sound its best.

Though most of my test listening was done with the Naim HDX music server, I did take the time to spin some vinyl with my Technics SL-1200/SME 309/Clearaudio Maestro wood combination through the Naim Stageline phono stage.

A wide range of speakers was used, but the majority of the listening was done with the new Finn speakers from Verity Audio. These little three-way floorstanders have a 91dB sensitivity and though probably more expensive ($6,500/pr.) than what the average Qute owner would choose, this amplifier was more than up to the task. If you were looking for a high-performance system with a minimal footprint, the Finn's would be my first choice. On a tight budget? Grab a pair of Vandersteen 1C's ($1,095/pr. and 90dB sensitivity)
(continued)

The Qute is easy to set up. On power up, it immediately looks for the wireless network from which you are streaming.

Setup

The Qute is easy to set up. On power up, it immediately looks for the wireless network from which you are streaming UPnP data, and if you have a Mac or Windows PC in place, it will find it immediately and let you stream music from your iTunes library, making the Qute a mini music server. I tried this briefly, with great results, but having the HDX made this feature unnecessary for me. However, those using their HDX in another room on the main system will enjoy having remote access to their library via the Qute in another room. There will be an iPhone/iPad app available shortly from Naim that will make this even easier. Since there are no controls on the front panel, everything is controlled by the remote, though you can raise and lower the Qute's volume by tapping the Naim logo. A quick tap mutes the volume instantly, which can come in handy when the phone rings and the remote is out of reach.

The Qute has a wide range of analog and digital inputs, but it has only one pair of speaker outputs. They require that you use speaker cables that have banana plugs, at least on the end connecting with the amplifier. Unlike the early Naim amplifiers, using Naim-specific speaker wire is no longer a must. I used Audioquest Colorado speaker cable with excellent results.

Extreme Versatility

Other than the CD drive in the full-size Uniti, the Qute can still control four digital sources: an analog source, the built-in FM tuner (DAB for our friends in Europe), internet radio and an iPod. There is a digital output and line-level output for those wanting to make the Qute part of a larger system, adding a DAC and larger power amplifier, but I think this defeats the compact nature of the whole affair. To Naim's credit, it can be done, and easily.

Bypassing the internal DAC of the HDX to use the Qute proved to be a slight step down in overall performance. But using the Qute with an inexpensive transport was a huge step up. Should you not be quite finished with silver discs, your favorite reasonably priced CD player will make a great transport for the Qute. I tried my older Denon 3910 and Pioneer 563; both sounded much better through the Qute than through their onboard DAC/analog stages.

The tuner performed admirably with my $20 Terk antenna, but since I live in a city lacking in FM diversity, the real bonus was the ability to access internet radio. Considering how many great stations are now available, I can't see why anyone would not want to spring for satellite radio.

At present, the review sample of the Qute was not ready to accept my iPod through the front-panel USB port, but playback from a USB jump drive was no problem. The album's table of contents was easily read on the front panel display, and playback then proceeded as normal. Naim Inc's Dave Dever assured me that on the upcoming software update, iPod playback would work the same way. Exactly like the Uniti and Wadia's 170i, the Qute will allow you to access the digital output of your iPod so you can use it as a high-quality (but extremely compact) music server. I couldn't help thinking how cool the Qute would be if it had the color touch screen of the HDX so that album art could be viewed on its front panel...

(continued)

Since there are no controls on the front panel, everything is controlled by the remote.

The Qute is attractive, compact, versatile and easy to use, but best of all, it sounds fantastic.

Saving the Best for Last, the Sound

The Qute is attractive, compact, versatile and easy to use, but best of all, it sounds fantastic. Naim has always had a reputation for producing low-powered, high-quality solid-state amplifiers. The early Naim Nait and Nait 2 integrated amplifiers are still held in extremely high regard, and it's not uncommon for them to fetch considerably more than their original price on the used market.

Paying homage to the form factor of the Nait 2, the Qute outshines its full-size sibling with a presentation that sounds closer to the top-shelf Naim gear than the Nait 5i amplifier that powers the standard-size Uniti. Thanks to its big power transformer, the Qute delivers the goods. When used with the 90dB Vandersteen's or the 91dB Verity's, I could rock out to my heart's content in my 11 x 17 foot living room. The Qute even did a more-than acceptable job of powering the Harbeth Monitor 40.1's that have a sensitivity of only 86dB.

Refinement is the name of the game with the Qute. Paired with any number of $1,000 speakers and a modest source, Qute proves itself to be one pleasant little amplifier. The Qute is a great performer as the core of a $3,000 - $4,000 system, and I'm guessing that's how most people will use it. But I was not prepared for the complete lack of grain when I supersized the system and added the Naim HDX as a source (with all uncompressed music stored on its hard drive) and the $6,500 Verity Finn's.

I felt like I was hearing the quality of the Qute for the first time, with a lack of grain that I would normally associate with much-more expensive solid-state power amplifiers. Much as the Nait 2 sounded much better than it should have for its small size, the Qute lives up to its heritage and then some.

Vocals took on an uncanny realism (for an amplifier at this price point) and my favorite current tracks from Peter Gabriel's latest album, *Scratch My Back*, had the necessary amount of grit and texture to remain interesting. Cheapo integrateds usually lack this finesse, and Gabriel ends up sounding like Seal. Moving to the other side of the fence, Gwyneth Herbert's subtle vocal shadings were fantastic on "My Narrow Man" from her current release on the Naim label, *All The Ghosts*.

The level of bass extension and control was impressive as well and again, the concept of texture kept coming up. It was amazing to hear an acoustic bass really sound like an acoustic bass. Unless I exceeded the comfort level of the Qute, I was pleased enough with the presentation that I nearly freaked out whenever my eyes perceived the small size of that box.

Last but not least, Qute had a splendid airiness about its overall sound, with plenty of space between the notes. I've listened to more than my share of inexpensive solid-state integrateds, and most of them are rubbish. Not only was a healthy amount of three-dimensional space reproduced, the tonality was very natural in a way that I previously felt could be accomplished only with much-more expensive gear.

Conclusion

Naim's UnitiQute will spoil you. If this is the core of a high-quality second system, you might find yourself spending less time with your main system. If it's your first venture into high-end audio, you're going to have to spend a lot of money, should the upgrade bug hit you some day; the Qute is that good.

Naim has hit the mark perfectly for a high-quality yet reasonably priced, all-encompassing HiFI component. Add your favorite pair of budget speakers and you are ready to rock for a reasonable outlay, yet it's good enough to up the ante considerably with higher-priced peripherals before you will get tired of it. A word to the wise: anyone who gets rid of their Nait 2 rues the day. Should you buy a Qute, I suggest hanging on to it forever.

Just like the legendary Nait and Nait 2 amplifiers, I'm positive the Qute will still hold a special place in many music lovers hearts years from now. This is what the music world needs more of. ●

The Naim UnitiQute
MSRP: $1,995
www.naimaudio.com

REVIEW

Naim has hit the mark perfectly for a high-quality yet reasonably priced, all-encompassing HiFI component.

REVIEW

Tall, Sexy and Danish:

The Dynaudio C4 Confidence Speakers

By Jeff Dorgay

On the carton of every Dynaudio speaker is a label describing the model inside, followed by the slogan, “because Danes don’t lie.” I don’t know if that’s true or not, but all the Danes I know are awfully nice people. One thing I *do* know for a fact, the Danes don’t make ugly products. On my recent trip to Copenhagen, I’d say that if I had to sum Denmark up in only one word, it would be style. The Dynaudio Confidence C4 loudspeakers are no exception to this rule, they are beautiful. Rather tall and slender (like most of the Danish people I met) at 72 inches high, they are slender and finished to perfection.

The Confidence C4 speakers retail for $19,000 in Maple, Cherry, Rosewood and Black Ash natural wood finishes, with Bird’s Eye Maple, Birch or Walnut natural veneers also available via special order at a 10% premium. Gloss Black, Gloss White Lacquer and Clear Lacquer over Natural Veneer premium finishes are also available at the 10% upgrade, bringing the retail to $20,900 per pair. Custom match-to-sample finishes are also available at an extra expense. Our review pair arrived in Rosewood Lacquer ($20,900 per pair)and the finish was flawless, with a very high gloss finish.

Dynaudio claims that this baffle, and their high quality crossover network (a 6dB/Octave design) makes for minimal interaction with the listening environment.

At the top of the Dynaudio range the C4's take advantage of DDC (Dynaudio Directivity Control) technology, which utilizes a specifically shaped front baffle that extends outward from the main speaker cabinet. Dynaudio claims that this baffle, and their high quality crossover network (a 6dB/Octave design) makes for minimal interaction with the listening environment.

Setup

These speakers weigh about 110 pounds each, so be sure to have a friend assist with setup. The C4's come packaged in large wooden crates, so plan on having storage space to keep these crates should you ever change residences.

Once out of the crates, the C4's are very easy to move around. They use a single pair of binding posts, right at floor level. If you don't have speaker cables terminated with banana plugs, it will be tough to work with spade lugs, as the C4's use the ones that are covered with plastic and only have a downward facing slot. This is my only complaint about these otherwise extraordinary speakers. They definitely need more useable binding posts, assuming that the average audiophile spending this kind of money on a pair of speakers has also bought some fairly good (i.e. thicker) speaker cables as well.

Even after casually placing the speakers in the room, the effect of the DDC system is evident. While these speakers definitely respond to a bit of careful placement, they sound remarkably good with minimal setup.

The Sound

These speakers are incredibly natural and coherent, rivaling that of some of my favorite panels. Vocal performances really shine, and in part to the large size of these speakers, recreate the dimension of height incredibly well. Best of all, that spatial representation doesn't go away when you stand up like it does with my Magnepans.

Thanks to their high degree of tonal accuracy, the C4's portray an excellent rendition of acoustic instruments along with the necessary spatial cues to fool you that you are listening to live music, especially when listening in from the other room. The review pair spent a fair amount of time in my living room not only for break-in, but to see how they would work in a less than optimum situation. Again, the C4's came through, not requiring a lot of fuss. My living room is the typical living room, with wood flooring, a big glass table and leather furniture. Hardly a model of acoustic efficiency.

I was using the Octave V-40SE amplifier that we reviewed last issue (40 watts per channel with EL-34 tubes) and the sound was convincing enough to fool more than one of my neighbors. Fortunately, I was going through a set of Blue Note classics at the time, supplied by the Naim HDX music server and no one threatened to call the police like they do when I'm playing Megadeth at brain damage levels.

This modestly powered but high quality amplifier revealed two important characteristics of the C4's; in addition to not being terribly fussy about placement, they sound incredibly good at low volume and work well with vacuum tube amplification. Not to be taken lightly, this is not something that many big speakers do well, and the C4's are better than most. As the actual footprint of these speakers is relatively small (though they are over six feet tall), I wouldn't hesitate to put a pair of these in a modest sized living room like mine, which is only 11 feet wide and 17 feet deep.

Much like a sedan with a large displacement V-8, there's nothing like a well designed pair of big speakers. The C4's have a tremendous dynamic capability and the ease that they reproduce dynamics at anything less than maximum level is the perfect recipe for long, fatigue free listening sessions. *(continued)*

RedEye, the personal remote.

The RedEye system allows the iPhone and iPod touch to control nearly any TV, stereo, cable box, DVD player, and many other devices that receive standard infrared signals.

Personal.

- Each iPhone or iPod touch acts as a controller
- More than one controller can simultaneously interact with existing home entertainment gear

Simple.

- One touch launches any activity—watch TV, listen to music, play a video
- Custom screen layouts for each activity means no hunting for the right button

Smart.

- Multi-touch gestures for common functions
- Free software upgrades delivered via iTunes
- Control different rooms from anywhere in the house

Made for iPod | Works with iPhone | Available on the iPhone App Store

RedEye
Less clutter. More control.

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

redeyeremote.com

I felt the overall tonality of the C4's was neutral to slightly analytical, not that it's a bad thing. Of course the ideal goal (at least for many listeners) is to have all the components in a system be perfectly neutral, the reality is much different - there are precious few if any completely neutral components. In that case I'd much rather have a highly resolving speaker that I can pull back a touch with electronics that possess a slightly rich character than starting with a dull, laid back speaker. A dull speaker will only sound slightly less dull, even with the best source components and amplification driving it.

Interestingly, when I first heard the C4's, Michael Manousselis (Dynaudio's US rep) was playing them through the Octave Jubilee tube monoblocks and the sound was heavenly. My next experience was at my local dealer, Pearl Audio, here in Portland, OR, where they were being demoed with the McIntosh MC2301 tube amplifiers.

Once the C4's arrived here, there were a number of amplifiers to add to the mix, as we were just on the tail end of our amplifier issue, so I had more than the normal compliment of amplification choices. As there wasn't anything here that sounded terribly harsh or forward, the C4's were a hit with everything I auditioned them with. Thanks to their level of resolution, the personality of each amplifier came through with ease.

The SimAudio Moon W-7 monoblocks, with 500 watts per channel took solid hold of the C4's as did the mighty McIntosh MC1.2kw's, with both amplifiers providing thunderous bass grip and power, though the Mac's had a warmer overall presentation and the Moon more controlled with more fine detail on tap. As you would expect, all of the tube amplifiers had an extra dose of mid-range magic, but at the expense of less control in the lower bass region. It was all good, however one of my favorite combinations was with my reference Burmester preamplifier driving the Moscode 402au power amplifier. This amplifier is definitely on the lush side, but being a hybrid design, it strikes a great balance of power along with a bit of romance. *(continued)*

Chameleons, Actually

All of these amplifiers allowed the C4's to deliver a stunning performance, but the huge, holographic soundstage they threw in both rooms large and small kept drawing me back to tube or hybrid amplification. Please keep in mind that is a personal bias. It seemed that everyone else that had a chance to listen to the C-4's had their own favorite amplifier choice, suggesting a wide range of applications.

It's also worth mentioning here that the C4's were a piece of cake to drive, also offering a potential owner a wide range of amplification choices. Even the Decware Zen, with only two watts on tap, did a convincing job in a smaller room, but I'd suggest anything from about 40 watts per channel to be compatible with the C4's.

That extra detail came in handy when listening to familiar recordings. This is definitely a speaker that will reward you with plenty of "Wow, I didn't hear that before!" moments. No matter what music I was listening to, there were plenty of little detail morsels that made me sit up and take notice.

Even with modest power, the C4's throw a very wide and deep soundstage. Listening to some of my favorites from the world of electronica was stunning, the gigantic image and deep synth bass in the Supreme Beings of Leisure's *i11* was reproduced at rave levels with the big Moon amplifiers, yet the speakers held their poise. They never reached a level where the image started to degrade and muddle together. If you like your music loud, yet with plenty of finesse, the C4's will not disappoint you.

If your electronics are up to the task, your favorite rock recordings will push the soundstage boundaries well beyond the speaker boundaries. This is definitely a speaker that gives you a huge slice of the six-figure speaker pie at a quarter of the cost.

Bass is well controlled and fast. Even though the C4's have a pair of 7-inch woofers in each cabinet, the gigantic, ported enclosures give these a low frequency limit of 25Hz, which my Stereophile test disc easily confirmed. Playing through my favorites from King Crimson, Genesis, Pink Floyd and the like, confirmed that the C4's had plenty of bass weight and texture.

I loved this speaker's ability to keep a complex mix intact. When listening to the Beatles' "A Day in the Life" from the recently remastered mono version of *Sgt. Pepper,* I was impressed with how well the bass line, vocals and various instrumental tracks all stayed separate, giving this mono mix an image that sounded almost stereophonic. I had the same experience with the heaviest metal tracks to my favorite classical tracks.

In my studio, I had the best results with these speakers slightly wider apart than my normal setup, which is about 9 feet apart. Once the proper balance of bass weight and midrange clarity is achieved by moving the speakers back and forth from the back wall, I tend to keep moving the speakers further apart left to right until the stereo image collapses (in about three inch increments). In this case, the C4's ended up almost 11 feet apart, which I'm sure further contributed to their ultra wide imaging. As a panel lover, I'm a complete sucker for this kind of thing, so I always ended a listening session with the C4's utterly impressed. The Mofi remaster of Beck's *Mellow Gold* was absolutely trippy, with minute electronic sounds floating all over the room as if I had a pair of surround speakers installed.

I only used a few degrees of toe in with these and the last touch was to get them up on their spikes for that last bit of bass tightness and image definition. I must make it a point though that those of you that don't possess Jedi speaker setup skills will still be able to achieve a high level of performance with the C4's.

Conclusion

There you have it, the Dynaudios play well with all music big and small. $19,000 is a lot of money for a pair of speakers, but comparing these to a number of things comparably priced, as well as a few that cost quite a bit more, they are more than worth the price asked and for many will be a final destination speaker.

While I am usually a fan of building a system where all the components have an equal level of performance, the Dynaudio C4's are such overachievers, I'd suggest buying these no matter where you are on the food chain and upgrading the rest of your system as you go along. ●

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Digital Sources dCS Paganini stack, Sooloos Control 10

Preamplifier Burmester 011, McIntosh C500

Phono Preamplifier Nagra VPS/VFS with Red Wine Audio Black Lightning

Amplifiers Burmester 911Mk.3, SimAudio W-7 monos, McIntosh MC1.2kw monos, Octave W40 SE, Moscode 402au

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

Cable Shunyata Aurora I/C's, Shunyata Stratos speaker cables

Vibration Control Silent Running Audio

Accessories Furutech DeMag, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators

ZVOX IncrediBase 575 Sound Bar

By Mark Marcantonio

For several years, manufacturers have been attempting to make surround sound a simple combination of setup and usage. From cube 5.1 systems to amplified DVD home theater in a box to surround bars, the quest for the ultimate solution continues into the second decade of the 21st Century. A current popular concept is that of the surround bar, a single slim column with several small drivers. Most are passive, requiring a home-theater amplifier. Having owned a sound bar previously before moving on to a 3.1 setup, I'm quite aware of their capabilities as well as limitations. Therefore, my curiosity and thoughts are focused on their capabilities compared to stock television sound and typical sound bars.

ZVOX came on the scene about two years ago with a powered single-box system needing only a subwoofer. Its rectangular shape allows it to be placed under a flat-screen television. Its popularity led ZVOX to produce other models with additional features. The Incredibase 575 is the current king of their lineup, taking the single-cabinet design one step further to include a built-in dual subwoofer system for $599. A 575HSD version with optical and coax digital inputs is available for an additional $100.

Sleek Yet Robust

The IncrediBase 575 is housed in an MDF enclosure measuring 36 inches wide by 16.5 inches deep by five inches tall. It easily supported the weight of my 42-inch plasma television as it is rated for up to 140 pounds. The width was only slightly smaller than the television, creating a balanced visual look. Complying with industry standards, the 575 is magnetically shielded. The front facing is wire mesh with the top covered in flat sheen vinyl, and the sides in high-gloss piano black. The back panel fits in perfectly with the simple setup mantra of the IncrediBase 575: just two pairs of RCA inputs (the second can be used for an iPod or other music device), a power switch and an AC power receptacle.

Behind the grille, five small, 3.5-inch drivers are placed with three toward the center and one near each side. Just inside the right outside speaker are two LED lights, one light green and the other blue, that can easily be spotted from any angle. The blue light flickers when using one of the buttons on the remote control, a nice touch to let the remote operator know that an adjustment is activating. The negative is that same the blue light also flickers when the mute is engaged, which I found distracting.

The two 6.5-inch subwoofers are down-firing. Because of this, a sturdy and solid stand is recommended to avoid unwanted vibration. The IncrediBase 575 uses 133 watts of power, with separate amplifiers for the LF and HF drivers built into the cabinet. The remote control houses the off, mute and auto on/off buttons as well as rocker-style switches for the treble, subwoofer, and phase cue control.

Getting Around the Remote

Although the IncrediBase 575 requires only a minute or so for connecting the RCA inputs and plugging in the power cord, plan on spending some time working the phase cue buttons on the remote. This feature allows the source signal to be mixed in a way to create the illusion of surround sound that is most pleasing to the listener. Give ZVOX a nod for honesty admitting that their process is not the equal to a 5.1 Dolby surround setup.

Since the IncrediBase 575 uses phase control to manipulate the signal rather than licensing Dolby, I found that with DVD or BlueRay movies, be prepared to adjust the phase during the first few minutes of the film. For example, the subtle, dialogue-driven *Everything's Fine* sounds best with a fully narrowed setting, thus allowed the dialogue to move out in front of other sounds in most scenes. But every once in a while, the surround processing missed and the voices blended into the music, forcing a quick rewind to clarify what was said. *(continued)*

The two 6.5-inch subwoofers are down-firing. Because of this, a sturdy and solid stand is recommended to avoid unwanted vibration.

Interestingly enough, the underrated *Martian Child*, another dialogue-based film, needed the widest possible selection to keep the various actors voices from blending together. This time around, the IncrediBase 575 was accurate with every scene, making an already engrossing movie even better. Near the end of the movie, "Mr Blue Sky" from Electric Light Orchestra is played with excellent energy and pleasant tonal structure.

Some Adjustments Required

During the review time, some movies just didn't play nice with the IncrediBase 575. The very first DVD I tried was *The Right Stuff*. The opening scene involves a black-and-white narration with some heavy bass impact. The IncrediBase 575 missed it altogether. Sound effects did improve during the horse-riding chase scene with the very accurate effect of hooves digging into the desert soil. Beyond that point, the accuracy and sonic realism went missing. Particularly disappointing was John Glenn's famous lift-off and fire-flies scene. With the soaring symphonic playing of "Mars," "Jupiter" and "Neptune" from Gustov Holtz's *The Planets*, the voice of the astronaut is all but lost. Finally, during most scenes, there was a sizeable suck out of the lower-middle frequencies; all the male voices sounded tilted upwards. Overall, a frustrating three hours with one of the great films of the 1980s.

Broadcast-television audio is a whole different animal. The instruction manual suggests a narrow setting to get the best performance with comedies, a statement I would whole-heartily support. *Two and a Half Men* lost virtually all background sounds when set at the widest phase cue position. Backing down to the narrowest point brought the intimacy back and removed the hollow sound. This worked inversely with the seating position for audio, which became wider as the adjustment narrowed. Strange but true.

Television dramas required a wider position. This is especially true with outdoor scenes or large sets. The phase cue adjustment varied by one or two clicks of the button, depending on the show being viewed. *Grey's Anatomy* with its close-in dialogue between actors did better with a narrower position. *Deadliest Catch* sounded best after pressing the widen (+) button twice.

Cable movies were a wild card when played thru the IncrediBase 575. The result was either impressive or miserable. Based upon its age, I thought *First Blood* would be an auditory disappointment. Instead, it sounded excellent via the AMC network broadcast. So too was the Clint Eastwood western *Pale Rider*. In both cases, the room filled nicely with the various sounds. On other movies, the previously mentioned lower-midrange suck out drained the life out of the film. The change in performance always happened when my confidence in the IncrediBase 575 was either at its highest or lowest point. It was always an adventure.

Final Score

The ZVOX IncrediBase 575 is quite a fascinating surround-sound solution for those who eschew wires or have television rooms where a traditional home-theater setup just won't work. With the right source material and proper setting, it offers up worthwhile budget solution in a space-saving package. It is not the equal of a true 5.1 system, but it's a definite step up from any built-in speaker system in today's flat-panel televisions.

Not completely a "set and forget" device, the IncrediBase 575 will require regular fiddling with the phase cue to get the most out of a variety of sources, and on occasion, the performance will disappoint; the 30-day trial lets you judge for yourself.

Regardless of cost, no sound bar will ever take the place of a discrete 5.1 surround system, but the ZVOX IntelliBase 575 is certainly a great step up from the standard speakers in your television. ●

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Designed by Yoav Geva (Gonczarowski)

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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[1], 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[2].

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.

[1] See YG Acoustics' ad titled Reason #3 for measurements of mechanical losses.
[2] YG Acoustics is unique in the industry in having in-house CNC precision-grinding equipment in addition to CNC milling machines.

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..."

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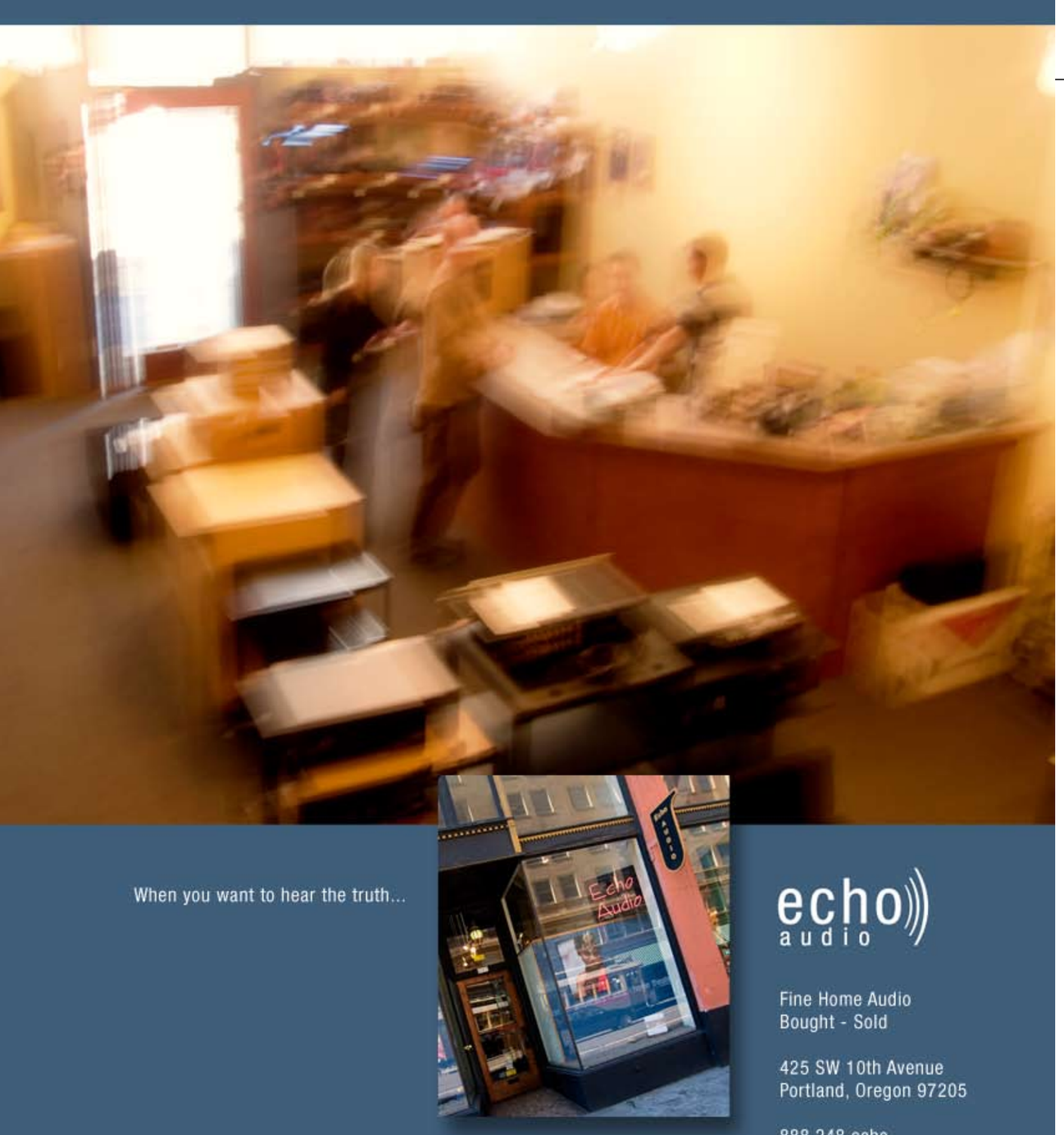
Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

No Dynaco amplifiers or Marantz tuners this issue...

But on one of our usual dumpster dog expeditions, our art director picked up a big pile of sheet music, most of it for 25 and 50 cents each. Who can resist the charm of the polka? And a one, and a two!

Perhaps it's time to turn the HiFi off and pull up the piano bench. Don't forget the bubble machine.



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