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- **Twilight Singing: A Conversation with Greg Dulli**



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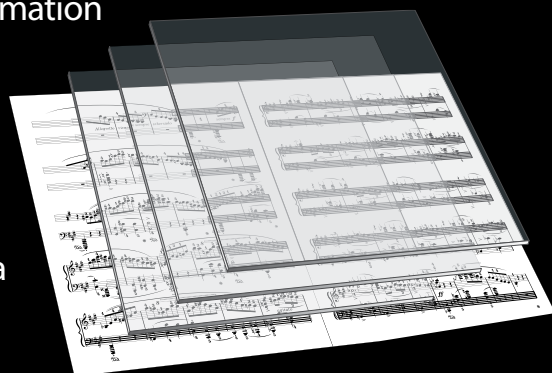
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Conductor material quality has a pronounced effect on the signal passing through. Different materials have more or less impurities, grain-boundaries, surface irregularities, etc.

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

IN PRAISE OF ZINIO

TONEAudio has been a paperless publication from the very beginning for many reasons, the most important of which is our concern for the environment. My mother-in-law



likes to say, "Trees are a *crop*, you can grow more." I wholeheartedly agree. But the actual process of printing a magazine is fairly toxic, as any number of waste products gets dumped into our ecosystem. A vision for an electronic future is something I share with Apple founder Steve Jobs. And having

spent my life as a professional photographer before starting *TONEAudio* nearly six years ago, I've always enjoyed looking at transparencies on a light box as opposed to looking at prints.

My selfishness perfectly dovetails with reading *TONEAudio* on a screen. And it's why we're thrilled to partner with Zinio.com, marking the beginning of what is shaping up to be a very promising future at this ever-growing publication. Zinio's iPad app works flawlessly, giving our magazine the form factor of a paper periodical with the vibrancy of viewing 8 x10 chromes on a color-corrected light box—the ideal blend of old and new technologies. While we were not the first audio magazine to embrace this platform, we are striving to be the most meaningful and most exciting to read. Our first few issues on Zinio will be almost identical to the traditional PDF that you can download at no cost from our website.

However, going forward, we will be adding audio and video to the magazine, along with extra photos (both reviews and features) and a few articles unique to the "Premium Version" of *TONEAudio*.

What's this mean for you? For starters, readers that have been faithfully downloading our PDF will still be able to do so. We are not abandoning the free version of *TONEAudio*, so you can continue to read it as you have in the past. But for the cost of less than three Starbucks Venti lattes, you'll be able to get access to even more cool stuff in the future. Those of you with Droid pads, fear not; Zinio has promised Samsung Galaxy and Dell pad support, with others on the way. And if you are reading this letter on a smart phone, I salute your visual prowess! Seriously, if you'd like to read *TONEAudio* on a smartphone, let us know, and we can make that an option as well.

For now, I'm hoping the additional navigation, ease of readability, and stability on the iPad will be enough to keep you intrigued while we are, in a sense, "under construction." I guarantee it will be worth the journey. We have many fun, informative ideas and projects up our sleeves that we can't wait to share with you.

As always, thanks for reading.



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NEW CONTRIBUTORS

Robert Loerzel

Robert Loerzel is a freelance writer and photographer in Chicago. His concert photos appear regularly in the *Chicago Reader* and on his blog, www.undergroundbee.com. He writes for *Chicago* magazine, *Signal to Noise* and other publications, as well as *Chicago Public Radio*.

Jim Macnie

Jim Macnie has been in love with music since childhood. He spent the last decade as the Managing Editor of **VH1.com**. He currently writes about jazz and pop for *Down Beat*, the *Village Voice*, and the *Providence Phoenix*. A visit to his blog, *Lament for a Straight Line*, might prove to be fun.



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Buddy Guy

Legend's

Chicago, Illinois

January 23, 2011

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Robert Loerzel

January in Chicago tends to be on the colder side. The extremely harsh winters of the 70s are a distant memory, but the city usually logs several inches of snow during the month and is often hit with bracing winds. These reasons alone prevent most touring artists from coming through town until later in the spring. Yet, for nearly two decades, January has hosted one of the city's must-see music events: Buddy Guy performing a month-long stand at his namesake club.

Blues fans from neighboring states as well as faraway countries regularly make the trek to catch the 74-year-old guitarist/singer at his home confines, which experienced a major upgrade in the guise of a new, two-story space that opened shortly after Guy's last annual run. Visitors no longer need to contend with cramped standing room areas or obstructing poles while watching the Louisiana-born icon tease onstage in the same manner that a child toys around with wood blocks. If you've only had the chance to witness Guy at a festival setting or at an all-ages show, you're missing out on the uncensored, unhinged showmanship of the last living great connected to the elite blues lineage that produced Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Otis Rush, and the like.

Dressed in a red suit and armed with a sharp Fender Stratocaster, Guy demonstrated no shortage of personality in front of another packed house. Live, seeing the master is as important as hearing him; Guy's physical articulations remained tethered to his sonic communication, and few musicians utilize their extremities so effectively.





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Auravis Systems is pleased to announce the arrival of Burmester's state of the art 100 Phono Preamp in Salt Lake City. As avid fans of analog music reproduction, ground breaking engineering, and world class craftsman, we could not be more excited about Burmester's introduction of this work of art.

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Flexible facial muscles conveyed expressions that touched upon humor, distress, surprise, sadness, and confidence. Whether balling his hands into a fist or flapping his arms as if preparing for a flight off a cliff, he shored up emotional narratives by acting out associated feelings and brimming with an enthusiastic giddiness that belied his age. Such trademark antics lacked the utmost degree of spontaneity—it's no secret as to why Guy is a beloved entertainer—yet added to a spirited concert that, following traditional precedent, found the international sensation ignoring a script and doing what the situation demanded.

Backed by a solid, stay-out-of-the-way band, Guy relished the roles of salacious loverman, pleading balladeer, unstoppable lothario, and down-and-out victim of circumstance. Songs such as "Hoochie Coochie Man" and "Drowning on Dry Land" served as opportunities for improvisational flights and playful exchanges. Models of balance, explosive guitar fills drove the conversations and Guy's frolicsome asides punctuated the sentences. Free to command his own room, Guy became an archetypical bluesman for whom women and whiskey are welcome. "Shiiiiittttt," he cheerfully proclaimed on several occasions, a big grin creeping across his face as a series of drawl-laden curses and bawdy double entendres cast a sinful jukejoint glow absent from tourist-oriented blues bars and Guy's family-friendly routine.

As for the winter chill? Not enough to prevent the five-time Grammy Award winner from venturing into the crowd, hamming it up with fans, and strolling outside to get a read on the 15-degree temperature all the while coaxing a beehive's worth of buzz from his guitar strings. Indeed, Guy let it be known



that, for all the polish that graces his recent albums, he's still capable of bringing of the noise in the form of voluminous passages, ice-picking notes, and searing chords that split the difference between overdriven blues, experimental rock, and cacophonous free jazz outbursts. When it was all over, he stayed behind to sign autographs and take pictures with fans, flashing an unmistakable smile that, akin to the dependably consistent January residencies, never gets old.

LIVE MUSIC

Motörhead

The Roseland Theater

Portland, Oregon

February 5, 2011

Text and Photos by Jeff Dorgay



“We are fucking Motörhead and we play rock and roll!”

That came from the mouth of Lemmy Kilmister, but truer words have never been spoken. Eleven years into the 21st century, at a time when most of the remaining bands with Motörhead’s tenure are shadows of their former selves at best and, at worst, caricatures, vocalist/bassist Kilmister and his mates (Phil Campbell on guitar and Mikkey Dee on drums) served up a distinctive brand of heavy rock that outpaced most, if not all, of their peers. The sold-out Portland crowd constantly roared back in approval.

Just few songs into the set, the trio launched into “Back in Line,” a blustery tune from the new album *The World Is Yours*. The evening’s biggest surprise? Motörhead only performed two songs from the satisfying new LP. In addressing this very topic, Lemmy laughed and said, “Well, the album is coming out Monday, I should at least play you a couple of fucking tracks.”



Rather than prance around like Mick Jagger, Lemmy primarily remained planted slightly to the right of center stage, his microphone in its trademark position: perched on a stand and situated above his head. The 65-year-old icon put every ounce of energy into the performance, playing with the speed and intensity of men half his age. After a set that lasted a few ticks beyond 90 minutes, he finished strong, his voice intact and barely breaking a sweat.

Meanwhile, Campbell stalked the audience from multiple vantage points while roaming around the stage and jumping up on the monitors. Thanks to an extra effects pedal installed right at the end of the stage, he was able to lean over within inches of maniacal fans and was almost scooped up by the crowd on more than one occasion. At the tail end of “Rock Out,” he unleashed a blazing solo that Dee later answered, complete with percussive pyrotechnics. Motörhead’s is truly a classic rock show, honed to perfection.

While one might not think much about the sound *quality* at a Motörhead show, it’s worth noting that the sonics were as magnificent as the performance. Imagine a Motörhead album recorded to the standard of the best audiophile pressings and played back with a 100,000 watts of power, providing the infinite dynamic punch that the band’s music demands. Such a scenario is why the only way to really experience Motörhead is to see the group live. No stereo system in the world can reproduce what the British legends do on a nightly basis at halls and theaters.



Appropriately, the band finished its normal set with the classic “Ace of Spades.” The double-fisted encore of “Born to Raise Hell” and “Overkill” perfectly described the evening’s performance. Spend an evening with Motörhead, and it becomes obvious as to why so many metal artists consider the British trio the penultimate standard.

Aladdin Theater

Portland, Oregon

February 3, 2011

Text and Photos by Jeff Dorgay



Even the best bands have off nights. Unfortunately, Black Dub recently experienced such a fate on in Portland. It certainly wasn't for a lack of talent (Daniel Lanois on guitar, Brian Blades on drums, Daryl Johnson on bass, and Trixie Whitley on lead vocals). Or a lack of trying. But perhaps the result of a wacky schedule that found the group playing Vancouver, Seattle, and San Francisco within the three days that led up to the Portland show. About ten bars into the opening "Love Lives," Lanois started laughing, quit the track, and started over. For the rest of the evening, he proved a reserved albeit gracious host that was somewhat fixated on buying a piano that caught his eye in a shop located next door.

A majority of the concert consisted of songs from the band's current *Black Dub* album. Yet Lanois also performed a few tunes from past albums and finished with "The Maker," from *Rockets*. Alas, despite digging into the past, the band never locked into a cohesive groove. Whitley clearly struggled with her voice. Even though the ensemble gave her a few breaks—punctuated by an outstanding Lanois pedal steel solo—she failed to naturally blend with her mates.

Daniel Lanois and Black Dub

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Unlike the self-titled record on which Whitley takes charge as lead vocalist, the performance was reminiscent of early Crosby, Stills and Nash shows where all three singers share an equal intensity. The approach certainly makes for a “signature” sound, but lacks contrast and movement that additional dynamics provide. To her credit, she did an exceptional job as a multi-instrumentalist, moving from drums to keyboard to rhythm guitar with ease. Whitley is a potential powerhouse; as she matures, she’s going to be a force. For now, her best effort came during “I’d Rather Go Blind,” on which Lanois and Johnson’s harmonies bolstered her sound.

Viewed as a guitarist, Lanois is an insightful player. Years of producing U2 with Brian Eno served him well. He

took his share of riffs from the Edge’s playbook and mixed them with rich atmospheric textures that sounded similar to his recent “Omni series” of records—sets obviously related to Eno’s DNA.

Still, the colorful palettes weren’t involved enough to carry the day. By the encore, the usually highly enthusiastic Portland crowd remained largely unmoved. Approximately half the attendees stuck around for the two-song finale. Considering the level of quality put forward on record, and the recent videos filmed to support it, the band probably just needs a good night’s sleep to make things right. Here’s hoping Black Dub is better prepared (and well rested) for the remainder of the tour. ●

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Trap Them

Samantha Marble captured Trap Them engaged with a sold-out crowd at the Cake Shop in New York City on January 15th, 2011. Cake Shop is one of the few clubs in NYC that supports underground music to the same effect as the late CBGB's.

You can see more of Samantha's work at www.samanthamarble.com



©Photo by Sam Holden

Standalone Motherfucker

A Conversation With Twilight Singers Leader Greg Dulli

By Bob Gendron

As soon as I learned what ten-digit phone number—the three middle figures were “666”—to dial, I knew the call with Greg Dulli would be a doozy. Not that there was ever a doubt. Conversations with the globetrotting Twilight Singers vocalist/guitarist are always refreshingly humorous, unsparingly honest, revealingly unpredictable, and full of awakening pop-culture references.

Reached at his home in Los Angeles three weeks before the release of his group’s excellent *Dynamite Steps*, the provocative frontman talked about a wide range of subjects. The new Sub Pop set represents Dulli’s first new record since he co-helmed the Gutter Twins’ opus *Saturnalia*, and the talk was our first since we met in the summer of 2007 in New Orleans while I was working on my 33 1/3 series book *Gentlemen*.

[Note: This is an abbreviated version of the full conversation, which can be read in its entirety on the TONE Website.] www.tonepublications.com

B: Talking to you already reminds me that I need to go back to the Royal Street Inn & The R Bar [Dulli’s bar/inn in New Orleans] now that you’ve got everything completed.

G: We finally finished it. Being a first-time innkeeper, the one thing that I had never seen is that with people constantly being there, they beat everything down. Just three and a half years in, we’ve already had to swap furniture because it’s constantly used. At my houses, because I live in two different towns, I get more wear out of things because I’m only home for certain amounts of time. In some of the more popular inn rooms, we’ve already swapped out coffee tables twice. I’m like, ‘What the fuck is going on in here?’ I’m not part of the cleaning crew, but I always ask: ‘What did you find?’ [Laughs]

And?

Blood, ropes, handcuffs, bindles [small envelopes used for powdered drugs], including people flat out forgetting large amounts of whatever they bought and all that stuff. God, wow. I’m glad I’ve moved past all that. I’d be following the maid: ‘What did you find? What did you find?’

Sounds like everything is going well.

Oh, it’s going great. The only sad thing is that I used to come into town, and I have a great house, but I always liked to stay in the big room—the big rock and roll room. I used to stay there for two or three days upon arrival and it would be my home vacation. But I can never stay in that room now. It’s always sold-out.

Do you still have the same house at which I visited you in New Orleans?

No. I moved to a much nicer house. And I didn’t really like that other one. That was my business partner’s house, and it wasn’t for me. I’m not a duplex-y guy. I don’t need to hear the fighting or the fucking going on on the other side of the wall. I’m a standalone motherfucker. [Laughs]

You mentioned you recorded several tracks for Dynamite Steps in LA. But when we talked in New Orleans, in August 2007, you were working on material in a studio there as well. Was that for Twilight Singers?

I was in Turkey. Everybody smokes there. There's a reason cigarette packages say "Turkish Blend." And I'm in an elevator. And they fucking have ashtrays in the elevator. I'm like, 'Man, I reached the peak of smoking.' What more could I do?

Yeah, maybe, but I think was still pretty deep in the Gutter Twins. I can tell you that I recorded the last songs of August 2010. That means that I must have begun in the fall of 2008. Eighteen or twenty months of songwriting, whipping things up, tossing them away. Two of the songs were at one point ditched because I couldn't unlock what needed to be unlocked on the songs. I brought them to a certain point and just got frustrated and quit. It was always a person who had heard the song and said, 'Dude, what happened to "Get Lucky?"' And I said, "'Get Lucky.'" I got frustrated with "Get Lucky." And they'd say, 'You should go back to it. That was a good one.' And then I'd go back. "Get Lucky" sat around for six months unfinished, because I didn't know how to finish it. It was someone else's enthusiasm for the song that made me want to complete it. "Last Night In Town" was the same kind of thing. I couldn't figure out how to finish that one either. There was a chorus of people who were all over that one. So I had to really grind on those two. Certain songs were really easy and written in a day. Like "Never Seen No Devil." "She Was Stolen" was written in an afternoon. Certain songs write themselves and they're ready to go. They are as is; some songs you have to sweat for a little bit.

Dynamite Steps has that trademark Greg Dulli atmospheric feel. And there's a nasty streak running through some of the material that evokes your famously provocative personality. Does any of the vengeance relate to circumstances that were happening in your life?

[Pauses] Anything kind of vitriolic, it had a target. Once I completed it, I called it even with the target. [Laughs] That said, there are parts of this record in particular that I think are optimistic and even transcendent. But I had a couple of things to work out. And I worked them out. And I will repeat that I'm going to call it square with the targets now.

You mention transcendence. Some of the music, especially the scope and sweep of the symphonic arrangements, sounds like you recorded the album to be played back on a big film screen in a movie theater. Was this intentional?

Yes. It also helps that I had great musicians. Amy Farris came in to play violin and cello; Petra Haden played violin. I have timpani and strings, because upon hearing it, I decided some songs needed strings. Some of the music just builds and builds. And Dave Rosser is fucking great on guitar. He's one of my favorite musicians I've ever worked with.

Your voice still sounds tremendous and unaffected by age. Your falsetto and range on Dynamite Steps are as good as they've ever been. Are you doing anything to keep your voice in shape?

I quit smoking a few years ago.

I heard you quit because you got to smoke in an elevator and didn't think you could ever top that.

Yeah, I was in Turkey. Everybody smokes there. There's a reason cigarette packages say "Turkish Blend." And I'm in an elevator. And they fucking have ashtrays in the elevator. I'm like, 'Man, I reached the peak of smoking.' What more could I do? *(continued)*

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I've been frequently hanging out on the West coast of Mexico on the beach. That is ripe for the get-down down there too. One way or the other, I'll be an old beach dude.

So you're feeling the benefits of quitting?

Oh yeah. All the time. I feel it when I go up the steps. And when I sing. But there are times that I really miss it. Sometimes I'll see someone with a cigarette and it's like seeing your ex-girlfriend with another guy. And when I'm having a drink. They go hand in hand. People think I quit drinking, too. I've read a few times where people said, 'Oh, I saw him with a drink.' And they're shocked. I haven't quit. If I quit, I'd sell the bars [Dulli owns three bars]. What would be the point of having them?

Speaking of drinking, since your prototypical onstage persona involved smoking, boozing, and a debonair stance, are you enjoying Mad Men?

You know what? I have watched only one episode but I can tell you this: Whenever I do bus tours, that's when I stockpile those shows. The only shows that I'm hooked on right now, and that I wait for from week to week, are *Breaking Bad*—a masterpiece of a show—and *Bored to Death* on HBO. I think it's amazing; Ted Danson in particular is fucking hilarious. *Eastbound and Down*, I like it, but I want to like it more. The shows I'm going to watch on the upcoming tour are *Mad Men*, *Deadwood*, and my friend Donal [Logue]'s show that got cancelled, *Terriers*.

I haven't seen Terriers but I've heard it's excellent.

Donal is my old roommate and one of my best friends of all time. I remember when he told me the name of the show. And he asked me what I thought.

And I said, 'Well, as long as you don't mind alienating the 18- to 50-year-old fan base that you're going to alienate with that title, you should be fine.'

The advertising they did for it told you nothing about what the show was about. I watched the first episode and it was great. But the creator could not be swayed on the title. It's what happens when you call something a weird name. Trust me: *Afghan Whigs*, if I had that one to do all over again, I would have. But that's [former *Afghan Whigs* bassist] John Curley. That's not mine. I had *Twilight Singers* and then that fucking vampire bitch came along. What could I do? Gun in my mouth. [Laughs]

Regarding the Whigs, I just want to say congratulations for spurning the 90s alt-rock nostalgia reunion wave that's claimed almost every other period band. Thank you.

You're welcome. You can thank Bob Mould [Husker Du], Paul Westerberg [Replacements], and the late Joe Strummer, too.

Rather than spend your time on a reunion jaunt, you spoke to me last time about wanting to eventually hang out in and play at a piano bar in Hawaii. Is that still the plan?

I sort of still have visions on it. But now I'm kind of digging the Mexican coast. I've been frequently hanging out on the West coast of Mexico on the beach. That is ripe for the get-down down there too. One way or the other, I'll be an old beach dude. ●

Current Releases

By the TONE Staff

Greg Dulli is the rare kind of artist who invites audiences to peer into the nether regions of his darkest thoughts. He uses albums as cathartic therapy, often teetering next to perilous edges and occasionally stepping across them. At his best, the vocalist/multi-instrumentalist provides listeners the type of intoxicating thrill that accompanies taking impetuous risks, witnessing back-alley exchanges, and being privy to secretive codes that reveal sensitive information.

In song, Dulli deals with lingering personal demons in the manner that professional athletes confront their most lethal opponents: Head-on and fully engaged, nerves raw and exposed, his mind solely focused on the subject at hand. Determined to do whatever it takes to prevail, he'll pay the costs later. When his cinematic records conclude, you're thankful for the visit albeit grateful that your soul doesn't reside in such haunting places. But the rush and reward one gets from going there? Addicting.



More than a decade removed from playing bravado frontman for the Afghan Whigs—a peerless group that still stands apart for resisting the nostalgic reunion circuit currently courting and bedding almost every other 90s rock band—Dulli remains invested in leading the Twilight Singers while also taking time for the Gutter Twins (his side project with Mark Lanegan) and pursuits as a photographer, writer, and bar proprietor. Nearly five years in the making, *Dynamite Steps* checks in as the Twilight Singers' most cohesive, diversified, dynamic, and captivating record. It's also among Dulli's most confessional, stark, cautionary, and savage works; no small feat for a musician who once admitted to feeling as if he was "pulling the bones out of [his] skin" onstage every night in 1993 while touring behind the Afghan Whigs opus *Gentlemen*.

Twilight Singers

Dynamite Steps

Sub Pop, CD and 2LP

Purchase LP from Music Direct

Never at a loss for biting one-liners and penetrating storytelling, the 45-year-old *enfant terrible* on *Dynamite Steps* inhabits the roles of a malicious provocateur, tortured spirit, calculating predator, and undercover rival—identities he's assumed before, but seldom as viciously, passionately, or authoritatively. "Born a liar, obfuscate/Step aside while I manipulate," Dulli hisses as if embodying the scourging voice of an evil subconscious, brushing aside any hope for peaceful reconciliation on "Waves," a heat-blistered tune whose lashing violence and distorted commotion match the threatening wordplay. Not that he's always in control of the sinister menace or afflicting situation. "Baby pulls me even closer/Tangled like the web she weaves/Shaking off her demons/Now they're coming after me" Dulli divulges amidst the down-home pluck of dobro strings, mournful sigh of violins, and floating vocal refrains on "Never Seen No Devil." Throughout, Twilight Singers contrast beautiful melodies and vulgar intentions to supreme effect.

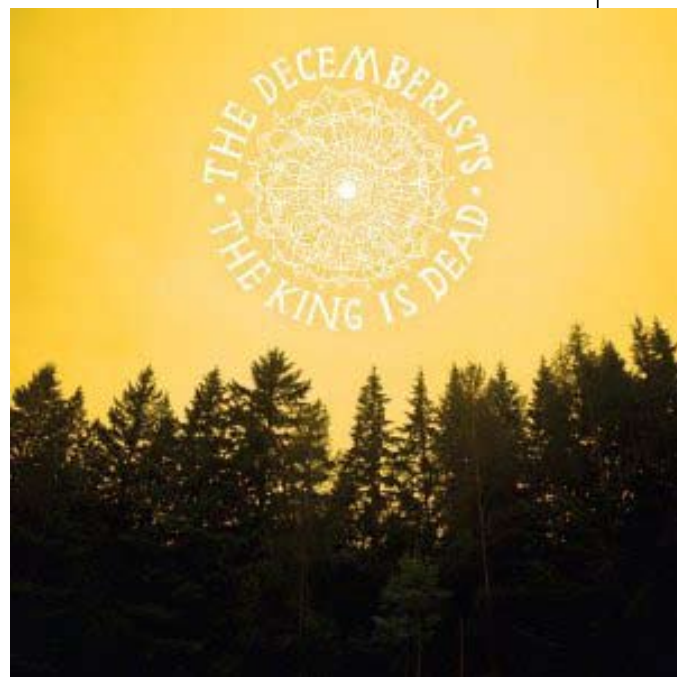
"You'll be lied to/You will suffer/I'm gonna get you back/Wait and see," Dulli cries in his distinctive soulful croon on "She Was Stolen," a sanguine piano-driven ballad that doubles as a *fete accompli*. On the hook-laden summons "On the Corner," he juxtaposes gospel commands with lustful declarations, instructing a target to "Spread your legs/Insert your alibi" as a Mellotron hums and guitars rattle in the background. Sent up with the singer's falsetto, the soaring song bears resemblance to the

R&B-leaning material off the Afghan Whigs' 1995 LP *Black Love* and draws from the same well of sources.

As has always been one of Dulli's trademarks, black-music strains swirl amidst highly atmospheric soundscapes inked with electronica, rock, chamber, symphonic, and psychedelic colors. Arrangements flirt with densely packed layers of sound while exhaling spare, fragile accents that augment rise-and-fall crescendos and built-in drama. Textures abound; notes practically take on a physical shape. And vocally, Dulli is in peak form. He demonstrates a poise that casts looming shadows on ominous fare such as the creeping "Get Lucky," funk-throbbing "Last Night In Town," and "Be Invited," a spooked fever-dream duet with Lanegan that's washed with uneasy vibes and murderous implications.

Filled with scourge, deception, danger, revenge, death, and sin, Dulli's narratives are nonetheless less linear and direct than in the past. He now pens verses in a more abstract fashion, connecting words via feeling and setting, the bundling together of individual words or short phrases intensifying the degrees of intrigue, coercion, and surprise. Seldom is the approach more effective than on the title track. A widescreen epic that finds the protagonist gain the upper hand by elimination, cunning, and circumstance, it closes *Dynamite Steps* with the cautious optimism of a vampiric figure who's seen and knows too much to vest blind faith in relationships or love.

—**Bob Gendron**



The Decemberists

The King Is Dead
Capitol, CD and LP

Purchase LP from Music Direct



©Photo by Autum DeWilde

The Decemberists' sixth album is most remarkable for what it's not. It's not a multipart suite built around an Irish mythological epic. It doesn't take inspiration from Japanese folklore, draw upon Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, or include obscure references to the Siege of Leningrad. Instead, the Portland crew strips back the artifice, breezing through ten deceptively simple folk-rock ditties with the air of a group entwined in a pleasant afternoon stroll.

It's a much-needed retreat following 2009's willfully impenetrable *The Hazards of Love*, an album that pushed both the band's musical ambitions and singer Colin Meloy's Scrabble-champ vocabulary to comic levels. "Thou unconsolable daughter," said the sister," Meloy sang on "A Bower Scene," crooning like a Renaissance Faire player moonlighting as an indie-rock frontman. "When wilt thou trouble the water in the cistern?"

Contrast such phrasing with the acoustic simplicity of *The King Is Dead*'s "January Hymn," on which Meloy tenderly sings,

"On a winter Sunday I go/To clear away the snow/And green the ground below." Then there's the gorgeous "Rise To Me," a lullaby awash in piano and warm sighs of pedal steel where new-dad Meloy appears to directly address his infant son, singing, "Oh Henry, can you hear me?/ Let me see those eyes."

The band sounds similarly unburdened, as though members took to heart Meloy's words on the album-opening "Don't Carry It All:" "Let the yoke fall from our shoulders." In turn, "June Hymn" shuffles softly through, alight in breezy harmonica and delicate finger picking. "All Arise" approximates a fall harvest celebration, rolling along on barrelhouse piano and playful fiddle. R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck directly contributes to three tracks, including the shadowy "Down By the Water" and "Calamity Song," a thumping end-times tale that sounds like a long-lost *Reckoning* B-side. Singer Gillian Welch plays an equally important supporting role, her earthy vocal harmonies buoying Meloy's reedier pipes on a handful of cuts.

Of course, Meloy being Meloy, *King* is not without its arty flourishes. When birds disrupt his rest on "June Hymn," he calls out the window: "The thrushes bleeding battle with the wrens disrupts my revelry again!" But these Shakespearean asides are rare on a set that finds the Decemberists forgoing their usual finery for their Sunday morning pajamas. Turns out it's a good look for them. —**Andy Downing**

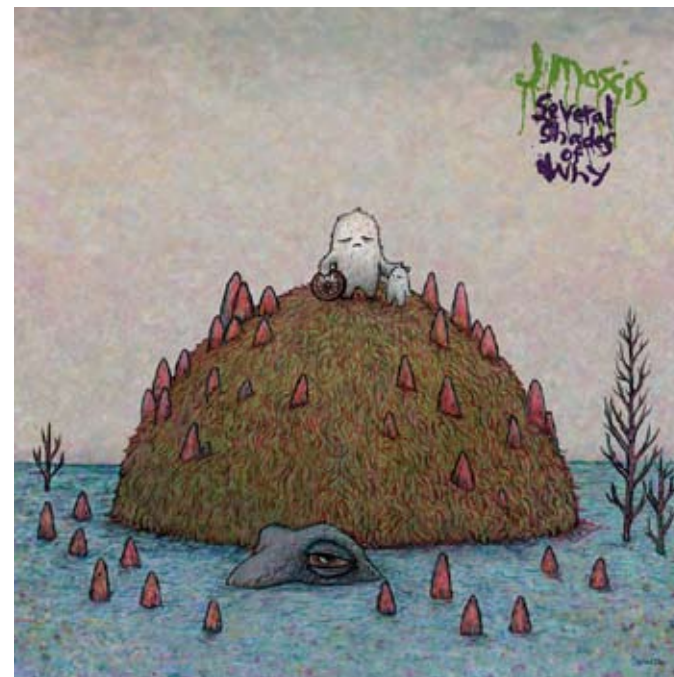


©Photo by Timothy Herzog

JMascis isn't regularly associated with tranquil acoustic music. Conversely, the silver-haired guitarist built a career around unleashing piercing, volume-screaming riffs and high-gain solos in Dinosaur Jr. as well as in side projects such as the Fog, Witch, and Sweet Apple. Influenced by Neil Young's noisier work with Crazy Horse, Mascis' biting tones and fierce, amplified playing are consistently placed upfront in the mixes of the records on which he's featured. Moreover, in the 90s, nobody onstage bled ears with more decibels than Mascis, who matched or exceeded the power summoned by the most extreme metal bands.

The indie icon's feedback-is-back reputation has only grown. While normally an honor reserved for classic rock and blues stars, his name graced a custom model Fender Jazzmaster in 2007. More recently, he's been creatively invigorated by the reunion of Dinosaur Jr.'s original lineup. Yet a gentler muse lies behind those curtains of wailing distortion. The Massachusetts-born instrumentalist unplugged as early as 1993 at a CBGBs gig documented more than a decade later on a limited-edition disc. In 1996, Mascis' *Martin + Me* presented interpretations of Dinosaur Jr. material and various covers recorded on an acoustic tour. A handful of delicate efforts with the Fog followed. Yet none bear the intimacy, cohesion, and sincerity present on *Several Shades of Why*.

Mascis' first solo acoustic album and Sub Pop debut, the ten-song set further exposes the beautiful tunefulness and pained

**J. Mascis**

Several Shades of Why
Sub Pop, LP and CD

Purchase LP from Music Direct

emotionalism at the root of his craft. While often concealed in fuzz or chaos, many of Mascis' best songs over the past 20 years capture the lifetime-lasting wounds related to longing, wondering, and searching. Such emotional themes recur on *Several Shades of Why*, which finds the singer/guitarist striving for degrees of destination, closure, companionship, and certainty without ever arriving at any agreed-upon understandings or firm conclusions.

"Turn the stick into my soul/ Hasn't changed much getting old," Mascis reticently admits on the laser-focused "Too Deep," a persistent hurt echoing in his achy voice, his reeling sentiment the residue leftover from freshly seeing a former partner and not entirely knowing how to proceed or what to say. Similar episodes of disorientation, wanting, waiting, and vulnerability distinguish a majority of the narratives. Darkness enters and leaves

Mascis overwhelmed on the aptly titled "Very Nervous," punctuated with brief spots of disturbing calm and elegant percussive touches that lend a mythic atmosphere suggestive of a room appointed with a rustling beaded curtain and potent incense. The singer seems equally lost on "Make It Right," the minimalist piano and strings reinforcing the solitary mood.

Throughout, Mascis transfers his restlessness into minor-key tension and pensive arrangements. On occasion, his trademark electric guitar enters the fray to advance the song or underscore a point. A gritty solo on "Is It Done" contributes to a contagiously progressive build; a few quick, nimble fills on the upbeat, bright "Where Are You" augment Mascis' cloudy, foggy thought process. He also gets assistance from Band of Horses leader Ben Bridwell, Broken Social Scene member Kevin Drew, Kurt Vile, and a few other

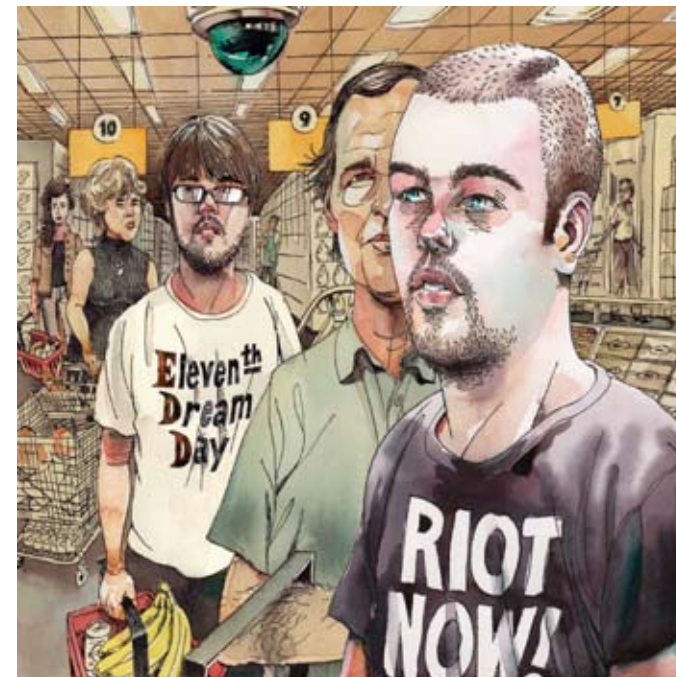
contemporaries, but primarily, the album retains a stripped and pure aesthetic. Mascis' songwriting bows to English folk, cozy country, and shuffling rock structures, his patient strumming usually taking the physical form of lapping waves. When employed, his note-picking techniques mesh into peaceful beds of soft rhythm.

Guitar heroics aside, *Several Shades of Why* puts Mascis' charming warble and slightly faded whine on display like never before; he's rarely, if ever, sounded so tender or mature. No wonder, then, that in spite of troubles and challenges, he celebrates survival in admirably modest fashion on the back-and-forth sway of "Can I," an anthem for the lost and lonely that seek reassurance and hope.

—**Bob Gendron**



©Photo by Jim Newberry

**Eleventh Dream Day***Riot Now*

Thrill Jockey, LP and CD

Purchase LP from Music Direct

History can be deceiving, even if chronicled or recorded by some of the better minds. Consider the plight of Eleventh Dream Day. Sure, there are numerous bigger, well-known bands from the underground's peak era. There's also a litany of other groups to which more credit for developing the alternative scene is ascribed, thirteen of which are rewarded with a chapter in Michael Azerrad's oft-referenced *Our Band Could Be Your Life* book. And there's a long line of artists that receive constant mentions on concertgoers' wish lists of older acts they'd like to see perform at high-profile festivals. But no indie guitar-rock band from the period's 1986-1990 heyday still sounds as vital and unchanged as it did back then as the Chicago-based ensemble.

Led by former husband-and-wife duo Rick Rizzo and Janet Beveridge Bean, the quartet has never broken up in spite of just sporadically getting together for the past 15 years. Hence, no fruitful, nostalgic cash-in reunion tours are waiting on the table. Not that the offers would be very lucrative. Survivors of major record-label politics, personnel turnover, and apathetic mainstream climates, Eleventh Dream Day remains under-the-radar heroes to a limited audience yet continues to play as if its very existence depends on it. Devoid of the cuteness, trendiness, and image-conscious posturing adopted by far too many acts in today's indie community, the band embodies the strengths of D.I.Y. spirit and uncompromising craft. *(continued)*

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Indeed, from the drumstick snap that opens the record to the headlong rush that closes it, *Riot Now* echoes all that is great about Eleventh Dream Day. Raw, gritty, noisy, resilient, and particularly urgent, the album sparks with an edginess that suggests anything can happen at any time. A majority of the songs were recorded in just one take; on-the-floor vibes, lifelike tonalities, and amplifier hum are palpable throughout, contributing to a sonic environment that's often as unsparingly visceral as the band's mood.

Extending a point strongly suggested by the humorous cover art, Eleventh Dream Day addresses the overwhelming feeling of dissatisfaction sweeping the nation while refusing to overlook the ironic fact that most citizens are reluctant to sacrifice anything for desired change. A surfeit of biting lyrics serves as metaphorical barbs. "Satisfied as I was/Time to cut it down" directs a revision-minded Rizzo on "Damned Tree," an angry tailspin of snarling melody, cracking percussion, and adamant vocals that ends up in a heap of sensory-blurring distortion. "There's something sad about America/In a check-out line watched from above" observes Rizzo on "Divining for Water," a smartly written call to action that hedges its bets on Bean's wordless bop-bop-bop backing refrain and Douglas McCombs' needling bass line. More directly, the calmer albeit dark cautionary tale "That's

What's Coming" warns of rifts and divides, Rizzo singing like a spooked prophet who's seen the future and is too frightened to divulge what lays ahead. "The old exits are gone/No matter which side you're on," he wearily discloses, laying waste to any hope for partisan protections or easy escapes.

Thematic cohesion aside, the stripped-down *Riot Now* is even more striking for the assured manner in which it blends group chemistry and incisive musicality. Bean bashes, thwacks, and strikes at her drum kit with relentless zeal. Her vocal rejoinders often overlap Rizzo's leads, resulting in a timbral diversity that assumes various forms. Wordless choruses resonate with angelic softness on a stomping "Cold Steel Grey" that, courtesy of secret-weapon organist Mark Greenberg, hops along like an unexpected parade proceeding straight down the main street of a dead-end town. Meaner and leaner, Bean matches Rizzo yelp for yelp on "Damned Tree," her pepped-up commands evoking a cheerleader on a sugar high after sucking down four cans of Red Bull. The six-minute lament "Away With Words" thrives on vocal contrasts, Bean poignantly cooing and spiritually crooning as her partner sing-speaks in a contemptuous tone, the song confronting the aftermath of tremendous disappointment and exiting on a spiraling outro that twists and turns like a corkscrew plunging into a vacuum-sealed wine bottle.

Time off hasn't hurt Rizzo's virtuosic abilities. The equal of any guitarist born since the Beatles invaded America, he shreds, dices, and jostles notes with understated technique and reality-checking toughness. In his hands, the instrument becomes a device for tuneful mayhem and the language of the damned. Guitar lines pounce, scrape, and drone; solos blaze, sear, and slice; effects whirl, spin, dizzy, and cough. Just when it seems Rizzo can't do more with six strings, a few pedals, and an amp, surprises emerge. Witness the spring-loaded bomp of "Satellite," on which Rizzo's guitar and Bean's percussion orbit in a parallel universe before the former takes control by mimicking the whooshing, chirping sound effects of a speeding spacecraft that, akin to Eleventh Dream Day, seemingly knows no bounds. —**Bob Gendron**

Indeed, from the drumstick snap that opens the record to the headlong rush that closes it, *Riot Now* echoes all that is great about Eleventh Dream Day.



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Gang of Four

Content

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More than 15 years removed from its last studio album, Gang of Four returns with a prickly effort that—more often than not—rips through the speakers like jagged shrapnel. The legendary Leeds post-punk outfit, which debuted in 1979 with the sociopolitical time bomb *Entertainment!* (an impossibly influential record due every bit of praise heaped upon it), comes out of the gates firing with the spastic “She Said,” showing little sign of rigor mortis after a prolonged period of inactivity.

Most of the tension emerges from the pitched battle between the band’s lone remaining founding members—guitarist Andy Gill and singer/yelper Jon King. The latter, delivering his cryptic poetry in either sharp, short bursts or in a creepy drawl, finds himself locked in never-ending conflict with the modern world (the rumbling “Who Am I”), religion (a weirdly hypnotic “A Fruitfly in the Beehive”) and, at times, even himself (“I never called the shots,” he wails like a drunken, despondent robot on the Auto-Tuned “It Was Never Gonna Turn Out Too Good”). On “I Can’t Forget Your Lonely Face,” he briefly inhabits the guise of the biblical serpent tempting Eve. “Just reach up,” he intones, “Pick the fruit from the tree.”

Gill responds to his partner’s exultations with equally jarring output. The guitarist, who tortures his instrument more than he actually plays it, conjures an array of gnarled textures and slicing riffs that echo all manner of horrifying machinery: dentist drills, assembly lines, jetliners scraping by overhead. At times, it can all seem a little dire, like surveying the London landscape following Nazi Germany’s bombing blitz in the 1940s.

Indeed, the crew comes closest to letting down its hair on the robo-funk of “I Party All the Time,” which opens with the line, “We are not prisoners.” Well that’s, um, good?

Elsewhere, the band lashes out at those who trudge through the monotony of day-to-day life (“Sleep/wake/sleep/wake,” King chants like a cult leader on “Far Away”), flashes a fatalistic streak on the metallic “Never Pay for the Farm,” and mimics an authoritarian regime on the sneering “Do As I Say.” Unsoftened by middle age, Gang of Four somehow maintains the same attack pose it did more than three decades back—an exhausting state that might go a long way towards explaining the extended wait between albums. Rest up, boys, global circumstances don’t seem to be improving.

—**Andy Downing**



©Photo by Robert John

Some things will never change. George W. Bush is still a Republican, Cal Ripken retains the consecutive games played record, and Fred Phelps continues on as an idiotic religious zealot that protests soldiers' funerals. Oh, and Motörhead remains loud, hard, unsubtle, grimy, and refreshingly tethered to the fundamentals of rock and roll.

As it nears its 40th anniversary, Motörhead is enjoying a momentous run. The streak began when leader Lemmy Kilmister's virtual likeness got reproduced in the *Guitar Hero Metallica* video game, exposing new generations to the group's highly influential albeit underappreciated legacy. Following a mediocre spell, the band stepped it up on studio albums, spanning 2004's *Inferno* to 2008's *Motorizer*. Moreover, the critically acclaimed Kilmister documentary, *Lemmy: 49% Motherfucker, 51% Son of a Bitch*, recently gained traction at nationwide screenings and international festivals; it's now available on DVD.

Independent of interactive visuals and film tributes, however, Motörhead is best experienced onstage and on record. Admittedly, the English institution hasn't produced a front-to-back classic in decades. Despite keeping its efforts lean and concise, the trio normally rounds out LPs with a few tracks that don't lack passion but want for completeness or differentiation. That said, anyone expecting Motörhead to vary its approach is listening to the wrong band; Kilmister and Co. just need to deliver its classic face-melting sound, brash humor, and nose-punching rhythms.

Driving with a bruising intensity and bludgeoning aggression that persists through a majority of the set, *The World Is Yours* raises a ruckus, waves a clenched fist, and scorches tympanic membranes. Songs relate to the usual topics—death

(the slashing “I Know How to Die”), music (the instant anthem and biographical statement “Rock N Roll Music”), rebellion (the rumbling “Outlaw”), fate (the hammering, hook-laden “Born to Lose”). Kilmister's black comedic wit rears its ugly head at opportune moments, as does his to-the-victor-go-the-spoils mentality and take-no-prisoners attitude. In today's politically correct environment, good luck finding another group that not only sings a menacing, chugging, ram-rodding payback tune called “Bye Bye Bitch” but also leaves absolutely no doubt about whether or not it means every word. Motörhead might be the last band anyone would ever want to dare cross.

Retribution and justice, long-time Kilmister concerns, also ignite “Get Back In Line,” a pulverizing slice of bluesy, overdriven speed-boogie rock that's the most gratifying tune yet about the ransacking of the middle class and depletion of business ethics; with all apologies to his similarly themed *National Ransom*, Elvis Costello should take a lesson on the brevity and punch demonstrated here. “If you think that Jesus saves/Get back in line,” growls Kilmister in his characteristically gruff voice, uttering phrases with do-or-die conviction. The band channels similar mettle on raging declarations that seem to chug motor oil and spit gray exhaust fumes. Rough-running grooves, decibel-choked heaviness, and Kilmister's gargling timbre define material that amounts to the

strongest, most consistent work Motörhead has yielded in recent memory.

For the time being, the trio has abandoned its penchant for novelty acoustic numbers. Akin to running into a brick wall and living to tell about it, *The World Is Yours* channels vengeance as sonic catharsis and adds another memorable chapter to the annals of the planet's preeminent live-fast-and-hard underground group. Play it loud.

—**Bob Gendron**



Motörhead

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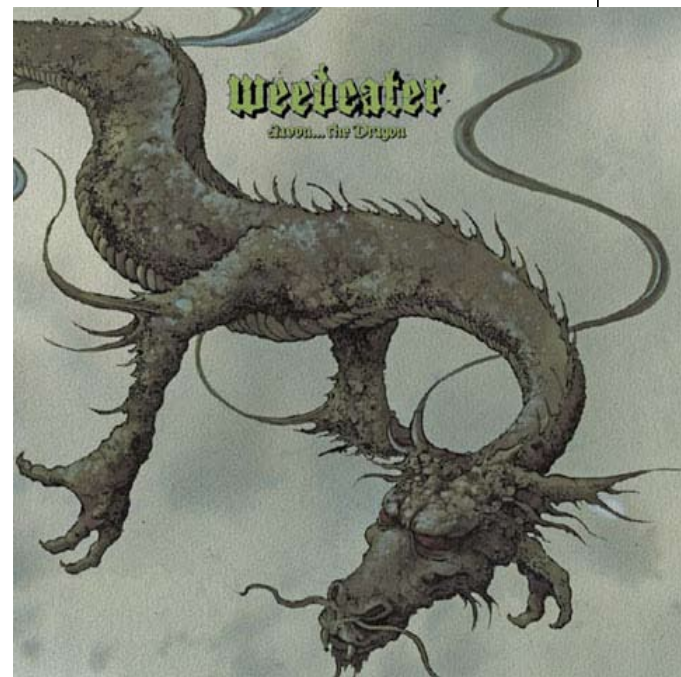
MUSIC

Smoking pot. Wrecking havoc. Collapsing eardrums with inhumanly high decibel levels filtered through SUNN and Marshall amplifier cabinets. Praising the joys of being stoned. Drinking copious amounts of alcohol, puking up green bile onstage, and continuing to perform as if it's another normal night out. Indeed, the dudes in Weedeater have some of the best jobs in music. Just not the best luck.

A string of random injuries befell the North Carolina trio in advance of recording the ground-shaking, land-quaking, bowel-rattling *Jason... The Dragon*. Initially, bassist "Dixie" Dave Collins blew off one of his toes with his favorite shotgun. (Yes, this is a true story, and no, trigger-finger Dick Cheney allegedly wasn't in the vicinity.) Then, drummer Keith "Keko" Kirkum tore his meniscus while on tour, requiring surgery. And since bad things are said to happen in threes, guitarist Dave "Shep" Shepherd subsequently dealt with a broken pinkie finger that nearly derailed a European tour and further postponed the already deferred album sessions. *(continued)*

No worse for the wear, the sludge-rock band revels in the art of the dirge on its fourth LP, 34 minutes of songs overloaded with down-tuned distortion, rumbling balled-fist riffs, larger-than-life ride cymbals, and subterranean bass. While most drug-styled metal groups take their cues from England or New Orleans, and subscribe to slower tempos, Weedeater draws from Southern rock and injects swampy malaise into its burial ground of bruising rhythms, fuzz-seared melodies, and indignant screeds. Doubt the legitimacy of the good-ol'-boy heritage? "Whiskey Creek" features a traditional banjo line plucked over the pleasing sound of a crackling river and, after a break, leads into a hidden track anchored by a tack piano.

Far from espousing Confederate flag waving, however, Weedeater sees the humor not only in its culture but that of its approach. Arriving with the ruinous might and careless ferocity of an earthmover stripping bare a Kentucky mountaintop in the name of cheap coal, the thrashing "Mancoon" manages to broach the topics of homemade dynamite and bite wounds in the same song. The brain-deadening "Long Gone" bubbles with the ready anticipation of a water bong. So distorted that it's nearly impossible to discern individual notes, "Turkey Warlock" drives a proverbial stake into victims. "Too bad/ Nice try/So sad," half-sings Collins in a damaged, resin-encrusted baritone rasp that evokes deceased AC/DC frontman



Weedeater

Jason...The Dragon

Southern Lord, CD and LP

Bon Scott—provided Scott attempted to sing with a 300-pound man pressing down on his chest. Painkillers leave Collins in a different mindset on "Palms of Opium," a psychedelic dreamscape rooted in woozy slide-guitar drunkenness and funhouse-mirror echo.

Weedeater's musicality and ability to surge separates the ensemble from a lesser pile of peers. As does the dampened, tonality-bursting production, courtesy of engineer Steve Albini, whose dry studio techniques are an ideal match for the staggered marches, crushing drones, and speaker-frying deluges that make *Jason...The Dragon* an addictively fun sonic narcotic.

—**Bob Gendron**

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Though these Chicago youngsters—still not old enough to legally knock back a few pints together—might be on the verge of a major breakthrough, it appears they currently have one much bigger concern on their minds: Girls. At least that’s how it sounds listening to the group’s sophomore album, a dreamy, guitar-driven effort that arrives dense with allusions to the fairer sex.

“Everything that I’m doing,” sings Cullen Omori, the band’s reed-thin, often bang-obscured frontman, on the woozy “Only One.” “I do just for you.” Similar sentiments abound throughout, the crew bashing through one love-struck nugget after another as if they prepped for sessions by reciting Shakespearian sonnets and immersing themselves in a slew of doe-eyed Drew Barrymore rom-coms.

Witness “Still New,” where Omori delivers his words as though his head is still dizzy from picturing that first kiss. “No doubt,” he sings, “It’s you I think and dream about.”

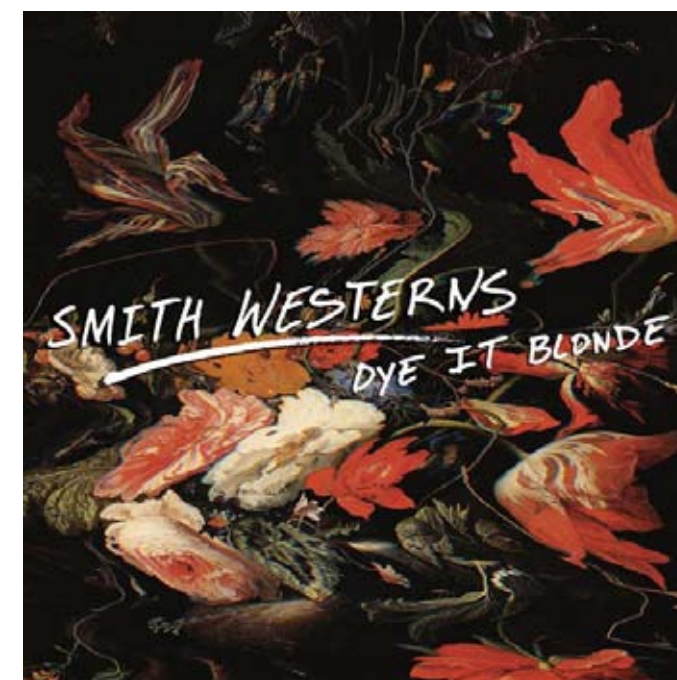
Smith Westerns’ blossoming ambition might be *Dye It Blonde*’s biggest surprise—particularly to anyone who’s ever heard/read the aloof, shrugging half-answers the mates supply in virtually every interview. Credit where credit’s due. Instead of sticking to Chicago and again recording with a four-track in the Omori family home, the trio decamped to New York City with an actual producer (Chris Coady)—hardly a move befitting the slacker mantle thrust on the band immediately after its scuzzy, self-titled debut surfaced.

Fortunately, a layer of gloss does these kids good, blowing up the notion that they were satisfied with their image as *Nuggets*-obsessed garage rockers that willfully obscured a prettier sound beneath layers of sonic fuzz. Given access to a proper studio, Smith Westerns emerge with an array of glam-rock stompers (“End of the Night”), swirling funeral anthems (“All Die Young,” colored here with rich church organ), and twinkling guitar pop (“Imagine Pt. 3”).

Throughout, Omori and his cohorts continue to daydream of great romances to come without ever capitalizing on any of their advances. At times, it’s a little like watching Kevin Arnold’s boyhood flirtations with Winnie Cooper in early episodes of *The Wonder Years*.

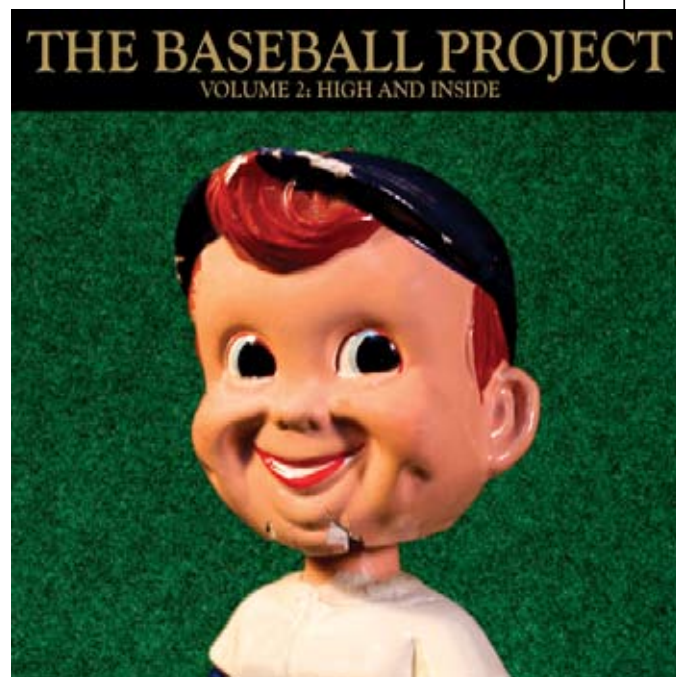
The band comes close to making a move on “End of the Night,” Omori coyly asking, “Are you gonna go home?” No answer follows, but there’s still plenty of time for real life to settle in down the road. Besides, who knows if Smith Westerns will stick with this music thing once the ladies actually start smiling back?

—**Andy Downing**



Smith Westerns

Dye It Blonde
Fat Possum, CD and LP



The Baseball Project
Vol. 2: High and Inside
 Yep Roc, CD and LP

Few pursuits allow limitless opportunities to effortlessly reflect on the past, channel hopes, and trace personal events like baseball. Flush with countless metaphors and inextricably tied to fond memories of warm summers, local pride, innocent hero worship, crackling broadcasts, and the cathartic emotional highs and lows associated with investing oneself in a team's outcomes, the national pastime in many ways mirrors the joys of life itself.

Such insights—as well as a common love of the game—originally brought ex-Dream Syndicate guitarist Steve Wynn, Minus 5/Young Fresh Fellows leader Scott McCaughey, R.E.M.'s Peter Buck, and drummer Linda Pitmon together as the Baseball Project. Filled with clever tales and catchy arrangements, the all-star quartet's excellent 2008 debut managed to avoid being pigeonholed as a novelty record. And its appeal to sports gurus ultimately resulted in the collective partnering with ESPN, writing more material, and embarking on a national tour.

The group's melodic sequel follows in the tradition-referencing and trivia-baiting spirit of its predecessor while witnessing a slight expansion of the sonic palette. While purists are more apt to gravitate to witty narratives concerning Seattle Mariners superstar Ichiro Suzuki (the surf-tipped "Ichiro Goes to the Moon," which comes on as a great lost Ramones track),



©Illustration by Cullum Rogers

San Francisco Giants personalities Pablo Sandoval and Tim Lincecum (via the gritty, scrambling garage-rock ditty "Panda and the Freak"), and early 20th century pitcher Carl Mays, the only hurler to ever toss a beanball that resulted in a player's death (a story framed as a haunting, from-the-grave ballad on the banjo-laced "Here Lies Carl Mays"), the band's appeal resides in its ability to create music and pen lyrics that speak to listeners on a basic human level.

Baseball Project members and a few high-profile guests turn their personal enthusiasm for particular players, clubs, and stats into analogies for larger themes. Ostensibly about his passion for the Minnesota Twins, Hold Steady frontman Craig Finn's crunchy autobiographical anthem "Don't Call Them Twinkies" celebrates underdog success and teenage wonder. "I prayed more in the dome/ Than I ever did in church," he confesses,

hitting on an issue to which millions of superstitious folk can relate. Everyone takes a vocal turn on "Fair Weather Fans," which addresses the reality that, even if people geographically relocate, their hearts can always remain loyal to a hometown. Accented with steel-pedal guitar fills and cooing organ notes, the country-esque "Twilight of My Career" approaches the notions of dignity, challenge, and self-worth from the perspective of an aging veteran who's cast on the scrap heap and determined to prove detractors wrong.

On *Vol. 2: High and Inside*, the white line between baseball history and everyday life is thinner than that which runs between third base and home plate. And akin to the game itself, the imaginative tunes—ranging from violin-laced boleros to jangling roots pop—inspire healthy degrees of daydreaming, smiling, and nostalgia gazing.

—**Bob Gendron**



Wanda Jackson

The Party Ain't Over

Third Man/Nonesuch, CD and LP

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©Photo by Autumn DeWilde

W

anda Jackson, the 73-year-old whirlwind alternately known as the First Lady of Rockabilly, strikes a defiant tone on her return to the spotlight, pledging to “rip it up” atop a flurry of sock-hop grooves that reek of black leather and hair pomade.

Still in possession of a disarmingly childlike croak, Jackson, her hair dyed jet-black on the album sleeve, shows little sign of slowdown as she slurs, exhorts, sighs, and coos through eleven vintage recordings that sound like they could have been uncovered in the bowels of some long-shuttered 1950s studio. Working with producer Jack White, who similarly spearheaded Loretta Lynn’s 2004 comeback *Van Lear Rose*, Jackson shoots for a retro sound reminiscent of the tattered garage nuggets (“Let’s Have a Party,” “Mean Mean Man”) that helped Jackson earn her nickname decades ago.

Although the singer has recently spent her time moonlighting on the gospel circuit, she expends far more energy here flirting with various paramours (“Teach Me Tonight,” “Like a Baby”) than exploring her reawakened Christian spirit (see the comparatively stilted “Dust on

the Bible”). “He ain’t no angel,” she purrs on a cover of Bob Dylan’s “Thunder on the Mountain,” her voice stretching out like a sleepy feline as her backing band locks into a lipstick-smeared strut. “And neither am I.” Fair enough. She takes things one step further with a predictable (yet oddly effective) cover of Amy Winehouse’s damaged testimonial “You Know I’m No Good,” which seems to appear solely so Jackson can smack down the troubled tabloid presence. *You want to see real trouble, honey? Take a gander my way.*

At times, it’s an uneven ride, pairing unfortunate experiments (the seaside calypso of “Rum and Coca Cola”) with howling gems (“Nervous Breakdown,” a reverb-laden nugget destined to land on the soundtrack to a Quentin Tarantino film). Still, Jackson gamely throws herself into each twist and turn, emerging with a record that can comfortably rub shoulders with past releases.

Credit White with the assist. Minimalist to the point of non-existence on *Van Lear Rose*, here he utilizes his considerable bag of analog tricks to heighten the dramatic tension, layering Jackson’s voice with echo, piling on the horns, and dirtying songs with barbed guitar lines that circle and snarl like hungry mountain lions. —**Andy Downing**

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MUSIC



Johnny Cash

From Memphis to Hollywood: Bootleg Vol. 2
Columbia/Legacy, 2CD

Johnny Cash singing a duet with “Bonanza” leading man and native Canadian Lorne Greene? It’s one of the many rarities that comprise *From Memphis to Hollywood: Bootleg Vol. 2*, a sequel to 2006’s *Personal File*, which focused on solo performances captured between 1973 and 1982. By contrast, the latest posthumous vault collection goes back to the beginning of Cash’s career and concludes in 1969. Spanning demos, outtakes, B-sides, and non-album singles, the 57-track set counts 22 previously unreleased (in the U.S.) songs among an archival trove the primarily presents the Man In Black in two of his most famous guises: Country rebel and Wild West cowboy gunslinger.

The two-disc compilation is wisely divided according to record label. Encompassing sides cut for Sun Records, the first disc is chronologically organized into four segments—On the Air, Early Demos, Sun Rarities, and More Demos. Evoking the recently released collection of Hank Williams’ Mother’s Best Flour radio program recordings, a 15-minute live broadcast from Memphis station KWEM in May 1955 unveils Cash’s first-ever radio performance and recorded show.

Complete with advertisements—Cash actually worked for the sponsor, Home Equipment Company, located across the street from the studio, and reads the promotional copy—it serves as a time capsule into a truly bygone era, where the artist petitions requests and promises to learn the songs if his band doesn’t already know them. Amusingly, listeners are told to write (and not call) the studio, further proof of the technologically limited period from which the show stems. Moreover, a closing announcement hyping an upcoming country jamboree at which Cash and Elvis Presley are minor players serves as a harbinger of just how drastically the environment would soon shift.

A surfeit of intimate demos, featuring Cash and his guitar, proves equally insightful. Often shorter and sometimes in different keys than the official versions, tunes such as “Get Rhythm,” “I Walk the Line,” “Country Boy,” and “When I Think of You” display an intense focus and carved-in-stone baritone that belie Cash’s age. Also of note is a romping, guitar-distorted “Rock and Roll

Ruby,” which later became a smash for Roy Orbison. Seven full-band outtakes and a pair of previously unavailable early Columbia sessions, not the least of which is “Restless Kid,” written for the Howard Hanks film *Rio Bravo*, round out the historical roll call.

In comparison to the snake-bit snap and simple, dirt-kicking twang of the Sun material heard on the companion disc, the 25 Columbia-era selections on the second disc portray Cash opting for a more polished sound. Backing pop-vocal choruses, bigger arrangements, and thematic narratives (usually rooted in a Western or North Country aesthetic) pepper fare such as “The Frozen Logger,” “Johnny Yuma Theme,” and “Locomotive Man.” Not surprisingly, the period coincided with Cash’s move to Los Angeles and involvement in cowboy television series and western noir. A few songs—the horn-accompanied boogaloo of “Put the Sugar to Bed,” down-in-the-valley timbral range of “You Beat All I Ever Saw,” and string-laden rumble “Thunderball” among them—are more interesting as sonic novelties than memorable performances.

The B-side of “Folsom Prison Blues,” and co-written with Charlie Daniels, suffers no such fate. One of the most emotionally devastating, poignant, and plain-spoken songs Cash ever composed, “The Folk Singer” stands as the most valuable treasure unearthed on *From Memphis to Hollywood: Bootleg Vol. 2*, essential for die-hard fans and highly recommended to everyone else with a passing fancy for country music and the genre’s most definitive figure. —**Bob Gendron**



Dolorean's Introspective Folk-Rock Beauty

By Jaan Uhelszki

For the past twelve years, Dolorean leader Al James has made wistful, fractured music that borders on secret diary entries penned with the introspection of a naturalist penning a logbook. His sad, harrowing tales of disillusion, estrangement, and epic insecurity tap into the same expressive vein that inflames Will Oldham's dreamlike rambles and Jeff Tweedy's quietly awkward narratives. Set in sparse, frozen landscapes, James' lyrics are seemingly inspired by the rugged, gorgeous terrain of his hometown, Silverton Oregon, a small locale south of Portland that serves as the setting for the David Spade film *Joe Dirt*.

But there's little, if anything, about James that echoes Hollywood. He is as self-effacing and understated as he is talented, turning out hushed and haunted albums that appear to have been created in a mythic era. And save for the fact he's dubbed his band Dolorean, not after the ill-fated *Back to the Future* car or Spanish indie band but a French group called Colleen, the Northwestern bard is both no-nonsense and pragmatic.

Recently signed to Brooklyn's Partisan Records, Dolorean just released *Unfazed*, its first album in four years revealing a more unfettered and saner James. Reached on the phone in Oregon, he told *TONEAudio* exactly what brought about the emotional sea change, what he thinks of his day job, and how to buy the right wine.

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FEATURE

JJ: Dolorean hasn't released an album in almost four years. What have you been doing?

AJ: I'm working for an ad agency. It's so much more stressful. Four months ago, I didn't care at all about Ford Explorer. Now I'm making a cool, beautiful Ford Explorer movie.

Aren't you afraid you'll get used to the money, and won't be able to go back to and make injured, down-on-your-luck albums?

I worry about whether I'm going to use up all my brain time on this. But it doesn't really happen. You just replace those ideas with better ones. My brain is working overtime.

and the realization that all the cards don't always play out the way I expected that they were going to. Eventually everyone needs to experience that. But for me, as a white suburban kid, I wrote a white suburban heartbreak album. I feel like the song "If I Find Love" is about how, when I'm on tour, I dream about being home and when I'm home, I dream about being on tour. When I'm broke I want money and don't care about time, and when I'm making money I want my time. There's this dichotomy of life that I've learned you have to live with.

So Unfazed means you don't get upset when you're caught between the ying and yang of modern life.

"We play songs differently every single time. We barely rehearse. When we go into the studio, we have these rough ideas, and I just feel like we've had a lot of success working from that model. We needed to learn how to enjoy the studio and not be balls of stress."

Does writing ad copy help you write better songs?

Yeah, strangely it does.

Why did you name your band Dolorean?

There's this French woman who does ambient music. She makes really great records and calls her band Colleen. But that's not her name. Dolorean's not mine, but it looked good [when] written down. It looks balanced on the page. It seemed like it was a word that had a definition, but I didn't really know what it was.

The songs on the last album seemed as if you were writing yourself out of a bad relationship. On The Unfazed, have you written yourself into a good one?

There was an element of [having] a good relationship on the horizon. I think any time that someone goes through their first really gut-wrenching breakup, you can't help but talk or write about it. For me, it was my first real sort of ground-shaking heartbreak

Totally. To me, that's the point of the whole album. Being patient. Living moment to moment.

You are a Zen master, huh? You also said that you found newfound joy in creating music.

We play songs differently every single time. We barely rehearse. When we go into the studio, we have these rough ideas, and I just feel like we've had a lot of success working from that model. We needed to learn how to enjoy the studio and not be balls of stress.

So the newfound calm is really new. On previous albums, did you frequently rehearse and approach the studio differently?

Yes. It used to seem like a big thing every time we stepped into the studio. Like, don't screw up. It was something I put on myself rather than the other guys, but it wasn't as fun as I think it should have been. *(continued)*

So it came down to an attitude adjustment. Did you start taking Tai Chi, going to a therapist, or take up some spiritual program that made you feel more “unfazed?”

I started running. Trail running and exercise are a massive positive force in my life.

Do you write songs while running?

Not so much. But “These Slopes Gave Me Hope,” on the new album, was written while I was hiking. It was a hard hike and the song came from being lightheaded and exhausted.

“I have a thing when I’m playing; I don’t always remember to smile. I’m not the most photogenic person. But I really have a lot of fun. I love laughing, I tell good jokes, just maybe not from the stage, and not in my songs.”

This is Dolorean Mach IV. What’s changed from earlier versions?

There’s a total and complete focus on music. You look at the picture of Neil Young and the Stray Gators and say, “Who the hell are those guys? One of them is wearing neon weight-lifting pants.” When we play, all of our pride and whatever healthy ego we have just comes from the fact that we can really play well. Show me a better group of musicians in [Portland] and a better songwriter; I don’t think you can. There’s also a suppression of individual egos that makes this one bigger, better thing.

Is there like a rule you live by or something you say to yourself prior to writing?

I guess it’s a little bit of the “Keep it simple, stupid” rule. What’s the Tom Petty line? “Don’t bore us, get to the chorus.”

I’m becoming more like that. I’m trying to say what I need to as efficiently as I can. It doesn’t mean that there can’t be a very complex feeling or sentiment or story, but let’s just like tell it in the most efficient way possible.

For the longest time, you drove a delivery van and wrote many of your songs when you were on the job.

I had that job for eight years. I had a really nice boss that would constantly let me go on tour and hire me back. He was a wine importer.

I knew when you were singing about pink wine on “How Is It?” that you had to have had empirical evidence.

I’m one of the few people that like rosé. But everyone should drink rosé. Especially on the first spring day in April.

How do you feel? Like Nouveau Beaujolais?

I think that’s a good way to go. We drink a lot of Pinot up here in Oregon around the holidays. With that job, I drank so much wine, my palate is over-educated. And the bad thing is I can’t always afford what I want.

Okay, give me a rule about wine.

I would say old world over new world, always.

Aside from oenophile trivia, what’s one thing that would surprise fans to learn about you?

My sense of humor. I have a thing when I’m playing; I don’t always remember to smile.



I’m not the most photogenic person. But I really have a lot of fun. I love laughing, I tell good jokes, just maybe not from the stage, and not in my songs.

Tell me a joke.

What’s the difference between a Baptist and a Catholic? Answer: A Catholic will say hello to you at the liquor store.

Do you have any superstitions before playing?

Don’t make a set list.

Tell me one thing that you’d change about yourself.

My stage presence.

What would you do differently?

I would want to keep getting better and better at making people feel comfortable at our shows and feel welcome and connected. I’m getting better but I have a lot of room to improve. I can get overly intense. I can forget to smile. It’s like I want people to know that I love what’s going on.

That said, what’s your primary goal in Dolorean?

To describe experiences for people that they’ve had, and explain them better than they can themselves. I put words to emotions to which, maybe, they’re unable to [express]. Or maybe they can convey them, and just need someone to explain them. ●

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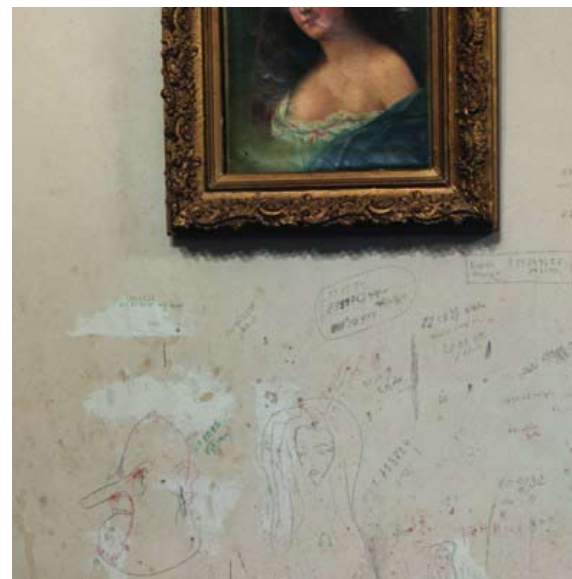
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Dolorean

Unfazed

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While it has been four years since Alex James has released a Dolorean record, one suspects the reason had more to do with the brainy musician's insistence on finding his way out of the maze of heartache he chronicled on 2007's *Can't Win* than a lack of inspiration. Rarely has resignation sounded so eloquent or as chillingly beautiful. But it's clear that James wasn't about to travel such a thorny path again.

In order to avoid the same emotional missteps that brought him to crisis, he engaged in rigorous self-examination—ruminating about who he was and what he needed in life. Then, only after he again felt whole—or, in the James universe, “unfazed”—was he ready to return to songwriting.

But while James claims to be pacific about the new phase of his life, he brings a little of past rancor along with him, opening *Unfazed* with a pair of songs that attempts to make sense of the war between the sexes while still obliquely dismembering the corpse of his past relationship. On the cowboy lament “Thin-Skinned,” the vocalist adopts a Tom Petty-like growl and dissects a couple from a Mars and Venus point of view. In what one supposes could be a scene lifted right out of the musician's own life, he proposes a solution to the constant bickering: “This old coast town is full of tavern and motels/Let's stay here for a while/I'll do my best to see your point of view/If you can do your best to see I'm not such a bad guy.”

Apparently, the sojourn fails to solve the problems, as on the following “Country Clutter” the protagonist moves out in what's one of the most elegant kiss-off songs since Alanis Morissette's “You Oughta Know.” “I have moved on, packed up my shit/If you find anything I left behind you can have it/Let it clutter up your life/The way you cluttered up mine.”

Having gotten those last dregs of bitter tears out of his system, James proceeds to reveal with great candor what he's learned in the past four years in a narrative arc that borders on a concept album. The bandleader shares in careful detail exactly how he has re-entered the social whirl, first courting a new woman in the title track to anxiously admitting in “Hard Working Dogs” that “love is frightening” to “Sweet Boy,” a modern rewrite of Peter Townshend's “Let My Love Open the Door.” And the revelatory “If I Find Love” follows a similar lyrical structure as Wilco's “I Am Trying to Break Your Heart,” each stanza a slightly different approach to chronicling what he will do if he finds love.

What also makes this album so fully realized is that James approached the recording process with a newfound freedom, giving long-time band members—keyboardist Jay Clarke, drummer Ben Nugent and bassist James Adair—license to approach the studio with an inventive, garage-rock spirit. What emerges is a more collaborative band effort than previous Dolorean albums past, the slow dance between James's austere, economical poetry and deceptively languid musical waves merging into a seamless, ascendant whole.

—**Jaan Uhelszki**

The Forgotten Oracle

By Jeff Dorgay

Oracle burst on the scene in 1979 with the Delphi turntable, and to many, set a new benchmark for analog playback. The Oracle also blazed a new trail for turntable aesthetics; its open suspended chassis and clear acrylic plinth dramatically contrasted with those of the then-voguish British tables. Linn and Rega owners were rather taken back by the new Canadian in the neighborhood. What's more, the era's audio magazines piled on the praise. After dropping \$2,000 and adding a tonearm, many listeners (including yours truly) found themselves in analog bliss. However, back then, two grand represented a ton of cash to spend on a turntable; my car wasn't worth \$2,000 in 1979.



FEATURE



A couple years later, Oracle introduced the Alexandria, which was not only half the price (\$995, including tonearm) but more conventional in appearance. The Premier tonearm included with the Oracle looks very similar to the Jelco arm of the day, and was simple to set up. It has a similar counterweight to that of the Rega RB300 but uses a nylon filament-mounted anti-skate weight and a VTA adjustment system not unlike that of the Triplanar tonearm. And the tonearm is terminated with a pair of RCA jacks on the rear of the turntable base, so you could use your

choice of interconnects. Remember, this was long before tonearm cables boasted four-figure pricetags.

Whereas the Delphi had a more sophisticated AC motor, the Alexandria uses a simpler mechanism. It does have one major advantage over its more expensive sibling, though. Speed adjustment is located on the front of the Alexandria and can be adjusted with your finger rather than via the tiny, ten-turn potentiometer adjustment found on the Delphi's motor pod. Both tables share the sorbothane "Groove Isolator" semi-squishy turntable mat, yet the Alex-

andria's platter isn't as massive as that belonging to the Delphi. The former features a two-piece, subplatter/platter arrangement that looked very similar to the Linn LP-12.

A suspended subchassis, just like the one in the Delphi, and equipped with three spring-loaded towers, is located underneath the conventional plinth. Upon further inspection, the spring arrangement looks just like that of the Delphi. However, Oracle's tech department reveals that the Delphi springs are unique to that model and will not work in the Alexandria.

A Long Run

Oracle produced four different variations on the Alexandria, making incremental improvements on each one, until the line culminated with the MK IV. These days on the used market, most Alexandrias tend to be earlier MK 1 and MK 2 versions since they were produced for the longest period of time.

Clean examples of the MK 1 and MK 2 versions often range between \$600 and \$800. But be aware that the metal subchassis can often be cracked or damaged, and is usually

a costly repair. Most tables also no longer have a functioning auto lift. Oracle has indicated that it can bring the older tables back to life, but shipping to Canada isn't cheap. Plan on spending another \$300 to \$700 to get a substandard Alexandria back in shape. The one pictured here is an MK 1 and is actually number 53 produced!

Oracle Director of Operations Jacques Riendeau informed me that there should be 36 volts at the tip of the DC adaptor and that the potentiometer was somewhat of a weak link in the turntable. *(continued)*



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You'll know if the potentiometer needs attention if the table will not hold stable speed. Chances are 50/50 that you will be able to spray contact cleaner inside and get it back in operation, but if not, send it to Oracle. If possible, find an Alexandria that comes with its original box.

The Sound

When properly set up, the Alexandria is still a formidable turntable. In keeping with the vintage ethos of this column, I mounted a blue NOS Ortofon MC20 moving coil cartridge and set it to track at the factory specification of 1.8 grams. I first played Little Feat's *Waiting For Columbus*, the double album live set from Mobile Fidelity. To take listening a step further, I chose the pressing I bought in 1980 instead of the current remaster.

There's no mistaking this table for anything else. Having used an Oracle turntable sporadically since 1980 (Delphi, Delphi MK 2, Alexandria MK 1, and currently, a Delphi MK V) I'm familiar with the Oracle sound that tends to be fast and dynamic, with excellent dynamic contrast. The table's suspension does a great job at isolating the platter from the environment and offering a quick, punchy low end.

When comparing the sound of my Delphi V with the new Ortofon MC20 Super, I was impressed with how the Alexandria is capable of performing; it still does a great job with the musical fundamentals and provides a very liquid, analog experience. Where a similarly vintage Linn LP12 seems slow and pondersome by comparison, the Alexandria is lively, and doesn't sacrifice the LP-12's midrange magic. Arguments continue about which model is superior, but I could live happily ever after with the Alexandria.

Cleanliness Is Key

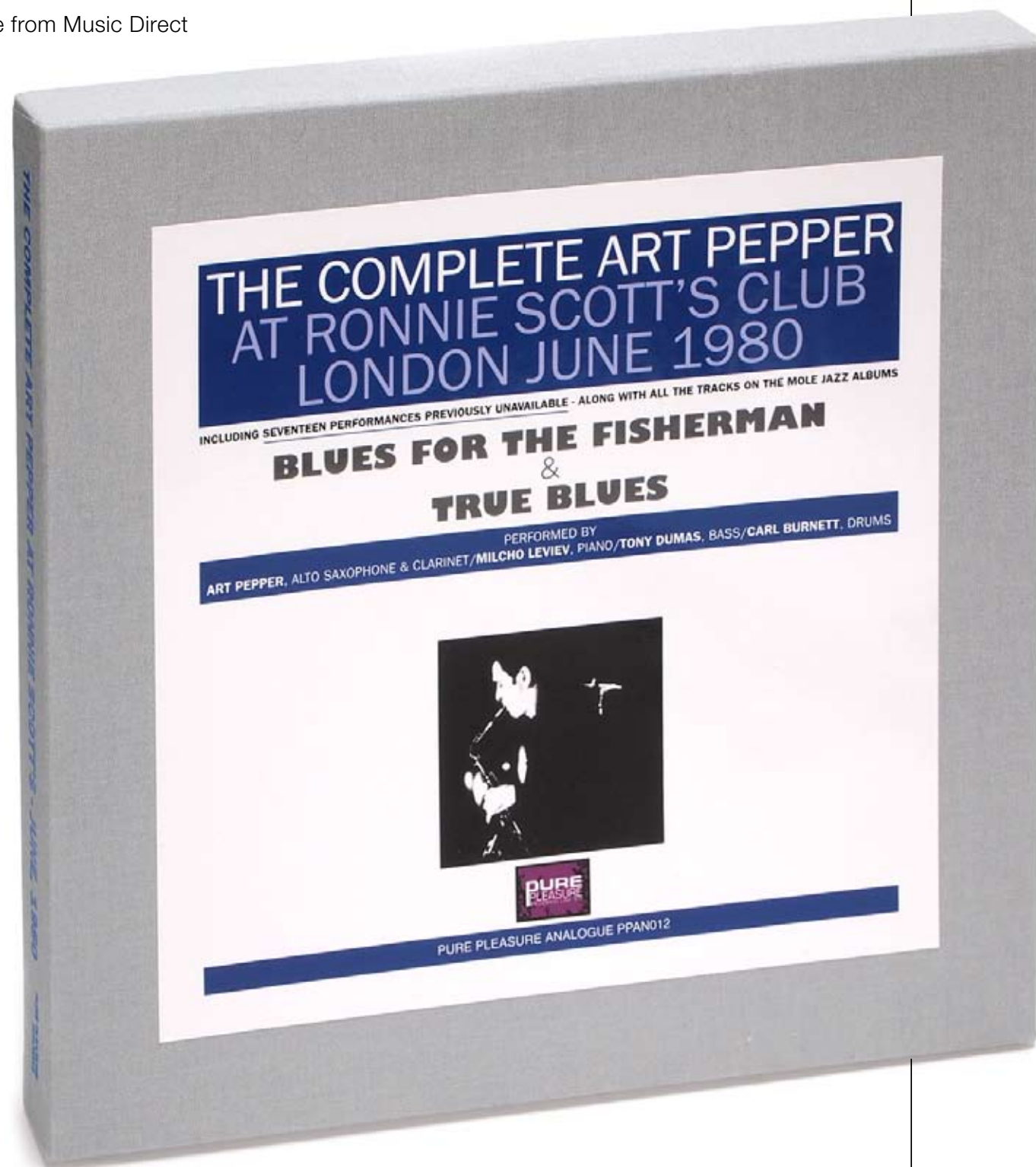
If you can find a well-preserved example of the Alexandria, it's tough to beat for the money, even if the auto lift does not work properly. If you choose to abandon the standard factory arm, there are boards available for SME arms as well. A used 309 or perhaps even a 3009 could be an excellent choice for this table with the right cartridge. Just be sure to adjust the suspension accordingly.

It's great to see Oracle getting ready to produce the Alexandria again, and the company is talking about a price of about \$3,995. Yes, it's a far cry from the original cost, but still about half that of a current Delphi VI. And given the new model's pricing, a full restoration on a vintage Alexandria might prove to be a bargain, indeed. ●

Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay

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Art Pepper

The Complete Art Pepper At Ronnie Scott's Club:

London June 1980

Pure Pleasure Records, 7LP Box Set

Pure Pleasure always does a great job of bringing obscure treasures to light. In the case of rescuing Art Pepper's legendary shows at Ronnie Scott's in 1980, the label has struck pure gold. Originally recorded for the long-defunct Mole Records, these records became nearly impossible to find and, if you did manage to locate them, incredibly expensive. This remastered 7LP set includes both Mole releases as well as 17 previously unreleased tracks, courtesy of Pepper's wife having uncovered the lost material.

The performances are simply fantastic. Pepper's playing is awash in nuance, and the Milcho Leviev Quartet is in constant sync with the saxophone master. Moreover, the audience is so quiet that you almost forget the music is played before a crowd. And, there's only a slight duplication of material, with "Red Car" and "Ophelia" played at both the June 27 and 28 shows. However, the different renditions, performed on back-to-back days, reveal Pepper's genius. His audience banter, also preserved on the albums, adds to the fun and realism.

As for the sound? Studio-like, with the venue's dimensions perfectly recreated. All 14 LP sides are immaculately clean; not a click or a pop anywhere, and BIG dynamics throughout. Better still, the liner notes claim that the records were made "using multi-microphones in a straight stereo mix with no noise reduction, limiting, compression or EQ."

The set also includes a booklet with photos, program notes, and commentary—great for any aficionado. Whether you are a completist that owns practically everything, or a relative newcomer to jazz or analog, this box set should be in your collection.



Iron and Wine

Kiss Each Other Clean
Warner Bros., 180g LP and CD

If you didn't know better, you might think Brian Eno had a hand in this record instead of resident Iron and Wine producer Brian Deck. It's a very cool departure, but Beam doesn't go so far out of his orbit to completely abandon the sound that originally put him on the mainstream radar a few years ago. A cursory listen to "Half Moon" anchors you to the band's past.

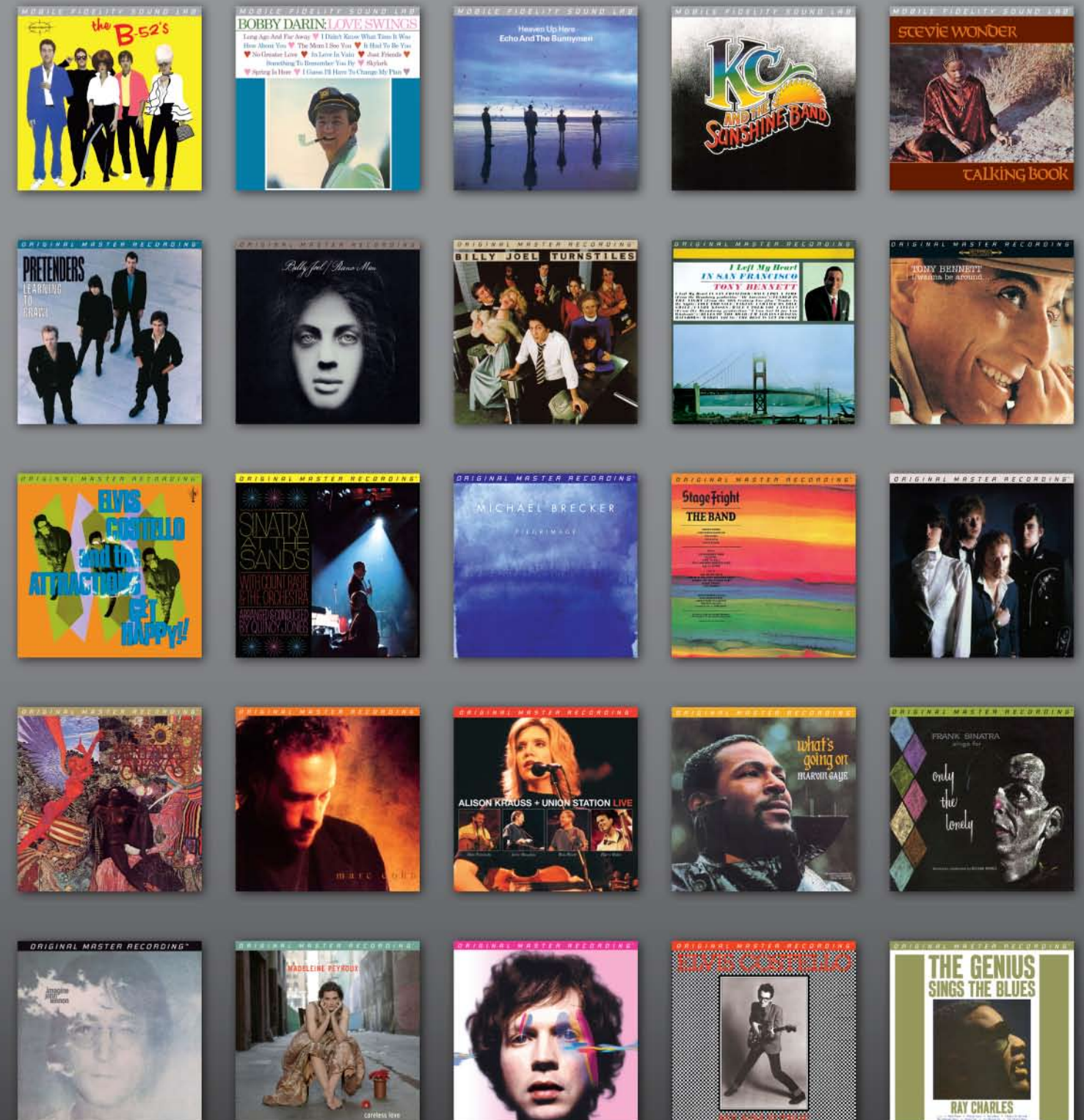
And the recording quality is outstanding. Calbi has taken care not to push up the levels and squeeze the life out of the intimate recording. From the start, on the opening "Walking Far From Home," the bass rattles the floor while the entire record has a very wide, lush soundstage reminiscent of the best studio creations of the 70s.

As a bonus, a CD is included for the iPod and music server generation. Once again, it's nice to see the major labels nail it. And with vinyl sales up again in 2010, it would be great to see the \$20 LP-and-CD combination become the norm. Sign me up.

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INXS

Kick
MoFi Silver Label, 140g LP

It's somewhat ironic that MoFi kicked off its new Silver Label with a mainstream pop title, but a sense of humor is always welcome in this wacky business. According to Josh Bizar, head of marketing for Music Direct, owner of the MoFi label, "While we can't always put our hands on the original master tape for the Silver Series, as we do with our standard pressings, we get as close as we can, and on some of these records, we've actually managed to get the original master. The big difference is that these records are mastered and cut in real time on 140g vinyl instead of 180g vinyl. The quality is still to the high level you've come to expect from MoFi."

When *Kick* was released in 1987, the LP was on its way out the door, and though many records were still recorded and mastered on analog tape, most of the vinyl getting pressed was mediocre at best. Originally produced by Chris Thomas (Pretenders, Elvis Costello) and mixed by Bob Clearmountain (Van Halen, Doobie Brothers), *Kick* proved no exception; revisiting my original pressing revealed CD-like sound, with healthy doses of compression and treble boost. MoFi's version still has a touch of HF boost, but it's a huge improvement over the analog original and miles ahead of the CD. The radio and MTV classic "Need You Tonight" doesn't even feel like the same tune. Replete with added spaciousness, you can hear lead singer Michael Hutchinson's vocal



stylings much easier and, like the rest of the album, there is now a welcome amount of LF energy. The bass is consistently heavier throughout, giving this record a much fuller sound, perhaps the most so on "Mystified" and "New Sensation."

Should you find yourself in a totally 80s mood, *Kick* is fun to revisit as it's chock full of familiar hits and finds INXS at the top of its game. It's amazing at how much more music there's on this record that many of us never heard the first time around. And after spinning both sides, it's clear that MoFi has kept its promise. The surfaces are just as quiet as any of the label's recent half-speed-mastered LPs, and while the latter still possess extra degrees of ultimate smoothness, the results are excellent and worthy of your hard-earned cash. And for any collectors concerned about cover quality, the printing is first-rate, too.



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The B-52's

The B-52's
MoFi Silver Label, 140g LP

Much as I love the B-52's, I forgot just how *awful* this record sounded. And really, there's excuse for the shortcomings. In 1979, the CD was still years away, but you'd never guess by giving this new wave classic a cursory listen. Compression is king; cymbals are crunchy and the soundstage is flat and two-dimensional. To make matters worse, the group's signature "Rock Lobster" tune is plagued with inner-groove distortion. Arrgh.

MoFi's Silver Label version instantly trounces the standard issue pressing. During the opening "Planet Claire," there's a great bongo track that is all but lost in the mix on the original. The remaster gives the aforementioned instruments plenty of room to breathe along with the vocal tracks. This pressing has oodles of bass energy; by comparison, the original sounds like a system with the subwoofer off and seems to roll off around 80hz with no weight. (Like all of the early Van Halen albums.)

And "Rock Lobster" now sounds incredible. Vocalists Fred Schneider and Cindy Wilson now have a much more distinct sound, especially when experienced after hearing the original pressing, on which they just blend in to be one, fat vocal track. And all traces of inner-groove distortion are banished on both sides of the LP, a testament to the care put into this pressing.

MoFi's Silver Label is just getting started; the label has many interesting titles in the queue. Who needs another copy of *Kind of Blue* anyway?

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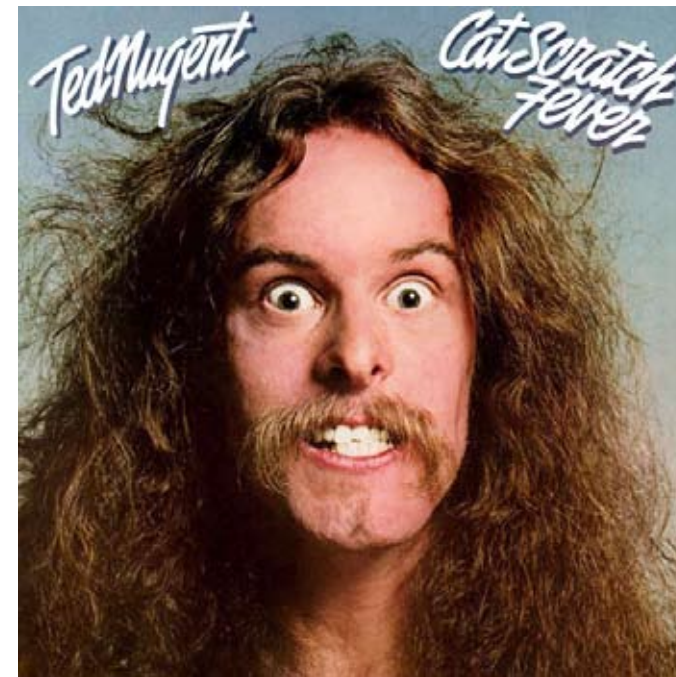


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Ted Nugent

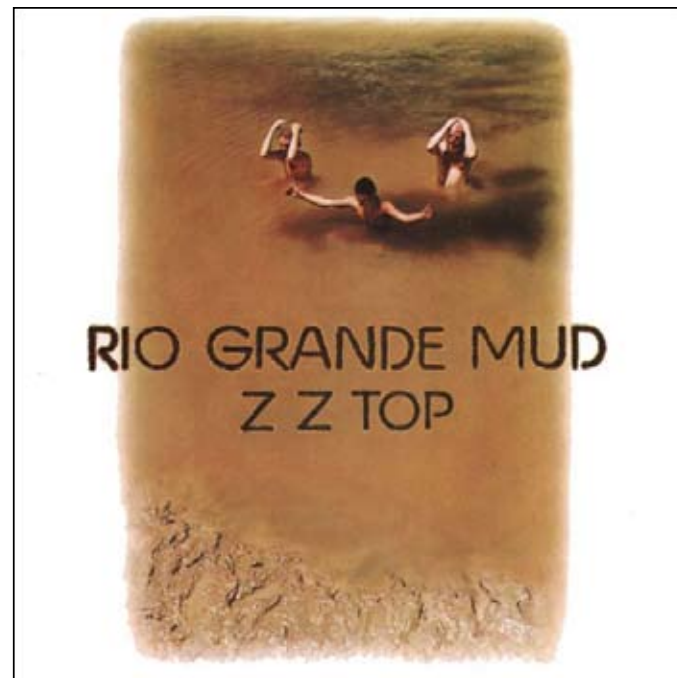
Cat Scratch Fever
Friday Music, 180g LP

Bolstered with confidence from my recent experience with Friday Music's remaster of Robin Trower's *Bridge of Sighs*, I decided to give the label's offerings another spin, especially considering it just pulled another one of my 70s favorites out of the vault: Ted Nugent's *Cat Scratch Fever*, the record that in 1977 made the Nuge an ubiquitous presence on rock radio.

A quick switch between the Friday version and my early stamper original reveals the former being quieter and smoother—definitely a job well done by Kevin Gray this time. While most of us have heard the title track more than enough, *Cat Scratch Fever* boasts a handful of great tunes that did not get much airplay before 10 p.m. Thanks to the extra air on “Death By Misadventure,” you’ll now hear more drumming finesse as well as a few extra layers of background vocals where, previously, there was only one fat background vocal track. And “Live it Up” has way more cowbell than on the original. (I’m not kidding.)

Combine these improvements with dead-quiet surfaces and zero inner-groove distortion, and the results maximize the heaviness of this rock classic; Friday's edition is a major success. Let's hope Gray and Co. soon get their hands on *Free For All* and *Ted Nugent*. That said, the packaging is sub par. The cover is dreadfully reproduced, very yellow with so much contrast it looks like the color separations were made from a color copy made at Kinko's. But I'm guessing you aren't buying a remastered copy of *Cat Scratch Fever* for the album art.

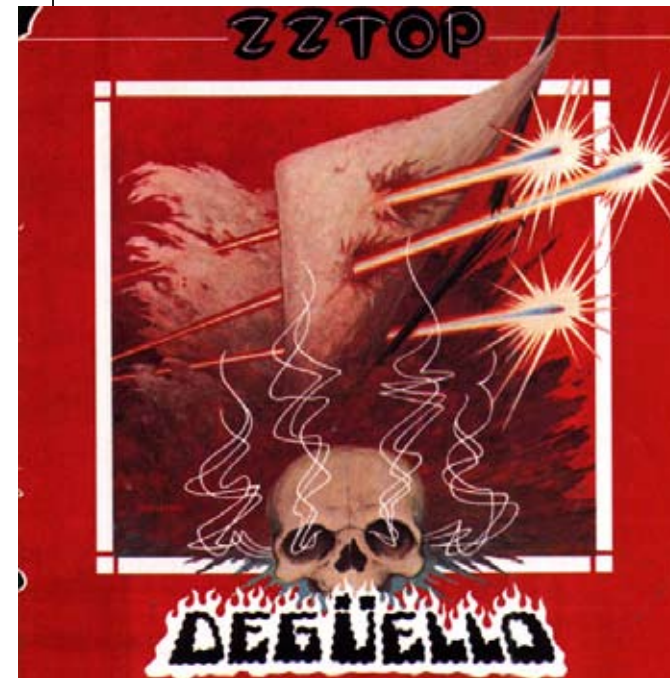
ZZ Top



Rio Grande Mud
Rhino, 180g LP

Back before the two front men in ZZ Top had massive beards and kicked their space shuttle into autopilot, the Texas trio really rocked. Need evidence? The band's second album, *Rio Grande Mud*, is a blues-rock powerhouse. Bassist Dusty Hill's rendition of "Francine" sounds like Ted Nugent turned up to 12, and guitarist Billy Gibbons demonstrates serious grit.

Unfortunately, this record is flat. While the sticker on the cover talks about all the care that went into the pressing, the highs are muffled and shallow. It sounds like the LP was transferred from a cassette tape, not a master tape. If the label read "Friday Music," I wouldn't be so surprised, but given that Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman did the work and claims an excellent track record, I'm reserving judgment until another copy is procured.



Deguello
Rhino, 180g LP

Everything you love about ZZ Top is here in spades: big blazing guitar riffs, grumbling bass lines, and powerful albeit sparse drumming that has made this band famous. How can you not love a record that features "Cheap Sunglasses" and "I'm Bad I'm Nationwide" as well as deep cuts such as "Hi Fi Mama" and "A Fool For Your Stockings?" While some might dismiss the fare as party music, the playing on *Deguello* is top-notch, replete with guitar sounds that could easily be mistaken as those of Stevie Ray Vaughan. When these guys weren't clowning around, they were damn good musicians.

Dusting off the original pressing revealed an overall flatness and fairly high level of surface noise. The new Rhino version offers mega dynamics, with Gibbons' guitar cutting through the grunge and now front and center. Frank Beard's drumming is also much cleaner, with the cymbals enjoying huge helpings of decay and smoothness.

My only complaint? Rhino didn't pay the same level of attention to the album's packaging as it did with *Rio Grande Mud*. The cover came apart in my hands as I removed it from the shrinkwrap. Tough to swallow for collectors that really obsess over replication, and for \$25, we deserve better. ●

was a little scared to lower the tonearm on Rhino's pressing of this 1979 set after my dreadful experience with *Rio Grande Mud*, but this one brought my faith back. (This leads me to believe that my copy of *Rio Grande Mud* is defective. I've had much better than average luck with audiophile pressings over the years, so perhaps my number was up.)



Silverline Audio Minuet

Supreme Speakers: Mini-Monitors, Max Performance

By Lawrence Devoe

Mini-monitor speakers have long been audio's little darlings—easy to place, reasonably priced, aesthetically pleasing. As evidenced by an unofficial website (www.ls35a.com), the Rogers LS3/5a BBC monitors still inspire cult reverence. Not that longstanding judgments against small speakers have gone away. Critics maintain that they get lost in larger listening rooms, suffer from limited bass extension, and don't generate enough air or image. Alan Yun apparently remains oblivious to such noise. His company, Silverline Audio, a breeder of high-performance speakers, has given birth to the “runt” of the litter, the Minuet Supreme.

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FEATURE



While unpacking these little beauties, I was impressed with the handsome rosewood vinyl veneer, high-quality speaker terminals.

The Minuets Move In

Given the hernia-inducing weight of some high-end equipment, it was a welcome relief to receive a 15-pound carton that a mere mortal can easily hoist. While unpacking these little beauties, I was impressed with the handsome rosewood vinyl veneer, high-quality speaker terminals, and compact size (9" x 5.5" x 7.25"). On the surface, nothing seems unusual about the Minuets' design. These are 2-way rear-ported bass reflex transducers with nominal 8-ohm impedance and claimed frequency response of 60–28,000 Hz. A 1" silk dome tweeter and 3.25" paper-pulp cone mid/woofer, protected by a removable black grille, cross over at 3500 Hz. The cabinets seem well braced, and yield a dull "donk" when rapped.

Setting up the Minuets was a piece of cake. They settled solidly, aided by Blu-Tack on my spiked 28" Target speaker stands, loaded with 60 pounds of lead shot. The Minuets can be bi-wired, which is how I hooked them up for this review. After a few days of serious break-in, the Minuets wound up 5 feet from the front wall, 6 feet from each side wall, and 10 feet from the comfy couch in my 15' x 21' x 8' listening room. They were placed 8 feet apart, and angled about 30 degrees toward the listening position. I did most of my listening with the grilles removed. However, if you have curious children or pets, leave the grilles on; the small sonic differences are not worth risking any damage to the drivers. And sure, my front end electronics—Pass XP-20 preamp and XA-100.5 monoblocks—and associated interconnects, power cords, and speaker cables (Nordost Odin) were overkill. But I had to hear what the Minuets would do with my best stuff.

Minuets Sing and Dance

When first hearing a speaker, I want know how it reproduces small ensembles and solo instruments. Since small groups and soloists can actually fit into many listening rooms, playing such music remains my favorite assessment of the speaker's ability to recreate "reality." In handling Duke's "In a Sentimental Mood" from Mark Levinson's *Live Recordings at Red Rose Music*, the Minuets had Chico Freeman's sax and George Cables' piano sounding just as I imagined they would in an intimate lounge. *(continued)*



After living with the Minuets, I have good reason to rethink my opinion on mini-monitors. These little guys sound much larger than they have a right to sound.

Another test came courtesy of James Boyk playing Prokofiev's challenging Sixth Piano Sonata off *20th Century Masters*, a track that boasts great dynamic range and percussive effects. No sweat for the Minuets; the piano was life-sized and appropriately brilliant.

Good recordings of vocal groups help evaluate a speaker's capacity to pick out individual players. I cranked up Ann Savoy and Her Sleepness Knights belting out "If Dreams Come True," where Savoy sings upfront and is backed by violin, guitar, piano and upright bass. The Minuets had no trouble keeping tabs on each instrument, particularly the dancing bass. I continued with a big-band Latin number, the self-titled cut from Pacquito d'Rivera's *Tropicana Nights* on Chesky Records, a 96kHz/24-bit download brimming with in-your-face dynamics and pace. The Minuets did the tricky salsa footwork without missing a step.

If I get lucky, a new component always leads to at least one magic moment. Aptly, the Minuets came through during the holiday season, when conveying the spaciousness of John Rutter's "Nativity Carol" as performed by the San Francisco Choral Artists on *Star of Wonder*. The song features the natural warmth of a mixed chorus pitted against a hearty pipe organ in a large hall; Silverline Audio's itty-bitsy speakers never got lost reproducing the fantastic details.

Similarly demanding, Wagner's "Das Rheingold" opens with a sustained subterranean organ pedal and low strings. Despite its age, Georg Solti's 1958 Decca recording remains unsurpassed in its evocation of the primordial orchestral chords. I played the cut several times just to be sure that I wasn't becoming delusional about the extended clean bass that the mighty mites emitted. Nope. A personal reference for 30 years, Sheila Jordan's *Sheila* LP sounded as fresh and lifelike as ever, with Jordan's voice and the accompanying upright bass right there in my room.

Maybe Size Doesn't Matter

Totem Acoustic's original Model 1s were the last mini-monitors to hold sway in my system. That was about 20 years ago. While I've always had a soft spot for the 1s, they never got me all the way up the stairway to audio heaven. The Totems handle upper and midrange quite well, but shortchange the bass extension and image size.

After living with the Minuets, I have good reason to rethink my opinion on mini-monitors. These little guys sound much larger than they have a right to sound. Voice reproduction, an important personal criterion for assessing a speaker, was warm and natural. High frequencies were extended in a good way, and not edgy or analytic, a compliment to Silverline Audio's choice of tweeter

and crossover implementation. The Minuets' ample bass and astonishing height and depth of image came as huge surprises.

Of course, there are a few practical considerations that should be taken under advisement. The speakers can produce pretty big sound, but their sensitivity (88db) is lower than that of many larger speakers. Silverline recommends amplifiers ranging in power from 10–300 watts RMS. During the review, I substituted Pass amps with outputs of 30 to 150 watts per channel. Pushed to near-realistic levels, the Minuets sang best for their supper when fed by amps capable of at least 100 watts per side. Before purchase, try auditioning the speakers with your own amplifier to be sure it is juicy enough to properly drive them. And since the Minuets are light in weight, they require solid stands to provide critical isolation and stability.

The Minuets are not labeled "Supreme" for nothing. These proverbial little Davids weren't embarrassed by anything I threw at them. No, you won't get the huge soundstage made possible by big panels. But you will get fabulous sound in the critical octaves and a satisfying sense of space. For those interested in home theater applications, Silverline Audio makes a compatible center channel. Just add another pair of Minuets, season with a compact subwoofer, and sit back and enjoy. What a bargain. ●

Jazz & Blues

By Jim Macnie



**Weasel Walter,
Mary Halvorson, Peter Evans**

Electric Fruit

Thirsty Ear CD

Free improvisation can use a laugh now and again. Last time drummer Weasel Walter and guitarist Mary Halvorson recorded together, they called their duet disc *Opulence* and titled their squalls in a direction that celebrated the good life. “Faberge Eggs Filled With Caviar” and “A Diamond Encrusted Frisbee” were typical tracks, but by the time “Bald Eagle Tartar Washed Down With a Cup of Melted Gold” rolled around, the silliness at hand was revealed. Comprised of choppy string storms, chattering percussion tsunamis, and disorienting dissonance, the music wasn’t built for kings and queens. It did provide a nice jab in the eye for the occasional haughtiness of “art,” however.

One of the attractions of the pair’s follow-up (this time with trumpeter Peter Evans on board) is the unpretentious way it presents itself. Yes, the abstractions concocted on *Electric Fruit* have a rich atmosphere. Halvorson’s strings can be wonderfully gooey, Evans’ horn sprays can fill up plenty of space, and the Wease’s addled thumpery makes for a giddy environment. But there’s a disarming it-is-what-it-is tone to the music, and it attracts listeners to the sharp turns of the trio’s interplay. Whether whispering to each other or wailing together, these three walk the edge of a cliff so we can sit on the edge of our seats.

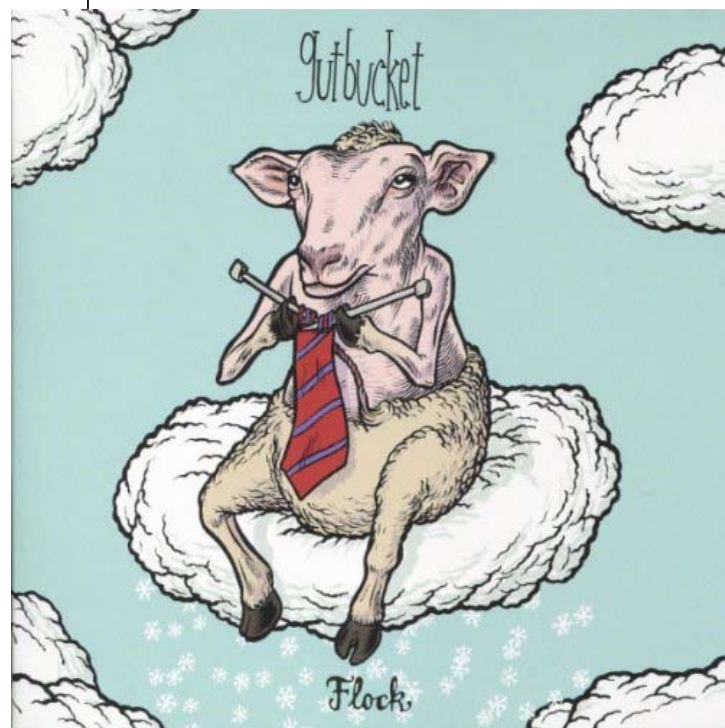
The landscape is always in flux. The drummer has a yen for death metal, so aggression is part of the pallet. The trumpeter is expert at post-bop filigree, so fanfare is in the mix as well.

Halvorson, whose comparatively straight *Saturn Sings* was applauded by myriad jazz critics last year, roams her instrument’s neck, generating a parade of textures; psychedelic fuzz might be followed by the gentlest of plinks. “The Stench of Cyber-Durian” puts all of the above to use, and like “Scuppernong Malfunction,” it serves as a reminder that, in this progressive program, all the action takes place in the synapses. Let’s hear it for kinetics.

No one turns to prog or thrash in search of grace. When you enter such waters, sharp time signatures and fractured melodies look you dead in the eye, and those who find themselves splashing around without a clue are going to be very tired quite soon. From the thrust of Emerson, Lake & Palmer's *Tarkus* to the storm of Prong's "Who's Fist Is This, Anyway," the experience can often be wearying.

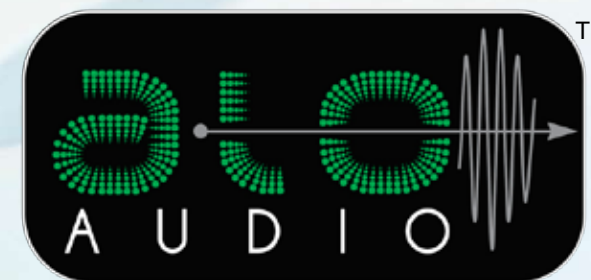
Gutbucket works the prog-jazz side of the tracks, and on its pointedly aggressive fifth album, a blend of intricacy and fierceness carries the day. The New York improvisational quartet puts Ken Thomson's reeds up front with Ty Citerman's guitar, their one-two punch offering a wildly clever blend of sounds that crafts a tune's personality. The choppy nature of the pieces, combined with the precision of the group's interplay, makes for a dizzying program. From the math-rock balderdash of "4 9 8" to the rat-a-tat exclamations of "Said The Trapeze to Gravity (Why Are You So Old)," Gutbucket may have mastered the art of overwhelming listeners.

There are dreamy moments on *Flock*, but even they have a vicious side. The droning lines of "Dog Help Us" offer a respite from the onslaught of jagged rhythms that begin the disc, yet an ominous tone persists. "Tryst 'n Shout" is more genial; a sideways groove is established, some Reichian repetition is nurtured, and keen propulsion is its own reward. Ultimately, these songs are well-positioned respites from the four-alarm blend of Crimson & Curlew at which this outfit has become quite expert.



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It takes a jazz improviser time to develop a personal sound on an instrument, so it's rather remarkable that Noah Preminger has made such quick advances in the singularity department. The 24-year-old tenor saxophonist is ubiquitous on the New York scene these days, and the plush lines that he pushes into action on his sophomore disc are filled with the kind of inviting tone that would seem to come from an old soul; 72-yr-old Charles Lloyd's current string of ECM titles offer something similar.

Utterly aerated, the initial horn sounds on *Before The Rain* arise as little puffs of smoke on the Rodgers & Hart nugget "Where Or When." As they glide by, they become more enticing. Which is to say: Preminger has quite a way with mood. To some degree, it stems from having the guts to leave plenty of negative space in a performance. That can be frightening for any horn player, as the particulars of all the foreground action become so crucial. But from pianist Frank Kimbrough's "November" to the leader's own "Jamie," a sense of daring enhances the bittersweet vibe floating through the program.

The stately attack stays in place even when things get a bit feisty. The quartet's romp through Ornette Coleman's "Toy Dance" bubbles over with playfulness,



Noah Preminger
Before The Rain
Palmetto CD

but Preminger keeps the squalls on the melodic side. Bassist John Hébert and drummer Matt Wilson know all about such decisions, so the turbulence has a keen balance. Something similar happens in the loopy contours of "Quickening," the best homage to Keith Jarrett's American Quartet I've ever heard. As Preminger flits around, the calm of his approach blends with Kimbrough's gnarled theme just enough to become one of the disc's most beguiling pieces. Ditto for the relaxed romance of "Until the Real Thing Comes Along," which feels like a confession of sorts. The real thing has arrived. ●

MUSIC

Club Mix

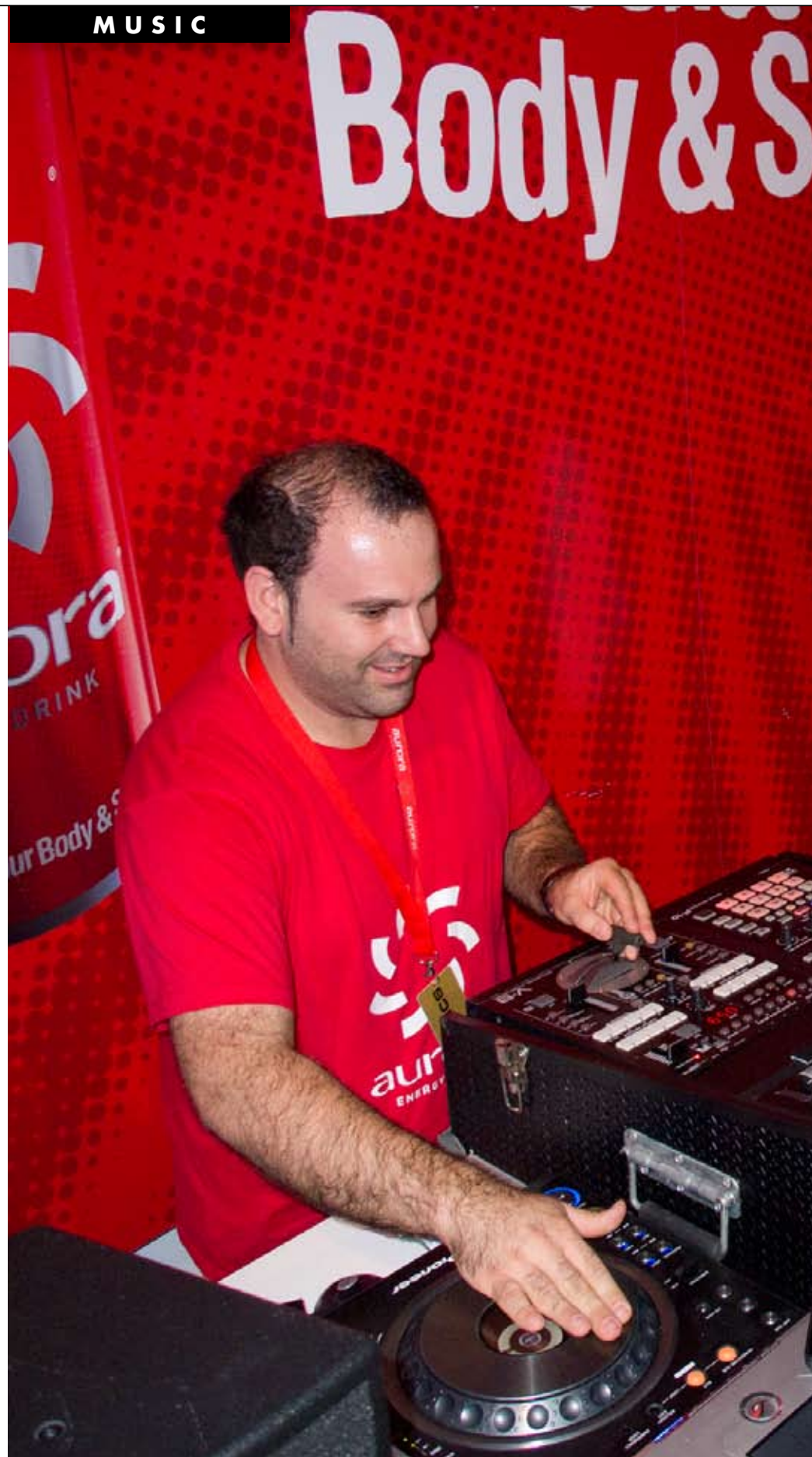
By Scott Tetzlaff

The MICS Show in Monaco

November 2010

If you ever got the chance to return from another planet, how would you answer the question, “How was it?” One has a similar dilemma when coming back from Monaco; it really is an alternate reality. A world of its own with a level of luxury presented on its own terms, Monaco is home to a legion of high-profile occupants and visitors. The harbor is lined with mega yachts and the streets claim more Bentleys per square inch than just about anywhere else. At the same time, the residents are relaxed and warm.

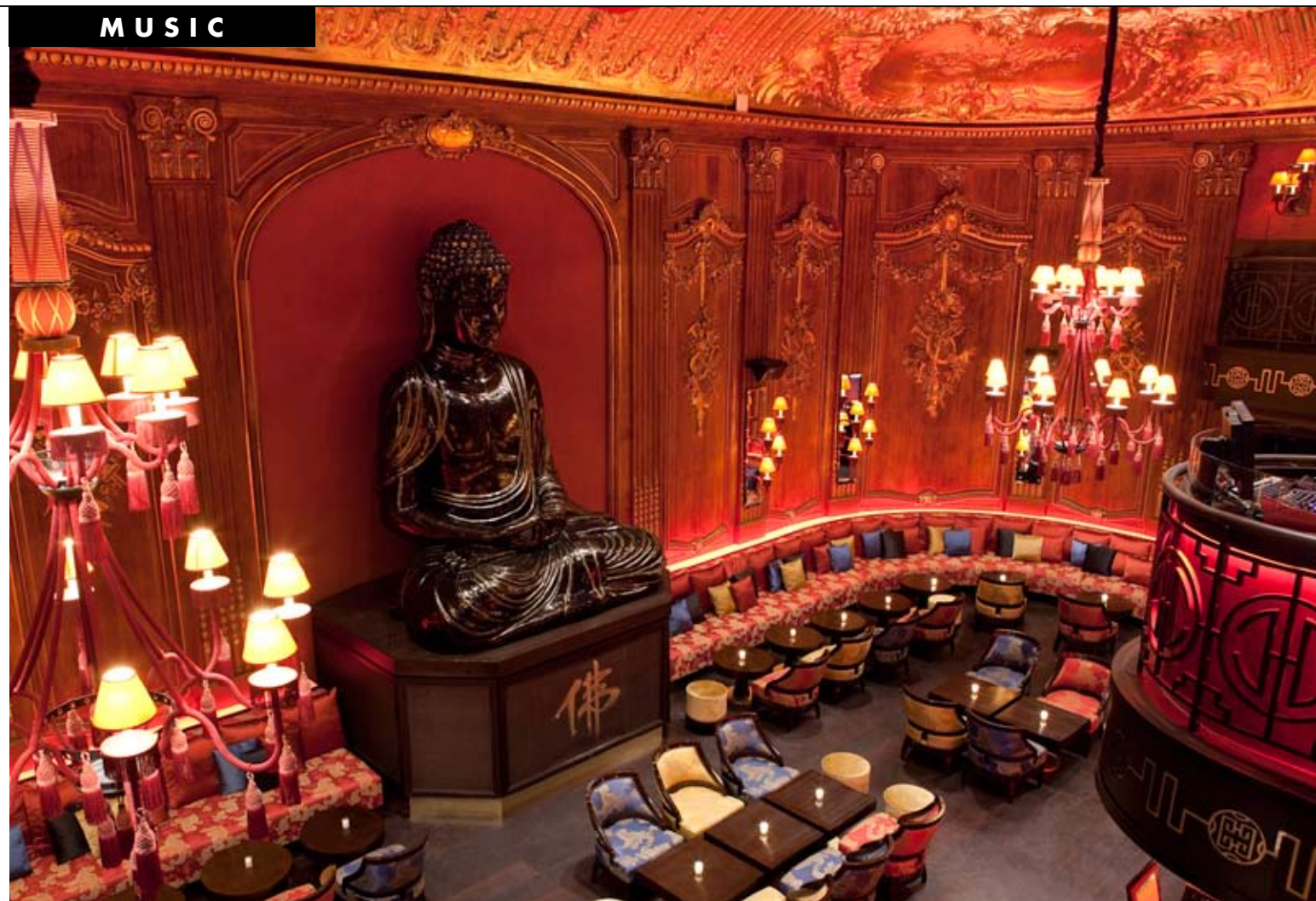




The first-ever Monaco International Clubbing Show took place in November at the sleek Grimaldi Center. Equal parts trade show, music event, and fashion show, it spread across the glamorous principality and played to a very festive atmosphere. By day, more than 100 brands related to the nightclub industry represented on the trade-show floor: beverages, lighting, sound, software, and other tech products mixed with some of the biggest names in clubbing. The DJ radio station 'FG' engaged in a live broadcast while interviewing performers and mingling with others on the floor. A "flair bartending contest" and Monster Energy Girls added to the thrill.

In an adjacent hall, a well-attended series of fashion shows courtesy of the Monte Carlo Fashion Forum kept the buzz going into each evening, with groups of models showing off a wide range of evening/club wear. Dubbed "The Cloud," the upper floor was turned into a stylish lounge for Moët and Chandon and came complete with diffused white lighting, DJs, and a wide range of beverages. An impromptu art gallery paid homage to the DJ world by featuring everything from photography to sculpture and a few low-rider motorcycles. *(continued)*





Not to be forgotten, the newly opened Buddah Bar offered a plush dining experience along with the excellent musical taste that fans of the Buddah Bar CD series expect. Draped in crimson velvet, with a gigantic Buddah front and center in the main dining room, the room found a DJ spinning from an exalted position directly above the bar.

Each night offered a series of DJ performances at various venues. The lower level of the Grimaldi Center was converted (very convincingly) into the MICS Club. I caught Joachim Garraud's performance and became transported into a high-decibel world of samples and beats amidst a sea of beautiful women, the most spectacular of which danced just beyond the edge of the stage where Garraud moved between turntables shrouded in a dense cloud of fog.

The party was not confined to the show grounds, as select locations opened their doors to host additional DJs. Such festivities carried on until dawn. Down near the harbor, the stylish Black Legend Club and Brasserie De Monaco hosted their own fetes. Jimmy'Z, the famed jetset millionaire playground, put everything over the collection of exotic cars parked outside.

As I returned to my hotel traveling on the main boulevard that doubles as the main straight to the Monaco Grand Prix, at which F1 cars dance to their own music at 170 mph, I couldn't imagine a better setting for a club-music show. Mark your calendars for next year. If you'd like watch a video recap, visit www.mics.mc. ●



DJs at MICS

Boys Noize

German-born DJ and producer Boys Noize (aka Alexander Ridha) has an impressive list of credentials, having worked with the likes of the Black Eyed Peas, Feist, Tiga, and 50 Cent. His sound is in the neighborhood of Chemical Brothers, Daft Punk, and Crystal Method. For a quick taste, listen to his debut *Oi Oi Oi*. His new EP is *Trooper*.

Bob Sinclar

A hall-of-fame caliber DJ, Sinclar entered the club scene in the 80s and began spinning at since the age of 14. Consequently, he's got an outrageous number of singles and collaborations. His style changes, but these days he's in a reggae mode. *Born in '69* offers a broad look at this veteran's methods.

Avicii

Sweden's Tim Berg burst onto the scene in 2008 with "Bromance," a chart-topper in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Avicii's newest single is "My Feelings for You," with Sebastian Drums.

Dennis Ferrer

The New York-based DJ and producer specializes in the deep, sexy, soulful sound. Check out his excellent compilation disc *House Masters: Dennis Ferrer 2.0* and his latest EP, *The Red Room*.

Joachim Garraud

The French remix artist, producer, DJ, and energy ball (he's not one to stand quietly behind the decks) has worked with an impressive array of talent: David Guetta, Deep Dish, David Bowie, Moby, and Jean Michael Jarre to name a few. His latest disc is *Invasion* but he's also credited on Guetta's recent *One Love*. Those craving his latest cuts should tune into his weekly podcast at www.joachimgarraud.com/.



DJs at MICS

Chuckie

Clyde Sergio Narain is of Surinamese descent and provides the classic Euro-dance club sound. *Dirty Dutch Digital (Vol 1)* and his EP with LMFAO, *Let the Bass Kick in Miami Girl*, will get you up to speed with the Dutchman in a hurry.

Dimitri Vegas & Like Mike

Now based out of Belgium, these Greek brothers have a style that's often referred to as smooth and soaring. A quick listen of their latest EP *Tomorrow (Give Into the Night)* immediately drives the aforementioned mood home. For a larger cross section, try *Essential Club Classics: Vol. 1*.

Toscadisco

Roman Boer grew up near Cologne, Germany. Adopting a name that's Spanish for "turntable," he's best known for his remix of Slam's *Lifetimes* and collaborations with numerous other DJs. His *Solo* CD is slightly more personal, with a much more environmental feel.

Feadz

French-born producer, DJ, and songwriter Fabien Planta combines Latin fusion with generous amounts of hip-hop flash. He recently worked on Mr. Oizo's *Rubber* and Uffie's recent *Sex Dreams and Denim Jeans*. Feadz's new *The T.U.F.F.* hit the shelves in late November, just after MICS.

Yolanda be cool

The Australian band comprised of Sylvester Martinez and Johnson Peterson is named after a quote from *Pulp Fiction*. In a recent interview, the collective deemed its style "eclectic," an understatement at best. These guys pull influences from more than their fair share of obscure places. The duo's latest single "We No Speak Americano" is an remix of an old 1950s Neapolitan-language hit. And it's just the beginning.

Truth and Soul

Zu Soul Superfly

By Steve Guttenberg

High-end companies like to claim that they create speakers that don't sound like other audiophile speakers. Usually, such assertions are just talk.

But Utah-based Zu Audio breaks almost every rule of speaker design. What's more, its American-manufactured designs kick ass, and play nice and loud without raising a sweat. And since all Zu models feature a 10.3" full-range driver that covers bass, mid, and well up into the treble range, they don't use a complex crossover network.

This almost direct-coupled approach yields major sonic dividends in the critical midrange region.

In Zu's Soul Superfly, the main driver extends slightly beyond 10kHz, and is augmented by a supertweeter that uses a Polish-made 1" composite dome tweeter mounted in a beautifully machined aluminum-flared horn. Most tweeters on two- or three-way designs are crossed over much lower, typically between 1.2–4kHz. Zu's technique makes for a dramatic difference in the way the speaker puts sound in the room. Boy, does it ever!



CLEAR



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FEATURE

Big Brother and Little Brother

The Soul Superfly is a hot-rodded version of the Soul, and the models sport a few key differences. The Soul is internally wired with Zu Mission cables; the Superfly is cabled with Zu's silver alloy B3. While the Soul uses ERSE Pulse-X audio grade polypropylene capacitors, the Superfly utilizes Mundorf Silver/Oil capacitors inline with the tweeter. The Superfly's cabinet is internally coated with a layer of QuietCoat Composite paint, with the MDF bonded with a penetrating binder; the Soul is untreated MDF. The Superfly employs a Cardas copper speaker wire clamping connector forged to the internal cable harness; the Soul uses traditional five-way binding posts. The Superfly can be custom ordered in any finish; the Soul is only available in Zu Smooth Matte black.

A Modest-Sized Speaker, Served Best with Tubes

Zu designs are super-efficient, and the Soul Superfly is no different, boasting a very healthy 101dB @ 1 watt spec. So it can rock the house with just a handful of watts. Don't worry, power handling hasn't been slighted; this bad boy can handle 300 watts. The Soul Superfly's 16 ohm impedance favors tube amps, so I used three: the Miniwatt N3 with 3.5 watts per channel; the Jolida FX10 with ten watts per channel; and a Luxman SQ-38u 30-watt integrated. The Superfly's high impedance also makes for a splendid match with OTL (output transformerless) tube amps from Atma-Sphere, Transcendent Sound, and Futterman. Zu claims that solid-state amps won't be the best matches with the Soul Superfly, but the company produces a few models that work equally well with solid-state amplification.

(continued)





As far as space demands are concerned, the Soul Superfly isn't that big. It measures 38" high and 12" square at its base, while the sloping side panels meet at the 9.5 square top panel. The MDF cabinet feels solid, and the speaker weighs 50 pounds. Build quality is excellent, and the model is available in three standard textured finishes: Chocolate, Cosmic Latte (beige), Cosmic Carbon gray. Zu also offers extraordinary custom-finish options albeit for a whopping \$2,000 extra. The fee is based on 20 extra hours of labor and the cost of expensive paints. But the charge is worth it. That metallic lime green Soul Superfly I spotted at the 2010 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest? Absolutely stunning.

Class Comparisons

Sonically, the Soul Superfly is tonally rich and solid, and possesses a weight that few other speakers anywhere its price range muster. Credit the 10.3" driver's air-moving power, dynamic punch, and near full frequency bandwidth for the gravitas. The sound is not as transparent as Magnepan's spectacular MG 1.7 panel speaker (\$1,995/pair) I reviewed in Issue 30, but the 1.7 can't match the Soul Superfly's tonal richness. If you want both—transparency and soul—be prepared to drop more dough.

Zu's Essence is a larger speaker, and utilizes a ribbon tweeter, making for a more refined-sounding experience. Still, I'm partial to ribbon tweeters. The Essence sounds bigger, with more air, resolution, a deeper soundstage, and more bass definition than that of the Soul Superfly, all for a higher price.



The Essence doesn't even match the Magnepan's walk-through transparency, but like the 1.7, Zu's speakers march to a different beat.

The Soul Superfly's big attraction? The way it unleashes dynamics. You'd be hard pressed to find another box or panel speaker anywhere near the Soul Superfly's size or price that touches it. In this sense, the speaker sounds more like a horn speaker, but without the usual horn (cupped-hand) colorations.

Amplifiers As Soul Food

I never thought Philip Glass' music had a wit of soul until I played it on these speakers. I liked the idea of Glass' music, but it often sounded cold, mechanical, and uninviting. The Soul Superfly changed my longstanding opinion once I played Glass' *Glasspieces* LP. Whoa.

The music's rhythms and grooves had me going, big time. The Soul somehow uncorked more of the music than I'd heard before. This was material that, after all, was once performed by living, breathing players, and it's the hi-fi's job to bring them back to life. The Soul did just that.

Early 1970s Columbia LPs tend to sound thin and hard, but that wasn't the case with Al Kooper's *I Stand Alone* when played through the Luxman SQ-38u integrated amp. The record's strings and brass, bathed in reverb, were a treat, and Kooper's elastic vocals seemed more humanly present than I'd previously experienced. The Soul Superfly projected a large soundstage, with fairly sharp focus. Not bad for an LP purchased for 99 cents at Princeton Record Exchange.

Switching amps, the Jolida FX10 did a fine job goosing the Soul Superfly into action with the Black Keys' raunchy blues. The duo's latest, *Brothers*, is a low-down romp, with massively distorted guitar and pummeling drums, and is best enjoyed with the volume cranked way up. The FX10 obliged, though the Luxman coaxed even more grunt from the mix. In addition, the Luxman delivered considerably more meat on the bones, but the FX10's sound was immensely satisfying on its own. *Brothers* sports the best batch of tunes from any Black Keys album, and the Soul Superfly only increased my love for the record.

The designation of the tubiest-sounding amp in the listening chain fell to the Miniwatt N3, a single-ended design that utilizes a single ECC83 twin-triode tube feeding one EL84 output tube per channel. *(continued)*

FEATURE

The N3 delivered a healthy 3.5 watts per channel to the Superflys, and they loved it. Sure, it looked almost comical: A teensy 5.25" wide and 6" deep amp next to the Souls. But those 3.5 watts were sweet and clear, with a truly gorgeous midrange and pleasantly full bass. Tone color and dimensionality were absolutely yummy, and textures came through with utmost transparency. The Miniwatt N2 sells for just \$378, but I could happily live with it and the Soul Superfly.

As might be expected, the Luxman SQ-38u integrated tube amp (review in the works) proved the best overall mate with the Soul Superfly, yielding more holographic imaging and a very un-hi-fi, yet totally musically convincing sound. Instruments sounded more natural, and after three different amplifiers, I became convinced that the Soul Superfly was designed for tubes. Why? There's a rightness to the sound that my solid-state amps can't match. Bass doesn't go subwoofer deep, but it's generously proportioned.

The solid-state Pass Labs XA100.5 monoblock amps exerted a profound sense of control over the Soul Superfly, the sort of difference that could be definitely felt when a drummer really whacked his kit. The big solid-state monoblocks offered more slam and dynamic contrast, but the overall tonal balance shifted to the cooler side. While this never appeared mechanical or harsh, it was easier to forget about the gear when I had a tube amplifier in the chain.

Blow Out the Candles

Zu just celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2010, and it seems like the company has only begun what will be a long run. The Soul and Soul Superfly are the latest additions to a promising product line and should be perfect fits for those with low-to-moderate-powered tube amplifiers that want something out of the ordinary. ●





MANUFACTURER

Zu Audio Soul Superfly
MSRP: \$2,600 a pair
www.zuaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source VPI Classic turntable with van den Hul Frog cartridge

Digital Sources Ayre C-5xe MP Universal Player, Oppo BDP-83 Special Edition

Electronics Parasound JC 1 preamp, Whest 2.0 phono preamp, Parasound JC 1, Miniwatt N3, Jolida FX10, Luxman SQ-38u, Pass Labs XA100.5, and First Watt J2 power amps

Speakers Dynaudio C-1, Zu Essence, Mangepan 3.6

Cable Zu interconnects, speaker cable; XLO Signature-3 interconnects, speaker cable, power cords; Audioquest Sky interconnects

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If You Love Music, Ace is The Place

By Jeff Dorgay

The Ace Hotel, between Fifth and Broadway on 29th in Midtown Manhattan, looks almost like a scene from a David Lynch movie when you walk in the door, and that's a *good* thing. If you crave an experience that's far from the ordinary as well as one that's reasonably priced, look no further. Rooms start at about \$275 per night; suites go for around \$375. By comparison, the Holiday Inn Express just down the street has a rate of \$325, and it sucks.



“Just let us know if you need more records,” a woman at the counter told me.

As I opened the door to my room, I heard Ornette Coleman on the radio and immediately, spotted a turntable! A red Music Hall mmf 2.2, to be exact. Every Ace room has one, complete with a stack of LPs. “Just let us know if you need more records,” a woman at the counter told me. For those who prefer to make their own music, acoustic guitars sit in the corner of the rooms as well.

Back in the main lobby, it's all rock and roll. Heart's “Barra-cuda” blasted out of the stereo, and the place was packed with cool people in skinny jeans eating, drinking, and Skyping. I felt as if I hadn't even left Portland. The Breslin Bar and Dining Room mentions a “meat-centric” menu, which was greatly appreciated, with 24-hour room service. Yes, your inner Homer can get pork chops at 3 a.m.

Coolness is always welcome, but the service is what makes your Ace stay memorable. The hotel staff understands nuance. Not in the fake, somebody-in-HR-told-me-I-have-to-greet-every-customer-with-a-smile way, akin to someone in Soundgarden's “Black Hole Sun” video, but in a heartfelt manner. Everyone from the doorman to the guy who refilled the mini bar was genuinely pleasant. When you've been to a dozen cities in less than a month, this is indeed welcome. *(continued)*



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Such attention to detail carries through to every bit of your stay. Room lighting is tastefully done, and the room itself is very functional. It's more like a studio apartment, with separate space for sleeping, working, hanging out, and bathing. A minibar that Hunter S. Thompson would appreciate is located in an updated retro fridge, stocked with a wide collection of liquor, a bottle of champagne, and a mini keg of Heineken, along with a full selection of smart water. It's the electrolytes, you know.

Here in my hometown of Portland, the Ace Hotel retains the same charm, with a Stumptown Coffee shop found just outside the lobby. Situated strategically in Portland's Pearl District, the Ace is only a few blocks from great food, great bars, a number of clubs to hear local music, and Echo Audio, the hi-fi shop that supplies Ace with those red turntables. Echo owner Kurt Doslu remarked, "It's been a lot of fun to send so many turntables their way, and the guests have taken remarkably good care of them. I don't send nearly as many replacement styli as I expected to when we first started discussing this project." The Portland location also happens to be near several great record stores, so if that red turntable manages to rekindle your love for vinyl, you can begin your analog journey just down the street.

Laying on the smarts, all of the Ace Hotels feature low VOC paints, vintage furniture, and recycled materials whenever possible. The room service is outstanding and Wi-Fi is free throughout the facility. The Portland Ace even offers bike rentals for getting around town sans auto.

In addition to its Portland and NYC locations, Ace also has hotels in Seattle and Palm Springs. Rumor has it that there may be one coming to San Francisco, too. The company's motto? "Thanks for sleeping with us." I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather stay. ●



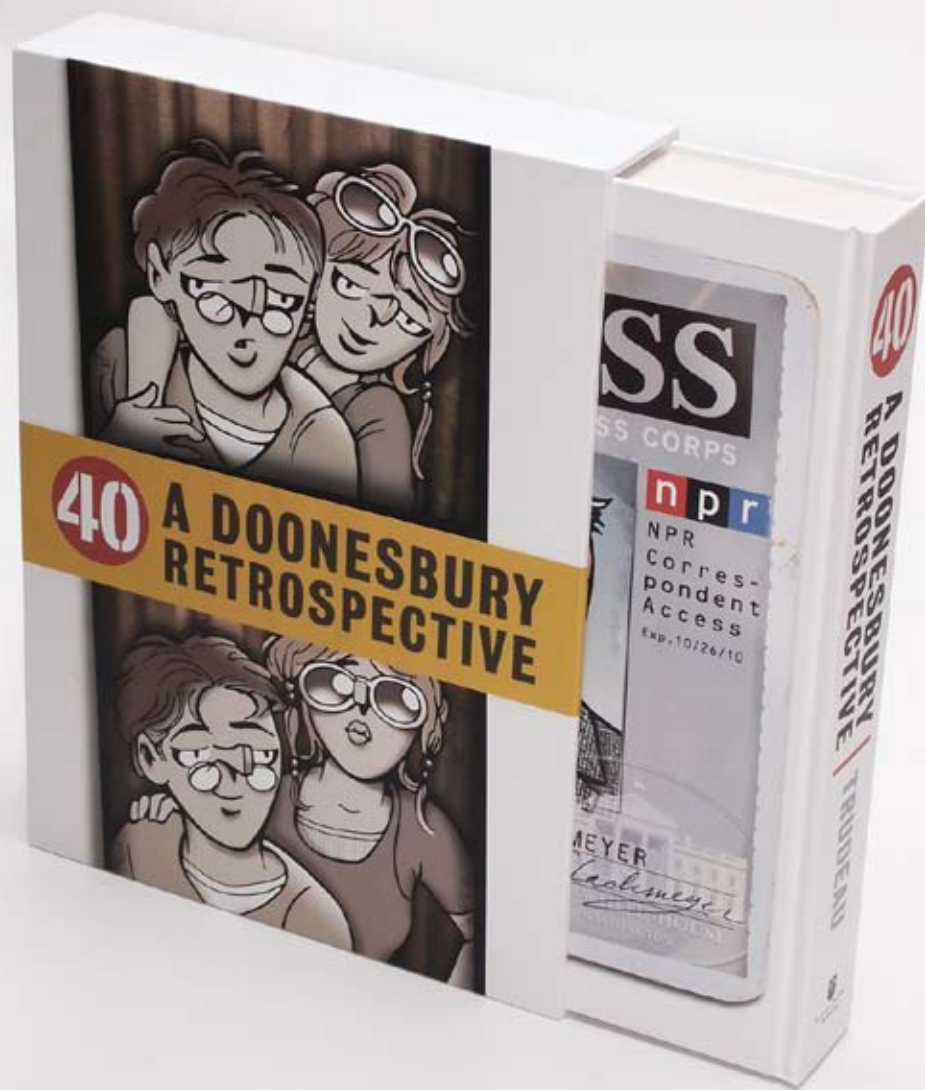
Echo owner Kurt Doslu remarked, "It's been a lot of fun to send so many turntables their way, and the guests have taken remarkably good care of them."

Echoing responses from his recent press blitz, G.B. Trudeau opens this massive collection of his work by telling us that the “Doonesbury gang has become a mob.” He then informs us what the book “is not,” gives us an overview of the plot, and breaks down the “Doonesbury years” into first, second, and third waves, taking readers from the beginning in the 70s to present day.

40: *A Doonesbury Retrospective* does not contain every single strip that Trudeau has penned; that would make for a far bigger book. Still, this tome involves about 13% of the 14,000-strip output. The oversize book has an almost equal blend of color and B/W strips, with fine art-print quality. And I admit it: As much as I love the paperless future, holding this book in your hands is cooler than reading it on an iPad.

Progressing linearly throughout Doonesbury’s history and introducing various new characters as the gang grows, the book is also punctuated with bios of the main characters along with Trudeau’s personal commentary. For those wishing to get up to speed with the cultural icon, this is a timeless reference. There’s even a fold-out “relationship chart” and an in-depth genealogy chart for the complete cast.

If you grew up with hi-fi, chances are that you grew up with Doonesbury as well. Here’s a great chance to reconnect with your past and some faded cartoon strips once proudly displayed on various refrigerators.



40: A Doonesbury Retrospective

G.B. Trudeau

\$100

www.amazon.com



C50 Stereo Control Center:

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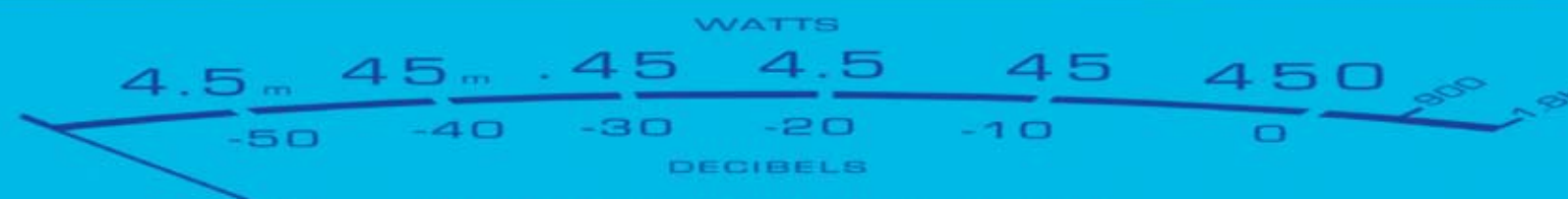


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*Known for his excellent taste in high-end audio, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has recently chosen the Acutus Reference SP turntable and Pulsare phonostage to head up an impressive audio system.



Both these products have recently won the unreserved praises of the press and now, it seems, gets a Presidential seal of approval....



Omron HEM-780 Blood Pressure Monitor

\$69.95
www.amazon.com



TONE STYLE

Though you might expect to see this little device in *AARP* magazine, it's actually quite handy. Textbook blood pressure is 120/70, and just like measuring your hi-fi system to get a baseline reading, it's a good idea to know where your blood pressure shakes out. Plus, it can be fun to see just how stressed you are from toiling over audiophile concerns! Akin to anything that causes hypertension, perhaps some behavior is in order.

Always a willing test subject, I took a few random measurements:

Resting BP: 124/75
(averaged over a week)

Halfway through Iron and Wine's new *Kiss Each Other Clean* album: 125/80

Halfway through Slayer's *God Hates Us All* album: 150/100

Preparing to solder loading resistors into the ARC REF 2 Phonostage: 150/110

Five minutes before equipment manufacturer arrives to inspect system: 155/110

Ten minutes after manufacturer leaves: 125/75

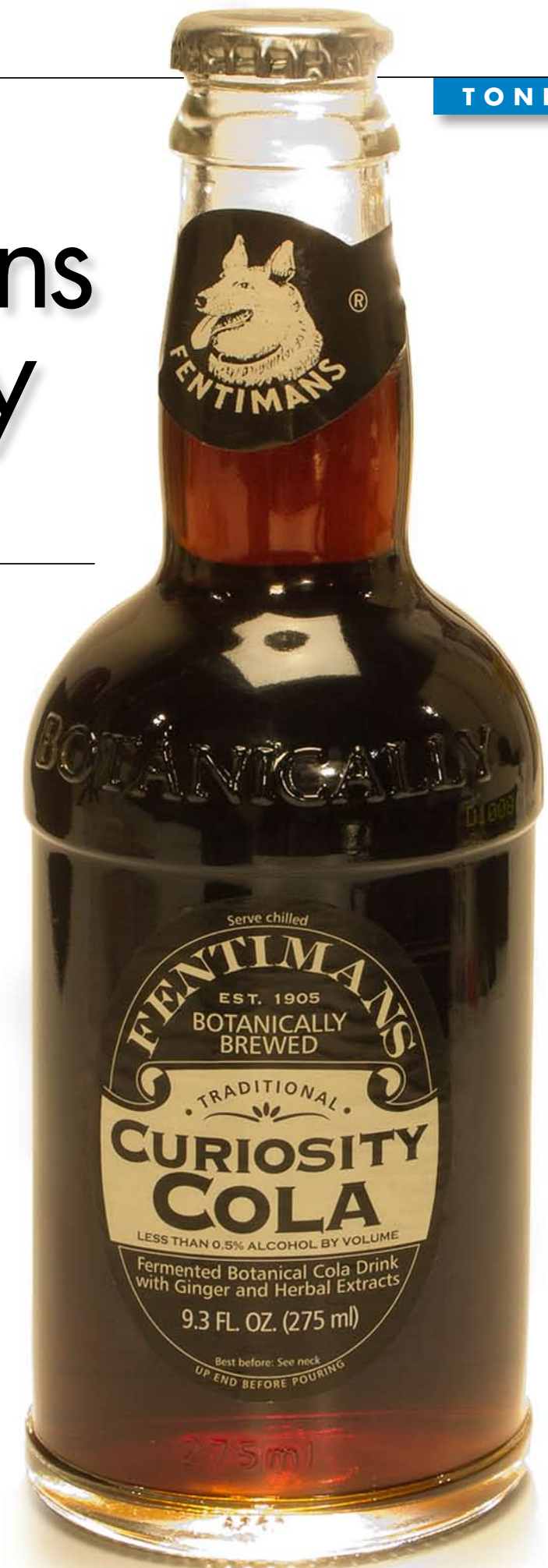
So there you have it: fun facts to know and tell. And in the end, not a bad way to keep track of your general health parameters. Who said measurements are bad?

Fentimans Curiosity Cola

\$3/9.3 oz (275ml.) bottle
www.drinkfentimens.com

While most of the *TONEAudio* staff is as enthusiastic about adult beverages as they are music and hi-fi, one can't drink beer all the time, but having soft-drink tastes that don't reach beyond a Big Gulp don't quite cut it either.

Submitted for your consumption is Fentimans Curiosity Cola. One sip and you'll never want to be a Pepper again. With a full-bodied taste that has a hint of ginger, the naturally made cola has only half of the nasty bits in a can of Coca Cola—and none of the preservatives.



www.woaudio.com/products/WA5.html

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Drobo S

\$759 (drives not included)
www.droboworks.com

Regardless of the option you've chosen for your digital music collection, if you haven't yet implemented a major backup strategy, trouble is on the horizon. Until we can buy multi-terabyte solid-state drives for a reasonable price, we're all stuck with hard-drive platters that spin anywhere from 7,200RPM to 15,000RPM. Everything mechanical fails at some point; it's a matter of when, not if.

But there's no reason to lose sleep. The Drobo S can be populated with your favorite hard drives, and it has five bays, allowing you to configure it to your liking. For music server duty, Drobo's "Self Healing Technology" ensures that your tunes are only being written to the healthy areas on your hard drives' platters. Should something fail, you only need to drop a new drive in the place of the faulty one and go. Drobo's software keeps you informed of disc health on a 24/7 basis.

No matter what type of system you may have (Windows, Mac or Linux), the Drobo is compatible and offers multiple connections. Moreover, you can plug into your Drobo via USB 3.0, eSATA, and FireWire 800. *TONEAudio* hasn't been using our Drobo S long enough for anything to fail, but it is comforting to know that there's now an additional line of protection.



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TONE STYLE



McIntosh Clock

Price: TBD
www.mcintoshlabs.com

Here's the ultimate crown jewel for the McIntosh owner that has everything. A clock, built from the same materials that McIntosh uses to build its hi-fi components, complete with a massive glass front panel, and of course, a pair of big, blue meters. Instead of indicating watts per channel, as they often do on power amplifiers, the clock has a meter for hours and one for minutes.

We're picturing the final prototype, straight from the McIntosh suite at the Consumer Electronics Show. Production is scheduled to begin soon. And yes, the clock feels just as beefy as a McIntosh component, so it should be a big hit with the faithful.

Passer Une Journée Supplémentaire à Montréal

Spend An Extra Day in Montreal

By Bob Gendron

With all apologies to the rocky mountain scenery around Denver and none to the draining sinkhole of an abyss that calls itself Las Vegas, Montreal easily takes the prize as the best host of the existing North American high-end audio shows. The Canadian city's culture, food, attractions, setting, and bilingual environment offer countless opportunities and watertight excuses for anyone attending Salon Son & Image (SSI) to extend their trip by at least a day.

Whether you're an exhibitor or an attendee, if you go to SSI and neglect to allocate time to explore Montreal, you're truly missing out. Here's a brief list of easily accessible entertainment and gastronomic pleasures worth considering, all of which are within traveling distance of the show.



Montreal Museum of Fine Arts



Walk

Vieux Montreal

Want to go to Europe without getting on a plane? Stroll the brick-lined streets, gaze at the stone-clad facades, and revel in the promenades in Vieux Montreal, a once-walled district that overlooks the old port and contains a surplus of elegant restaurants, cozy cafes, friendly street vendors, horse-drawn carriages, and compelling heritage sites. History buffs will be in heaven, and architectural mavens won't want to leave. Grab a map that spotlights the myriad attractions. Place Jacques-Cartier, Notre-Dame de Bonsecours, Bonsecours Market, and Montreal History Center should be on all short lists. For an unforgettable brunch, stop by Le Saint-Sulpice Hotel, right down the block from the Basilique Notre-Dame, a cathedral as impressive as any in North America.



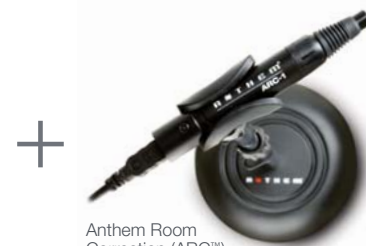
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Shown: LTX 500 Projector



AVM 50v audio/video processor



Anthem Room Correction (ARC™)



LTX 500 LCOS Projector

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Contact us to discover the beauty and technical excellence of NuVision by booking a technology test drive.

Kim Tesori, 480.970.9120, kim.tesori@nuvision.com or visit www.nuvision.com.

* Only available on 55" FX10 LS

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Quartier Latin

Downtown promises a surfeit of riches, but many of the most authentic Montreal vibes and flavors are found in its colorful neighborhoods. A Francophile area populated with independent shops, scrumptious cafes, dynamic nightclubs, dynamic theaters, and young students, Quartier Latin comes alive in the evening and doesn't go to sleep until early morning. Film aficionados should head straight for Cinémathèque Québécoise (335 Boulevard de Maisonneuve Est). Chocoholics, Juliette et Chocolat (1615 Rue St. Denis) will satisfy the strongest cacao cravings. Pastry fiends, peer into the windows of La Brioche Lyonnaise and drool; its crepes de sarrazin and crepes de froment are outstanding. Everyone else, plant yourself on Rue St. Denis, ignore your compass, and take it all in.

The Underground

Montreal's Underground, also known as RESO, stretches for 19 miles and allows pedestrians to get around the city without dealing with outside elements. Clean, spacious, and bright, it links together thousands of boutiques, offices, churches, hotels, restaurants, universities, and unique subway stations. Take the plunge and wander around until you get lost.

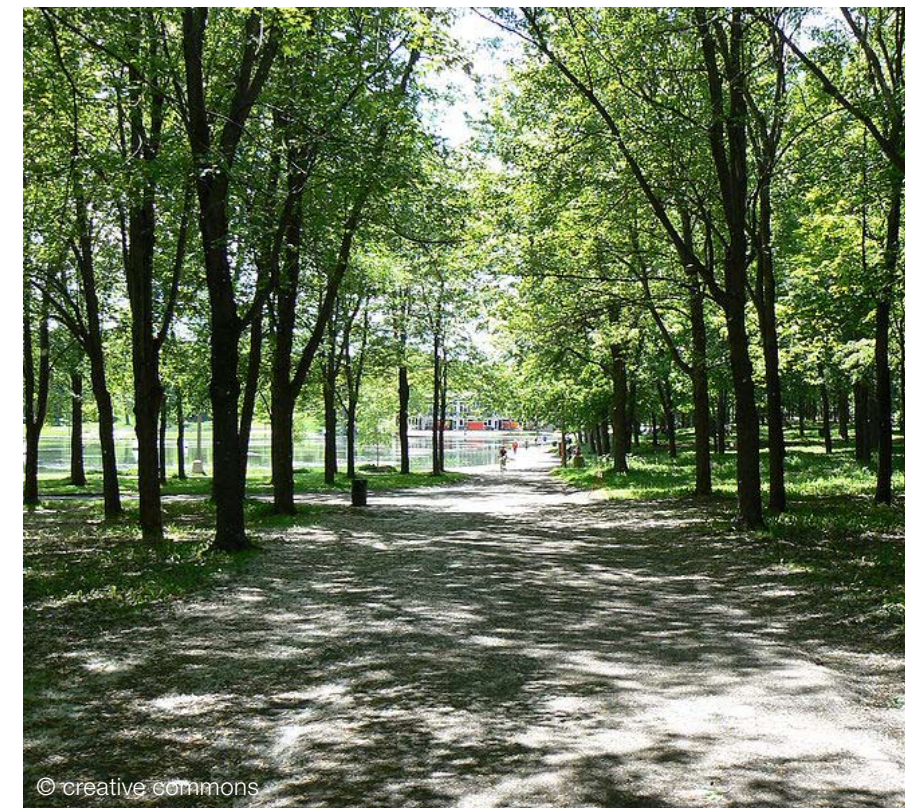


Look

Look

Mont-Royal Park 1260 Chemin Remembrance

Designed by American landscaper Frederick Law Olmsted—the artist responsible for New York's Central Park and Chicago's Jackson, Washington, and Marquette Parks—Montreal's most prominent and visible park should be scaled bottom-to-top, where it provides unbeatable vistas of the downtown and surrounding areas. While scaling the large hill, be sure to catch a glimpse of the Croix du Mont-Royal, a huge steel cross installed in 1924, and visit Beaver Lake, a year-round destination for locals seeking to escape the urban grind.



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Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
1380 Rue Sherbrooke Ouest

Boasting world-class museums on subjects ranging from natural history to modern architecture to science, Montreal doesn't lack for educational and illuminating institutions. Yet the museum that utterly overwhelms in terms of scope and collection is the Museum of Fine Arts, so large that it occupies several buildings and requires days to exhaustively navigate. Simply breathtaking.

Canadiens de Montreal

To understand why hockey is king in Canada, and why Montreal's record-holding Canadiens dominate the headlines, all you need to do is watch a game in a local bar. On game days, any self-respecting establishment with televisions has the channel tuned into the Habs. However, Champs Bar and Restaurant (3956 Boul. St. Laurent) and Taverne Normand (1550 Mont. Royal Est) are hard to beat. Of course, there's no substitute for watching the action live in the Bell Centre, but the Canadiens are on the road while SSI takes place. Yet another reason to stay until April 6; the Habs host the reigning Stanley Cup champions Chicago Blackhawks in a prized Original Six meeting on April 5.

Taste

Au Pied de Cochon 536 Duluth Est

No matter your taste, you won't leave Montreal hungry. However, if your preferences skew towards meat, there's no superior restaurant than this astounding Quebecois eatery that turns foie gras into an art form. The steak tartare, foie gras poutine, happy pork chop, and sugar pie are among the highlights. Oenophiles and whiskey drinkers will also be pleased, and the lively environment encourages extended meals. A phenomenal experience that challenges your gut without busting your wallet.

Le Fourquet Fourchette 265 Rue St. Antoine Ouest

Most discernible beer drinkers are familiar with Unibroue, the Quebec-based brewery behind Maudite, La Fin Du Monde, Trois Pistoles, Noire de Chambly, Don De Dieu, and Blonde de Chambly. Situated in the beautifully modern Palais des Congres, Le Fourquet Fourchette doubles as a Unibroue-themed restaurant that offers all of its beers on tap and creates its main entrees with recipes that involve a given Unibroue beer. The pairings are often inspired, and 95% of the products come from local producers. Lunch spots don't come any more ideal.

Schwartz's Hebrew Delicatessen 3895 St. Laurent

Yes, it's popular among tourists, yes, it's cramped and narrow, and yes, you'll likely wait in line. However, the smoked meat mecca Chez Schwartz Charcuterie Hebrique de Montreal rivals any New York deli you ever hope to visit. For those with a really healthy appetite, right up the street is Moishe's Steak House (3961 St. Laurent), a delightful Jewish institution that cooks its delectable steaks over charcoal and features an old-world dining room. Be certain to savor the pickles.

St. Viateur Bagel 1127 Mont. Royal Est

With several locations, St. Viateur's hand-rolled, wood-burning oven-baked bagels are quite simply the best in the world. Better still, the "Plateau" location is right in the center of a Francophone neighborhood bursting with European style. Used book and record stores dot the avenue. ●



POWER TRIO

The latest additions to Burmester's Top Line offer award winning fidelity and tremendous versatility. The 088 preamplifier features X-Amp 2 modules and can be configured with an on-board phono stage or DAC. The 089 CD player uses an advanced Belt Drive system to keep digital jitter to a minimum, while also featuring a preamplifier stage with volume control and a pair of analog inputs. The 100 phono preamplifier combines two phono inputs and an optional 24-bit/192kHz analog to digital converter, so that you can capture your favorite vinyl treasures at the highest quality possible.

Burmester
ART FOR THE EAR

Top Line
HANDMADE IN GERMANY

AVID Acutus Reference SP



\$19,999 (without tonearm)
www.musicdirect.com

Given the gorgeously machined and polished surfaces, it's easy to get sidetracked by the beauty of AVID's flagship turntable. But its performance is an analog lover's dream come true. Offering up a massive soundstage, firm LF grip, and excellent extension, along with an inner detail delicacy that few turntables at any price possess, this is truly an exciting record player.



verityaudio.com

Vitus Audio MP-P201 Phono Preamplifier



\$59,995
www.vitus-audio.com

How good can a 60 *thousand* dollar phonostage be? While one could pontificate about what other goodies could be had for that kind of money, rest assured that the ladies and gentlemen that can afford this Vitus model didn't lose all their marbles in the last stock market crash. We will soon investigate this enviable piece of gear.

NAD PP-3 Phono Preamplifier



\$199
www.nad.com

At the completely opposite end of the spectrum, what will \$199 get you? More accessible than the Vitus, this NAD is a valid part of the vinyl world, especially with so many people getting back into spinning records. It's a great place to begin your journey. And for the cost of a few Kobe beef burgers, you get an MM/MC phono preamp and the ability to output directly to USB so you can digitize your LPs as well.

Ooh La La

The Devialet D-Premier Does It All

By Jeff Dorgay

As you look at the gorgeous French polished aluminum box that isn't much larger in size than a medium Domino's pizza container (and probably not much heavier if you order your pizza with extra meat and cheese), forget everything you know about high-end audio. The Devialet D-Premier is anything but cheesy. It belongs in the Louvre—with a great pair of speakers connected, of course. But it will look equally stylish in your listening room. While it appears to be a square box at first glance, when you place it on a countertop or other flat surface, you detect the slight curve of the casework, which adds to the visual complexity.

Much more often than not, associating the word "lifestyle" with an audio component is the kiss of death, as the term usually means "mediocre performance wrapped in a shiny box." What makes the D-Premier so exciting is that it offers world-class performance in an elegant, compact enclosure. If you happen to be someone who has always loved music, but avoided a high-end system because you didn't want all the boxes and cables overwhelming your living space, the D-Premier is the perfect solution.



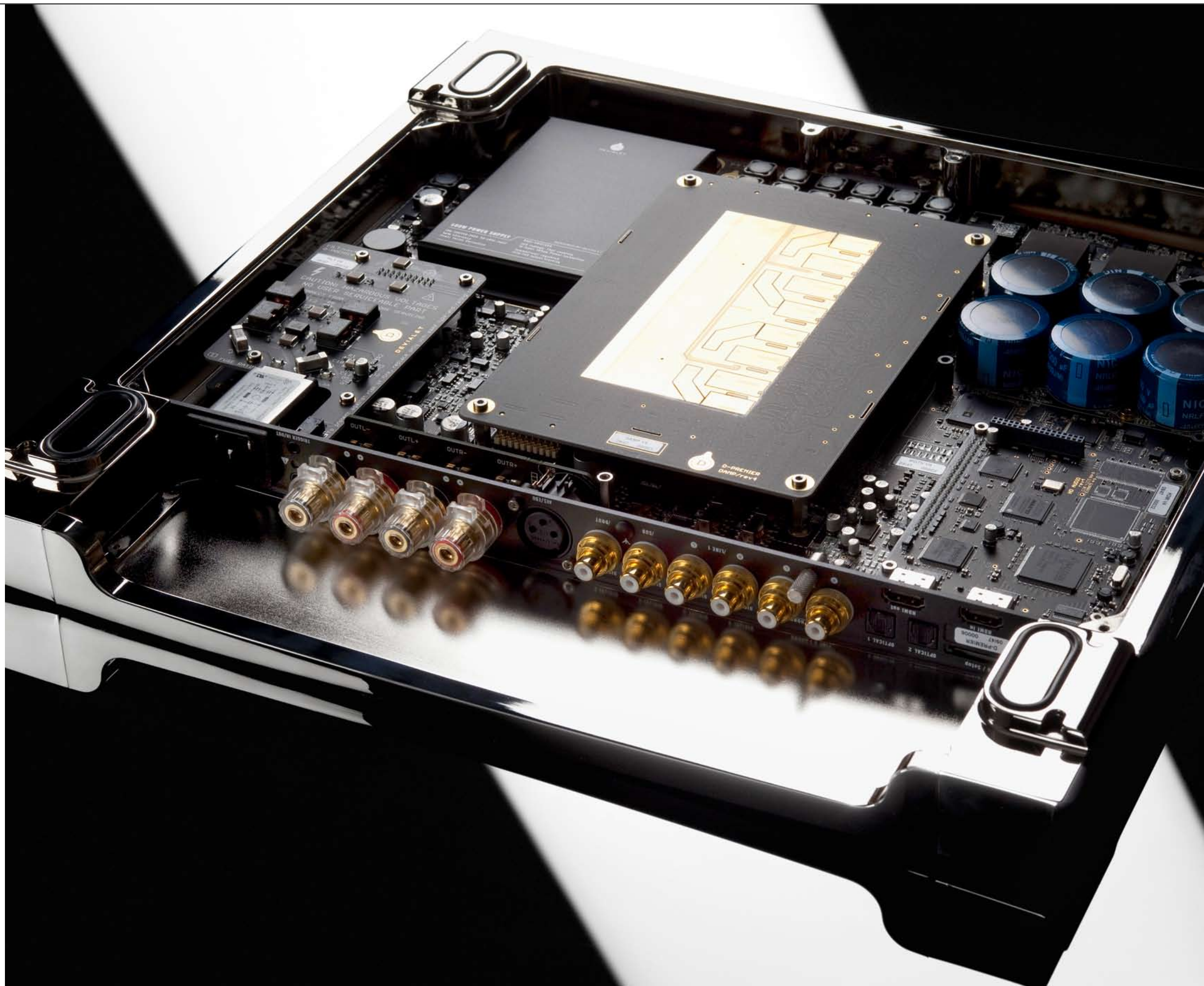
Peruse the company's website (www.devialet.com), and you might be under the impression that the D-Premier is merely an integrated amplifier. Yet it's quite a bit more. This compact sculpture houses a complete audio system: There's a 240-watt-per-channel power amplifier, full-function preamplifier, 24 bit/192khz DAC, phono preamplifier, and a wireless bridge all tidily packed inside. As of this review, the wireless function and HDMI input were not yet enabled, but when they are ready in the fall, it will only take a quick firmware update via an SD card slot located on the rear panel to gain the additional functionality. You'll be able to painlessly download the software via the Devialet website and make the upgrade just as you would on a camera or laptop, insert the card, reboot, and voila, a new component.

One of my biggest challenges in writing this review was figuring out exactly what to call the D-Premier. With such a wide range of capabilities, for now, let's think of it as an integrated amplifier with benefits. The D-Premier features an analog input that can be configured for MM or MC phono use, and an additional line-level analog input, both via RCA jacks. In addition, four RCA S/PDIF inputs, a pair of TOSLINK optical digital inputs, an XLR AES/EBU digital input, and an HDMI 1.3 input are onboard, so you can connect anything but a balanced line-level source via XLR connectors. One set of speaker outputs is provided, as is a line level RCA output for a subwoofer. Bass level can also be controlled via the remote.

Far Beyond Class D

Devialet takes a different approach to amplifier design with its patented ADH (Analog/Digital Hybrid) technology, which utilizes a pure Class A driver directly connected to the speaker outputs, with the Class D output section doing all the "heavy lifting" as a current provider connected in parallel. More technical information is available on the Devialet website, but to simplify, the Class A section sets the distortion-free sonic signature of the amplifier and the Class D provides high-power output with low heat, allowing for the compact form factor.

(continued)



The D-Premier utilizes a pair of Class D output modules, yet it is driven by a pair of Class A amplifiers in a unique hybrid module configuration that provides the advantages of both designs and the limitation of neither. First and foremost, the D-Premier does not sound like any Class D amplifier I've ever heard. I admit a slight personal bias *against* Class D amplifiers even though I keep auditioning every one I can get my hands on. But shortcomings remain. They typically offer a degree of sterility in their presentation, and in my experience, have been highly speaker-dependent, much like an SET or OTL amplifier. Hence, an optimum match yields decent sound, but a less than optimum one makes for a mediocre musical performance. Even the best examples have sounded somewhat flat. That said, it is clear that Devialet's technology represents a quantum leap forward in tonal purity.

Pairing the D-Premier with a wide range of speakers (Gamut S9, B&W 805D, Magnepan 1.6) along with several models I had in-house for review and photography (Zu Soul Superfly, Martin Logan Aeries i, PMC DB2i, Totem Forest) all provided synergistic combinations and a consistency I've never experienced with traditional Class D amplifiers.

While Class D amplifiers often exhibit an impedance mismatch with some speaker/speaker cable combinations, resulting in a sound that is brittle and lifeless at best or seriously rolled off at the HF portion of the frequency spectrum, the Premier-D did not change its character. But remember, it is *not* a pure Class D amplifier. I did all of my testing with the factory standard settings, yet the amplifier characteristics can be optimized to your speakers to allow for the most advantageous combination. Again, custom tuning is as easy as upgrading the firmware, and makes the D-Premier obsolete-proof.

The most interesting result of my speaker swapping related to how well the D-Premier performed when driving the Magnepan 1.6s, which are notoriously power-hungry. 240 watts-per-channel is usually the place that gets the party started with these speakers, yet the D-Premier not only effortlessly drove them to realistic sound levels, the sound quality was fantastic, offering



a three-dimensional soundstage with excellent bass extension and texture. The Magnepan 1.6 speakers remain in my arsenal if for no other reason to torture amplifiers. There are precious few under-400 watts-per-channel amplifiers that I've heard that can really grab hold of the Magnepan's and offer the control and sheer current delivery that the speakers really need.

Should the need for even more power arise, the D-Premier can be configured to be part of a multiple amplifier system. So, you could easily multi-amp your Magnepan's or any other speaker in such a manner. Multiple D-Premier units can be configured for bi-amplification or as bridged mono amplifiers. The amplifier section is stable into 2-ohm loads and is rated at 240 watts per channel into a 2-6 ohm load and 190 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load. Devialet allows two adjustable parameters for the power amplifier section: maximum power and the impedance of the speaker used. According to Devialet's Mathias Moronvalle, "When tuning the amplifier to anticipate high current for a given voltage due to low speaker impedance, the amplifier can deliver more peak current and thus, operate more linearly."

My Gamut S9 speakers, while highly resolving, are ever so slightly on the warm side of neutral, so the D-Premier turned in a brilliant performance here. It's also worth noting that this amplifier was not terribly affected by differences in cable. Switching between Cardas Clear, AudioQuest SKY, and Shunyata's Aurora showed a difference between the three, but not as much as it did with my reference Burmester gear.

A Balance of Resolution and Musicality

The measured specifications of the D-Premier indicate an amplifier that seems to be completely free of any distortions with a noise floor of over -130db. Even with the volume control at maximum, not a hint of background noise emanates from the speakers. If I had to describe the D-Premier's presentation in one word, it would indeed be "clean."

(continued)

D-Premier is one of a small group of components that is highly resolving without being harsh. It will, however, reveal every bit of nuances in the connected source hardware as well as your software, so if your source material is not up to snuff, prepare to be outed. If you want forgiving sound, buy a vintage vacuum tube amplifier with EL-34 tubes.

The depth of the soundstage that the D-Premier presented continually impressed. Devialet's unique method of blending Class A into the mix gives this amplifier its magic. No matter what music I listened to, I experienced a tremendous amount of image depth that resulted in a highly realistic musical experience. On the intro track from the Beatles' *LOVE*, that mosquito felt as it was buzzing directly in front of my nose. I had a similar experience with "Equinoxe 1-4" from Jean-Michel Jarre's *Equinoxe*; I found myself surrounded in synthesizer sounds seemingly coming from all around the room. *Zoolook* was equally enchanting.

Bass was tight and well controlled, and the highs were extended albeit smooth. The D-Premier diverged from its standard solid-state and vacuum-tube competitors at the very end of frequency extremes. When I listened to one of my favorite acoustic bass recordings, Charlie Haden's *The Private Collection*, every bit of Haden's playing came through with the required amount of texture, conveying convincing realism, especially on the 24/96 version. And when I

mixed it up with Sly and the Family Stone's "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey" the electric bass line had plenty of speed and snap. My reference Burmester 911 mk. 3 monoblocks had a richer presentation, but these amplifiers (and the accompanying preamplifier) have a price tag that's about six times that of the D-Premier. Hence, the performance is way beyond what you would expect at this level.

The D-Premier has an upper register that has to be heard to be believed; it is devoid of a signature sound. I listened to quite a few acoustic recordings to try and define one, but it had none. At least in terms of sound *quality*, Ginger Baker's drumming on *Cream at Royal Albert Hall* is sublime, especially when he hits his favorite ride cymbals with the small bolts affixed to them. Once again, no signature was added or subtracted.

It's important to keep in mind that, for \$15,999, you are getting essentially four components and really, five if you take into account the music streaming capabilities. Break down the price, and it's impossible to find an amplifier, preamplifier, DAC, and phono-stage of this caliber for \$16k, not to mention the requisite three additional sets of interconnects, three power cords, and additional rack space needed to accommodate all the gear. If you are going to use all of these features, the D-Premier is an incredible bargain. But even if you just use it as an amplifier, preamplifier, and DAC, it's nearly unthinkable to get such high performance

for this price. I certainly haven't heard anything that compares.

Too Cool

For those who love to argue about the validity of Apple's hardware versus everyone else's hardware, a simple swipe of the mouse will tell you the difference. The action of Apple's mouse eclipses anything in PC world; you both notice and appreciate it, or the care spent on the mousing algorithm has gone to waste.

By comparison, the D-Premier's volume control is not only visually compelling but possesses the best control action I've ever felt. In the day of stepped attenuators via remote, the D-Premier's square control module's action is silky smooth. It feels like the throttle in a Bentley Continental R; the sound builds gently and evenly, just like the thrust of the Bentley's V12. Once you experience it, you will be spoiled for anything else. And unlike most components that use an IR sensor—limiting the remote control to a line of sight ranging from about 10 to 15 feet—the D-Premier remote is controlled via RF, so you should be able to control the volume from anywhere in the house.

Another huge plus? The ability to hang the D-Premier on the wall and completely bypass the equipment rack—whether in a design-conscious environment, one where space is at a premium, or both. Thanks to a removable panel that hides the cables and the highly polished surface, the D-Premier all but disappears into the room. (*continued*)



A pale blue light that indicates the volume level and input source is the only way you'd ever suspect it's an electronic component. Everything is controlled from the remote. Just like Apple, the packaging is as artfully done and the instruction manual easy to understand—no detail is ignored.

Oh, the smooth, exquisite, polished finish of the D-Premier begs to be caressed. But resist the urge, because you'll mar its perfection with your fingertips. However, if you and your friends can't resist, a microfiber cloth and a gentle cleaner will keep it in top shape. (Use the same cleaner that you use to keep a flat-panel display screen clean. Do *not* use Windex, 409, or any heavy duty cleaner as it will probably stain and streak the polished aluminum casework.)

DAC

The DAC section has 24/192 capabilities through the S/PDIF and Optical inputs, but there is no USB input. I used the dCS Paganini transport via S/PDIF and balanced connections, and concur with Devialet that even better performance was achieved with the balanced connection. The low noise floor again made such a conclusion apparent, especially when listening to classical recordings recorded digitally. The silence with this combination proved to be uncanny.

When comparing the D-Premier's DAC to a number of standalone DACs in the \$2,500 to \$5,500 range, the Devialet was the clear champion in terms of dynamics and tonality. Some of this must be attributed to the simple signal path that's involved. Again, much like the phonostage, this DAC should be more than capable for 95% of the most demanding audiophiles. Those wanting more performance will have to spend five figures on a DAC alone, which means more boxes, cables, etc., defeating the purpose of this savvy component.

The D-Premier upsamples everything to 192kHz/24-bit resolution from a fixed-frequency, low-phase noise clock source. Devialet feels that this architecture provides extremely low jitter and contributes greatly to the DAC's highly transparent sound. After extended listening to digital files, one walks away from the D-Premier is unfatigued,



especially when listening to acoustic instruments. It's one of the rare DACs that I've heard at any price that makes you forget you are listening to digital and allows you to just concentrate on the program material.

A Fresh Phonostage

Like most other phonostages, impedance and capacitance loading is controlled in the analog domain, with a network of resistors and capacitors switched in and out (but controlled again, by the SD card configuration). That's where any similarity to standard phonostages ends. The default setting of the D-Premier's phonostage is a standard moving magnet arrangement with 47k loading. I began listening with the Grado Statement 1 mounted on the Spiral Groove SG-2/Triplanar combination. While the aforementioned cartridge is a moving iron design, it uses a standard 47k loading and is fairly impervious to capacitance loading. Thanks to the D-Premier's high gain and ultra low noise floor, its lower output of .5mv was no problem. This proved an excellent match for the rest of my system, offering up an eerily silent background.

I've never heard a phono preamp with a -130 db noise specification, which alone makes this configuration interesting on a number of levels. I spent a fair amount of time searching my record collection to find the quietest pressings. After listening to the last year's worth of Music Matters Blue Note releases, I moved on to Speakers Corner's pressing of Santana's *Caravanserai*. The mellowest Santana album, it features involved percussion that punctuates Santana's guitar tracks. The intro to "Song of the Wind" is particularly quiet. With the D-Premier's ultra-low noise, the track seems to build out of nowhere. The component blends the silence of a digital recording with the warmth of analog: A perfect combination.

How does it happen? The phono signal is sent through a set of Burr Brown analog-to-digital converters (again at 24/192 resolution), and the RIAA equalization is applied in the digital domain. (continued)



Again, Devialet feels that this approach offers greater linearity and more accurate translation of the RIAA curve than performing the task in the analog domain. While analog purists may wretch at the idea of taking their beloved *analog* signal, digitizing it, and processing it digitally, the D-Premier flawlessly functions. Devialet provided a custom profile for the Shelter 501II MC cartridge; it worked perfectly when I made the change. In the future, Devialet will supply “cartridge profiles” for most of the major cartridges in use, and again, it will only require rebooting the D-Premier and uploading the settings.

Again and again, the D-Premier defies comparison. Because the phonostage is so quiet, it offers a different perspective with its low-level detail retrieval. However, when moving to my reference Audio Research REF 2 Phono, the latter still had a more inviting analog presentation. Such a last bit of analog magic comes with a pricetag that’s almost twice that of the D-Premier. Those with perfectly clean records, and especially classical music lovers, will really appreciate this phonostage. At the risk of repeating myself, but remaining entirely honest, the onboard phonostage easily meets or exceeds most of the phonostages I’ve experienced in the \$5,000 range. With performance at this level, 99% of D-Premier users will probably be thrilled. It’s certainly much better than any other onboard stage I’ve heard in an integrated, save the one in the darTZeel CTH-8550, another very, very expensive amplifier.

More on the Horizon

As they say on late-night television infomercials, “Wait, there’s

more.” In the future, the D-Premier will have a functioning HDMI 1.3 input, so you will be able to use the amplifier along with your video system or as a high-quality DAC for playing back Blu-ray music discs. There will also be a wireless adaptor, which means you will be able to stream from your favorite computer source, just like you would with a Squeezebox. Only an extension board needs to be installed at your dealer, the antenna is already in place. (When these additional features become available, the D-Premier will return to *TONE* this summer for a follow-up review when these additional features are available.)

In the interim, there’s no reason not to make the D-Premier the hub of your audio system. The only thing missing is a USB port for the DAC. But considering the number of high-quality USB>S/PDIF converters on the market, I wouldn’t consider its absence a deal-breaker. There isn’t a wasted square millimeter of space inside the enclosure, so I don’t know how Devialet engineers could have squeezed another board under the hood!

Conclusion

The Devialet D-Premier is a top-shelf audio component in every way; it’s even better when considered as a complete audio system in one box. Revolutionary engineering combined with short signal paths and minimal need for external cables all adds up to incredible sound that will have very broad appeal. Clichés aside, the D-Premier is more than the sum of its parts, in concept, performance, and value. If you take advantage of all the functions it offers, I don’t know how you could possibly acquire an amplifier, preamplifier,

DAC, phono preamplifier, and music streamer for the cost of the D-Premier. Of all the components to which we have awarded our Exceptional Value Award, I can’t think of one more deserving than the D-Premier.

If all that weren’t enough, the component’s elegant design makes it blend into any decor with ease, forever banishing the idea of not having a high-performance audio system only because of the ensuing clutter that comes along with a rack and cables.

Whether you are downsizing from a rack full of gear or starting fresh, the Devialet D-Premier offers world-class sound, meticulous attention to detail in both style and construction, and a virtually unlimited upgrade path. What’s not to love? ●

The Devialet D-Premier
MSRP: \$15,999

MANUFACTURER

www.deviallet.com
(North America)
www.audioplusservices.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Source Sooloos Control 10, dCS Paganini transport

Analog Source Spiral Groove SG-2/Triplanar w/Grado Statement 1, Rega P9/RB1000 w/Shelter 501 II, Audio Research REF 2 Phono

Speakers GamuT S9, B&W 805D, Magnepan 1.6, MartinLogan Aeries

Cable Cardas Clear, I/C and speaker

Power Running Springs Dmitri, Running Springs Mongoose power cords

REVIEW

A Marvel of Miniaturization

Nagra MSA Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

Swiss hi-fi manufacturer Nagra built its reputation on the ability to produce high-quality audio components in very compact casework. The company has continually honed its engineering and design skills, making every speck of space in pro audio gear count. Such expertise has resulted in consumer gear that looks very similar to pro gear. Indeed, when I visited Nagra's factory last summer, the MSA amplifier was in its final design stage. Prototypes sat on the table, along with another new amplifier that uses 300B vacuum tubes.

Unfortunately, with its "bigger is better" philosophy, the U.S. market has been a bit reluctant to embrace Nagra. Nothing could be more shortsighted: Nagra gear often outperforms the stuff in the large boxes. We've used quite a bit of its gear as reference components over the years, and the sound quality has always been first rate. The MSA power amplifier is yet another example of the firm's engineering prowess.
(continued)





The current MSA amplifier utilizes a single pair of power MOSFET output transistors and is completely symmetrical from input to output, featuring only a pair of XLR input connectors. Should you need single-ended RCA inputs to accommodate your preamplifier, Nagra supplies a pair of Neutrik adaptors in the box. The amplifier also has a pair of switches that adjust input sensitivity to 1V or 2V for maximum output. It's a handy feature, especially if you have an older preamplifier that doesn't have a lot of gain, or if you'd just like to optimize the volume control range of your preamplifier. The MSA is also designed to be used as a bridged monoblock, so listeners requiring more power can easily add a second amplifier and double the power output.

Requiring the same amount of rack space as the Nagra PL-L preamplifier (11 x 9 x 4.6 inches), VPS phonostage, or CDP CD player, the \$11,750 MSA takes advantage of Nagra's VFS Vibration Free Support platform to further improve sonics. Unlike the pyramid-shaped PSA amplifier, rated at 100 watts per channel and outfitted with an LED display to indicate power and clipping, the MSA adds the familiar Nagra modulometer power indicator along with a red LED to indicate clipping. These touches prove very useful, especially when playing heavier music, as the MSA does not sound harsh when driven to modest levels of clipping. An optional cover is available to hide the heat sinks, but they are such a functional piece of modern art, it's a mystery as to why anyone would want to cover them up. A familiar rotary switch used for on, off, mute, and "auto" functions rounds out the styling cues.

Initial Impressions

At just 21 pounds, the MSA is easy to unpack and set up. Thanks to the gigantic heat sink located on top of the amplifier, it runs cucumber cool. Even when pushed hard with heavy metal favorites, it barely got warm to the touch. The MSA does not require much space to keep it within operating limits. *(continued)*



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The Absolute Sound,
Issue 193



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TONEAudio
Magazine,
Issue 18



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My review sample already had some hours on the clock, but my experience with past Nagra gear has been that it only requires 50-100 hours of break-in time. Much like any solid-state amplifier, the MSA opens up and sounds its best after being powered up for a few hours, and can be left in the "on" mode all the time, or the "auto" mode where it will slip into standby mode after a few hours. In the interest of being green, the MSA draws only one watt of power in standby mode.

Top, Bottom, and In Between

Having lived with the Nagra PSA power amplifier for a few years, it's fair to describe its "sound" as extremely neutral. The PSA adds or subtracts little, if anything, from the presentation. This characteristic may be good for some. But for anyone looking for a bit of tonal embellishment, it may not serve as a proper fit.

I've always preferred the sound of the PSA with the PL-L tube preamplifier, as the latter claims an ever so slight warmth to its presentation, making the two a highly enjoyable and musical combination.

While the MSA stays true to the Nagra philosophy of signal purity, there is an additional dose of signal purity and delicacy to the presentation. It might be due to the single pair of output transistors. Currently under review, the First Watt M2 also uses a single pair of MOSFET output transistors and has a sonic signature that's not unlike the best vacuum tube SET amplifiers I've experienced. The difference with the MSA? It possesses the low-level detail of the world's finest SETs, yet also maintains the grip and control associated with a great solid-state amplifier. An outstanding combination, it underscores my philosophy that, with solid state, you can have it all. *(continued)*

Granted, some users will need the extra bit of power that the PSA brings to the table. My reference GamuT S9 speakers have an 89db sensitivity rating, and unless I played fairly compressed rock music (for example, Def Leppard's *Pyromania*) I rarely pushed the MSA to its limits. Even when cranking the band's "Rock, Rock (Till You Drop)," I remained impressed at the ease the MSA exhibited, even with its little red LED almost solid in appearance. The Nagra owner's manual does not list the latter as a "clipping indicator," per se, but as a warning that the output stage is passing more than 9 amps of current. I can push the PSA harder, but it was not as composed at the limit as the MSA. For those with more refined musical taste, the MSA should provide more than enough juice.

Balanced in all aspects of performance, the MSA excelled with pace and reproduction of inner detail. When listening to DEVO's "Blockhead" from *Duty Now For the Future*, the underlying synth riff never got buried in the mix, as it's wont to do with lesser amplifiers—especially during the chorus, when the band members yell "Blockhead!" Should classic DEVO not be your liking, Keith Jarrett basically achieves the same effect as he sings along in a trademark disjointed manner while playing piano. During one of his improvisational bursts in "No Moon At All" from the 2010 duo album *Jasmine*, Jarrett's voice floats right above the keys as it does when you hear him live. Since he uses a standard Steinway on the performance, it was easy to compare the tonality between the recorded instrument and my Steinway. The MSA displayed perfect tonal realism with acoustic instruments.

Furthermore, Charlie Haden plays bass on *Jasmine*, underscoring the MSA's quick transient attack and delicacy. You can hear every move of Haden's fingers sliding up and down the neck of the bass. And while the MSA was long on texture, it did not run out of steam when asked to produce prodigious bass, either. Playing deejay and spinning club-music favorites from Kruder and Dorfmeister, as well as the recent *Hotel Costes 14*, featuring some great tracks by Tosca, I was stunned at how well the diminutive amplifier controlled the woofers on my reference speakers.

But what takes the MSA into another realm is its ability to resolve subtle spatial cues. No matter what my choice of program material, I always managed to hear those little sonic treats that only come to life on the world's finest amplifiers. An extra layer of guitar here, one more overdub there: These are the things you either forget about when using a lesser amplifier or, your brain attempts to fill in the gap. But when you hear them through your speakers, you know you are indeed listening to something special. *(continued)*

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As it did with the other Nagra components with which I've paired it, the VFS platform (\$1,925) added more clarity to the MSA's overall presentation, most notably on low-level acoustic passages. Admittedly, the VFS did not make as dramatic of a difference with the MSA as it did with my VPS phono preamplifier, no doubt due to the vacuum tubes in the VPS being more sensitive to outside vibration. I highly recommend first getting intimately familiar with the MSA and auditioning the VFS at a later date.

Style and Performance

If you are looking for a high-performance music system that needs to fit in a compact space, I can't suggest the MSA highly enough. This one is a precious jewel, offering a level of refinement only heard from some of the world's best (and most expensive) solid-state power amplifiers. Adding the PL-L preamplifier makes for a genuinely formidable combination. And while 60 watts per channel isn't everything to every audiophile, if you have a pair of speakers with the efficiency to optimally operate with this level of power, you will likely find the MSA an enchanting wonder. ●

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MANUFACTURER

www.nagraaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Rega P9/Shelter 501II, Audio Research REF 2 Phono

Digital Source dCS Paganini Stack, Sooloos Music Server

Preamplifier Burmester 011, McIntosh C500

Speakers GamuT S9, B&W 805D

Cable Cardas Clear

Power Running Springs Dmitri

Bel Canto e.One FM1 FM Tuner:

Riding the Airwaves on New Wings

By Lawrence Devoe

We live in an era of audio contrasts. Digital disc players and music servers coexist with vinyl playback systems like lions and lambs. Reel-to-reel and cassette tape decks appear headed for white elephant status. FM radio, the only other major analog holdout, remains under siege from satellite and Internet broadcasting. So why bother with a new analog FM tuner?

I posed the question to John Stronczer, CEO of Bel Canto Design. A self-confessed FM fancier, he sees the creation of the FM1 as a “challenge,” a device that applies his company’s advances in digital-signal processing to taming the occasionally wild analog FM signal. Stronczer wisely resisted the temptation to “throw in” HD Radio because of its inferior compressed sound. He’s convinced that there are enough audiophiles who will appreciate the fruits of Bel Canto’s labor and prefer the superiority of honest analog FM sound. The performance of the FM1 should prove him correct.





The Wonderful World of FM Radio

My long love affair with FM radio started with a Dynaco tuner in the 1960s and was fueled by stations like Chicago's WFMT. Leaving the city's bitter cold for Augusta, Georgia's humid heat, I found that my FM options had also gone south. To fulfill the need for high quality cultural programming, I turned to two local public radio stations. Unfortunately, they reside in the low rent district of the FM band. Their weaker signals led to the acquisition of quieter, more sensitive FM tuners—including those from Magnum Labs, Fanfare, Day Sequerra—and supporting them with excellent antennas.

Of course, listening habits change over time. After discovering digital music servers, I started spending more time with Internet radio and less with my beloved analog FM tuner. The good news about digital music servers is that they access thousands of

radio stations that cover all genres. The bad news: highly compressed signals (usually 128 kbps or lower) that reduce frequency response and channel separation. While I didn't miss analog FM's snap, crackle, and pop, I missed its air and dynamics. Enter the FM1, Bel Canto's first serious foray into the world of analog FM tuners.

FM1 Crosses My Threshold: The Magic Box

Aesthetically, the FM1 shares the compact, understated façade of its e.One stable mates. A multifunction knob selects broadcast mode, station frequency (call letters and program data when available), and signal strength. The supplied remote can store 10 preset channels and controls other compatible Bel Canto equipment. Pushing the "tuner" button enables forward and reverse channel selection, operation display, and forced mono for noisy stations. *(continued)*

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The “magic” in this little box comes from its sophisticated digital signal processor (DSP) that massages the raw FM signal.

On the back, the rear panel is cleanly laid out. From left to right, there is a power switch; an input for the basic outboard power supply or optional VBS1 (virtual battery) and LNS1 (line power supply); XLR or RCA analog outputs; an antenna input; an RS-232 control port; and bank of digital outputs (SPDIF/BNC, Toslink, and AES/EBU). The “magic” in this little box comes from its sophisticated digital signal processor (DSP) that massages the raw FM signal. After digital processing, the signal can be routed to analog or digital outputs (as a 96kHz/24-bit data stream). This onboard technology is an offshoot of Bel Canto’s extensive DSP research. I listened through both balanced and unbalanced analog outputs feeding my Pass pre-amp, and through the digital coaxial outputs into a PerfectWave DAC.

The most critical and time-con-

suming part of setting up the FM1 is described in the concise user’s guide under the heading “Choosing Your Antenna.” The supplied wire antenna is intended to ensure proper functioning of the FM1, but not for critical listening. As my housing subdivision falls between rural and urban in terms of broadcast signal strength, I followed the company’s recommendations to the letter. I also placed a Magnum Labs Signal Sleuth between the antenna lead-in and the FM1. The Sleuth greatly aids the cause of public radio stations found at the far left of the FM band.

The Listening Sessions: The Sounds of Silence

It took nearly two hours to set up my two antennas. A Fanfare FM-2G antenna took turns with a Winegard multi-element Yagi, the latter as ideal for single-family homes as the former

component is for apartment dwellers. The FM1 is more sensitive to antenna selection, orientation, and placement than just about any tuner I’ve used. I regretted not being able to use an oscilloscope to assist in the tedious but essential process of antenna adjustment. Fortunately, the FM1’s signal strength display readout on the front panel offers considerable help with antenna orientation.

Greater Augusta sports 18 analog FM stations that have Internet counterparts, enabling a direct comparison of both broadcast methods. The Fanfare whip antenna retrieved 12 stations suitable for listening; the Yagi got all 18 and was used for most of the critical sessions. While the FM1’s signal strength indicator ranges from 0 to 100, a reading of at least 40 is needed to prevent the tuner defaulting to Blend (reduced channel separation) mode. With ei-

ther antenna, only 8 stations hit the necessary target: My two public radio favorites and six popular music stations.

FM noise, the Achilles heel of analog stereo broadcasts, was minimal for the strongest stations. Bel Canto’s latest design is the quietest tuner I’ve ever heard. Public radio stations sounded better than their pop counterparts that typically EQ their signal for “boom and sizzle” aimed at car and portable radios. The FM1 mercilessly exposed such differences in broadcast techniques, just as a good tuner should.

My “aha” moment came when comparing Internet broadcasts from a Logitech Squeezebox Touch connected to a PerfectWave DAC. The analog broadcasts had a slight hiss, but their air, imaging, and warmth easily bested that of

the highest-quality digital stations. Voices sounded more natural on the FM1 and lacked the pervasive tubiness of many Internet sources. After many A/B comparisons, I was hard pressed to detect a consistent difference between the FM1’s digital and analog outputs—both sounded excellent. Best overall sound came from balanced operation.

To further experiment, I retrieved my old Fanfare FM-1A from storage. After hooking it up to the same antennas and playing it through balanced outputs, the tuner picked up all of the stations that the Bel Canto unit captured. The Fanfare did a creditable job with dynamics and imaging, yet its noise level, even on the best stations, registered noticeably higher than that of the Bel Canto and intruded on my enjoyment of the music. *(continued)*



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Signing Off

Like a first date, many of us fondly remember FM radio as a gateway to new life experiences. The top FM stations had the best sound and programming capacity that went far beyond that of our home music libraries. These stations also served up rare recordings and live concert broadcasts.

So, before you conclude that \$1500 is too steep an admission price, consider that it's a one-time cash outlay compared to the ongoing and rising expense of annual digital subscriptions with high-speed Internet portals. And, in the end, remember, you're footing the bill for lower fidelity.

Bel Canto's FM1 is evolutionary in its handling of FM noise. It breathes new life into your stereo system, regardless of its vintage or price point. Analog FM remains a viable audio option, and will be around for the foreseeable future. If you live in a metro area blessed with strong, clear FM stations and highly varied programming, the FM1 presents one of the best modern arguments in support of the radio medium that I've ever heard. ●

**Bel Canto e.One
FM1 FM Tuner
MSRP: \$1,495**

MANUFACTURER

www.belcantodesign.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources Esoteric P-03, D-03, G-Orb, UX-Pi; Logitech Squeezebox Touch; Meridian Sooloos; PS Audio PerfectWave

Analog Sources VPI HRX w/12.7 arm, Rim Drive; VPI Aries w/10.5i arm, flywheel, SDS Controllers

Phono Cartridges Clearaudio Goldfinger v.2, Clearaudio Stradivari

Phono Preamplifiers Pass XP-25, XP-15

Preamplifiers Pass XP-20; Lexicon 12HD-B

Power Amplifiers Pass XA-100.5, Pass X-3

Speakers Martin Logan CLX, Stage, Script-I, Descent-I (2), Descent (2)

Interconnects Nordost Odin, Valhalla

Speaker Cable Nordost Odin

Power Cords/Conditioning Nordost Odin, Valhalla; Running Springs Audio Dmitri and Maxim

Vibration Control Black Diamond Racing

Room Treatment Echo Buster, Corner Busters, Bass Busters, Double Busters



Totem Acoustic Forest Loudspeakers

By Mark Marcantonio

One of the most exciting aspects of high-end audio is finding an unassuming product that delivers big results. Totem Acoustics has a well-deserved reputation for producing small speakers with a big sound. If you've experienced a Totem demo at a hi-fi shows, you know the company demonstrates a habit of playing its entry-level speakers more often than the flagship models, as if to reinforce this message.

My personal fun with the Totem Forest speakers began with the first track I played, Joe Walsh's "Life's Been Good." The review pair arrived courtesy of an East Coast Totem dealer rather than directly from the Montreal factory, so some of the break in was already complete. A solid week spent listening to classic rock, served up via the McIntosh MS750 music server, handily finished the break-in period.



REVIEW

Not that I minded looking at the speakers in the meantime. My Forests were finished in Ice, a high-gloss finish that has the slightest tinge of gray, and part of the family of four “design” high-gloss paint finishes that include Dusk, Sky, and Fire. (Black, Blue, and Red.) They are also available in white satin and three wood finishes: black ash, mahogany and cherry. Finish quality on the review pair was as smooth as anything coming from the Wilson factory, a highly impressive feat for a \$3,500 pair of speakers.

Unique Approaches

Totem’s preference to call its speakers “columns” underlines the distinctive aspects that make up the Forest. The color gives the Forests the appearance of being larger than the 7.7 x 34.3 x 10.6" (195 x 870 x 270 mm) measurements suggest. The rounded front edges are different than many of Totem’s other models. And instead of utilizing conventional spikes to mechanically couple the speakers to the floor, designer Vince Bruzzese took a novel approach. A trio of aluminum “Claws,” with balls arrayed in a triangle pattern, comprises a very solid base. Functionally, the balls act like spikes and decouple the speaker from the floor.

The Forest is a two-way design, featuring a 6.5-inch (165mm) woofer and a 1-inch (25mm) chambered aluminum dome tweeter, with a second-order crossover at 2.5 kHz. Drivers are neatly flush mounted, and according to the well-written manual, should be listened to without grilles. Totem is firm in its belief that grilles are optional. Unless you have small children or shed-prone pets, they will probably be unnecessary.

Peeking inside the cabinet reveals the same level of attention to the finer details. The interior is sprayed with borosilicate damping material instead of stuffing foam. Similarly, the crossover network is also robustly built with top-quality components and heavy wiring.

(continued)



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REVIEW

Straight-Ahead Setup

The Forests spent the most time in my 13 x 19 foot family room, which has an 8-foot ceiling. During the initial weeklong break-in period, the speakers were randomly placed but still threw a very convincing three-dimensional soundfield. These are not finicky speakers.

Listeners that spend a few hours on placement will reap tremendous rewards, as careful setup techniques yielded even better sound. In my room, the Forests ended up three feet from the rear and side walls, with my listening position about 8 feet back. Wide dispersion is a Totem hallmark, and the Forests were one of the few speakers I've experienced that did not require toe-in alignment. (Not that they sounded overly harsh with the toe-in array.) The wide dispersion also helps when listening casually from another room. Guests were always impressed at how good the Forests sounded, even when used as background entertainment.

Important note: The Forests' imaging performance suffers if you have to place them too close to the rear or side walls. If possible, give the speakers at least 18–24 inches from any wall. Their rated power handling is 50–200 watts, with a nominal impedance of 6 ohms, making the Forests easy to drive with solid-state or vacuum tube electronics. I got great results with the AudioEngine N22 amplifier and vintage Marantz 2230B (22–30 watts per channel), so if you currently don't have the budget for speakers and speakers, the Forests provide a great foundation on which you can build.

Taking Care of Business

Thanks to the surfeit of power supplied by the i-7 amplifier, it was easy to put the Forests to task. In most instances, your ears will give out before the speakers do. When listening to the Pixies' "Allison" from Mobile Fidelity's remaster of *Bossanova* at high volumes, the Forests still maintained the placement of the individual guitar tracks without experiencing any soundstage collapse. *(continued)*



If required, the Forests produce serious bass, but you will need to spend time fine-tuning them to your liking. A mass-loading compartment is located in the bottom of each speaker, and I found the perfect balance by placing about eight pounds of sand in each one. The upshot of utilizing the loading option instantly materialized on the music sources. Don Williams' deep, gravelly voice became tighter and better defined with the sand in place. And the thunderclaps in "Gaia," from James Taylor's *Hourglass*, carried a lot more weight than expected.

Instrumental pieces posed few challenges. John Barry's sweeping, percussion- and horn-driven soundtrack to *Dances With Wolves* requires speakers with a wide soundstage in order to pull off the connection to the wide-open Dakota prairie. The French horns in "Journey to Fort Sedgewick" arrived with sublime tonality. And while the Forests admirably handled the percussion and detailed bass line in "Pawnee Attack," the track illustrated the speakers' understandable limitations. A small speaker can only move so much air, and the cut forced me to scale back the volume.

Dialing down the volume and switching the program material to Wilco's 2009 self-titled album, I found the harmonies on "You and I" taking on a magical character. Whether you prefer Johnny or Rosanne Cash, listeners that favor male or female vocalists will enjoy the midrange body the Forests offer.

While the Forests proved an excellent match with vacuum-tube electronics, just like the Mites and Rainmakers that I have used extensively, they were a much better match with my modded PS Audio Trio C100 integrated amplifier than the aforementioned two examples proved to be. Your amplification choice shouldn't be a limiting factor.

Final Call

Equally pleasant at low and high volume levels, Totem Acoustic Forests offer a highly musical experience for a modest price. They play well with the three major amplification types: solid-state, vacuum tubes, and Class D. Factor in the ease of setup and a gorgeous pair of cabinets that come in a wide range of finishes, and you end up with a perfect recipe for a fatigue-free speaker that's enjoyable to look at as it is to hear.

Additional Listening:

With so much attention placed on the stratosphere of hi-fi components, it's always thrilling to hear something as engaging as the Forests at a price that most audiophiles can afford. Per Totem's instruction, I used no toe-in on the speakers and put them about six feet apart (tweeter center to tweeter center) in my main listening room, which measures 24 feet wide and 16 feet deep. Placing them about four feet from the rear walls minimized sidewall interference. The Forests had a perfect balance of midrange clarity and sacrificed nothing in the bass department.

Even though these speakers are slightly on the lower side of the sensitivity scale, at 87db, the 45-watt-per-channel Conrad Johnson MV-50 C1 and 25-watt-per-channel Pass Labs M2 had a much easier time driving the Forests than they did my Magnepan 1.6 or Vandersteen 2CE speakers, which have similar sensitivity specifications. Since 25-40 watts will only get you so far, a quick swap for the new Simaudio Moon i700, with 175 watts per channel, offered me the ability to play my favorite metal and large-scale classical tracks without strain—at least until things got very loud.

The key term with these speakers? Balance. Totem Forests' top-to-bottom coherence caught me off guard in the initial listening sessions. I wasn't missing my panels, yet the Forests moved a serious amount of air when I wanted to get wacky with the volume control. By comparison, the Magnepans can be very beguiling when listening to solo vocals, but don't rock with authority. The Forests ably captured vocal nuances and spatial cues, but also had the speed and weight necessary to thoroughly enjoy records like Electric Wizard's *Dopethrone*.

Indeed, the Forests' strong suit relates to how they offer a healthy dose of resolution without crossing over to the dark side of harshness. However, the speakers will reveal shortcomings in your gear if it is not up to par. Connect the Forests to a budget solid-state integrated and you will probably be disappointed. But don't point your finger at the Forests. Spend a few extra bucks on some worthy components (I suggest a nice tube amp), some decent cable, and I suspect you will share my amazement in hearing that \$3,500 speakers can sound this good. *TONE* is proud to award Totem one of our first Exceptional Value Awards for 2011.
—Jeff Dorgay

The Totem Forest
\$3,495 per pair

MANUFACTURER
www.totem-speakers.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Rega RP1 w/Ortofon Super OM40, Simaudio 5.3

Digital Source McIntosh MS300 Music Server, Simaudio D300 DAC

Amplifiers Simaudio Moon i7, Vista Audio i34

Misc Shuynyata Venom 3 power cords



The EAT ECC803S Tubes

High Performance or Hype?

By Jeff Dorgay

Music Hall's Leland Leard always goes the extra mile. The test set of EAT ECC803s tubes arrived at my doorstep just days before Christmas, with little green bows tied around each box. Nice touch dude! Having had an excellent experience with the EAT KT88s reviewed in Issue 30, I was hoping for a similar performance increase with the company's small signal tubes, direct replacements for the ever-popular 12AX7 dual triode.

If you read the aforementioned review, you know that the EAT (European Audio Team) products are not inexpensive; the KT88s tip the scale at \$450 each. Similarly, the ECC803s reviewed here are on the pricey side at \$225 each, but if you've been following New Old Stock (NOS) vacuum tube prices, you know that this isn't all that crazy, with the rarest of the Telefunken's now trading for \$400 or more a piece.

The toughest part of playing the NOS game is that when something bad happens, you are on your own. Granted, disaster doesn't strike often, but just like any tube, they can fail. And when you spend \$400 a pop, it leaves a lousy taste in your mouth, especially if you spent the extra money to have a

pair or a quad match-ed for your preamp. Once you get hooked on premium tubes, standard-issue stuff won't provide the fix you need. So what's a tube junkie to do?

New Tube Benefits, NOS Tube Sound

EAT tubes provide the best of both worlds. As brand-new tubes, they carry a six-month warranty. Most tubes will fail shortly after turn on, or within the first 100 hours of use. The ECC803s are also tightly matched for gain and noise specs, so these are premium tubes that you can use in a phonostage or other high-quality application, requiring noise kept to a minimum.

These days, most standard-issue vacuum tubes have a tough time exceeding 5000 hours before signal degradation or outright failure. Nonetheless,

EAT claims a minimum lifespan of 10,000 hours.

That's the equivalent of listening to music for six hours a day, seven days per week for almost five years straight. I'm guessing that most audiophiles listen approximately half that much, or perhaps less. Doing the math, the cost only comes out to about ten cents an hour if you buy a set of four for your favorite preamplifier!



As you can see from the photo, the ECC803s come attached with EAT's patented, finned aluminum tube coolers. Not only do these look super cool, they help lower the tube temperature, extending tube life. However, space may be an issue. With its tube output section, McIntosh's C500 control center seemed to be a perfect candidate for the ECC803s, given the unit's four 12AX7s in the line stage and another four in the phono stage. Unfortunately, due to the bright red, attached finned tube coolers, the

EAT tubes will not fit in the front (linestage) section of the C500.

To take advantage of the ECC803s' low noise specification, I concentrated on using them primarily in the phono section of the C500, where they gave an impressive performance. Capturing 24bit/192khz samples of the C500 before and after swapping tubes confirmed that the EAT tubes were far superior to the stock versions in every way. Benefits included a smoother, yet more extended high end and a significant drop in noise floor—both

great to have in a phono stage.

Acoustic music made it easy to tell the differences made by the ECC803s. The Jung Trio's *Dvorak Trio in F Minor, Op.65* (recently released on Groove Note) claimed a much more organic, palpable feel with the EAT tubes in the phono stage. Violin and piano sounded more natural, with a more organic sound to the strings. The instruments also possessed more natural decay. Indeed, no matter the music, everything had more body with the EAT tubes. *(continued)*



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Consistent Performers

The improvement wrought by the ECC803s remained consistent in the other gear that I auditioned. Moreover, an equivalent upgrade was also found in the phonostage of Conrad Johnson's new ET3 SE preamplifier currently being reviewed. Staff writer and vintage gear collector Jerald O'Brien has an extensively modded Dynaco PAS-3 preamplifier as well as a mint Audio Research SP-3 preamplifier; both rely on the 12AX7. In a direct comparison to the SP-3 loaded with vintage Telefunken's, the EAT tubes gave no ground at all, and we both strained to hear any difference.

Unless you are the ultimate perfectionist, the ECC803s may represent slight overkill for your average tube power amplifier. After a short test drive with the McIntosh MC275 and a pair of PrimaLuna monoblocks, the change was not as dramatic as it was when used for preamplifier duty. In all fairness, both of these amplifiers used 12AT7 tubes along with the 12AX7s, so perhaps with all EAT tubes in the small signal position, a larger improvement would have been realized. At present, EAT only has an ECC88 (6922/6DJ8) tube on the market. Perhaps the 12AU7 and 12AT7 aren't far behind.

900 Large

Regardless of how you roll, 900 bucks is a fair amount to spend on a set of tubes. While it is impossible to tell if they will actually hit or exceed their lifespan targets, the ECC803s are (provisionally) highly recommended. I have friends that have paid double or triple that amount for a power cord that had little or no effect on their system.

Besides, the proof is in the listening. These tubes transformed every preamplifier I had a chance to plug them into, sounding as good, if not better, than any vintage NOS tubes I've sampled. And in the latter realm, the ECC803s are definitely in the middle of pack when it comes to expense. We purchased the review set of ECC803s to use in System Three in order to determine their longevity.

Here's to the new king of 12AX7s. ●

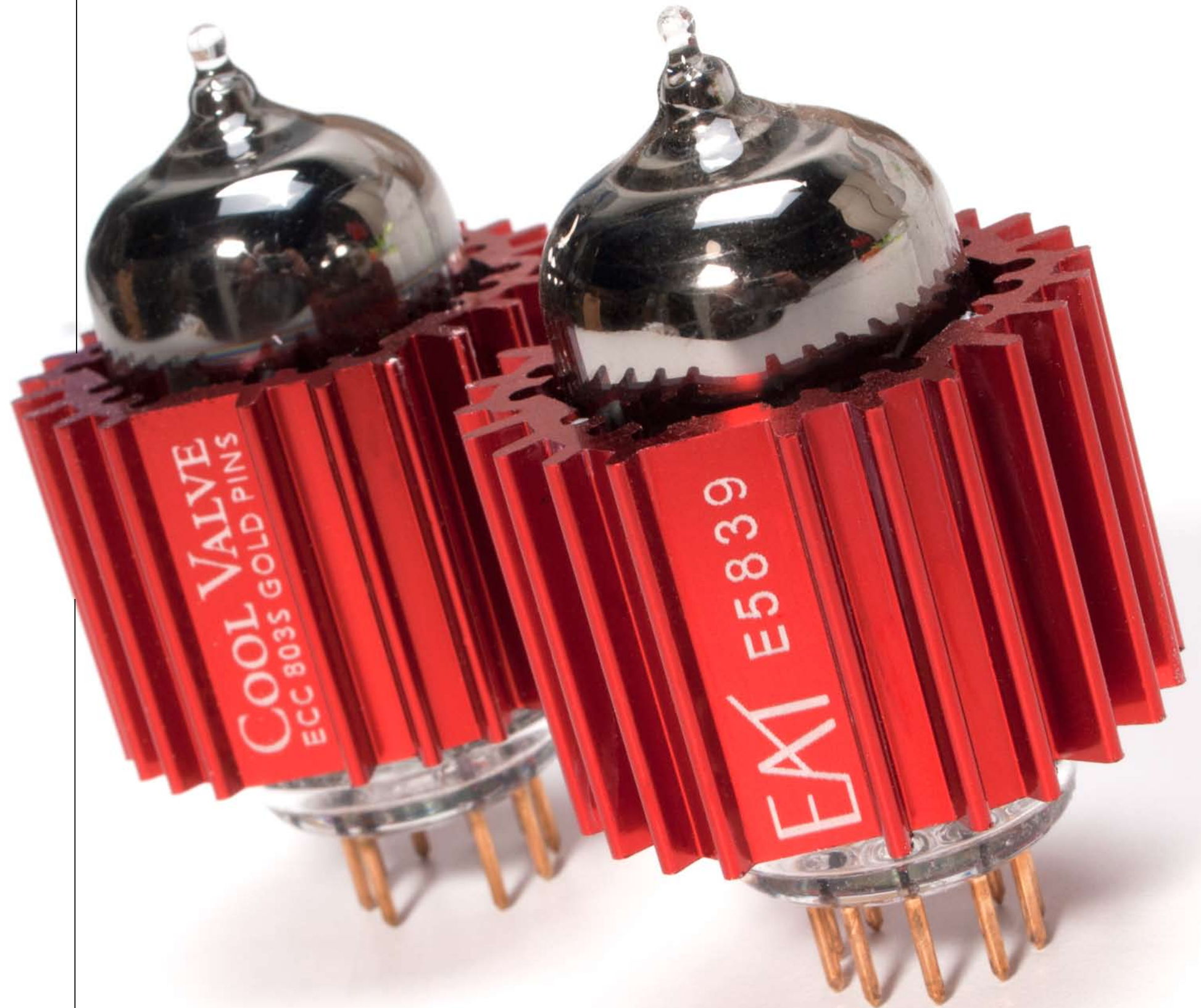
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Budget Audio Redefined

Polk Blackstone TL2 and PSW111 Speaker Combination

By Jeff Dorgay

One of the biggest concerns facing the audio industry is how to lure new converts to the wacky world of *gear*. These days, the higher end of the high end will easily set you back six figures.

That's not only out of reach of Joe Six-Pack, it's out of reach of most rational humans that don't earn seven figures. At *TONE*, we continue to provide more coverage of entry-level and vintage gear for good reason; we all have to start somewhere. But it doesn't have to be a bad thing. You can get satisfying sound on a tight budget, and the Polk Audio Blackstone TL2s will stretch your audio budget further than anything I've ever experienced.

Since its emergence in the mid-70s, Polk's mantra to offer high-end sound without matching high-end pricing has remained the same. On a recent visit to its corporate headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland, I saw and heard a number of its latest efforts, including a new flagship speaker in the \$5,000 per pair range. But the most exciting thing I saw was the Blackstone TL2 speakers you see here.

For \$99.99 each, you get a pair of tiny satellite speakers that use a 3 1/4-inch-long throw woofer and 1/2-inch silk dome tweeter in a tiny cabinet weighing only about 3 pounds that I guarantee will blow you out of your chair, ala the old

Maxell cassette man, when they are mated with the matching PSW111 subwoofer (\$299.99.) So, for \$500, you can have a rocking set of speakers that won't take up much space in your living area. Add a great vintage 70s receiver for \$200 to \$300, and you still have enough money left from a \$1,000 bill to grab a decent used turntable.

Five- and six-figure speakers are pretty normal in our world, so it's incredibly cool when you hear something this amazing for \$500. For the stylistically inclined, rest assured that these speakers look as great as they sound. Their curved cabinets should fit any decor, whether you use them with stands or mount them to the wall or ceiling.

How Does Polk Do It?

Beginning with its RM 3000 system, Polk entered the world of small satellite main speakers with a powered subwoofer in the late 80s. The tiny speakers and their powered subwoofer listed for \$700 and redefined what a sat/sub system could do. They may not have invented the genre, but they certainly moved to the head of the class in short order. More than 20 years later, Polk remains at the forefront, building a better system for \$200 less. Of course, some of this is due to offshore manufacturing, but most of the credit goes to the experienced design team located in their Baltimore facility.

Employee turnover is very low at Polk, and a majority of the staff has been with the company for decades. Such depth of experience makes it a lot easier to build a substantial base of knowledge. Every aspect of Polk speakers is designed from the ground up, which also helps in a situation like this, because instead of trying to build a box around off-the-shelf components, Polk's engineers designed everything to solve the specific problem of making a high-performance speaker fit in a small enclosure.

Just like Polk's larger speakers, the TL2 uses a ring radiator tweeter that is similar to that used in its LSi floorstanding speaker systems. The company's Time Lens system of aligning the woofer and mid bass on the same plane gives the speakers a high level of coherence, making them sound much like a single-driver speaker but with the performance advantages of a two-way system. (Read about the TL2's other unique features here: <http://www.polkaudio.com/homeaudio/blackstonetl/technology.php>)

Set-up Options

Polk offers three different ways to use the TL2/PSW111 combination. No matter what your amplification situation, it's a breeze to utilize. The system can be used with your speaker level outputs, line level outputs, or, if you have a multichannel home-theater system with an LFE input, that will also work. *(continued)*

Frugalicious.

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Polk's engineers designed everything to solve the specific problem of making a high-performance speaker fit in a small enclosure.

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ZU Omen
\$999 pr

If we told you that you could now own a spectacular pair of full-range loudspeakers (real bass response down to 30Hz), hand-built in the state of Utah for under a grand, you'd probably think we were crazy. The Zu Audio Omens really do exist and they sound incredible. These speakers are built like tanks, with a 10" full-range driver (Zu Audio's 4th generation of this type) and a time-aligned super tweeter delivering both extension at the frequency extremes and dynamics like you've never heard before.

Wharfedale has always been at the leading edge of development in acoustic science. New technologies and materials create new opportunities to push the boundaries of music reproduction. The loudspeaker is often regarded as the weakest link in any system, Wharfedale develops loudspeaker systems capable of extracting the best from any hi-fi - loudspeakers that will continue to improve as you upgrade the rest of your system. EVO2 is the successor to the highly acclaimed evolution series of loudspeakers. Although the lineage is obvious, every internal component has been updated and improved to create a loudspeaker series which can justifiably be called state-of-the-art' in every respect.

Wharfedale EVOII-8
\$800- \$399 pr



If you have access to test tones, you can get a great feel for where the satellites stop and the subwoofer takes over, making it easier to concentrate on overall system smoothness.

The TL2 claims a low-frequency response spec of -3db at 125Hz, but you can take advantage of room gain by placing the speakers in the corner of the room or near the rear walls. They will even work well on a bookshelf, though imaging performance may suffer. The PSW111's LF crossover setting is variable from 60Hz to 150Hz. A 60Hz setting is too low for the TL2s and leaves a hole in the upper-bass response, but start at that level so you can slowly bring up the subwoofer level and presence.

Should you lack sophisticated measurement tools, play a few bass-heavy tracks and fine-tune the level and frequency crossover controls until the speaker system has sufficient bass weight without the subwoofer sounding rough or boomy. You'll know you've nailed it when you get full-bodied bass

response from the tiny speakers and can't really tell where the sub is located in the room. If you have access to test tones, you can get a great feel for where the satellites stop and the subwoofer takes over, making it easier to concentrate on overall system smoothness.

Mind-Blowing Sound

Any pre-conceived notions you may have about small speakers will vanish the minute you play music through the TL2s. Having heard more than my fair share of outright lousy inexpensive (under \$1,000/pr.) speakers, the TL2s are a treat, even for those of you with champagne taste and budgets. Initially staying in the budget groove, I plugged in my used Pioneer SX-424 receiver that I picked up for \$60 on eBay for last issue's "Slummin" column. *(continued)*



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I was able to push these speakers extremely hard before distortion started to set in. And yes, I dialed up the volume up to levels that would certainly cause the average apartment or dorm dweller to get angry looks from neighbors.



Using 50-cent-per-foot Radio Shack speaker wire and a used Denon 3910 universal disc player (also purchased on eBay for about \$200) made for a highly impressive budget system, and a great place for any music lover to start their journey.

Even with 15 watts per channel, the little Polks played authoritatively. When listening Alice in Chains' *Jar of Flies*, I could crank "I Stay Away" to (small) room-rattling levels. A brief stint with favorite tracks that have a lot of LF energy will help you optimize the subwoofer to perfection and attain more musical enjoyment.

As much fun as the TL2/PSW111 combination is with a vintage receiver, I wasn't ready for the big jump in sound quality I got when stepping up to better electronics. First, I swapped the SX-424 for the Cambridge Audio 840P (a 90-watt-per-channel solid-state integrated amplifier) and then, for the Croft Series 7 tube preamplifier, and finally, the Micro 25 hybrid power amplifier. Each took the sound quality further than the preceding setup. Indeed, the TL2s are extremely revealing speakers.

Suffice to say that, when mated to the \$2,500 Croft setup, the Polk combination more than held its own. Connecting it to world-class electronics revealed imaging performance and reproduction of spatial cues that I expect from

speakers costing much more. Granted, with the dCS Paganini stack driving the system, you could now easily hear the speakers' limitations, yet they still made no missteps. The only errors were those of omission. But if you don't listen to music with huge dynamic and frequency extremes, you may never miss a thing. Once properly setup, bass from the three-speaker system boasted excellent detail; this was not a case of hearing just one-note bass thump away. I was particularly excited listening to Marcus Miller's new *A Night In Monte Carlo*, which contains several great bass solos.

The mids are natural and open, neither squawking nor beaming. Fans of vocal music will be thrilled with the large helpings of coherence. Listening to Anja Garbarek's "Big Mouth" on her *Smiling and Waving* proved a joyful experience. The shifts in her timbral character as she goes from a highly processed background vocalist to a cleaner, main vocalist were easy to track with the speakers, as they never lost control of the electronic instrumentation in the background. Ani DiFranco's live version of "Amazing Grace" from *Living in Clip* was another fun song that the TL2s aced. DiFranco's complex vocal stylings fall flat and lose natural resonance on unresolving speakers. But the Polks sailed right through, delivering a rich performance. And if you are sick and tired of Nils Lofgren's "Keith Don't Go" (and let's face it, who isn't?) but hooked on plucky acoustic guitar music to serve as test material, try DiFranco's "Gravel"—you may have a new favorite test track.

And if it's power you want, it's power you've got. I was consistently impressed with how loud these little speakers played without breakup. Though many of us believe that you can only get "big sound from big speakers," the TL2/PSW111 combination renders such thinking obsolete. Even when spinning some of my favorite heavy tracks from Led Zeppelin, UFO, and Deep Purple, I was able to push these speakers extremely hard before distortion started to set in. And yes, I dialed up the volume up to levels that would certainly cause the average apartment or dorm dweller to get angry looks from neighbors.

Finally, the Polks do something that almost no budget speaker does well: They offer up a liberal share of resolution at low volumes. And in tackling this challenge, they do an even better job with tube amplification than solid-state. Even at quiet conversation levels, it was easy to discern the differences between Robert Plant and his backing vocalists on the recent *Band of Joy*. This degree of dynamics and contrast reveals a high level of linearity that I've never had the pleasure of experiencing at this price.

Oh, and for those looking for the ultimate computer system, the TL2s perform incredibly well when used nearfield on a desktop. With the subwoofer under your desk, the TL2s throw a huge soundstage. Matching them with the latest MiniWatt three-watt amplifier served as a perfect choice, as it coupled tube warmth with the speakers. *(continued)*

RedEye, the **personal** remote.

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Simple.

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- 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



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

redeyerebate.com

You Know You Want 'Em!

I've rarely heard a pair of \$1,000 speakers, let alone a \$500 set, which possesses this level of balance. You need the subwoofer to make them sing, but it's worth the extra money. The \$600/pair Silverline Minuets (reviewed this issue) are also excellent, but don't have the TL2/PSW111's bass grunt or cheaper price. The Polks win the day.

If I were starting my hi-fi journey today, these would be the speakers I would buy. The Polk TL2/PSW111 combination offers everything a music lover could want: Great imaging, weighty LF performance, tonal accuracy, and the ability to play loud when required.

And they are solid enough that, should you join the ranks of dedicated audiophiles, you will be able to go through a few rounds of electronics upgrades before you start thinking about a better pair of speakers. The TL2s are that good; they may just stay in your family forever.

Polk Audio's claim of "Big Speaker Sound Without the Big Speakers" is spot-on. *TONE* is eager to award the TL2/PSW111 speaker combination one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2011, and they will be the speaker to beat for one of our Product of the Year Awards this December. Enthusiastically recommended. ●

Polk Audio TL2 speakers and PSW111 subwoofer

MSRP: \$99.99 ea (speakers), \$299.99 (subwoofer)

MANUFACTURER

<http://www.polkaudio.com/homeaudio/blackstonetl/index.php>

PERIPHERALS

Digital Source Denon 3910, dCS Paganini stack

Analog Source Dual 1219/Grado Red, Rega P3-24/Denon 103

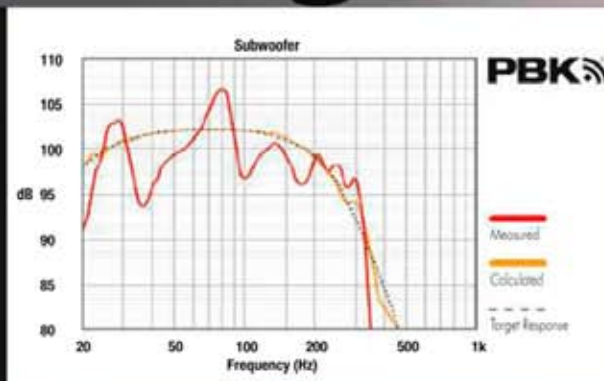
Amplification Pioneer SX-424, Cambridge Audio 840P integrated amplifier, Croft Series 7 preamplifier/Micro 25 power amplifier

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— Chris Martens, AV Guide

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WEB REVIEW

From Our Website

In case you haven't been perusing our website on a regular basis, we are constantly adding gear reviews between issues. The following are links to the three most recent reviews.



Vitus Audio SS-050 Amplifier

\$26,999

[click here to read web review](#)

A no-holds-barred approach to amplifier design, the SS-050's removable top panel reveals a perfectionist approach to build quality and parts selection. In case the gold casework isn't for you, Hans Ole Vitus also builds them in silver and black. But we suspect that the gold will grow on you...



Croft Micro 25 Preamplifier and Series 7 Power Amplifier

\$1,250 each
[click here to read web review](#)

This vacuum-tube preamplifier and hybrid power amplifier will not only astonish you with their musicality, but you'll be stunned to see the little amount of circuitry that exists inside the boxes! Designer Glenn Croft is back, and his latest creations are marvels of simplicity. Featuring point-to-point wiring and nothing more than what is absolutely needed to get the job done, these components will anchor a great hi-fi system on a tight budget.

McIntosh MR-88 Tuner

\$4,000
[click here to read web review](#)

What, a tuner? A \$4,000 tuner? Considering that the best FM tuners of the 70s were close to \$1,000, and some of those tuners easily command four-figure prices on eBay today, the McIntosh MR-88 is a bargain. It features legendary performance with terrestrial radio, but includes HD and satellite capabilities, too. And in true McIntosh tradition, it has the classic styling that launched a full line of fantastic tuners. If you are a radio aficionado, you owe it to yourself to see the MR-88 at your local McIntosh dealer.



Slummin'

By jeff Dorgay



Nakamichi TA-2A

\$60, eBay

While we only feature one Slummin' product this issue, it's a major classic. Many audio fans consider Japanese receivers built in the mid-to-late 70s the pinnacle of their respective era. And while the quality from Marantz, Pioneer, and others taking a major nosedive by the 80s, there was one exception to the rule—Nakamichi.

The legendary cassette deck manufacturer, which had already produced the 400 and 600 series of separate components, was still going strong in the 80s with another line of preamplifiers: the CR-5 and CR-7. The latter were well regarded, but the real magic existed in the matching PA line of power amplifiers that featured STASIS technology licensed from none other than Nelson Pass. These amplifiers still sell for around \$1,000 and are worth every penny.

But the prize for the true bargain shopper? The TA-2 pictured here. With a genuine 50-watt-per-channel STASIS amplifier inside, they can usually be found in great shape for around \$100. This one just happened to be a little less, was in perfect condition, *and* packed with care. A definite keeper, and with a pair of vintage JBL L100s, one of the best trips down memory lane that's available.

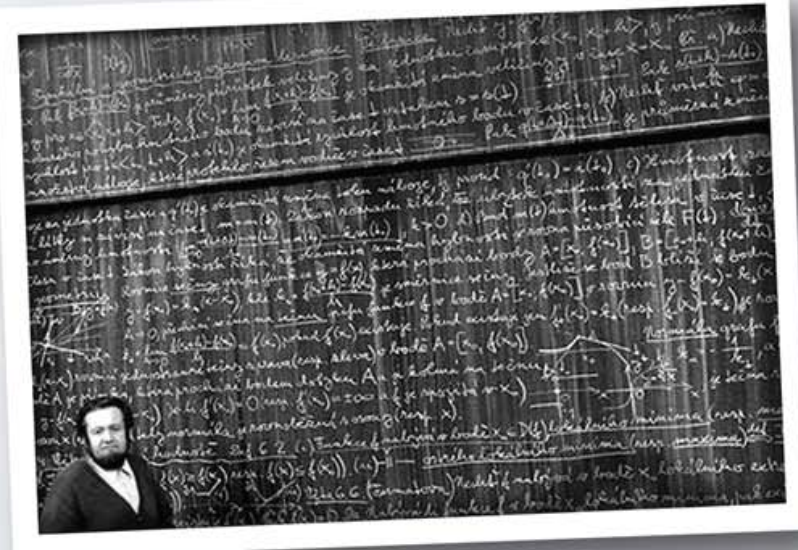
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—Robert Harley, *The Absolute Sound*, March 2007



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