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No. 36 April 2011

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Drive-By Truckers

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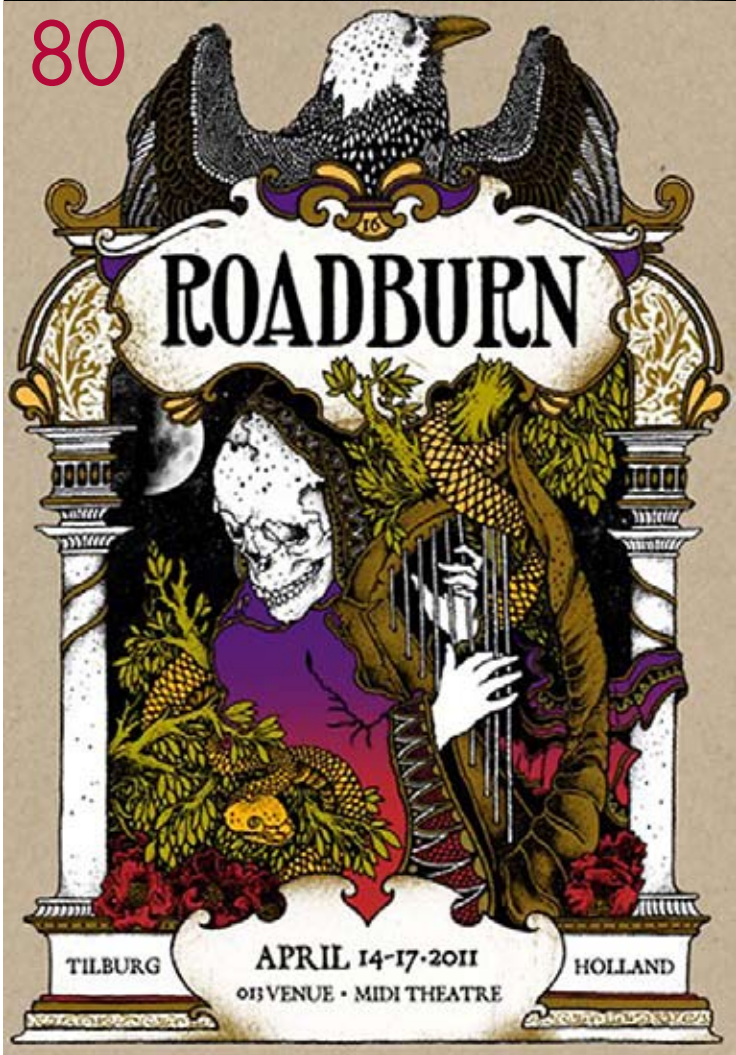
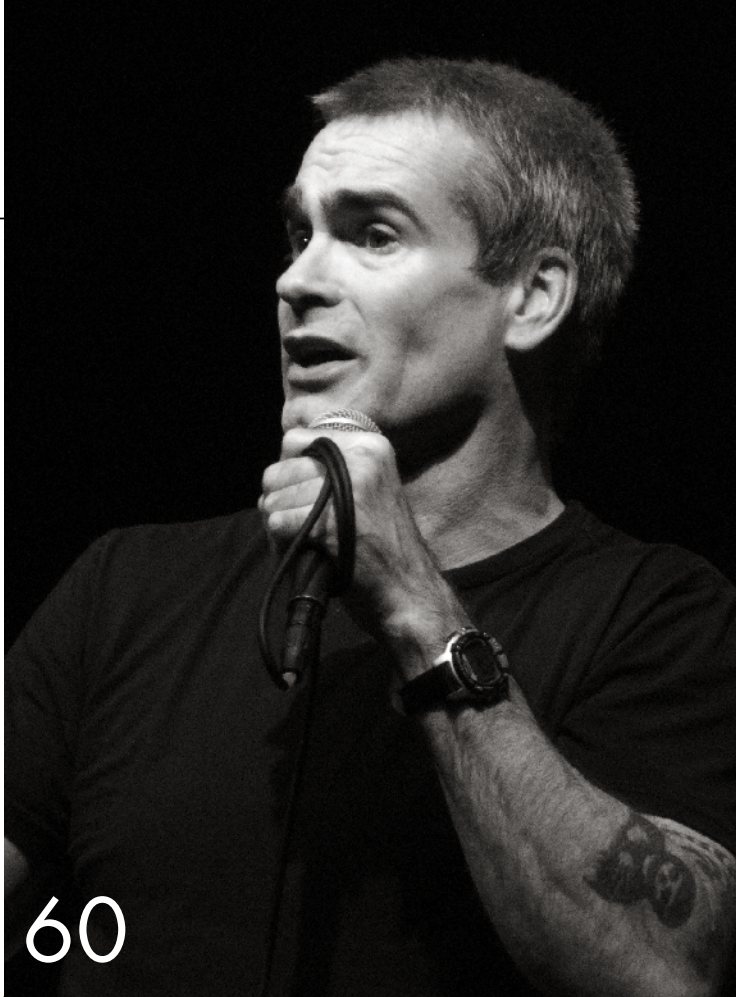
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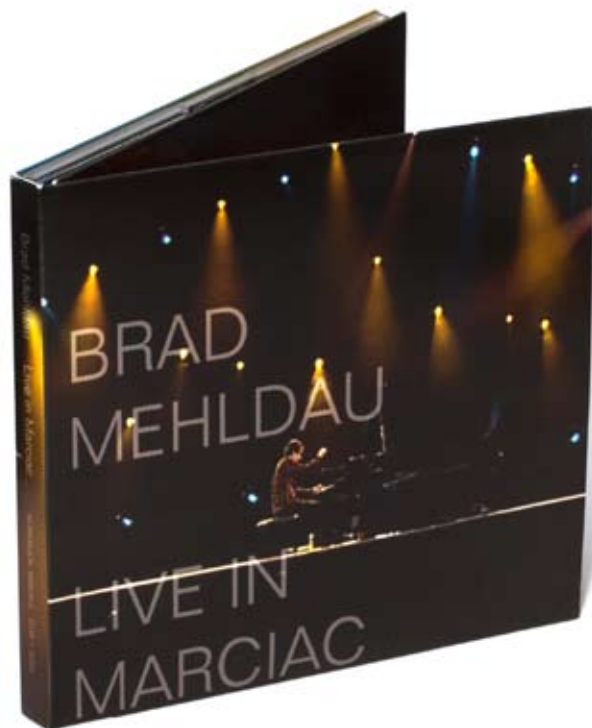
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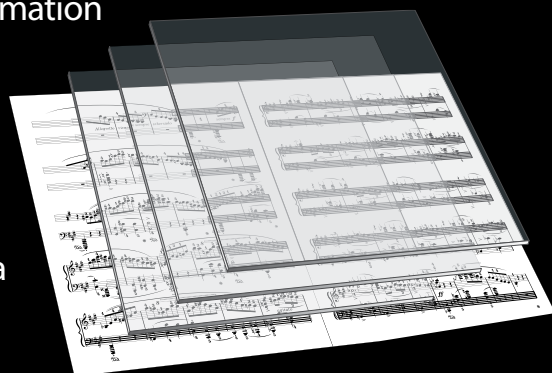
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Conductor material quality has a pronounced effect on the signal passing through. Different materials have more or less impurities, grain-boundaries, surface irregularities, etc.

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

ATTENTION: ALL COOL KIDS

TONEAudio contributor Steve Guttenberg always brings up great discussion topics on his blog (<http://news.cnet.com/audiophiliac/>). A recent question proved no exception to the rule.



"Were you, or are you, still the cool kid that has everyone over to your house to listen to music?" he asked. For all the waxing poetic about how to grow the high-end audio and music industries, his query serves as the most useful dialog-starting comment I've heard on the related subjects—and it brings back great memories, as well.

Ever since I was able to earn money, most of it has gone towards the pursuit of a great hi-fi system and diverse record collection. It was—and still is—a great time to have friends by to listen to music and perhaps do a little bit of brainwashing on behalf of the high-end audio cause. Honestly, over the years, I've never had to push much. One good listening session and the uninitiated were usually off on their own quest. Steve commented, "I was the original audio advisor, helping my friends put systems together." Thirty-plus years later, and not much has changed. We are still helping our friends adjust VTA and fine-tune speaker placement. I'm glad they still care about sound enough to bother.

As much fun as it is to get someone else to share in your addictive behavior (ahem, hobby), it's even better to be exposed to other listeners' favorite music. (As long as it's not Patricia Barber, Eva Cassidy, or Norah Jones. Snooze.) Whether it's a play list or a pile of LPs, there's nothing I enjoy more than finding music that I didn't previously know about. If you aren't taking full advantage of our music reviews, you should. Our staff has led me to a lot of superb LPs and CDs that I wouldn't have found on my own—and they are even more obsessive about it than me.

But the most rewarding part of the journey? The great friends I've made as a result of our mutual love of music. So even if you don't have the amount of chill time that you did back in school, invite some friends over for dinner and drinks (or maybe just drinks), and ask them to bring a few of their favorite pieces of music along, no matter what the format. It's bound to lead to interesting discussion and, on the way home, they will still think you're the cool kid.



Publishers Note: In our last issue's Preview section, the web address for NAD was incorrect. The correct address is: www.nadelectronics.com



"He's protecting his collective audiophile rights."

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Vic Theatre

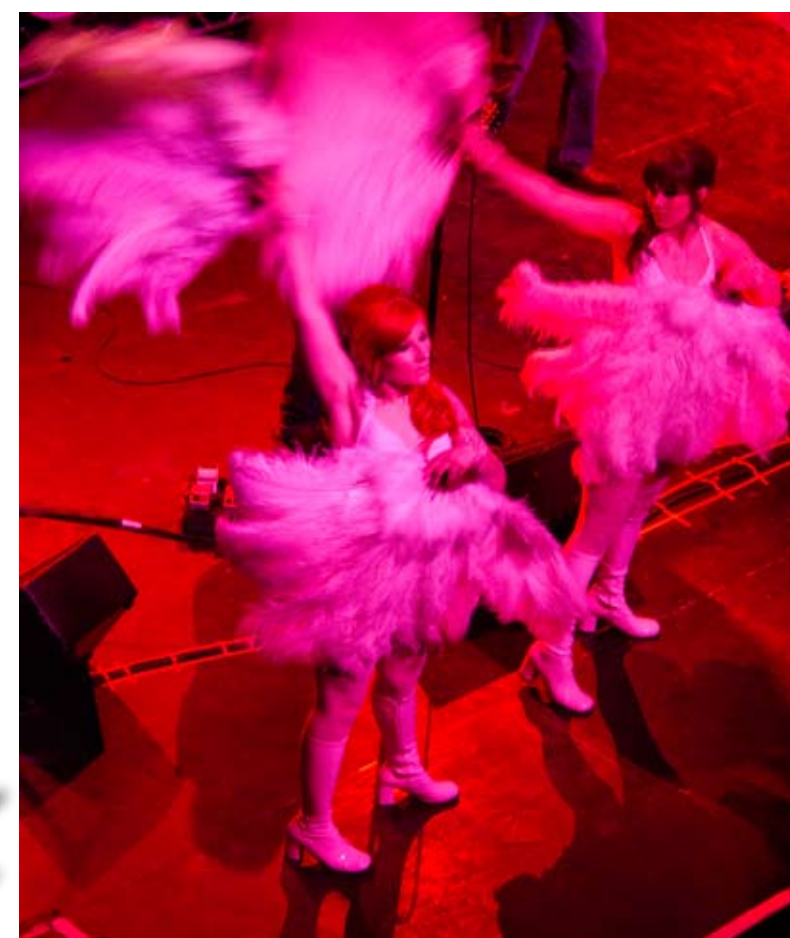
Chicago, Illinois

February 25, 2011

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Jeff Dorgay

“Whatever you paid to get in, it wasn’t enough.” Drive-By Truckers guitarist/vocalist Mike Cooley’s impromptu statement at the first concert of a two-night stand his band played at Chicago’s Vic Theatre may have referred to the additional sideshow attraction of female feather dancers. But it could’ve just as easily described the group’s raw, unshackled, and positively brilliant 140-minute performance. The members of the Truckers are far too modest to ever make such a claim, but few groups are better suited to back up braggadocio remarks.



Drive-By Truckers



Since its 1996 origin, the Georgia sextet has cut its teeth in venues ranging from cramped bars to plush theaters to faceless outdoor arenas, touring as both headliner and opener while putting upwards of nearly 2000 gigs in its collective rearview mirror during the past decade alone. Amidst myriad lineup changes—Cooley and fellow guitarist/singer Patterson Hood constitute the remaining original personnel, although current multi-instrumentalist John Neff was involved at the start before taking a break—the ensemble is responsible for several of the best records of the last 30 years. *Southern Rock Opera*, *Decoration Day*, and *The Dirty South* constitute a trifecta on par with any other one cares to name.

A tremendous asset, the band's robust catalog heavily factored during a set in which the Trucker seemed out to reaffirm their bond, chemistry, and vitality. In opening with the one-two-three punch of the raucous "Puttin' People on the Moon," romping "Get Downtown," and spunky "(It's Gonna Be) I Told You So," the collective immediately displayed core strengths in the form of three capable lead vocalists, vivid narratives, and broad sonic palettes. Watching the Trucker interact conveyed a rarified impression that most bands never attain: Refusing to settle for being merely good, the group attacked songs and targets with the express purpose of wanting to be great.

Merely firing off songs in a loose, gritty manner wasn't enough. Completely caught up in the moment,

Hood occasionally fell to his knees, swiping at his guitar strings as if he was violently pulling a reluctant starter cord on a lawn mower. Cooley would stand toe-to-toe with his burly mate, each unfurling mean, snarling passages that tugged like a dog yanking to break free of a restrictive chain. When freed of sit-down pedal-steel duties, Neff joined in the fray, swaggering as part of a three-guitar army whose screaming volumes, crunchy distortion, and greasy leads stomped, bounced, and rattled on behalf of celebrating a ragged glory.

With protests for working-class rights occurring in a state capitol just a few hours north of Chicago, and the glaring reality that the corrupt business executives culpable for the economic collapse won't receive punishment beginning to stare frustrated Americans in the eye, the Trucker's evocative character-sketches of low wages and difficult times ("This Fuckin' Job"), tough luck and improper recompense ("Carl Perkins' Cadillac"), trigger-finger impatience ("Guitar Man Upstairs," "Ray's Automatic Weapon"), hard living ("Women Without Whiskey"), and scandals ("Go-Go Boots") took on profound meaning. Even more so because the band's proficiency in Southern boogie, country soul, hardscrabble folk, yearning gospel, ominous balladry, and bluesy hard rock afforded each tune requisite sentiment, mood, and atmosphere. Hood's down-home drawl, Cooley's reedy timbre, and Jay Gonzalez' lynchpin piano and organ fills did the rest. *(continued)*

Watching the Trucker interact conveyed a rarified impression that most bands never attain: Refusing to settle for being merely good, the group attacked songs and targets with the express purpose of wanting to be great.

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Whether experienced on the hard, darkened riffs driving "Where the Devil Don't Stay," horse-bucking chords shaking "Feb. 14," or bruised soul grooves affixed to "Mercy Buckets," the Truckers dug deep into arrangements, taking advantage of the available instrumentation and investing gutsy emotion into every song. The band blurred the line between fictional and personal matters to the point Cooley shared the same wearily compassionate feelings as the stripper in "Birthday Boy" as Hood did when stepping into the role of a son of a preacher man on a heartwarming rendition of Eddie Hinton's "Everybody Needs Love." Battered, scarred, and broken—but never defeated.

Lasting salvation and release also came in the form of explosive, no-bullshit anthems and the Truckers' continual penchant for championing survival amidst all odds. A rousing cover of Warren Zevon's "Play It All Night Long" oozed the kind of piss, sweat, jizz, and blood referenced in the lyrics. Hood's biographical "Let There Be Rock" name-checked the Clash, AC/DC, Ozzy Osbourne, and Bruce Springsteen while bursting forth with redemptive purpose, its swampy accents and sweet-tea flavor further stoking the momentum. Mirroring the band's own attitude, "Shut Up and Get On the Plane" let it all hang out, a quit-your-bitching slap to the face of whiners and complainers. The defiant message: Reality often bites, but if you're too scared to live and love, you might as well drop dead. And what better way to taste what life has to offer than turning up the amps, railing against what brings you down, exorcising aches, and wailing 'til you drop. What a show.

So much for debating the merits of Truckers' present lineup versus those of prior casts. Case closed. Applying for the job of the best live rock band on any given night? The line starts here. ●

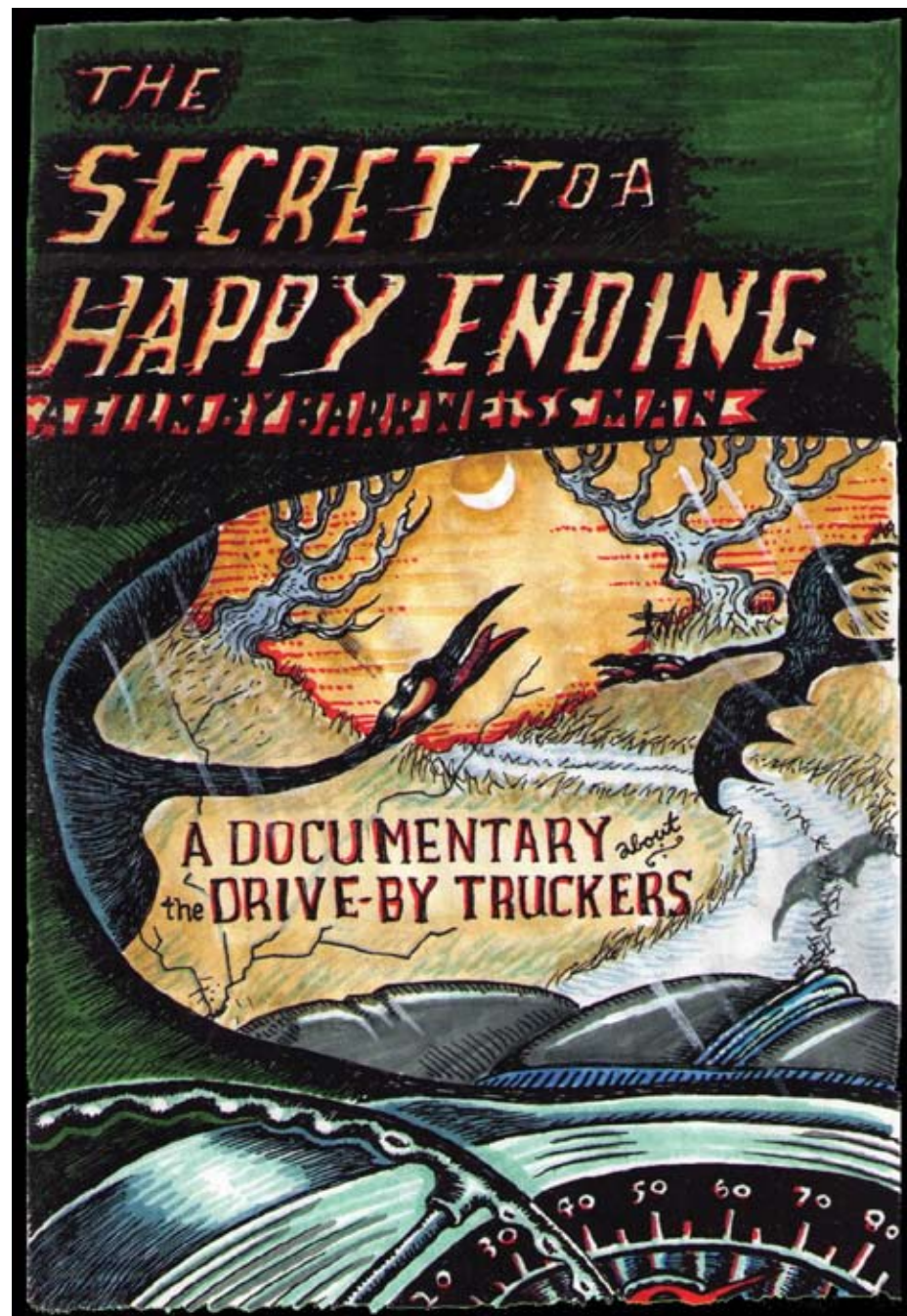
LIVE MUSIC



The Secret to a Happy Ending

A Documentary About the Drive-By Truckers

A Film by Barry Weissman 101 minutes



When Barry Weissman contacted the Drive-By Truckers in late 2004 about the possibility of making a documentary, nobody involved had any idea that the director would ultimately capture the band at the most transitional and tumultuous times of its existence. The original concept—a film that would attempt to trace the group’s belief in rock’s transcendent capabilities and its related connection with fans by peering into songs, backgrounds, concerts, and interactions—ultimately evolved into a story about perseverance, grit, relationships, attitude, and survival, some of the very subjects the Truckers so eloquently and honestly sing about.

Rather than dig up “the dirt underneath” the band or function as a definitive biography, *The Secret to a Happy Ending* depicts who the Truckers are as human beings and how their songs mirror oft-painful truths. Lead singer/guitarist Patterson Hood plays acoustic versions of songs while his baby makes noise in the background, causing the musician’s face to light up with an ear-to-ear smile; guitarist/vocalist Mike Cooley also discusses fatherhood and the personal origins behind originals such as “Space City.” The dynamic between former guitarist/singer Jason Isbell and bassist Shonna Tucker plays out in front of the cameras, not with exaggerated reality-television drama, but with subtle gestures and unspoken glances. Isbell and Tucker married one year before filming began. By the time Weissman and his crew finished, the couple was divorced, and Isbell out of the band. As *The Secret to a Happy Ending* makes clear, the guitarist nearly had company. The Truckers almost broke up due to the inevitable tension and stress related to the road, recording, and getting along.

Behind-the-scenes interview clips from people close to the Truckers—artist Wes Freed and his wife Jyl, Hood’s father and Muscle Shoals session musician David Hood, producer David Barbe, longtime friend and former manager Dick Cooper, and several others—lend additional perspective and history. Raw, as-is video footage of the members’ Southern locales and homes reinforce their influences, personalities, and constitution. Yet it’s Weissman’s technique of weaving segments of the Truckers’ joyous live performances into the rock doc’s overall narrative that best achieves his goal of scripting a “love letter to rock and roll.” Using song lyrics and group’s passionate playing to advance the story line, he showcases how and why the Truckers remain, 15-plus years on, one of the very best bands to emerge in the last 40 years and arguably, the most American of them all. —**Bob Gendron**

Rather than dig up “the dirt underneath” the band or function as a definitive biography, *The Secret to a Happy Ending* depicts who the Truckers are as human beings and how their songs mirror oft-painful truths.

DEVO

The Crystal Ballroom

Portland, Oregon

March 16, 2011

Text and photos by Jeff Dorgay

Shot out onstage like spuds from a potato rifle, DEVO greeted a frantic Portland audience sporting prerequisite energy domes in both the new, focus-group-tested blue and traditional red colors. There was even a lady wearing a suspicious lime-green dome. Asked where she got the counterfeit contraband, she replied, “I got sick of the standard issue red and blue models, so I painted my own.” Such is the level of understanding shared by the band and its devotees, which filled the Crystal Ballroom to the rafters and out to the stairwells, redefining the term “standing room only.”

On last year’s tour, the group eschewed its then brand-new *Something For Everybody* record and concentrated instead on back-to-back performances of the touchstone albums *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are DEVO!* and *Duty Now For The Future*. By comparison, this evening’s show featured a wider palette that suggested a “Best of DEVO” retrospective. A majority of the set stemmed from the ensemble’s first five (arguably strongest) records, with several recent tracks added for good measure.





LIVE MUSIC

Granted, DEVO frontman Mark Mothersbaugh and lieutenant Gerald Casale are now slightly stouter spuds. Yet they energetically bounced around and displayed musicianship that exceeded that of their 70s heyday. The addition of former Nine Inch Nails drummer Josh Freese to the classic lineup proved masterful. As did digital-projector technology and a handful of laptops, which allowed the classic DEVO video clips and visual effects to run much smoother than in the past when the band relied on analog machinery to get the job done. In this regard, DEVO hasn't devolved. A bevy of classic analog synthesizers and retro riffs kept the 70s vibe intact.

Though the band began the show wearing current, AARP-friendly grey pantsuits that featured modified *Phantom of the Opera*-style facemasks, it didn't take long for the ensemble to strip down to blue t-shirts and gray pants accessorized with the blue energy domes. More wardrobe changes ensued before the night concluded. Retro yellow jumpsuits and red energy domes appeared for "Satisfaction" and lasted for a few songs until Mothersbaugh tore his outfit to bits during "Uncontrollable Urge," prompting his mates to do the same. It seemed like 1978 all over again. *(continued)*

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Wisely, DEVO appeased everyone by playing "Whip It" early on. At the halfway mark, when the group asked the fateful question "Are we not men?," almost every iPhone camera in the hall lit up to capture the band perform its signature song—adding to the dismay of the tight-fisted venue security that until this point kept cameras of *all* types at bay. Signaling that the end was near, another wardrobe change found the band slipping into stylish hot dog shirts and finishing the set. Mothersbaugh gave fans a special treat during the encore, donning the famous Boogie Boy costume and ending with "Beautiful World."

Yet the group's "What We Do Is What We Do" stood out even more than the humorous fashion commentary. Making the song's case as DEVO's Corporate Anthem for the 21st century, Mothersbaugh and Co. sang, "What we do is what we do/It's all the same/It's nothing new." What DEVO continues to do is offer great fun. How can anyone argue with that? ●



Photographer David Thai captures an introspective moment during the recent Warpaint show at the Biltmore Cabaret in Vancouver, BC on Saturday, March 19th.

You can see more of David's work at www.mrdavidthai.com

Current Releases

By the TONE Staff

During its first decade, Low echoed its name, playing minimalist music at crawling paces that framed the haunting vocal harmonies of husband-and-wife leaders Alan Sparhawk and Mimi Parker. The approach caused a few problems in the group's formative years. In need of quiet, Low often competed with noisy audiences unprepared for the band's distinctive take on chamber rock. Having built a reputation on its stubborn commitment to a hushed aesthetic, the ensemble proceeded to throw listeners for a loop on 2005's explosive *The Great Destroyer* before returning to quiet violence and foreboding tempos on 2007's war-themed *Drums and Guns*.



Recorded in a former Catholic church, the more intimate and pure *C'mon* marks a further retreat to the Duluth ensemble's core sound. Tunes are nearly devoid of electronic treatments or textural interference. The set also continues the band's subtle evolution—which, over the course of more than a dozen good-to-excellent LPs and EPs, seemingly progresses as patiently as its songs—into a group that harnesses acoustic environments and instrumental shapes as well as any of its contemporaries. On *C'mon*, these traits are enriched by reflective songwriting

that addresses lasting personal relationships—and the challenges, feelings, and conflicts they bring forth.

The plaintive dynamic between Sparhawk and Parker comes to fore in various manifestations. Against an enchanting melody that evokes a tiny music box, the duo intertwines its voices on “Try to Sleep” in the manner in which a baby unconsciously burrows into a swaddling blanket. Glistening, somber, and peaceful, it's one of several lullabies that convey irony-free sweetness and delicate love. The gorgeous desert ballad “Done” aches with related hymnal overtones and

poetic grace, a pedal-steel guitar reinforcing a poignant sympathy that mirrors Sparhawk's achy voice and weary condition. Biblical allusions adorn the narrative and, by extension, the gospel arrangement. Sparhawk's protagonist is adrift in the wilderness; he's tired, yet his lone request pertains to his unnamed love, not for water or relief. And on the fragile “\$20,” Low expresses a chilling degree of sincerity, the pair's singing coming across like the severe reading of an English sonnet, their eyes and seriousness burning holes in the text. *(continued)*

Recorded in a former Catholic church, the more intimate and pure *C'mon* marks a further retreat to the Duluth ensemble's core sound.

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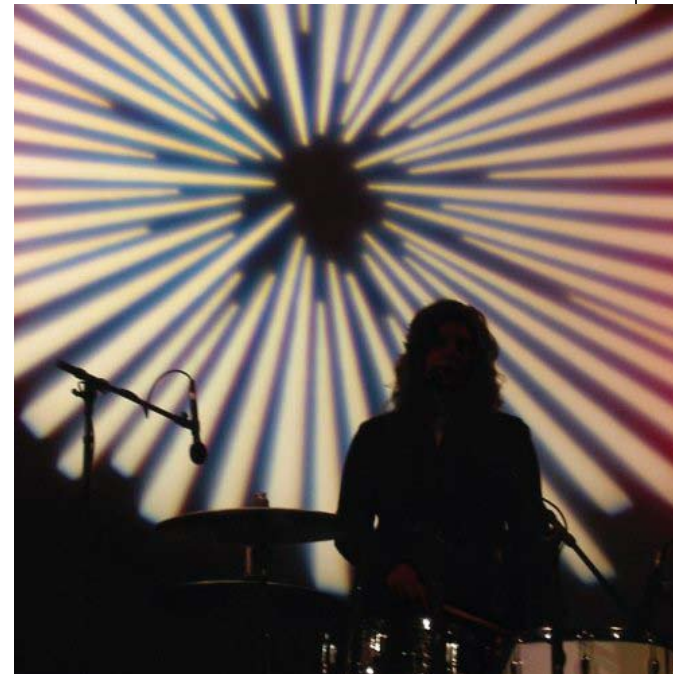


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MUSIC



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Thematic candor aside, Low's songs resonate with a brooding tension and reserved uncertainty that makes each atmospheric note count.

Thematic candor aside, Low's songs resonate with a brooding tension and reserved uncertainty that makes each atmospheric note count. Such apprehension spurred Robert Plant to cover two of the band's songs on his recent record, one of which led to a Grammy nomination. Low channels one of its own influences on the slight country stomp of "Witches," the chiming guitar chords and distorted fills an homage to Neil Young's "Cortez the Killer." Parker's layered choral voice within the dramatic chamber waltz "Especially Me" is equally glorious and edgy, the steady slow-building structure replete with sparingly plucked violins, calm percussion, and twanging guitar refrains that circle around a primary lyrical motif that underscores the anxiety and guardedness that all long-term relationships experience: "If we knew where we belonged/There'd be no doubt where we're from/But as it stands/We don't have a clue."

Throughout, the converted church's cathedral spaciousness contributes color and dimension to the sonic tapestries. Low randomly hit toy drums, boxes, and secondhand kick drums in the middle of the space, gauged their sounds, and elected whether or not to use them as accents. Similarly, volumes swell and recede to where that noise levels become auxiliary musicians. As far as the latter are concerned, jack-of-all-trades guitarist Nels Cline sits in on the epic "Nothing But Heart," his sonorous array of feedback and refracting solos floating over a constantly repeated refrain that warmly burns like embers and finds Low exiting on one of its most convincing and affirming highs yet.

—**Bob Gendron**



On his Merge Records debut, the Mountain Goats' John Darnielle grows even more elusive and elliptical, his songs frequently cultivating the same sense of mystery and straight-up weirdness as a David Lynch film.

Darnielle, distancing himself from straightforward, über-confessional albums about his damaged childhood (*The Sunset Tree*) and broken relationships (*Get Lonely*), emerges as a more slippery presence even as the musical backdrop comes into tighter focus. In many regards, *All Eternals Deck* is the Mountain Goats' prettiest record, awash in gorgeous string arrangements, pristine acoustic picking, and delicate piano. True, there are few wrinkles for anyone already steeped in the band's catalog, but everything sounds just a bit more refined.

The coded imagery does little to deter from the overall effect of the music, as Darnielle conjures an array of moods and emotions with his deft wordplay. On "Birth of Serpents," he appears to slither through his own subconscious like Jim Carey in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, remembering himself as an awkward teenager ("See that young man who dwells inside his body like an uninvited guest") before moving on to even deeper, darker places. "The Autopsy Garland" opens like a scene from a Cormac McCarthy novel, red sun hanging ominously in the sky. But instead of grizzled gunslingers, the villains on the horizon are suited, cognac-guzzling businessmen. "You don't want to see these guys," cautions Darnielle, ever wary of man's true nature, "Without their masks on."

"Never Quite Free," built around tender piano, finds Darnielle offering comfort to a dying compatriot. "Right outside your window there's only friendly fields and open roads," he sings in his nasal tone. "The view goes on forever. And you'll never want for comfort. And you'll never be alone." Similar ideas of the afterlife echo throughout "Liza Forever Minnelli," Darnielle singing about the part "you braced yourself against" (death) and then "the other part." Perhaps this explains why the singer doesn't flinch in those moments when things appear bleakest. Witness "Beautiful Gas Mask," where he and a lover hold hands and continue singing as they plunge into the void.

Despite a name that sounds lifted from a cult sci-fi film, "Outer Scorpion Squadron" actually materializes as the album's most bruising moment, Darnielle recalling his most painful memories atop a lonely bed of piano and strings. He retreats even further on "Sourdoire Valley Song," pining for a simple life with "few friends and fewer closer friends." "High Hawk Season," by



The Mountain Goats

All Eternals Deck

Merge Records, CD or LP

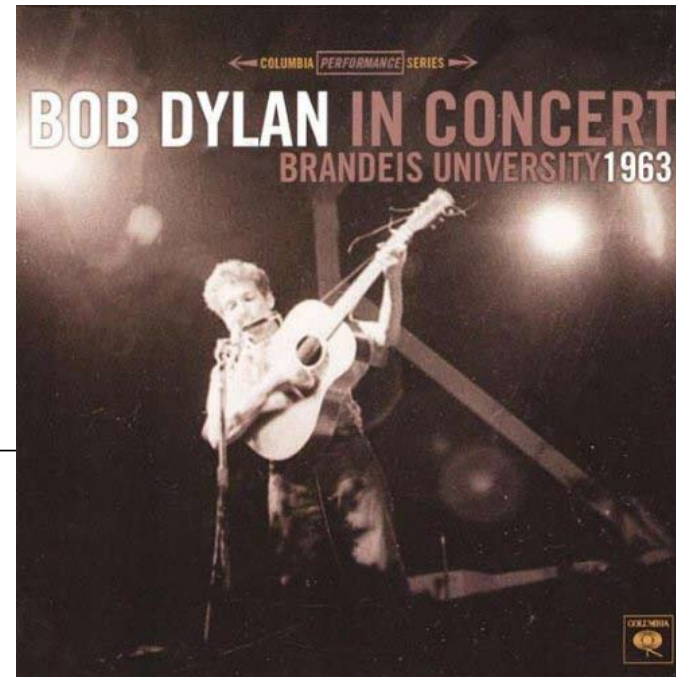
contrast, evolves into something of a call-to-arms, a choir of voices (think a barbershop quartet interpreting Pentecostal spirituals) surrounding the singer as he cautions, "We are young supernovas and the heat's about to break." It's a rare outburst on a record that's more about finding a way to live with yourself than trying to change the world around you.

"Why should we hide from anyone?," Darnielle asks on "Age of Kings." He doesn't stick around to answer his own question, stealing away to the catacombs with his lady as shadowy figures draw near. But the suggestion is clear: Sometimes the desire to enjoy those final few moments with a love can be reason enough to try and lay low.

—**Andy Downing**



Bob Dylan was all of 21 years old when he took the stage for two short performances at the Brandeis University Folk Festival on May 10, 1963. The highly touted singer-songwriter's 1962 debut album had flopped. He'd just wrapped up sessions for a sophomore record, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, which would see release later in the month. By no means was the Bard any sort of championed spokesperson or celebrity. All that would change within a few weeks.



Bob Dylan

In Concert—Brandeis University 1963
Columbia/Legacy, CD or LP

Indeed, it's the rare opportunity to hear Dylan during this early, transformative point in his career that makes *In Concert—Brandeis University 1963* a compelling experience. Recorded on a seven-inch reel-to-reel and possessing terrific clarity, the brief archival collection also hints at the vocalist's now-trademark puzzling habits. Despite having culture-altering tunes such as "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright," "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," and, most significantly, "Blowin' in the Wind" at his disposal, Dylan ignores them and instead gives the audience lighter-hearted narrative-based fare in the form of the farcical "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues," "Talking Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues"—a minor satirical classic in which Dylan couches socio-economic commentary amidst an amusing, over-the-top storyline—and "Talkin' World War III Blues," a topical comedy on

subjects ranging from conflict to paranoia.

Loose, relaxed, and jocular, Dylan revels in the humor. His voice, playing, and tone clearly sound more innocent, hopeful, and warm than they do after fame placed him at the forefront of the folk scene and triggered a personal cynicism that, if at all present in May 1963, is held in check. There's not much revealing banter, but even Dylan's witty between-song remarks take on a different tone than they would by the early fall and soon after, following, as Dylan expert Michael Gray points out in the liner notes, President Kennedy's assassination. In many regards, even with the presence of the weighty "Masters of War" and "Ballad of Hollis Brown" (which, akin to three of the other songs here, remained unreleased for the then-foreseeable future), *In Concert—Brandeis University 1963* marks one of the last

moments in history when Dylan feels he can afford to be a wide-eyed folkie and cautious optimist.

As for the kept-under-lock-and-key "Blowin' in the Wind?" By the summer, Peter, Paul and Mary turned the anthem into a smash that went on to sell more than two million copies and, in the process, propelled Dylan into the national limelight. While an impossible scenario, it's fun to imagine that the Bard somehow knew about all of the changes on the horizon and thus savored his normalcy at this intimate event before the storm's arrival. —**Bob Gendron**



Bill Callahan, who spent the bulk of his two-decade-plus career mining the shadows for songs as Smog, has carried a lighter load since dropping the latter moniker for his birth name on 2007's *Woke on a Whaleheart*. That approach slightly changes with the arrival of *Apocalypse*, a bruising, shell-shocked album defined by heartache and regret.

Things open on an ominous note with "Drover," a windswept tune that sounds like it could double as the theme song for some classic Western villain. The mood grows even more desolate on "Riding for the Feeling," which finds Callahan holed up in a lonely motel room reliving the final days of a broken relationship. "All this leaving is never-ending," he exhales in a mournful baritone. "Don't go, don't go, don't go." Just one song later, Callahan imagines himself in an open field, recounting his visions as though he's lying prone on a couch recounting a dream to his therapist. "I'm standing in a field/A field of questions," he croons atop a spring meadow of breezy flute, cricket chirps of guitar, and shimmering cymbals.

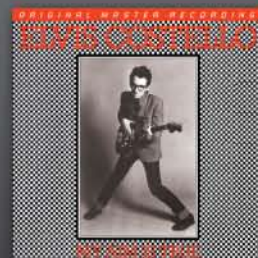
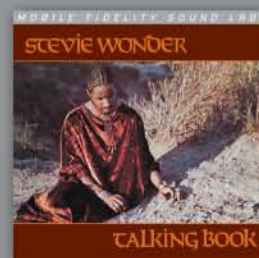
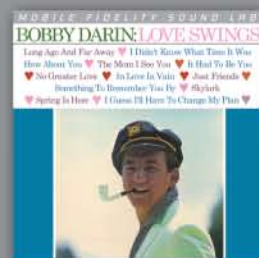
At times, the depression grows so severe that even menial tasks take on near-cosmic significance. On "Baby's Breath," he struggles to mow the grass ("I looked down at the lawn and wondered what all was gone") and equates weeding his garden with an inability to appreciate good things in his life before they've left him for good. *(continued)*

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MUSIC



Bill Callahan

Apocalypse
Drag City, CD or LP

Callahan regains a little mojo on “America!,” a sardonic tune that arrives amidst a military march of drums and strutting rock riff. Along the way, the singer mocks the fetishization of patriotism (“I wish I was deep inside America tonight”), points to the country’s repeated involvement in unjust wars (whether in Afghanistan, Vietnam, or with Native Americans) and argues that our cultural exports can do more to spark change than any number of bombs. After name-checking Kris Kristofferson, Mickey Newbury, and Johnny Cash, he proclaims “What an Army! What an Air Force! What a Marines!”

With just seven songs, Callahan doesn’t overstay his welcome, though the relatively meager track list makes the odd misstep more pronounced. Witness the foggy “Universal Applicant,” a regrettable bit of filler with lyrics that come across like the stoned ramblings of a 60s acid casualty. Better is the album-closing “One Fine Morning,” a solemn acoustic number that finds Callahan staring down the Final Days and trying to regain his newborn sense of optimism. “When the earth turns cold...and black,” he sings. “Will I feel you riding on my back?” —**Andy Downing**



The Kills

Blood Pressures

Domino, CD or LP

She & Him are cuter, Matt & Kim goofier, Sleigh Bells noisier, Jenny & Johnny mellower, the Raveonettes slicker, and Wye Oak more intimate. But no co-ed indie-rock duo possesses the Kills' erotic dynamic and sensual danger. On *Blood Pressures*, the band's first release since singer Alisson Mosshart began moonlighting with Jack White's Dead Weather project, the trans-continental couple retains its noisy aesthetic while giving credence to adventurous possibilities wrought by Mosshart's sultry, sassy voice—particularly when abetted by partner/guitarist Jamie Hince's instrumental (and occasional vocal) responses.

The group's minimalist roots remain in place. Thrift-shop assortments of drum machine beats are intentionally crude, cut-up, scarred, and distorted. Rhythms rattle and creak akin to an old, faulty steam radiator that reluctantly coughs out heat. Filtered through reverb and dirt, the Kills' sonic gunk chuffs and chafes, touching on damaged reggae ("Satellite"), cranky dub ("Baby Says"), and barbed

funk ("Damned If She Do") vibes. Manipulated electronics and thick, fuzzed-out distortion contribute additional layers of abrasion, roughing up cleaner pop textures in the same way that urban streets scuff up a new pair of shoes. Such contrasts augment the Kills' trademark strength: Nocturnal dread, the sense that no matter how merry circumstances seem, ominous fates lurk in the future. It's no wonder that the lone unadulterated bright spot on the album, a British-reared psychedelic ballad named "Wild Charms" that comes on as a lost outtake from the Beatles' *White Album*, lasts for barely a minute.

"You can holler, you can wail/You can blow what's left of my right mind," declares Mosshart in an alluring, desperate timbre on the percussive stutter "Future Starts Now," the frontwoman testifying on behalf of an unhealthy obsession over a romantic partner she refuses to give up. Warning: Despite the crafty hook and hypnotic reverb, this is not the sort of love song you want to hear your mate whisper in your ear. Primal, raw, and distraught, it's more threat than dedication. Hince's underlying backing vocals add to the poisonous dynamic. Similarly, the arched choral breaks on "Satellite" and Mosshart's breathy, attitudinal swagger on the dancefloor-ready "Nail In My Coffin" register as warnings, the latter featuring an electro-shocked blues riff that resonates like a ship's throaty fog horn echoing in a harbor.

For all the compelling instrumental commotion—the Kills' grainy tapestries evoke the din of everything from spinning 78RPM records to corkscrews stuck in obstinate wine bottles—*Blood Pressures* boils down to solid songwriting and Mosshart's vocal performances. And she needn't cool art-punk dissonance, pulsing chants, or gothic refrains to be convincing. With synthesized strings hovering in the near-distant background, and a sorrowful piano melody acting as the primary stanchion, Mosshart channels Marlene Dietrich's smoky cabaret persona on the devastating slow-burner "The Last Goodbye," unleashing vulnerability in a song littered with broken hearts, reluctant farewells, and unrequited love. The duo has never sounded so seductive or exposed. It's the searing moment when the glitter, glamour, and grime give way to severe emotion, regret, and acceptance—and the from-the-heart confessions that it brings.

—**Bob Gendron**



Chicago sister-brother duo White Mystery packs a relatively spartan setup—big sis Miss Alex White plays guitar and sings, and bro Francis plays drums and provides backing vocals—but don’t think of the duo as minimalist. “I don’t like to use the term ‘minimalist,’” said Alex in an interview late last summer. “Because I don’t consider [our music] that at all.”

This is especially true of the pair’s sophomore album, *Blood & Venom*, a garage-rock rumblor dense in howling guitar squall, echo-laden vocals, and primal, thundering drums. Indeed, this brawler of a record could double as an alternate soundtrack to the extended back-alley fight between Keith David and Rowdy Roddy Piper in the 80s cult classic *They Live*.

Alex White, who first cut her teeth in a trio of bands—Miss Alex White & Chris Playboy, the Hot Machines, and Miss Alex White & the Red Orchestra—finds the perfect foil for her flame-throwing fretwork in brother Francis, who pounds at his kit like a more muscular Meg White (no relation), leaving plenty of room for Alex to construct towering walls of feedback. *(continued)*

Just listen to the grimy “Smoke,” a primordial thumper on which it momentarily sounds like she’s wielding a chainsaw.

It appears that lo-fi is more than just an aesthetic for the pair. Much of *Blood & Venom* sounds like it was recorded on a budget four-track deep in some dark, dank sewer. The whole album rattles as though the needle danced in the red throughout the entire session—a fitting thought when visually confronted with the pair’s matching ginger afros.

The lyrics are every bit as bare-knuckled as the sound, acting more as rallying cries than moments of intensive introspection. On “Smoke,” Alex prowls the streets like an alley cat: “Looking for some trouble, know I’m gonna find it.” “Good Girl” invites all the ladies to “raise your fists up [and] punch a hole in the world!” Sometimes the songs come across like fun little goofs. Witness the garage-punk of “Birthday,” where Francis invites everyone to “boogie down in your birthday suit!” as Alex’s guitar roars like a backfiring muscle car.

Noise abounds. “Dead Inside” comes across like the Who’s “I Can’t Explain” filtered through the Slits, Alex wailing as if she’s trying to excise deep-seeded demons. Newborn theme song “White Mystery” lays out the pair’s differences (she’s into coffee, he likes his whiskey) and their shared vision. “My love for you is outta site,” Alex wails before the two lock into a pummeling groove that mimics a drum kit being run through a blender. Sounds like love to me. —**Andy Downing**



White Mystery

Blood & Venom

White Mystery, CD or LP

The whole album rattles as though the needle danced in the red throughout the entire session—a fitting thought when visually confronted with the pair’s matching ginger afros.



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The Baptists

Baptists

Southern Lord, 7" LP single

Minimalist-styled record sleeves. Blurry photographs depicting live commotion. Sonic production that emphasized the lower ends of hard, sludgy, grime-caked rock played by guys that could pass as dock loaders and butchers. A communal bond with small club audiences that became willing participants in the alcohol-soaked shows. Long before Sub Pop became a household name, the aforementioned traits distinguished the label's late 1980s releases.

However different musically, the imprint's artists shared a similar aesthetic, and the records—most often, seven-inch singles—shared a related look.

Primarily known for cutting-edge experimental, doom, stoner, drone, and black metal, Southern Lord has recently turned its ear toward crust/hardcore metal that recalls the excitement and feel of early Sub Pop fare. While heavier, louder, and faster than the Seattle label's formative material, Southern Lord's hardcore-leaning artists possess an equivalent underground vibe, primal sense, and interrelated sound intent on shaking wax loose from listeners' ears. And, vinyl is the dominant medium.

Available only on seven-inch, the Baptist's self-titled single comes on like a cement mixer spinning at twice its regulated revolutions. Notes joust, collide, roll, and tumble, the instruments shrouding the volcanic vocal outbursts. Opening with sleeting feedback before hitting the wall at top speed, "Good Parenting" is the sonic equivalent of one of Charles Peterson's black-and-white pictures. "Bachelor Degree Burn" approaches with the ominous might of an angry Yeti spying its prey, the tune's midtempo stomp and viscous, thick tones adding to a formidable surge. Yet, akin to all four songs here, the rage and intensity don't prohibit an allegiance to structure and carefully considered volume swells. The Vancouver ensemble goes for the throat, but it also recognizes the importance of picking the right moments to do so. *(continued)*

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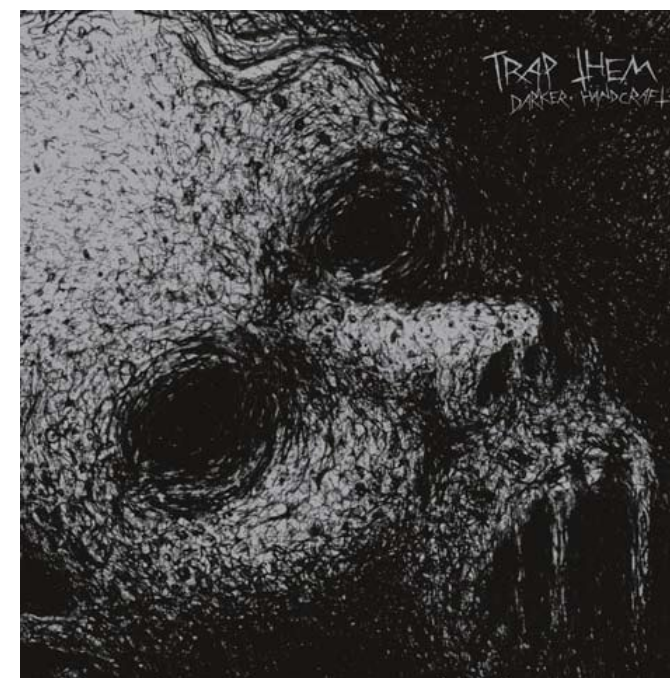
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Lebanon

Overdose/Overload
Southern Lord, 7" LP single



Trap Them

Darker Handcraft
Prosthetic, LP or CD

Not too far across the border, Portland's Lebanon—comprised of former members of From Ashes Rise, Hellshock, and Coldbringer—makes its Southern Lord debut with a seven-inch that immediately launches into brisk, speed-freak mayhem. Taking its marching orders from Motorhead and extending the D-beat tradition, the quartet approaches thrash-metal signatures on “Overdose/Overload,” an aptly named garage-reared blast of ire that gets right to the heart of the group's reason d’etre. Joel Smith maintains the D-beat regiment on drums, and Brad Boatwright and Josh Armstrong's guitars form an amphetamine-ripped, no-life-til-leather combination that finds one member swiping chords while the other punches his fist at them. “Mere demons in a devil's race,” cries Boatwright, the band responding to the despondent claim as if they're rats desperate to evade being doused in gasoline.

Five-hour energy pills and successive Red Bull shots have nothing on Trap Them's *Darker Handcraft*, one of the most monstrous hardcore/crust records to emerge in years. It's no wonder that the first vinyl pressing sold out before the album's street date. The New Hampshire group records for both Southern Lord and Prosthetic, which are less in competition with one another than they are aligned towards the same goals. The quartet's new LP for Prosthetic is by far its most potent and focused statement.

Netting the same kind of face-melting impression as Nails' *Unsilent Death* and The Secret's *Solve Et Coagula*—each issued last year by Southern Lord and couched in relentlessness, violence, and brutality—*Darker Handcraft* functions like a bulldozer. The music has no regard for anything in its way, and possesses the strength to shove, push, and crush everything that crosses its path. However, Trap Them isn't content to simply aim for and achieve frenetic degrees of hyperbolic noise and head-on extremity. *(continued)*

MUSIC

Deft time changes, strategic transitions, and taut interplay abound. Physicality isn't just limited to the songs, but their impact.

For all of its carnage, "Damage Prose" hums along akin to a locomotive eagerly devouring the coal in its engine. "Scars Align" grinds and digs, the weighty drums delivering blows to the head, the track monolithic in scale. The instrumental segue "Sordid Earnings" suggests the enemy at the gates, torches burning and fists pounding, ready to ransack the powers that be. "All By the Constant Vulse" is pure aggression, an assault that bashes skulls and pulverizes them until they're ash.

Along with superb songwriting, purpose, and execution, spot-on production elevates Trap Them above its peers. Converge leader Kurt Ballou bestows the LP with a remarkably solid dynamic foundation and percussive base that's positively lethal. Whether experienced on the stampeding "Slumcult & Gather" or pouncing "Every Walk A Quarantine," complete with back-and-forth guitar riff dialogue between the left and right channels, the sonics leave a lasting impression—literally and figuratively. Invigorating.
—**Bob Gendron**

©Photo by Samantha Marble





The Strokes

Angles
RCA, CD or LP

At this point in their career, the members of the Strokes are more like business partners than bandmates. The New York City quintet first burst onto the scene in the fall of 2001 with an album (*Is This It*) and a look (black leather, torn denim, and finger-combed hair) that exuded Lower East Side cool. Frontman Julian Casablancas sang like he'd been weaned solely on old Lou Reed records; guitarists Nick Valensi and Albert Hammond, Jr. traded frantic staccato riffs that sounded like the Yardbirds loosely reinterpreting Chuck Berry. In the years that followed, the crew struggled to recapture the magic of that debut before finally going their separate ways in 2007.

In the ensuing downtime, band members pursued side projects with varying degrees of success—drummer Fabrizio Moretti, he of the cartoonishly Italian name, released the best album of the bunch with his side project Little Joy, easily topping solo turns by Casablancas and Hammond—before regrouping for a series of celebrated festival shows last summer.

Alas, the band's fourth album, *Angles*, proves unable to maintain the momentum of those comeback gigs. Indeed, it often sounds as though the musicians have struck an uneasy alliance. While the ensemble was the equivalent of

five fingers on a fist with *Is This It*, here, it often seems like old friends struggling to figure out what it once was that they shared in common. How else to explain synthetic new-wave throwaways like "Metabolism" and the Thin Lizzy-lite of "Gratisfaction"?

Part of the disconnect might actually stem from a writing process that saw all five making contributions and Casablancas finally relaxing his Gaddafi-like control on the group. Without a defined ringleader, the Strokes are free to follow their whims, pursuing reggae-tinged rock ("Machu Picchu"), new wave ("Two Kinds of Happiness"), and robo-funk ("You're So Right"). Casablancas and Co. even make a stab at recapturing the spirit of their debut with the urgent "Under Cover of Darkness," which borrows a vocal melody from U2's "Angel of Harlem" and molds its call-and-response guitar on their own early hit "Last Night."

As a singer, Casablancas still delivers nearly every line with a slouch. "I don't know why I came down," he sings on "Call Me Back," his voice echoing the disinterest in the words. The ever-detached frontman could just as easily be speaking for his mates. Too often, *Angles* sounds less like a product of true inspiration than a marriage borne of convenience.

—**Andy Downing**



©Photo by Lance Mercer

Pearl Jam owned the early 1990s. The group smashed records for most first-week sales by a single album, sold-out every concert it booked, and became reluctant role models for a generation hellbent on embracing Seattle-reared rock during a brief period when underground music ascended to mainstream status. Yet the band rebelled against its own success, pushing back with a series of decisions that served to alienate a large contingent of its fan base and almost caused the quintet to implode. Questioned by many at the time, the hard-line stances and anti-commercial behavior seem necessary when viewed in retrospect on the eve of Pearl Jam's 20th anniversary.

In celebration, *vs.* and *Vitalogy*, the two albums written and recorded during the contentious era, have been remastered and reissued with bonus tracks. Available separately, as a lavish 5LP/3CD box replete with memorabilia, or as a superb three-disc set that includes a scorching 1994 live show captured in Boston, the full-length efforts seethe with the frustration, vitriol, duress, pressures, and tension that largely informed their creation. Both are historical snapshots of an unforgettably rich cultural episode as well as classic statements that have lost none of their original luster. Fiercer, more raw and personal than the group's blockbuster debut *Ten*, they remain Pearl Jam's finest hours.

Born out of experiencing an immense rise in stardom that witnessed the band ascend from playing 500-capacity clubs to arenas at Lollapalooza within a span of several months, *vs.* is true to its title and "five against one" refrain on the heel-nipping gallop "Animal." The fenced-in sheep attempting to break free of its confines on the album cover isn't there by sheer coincidence. Boiled down to its core, *vs.* is Pearl against the world, a record that attempts to maintain sanity amidst an environment of hangers-on, leeches, and soul-robbing expectations.

Vocalist Eddie Vedder rages with a level of nerve, passion, and menace that offsets the few hints of self-righteousness and narcissism. Slash-and-burn riffs ("Go"), locked-down grooves ("Rearviewmirror"), and snarling funk motifs ("Rats") up the energy quotient. Lyrically, the group puts a handful of common targets—gun violence, corrupt law enforcement, slimy politicians, clueless pundits—in its crosshairs but also turns out a pair of sensitive acoustic tunes (the haunting "Daughter," the heartwarming "Elderly Woman Behind the Counter In a Small Town") that foreshadow the stylistic expansion that blossomed on *Vitalogy* and beyond. And with the closing ballad "Indifference," Vedder and Co. sound an alarm on par with that of Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind."



Pearl Jam

vs. and *Vitalogy: Deluxe Edition*

Epic/Legacy, Deluxe Edition 3CD or Deluxe Edition 5LP + 3CD Box Set; also available as individual CD or 2LP Sets

Soon after *vs.* topped the charts, Pearl Jam retreated and began attracting more attention for its oppositional methods. Having already refused to shoot videos, the ensemble withdrew from interviews and started a direct-to-audience approach that it maintains today. Pearl Jam also took on Ticketmaster, ultimately canceling an entire tour in protest of the monopoly's policies while also refusing to perform at venues associated with the company. Nirvana leader Kurt Cobain's April 1994 suicide further thrust Vedder into the limelight as spokesperson—a position he detested more than the contradictory Cobain who, years prior, blasted Pearl Jam for advancing a corporate agenda. Internal band strife also prompted the dismissal of drummer Dave Abbruzzese. *(continued)*



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Vitalogy reacts and responds to these circumstances.

Not surprisingly, the 14-song set is rife with savage rhythms, dark sentiments, and caustic vibes. The stripped-back production—exposed to even barer regard on the reissue—clearly conveys the group's unyielding attitude and walk-and-talk-it conviction. Save for "Spin the Black Circle," an homage to vinyl, and the accordion-accompanied fun goof of "Bugs," the album bares its collective teeth via Stone Gossard and Mike McCready's increasingly defiant guitar interplay, Vedder's possessed singing, and a broadened songwriting palette. The momentum-building lament "Betterman" perfectly unites an unforgettable melody with universally understood emotions; "Not For You" endures, along with Mudhoney's "Overblown," as the most eloquent and merciless condemnation of the mainstream's dalliance with the Seattle scene; "Nothingman" and "Immortality" seize quiet textures and introspective poetry to transcendent effect.

Songs from both records, along with four deep cuts from *Ten*, a cult-favorite B-side, and two covers comprise *Live at the Orpheum Theater, Boston, April 12, 1994*. A widely sought-after bootleg, it now takes its place as one of the great live records, a forceful portrait of a band creating its own identity and strengthening its bond, throwing itself into a fire and emerging the better for having done so. Vedder, then prone to scale venue scaffoldings and beat microphone stands into floors, won't be denied. At times, he gives the impression of a man about to explode, calling out the crowd and detractors like a fighter willing to take on any challenger. Versions of Rocket from the Tombs' "Sonic Reducer" (with Mudhoney's Mark Arm) and Neil Young's "Fuckin' Up" act as sharp lances to the senses; "Release" and "Oceans" function as cathartic escapes.



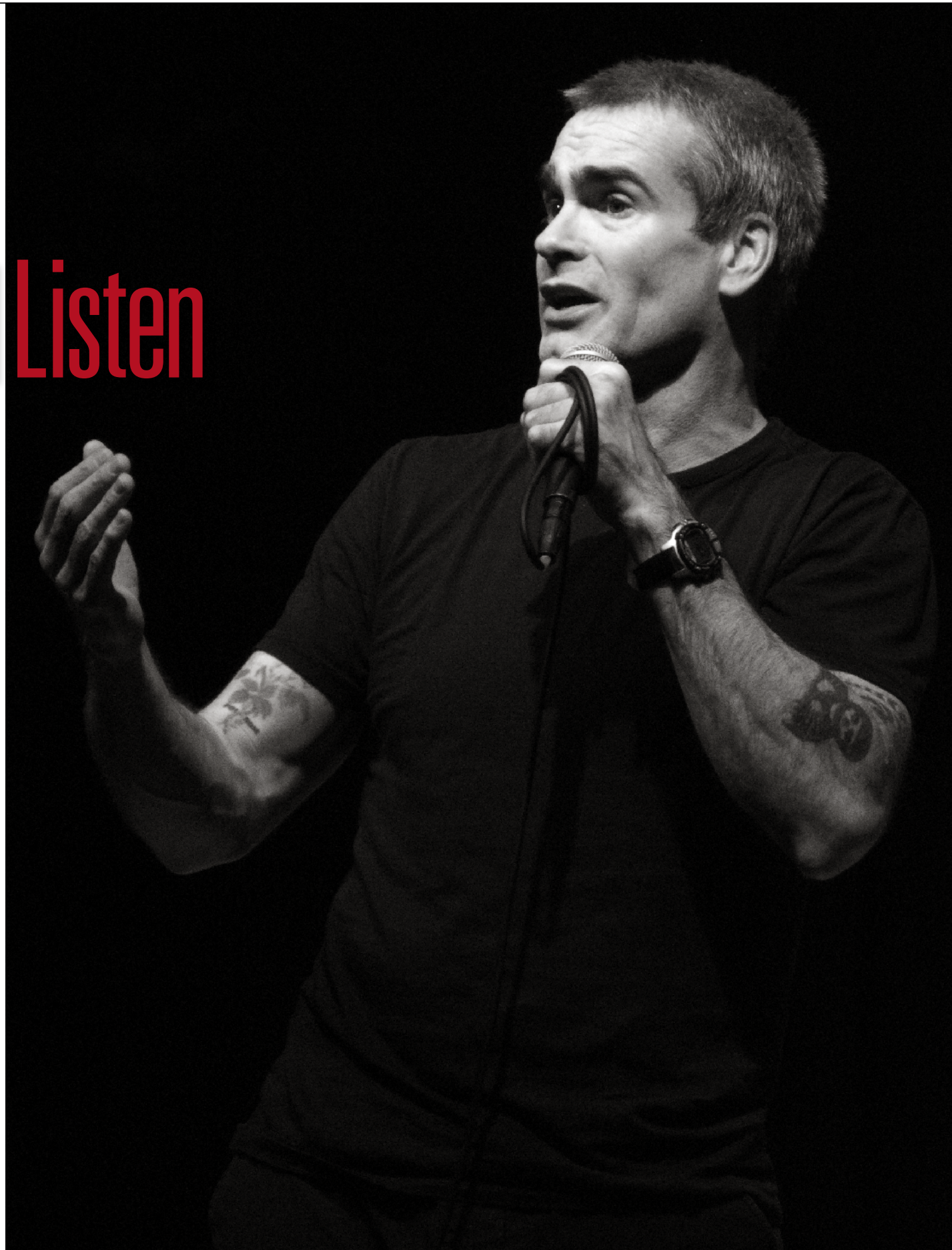
©Photo by Lance Mercer

Despite the strength of the other bonus material—an acoustic rendition of "Hold On," a previously unreleased organ/guitar-only mix of "Betterman"—on the reissues, there's no substitute for hearing a phenomenal band onstage precisely at its coming-of-age moment. With *vs.* and *Vitalogy* as bookends, the Boston concert serves as the exclamation mark on a crucial point in time that both America and the music world have yet to see equaled.
—Bob Gendron

Henry Rollins Speaks—You Should Listen

By Andy Downing

Henry Rollins, the onetime Black Flag singer who's gradually evolved from a violence-prone hooligan into a modern Renaissance man, turned 50 this past February. He marked the occasion with a lengthy spoken-word tour. Reached at his home in Los Angeles just days after his birthday, the loquacious author/singer/actor/publisher/speaker unloaded on everything from the emergence of the Tea Party to his own father, a "right-wing douchebag" that he's spent a lifetime distancing himself from.



On turning 50

At the end of the day, it is just another year between 49 and 51. But since we do break things into ten or whatever—the 50-yard line, dun, dun dun!—it's like the first half of your life. I mean, arguably, that's not true. I'm probably at the 66% mark if I get 75 out of the deal. Chances are you won't get 100, but you never know. My grandmother lived to be 102 and was completely clear. My family, what little I know of them, are exceptionally healthy people. My mother is 80 and is still all there. My father, who I don't really know, is probably out somewhere in the weeds with his AK worshipping Sean Hannity and waiting for Obama to take his gun away. As far as I know, he's in his late 80s and still with us. He's kind of a right-wing douchebag.

On how he's mellowed (slightly) with age

As a young person it's all about you. You're so sleek and beautiful. You want to meet the chicks. Some guy in a magazine says something bad about you, so you want to kill him. I don't even read reviews now. "What if someone says something bad about you?" "Hey man, First Amendment." I love the First Amendment more than I hate anything mean or snarky that you might say about me. And, quite honestly, I've got bigger fish to fry.

On choosing charity over a fleet of Ferraris

It happened once I could say, "Okay, I've got the year's rent. The roof doesn't leak. I'm stable. I've got money for food." Then I could look around because I wasn't so glued to the wheel in front of me, focusing on keeping my go-kart on the track. It's not like I got money and bought a fleet of Ferraris and a bunch of 16-year-old prostitutes. I drive a Subaru. But as soon as I had stability, then I could go, "Okay, and you wanted something? Sure." *(continued)*

On the right wing's "embrace" of family values issues

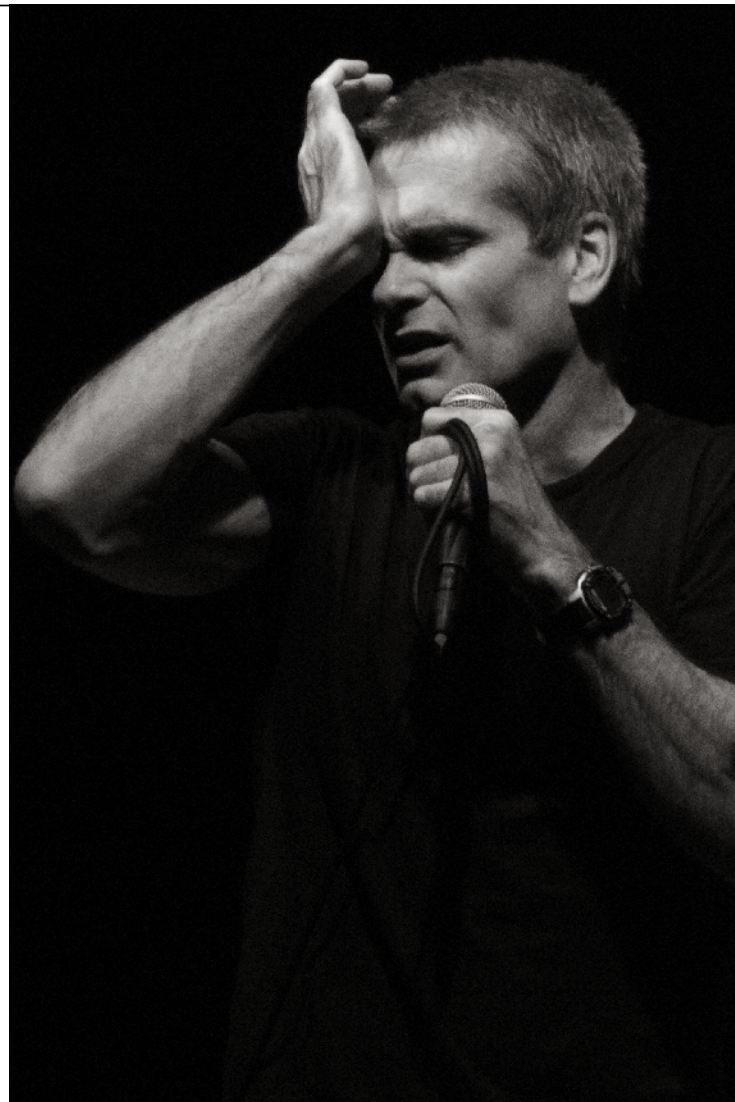
I think John Boehner probably doesn't have anything personal against Planned Parenthood, but those kinds of things keep guys like him in office. Gay marriage? These people don't care. They really don't. It's just a fundraiser. They would lose a fundraising tool if abortion became illegal across the board. So they really do like Roe vs. Wade because it gives them something to rail against. If gays could get married—if that was just the law of the land—they would be screwed because they would lose a boogiemer issue. I think a lot of these people know better, but they have a lot of intellectually malnourished people supporting them.

On the Tea Party

I can see the anger of a Tea Party person, but when you see the information that fuels them you're like, "Really? That's not really what's happening." "Well you're just spinning it your way." "No. No. Here are the numbers. Here are the real numbers. Here's your beloved Ronald Reagan. Here's how many times he raised taxes in six of his eight years in office: 11 times. So is he really your guy? I'm telling you how it is, man. Don't ask me. Look at the record. Look at the government documents."

On Sarah Palin's *Going Rogue*

It's so completely depressing. It's a total 180 to reality. And it's just totally moronic. There's kind of a Hallmark greeting card glow to the thing. And it's so, so ghost written. Like she comes in, "So, I bought lunch one day." "Thank you, dear. That's all we need. We'll write the rest."



On the challenge of portraying a white supremacist on *Sons of Anarchy*

The part that was challenging is probably not the part you think was challenging. Was it challenging to be a white power proponent? No. Because that is a very unemotional person. He takes his orders. "Kill that Mexican." Boom. Go eat dinner. No problem. His emotional range was nothing, really. He's an automaton. He's a hate-fueled, psychotic, sociopathic killing machine who just takes orders for a whiter America. But while he was this excruciatingly awful human being, he was also an exceptionally good dad and devoted father. *(continued)*

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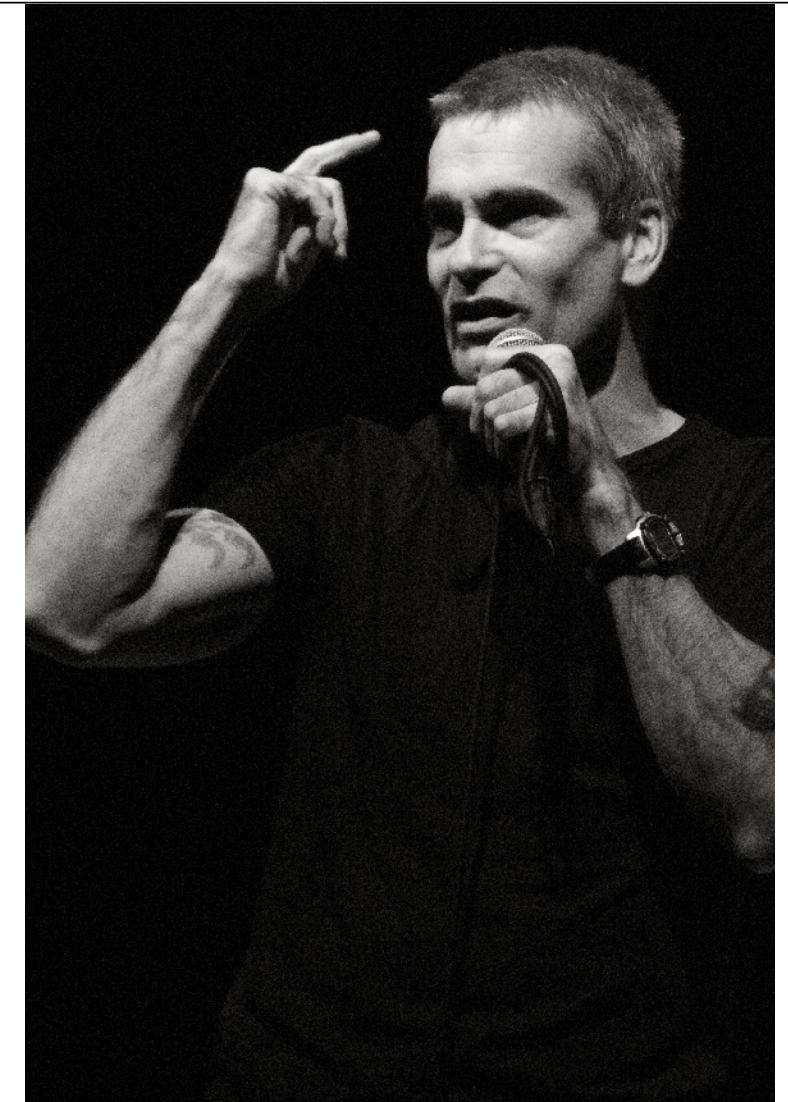
The highest compliment I was paid was by the show's creator, Kurt Sutter, who sent me a very nice email that I still have buried away somewhere. He said, "We knew you could be an angry, hate-fueled guy with no problem. But you made him a good dad and you made him a curious character. And that's what we didn't think you were going to sell as magnificently as you did." That's what I wanted to do. That was the hardest part of that character. It was like, "What a prick." Oh, wait a minute—he's a soccer dad.

On the flood of acting offers that never materialized afterwards

I was kind of hoping I'd be hounded by offers after [*Sons of Anarchy*] and nothing actually came my way. You always hope you have a foot in the door and you'll be fairly spoiled. Like every single series will say, "We demand your presence here on the set." And not a single offer. That's life.

On his public persona versus his private persona

If there's a disparity between my public and private persona, I'm really not aware of it. And just because I'm not aware of it doesn't mean there isn't one. That said, I really don't know what I don't divulge at any given moment to any person anywhere—at the supermarket, onstage, or in interview. There's no secret drug habit. The thing I spare you is the incredibly boring proclivities I have of like researching some label for like three hours on the Internet or downloading some avant-garde Japanese sax player's music until 4 o'clock in the morning. That's me on a Saturday night. You're talking to a geek, basically. Don't get us started. We'll tell you everything.



I don't have a TV here. I read. There's a lot of art on the walls. There are custom-made bookshelves that go up to the ceiling and a record collection that would probably peel the paint off your car. When I'm off the road I live in that world. Then I go back out there and I'm that thing you throw peanuts at, as Bo Diddley once said. ●



 **MICS**

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Live Divinations

*A Conversation With Mastodon
Drummer Brann Dailor*

By Bob Gendron

Psychedelic vortexes. Bloodthirsty wolves. A red sabertooth beast attacking a vicious Yeti. Vikings dueling until the death. From the fire-ravaged horse on the cover of its first record to the astral themes that dominate 2009's progressive *Crack the Skye*, Mastodon has paired imaginative imagery with conceptual narratives, creating a multimedia dialogue that further drags listeners into its dream worlds.

Never before has the connection been as prominent as on *Live at the Aragon*, a recently released CD/DVD and 2LP/DVD package that captures the virtuosic metal group's October 2009 concert at Chicago's Aragon Ballroom. Featuring *Crack the Skye* performed in its entirety, the live set illuminates the topical visuals projected behind the band during the tour, adding fresh perspective to the plot twists within the storyline. As a bonus, the DVD allows fans to watch the *Crack the Skye: The Movie* independent of the performance, further focusing in on the specially created visual treatments.

Reached on the phone at his home in Atlanta, Mastodon drummer Brann Dailor reflected on the tour, explained decisions behind the group's first-ever live set, and expressed why he loves a good challenge.

BG: The Aragon is a famed rock venue, yet it's also renowned for cavernous sound issues. Why did Mastodon choose to film the Chicago show there?

BD: Chicago is one of the first places that liked us. We always have a great show when we play there, and there are always a lot of people that come out. And the Aragon is probably one of the most beautiful venues in the country. We felt it was the perfect spot, and the date came in the middle of the tour. New York and Los Angeles were options, but those places are just too nuts. There are too many interviews to do and too much industry. Atlanta wouldn't be good, either. It made perfect sense to do it in Chicago.



The band has played Aragon multiple times over the years as an opener for other bands. What was it like to return to the same place as a headliner?

It's amazing. We had been the opening band on package tours just a few years prior with Slayer or whoever. You feel like you're moving up the ladder. It's great to look out into the audience and see all of those people there, mainly for you.

Mastodon has always been graphically oriented, from album cover art to t-shirt designs. How did you conceptualize the running visuals to accompany the tour?

We always wanted to do something like that but we really never had the budget for a production of that size or nature. When it came around, we spent the money and were able to get an entire movie made that goes along with the storyline of the album. We ran a whole treatment and Roboshobo [who has also produced several Mastodon videos] ended up shooting the entire film. It links up to the album perfectly.

How much input did you have on the film?

Everything that's in the film is a back and forth between the band and Robo. We wanted the movie to resemble the Silent Film era of filmmaking. And they took some of Paul Romano's artwork and animated it. Those two things combine. But of course, the whole story was written way before the album was released. The story was being completed while we were writing the album, and the lyrics went alongside the story.

Since you were playing *Crack the Skye* in its entirety, did you prepare for these shows differently than other gigs?

Not necessarily. It's definitely demanding, though. Playing that record straight through is an ordeal. I thought it came out pretty good, especially toward the end of the tour. It's not that different of an approach. Just song after song, that's the set. You just play it through. *(continued)*

We were down here [in Atlanta] everyday all day long. That's our job, and it's a pretty awesome job, so nobody is complaining. We want it to be right. Every time we take the stage we want to be great.

How much preparation was required before the band was able to sync the music up to the backing visuals?

We logged quite a few hours of practice. We were down here [in Atlanta] everyday all day long. That's our job, and it's a pretty awesome job, so nobody is complaining. We want it to be right. Every time we take the stage we want to be great. The vocals are the hardest part. None of us are singers. I don't know what the hell we got ourselves into. [Laughs] There's all this singing on the record; we can't sing! We do a decent job and were able to squeak through getting it right. At least we hope so.

You hear yourself when you play onstage, but it's different than hearing and watching yourself on a concert disc. Now that you've seen the DVD, to your ear, what are the differences between the studio record to the live performance of Crack the Skye?

The live record sounds more like a band rocking. Songs are a little bit faster and a little bit livelier. With the live record and DVD, we didn't go in and doctor anything in the studio. That's us on any given night on that tour. That's what you get. If there's any screw-ups or moments of vocals being off-key, that's pretty much how it goes for just about any given performer. Unless you're like Stevie Wonder or somebody like that. But it pretty much went off without a hitch. I think it's one of our better performances. The pressure was for everybody to be perfect at that gig. We weren't going to film another one. We sunk everything

we had into that performance; ten cameras and all of the gear. I'm really happy we didn't experience any disasters because there wouldn't be any going back and fixing anything. We probably just wouldn't be able to release it. Instead, we'd eat a bunch of cash. Luckily, our band throughout the ages has been able to rise to the occasion.

Crack the Skye is rife with complex time signatures and jazz-like changes. Is there any particular segment on the album that's more demanding than another to replicate live?

There's nothing too crazy. After playing it so many times, you just get used to it. But I don't want to be used to it. I want to be in the moment and in the music. I really try to stick myself into it emotionally so that, clichés aside, I'm feeling the music. I want to have amazing moments onstage with the guys every single time. I want it to be great. I want to rise above. That's the most challenging part for me. You play this stuff everyday but you don't want to get complacent, you don't want to get like 'eh.' I don't not want to care. I don't want to roll up and be bummed about being there, ever. I don't want to be going through the motions. After a long tour, that's the most difficult thing to do, go out there and be in it. A lot of times your mind has a tendency to start to wander. And that's with anything. I try to make sure that every time one of my vocal parts comes up, I'm on key. The most challenging part of the shows is playing drums and singing simultaneously. *(continued)*

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I want to be awesome, but sometimes I'm just out of breath from playing drums back there. That was a whole new challenge. But I like a nice challenge.

Five years ago in a conversation, you told me your goal was to tour and be able to come home, pay the electric bills, and take care of business. Mastodon is now beyond that stage. What's in store for the future?

I'm in my rehearsal space right now, staring at my drums. I intend on playing them once I get off of the phone. We are writing the new record right now and are knee-deep into new material. We have about 15 songs. It's pretty crazy how much material we were able to collect on the road. The Alice in Chains tour was a very prolific period for everybody. We were in arenas every night and just hanging around there all day. We put a little guitar amp and some guitars in whatever hockey locker room we were in at the moment. Then we'd just go back there and start rocking. We'd get our phones out and record stuff that we thought was good. When we got home, we just dumped out all of these crazy riffs. Hopefully, it's going to amount to another badass record. At the moment, everything sounds headed in a cool direction. It's going to be a beauty and the beast type of epic. Every band says their new stuff is great. But that should be the case. If you're making music and writing, the new stuff that you're working on should be what you are most excited about. I just have a really good feeling.

Do you foresee working similar visuals into your shows from here on out, or is there a desire to go back to the old-school days of dropping a tarp behind the band?

I'm not sure. I'd love to do the visuals again. We'll see if we can afford it. It definitely adds a different element to the show and gives people another reason to come out. We'll see how much money is in the wallet when we get done recording and get ready to go out on tour.

Since you're a personal fan of the visuals, were you often tempted to turn around and look behind you to see what was going on onscreen?

I'm looking back there all of the time. The visuals also reflect off of my toms. So I'd see things like Rasputin with a bag over his head, and I'd be like, 'Oh Jesus, what's happening?' I'm looking all around. Usually, it's toward people on the side of the stage, friends of the band and such. A lot of the time, I'm looking over there and shooting them the bird. I'm having a good time back there. ●



Every band says their new stuff is great. But that should be the case. If you're making music and writing, the new stuff that you're working on should be what you are most excited about.

Denon DP-62L Direct Drive Turntable

By Jerold O'Brien

With Technics recently abandoning production of its venerable SL-1200 model, direct-drive turntable fans must either purchase new models from high-end producers like Brinkmann or find used models from sources like eBay or Audiogon.

Of course, the 1970s and early 1980s signaled the heyday of direct-drive turntable manufacturing. Brands like Kenwood, Pioneer, Technics, Sansui, Sony, and Denon competed for domination. Their products stood in direct opposition to belt-drive tables from Linn, Thorens, and Rega. Whereas belt-driven models were quite simple, direct-driven machines were massive, over-engineered, and technically sophisticated. Emphasis was placed on perfect speed stability and isolation. And while belt-drive companies' hype machines seemed to have success in turning audiophiles away from direct-drive tables, mainstream music lovers purchased tons of direct-drive units before mass-level vinyl playback faded away during the late 80s. There's something to be said about the merits of the direct-drive engineering prowess.

FEATURE



No Lightweight

One of Denon's top-line models from 1982, the DP-62L featured here is in ideal operating and physical condition. Mint, these turntables regularly fetch \$500 to \$700, with a quality dust cover coming a bonus. Considering they originally sold for \$595 in 1982, the level of retained value is excellent. This particular DP-62L was purchased on eBay for \$550 (with local pickup) and sold by the original owner. The unit's handsome rosewood/mahogany wood base, set off

by the massive motor assembly, aluminum die-cast platter, smoked dust cover, and sophisticated tone arm, commands attention.

It's heavy too, weighing in at just over 25 pounds. And a truly excellent find, as the seller not only had the original owner's manual (sadly, no original box) but both the straight tonearm wand with fixed headshell and the S-shaped wand with removable headshells, similar to those on the Technics SL-1200. Such flexibility, along with the ability to adjust VTA, makes comparing cartridges a breeze.

The arm also features a user-adjustable electronic damping mechanism to eliminate stray resonances. Semi-automatic in operation, the DL-62L requires you to manually cue the tonearm at the beginning of a record but automatically lifts when an LP finishes playing. Handy!

Serious Listening

TONE publisher Jeff Dorgay used the Denon with a Lyra Dorian MC cartridge with excellent results, but my journey began with a Sumiko Blackbird high-output MC cartridge. It didn't take long to get the 'table dialed in, and it was easy to detect the Denon's signature. Just as I remembered, the bass response was deep, the stability rock solid, and boy, was this 'table quiet!

I immediately noticed such characteristics when playing Eric Bibb's *Friends*. Along with that of duet partner Guy Walker, the singer's deep, resonant voice appeared out of a silent background. The voices were in stark contrast to the twin twelve-string guitars' quick, percussive strumming, which possessed great bite and no glare. You can't get this kind of depth from one of today's \$500 turntables. Next up, "Mami Gato" from Medeski, Martin & Wood's *Note Bleu*. The Denon easily captured the fat sound of Chris Wood's acoustic bass while delineating John Medeski's piano and losing none of the drum cymbals' shimmer.

Conspiracy and Redemption

In listening to "BK's Broiler" from Bruce Katz' *Crescent Crawl*, I was impressed with the ease with which this modestly priced turntable/arm/cartridge combination breezed through the most demanding chord progressions. Yet one thought kept nagging me: *(continued)*





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FEATURE

Did the audiophile press unfairly dismiss direct-drive turntables in the 80s? Based on the performance of this ‘table, I would have to say yes.

But there was still more performance to wring from this combination. Swapping the Blackbird for the newly released Ortofon MC20 Super cartridge, reviewed in this issue, proved a definite upgrade. Replaying the aforementioned cuts yielded even better results; the bass had more control and the treble went from great to gorgeous. Digging out an RCA Living Stereo recording of Schubert’s *Symphony No. 8 (“Unfinished”)*, with Fritz Reiner and the CSO, offered strings arranged left to right and front to back in perfect proportions within a deep soundstage. The character of the violins? Outstanding.

Being a tweakosaurus, I started wondering about upgrading various parameters on this robust platform. A quick Internet search revealed that others have had the same ideas, and have added damping material to the base and platter, with excellent results. Replacing the cheesy tonearm cable with a pair of RCA jacks (allowing for the use of a premium pair of interconnects and an improved platter mat) also pays dividends.

If you want to get really wacky, you could hardwire a new tonearm cable or modify the plinth to accept a better tonearm. Should you ache for improvements but lack the prowess to complete the tasks, visit <http://vinyl-revolution.com>, which offers a wide range of vintage direct-drive tables. The company comes across older Denon models on a regular basis, and sells them with most tweaks already in place. Vinyl Revolution will even mount a cartridge of your choice if you aren’t comfortable doing so.

Solid Value

While Denon still offers one direct-drive turntable, it pales in comparison to the DP-62L. It affords a level of sound quality that, today, will probably set you back about \$2,000. So, yes, paying \$700 for a flawless DP-62L constitutes a bargain. The hunt is worth the payoff: If your analog experience is limited to budget belt drives, one of these beauties will pleasantly surprise you. ●

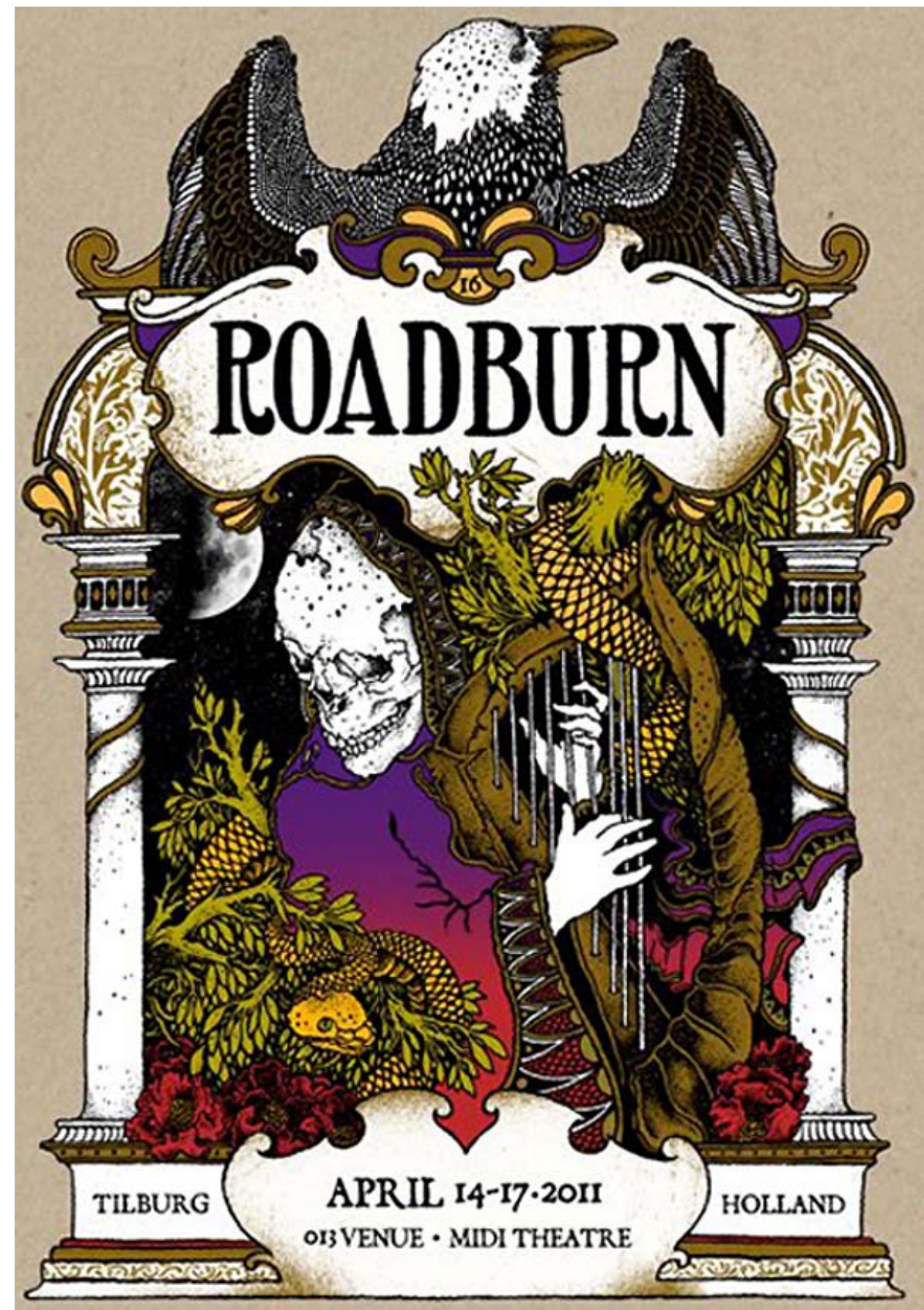
“Unspeakable Fire Flowing Through Art”

**An Interview With Roadburn Festival Organizer
Walter Hoeijmakers**

By Bob Gendron

*A*n intimate four-day gathering of psychedelic, avant-garde, heavy, and nearly every other imaginable cutting-edge sonic delight, Roadburn Festival is without peer. Every April, dozens of bands and eager listeners from more than 40 countries descend upon a quaint town in the Netherlands to share in a common love of sensory-absorbing music, underground art, and likeminded discussion. It's not difficult to understand why.

Unlike most festivals, Roadburn is focused and small; boundaries between the performers and audience are practically nonexistent. Due to its international reputation, unparalleled vision, and limited capacity, the multi-day event sells out within minutes. Indeed, Roadburn has become the gold standard a music industry that's increasingly more reliant on festivals. This year's lineup represents a veritable wet dream for any metal, experimental, or doom fan: Sunn O))), Godflesh, Shrinebuilder, Winter, Trap Them, Corrosion of Conformity, Keiji Haino, The Secret, Earth, and Swans are just some of the names involved.



TONE is honored and humbled by the organizers' invitation to attend Roadburn 2011. Our forthcoming report will serve as the magazine's cover feature in Issue 37. In the meantime, to get an even better understanding of Roadburn's history, purpose, and unique characteristics, we talked with festival organizer—and fellow audiophile—Walter Hoeijmakers via email. All festival directors should bring his level of passion, insight, and dedication to the fore.

BG: Roadburn began as a website but ultimately turned into a festival. Can you give some background on how the music festival came about, and when you started?

"At the very beginning, we just wanted to convey the overall feel of the website onto the stage. We started out very small by inviting several bands that we had featured on the website. Plus, we wanted to project parts of the website's artwork behind the bands, and also have deejays spinning the music we were covering. Along the way, we started to experiment with live streams since we also sought to keep up with Internet's progress. There was no real master plan; but nothing was contrived, either. We just did what felt best, and got tons of creative input along the way. All of this cumulated into the 10th Roadburn festival in 2005, which became the blueprint for the festival as we know it today."

Most festivals are sprawling affairs that involve tens of thousands of people and vague artistic focus. Roadburn is the opposite and strives to melt any boundaries between artists, fans and organizers. How do you manage to accomplish this and what motivated you to set these goals?



"We want Roadburn to be a small, intimate, and well-organized festival. We love the bands, and thrive on creating a unique social vibe by emphasizing the cutting edge and honoring the forefathers. This is all joined together by a love of music. We're not thriving on financial goals, neither do we want to be the next 'best outdoor festival.' Our main goal is to bring together a diverse group of artists that push the envelope, are truly original, and inspire us all with the unspeakable fire flowing through their art. It's a gathering of kindred spirits, bands, and fans alike, and the lines between them are often completely blurred as they all worship the power of sound together. At Roadburn, most bands don't hang out backstage: They can be found down in front!"

Tickets for this year's festival sold out in about 15 minutes. The fest is now an internationally recognized phenomenon. Do you have any idea how many countries are represented by the people attending? Do you remember how long it took the first festival to sell out?

"The first-ever Roadburn Festivals didn't sell out at all. We sold out in 2003 for the very first time when the festival took place at the Effenaar club in Eindhoven; 450 people showed up. Then, in 2006, Roadburn sold out a few days prior to the festival. We had moved to the 013 venue in Tilburg, and offered 1750 tickets. It was crazy to see that approximately 70% of our attendees were from abroad and not from the Netherlands. These figures still stand today, as we have about 44 different nationalities attending the festival.

They descend upon Tilburg from the world over, ranging from the USA and South America to Australia and Japan, and all the European countries in between. For Roadburn 2011, we're even welcoming people from Singapore and Indonesia. It's something that still amazes me today as we just started the festival out of a labor of love, and still do it for that very reason."

As the organizer, can you share what your duties involve and how early you start planning? Once the festival begins, are you able to enjoy it or are you too busy managing logistics?

"We start planning one year in advance. I'm already working on Roadburn 2012 even though the 2011 edition has yet to take place. Unfortunately, I'm not able to see much at the festival as I'm often busy micro-managing. I always tend to spend time with bands and attendees, and as soon as I'm able to catch up with them, you'll find me backstage or talking to all the wonderful people in the venue's hallways. Sometimes I can enjoy a band. There's always a show that I'm trying to catch in its entirety, and it's my goal to catch several this year. I desperately want to see likes of Wovenhand and Shrinebuilder, among others. Luckily, we record most performances for the on-demand audio streams, and I catch up with everything at home when listening to the streams."

The lineup for Roadburn 2011 is any metal and underground music fan's dream. How do you go about inviting artists? Do you start with a wish list? Do certain bands contact you expressing their desire?

"Both Jurgen van den Brand (Roadburn's co-organizer) and I start out with a band list. We have a pretty good idea of the bands we'd like to invite for the festival.

The list keeps changing throughout the year, and we're very proactive by approaching the bands ourselves. It's always very rewarding if certain bands on our list start to approach us. It's in the spirit of the festival, and makes confirming their involvement easy. On a personal note, I've been around in the underground scene for more than 25 years and happen to know many bands personally, as well as lots of bookings agents, managers, and journalists. This is really helpful, because getting in touch with certain bands is really easy for me. The Roadburn phenomenon also helps to get in touch with bands that I don't know on a personal level."

You were able to get Keiji Haino, Caspar Brotzmann Massaker, Ufomammut, and at least a half dozen other bands that can be considered nothing less than coups for any festival. How does one go about doing this?

"Keiji Haino and Caspar Brotzmann Massaker have been invited by Sunn O))) for their curated Roadburn event. We asked [Sunn O))) leaders] Greg Anderson and Stephen O'Malley to open up the styles and sounds of the festival, and they did a great job. Their curated day is nothing short of amazing, and a tribute to some master guitarists that influenced them as artists. Offering a day of the festival to a curating band or artist is of great help in getting coups for Roadburn. It inspires other bands to be part of the festival as well, as they want to be among their peers in an intimate setting—which is Roadburn."

This year's lineup has a definite psychedelic and doom flavor. Was this intentional? If so, are there any bands that you targeted that, for some reason, you weren't able to get for the festival?

"It all happened naturally. When we started to work on this year's Roadburn festival, we noticed some very interesting doom and psychedelic bands that we really liked. It's part of our mission to put emphasis on the cutting edge. Thus, inviting these bands was inevitable, and pushed Roadburn 2011 in a more doomy and dark psychedelic direction. We love evolving the festival in manners like this to keep it interesting for our attendees. In the end, the festival should be a tribute to the open minds of bands and attendees alike. As far as bands we wanted but didn't get, it would have been great if we could have had The Obsessed for Roadburn 2011, but we couldn't pull off the reunion yet!" *(continued)*

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There's an incredible balance between new and older bands on the bill, i.e., with highly influential veterans such as COC, Pentagram, Godflesh, and Earth sharing the bill with relative newcomers such as The Secret, Liturgy, et al. Was this by design?

"We want Roadburn to be a well-balanced festival and do everything to keep it that way even if it means that we have to pass on certain opportunities. In order to keep the balance, several great bands didn't make it on this year's lineup. However, we remain in touch with these bands for future Roadburn festivals since they are good reference points for next year's direction."

Is there anything that you are doing for this year's festival that improves upon what you did in the past?

"We keep improving every year, whether it's about backlines, projections, crowd control, food vendors, a merchandise venue, or the metal disco. We want to maintain the laidback vibe of the festival as much as we possibly can. Luckily, the incredible staff of the 013 venue, home of Roadburn, is of great help—they are a main part of the festival, too."

What advice what you give somebody who has never been to Roadburn?

"Go with the flow. Don't try to catch as many bands as you'd like or get distracted by some overlaps. Please immerse yourself in the laidback vibe of the festival, and enjoy the company of all these like-minded people. Then you'll experience the camaraderie amongst the festivalgoers and end up seeing some amazing bands you didn't intend to see while making new friends along the way."

You've been there from the start. Can you share a few favorite memories?

"There are way too many stories to be told. Maybe I should write a book some day about all the shenanigans and debauchery behind the scenes—hahaha! All joking aside, if someone would have told me 25 years ago that I would run a festival like Roadburn and collaborate with either Neurosis,

INTERVIEW

Tom G Warrior (of Celtic Frost and Triptykon), Saint Vitus, or Hawkwind, I simply wouldn't believe them. It all just happened."

Is there any single band or performance this year that you can't wait to see?

"As I said earlier, I'm really looking forward to seeing Dave Eugene Edwards Wovenhand at Roadburn. It's an incredible coup for the festival to have the band on the bill. At first glimpse, Wovenhand is a little off-kilter, as Roadburn tends to be an underground festival for psychedelic, avant-garde, doom, or any other variation of leftfield sonic pleasures that push the boundaries of music. But Wovenhand will prove that making really heavy music does not necessarily mean having the loudest guitar or the most amps."

You're obviously a huge music fan. And the intimate construction of the festival suggests that you appreciate good sound. Are you interested in audio gear? If so, on what kind of system do you listen to music at home?

"I have been fascinated by audio gear and spent lots of money on speakers, interlinks, tweaks, and the like over the years—just like many of *TONE's* readers, I suppose. For the last 8 years, I've been really enjoying my Marantz Music Link series (preamp, phono preamp and monoblocks). My current set of speakers is Floating Systems' Synthese.

"I have a pair of AE4s (by Acoustic Energy) as well, but don't use them very often. I really love old MIT interlinks and MIT Terminator speaker cables, which I prefer over high-end Japanese brands like 47 Lab; I have some of their interlinks as well.

"I'm in love with my mid-70s Ariston RD 11 turntable (it's the predecessor of Linn's LP12) plus SME tonearm. As far as cartridges go, I'm sticking to a Grado Statement Wood—amazing warmth, and perfect for my vast collection of 60s and 70s rock on vinyl.

"I prefer vinyl over CDs any time, but have an experimental CD player that's custom-built by a Swiss audio geek. I bought it relatively cheap. Sometimes you need to be lucky!" ●

Audiophile Pressings

By the Tone Staff

Click on album art to purchase from Music Direct

While this performance was captured at the apogee of Carole King's career, between *Tapestry* (which would sell more than 11 million copies) and *Music* (her only other platinum release), it wasn't released on CD until 1996, and it failed to chart. The marginal sound quality on the original CD has helped lead to it being left in the bargain bin for about a dollar these days, but the rarely visited performance is exceptional nonetheless.



Carole King

The Carnegie Hall Concert:
June 18, 1971
Mobile Fidelity, SACD

Mobile Fidelity's new SACD still contains a few of the foibles present on live records made in the early 70s, but the sonic improvements are dramatic. The mid-90s Sony release is very compressed, with King's vocals somewhat buried in the mix—not unlike her recent *Live at the Troubadour*, on which the band constantly overpowers her.

By comparison, this archival set showcases King, front and center stage on grand piano, with minimal accompaniment from Charles Larkey on bass and Danny Kortchmar on guitar. James Taylor makes a guest appearance on “You’ve Got a Friend”; just listen to the youthful age in his voice here, completely different than that on the *Troubadour* album. And where the original pressing lacks any depth whatsoever, the MoFi disc reveals hall ambience, evident from the first few piano notes and surprisingly apparent in the applause-filled breaks between songs. King fans should be pleased at the treatment MoFi has afforded this obscure gem.

—Jeff Dorgay



GRAND FUNK
We're An American Band

Grand Funk Railroad

We're An American Band

Friday Music, 180g LP

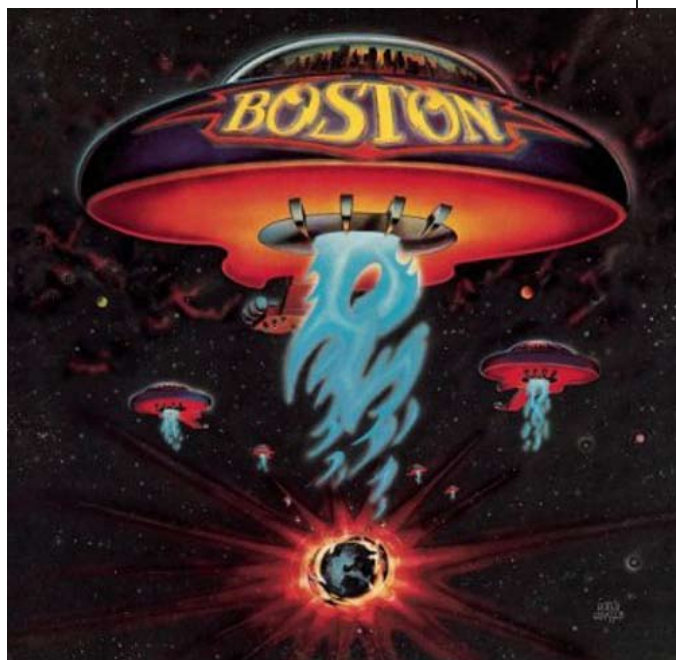
Few rock anthems received more airplay during the 70s (and, for that matter, the 80s) than “We’re An American Band.” The song remains a classic-rock radio staple. As one of Todd Rundgren’s earliest production efforts, this Grand Funk Railroad record has less of the signature Todd “sound” than his later attempts, but that’s a debate for internet forums.

Comparing Friday Music’s *We’re An American Band* to an early stamper yellow original pressing amounts to a dead heat. The yellow vinyl original still has the edge in top-end smoothness as well as more low-level detail. The discrepancy in smoothness is most evident on Side One’s “Creepin’.” On the original, the high hat rather effortlessly fades into oblivion, while the effect on the new orange pressing (not yellow when you do a side-by-side comparison) is slightly grainy. Similarly, the reissue’s dynamics fall slightly short; when the train roars across the soundstage on “The Railroad,” it doesn’t as forcefully jump out of the speakers.

But the Friday LP receives the nod as you get closer to the center of the record; inner-groove distortion is definitely higher on the original.

It also appears that the Friday version is cut at a slightly lower level than the original, always a good thing. Moreover, the amount of tape hiss in the presentation convinces me that Friday utilized the actual master tape, just as advertised. However, while the pressing is quiet and the jacket printed on decent stock, it’s unfortunate that the cool red and blue “We’re an American Band” stickers aren’t included; they would’ve been a nice touch.

If you have a mint original of *We’re An American Band*, there’s no reason to buy another copy. But if this LP is one of your favorite rock records and your original is not up to snuff, or you happen to be starting over with vinyl, forget those black vinyl copies in your used record store. Friday’s orange edition is a worthy addition. —**Jeff Dorgay**

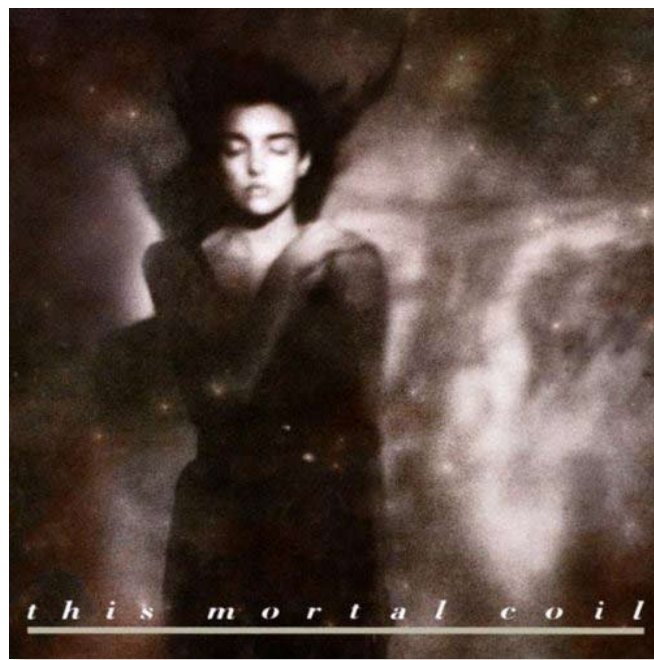


Boston

Boston
Friday Music, 180g LP

Another ubiquitous 70s rock record, Boston's self-titled album garnered the band a monumental legion of fans that had no idea that it would take the band almost a decade to release a sophomore album. Friday Music hasn't made any major missteps here; the record is basically quiet, but it's just as bright as the original, and relatively flat. Adding insult to injury, my copy was slightly off center. Again, such faults are inexcusable when being asked to pony up \$30 for an LP.

The worst news for those that already shelled out for Friday's pressing? *Boston* sold 17 million copies and, as a result, I was able to pick up a clean used copy for four bucks at a local store. And it sounds just as good as the reissue. For those keeping score: Grand Funk, yes; Boston, no. —**Jeff Dorgay**



This Mortal Coil

It'll End In Tears
ORG Music, 180g LP

For totally 80s Goth fans, this Morrissey-meets-Twin Peaks effort is sure to please. This Mortal Coil, consisting of Dead Can Dance and the Cocteau Twins members, along with other artists from the 4AD roster, is very interesting to say the least.

Like so many 80s and 90s releases, used CDs of *It'll End In Tears* are cheap, plentiful, and possess relatively poor sound quality. By comparison, the LPs are tough to find on local store shelves. Amusingly, a few Goth record store clerks I encountered in Portland couldn't hold back a smile when I asked for the album *on vinyl*.

ORG again adheres to its consistently high level of quality and production sensibilities. Whether or not This Mortal Coil is your cup of tea, the label should be applauded for producing another creatively outstanding record that's not just another boring audiophile female vocal set. Pressed in Holland by Furnace MFG, the LP is dead quiet from start to finish, with a very smooth and sultry top end. The silent surface also helps expose the multiple layers of vocals and strings, adding to the songs' overall creepiness. And I mean that in the best possible way. For those requiring an even more exclusive edition, ORG pressed 500 copies on white vinyl.

—**Jeff Dorgay**

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Most classical devotees know that *Espana!* features legendary Spanish conductor Ataulfo Argenta leading the London Symphony Orchestra in a program of so-called “Spanish” blockbusters. But, ironically, only one piece is penned by a Spanish composer (Granados, *Danza Espanola*) while the others are by a Russian (Rimsky Korsakov, *Capriccio Espagnol*), German (Moszkowski, *5 Spanish Dances*), and Frenchman (Chabrier, *España*).

Espana!

Ataulfo Argenta/London Symphony Orchestra

London/Original Recordings Group,
2 180g 45RPM LPs

The LP was initially issued in the United States as one of the index recordings of London Records’ vaunted “blueback” series, known for its demonstration-quality sound. Original bluebacks often sell for hundreds of dollars but, truthfully, many are overly bright or have serious groove noise that’s readily audible on high-end turntables.

This ORG reissue has dead-quiet surfaces that would not be very meaningful if the sound quality was not up to that of the original issue. It is. And because ORG spread the program over three sides (the fourth repeats *Capriccio Espagnol* and *Danza Espanola*) and issued the set at 45 rather than 33 1/3RPM, the sonic benefits are immediately apparent. Beginning my listening with *Capriccio Espagnol*, the most popular selection, was a real thrill. From the opening brass chords and the subsequent massive pulse, the selection represents orchestral playing at its best. And while you have to get up and change the LP sides twice more, you will do so eagerly in anticipation of hearing the other works. If the original blueback is a classic, this limited-edition, Bernie Grundman-mastered set is a classic-beater in every sense of the term.

—Lawrence Devoe



Falla

The Three Cornered Hat Ballet; La Vida Breve: Interlude and Dance

Teresa Berganza, mezzo/Suisse Romande Orchestra/Ernst Ansermet

London/Original Recordings Group,
2 180g 45RPM LPs

Manuel de Falla was one of Spain’s most popular 20th century composers. This rousing 2-LP set from ORG shows why. His *Sombrero de tres picos* (or *Three-Cornered Hat*) is a spirited ballet with clear echoes of its flamenco roots, beginning with opening olés and castanets.

Manuel de Falla was one of Spain’s most popular 20th century composers. This rousing 2-LP set from ORG shows why. *His Sombrero de tres picos* (or *Three-Cornered Hat*) is a spirited ballet with clear echoes of its flamenco roots, beginning with opening olés and castanets. It’s complemented by a cameo appearance—complete with birdcalls—from the great Spanish mezzo-soprano Teresa Berganza. Swiss conductor Ernst Ansermet, leading his personal band, the Suisse Romande Orchestra, premiered the piece in 1919, which helps makes this 1961 recording *the* definitive reading. It’s obvious from every bar recorded here that Ansermet possessed a natural affinity for Spanish music. I have the original London blueback recording, long considered a sonic spectacular.

ORG reissued this classic over four LP sides, and also included two selections from Falla’s opera *La Vida Breve*. The advantages of the 45RPM mastering and silent surfaces are plain as day. The label’s engineers also tamed the brightness that was typical on some early London LPs. Just listen to “Miller’s Dance” with its pounding rhythms and massed strings, the saucy quote from Beethoven’s 5th Symphony, or the concluding “Jota,” with its sharp brass attacks and bass drum thwacks. As good as the original recording was—and still is—ORG managed to improve a legendary recording that I did not think could be bettered. Spanish music aficionados need to put this LP set on their short list of essential purchases.—Lawrence Devoe

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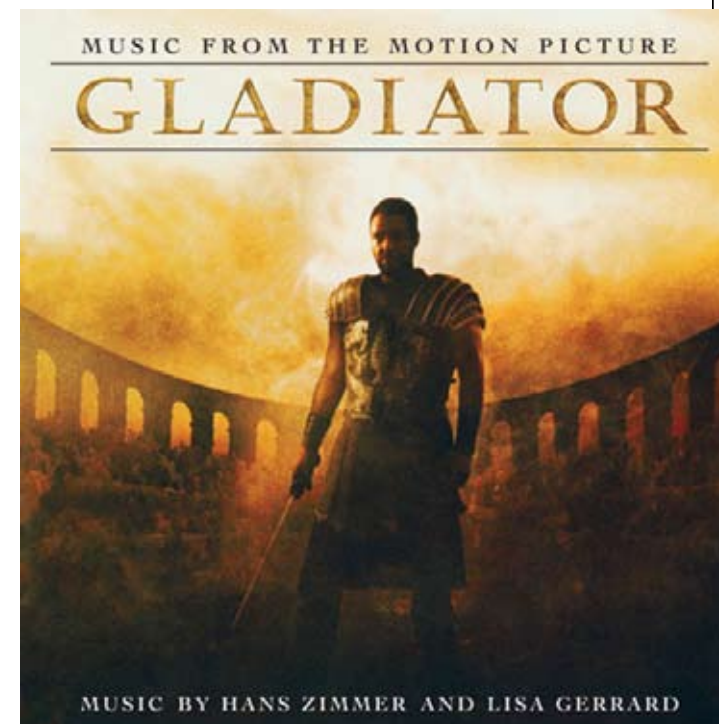


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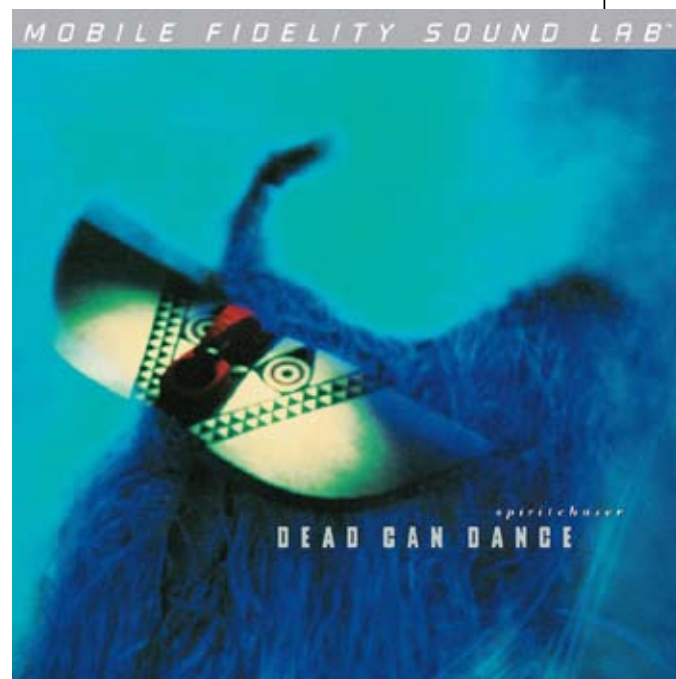
Gladiator: Music from the Motion Picture
London/Original Recordings Group,
2 180g 45RPM LPs

Largely thanks to enduring themes of persecution, freedom, and heroism, *Gladiator* counts itself as one of the new millennium's blockbuster movies. Yet Hans Zimmer and Lisa Gerrard's score has as much to do with the film's impact as the visuals or narrative.

Initially, the collaboration between the veteran film composer (Zimmer) and pop singer (Gerrard) seemed an odd pairing. But as Dead Can Dance fans knew, Gerrard is not a typical pop vocalist. The resultant score sounds nothing like conventional Hollywood Roman extravaganzas, ala *Spartacus* or *Ben Hur*.

Presented on this 2LP set in spectacularly huge orchestral sound, you can readily hear Gerrard's otherworldly contributions to Zimmer's punchy, pungent tonal palette. The 17 selections provide contrasting albeit evocative styles, ranging from exotic Middle Eastern harmonies ("The Wheat") to more conventional brassy martial music that echo Gustav Holst's *The Planets* ("The Battle"). The overall tone tends toward somber, so the need for three side changes provides welcome breaks in the prevailing mood. And the level of musicianship produced by Gavin Greenway and the Lyndhurst Orchestra is first-rate—as is the ethereal female vocalist who intermittently appears during the proceedings. As expected, the records' surfaces are spotless and the packing superb.

—Lawrence Devoe



Dead Can Dance

Spiritchaser and *Into the Labyrinth*
Mobile Fidelity Silver Label, 140g LPs

Mobile Fidelity handled the SACD remastering of these albums a few years ago with excellent results. If you are a Dead Can Dance fan and into vinyl, these records are guaranteed to please. For those not completely familiar with MoFi's new Silver Label, its LPs are still pressed at RTI in California and under the same conditions as the imprint's 180g Original Master Recordings—with the same skilled people at both ends of the process. However, there are two main differences between the two product lines.

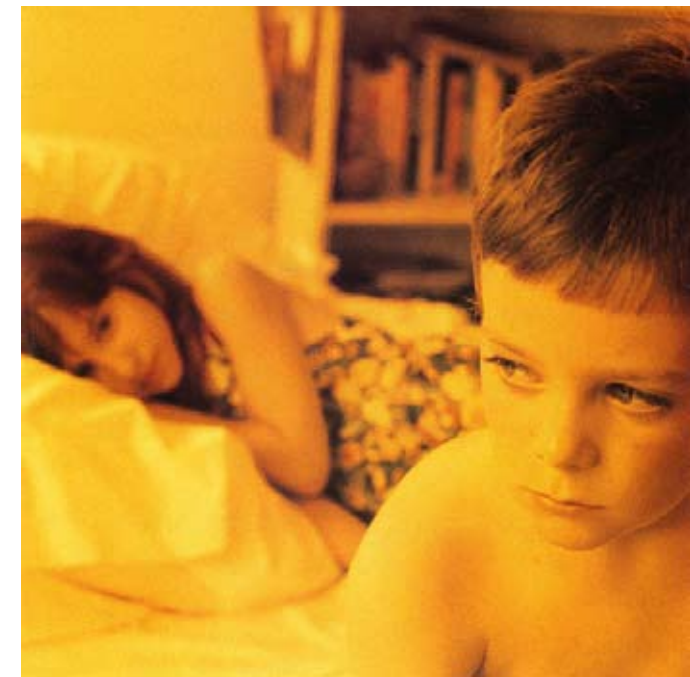
According to Mobile Fidelity's John Wood, Silver Label titles will use "the best tape available" instead of *only* the original master, as they do with all Original Master Recordings. This qualification opens the field and maintains MoFi's impeccable dedication to getting all the detail from the original tape. In addition, the mastering process for Silver Label LPs is performed in real time; ORM titles are half-speed mastered. Finally, Silver Label records are pressed on 140-gram vinyl instead of the 180-gram vinyl format used for ORM albums. The good news for vinyl lovers is that the lower price of Silver Label pressings (\$22.99 vs. \$29.99 for single records, \$34.99 vs. \$39.99 for double album sets) makes them easier on the wallet as well.

Technology and economics aside, these Dead Can Dance releases represent an unqualified success. Having extensively listened

to the SACDs, I can't imagine these records sounding any better, even if they were mastered at half-speed. The backgrounds are perfectly silent, and the high end exquisitely smooth. The nod goes to MoFi when comparing the new pressings against my original vinyl copies. But when pitting the analog against the SACDs, digital wins out.

Both Dead Can Dance albums feature ultra-wide dynamic ranges and subterranean bass groove; the LPs are fantastic, but this is clearly a case of high-resolution digital having an edge. The minute I pushed the "play" button to begin *Spiritchaser*, the extra air on the SACD grabbed me. The new pressing does an admirable job reproducing the bass line in "Song of the Stars," yet switching to the SACD is akin to adding a subwoofer to my system and yielded genuine room-shaking grunt.

Compleatists should grab both versions. But if you have a great digital front end, you may find yourself just slightly a bit disappointed with the presentation on the analog records, especially if you possess a system capable of reproducing that last octave of bass.—**Jeff Dorgay**



The Afghan Whigs

Gentlemen

Hi-Speed Soul Records, 180g LP

If I missed buying the Afghan Whigs' *Gentlemen* on vinyl the first time around upon its original 1993 release, rest assured that this remastered version of what is considered by many to be the band's best and most musically sophisticated effort needs to be part of any record collection. And while the CD can be had for a few bucks, it doesn't do justice to the layered guitar work, driving beats, and textural atmosphere that feels like it could be right at home on a Brian Eno and U2 collaboration. Indeed, the LP is where it's at.

While the Cincinnati-based group never got the popular recognition it sorely deserved before calling it a career in 2000, word later got out. A quick perusal of eBay reveals the quartet's albums selling for \$30-\$100, with harder-to-find EPs shooting towards \$250. Two record stores in my area were even selling less-than-pristine copies of *Gentlemen* for \$40. A few eBay merchants are vending this new pressing for \$30, but you can grab it from most online vendors for \$20 and it includes a foldout of the album art, complete with lyrics.

The magic is apparent right from the beginning: The tambourine level on the opening "If I Were Going" comes out from above the wind noise, floating about 8 inches from the front of your face while the lead and rhythm guitars blaze in sync with lead singer Greg Dulli's voice before gently fading back out on the intro of the second song, the title track. All of the extra ambience and depth add to the tension, and at the same time, show off the precision with which this record was created at Memphis' legendary Ardent Studios. Highly recommended.—**Jeff Dorgay**

Perfect Tool

Denon DL-103R Cartridge

By Jeff Dorgay

In a world of five-figure phono cartridges, a serious audio aficionado might pass on the Denon DL-103R because it's too inexpensive. Wrong decision. They'd be missing out on one of the high-end's best bargains. A decent moving-coil cartridge for \$379? Heck, a decent cartridge for \$379? Yes and yes. If you love analog, the DL-103R is a cartridge you should not be without. First introduced for broadcast use in the early 60s, it brought a new level of detail to analog playback.

The DL-103R has always used a spherical stylus and boasts a relatively low output of .25mv. It's also undergone constant refinement over the years, with the current model featuring 6N copper coils.





The DL-103R possesses a tonal balance that's ever so slightly on the warm/romantic side, giving everything you spin a little extra bump of tonal richness.

Simple Setup

Unlike some others in the Denon line, the DL-103R is a low-compliance cartridge, which makes it easier to implement in most of today's tonearms. The conical stylus profile aids with the DL-103R's easy setup; it's not at all fussy. While the .25mv output didn't pose a problem for any of the phono cartridges I had on hand, double check that your phonostage has at least 60db of gain—a little more won't hurt. DecWare's newest step-up transformer proved a perfect match for the Denon, should you not want to add another box with a power cord. Just be sure to tell DecWare what cartridge you are using so the company can optimize the transformer for the 103. And per Denon's spec sheet, 100 ohms proved the optimum loading point for a conventional moving-coil preamplifier.

A quick listen with the Rega RP-1 resulted in an amazing budget analog setup that wasn't crazy money. Stepping up to the P3-24 offered greater resolution across the tonal spectrum, and more bass weight. However, I did most critical listening via the Triplanar VII mated to the new AVID Volvere SP. And no, this cartridge was not the least bit embarrassed by an \$11,000 table/arm combination.

A Touch Too Much

With virtually every bit of new vinyl being pressed from digital masters, most LPs are too hot in the upper registers and sound rather CD-like. If you've just scored a new turntable, and listening to some of your favorite recordings on LP leaves you a little bit cold, this cartridge is the answer.

The DL-103R possesses a tonal balance that's ever so slightly on the warm/romantic side, giving everything you spin a little extra bump of tonal richness.

Granted, the cartridge didn't have enough richness to overcome the inherent brightness of the new 12" maxi single of C-Low Green's "F**k You!," but it went a long way at making the hit song much more listenable. But it worked wonders on the Twilight Singers' *Dynamite Steps* (reviewed by editor Bob Gendron, last issue). The record is the perfect example of an album comprised of brilliant music with a bit too much ProTools in the final mix. Play it back with the SoundSmith Sussurro Paua cartridge—which reveals way too much detail for this particular record—and you will be running for the Tylenol bottle; *(continued)*

FEATURE

As much as you might think everything wine and roses from analog's early days, the dirty truth is that a lot of these records need a little help—and the Denon DL-103R is just the cartridge to provide assistance.

it's sure to give you a headache. Yet the warm midrange magic that the DL-103 brings to the sonic picture tames the beast and allows actual engagement.

With so many classic albums from the 60s and 70s being repressed—albeit rarely from the original analog tapes—the “new vinyl sound” isn't always warm and magic like it was in the 60s. Moreover, many such records were knocked out with little care invested in the original production. So, as much as you might think everything wine and roses from analog's early days, the dirty truth is that a lot of these records need a little help—and the Denon DL-103R is just the cartridge to provide assistance. Recently remastered pressings of VanDerGraaf Generator's *The Aerosol Grey Machine* and the Tangerine Zoo's *Outside Looking In* are both older albums that, while pressed on vinyl, retain a decidedly digital edge. The DL-103R also made a number of my favorite 70s MoFi records more enjoyable and my Nautilus pressings listenable.

Posh Performance

The biggest surprise came when using the DL-103R with the Rega P9 or AVID Volvere. I wasn't prepared for how much performance was lurking! A more stable platform allowed the DL-103R to show off its much more solid bass performance and imaging abilities. The AVID/Triplanar combination extracted the maximum from the cartridge, throwing a large sound-field well beyond my speaker

boundaries. When using this 'table in System Two (C-J tube electronics, B&W 805D speakers), I easily fooled some of my audio-ophile cronies into thinking that a much more expensive cartridge was at work.

Forgiveness

“Forgiving” is the word that best describes the DL-103R. It won't retrieve that last bit of minute detail from meticulously recorded albums; that will cost you \$3–\$10k. But, what it will do is give average records in your collection a new lease on life. The Denon DL-103R is one of the few components I've experienced that truly serves two masters. In more modest turntables (Rega P3, SL1200, etc.), it goes a long way at making up for the shortcomings of low-budget records. Yet it also performs incredibly well in fairly expensive turntables.

While the best pressings in the analog domain seemingly join the endangered species list on a daily basis, there are still plenty of acceptable LPs to be had in the \$3–\$6 range—a perfect place to build a music collection without breaking the bank. Whether you use the Denon DL-103R as a primary or secondary cartridge, I guarantee you will enjoy it. ●



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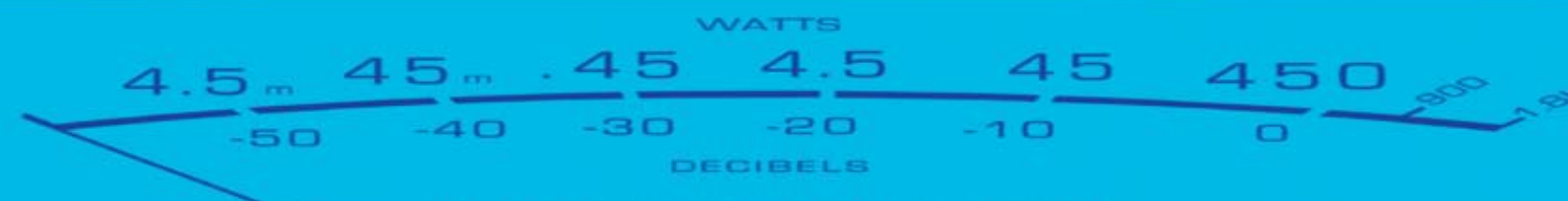


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A Legend In His Time

Wesley Orbison Opens Up About His Iconic Father's Songs and Performances

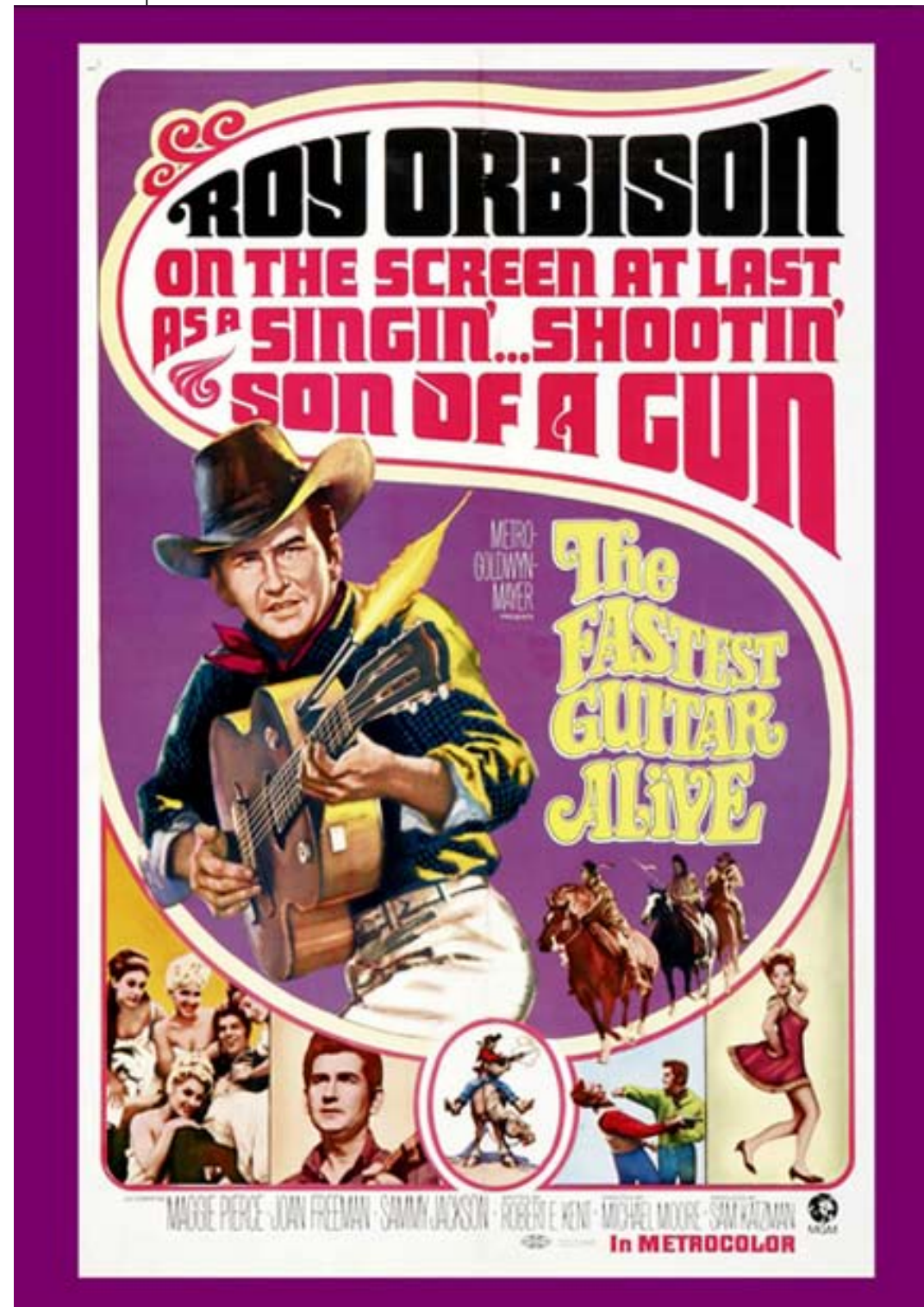
By Carey Borth

Like father, like son. Not only does eldest son, Wesley Orbison, sound like his legendary dad, Roy, but he, too, is a songwriter, singer, guitarist, artist, and film enthusiast. A Nashville resident, the younger Orbison holds a State Championship bowling title and competed in the National Bowling Tournament, a fact Roy was proud to discuss. But you can probably guess that I didn't call Wesley just to talk strikes and spares.

Rather, we chatted about film, performance, and songwriting issues related to his father, who would have celebrated his 75th birthday this April if not for his untimely death in 1988 during the height of his success with the Traveling Wilburys.

Carey Borth: *Roy Orbison's music has been used in more than one hundred films and television shows. But I'm particularly curious about the collaboration with David Lynch. How did it come about?*

Wesley Orbison: Because my father had a full-voice with a vocal range of 3 ½ octaves, his music lent itself nicely to the dreamlike quality of Lynch's films. Dad rarely relied on falsetto. The song "In Dreams" was already placed in the movie *Blue Velvet* when he was given a screening. At first, he didn't think he was going to like it, but after seeing it in the context of the film, he approved.



Did he have a favorite film?

He enjoyed the British humor of the Monty Python film series as well as war and historical pictures like *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and *Tora, Tora, Tora!*. My grandparents worked at Consolidated Aircraft, in Fort Worth, Texas, building B-24 bombers. Grandfather owned a time-share on a lightweight Piper Cub airplane and would take dad up in it. Dad built remote-control airplanes ever since he was a child. When a model airplane company went out of business, he bought it and turned it into his workshop.

Some great moments in music history are revisited in the films *Black & White*, *Night*, *The Anthology*, and *In Australia*, 1973, all produced by Barbara Orbison. In addition to being a performing musician, was Roy an actor?

Although a biopic was planned in 1980 with his good friend, Martin Sheen, as the person to play him, it never materialized. He made only one movie in his career, MGM's western-musical *The Fastest Guitar Alive*, in 1967. It was written for Elvis Presley, who turned it down. Dad sang six of his songs and had another four on the soundtrack. "Pistolero," "Medicine Man," and the theme song all did well abroad. Unfortunately, in the scene where he gives the girl guitar lessons behind a dressing screen, the latter got kicked over and crashed down on his leg. He finished the film with a broken leg and the cinematographer shot around it. Ted Turner bought the rights and plays the film on Turner Classic Movies.

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FEATURE

What can you share about Roy's songwriting habits?

My father was a singer first and foremost, but wrote or co-wrote all the hits except for "Candy Man," written by Cindy Walker. He usually had a co-writer, such as Joe Melson, who co-wrote and styled parts of "Only the Lonely," "Crying," "Blue Bayou," "Blue Angel," and "Running Scared." He had a writing room in his house, with two love seats and a coffee table, and a "Do Not Disturb Sign."

Are there any memorable songwriting stories that come to mind?

"Oh, Pretty Woman," was written about my mother, Claudette. She interrupted a session with my father and Bill Dees. She came through to go shopping and asked dad for money.

Bill said, 'A pretty woman doesn't need any money.' Bill

thought that would make a great song, but dad said, 'No, but "Pretty Woman," would.' By the time mom returned from the store, it was written. They played the new song back to her. Another time, dad had a dream that Elvis had a new hit song on the radio. When he woke up, he wrote down the lyrics, and then drove over to Elvis' house. But he wasn't at home. So, instead of giving Elvis the song, he recorded it himself and it became the hit "Only the Lonely." The recording producer added the introduction from the song "Come Back to Me (My Love)."

It's fortunate that Elvis wasn't available!

Yes, but a similar situation happened when Bob Dylan wrote and offered his song "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" to my father. But he wasn't home at the time when Dylan tried to pitch it. Dylan recorded it a year later, in 1963, and became a song loved, and sang, by many.

Any tales from the road that you recall?

During his first U.K. tour with the Beatles, a fan asked dad what he thought of them. He answered, 'What is a Beatle, anyway?' Unknowingly, John was standing behind him and said, 'I'm a Beatle, and I'm John Lennon.' They had an argument over who was going to open the show during that tour, so dad said, 'If I open, I'm going to pull out all the stops.' He did, and the audience couldn't stop cheering long after he left the stage. Lennon then told him, 'Yankee, go home.' Of course, this banter was only temporary and the Beatles wrote the song "Please Please Me" for him. Because Roy was only playing original material at the time, he thanked them, but said they should play and release the song, which of course they did, and it became the title of their debut album.

'What is a Beatle, anyway?' Unknowingly, John was standing behind him and said, 'I'm a Beatle, and I'm John Lennon.'

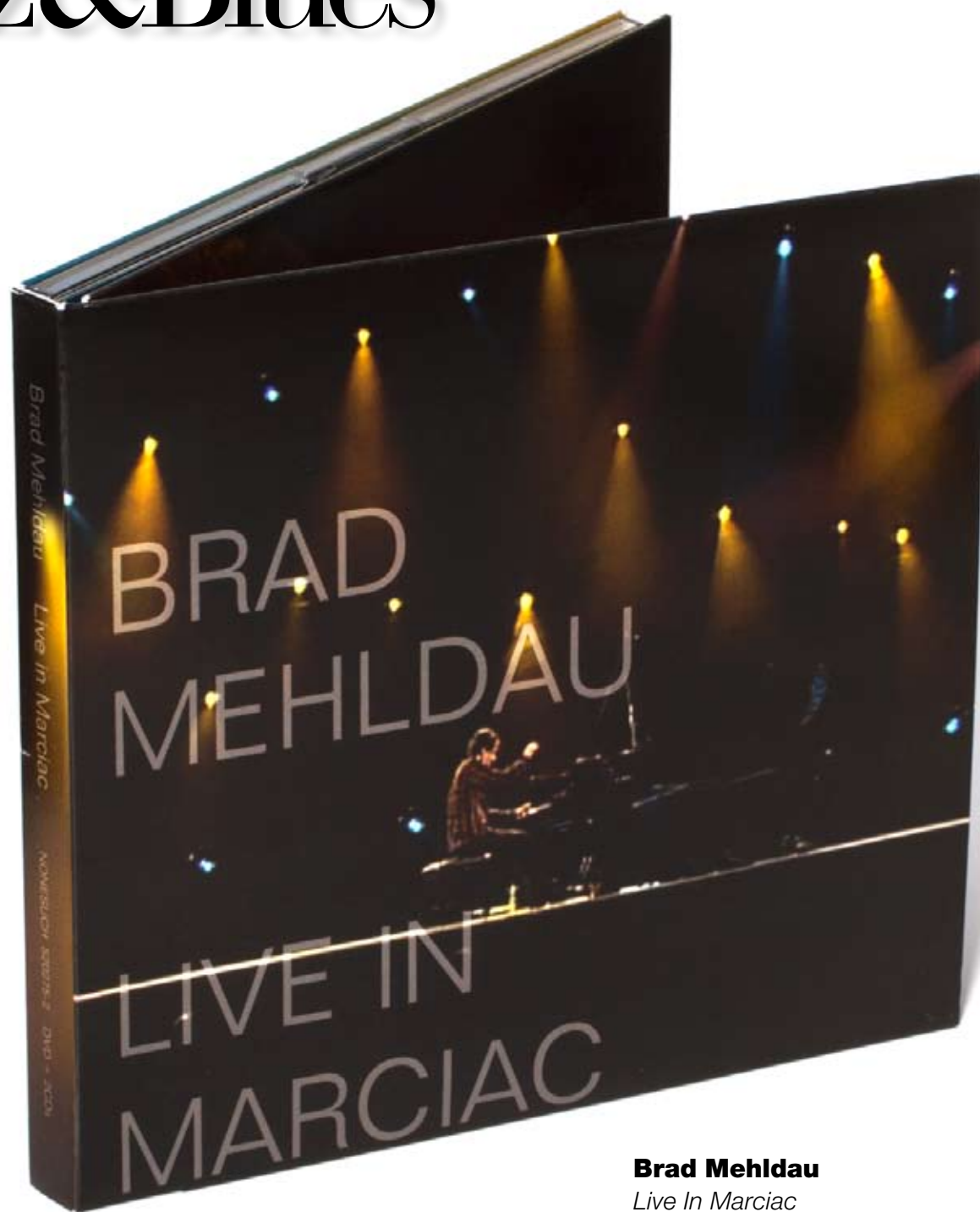
Later, the Beatles sought his advice on whether or not he felt they would have a market in the U.S. Roy told them, 'Keep the bowl haircuts and play the Ed Sullivan Show.' The Ed Sullivan Show helped launch my father's career. They followed his advice on both counts.

Later in his career, your dad dealt with multiple tragedies. What was the source of his strength after the untimely deaths of Claudette and your two older brothers?

Dad was religiously minded and studied the Bible. He worked through his grief by songwriting and performing. I'd like to point out that his songs "In Dreams," "Running Scared," "Only the Lonely," and "Crying" were all written prior to their tragic deaths. His song, "Heartache," written afterwards, was never released because he did not want to capitalize on the tragedies. He definitely had a strong sense of morality and strong sense of self. ●

Jazz & Blues

By Jim Macnie



Brad Mehldau

Live In Marciac
Nonesuch, 2CD + DVD set

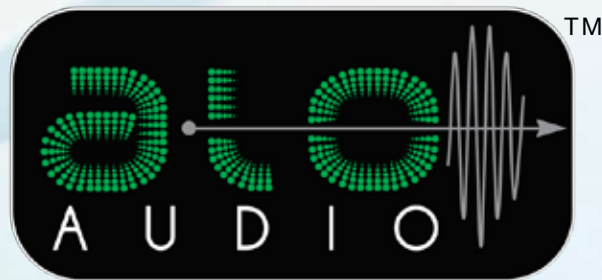
Brad Mehldau built his sizable rep on a series of trio records, each dedicated to revealing the depth of his imagination, and each enjoyable thanks to the deep interplay the pianist nurtures from his colleagues. But with the arrival of his third solo disc, Mehldau may be making a case for himself as a guy who can get the job done on his own.

The dramatic “interplay” between his hands on *Live In Marciac* is often gripping. This is a recital that steadily veers off to a number of intriguing destinations, from ancient romance tunes like “Secret Love” to modern pop trinkets like Nirvana’s “Lithium.” With each theme that ripples by, Mehldau proves extremely resourceful.

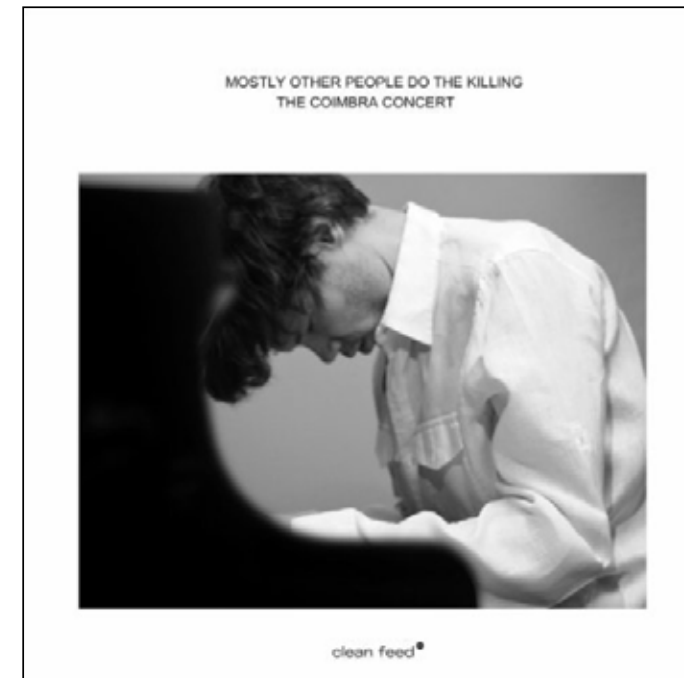
Better still on this double-disc set recorded live at the famed French jazz festival, the pianist captures a performance that gracefully crushes a longstanding stylistic bugaboo: his predilection for waxing melodramatic. Rumination is expected in solo piano dates—the 40-year-old has brought lots of eloquence to ennui—but there have been times when he has milked its accompanying sentiment. *Live In Marciac* is more propulsive than his previous recitals. And that’s a good thing.

Radiohead’s “Exit Music (For A Film)” is driven by a nervous staccato pulse that almost sends it into Steve Reich territory. “Lithium” has a bouncy joy. Mehldau chooses such covers for their beauty, but he also enjoys transforming them. Blink and you might miss the moment “Martha, My Dear” becomes a jittery minuet. Such transitions are fascinating to behold while watching the accompanying DVD. The craft of his keyboard action is daunting; no wonder he’s celebrated as a young master. But it’s the extra aggression that serves this music best. A little feistiness in place of the angst goes a long way.

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Mostly Other People Do The Killing

The Coimbra Concert
Clean Feed, 2CD

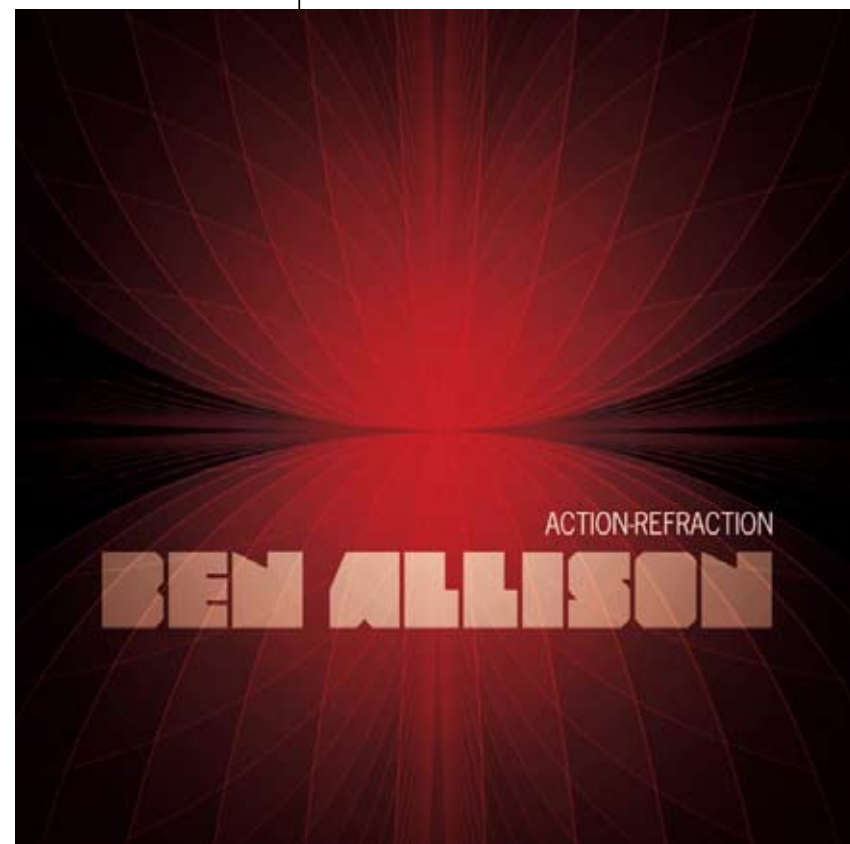
No way around it. Emotional ardor and intellectual acuity often bring an earnest vibe to jazz, so those who offer a comparatively lighthearted stance have a good chance of standing out. From Louis Armstrong's glee to Han Bennink's shenanigans, a bit of levity has long had a way of wooing an audience.

Mostly Other People Do The Killing, a New York quartet of deeply skilled improvisers, likes to play the wiseacre card. The covers of the band's first three discs are designed to meticulously ape a classic jazz album (my fave finds the ensemble saluting

Roy Haynes' *Out Of The Afternoon*, fake mustaches and all), and its ram-bunctious freebop is built on a manic esprit that's proud of its entertainment skills. The group's fourth disc, a two-CD set recorded live in Brazil, teems with the kind of wit that enhances its signature experimentalism; the record is both cagey and cavalier.

Trumpeter Peter Evans, saxophonist Jon Irabagon, drummer Kevin Shea, and drummer-composer Moppa Elliott have been together long enough to let swagger represent their cohesion. *The Coimbra Concert*, which captures them at their high-flying best, conjures the eruptions of Charles Mingus, humor of Raymond Scott, and of boisterous beauty of the Art Ensemble, ably placing them in a deeply creative continuum. The exclamations of "Burning Well" and "Factoryville" are bound by a loose-limbed swing that willingly trades grace for groove, and "Round Bottom, Square Top" makes a case for frenzy being a crucial jazz element. On this album, every time the racket starts, it's in the service of an irresistible ditty with a silly side.

The Coimbra Concert album cover sticks out its tongue at Keith Jarrett's *The Köln Concert*—a wealth of deep thoughts that finds the pianist judiciously gauging each note. MOPDTK has a blast plopping a cream pie in the face of such sobriety, romping through its show with an agitated informality. At some points, you can almost hear the audience chuckling through the clamor.


Ben Allison

Action-Refraction
Palmetto, CD or LP

From Bjork to Black Sabbath, an array of pop artists have had their tunes updated by clever jazz acts over the past few years. The strategy often provides a refreshing twist while occasionally tilting towards novelty. Except for a pair of John Lennon pieces, Ben Allison has dodged this tack. After eight albums of original tunesmithing, he's known as much as a composer as he is a bassist. But his latest disc makes hay with six covers that ably illustrate the depth of his imagination.



Leading a quintet he deems “an electro-acoustic orchestra,” Allison definitely fulfills the “refraction” part of the album title.

It's not only pop that gets re-spun. The record begins with Thelonious Monk's “Jackie-ing,” and includes Samuel Barber's “St Ita's Vision.” Both are bent to accommodate episodes of interplay. The former trades Monk's esprit for something a tad more sober (you can thank Michael Blake's bass clarinet), and the latter opens up to give Jason Lindner's synth a chance to squiggle a bit. Each sets a reflective mood. By comparison, a rendition of PJ Harvey's “Missed” sounds like a jukebox hit. A grinding guitar riff, a thud of drums, and the quintet finds itself snaking down a dark alleyway.

More impressionistic are Donny Hathaway's “Some Day We'll All Be Free,” which chugs through a sweet R&B groove and invites fractious background fuzz to the party, and Neil Young's “Philadelphia,” which waxes forlorn yet finds guitarist Steve Cardenas plucking pretty. But perhaps it's the Carpenters' “We Only Just Begun” that boasts the most creative arrangement. An itchy pulse rubs up against a languid melody and *voilà!*, the schmaltz is now sophisticated—not unlike like what Cassandra Wilson did with “Last Train To Clarksville.” It's this kind of ingenious magic that might make fans beg for *Action-Refraction, Vol 2*. ●

After eight albums of original tunesmithing, Allison's known as much as a composer as he is a bassist. But his latest disc makes hay with six covers that ably illustrate the depth of his imagination.



Ortofon's MC 20 Super

The Return of a Classic

By Jerold O'Brien

From the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, the MC 20 was one of the best-selling low output moving coil cartridges and a welcome surprise when compared to the other paltry options. An alternative to Japanese offerings from Denon, Supex, and Fidelity Research, it graced many a high-end turntable. As luck would have it, the Super version came out in 1985, just as CDs began to take off in popularity. Bummer. But if you missed it back then, here's your chance to enjoy it anew.

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FEATURE



The 25th anniversary edition comes nicely packaged in a mini aluminum case reminiscent of a Zero Halliburton metal briefcase. Inside, one finds the gold aluminum-bodied cartridge, requisite mounting hardware, and an NOS universal Ortofon headshell that also offers azimuth and overhang adjustments. Considering that it's just \$800, the MC 20 Super doesn't shirk on presentation.

Staying True to Retro Roots

Thinking that a retro cartridge might work well in a retro tone arm, I recently purchased the ten-inch version of the SME M2, the closest one can come to getting a classic 3009 arm these days. It even has an identical mounting method, as the arm fits into the mounting cutouts into which the older arm fit. To complete

the retro theme, I tried the arm/cartridge combination on a vintage Luxman PD-121 direct-drive turntable. The combined arm/cartridge resonant frequency turned out to be in the ideal range of 9.6Hz. Once properly aligned, and with the tracking force adjusted to the recommended 1.8 grams, the setup looked outstanding. Keeping everything in the SME vein precluded use of the Ortofon headshell that will now be put to good use in one of my other turntables.

I evaluated the MC 20 Super with a PS Audio GPCH phonostage that's modified with a full range of Cullen Circuits upgrades. While Ortofon recommends loading the cartridge with greater than 10 ohms, 100 ohms yielded the best results in my system. Anything less proved too bright and dulled transient attack. *(continued)*

Slight Break-In Required

Initially, the sound tilted toward bright and steely, so I put about 30 hours on the cartridge before settling down to critically listen. After the MC 20 Super traced its way through a handful of albums, the sound significantly smoothed out and took on a much more engaging character.

Pure Pleasure's recently released reissue of Keb' Mo's *Peace, Back By Popular Demand* proved a new joy to hear. The singer/guitarist's cover of Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" showed off two of the Ortofon's biggest strengths: bass attack and dynamics. The bass drum boasted a "punch you in the chest" quality while the percussive wood block appeared in the soundstage with a sudden "crack." Vocals were unstrained, very natural sounding, and without the bloat that many budget MC cartridges instill in the interest of providing a warm presentation.

Next, to get a better feel for the acoustic performance, I tried the first *Gateway* recording by John Abercrombie, Dave Holland, and Jack DeJohnette. During "Back-Woods Song," Holland's bass lines were clearly delineated while DeJohnette's busy, melodic drumming remained punchy on the snare and shimmering and airy on the cymbals. At once ethereal and biting, Abercrombie's guitar floated above the rhythm section. On "Waiting," the cymbal attacks were fast and ideally detailed, and the stand-up bass full and resonant. I immediately forgot about the cartridge and enjoyed the music.

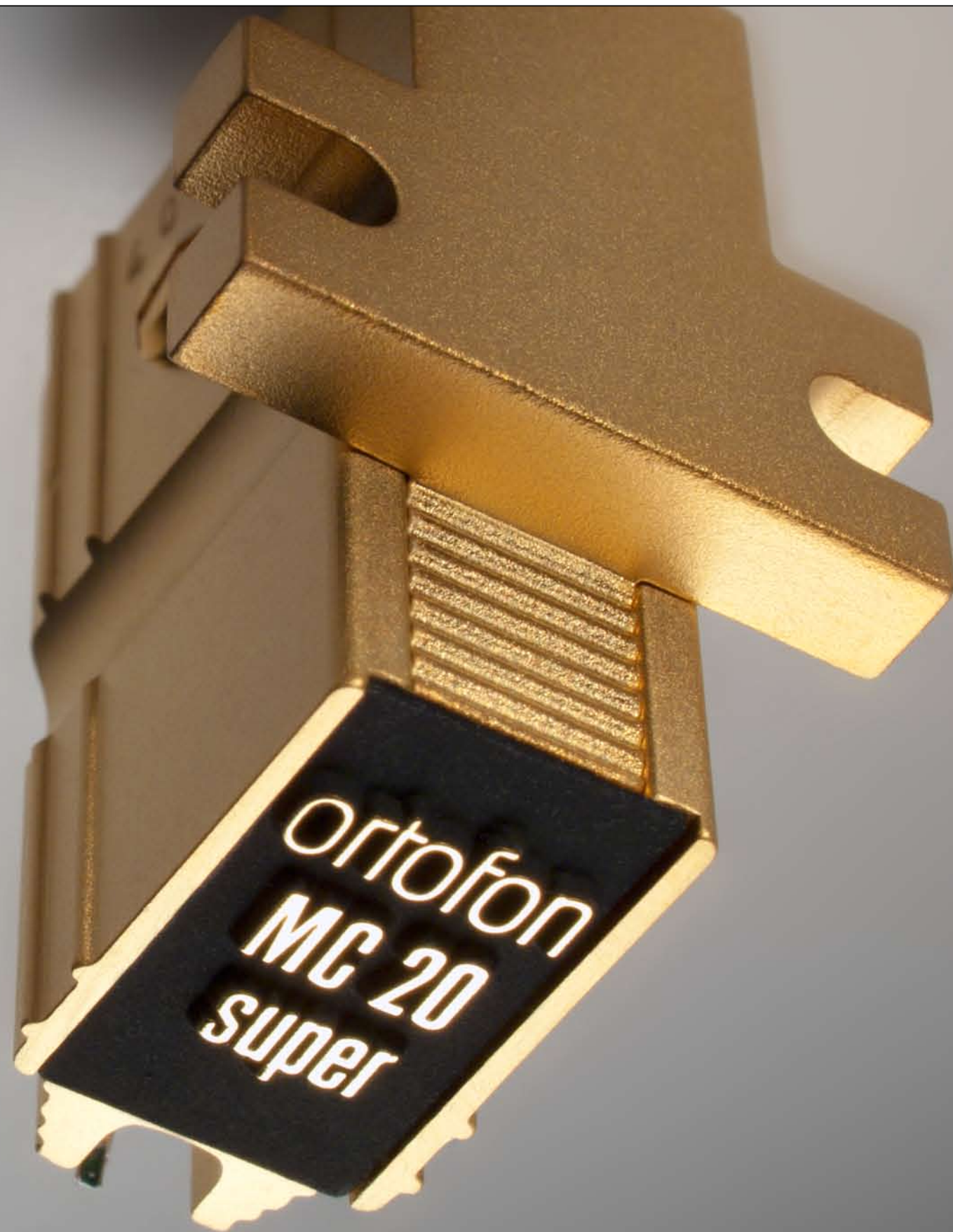
To increase the torture test and find out how the MC 20 Super would reproduce a full orchestra, I chose Sir

Adrian Boult conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra's performance of Elgar's *Falstaff-Symphonic Study* on EMI/Odeon. Here, the full width and depth of the concert hall revealed itself to scale, providing extremely accurate string sound sans artificial or annoying artifacts—a tough hurdle to jump even with the best cartridges. The realistic swell and ebb of the dynamic peaks is tough to track all the way through, yet posed no problem for the MC 20 Super.

Finally, to get a handle on the Ortofon's ability to accurately portray vocals, I spun *John Coltrane And Johnny Hartman*, one of the most natural vocal recordings ever made. While many listeners use female vocals for evaluation, I believe male vocals are the more difficult of the two for gear to resolve. The Ortofon put Johnny Hartman in the room squarely between the speakers, and without any undue spotlighting. Once again, the all-important mid-bass region remained totally devoid of coloration. In addition to the superb vocal performance, Coltrane's sax came across as round, breathy, and smooth.

Head of the Class

Competition is fierce once you approach the \$1,000 level in phono cartridges, especially considering that there are plenty of great models of moving magnet, moving coil, and moving iron cartridges from which to choose. Such cartridges lack the level of refinement and resolution that high-dollar models provide, so musicality rules the day when shopping in this neighborhood. And musicality is what the Ortofon MC 20 Super offers in abundance. Highly recommended. ●



Museum Art With Sound

Specimen Audio Little Horn Speakers

By Bob Gendron



For the past two Decembers, violinist/singer/whistler extraordinaire Andrew Bird took up a three-day residence at Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church for a series of intimate solo concerts that allow the musician to stretch out and test previously unreleased material in front of small crowds delighted at the privilege to watch a master at work. The experience is enriched by the transcendent atmosphere: The majestic chapel features tall stained-glass windows, gothic arches, wooden pews, and sublime acoustics that seemingly make the subtle lighting emanate a spiritual wintry glow.

Yet the most impressive sight doesn't concern the stunning architecture or god-is-in-the-details structural accents. Rather, it's related to the outrageous spectacle of Bird's onstage setup: Namely, the vivid array of horn speakers through which the instrumentalist plays. Resembling a forest of colorful old-school Victrola phonographs that come in different sizes—not the least of which is a double-horn model that oscillates at the touch of a pedal—the loudspeakers appear ripped out of the pages of a Dr. Suess book. But they're no fantasy.

Each is handcrafted by Specimen Products in Bird's adopted hometown of Chicago. The roots-based artist and specialty equipment/audio manufacturer have collaborated for years. Future plans involve a potential installation in New York's Central Park that, akin to a giant carousel, imagines loudspeakers attached to a multi-storey spindle, spinning dozens of feet in the air, and reproducing an intriguing blend of sounds. *(continued)*



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.

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TONE STYLE



For those who have never lost sight of the futuristic visions they encountered in comic books—as well as anyone that adores public intersections of experimentation, physics, and design—the objectives constitute a dream come true. It's one of many ideas proffered by Specimen designer/owner Ian Schneller.

With tousled hair, wire-frame glasses, and easygoing demeanor, Schneller resembles *Ghostbusters*-era Harold Ramis. He looks every part the mad scientist but behaves as a music aficionado whose objectives remained focused on the listening experience, not egghead laboratory tests.

Schneller launched the Specimen name in 1981 and developed it into an actual company by 1984.

A visit to the manufacturer's workshop reveals a paucity of modern, electronic gadgets and a proliferation of traditional hand tools utilized for carving, splicing, shaving, edging, and affixing. The space, located in a lesser-traveled section of West Humboldt Park, resides in a classic industrial building that offers the benefits of tall windows and a clean, loft-type floor plan. In addition to constructing speakers and tube amplifiers, Specimen builds custom guitars, ukuleles, lutes, basses, violins, and mandolins. Schneller and his

staff also teach guitar building and repair.

Despite the gorgeous and intriguing factors reflected in Specimen's instruments—the Royale is an archtop guitar that “offers the player enhanced biofeedback”—nothing beats the appeal of the company's horn speakers. Think of them as museum pieces that also happen to play acoustic-based music with phenomenal degrees of accuracy, clarity, and openness. Intentionally suited to low-power SET tube amps, and easily coupled with Specimen's 50-watt satellite subwoofer, *(continued)*



Specimen's \$1850 Little Horns are comprised of high-density fiberglass and Baltic birch plywood. The 8-inch base functions as a compression chamber for the horn, which fit to each base akin to the way a guitar's neck adjoins to the body.

At just 36 inches tall, the speakers maintain the versatility of a bookshelf model that can be placed in an office, den, or living room. Yet the Little Horns' most attractive aesthetic asset is the limitless range of available colors. Specimen currently offers nine horn color combinations and eight base color choices, but will accommodate any custom-paint request. Go crazy. Once you see the speakers in person, it's almost impossible to resist the temptation of acquiring a pair, if even just to blend in with your décor.

Of course, with a maximum power handling spec of 24 watts, the Little Horns won't satisfy most serious listeners' desires for a devoted main speaker. They also don't take well to reproducing the bigger soundstages, dynamics, and bottom-end frequencies of harder rock, pop, or electronic-dominant music let alone meet the sonic demands of metal, hip-hop, or funk. Then again, very few audiophile speakers with five-figure price tags even succeed in the latter categories.

But the key strength of the Little Horn tends to offset many of the shortcomings. It plays small-scale acoustic fare with marvelous transparency, majestic elegance, involving detail, and luxurious air. Records such as Johnny Cash's *American IV: The Man Comes Around*, Mobile Fidelity's pressing of Frank Sinatra's *Sings for Only for the Lonely*, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' *The Boatman's Call*, J. Mascis' *Several Shades of Why*, and Bob Dylan's *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* seldom, if ever, sounded more immersive or immediate. Midrange presentation was excellent. Granted, the speakers' handling of more energetic rock—the Drive-By Truckers' *Go-Go Boots*, Social Distortion's *Hard Times and Nursery Rhymes*, the Twilight Singers' *Dynamite Steps*—skewed towards cloudy and restrained, even though the tone remained enviously warm and organic. When played at lower volume levels, the distractions weren't too noticeable.

Which is another reason why the Little Horns make for an ideal bookshelf or computer speaker. Name another speaker that so seamlessly blends into a modern art museum or one that users can make their own piece of art, fancy frame not needed. While they are definitely more costly than other computer/bookshelf models, they also transmit acoustics with three-dimensional realism, throw an admirably large (for its size) soundstage, and function as instant conversation pieces. Not to mention the old-world craftsmanship and charm. *(continued)*

The key strength of the Little Horn tends to offset many of the shortcomings. It plays small-scale acoustic fare with marvelous transparency, majestic elegance, involving detail, and luxurious air.

TONE STYLE

Should you desire a version of the Little Horn that could handle the rigors of a full-range system, Specimen makes the XL Horn Speakers—\$12k models that Bird used as his exclusive PA system at his December concerts. The abundant tonality, frequency resonance, and sonic purity produced by four of the 8-foot-plus-tall XL Horns (coupled with more than a dozen Little Horns and the spinning double-horn model) filled the church with a sound that was nothing less than heavenly. *TONE* is securing a pair of these beautiful, mammoth XL Horn Speakers for a summer review. After all, Bird shouldn't have all of the fun. ●

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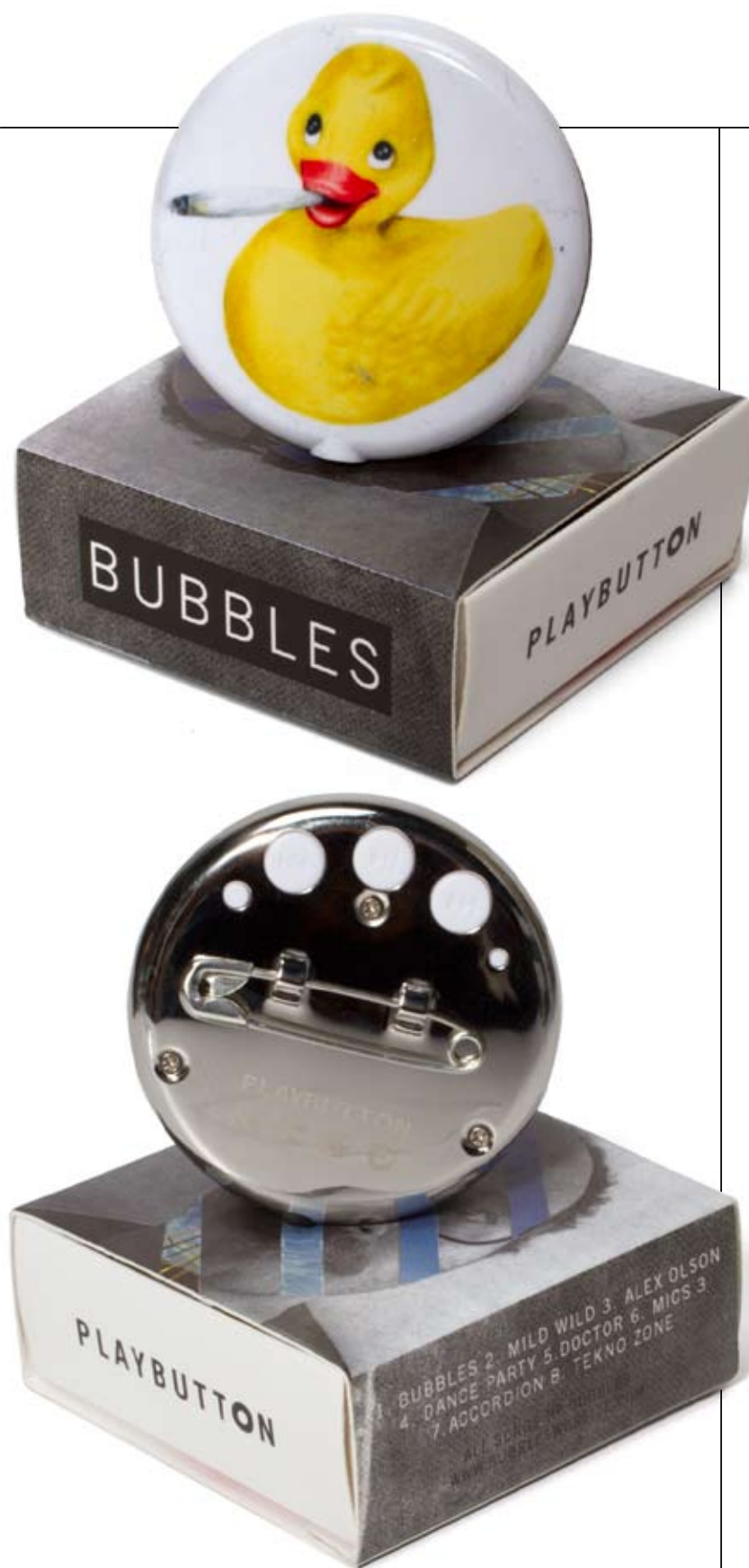


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Playbutton

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If you like to mix up your digital content, the wearable Playbutton is not for you. The tiny, almost weightless MP3 player features a prerecorded album from a specific band—in my case, Bubbles, a synth-pop duo from New York City. The content must be played like an album, with an unalterable sequence going from start to finish. Playbutton also specifically notes that the music cannot be changed or downloaded.

An amusing novelty concept, the cute device may be a bit too user-unfriendly. While you can go from track to track via controls located on the button's rear face (which has a safety pin attached, just like the pins of bands folks wore on denim jackets during the 70s and 80s), you cannot adjust the volume up or down. However, the sound quality is surprisingly good, and the Playbutton possesses enough juice to drive a pair of Sennheiser 650s to a reasonable level. The audio output jack also doubles as the charging outlet. Simply connect the Playbutton via USB to your computer and it recharges.

Playbutton ranks high on style points, yet it would be far cooler if you could load a blank model that held more songs. I know, spoken like a true audiophile, always wanting to tweak whatever gear is in front of us. Perhaps the Playbutton is the ultimate in music Zen. One album, one order: take it or leave it.



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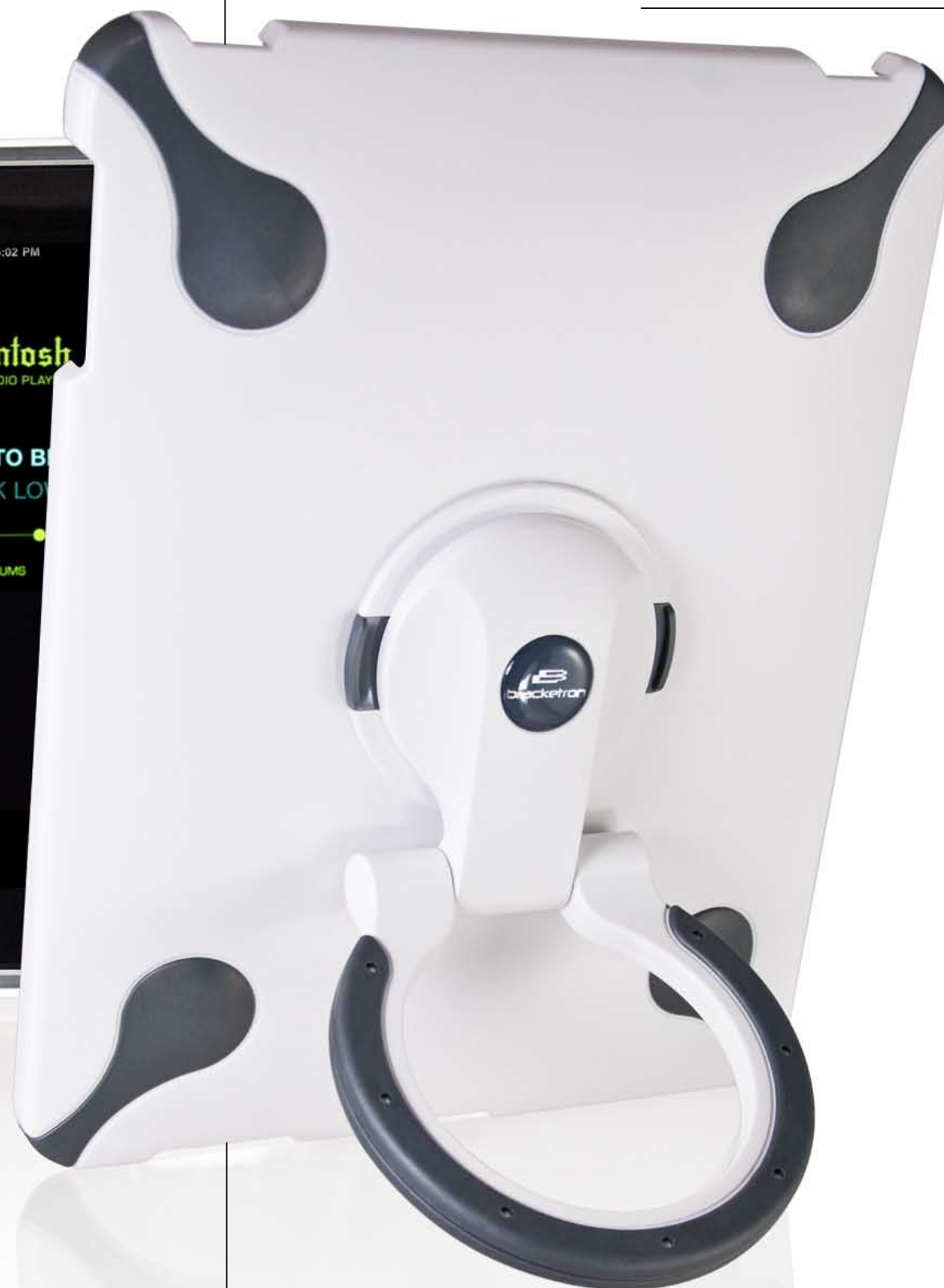


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After starting out ten years ago with just one product—the Custom Bezel Mount—Bracketron now offers so many innovations designed to mount mobile electronics that it's become impossible to peruse its website and not see at least three or four things that you need right now—especially if you love gadgets.

The company's newest invention, the Twist 360°, should be on shelves by the time you read this. It acts as a lightweight, yet highly protective outer case for the iPad that comes complete with a rubber-coated ring attached to a 360-degree rotational swivel mount. (Hence the name.) Combined with the rubberized corners of the actual mount, the Twist 360° is a great way to hold your iPad stable on any surface of your choice. Want to hang your iPad? Bracketron even offers an optional ring that mounts to walls. Now, if only the iPad was waterproof, it could be a tub toy...



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– Michael Fremer, *Stereophile* (January 2011)



Pulsare Phono Stage



TONE STYLE

Breitling for Bentley Supersports QP Light Body

Price: Approx. \$7,000
www.breitlingforbentley.com

Breitling's latest timepiece mirrors the red-accent detailing on the clock of Bentley's new "Ice Speed Record" convertible. After all, one wouldn't want their Garanimals to be improperly matched with the top-down, would they? Joking aside, Breitling makes serious timepieces, and this particular creation takes advantage of its bulletproof-titanium chassis design and Calibre 27B jeweled movement.

Like all Breitling models, this watch is an officially certified chronograph and features the standard bevy of day, date season, and elapsed time functions—plus a few that only John Travolta knows how to operate. Thanks to the rubber wristband, the Breitling for Bentley Supersports QP Light Body serves as a more casual timepiece that should come in handy the next time you need to ditch your tux and go scuba diving for either treasure or criminals on a moment's notice.

Beer Snob

Life is too short to drink mediocre beer.

By Bob Gendron

Slainte:

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Keep Getting
Better



Goose Island Beer Company

Matilda Belgian Style Pale Ale

Goose Island stands as the grand dame of Chicago's thriving craft-beer scene. Opened in 1988, the company currently produces more than 50 different beers throughout the year while taking home every conceivable major brewer award. Distribution has exploded—Goose Island is available in 18 states as well as select regions of Europe. Chicagoans are especially spoiled. The company operates two brewpubs in the city, and its beers are ubiquitous in local pubs, stores, and restaurants. Up until the past few years, Goose Island's classic ales—Honkers, Summertime, Harvest, India Pale, and Mild Winter—abetted a handful of higher-end offerings. Of late, Goose Island has ramped up its selections with a focus on the specialty market. Its Bourbon County Brand Coffee Stout is regarded by many aficionados as the best beer made in America; cellared bottles sell for hundreds on the aftermarket. Don't fret. Part of Goose's Vintage Reserved line, Matilda is nearly as rewarding, its mild fruit scent, light caramel appearance, and spicy (cinnamon, clove, white pepper) flavors an intriguing version of a strong Belgian ale. Oeneophiles, please note: Matilda pairs as well with cheeses and seafood as any beer you'll likely encounter and shares more than a passing resemblance to wine. Be certain to sip the gently creamy, sweet-leaning yeast-dominant concoction in a tulip glass or snifter in order to experience its full flavors and satisfying tastes. Drinking from a pint-style glass crushes the beer's elegant character and renders its refined properties an afterthought.

(At press time, Anheuser-Busch announced that it acquired Goose Island in a deal worth nearly \$40 million. The investment epitomizes Goose's success and appeal. And while it will no longer be a by-the-book "craft brewer," the label will remain in Chicago, expanding both distribution and selection, good news for beer drinkers everywhere.)

3 Floyds Brewing Company

Alpha King Pale Ale

Ranked by the country's leading beer authorities as among the nation's premier breweries for the past several years, and proprietors of a colorful brewery rightly viewed as a mecca by discerning drinkers in the Tri-State area, Northwest Indiana's 3 Floyds invests in its craft beers the same kind of passion, care, and creativity that Bristol Cars puts in its hand-made automobiles. In the span of four years, the company has tripled its output, yet the demand continues to far outpace the growth. Finding its beers can be a hit-and-miss proposition; retailers fortunate enough to get them quickly sell out; some establishments are whining about not being able to even stock 3 Floyds. No matter how one views the issue, it's a good problem to have—particularly given the quality hasn't slipped in the least. In fact, 3 Floyds just keeps improving. The Munster-based brewer's signature offering, Alpha King Pale Ale, is a standard to which all American pale ales should aspire. On the verge of being an Imperial pale ale, it possesses a gorgeous golden-orange amber look, generous and slightly off-white head, and meticulous lacing. Savor the citrus aroma, then dive into the complex albeit mellow hop notes, balanced malty bitterness, warm grapefruit and pine accents, and smooth body. And the vibrant, spirited label is indicative of all 3 Floyds inventions—it's part of the charm and reflects the company's strong-flavored products. As wonderful it is to experience its beers out of a bottle—Dreadnaught, Gumball Head, and Robert the Bruce are also phenomenal—a trip to 3 Floyds' cozy brewery yields a much vaster draught selection than what's available in six-pack cases. Ham on Rye, a delicious and smoky beer that tastes just as advertised; Topless Wych, a deep, dark, black coffee- and chocolate-hued porter; and Zombie Dust, a single-hop pale ale that features Citra hop from the Yakima Valley, are a few of the seasonal treasures that you might encounter.



www.woaudio.com/products/WA5.html

WOO AUDIO
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Metropolitan Brewing

Dynamo Copper Lager

Still less than three years old, relative newcomer Metropolitan Brewing has already made giant strides, focusing on three flagship lagers that intentionally temper the wildness present in most craft offerings with the smoother, drier, more drinkable flavors of traditional German lagers. Not surprisingly, head brewer Doug Hurst learned his trade in Germany and became schooled in the country's legendary (and since repealed) 1516 purity law: that beer only be made with water, malted barley, and hops. Of course, Metropolitan also uses yeast, but the company's creations resound with related simplicity and balance. Designed for connoisseurs that may prefer less hoppiness and maltiness, Dynamo Copper Lager meets the two extremes in the middle. Boasting a clear copper finish and fair albeit quickly diminishing head, pleasant mouthfeel, and medium-toasted aroma fragrant with caramel notes, Dynamo is comparatively mild, but again, it's by design. The light body, grassy hops, and noteworthy carbonation evoke that of another easygoing Midwestern favorite—New Glarus' Spotted Cow. Pleasant, fresh, and straightforward done extremely well. Ideal for lunchtime drinking or suggesting as a substitute to your friends that swear by mainstream suds. Odds on they'll be persuaded to switch allegiances after taking the first sip. ●



Shown: LTX 500 Projector



AVM 50v audio/video processor



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Parasound JC3 Phonostage

\$2,399

www.parasound.com/halo

Designed by the legendary John Curl, the man who redefined the phonostage in the 80s with the Vendetta, the JC3 shares much in common with his original model. A peek under the hood of the compact chassis reveals high-quality parts and meticulous assembly. Fully balanced outputs and a true dual mono chassis design seriously challenge what you might expect for the very reasonable price. Review in progress.



NAIM DAC

\$3,650

www.naimaudio.com

Given NAIM's world of modularity, the company's first standalone DAC makes for a welcome addition to its lineup. Easily accommodating digital sources up to 24bit/768khz resolution, and with every imaginable input, this DAC is more than ready for the future. And, like NAIM's other components, the biggest of the four available power supply upgrades take the DAC's performance to sublime levels. Review in progress.





Burmester 100 Phono Preamp

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.

The 100 Phono Preamp may be the world's most advanced phono stage amplifier. At its core, the 100 is built with the finest, hand selected and proprietary components. The design is executed with Burmester's zero compromise "Reference Line" technology. The Result? Possibly the quietest, most accurate and spectacularly dynamic and natural, three dimensional presentation ever yielded by a phono stage amplifier.

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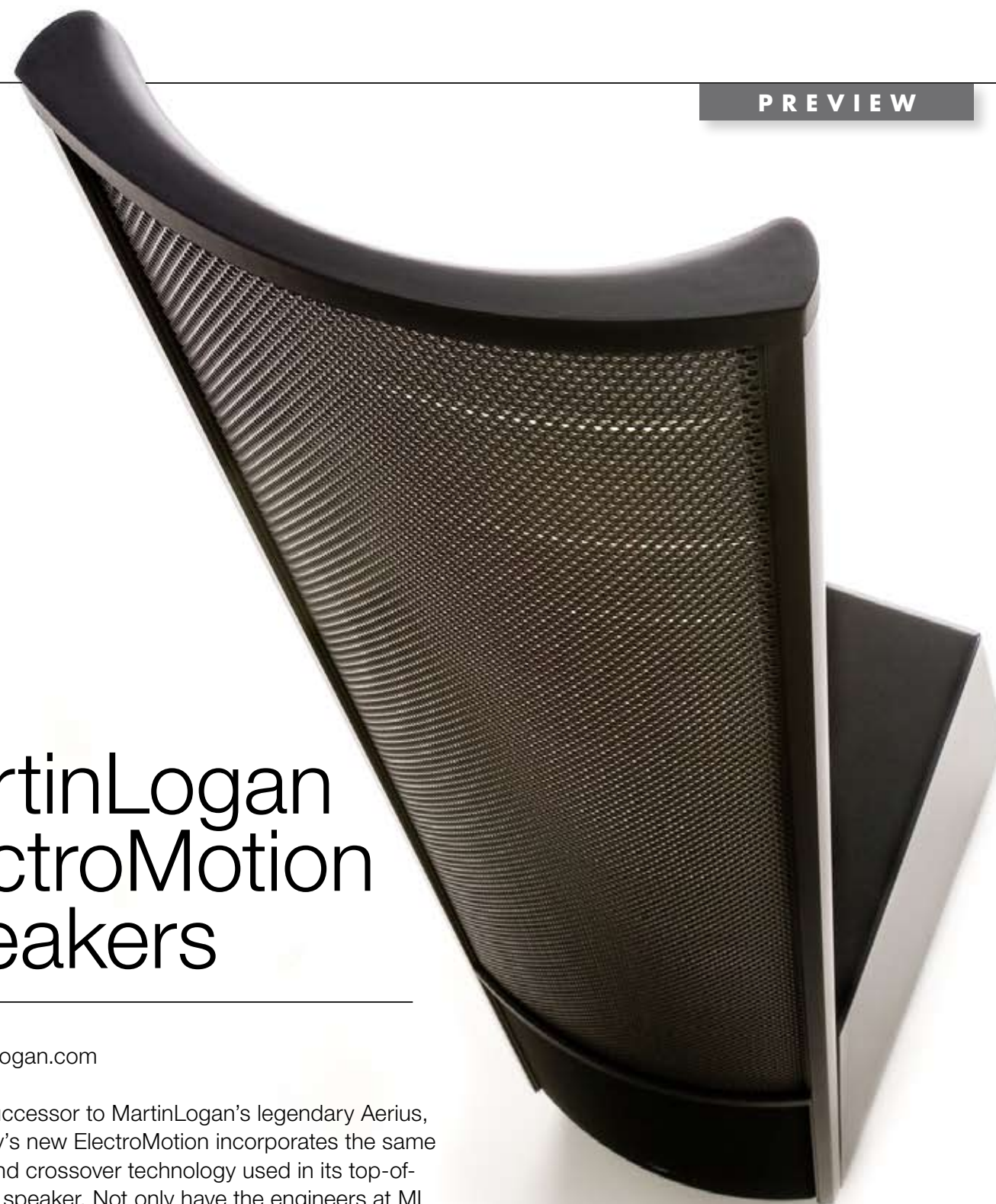


MartinLogan ElectroMotion Speakers

\$1,999

www.martinlogan.com

A worthy successor to MartinLogan's legendary Aeries, the company's new ElectroMotion incorporates the same ESL panel and crossover technology used in its top-of-the-line CLX speaker. Not only have the engineers at ML kept the footprint small, just like that of the Aeries, they've kept the price small as well—the ElectroMotion has a price of just under \$2,000. Exactly what the Aeries cost back in the early 90s. And the sound...well, you'll just have to check in to our Spotlight section to keep an eye on it.





AVID Acutus Reference SP Turntable

A PERFECT DESTINATION

By Jeff Dorgay

Unless you earn \$2 million an episode, a la Charlie Sheen, \$25k is a lot of change to spend on a turntable and tonearm, especially when adding a worthy cartridge and phonostage could easily double the sum. Taking economics into consideration, *TONE* receives plenty of email from readers with turntables in this range or considering a similar level of purchase. We get substantially fewer communiqués from listeners contemplating a six-figure turntable—now, that's crazy talk.



To be certain, audiophiles opting to make purchases in these price ranges are well-heeled, yet most seem to be longtime analog lovers that are seeking out that “destination ‘table.” They’ve owned a number of turntables and amassed a fairly substantial vinyl collection. Typically, \$25k doesn’t constitute an entry-level price point for many vinyl aficionados; something is often sold or traded (maybe a jet ski or motorcycle) for the down payment, so the sting isn’t quite as severe.

While it’s easy to get carried away with any number of six-figure turntables, \$25-\$30k represents the sweet spot, and right where the AVID Acutus Reference SP lies. The ‘table itself lists for \$19,995 and the SME V tonearm (which arrived pre-mounted on our review sample) bumps the price up another \$5,495. The subchassis on comes pre-drilled for an SME tonearm, but adaptors for Rega, Triplanar, and a few others can be purchased from \$100-\$225, depending on the version you require. Current Acutus owners can easily upgrade to the Reference SP—which incorporates AVID’s latest-generation digital-speed control, larger power supply, and two-drive belt system—for \$6,400.

Save for a sold-out 10th Anniversary Model (\$40,000) limited to just ten units, the Ref SP stands for all practical purposes as AVID’s top-of-the-line turntable. In case you’re wondering, AVID stands for “A very interesting design.” And since the Acutus served as AVID’s original turntable design, the SP Reference takes advantage of everything the manufacturer has learned during the past decade. *(continued)*

“Rather than say that’s my product, take it or leave it, we listened very carefully to what our customers had to say and, bit by bit, addressed any issues they didn’t feel were best-in-class. We’ve taken this approach all the way to the packaging, with excellent results.”

AVID designer and director Conrad Mas explains that, a few years ago, he wanted to take the company and his products to an even higher level.

“Rather than say that’s my product, take it or leave it, we listened very carefully to what our customers had to say and, bit by bit, addressed any issues they didn’t feel were best-in-class. We’ve taken this approach all the way to the packaging, with excellent results.”

Everything is Jelly

While the Ref SP is AVID’s premier turntable, the entire line benefits from Mas’ design philosophies. He feels that it is essential for a turntable to get rid of the vibrational energy in the environment as well as that in the vinyl record itself. As he likes to say, “Everything is jelly at a certain frequency; you just can’t see it. The goal is to move all of the vibration away from the cartridge.”

The subchassis is cast from a variable density, highly granular aluminum, which damps the mid and low frequencies most effectively while even the coating on the subchassis is specifically designed to reduce the skin tension of the aluminum casting, effectively dissipating the HF resonance. Rather than cast from a solid shape, the area between the bearing and the tonearm mount looks as if it is folded, giving the shape more rigidity than a solid piece, yet having lighter weight. Mas comments, “This is the most important part of the subchassis, where rigidity is most critical.”

The platter takes the same approach. Mas adds: “The chrome plating on the SP Ref isn’t for the bling factor, it’s functional. It does an excellent job at killing HF resonance. We’ve tried a number of different coatings, but when we did the measurements, nothing worked as well as the chrome plating. When we listened to the different finish options, the chrome sounded best by far.”

Interestingly, Mas feels that the recent trend of 180- and 200-gram LPs is counterproductive. “What we want to do is evacuate the vibration of the record as far away from the stylus as fast as possible. A 200-gram platter stores more energy that the stylus will read and adds a veil to the sound.” *(continued)*





CM-IW2000

The iPad has become the face of the modern home, with Apps for anything and everything. So doesn't it make sense to have a central location to check emails, post notes, update social networks, or even work out what to wear and which route to take to work.

With iPort, the iPad is neatly installed into the wall, fully charged, and always ready to use.



Most turntables concentrate the majority of the mass in the chassis/subchassis assembly. AVID takes a different approach with its units by making the platter the most massive component. Since there's no heavy subchassis deflecting the bearing during vibration, bearing noise is kept to a minimum. This is the main reason that the Reference SP has such a low noise floor. In addition, a polymer disc is bonded to the 10kg aluminum platter that has a specially designed polymer mat bonded to it which reflects vibration created by the stylus during playback, this being channeled through the bearing that the record is mechanically grounded to. This differs from plastic platters that store vibration or felt mats that allow the records to vibrate causing mistracking.

Mas feels that a suspended 'table represents the optimum in vinyl playback design because the springs can be tuned to a specific frequency, again effectively isolating the important stylus from outside vibration.

In the vertical axis, AVID's suspension is tuned to 2.5Hz, a factor of two lower than the average cartridge/arm compliance frequency. By comparison, a seismograph, tuned to measure the vibration of the Earth, is at .5Hz.

The Opposite Approach

The main advantage of direct-drive turntables relates to the amount of on-hand torque; by comparison, to minimize the motor's control on the platter, belt-drive 'tables rely on wimpy motors coupled to a tiny belt. Flying in the face of convention, AVID utilizes a powerful motor to drive the platter, thus offering more control. Belt-drive owners also likely notice the fairly pokey start-up. Not so the Ref SP. It starts quickly, just like a direct-drive broadcast table!

AVID hand-builds the motors in its factory, where they are then hand-tuned to the individual power supply that will be shipped along with the turntable. In the case of the Ref SP, the power supply alone weighs

42 pounds (19kg.) and features a 1KV power transformer. As I unpacked the box, I honestly thought the company made a mistake and shipped me one of its new power amplifiers instead.

Tradition aside, the approach works flawlessly. A cursory check of the speed with the Acoustic Sounds test record and digital multimeter revealed perfect accuracy: 1000Hz on the nose. *(continued)*



Setup

The Ref SP requires some assembly, but thanks to the concise manual, you should be up and running within about 30 minutes, even when working at a leisurely pace. As much as you will want to spin records as quickly as possible, a more metered set-up pace will give you an even greater appreciation for the care that went into the component parts.

Once the bearing ball is inserted and the main bearing gently slid into place, you can mount the 35-pound platter on the subchassis, making mounting and aligning your cartridge a much easier task than doing so with the whole 'table assembled—a nice touch. This streamlines the set-up process, because you aren't fighting the turntable suspension when trying to set VTA and such. It allows closer access to the area where the stylus meets the alignment gauge and, again, a higher degree of accuracy.



AVID supplies an alignment protractor to help with the overhang alignment. Mas mentions that this step is "absolutely critical." Which is exactly why the company spent the time and trouble to create its own alignment jig for the SME tonearms. (AVID also produces these for Rega and Linn arms as well as a universal version.)

The last bit of setup involves fine-tuning the suspension and placing the chassis onto a level surface. Once the subchassis is leveled with the supplied tool, the suspension is perfectly tuned to the proper frequency. The final act involves fitting the three O-rings to the suspension towers and attaching the two drive belts, the only tough part of the entire process. First, pause in order to focus your concentration. Fortunately, my chi was in perfect order. I slipped the belts on just right on my first attempt.

An \$80 syringe of silicone damping fluid that usually comes with the SME V is the lone thing missing from the Ref SP box. It's not advised. The subchassis' unique design moves the vibration straight away from the base of the tonearm mount, effectively into the subchassis.

Moreover, external damping is usually required when using a cartridge with too much compliance in an arm with too much mass, but the AVID's low suspension frequency and clamping system eliminates the need for its use. "That's why the SME arms get a bad reputation for wooly bass. Reflected vibration boosts bass and colors the midrange. It's not the arm at all. And the non-linear damping in the vibration path, making up for the compliance mismatch, kills the high frequencies. Not so with our 'table.'

Having spent quite a bit of time with SME tables and tonearms in particular (I own four of them, from the vintage 3009 up to the V), I can assuredly state that the Ref SP is a completely different animal. If you didn't think an SME arm could sound light and lively, guess again. *(continued)*





Though I've always found SME arms slightly heavy-sounding, their consistency and ease of setup has always made them a favorite. But with AVID's 'tables, there is no sonic compromise. Mas is definitely on to something.

Listening and Comparisons

While it is always difficult to actually describe the sound of any component without putting it into context, the Ref SP reminds me of a combination of my two favorite turntables: the Rega P9 and the SME 30. If you can imagine a 'table with the weight of an SME 30 that also has the pace, timing, and speed of the P9, that's the closest anyone can get to telling you exactly what the Ref SP sounds like.

Almost immediately, the Ref SP became the go-to mechanism in my stable of reference turntables. After a few days of comparisons, it was obvious that I could not live without it. It also meant that a couple of other turntables had to go. Its performance with grade A+ pressings was nothing short of amazing. But even with average pressings, like Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Trilogy*—a record I've heard hundreds of times since the 70s—revealed new tidbits. Listening to "Abaddon's Bolero" revealed another layer of very quiet synthesizer playing at the beginning of the track. And as Greg Lake's bass line entered, there was more texture—and the bass actually had a firm placement in the left channel.

Playing the same track with the same tonearm and cartridge combination on my Oracle Delphi V spread the bass out almost evenly between the channels, with a significant loss of pace.

Staying in the classic rock vein and moving to the Classic Records pressing of Alan Parson's *I Robot* also yielded a completely new experience. The background chanting in the title track possessed a chilling realism I'd never heard before, as it simply rose up and crept in and out of the forefront.

Experiencing acoustic material proved equally great. Listening to Analogue Productions' recently remastered Bill Evans *The Riverside Recordings* box set approximated

sonic nirvana. "Polka Dots and Moonbeams," from *Moonbeams*, starts gently. The ultra-low noise floor of the Ref SP brought the music up out of what seemed like nowhere; the tonality of the piano epitomized perfection. At the beginning of Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No.1 in F sharp minor, Op. 1*, the horns jumped right out of the soundstage in a way that they never have done in my system. Thanks to the additional dynamic range, the overall presentation felt louder since quiet passages were now significantly quieter.

Having performed a number of listening experiments with many turntable/cartridge combinations, I've arrived at the firm conclusion

that a top-notch turntable with a modest cartridge will deliver more sound than a big-bucks cartridge on an inexpensive turntable. Even when using the Ref SP with the inexpensive Denon DL103R, I was consistently impressed at how much further I could hear into the cartridge's capabilities. Hence, a device I considered somewhat lackluster in budget turntables turned in a stellar performance with the Ref SP. Moreover, all of the \$5,000 cartridges I had at my disposal came across as relatively ho-hum (even when aligned to perfection) when mounted to a budget turntable—again confirming Mas' analysis of how important every aspect of a turntable design is to playback. *(continued)*

Almost immediately, the Ref SP became the go-to mechanism in my stable of reference turntables. After a few days of comparisons, it was obvious that I could not live without it.



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REVIEW

MANUFACTURER

www.avidhifi.co.uk

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier Burmester 011

Power Amplifier Burmester 911 mk. 3

Phono Preamplifier Audio Research REF 2 Phono, AVID Pulsare

Phono Cartridges Koetsu Urushi Blue, SoundSmith Sussurro Paua, ClearAudio DaVinci, Grado Statement 1

Tonearm SME V

Tonearm Cable Furutech Silver Arrow

Speakers GamuT S9

Power Running Springs Audio Maxim, Dmitri

Cable Shunyata Aurora

The Ref SP does a better job of extracting the music out of vinyl grooves than anything I've encountered—a job that is deceptively simple yet incredibly tough.

When listening to familiar records with the same cartridge (in this case, a Lyra Skala) mounted to both the Ref SP and my current reference, the Spiral Groove SG-2, the Ref SP's additional dynamic punch became instantly apparent on heavy rock music, large-scale symphonic music, and everything in between. The 'table's ability to unravel the intricacies of complex recordings is simply phenomenal. What's more, the rock-solid pitch stability and ultra-low noise floor offer up more than pinpoint imaging, painting tonal images in true three-dimensional space. Who needs multichannel when two-channel is rendered so clearly?

The Rabbit is in Hand

I've been chasing the analog rabbit for more than 30 years. I'd come awfully close to catching it in the past, but with the AVID, I finally got the rabbit by the ears. The Acutus Reference SP combines bespoke build quality, ease of setup, and stellar performance in a gorgeous package. What else could you possibly want?

Yes, this is the point in the review where the reviewer often says that they would “buy this 'table if they could afford it and will really miss it when they send it back.” Not here baby. I love this 'table; it offers by far the most enjoyable analog experience that I've ever had. Not only did I purchase the SP Ref, I bought two AVID tables, having also upgraded my Volvere to a Volvere SP.

The Acutus Reference SP is indeed A Very Interesting Design. ●

AVID Acutus Reference SP Turntable (tonearm not included)

MSRP: \$19,995 (US); £13,500 (International)



Kiseki Blue N.O.S. Cartridge

By Ken Kessler

N.O.S.: As tube lovers know, the abbreviation stands for “new old stock,” meaning exactly that—unsold wares in as-new condition. But how often are we lucky enough to see the term applied to something other than tubes? Is there a forgotten shop somewhere in the heart of England with a couple of unsold pairs of LS3/5As awaiting discovery? Some mint, boxed Rabco tonearms in the back of an New York warehouse? At the very least, and since they take up no space, how about some N.O.S. cartridges?

Wish granted. One hundred Kiseki Blue cartridges known as the Blue N.O.S. recently emerged from the Dutch audio group that developed the first Kiseki back in 1979. As Herman van den Dungen (the man also behind PrimaLuna and Mystere tube amps) explains, he and a few other Koetsu distributors started Kiseki in response to their dissatisfaction with Koetsu’s sporadic supplies and quality-control issues.



“From my inventory of parts, I knew I could make around 100-105 new Kiseki Blue N.O.S. cartridges.”

Kiseki made an immediate splash, finding favor alongside other new-wave moving coils such as Mr Brier, Ikeda, and Miyabi. Sales amounted to a heady 150-200 units a month, astonishing business for a cost-ly moving-coil. “But,” van den Dungen notes, “once CD came on the market, sales dropped to an unbelievably low level. At the same time, I became responsible for a new high-end shop which was suddenly left without manager, so the Kiseki project kind of ‘fell asleep.’”

As for the reawakening? Last year, van den Dungen found an original Blue, “never used, in a sealed wooden box. I installed the it, played the record and the music was alive. And that made me think, ‘Why not do it again?’ From my inventory of parts, I knew I could make around 100-105 new Kiseki Blue N.O.S. cartridges. Soon, I produced two samples with different styli, made my choice, and production started. After that, we will do a ‘normal’ production of the same quality as Kiseki Blue N.S. [New Style] cartridges. But we will use a smaller body—the one we used in the past for our other cartridge brand, MillTek.

“Only 100 of these N.O.S. versions will be available, as these are partly made with the stock of old parts I had. I also have a much smaller quantity

of parts for PurpleHeart, Black-Heart, and Agaat, so those will form the rest of the ‘New Old Stock’ series. Every N.O.S. model will then be followed by an N.S. model.” The other N.S. models, like the Blue N.S., will use the smaller housing, as per MillTek.

Van den Dungen sent out around a dozen N.O.S. models to friends and reviewers, leaving the remainder for sale at approximately \$1200-\$1450, depending on tax and duties. When they’re gone, the Blue N.S. will see release. The cartridge reviewed here is a Blue N.O.S., number 003/100. It’s nothing short of spectacular. And I say this as one who swears by his Koetsu Urushi.

It’s easy to hear why and how the original Kiseki—if this N.O.S. does indeed replicate that famed cartridge of 32 years ago—was such a hit. Since its balance is livelier, the model was/is not a “mutually exclusive” rival to the Koetsu, but it still sounds warm and rich. My adoration for Koetsu cartridges stems from their ability to serve as the “gentle side” to my other love, the Decca; you could say it’s a matter of politeness versus naughtiness. Although it could pass for a Koetsu through systems with overly romantic tube electronics and reticent electrostatic speakers, the Kiseki possesses

much (but not all) of the inimitable sparkle of a working Decca.

I installed the Kiseki in an SME V12 on a SME30/12, played through an Audio Research PH5 phonostage and Ref 5 pre-amp driving Quad II-eighty monoblocks into Wilson Sophia 3s. I wasn’t trying to create a “period” system for authenticity. Instead, I wanted to hear what is effectively a brand-new 1979 cartridge played in 2011 conditions. The initial reactions? Open admiration for its slick tracking ability at a few milligrams under 1.9g, deliciously ample yet tight bass, and open soundstage with VistaVision scale.

Whenever I need to test the majesty of a system, I dig out the J. Geils Band’s *Sanctuary* and cue up “I Can’t Believe You,” all soaring guitars and massive percussion. The Kiseki sailed through it with same ease of the system that I was actually using when the LP was first released—the year before Kiseki was born. The cartridge scaled the heights of the guitar break, while Peter Wolf’s vocals rasp remained in front and the best rhythm section ever forged in Boston pounded out a foundation that can only be defined as “solid.” The room was filled like a sausage casing. *(continued)*

Distaff vocals, courtesy of a squeaky Cyndi Lauper, extracted from the Kiseki the very natural midband that so endears Koetus to me. Meanwhile, some serious Brian Setzer twanging from the debut Stray Cats LP allayed fears of softening in the upper registers: The Kiseki's clarity, allied to cut-glass leading edges, meant the kind of transient attack that charms Van Halen fans when Eddie goes into manic mode. Its precision almost resembles that of the last-generation Shure V15s rather than the surgical precision of a Decca Gold. Equally, the slap bass sounded just like the live version I'd heard in late February at the London opening of *Million Dollar Quartet*: rotund, rubbery, rambunctious.

If this simply constitutes a trip down Memory Lane, then be it so: Nostalgia is never a bad thing when discussing LP playback. But the Kiseki Blue N.O.S.' sound is as "now" as the system that hosted it in my room. And as far as the price is concerned, it would be churlish to not call it a genuine bargain. ●

The Kiseki Blue NOS Cartridge

Global pricing for remaining examples:
€1450 inc sales tax or €1200 sans sales tax

MANUFACTURER

www.kiseki-eu.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source SME 30/12 and
SME V12 arm

Phono Preamplifier ARC PH5

Preamplifier ARC Ref 5

Power Ampifier

Quad 11-eighty monoblocks

Speakers Wilson Audio Sophia 3

Cable Various cables from
Kimber and Yter



This Is It:

Luxman SQ-38u Integrated Amplifier

By Steve Guttenberg

Sometimes, there's no substitute for tradition or heritage. Consider: The original Luxman SQ-38 integrated amplifier debuted in 1963 and was followed by the SQ-38D in 1965. The SQ-38u is, in fact, the eleventh incarnation of the design, and the new model looks every bit like vintage hi-fi even as its insides reflect modern thinking.

History aside, I was relieved to hear that the SQ-38u sounds like what it is: A vacuum tube integrated amplifier. A lot of contemporary tube gear sounds more or less like solid-state. Not the SQ-38u. And while it's certainly not the least bit dated or slow sounding, you'd never mistake it for a transistor amp. It's too holographic, tonally sweet, and pure. But if solid-state sound is what you're looking for, Luxman offers a tasty selection of SS integrated models from which to choose. The company also offers a matching PD-171 turntable (\$6,000) and D-38u CD player (\$4,000) for buyers interested in maintaining the retro look.



You Can Look—And Touch

Of course, the appeal of the SQ-38u's machined front panel—and its cluster of metal knobs and switches—is more than skin deep. Just like the good old days, the controls have a perfect feel. There are eight knobs in all: An A/B speaker selector; Separates On/Off (controls the rear panel preamp output jacks); Input Selector; a silky-smooth Volume Control; Bass and Treble; Phono Cartridge Gain; and left/right Balance. Three switches—Low Cut (rumble filter), Mono/Stereo, Tape Monitor—are flanked by a headphone jack and mute button. The metal chassis is sheathed in a handsome wood case, and the little remote control simply handles volume and mute.

Connectivity isn't generous but it's certainly adequate, and the connectors are comprised of high-quality materials. You get five pairs of RCA inputs: Rec Out/Monitor; Pre-Out/Main-In jacks; and two sets (A & B) of speaker binding posts. The tube complement runs to four EL 34 power tubes, four 12AX7s, and three 12AU7s planted within the 15.7" wide by 7.7" high by 12.2" deep chassis. The SQ-38u weighs a very solid 44 pounds. It's built! *(continued)*



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cartridge
MM
MC high
MC low



The all-tube phono section handles moving magnet as well as low- and high-output moving coil cartridges, the latter two options via step-up transformers. Built-in phono preamps are rare on today's integrated amps, especially tube models, so I was eager to test out the SQ-38u's vinyl playback abilities. The sound was yummy, and brought out the best on Blondie's debut LP. I forgot how perfect a fit singer Debbie Harry was in the band, and the record contains the sort of music that's best enjoyed turned up loud. Everything I love about analog sound was just that much more delicious with the SQ-38u in the system. Tube noise? Commendably low.

Unlike those on most integrated amps, the headphone amp isn't based on a little op amp. Rather, this bad boy uses the tube output stage that drives your speakers, albeit padded down with just one resistor to play headphones! That's right: You get the same sound from your headphones as the speakers. Extremely dynamic and very transparent, the SQ-38u's headphone sound is far and away the best I've heard from an integrated amp. The Luxman had no trouble driving difficult models like the Hifiman HE-6 planar magnetic headphones. Suffice it to say that the SQ-38u is completely on par with my \$1,050 Woo Audio WA-6SE tube headphone amp.

Tone controls? Wow, it's been a long time since I last used a high-end product with bass and treble controls, and those on the SQ-38u are the same as those on the original 1963 design. Subtle gradations of bass and treble shifts can make less-than-stellar-sounding recordings, like Bruce Springsteen's *Darkness on the Edge of Town* CD, more listenable.

I dipped the treble down to eleven o'clock, and the bass up to 1:30. Much better. Once I really got into the music, I realized what I've missed from the Boss' more recent albums: The band doesn't sound like a band anymore. On *Darkness*, Springsteen is playing with a band of brothers. The SQ-38u brought out the best of them without highlighting the recording's harshness.

Better still, when I played an audiophile recording with real spatial depth—as opposed to digital reverberation—the SQ-38u unleashed a fully three-dimensional soundstage. Puente Celeste's *Nama*, a CD from MA Recordings, is recorded “live” with no overdubs and on a pair of custom microphones; the sound was palpably alive. The disc ideally captures the sound of musicians playing in real time, listening, and reacting to each other. A pure thrill, as the sound went beyond mere hi-fi.

Moving and Grooving

I initially listened to the SQ-38u with a pair of Zu Soul Superfly speakers (reviewed in Issue 35), which proved a match made in heaven, but later used my Zu Essence speakers. Duke Ellington's *Blues In Orbit* SACD bounded out of the Essence models with rare gusto. The music may have been recorded a half century ago, but it was alive and kicking as if made yesterday.

Inspired, I dug out Rhino Records' *Beg Scream & Shout* box set: Six CDs loaded with the very best Motown, Stax, and indie soul, from gems like Jackie Wilson's “Baby Work Out” to one of my all-time favorite party tunes of the 1960s, the Bar-Kays' “Soul Finger.” This music is all about energy and drive. *(continued)*



The Luxman sounds less like a hi-fi component, and more like live music.

Could the SQ-38u deliver? In a word, abso-funk-en-lutely! I couldn't stop jumping around, just like I did when I was a teenager hearing these tunes for the first time. Never once did I think about transparency or palpable imaging.

For the last great live Stones album, 1995's *Stripped*, I switched over to Dynaudio's C1, a more precise-sounding speaker than the Essence. Soundstage focus is also superior, and the SQ-38u surprised me with its weight and gravitas. Quieter, acoustic-based tunes like "Wild Horses," "Angie,"

and "Love in Vain" were reach-out-and-touch vivid, and claimed to-die-for intimacy. Harder-rocking tunes such as "Street Fighting Man" and "Like a Rolling Stone" felt, to a certain degree, reigned-in. Power wasn't the issue. The SQ-38u played loud enough, but dynamics were perceptively scaled down and blunted the Stones' full-frontal assault.

Shifting gears, on Brian Eno's *Ambient 4: On Land*, ever-shifting soundscapes and churning atmospheres glide over squeaking, fluttery accents. There's a lot

going on, and the depth of the stage mesmerizes. Solid-state amps produce the textures but suppress the space. The Luxman made the album come alive, offering up an immersive experience, which is how this recording should be experienced.

From tubes, I want romance, and the SQ-38u delivers. I'm not a fan of tube amps that try to go toe-to-toe with solid-state amps in regards of control and razor-flat response. Hence, when I compared the SQ-38u with my Parasound JC-2 preamp and First

Watt J-2 (25 watt x 2) amp while listening to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Michael Brook's *Night Song*, the solid-state versus tube sound contest didn't produce a clear winner.

The JC-2/J2 unfurled a more precisely focused soundstage, with more taut bass, but the SQ-38u gave me more of Ali Khan's 300-pound heft. Pardon the cliché, but the tube sound possessed more palpable body and roundness. To be sure, the CD sounded great with both components. It's just that the SQ-38u shaved off a tiny bit of the CD's edge. The

Luxman sounds less like a hi-fi component, and more like live music; the JC-2/J2 is more tuneful and rhythmically agile.

Gimme Some Truth

Some otherwise fine amps can't supply the essence of music. They may be transparent, image well, and uncork many a recordings' full dynamic range, but the sound still misses the mark. Musical truth separates this Luxman from the pack. The SQ-38u zeroes in on the music and satisfies the soul.

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Additional Listening:

Regardless of whether you choose its solid-state or vacuum tube models, Luxman seems to have captured the market in terms of providing a warm, somewhat romantic sound. Akin to the company's L-590A II integrated (reviewed in Issue 13), the SQ-38u is a modern classic, with vintage styling cues *and* tone controls. There's even a cool, tiny yellow LED in the volume control that blinks while the amplifier warms up.

While I also had a pleasant experience with the Zu speakers, my little slice of heaven came courtesy of B&W's 805D speakers. Their highly resolving nature, smoothed ever so slightly by those EL-34 output tubes, made for a delicious presentation. My recently restored JBL-L100s also made for an intriguing albeit more vintage-sounding system.

Caveat: If you are looking for the last word in vacuum tube resolution, look elsewhere. But if you'd like to stop stressing out over what vinyl pressing you need to locate, the SQ-38u is what you want. Its phono stage is killer. All three positions (MM, MC-low, MC-high) work equally well, but the combination of a Rega P9 with Shelter 501 proved irresistible. The Denon 103 comes in a close second.

Granted, a 30-watt-per-channel tube amplifier can't be everything to everyone; it won't play heavy rock or major orchestral works at anywhere near realistic volume levels with most speakers. But if you'd like to get off the audio-phile roller coaster and just enjoy the majority of your music collection without hassle, I can't think of a better choice than the SQ-38u. It's a magic amplifier that offers the perfect blend of tube romance without the layer of murkiness that plagues vintage tube designs. I can see why it has been such a popular model for so many years. Highly recommended.—*Jeff Dorgay*

REVIEW

Luxman SQ-38u
MSRP: \$6,000

MANUFACTURER

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(U.S. importer)

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, Pass Labs XA100.5, and First Watt J2 power amps

Speakers Dynaudio C-1, Zu Essence, Mangepan 3.6

Cable Zu interconnects, speaker cable; Analysis Plus Silver Oval interconnects and speaker cables; Audioquest Sky interconnects

Better than Smurfs

The Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue

By Jeff Dorgay



Three of my favorite things come in bright blue: Smurfs, rare Porsche 911's (only a few came from the factory in Mexico Blue), and Koetsu's Urushi Sky Blue phono cartridge. To most audiophiles, Koetsu summons up a vision of analog exotica that defies definition and affordability. Produced by hand and in small quantities, these Japanese beauties are the stuff of waiting lists and privilege, with the cost of top models inching towards \$20,000. But you don't have to drop five figures to get a substantial helping of what Koetsu offers.

Every Koetsu cartridge features hand-wound coils and hand-carved bodies from various woods and stone, which determine the ultimate tonality of each model. Various models use different wire for coil windings, and alternate magnet materials give each a unique sound. The lacquer finishes even impact the final result. Here, the Urushi Sky Blue utilizes a rosewood body with Samarium-Cobalt magnets and a set of silver-plated coils. Packaged in a simple but elegant wooden box, it runs \$4,300.

Tech Basics and Setup

The Sky Blue is a low-compliance cartridge (5 x 10⁻⁶ cm/dyne) that works best in higher-mass arms. I achieved very distinctive results in two tonearm/turntable combinations at my disposal. The Avid Acutus Reference SP/SME V offered better dynamics and more weight, with the cartridge exhibiting tremendous low-level detail thanks to the nonexistent level of mechanical noise. The Rega P9 proved completely different, with plenty of pace and inner detail, but somewhat less definition and a mel-lower lower register. Warmth definitely crept in, but at the expense of resolution. Overall, very pleasing, but this cartridge changes its character depending on the platform on which it is mounted—and more drastically than others that I've tried.

Suggested tracking force is listed at 1.8 – 2.2 grams and, true to form, I found optimal tracking to be just slightly past 1.9 grams. It's worth noting that this cartridge is relatively easy to set up and not as sensitive as some with regards to ultra-fine adjustment. And it still gave a great showing slightly off the optimum setup point. Output is a low, but not unreasonable .4mv, so it should be compatible with most high-gain phono preamplifiers (about 60db and up). I preferred 200 ohm loading with the ARC REF 2 Phono, with 500 ohms a bit dark. I experienced similar results using the AVID Pulsare phono-stage.

Chameleon-Like

Balance and delicacy are the Sky Blue's key qualities. At first listen, it's easy to dismiss the Urushi as slightly soft, but it doesn't take long to realize that you are hearing tonal gradations, often more subtly than ever before. *(continued)*



Most of my Koetsu experience has come with friends' SME 20 and 30 tables. I admit that I was somewhat taken aback when fitting it to the AVID Acutus Reference SP. The presentation was transformed, replete with a full measure of nuance (this, I was used to) but with an extra level of dynamics (this, I was not).

Moving through various music food groups with familiar material again revealed a level of fine detail without being too forward or harsh. My personal bias tends to favor just about anything that is ever so slightly on the warm side of neutral. Warm, slow, and syrupy gets boring, especially on a high-resolution system. But let's face it: Most records boast less-than-phenomenal sonics, which is why you need more than one table/arm cartridge setup.

However, because most records are less than perfect, the Koetsu makes a fantastic daily driver. Although I have a couple of cartridges that have more ultimate resolution and are incredible with ideal recordings, I can't play the first Boston album with either of them. "Foreplay/Long Time" sounds awesome when played on the Koetsu, and this is a true test of a cartridge's merit. Throw some of your worst-sounding records at a phono cartridge to see what it's made of, I say. Patricia Barber sounds great on just about any analog setup, but who cares? And even if you are a classical music lover, chances are you've got a pile of recordings that are far from perfect. The Sky Blue's slightly rich character goes a long way at making mid-80s DG recordings more palatable.

On the pop front, listening to Yim Yames' *Tribute to...* was a treat. It's exactly the kind of music with which this cartridge excels. Yames' vocals and mandolin balance perfectly, and with an added bit of ambience lost on a few lesser cartridges, the overall presentation was extremely realistic and made me feel as if I were sitting in an empty theater, tenth-row center. The banjo performance on the cover



George Harrison's "Love You To" was sublime; the hauntingly realistic level of three-dimensionality the Koetsu brought forth stunned me. I had the same experience with the recent Jung Trio album on Groove Note. Piano and violin were rendered with an extra fine layer of detail; I've never heard a more natural rendition of a violin in my system.

Like Sleeping on 1500-Thread-Count Sheets

If you've slept on ultra-high thread-count sheets, you know how the bedding just seems to disappear as you sink into the bed and makes it that much easier to relax. That's what the Sky Blue does with music. The tonal gradations are so smooth, and combined with a high ability to unravel dense recordings, it's easy to stop *thinking about gear*.

To achieve this experience, cue up Shriekback's "The Reptiles and I" from *Big Night Music*. While the lead vocal is airy and over processed, it goes flat without a healthy dose of resolution on tap. At the same time, synthesizers and bongos float out of phase with no specific location before disappearing into the room boundaries. None of this magic was present on the digital version of the album, even when played through my dCS Paganini stack.

MoFi's recent release of Linda Ronstadt's *Simple Dreams* revealed similar results. It's a fairly dense recording, with an incredibly wide soundstage and various instrument tracks judiciously sprinkled in the mix. For those craving "pinpoint imaging" in their stereo system, the song should satisfy even the fussiest audiophile. It's one of those tracks where you go from hearing Ronstadt breathe at the outset before her voice swells, producing an immersive experience that will have you searching for non-existent surround-sound speakers.

Many Koetsu owners comment on the cartridges' ability to minimize surface noise. *(continued)*



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TONEAudio
Magazine,
Issue 18



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Perhaps this is due to Koetsu's unique stylus profile that rides the groove in a slightly different spot, yet it was definitely something I noticed with records that are known to be on the noisy side. Minimal clicks and pops seemed to possess a similar intensity, but low-level groove noise was lower overall.

Comparison and Conclusion

If the Sky Blue has a weakness, it's the slight softening of leading transients. The cannon shots in AC/DC's "For Those About to Rock (We Salute You)" didn't quite have the punch that they had with the Lyra Skala. Still, the slightly thin tonal balance of Bon Scott's voice on "Night Prowler" had a little extra body, a welcome benefit. So remember: What the analog gods give, they also take away. However, this cartridge did such a great job with everything else, I rarely gave the slight loss of ultimate dynamics a second thought. Detail fanatics may not find this shortcoming acceptable, but again, it depends on your taste, system, and recordings. Think of the Lyra Skala (another one of my favorites) as a Stratocaster and the Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue as a Les Paul Custom. And the Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum is somewhere in between, but that's another review.

Koetsu cartridges are usually somewhat tough to find, but Acoustic Sounds carries a larger stock than anyone in the States. If you decide you need one of these exquisite transducers, give the Kansas-based company a call sooner rather than later. Otherwise, the wait for restock may prove unbearable. And once you get your hands on one, you'll see why these special cartridges have such a dedicated following. ●

AT A GLANCE:

The Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue Cartridge

MSRP: \$4,300
www.koetsuusa.com

YAY: Luscious presentation,
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NAY: Slight lack of ultimate
dynamics

OKAY: Expensive, but not
outrageously priced

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Phono Preamp ARC REF 2 Phono,
AVID Pulsare

Speakers GamuT S9


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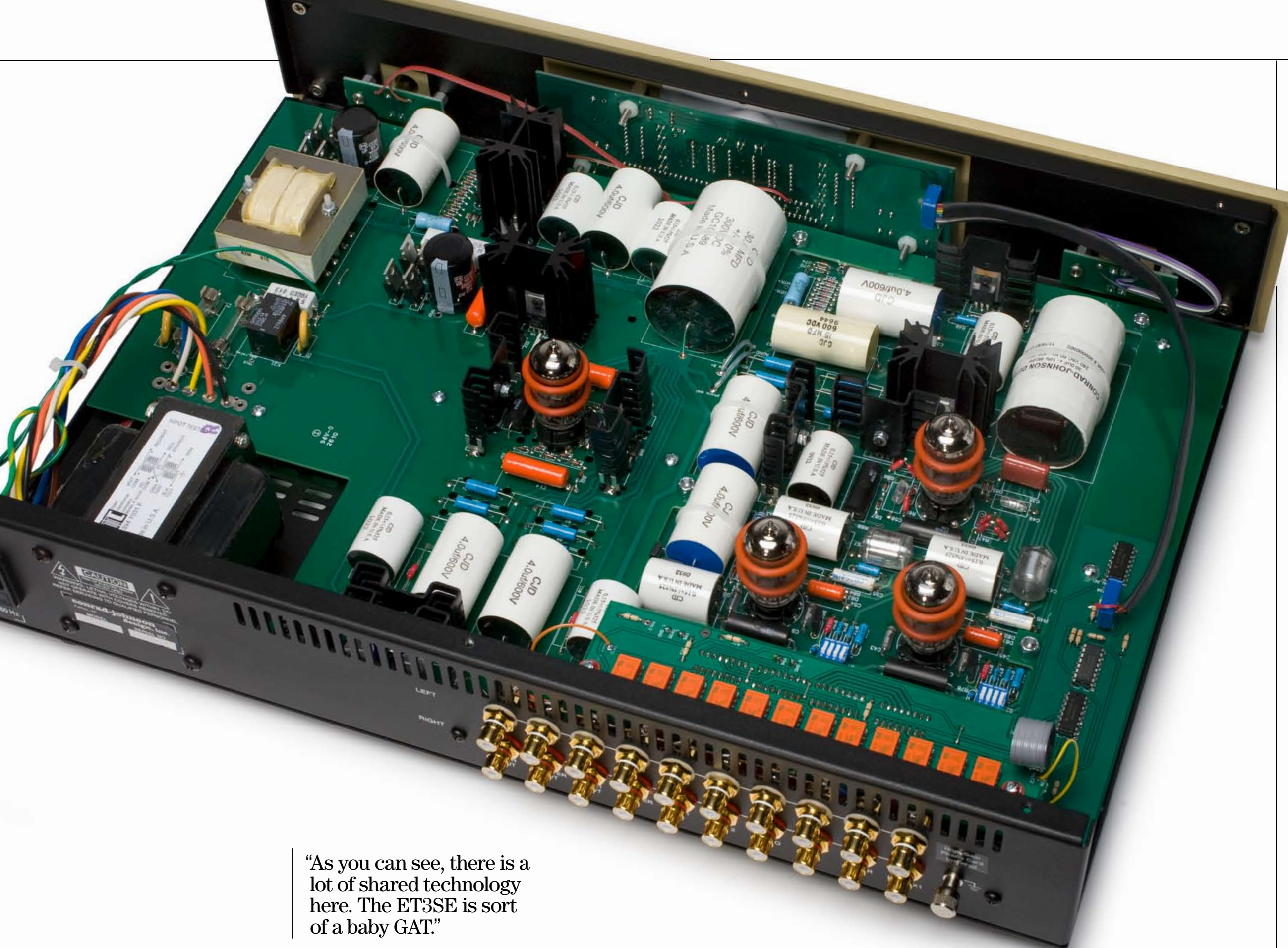
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Baby GAT: C-J's ET3SE

By Jeff Dorgay

“It just sounds right.” Conrad-Johnson’s longtime motto is simple and true. After all, the company counts a loyal following and a 30-plus-year history of producing some of the audio industry’s top amplifiers and preamplifiers. C-J’s ART, ACT 2, and GAT preamplifiers have won almost every award the press bestows, and many of the world’s top audio journalists agree that these preamplifiers are the best in class. Considering how infrequently we all agree on *anything*, that is high praise indeed.



“As you can see, there is a lot of shared technology here. The ET3SE is sort of a baby GAT.”

Of course, the C-J sound has changed a bit over the years. ART preamplifiers have always had a huge, three-dimensional soundstage with boundless weight to the presentation, while the 6H30 tube-based ACT 2 (my personal reference for many years) is slightly more dynamic and arguably more tonally correct. The current GAT offers the best of both worlds. It has the size and weight of the ART with the speed of the ACT 2, and is a hybrid design, using a composite triode gain stage (via one 6922 tube per channel) and a MOSFET buffer stage.

If you’ve been lucky enough to own or sample the GAT, you know it’s a truly spectacular preamplifier, albeit with a hefty \$20k pricetag. The big news is that, for those wanting high performance on a lesser budget, the ET3SE offers much of what C-J learned with the GAT. During a recent factory visit, Lew Johnson showed me the internals of the ET3SE and pointed out all the similarities to the main circuit board of the GAT, which he had on-hand for direct comparison.

“As you can see, there is a lot of shared technology here. The ET3SE is sort of a baby GAT,” he said, with budding enthusiasm. “Here’s what’s *really* special. The phonostage is essentially the TEA-2SE that you just got done reviewing, and it’s all on one chassis. And, as you can see, we’ve incorporated a healthy dose of our CJD Design Teflon capacitors.” The main differences between the top-of-the-line GAT and ET3SE? The size of the power supply, the complexity of the stepped attenuator controlling the volume level, and the sophistication of the composite triode stage. *(continued)*

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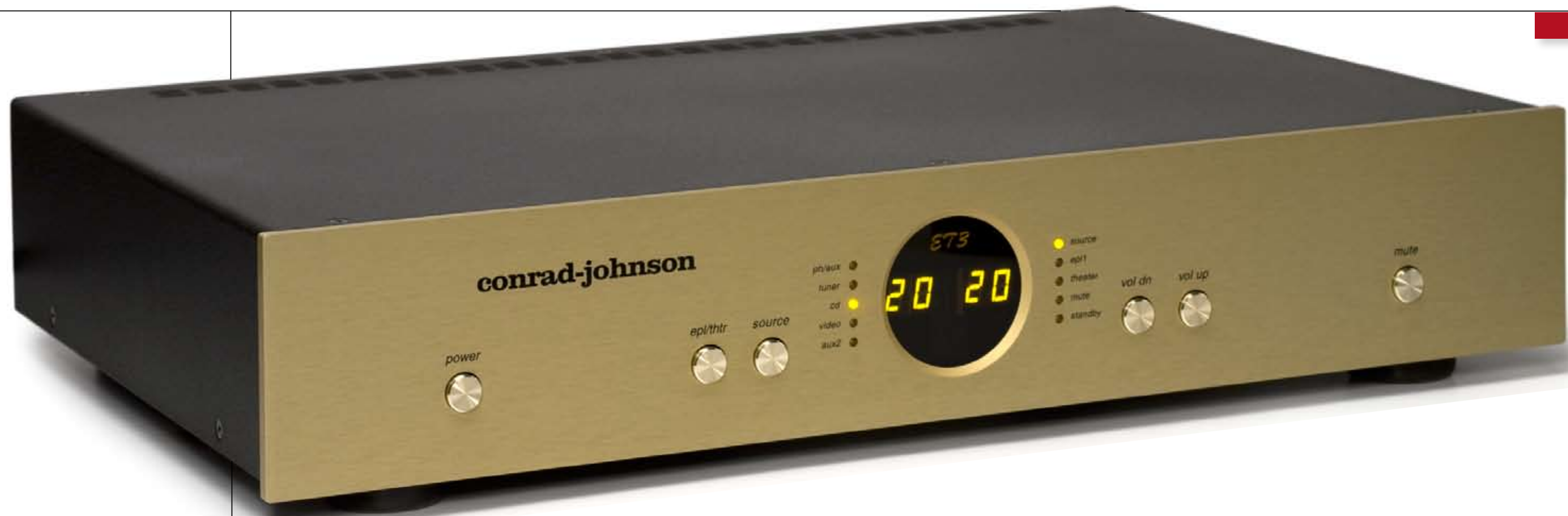


P9 \$4995



In a sense, the ET3SE offers about a quart and a half of the GAT's sound for less than a quarter of the price. It lists for \$4,000 without phono stage and \$5,500 with a built-in phono stage. The high-gain version features 54db of gain, and is suggested for cartridges with an output of 1.0mv or less; the low-gain version features 40db of gain and is optimized for cartridges greater than 1.0mv, though most high-output moving coil and moving magnet designs usually fall in the 2.0–5.0mv range, which should be perfect. We reviewed the high-gain model.

It should be noted that non-SE versions are available for \$2,500 and \$3,350, respectively, but lack the high zoot capacitors. Johnson mentions that while the GAT preamplifier uses 23 massive 2.0uF/350v CJD Design Teflon capacitors (at a retail price of about \$250 each), the ET3SE uses a handful of 4.0uF Polypropylene capacitors bypassed by .15uF Teflon capacitors. This arrangement has the bypass capacitor dominating the sound of the main cap, but “there is no free lunch, the pure Teflon arrangement remains audibly superior.” *(continued)*



If past C-J phono and linestages we've heard are any indication, you can expect the non-SE versions to have a somewhat warmer tonal balance with less extension at the frequency extremes; more of the "Classic C-J sound," if you will. Should you purchase a non-SE model, you can always send it back to the factory for the upgrade, but it will end up costing a few hundred bucks more than the cost of a normal SE model. While I'm spending your money, I highly suggest going all the way and purchasing the SE version. You won't regret it.

Clean Design

The front panel is free of knobs, utilizes the same round numeric display for volume as past C-J preamplifiers, and comes in any color you like, as long as that happens to be classic C-J champagne anodized aluminum.

Like all C-J preamplifiers, the ET3SE is a single-ended design, complete with RCA jacks for inputs and outputs. For 99% of ET3SE owners, this should not present a problem, as the model had no issue driving a 25-foot pair of interconnects without signal degradation. (I've had similar luck with my ACT2.)

On top of the splendid aesthetics, the ET3SE is extremely flexible, boasting five high-level inputs as well as the phonostage. It also has a tape loop, or as C-J likes to call it, an "external processor loop." If you have a tape recorder or outboard equalizer, this is a great way to switch it in and out of the amplification chain when not in use. I employ a Manley Massive Passive studio equalizer when working on restoring my vinyl collection, so this is one of my favorite features. My only complaint? I would love to see a second pair of main outputs for those who use a powered subwoofer.

The only downside to the SE model with all those Teflon capacitors is that it really does take 500 hours to sound its best, just like my ACT 2. But once it's finally broken-in, the ET3SE opens up and offers a surprising amount of performance for a preamplifier in its given price range. At first glimpse, the ET3SE sounds slightly compressed, with a constricted soundstage. It begins to come out of the fog at about 150 hours, with the presentation making a big jump right around the 300-hour mark before showing further improvement between 300 and 500 hours.

Mix and Match

Most of my listening was spent with the recently upgraded MV-50C1, a unit that last summer went back to the C-J factory to have a full complement of CJD Design Teflon capacitors and similar power supply upgrade. While

Johnson pointed out that my "new" MV-50 does not possess the last bit of frequency extension offered by its current tube amplifiers, it's still damn good, retaining all the magic that the MV-50 had in its day, with a lot more bass grip and high-end clarity that it did when brand new.

I also made it a point to drive a handful of other amplifiers, both tube and solid-state, all with excellent luck. Nelson Pass' First Watt M3, a single-ended, class-A solid-state design, proved to be an awesome combination with the ET3SE. I've been using C-J vacuum-tube preamplifiers with solid-state power amplifiers to great success since the late 70s when I first mated the C-J PV2 with a Threshold 400A, another of Pass' fine designs. Nothing has changed; it's still a great pairing. *(continued)*

On top of the splendid aesthetics, the ET3SE is extremely flexible, boasting five high-level inputs as well as the phonostage.

Because the ET3SE is a model of simplicity, it warms up quickly and uses a basic remote to change functions and volume. The attenuator “clicks,” just like the one on my ACT2; it’s a friendly, familiar sound. The remote is a stripped-down plastic model—cheaper when compared to the billet aluminum remote that higher-end C-J preamplifiers use—but it helps keep the cost more reasonable. If you must have the billet remote, the folks at C-J can sell you one as an accessory.

That Big C-J Sound

Once the break in period was complete and I got down to serious listening, I became amazed at how much this preamplifier is capable of delivering! During casual listening sessions, and when using less than the most pristine software, it was easy to get fooled into thinking I was listening to one of C-J’s top preamplifiers.

The size of the soundstage instantly caught my attention. Left to right, images extended beyond the speakers’ boundaries, and there was an abundance of front-to-back depth as well. Not as much as with the ACT 2, but much more than I expected. And thanks to that ever so slight warmth to the ET3SE’s character, its extra tonal body goes a long way with digital playback, especially on discs that sound less than perfect.

The Motorhead concert set *Better Motorhead Than Dead: Live at Hammersmith* features a somewhat flat recording of Lemmy Kilmister’s voice. But through the ET3SE, his timbre on signature tracks such as “Love Me Like A Reptile” and “Ace of Spades” had extra presence that was both pleasant and welcome. The ET3SE is just one of those preamplifiers that makes your music collection come alive, especially after it gets an hour or two to fully warm up.

Moreover, the preamplifier’s hybrid design strikes a perfect balance, offering a punchy sound that will have you clamoring to try and define. Whereas some hybrid designs end up representing a compromise, the C-J blends the best of both worlds—extremely quiet, providing healthy tonal contrast, yet powerful and controlled, with weight and accuracy at both ends of the tonal spectrum.

For example, Trey Gunn’s recent *I’ll Tell What I Saw* features a ProTools-heavy mix, and its massive bass riffs can get muddy in a hurry. Yet the ET3SE sailed right through, keeping the bottom solid and on track, while maintaining the integrity of the powerful percussion. *(continued)*

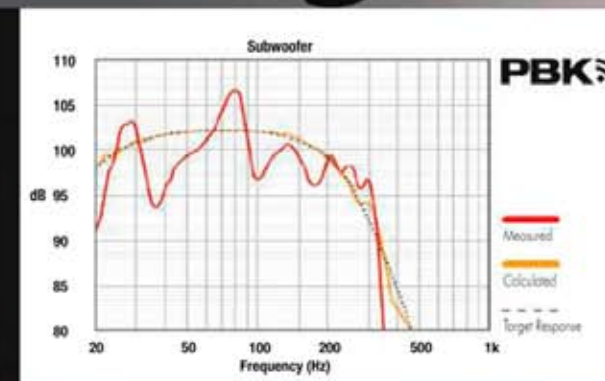


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— Chris Martens, AV Guide

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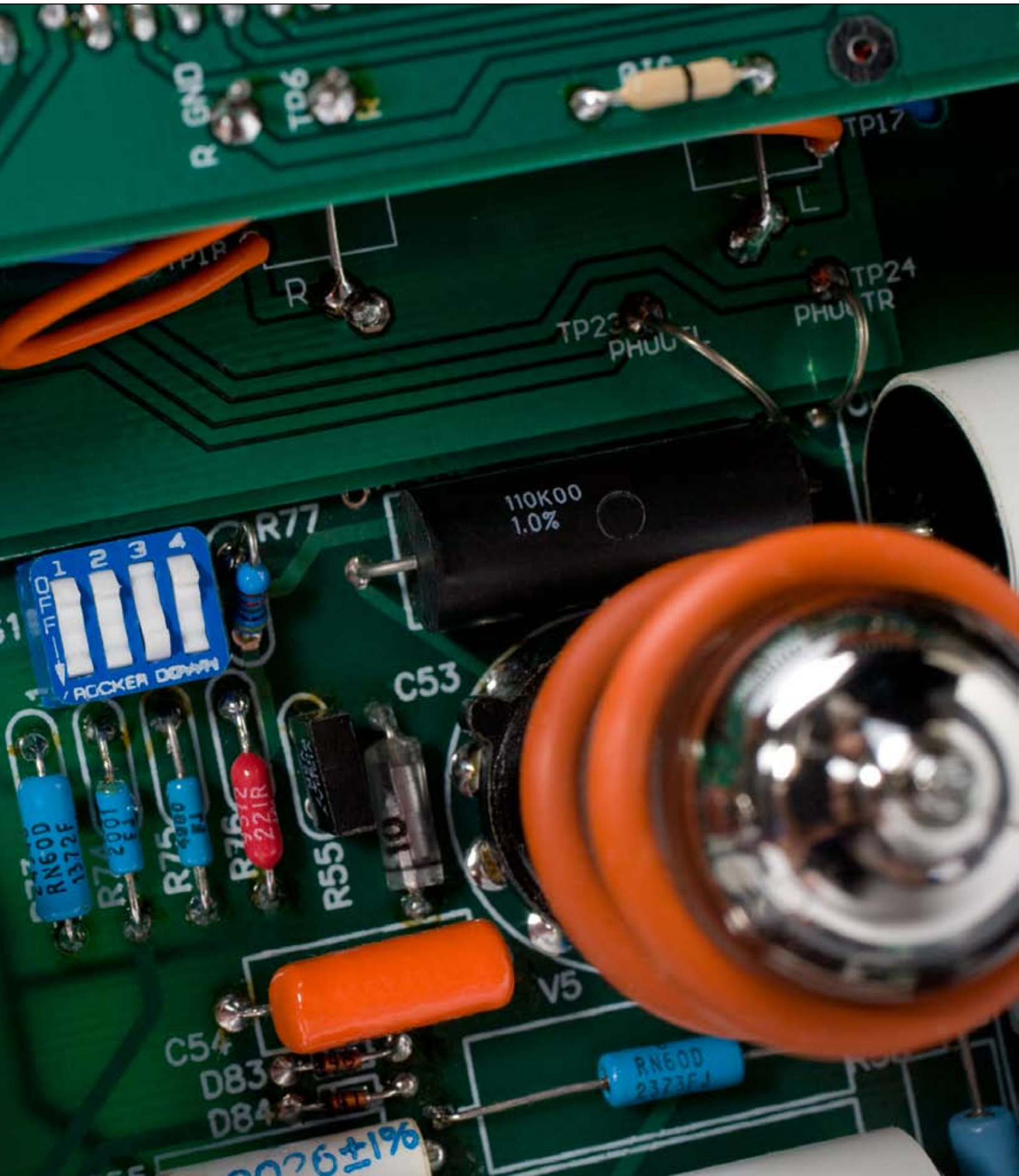
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10” drivers handle the amazing 9,000 watts Peak Power and 4,500 watts Continuous Power the amp delivers through its unique Power Factor Correction feature.



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I was equally stunned when enjoying a 24/96 high-resolution copy of Talking Heads' *Fear of Music*, a fairly dense album that exposes the beginnings of bandleader David Byrne's obsession with Brazilian rhythms. Again, the ET3SE did an outstanding job of keeping the pace tight and maintaining the dynamic impact.

Phono Fantastic

For audiophiles that long for the good old days when preamplifiers contained a great phono stage, the ET3SE comes up roses, especially if you don't want a rack full of gear and cables. On analog, I used the Oracle Delphi V/SME 309/Lyra Dorian combination for a majority of my listening. But even when I experimented with cartridges in the \$2,500 range, they never made me feel as if the ET3SE's internal phono stage was outclassed.

To get a read on more budget-conscious cartridges, I tried the Rega P3-24 with a Dynavector 17D3, but the relatively low output (.3mv) pushed the noise floor of the ET3SE's phono section. The higher output (.6mv) Lyra Dorian proved a better match. Even the additional .1mv of the Shelter 501II offered superior results when compared to the 17D3, which seems to fare better with phono stages offering at least 60db of gain.

One of the most pleasing aspects of a great internal phono stage is that one need not worry about synergy between phono stage and linestage, or

the optimum interconnect cable. Given that C-J's TEA2 SE outboard phono stage is \$4,000, the ET3SE's level of phono performance is amazing. Mirroring the sound of the linestage, the phono section has the same attributes. If you want a more in-depth description of the sound, please consult Jacob Heilbrunn's review of the TEA2SE here ([--WEB LINK HERE--](#)).

Suffice to say, it was easy to get lost listening to records for hours on end with the ETSE3. When used in conjunction with the MV-50, Oracle turntable, and B&W 805Ds that reside in System Three, the C-J caused me to always come away highly impressed at the quality and amount of true high-end sound available at a price that won't force you to make your kids attend community college.

Extra Credit

Those who can't stand to listen to anything in its stock form should consider rolling the tubes in the ET3SE. The phono stage uses three 12AX7s and the linestage one 6922. While I was able to get a significant jump in performance by using the EAT tubes reviewed in this issue, three add \$775 to the price of the ET3SE, and they burn away, whether or not you are using the phono input. A more cost-effective upgrade can be had from purchasing one premium 6922 tube for the linestage (again, I suggest the EAT tube). As good as the ET3SE is, it goes to 11 if you swap the stock tube for the EAT.

True Value

I am proud to award the Conrad-Johnson ET3SE a 2011 Exceptional Value Award. For many audiophiles, this preamplifier will be all you ever require, offering great sound, top build quality, and immense flexibility for \$5,500. I defy anyone to find a more musical combination of preamplifier and phono stage for this price. ●

AT A GLANCE:

The Conrad-Johnson ET3SE Preamplifier

MSRP: \$4,000 without phono stage, \$5,500 with www.conradjohnson.com

YAY: High performance, one-box design, great sound

NAY: Lacks the cool remote of flagship C-J preamps

OKAY: Still the same light-gold packaging from past designs

PERIPHERALS

Digital Source dCS Paganini Stack, Sooloos Music Server

Analog Source Oracle Delphi V/SME 309/Lyra Dorian, Rega P3-24/Shelter 501III

Power Amplifier Conrad Johnson MV-50C1, Octave MR130SE

Speakers GamuT S9, B&W 805D, Verity Finn

Cable AudioQuest SKY

Power Running Springs Dmitri, Duke

Master of Detail

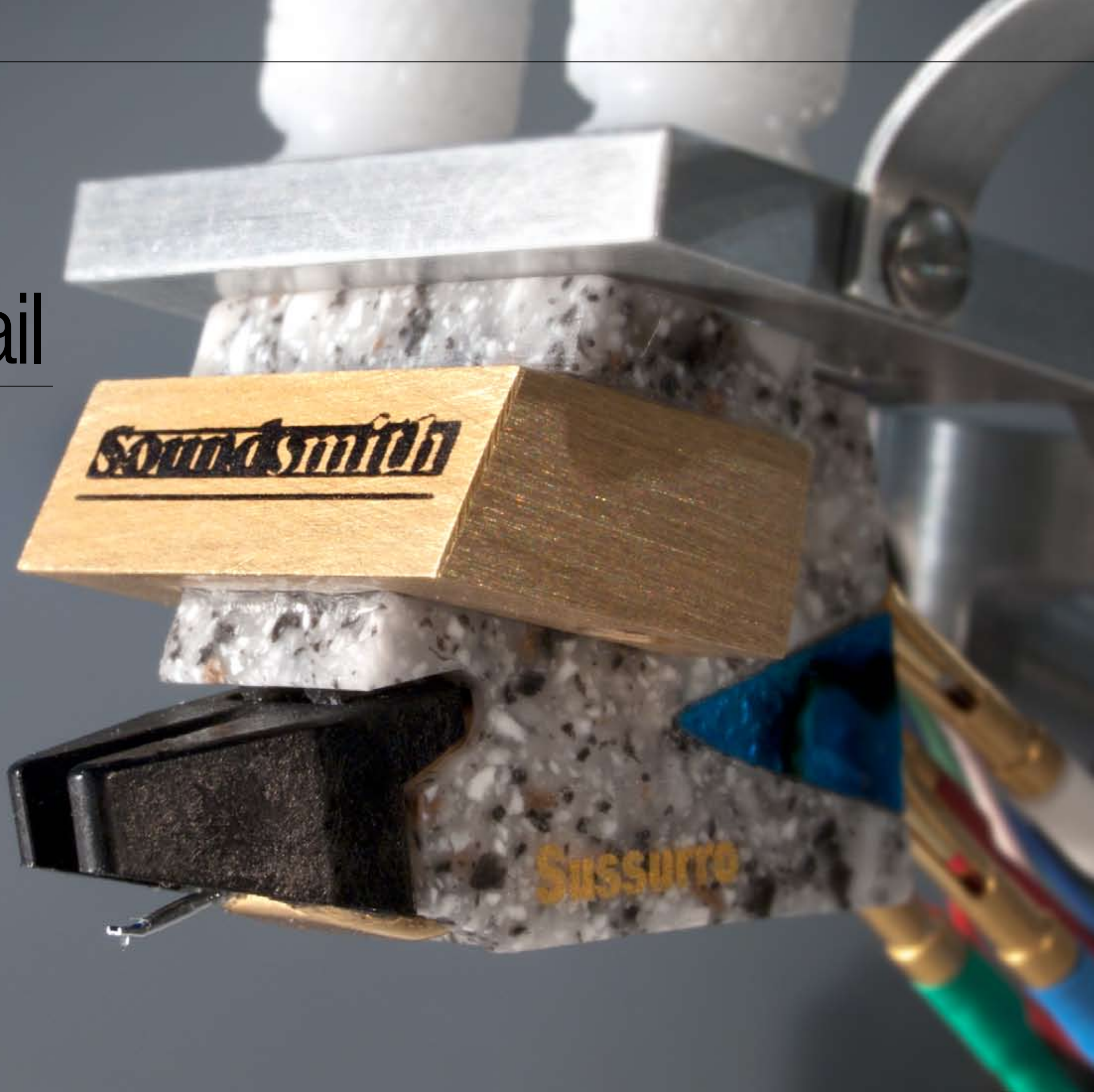
The SoundSmith Sussurro Paua

By Jeff Dorgay

Two years ago, *TONE* awarded SoundSmith our Analog Product of the Year award for its aptly named The Voice cartridge, a moving iron design that retails for just under \$2,200. Everyone who had a chance to audition it in our reference system was astonished by its ability to deliver such a high level of performance for such a reasonable price. After 15 minutes of listening, some of the most experienced audio enthusiasts expressed surprise at the cost, expecting it to be higher.

Well, déjà vu is setting in. In a day where \$20,000 phono cartridges exist and \$10,000 cartridges are relatively common, the Sussurro Paua is priced at \$3,495. Every unit is hand-built and optimized by SoundSmith owner Peter Ledermann. It's a low-compliance cartridge and works equally well in both my SME V and Rega RB1000 tonearms.

While most audiophiles tout the superiority of moving coil cartridges, the Sussurro Paua's moving iron design allows the stationary magnet in the cartridge to be held rigidly in place, with only the cantilever moving. This results in a much lower moving mass—hugely contributing to the cartridge's incredible transient attack.





Chris Sommovigo, SoundSmith's director of sales and marketing, calls the Paua "a bit more sultry." I agree. These very characteristics appealed to my built-in bias of liking my system ever so slightly on the warm side of neutral.

Sussurro or Paua?

SoundSmith's website reveals two cartridges, the Sussurro and the Sussurro Paua. The former is pricier, at \$4,495. Which one is right for you? Both have relatively similar specs. But where the Paua uses a nude contact line diamond, bonded with SoundSmith's "secure mount" technique to a dual mode aluminum alloy cantilever, the Sussurro features a single-crystal ruby cantilever/stylus assembly. The latter design results in even higher trackability (the Paua is no slouch in this area) and the ability to extract even more information from the grooves.

Chris Sommovigo, SoundSmith's director of sales and marketing, calls the Paua "a bit more sultry." I agree. These very characteristics appealed to my built-in bias of liking my system ever so slightly on the warm side of neutral. Not warm, syrupy, and lush; that tends to be slow and lacking detail. Yet, just like my favorite shade of yellow: A color that isn't 100 % yellow, but 100% yellow with about 3% of red mixed in. I'm talking just the tiniest bit of warmth.

Set-up Basics

The Sussurro Paua differs from The Voice in a few ways. Instead of having standard 47k loading, it works in a range of 1,000–4,000 ohms. For best results, SoundSmith suggests that loading not go above 5,000 ohms. I found 2800 ohms to be optimum, but those only having a 1000-ohm option on their preamplifier should not shy away from the cartridge. *(continued)*

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



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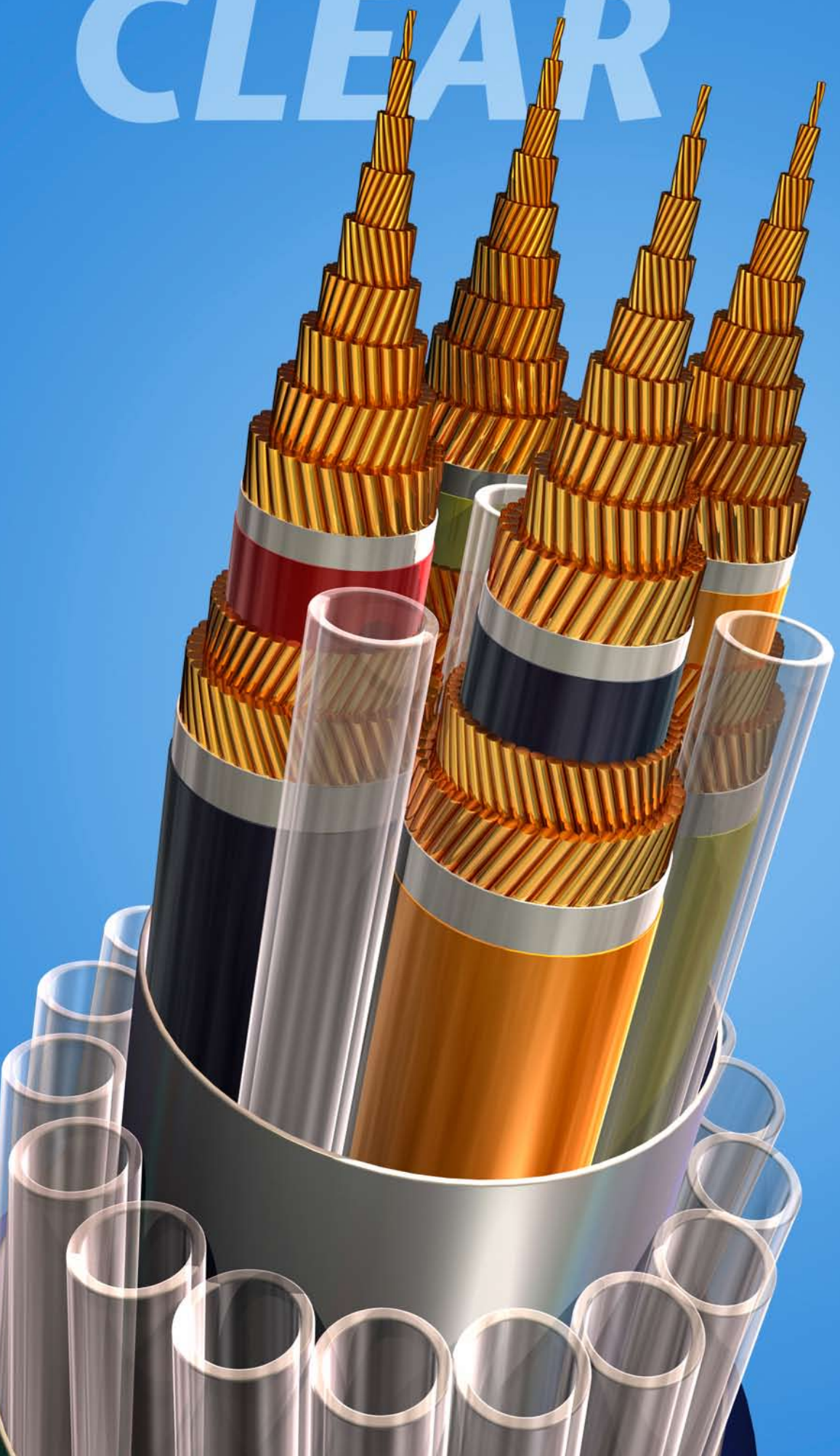


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REVIEW

Ledermann feels 1000 ohms is the tipping point, “below 1000 ohms tends to lower the HF response and above 1000 ohms tends to accentuate it.” Breaking it in with 1000-ohm loading while waiting for custom-loading resistors to arrive from Audio Research didn’t give me hives. And I could have easily lived with the Sussurro Paua loaded thusly if custom loading was not an option. And as Ledermann mentioned, it does depend on the recording, so I’m glad I have both at my disposal.

While most moving iron cartridges have a fairly high output (in the 2mv range), the Sussurro Paua is unique in the sense that it is a low-output design: .3mv. Again, fewer windings on the coils help reduce the mass and add to signal purity. As an added bonus, the cartridge features a six sided shielding system, resulting in very low background noise. The Sussurro Paua is definitely one of the most quiet phono cartridges I’ve had the privilege of using.

If you’ve ever had the chance to meet Ledermann at a hi-fi show, you know he’s a major analog braniac. He’s kind of like Yoda, always thinking of ways to make the whole system better. His new EZ-Mount system (patent pending) features *four* sets of thumbscrews, made from different materials (nylon, aluminum, stainless, and brass) that vary in weight from one gram per pair to a little more than six grams per pair. Such options allow you to dial in just the right amount of mass at the end of your tonearm.

And, as Ledermann mentions on the company’s website: “Now it only takes two hands to mount a cartridge.” No, it’s not as stylish as a pair of small Allen Head screws, but it’s an excellent solution to a vexing problem.

Once you utilize the EZ-Mount system, you’ll happily forgo fashion. Sommovigo mentions that the Paua “is a bit more forgiving in the setup than the Sussurro.” While I am unable to comment on the direct comparison, the Paua is indeed a snap to set up. I can’t imagine this cartridge proving tough for even those with moderate analog skills—especially in the case of an SME user, where the adjustment protocol is so straightforward. Since VTA on the Rega P1000 arm can only be roughly adjusted with spacers, I suggest starting with a 2mm spacer that can be purchased at a local Rega dealer or online from Music Direct.

Tracking force is listed at 1.8 to 2.2 grams, and while starting squarely in the middle of the range worked well, the SME arm tended to navigate the toughest portions of my favorite test tracks at 1.95 grams. The RB 1000 also responded to tracking very close to the 2.2-gram limit. All tracking force measurements were made with the ClearAudio Weight Watcher digital scale.

Nailing the Fundamentals

The Sussurro Paua handled all of the basics with ease. Spot on tonality? Check. Acoustic instruments possessed a perfect balance of tone, attack, and detail.

When listening to Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue*, or for that matter, any favorite Miles albums, his trademark horn took on a truly three-dimensional feel, with an extra measure of texture that will fool you if you close your eyes for even a few seconds. It’s here where that drop of warmth works to your advantage. I spun a handful of cursory piano and violin records that again reinforced just how natural the Sussurro Paua sounds. Once you put 20 or 30 hours on the Paua and double-checked the setup, perhaps with a slight bit of readjustment, I recommend trying a few of your standby acoustic tracks.

The excellent musical texture extends to the frequency extremes as well. Staying in the Miles/John Coltrane groove proved a divine experience. The 200g Classic Records pressing of *Kind of Blue* rendered the cymbal decay without any steps in the gentle gradation; the music just seemed to disappear into the black. Acoustic bass was perfectly rendered, with a thickness of tone that made the instrument absolutely convincing. Standing in the other room, the sound was as close to real as I could imagine. Bass? Neither over- nor under-damped. And the midrange came as close to ideal as you’re going to get unless you start seriously thinking about spending five figures.

Most importantly, the Paua is a fantastic tracker. I couldn’t throw anything at it that it couldn’t handle, and the cartridge sailed through tracks that have given a few more “pedigreed” cartridges a hard time. (*continued*)

sound choices

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naim audio
nordost
nuforce
primaluna
pro-ject
ps audio
quadraspire
rega
richard gray
runco
shunyata research
sim 2
simaudio moon
sonos
soundsmith
vpi

Finding the Scooby Snacks

You know a component is great when you revisit old favorites in your collection and they seem new again. The Sussurro Paua makes this happen. Listening to the 200g reissue of Led Zeppelin's *IV*, I went straight for "Stairway to Heaven." While the patron at Wayne Campbell's local music store would highly frown upon my opinion, I'm so sick of this overplayed song that the Paua would really need to unearth fresh sonic treasures to make me change my mind about ever hearing it again. But that's exactly what the cartridge did. Robert Plant's voice never possessed more delicacy, and the revelation forced me to re-examine the entire Zep catalog. Jumping back to the opening track of Led Zeppelin *II*, "Whole Lotta Love" exploded, yielding a greater contrast between Plant's quiet, ethereal screams and John Bonham's propulsive beats during the psychedelic drum solo than I'd ever experienced.

Sometimes you have to go where the music leads you. As much fun as it is exploring new releases with the Sussurro Paua, I kept getting dragged back to the warhorses in order to hear the *differences*, digging for tidbits of new details in old favorites that I'd missed before. No matter what path I took, I was always rewarded with a Scooby Snack—an extra helping of Jimi Hendrix's distortion; a smidge more shimmer in Shelley Manne's drumming; more cowbell on "Don't Fear the Reaper." The Paua continually impressed.

This cartridge invites long listening sessions. I always find resolution intoxicating, but never at the expense of smoothness.

One for You, One for Me

The Paua is the ying to my Koetsu's yang. On recordings that are slightly harsh or flat, the Koetsu Urushi's extra help of warmth goes a long way in making such LPs more enjoyable, and occasionally, you just want to cheat and get more saturation in the mix. But for recordings at the top of the food chain, the Paua is the go-to cartridge. If I had to live with just one cartridge, I would choose the Paua, because it offers more with a wider range of the recordings in my collection. As it stands, the cartridge will be happily employed spinning records in the future, as we have added it to our reference fleet.

My time spent with the SoundSmith Sussurro Paua has been grand. Ledermann has created a true analog masterpiece—no small feat given the price. While the Paua is by no means a "budget" cartridge, it certainly has me thinking about the two \$10,000 phono cartridges (the Lyra Olympos and the Clearaudio Goldfinger) and wondering if they really need to stay there. Regardless of your system's performance level, the Sussurro Paua is worthy. ●



REVIEW

The SoundSmith Sussurro Paua
MSRP: \$3,495

MANUFACTURER

www.sound-smith.com

PERIPHERALS

Turntables AVID Acutus SP
Reference/SME V, Rega P9/RB1000

Phono Preamplifiers Audio
Research REF Phono 2, AVID
Pulsare, Red Wine Audio Ginevra

Preamplifier Burmester 011

Power Amplifier (2) Burmester 911
mk. 3 monoblocks

Speakers GamuT S9

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

Cable Shunyata Aurora I/C and
Stratos SP

Accessories Furutech DeMag,
Loricraft PRC-3 record cleaner



10-Minute Upgrade

REGA RP1 PERFORMANCE PACK

By Jeff Dorgay

Last fall, we raved about Rega's RP1 turntable, and for good reason—it raised the bar for entry-level performance and simplicity. It only takes about five minutes to unbox and is by far the easiest 'table to set up. An Ortofon OM5 cartridge is installed and aligned at the factory, and the only thing standing between you and spinning records is the need to place the mat on the platter and slide the tonearm counterweight up on the armtube as far as it goes.

Of course, audiophiles like to *upgrade* things. It's in their blood. Internet forums are ripe with tales of people who modded and tweaked RP1s until they become Frankentables. While there's nothing wrong with that approach, it sort of ignores the RP1's budget, no-nonsense ethos. The 'table represents a user-friendly way to dip your toe into analog. And, since the Ortofon OM5 cartridge is very similar to the company's OM 10, 20, 30 and 40 cartridges, a simple stylus upgrade will get you within striking distance of any of the aforementioned higher-end models. Just remove the stylus and plug in the new one. Staff member Mark Marcantonio did just that in his quest for more analog performance and couldn't be happier (although, when I turn my back on him, I see the look he gives my P9).

A Factory-Authorized Solution

If you aren't terribly interested in exploring cartridge alignment, VTA, and the like, but are so enchanted with analog that you're ready for another fix, the RP1 Performance Pack is your ticket. It has the factory's blessing and completely consists of Rega components. The \$195 price tag isn't crazy money and the contents offer a substantial bump in performance. Individually, these items would set you back about \$250, so it's a great deal as well. What's included? A Rega Bias 2 MM cartridge, wool platter mat (standard issue on Rega's \$2,500 P7 turntable), the white rubber reference-drive belt, and a card that's used as a shim between the end of the tonearm stub and counterweight—so you don't even have to buy a stylus force gauge. But, now that you're on the upgrade path, you might as well get a stylus gauge, too, as you'll need it one day.

Again, this is a very easy process. While the Bias 2 doesn't use Rega's three-point mounting system, like its more expensive cartridges, you can center the stylus in the little hole at the top of the headshell (as seen in the photo). If you'd like to be more precise, get a cardboard stylus protractor from your Rega dealer, or you can buy *another* accessory. See how much fun analog can be? I suggest either MoFi's legendary Geo-Disc for \$49.99 or AVID's Rega Alignment Gauge for \$49.99, both available from Music Direct.

Next, remove the tonearm counterweight, and slide it so that the card slides easily between the weight and end of the tonearm stub, just as you would when adjusting the contact points on a Norton Commando. Rega suggests setting all its MM cartridges to a tracking force of 1.75 grams. Sure enough, according to my digital tracking force scale, it was spot-on at 1.77 grams.

The only step remaining is the belt and mat change. Gently lift the platter from the turntable to expose the subplatter. That's the big pulley with the belt going around the small pulley. Remove the rubber-band-like black belt and replace it with the new white one. Set the platter back on top and swap out the old mat for the new one and you are done.

Listening

Grab your favorite record and you should notice a few things. Your new, upgraded turntable should yield a big jump in clarity and dynamic punch. Playing "Jingo" from Santana's self-titled album had a lot more slam when the drums enter the track, and the cymbals had quite a bit more smoothness and decay. There's more going on at the bottom of the scale as well. The synth bass lines in Brian Eno's "Paleosonic" from his recent *Small Craft on a Milk Sea* possessed more genuine grunt. And, of course, there's more midrange magic, so female vocal lovers will freak out when they hear the differences on their favorite test tracks.

Easy!

So, take a minute to admire your work, and also burn the moment in your memory. Now that you've had a taste of upgrading your turntable, life will never be the same. You've got the fever and you don't even know it. Enjoy. ●

Unencumbered Analog

Ypsilon VPS 100 Phono Preamplifier

By Jacob Heilbrunn

Greece is known for a number of things. It's the origin of western democracy. It was overtaken by the Romans. It's constantly feuding with Turkey. It's got beautiful islands. And most recently, it experienced rioting over its bankruptcy. But stereo equipment? It's no secret that there are hard-core Greek audiophiles, but the last thing I would ever associate Greece with is the production of high-end audio gear. I couldn't have been more wrong.

Ypsilon electronics, for example, is aiming to become one of the big dogs in the stereo world. It boasts an array of transformer-coupled preamplifiers, phonostages, and amplifiers whose sonic achievements are nearly as staggering as their price, which is to say that both are very high. Based in Athens, the company is headed by technological whiz Demetris Backlavas, as genial a soul as you'll ever meet in the high-end industry.





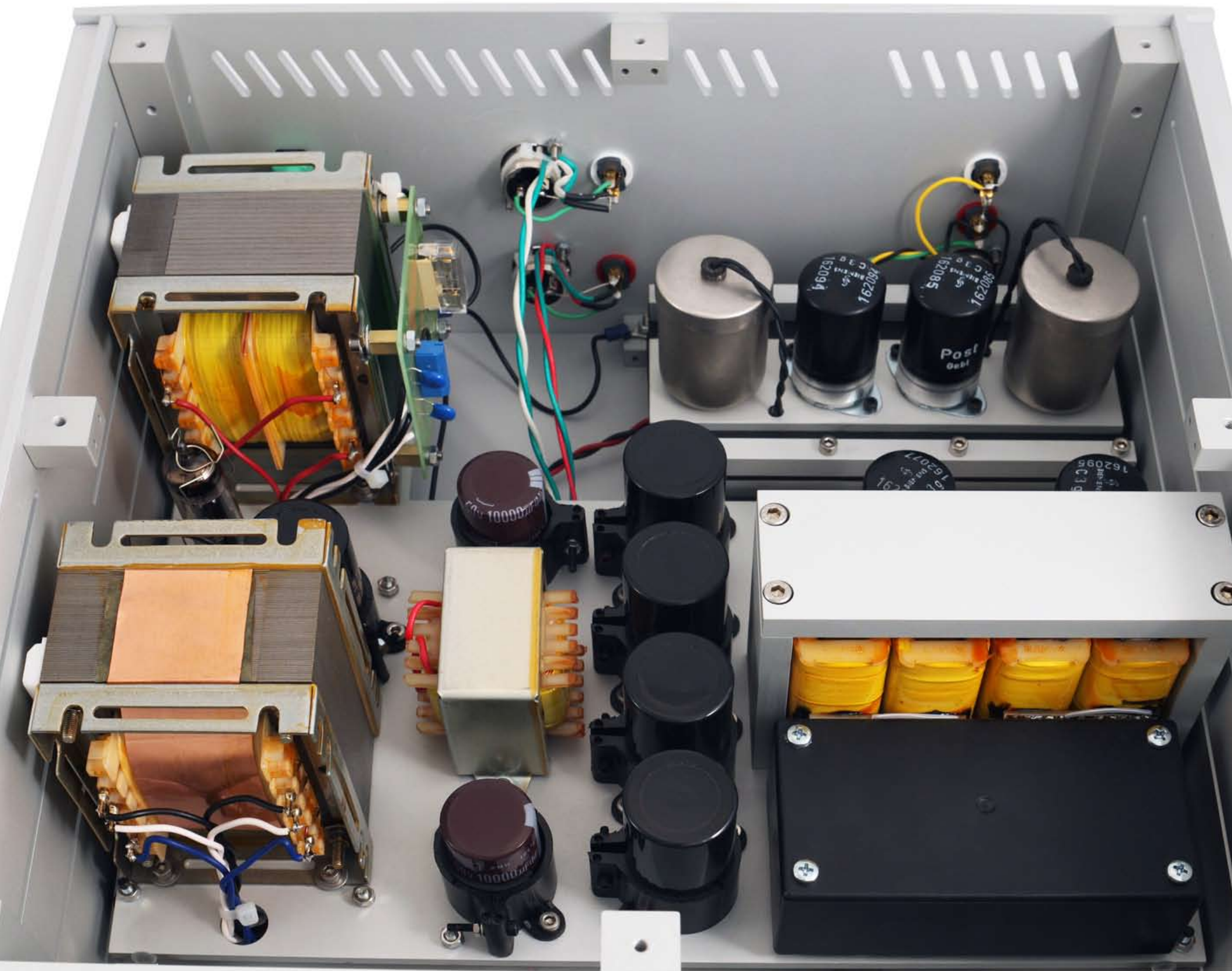
Past and Present Transformed

Ypsilon, like its importer Brian Ackerman of Aaudio Imports—who is based in Parker, Colorado, and who is an indefatigable audiophile—does not do things by half-measures. The fit 'n finish of its units are impeccable and understated. The most bling you'll see is a steady blue light that emits from the front panel. But inside is a plethora of whiz-bang technology that represents, in many ways, a unique fusion of past and present.

The \$26,000 Ypsilon VPS 100 employs a hefty outboard transformer to step up the tiny phono signal. The external transformer is matched in gain to the cartridge you're using. The upside is that the match should be perfect; the downside is that you may need more than one transformer if you're using multiple arms and cartridges. Yet the build quality of the transformers appears to be exemplary.

You may well find yourself using more than one transformer, and if so, you can also use loading plugs with them to change the impedance. Depending on which transformer you're using, the amount of gain varies. I found the MC-16 to be the most versatile. In theory, lower gain transformers mean fewer windings and purer sound. In addition, Ackerman recommends utilizing the Stage III Concepts Analord Prime phono cable from the transformer to the Ypsilon unit itself. I took his advice and discovered that the Analord Prime offers mesmerizing performance. It is fast, spacious, and refined. Unequivocally recommended. *(continued)*





Zero Capacitors

Inside, the VPS 100 has two Siemens C3g tubes for the gain stage and a 6CA4/EZ81 tube rectifier. Ypsilon's main claim to fame is that it doesn't use capacitors in the signal path or anywhere else. Capacitors, you may recall, do two things: store and release energy. A small industry has developed around creating ever-more transparent and fast capacitors that eliminate what sounds like the smearing of music in preamps and amplifiers. But Ypsilon apparently decided to perform an end-run around the capacitor issue. It's returning to the pre-capacitor age when transformers and lots of chokes did the job. Only Ypsilon's transformers are made in-house and feature amorphous cores. In other words, they're supposed to sound superior to any capacitor. Do they? Judging by the performance of the Ypsilon phonostage, the answer is a resounding yes.

Effortless Sound and Performance

Whether the Ypsilon is flatly superior to any phonostage in or above its price class will always be subject to dispute. But the phonostage, to which I've listened for nearly six months, possesses some remarkable characteristics. Its most notable trait is its transparency to the source—an ability to project back, up, sideways, down, revealing aspects of LPs that, frankly, had never been previously apparent. It also has an extremely organized sound.

Some of these attributes first came to me while listening to a scintillating LP titled *The Black Motion Picture Experience*, picked up for a cool \$20 at Los Angeles' Record Surplus, one of the last major purveyors of used vinyl. Featuring cuts such as "Super Fly," "Freddie's Dead," and "Across 110th St.," it offers a stern test of any stereo system. The Ypsilon passed the exam with flying colors. Perhaps its most striking feature related to the sheer scale it reproduced. The Ypsilon seems to offer another octave of air on top, allowing it to produce a tremendous amount of detail with ease. Soprano voices, choirs in the background, and cymbal strikes all emerged from stunningly black backgrounds. They were also precisely located, no mean feat when you're talking about a 1970s LP with a large cast of characters and instruments. The Ypsilon was never ruffled.

Similarly, on Richard Betts' prized *Highway Call*, the Ypsilon managed to take a recording that can sound slightly compressed and inject it with a dose of air. In that it beautifully separated the drums and guitars and voices from each other, the Ypsilon gave the sense of a live band playing. It provided a much closer connection to the music, allowing that critical part of the brain to turn off and just enjoy the sound.

Moreover, the size of the soundstage can become almost hallucinatory. For all its transparency, which is as good as I've ever heard, the Ypsilon doesn't thin out the sound at all.

(continued)

On the contrary, drum whacks come through with awe-inspiring heft. So do double basses on orchestral recordings, like Stravinsky's *Firebird* conducted by Antal Dorati on a legendary Mercury pressing. The union of extreme detail, coupled with massive presence, really has to be heard.

There's an immediacy to the sound, a lack of restraint, and a sense of a time delay having been removed when the Ypsilon is in my system. The Ypsilon, you could say, sounds unencumbered. It allows the music to float out in an ethereal way. Consider the album *Sam Cooke at the Copa*, an old mono on RCA Victor. The Ypsilon bestows a real sense of the club in which Cooke sings. And the soul legend's voice sounds divinely inspired. Almost—dare I say it?—live. Ditto for the Miles Davis recording of “My Funny Valentine” on the Prestige album *Cookin' With The Miles Davis Quintet*. The extent to which it sounds as though the muted trumpet, plangent and tinny, hovers in the room is remarkable. The Ypsilon appeared to capture every last nuance and shading.

Tales of Brave Ulysses

The most breathtaking sound that I heard with the Ypsilon came courtesy of an Oscar Peterson and Jon Faddis recording on Pablo. Peterson, the heir to Art Tatum, possesses an incredibly virtuosic style. Notes can spray out like a geyser when he tinkles the ivories. On “Lester Leaps In,” the speed and full sound of the piano are simply the best I've experienced. The Ypsilon conveyed the piano's harmonic overtones with astounding fidelity.

These pluses, it must be said, were not immediately apparent. It took months for the phonostage to break in. Some pieces don't seem to require much run-in time. The Ypsilon is assuredly not one of them. At times I wondered whether its performance would ever pick up. But my guess is that the wire in the transformers just takes eons to burn-in. In fact, I'm not at all sure that the unit has finished its odyssey.

Like the ancient Greek hero Ulysses, it's taking its sweet time to reach its home destination. But the path that leads to it is sheer bliss. The Ypsilon is as pure as it gets. It is not a good phonostage. It is a superb one. But beware: If you audition the Ypsilon, you will almost surely be unable to part with it. ●



Additional Listening:

To fully understand the enthusiasm put forth in this review, it is important to mention that the reference system used to evaluate the VPS 100 is truly staggering, both in capability and the care spent setting it up. On a recent visit to Jacob's house, I was instantly taken back by the Wilson X-2's and matching pair of Thor subwoofers. You don't see that kind of hardware at the average audio society event. While the four Classe CA-600M monoblocks and Messenger Reference Tube preamplifier were indeed impressive, just behind the system—and in an isolated room—sits a Continuum Caliburn with a pair of Cobra arms. One arm is optimized for stereo playback and features the AirTight PC-1 Supreme; the other is outfitted for mono with a Lyra Titan Mono. To put it mildly, there is no weak link in the reproduction chain.

Having listened to most of the cuts referenced in the review here, I concur with all of Jacob's conclusions. Again, the most impressive aspect of the Ypsilon is the effortless-ness of its presentation. The moment the tonearm is lowered onto the record, the concept of listening to a music system disappears from your consciousness, allowing you to enjoy music reproduced without limitation. And that's truly what high-end audio is all about. —Jeff Dorgay

Ypsilon VPS 100 Phono Preamplifier

MSRP: \$26,000

US Distribution: Brian Ackerman

www.aaudioimports.com

(720) 851-2525

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Continuum Caliburn w/2 Cobra tonearms, AirTight PC-1 Supreme (Stereo) Lyra Titan (Mono)

Preamplifier Messenger

Power Amplifier Classe CA-M600 Monos (two more for subwoofers)

Speakers Wilson Audio Alexandria X-2 w/Thor Subwoofers, Magnepan 20.1

Cable Jena Labs

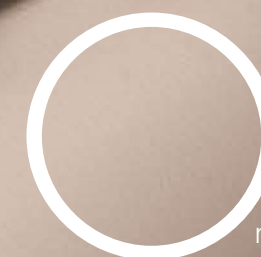
Power Isoclean Supreme Focus

Stage III Concepts Analord Prime Phono Cable

Infinite Versatility

The Octave Phono Module Preamplifier

By Jeff Dorgay



One of the toughest things audio enthusiasts face is knowing when to stop hunting for a different piece of gear. How many times have you planted your feet, determined to stick with your favorite preamplifier *du jour*, only to fall in love with a new power amplifier that needs XLR inputs where previously, you only had RCAs or vice-versa? Perhaps a second turntable makes sense, but you don't want to abandon your current phono preamplifier for something different that only has one input. And so it goes.

I've always enjoyed Naim's modular concept of adding a larger power supply to increase a system's performance, but German manufacturer Octave takes things even further, allowing you the option of choosing your input sources as well as your output choices. And, like Octave's power amplifiers, there is an external power supply upgrade, which in this case, is a passive device that offers additional capacitance. Old timers may remember this arrangement in the Dynaco Stereo 400 power amplifier.

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REVIEW

Many Modules

Octave's Phono Module and power supply sell for \$4,500, but the price does not include any input or output modules. One high-level input module can be switched between XLR or RCA jacks, which makes for an extremely versatile option. You get three different choices exist for the phono inputs. The MM module with RCA inputs offers 38db of gain, with 1k and 47k input impedance, and costs \$450. Two (RCA and Balanced) options exist for the MC modules, offering 58 or 65db (switchable) gain along with a subsonic filter that can be enabled, with a 3db cut at 20hz. Loading is adjustable in 13 steps, from 62 ohms to 1000 ohms. There is one MM module with 38db of gain, with 1k and 47k loading settings. The aforementioned modules sell for \$600 each and are preset with the subsonic filter engaged. Finally, the standard MM and MC modules both feature RCA jacks, but there is also an optional module with a set of balanced XLR inputs that provides the best performance in terms of lowest noise—provided you don't mind switching to a balanced input cable for your tonearm.

Should you need a high-level input, add a module. While you can only use one input at a time, this \$600 board features an XLR and RCA input that's switchable via a small pushbutton. And, there are three choices for output modules: A standard RCA version is \$450 with fixed and variable outputs; two DD (direct drive) modules are designed to drive a power amplifier directly, making the Phono Module a full-function pre-amplifier. The latter carry an \$800 pricetag, and come with a choice of two RCA outputs or one RCA and one XLR.

Take a deep breath and sort your options; these choices make the Phono Module sell for somewhere between \$5,400 and \$7,500, depending on configuration. Plus, you can always change the setup. For more configuration information, visit this link to the Octave site, with all the specs along with more pictures:

<http://www.octave.de/en/htdocs/verstaerker/phonomodule.php>

(continued)



Setup and Configuration

When you've made your final module decisions, remove the corresponding blank panels with a Phillips screwdriver and gently insert the modules. To make things user-friendlier, Octave has given the output module one more pin than the input modules so you can't make a mistake. The pins going into the main circuit board must be tightened down with a jeweler's (or other very small straight blade) screwdriver. Install the tubes, connect the external power supply, and you are ready to roll. The Octave manual is one of the most concise I've had the pleasure of reading, so even a novice audiophile will have no trouble assembling the Phono Module. And, should you change your mind in the future—the module configuration can be easily changed, that's the beauty of the Phono Module.

Regardless of your configuration, there will be three tubes on the main circuit board. The ECC88 (6922) is used for the output buffer, an ECC81 (12AT7) makes up the main amplification stage, and an ECC83 (12AX7) is used for the input stage. Octave suggests using "a high quality, low noise" tube for the latter position; the Phono Module came with a set of JJs installed. The DD output module in the review unit also had an ECC88 on board, making for a total of four tubes under the hood.

The Phono Module is a hybrid design that uses high-quality, low-noise Op amps for additional buffering where needed. Designer Andreas Hoffman made the decision to keep the output impedance low, but as a side benefit, the overall noise floor is very low as well. A number of manufacturers have taken this approach to incorporate the tonality of vacuum tubes with the flexibility of solid state. The resulting tonal balance is very neutral—perhaps too much so for vacuum-tube enthusiasts that want an abundance of bloom. If you didn't know better, you might not even think the Phono Module had tubes inside. The Octave is close to perfection: It doesn't sound like tubes or solid state, just music, and can be adjusted to your taste.

Thanks to the Octave's wide range of gain and loading adjustments, I easily optimized my plethora of phono cartridges. After a number of trials, I settled on the Denon 103R with the AVID Volvere SP/Triplanar and the SoundSmith Sussurro Paua with the Rega P9.



Who Says You Can't Make a Great First Impression?

Listening began with Robert Plant's current LP, *Band of Joy*. I was immediately taken by the excellent portrayal of space offered by the Phono Module, which kept Plant's voice well separated than that of support singer Patti Griffith, without ever causing her to fall into the background of the mix. Even with the budget Denon cartridge, the sound was spacious, with excellent bass control. While planning to jam some classic Plant (via Classic Records' remasters of the Led Zeppelin catalog), I got sidetracked by the doorbell and our music-loving UPS deliveryman. When he spotted the ORB's *Metallic Spheres* LP inside a box he handed me, he felt like parking the brown van and hanging out for a while. We traded Pink Floyd stories for a few minutes and he assured me that the bass on the ORB record was *killer*. "I don't even own a CD player," he proudly said, but I finally convinced him he had to deliver everyone else's packages or my neighbors would be torqued at what brown wasn't doing for them today.

However, such passion made for a good excuse to pass on Zeppelin and spin the ORB. The UPS dude was right: the record does have excellent bass, and the Phono Module did a fantastic job of capturing the impact of the deep, synth bass throughout. No matter what I played, the Phono Module always had plenty of weight on tap.

Stepping up to the SoundSmith Sussurro Paua proved a good combination even if it offered a bit too much of a good thing for my system. There was resolution galore, yet the overall presentation came across as slightly two-dimensional, sounding remotely digital—almost more like a great 24/96 digital recording rather than pure analog. The AVID Acutus Reference SP with Koetsu Urushi Blue was exactly what I was looking for, a combination of high resolution and a small helping of tonal warmth. It made many a classic rock favorite come alive. MoFi's pressing of *Santana* exploded with the Koetsu and, as it's already extremely quiet, the cartridge supplied great dynamic contrast. *(continued)*



Great as a Phono Preamplifier or a Linestage

Thanks to the RCA and XLR outputs, the Phono Module worked well with the amplifiers at my disposal, its neutral character staying true with every power amplifier with which it was mated. It's also worth noting that it didn't have any problem driving fairly long (6-meter) interconnects through either the RCA or XLR outputs. And while it achieved more magic with Octave's MRE 130 monoblock amplifiers (as you might expect), you should be able to smoothly blend the Phono Module with your current power amplifier.

The Power Module represents the best choice for the analog lover with two turntables and only one digital source—or even the analog purist who doesn't require a high level input and instead wants to go directly to a power amplifier. Initially, I thought its only shortcoming was its inability to allow adjustment of the three phono inputs (ala the Aesthetix

Rhea or ARC REF 2 Phono) from the listening chair. But then I concluded that I was just being a lazy American. Extra microprocessor controls would add to the cost and designer Andreas Hofmann feels that this would degrade the sound somewhat. In retrospect, Octave made the right choice. At its current price, the Phono Module has few—if any—peers. Pushing it towards \$10k would invite stiffer competition.

Time to Roll

Excellent as the Phono Module is in stock form, upgrading the tubes brings tremendous sonic benefits regardless of your preference. Variations on the input tube will effect the overall noise floor more than the other tubes (hence Octave's suggestion at using a very low-noise tube here) and the output tube seems to impact the overall tonal character more than the other two. Ditto if you have the DD module installed, using the Phono Module as a linestage as well. The buffer stage did not make as much difference, but in

all fairness, there aren't many exotic 12AT7s on the market.

Should you prefer a bit warmer, more romantic sound, the NOS route is the way to go. Your favorite Mullard or Telefunken tubes will give the Phono Module more midrange magic but sacrifice high end extension and even a little bit of bass definition. There's no free lunch. If you enjoy the character with the stock tubes, but would like more resolution, I suggest the EAT tubes. These are definitely my favorite favorites, offering incredible detail, super low noise, and a big overall sound. If you only feel like buying one \$225 tube, replace the input tube—it further drops the noise floor in this already super-quiet preamplifier. A bonus if you have a premium phono cartridge.

The external power supply booster, the only option I didn't explore, is still in the design phase. If it performs anything like the Super Black Box on the Octave MR 130 monoblock amplifiers currently in for review, it will take the Phono Module another large step forward in performance. *(continued)*



REVIEW

Superlative Performance

Regardless of your needs, if you have more than one turntable or plan on adding more than one in the near future, making the Octave Phono Module the cornerstone of your system won't leave you painted in the corner. Its understated exterior design and overbuilt interior assure that it will perform flawlessly as your system changes. Without question, this is definitely a preamplifier with which you can grow for years to come. We are happy to award it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2011. ●

The Octave Phono Module
MSRP: \$5,400 to \$7,500 (depending on configuration)

CONTACT

www.octave.de (Manufacturer)
www.dynaudiousa.com (US Importer)

PERIPHERALS

Turntables AVID Acutus Reference SP w/SME V, AVID Volvere SP w/Triplanar VII, Rega P9 w/RB 1000

Cartridges Koetsu Urushi Blue, SoundSmith Sussurro Paua, Shelter 501 II, Denon DL-103R

Power Amplifiers Octave MR130 monoblocks, Burmester 911 mk.3 monoblocks, McIntosh MC 1.2K monoblocks

Speakers GamuT S9

Cable Cardas Clear

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From The Website

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

AVID Pulsare Phonostage



\$5,000
www.avidhifi.uk.co

A fully balanced and vastly adjustable phonostage, the AVID Pulsare brings five-figure performance to a much more affordable level without compromise. Those needing a bevy of shiny lights and remote control should look elsewhere. But if it's pure performance you're after, this is the ticket.

[Click here to read the full review.](#)

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www.german-physiks.com

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[Click here to read the full review.](#)



Burmester 100 Phonostage

\$16,900 – \$23,900 (depending on configuration)
www.burmester.de

Where the AVID offers maximum bang for the buck, the Burmester 100 takes no prisoners, enclosing a stellar preamplifier *and* a studio-grade analog-to-digital (ADC) converter for those wanting to digitize their vinyl collection. Featuring two inputs that can be configured for MM or MC phono cartridges and a unique circuit to eliminate channel imbalance, the Model 100 offers top-shelf sound quality along with exceptional flexibility. And, of course, it is wrapped in a bank vault-like case, with Burmester's signature chrome front panel.

[Click here to read the full review.](#)

Slummin'

By jeff Dorgay

Ortofon MC20

(original edition)

eBay, \$90

We featured the latest Ortofon MC20 in this issue and though it's a bargain at \$850, the first generation of the MC20 isn't bad in comparison—and an incredible find for the price. And I'm pretty sure the SoundSmith will still rebuild them. Fortunately, this one still sounds great. A perfect upgrade for all Technics SL-1200 owners seeking higher fi on a tight budget. Just don't mistake this one for the Ortofon DJ cartridge; you can't scratch with the MC20.



ADS 200i

Garage Sale, \$10

The original “mini” monitors, featuring soft-dome tweeters and rubber suspended woofers. There were powered versions of the ADS 200i, too. They paired nicely with portable Nakamichi cassette players to make for one of the world's first compact high-end systems.



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