

# TONEAudio

Music.Gear.Style.

No. 44 February 2012

## Wilco Shares the Whole Love

**Live in Chicago**

- **Spin This:** Reviews of New Albums by Andrew Bird, Sharon Van Etten, Air, Ani DiFranco, Van Halen, and More
- **Style:** Metal, Beer, and Burgers at Kuma's Corner; Visiting the Macallan's Distillery in Scotland
- **Gear:** Loudspeakers from MartinLogan, and Davone; ARC's REF 150 Power Amplifier; and Much More!



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# CONTENTS



83

- 11. PUBLISHER'S LETTER
- 12. TONE TOON  
By Liza Donnelly



94

## features

- 70 Budget Gear  
**Ortofon MC Vivo Cartridge**  
By Jerold O'Brien
- 116 Journeyman Audiophile  
**Musical Fidelity M6 500i Integrated Amp**  
By Jeff Dorgay
- 83 Kuma's Corner  
**Metal, Beer, Red Meat, and Anger**  
By Bob Gendron
- 87 Single-Malt Sensation  
**Visiting the Macallan's Distillery in Scotland**  
By Bailey S. Barnard
- 94 iCade Gaming Console  
**Space Invaders—New Meets Old**
- 96 iRobot Roomba  
**Cleans Floors Like Magic**

## tone style

# CONTENTS



112

## tone style

- 101 Cool Jazz Ice Cube Tray  
**How to Play with Your Drink**
- 103 LapTop-Pro  
**Clean Up and See Again**
- 105 *How To Archer*  
**Advice for the New Spy**
- 106 iCrystal Cable  
**Micro Diamond**
- 108 Munchstaches  
**Cookies in Disguise**
- 110 Bjork's *Biophilia*  
**Science and Music Collide**
- 112 B&W Zeppelin Air  
**New and Improved!**



87



# CONTENTS

## music

### 14. LIVE MUSIC:

Wilco at Chicago's Civic Opera House *By Bob Gendron*; Snapshots *By Atane Ofiaja and Samantha Marble*

### 24. SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE:

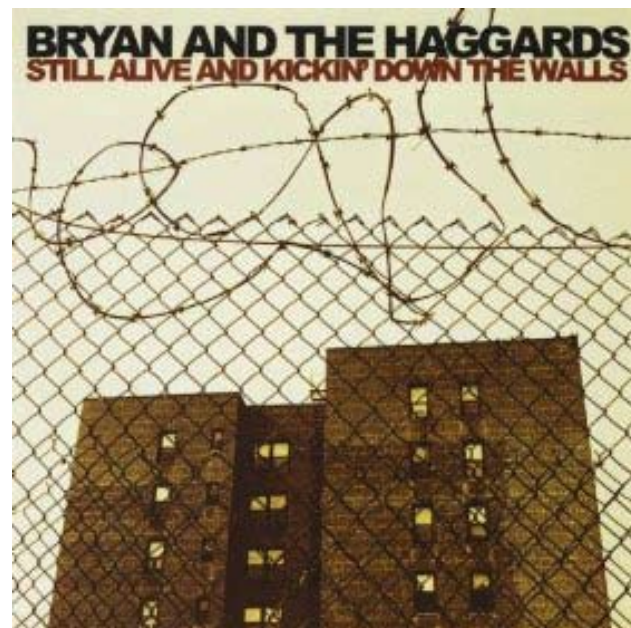
Reviews of New Pop/Rock Albums *By Bob Gendron, Andy Downing, and Todd Martens*

### 56. AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS:

Lynyrd Skynyrd, Carole King, Weather Report, BTO, and More *By Jeff Dorgay and Lawrence Devoe*

### 76. JAZZ & BLUES:

Releases from Esperanza Spalding, Bryan and the Haggards, and Tord Gustavsen Quartet *By Jim Macnie*



### 79. Bryan and the Haggards

*Still Alive And Kickin' Down The Walls*



# CONTENTS

## gear previews

### 126. PS Audio P10 Power Plant

### 129. Dynaudio Confidence C1 II Loudspeaker

## gear reviews

### 130. Danish Modern Davone Ray Loudspeakers *By Steve Guttenberg*

### 138. Single-Box Perfection ARC REF 150 Power Amplifier *By Jeff Dorgay*

### 150. Myriad Options Monk Audio Phonostage *By Jacob Heilbrunn*

### 160. A Case of Bass MartinLogan Montis Loudspeaker *By Jeff Dorgay*

## web reviews

### 172. Red Wine Audio Signature 15 Integrated Amplifier

### 175. Rega Apollo-R CD Player

### 176. Slummin' *Gear on the Cheap*

### 179. Manufacturer Info.







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## PUBLISHER'S LETTER

With Santa's sleigh barely cooled down from Christmas, it was time again for the annual Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. Usual harrumphing notwithstanding, the gathering represents a great chance to catch up with friends and colleagues. Slightly scaled down, this year's show still offered plenty of new goodies.

If you'd like pages depicting photos of rooms chock full of massive equipment racks—and gear piled to the sky in Babelesque fashion at best, and Cat in the Hat fashion at worst—skip over to [www.stereo-phile.com](http://www.stereo-phile.com). The site does a tidy job, its scribes tirelessly working to tell you about the latest woozle.

Me? I'm always more interested in the show's vibe. This year's mood was significantly more upbeat than that of last year, itself cautiously better than in 2009, when most of us were just happy to be standing erect after the fall of 2008. Who attending the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest later that same year can ever forget the zombified looks on everyone's faces as the economy collapsed?

Thankfully, we've turned the page. Dealers are stocking product again and several manufacturers enjoyed record years, in part by embracing the global market. Optimism abounded. So did smarter logistics.

By moving the show to the middle of the week, organizers made it easier to conduct business. Fewer audiophiles scurried about like wet cats left out in the rain, crabby because manufacturers wouldn't play every female vocal track on their USB stick. Yes, too many rooms still played the same tired songs. And, now that the porn convention—ahem, the Adult Film Awards—moved to a different venue, random components and amusing surprises were minimized. It was always easier to trudge through the five minutes of "Keith Don't Go" knowing hot chicks might be in the elevator, their very presence soothing your post-audio torture.

But all wasn't toil. Quite a few rooms boasted significantly above-average sound, offering enough catnip to supply a stream of product reviews that will last the better part of the year.

We can't wait to share it all with you.





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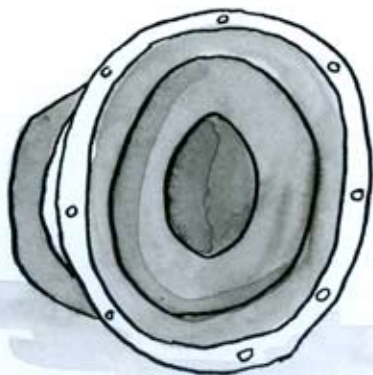
Wilco's Jeff Tweedy  
by Jeff Dorgay

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6-inch Woofer



10-inch Woofer

DONNELLY



**Civic Opera House**

Chicago, Illinois

**December 12, 2011**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Jeff Dorgay

# Wilco

**A**s Mavis Staples and Nick Lowe joined in for a show-stealing rendition of The Band's "The Weight," Wilco closed the opening salvo of its five-night hometown stand in memorable fashion at a sold-out Civic Opera House. Leader Jeff Tweedy traded verses with the gospel legend and pub-rock icon, respectively, capping a 130-minute concert that, akin to its recent *The Whole Love*, witnessed the beloved sextet reconnect with its organic strengths and rebound from a previous stretch pockmarked with complacency.

While there's never been any doubting the chemistry and potential of Wilco's current lineup, now together longer than any previous incarnation, its studio showings have yet to produce a work on a level with 1999's *Summerteeth*, 2002's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, or 2004's *a ghost is born*. Arriving in the wake of an ambitious and expertly executed Chicago residency during which it played every song in its catalog, the ensemble's 2009 tour left an empty feeling, with the group opting for safe comfort rather than bold risks. Tweedy, in particular, seemed to be succumbing to the mid-career creative block that inflicts most legacy artists. Not that constant outsider hype or unsolicited tie-ins (a sandwich, beer, and soda, among other products, named in the band's honor) helped.



Yet from the ten-minute-plus "One Sunday Morning (Song for Jane Smiley)," a hushed folk epic that spirited guitarist Nels Cline splintered with violet-hued textures, to the frenetic lightning-striking coda gracing a delightfully jagged "A Shot in the Arm," Wilco on this mild winter evening subscribed to a loosened-up nature receptive to surprises and detours. Glenn Kotche, still rock's best jazz drummer, tapped out Morse Codes of rhythmic voodoo with an array of percussive devices, blending colorful sounds with atmospheric electronic back-grounds on "Poor Places" and providing an elegant thump to the cheery vibes pervading "I Might."

Recognizable via his trademark tousled hair and scraggly beard, Tweedy toned down his onstage banter—not to the extent of ignoring the crowd or bypassing every opportunity to crack wise, but noticeably enough to focus on the music. He repeated the climactic "Nothing!" refrain in "Misunderstood" no less than 32 times, the self-aggrandizing song coming on like a nearby thunder-clap before the violence finally gave way to calm, similar to the way, after black clouds pass, forest activity rears back to life after a destructive storm. The singer's softer side emerged during the rootsy "Far, Far Away," augmented by Cline's purring lap-steel accents, an attenuated "War on War," and graceful "What Light," which threatened to float away into the ether. *(continued)*





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## LIVE MUSIC



Each member's distinctive sonic skills extended to their physical traits, with the collective forming a potluck of cohesive personalities and specialties. Laidback keyboardist Mikael Jorgensen resembled an accountant; giddy multi-instrumentalist Pat Sansone passed as a Justin Bieber look-a-like; rock-steady bassist John Stirratt seemed a professor plucked straight out of an English lit class at nearby Columbia College; and the mesmerizing Cline filled the shoes of Gumby, an awkwardly towering presence whose lanky frame shivered and recoiled in reaction to the buzzing harmonic passages and noise-blanced solos he unfurled, occasionally wildly, as in communion with Tweedy throughout "I'm the Man Who Loves You," which the latter punctuated by scraping his guitar strings with the side of a metal license plate.

For all unhinged moments, a few turns dragged. The band severed "One Wing" just as it began to take flight. The acoustic "Rising Red Lung" and understated bop of "Capitol City" registered as filler, especially amidst superior newer material such as "The Art of Almost."

Still, with decorative white ornaments hanging overhead in a stately venue that's witnessed a lion's share of dramatic productions, Wilco triumphed without putting on cute airs or resorting to simple nostalgia. With Staples onboard urging everyone to put "the load on" her, it was the kind of night on which a drummer can stand on top of his kit in winking king-of-the-mountain fashion and a group can perform while fake snow falls—and still look (and sound) good doing it. ●



A long way from its native Australia, the Death Set makes NYC its temporary home, with singer Johnny Siera interacting with the audience at the Webster Studio.

*Photo by Samantha Marble*





He's Tesco Vee and you still suck. The Meatmen do what they do best, taunting the crowd at Club Europa in Brooklyn, New York, winding up their fall tour.

*Photo by Samantha Marble*





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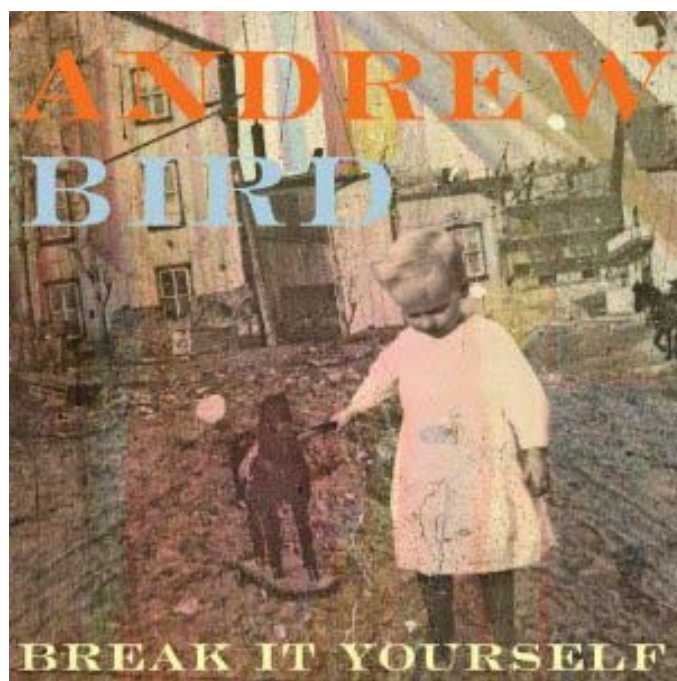
Markus Strickland belts it out on the sax, with trombonist Ku-umba Frank Lacy, sitting in with the Revive Da Live Big Band at Sullivan Hall in New York City.

*Photo by Atane Ofiaja*





# New Releases


**Andrew Bird**
*Break It Yourself*

Mom + Pop, CD or 2LP



O

nstage, Andrew Bird is the musical equivalent of a magician that keeps audiences second-guessing the tricks of the trade. Bird causes notes to seemingly appear from nowhere, juggles multiple loops, remembers the orders in which passages get stitched together, and plays with a casual looseness that gives no whiff of the complexities associated with the tasks. The only time Bird displays any sense of fear is when he addresses the crowd. For all of his cultured prose and etymological vocabulary—to say nothing of his fearlessness of premiering in-the-works pieces before large audiences—he's a shy performer that prefers to communicate via song.

Photo by Cameron Wittig



The modest approach—and Bird's singular style of balancing singing, violin playing, whistling, looping, and guitar playing into sophisticated folk-derived music—serves the Chicago native well. He's not mainstream. But in selling out theaters across the country and attracting audiences of all stripes, Bird sits atop a commercially successful and critically respected perch most indie artists would envy. Many female listeners swoon at the mention of his name; male counterparts admire his cool; nearly everybody stands enraptured by his classically influenced mélange of conversational pop, early jazz, gypsy swing, and traditional bossa nova.

Entering his second decade of making records under the solo banner, Bird captures on the enthralling *Break It Yourself* the equilibrium between bold eclecticism and cohesive melodicism flirted with on 2007's *Armchair Apocrypha* and abandoned on 2009's rather plain *Noble Beast*. The improvement might owe to trial-and-error development. Several tunes here date back to at least 2010, when Bird first tested them in concert.

With rare exception, the new songs intersect with intrepid wit, fluttering harmonies, and romantic tissues. Better still, they are resoundingly human and incredibly aligned.

Unlike previous Bird efforts that, in spire of their virtuosity or catchiness, often sprawl or utilize quirkiness as a defense mechanism, *Break It Yourself* retains both a concision and emotionalism essential to the music functioning as fully developed songs rather than intriguing showpieces. Bird's multi-instrumental hallmarks—nimble arpeggios, pizzicato plucking, tapped xylophone lines, fluttering violin rejoinders, tip-toeing string passages—and whip-smart lyrical rejoinders have seldom sounded so through-composed. Pensive flourishes, impeccable timing, and jaunty accompaniment, too, contribute to the accessibility and adventurousness. So does the fact that the largely relaxed material is recorded live, with scant overdubs, in Bird's barn. Unforced and inviting, the band's output ripples with organic textures and natural reverb.

Primarily consumed with heartbreak and loneliness, and approaching such themes from freshly

original metaphorical and philosophical viewpoints, Bird revels in pairing introspective questions and rhyming couplets amidst contemporary jigs, sweeping waltzes, and country shuffles. A falsetto lilt and gorgeous finish lift "Desperation Breeds..." out of an initial fog. The playful hypnotism of "Give It Away" rises and falls against a stilt-walking bass line. Slight trembling and turbulence frame a brief psychedelic episode during "Eyeoneye," underscored with rock urgency and responsive background vocals.

Bird's command of textures and pacing cannot be overstated. He tangoes on "Orpheo Looks Back" while charming with a delicacy usually associated with a professional glass blower. "Dance Caribe" gets away with a calypso beat and breaks out into a clog-heel-kicking hoedown. Gentle percussive crashes and vocal ache color "Lusitania," the accents serving as symbols for a ship smashing into the shore.

Disaster, despair, dissonance: Bird still hasn't found the answers to many of life's bigger mysteries, but in finding joy in altering perceptions and defeating conventions, he's never been so convincing.

—**Bob Gendron**

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Photo by Shawn Brackbill

**T**here are moments on Tanlines' debut full-length on which it seems as if the 11 songs on *Mixed Emotions* were recorded in a bedroom. As far as dance music is concerned, the duo of Jesse Cohen and Eric Emm can be sparse, quiet, and pensive, armed with the type of coming-of-age lyrics occasionally reserved for the coffeeshop set. Placing that bedroom in a city, however, would be a more difficult task.



### **Tanlines**

*Mixed Emotions*

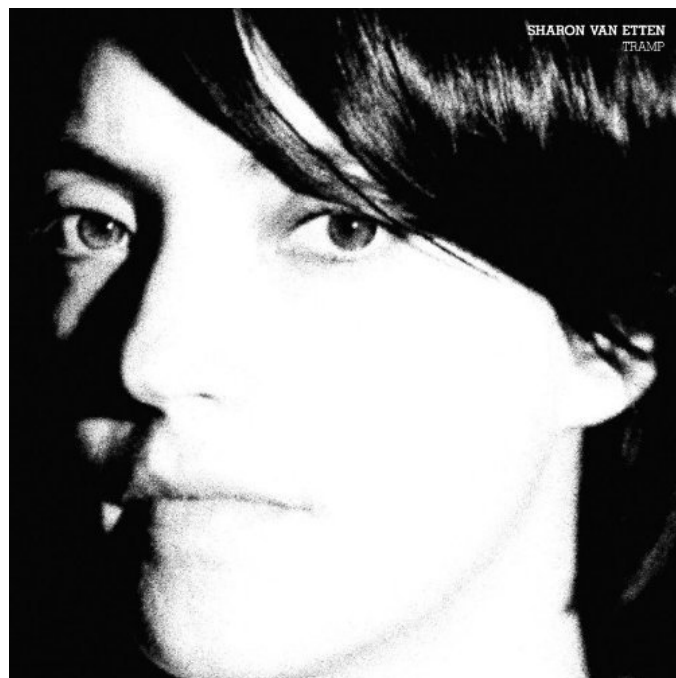
True Panther Sounds, CD or LP

A Google search and a label press release will tell you Tanlines hail from Brooklyn—the part of the borough responsible for the likes of Yeasayer and TV On the Radio, no doubt. Yet, akin to the aforementioned Yeasayer and Merrill Garbus' tUnE-yArDs, Tanlines take a worldly approach to the groove. There may, in fact, even be a steel drum (don't stop reading!) in "Real Life," but the duo uses the sound carefully. Rather than go the full-on island route, the clicks and clacks of a Tanlines rhythm represent more of an organized racket—an assemblage of various implements that can be found in a nearby alley or kitchen.

The synthesizer is the other main instrument of choice. Employed more lushly, as on a track like "Rain Delay," and the band recalls 1980s-era Genesis—and yes, that is indeed a compliment. More frequently, however, it's used as an accenting device. See, for instance, the airy beats on the keep-things-in-perspective mantra of "Yes Way" or one-size-doesn't-fit-all, snapping-fingers build of "Not the Same." Low-fi back-packers they may be, but Cohen and Emm still reach for pop universality.

—**Todd Martens**





**Sharon Van Etten**

*Tramp*

Jagjaguwar, CD or LP

**S**haron Van Etten provides many reasons why you wouldn't want to be her—or at least, in her first-person narrator's position—on the engrossing *Tramp*. The indie-rock songstress, whose excellent sophomore album, 2010's *Epic*, deals with loss and break-up in unsparing fashion, continues to extract anguish, anger, affection, and doubt from romantic mis-en-scenes. She sings of wanting scars to heal, taking risks, remaining confused, trying in vain, and entering into situations she realizes will end in tears.

Van Etten, however, never solicits pity or begs for pathos. Her refusal to remain on the sidelines, and flashing of a tough-skinned persona and bold intrepidity to love, gives listeners motives to pause, reflect, and ponder the scenarios that play out in her songs—painful or not. In an age of fleeting commitment and shielded identity, Van Etten comes across as one of her generation's mavericks for possessing the courage to fail, fortitude to project feelings, and sense to try all over again. Of course, it's entirely possible that every one of the twelve tunes on *Tramp* is purely fiction, or simply inspired by acquaintances and friends.

Yet the Brooklyn-based vocalist/guitarist makes each song intimately personal in a manner that, at the very minimum, contributes to the illusion that each is an introspective narrative. It's a trick parlayed by much of the best pop and rock artists, and assisted by the fact that Van Etten's measured timbre largely remains balanced between extremes of heartache, rage, and happiness. Swathed in gentle reverb, her singing occupies a divide between whispered murmur and full-throated confession, the last words of a verse often trailing off into an aurora borealis haze. Hers is a reluctant albeit necessary vulnerability, her observations and insights doubling as reactions and verdicts, soul-searching results indicative of difficult investigations. *(continued)*

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Photo by Dusdin Condren

## MUSIC

An organ introduction poises “All I Can” for its development into a quiet anthem, Van Etten’s optimistic voice unspooling like a ribbon on a flywheel. Ambient flutter-and-wow shape “Joke or a Lie,” words spilling off the tip of Van Etten’s tongue on a composition imploring myriad interpretations. Is it a confession? A goodbye? A retort? All three? Reflecting the indeterminate nature of love itself, the New Jersey native treats emotional clusterfucks with degrees of obscurity, properties conveyed not only via doubting phrases but in the wispy manner her delicate voice transitions into a high-pitched coo—a naked falsetto at once sighing of relief and peaceably admitting fragility. Not that Van Etten doesn’t know what she wants or deserves.

“I think I need more than the flowers and letters, man,” she states on the piano-driven chamber pop of “Ask,” searching for lastingness to cure ache as summoned memories, admissions, and situations pour salt in her wounds. On the very next song, “I’m Wrong,” she buries herself in contradiction, thinking warped mind games and sweet little lies might lead to resolution even though it’s quite clear she genuinely doesn’t believe reconciliation will occur. It’s hard to fault her logic or desire. And her route to contentment is a helluva lot cheaper than visiting a shrink. —**Bob Gendron**

While Van Etten’s periscopic details and metaphoric allusions don’t come as any surprise, her newfound comfort with grander arrangements and larger-scale production makes *Tramp* a cohesively interactive and intertwined album. Isolated traits—such as the wet sound of a snare-drum head or pervasive ambient cues—cocoon her voice (and stories) in environments sympathetic to alluring melodies and deceptively complex instrumentation. On the vengeful “Serpents,” a spooked three-minute episode during which Van Etten brilliantly accuses a wrongdoer of sucking on

dreams and strikes back by declaring she’ll sleep with someone else instead, a steady series of pounding percussion and chiming guitar chords build, welcoming the sudden bursts of agitated catharsis.

Primarily, however, Van Etten settles for less direct expressions and cleverly percipient remarks. A light tambourine rattles amidst the mellow sensuality of “Give Out” on which the singer cites a man as the cause of her moving to a city and, in the same sentence, credits him as the reason she’ll have to depart.




**Ani DiFranco**

*Which Side Are You On?*  
Righteous Babe Records, CD or LP

**T**hese are troubling times. High unemployment continues virtually unabated. Banks and corporations act with impunity while teachers and laborers remain under steady assault. One war is ramping up as a second slowly draws down. But unlike the Civil Rights movement (“A Change Is Gonna Come”), Vietnam War (“What’s Going On”), or even instances of police brutality in 1980s Los Angeles (“Fuck tha Police”), few modern musicians have been inspired to pen politically and/or socially charged tunes about the current unrest.



Photo by Patti Perret

Into this void walks folkie Ani DiFranco, who turns portions of her first album since 2008’s *Red Letter Year* into a veritable soundtrack for the Occupy Wall Street movement. “They stole a few elections/Still we the people won/We voted out corruption and/Big corporations,” she sings on the fiery title track—an updated version of the 1931 pro-union protest anthem popularized by Pete Seeger, who appears here on banjo and backing vocals. “We voted for an end to war/New direction.”

Time and again on *Which Side Are You On?*, DiFranco calls out inaction and blind acceptance of the status quo, lashing out at political leaders (on “J,” she calls on President Obama to do more than “shift his weight”) and the populace at large, asking, “America, who are we?”

Answers don’t come easily, particularly on the album-opening “Life Boat.” The ode to her long-time home of New Orleans paints a picture of the city’s near-biblical Hurricane Katrina flooding (“This park bench is a lifeboat,” she sings atop watery electric guitar) and never-say-die spirit. This Crescent City influence stretches throughout, surfacing in the second-line skronk of “If Yr Not” and loping bossa nova groove of “Splinter.” “J,” meanwhile, paints a horrifying picture of oil-slicked birds and the countless miles of

marshlands and gulf coastlines decimated by the BP oil spill.

While DiFranco sounds newly energized by contemporary events, she occasionally slips into liberal cliché, donning Birkenstocks for the acoustic shuffle “Promiscuity” (a momentum-sapping turn about the unnaturalness of monogamy) and pro-choice anthem “Amendment” (a tune whose clumsy lyrics overpower the admirable feminist concepts at its core). “And if you don’t like abortion,” she sings over flaccid acoustic picking, “don’t have an abortion.” Worst. Bumper sticker. Ever.

Still, credit the veteran singer-songwriter with having the *cajones* to tackle the countless issues threatening our fragile democracy. While DiFranco claims to have calmed on the leisurely “Unworry, singing,” she makes it clear elsewhere she’s still got plenty of fight left in her.

—**Andy Downing**



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## Rosie Thomas

*With Love*

Sing-A-Long Records, CD

Near the midpoint of Rosie Thomas' sixth full-length studio album, the Michigan-born singer-songwriter spells out exactly what she's looking for in a relationship, cooing, "I want the movies, and I want the love songs." Fittingly, then, *With Love* arrives dense with allusions to big-screen-style romance, Thomas making lyrical reference to everything from *Jerry Maguire* ("Every part of me that's missing he completes," she sings on "Is This Love?") to *The Wizard of Oz* ("Really Long Year" borrows, in part, from "Somewhere Over the Rainbow").

Yet, despite its release date (the album is tied to Valentine's Day) and Hallmark-greeting title, *With Love* isn't as clean and tidy as most Hollywood happy endings. Thomas writes songs about being torn apart ("Back to Being Friends") and thrown together ("2 Birds"), and there are far more questions than answers, as the sweet-voiced musician sings lines such as "What if it's over?"; "If we went back to being friends what would it do?"; "Is this love? Can it be?"

But even during moments when Thomas' emotions are scattered, the musical backdrop remains almost universally lovely. Gentle piano, delicate acoustic picking, and brushed drums flower like sun-kissed petals. This is true even on "Two Worlds Collide," a numbing tune on which the singer describes a busted relationship using terminology usually reserved for sci-fi disaster flicks.

The album, recorded with Black Wescott and David Bazan, includes appearances from singer Jen Wood and Iron & Wine's Sam Beam, who chips in with spectral oohs and ahs on the buoyant "Over the Moon." However, Thomas remains the central figure. Her upbeat personality shines through even when she pours her broken heart out on "Sometimes Love"—a lazy "River" of a ballad that owes a heavy debt to Joni Mitchell.

Still, for all its beauty, one can't help but wish Thomas would stretch out musically—or at least lash out on occasion. Instead, *With Love* is all rounded corners and sanded-down edges, emitting the same impurity-masking, soft-light glow in which Barbara Walters films all her interviews. In that regard, don't be surprised when these songs start making the rounds on network television and providing a soundtrack for all the well-coifed, McDreamy doctors as they fall in and out of love. It's not quite the movies to which Thomas aspires. But it's as close as the singer-songwriter gets on the comfortable, comforting effort, which has its sights set on the stars but can't quite free itself from an earthly pull. —**Andy Downing**



**R**eviewing Air's soundtrack to the restored silent film classic *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*) is not the easiest of tasks. At 35 minutes, it's a swift, playful affair, full of devilishly fun vintage sci-fi sound effects and a few triumphant turns on the piano. Yet divorced from the 1902 Georges Méliès film, the score, while largely a hoot, loses a tad of its retro-cool luster.

To be certain, "Astronomic Club" is a bizarre mix of human-like effects, synthetic trumpets, and booming rhythms that at once sound like two drums and an eerie tom-tom march. "Sonic Armada" could be an alternate score to Disney Tomorrowland staple Space Mountain. Even without Méliès' hopping-mad Martians and giant mushrooms, it's hard not to be taken with this surprisingly funky digital creation. Likewise, "Parade" is full of celebratory choirs and danceable electronic squeaks, complete with teasing breakdowns.

(continued)



**Air**  
*Le Voyage Dans la Lune*  
Astralwerks, CD

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Photo by Wendy Bevan

As a score, it's expertly composed. The title track is but 14 minutes, and there's no filler in Air's cinematic accompaniment. The latter manages to capture the majesty of Méliès' early film work and does so without sounding either too modern or slavish to the silent era.

There is, however, a wee bit of padding. It's hard to fault Air members Nicolas Godin and Jean-Benoit Dunckel for wanting to lengthen some tracks. But when Au Revoir Simone and Beach House's Victoria Legrand are added to the mix, their voices, though lovely, are jarring on this tightly focused collection. And there's no need to toss in a countdown on the intergalactic "Seven Stars."

Of course, by the time such late-album tracks manifest, Godin and Dunckel have again proven why they were the ones tasked with scoring such a revered work. —**Todd Martens**

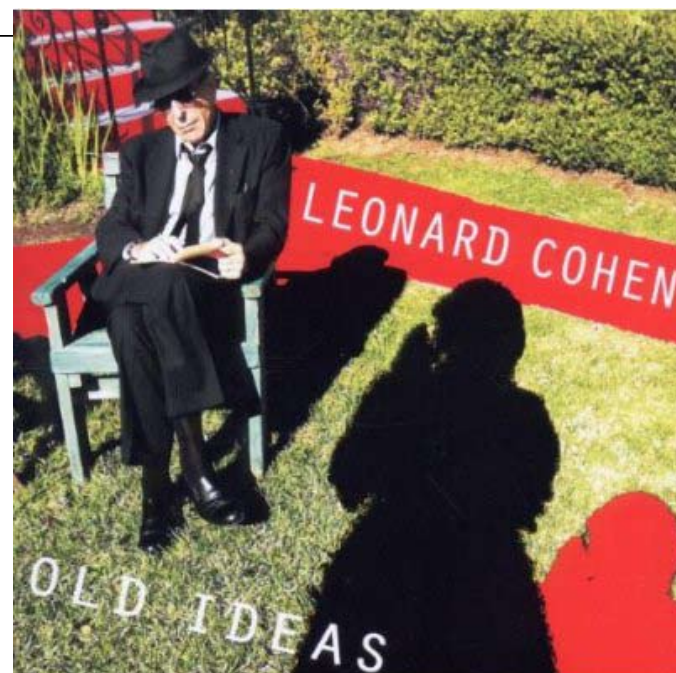


**T**he title of Leonard Cohen's latest album—his first since 2004's *Dear Heather*—applies not to his advanced age (the singer turned 77 in September) but to the musings on human frailty, religion, sexuality, and mortality that have defined his work since he gave up poetry for a music career when he was still in his 30s.

In those early days, Cohen was a relatively young man who merely sounded ancient, his voice conjuring Old Testament imagery even when he looked like an uncomfortable kid in his dad's suit. Nowadays he's grown fully into that glorious instrument—not to mention the finely tailored threads that have become his signature look. Indeed, if god has a singing voice, one would imagine it sounds something like Cohen's deep, gravelled baritone. It's a concept that doesn't seem outside the realms of possibility considering the Book of Revelations vibe that often runs through the Canadian native's best material.

Interestingly enough, *Old Ideas*, Cohen's finest work since 1988's *I'm Your Man*, opens with "Going Home," a graceful number that successfully punches a hole in this godly image. The singer chides himself as a "lazy bastard living in a suit" before surmising, "He will speak these words of wisdom/Like a sage, a man of vision/Though he knows he's really nothing." While still a carnal being—"I ain't had much lovin' yet," he sings coyly on "Anyhow"—it's clear his fascination with the pleasures of the flesh have somewhat dulled with escalating age. "I'm tired of choosing desire," he sings pointedly atop minimal acoustic strumming on "Crazy to Love You."

Instead Cohen, who was born into Judaism and later lived in seclusion in a Zen monastery before being ordained a Buddhist monk, spends much of the album exploring more universal issues of spirituality. On "Amen" he sings of angels



### Leonard Cohen

*Old Ideas*

Columbia, CD or 2LP

and vengeful gods, delivering his weighty words like Moses handing down the Ten Commandments. A softer side surfaces on "Come Healing," a string-kissed psalm awash in angelic female voices and subtle church organ.

The musical arrangements are carefully considered, framing Cohen's words rather than driving the action—a welcome departure from the drippy synthesizers that unfortunately defined his work for more than two decades. Perhaps inspired by two years of intensive touring, the singer stretches out, flirting with menacing blues ("Anyhow"), dusty Ennio Morricone film scores ("Lullaby"), and shuffling country rock ("Banjo").

Throughout, Cohen sounds keenly aware of his own mortality ("I know my days are few," he cautions on "Anyhow"), making Bob Dylan's 1997 album *Time Out of Mind* a clear reference point. Still, the singer-songwriter doesn't sound like he's settling up his earthly affairs in anticipation of that final journey, whatever form it might take. If anything, his curiosity, wit, and humor have only been sharpened by the passing of time. Consider *Old Ideas* more of a return to form than a parting shot of any kind. It's good to have you back, old friend. —**Andy Downing**

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**F**

our songs into its second album, Chapel Hill-based Lost in the Trees offers an orchestral arrangement that almost approaches the grandeur of an overture. A trickle of piano notes gives way to a continuously building string arrangement, and by the two-minute mark of "Icy River," the give-and-take countermelodies open up numerous tangents. It feels less like a rock song than it does a sampling of classical-inspired themes—an imaginary score created not to accentuate the vocal path of Lost in the Trees architect Ari Picker but to illustrate his words with an entirely new world.

Picker doesn't write songs so much as craft aural escapes. The clickety-clack rhythms of "Neither Here Nor There" sound as if they belong to a creature that exists only in a Grimm's fairy tale, while the lost-in-the-winds backing vocals and foreboding violins of "Garden" are as fanciful as any Danny Elfman/Tim Burton collaboration. Images of religion and nature dominate, wrapping Picker's meditations on isolation and panic in near-biblical trappings. Vocally, however, Picker comes from the Thom Yorke school of singing, and it's easy to let his upper-registry voice fade into the tapestry. *(continued)*



### **Lost in the Trees**

*A Church That Fits Our Needs*  
Anti-, CD or LP

**Images of religion and nature dominate, wrapping Picker's meditations on isolation and panic in near-biblical trappings.**



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**MUSIC**



Photo by D.L. Andersen

Spend a little time  
with *A Church That  
Fits Our Needs*  
and it's no wonder  
Picker studied film  
composition at the  
Berklee College of  
Music.

Signed to L.A.-based Anti- Records, the adventurous offshoot of Epitaph Records that works with the likes of Tom Waits, Wilco, and Neko Case, among others, *Lost in the Trees* is largely a collective centered on Picker. In the hands of a lesser arranger, these folk-based tunes with woodsy visions would be hushed, backwoods stuff. Yet spend a little time with *A Church That Fits Our Needs* and it's no wonder Picker studied film composition at the Berklee College of Music.

Much of what will be written about this album will likely focus on its inspiration. The song cycle—one on which the strings, harps, and choir-like backing vocals interweave into the tracks rather than simply exist as pleasing additions, as they do on *Lost in the Trees*' 2010 debut—came about after Picker's mother committed suicide. Yet Picker isn't interested on dwelling on his thoughts so much as finding ways to color them. —**Todd Martens**





### Heartless Bastards

*Arrow*

Partisan, CD or LP



Photo by Nathan Presley

“Sometimes you just need, need a little help/On this long way home,” patiently drawls Erika Wennerstrom on the slow-fuse ignition of “Marathon,” the spacious opener to Heartless Bastards’ fourth album. The declaration represents a thematic reversal for the straw-blond singer/guitarist and her veteran group. Whereas 2009’s *The Mountain* found her asserting a drifter’s independence and bleeding dry from her veins poisoned memories left behind by a failed relationship, she makes frequent references to home, optimism, and comfort on *Arrow*, the ensemble’s most well-rounded and confident effort.

Having initially turned heads with 2005’s critically acclaimed *Stairs and Elevators*, the collective began in Ohio as a rough-and-tumble garage band and steadily evolved into a group that also draws from folk, pop, and soul. Despite promise, widespread recognition remained evasive. Parallels to fellow Buckeye State natives the Black Keys followed yet often missed the point, as the two groups share bluesy roots and geographical identities but little else.

As the band’s lone remaining original member, Wennerstrom stands as the principal attraction—and for obvious reason. Armed with a smoky, husky, and occasionally

masculine timbre possessing the marbled composition of a porterhouse steak, she lays claim to an arresting instrument on par with any of her female contemporaries—EMA, Teri Suarez, Merrill Garbus—that emerged last year. She occupies a neutral territory that’s equally tough-minded and sympathetic, the attitude and sound not unlike those of a take-no-guff woman bartender who calls regulars “honey” but drags drunken pricks out by their ear. Hers is an unpolished, non-sanded delivery, all the better to rub up against the gritty guitar chords and Marshall amplifier romp that courses through the music.

Newly expanded to a quartet, Heartless Bastards complement her variety of curled words, swooping refrains, and dizzy falsetto spins with two guitars engaged in cat-and-mouse games of hide and seek. Percussion, too, is vastly expanded, not to simply provide sharp backbeats and racing clatter but to instill texture and atmosphere, whether it be the dramatic resonance of large ride cymbals mimicking waves crashing up against limestone walls or repeat drum rolls establishing a momentous foundation around which melodic guitar lines wrap like ivy.

Primarily recorded live in the studio with few overdubs, the songs retain a D.I.Y. feel without sacrificing a put-together coherency. Wennerstrom puts listeners on the edge of an imaginary desert cliff during the Spaghetti Western cowpoke “The Arrow That Killed the Beast,” singing at a leisurely pace before opening up her lungs, taking in air, and seemingly swallowing a surrounding canyon. Swampy acoustic strumming and clip-clopping hand drums inform the ramble-on “Skin and Bones,” one of myriad tunes benefiting from the addition of second guitarist Mark Nathan. His riffs on “Got to Have Rock and Roll” allow the promissory statement to double as the spawn of Big Star’s “In the Street.”

For all the crunch and sway, the elasticity is built around Wennerstrom’s sticky-caramel phrasing. It’s in full force on “Parted Ways,” a bounding glam-accented shot of reality-grounded positivism that, akin to the bulk of *Arrow*, comes on like the celebratory rock n’ roll return of a prodigal daughter. —**Bob Gendron**





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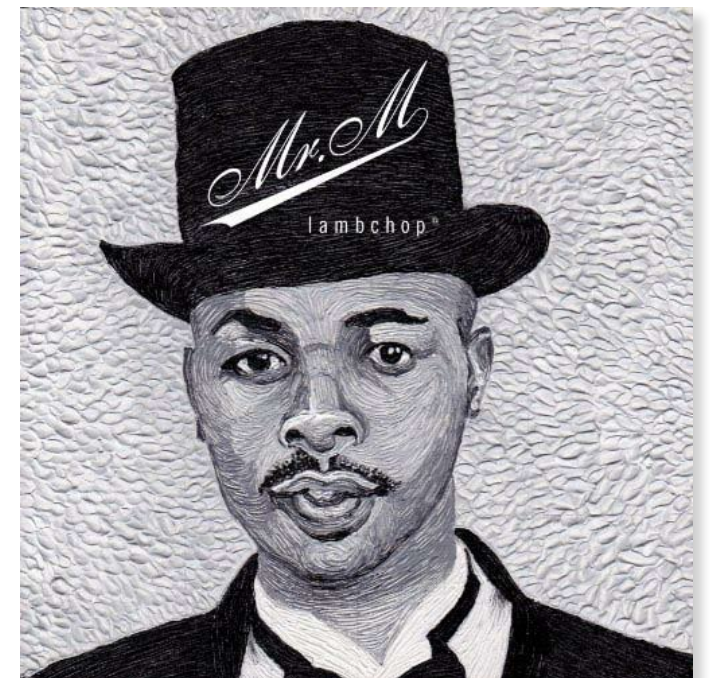
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**L**ambchop's eleventh full-length studio album opens with a grandiose swell of celestial string that slowly arching skyward—only to be pulled back down to earth the moment frontman Kurt Wagner opens his mouth. "Don't know what the fuck they talk about," he shrugs in his usual clipped delivery. And so it goes on a record that frequently pairs the kind of ornate, sweeping orchestration that would have Burt Bacharach salivating and Wagner's hardscrabble words, which often sound culled from back issues of Harvey Pekar's workingman's chronicle *American Splendor*. On "Buttons," for one, a sad-sack tale soundtracked by solemn violin, Wagner sings (well, speaks, really) about a blue-collar schlub stuck picking up trash on the highway as his life continues to pass him by.

Prior to starting work on *Mr. M*, Wagner set aside music in favor of painting. His decision followed the death of his friend and fellow artist, Vic Chestnutt, who passed away Christmas Day 2009. The specter of his loss hangs over heart-heavy songs like "2B2," a slow, shuffling ditty about the challenges of connecting with humanity. Similar sentiments surface on the acoustic lament "Nice Without Mercy," and it's impossible to think the singer didn't have Chestnutt in mind when he penned the line "God comes and gathers up his jewels."

Elsewhere, the band toys with lounge-y instrumentals ("Gar"), jaunty piano numbers involving characters just trying to survive ("Gone Tomorrow,"



### Lambchop

*Mr. M*

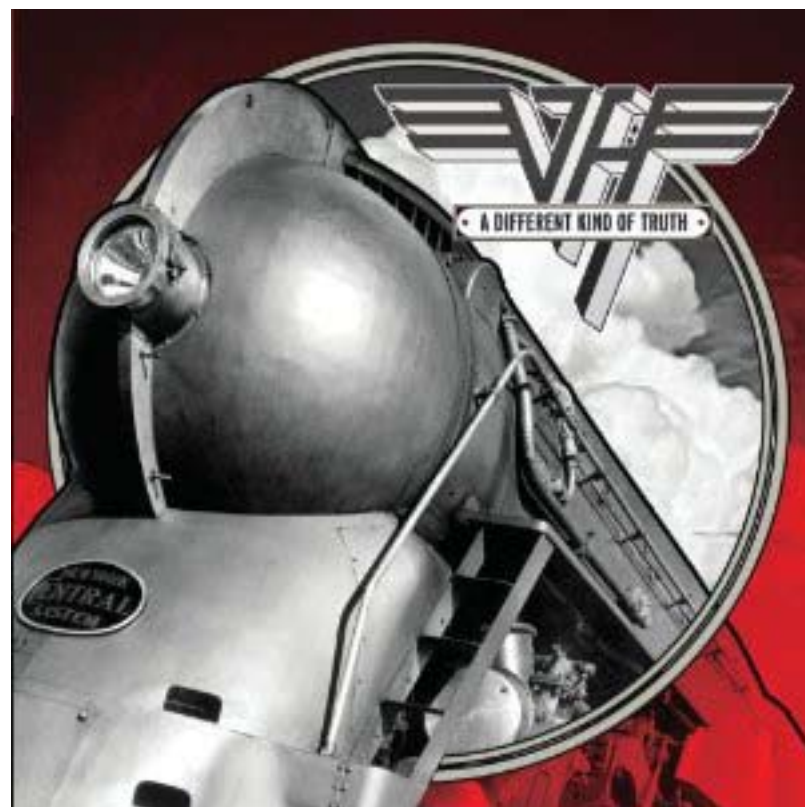
Merge Records, CD or 2LP

which plays like a musical version of Ramin Bahrani's *Chop Shop*), and cryptic love tunes that sound more resigned to a fate than embracing it ("Never My Love").

This is definitely an album that rewards patience; more than half of *Mr. M*'s 11 cuts clock in at more than five minutes. "Mr. Met" stretches out over seven-plus leisurely minutes, piling on airy strings, the hazy thrum of an acoustic guitar, and brushed drums that mimic shuffling footsteps. At times, the approach makes for a challenging listen, particularly on the instrumental "Betty's Overture," a three-minute interlude that feels like it takes nearly four times as long to finish. Similar atrophy seeps into "Kind Of."

Still, Wagner and Co. haven't sounded so focused in years, and there's something beautiful in the way the frontman lurches down cracked sidewalks and tosses himself into gutters for lyrical inspiration—even on an album on which the music aspires to play in the country's most pristine orchestra halls. —**Andy Downing**





### Van Halen

*A Different Kind of Truth*  
Interscope, CD or 2LP

**D**avid Lee Roth might have a bright future as the replacement for William Shatner in Priceline commercials. The flamboyant vocalist and natural-born pitchman takes spoken-word turns on several occasions throughout *A Different Kind of Truth*, going into character with an exaggerated low-register timbre that harkens back to his narrative role on “Panama.” Yet whereas Roth sounds credible on the latter, a youthful California-tanned playboy salivating as he ogles a bikini-clad woman during the me-first hedonism of the 80s, he now comes across like an older man reading words off cue cards, uncertain as to whether he should play up the script or attempt to keep a straight face. *(continued)*

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It could be worse. Van Halen's first studio album in nearly 15 years—and its first with Roth in almost three decades—could've sunk to the level of Sammy Hagar's "supergroup" Chickenfoot. While the quartet, augmented by Eddie Van Halen's son Wolfgang on bass, should've adhered to the concision exemplified by *Women and Children First* and *Fair Warning*, each featuring just nine tracks, there's enough passable fare scattered amidst the 13 songs to prevent mockery and, there are no syrupy ballads. Still, in spite of a few inspirational bursts, the band seems out of ideas and generally, acts as a foil for Eddie's pyrotechnic guitar stunts. The puffed-out-chest exuberance, top-of-the-world confidence, and raw force of its past are gone.

Yet drummer Alex Van Halen's Venice Beach muscleman flex and gut-thumping toughness, Roth's flashy exclamations and self-conscious camp, and Eddie's high-wire fret acrobatics and whammy-bar-bending solos surface in places. When the devices are collectively put in the service of song, as on the catchy glam-pop "Tattoo," carefree strut "Beats Workin'," or prancing "She's the Woman," Van Halen distances its reputation as a hard-rock band that simply reformed

for another nostalgia-based cash grab. And it retains the sense to know from what early material it should liberally borrow. After a thudding introduction, "As Is" reveals itself as a doppelganger for "Hot For Teacher," scurrying pace and finger-tapped licks included. The acoustic-into-electric blues signatures and Roth's conversational yippety-yap jive on "Stay Frosty"? Yep, "Ice Cream Man" has returned, cold themes preserved. Roth even tries to reprise his trademark squeal on "Big River," bolstered by old-fashioned give-and-take grist between the Van Halen brothers, even if his results are more *Asylum*-era Gene Simmons than vintage DLR.

In procuring "new" tunes, Van Halen allegedly pulled from demos and instrumental sketches recorded years ago. For better and worse, there seems to be some truth to the theory. The piecemeal construction of the paint-by-numbers "Blood and Fire" and one-dimensional "China Town" lack cohesiveness and suggest everything is built around pre-existing guitar lines rather than developed melody. *A Different Kind of Truth* often wants for more of the latter as well as the ample spaciousness and unforced attack present on Van Halen's most aggressive classics. Insufficient, too, is

the knife-sharpness and spring-coiled crunch of Eddie's tones, which, at their best, double as switchblades that balance Roth's hand-wagging flair. And while the collective's lyrics have seldom been much more than afterthoughts, cringe-worthy lines abound. Eddie's Racer X-styled flurries, corkscrew turns, and zip-zah-zang arpeggios marginally save a number of plodding songs from imitation status.

But even a mostly reinvigorated virtuoso can't rescue the messy "Honeybabysweetiedoll," Hagar-esque "Outta Space," or pile-driving "Bullethead" from the scrap heap. Hearing Eddie, sans accompaniment, dazzle on a few experimental instrumentals would be preferable to such fodder. At this juncture, the likelihood of the reclusive musician pushing himself to those limits seems remote. Above the dulled, synth-based fluff of later-era Van Hagar albeit absent the boisterous sleaze and hook-drenched swagger of the group's heyday, *A Different Kind of Truth* constitutes a minor victory, however compromised.

—Bob Gendron

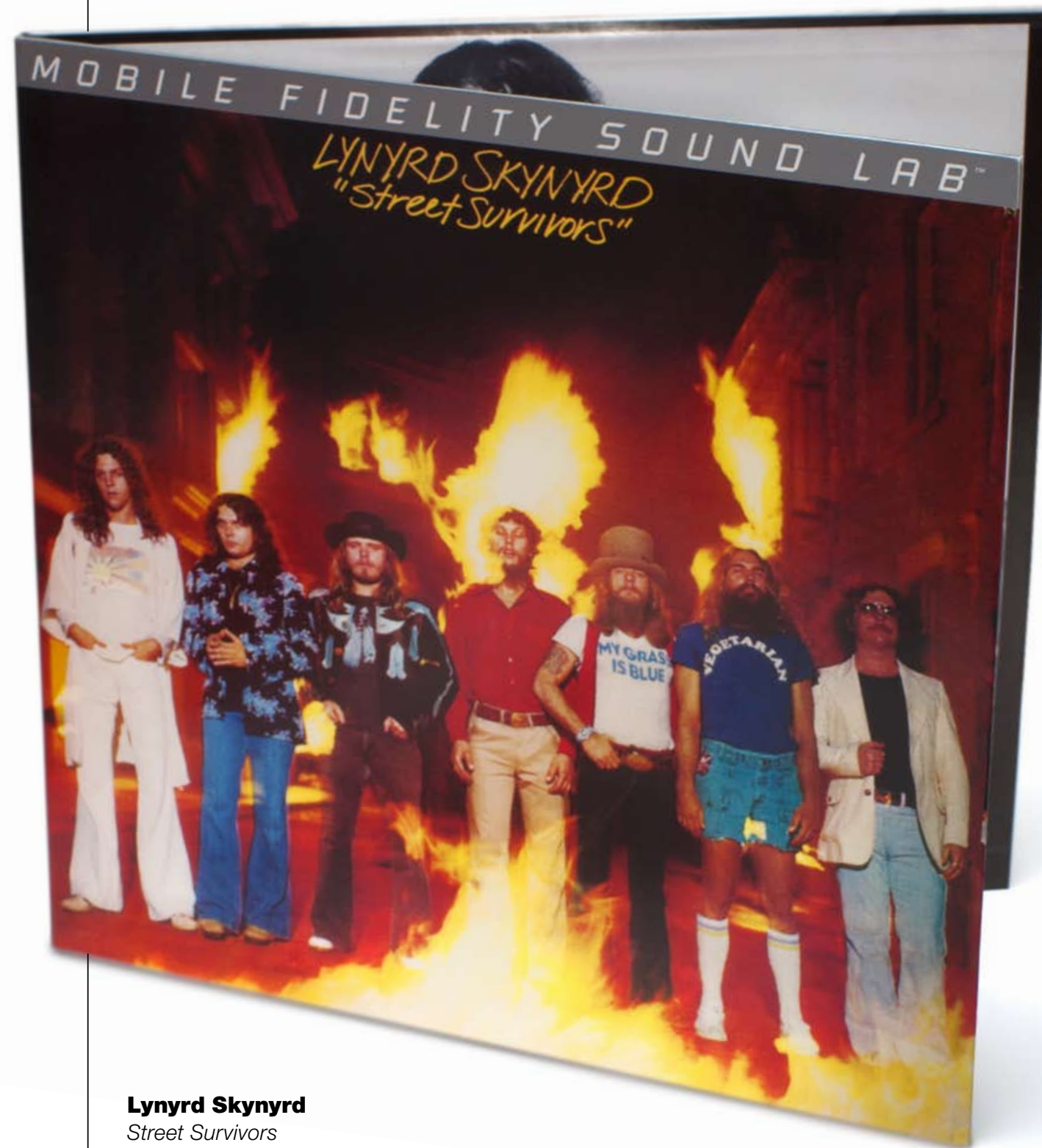


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## Lynyrd Skynyrd

**H**ow many times have you shouted, “Play some Skynyrd” at a lousy bar band? Better yet, how many times has this thought crossed your mind when you were subjected to another female vocal track demoed at a hi-fi show? Unfortunately, as much as you may love Lynyrd Skynyrd, most of the band’s albums are not mastered with much care. Flat, compressed, and grainy are the general rules. The recent Japanese/Universal pressings are most unrighteous.



**Lynyrd Skynyrd**  
*Street Survivors*  
 Mobile Fidelity Silver Label, LP

However, Mobile Fidelity again proves that “audiophile pressing” and “fun” can coexist on the same planet. And, it’s pretty awesome that the label includes the now-famous “flaming” cover originally limited to about 5000 copies after several members of the group got killed in an airplane crash only days after the record was released in 1977.

Instead of sounding like a veil is removed, the MoFi pressing is akin to hearing an entire shower curtain taken away, with every aspect of the record greatly improved. Lead singer Ronnie Van Zant is now way in front of the mix, and you can actually hear guitarist Steve Gaines right behind him. It all comes together on “That Smell” when Van Zant goes “Awwwwwww...” and seemingly fades out forever. The overplayed radio classic takes on new life.

Also, what’s the point of having three guitarists in a band if it all just sounds like one big, fat guitar in the final mix? While a bit of compression sneaks in now and then, it’s glorious to hear all three guitarists distinctly, all with their own individual space and tone. It’s like having a fishbowl full of guitars. Grab a second helping before you put this LP back in the jacket. —**Jeff Dorgay**



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MUSIC

## Carole King



**Carole King**

*Music*

Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

**M**obile Fidelity did a great job last year resurrecting Carole King's *Live At Carnegie Hall* double album. The reissue label backs it up with *Music*, mining major treasure from the early 70s master tape. While King's third album failed to match the 11-times platinum success of *Tapestry*, *Music* achieved gold status soon after its release. It also contains a handful of hits that were more successful for artists that later covered them than they were for King.

Using an early Ode copy for comparison reveals the original pressing possessing more sparkle on the top end, but more surface noise, too. Thanks to the MoFi edition's extra resolution, it's much easier to hear the expressiveness of King's voice and keyboard overdubs. Listeners with cartridges featuring a more romantic tonal balance might be a bit disappointed. My Koetsu Urushi Blue is too polite for this record, yet the more resolving Rega Apheta is suited to extracting every bit of detail. Both the original and remaster suffer from modest distortion lurking in the loudest passages. However, said offense is nowhere as egregious as that plaguing Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark*. —**Jeff Dorgay**




**Weather Report**
*Heavy Weather*

Original Recordings Group, 180g 45RPM 2LP

# Weather Report

**A**rguably the jazz fusion band's best album, *Heavy Weather* is indisputably Weather Report's most commercially successful effort courtesy of the memorable song "Birdland," which in the late 70s could be found on a jukebox in just about every fern bar. This is also the Weather Report set on which bassist extraordinaire Jaco Pastorius became fully involved, writing two tracks and playing on all of them.

Columbia made some pretty grotty-sounding records during this era, and *Heavy Weather* is no exception. Many of the nuances are lost in the original, and my 1A/1B pressing feels like a brick-walled CD, with mids pushed up so far it feels like Wayne Shorter is playing his sax in my lap—quite unnerving. Lest we forget, this is when the loudness wars began, with record companies trying to get better sound in everyone's cars and on table radios.

ORG's pressing is silky smooth, the percussion is more listenable and handclaps natural, no longer sounding like someone beating a stick against a wall. Shorter returns to playing with the band, and overall balance is restored. The added dynamics gleaned from spreading the recording out onto a pair of 45RPM discs brings out new feelings of excitement. Pastorius' bass riffs snarl with authority, Shorter's sax flows through the soundstage, and the rest of the players' contributions disclose the presence of a spaciousness this recording never had before. Another triumph from ORG. —**Jeff Dorgay**



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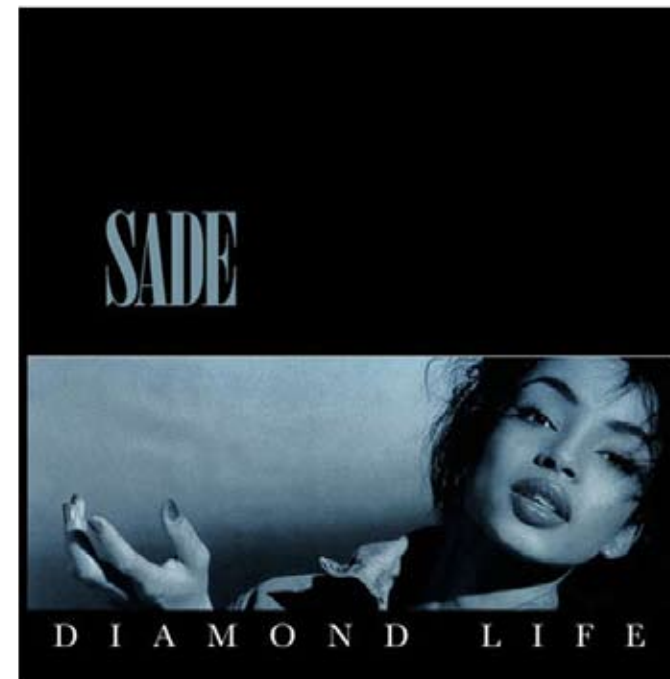
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# Sade



## Sade

*Diamond Life*

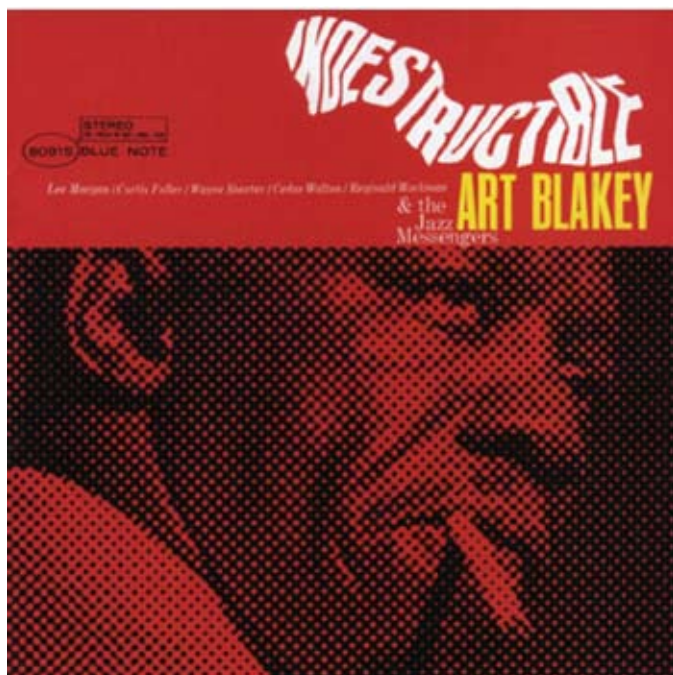
Audio Fidelity, 180g LP

**S**ade's debut was all the rage in 1985, grabbing major MTV airplay as well as time on popular and jazz radio stations. Lead singer Sade Adu combined a soulful sound and sexy demeanor to the tune of six-times platinum.

Kevin Gray at Cohearent Mastering took the helm here, and eliminated about half of the original's top-end crunchiness. Fortunately, this Audio Fidelity reissue possesses a considerably wider sound-stage. The original keeps percussion bits and keyboard fills tightly wrapped towards the center of the speakers, while the presentation here is more relaxed, with low-level details more ethereal. The intro to "Why Can't We Live Together" is the best cut on the record, with bongos bouncing back and forth beyond the speaker boundaries, and the bass line locked in place as Adu's voice wafts up from the silence.

Interestingly, there's a much greater sense of vertical dimensionality in the new pressing. The original rendition of Adu's voice is more diffuse; here, her voice feels right at microphone height. And the remaining audiophile boxes are properly ticked. My pressing is free of clicks and pops, has a much lower noise floor, and features an exquisitely printed gatefold cover. A very worthwhile addition to any record collection. —**Jeff Dorgay**




**Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers**
*Indestructible*

Music Matters, 180g 45RPM 2LP

## Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers

**D**amn! This record is what bop is all about. The early Blue Notes don't capture it and the Rudy Van Gelder CD remasters squelch it. "The Egyptian" gets to business right away, taking up the first side of this two-record set.

More than one engineer has stated that percussive impact is tough to capture, but it's perfection here. Art Blakey authoritatively slams down his drumsticks on the side of his kit and you can feel the resonance as they bounce off the rim. Meanwhile, Lee Morgan, Curtis Fuller, and Wayne Shorter battle for the limelight, each coming to the front of the stage, then stepping back while the other prepares to take a shot. And that's just the opening cut.

The sonics are larger than life, with Blakey keeping rock-solid time, the glue holding the band together. Surfaces are dead-quiet, yet full of life. Yes, it's hard to believe these records were made from tapes now more than 50 years old. Music Matters continues to set the jazz standard for aural bliss. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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### **The Decca Sound**

Universal, 180g 6LP box set

**De Falla:** *The Three-Cornered Hat/La Vida Breve* (Ansermet/Orchestre de la Suisse Romande)

**Rachmaninoff:** *Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor* (Ashkenazy/Fistoulari/London Symphony Orchestra)

**Respighi:** *Feste Romane/Pini di Roma* (Maazel/Cleveland Orchestra)

**Wagner:** *The Golden Ring* (Various soloists/Solti/Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra)

**Messaien:** *Turangalila –Symphonie* (Chailly/Thibaudet/Harada/Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra)

**Beethoven:** *Violin Concerto in D Major*; Britten: *Violin Concerto* (Jansen/Jaarvi/Die Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen/London Symphony Orchestra)

**M**ore than 50 years ago, Decca, the renowned UK recording company, ushered in the stereophonic era with its trademark “FFSS” (or “full frequency spectrum sound”) classical LPs. *The Decca Sound* is a limited-edition box of six LP reissues selected for their outstanding performances and, well, their sound. Unlike the 140g British-stamped predecessors, these new 180g vinyl heavyweights are minted in Czechoslovakia. Four are analog recordings, while two stem from digital originals and make their vinyl debut. A souvenir booklet on Decca’s fascinating history of making great recordings completes the box.

The oldest analog recording, *The Golden Ring*, offers well-known excerpts from Wagner’s operatic ring cycle performed by Sir Georg Solti and the Vienna Philharmonic. I’m immediately struck by the record’s silent surfaces (never one of Decca’s strong points) and brilliant, bright, orchestral sound. The final scene of *Das Rheingold*, complete with anvil splitting and the gods’ entry into Valhalla, conveys the huge soundstage and dynamic range achieved by producer John Culshaw and his studio magicians. Remember, this excerpt was taped in 1958.

The excellent sonic signature is consistently maintained throughout the other analog recordings. Ernest Ansermet and his Orchestre de la Suisse

Romande give a pulse-pounding rendition of de Falla’s *Three-Cornered Hat* featuring authentic Flamenco effects. Rachmaninoff’s *Third Piano Concerto*, played by Vladimir Ashkenazy and sympathetically supported by maestro Anatole Fistoulari and the London Symphony Orchestra, is as good a reading as this romantic work gets. There is nigh-perfect balance between piano and orchestra; listen to the heart-on-a-sleeve second movement adagio. The LP also sports the most natural sound balance of the bunch. The final analog entry showcases Lorin Maazel and the Cleveland Orchestra delivering two Respighi blockbusters, *The Pines of Rome* and *Roman Festivals*. These evocative images of ancient and modern Rome generate a massive wall of sound without swamping excellent instrumental details. Superb handling of the dynamic extremes rightly earns the LP perennial audiophile-favorite status.

When Decca went to all-digital recording consoles in the 1980s, it continued to issue LPs cut from digital masters. However, newer technology never guarantees better sound, and many early digital-era LPs suffer from excessive glare, a trait shared by their CD counterparts. Fortunately, the news is better concerning the two digitally sourced LPs here. Riccardo Chailly and the Concertgebouw Orchestra generate a hell-for-

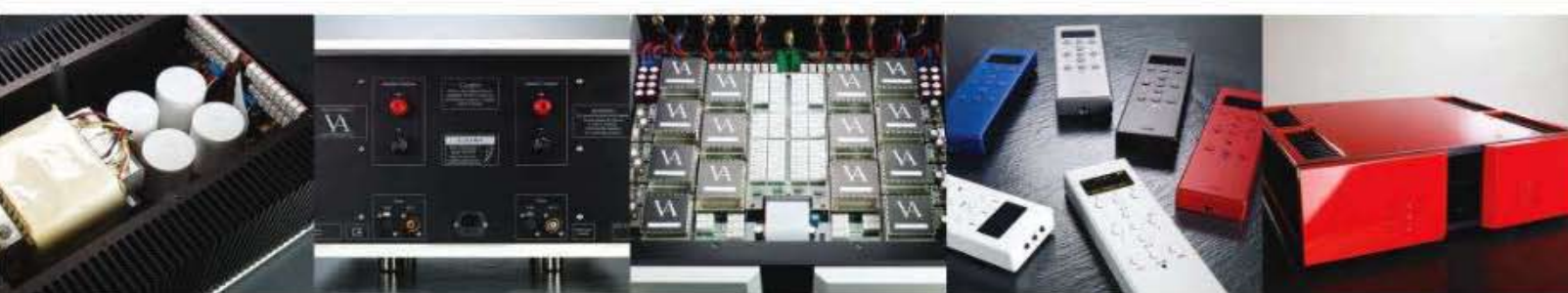
leather rendering of Messaien’s massive *Turangalila Symphony*, with strong contributions from piano virtuoso Jean-Yves Thibaudet. Young violin star Janine Jansen’s takes on Beethoven’s warhorse concerto and Britten’s modern classic hold their own against stiff competition.

In comparing the contents of the box to the original LPs of the analog recordings and to the CDs of the digital editions, the analog reissues are reasonably accurate facsimiles of the originals. However, their much quieter surfaces enable more detail to come through. The digitally sourced LPs improve upon the previous CD releases in terms of warmth and ambience.

Limited-edition deluxe box sets are all-or-nothing propositions. Should classical lovers drop more than \$100 on *The Decca Sound*? On the basis of the four analog recordings alone, yes. If you don’t have the originals, you would have to shell out far more money to get pristine first-stamper pressings. And even if you already own the original records, they’re not “heavy” vinyl or don’t possess noise-free surfaces. Besides, all of these records offer head-of-the-list performances of works that should be in every classical library.

—**Lawrence Devoe**





### Bachman-Turner Overdrive

*Not Fragile*

Audio Fidelity, Gold CD

## Bachman-Turner Overdrive

**B**TTO's third album, *Not Fragile*, showcases the Canadian rockers at their peak before they succumbed to Spinal Tap-like player changes and arguments. Lending his signature "breath of life" to the arena-rock classic, Steve Hoffman gives this CD reissue a much-needed push in the direction of the original analog LP, augmented with an overall warmth resembling the DCC series for which he's known.

Pulling an early Mercury pressing from my record collection reveals the original LP to be fairly lively, but the standard CD is awfully compressed. The Audio Fidelity disc goes miles better, separating the guitars of the brothers Bachman and giving the music a semblance of depth and smoother high end. Bass warmth and texture are substantially improved, and best showcased on "Rock Is My Life" with a rich, fat sound and hefty decay.

Whether this disc stands the test of time where the rubber meets the road. A clean original LP can be had in most used record stores for about \$3. But if you are a diehard digital and BTO fan, let it roll. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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# Ortofon MC Vivo Cartridge

By Jerold O'Brien

**M**C Vivo is not the latest hip-hop sensation, but it's sensational nonetheless. With MC cartridge prices spiraling into the clouds like a missile that lost its ground link to Earth, it's a relief to hear this aural much value for \$400.

Ortofon has manufactured moving-coil cartridges in Denmark since the 50s. While many audiophiles are after the 2M series of MM cartridges, I'm still an MC fan first and foremost. But this cartridge is completely different, made from Lexan DMX (another hip-hop reference!) that reminds me of the MC 20 moving-coil cartridge that in the early 1980s attracted a massive following.



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Eschewing pedestrian packaging, the MC Vivo slides out of the standard red-and-white Ortofon box. Mounted to the forthcoming Zu Audio rendition of Technics SL-1200 turntable, replete with techie tricks and a Rega RB-700 arm, the MC Vivo had the Grateful Dead's "New Speedway Boogie" flowing with ease. Eyeballing the setup with the MoFi GeoDisc works well, and after making any needed adjustments, you'll be spinning more records in ten minutes. If you have access to better tools (like the Feickert complement at the *TONEAudio* studio), fine-tuning further improves the performance.

The MC Vivo uses a standard aluminum cantilever with nude elliptical diamond stylus. Seven-nines (99.9999% pure) copper wire is used to wind the coils. Output is .5mv and suggested loading is 500 ohms, the sweet spot with my Pass Labs XP-15 phonostage. Stumped by the specs? You'll understand them the second you lower the stylus on a record. This cartridge is an excellent tracker, and the stylus profile rides the groove in a manner that doesn't accentuate groove noise.

While MM cartridges often offer more in the dynamics department, the MC Vivo knocks out even the Clearaudio Maestro via its low-level detail retrieval and grain-free delicacy. Listening to Mobile Fidelity's recent remaster of Billy Joel's *Piano Man* illustrates these strengths. Joel tends to pound the keys, and this record quickly exposes any cartridge lacking in dynamics. *(continued)*





The 45RPM 12-inch single of “The Heart’s a Lonely Hunter,” featuring David Byrne with Thievery Corporation, reveals the MC Vivo provides punchy dynamics and killer bass grooves. Moreover, synth riffs that sound like those featured on Mr. Scruff’s “SweetSmoke” seemingly float around my consciousness, akin to the little pies hovering in the song’s video.

I don’t really care how Diana Krall’s *Live in Paris* sounds on the MC Vivo, but Doug and the Slugs *Cognac and Bologna* is awesome. The tom fills in “Soldier of Fortune” go beyond the left speaker’s boundaries, and lead-guitar breaks feature plenty of meat. Should you not have Doug and the Slugs’ records, any LP rife with multiple layered harmonies and studio trickery will show what this cartridge can do.

Male and female vocals get fleshed-out to satisfactory levels via the MC Vivo. Vide, Amy Winehouse’s posthumous *Lioness: Hidden Treasures*, which will make you a believer. Revisiting

Stevie Nicks’ voice on Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumours* displays her signature breathiness with ample depth and texture; it feels as if a much more expensive cartridge is doing the work. OK, the Meatmen’s *We’re the Meatmen and You Suck* still sounds terrible, but you can’t win them all, and it isn’t the cartridge’s fault.

Extension at both ends of the spectrum is better than one might expect from a \$400 cartridge. Bass response, as well, is excellent, with abundant low-frequency detail accompanying the weight. Just cue up the hard-hitting beats of Run-D.M.C.’s *Kings of Rock*. Maybe MC Vivo is a hip-hop star after all. ●

**Ortofon MC Vivo Cartridge**  
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# Jazz & Blues

By Jim Macnie



## Esperanza Spalding

*Radio Music Society*  
Heads Up, LP or CD

A conundrum exists within the jazz-inflected R&B of Esperanza Spalding's fourth album, and it's based on identity. The acclaimed bassist, who famously won the Best New Artist Grammy last year, is a superb instrumentalist, gifted improviser, decent singer, and fledgling pop songwriter. Because she's got big ears and plenty of ambition, she positioned *Radio Music Society* to incorporate all these skills. It achieves its goal: You can dissect several of the tracks and come up with chunks of every one of the aforementioned elements. But, as they form a whole, they melt all over each other and get gooey. This 12-song program is a bit overwhelming, in the wearisome sense.

Like a mix of Minnie Ripperton and Meshell N'degeocello, Spalding flits through the music, negotiating funk beats, launching syncopation, and addressing rhythmic changeups like a bronco rider daring to be thrown. Her agility is impressive, but the kaleidoscopic nature of the passages finds one song bleeding into the next. Taken individually, the melodies are attractive; heard together, their jagged designs dare you to follow for three or four tracks in a row. This is one of the itchiest records I've ever heard.

Diamonds shine when cracked away from the whole. "City of Roses" supports its jumpy architecture. "Cinnamon Tree" offers breathing room. Stevie Wonder's "I Can't Help It" features a gorgeous swoop. The title cut is also strong, the tune about the magic that can emerge when spinning the dial during a car ride. Ultimately, it provides good advice for Spalding's disc: *Radio Music Society* sounds best while digesting each track on its own.

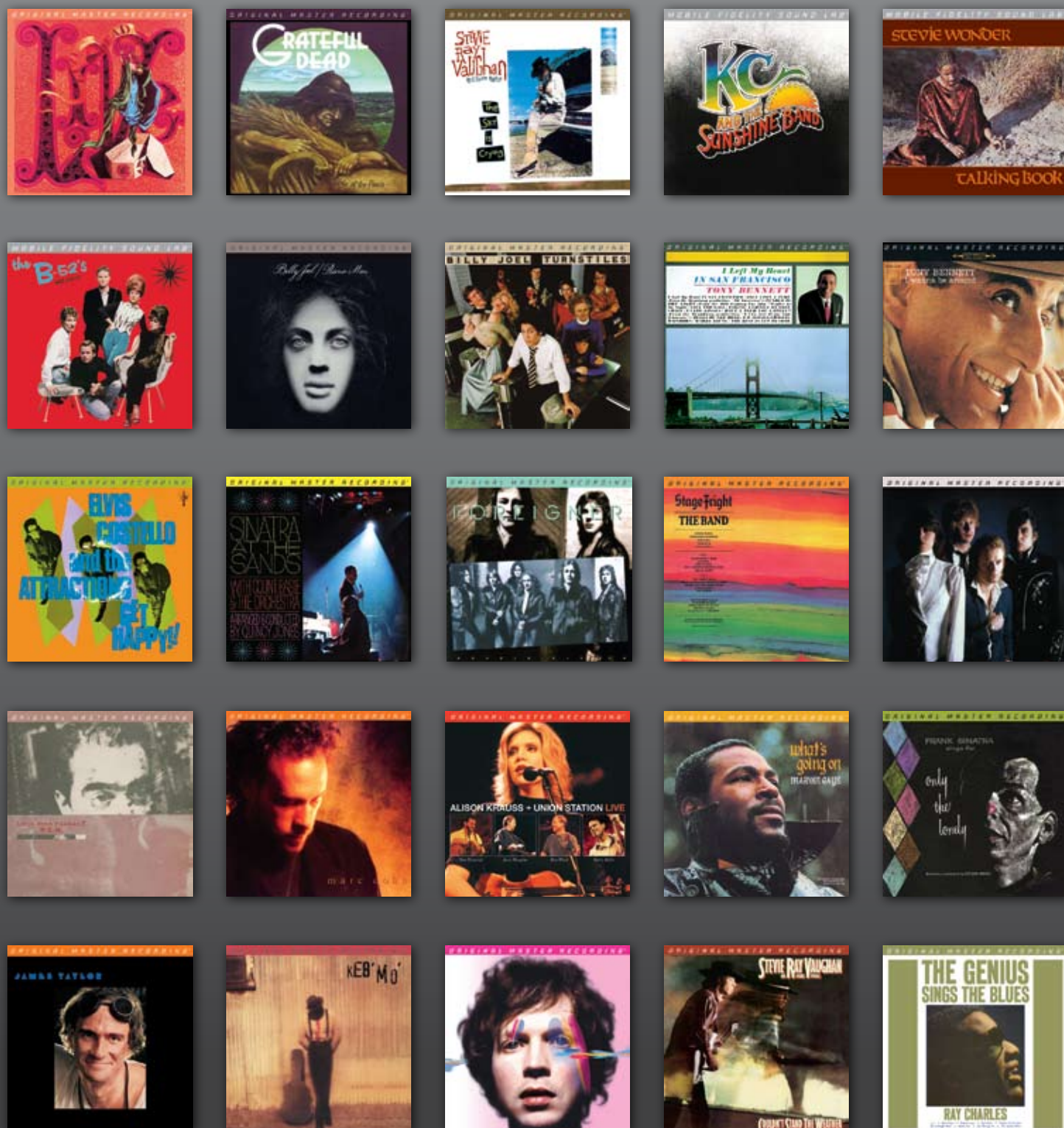


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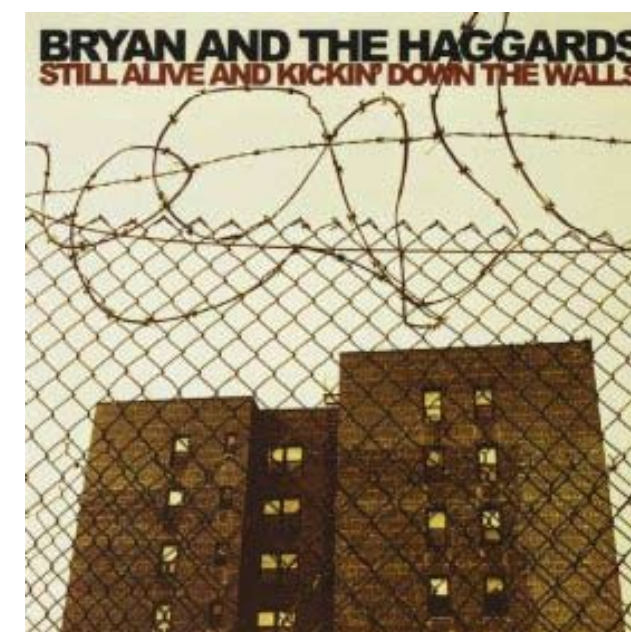
## MUSIC

Drawing a line between country music and jazz takes some doing. There's the high-spirited charm of Bob Wills' western swing, and the fluid improvisational ideas of killer soloists like Speedy West and Jimmy Bryant. There's also the daffy romp Eugene Chadbourne took through the music on the endlessly entertaining freeprov & western *There'll Be No Tears Tonight*. But there's not much else, especially in the modern realm. That's why the barroom bounce of Bryan and the Haggards feels good to open-minded fans that dig both styles. With two gallivanting saxophones upfront and a songbook that milks the cream of Merle Haggard's superb canon, the puckish Brooklyn outfit brings some skronk to the honky-tonk.

*Still Alive And Kickin' Down The Walls* stands the quintet's second disc, and like its predecessor, it's a hoot. The band—saxophonists Bryan Murray and Jon Irabagon, guitarist Jon Lundbom, bassist Moppa Elliot, and drummer Danny Fischer—may genuflect to timeless Hag tunes such as “Turning Off A Memory” and “Ramblin’ Fever,” but it peppers ‘em with ideas that come from Sonny Rollins and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Because the melodies get as much dap as the mayhem, most of the action stays on the twang side. Yep, dissonant moments and solos veer into the stratosphere, but the rhythm section keeps chugging along, adhering to the tune at hand.

I like it when it gets giddy. “Seeing Eye Dog” isn't Haggard's best-known tune, but it's one of his most fun. These guys hear the essential humor and provide plenty of “Yackety Sax” allusions during the update.

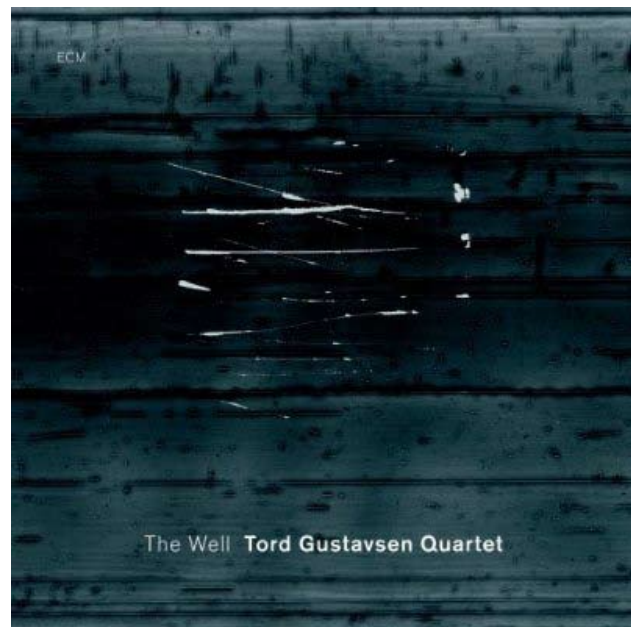
Indeed, *Still Alive And Kickin' Down The Walls* occasionally seems to be as much a nod to Boots Randolph as it is to Haggard. But the ensemble also has a serious side. One of the most gorgeous moments comes during “Turnin’ Off a Memory,” a barroom ballad that finds Murray and Irabagon blending their lines in a swirl of sadness, making room for all sorts of idiosyncratic phrasing. Listen closely and you can almost hear a tear dropping into the beer.



## Bryan and the Haggards

*Still Alive And Kickin' Down The Walls*  
Hot Cup, CD




**Tord Gustavsen Quartet**

*The Well*  
ECM, CD

Some bandleaders are so tied to a particular sound that, during the arc of their career, it seems formula is installed. Norwegian pianist Tord Gustavsen fashioned a seductive style of balladry when his 2003 ECM debut *Changing Places* introduced us to an instrumentalist who made silence a constant companion, and who appeared as smitten with the establishment of mood as he was with the generation of interplay. Most of the records that arrived in its wake forward a similar message.



*The Well* brings more of the same to the table. But rather than chide the artist for a monolithic view, applaud his focus and dedication to poised reflection. The more I spin this album, the more I fall for its through-composed persona. And such a musical description isn't literally true. Gustavsen's team of tenor saxophonist Tore Brunborg, bassist Mats Eilertsen, and drummer Jarle Vespestad invents personalized lines on

every track. But the ensemble's demeanor is so tight, and so infatuated with the pianist's melodies, little "soloing" takes place—at least in the old-fashioned sense.

Occasionally, the group has a problem with originality. Gustavsen operates in the wake of Keith Jarrett. The touch, the tunes, the gentle sweep of the reflective aura giving the music its main personality—they're all beholden to the iconic pianist. While sounding

tender and alluring, Brunborg, too, seems a composite of Jan Garbarek and Charles Lloyd. To say the least, it's a sweet combo of influences, yet it makes the collective hard to pick out in a crowd.

Nevertheless, *The Well* possesses enough eloquence to control its emotional environment in a deeply authoritative way, an achievement in any music. If you're into glistening melancholy, this one has a poetic side. ●



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TONE STYLE


# Metal, Beer, Red Meat, and Anger Kuma's Corner

By Bob Gendron

**S**tep into the cramped lair housing Kuma's Corner and you'll likely put your name on the list for one of the limited tables at which carnivores anticipate savory meals based on red meat, pretzel buns, fries, whiskey, and beer while Japanese slasher-porn films play on a television screen above the bar and extreme metal songs blare from speakers. As you wait—and wait you will, upwards of two hours on weekends—down a Jack Daniel's on draught and take notice of the restaurant's un-ironic rules, posted next to the door.

"We will not 'put on the game, bro.'" "No music requests." If only all foodie destinations were so sincere. Or reflected such truth-in-advertising ambience: Framed sketches of half-naked dominatrices and photos of aggressive bands hang on the walls. A subtle, chalk-written "Die Emo Die" message hovers over a painting of a fierce bear.





Two closet-sized restrooms are blanketed with wallpaper depicting classic sailor tattoos, unembellished images to which patrons add clever graffiti that seems to inspire ongoing conversations. The heavily inked and pierced wait staff, too, follows a metal-themed accord. Live free, celebrate individualism, and make no apology when none is required.

With rare exception, Kuma's doesn't need to say "sorry" too often. Practicing bovine slaughter in an ambrosial manner in accord with the city's former reputation as the country's slaughterhouse capital, the hamburger purveyors helped launch in Chicago more than five years ago an explosive interest in gourmet beef patties that continues unabated. Imitators try, but no Midwestern locale captures the mouthwatering tantalization and nose-alluring essence of dead cow, piquant cheese, and innovatively paired garnishes as excellently or consistently as Kuma's.

Expressive of their intensity, personality, and boldness, the neighborhood outpost's thick, plush, and juicy creations are coined in honor of namesake metal titans such as Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, and Megadeth as well as underground favorites Lair of the Minotaur, Brujeria, and Solace. Kuma's burgers aren't about gimmickry; they aren't the biggest, and their epicurean toppings aren't for show. Rather,

whether experienced with the Pantera (roasted poblano pepper, bacon, cheddar and Monterey Jack, house-made ranchero sauce, tortilla strips) or Black Oak Arkansas (red-wine BBQ sauce, bacon, aged white cheddar, Alpha King-battered fried shallot rings), ingredients complement each other and contribute to a unified flavor and mood—spicy, sweet, peppery, tangy, or otherwise. Even the gastronomic landfill that is the Slayer—a mountainous pile of fries dog-piled by a burger, chili, cherry peppers, andouille, onions, jack cheese, and anger that's Kuma's equivalent of the gut-busting Old 96'er chowed by John Candy in *The Great Outdoors*—isn't so much about the size as it is taste.

Crafted with the meticulous care a microbrewery showers on a limited-batch bourbon stout, the food is on par with the froufrou cuisine prepared by chic, Michelin-starred bistros. Yet the scoffing attitudes, fragile portions, small-mortgage prices, and frustrating reservations processes that usually accompany the latter's pleasures are nowhere to be found at a joint that not only revels in working-class aesthetics but sends patrons home with sensory reminders of them. Due to the unenclosed 16 x 6-foot kitchen, you'll come away smelling of burning meat. And it'll only make you hungrier for more.

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TONE STYLE

# Single-Malt Sensation

## Visiting the Macallan's Single-Malt Whisky Distillery in Scotland's Speyside Region

By Bailey S. Barnard





## TONE STYLE



**L**ike many single-malt Scotch whisky distillers, the Macallan is best known for staple whiskies commonly found on the top shelves of any respectable establishment with a liquor license. Indeed, the Macallan's 12 Years Old and 18 Years Old, which retail for approximately \$43 and \$140, respectively, exemplify the brand's trademark rich and oily character. This distinctive style can be attributed to (among other contributing factors) the Spanish oak casks originally filled with Sherry used to age these whiskies, and the unusually small copper-pot stills— the smallest stills in all of Scotland's Speyside region—utilized during the distillation process.

However, a visit to the Macallan's distillery, located in the famed Scotch-making region in Northern Scotland, prompts the enlightening discovery of myriad rarer and lesser-known varieties of the Macallan, which are sure to satisfy the tastes of any dram-loving drinker.

## INTRODUCING

800  
W  
PRESTIGE



> Model shown - 826W  
\$3,699 MSRP

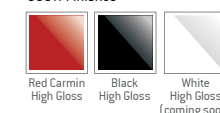
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### 800W Finishes







**The scenic Macallan estate, which produces some 700,000 cases each year—a total that allows it the title of the world's second-best-selling single-malt producer behind Glenlivet—comprises 370 acres of land.**

The Macallan obtained its license to produce whisky in 1824, making it one of the first distilleries to do so. Moreover, it gave the whisky maker one of the oldest and most diverse stocks in all of Scotland. The scenic Macallan estate, which produces some 700,000 cases each year—a total that allows it the title of the world's second-best-selling single-malt producer behind Glenlivet—comprises 370 acres of land. The River Spey, the water source of choice for the regions' 50-odd distilleries, borders the location on the south and southeast sides. (More distilleries exist in Spey-side than in any of the five other single-malt whisky regions.) In addition to the whisky-production and storage facilities, the Macallan estate is home to the circa-1700 Easter Elchies House, rolling pastures for sheep and cattle grazing, and 95 acres of Minstrel barley fields, a variety exclusive to the Macallan that supplements the other strains of barley used for malting. *(continued)*

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



## TONE STYLE

The Macallan's current single-malt offerings range in age from 10 years to 60 years, the latter of which can be found in the newest addition to the distiller's Six Pillars Collection, which became available in September for \$20,000 per bottle—a cost justified by the six-decade-old spirit's remarkable rarity and custom Lalique crystal decanter. Other, more accessible whiskies in the Macallan's vast portfolio include 10- to 30-year-old single malts aged in Sherry oak casks of Spanish origin, and the Fine Oak collection— a line that also comprises single malts aged 10 to 30 years, but which instead uses a variety of second-fill U.S. bourbon casks, as well as sherry oak casks from both Spain and the U.S. From there, the Macallan's portfolio goes up to include whiskies of greater age and rarity, most notably demonstrated in its Fine and Rare offerings aged up to 60 years and priced well into the thousands of dollars.

For the more-modest whisky drinker, the Macallan's staple 12 Years Old and 18 Years Old whiskies aged in Sherry Oak will not disappoint. On the nose, the 18 Years Old reveals hints of citrus, vanilla, and cinnamon coming through predominate notes of Sherry. The palette of this whisky is notably smooth and sweet, with delicate amounts of spice and oak complementing a lingering caramel and toffee finish. Newcomers and longtime single-malt devotees will find such drinkability a warm, wonderful welcome.

**The Macallan**  
[www.themacallan.com](http://www.themacallan.com)







# iCade Gaming Console

\$99  
[www.icade.com](http://www.icade.com)

If you're old enough to remember the dawn of the video-game era, you probably pumped enough quarters into the arcade versions of Asteroids, Frogger, and Ms. Pac Man to buy a substantial hi-fi system. But that's all water under the bridge, right? No longer.

In typical 70s fashion, some assembly is required, but the iCade console only takes about five minutes to piece together. Every retro detail seems intact—right down to the fake wood-patterned vinyl on the front.

The only thing missing is a slot for quarters. Behind the faux quarter bezel lurks a bluetooth interface that, once paired with an iPad, permits instant game play via the on-panel controls.

Download Atari's Greatest Hits from the App Store, set the joystick response from sluggish to twitchy, and you're rocking. The 8-bit sound and graphics brings smiles from players young and old. Shut off that PS3 and take a stroll down memory lane or, perhaps, discover these classics for the first time.



# iRobot Roomba

\$429

[www.irobot.com](http://www.irobot.com)

**H**ow much time do you spend vacuuming? An hour a week, perhaps more if you've got four-legged friends. Extrapolate your estimate over a two-year period, and you give up almost two weeks of your life keeping your floors clean. You could have spent that time listening to records, drinking beer, or building a battle bot. As Angelina Jolie said in a recent interview, "Want to really turn me on? Clean something!" Imagine what a stud you'll be if you have an iRobot Roomba.







Think of the iRobot as a battle bot that keeps your house clean. A glance at the company's dossier reveals it doesn't just build fancy vacuum cleaners; the firm makes serious hardware that monitors oil spills and sniffs out explosives. Its 510 Packbot is "one of the most successful battle-tested robots in the world." Hmm...I hope the Roomba isn't sending my housing coordinates to a Borg cube somewhere.

The model 564 Pet Series model (pictured here) includes iRobot's "virtual halo," which transmits a 20-inch ultrasonic signal around your pet's food and water dish so they will not be inhaled. A three-stage cleaning system claims to get 98% of dust, dirt, and hair off your floors. It adjusts to different floor surfaces on the fly, transitioning from hardwood to carpet without skipping a beat.

Nerd factor is high, but so is user friendliness. A quick overnight charge and cursory look at the start-up guide is all you need to do. Hit the big green button that says "Clean"

on the top panel and let the Roomba rip. When it's done, it automatically shuts itself off and heads back to its charging station.

After turning it loose for an hour, I was sold. It works phenomenally well. Now I can clean records in the studio while my house is spiffed up. Who says guys can't multitask? Better living through science, indeed. And spending \$429 on a vacuum cleaner is no crazier than spending \$400 on little foam things that keep speaker cables off the ground.



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“It revealed an incredible wealth of genuine low-level detail... If times got tough and I had to sell my big rig, I could listen happily ever after to the Diva II SP. That's how well balanced and robust its overall sound was.”

– Michael Fremer, *Stereophile* (January 2011)



Pulsar Phono Stage

TONE STYLE



## Cool Jazz Ice Cube Trays

\$9.99

[www.fredandfriends.com](http://www.fredandfriends.com)

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meets

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TONE STYLE



## LapTop-Pro

\$14.95  
[www.lenspen.com](http://www.lenspen.com)

**K**eeping clean the glossy screens on laptops, tablets, and smartphones is a major challenge. Many purported solutions just smudge and slide the dirt around, just like you did with your peas at the dinner table, trying to convince mom you really were eating them.

Lenspens makes different products for the various devices, yet its LapTop-Pro takes care of all of your mobile devices. Resembling a giant Sharpie, it's a self-contained, three-part system consisting of a very soft brush for monitor screens; a stiffer, bristly brush to whisk dust bunnies from keyboards; and a cleaning pad that removes swirl marks from monitors. Extra-stubborn fingerprints can be eliminated via an enclosed "Screen Cleaning Tissue." LapTop-Pro also folds back together, so there's no need to worry about losing parts. Two replacement pads, with a claimed cleaning life of 500 operations, are included.

Eliminate the haze. Computing is much easier with a clean screen!



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- ✓ **Yes**, you can play music from a flash drive or USB hard disk drive (MRX 500/MRX 700);
- ✓ **Yes**, Internet radio is included (MRX 500/MRX 700); HD radio too on the MRX 700;
- ✓ **Yes**, you can use it with your iPod or iPhone — optional Anthem MDX 1 dock coming soon;
- ✓ **Yes**, it's intuitive with user-friendly menus;
- ✓ **Yes**, ARC is included with every MRX.

**3D**  
equipped

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## TO NE STYLE

# How To Archer

Harper/Collins

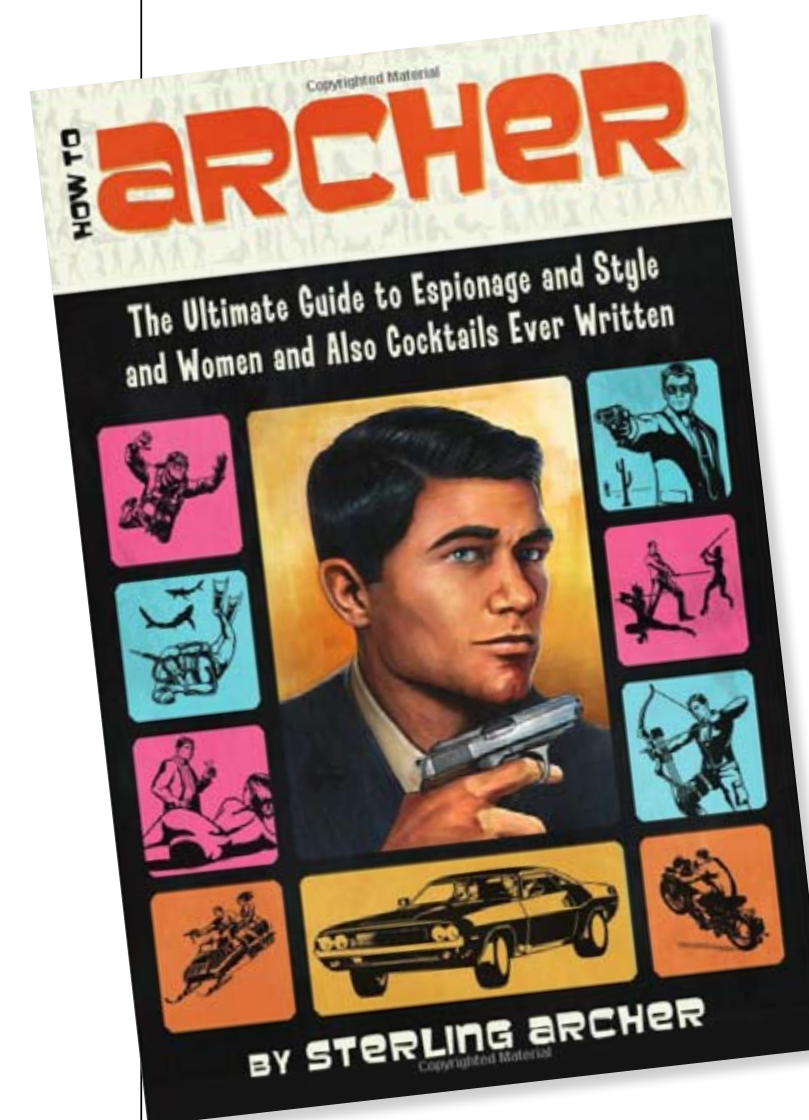
\$14.95 paperback, \$9.95 Kindle edition

The world's newest spy, Sterling Archer, has written an all-inclusive "how to" manual that will help you become a secret agent—or at least, find personal enlightenment. Of course, the great one doesn't give all his secrets away, but offers excellent advice in the forward, where he warns potential foes by stating: "I'd just shoot you in the face."

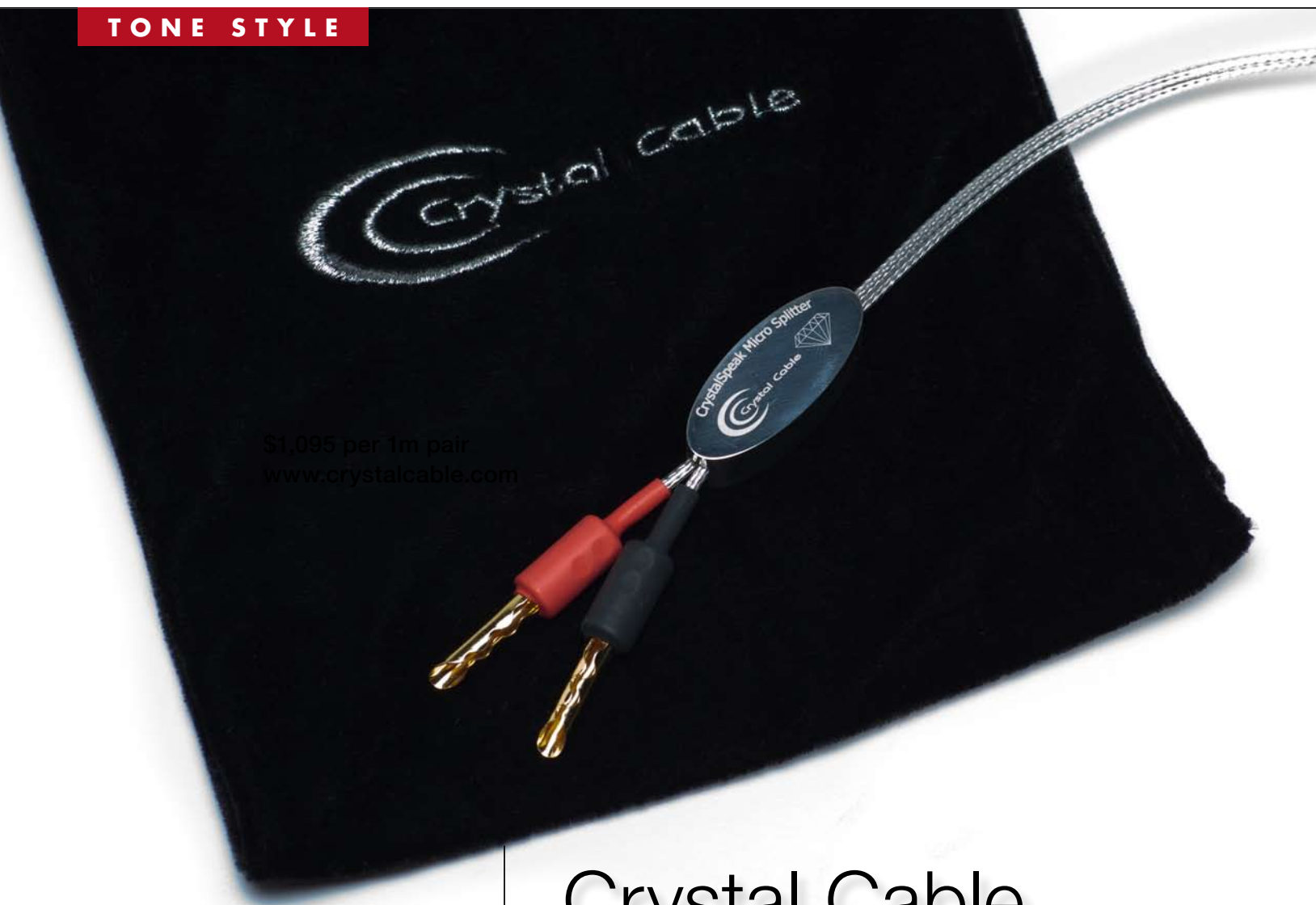
Other awesome Archerisms include entries about his choice of weapon, the Walther PPK, about which he declares, "If whatever you're shooting doesn't die after you pump eight thirty-two caliber slugs into it, it's probably a dragon"; his favorite car, a Dodge Challenger, and how to drive it "big, fast, hard"; how to escape from dangerous situations, and the related pearl of wisdom, "Don't get caught." And yes, he dishes on drinking advice. "The cherry in a Manhattan makes it a nice transitional cocktail, to help you ease into whatever you will be drinking at lunch." Perfect.

Senior Archer rounds out the tome with great tips on where to buy clothes and shoes, and some serious insight into the finer points of dining and dating, cluing us in that he doesn't pay for any of this stuff.

Download the book in its Kindle version so you can get it right now and remotely erase your iPad should the information fall into the wrong hands. Targeted at those of us that think secret agents simply look fabulous, drink expensive booze, and bang hot women, *How To Archer* begs the "Why would they not?" question.







\$1,095 per 1m pair  
www.crystalcable.com

## Crystal Cable Micro Diamond

**W**hy are we writing about interconnect cable in the Style section? Because these cables constitute the answer for everyone that desires great sound but does not want a massive loom of cables cluttering up the listening room. Micro Diamond interconnects (and matching speaker cables) are meticulously crafted and tiny in diameter. They resemble fine jewelry, and even come in a bag that looks as if it came from a diamond store.

The cables' cross-section reveals perfect silver conductors and gold filling up the spaces between them. Such a composite approach affords a more musical sound and passes more current than silver strands do alone. The end result is truly audio jewelry.

# Benchmark



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## The More Things Change, the More Things Stay the Same ...



## ... Audio Is Fragile, Audio Needs Respect

The frontier of transferring an audio signal keeps moving, the details change. However, the unchanging audio reality is that in every new application, and every way of packaging beautiful sound, audio is in danger of becoming not-so-beautiful ... unless love & respect, and good engineering & clever design, are applied at all times.

AudioQuest is proud to have been pushing the frontier of better cable design for 32 years ... through thick and thin, for analog and digital, for real-time and packetized. We share the fantasy that someday transferring audio will be fully robust and immune to degradation. In the meantime, we are very pleased that AudioQuest can make a huge difference in sound quality, whether for just a few dollars, or for the-state-of-the-art.

[www.audioquest.com](http://www.audioquest.com)

**audioquest**





# Bjork



**Bjork** *Biophilia*  
\$12.99 Apple App Store

**S**tephen Colbert isn't the only one smitten with Bjork's latest work as experienced on the iPad. When interviewed on "The Colbert Report," Bjork admitted *Biophilia* was originally conceived in 2008 on a touch-screen computer, allowing her to "sing and play guitar at the same time, like a troubadour."

Her *Biophilia* application begins courtesy of a chart-like interface, with tracks appearing as bright stars within constellations, the latter slowly spinning on an iPad screen. Rearrange the positioning merely by touching the map and adjusting the perspective. Once chosen, the screen zooms in, offering options to play a track in a number of different, not always intuitive ways. You can also view each track in "Score" mode, which gives way to the musical notation relating to each instrument.

Whether you enjoy the *Biophilia* album or not, interacting with it in such an organic manner becomes beguiling. Each song has a different, freeform delivery method that gives you the opportunity to remix each tune with every successive listen, and save your results should you desire. Where's Todd Rundgren when we need him?

## REFERENCE 150

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isn't on television.



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# B&W Zeppelin Air

\$599

[www.bowers-wilkins.com](http://www.bowers-wilkins.com)

**B**owers and Wilkins continues to redefine desktop hi-fi systems with its current Zeppelin, re-coined the Zeppelin Air because of its compatibility with Apple's AirPlay technology. Thanks to AirPlay, you no longer have to physically dock an iPod to the Zeppelin in order to enjoy portable music collections. Plus, all wireless devices stream to the Zeppelin Air. The no-sweat setup is akin to pairing a bluetooth device to a car or computer.





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Woo Audio is a designer and manufacturer of WES. We are an authorized Stax reseller .

TONE STYLE

Users familiar with the original Zeppelin will be impressed with improvements in the new model's overall sound quality. In addition to added clarity, there's more punch throughout the range. Newcomers to the Zeppelin Air should be bowled over by the amount of sound produced by this small, stylish desktop system. It's the perfect choice for anyone seeking to place a multimedia hub in a small space.

Of course, you can still plug an iPod or iPhone into the conveniently placed dock. The internal DAC is upgraded to take advantage of 24-bit/96kHz sources, too. Call it an audiophile bonus.

● Read the full review on the *TONEAudio* Web site by clicking here.





FEATURE

# Sexy, Black, Powerful

## Musical Fidelity M6 500i Integrated Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

With some prognosticators saying 2012 will be the end of the world, do you want to chance spending the last year of your life unable to really crank up your stereo? Musical Fidelity is known for making “super integrated” amplifiers; its new M6 500i represents another benchmark in this field.

The British company’s M6 500i is tough to resist. Especially when I don a Darth Vader mask and convince you the force is strong in this dark, monolithic machine. Can you feel it? You’ve had the urge to upgrade your current little integrated. Now focus. Forget about those telling you power isn’t important. It is, and the M6 500i delivers 500 glorious, window-rattling, tweeter-melting watts per channel that will take you from the back of the arena to the front row. Sense your desire for more power getting stronger? Let anger consume you as you contemplate ditching your current amplifier. Good.



## FEATURE



With the M6 500i, listeners equipped with inefficient speakers will no longer be doomed to experience Metallica or Shostakovich at inferior volume levels. Remember, lifelike dynamic swings are just as important to musical accuracy as tonal accuracy. Even Shania Twain sounds better with oodles of power behind her. And the M6 500i's tremendous bass control keeps speaker woofers pulsating.

### Power and Connectivity

The M6 500i features four RCA line-level inputs (one of which is switchable between AUX or HT pass-through) and one balanced XLR input. Compatibility with most systems should be simple. I'd love to see another balanced input, but for \$6,995, you can't have everything. The M6 500i also includes tape out jacks and a variable level (RCA jack) output for those who might want to add a powered subwoofer or two.

This unit isn't merely a high-powered brute. You won't mistake it for that of a Burmester, but the metalwork is top-shelf. Finish quality is highly uniform, the front panel convincingly massive, and the volume control substantial. Buttons are tastefully small, and a nice remote is included. Fonts are stylish and understated. No giant logos, either—another mark that bridges the gap between a top-line component and a budget sibling.

Repeat after me: Exceptional Value Award. The M6 500i comes in silver, too, but as the late-night spy Archer would say, "Why would you?" Black suits its powerful nature just right.

*(continued)*

# PASS

XP-30:

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Balanced

Detailed

Hypnotic

Defined Bass

Natural

Engaging

Flexible





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Experience the “El Superiores” Speakers

## FEATURE

### Forewarning

Once you drive a Dodge Challenger with a Hemi under the hood, the wimpy six-cylinder model at the National rental counter always sucks—no matter how much Patrick Stewart tries to convince you otherwise. And so it goes with a well-designed, high-power amplifier. Adding the 3,000-watt JL Audio Gotham subwoofer to the system and spinning Iggy and the Stooges’ *Raw Power Live: In the Hands of the Fans*, the M6 500i becomes both Death Star and time machine. Giving the volume control a forceful spin and closing my eyes puts me right back at that legendary September 2010 show, where editor Bob Gendron and I saw Pop passed right through the crowd. That’s realism.

But remember, power corrupts. If you aren’t careful, you might damage your hearing—or speakers—with the M6 500i. Case in point: A few bottles of Maudite placed *TONEAudio* contributor Jerold O’Brien and I in full-on Beavis and Butthead mode as we proceeded to liquefy a pair of AR3a speakers just like we did when we were younger. And while a small amplifier driven to clipping handily destroys a tweeter, a big amplifier driven to clipping scorches woofers, and usually involves minor pyrotechnics. That’s exactly what happened.

Feeling like the wise old owl in the Tootsie Pop commercial, we wanted to see how many minutes of Sepultura it would take to completely destroy the AR3as. The answer? Two minutes and fifteen seconds of “Stronger Than Hate” from *Beneath the Remains*, and the speakers were lifeless carcasses.

We ended the festivities, as the M6 500i’s force kept growing stronger. We momentarily considered vaporizing O’Brien’s Vandersteen 1Cs.

The next morning, as we headed out to Denny’s for a Grand Slam breakfast (don’t let friends drive home drunk, especially when they are hopped up with the thrill of destruction), we pondered if it was all just a dream. Nope. The smell of burned electric components still filled the listening room. Heavenly.  
*(continued)*





## FEATURE

Mixing synergies with the Verity Audio Amadis, Magnepan 1.7s, Peak Consult Kepheus, and a handful of other speakers proves highly enjoyable, regardless of program material. The M6 500i makes for a great system anchor as it opens the door to whatever speakers you have or might want in the future. Even the Magnepan's, which need power in the manner a neurotic girlfriend needs attention, lit up with the M6 500i.

Lest you think we are all head-banging maniacs at *TONEAudio*, rest assured the M6 500i features a high level of refinement and tonal finesse that suits all types of music. While this high-powered solid-state amplifier won't fool you into thinking you are listening to a pair of tubed monoblocks, it is never harsh or strident.

Evaluating current Audio Wave XRCDs illustrates such traits. Walter Bishop's piano on Jackie McLean's *Swing, Swang, Swingin'* just glides through the background of the tune, never dropping off the beat. Cymbals are crisp, awash with lingering decay. When McLean enters, his sax is chock full of texture, bouncing from simmer to boil, and then overflows outside the speaker boundaries as the tempo increases. *(continued)*



### C50 Stereo Control Center:

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- New eight band tone controls are programmable by input selection
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- Multiple amplifiers, headphones or signal processors are all controlled

## PERFECT PAIR

### MC452 Stereo Power Amplifier:

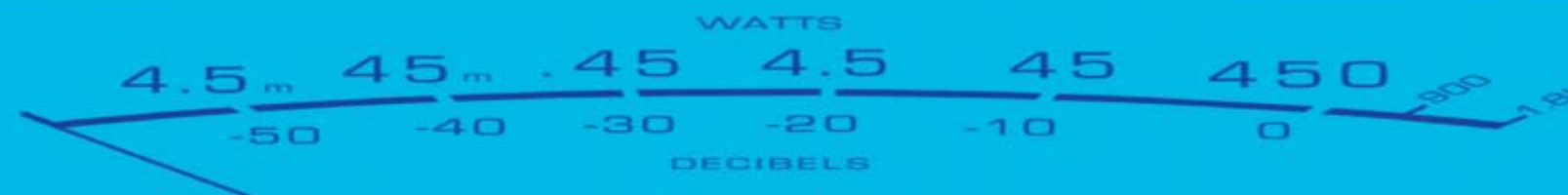
- The most powerful McIntosh stereo amplifier, MC452 is the master of the most delicate or demanding musical passages
- The latest advancements in transistor technology and circuit design result in cooler operation and longer life
- Larger, easier to read power meters monitor the power delivered while protecting one's speaker investment
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- **900 WATTS** OF DYNAMIC POWER
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**900 watts** Dynamic Peak Power / 300 watts RMS Sustained.

**Ultra-Class-D™ power amplifier** with unique switching power supply and digital signal processing. Sophisticated mathematical algorithms shape frequency response ensuring accurate, consistent and musical bass without distortion, even when the subs are pounding out bass at the highest levels.

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SUB 8 – 8" cone size / SUB 10 – 10" cone size / SUB 12 – 12" cone size.

**MONITOR SUB 8**  
**MONITOR SUB 10**  
**MONITOR SUB 12**



For more info visit [www.paradigm.com](http://www.paradigm.com)



All Monitor subwoofers consume less than 1 watt in Standby



## FEATURE



Is there anything the M6 500i cannot do? Not really. Sure, a couple of the higher-priced integrateds possess more midrange sweetness, and more resolution, but they cost two-to-four times as much. You get what you pay for with the megabuck amps, yet you get tremendous performance and value with the M6 500i. Separates aren't the answer, either. You'll be hard-pressed to find a 500-watt-per-channel power amplifier that delivers the goods for \$7k—and you'll still need a preamp and pair of interconnects. And Darth Vader's got no use for such extra troubles when galaxy-conquering power can be had from one box. ●

**Musical Fidelity M6 500i Integrated Amplifier**  
**MSRP: \$6,995**

[www.musicalfidelity.com](http://www.musicalfidelity.com) Factory - UK  
[www.temposales.com](http://www.temposales.com) US Distributor

\*Paradigm's PBK and PT-2 Wireless Transmitter available as extremely affordable options.





## PS Audio P10 Power Plant

\$4,995  
www.psaudio.com

**P**S Audio brings it all home with its latest P10 Power Plant. Going beyond mere filtration, the P10 generates fresh AC power with ultra-low distortion, eliminating one of the main causes of grit in any system. The feat is enough to make the P10 an award-winning product. Yet the unit also incorporates power management that allows any one of the five outlet banks to be regulated at pre-set intervals. Best of all, you can control it all from the Web or a smartphone.

# Cypher Labs



## AlgoRhythm Solo®

The AlgoRhythm Solo® delivers uncompressed, high quality audio from an iPod, iPhone or iPad to portable or home audio DACs and amplifiers, via both digital and analog outputs.

- Asynchronous mode USB to SPDIF conversion for low-jitter coaxial digital output
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- Portable design with short and clean signal paths

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**PREVIEW**

## Dynaudio Confidence C1 II Loudspeakers

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The smallest speaker in Dynaudio's Confidence line is perhaps the mightiest in terms of sound per pound. Utilizing the same Esotar2 tweeter and midrange driver as the C2 and C4 speakers, the Confidence C1 II brings the larger models' sound quality to a smaller enclosure. The last bit of deep bass and maximum SPL are sacrificed, but the high resolution and neutral tonality remain untouched.





# Danish Modern

## Davone Ray Speakers

By Steve Guttenberg

Looking at speakers at high-end audio shows often gives one the impression that audiophile speakers are designed to exclusively appeal to audiophiles. I'm a card-carrying audiophile, so sure, I think 73-inch tall, 600+-pound Wilson Alexandria X2 Series 2 speakers in "Fly Yellow" are drop-dead gorgeous. But the average dentist, business executive, or banker would probably think they're monstrosities. Meaning that, even if they could afford to buy a pair, they wouldn't consider living with them. Few "civilians" subscribe to high-end speakerdom's form-follows-function aesthetic.

Which is why I smiled when I spotted the Davone Ray speakers at last year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. On stands, the speakers didn't come up to my waist, and their curvy styling, inspired by the iconic Charles Eames chair, stopped me in my tracks. Since the Danish-made Ray stands out in the overcrowded world of rectangular box speakers, I'm guessing non-audiophiles might be intrigued.



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Harbeth speakers have the clarity, imaging, dynamics and fatigue-free character that I demand of speakers in my work. I highly recommend them! – Kevin Gray

*Coherent Audio owner, Kevin has mastered music for every major label. He has more than a hundred top ten and Grammy award winning records, and dozens of RIAA certified gold and platinum albums and singles.*



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## REVIEW

Moreover, the sound did not disappoint. MA Recordings' Todd Garfinkel used a pair to demo his music, and I was totally smitten. The Rays projected a deep and wide soundstage, and the bass was more potent than I'd have expected from such a modestly sized speaker. I returned to listen again and again, so I was curious about how the sound would hold up at home.

### Unique Design

Coming in at just 28.5" high mounted on its stand, the Ray is small in stature. Granted, its modern styling won't be a great fit with all decors, but its spouse-acceptance factor should be well above that of most full-range audiophile speakers.

The Ray sports a black cloth grille mounted on a plywood frame—something you won't find on many speakers. Remove the grille, and you'll see the front baffle is covered with nicely finished real black leather (the rear panel is leather-clad, too). I asked company founder and aeronautical engineer Paul Schenkel about why he opted for genuine leather. He said he prefers natural materials—not for sonic reasons, but for the quality they impart.

The Ray boasts just one (coaxial) driver, and it's unique to this design. The driver incorporates a 1" Illuminator silk-dome tweeter that sits in the center of an 8" Volt woofer. No wonder the Ray produces a more coherent soundstage than speakers with a row of drivers arrayed over their front baffles. I'm sure other high-end speakers utilize a single coaxial driver, but the only one that immediately comes to mind is the Thiel SCS4. I remember being knocked out by the SCS4's precise imaging, but the Ray is a more full-range design. *(continued)*



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The powdercoat-black-finished solid-steel stands are also works of art. Their curves perfectly complement the speakers, and while I first thought the stands looked too spindly to securely support the Davone, there's almost no give when I nudge the speaker with my finger.

The Ray's curved, walnut-veneered, sixteen-ply beechwood cabinet is fitted with medium-density fiberboard front and rear baffles. Impedance is listed at 7.5 ohms, yet it gets down to 4.1 ohms at 20kHz. A Cardas speaker-wire clamp accepts spades, bare wire, and, in a pinch, banana plugs. The backside also sports a large bass port, so don't even think of placing the Ray near a wall. This speaker needs room to breathe.

### The Joys of Cooking

The Ray's even-tempered balance is its prime virtue, but its big-as-life imaging is what kept me grabbing records. Older 1960s recordings, like the live Modern Jazz Quartet works with Jimmy Giuffre, sound wide-open. There's a lot of "leakage" between mics on these albums, so when you play speakers as time-coherent as the Rays, you feel like you're in a huge sound space. The solidity/presence of Giuffre's clarinet, as well as that of the drums, bass, and piano, is nothing less than thrilling. The Rays more completely conjure the recording venue—not so much in the look-at-me, high-resolution sense—but in a manner that relates to the soul of the music and how live instruments actually sound. *(continued)*





These characteristics account for why the Ray's midrange glories don't require agonizing analysis. "Homeless," from Paul Simon's *Graceland* CD, elicits goosebumps. The track is almost a capella, with Ladysmith Black Mambazo's vocals recorded at Abbey Road Studios. The voices sound strikingly human, an increasing rare quality on contemporary recordings. And on Simon's "My Little Town," from *Still Crazy After All These Years*, I hear aspects of the mix I've never noticed before. Consider the opening solo piano, occupying an actual acoustic space. As acoustic guitar, horns, bass, and drums enter, the tune starts to sound like a standard 1970s multitrack pop recording. Listening over the Rays, you genuinely hear the mix evolve.

By contrast, Leonard Cohen's *Live Songs* is a sparsely populated, purely acoustic affair. And Cohen is right there, between the Rays, as live as can be. This illusion is what high-end audio is about. It's supposed to generate these epiphanies.

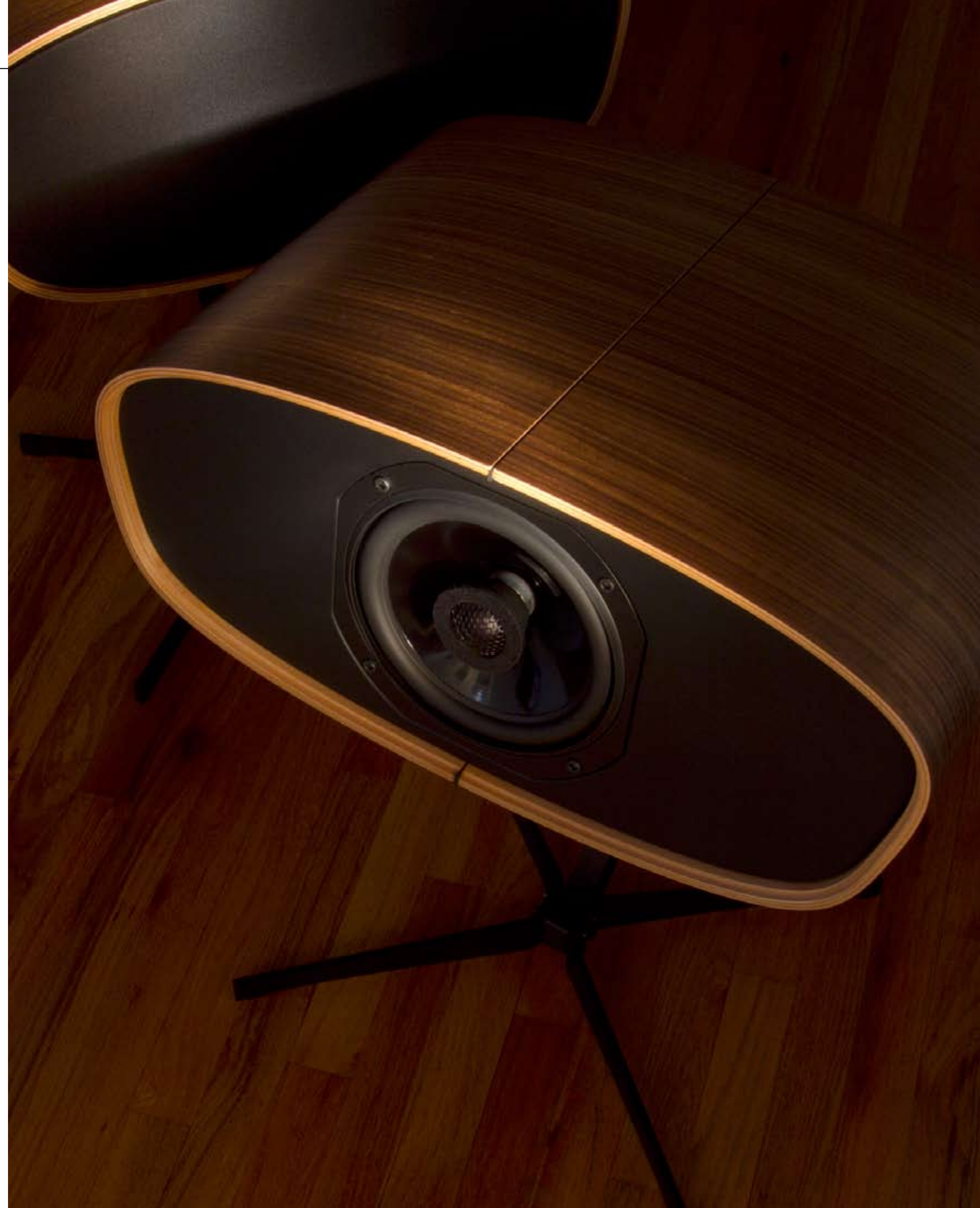
Satisfied the Rays can sound sweet, I pulled out the Black Keys' *Attack & Release* CD to indulge my blues-rock fantasies. No worries—the Rays can boogie when the urge strikes. But if you live on a steady diet of high-decibel tunes, the speaker will not provide the necessary impact—certainly not like the kind you get from a pair of heavyweight towers.

That said, the Ray easily conveys the Dirty Dozen Brass Band's meaty, big and bouncy rhythms. The swinging ensemble doesn't have a bass player; instead, the sousaphone's blatting bass lines provide the music's pulse. Lesser speakers gloss over such contributions, but the Ray never misses the beat. Indeed, the Dirty Dozen Brass Band's *Mardi Gras in Montreux* LP could have been called *The Joy of Cooking, New Orleans Style*. There's no Pro Tools messing with the sound, so the music speaks for itself.

### Truly Original

Listening over the long term, the Rays constantly surprise me, with every record sounding different from the last—always a good sign. All LPs and CDs are recorded under wildly different circumstances, and the Ray made these facts abundantly clear.

There's a lot to love about this speaker: Its small stature, unique styling, and the way its single driver presents an unusually transparent view of the music. I just wish more speaker companies were coming up with such truly original designs. ●



**Davone Ray**  
MSRP: \$7,500 per pair

### MANUFACTURER

Davone

### CONTACT

[www.davoneaudio.com](http://www.davoneaudio.com)

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** VPI  
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**Digital Sources** PS Audio  
PerfectWave Transpost & DAC; Oppo BDP-95 Special Edition

**Electronics** Pass XP-20  
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LP phono preamp; Bel  
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XA100.5, and First Watt J2  
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**Speakers** Dynaudio C-1,  
Mangepan 3.7

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By Jeff Dorgay



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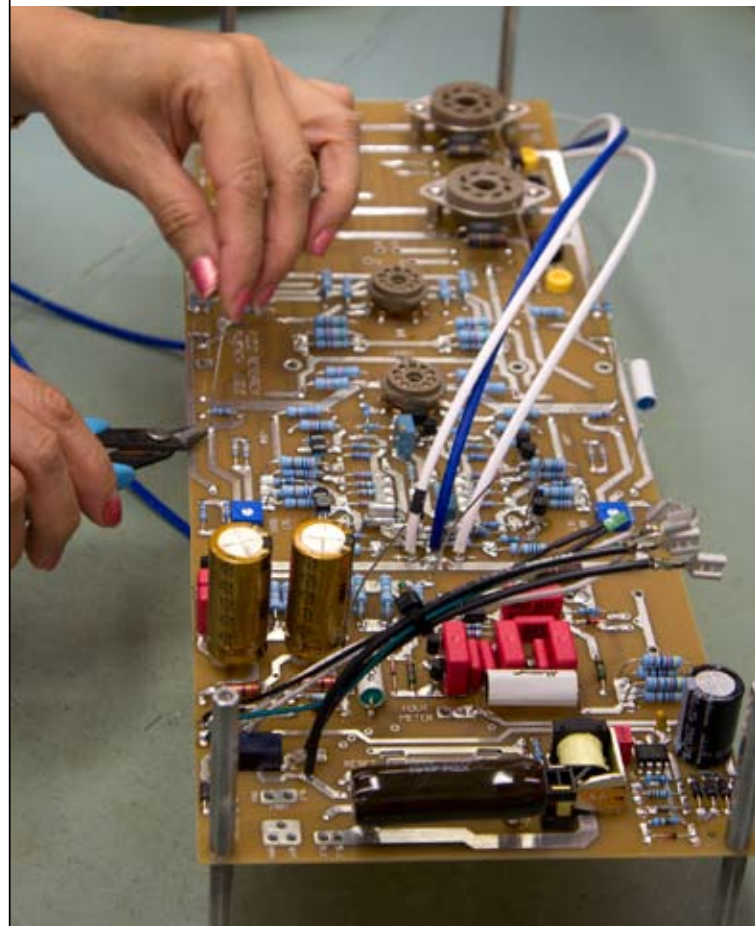
REVIEW



Audiophiles have a habit of prematurely discarding things. In the 70s, a proliferation of low-efficiency box speakers and transistors convinced many enthusiasts to abandon vacuum tubes for high-powered solid-state amplifiers. Listeners were on a quest for “perfect measurements,” only to wonder if they’d made the wrong choice after the fact.

History repeated itself again in the 80s with the compact disc, as many of the same devotees ditched vinyl in favor of “perfect sound forever” and the digital medium’s superior measurements. Fortunately, technology always seems to come full circle and often reaches its development pinnacle years after introduction. The ARC REF 150 power amplifier exemplifies this trend.





### Tradition

The \$12,995 REF 150 builds on the success of the previous \$10,995 REF 110, the consummate one-box solution for audiophiles that don't require the power of the larger REF 250 and 750 monoblocks. ARC executive Dave Gordon notes: "The REF 110 is a great amplifier. Yet the extra output of the REF 150 is perfect for our customers wanting the REF sound, but don't want to commit to the space a pair of monoblocks required." One chassis also has an advantage in that the REF 150 only requires replacing eight power tubes (approximately every 5000 hours) and, subsequently, produces less heat. Tubes are cooled by a pair of back-panel fans that only make themselves faintly known when the music is off. And even then, one must listen intently to hear them.

Looking virtually identical to its predecessor, the REF 150 sports major internal changes.

There's a much bigger power supply, with double the storage capacity of the REF 110, and redesigned output transformers to maximize the capacity of the KT120 output tubes. Past ARC power amplifiers use the 6550. However, the increased dissipation of the new KT120 tube allows for a substantial power increase. Proprietary capacitor technology utilized in the 40th Anniversary Reference Preamplifier significantly contributes to the new amplifier's improved transparency. Currently, there's no upgrade option for REF 110 owners. Still, Gordon mentions that the KT120 tube can be a drop-in replacement for the 6550 in the REF 110 and "provides a bump in power output, close to 20 watts per channel." Not a bad upgrade for about \$800.

Having owned numerous ARC power amplifiers during the past 30 years, I love that the company prefers a path of measured evolution rather than ricocheting from one design to the next. This approach keeps high both demand and resale value for vintage ARC gear. Some older models are now worth more used than they were when new. The current hybrid design, featuring low-noise JFETs in the first input stage, began back in the late 80s with the Classic 120 and Classic 150 monoblocks. The latter models ran eight 6550 tubes in each channel in triode mode. By comparison, the REF 150 utilizes ARC's patented "cross cathode coupled" output stage, delivering more power from half as many tubes—and providing better overall sound.

Listeners that find the last-generation REF 110 amplifier slightly forward in tonal balance and somewhat difficult to push will love the improvements made to the REF 150. ARC diehards, take note: The change in overall sound is almost identical to the improvement between the REF 3 preamplifier and REF 5. Audio Research achieves a delicate balance of delivering extra, almost-indefinable tonal tube richness while avoiding the common trap of masking resolution with warmth—or speed with an overblown soundstage. In other words, the REF 110 goes to 9.3 and the REF 150 goes to 11. *(continued)*







**I'm instantly struck by two characteristics: The REF 150 sounds more lifelike right out of the box than recent ARC components, and it possesses colossal bass grip.**

### Compatibility

The REF 150 features a single pair of balanced XLR connections for the input and three output taps (4, 8, and 16 ohm) for speaker outputs. Thankfully, ARC employs quality copper binding posts instead of the awful, plastic-coated connectors used on too many of today's power amplifiers. Solid connections are important, and these do the job. A 20-amp IEC socket is used for power transfer, as is a heavy-duty power cord.

Integrating the REF 150 into both of my reference systems—one featuring ARC's REF Phono 2 phonostage and REF 5 preamplifier, the other comprised of the Burmester 011 pre-amplifier and Vitus Audio MP-P201 phonostage—proves seamless. Note: The design of the REF series power

amplifiers is such that they will not work with single-ended (RCA outputs only) preamplifiers. A balanced pre-amplifier must be used, or distortion will rise dramatically, accompanied by a substantial decrease in power. This is due to the omission of the phase inverter stage. Excellent synergy is also achieved running the REF 150 direct from the dCS Paganini stack, in effect making the ARC an all-digital control center. No matter your front end, the REF 150 will deliver.

The REF 150 is equally versatile with a wide range of loudspeakers. While it can't push my power-hungry Magnepan 1.7s to ear-busting levels, it plays them at coherent levels with all but heavy-rock tracks—a major feat for most amplifiers, and an incredible achievement for a tube amplifier. *(continued)*

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## REVIEW

The new MartinLogan Montis speakers make for a fabulous combination with the REF 150, a match previously problematic due to the speakers' low impedance (.56 ohms at 20kHz). The Montis' slightly higher impedance combines with the REF 150's superior drive to play extreme music at any level desired, with no loss of high-frequency information. It all reminds me of the synergy achieved years ago with ARC's legendary D-79 power amplifier and MartinLogan's CLS speakers.

### Outstanding Impressions

I'm instantly struck by two characteristics: The REF 150 sounds more lifelike right out of the box than recent ARC components, and it possesses colossal bass grip. Those of the opinion that vacuum-tube amplifiers can't produce prodigious amounts of bass weight or control are in for a major paradigm shift. In these respects, the REF 150 amazes.

The Chemical Brothers' "Galvanize," from *Push The Button*, reveals wet and loose beats that challenge amplifiers to capture their gravitas. The REF 150 aces the test. Sampling everything from Pink Floyd to Stanley Clarke shows the amplifier claims immense power and control over lower registers. Regardless of the speakers, the REF 150 goes deep, and yet, stops on a dime with bass transients. No, I don't believe "tube watts" sound more powerful than "transistor watts." But there's no substitute for a

well-designed power supply with ample reserve capacity. The REF 150 sounds much bigger and more dynamic than its power rating suggests.

Texture is treated in equal measure, leading me to an old audiophile favorite, *The Three*, a JVC direct-to-disc LP featuring Shelly Manne on drums, Joe Sample on piano, and Ray Brown on bass. Listening to Brown's playing on "Satin Doll" is sublime, with every up-and-down movement of his fingers smartly distinguishable.

But man cannot live by bass alone, and the REF 150 excels with practically every other aspect of music reproduction. The amplifier's ability to hold its poise when pushed very, very hard leaves me stunned. Warner Bros.' analog remaster of Van Halen's *Van Halen II* is no audiophile masterpiece, and the third track, "Somebody Get Me a Doctor," often collapses into a one-dimensional experience. Yet, even at close-to-concert decibel levels, Eddie Van Halen and Michael Anthony's background vocals retain distinct separation rather than just sounding like a single vocal.

Imagined or not, electric guitars reproduced through tube amplification represent the proverbial equivalent of an extra push over the cliff. The REF 150's resolution is particularly tasty when listening to bands featuring multiple lead guitar players; think Judas Priest, Slayer, or Metallica.

The title cut to Judas Priest's *Ram it Down* personifies the increased power such tracks exert when you can easily discern multiple guitarists in the mix.

For those preferring to twirl rather than bang their head, look no further than Mobile Fidelity's recent remaster of the Grateful Dead's *Live Dead*. Filled with layer upon layer of guitar and keyboard tracks, the LP takes on new life via the ARC, revealing previously obscured tidbits. Consider: Jerry Garcia's guitar begins as a whisper on "Saint Stephen," yet when he ramps up the volume, the organ way off in the background doesn't lose its integrity.

### Power and Delicacy

The REF 150 never stumbles, handling the power of a guitar solo or delicacy of a flute passage with ease. Without question, this amplifier roars when required. But thanks to its wide dynamic range and bandwidth, it retains a full-bodied sound at low playback levels. Those subscribing to the "first watt" theory (i.e., if the first watt isn't great, the rest won't be either) can rest assured the REF 150 is up to the task.

Rounding out my evaluation with a wide range of vocal standards confirms initial impressions. The REF 150 is a very natural-sounding amplifier—never forward, bright, or harsh. Bob Dylan's *Bootleg Series Volume 8* comes off with the depth of a stereo record. (continued)



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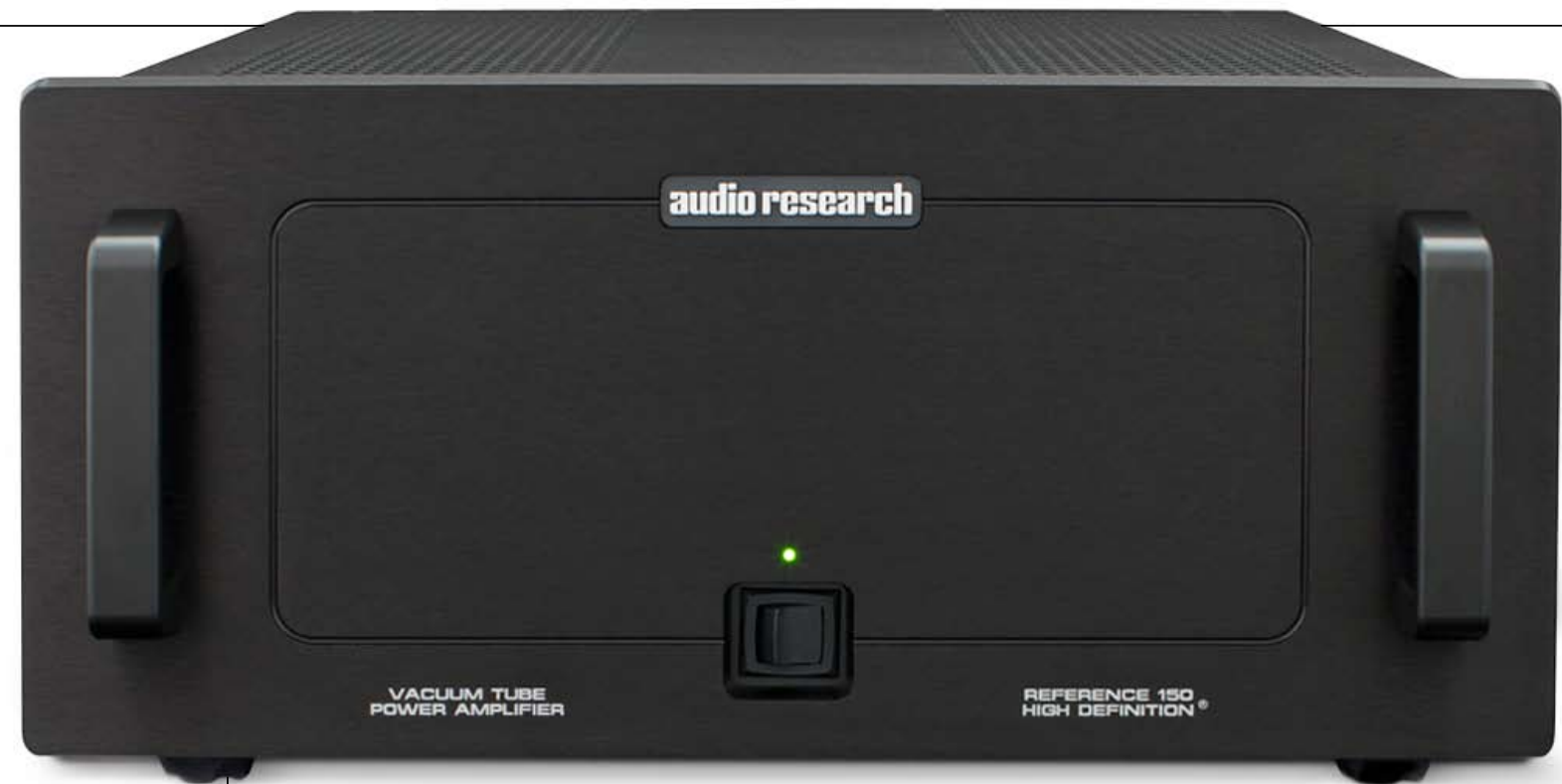
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At first listen with any component, dynamics usually woo you into further listening sessions. However, tonal accuracy and overall natural sound are the sonic sauces that keep you on the couch for hours, seeking out “just one more record.” Sure, many Internet pundits complain that recorded music sounds nothing like the real thing. Pish. If your speakers and source components are up to task, the REF 150 will produce such sensations with the best recordings—and amply seduce you the rest of the time. Cream’s “Sleepy Time, Time” from its 1995 performance at Royal Albert Hall splendidly reproduces the venue’s ambience. I feel as if I’m sitting in the center of the 15th row in this famous concert hall—no surround speakers needed!

If you’re seeking classic tube-amplifier sound that is larger than life and full of romance, the REF 150 isn’t your bag. However, if you desire a modern amplifier possessing musical integrity, timbral accuracy, and wide-band frequency response—yet still boasting the hallmark three-dimensionality, air, and tonal saturation of mighty vacuum tubes—the REF 150 offers emotional engagement few amplifiers at any price can match. ●

**Audio Research REF 150  
Power Amplifier  
MSRP: \$12,995**

### **MANUFACTURER**

Audio Research Corporation

### **CONTACT**

[www.audioresearch.com](http://www.audioresearch.com)

### **PERIPHERALS**

**Preamplifier** ARC REF 5,  
Burmester 011

**Phono Preamplifier** ARC REF  
Phono 2, Vitus Audio MP-P201

**Analog Source** AVID Acutus  
Reference SP/SME V/Sumiko Palo  
Santos

**Digital Source** dCS Paganini,  
Sooloos Control 15

**Cable** Cardas Clear

**Power** Running Springs Dmitri,  
Maxim power conditioners

**Accessories** Furutech DeMag,  
Loricraft PRC-4, SRA Scuttle Rack





# Myriad Options

## Monk Audio Phonostage

By Jacob Heilbrunn

What is it about phonostages? More than almost any piece of audio equipment, they seem to exert a decisive impact upon the sound—at least when it comes to playing analog equipment.

I still remember the day when I fired up my Linn LP-12 and listened to the differences an Audio Research PH-3 made on my Snell E-IV loudspeakers. Suddenly, as if by magic, an enormous soundstage and deep bass emerged. It then became palpably clear to me that a phonostage could expand or crush the sound of a good turntable, and inject air into the soundstage or make it seem lean and emasculated. Much of this probably has to do with the tiny signal that the phono preamplifier sees coming from the cartridge. Over the years, I have never ceased to be shocked at what critical roles phonostages play in making vinyl sing (or not).

### Features Are More Than a Curiosity

My experience helps explain why I looked forward to the Monk phonostage with more-than-ordinary curiosity. No, analog's roaring comeback during the past decade isn't a secret. New cartridges, 'tables, and tonearms seemingly appear every week. But the Monk has special qualities that separate it from its peers. For starters, the model possesses no less than five equalization stages, including separate ones for Decca and Columbia LPs. It permits you to adjust the gain up to a whopping 70 dB. With that amount, you'll never have any troubles driving a black disc to peak levels.



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## REVIEW



And, not least, it's equipped with a plethora of capacity and impedance switches. Oh, I almost forgot: It also comes with three phono inputs. If you're one of those people that own multiple turntables, the Monk might be ideal. Finally, the Monk's appearance is quite nifty—it's compact, and can be easily tucked under your arm if you have to move it about. The diminutive size, however, in no way reflects its actual performance. This is a superb unit.

### Holographic Width and Depth

A low noise floor, the *sine qua non* of fine audio reproduction, is the first characteristic that comes to attention. Few things are more obtrusive than a noisy phonostage, the audio equivalent of a flickering television screen. Inevitably, noise, whether hum or tube rush—or, heaven forbid—both at the same time, also masks detail and disrupts the soundstage. Nothing of the sort occurs with the Monk.

Instead, while listening to a very well-recorded LP of Mahler's *Symphony No. 4* played by the Concertgebouw Orchestra on the Philips label, I'm immediately and most favorably impressed by the soundstage's depth and width. You can almost hear the string players shuffling their feet or turning a page of sheet music. When noise is banished, there's a sense of ease. As a piece begins, music emerges from black space in a more holographic way.

The Monk provides a real feeling of space and scale, as well as delicacy. It gives you an idea of the cavernous character of a concert hall, a trait upon which I place a high premium. Stereo systems sound more "live" when you can discern spatial cues. At the same time, the Monk's timbral accuracy is quite good. On the Mahler Fourth, the strings shimmer and possess a genuine sheen, while the brass sections have the blatt only a good phonostage can convey. (continued)



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-Wayne Garcia, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND  
SEPTEMBER 14TH, 2010

## ▼ ORTOFON 2M BLACK \$699

"more than likely the spiritual heir to the venerable (and very much missed) Shure V15 series cart."  
- STEREOREVIEW.COM



"The **ORTOFON 2M BLACK** is quite possibly the best moving magnet cartridge on the planet. With a nude Shibata diamond, it retrieves information from the groove effortlessly, and flawlessly. The 2M Black is easy to recommend for music lovers of all types."  
- NEIL GADER, The Absolute Sound

## ▼ ORTOFON 2M BLUE \$225



In a Nutshell then, the new **ORTOFON 2M BLUE AND RED** moving magnet cartridges offer a thoroughly modern sound that suits today's albums. Both are highly revealing and an engaging listen that is nothing other than very impressive at the price.

-HIFI WORLD REVIEW

## ▼ ORTOFON 2M BRONZE \$399



## ▼ ORTOFON 2M RED \$99

"...one sophisticated and musical cartridge - for the price of a nice dinner for two."  
- NEIL GADER, The Absolute Sound



"The **ORTOFON 2M RED** raises the bar for budget cartridge performance. You won't find a cartridge in the range that pulls more detail from the groove. Sonically, the 2M Red is transparent, convincing, and accurate."

www.needledoctor.com



It's also easy to discern the different sections of the orchestra. Due to the Monk's lack of smearing, music does not simply sound like a homogenous blur.

Nor does the Monk falter when it comes to reproducing the Concertgebouw at full volume. Mahler is often hard to duplicate simply because his orchestral works erupt into thunderous, anguished crescendos that overwhelm stereo systems that can't really handle so much volume and detail. The Monk remains unfazed.

### Loud and Clear

This phonostage communicates infectious excitement—it makes you want to listen. *The Black Motion Picture Experience* features the Cecil Holmes Soulful Sounds and "Across 110th Street," a cut on which blaring trumpets and throbbing bass provide a clear path to detecting the performance of any piece of equipment in the chain. The Monk does very well indeed.

No, the trumpets are not as distinct as they are my reference Ypsilon phonostage. Nor is the sound quite as natural. But consider the price differential: \$3,500 versus \$26,000. I'm not missing all that much on the Monk, and what I do lose is more a matter of sins of omission rather than commission.



The blunt truth is that the Monk allows the music's raw, surging power to come through loud and clear.

Such grip and clarity are partly attributable to the fact that the Monk is a solid-state unit. Here, we arrive at the divide between tube devotees and solid-state fans. The differences are well known. Solid-state tends to have more grip and sheer impact, at least in the nether regions. Tubes, by contrast, offer a billowy soundstage and warmer mid-range. Are some of the qualities associated with tubes simply colorations? Sure. But then again, tubes seemingly mirror the sound you actually hear in the concert hall.

The Monk lands firmly on the solid-state side; it sounds a shade more electronic in timbre than a tubed unit. On the other hand, tube virtues are firmly in evidence. And the build quality looks impeccable. I'd be very surprised if the unit doesn't prove ultra-reliable. Best of all, the Monk delivers the musical goods. It never blushes when called upon to deliver full-scale rock or classical works. At the same time, it's more than capable of providing subtle dynamic gradations. I'm more impressed by what it does than by what it does not, to say nothing of the fact that the price point for excellence keeps getting reduced.





## Additional Listening

Jeff Dorgay

A true vinyl enthusiast's desires are diametrically opposed to those of the Highlander: There can't be only one—cartridge, that is. As your music collection broadens, variety demands you obtain at least one (or two) more cartridges to get the maximum listening enjoyment from your records. The Monk Audio Phonostage helps achieve this goal at a much lower price than any of the other affordable multiple-input phonostages we've reviewed.

Given the Monk's brilliant layout, adding a second or third turntable (or tonearm, if your 'table has the option) is simple. Since all the necessary settings are located on the front panel, you can move between setups at will and, if you possess a 'table with removable headshells, the possibilities are infinite. I suggest a highly resolving setup, one that's a bit more forgiving, and a mono cartridge.

The Monk takes a different approach to cartridge loading by offering multiple options (15k to 220k) for MM cartridges. I've never experienced a cartridge requiring a 220k loading, but the ability to go up to 56k accommodates my Shure cartridges. MC step-up comes via a pair of high-quality transformers. Switching between Koetsu, Denon, Rega, and Lyra MC cartridges is effortless.

This unit is extremely quiet, possesses great dynamic range and contrast, and remains highly musical. Those longing for even blacker backgrounds can ditch the wall-wart power supply and add a Red Wine Audio Black Lightning battery supply. With a second (or third) analog setup at your disposal, you may wonder how you ever got by with just one. ●

**Monk Audio Phonostage**  
MSRP: \$3,500

### MANUFACTURER

Monk Audio

### CONTACT

[www.monk-audio.com](http://www.monk-audio.com) (mfr)  
[www.avataracoustics.com](http://www.avataracoustics.com)  
(US Importer)

### PERIPHERALS

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

**Preamplifier** Messenger

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

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

**Cable** Jena Labs

**Power Cords** Isoclean Supreme Focus; Stage III Concepts Analord Prime Phono Cable



## 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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# A Case of Bass

## MartinLogan Montis Loudspeaker

By Jeff Dorgay

Magnetic planar, ribbon, electrostatic, and hybrid combinations: Variations on panel-speaker themes are so widespread, they're enough to make one's head spin. And woe to the audiophile that doesn't agree with one approach. For instance, admitting to a Magnepan aficionado that you like MartinLogan speakers can be the equivalent of treason, sparking reactions that will leave you thinking you just argued with a bunch of soccer hooligans in a pub.

Having owned pretty much all panel types over the years—from the Quad 57 to the mighty Magnepan Tympani to the phenomenal MartinLogan CLX—I love 'em all. However, they all have limitations that, when minimized, allow for captivating musical presentations one will either adore or despise.



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Much that of like a single driver/SET system, an ESL speaker's midrange is positively dreamy. Vocals, in particular, sound amazingly lifelike.

Other than its CLX and earlier CLS, all full-range electrostatic designs, MartinLogan hangs its hat on a hybrid design that mates a dynamic (cone) woofer to an ESL panel. The approach looks great on paper, with the cone woofer bringing the necessary punch and the ESL panel providing the trademark finesse. In practice, however, it's a tough marriage, as the woofer and ESL panel dissipate sound pressure in different ways, making for a slight disconnect in the frequency spectrum.

Critics of the hybrid approach argue that the woofer doesn't have the necessary speed to keep up with the ESL panel, robbing the otherworldly coherence that draws us to the design in the first place. So, often like that other marriage of convenience, the SUV, it isn't always as sporty or utilitarian as some might prefer. I've always been willing to excuse a bit of panel/woofer integration perfection for weight and slam. I can't play Metallica on Magnepons, but I can on the MartinLogans.

No manufacturer does a better job of joining a cone woofer to an ESL panel than MartinLogan. It's for good reason—the company has more seat time with the breed than anyone else. MartinLogan's constant refinement of woofer and crossover designs (and improvements to the ESL panel) cheats physics rather handily. Enter the \$9,995 Montis.

#### Up and Running

MartinLogan provides some of the best manuals in the business, so you will be rocking out before you can even say "vertical dispersion." These speakers weigh only 58 pounds each and are easily unpacked by one person. If your room accommodates such a setup, start with the speakers about 8-9 feet apart and with slight toe-in. MartinLogan's "flashlight" method for setting toe-in works very well and, even though these speakers play nicely when placed close to the side walls of a listening room, the further you can keep them away from side walls, the larger overall sound field. *(continued)*





When listening to the Montis on both the long and short wall in my 16 x 25-foot listening room, the former gets the nod for producing an expansive stereo image. I suggest moving the speakers apart in 6-inch increments until the stereo image collapses, then back in ever so slightly. The Montis are shipped with hard rubber feet that can be swapped with spikes. The latter results in slightly faster bass transients, but thanks to the great improvements, I didn't hear as much of a difference between spiked and unspiked operation as in past ML models.

The bass control, located on the rear panel, affects the output level of the woofer +/-10dB at 100Hz. Start at the center (zero) position and optimize speaker placement for the best balance of bass definition and mid-range clarity, sparingly using the bass control for best results. Also, the Montis has a lighted "ML" logo on top of the woofer cabinet and a small blue LED on the front face. A three-position switch allows users to choose maximum blue, dim, and off.

### Beauty Beneath the Surface

Looking much like the earlier Spire, reviewed very enthusiastically in Issue 20, the Montis uses the same ESL panel as the Summit X and a slightly different 10-inch woofer that crosses over to the panel 10Hz higher at 340Hz. (It was 330hz in the Spire.)

A new Vojtko-designed 24-bit DSP crossover enables a far better match between woofer and panel than ever before. With custom slopes on the high- and low-pass frequency segments, the Montis boasts more bass drive than the Spire. Plus, integration improved tremendously. MartinLogan designers never sit still, and as scary as "equalized" sounds in product literature referring to the woofer, the concept works splendidly. According to Devin Zell, MartinLogan's product manager, the DSP crossover yields another benefit: consistency. "We were able to achieve much more consistent results within the crossover, holding values to a much tighter tolerance than with passive components. This also provides more consistency from one sample of the product to another."

Acoustic jazz tracks underscore how far the Montis has come. While the Summit and Spire never struggled in this area, acoustic bass always lacked a bit of texture. *(continued)*







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No longer. Grant Green's *Idle Moments* exemplifies this newfound fluidity. The bass playing here is subtle, seldom taking center stage. Yet the additional texture supplied by the Montis keeps the bass in the center of the pocket, right where it belongs, allowing the listener to forget about it and providing a better foundation for the music.

Whether real or imagined, the increased clarity in the lower register permits more midrange detail to shine through. Grace Jones' *Nightclubbing* features a more detached electric bass line that, while great on a pair of Cerwin Vegas, usually sounds somewhat out of place on a high-end system. The Montis nails it, retaining the force albeit tightening up the overall feel.

#### Tube Friendlier

Many ESL enthusiasts clinging to the notion that tubes are the only way to go with beloved panels forget that hybrid designs are a different animal. Earlier MartinLogan hybrids sport a minimum impedance in the 2-3 ohm range, making them easier to drive than recent models that drop to a .25-ohm impedance at 20kHz.

While the Vantage, Summit, and Spire are not amplifier destroyers in the way that my full-range ribbon Apogees are, the high-frequency response nose-dives with practically every tube amplifier, often making for a combination that sounds similar to a traditional dynamic speaker, albeit with a blown tweeter. Happily, the Montis sports a minimum impedance of .56 ohms (with an overall impedance of 4 ohms)—making these speakers much easier to drive with a tube amplifier.

The match with the ARC REF 150 is downright spooky—plenty of high-end sparkle, taut bass response, and a wonderful, airy midrange that one usually associates with the finest vacuum-tube/ESL combinations. This amplifier stands as the one of the best companions for the Montis—the very best I've heard yet.

The Montis has no problem being driven by the 25-watt Grant Fidelity SET monoblock amplifiers, which utilize the gigantic 845 output tube. High frequencies don't roll off; however, a slight midbass hump considerably warms up the sound. (continued)





Some will welcome the more romantic sound, the combination sounding more like a pair of Sound Labs or Acoustat 2+2s with more bass drive. Either way, the fact these speakers can be comfortably driven by an SET is remarkable. Listeners whose musical taste leans toward female vocalists should be enraptured by this marriage. Sinead O'Connor's *How About I Be Me (And You Be You?)* proves exquisite, yielding the larger-than-life vocals at which ESLs excel.

### Equally Adept With Solid-State

These speakers are no slouch with the Burmester 911 mk.3, either. Thanks to the Montis' resolving abilities, the massive solid-state amplifier brings an equally tasty albeit different flavor to the fore. Whereas the REF 150 has a definite ceiling regarding how loud it can play, the 911 mk. 3 easily drives the efficient (91db/1 watt) Montis to brain-damage levels. Even when cranking the title track from AC/DC's *For Those About To Rock*, there's still plenty of headroom for the parting canon shots.

Fast speed metal, served up via Megadeth, Anthrax, and Motorhead, presents no issue for the Montis when the Burmester amplifier is at the driver's seat, keeping the sound from the panels clean and controlled. Akin to the Summit, Spire, and Summit X, these ESLs rock—provided your amplifier is up to the task. An amplifier of lesser quality has more trouble driving the panels, a deficit that's often mistaken for a woofer/panel coherence issue. The better your power amplifier, the smoother these speakers sound.

Slowing the pace, the acoustic guitar interlude in the middle of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's "Déjà Vu" from the *25th Annual Bridge School Concerts* becomes particularly moving. You can easily discern the sound of each individual guitar in its space and, when the players hit the occasional low string, the additional coherence of the new woofer/crossover keeps you in the groove, never drawing attention to the speakers. *(continued)*



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## REVIEW

### Solid Evolution

Should you trade-in your Vantage, Spire, or Summits for Montis? It depends on your room, system, music, and pocket-book. If you absolutely must have the latest/greatest, snag a pair. Is this speaker a significant upgrade? Unquestionably.

When MartinLogan developed the current Spire and Summit X via cross-over advances made on the CLX model, the speakers' added midrange clarity impressed but the main quibble with the hybrid ESL design still lurked. The Montis makes the biggest jump to date at integrating a cone woofer with an ESL panel. If that's what you've been craving, you will enjoy the Montis. ●

**MartinLogan Montis**  
MSRP: \$9,995/pair

**MANUFACTURER**  
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### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** AVID Acutus  
Reference SP/SME V tonearm/  
Koetsu Urushi Blue Cartridge

**Digital Source** dCS Paganini,  
Sooloos Control 15

**Preamplifier** Burmester 011

**Phono Preamplifier** ARC REF  
Phono 2

**Power Amplifier** ARC REF 5,  
Burmester 911 mk. 3, Pass Labs  
XA200.5s

**Power** Running Springs Dmitri  
and Maxim power conditioners

**Cable** Cardas Clear



# From the Web site

When we're in between issues, we add gear reviews to the *TONEAudio* Web site. The following are links to the two most recent reviews.

## Red Wine Audio Signature 15 Integrated Amplifier

\$1,500

[www.redwineaudio.com](http://www.redwineaudio.com)

The Signature 15 pushes the boundaries of what's possible with battery-powered hi-fi. If Class D isn't your thing, this integrated just may be. It's a completely different animal, possessing an all-FET Class AB output stage. The glorious sound is tonally rich as well as dynamic.

Whether you want to build a great second system or simply demand high performance on a tight budget, the RWA Signature 15 provides a simple elegant solution. And thanks to the batteries, you can save money you might've spent on an expensive power cord or power line conditioner.

- Read the full review here.



"It's truly **thrilling** to hear this level of sound quality from an amplifier with an \$895 price tag...this one could make a **crazed audiophile** out of you where you least expect it." - Jeff Dorgay, *TONEAudio* May 2011

"It's Rega's entry-level model, and few manufacturers **make one as good**. It could be exit-level too... No integrated amplifier I have heard for under \$1000 has a **finer** built-in phono stage." - Sam Tellig, *Stereophile* Dec 2011

"It's the **music** itself that always grabs your attention, rather than any particular hi-fi virtue. And that, of course, is **exactly the way it should be**." - *What Hi-Fi?* 2011

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WEB REVIEW



#### Rega Apollo-R CD Player

\$1,095

[www.rega.co.uk](http://www.rega.co.uk)

[www.soundorg.com](http://www.soundorg.com)

Rega's latest CD player is out-of-this-world good, building on the musicality established by the first-generation Apollo while making quantum leaps in dynamics and extension at both ends of the frequency scale.

Keeping the styling cues Rega owners know and love, the Apollo-R features new, half-size casework that made its debut in the Rega DAC. And the Apollo-R can be pushed to even higher performance levels provided you are in the mood to bestow your Rega dealer with more cash.

● Read the full review here.



# Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay



"Just pop the top for kicking bass!"

## Music Bullet

\$19.95

[www.getmusicbullet.com](http://www.getmusicbullet.com)

How much sound can you get for twenty bucks? That depends on your craftiness. A few years ago, I found a pair of AR2ax speakers with a \$30 price tag at a garage sale and talked the owner down to a cool \$20. And they weren't half bad. One of our readers restored the speakers to full glory, and they make music in his bedroom system to this day.

When I saw the ad for the Music Bullet while watching "Tosh.0" one evening, I couldn't resist. People were moving and grooving, and a pretty girl exclaims, "It's just like being at a concert!" Since I acted "right now," I got a second Music Bullet at no charge, and thought of a great idea: two Music Bullets for a stereo setup. The polite gentlemen on the other end of the phone wasn't amused when I asked about the possibility of five to create a surround-sound system, and reminded me no subwoofer is needed. "Just pop the top for kicking bass!"

These speakers have a retractable, foot-long cable with a mini stereo jack on the end and

feature a rechargeable battery, serviced via a computer's USB port. They come in red, black, and blue, but the company sends what it feels like shipping.

And as the great faux-metal band Dethklok likes to say, "Disappointment is the ultimate metal gift." The Music Bullet provides neither concert-like sound nor kicking bass no matter how far I stretch it out. Seriously, the standard speakers in my iPhone 4g offer superior bass and play louder without distortion, a finding confirmed by a quick listen to Dethklok's second album, *Dethalbum II*.

For now, the best \$20 bargains in hi-fi still lurk at your neighborhood garage sale. ●



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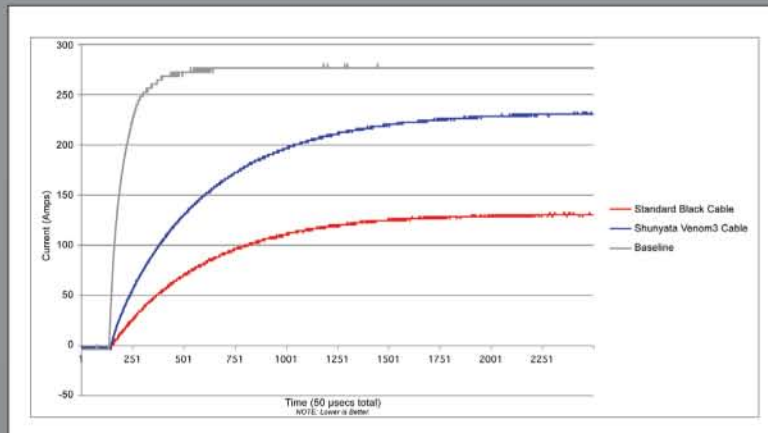


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## DTCD CURRENT COMPARISONS

The graph below demonstrates the difference in instantaneous current delivery between a stock AC cord and the \$99 Shunyata Venom 3. There is an enormous difference between the two cords; the Venom 3 delivers 84% of the available current while the stock cord only delivers 47%. The Venom 3 delivers almost twice as much current.



## Shunyata Power Cords: The First Six Feet Your Components See

Shunyata power cords are the most highly advanced power cables made. Their new Venom 3 is the best-value power cable ever designed. Shunyata's other cables are nothing short of revelatory.



## Shunyata's New Venom 3

Like Neil Gader said last month in his power cord shootout, "If there was a ringer in this field, the Venom was it...for less than a hundred bucks, I had to ask myself, is Shunyata on a mission to embarrass everyone?" We couldn't have said it better ourselves. Try the Shunyata Venom 3 and we'll give you 100% trade-up value towards any better Shunyata power cable... forever.



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MartinLogan: [www.martinlogan.com](http://www.martinlogan.com)

McIntosh: [www.mcintoshlabs.com](http://www.mcintoshlabs.com)

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Vitus Audio: [www.vitusaudio.com](http://www.vitusaudio.com)

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Wireworld: [www.wireworldcable.com](http://www.wireworldcable.com)

Woo Audio: [www.wooaudio.com](http://www.wooaudio.com)

Zu Audio: [www.zuaudio.com](http://www.zuaudio.com)