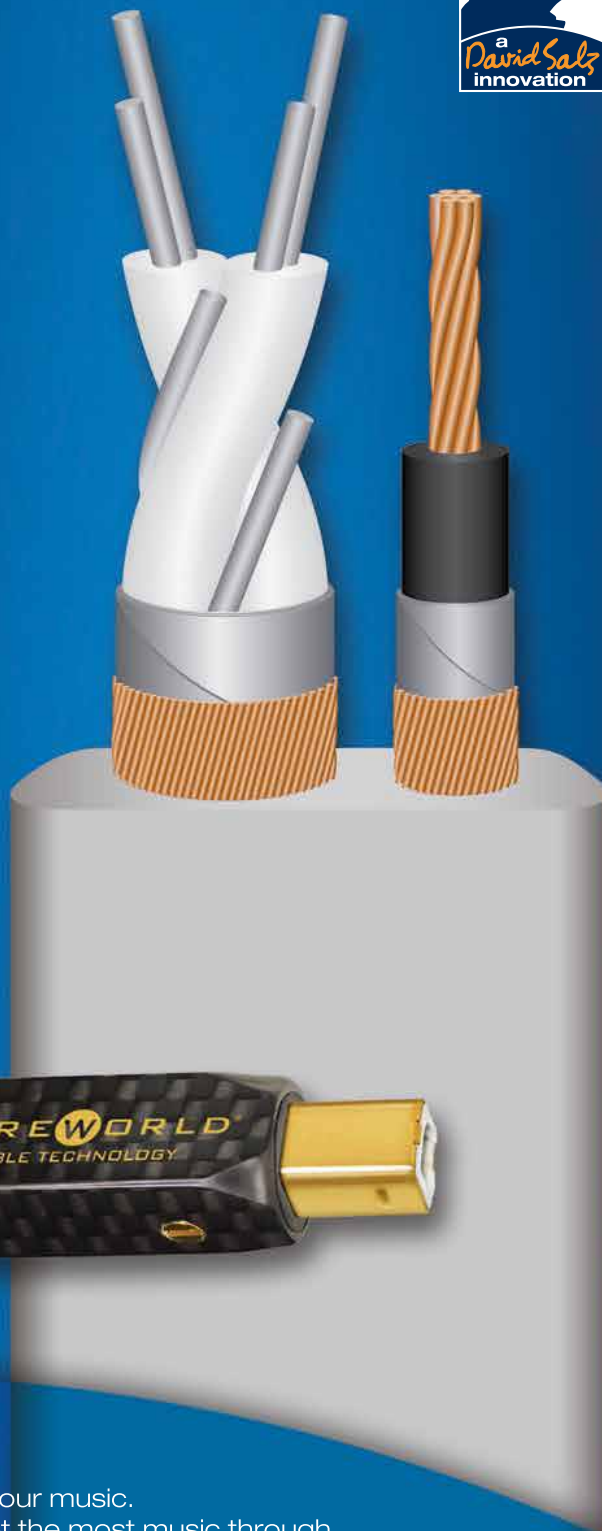


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No. 50 November 2012

The Look of Power From Furutech



Live from Portland:
Giant Giant Sand

Spin the Black Circle:
Taylor Swift, Jamey Johnson,
Soundgarden, Dan Deacon,
Dethklok and More!

The Beatles LP Remasters:
To Buy or Not To Buy and Why

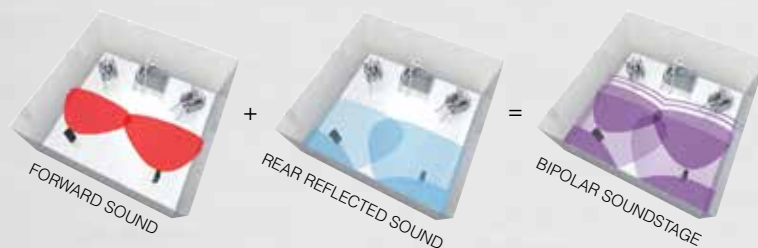
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The AudioQuest DragonFly is certainly the coolest product I've used in recent memory ... I know of no other product that performs this well for so little money. – **Computer Audiophile**



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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



Wow, 50 issues! Seems like it was only yesterday that I was scrambling to get the first issue loaded to the server, jump on a plane, and get to the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest to tell the world about *TONEAudio*. Crazy.

When Porsche introduced the 911 in the early 1960s, most of its contemporaries said that a rear-engine sports car wouldn't fly. I was told that an online magazine in PDF format would not work either, and by more people than I care to remember. But, just as that 128-horsepower car has been continually refined over the years into a 400-horsepower supercar, we've taken a similar approach to the famous German manufacturer: constant refinement.

As we've followed a slightly twisted path to get from there to here, our greatest strength resides in our staff's versatility. I remember photographing Todd Rundgren during his "Back to the Bars" tour in 1981, where he and the members of Utopia all got up from their seats, switched instruments, and carried on as if nothing had changed. From the seat of the drum kit, Rundgren quipped, "This is the way we like to do it when we're recording."

So do we. Bob Gendron has written a number of great articles on beer and travel in addition to his daily duties as Music Editor; Ben Fong-Torres just turned in an interesting look at the Sonos Music System; Ken Kessler is equally at home writing about luxury goods as he is hi-fi gear, past and present; gear editor Bailey Barnard will be joining the review pool next year.

Next issue, speaker manufacturer Alon Wolf from Magico even gets in on the act. I spent my early years as a photographer in the advertising industry, and can definitely say Wolf is a master photographer. The images he captured of his speakers are as good as any I would take, so we're showcasing his talents in the Magico S5 review in December.

Most of the people I've met in this industry have a similar level of cross training, and many of the readers with which I've interacted share multiple passions. That's why *TONEAudio* continues to incorporate bits of overlapping worlds within its pages. All jokes about living in our parent's basement aside, it appears we are all fairly interesting monsters.

Don't hesitate to drop a note via email, or our Facebook page www.facebook.com/tonepub2. Our social-media community has dramatically grown this year, and we've really enjoyed interacting with you there. I would also like to thank many of you for your civility and engaging dialog. It's a refreshing respite from the snarkiness that pervades all too many online forums.

I'm pleased with what *TONEAudio* has become, and we've still got plenty of big ideas in store for our readers. Stay tuned for the next 50.

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NEW CONTRIBUTORS

Mike Liang

Mike Liang lives in an undisclosed man cave in the Western U.S., surrounded by his wife, two dogs, DACs, amps, and over 100 pair of headphones. He struggles with a repressed personality, known to YouTube viewers and Twitter followers as HiFiGuy528, where he can be found randomly opening headphone boxes and offering commentary.

Andre Marc

A New York native, Andre Marc has been writing professionally since college. He grew up in an audiophile household, nurtured on tubes and ESLs. He now calls San Diego home, with a passion for the outdoors, and high end audio. A true music junkie and music collector, he owns over 10,000 recordings. He is also full time contributor to **www.avrev.com**



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Giant Giant Sand

Mississippi Studios

Portland, Oregon

October 8, 2012

By John Darko

Photos by Jeff Dorgay

“That sounds like the first eight albums,” Howe Gelb mumbles as the final notes of “Forever And Day” turn in on themselves under a pile of guitar squall. It’s true. Giant Sand used to sound more raucous, but this Portland appearance at Mississippi Studios is not the usual Giant Sand show.

Gelb has been around the block more times than most. Twenty-five years into Giant Sand’s career, he’s rotating lineups once again. In 2011, Gelb expanded both personnel and band name. Under the Giant Giant Sand moniker, tonight’s troupe are running us through *Tuscon: A Country Rock Opera*, Gelb’s most mainstream-shooting record since 2000’s *Chore Of Enchantment*. The album is more country than rock, at times sedate but nearly always enthralling. It plays out similarly when experienced live.



Running through a set that draws almost exclusively from *Tuscon*, the band isn’t playing oldies tonight. No opera can be sustained by a single voice. The Giant Giant Sand front man holds fast to stage right. Here, Gelb cuts a figure somewhere between Vincent Price and Leonard Nimoy. He’s a strange-looking fella with a voice that’s been aged in oak barrels.

A smattering of clever lyrical turns (“Where the band gets played by the song”) and double meanings murmured atop strummed guitar and brushed drums unfold on opener “Wind Blown Waltz,” and the crowd gets transported to the desert. Gelb’s voice is less whiskey and cigarettes, more bottomless well. Other story songs, like “Detailed,” are built upon a Mexicana-tinged boom-chicka-boom simplicity. Gelb’s songwriting so convincingly evokes the desert, you can almost feel the heat and dust of Arizona—no small feat when playing to a bunch predominantly Pacific Northwesterners.

After a strong start, one—then two—technical hiccups shove a stick into the spokes. Gelb breaks a string. He pauses to show us the guitar neck that he snapped in Spain and has been reaffixed with TiteBond. An anecdote about how the Spanish called it “Tittybond” breaks the awkwardness and buys the band time to recompose. Moments later, the battery in the guitar pedal that Gelb “won in the divorce” dies. A good time to switch things up.

Looking like a pair of mariachi-trained brothers that do Gelb’s dirty work behind the scenes, center-staged Brian Lopez and Gabriel Sullivan enjoy opportunities to take the horse by the reins and reclaim momentum. *(continued)*

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When they step up for lead vocal duties, they own the show. Stronger of voice and more strident than Gelb, Lopez and Sullivan ladle spoonfuls of Spanish soul. The stark contrast between the players proves far more interesting live than it is on record and, taken as a whole, the concert is the better for it.

Glitches behind him, Gelb leads the pack again. He drags a mic to his rear-facing piano ("I knew I shoulda put wing mirrors on this thing") as Lonna Kelly steps out of the shadows to sing lead on a couple of lounge shuffles, one an age-old tale of loving and losing. Both on record and onstage, Kelley is like a Diana Krall that hasn't been run ragged by audiophile clichés.

The show's final few numbers fumble the ball more times than not, which is perhaps (Giant) Giant Sand's shtick. Deciding whether it's deliberate or accidental is anyone's guess, and is more gentle collapse than explosive farewell.

Despite the meandering, sometimes-aimless performance, it never falls short on humanity and conviction. Occasional spurts of intensity burn brightest. *The Country Rock Opera* concept is easy to dismiss on paper, and might sound contrived on record, but the tenderness that stems from a variety of lead performers infuses the live show with soul. Like an old jalopy, it chugs along nicely, until eventually spluttering to a halt. ●

LIVE MUSIC





Revox A77 and B77

By Ken Kessler

Along with the boom in killer headphones and headphone amps, the past few years have turned up another unexpected revival. It was clear to all—upon hearing the insultingly poor ear-buds supplied with iPods—that there was an opportunity to revitalize a moribund audio sub-genre. Stand-alone DACs, bad-ass Japanese direct-drive turntables, and a few others are enjoying rebirths, too. But who would have predicted a comeback for reel-to-reel tape?

It never was a populist format, however often magazines like *Playboy* featured them in “bachelor pad” layouts in the 1950s and 1960s. They were owned mainly by the hard-core audiophiles of the day, those with 1) enough money to feed them open-reel tape, which never was affordable in the manner of the later cassettes, let alone CD-Rs, 2) no aversion to a conscientious handling regimen as irritating as that of LPs, and 3) an appetite or need for the ability to record. And costly pre-recorded open-reel tapes were always of limited appeal.

As for the comeback, it is primarily a high-end phenomenon. Opus 3’s astonishing pre-recorded tapes cost as much as 10 CDs or four audiophile LPs. Rebuilds and upgrading from specialists like Gold Sound and United Home Audio are serious investments. Finding blank tapes is such a chore now that even used tapes, to record over, have value: I saw a vendor selling used 10½in Maxells for \$10 each at the recent AudioJumble in Southern England.

FEATURE

When tape recorders moved from tubes to solid state, the bulk and the weight reduced slightly, though the size of the tape reels a machine could handle determined how small it could go. But the cooler running and quieter operation made open-reel decks a shade more attractive, and the genre survived well-past the arrival of the cassette. But by the 1990s, you would see reel-to-reel machines mainly in systems belonging to those with vast libraries of tapes, or to anachrophiles who simply prefer archaic means of sound reproduction.

Among the most popular—and deservedly so—of the solid-state open-reel machines were the Revox A77 and B77. Like the equally coveted all-tube G36 that it replaced, the A77 launched in 1967 falls under the heading of “semi-pro,” and was equally popular at home and the studio. Pros loved them because they were compact and relatively portable.

A77s and B77s arrived in time for hi-fi’s period of greatest desirability, the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, and were the decks of choice among European audiophiles. They vied mainly with Tandberg, Grundig, Uher or Ferrograph, while Americans had a greater affinity for Crown, Ampex, and select Japanese models from Sony, Dokorder, TEAC and Technics.



For most, though, Revox was the Rolex Oyster of tape decks, in every sense of the analogy: ruggedness, functionality, and exclusivity, but without insane pricing. Note that last bit: its status was not a matter of cost, as prices of upscale open-reel-tape decks were close from brand to brand, the main exception being the always-dearer Nagra. In 1986, for example, a B77 Mk II at \$1999 was similar in price to a Sony or TEAC with 10½in spool capability.

As for Revoxes in retrospect (and as is the case with different versions of any vintage item), you will find not only factions for either A77s or B77s, you’ll even find those who prefer Mk I B77s versions over Mk IIs and vice versa, or A77 Mk IIIs over Mk IVs. As both A and B are closely related, the smart money would be placed on the later B77 as the model that may be the nicer to use in the modern era.

What the A77 delivered of its tubed predecessor, in addition to electronic instead of mechanical switches, silence and cool running, was a superior three-motor, direct-drive tape transport system. Its innovations included a capstan motor to drive the tape at constant speed, with the other two motors overseeing the tension of the feeder spool and constant tension for the take-up spool. Rewind and fast-forward speeds were exceptional, too, the winding was admirably smooth, and braking was electromagnetically servo-assisted. *(continued)*

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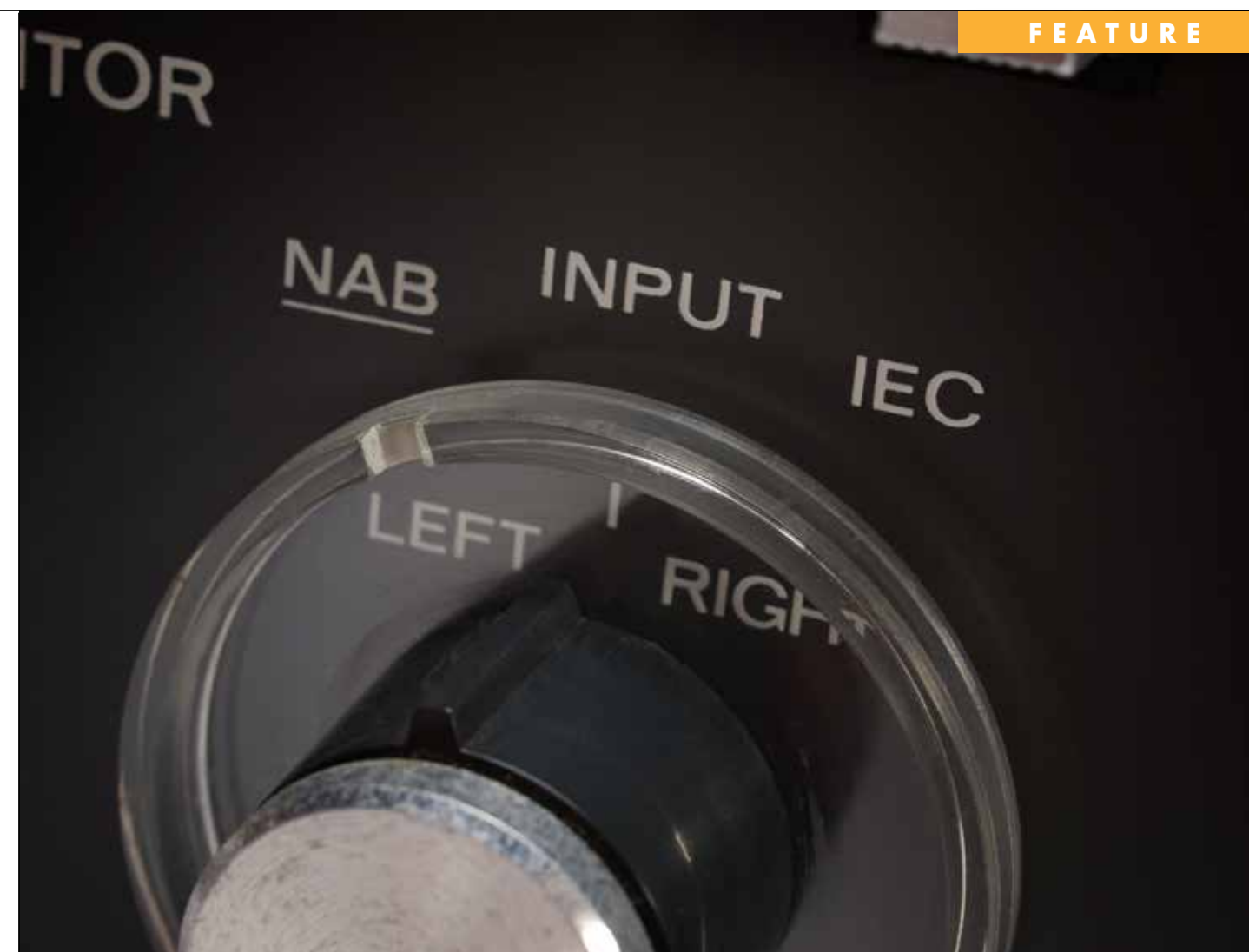


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FEATURE



Depending on your needs, pro or domestic, Revox offered quarter-track or half-track formats, and speed choices of 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ ips/7 $\frac{1}{2}$ ips, or the high-speed 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ ips/15ips configuration. Variants also included half-track, quarter-track and slow-speed versions 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ ips. Details included precise relay controls; accurately calibrated and illuminated VU meters; a four-digit tape counter; photo-electric end-of-tape switching; easy access to the heads for adjusting, cleaning or de-magnetizing; plug-in circuit boards for easy maintenance or upgrades; separate output for headphones with dedicated volume and balance controls; switchable EQ (NAB for recording and both NAB and IEC for playback), plus special features for editing. Inputs included switchable high/low Mic, Radio and Auxiliary.

Specs were remarkable for a machine measuring only 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x16x7in, compared to console types found in studios. The signal-to-noise ratio was stated as better than 58dB at 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ ips and 56dB at 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ ips, with crosstalk better than 45dB in stereo undistinguished by today's standards, but a recent listen to master tapes on a mint B77 proved it to be more than good enough for "high end" usage. *(continued)*

FEATURE



From A To B

After the A77 ended its run with Mk IV status, Revox unleashed the B77 in 1979/80. It was smoother to operate, better-sounding, more generously equipped, and more reliable. Revox built the B77 around an aluminum die-cast chassis. Like the A77, it housed three AC asynchronous motors, the capstan controlled by a tachometer head that read a series of pulses created by the teeth on the circumference of the motor, their rate compared against the frequency of an internal oscillator. This ensured superlative speed accuracy, while reducing wow and flutter. The A77's relay controls were supplanted by transport controls overseen by solid-state logic.

A three-head machine like the A77, the B77 also had space to accept an optional fourth head, enabling the unit to be compatible with for slide-projector synchronization. Also provided by the B77 were sound-on-sound, adding echo or reverb to an existing track, "Duoplay" when both recorded tracks are used simultaneously but to play back different material, and "Simuplay" for synchronizing music on one track with speech on another. The Revox B77 also provided a splicing block with built-in cutter fitted to the front panel, audible tape shuttling and, in the Mk II, built-in vari-speed control +/-10%, equal to a pitch change of two semi-tones.

Slightly larger than the A77, it still occupied a space of only 17 3/4 x 16 1/4 x 8 1/4 in. Performance gains over the A77 affected every area, from wow-and-flutter to crosstalk to S/N ratio. As far as I can gather, only one functional sacrifice was made when the A77 morphed into the B77, in that customers purchased the B77 with either NAB or IEC equalization, not both.

Revox B77 In The 21st Century

Like any vintage open-reel decks, all have suffered the ravages of time and wear; besides checking out the electronics, tape decks have mechanical elements that need replacing, and tape head wear is a primary concern. *(continued)*

FEATURE

What makes the Revoxes so appealing is that they shared much with their Studer-badged professional siblings, so they're more rugged than most. And sonically, they are among the most domestically-acceptable open-reels—by that, I mean in terms of price and dimensions—that can ape the brilliant sound that keeps so many exhibitors at recent hi-fi shows demonstrating with open-reel tape.

Some might think that there may be a US-vs-Europe divide at play, and I appreciate that many brands use hot-rodded TEAC/TASCAM or Technics reel-to-reels at shows. Conversely, a number use Nagra's, which—like the Revoxes—are as Swiss as William Tell. Comparing eBay.com with eBay.co.uk reveals similarities in pricing, too: parts donors from under \$100 to good, median buys for \$500 and perfection for \$1000.

Revox users are well-supported by specialist repair services, particularly for spares. Dedicated web sites can provide information ranging from servicing, such as www.revox.freeuk.com, to hot-rodding, as well as sourcing fully-refurbished machines beyond those you might find on eBay. We heartily recommend a few evenings studying the lore on www.taperecorder.co.uk and www.reeltoreel.de/worldwide/B77.htm before you go crazy with eBay. Pub. Note: For our Stateside readers, I suggest perusing www.tapeheads.net as well.

Whatever route you might pursue, the Revox's style, reputation, build-quality, smooth operation, configuration options, and ergonomic brilliance, and—it must be added—sheer “Swissness,” captured the hearts of many thousands of aficionados. Enjoy one for an evening and you'll hear why. ●



New Releases

Taylor Swift

Red

Big Machine, 2LP or CD



The number of artists that could actually get away with having their face plastered on a pizza delivery box is rather small. It has to be the type of artist regularly described with the word “brand,” and whose new albums are treated with marketing onslaught that regularly greets films with such as words as “Avengers” or “Dark Knight” in the title.

With the release of *Red*, Taylor Swift has confirmed what many have suspected for a long while. She is not a country artist but a pop brand, one whose new work can be delivered to your door via a nationwide pizza chain (this is true) and whose collaborators are discussed as frequently as her sound. Perhaps more, as *Red* sees Swift working with ace songwriters such as Max Martin (Britney Spears, Kelly Clarkson), Butch Walker (Avril Lavigne, Pink), and Dan Wilson (Weezer, Dixie Chicks).

At the recent broadcast of the Country Music Association Awards, Swift even seemed out of place. The sound of new album *Red*, her fourth, is as Nashville as Carly Rae Jepsen’s ubiquitous hit “Call Me Maybe.” In fact, while listening to the record, I seriously often thought my iTunes skipped to Jepsen, especially on the bubbly stop-and-start chorus of “22.”

Having sold more than one-million copies of the effort in its first week of release, Swift has cemented her status as a Lady Gaga-level pop star. That said, some moments on *Red* are irresistibly catchy. Opening track “State of Grace,” for instance, sees Swift rocking with the type of session musicians that can channel U2 with the snap of a finger. “Stay Stay Stay,” meanwhile, dials things down for a cutesy indie-pop ditty that feels comprised of all the best parts of Apple’s iPod commercials.

On *Red*, there’s a Swift for every occasion. “I Knew You Were Trouble” goes from jangly acoustics to current, Skrillex-influenced dancefloor trends. It’s not a full-on electro-pop number; still, enough rave culture is thrown in to ensure Swift will get remixed by the DJ at the local club. And just to

show that she hasn’t forgotten her roots, there are teenage-dream ballads such as “Begin Again.”

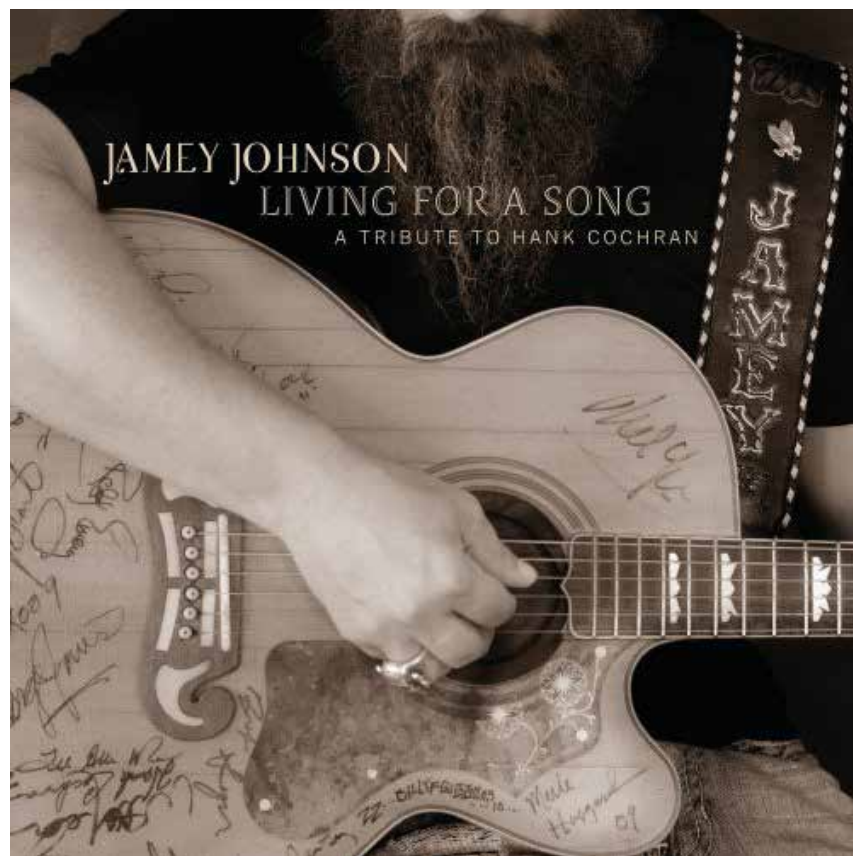
In the same way, perhaps, that rock bands such as Radiohead and Wilco are likely too ambitious and too talented to make a train wreck of an album, enough money and back-end production back Swift to at least guarantee more than a few pop hits per album. Her general likeability—she’s sort of a grown-up Tinkerbell—and sly nods to indie records that are “cooler” than hers via tunes such as “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together” make her the rare star that sells wholesomeness and bashfulness.

But at 16 songs and more than 64 minutes in length, *Red* overstays its welcome. Rom-com collaborations with puppy-dog British vocalists such as Ed Sheeran and Gary Lightbody need to go, and the album suffers from a general lack of direction. As a songwriter, Swift’s strength is in her approachability. She has, for instance, a deft ability to write anonymously detailed lyrics. We all, for example, know the “little kid with glasses in a twin-size bed” in the Shania Twain rocker “All Too Well.”

For that reason alone, *Red* will make a lot of people happy. Her record company, many of her fans, her collaborators, and no doubt Swift herself.

In many ways this is an album that a young pop star is expected to make. That’s fine, but it’s okay to have wanted more, too. After two hit albums and an Album of the Year Grammy before she was 21, the young Swift earned the right to take risks. *Red*, however, plays it safe, and presents us with another artist trying to keep up with trends rather than set them.

—Todd Martens



Jamey Johnson

Livin' for a Song: A Tribute to Hank Cochran
Mercury Nashville, 2LP or CD

Songwriter Hank Cochran, who passed away in 2010 at the age of 74, was born during the Great Depression, and in his songs, he often sounds like he spent a lifetime trying to shake free from it. Much of the material on *Livin' for a Song*, a new tribute album spearheaded by country rabble-rouser Jamey Johnson, sounds born of heartache, honing in on stately tunes that trace the sad, slow arc of relationships falling to pieces and the deep-seeded scars left behind in their wake. Opener “Make the World Go Away” sets the tone, Johnson and Alison Krauss trading lines about better days gone by (“Do you remember when you loved me?”) atop a backdrop of woozy pedal steel and a trickle of piano notes that fall as steadily as teardrops.

Johnson, who hit a career peak in 2010 with his double-LP *The Guitar Song*—a painfully overlooked gem that arguably stands as the best country album of the last ten years—recruited a veritable murderer’s row of multi-generational collaborators to the project, including Krauss, Willie Nelson, Elvis Costello, and Leon Russell (perhaps the only man with a beard bountiful enough to stand up to Johnson’s own). More important, however, is Johnson’s willingness to cede the spotlight to his all-star guests. He gamely plays the sideman when Nelson delivers the devastating opening blow on the battered “Don’t You Ever Get Tired of Hurting Me” and acts as Lee Ann Womack’s foil on a playful “This Ain’t My First Rodeo.”

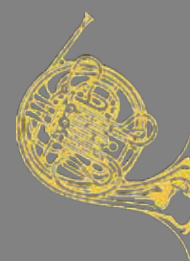
As its title suggests, *Livin' for a Song* keeps the focus first and foremost on Cochran’s words. Johnson and his cast of collaborators are careful not to overreach. Arrangements are universally tasteful, and songs generally built from little more than roadhouse piano, unfussy drums, pedal steel, and the occasional country-fried honky-tonk lick. These are wise decisions, and further highlight sharp vocal performances from the likes of Kris Kristofferson (who adds a weathered, roguish charm to “Love Makes a Fool of Us All”) and Russell, who brings a lion-in-winter gravitas to “A Way to Survive,” a song about holding onto the past as a means of making it through another day. *(continued)*

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MUSIC



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Many of Cochran's songs appear rooted in the idea of memory. This is true whether he's embracing the past as a crutch ("A Way to Survive") or staring it down as yet another hurdle to overcome (the shattered "She'll Be Back," which contains the pitch-perfect line "If she's anything like her memory, she'll be back").

Fittingly, then, many of these tunes call to mind another time and place. The music conjures an assortment of rowdy honky-tonks (a spirited "The Eagle") and lonely corner bars (the last-call swoon of "I Fall to Pieces," which tries but can't quite live up to the standard set by Patsy Cline's timeless version). It's little surprise. After all, the 37-year-old Johnson is something of a throwback

himself, and although he's decades removed from elder collaborators like Nelson, Bobby Bare, and Ray Price, he's certainly a kindred spirit.

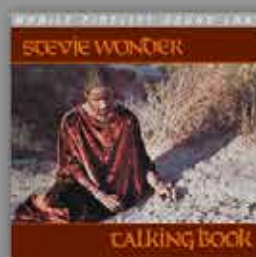
On this project more than any other, Johnson appears to have fully embraced his role as a musical steward—one that will keep the outlaw tradition alive long after its eldest practitioners are dead and gone. In that sense, his version of "A Way to Survive" starts to take on an even deeper meaning. "I must cling to what's gone," sings Johnson, "If I'm to move on." And so it goes on an album that tightly clings to the past even as it points to an increasingly bright future for the still-rising country star.

—**Andy Downing**

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Soundgarden

King Animal

Seven Four Entertainment/Republic
Records, 2LP or CD

When grunge graybeards Soundgarden hopped on the reunion express in 2010, the band was grandfathered into one of the headlining slots at Chicago's Lollapalooza music festival. The move was warranted, for even if the 90s rock giants weren't playing some of their first shows in about a decade, Soundgarden helped define the Lollapalooza brand in its first incarnation as a touring festival. The group just happened to have a terrible slot, having to close the festival opposite Arcade Fire. Hence, fans were presented with a rather peculiar quandary: see a formidable rock band that hasn't performed live in about 10 years or see an orchestral band in its concept-album prime?



Yet even Soundgarden recognizes it's almost always better the first time, and the sludge-drilling Chris Cornell-fronted outfit dispenses with such criticism on the opening track of its first new album since 1996. "I only ever really wanted a break," Cornell howls in "Been Away Too Long," a song full of lyrical imagery about running in circles. Soundgarden may not know whether it's heading backward or forward, but about 90 seconds into the record, it stops to matter. This is the most conventional, straight-ahead track on the record. Kim Thayil's guitar takes what had been a rather formidable riff and melts it into something that twists and oozes, until it locks into a groove in the song's final moments. The Soundgarden of *King Animal* isn't exactly going anywhere new, but it does make a more than valiant effort to

avoid charges of living in the past.

Of the set's 13 tracks—(16 for those who bought the extended edition)—not all burrow as deep. Some, especially the more spacious, less aggressive tracks such as "Blood On the Valley Floor" and "Taree," aim for mysticism but largely just trudge along in trying to find it. Sure, Soundgarden always had the tendency to traffic in somber melodicism, but anyone that's seen the band during the past two years can confirm that it remains a potent little group.

So when *King Animal* lets the band out—lets it stretch and roam—it shows why Soundgarden was and should still be considered one of the more ferocious hard rock bands around. "Non State Actor" begins with a wind 'em guitar riff that clocks its way up and down

until it's impossible to try and track where drummer Matt Cameron is heading. "Rowing" lets the band get freaky, as it plays what sounds like a tormented blues song thanks to Ben Shepherd's taunting, out-front bass lines.

The marriage of metal and psychedelics that set Soundgarden apart from the rest of the Pacific Northwest's 90s rock aggressors does so again on *King Animal*. Cornell's vocals get mysteriously lowered deeper into the mix to great effect on the Stonsey "Attrition"; "A Thousand Days Before" takes a left turn with elements of Middle Eastern guitars. The band, unexpectedly, finds the more adventurous aspects of *King Animal* in an expected place. "Here," sings Cornell, "in the dark."

—**Todd Martens**

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Kiss
Monster
 Universal, LP or CD

When Kiss first hit the scene in the mid 70s, the band was lousy musicians with a ton of attitude, writing songs about conquering the world and the women that inhabited it. The group's stage show, however, eclipsed anything that came before and brought arena rock to life.

Nearly four decades later, Kiss is a highly polished unit, and *Monster* is perhaps the best-ever Kiss record from standpoints of production, performance, and sound quality. All the Kiss hallmarks are here: massive drums (complete with space echo), huge guitars, and plenty of bravado. But considering this is 2012, the preconceived combination ends up sounding like a Winger album, right down to the carefully calculated breaks in songs where Gene Simmons or Paul Stanley slip in a line of innuendo after the blazing guitars fade to zero.

Akin to how boring Bruce Springsteen sounds when he entertains romantic fantasies of a woman at the checkout counter, Simmons reciting vapid lyrics like "It all comes down to the wall of sound/Yeah, we all bow down to the wall of sound" (amidst countless, perfectly overdubbed guitar bits) and Stanley carrying on about how "he's a freak" are cringingly lame, particularly for 60-year-plus-old guys. *(continued)*

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Gene and Paul are too old and too rich to have any credibility singing this stuff. Thank god their marketing brains have not decided that they should cover the American Songbook. Not that it would be much worse.

“Eat Your Heart Out” qualifies as the worst cut on the album. It starts with the guys singing a capella before breaking into a hard-rocking groove, with Simmons proclaiming a “hot mess is just what he needs.” As premeditated amounts of fill lurk in the background, the tempo replicates those on the five previous songs. It’s all one big Kiss track blended together.

Guitarist Tommy Thayer and drummer Eric Singer contribute more here than on than past efforts. Simmons claims the

strategy factors into the band’s revitalization, yet it’s too little too late. Perhaps he and original bandmate Stanley are just exhausted. For his part, Stanley, as seen via recent YouTube concert footage, has almost entirely lost his voice. Watching and listening to him try and sing the classics isn’t pretty.

The high-res version of the album, available on HD Tracks, sounds decent, with the LP taking a back seat in sonics. No surprise there: The vinyl is doubtlessly an afterthought to capitalize on current interest in analog.

Monster might have been a good Kiss studio album in 1978. It sucks to grow up.

—Jeff Dorgay

A m a d i s

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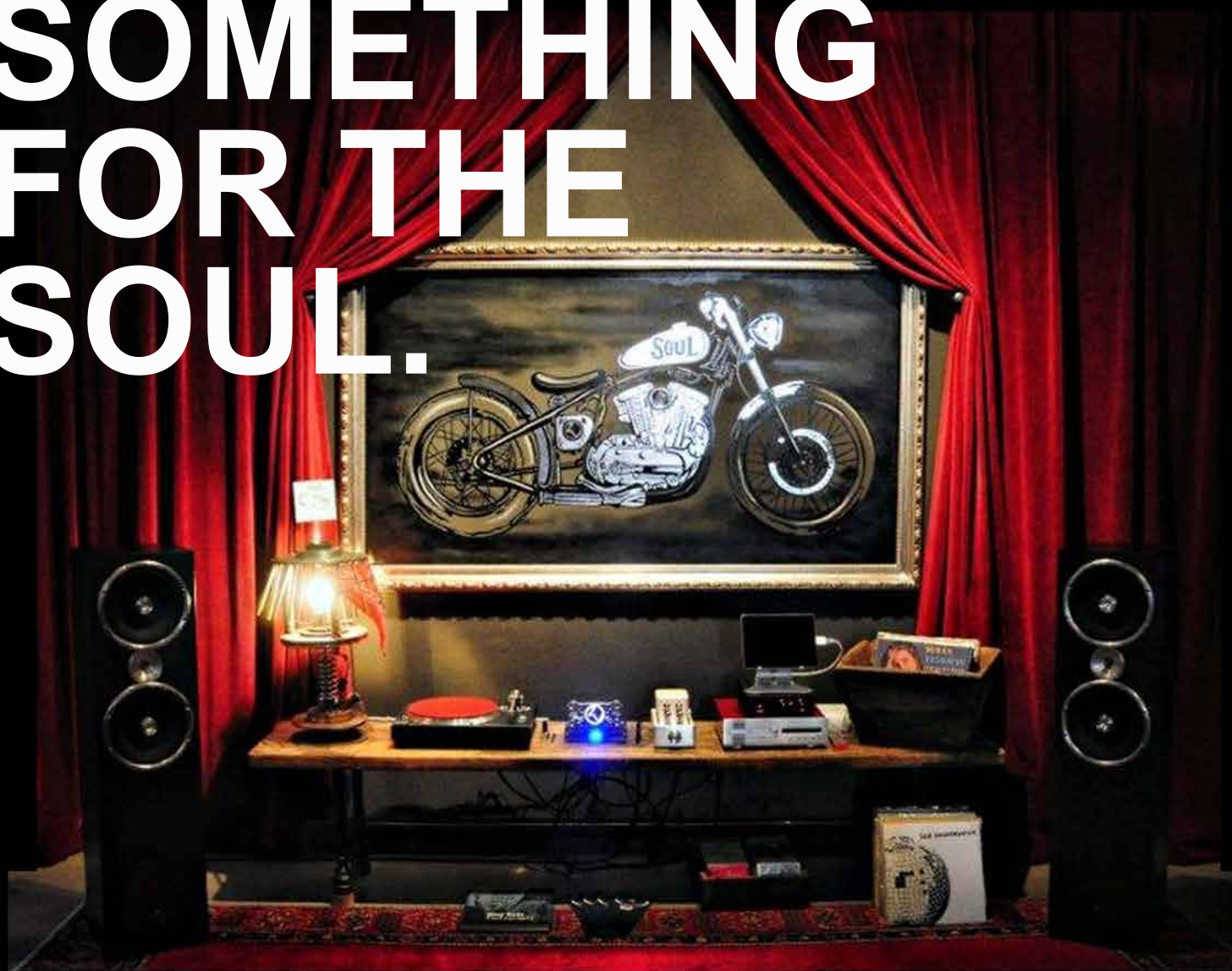
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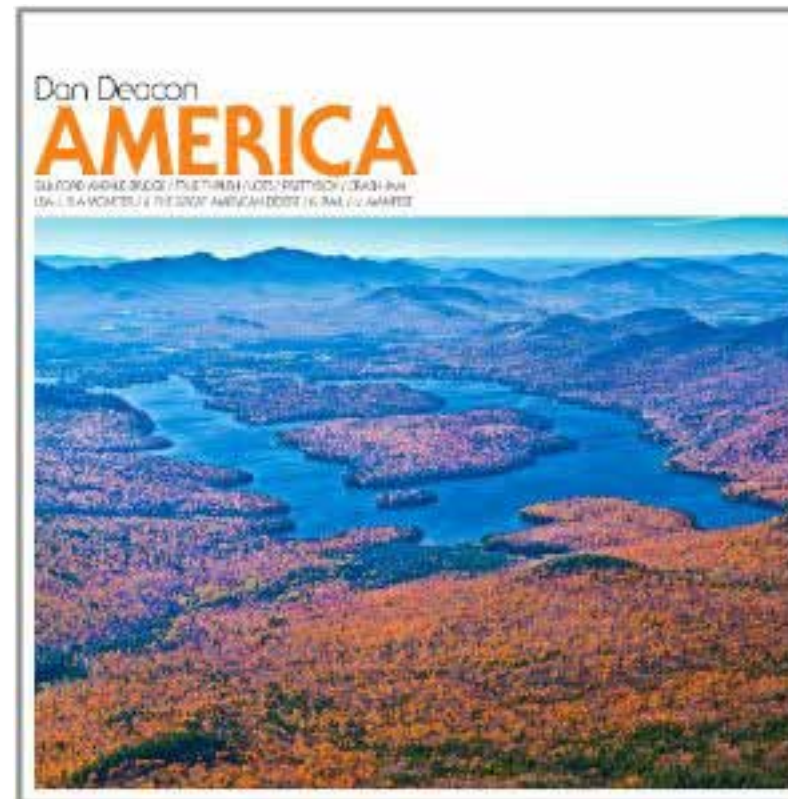
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MUSIC



Dan Deacon

America

Domino, LP or CD

Dan Deacon burst onto the music scene in 2007 with *Spiderman of the Rings*, a playful, low-budget affair that cast the Baltimore-based musician as something of a hyperactive, overgrown child. Layering together kinetic eight-bit beats and sampling everything from Woody Woodpecker to equally cartoonish rapper Ludacris, Deacon crafted giddy dance tracks wholly designed to stimulate the body.

This time around, however, he's just as interested in stimulating the mind.

In recent interviews, Deacon, disheartened by nightly exposure to drug-addled dance crowds, talked about wanting his music to have a deeper, more meaningful impact. In this regard, *America* continues a transition the musician started in 2009 with *Bromst*. There's an increased focus on vocals, and he takes a more classical approach to arrangement and composition—even closing the album with a four-part, 20-minute suite inspired in large part by his burgeoning side career as an avant-garde composer. It's also, in some ways, Deacon's bleakest record, driven by a sense that suggests he's been forced to set aside childhood things and stare down life as an adult.

Deacon, 31, began writing *America* in early 2009 shortly after reading Cormac McCarthy's apocalyptic novel *The Road*. The latter tome's bleak sensibility appears to have bled into his worldview. At times, Deacon comes across like a soothsayer letting loose with a scary vision of the end times, singing: "I see the hillsides burning in flames"; "The light will explode with clouds and ash"; "Nothing's green/Nothing grows/Everything's burned."

America opens with "Guilford Avenue Bridge," a tune named for a 174-foot concrete-and-steel expanse in Baltimore. It's a symbolic move—the musician taking one last look back at his beloved hometown before venturing into the American wilderness. From there, the music often spirals off in unexpected directions, moving from the weightless grandiosity of "True Thrush" to "Crash Jam," a buzzing, reverb-heavy number that sounds like towering robots laying waste to entire cities. (continued)



At times, the album echoes the feel of traversing the American countryside, and songs veer from wild and overgrown to trim and orderly. Nowhere is this truer than on the stunning four-part suite that closes the album. On “Is a Monster,” for one, a gorgeous string section slowly gives way to a mechanized, assembly-line beat—a shift that mirrors the sensation of driving past overgrown prairies gradually tamed by concrete and meticulous landscaping. “Rail,” in turn, could pass for a lost Kraftwerk track, its repetitive groove evoking a steam locomotive chugging along at full power.

Like the country itself, Deacon’s *America* is both awe-inspiring and, at times, horrifying. He balances dark lyrical themes (disease, pestilence, and imminent nuclear destruction) with weirdly optimistic instrumental passages that hint at a deep-seeded belief that things will indeed get better. The musician has

repeatedly said he once believed an apocalypse was not only inevitable, but welcome, and his earliest recordings could rightfully be described as the soundtrack to end times—one final, cartoonish blowout before the ship heaves and sinks to the bottom.

These days, however, he looks and sounds like a man determined to avoid disaster, even aligning with the Occupy Wall Street movement. This newborn mindset surfaces most cleanly on the album-closing “Manifest,” an anthemic, horn-stoked episode that ends things on an upbeat note. “Hope I get it right tomorrow,” sings Deacon as the music builds to a grand, orchestral swell, coming across like a man unwilling to let the looming darkness extinguish his inner light. —**Andy Downing**

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Jan
Jan
 Enclaves, LP or CD

Jan is the solo project of Kim Talon, something that means nothing to most everyone reading this. Don't worry, this review is not going to chastise anyone for being out of the loop.

Talon was part of a respected cult act in Los Angeles named Eagle & Talon. Correction: A respected cult act in one or two hip neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Every major city claims similar groups—acts that specialize in scrappy but sharp punky, garage rock. The band struggled to sell records and even struggled to raise money on crowd-funding site Kickstarter.

Sadly, Eagle & Talon took a hiatus just as it began to branch out beyond its Sleater-Kinney-inspired roots and brought in more dance textures. As Jan, Talon once again grounds everything in a grimy coat of underground rock. Yet she's also assembled a 12-track collection that's restlessly urban and full of hooky, dependably tough guitars.

"Your education, your art diploma, you think that those are going to save your life," Talon sings on "Cousins," delivering the line with a scene-it-all before daftness that's a step beyond cynicism.

She falls back on streetwise riffs, ultimately developing a sleeves-up attitude matched in tracks such as "How to Beast" and "Work for the City." And there's more than meets the eye, as demonstrated by the latter song, tempered with cooing background harmonies and guitars that ultimately turn on themselves like funhouse mirrors.

The standout instrument is Talon herself. Her vocals aren't a knockout howl or a thing of pop perfection, but they aptly lead songs in and out of more atmospheric territory—be it the cold starkness

of "All of These Igloos" or windswept guitars and creaky-door rhythms of "Ailing Ale." She sings rock songs like they're ballads and slower numbers like they're full of chaos, and when she finds a balance, as on "Act Like a Pantry," the songs become neatly compartmentalized agents of tension. —**Todd Martens**



Dethklok

Metalocalypse: Dethalbum III
William Street Records, LP or CD

When we last heard from Dethklok, the band's revenues were equal to the world's seventh largest economy. Since, the group's reclusive behavior has only increased its appeal. Brisk sales of the new record pushes it to the number four slot, and if the new tour proves as successful as the last, the band could overtake Japan's GNP by year's end. Pressed for answers in a recent interview, lead singer Nathan Explosion merely shrugged his head saying, "Whatever." Ah, the power of make-believe humor and rock farce.

Pulling no punches and leading with "I Ejaculate Fire," *Dethalbum III* checks in as the quintet's most brutal effort yet. Explosion's voice comes full-throttle as he growls above the pummeling, machine-gun fire of bass drums. The remainder of the set retains Dethklok's signature dark vibe, bouncing between themes of death, despair, and the fantasy world it claims as its own.

Surprisingly, the band steps out of its usual guitar-dominated format on "Ghostqueen," dominated by Explosion and percussion. But the lead guitarists get plenty of time to shine. Skwisgaar Skwigelf and Toki Wartooth's Judas Priest-like banter reaches new heights throughout "Killstardo Abominate."

Dethalbum III stays relentless in pace, with no breaks in the action. As promised, this is metal as it should be. And if that's not enough, the deluxe edition includes making-of footage. Death to all false metal!

—Jeff Dorgay

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Aperion Audio Verus Grand Bookshelf Speakers

By Mark Marcantonio

Aperion Audio in Portland has a well-deserved reputation selling speakers directly to the end user through its website, offering speakers with solid designs and fine cabinetry. The quality of its products paired with terrific customer service has earned the company a loyal following.

Its latest Verus Grand series speaker (priced at \$598 per pair) is the bookshelf version of the company's Verus Grand Tower speaker. The compact speaker features a fresh design, beginning with a tapered cabinet and full-face front flange. Its all-new ASR soft dome tweeter looks a bit funky, with its vertical bar, but it is a smooth performer. Aperion pairs the tweeter with a 5.25-inch woven-Kevlar driver. The braced fiberboard cabinet, available in cherry or gloss piano black veneers, is 13 inches tall, 7.5 inches wide and 9 inches deep, and has a port at the rear. The front grilles are held in place by magnets, making for a clean front face that looks just as good with the grilles removed.



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FEATURE

Setup is quick and easy: Simply place the speakers 6 feet apart, 2 feet from the back wall and about 9 feet from the listening chair. They are slightly stiff out of the box, but after a few days of nonstop play at modest level, the speakers reveal their true sound. Eschewing toe-in placement, the Verus Grands work perfectly well positioned straight on.

Smooth Operators

Exploring Rita Wilson's (yes, Tom Hanks' wife) cover of "Wichita Lineman," the Verus Grand Bookshelf speakers represent the piano with a slightly mellow tone that exhibits a hint of sparkle. The speakers convincingly reproduced the decay of each note during the last 30 seconds of the traffic, with Wilson's voice never becoming shrill—high performance indeed for speakers at this price point.

These small speakers easily create a large soundstage, placing the keyboard in the opening track of Bonnie Raitt's latest album, *Slipstream*, outside the left speaker, while Raitt's lead guitar stays anchored low and inside the right speaker. Tonal balance is the key, with Raitt's sultry vocals never being overshadowed by the solid bass response these speakers provide, exceeding what you might expect of a LF spec of 59 Hz. The hint of breathiness shown on "Take My Love With You," a highly pleasing and an unexpected treat, reveals more resolution than the norm for a \$600 pair of speakers. (continued)



FEATURE

An Easy Test-Drive

The Verus Grand Bookshelf speakers work well with tube, solid state or Class-D amplification; however, combining them with an EL34-based tube amplifier adds a bit of extra jump when listening to tracks like Brian Setzer's "Dirty Boogie." His big-band orchestra fills the listening room with plenty of front-to-back depth.

Bill Frisell's classic album *Good Dog, Happy Man* shows off the ability of these speakers to reproduce midrange and upper bass texture, with the various cello arrangements readily present here. On the other hand, the signature baritone vocals of Crash Test Dummies' front man Brad Roberts fall a bit short on "Superman" and "Mmmmm." But to Aperion's credit, the company makes quality the priority with these speakers, rather than inducing a mid-bass hump to give the false impression of bass. As a result, the critical mid-band is much clearer.

For those also using these speakers in a home theater setup, Aperion includes mounting brackets, which get the speakers up and out of the way. Watching the *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, the dialogue and city noise stay separated from the music in the sound track, with the music clear and enveloping. It's easy to take an Aperion system from a two-channel setup up to a full 5.1-channel system—simply add another pair of Verus Grands for

surrounds, a Verus Forte center-channel speaker (\$350 each) and one of Aperion's Bravus powered subwoofers (priced from \$349 to \$899 apiece).

Aperion backs all of its speakers with a 10-year warranty, 30-day trial, and free shipping both ways, making the Verus Grand Bookshelf speakers an easy choice for an in-home audition.

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Audioengine D2 Premium 24-bit Wireless DAC

By Mark Marcantonio

Audioengine's new D2 Wireless DAC provides an elegant solution for those wanting a higher-quality streaming solution than just a wireless transmitter, which the Hong Kong-based manufacturer offers with its highly successful W1 and W2 wireless analog transmitters. The new W2 digital transmitter, priced at \$599 for the set, is integrated with a two-piece DAC system that comprises separate sender and receiver units. The system is capable of processing 24-bit/192-kHz music files, with the ability to stream 24-bit/96-kHz files.

The sender unit is connected (and powered, if desired) via USB connection, with an optical input also available. The sender then transmits the digital signal to the receiver via a walled wireless 802.11g network. The system removes output-level distortion from the equation with a separate signal. The D2 system can work with up to three receiver units in different listening systems.

Highly versatile, the D2 DAC can be used as more than a standard computer-based wireless DAC: It is equally at home acting as a PCM-to-home-stereo link and as a wireless USB-to-S/PDIF convertor. The latter proves handy with my reference SimAudio 300D DAC, which features a USB limited input for 16-bit/44.1-kHz files.

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FEATURE

Nuts and Bolts

The D2 DAC presents a clean and compact design aesthetic consisting of dark-grey brushed aluminum casework with thick plastic end caps. The sender and receiver units each measure 4.75 inches wide, 5.5 inches deep, and 1 inch high—each unit is barely larger than three CD cases stacked on top of each other.

The faceplate of each unit has two grayish LED buttons—one for power and one for pair-sync status. The sender has a silver output volume control knob, optical and USB inputs and a jack for the wall-wart power supply. The receiver has RCA output jacks occupying the same space as the knob and USB port on the sender. An optical output and power jack receptacle finish off the receiver's front. The back panels of both units hold only the dual antennas. A few may grumble about front-facing jacks, but small-stature equipment does require compromise on occasion.

Up and Running

Setting up both the D2 units to pair with either an Apple MacBook or Windows Vista desktop and main audio system took less time than unpacking and reading the brief but informative manual. *(continued)*

The sender and receiver units each measure 4.75 inches wide, 5.5 inches deep, and 1 inch high—each unit is barely larger than three CD cases stacked on top of each other.





For Macintosh owners, simply open up the sound control in your computer's system preferences and select "Audioengine D2". Windows users verify connection in the sound application of your control panel menu. In either case, make sure to start with the sender unit's output turned all the way up. Typical of all Audioengine products, the D2 system comes with a full assortment of cables, so running to RadioShack won't be necessary.

For owners of larger homes or those broadcasting to or from a studio or garage, the D2 transmission range easily exceeds 100 feet, according to Audioengine, and will transmit through one exterior and one interior wall without signal degradation. I tested the transmission through an exterior wall and five interior walls at a distance of some 70 feet and the D2 yielded equally good results.

At just \$599 with full wireless functionality, one might bet that the D2's DAC section would be the weak link. Here, the PCM1792A chip serves the DAC well. Consistency across the spectrum with all components is a big thing with us here at *TONEAudio*, and the D2 DAC performed above expectations across the board.

Peak Performer

Listening to the D2 DAC, the one word that keeps coming to mind is "smooth." The D2 is a budget DAC that successfully avoids the dreaded listener fatigue. When using the D2, bass guitar definition has a solid punch in The Burned's toe-tapping "Hard Lesson," along with a pleasant richness and depth. On the top end of the frequency spectrum, the D2 delivers Kathleen Edwards' clear vocals in "Change the Sheets" without the grain or irritation that plague most DACs at this price point. The soul of music lives in the midrange and the xylophone in Steely Dan's classic "Aja," which comes across with the sweet warmth that many budget DACs miss.

The Audioengine D2 DAC offers convenience and high performance in a compact package that is reasonably priced. Computer audiophiles take note. ●

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Audiophile Pressings

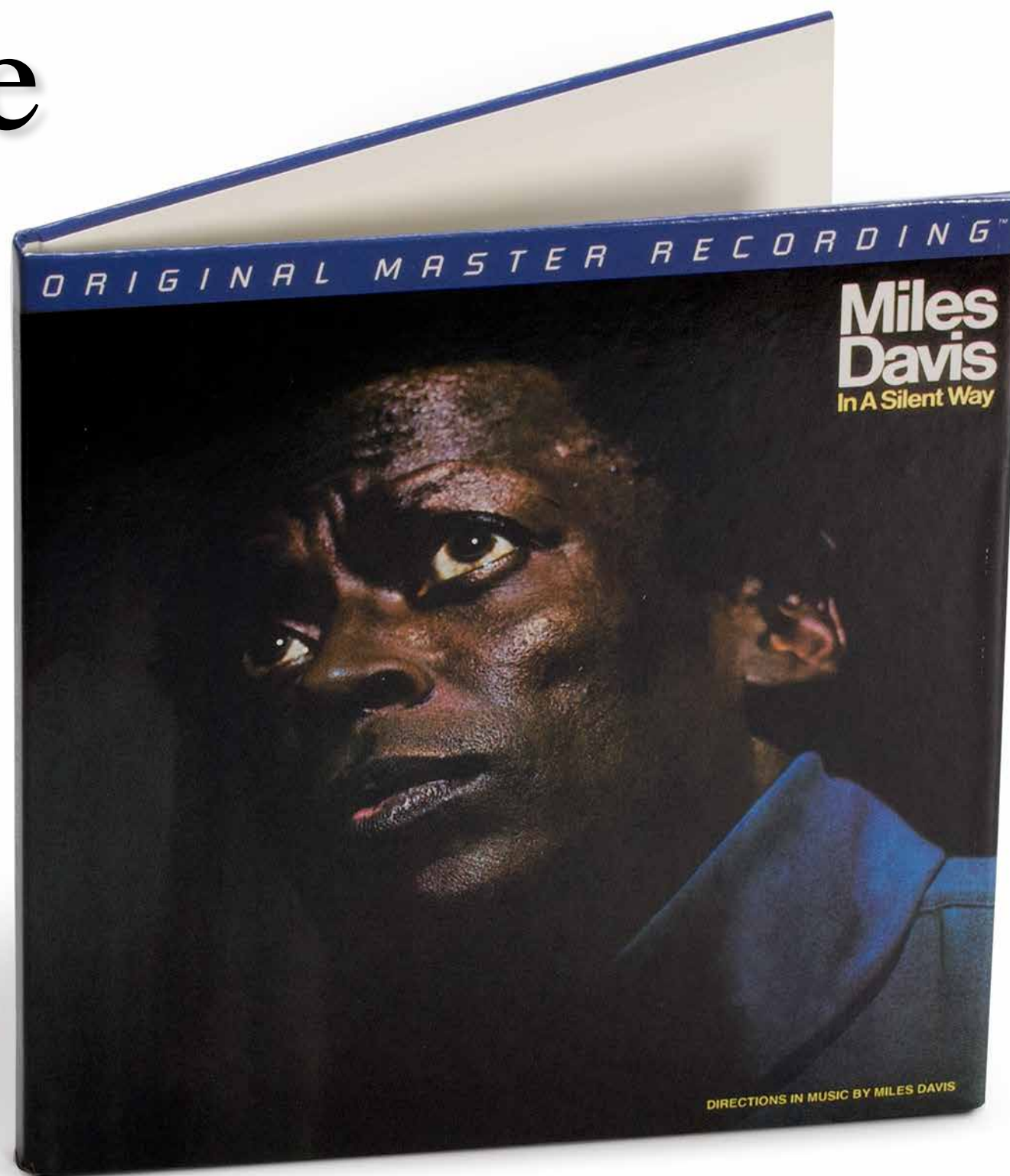
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In a Silent Way

Mobile Fidelity, Hybrid SACD



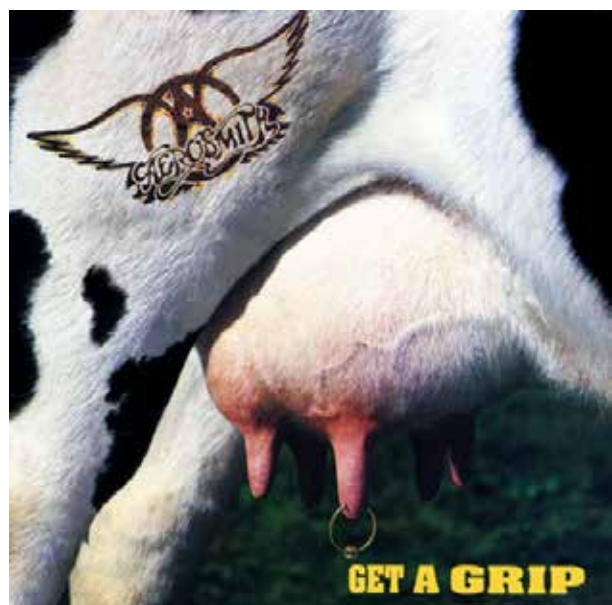
Miles Davis

In a Silent Way

initiated Miles Davis' full-blown commitment to fusion, which continued with his next album, *Bitches Brew*. A cursory look at the record credits reveals major fusion powerhouses present and accounted for—Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Joe Zawinul, and Chick Corea.

Mint, early-stamper Columbia 360 pressings can fetch between \$50 and \$100. With only a late LP pressing and the Davis CD box set used for comparison, the MoFi disc is light years ahead. The highs are so smooth, and Davis' trumpet so fluid, it shows how good SACD can sound when handled with care.

A bit of tape hiss creeps into the quietest parts of the album, adding to the analog feel. MoFi's LP edition is coming soon. It will be interesting to see how, if any, it improves upon what's here.



Aerosmith

Permanent Vacation and *Get a Grip*
24/96 HD Tracks Download

Aerosmith

Aerosmith floated off almost everyone's radar during the end of Reagan's second term. The band's 1985 release, *Done With Mirrors*, went Apollo 13, leaving one of the world's hardest-rocking bands in the "Where are They Now" bin. Everything turned around by the end of the summer of '87. "Dude Looks Like a Lady" hit MTV like a bullet and got played almost nonstop; "Rag Doll" and "Angel" followed in early 1988. The Toxic Twins were back in full force, addictions at bay and squabbles behind them. Initiated by a collaboration with Run-D.M.C., the transformation marked one of the biggest comebacks in music history.

At the time, digital dominated, and LPs were basically pressed as an afterthought. Mastered by George Marino at Sterling, the original Geffen copy of *Permanent Vacation* is bright, much like the CD. If you can find one, the Japanese version qualifies as the best original; prepare to part with \$50, plus shipping.

The HD Tracks version restores much-needed dynamic range, allowing the record to rock harder than ever. While Aerosmith has enjoyed plenty of cheeky moments, many forget it was once a tightly knit unit. *Permanent Vacation* oozes texture, from Steven Tyler's harp playing to Joe Perry's guitar work. Now, with room to breath, it's easier to see the musical genius at hand. *(continued)*



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MUSIC



Aerosmith

Pump

24/44.1 HD Tracks Download

Switching back to the original Geffen CD reveals a lack of vocal depth, echo, and decay—especially on “Dude Looks Like a Lady”—along with a tipped-up high end and compression on the drums. Granted, the latter still don't sound that much like drums on the HD version, but it's a step in the right direction. The HD edition also offers a much wider soundstage than the analog or digital originals. If this happens to be one of your choice classic-rock sets, you will marvel at the new details, with additional guitar fills, clearer overdubs, and more overall texture.

The next album in Aerosmith's catalog, *Pump*, is only rendered in the 44.1/24 format, and leaves this writer wondering: What's the point? Passing it off as a “high resolution” download is misleading, and while arguments abound regarding bit depth being just as important as sample rate, high-frequency crunchiness always seems to suffer. It's tough to believe a 24/96 file doesn't exist.

On 1993's *Get a Grip*, more compression works its way into the mix, and even though this is a 24/96 file, scant information is revealed when compared to the original CD. High frequencies are again accentuated on the original, still the HD version, admittedly more dynamic, comes across as flat. Unless you really need to hear “Cryin'” with another db or two of dynamic range, pass.

The Beatles

The Web has been abuzz for more than a year about EMI's latest attempt to extract more oil from a well that we keep thinking will eventually run dry: the Beatles catalog. Yet the label manages to surprise us again, with a newly remastered set of vinyl.

Most retailers are discounting the new box to somewhere in the neighborhood of \$350-\$375, breaking the cost down to about \$27 per title; single albums are forthcoming. Not crazy money in audiophile terms. These record sound much better than anything you'll ever buy from Friday Music.

Unfortunately, Beatles lovers and audiophile collectors got thrown under the bus in one aspect, as the powers that be chose 24-bit/44.1kHz files for mastering instead of the high-resolution 24-bit/192kHz files used for editing. When the box sets reached the buying public last week, and seemingly everyone who was anyone--and a lot of those who aren't--promptly declared it rubbish.

Of course, once completist collectors are removed from the equation, as many of them won't take the damn things out of shrink wrap anyway, who is the real audience for these records? If you are lucky enough to have mint, low-stamper UK, German, or Japanese pressings of these classics, you already have the grail. Even if EMI had produced these new records from 24/192 masters, they would have still sucked in comparison.



The Beatles

The Beatles Stereo Box Set
EMI, 16LP Box Set

Sure enough, when evaluating a few tracks from *Sgt. Pepper* and *Magical Mystery Tour* on my \$100,000 analog front end, the new records fall short. This, however, is akin to comparing a New Beetle to a vintage '67 VW Bug with 1,500 miles that's either been lovingly restored to perfection or, better yet, is completely original and NOS. It's a pointless argument.

Even my favorite go-to set of Beatle albums, the blue BC-13 box, now fetches a thousand bucks in mint condition--if you can find one. When judged against these, the new records still lose a bit in top-end air and ultimate bass punch. Say what you will, but I like the stereo mixes.

Taking to the streets, I scoured a few of my local record stores (we've got quite a few here in Portland) and found used Beatles albums in horribly disfigured condition, with tattered covers and vinyl surfaces that I wouldn't play on a Close and Play. Average cost? About \$15, some as high as \$30. Most were American Capitol pressings. A rubbish situation, and you won't do much better on eBay.

Changing it up from my megabuck system to something more real world (a Rega RP6/Exact combination, playing through the vintage Nakamichi receiver and JBL speakers we used in our room at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest), the new records sound pretty damn good. *(continued)*

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August 2012 Paul Rigby, HIFI World Magazine



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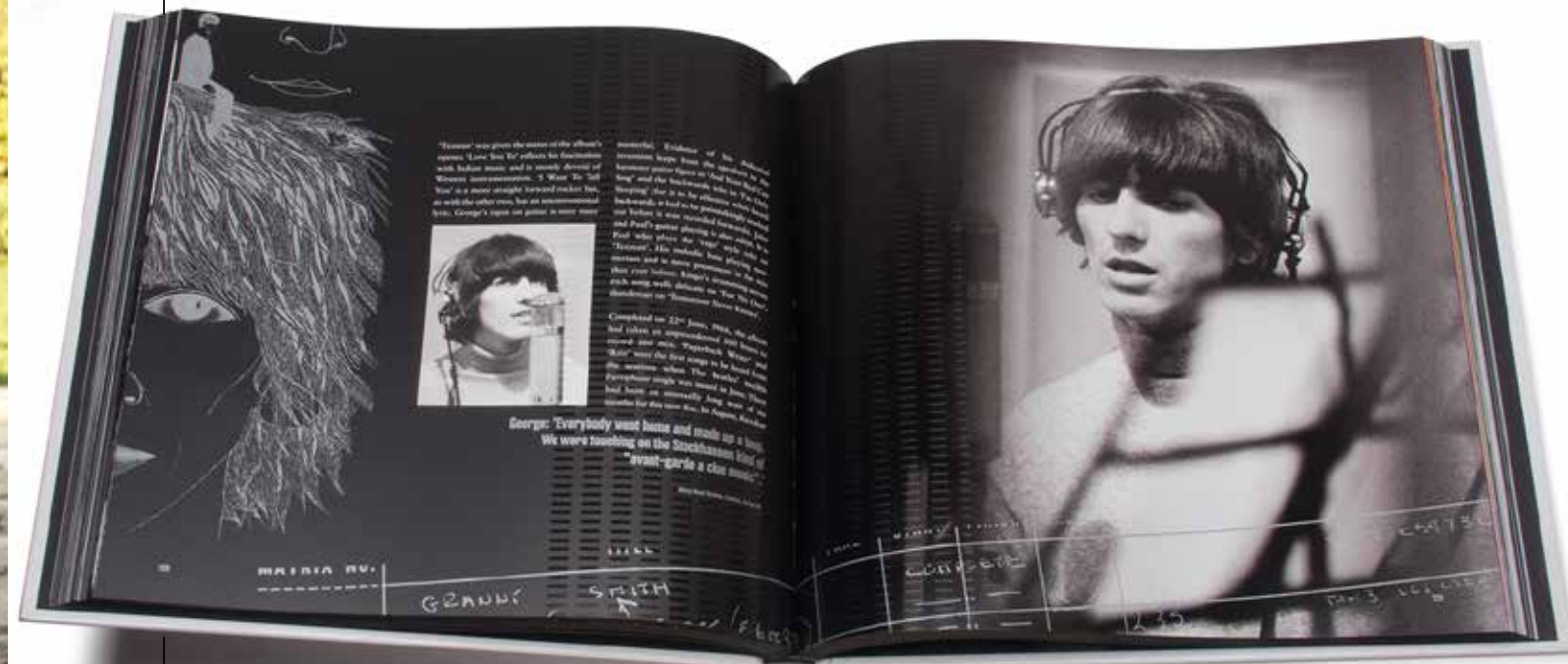
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MUSIC



The physical presentation of the box also qualifies as very good. Again, we are dealing with copies of copies, and the amount of money required to print these at a level commensurate with fine art is prohibitive. Contrast is picked up and some tonal scale lost, but again, when comparing to my mint BC-13 box or a scuffed American copy in the used bin, the new box comes out ahead. The jewel is the 252-page book, offering an engaging overview of the Beatles history. The records themselves sport a mixture of Parlophone label, Capitol label, and Apple label IDs--a fun touch for those new to Beatlemania. Not historically correct, but informative.

Early purchasers have mentioned sporadic pressing problems, but the set we received for review (purchased from SoundStageDirect.com) is free of defect. Hopefully, issues remain limited to the first out of the chute. A gentle hand is required to remove the tightly fit outer

slipcover, but I'm guessing that if you can't remove it without damage, you're not much of a hit with ladies, either.

Seasoned audiophiles, record collectors, and music lovers often forget that new people discover the Beatles and vinyl, every day. A majority of them could care less about first-stamper this or German pressing that. If you have rare, original pressings of these records, relish the fact that you own a precious part of music history. You will never be happy with these pressings.

Those of you beginning your vinyl journey, whether music lover, budding audiophile, or both, the current Beatles box will prove a great addition to your collection. Who knows, they may lead you to get caught up in all this madness to seek out a few mint originals for your collection someday. ●

SoundCast OutCast Portable Indoor/Outdoor Speaker System

Starting at \$900
www.soundcastsystems.com



Is it a futuristic beer keg? A spare droid from *Star Wars*? A water conditioner? While it does look futuristic, this curious device is available today from your local SoundCast dealer—and it's one of the most interesting portable music systems we've seen.

The OutCast is a single 26-inch tall cylinder with a slight taper in the midsection. The control panel is located on the top of the device. It lets users operate an iPod or iPhone, as well as iTunes, Pandora, and Rhapsody. The easy-grip handle, also on the top, has plenty of room for those with large hands, while the sealed function buttons should be impervious to prying hands and intoxicated neighbors.

Within the casing are four sections. The uppermost section holds the receiver unit and a 100-watt Class-D amplifier. The middle section contains four 3-inch drivers aligned in a right-left-right-left pattern that creates a 360-degree stereo output. The bottom section features a sealed chamber holding the 8-inch IMPP woofer, which, with its down-firing placement, allows for even bass dispersion. The bottom section has ports for the woofer and ambient blue lights, and also serves as a sturdy base. The OutCast's heavy-duty design and external material limits exposure to the elements, while still letting the music be heard.

Setting up the OutCast and installing its rechargeable nickel-metal hydride battery takes about five minutes, if you take the 90 seconds required to read the manual. Both the audio-input jack for non-iPod MP3 players and the power-cord socket are covered by a flexible but tight-sealing rubber gasket. The OutCast offers three 2.4-GHz channels, which are manually switchable, to prevent interference with other wireless devices.

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Over the years this has included tonearms, speakers (both active and passive), a record label producing and recording some of the world's finest musicians, cabling and interconnects, phono stages, tuners, amplifiers, DACs, preamps, CD players, crossovers, power supplies, whole house distributed audio systems, and networked audio components such as audiophile-grade servers and streamers.

Naim also designed the audio system for Bentley® automobiles.

Staying true to the vision of the late Julian Vereker, the founder of Naim Audio, we will continue to push the envelope and invest in new technologies that carry forward the experience of listening to music in its most genuine form.

But even as we move from spinning vinyl to CDs to streaming hi-res music files throughout the home, we will never lose sight of what truly matters:

the music.



A Perfect Partner

Placement of the OutCast is key to its performance. Getting the unit away from anything within at least five or six feet is critical for stereo performance. Then, once you've charged it overnight, you're ready to rock.

Combining the iCast dock/transmitter (a \$100 option) with an iPod Classic, the Outcast fills most backyards with quality-sounding music. Sell that boom box at your next yard sale, because the Outcast has serious low-end grunt. Its midrange punchiness combined with omnidirectional ambience redefines outdoor hi-fi. Blasting Adele's *21*, the OutCast easily carries her vocals to the end of my backyard, yet it wasn't so loud as to send the neighbors into fits of rage.

The conveniently placed handle makes light work of carrying the 25-pound OutCast around the yard or to a neighbor's house. And it's equally at home indoors as it is outdoors.

tone style

Better Than A Rock

By Mark Marcantonio

Unlike those outdoor speakers that look like rocks (but do not rock when called upon), both the OutCast and smaller OutCast Jr. (which starts at \$600) deliver the goods, no matter what the volume. This is an all-purpose portable player with serious capability. Whether I was playing John Mellencamp or AC/DC, the sound was full and clear. At a recent outing, a few guests complimented the sound quality and wondered where the wires were—one of the OutCast's most-noticeable perks.

The device claims a 300-foot range between it and the iCast wireless dock. It was still playing solidly at the edge of my 200-foot yard, but does drop off somewhat around corners. For best results, you'll want to keep it within line of sight. Like a tuner car from *The Fast and the Furious*, the OutCast features blue mood lighting to increase its sci-fi feel.

Don't be surprised if taking the OutCast or Outcast Jr. to your next party makes you the hit of the neighborhood. ●





iPad mini

\$329 - \$659 (depending on configuration)
www.apple.com

Though an iPad mini with a Retina display is probably right around the corner, the current version, with its 7.9-inch display (versus 9.7 inches for the standard iPad), does remarkably well at delivering the iPad experience in a smaller, more-compact package. Best of all, Apple has trimmed the price: The mini starts at \$329 for a 16-GB, Wi-Fi-only model.

Feeling lighter than its 11-ounce weight, the mini delivers all the features you're used to in the full-sized pad: front and rear cameras, FaceTime capability and a similar range of memory, from 16 to 64 GB.

Utilizing the same dual-core A5 processor as the iPad 2, the mini feels a bit sluggish in comparison to the current iPad, which has the A6X unit under the hood, when playing video games or surfing the web. The mini still does admirably well with a fast Wi-Fi connection.

Much like Amazon's Kindle Fire, or some earlier Android tablets, the mini seems to be a better Kindle than magazine reader. But it's a *mega* remote control for any of your music servers or other devices so equipped—and iTunes is also a blast to use on the mini via AirPlay, if you have a B&W Zeppelin or other

AirPlay-enabled music player. The additional screen real estate of the mini a blessing for those used to an iPod.

If you consider the current iPod touch a baby iPad, the family is now seamless, with offering in kid's meals, regular and large sizes. Should you be a multiple iDevice family, the mini shares the same power connector/charger as the iPhone 5. Audiophiles will be disappointed to know that this means it is *not* compatible with the Wadia 170i or 171i docks.

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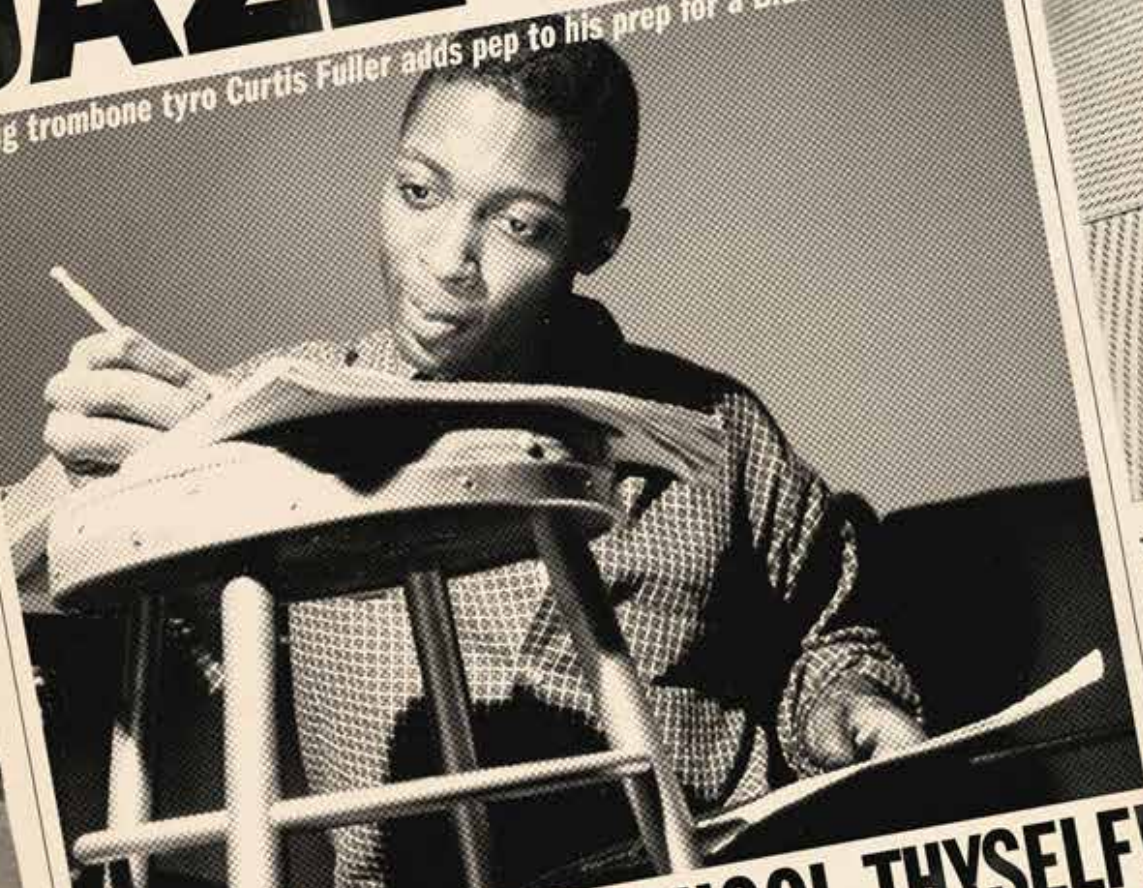
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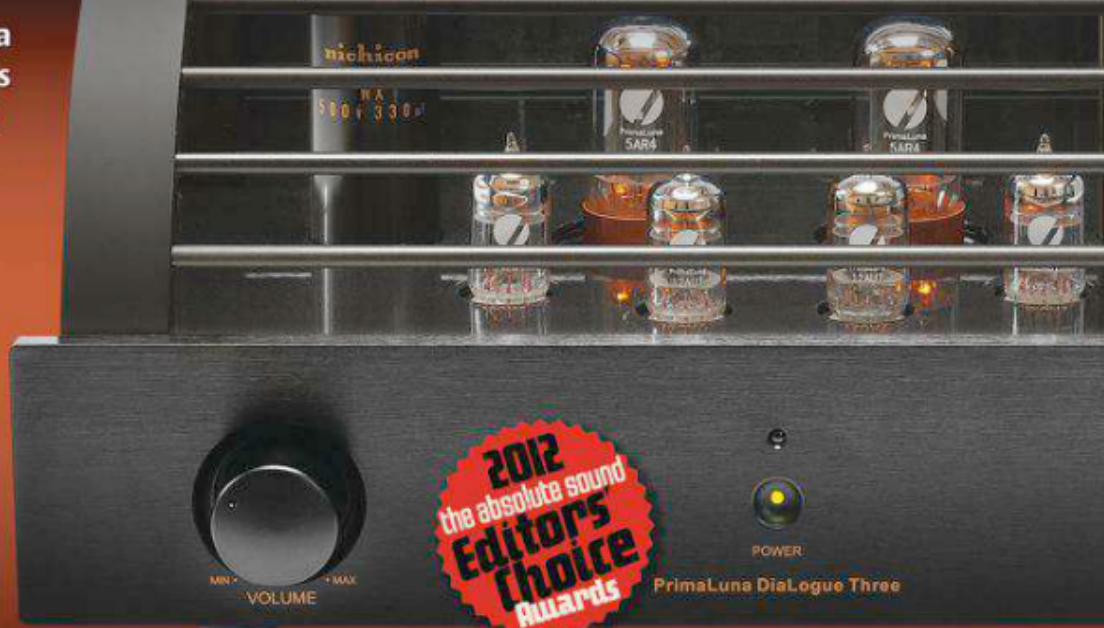
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An Onkyo Trifecta

By Andre Marc

There seems to be somewhat of an audio renaissance coming out of Japan these days. Several brands that have been entrenched in home theater are gathering their engineering muscle and returning to their two-channel roots. One such brand is Onkyo, a company with a long history—it was established in 1946, to be exact—and a long list of innovations and accomplishments.

Onkyo brought to market the first cassette deck capable of high-speed dubbing and continuous play, as well as the first CD player to use optical data transfer. The company has also been an innovator in surround sound, shipping the first THX-certified A/V receivers and the first THX 5.1-channel receiver. In fact, my first home-theater receiver was an Onkyo, which I passed on to a friend during one of my upgrades—it remains in his system seven years later! But my first experience with Onkyo was as a teenager, when I owned one of the brand's tuners, which was one of the finest available at the time.

FEATURE

**Pre-Holiday Cheer**

Christmas and Hanukkah came early this year, when three boxes appeared at my door containing Onkyo Reference Hi-Fi components: the M-5000R power amplifier (\$2,699), P-3000R preamplifier and DAC (\$1,899) and C-7000R CD player (\$1,499). All three are superbly built, with excellent black casework that beautifully matches my equipment rack.

The M-5000R is a behemoth of an amplifier. It's about the size of a microwave oven and weighs in at an impressive 52 pounds. It has something of a retro appearance, with two large power-output meters on the front panel. I happen to love meters, but for those preferring "deep-listening" sessions in total darkness, the meters can be turned off. The M-5000-R delivers 80 watts per channel into 8 ohms, and using it in bridged-mono mode via a lone XLR input doubles the power. It has two unbalanced RCA inputs, plus the usual IEC receptacle for power input. Interestingly, all three of these Onkyo components only have a single two-prong input instead of the usual three.

The P-3000R preamp is also substantial, tipping the scales 25 pounds, and it features a plethora of input and output flexibility. *(continued)*

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FEATURE



In addition to its two-channel capabilities—courtesy of four analog inputs, a MM phono input and several sets of analog outputs—it also functions as a digital hub, with two S/PDIF coaxial inputs, two S/PDIF optical TosLink inputs, and an AES/EBU input. It also features a TosLink digital output and a sole USB input for those using a computer as their music source.

The P-3000R is very cleverly put together, with many performance-optimizing design choices and user-configurable options. Most noticeable among these is the ability to shut down the digital circuitry completely when using the analog inputs. Users can also engage 2-times or 4-times upsampling with the touch of a button, or choose to have the data pass through in its native format. All digital inputs other than the TosLink (which is limited to 24-bit/96-kHz data) can handle 24-bit/192 kHz data.

The P-3000R also conveniently displays the incoming sample rate, which is a feature I have really gotten used to. (Of course, you can shut off this display if you prefer.) Purists can also bypass the bass, treble and balance controls on the front panel, though these come in handy with troublesome tracks. The P-3000R is also equipped with a requisite 1/4-inch jack for headphone listeners. All of this amounts to some seriously impressive functionality.

The C-7000R CD player is equally impressive. It is built with the same heft and attention to detail as the other two pieces. It features a conventional front-loading design, with a very solid CD tray, while offering coaxial and optical S/PDIF outputs and an AES/EBU output, so it can be used solely as a transport. There are also two user-selectable digital filters, called SHARP and SLOW, as well as a phase button that allows for normal or reverse settings. *(continued)*



Modern Classic: V40 SE

For the discerning music aficionado.

The V40 SE is a push-pull pentode integrated amplifier delivering 2 x 40W output power. OCTAVE has combined the sonic purity of the classic tube design for all sound-relevant circuit parts with modern semiconductors for tube circuit periphery, including innovative power management and electronic monitoring protection systems such as the energy-saving Ecomode.

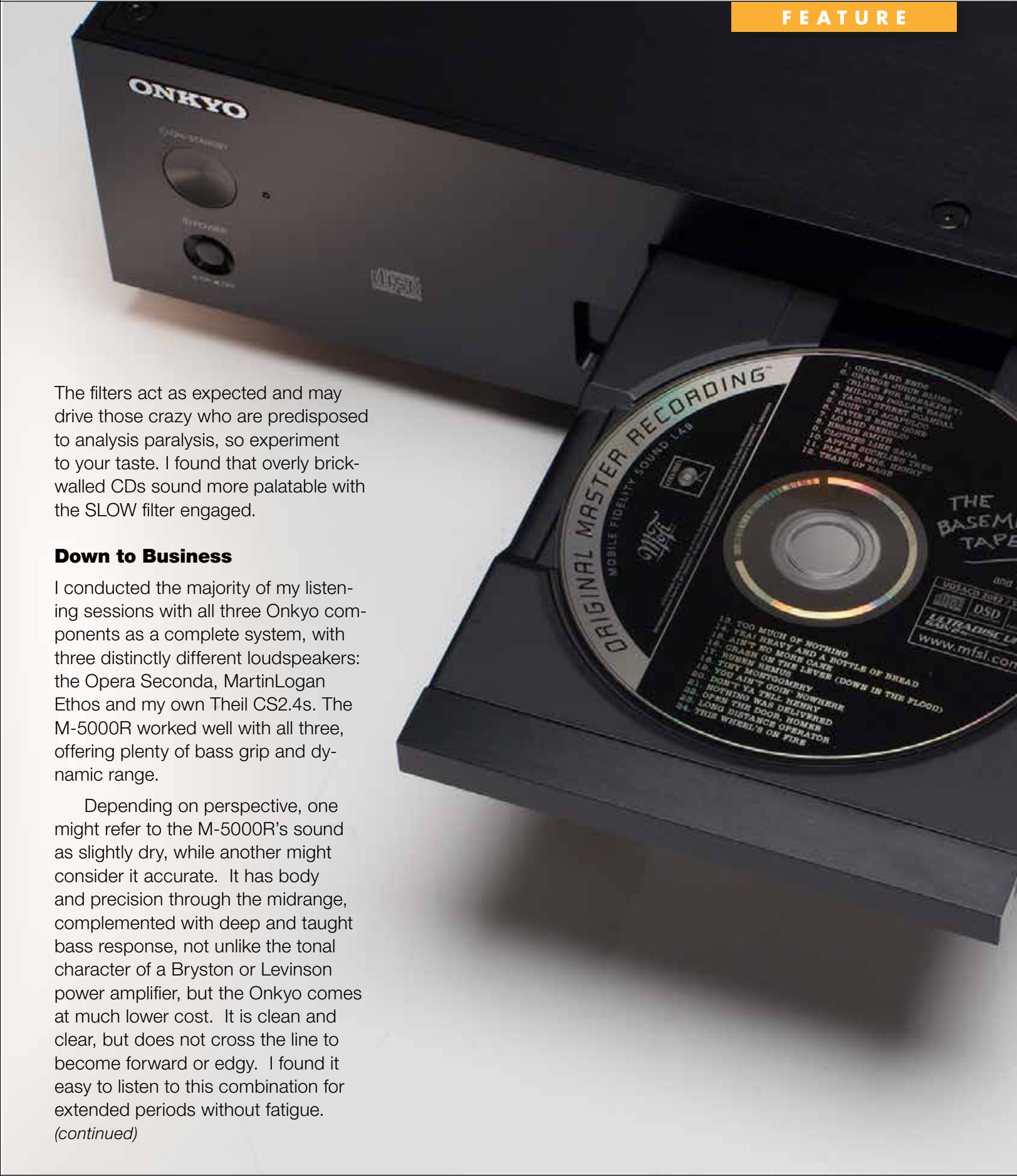
The ease of operation via its exacting yet simple fixed bias control and comprehensive electronic safeguards, along with its state-of-the-art performance affords absolute refinement, enduring value and unmatched reliability. Further audible improvement and an upgrade path are offered via the optional OCTAVE Black Box power supply capacitance module.

Exhibited in a range of models that redefine the expectations of tube amplifier performance, OCTAVE's timeless contemporary design and harmonious sound quality epitomizes the understated elegance of a true modern classic.

OCTAVE is distributed in the United States & Canada by Dynaudio North America.

Phone: 630.238.4200

E-mail: info@dynaudiousa.com



The filters act as expected and may drive those crazy who are predisposed to analysis paralysis, so experiment to your taste. I found that overly brick-walled CDs sound more palatable with the SLOW filter engaged.

Down to Business

I conducted the majority of my listening sessions with all three Onkyo components as a complete system, with three distinctly different loudspeakers: the Opera Seconda, MartinLogan Ethos and my own Theil CS2.4s. The M-5000R worked well with all three, offering plenty of bass grip and dynamic range.

Depending on perspective, one might refer to the M-5000R's sound as slightly dry, while another might consider it accurate. It has body and precision through the midrange, complemented with deep and taught bass response, not unlike the tonal character of a Bryston or Levinson power amplifier, but the Onkyo comes at much lower cost. It is clean and clear, but does not cross the line to become forward or edgy. I found it easy to listen to this combination for extended periods without fatigue.
(continued)



I've been on a Tim Buckley kick lately and his third album, *Blue Afternoon*, proves a perfect test track for this system. The album is beautifully layered, showcasing Buckley's jazzy yet more psychedelic side, and communicates the Onkyo trio's ability to render subtle nuances while producing plenty of soundstage with both width and depth.

With many music lovers still not embracing the latest trend of computer-sourced playback, the C-7000R makes a perfect solution for anyone who has a modest-to-large CD collection and who still prefers to put a disk in the tray and push play. Listening to an extensive collection of male and female vocalists, including McCoy Tyner, Irish singer Lisa Hannigan, Norah Jones, Shelby Lynne and Marvin Gaye, the Onkyo player shows its strength in delivering an overall smooth tonal balance. Having auditioned a wide spectrum of players from \$1,000 to \$5,000 this year, I found that the C-7000R is definitely worth its \$1,499 price. I was able to take it to an even higher level when using it with my external Bryston DAC.

Shining Star

The P-3000R preamp is the standout component of this trio. It features a built-in DAC and a discrete MM phonostage, as well as an analog linestage. Having left my record collection behind some years ago, I deferred to our publisher for input on the P-3000R's phonostage. He reports that the discrete phonostage easily compares with anything that one might purchase in the \$300-to-\$400 range, and that it is a perfect match for the great crop of turntable-cartridge combinations within reach of the Journeyman Audiophile. *(continued)*



Are we Clear?

cardas.com/clear

FEATURE

The internal headphone amplifier works well with a variety of different phones: The Grado PS500, Sennheiser HD 650 and Audeze LCD-2 all proved highly compatible. A headphone section this good would probably set you back a couple hundred bucks, and not having to purchase interconnects and power cables for these three boxes, if they were external, saves you a lot of dough.

Of course, the Onkyo components offer great synergy when used together, but the digital performance of the P-3000R's internal DAC is so close to that of the C-7000R that it is not a necessary purchase for the listener only playing music from a computer or music server. (Onkyo has its own iPod/iPad dock, which utilizes a digital data stream that allows it to plug right in to the P-3000R's DAC.)

Switching between multiple digital sources, I preferred engaging the 4-times upsampling for Red Book files and 2-times upsampling for 24-bit/96-kHz files, but like the filtering, this is subject to personal taste. Should you add the P-3000R to your system, you'll definitely want to experiment.

Living Up to Its Reputation

We tip our hat to Onkyo for such an impressive commitment to two-channel audio. These components are definitely worthy of the company's long heritage. They combine great sound with solid build quality and a design aesthetic that has a foot firmly rooted in the company's past but that Onkyo has updated for the 21st century. We can highly recommend all three pieces. Watch our website for further analysis of these individual components. ●

www.onkyo.com



PREVIEW



Azur 851C Upsampling DAC, CD Player and Digital Preamplifier

\$1,850

www.cambridgeaudio.com

Cambridge Audio raises the bar, and throws in some major functionality, with its latest CD player, which can be used as a DAC. It offers a USB input and three standard digital inputs, all of which are capable of accepting source material with resolutions as high as 24 bit/192 kHz. With RCA and XLR inputs, it is compatible with whatever amplification your system features. And thanks to a new DSP volume control, the 851C can also be used as a preamplifier, provided you're not using a turntable as a source.

Watch the Comparo section of our website, where we will compare the 851C and its companion 851A integrated amplifier to the last generation models to see *exactly* where the improvements are.

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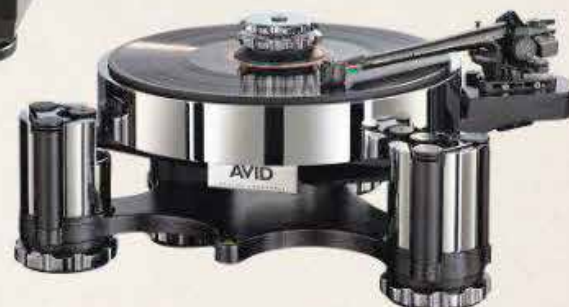


Rega RP1



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VPI Classic 1



Rega RP6



Clearaudio Concept



VPI Traveler



Marantz TT-15



Decware Zen Triode Phonostage, Model ZP3

\$1,195
www.decware.com

Decware is held in such high esteem here at *TONEAudio*, because the company builds all of its components by hand and guarantees them for life. This is a true artisan company, offering products with performance that goes well beyond their price tags—and the ZP3 is no different. Its all-vacuum-tube design provides MM phono users a slice of analog heaven for a very reasonable price. (MC users need merely add the Decware MC step-up transformer for an additional \$495.) The Analogaholic will have a report shortly.





German Physiks Unlimited MK II Speakers

\$10,000/pair
www.german-physiks.com

If you're tired of fussy speakers that take forever to set up and that have a confined sweet spot, the Unlimited MK IIs are a breath of fresh air. Their footprint is relatively tiny—each speaker has a base of just 9.5 square inches (24 sq. cm)—and their downward-firing woofer is unobtrusive. However, their nearly full-range carbon-fiber DDD driver, which crosses over from the woofer at 200 Hz, provides stunning, ESL-like realism while still maintaining an omnidirectional radiation pattern. This allows everyone in the room to hear a superb stereo image.



Product: 122 Integrated Amplifier

P R I M A R E

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Primare began in the mid 1980s by producing some of the audio industry's most celebrated products with their famed 900 and 200 series. These products not only broke new ground in presenting music in a new clean manner, but also proved that audio components could be beautiful works of art. In the same way that sound was presented with a new philosophical approach of "no sound," the aesthetic also had to be absent of unnecessary clutter and noise; simplicity in circuit design combined with simplicity of aesthetic design.

Today Primare embarks on a new era of two-

channel playback with a full range of new products. With continued belief in the importance of physical media, Primare has created three revolutionary new series of products each designed to take advantage of newer high-resolution music formats provided by computer audio. While these may be the frontier, Primare has created a full range of new sources designed for the many different media from analogue to BluRay as well as products that focus on musicality and simplicity in high-performance multi-channel.

Primare - It's the silence between the notes.



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PREVIEW

dCS Vivaldi

\$108,000 (four-box stack)
www.dcsLtd.co.uk

We've been using the dCS Paganini stack as a digital reference for the last two years and it has been untouchable—until now. Technology moves on and the four components in the new system have too many improvements to discuss them all here. Suffice to say that a recent visit to the dCS factory in Cambridge, England, revealed just how much more sound remains to be squeezed from the compact disc and the digital bitstream. Our review of the Vivaldi system begins in late December, but we will periodically post photos and listening impressions to our Facebook page.





Audio Electronics Nighthawk

The Return of a Classic Brand

By Michael Liang

Unless you've been in the audio community since the early 90s, chances are you haven't heard of Audio Electronics by Cary Audio. Audio Electronics (AE) was created in 1993 as a way for Cary to reach out to budget minded music lovers and audiophiles. AE offered award-winning products that are still highly regarded to this day. In 2009, Cary Audio put Audio Electronics into hibernation concentrating on their core brand. Today, Audio Electronics is back—offering new products with a focus on sleeker designs, smaller footprints, and superb performance still at an affordable price point as in the past. The first product to hit the streets is the Nighthawk headphone amplifier—at \$1,199.



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The Nighthawk is considerably larger than the average portable headphone amplifier at 14.5" L x 8.5" W x 4" H, but don't let the size scare you. It is well designed and easy-to-use featuring only the basic necessities—inputs, output, power. A silky smooth volume control, and a rock solid ¼-inch headphone jack adds to the feeling of quality, but an additional 1/8-inch jack would have been good for added flexibility, especially considering how many phones are showing up on the scene with the smaller plugs.

There are two pairs of outputs on the rear panel, one of them a pass through. The five second soft start/mute circuit is a nice touch – nothing worse than hearing a headphone amp make a loud click when you have your phones on!

Unlike the more expensive Cary HH-1 headphone amplifier (\$1,595) which is a hybrid design, utilizing a pair of 6922, the Nighthawk uses a Class-A solid state circuit with no feedback. We'll be reviewing the HH-1 at a future date for comparison, but the Nighthawk proves no slouch with a wide range of headphones.

Test drive

A Mac Mini serving up CD rips through the McIntosh C50 preamp/DAC was used for all source files. Even after three solid days of 24 hour operation, burning in another pair of headphones for another report, the Nighthawk remains cool, generating less heat than my iPhone. A great thing for those keeping their headphone systems in tight quarters.





FEATURE

The Audio Electronics Nighthawk
MSRP: \$1,195
www.caryaudio.com

Listening with everything from entry-level cans to the higher end models like the Denon D7000, Beyerdynamic T1, the Nighthawk proves clean and natural, adding no discernable flavor to the sound. However, system synergy is everything in headphone world, and with some phones more difficult to drive than others, the Nighthawk is not a perfect match with the Sennheiser HD800s. A much better match is my reference Lehmann Audio Black Cube Linear—similarly priced but totally different sound.

The Nighthawk pairs well with the mid priced phones

in my stable. The AKG K550, Sennheiser HD600 and Pioneer SE-MJ591 all proved a breeze to drive. Synergy rears its head again, with the AKG 550s a sweet match. I went back to these phones repeatedly and have never had a better experience with the K550. Natalie Merchant's *Ophelia* album proved highly satisfying with rich vocals and well controlled bass response, yet no hint of bleeding into the vocals or background instruments.

This versatility makes the Nighthawk a perfect choice for the budding or seasoned

headphone enthusiast. Even my \$99/pair Sony MDR-XB600 (Extra Bass) phones that sound mediocre at best with my iPhone really came to life with the Nighthawk. A playlist of Deadmau5 favorites showed how well controlled and powerful the bass response could be even with budget phones. All I wanted to do was turn it up!

Pub Note: Those with Audeze LCD-2 and LCD-3 phones can also rest assured that the Nighthawk is an excellent match with these planar favorites, which can be tough to drive. ●

Rivals Agree? What's Up With That!



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Michael Fremer, Stereophile, May 2012

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in amazement."*

Jacob Heilbrunn, The Absolute Sound, September 2012



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A Different Approach

PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium CD Player

By Jeff Dorgay

Whenever I'm asked to suggest a CD player that's warm, romantic, and "anti-digital," I always recommend a player with a vacuum-tube output stage. I nominate the same player *TONEAudio* contributors Bob Gendron and Jerold O'Brien use—the PrimaLuna ProLogue 8, now labeled the Classic. It takes the harsh, digital sting out of CDs. Sure, some digital players are more accurate and refined. But if you are a hardcore analog nut, many end up sounding thin in comparison. PrimaLuna recently took its vacuum-tube digital disc player a step further with the improved Premium.

For those not familiar with the name, PrimaLuna has been in business for more than a decade and boasts a fantastic reputation for sonics, build quality, and wonderful fusion of old-school and modern aesthetics. Available with satin black or silver faceplates, the new player's chassis is covered in a deep metallic-blue finish that's hand-polished to display a mirror finish—a PrimaLuna hallmark.

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REVIEW



My only complaint with the Classic? It lacks a digital input. But PrimaLuna addresses this and more with the Premium. To its credit, the company has not simply tacked a vacuum-tube buffer onto the end of a traditional CD player to soften things up. All the gain stages utilize vacuum tubes, and the Premium is the only player we've seen that uses a tube for the clock circuit, as well.

Arguments about system synergy and tonal coloration aside, the approach works well, and in much the same way an analog enthusiast would choose a Grado Statement or Koetsu Urushi phono cartridge over a Lyra Titan i or Ortofon Winfield. It's not better or worse, but it's a specific flavor, and if it's the one you crave, nothing else will do.

Beginning listening sessions with discs on the harsh side of the spectrum, it takes only a few minutes to see the brilliance of this approach. No, the Premium still can't make the brightest CD ever made, Stevie Wonder's *In Square Circle*, sound like an LP, but everything else on my toxic list becomes considerably more palatable. Tinkly percussion bits in "Thunder," from Prince's *Diamonds and Pearls*, float around the sound-stage as they should, with the electronic drums now slightly subdued, and making all the difference in the world. *(continued)*

While I won't define what this instrument produces as a tone control, it is a different set of tonal values, and even on the best CDs, an enjoyable presentation. For those new to *TONEAudio*, my listening bias favors an overall tonal balance just a touch on the warm side of neutral. So if you possess canine hearing and want a system than can remove wallpaper from the walls, you know where I stand.

New Versus Old

Costing \$1,000 more than the Classic, the Premium adds a larger, dual mono power supply, upgraded active and passive parts, and a different analog stage featuring four 12AU7 tubes (the original uses a pair of 12AX7s and a pair of 12AU7s). The dual 5AR4 rectifiers are retained to excellent effect. One of the biggest improvements arrives via the incorporation of a second Super Tube Clock, further reducing jitter and increasing low-level resolution.

Borrowing O'Brien's Classic for a side-by-side comparison proves illuminating. Where the original player sounds more like a Dynaco Stereo 70, i.e. "classic tube sound," the Premium sounds more like a modern tube amplifier; think BAT or ARC. It still possesses a wonderful and tubey midrange, but also greater extension at the top and bottom end of the frequency range, and stronger inner detail and punchier dynamics.

Brian Eno's latest work, *Lux*, illustrates the aforementioned characteristics. Another of his ambient works, reminiscent of *Tuesday Afternoon*, the composition rolls along gently with bell-like keyboard sounds that ease in and out of consciousness. Where the Classic cuts the decay short, the music lingers longer and fades further out before going to black via the Premium. A similar experience manifests on the title track of Jack White's current *Blunderbuss*,



with the newer player doing a better job at keeping sorted individual elements in a mix. Every disc I play with a relatively dense mix yields the same scintillating results.

Long-Term Pleasure

The Premium never gets on your nerves and proves great for extended listening. The vacuum tubes also make it easy to tune the sound. Stock PrimaLuna tubes will be fine for most, but with a plethora of vintage 12AU7s on the market (and at significantly less cost than 12AX7s), one can tube-roll to infinity. Scour the Internet, or brainstorm with Kevin Deal at Upscale Audio, PrimaLuna's importer, to enjoy different perspectives on the player when the mood strikes.

Full-day listening sessions are free of fatigue and, on more than one occasion, I'm lulled into thinking that I'm not listening to digital. Comparing the Premium to my Linn LP-12 turntable, I wasn't disappointed in the least. Switching back and forth between CD and vinyl versions of the Tubes' *What Do You Want From Live?* surprises me, with critical cues like audience claps and hall ambience nearly identical in texture and rendition.

A wide range of source material reveals no obvious shortcomings, although the slight warmth added by the all-tube design lends something special to rock and solo vocals. The grungy guitars of Mick Ronson and Ian Hunter on the classic "All the Young Dudes" overflows with texture and overtone, sounding like a pair of Marshall stacks right here in the listening room, with their Celestion drivers flapping at maximum excursion. Cat Power's "Manhattan" is equally enthralling, her wispy vocals hovering just above the main mix—another example of a modern disc sounding better than it ought to. *(continued)*

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REVIEW



One Input Makes All the Difference

When PrimaLuna introduced its first CD player about three years ago, computers were not the ubiquitous music sources they are today, and the company's players had a closed architecture. The Premium's USB input allows for a computer to be directly plugged in and utilizes an M2Tech HiFace USB/SPDIF converter internally, a touch that tremendously increases the player's value.

Feeding high-resolution files into the Premium's USB reveals the DAC's merits. The bass riffs in Charlie Haden's *The Private Collection* instantly disclose the advantage of extra resolution from

the HD download versus the excellently recorded CD. Texture abounds, and the player sounds more neutral when playing high-resolution files, with the slight bit of upper-bass warmth fading further into the background.

Comparison listening puts music played from the tray on equal footing with the same 16/44.1 files played via USB input. Still, high-res files via the server gain the edge in clarity and dynamics. All digital files are upsampled via a Burr Brown SRC4192 24bit/192kHz upsampling circuit and converted to analog via Burr Brown PCM1792 DACs. While some audiophiles condemn upsampling, it works splendidly here. (continued)



PrimaLuna Premium CD Player
MSRP: \$3,999

MANUFACTURER

PrimaLuna

CONTACT

www.primaluna.usa.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier ARC REF 5SE

Power Amplifier Pass Labs
XA200.5 monoblocks

Additional Digital Source

Mac Book Pro/Pure Music

Speakers Sonus Faber Aida

Cable Cardas Clear

Ticking the Remaining Boxes

Since it's a tube player, the Premium takes about an hour to stabilize. It sounds a bit slow with some upper bass bloat for the first 15 minutes, but within an hour, the issue completely dissipates. The Premium comes triple-boxed and includes a tube cage and pair of white gloves to keep the player's smooth finish free of fingerprints—or provide amusement when you play *Thriller*. The posh aluminum remote also controls any PrimaLuna preamplifier or integrated amplifier, keeping room clutter to a minimum. But don't lose it. You can't access the USB input or change phase without it.

I appreciate that the Premium only has a 2-volt output from its RCA jacks (instead of the more common 4-volt output), allowing the average listener to stay in the sweet spot of its operating range and offer a wider range of volume adjustment.

No, PrimaLuna's strategy isn't for everyone. Detail fanatics demanding razor-sharp leading edges on transients might be better served by a solid-state player. But if digital still leaves you cold after all these years, and you're wondering why you still aren't enjoying your CD collection (or digital files) as much as you should, give the Prologue Premium CD player a spin. ●



Outlet Elegance

Furutech f-TP615 AC Power Filter/Distributor and PowerFlux Power Cords

By Jeff Dorgay

Clean power is always at a premium in a hi-fi system, and Furutech is one of the leaders in the field. Its f-TP615 works overtime in my system, where I never seem to have enough outlets. Performing in concert with Furutech's top PowerFlux power cords, the f-TP615 provides an excellent way to keep gear supplied with the high-quality power it requires to be its best.

If you are a student of the "last wire" school of thought, and claim that the journey of power from the generating station to your system travels through junk wire—and that adding five feet of premium wire and connectors won't change things—I won't try to convert you. However, if you believe, like me, that AC power in the wall is more like a gigantic well, full of murky water into which one taps to power a system, read on.



Remember, your hi-fi system essentially modulates the AC power coming into the box with audio signals that go to your speakers. The cleaner the source, the cleaner the result.

While I have tried the f-TP615 in several different systems, all yielding excellent results, it best proves its mettle supplying power to my digital front end, the four-box dCS Paganini stack.

Digital Enhancement

Swapping all four stock power cords with PowerFlux and

f-TP615 instantly improves the dCS' performance in two areas: Lowering the noise floor and removing hash/grain from the presentation. All too often, we mistake the harshness of digital playback for grunge in the AC line.

Spinning David Byrne's live performance with Caetano Veloso at Carnegie Hall illustrates the aforementioned effects. The sparse yet dynamic recording, featuring the two artists playing acoustic guitar, sounds fine when utilizing stock cords. But a quick switch to the Furutech components reveals

more air around the guitar strings, a richer tone, and more body to the audience's applause. It doesn't hurt to have the Sonus Faber Aida speakers helping convey the very nuances the Furutech products bring to the dance.

Extended listening makes it easy to get used to the newfound liquidity, and it only takes a quick exchange back to the original setup to hear the soundstage collapse on itself. Everything sounds smaller, less focused, and as if I've moved my system to a smaller room.

Next Step, Analog

Anxious from noticing the improvements to the digital side of my system, I was curious to see how my analog front end would fare. Combining the distributor and cords with the ARC REF Phono 2SE, Simaudio 810LP, and Pass Labs XP-25 phonostages that supply my four turntables with amplification, I witness the same effect.

Interestingly, the Furutech components net a more pronounced impact on vacuum-tube gear, wiping away more "veil" than with the digital components at my disposal. Considering the miniscule signal voltages at work, this really is money well spent. Auditioning the latest release from Music Matters, Joe Henderson's *In and Out*, cymbals spring to life with more vigor than before. There's also a definite increase in bass texture.

Such improvements in analog resolution also mean that it's easier to hear the positives of the Furutech DeMag/DeStat combination—two essential accessories in my analog tool kit.

In the Box

The f-TP615 is built to Formula One car standards. All parts and conductors are treated with Furutech's Alpha cryogenic and demagnetizing process. The outlets and receptacles are industrial works of art, which is why many other manufacturers turn to Furutech for plugs and receptacles. Twelve-gauge Alpha -22 wire is used throughout, and the aluminum chassis is covered in a proprietary

coating, then combined with ceramic and nano-carbon damping spikes. Each detail ensures the power flowing to your components is as pure as possible. And it all works brilliantly.

While these Furutech designs qualify as premium power products, they will not turn a \$500 CD player into a dCS stack. Exhaustive listening comparisons reveal a combination of the f-TP615s and PowerFlux power cords offers the greatest gains in the lowest level of a system's resolution. Used in concert with top-shelf electronics, they allow components to attain maximum performance. In this context, I enthusiastically recommend the Furutech f-TP615 and array of PowerFlux power cords. ●

**Furutech f-TP615
Power Distributor**
MSRP: \$998

**Alpha PS-950-18
Power Cords**
MSRP: \$2,995 ea.
(1.8m length)

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- Jeff Dorgay, *ToneAudio*, Issue 22, 2009

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- Colin Miller, *Secrets of Home Theater and High Fidelity*

Fathom® f113

Class A Recommended Component

- *Stereophile*

"Editor's Choice" Award

- *The Absolute Sound* (2007, 2008, 2009)

Fathom® f212

The Fathom f212 has raised the performance quality of my audio system, and my enjoyment of it, to much higher levels.

The Fathom f212 belongs in the top-rank-Class A-of "Recommended Components."

- Larry Greenhill, *Stereophile*, April 2010

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- Jeff Dorgay, *ToneAudio*, Issue 26, 2009



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COMPACT, ELEGANT, AFFORDABLE

Peachtree Audio novaPre and Peachtree220

By Andre Marc

Peachtree Audio burst on the scene in 2007 with its Decco integrated amplifier with built-in DAC and onboard USB input, which was somewhat of a novelty at the time but has since become ubiquitous. It also has another fun feature: a vacuum tube in the preamplifier section that is visible through a glass window on the front panel, which breaks up an otherwise plain-looking case and combines design elements from audio's past and present. The success of the reasonably priced Decco—Peachtree sells refurbished versions of the original Decco for \$499—led to a broader product line and contributed highly to the viability of a new renaissance of integrated amplifiers with built-in DACs. Here, Peachtree was clearly a trendsetter.



Peachtree's products combine stateside engineering and design talent with overseas manufacturing efficiencies. It has grown its initial dealer-direct model to include an extensive dealer network to help support the company's expanding product line. Two of the newest additions to the lineup are the \$999 novaPre and the \$1,399 Peachtree220 power amplifier reviewed here. The company has also moved further upmarket with its Grand series, which thus far comprises an integrated amplifier and a preamplifier. We'll explore these at a future date.

A Quick Tour

The novaPre features four digital inputs and an analog input, so those wishing to incorporate an analog source are not left out in the cold. There are two single-ended RCA outputs, both with variable peak levels so that a powered subwoofer can be used, which is particularly useful for those employing a sat/sub system.

The Peachtree220 is a powerful Class-D amplifier, with 220 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load that almost doubles to 400 watts per channel when going into a 4-ohm load. The review samples arrived with a beautiful rosewood finish. (They are also available in high-gloss-black and cherry-wood finishes. Cherry is standard, rosewood and black a \$100 upcharge.)

Fit and finish is impressive and build quality is at the top of the chart, with perhaps the only inconvenience being that the RCA jacks are a bit close together, which limits your choice of interconnect cables to ones with svelte connectors. My reference cables from Kimber and Transparent just made it, but some others with large plugs may not. Setting up the Peachtree combo has a low degree of difficulty. Eschewing the stock power cords for a pair of Shunyata Venom cords adds a cost-effective bump in sound quality. *(continued)*



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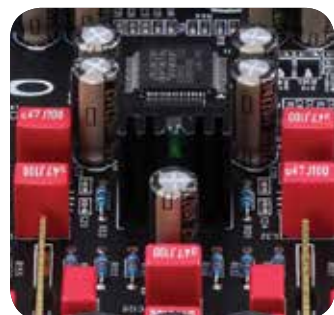


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The novaPre's digital inputs feed an ESS Sabre DAC capable of handling 24-bit/192-kHz data. One of the digital inputs is the ubiquitous asynchronous USB, along with S/PDIF coaxial and TosLink inputs. The novaPre's optical input is limited to 24-bit/96-kHz data, while those from most others handle 24-bit/192-kHz data. In addition to the variable line-level outputs, there is a headphone jack on the front panel. The tube in the window remains, but now a 6N1P replaces the 6922 of the original Nova, and can be included in or out of the circuit with the flip of a switch. In this case, it acts as a buffer stage—handy when a bit of tube warmth is really needed. The 6N1P is a very reliable tube, but does not encourage tube rolling, as there are few variations on this one. Oddly, the novaPre only features single-ended RCA outputs, while the companion power amplifier has

a pair of balanced XLR inputs.

Good First Impressions

The Peachtree gear breathes life into familiar reference tracks as well as new favorites. Marc Johnson's latest ECM collaborative album with pianist Elaine Elias, called *Swept Away*, is a perfect example. The natural elegance of the arrangements is reminiscent of Bill Evans—full of tonal color and richness. Piano and acoustic bass are always tough to reproduce convincingly, especially on an amp and preamp with a lower MSRP than a pair of premium interconnects. Particularly impressive was the Peachtree combo's ability to control the lower frequencies, rendering the full-bodied, woody texture of Johnson's bass lines, with no overhang into the midrange. This only improves as the gear racks up listening hours.

Staying in the ECM groove, next up is Anouar Brahem, the Tunisian master of the oud, which is a Middle-Eastern variation on the lute. Brahem's recordings vary in texture, with accompaniment including saxophone, accordion and flute. The Peachtree pair exhibited an overall smoothness and pace in capturing these exotic melodies and rhythms, which became simply hypnotic the longer I listened. When mixed in with the other exotic instruments, the oud provides a true test of resolution that the Peachtree gear easily passed.

While I was drawn to recorded acoustic music, I also wanted to give the Peachtree gear a chance to rock out. Texas singer-songwriter Ryan Bingham just released his fourth album, *Tomorrowland*, which is a more straight-ahead rock effort. His previous outings were laced with Southwestern flavors, country and blues. (continued)





Bingham lets loose on this new self-produced and self-released recording. He is pissed off and he wants you to know it. The politically charged lyrics are perfectly underscored by the Stones-esque hard-charging backing. The Peachtree duo did not falter in any way, providing plenty of the necessary drive and energy.

I Believe by the great '90s band Spain was the last disc that crystallized what the Peachtree combo is all about: nuance. The band's music is filled with deep emotional content, played at downbeat tempos, and finely textured. The Peachtree gear allowed all the emotion in these beautifully

layered compositions to shine through brilliantly, especially on tracks like "She Haunts My Dreams" and "Born To Love Her."

Moving on, now using the novaPre as straight preamplifier, with a Marantz CD player connected to the Peachtree's analog inputs, I heard much of what I heard with sources connected to the digital inputs. I found the novaPre to be rather straight up, with bad recordings not at all flattered. Mumford & Sons new album *Babel* is somewhat brittle sounding, which is exactly what comes through the novaPre. (continued)

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On the other hand, U2's classic track "Please," from the band's *Pop* album, is big and bold, with plenty of drama and a warmer overall sound that the novaPre rendered with equal fairness. Regardless of musical choice, the novaPre neither embellished nor detracted from familiar music.

This writer preferred keeping the tube in the signal path, so I kept it engaged most of the time. The difference is subtle but obvious. Engaging the tube adds an organic ease and additional harmonic complexity to the presentation. Of course, your preferences will vary depending on your taste and the rest of the system, but it's nice to have the option.

Born for Each Other

Both units worked flawlessly in my system during the review period. My only complaint is a minor one: I wish the volume steps at the lower settings were more nuanced via the remote control. One tap brought it from conversation level to total silence. It would have been nice to have a wider gradation, as with the volume control on the front panel.

The integrated amplifier with onboard DAC is a category that continues to become more popular as more music lovers turn to their computer as a source component—and the novaPre is a prime example. Mating it to the companion Peachtree220 power amp makes for easy one-stop shopping.



Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

With an admitted bias *against* Class-D amplifiers, I was smitten with the Peachtree220 when I first heard it early this year at the Consumer Electronics Show, where the Peachtree folks were using a pair of Aerial 7T speakers to showcase their latest products. For those unfamiliar with the Montis, this is not a particularly easy speaker to drive, as it presents relatively low impedance at high frequencies, which more often than not throws both tube and Class-D amplifiers a curve.

The Peachtree combo proved a formidable partner for the Montis, and I would have easily believed Peachtree front man David Solomon if he had told me that these two boxes cost twice as much. They gripped the Logans with aplomb, casting a huge soundstage combined with a smooth high end—impressive.

Before sending these two pieces to Andre for review, I made it a point to try both the 220 amp and novaPRE here with the variety of different speakers that I have at my disposal—and they passed all tests with flying colors. Even a couple of the more difficult speakers in my arsenal (the B&W 802D and the Magnepan 1.7) were no problem, so whatever you might be using, rest assured, the Peachtree220 will be up to task.

The novaPre proved equally flexible, whether using the So-oloos music server, Mac mini or

an old Denon CD player as a digital source, with everything from MP3s to the latest offerings from HDtracks.

Two words sum up this combination: value and refinement. In a world full of five- and even six-figure components, these separates from Peachtree offer mega performance at a modest price, allowing the creation of great music system on a tight budget. I am happy to award them both one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2012. ●

Peachtree novaPre and Peachtree220 power amplifier

MSRP: \$999 (novaPRE); \$1,399 (Peachtree220)

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Cables Transparent MM2 Plus, Kimber Hero Ag, QED Genesis Silver Spiral, Shunyata Venom

Dynaudio Confidence C1 II

Small in Size Only

By Jeff Dorgay

lasting Joy Division's "She's Lost Control," (the 12-inch version), I once again forget that the Dynaudio Confidence C1 II speakers are small in stature, because these stand-mount speakers move *serious* air. With a claimed LF spec of 45 Hz, they practically defy physics for a speaker this size. The Burmester 911 mk. 3 amplifier in room two produces 350 watts per channel into four ohms and proves a perfect match for the C1s, which have a sensitivity of 85 dB/1 watt. Powered thusly, the speakers never run out of headroom, making for an enormous soundstage in my second sound room (13 by 16 feet).

I keep the volume level high as Bowie's "The Heart's Filthy Lesson" tests the speakers' ability to deliver a coherent rendition of this dense mix, which combines a deep, driving synth-bass line with dissonant keyboard lines and layer upon layer of sound, while Bowie's lead vocals remain anchored well out in front of a gigantic ball of sound. This track is tough for \$50,000 floorstanding speakers to handle at this volume, but the C1s ace yet another torture test. Now it's time for some Iggy Pop.

While the woofer and tweeter of the C1 look identical to the components used in the floorstanding C4, Michael Manousselis at Dynaudio makes it clear that "the Confidence models all feature the Esotar2 driver platform, but each model has its own unique drivers with optimized parameters. While very similar overall, each speaker is indeed different." The C1 is the perfect speaker for the audiophile wanting extremely high performance in a compact space, but it also carries itself well in a big room: A visit to Simaudio in Montreal earlier this year reveals the C1s playing in Sim's main sound room (almost 22 by 30 feet) and filling it nicely, with LF output that had me looking for a subwoofer.



A True Destination Speaker

The C1s are easier to drive than their 85-dB sensitivity spec suggests. Even the 10-watt per-channel First Watt SIT-2 power amp drives them without trouble. This is also great news for vacuum-tube lovers. The C1s are tube friendly, and I must admit to being in sonic heaven when coupling the C1s to the KR Audio Kronzilla dual monoblock tube amplifier. This 50-watt SET amplifier has incredible bass heft with the delicacy of a 300B amplifier, but that extra 40 watts per channel makes for spectacular dynamic swings impossible to accomplish with a low-power SET.

This is an excellent long-term speaker to build a system around, and it only gets better as you upgrade the rest of your source components. The C1s deliver good sound with modest amplification and cost-is-no-object components, or anything in between. Their level of resolution makes it easy to distinguish nuances between five-figure amplifiers, but they still sound fine connected to a vintage Harman/Kardon Citation amplifier.

See-Through Sound

The top hallmarks of a two-way speaker and its associated simplicity are transparency and freedom from driver interaction. Taking advantage of a gentle, 6dB/octave crossover slope, the C1 achieves a level of coherence reminding me of the Quad 57s sitting here for comparison.

The C1s disappear instantly, painting an enormous wall of sound that belies their size. Cueing up Patti Smith's "Space Monkey," the Farfisa organ pulses in and out of the track, almost breathing in the room as if you can hear the speaker cabinet rocking back and forth about to tip over on stage. A similar rendition of depth is achieved at the beginning of Thin Lizzy's "Cowboy Song." The harmonica at the beginning of the tune sounds miles in the distance, with Lynott's voice staying anchored as the lead vocals take center stage and the rest of the song builds. *(continued)*



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Putting the pedal down with Genghis Tron's album *Board Up The House* proves these speakers can play loud, provided you have enough clean power behind them. Romping through a playlist heavily populated by Slayer, Mastodon and Van Halen underscores the ability of the C1 to play heavy tracks without overhang or fatigue. This is a speaker that can keep up with whatever you throw at it. But the low-level resolution is what makes the C1 so special—this speaker is dynamic in a way that no panel ever could be. During the first guitar break in Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker," you can hear the slight hum of Jimmy Page's amplifier stack right before he goes back to maximum volume. Twenty minutes rocking out with these and you'll drop your Magnepans off at the nearest Goodwill on your lunch hour.

The crossover point between woofer and tweeter is 1,800 Hz, but the drivers are so well integrated that there are no anomalies in the critical vocal range. Male and female vocals are both reproduced with ease. Johnny Cash's voice has the right amount of weight and grit to sound convincing, and the C1s equally represent the subtle nuances of the female voice. Listening to the eponymous album from Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway via 24-bit/192-kHz download is an exquisite experience—the C1s keep both vocalists properly sorted. And Ella is just heavenly.

Multiple Personalities

While the C1s will perform admirably with small amplifiers, prepare for a completely different experience if you have a large, high-current power amplifier at your disposal. The character of these speakers changes, now having more reach and control in the last octave. Concentrating on music with a lot of LF output, I never really felt like these speakers needed augmentation at the low end of the frequency spectrum. The famous heartbeat that opens Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* rumbles the room with authority.

Even when delivering large-scale orchestral music, the small Dynaudios thoroughly convince, especially with the Simaudio 880M monoblocks that just arrived for review. Again, power goes a long way with these speakers.

Behind (and Beneath) the Grille

The C1s have an interesting shape. The main enclosure—a slim design only 6 inches wide, 14 inches deep and 15 inches high—is bonded to a front panel extending beyond the enclosure boundaries. Removing the grille reveals the 6.6-inch woofer mounted just over the 1.1-inch Esotar2 soft-dome tweeter. Using the speakers sans grill also reveals optimum performance. The grille does not hamper things much, but the nuanced imaging suffers slightly with the grilles on. Besides, these speakers look much more like sculpture with the grilles removed, so why leave them on?

My review pair came with the \$450-per-pair Stand4 stands, which simply bolt into the bottom of the speaker cabinets. This removes all the guesswork that can surround selecting the appropriate stand—the provided ones minimize stand interference and provide ideal playback height. Stylish and massive, the stands work well, though I am informed that Dynaudio will soon replace them with the new Stand6 models, which come with a slight price increase to \$500 per pair. Because of the slim form factor of the speakers, I suggest using the Dynaudio stands and leaving it at that. They are elegant, they complement the speakers perfectly and they have sufficient mass to do their job properly.

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In terms of the speakers' aesthetic, the standard maple finish just seems more Danish to me (and suits my personal preferences), but standard finishes also includes rosewood, cherry wood and black ash. Black or white gloss and clear gloss lacquer are also available for an additional \$800 per pair.

The Signature version of these speakers, at \$8,500 per pair, is slightly more expensive than the standard edition. With the Signature speakers, upgraded finishes come standard and include two extra choices that are exclusive to the Signature model: Bird's-eye maple, stained in either a dark-brown Mocca or dark-red Bordeaux finish with clear-gloss lacquer. An additional bonus to the Signature model is a 10-year warranty, where the standard version has a 5-year warranty.

The Standard and Signature models share exactly the same drivers and crossover components, so they do sound the same.

I'm Keeping 'Em!

The official listening sessions end as they began, playing heavy music louder than I should. (i.e. Grinderman's "Evil" at equally wicked volumes.) The combination of the C1s and the Burmester 911 is too much fun to keep the volume or choice of music at civil levels. As I repeatedly push these compact speakers to the edge of their performance envelope, they continue to take everything I can throw at them with ease—so I happily wrote Dynaudio a check for the Confidence C1 IIs, which will be the reference speaker in room two going forward. Their combination of wide-frequency response, natural tonality and high resolution makes them a perfect fit for a top-quality audio system. ●

Dynaudio
Confidence C1 II
MSRP: \$7,700 – \$8,500
(stands additional)

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Exposure 3010S2 Monoblock Amplifiers

A Purist Approach

By Jeff Dorgay

Exposure espouses a simple tenet: Produce high-quality hi-fi gear at very reasonable price. Still made by hand in the UK, the manufacturer puts all the value into the sound quality. Users wanting elaborate casework or billet remote controls should look elsewhere. But if an understated look with excellent performance is your game, tune in to Exposure.

Much like Naim, Linn, or Rega products, a complete system gives the full perspective on the Exposure sound. What began as a review of monoblock amplifiers quickly morphed into a full system review. We will touch on the other products in the Exposure 3012S2 lineup, but concentrate on the monoblocks.

For the price-conscious, top-line 3010S2 components are priced as follows: The full-function preamplifier retails for \$2,395 without phonostage (MM or MC cards available at \$495 each); the CD player runs \$1,595; and the monoblocks \$2,895 a pair. All components are available in silver or black.

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REVIEW



Family Affair

My first exposure to the 3012S2 components happened at Executive Stereo in Toronto, where they were featured with a pair of Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 speakers. As the Compact 7s are one of our reference speakers, it was easy to get into the groove despite the unfamiliar location. The current Compact 7 is chameleon-like, and when fed with a low-power amplifier tends to be more of a wallflower. Yet when a high-power, high-current amplifier like the Exposure is part of the equation, the Harbeth rocks.

With TONEAudio's Room Two now completed, and tailored to smaller speakers, the Harbeths were the perfect place to begin

listening. I also used the Exposure stack with the Dynaudio Confidence C1 II and Penaudio Cenyas. The matching Exposure preamp and CD player rounded out the system for most of my listening sessions. A few variations on the theme later revealed that, while system synergy is high, these components work well with other brands.

Double Exposure

As hard as it is to believe, less than \$3,000 gets you a pair of 100-watt mono amplifiers that use discrete components. Indeed, the 3012S2s are marvels of cost-conscious engineering.

Imaging is a major strong point of monoblock amplifiers,

and it's no different here. Thanks to the physically separated chassis, signal separation is maximized and the Exposure monos a delight. Me'Shell Ngedeocello's classic *Plantation Lullabies* proves revelatory. This record features some of the best deep bass grooves the 90s have to offer, as well as a massive soundscape. The first few cuts instantly disclose massive grip without sacrificing pace, and the monoblocks sail through Ngedeocello's complex bass lines. The opening bass riffs on "Call Me" are positively crushing through the Cenyas—so much so, they suggest a subwoofer lurks in the area. Small monitors and British amplification: a slice of hi-fi heaven. *(continued)*

Power Rules

All of the small speakers at our disposal have a sensitivity rating of 84-86db. They all sound okay with a classic 15-watt Naim Nait amplifier, and definitely become more interesting with the new Rega Brio-R's 50 watts per channel (or 30 watts of tube power). However, 100 watts per channel makes the game even more interesting. Little speakers often passed off as "polite" light up via the Exposure monos.

There's no mistaking these amplifiers for having valves, but the sound is ever so slightly relaxed for solid-state—an enticing balance of pleasant albeit resolving qualities usually reserved for much more expensive solid-state gear. James Taylor's *Sweet Baby James* (Audio Fidelity's current remaster) comes alive through the full quartet of Exposure gear. Taylor's voice claims lavish body and decay, staying firmly in its own space as the resonance of his acoustic guitar takes over the soundstage, extending well beyond the speakers.

Best of all, 100Wpc opens the doors to big speakers as well. Pairing the Exposure units with B&W 802 Diamonds simply rocks. Going through some 70s guitar-heavy favorites, and cranking up Robin Trower, Pat Travers, and Rory Gallagher, will convince even the harshest skeptic that Exposure deserves an audition. Fed by my newly rebuilt Studer B67 (to avoid acoustic feedback at high volume in a small room), spinning needle-drops via the AVID Acutus/TriPlanar/Lyra Atlas combination pushes the Exposure stack as hard as possible. After a solid hour of maximum rock, the amplifiers are still barely warm to the touch.



These monoblocks also make for a fantastic combination with a pair of Vandersteen 2CE Signatures that, at 86db, usually need more giddy-up than the average integrated can muster. The Vandersteen/Exposure combination is very dynamic, as the amplifiers take firm control in the bass region. And the 'Steens are capable of getting down pretty low—provided the amplifier possesses enough control. The S2s did not disappoint. Playing Kruder and Dorfmeister's "Bug Powder Dust" moves plenty of air and results in a visceral experience.

It just wouldn't be an audiophile review without female vocal tracks, right? Patti Smith's latest, *Banga*, sees the icon back in fine form, her laden voice as heavy and penetrating as ever. Smith's rendition of Neil Young's "After the Gold Rush" is haunting, especially in comparison to the original. As made transparent on this track, inner detail is another field in which the Exposure amps excel. Regardless of your favorite vocalists, these amplifiers have enough tonal contrast and body to convince you they cost more than the price on the tag.

Plugging the Exposure stack in to the \$110,000 pair of Peak Consult Kephheus speakers shows off the former gear's true capabilities. They even have no problems driving the Magnepan 1.7s.

So, let's review: Great imaging? Check. Rock-solid bass and dynamics? Check. The only thing the Exposure monoblocks leave on the table in comparison to big-bucks amps is a smaller helping of image depth and ultra-fine detail. When judged within the \$3,000-\$4,000 range, they are at the top of their class. *(continued)*



The Rest of the Chain

Exposure's matching CD player and pre-amplifier are worthy additions to the system, and well on par with similarly priced components. But the monoblocks are the real over-achievers.

The preamplifier is straightforward, with basic volume control and selector switch. All inputs and outputs are RCA. A look under the hood reveals a basic power supply and op amp layout, with connectors for adding either a MM or MC phonostage. To their credit, the \$495 phono cards utilize fully discrete designs. Kudos to Exposure for offering the board as an option; listeners uninterested in vinyl can spend the money elsewhere.

Playing LPs via a mid-80s Linn LP-12 with Shure V15vxmr cartridge and Rega RP6/Exact combination gives wonderfully with the onboard phono section. As you might expect, this solid-state phonostage is extremely quiet and dynamic. It resolves enough detail to get you hooked on analog. Don't say I didn't warn

you. Bottom line, the 3010S2 preamplifier gets out of the way of the music in terms of adding coloration or distortion. Isn't that what a good preamplifier should do?

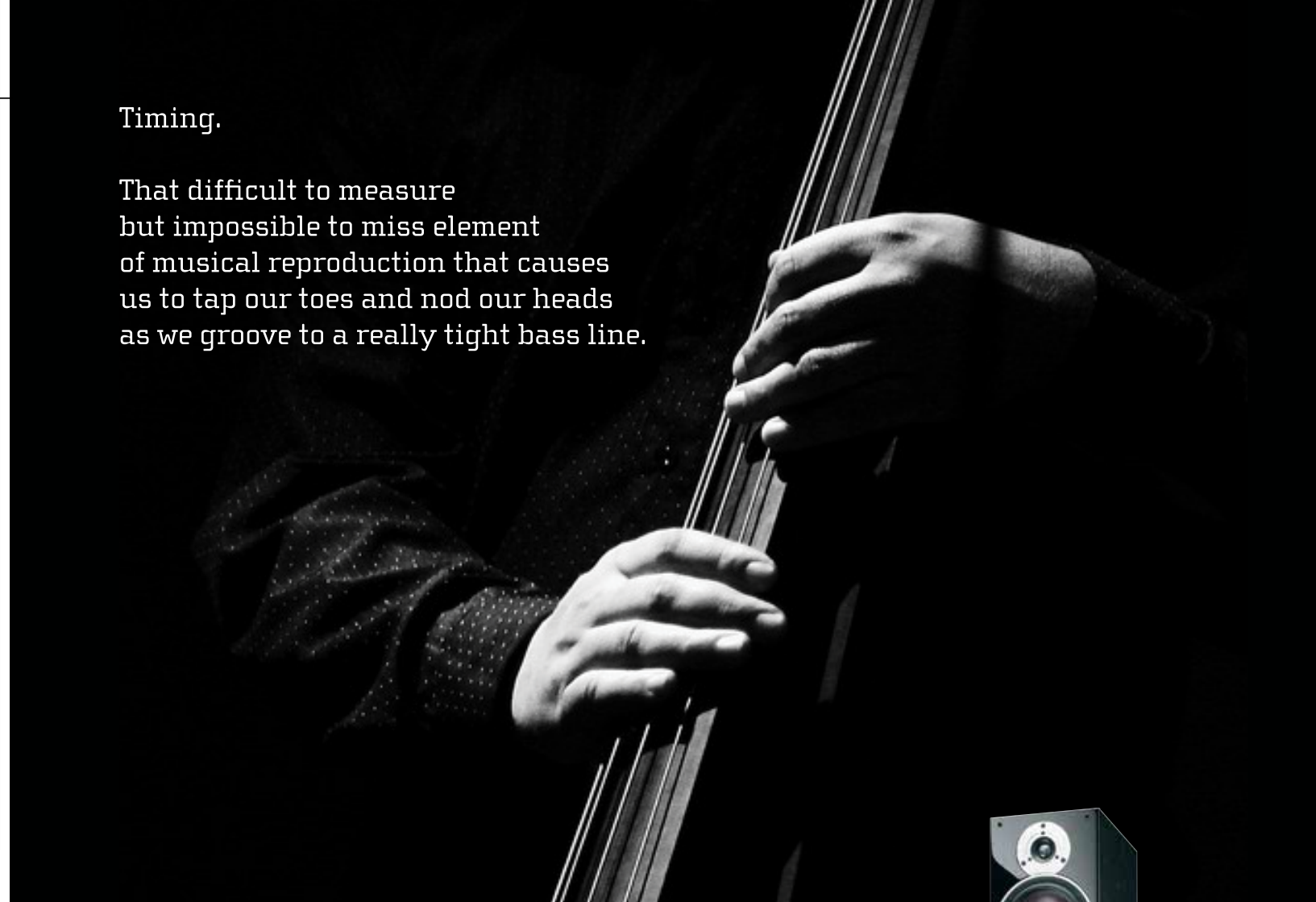
The matching Exposure CD player keeps the same design and performance ethos as its sister components. Its uncluttered, no-frills approach doesn't hint at the performance lurking under the hood. Actually, I'm most impressed at what this player does not do. It is very free of grain and digital artifacts. Tonally, it's right smack in the middle of the comparably priced Naim and Rega players; not quite as warm and forgiving as the Rega, not quite as forward as the Naim. This is a CD player that you can listen to for hours on end without fatigue.

Visiting a Different Neighborhood

Revisiting the James Taylor disc with my recently rebuilt CJ PV-12 (sporting a full complement of CJD Teflon capacitors) reveals more depth and midrange texture, with a smoother top end than the Exposure pre. *(continued)*

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I admit reviewer bias, and 'fess up that I'm a huge fan of a tube preamplifier combined with a solid-state power amplifier, taking advantage of the strengths of both topologies.

The Exposure amp and preamp provide wonderful tonal accuracy and dynamic attack, but adding a tube amp to these monoblocks really has me freaking out. In a good way. Janis Joplin's singing on "To Love Somebody" jumps out from between the speakers, capturing her voice from the lowest breath to the loudest scream with ease, all the while her band stays firmly locked in place.

Fantastic Value and Performance

All told, the whole stack comes in just under \$7,000, and provides serious performance. Add your favorite speakers (and maybe a turntable) to complete a reasonably priced, high-performance music system. While the individual components all excel in their own right, the combination is tough to beat for a music lover that wants to get off the upgrade train and just get down to enjoying their music collection.

Yes, it's easy to see how these amplifiers could become cult classics. They easily reveal what is placed in front of them and deliver a level of performance well beyond their price. The very definition of what qualifies for a 2012 Exceptional Value Award.

Exposure 3010S2 monoblock amplifiers

MSRP: \$2,895/pair

MANUFACTURER

Exposure Electronics

CONTACT

www.exposurehifi.com (factory)
www.bluebirdmusic.com (NA distributor)

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Rega RP6/Exact cart, Linn LP-12/Shure V15mvxr cart

Digital Source Sooloos Control 15

Speakers Vandersteen 2 CE Signature, Harbeth Compact 7-3ES, Dynaudio Conficence C1 II, Penaudio Cenya, GamuT S9, Peak Consult Kepheus

Cable Cardas Clear

Power Running Springs Haley

Accessories GIK room treatments, Furutech DeMag and DeStat

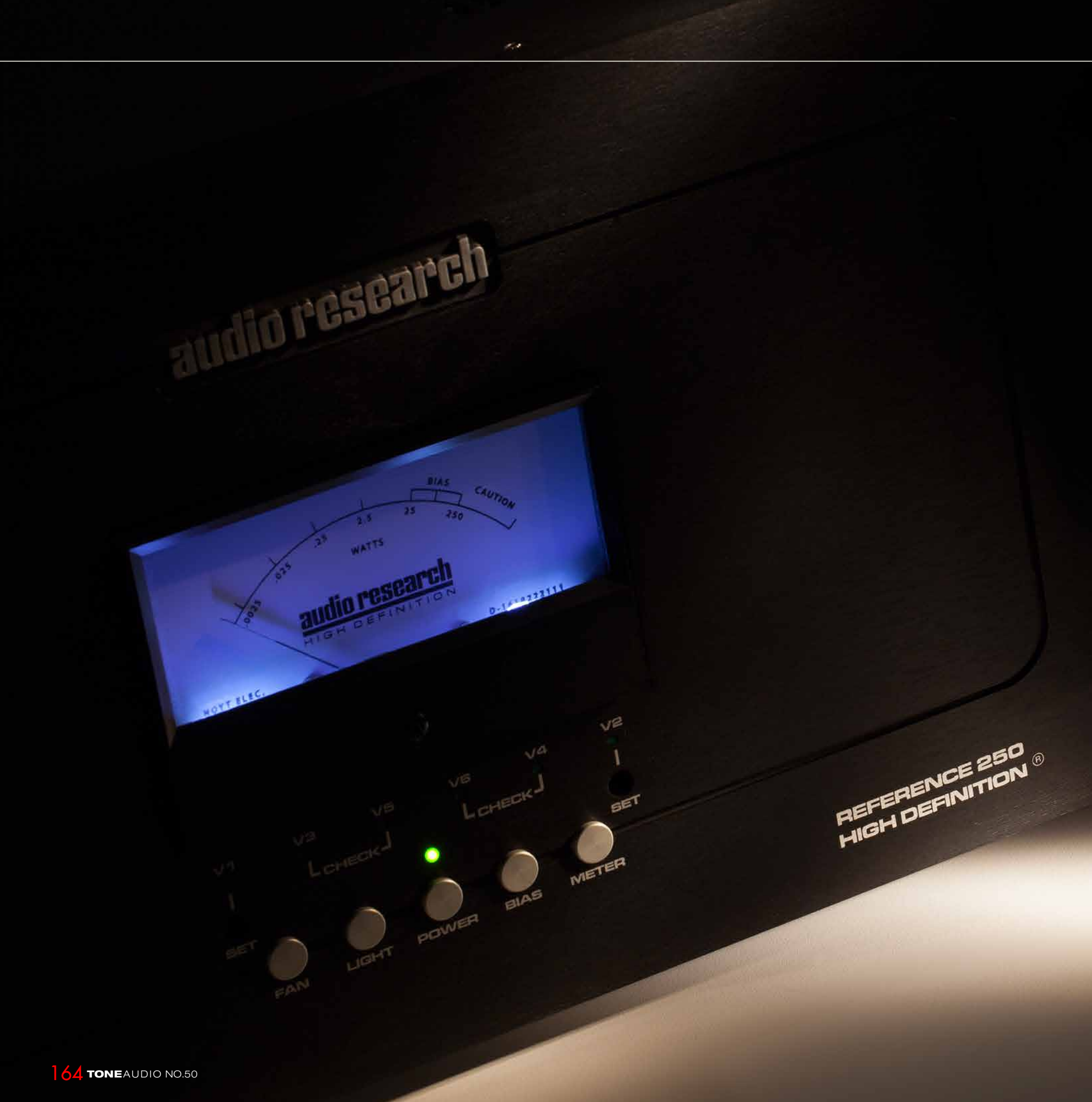
Perfect Balance

Audio Research REF 250 Monoblocks

By Jeff Dorgay

Power output meters are just cool. Back in the late 80s when the legendary Audio Research D-79 amplifier stood as my system's cornerstone, watching the meters bounce into the red "caution" area—as the SPL got somewhat out of hand—made me feel like a mad scientist in a *Mothra* movie, waiting for sparks to fly. Fortunately, they never did, and my D-79 never missed a beat.

Today, my hair is as gray as the front panel on my ARC REF 150 power amplifier, which has served me equally well. But with a pair of speakers possessing an 88dB sensitivity rating, there are times when I find myself itching for a bit more power. And as awesome as a pair of REF 750s sound, the idea of replacing 36 KT120 power tubes on a semi-regular basis scares me. Perhaps if I could buy them by the palette at Costco...



For every one that's lusted after a Ferrari and bought a Porsche 911 because it just made more sense on a daily basis, I submit the ARC REF 250 monoblocks. At \$25,990 per pair, they are not an impulse purchase. Yet for those with an ARC amplifier (or amplifiers) already in their system, trading up isn't a stretch. ARC's Dave Gordon likes to say that the company's best entry-level product "is a good, clean piece of used ARC gear." Sounds like it's time to pass that pair of REF 210s or VT100 on to another happy owner, and roll up to the bar for a pair of REF 250s. Then again, I can justify anything related to audio.

Quite the Trip

I have one main requirement for five-figure hi-fi: It has to take you on a trip, giving you an immersive experience that allows you to forget about the system and groove on the music. Forget about specs, measurements, tube, or transistor. Once the REF 250s have about 45 minutes on the clock, they take you there.

What better place to start than with the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* in stereo? Argue mono versus stereo all day long, but the latter version is extremely trippy, and as wide as a stretch of US 40, driving through Kansas on a clear, sunny day. Lennon is all the way out in Missouri, McCartney is over in Colorado, Ringo drums g somewhere in Nebraska, and George Harrison sits in the seat right next to you. Who needs drugs when music sounds this good? The mix tightens up on *Revolver*, with more dynamics. Harrison's guitar blazes out in front of the speakers, buzzing in my head during the chorus on "Taxman."

Next up, AC/DC. Taking advantage of an all-ARC amplification chain, this time using the REF Phono 2, AVID Acutus Reference SP, and Lyra Atlas cartridge (mounted on the TriPlanar arm), the 45RPM single of "Let's Get it Up" (from *For Those About to Rock*) sends the power meters dancing at the edge of the caution zone. It's like old times, but better. *(continued)*



Welcome to the Family

When you're born into the right family, some things are simply assured. When that family is Rega, that means the heritage and pedigree that comes from over 30 years of building some of the industry's most widely respected and beloved turntables, the beauty of a simple design that not only functions but outperforms expectations, and a price that leaves you with enough left over to buy a few more albums for your collection.

Enter the new RP6: incorporating Rega's new phenolic double brace technology and completely redesigned RB303 tonearm with stainless steel counterweight, it bears a definite resemblance to the acclaimed RP3. The RP6 offers a host of additional features, however, that set it apart from its sibling: an innovative two-piece glass flywheel platter sits atop a brand new aluminum subplatter assembly for improved speed stability, accuracy, and consistency, all while the platter (and therefore the vinyl) is presented to the stylus as flat as possible. It also includes Rega's 24V low-noise motor and redesigned TT-PSU outboard power supply with push-button speed control.

Available in four high-gloss finishes: Red, Green, White, and Black. \$1495 (without cartridge) or \$1990 with Exact cartridge pre-fitted.

rega

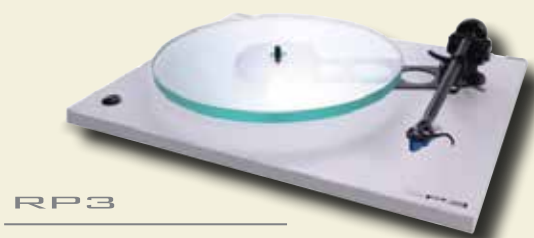
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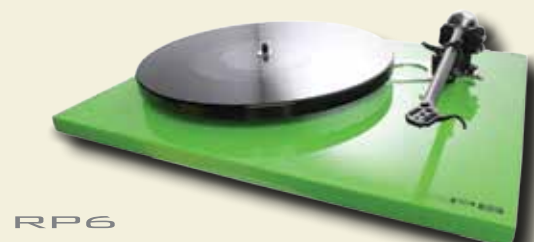
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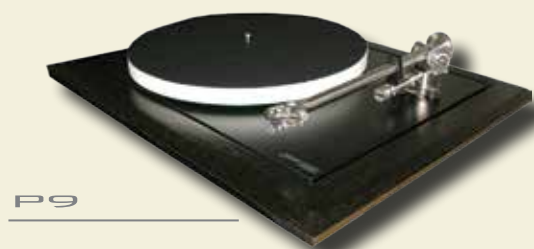
RP1



RP3



RP6



P9



RP78



Much, much, better. Move over Rover, the new REF series is where it's at. Not stopping there, I dial up the 24/96 release of Kiss' *Destroyer* from HD Tracks. Aural madness ensues.

The sheer dynamic punch the REF 250s possess is simply unbelievable—the soundstage never collapses, even at near concert-hall levels. I haven't listened to music this loud in my listening room in a long time. Yet the REF 250s handle it so effortlessly, it's easy to keep goosing the volume control further and further, waiting for a hint of compression or distortion. It never arrives. With all due respect to the ARC dealer network, unless a bunch of listeners have fearfully inefficient loudspeakers, I don't know why they'd need the REF 750s.

Moving the cables back to the REF 150, the amplifiers sound relatively similar, especially at modest levels. Still, the full mono

chassis and bigger power supplies make for a wider, deeper soundstage and more solid foundation to the bass lines, no matter what kind of music pours out of the speakers. Yes, the REF 250s are double the cost, but offer a commensurate increase in performance.

Catch the Buzz

A quick beverage break reveals I'm listening way too loud. My ears now have a slight tingle, so the volume comes down from 81 on the REF 5SE to a more prudent 30. Coasting through Aimee Mann's new *Charmer* album provides an audio sorbet that calms and cleanses the palette before I peruse recent Music Matters Blue Note reissues. The REF 250s' extra power and separate power supplies expand Blue Note's super stereo feel beyond the norm, excelling in texture retrieval. *(continued)*

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The PQS-302 is exceptionally transparent and this is enhanced by the elimination of any mid-band crossover point. This is due to the ultra-wide range of its DDD drivers: 170Hz to 24kHz. Two 8-inch woofers integrate seamlessly, to provide fast, clean bass down to 26Hz.

Add in stop-start transients, great tonal purity and a wonderful sense of musicality and it is easy to understand why the top German audio magazine Stereoplay uses the PQS-302 as the reference for all their reviews.

To find out more about the PQS-302, or any of our other models, please contact us.



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REVIEW

WARNING
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Forget *The Sheffield Drum Record*. Art Blakey's *Free For All* is an amazing example of the maximum amount of drum sound a vinyl groove can hold. The REF 250s take the music beyond conceivable limits. I continue to push the volume, but my system never runs out of juice. This is the closest I've come to actually hearing a real drum kit in my room. Cymbal tone and texture are spot on, but Blakey's explosive drumming doesn't flatten out for lack of amplifier reserve.

Even with a fairly compressed track like U2s "Beautiful Day," soundstage depth impresses. The Edge's backing vocals, often lost in the mix, occupy their own private space, well off to the left speaker boundary, yet unmistakable nonetheless. Given how well they reproduce average recordings, the REF 250s seem borderline miraculous.

Slowing the groove for Mickey Hart's audiophile classic *Dafos* makes for a welcome

reunion. The delicate percussion in "The Subterranean Caves of Kronos" gets rendered with sublime smoothness, putting me at rest for almost three minutes until the monstrous drums of "The Gates of Dafos" sledgehammer my body into the listening chair and place me in the middle of a tribal mating ritual. Once again, the REF 250s strike an ideal balance between control, finesse, and impact. Herein lies the magic: massive power, yet the REF gear starts and stops on a dime, allowing for an incredibly fatigue-free experience.

Easy Implementation

The REF 250s prove at ease with every speaker we have at our disposal: GamuT S9, Sonus Faber Ellipsa SE, B&W 802D (notoriously difficult to drive), and even the Magnepan 1.7. Thanks to multiple taps at 16, 8, and 4 ohms, you should be able to find the winning combination for your speakers. *(continued)*

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— Robert Deutsch, *Stereophile*, June 2012

TONEAudio

"I'm happy to grant the [Prologue Premium] integrated an Exceptional Value Award for 2012. Like the legendary tube amplifiers from McIntosh and Marantz, it's an amplifier you can hand down to your family members through the years."

— Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio*, April 2012



Setup is also a snap, and at 73 pounds each, the REF 250s are not too difficult to move. As with any tube amplifier, they require adequate ventilation. The REF 250s are fan-cooled and extremely silent in operation. They use the same 20-amp IEC connector as other ARC Reference gear, so keep this in mind if you are thinking of upgrading power cords. ARC claims power usage as 700 watts at 250-watt output, and 1000 watts "maximum." While you can use both on a 15-amp circuit, listeners pumping up the volume at high levels will benefit from a 20-amp dedicated circuit for the amplifiers.

Configuration

Along with doubling the power supply from the REF 210 it replaces, the REF 250 utilizes a design very similar to the REF 150, with eight KT120 power tubes per channel (instead of four) being driven by another pair of KT120s and the 6H30 that seems to be universal in current ARC amplifiers. A 6550C is employed as a voltage regulator. In a nod to past ARC designs, a traditional analog meter replaces the fluorescent display.

The KT120 tube proves excellent across the range. In addition to the increased power dissipation (which translates into increased power output), the KT120-based ARC amplifiers have more aural ease than earlier amplifiers using the 6550. Depth and air are more abundant, with speakers disappearing in the room more convincingly. And nobody's going to complain about that. ●

Audio Research REF 250 Monoblocks
MSRP: \$25,990/pair

MANUFACTURER

Audio Research Corporation

CONTACT

www.audioresearch.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source AVID Acutus Reference SP/TriPlanar/Lyra Atlas

Digital Source dCS Paganini stack, Sooloos Control 15, Aurender S10

Preamplifier ARC REF 5SE

Phonostage ARC REF Phono 2SE

Speakers GamuT S9, Magico S5, Sonus faber Ellipsa SE, B&W 802D

Power RSA Maxim and Dmitri

Cable Cardas Clear

Accessories Furutech DeMag and DeStat, Audio Desk System RCM, GIK acoustic panels and Tri Traps.

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.



Bryston BP1.5 Phonostage and MPS-2 Power Supply

\$3,695 (phono); \$1,695 (power)
www.bryston.com

The Analogaholic runs this Bryston phonostage, along with the accompanying power supply (which weighs *more* than the phonostage), through its paces with a plethora of MM and MC cartridges. The verdict: a quiet, dynamic, single-input phonostage that delivers the goods, with gain and loading that are easy to set. Read the rest of the review here: ●

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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WEB REVIEW



Red Wine Audio Liliana Monoblocks

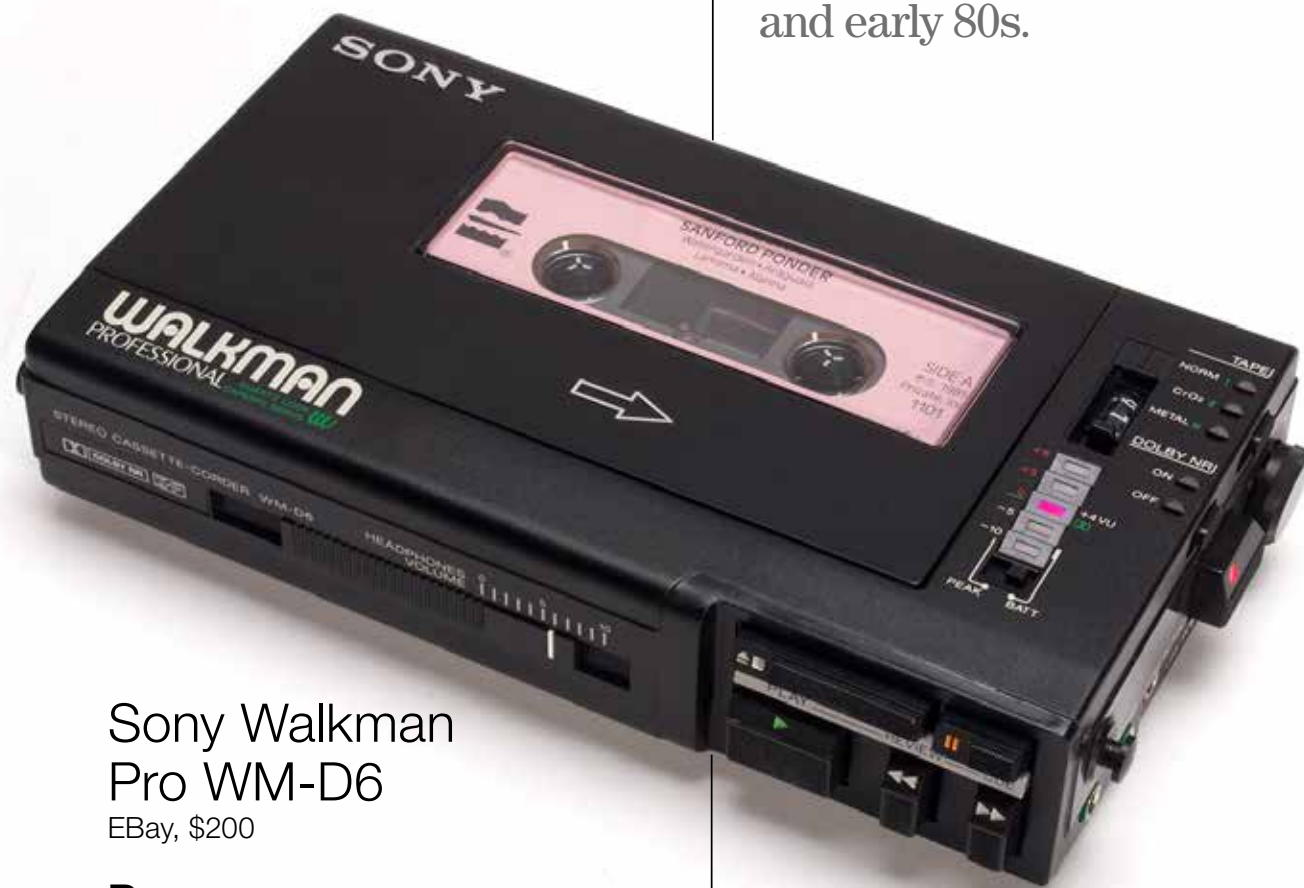
\$6,000/pair

www.redwineaudio.com

Vinnie Rossi, the man who's put the oomph in battery powered audio gear has made a grand statement with the Liliana monoblocks – which produce 115 watts per channel (into an 8-ohm load) utilizing a hybrid vacuum tube/MOSFET design. Featuring all the delicacy of his smaller amplifiers, combined with a virtually non-existent noise floor, these compact powerhouses need no premium power cords or power conditioners to deliver top performance. You can read the full review here: ●

Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay



Sony Walkman Pro WM-D6

EBay, \$200

Perhaps this was the original high-resolution portable player. Though the spec sheet only claimed a frequency response of 40 – 15,000 hz, this portable recorder was like having a mastering deck in your (fairly large) pocket, producing tapes that rivaled the best home decks of the day. The final WM-D6C version, incorporates Dolby C as well, and usually fetches almost twice the price.

This issue we have a couple of great items from the past, both somewhat connected to the world of “portable audio,” as we knew it back in the 70s and early 80s.

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Koss ESP-9

EBay, \$45

The Koss ESP-9 set the headphone world on fire back in the early 70's, using the same electrostatic technology used in legendary speakers like Quad, KLH and Acoustat. Usually found for a song, these vintage phones are surprisingly good. And, the squishy ear pads are still available from Koss!



Where to find what you have seen in **TONE**Audio Magazine.

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