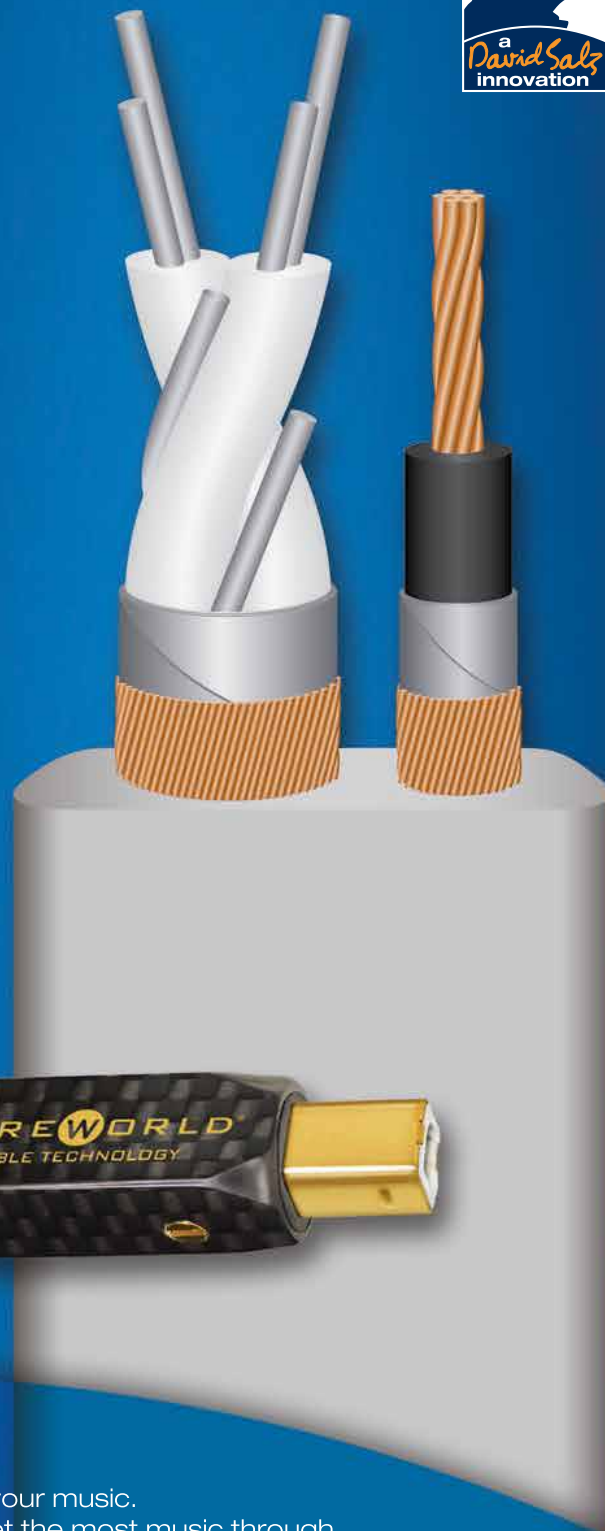


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# TONEAudio

Music.Gear.Style.

No. 51 December 2012

## Product of the Year 2012 Sonus faber Aida Loudspeaker



### Spin the Black Disc:

Reviews on New Albums by Yo Lo Tengo, Jim James, Radar Brothers, Scott Walker, Christopher Owens, and More

### Rock and Pop Box Sets:

Bob Gendron's 2012 Favorites

### Performance and Style:

The AMG V-12 Turntable and Robert Koda K-10 Preamplifier

### The Gorbals Restaurant

Meet *Top Chef* Winner Ilan Hall

### A Peek at the McIntosh McAir

The Wino Returns with Champagne!

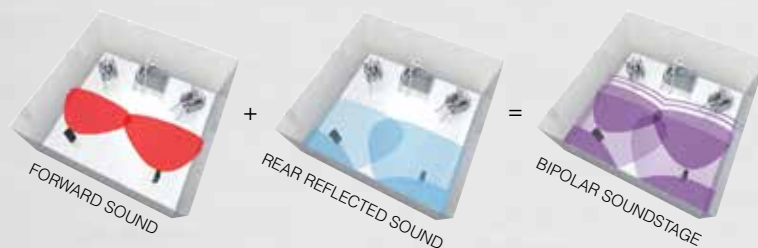
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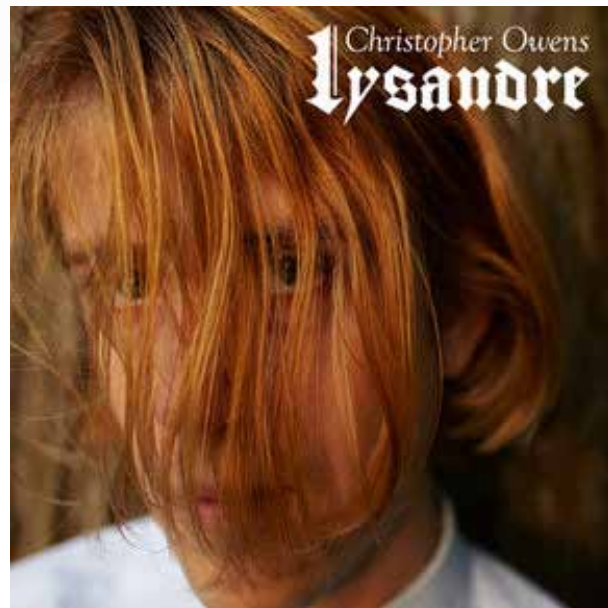
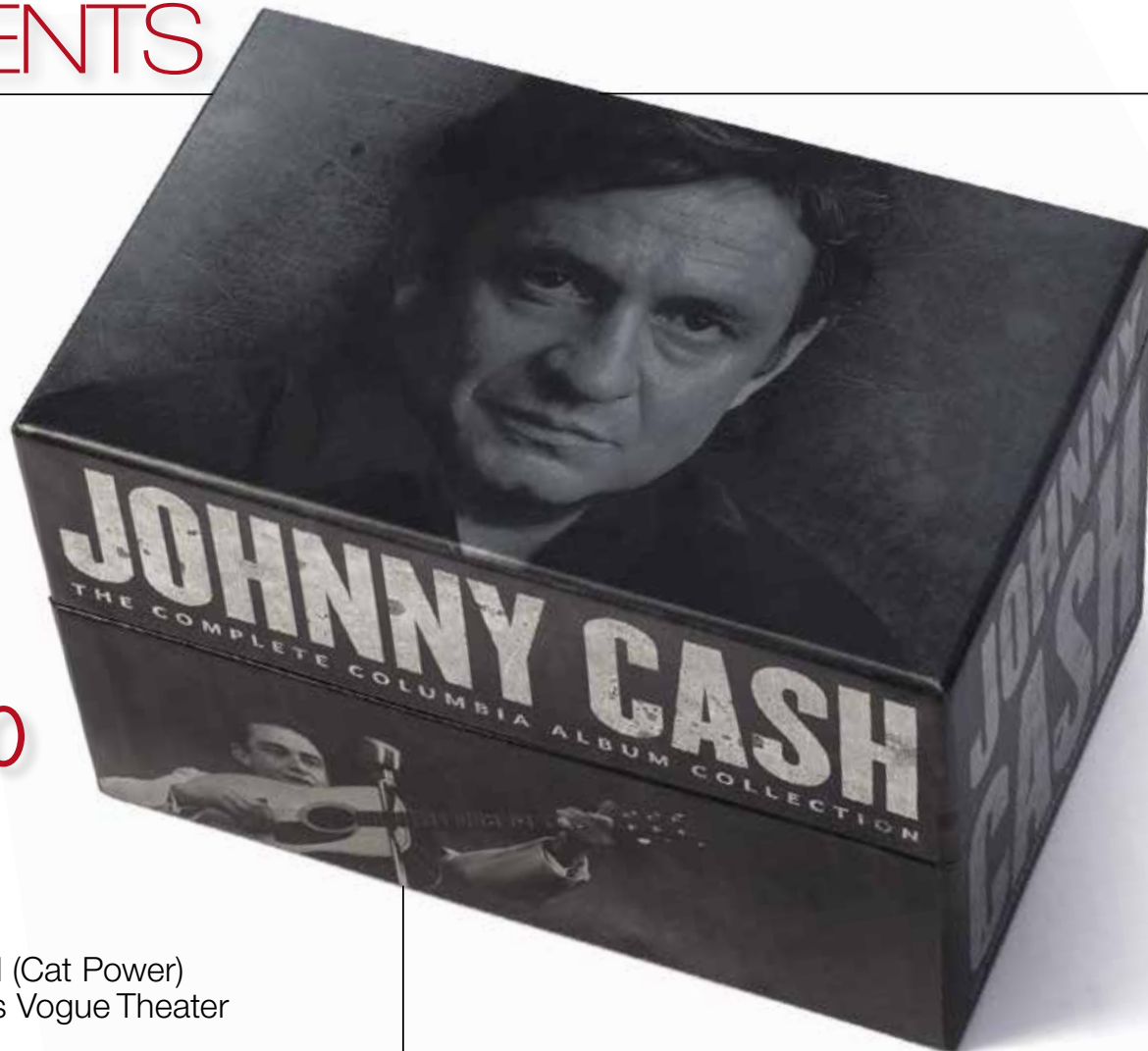
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# TONEAudio AWARDS 218. 2012





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**North America:** AudioQuest's \$249 DragonFly USB DAC is brilliant in every respect: form factor, cool factor, versatility, value, and sound quality. I can't think of a product that makes high-end sound more accessible to more people. Want better sound? Here, plug this into your computer. Done. – **The Absolute Sound**

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**

There's no better gateway drug for the world of high-quality sound reproduction than the AudioQuest DragonFly. – **TONEAudio**



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## PUBLISHER'S LETTER

This marks another "Product of the Year" issue and, as with every year, trying to pick our favorites from the year's review fleet is tough. While a handful of audiophiles clamor for scathing reviews, we do not provide fuel for this fire. Listening to music on a great hi-fi system is one of my life's greatest pleasures and I'm guessing you value your ever-fleeting free time as much, if not more, than I value mine.

If you're looking for a magazine with an axe to grind, or one that takes a consumer report-like approach to audio reviews, I hate to disappoint you, but you need to look elsewhere. If you're still with us after almost eight years, I suspect you're okay with that, so this message is more directed at our new readers.

When I started *TONE*, my goal was to help readers assemble a great stereo system, whether they had a thousand dollars or a million dollars to spend (or wherever they might fall in between the poles of that continuum.) And we've heard some fantastic products at all levels. While we're giving our overall Product of the Year award to the \$120,000 Sonus faber Aida loudspeakers, our top award in the digital category goes to the AudioQuest DragonFly, because it's such a quantum leap over what was available a few years ago and this DAC, which is no bigger than a USB jump drive, also includes a headphone amp!

The rest of the choices fall somewhere between affordable and madness—but if you're obsessed with good

sound, then it's somewhat madness no matter how much you spend, eh? Make no mistake: Everything we review is gear that we feel is worth your time to investigate. If it's not something we'd be interested in owning, we let it fall by the wayside. We'll leave the argument clinic in the hands of the internet pundits.

For our music lovers, music editor Bob Gendron has done an exhaustive job seeking out the top box sets of the year, and I must admit my wallet is a few hundred dollars lighter after reading the advance copy. And I've got a list of my favorite audiophile pressings for 2012. (But I'm guessing most of my selections won't end up in too many other publications, so take my advice for what it's worth.)

Combining the world of music and food, something else near and dear to the *TONEAudio* staff, we pay a visit to a restaurant in Los Angeles run by the son of Roy Hall (proprietor of Music Hall) and have a marvelous meal. As it turns out, Roy's other passion has always been cooking. His son has not followed him in the audio business, but he loves music and makes some killer bacon-covered matzo balls!

Seeing as the world did not end on December 21st, as some predicted it would with the end of the Mayan calendar, we continue bringing you more music, gear and cool stuff for 2013.

I wish you all a happy New Year and thank you for your continued support.





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# NEW CONTRIBUTORS

## Tim Moyers

**T**im joins us as an equal part music enthusiast and gear aficionado, with “lots of records” in his possession. A many of many talents, his day job as a therapist should help him cut through the wackiness in the world of high end audio. In addition to that huge record collection, he currently owns 10 pinball machines and is ranked 1401 (IFPA) in the world as a pinball player.

## Matej Isak

**M**atej Isak is more than just a contributor, his website *Mono and Stereo* **www.monoandstereo.com** has a tremendous following in Europe and we are pleased to announce a collaboration between TA and M&S going forward. We both share an equal passion for music and hifi, yet because of our respective environments, have access to gear that the other does not. Or in the case of the Robert Koda K-10 preamplifier this issue, Isak offers his perspective on this unique piece of gear.

Please keep an eye not only on the pages of *TONEAudio* going forward, but also on the *Mono and Stereo* site. We will be sharing a bit of content between the two, offering the first paragraph of their reviews and an accompanying photo, linking there for the rest of the story in the effort to grow the presence of both of our sites.

We look forward to a fruitful relationship with M&S and further insights into the European market.



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*“So how will you pay for all this now that it’s NOT the end of the world?”*

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Chan Marshall (Cat Power) captured in one of her final tour appearances, playing Vancouver's Vogue Theater on November 2, 2012.

*Photo by David Thai*



FEATURE

# Krell KSA-50

By Ken Kessler



## FEATURE

**A**mong my many life-changing “firsts” I recall—like the first time I had Beef Wellington (September 5, 1972) or received a copy of *Meet The Beatles* (March 10, 1964)—I will never forget the first time I heard the name “Krell” in a manner unconnected to the film *Forbidden Planet*. I was attending a minor hi-fi show in Kent, in Southern England, and one of high-end’s odder characters, a fellow US expat named Alex Raffio, came up to me and told me to prepare myself for hearing “the greatest amplifier in the world.”

One day, Alex’s story will be told, in the same tome that will include the tales of John Iverson, Ira Gale, Jim Bongiorno and other world-class audio eccentrics, but that must wait. However “unusual” Alex might have been, his observation was correct. For the next decade or so, as far as the British market was concerned, Krell would own that region’s high-end solid-state market. And that was at a time when the Linn/Naim bloc ruled it with an iron fist.



Ironically, one of the earliest to recognize Krell’s brilliance was John Atkinson, then the editor of *Hi-Fi News & Record Review*. The irony? He was as responsible as any for encouraging, or at least not containing, the Linn/Naim tyranny. Thus his conversion to true high-end hardware—imported, no less!—was one of the first cracks in that duopoly’s xenophobic control of the UK market. Equally crucial would be his move to the US to edit *Stereophile*. I tell you this because Krell did not take the US, its home country, by storm from the outset.

Eventually, the impact that Krell’s original, genuine Class-A power amplifiers had on the global high-end scene, outside of its American homeland, would also matter as much in the States. I am in no doubt whatsoever that the UK market discovered Krell before the US market, a belief confirmed by its founder, Dan D’Agostino, even though Krell was, at that time, a fellow traveller of speaker-maker Apogee. When the great history of audio is written, the tale will tell how that pairing—just like Linn/Naim, Audio Research/Magnepan and other great duos—shared their nascent growth. Simply put, the early Krells were the only amps available that could deal with the 1-ohm impedance of the full-range ribbon Apogee speaker. *(continued)*



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### FEATURE



At the time, Class-A solid-state amplification was nothing new in either the US or the UK, Krell having followed J E Sugden and Mark Levinson. The difference was in the power, because the heat and bulk of Class-A amplifiers restricted them to ratings typically below 25 watts. What Krell did was to apply Class-A topology, with its freedom from transistor-switching distortion, to amplifiers that could keep up with the non-Class-A powerhouses of the day from Threshold, Phase Linear, and Marantz, with ratings typically of 250 watts/channel.

Atkinson, by then a committed Krell user, having fallen in love with the KSA-50 he reviewed in August 1983, immigrated to the US in 1986. In that article, he called the amp “a paradigm shift of the finest kind.” What converted Atkinson, previously a professional bass player, was hearing deep, authentic bass utterly non-existent in systems powered by weedy little British amplifiers. Lower-octave resolution was one of his defining areas in sound reproduction, and the Krell managed it in a way that was alien to the British.

Another critical area was that of soundstage,

which the British “didn’t believe in.” In the early 1980s, UK reviewers thought that this was merely a US obsession with no foundation in reality, especially because a revered Linn-Naim setup was totally a “2-D” experience. In Atkinson’s seminal review, he described the soundstage as “wicked big.” Eventually, other UK journalists became Krell fans, including Martin Colloms and Jimmy Hughes. But the US—then in the thrall of *The Absolute Sound*—would soon realize what it was missing.

[NOTE: If this example of the Brits showing Americans what they had right under their noses sounds a bit presumptuous, please remember that the British played almost as big a part in reviving the then-moribund genre of the blues as did our own Paul Butterfield, Canned Heat and John Hammond, while the Beatles probably did more in their early days to glorify Motown than Berry Gordy ever could have dreamed. Alas, the reverse doesn’t work: The British are perhaps too jaded to realize what they have, so Americans reminding them that they once possessed the world’s finest postal system, produced the greatest affordable sports cars, etc., has no impact.] *(continued)*



FEATURE

Whatever the reasons for Krell's slow start in the US and its rapid rise in the UK, it was the company's third amplifier—the aforementioned KSA-50—that made Krell accessible to a wider number of listeners than those who could afford Krell's KSA-100, let alone its KMA-200 monoblocks. Recently, I was able to spend a few weeks with an as-new KSA-50 acquired by a friend. He invested the same amount in a full restoration that he paid for the unit. The resultant performance reinforced the notion that we haven't progressed very far in three decades.

My fellow "Saturday Morning Sad Bastard" Jim Creed found the KSA-50 for £600 (\$960) on eBay, but when it arrived, we were in for a shock. Much of the original hardware—fuse holders, original terminals, etc.—was missing, and the innards had been tampered with in a manner that strayed so far from the original spec that it needed a complete overhaul.

Checking the serial number, the importer realized that this exact unit had been owned by a notoriously weird British reviewer—one of those benighted souls who bought into the BS of employing such psycho-tweaks as sticking foils and magnetized screws to the amp. It is to the credit of both Krell and the importer that they were able to source every single part to undo the damage.

Presented with a now-pristine example of the Krell, I inserted it into a system consisting of an SME turntable with a 3009 tonearm and vintage Supex cartridge, my oldest CD player (six years younger than the Krell), a circa-2010 Audio Research Ref 5 pre-amp, and Wilson Sophia 3 speakers. *(continued)*



# A m a d i s

Every company has a story to tell about its beginnings, a rationale for existing in the ever-more-crowded space we call high-end audio. Yet so relatively few can lay claim to building endearing products that stand the test of time.

In its humble beginnings nearly 20 years ago, Verity Audio cleverly defined its reason for existence through the choice of name for its very first product: Parsifal. As Wagner's Parsifal sought and defended the mythical Holy Grail, Verity's Parsifal has inspired and delighted thousands and has pushed its designers in pursuit of our Holy Grail: **musical truth**.

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## FEATURE

The KSA-50 was right at home, reminding me that back in the day audiophiles like Atkinson often paired Krell amps with Audio Research tube preamps.

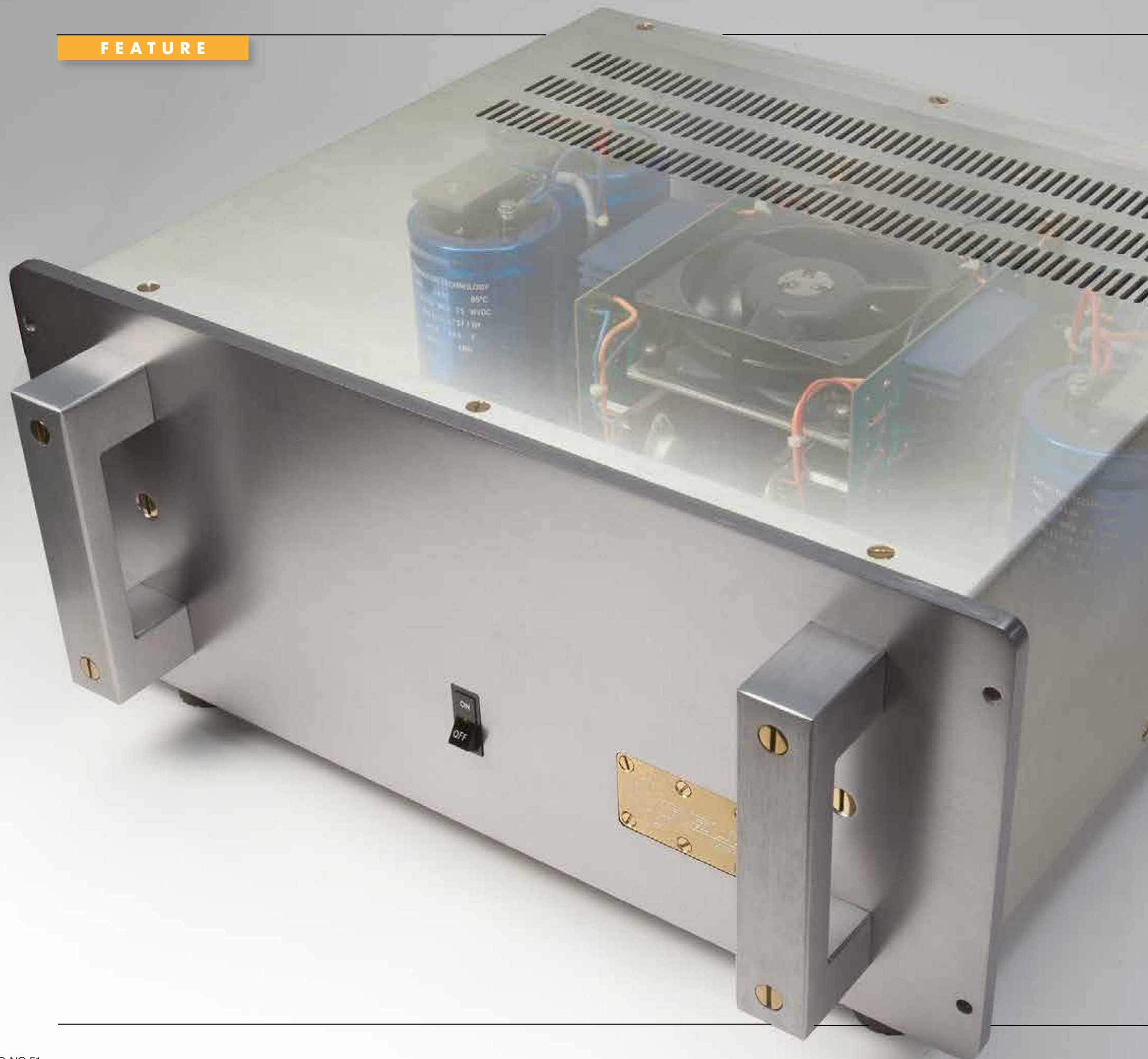
Aesthetically, the KSA-50 is an amp of the "functional" school. Though beautifully made and featuring nice details like a brass name-plaque hand-engraved with a pantograph, it remains a utilitarian amplifier. The front panel comprises simply an on/off switch and an LED to indicate when the power is on. Inside are hefty, potted toroidal transformers and massive capacitors the size of beer cans that flank a large fan to keep this true Class-A beast cool. Its rear-panel fittings are suitably robust.

Although I tried the KSA-50 with current speakers, I couldn't resist unearthing my cherished Scintillas (a superb modern facsimile is offered by Australia's Apogee Acoustics, [www.apogeeacoustics.com](http://www.apogeeacoustics.com)). These speakers are probably best fed by the KSA-100 as a minimum, but, as I am no headbanger, the KSA-50 was more than ample.

Firing up the Apogees, with vintage Krell-power, is a near-religious experience for me, because many years ago this pairing introduced me to the most elevated reaches of high-end performance. To hear that the duo is still formidable 30 years later is as revelatory as my initial exposure, in that the experience is an indictment of all that has happened since: The combination would still earn a 5-star rating today from any listener who is free of prejudice. *(continued)*







As Atkinson noted with utter clarity and precision, the bass is fluid, deep and natural. Inappropriately, given audio snobbery's still-dominant preference for jazz and classical as the most legitimate arbiters of a system's worth, I played what I consider to be some of the most seductive, impressive drum sounds of the past 50 years: glam rock from the likes of The Glitter Band, Mud and other trashy but fun pop music of the 1970s. The impact was palpable. And turning to the easier-to-drive Sophias, it was enough to create those sensations that home cinema users experience with powered, vibrating seating—only my chair is conventional and the floor is a 3-foot thick layer of concrete on terra firma. The smallest Krell can cause just about any speaker to move a lot of air.

For the luscious, fluid decay that endears listeners to Class-A performance as much as amps at the sweet top-end, I wallowed in the thunderous double drum kicks and powerful electric bass on “Rock’n’Roll Part II.” This appeared in the cavernous soundstage that paved John Atkinson’s road to Damascus so many years ago. The band’s claps and “hey-hey” chorus stand proudly stage right; the sizzling fuzz guitar stage left.

Nothing about the Krell KSA-50 sounds “vintage” in any way. It possesses all of the qualities that we demand in modern equipment, including speed and attack, clarity and transparency, and—if not so much with the Scintillas—a sense of limitless power and unharnessed dynamic contrasts.

Alas, Jim sold the KSA-50 to a lucky swine who paid him £1,500 (\$2,400) for his fully restored example. The original 1983 price was \$1,800. Even today, the Krell KSA-50 behaves like a current \$5,000 solid-state amplifier of universally recognized pedigree. And \$5,000 just happens to be the current equivalent of \$1,800 in 1983. So if you come across a KSA-50 in working order for under \$2,500, grab it. At the very least, it will heat a small room. ●



# New Releases

**R**ock's secret history can be found within the catalog of Yo La Tengo. For approximately 30 years, the band has survived on the borders of all that is mainstream in pop. Pastoral, dissonant, confused, and direct: Yo Lo Tengo albums skirt in and around all of it.

A new Yo La Tengo record is therefore often an affirmation of the dependable, its carefully arranged pop orchestrations providing a backbone for much of what sprouts into indie rock. *Fade* presents the band at its loveliest, a relatively svelte collection of meditative tunes regarding the endurance of relationships—the good, the bad, and the mostly in-between.

©Photo by Jesper Eklow



## Yo La Tengo

*Fade*

Matador Records, LP or CD

"We try not to lose our hearts, not to lose our minds," the trio of Ira Kaplan, Georgia Hubley, and James McNew harmonize on opening "Ohm," the longest track at more than six minutes. The tune's sonic architecture is, like much of Yo La Tengo's fare, minimal; its instrumental lines so clearly drawn that it feels like a piece of modern art. The rhythmic shuffle, the handclaps, and the fuzz-drenched guitar all exist as separate but integral pieces of a puzzle.

Yo La Tengo has long found comfort in the drone of the Velvet Underground, and the collective has long possessed the ability to make the ghosts of rock's past feel current and vital. The new LP's first five tracks outline Yo La Tengo's rock influences, and the latter five gradually evaporate them one piece at a time, until moments sometimes feel as if they barely exist. With Tortoise's John McEntire lending a hand in production, *Fade* balances orchestral elements—the closing

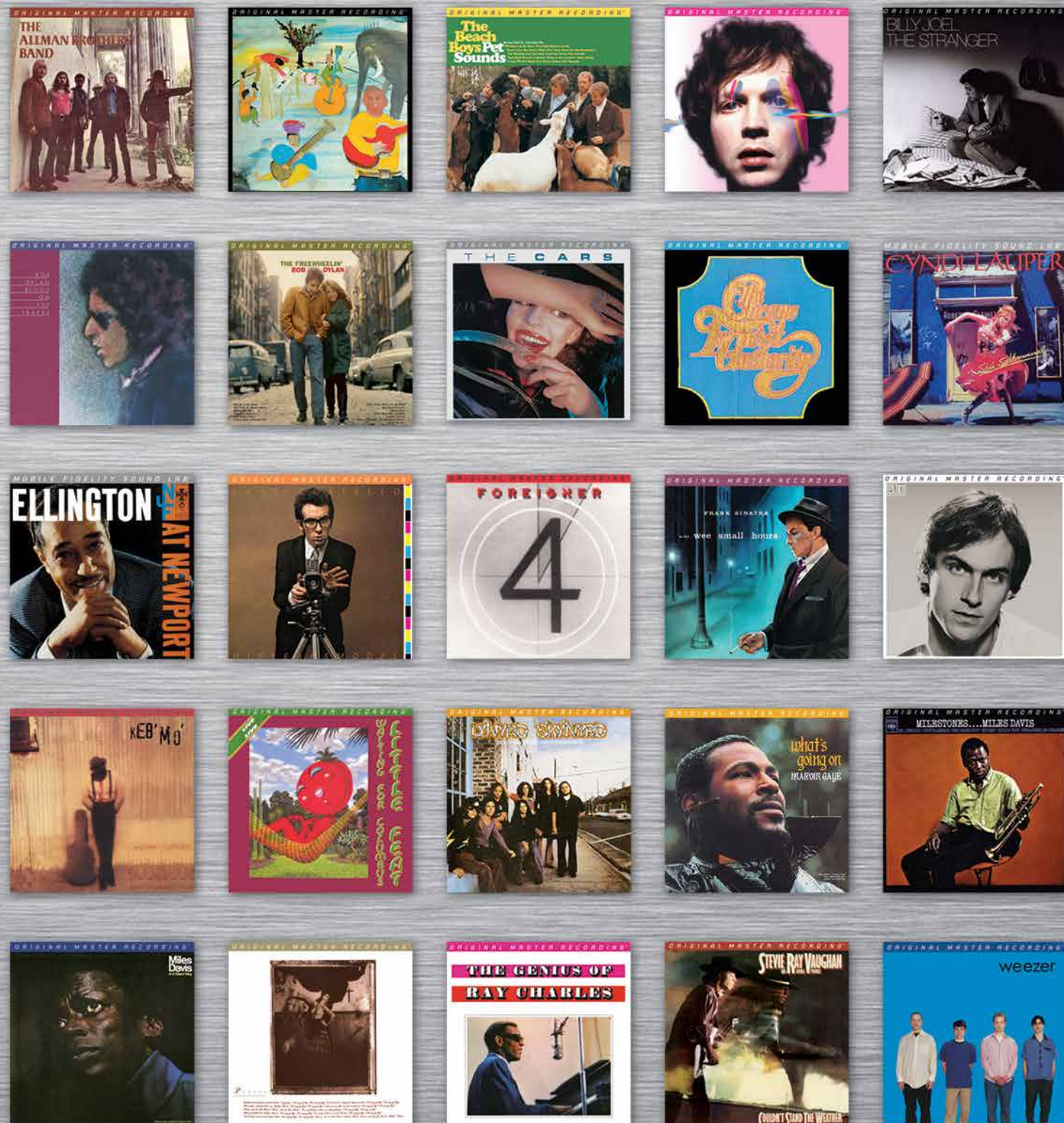
"Before We Run" is a mini-symphony—with explosions of studio haze.

But, with everything in studious moderation, it all feels of a singular piece.

"Stupid Things" acts as a bridge, its serenading guitar lines propelled by a locomotive groove. Its emotional core operates as a plea for maintaining perspective. "I'll Be Around" is little more than some techy feedback and delicately strummed guitar, and "The Point of It" functions a lullaby set to celebrate the joys of getting older. The music lingers long after dissipating, especially the metronome chords and calming trumpet of "Cornelia and Jane." Hubley sings lead, her tranquil voice a head on your shoulder.

"I hear them whispering, just out of view," she whispers, urging listeners not to pay attention to the voices that can keep one up at night. Once again, Yo La Tengo is a testament to the comfort of the familiar. —**Todd Martens**





**Jim James**  
*Regions of Light and Sound of God*  
ATO Records, LP or CD

“**N**othing ever stays like it was in the beginning,” sings Jim James in the midst of his full-length solo debut, *Regions of Light and Sound of God*. “Nothing ever stays the same way for too long.”

This is certainly true of both James and his longtime band My Morning Jacket. The Louisville-based crew first emerged in the late 90s as a throwback to the classic Southern rock era before slowly morphing into art-rock weirdos over the course of a half-dozen wildly divergent albums. James has adopted a similar approach outside the ensemble. He’s recorded alongside M. Ward, Conor Oberst, and Mike Mogis in the eclectic supergroup Monsters of Folk and released a stripped-down tribute to late-Beatle George Harrison under the regrettable name Yim Yames.

The singer’s evolution continues on *Regions of Light and Sound of God*, which sounds vaguely futuristic despite taking significant lyrical inspiration from Lynn Ward’s 1929 graphic novel *State of the Art* (A.E.I.O.U.). Dense and moody, it’s awash in plodding piano, creeping funk guitar, and scraggly digital textures. *(continued)*



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## MUSIC



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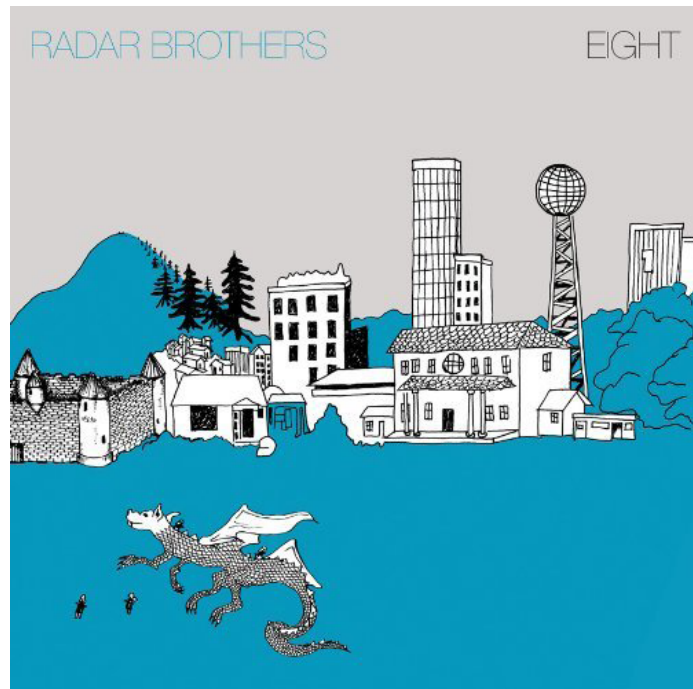
Despite his ongoing explorations both of spirituality and self, James doesn't take himself all that seriously—even if this audacious, immersive solo turn, which connects far more often than it falls flat, suggests otherwise.

From there, the singer ventures deeper into spacey jazz odysseys (“Know Til Know”), fractured funk (“Of the Mother Again”), and cinematic turns like “Actress,” a gorgeous tune built around sweeping strings that could have been lifted from a classic film score. “A New Life,” in turn, sounds like James’ attempt at a big, 1950s-style Roy Orbison ballad. As the song builds to a towering crescendo, it’s a pleasure to hear the frontman finally let it rip.

While James devotes much of his time wrestling with big ideas—“I’m straining to remember just what it means to be alive,” he sings early on—he occasionally flashes a much-needed playful side. On “Know Til Know” the hirsute vocalist/guitarist expresses being “at a loss for words,” and immediately follows the admission with a brief, wordless moan. When he begins questioning humanity on “State of the Art,” his voice cracks and digitizes, suggesting a glitch in the Matrix. Then, on “A New Life,” James chuckles after delivering the line, “I think I’m really being sincere.”

The implication is clear: despite his ongoing explorations both of spirituality and self, James doesn't take himself all that seriously—even if this audacious, immersive solo turn, which connects far more often than it falls flat, suggests otherwise. —**Andy Downing**





### Radar Brothers

*Eight*  
Merge Records, LP or CD

**Y**es, this is the eighth album from the Radar Brothers. But focusing on the title and number adds up to an overwhelming way to approach it. The Los Angeles band—essentially now a collective revolving around sonic architect Jim Putnam—has over the last decade-plus released seven albums that leisurely sway in the direction of Laurel Canyon-inspired folk pop.

©Photo by Joseph Armario



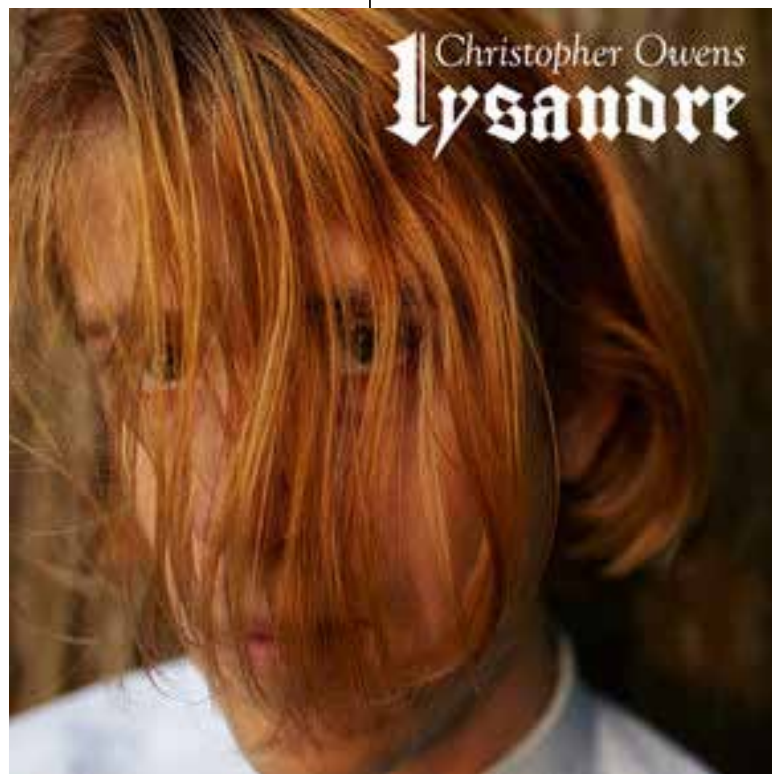
*Eight* constitutes something of a reboot. It's not a full re-imagining or revamping of a sound that's long been able to inspire hammock envy. Rather, it argues that this is now the place to start delving into the group's music. Here, Radar Brothers swell to a sextet, with three new additions since 2010's *The Illustrated Garden*. The most illustrious recruit happens to be Dan Lead, formerly of L.A.'s sadly little-known power pop outfit, the Broken West.

Two other fresh faces, Brian Cleary and Ethan Walter, specialize in keyboards and piano. All told, they create a pop band with a little more rock n' roll energy (see "Reflections") and quite a bit more mysticism (see each of these 11 tracks, but begin with "Change College of Law"). Songs such as the slide guitar-infused "Couch" and the piano reverie "Horse Down" echo Mercury Rev, while cuts placing the guitars out front ("Time Rolling By") are reminiscent of Granddaddy's thoughtful style. An aural relaxant that deflects attention, Putman's voice sets the mood throughout. His singing burrows into the arrangement, be it via the plucky bass notes and hollow grooves of "Bottle Song" or fuzzy mantra-like melodies of "Change College of Law."

Little is said and much is repeated throughout "House of Mirrors," on which keyboards sneak in more interstellar textures. But the truly uncharted territory arrives courtesy of the shoegazey "If We Were Banished" and weirdly demented "Ebony Bow," with its cult-like vocal pleas, disoriented guitar solos, and cresting keyboard atmospheres. *Eight* proves there's always something new to learn.

—**Todd Martens**




**Christopher Owens**

*Lysandre*  
Fat Possum, LP or CD

**O**n 2011's *Father, Son, Holy Ghost*, the album that might prove to be Girls' swansong, frontman Christopher Owens came across like a musical pilgrim on a quest to uncover deeper meanings in life. Working with bandmate Chet "JR" White, among others, the singer turned out sprawling, epic guitar jams that delved into weighty themes like religion, sin, redemption, death, and enlightenment.

On *Lysandre*, Owens' first solo release since unexpectedly breaking up Girls last July, his scope significantly narrows. The songs are smaller and more personal, inspired by his former band's first tour and a brief albeit intense relationship he shared with a woman with whom fell in love at a music festival.

The romantic intimacy carries over into a mellower musical backdrop, which touches on 1970s rock ("Here We Go"), 1770s folk (the flute-laced "Lysandre's Theme," which suggests a Renaissance Fair in full swing) and, briefly, calypso (the oceanside getaway of "Riviera Rock"). "New York City" packs in one of the best saxophone solos this side of the E Street Band, a riotous free-for-all that neatly rescues the much-maligned instrument from the soft-rock hell of recent Bon Iver recordings. *(continued)*

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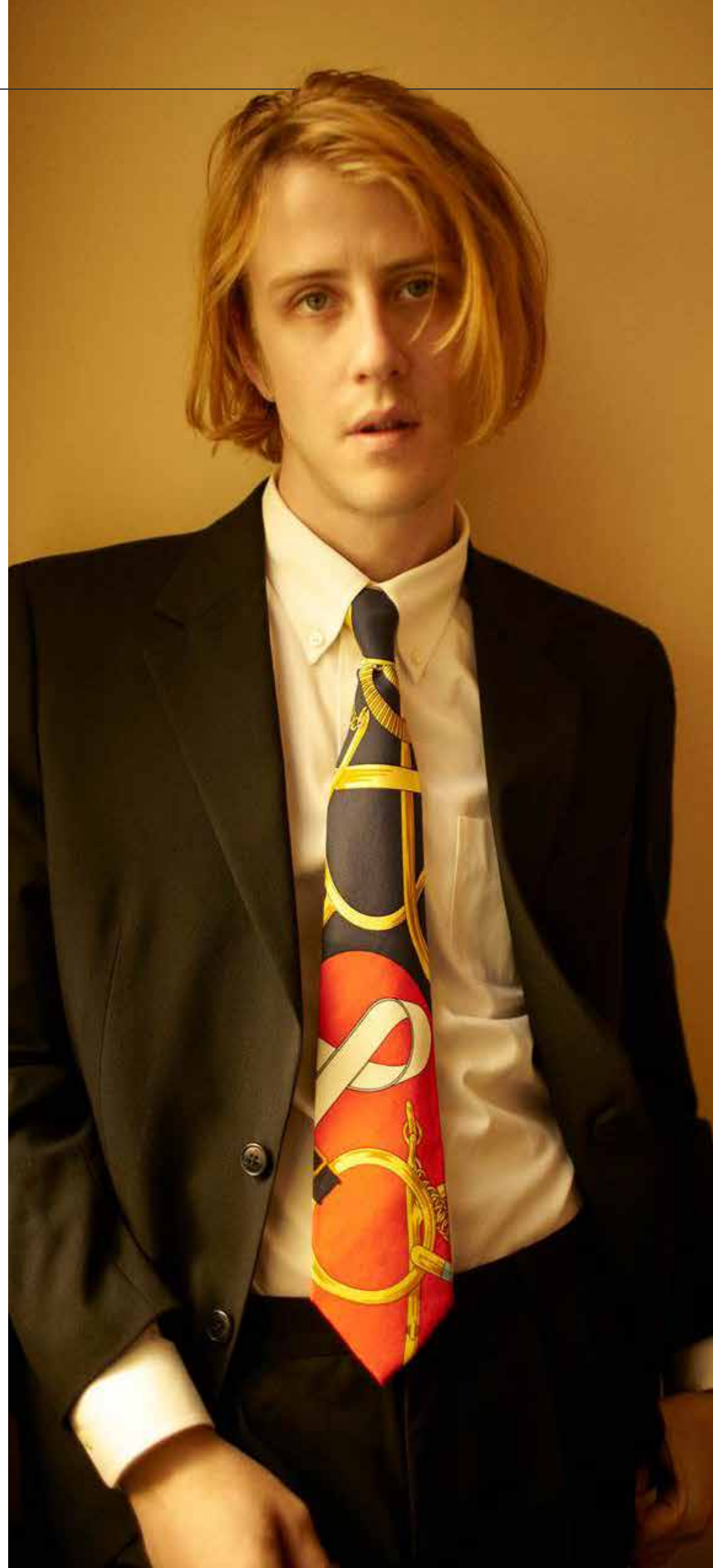
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*Lysandre* is essentially constructed as a two-part suite. In the first, Owens recounts his early days in Girls (“Look at us in New York City,” he sings with wide-eyed delight on “New York City,” “Everybody is listening to me!”). In the second, he falls in love with a girl and spends days at a time in her arms before distance gradually forces them apart. The album-closing “Part of Me (Lysandre’s Epilogue)” effectively ties together the seemingly disparate threads, a chastened Owens offering a final goodbye to the girl/Girls as he sings, “Oh you were a part of me/That part of me is gone.”

It’s unwise to dismiss *Lysandre* as a simple breakup album, however. While a handful of tunes are certainly born of heartache, including the aptly titled “A Broken Heart,” Owens doesn’t waste many moments wallowing (“Don’t try to harsh my mellow, man,” he sings like a 1960s flower child on “Here We Go Again”). Overall, he sounds more interested in taking stock of the ways these intense relationships shaped him as both a man and a musician.

On the album-opening “Here We Go,” the lone track that hints at the Girls of old (note the searing guitar solo that surfaces and quickly recedes about 90 seconds in), Owens exudes the confidence of youth as he sings, “I’ve got it all figured out.” He then spends the rest of his time detailing how much he has left to learn, turning out incisive songs rooted in falling-outs with friends (on “New York City” he details a run-in with a pocketknife-wielding associate) and lovers alike (“Everywhere You Knew” reconstructs the final days of a doomed relationship in photographic detail). It’s a credit to Owens’ talent—and his prospects as a solo artist moving forward—that he can make such personal statements ring out like deep, universal truths. —**Andy Downing**



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**Veronica Falls**

*Waiting for Something to Happen*  
Slumberland Records, CD

**S**omewhere between Fantasyland and Frontierland, I wanted to hear Veronica Falls. Disneyland alone isn't for everyone, but I've done it now five times in 2012, most recently in mid-December. I love the place, so much so that merely stepping onto Main Street U.S.A. brings tears of nostalgic joy to my face each and every time I do it.

Yet going the single-rider route during the holidays can be tough. Not the Pogues' bitter, angry heartbreak of "Fairytale of New York" tough, just more wistful. The sense that something—or someone—is missing. And yet, there are still those tears of joy that materialize at a time and place that inspires such happiness.

Such a mix of innocent optimism and grown-up realism permeates the guitar-driven garage pop of Veronica Falls. Jangly guitars rush songs forward, but casually languid vocals and harmonies create a feeling of running in place. The narrators on this 13-track collection are dreamers. "We can dream together," helpfully sings Roxanne Clifford on "My Heart Beats," and on "Teenage," she simply wants to share a late-night drive around town with a crush.

Yet idealism is busted throughout. The thumping rhythms of "So Tired" arrive in pre-party excitement mode, but Clifford is tired of being alone, tired of people she knows. "Everybody's Changing" slows things down for minor-key melancholy and "Shooting Star" waits for a fairytale ending—with menace. Here, back-and-forth vocals between Clifford and James Hoare aren't used to harmonize or echo, but haunt. *(continued)*

# Benchmark



## DAC1 HDR

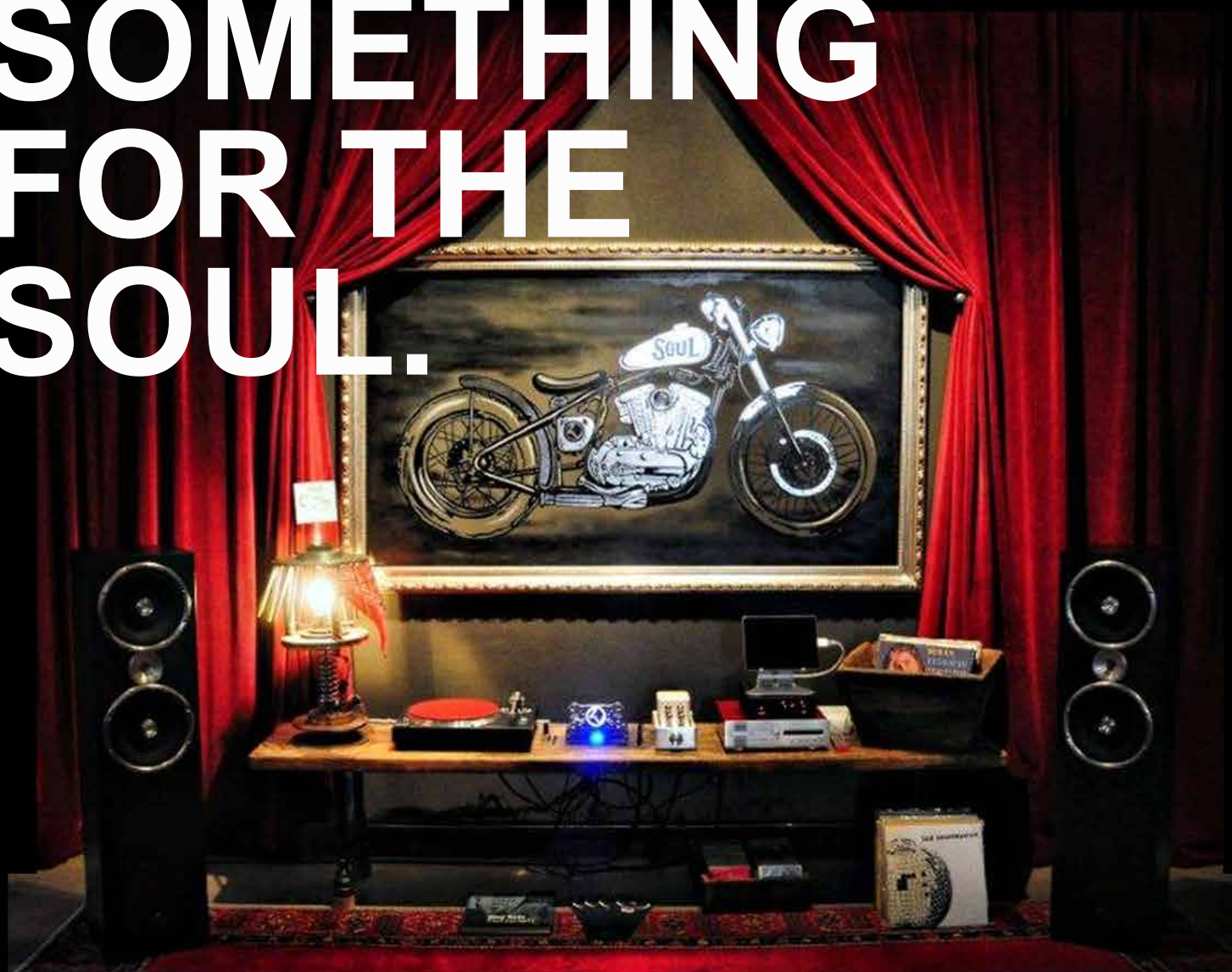
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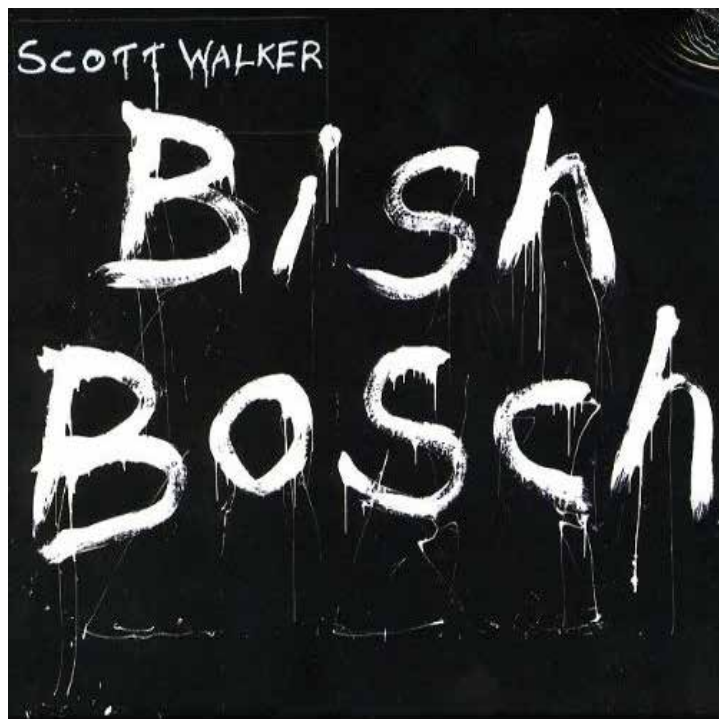


©Photo by Robin Silas Christian

The London-based band, after all, still obsesses over death imagery and hangs on to the misguided romanticism that posits suffering must come before enjoyment. Yet if the act's self-titled 2011 debut channeled the vibe associated with the tragic girl-group songs of yore, on *Waiting for Something to Happen*, Veronica Falls speak strictly of metaphorical matters of the heart. "Buried Alive" views a relationship as a death sentence and, complete with swooning harmonies, it qualifies as one the more hooky songs.

Ultimately, it's a warts-and-all look at getting along, and one that isn't going to let a crummy mood ruin a three-minute pop song. "Everybody's crazy," Clifford sings on the title track. "What's your excuse, baby?"  
—**Todd Martens**




**Scott Walker**

*Bish Bosch*  
4AD, 2LP or CD

**S**cott Walker's recent output can be described as easy listening for asylum inmates and mass murderers.

In the midst of his third album in 17 years, which bears only a passing resemblance to any form of popular music, the 69-year-old wails about cutting off his "reeking gonads" and feeding them to another man's "shrunken face" like some kind of self-mutilating Hannibal Lecter. The musical backdrop is similarly disturbing, Walker constructing an unfinished symphony of horror-film strings, found sounds, cold electronics, operatic outbursts, shrieking guitars, and trash-compactor drums.

*Bish Bosch*, the final part in a trilogy that started with 1995's *Tilt* and continued in 2006 with *The Drift*, opens with 30 seconds of punishing drums overlaid with a cringe-inducing metallic screech. The segment turns out to be one of the more accessible moments on the album—a fact to which Walker alludes when he sings, "If you're listening to this you must have survived," four minutes into the record's penultimate track. The avant-garde musician delivers the laugh-out-loud line with a knowing wink, as though fans that endured his prior abuse are roughly the equivalent of the bloody survivors left standing at the end of a slasher flick. It's been a startling evolution for Walker, who first emerged in the 1960s as a lush, orchestral pop balladeer before entering this second, significantly more challenging career phase.

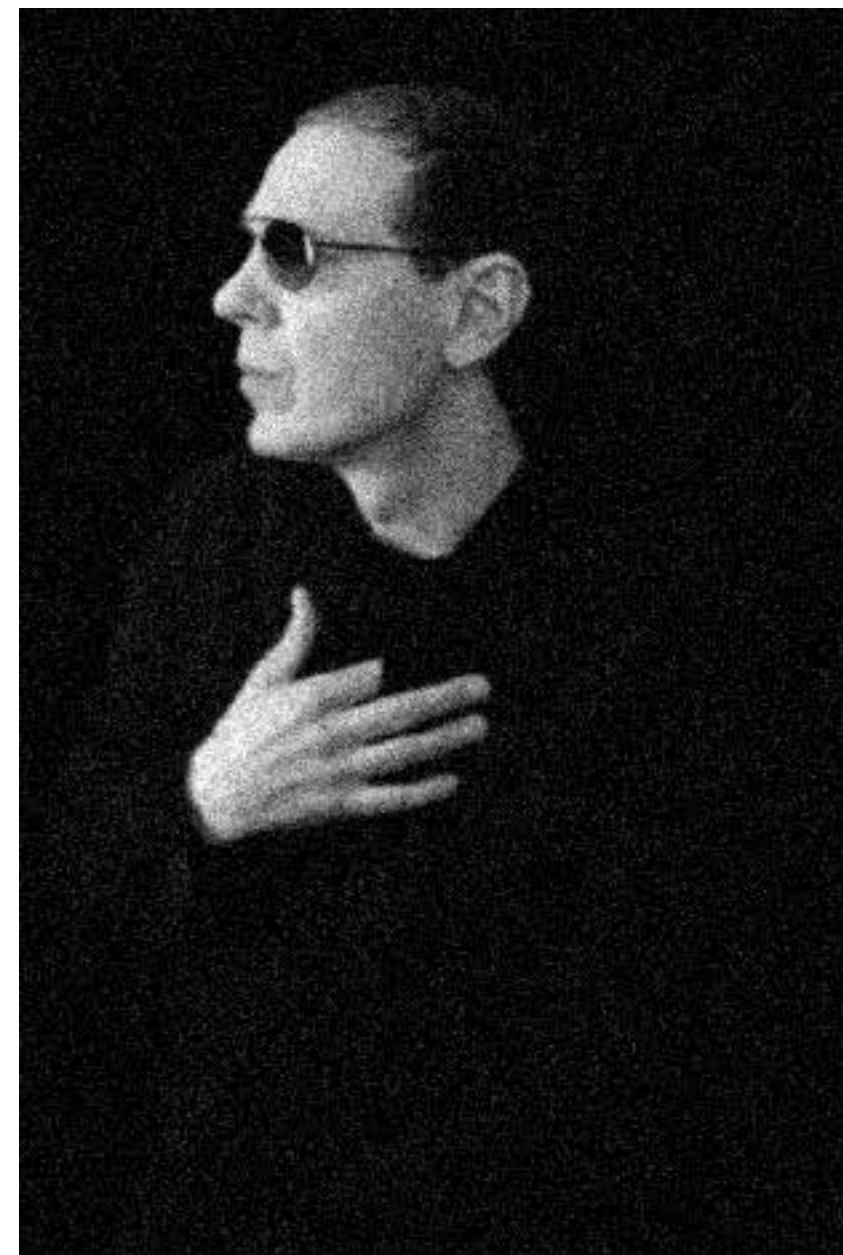
While undoubtedly difficult, *Bish Bosch* is also, at times, immensely rewarding. Like Diamanda Galas, Jacques Brel, or even Richard Wagner, Walker has a way of hitting on sounds that provoke primal, animalistic responses in listeners. "Epizootics!," for one, veers between weirdly atmospheric passages and deep explosions of brass that make it sound as though a second-line parade accidentally wandered through the studio. Walker's vocal intro on "Corp De Blah," in turn, is downright lovely, particularly in contrast with the chaos surrounding it. Then there are the snarling metal guitars that briefly cut through the morass on "Phrasing," circling the singer like hungry jungle cats.

Unfortunately, Walker's ambitions often trump accessibility. So it goes on "SDSS14+13B (Zercon, A Flagpole Sitter)," a 20-minute-plus patience-tester that hasn't verses, chorus, or discernible structure. It does, however, include lyrical references to Attila the Hun, Louis B. Meyer, and Luis Bunuel's *Simon of the Desert*. Later on in the album, he inexplicably starts singing in Danish.

Akin to director David Lynch, who enjoys a similar reputation as an outsider artist, Walker enjoys blending the high brow with the low. In Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, Dennis Hopper's villain offered cheers with working-class favorite beverage Pabst Blue Ribbon ("Heineken? FUCK THAT SHIT!"). Here, Walker occasionally breaks from his more esoteric cultural references to drop "yo mama" jokes. Vide, "You're so fat when you wear a yellow raincoat people scream, 'Taxi!'" and "Does your face hurt? Cause it's killing me," which, unfortunately, are actual lines on the record.

Yes, these adolescent asides are included to prod and provoke, and fall in line with the general themes of cruelty and human suffering that have largely defined Walker's work since the mid-90s. Still, even the musician's most ardent supporters have to be hoping that, next time around, he inflicts a little less of the punishment on his audience.

—**Andy Downing**





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**Pissed Jeans**

*Honeys*

Sub Pop, LP or CD

**F**or as much as the debate over healthcare dominated our recent election cycle, the topic rarely creeps up in rock n' roll. Whether this is due to any perceived lack of sexiness related to the inner workings of Obamacare or simply a desire on the part of our musicians to remain non-partisan on issues of health and wellness is a topic still open for research. In the meantime, Pennsylvania's rock n' roll Garbage Pail Kids, Pissed Jeans, have actually opted to vent their frustrations with the world of co-pays and doctor referrals. They simply want none of it.

Stertorous vocalist Matt Korvette doesn't waste any time in "Health Plan," a two-minute song full of howls, grunts, and chainsaw-fast guitars. He first acknowledges his grown-up responsibilities and then spits on them. "Now is the time in my life to choose a health plan," he sings, delivering the line with one of the most patient growls in hard rock." You wanna know my secret? I stay away from doctors." *(continued)*

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





©Photo by Sasha Morgan

It's as if the Tommy in the Replacements' "Tommy Gets His Tonsils Out" has grown up with a lifelong fear of medical practitioners and started a band to rant and rave about the more mundane aspects of modern life. "You're Different in Person" uses a slightly funky, stutter-step rhythm to address disappointment in online matchmaking. "Cafeteria Food" arrives as the rare mid-paced song, but it's the most sinister track, with stalking drums and persistent, static-drenched guitars.

While the sludgy quartet may appear to want to help you eat healthier, there's usually an ulterior motive in each burst of noise. Good news, for instance, is equated in "Cafeteria Food" as "feeling like I'm not the father." The snarling, Jesus Lizard-like intensity of "Teenage Adult" both condemns and

celebrates Peter Pan syndrome, and "Loubs" stretches a high-heels obsession to nearly five minutes, finding new uses for feedback with every verse.

Five or so years ago, Pissed Jeans initially came across as just a bunch of bratty loudmouths that harkened back to Sub Pop's underground roots. Yet on *Honeys*, its fourth effort and third LP for the label, the band has found its stride by gradually adding more humor. Plus, no-frills rock is making a comeback of late—even if Pissed Jeans lacks the melodic rush of FIDLAR or ferocity of Ceremony.

Still, Pissed Jeans has advice for those wanting more. "Take all my faults and twist them in your head until I look like a sweet and thoughtful man," Korvette sings on "Romanticize Me." Put your mind to work.

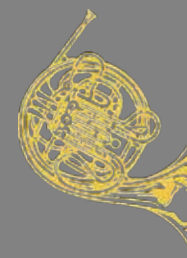
—**Todd Martens**

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# AudioQuest's Miniature Marvel The DragonFly

By Jeff Dorgay

I have been having way too much fun with the AudioQuest DragonFly—so much fun that it's taken me all year to write the damn review. This nifty little device has quickly become a must-have travel accessory. And although I'm perhaps not as dashing as George Clooney, I am on an airplane these days almost as much as his character in *Up in the Air*—but fortunately I never have to fire any of the people I'm visiting.

Here's how it usually goes: The minute we hit 10,000 feet and the pilot signals that personal electronics can now be used, I pull out the DragonFly and whatever phones I've brought along for the ride. Before I can even get the cans on my head, the passenger in the seat next to mine asks, "What is *that*? I've never seen one of *those*. Is it expensive?" And I've had just as many female as male passengers inquire. On the flight home from the Munich High End show, I just happened to be sitting next to an audio nerd who was terribly impressed. "How did you get one of those?" he asked. It turns out that he was a loyal *TONEAudio* reader, which always makes for great conversation.



After a quick listen, everyone comes away convinced that they need a DragonFly—even Bose noise-cancelling headphones users, and that's saying a lot.

## What Makes It So Awesome?

We could go on and on about all the techie bits that make the DragonFly so special—like its 24-bit/96-kHz Sabre DAC, on-board headphone amplifier and built-in digital volume control—but that would be kind of boring. (For those wanting such techie bits, read Art Dudley's excellent review in the October issue of *Stereophile*.)

Beyond its technical achievements, the DragonFly succeeds on many levels. It sounds way better than its \$249 price tag suggests, but the real triumph of the DragonFly is that it's *accessible*. You don't have to be a mega-nerdtron to understand it (or use it, for that matter), but if you are a true audio enthusiast, you'll immediately grasp its gestalt. Among the 100-plus parts inside this tiny music machine, which is barely bigger than a USB jump drive, are Sabre ESS DAC chips, a pair of clocks and a 60-step digital volume control. The USB connector even uses the same silver coating as AQ's premium USB audio cables.

But you'll forget all of that the minute you plug it in. I've used a

couple of excellent portable DAC/headphone amplifiers, but none of them are conducive to traveling light. The DragonFly requires no power adaptor, cables or accessories; just plug it right into your laptop's USB port, direct your computer to use it as the sound output and you're rolling. It works equally well with Mac or Windows operating systems.

My review of the DragonFly begins with my current traveling companions, the Sennheiser PXC 450 noise-cancelling headphones. Starting with Bombay Dub Orchestras' *3 Cities*, in straight 16-bit/44.1-kHz mode via iTunes, there is a major jump in sound quality that instantly eliminates some of the fog that always accompanies noise-cancelling phones. With the already spacey vibe of this album, the presentation is definitely more hallucinogenic via the DragonFly. Driving guitars, courtesy of Black Sabbath's *Paranoid*, quickly nudges me back into audiophile mode, as I listen to the big improvements the DragonFly makes to Apple Lossless files through noise-cancelling headphones. The cymbals in "Fairies Wear Boots" have a smooth, natural timbre through the DragonFly that make me want to goose the volume up a bit higher than might be prudent—so be careful: The lack of graininess and distortion catches you off guard at first.



## FEATURE

Flying always makes me impatient, so I often bounce back and forth between music, movies and Angry Birds, but thanks to the DragonFly's virtual elimination of listener fatigue, I'm listening to complete albums—something I rarely do on a plane. I save the playlist from this trip so I can compare tracks when back in the office with a full compliment of other headphones.

### Better Phones, Better Results

With the impressive performance that the PXC 450s turned in, I'm not prepared for what the DragonFly is capable of with my cache of over-ear headphones. Should I start at the bottom and work up, or the other way around? Decisions, decisions. Patience gets the best of me and I jump right in with the Audeze LCD-2 planar phones and upgraded Cardas Clear headphone cable.

Yeow, this is incredible! Even with 16-bit/44.1-kHz files, it's like strapping a pair of Magnepan 1.7s onto my head, with a First Watt amplifier on my back—which would not be convenient or fashionable. School Food Punishment's *Air Feel*, *Color Swim* gives the LCD-2s a great workout, with layer upon layer of well-sorted vocals and synthesizers. Switching back to the headphone jack on the MacBook Pro is now unacceptable—the additional resolution provided by the bigger phones is too much fun to be without.

There's more texture and decay everywhere. The bongos at the beginning of William Shatner's rendition of "Space Truckin," from *Seeking Major Tom*, now feels like it's being played through a great pair of loudspeakers, and I find myself forgetting that I even have headphones on.

### High-Resolution Files: The Final Frontier

Upping the ante to recently downloaded files from HDtracks shows just how much the DragonFly is capable of. The latest version of Pure Music software is a night-and-day upgrade from the standard CD-quality files I have on hand of Herbie Hancock's classic album,



*Head Hunters*. The beginning of "Watermelon Man" now has air on the acoustic instruments that wasn't there before, and the bass line now has plenty of its own space and texture. Those not convinced of the validity of higher-resolution digital files need not purchase a five-figure digital rig; the DragonFly and a great pair of headphones will make you an instant believer.

As my next-door neighbor, who knows nothing about audio, shouted while listening to the 24-bit/96-kHz version of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*, "I like this a lot better!" (Funny how people shout when wearing headphones, isn't it?)

Having auditioned a wide range of great DACs in the \$1,000 range, I can tell you that the DragonFly easily competes. It has a decidedly "un-digital" sound, with an ease that should appeal to even the most hardcore analog lovers. At the risk of offending the analog loyalists, I will say that if I were putting together a system on a modest budget, I'd much rather listen to even Red Book CD files through the DragonFly than cobble together a \$249 analog solution and play gnarly records found in the budget bins.

Eliminating the casework and power supply from the parts count (and no doubt some profit margin) goes a long way at get-

ting the price down. Bravo to AQ for delivering this product for such a down-to-Earth price.

### Anchor Your Audio System

If the DragonFly were only a headphone amp, it would be a major bargain at \$249, but it's equally exciting used just as a DAC. Mated to the Sansui receiver and JBL speakers (covered on page 77), and an earlier-generation Mac mini purchased on eBay for about \$100 bucks, I managed to create an amazingly musical system for just under \$1,000 total. In this case, the fixed analog output of the DragonFly works well, taking the digital volume control out of the equation.

Picking out the ethereal Fairlight sounds on the Tubes' *Completion Backwards Principle* is an exercise in trippiness. Things were floating all around the imaginary soundstage in my head. Not able to stop there, Eno's *Ambient 4: On Land* dragged me further into the world inside my head—one that is typically only provided by listening to headphones.

Moving further upscale, to the system in room two, which is now configured with a Conrad-Johnson PV-12 preamplifier, Krell KSA-50 power amplifier and a pair of Dynaudio Confidence C1 II speakers, the DragonFly still cuts the mustard. On a recent visit to the KEF factory in the UK,

I had the pleasure of experiencing the DragonFly in KEF's reference system with a pair of its flagship Blade speakers (\$30,000/pair). Impressive!

### No Longer Outside Looking In

There's no better gateway drug for the world of high-quality sound reproduction than the AudioQuest DragonFly: Just add the laptop and the headphones you already own and prepare to be blown away. Or plug it into your current hi-fi system and use it as a high-resolution DAC—it's all good.

If you spend as much time on a plane as George Clooney and I do, or if you are just an avid headphone listener, you need a DragonFly. If you aren't an avid headphone listener, I'll bet you quickly become one with the DragonFly on hand. And playing Angry Birds has never been more fun. *Bahooonga!*

I am very happy to announce that the DragonFly is our Product of the Year in the digital category.

**The AudioQuest DragonFly**  
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[www.audioquest.com](http://www.audioquest.com)



## FEATURE

# Blue Aura v30 Blackline Integrated Tube-Amplifier System

By Mark Marcantonio



With the burgeoning number of adults working from home, the office-audio category has become an industry bright spot. Filling this space is Blue Aura's \$549 v30 Blackline music system, which satisfies the craving for vacuum tubes and matching speakers, and does so in a space-conscious package.

## Out of the Box

The handsome, three-piece system looks sharp wherever I place it in my office—I tried both my bookshelf and credenza—but the system's striking aesthetics never dominate the décor. Los Angeles-based Blue Aura wraps the speakers and the body of the amp in black faux-leather, and accents the amp with chrome trimmings.

The amp is 10 inches wide, 7.5 inches deep and 5.5 inches tall, and the plated handles on either side of it double nicely as bookends. Adorning the front panel is a pair of matching chrome knobs—one for adjusting the volume and one for selecting from the three inputs (USB, LINE, and AUX). Two 6N1 tubes flank the taller 6E2 tube, with its decorative but unnecessary green glowing light filter. A four-post tube guard with a plexiglass-and-chrome top shelf protects the tubes from inadvertent fingers or the common office mishap.



## FEATURE



On the back panel, from left to right, are three inputs (RCA, mini-headphone, and mini-USB B), followed by a mini-headphone output jack, four brass speaker jacks, the power-cord socket and power switch.

The 5.5-inch tall speakers look similar to the Audioengine A2s, with forward-facing slits towards the bottom of each speaker serving as bass ports. The 3/4-inch tweeter and 3.5-inch paper driver surprised me from the outset with some obvious low-frequency grunt and detail. With the speakers set on their over-sized-hockey-puck stands and with the bookcase as an additional cabinet, the sexy, sultry vocals of Sade fill my 11-by-10-foot office. Changing out the included 18-gauge speaker wire for some 12-gauge wire further defined the speaker's impressive resolution.

### Dishing It Out

Forget the typical tinny computer sound and irritating fake subwoofer output—the v30 avoids that pitfall. This is a setup I find enjoyable listening to for several hours, which helps me grade papers without becoming restless.

When playing rounded sharp-edged recordings, such as Donald Fagen's *Kamakiriad*, the v30 settles down nicely. I then play some loss-less recordings, with my laptop and Audioengine D2 wireless DAC system on my desk and the v30 on the bookcase, and intoxicating sound fills the office. Even with the speakers just 30 inches apart, the system offers impressive instrument placement.

It's obvious that the Blue Aura engineers understood that the typical home-office setup limits how far apart speakers can be placed. The result is a nice, expansive sound-stage and subsequent enjoyable listening experience. Even stepping down to my MacBook's analog output and running a wire to the v30 yields worthwhile results.

The system excels at reproducing jazz music, and quickly makes Vince Guaraldi's classic *Charlie Brown Christmas* a playlist favorite. The v30's ability to recreate the individual bass notes in "O Tannenbaum" bests the budget bookshelf speakers that normally occupy my office—and those are more than three times the size of the v30's speakers. Guaraldi's piano matches the glow that the three tubes adds to the keystrokes. The slight loss in absolute detail is easily made up by the system's warmth and rich decay.

As the days pass, the v30 becomes the reason to listen to music, the goal being to see what it can handle musically. While blasting Slayer at house-party levels isn't realistic, the unit has no problem getting into the 90-plus-dB range before hitting its sonic wall. It delivers more complex rock with ease. John Mellencamp's *Lone-some Jubilee*, with its multitude of instruments, sounds open and uncongested—a neat trick for such a diminutive setup.

As expected, the v30's three glowing tubes make the midrange beguiling. Female vocals and instruments are lush and warm, and void of the syrupy slow quality that creeps into many budget tube systems. In this price range, the v30 is downright first-rate, especially in the level of clarity it brings to Pink

Martini's "Mar Desconocido," with its tempo-leading bongos, and to the plucked guitar and xylophone in the next track, "Taya Tan."

### Just For Fun

One Sunday afternoon, I pair the 20-wpc integrated amplifier with the 92-dB-efficient Verity Audio Finns. The v30 does itself proud here, powering the Finns with confidence. Though the amplifier section won't make one forget PrimaLuna's resolution, particularly in the higher register, it does move some serious air, representing the basics of tone and balance remarkably well.

Even in larger spaces, such as my 13-by-19-foot family room, the v30 delivers open sound. With the amp and speakers on the rock fireplace hearth with the angled puck speaker stands tilted upward, the room fills with warm holiday sounds. Even with the sliding door to the kitchen closed, I was still able to enjoy the details emanating from the system.

For those that desire tunes but need focus on work in their office, the musicality of the v30 Black-line make it a top-tier choice for the home office. Looking to add a source wirelessly? Just add Blue Aura's WSTxR wireless transmitter/receiver kit for \$149.

[www.blueaura-audio.com](http://www.blueaura-audio.com)



# The Year in Rock and Pop Box Sets



## A "Great Eight," and Several Commendable Specialized Releases

By Bob Gendron

**E**volution by way of specialization. Following the same patterns driving craft beer and farm-to-table gastropubs, most 2012 box sets targeted specific audiences rather than general listeners. And they're better for it. Recognizing that the era during which the public willingly shelled out for multidisc career anthologies and lavish greatest-hits packages is gone—as well as the fact that nearly every deserving artist already received such treatment—labels catered to hardcore fans of specific performers and genres.

While the strategy means fewer coffetable-worthy collections exist than in years past, most green-lighted sets claim a quality, elaborateness, and comprehensiveness rarely seen just several years ago. Not surprisingly, fewer labels are making them. Rhino, which once released several titles per month, has all but exited the market. A force for decades, Sony Legacy now reigns as the undisputed king of box sets.

With niche marketing holding sway, the line between essential and appealing has increased. Several hyper-specialized sets qualify as irresistible curiosity items aimed at discrete tastes. Not that some of these boxed volumes aren't worth seeking out. Watain's *Opus Diaboli* (black metal and underground fans, rejoice); the wonderfully packaged Grateful Dead *Spring 1990* (five concerts documenting one of the collective's last well-regarded tours constitute bliss for Deadheads yet aren't the place to start for casual fans); and the Tompkins Square label's *Work Hard, Play Hard, Pray Hard: Hard Time, and End Time Music 1923-1936* (a three-disc volume of obscure country and folk drawn from the library of a Kentucky collector) warrant exploration.

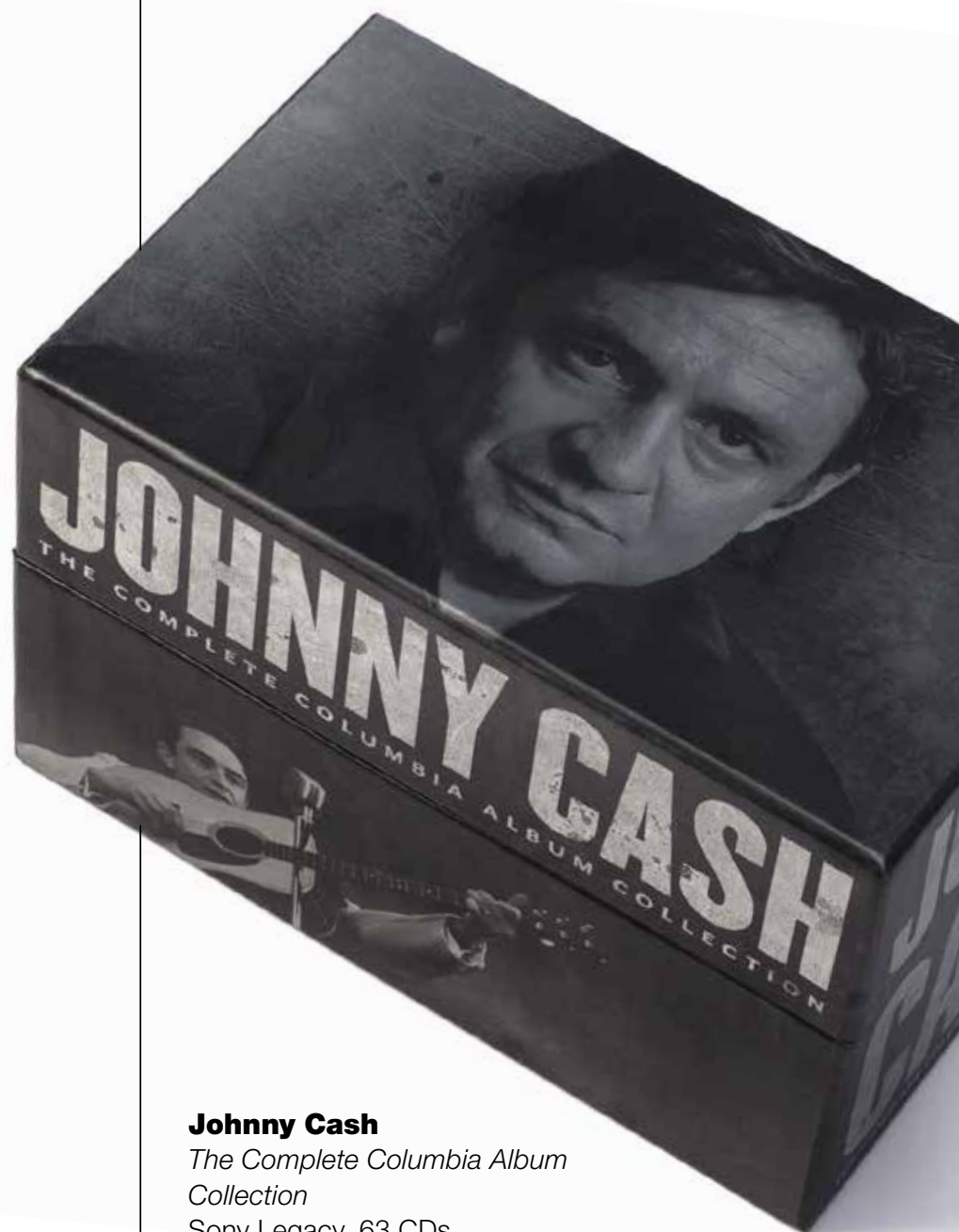
Vinyl boxes? We cover and recommend the Beatles' *Stereo Box* in Issue 50. Analog lovers can also discover rewards by way of the *Blur Vinyl Box Set* (contains each of the group's seven studio efforts, and the first five LPs are remastered from the original source material); the Velvet Underground's *The Verve/MGM Albums* (mono versions of the band's first three efforts, plus more, but you'll deal with inferior packaging); William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops* (wordless music and metaphor at their ultimate); and, for collectors, crate diggers, and soul aficionados, Numero Group's massive *Omnibus 45 Set* (a trove of 45 rare and unique 45RPM soul singles).

Be certain, however, to save shelf space for the following—the "great eight" box sets of 2012. Whether celebrating iconic albums, bringing to light time-capsule performances, or making a strong case for the increased historical merit of an artist, they offer insight, context, purpose, extraordinary music, and first-rate packaging. (Prices reflect suggested retail; in almost every case, titles can be found for much cheaper.)



Sixty-three CDs by any artist equals a daunting number. Even for Johnny Cash. Amassing every single last one of the Man In Black's albums for Columbia—including 35 never before released on disc in the U.S., and his first 19 titles presented in mono—this heavyweight contender spans 1958's *The Fabulous Johnny Cash* through 1986's *Heroes* (with Waylon Jennings), and also encompasses both Highwaymen efforts and two new, expertly assembled compilations. Overkill? Not, as it happens, when Cash is concerned.

Save for Bob Dylan and Ray Charles, no other single musician touches on so many styles with such authority. Cash's commercial success afforded him license for multifaceted thematic albums, and whether delving into gospel, American Indian ballads, western fare, rockabilly, traditional folk, patriotic hymns, holiday jingles, or children's tunes, he does right by them all. Is every attempt a classic? No. Even the greats occasionally miss the mark. Yet, by and large, what's here boggles the senses. Apart from the nearly impeccable string of releases stretching from '58 through '70, pay close attention to 1973's live *Pa Osteraker*, (continued)



### Johnny Cash

*The Complete Columbia Album Collection*  
Sony Legacy, 63 CDs  
\$325

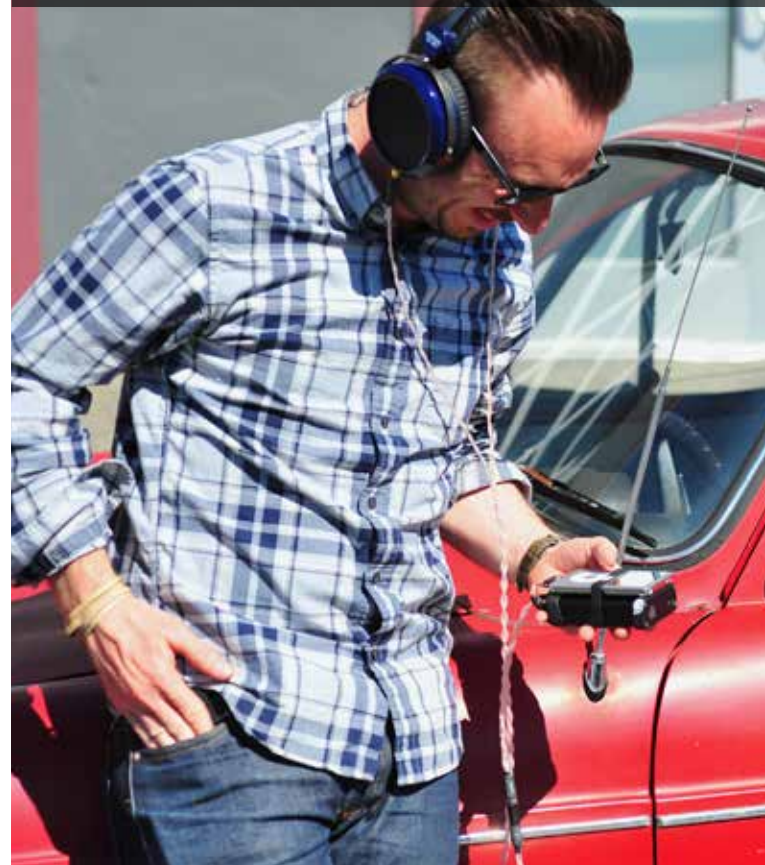
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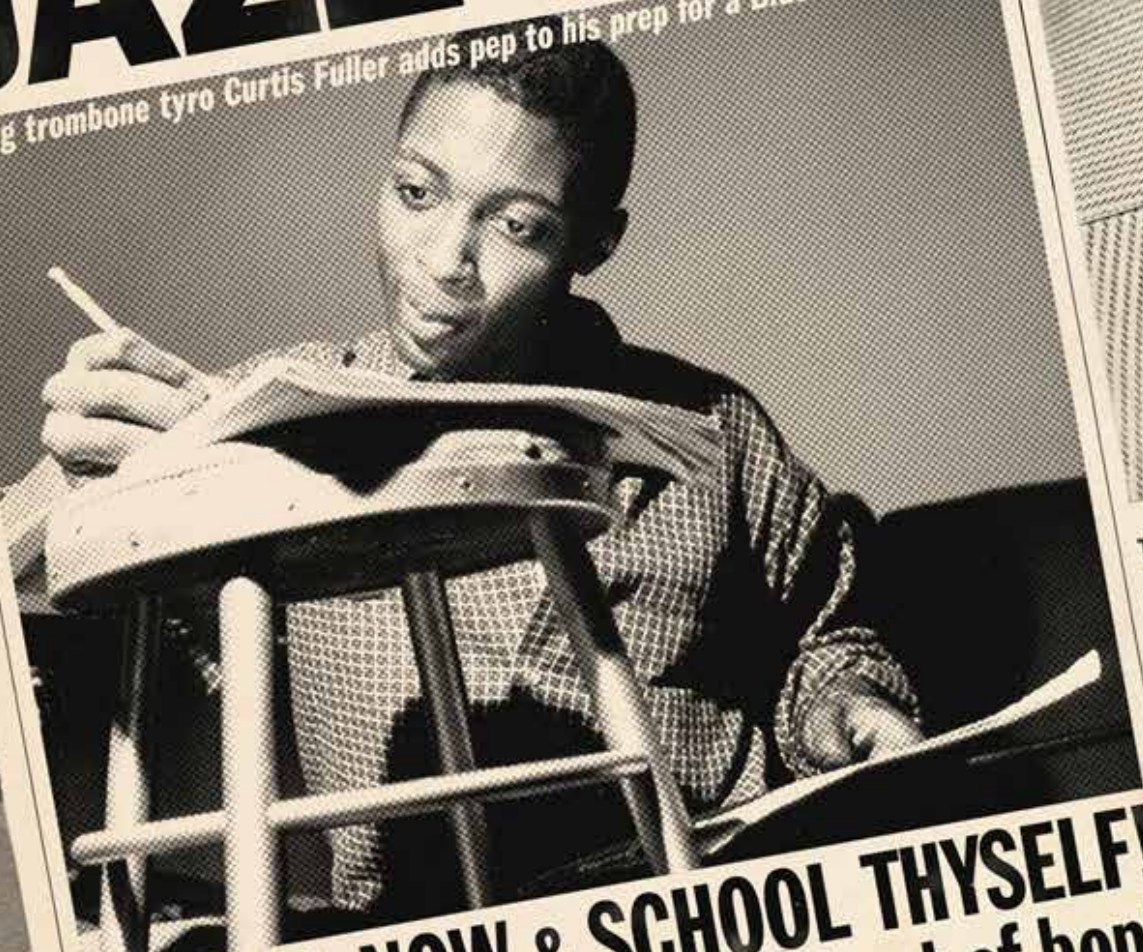


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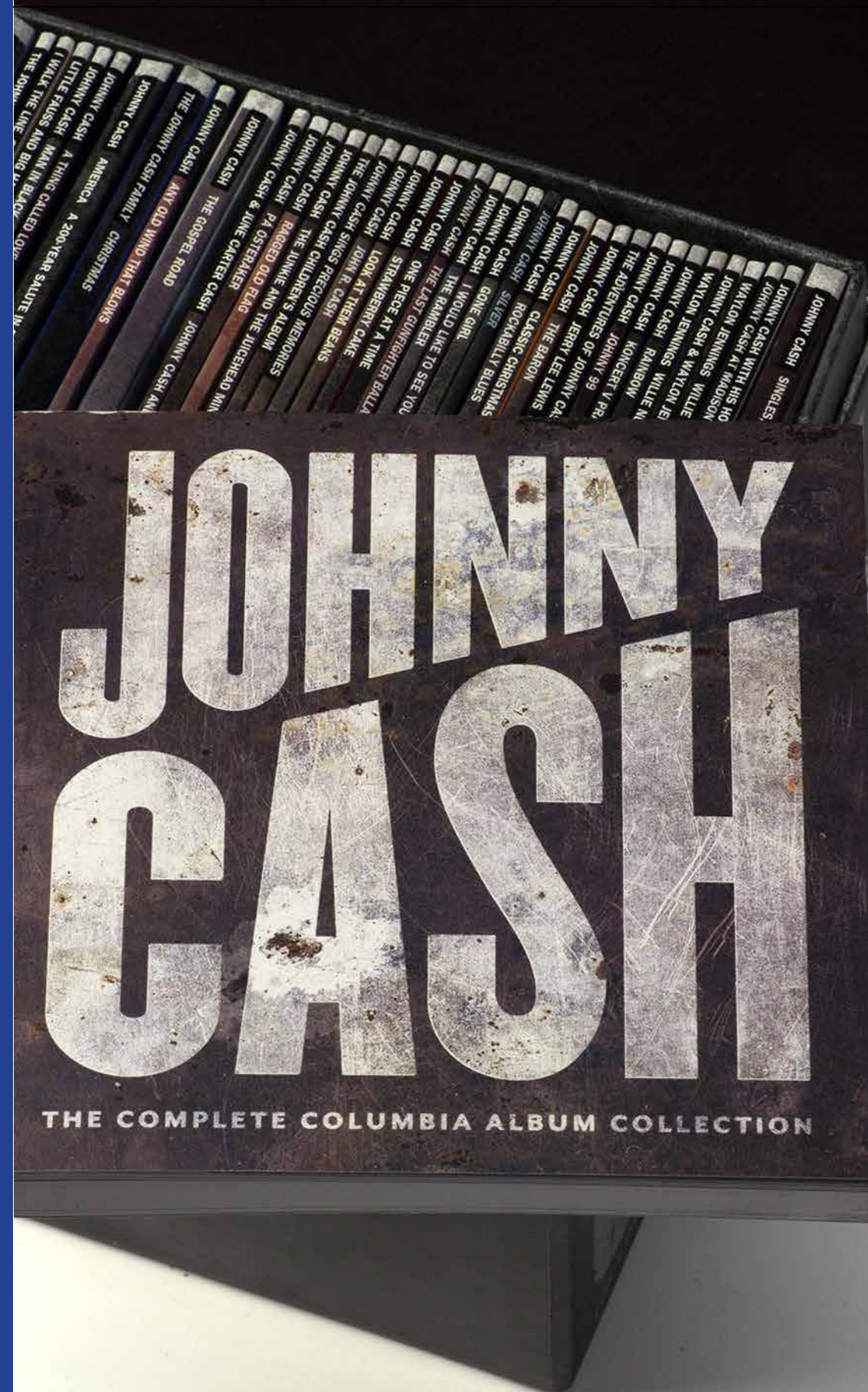
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1974's *John R. Cash*, and the pre-American Records entry *Johnny 99*, an album that suggests Cash ready for his comeback but without an influential power broker in the form of Rick Rubin to secure him an audience.

*The Complete Columbia Album Collection* accomplishes a multitude of feats. None are larger than begging a looming question: Does Cash, given the diversity, scope, and quality of music produced over this roughly three-decade period, stand taller than former labelmate Elvis Presley? The answer seems to lean towards the affirmative. Cash may not have *Graceland* or the built-up myths, but then again, this champion of freedom, justice, peace, and equality isn't the type of hero that needs a postage stamp to solidify his legacy. Courtesy of this project, a re-evaluation of rock music's preeminent figures is in order.

Situated in chronological order in a flip-top box, the CDs are housed in mini-LP replica sleeves with original artwork. A fat, 200-page book contains pertinent details and 5,000-word essay. Seminal.



Considered by myriad music aficionados the best reissue label in the biz, Numero Group established its sterling reputation by way of rescuing from the dust bin largely forgotten-about regional soul, gospel, and pop. With rare exception, the imprint's finds usually date from the 60s and 70s, and boast eccentric backstories. Meticulous liner notes accompany every release, as do a plethora of surprises. The label's first venture into rock involves a band only slightly more well known to general audiences than many of its R&B-based titles, but one that's magnificently important.

The first artist signed to Sub Pop that completely deviated from the "grunge" aesthetic, Codeine enjoyed a relatively short existence before its members, concerned they'd slide into less-than-perfectionist standards if they soldiered on, called it a day. The trio's meager output—two full-length LPs, one EP, and a handful of singles produced over the course of roughly four years—nonetheless garnered the attention of both the indie and mainstream press, which, akin to the collective's peers, marveled at its dirge-like tempos, introverted heaviness, and time-defying restraint.

Aptly named, the group employs unhurriedness as a numbing agent. Conveying themes of detachment and deficiency with stoic poise, vocals are seemingly devoid of emotions unrelated to despair or disappointment. Distorted, gunmetal-gray guitar swells droop and hang like opaque curtains, while the band's secret weapon—frill-free percussion that moves s-l-o-w albeit sprawls across vast canvasses—freezes everything in place. The sonic hybrid stood apart from metal, industrial, goth, or anything else of the time. Songs are oddly beautiful and surreal, euphoric and calm. Codeine carries the minimalist, barren aesthetics over to the album covers. Dim stars rest against a desolate white backdrop; a grand European palace and gardens, so enormous they appear isolated, suspend reality; a birch tree hibernates in winter.

Supplementing the complete studio output, demos and unreleased fare on Numero's opulent box aurally disclose Codeine's music wasn't as easily to make as it sounds to the naked ear. Each cut is cause for greater reflection and appreciation. Three essays dig beneath the band's surface history. Every significant underground artist should be so lucky to have its own version of *When I See the Sun*.

### Codeine

*When I See the Sun*  
Numero Group, 3 CDs/ 6 LPs  
\$80




**Michael Jackson**

*BAD: 25th Anniversary Edition*  
Sony Legacy, 3 CDs/1 DVD  
\$40

**N**o artist in history has ever felt what it must have been like for Michael Jackson to follow-up their sophomore album. That's because no studio set has ever sold in such vast quantities as 1982's *Thriller*. After sweeping the Grammy awards and piling up 25-plus million in sales in the U.S. alone, what does one do for an encore? No matter what he created, Jackson could've never pleased everyone or met expectations.

Long lurking in the shadows of its ubiquitous predecessor, *BAD* is placed in a renewed context thanks to this opinion-changing reissue. Augmented by a disc of standout B-sides, demos, and rarities—and a DVD containing Jackson's July 16, 1988 concert at Wembley Stadium (audio contents are replicated on a CD)—the multimedia set eradicates previous criticisms suggesting the record a calculated imitation of *Thriller*, albeit one with more modernized arrangements.

*(continued)*


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Revisiting songs such as the anthemic title track, inward-looking “Man in the Mirror,” metal-flirting “Dirty Diana,” and, particularly, the rhythm- and gravity-defying “Smooth Criminal” reveals Jackson as his era’s Michael Jordan. He’s a five-tool pop perfectionist that not only wants to dominate the field, but crush the competition. Sure, there’s no rescuing the duet with Stevie Wonder (“Just Good Friends”), but the sleek combination of dance grooves, rock drive, and R&B beats throughout come across as having not lost an edge.

Slightly drab on CD, the concert reaches fever pitch on DVD. Jackson’s dancing and choreographic displays remain marvels, and the era’s iconic fashions conjure a communal feel absent from much of today’s scene. Two full-color, photo-filled booklets round out the celebration.

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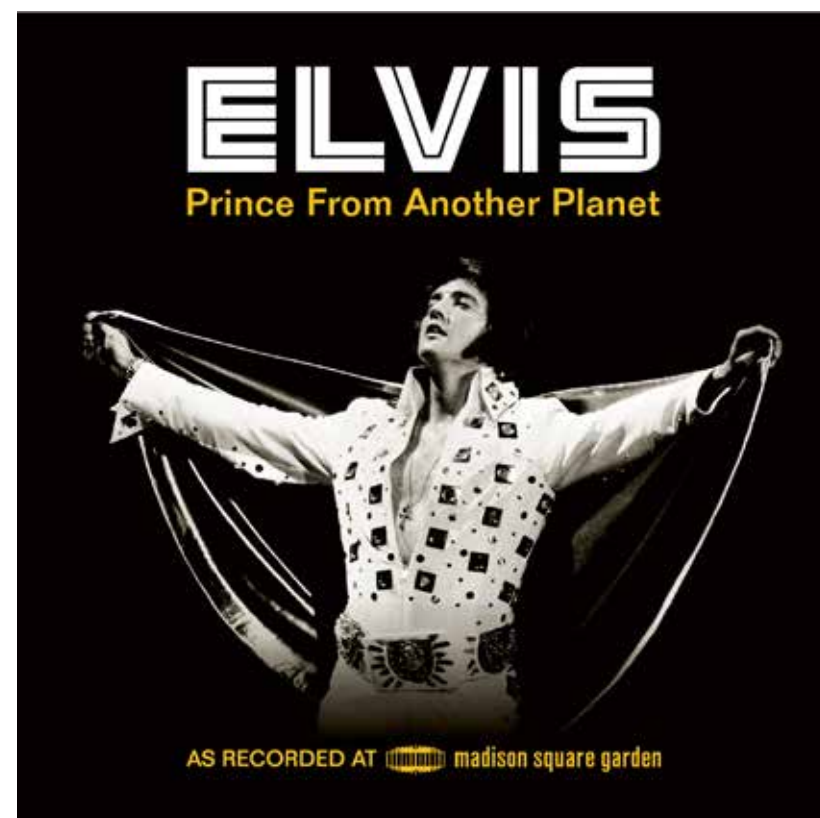
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**Elvis Presley**  
*Prince From Another Planet*  
 Sony Legacy, 2 CDs/1 DVD  
 \$35

Taking its name from a *New York Times* headline trumpeting a review of Elvis Presley's four sold-out shows at Madison Square Garden in early June 1972, *Prince From Another Planet* amasses in newly remixed form the previously issued *An Afternoon in the Garden* and *Elvis As Recorded At Madison Square Garden*, along with a DVD touting previously unseen handheld-shot footage of the afternoon concert. As box sets go, it's rather compact. And while these shows represent Presley's first-ever public gigs in New York City, history alone doesn't justify the collection. What does is the fact that it spotlights a pair of incredible performances during a time many believed the icon to have already passed into cartoonish "Fat Elvis" form. Not so.

Aided by one of the greatest support groups to ever grace a stage—the TCB Band, counting guitarist James Burton, drummer Ronnie Tutt, and bassist Jerry Scheff among its ranks—as well as several backing vocalists and an orchestra, Presley blitzes through a heterogeneous repertoire with pronounced command, blinding speed, tangible enthusiasm, and almost-vengeful determination. On classics such as "Hound Dog" and "That's All Right," tempos

are almost doubled, the musicians keeping up with their leader's every insinuation to push ahead with rabid intent. Presley barely pauses to catch a breath, and the wildly divergent setlists afford no easy outs. Grandiosity—Presley enters to *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, pitches impassioned takes of "An American Trilogy" to Mt. Everest-like peaks, and ups the drama to soap-opera heights on horn-soaked readings of "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'"—conveys the

impression that royalty truly presided over the affairs.

Forget the '68 *Comeback Special*; no official live Presley release tops the commotion, frenzy, sweat, and adrenaline here. A vivid 54-page book catches fire courtesy of Patti Smith guitarist and veteran journalist Lenny Kaye's 5000-word essay on the spectacle, accompanied by illuminating photos, newspaper article reprints, and interview transcripts.







### **Rage Against the Machine**

*Rage Against the Machine: XX*  
Sony Legacy, 2 CDs/2 DVDs/ 1 LP  
\$120

*"Are these guys any good?"* audibly mutter passersby, wondering whether or not the then-unknown band playing on a college campus is worth their time. Captured by a single camera, Rage Against the Machine's first public performance in October 1991 stands out not for winning over converts but because of how locked-in the band already sounds. Playing most of the songs that landed on its self-titled debut, extolled for its 20th anniversary in this multi-format box set in which the aforementioned event is presented on DVD, the quartet attacks with uncommon focus and preparation, altering little between its time honing the material on small stages and hitting the studio months later. The group's widely circulated demos, sold at early shows and included here on a separate disc, point at the same conclusion. *(continued)*

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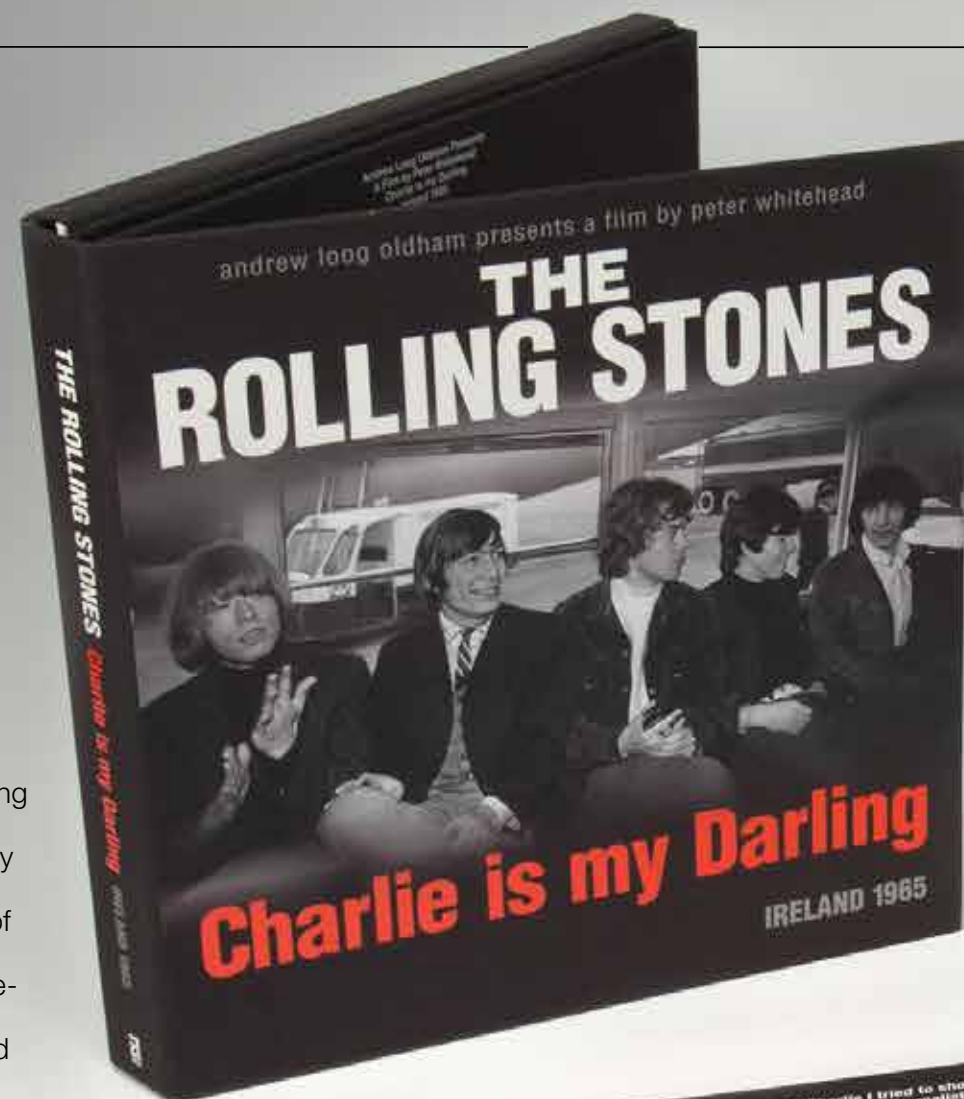
Public Enemy leader Chuck D pens the set's liner notes and invokes RATM's unusual pedigree and fortitude, too. Aside from the evolution of guitarist Tom Morello's solos, few of the band's blueprints undergo considerable modifications on the debut. The upshot of such an exacting work ethic translates via the foursome's combustible onstage performances, which take the vigorous agitprop to volatile levels surpassing those heard on the superbly recorded album. Compiled on two DVDs, and comprising an entire concert (June 2010 in London) as well as clips plucked from an assortment of career-spanning shows, live takes of call-to-arms anthems such as "Killing in the

Name," "Freedom," and "Bulls on Parade" burst with powerhouse dynamics, bulldozing power, and animated passion.

The hypocrisies of multimillionaires urging rebellion via sloganeering lyrics notwithstanding, what counts is the incendiary music—a conflagration of metal, rock, punk, and hip-hop sent up with a cutthroat aggressiveness meant to tear down the corporate structures and oppressive regimes they rail against. The only reservations? Much of the content is previously released or readily available on Internet bootlegs. One also wishes the DVDs were Blu-rays, and the 40-page book more exhaustive.



Stories surrounding the pandemonium at mid-1960s Rolling Stones shows are legion. Tales of fainting girls, brawling boys, and all-around screaming and shoving mayhem inform the band's mystique. It's easy to believe the recollections are exaggerated for the sake of legend, yet as confirmed by this official albeit never-before-released film, the hysteria often spilled onstage and forced the band to quit before the shows finished.



Shot just weeks after “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” reached number one, *Charlie Is My Darling: Ireland 1965* is expanded from its original 35-minute length to a 65-minute peer into the lives of the Stones as they travel around Ireland, gather backstage, and cavort between concerts. Watching Mick Jagger and Keith Richards developing the song “Sitting on a Fence” while lounging in a motel room borders on the surreal. As does the duo’s brief, playful, gently ribbing versions of Beatles songs, early pop standards, and Elvis numbers. Reflecting a deeper seriousness and raw explosiveness, live footage of tunes such as “The Last Time” and the group’s cover of Chuck Berry’s “Around and Around” crackle with tangible energy. The first-ever live rendition of “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction”? It’s here, too.

The film makes evident the materialization of a burgeoning countercultural movement and changing of the guard, and not just because of its portrayal of the amped-up performances (and invaluable shots of the manic crowds). Jagger’s prescient interview responses, which include spot-on observations on American youth and pop songwriting up until the mid-1950s, prove equally revealing. Every member is interviewed; so, too, are ecstatic fans, and a priest that nearly lost his job after he was spotted at a concert.

Expanded with an array of goodies, the movie is presented in three restored versions on both DVD and Blu-ray. Two CDs—one a soundtrack, the other a captivating collection of 13 live tracks recorded during the 1965 tour (a program duplicated on the LP)—and a 42-page hardcover book fill the savvy package.



### Rolling Stones

*Charlie Is My Darling: Ireland 1965*  
ABKCO, 2 CDs/1 Blu-ray/1 DVD/2 LPs  
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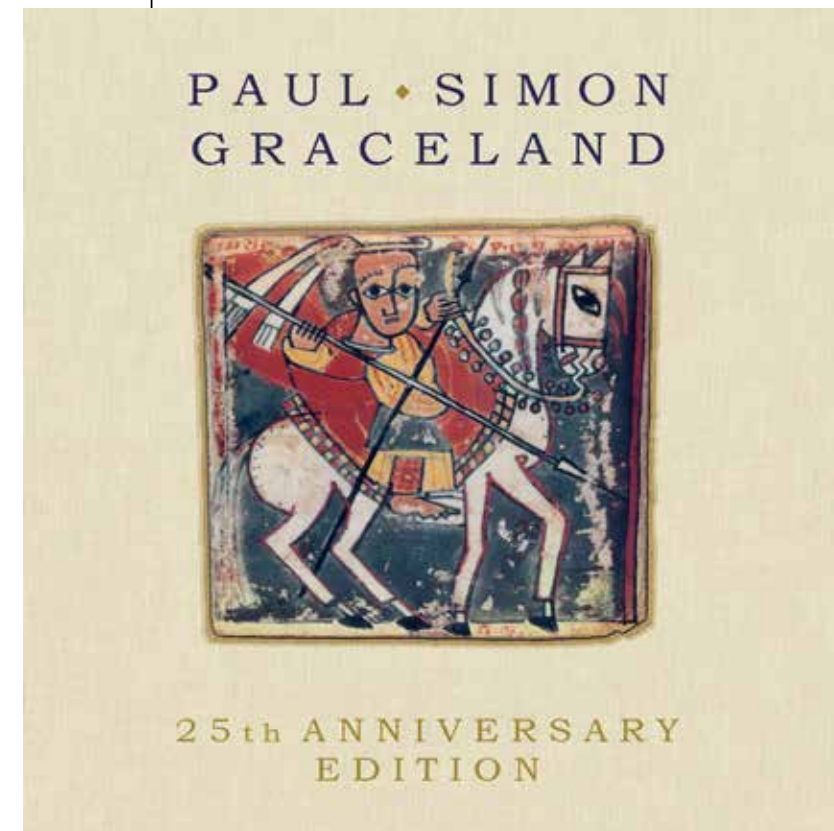
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## MUSIC



### Paul Simon

*Graceland: 25th Anniversary Edition*  
Sony Legacy, 2 CDs/ 2 DVDs  
\$120

Since its 1986 release, Paul Simon's *Graceland* has led a double life. While other crossover albums preceded it, the record ignited interest in “world music” and turned the vague catchphrase into a trendy subgenre. Yet Simon’s controversial methods—he circumvented a U.N. cultural boycott against South Africa, ignored the advice of experts, and recorded a majority of the songs in the country with South African musicians—have always tarnished the effort’s accomplishments, which include two major Grammy Awards and inclusion in the United States National Recording Registry. *(continued)*



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## MUSIC



Joe Berlinger's *Under African Skies* documentary, the grand prize amidst the well-appointed crack-jack box that is *Graceland: 25th Anniversary Edition*, confronts such issues and tries to put them to rest. Peter Gabriel, David Byrne, Paul McCartney, and Quincy Jones are among recognizable figures volunteering recollections and opinions; Simon's return to the country some 25 years later for a reunion concert performed by the *Graceland* band provides a corollary backdrop. Anti-apartheid activists and leaders speaking about the extreme situations, divided reactions, and inherent contradictions regarding

the record suggest the tension—and Simon's somewhat selfish motives—may never be resolved. Which, Simon maintains, is why the music's ends justifies the means.

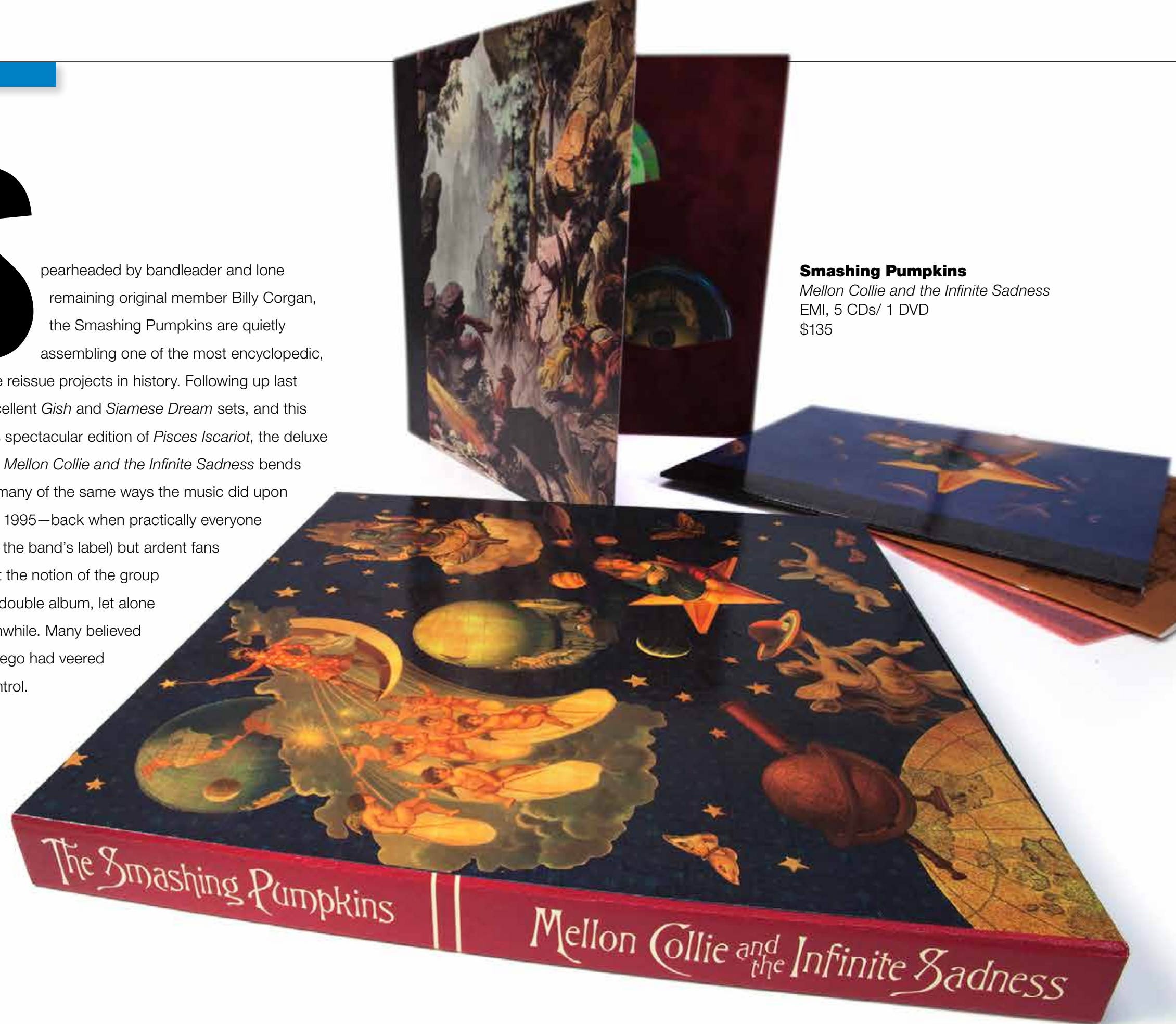
Represented here on a superbly remastered CD along with a separate volume of bonus tracks, *Graceland* remains undeniably fresh. The exhilarating collision of contrasting harmonies and bubbling, dance-inviting grooves engenders a joyousness, optimism, and transcendence intended to defeat the evils occurring in the cloistered environment in which the music was made. A second DVD

contains the film *The African Concert*, the visual register of an event blending Graceland songs with traditional South African tunes. Seen amidst ambassadors like Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, and Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Simon is a mere mortal.

Sony Legacy spares no expense in the packaging. Teeming with textured paper and cloth, and loaded with pertinent information and library-quality books, *Graceland: 25th Anniversary Edition* is exquisite. Analog fanatics will want to supplement it with the reference-quality LP.



**S**pearheaded by bandleader and lone remaining original member Billy Corgan, the Smashing Pumpkins are quietly assembling one of the most encyclopedic, immersive reissue projects in history. Following up last year's excellent *Gish* and *Siamese Dream* sets, and this summer's spectacular edition of *Pisces Iscariot*, the deluxe version of *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* bends minds in many of the same ways the music did upon release in 1995—back when practically everyone (including the band's label) but ardent fans scoffed at the notion of the group issuing a double album, let alone one worthwhile. Many believed Corgan's ego had veered out of control.



### Smashing Pumpkins

*Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*  
EMI, 5 CDs/ 1 DVD  
\$135

Replete with the original record remastered and three CDs stuffed with dozens of previously unreleased tracks, this museum-level piece arrives in a magnetically sealed package adorned with beautiful, embossed cover art that extends the record's Georges Melies-inspired visual concepts. It all evokes adventure, fantasy, and exploration—just like the terrifically ambitious and fearlessly expansive music, which sounds even more impressive and vibrant today than it did nearly 20 years ago. The unburied archival treasures help place the extravagance, massiveness, and extremities of the finalized studio songs in context, and also reveal Corgan held back even more ideas, alternative arrangements, and tunes. The amount of material isn't what stuns; the across-the-board quality and imagination do, however—and do so consistently.

Akin to finding a curiosity-sparking heirloom dating from the early 1900s, or discovering for the first time the otherworldly odysseys inherent in a leather-bound volume of classic fiction, the outer box and one of the two inclusive books overflow with illustrations of angels, moons, exotic landscapes, and inventive animal characters that encourage further investigation. A second, expertly printed book contains lyrics. Corgan pens track-by-track liner notes, and a DVD documents a 1996 London concert as well as four extra performances. A velvet-lined gatefold disc holder and decoupage kit cap off 2012's best overall box set. ●





# TONEAudio Music Editor Bob Gendron's Top Rock and Pop Albums of 2012

## 1. Japandroids

*Celebration Rock*

## 2. Killer Mike

*R.A.P. Music*

## 3. Sharon Van Etten

*Tramp*

## 4. Kendrick Lamar

*Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City*

## 5. Ty Segall

*Slaughterhouse and Twins*  
(tie/combined)

## 6. Neil Young & Crazy Horse

*Americana and Psychedelic Pill*  
(tie/combined)

## 7. Justin Townes Earle

*Nothing's Going to Change the  
Way You Feel About Me Now*

## 8. Frank Ocean

*Channel Orange*

## 9. Baroness

*Yellow & Green*

## 10. Dr. John

*Locked Down*

## Rounding Out the Top 25

### —Honorable Mentions:

**Neneh Cherry** *The Cherry Thing*,

**Dan Deacon** *America*,

**Bob Dylan** *Tempest*, **EI-P** *Cancer 4 Cure*,

**Father John Misty** *Fear Fun*,

**Jamey Johnson** *Living for a Song:*

*A Tribute to Hank Cochran*,

**Men** *Open Your Heart*,

**Miguel** *Kaleidoscope Dream*,

**Bob Mould** *Silver Age*,

**Passion Pit** *Gossamer*,

**Redd Kross** *Researching the Blues*,

**Santigold** *Master of My Make Believe*,

**Tame Impala** *Lonerism*,

**Corin Tucker Band** *Kill My Blues*,

**Bobby Womack** *The Bravest Man in the Universe*

### Five Consistently Overrated Records:

**Bat for Lashes** *The Haunted Man*, **Death Grips**

*Money Store*, **Dirty Projectors** *Swing Lo Majellan*,

**Godspeed You! Black Emperor** *Allelujah! Don't*

*Bend! Ascend!*, **Grimes** *Visions*



# Ground Zero

By Jeff Dorgay



Do you remember where you were the first time you heard music on a decent hi-fi system?

Better yet, do you remember what components you were listening to? For me, that day was sometime in the fall of my freshman year of high school. My parents dragged me to the mall to get “back-to-school clothes.” After breaking free, I found the coolest place at the mall—maybe even the coolest place in the world: It has wall upon wall of backlit Japanese receivers and multiple speaker options, all controlled by a gigantic box with lighted buttons. Flanner & Hafsoos (now Flanner’s Audio, in Milwaukee, WI) was an oasis.

At the time, *TONE* staff member Todd Sageser lived across the street from me. Having perused his copies of *Audio* and *Stereo Review*, I knew the lingo somewhat and confidently told the Flanner & Hafsoos salesperson (they were called “audio consultants” back then) that I wanted to hear the JBL L26 speakers, powered by a Sansui 771 receiver. He tore the shrink-wrap from a fresh copy of Steely Dan’s *Pretzel Logic* and set the Shure M91ED cartridge down on “Rikki Don’t Lose That Number.”



I was bluffing my way through this fairly well when my mom entered stage left and said, “He’s only 13 years old. He can’t afford any of this stuff.”



I was bluffing my way through this fairly well when my mom entered stage left and said, “He’s only 13 years old. He can’t afford any of this stuff.” Yikes—\$299 for the speakers, \$379 for the receiver and \$249 for the table. The salesman helped to save my dignity: On the way out he said, “I’ll throw in the cartridge and the speaker wire if you take the system.”

About six months later, I had saved up enough paper-route money and allowance to buy a pair of AR-7 speakers from my generous neighbor, who was buying a pair of ESS AMT-1s (which would eventually become mine, as well). Combining the AR-7s with my sophomore electronics-class project—a very crude EL34-based amplifier that hummed sporadically—and a used Technics SL1600, I pieced together my first hi-fi system. Yet, I always longed for that Sansui/JBL/Dual combination.

### Major Wood

While some 50-year-old men have midlife crises involving Harley Davidsons and much younger women, I remained on a quest for that first system. Eventually it all came together, with the Sansui being the first part of the puzzle to fall in my lap. A late night eBay session revealed a “mint, original owner” 771 that had all the packing, the original warranty card and the placemat showing the circuit diagram. I was in nerd heaven.

An exhaustive search for a pair of L26s proved fruitless, with a close call in Montreal. A good friend had a pair, but they were somewhat buried at his mom’s house and the woofers would need re-coning. Every rock overturned on eBay and Craigslist had a scorpion or a cow pie underneath it—then one day I got the call. *(continued)*





Pro-Ject  
Debut Carbon



Rega RP3

Music Hall USB-1

AVID Acutus



Rega RP1



VPI Classic 1

Clearaudio Concept



VPI Traveler



Marantz TT-15



Funk Firm LSD



"Dude, it's JBL Mike," said the familiar voice on the other line. "I know you've been looking for a pair of L26s and I've got a pair that are primo—*new* old stock." (Before you laugh too hard, JBL Mike sells L100s all over the world and has a Ferrari 456 parked in his garage.) The phone call ended with an even bigger surprise: "And they've got the super-rare blue grilles," Mike told me.

An hour later I was in JBL Mike's garage, gleefully rubbing my hands together at the sight of these speakers, which looked as though they had been in a Ziploc bag since that fateful day at Flanner & Hafsoos. And Mike taunted me further: "Check these out—the original stands," he said, brandishing a pair of wooden speaker stands that seemed as though they were made from Lincoln Logs, with the JBL logo burned into the wood.

A large stack of 20-dollar bills changed hands, just like a drug deal, and then I was on my way with the speakers I've been dreaming about for almost 40 years. There was only one piece of the puzzle left. All it took was a quick call to Bill at FixMyDual.com and I had a spotless Dual 1229, complete with NOS Shure M91ED, on its way to me in the Pacific Northwest.

### Back to the Future

All the toys now in my possession, I am hesitant to put the system together, dreading a less-than-stellar experience—much like running into one of your old girlfriends at a school reunion. While anticipating the Maxell moment, with the same copy of *Pretzel Logic* I've had since 1974, the M91ED just doesn't pass muster. The system sounds dark, dull and uninvolved. So I substitute the M91ED for the freshly restored (from Vinyl Nirvana) Thorens TD-125/SME 3009/Sumiko Blackbird combination, which proves a huge step up, again convincing me that NOS cartridges are not always a great idea.

This basic system is still very involving on all levels. Using a pair of AudioQuest Sidewinder interconnects (\$39/pair) and some of the brand's bare type-4 speaker cable, (\$5/foot) between spring terminals on the Sansui and the JBLs, it all pulls together nicely. I had a lot of fun rounding out the system with a Nakamichi 700II that I couldn't even dream of affording when I was making \$1.20 an hour working at McDonald's. I wish my experiences with vintage cars were half this fun—or affordable. *(continued)*



## FEATURE

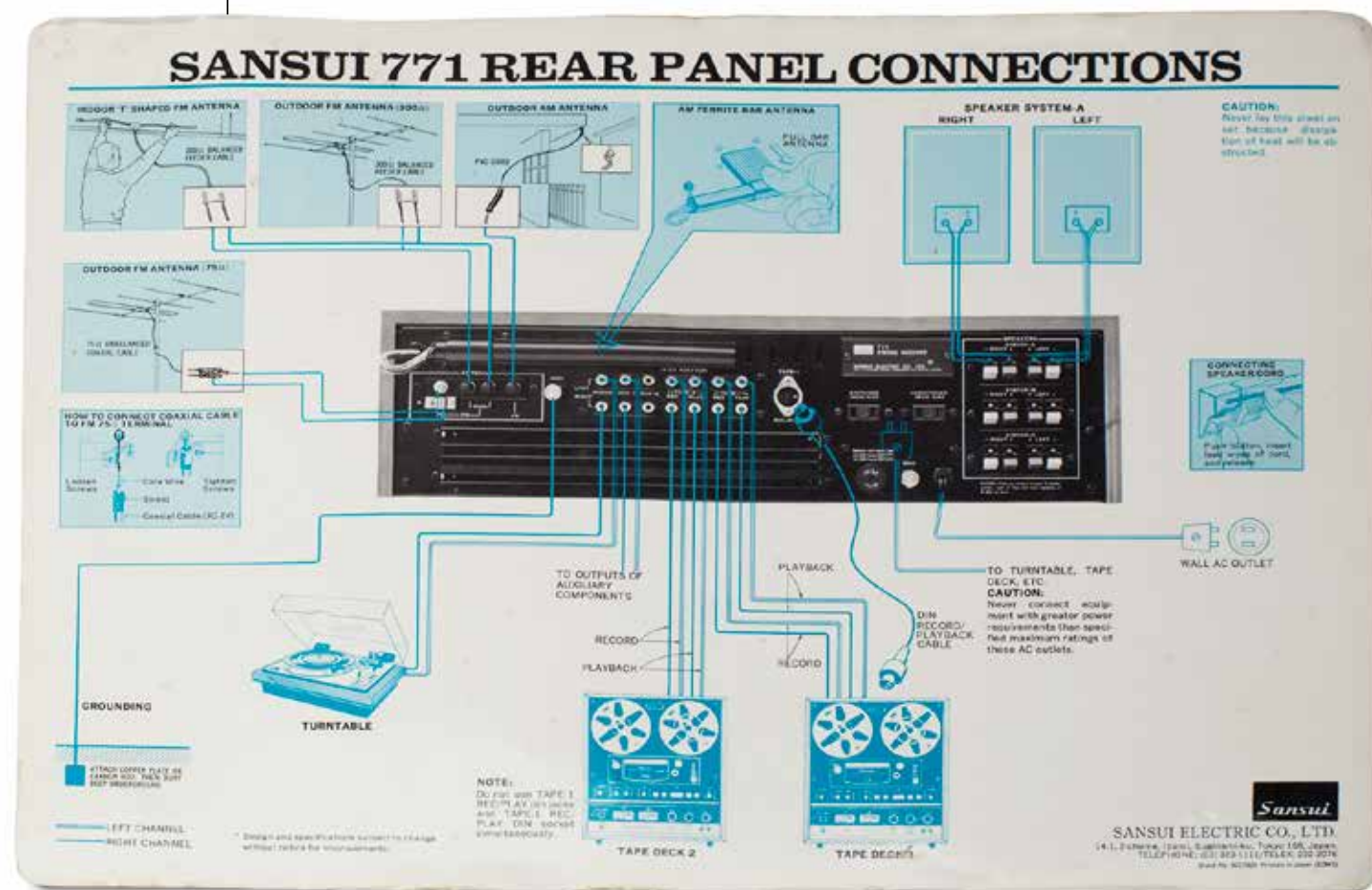
When compared to its modern counterparts, the 771 is above average in terms of tonality and bass punch, even though the front panel is full of tone controls, filters and a loudness button. But it is somewhat below average in terms of noise: It sounds like it has a signal-to-noise ratio of about 50 dB, but a few buddies even nerdier than me claim a complete re-cap will have it working as good as new, if not better.

The JBLs turn out to be the major trophy of the system. I swap out the Sansui for PrimaLuna's latest ProLogue Premium amplifier (equipped with EL34 tubes and delivering 35 watts per channel) and pre-amplifier to reveal budding-audiophile sound in spades. I can't think of a pair of speakers I've heard on today's market costing the same \$350 I paid for these

JBLs that sound remotely close.

They provide that legendary room-filling JBL sound; warm with a bit of mid-bass bloom, yet the high frequencies are much tamer than I remember. Cymbal crashes are clean, and acoustic instruments have a rightness about them that is comfortable to listen to for an extended period of time without fatigue. The speakers are dynamic, and when the program material turns to the mid '70s, (when the speakers were originally made) the presentation is exceptional. There's nothing like listening to *Court and Spark*, *Rumours* or *Frampton Comes Alive!* on a great pair of vintage speakers.

I encourage you to make your own audio pilgrimage. ●



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# The Gorbals Restaurant

Los Angeles, California

Sure, we've talked about everything from Aston Martins to fine liquor in the *Style* section, but now we're talking about restaurants? When the proprietor is a *Top Chef* winner (on the series' most-watched episode) and his dad just happens to be Roy Hall of Music Hall Audio, then hell yes we're talking about restaurants!



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## TONE STYLE

Those of you who have had the pleasure of hanging out with Hall Sr. at audio shows know he's quite the food and liquor aficionado. As it turns out, he's also the family cook. When we sat down to dinner at his son's restaurant, the Gorbals, which is tucked away off of South Spring Street between West 5th and 6th Streets in downtown Los Angeles, Ilan Hall tells us he's "been cooking with his dad since he was a kid."

Having studied at the Lorenzo de' Medici institute in Florence at 17, Hall bounced back and forth between Italy, New York and California, graduating from the Culinary Institute of America somewhere in between. But the impetus to appear on *Top Chef* came from a friend who inspired him to send in a tape. Hall reminisces: "I was broke, so I went to Radio Shack to grab a camcorder and found out exactly what their return policy was, so I could return it after the shoot. It was all about personality." Less than two weeks later he had a positive reply from the show.

Though he had a few gigs in the works in New York, where he spent much his professional career, the change of pace that Los Angeles offered was intriguing. "I love being in LA," he says, reflecting on his transition to the West Coast. "The move has brought nothing but positive things. We've been open for three years; I've met my wife here and had my son here; I've built a life here." (continued)





**“We’re fearless with what we serve, not to wow people, but because the foods are delicious. I love nose-to-tail food. There’s not enough of this in the United States.”**

Named after the Gorbals district of Glasgow—he is half Scottish, after all—the Los Angeles restaurant comprises a dining room and bar, and has a contemporary feel, with subdued recessed lighting, wood floors and a mixture of tables and benches creating an intimate atmosphere.

When the subject of Music Hall comes up, Ilan mentions that he did help his father out along the way. “My friends and I used to help Dad stuff envelopes for his mailing list. I hated that—that was before the Internet. But I loved music and still have a turntable. I’ve had a turntable since I was ten.” Asked if his wide range of musical taste includes any guilty pleasures, he proudly states that he’s “not ashamed of any of his choices. I don’t like folk music, but I do like Weird Al Yankovic.” Hall admits that he has an influence on the eclectic music played in the restaurant, but that it is a fairly democratic thing. “I like early ’90s R&B, because it’s something most of my clients can bob their heads along to. Great music is a big part of the vibe.”

As we dine on a wide range of things, from roasted corn to oysters, lamb, and burgers, Hall quickly ducks out to check on a few things in the kitchen, returning to discuss the menu, which he describes as “taking inspiration from my fridge growing up. We’re fearless with what we serve, not to wow people, but because the foods are delicious. I love nose-to-tail food. There’s not enough of this in the United States.” *(continued)*

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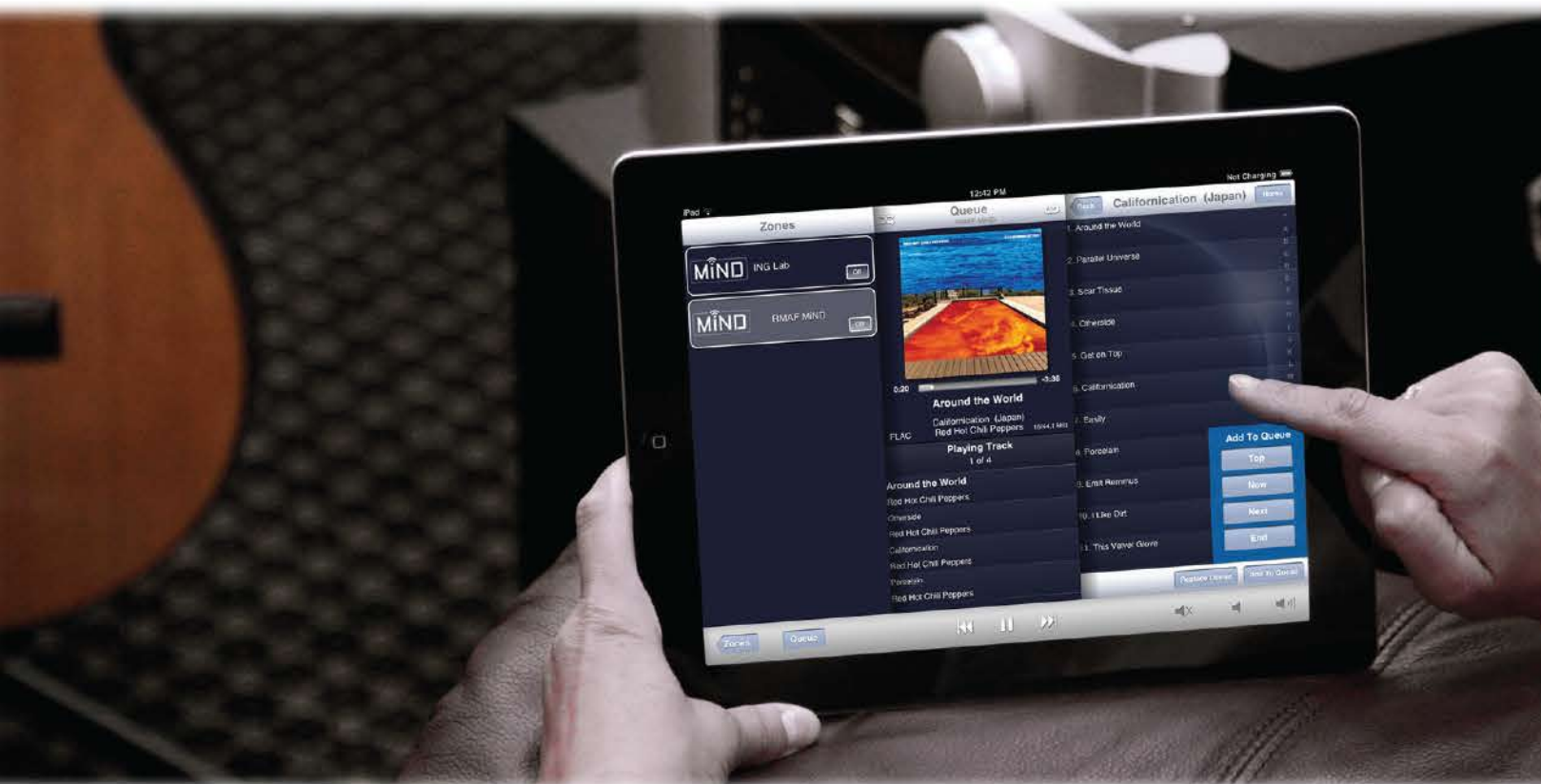
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**Not only can this man cook, he's got a tremendous sense of humor. You have to love anyone of Israeli descent who makes bacon-covered matzo balls.**

He constantly draws upon his experiences both as a customer and a chef to create the current menu, and often goes on new expeditions to investigate new tastes. Yet, at the end of the day when he is dining with friends, he just likes to enjoy food and it is still a ton of fun. "I love to eat, I couldn't do this if I didn't have a blast doing it," he says. "Eating by myself is more R&D."

Not only can this man cook, he's got a tremendous sense of humor. You have to love anyone of Israeli descent who makes bacon-covered matzo balls. Like everything else on the menu at the Gorbals, the matzo balls are fantastic!

If you're a Los Angeles local and haven't tried this place yet, or if you plan to visit the area, you must stop by the Gorbals. The restaurant serves dinner from 6:00 pm to midnight Monday through Wednesday, and from 6:00 pm to 2:00 am, Thursday to Saturday. Make your reservation today: 213-488-3408. ●

[www.dynamic-ink.com/thegorbals](http://www.dynamic-ink.com/thegorbals)



# Binghamton Meets Cupertino

By Jeff Dorgay

As I unbox the new McAire wireless music system, from that *other* apple of my eye—the one in Binghamton, N.Y.—the similarities between it and something from the Apple of Cupertino, Calif., are uncanny. Mixing old styles with new styles, the McAire's outer packaging and quick-start guide look suspiciously West Coast, but I've opened enough McIntosh hi-fi gear to recognize the owner's manual instantly—and this one is pure McIntosh Labs.

A few years ago, with its F80, British manufacturer Meridian broke the price barrier for a high-performance compact audio system. Now a serious American brand offers an alternative to the Bose Wave radio, and the McAire is equally as intriguing as the F80, both in terms of performance and aesthetics.

McIntosh's Ron Cornelius says, "It's expensive for a dock, but it's a really affordable McIntosh system." The McAire retails for \$3,000.





## tone style

### It's Heavy and It Rocks

While the McAire is an amazing wireless player for your iPhone, iPod or iPad, it's so much more than that. This 31-pound one-piece system features the same titanium tweeters and inverted-dome midrange drivers with NRT magnet structures found in the brand's flagship XRT speakers. In the McAire, McIntosh couples these to a pair of 5-inch slot-loaded woofers that produce formidable bass. The system features Class-D amplification, but McIntosh doesn't list a specification for power output. Suffice it to say the McAire really rocks.

I begin the audition with "Who," the lead track from the new David Byrne & St. Vincent album *Love This Giant*, which instantly establishes the bass response of the McAire. The tabletop quakes, as the big, blue McIntosh meters swing merrily to the beat. This thing fills the room with sound!

Next up: "Hail Bop," from the self-titled Django Django album. With so much spacey, synthesizer sounds, twangy guitars and ethereal harmonies, this track shows the McAire's ability to set a gigantic soundfield—doing so on our art director's desktop. The sound is so big that she takes control of the remote to slow the pace down a bit, switching to some classic Michael Hedges. (continued)



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The McAire proves equally adept with acoustic guitar, before we take a walk on the wild side with Marc Ribot's *Silent Movies*, a record full of empty space, feedback and distortion. I end the first of many listening duels with AC/DC's "Rock 'n' Roll Damnation," leaving everyone in the office impressed with the McAire.

### Well Connected

The McAire is Apple-certified, so you can connect any iDevice via USB cable or wirelessly via AirPlay. The initial setup is straightforward, requiring just your device and the small supplied remote. The Ikea-like quick-start guide walks you through the process in a few minutes. Those not wanting to have their device floating around on the tabletop, or in their pocket, can take advantage of the McIntosh ST-1 stand (sold separately; \$50), which fits any of Apple's portable devices.

You can stream music to the McAire using your home's Wi-Fi network and iTunes on your Mac or PC—but why bother when you can utilize the McIntosh app for your iPhone or iPad? Using the app gives you similar functionality to iTunes, but turns the screen of your device into yet another McIntosh blue meter! What could be cooler than that?





An auxiliary audio input on the back panel lets you get really wacky if you want, by connecting a turntable or other source unit to your McAiré system. We didn't take things *that* far, but we did plug in a vintage McIntosh MR-71 FM tuner. This requires a bit more shelf space, but the tube tuner is a nice addition to the system, if you're listening to FM radio.

For seasoned McIntosh aficionados, or those discovering the brand for the first time, the McAiré compact system is an excellent idea for adding high-performance audio to any room in the house. ●

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

**W**hat happens when a group of music-loving, fine-furniture designers put their heads together? They create the Modern Record Console. With the Console, Symbol Audio pays homage to the classic designs of Herman Miller and Knoll from the '50s and '60s. A true masterpiece, the Console combines a tube amplifier, built-in subwoofer and a turntable.

This isn't your dad's Magnavox, folks. And for the hardcore audiophiles in the crowd who are ready to send us nastygrams explaining that they can buy a better rack full of separate components for half this price, this is not for you either.

Harkening back to the day of all-in-one consoles, Symbol's version is a prize for the music lover living in a design-conscious environment who does not want a rack full of gear and is willing to pay for bespoke quality. We visited the Symbol factory, and must admit that this thing sounds pretty damn good. And while we were there, fashion icon and music aficionado John Varvatos was in the Symbol studio giving the Console the thumbs up.

With EL84 tubes, big transformers and Omega single-driver speakers, the Console has some serious audiophile cred under the hood, which, as you can see from the photo, can be neatly tucked away. Sales of the Console have been brisk so far, so if this tickles your fancy, you might want to pick one up sooner rather than later.

Watch for more from Symbol in our pages next year.





## Nakamichi Shirt

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**W**ith gold, glowing, disco-boy print on the front, this T-shirt expresses some serious '80s nerdiness. It's a perfect replica of the ones sold by dealers back in the day, and it's a great way to show your loyalty to the brand. The shirt can also be found with the Dragon logo. Disco Stu approves this message.

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TONE STYLE

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We've seen this kind of thing before, but RA has taken this to another level of performance, with stunning results. We'll have a full review shortly, but we're having too much fun with these right now!





# TheWino

By Monique Meadows

Back in the 17th century, wine bottles were exploding in wine cellars in northeastern France, in the region now called

Champagne, creating scenes worthy of slapstick comedy—except the winemakers were not laughing.

A host of winemaking challenges, including climate, the thin glass of the bottles at the time and a problem that emerged from attempting to ferment

still wine, caused the bottles to explode. The “problem” was that bubbles formed inside the bottles. Among the winemakers trying to eradicate

these bubbles was a French Benedictine monk by the name of Dom Pérignon—who, after sipping the sparkling liquid, is rumored to have exclaimed,

“Come quickly, I am tasting the stars!”



But the history of Champagne is much older than that. It began with 5th-century Romans plantings vineyards and turning the subsequent still wine into a more regal sparkling wine, using a second fermentation process occurring in the bottle. More than 1,000 years later, the French caught on. Since the first success adding carbonation to still wine, Champagne (known as simply “sparkling wine” outside that region of France) has toasted marriages, birthdays, anniversaries, New Years, and Super-Bowl victories, and bottles of it have been smashed against the hulls of ships during christenings. But what is often missed is the opportunity to enjoy the celebrated drink on any occasion, or to pair it with food. With no disrespect to a classic Brie cheese plate or caviar, Champagne makes a fantastic and intriguing pairing with a wide range of bites—from salty snacks, to lobster, to sushi, or even fried chicken.

My first taste of *true* French Champagne was at Vincent, a renowned French restaurant in Phoenix. Chef and owner Vincent Guerithault himself, on the evening of a New Year’s Eve dinner, was pouring his guests Champagne. I expected to taste the same inexpensive but well-meaning liquid I had during so many toasts. I was surprised, instead, by the sublime aromas and flavors hitting my senses—notes of apples, pears, citrus fruit and even brioche, all of which were elevated by those incredible bubbles.

Mireille Guiliano, longtime Veuve Clicquot spokesperson, describes the experience best, in her book *French Women for all Seasons: A Year of Secrets, Recipes, & Pleasure*. “[Champagne] is at once history and culture and pleasure and celebration, quality and refinement,” she writes. “The sound of a cork popping is magic.”

But Champagne and its sparkling cousins beg to be enjoyed more often than at events with guest lists. There are so many exceptional selections on the market today, including those from throughout Europe and here in the U.S. What follows are four of my favorite picks, all of which are excellent values—so be sure to seek them out.



## TONE STYLE

# J.P. Baudouin Champagne

**Brut Prestige**

Aube, France \$41

While large French Champagne houses like Moët & Chandon and Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin have huge shares of the market, there are plenty of smaller gems to be found, often for a bit less money. One in particular got its start in the mid 1960s, when Louis Baudouin purchased three acres of vineyards in the very small village of Engente (with a population of just 44 people), located near Arrentières in the southern part of Champagne known as Aube. While those first harvested grapes went to a local co-operative, Louis's son, Jean-Pierre, joined the family estate in 1972 and purchased more vines. The estate released its first wine three years later. Today, those 23 acres of vineyards, which are located on the slopes of a small valley where the grapes can slowly ripen, average 40 years of age.

Most Champagnes are made with a blend of three grapes: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. The Baudouin Brut Prestige, however, is made exclusively with hand-harvested Pinot Noir grapes from a single vineyard. This Champagne has a light golden color and offers aromas of bread and citrus fruit, with a rich flavor and delicate crispness. Surprise a few of your Champagne-connoisseur friends with this selection.



Product: 122 Integrated Amplifier.

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#### TONE STYLE

## Riva Di Rocca

### Prosecco

Veneto, Italy \$16



ften called “Italy’s  
Champagne,” Prosecco is  
actually a lighter-style sparkling wine  
made from the Prosecco grape and  
with softer bubbles, but with the same  
ability to toast a celebration or precede  
a meal. Riva di Rocca is made in the  
“extra-dry” style, meaning that it is still  
dry like Brut, but that it offers a hint  
of sweetness and very fine bubbles.  
Prosecco is also part of the famous  
Bellini Cocktail, which is traditionally a  
blend of Prosecco and peach puree—  
a recipe that originated in Venice from  
Guiseppe Cipriani, the founder of the  
city’s famous Harry’s Bar.

This example hails from the Case  
Bianche estate, which is located about  
30 miles north of Venice, in the hills  
of what is known as the Conegliano  
Valdobbiadene DOCG—a region with  
over 100 sparkling-wine producers. In  
Italian, the estate’s name references a  
row of white farmhouses situated on  
the highest point of a ridge between  
two of the region’s villages. Riva di  
Rocca is made using the Charmant  
method, meaning that its primary  
fermentation occurs in stainless-steel  
tanks and that it does not undergo  
a second fermentation in bottle. It is  
best enjoyed within two years of the  
wine’s release and delivers notes of  
apple, pear and a touch of citrus on  
the palette. This Prosecco is a true  
charmer, especially paired with olives  
and Prosciutto or Roasted Tomato  
Bruschetta.



# Montsarra

## Cava

Penedès, Spain \$18

The history of Cava can be traced back to the travels of one Joseph Raventós, of Spain's Codorníu winery, as he traveled throughout Europe promoting his wines. His introduction to Champagne while in France inspired an intense passion to create sparkling wine in his home country. The name Cava comes from the Spanish word for "underground cellar" and was adopted by Catalan winemakers to distinguish their sparkling wine from French Champagne.

Montsarra Cava is made in Spain's Penedès region, in eastern Catalonia near the Mediterranean coast. On that landscape sits Heredad Montsarra, a vineyard in the town of Torroelles de Foix, complete with a medieval Catalan farmhouse. The estate, which was originally built as a monastery in the 16th century, produces a Cava that is a blend of three native grapes: Macabeo, Xarel-lo and Parellada—all from the Montsarra vineyards. Montsarra Cava is made in exactly the same way as Champagne in France and is typically cellared for a minimum of one and a half years. However, Spain's native grapes, warmer climate and distinctive *terroir* give Cava its unique character. With this example, winemaker Ramon Viader Guixà has created a Spanish sparkling that garnered 90 points from *Wine Enthusiast* and *Wine & Spirits*. Michael Franz of the Washington Post calls Montsarra Cava "a brilliant rendition of its type."



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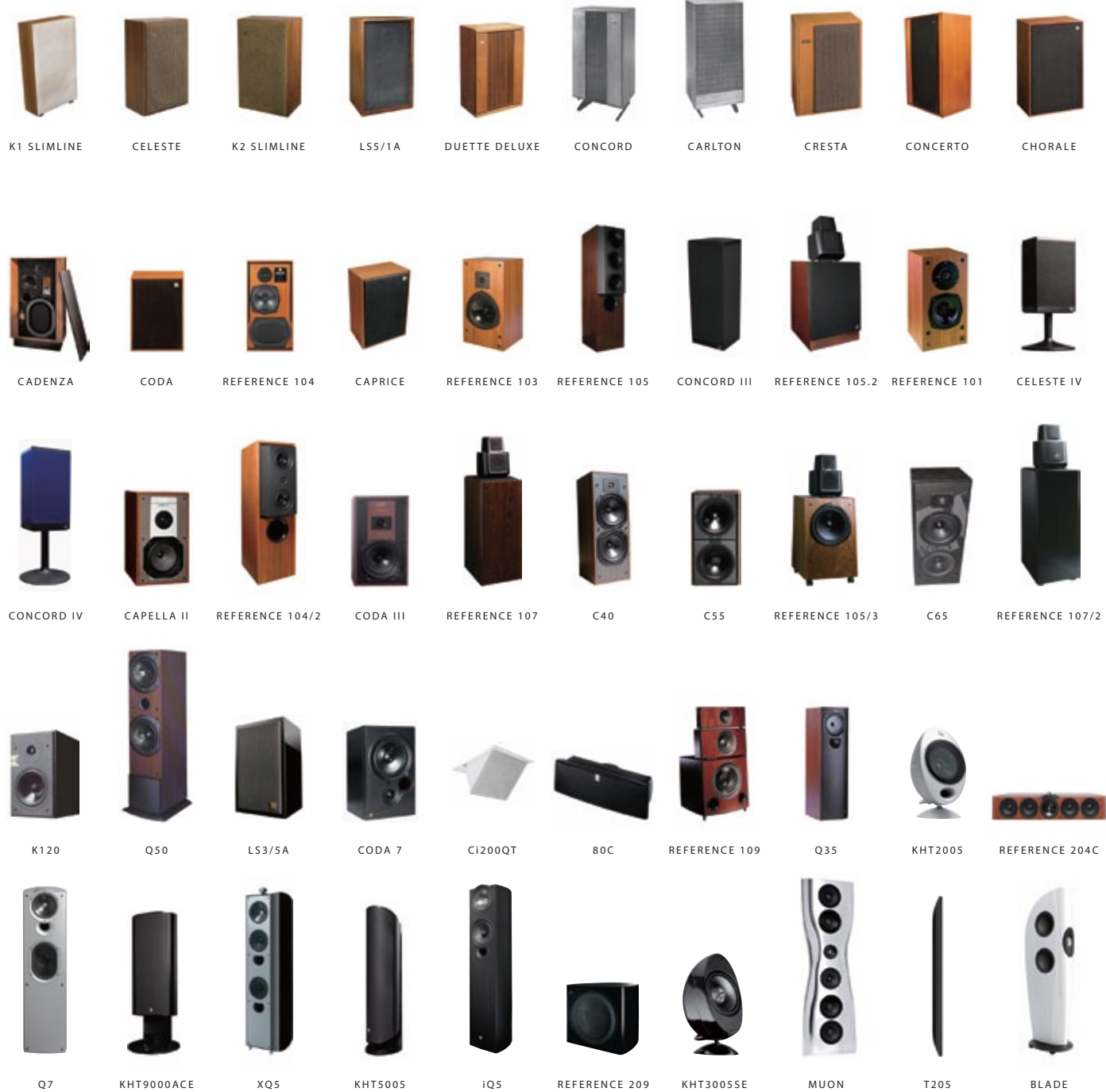
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# THE FIFTY



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## TONE STYLE

### Gruet

**Brut** (non-vintage)  
New Mexico, USA \$17

Something very French has been going on in a small area of north-central New Mexico. Wine grapes are growing for the production of sparkling wines at 4,300 feet elevation—some of the highest vineyards in the U.S. Planted and produced by a French family known for its Champagnes in France, the Gruet vineyards began as an experiment by Gilbert Gruet, who was traveling through the Southwest in 1983 when he met a group of European wine-makers that had planted vines in the town of Engle, just north of Albuquerque. Gruet seized the opportunity to plant vineyards on the area's arid but inexpensive land, which seemed to produce spectacular Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes, which he planted exclusively. His son and daughter soon relocated to New Mexico, and he had manual winemaking machinery shipped from France.

Today, the winery produces several styles of sparkling wine, as well as several Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs. The Gruet Brut NV is the label's flagship sparkling wine, known for its classic, crisp style and toasty finish. It is rich and sophisticated, with fine bubbles. It garnered 89 points from *Wine Spectator*, which called it "focused and richly styled, with spicy tropical fruit aromas and appealing baked apple, cinnamon and herb notes." Popping open this sparkling wine can be equally as magical as popping open Champagne. Salut! ●



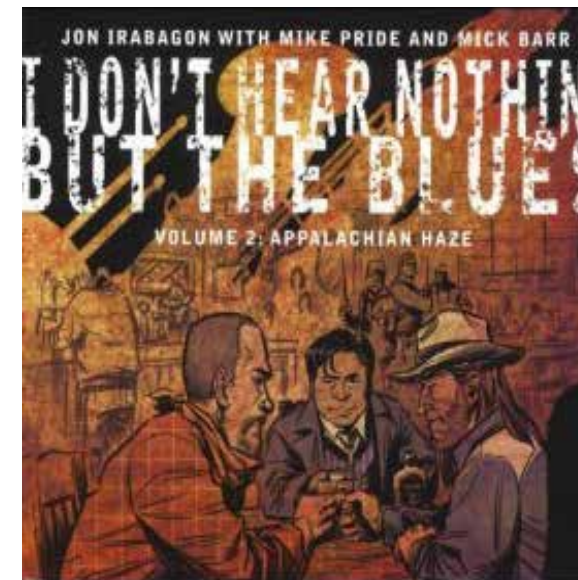
# Jazz & Blues

By Jim Macnie

Versatility is a plus in any profession, and Jon Irabagon's improvising skills have powered a handful of approaches during the last few years. In 2008, the saxophonist walked away with the top prize from the prestigious Thelonious Monk Competition, an annual event spotlighting young talent working in a mainstream jazz vernacular.

But Irabagon is anything but a Johnny One Note. The sundry lingos in which he's shown an interest are many, and he's especially eloquent when it comes to skronk. Of late, from his fractious bass-and-drums trio Foxy, to his freewheeling *I Don't Hear Nothin' But The Blues* collabo with percussionist Mike Pride, he's investigating the impact of extended blowing. This second album by IDHNBTB adds string player Mick Barr from radical guitar/drums duo Orthrelm. The result boosts the fierceness level a couple notches, and gives us one of the orneriest ragas ever.

©Photo by Bryan Murray



## Jon Irabagon, Mike Pride, and Mick Barr

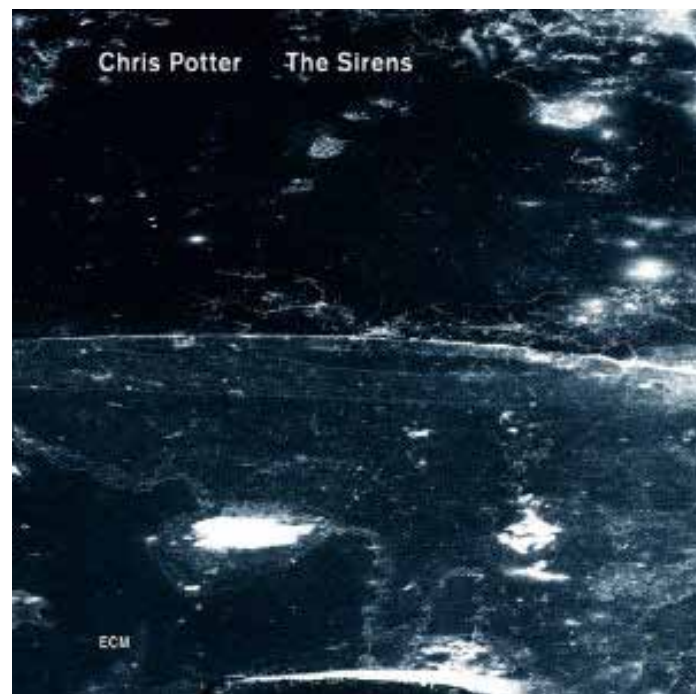
*I Don't Hear Nothin' But The Blues Volume 2: Appalachian Haze*  
Irabagast, CD

The title piece is a thorny squall that engages without melody and bets the farm on the glories of friction. It is euphonious only if you've grown up absorbing precedents such as Coltrane's *Ascension* and Lightning Bolt's "World Wobbly Wide." But its expressionistic alarm engages in all sorts of ways.

The furor comes from a palpable sense of collaboration, and its emotional power reignites every 10 minutes or so. It's not a suite. This mighty wind starts blowing from the get-go and doesn't stop, or even downshift, until it concludes four minutes later. But its beehive swirl does have nuanced sections. Somewhere around half-way, Barr rocks a circular phrase that underscores the hints of minimalism that dart throughout the piece. It's Pride that seems to control the amendments. There's a spot during which he brings the storm inside a strip club with a saucy tom-tom maneuver. Irabagon answers by further exploding his lusty *cris de cour*.

What these guys find in "Appalachian Haze" is a way to lock in together and rattle towards a place where exclamation and tumult takes on its own definition of grace. Looking over their shoulders at Ornette Coleman's "Free Jazz" and "Song X," they know damn well it's out there, and don't stop till the plant their own flag.




**Chris Potter**

*The Sirens*  
ECM, CD

There's a difference between true drama and mere tumult, and on Chris Potter's first disc for ECM, one of the preeminent saxophonists of his generation makes a decided stance to strive for the real deal. Potter's skills can take him anywhere.

©Photo by Tamas Talaber



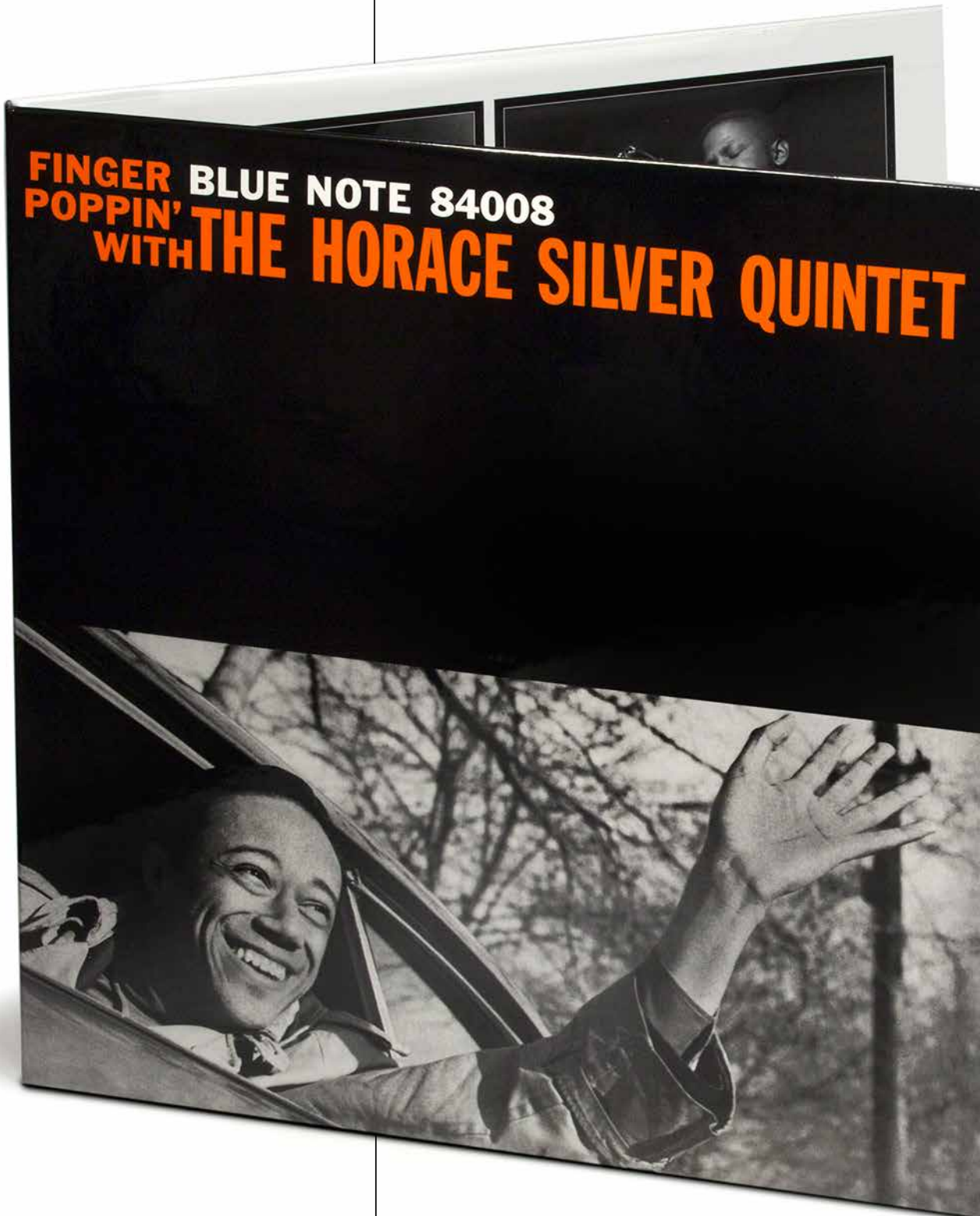
When not working with Pat Metheny or Dave Holland, he's examining the friction points that lie between knotty time signatures and gnarled horn lines. His Underground group has come to define a modern jazz lingo that could be deemed math funk. But after rereading Homer's *The Odyssey*, Potter grabbed himself a new cohort, wrote himself a handful of tunes that veer away from his customary sound, and hit the studio. *The Sirens* is a turn of the page.

With his imagination on 8 BC, several pieces are built on a steady unfolding of events. Potter's tenor persona has always been piercing while still waxing supple, and the balance of the two extremes is one of things that make a few of these pieces so disarming. Bop remains the dominant lingo in his work, but here things are stretched out a bit. This album celebrates long tones, breathing room, and the exploration that often binds them. Several songs reveal themselves slowly, and seem all the more captivating for it.

The title track, in particular, is a lesson in seduction. With bassist Larry Grenadier bowing, Potter's bass clarinet invites listeners into a misty lament that glistens with Craig Taborn's piano. Just when everything seems to be a smidge too mystical, the tenor arrives. Its keening soliloquy updates us on what true lyricism constitutes.

There are moments when things seem a bit overwrought. But in the large, Potter and company (drummer Eric Harland adds nuanced flair and pianist David Virelles plays celeste and harmonium) fill their elaborations with a heart-and-soul approach that makes the individual pieces cohere as part of a genuinely identifiable whole. It's great to hear him come up with such a richly emotional piece.





## 2012's Best Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay

**2012** proved bountiful for remarkable audiophile-grade releases. SACDs, CDs, LPs, and high-resolution downloads were all represented by titles worthy of repeat listens on the best stereo systems money can buy.

In particular, Mobile Fidelity, Speakers Corner, and Analogue Productions stepped up their respective games in terms of quality and quantity. And while Music Matters halved its Blue Note series to two pressings per month (compared to the four titles its released over the past few years), the selections stayed strong. How much more gold is available to mine in the Blue Note catalog? Only Joe Harley and Ron Rambach know for sure.

And digital? While Neil Young's hints

at a new format via Pono remains a pipe dream, and a few boutique labels have started to release DSD downloads (which few listeners have the hardware to decode at this point), 24/96 and 24/192 files grew closer to the mainstream—at least to the audiophile crowd.

The best news of the year? HD Tracks and other high-res download services gained access to a broader spectrum of titles. Classic rock albums, ECM catalog fare, and even a few current releases are now pouring from the imprint's tap.

Below, you'll find my favorite audiophile pressings of 2012, in no particular order of significance other than alphabetical. With rare exception, all are chosen for their combination of fun and sound quality.

**Anne Bisson** *Blue Mind*, Fidelio, 180g LP

**Elvis Costello** *Imperial Bedroom*, Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

**The Doors** *L.A. Woman*, Analogue Productions, 200g 45RPM 2LP

**Bob Dylan** *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Mobile Fidelity, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway**

*Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway*, HD Tracks, 24/192 download

**Herbie Hancock** *Empyrean Isles*, Music Matters, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**Kiss** *Destroyer-Resurrected*, HD Tracks, 24/96 download (not the LP)

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

**Jaco Pastorius** *Jaco Pastorius*, ORG, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**The Rolling Stones** *12 x 5*, HD Tracks

**Horace Silver** *Finger Poppin' With the Horace Silver Quintet*, Music Matters, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**Weather Report** *Heavy Weather*, ORG, 180g 45RPM 2LP





# Light Harmonic DaVinci DAC

\$30,000  
[www.lightharmonic.com](http://www.lightharmonic.com)

**T**he DaVinci DAC has grabbed the attention of audiophiles worldwide, thanks in part to its unconventional shape. Other than the ability to process 24-bit/384-kHz files (with native DSD capability on the horizon), its sound is not so much unconventional as it is exceptional. We've been listening to this one for some time now and it stacks up rather nicely to the best available.

Our review is immediately forthcoming.





# AVID Ingenium Turntable

\$1,300 - \$2,200 (depending on configuration)  
[www.avidhifi.co.uk](http://www.avidhifi.co.uk)

**A**VID designer Conrad Mas has produced a new, minimalist table that is sure to shake up the highly competitive turntable market between roughly one and two thousand dollars. And it can be configured with one or two tonearms, making it perfect for the vinyl enthusiast with either a large mono collection, or those just wanting more than one flavor of reproduction.

Watch for our review on the Analogaholic page very soon.



# Ortofon Cadenza Bronze MC Cartridge

\$1,995  
[www.ortofon.com](http://www.ortofon.com)

**W**ith the review almost done, we are enjoying the Cadenza Bronze so much that we bought a *pair* of them to use in our turntable and audiophile-pressing comparisons. Using the Cadenza Bronze in concert with a pair of AVID Volvere SP turntables, with matching Furutech AG-12 tonearm cables and a plethora of tonearms, we found that these two identical platforms make it easy to isolate the effect of making one change in the setup.

The Bronze's .4-mV output makes it an easy match for nearly any MC phonostage, and makes the Nude Ortofon Replicant stylus easy to optimize. The Cadenza Bronze is a keen tracker as well, and gives you a big bite of the money-no-object analog pie at a price that won't break you. Our review is in process.





# Bryston BHA 1M Headphone Amplifier

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**B**ryston's first headphone amplifier incorporates what they have learned in decades of amplifier design, and arrives well sorted. The BHA 1M offers single ended and balanced outputs, along with high and low gain options. Best of all, its low profile makes it easy to incorporate just about anywhere in your system. Review up shortly in the Macro section of our website.

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# Sonus faber Aida Loudspeaker

by Jeff Dorgay

## **“Aida” is the New Italian Word for Perfection**

How many times have you heard a fellow audiophile or music lover say, “For that kind of money, those speakers should wash your car” or, “They should be better than sex”—or something to that effect? A pair of Sonus faber Aida loudspeakers cost \$120,000 and are better than sex. Spend a few minutes immersed in a serious listening session, and you won’t care if your luxury car is dirty. Play a few more tunes, and you might not even notice your significant other beckoning you to the bedroom for some intimate time. They are that good. Indeed, the Aida is as close to perfection as I’ve experienced, and I’ve spent a lot of time listening to the world’s finest speakers. These, however, do nothing wrong.

Steve Martin once said, “First, get a million dollars.” Perfection doesn’t come cheap, and that’s the only bad news concerning the Aida. This speaker caters to an exclusive club, yet sales are steady, especially now that the \$200,000 “Sonus faber” is no longer on the market. And while these gems flawlessly perform no matter what they’re connected to, the better your source components, the better the end result.



## REVIEW

Listening to an old favorite, 10cc's *Bloody Tourists*, the heavens align, as they do every time I listen to the Aidas (pronounced Eye-ee-dah). Regardless of the recording material or recording quality, I'm hearing more music than I've ever experienced on familiar recordings—and my reference GamuT S9 speakers aren't exactly slouches. Passages decay more than they did before. There's an extra guitar overdub here I hadn't noticed, and an extra layer of vocals. If you audition the Aida, prepare to invest in coffee. You'll be shutting off the lights at 2 a.m. just because you have to hear just one more record.

These rewarding experiences, my friends, are what the pinnacle of high-end audio is about. Sound so good, so real, you can just reach out and touch it. If you like smooth vocalists like Diana Krall, the Aidas offer you the opportunity to have a sonic lap dance. If you want to rock, and have enough amplifier power, the Aidas put Slash and a wall of Marshall cabinets in your room. And if you like electronica, the Aidas deliver Deadmau5 to your door, mouse mask and all. Acoustic music lovers are in for the biggest treat. The Aidas present a tonal accuracy and contrast that, by far, are the most natural and convincing I've ever witnessed.

When covering a Deadmau5 show with Music Editor Bob Gendron last year, he remarked, "Your system can't do *that*..." Yet, on a recent visit to the *TONE* studio, he had recalibrated his perspective. Playing "Raise Your Weapon" from *4x4=12*, and twisting the level control on the ARC REF5SE up to 80, a monstrous grin came over his face. Switching the program to the Slayer *Vinyl Conflict* box set, he admitted, "These speakers play at concert-hall levels with none of the distortion and fatigue you get at a live performance. I've never heard a stereo system sound like this." Another convert. (continued)



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## REVIEW

### Posh Treatment

Every pair of Aidas comes with a visit from Sonus faber to make sure the speakers are optimized for maximum performance. If you live in North America, chances are high that Sumiko's Bill Peugh will make the journey. Having heard Peugh work his magic at countless dealers and audio shows, it was a pleasure to have him take the time to set up the Aidas here.

For a speaker that weighs 365 pounds each, the Aida is a svelte tango partner. Thanks to the enclosed collapsible trolley, they are easily moved about. And the job can be done with one person, making it easy to place the speakers in a listening room. Another example of how no stone has been left unturned by Sonus faber.

After a brief listen to a single speaker in the room so we could get a handle on bass response, we introduced the second speaker into the system and found the pair beginning to optimize. The Aida uses a rear-firing midrange and tweeter, each having their own controls on the rear panel. The "Sonus faber" introduced this concept, and it's used to great success here. For now, the Aida is the only other speaker in the Sonus faber range with this function.

Having set up the speakers for the best combination of imaging, frequency smoothness, and bass response, we turned to fine-tuning the rear firing drivers. It's an illuminating process: The level coming from the drivers isn't terribly high, yet when adjusted, it causes a profound difference to the overall sound. Setting the level too high destroys the Aidas' precise imaging performance by way of brightness. Not enough, and the speakers lose some airiness and coherence. Much like fine-tuning VTA, the speakers disappear when a perfect balance is obtained. No small feat for six-foot-tall models. (continued)





## REVIEW

How quickly the Aidas settle into a groove. We are listening in earnest by the end of the first afternoon. My review models boast very few hours of prior listening time, so they are—for all practical purposes—a fresh pair. Like those on any speaker, the drivers require a certain amount of physical break-in to open up and achieve full body. The Aida is no different, although in retrospect, it merely sounds smaller and less extended after the initial uncrating. Bass is not completely fleshed out, and coherence between drivers is not as good as it is with a couple hundred hours on the clock. By the next day, after 24 hours of continuous play, they begin to relax.

Sumiko's John Paul Lizars assures me the speakers change character during the break-in period, but it must have happened while I was sleeping. To be clear, I left them playing 24 hours a day during the review period; they had to be back in time for the 2013 Consumer Electronics Show.

As tests evolved, all I noticed was a slight fog, which progressively dissipated. Leaving the Pass XA200.5s Class-A monoblocks powered-up for nearly a month had consequences on my electric bill; I used three times more electricity as the average house in my neighborhood. Yikes. I've had a few paranoid delusions of the DEA showing up at my house with a SWAT team wanting to know where I'm growing the marijuana crop, only to give them a tour of my studio. "Sorry officers, no drugs in here, just these big amplifiers." If I'm not at CES in January, you'll know why.

I spent the bulk of my listening time utilizing the Pass monoblocks and Octave Jubilee monoblocks, which offer 250 watts per channel of vacuum tube power.

### Under Pressure

The Aidas are polite company at low to modest listening levels. But as the volume goes up, they do an even better job at disappearing in the room. Sumiko representatives often discuss the concept of "pressurizing the room," and I've never heard it better illustrated than with these speakers. Interestingly, I found myself (and guests) listening to the Aidas at higher levels than normal. *(continued)*

# Emerge From the Darkness

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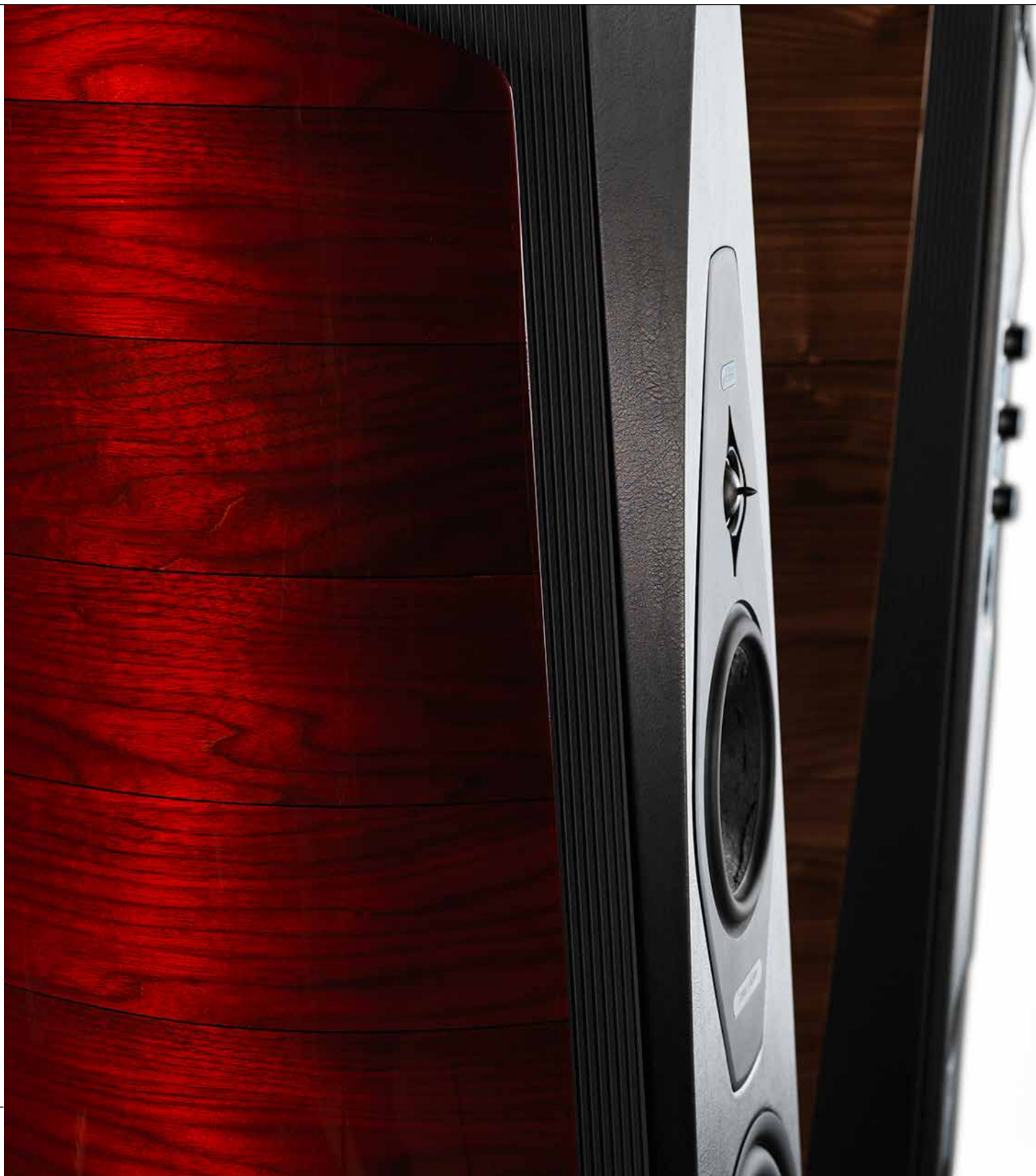
Once the volume hits a certain point, the aforementioned effect becomes hypnotic, drawing you further into the presentation than you might have thought possible.

Fatigue that accompanies twisting the volume control to the upper regions? It's just not there with the Aidas. Instead, it feels as if you can just keep turning up the volume forever, or at least until your amplifiers run out of power.

Tied to a chair and given truth serum, I'll confess my love of the sound of a great electrostatic speaker like the Quad 57 or the MartinLogan CLX. Coherency is my hot button. It's not so much midrange magic, but midrange correctly rendered. With no crossover in the path, the associated distortions, by design, do not exist. And distortions are a big part of what convinces your brain that you're listening to a stereo system instead of the real thing.

Again, the Aidas do the seemingly impossible, providing a seamless soundstage that never sounds like a woofer, tweeter, and midrange in a cabinet (even though their complement of drivers has crossover points at 55, 180, 250, and 3,000Hz). There's so much new technology incorporated in this speaker, it would take a whole book to cover depth. And that's precisely what's included with the Aida—a 200-page tome, illustrating every facet of the speaker's philosophy, design, and construction. Not to mention a massive collection of great photos, beautifully printed.

The Aida's downward-firing 13-inch woofer produces bass with incredible texture and grip. I also suspect it heavily plays into its ease. The bass isn't as aggressive, gut-punching, or pants-flapping as that of a few favorite audiophile darlings, but it possesses a presence that provides a true musical foundation, as it should. Just like when you listen to a musician playing a stand-up bass in a club.



Vide, the acoustic bass line in Stanley Clarke's *In the Jazz Garden* is rich with decay, texture, and pace. Clarke's instrument does more than maintain a separate space from piano and drums; it projects a three-dimensional effect that bass rarely manages in a recording. When changing the program to Dan Deacon's *America*, the growling synth bass line shakes my room. These speakers move serious air when required.

The high-frequency spectrum is equally well represented. Older Sonus faber speakers, while providing highly pleasing sound, are often criticized for a midrange glow that borders on coloration. The Aida retains a high degree of utter tonality and soul, and provides a high degree of resolution and the ability to render musical detail without harshness, distortion, or fatigue. It yields a greater degree of loud-to-soft gradation than anything I've heard shy of the world's finest horn systems.

Moving away from the ring radiator design of the former flagship, the Stradivari, a new, 29mm "arrow point" tweeter gets incorporated in the Aida. The intriguing albeit delicate bar is a very specific wave guide. Nothing in the Aida is without function. Peugh states the soft dome allows for a more natural response as well as more even and natural room dispersion. Experiencing the Aida is remarkably similar no matter where you sit in the listening environment, contributing to the notion of musicians playing in another room when listening from afar.

While the Aidas have a sensitivity spec of 92db with one watt, they give more with tons of clean power on tap. A sampling of lower-powered amplifiers in the 25- to 50-watt-per-channel range proves acceptable. Still, small amplifiers run out of juice when called upon to really rock. And I can't imagine an Aida owner not wanting to take advantage of as wide a range of music as possible.



## REVIEW

### Ooh, the Cabinet

Much of the Aida's sound can be traced to the cabinet and Sonus faber's approach. A visual *tour de force*, these speakers arouse and impress, coated with layer upon layer of hand-applied and hand-polished lacquer. The metal bits receive the same amount of attention to fine detail, right down to the exact formulation of the bath used to apply the anodized coatings. Words and photos do not do justice to these audible works of art. The booklet states the processes used in the speakers' construction is "like that in an Italian super-car," and it isn't kidding.

Many current speaker manufacturers live and die by the sword of completely eliminating any resonance from the enclosure. However, Sonus faber looks at speaker design like an instrument manufacturer would, working with resonances and fine-tuning to achieve a more musical result. If you like the Wilson/Magico/YG Acoustics approach, I doubt you will love the Aida—just as I wouldn't expect an automobile enthusiast that loves the Aston Martin DBS to be equally excited about the Porsche 911 GT3. High performance, different approach.

As for the emotional connection the Aidas engender? A non-audiophile friend, who is a cabinet maker by trade, was in awe of the enclosures that take nearly three weeks to complete. Before I put Mobile Fidelity's recent 45RM remaster of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* on the turntable, he was explaining "no one listens to vinyl anymore." Then, when the needle dropped, he teared up. "I used to go to the Village and see Dylan all the time. This puts him right in the room." We switched back to the same album on CD, even played through the fantastic dCS Paganini, and the magic diminished. How can you ask for a better, more emotionally engaging experience?



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## Listen to Get the Rest of the Story

If you were hoping for a treatise on specs, measurements, and speaker configuration, that's not what matters here. And none of it will matter to you after you've spent 60 seconds listening to one of your favorite pieces of music through the Aidas. I can't think of a more sublime example of high technology serving fine art.

Should a \$120k pair of speakers not be on your short list, try and experience the Aida anyway. And have your Sonus faber dealer demonstrate the new \$2,498 Venere 2.5 speakers. A staggering amount of technology trickled down to the company's entry-level speakers, and is only be made possible by an enterprise that has the resources to build an Aida.

Just as Verdi's Aida took his art to its highest level, Sonus faber's Aida takes the aesthetic and acoustic art of speaker-building to an equally lofty level. While it can be tough to justify the value with products so expensive, having spent plenty of time with most of the top models in the six-figure bracket and a considerable number of great speakers in the \$20k- \$50k range, I can say with absolute certainty that Aidas offer sound and build quality commensurate with price. They have provided one of the most enjoyable musical experiences of my career. ●



Sonus faber Aida  
MSRP: \$120,000/pair

### MANUFACTURER

Sonus faber

### CONTACT

www.sonusfaber.com (Manufacturer)  
www.sumikoaudio.net (US distributor)

### PERIPHERALS

#### Analog Source

AVID Acutus Reference turntable/  
TriPlanar tonearm/Lyra Atlas cartridge,  
AMG V-12 turntable/AMG arm/  
Clearaudio Goldfinger

#### Digital Source

dCS Paganini stack,  
Aurender S10 music server

#### Preamplifier

ARC REF5SE, Robert Koda K-10

#### Power Amplifier

Burmester 911 mk.3,  
Pass Labs XA200.5 monoblocks,  
Octave Jubilee monoblocks

#### Cable

Cardas Clear

#### Power Cords

Furutech PowerFlux

#### Power Conditioning

Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim

#### Accessories

GIK room treatments, Furutech DeMag  
and DeStat, Audio Desk Systeme  
record cleaner, SRA Scuttle rack



## Refinement of a Classic

# The Audio Technica AT-OC9/III Phono Cartridge

By Tim Moyers

Audio Technica celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, and part of its new-product lineup includes the brand's reimagined flagship phono cartridge, the AT-OC9/III. Audio Technica, founded in 1962, initially designed and produced phono cartridges for direct supply to original audio-equipment manufacturers within Japan. Since then, Audio Technica has expanded its product line to include turntables, microphones, headphones and, as its website states, "other problem-solving audio devices." The first-generation AT-OC9 was launched in 1987. Audio-Technica's website lists the current retail price for the newest iteration as \$1,129; however, a quick web search reveals street pricing around \$799.

This cartridge arrives nicely packaged, but recipients should resist the temptation to just tear into the box, because the protective stylus guard is not in place during shipping. The cartridge could be easily damaged if you aren't careful.

## Your MC Journey Begins

The OC9/III is the perfect cartridge with which to enter the world of moving coils, if you've got the interest and wherewithal to begin your journey by dropping nearly \$1,200 on a cartridge. It has a slightly low output (.4 mV) and will require a step-up device capable of around 60 dB to achieve the best balance of dynamics and low background noise.

Installation and mounting on the VPI Classic 3 proves very easy, with minimal time to optimize tracking parameters. Audio Technica suggests a range of 1.8 to 2.2 grams and a minimum load impedance of 100 ohms. Varying the tracking force in small increments reveals that 2.0 grams is the optimum balance on my table. The handy remote on my Aesthetix Rhea phono-stage also makes it easy to examine various loading and gain options, settling here on 250 ohms and 60 dB of gain.

The OC9 sounds good out of the box, but does open up slightly after about 30 to 50 hours are on the clock. As with any cartridge, it's an excellent idea to double check VTA and tracking-force settings as the suspension settles after the initial break-in process. The Classic 3's easily adjustable VTA has me back to perfection in no time, with only a slight touch up required. If the cartridge sounds slightly dull from the outset, check this adjustment first. *(continued)*



### Spin the Black Discs

The new Beatles Stereo Box Set on vinyl arrived shortly after the OC9, so plumbing the depths of Fab Four's catalog with this new cartridge seemed a perfect place to start. Beginning with *Sgt. Pepper* proves the new pressing to be a winner compared to the Capitol and Parlophone discs in my collection. The OC9 immediately renders great bass dynamics and overall presence. Controversy aside, switching back to my reference cartridge, the Lyra Atlas, confirms that the new pressings are excellent overall.

It also confirms that the OC9 has a tonal balance that is slightly on the warmer, more forgiving side of neutral, much like the AT33EV reviewed last year in *TONEAudio*. The OC9 is not a bad idea for those collecting a lot of used records or listening to music produced in the mid '90s and beyond, much of which is sourced from digital masters anyway. In essence, the OC9 is an excellent daily driver, with a great balance of dynamics and detail retrieval. If this cartridge is lacking anywhere, it might be in ultimate bass tautness and control, but this is more a personal preference than an overall judgment.

After most of the Beatles Stereo Box Set, Ryan Adams 2011 release *Ashes and Fire* clearly illustrates the performance of this cartridge with more modern material. It is one of my favorite purchases from that year, more reminiscent of *Whiskeytown* and his first solo release, *Heartbreakers*, which is a more raw, gritty record.

The opening "Argument With David Rawlings Concerning Morrissey," is a fun track, showing off how well the OC9 does with solo vocals in a BBC kind of way. The first track on side B, "Invisible Riverside," is a slow pop-rock tune that opens with guitar and is followed quickly by bass and drums—a perfect place to catch an emotional response when the stars line up.

This fleeting moment is captured quite well with the OC9, reproducing the essence without being too loose or overly analytical either. This studio recording is also an excellent imaging demo and the OC9 has great focus, though the image portrayed does not extend well beyond the speakers, with the speakers themselves disappearing with a more refined cartridge. But the OC9 takes good care of the fundamentals and is a great step up from the graininess usually present in the average MM cartridge in the \$400-to-\$600 range.



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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.

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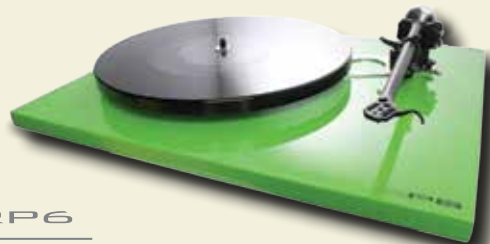
RP1



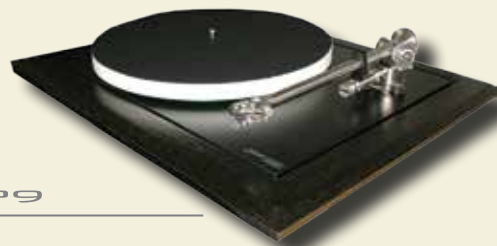
RP3



RP6



P9



RP78



## REVIEW

# Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

**A**uditioning the OC9 on an identical VPI Classic and the VPI Traveler showed that this cartridge is perhaps best suited to rock and jazz. I concur with Mr. Moyers that it is ever so slightly on the soft side, particularly with leading transient edges. Piano and violins are pleasant with the OC9, but lack a little bit in terms of ultimate texture.

However, this is just what the doctor ordered when rocking out—be it Metallica, Slayer or Hendrix—making many of these recordings sound better than you remember them, especially for those utilizing the OC9 in a table like the Traveler, an RP6, a Pro-Ject or something similar.

Comparing 24-bit/192-kHz digital captures of the AT33EV I reviewed last year to captures made with the OC9 reveals the top AT cart having a similar natural tonality, but with more extension on both ends of the frequency spectrum. There is definitely a “family sound” going on here. Much like with the AT33EV, I found that the OC9 is a bit better suited to any one of the excellent solid-state phonostages in the \$1,000 range, like the Lehmannaudio Black Cube or the AVID Pellar. The slight softness of the AT cartridge is a perfect balance to these phonostages, which can sound a little etched with the wrong front end.

**AT-OC9/III**  
**Moving Coil Cartridge**  
**MSRP: \$1,129**

**MANUFACTURER**  
Audio Technica

**CONTACT**  
www.audio-technica.com

**Peripherals**  
**Turntable** VPI Classic 3  
**Cartridge** Lyra Atlas,  
Lyra Dorian

**Phonostage**  
Aesthetix Rhea Signature

**Preamp**  
Aesthetix Calypso Signature

**Power Amplifier** Ayre MXR  
monoblocks

**Speakers** Vandersteen 5A

**Cable** AudioQuest WEL Sig,  
Wild Blue i/c, WEL Sig Power

**Power** Furman Reference

**Accessories** VPI SDS,  
VPI HW17 SRA Isolation  
bases, Billy Bags Rack



# Robert Koda Takumi K-10 Preamplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

My favorite way to initially experience any audio component is to listen to a record I've heard hundreds of times, regardless of fidelity. A recording you intimately know serves you well when trying to get a read on the sound of something new.

Until the K-10 arrived, my system hadn't undergone any changes for nearly a year. When my chosen LP, an early mono copy of Big Brother and the Holding Company's *Cheap Thrills*, hit the turntable, I wasn't prepared for the amount of sensory input delivered to my brain. It's similar to going from excellent digital to the most sublime analog experience. Or perhaps, moving from a standard violin to a Stradivarius.

In Japanese, the word "takumi" has a few translations. The one corresponding to the Kanji character imprinted on the preamp's front panel means "artisan." I can't think of a component I've reviewed more worthy of the title.

Robert Koda  
匠





**More than just richness, or an increase in tonal saturation, the K-10 provides an almost infinite upsurge in resolution.**

More than just richness, or an increase in tonal saturation, the K-10 provides an almost infinite upsurge in resolution. Think of it as such: When increasing the magnification of a photographic image on your computer screen, a point is reached wherein everything is reduced to pixels and falls apart because of the maximum capacity of the screen's resolution. However, with the K-10, even after months of critical listening, there seems to be no limit as to how far you can peek into a recording.

Similar effects occur with a Japanese pressing of Bruce Springsteen's *The Wild*, *The Innocent*, & *The E-Street Shuffle*. The horns and vocals breathe with life, with new surprises everywhere on a record to which I've been listening for nearly 40 years. Much like the Sonus faber Aidas reviewed this issue, the K-10 takes you somewhere you've never been—and that's exciting.

#### **Simple, Yet Simply Amazing**

The cost of this experience? \$31,000. Plus the price of a remote. The K-10 does not include one. A purist design, this solid-state preamplifier achieves greatness via extreme refinement, not so-called proprietary this or that. No part of the K-10 receives less than punctilious attention to detail. *(continued)*



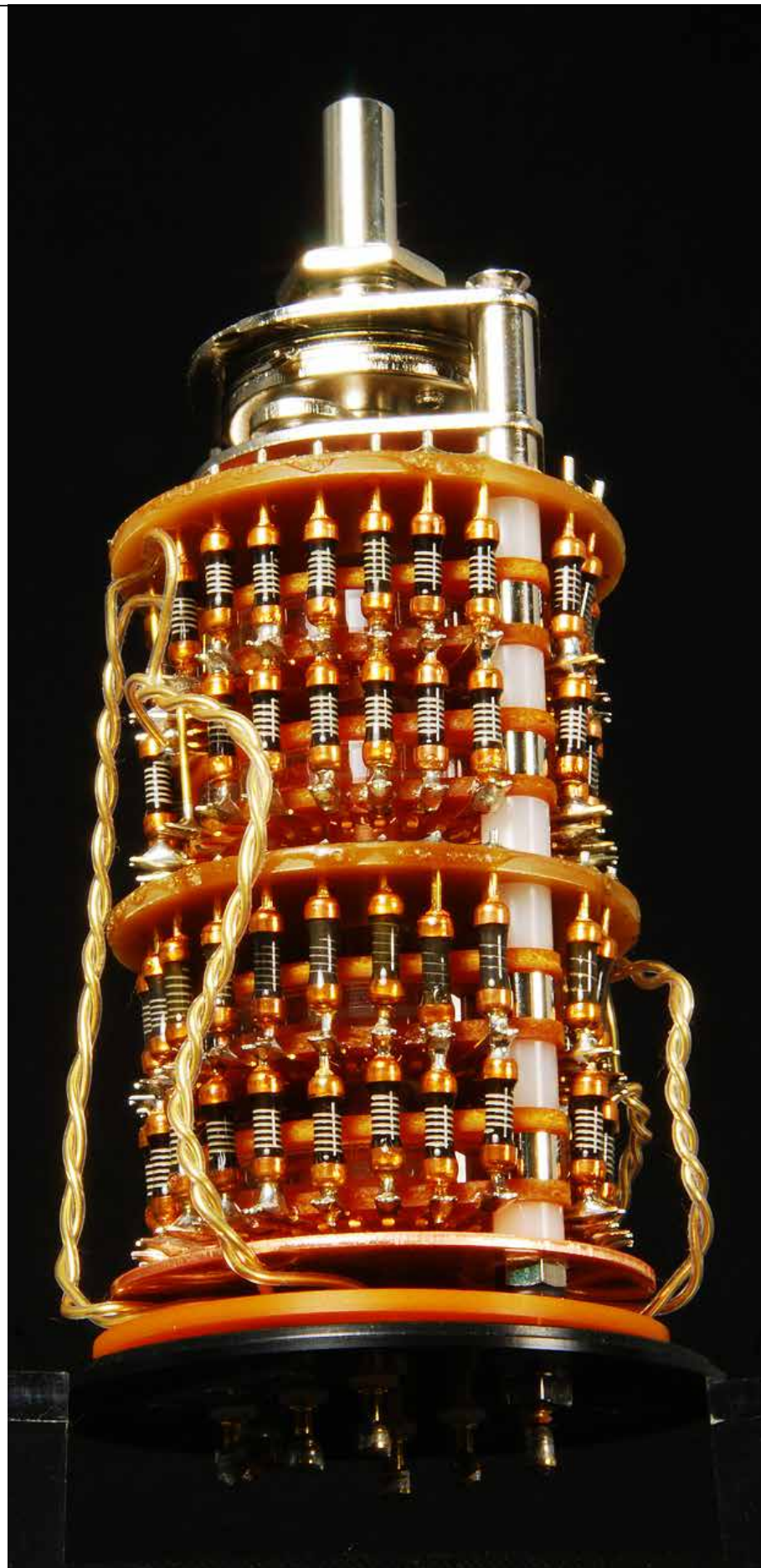
## REVIEW

And although it's solid-state, nearly everything is wired point to point, with only two tiny internal PCBs. Koda says the latter feature gold placed over thick copper tracks, and one enjoys point-to-point silver wiring.

The audio circuit and power supply are not only separated from each other, they are each built into their own sub-enclosures inside the chassis. The choke power supply is encased in a magnetic vault comprised of 2mm-thick soft iron; the preamplifier circuit is inside a mu-metal case, within a copper compartment and again the whole preamplifier is again encased in a copper chassis. To minimize switching noise, the model only uses two diodes and a zero-feedback discreet voltage regulator.

The attenuator uses exotic, precision carbon composition resistors specifically designed for audio use (Koda stresses that these parts are only used in audio applications). An L-Pad design means there are never more than two resistors in the circuit at any given time. This, compared to that of a ladder design with multiple resistors and solder joints.

Interestingly, the K-10 doesn't respond to additional tweaks or attempts to further control vibration. It is built like a bank vault. Its robust power supply makes it one of the only components we've reviewed that does not really react to upgrades in the power path. (The other is the Naim CD-555.) Swapping power cords proves fruitless, and the K-10 doesn't sound much different when plugged directly into the wall or a variety of expensive power line conditioners. *(continued)*



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Such perfection is not easy to achieve. Every aspect of the K-10 is hand-assembled. Each unit takes about a week to assemble. At almost 60 pounds, it weighs as much as many of the power amplifiers we've reviewed. My ARC REF 5SE and Burmester 011 feel lightweight in comparison!

### Relax and Listen

Going without a remote control forces you to sit and listen, and realize the benefits of your favorite music. The K-10's Zen-like tranquility sneaks up slowly, and after becoming fully acclimated to its presentation, I find myself programming sessions by album sides and whole albums—how I used to listen before becoming spoiled with remotes. I love it.

Initial listening—described at the beginning of this review—was conducted via my Linn LP-12 and a Shure V15vmxr. Yeah, the experience was that compelling. I wasn't ready for how much more information the AVID Acutus Reference/Lyra Atlas/Indigo Qualia brought to the system. It's like driving a high-powered 12-cylinder car for the first time. The staggering resolution is initially intoxicating and overstimulating. Mark Mothersbaugh of Devo put it best in the inner sleeve of *Duty Now For The Future*: "Add a third dimension to your 2D world."

Yet it's even more. Everything played through the K-10 possesses extra dimension and resolution; it's as if music now possesses a fourth dimension. Much as I love great digital reproduction, the K-10 repro-

duces things in a continuous tone manner, like rotogravure printing or high-speed open-reel tape. The flow of musical notes and space between them bring you even closer to the illusion of feeling you've brought performers into your listening room.

Aimee Mann's voice gently floats between my speakers when listening to "Invisible Ink." Major space between her vocal pauses and guitar accompany bass that rises up from the floor, folding into the mix. Minute environmental sounds on the title track to *Lost In Space* float like fireflies, buzzing past your head.

### If You Need to Rock

Make no mistake, the K-10 has a rock-solid foundation and plays highly dynamic selections with equal ease. Jimi Hendrix's classic *Are You Experienced?* comes through in a thunderous manner, his groundbreaking distortion effects more exciting because of the additional resolution. And *Van Halen II* never sounded better. Yes, distorted rock recordings can even achieve exalted status on a high-performance system.

The ultra-low noise floor always feels like it plays a few db louder, another bonus when playing acoustic music. Guitars, drums, and percussion explode in a way that hasn't happened before in my system, regardless of amplifier model or type employed. Leading and trailing transients occur with immediacy, possessing no overhang on either end, and abolishing listener fatigue in the process. Music lovers that appreciate string quartets and small-

ensemble music will be shocked by the realism.

### Really? No Tubes?

Out of respect to Mr. Koda, I did not pop the inner covers to photograph the K-10's insides. While a few audio buddies insist it's a vacuum tube preamplifier, this component is in a category by itself. The combination of the K-10 and Burmester 911 mk. 3 or Pass XA200.5 monoblocks is eerily quiet. With the volume control up to the fullest degree, nothing emanates from the speakers, even with my ear solidly against the tweeter.

All this translates into an anchor that extracts the maximum amount of music from your sources and does so inclusively. The K-10 underscores the ideal that a truly fantastic music system sounds wonderful, regardless of the music in your collection. Granted, the most pristine pressings have offer more, but even the most mediocre records on my shelves sound enticing played through a system based around the K-10. There is so much information to discover, you will want to listen to all of your music again.

I have one complaint: a wish for finer gradation in the steps of the attenuator. Every amplifier I tried had a point at the upper range of the control that always felt as if it could use an intermediate step between settings. However, as I adjusted to not having a remote control, I quickly adapted to any gradation shortcomings, which were much easier to deal with on the digital side since the dCS Paganini allowed fine-tuning via its excellent digital volume control. *(continued)*

**Everything played through the K-10 possesses extra dimension and resolution; it's as if music now possesses a fourth dimension.**



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**The K-10 works well with every power amplifier at my disposal and has no trouble driving 20-foot interconnects via single-ended or balanced outputs.**

### Ins and Outs

Thanks to more than 10v of maximum output and an extremely low output impedance, (75 ohm balanced, 37 ohm x 2 single-ended RCA), the K-10 works well with every power amplifier at my disposal and has no trouble driving 20-foot interconnects via single-ended or balanced outputs.

Three RCA inputs, and one XLR input are neatly arranged on the rear panel. Two sets of RCA and a true balanced XLR output is also available. I noticed no difference in sound quality between inputs or outputs. Mr. Koda notes that in order for the XLR output to be a true balanced output, this option must be selected with the rear panel switch.

A circuit breaker-protected power switch also resides on the back, and is not lit, again emphasizing the design's utter simplicity. The owner's manual suggests the preamplifier not be powered on for extended periods of time. Unlike many other solid-state preamplifiers I have used, it stabilizes from being cold in virtually no time. *(continued)*





### What an Experience

The individual parts, the resistors, capacitors, and switches comprising an amplifier, preamplifier, or other component all affect the final sound. And often, active components—primarily solid-state or vacuum tubes—feature a characteristic sound. Reviewers and consumers usually refer to transistors as having a more analytical sound, while tubes are generally characterized as having a warmer, more organic sound.

Rare, however, are components that have so little coloration and lack of a “sound.” The Robert Koda

K-10 preamplifier is the finest example of this trait I’ve experienced. If you can’t bear to live without a remote control, the K-10 is not the best choice for you. If you are prepared to let go of convention and immerse yourself in pure sound, I suspect you will love the K-10 as much as I do.

To be sure I’m not dreaming, Mr. Koda has agreed to grant me a long-term loan on the K-10. I will produce a follow-up review at end of 2013, after the preamp has been used as a reference component with a wider variety of power amplifier and source combinations. ●

*Our new man in Europe, Matej Isak has also spent a great deal of time with the K-10 and shares my enthusiasm. These are the two links to his further thoughts: <http://tinyurl.com/b4meglr> and <http://tinyurl.com/bj4mdwe>*

**Robert Koda Takumi K-10**  
MSRP: \$31,000

### MANUFACTURER

Robert Koda LLC

### CONTACT

[www.robert-koda.com](http://www.robert-koda.com)

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** AVID Acutus Reference SP/TriPlanar arm/Lyra Atlas Cartridge, AMG V12/AMG arm/Clearaudio Goldfinger

**Digital Source** dCS Paganini stack, Aurender S10 music server

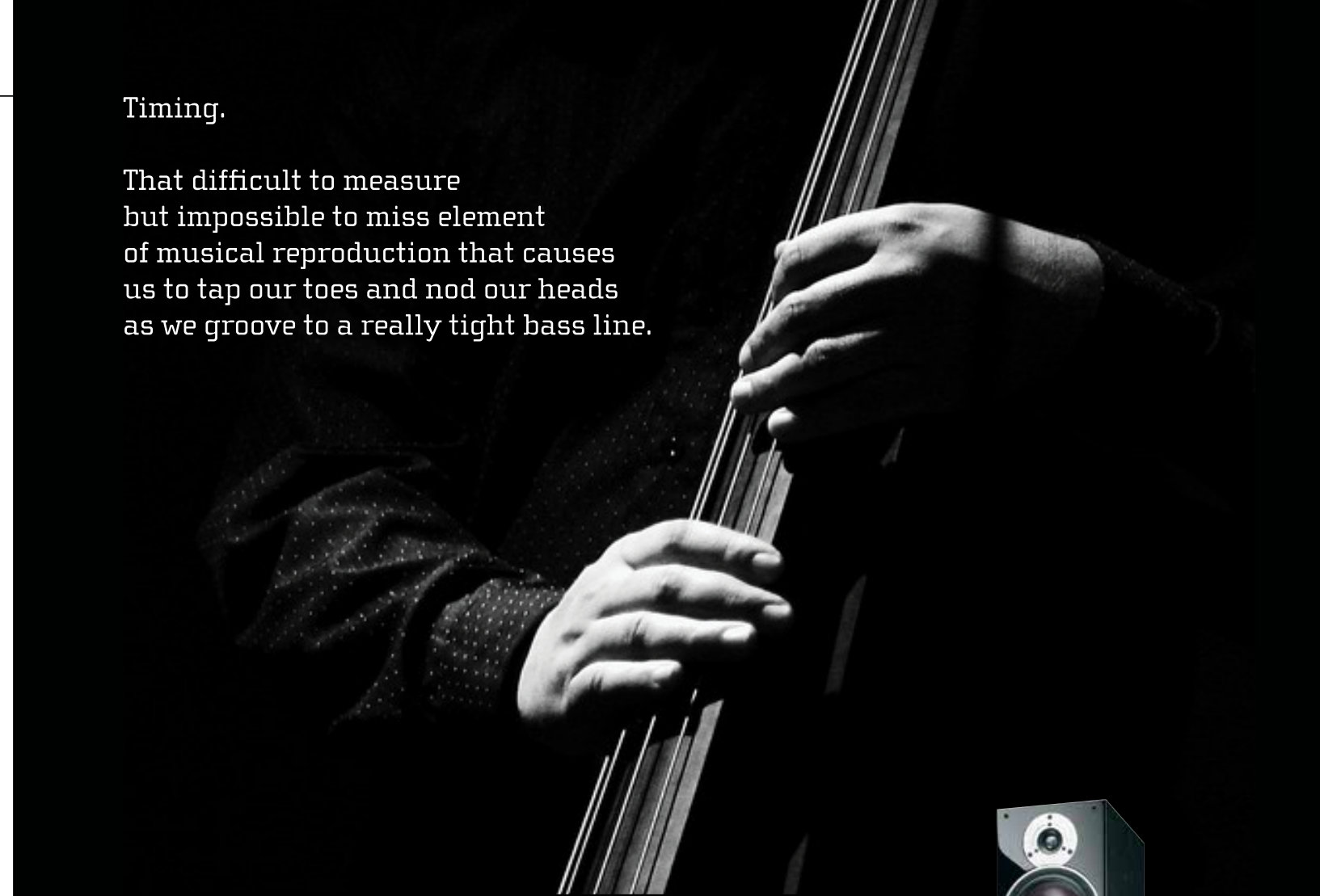
**Phonostage** Audio Research REF Phono 2SE, Pass XP-25, Indigo Qualia

**Power Amplifier** Burmester 911mk.3, Pass XA200.5 monoblocks, Octave Jubilee monoblocks

**Speakers** GamuT S9, Sonus faber Aida

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Amplifier optimized



# The VPI Traveler Turntable

By Jerold O'Brien

**M**y analog journey has encountered numerous VPI turntables through the years, and they have always provided satisfying sounds and steadfast mechanical reliability, beginning with the HW-19, now out of production. The company's current Classic-series turntables are enjoying rave reviews around the world—our publisher is certainly enjoying his. After I spent some time with the Traveler at this year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (RMAF), it became clear that VPI has not merely created an entry-level table with a VPI badge; the Cliffwood, N.J.-based manufacturer has built a reasonably priced table with the same solid engineering and build quality that goes into the rest of its lineup.

With the resurgence of vinyl underway, there are more and more turntables being offered in the entry-level arena. But to be honest, I have not been that impressed with many of the sub-\$1,500 offerings. Maybe it's just the audio dinosaur in me, but many of them seem a bit spindly. Sure, I've gotten them to make nice music, but I always seem to find myself left with an incomplete feeling telling me all is not right in Recordsville.



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## REVIEW



The VPI Traveler hits a different chord at this price point. Unpacking its heavy shipping container tells you there's more than a toy packed within. And packed well it is. I can't foresee even the most ham-fisted shipper damaging the Traveler during shipping.

Parts unpackaged, the assembly process goes off without a hitch. Those experienced with turntable set-up will find Traveler's setup a breeze. In less than forty-five minutes, this turntable was making great sound in my listening room, with no need to tweak things further. Beginners will find the instruction manual clear and detailed. A little focus and Jedi patience will have you spinning your favorite LPs in no time.

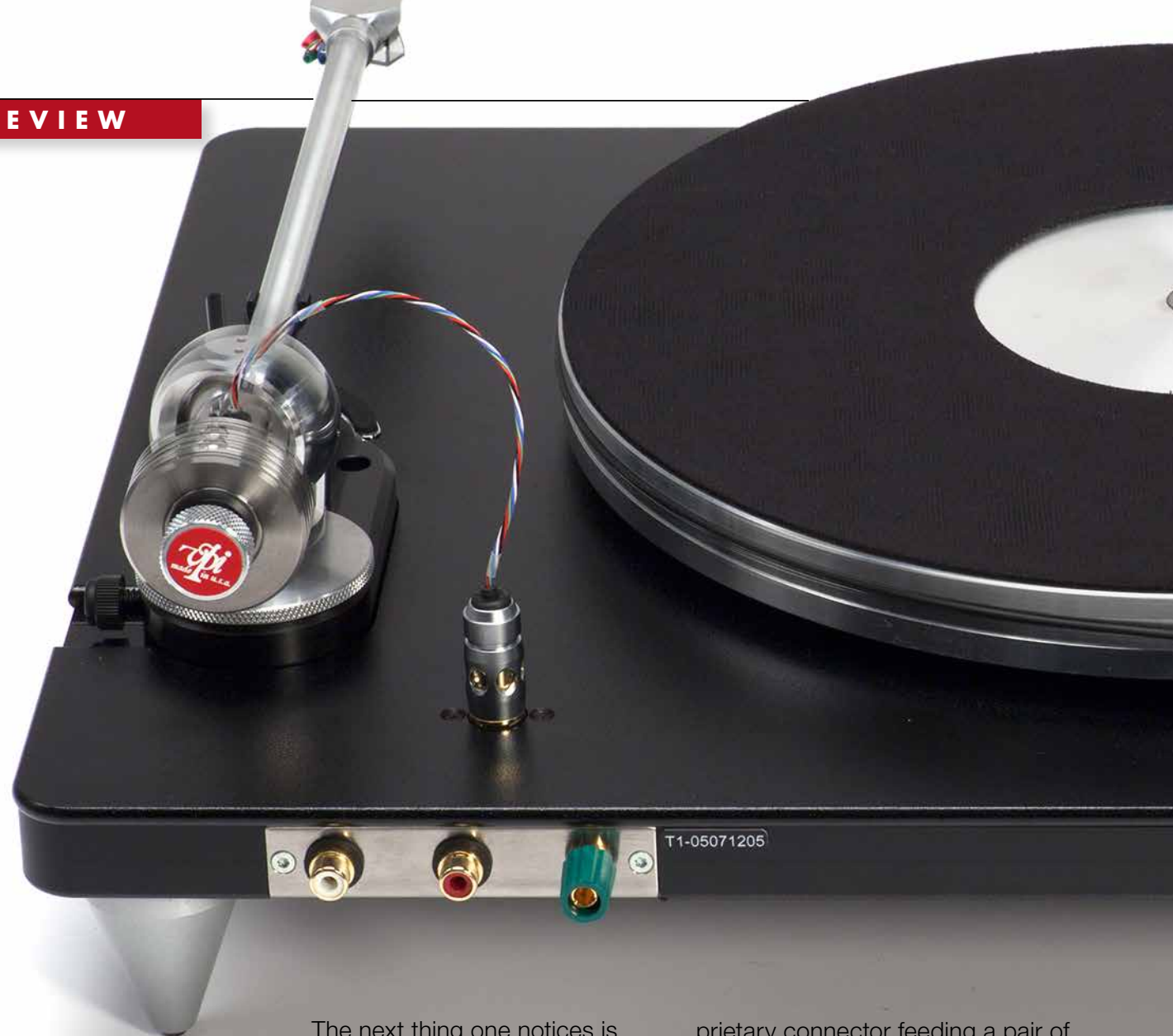
### High Points

This table's level of fit and finish is of a very high order. Machined-metal parts are smooth and polished, the paint on the plinth's top plate is high grade and

the platter feels like it's machined from billet. In fact, it's made from aluminum damped by stainless steel, a great way to break up any resonances that may occur. Spinning the platter reveals a high-quality spindle-to-bearing interface, indicating top-notch machine work. It seems to continue spinning forever when you shut the power off. The non-removable platter mat is made of neoprene rubber and provides additional damping.

This philosophy continues with the plinth, which is an aluminum top plate bonded to a thick acrylic base—impressive compared to the usual machined MDF or plastic that is typically used for plinths in this price category. A set of rubber tipped cones allow for leveling the Traveler. Combined with the solid plinth is a 10-inch tonearm instead of the ubiquitous 9-incher on most other tables, which gives the Traveler a leg up by minimizing tracking angle distortion. *(continued)*





The next thing one notices is the Traveler's gimbaled design, a departure from the VPI norm, as the company usually makes unipivot tonearms. However, VPI claims that the Traveler's friction levels are nearly as low as the brand's more expensive unipivot designs. The Traveler's arm moves smoothly and freely in both the lateral and vertical directions. The counterweight and tracking-force adjustment is another finely machined affair and easy to operate during setup. The tonearm is equipped with a VTA on-the-fly adjustment that works beautifully and without fuss. Finally, the signal goes from the arm through a pro-

proprietary connector feeding a pair of RCA jacks fitted to the rear of the plinth.

VPI does not supply a dedicated tonearm cable with the Traveler, so users are free to experiment with cabling options between the turntable and phonostage. I advise caution here, because the wrong type of cable can seriously compromise the sonic results. If possible, try one of the current tonearm cables on the market available with RCA jacks on both ends; these cables usually make an extra effort to minimize cable capacitance, resulting in better transference of the delicate phono signal. *(continued)*

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## REVIEW

### Taking Care of Business

Sticking with the winning formula in *TONE-Audio's* RMAF room, listening began with the \$599 Ortofon Rondo Red low-output MC cartridge, which brings the combination of turntable and cartridge to \$1,900—not exactly spare beer money, but a fine investment nevertheless. I tried two different interconnect cables with excellent results: the AudioQuest King Cobra (\$249/pair) and, for the more budget-minded, the KAB Jazz (\$33/pair). In the end, I preferred the AQ cable on most material, but the KAB is a well-made product, providing great shielding from RF and decent audio performance.

First up was Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (Mercury Living Presence, London Symphony Orchestra, Antal Dorati conducting). The Traveler/Rondo Red combination provides a convincing sense of hall ambiance, while simultaneously placing the sections of the orchestra firmly in place. Once the music reaches full gallop, the Traveler delivers the music's swell and crescendo with the requisite delicacy and impact, with the woodwinds sounding exceptionally natural.

Next up, in a more delicate vein, is Trio Galanterie's *Eighteenth-Century Music For Lute and Strings* on AudioQuest records. The Traveler captures the interplay of the cello, lute and violin on this recording with complete intimacy, like a concert for one. The Traveler presents the fundamentals and overtones in a harmonically rich fashion, with strummed, plucked and bowed instruments—not an easy task, but one that is performed exceptionally well here.

Changing genres, the latest Charlie Hunter recording, *Not Getting Behind Is The New Getting Ahead*, is a self-released limited-edition album featuring Hunter on seven-string guitar and Scott Amendola on drums. This live-in-the-studio outing will challenge any arm-cartridge combination with its dynamic close-miked drum sound, biting guitar and punchy, resonant bass. Again, the Traveler/Rondo combination turns in an ace performance. (continued)





Ralph Towner's "Piscean Dance," from his *Solstice* album, is another studio jam/duel possessing great dynamic swings. The crystalline but completely natural sound of cymbals and snare drum, while Towner's signature twelve-string guitar weaves in and out of Christensen's rhythmic patterns, underlines how well this modestly priced table handles complex music without losing its soul.

Both Eric Bibb's *Friends* and John Mayall's *The Turning Point* underscore the Traveler's ability to combine bass weight with fundamental mid-range body and tonality. The Traveler's rock-solid pace gives a sense of presence rarely accomplished by an analog front end at this price.

#### Past Meets Present

Fully impressed with the Traveler so far, I decide it's time to try something off the beaten path. A NOS Acutec 412 STR cartridge would put any tonearm to task, as this high-compliance cartridge usually works best with ultra-low-mass tonearms.

Set to 1.5 grams, the combination sailed through the most-difficult passages at my disposal, proving what great all-around performance the Traveler offers: It should be just right for most MM or MC cartridges.

#### So Take a Trip to Your VPI Dealer!

Combining robust construction, a high level of fit and finish and an excellent sonic presentation, the VPI Traveler establishes a new benchmark for its price. VPI left no stone unturned, from getting the basic record-playing ability right to employing clever engineering. And you can order it in a variety of colors (for an extra hundred bucks). Whether you are just getting into the world of vinyl, adding a second turntable to the stable or are replacing a turntable that has left you wondering if there's more to be had for your money, I highly recommend the Traveler. Have a few less lattes per month, or perhaps even skimp on record purchases for a few months, to make the very reasonable leap for this remarkable table. *(continued)*





# Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

I was equally curious to see how much of the essence of VPI's more-expensive Classic One could be incorporated into the Traveler. The Classic One is a linear step up in the VPI range and its roots are readily apparent. The Traveler resembles the Classic much more so than it does the Scout/Scoutmaster series. Using both tables side by side through the Audio Research REF Phono 2 SE, with matching Dynavector DV-20X2L cartridges (\$850), the main differences between the two are in bass weight and low-level detail retrieval.

Listening to the biting guitars on the anniversary remaster of the Smashing Pumpkins' *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* reveals more punch from the Classic, but the Traveler is no slouch for the price. Comparing the Traveler to my late-1980s LP12 is like getting out of a Triumph TR6 and getting into a Porsche Boxster: Everything feels much crisper and more defined overall.

The overall tonality of the Traveler is remarkably similar to the Classic, and when not playing records with ultra-wide dynamic swings, one might be easily fooled. The DV-20X2L is an excellent match for this table, for those looking to take their analog experience a step further. I had equally good results with the Sumiko Blackbird high-output MC, another favorite of mine in the \$800-to-\$1,200 range, proving that this table is not embarrassed in the least by a cartridge costing almost as much as the table. This level of performance makes the Traveler an excellent *long-term* turntable choice.

We not only recommend the Traveler highly, we have purchased the review sample. It will become a reference component in gear editor Bailey Barnard's new system, so we can indoctrinate him in the ways of the LP. ●



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**PERIPHERALS**  
**Preamplifier** Coffman Labs CO-1 (phonostage included)

**Power Amplifier** Pass Labs Aleph 3

**Speakers** Harbeth Monitor 40.1

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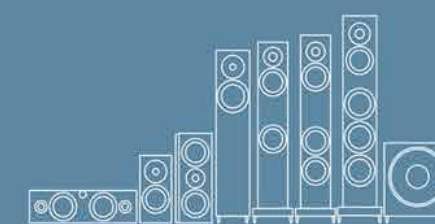
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# Totem Acoustic Mani-2 Signature Speakers

**Let the Spirit Move You**

By Lawrence Devoe

If you believe that it's possible for good things to come in small packages, then mini-monitors are right up your alley. These little fellas warm the hearts and ears of space-constrained audiophiles everywhere. Besides having room-friendly sizes, mini-monitors simply disappear once you toss in decent amplifiers, cables and stands. Montreal's Totem Acoustics has been building great compact loudspeakers for two decades. CEO Vince Bruzzese seems to have applied Native American spirits, or some such supernatural force, to his speakers, which should not come as a surprise to the Totem true believers who have always known that Bruzzese and company were on to something. I bought my first-edition Mani-2s in 1996 and they have graced my smaller listening room ever since. More than a decade later, Totem has completely rethought this speaker, with the new Signature version.





### House Spirits

The exteriors of the Sigs resemble those of their predecessors, but these speakers are all new on the inside, from internal bracing to crossovers and drivers. There are two new distinctive aesthetic features: a little blue dot above the tweeter and a plaque on the rear. Similar to the original Mani-2s, these are 4-ohm speakers that measure 16.4 inches tall, 8.5 inches wide and 12 inches deep, and they weigh 23 pounds apiece.

Each speaker features a 1-inch aluminum tweeter and two 6.5-inch woofers in an Isobarik formation—meaning that one driver faces into the cabinet and the other faces the outside world. Each rear panel is ported and has two sets of terminals for bi-wiring. Totem offers an optional grille, but the company openly prefers that you listen to the Sigs in their birthday suits.

After easing the Blu Tack off of my Mani-2 originals, I place the new speakers on the same lead-filled Target stands. My room dimensions being on the small side (15 by 10 by 8 feet), I locate the speakers 3 feet from the short wall and 2 feet from the sidewalls, with 5 feet of space between each speaker. My listening distance was 8 feet. As the sensitivity of the Sigs is relatively low (85 dB), Totem recommends amplifiers for them that can crank out at least 40 watts per channel. Advice notwithstanding, I have zero trouble driving them to satisfactorily clean listening levels with two different integrated amps, rated at 30 and 35 watts. *(continued)*

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# Man, Oh Mani-2

Totem suggests a minimum 200-hour break-in period and I willingly comply. Two relatively low-powered integrated amplifiers, the PrimaLuna Premium Prologue (35 wpc) and the Pass Labs INT-30A (30 wpc) provide the juice. A PS Audio PerfectWave Transport with MKII DAC and a Logitech Squeezebox Touch, armed with a USB drive, serve up the music. Since extended low bass was an original Mani-2 “calling card,” I go straight to Patricia Barber’s “Constantinople” from *Modern Cool* (Premonition Records). Midway through this jam session, Michael Arnopol cuts loose on his acoustic bass in jazzy yet articulate fashion. The Sigs give a true-to-form account of this solo, right down to the resonances of the bass’s sound-board. Continuing the low-frequency session, I go to the Pipes Rhode Island CD (Riago) for Stephen Martorella’s masterful handling of the Widor *Adagio*. The low pedals on this piece prove little problem for the Sigs, whose little woofers move considerable air in my listening room.

From my perspective, voice reproduction separates loudspeaker contenders from pretenders, so I toss the Sigs Tony Bennett, in an XRCD2 remastering of *The Tony Bennett Bill Evans Album* (JVC). Bennett’s slightly raspy voice has a remarkable way of drawing you into each song. One listen to “Some Other Time” reassures me that the Sigs can really do vocals. To add more fuel to this fire, I play Isaac Freeman and the Blueblood’s “Beautiful Stars” (Lost Highway Records). Freeman’s deep-bass vocals resonate like the voice of God, a quality captured by the Sigs, minus the mid-range coloration often found from small speakers. *(continued)*



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Ultimately, speakers get their cardio workouts from large-scale orchestral works. I administer this last treadmill test with a 24-bit/96-kHz download of Stravinsky's Firebird Suite turned in by Japanese conductor Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra (Reference Recordings). This piece's no-holds-barred finale has all the forces wailing away at fortissimo levels. The next best thing to the players actually leading a frontal assault into my room is having the Sigs give me a good wallop, and they do so without a hint of strain.

### The Ancestral Voices Have Spoken

In the past decade and a half following the arrival of my original pair of Mani-2s, there have been three Washington administrations, two foreign wars, and, in case you missed it, a massive market tanking. Surprisingly, the high-end audio industry has managed to rock on. Some companies, like Totem Acoustic, have actually flourished and expanded their loudspeaker lines. Each generation of Totem speakers has drawn from the wisdom of its ancestors. This makes the company's decision to issue a second Mani-2 generation an interesting one, since many of the newer Totem speakers have been larger floorstanders.

Comparing the Sigs to their forebears shows how much the Totem design team has invested in product reinvention. The sonic strengths of the originals, such as good imaging and bass extension, have been further improved. The soundstage is noticeably broader, deeper and taller. The bass is better articulated, while highs sound more natural, courtesy of the new tweeter. Most importantly, midrange clarity, not a strength of the original Mani-2s, is dramatically better.



Midway through my review, I noted that Totem offers an accessory that, for obvious visual reasons, is called the "Beak." This is a custom-milled 2-inch-high aluminum cone with "micro-ribs." According to the product literature, Beaks are meant to "control parasitic vibrations that occur on top of a speaker cabinet." Totem further suggests that Beaks help produce better imaging and high-frequency performance. They can be placed atop each enclosure, either singly or in pairs.

While I am not a big-time tweaker, I did experiment with these curious devices. Having the Beaks on and diagonally aligned from front to back produced smoother highs and a more coherent soundstage—maybe not to a shattering degree, since the Sigs are already so good, but the result was certainly noticeable and could be reproduced on repeated listenings.

### Conclusions: Is the Mani-2 for you?

So what does \$5,295 (plus an additional \$300 to \$400 for high-quality speaker stands) get you? It *won't* get you the huge soundstage of large panels or the subterranean bass of a separate subwoofer. It *will* get you compact speakers that fit easily into most listening rooms. It *will* get you intensely musical sound from all the sources at your disposal. As a bonus, you *will not* need monster amps to drive these guys. In a modest-sized listening room with two integrated amps, each rated at less than 40 watts per side, I got great sound aplenty from the Sigs, although their bass response seemed slightly plumper with the Pass than the PrimaLuna. *(continued)*



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## REVIEW



The jungle of \$5,000-plus speakers is the natural habitat for many species of widely differing designs. Most speakers in this price range will provide pleasurable listening if mated with proper electronics, cables and, most critically, a room with the appropriate dimensions. When it comes to getting the most sound in a modest-sized room, the Mani-2 Sigs will give you just about as much as you can hope for in terms of imaging, smooth highs, clear mids and extended bass that has to be heard to be believed. If this is not enough to sell you, you should note that my 15-year-old Mani-2s, while clearly bettered by the Sigs, still sound pretty darn good (i.e. I'm not throwing them away), which is a testimony to the build quality of Totem speakers. ●

**Totem Acoustic Mani-2 Signature Speaker**  
**MSRP: \$5,295 (USD)**

### MANUFACTURER

Totem Acoustic

### CONTACT

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

### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Source** Logitech Squeezebox Touch, PS Audio PerfectWave Transport and DAC MKII

**Integrated Amplifier** Pass Labs INT-30A, PrimaLuna Prologue Premium

**Power Conditioner** Running Springs Audio Elgar

**Cables** Nordost Valhalla, Frey

**Power Cords** Nordost Valhalla, Brahma, Vishnu



# Smooth Operator

## The AMG V12 Turntable

By Jeff Dorgay

Being an enthusiast of great industrial and mechanical design, I hold objects that perform as well as they look in the highest esteem. I confess to becoming an admirer of the AMG V12 the second I saw pictures of it. When I saw the V12 in person, had I been sitting on an analysts couch, performing a word-association drill, *Leica* would have been the first word that came to mind. Imagine, those of you who own or have owned a Leica (or an older 500-series mechanical Hasselblad), that the camera maker decided to enter the turntable business and bring its level of machining expertise to turntable design.



But craftsmanship from a brand like Leica goes so far beyond simple aesthetics. How would a turntable manufacturer translate the damped feel of a Leica focusing mechanism, or the positive engagement of a Ferrari gearshift, or the vault-like sound that a Rolls Royce door makes to the language of turntable design? Germany's AMG (for *Analog Manufaktur Germany*; no relation to the Mercedes-Benz design branch by the same initials) puts the same level of artistry into its V12 turntable. Its design allows users to operate the capacitance-controlled power and speed switches and feel the effortlessness of the tonearm, while the uniformity of its machined and anodized surfaces provide a visual package as stunning as the turntable's performance.

At \$16,500, a cost which includes the wooden base and 12-inch AMG tonearm,

the V12 achieves price parity with its peers from AVID, Clearaudio, SME and others. During a conversation with AMG designer and principal Werner Röschlau at the Munich High-End back in May, I learned of the high level of refinement that the V12 offers and that this is not really his first attempt at building a turntable. Röschlau, who is an engineer by trade, did high-precision machine work for a few top turntable manufacturers for over a decade. Along with his own design expertise, Röschlau applied what he learned working for those manufacturers to the V12.

This turntable is the epitome of simplicity in look and operation. Röschlau tells me that every aspect of the tables' design revolves around simplicity, functionality and longevity. "I truly hope that these turntables outlive me," he says with a smile. (*continued*)



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## REVIEW

### Sharpen Your Skills

The V12 offers an amazing combination of weight, stability and delicacy. The SME arms that I use on a number of tables feel thick and clunky compared to the V12 arm (though the former are easier to adjust at first). Again, the comparison to a Leica comes to mind with the V12, as I reflect on the turntable's small, lightweight, minimalist controls that make perfect sense once you get used to them.

It's often said that people who are masters of their craft make things look deceptively easy. Sitting at home watching Sebastian Vettel win the F1 championship, you think, "How hard can it be? I can drive a car." I was thinking the same thing, as Garth Leerer, the US importer for Musical Surroundings, fine-tuned this table.

But this tonearm does not invite constant fiddling like a Tri-Planar does; the V12 arm is perfect for someone who sees turntable setup as something you do once, rather than for someone who sees it as an ongoing sport. AMG includes a full set of allen-head screwdrivers for every one of the V12's adjustments, though the instruction manual falls woefully short in terms of helping the uninitiated—there are no pictures. If you haven't set up your fair share of tonearms, this may not be the best place to begin your analog-setup journey.

The manual *does* warn you to use a light touch when making all adjustments. The screws are all tiny: .65-, 1.5- and 2-mm allen-head screws that disappear into the casework, further contributing to the ultra-clean design. But excess torque will destroy the subtle handiwork, so proceed with extreme care. *(continued)*



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Another tip for those of you adding the V12 to your system: Level the plinth *before* you attach the platter, as one of the three-adjustment screws is under the platter and cannot be accessed once you've fully assembled the table. You should also be sure that the V12 is on a very solid surface, as the weight of this table will sink into any wooden rack shelves you might have.

Adding the optional HRS platform made specifically for the V12 boosts performance even further, with better low-level detail and transient slam, but the upgraded platform is not necessary—the V12 is enjoyable delivered from the factory as is. But Leerer mentions that he feels the sound of any turntable can be improved by better isolation, such as that offered by the HRS platform, which offers a similar performance increase when I pair it with my fully suspended AVID Volvere SP turntable. The HRS platform is a \$2,500 upgrade that is well worth the investment.

Though the V12 requires a steady and patient hand to optimize it, the end result is more than worth the effort. And if you subscribe to the philosophy of form following function, there may be no better example of record-spinning art than the V12. Even the belt-drive mechanism is handily hidden beneath the platter—the mechanism slips on easily if you use the enclosed spiked wooden tool according to the manual. (The turntable manual is much better than the tonearm manual, and it's

well illustrated.). Röschlau makes it a point to mention that even this step, while appearing a style move, “Keeps the belt out of the environment and free of dust and UV rays.”

## Recalibrate Your Senses

The V12 sounds as good as it looks, perhaps even better. Immediately upon power up, the V12 feels solid and elegant—this is a serious record-playing machine. The glowing red speed buttons turn to green with a mere touch. And the V12 can accommodate 78RPM playback, for those with legacy collections.

We can argue about the merits and shortcomings of a 12-inch tonearm versus a shorter tonearm, but the main argument for a longer arm is minimized tracing distortion. Here, the V12 succeeds brilliantly by utilizing an incredibly stiff yet lightweight tonearm wand that has an effective mass of only 12.9 grams.

A non-suspended design, the V12 table utilizes a massive CNC-machined plinth and an adjustable, high-mass aluminum “pod” pre-drilled for the tonearm mounting. This removable pod uses a bayonet mount and is geared towards the analog enthusiast wishing to explore multiple tonearm and cartridge options. The finely graduated scale, where the base of the pod meets the plinth, makes it easy to perform the necessary adjustments for other tonearms with slightly different spindle-to-pivot distances. *(continued)*





Listening begins with a well-broken-in Lyra Kleos that has spent enough time on the AVID Volvere SP/SME V and the VPI Classic tables to be a familiar starting point for my review of the V12. The AMG is considerably more expensive than the VPI and still almost a third more than the AVID/SME combination, and the presentation is markedly different. Immediately, there is an increase in resolution from top to bottom, as well as a decrease in distortion. A handful of albums from the “chronic-inner-groove-distortion” bin track through much easier than before.

Camper Van Beethoven’s *Key*

*Lime Pie* just happens to be at the top of this list. A record that has always felt fairly grainy and etched on top plays now tracks clean. The inner cut on side one, “Light From a Cake,” used to have a more gravely feel to the vocals, usually causing me to prematurely end the side, but now it sounds smooth, with the drums greatly improved and the violin fluid, where this experience used to be torturous.

Investigating other problematic tracks reveals the same thing: an overall continuity and sonic integrity, with no sign of drawbacks. Thanks to the Furutech’s incredibly handy disc flattener, there are no

more warped records in my collection, so I can’t comment on the longer tonearm’s ability to track highly warped records.

### Time Flies

Now that I’m comfortable with the sound of the V12, exploring different cartridges is in order. Next stop is the Sumiko Palo Santos, which has been favorably reviewed here, and offers a similar tonal balance to the Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum. Slightly rich tonally, this combination provides excellent extension and a somewhat warm rendition of the lower frequencies.

The AMG tonearm transforms

the Palo Santos cartridge. Sounding almost too warm and a little tubby with the SME 312 tonearm (also 12 inches), the Palo Santos snaps to life on the AMG, now with more definition in the lower registers. Lynyrd Skynyrd’s classic *Street Survivors*, via the recent MoFi Silver Label release, proves enlightening, with the multiple layers of guitars now having more bite than before; yet, the overall presentation retains the smoothness that is the signature of the V12.

The more time I spend with the V12, the more the palette it paints feels like open reel tape. Herbie Hancock’s masterpiece, *Empyrean*

*Isles*, unfolds just as it did when I heard the master tape during the Music Matters remastering session, with the presence of each of the four virtuosos retaining distinctly separate spaces and with the musicians’ complex improvisations intact. The V12 delivers percussion and cymbals that are rich with attack and decay, but that strike a perfect balance of timbre and tone.

### Diva Approved

Of course, the female voice is the litmus test for so many audiophiles, so a thorough exploration again reveals the extremely low distortion this configuration is capable of.

Now, having moved to the Clearaudio Goldfinger cartridge, the bar is raised considerably. Anyone doubting that this table can carry what is arguably one of the world’s finest (and, at \$15,000, most expensive) cartridges is selling the AMG table short.

Marianne Faithfull’s take on the Rolling Stones’ classic “As Tears Go By,” from her 1987 record *Strange Weather*, is sublime, with the V12 extracting every bit of her addiction-scarred voice, and with Bill Frisell’s guitar hiding in the background, wandering in and out of the mix. *(continued)*





Faithfull's voice is tough to capture, but the V12 gets every bit of grit out of the vinyl, highlighting the differences between the original pressing and the ORG 45RPM remaster.

Wilhelmenia Wiggins Fernandez's rendition of *Aria* from 'La Wally' illustrates how well the AMG/Goldfinger combination paints the striking sustain of the solo voice in an operatic setting. Much like being called on to reproduce the violin, the combination demands tonal purity and a wide dynamic range, or else the illusion is lost. Fernandez's voice feels as if it is floating in front of me, even on the most dramatic passages. For those unfamiliar with this piece, it is featured on the soundtrack of the '80s cult-classic film, *Diva*.

### Let's Review

After living with the AMG V12 since mid June, I'm as smitten with it as the day I first unboxed it—not always an easy feat in the wacky and rapidly

evolving world of high-end audio. It's often too easy for the charm that captures you in a dealer or hi-fi show demo to fade all too quickly after the excitement of the purchase wears off. A cursory look at the online buying-and-selling community Audiogon will reveal this to be the case with so much gear.

I'm happy to say that this has not happened with the V12—hence I've purchased the review sample to make it a permanent part of our reference system. There is still more information to be culled from your LP collection, but it's going to take a *lot* more money to get there, especially if you've paired your V12 with a flagship cartridge like the Clearaudio Goldfinger, Lyra Atlas or something comparable.

The AMG V12 is such an excellent value, in terms of performance for the price, meticulous build quality and timeless style, that we award it our Analog Product of the Year award. ●

**The AMG V12 Turntable**  
**MSRP: \$16,500**  
**(includes wooden base and 12-inch AMG tonearm)**

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

### PERIPHERALS

**Phono Cartridge** Lyra Kleos, Sumiko Palo Santos, Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement

**Phonostage** Audio Research REF Phono 2SE, Simaudio Moon 810LP

**Preamplifier** Audio Research REF 5SE, Robert Koda K-10

**Power Amplifier** Pass Labs XA200.5 monoblocks

**Speakers** GamuT S9, Sonus faber Aida

**Cable** Cardas Clear

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

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- *Stereophile*

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

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# AKG K702 65th Anniversary Edition Headphones

By Michael Liang

To celebrate its 65th anniversary, Viennese manufacturer AKG introduced two limited-edition versions of older products: the C451 condenser microphone and K702 headphones. In this review I will focus on the new K702 65th Anniversary Edition headphones (K702-65). Building upon the solid foundation laid by AKG's K701, K702 and Q701 models, the K702-65th promises to be the pinnacle of a popular and prestigious family. It carries an MSRP of \$499.

Visually, the K702-65 is similar to its current production sibling, the K702. Both models feature an open design that utilizes flat-wire voice coils and AKG's patented Varimotion two-layer diaphragm. For connectivity, it features a mini-XLR cable, which is detachable for extra versatility.

The K702-65 is handcrafted in AKG's facility in Vienna, and has a limited production run of just 3,000 units worldwide, each of which are individually tested and numbered to ensure the highest quality. For the new phones, AKG didn't just give us a re-badged K702; the company updated the design with a "TITAN-Look" finish, a redesigned genuine leather headband and soft velour ear pads with memory foam inside them for improved comfort. The material changes are subtle, but they go a long way.

As you might imagine, some of these changes have also affected the sound signature. The K702-65 pairs well with the Musical Fidelity M1 DAC and X-Can V8 tube headphone amplifier that I used for the bulk of my test listening.







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- Sam Tellig, Stereophile

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- Andrew Harrison - Hi-Fi News

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- Martin Colloms - Hi-Fi Critic

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- David Price - Hi-Fi World

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- Srajan Ebaen - 6 Moons

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After 72 hours of burn-in, the K702-65 begins to distinguish itself as more than a mere twin of the K702. Even though the two models share a common sonic signature, the anniversary version addresses some of the standard K702's sonic shortcomings (which are often perceived to contribute to thinness overall.)

Sampling tracks by Sixpence None the Richer and from Bruce Springsteen's *Greatest Hits* album, I find the midrange on the K702-65 to be slightly smoother, with more body and texture than the K702. While still not overly warm or lush, the K702-65 still provides the fairly neutral midrange present in the original, without being so forward or analytic. The highs on the K702 are prone to sibilance, but this is much less noticeable on the new model, particularly when listening to cymbals and percussion. Sampling some of the recent Blue Note XRCDs is much more relaxing through the newer phones, which also offer a level of refinement that doesn't give up the transparency this model number is famous for.

The new ear pad material makes the biggest difference for the better—not just in terms of comfort, but also in terms of the quality of low-frequency reproduction. Tracking through Michael Jackson's 25th Anniversary Edition of *Bad*, I find that the weight and dynamics of the bass line in the title track have better definition and texture, as well as more apparent speed. Fortunately, AKG has not turned these phones into skull-shaking "bass monsters."

I'll stick my neck out and suggest that if you love your K702 originals than these will be a welcome upgrade. AKG's 702-65 is the company's best effort to date in the K701/702 series, improving on every aspect the range has to offer without making any sacrifices.

**AKG K702 65th Anniversary Edition Headphones**  
MSRP: \$499  
[www.akg.com](http://www.akg.com)





# Logitech UE 9000 Headphones

By Michael Liang

In 2008, when Logitech acquired Ultimate Ears, an industry leader in custom in-ear monitors, the Newark, Calif.-based conglomerate significantly expanded its line of personal audio products. Today, a full array of headphones and portable speakers are available under the combined name, Logitech UE. Having experienced success with its in-ear monitors, Ultimate Ears paved the way for the Logitech UE 9000s, a \$349 pair of wireless Bluetooth headphones. With so many companies getting in on the wireless game these days, the UE9000 is a solid contender.

## Stylish Good Looks

The UE 9000 is the company's flagship model. It features elegant styling, and you won't need a pair of zippered Sammy Hagar "I Can't Drive 55" pants to go along with them. Build quality is excellent, with nary a squeak or rattle. Oversized ear cups surround your ears with form-fitting memory foam, while the headband has just the right amount of padding, lending an unobtrusive feel to these headphones.

And for those on the go, the ear cups swivel and lay flat in the included hard-shell case, making for a low-profile package that fits easily in your briefcase or luggage.

## Broad Feature Set

Logitech packs so many features into these headphones that the \$399 MSRP seems like a bargain. The UE 9000 has an around-the-ear closed-back design. It does a good job of passive noise isolation, but Logitech also adds active noise canceling for maximum outside noise rejection. Wireless streaming via Bluetooth supports A2DP and apt-X for lossless CD-quality audio (though not all Bluetooth devices support this codec). Battery life in wireless (Bluetooth) mode is said to be around 10 hours, with a three-hour recharge cycle. The phones also have a passive mode so the music doesn't have to stop when the battery is dead.

Kudos to Logitech for including an audio cable with an in-line remote for wired mode. Having to dig for your music player to change

tracks or adjust the volume is often cumbersome. More manufacturers should follow Logitech's lead on this one. The integrated three-button remote controls most modern Apple portable devices, and offers play/pause and next/previous functionality, and the ability to adjust the volume.

## Listening on the Go

I audition the UE 9000s in three distinct modes: wired with active noise canceling off; wired with active noise canceling on; and wireless Bluetooth with active noise canceling on. The AudioQuest DragonFly USB DAC running iTunes on my MacBook Air sets the baseline for using the UE 9000s as standard wired phones, before moving on to the more "mobile" options.

Listening to Alicia Keys' *As I Am* reveals a well-balanced tonality, with nothing jumping out from any particular part of the audio spectrum to distract the listener. Her voice sounds natural and organic, while the highs have enough oomph and crispness, without causing fatigue. This album has a heavy bass groove, yet the UE 9000s sail right through, keeping the bass track in place without boom or, even worse, bleeding into the midrange. There's just enough weight to keep your foot tapping. I found myself seduced the most by the UE 9000s smooth midrange.

Jumping over to *American Idiot* (Original Broadway Cast recording featuring Green Day) again underscores the midrange prowess of

these phones. The UE9000s exhibit excellent stereo separation and a relatively wide soundstage—uncommon in a closed-back headphone.

## Noise Be Gone

The active noise canceling works in both wired and wireless modes. With the electronics on, the overall sound signature remains roughly the same. The most noticeable difference is a tad more kick in the bass ranges and slightly more snap in the highs, which should please most listeners. This gives music a bit more presence, especially when listening through an iPad, iPod, iPhone or laptop.

Now let's cut the cord! Pairing the UE 9000 is as easy as hitting the switch and clicking a couple of onscreen buttons on the MacBook Air. I was wire-free within seconds. Using apt-X confirms that the stream is rock-solid. The audio quality exceeds my expectations, though it lacks some of the refinement to be had in wired mode. But that's a small price to pay to be untethered.

The apt-X codec is unavailable to Apple's portable devices, but I find the A2DP streaming of sufficient quality for general mobile use. The UE 9000 is a very capable headphone for home and mobile use and is a solid buy, considering its combination of sound quality and versatility. ●

**Logitech UE 9000 Headphones**  
**MSRP: \$399**  
[www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com)



# TONE Audio AWARDS 2012

This past year has been an intriguing one, with excellent products throughout the price spectrum. The select components featured here are those most deserving of another look. Beyond our overall Product of the Year, which is a very expensive pair of speakers, the only other speaker we give an award to is in the Budget Speaker category. We felt it would be somewhat redundant to make a mega speaker our Overall Product of the Year and then give a Product of the Year award to another speaker.

Our awards are divided into Product of the Year Awards, for gear that redefines a category regardless of price, and Publisher's Choice Awards, which are my "teacher's pet" picks. PC awards are located on our website in the "Awards" Section. And we're already starting to think about 2013!

## 2012 Product of the Year OVERALL

### Sonus faber Aida

\$120,000/pair

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

[www.sumikoaudio.net](http://www.sumikoaudio.net)

Spending \$120,000 on a pair of speakers should provide a transcendent experience, and provided you have the room and system to back them up, the Aidas do just that. If we gave an award for visual design, Sonus faber would always be at the top of our list. But a beautiful package isn't enough to be at the top—these speakers also deliver sonically, and should be at the top of everyone's "best of" lists.





AWARDS

# 2012

## Product of the Year

### PREAMPLIFIER

#### Robert Koda Takumi K-10

\$31,000  
www.robert-koda.com

The K-10 is at the upper end of the price spectrum for a linestage, especially one with only four inputs and no remote. Yet it is built with the bespoke attention paid to a six figure Swiss timepiece or Rolls Royce. Every component painstakingly hand matched and assembled in a vault-like enclosure, sonically and mechanically.

Best of all, the K-10 delivers the goods, producing music in an uncolored nature that will puzzle even the most seasoned audiophile as to circuit design and type of active devices employed. It is pure music.



AWARDS

# 2012

## Product of the Year

### AMPLIFIER

#### Pass Labs XA200.5 monoblocks

\$44,000/pair  
www.passlabs.com

Pass Labs is a company that quietly goes about the business of building fantastic amplifiers. Most of its customers love the company's products, thus they rarely turn up on the secondary market. Designer Nelson Pass has more basic technology patents than any other amp designer on the planet and he believes in great sound *and* ultra reliability—which is a good thing, because you don't want to pick up the tab to ship these monsters back to Pass. (They weigh 159 pound each.)

Our publisher's reference now for the better part of the year, these Class-A monoblocks run warm, and present an almost vacuum-tube-like sound with the heft and control that is exclusively the domain of solid state.





AWARDS



# Product of the Year

**A N A L O G**  
**Turntable**

## AMG V12 Turntable

\$16,500 (with arm and wood base)

[www.amg-turntables.com](http://www.amg-turntables.com)

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

The AMG V12 combines the best of all worlds, offering museum-grade good looks, meticulous build quality and world-class sound. Setting up and adjusting the V12 requires a careful hand, but the reward is worth the journey. Fully capable of supporting the world's finest phono cartridges, this is a turntable that could be in your family for decades.



AWARDS



# Product of the Year

**A N A L O G**  
**Phonostage**

## Simaudio Moon 810LP

\$12,000

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

Applying everything that Simaudio has learned from producing its recent round of reference components, the 810LP is nothing less than a full-scale assault on analog playback. The company's scale of manufacturing gives it the ability to produce a \$12,000 phonostage at a level of performance that would cost three times as much from a boutique manufacturer.

The 810LP takes a purist approach, with no microprocessors; only a single input (with choice of balanced XLR or RCA connection) and fully manual gain, with loading safely out of the signal path. If that isn't enough, there's another socket on the rear panel labeled "power supply," which hints that there may be even more performance to come.





# Product of the Year

**BUDGET  
ANALOG**

## Pro-Ject Debut Carbon

\$399

[www.project-audio.com](http://www.project-audio.com)

[www.sumikoaudio.net](http://www.sumikoaudio.net)

The Debut Carbon offers a great way to get into the analog game on a tight budget—and the bold color palette is an added bonus. For four hundred bucks, you get a turnkey analog solution with an Ortofon 2M Red cartridge and an upgrade path. The signal cable can be easily changed, the platter upgraded or Pro-Ject's Speed Box added for more performance, should your interest in analog grow. Or just buy one in a cool color and spin some records!



# Product of the Year

**DIGITAL**

## AudioQuest DragonFly

\$249

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

Have we lost our minds? A \$249 DAC as POY? We may be guilty as charged. However, even a quick listen to the AQ DragonFly reveals performance for which you'd expect to pay four figures. While the term "giant killer" is *verboden* here, the DragonFly has made some very specific compromises, but all of them are in the pursuit of simplicity and performance. Fancy casework? Nope. Multiple inputs? Forget it. 24/192 support? You'll have to settle for 24/96. Remote control? Nada. It doesn't even have a wall-wart power supply, but that's a good thing from a reviewer who's lost more remotes and power supplies than everyone else in the industry combined.

What you do get is sound quality that you're going to have to pay a ton more for elsewhere. Plug this miniscule miracle into your laptop or a Mac mini and be prepared to freak out.





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## AWARDS

# 2012 Product of the Year

## BUDGET LOUDSPEAKER



### Definitive Technology SM45

\$398/pair

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

It's tough to make a great pair of speakers for a few thousand dollars a pair. With its SM45 speakers, Definitive Technology accomplishes a miracle for just under \$400 a pair. Eschewing a big cabinet and the big bass boom associated with this type of speaker, the company utilizes the same tweeter from its SM65 and incorporates a smaller 5.25-inch woofer, resulting in a brilliant little stand monitor that covers some serious ground.





## BRYSTON BHA-1

\$1,395

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

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AWARDS

2012  
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## Rivals Agree? What's Up With That!



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*"... it opens a window on the music ...  
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Michael Fremer, Stereophile, May 2012

### 2012 Golden Ear Award Winner

*"The LYRA Atlas is not a cartridge  
that will leave you shrugging your  
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in amazement."*

Jacob Heilbrunn, The Absolute Sound, September 2012



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AWARDS

# 2012 Product of the Year CABLE

## **Furutech PowerFlux Power Cords**

\$2,999 each per meter  
[www.furutech.com](http://www.furutech.com)

**W**e rarely write about cable in the pages of *TONEAudio*, and power cords even less. But the Furutech PowerFlux Cables are something special. If you have a modest system, forget about these—Furutech has some much more reasonably priced power cords that will help your system. But for those of you looking to take a statement system further and wring every last bit of performance from it, the PowerFlux cables do the job. You wouldn't put 89-octane gas in your Ferrari, would you?

AWARDS

# 2012 Product of the Year ACCESSORY

## **GIK Room Treatments**

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

**B**efore you spend a penny on exotic wire, equipment racks or those crazy things that look like coat hangers, invest in some solid acoustic science. GIK demystifies the art of acoustic treatment, with products in various shapes, sizes and levels of trim. Best of all, the company has a great website and a staff that can help you get effectively through the maze of room treatments. Every \$1,000 spent wisely on your room will do more than 10 times that amount spent on wire.

While you're at it, stop at Ikea and buy a big throw rug for that hardwood or tile floor in your listening room. Rant done.







AWARDS

# Product of the Year

A P P

## Turnplay

Apple App Store  
\$1.99

**A** virtual Technics SL-1200, Turnplay is a brilliant skin for the music in your iTunes library. Sporting an Ortofon Concord DJ cartridge and a functioning strobe, platter light and pitch control, they have pretty much thought of everything. You can even scratch back and forth in real time! Now we need someone to geek this out further with multiple turntable, tonearm and cartridge choices.

AWARDS

# Product of the Year

## NEW PRODUCT

## New Clear Audio NC1000 Amplifier

\$2,600

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

**H**igh end audio is always a set of calculated compromise. Some products offer more performance, others more functionality and others spiffier look and feel for the money. For this reason, we have never used the phrase “giant killer” in this magazine, because there aren’t any.

But there have been a history of products at their introduction that concentrate strictly on high performance and while overhead is low, can offer tremendous sound quality for the price asked. We think the New Clear NC1000 is exactly this type of product. This Class-D amplifier, producing 500 watts per channel is robustly built, enclosed in modest casework, with a level of refinement that rivals far more expensive amplifiers.





# 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 three most recent reviews.



## Kronos Turntable

\$28,000 (without tonearm) [www.kronosaudio.com](http://www.kronosaudio.com)

**T**he Kronos Turntable hit the analog scene in the spring of 2011 at the Montreal hi-fi show, impressing an enthusiastic audience. While two platters might not be considered unique, having one spinning in the *opposite* direction certainly is. Louis Desjardins, the turntable's designer, has a patent pending for this innovation.

Though the Kronos looks somewhat complicated, it is easy and straightforward to set up—full assembly and mounting a tonearm take less than an hour. Gorgeously finished and packed in a compact, aluminum flight case, this turntable, which is the debut product from Kronos Audio, is packaged like the world-class performer it is.

For a full description of its sound, click here: ●



# Talea Tonearm

\$8,500 [www.durand-tonearms.com](http://www.durand-tonearms.com)

Designer Joel Durand has created a masterpiece in steel and wood with the Talea. While many other tonearms feature adjustable VTA, the Talea allows you to adjust the Azimuth on the fly, while the record is playing. Exquisitely built and finished, the Talea is a truly bespoke product. The sound is unlike anything we've yet heard, delicate, yet forceful at the same time. Just like the cartridge manufacturers that have turned to wood bodies for a unique sound, so goes the Talea. If you're looking for a different take on analog, this one should be at the top of your list.

Read our full review here: ●



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“Standouts in their price class.”

EDITOR'S CHOICE, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND

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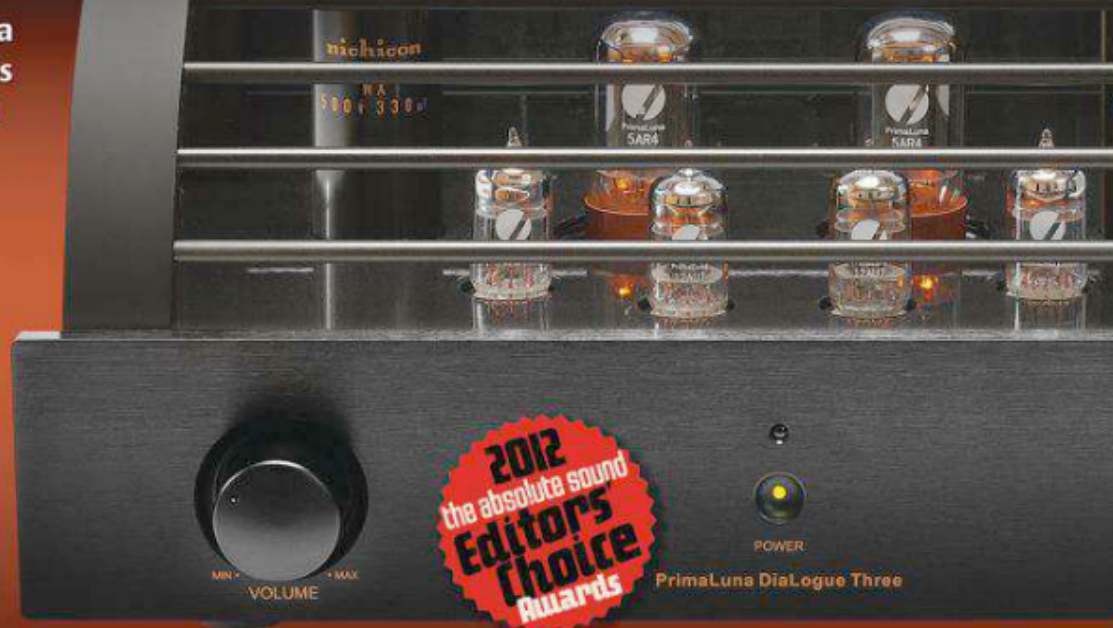
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# Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

With so much interest in so many things retro, these two vintage players from Echo Audio in Portland, Oregon ([www.echohifi.com](http://www.echohifi.com)) proved too much fun to pass up. Of course fidelity is seriously lacking, but what these two tables lack in resolution, they certainly score high on the coolness chart. Both, under \$60 each.





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