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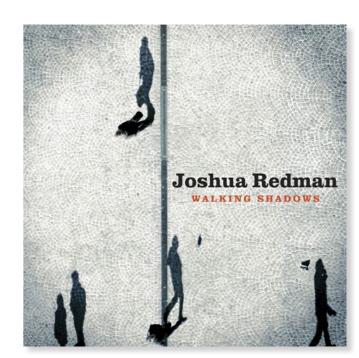
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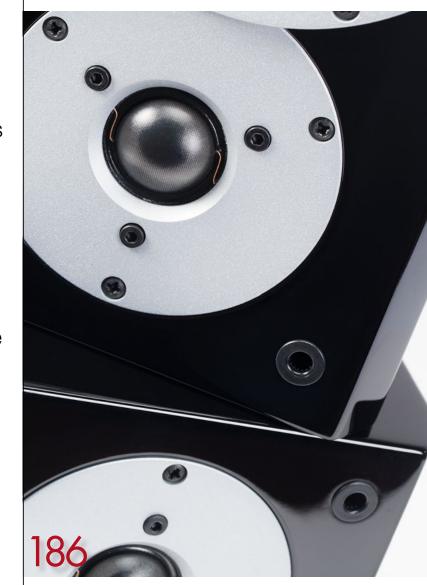
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

aving spent most of my life obsessed with cars, motorcycles, cameras, music and hi-fi, I find that a handful of similar patterns continue to appear across these interest groups. Unfortunately, most hi-fi magazines insist on compartmentalizing your options into either "music lover" or "gear lover" categories, and you couldn't possibly enjoy both, or be interested in one serving the other. I would like to postulate that it's more complex than that.

As much as we love to stop by our favorite Internet forums and crucify those who don't share our beliefs, a larger subset of enthusiasts exists. My favorite bitch-fest is always from the person with a modest system who claims that those with mega systems can't possibly enjoy music because they've spent so much money on gear. And of course the converse is true, as well.

While you might think the person with the massive hi-fi system, or 89 different copies of the *White Album* isn't as happy as you are with one, or that they don't "get it," I assure you that they do. If I've learned anything in my travels it's that people fixated on things all have a hot button for something, and where you find your joy in all of this is the key. Granted, some seem terribly frustrated because they don't have the perfect power tube or pressing, and there is a small subset subscribing to the notion that "nothing is as good as it used to be." Luckily, the high misery index that these individuals proudly display on their foreheads make them easily avoided.

Most semi-rational music and gear lovers, however, seem to center around quality, quantity, rareness, completeness or first out of the gate. One music lover I know has to have every molecule of an artist's output. He is dead serious when he says "I've got everything Jimi Hendrix, except the corpse." Herbie Hancock smiles telling me that the minute something new comes out in Apple world, he has to have it first. I, too, have to admit that access to the newest thing is my catnip.

Sure, there are probably too many audiophiles out there who have very limited musical appreciation, but at the end of the day it's your party—so rock on. And wherever the two circles of the music-and-technology Venn diagram intersect in your life, my hope is always that we can help you make a bit more sense out of it and perhaps find a few things to put on your short list.

So here's to finding your joy, wherever it exists. Stop by our Facebook page and share some of it with us. I'm sure you'll find at least a few kindred spirits.





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NEW CONTRIBUTORS



Ellen Green

Ellen was actually the one paying attention in English class, back at Oak Creek Senior High, when our publisher was reading Rolling Stone, hence her mad editing skills. After a successful career teaching German and French at a number of high schools in the Milwaukee school system, she gave in to the lure of sunny California and moved to San Diego. In addition to proofreading and copy editing for a few local publications, she has been tutoring English writing skills and ESL.

Her taste in music is eclectic, bouncing between jazz, classic rock and plain old top-40 radio. In her off hours, you can find her with a camera in hand, exploring off-the-beaten-path places in San Diego, discovering wines, or on a weekend getaway with her husband. And her annoying love of trivia got her a spot on Jeopardy!, winning a trip to Maui in the process.

Ellen joins us as web editor, where she vows to clean up our act.

Rob Johnson

Rob's audio journey began as a toddler. His parents made him a "human iPod Shuffle," letting him change the records on their massive console stereo, firmly cementing his love for music and audio on his sixth birthday with a gift of a portable radio/cassette player. He claims they did not see him much until high school days after that, and then only tethered to a Walkman.

The years that followed found Johnson working as a DJ for hire at weddings and private parties, as well as doing live recording at a local concert hall. Somewhere in the middle of all this, the audiophile bug took hold, continuing to the present day.

After a successful career in the world of public relations, Johnson joins us as a contributing writer and our review coordinator.



"I knew it would come to this."

TONEAudio

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RICHARD THOMPSON EMMYLOU HARRIS & RODNEY CROWELL

Chicago Symphony Center

Chicago, Illinois

March 20, 2013

By Bob Gendron Photos by Samantha Marble

rom the moment he strolled onstage with his self-described "Celtic power trio," Richard Thompson made dexterity, inventiveness, and poise look second nature. Tasked with opening a co-headlining bill with Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell at the Chicago Symphony Center in mid-March, the British guitarist impressed with subtlety and modesty during a 60-minute set that seemed at least an hour too short.

Never one to seek the spotlight, the beret-clad Thompson manipulated textures and tones with the same craftsmanship a master tailor utilizes to work a needle and thread. Eschewing showiness, waste, excess, and the slightest extravagance, the 64-year-old stood in stark contrast to the conventional guitar hero. His humility also shone during his tongue-in-cheek banter. Akin to the protagonists populating many of his character-driven songs, Thompson is a common bloke—or at least wants to be viewed as such in spite of virtuosic guitar skills and a cunning wit that could make an lvy League prep student blush with envy.



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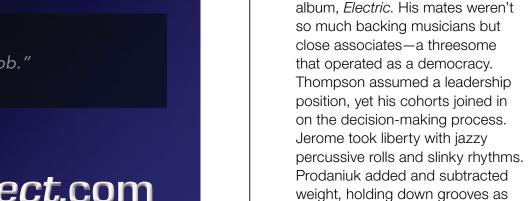
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with those on his excellent recent

Thompson did to guitar strings what

Prodaniuk, Thompson stripped

tunes to their core, preferring

puppeteers do with marionettes.

Perusing rockabilly, blues, folk, funk, rock—and nearly every style outside and between—Thompson defied limitations. He exemplified grace, politesse, smoothness, cleanness, and finesse. Each fill and solo represented another opportunity for adventure, discovery, and risk-taking. And he wasn't about to miss a chance. Still, nothing appeared out of place, no note or passage inserted without reason. Expressing an innate knack for harmony, his fingers caressed the fretboard like those of a master pianist tinkling ivories. (continued)

Perusing rockabilly, blues, folk, funk, rock-and nearly every style outside and between-**Thompson defied** limitations.

LIVE MUSIC



THE FIFTY



1961 - 2011







Fittingly, Thompson and Co. produced sounds similarly grand, dynamic, and driving. His trio got more mileage out of three instruments than many groups do from six.

Thompson outfitted the bluecollar lament "Stuck on a Treadmill" with a shuffling pattern indicative of a workingman's feet tired from repeating the same steps on a factory floor. Toughness and lightness merged on "Sally B," the ensemble rolling and tumbling through a landscape of S-curves, hills, and underpasses. Sure-handed restraint and control emerged on the cautious "Keep Your Distance," on which tension trumped explosiveness. Heavy artillery emerged during "If Love Whispers Your Name" and a searing "Can't Win." On the latter, Thompson sang through gritted teeth before channeling acidic bitterness through a winding guitar solo sparked with caustic emotion. Barely moving while going on the attack, he demonstrated the determination of a military general, striking and retreating, then returning and hitting twice as hard.

By comparison, sinewy lines on the clever "Good Things Happen to Bad People" smirked with all-knowing sensibility. Through it all, Thompson maintained the calmness and cool of Hall of Fame goalie Patrick Roy in a Game Seven Stanley Cupfinal. The composure added to the sincerity of the heartfelt "Saving the Good Stuff," a ballad that waltzed with delicate ease, Thompson taking a breather as he contemplated his next tightrope-walking feat. (continued)

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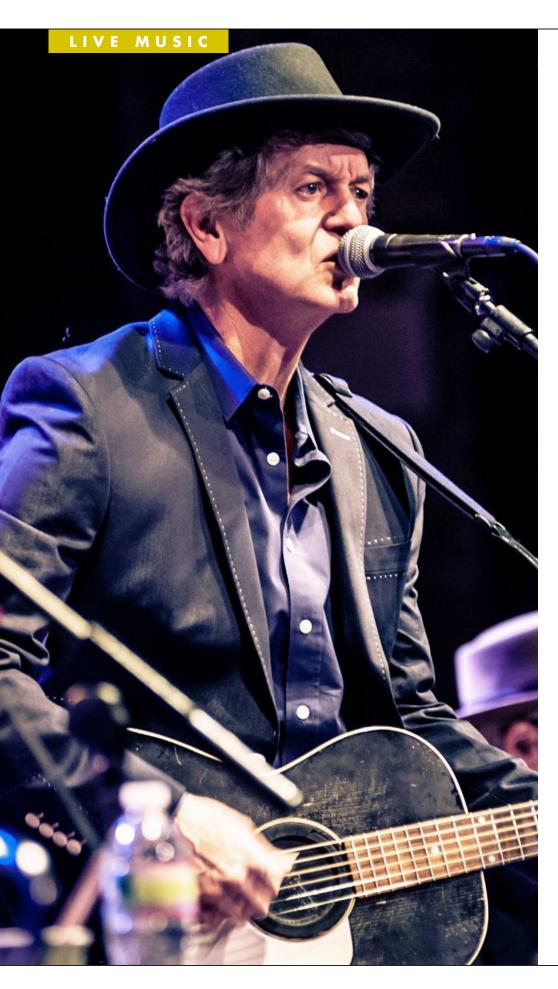
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This was Harris and Crowell's night to celebrate their musical bond and, by extension, the country and vocal pioneers that factored into their evolution. Following their peer's maneuvers, Harris and Crowell came across somewhat tame. Yet the tandem, supported by a competent quintet and able to conquer a few early technical problems, expressed equivalent charm and proficiency. The pair—whose history encompasses more than four decades and finally resulted in a recent collaborative album, *Old Yellow Moon*—approached songs as conversations between longtime friends. Their chemistry was evident simply from the way they interacted. "Emmylou has the soul of a poet, the voice of an angel, and the heart of a cowgirl," explained Crowell. In return, Harris credited Crowell for writing songs that suited her style in the early 70s—a time when she still reeled from the death of her previous artistic partner, Gram Parsons.

Not surprisingly, Parsons' echoes resonated during Harris and Crowell's nearly two-hour performance, most obviously via his "Return of the Grievous Angel" and "Wheels." Yet this was Harris and Crowell's night to celebrate their musical bond and, by extension, the country and vocal pioneers that factored into their evolution. *(continued)*

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The veterans paid homage to Townes Van Zandt ("Pancho and Lefty"), the Everly Brothers ("Love Hurts"), and Roger Miller ("Invitation to the Blues"). They probed heartache and sadness, extending outlaw traditions sweet (Waylon Jennings' "Dreaming My Dreams With You") and sobering (Kris Kristofferson's "Chase the Feeling," given a proper saloon atmosphere).

"Remember country music?" asked Harris. "They used to play it before it got taken over by the pod people." For the silver-haired vocalist her timbre still impeccable and phrasing as pure as a fresh blanket of snow-old-time storytelling, honky-tonk kicks, and expressive vulnerability remain paramount. She inhabited the mournful "Back When We Were Beautiful" as if she were issuing an autobiographical statement. On the accordion-accented "Hanging Up My Heart," she transported the crowd to a rodeo dance.

Harris is all class, but she's no shrinking violet. And Crowell needed little encouragement to break loose. Welcoming Thompson into the fray for a one-off jam, the collective injected early rock n' roll energy into an extended version of Crowell's "I Ain't Living Long Like This," Thompson firing off complementary riffs as the band of cowboys and lone cowgirl rode off in search of the nearest roadhouse.



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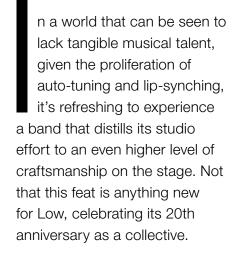




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For the uninitiated, Low features a slow, sparse, albeit encompassing sound and consists of original members Alan Sparhawk (guitar, vocals) and wife Mimi Parker (drums, vocals). Bass player Steve Garrington freelances, providing additional keyboards and backing vocals. Long prized by critics and peers (Robert Plant has covered several of Low's songs), the Duluthbased ensemble nonetheless remains strangers to widespread commercial fame. However, judging from the fans that arrived from farflung states to experience its show at Portland's Mississippi Studios in early April, Low's appeal is doing just fine, thank you.

Live, Low doesn't operate in power trio mode. Unhurried and unbowed, the band built each arrangement on Parker's gentle drumming. She used only a snare drum, upright bass drum, and large cymbal, with a brush and wrapped mallet. (continued)





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LIVE MUSIC

The house mix sounded like a vintage 60s stereo record, with Sparhawk mixed hard right, Garrington hard left, and Parker dead center-reflecting the manner in which the musicians were spread out on stage. Choosing not to overpower the room with volume, the amplification mirrored that of an enormous audiophile stereo system, with bigger dynamics and extreme clarity further contributing to the ethereal mood.

Opening with the metaphorical "Plastic Cup," the majority of the set drew from Low's current album, The Invisible Way. Sprinkled amidst the gospeltinged "Holy Ghost" and haunting "Just Make It Stop," tunes culled from the band's earlier Sub Pop and Kranky releases functioned as punctuation marks. A rendition of "Dinosaur Act" came across faster than on record, and worked wondrously, as Sparhawk took more license on guitar, stretching out in distance as well as tone. He created deep textures with just a couple of pedals and two modest amplifiers—a lesson many of today's guitarists could heed.

Following the format of *The* Invisible Way, Parker shared in an equal amount of lead vocals and, as a result, the band felt more well-rounded than on prior tours. And Sparhawk seemingly knew it. "I've been trying to say less tonight," he said, wisely letting the occasional jolts of noise, unsettling delicacy, and contemplative narratives do the talking.



or some of us, it's the Rodney
Dangerfield of the Thorens family of
turntables. The barely-remembered
TD 125 Mk II, though cherished
when it was current, rarely figures in
audiophile reminiscences, heated bar
debates or lists of all-time greats. I
used one for many years with an SME
3009 arm, and wish I still had it, so
I am as guilty as any of dissing this
gem. Aah! The glories of hindsight!

Despite its status when new, the TD 124 was but one of a number of superlative turntables mortally wounded by the Linn LP12, aka the Sondek. Equally, with the passage of time, it has been overshadowed by its Thorens-made predecessors, both above and below it in price, and by its disproportionately expensive descendants.

Among collectors, the hot
Thorenses include the TD 124 at
the top irrespective of one's audio
politics, the TD 150 for realists
(and for me, the most important
turntable in audio history after the
AR Universal), and – for those lucky
enough to be filthy rich and tenacious
– the later Reference and Prestige
behemoths. All are superlative decks,
but the TD 125 just may be the most
balanced, the sanest compromise,
and the easiest with which to live.



Born in 1968, the Thorens TD-125 (Mk I, of course) directly followed what most enthusiasts would rightly nominate as the Swiss/German firm's single greatest achievement: the TD 124, rather than the similar TD 150 of 1965. Appropriately, a perfectly-restored, serviced and installed TD 124 will, as of 2013, still give most record spinners a run for their money. However, only the most deluded apologist would argue that this idler-drive/belt-drive hybrid is either as quiet as, or as dynamic as the pure belt-drives that followed the TD 124—let alone the "budget model" TD 150 that sold alongside it. And that includes the TD 125.

According to Gerhard Weichler's *Thorens: the Fascination of a Living Legend* (2006), the TD-125 was born of a number of causes, a perfect storm demanding a new flagship model. Thorens was moving factories from Switzerland to Germany, the TD 124 was nearing the end of its life as a viable product after some 100,000 had been made, and the latest stereo cartridges demanded greater refinement. The TD 124 was most assuredly a child of the monophonic 1950s and its time had surely come.

Not unaware of the phenomenal success of Edgar Villchur's \$68 AR

turntable of 1961 (and regardless of its almost laughable price advantage over any import), Thorens introduced the TD 150 in 1965. It was, for all intents and purposes, a better-built AR, with the added appeal of accommodating a choice of tonearms. The TD 150 is the direct link between the AR and the Ariston RD11, which became the Linn LP12, and I've heard them outperform the much costlier TD 124. But that's another tale.

At this stage, it's worth informing you of the three turntables' original prices. The only contemporary guide I have showing all three—TDs 124, 150 and 125—is the 1970 Hi-Fi Year-

book, published in the UK. I believe that the pound (£) of 1970 was exchanged at around \$4=£1, so convert if you must, but the point of this illustration is to indicate where each turntable fit into Thorens' range.

In this guide, with prices including taxes and rounded to whole pounds, and without tonearms, the TD 124 retailed for £45, the TD 150 sold for £30 and the then-new TD 125 cost a heady £70. That should make you want to hop in a time machine, because £70 some 43 years ago was equal to only £900-£1000 in today's money. And that's only US \$1500 in 2013 smackers....

Because the TD 150 was an entry-level turntable, and the moneymaking flagship TD 124 was on its way out, a more substantial belt-drive —call it a TD 150 on steroids—was an obvious solution. Moreover, given the rapid growth of solid-state technology in the 1960s, Thorens was inspired to add to the TD 125 something not applied to the TD 150: electronic speed control.

It truly was a beefed-up TD 150, based on the same topology of a small motor driving a pulley and belt beneath the platter, a basic plinth, a full-length armboard, controls at the front, available with or without factory-fitted arm. (continued)



The electronic speed adjustment upped the controls count, so it featured, in addition to on/off and speed adjustment of +/- 2%, aided by illuminated strobe visible through a window at the front. Speed control was accomplished with a linear potentiometer, and an AC generator with the frequency controlled by a Wien-bridge oscillator.

Despite the addition of electronic speed control—another slider controlled the cueing lift/lower if the turntable had the factory-fitted TP 25 tonearm – the deck was still a simple, classic three-speed design. Three-point suspended subchassis, uncluttered undersides, a removable full-length arm-board that presaged that of the LP12 (and which could even accommodate a Rabco parallel tracking arm), the TD 125 was inescapably the direct link between the TD 150 and the LP12.

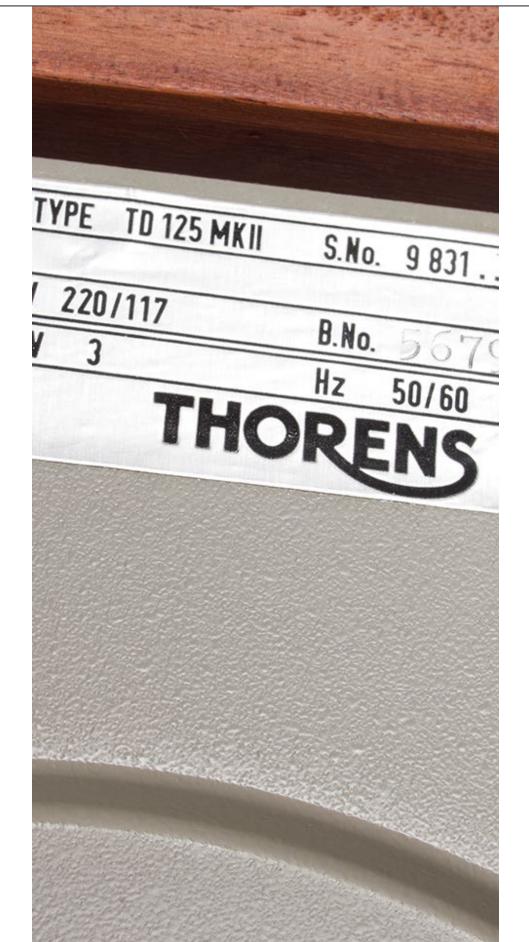
Thorens did improve on the TD 150 with the TD 125 in a number of other areas, not least thanks to greater mass and more robust construction. Isolation of the various elements was superior, while the switching of power on/off and speed changes were achieved electronically rather than mechanically as on the earlier models. The two-section platter consisted of the 12in section fitted over the smaller subplatter around which the belt was positioned. The mat was a sculpted rubber affair that, in the post-Linn era, most users replaced with something offering better contact between LP and platter, such as simple felt. (continued)





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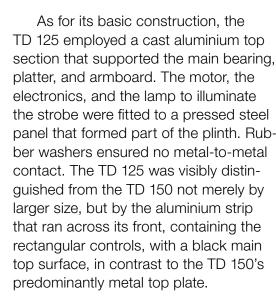
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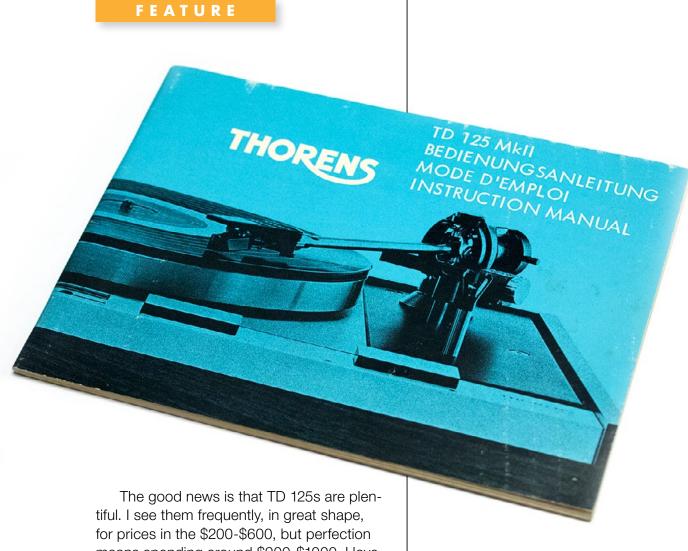
As for the suspension, it consisted of three conical springs in adjustable cups. For disco use—yes, over 40 years ago—the TD 125 could be converted with rubber damping spheres in place of the

floppier springs. A properly set-up TD 125 is fairly floppy, but not comically so, but the added rigidity for club use was advisable.

FEATURE

By the time the TD 125 was replaced in 1976 by the more sophisticated TD 126, it had achieved Mk II status, thanks to changes in factory tonearms from TP 25 to TP 16, refinements to the electronics and other detail improvements. The TD 126 was much more complex, and possibly less successful because, by 1977, the Linn hegemony was in full swing. How many TD 125s in all forms were produced, though, is hard to determine, but it should be noted that, in 1975, along with the TD 160, Thorens manufactured 500,000 turntables. Yes, a half-million. (continued)

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tiful. I see them frequently, in great shape, for prices in the \$200-\$600, but perfection means spending around \$900-\$1000. I love it with the SME 3009, and had a blast with the Infinity Black Widow, but it's also a perfect playground for Grace and Audio-Technica arms of the period. What you get for your money is a turntable with evocative 1960s styling, excellent isolation from footfalls, generous space to accept most 9in arms, and—above all—a sound that settles nicely between the romantic and the hygienic.

Of this I am confident: if you were to listen to a system blindfolded, with a TD 125 at its heart, fitted with a modern arm and cartridge such as an SME M-2 arm carrying a Denon DL-103R, you'd be forgiven for thinking that it was a \$6000 front-end. Silky, detailed, open, with a deep soundstage ... be glad this remains vintage hi-fi's best-kept secret.

Pub. Note: Taking Mr. Kessler's advice a step further, a great source for ultra minty TD-125s is Dave Archambault at www. vinylnirvana.com He's always got tables in stock, or can refurb/ repair yours if the mood fits. And, he's got a true craftsman making hardwood plinths that can create something from mild to wild for your restored beauty, giving it a better look than the day it left the Thorens factory. Dave restores them all with tender loving care, so give him a shout. (and tell him we sent you!)

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Bankrupt!
Loyaute/Glassnote, 180g LP or CD



imple rule: When a singer, in this case Thomas Mars from Phoenix, croons "why would I lie to you?" to a lover, and does so in a song entitled "Chloroform," he's probably not to be trusted. Don't be fooled by the keyboards, even if they're as sparkly clean as those countertops in the model home. And don't be tricked by the big, dance-tent-at-a-festival beats.

With Phoenix, it's easy to simply admire the surface prettiness—the aural equivalent of a model's good looks—but there's more to the ultra-shiny dance pop of this Parisian quartet than meets the eye.

Now on its fifth album, and the follow-up to 2009's Grammy-winning breakthrough *Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix*, the band has emerged into a rather reliable and tentatively experimental interpreter of pop trends. While the band is far from a household name, many are betting on 2013 to be massive for Phoenix. This summer, it will be among the top-billed at major events such as Southern California's Coachella Valley Music & Arts

Festival and Chicago's Lollapalooza. Few acts, after all, so easily navigate between guitars and EDM-friendly grooves, and *Bankrupt!* sees Phoenix further exploring its digital tendencies.

While label head Daniel Glass was probably being overly ambitious when he told *Billboard* that *Bankrupt!* could be "revolutionary," there's no reason to believe this album won't be heard from start-to-finish at any hip summer party. Seemingly a collection of songs about the perils of fame and money (apparently Phoenix didn't get the message that this is Drake's territory), *Bankrupt!* captures a band writing about wanting to hide from it all even as it mimes a sound built for the masses.

"Entertainment" starts with synths that reference East Asia and sees Mars' voice getting deeper and deeper into the mix. Only the line "I'd rather be alone" is clearly heard, while "SOS In Bel Air" begins with a video-game explosion and segues into the band's still-fresh mix of club-worthy rhythms and disco accessories. All the while, Mars just wants to get the heck out of your fancy party. "Trying to Be Cool" is the most straight-ahead pop number, and the post-chorus ascending/descending guitar passage the trippiest Phoenix has ever managed. The album gets weirder still: The title track gets caught inside Daft Punk's vision of *Tron* for about four minutes before Phoenix tells us how lonely it is to be a prop for the pretty people.

Of course, enjoying Phoenix is to lose oneself in the exuberant sound. Whether it's the dreamy guitars of "Drakkar Noir," the aggressive start-and-stop rush of rave beats in "Don't," or nostalgic vision of 60s pop that never was in "Bourgeois," Phoenix knows its place in the world. As the 40-minute sugar rush comes to a close on "Oblique City"—a song that strips away the ping-pong melody and electronic layers until all that's left is classic rock-styled guitar picking—Bankrupt! can question excess all it wants. It doesn't change the fact that it revels in it.

-Todd Martens

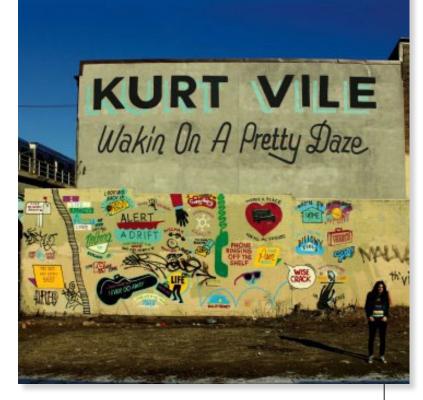
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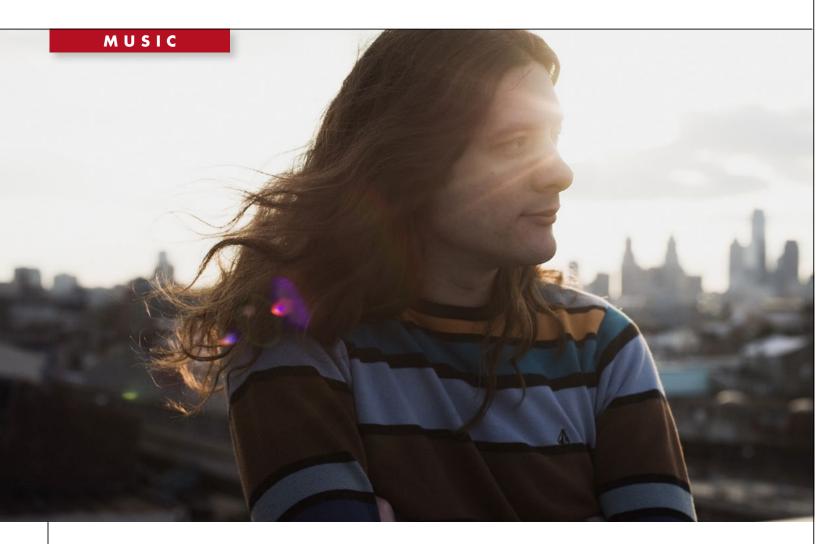


Kurt VileWakin on a Pretty Daze
Matador, 2LP or CD

urt Vile is growing up. The 30-something singer/guitarist, who broke through as a founding member of the War on Drugs before launching a solo career in 2008 with the endearingly lo-fi Constant Hitmaker, is now a married father of two. A promo video for his most recent single even features his eldest daughter bouncing around the family home in a zebra mask.

Fittingly, the Philadelphia native's music has matured as well, and his fifth full-length studio album, *Wakin on a Pretty Daze*, sounds like the work of a man who's embraced his role as a father, husband, and provider. "There comes a time in every man's life," he sings atop a rolling mist of guitar on "Too Hard," "when he's gotta take a hold of the hand that isn't his."

Elsewhere, Vile turns out surprisingly straightforward love tunes (the ethereal "Never Run Away"), meditative jams that linger like long-burning incense (the nineminute-plus title track unfolds so casually it could have been directed by filmmaker Peter Jackson), and sun-kissed numbers like "Goldtone," an epic slacker ballad where Vile manages to distill his music down to its absolute essence. "Sometimes when I get in my zone you'd think I was stoned," he sings in his trademark drawl. "But I never, as they say, touch the stuff. I might be adrift, but I'm still alert. Concentrate my hurt into...golden tones." (continued)



In the past, Vile's songs were less "golden tones" than roughhewn cave paintings. The recording quality was generally sketchy at best, and the singer's words often unintelligible, their meaning masked by his Fred Fenster-like propensity for mumbling. The musician's 2011 album marked a distinct turning point, however, and he takes a similarly scrubbed-up approach here. Viewed as a whole, the songs are both pristine and expansive. Vile's maze-work of fingerpicked guitar often shimmers like galaxies of newborn stars.

The musical touchstones are varied, and tunes hint at everyone from John Fahey to Neil Young (dig the snarling intro to "KV Crimes"). "Air Bud," possibly the best song ever recorded to share a title with a movie about a basketball-playing dog, even incorporates shaggy Eastern influences. While Vile has undeniably matured, his lyrics haven't lost their sense of playfulness.

He opens "Too Hard" by pledging to do his duty to both God and country (you know, for his daughters' sake) before slowly inching away from such grandiosity. "Hey, but I'm just human after all," he sings. "I will promise not to smoke too much. And I will promise not to party too hard." So, baby steps, anyway.

The percolating "Was All Talk," in turn, finds Vile tweaking his youthful impetuousness (dude did title his solo debut *Constant Hitmaker*, after all), singing, "There was a time in my life when they thought I was all talk."

These days, however, it seems he's content to shut up and let his guitar do the talking. "Making music is easy," he drawls as the song draws to a close. "Watch me." And with that he unwinds a slow-burning solo that trails across the tune like some grand comet's tail. Keep your eyes fixed on the skies. —*Andy Downing*

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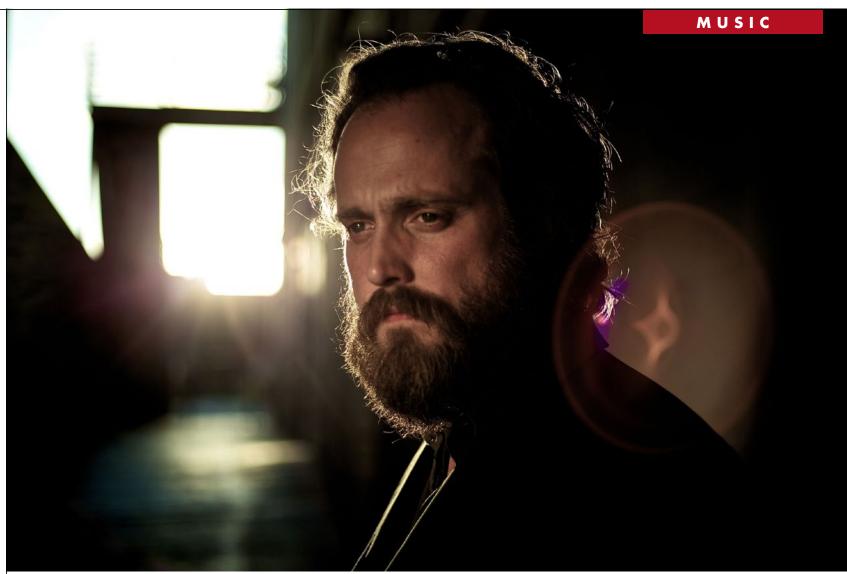


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Iron & Wine
Ghost on Ghost
Nonesuch, LP or CD

he latest project from artsy Southern softie
Sam Beam, who heads up Iron & Wine, begins
with a brief (22 seconds to be exact) overture
of rhythmic noise. It could be the sound of a
hellhound let loose in a tight kitchen, or some
sort of struggle in an alley. But it's over and
done with rather soon, and it's little more
than a tease. There's no racket to be had on
the dozen songs that follow. This isn't too
surprising, as Beam—over the course of a
career that now spans more than a decade—
has gradually matured into one of indie rock's
foremost crooners.



©Photo by Craig Kief

Jazzy atmospheres dot much of *Ghost on Ghost*. They're as diverse as the sweet harmonies and brunch-time grooves of "Joy," bachelor-pad baroque of "New Mexico's No Breeze," and New Orleans noir of "Lovers' Revolution." Involving chamber pop musicians such as Rob Burger (Tin Hat), jazz act Sex Mob, and ace jazz drummer Brian Blade, the record's songs project an intimate, loose feel.

"Caught in the Briars" ends in a free-form breakdown that implies the tune materialized out of a very brief moment of musical coherence. "Low Light Buddy of Mine" is all dark, plucky bass notes best heard well after last call. "Baby Center Stage" possesses such a relaxed feel that, in lesser hands, it would come across as a long-lost Elton John number. But Beam accessorizes minimally. Rather than dominate, a Western guitar, a nostalgic piano, and falsettodriven harmonies come and go.

Comparisons to 70s giants such as John and Van Morison are becoming increasingly

regular for Beam, and there's an ageless albeit not-quite-old-fashioned nature to everything he touches. At times, it's quite regal. If he wanted, Beam could be indie rock's answer to Michael Buble—a singer whose style he parallels on the holiday-referencing "The Desert Babbler." But like the album's title, Beam, for better or worse, prefers to let his melodies drift in and out, opting for musicality and anonymity over showmanship. —*Todd Martens*

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STEVE EARLE



LOW HIGHWAY

Steve Earle & The Dukes (And Duchesses)

The Low Highway
New West Records, LP or CD

t 5

has built an enviable career. He's an acclaimed singer-songwriter, producer, author, and actor. An elder statesman of the roots music scene, Earle seems a far cry from the nervy young rebel who debuted in 1986 with the classic *Guitar Town*. You'd think by now he could just sit back and relax. But an undertow of restlessness pervades *The Low Highway*, Earle's 15th studio album. His trademark take on Americana has grown weightier with time, and evolved into haunting, circumspect, largely acoustic music.

Even when he travels well-worn ground, Earle does not come across as dated. He remains a hardcore, if mournful, troubadour on the title track, contemplating an America filled with folks that are hurting. "Saw empty houses on dead-end streets/People lining up for something to eat," he sings in a burnt, gravelly rasp of a voice. (continued)

MUSIC

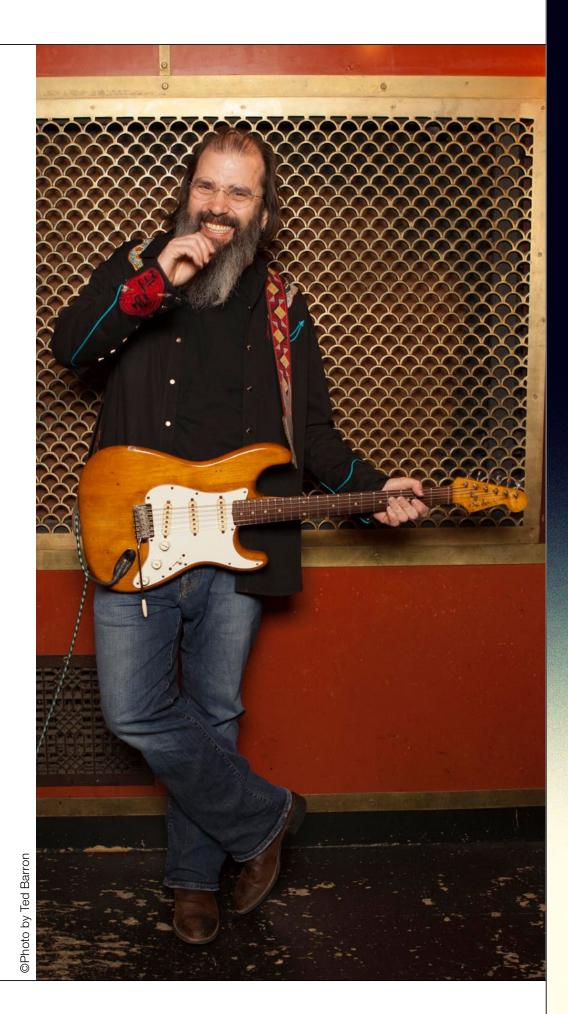
Lyrically, this not a new revelation. Yet Earle maintains such a palpable conviction in his delivery that he makes old conceits sound fresh. As much as he has been influenced by the drunken romantic poetry of Hank Williams Sr. and Townes Van Zandt, Earle is deeply informed by the socialist spirit of Woody Guthrie.

On *The Low Highway*, Earle includes his band's name on the cover, the first time he has done so since 1987's *Exit 0*. It's a righteous move given the exquisite contributions the musicians make to his songs. Earle also adds "The Duchesses" to the title to acknowledge his talented female players, including his wife, singersongwriter Allison Moorer.

Good as Earle is, he's not infallible. "21st Century Blues," a country-rocker that sounds like a clumsy parody of Springsteen, is a clunker. Other than this misstep, Earle is on point throughout, whether hammering down on the old-timey outing "Warren Hellman's Banjo" or expressing heartbreaking memory on "Remember Me." Three songs here were originally written for the HBO's "Treme." Two are co-written with series co-star Lucia Micarelli: the fiddle-driven "Love's Gonna Blow My Way" and bittersweet "After Mardi Gras."

"Down the Road Pt. II" finds Earle taking to the highway. "Roll over Kerouac / Tell Woody Guthrie the news," he sings. All these years on, he remains an eversearching spirit.

-Chrissie Dickinson



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MUSIC



Low *The Invisible Way*Sub Pop, LP or CD

here's mood music, and then there's whatever it is Low is currently doing. Now on its tenth album, the Duluth, Minn., trio remains perhaps the only band around about which its fans could plausibly worry that the act's songs could disappear into nothingness. Not, of course, that the collective would call it quits—but simply that Low's grace with mining the quiet and perfecting the art of patience could lead Low down a path where its songs are barely a murmur.



Of course, there's plenty of beauty to be had in such precise restraint. Yet with Low, there's often just as much disquiet. "The truth can hide, sometimes right behind the sorrow," sing Alan Sparhawk and Mimi Parker on "Waiting," and then they go looking for it "behind the smile." Meanwhile, a melody is gradually revealed a by a loving, whispering guitar, as if there's someone it doesn't want to disturb.

Sparhawk and Parker's overlaying vocals have always conveyed unrest; they're working in concert, yes, but they harmonize blankly, singing in much the same way two pallbearers walk in unison. What's different here is the way each instrument is intimately isolated. Produced by Wilco's Jeff Tweedy, *The Invisible Way* doesn't sound stark so much as simply forlorn. For example, the few minor-key piano notes of "To Our Knees" that give way to delicately plucked guitar strings, the wood-board patter of "Mother," or the rhythmic, twilight brush strokes of "Amethyst."

It's not always comforting, but there is plenty of room—and space in the songs—for reflection. "Time, it pulls out your eyes," Sparhawk sings on "Amethyst," as much of *The Invisible Way* seems to steadily march toward one's later years in life. When there is an electric guitar, it's striking to the point of horrifying, such as the all-enveloping doom that leaves feedback skid marks all over the song's coda. "Happy birthday" is the message repeated throughout the song's final moments, but the sentiment isn't one of Hallmark variety.

Similarly, "Plastic Cup" starts as a mediation on aging—a narration that goes from partying with childhood friends to leaving urine samples for doctors—and that's just in the first verse of the first song on the album. With an acoustic guitar built for a hospice waiting room, the song follows the cup holding the urine sample until it's buried in a trash heap and discovered centuries later by historians. How's that for a wake-up call?

Yet Low makes such helplessness sound glorious. Parker takes the lead on "Just Make it Stop," where defeatism transitions into determination with each passing harmony. It may not all end up OK, but Low isn't ready to surrender to the calm, either.

-Todd Martens

thyself









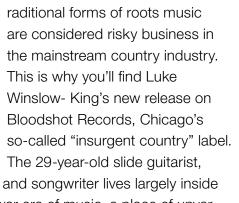












singer, and songwriter lives largely inside a pre-war era of music, a place of unvarnished delta blues, jazz, and gospel.

A Michigan native, Winslow-King moved to New Orleans in 2001. Over the last decade he's made a name for himself in the NOLA music scene and paid his dues through continuous live gigging. At first blush, it might be easy to file Winslow-King as an inordinately talented imitator. He kicks off The Coming Tide with the title track, his bloozy guitar set against the syncopated thwacking of a stripped-down drum kit. There's no arguing he's terrific at replicating music as period piece.

Winslow-King is a low-key, convincing singer, yet it's vocalist and washboard player Esther Rose who emerges as a deceptively powerful weapon. Her sweet, sharp, sometimes ghostly voice seems to rise from the ether of a bygone era. Her vocals are a seductive instrument in their own right, whether she's harmonizing with Winslow-King or engaging with him during snappy call-and-response sequences. (continued)



Luke Winslow-King The Coming Tide Bloodshot Records, LP or CD

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Singing and playing guitar against piano, trumpet, and fingerpicks scratching a washboard, Winslow-King brings loving authenticity to "I Know She'll Do Right By Me." He's equally engaging on the spooky blues-folk murder ballad "Ella Speed." It's clear this guy is far more than just a master of mimicking an old-school jukejoint sound. He's a revelation when he steps away from his too-polite homages to the past and gives free rein to the nastier side of his guitar-playing skills. "Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning" is a triumph of snarling restraint. The dirty gospelblues number speaks of Sunday morning salvation in its lyrics but reeks of Saturday night sin via its wickedly insinuating music.

"I've Got My Mind Set On You" is another raw, distorted blues stunner that conjures the spirit of blues icon Son House. Winslow-King's guitar is filled with stinging, buzzing, insistent, repetitive power. The blues, like much country, has gotten very clean in the modern age. Winslow-King demonstrates just how potent it can sound when a player gets back to the soulful basics.

-Chrissie Dickinson





How to Destroy Angels Welcome Oblivion Columbia, 180g 2LP or CD

ny suggestion that Nine Inch Nails mastermind Trent Reznor has completely mellowed with age should be immediately put to rest.

In a recent "Ask Me Anything" segment on the popular Web site Reddit, the singer responded to one inquiry ("As millionaires, why did you sign up with a record label to promote your new album?") in profanely hilarious fashion, writing, "Sorry, the wifi on our yacht is having issues, we can't get your full question to load. Try sending me an email at gofuckyourself@youcunt.com."

Still, at 47 years old, Reznor's music has certainly started to reflect his advancing age. As such, his outbursts tend to take place outside the recording studio these days, and songs project something closer to existential dread rather than all-consuming rage. This is true of both late-era Nine Inch Nails albums like Ghosts I-IV, and his award-winning film-composition work for David Fincher movies The Social Network and The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo. Such haunted vibes carry over into his full-length debut with How to Destroy Angels, a group that includes his wife, Mariqueen Maandig, and longtime producer/creative partner Atticus Finch.

The band, which first surfaced shortly after Nine Inch Nails went on hiatus three years ago-a break that, to the surprise of nobody, ended last month—is

more collaborative than Reznor's previous venture. Maandig, not Reznor, handles primary vocal duties. This, it turns out, is not exactly a good thing. As a singer, Maandig is pedestrian at best, and the tunes on which she's pushed to the forefront ("How Long?") are among the weakest. Conversely, the best work almost entirely dispatches of vocals. Witness the quietly simmering "The Loop Closes," which piles on spiky synths and buzzing drums for three tension-filled minutes before Reznor and Maandig show up and start whispering cryptic asides ("The beginning is the end...").

Fortunately, Welcome Oblivion is an album driven almost solely by texture and mood, and more often than not, Maandig's voice is treated like another instrument in the mix. On "Too Late, All Gone," a slinky number that sounds something

like robots copulating, her breathy vocals inject the song with an air of humanity. Likewise, the singer acts as a flesh-and-blood foil to the crackling, animatronic buzz of "And the Sky Began to Scream."

As time goes by, it seems increasingly apt that Reznor titled Nine Inch Nails' 1989 debut Pretty Hate Machine, and it seems as though he's spent a bulk of his career crafting a sound that neatly fits that image. Welcome Oblivion rarely strays from this template (the lone exception being the fractured folk of "Ice Age"), Reznor and Finch working in tandem to create a bone-chilling landscape of whirring, mechanized noise. It's nothing new, sure, but it still functions as a nifty little placeholder for fans waiting on the next, inevitable Nine Inch Nails album. - Andy Downing



Besnard Lakes *Until In Excess, Imperceptible UFO*Jagjaguwar, LP or CD

ew new sounds are as big as those crafted by the Besnard Lakes. It's a reliable facet of this little-known Montreal quartet that continues to surprise, even as the band is now four full-length albums deep into a career that has spanned about a decade.



The cornerstones of the band's sound remain in place on *Until In Excess, Imperceptible UFO*, but the key to understanding the Besnard Lakes is now coming into greater focus. The group's songs, anchored by husband-and-wife tandem Jace Lasek and Olga Goreas, don't build so much as unfold. Harmonies on "46 Satires" slow-dance around each other, guitars on "Alamogordo" crest and then retreat and then crest again, as if in a constant tugo-war with some unseen gravitational force.

Familiar instruments—a bass, an organ—bleed together on every track until they no longer seem familiar at all. Vocals are intimate, the guitars are built for an arena. And then there are moments, such as on "And Her Eyes Were Painted Gold," that suddenly travel back in time, where the patient but forceful arrangement is taken over by 50s-inspured vocal "bops" and whistles.

The sonic miasma manages to fade in and out, as if the eight songs are part of one continuous time loop. The slow-bending "The Spectre" shape-shifts into a long-lost Beach Boys track. "Close your eyes," Lasek sings in a falsetto, and the phrase feels more like an order into hypnotism than a lyric. "People of the Sticks" is carried by majestic rhythm and guitars that, seemingly, could move mountains. And yet everything feels a little weird, almost as if the guitars are strumming both forward and backward.

Somewhere within the lyrics resides a spy novel. The Besnard Lakes have designed each album and song to be connected, with each track telling a different facet of the story. Good luck decoding it; this is rock 'n' roll where mystery is paramount. —*Todd Martens*





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ho said losers always finish last? Mudhoney, the forever underappreciated albeit most crucial cog of Seattle's famed "grunge" era, is the scene's longest-running band still standing. The beloved underdogs

celebrate their 25th anniversary this year with a brilliant new album that follows on the heels of I'm Now, a film documenting their career. Only casually mentioned the same breath amidst their hometown city's bigger acts-Nirvana. Pearl Jam. Alice in Chains.

Soundgarden, even the side project Temple of the Dog-the quartet took the entire musical explosion in stride despite releasing the record (1991's Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge) that saved Sub Pop by buying the label a few extra months on its then-failing lifeline and becoming one of the last underground artists to sign to a major label that, true to form, soon left the group to rot on a vine. Mudhoney accomplished it all with its humor and modesty in tact. No tabloid-fodder rehab stories. No internal controversies or reality-TV marriages. No breakups and ballyhooed reunions. Simply a legacy that claims nine-record discography with only one mediocre effort (Under a Billion Suns), countless shows, and thousands of empty beer cans.

To better put the group's 25-year stretch and excellent Vanishing Point in context, consider the history of 2013's most hyped anniversary-commemorating band, the Rolling Stones. By the time the self-proclaimed World's Greatest Rock and Roll Band marked its first quartercentury together in 1987, its creative impulses were essentially kaput. Forgettable albums were released as excuses to tour and stay in the limelight; the Stones issued their last great LP (Tattoo You) just shy of their 20th birthday,



Mudhoney

Vanishing Point Sub Pop, LP or CD

a circumstance that remains true to this day. This isn't to suggest that, when their legacies are viewed through a wide-angle lens, Mudhoney is superior to the Stones. However, while the Stones gave little reason other than nostalgia (and expensive ticket prices) to care about their present once 1981 passed, Mudhoney offers plenty of incentive to listen on Vanishing Point. There's something to be said for relevancy and continuing to try, particularly after the blush of youthful abandon has long faded.

Weathered and wiser, Mudhoney isn't the same band it was in 1988. The quartet sticks to the heavier, tighter approach its pursued since Guy Maddison replaced original bassist Matt Lukin more than a decade ago. Psychedelic accents, absent from the group's initial era that cropped up at the turn of the century, also appear. Vocalist/guitarist Mark Arm and Co. is now more menacing, retaining its trademark flippancy but railing at targets with tangible urgency, spite, and acidity. (continued)



Mudhoney's return to shorter songs and horn-free arrangements—decisions enacted on 2008's excellent *The Lucky Ones—* continues here. Spunky and simple, tunes on *Vanishing Point* retaliate against dreaded targets, provide catharsis, and look for escapes. Fun is always just a fuzz-drenched guitar chord or sleazy organ fill away.

"I'm not on some grandiose trip/I'm fine with little sips," declares Arm on "I Like It Small," a catchy number about low-yield, limited-appeal existence that simultaneously functions as a shot at outsized personalities and witty mantra given the group's experiences. It's impossible to tell if Mudhoney skewers more toward the serious or sarcastic, yet the cheerleader-chanted coda and discernible merriment appear to indicate

an equal amount of both traits are in play. Such cleverness extends to the buzzing, quasi-philosophical "What To Do With the Neutral" and mystical "The Final Course," an amusing tale of death featuring Arm opting for arch vocals to accentuate the thespian narrative. Imagination reigns. Amidst waves of phase and decay during "In This Rubber Tomb," he's off exploring uncharted terrains, licking god particles, and getting lost in space as Mudhoney updates early Hawkwind and Amon Duul for a new generation.

Outsider adventures aside, Vanishing Point shines courtesy of Mudhoney's venomous reactions to celebrity, entitlement, sycophants, privilege, and phoniness. Unlike so many self-satisfied and mellow indie-rock contemporaries, here's a band at least paying attention to what's happening in the world.

"I don't care if you think I'm a prick," yowls a defiant Arm on the spring-loaded "I Don't Remember You," smirking undercurrents complementing his annoyed demeanor and resilience to conform, suck up, or pretend to gain a temporary advantage. The band roars with similar underdog purpose and tenacity on "The Only Son of the Widow From Nain" and bluesy "Sing This Song of Joy," a kiss-off ripper that revels in the death of an adversary, ala Bob Dylan's "Masters of War." Then again, Dylan never penned anything as hilarious and antagonistic as the setclosing "Douchebags on Parade," a should-be anthem that speaks for itself and begs to be blared anytime life's contemptible scum bring you down. Consider revenge and justice served. —**Bob Gendron**



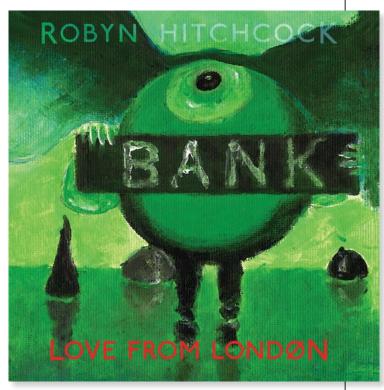
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Robyn Hitchcock
Love from London
Yep Roc Records, LP or CD

rior to listening to Robyn Hitchcock's Love From London, the latest offering from the 60-year-old British cynic perhaps still bestknown for his work in psychedelic-rock outfit the Soft Boys, a mistake was made. A link to an interview with Hitchcock on The Onion's AV Club was passed along one where discussed the songs he hated most. He chose "Arthur's Theme" from Christopher Cross, the 1981 tune most of us know best from hearing at dentist offices. Of the soapy piano ballad—and it's okay if you don't remember it-Hitchcock said that it sounds as if you've "just become incontinent and soiled your clothing, but you've just been given an enormous amount of painkillers so it doesn't matter."

Two things: One, the music criticism here is not going to be as good as that remark. Two, reading that before listening to *Love from London* created unreasonable expectations as to the potential ferociousness of the album. So, before reading The Onion interview, listen to the *Love from London* track "Fix You," a fiery little defense of the working class. "They make you redundant and blame you for being a slacker," Hitchcock sings, all while a guitar rings like an ambulance siren in slow motion, the sound, perhaps, of waking up with a hangover after drinking your wages. *(continued)*

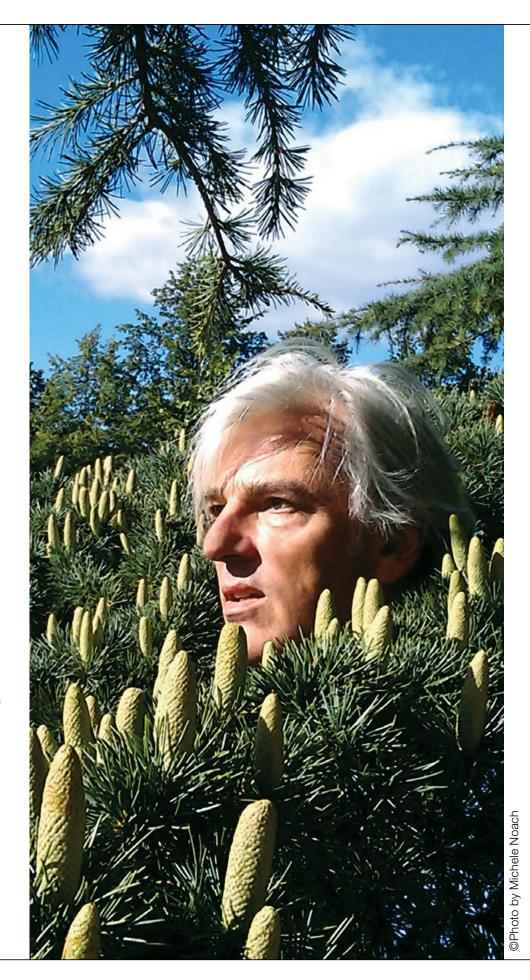


MUSIC

Much of Love from London strikes a similar mood, one that's a little sad and a little angry. Yet, no other song makes reference to your failing kidneys and inability to pay for health insurance. "Harry's Song," which could be about Prince Harry, or a friend or a family member, or an answer to songs of the same name from Ringo Starr song or Barclay James Harvest, is especially disturbing. The spare piano melody could be lifted from a horror film. Meanwhile, Hitchcock sings of drifting apart from an acquaintance. "I don't know anything about you," his voice echoes. Then a long pause. Then the word "anymore."

There are moments of fun, too, but even "I Love You" seems to fade in and out of consciousness. Instruments are fuzzy, and so is Hitchcock's voice, as he sings of puppy-love clichés and late-in-life settling. "Nothing in the world's like you," Hitchcock intones. "Believe me, because I've looked."

The bottom line: You never quite knew when Hitchcock is screwing you or being honest, be it the upbeat "Devil On a String" with its images of gift wrap and champagne, or the blocky beats and forlorn strings of "End of Time," where Hitchcock may or may not be ready to call this life thing quits. Or maybe he's just looking for an out of a relationship. "Get some 60-second feelings for yourself," he snarls, before opening up his arms to the heavens. -Todd Martens





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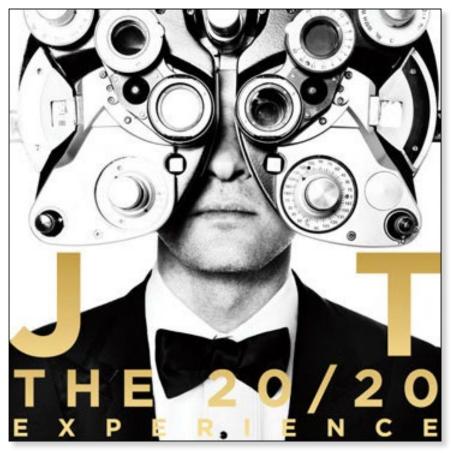












Justin Timberlake
The 20/20 Experience
RCA, 2LP or CD

ustin Timberlake undoubtedly has Hollywood ambitions. In the seven years since the onetime Mouseketeer released his last album, *FutureSex/LoveSounds*, he has focused primarily on his film career, turning up in movies both good (*The Social Network*) and, uh, not so much (*The Love Guru*). So perhaps it's not all that surprising Timberlake's long-in-the-works return to music, dubbed *The 20/20 Experience*, remains cinematic in its scope.

"Just like a movie shoot," he sings in his trademark falsetto on "Tunnel Vision," "I'm zoomin' in on you." Elsewhere, the singer sets tunes on the bottom of the sea (the gorgeously minimalist "Blue Ocean Floor") and in the far reaches of the cosmos ("Spaceship Coupe," a bizarre cut built around the ecstatic moans of a what could be an orgasming alien), essentially constructing his album as a blockbuster Hollywood epic with a bottomless budget.

Working with producer Timbaland, who helped shape the still revolutionary-sounding FutureSex, Timberlake crafts a soundscape worthy of these grand ambitions. Most songs stretch beyond the seven-minute mark and incorporate a variety of sounds and styles. "Pusher Love Girl," for one, drifts in on a haze of pot smoke and cinematic strings before the producer piles on a full gospel choir, strutting Motown horns, and funky electronic blips. "Let the Groove In" delivers on its title, building from a minimalist patter of African hand drums into a full-on dancefloor burner that comes on like a modernist take on Michael Jackson's "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'." "Don't Hold the Wall" employs a veritable maze of Timbaland sonic trademarks (skittering synths, babyish vocal samples),

which Timberlake navigates as deftly as a punt returner slicing his way through the defense for a long touchdown.

Like most Hollywood films, however, there's rarely anything of substance beneath the pretty. polished surface. Lyrically, Timberlake focuses almost solely on sex, drugs, and his wardrobe. (The lead single "Suit & Tie" essentially doubles as an advert for pal/fashion designer Tom Ford.) In that sense, the songs on 20/20 often sound like they could have been penned by Sean Parker, the Internet capitalist Timberlake portrayed as a greedy sleazeball in The Social Network ("A million dollars isn't cool. You know what's cool? A billion dollars!").

It's a shame, too, because Timberlake's public persona is, in general, damned likeable. He's clearly got a well-honed sense of humor (check his near-flawless record as a Saturday Night Live host), and in interviews, he comes across as almost unbearably charming. Unfortunately, these character traits are largely whitewashed from 20/20, an album nearly as self-involved and materialistic as the Jay-Z/ Kanve West collaboration Watch the Throne. Witness "Mirrors." a creepily narcissistic ballad that could easily be interpreted as Timberlake's love letter to self.

(One can almost picture the singer adjusting his own tie as he croons, "Aren't you somethin' to admire?")

Only occasionally does
Timberlake let his more playful
side overtake this inner sartorial
tastemaker. Such is the case on
"Strawberry Bubblegum," an endearingly goofy slice of ear candy
that includes a sly reference to
"Pop," a song he belted out with
his boy-band cohorts in 'N Sync
way back in 2001.

In the pop spectrum, a dozen years can safely be considered a lifetime. So credit Timberlake with finding ways to maintain his leading-man status. Now, like any modern actor of note, he needs to remind us he's more than just a pretty face the next time around. —*Andy Downing*

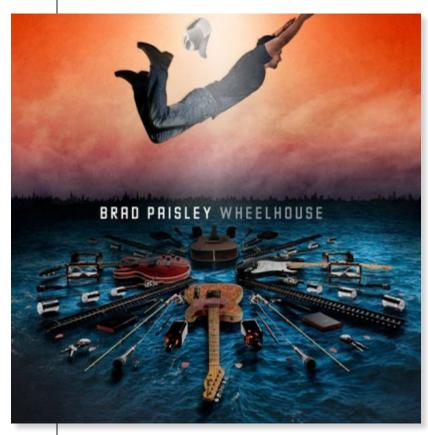


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Brad Paisley
Wheelhouse
Arista Nashville, 2LP or CD

n Wheelhouse, his eighth studio album, Brad Paisley breaks with Music City protocol and produces himself for the first time. The country star and guitar-slinger extraordinaire even renovated an old farmhouse into a home studio to record his unique vision.

Wheelhouse is a highly ambitious 17-track effort filled with special effects, overdubs, samples, and myriad guest cameos (Monty Python's Eric Idle even shows up for a star turn). It's also a mixed bag. Paisley seemingly experimented to his heart's content in the studio. The release reflects the pros and cons of that unregulated freedom. (continued)

Amadis

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.

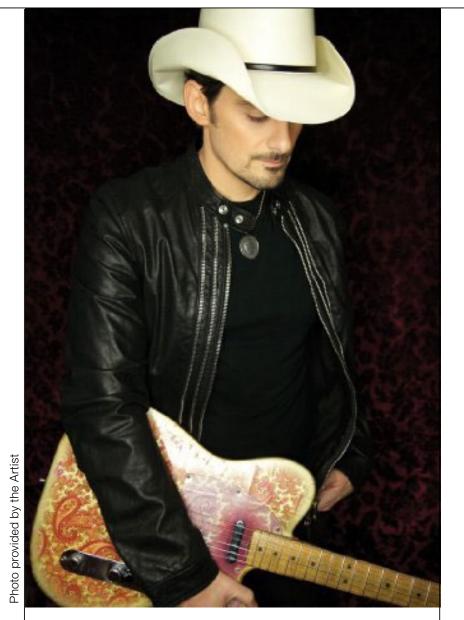
A dedicated and passionate knight from a yet another tale, Amadis was born from Verity's undying quest to continue seeking musical truth. Featuring a healthy 93db sensitivity, and with larger, more powerful drivers than Parsifal, Amadis promises to fulfill the desires of those who have loved the transparency and liquidity of Parsifal but seek even more power, extension, and impact. Palpable and accurate, with natural rendering of tone and texture from top to bottom, Amadis is otherwise pure Verity. In short, Amadis faithfully picks up where Parsifal began so long ago.

So we beg the question: are you still searching for your Holy Grail?

The answer to your quest may be closer than you think.







Let's start with the triumphs. "Runaway Train" finds Paisley at his full-tilt best and set against an explosive mix of fiddle, guitar, pedal steel, and drums. Equally appealing, "Southern Comfort Zone" is a smart ode to leaving the insularity of a small town and embracing the larger world. A bracing country rocker, "Pressing On a Bruise" mightily benefits from some solid vocals and an ace rap from singer-songwriter Mat Kearney. Paisley's risk-taking also results in a progressive country winner via the expansive "Outstanding In Our Field."

The song features ghostly samples of the late legend Roger Miller, as well as guest appearances from contemporaries Bentley and Hunter Hayes.

Now for the outright weird. Paisley the producer seems like a kid in a candy store on several tracks. Excited by choices at his disposal, Paisley chooses them all. Sugar shock ensues. To wit: "Karate," a clanging female-empowerment anthem against domestic violence. The tune concerns an abused wife who secretly takes karate lessons, earns a black belt ("to match her eye"), and then pummels her offending husband in a violent fight. It features rocking guitar, big drums, hard-plucked banjo, a children's choir (!), and a redneck rap courtesy of Charlie Daniels. Whew. One question: Where's the kitchen sink?

"Karate" is upbeat to the point of clinical mania. I still can't decide if I love this song for its weirdness (ala an over-the-top Jerry Reed classic) or if I loathe it for its bizarre overkill. On a related note, Paisley may well deserve props for recording a plea for racial understanding in "Accidental Racist," featuring veteran rapper LL Cool J. Yet, while sentiment is admirable, the song is musically and lyrically awkward.

Such criticisms are quibbles in the big picture. Wheelhouse is Brad Paisley coloring far outside the lines. Although it features occasional excesses, the album continually surprises with chancetaking. How many mainstream country albums do that? —Chrissie Dickinson

The Lounge Audio Phonostage

A \$200 Miracle

By Jeff Dorgay

he prudent audiophile always has the DIY path as a reasonable alternative to the ever-increasing cost of hi-fi equipment. While the option is certainly a valid one, if you don't really know what you're doing, it's all too easy to spend the cost of a factory-assembled unit and still have a pile of wires that sounds like hell—though, as some of my obsessed DIYer friends say, "That's the fun."

Over the years, companies offered kits to help bridge the gap, allowing you to save on labor costs and keep uniform quality of parts, in addition to giving you the emotional reward of actually building your own component. The best companies even had technical support, offering repair services if you strayed too far off the path. The famous Dynakits of the 1960s are a perfect example of this, and many of these components are still playing today.

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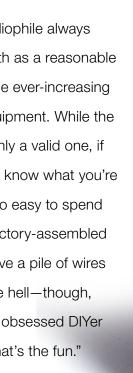
But what if you just aren't good at being a backyard engineer or soldering components to a PC board? Having more knowledge than a mere hobbyist is especially important when it comes to producing a phonostage, whose high gain and delicate signal makes it even easier to screw up than wiring a power amplifier.

Enter, Robert Morin, who after working for Harman, Alesis, and Hovland, decided to design his own phonostageone that wouldn't break the bank. He explored the LCR option for phono equalization, consisting of an inductor (L), capacitor (C) and resistor (R) network. As this was often used on some of the early cutting lathes to achieve the proper RIAA curve when making the record, it made perfect sense to mirror this on playback.

(For those not familiar with any of this, click to this Wikipedia article for a decent explanation of how the RIAA curve works: http:// en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RIAA_ equalization)

To make a long story short, when a record is made, the bass is boosted and the treble is attenuated. Upon playback, the opposite of this equalization curve is applied to level the frequency response back to flat—at least in theory. The better job a phonostage can do with this, the more lifelike and musical your records sound.

Morin claims that his tenure at Alesis gave him the "design-for-the-common-guy bug." His Lounge phonostage succeeds beyond measure on so many levels. It's even packaged in a nice wooden case, with a cool, glowing-blue LED placed in the Plexiglas top plate. (continued)





A LOT of Music in a Little Box

Morin mentions that when he was on the final design stage of this project, a few of his colleagues mentioned that the Lounge had a "nice, rich sound." The Lounge reminds me of the Thorens TD-124, which I'm currently using it with, via a freshly refurbished SME 3009 tonearm and NOS Ortofon VMS 20 Mk II cartridge.

I was not immediately floored when I put the tonearm down on the first record; but once powered up for 48 hours, the Lounge really blossoms. Listening to the MoFi remaster of Elvis Costello's *Imperial Bedroom* is utterly fantastic. This little preamp has pace in spades, with a nice solid bottom end, which is something budget phonostages always lack.

Revisiting the Doors box set proves equally illuminating. I start with the original self-titled album. The organ on "Twentieth Century Fox" floats between my recently refurbished Acoustat 1+1s, powered by the Octave Jubilee monoblocks. The driving bass line is reproduced with a texture that

sets me back in my listening chair. That's right, I'm using the Lounge in the context of a six-figure system, and it's delivering the goods in a major way. The soundstage is expansive in both directions, with a delicacy that belies its modest price. This is just way more *music* than you'd ever expect from a \$200 box.

Even in a modest system, the Lounge excels. We've set up a great "real world" system, consisting of a used Pass Labs Aleph 3 power amplifier (\$700), used Conrad Johnson PV-12 linestage (\$600), a pair of KEF LS50 speakers (\$1,500) and Rega RP3 turntable with Exact cartridge (\$1,200). Compared to a handful of phonostages in the \$200-to-\$500 range from Cambridge, Rega, Naim and Lehmann, the Lounge is miles ahead in every way: dynamics, tonality and frequency extension. It's on par with the rest in terms of having a low noise floor, as they are all solid-state designs.

What really separates the Lounge is the ease with which the music just flows. There isn't a hint of grain anywhere. *(continued)*



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FEATURE

The big-bucks phonostages at my disposal certainly have more dynamic slam, with more HF extension, etc., but the Lounge gives you such a big slice of the pie that you won't be sitting in your listening chair feeling like you're missing out on anything.

It also performs well with a wide range of cartridges. While the VMS 20 Mk II is one of my favorite go-to MMs (and can be had for about \$150 with a little luck), I also use the Ortofon 2M Blue, Grado Master moving-iron and Shure V15mxVr cartridges with equally good result. Sumiko's Blue Point and Blackbird high-output moving-coil cartridges, which have a lower 2.5-mV output (all the others are in the 5-mV range), still prove excellent matches for the Lounge. It's worth noting that the Blackbird can sound a little thin with the wrong phonostage combination, but it gives a robust performance with the Lounge—one of the best I've experienced.

The Analog Bargain of the Millennium

Here's where you get to take advantage of a single man's passion. The average \$200 phonostage has about fifteen bucks worth of parts under the hood. Add casework, shipping, a cool box, overhead, dealer network, etc., and pretty soon you're looking at 200 clams.

As I've got nothing against the mainstream manufacturers for earning their dues, the Lounge cuts out all the middle steps and essentially gives you what you'd have to pay \$1,000 for, because Morin doesn't have a distribution network or the overhead of a big manufacturer. And God knows how



many hours of development lurk in this little box that will probably never be amortized.

Of course, Mr. Morin is only one man, and he's only going to produce so many of these, so companies like Cambridge Audio won't be shuttering the plant anytime soon. But for those of you in the audience that truly love music and are on a tight budget, this one will blow you away.

The bad news is that I might just be spoiling all of this by telling you about it. Should Morin ever take this to the next level, you'll never be able to buy a Lounge for \$200. If this were packaged in a little bit fancier case and on the rack at your favorite dealer with a \$1,500 price tag, you'd still be telling your Internetforum friends what a killer deal the Lounge is. I originally purchased the Lounge with the intent of making it a Facebook contest giveaway, but I'm keeping it as a permanent reference in room two. This is one of the most enjoyable hi-fi components I've listened to in a long time. Buy one now, while you still can. ●

Lounge Audio Phonostage MSRP: \$200

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ClubMix

By Connor Willemsen











Until Now looms as a melodic and tranquil antidote to the grinding dubstep and breakbeat rhythms permeating contemporary dance music. While never losing sight of its electro-house roots, the album is tinged with a yearning wistfulness suited to its status as the group's swan song. Swedish House Mafia mastered the art of combining sweet pop vocals with house beats, and "Calling (Lose My Mind)" is textbook work. The trio intersperses the crooning of OneRepublic's Ryan Tedder with gently thrumming rhythms that waft among the vocals and smoothly build into reverberant crescendos.

Deep bass lines and hints of soft distortion exist in a carefully orchestrated equilibrium with Tedder's voice.

Elsehwere, Swedish singer
John Martin delivers a melancholic tale of loss and heartbreak
on the Grammy-nominated "Don't
You Worry Child." Electronic piano chords frame Martin's voice as
synthesized riffs rise and fall with
bass pulses. The melody swells,
infusing the track with a warily
optimistic spirit in poignant contrast to the angst of the lyrics.

Of course, *Until Now* serves up plenty of dance anthems that complement its softer side. Rob

Swire and Gareth McGrillen of dubstep duo Knife Party collaborate on "Antidote," which layers wobbling bass beneath urgent drum-machine lines. "Greyhound" harks back to the trio's early years with a fast, driving melody punctuated by piano chords and trailing decays. However, the record stands out most by way of its integration of electro-house motifs with diverse vocal performances and remarkable lyrics. In a world where entire albums can be created with nothing except a laptop and a pair of headphones, Until Now rises to a higher level of polish and complexity.



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roy Beetles never heard dubstep before attending Excision's performance at Canada's Shambhala festival in 2008. For Beetles, the revelatory experience inspired the amateur hip-hop artist to try his own hand at producing. Styling himself after a name he used to play videogames, Datsik was born. By the end of the next year, he counted two EPs and a collaborative set with mentor Excision at Shambhala 2009 under his belt. His rise accelerated through a joint tour with Steve Aoki and back-t-back performances at Las Vegas's Electric Daisy Carnival, the biggest electronic music festival in North America.

Datsik's first full-length album, Vitamin D, fuses his signature dirty, wobbling bass with hip-hop vocals and rapid tempos that lend an omnipresent urgency to the sound. Eschewing the dramatic buildups and drops common to dubstep, he mixes between throbbing beats and heavily syncopated bass notes that oscillate under the frenzied trill of electronic melodies. The album's guest artists build on Datsik's powerhouse dubstep foundations, each lending their own unique flavors.

Israeli psychedelic trance duo Infected Mushroom and Korn singer Jonathan Davis contribute to "Evilution," imbuing the track with dark and grungy tension. Punctuated by the eerie flutter of bells, reverberant lulls methodically build into deep, distorted blasts that crash regularity. Buried within the mix, Davis' lyrics lace the song with hints of metal and intensify a pervasive sense of foreboding. "Fully Blown" pays tribute to Datsik's love of hip-hop with tight, hard-hitting raps from fellow Canadian Snak The Ripper.



Datsik

Vitamin D Dim Mak Records, CD

A furious drum line anchors the vocals against a grimy backdrop. Datsik breaks down the beats into a simple, pounding rhythm during Snak's verses, preserving the song's energy while allowing the lyrical flow to shine.

By contrast, "Don't Feel Right" eases the tempo to a sedate 86 beats per minute. Undulating bass pulses collapse into interludes of swooning classical strings. Electronically doped female vocal samples offer snippets of carefree indifference. The lazy cadence offers repose from the driving pace of the album, and still, Datsik's penchant for heavy, grinding beats keeps everything intense.

With Vitamin D, Datsik has crafted a surefire crowd pleaser. Subtlety goes by the wayside in favor of bombast—precisely why heavy dubstep is such fun.





The SM 65 stands 20 inches tall and measures 18 inches from front baffle to back panel. Weighing in at 22 pounds apiece, this is no "mini monitor." The speaker's gloss-black front baffle is attractive and features a D'Appolito array, with Def Tech's proprietary 5.25-inch midrange driver above and below a specially treated aluminum dome tweeter. Interestingly, the speaker combines a top-firing passive radiator with a phase-coherent crossover network and heavy internal bracing on the cabinet—this is top-quality stuff for a speaker at this price.

Simple Setup

The SM 65s are finished in black, and each speaker comes equipped with two sets of high-quality binding posts to allow for bi-wiring. I single-wire the speakers with a pair of Transparent MusicWave cables. Def Tech supplies a set of attractive grilles with the speakers, but all of my listening was done without them. The speakers benefit from high-quality stands; I use stands from Sound Anchors for my review.

Toeing-in the SM 65s at about 20 degrees works perfectly in my room, and because of the speakers' small size, they are easily adjusted to achieve the ideal balance for your room and taste. The review pair arrives with a few hours on the clock, so it only takes an hour or so for the speakers to settle into a groove that keeps me in the listening chair for hours.

The SM 65s' 92-dB sensitivity makes them incredibly easy to drive; they require very little power to rock the house, which makes them a good fit for low-power tube amplification.

They are an excellent match for the 20-watt-per-channel Bob Carver Black Magic 20 stereo amplifier I reviewed last issue. Our publisher even mentions that he has excellent results pairing the SM 65s with his 25-watt-per-channel 845 SET amplifiers and the EL-34-powered Ultravalve amp from AVA.

Getting Down to Business

After just a brief listen, I quickly discover the areas in which SM 65s are superb. First and foremost, they excel at presenting soundstage depth, providing the best I have experienced from a sub-\$1,000 speaker, with the recording space extending well behind the speakers. The soundstage width these speakers provide is equally enticing, as they spread the performers across my listening room. Even more exciting is the tonal purity through the midrange that the SM 65s deliver; vocals are beguiling, as are acoustic instruments. Piano, strings and acoustic guitar are well represented, which is a tough mark to hit at this price.

Thoroughly satisfied with speaker position, I turn first to the sublime new release from Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Push The Sky Away*, which I have been listening to a lot recently. This is one of the most melodic and focused recordings of Cave's amazing career. Midway through this dramatic song cycle, it becomes clear to me that I'm experiencing a *performance*, rather than merely listening to a home playback system, which is a rather rare occurrence for a speaker of this size. *(continued)*

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the music.



Through the SM 65s, Cave's voice is as present and dimensional as one could hope for, especially within the context of the sparer arrangements—a definite goose-bump moment.

The excellent 2002 remaster of Lou Reed's classic album, *Transformer*, is a blast through these speakers, with all the elements of the mix coming together as a coherent whole. Key tracks like "Satellite Of Love" and "Walk On The

Wild Side" sound fresh and lively. It's easy to hear why this album was so hugely influential.

Marvin Gaye's overlooked masterpiece, *In Our Lifetime*, is equally revelatory. The genius of Gaye's catchy melodies, funked-up rhythms, dense arrangements and famous vocals (which are clearly at their peak at this point in his career) all feel as if they are framed in a halo, while the speakers easily keep pace with the snappy

bass lines and syncopated beats—pure magic.

Staying on the Marvin Gaye kick, I turn next to his sprawling masterwork from 1978, Here, My Dear. This R&B/funk classic sounds otherworldly through the SM 65s, which never single out any obscure detail at the expense of overall musical flow; it feels like I am sitting at a mixing console in a smaller room. The StudioMonitor lives up to its title. (continued)



By Comparison

Though my reference Harbeth Compact 7ES-3s are considerably more expensive than the SM 65s, both pairs share aspects that I enjoy—primarily seamless driver integration and tonal purity. Even after a short time, it's obvious that the SM 65s make great music. They are highly balanced speakers that make extended listening sessions a breeze, while eschewing fireworks for timbral clarity.

The \$900 SM 65s use the same mid-woofer and tweeter as the \$400 SM 45s, which *TONE-Audio* recently reviewed, as well as an identical cabinet design. The simple enclosure is perfectly acceptable at \$400, but as we approach the \$1,000 mark, there are a handful of competitors

providing better aesthetics. I'd happily pay another \$100 to see the SM 65s in a cabinet more worthy of their sonic performance. (Perhaps a Signature series is in order?) The same goes for the binding posts and jumpers, which seem to be plaguing a number of other speakers these days. The SM 65s' binding posts are difficult with beefier speaker cables.

However, these are minor points. In the end, the sound quality of Def Tech's SM 65s proves paramount. These are a great pair of speakers around which to build a high-performance yet reasonably priced system. ●

www.definitivetech.com





Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay



HD Tracks, 24bit/192khz download



VANHALEN

inally, someone has done justice to the Van Halen catalog in the digital domain. Simply take "You're No Good" from *Van Halen II*. Seconds into the track, the delay of the noise gate on the hi hat hints at a recovery of dynamic range lost on the original CDs and relatively squashed on the original LPs. We often forget that not everything released on vinyl is awesome.

Similarly, the first drum thwack in "Outta Love Again" sets the tone for what's to come. This collection has punch, and if your system has the juice, you will find yourself turning it up to the point of pain, because it feels great. It's a shame we had to wait until 2013 to hear one of the world's greatest bands sound the way it should have all along.

Chris Bellman's (from Bernie Grundman Mastering) prior analog treatment of *Van Halen 2, Women and Children First*, and *1984* let the cat out of the bag that there was sonic gold in these master tapes. The vinyl releases are fantastic, but for those no longer living in the analog domain, the HD Tracks versions are equally excellent. Like Bellman's editions, these tunes now have a bass line, with weight and texture doing justice to the VH sound. The bass processing at the beginning of "One Foot Out the Door" authoritatively snarls in a way it never does on the originals, and underscores Michael Anthony's creativity on the instrument. Each

one of these albums now has the proper anchor that the bass guitar brings to the rhythm section, giving the classic tunes a heavier, more demonstrative feel.

And that's just the beginning. The extra resolution adds an extra dimension to Eddie Van Halen's quitar virtuosity via layer upon layer of effects, overtones, and grit. You can now hear every bit of the fretboardtapping magic that pushed Van Halen to the head of the guitar god class. The intro to "Unchained" rockets out of the left channel, well beyond the speaker, taking up the width of about three Marshall cabinets. Folks, this is big guitar sound. Even the studio trickery, with Eddie panning about the soundstage, bouncing between the distortion and clean channels on his amplifiers, is big and full of life. It's easy to forget the engineer behind the control panel.

Where the original CDs sound like a ball of compression and distorted guitars, the high-resolution tracks have myriad treasure that's tough to discern on the originals. The bottles tinkling on "Hot For Teacher," David Lee Roth's subtle smart remarks on "Dirty Movies," and Van Halen senior's clarinet playing on "Big Bad Bill is Sweet William Now" are just a few examples. Even the most loyal Van Halen fan will find tidbits previously buried in the mix. (continued)

MUSIC

While drummer Alex Van Halen still sounds slightly compressed, especially on the bass drum and snare, the cymbals and toms are opened up, with more space than before. Now, you can hear him pounding the drumsticks on the side of the snares between beats on "Hot For Teacher" as bottles tinkle in the background and roll down the floor, between the class talk and scrunching of paper. Much like his brother's guitar, Alex's drum set has a larger presence on this remaster.

Moreover, David Lee Roth's vocals are full strength, whether cooing on "Ice Cream Man," joking around on "And The Cradle Will Rock," or delivering his signature histrionic screams on "Somebody Get Me A Doctor." Eddie and Alex's backing vocals are also much clearer and more prominent, adding depth to these recordings. Vide, Anthony's classic line "Come on Dave, give me a break" during "Unchained" is more comical. Even the couple of clunkers are much more palatable, thanks to the increased fidelity.

HD Tracks' Lisa Hershfield says, "all Van Halen transfers were from the original EQ production analog tapes," and after thorough listening and comparison to the originals, I have no reason to doubt her. The only odd decision is to release the records as

a full set, with a single collaged album cover, instead of breaking them up as individual albums with the associated covers. The latter can be done with a bit of extra effort, and will make it easier when navigating on your music server.

What is appreciated is the \$109 price for six studio albums in 24/192. 24/96 is also available, but why bother when the 24/192 files are so good? As David Lee Roth once said, "Get the maximum effort, get the full bug." ●



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TONE STYLE

Pairing this tasting comparison with the latest Xs 300 monoblocks from Pass Labs, the KEF Blades and the dCS Vivaldi digital audio player recently featured in Robb Report was just icing on the cake. Great music and great scotch always seem to go well together.

Like the Macallan, the Costco 20-year-old whisky is, in fact, from Speyside. I was unable to find out what specific distillery produces the Costco spirit, what specific barley variety it uses, or much about the production process beyond the information provided on the label. I can tell you that Alexander Murray & Co. imports the Kirkland whisky in partnership with Terroirs Distillers of Burgundy, France. (www. alexandermurray.com)

The most notable production difference between the Kirkland whisky and the Macallan is that the Kirkland is aged for 20 years in oak barrels—likely second-fill American bourbon barrels—and then finished in casks that previously held sweet sherry dessert wine; the Macallan is aged all 18 years in sherry casks made from Spanish oak. This gives the Macallan 18 its dark, almost cherry color and its rich flavor profile. The Macallan also uses just the top few percentage of its distillate, the rest of which it sells to blended-scotch makers (or perhaps to Alexander Murray & Co. for use in the Kirkland scotch; Macallan does produce a variety exclusively for Costco).

By using the best of its distilled spirit for aging, the Macallan distillery imparts its whisky with a silken, almost syrupy viscosity that makes it best enjoyed neat. On the nose, the Macallan 18 exhibits notes of rich, damp soil and a bouquet of spices, along with hints of citrus, honey and vanilla. On the palette, the Macallan offers flavors of sweet dried fruit, toffee and caramel, with a smoky finish and lingering vanilla notes. The Macallan 18 is bottled at 43% ABV, compared to the standard 40% of the Costco 20-year-old whisky. (continued)



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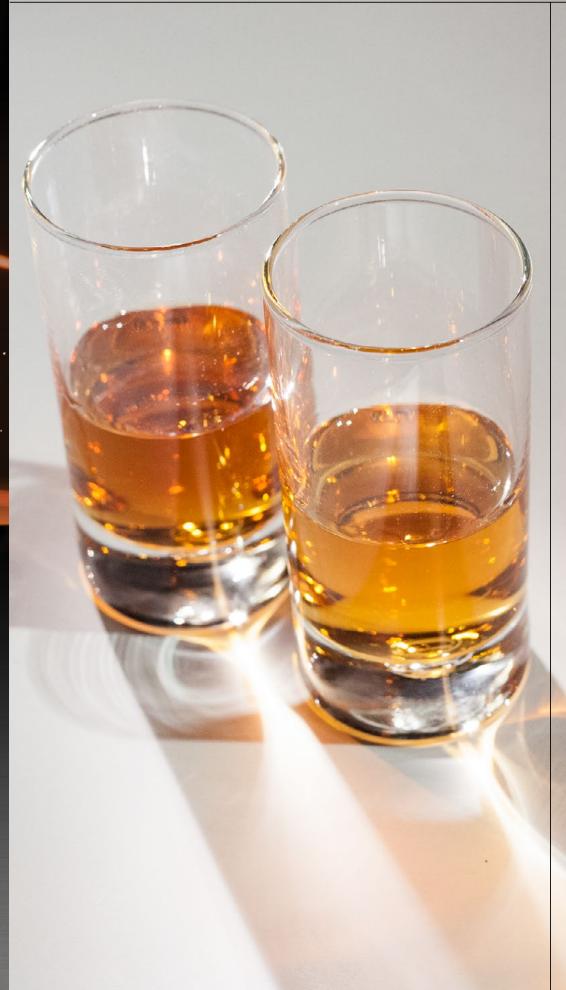
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III Digital Inp



TONE STYLE

The Costco scotch is lighter in color than the Macallan 18 and has a nose full of oak and earth, with light hints of fruit, including pear and apricot. Its palette is a bit spicy, with notes of clove and orange zest, followed by a slightly dry finish. I also pick up on some leathery flavors (in a good way), with hints of dark berries and currant from the sherry finishing cask. Pour the whisky over rocks to open up some of the sweeter notes of vanilla and caramel-which is how the label recommends you enjoy it—and you've got yourself a damn respectable 20-year-old single malt, especially considering its \$50 price tag.

Just as you wouldn't expect a \$1,500 turntable to compete with a \$15,000 turntable, you should not expect the Costco whisky to replace the Macallan 18 on your home bar. The Kirkland scotch is a solid everyday drinking whisky, while the Macallan 18 should be cherished and best enjoyed on special occasions, with good friends and, of course, with good music.

The Macallan 18

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Nintendo Controller Coffee Table

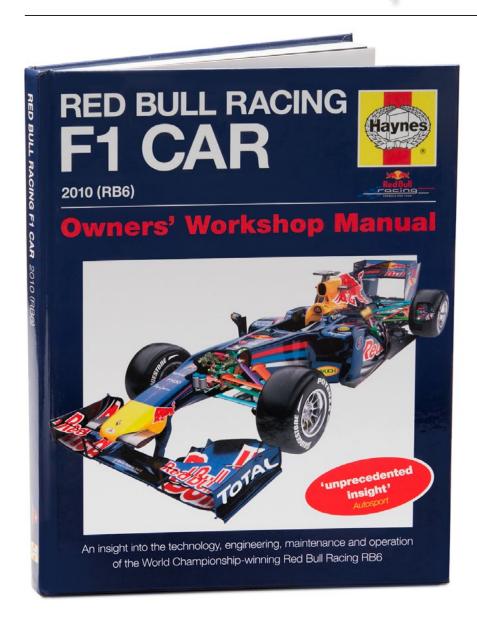
\$1.995

bohoworkbench.com

A while back we featured a coffee table that looks like a cassette tape. This one is from a different artist, based in Venice Beach, Calif., but it keeps the retro vibe alive. Available in a couple different woods and finishes, this table is designed to look exactly like a first-generation Nintendo game controller. Best of all, remove the glass tabletop and it can be used as a functional controller. How cool is that?



Haynes Red Bull Racing F1 Car Owners' Workshop Manual



\$25 www.amazon.com

am sure many of our readers have used Haynes manuals to repair their cars and motorcycles over the years, so how about something a bit more complex? While this manual won't help you rebuild the current Red Bull F1 car, or get a spot on the pit crew, it does offer a ton of insight into the mechanical complexity of last year's championship car. Of course, this year's car is a highly guarded secret. In any case, this book is a must-have for the hardcore petrol head.

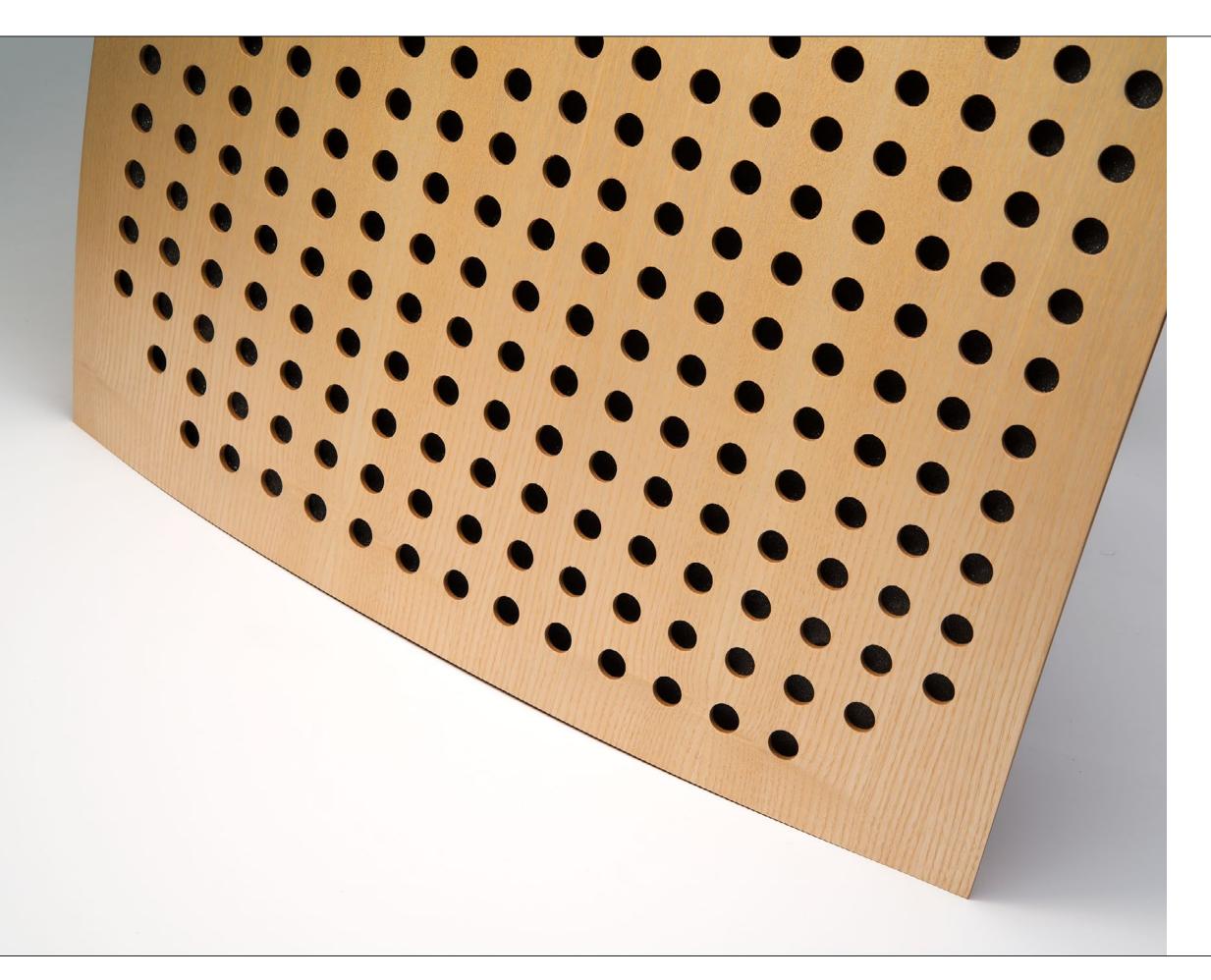


Gumby Shot Glasses

\$10 www.amazon.com

There are fewer greater pleasures than drinking Macallan 18 from shot glasses with Gumby and Pokey on them. Perhaps my favorite is the one with just the Gumby face—and the more you drink, the more amusing these become.

108 TONEAUDIO NO.54



Vicoustic Omega Wood Acoustic Panel

\$79 and up www.vicousticusa.com

Most room treatments are not designed with aesthetics in mind, or even on the radar for that matter. But the panels from Portuguese company Vicoustic are much different. They feature a combination of wood and fabric products that provide absorption and diffusion, all in a stylish package. The Omega Wood panel you see here is available in a wide range of finishes that will complement any décor. Once installed, you won't even know they are room treatments, and that's the goal.

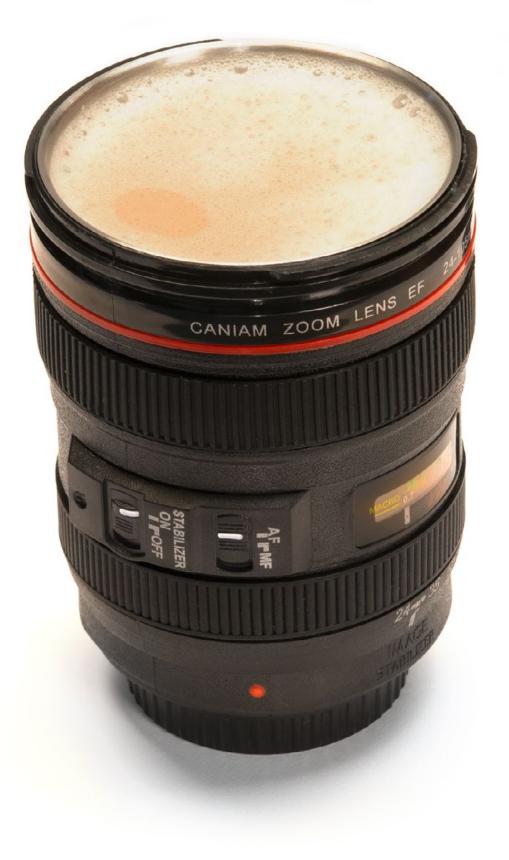
Vicoustic has treated everything from the control rooms at the BBC to my main listening room. (Watch for a full review soon.) The real key to Vicoustic's success is the brain trust behind the product. With multiple engineers and acousticians, and a lab that is almost infinitely configurable, the company has countless solutions to your acoustic problems that won't make your listening room look like a rubber room.

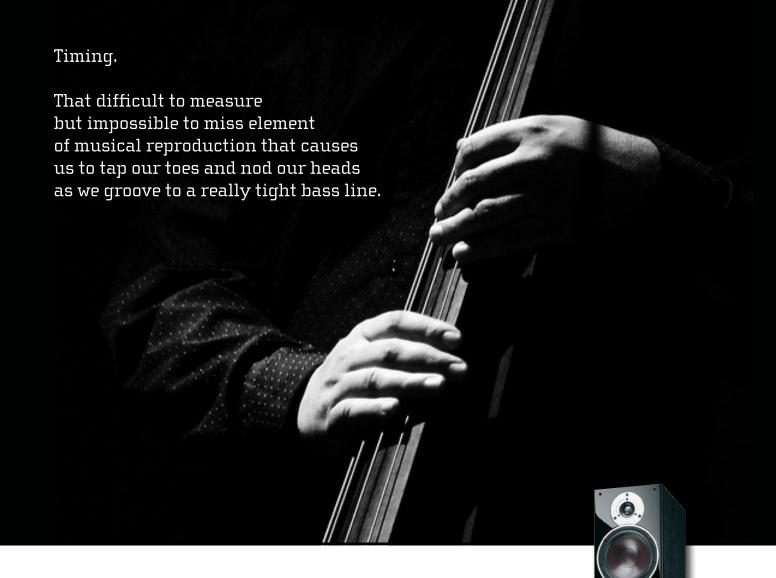
- Jeff Dorgay

Camera Lens Coffee Mug

www.amazon.com

While we try to keep our precious SLR and its lenses away from liquids, here's one you can dump your coffee all over-or, to be more precise, into. Looking scarily close to a Canon 24-105-mm f/4L zoom lens, this is the perfect conversation piece for your desk or photo studio. Just don't get confused and pack the coffee mug in your camera bag, or your next photo assignment might be cut short!





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By Mark Marcantonio



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—Dick Olsher, *The Absolute Sound* Issue 233 • May/June 2013

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The matching cylindrical subwoofer features a 6.5-inch woofer and passive radiator, with the RCA input jacks set near the active driver. The 40-Hz-rated woofer sits on the curved top of a 50-watt amplifier/crossover. The aluminum-milled casing's front panel is simple, with only knobs for volume control and crossover setting, which is adjustable from 40 Hz to 200 Hz. The back panel holds the subwoofer output, in/out jacks for the source, power-toggle switch, and socket for the two-way power cord.

The subwoofer puts out a prodigious amount of low-frequency energy, though it is limited to about 40 Hz—which is enough to augment the satellite speakers such that the bass seems like it's coming from the speakers rather than the subwoofer. In my room, setting the crossover to 130 Hz provides the best integration with no midrange anomalies. Of course, you will have to experiment in your room.

Set up takes all of 5 minutes, and perhaps the most daunting task is concealing the bright, flamingo-pink speaker wire supplied with the kit. Wiring such as Crystal Cable's Piccolo, which can be easily concealed, would be fantastic here. With the speakers angled upward atop each of my end tables and the subwoofer tucked beneath one of the tables, my dinner guests are impressed; my non-audiophile spouse and I have successfully bridged the gap between quality sound and style.

The system reproduces the bass guitar on Dire Straits' "The Man's Too Strong" without fake boom; it does the same on Fleetwood Mac's classic song, "The Chain." The lush harmonies of the Indigo Girls' "Kid Fears" provide further evidence that using a high crossover setting is the right decision for my room. Listening to the satellite speakers alone (priced at \$495 per pair) clearly illustrates why you need the sub, which elevates what might have been mistaken for a desktop system to one providing room-filling audio.

Casual, laid-back trumpet from such 1960s-era Burt Bacharach compositions as "This Guy's in Love with You" fits the aesthetics of the Joey Roth system. It's easy to picture *Mad Men*'s Don Draper on the couch listening to this setup—just add a lava lamp and a glass of scotch.

Pairing artful design with audio equipment has never been an easy task in the budget world. In this regard, Joey Roth's system can be deemed an unquestioned success. The beautiful and simply styled white porcelain, matched with honest pleasurable acoustic properties, makes the system a winner.

Joey Roth Ceramic Speaker and Subwoofer System \$1,095 www.joeyroth.com



120 toneaudio no.54

Jazz&Blues

By Jim Macnie



Dave Douglas *Time Travel*Greenleaf Music, CD

here are frolicsome moments on Dave Douglas' 2012 album *Be Still*; then again, there are frolicsome moments on all of the well-regarded trumpeter's discs. But in the large, the program is plaintive. The pieces his new sextet essayed are Protestant hymns chosen by his mom, who died the previous summer. She'd requested her son to play these particular songs at her memorial service, and aided by vocalist Aoife O'Donovan, Team Douglas performs them with a wistful tone. With an aura of elegy drifting through the entire record, the music is gorgeous, but bittersweet.



With the arrival of *Time Travel*, that aura wafts away. The new quintet outing (O'Donovan is gone) is the yin to *Be Still*'s yang, full of the jaunty, aggressive swing on which Douglas has put a personal spin for 20-plus years. It's also a delicious album on multiple levels. He's drafted a program of inviting melodies, he's corralled a handful of go-getters to juice the tunes, and he's put his keen ear towards the balance of audiencesating and envelope-pushing. Nothing radical takes place, but the squad—saxophonist Jon Irabagon, pianist Matt Mitchell, bassist Linda Oh, and drummer Rudy Royston—is about as modern as a mainstream outfit can be.

Front lines often define a jazz statement, and Irabagon's wooly explorations are a sweet match for the leader's darting horn lines. Douglas frequently enjoys episodes of polyphony (one of the benchmark maneuvers of his days with John Zorn's Masada), and the moments of ruckus he squeezes from his mates often make *Time Travel* erupt in irresistible ways. And any rhythm section with Royston at the center is bound to be explosive. Vide, the physical nature of the tunes—from "Garden State" to the title track—places the poetry of exclamation deeply in the mix.

A key Douglas strength remains his power to dispense joy. His bands usually sound like they're having a blast when they're in the middle of romp. "Beware Of Doug" and "Bridge To Nowhere" generate such collective giddiness here. The former sports a cartoonish melody (oddly, I'm seeing a city slicker trying to make his way through a field of cow patties) but the group has a serious grip on its playfulness. "Bridge To Nowhere" is all about coordination, with the collective shifting up and down with such subtlety that everything feels like it's in constant motion. That's the kind of magic that Douglas delivers on a regular basis. Having just turned 50 this winter, he's an artist with a wealth of experience behind him and lots of new ideas to test out.

122 TONEAUDIO NO.54

Emerge From the Darkness

DIGITAL (r)EVOLUTION...again from Wadia





Joshua Redman Walking Shadows Nonesuch, CD

t's rather expected that jazz saxophonists make an orchestral statement at some point. The move has been in place since Bird swooped around in front of groups led by Jimmy Carroll and Joe Lipman at the end of the 40s. Gorgeous stuff has been generated in its wake, of course. I'd be lying if I said I'd never gotten goose pimples from Stan Getz's Focus or Joe Lovano's Symphonica. So Joshua Redman's new nod to this part of jazz tradition doesn't come out of left field. But the smartest thing about Walking Shadows is that the orchestra takes a breather now and then.

Redman is a thinker who knows about design. The orchestral tracks on the new disc—with arrangements by Brad Mehldau, Patrick Zimmerli, and Dan Coleman. who also conducts—define the program, but they're intermittently spelled by pieces sans strings. The approach makes each side of the equation that much more attractive. The transition from the stark (bass-only accompaniment) "Adagio" into the micro-fantasia of "Easy Living" is one of those memorable juxtapositions that stick with you for days. (continued)

gamutaudio.com









Redman's rounded tone makes excursions through romantic themes like "Lush Life" and "Stardust" seem deeply natural. There's a fair amount of improvising, but he also milks the melodies of these ballads, and rightly so: His horn fits the scenery. Yet squalls aren't avoided in the name of sentiment. By the time The Beatles' "Let It Be" concludes, he's wrung the chorus dry.

The disc's quartet of pianist Mehldau, bassist Larry Grenadier, and drummer Brian Blade is comprised of old pals, and here, they work as one. On Wayne Shorter's "Infant Eyes," they wrap the string arrangement around them as if it were a flashy fur cowl. It's one of the disc's most compelling performances, as is Mehldau's "Last Glimpse of Gotham," which has a feel of prairie noir, and finds Redman waxing as lyrical as ever.

That said, the saxophonist's "Final Hour" is the most haunting piece at hand. At his best, Redman can make a plaintive meditation sound "orchestral" with just a piano and bass beside him.

The Bryston BHA-1 Headphone Amplifier

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ryston has always been known for making high-quality, high-value electronics. The company has now addressed the continuing growth in the personal audio (i.e. headphone) world, with its new BHA-1 headphone amplifier. It's instantly apparent that Bryston has done its homework on this one. In addition to coming with Bryston's industry-leading 20-year warranty, the BHA-1 feels like a product you'd want to keep forever the minute you take it out of the box.

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For many, the term "headphone amplifier" might conjure up a vision of something small and lightweight. While the BHA-1 is indeed compact, only taking about 3 inches of rack height, it's densely packed and feels heavier than it's claimed 8-pound weight. The inside is full of goodies, including a big torodial transformer, major power supply, Noble volume control and all discrete circuitry throughout. If you're thinking that the BHA-1 looks more like a linestage, you're half right. The BHA-1 can be used as a two-input (one balanced and one single-ended) linestage, with balanced outputs—which makes this a perfect unit for the headphone enthusiast looking to expand to a speaker-based hi-fi system (but I'll talk more about that later).

BALANCED

The front panel of the BHA-1 features individual balanced outputs, a stereo balanced output and a traditional ¼-inch stereo jack, so no matter what kind of phones are in

your collection, you will be able to plug them in.

Playing the Field

The BHA-1 integrates perfectly into room two, with the Thorens TD-124 turntable, SME 3009 tonearm, Ortofon VMS 20 Mk II cartridge and Lounge MM phono preamplifier providing the analog signal; the balanced output of the new Oppo BDP-105 universal player handles digital duties.

Listening begins with the most difficult phones to drive in my collection, the HiFiMAN HE-6s. While the BHA-1 has more than enough current drive to handle the HE-6s, this is not my favorite combination, with the top end sounding crunchy and slightly compressed—but this is an extreme torture test. I've never found these phones to sound stellar on anything but HiFiMAN's own amplifier, which is purpose-built for these cans. (continued)

Tracking through Richard
Thompson's latest LP, *Electric*, with
my faithful Sennheiser HD 650s (recabled by ALO Audio) proves much
easier on the ears—a smoother
high-frequency balance and a more
dynamic presentation. The Grado
GS500s and a highly modded pair
of SR60s from ALO Audio also
prove easy to drive, both of them
exhibiting a good tonal balance. It's
amazing how addictive a modest
analog setup can be through headphones!

However, my favorite mate for the BHA-1 is the Audeze LCD-2. The dead quiet presentation of the BHA-1 and the lightning-fast transient response of the LCD-2s make it feel as if I'm wearing a pair of Magnepan speakers. The sound rendered is airy, transparent and big.

I move on to the latest MoFi release of Duke Ellington's *Ellington at Newport*, which underscores the dynamic ability of this headphone amplifier. With the interplay of the musicians and the horns blasting about the soundstage, this mono recording has so much depth that it sounds like stereo—even more so through phones.

Regardless of the phones you choose, the BHA-1 will impress you with its ability to throw a soundstage that is both wide and deep. *Dark Side of the Moon* is still bitchin' with headphones on, and just to take a trip in the way-back machine, I try the album out with my original set of Koss Pro4AA headphones, which I've had since high school. They sound amazing playing this rock classic through the BHA-1. What fun!



Vocalists and acoustic instruments are rendered with ease and accuracy. I won't bore you with the list of male and female vocalists auditioned, but suffice it to say that the BHA-1 provides a high level of midrange clarity and transparency.

Thanks to its big power supply, the BHA-1 not only provides fantastic bass response, but also a low noise floor. Build quality is robust throughout, with a solid chassis and top-quality connectors, which are a must when one is constantly plugging and unplugging headphones.

Double Duty

Used strictly as a headphone amplifier, the BHA-1 is well worth the \$1,395 MSRP on the basis of its sonic performance and flexibility. However, those wanting to make it part of a traditional linestage/power, amplifier/speakers type of audio system just got a free linestage thrown in with the deal.

Setup thusly in room two, with a handful of tube and solid-state power amplifiers from Van Alstine, PrimaLuna, Pass Labs and Simaudio, the BHA-1 is an excellent linestage, offering the same characteristics described in headphone mode. It has no problems driving a 20-foot pair of interconnects and its compact profile will integrate easily into your décor or rack setup.

The overall sound is very much like that of the Bryston BP1.5 phonostage we reviewed in 2012: clean, dynamic, neutral and to-the-point. The BHA-1 does not embellish or color the sound delivered. *(continued)*

132 TONE AUDIO NO.54



Mating the BHA-1 to the KEF LS50 speakers and the PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium power amplifier makes for a wonderful combination within the financial reach of most audiophiles. Even at high volume, the BHA-1 (especially in the context of a system utilizing a tube power amplifier) contributes no noise of its own.

The two inputs should be all that most people need to incorporate a digital and an analog source into the system. I'm sure some have suggested that Bryston add remote control, a motorized volume control, etc., and while I'm sure the company's engineering team did ponder these questions, the addition of this functionality would bump the sticker price up considerably.

At \$1,395, this has to be one of the best audio buys going. The tonal quality, versatility as a headphone amplifier and the fact that it makes a killer preamplifier are three great reasons why the Bryston BHA-1 deserves one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013.

Bryston BHA-1 Headphone Amplifier MSRP: \$1,395 www.bryston.com



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April 2013 135

Ferrari Cavallino T350 Headphones

By Mike Liang



errari is well known around the world as a premium automaker. Its iconic prancing horse logo is as recognizable as the silhouette of a Coca-Cola bottle. Owners and admirers of the car consume Ferrari-branded merchandise (T-shirts, caps, mugs, etc.) with equal enthusiasm, but most audiophiles cringe at the thought of automobile-branded audio products; the mediocre reception to the Ferrari-branded Art. Engine floorstanding loudspeaker introduced a few years ago is a perfect example.

Understandably, the famed Italian carmaker does not put its name on standard, off-the-shelf products, so it sought out Logic3 (which is now 36 years old), and the two companies worked closely together to design and build a complete line of headphones and music docks. The Cavallino collection draws its inspiration from Ferrari's GT road cars, while the Scuderia collection reflects the company's F1 racing team.

FEATURE

The \$399 T350 is the top-of-therange headphone in the Cavallino collection, and its attractive tan-colored leather skin wrapped around its aluminum body is an instant head turner. Those feeling more incognito can choose the all-black model. But when you are wearing something from Ferrari, why not attract a little attention?

While the T350s are considered full-size headphones, they are not circumaural (around-the-ear). Instead, they feature ear cushions that rest on the ear (and are thus called supra-aural). For this reason, their passive noise isolation is quite good. The headphones also employ rather impressive active noise cancelation (ANC) for even better ambient noise rejection—maybe not as good ANC as some models from Bose, but it's better than most ANC models I've experienced. But, as with all ANC headphones, do expect some hiss when the circuit is engaged.

The T350 requires a pair of AAA batteries to operate, because a passive mode is not present. Luckily, the T350 sports a ridiculously long battery life. I use the included alkaline batteries for a couple of hours before bed nightly for over two weeks before the battery light turns amber, indicating that the juice is low. Those using rechargeable batteries should consider that the charge stamina will suffer slightly if you do.

Like most modern headphones, the T350 is Appledevice friendly, thanks to its removable audio cable with 3.5-mm plug and integrated microphone and remotebut the designers didn't stop there. The T350 also comes with cables that will work with your Windows, (continued)



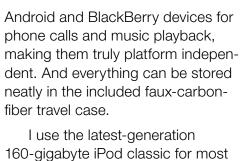
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I use the latest-generation 160-gigabyte iPod classic for most of this review. Listening to Rodríguez' Searching For Sugar Man soundtrack via the Cavallino T350 is a pleasant experience, with his vocals nicely separated from the acoustic guitar and percussion throughout. These are a closed-back set of phones with a very spacious sound—the echo in the track "Cause" feels as if it extends way beyond the boundaries of my head.

The headphones' overall tonal balance is fairly linear through the mids to the upper highs, and they possess excellent sibilance-free extension, with the vocals sounding organic rather than processed. Pink Martini's Smypathique is a go-to album that offers audiophile sound quality while remaining perky. With these phones, there is plenty of air around the vocals in "Song of the Black Lizard," but switching the program material to some classic hip-hop tracks reveals the only shortcoming: The lower bass is somewhat lacking, but part of this is the result of using the iPod directly. These phones will need a proper amp to get the full-bodied bass they are capable of. Plugging into the Red Wine Audio Isabellina DAC/amp, for example, brings Snoop Dogg back to life. Comparing these to a few other recently reviewed phones, like the Logitech UE9000s, also shows the Logic3 phones to be slightly grainy.

Either way, this is a superb collaboration out of the chute. Ferrari by Logic3 has created a competent, stylish and musical pair of headphones worthy of the prancing horse. The big question is whether these will appeal equally to the Ferrari tifosi (Italian for fans) and the audiophiles. Regardless, I'm looking forward to Logic3's next effort, with or without the prancing horse badge.

Ferrari Cavallino T350 Headphones MSRP: \$399 www.ferrari-by-logic3.com





FEATURE

Denon AH-D340 Headphones

By Mike Liang

or 2013, Denon has added a smaller, more-affordable model to its Music Maniac collection of headphones. Visually, the \$300 D340 looks similar to its more-expensive big brother, the AH-D600, and features equally attractive styling, which means you won't be mistaken for a DJ with these phones on. The D340 feels feather light on the head, even lighter than its roughly half-pound weight suggests.

Like the rest of the Music Maniac line, the D340 features Denon's patent-pending pentagonshaped ear pads, which are made of memory-foam cushioning. Intended to be fully portable, the phones include a removable 3-foot cable with 3.5-mm plug, as well as an inline Appledevice-compatible remote and microphone. (The cable plugs into the right side of the phones, which is a bit awkward for lefties like me.) An oversized zippered pouch allows you to tuck the D340 in without unplugging the cable, which makes traveling with the phones easy.

Audio purists can easily source a longer aftermarket cable without the remote for use with your hi-fi system. One of our favorites from ALO Audio works well and produces an increase in performance. (continued)

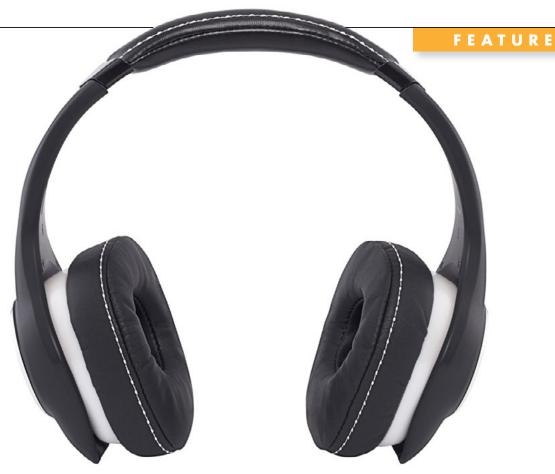
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Plugging into the Bryston BHA-1 headphone amp (which we review in this issue) quickly provides better bass response and a cleaner, less-grainy top end when sampling some jazz tracks consisting primarily of acoustic instruments.

The D340 ignores the current trend of portable headphones—overly lush midrange response, heavy bass and rolled-off highs at the expense of musical accuracy. While these are still not the last word in tonal accuracy, they do exhibit a very transparent midrange and more punchy, dynamic bass response, with a smooth high end.

I threw everything at these Denons: Earth Wind & Fire, Cyndi Lauper, Tiësto, Eminem, Kelly Clarkson, and even some André Rieu. The D340 allows me to concentrate on the music and escape the analytical mode. It leaves very little to be desired for a pair of portable headphones. Denon has done a phenomenal

job tuning them to a higher level than most at this price point.

While I usually have a portable headphone amplifier with me on the go, I find the AH-D340 easy to drive. They work well straight from a phone or iDevice, so unless on a long plane trip, you can probably leave the headphone amp at home and not take much of a hit in sound quality.

Since the launch of the first two Music Maniac headphones last year, Denon has faced a rather tough transition period, with fans of their older headphones criticizing the company's latest efforts. While the D340's design is a far departure from the mahogany ear cups of the past, it is an outstanding performer and worthy of the Denon

Denon AH-D340 Headphones MSRP: \$300 www.denon.com



KEF Blade Speakers

\$30,000 to \$32,000 (depending on finish) www.kef.com

You could get a pair of KEF Blades in the standard black or white finish, but when you have super-cool choices like orange sorbet, lime sorbet or racing red, why would you bother with plain old black or white? Featuring KEF's patented Uni-Q coincident driver and four side-firing woofers, the Blades combine the punch of a big floorstander with the coherence of an electrostat and the imaging of a mini-monitor—remember, KEF made the drivers for the original LS3/5A speaker. The Blades are like getting a Lamborghini for the price of a Boxster, and that's pretty awesome indeed. The full review is coming shortly.



P R I M A R E

THE SOUND AND VISION OF SCANDINAVIA

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

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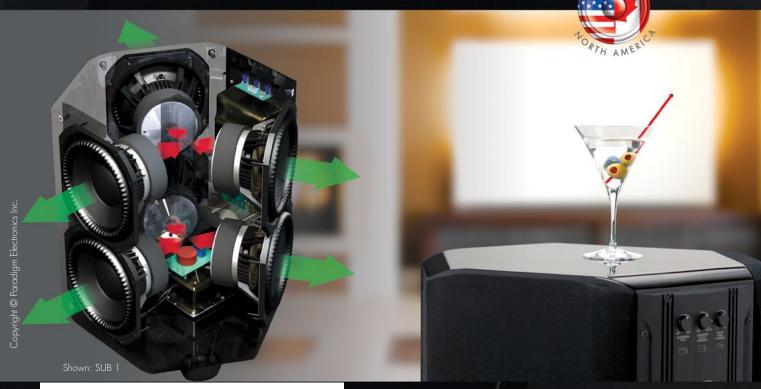
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10" drivers handle the amazing 9,000 watts Peak Power and 4,500 watts Continuous Power the amp delivers through its unique Power Factor Correction feature.

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aligned (two on each side) inside the cabinet in a Vibration Canceling Architecture. As powerful opposing forces of equal magnitude, the vibration-reaction forces effectively cancel each other out. Barely a ripple disturbs the contents of the glass placed on top of the cabinet, such is the degree to which unwanted, distortion-inducing

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† The only company to be #1 Best Price/Value twenty- two times! Inside Track annual independent nationwide survey of consumer electronics specialist retailers and custom installers.

www.paradigm.com



Music First Audio Classic v.2 Preamplifier

\$4,000 www.mfaudio.co.uk

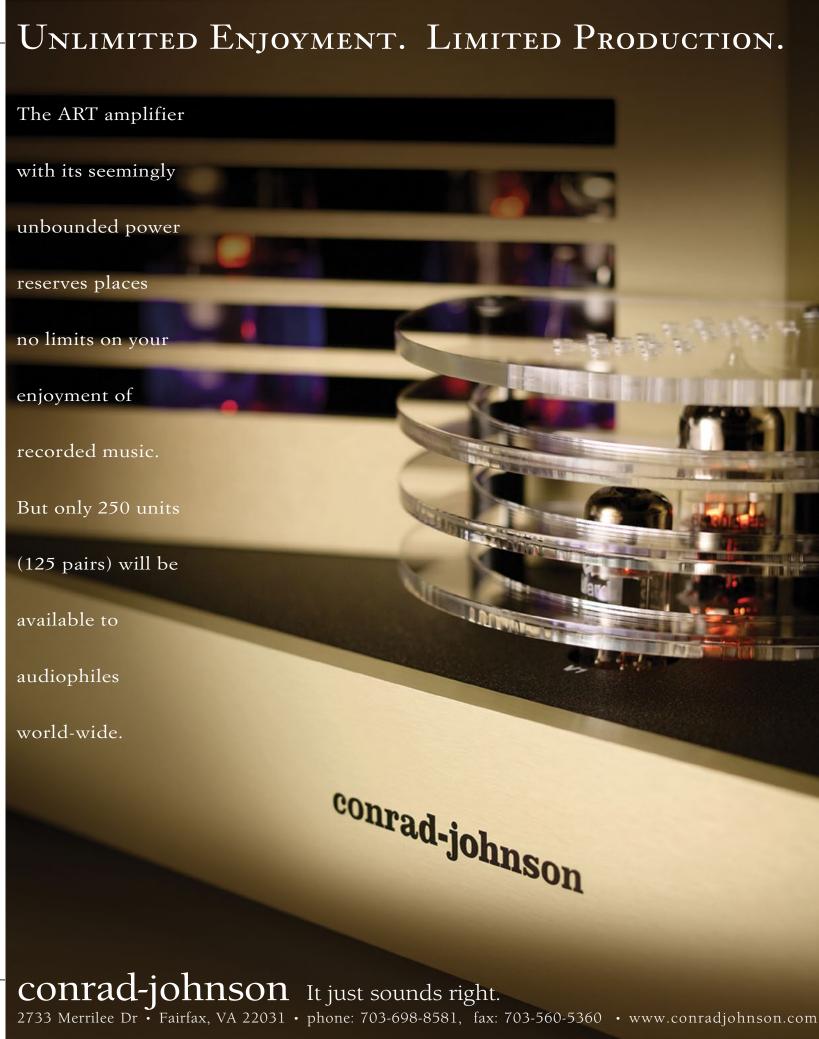
Another interesting take on preamplifier design, the Classic v.2 uses a 24-step attenuation transformer, bypassing the problems with a resistor-based passive preamplifier. How does it sound? You'll just have to hang on for a few more weeks until we finish the review. So stay tuned.



Audio by Van Alstine Ultravalve Amplifier

\$1,999 www.avahifi.com

It's just as tough to build a bad EL-34 amplifier as it is to build a great one, but the Ultravalve is one of the greats. With mil-spec construction quality in a simple, yet elegant chassis, this hand-built power amplifier features point-to-point wiring throughout and top-quality parts. Like your favorite Marantz or McIntosh tube amp, this is a current-day classic that you can hand down to the next generation. Our review is in process.





Simaudio Moon 850P Preamplifier

\$28,000 www.simaudio.com

Calling this a "preamplifier" is somewhat of an understatement. The 850P keeps the power supply in a separate chassis to add grunt and provide a lower noise floor. It also features a plethora of RCA and XLR inputs and outputs to accommodate whatever you have in your system. Whether paired with the 880M amplifiers we reviewed last issue or the amplifiers of your choice, the 850P is the perfect anchor of a cost-is-no-object system. The full review is planned for issue 55. ●

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always look forward to the arrival of houseguests. And, as far as visitors go, the Sonus faber Venere 3.0 speakers make a great first impression—even before the music begins.

With these speakers, priced at \$3,498 per pair, Sonus faber made some compromises, but did so without losing brand cred. To achieve the speakers' reasonable price, Sonus faber moved production offshore to China, in a factory closely resembling its Italian facility. The 3.0s are the flagship of the Venere series, which abandons the classic Sonus faber look, borrowing instead the lyre-shaped cabinet of the company's top-of-the-line Aida speakers. The 3.0s are available with a glossy finish, in either black or white, as well as with a walnut-wood finish for an extra \$500 per pair.

After escorting the speakers up to my listening room and unboxing them, I feel under-dressed in my T-shirt. My review speakers feature white side panels, complemented by a black top and front. I'm tempted to ask the speakers if they prefer their martinis shaken or stirred—the cocktail party music would soon follow. (continued)



REFERENCE 75

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- Jeff Dorgay





G1-A Preamplifier

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You Look Maaaaarvelous!

Sonus faber describes the speaker as having a "lyre shape." I describe it as being shaped a bit like a pear when looking at it from above, with the narrow part at the back raised slightly. The speakers are squared off at the front to create a flat plane for the drivers. Ultimately, this combination of angles, curves and lines gives them a sculptural aesthetic—or perhaps a look similar to those of the robots in Bjork's "All is Full of Love" video. But let's stick with the former descriptor.

The Veneres are sizeable floorstanders: about 4 feet tall, with enough room to house a silk dome tweeter, a 5-inch midrange driver and two 6-inch bass drivers, plus a rectangular port at the bottom. The base is made of strong glass with aluminum connectors at the edges, where you affix the tapered, spiked cone feet. This combination provides a solid anchor for the Veneres, but take note that the spikes are quite sharp at the business end; they will easily pierce carpet or leave noticeable scratches on your wooden floor—or your foot. Consider yourself warned.

Two sets of binding posts facilitate bi-wiring or bi-amping, and the included jumpers make it easy for those of us with only one set of speaker cables.

Strike a Pose

Eager to see if the speakers' sonic capabilities match their good looks, I begin the setup process. The Veneres are fairly easy for one person to move. I appreciate their 47-pound weight (as does my back) after having lugged my reference Piega P10 speakers out of their usual position, which is where the Veneres' placement process begins. After trying to fine-tune their placement in my 17-foot-by-20-foot listening space, I find that the starting point ultimately offers the best acoustics—about 4 feet from the back wall, 2 feet from the side wall, and about 8 feet apart. (continued)

After some toe-in experimentation, I determine that the Veneres require only a small amount for best imaging. Like two polite and conversational party guests, the speakers are not too finicky about where they stand, and their oration inspires active listening.

The Best Of Chesky Classics & Jazz & Audiophile Test Disc offers some helpful tracks for speaker setup, demonstrating the ways in which surround sound can be simulated using a pair of speakers. In one example, David Chesky walks around an omnidirectional microphone tapping on a tom-tom drum. In another example, the experiment is simulated using digital-processing technology. When placed well, good speakers can make Chesky and his drum appear to travel a circular path around the listening room. Very good speakers placed optimally can make it seem as if Mr. Chesky is walking behind the listening position, which is especially noticeable with the digitally processed track. The Veneres prove very capable of this auditory illusion.

Start the Show!

Once optimized, I'm exciting to fire up the speakers—and am quickly impressed. It's clear that Sonus faber put its biggest investment into the Venere 3.0 where the money belongs: the sonics.

First of all, these speakers do a shockingly good job of extending the perceived width of the stage on which the musicians are playing. Aimee Mann's "One," from the soundtrack to P.T. Anderson's 1999 film *Magnolia*, starts very simply, with her voice front and center, which the Veneres render



very well. Later, with the onset of additional instruments, the song explodes out to each side of the soundstage. The speakers manage to bring those bits of music around the edges of the room into the listening area. The same is true with larger orchestral pieces, like Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" concertos. These speakers incorporate that broader stereo image seamlessly into my listening space, with sound floating beautifully around the room.

I will say that the front-to-back depth of the speakers' perceived stage is limited, as one might expect from any speaker in this range. Live at Luther College, from Dave Matthews and Tim Reynolds, is a great test for this, as individual audience members shout various requests and comments toward the musicians. Elements in the distant of the recorded space seem pushed forward toward the plane provided by the Veneres.

While tight and tuneful in the bass registers, the Veneres do not dip below 38 Hz, according to Sonus faber's specs, which is confirmed by my own test tracks. Madonna's "Drowned World/Substitute For Love" offers some very low notes, which are barely audible through the Veneres. But for most people, especially those living in small spaces or condos, limited low frequency be a desirable characteristic to reduce late-night complaints from sleeping neighbors. Those seeking very low, foundation-rattling bass punch may find the Veneres a bit light for their tastes. For most types of music, the bass of the Veneres balances well with the overall mix. (continued)



I enjoy Portishead's "Cowboys," but the vocal effects in this recording can make Beth Gibbons' voice quite fatiguing on an overly revealing system. The song illustrates the Veneres' extended but forgiving highs. The speakers let the overall musical experience shine through, as opposed to drawing the listener's attention to a single, hard vocal edge.

While some more expensive speakers reproduce more nuances, the Veneres tend to take the high road, as if you are sitting further back in the auditorium, where each onstage pick of the guitar, draw of the bow across the cello strings or squeak of the saxophone diminishes sonically over a distance. For example, Beck's "Lonesome Tears" features a single triangle strike with an extended ring; some of the immediacy, sparkle and ambient decay is lost with the Veneres' reproduction, but they still do a mighty good job of it.

Here Come the Papparazzi

It's obviously nor fair or helpful for you, the reader, to compare the Veneres to my Piega

P10s, which start at \$9,500. In absolute terms, the Veneres give up some transparency, realism and detail compared to higher-end speakers. But for \$3,498, the level of balance these speakers offer is stunning.

Sonus faber's voicing choices for this speaker are well thought out, being more musical than analytical. The Veneres are well balanced for many types of music, including rock, classical and jazz, as opposed to exceling only at one genre. They reproduce vocals wonderfully, bringing them to the front instead of recessing them into the mix. The bottom line is that the price is right and the speakers provide countless hours of listening pleasure.

It's very exciting to experience wonderful products like these, which can fit realistically into many audiophiles' budgets. It's hard not to give the Venere 3.0 speakers an enthusiastic recommendation. A few compromises aside, they offer very impressive audio performance. Combining this with their attractive, modern look and bargain \$3,498 price tag makes these a stellar value and very much worth your audition.



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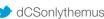
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Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

After spending some quality time with Sonus fabers flagship Aida, I found it very intriguing to see just how much of this lineage could be achieved in such a reasonably priced speaker. All of the style cues suggest that this new speaker has come from the same brain in terms of style. For those not intimately familiar with the top of the Sonus faber range, you'd be hard pressed to tell the Venere 3.0s were made in a Chinese factory—they are that good.

Instead of trying to make the speaker cover a wider range while sacrificing quality, Sonus faber settled for a bit less ultimate bass weight to help keep the range in top shape. Unless you are playing Deadmau5 at club levels in a big room, I doubt you will find these speakers lacking.

The Venere not only has a heavy dose of Sonus faber heritage, it is also a nice balance between the warmer, more forgiving SF of old and the resolution that the Aida brings to the table. The Venere's 90-dB sensitivity rating makes the speaker an excellent match for just about any amplifier, tube or transistor with more than 25 watts per channel on tap. Whether I mated the Veneres to the PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium power amplifier recently in for review, (35wpc/EL34 tubes) or my vintage Pass Labs Aleph 3 (30wpc/solid-state Class A), I couldn't find myself ever requiring more power than this within the 13-foot-by-16-foot confines of room two.

This combination of beautiful sound, timeless visual style and high build quality wins the Sonus faber Venere 3.0 speakers one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013. These are top performers in their price range. Those wishing for a wood cabinet can step up to a walnut wood finish for \$3,998 per pair. ●



Sonus Faber Venere 3.0 Speakers

MSRP: \$3,498/pair (gloss white or black) \$3,998/pair (walnut wood)

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CONTACT

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Jena Labs Valkyrie and Symphony interconnects, Jena Labs Twin 15 speaker cables

Power Cord

Running Springs Audio Haley, Cardas Golden, Golden Reference/ Mongoose

Accessories

ASC TubeTraps, Cathedral Sound room-dampening panels

164 TONEAUDIO NO.54
April 2013 165

Polk Audio LSiM703 Speakers

By Andre Marc

olk Audio has been making high-quality products since 1972. Over the last few years, the company has been stepping up its game at the high end of its product line, beginning with the LSiM707 floorstanding speakers, which we reviewed back in issue 42. The \$1,500-per-pair LSiM703 bookshelf speakers reviewed here capitalize on the same technology and driver advances as the larger 707s, but do so in a smaller package. And like the \$4,000-per-pair 707s, the 703s perform well beyond what their modest price tag suggests.





The three-way LSiM703 employs a rear port and Polk's Dynamic Sonic Engine design, which places the 3.25-inch midrange driver and 1-inch ring radiator tweeter in separate chambers within the speaker enclosure, further isolating the driver units from the acoustic vibrations produced by the woofer. The midrange and woofer cones are constructed of polypropylene, which is injected with air to form a honeycomb structure that combines the benefit of low mass, stiffness and high damping. The crossovers include both Mylar and polypropylene capacitors, as well as non-magnetic air-core inductors, which are less prone to electrical-signal distur-

bance and thus deliver improved transparency. This construction provides a good balance between sensitivity and smooth frequency response, and is indicative of the speaker's build quality in general from the flush grilles, right down to the high-quality jumpers between the binding posts, which can be bi-wired.

Our review samples are finished in an attractive cherrywood veneer. (Ebony is also an option.) The speaker's MDF-based enclosure is exceptionally inert, which a classic knuckle-rap test confirms. I leave the grilles off for all listening sessions, though they will come in handy wherever prying fingers or noses lurk. I find that the LSiM703's bass response and imaging focus benefit from inert stands, and my 26-inch-tall Sound Anchors prove a perfect fit.

Engineering Excellence

The detail paid to the time alignment, transparency and coherency comes through the LSiM703s immediately, allowing the heart and soul of the music to shine, regardless of musical genre. Malian vocal legend Salif Keita's album Papa, with its modal melodies and deep grooves, is a magical experience through the compact Polks, which require proper toe-in to create a convincingly holographic presentation. I suggest the classic equilateral triangle configuration for optimal results. (continued)

GIBRALTAR 1999-2013 RIP ALL HAIL CASTLE ROCK!



Late one snowy night at a Michigan motel, January 1999, I designed Gibraltar speaker cable for my own system. I needed an extremely high-performance cable which would provide true Double-BiWire performance in a single attractive cable. While I needed to optimize a 2-way speaker, in which the transition between woofer and tweeter is above the midrange, the challenge I enjoyed overcoming in those early morning hours was designing a cable which would also be equally effective Full-Range or when used to BiWire a 3-way speaker (in which the bass/treble transition is below the midrange, the midrange information being carried by the treble cable rather than by the bass cable as with a 2-way).

Original Gibraltar's all important basics - superior geometry, almost ideal isolation between the magnetic fields of the bass and treble signals, Perfect-Surface metal, conductor size maximization (AQ's SST), etc. – are the fundamentals of our new Castle Rock cable, as are crucial post-1999 improvements to Gibraltar, such as even better metal and AQ's DBS (Dielectric-Bias System).

You might not notice that Castle Rock's new more nicely sculpted "breakout" (covering where the cable separates into red and black legs) is no longer metal. We have made this all-models upgrade because speaker cables and AC cables carry large magnetic fields which interact with any metal "collar" around the cable.

Smaller ingredients, such as non-metallic breakouts and the new NDS (Noise-Dissipation System) built into Castle Rock, and bigger changes, such as Castle Rock using the same sleek new Signature Series spades and bananas developed for the WEL Sig. Series cables, add up to an important difference in what you hear and enjoy.

Even though the jump up from last-generation Gibraltar to Castle Rock is no bigger than the cumulative improvements brought to Gibraltar over its long life, Castle Rock's own new systems and materials earns it a new name to honor Gibraltar's long-term evolution + Castle Rock's new ingredients.

William E. Low





The Stranglers' classic track "Golden Brown" is a great reference, combining a dry but wellrecorded lead vocal and great melody with intricate interplay between bass and drums. Lesser speakers homogenize these elements, but the Polks shine, keeping the pace and keeping the individual elements separate from one another. I put this tune on repeat for more than a few plays. On the title track of Lisa Hannigan's Passenger album you can hear every breath and lip purse on her closely miked vocals—a tough accomplishment for a speaker in this price category.

While the LSiM703s are not an overly analytical or strident speaker, they are precise in the way that their realistic presentation draws you into the music, and then holds you there. Music lovers will have a difficult time using them strictly for background music. They start and stop transient musical events on a dime, with no overhang, confusion or timing issues. The Polks sometimes even seem to have the authority and realistic weight in the bass region of floorstanders, with the bass guitar and bass drum having real impact and definition. The only trade offs that become apparent after extended listening are the sudden falloff of the deepest bass notes and the last bit of midrange refinement that far costlier speakers offer.

To their credit, the LSiM703s always stay out of the way of the music, allowing the distinctions between different masterings of classic albums to come through

with ease. The speakers also spotlight newer recordings that fall victim to the "loudness wars," and give recordings with excellent dynamic range plenty of breathing room. In this regard, they remind me of my Thiel CS2.4 floorstanders; that's pretty good company, considering that the Thiel's cost four times what the Polks do.

The LSiM703s work equally well with solid-state or tube amplification, making them an easy fit for whatever you have on hand. I fall smitten when pairing them with the Carver Black Magic 20 stereo tube amplifier I just finished reviewing; combining EL84 tubes and the smoothness of the Polks makes for a seductive, userfriendly system.

A Superb Value

The overall feel of the Polk LSiM703s is one of a more relaxed ease, mixed with high-quality construction; nothing screams budget in their sound or appearance. That's the advantage of going with speakers from a company with 40 years of engineering and manufacturing expertise. Polk has hit the bull's-eye with the LSiM703, proving that a big company can easily compete with (and even excel beyond) what a smaller artisan company can accomplish, and do so at a moderate price. These speakers are on my suggestion list for friends on a reasonable budget in the market for quality bookshelf speakers. We are happy to award the LSiM703s one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013.





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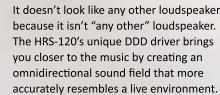
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maintain clarity and finesse, even on complex high-level passages, making it easier to follow each instrument, just as

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To find out more about the HRS-120, or





LSiM703s off to Andre, I was anxious to see just how much of the 707 floorstanders sound was available here. Because the 707. 705 and 703 all share the same components in their *Dynamic* Sound Engine driver design, you really only give up low-frequency weight and dynamics as you come down the range, so those listening in a smaller room aren't really sacrificing much. In my smaller (13-foot-by-16-foot) room, these speakers really rock the place, and a little bit of room gain goes a long way.

While these speakers can

tween amplifiers incredibly well, I share Andre's excitement for using them with tube amplifiers. I have excellent results with the PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium integrated, as well as with my vintage Conrad Johnson MV50. Combining the speakers with the Rega Brio-R integrated amp, a Rega DAC and a Mac mini makes for a smoking system for about \$3,500—which is a perfect place to start your audiophile journey, or just stay there happily ever after. There's never been a better time to be a music lover and an audio enthusiast.

Polk Audio LSiM703 Speakers

MSRP: \$1,500 per pair

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Polk Audio

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www.polkaudio.com

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Amplifier

McIntosh MA6600 integrated amplifier

Digital Sources

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Cable

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The Cost of Real

Boulder's 3050 Monoblocks

By Jeff Dorgay

hat do you get for a whopping \$205,000 dollars?
You get *real* music, provided you have speakers and ancillaries up to the task. Each of Boulder's massive 3050 monoblocks weigh 450 pounds and supply 1500 watts of Class-A power per channel, delivering an experience beyond anything I've ever heard. The price tag of awesome is rarely a small one.

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April 2013 175



You also need a dedicated 220/240-volt line for each monoblock amplifier. My wimpy 20-amp dedicated lines are not enough for me to commandeer a pair of these for review, so I go to the mountains of Boulder, Colorado, home of Boulder Amplifiers. Forget the usual audiophile excuses about how a review can't be written without the product being in your own system, because in this case the Boulder listening room features a pair of Focal Grande Utopia EM speakers, a model I am very familiar with.

"We haven't sent these out for review because no one has enough AC power in their listening room to accommodate these," laughs Boulder's Rich Maez as we tour the factory. And I'm guessing that only a privileged few also have floors stout enough. For those with enough power on tap and hefty floors (and the wherewithal to afford a pair), the 3050s arrive with Colorado-mined black granite bases that perfectly match the asymmetrical shape of the amplifiers. (continued)











CONCERT GRAND SERIES - SYMPHONY EDITION

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(continued)



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The Epitome of Craftsmanship

The visit begins in the machine shop, where the exquisitely machined parts that make up a Boulder amplifier come to life. Each 3050 heat sink is machined from a 115-pound solid billet of 6061-T1 aluminum alloy. Once through Boulder's various CNC machining centers, the amps undergo a series of final finishing operations, ending with bead-blasting and clear-anodizing processes. As impressive as the chassis and heat sinks are, perhaps the coolest part of each Boulder 3050 is the massive power switch, which features a highly polished paddle machined from stainless steel. It's actuation feels like the clunk of a Bentley door.

Shop foreman Ian Balmforth has been with Boulder for over 15 years, having inherited the job from his father, and he takes a tremendous level of pride in his work. The rest of the employees in the Boulder factory share the same level of enthusiasm for their work, often putting their efforts and expertise into different phases of component production and for different models. When orders are ready for a batch of 3000-series components, they work on nothing else until the run is complete. Whereas so many products are built in hours, the Boulder 3050 monoblocks take approximately four weeks each to complete, from the time the raw metal enters the dock until the finished, tested and safely crated amplifiers leave.





Fully balanced, differential power amplifiers from start to finish, the 3050s offer only balanced inputs, and the driver stage consists of Boulder's latest discrete 99H modules. A giant metal tunnel runs through the center of the amplifier chassis, with four separate, potted transformers inside, which helps drop all mechanical and electrical noise to the theoretical minimum.

Power and Control

The Boulder 3050s have more power than anything else you can buy, but sheer watts are not the whole story. Boulder's president Jeff Nelson explains it as a "factor of control," telling me that the more power available and the more devices to distribute the load—there are 120 output transistors in each 3050—the easier and more precisely the amplifier can control the movement of the speakers' drivers and the EMF that the woofer cones generate.

Rich Maez begins my listening session of the 3050s with an introduction to the range. Everything is driven by Boulder's 2010 preamplifier and 1021 network disc player. The 1008 phonostage we reviewed back in issue 27 sits on another rack with a SOTA turntable. AC/DC's "Rock and Roll Ain't Noise Pollution" plays through the 800-series monoblocks (also reviewed in issue 20) with good results. Everything Boulder is famous for is here in spades with this \$12,000 pair of amplifiers: Bass weight and control, lightning-fast dynamics and a big soundstage—impressive and duly noted.

Switching the cables to the 1050 monos and then to the 2050 monos clearly illustrates the progression. Tonality remains the same, but each pair of amplifiers reveals more music than the models before. Going up the range brings a lower noise floor, more weight and more dynamic jump. And the 2050, which has been Boulder's flagship for years, is indeed impressive, with the Grande Utopias turning in a truly grand performance.



For those not familiar with the Focal Grande Utopia EMs, they are one of the world's finest loudspeaker systems, but their stunning level of resolution can disappoint if the rest of the system doesn't deliver the goods, and I have heard this speaker turn in more than one lackluster performance over the years with mediocre systems. (That's my polite way of telling those of you who don't like the Grande Utopias to shut your pie holes...insert smiley face.) They excel here.

Music's New Definition

Wonderful as the 2050s are, the 3050s are a quantum leap in every aspect of performance. Revisiting the AC/DC track is a stunning experience. The Grande Utopias simply liquefy in the room now that the 3050s are powering them; there seem to be no speakers whatsoever, just music. *(continued)*

Tonality remains the same, but soundstage width and depth jumps to another level with the 3050s. The Grandes become even more coherent, fading further into nothingness. I've been listening to *Back in Black* since the day it was released in 1980, and I've never heard it like this. The drums now have the force to convince you that you're listening to the real thing, along with the right texture and tonality of the various drumheads.

Miles Davis' "Freddie Freeloader" stretches out between the speakers, with natural-sounding cymbals and endless texture present in the recording; it feels as if you can hear all the way inside his horn. This speaker-amp combo delivers a similar effect with the piano, which just floats directly out in front of the left speaker and is rendered to perfect scale, as a drumstick cracks down on the rim of the snare and Miles' trumpet glides in so gently you don't even notice it until the sound is there in full force.

These amplifiers deliver unbelievably tight pace and texture in the low-frequency register, regardless of volume level, again giving a feeling of being in the performance instead of just listening to it. Acoustic bass is fleshed out perfectly, with just the right amount of resonance and texture, while electric bass growls as it should.

Unlimited Dynamics

Revving up the tempo with a dose of hard bop, Rich goes for some Freddie Hubbard, whose horn on "Philly Mignon" blows me back in the listening chair—Maxell-man style.

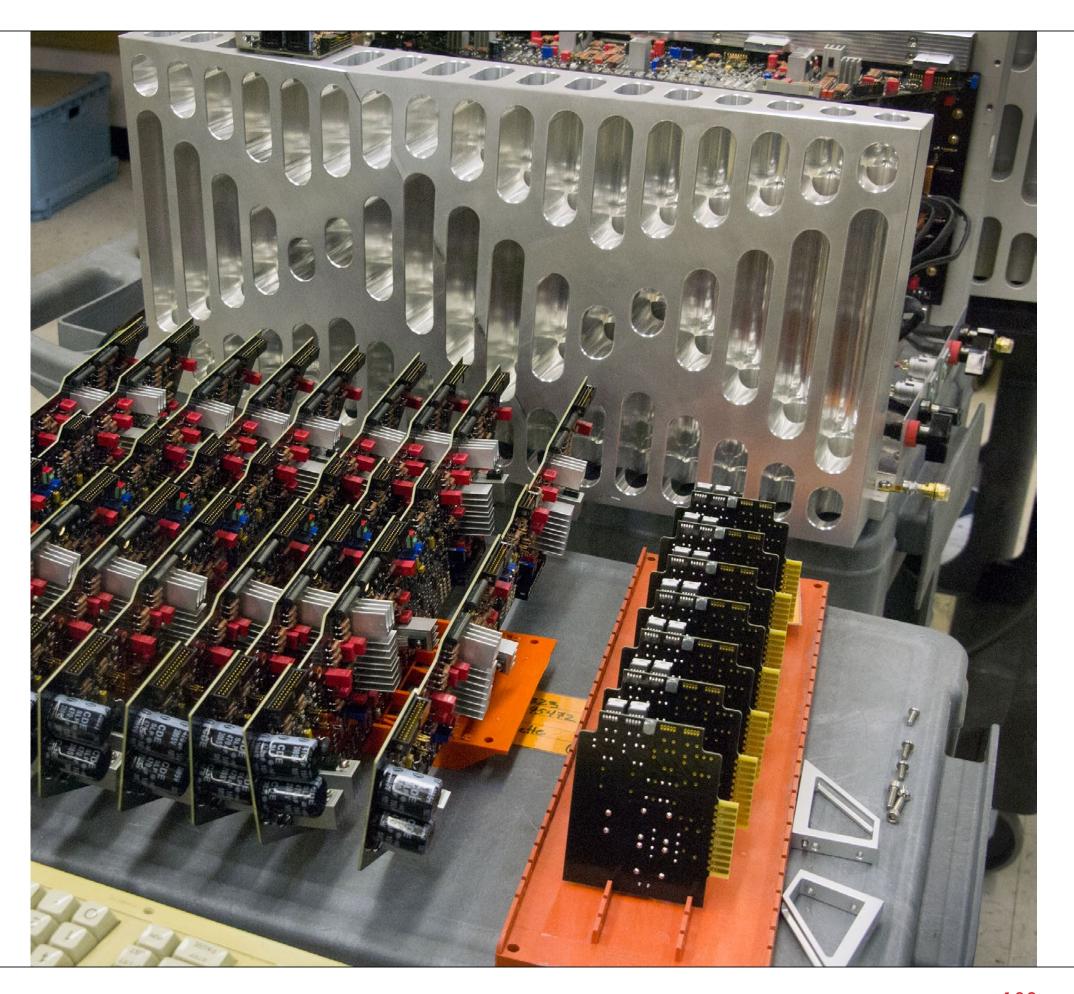
The complete lack of clipping or compression continues to amaze me as the hours roll by. The opening bit to Pink Floyd's "Welcome to the Machine" feels as if you are in an elevator 6 feet under the floor, moving up through solid matter to listening level and then up another three stories.

The bongos in Bob Dylan's "Everything is Broken" take on a life of their own, sounding much larger than life. While I've often dismissed Dylan's *Oh Mercy* album as flat and uninvolving at the standard 16-bit/44-kHz resolution, it comes alive in all three dimensions in this system. I don't even want to listen to vinyl!

More time goes by as I investigate countless tracks that I've heard time and time again on many systems. I'm continually amazed by the new experiences these amps deliver—from the Beatles to Metallica. As Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong run through "Isn't this a Lovely Day," I feel as if the room's walls are missing and the performers are walking around me as they sing.

Playing music through the Boulder 3050 monoblocks is hallucinogenic. Continually stunned by everything I choose, I don't want to leave the listening chair, but by now it has become dark and everyone but Maez and Nelson have long gone home for the day, so it's time to call it a night.

Boulder achieves the ultimate with the 3050s: They resolve more detail than anything I've ever experienced, yet they are never harsh or off-putting in any dimension. *(contained)*





As I listen to quite a few albums I am infinitely familiar with (some of which are not known for their sound quality) the music comes alive through the Boulder/Grande Utopia combination in a spectacular manner. I'll go on record to say that this is the most musically lifelike system, coming the closest to the real thing I've

Meeting the Goal

Boulder president Jeff Nelson

of the 3050s. They truly disappear, becoming a conduit of music unlike anything I have experienced.

The paradox of the Boulder 3050s is twofold: Hearing them will reset your bar in terms of what is possible in the world of reproduced sound, even if you only listen to average recordings. They will also spoil you for anything else. You don't really need that 401k, do you? You'll be too old to enjoy it anyway, right? For our readers fortunate enough to afford a pair of 3050s, I guarantee you will not be disappointed.

In addition to otherworldly sonic performance, Boulder amps come with a level of craftsmanship that is also beyond anything else l've experienced. Most Boulder amplifiers produced over the company's history are still in use, and most are still owned by the original owners.

Boulder doesn't do "mid-model updates," and a quick glimpse at eBay shows only a couple pieces for sale on the secondary market, and they command high prices. (Three of the six sellers say their reason for selling is that they bought the next piece up in the Boulder line.) I can't imagine where you would go after owning a pair of the 3050s.

Those a little less well heeled might consider the 900-watt-perchannel 3060 stereo amplifier, which sells for \$115,000. It will still require a single 30A 240-volt outlet, but Rich Maez assures me that it offers up a very enticing experience.

Having spent plenty of time with some of the world's top amplifiers, I can tell you that the Boulder 3050s deliver the goods. This is not a case of paying three times as much for a miniscule increase in performance; this is a mind bender. You'll never be the same.

Boulder 3050 Monoblock Amplifiers

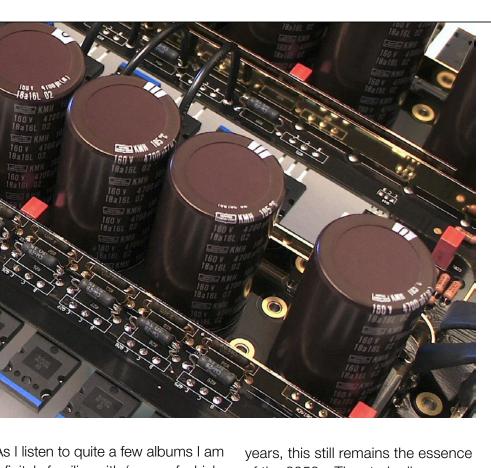
MSRP: \$205,000 per pair (including granite bases)

MANUFACTURER

Boulder Amplifiers

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ever had the pleasure of listening to.

claims his company's ultimate goal is to produce an amplifier devoid of sonic signature, one that lets the music come through as it may. For this reviewer, Boulder has succeeded fantastically. In the early 1990s, in his review of Boulder's original 500AE power amplifiers, Stereophile editor at the time, J. Gordon Holt, said that the amplifiers "are just not there." Though incredible progress has been made in 22

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Compact, Powerful, Versatile ...Stunning



Dynaudio Vireless Speakers

By Rob Johnson

ynaudio's reputation for coaxing great sound from a small cabinet remains intact with the Xeo 3 speakers, which add wireless operation to the mix, as do the floorstanding Xeo 5s. This is indeed an exciting prospect for those not wanting to deal with a traditional amplifier-preamplifier-DAC setup, or the looming cable mess. For Dynaudio's Xeo speakers, the term "wireless" is only slightly misleading, as AC power is still required and you still need to connect a small interface to your computer, but you can kiss interconnects and speaker cables goodbye!



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Synergy Solid State Amplifier





The modestly sized Xeo 3s are 7 inches wide, 10 inches deep and 11 inches tall, and are available in white or black, with either glossy or satin finishes. The front grilles disguise a 5-inch woofer and 1-inch soft dome tweeter derived from Dynaudio's Excite X12. This small size allows for multiple placement options. Our art director has been using them as near-field desktop speakers for some time now with excellent success. (I received a Marge Simpson growl as I pried them away from her for this review.) (continued)

Those preferring to mount the speakers on stands will have the best results using 24- to 30-inch-tall stands, which will keep the tweeter close to ear height. The speakers' rear-firing port does not interfere with operation when close to the wall, so placement on a tabletop or desktop also works well. Dynaudio offers its Stand 3X matching stands (available in gloss black, gloss white, matte black or silver finish), which feature cable management for the Xeo power cord and retails for \$350 per pair. If using the speakers on a tabletop, desktop or shelf, I advise placing something small, soft and squishy beneath the speakers to act a buffer between the woofer and said surface. Dynaudio markets its SF1 speaker foot base for \$85 per pair as a solution for such applications.

The Xeos have an MSRP of \$1,950, with the wireless transmitter costing an extra \$350. It's worth noting that operating the speakers does not require interfacing them with your current Wi-Fi setup; they have their own direct 2.4-GHz wireless connection from the transmitter to the speakers. Plugging the transmitter directly into your computer eliminates the need for the provided power supply, which further minimizes desktop clutter.

While a nearly \$2,000 price tag might seem high at first for a pair of compact speakers, the Xeo 3s are each equipped with a pair of 50-watt onboard power amplifiers—one for the woofer and one for the tweeter. Because the digital amplifiers integrated into the speakers is a PWM (Pulse Width Modulation) design, it recalculates the incoming digital signal data in a way that the drivers see the data much like an analog sine wave. This offers the least amount of signal conversion loss, but does limit the files that can be played to 24 bit/48khz. Dynaudio's well-written manual will take you through the full setup in just a few minutes. I run Windows 7, and my initial trepidation melts away, as the Xeo 3s' setup requires just a few mouse clicks; our art director concurs that the Mac side is equally trouble free. (continued)



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Setting a Course

There are a few switches on the back of the speaker boxes with which you will need to familiarize yourself. The power switch activates the 50-watt built-in amps; once the speakers are on, the remote puts them in low-power standby mode when the speakers are not in use.

The speakers also sport a few other switches, which enable various usage scenarios. You can designate each speaker as either a right or left channel module in a stereo setup, or you can use them both in mono mode. When using the Xeos as a main stereo pair, or as rear speakers in a home-theater setup, one left and one right speaker are the obvious choice. For those wishing to fill a larger space with sound, or those not worried about stereo imaging, the speakers can be set to mono—a cool feature if you need sound reinforcement for a party.

Note that each pair of Xeos has one speaker with a small blue LED light behind the grille, which blinks to acknowledge that the remote signal is active. While the speakers communicate with each other to preserve the same volume level, there is no volume control on the speakers themselves—so don't lose the remote!

Multiple pairs of Xeos offer enormous versatility for those wanting sound throughout their listening space. A second toggle switch on the rear panel of the speakers assigns one of three zones—A, B or C—and each transmitter can be assigned to any of the zones. All speakers can be set to receive the audio signal from one transmitter and one source, thereby playing the same content on all of them.





Alternately, you can plug different sources into different transmitters (purchased separately) and assign that audio signal to any speaker pair.

These scenarios facilitate, for example, playing computer-based music on one pair of Xeos in a bedroom, while the main room hosts a movie from your DVD or Blu-ray Disc player. The volume of the Xeo pair in each room can be adjusted independently by their respective remotes. Again, refer to the well-illustrated manual for setup assistance.

Born to Fly

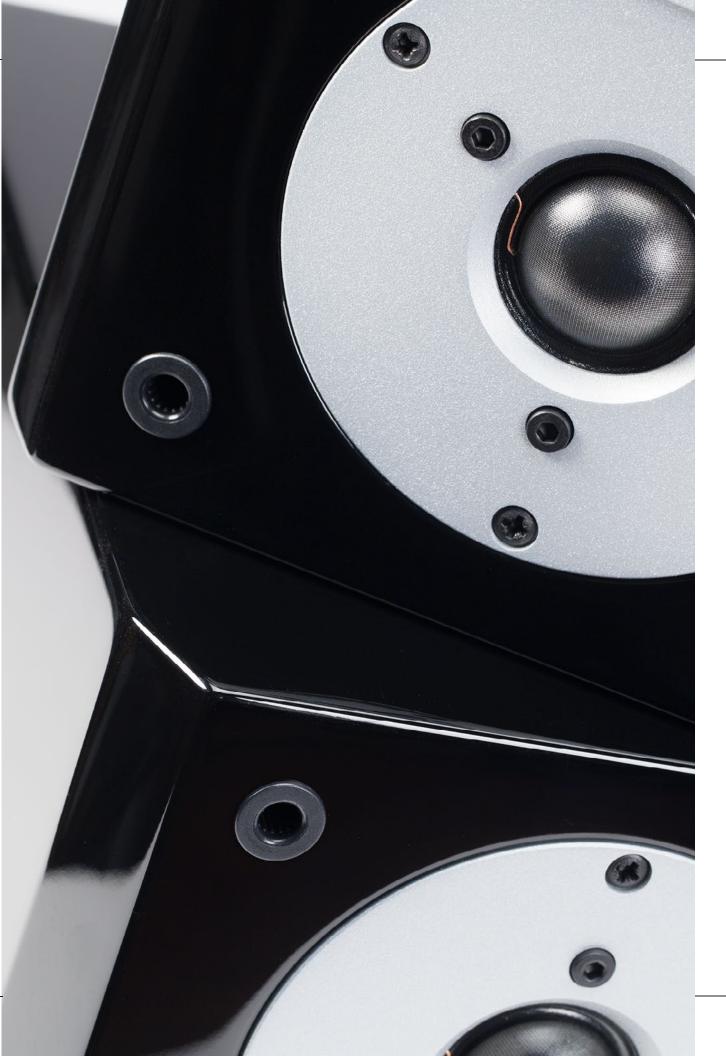
The Xeo 3s perform beyond what their small size might initially suggest. The internal amplifiers are well matched to the speakers, optimizing the sound produced and ultimately offering great value. As with all the other Dynaudio speakers I've experienced, the hallmark ease and midrange clarity of the brand is well intact here. The richness of Anjani's voice on the title track to her 2006 album, *Blue Alert*, alongside the delicate and tuneful rendering of piano and saxophone notes, demonstrates just how well the Xeo solution works to create a satisfying musical experience.

Waldeck's "Slowly" illustrates the Xeo 3's ability to generate solid, dynamic bass, despite its small enclosure. Magma's "Horn Antenna" further reveals the low-frequency capability of these speakers. Again, table mounting will add a little bit of LF gain and grunt, but at a slight loss of imaging finesse. *(continued)*

The speakers reproduce the other end of the spectrum with equal ease and precision. The cymbal strikes in Norfolk & Western's "Letters Opened in the Bar" illustrate a gentle ring and delicate decay.

Further listening with recent Blue Note releases on XRCD confirms the ease with which the Xeo 3s handle acoustic instruments. The gentle vocal styling present on Jakob Dylan's first solo effort, Seeing Things, combined with the acoustic guitar on the opening track, "Evil is Alive and Well," demonstrates the large sound space these speakers can reproduce without losing the delicacy of the track to wireless transmission.

The only restriction to the Xeo system is the 24-bit/48kHz limit of incoming files; for now, those with major highresolution music collections will not be able to enjoy fullbandwidth audio with a Xeo system. The Dynaudio Xeo 3 speakers present great value. fantastic sound and excellent build quality to the music lover who is perhaps not ready to go for a full-blown audiophile system, but who is dissatisfied with the similarly priced wireless offerings from Sonos, B&O and Bose. In this respect, the Dynaudio Xeo 3 is miles ahead of the competition in terms of its natural delivery and tonal finesse.



Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

Of course I had to torture these speakers with some Iron Maiden, Slayer, Van Halen and Zeppelin just to see if they could take it. And like the Confidence C1 IIs I've been using as a reference in room two for a year now, these tiny Danish marvels rock the house—or in this case, my desk. Using the Xeo 3s on either side of my 30-inch Apple Cinema Display makes me wonder why anyone would ever want a pair of headphones.

The mix is immersive, with the stereo image unfolding between me about a foot in front of my head, as I blast David Lee Roth's "Ice Cream Man," and then quickly segue to Maiden's "Powerslave." The small, wireless Dynaudios provide fatigue-free listening during long photo-editing sessions, and underline just how much they have in common with the Confidence series. This is where you can really reap the benefit of a compact speaker produced by a major speaker company that builds its own drivers, and that possesses extensive research and design capabilities. The technology trickle down is tough to ignore.

Even if the Xeo 3s don't turn you into a sound-crazed audiophile right away (but they just might), don't forget that analog input. It's a great way to augment the sound of your television, or perhaps sneak a turntable into the mix. Plugging the Pro-Ject Debut Carbon table (paired with the Ortofon 2M Red cartridge and Lounge MM phonostage) into the Xeo expands my desktop/small-room experience tremendously. Spinning some of my favorite albums in this space has me forgetting all about the high-res files on my Mac mini.

Everyone on the *TONEAudio* staff who had a chance to play with the Xeo 3s agrees that they are excellent in every way, from their subtle aesthetics to their ease of setup and use. We are happy to award them one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013.

Dynaudio Xeo 3 Wireless Speakers

MSRP:

\$1,950 per pair \$350 for the Xeo wireless

transmitter \$350 per pair for optional

\$85 per pair for optional
Dynaudio SF1 speaker foot

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PERIPHERALS

THE QUALIA INDIGO PHONOSTAGE

A Purist Approach

By Jeff Dorgay

nalog music playback has a lot in common with analog photography: More often than not, the average person on the street thinks of it as an antique process from an arcane age. But as you and I know, those who do engage analog music relish the subtleties it provides. Some even become wildly evangelical about the experience, while others quietly build a temple to it.

INDIGO

Of course, there are many paths to enlightenment, and those paths often come down to a matter of personal taste. Much like the photography enthusiast who uses the same Leica M body armed with a 35-mm Summicron lens no matter where their photography travels take them, some analog enthusiasts rely on one turntable, tonearm and cartridge. Those looking to maximize this type of system will cherish the Qualia Indigo phonostage.

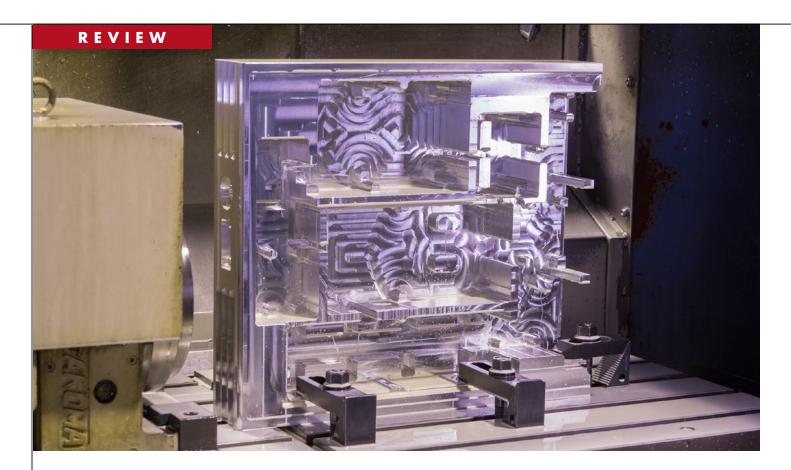


Tracking through the first side of the Beatles Revolver is a revelation—and this is the true benchmark of a stratospheric component. The Indigo illuminates the finest details, ones I didn't even know were there. Ringo's drumming, for example, has texture that it never possessed in my system before—and I've been listening to this record for a long time. His voice in "Yellow Submarine" is richer than I remember, especially while accompanied by the soft backup vocals of Lennon and McCartney, who seem as if they are whispering from the side of the control booth. In the past, those backup vocals always felt somewhat subdued in the mix.

Iron Maiden proves even more enlightening. The maxi-single of "Two Minutes to Midnight," from *The First Ten Years—Up the Irons* box set, lays down a barrage of rapid-fire drumming behind layers of guitars, all perfectly rendered and awash with texture and dynamics. The Indigo gives this music exactly what it requires. I quickly switch back to my other reference phonostages (the Simaudio MOON LP810 and the Audio Research REF Phono 2 SE) and they both sound flat, two dimensional and blurred by comparison, especially when playing Iron Maiden.

The Cost of Excellence

The Qualia is not for everyone. The three-box setup commands \$60,000. A trip to Tokyo to meet the designer, Masanori Fujii, reveals the diligence that went into what's beneath the system's exquisitely machined exteriors. Our first stop is well outside of Tokyo in the Nagano Prefecture, where we visit the facility that builds the casework for Qualia. The shop is spotless and highly organized, and also has jobs for Mitsubishi Motors and a few other electronics manufacturers in the queue. We see a raw chassis sitting on the bed of a five-axis CNC mill, waiting for final cutting operations to take place. *(continued)*



The final chassis are taken to be measured in a clean room, where a CMM (coordinate-measure-ment machine) verifies dimensions to .001-inch tolerances compared to the original CAD documents. Qualia pays meticulous attention to the chassis, which aides the phonostage in two ways: The individual chambers machined out of the solid-aluminum block create individual quiet chambers for each stage of the electronics, mechanically and electrically isolating the gain stages from the power supply; it also creates a finely polished, anodized finish that will last a lifetime and beyond.

Tranquility

The only other experience I've had that matches my time spent with the Indigo is taking photos with the Leica S2 medium-format digital camera. As it turns out, Fujii-san is a master photographer and cinematographer in his own right, so we decide to make a side trip to the Leica store in Tokyo's famous Ginza shopping district, where I get the chance to capture some images with the S2.

Other digital cameras always take a moderate amount of "post processing" to get the color

balance and sharpness of the image just right, picking up grain and noise in the process. Images captured with the S2 are so free of artifacts that they are ready right from the camera's initial capture. High magnification of these images reveals a subtle smoothness of tonal gradation that just doesn't happen with my favorite Nikon and Canon DSLRs. But you don't notice what you're missing with the lesser cameras until you compare the images with something that is better by a significant order of magnitude.

This is what the Indigo brings to the table sonically. Listening to the intro of "Pusherman" from the Super Fly soundtrack strikes a meaningful chord, and Fujii-san has become a pusherman of sorts himself, getting me hooked on the sound of the Qualia Indigo phonostage—it's positively addicting. After nearly four months of listening to the Indigo while comparing a wide range of phono cartridges, I can't get enough. I would say it even exceeds the Vitus MPP-201 in terms of ultimate resolution and musicality. Just when you think the bar can't be raised any higher, a new challenger arrives. This is a high mark indeed. (continued)

Audiophile-Quality 'Table for Under 300 Bucks

Pro-Ject Debut III w/ Ortofon OM-5



Cartridge Matching and Setup

Because the Indigo phonostage does not allow any loading adjustments and its gain is fixed at 69 dB, setup takes no longer than the time required to unbox the two separate mono preamplifier stages and the power supply. The power supply weighs about 30 pounds and each preamplifier weighs about 45 pounds, with two custom umbilical cords to connect the three boxes together.

Single-ended RCA inputs and outputs are the only thing on the tidy rear panel. The Indigo has a 50-ohm output impedance, allowing for some distance between it and your linestage if need be. It had no problem driving a 16-foot pair of Cardas Clear interconnects to the ARC REF 5 SE linestage, but for the majority of my listening I went with a 1-meter pair for ultimate signal integrity.

Wading through a dozen different phono cartridges reveals that cartridges with impedances ranging from 4 to 15 ohms pair best with the Indigo. Consequently, the Lyra Atlas (4.2 ohms) proves perfect; the 30-ohm Clearaudio Goldfinger is less so. Interestingly, the Denon DL-103mr (14 ohms) turns in a phenomenal performance here, revealing more musical detail and dynamics than I've ever experienced with this cartridge.

While I doubt most users will be mating the Qualia with a \$379 cartridge, when I paired the same cartridge with the AVID Acutus Reference SP table and SME V tonearm, more than one audiophile friend was fooled into thinking they were listening to something far more expensive. The Ortofon SPU is another wonderful match for the Qualia, and will have to be revisited when my Thorens TD-124 returns from Switzerland with a full complement of Swissonor upgrades. Even on a stock TD-124 with the SME 3009, this was an intriguing combination, providing an incredibly weighty presentation. Tracking through the Music Matters Blue Note catalog was heaven, with horns and drums exploding from my speakers in a way that only the big, idler wheel table brings to life. (continued)



But the last combination I try turns out to be the most musical of all when paired with the Indigo: the Miyajima Kansui cartridge and Durand Talea tonearm, again mounted on a second AVID Acutus Reference SP table. The yin to the Atlas' yang, the Kansui is highly resolving in this setup, and so detailed that it even reminds me of the Lyra Olympos. This combo offers a smoothness that rivals that of openreel tape, with an effortless top end that is never etched. After listening to this for the last few months, my lust for an open-reel deck and a highly limited software selection is quenched.

How Do You Measure Tone?

The posthumous Jimi Hendrix release, *People, Hell and Angels*, is a perfect disc to illustrate the sheer body of the Indigo. This phonostage does not overwhelm any part of the frequency spectrum with dynamics, yet it is true to the music in a way that goes beyond what one could ever measure. If you've spent any time in front of a wall of guitar amplifiers, you know the complex patterns of overtones they present—and the Indigo reproduces them just right.

An equal case can be made for acoustic instruments and the human voice, with which the Indigo achieves greatness. It carries the tonal richness and complexity of acoustic music and vocals, tricking your brain into thinking you are listening to a singer or a solo saxophone in your room.

The stratospheric price and performance of the Indigo does not make for many peers, but the obvious competitor that many will think of at this price is the Vitus MPP-201.

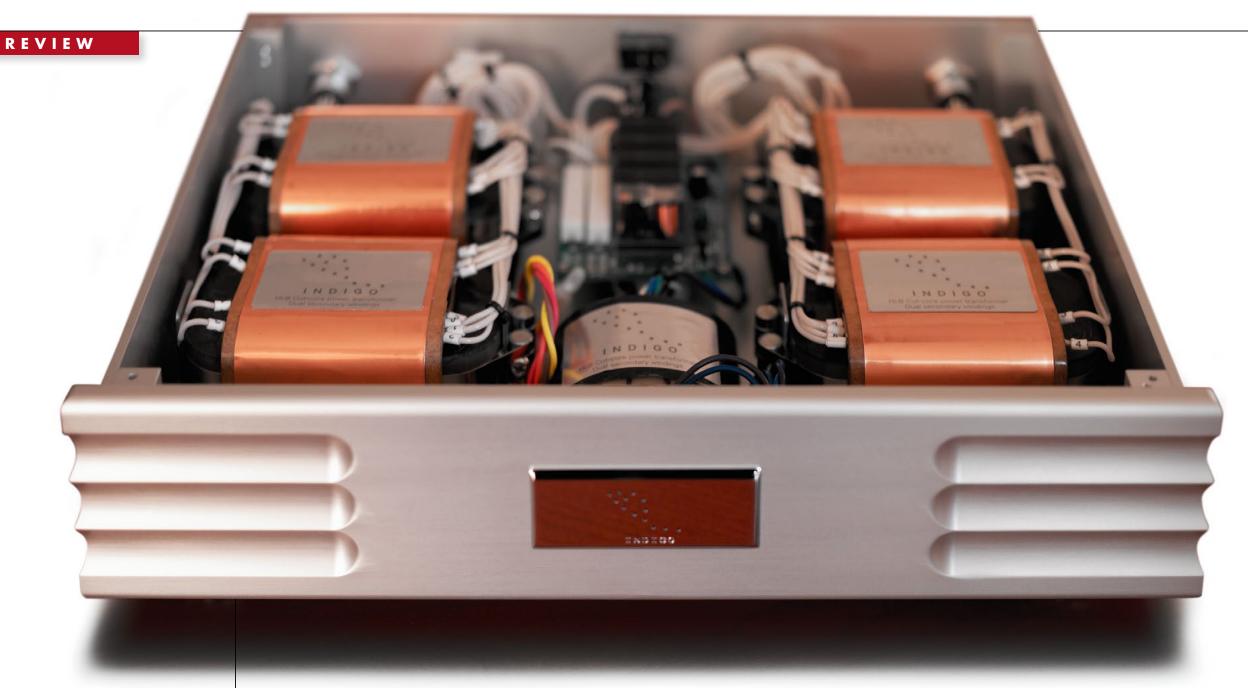


The Indigo does not whack you over the head, overwhelming you with dynamics like the Vitus MPP-201 does. It overtakes the listener slowly, engulfing him or her as a master Go player would, letting you feel in control of the situation until it is too late and you realize surrender is the only prudent course.

The first few guitar notes of "Horn," from the current remaster of Nick Drake's *Pink Moon*, instantly puts your mind at ease. The Indigo goes further than just eliminating grain, it completely eliminates the stress and tension surrounding reproduced music, which truly flows through this phonostage, in a way that even the mighty Vitus cannot match.

This makes for hours of fatigue-free listening. Especially with much of today's current vinyl pressed from digital sources, the extra tonal body that the Indigo provides goes a long way with making these records more pleasurable. A good example of this is than the new Wallflower's release, *Glad All Over*, the big sound of which is distinctly digital in nature, yet the Indigo renders it with a more delicate feel than the other phonostages at my disposal can muster.

The old saying about the "space in between the notes" couldn't be more appropriate when describing this phonostage. Every aspect of its analog reproduction (provided you have the perfect cartridge for a mate) has a bigger dose of reality attached. Cymbals fade a little longer, drums have more resonance, vocals have more palpability, etc., etc. (continued)



I didn't think a solidstate phonostage could produce width and depth on this grand of a scale. Much like the Robert Koda K-10 linestage we reviewed a few issues ago, the Indigo phonostage renders music without a trace of "sound," which makes it feel like neither solid state nor tube in its presentation—again, bettering the fantastic Vitus in this regard.

Finally, a review of the Indigo is not complete without discussing the sheer space it can generate. Until this

phonostage was plugged into my system, I didn't think a solid-state phonostage could produce width and depth on this grand of a scale. A test pressing of the self-titled *Creedence Clearwater Revival* has an impromptu listening panel mesmerized by the way the band members fill the listening space, with the universal comment being "I've never heard it sound like that..."

Indeed Impressive

For \$60,000 you should get magic, and the Indigo Qualia phonostage delivers it in spades, the only caveat being that it is intended for the more monogamous audiophile. But I'm guessing that, if you're playing in this league, you have the time and resources to find the perfect cartridge to complement your system. (Or you could just take my word for

it and buy a Lyra Atlas—it will be a happy marriage indeed.)

Masanori Fujii has been kind enough to allow me more time to evaluate the Indigo, so I'll be able to try it with an even wider range of cartridges and source material. I'll report back towards the end of the year with a "long-term" perspective. At present, it represents the high-water mark in my analog experience.

Qualia Indigo Phonostage MSRP: \$60,000

MANUFACTURER

Qualia & Company

CONTACT

qualia-highend.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

AVID Acutus Reference/ TriPlanar/Lyra Atlas

Preamplifier

Robert Koda K-10

Power Amplifier

Pass Labs Xs 300 Monoblocks

Speakers

GamuT S9, KEF Blade

Power

IsoTek Super Titan, IsoTek Power cords

Cable

Cardas Clear

Accessories

Furutech DeStat, DeMag, Audio Desk Systeme RCM



A Compact Canadian Masterpiece

By Jeff Dorgay

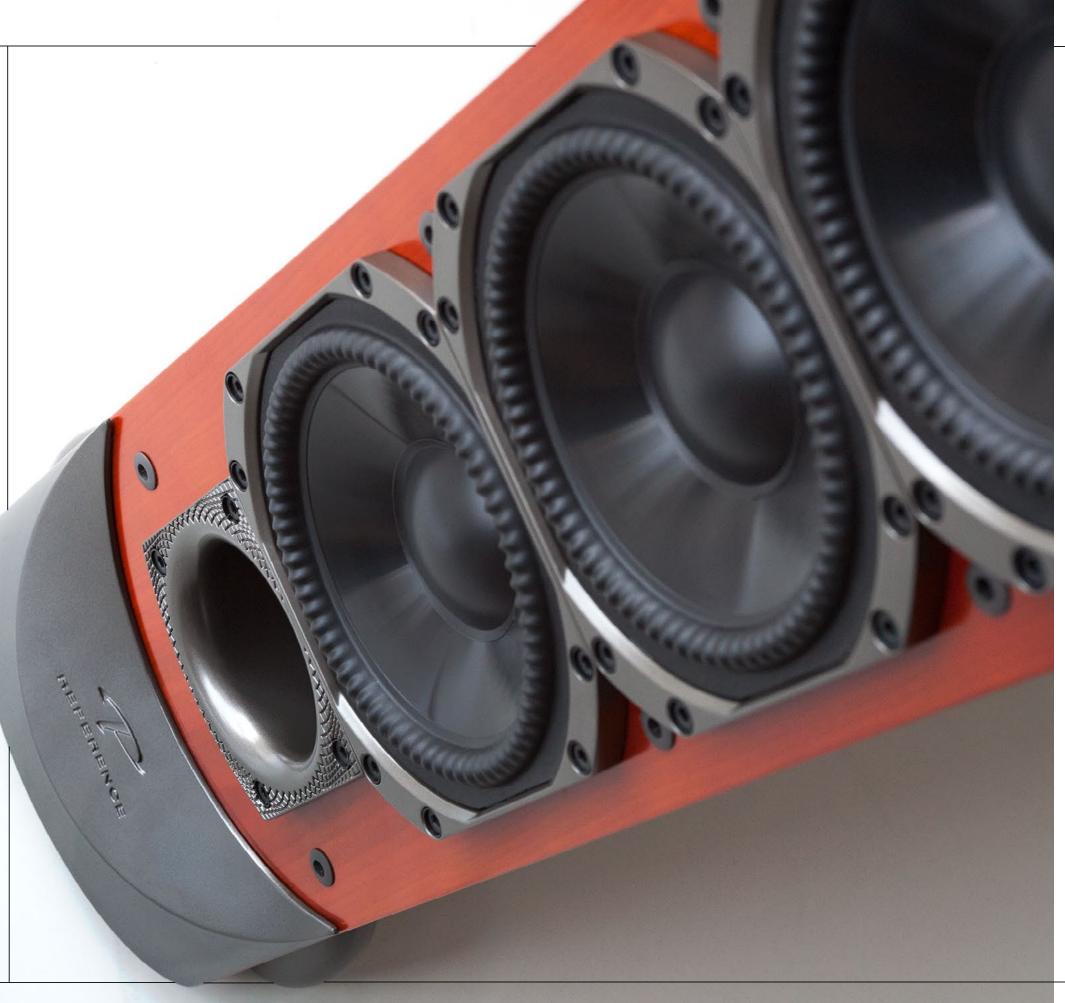
poiler Alert: The
Paradigm Reference
Signature S8s are
amazing speakers that
don't cost a small fortune. They offer
performance way beyond what you'd
expect for \$8,998 a pair. Many of us
know the Canadian company for its
smaller speakers and great hometheater systems, but the Signature S8s
have major audiophile cred.

Eddie Jobson's *Theme of Secrets* paints an enormous sonic landscape in all directions, with low-level detail and spatial cues galore. It's a fantastic yet obscure audiophile freak-out record that, in a great system, feels like a surround-sound mix from two channels, which is a test that the Ref Sig.S8s pass handily. The beryllium tweeter and line-array-type configuration give the speakers a high degree of coherence, which is a major contributor to their ability to reproduce vocals—male or female—with such lifelike ease.

The '80s club classic "Sex (I'm a...)" from Berlin encourages twisting the volume control. The Ref Sig.S8s keep the driving disco beat firmly anchored without losing track of the seductive lead vocals, while also keeping all of the backup vocals sorted, as they pop in from all over the soundscape, mildly suggesting what our lead vocalist might be. The cranky, out-of-phase lead vocals in Sheep on Drugs' version of "Waiting for the Man" takes a similar turn, with a great mix of vocal layers and spacey electronic effects zooming all over the listening room—further showcasing the fact that these speakers possess extraordinary imaging abilities.

Those with more traditional tastes, take notice: The Paradigms perform equally well rendering the delicate shadings of Anne Bisson's "Dragonfly" or Annie Lenox's strong lead vocals in "No More I Love You's." Tracks like these reveal that the integration of the tweeter and midrange driver directly below it is fantastic.

Thanks to their 92-dB sensitivity, the speakers barely budge the power meters of the 200-watt-per-channel D'Agostino Momentum stereo amplifier that I'm currently enjoying. The Momentum really grips the Ref Sig.S8s' four 7-inch woofers, proving that you won't likely need to pair these speakers with one of Paradigm's massive subwoofers.



REVIEW

Justin Timberlake's "Let the Groove Get In" is the only track with which I can actually push the multiple woofers to their boundaries, with the Momentum's needles moving in earnest to the song's opening bass riff.

Taking further advantage of the powerful low-frequency abilities of the Ref Sig.S8s, I demo some Aphex Twin and there's loads of low-end rumble, but everything else is smooth sailing. If you really need to rattle the foundation of your house, or love your movies loud, by all means peruse the Paradigm catalog. However, most of us will be thrilled with the bass response that these speakers deliver. Best of all, the high sensitivity of these speakers allows a wide range of compatible amplification, making them a fantastic anchor for your system. We can continue the tired chicken/egg argument of whether one should prioritize the speakers or source components-but I suggest building around a pair of speakers that you love, because they ultimately require more effort to interface with your environment, visually and audibly. And what's not to love here?

Quality is Key

The Ref Sig.S8s may have a relatively small footprint—about 4 feet tall, with a base measuring 8.5 inches by 20.5 inches—but they are massive on quality. *(continued)*

Paradigm creates such high-value speakers by designing and building all of its drivers in house at its factory near Toronto in Canada. Unlike many lesser speaker companies, which are often forced to work with off-the-shelf drive units—and sometimes make up for a driver's inadequacies by tweaking the crossover network, and thus produce a substandard result—Paradigm builds it all from the ground up.

Visiting Paradigm last year revealed what a large proportion of its factory is devoted to research and design. Paradigm is one of a very small group of speaker companies that not only builds their own drivers, but also only builds drivers specifically to meet the needs of a speaker, once that speaker's objectives are finalized. And because the company has such a large operation—the factory is almost 260,000 square feet—there are tremendous economies of scale in terms of the raw materials they can purchase.

Even Paradigm's tiniest Atom mini-monitors (\$398 per pair) feature these same levels of design and engineering excellence and attention to construction detail. I'm sure that a company outsourcing all of these components would have to charge twice as much for a similar speaker—and many do.

The Cradle Will Rock

Near the end of this review, HDtracks announced the release of the first six Van Halen albums on 24-bit/192-kHz download. What better way to evaluate the performance limits of the Ref Sig.S8s than to crank Van Halen for an afternoon?

I start slow, with David Lee Roth on "Ice Cream Man," and the speakers illuminate the delicate vocal stylings of this track, which is full of echo and reverb, with S8s reproducing Eddie Van Halen's acoustic guitar flawlessly. Midway through the track, as the rest of the band chimes in, the Ref Sig. S8s have no problem accommodating the driving bass line and the drums. The amount of clean, undistorted sound these speakers produce is as impressive as the finesse with which they deliver it. *(continued)*





What is the M1? An ultra-powerful state-of-the-art monaural amplifier that runs so quietly it's a critical listener's dream.

What's all the fuss about? The M1 offers the highest sound quality at all levels, flat frequency response into any load and is stable into the most difficult loads. It will release all the dynamic potential inside the source signal — not only the full dynamic range of the signal but those sonic details and subtle nuances that are rarely heard due to power limitations within most amps.

Who designed the M1? It was designed in our advanced research center in Canada and manufactured in our Toronto facility. No off-the-shelf elements, the M1 is completely proprietary.

Myth Buster! The M1 is not a digital amp, there are no A/D or D/A converters in the signal path.

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These are far from just being rock-androll, brain-damage speakers. They do finesse as well as they do loud, making them a fit for whatever music you enjoy. Bill Bruford's The Sound of Surprise, for example, is an album that bridges classic jazz patterns with some great prog rock riffs. On the track "Half Life," piano floats amidst Bruford's slower interludes, but the Ref Sig.S8s can instantly accelerate when the program material dictates. Playing acoustic fare also underlines the speakers' worthiness of great amplification. The beryllium tweeter strikes a perfect balance of resolution, clarity and timbre that benefits from being fed thusly. These speakers easily reveal the subtle differences between the megabucks power amplifiers we had in for issue 53.

Having used these speakers with a wide range of amplification, I'd suggest going the tube route if you have to compromise your amplifier budget. The slight softness of a modestly powered tube amplifier will provide a more musical result overall than an inexpensive solid-state amplifier. For those of you closed to the idea of a metal-domed speaker, I submit that it was probably the amplification used that ruined the experience for you, not the speaker.

The Rega Brio-R integrated amplifier proves an excellent low-price, high-performance partner for the Ref Sig.S8s, as does the PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium integrated tube amp. And it just gets better as you go up the food chain. The new 200-watts-per-channel Plinius Hautonga integrated amplifier that we are currently auditioning is a brilliant combination with these speakers, offering wonderfully lifelike sound and limitless dynamics. With these speakers, those with amplification in the \$5,000-to-\$10,000 range might even be scratching their heads, wondering why their more well-heeled audio buddies bothered spending more. (continued)



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Under the Hood

Beneath the veneered cabinets. which are available in beautifully finished cherry or gloss black, lurks the best technology that Paradigm has to offer (though the company has just released a 30th anniversary model that looks very intriguing...). The 1-inch pure-beryllium dome tweeter of the Ref Sig.S8 is coupled to a 7-inch cobalt-infused aluminum midrange, which utilizes a dual-layer voice coil and an enormous die-cast basket that acts as a heat sink—critical for a driver that takes the bulk of the bandwidth in this three-way speaker system.

Four 7-inch woofers round out the package, with an on-axis spec of –2 dB at 39 Hz, and a typical –3 dB at 24 Hz in an average room. Our trusty *Stereophile Test CD* confirms that the speakers can deliver on a strong 30-Hz track, with a dip at 25 Hz and then quickly fading off after this point, even with the massive Pass Xs 300s driving them. This is very impressive performance for a pair of \$8,998 speakers.

Don't let the compact footprint fool you: These slim speakers weigh 100 pounds each, so unless you turn green when someone makes you mad, get some help to unpack and move them into place. The Ref Sig.S8s come with small rubber feet, and a full set of spikes.

Paradigm suggests that you use the speakers with grilles on, as this is the way they were

voiced. Always one to follow directions, I go this route and concur that this is a slightly smoother sound, though it makes the high-frequency response slightly more pronounced if you remove them, especially when using a tube amp. Plus, there's so much craftsmanship here that it just seems a pity to hide it all beneath those grilles!

Setup is straightforward, beginning with the speakers about 9 feet apart on the 15-foot short wall of my main listening room, with a slight toe-in to make the listening position about 10 feet back. As with any speaker, I like to key in on the bass response first—going for the best combination of power and locking them into the room, and then making slight adjustments for imaging later. The Ref Sig.S8s are not terribly fussy speakers to work with, thanks to their great power response and wide dispersion, so even those with modest skills will be happy with the results. But, if you're so inclined, 30 minutes of serious geeking out will reward you with a more three-dimensional soundstage.

If you're looking for a pair of speakers that offers serious five-figure performance without a five-figure pricetag, consider the Paradigm Reference Signature S8s. In the scheme of today's wacky audio world, where \$100k speakers are no longer rare, these are refreshingly great—and we are happy to give them one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013.

Paradigm Reference S8 Signature Speakers

MSRP: \$8,998 per pair (available in cherry or piano black)

MANUFACTURER

Paradigm

CONTACT

www.paradigm.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

AVID Volvere SP turntable, SME V tonearm, Koetsu Urushi Vermillion cartridge

Digital Source

Light Harmonic DAC, Sooloos Control 15 server

Preamplifier

ARC REF 5 SE

Amplifier

ARC REF 150, D'Agostino Momentum stereo, Rega Brio-R integrated, PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium integrated, Plinius Hautonga integrated

Cable Cardas Clear

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Hitting the Sweet Spot

The KEF R300 Bookshelf Speakers

By Jerold O'Brien

ull-line speaker manufacturers, like Focal, B&W and the brand featured in this review, often deliver the most bang for the buck in the middle of their product ranges. These products may not have the ultimate performance of the flagship, but they don't cut corners either, as can often be the case with entry-level models. And while KEF has been garnering a lot of justified praise on its specialty speaker models, like the Blade and the LS50, the potential buyer looking for a relative audio bargain would do well to investigate the KEF R Series. There's some fine stuff happening in this range, folks.

The R300 is the larger of the two bookshelf

models in the R Series. And unlike its smaller sibling, the two-way R100, the R300 is a three-way bookshelf, which is not the most common of layouts for a stand-mounted speaker. It is interesting to note that the smallest speaker in KEF's Reference Series, the 201/2, is also a three-way stand-mounted model. I've heard the Reference 201/2 on a number of occasions and have always been really impressed with its honest presentation of music. I'm here to tell you that the R300 gets within a stone's throw of the 201/2, doing so at a much more reasonable price; the R300s cost \$1,800 per pair, compared to \$6,000 for the 201/2s.

Technology and Performance

Unlike KEF's former middle range, the XQ Series, which were great sounding and gorgeous to boot, these R Series products won't win any beauty contests. They are simple-looking boxes, albeit ones that are superbly finished and constructed. The review pair of R300s arrives in a nice black-gloss finish. (Rosewood and walnut veneers are also available.) The beauty of this range is in the technology and performance. Some nice touches with this line include the magnetically attached grilles and the strapless bi-wire capability, which makes for easy bi-wiring and lets you forget about losing the gold-plated brass strap usually supplied with speakers in this price category.

The R300 features yet another generation of KEF's Uni-Q driver, which is central to most KEF products, giving them their signature coherent sound. For those unfamiliar with the Uni-Q, it is KEF's way of making the midrange and treble drivers into a point-source radiator—the often sought-after but rarely attained ideal for a lot of speaker manufacturers. This generation Uni-Q benefits from the same technology in KEF's flagship Blade speakers. The midrange cone is made from an aluminum-magnesium composite, which makes for much-desired lightness and stiffness. Ribs across the surface of the driver cone minimize resonance, while the surrounding material provides further dampening. The tweeter, which is made from the same material, is rear vented to reduce backward pressure, minimize

distortion and increase power handling. KEF's tangerine wave guide fits over the tweeter diaphragm to further control the already wide dispersion characteristics, particularly those at the highest frequencies.

The 6-inch bass driver is also a stiff and strong aluminum affair, anodized with a satin-like material, with a large aluminum voice coil and a vented magnet assembly behind it. One quickly realizes that this rather conventional-looking box is anything but—there is a lot of technical sophistication packed into this small cabinet.

Initial Assessment

I play music through the R300s for 80 hours before optimizing them up for serious listening, with perfect placement via a pair of 26-inch Sound Anchor stands to put the Uni-Q driver at ear level relative to the sitting position from my couch. With this placement, the front plane of the speakers is 3 feet from the back wall, with each unit 3.5 feet from the sidewalls. A slight 5-degree toe-in puts the optimum listening point with the most-stable imaging just over 9 feet from the speakers.

Serious listening begins with some small-ensemble jazz selections. First up, the self-titled Bill Frisell, Ron Carter and Paul Motian Trio, from three musicians needing no more introduction. On the album's Miles Davis/Ron Carter bluesy composition "Eighty One," the R300 captures the interplay of these musicians in a seemingly large acoustic space. (continued)



The speakers reproduce Carter's muscular acoustic bass without bloating, but with a tightness, depth and scale that is surprising given the small stature of the speaker. Drums appear dramatic, with a snapping snare that shows off the quick acceleration of the Uni-Q driver. Cymbals sound physically higher in the mix and have a textured shimmer with plenty of decay—this tweeter is indeed a honey. In the midst of all this, Frisell's quirky guitar stays locked front and center, as occasional biting chords punctuate the mix. The R300 paints an engaging and natural portrait of this trio playing at the top of their game.

Next up, the Tord Gustavsen Quartet's newest CD, *The Well*, on ECM; the soulful R&B composition "Circling" proves highly satisfying. The R300 puts Gustavsen's piano squarely between the speakers in a very deep space, keeping the recording well organized amongst the rest of the players. The brushwork on drums emphasizes the low distortion of the Uni-Q driver—there is some real magic going on in this small cabinet.

The Best for Last

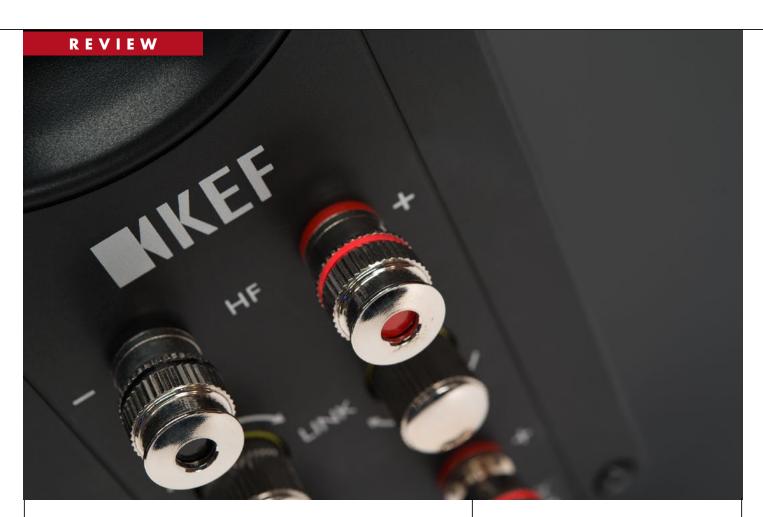
I turn to vinyl for some female vocals, starting with Ella Fitzgerald's "Black Coffee," from the soundtrack to the 1960 film Let No Man Write My Epitaph. This sparse ballad is no more than Paul Smith on piano accompanying Fitzgerald, and brings to the forefront the precise imaging capabilities of the Uni-Q. Fitzgerald's lead vocals are focused dead center, yet you can hear her moving around the mic during the tune, with soft piano dancing in the background all the while. This level of realism keeps me riveted to the chair for the entire album.

REVIEW

Patti Smith's voice is a tough one to capture without it sounding overly harsh or shrill, and can go awry with speakers based on metal drivers, degenerating her vocals into a ball of harshness. The ease with which the R300s handle this intricate voice instantly reveals just how effectively KEF has tamed stray resonances. Howard Tate singing his 1960s hit, "Get it While You Can," illustrates the integration of these drivers, with the rise and swell of his raspy, wide-ranging voice revealing no anomalies. Rocking out with Television's album Marquee Moon is just good fun, yet playing this rock classic louder than is prudent demonstrates how much punishment these speakers can handle—they are much like the Blades in this respect. And it does get the juices flowing!

As with all small speakers, the R300s do a fantastic job spatially with large-scale orchestral music. They excel at delivering the timbre and tonal richness of The Reiner Sound via Classic Records' 200-gram reissue of this Living Stereo classic. And while the fundamentals of the plucked double bass remain true to sound and texture through the R300s, there is definitely a limited reach to their low-frequency abilities. (continued)





Should your musical taste require more extension, consider KEF's R400b powered subwoofer, a perfect companion to these stand speakers. But that's another review...

With so much attention focused on KEF's amazing LS50, the R300 holds its own surprisingly well. It shares the LS50's Uni-Q driver technology and to some extent its voicing, but it is a different animal indeed. The LS50 offers a slightly wider frequency response, with a smidge less midrange purity. However, it does appear to play slightly louder, so each will appeal to a different user. Think of the LS50 as a European version of the Lotus Esprit, and the R300 as its slightly heavier yet slightly more-comfortable U.S. sibling.

It should be noted that the R300's reasonable 88-dB sensitivity means anything over about 25 watts per channel is a go—depending on your room size, of course. Tubes or solid-state power amplifiers work equally well, and the R300 is more than resolving enough to illustrate the differences. In the end, the R300 is proof positive of an exciting product from a legacy company that understands vertical integration. ●

KEF R300 Bookshelf Speakers MSRP: \$1,800 per pair

MANUFACTURER

KEF

CONTACT

www.kef.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

VPI Classic 1/Sumiko Blackbird

Digital Source

Simaudio MiND streamer, Rega DAC

Preamplifier

PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium, Klyne SK5-A

Power Amplifier

PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium, Krell KSA-50

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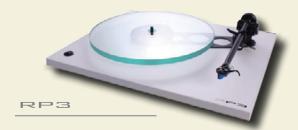


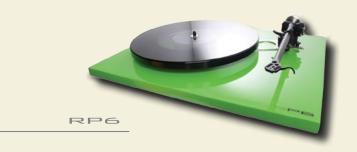
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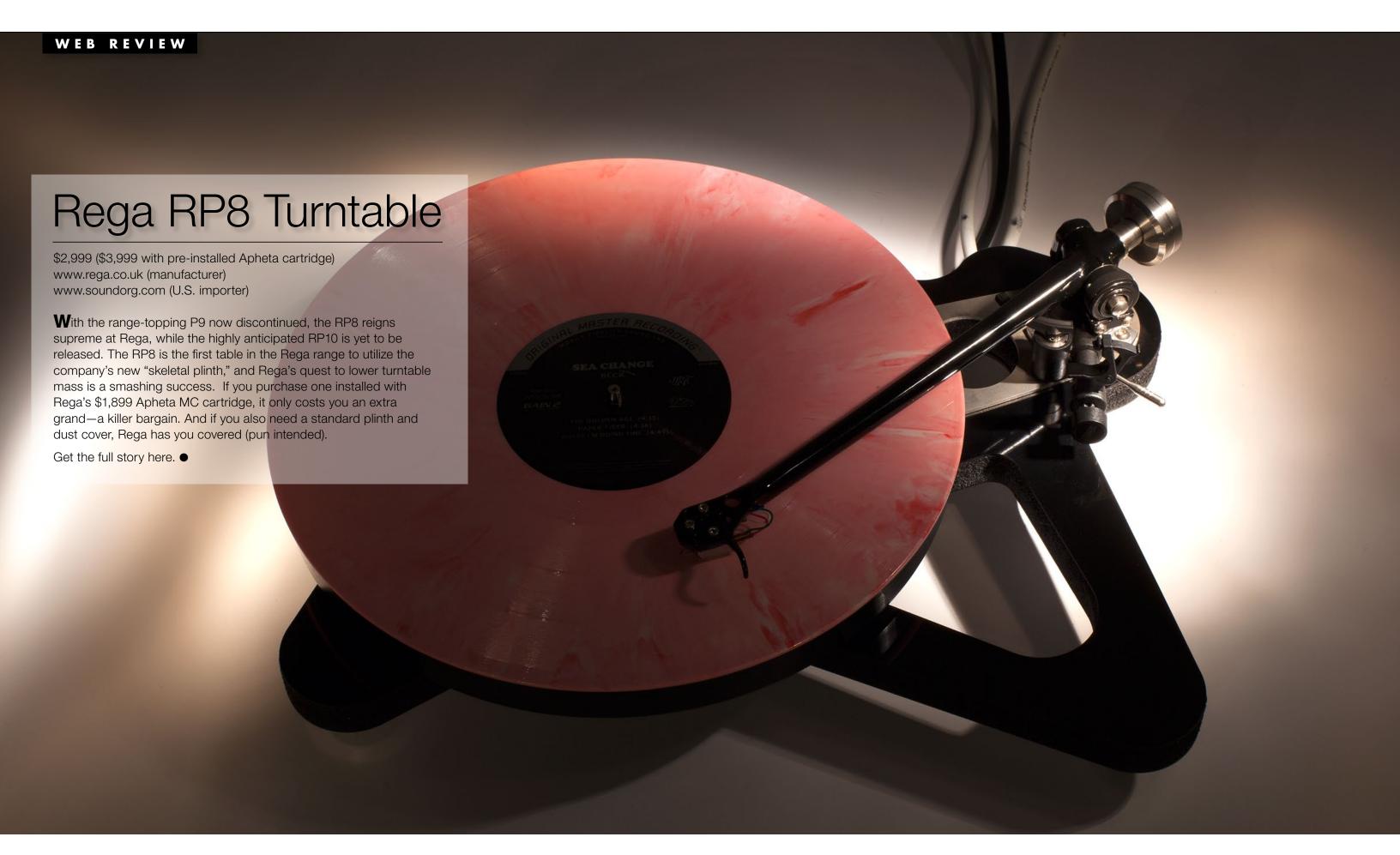
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Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

hile I do spend considerable time hunting for bargains on the pages of eBay and at garage sales throughout the Pacific Northwest, my friends and family members are often the ones who find the coolest stuff for me. Recently, as I was in the midst of a journey restoring a pair of Acoustat 1+1 speakers, TONE staff member and lifelong friend Todd Sageser pinged me on Facebook. "Want my old 2+2s?" he asked? How could I refuse?

So it was off to Seattle to pick up a pair of speakers that have been around for decades. When I told this tale to Jonathan Spelt, an old audio buddy and owner of Ultra Fidelis, he laughed and said, "I remember the day I sold Todd those speakers!"

An hour later, after sharing many great car and hi-fi stories, I began cleaning up the 2+2s. The speaker's "socks" had been stained light beige, likely from years of apartment living with roommates who were obviously smokers. But after a few days soaking in a concoction of OxiClean and pure Clorox bleach, they come remarkably clean, with the polyester fabric still intact. My only remaining option was to dye them black—though I did also consider tie-dyeing them...

Stay tuned as we bring these classic electrostats back to their former glory.





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The Cable Company: www.thecableco.com

Cardas Audio: www.cardas.com

Conrad Johnson: www.conradjohnson.com

dCS: www.dcsltd.co.uk

Dynaudio: www.dynaudio.com

Echo Audio: www.echohifi.com

Estelon: www.estelon.com

German Physiks: www.german-physiks.com

GamuT: www.gamutaudio.com

JM Labs/Focal: www.audioplusservices.com

JL Audio: www.jlaudio.com

IsoTek: www.isoteksystems.com

Lyra: www.lyraanalog.com

MartinLogan: www.martinlogan.com

McIntosh: www.mcintoshlabs.com

Meridian: www.meridian-audio.com

Mobile Fidelity: www.mofi.com

Mystere: www.mystere-usa.com

Music Direct: www.musicdirect.com

Music Matters: www.musicmattersjazz.com

Music Millennium: www.musicmillennium.com

Nagra: www.nagraaudio.com

Naim: www.naimusa.com

Octave: www.octaveaudio.de

Paradigm: www.paradigm.com

Primare: www.vanaltd.com

Qualia: www.gualia-highend.com

Red Wine Audio: www.redwineaudio.com

Rega: www.soundorg.com

Rogers HiFi: www.rogershighfidelity.com

Simaudio: www.simaudio.com

Soul Custom: www.soulcustom.com

SoundStage Direct: www.soundstagedirect.com

Totem: www.totemacoustic.com

Upscale Audio: www.upscaleaudio.com

Vicoustic: www.vicoustic.com

Wadia: www.wadia.com

Wireworld: www.wireworldcable.com Vienna Acoustics: www.vanaltd.com

VPI: www.vpiindustries.com