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2012: Here's to another 30 Wonderful Years

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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



H

ere's a great, inexpensive tip to make your hi-fi system sound a lot better: Shut it off. Really. Walk away from it for a few days and forget about it. No cheating by going on a record-buying spree either. Do something completely unrelated to hi-fi for a little while. Think of it as a fast for your ears.

Inspired by the book *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*, by Matthew R. Crawford, I picked up a vintage motorcycle and broke out the box-end wrenches handed down to me by my grandfather. It's a 1979 Kawasaki KZ1000 LTD, the same model I had back in 1981 when I was listening to a pair of Acoustat 2+2s—great memories all around. Nothing helps you to forget about room acoustics and optimizing VTA quite like synchronizing a quartet of carburetors.

As easy as it is to get carried away with all the awesome gear at our disposal, it's also sometimes easy to forget our true enjoyment of music. Perusing various Internet boards, I see a lot of banter and arguments about minutiae, and precious little enjoyment. So shut off your system for a bit and shift your focus. Just as a great hi-fi system can help shift your mood away from your daily grind, sometimes one's hobby or leisure pursuit can become equally toxic, and that's when it's time to take a vacation.

Typically, the Memorial Day weekend is one that I spend rocking out, exploring new music and doing a lot of record shopping. But this year, I shut the door on room one and two, left the week's record purchases in the shrink-wrap and did some vehicle maintenance—in silence. I ran my errands in the Miata with the top down, just taking in the sounds of the environment, and got my hands good and greasy working on the bike.

This therapy worked brilliantly. Three days of no hi-fi helped me realize just how much I do enjoy listening to music and that my system sounds pretty darn good after all. And now I'm thinking that my garage system is in need of an upgrade for future days of wrenching. A bit of classic rock might make cleaning all those greasy parts a little bit more enjoyable.



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NEW CONTRIBUTORS



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Madelaine Coffman

Madelaine Coffman is the Founder and Artistic Director of Heretic Opera, a company which creates new works of music theater for online distribution. Heretic Opera's upcoming production, Valentine, is based upon her original story and libretto. She is also the Design & Web Consultant for Coffman Labs, where she helped to develop and voice the G1-A, a modernist take on the classic analog preamplifiers of the hifi golden age. Madelaine received her training as an opera singer and performing artist at Mannes College of Music (NY), HB Studios (NY), Portland Actors Conservatory, and Portland State University. She is a founding Steering Committee member of Portland Emerging Arts Leaders (a member of the Americans for the Arts' Emerging Leaders Network).



Liza, our cartoonist, exercising her vacation rights.

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INFECTED MUSHROOM

Roseland Theater

Portland, Oregon

April 26, 2013

By Connor Willemesen
Photos by Jeff Dorgay



Infected Mushroom unleashed an auditory and visual onslaught on a packed audience at Portland's Roseland Theater in late April. Playing an uninterrupted 90-minute set, band members Amit Duvdevani and Erez Eisen performed from massive pods covered in kaleidoscopic digital projections. Huge arrays of subwoofers filled the 1400-capacity venue with bass frequencies that were felt as waves of acoustic pressure.

It comes as no surprise Infected Mushroom knows how to throw a good party. Since 1999, the veterans have performed across the globe, including stops at Coachella and North America's largest dance festival, Electric Daisy Carnival. Such longevity is not born of complacency. Having evolved from its trance roots, the Israeli duo incorporates elements of electrohouse, drum-and-bass, and heavy metal to create a singularly dark and dynamic sound.

Clearly designed for larger spaces, the act's enormous array barely fit inside the Roseland. Twin globes enclosing the duo's performance platforms towered to the ceiling and stretched the entire width of the stage.
(continued)

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LIVE MUSIC

Situated in the balcony, dual projectors transformed the event into a glowing psychedelic cinema. Visuals that depicted neon city streets, alien landscapes, and outer space flashed in sync with the music.

Playing most of their latest album, *Army of Mushrooms*, Eisen remained behind his decks to mix while Duvdevani handled vocals. Abandoning his pod, the latter bounded about with boisterous verve. During a cover of the Foo Fighters' "The Pretender," Duvdevani's thundering voice turned the song into a metal power ballad. His singing proved quite versatile, shifting styles to deliver a harmonious rendition of "I Wish" before leading the audience through a communal "U R So Fucked."

A majority of the set focused on fast-paced dance tracks. As Eisen spun together layers of bass and percussion from his perch, Duvdevani jumped, danced, and yelled. Cranked to maximum volume, the sound system hardly did justice to vocals or higher notes. But to complain about sonic nuances misses the point. Infected Mushroom gave the crowd what mattered—crushing dance beats powerful enough to be felt and heard, and a cutting-edge digital display with visuals worthy of the group's suggestively psychotropic name. ●

The ARC SP-11 Preamplifier

By Ken Kessler

R

esiding at the top of the heap for at least three decades, Audio Research Corporation preamplifiers are almost default purchases for certain types of tube lovers. ARC preamps are adventurous in their technology yet conservative in execution, so they appeal to audiophiles who like to minimize risks. They're perfect for listeners who want state-of-the-art sound, while knowing that the maker will still be in business at the end of the listening session. And the unit won't self-immolate.

Such "steadiness" wasn't always so, as owners of the most important in the SP series, the SP-6, will recall. That preamp went through so many revisions that it became a totem, almost a stand-up comedian's joke, for high-end instability (commercial, I hasten to add, not electrical). By the time the SP-11 arrived, however, Audio Research was in possession of almost Mercedes-Benz-like gravitas. With today's Reference models, including the current REF 5 SE and REF 10, ARC purchases are no-brainers.





When the SP-6 arrived in 1978, Audio Research had already earned a place at the front rank of high-end manufacturers—remarkable when you consider that the company was only eight years old. Founder William Z. Johnson's company made a rapid transition from modifier of Dynaco units to a distinctive brand with its own circuits and its own look; the earliest preamps actually shared faceplates and chassis with Dynacos. The SP-6 marked a big break from modded Dynas, while the SP-10 of 1982 introduced two-chassis topology with separate power supplies.

In October 1985, ARC unveiled the SP-11 at the price of \$4,900, which signified another evolutionary step from its all-tube forebears. (Note that the price is equivalent to \$10,600 in today's money, pegging it not far off the price of a REF 5 SE.) This unit was a hybrid, foreshadowing the mature, apolitical and now fairly standard practice of exploiting the best of both worlds. And while I'm aware that there are cultists who would happily debate into the wee hours the merits or demerits of tube versus solid-state rectification, I am not one of them. I'm more concerned with the end than the means.

For the SP-11, ARC devised a preamp in which every active stage used a triode tube and a FET; the total complement was six 6DJ8s/ECC88s. The resultant marriage was the blessed mix of valve sound with solid-state noiselessness and distortion that's impressive even by 2013 standards. Indeed, everything about the SP-11 will allow anachrophiles to insert it into any system you can put together today, with one exception: It predates our current fetish for fully balanced operation, so it has no XLR outputs.

That, however, is as moot a condition as all-tube versus hybrid, and there are plenty of products on the market today without the balanced option—including a few from ARC itself. I certainly wouldn't let it preclude the acquisition of a mint SP-11 if one were to come my way. (Indeed, I'd love to hear *TONE* publisher Jeff Dorgay's SP-11 side-by-side with a REF 5 SE.) And a mint one has to be worth \$4,000 of anyone's hard-earned pay. *(continued)*



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Just look at the faceplate: It gives you everything you could want in a full-function control unit, and then some. Like a precious few tweaky units out there, the SP-11 provided separate level and gain controls, which allowed ultra-fine tuning of the volume setting to suit the dynamics of the source. This also prevented overload in a unit, which launched during the first two years of the existence of CDs, while still showcasing LP playback—and many were the jolts when switching from one to the other without adjusting the gain, before everyone got used to the higher output of CDs.

One soon learned how to accommodate sources of wildly differing output, how to exploit the two controls for the lowering of background noise levels and other stages of flexibility not seen in preamps prior to more recent models that allow users to pre-set the levels for individual sources, such as the REF 10, assorted examples from McIntosh and others with on-board microprocessors.

With the SP-11, one set the general volume with the gain and fine-tuned it on an as-needed basis with the level control. Both controls employed 32 detent potentiometers.

Its five inputs were labelled phono, tuner, CD, video and spare, while its birth in a transitional era is revealed by a separate rotary with five impedance settings for phono, and another for mono/stereo/reverse/left-only and right-only. Further control beyond the minimalism of contemporary rivals from, say, the British included a row of toggles selecting tape monitoring, tape copy, choice of either of two decks for playback, dubbing in both directions, mute, bypass, polarity inversion and the insertion of a subsonic phono filter. Use of the bypass switch avoided all circuitry except gain, volume control and output buffering. It also deactivated the balance control, a rotary positioned between level and source select. *(continued)*



At the back, as still practiced by ARC, are rows of gilded RCA phono sockets, seven pairs for sources including the tape decks, and six pairs for the two main outputs and tape-record connections. The identically sized power supply provided on/off and activating or switching off of the four auxiliary sockets on the back (three switched and one un-switched). This would have probably been blanked off in export markets, and I suspect most hardcore audiophiles in the United States would have avoided their use on purist grounds. But the convenience was undeniable, especially for single-switch power-on operation.

Also still employed by ARC is a warm-up period from switch-on, so one need never suffer nasty bangs—and as this was likely to be used with big power amplifiers, it's a precaution worth applauding. What was notorious about the SP-11, despite its hybrid DNA, was a lengthy warm-up period, needing a good 15 to 30 minutes to sound good, and a few hours to sound its best. It always reminded me of a great red wine, one that didn't truly reach its drinkable best (from opening) until an hour or two had passed. And, yes, I know that there are those who will argue that the only reason wine tastes better at the end of the meal is because you've had more to drink than when you started. As one with

the willpower to decant my reds three hours before drinking, I know that's not the case.

While Dorgay will insert into his own hands-on experience with a mint SP-11 in a 2013 context (see "Additional Listening" below), I am content to recall that it sounded less warm than the SP-10, and less tube-y, which is as it should be. Equally, the SP-11 would in no way be mistaken for a solid-state preamplifier, yet it offered the precision, silences and precise bass attributed to transistor control units. I also recall that the phono stage was an utter delight, especially with MCs of relatively high output that could exploit its 47k-ohm setting, and work well enough with its 76 dB of gain. It was and is a magnificent device, an all-time great.

ARC's Dave Gordon tells *TONE*, "Terry Dorn and I are guessing that we produced around 3,000 SP-11s, totalling the original and the Mk II together." And to wind up collectors, he adds, "Of those, we produced 100 champagne gold Mk IIs exclusively for our distributor in Taiwan." When the SP-11 in Mk II form reached the end of its production, the retail price had only ascended to \$5,995.

Dave also noted, "I think it was pretty unusual to see a tube preamp with a phono bandwidth of 100k and a line-stage bandwidth of over 200k in 1985." Hear, hear.

Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

I agree wholeheartedly with Mr. Kessler that a mint SP-11 is not at all out of place in a modern system today, and he's spot on for the price of a mint unit. Fortunately, a call to my good friend Jonathan Spelt at Ultra Fidelis, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, yielded the one you see in this article for slightly less. It even included the factory's original, dual-box packaging—essential if you are paying top dollar.

In the context of a six-figure system, the SP-11 (mine is a Mk II version) holds its own with the REF 5 SE and REF Phono 2 SE that I use as daily reference units. Granted, the newer models offer up more frequency

extension, dynamic slam, and a bit more inner detail, but the vintage pre is so damn good in every way, I could easily live with an SP-11 and ignore what I'm missing. A little help from Kevin Deal at Upscale Audio resulted in a great set of NOS tubes, taking my SP-11 to an even higher level.

And the phonostage is fantastic. As more and more rack space seems requisite these days, it's wonderful to revisit this concept of a great linestage and phonostage all in one chassis, much to the chagrin of the wire barons. I defy you to find anything this good built new today for anywhere near this price. ●



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NEW RELEASES



Jason Isbell

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Last year on Twitter, Jason Isbell accused country star Dierks Bentley of stealing his “In a Razor Town” song and co-opting it for “Home.” The fact that the latter single became a number-one hit isn’t important. What matters is that it’s performed by a bland singer whose pedestrian fare subscribes to Nashville’s commercial rules and who responded to Isbell’s claims by facetiously Tweeting, “THIS JUST IN: Nashville and LA songwriters running out of ideas... rushing to steal jason [sic] songs!”

Anyone that’s listened to so-called country radio in the past decade would likely take issue with Bentley’s statement. In Nashville, originality is anathema; formula is sacred. Bentley’s comment also rings with ironic truth: Isbell is indeed a fine songwriter.

Most tunesmiths would be lucky to crib from him. Since emerging in late 2001 as a member of the Drive-By Truckers, Isbell has made his mark as a distinguished guitarist and wordsmith, turning out bold, introspective tales steeped in the people, places, and habits of the Alabama Bible Belt where he grew up.

Yet, akin to many standout artists, Isbell has paid a considerable price for his craft. He endured a divorce to then-Drive-By Truckers bassist Shonna Tucker that factored into his departure from the group. The 34-year-old also spent a majority of the last 10 years drowning in liquor to the extent he cannot even remember much of his period with the Truckers. A full-blown alcoholic, Isbell would begin drinking early in the morning—provided he even got up.

“Wasn’t quite morning, I wasn’t quite breathing/My heart way up in my throat,” he sings on the life-on-the-road, garage-rocking chronicle “Super 8” from *Southeastern*. “Girl starts screaming and the maid starts screaming/And it looks like it’s all she wrote,” he continues, with a sly grin.

Isbell, of course, survived his death-tempting ordeals. He swore off booze in February 2012 amidst a concerted effort to stay clean. He toured with fellow recovering substance abuser Ryan Adams and gained support. He remarried, to another musician, Amanda Shires, whose fiddle joins with Isbell in harmonious union. And in the brilliant

Southeastern, he molded the kind of album every musician yearns to make once in his or her lifetime.

Honest, dignified, unguarded, and courageously personal, *Southeastern* is the repentant and sobering sound of a man’s coming to terms with his demons, mistakes, strengths, desires, and needs. It opens a window on the future by looking back at the past and offers an unflinching gut-check of human nature via narratives tied to tragedy, loss, vulnerability, maturation, healing, and responsibility. Throughout, Isbell never reaches for self-pity, weighs down the listener in sadness, or stands on a soapbox to preach. His balanced approach and unshakeable calm are as remarkable as the poetic detail and lyrical descriptiveness.

Billed as a solo album (Isbell’s second), *Southeastern* retains a stripped-down and organic country-rock feel, even when a handful of guests and backing musicians appear. On the gorgeous album-opening “Cover Me Up,” Isbell turns in the rawest vocal performance of his career. Framed by an acoustic guitar and minimalist pedal-steel fills, he reflects on hitting rock bottom before finding his once-shattered faith restored in the form of a new companion. The devotional ballad is more than an apt way to commence an intimate record imbued with austere contemplation. It’s an anchor, an attention-getting prelude to the sincerity and themes that follow. Falling in love and getting a fresh start at life are

paramount among them.

Whether taking stock of how opening himself up to love altered his attitude (the golden-hued “Stockholm,” a duet with Kim Richey), mulling moral obligations (the flinty “Yvette,” a hard-hitting allegory of familial abuse), or rummaging through the wreckage of failed romances (the crackling “Flying Over Water”), Isbell doesn’t sugarcoat sins or pretend he’s clear of vices that nearly destroyed him. He lugs his heavy emotional baggage with him while he wonders about right answers, searches for what really defines a man, and worries if past ghosts will continue to haunt him in the future. Occasionally, they do.

On the swaying “Songs That She Sang In the Shower,” a pensive Isbell recognizes that wonderful memories attached to a former partner will follow him forever. Outfitted with a tumbling chorus that rains down with damning certainty, the song seizes on the strong connections people have with music—and how melodies can trigger landscapes, feelings, and images more accurately than sight, touch, or smell. Similarly candid, Isbell admits lies, deficiencies, and addictions on the confessional “Different Days.” As he ruminates on transformation, muted finger-picked notes ballet about his voice like fireflies dancing in the pale moonlight. “My daddy told me, I believe he told me true that: ‘The right thing’s always the hardest thing to do,’ he sings. *(continued)*

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Isbell keeps such advice close to the heart throughout *Southeastern*, which could be seen as his commitment to adhere to the principle no matter how steep the cost. For him, integrity comes first. During the heart-breaking “Elephant,” the Alabama native paints a surgically accurate picture of a terminally ill cancer patient, the aural effigy playing like a film in the listener’s mind. Scenery, environments, and characters come to life as they do in a gripping novel. In under four minutes, he examines the spirit required to battle the disappearance of dignity, explores the spiral of life, underlines comfort wrought by lasting friendship and small distractions, and lays bare the pain of loneliness.

“Traveling Alone” unfolds with comparable poignancy. Its acoustic dust-broom sweep and sweet violin lines waltz hand-in-hand, each married to the singer’s calm recollections. A wake-up call and invitation, the song is one man’s steadfast promise to rebuild his soul and take a mate along for what’s left of the ride. Not that the journey is ever easy or without doubts.

“There is a man who walks beside me/He is who I used to be,” Isbell sings in a tobacco-stained acapella voice on the opening to the mighty “Live Oak.” “And I wonder if she sees him and confuses him with me.” Ostensibly, the frontier-style song tells the story of a reformed criminal pondering how his lover views him. But really, the tale serves as a transparent metaphor for Isbell’s own life—and for anyone that’s ever harbored the concerns, insecurities, and anxieties that coexist with relationships and transformation. By speaking for himself, Isbell speaks for us all.

—Bob Gendron



©Photo by Michael Wilson

**Daft Punk**

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In “Beyond,” a weightless number that arrives just past the midpoint of Daft Punk’s long-in-the-works new album, *Random Access Memories*, the French electronic duo lays out the blueprint for the perfect song. “(It) speaks of places never seen/It holds a promise long forgotten,” the tandem sings, sounding something like sleep-deprived androids. “It is the birthplace of your dreams.”

Fittingly, the pair spends much of its first studio album since 2005’s *Human After All*—excluding the soundtrack for *Tron: Legacy*—revisiting the various sounds and styles that informed its earliest musical excursions. It’s an unexpected move, to say the least. In recent years, Electronic Dance Music (or EDM, as it’s commonly referred to in the press) has seemingly taken over popular culture, with single-name DJs like Skrillex, Baauer, and Bassnectar dominating summer festival lineups and providing the soundtrack for countless film trailers, television advertisements, and Internet video memes. (Everyone from King James and the rest of the Miami Heat to local, mid-America high-school students recorded Versions of Baauer’s inescapable “Harlem Shake”). (continued)

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Rather than surfing a cresting wave they helped form with influential albums like *Homework* and *Discovery*, however, Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo and Thomas Bangalter—the humanoids collectively known as Daft Punk—have gone out of their way to bash the current EDM craze in interviews. “The problem with the way to make music today, these are turnkey systems; they come with preset banks and sounds,” they told *Billboard* magazine. “They’re not inviting you to challenge the systems themselves, or giving you the ability to showcase your personality, individuality.”

With *Random Access Memories*, the duo, which still dons robot masks for photo shoots and performances, actually attempt to place some distance between themselves and modern technology. The album is recorded in analog, and a small army of live musicians—including disco legends Giorgio Moroder and Nile Rodgers, producer/rapper/singer Pharrell Williams and indie rockers like Panda Bear of Animal Collective—supplant the usual array of samplers, synthesizers, and computers.

So while past efforts tended to sound vaguely futuristic, *RAM* is actually backward-looking, embracing a comparatively handmade aesthetic that aspires more to the bombastic, over-the-top feel of late 70s prog-rock, R&B, and disco. When the drums kick in on “Contact,” for example, there’s no doubting human hands are manning the kit, and

the results are glorious. Such ambition is evident everywhere from the album’s extensive runtime (at 75 minutes, the record occasionally feels a tad overstuffed) to its sumptuous sound, which flirts with everything from disco and house to Technicolor Broadway schmaltz.

Pharrell Williams and guitarist Nile Rodgers drive a trio of tunes, including lead single “Get Lucky,” which neatly replicates the disco-funk of Rodgers’ band Chic. “Lose Yourself to Dance,” a second cut featuring the pair, does exactly that, riding Rodgers’ impossibly fluid guitar line for six hypnotic minutes of dance-floor-bumping bliss.

Elsewhere, Daft Punk attempts to stimulate the brain as well as the body. “Giorgio by Moroder” might sound like the name of a high-end fragrance line, but it’s actually a nine-minute ode to 73-year-old synth pioneer Giorgio Moroder, who kicks off the track by chatting up his role in shaping what he refers to as “the sound of the future.” “Within” journeys into the mind rather than venturing off into the cosmos, coming on like a musical adaptation of *Being John Malkovich*. “There’s a world within me that I cannot explain,” sings the duo atop downcast piano. “Please tell me who I am.”

References to memory, time, emotion, transience, and love are scattered throughout the album, which shares at least some thematic elements in common with the 1986 film *Short Circuit*,

where experimental robot Number 5 is struck by lightning and gradually adopts a number of human traits. “Touch,” a hammy albeit oddly affecting number featuring a vocal assist from Paul Williams, the unashamedly cheesy songwriter behind tunes like the Carpenters’ “We’ve Only Just Begun,” opens with a voice intoning “I remember touch” like an android slowly regaining spatial awareness. “You’ve almost convinced me I’m real,” continues Williams as the track builds to a grandiose close that includes everything from orchestral strings to a full-on children’s choir. “I need something more.”

At times, the duo overreaches, and it can be difficult to slog through tracks like “The Game of Love,” a wispy soft-rock ballad that sounds as though it were composed by a heartbroken computer. The yacht-rocking “Fragments of Time,” in turn, could pass for a feather-haired Hall & Oates throwaway.

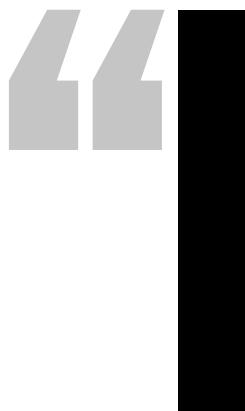
Nonetheless, *RAM* remains a fascinating and entertaining listen, balancing breezy party tracks with more high-concept moments that reveal endearing quirks more gradually. Indeed, by looking to past sounds, styles, and influences—the birthplace of their musical dreams, as it were—Daft Punk emerges with an album that sounds both familiar and entirely new, and it’ll be endlessly enjoyable to look on as the group’s EDM contemporaries struggle to keep pace in the coming months.

—Andy Downing

**The National***Trouble Will Find Me*

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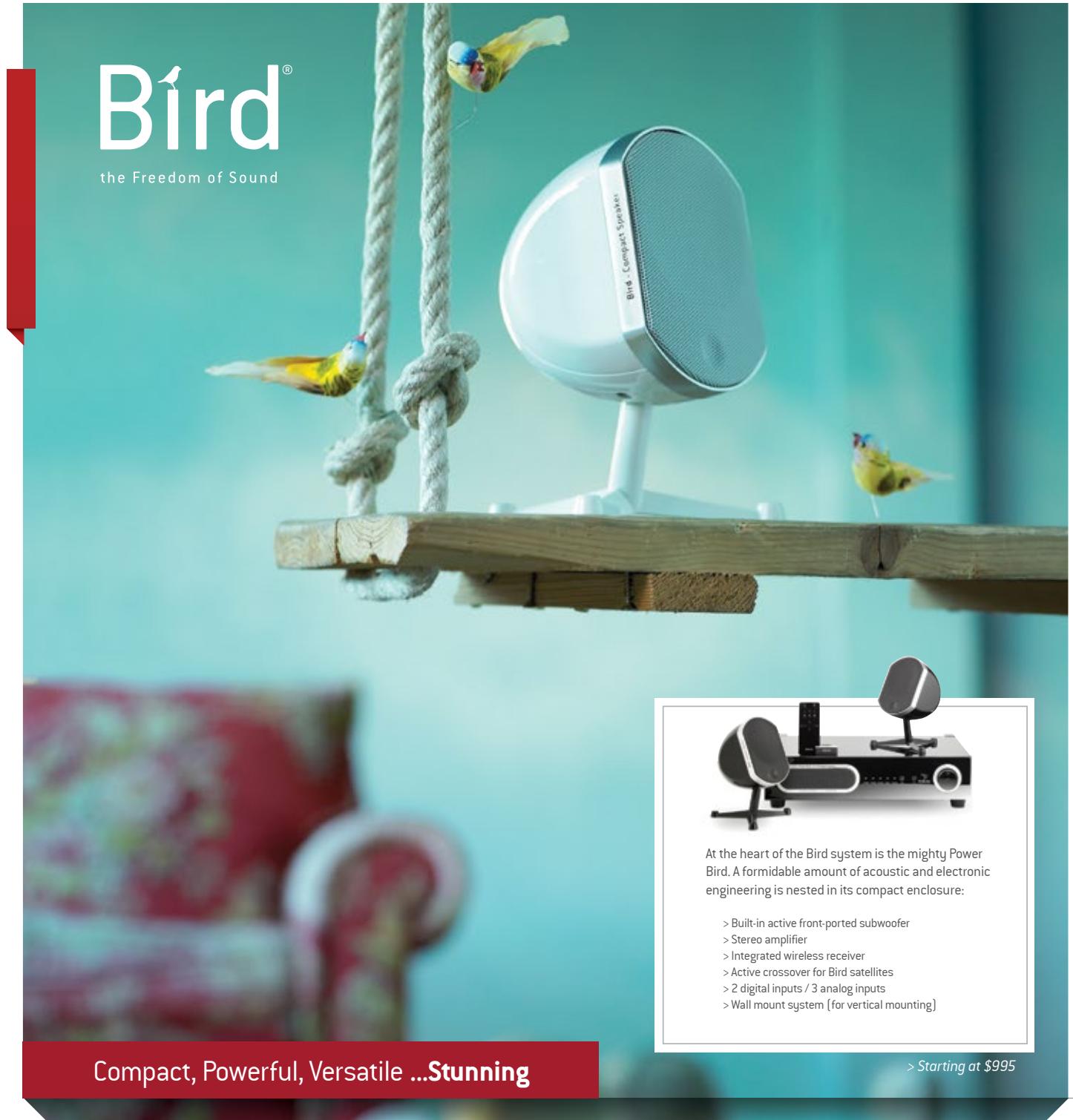


have only two emotions," singer Matt Berninger observes early on the National's sixth studio album. They are extremities, he warns: "careful fear and dead devotion." He delivers the line with his detached, broken baritone in much the same way as he has over the Brooklyn-based band's prior five albums—with bloodshot fragility that may or may not be on the brink of paranoia.

Unhealthy obsessions and oceanic levels of mistrust are where the National have emotionally resided for much of their recent efforts, and 2010's *High Violet* fine-tuned the tension-packed guitar torment into an atmospheric formula. The hooks are buried in the tease, as the tortured, stretched chords never quite provided the release of an explosion.

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The latter doesn't come on *Trouble Will Find Me*, either. But what becomes apparent is that nearly an hour of Berninger teetering between highs and lows—his bandmates working overtime to explore all the colors and shades in the key of sulk—proves an alternately impressive and exhausting listen.

"When I walk into a room, I do not light it up," Berninger sings on "Demons," a rare moment of comedic understatement on an album where much of the relationship drama has the listener wanting to stop the music and scream "run!" "Remember," Berninger says on "I Need My Girl," "when you lost your shit and drove the car into the garden?" Or, his own red-flag declaration on "Slipped" that he "was a television version of a person with a broken heart."

Trouble Will Find Me is musical theater that explores characters that are losing their minds. And Berninger's stand-and-take-notice voice is gripping through each of these 13 carefully crafted songs, whose layers and dusky dimensions are rarely revealed on first listen. Be it acoustic

laments ("I Should Live in Salt") or crash-and-burn anthems ("Sea of Love"), these are deft pieces of songcraft that award close listening. Vide, the unexpected piano strikes on the former and ghostly backing vocals and reverberating guitars that arrive in the final act of the latter. Subtly abounds.

"Pink Rabbits" is a sort-of old-fashioned ballad that sees Berninger slipping into Leonard Cohen mode, but the anchor of the song (and album) is drummer Bryan Devendorf, who graces the anxiety with rhythmic heartbeats that eerily anticipate any changes in pace of the vocalist. A cauldron of strings and damning bass booms make "Fireproof" feel hellish. "Hard to Find" closes the album with a tearjerker, its higher-pitched guitar notes providing at long last a starry twinkle. Don't mistake it for optimism. The album is a mood piece, one in which it's reasonable to worry for those to which it brings comfort. —**Todd Martens**



Vampire Weekend

Modern Vampires of the City
XL Recordings, LP or CD

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In the titular selection from author Karen Russell's latest collection of short stories, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, two married bloodsuckers recount the many disappointments of their long-entwined lives, which one colorfully describes as "a commitment to starve together."

A similarly bleak pall envelops the latest album from another crew of night dwellers: New York City quartet Vampire Weekend, which finally sheds its inherent United Colors of Benetton preppiness in favor of a darker and ultimately more fulfilling sound on *Modern Vampires of the City*.

The shift is foreshadowed early on. While the album opens with a chorus of angelic voices ushering in a new day ("Obvious Bicycle," which ranks amongst the group's prettiest songs), by the second track, frontman Ezra Koenig is singing about the sun going down and darkness settling in.



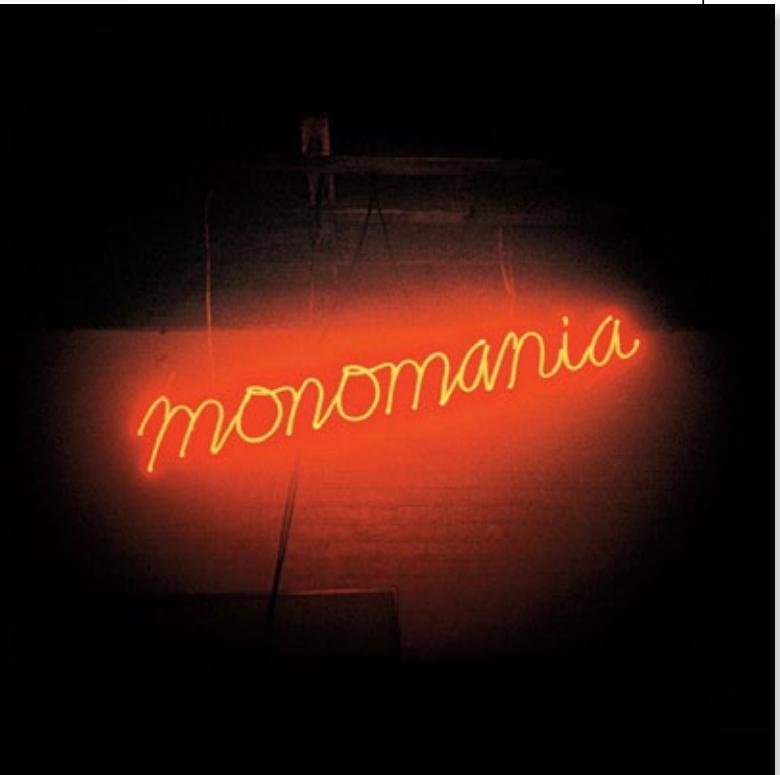
So while the crew breezed through past efforts, sipping horchata and frolicking on yachts anchored in posh locales like Cape Cod, here it adopts a more reflective pose, turning its attention to the fleeting nature of adolescence. "The gloves are off/The wisdom teeth are lost," sings Koenig on the gilded "Step." "I feel it in my bones." References to time slipping away abound, and there are moments the frontman sounds as death-obsessed as the wickedly morbid character Bud Cort portrays in the 1971 film *Harold and Maude*. "There's a headstone in front of you," he sings on one tune, "and everyone I know." Elsewhere, the band romanticizes the death of Henry

Hudson ("Hudson"), parts ways with an unfortunately named girl ("Diane Young," an urgent tune where the name Diane Young and the phrase "dying young" could easily be interchanged), and stands helplessly by as the clock hands continue to spin (almost every song).

As with most humans whose focus drifts towards the final days, Koenig and Co. reveal a slightly more spiritual side this time around. The crew name-drops *Paradise Lost* and asks "who will guide us through the end?" on the galloping "Worship You," sings of the biblical burning bush on the percolating "Ya Hey," and adapts a 19th-century spiritual for "Everlasting Arms," a gorgeous number that sounds like

a natural evolution of the group's long-vested Paul Simon obsession. Of course, there's little need to fit the bandmates for those cassocks just yet. On the shuffling rocker "Unbelievers," for one, Koenig envisions religious fundamentalists tying he and his gal down to the train tracks for their lack of faith, singing, "Is that the fate that half of the world has planned for me?"

Likely not. In fact, with this album, the percentage of the population that had (rightly) dismissed Vampire Weekend as too precious and preppy has new cause to revisit the band. It's almost as though by looking to the end, the crew has finally given itself a much-needed fresh start. —Andy Downing

**Deerhunter**

Monomania
4AD, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

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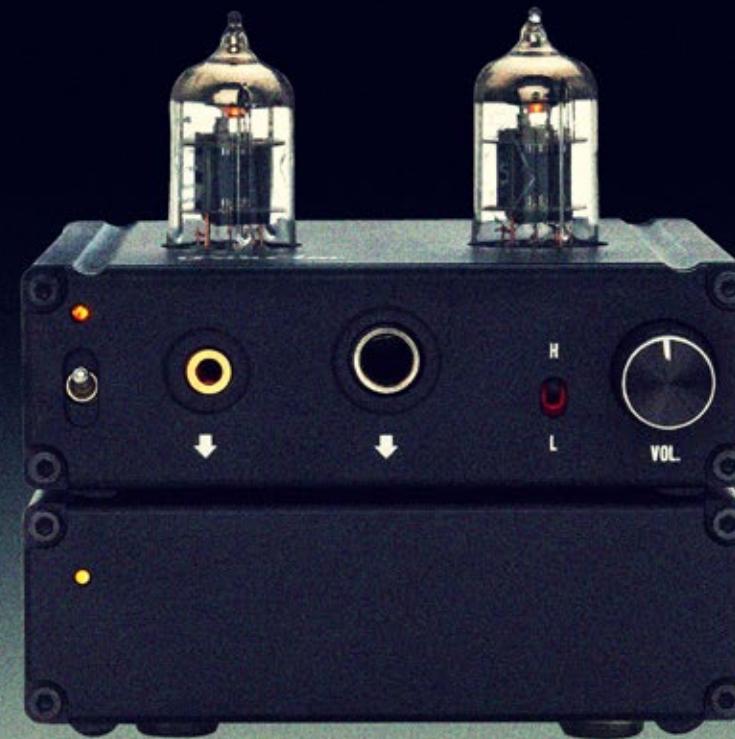
alcyon Digest, the 2010 album from Atlanta rockers Deerhunter, is a beautiful-if-downcast effort packed with thoughtful tunes about confronting death and embracing life. In that regard, *Monomania* initially feels like a big step backwards.

The songs are rougher and unabashedly lo-fi, filled with crass one-liners, throwaway asides, and bad jokes. And there's some sense Bradford Cox, the main creative force within the band, constructed the album in an attempt to beat back fans and critics that have circled the group in increasingly large numbers since it released its breakthrough album, *Cryptograms*, in 2007.

But even if the songs were initially considered throwaways—a recent Pitchfork profile on Cox noted he wrote many of the tunes amidst personal turmoil and heavy drinking, and never had any intention of putting them to tape—there's something beautiful about the fearless way the band throws itself into the record's assortment of sleazy garage-rock cuts.

"Leather Jacket II" is nearly as rough-and-tumble as its title suggests, layering on distorted vocals, barbed stabs of guitar, and a rumbling drumbeat that sounds like it's being pounded out on a dinged aluminum trashcan. "Dream Captain" could pass for a time-corroded David Bowie demo, combining space-oddity lyrical shout-outs ("Dream captain, send me your ship!") with a shuffling glam guitar melody. Raunchy rocker "Pensacola," in turn, could sit in as one of the tales from the @_FloridaMan Twitter account, detailing the comings and goings of a balding panhandle native that gives his woman the boot before hopping a bus out of town. *(continued)*

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The Deerhunter of old makes an occasional appearance. "Sleepwalking," for one, is nearly as majestic as anything on *Halcyon Digest*. "I've been looking for some harmonies," sings Cox atop guitars that flutter and dive like nectar-drunk butterflies, "Some words to sing that could really breathe." But these moments of peace are rare on an album that consistently finds the band embracing its rowdier side. Witness the

chaotic title track, a scuzzy, barnacle-caked rocker that slowly devolves into five minutes of blissful white noise.

Musically, *Monomania* can be, for the most part, easy to embrace. Lyrically, however, the material can be a tougher slog. Just try not to wince when Cox sneers, "I'm a boy, man/And you're a man, man" on "Dream Captain"—a line singers far more charismatic than he would struggle to pull off convincingly.

Then there are those forced passages that sound engineered to court controversy. "For a year I was queer," Cox sings on "Punk (La Vie Anterieure)," "but I found it such a bore."

Fortunately, the frontman's words tend to take a backseat to the glorious crunch of guitar noise. "If you ever need to talk I won't be around," sings Cox, tellingly, on "Blue Agent," stepping aside to let his guitar finish the thought. —*Andy Downing*

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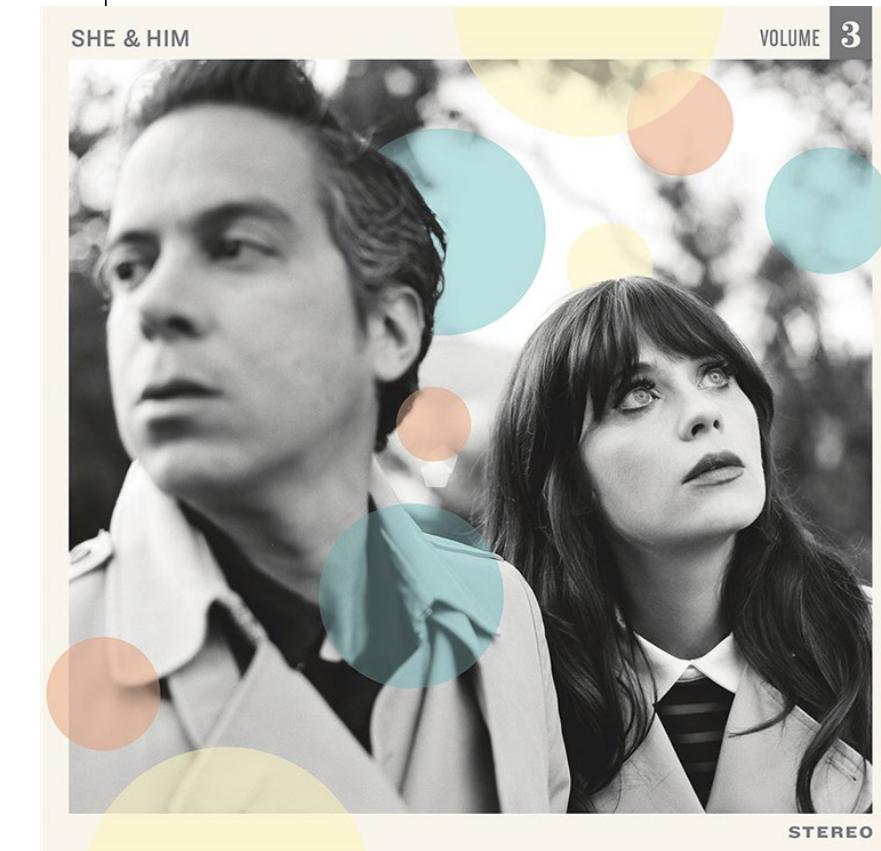
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One of the more unforgettable rock n' roll scenes in film comes during the 1980s sci-fi romance *Back to the Future*. In the final act, Michael J. Fox's Marty McFly grabs a guitar at a 1955 high-school dance and anchors a capable rhythm & blues band through the scorching "Johnny B. Goode" and doo-wop slow-dance "Earth Angel (Will You Be Mine)." One of the messages, intentional or not, is that it's better to define the best songs of another era as timeless rather than classics. Another message: Boy, wouldn't it have been fun to have played rock 'n' roll during its innocent beginnings?

She & Him, the moniker for the vintage musical plaything of indie-rock guitar wiz M. Ward and happy-go-lucky geek idol Zooey Deschanel, seems to permanently exist in that *Back to the Future* scene. They are modern-day artists with good taste and a best-of-intentions desire to bask in the past.

The duo's formula is well in place here on the duo's fourth proper album (three volumes plus a Christmas collection), and not too much has changed on this stroll down pop's memory lane.
(continued)

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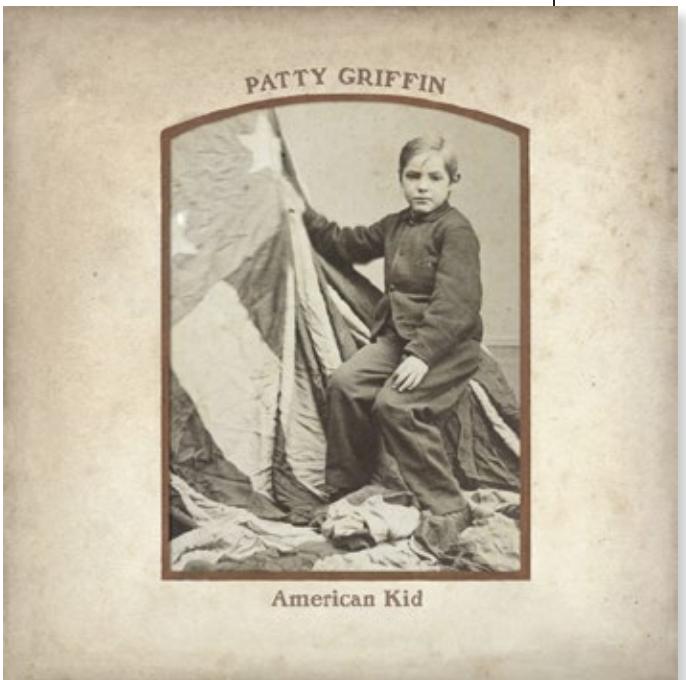


Deschanel's lyrical trifles are on the level of profound poolside gossip ("I never wanted your love but I needed it," she ever-so-lightly sings early on). Styles aren't so much as explored as pleasantly alluded to. "I've Got Your Number, Son" has flashes of grand, Beach Boys-inspired overtures and harmonies, while the Motown-inflected "Together" sports a plucky guitar groove and lively sax.

Since the release of 2008's *Volume One*, Deschanel has—thanks to Fox sitcom "New Girl"—become someone whose personal life is debated in the TMZ comment section. But whether in her acting or singing, she remains an understated star. A squint of her eyes stands in for emotion on television, and on record, she's mastered an increasingly rare art of tender shading and conversational crooning. She's a jazzy ingénue on the blue piano ballad "London"

and a girl-group cheerleader on the upbeat and gooey "Somebody Sweet to Talk To."

While Deschanel has grown as vocalist, she remains a patient singer who finds comfort in the melodies rather than taking charge of them. Rather than attempting to craft a pure facsimile, she approaches varying styles as if she's trying on different hats on a movie set. She and Ward have fun with the flirty, tempo-shifting, showtune-ready suite of "Snow Queen," the goofy Elvis-in-Hawaii-feel of "Shadow of Love," the Bacharachian "Something's Haunting You," and the swift, unadorned, top-down cruise of a cover of Blondie's "Sunday Girl." It may not be as fun as a trip back in time via a Delorean, but for She & Him, toying with the past hasn't yet gotten old. —Todd Martens

**Patty Griffin**

American Kid
New West Records, 2LP or CD

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ince her 1996 debut, Patty Griffin has earned a rep as a singer-songwriter's singer-songwriter. While not quite scaling the singular artistic heights of a Lucinda Williams, the flame-haired Griffin rightly earned critical kudos as an emotionally resonant tunesmith.

She's also a member of Robert Plant's Band of Joy. And the Led Zeppelin frontman-cum-Americana convert joins Griffin on several tracks on her seventh release, *American Kid*. Plant and Griffin have both denied marriage rumors, but the two are an item and reportedly live together.

Although they haven't tied the legal knot, there's a committed vocal relationship going on in Griffin's "Ohio," a beguiling piece of rustic psychedelia and one of the standout tracks here. Blending in an arresting union, their voices are set against haunting drone notes and the sound of fingers sliding across the steel strings of a guitar.



©Photo by Cambria Harkey

Griffin co-produced *American Kid* with multi-instrumentalist Craig Ross. The two deserve high marks for achieving such an organic sound. This time around, Griffin skipped her usual recording destinations of Nashville and Austin and headed to Memphis, where she enlisted such musicians as North Mississippi Allstars Luther and Cody Dickinson. Such influences reach full flower on the raw, gutbucket blues "Don't Let Me Die in Florida."

Throughout, Griffin bears a vocal resemblance to one of her great champions, Emmylou Harris. Her voice cuts high but has a grainy undertow. The bittersweet sound colors many songs with a piercing sense of melancholy, even when the music strikes a jaunty tone (the loping "Go Wherever You Wanna Go").

According to Griffin, *American Kid* is inspired by the approaching death of her father. Certain songs cast a poetic and frequently abstract look back at his life. The heart-wrenching "Irish Boy" sets Griffin's vocals against a spare piano. A cover of the Lefty Frizzell classic "Mom and Dad's Waltz" shows off her ability to authentically express homespun sentimentality.

Not everything fits into a cohesive whole. Several tracks, including "Wild Old Dog" and "Not a Bad Man," feel more like moody works-in-progress than fully realized songs. But Griffin is a class act, and her occasional missteps are mostly apparent because she sets the bar high.

"Every strand has come unwound/ Every heart is all worn down," she sings on the mournful "That Kind of Lonely." Like many of the songs here, it resonates with a quiet yet deceptive power long after it ends. —**Chrissie Dickinson**


Pistol Annies
Annie Up

RCA Nashville, LP or CD

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In the grand scheme of country protest songs, "Being Pretty Ain't Pretty" may not at first appear to pertain to the most noble of causes. It's clever enough—a three-minute Western waltz lamenting the time and money it takes to stay fashionable—but it's somewhat rebellious when it's considered that the tune is a product of mainstream Nashville in 2013. Traditional in instrumentation and intimate in production, the bitter, modern-day gripe emphasizes harmonies rather than big hooks, and it places one of the genre's stars, Miranda Lambert, in a supporting role. The Pistol Annies, a side-project Lambert shares with singer/songwriters Ashley Monroe and Angaleena Presley, once again shows a more modest approach can outdo all the glitz of the Nashville machine.

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MUSIC

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And *Annie Up* has a blast while doing so. “Unhappily Married” is more in line with the country spunk of indie labels such as Bloodshot Records than anything on Lambert’s 2011 hit *Four the Record*, and “Hush Hush” carries a Loretta Lynn swagger. The former boasts a wonderfully sardonic opening line (“Must be mistaking me for the maid we don’t have”) and the latter could be a long-lost radio hit from the 50s, at least if weren’t for characters who were ruining Christmas by talking up Rapture propaganda.

It’s not all so devilish. “Loved By A Workin’ Man” falls prey to some blue-collar mythmaking and the cheerleading ‘Girls Like Us’ is borderline hokey. Yet two missteps are forgivable when ballads such as the AA-no-longer-works dirge

“Dear Sobriety” and divorce stinger “Trading One Heartbreak for Another” paint such vivid pictures. “This is gonna hurt even more,” sings Presley on the second of the two as she awakens to reality that her child misses his father. Plights of normal folk prominently figure in the lyrics.

“Don’t Talk About Him, Tina” is an exasperated, two-stepping ditty on which the protagonist pleads with a friend to just shut the heck up about her ex. “Damn Thing” is a borderline bluegrass attack that rails against the daily grind. All 12 tracks are written entirely by the trio. No need for the hired guns that litter with duds Lambert’s most recent effort or Monroe’s new *Like a Rose*.

Yep, come to think of it, *Annie Up* is quite rebellious after all. —*Todd Martens*

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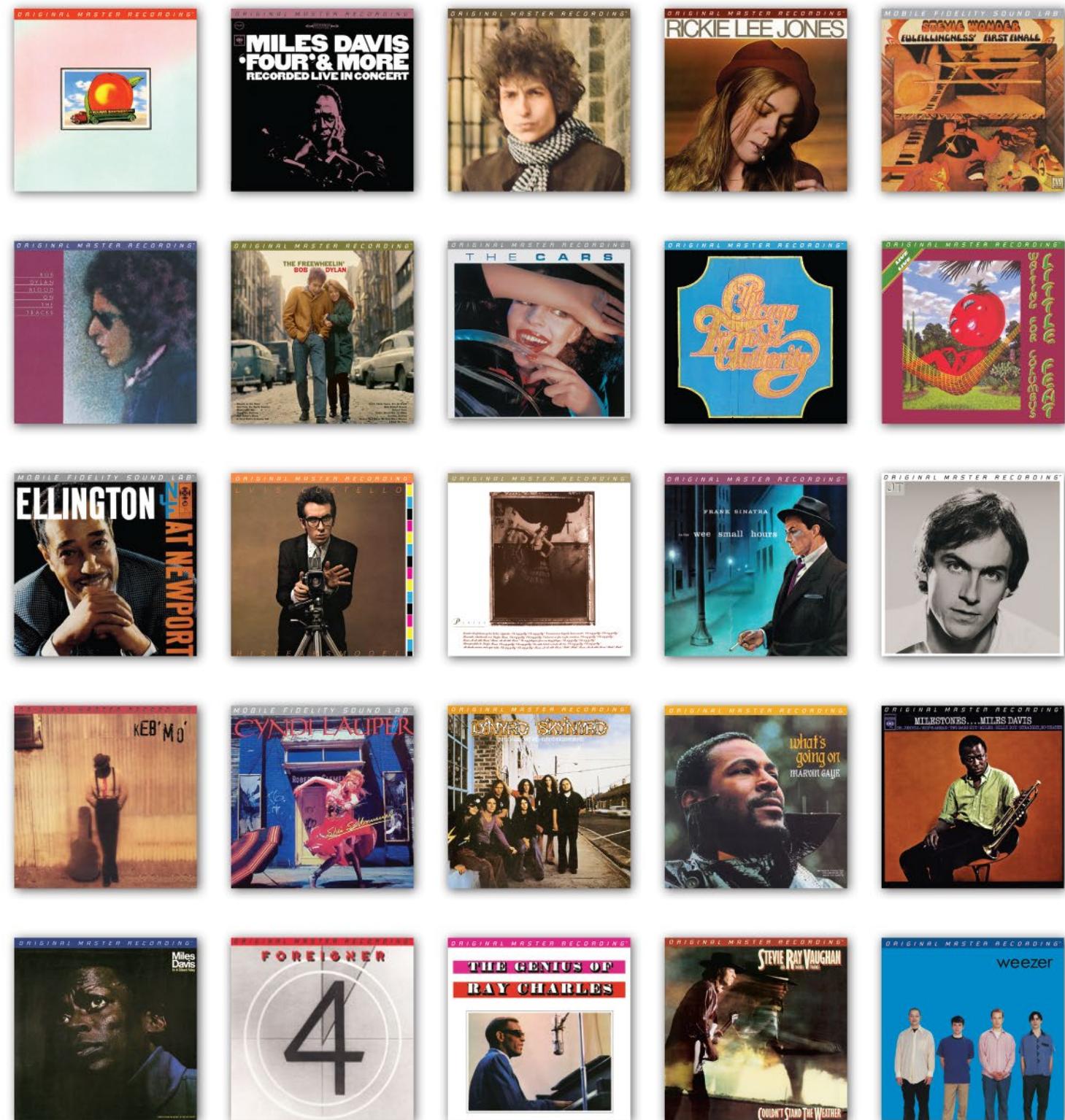
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Twenty-something Kacey Musgraves is rightly being hailed as a fresh voice on the country scene. Indeed, there's a lot to love about her major label debut *Same Trailer Different Park*. It's a promising release, but not without a few flaws.

Co-written by Musgraves, Josh Osborne and Shane McAnally, "Merry Go 'Round" is the hit that put her on the map. The music is lovely, low-key country-pop anchored by a warm, percolating banjo. Set in a hillbilly Peyton Place, the song explores the dark shadows beneath the romanticized exterior of small town life: "Mama's hooked on Mary Kay/Brother's hooked on mary jane/And daddy's hooked on Mary two doors down."



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Musgraves' twangy soprano is equal parts fragility and resilience. Her voice is so entrancing, it could almost trick you into missing the pointed lyrics. "Tiny little boxes in a row/Ain't what you wanted/It's what you know," she sings. Those lines bring to mind Malvina Reynolds' classic evisceration of suburban conformity, "Little Boxes." Like that '60s hit, "Merry Go 'Round" couches its stinging criticisms in a pretty, sing-songy melody. Both songs are as irresistible as they are arguably reductive.

Musgraves deserves a lot of credit for not singing a predictable paean to pickup trucks, beer, and American pride. But neither does she come close to the gutting gravitas of Jamey Johnson's "High Cost of Living," or even Tim McGraw's conflicted reading of "Drugs or Jesus," harrowing songs that empathetically address contemporary small-town lives gone wrong. In comparison, "Merry Go 'Round" traffics in expertly polished rhymes packed with stock characters.

A subtle 1960s musical vibe dapples a number of her other songs. With its tambourine, rich acoustic guitar, and harmonica, "My House" evokes the folk-pop salad days of the Newport Folk Festival. In "Silver Lining," she could be a contemplative Petula Clark standing at that imaginary corner where Carnaby Street and Music Row intersect. The playful "Follow Your Arrow" is an unapologetic call for people to shake off the shackles of moral judgment and live life to the fullest. Tucked into this sunny sound is a shout-out in support of same-sex relationships: "Make lots of noise/Kiss lots of boys/Or kiss lots of girls/If that's something you're into."

Yes, Musgraves has, talent, brio, and enormous promise. Her challenge going forward is to avoid the seductive pitfall of choosing the merely clever over the profound. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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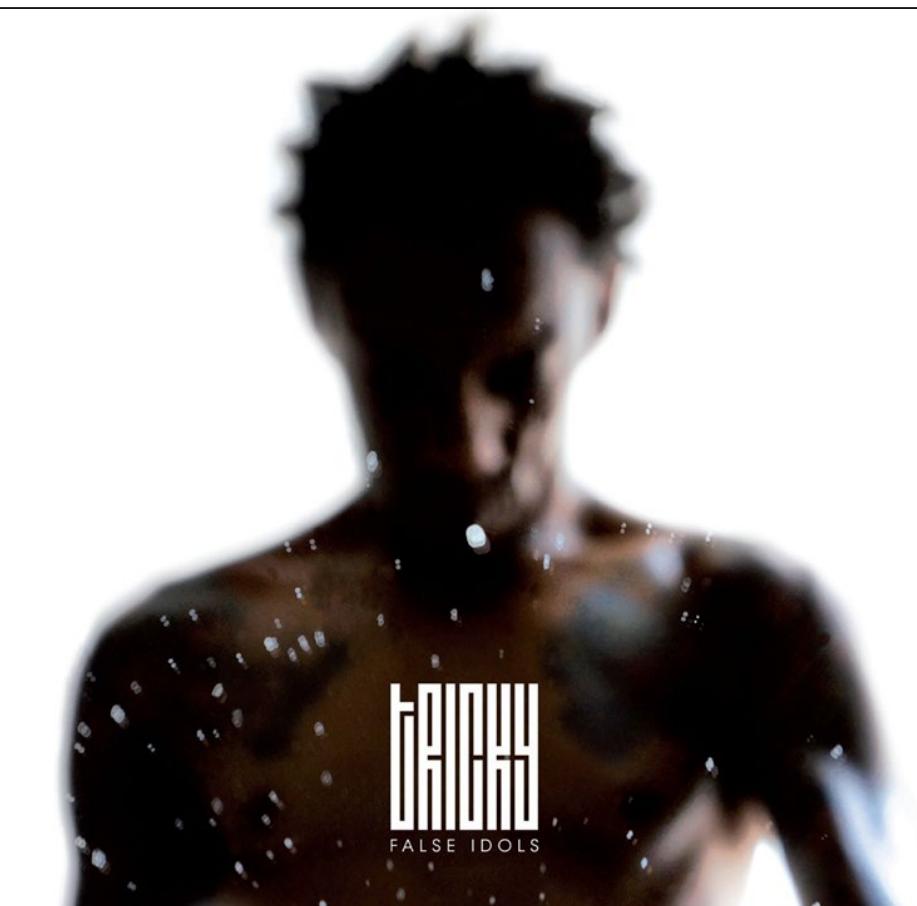


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MUSIC



Tricky

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D

uring a stretch in the mid-90s, few artists were as compelling and, at times, as outright terrifying as Tricky. In concert, the British musician, born Adrian Thaws, tended to perform with his back to the audience, reciting his mysterious incantations in a smoky, Golem-esque rasp. Early albums like *Maxinquaye* and *Pre-Millennium Tension* were equally unsettling, capturing the paranoia and sickness of a planet he deemed to be in imminent peril. "I tell you everything/I tell you lies," he spit on "Tricky Kid." "Look deep into my mongrel eyes."

At the time, even the musician's most gorgeous tracks sounded somehow sinister. Witness "Makes Me Want to Die," a hushed spiritual where Tricky whispers his demonic words from the shadows, adding a dark counterpoint to Martina Topley-Bird's angelic lead turn. Unfortunately, even evil can grow complacent, and by the time his limp 2010 album *Mixed Race* rolled around, Tricky sounded as bored and distracted as an aged, declawed house cat.

With that in mind, it was somewhat disconcerting when the singer opens "Nothing's Changed," the lead single from his latest salvo, *False Idols*, by hissing, "Nothing's changed/I still feel the same." Fortunately for all, most everything has changed. Gone is the bland gangster posing of *Mixed Race*, replaced by the bleak, foreboding sonic landscape he pioneered on early efforts.

"My last two albums, I thought they were good, but I realize now they weren't," he wrote in a press release accompanying the new record. "This album is about me finding myself again."

Tracks here, in turn, are universally downtempo, scored by minor-key melodies, haunting vocal turns (FiFi Rong successfully adopts the Topley-Bird role on "If I Only Knew"), and Tricky's coded ruminations on everything from religion ("Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine," he sings on one tune, echoing Patti Smith) to the precise moment the soul exits the body upon death ("We Don't Die").

Things only grow more hopeless from there. "Nothing Matters" could pass for the musings of a kidnap victim experiencing an intense case of Stockholm Syndrome. "You use me, abuse me, control me," sings Nneka-Lucia Egbuna atop gently

throbbing electronics. "As long as you love me." Elsewhere, Tricky envisions society's inevitable collapse ("Does It"), details a doomed romance ending in a hail of gunfire ("Bonnie & Clyde"), and beckons Jesus to return to Earth to wipe the slate clean once and for all ("Passion of the Christ").

At its core, however, *False Idols* serves to document a once-adrift artist's attempts to rediscover his creative mooring. There are countless references to being displaced ("Can't seem to find my way home," sings Francesca Belmonte on "Tribal Drums") and outside forces stripping you to the bone ("Take what you need," sings Belmonte on "Is That Your Life"). It might have taken some time, but, much like Moses leading his people to the Promised Land after 40 years spent lost in the wilderness, Tricky finally appears to have rediscovered his footing.

As he puts it near the close of "Tribal Drums": "I'm lost, and found."

—Andy Downing



"My last two albums, I thought they were good, but I realize now they weren't," he wrote in a press release accompanying the new record. "This album is about me finding myself again."

Dynavector DV-20X2 Low-Output Moving-Coil Cartridge

Very Groovy

By Lawrence Devoe

Dynavector has been a household name in the phono-cartridge business since the mid-1970s. I have fond (albeit slightly faded) memories of an early generation Dynavector moving-coil cartridge that set me back a couple of C-notes (big bucks for that era). That cartridge's ability to extract inner detail and provide sheer musicality from my treasured LPs opened up new vistas for my then-youthful ears and made me a moving-coil fanatic for life. In the following three-plus decades, I have had dozens of MC cartridges in my sound systems, but the DV-20X2 represents my first return trip to the Dynavector domain.

Getting the Lowdown on Low Output

An increasing number of MC cartridges are being offered in high- and low-output versions. The DV20X2 cartridge comes in both high-output (2.8 mV) and low-output (0.3 mV) versions; the latter is discussed here. This well-made cartridge features a 6-mm aluminum pipe cantilever with a Micro Ridge nude diamond stylus and neodymium magnets. Weighing in at 9 grams, it will be compatible with most available tonearms.



Whether phono inputs are already included in a preamplifier or come installed on freestanding phonostages, they are often optimized for either moving-magnet or moving-coil cartridges. Meeting the specifications of these inputs is critical for optimum performance. High-output MC cartridges are usually intended for inputs capable of handling a much higher signal without overloading (a feature typical of MM inputs). Low-output MC cartridges are designed for phonostages that have step-up capability for their much lower signal amplitude.

Over the years, there has been much discussion about the comparative virtues of high-output versus low-output MC cartridges. While these two types of cartridges differ in the number of coil windings and often in their weight, die-hard vinyl fans tend to prefer low-output versions, citing their alleged greater purity of sound. However, before going with a low-output MC option, particularly one with the output level of the DV-20X2, it is vital to know if your phono preamp has sufficient gain, so you can avoid a significant noise penalty. *(continued)*



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Get Moving

For this review, I used a modified VPI Aries turntable with outboard flywheel, a Nordost-wired VPI 10.5i tonearm and a Pass Labs XP-15 phonostage. Having considerable experience with other low-output MCs, I set the XP-15 at its highest gain (76 dB); and after some preliminary listening, I settled on an impedance of 100 ohms (within the range recommended by Dynavector) and tracking force of 2 grams. Installation was non-fussy, and with my linestage gain turned up to normal listening levels in the absence of a source, there was, blessed be, no noise.

For the past two years, I have become obsessed with a

cut from Esperanza Spalding's Grammy-winning *Chamber Music Society* (*Heads Up*). On the snappy Brazilian tune "Inútil Paisagem," Spalding exchanges lines in English and Portuguese with noted jazz singer Gretchen Parlato. This song not only tests a cartridge's resolving ability to distinguish between the two female voices singing in the same range, it also tests how well the cartridge keeps the background acoustic bass notes in focus. No problems here, as the two women (and Spalding's bass) get right into my room with great pace and pitch.

Whether or not you are a Patricia Barber fan, her albums are consistently blessed with

great sound. For its full panoply of vocals, lively percussion, throb-bing baseline and intermittent trumpet riffs, the track "Constantinople" on *Modern Cool* (Premotion Records, OOP) is tough to beat. A cartridge is sorely taxed to keep up with these proceedings, letting us hear all of the interweaving lines, and here the Dynavector definitely keeps its cool.

I have always been a sucker for live recordings that eschew the artifice inherent in most sound studios. There is a delightful little holiday record (sadly no longer in print) called *The Christmas Revels* (Revels, Inc). This LP features a talented community music group in live performance of traditional music of the season. (continued)

FEATURE

The stage action is constantly shifting as the musicians move around, there is the expected assortment of background noises and listeners get a real sense of an organic performance. I feel that DV-20X2 gives me most of what I expect when compared to the previous representations from my other (and far more expensive) cartridges.

A supreme test for any cartridge is the closing scene from Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, in which a huge storm gathers (in the orchestra) and the god Donner delivers a lightning bolt with the strike on an anvil. The only recording that I have ever heard that does this piece justice is the 1958 Decca LP (recently reissued as "The Golden Ring" Highlights disc, a part of a deluxe Decca vinyl box set). The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, under the baton of Sir Georg Solti, delivers the music, and an actual anvil was used for the onstage sound effect. A huge wall of sound just blows out of the speakers and this cut tests a cartridge's ability to resolve complex instrumental voices and its ability to stay in the grooves when the music goes fortissimo. I'm happy to report that the Dynavector never flinches on this one; had Wagner been in my listening room, I'm certain that he would have smiled.

**A Dynavector to Die For?**

One sign of a great cartridge is its ability to draw listeners in and, in so doing, compel them to play entire LP sides rather than stopping after a single cut. And the DV-20X2 cartridge is just that kind of analog transducer. At its \$850 asking price, it's not nearly as steep as the top of the Dynavector price line—or, for that matter, any of my current reference cartridges, the least expensive being the \$1,995 Lyra Helikon (also a low-output star). What the Dynavector does well is convey a palpable soundstage, retrieving much of the detail that resides in the groove (without being overly analytic). It also easily handles complex sound signals without getting swamped.

If not the ultimate word in any of these categories, this MC cartridge will still provide substantial listening enjoyment with terrific musicality. Provided your phono preamp is up to handling low-output MC cartridges, this is an easy one to recommend to serious vinyl lovers. ●

Dynavector DV-20X2
Low-Output MC Cartridge
MSRP: \$850
www.dynavector.com

CLUB MIX

By Connor Willemsen



Knife Party

Haunted House

Earstorm/Big Beat Records, Lossless
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After finding stardom during decade-long tenures as part of drum-and-bass band Pendulum, Rob Swire and Gareth McGrillen shifted their focus to electrohouse in 2011, rebranding as Knife Party. Instantly elevated to new heights of success by relentless touring and headlining music festivals across the globe, the Aussie duo has yet to release a full-length album.

The collective's third EP, *Haunted House*, is disappointingly brief at only 19 minutes. However, quality wins out over quantity, and each song is a knockout. Think of it as getting the four best singles from an album without any crappy filler.

Maintaining Knife Party's penchant for cross-genre mashups, *Haunted House* incorporates dubstep, electrohouse, and drum-and-bass to create a morphing sound where each measure offers up a slightly different blend of sonic details, new noises, and unique riffs. Lighthearted oddities sprinkled throughout the EP include a cornucopia of sound effects and zany vocal samples.

"Internet Friends (VIP)" features a computerized female voice lambasting her social-media rejection: "You blocked me on Facebook. And now you're going to die." Behind the jilted robot's bellicose threats, Swire and McGrillen combine a wobbly dubstep bass line with grungy digital tones and swelling chords to create a powerhouse dance anthem.

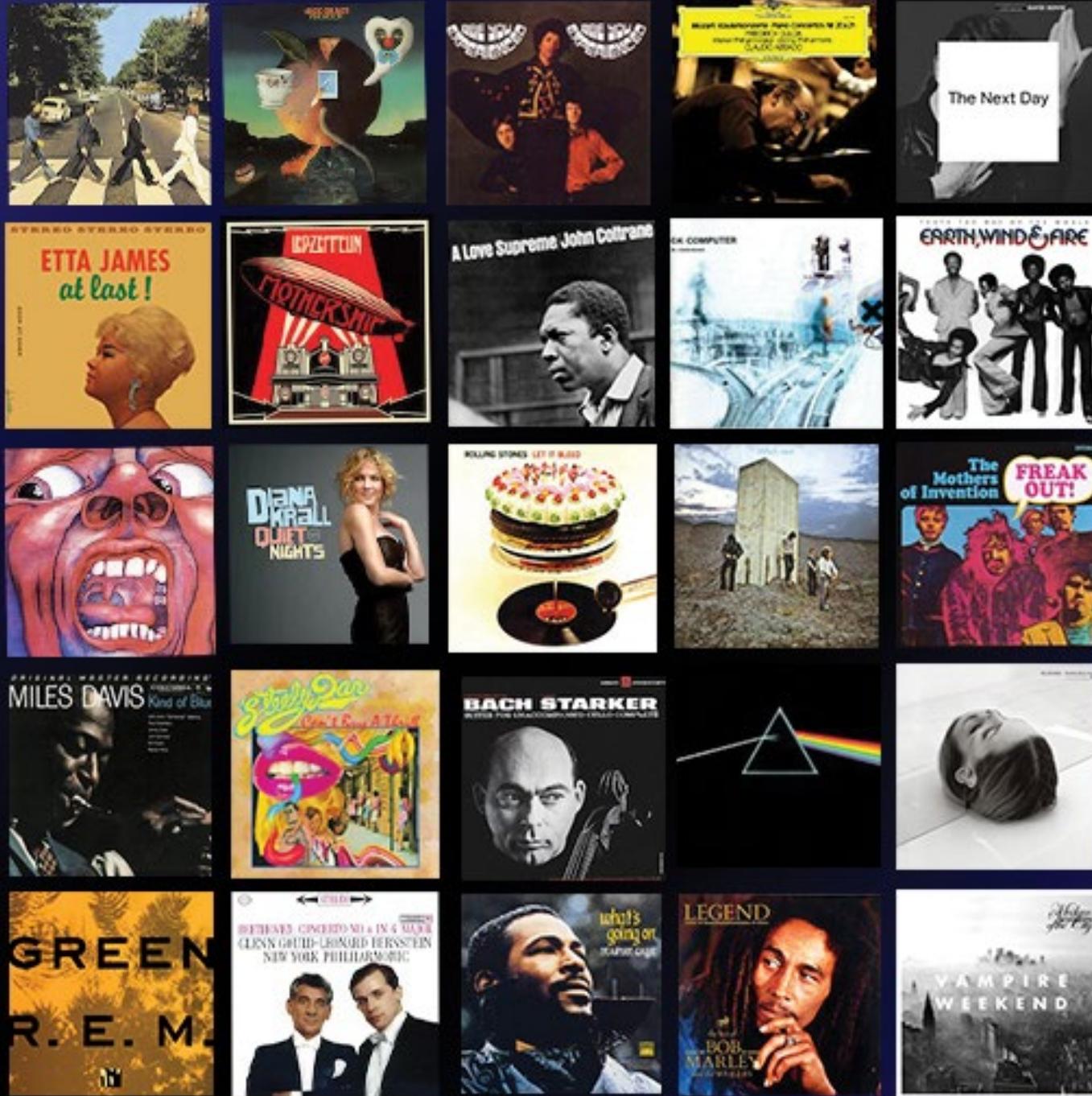
Melodic overtones and driving beats on "LRAD" hark back to the duo's work in Pendulum. Smooth electrohouse lines build the track's foundation. Wailing klaxons and punchy beats grow towards powerful crescendos before collapsing into rattling percussion interludes.

Similarly adventurous, "Power Glove" cranks up the energy with oscillating dubstep blasts that contrast against choral intonations. Speedy drum lines and sharp synthesizer notes couple on "EDM Death Machine" before ceding to melodic chords. Whirring mechanical noises and methodically spoken apocalyptic divinations keep the track in line with the EP's spooky, surreal vibe.

Pervasive throughout *Haunted House* is the feeling that Swire and McGrillen wanted to cut loose and have fun. With the impeccably crafted beats and constant refusal to take themselves too seriously, they succeed brilliantly.

Pervasive throughout *Haunted House* is the feeling that Swire and McGrillen wanted to cut loose and have fun. With the impeccably crafted beats and constant refusal to take themselves too seriously, they succeed brilliantly.

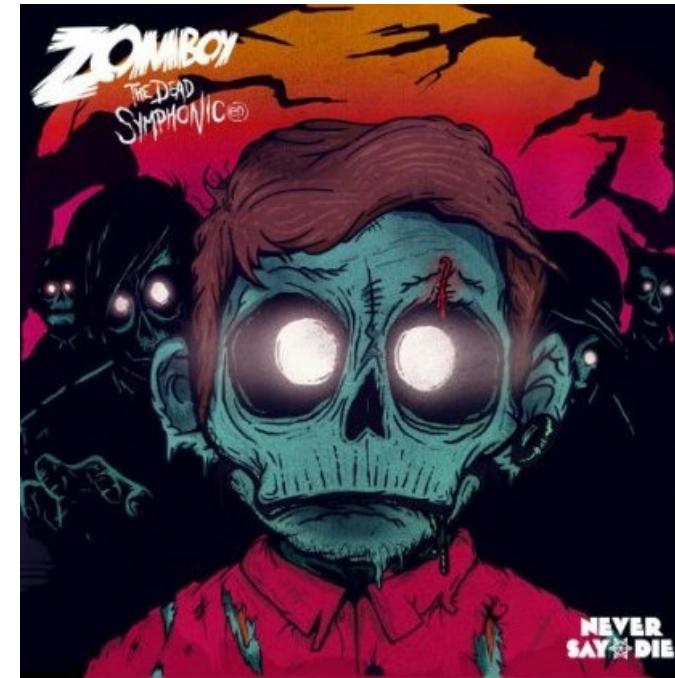
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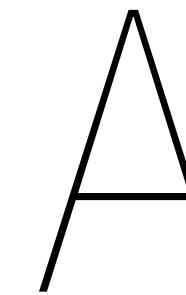
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Zomboy

The Dead Symphonic EP
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recording engineer by trade, Joshua Mellody exploded onto the electronic dance music scene in 2011 as Zomboy. His sophomore release, *The Dead Symphonic EP*, lives up to its name. While plenty of electronic artists mix touches of strings or piano into their songs, the Guildford-based artist's latest work is a sincere effort to fuse two of the most dissimilar genres: classical and dubstep.

Despite the improbability of the mash-up, or perhaps because of it, the results border on phenomenal.

Rather than alternating between styles, Mellody creates a sound that layers seemingly incompatible elements. He anchors "Hoedown" with an unhurried bass line and synthesized percussion before deftly interweaving soaring orchestral refrains that play in harmony with the electronic rhythms. Even as the strings fade away, their essence persists as synthesized notes carry the tune forward. Striking a balance between vigor and delicacy, the bass contorts in wobbling dubstep bursts but never overwhelms the classical fare.

"City 2 City Ft Belle Humble" frames singer Belle Humble's velvety vocals against ethereal piano chords and fluttering bells that sparkle like fireflies across a reverberant soundscape. Overshadowed by a lively drum-machine beat and swelling melody, her voice lingers in the background, yet defines the song's sweetly reminiscent tone.

Despite the adventurous foray into classical elements, Mellody doesn't neglect his fundamental sound. Distorted electronic crackles and staccato trills punctuate dynamic bass blasts on "Deadweight." Progressive drum lines peak before mutating into churning dubstep. Short vocal samples and sound effects pepper the track, and are smoothly integrated with the rhythms.

With only two years producing music and two EPs to his credit, Mellody has only begun to make his mark on the world of dubstep. A promising future awaits.

For Chris Brown, it seems that the second time is the charm. Styling himself as ChrisB., he released a dubstep EP in 2011 that garnered little attention. However, his new release, *Triangular Objects*, has elevated him from performing in bars to scoring a coveted spot in the star-studded lineup of Canada's huge Shamabala music festival. The newfound success is no coincidence. He abandons dubstep on *Triangular Objects* to craft scintillating glitch-hop where glassy waves of bass ripple underneath artfully spliced clicks, pops, and crackles. Rich synthesizers and heavy doses of reverb lend a grandiose sense of scale to the colorful sonics.

Free of pounding dance beats, the music pulsates with deliberate, unhurried pacing. Smooth notes reminiscent of a gently plucked electronic guitar open "Eye In The Sky" and anchor the melody as Brown mixes languid bass with old-fashioned turntable scratching. Electronic samples chopped into percussive snippets play along with the drum-machine lines, creating a vibrant amalgamation of digital percussion.

"TRIPPING IN THE KEY OF BALLS" deserves mention for the endearingly cheeky title and its dense blend of fluttering bells and tremolo bleats. Pushed to the forefront of the sparse soundscape, a rhythmically spiced buffet of clacks



ChrisB.

Triangular Objects

Gravitas Recordings, Lossless Download (Beatport) or Lossy Download

and clicks pair with ratcheting tones to build the song's backbone. Brown burnishes the mix with looping motifs and gently swishing cymbals that tie the track's elements into a smooth, coherent whole. Splitting from the EP's downtempo vibe, "TRENDY" radiates feisty energy. Swooping tones render the melody at a pulse-quickening 142 beats per minute. Again eschewing pounding beats, Brown simplifies the bass line to billowy, periodic pulses.

Triangular Objects breaks outside of the mold. Stepping away from the simple themes and grinding bass of most electronic dance music, ChrisB. has found his groove in sculpting fantastical glitch-hop soundscapes. ●



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The Funk Firm's Little Super Deck

Trippy Indeed

By Jeff Dorgay



Things that reference hallucinogenic drugs tend to pique my interest. And the Little Super Deck (or LSD) from the Funk Firm will indeed take you on a trip to vinyl bliss, doing so for a lot less money than you'd expect—\$1,995 to be exact. Our review unit arrived in a very THX 1138-esque shade of white, but the table is also available in black or red, or with a black top and wooden base. You can also dress it up with a different colored Achromat for an extra \$99. Brian Tucker of Pro Audio Ltd., Funk Firm's U.S. distributor, suggests using *only* the 3-mm Achromat, as the 5-mm version raises the arm

too far for the correct vertical tracking angle to be established and bumps the arm up against the dust cover. A standard felt mat, similar to the one on a Rega or Linn table, is included at no charge.

Dropping the stylus on the record is a revelation, pure and simple. After a few long evenings of playing records until the wee hours, I still find myself shaking my head, wondering how this much performance can be had for two grand. As I listen to the records from the large pile of my Music Matters Blue Note collection, it becomes clear that this table gets to the heart of the music—it's a master of tone.

Whether I'm listening to Herbie Hancock or Lee Morgan, the LSD delivers acoustic instruments with a level of tonal body and contrast that I'm not used to from a \$2,000 turntable.

Though the sky is the limit for turntables these days, the \$2,000-to-\$3,000 range has so many excellent choices, with the playing field being upset on a regular basis. Rega, Clearaudio, AVID, VPI and Pro-Ject (just to name a few) all have strong offerings that provide a major improvement in performance over tables costing about half as much. With so much competition at this level, it's a pretty

exciting time for analog lovers who have a bit of spending money but who don't want a table costing as much as a new car.

Some Assembly Required

A cursory look at the LSD doesn't arouse suspicion, meaning that it looks fairly generic from a distance. Closer inspection reveals just how much engineering has gone into this little marvel. The LSD does not provide the same plug-and-play install that a Rega deck does, and there isn't much similarity between the LSD and a Rega beyond the glass platters. And, unless you've got good mechanical aptitude and

are fairly intuitive, have your dealer set this baby up.

Unfortunately, the instructions for the LSD, which requires a fair amount of unintuitive assembly, are somewhat dreadful. I understand that the cost of printing a manual like the one that accompanies a pair of Sonus faber speakers is prohibitive for a \$2,000 turntable, but a high-resolution PDF file showing some actual *pictures* of the damn thing during each stage of the setup process should be considered essential. I'm not singling out Funk Firm here, though: I've yet to read a great turntable setup manual. *(continued)*



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The photo included in the manual does illustrate the three-pulley “vector” system, which uses two additional free-spinning pulleys, so that the drive belt goes around the platter in a triangular formation, minimizing the need for multiple motors. This is an ingenious solution for a table at this price, and a further example of how over engineered this product is—not to mention the fact that this system provides tremendous benefits when reproducing stringed instruments, particularly the violin. Keep in mind that this is the same system used in Funk Firm’s flagship table, as well as the company’s \$4,500 upgrade to the Linn LP12.

Just to see if this was all marketing hype or not, I used a shorter belt, driving the platter only with the motor pulley (returning to the Jung Trio for the same violin passages). While you might not notice the difference the pulleys make when listening to your favorite rock records, those loving acoustic music will really appreciate the additional pitch stability this setup provides.

The LSD features a DC motor, similar to what designer Arthur Khoubesserian introduced decades earlier with his highly successful Pink Triangle table, powered by a small wall wart. You can change speeds between 33 and 45 rpm using the switch on the plinth, which is handy for those having large record collections.

Moving Right Along

Those who are Jedi master enough to assemble the LSD will be highly impressed with how it implements some of its features. Funk Firm takes a unique approach (patent applied for) to setting the anti-skate, using a weight attached by fishing line to a sliding rod. This allows for ultra-fine tuning of the anti-skate force, which couldn’t be achieved by simply putting the loop in a rung marked in 1/4-gram increments. (continued)



FEATURE

Funk Firm also has a unique way to set the tracking force: Using a combination of an under-hung counterweight and a vertical-track-force slider, located right on the arm tube, allows for a better optimization of mass on the table than merely adjusting the weight on the back end of the tonearm. You can slide the collar up towards the headshell to increase effective mass for your favorite MC cartridge, and slide it back for the opposite effect when using MM carts.

The single screw holding the headshell in place allows adjustment of overhang and azimuth, and it is also a little tricky. Keep the screw snug but not tight while making minor adjustments, or this will drive you bonkers.

This worked perfectly with my favorite MM, a NOS Ortofon VMS 20 Mk II, and the Lyra Kleos MC. Dialing in the mass optimizes each cartridge better and ultimately eliminates that “thin” feeling that seems to accompany most budget turntables. On the other side of the spectrum, my standard-issue late-'80s LP12 sounds slow and out of time by comparison—it lacks the sheer jump and acceleration on musical transients that this table possesses. Some of this can be attributed to the F5 arm using the same Swiss Abec 7 bearings that my \$5,500 SME V arm does.

Because of the F5's ability to extract information from the black grooves, mating it with a cartridge that costs 50 percent more than the table still makes sense—



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FEATURE



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though a cartridge at this level is probably at the limit of what most LSD owners will consider purchasing. Lyra's more reasonably priced Delos (\$1,695) is a super partner for the F5 and LSD, as is the \$850 Dynavector DV-20X2 and the \$1,195 Sumiko Blackbird. I also had excellent results with the \$379 Denon DL-103R cartridge; the variable mass aspect of the F5 tone-arm really comes in handy with this classic cartridge.

A Great Pickup Arm, All by Itself

As the F5 pickup arm is available separately for \$1,295, the LSD seems like the ideal upgrade for a Rega table. And, as we just happen to have a pair of P3s on hand, it makes perfect sense to take one for a spin, mounting an Exact 2 on each table. Those of you possessing a P25, P3, or P5 and wanting a serious upgrade should seriously consider an F5—everything improves dramatically. The arm (sold separately) features the newer, three-point Rega mount. The one supplied with the LSD is compatible with older Rega tables, and the mounting plate is similar to those of AVID tables.

My P3, already equipped with a Groovetracer subplatter, is now somewhat of a "Frankentable" with the F5 installed, but it's a blast. Bass weight increases dramatically: Going back to The Art of Noise's *Who's Afraid of the Art of Noise?* reveals bass that goes deeper and hits harder. However, the biggest improvement is that of inner detail. *(continued)*



Cardas Headphone Cables

When listening to George Harrison's guitar on "Taxman," there is definitely more bite and decay compared to the standard Rega arm, and overall pace is improved, as well—no more cowbell required. A similar effect is realized with "Eleanor Rigby," in that the violins now have more separation and body, and less grain.

Finally, we gave the F5 a spin on the new AVID Ingenium, with similar results. As good as the LSD is, the F5 is the star of the show.

It's Like Buying a Pickup Arm and Getting a Free Turntable.

Putting the Funk Firm LSD through its paces with a handful of cartridges proves that this table is a steal for \$2,000. When compared to equally priced competitors from SME and Rega, the F5 pickup arm makes the LSD an even better bargain, with some innovative features that the competition doesn't have. But remember, this table will need a good dealer or good skills to set up properly.

But once it was setup, I could not find fault with the LSD, no matter what kind of music I listened to. Going back to a few of the higher-dollar tables in my collection, I could see what I wasn't getting in terms of dynamics and resolution, but the LSD combines it all so well, it won't leave you wanting much more, no matter how good your system is.

The LSD strikes such a good equilibrium of basic, balanced aesthetics and the ability to reveal a lot of music that it may actually be a destination turntable for many analog aficionados. Those stepping up from *anything* in the \$500-to-\$1,000 range will be shocked at how much music is lurking in their record collection.

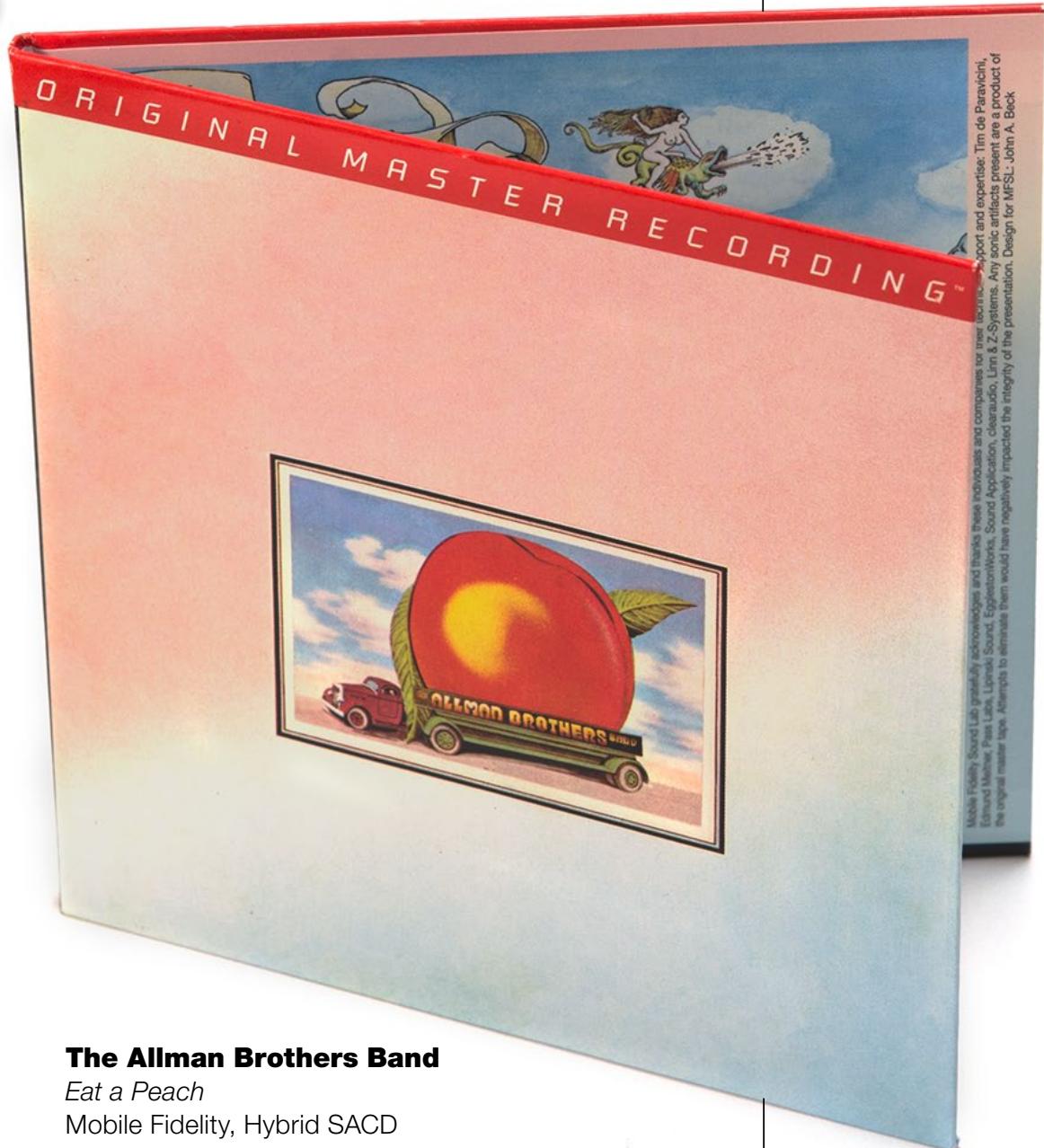
And because of this, we are happy to award it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013. ●

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AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

By Jeff Dorgay



The Allman Brothers Band
Eat a Peach
Mobile Fidelity, Hybrid SACD

The Allman Brothers Band

Legendary rock photographer Jim Marshall once responded to the baited question, "Beatles or Stones?" by quickly replying, "Neither. Allman Brothers, that's the best fucking band in the world." And so it may have been in April 1972 when, not even a year after their highly successful *At Fillmore East* hit, the Allman Brothers released another double album—this time with two sides of studio tracks and the other two comprised of live material that didn't make it on the Fillmore record.

As bandleader Duane Allman met an untimely death on a motorcycle, he only participates on three of the studio tracks.

Staff collector Tom Caselli, who has practically every copy of *Eat a Peach*, candidly says: "This is not an audiophile recording. It's not in the same league as the Fillmore record." The first track of the Mobile Fidelity SACD, "Ain't Wasting Time No More," feels compressed, with moderate high-frequency rolloff. But don't be discouraged. The rest of the disc possesses plenty of sparkle, depth, and dynamics. Delicate cymbal and percussion work at the beginning of "Les Brers in A Minor" instantly cues you in for what's in store.

And you'll either love or hate the thought of getting to hear "Mountain Jam" in its entirety without interruption. To Mobile Fidelity's credit, the song now sounds considerably better than it does on the Capricorn pressing on hand here at the TONEAudio office. Whether you go to your favorite used record store, or eBay, one of these will set you back about \$15-\$20. Listeners with an SACD player will be pleasantly surprised. What's more, the original MoFi version of *Eat a Peach* on LP currently fetches as high as \$200—a cost that should soon crash as hard as 2008 real-estate prices in Phoenix. MoFi will have the new vinyl version out by the time you read this.

Compared to the Capricorn version, the SACD has more inner detail across the board, and a warmer, stronger bottom end as well. Gregg Allman's keyboard playing also comes through more clearly throughout. Boasting a very analog-like feel all the way through the program, this reissue deserves top marks.

Donna Summer

Donna Summer

Love To Love You Baby
HD Tracks, 24/192



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A novel idea.

N

ow that Daft Punk has ushered in a new era of disco, it only seems fair to go back to the source. Mobile Fidelity did a spectacular job about a year ago on KC and the Sunshine Band's self-titled release, and now, HD Tracks ups the ante via this album and *Bad Girls* from the Queen of Disco.

It goes without saying that the original LP sounds dreadful. Remember? Highly compressed and very shrill on top because, let's face it, no one was evaluating the sound quality while in a coked-out haze on the dance floor.

The masters used here are surprisingly good. The 24/192 files are full of air and life, with a much groovier and driving bass line. Donna Summer's trademark voice has more body and substance, but perhaps the best surprise arrives via the great funky guitar riffs previously buried in the mix.

Most hardcore audiophiles won't put their Patricia Barber albums down for this one, but you should. ●

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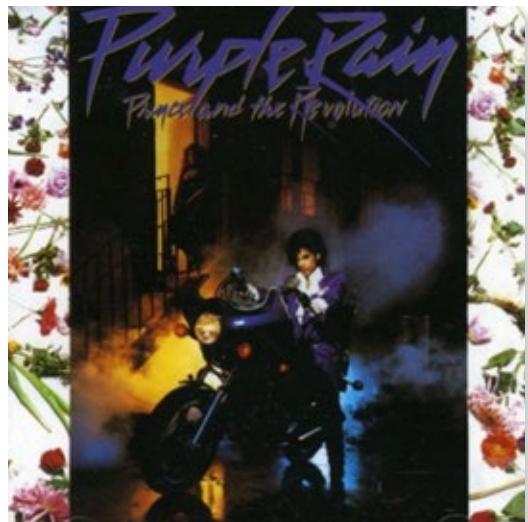
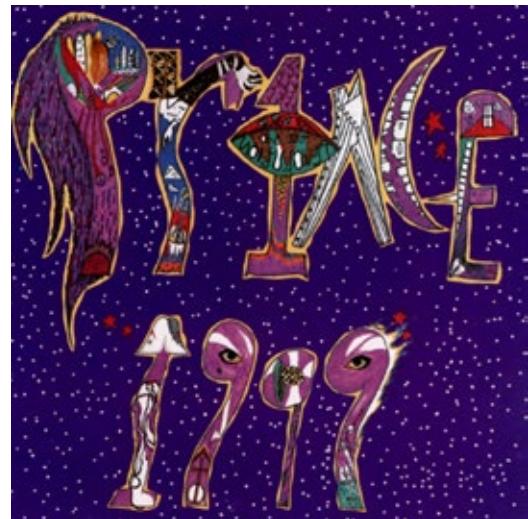


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Prince



Prince

1999

Purple Rain

HD Tracks 24/192 download

Listening to Prince let out one of the best screams in rock, at the end of "International Lover," is all you need to be convinced that HD Tracks has produced a winner with Prince's 1999. Both the original CD and LP are fairly flat in the dynamics department. And the early versions of the compact disc eliminated the track "D.M.S.R." to fit the entire two record set on a single disc.

1999 and *Purple Rain* are the two best-selling efforts of Prince's career, both featuring hits that got heavy radio and MTV play back when the Purple One was at the height of his popularity. Yes, the recent LP reissues, mastered by Bernie Grundman, are also fantastic. And while they get the nod for analog smoothness, these high-resolution digital files have slightly more punch and a lower noise floor to reveal more sonic gold.

When Wendy and Lisa coo, "I think we have to torture you now," it will make the hair stand up on the back of your neck in anticipation of erotic moments to come. This is what Prince has been about all along, recent religious status notwithstanding. The highs are still congested due to the fact that there's a lot more drum machine than real drums here. But everywhere else, these tracks are phenomenal. The HD files

also boast more weight in the bass line, giving you another reason to get up and shake your booty.

Both records now have a huge soundfield, taking advantage of the multitrack format, with small sound effects everywhere and floating between your speakers like a great (and tastefully done) surround mix. But the best improvement in these files compared to the original hard copies is the amount of life, air, and impact in Prince's guitar playing. Somewhat subdued on the originals, he's fully in charge here. It shifts the perspective more towards his blazing leads and tasty fills to the extent the CD now feels like a synthesizer album. As it should be; Prince remains one of the most underrated guitar heroes of his time.

Here's hoping HD Tracks will be able to bring more Prince titles to its catalog, and that whatever source supplies the files takes as much care with the transfers as it did with these. It's also worth mentioning that HD Tracks' download times have decreased dramatically in the last month. Where 24/192 files used to take hours, a full album now downloads in 10-15 minutes with a high-speed connection. A nice upgrade that makes the process that much easier. ●

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THE WINO

By Monique Meadows

WWhile many of us in North America have spent the past few months plowing through (pun intended) the snowfall of a wild winter, vineyard workers south of the equator, at the southern tip of Africa, have been busy with the harvest. Unlike the autumn vineyard harvests of the northern hemisphere, the harvest in South Africa occurs in February, March and April.

Daily temperatures in this wine region, which lies at the very base of the country, range from 73 to 104 degrees Fahrenheit. Due to its location near the 30th parallel south, South Africa's vineyards are subject to a similar climate as those of Chile, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand.



South Africa has been making wine since the 17th century, but the era of apartheid and its trade sanctions on imports kept the wines out of the United States and other global markets. During that period, from 1948 to 1994, most of South Africa's grape growers sold their grapes to co-ops, which turned the juice into distilled alcohol, sherry and port. With the end of sanctions came a new era of South African winemaking. Today, South Africa is the world's eighth largest wine producer, propelled by a new generation of winemakers seeking to compete with the rest of the world. "The best South African wines," states Stephan Tanzer, wine critic and author of *Tanzer's International Wine Cellar*, "can satisfy even the most inveterate fans of European wines, and at far gentler cost."

Several years ago, I was treated to a South African wine dinner at Arrows, a celebrated restaurant in Maine owned by Mark Gaier and Clark Frasier, who the James Beard Foundation named the Best Chefs of the Northeast in 2010. The restaurant's wine steward had just returned from a trip to South Africa and worked with the kitchen to recreate some of what she experienced. For my meal, each course was paired with wine from producers and regions I was unfamiliar with. (Some of the wines are highlighted on the following pages.)

At Arrows, the wines were paired with South African specialties, including Cape Malay chicken, Franschhoek duck, grilled ostrich and antelope kababs, and Bobotie, a spiced minced meat dish, as well as with foods not so foreign to our American table. Bright, bold and layered with flavors, the wines were a delicious testament to modern South African winemaking. "If Argentine wine is led by an iconic superstar [Malbec]" says Tanzer, "then South Africa fields a more well-rounded team with many players."

South African wines continue to be great values. And you don't need to wait for dishes of ostrich and antelope to venture into South African wine territory. Here are four of my favorite go-to bottles, all under \$20. Look for them from your local wine merchant, and take home a bottle or two.

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MAN Vintners Chenin Blanc 2011

Coastal Region, Paarl \$11

If you haven't tried Chenin, known as "Steen" in South Africa, this wine is a good place to start. In the United States, in a sea of Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc is often an overlooked white wine. In France's Loire Valley, Chenin is known as Vouvray. In South Africa, the grape is the heralded workhorse of vineyards producing the area's premier white wine, though Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay are gaining ground.

José Conde and brothers Tyrrel and Philip Myburgh started making wine together in 2001. Conde is the owner/winemaker of the award-winning Stark-Condé Wines in Stellenbosch. Tyrell, the cellar master, is a fifth-generation farmer in Paarl, in South Africa's Western Cape region, where most of the country's vineyards and wineries are located. He and his brother run award-winning Joostenberg Wines. The three men—whose wives, Marie, Anette and Nicky, lend their initials for MAN—made their first cases of wine in a tractor shed, and are now exporting their wines to 25 countries.

"Grape growing in our area is not for wimps," says MAN. "There is little rainfall, and you have to be in tune with your vineyards. Too much crop or too much stress and you end up with grapes that can't ripen, or worse. But this is grape-growing heaven for generations of our farmers. There are no large, tasteless grapes here."

Indeed, the area's Mediterranean climate and old-shale soils provide the wines with delicious minerality and complexity. MAN's rich Chenin Blanc is an easy-drinking wine, with vibrant aromas of tropical fruit and apples pulling you into an ocean of citrus flavors. Great on its own, Chenin is also a versatile food wine and pairs well with chicken and seafood dishes. But go beyond there—try it with a spicy Thai curry.



Southern Right Sauvignon Blanc 2011

Walker Bay \$16

Tim Hamilton Russell founded Hamilton Russell Vineyards in 1975. It was the first wine estate planted in South Africa's Walker Bay, just a mile from the Atlantic in the path of cool maritime breezes. Chairman of a top South African ad agency at the time, Russell decided to purchase and revitalize a rundown property behind the old fishing village of Hermanus, which he turned it into one of the country's leading wine estates, or "wine farms" as they are called, and built a reputation as a creative and progressive wine producer. His son Anthony took the helm in the 1994 and scaled back production to focus on just two wines: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

The estate later expanded to include a second label, Southern Right, which specializes in Sauvignon Blanc and Pinotage, a grape designed specifically for South Africa's hot climate. The winery's name refers to the rare Southern Right whales that visit the waters of Walker Bay, the coolest wine-producing region in South Africa. The estate makes a contribution to Southern Right whale conservation from the sale of each bottle of wine.

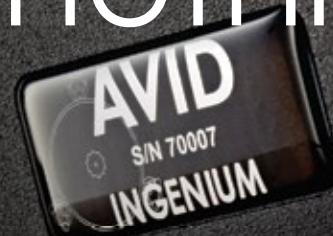
Sauvignon Blanc fans will love the focus of this wine. It's all here: a bright white wine from 100-percent estate-grown grapes, with big juicy citrus notes, a nice mineral touch and abundant acidity. It's a mouthwatering wine rich in personality. If you love the mineral style of France's Loire Valley Sauvignon Blanc and the tropical notes of those from New Zealand, this South African offering is a contender—and one to cozy up to with a plate of oysters.



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Robertson Winery Cabernet Sauvignon 2011

Robertson Valley \$11

Robertson Winery, established in 1941, is one of the largest estates in South Africa. Its vineyards sit in the Robertson Valley, located 160 miles from Cape Town and bordered by mountains and rivers. The winery has a long tradition of working with grape-growing families in the community, some of which are seventh-generation growers. Cellar master Bowen Botha oversees winemaking and believes that the desired style of each Robertson wine determines the choice of vineyard.

I find this Cab to be a charmer and a super value. It has the richness you expect from a Cabernet Sauvignon and surprising complexity at this price—be it from the four months of aging in oak or the South African earth that translates to the vines. I've always thought there might be a splash of Pinotage in this wine, but the wine specs say that it's 100 percent Cab. People are not disappointed when I steer them to this bottle. It's a great little Cab and they get change back on their \$20. The wine is smooth and full-bodied, with rich, dark fruit and touches of spice from the oak-barrel aging. It will stand up to a grilled steak.



Spice Route Chakalaka 2009

Swartland \$19

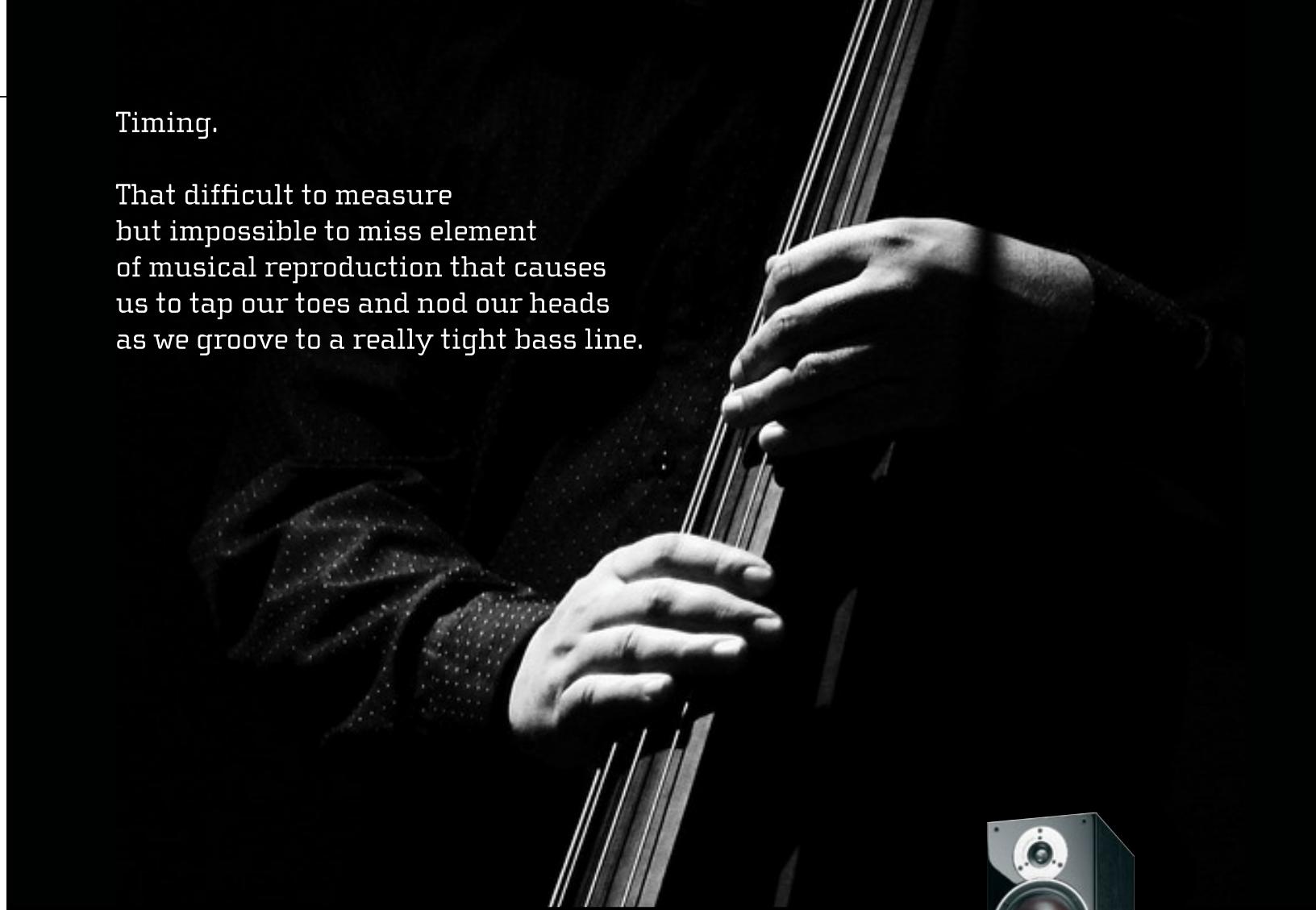
Spice Route is a project by Charles Back of Fairview, one of South Africa's most successful wine estates, which was founded by Back's father, an immigrant from Lithuania. The younger Back, like his father, is considered an innovator, and today works with grapes never before grown in vineyards in South Africa. He opened the Spice Route winery in 1997, inspired by the "nerve and dash" of the 15th-century mariners who transported exotic Eastern spices to Western Europe along what was known as the spice route. Working with deep red soils of non-irrigated bush vine that see long hot summers with cool Atlantic breezes, Back has taken Spice Route to huge success in the South African wine industry. "The Swartland is a region for extreme winemaking," he says. "It is harsh and unforgiving but ultimately rewarding."

Spice Route is known for its robust and spicy red wines, and Chakalaka does not disappoint, delivering a complex fusion of flavors. The name is a nod to a spicy South African relish and a dish born out of the country's past that brought together many different cultures. This wine brings together grapes known for deep flavor and spice: Syrah (referred to as Shiraz in South Africa and Australia), Mourvèdre, Carignan, Petite Sirah, Grenache and Tannat, aged in French and American oak.

"Dark and winey with lots of sappy kirsch, blackberry and plum sauce notes supported by dark licorice and sweet spice through the finish," reads the review from *Wine Spectator*, giving this wine a 90-point score. Consider Spice Route Chakalaka a thrilling "well-rounded team of many players." It is an outstanding match with lamb and a winner with mature cheeses. ●

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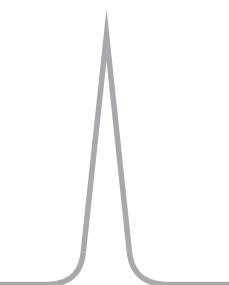


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And while this aluminum and magnesium marvel looks perfectly suited to the iPad, it also mates perfectly with any of your other mobile devices. Its internal battery will play for about 8.5 hours if you are really pushing the volume, or about 10 at a more modest volume, confirmed by our listening.

Not only does the Sound Cylinder's compact form factor make for easy portability around the house, it's the perfect travel companion as well. This and an iPad make for a great miniature home theater that fits in your carry on luggage.

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Fiat 500e

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As cool as the Fiat Abarth that we profiled back in issue 53 is, the idea of not burning any gasoline to run day to day errands is enticing. And, it balances out the carbon footprint for those, like our publisher, who sport gigantic, Class-A monoblock amplifiers.

Soon to hit our shores, Fiat is mumbling that while the purchase price will be in the neighborhood of \$32,000, but they are going to offer short term leases for \$199 a month. The car has been enthusiastically reviewed by Gizmodo, so we look forward to getting our paws on one soon. With 143 foot pounds of torque and a single speed transmission, the performance could be indeed promising. What a stylish way to save the world from global warming.



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Symbol Audio Tabletop HiFi

\$1,800

www.symbolaudio.com

By Rob Johnson

Symbol's new Tabletop HiFi offers a refreshingly attractive alternative to the more traditional form factors of audio equipment. In essence, the HiFi is a powered music playback system, but the console's unique nuances make it so much more than that.

The HiFi, which measures 28.75 inches long by 9.5 inches high by 8.5 inches deep, offers an absolutely clean and modern-looking appearance free from visible knobs, controls or indicators. All the owner sees from a listening position are two 4-inch, full-range drivers set widely apart on the HiFi's face.

A built-in Class-D amplifier provides 8 watts to the front drivers and 15 watts to the 5.25-inch subwoofer. Symbol hides the down-firing woofer beneath the cabinet, which has dual rear ports. With so much hardware crammed into a small space, the HiFi tips the scales at a substantial 30 pounds.

On the rear of the unit, the HiFi offers a master volume knob as well as a separate control for the subwoofer, allowing the owner to tailor the sound to his or her preference. The rear-facing controls require the user to lean behind the unit to visually locate them, until the placement of the controls becomes familiar, but the volume knob is easy enough to reach over the top of the unit. The HiFi offers only one input, a 1/8-inch minijack. If a user intends to switch between multiple sources, a cable splitting

adapter or other manual intervention is needed.

When ordering a HiFi, soon-to-be owners have the opportunity to customize the appearance of the face and cabinet. Options for the front include a walnut or oak finish, or a clean white or gray; cabinet finish options include walnut wood grain or a minimalist black, white or orange. For families with young children, it's probably a good idea to go with the protective, poke-proof metal grille option for the drivers. The grilles match whatever finish you chose for the rest of the unit. The many custom options allow the HiFi to be either a striking visual element for a room, or a chameleon blending into the background. Either way, those house-guests who do notice it will find both its aesthetics and its sonics appealing.

Symbol Audio's HiFi is available for \$1,800, regardless of finish choices. Given the unit's single-box, single-input design, it's clear that the Symbol Audio solution is a purist one that's not trying to compete directly with full-blown component stereo systems. It's designed to fill a room with sound from a single source, and do that job very well. Those audio enthusiasts seeking multiple input options, pinpoint stereo imaging and a broader soundstage may be served better by more traditional stereo equipment. But for those who prioritize the appearance of a beautiful, stylish and unobtrusive audio system, and who also want good sound to complement it, the HiFi is an elegant solution. ●

M ON CLASSICAL

By Madelaine Coffman

Classical music encompasses a wide variety of styles, time periods, and cultures. For listeners both new and experienced, exploring the lesser-known byways can yield unexpected gems. Each column will investigate two contrasting recordings that represent different perspectives on the same theme. This issue, we look at music from the second half of the 20th century that was inspired by non-classical media. Comments, questions, or suggestions for future themes/recordings can be sent to:

m.on.classical@gmail.com



Three Pieces for Blues Band and Orchestra

(1968), William Russo.

Also included: Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* (1961), Leonard Bernstein.

Recorded in 1973 by the Siegel-Schwall Band and the San Francisco Orchestra. Conducted by Seiji Ozawa.

“Nobody leaves this place without singing the blues.” —Albert Collins in *Adventures in Babysitting*

Background: In 1966, the conductor Seiji Ozawa decided to unwind after a rehearsal with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. David Noble, the music critic for the *Chicago Sun Times*, took him to Big John’s—a legendary hotspot in Chicago’s Old Town where world-famous blues bands played for primarily white audiences. (According to a 1967 article in the *Chicago Daily News*, Ozawa was at first denied entry to Big John’s because he looked much younger than his 31 years. He had to return to his hotel room and retrieve his passport before he was allowed inside.)

The Siegel-Schwall Band, recently formed, took the stage that night. Ozawa quickly became a fan, and mentioned to a reporter on his second visit that he’d like to feature the collective in an orchestral concert. At the time, it was revolutionary for a serious classical conductor to suggest such a thing.

The next year, as Music Director for the Ravinia Festival, Ozawa conducted composer William Russo’s *Symphony No. 2, Titans*. A few days later, Ozawa proposed a “blues concerto” be composed by Russo (who was experimenting with rock and jazz forms at Chicago’s Columbia College), performed by the Siegel-Schwall Band, and conducted under his baton. The Ravinia Festival (aided by an Illinois Art Council Grant) commissioned Russo to write a work incorporating both orchestral and blues band musical forms.

Music: A joyful celebration of music’s universal language, it is a playfully seductive treat for lovers of jazz, blues, and modern classical. Opening with the signal to a duel—hushed strings and a harmonica wail, strongly reminiscent of an Ennio Morricone score—it quickly transitions into a band versus strings battle that would have been at home in any mid-century 007 action sequence. The shootout between the orchestra and blues players begins.

In these three pieces, Russo fills the essential simplicity of the blues structure with classically inspired harmonic nuances, gestures, and references. The orchestra functions as both backup and competition for the band, countering the modern blues vibe with a dizzying array of classical motifs.

Every time the orchestra overreaches, the band steps in to move things along with a quick blues tempo. Sometimes working together, sometimes at odds, the two musical idioms vie for control—neither able to fully suppress the other, both benefiting from the other’s presence. The heady pleasures of esoteric exploration are given their due, but we always come back to earthy, sensual ground, returning after every classical digression to a basic blues riff.

At the very end, the harmonica is liberated from the classical constraints and blues meter, and transformed into an instrument of jazz-like virtuosity before it rejoins the orchestra and band for a joyous finale.

Available: The original Deutsche Grammophon vinyl pressing can be found in records stores as well as on eBay and other online retailers. A 2002 CD release (replacing the Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* with Russo’s *Street Music* and George Gershwin’s *An American in Paris*) can be downloaded from iTunes and Amazon. You can also stream the music on Spotify.



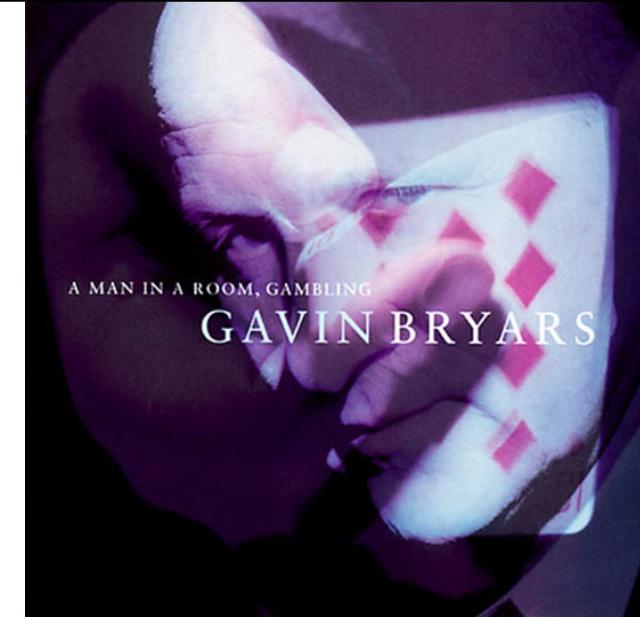
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A Man In A Room, Gambling

(1992), Gavin Bryars and Juan Muñoz.

Recorded in 1998 with Juan Muñoz, Yukio Fujishima, and The Balanescu Quartet.

"The passionate gambler's imperturbability, like a lover's, is a symptom of obsession more stubborn than others."

—Christina Peri Rossi,
Dostoevsky's Last Night

Background: Two decades ago, Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz approached English composer Gavin Bryars about a possible collaboration for radio broadcast. Inspired by a variety of sources (including pianist Glen Gould's experimental recording techniques), the writings of gambling expert S.W. Erdnase, and the "Shipping News"—a meteorological broadcast by BBC Radio 4 throughout the day "heard by many casual listeners...[and] part of a dimly-perceived auditory experience out of which each radio listener attempts to visualize an intensely dramatic world"—Bryars and Muñoz created 10 five-minute pieces intended to be played before late-night radio news programs. Muñoz, who wrote and performed the text, envisioned a late-night traveler encountering by chance the brief, inexplicable broadcasts.

Music: Hypnotic and beguilingly non-narrative (at certain points, it even undermines the idea of a linear progression of events), each five-minute "radio programme" is

ostensibly part of an ongoing instructive series teaching the listener the art of concealment and illusion in gambling. Vide, the gambler narrator spouts phrases such as: "Some people with a high moral sense use the word 'tricks' to describe these subtle techniques, but we prefer to call them artifices."

A melancholy string quartet creates a romantic, somewhat decadent mood with shimmering and often-dissonant chords. At other times an unsteady, disconcerting sensation is created by punctuating musical fragments with long pauses or by passing a melodic line from one instrument to another. The music seems at first somewhat disconnected from the text, providing only an emotional underpinning, as the interplay between the two is not immediately clear. But as the episodes progress, it becomes apparent that they not only share a steady tempo, but also utilize

the same repeated motifs and structural form (intro, body, and resolution, much like a traditional radio program). The overall ambient effect and repetition make it some-

what difficult to focus on any of the discrete parts, much like carefully watching an illusionist's hands only to miss the crucial moment.

The text finds other ways to disorient the audience. In the second half of the series, another voice repeats some of the gambler's phrases—and not always accurately. In another episode, crowd and street noises echo in the background, and it is explained, "we have lost today's program somewhere...or rather we have lost the text that we intended to read."

The final episode presents a philosophical discussion of gambling, while the musical form attains its clearest, most consonant incarnation. What once seemed pensive or foreboding now sounds full of anticipation.

"Did you see? Did you see? Thank you very much for being with us tonight and lots of luck."

Available: It's on iTunes and Amazon, or you can purchase an autographed CD from GB Records at: www.gavinbryers.com ●

DESERT DRIFTER

A Conversation With Tuareg Guitarist Bombino

By Andy Downing

Nomad (Nonesuch) is a fitting name for the third full-length album from Tuareg guitarist Bombino for myriad reasons. Traditionally, the Tuareg people live a nomadic lifestyle, drifting across national borders in the Saharan interior or North Africa, and Bombino, born Omara Moctar 33 years ago, has spent much of his adult life on the move. Sometimes this was by choice—he has maintained an active tour schedule in recent years—while other times, outside elements forced him into exile.

Adding to the appropriateness of the title, Bombino opted to record the album some 5,600 miles from his home in Niamey, Niger when he decamped to Nashville with Black Keys frontman and Grammy-winning producer Dan Auerbach. At the time, the musician had little familiarity with Auerbach, writing via email, “I did not know Dan’s music until he invited us to work with him.”

“My manager played me some of his music with the Black Keys,” continued the guitarist. “I could tell listening to those songs that we would make a very powerful record together. He had a strong sense of the blues in his music, so I knew we would have a basis to communicate, musically speaking. Luckily this turned out to be the case.”



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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.

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This chemistry drives much of *Nomad*, a staggering album that bridges the divide between the more traditional sounds of Tuareg collective Tinariwen (lead guitarist Ibrahim Abaraybone was a strong early influence on Bombino's playing) and the modern era. Bombino rips into songs like "Amidinine" with an almost punk-rock urgency.

The bright, spacious recording is saturated with guitars, and the musician's fretwork revelatory. Bombino coils his notes, hammers out rhythmic leads, and unfurls finger-cramping passages before pulling back for the acoustic "Imidiwan," which stretches out like a weary desert traveler at the end of a long day's journey.

Communicating by email, Bombino opened up about life in exile, the lure of the desert, and the places he feels most at home these days.

Have you spent much time in the States?

I have spent quite a bit of time in the United States, actually. I first came to the United States with a group called Tidawt. We were in California for about one month in 2009. Then I came back to work on *Agadez*, my first real solo album, and I was in Boston and New York at that time. Since 2011, I have been touring quite often in the USA—about three tours per year. So I am starting to become familiar with the American mentality and way of life. There are some great places in America. It's really fun to visit.

Did you have any preconceived notion of what life in the U.S. would be like prior to your first visit?

To be honest, I did not spend very much time thinking about what life would be like in America. In Niger we grew up more connected to France and Europe, so I was not thinking about America. It was too far away, like a distant dream. I would imagine sometimes being in France or somewhere in Europe, but even that was not something I would think about very much. I was much more focused on my environment and culture where I was at the moment. I really was never thinking that I would travel outside of Africa. *(continued)*

Was the language barrier ever an issue working with Dan Auerbach?

In the end, I can say no, the difference in language was not an impediment for us in the studio. My manager is from New York, but he speaks French. He was there to help with the language but he did not need to do very much, especially after the first two days or so. Once we found a rhythm of how to work in the studio, there was not very much that needed to be communicated through words. We could just give each other nods and other gestures and everyone could understand perfectly what was happening.

Do you think Dan drew anything different out in you as a player?

I think Dan gave me a new confidence with recording. It's true that this was my first time in a real studio! Before, my albums were recorded just putting a microphone in front of a live performance. So this was a big experience for me and the band. Dan made us feel very relaxed in the studio and very confident. We felt like, "We have come all this way, from the Sahara to Nashville, because this big star wants us to come and work with him. So there is value in what we are doing here." This gave me a lot of confidence to just relax and play my music the way I like it.



Why do you find yourself drawn to the desert? What does it bring to your sound?

The desert is the best place in the world to play music and to listen to music. It is the most peaceful place in the world. For me, it is like my heart opens up wide whenever I am in the desert. I will feel a great sense of peace and of freedom. It is the inspiration I try to use to make my music. I write songs in the desert, and I work on new things there because I feel very open to experiment with new ideas when I am in the desert.

How much of your sound is a product of your environment? Do you think your music would sound different if you lived somewhere like London or New York City?

Wow, I don't know. It is really so hard for me to imagine living anywhere but in Africa. I don't think I could be an artist if I lived somewhere else. My life would be too uncomfortable for me.

You've lived in exile a number of times in your life. How would you describe the experience to someone who has never had to live under such hardship?

Wow, that is a good question. I would say it is like being in prison, maybe, but I think it is worse than that. In prison you know what is happening. When you will become free again. You know that your family and friends are safe without you. In exile, you don't know anything about the people you care about or when you will be able to return home. So maybe it is like being on a desert island waiting for someone

to come and save you. You feel very powerless and frustrated. It feels like someone has robbed you of your basic humanity. For me, the feeling of being free and knowing that your family is free and safe, these are basic things for a human being to feel like a human being.

What role did these various exiles play in terms of shaping your music?

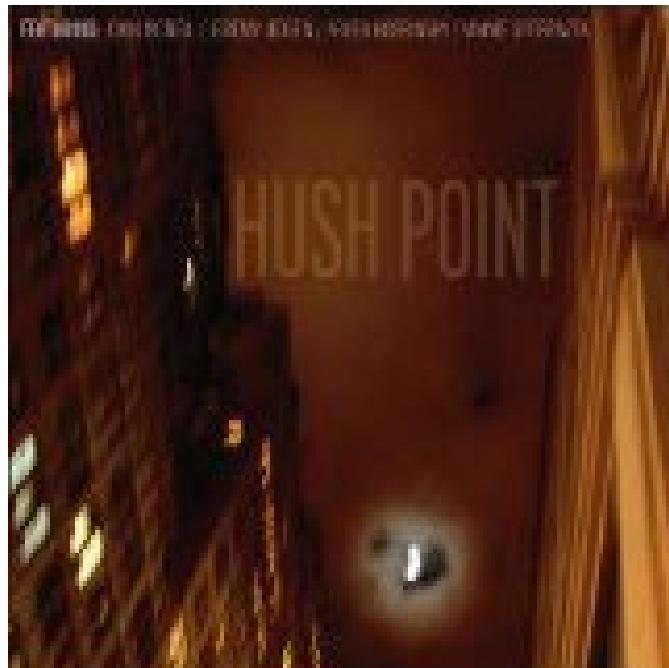
Well, I think the best art in the world comes from a feeling of struggle. It comes from pain, from regret, from loneliness, from broken hearts. All of this I have felt in my life. So I think it was like my university of being an artist that has a purpose and something important to say to the world.

How have those experiences changed your concept of the word "home"? Where do you feel most at home these days?

I feel most at home in Niamey with my wife and my daughter, and also in Agadez with my grandmother and my cousins. I have good friends in Niamey and in Agadez. I am a very lucky man. I know the pain and suffering of not having one home, so now to have two homes! It is like I have been given a second life. A very lucky one. ●

JAZZ & BLUES

By Jim Macnie



Hush Point

Hush Point
Sunnyside, CD

For the last several years, John McNeil has made records that play off of the cool jazz that dominated the West Coast scene during 50s. In his mid-60s, the trumpeter usually opts for clever designs rather than blazing chops and often finds a younger saxophone foil to accommodate his ideas and humor. Everyone from Bill McHenry to Noah Preminger to Allan Chase has stood shoulder to shoulder with him. Together, they've made a case for the calm and composed being as evocative as the blaring and expressionistic.



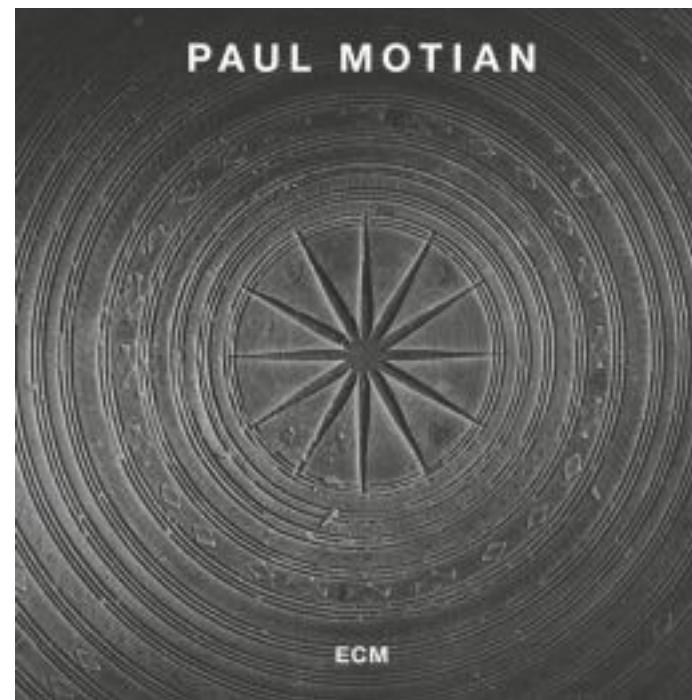
Hush Point, a new quartet that finds McNeil in a cohort of saxophonist Jeremy Udden, bassist Aryeh Kobrinsky, and drummer Vinnie Sperrazza, follows a path similar to its predecessors, but with a twist: The record is a bit more muted than previous discs. "Yeah, this is my quiet band," he told me in passing a few months ago. Indeed, from Stan Getz to Lee Konitz to Jimmy Giuffre, bandleaders that stressed a measured approach rather than a *cri de cœur* populated the 50s. On its self-titled debut, Hush Point follows suit. Each of its instruments revel in their own unique sound,

and allow quiet to be a very effective fifth member.

Udden is a head-turner in this game (don't miss his recent *Folk Art*). His alto sax is arid, wise, and enticing, a la Paul Desmond. The less sound that surrounds him—the quartet arrangements occasionally find a member of the band disappearing, or at least, sitting quietly in the corner—the more impact his lines have. His alignment with McNeil is tight, and their agility helps shoot off sparks. On Giuffre's "The Train And the River," a pulsing classic from the cool jazz era, they parallel each other while still providing individual

statements. The McNeil original "Get Out" works the same way, while benefiting from Kobrinsky and Sperrazza's nonchalant lift-off.

If the West Coast scene was always a tad too sunny, these guys manage to inject a shadow or two while still keeping its DNA intact. There's a curt cluster of gnarled interplay that punctuates the otherwise breezy "Peachful" that lets you know we're still in 2013, and though fleeting, it strikes a useful balance, lining a chipper tune with momentary tension without harshing its mellow.

**Paul Motian**

Old & New Masters
ECM, 6CD box set

Jazz loves inspired eccentrics. So the fact that Paul Motian was a beloved figure for the last several decades shouldn't surprise anyone mildly familiar with the music. Not everyone knows his name, of course. The drummer/bandleader constantly performed, but wasn't the most high-visual artist around. In the years before his death in autumn of 2011, he worked in NYC exclusively (plane travel was a foe). If you wanted to see him create his decidedly idiosyncratic version of swing, you had to hit Manhattan.

This new six-disc box set unites the initial albums Motian made for the ECM label, his first dates as a leader after earning a rep as Bill Evans' drummer (he's key to the magic found on the 1961 classic *Sunday at the Village Vanguard*), and foil for Keith Jarrett (ditto for the equally classic *Fort Yawuh*, also cut at the Vanguard). A cagey improviser who knew a well-designed series of taps, rattles, and flutters could be just as potent as more established rhythm strategies, he figured out how to get a wealth of ensembles to maneuver through his somewhat folksy and often mysterious compositions. He liked mood, he liked sound, he liked aura. The music in this set makes that clear.

During this time frame, Motian kept his bands in flux. 1971's *Conception Vessel* stretches from plinking strings to trap solos to a duo exchange with Jarrett. Flute and violin make their way into the mix as well. By '74's *Tribute*, he'd found a way to blend two guitars with an earthy alto sax, and the exploratory grooves he refined with bassist Charlie Haden (in Jarrett's band) became some of jazz's most compelling. By '77's *Dance*, he connected with fellow traveler Charles Brackeen, a gritty reed player whose blues vocabulary is both immediate and spacey. *Caprice* is the through-line of Motian's ongoing approach. As somber as some of these performances are, whimsy drives their invention. The bandleader encouraged his groups to feel out the music and take the improvisations wherever the process suggested.
(continued)

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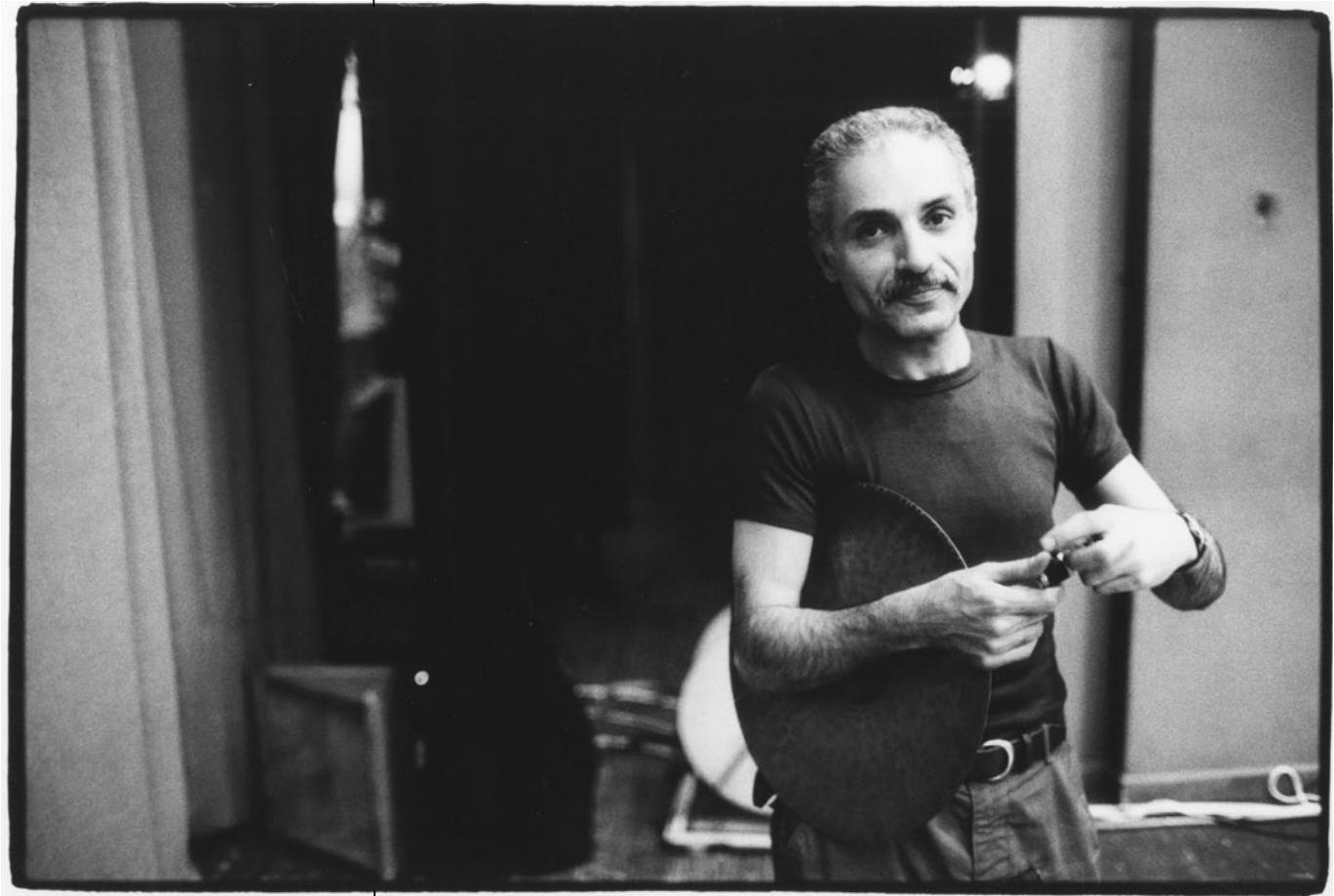
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There are no truly extended excursions here, but even the four-minute "Kalypso" enjoys a rolling fluidity. Turn your back on it for a sec and it seems like it could spill on forever. By 1981's *Psalm*, the drummer found two key compatriots, guitarist Bill Frisell and saxophonist Joe Lovano. The quintet that makes the album's music has an orchestral flavor, perhaps due as much to Frisell's effects box as the leader's pen—and the signature Motian eeriness dominates the action as well. "Fantasm" may be born on terra firma, but it lives in the clouds.

By the time the drummer chips the ensemble down to a trio for the masterful *It Should Have Happened A Long Time Ago...*, one of the most unique band sounds in jazz history is up and running. Motian's brushes, Lovano's long tones, and Frisell's moonscapes nurture the group's dreamy nature. Like a modern version of the Modern Jazz Quartet, the players use grace as their calling card, even when they are raising the roof. Motian would go on to make many more records (don't miss his long stretch of pips on the Winter+Winter label), but this set shows that many of the ideas he wanted to test through his life were on his palette right at the beginning. ●

DIGITAL VS. VINYL

(PART 1)

By John Darko

As a digital audiophile, what really grinds my gears is when people claim that vinyl sounds superior to digital. My rebuttal is always, “Which vinyl? Which digital?” Their response is usually a bemused *Huh?*

Do they believe that some kind of magic is held within those grooves that can be extracted with any turntable-cartridge-phonostage combination and that it will sound superior to a similarly priced digital audio front end? I suspect some folks are (perhaps mistakenly) reiterating received wisdom without carrying out listening tests of their own.

And it isn't just audiophiles. My hipster friends are the biggest culprits of this misdemeanor. “Vinyl is so rich and warm,” they opine. *Really?* On your \$200 mid-1980s mini system vinyl sounds better than CD? *Really?* I'm usually polite enough to stifle my chuckle. Incidentally, I suspect the received-wisdom meme is a major driving force behind vinyl's resurgence amongst the under-30s

crowd. But per usual, I can't prove it.

Is vinyl really better than digital? I was keen to investigate. This was not something that could be rushed. During the past 18 months, I've been experimenting with the black stuff (vinyl, that is) and have amassed a half-decent record collection. I've also spent time with several turntables; not too many and nothing too flashy. I started with a Rega RP1 turntable with the Ortofon Blue cartridge—and loved it. This gave way to a Rega RP3, which was clearly another step up. I even snagged an old Dual 505 purely because this was the same table I used 20 years ago, when I last spun vinyl on a regular basis. Another late 2012 turntable diversion was a Technics SL-1200MK2. It was the easiest to use but didn't last too long once I realized the work required to get it up to an audiophile standard.

More recently, a turntable-loving friend helped me get a Goldring Lenco 75 up and running. The stock arm was

the first thing to go. It now runs a Grace tonearm and Zu-modded Denon DL-103R cartridge. Even with the most basic of phonostages—a Pro-ject Phono Box USB—the Lenco offered more drive and body than the aforementioned Regas and Dual; those budget belt-drive tables sound comparatively thinner, spindly even. The RP1 and RP3 are superb entry-level decks, but they are no matches for the direct-driving Lenco with the Zu/Denon cart.

I recently substituted the Pro-ject Phono Box USB for the new entry-level phonostage from iFi, the iPhono (\$399). The fruits of this AMR/iFi Micro collaboration have already been proven with the excellent iUSBPower unit, which brings noticeable power-supply improvements to many USB DACs. The iPhono shares the same candy bar-sized aluminum shell as the iUSBPower, as well as the same low-noise switched-mode power supply. Cleverly, the packaging is also identical. *(continued)*



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Turn the iPhono upside down and you'll see a plethora of DIP switches; these are used to set gain and loading. And all but the lowest-outputting MC cartridges are covered. Setting up the Zu-modded Denon was a cinch.

Improvements over and above the Pro-ject are immediate and obvious (and become even more substantial as the unit runs in). A small increase in tonal mass plumps up Bill Callahan's vocals on his *Apocalypse* LP. Rhythmic traction is now crisper on LCD Sound-system's swansong *This Is Happening*. Overall clarity and transparency take a big leap forwards. However, the biggest advantage that the iFi phonos-

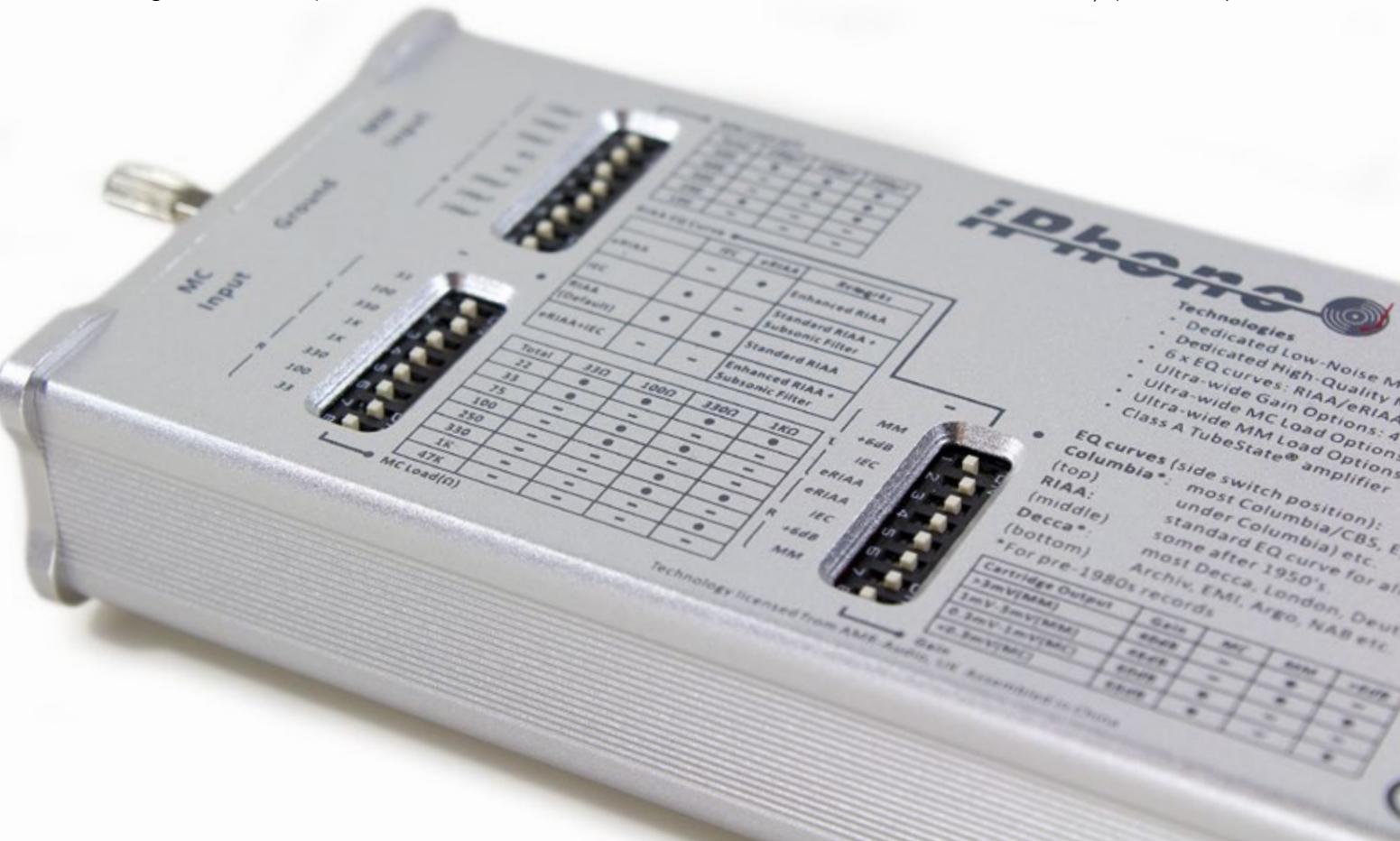
tage lords over the Pro-ject is its ability to deconstruct complex passages; the way it separates the dual layers of drums on Bright Eyes' *Digital Ash in a Digital Urn* is a prime example.

A very minor complaint with the iPhono is that on some records the treble can get ever so slightly spitty, but I'll concede that this could easily be an issue further up the chain that is simply being masked by the Pro-ject's less-resolving manner.

And did I mention that the iPhono also offers three user-selectable EQ curves? I initially opted for the RIAA curve, as nearly all of my records were manufactured after 1975. You could be a stickler for using the

Decca and Columbia curves for older records, or you could see them as alternative sonic seasoning. On some records, I enjoyed the Decca curve more: It lent music a shade more vocal bloom in my current system (a REDGUM RG60 integrated and Magnepan MMG loudspeakers).

Is this the most flexible budget phonostage currently available? Quite possibly. I dig its sound big time. But the iPhono was up for a sonic death match, so in came a Mac mini, with the iUSBPower pushing ones and zeroes into my current favorite budget DAC: Resonessence Labs' Concero (approx. \$600; reviewed in issue 53 of *TONE*). (continued)





The album? Tom Waits' *Small Change*, recently remastered from the analog tapes and repressed by Rhino Records—it sounds stunning on wax. Yes, mine is a post-recall copy. Textural and timbral information as well as bass weight prove that the Rhino vinyl is clearly superior to an Asylum 1989 CD lossless rip of the same album. And therein lies the catch: older CD issue vs. relatively recent vinyl remaster. Hardly apples to apples, is it? (These Rhino remasters have yet to make it to CD.)

LP: <http://www.discogs.com/Tom-Waits-Small-Change/release/2933494>

CD: <http://www.discogs.com/Tom-Waits-Small-Change/release/374238>

Next to hit the Lenco was a fairly standard Australian pressing of David Bowie's *Scary Monsters*. This was compared to a 24-bit/192-kHz rip sourced from the 2003 Hybrid SACD. Surely the SACD would win out, right? Everyone loves hi-res and it's common knowledge

that many Australian pressings were sonically inferior to their European and American counterparts. But no! Again, the record won out by a country mile. Next to the vinyl, the hi-res rip sounded lifeless—dead behind the eyes. Unexpectedly, the rip also sounded compressed (vertically squashed). Again, I suspect this to be a case of apples versus oranges. The SACD was likely sourced from the most current remaster (carried out by Peter Mew in 1999).

LP: <http://www.discogs.com/David-Bowie-Scary-Monsters/release/1015181>

SACD: <http://www.discogs.com/David-Bowie-Scary-Monsters/release/1504686>

The conclusion is that mastering (and recording) quality matters as much as the playback medium. For a fair digital-versus-analog comparison, a record and CD sourced from the same master would need to be found.

Tune in next issue for those findings. ●

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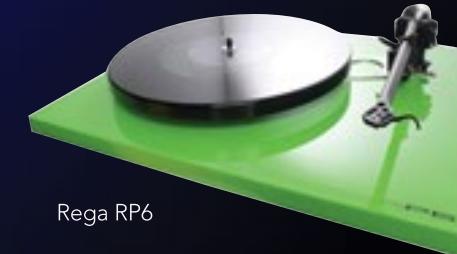
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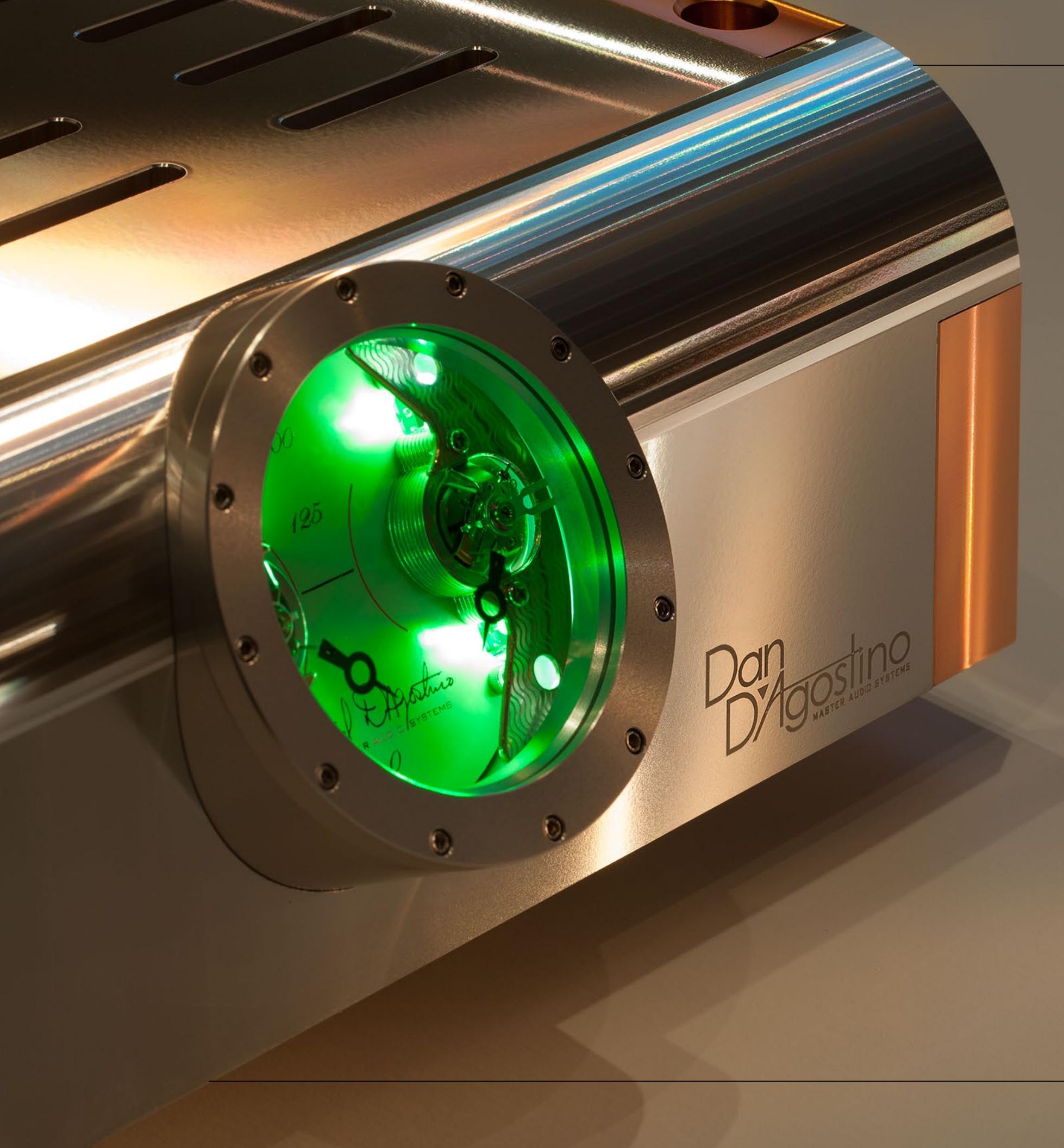


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We'll take you on a magical mystery tour of this sonic treat in issue 56.

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Full review in issue 56.





Nagra Jazz Preamplifier

\$12,000

www.nagraaudio.com

N

agra's new Jazz preamplifier, inspired by the Montreux Jazz Festival (of which Nagra has been a sponsor for years, and their equipment is used to record the live performances) is a major evolutionary step up from the former PL-L, which has been a big hit with the *TONEAudio* staff.

The low noise, clean midband and dynamic performance that characterized the past preamplifier has been uniformly improved with the Jazz. And, their legendary modulometer allows you to keep an eye on the output level, providing a visual cue to what's going on as well as an aesthetic cue to past Nagra preamplifiers and recorders.

It's compact form factor, honed by decades of experience in the field, is beautifully packaged and takes a minimum of space to perform. The input and output connectors have now been relocated to the rear panel, instead of on the sides of the enclosure and there is a new, more compact remote control.

Bottom line, it's an improvement over the PL-L in every way, but as with all Nagra products, it is evolutionary, not revolutionary. Review out shortly.

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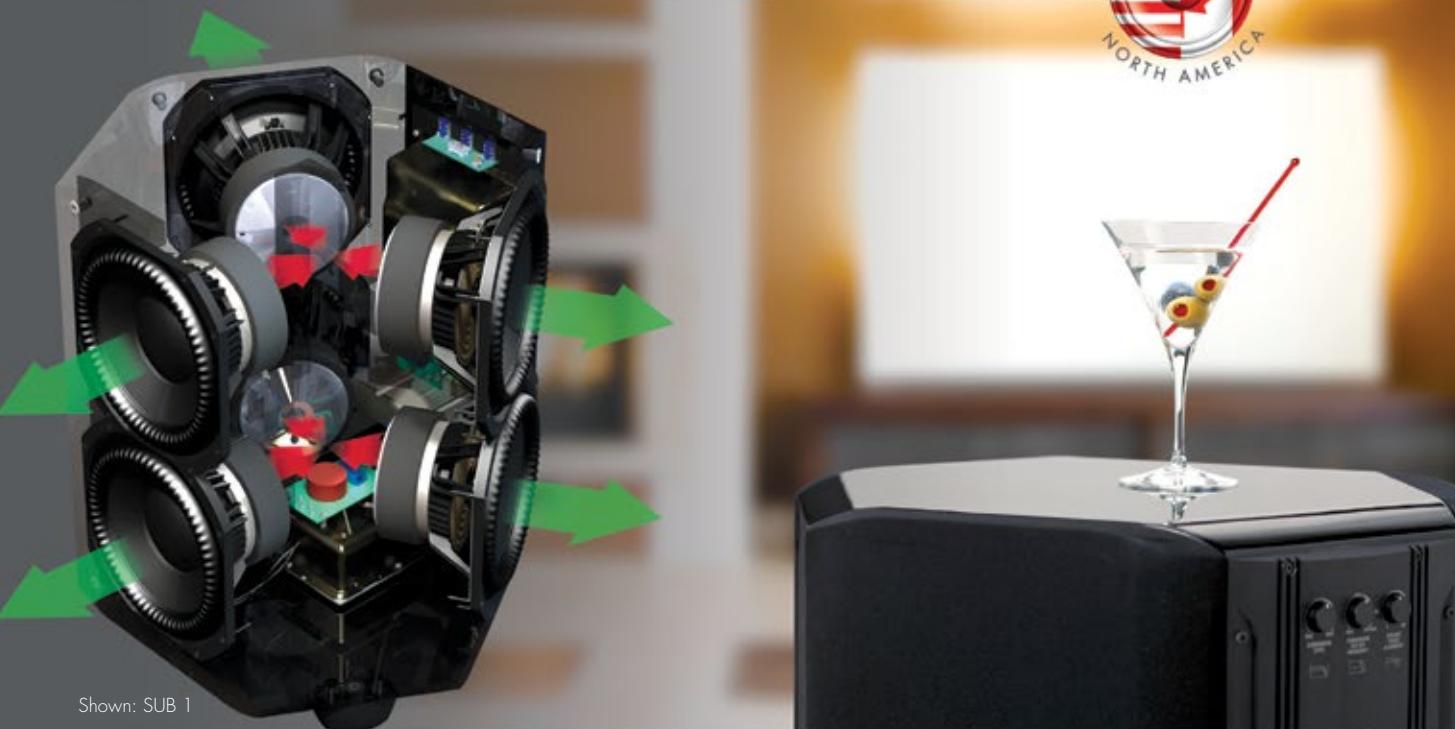
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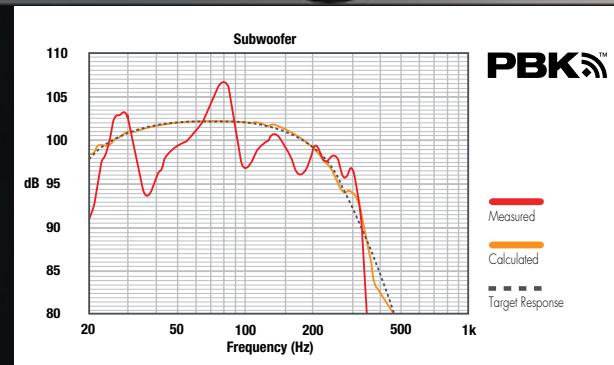
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Shown: SUB 1



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Sonus faber Guarneri Evolution Speakers

\$22,000/pair (with stands)

www.sonusfaber.com (Factory) www.sumikoaudio.net (US Distributor)

Sonus faber has performed a minor miracle with the new Guarneri Evolution, bringing the experience of their flagship Aida to a small form factor, optimized for a smaller space. However, nothing has been compromised in terms of sonic or aesthetic excellence. This stand mounted two way system produces sound beyond what you'd

ever expect from a small, stand mounted monitor; both in terms of frequency extension and dynamics.

Finished in seven coats of lacquer that is hand applied and polished, the only question remaining is do you want yours in the Graffit finish you see here, or the Red Violin? You want the stands. Review in process. ●

2013: A DAC ODYSSEY

Chord Electronics Chordette QuteHD DAC

By Rob Johnson

"Open the pod bay door, Hal."

As I unbox the Chord Chordette QuteHD DAC, I cannot help but recall that famous quote from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The Chordette is indeed reminiscent of the HAL 9000 computer from the movie, complete with a large, round eye, which offers a view into the internal circuitry. This window emits a variety of colors from the device's internal LEDs, and the red glow, which appears when the DAC is converting a 44.1-kHz signal, is eerily HAL-like. Other colors appear at higher bitrate conversions, and the Chordette is capable of handling a whopping 32-bit/384-kHz signal.

The Chordette measures only 6 inches wide, 3 inches deep and 1.75 inches tall, which allows placement on a shelf or next to an existing piece of equipment on your audio rack. The anodized aluminum exterior has nicely rounded edges and is available in a variety of colors, including blue, black, and silver. The DAC's power arrives from a thin-wired wall wart. For those seeking a minimalist audio solution, the Chordette provides a welcome form factor.



"It can only be attributable to human error."

Setup proves very straightforward, with the Chordette offering one option for the analog output: a stereo pair of single-ended RCAs. Users do have the option to connect it to digital sources via USB, optical or coaxial inputs. It's important to note that the coax input is in the form of a BNC connector, not the more common RCA variety, so those wishing to connect a source using this input will need the appropriate cable. BNC connectors are great for their ability to transfer a signal and physically lock onto their receptacles, but I'd like the option to connect both types of coax inputs. Luckily, I have a Stereovox XV2 digital cable on hand that offers BNC on one end and RCA coax on the other.

Installing the Chordette is simple and seamless, with the packaged CD containing drivers for the USB setup. Once I place the disc in my PC, connect the USB cable and power up the Chordette, Windows 7 has no problems recognizing the DAC and activating the needed drivers. Mac users need only go to their control panel and select the Chordette as their digital output device.

The Chordette is a black-box solution, meaning there are no buttons, switches or knobs to control it. Simply connect your digital sources and the DAC takes care of everything else. Without an input selector, the Chordette prioritizes incoming signals when multiple inputs are connected simultaneously. For instance, if coaxial and USB cables are both connected to the unit the default priority is the USB input; optical is the lowest priority. When I pause the USB source material from the computer, the Chordette begins its search for the next-ranked input source, which in my case is the coax connected to a CD player. After about 20 seconds, it resumes playing the second source automatically. For those with a single digital source this could not be simpler.



For those with multiple sources, it's mostly a matter of stopping any source you don't want to hear. Even when unplugging the USB cable in the middle of a song, the DAC makes a quick search and, after a pause, it moves on to the next available connected source.

"I'd like to hear it, HAL. Sing it for me."

With the Chordette, joys are many and quibbles are very few. It creates a supplemental "drive" to the music. It doesn't actually speed up a song, but it creates a subtle sense of urgency that pulls in (and holds) the listener. Attack on guitar plucks and drum beats in Gipsy Kings' *Ritmo de la Noche* commands attention, but it never overpowers the big-picture musical experience. Yet, on smaller-scale solo performances, the Chordette still accentuates delicacy and nuance, making this DAC a great option for all types of music.

The Chordette provides a nicely balanced presentation across all frequencies. Highs are realistically and enjoyably rendered; mids are smooth and lifelike; and bass presentation is punchy, full and deep. One small experiential variance from my usual reference, in the form of "Otherwise" by Morcheeba, reveals low bass notes pushing upfront in the virtual stage and competing a bit with the vocals. Admittedly, I enjoy a little extra heft in some recordings so this aspect will prove a non-issue for many listeners, especially those with smaller speakers.

This DAC also provides a stellar level of detail across all sample rates. Even a 48-kHz translation demonstrates audible improvement over a standard 44.1-kHz CD. A CD of the Connecticut Early Music Ensemble performing Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* puts a shiver down my spine during a few passages—an experience

I don't have too often. With ribbon tweeters, a small amount of perceivable sharpness emerges at times in lower-resolution digital recordings, which can detract from the musical experience. But this DAC really draws me into the musicality of a song rather than simply evaluating the equipment producing it.

When I use the Chordette's coax connection to a CD-quality source, the sound is marvelous. However, the perceived width of the performance has some limits. Air's "Venus" provides a good test for this. With some other DACs, the musical experience extends well beyond the speakers' limits and remains there. The Chordette is reined in a bit and does not exceed the physical speaker boundaries to the same degree. I do find some improvement in this regard when using the USB connection, or when using a dCS Purcell to upsample to 96 kHz. (continued)

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- Jeff Dorgay



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REVIEW

What the Chordette creates between the speakers is both dramatic and convincing. Johnny Cash's cover of "Danny Boy," recorded late in career, reveals the age in Cash's voice. There's an emotional undertone in it that transcends the song itself, especially when accompanied by the distant-sounding pipe organ. For those wanting to experience every nuance up close, in a front-row seat, this DAC enables that experience. Those who prefer to sit further back at a performance may find the detail a bit much. But even for those listeners, I expect many will enjoy the change of seat location as the Chordette ushers them toward it.



"Road to Hell: Part I" by Chris Rea sonically simulates a person driving a car down the highway in the rain. On this track, the Chordette does an incredible job recreating front-to-back depth and layering. Windshield wipers scrape from side to side, the radio switches between various news stations and many cars drive by in the distance with a *whoosh*. The portrayal of these elements though the Chordette is exciting: The passing cars sound well behind the speakers, with their tires rolling over a wet road; the wiper blades appear ahead of the listener, as though clearing rain from a pane of glass between the speakers (you can hear that the driver needs to buy some new blades); and the simulated radio stations, with news updates panned left and right, have a sound one would expect from old car speakers. *(continued)*

"You guys have really come up with somethin'."

When asked about its status, the HAL 9000 replied, "I am putting myself to the fullest possible use, which is all I think any conscious entity can ever hope to do." While obviously not conscious, the Chordette QuteHD certainly puts its skills to the fullest possible use in a home audio system. The team at Chord Electronics has done an outstanding job designing and voicing this amazing little DAC. It offers flexible input options, a very small footprint and extreme ease of use, as well as adaptability for both low- and high-resolution digital sources. Combining these attributes with wonderful sound, this DAC proves a marvelous addition to a stereo setup. For those evaluating DAC options around the Chordette's \$1,700 price range and who enjoy feeling like they are in the front row at a musical performance, the Chordette is a fantastic option. ●



Chordette QuteHD DAC
MSRP: \$1,700

MANUFACTURER

Chord Electronics

CONTACT

www.chordelectronics.co.uk

PERIPHERALS

Speakers

Piega P10

Amplifier

Mark Levinson 335

Preamplifier

Coffman Labs G1-A

Digital Source

Audio Research CD3 MKII, dCS Purcell processor, EAD 9000 MKIII DAC

Cables

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

Power Conditioner

Running Springs Audio Haley

Power Chord

Cardas Golden, Golden Reference/Mongoose

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The Oppo BDP-105 Universal Player

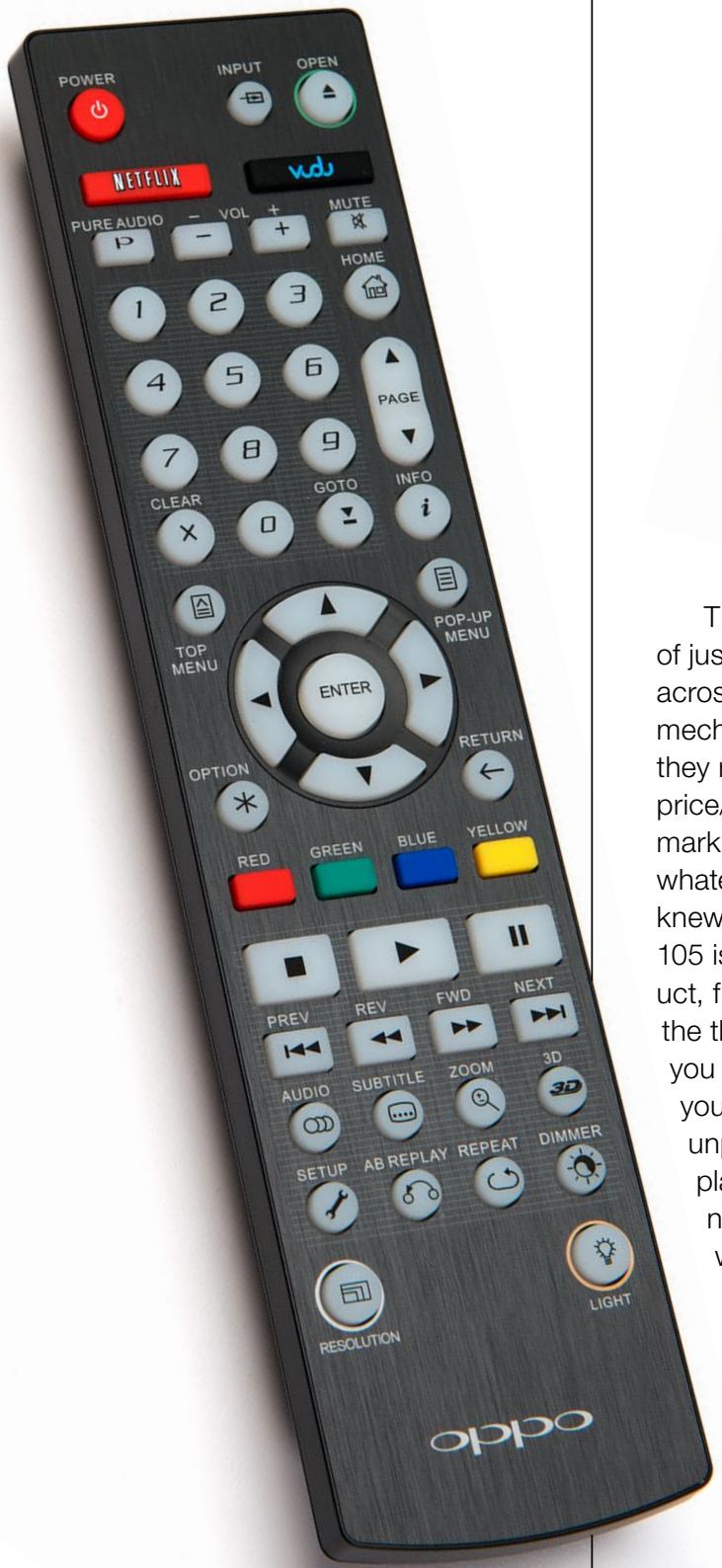
A Music-Lover's Multilingual

By Jeff Dorgay

After a few months with the Oppo BDP-105, I've reached the conclusion that it's the perfect digital anchor for just about any system. If you're a music lover, this player will allow you to listen to anything your heart desires on any kind of media. If that weren't enough, it's also a 24-bit/192-kHz DAC that lets you play all the digital downloads in your music collection—I can't think of a better DAC for the price. Those collecting music files in the DSD format are also covered, the BDP-105 can play DSD files from any optical or USB storage too. And if you're a movie nut, Oppo throws in an awesome DVD/Blu-ray player with the deal.

But that's just scratching the surface. If you'd like to get back to listening to music, just go online and order a BDP-105. It rules. I've auditioned a lot of great digital players over the years, with reasonable to ridiculous pricetags, and the BDP-105 makes the entire process so painless; it's a wonderful thing indeed. It's hard to believe that the MSRP is only \$1,199.





The earlier Oppo players of just a few years ago came across as slightly lacking in mechanical finesse, though they represented an excellent price/performance benchmark. But you can forget whatever you thought you knew about Oppo. The BDP-105 is a world-class product, from the casework to the thoughtful packaging. If you didn't know any better, you'd swear that you were unpacking a \$20k Meridian player, right down to the nice bag that the case is wrapped in. Also included is a concise owners manual that easily guides you through all of the setup procedures—an essential read for those using both the audio and video portions of



this player.

The remote is straightforward and all business. This is where the \$1,199 Oppo differs from the \$20k Meridian player (and even trumps the mighty Meridian). In addition to the standard-issue backlit remote, Oppo also provides a free, downloadable app for Android or iOS users, allowing you to leave the remote in the box. For someone always losing remotes (like me) or despising clutter (my wife), this is an outstanding solution. The menus are easy to read, and the app separates functionality into two screens: one that acts as an express remote, and one with the full feature set of the remote. This is a brilliant move that I wish more manufacturers would duplicate. *(continued)*

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Getting Down to Business

Those wanting to skip the manual and just concentrate on playing with their new shiny thing (or in this case, matte black) can get pretty far without the manual. CDs and SACDs play without needing the user to access the remote control or external monitor. Playing the discs in your DVD-A or video collection requires a monitor, so that you can set the correct multichannel aspects for your system.

While I'm not much of a videophile, it's worth mentioning that this player integrates fantastically with my Anthem MRX 700 home theater receiver. (Be on the lookout for this combination being mentioned frequently in upcoming concert-disc reviews.) The video performance of the BDP-105 is simply stunning, and I'd happily pay the 1,200 bucks asked for just the video section of this player. Operation is quick, color rendition is excellent and the noise floor is supremely low, resulting in a very saturated picture. But that's another review for another day.

Regardless of disc chosen, the BDP-105 plays them quickly and effortlessly with no long boot-up sequence required. When listening to audio discs, users can access a "Pure Audio" mode from the remote to shut down all of the video processing circuitry, providing optimum audio performance—and this is worth doing. On the extended "Mountain Jam," from the recent MoFi release of the Allman Brothers classic album *Eat a Peach*, the mid-range frequencies open up, and the Pure Audio mode removes a layer of grain from the high frequencies. The extended drum solo on this record reveals good attack and transient response, while the audience mixed in confirms an excellent sense of the three-dimensional spatial perspective.

For someone with a wide range of music, all in different formats, the BDP-105 helps to bring the fun back to music collecting. Now, when you're shopping at the local used music store, or eBay, it won't matter what the format is. While this reviewer is *not* on the DSD-download bandwagon yet, it's nice to know that new BDP-105 is already equipped to handle this format, and the other Oppo player I have needed only a quick firmware download/install to be fully capable; perhaps at a later date we will explore this option. For those interested in the full media capabilities of the BDP-105, please click here: www oppodigital.com/blu-ray-bdp-105 (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.

Happy listening!

William E. Low

audioquest



Ins and Outs

Those moving away from optical discs will enjoy the DAC performance of the BDP-105. With coaxial, Toslink, asynchronous USB and HDMI inputs, the BDP-105 is a perfect digital hub for any source, whether it's a computer or a transport. RCA, HDMI and balanced XLR outputs (along with full 7.1 outputs) make the BDP-105 equally easy to

merge into any system. Those just starting to assemble a component system can even take advantage of the BDP-105's variable outputs and work without a preamplifier or linestage. Stepping up to the main system in room one, utilizing identical Cardas Clear interconnects, I find no difference in sound quality between the RCA and XLR outputs, and the BDP-105 has no problem driving long interconnects of either style.

The BDP-105 works well in the context of a system built around a

PrimaLuna ProLogue power amplifier and a pair of Dynaudio Confidence C1 II speakers. Nothing in the owner's manual specifies whether the volume control is in the analog or digital domain, but the volume control works effortlessly from the remote or phone app. Those wanting to build an all-digital system could easily live with the Oppo player and a power amplifier.

My reference Sooloos Control 15, via the S/PDIF input, provides excellent synergy, as do high-resolution digital files played from the Aurender S10. I use the Meridian Audio Core 200 to sample the Toslink input, and a MacBook Pro for the USB input, running iTunes and Amarra. All inputs work without a hitch, providing good fidelity and the ability to easily switch between them without noises or glitches. This player is positively painless to use, no matter what the source! *(continued)*

To make sharing music even easier, there is a USB input right on the front panel that lets you plug a USB stick directly in, provided the music files are in standard formats. When the player is hooked up to a video display (which you'll need for DVD and Blu-ray formats anyway), you can even stream music files from your NAS. If there's a format that the BDP-105 *can't* handle, I haven't got it.

Comparisons Big and Small

The BDP-105 does so much right and nothing wrong. Unless you put the player head-to-head with something like a dCS stack or the DaVinci DAC (on a world class system), you won't even miss the resolution that these flagship players offer—and those come at a *much* higher price. While the following is a somewhat silly comparison, it does outline the boundaries of the BDP-105's performance envelope: Jumping into a friend's Ferrari F430 immediately reveals what my little Fiat Abarth is incapable of; yet, when I'm back in the Abarth's drivers seat for 10 minutes, happiness returns and I'm not missing the F430 one bit. And let's not even talk tune-ups.

Comparing the BDP-105 to similarly priced hardware, and even players costing twice as much (some even more), the Oppo is ahead by a country mile. There are a few DACs in



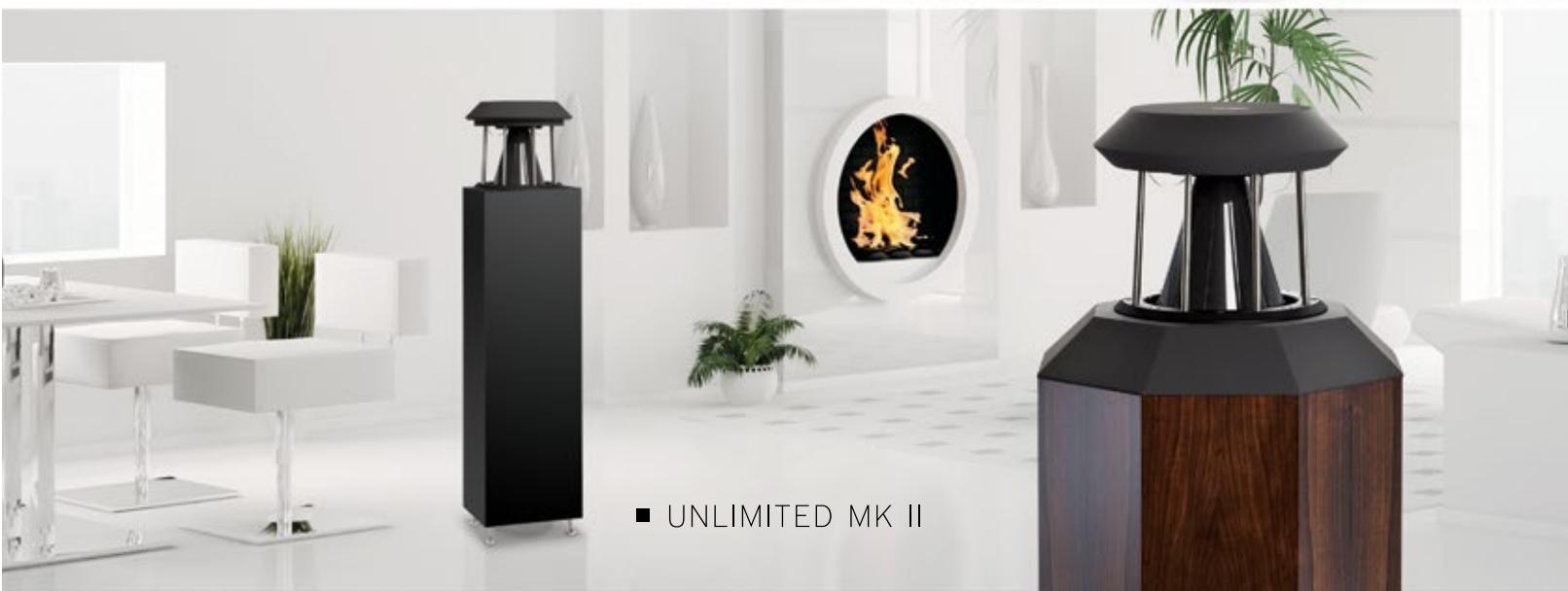
the \$1,000-to-\$2,000 range, the Rega in particular, that sound slightly more "analog-like," revealing a smidge more music than the Oppo, but none of these players have the format diversity that the Oppo offers. It even has an onboard headphone amplifier that works as well as anything you'll pay a couple hundred bucks for; the Oppo headphone amp proves compatible with all of the headphones at my disposal.

Whether rocking out with Alice in Chains or a peaceful Mozart symphony, this player always delivers a highly musical experience. Highs are well rendered, and, if anything, the tonal balance of the BDP-105 is ever so slightly on the warm side of neutral, which is a good thing with most digital files.

Fans of acoustic and vocal music will be thrilled with the natural sound quality that the BDP-105 reveals. Even after a few months, I remain impressed with just how much performance is here for this price. The title track from Dessa's 551 sounds fantastic, with the combination of vibes, her husky voice and the deep bass beats. The mix stays coherent with the lead vocals well out in front while the vibes occupy a larger-than-life, diffused part of the recordings space. *(continued)*



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A Fantastic Buy

The BDP-105 feels substantial when lifted from its box, and removing the cover reveals a tidy layout. A miracle of surface-mount efficiency, the Oppo has separate boards for power supply, analog circuitry and the DAC section, all tied together with flat cables. The construction suggests Mark Levinson-level quality more than anything else. This player is a benchmark for sound at its price, as well as for build quality. I've seen more than a few \$5,000 players that are mostly air under the hood.

While we are more than happy to award the Oppo BDP-105 one of our Exceptional Value

Awards for 2013, it is worthy of even more. This is a rare component that ticks all the boxes from both a sonic and an engineering perspective, and that is tastefully designed and luxuriously packaged to boot. No, you don't get a dCS Vivaldi for \$1,195, but you do get a digital player that can deliver every format imaginable, doing so at a level better than every one of its peers. And there's that free video player thrown in with the deal. It doesn't get any better than this.

For an encore, we will be comparing the BDP-105 to its lower-priced sibling, the \$499 BDP-103. Watch the Compara section of our website. ●

Oppo BDP-105
MSRP: \$1,199

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Preamplifier Nagra Jazz

Power Amplifier D'Agostino Momentum Stereo

Speakers Sonus faber Guarneri Evolution

Cable Cardas Clear

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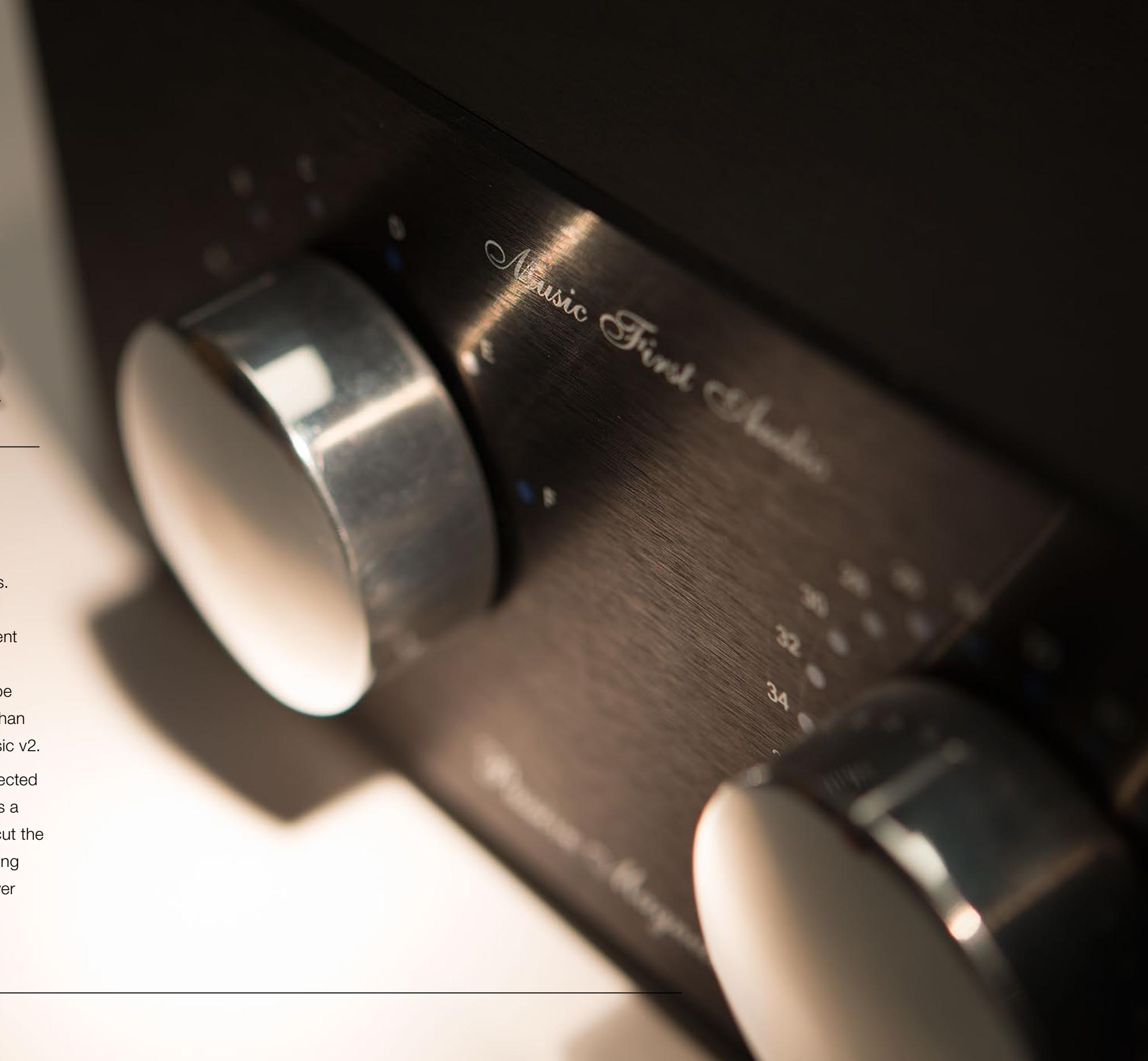
MUSIC FIRST AUDIO CLASSIC V2 PREAMPLIFIER

By Andre Marc

Music First Audio, based in Hastings, East Sussex, in the U.K., has been making passive “preamplifiers” for a number of years. Technically, it may be a stretch to call these products *preamps*, since they are 100 percent passive in nature, providing no active gain.

(Referring to Music First Audio products as passive *linestages* may be more technically correct.) It is worth noting for those needing more than unity gain that there is a +6-dB switch on the rear panel of the Classic v2.

The transformers have dual primaries, allowing them to be connected in series as a step-up device offering the +6-dB option, or parallel as a 1:1 transformer. Bear in mind that selecting the +6-dB option does cut the range of attenuation by an equivalent amount, but it also allows pairing with older components with lower outputs. It can still drive your power amplifier to full output, and sound quality is not compromised in the least by selecting this option.





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Alan Sircom, HiFi+ Issue 99

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Before getting to the heart of the product under review here, the Classic "Preamplifier" v2, it is appropriate to discuss the product category of passive linestages in general. A preamplifier in the classic sense provides input switching among sources, a signal boost to drive a power amplifier and, of course, volume attenuation. An active preamp also gets involved in impedance matching, which can be critical. Purists, however, claim that the extra gain stage is unnecessary in most cases, since most *modern* sources can drive a power amplifier directly. The issue then becomes volume control, so you don't blow up your amp and speakers.

There are several ways volume control can be engineered into a passive linestage. The most common is a resistor-based attenuator. This approach, while valid, does have some possible disadvantages, like frequency-response aberrations and issues with interconnect length. A far more technically advantageous approach is the transformer solution, sometimes

referred to as a TVC-based design (for Transformer Volume Control). This allows for a total decoupling of your sources from the power amp, avoids impedance mismatching (which can lead to a loss of HF information and/or dynamics) and maximizes transparency. The Classic v2 uses two transformers, one per channel. However, this approach is more costly and complex. The unit is priced at roughly \$4,000 (or £2,200).

Direct to the Source

Music First Audio's parent company, Stevens & Billington Limited, has been around since 1963. The company's transformers are highly regarded for quality and tight tolerances in both the high-end-audio and broadcast industries. In describing the differences between the Classic and the company's higher-end Baby Reference, company owner Harry O'Sullivan said, "The Classic features our original transformer design, honed over the years and first finalized in late 2002. (continued)

In the years that followed, we realized that an even better transformer offering the pinnacle of performance would take time, and proved to be an even costlier process—resulting in the transformers used in the Reference and Baby Reference models.”

This new transformer features a core that is 25 percent larger, and delivers improved low-frequency response and high-level power handling. The transformer in the Classic v2 also uses a 25-percent-larger core but retains the winding structure of the original—a clear trickle-down effect.

The Classic v2 drives both Audio Research VS55 and Bob Carver Black Magic power amps, using Darwin Ascension Silver interconnects, for the duration of this review, in place of my Audio Research SP16L active tube preamp. The connected source is a Bryston BDA-1 DAC. A quick comparison instantly reveals that the Classic v2 removes subtle layers of thickness and grunge, and the most transparent-to-source sound I've ever experienced with these amplifiers.

With the Classic v2, music emerges from noticeably quieter backgrounds than my tube linestage can deliver. While I have used some excellent active linestages over the years, the Classic v2 offers more resolution everywhere, with more distinct details, where in the past many of these details



were more homogenous. This effect feels much like the difference between master tape and a second-generation copy.

Further Listening

The DVD-A of Seal's *Best 1991–2004* sounds huge via the Classic v2, offering up bass performance on this disc that sets new standards for control and articulation in my reference system. Yet at the same time, the subtle, exotic textures that are a hallmark of this performer are now much easier to distinguish. While “Killer” and “Kiss from a Rose” have been my reference tracks for years, the Classic v2 offers a fresh perspective—which is always an exciting experience with a new component.

A new reference recording, Steve Earle's recently released *The Low Highway*, clearly illustrates Earle's inspired playing. Textural cues—like the wood and steel of Earle's acoustic guitar, the snap of the snare drum, and the creative accompaniment of fiddle, piano, banjo and mandolin—are a cinch to identify in the mix, convincingly showcasing the muscular backing band of this troubadour.

The incredibly low noise floor of the Classic v2 serves quieter, more intimate music well, perhaps best of all, again allowing more of the lowest-level details to come through. The spacious, minimal arrangements of Tunisian oud master

Anouar Brahem stretch out and breath at a much lower listening level, freed from the electronic noise of an active linestage. The Classic v2 brings these performances closer to life, with an enormous sound stage projecting the instruments in the stereo image well beyond my speakers' boundaries. This masterful imaging performance and the low noise floor are the Classic v2's greatest strengths.

The Fine Points

Four RCA inputs and two balanced XLR inputs should suffice for most users. The standard Classic only offers a single pair of (switchable) RCA or XLR outputs, but for those requiring a second set of outputs to drive a powered subwoofer or additional amplifier, this can be added to your unit at modest cost, as can other customizations. Keeping with the purist approach, Music First ships the Classic v2 without a remote, but one is offered for an additional \$1,000. The fairly elaborate remote includes a rear-mounted stepper motor, so there is no interaction with the signal path.

So the major question is, “Do you want just the facts or a preamplifier that can perhaps embellish somewhat?” As we well know, some preamplifiers can do just that, adding some dynamic weight and even a sweetness of tone, which can be a good thing in many cases. *(continued)*

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Synergy
Solid State Amplifier



Music First Audio
Classic v2 Preamplifier

MSRP: Approx. \$4,000
 (£2,200)

MANUFACTURER
Music First Audio

CONTACT
www.mfaudio.co.uk

PERIPHERALS

Speakers
Thiel CS2.4

Preamplifier
Audio Research SP16L

Power Amplifiers
Audio Research VS55,
Bob Carver Black Magic

DAC
Bryston BDA-1

Transport
Musical Fidelity M1 CDT

Server
Mac mini/Squeezebox Touch

Cables
Transparent, Audience,
Darwin, Element, DH Labs

Accessories
Audience aDapt
Response aR6 power conditioner, Symposium Rollerblock Jr. ball-bearing isolation, Shakti Stone electromagnetic stabilizer

The Classic v2 allows the music to come through with an addicting sense of purity. Most modern sources have enough output to drive power amps and all but the most insensitive speakers to satisfaction. So the need for an active preamp can be a preference more than a necessity in many cases.

The other question to be raised is whether to take advantage of Music First's silver or copper transformer wiring. The company admits on its website that it does not consider the silver a premium sound option, though the silver wire is more costly and tougher to work with.

If transparency, a virtually non-existent noise floor and quick transient response

are priorities, the Classic v2 should be high on your short list for linestage auditions. A nice bonus is that it feels like a luxury component, and is made with precision and an attention to detail that can only be accomplished with low-volume, bespoke components.

The Classic v2 is a revelation, providing performance that will only be limited by the source components driving it. How much better is the company's Baby Reference, with the full-blown transformer design? Stay tuned, as I'll be reviewing one shortly! If you're tired of exotic power cords and tube rolling, this is the linestage for you—enthusiastically recommended. ●

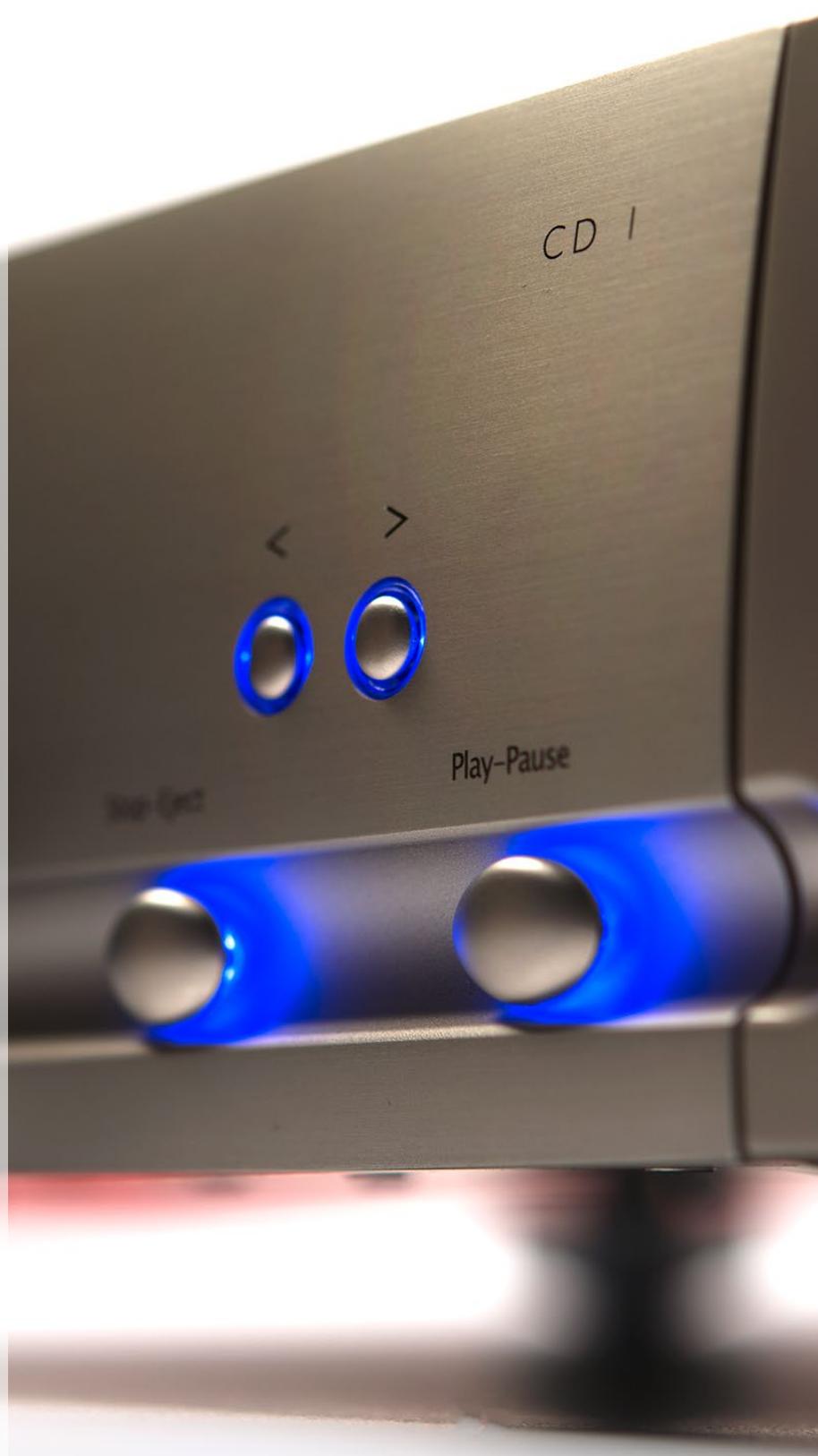
Parasound Halo CD1 Player

By Rob Johnson

PARASOUND

As I dislodge the packing material from the shipping box containing the Parasound CD 1, it's easy to have a positive first impression of the flagship of the Halo product line. I set aside the cardboard and Styrofoam layers to find the player carefully wrapped in a bag of blue velvet. I can't help but recall the lyrics that Bobby Vinton made famous: "She wore blue velvet."

Physically, the CD player complements the Parasound Halo product series. As one might expect from name of the collection to which it belongs, the CD 1 sports blue LEDs that cast lighted halos around the buttons flanking the red power indicator in the center of the player's faceplate. The CD 1 is built from the ground up to play only Red Book CDs and CD-Rs, plus the standard CD layer on SACDs. I have to admit that my own digital collection is about 95 percent Red Book CDs, but I prefer to have the ability to play SACDs or DVD-As without needing a second player.



INTRODUCING



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



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Users have a few options in the unit's setup menu. One function worth noting is the "CD eject" option. The default is to eject a disc when the unit is powered off, but overriding this is a good idea if the player is behind a cabinet door with limited clearance.

The provided Halo remote facilitates access to common features, many of which apply to the CD 1 only, while the others apply to the Halo JC 2 or P 7 preamplifier. The remote allows users to select a CD track by number, or by the forward or back buttons. Fast-forward and fast-reverse are also nice touches, should you want to relive a particularly striking musical passage. The remote also offers a polarity switcher for phase matching as well as a display dimmer. While the remote has very accessible and practical functionality, it's very utilitarian and made of a light, somewhat flimsy-feeling plastic. For a unit of this build quality and price point, I'd prefer to see a more elegant metal remote.

Ours a [CD] I held tightly

Connecting the unit is simple and flexible. The CD 1 offers both RCA and balanced XLR analog outputs, as well as three digital output options—BNC, coax and optical—for those who might want to use it as a transport. The Halo's software takes 20 seconds to load before it's ready to play a disc. When the desire for a music fix strikes, this boot-up time feels much longer.

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The CD 1 is a slot-loading player, and discs require a fair amount of pushing before the player decides to accept them. When about an inch of the disc remains outside the player, the CD is sucked in with startling grip and speed. Once the CD disappears, the player ponders for 10 seconds while evaluating the disc's contents, and then plays the first track automatically—giving you just enough time to reach the listening chair and catch the first few notes of the song. While it's pondering, the CD 1 is actually buffering the first 30 seconds of disc data, helping to reduce the error correction associated with a more traditional CD player. The end result – a less digital, less fatiguing sound.

As I sit down for my first listen, I notice that the display is too small to see any information from my listening position. This isn't too much of an issue if you're familiar with the disc being played, but if you're not so familiar with the material you might need to use binoculars, or wait for the chorus, to determine which track you are hearing.

Warmer than May Her Tender Sighs

Any quibbles with the user experience quickly fade from mind once this player starts singing. For analog playback, the Parasound offers a toggled choice of discrete or op-amp analog outputs. In the discrete setting, the sound is produced from the transistor output stage. In the op-amp setting, the signal is sent directly from the op-amp output stage. The different options impart subtle changes to the overall sonic signature. While the settings are similar, the op-amp setting lends a bit warmer feel, with a slightly more relaxed presentation; the discrete setting offers a bit more perceived detail, but on poor recordings this sonic edge proves more obvious. Experimentation for your own preference on each disc is encouraged and there is no right answer, so it's great to have both options. *(continued)*





Emerge From the Darkness

DIGITAL (r)EVOLUTION...*again* from Wadia



Music from this player sounds smooth and natural, with all the nuance and subtlety one could hope to coax from a CD. Bass, mids and highs complement each other wonderfully, and no particular region of the audio spectrum appears to stand out from the others.

I seek out my best CD source material to put the CD 1 through its paces, and Mobile Fidelity recordings prove a great starting point for evaluation. It's exciting to experience the player's portrayal of Beck's *Sea Change* on the MoFi disc. The triangle strike in "Lonesome Tears" offers a beautiful, natural-sounding ring and very long decay rivaling the best I've experienced. Beck's vocals are equally beguiling as the lyrics and emotion spill from his voice. The Parasound does a stupendous job of layering front-to-back

musical elements, even when they may overlap in the perceived left-to-right stereo image.

During "On the Run," from Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (MoFi), it's easy to pick out a man panting and running from right to left, as well as his 90-degree turn to run away from the microphone, thereby fading into the background. "Us and Them" offers a similar experience, as gentle echoes pan and spiral around the perceived source of David Gilmour's vocals in the center.

Madonna's "Candy Perfume Girl" starts with a synthesized, pinpoint sound bouncing left and right. The CD 1 manages to put that element in front of the speakers, rather than being recessed between or behind them. I have not experienced this effect to the same degree with very many pieces of equipment. *(continued)*



"Song for Olabi," from *Quiet Letters* by Bliss, combines vocals with drums, shakers, rain sticks, flutes and synthesized notes. Not only does the CD 1 present these instruments with sound that is surprisingly organic, but it also places them on the stage so that a front-row listener can both hear the instrument and visualize it. I find myself looking for a musician "behind" the person at the front of the stage holding the shaker. While many pieces of audio equipment tend to blur and compress sonic elements together into a more two-dimensional space, the CD 1 stitches together all the subtle sonic queues in a recording to extend and separate the musical experience into three dimensions.

On Dirty Martini's "House on Fire," the CD 1 renders the glockenspiel with more realism than I have heard in a recording. Okay, there aren't a lot of songs in my collection that include glockenspiel, but you get my point; the delicacy and decay of the notes sound both lively and lifelike.

Lower quality CDs, like Sisters of Mercy's *First and Last and Always*, proves a little bright-edged, as I'd expect, but the Parasound still manages to encourage the vocals to come closer to the front of the soundstage, instead of being recessed within the mix. The CD 1 does not sugarcoat the CD experience, but it does make the most of the material provided.

(continued)



As a transport, this player offers equally stellar experiences. It manages to chisel out each and every digital bit on the CD before sending it to an outboard DAC. Several experiments confirm the capability of the DAC within the CD 1, proving itself competitive with my reference digital processing gear in many ways, though the musical presentation is not quite as wide with the CD 1. I find myself wishing the Parasound included a digital input to allow experimentation with its interpretation of other digital sources, like a computer. But for those needing only CD functionality, this player is sublime.

In My Heart There'll Always be...a Memory

At \$4,500, the Parasound

CD 1 is a significant financial commitment for a device that plays only Red Book CDs. At the same time, the sonic portrayal of music is every bit as good as many transport plus DAC combinations I've heard over the years. The discrete and op-amp settings provide the ability to do some sonic tailoring to match your system—and being able to switch on the fly is a bit like having two CD players in one. For those in the market for a dedicated CD player in this price range, the Parasound CD 1 offers exceptional sound and a very rewarding musical experience. ●

Parasound
Halo CD 1 Player
MSRP: \$4,500

MANUFACTURER

Parasound Products, Inc.

CONTACT

www.parasound.com

PERIPHERALS

Speakers Piegas P10

Amplifier Mark Levinson 335

Preamplifier Coffman Labs G1-A

Digital Source Audio Research CD3 MKII, dCS Purcell processor, EAD 9000 MKIII DAC, Genesis Technologies Digital Lens

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

Power Conditioner Running Springs Audio Haley

Power Cord Cardas Golden, Golden Reference/Mongoose

Accessories Mapleshade SAMSON racks and shelves, ASC TubeTraps, Cathedral Sound room-dampening panels

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Simaudio MOON 850P Evolution Preamplifier



A Worthy Companion

By Jeff Dorgay

T

he Simaudio MOON Evolution series 850P has a number of interesting technical elements that make it an amazing preamplifier. If you happen to be the type of audiophile who is swayed solely by technical expertise and specs, you should mosey down to your MOON dealer to buy an 850P right now. If you're the type of audiophile who craves a component that is both completely musical and free from coloration and grain, you should also head down to your dealer, if only to demo the 850P, which I think you will find more than worthy of your equipment rack.

In Brief: the 850P is wondrous.



The argument continues as to whether or not vacuum tubes exceed the performance of transistors in terms of retrieving more information from the source and why. As the boundaries are pushed on both fronts, the results are equally excellent. I've always liked the wonderful midrange and airiness of vacuum tube preamplifiers—that holographic image they are known to provide. Many call this a sort of euphonic coloration, and for whatever reason, I enjoy it. Especially with digital sources, a bit of that tube magic always seems to go a long way.

Lately, at the extreme high end of the price spectrum, I have found that a handful of solid-state preamplifiers provide a magic that I've never heard from tubes. I've recently had the good fortune of listening to some excellent

(and high-priced) examples from Indigo/Qualia, Burmester and Robert Koda, all of which deliver top-quality sound from a solid-state design. You can add the Simaudio MOON 850P to that short list of preamps that offer a combination of cleanliness, dynamics, resolution and quietness unsurpassed by their vacuum-tube brethren.

Considering that a fully matched and optimized set of NOS tubes for one of my favorite tube preamplifiers commands about \$2,000 these days (with no guarantee on the tubes), I breathe a sigh of relief knowing that the 850P will work effortlessly for decades, always plugged into the wall and always ready to go. And the 850P only draws 27 watts from the line in the process, so there is no eco-guilt associated with leaving it on continuously. *(continued)*



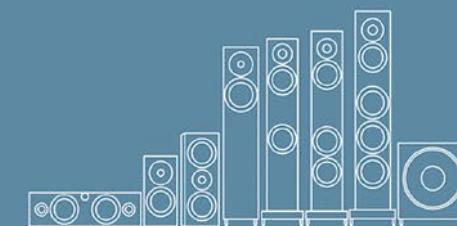
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I'm still not ready to abandon the glowing bottle entirely, if for no other reason than the fact that sometimes different is good, if not downright enjoyable. But for those becoming tired of chasing down NOS vacuum tubes (and I for one am tired of vacuum tubes that now cost more than my first car), the 850P is liberating. Yet, after a few months with the 850P and the companion 880M power amplifiers that we reviewed recently, I'm convinced that these new MOON pieces belong to an elite group of components that offer their owners a no-holds-barred level of performance.

The two-box, 72-pound 850P is priced at \$28,000. One of the boxes is for the power supply and the other is for the gain, control and switching circuitry. The two chassis' are tethered together by three umbilical cords; two 4-pin XLR cables (for left and right channel DC power) and an 8-pin RJ45 etherCON cable (for data communications). The cost of this level of high performance is concurrent with the price tag; if anything, compared to other units I've auditioned costing consistently more, it's really quite the bargain. Should you desire blue LEDs on the front panel, rather than the standard red, it can be done for an additional \$625. When we visited the factory, they explained that the blue LEDs are quite a bit more costly than the red ones.

Truth in the Listening

Like every other Simaudio product we've auditioned, the 850P needs about four or five days of being continuously powered up before it blooms into its final sound. With no capacitors in the signal path, it will not require hundreds of hours of break-in time, so you can get down to business straight away.

Serious listening begins with the Rolling Stones live album *Brussels Affair (Live 1973)*, with the classic track "You Can't Always Get What You Want," which seems a bit ironic, as the 850P really does offer it all. Feeling the band spread out on stage in front of me—through the \$120k-per-pair Sonus faber Aida speakers, with a pair of 880M monoblocks—I'm instantly immersed in the performance. *(continued)*

With the 850P, I get what I want and what I need: a highly resolving musical performance with an absence of noise and grain.

It goes without saying that the 880Ms are a perfect match for the 850P, and in the context of a mostly MOON system (I use the 810LP phonostage for analog source material and the dCS Vivaldi for digital duties), you'll forget that you're listening to a stack of solid-state gear. As I hinted at in the beginning of this review, the 850P is truly without a sound of its own, and when mated to the other MOON components, it's dead quiet. Even when putting my ears directly up to the Aida tweeters, there is no background noise coming through.

Digging Deep

Even an average recording, like Run-DMC's *King of Rock*, comes alive through the 850P. This linestage offers up layer upon layer of texture, with atomic clock-like pace. The slightly wavering analog synthesizer in "Can You Rock It Like This?" is firmly anchored, while the other keyboard floats in and out of the mix, as Run and DMC assault the soundstage. Their shouts from the left and right channels echo well into the background. All of this remains on top of some massive bass beats that go deeper than I've experienced before.

On a quest for even more bass, I turn to SBTRKT's self-titled album, which underlines the sheer drive and control that the 850P can deliver. *(continued)*



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When pushed to near-live sound pressure levels, the Aidas feel as if we've added a pair of subwoofers to the system, shaking everything in my listening room that isn't nailed down. The soundfield now extends well past the speakers, almost seeming to extend past the walls themselves. A quick dose of heavy rock, care of the Scorpions smash album *Love at First Sting*, reveals more treasure. This early digital recording, which is somewhat densely packed, still has its digital edge, but is much more open, with depth in all three dimensions. The two lead guitarists now have plenty of space between them, where on a lesser system they just feel like the same guitar overdubbed. This is a subtle enhancement, but an exciting one.

It's these small details, from records that you've listened to hundreds of times, that makes the 850P amazing and worth the scratch—if you've got the space on your Visa card. The way the pedal steel gently enters the mix at the beginning of Matthew Sweet's "You Don't Love Me" feels like a Navy SEAL rising up out of the water slowly, never drawing attention to himself. Whether it's the gentle swish of a brush on a cymbal, the plucking of a violin string or the sound of fingers sliding up the neck of an acoustic guitar, the clarity of the 850P provides subtle insight into any musical performance, going the extra step towards creating the illusion of real music in your listening room.

Revisiting Herb Alpert's disco classic "Rise," from the album of the same title, is simply a blast.
(continued)



Even though the MoFi LP has somewhat of a "smiley faced" EQ curve, the bongos at the beginning of the track explode out of the speakers with tremendous texture, again bringing something new to the sonic picture.

Considering how much more music the 850P illuminates from tracks with average production values, the really great recordings in my collection come alive in a big way. Solo vocals prove irresistibly silky. Tone and timbral accuracy are also perfect. Aficionados of classical and jazz will be floored at the additional amount of information now available. While this preamplifier does not embellish, fatten or sweeten the sound at all, it maintains tonal richness, with lifelike renderings of acoustic instruments.

If the rest of your system is of equal capability, the MOON 850P will take you to an even higher level. In addition to Simaudio's own 880M amplifiers, I pair the 850P with a few other fantastic amplifiers and achieve equally satisfying results: the vacuum-tube-powered Octave Jubilee monoblocks, the solid-state

Burmester 911 MK3, the Xs 300 monoblocks from Pass Labs and the D'Agostino Momentum stereo amplifier—all of which prove an equally capable match for this stellar linestage. If your system isn't in the stratosphere yet, the 850P is the perfect building block to start down that path.

Under the Bonnet

Those with multiple program sources will love the 850P. With four single-ended RCA inputs, three fully balanced XLR inputs and a monitor loop (RCA inputs), control flexibility is the name of the game. But it doesn't stop there. With a pair of balanced XLR outputs and another pair of RCA outputs (one fixed and one variable), the 850P can accommodate any combination of multiple power amplifiers, crossovers or powered subwoofers. Like every MOON product, the foundation of the 850P begins with the power supply. In this case, its massive, dual mono supply is in a separate box with transformers custom built for this application only, rather than relying on off-the-shelf parts. *(continued)*



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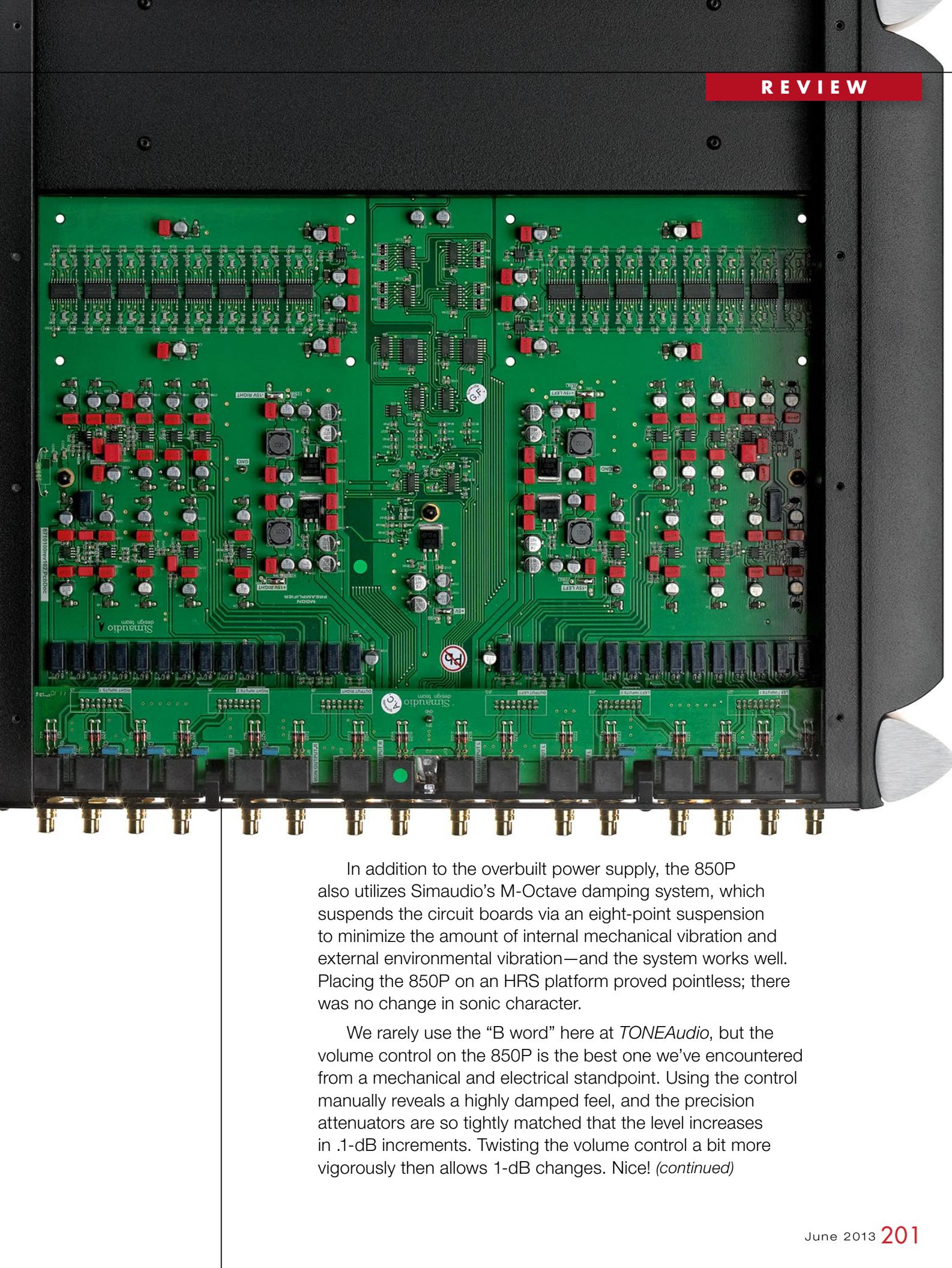
The one.

REVIEW



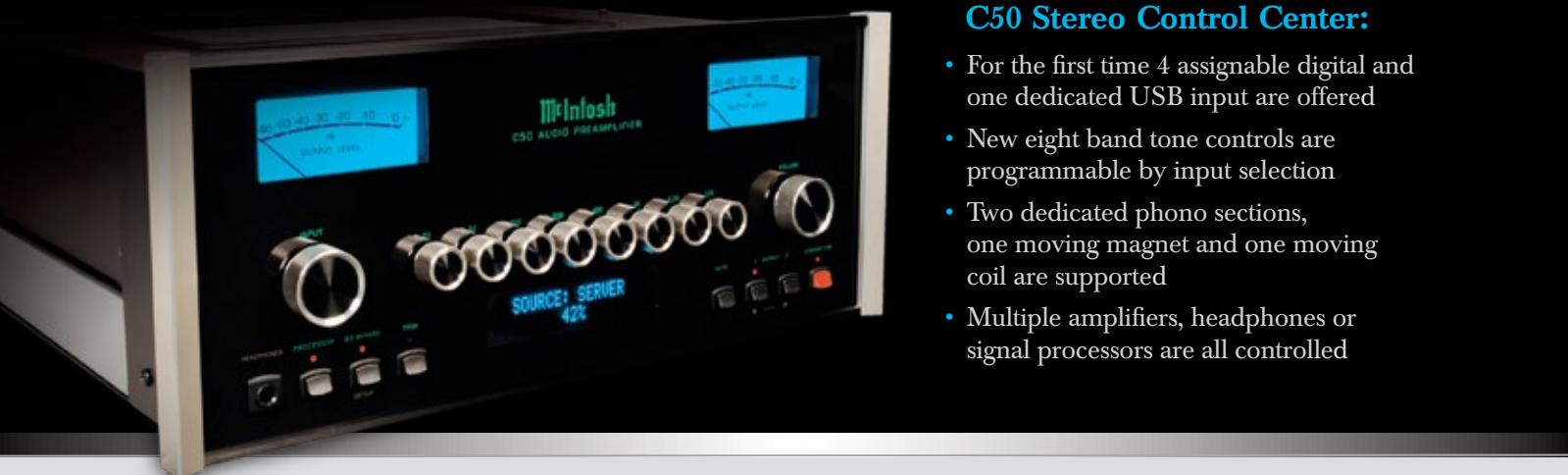
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In addition to the overbuilt power supply, the 850P also utilizes Simaudio's M-Octave damping system, which suspends the circuit boards via an eight-point suspension to minimize the amount of internal mechanical vibration and external environmental vibration—and the system works well. Placing the 850P on an HRS platform proved pointless; there was no change in sonic character.

We rarely use the "B word" here at *TONEAudio*, but the volume control on the 850P is the best one we've encountered from a mechanical and electrical standpoint. Using the control manually reveals a highly damped feel, and the precision attenuators are so tightly matched that the level increases in .1-dB increments. Twisting the volume control a bit more vigorously then allows 1-dB changes. Nice! (continued)



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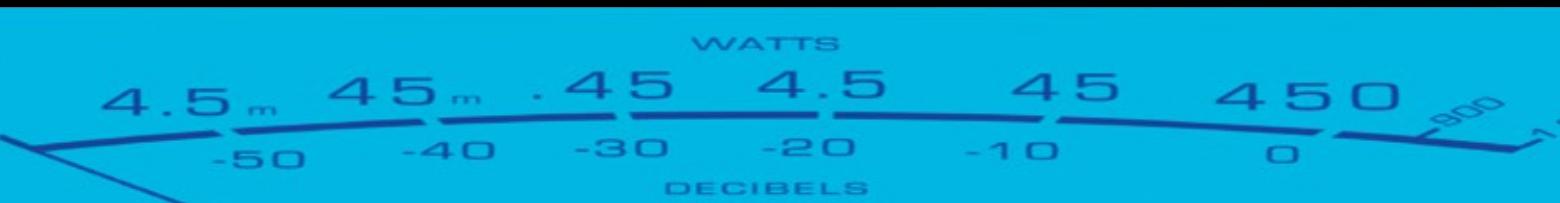
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Thanks to careful, high-quality component choices, the 850P should provide years if not decades of trouble-free service. And don't forget Simaudio's 10-year warranty. With so many garage builders, whose total yearly output rarely reaches double digits, it's nice to know this is a company with years of history to support a product of this caliber. You can revisit our Simaudio factory tour here, to get a glimpse of what goes into making the MOON components.

Indeed Special

The 850P is a rare product, in the sense that the typical audiophile adjectives don't really apply. It doesn't destroy or annihilate, it just gets out of the way. And while that may sound simplistic and devoid of fanfare, if you've been on a quest for an ultimate preamplifier, you know how tough this is to achieve. This is a rare component in the way it disappears, revealing nothing but the music carried through it. Those still wanting the tube sound might not be convinced, but regardless of what your built-in prejudices are, anyone in the market for a destination preamplifier should audition the 850P. I've yet to hear one that reveals more music. ●

Simaudio MOON
Evolution 850P Preamplifier
MSRP: \$28,000

MANUFACTURER
Simaudio Ltd.

CONTACT
www.simaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog source AVID Acutus Reference SP turntable, TriPlanar tonearm, Lyra Atlas cartridge; SME V tonearm, Clearaudio Goldfinger cartridge

Digital source dCS Vivaldi digital playback system, Sooloos Control 15, Aurender S10 server

Power amplifiers
Simaudio MOON 880M monoblocks, Octave Jubilee monoblocks, Pass Labs Xs 300 monoblocks, D'Agostino Momentum stereo amplifier, Burmester 911 MK3 stereo amplifier

Speakers GamuT S9, Sonus faber Aida, KEF Blade, Sonus faber Guarneri Evolution, Dynaudio Confidence C1 II

Cable Cardas Clear

Power IsoTek Super Titan

Accessories GIK room treatment, Furutech DeStat and DeMag, Audio Desk Systeme RCM

UNISON RESEARCH PHONO ONE VALVE PHONOSTAGE

By Jerold O'Brien



Phono One
Valve Phono Preamplifier

Vinyl lovers have no lack of choices these days when it comes to purchasing a phonostage. Whether you're an analog beginner or a veteran, your needs are covered from the entry-level price point all the way to the mega-buck region. But when narrowing down the characteristics and features that are of particular importance, the choices start to thin out a bit: outboard power supply, check; great build quality, check; great cosmetics, check; tube based, check; good cartridge-loading options, check; Class-A zero-feedback design, check; Italian, check. Italian? If you've checked all of those boxes then you've arrived at Unison Research.

The \$3,295 Phono One is a rather attractive product from the Italian firm. Unlike the usual aluminum box, this beauty features a black-powder-coated steel case, along with a wood front panel and a sculptured wood accent panel on the top—which gives the phonostage a unique look and provides damping.

The power supply is housed in a separate enclosure, which an umbilical cord connects to the main chassis. This separation is very critical in phono applications where the signal is delivered at such low levels; in a tube-based product it becomes even more important. Using an external power supply is not the cheapest way to build a phono preamplifier, but it insures low noise and prevents the delicate phono signal from being contaminated by power-supply noise.

Peeking inside the main chassis reveals nicely laid out circuit boards populated with quality parts. The board containing the tubes is separate from the RIAA EQ section, and isolated from the chassis via four rubber grommets—a nice feature that reduces any sort of vibration coming from outside the unit, and damps any possible microphonics coming from the tubes themselves. The five tubes in this section are new production Tung Sol 12AX7s. I did all my listening with the supplied tubes, eschewing my usual enthusiasm for tube rolling, because all of my favorite matched 12AX7s are quads!

(continued)





Easily Adjustable

The back panel of the main chassis offers gold-plated RCA connectors for input and output, along with DIP switches for cartridge loading. MC-resistive loading options are set at 20, 50 and 100 ohms, which is enough to cover most of today's MC cartridges. For moving magnet, the ubiquitous 47k ohm is the only option, though capacitance can be set at 100, 200, 320 and 420 pF. An Ortofon MC 20 Super 25th Anniversary and a recently restored Lyra Clavis provide the basis for most of my MC listening, with a NOS Acutex 412 STR and a tried-and-true Shure V 15 Type IV for MM duties.

Beginning with the Lyra Clavis loaded at 100 ohms proves palatable (even though this cartridge usually requires a higher load) in concert with the latest Audience Au24SE phono cable, which is a favorite here at *TONEAudio*. This cable is optimized for cartridges with low internal impedance, such as the Lyra and Ortofon.

When I switch to the Shure and Acutex MM cartridges, I use an AudioQuest King Cobra cable from the tonearm to the phonostage, achieving outstanding results with both setups.

The first LP on deck is Nina Simone's *Pastel Blues*. The song "Chilly Winds Don't Blow" showcases her distinctive voice, which can be irritating unless everything in the chain is near perfect. In this case, her generally high-pitched tone comes through in great detail but with a welcome smoothness in the higher registers. The Ortofon proves best at the 20-ohm setting, but both of these extremely low-output MC carts expose the noise floor in the Phono One—our publisher has better results with MC carts in the .5-MV range. (See "Additional Listening" below.)

Next up is The Soundtrack of Our Lives, with "In Someone Else's Mind" from the *Behind the Music* album.
(continued)

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This Pink Floyd-ish tune features double vocals that the Phono One easily unravels and separates in the sound stage, with background percussion and droning sound effects placed way back, even behind the music. Peter Gabriel's debut solo album, a Direct-Disk Labs reissue of the original Atco Records release, again proves that the Phono One is a natural performer. The phonostage easily handles the soaring crescendos at the end of "Humdrum," separating the various instruments and studio effects while keeping the vocals completely intelligible, even at the highest levels.

Act Two

When I switch to my MM cartridges, the Phono One really starts to shine. I don't know whether the MM stage received extra attention during the engineering phase or whether my MC cartridges simply did not have complete synergy with the product. In any case, the big bang comes from the lowly Shure cart for the rest of the evaluation period. As in all things vinyl, you never know what's going to sound best until you've run down all the options.

Esperanza Spalding's *Junjo* begins the second round of evaluations in earnest. On the leadoff composition, "The Peacocks," the Phono One presents the instruments in space and in a beautiful front-to-back fashion. The drum kit exhibits tremendous attack, while the cymbals show intricate detail without distracting from the rest of the mix. And, of course, Spalding's bass lines are muscular and clearly delineated.

Anne Bisson's album *Blue Mind* serves as the obligatory female

vocal demo. The song "Camilo" is a mournful, quiet ballad. The Phono One conveys the full emotion of the song through Bisson's breathy voice, which floats exactly between the speakers, while the phonostage presents the acoustic bass as a strong foundation. If you've had the chance to hear Bisson sing up close and personal at any of the recent hi-fi shows, you'll recognize this instantly. My final choice is Steve Miller's *Born 2 B Blue* album. The tune "Ya Ya" is a wonderfully recorded affair and sounds fantastic through the Phono One. The highest compliment I can pay this phonostage is to say that it will allow you to take off your audiophile hat and let you just get into the music—no chin-stroking analysis required here.

The inner tweakazoid in me experiments with a few power cords at the end of the evaluation, just to see if more performance can be wrung from this Italian beauty. After four tries, I settle on the Crystal Cable Ultra, which provides the best combination of speed, dynamics and musicality. After getting used to this combination, I switch back to the stock cord, and quickly realize that a good power cord is a worthy upgrade for the Phono One.

With so many phonostages vying for your dollar, the Phono One is at the high side of the price range for what it offers; but, with an excellent electrical and physical design, the Phono One is a wonderful alternative to another stamped-out black box. And now, with Colleen Cardas added to the dealer network as the U.S. importer, this Italian wonder is easier than ever to experience outside of a hi-fi show, and that's a good thing.

Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

I was instantly drawn to the visual style of the Phono One, but then I'm a sucker for all things Italian. And the price doesn't put me off either; I'll always pay a few extra bucks for style points. That's why I drive a Fiat Abarth instead of a Hyundai Veloster.

Following Mr. O'Brien's lead, I try a handful of MC cartridges with slightly higher outputs. Sticking with Ortofon, the Cadenza Bronze MC, with its neutral tonal balance and .4-MV output, proves perfect in room two; I mount the Cadenza on an SME 10 turntable with SME V tonearm (and this cartridge works incredibly well when loaded at 100 ohms). The Rega Apheta MC, which works best at lower loading, provides incredible synergy loaded at 20 ohms via the Phono One, which delivers what is perhaps the best performance I've ever experienced with this cartridge.

The Grado Statement 1 also proves fantastic with the Phono One; its .5-MV output and 47k loading requirements are no problem at all, underlining the fact that you can mate this phonostage with a premium cartridge in the \$2,000-to-\$3,000 range.

Finally, swapping the factory tubes for a full set of EAT tubes transforms this great preamplifier to an exceptional one: Dynamics improve and noise drops, so I'll go out on a limb and suggest tube rolling with this one—just make sure you get five matched tubes.

The Phono One is certainly good enough to be purchased for our ever-growing fleet of phonostages, so we will report back towards the end of the year, with a long-term follow-up, after it has been used with an even wider range of phono cartridges. ●



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Phono One Valve Phonostage
MSRP: \$3,295

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The Hautonga is not just another pretty face, this amplifier rocks. Its massive power supply offers great dynamic range and allows a wide range of speaker choices, not available to those with a lower powered amplifier. We've paired it up with Plinius' Tiki Network Audio Player (review also in progress) and have come away highly impressed with the performance of this pair.

● Our review of the Hautonga is available [here](#).



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Portland, Oregon designer Damon Coffman is back, this time with a headphone only version of his C1-A preamplifier that we were so excited about earlier this year. With a plethora of inputs and three impedance settings, this one proves to be a top level headphone amp. This vacuum tube powered design utilizes the same form factor as the G1-A, but a completely different tube combination, relying on a pair of 6C4 triodes and two pairs of 50L6, so replacements are plentiful and inexpensive.

- The sound is heavenly, and you can read all about it here.



BARGAINS

Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

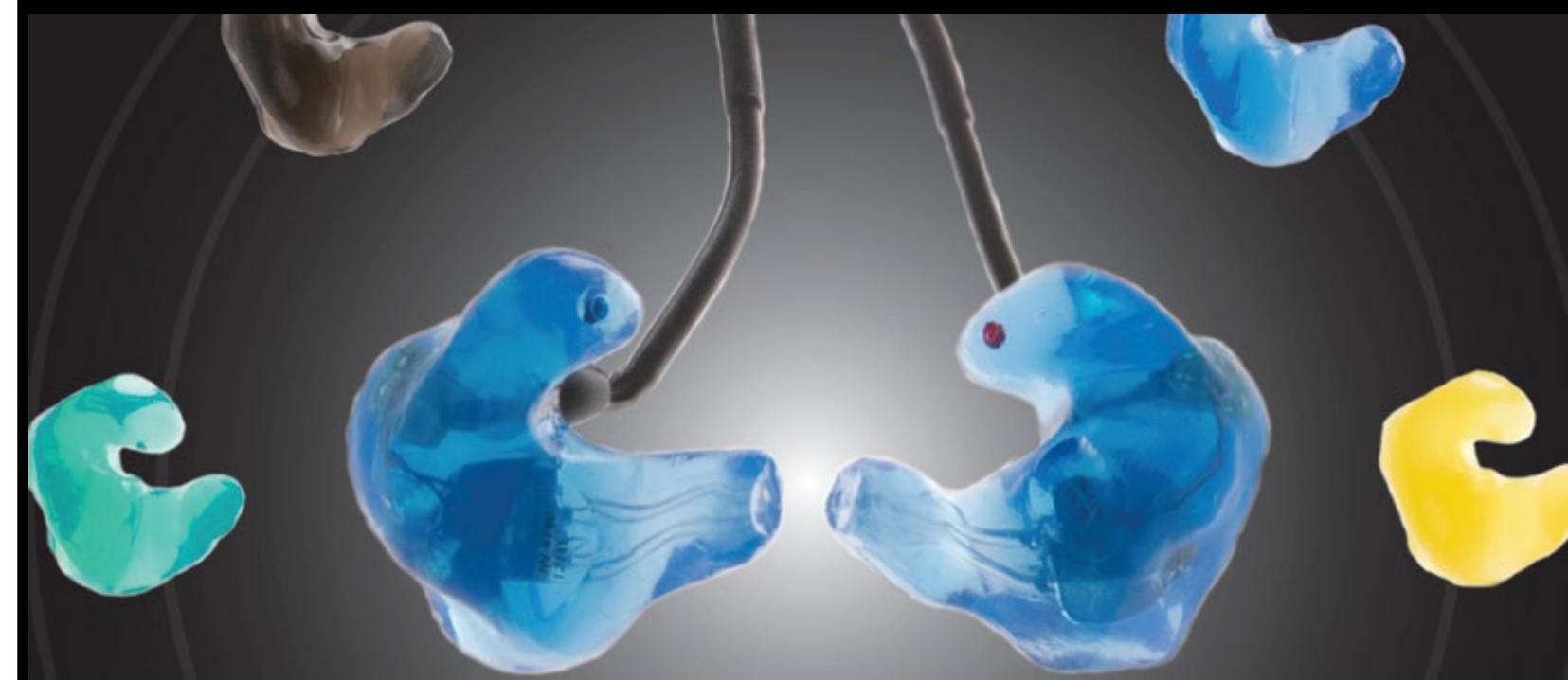
**Tung Sol Tube Caddy**

\$20, Craigslist

Yep, this is the one that the TV repairman used to carry in his station wagon when I was a kid, so how could I resist? Staffer Jerold O'Brien called one afternoon and pointed this one out, so a quick call put me on the road again. A little elbow grease and this baby will be ready to hold my tube stash.



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#1**

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