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THE HEADPHONE ISSUE Sennheiser, Grado, KEF, and More ■ Amps from ALO, NuForce, Auralic, Woo

SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE Reviews of More Than 15 New LPs: Neko Case, Mark Lanegan, Ty Segall, Superchunk, Chvrches, The Civil Wars, and More! **Does The Clash Still Matter?** Todd Martens Ponders the Question While Delving into Sound System



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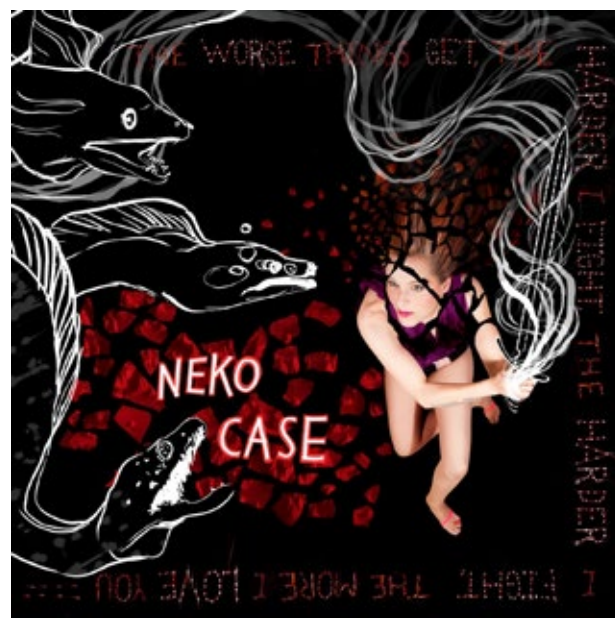
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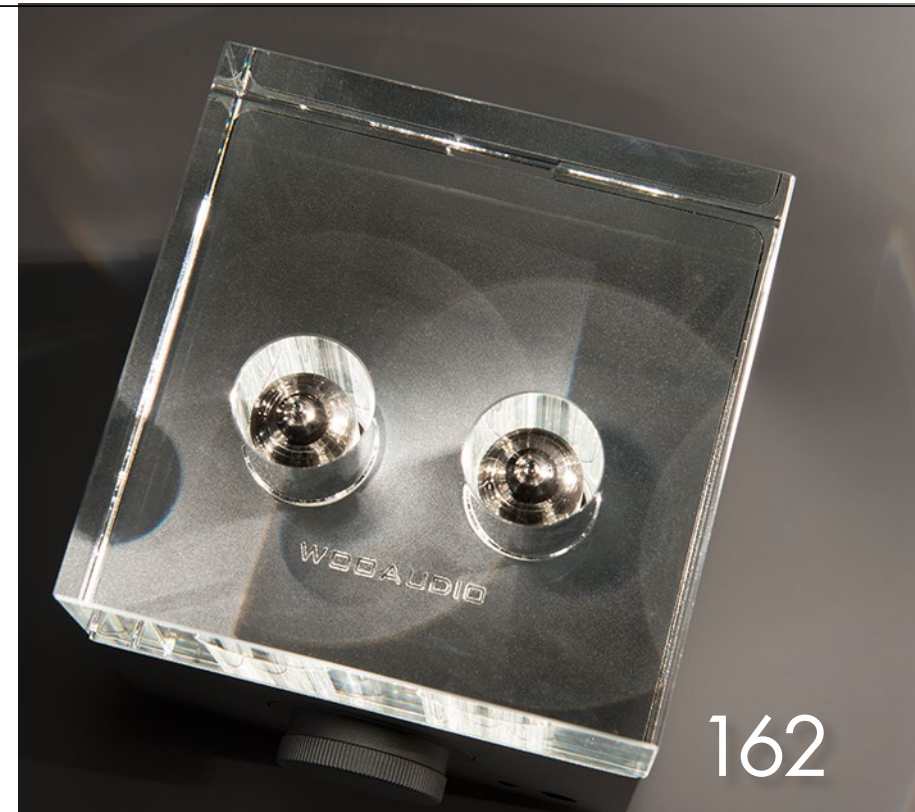
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



Though we've been somewhat lazy covering the headphone beat over the past few years, thanks to the enthusiasm of new writers Mike Liang, Ian White and Rob Johnson, we're in with both feet now. This all-headphone issue celebrates our commitment to headphone coverage, and we will be doing a lot more of it in the future, with a dedicated section every issue entitled *Personal Fidelity*.

Even though I've managed to acquire ten pairs of headphones and a few headphone amplifiers, I began this journey *not* a headphone guy. They are kind of like Pokemon: you want to catch 'em all. And unlike speakers, it's easy to have a collection of headphones and amplifiers, each suited to a specific task, optimized for your favorite music.

Though I still prefer listening to music in a good-sized room on a large pair of speakers, I feel like I finally get the headphone thing – and I attribute much of this to the infectious enthusiasm of our staff headphone aficionados. It's hard to ignore this group of guys who dig headphone listening so much.

We've got a wide range of reviews, spanning from some great entry-level phones to the Audeze LCD-3s, along with ALO Audio's flagship headphone amplifier which tips the scale at \$5,000. Even a few years ago, this would have been unthinkable in the personal audio market, but is now becoming more commonplace. I even managed to procure a mint NOS pair of Sennheiser 424s, which brought back some great memories, as these phones really revolutionized the industry in the early '80s when they were introduced.

In addition to the hardware reviews, we've taken a visit to Grado Labs in Brooklyn and ALO Audio right here in the Pacific Northwest, getting some perspective on East and West Coast entrepreneurs. Grado has been in business for decades, while ALO, the upstart, has been blazing a trail of its own. While different in heritage and approach, they both approach their products with the same gusto. We will have full reports on both of these companies in Issue 58.

So as I sit here on a plane the day after we've put Issue 56 to bed, listening to the new Grado Earspeakers with an ALO headphone amp, I'm thinking this is a pretty cool world after all, and it's come a long, long way from the Koss Pro 4As that I had in my youth. If you're already a headphone enthusiast, we'll have more for you going forward.

Last but not least, I would like to introduce the newest member of the TONE staff, Kristen Bauer, who produced the piece on rock poster artist, Jermaine Rogers. Not only did she pen an outstanding interview, she was able to convince Rogers to do our cover as well. Bauer will also be the cohost on our new video program, *Sh*tty Album Fridays*, where we celebrate our musical guilty pleasures. Stay tuned for more details and thank you as always for your support!

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NEW CONTRIBUTORS



Dreamland Mickey

by Tristan Eaton

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Kristin Bauer

Kristin is an artist, a pop culture enthusiast and music lover, always drawn to album art and concept design. Raised in Minnesota by a father who is quite possibly the Who's biggest fan, the soundtrack of her childhood was full of classic rock.

Since then she has been immersed in the worlds of art, music and writing. Kristin spends her time in the Southwest and West Coast interviewing and covering movers and shakers in art and music for several publications and sites, and creating edgy art shows on her own or with artist husband Emmett Potter, with whom she co-owned Squeeze Gallery.

She also enjoys listening to shitty music from time to time, and you can tune into TONETV's new show Sh*tty Album Friday which she co-hosts with publisher Jeff Dorgay, to get the inside scoop.



"I just feel like no one listens to me anymore."

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I Am Curious (Yellow)

By Jeff Dorgay

With headphones now regularly tipping the scale with four-figure price tags, it's always interesting to revisit the (then) \$29.95 Sennheiser HD 414. Introduced in 1968, the HD 414 was exciting, not only for its open-air design, which was a first, but also for its bright yellow foam ear pads. Remember, this was 1968, and many audiophiles were listening to big, bulky, dark green Koss Pro4s.

The lighter design of the HD 414s made for more comfortable listening sessions, but with one unexpected side effect—now Mom and Dad could hear the trippy lyrics to all those Jefferson Airplane tunes you were rocking out to.



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FEATURE



The earlier versions of the HD 414s had an impedance of 2,000 ohms, and so they presented an easy load to the receivers of the day. So, to keep this exploration true to form, we begin with a vintage Marantz 2270.

Jimi Hendrix's "If 6 Was 9" comes across as solid as ever, with the quiet, subtle whispering in the background. These details are often tough to hear on an average system utilizing speakers, and they remind me why so many of us turned to headphones at an early age. It was always about a more detailed and intimate performance, compared to what speakers (especially the speakers of the day) could muster.

The vocal purity of these phones is good but not excellent. They do have an overall smoothness, making it easy to ignore the slight veil, until you try a pair of contemporary phones. A pair of current HD 650s, equipped with an updated cable from ALO Audio, instantly brings the listener into the 21st century. The HD 650s are more resolving across the spectrum. It is worth noting that, like the new phones, the HD 414s do respond dramatically to better cable. While the \$200 ALO cable doesn't make sense for a pair of NOS phones, using the stock cable that came with the HD 650s for the HD 414s makes for a very inexpensive (i.e. free) upgrade from the 40-year-old supplied cable. *(continued)*

FEATURE

The overall experience with these recently purchased NOS HD 414s is excellent; they are highly listenable headphones, indeed. You can buy a pair for anywhere from about \$15 per pair to \$100, for a NOS pair like the ones pictured here. The replacement ear foam pads are about \$12 per set, and though they are no longer made, NOS drivers are still available, commanding prices as high as \$75 each.

Moving up to the HD 424

The early '70s brought the HD 424 to the lineup, with a price tag of about \$80. The signature yellow pads remain, and the HD 424s are slightly more efficient than their predecessor, yet the overall sound quality through the Marantz remains more similar than different. The HD 424 has a more spacious soundstage and better resolution of deep bass.

Spinning Justin Timberlake's "That Girl," from his recent album, immediately reveals a bass groove that the HD 414 can't muster. The newer phones also do a better job with the room ambience and applause, giving an even airier feel than the HD 414s.

Acoustic fare is more of an equal match. Piano riffs from *Keith Jarrett at the Blue Note* are rendered with good texture and decay, along with a soulful helping of Jarrett's grunts on the track "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To." Here, switching back to the older HD 414 better reveals the progress made with the 424s.

Like with the HD 414, the yellow ear pads are both reasonably priced and readily available—which is a good thing, as the pads in the pair we purchased on eBay had the consistency of bee pollen, falling apart as we removed them from the box. Replacement drivers are tougher to find.

Importance of the Amp

Both the HD 414 and HD 424 work well at modest volume with a laptop, iPhone or iPod, though those craving high volume will want an outboard amplifier. Trying everything from a Cypher Labs Algo-Rhythm Solo up to the ALO Audio Studio Six proved that these vintage phones possess at least the resolution to discern between amplifiers. Sennheiser's own DAC/amplifier also proves an excellent partner, albeit a somewhat expensive one at \$1,999. *(continued)*



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FEATURE

Both phones respond well to upgraded amplification, revealing more music. However, the major shortcoming of these vintage phones is their lack of dynamic range, which dense recordings make more apparent. Examples like Bowie's *Outside*, Nine Inch Nails' *The Downward Spiral* or either of the Grinderman albums clearly show that these phones can only be turned up so far. And maybe that's a good thing.

Grab 'Em and Go

Whether you are a major head-phone enthusiast who would like to add a few vintage phones to your collection or you are just entering the world of personal audio, both of these Sennheiser phones are more than worthy. As with any vintage product, find the cleanest, best taken-care-of pair you can—there are enough of these floating around that a pristine example will only set you back a few extra bucks. Plan on replacing the foam pads and see if you can score a better cable, and you've got a great recipe for headphone fun. ●



NEW RELEASES

**Mark Lanegan**

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Imitations

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Since splitting with the Screaming Trees nearly two decades ago, Mark Lanegan has preferred to hide in the shadows and draw on his well-deep baritone to haunt, shade, and suggest. Capable of raising his ire and upping the volume, Lanegan instead opts for slower, bleaker, more methodical approaches. The strategy is befitting a moody singer that seemingly invites scarecrows to roost on his shoulders and death to linger in the air.

As there's no irony in his vocabulary, he's the quintessential *noir* vocalist—a hovering presence that serves as the musical equivalent of the mysterious, protagonist-torturing figure in any number of late 40s/early 50s film noir classics. Only Lanegan doesn't need to act or dress the part in order to manipulate circumstance and exact revenge. He simply utilizes his single-malt-stained, low-register husk of a voice to express ominous portent, cast anguish, boil tension, or convey tremendous burden.

Which is why hearing the imposing artist croon a tender-footed rendition of Nancy Sinatra's "You Only Live Twice"—yes, *that* "You Only Live Twice," the title song to the James Bond movie of the same name—comes as quite the surprise, one of several on *Imitations*, Lanegan's eighth solo album. Fans aware of his three collaborative efforts with former Belle and Sebastian member Isobel Campbell will recognize the move isn't without precedent. With Campbell, Lanegan has produced modern versions of the Lee Hazelwood-Nancy Sinatra duet records on which she is the soothing beauty, he the raspy beast. Yet, on his own, Lanegan has rarely (if ever) delved into such gentility—let alone straightforward versions of three Andy Williams tunes. Is this really the same man that specialized in mournful elegies, functioned as a vocal undertaker during his stint in Queens of the Stone Age, and played a menacing Lucifer to Greg Dulli's lascivious Mephistopheles in the Gutter Twins?

The explanation lies in Lanegan's desire to make a record akin to those he heard growing up. "When I was a kid in the late Sixties and early Seventies, my parents and their friends would play the records of Andy Williams, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and Perry Como, music with string arrangements and men singing songs that sounded sad whether they were or not," he explained in late June on his Web site, adding that he shared the same affinity for country records by the likes of Willie Nelson and George Jones. Hence, *Imitations* mixes vocal standards with a handful of contemporary numbers—the latter ranging from Chelsea Wolfe's rustic "Flatlands"

to Dulli's gorgeous chamber ballad "Deepest Shade," a song penned for the Twilight Singers but never released.

While Lanegan brings a subtle high-and-lonesome country feel to Vern Godson's "She's Gone," he treats all the material with solemn reverence. He's not out to rearrange or conjure different meaning. Stripped-down and beautifully scored with the bare minimum of clean guitars, horns, and strings where necessary, *Imitations* is, by and large, an idiosyncratic singer's homage to the vocal craft, and to songs tinged with various degrees of heartache. Lanegan doesn't possess the range needed to pull off "Lonely Street" or fluidity of

French to convincingly deliver Gérard Manset's "Elégie Funèbre." Yet he's a natural inhabiting John Cale's "I'm Not the Loving Kind," Frank Sinatra's "Pretty Colors," and even "Autumn Leaves," all of which now sound even more despairing than before. Which isn't to say they surpass the originals; that isn't the point, nor is it Lanegan's aim.

Indeed, evaluated and enjoyed within the context and ambitions Lanegan outlined, *Imitations* adds to the impressively diversified resume of an artist who's a singer in the truest sense of the term. Jones, Cash, Dean, and the boys would be proud. —**Bob Gendron**



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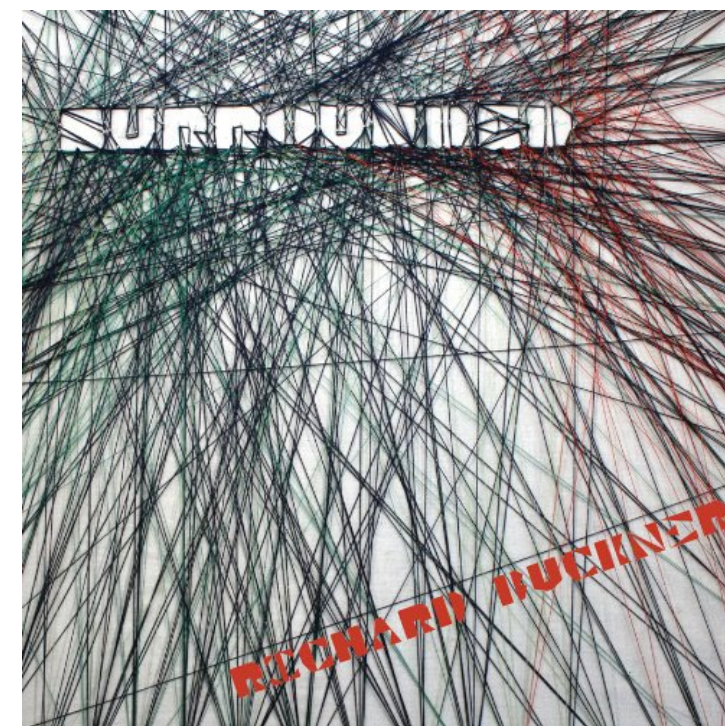


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MUSIC



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Even when Richard Buckner sings about being lost in a crowd or on the run with a would-be lover, he has a way of sounding achingly, devastatingly alone. Indeed, the cult singer-songwriter's deep catalog could be described as one extended, heartbroken sigh. It's a trend that continues on the California-born musician's latest full-length studio effort, *Surrounded*, an album that, in spite of its title, finds Buckner again striking out on his lonesome.

“I was alive,” he sings atop acoustic strumming and rich autoharp on “Foundation,” “But a vision left alone.”

As on 2011's *Our Blood*, Buckner continues to distance himself from his more stripped-down, alt-country roots here, embracing electronic textures that add a lushness to the material while somehow increasing the gulf between the singer and the rest of humankind. *(continued)*

“I was alive,”
he sings atop
acoustic
strumming and
rich autoharp,
“But a vision
left alone.”



©Photo by Richard A. Smith

Witness “Cut,” a percolating tune where machines stand in for fellow musicians, heightening the sense of solitude. “When You Tell Me How It Is” sounds similarly dense albeit deserted, Buckner layering on crisp acoustic guitar, dissonant melodica, and distant background loops that mimic the hum of a life-support system. It’s essentially the work of one man locked away with his machines.

Buckner again refuses to linger, and he works his way through the album’s nine cuts in just a shade over 34 minutes. Even so, *Surrounded* never once feels rushed. It’s simply as long as it needs to be, which speaks to the singer’s ever-expanding abilities as both a writer and an editor.

On *Our Blood*, the musician tends to deliver his words with a clear sense of urgency, often singing as though his time were running down and he needed to get everything onto tape before expiring. Here, he takes a more casual approach, and his tone practically beckons listeners closer, as if he were sharing a series of increasingly intimate secrets.

Of course, trying to cull specific meaning from Buckner’s phrasing can be a tricky proposition. His lyrics tend to be elliptical and difficult to grasp; when he sings of “the shade of the night/only leading you on” on one song, he could easily be speaking of his own slippery words. Their specific meaning, like a firefly at dusk,

seems to momentarily flicker before again giving way to all-consuming darkness.

Even so, the singer’s lyrics speak to deep reserves of loneliness (he sings of “waking just in time to miss the show” on “Lean To”), a desire to make a deeper connection (“We should go out sometime,” he hopefully offers on “Go”), and an awareness of his own limitations. “The caption should say he doesn’t know where he’s going,” he sings wearily on “Beautiful Question.” Even if this is true—and Buckner’s albums appear to argue the statement is true for all of us—it certainly doesn’t make the journey any less enjoyable. —**Andy Downing**

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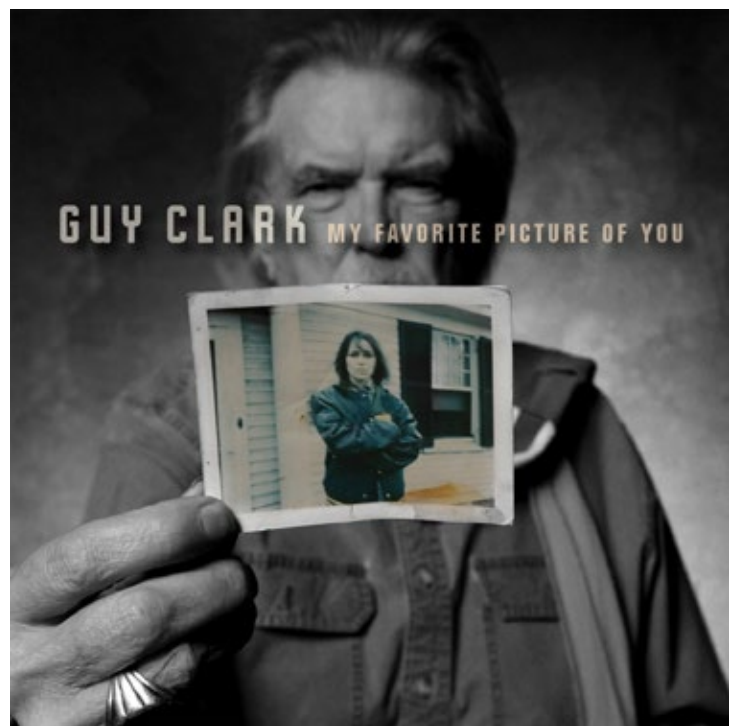


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Guy Clark

My Favorite Picture of You
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s a young man, Guy Clark made his name as an edgy, new-breed country songwriter along with the likes of Townes Van Zandt and Mickey Newbury. Now 71, he's taken on the mantle of lion in winter.

My Favorite Picture of You is a finely wrought, late-in-the-day statement. The centerpiece is the title track written for his wife, Susanna, who died in 2012. On the album cover, Clark holds a Polaroid of her as a young woman. The song is a shattering ode to that photo and all it represents: the good times, the bad times, and the woman who stuck with him through it all.

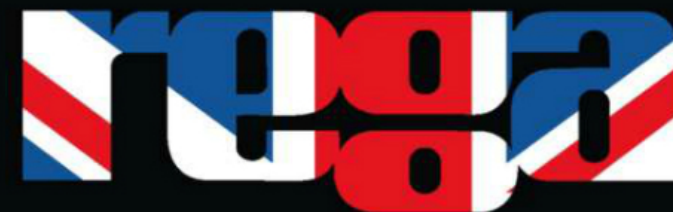
Clark displays a deep social conscience in several songs. The bright Tex-Mex melody of "El Coyote" belies the darker story at its heart: undocumented Mexican workers exploited and abandoned by the "coyote" they've paid to smuggle them across the border. "Heroes" spotlights a damaged Iraq War veteran after they've come home.

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MUSIC

Employing old-school country recitation, Clark tells the story of a scarred young man going off the rails: "A silver star and a pistol in a drawer/The morphine just ain't workin' no more." Like John Prine's classic "Sam Stone," "Heroes" cuts with scalpel precision, focusing on the raw specifics of one soldier's story.

The singer's songs are built on mournful cello, quietly burbling banjo, sweet fiddles, and warm acoustic guitars. Melodies are memorable and winning. But the lyrics, delivered in Clark's weather-beaten voice, are what resonate most. Like a gifted short-story writer, Clark is all about details honed to a razor's edge. "Rain In Durango" is a shrewdly observed character study of a rambling girl: "She wound up with a backstage pass/Was hangin' with the pickers in the band/Till her heart got broke by a banjo man/Now she's had all the bluegrass she can stand."

Every cut is a smart, distinctive gem. The riveting western story-song "The Death of Sis Draper" would make the late Marty Robbins smile. Clark also casts a sharp eye on the dangerous, addictive life of an artist in "The High Price of Inspiration." And he offers up a cheeky take on life in "Good Advice."

"Don't give me no advice that rhymes/I've heard it all a thousand times/Don't start preachin' between the lines/Give me somethin' I can use." What Clark gives us is thoughtful art. *My Favorite Picture of You* is a quiet treasure.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

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It's impossible to separate the broken music on the Civil Wars' self-titled sophomore album from the drama currently surrounding the folk-rock duo.

Last fall, Joy Williams and John Paul White abruptly called off a European tour, issuing a tersely worded press release that cited "internal discord and irreconcilable differences of ambition." More recently, Williams has done interviews where she's said the two singers are no longer on speaking terms and there are currently no plans to tour in support of the new record. Reconciliation, it appears, is nowhere on the horizon.

Against this backdrop, the pair's latest effort plays like an extended breakup. "Oh, I wish I'd never seen your face," the two harmonize on the album's bruised opening cut, "I wish you were the one that got away." White, his voice a deadened whisper, opens the reflective "Same Old Same Old" singing, "I want to leave you/I want to lose us/I want to give up." Even more damning is Williams opening admission on "Eavesdrop," particularly considering the pair's incommunicado status: "I don't want to talk right now."

The Civil Wars

The Civil Wars
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This kind of disharmony was all but unthinkable just two years ago. The group released its 2011 debut, *Barton Hollow*, to near-universal acclaim, racking up a pair of Grammy wins (for Best Country Duo/Group Performance and Best Folk Album), more than a half-million in album sales, and plaudits from contemporaries like Taylor Swift, who invited the duo to record a song with her for the soundtrack to the *Hunger Games* movie.

In spite of current tensions, the album maintains a sense of desperation, as Williams and White wish they could somehow pull closer despite the gulf steadily widening between them. "Just hold me," they plead as "Eavesdrop" builds to a feverish close. Although



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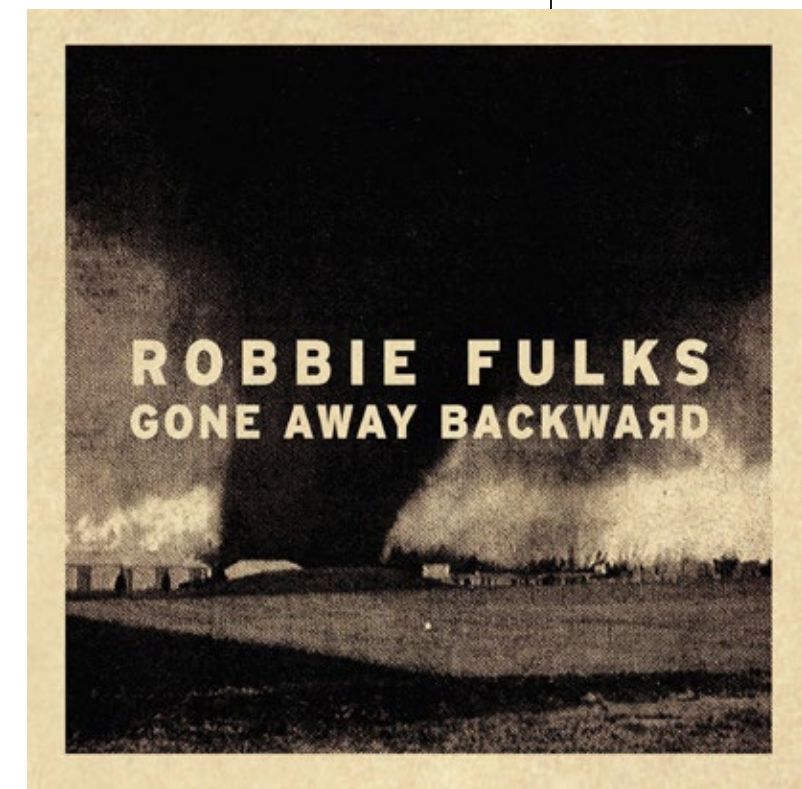
the two were never romantically linked—both are in relationships outside the band and have always denied any involvement beyond a musical partnership—they share an obvious intimacy that surfaces on songs like "Dust to Dust," a lilting slow dance that feels a bit like listening in on a private conversation. A similar closeness informs "From This Valley," a mountain waltz driven by White's limber acoustic strumming.

While much of the music here cuts deeper than the band's surface-level debut—note the acidity that surfaces in "Oh Henry" when Williams sings, "The grass is green everywhere but underneath"—there are times the devastated atmosphere borders on maudlin. This is particularly true on a pair of ill-chosen covers, including Etta James' "Tell Mama" and a ponderous, glacial take on Smashing Pumpkins' "Disarm" that appears to exist solely to test a listener's reaction time in reaching for the "skip" button.

Despite these flaws, however, *The Civil Wars* remains a stirring and oftentimes emotional effort. If current appearances hold and the album serves as the pair's swansong, well, there are certainly worse ways to go out. —**Andy Downing**



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Robbie Fulks

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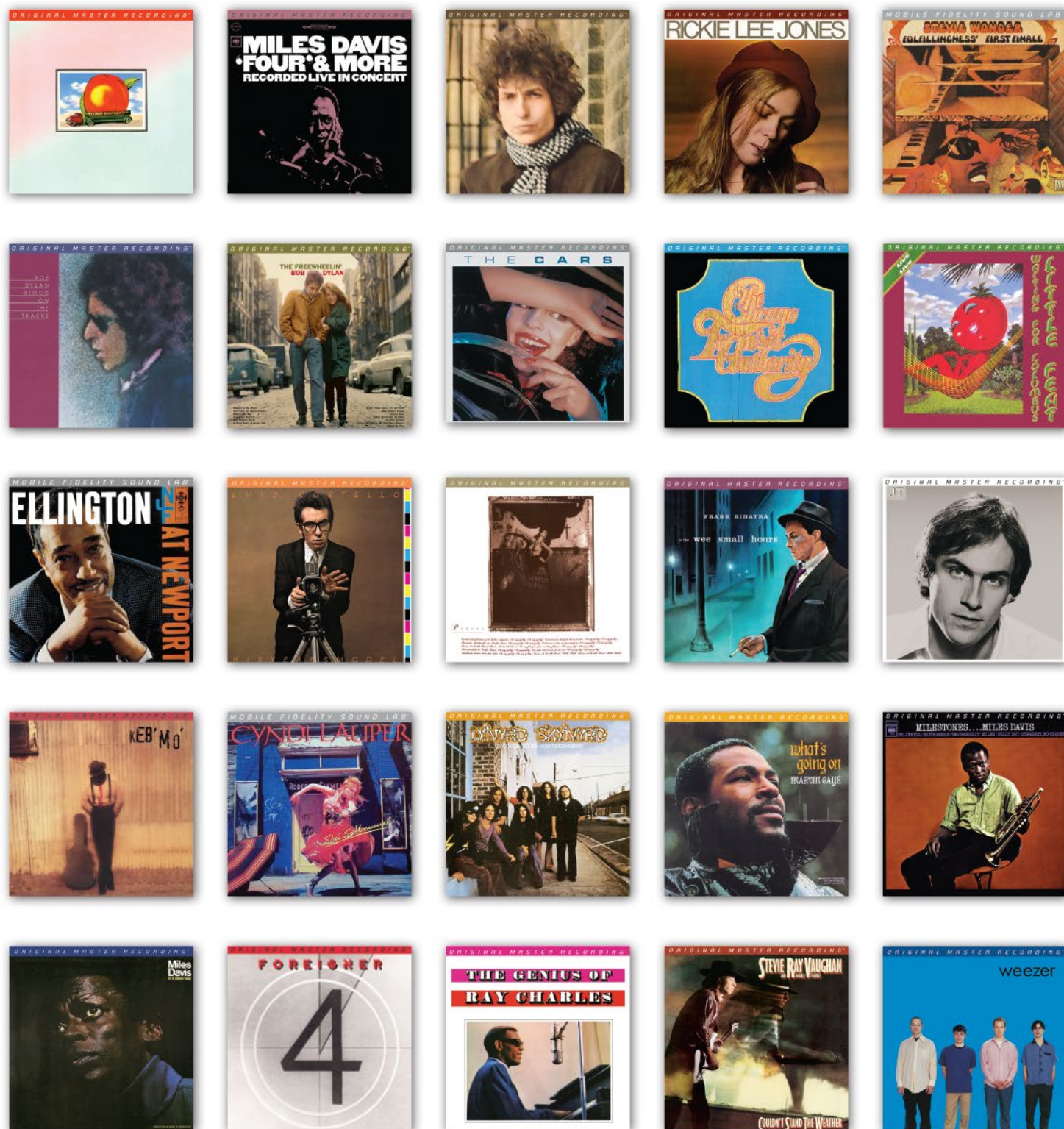
Back in the 1990s, Robbie Fulks emerged on the radar with his blistering anti-Nashville manifesto “Fuck This Town.” Yes, Fulks is a genuinely funny guy. But despite a string of complex albums, his early image as an alt-country smart-ass can still obscure the sincere breadth and depth of his talent.

Fulks mostly plays it straight on the new *Gone Away Backward*. A chunk of the album showcases Fulks’ sure way with old-school country and bluegrass (the moody mountain lament “I’ll Trade You Money For Wine” and lightning-fast-picked instrumental “Pacific Slope”). But he also stretches into shivery modern parlor ballads (“The Many Disguises of God”), slinky acoustic blues (“Imogene”), and several terrific hybrids of modern country and folk. *(continued)*

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Filled with small-town ennui and wrapped in a gentle melody, “Where I Fell” is alternately funny, mournful, and exhausted. The song uncoils like something Roger Miller would’ve written during a severe hangover, right down to a couple bars of enervated whistling. Fulks sings, “Daddy used to catch his supper in this river/ Now you can’t swim it/ Smells like a 20-ton truck full of paint thinner/Sank down in it.” For all its clever, twisty wordplay, it’s a poignant soliloquy from a man resigned to live where he has fallen—an America of increasingly diminished returns.

There are a few wiseacre moments here. In the bluegrass tune “Sometimes the Grass Is Really Greener,” a mountain musician tries his luck in Nashville. The lyrics find Fulks still getting in his digs against the industry powers that be. It’s fairly amusing, but at this point, predictable: “The record company man confessed he liked me/But he had to shave a few rough edges down/Cut my hair like Brooks and Dunn’s/Trade the banjo for some drums/’Cause no one would buy that old high lonesome sound.”

Fulks strikes gold when he sets such salvo aside and plays from the heart. He’s winningly sentimental on the country-folk ballad “That’s Where I’m From,” a man’s bittersweet look backward at his down-home country roots. Yet the pretty albeit emotionally crushing “Guess I Got



©Photo by Stan Golovchuk

It Wrong” is the standout track, putting Fulks within striking distance of heavyweights like Don Williams and Gordon Lightfoot.

It’s times like these when you are forcibly reminded Fulks isn’t just everyone’s favorite alt-country funnyman. He’s one of the most serious songwriters around, inside Nashville or out.
—**Chrissie Dickinson**



Neko Case

The Worse Things Get, The Harder I Fight, The Harder I Fight, The More I Love You
Anti-, 2LP or CD

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Neko Case outlines a number of options at the start of her latest solo venture, the singer's first in four years. "Hey, little girl," she sings on album opener "Wild Creatures," "would you like to be the king's pet or the king?" But it's not exactly an either/or proposition.

To step into Case's world has increasingly become a journey into a storybook-like land. These tales are sometimes bruised and somber, but reality is askew, the arrangements are darkly lush, and the voice is never less than clear, rich, and sublime. As "Wild Creatures" gets whisked into a cauldron of magical woodwinds, fiery strings, and sturdy choirs, Case hints at other potential paths for the "little girl." Invisible and odorless are the traits our hero desires, but Case would settle for the position of king.



Yet, beware of the man at the top. "It's the loneliest," Case sings, her voice calming what was a suddenly violent piano. In two-and-a-half minutes, Case has given us a Tolkien-worthy epic full of backstabbing members of royalty and hellish-sounding choirs. Both singer and orchestrator eventually come back down to earth. Not all of *The Worse Things Get* strays from the artist's country-dipped backbone. But taken as a whole, the record is one of her most lively and mysterious efforts to date.

"Night Still Comes" is full of early-morning mysticism and borderline-surreal lyrics ("My brain makes drugs," Case croons at the start), with the subtle addition of orchestral touches and call-and-response backing singers adding more depth. "Man" is frantic rocker with bursts of fuzz-laden guitars and raining keyboards, whereas "Where Did I Leave the Fire" crackles with echoes, crickets, and jazzy pianos seemingly lost in a haunted forest. "Change the way I love you," Case then demands on the gospel scolding "Local Girl."

Ever more ambitious, "Ragtime" combines bits of the aforementioned songs and then some. An old-timey keyboard simmers as Case takes the listener on a confidently casual stroll around big, brassy notes and ghostly, operatic singers. As she drowns in a wonderland of roots-gone-mad sounds, she pointedly takes stock of her environs: "I am useful and strange." No doubt, that. —**Todd Martens**

**Ty Segall***Sleeper*

Drag City, LP or CD

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Ty Segall

has finally descended from what seems like a prolonged amphetamine high. Or, at the least, the garage-rock maven mellowed long enough to take a breath and allow his growing legion of fans to do the same. Nothing wrong with exhaling every once in a while.

Segall, who has been releasing records with myriad bands since 2005 before embarking on a solo career in 2008, came into full bloom during the past 15 months. A pair of records, *Twins* and *Slaughterhouse*, closely followed the promising *Goodbye Bread*, issued toward the end of 2011. Rather than mimic the too-much, too-soon approach of many of his contemporaries that release nearly every song they record, Segall justified his prolific output by way of albums steeped in solid melodies, concise arrangements, sincere originality, and simple hooks. He also blew away crowds with fervent live shows via a band that included guitarist Mikal Cronin, whose *MCII* stands as one of this year's power-pop gems. What would Segall do for an encore?



©Photo by Denee Petracek

As it happens, turn the volume down, shut off most of the amplifiers, flirt with introspection, and leave fans wanting more by releasing just one album for the entire calendar year of 2013. Primarily unplugged and indirectly personal, *Sleeper* exhales with the increasing maturity and poise of a 20-something pondering life's heavier moments and challenging situations. The LP is Segall's most straightforward singer-songwriter effort, and his most serious. Not surprisingly, its gestation coincided with his father's death and the vocalist/guitarist cutting

off communications with his mother.

Rather than the art of a musician who sounds prepared to jump off a roof into a swimming pool below, or one motivated to see just how many eardrums he can make ring with decibel-rich distortion, *Sleeper* prizes atmosphere, acoustics, and color. Segall's established proclivities for psychedelia and paisley-underground pop shine. His calm voice and acid-melted falsetto often streams through subtle effects filters that engender a wavy, foggy, British quality.

Guitar fills, such as the slide patterns on the fun-with-mirrors country-folk of "6th Street," zig and zag in directions equivalent of those of Lombard Street in his former home base of San Francisco. Sadness gives way to self-assertion and pained relief in the form of jangly rhythms ("The Man Man," "She Don't Care"). On the coda to "Queen Lullabye," Segall even flirts with raga mysticism.

Many of the tunes take on the quality of hazy dreams: Time and place remain fuzzy, voices echo, everything is over before you can completely grasp what just happened. "Oh dreamer/My sleeper/My dream's dream come true," Segall warbles on the gorgeous chamber-pop title cut, playing the role of his lover's baby blue as strings soar in the background and a thickly resonant unplugged guitar strums in the foreground. It sets the tone for an effort on which Segall appears to seek comfort and peace of mind.

Indeed, where the vocalist's previous works are glad to be the center of attention—extroverted affairs that thrive on energy, volume, and speed—*Sleeper* is content to be a wallflower that stands off to the side and lurks in the quiet corners of a room. And, as made clear by the ongoing three-decade-plus career of Robyn Hitchcock, whose arc and sound Segall looks to be tracing, being an underdog has its benefits. —**Bob Gendron**



Superchunk

I Hate Music

Merge Records, LP or CD

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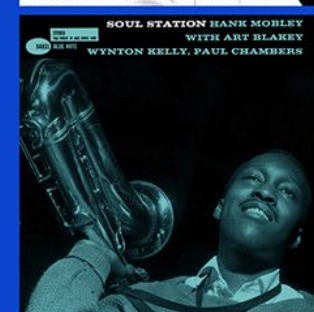
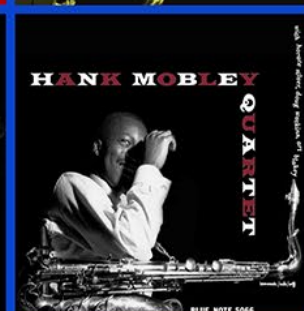
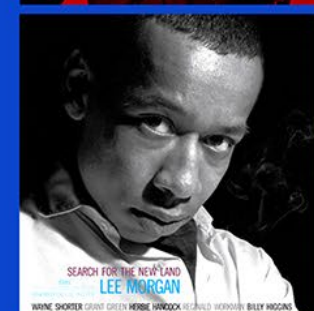
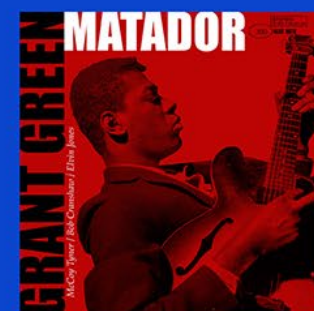
Credit goes to Superchunk for crafting what is arguably the album title of the year. It's three words, "I Hate Music," that when affixed to a CD, LP, or collection of MP3s, encapsulates a number of the mixed emotions of fandom, alluding equally to its limitations and necessity.

It isn't hard to guess where Superchunk ultimately lands on this love/hate debate, especially when one considers that Mac McCaughan and Laura Balance, the architects of the long-running Chapel Hill, N.C. band, have also spent the last two-plus decades building Merge Records into one of the most beloved brands in independent rock.

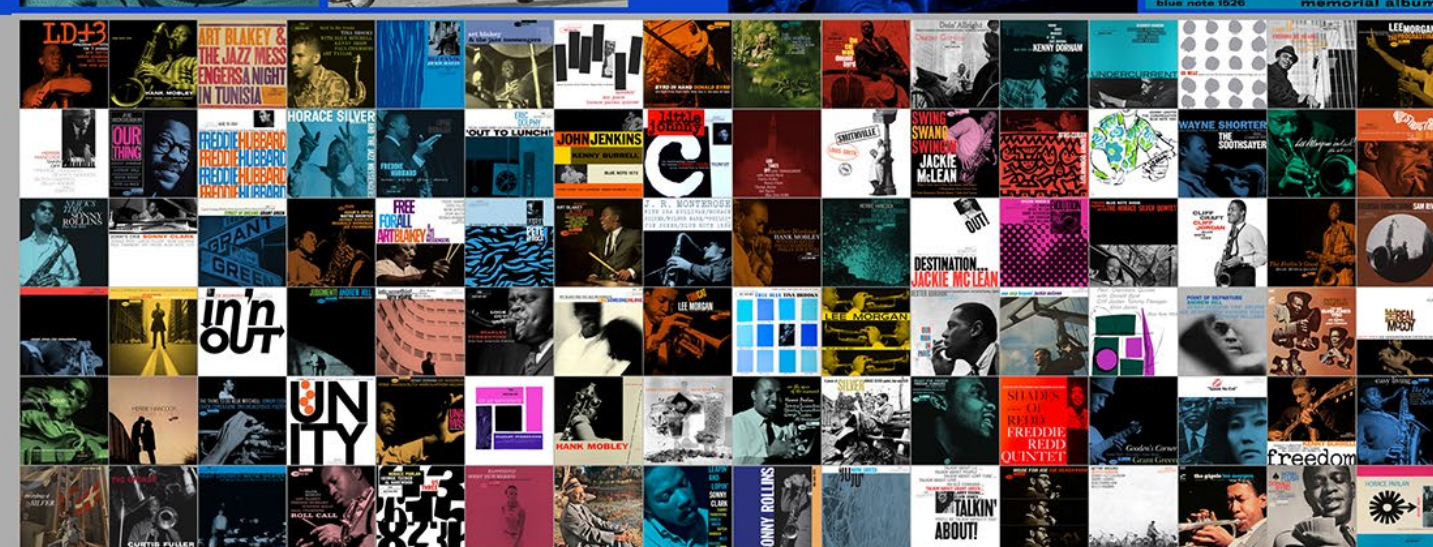
The line appears on the second track, "Me & You & Jackie Mittoo," which begins, as many a Superchunk song starts, with a clenched riff and McCaughan's lean vocals, always higher-pitched and more exuberant than one expects. "I hate music," he tells us, arguing "it can't bring anyone back to this earth." Then the kicker: "But I got nothing else, so I guess here we go."

Consider it something of a thesis here, as Superchunk—over the course of these 11 songs and 37 minutes—presents an album of punk rock at its most grown up. Adult concerns and simple pleasures abound. They "ate and drank and ate and drank" amid the wily, fancifully fast hooks of "Trees of Barcelona" and want nothing more than to lock the door and be left alone in the frantic "Staying Home." (continued)

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Each song dispels the myths that rock n' roll is a young person's game, as *I Hate Music* and 2010's *Majesty Shredding* (the band's first album in almost a decade) reveal Superchunk at its leanest and most thoughtfully direct. Questions linger—"Do you like this place?" McCaughan asks early in "Overflows"—long after any emotional exhaustion is erased by drummer Jon Wurster's never-less-than song-defining rhythms. The band slows down and amps up the cynicism on "Out of the Sun," and "Your Theme" sees McCaughan and Jim Wilbur building guitar upon guitar in a search for a rock n' roll identity (with the help of some glorious "ba ba bas"). The slow-building and

pensive "What Can We Do" gets sturdier with each verse, as the struggle to maintain a relationship without getting "tied up" or "trapped" becomes increasingly desperate, and increasingly unlikely.

The song title of the latter is one of many unanswered, post-thirty-something questions posited throughout the set. "Do you think the answer is love?" McCaughan wonders on the shimmering "Low F." If it at first seems an optimistic query for these veteran rockers, it isn't any more silly or abstract than putting one's faith in the healing power of a pop song, which Superchunk unabashedly does time and time again. —**Todd Martens**

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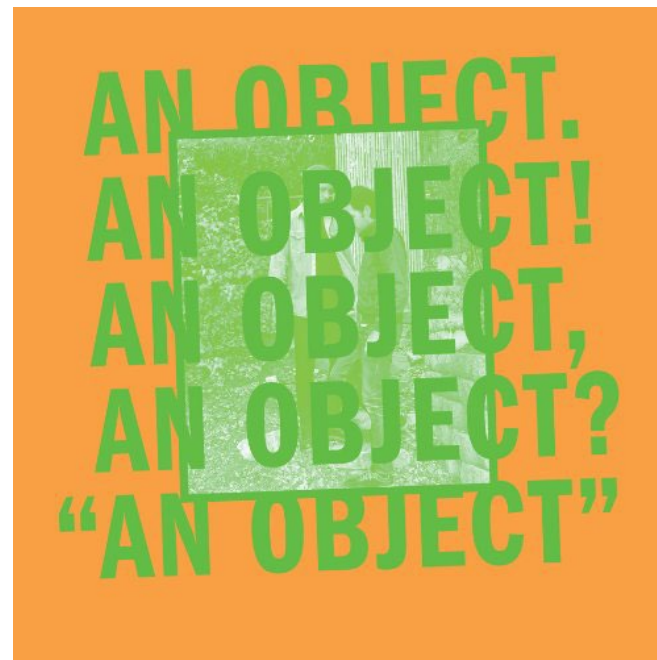


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MUSIC



No Age

An Object

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Noisy punk rock isn't supposed to sound lonely. The very description connotes loudness, some sort of commotion or a ruckus, and that usually involves people. Or, in the case of No Age, people manipulating machinery. How else to properly explain what rhythmic operator Dean Spunt and guitar tormenter Randy Randall conjure up on *An Object*, the L.A. band's fourth album.

Songs such as "Defector/ed" and "A Ceiling Dreams of a Floor" create an effect of running in place. Spunt's momentum is all forward, while Randall's guitars, whether via the glistening metallics of the former or rainy feedback on the latter, seem content to take their time getting to their destination. The end result is a record that's alternately loud, fast, and meditative. If No Age had begun to fill in the gaps with digital trickery on recent albums, here, instruments are toyed with before giving way to more modern sounds.

"Running From A-Go-Go" begins as something of a distress call, the guitars twisted and morphed until they sound like an old reel-to-reel machine. "One more night alone," Spunt sings, always matter-of-factly as images of late-night drives and truck stops dominate. It's cliché for a band to write about life on the road, but No Age gets away with it by emphasizing little more than the emptiness. If you're going to tackle well-traversed ground, do it with focus.

Randall's riffs hit like giant blocks of reverb, and how accessible a particular song is (or isn't) usually depends on how much he chips away at the excess. "Circling With Dizzy" attacks like bees just stripped of a hive while "I Won't Be Your Generator" sees the pair writing a rather concise, albeit spiteful, relationship-gone-south ditty. "Lock Box" nearly trips over itself with dueling rhythms, each a stompy little block of frustration, and "No Ground" is two-and-a-half minutes loaded with finger-in-the-socket guitar riffs.

"Who do you think you are?" Spunt shouts, adding, sarcastically, "Your life is set in stone." No Age doesn't believe that, of course. The band has once again gone in search of a melody by drilling away at the concrete. —**Todd Martens**



Deer Tick
Negativity
 Partisan, LP or CD

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G

rowing up can be hard to do.

Since emerging from Providence, Rhode Island, in 2007, and reeking of alcohol, tobacco, and lord knows what else, John McCauley and his rotating cast of Deer Tick bandmates have turned youthful abandon into compelling theater. For years, the group's boozy concerts frequently teetered on the edge of disaster, as though things were just a shot and a beer from completely unraveling.

The persona sometimes carried over into the band's off-stage interactions. I interviewed McCauley twice in 2011. The first time, he was outgoing and loquacious despite (or more likely because of) admitting he was already on his fifth beer of the day. It's probably worth noting, at this point, it was not yet noon when we chatted. The second time, the frontman could hardly muster a complete sentence, shrugging his way through the conversation as if the previous night's shenanigans still clouded his brain.

At times, the band's albums have followed a similar pattern. The group split 2011's *Divine Providence* neatly down the middle, following a riotous first half with a slow,

meandering hangover of a second half—a shift that suggested all the late nights finally had taken their toll. And who can blame the band, really? Can anyone aside from genetic freaks like Lemmy and Shane MacGowan maintain such pace into their 30s and beyond?

With *Negativity*, Deer Tick sounds bound and determined to make the transition into adulthood. McCauley kicks off the album with a soul-kissed marriage proposal on "The Rock," a title that could have taken on any number of illicit meanings on past albums. Then, on "Mirror Walls," he sings, "I cut my credit cards and tried to grow up" like a man formulating some grand plan for his future. Heck, the album even

includes a guest turn from singer Vanessa Carlton (on the he said/she said of "In Our Time"), a clean-cut radio darling who one could imagine appealing to mainstream music fans more likely to associate Deer Tick with the pests one must avoid while hiking the wilderness.

Try as he might, however, the singer can't quite escape his damaged past. Songs reference everything from his father being jailed on charges of conspiracy and tax fraud ("With a hug and a kiss you may say goodbye to all you've ever known," he croaks on the stiff-upper lip of "Mr. Sticks") to the dissolution of his engagement and subsequent slide into alcohol and drug use. On the horn-stoked "Trash," for one, the

singer struggles to rouse himself for a noon motel checkout before referring to himself as a "wasteful savant."

While McCauley hasn't quite shaken free of his demons—the "monsters in [his] periphery" close in again on the eerie "Thyme"—he's clearly trying to gain some semblance of control, and, musically at least, the band has never sounded this sure-footed. It stomps its way through shaggy Memphis soul burners, swooning ballads and other rollicking numbers that conjure the shit-kicking spirit of the its rowdier past. Maturing, it would seem, doesn't mean one has to grow up completely.
 —**Andy Downing**

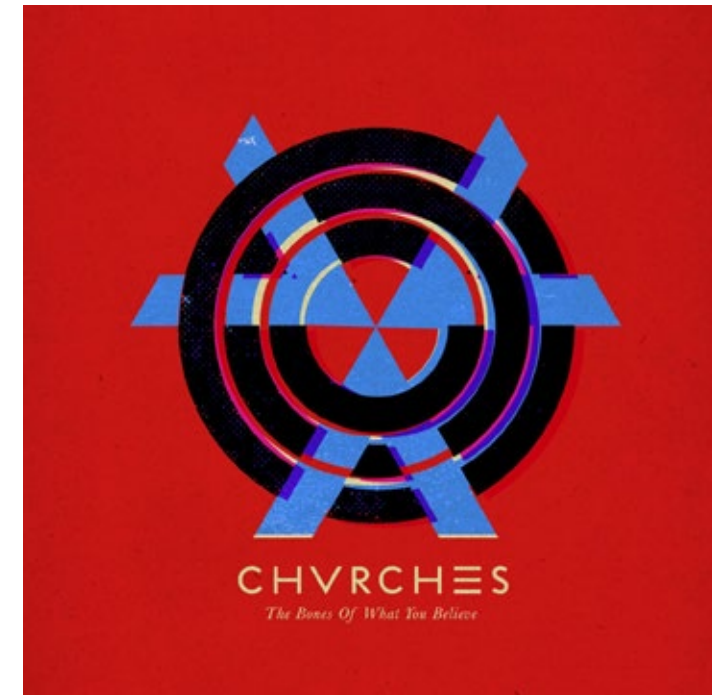


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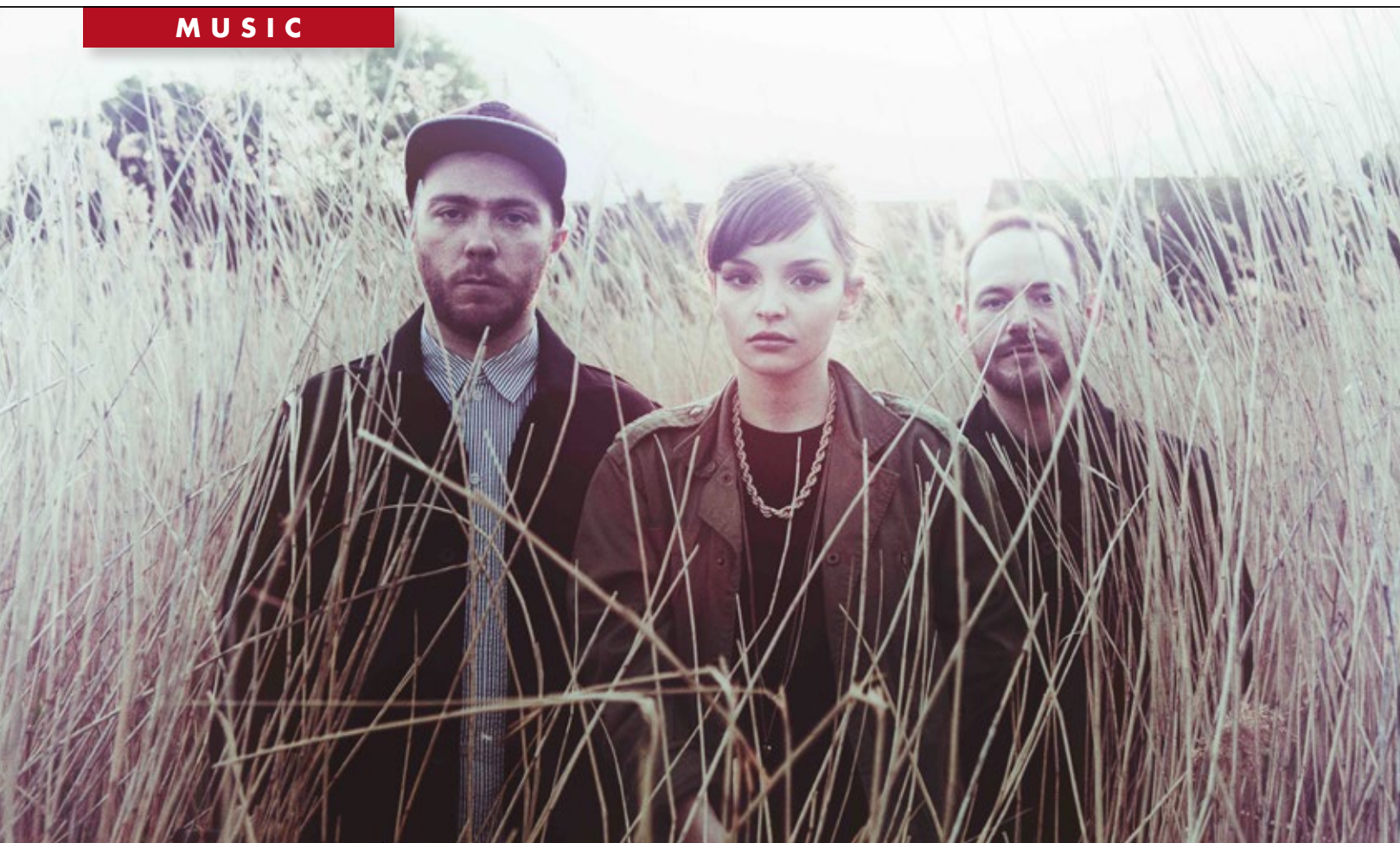
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S

cottish synth trio Chvrches comes out ready for war on “We Sink.” Lauren Mayberry is a luminous vocalist, but she’s looking for a revolution.

“Let me stop for a second,” she sings mid-song, but she doesn’t, instead taunting that she’ll be a “thorn in your side” till death. Keyboards fire lens-flaring sun-spots around her, beats shiver and shake, and, as Mayberry declares “we are gonna fail if you lead us,” Chvrches delivers a vintage-tinged blast that feels tailor-made for our times of economic and political strife.

One of the debut album’s greatest achievements takes retro-styled synthpop, a genre the underground and mainstream have heralded as chic for much of recent memory (see Lady Gaga, Passion Pit, M83, Daft Punk, Kesha), and makes it sound vital. There’s never any doubt that this relatively young band—Chvrches has existed for less than two years—views its role as one of importance. *(continued)*



When you have a frontwoman ready for battle, best get out of her way.

"You can't get enough," Mayberry sings on "Lies," promising that she can "make a true believer of anyone." The sounds behind her may be laser bright, but they possess heft. The beat steps forward as if it's one of the robots leveling a techno city in Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim*. Meanwhile, the push and pull between sweet and venom makes one inclined to believe her more often than not. It's a theme Chvrches works well, as "Gun" sees Mayberry becoming one of pop's cheeriest-sounding aggressors. The singer threatens to weaponize herself while backing mates Iain Cook and Martin Doherty layer keyboards as if they're trying to conjure a backing choir—twinkling like Tinkerbell at song's start but soon shadowing her every word

with spell-like blasts of digital flurries. "Tether" finds Chvrches updating the slow-build rock anthem for festival dance tents, and "Recover" delivers a take-me-or-leave-me ultimatum with all the tranquility of a satellite spinning in space.

Yet Chvrches never gets too out there. Even "Science Visions," which at times sounds like a lost Tangerine Dream soundtrack cut from the 80s, ultimately emphasizes open-armed choruses rather than atmospheres. The only interruptions in momentum arrive via three moments when those other than Mayberry take the vocal reins. Rather than attempt to match to her buoyancy, Cook and Doherty try to play it straight. But when you have a frontwoman ready for battle, best get out of her way. —**Todd Martens**

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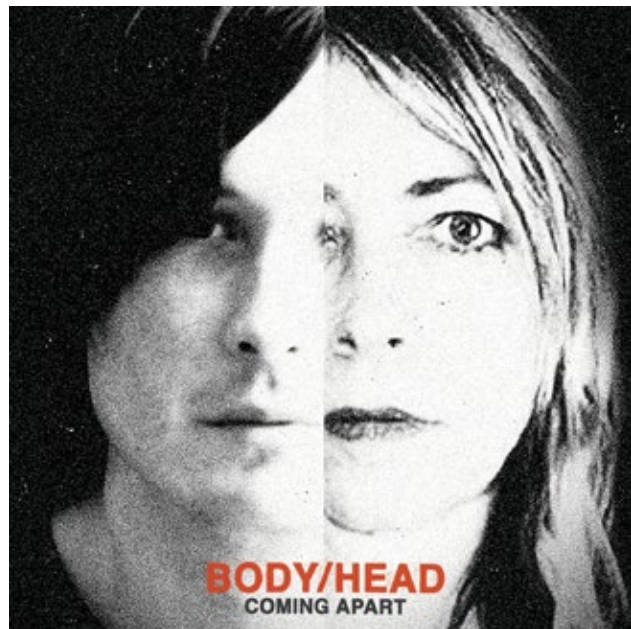
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**Body/Head***Coming Apart*

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Sonic Youth is no more. Anyone still mourning the loss of New York's long-standing art-house noise rockers—a band that amassed three decades of occasionally tuneful, often atonal and reliably experimental works—should listen to *Body/Head*.

The new project from one-time Sonic Youth co-anchor Kim Gordon is the music equivalent of ripping off a Band-Aid. It's going to hurt, and best to just get it over quick. But there's no point in letting a rock n' roll wound brought on by the dismantling of a beloved band fester longer than it needs. So yes, this one is going to be painful. The agony may not arrive until Gordon starts barking (track three, "Last Mistress"). Or it may be kept at bay until it becomes apparent that the guitar is tuned only to its "haunted house" setting on every song on this album. But the hurt will come. *Coming Apart* is a dreadful listen.



©Photo by Annabel Mehran

Fans of Sonic Youth will no doubt hear an album inspired by the dissolution of Gordon's longtime marriage with former bandmate Thurston Moore. She has spoken openly about the relationship's end and her attempts to save it. Those are difficult interviews to read, and *Coming Apart* feels largely an attempt to manage emotions that will never quite make sense.

The album, for instance, opens with a guitar that sounds as if it's being murdered, its every scrape of a string being drained for blood. Gordon sounds less like a vocalist and more like someone who has had the entirety of life stripped from her, noting that she can "only think of you in the abstract." The line is not without its power. However, managing the whispers, clanks, and scrapes that accompany it (and all these songs recorded with guitarist Bill Nace) proves to be an endurance test.

A press release helpfully (annoyingly?) comes with a self-described "think piece" written by a professor at Barnard College/Columbia University. It informs us about the obvious, that this is drone music, where the lingering of guitar notes are "ritualistic" and "the question of quality is beside the point." The latter contention is one worth debating, as *Body/Head* is still a product, and one that, like every other album Matador releases, will be sold at record shops the world over. It needn't conform to verse-chorus-verse structure (heavens no), but this abrasive, ambient

noise and vocal moaning appears therapeutic only to the one performing it.

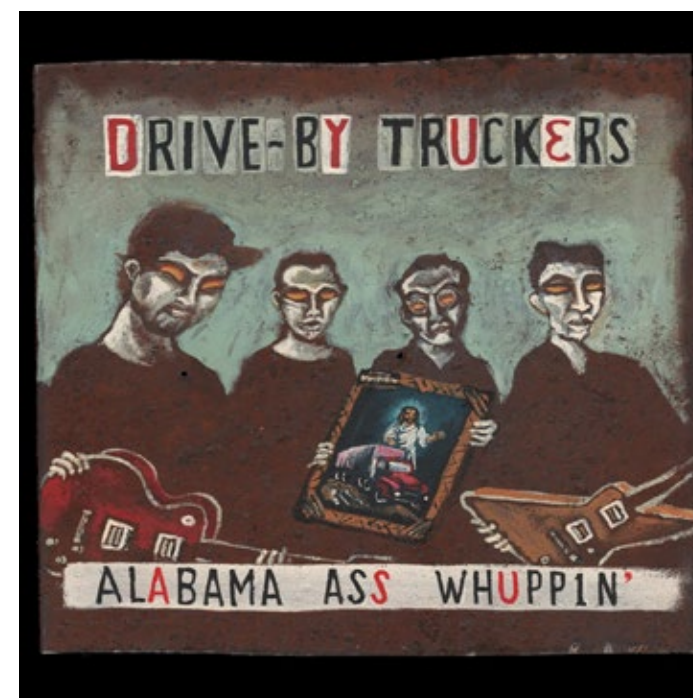
And yet there are moments where Gordon hits on ideas that could be germs of commanding songs. Take the demented, alarm-like riff of "Actress," or the heartbeat-driving "Murderess." We may never know what they could have been without the warbles and extended moments of tape hiss, but they live, for now, as sub-Laurie Anderson art projects. The album does have one almost song in "Aint," and it's heartbreaking. Gordon tells us the possessions she does and doesn't have over its six minutes.

"I've got my hair," she sings, and then she gives a laundry list of things she does indeed count among her arsenal. Head? Check, she has one of those. Brains? Check. Ears? Check. Eyes? Check. Nose? Check. Mouth? Check. Smile? Check. Tongue? Check. Chin? Check. Boobs? Check. Arms? Check. Soul? Check. Sex? Check. Hands? Check. Fingers? Check. Legs? Check. Feet? Check. Toes? Check. Liver? Check. Bladder? Check.

Anyone who dabbled in high school poetry may sense that the word "freedom" is coming next, but the song doesn't fail because it becomes predictable. After all, finding one's footing after a failed relationship is a universal dilemma, and one that will forever make for potent songs—pop and experimental alike. The key word is "songs," and those are lacking here. —**Todd Martens**

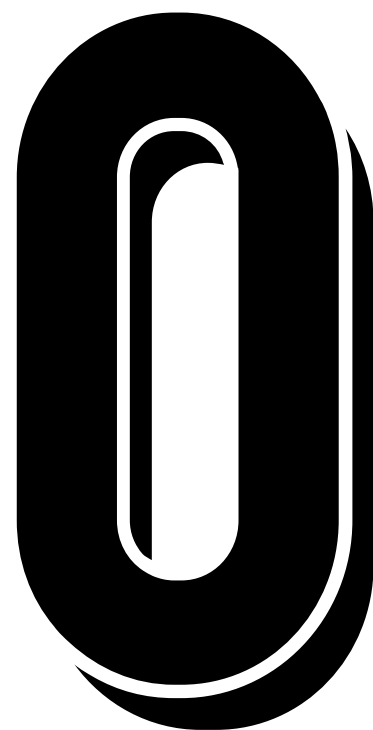


©Photo by Daniel Coston

**Drive-By Truckers***Alabama Ass Whuppin'*

ATO, LP or CD

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ut of print for more than a decade, *Alabama Ass Whuppin'* chronicles the Drive-By Truckers before the group released its 2001 breakthrough *Southern Rock Opera* and long before the collective refined, ever so slightly, its bar-band sound. Raw, ballsy, crude, and imperfect, it's the kind of truthful live album artists don't make anymore—a shit-kicking, warts-and-all set designed to be turned up to maximum volume and enjoyed with shots of cheap whiskey and cut-rate beer. Available for the first time on vinyl, it's restored from the original ½-inch analog tape mixes and bestowed with much-improved cover art by Wes Freed.

When queried about a possible reissue of the 12-song set years ago, singer/guitarist Patterson Hood said it would again see the light of day when the time was right—but that he didn't know when that time would be. Judging from the grinning recollections in his informative essay, he's come to terms with allowing the greater public to witness what one of today's sharpest, smartest, most dependable bands resembled just as the members were deciding to devote themselves full-time to the cause. "It's a document of a period in time that I wouldn't go back to for all the money in the world, but I'm proud of the shows that we played and the songs that we wrote," he writes.

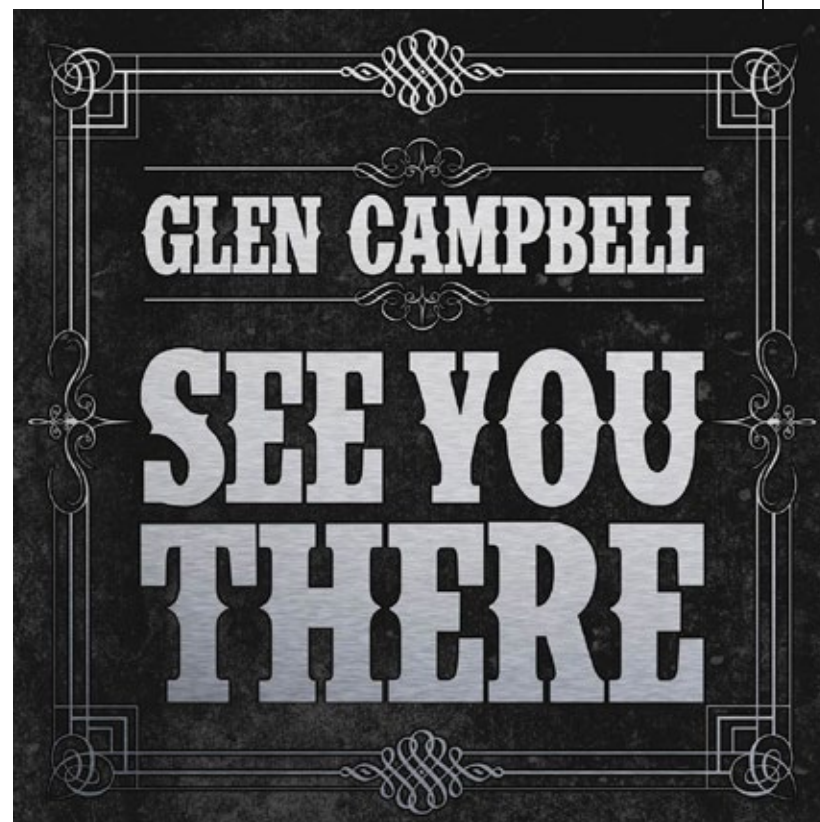
Taking its title from a phrase singer/guitarist Mike Cooley may (or may not) have uttered, *Alabama Ass Whuppin'* was recorded at a handful of Georgia dive bars and small clubs shortly after the quartet released its sophomore album. As such, it's the equivalent of a blurry Polaroid in which the subjects don't remain still. The Truckers were already in transition away from a Southern-fried country/roots act and toward a harder, brash rock n' roll band infused by punk vigor and lit by liquor-fueled energy.

From the opening notes of the damning, distortion-bleeding "Why Henry Drinks," it's apparent the group is playing for its life

and couldn't care less about its knock-off-brand instruments and secondhand amplifiers. From a technical standpoint, Hood, Cooley, and company are leagues better now, but back then, they had a deeper connection to the dead-end-town feelings of "Buttholeville" and vicarious existence of "Steve McQueen" because they were the people in those songs. Ditto the uncredited cover of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Gimme Three Steps," which seems like it's going to fray at any second. The barn-burning rendition of Jim Carroll's "People Who Died" does, in glorious hell-raising fashion.

Hood's prior reservations about *Alabama Ass Whuppin'* are understandable: It isn't representative of the Truckers' past decade-plus and a few tunes, such as "The Avon Lady" and "Margo and Harold," at best loom as curiosity items. Yet "18 Wheels of Love," "Lookout Mountain," and poignant "Love Like This" (the only Cooley-sung track here, another sign of how things have changed) indicate the greatness that lie around the corner. Hearing how the band got there is one helluva ride.

—**Bob Gendron**


Glen Campbell

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It's impossible to listen to *See You There* without thinking about the sad circumstances surrounding its making. Glen Campbell, stricken with Alzheimer's disease, recorded these songs during the same sessions that produced his 2011 release *Ghost On the Canvas*. They are largely revivals of his greatest hits with new arrangements by producers Dave Darling and Dave Kaplan.

Of course, it's worth remembering that Campbell's history is deep and often underrated. Before his solo fame, he was part of the Wrecking Crew, the prominent team of Los Angeles session men that played on a number of major 1960s recordings. Campbell's credits include studio work on the Beach Boys' groundbreaking *Pet Sounds*. Even Carlos Santana used to be in awe of Campbell's guitar virtuosity.

But Campbell's world-class chops took a back seat to his eventual solo hits, some near-mystical epics penned by iconic songwriter Jimmy Webb. Campbell's clear, yearning tenor branded a number of unforgettable singles: the Vietnam War soldier's cry "Galveston"; the exquisite rendering of loneliness via "Wichita Lineman"; John Hartford's portrait of a romantic rambling man on "Gentle On My Mind." They endure.

And they're also some of the songs Campbell revisits here, reworkings that range from ragged to glorious. The album opens with an emotional jolt courtesy of the piercing "Hey Little One," a gorgeous orchestral mix of timpani drum rumble and atmospheric guitar chords. Despite his illness, Campbell's crystalline voice remains striking. It's a heroic performance. Ditto for "Wichita Lineman," a classic of desire and dislocation. With its swooping steel guitar, throaty guitar notes, and Campbell's keening voice, lonely never sounded so good.

(continued)

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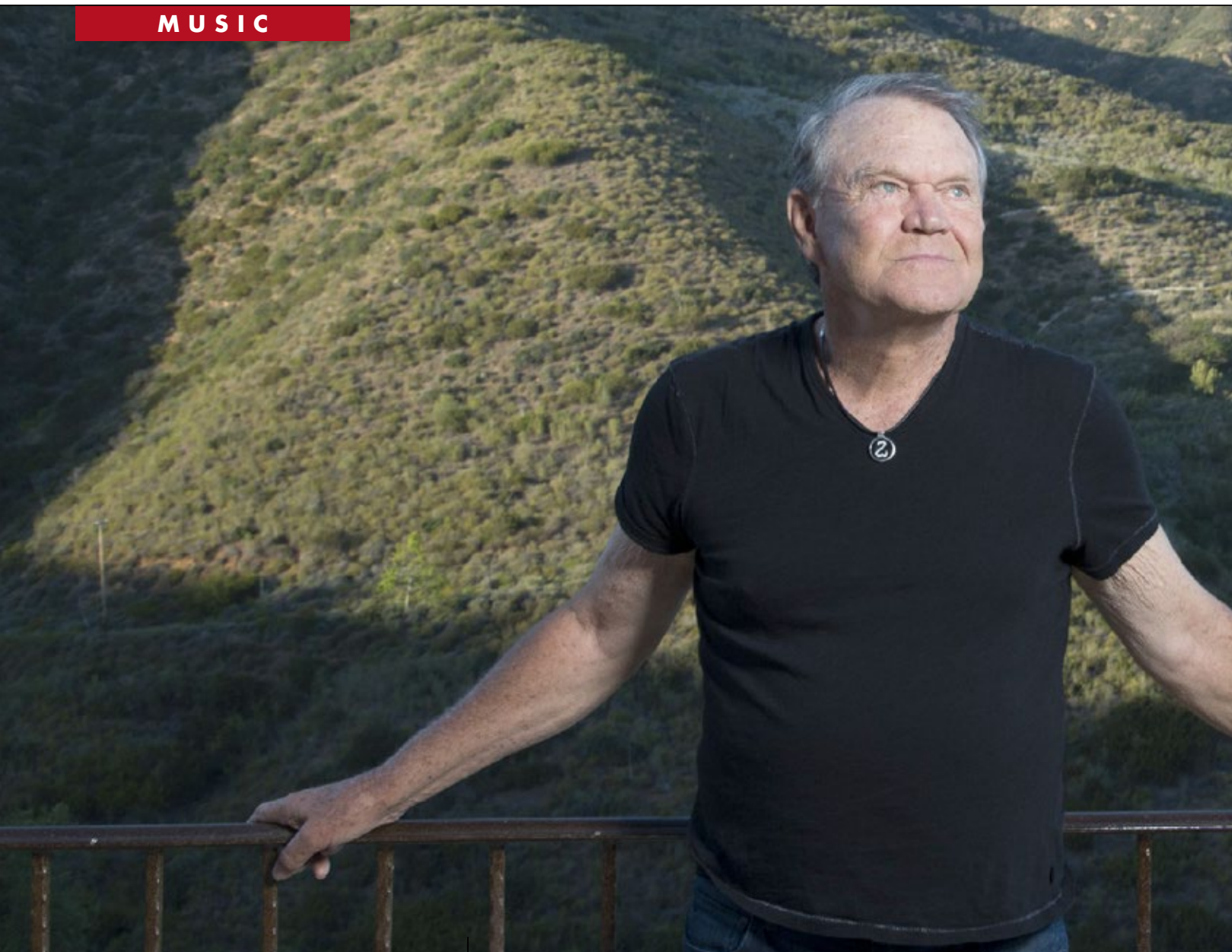
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The same can't be said for the choppy "Gentle On My Mind," with its overly flanged guitars and Campbell's rushed, artless vocal. It makes one long to return to the haunting original. As for "Galveston," it's rendered as an overly busy, complicated stew.

Other winners include a rainy-day version of "Rhinestone Cowboy," effectively stripped down to Campbell's voice and one moodily strummed guitar. "Waiting On the Comin' of My Lord," featuring Jose Hernandez, attains the big, bright feel of 60s AM radio pop by recalling the mariachi horns of Herb Alpert & the Tijuana Brass and the breezy strings of classic Petula Clark songs.

There's also great beauty in the lush wall of sound on "What I Wouldn't Give." Campbell sings "Just close your eyes/I'll see you again." Like the best moments on this album, it feels like a bittersweet send-off. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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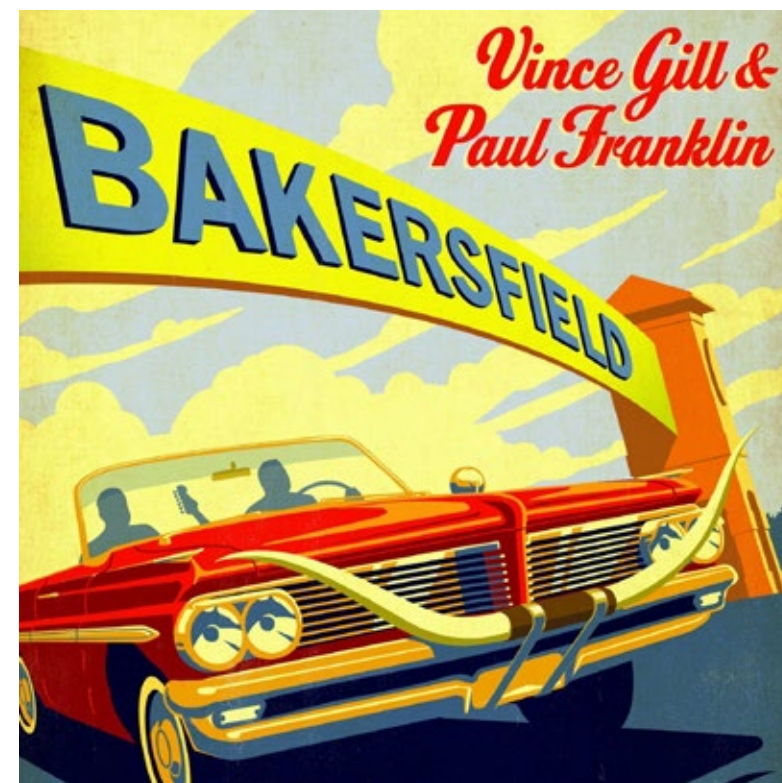
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MUSIC



Vince Gill and Paul Franklin

Bakersfield

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Vince Gill's post-superstar career has been a fresh reinvention. Unchained from the Top Forty, he's freely following his roots music muse. An affable guy with fierce talents, Gill has quietly become a leading conscience for country music in the 21st century.

His recent projects are both fascinating and straight from the heart. He produced Ashley Monroe's acclaimed album *Like a Rose*. He's brought trad-country traditions back into focus as a member of the Time Jumpers. And now, with his new *Bakersfield*, Gill teams with esteemed steel guitarist Paul Franklin for a worthy tribute to titans Merle Haggard and Buck Owens.

This is a musician's musician album, filled with an A-list ensemble of players. At the center are Gill and Franklin, monster pickers with proper egos. They stretch out on solos but never overplay. If you've come looking for guitar wanking, go elsewhere.

The album kicks off with a blistering version of Owens' "Foolin' Around." It's clear from the first note that no one treats this music like a delicate Faberge egg. The sound is a consummate package of hard backbeats, dancing fiddle, walking bass lines, choked steel, and stinging electric guitar. One is reminded that the Fender Telecaster is indeed a revolutionary instrument. While Franklin is an acknowledged steel guitar master and revered veteran session man, Gill gets his due here as an ace axeman in his own right. Between the two, strings are bent, snapped, caressed. It's dazzling and seemingly effortless. Country-guitar geeks will be in heaven.

The duo simultaneously channels and updates the spirit of an era. These songs are visceral renditions, from the muscular two-stepper "He Don't Deserve You Anymore" to the boozy, insinuating "The Bottle Let Me Down." Gill subtly conjures the unique vocal styles of Haggard and Owens. His yelping croon fits snugly into the pocket of Owens' "Together Again." He also inhabits Haggard's ex-con manifesto "Branded Man" with nuance and energy.

A lesser artist would embalm these classics or mangle them beyond recognition. But nothing on *Bakersfield* feels cowed by legend or tries too hard. Gill and Franklin embrace history with equal parts gusto and respect.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

DOES THE CLASH STILL MATTER?

A new box set causes Todd Martens to ponder this vital question—and several others.



The Clash
Sound System
Sony/Legacy, 11CD/1DVD box set



L-R Joe Strummer, Paul Simonon, Topper Headon, Mick Jones

The members of punk rock pioneers the Clash were confronted with a lot of nonsense while they were a band in the late 70s and early 80s. When in 1980 the group released a dub-influenced cut titled “Bankrobber,” a song about growing up the son of a criminal, a review in a prominent U.K. publication took scraggily voiced Joe Strummer to task for not being the son of an actual bank robber. And when the band shifted its political focus from London to the world at large with 1980’s *Sandinista!*, the *NME* quipped, “What do they see when they look in the mirror? Third world guerrillas with quiffs?” Each of these instances is detailed in Marcus Gray’s biography *Last Gang in Town: The Story and Myth of the Clash*.



Of course, those that mix politics and music are often held to a higher standard, as Clash-sampling electronic artist M.I.A. found out in 2010 when the *New York Times* contrasted her desire to rebel with her hunger for truffle fries. Hell, even the Clash viewed the socially conscious with skepticism, criticizing on 1978's rhythmically shifting "(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais" the groups that would turn "rebellion into money."

Sony's new 11-disc, 1-DVD Clash retrospective *Sound System* doesn't set out with the ambition to debunk any myths or tell a straightforward narrative. It gives us all but one of the Clash's albums (only the band-

splintered *Cut the Crap* is missing) and an assortment of outtakes, B-sides, and demos (52 of them in all). Contextually, Sony relies on a \$189 retail price and a hefty, impressively detailed boombox-like crate to tell us that this is important—that the Clash not only still matter, but warrants this treatment.

It would be tired and obvious to point out how un-punk it all seems, especially the inclusion of a cigarette-like poster roll, military dog tags, stickers, and a blank book (blank!) whose cover is adorned with a famed Strummer quote ("The Future is Unwritten"). But going down such a route is as reductive

as those that sought to criticize the Clash's socially conscious ambitions on the basis of the band's purported authenticity rather than the artfulness of its work.

In fact, if one were to attempt to affix any narrative to *Sound System*, it would be one of tragedy. The collection shows us the output of a band that was both blissfully raw and restlessly prolific. But also one that sputtered out while its creativity remained at a high. Diehards will head straight to the outtakes (you already have the albums, after all, and this is clearly aimed at the serious collectors) and marvel at how quickly the Clash improved.

A 1976 rendition of "I'm So Bored With the U.S.A." is cluttered with needless lyrics, including what sounds like Strummer directing some ire toward Boston baseball fans. It's a long way removed from the refined, tempo-shifting guitar fluidity that is the live take on "Stay Free," recorded just two years later. The song is a showcase for Mick Jones' innocence-lost vocals and, along with "Cheapstakes," one of a handful of unexpected live songs found for this project.

Working against *Sound System* archivists is the fact that little in the Clash catalog remains unearthed. In just six years, the Clash cut eight CDs worth of music. The 50-plus scraps here are largely culled not from the band's first two punk rock albums—1977's self-titled debut and 1978's *Give 'Em Enough Rope*—but its later period, when world music and groove-based structures dominated its music. Some of it is, admittedly, a little goofy, such as the retro video-game effects and island drumming of *Combat Rock*-era outtake "The Beautiful People Are Ugly Too." But when a band releases double and triple albums in the span of a few years, one has to know what was left on the studio room floor likely won't be gold.

More important is how *Sound System* illustrates that this is a band that, long before Paul Simon or Vampire Weekend, recognized that music borders should be erased, be it entryways to underground American clubs ("Magnificent Dance") or Jamaican dancehalls ("Rockers Galore on a U.K. Tour"). And this, too, is a band that, long before U2, LCD Soundsystem, or the entirety of 80s new wave, showed us rock n' roll and dance music belonged together (varying mixes of "Rock the Casbah").

The Clash's musical hunger is evident in the footage of the would-have-been 1981 documentary *Clash on Broadway*, in which the group looks down with amazement at New York City beatboxers (and a possibly inebriated Topper Headon doubts his future drumming for the Clash). It's also revealed on a string of previously unreleased tracks, including via the jazzy head-case electronics of an extended edition of "Sean Flynn" and hippy synths of "Idle in Kangaroo Court."

Sure, the Clash shed punk rock (as a sound, that is) rather quickly. Still, as a document of a late-70s movement, the Clash's self-titled debut remains irrefutable. The remastering on the early, no-frills tracks—and indeed, throughout the project—is lively but unobtrusive. Casual listeners won't notice much change, but headphone examination reveals a little more fluidity in Paul Simonon's bass on "Garageland" and a smidge more scruff in Jones' guitars on "Janie Jones," tunes that still hit hard and fast.

So, what about questions of value and relevancy? Completists will grumble about what's missing. For nearly \$200, *Sound System* lacks any reflection of the loving work that went into remastering live albums in 1999 and 2008 (*From Here to Eternity* and *Live at Shea Stadium*, respectively), which illustrate the unwieldy nature of a Strummer live performance. Also, there are odd omissions here and there, such as the more overtly electronic B-side "Mustapha Dance," the slow-dance cover of Motown's "Every Little Bit Hurts," and many of the outtakes found on the 2004 reissue commemorating the 25th anniversary of *London Calling*. (continued)

***Sound System* illustrates that this is a band that, long before Paul Simon or Vampire Weekend, recognized that music borders should be erased, be it entryways to underground American clubs or Jamaican dancehalls.**

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MUSIC



©Photo by Adrian Boot

L-R Joe Strummer, Paul Simonon, Mick Jones

The latter in particular is hard to find, and largely relegated to eBay, where it sometimes fetches more than \$50. There's no excuse for leaving those 21 demos, or 30-minute making-of film, off this set. Forcing the band's most serious fans to go on any sort of scavenger hunt is inexcusable, especially when they're given a blank book (blank!) instead of more songs. Fans will adore what's here, but why not go the extra step and make this a one-stop shop?

If there's a bottom line, it's that the Clash still matters. This conclusion is clear not from some of the box's collected essays (from the likes of studio

technician Tim Young or Clash videographer Don Letts, later a member of Jones' post-Clash band Big Audio Dynamite) or any of the set's extremely brief outtakes of Clash interviews. Rather, such enduring importance becomes evident while viewing the 60-odd-minute DVD of promotional videos and rare live footage that dates back to 1977.

One needn't spend a dime to understand why Clash tunes such as "Bankrobber" culturally polarized audiences. Simply re-watch the video for "Rock the Casbah," once an MTV staple. It was, as director Letts writes, "a half-baked idea," in which

Strummer, Jones, and company were directed to act militant in front of an oil derrick, all while an Arab and a Jew run amok around Texas eating fast food and tossing garbage in fancy pools. Yet, even today this seems daring. Here is a band addressing tension in the Middle East, simply because that is what a band does.

No wonder the Clash was cocky. The *Sound System* DVD has a clip of Headon responding to a question about the Clash's future. "Musically," he said, "we go forever." Not everyone needs the extras here, but it is nice to be reminded of Headon's sentiment now and again. ●

FEATURE

Best Boom for the Buck

Headphones Under \$100

By Rob Johnson

In the world of high-end audio, Benjamin Franklin generally doesn't get you too far—no wonder his lips look pursed in his portrait on the \$100 bill.

There are some exceptions, including the Grado SR80i and the Pioneer SE-A1000 headphones.

Compared to “big iron” hi-fi solutions, a good set of headphones and a good portable source can provide a great deal of musical fulfillment for a fraction of the cost. Plus, unlike 600-watt solid-state monoblocks, a headphone enthusiast has the luxury of taking audio equipment on the road. Not breaking our backs or the bank, we had the opportunity to bring two budget-conscious pairs of headphones to the testing room to see how far \$100 can take a listener in the journey to sonic nirvana.



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FEATURE

Grado SR80i

Like most Grado headphones, the SR80i features an open-back design, which means that the headphone does not contain the sound. For these Grados, the back of the ear cup is perforated plastic. If doing some high-volume jamming on public transit or a plane, users should be mindful that their music will be audible to others. Of course, the listener can also expect external noise to leak in.

The 80i headphones retail for \$99. Grado made several wise choices when designing this model, economizing the production cost and build and focusing on sonic attributes. The adjustable, synthetic leather headband is light and passes the Goldilocks test: Not too tight and not too flimsy; it's just right. For me, the stock foam ear pads, which sit directly against the ears, have a tendency to get warm, uncomfortable and a bit itchy during longer listening sessions. However, cost of production needs to be reduced somewhere and I'd much rather see the shortcut affect the ear pads than the eardrums.

The Grados terminate with a 1/8-inch mini-jack, but they come with a 1/4-inch screw-on adapter. Powering the SR80i headphones with an iPod Classic, a portable ALO Audio RX MKII headphone amp or my Coffman Labs G1-A reference preamp, I find that the sound is extremely good for the money.
(continued)





FEATURE

Grado's SR60i, one step down from the 80i, is another great value headphone at \$79. However, if you can stretch your budget slightly, the 80s prove a worthy step up. I compare the two headphones side by side and find that the 80 offers a slightly different sound profile—one that feels like moving several rows forward at a live performance. Bass is a bit more defined; highs are more revealing and seem a bit more forward in the mix. There's also a slightly better sense of virtual soundstage width and depth. For those who prioritize a more relaxed presentation, the 60i may be a good fit. For those who prefer to feel closer to the action, spend the extra \$20 to get the 80i. If you take good care of them, the minimal additional cost may be the best long-term investment you can make.

At this price point, it's very hard to criticize the sonics of the SR80i. In absolute terms, higher-priced headphones like the Sennheiser HD 650s offer a heftier build and added comfort, along with more lifelike and nuanced musical reproduction, but at five times the price.

Are these the best headphones under \$100? It's a subjective question and depends a lot on a user's sonic preferences and whether an open-back design works best for their listening scenarios. But if you choose to take the leap of faith and bet your money on the SR80i, you will not be disappointed with their sound. *(continued)*

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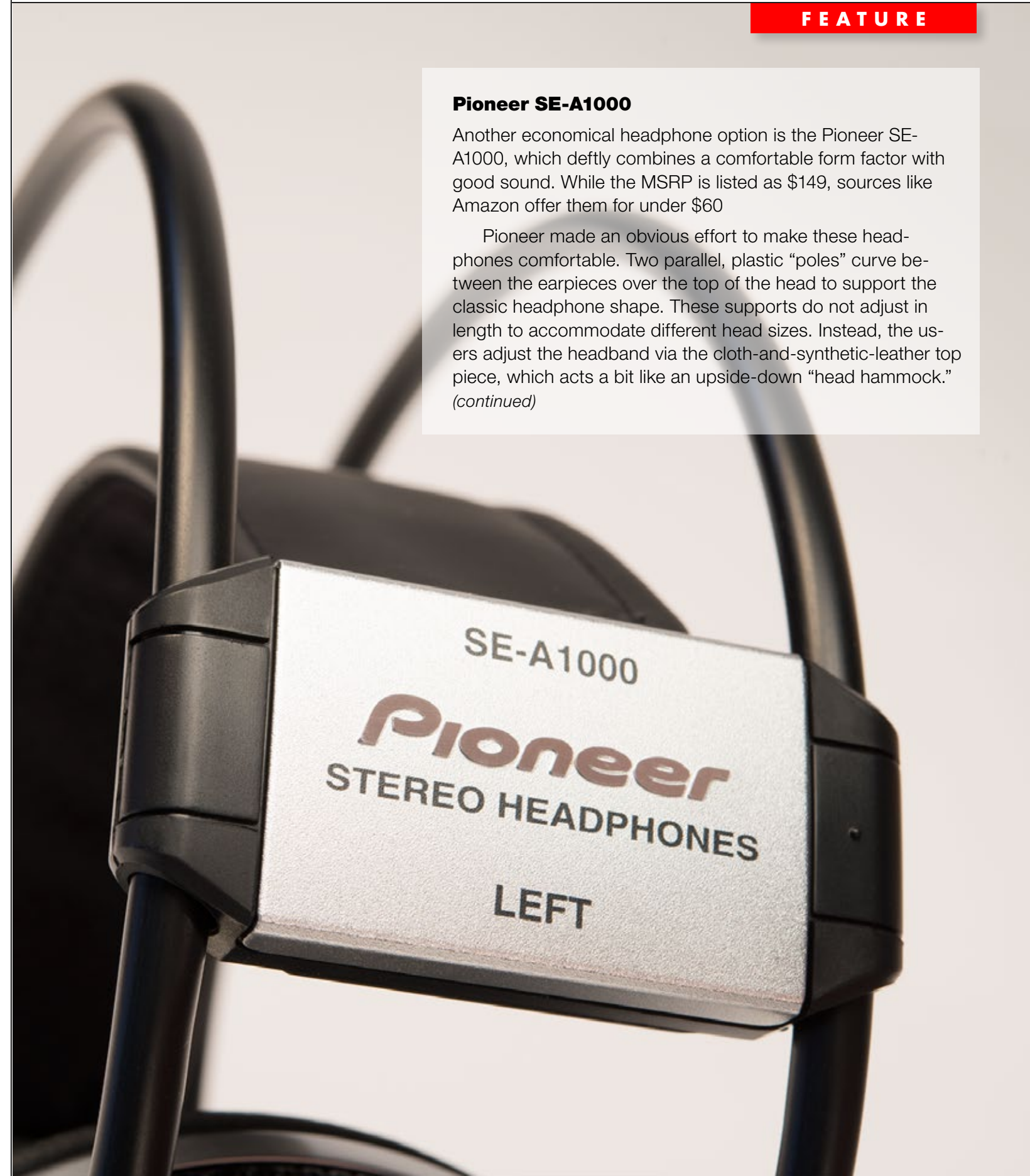
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FEATURE

Pioneer SE-A1000

Another economical headphone option is the Pioneer SE-A1000, which deftly combines a comfortable form factor with good sound. While the MSRP is listed as \$149, sources like Amazon offer them for under \$60

Pioneer made an obvious effort to make these headphones comfortable. Two parallel, plastic "poles" curve between the earpieces over the top of the head to support the classic headphone shape. These supports do not adjust in length to accommodate different head sizes. Instead, the users adjust the headband via the cloth-and-synthetic-leather top piece, which acts a bit like an upside-down "head hammock." *(continued)*



FEATURE

The headphones rest snugly but comfortably with the subtle tightening of elastic under this headband, providing minimal tension against the top of the head. The overall look and feel is a bit plastic—but for a budget headphone, performance is paramount to comfort.

The SE-A1000's cloth-covered ear pads are large and spongy and envelop the ear. The resulting solution proves light and comfortable, even for long listening sessions. While open-backed, the ear cups do a pretty good job keeping outside noise in its place. With a quiet background, a listener can pipe in their favorite music at low levels, or jack up the volume a bit for added punch. For those wishing to take their headphones on a stroll around the city, these ones are a bit large.

In addition to the included carrying pouch and the 1/4-inch adapter, Pioneer gives the extension cable a flexible cloth covering. I find that this sheath helps reduce tangling. The headphones also include an attached Velcro strap to make it easier to fold the cord up neatly when not listening, or when you simply want to shorten the cord temporarily.

These Pioneers produce good sound, as one would expect from a company that has spent so many years in the audio industry. Connecting them directly to an iPod Classic, with loss-

less audio files, provides plenty of juice. From this source, music is generally relaxed and easy on the ears, and it still retains the musical nuances you want to experience with your favorite songs. These headphones are a huge leap beyond the standard iPod ear buds.

When provided more power though an external headphone amp, the Pioneers deliver a bit more aggressive musical voicing. Bass improves with greater presence, but as with all open-back designs, there are limits to the bass punch. Male vocals are especially well rendered and enjoyable. Higher frequencies seem a little more forward and slightly bright to my ears. Especially noticeable at higher volumes, this characteristic can create a bit of stridency and sibilance on some female vocals. But there also can be upsides to that touch of forwardness. Cymbals often provide a meaningful sonic capability test. With a good source, the SE-A1000s do a really nice job of reproducing the strike, ring and ambient decay of cymbals. In this case, the pronounced highs add flavor to the recorded musical experience.

For their capability-versus-expectation value, the Pioneer SE-A1000 headphones have many upsides and present few quibbles. Especially for those who prefer a more forward musical presentation, the SE-A1000s prove themselves very worthy of your audition. ●



FEATURE

PERIPHERALS

Reference headphones

Sennheiser HD 650,
Sony MDR7506

Headphone amplifiers

Coffman Labs G1-A
preamp/headphone
amp, ALO Audio RX MKII
portable headphone amp

Sources

Marantz TT-15 turntable,
Audio Research CD3 MKII
CD player, iPod Classic
(7th generation)

Miscellaneous

Cypher Labs AlgoRhythm
Solo DAC, Running
Springs Audio Haley power
conditioner, Cardas Golden
and Golden Reference/
Mongoose power chords,
Jena Labs interconnects,
Mapleshade Samson rack



Bigger Than Life

A Conversation With Original Sly and the Family Stone
Drummer Greg Errico

By Andy Downing

The late 1960s/early 1970s were a famously tumultuous time in the United States and, as attested by the new career-spanning box set *Higher!* (reviewed here), few bands recorded music that better reflected the era than Sly and the Family Stone. *TONEAudio* contributor Andy Downing recently spoke with the group's original drummer, Greg Errico, about the formation of the band, Sly Stone's steady decline, and the likelihood of any future reunion.

W

hy do you think this music has stood the test of time the way it has?

Great songwriting. Sly's lyrics and stories touched people. Then there's just the magic the group had. It was a strong bond, and that carried over into our performances and recordings. The combination of those things seems to have created this thing that has a life of its own. When the new generation is hearing it, it still connects with them even though they've never seen the group or been part of the marketing and promotion and all that. It's just there. A lot of times we go out and people don't necessarily remember or connect with the name of the group the Family Stone, but you say one of the songs and they go, "Oh yeah!" So they remember the songs. So, yeah, the music still lives and still connects with people.

How did you first come into contact with Sly?

Well, Sly was a DJ on a great radio show back then, so I knew of him. His brother, Freddie, we had a group called the Stone Souls for a little over a year. Sly had made a few swipes at starting a group. I think it was called Sly and the Stoners. It didn't work out, and he was taking another shot at it. So he handpicked everybody. I literally went over to the house for rehearsal one night with the group Freddie and I had, and when I showed up nobody from the group was there. I walked in the room and Sly and Freddie said, "We're going to start something new tonight." They had already talked about this, but I didn't know. That very night everyone showed up and we talked about what we were going to do. Then we rehearsed for about a week and started performing.



©Photo by Stephen Paley

I-r Sly Stone, Cynthia Robinson, Freddie Stone, Rose Stone, Jerry Martini, Larry Graham, Greg Errico

How would you have described Sly in those early days?

Oh, he was just electric, colorful, [and] intelligent. He really connected with people. His charisma really carried over when we got onstage. He was bigger than life.

You were part of a mixed-race, mixed-gender band at a particularly tumultuous time in American history. Did those outside tensions play into the music you were making?

For us, I mean, yeah, you're absolutely right. It was a challenge when we went on the road. There were extra things we had to deal with and were confronted with when traveling around the country.

But as far as the music goes, I think that diversity and that mix brought color and interesting elements that wouldn't ordinarily be in a group at that time. To tell you the truth, at that point and time when all this psychedelic rock is happening, we were doing R&B. Of course, we mixed in heavy influences of rock and roll and psychedelic and jazz.

You mentioned being confronted by some of those outside elements. Is there a particular incident that really stuck with you?

Yeah, right off the top, there were a lot of riots in the big cities and it was literally martial law in some cities.

I remember we were driving through Detroit and we were out of gas so we had to pull off downtown. And we pull off, and we knew there were things going on, but we didn't know of anything in any specific areas. We just needed gas at two or three in the morning so we pulled off. We drive a few blocks and all of a sudden we're surrounded by Army trucks and there might have even been a tank or two. The next thing I know we're out of the car with our hands up against a brick wall on some building on some side street downtown and they have their rifles out pointed at us. It was a tense moment, to say the least.

I thought it was interesting that in the liner notes of this new box set you said of the song "I Get High On You," "You can tell we're experimenting with different stuff, searching for a sound." Do you think there was a particular moment you really found your voice as a group?

I don't know if there was a moment. I think it was an incremental thing. I can remember moments where it was like, 'Okay, we solidified something we were trying to do.' Then it would get to another stage. We brought new elements, and the material was getting better. And these things happened in leaps. *(continued)*

We were experimenting with different things at the time, and some stuff stuck and some stuff didn't.

It seems like you guys essentially created the template for what would become 70s funk when you released "Thank You" in December 1969. Did it feel like you had hit on a new sound?

We were pretty proud of what we were creating. We started the group in December of 1966, and we had done five albums by '71 when I left the group, including the greatest hits, so all that was done in a five-year period. Things were really moved along at an accelerated pace. I was 17 when I started the group, and at that age you're just flying. You're not thinking about anything.

"Stand" really launched the group into the public eye. Could you tell even in the studio you had something special with that song?

Yeah, you could feel the dots were connecting. Every time we went back in the material was getting better and better. We were very confident going into the studio, and we weren't afraid to try or do anything. We had all these great elements, so something had to come out the other end. I mean, we had no idea about the significance and the scope of what we were creating at the time, and what it would end up being and what it would mean in music history.

Can you recall the first time you heard one of your drum breaks sampled by another artist?

You know, that was way later on. I had stopped playing for a while, and I remember listening to the new stuff coming out and going, 'Jesus that sounds like me.' This is in the back of my mind; I'm not actually saying this to anybody. Later on I came to find out it was hundreds of songs, but I didn't know it for years.

Even in the band's heyday Sly was tight-lipped when it came to the media. Did you feel like you really got to know him being around him? Or did he always have his guard up?

In the early days? Oh, we used to hang and go to movies. We bought boats and we'd go to the lake together. He wasn't like that with us. We used to hang.

I read a 1974 Melody Maker interview with him where he said, "I won't ever be predictable," and I have to imagine that was a blessing and a curse for you guys.

Well, you know, yeah [laughs]. In contrast to your last question, I remember when he told us he was going to move to Los Angeles [in late 1969]. We all looked at each other...because we realized it was the beginning of the end. From that point, yeah, there was, well, not a wall, but less and less communication and less and less brotherhood. He moved down there and became a victim of a lot of the wrong things.

What part did you actually play in recording sessions for There's a Riot Goin' On?

Well, with *Riot*, I had left the group and the tracks I'm on were tracks we already had done. For instance, "Thank You for Talkin' to Me Africa," and "Runnin' Away." He did the rest of it upstairs in his home studio in Bel Air, I think it was. I never went down there.

What did you think when you first heard the album then?

Well, when it came out someone brought it by. It was a definite change. It got darker, and it definitely reflected some of the turmoil of the moment. The name is *There's a Riot Goin' On*, so it all made sense. There were no lies there.

Was that a difficult album for you to listen to?

No, I mean, it wasn't difficult. How do I say this? I kind of expected it to be like that. There were no surprises, really. There was still some great songwriting, but, yeah, it was darker than earlier *Family Stone*.

How challenging was it on a personal level to watch Sly's decline and not be able to do anything to stop it?

Very frustrating. That was one of the reasons I left. It was exactly that. I didn't feel like there was anything I could do anymore. It's funny, this week someone just sent me some lost footage from a show we did in 1970. (continued)

No other headphones come close

"I'll be using LCD-2s as my main reference standard against which I'll judge all other headphones."

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©Photo of Greg Errico by Fred Lombardi

I was just watching some of it a little while ago. Someone said it was played on German TV, but I think it was recorded somewhere in London or the UK. The reason I'm bringing this up is because looking at it, I'm looking at Sly and he's having a good time. I'm looking at Freddie, though, and I can see some anger. And I'm looking at me, and I see anger. We're kicking ass, but I can see anger. I can see it in there.

When did you last talk to Sly?

Whew, let's see... It's been a couple years at least. I talk to people

that speak to him, but I haven't spoken to him in quite a while.

Have you completely given up hope of any reunion?

You know, we made a couple attempts, and I don't know how capable... You know, I don't know what to say about that. We went down for Coachella [in 2010]. Do you know anything about that?

Oh yeah, of course.

Have you seen that footage? I spun on my seat [behind my drum kit] and turned around to the camera—and this was

broadcast all over the Internet—and I had tears running down my eyes. It was very difficult to go through that. So what can you say?

The damage has been done and the chemicals have taken a toll. I gave it a shot then, and I got my ass kicked. As long as we're all still alive I guess a miracle could happen, but that's probably what it would take at this point. ●

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MUSIC



Sly and the Family Stone

Higher!

Legacy/Epic, 180g 8LP box set or 4CD box set

When Walt Whitman wrote in “I am large, I contain multitudes,” he could have been talking about Sly Stone, the creative force behind funk/soul pioneers Sly and the Family Stone.

Over the course of his decades-long career, Stone has adopted countless guises: the outgoing showman, the damaged recluse, the king of the dance floor, the spark of the riot, the clear-eyed prophet, and the hazy burnout. All these sides and more can be heard on *Higher!*, a sprawling, four-disc set that attempts to boil more than 13 years of music down to a relatively taught 77 tracks.

Songs appear roughly in chronological order, beginning with 1964’s aptly titled “I Just Learned How to Swim” and running through 1977’s “High,” initially recorded for one of the singer’s solo albums. Because of this structure, the first two discs are dominated by oddities and failed explorations, with Stone’s mixed-race, mixed-gender band hitting on the occasional gem (previously unreleased slow burner “I Know What You Came to Say”) as it attempts to find its footing. Drummer Greg Errico discusses this point in the expansive liner notes, which include a track-by-track synopsis and lengthy essay by Jeff Kallis, the author behind Stone’s only authorized biography.

“This track was recorded during the same time period as ‘Underdog,’ as it has many of the same attributes,” wrote Errico of “Undercat,” a throwaway instrumental that closes the second disc. “It ended up becoming the song ‘Plastic Jim’... You’ll hear the similarities. With most of our songs, they would develop or morph through experimentation...”

While the band’s musical prowess is undeniable in even these early sketches (Larry Graham’s bass playing is both nimble and athletic, while Errico doubles as something of a human breakbeat on funk standouts like “Chicken”), it isn’t until 1968 rolls around that the crew really hits its stride.

Disc three captures this too-short period where Sly and the Family were arguably the biggest hit-makers on the planet, dropping classic singles like “Everyday People,” “I Want to Take You Higher,” and “Somebody’s Watching You” with practiced ease. Even castoffs from the era sound absolutely vital. *(continued)*

The previously unissued instrumental “Feathers,” for one, appears to be constructed from little more than soul horns, some terse guitar, and Errico’s rail-driving drums. Yet it crackles with life and tension. Even better is a series of tracks recorded live during the band’s August 1970 performance at England’s Isle of Wight Festival, highlighted by a monumental version of “Dance to the Music” where it sounds like Stone is trying—and quite possibly succeeding—to raise the dead.

But on the tracks from *Riot* included here (“Family Affair,” “Runnin’ Away”), the frontman, his body and mind ravaged by copious drug use and a growing sense of paranoia, sounds incapable of finding contentment even within.

Few artists so poignantly documented the ways 1960s hippie idealism corroded against the backdrop of the Vietnam War and assassinations of transformative figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. Stone, for his part,

Consider *Higher!* a long-overdue reminder of why Stone still matters, and why he deserved far better than his current standing suggests.

Unfortunately, the band’s time at the top was painfully short-lived. It’s a notion Sly and Co. hinted at on “Somebody’s Watching You,” singing, “Ever stop to think about a downfall/Happens at the end of every line.”

Before the fall, however, Sly Stone managed to pull himself together just long enough to record what stands as his defining album, 1971’s *There’s a Riot Goin’ On*. It remains a difficult piece to absorb—a blast of dark, desperate funk every bit as damaged as the man who created it. On “Stand,” recorded just 12 months prior, Stone sang about finding freedom in one’s mind.

never quite recovered. Even as he managed to record a handful of noteworthy songs (“In Time,” “Frisky”) in the ensuing years, he never recaptured the same manic energy or sense of zeitgeist that defined his work from the late 60s/early 70s. Worse, he currently exists as little more than a cautionary tale, popping up now and again (at the Grammys, onstage at Coachella) to remind us that, yes, he’s still as broken as ever. Consider *Higher!* a long-overdue reminder of why Stone still matters, and why he deserved far better than his current standing suggests. —**Andy Downing**

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CLUB MIX

By Connor Willemsen



Major Lazer

Free The Universe

Mind Enterprises, 2LP or CD

Thomas Wesley Pentz has never seemed content with a single musical style or sound. First garnering recognition and critical acclaim under the name Diplo, his work has delved into dubstep, electro-house, and hip-hop—in addition to ventures and experiments in myriad other genres. From early collaborations with singer M.I.A. to releasing at least 19 mixtapes and three solo albums, his production is as prolific as his taste diverse.

Teaming up with fellow DJ and producer Switch in 2009, Pentz created the crossover dancehall project Major Lazer and released *Guns Don't Kill People... Lasers Do*. The album is sonically dense—driven by fast-paced, pulsating rhythms—and features more than a dozen Jamaican vocalists and contributing producers. Fast-forwarding to 2013, Pentz largely shelved Diplo to dedicate himself to **Major Lazer** full-time. Switch has been replaced by Jillionaire and Walshy Fire.

Free The Universe bristles with a who's who of dancehall artists. Between the group's shakeup and the interceding years between albums, Major Lazer's sound has also morphed to draw from the style of Diplo's electro-house days. Dancehall still permeates the album, but the Jamaican theme is dialed back to highlight danceable beats. Between Pentz's penchant for variety and the abundance of guest vocalists and producers, each track shines with stylistic diversity.

Dubstep producer Flux Pavilion contributes to "Jah No Partial," on which progressive chords build between crashing cymbals and

vocals sampled from dancehall singer Johnny Osborne's "Mr. Marshall." Horn-like tones fluctuate and wobble, but the bass remains firmly in step with the song's rhythm, turning dubstep's signature sound upside-down. Wynter Gordon's sweet, crystalline voice cuts through the hazy bass lines and gently distorted reverb on "Keep Cool" as reggae artist Shaggy lends raspy, flowing rap interludes. The mix is simple, and smartly supports the top-notch vocals with snappy percussion.

Pentz deftly blends contributions from Santigold, Vybz Kartel, Danielle Haim, and Yasmin on "You're No Good." Rumbling bass pulses roll across a soundscape punctuated by handclaps and rattling snare drums. The crackle of worn vinyl is heard deep within the mix, and whether the result of genuine turntable mixing or artificially added, it complements the song's methodically pacing and wistful tone. With seductive crooning by Mystic and decidedly salacious raps by Tyga and 2 Chainz, "Bubble Butt" proves to be the record's most memorable song. Between its cheeky lyrics and catchy sampled

vocals and simple drum lines, the single broke into the *Billboard* Hot 100.

Free The Universe reveals Pentz's musical maturity with finely crafted beats and an impeccably curated portfolio of collaborators. Until he moves onto his next project, there's much to be expected from this innovative group.


Destroid
The Invasion

 Self-released, MP3 download
(iTunes or Beatport)

Long before Skrillex garnered Grammy nods and thrust electronic dance music into mainstream conciseness, Jeff Abel was crafting beats and drops that eventually defined the subgenre of super-heavy dubstep. His work under the moniker Excision has spanned nearly a decade and given rise to numerous successful protégés, including fellow Canadian Datsik. Famous for shoehorning a powerful 100,000-watt outdoor sound system from PK Sound into every venue he visits, Excision plays music intensely driven with percussive beats and deep, tight bass lines.

In 2012, Abel partnered with fellow heavy-dubstep producer Downlink and erstwhile Pendulum drummer KJ Sawka to create Destroid, a supergroup. The collaboration quickly yielded a North American tour and an album, *The Invasion*.

Branching out beyond Destroid's primary members, a menagerie of artists contributes, including Space Laces, Messinian, and EDM veteran Bassnectar.

Despite the diverse lineup, Excision's style permeates the tracks. Compared to X Rated, his last solo work, *The Invasion* turns the energy down with more prominent melodies and calmer transitions between the grinding dubstep blasts. Still, the sound is powerfully uptempo, relentlessly focused on bass lines, and hardly mellifluous. A mosquito-like whine floats atop the pummeling beats and heavy drums of "Activation," making a statement of sonic discord.

Apocalyptic themes have been a focus of Excision's music throughout his career, and spillover into "Wasteland," on which electronically distorted spoken vocals chronicle tales of interstellar doom between clanging cowbell samples and rapidly wobbling bass. "Annihilate" continues the doomsday theme while smoothing the syncopated dubstep pulses with an electro-house rhythm and snappy drums. Wryly serious lyrics contribute to the album's heavy, dark vibe while coming off as comical in their hyperbolic absurdity.

Producer/emcee Messinian lends vocals to "Flip the Switch" as grinding loops of distortion and kick drums lay an energetic foundation. Differing from recent fusion efforts by dubstep artists such as Datsik, the rapping plays second fiddle to Excision's beats and drops, and the track never cedes its status as a festival-worthy banger. "Blast Off" showcases KJ Sawka's talents at a punishing 176 beats per minute while Ajapai and Excision dig deep into the bass.

In the quickly changing world of EDM, *The Invasion* proves to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Destroid's members have managed to integrate KJ Sawka's live drums and electro-house motifs while preserving the brute power and aggression typifying their super-heavy dubstep roots. ●

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SENNHEISER HD 700 HEADPHONES

By Mike Liang

Founded in 1945 as “Laboratorium Wennebostel,” Prof. Dr. Fritz Sennheiser’s namesake company is now known around the world as a leading manufacturer of headphones and professional microphones.

In 2008, Sennheiser flexed its technological muscle with the launch of its flagship HD 800 headphones, which hit the sales floor at a then unheard of \$1,495. Since its introduction, the HD 800s have become one of the world’s most respected headphones among audiophiles; you can’t go to a hi-fi show or a headphone meet without seeing a few pairs in use. Even today, five years later, the HD 800s remain one of the most technologically advanced dynamic-driver headphones going.

**The Feel**

Like with most statement products, knowledge and experience gained usually trickles down to more affordable products in the manufacturer's portfolio. In 2011, the \$999 HD 700s were born. The HD 700s share the eye-catching design of the flagship model—and, at first glance, might be mistaken for it. Both models are unquestionably Sennheiser, with open-back designs and circumaural ear cups with metallic finishes.

The HD 700s retain the HD 800's high level of fit and finish—an ultra-light frame, silicone-treated headband and soft, plush ear pads—which makes them remarkably comfortable for extended listening sessions. And thanks to their large size, the HD 700s will accommodate any size ears. The detachable, dual-entry, silver-plated oxygen-free, four-wire copper cable gives the HD 700s a clean look. Unlike my workhorse HD 650s, which use a proprietary connector, the HD 700s rely on a standard 1/8-inch connector. This easily detachable cord allows for simple upgrades and tidy display for enthusiasts with large collections.

It's worth noting here that the HD 700s take a fair amount of time to break in and sound their best—something even Sennheiser makes a point to address. So don't judge these headphones on what you hear directly out of the box. Hook them up to a source that can be easily placed on repeat and just let them cook for about a week, playing music 24/7 until you sit down for serious listening. *(continued)*

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Naim also designed the audio system for Bentley® automobiles.

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

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

the music.



FEATURE

The major difference between the HD 700s and HD 800s is in the midrange and high-frequency presentation.

Easy to Drive

As I've been using the Lehmannaudio Black Cube Linear headphone amplifier with my HD 800s for a few years with wonderful results, this proved a perfect place to start with my review of the HD 700s. (In fact, Sennheiser originally chose the Black Cube Linear as the official amp to drive the HD 800s at the company's press events when those headphones were launched.)

Of course, compatibility with Sennheiser's own HDVD 800 amp/DAC is top notch. It offers a big, wide soundstage with incredible depth and stereo separation that is not always found with headphones in this class. Listening to Daft Punk's new album, *Random Access Memory*, I am immediately taken by the HD 700's low-frequency response. Bass notes have speed, weight and even punch when the music demands it.

The major difference between the HD 700s and HD 800s is in the midrange and high-frequency presentation. Where the HD 800s can be a bit peaky in their treble response, the HD 700s come across as cleaner and perhaps even slightly more neutral—but this comes at the expense of the ultimate resolution that characterizes the HD 800s. (continued)

FEATURE

Do you order your next BMW 3 Series as a 335i with sport suspension, or do you go all the way to the M3 and get a more purposeful high-performance driving experience, even though it's a bit rougher in town? A similar choice awaits you with the HD 700s.

Where the HD 800's extra resolution will reward those seeking that grail, it will require more care when matching components. The HD 700s still possess enough resolution to allow the listener to hear the difference between amplification, but you may not have to work as hard to find sonic nirvana with the HD 800s.

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The HD 700s pair admirably with any Apple iDevice, though don't expect the same level of clarity that a decent headphone amplifier will provide. When I jump up to the ALO Pan Am (directly from an iPod), the resolution is noticeably increased and the soundstage is dramatically expanded, with more distinct stereo separation. This is particularly trippy when listening to Iron Butterfly's "Soul Experience," from the *Ball* album. The keyboard effects have me spinning around the room, while the drums pan from one side of my head to the other—great stuff.

Equally good results are had with the AlgoRhythm Solo portable amplifier; thanks to its compact nature, this amp makes a great anchor to a traveling system based around the HD 700s.

The question you have to ask yourself is will you choose the easier-to-mate HD 700 or the fussier (but even more highly resolving) HD 800? Only a trip to a local Head-Fi meet or your Sennheiser dealer will help you make the call. Just make sure the HD 700s you audition are fully broken in. Happy listening! ●

Sennheiser HD 700 headphones
MSRP: \$999
www.sennheiser.com



AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

By Jeff Dorgay

Frank Zappa

If you haven't visited Frank Zappa's legendary debut in some time, it's a road trip worth taking. Many of the familiar Zappa-isms are here and in full force, from the heavily layered vocals to the trippy time signature changes and tributes to doo-wop.



Frank Zappa

Freak Out!

Barking Pumpkin Records, 180g 2LP

Beginning the journey with an original Verve pressing reveals slight compression and major midrange/vocal recession, resulting in a flatter-than-flat presentation. By contrast, this Barking Pumpkin remaster, while derived from the original stereo digital safety masters, is tastefully redone. It exceeds the original in every way except one: the extreme high frequencies on the original, all-analog pressing remain cleaner. However, the remaster wins the day in every other regard.

Bringing the level of the midrange up to par shows more sonic trinkets that Zappa always hides slightly below the surface of his recordings—a morsel of percussion here and a splash of xylophone there, along with freaky whispers that are now much easier discern. This classic is a tasty treat.

THE SMITHS

**The Smiths**

The Smiths, Meat Is Murder
HD Tracks, 24/96 download

The Smiths

The Smiths' first two albums were as much an essential part of a record collection in 1985 as they are today, as they influenced a number of pivotal bands after the group's relatively short career came to an end. Revisiting the original slabs of Sire vinyl reveals these distinguished LPs recorded in a relatively lifeless manner. The drums are virtually lost in the background, unable to stand above the din of the mix. Morrissey's signature voice lacks any kind of tonal richness.

HD Tracks thoroughly resuscitates both records in every way, making it much easier to appreciate the craftsmanship on both. Starting with "The Headmaster Ritual," from *Meat is Murder*, Morrissey's singing finally has weight and body. The drums have a life of their own, and Johnny Marr's guitar texture resides slightly to the left of center, now claiming height, depth, and decay—as it should. Returning to the self-titled album, "This Charming Man" is much more beautiful to behold courtesy of Morrissey's lead vocal, now boasting its own space, as it does on the HD version of *Meat is Murder*.

So, give your old Smiths LPs to one of your young friends just discovering music on vinyl and let them spin away. The magic is in the high-resolution digital files this time.

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Devo

Devo

Devo Hardcore: Volume 2
Superior Viaduct, 2LP



In the liner notes to Devo's 1979 release *Duty Now For the Future*, the spud boys from Akron instruct us to "add a third dimension to our 2-D world." Who knew we would have to wait until 2013?

Originally only introduced on CD, *Devo Hardcore: Volume 2*, a compilation of B-sides and unreleased outtakes, sounds like ass in digital. While tons of fun, it completely lacks fidelity of any kind. Calculated move or careless? We may never know.

Thankfully, Devo-tees can now enjoy their favorite band in full, trippy glory. *Devo Hardcore:*

Volume 2 is a sonic masterpiece in comparison to the original, as ironic as that might seem. Where the original seems recorded on a portable cassette recorder from Radio Shack, this vinyl release is full of life. Now you can hear the tape hiss on "Bamboo Bimbo," as well as the clever fretwork on the guitar. Mark Mothersbaugh's madcap vocals mix with maniacal synth riffs and bounce all over the soundstage, creating psychedelia in ways that the original can't muster.

There's more detail everywhere, but the biggest improvement is in the guitars. Whether the increased twanginess, in

"Itchy Goo," or the additional layers available on "Fountain of Filth," it helps the listener further distill Devo's zeitgeist. And the early rendition of "Workin in a Coal Mine" is positively precious, foreshadowing what would come much later on *Total Devo*.

The pressings are flat, surfaces quiet, and album art nicely reproduced. How could you ask for more? If you love Devo, grab this now, as *Volume 1* is already out of print. ●

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BEER SNOB

By Bob Gendron

Craft Beer in Cans

Welcome to the Future?

For years, beer in cans seemed the equivalent of wine in boxes or the cassette tape. No craft brewer dared put its product in the same aluminum containers associated with mainstream suds and, worse, discount swill keyed and chugged by high school partiers in parks, parking lots, and basements. Besides, who wanted to risk spoiling their beer with the almost-inevitable metallic taste?

But times changed, technology improved, and breweries from coast to coast are embracing cans as a delivery mechanism. Bottles still dominate and, with rare exception, remain the preferred method. Yet whereas the presence of cans once made shopping easy—avoid the pop-top, gravitate toward the bottle top—drinkers can no longer afford to be automatically dismissive. And the reasons have nothing to do with nostalgia, hipster irony, or transparent marketing tactics (hello, Miller Lite Punch-Top Can).



Some brewers, including Grand Rapids' outstanding Brewery Vivant, argue cans make their beverages taste better. "Cans provide better protection from flavor-degenerating oxygen and hop flavor-robbing sunlight," read each of the Michigan organization's cans. "This is the best package we can provide to bring our beer to you, tasting the way the brewer intended it. Enjoy."

Brewery Vivant cites another equally good reason for avoiding glass. Due to their lighter weight and up-cycling potential, as well as their composition (more recycled content) and easier manufacturing process (they require less energy and take up less of a footprint than a bottling line), cans are greener. As most forward-thinking microbreweries strive for sustainability, they likely represent the future.

Cans also provide one more advantage: Akin to a vinyl album cover, their canvas can accommodate more artwork, provided the brewer is creatively inclined. The three beers included in this edition of Beer Snob showcase such potential—and reveal how tasty and aromatic beer in cans can be when poured into proper stemware. Bottle snobs, prepare to be converted. *(continued)*

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TONE STYLE

8-Bit Pale Ale

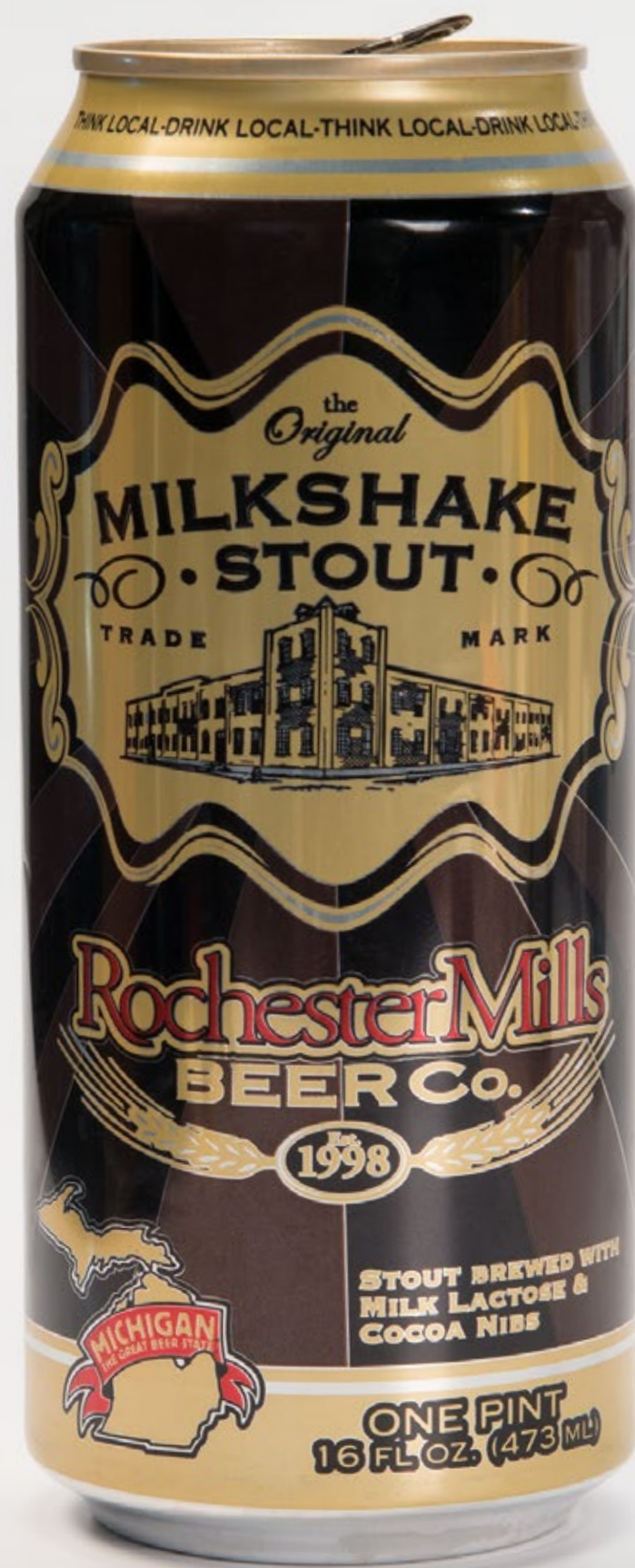
Tallgrass Brewing Co.
Manhattan, Kansas

Tallgrass' 8-Bit Pale Ale is one of the few beers that could get by on looks alone. No, not how it looks in a glass but rather how it's presented in that retro-80s can, complete with both a faux Pac Man whose tongue is licking his chops and explosion clouds that mimic those of countless Atari games that dominated Aladdin's Castle when Michael Jackson's *Thriller* ruled the universe and Russia served as the free world's biggest worry. The can's visual designers—as well as the writers, for “Hop Rocketed Pale Ale” smacks of originality—surely misspent countless hours of their youth in front of game consoles.

It might not be as much fun, but 8-Bit would go down just as smoothly without the clever packaging. This is a thirst-quenching pale ale, completely deserving of its cool, attention-getting vessel. It pours with the hazy straw-orange color of a sunrise on a hot summer day in the city, giving way to a one-finger white head and subtle lacing. A deep in-hale detects scents of pineapple, orange peel, lemongrass, and malt. The latter characteristic informs the medium body. 8-Bit possesses a pleasing earthiness, with the advertised “galaxy hops” suggesting orange, grapefruit, and associated citrus.

Connoisseurs enamored with the West Coast's hop-is-everything trend—in which brewers seemingly compete to out-hop each other's IPAs—should note Tallgrass stays true to the traditional definition of a pale ale. 8-Bit isn't designed to blow your tongue off. Rather, the mouthfeel is balanced and primarily light, but not so thin as to give the impression of watered-down weakness. Balance is key. And Tallgrass nails it, from presentation to sipping ease to finish, with the satisfying equivalent of getting a free bonus life in Pac Man. Let the games continue.





The Original Milkshake Stout

Rochester Mills Beer Co.
Rochester, Michigan

Naming a beer the Original Milkshake Stout sets one up for serious expectations. Dessert fiends and ice-cream fanatics take their dairy seriously, and can quickly point out the differences between a real milkshake and artificiality of the more commonplace shake. Besides, milkshakes retain a special place in most peoples' hearts no matter their age. Strawberry, vanilla, or chocolate, they are a happy link to childhood, veritable reminders of nights spent at grandma's house and rewards given for learning how to cooperate while playing organized sports as a kid. Their innocent connotations largely remain unsullied.

Clearly, somebody at Rochester Mills Beer Co. gets the connection. And they also get the concept. The Original Milkshake Stout doesn't disappoint. Wisely, it lacks the sweetness of a dessert and steers clear of trying to replicate the exact taste of its name-sake while coming close enough to justify its name. Made with four different malts, a low hop content, and lactose (milk sugar), the beer pours dark brown and looks creamy to the naked eye. Generous lacing, a sediment-free appearance, and alluring smells of roasted malt, chocolate, and yes, milkshake, add to the experience.

Rochester Mills credits the region's glacial water supply for the beer's smoothness and taste, notably consistent and infused with medium-roast coffee, tree nut, cocoa, and faint mineral notes. Like many stouts, allowing the drink to warm for a few minutes enhances the flavors and silkiness. First-timers might be slightly put-off by the slight albeit undeniable metallic presence. They might long to find this one on draught.

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TONE STYLE

Contemplation Ale

Brewery Vivant
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Word to the wise: If given the chance, sample anything stamped with Brewery Vivant's name and rooster logo. Inspired by the micro-breweries prevalent in Southern Belgium and Northern France, the locally focused company loves to experiment and pair its offerings with food. Few, if any, North American breweries are currently releasing Belgian-style selections as creative and enjoyable as Vivant. (Oh, and for those interested in the brewer's defense of cans, visit breweryvivant.com/index.php/the-beer/the-cans.)

Brewery Vivant offers four year-round beers, including the superb Big Red Coq, a Belgo-American red ale pregnant with citrus flavors and defined by amazing drinkability. Yet the brewery's seasonal offerings further demonstrate its ongoing imagination. While many are available only at the actual brewery (housed in an old chapel), several get canned.

Made with Michigan-harvested honey and Michigan-grown hops, Contemplation belongs near the top of any best summer beer lists. It isn't designed to compete with the heaviest hitters, and by no means is Vivant's finest beer. But when the weather is warm, sticky, and sunny, Contemplation comes on like a gentle breeze. With honey present in the amber color, modest breadly aroma, and overall taste, the beer contains a number of subtleties. Pepper, spice, fruit, and sugar tingle the nose. Enhanced complexities thrill the palette, with a tame sweetness, herbal tones, and floral aspects complementing a dry finish. Medium-light in makeup, Contemplation claims a low carbonation and smoothness that suggest having just one isn't enough. ●





Almost a DSLR Canon's EOS M

\$599 (with 18-55mm lens) www.canonusa.com

We've been using Canon's compact G-series digital cameras in succession since the G9, each one making incremental gains in performance over the last, both in terms of image capture and image processing. The big jump came with the G1 X, which featured a much larger image sensor (APS-C; 22.3 x 14.9mm), giving that camera an edge in low-light situations, capturing images that rival many DSLRs.

The EOS M builds on this success, combining the high quality of the G1 X sensor, with the ability to change lenses. Currently there are only two lenses available in the EOS M stable: a 22mm f2 lens (about 35mm equivalent with full frame sensor) and an 18-55mm f3.5-5.6 zoom. Though MSRP on this combination is \$599, it can be had for about \$340 online, making this an incredible bargain.



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TONE STYLE



18 megapixel power

Pixels aren't everything, but in the case of the EOS M, a sensor with larger pixels than the rest of the pack makes for high ISO/low noise images, allowing much cleaner photos in low light situations than the comparably priced point-and-shoot cameras at your disposal. Thanks to great face recognition software and the sensor from the G1 X, shooting at ISO 1600 and up is now a breeze, making this the perfect camera to sneak into your favorite concert, where "professional" cameras are not allowed.

Average to high light level results are even better – pictures taken with the EOS M compare favorably, almost identically, to identical images captured with the Canon EOS 7D DSLR. Those using the EOS system can mount their full complement of EOS lenses with a convenient adaptor (\$199) and retain full auto focus and image stabilization, making the EOS M an ideal backup body. Mounting a 70-200mm f2.8D lens yields crisp results with no lack of functionality.

Highlights and shadows are clean and noise-free at all but the

highest ISO rating. As for composition, the EOS M's three-inch viewing screen is easy to compose with, even in fairly bright light. As with every other compact camera, this is perhaps the only area where the EOS M falls down in comparison to a DSLR, as looking through the actual viewfinder in bright light is still the easiest way to focus a camera.

Those needing more viewing area can plug in an external HD monitor via the HDMI port, as you would with one of the higher-end EOS DSLR bodies. *(continued)*

tone style

Best of all, the EOS M allows you focusing and composition in real time, making this camera incredibly easy to use in a studio situation, especially with manual focus engaged.

Smashing ergonomics

Legacy G-series users will instantly feel at home, yet will notice the stripped-down feel of this camera in comparison. Rather than having most of the buttons on the outside of the camera, nearly everything is menu driven on the EOS M, making for a sleeker camera.

Fully automatic mode delivers great pictures, yet the EOS M allows full manual control of everything for the advanced photographer who desires it. Full HD video (1080 x 1920 pixels) is only a button click away and again, the results closely resemble that of an EOS 7D. Images are captured via SD cards, and if you plan on capturing a lot of HD video, purchase the fastest data transfer card you can find.

Taking advantage of Servo AF mode, the EOS M can capture photos at a rate of just under two frames per second, so it may not be the best camera for covering a Formula One race – but it should be more than adequate for the next birthday party or soccer match. And remember, some of the world's best photographers shot without motorized assist, so up your game accordingly...

Almost...

So whether you'd like a compact camera that will work in tandem with your DSLR, or a high-performance camera that can take advantage of a wide range of lenses, the Canon EOS M is worthy of the moniker.



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tone style



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Maxboost Atomic Air External Battery and Case for iPhone 5

\$99.95 www.amazon.com



First the good news: the Maxboost significantly outperforms its published spec of doubling the battery life of an iPhone 5, it almost triples it. And the integral hard case barely adds any weight or girth to the iPhone's sleekness. But now the bad news: reception is cut by about 30% in weak signal areas, netting you additional hours of dropped calls. Nice.

However, if you live in fairly strong signal areas, and take advantage of LTE, use the GPS dependent apps a lot or just have a motor mouth, this device will make your life better.

Product: I22 Integrated Amplifier



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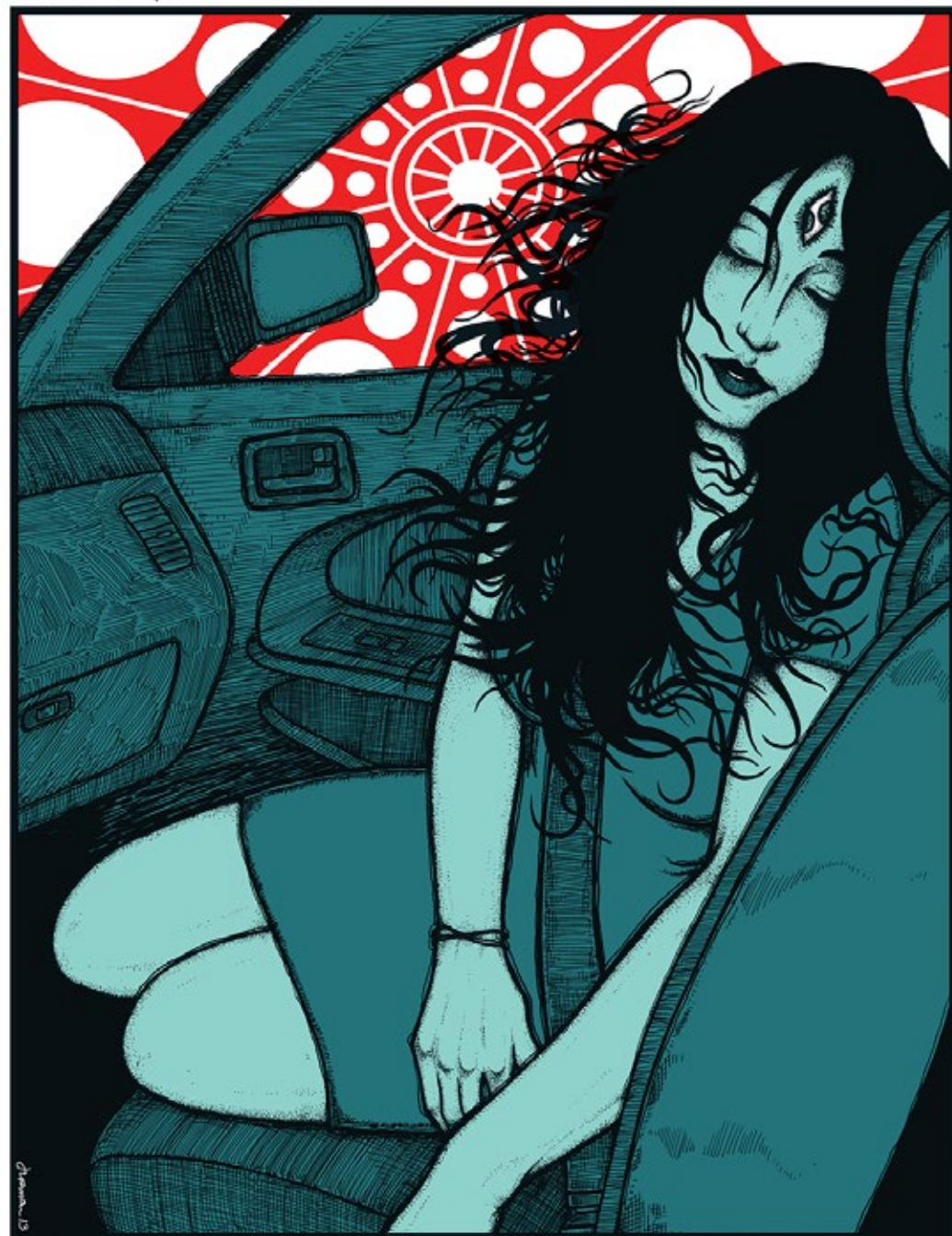
Jermaine Rogers

A Modern-Day Art Shaman
with a Cult Following

By Kristin Bauer



This Cool night air is Curious...



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Jermaine Rogers is a no-nonsense hustler of an artist, with a pure love of music and an impressive portfolio that has been decades in the making—and still grows daily. After inviting him to grace the cover of *TONEAudio* with his art, I chatted with Rogers at length about his background, ethos, process and what it all means (or doesn't mean) in the grand scheme of things.

"Your artwork is the one place where you don't run," says Rogers, who has brazenly pursued his career amidst many twists, turns and changes in the business of poster art. Having worked with bands like Radiohead, Ween, Deftones, Built to Spill, Stone Temple Pilots and many countless others, he is indeed a master of his craft.

Born and raised in Houston, where he has always kept his roots in some form, Rogers originates from one of the triangle of Texas cities that has spawned major poster artists over the last 50 years. He grew up with a natural love of art and a distinct inclination for drawing, and still recalls his first discovery of the magical genre of poster art.

"Right about the time I was 17, I started seeing [Frank] Kozik's stuff everywhere," Rogers recalls. "I still have this old flyer of his I pulled off the wall and I kept it for like 25 years. It was like walking through a foreign country and hearing only foreign language and then all of a sudden you hear someone speaking your language—that's how it was when I saw that first Kozik piece." Several years later, at the age of 24, Rogers quit his job working at a local museum to give his love of making poster art the full-time attention he knew it deserved. *(continued)*

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FEATURE

Looking back, he knows it was the right place and the right time. Around 1996, by the time the Internet had brought all the distant corners of the country together, Rogers discovered that there were only about 10 artists in his genre and field nationwide.

"You had myself in Houston, Emek over in LA, Justin Hampton in Seattle, Mark Arminski up in Detroit and Jeff Wood down in Georgia. It was this small group of people." This revelation for Rogers and the other artists led them to band together and then, with the creation of gigposters.com, poster art fan bases began to grow exponentially.

"Nobody was doing it at that time for the money," he says. "They were doing it because they wanted to—there was nothing else to gain." Rogers has always had a very instinctual approach to the marketing and commerce of his art. With the advent of the Internet and all the changes that ensued, he always pushed to keep ahead of the curve to ride out the traps of the "suit and tie" aspect of the industry.

In 2002, Rogers had the idea of doing poster series for band tours, making a completely unique poster for every city on the tour—an idea that changed the poster industry. "I pitched the idea to Emek and Justin Hampton and we all kind of knew the Queens of the Stone Age. I knew [the band's founder Josh] Homme back from some Kyuss stuff and Justin had a direct line into him, too. It was the perfect storm. (continued)



FEATURE

We signed a deal to do a poster series for the American tour of their upcoming album, *Songs for the Deaf*. It was the hottest album that summer and a lot of people took notice. It was the first sustained every-date-of-a-leg-of-a-tour poster series. [There were] 30 dates; we each cranked out 10 posters. Now that's a sort of a model that [artists] use."

Perhaps one of the most impressive things about Rogers is how he has managed to keep his finger on the pulse of music-art marketing, while at the same time remaining totally down to earth and preserving the fluid passion for his artwork. With so many artistic projects always in the works, it's easy to assume that he has a militant and refined creative process that he goes by, but to this Rogers says, "The process for me is no process."

He elaborates, "I tried to have a process early on, 'cause I thought that's what you do. But then I started to realize the process kills everything—at least for me. I don't want a process because the art should just come out. I did a poster for Soundgarden years ago, where I drew Jesus Christ and the Devil shaking hands; that [idea] was an instantaneous thing." Channeling ideas that come naturally from within and strike a chord with the framework through which he views the world, Rogers believes his role as an artist surpasses that of a tradesman.

"Alex Grey said once that the artist is the modern-day shaman, which is absolutely true," he says. As a modern-day shaman, Rogers believes that all an artist has to do is find his or her tribe. "Artists need to figure out who they're talking to," he says, "And if you don't know who those people are, look at yourself. (continued)"



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That's who you're talking to—and if you find them, they will carry you because you're one of them."

Rogers aims to stay true to his many visions, while always synchronizing to the vibe of the band he is working with. "I'm not going to do the same thing for Tori Amos that I'm going to do for Tool. I used to get a lot of static from other artists because early in my career I would do these things that had nothing to do with the bands—like I'd do these big crazy bears; I've been doing that shit since I was a teenager. It has nothing to do with the band. It's my job to advertise the band and, as artists, we're supposed to get away with as much shit as we can," he says. "If I can make a personal statement and get away with it—that's why I love Kozik, 'cause he just doesn't give a shit. He would do the design and it would have nothing to do with the band. But it fits the vibe."

And capturing the vibe while polishing his very identifiable line work and styles over the years has earned him his following. Rogers regularly releases limited-edition posters, including one he did this past spring for new series of Deftones prints. Within minutes of that release going live, Rogers' website got so much traffic that the server locked up and he sold out of some 200 prints. In a true testament of art imitating life (or vice versa), Rogers' poster prints have become just as hot in terms of demand as the tickets to the actual concerts themselves.

(continued)



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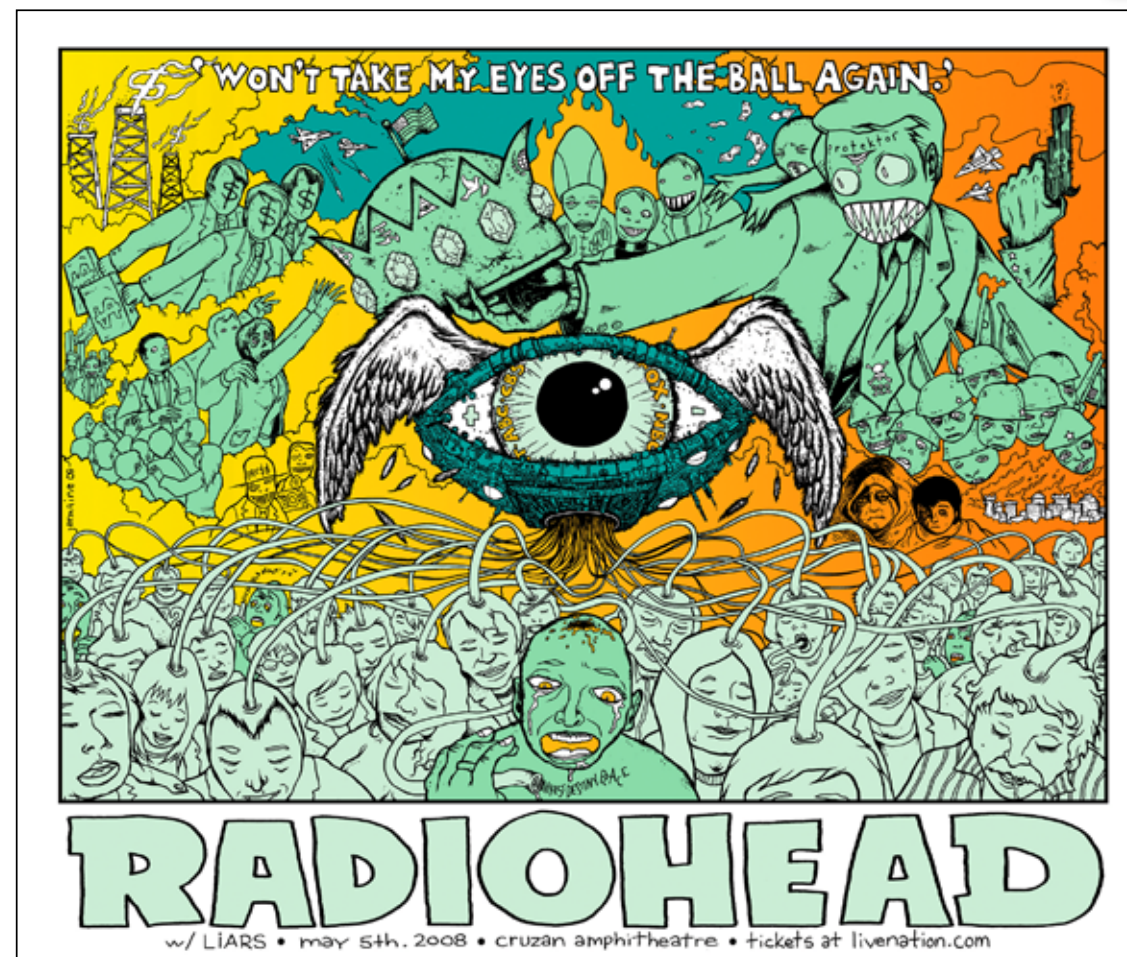
"Harry and Mat, IMO this arm is a serious game changer!"

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-Anthony H. Cordesman



Similarly to when bands get mainstream attention and their possessive fans from early on call them sellouts for taking the next level of opportunity, Rogers has caught his fair share of flak in the poster-art industry. "The first time I did a poster for a big band I got called a sellout," he recalls "And I'm like, you know what? I had my years of eating hotdog buns and Vienna sausages, and after a while you think to yourself, 'If this is what I do, I am going to try and put my art in front of as many people as possible.'"

He started out small and local with a lot of bands that were on their first tour. For example, before Radiohead was the Radiohead we know now and was just a little band from England, Rogers did a poster for their first tour of *The Bends*. Some of his most memorable poster art was done

for Radiohead, and his recent series of posters for the Deftones marked 18 years of doing poster art for them. And in that time, while Radiohead and the Deftones have amassed stable fan bases, Rogers has built his own. He also runs his own business selling his art and manages his own releases. He continues to work with bands he likes and respects, and has come to be an iconic and highly regarded poster artist.

At the end of the day, Rogers is most concerned about his integrity and eliciting thoughts and feelings with his work. "My goal is always to make stuff," he says. "I don't want people to be apathetic; I prefer outright hatred to apathy. I try to kind of steer my career that way." ●

www.jermainerogers.com

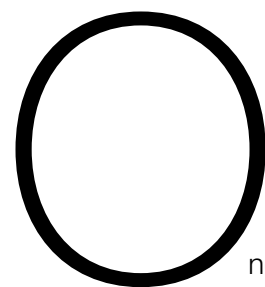
JAZZ & BLUES

By Jim Macnie



Fred Hersch and Julian Lage

Free Flying
Palmetto, CD



One of the first records that secured my love of jazz was Jim Hall & Bill Evans' *Undercurrent*, a 1962 guitar-piano duet in which every note is insightfully placed and the rapport deepens as the interplay rolls along. It's the album I have on my mind while absorbing the music of *Free Flying*.

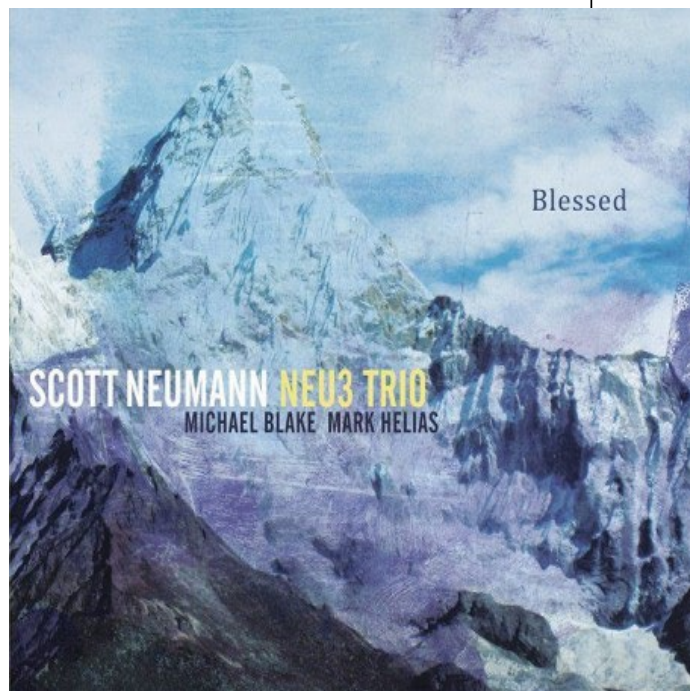


©Photo of Fred Hersch by Vincent Soye

There have been other fetching guitar-piano sessions since: Pat Metheny and Brad Mehldau waxed a beaut, and Joe Morris' romp with Matthew Shipp should be searched out by any fan. But this is a date that just might make the subgenre's short list, an exchange where communication and poise conspire to create true brilliance.

Pianist Hersch tips the hat to Hall on "Stealthiness," a piece that overtly echoes the counterpoint that marks *Undercurrent* (and its mate, *Intermodulation*). In the press notes, 25-year-old guitarist Lage says that part of his goal for this live date was to "oppose" the lines his 57-year-old partner had just played. He goes about it in a captivating way. Whether waxing fluid, or dropping a series of jagged zigzags, the flurry of complementary gambits doesn't stop. Hersch, a modern piano master whose mainstream parlance is often peppered with leftie lingo, pushes boundaries as diligently as he genuflects to melody. The designs he steadily offers his partner are inviting and provocative.

Fireworks open the disc. "Song Without Words" seems stately, but there's a tempest in the fugue-like approach. A jaunty spin on Sam Rivers' "Beatrice" lets each player demonstrate some flash as well. By the time "Monk's Dream" closes the set, the dynamics have been established. Chemistry is paramount, and these guys finish each other's sentences like an old married couple.


Scott Neumann Neu3 Trio
Blessed

Origin, CD

Sometimes success is a byproduct of simple chemistry. The members of drummer Scott Neumann's Neu3 Trio don't boast the largest profiles in jazz. Neither do they arrive with lofty concepts about the way the music should change. Indeed, *Blessed* makes its mark by betting the farm on two of jazz's bedrock elements: grace and rigor.

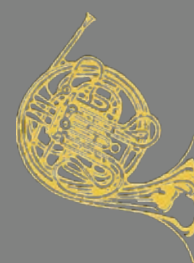
Neumann enlists saxophonist Michael Blake and bassist Mark Helias for this date, and the loose-limbed trio seems juiced by the possibilities of freedom while nodding to the guideposts of composition. Which means these New Yorkers grab a handful of blowing vehicles penned by the leader and squeeze them in all sorts of ways until something valuable emerges. That doesn't take long. While there's plenty of leash given to each soloist, the eloquence of their group interaction looms large. This music isn't overly preened, but the cohesion is remarkable. Everything—from the momentary eruptions to the nuanced fades—feels natural. It's remarkable when a band's teamwork is an album's defining trait.

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MUSIC



Blake's horn shines throughout. He's a freebop kingpin and an expert on the subtleties of trio dynamics (check last year's *Union Square* with Ben Allison and Rudy Royston). Here, his game is all about balance. Low-register purring, pithy squalls, thoughtful long tone; he rides the mercurial grooves presented by Helias and Neumann with a wealth of good ideas. A nod to Dewey Redman's buzzy blues growl starts Roswell Rudd's "Keep Your Heart Right," and as the three players nudge each other into different directions, Blake proves a slow simmer can be as impressive as a vigorous boil.

Along the way, Helias makes a case for agility. His own Open Loose group works a similar territory as this band, and the pliability of his instrument becomes more and more articulate with each year. Neumann seems to know exactly how to tickle these guys. Whether feathering around or nudging the action forward, he makes a measured approach seem sage. Congrats to him for rounding up a crew that makes deep swing and personalized approaches carry the day. ●



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\$20,900 www.pliniusaudio.nzld.com

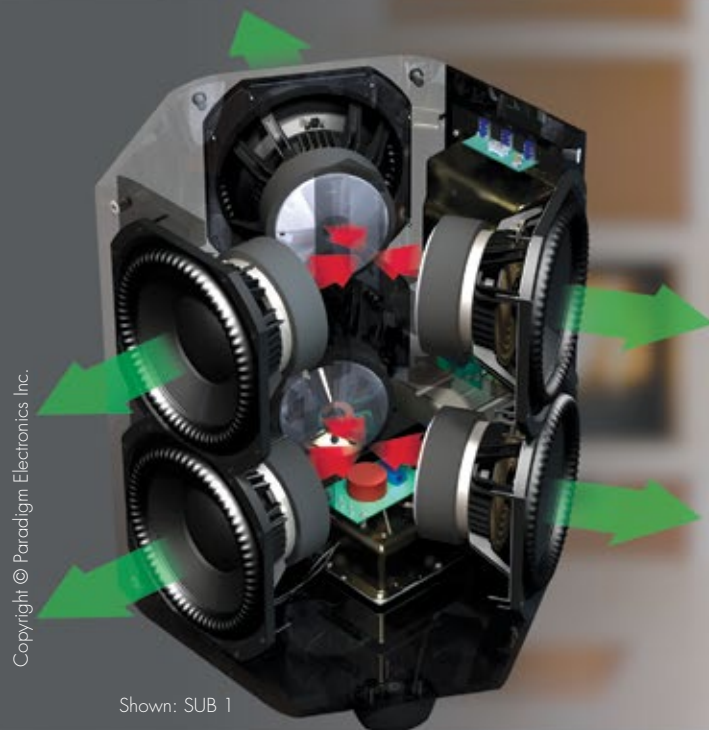
Plinius' flagship amplifier can be used as a 300 watt per channel stereo amplifier, or if that is just not enough power, can be converted into a 1000 watt mono amplifier with a flick of the conveniently placed switch on the rear panel.

Either way, the sound is glorious, and compared to some of the top amplifiers we've auditioned lately, this one is truly a bargain for what it delivers. Read about it shortly on online.

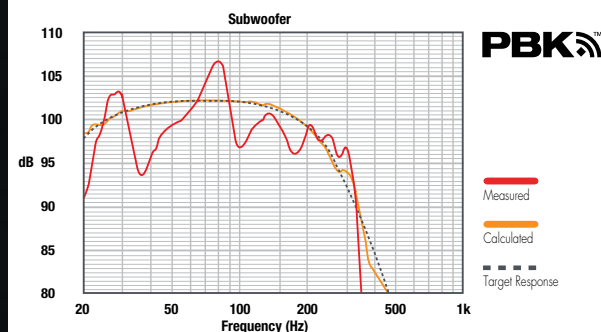
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Shown: SUB 1



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— Chris Martens, AV Guide

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



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www.paradigm.com

PREVIEW



Naim UnitiQute 2 Integrated Amplifier/DAC

\$2,100 www.naimaudio.com

Carrying on the success of the initial UnitiQute, which we reviewed back in Issue 29, the Qute 2 has more power and increased capabilities, yet remains very close in price to the original, introduced three years ago.

This minute form factor, reminiscent of the original Naim Nait integrated amplifiers, packs a 50 watt per channel amplifier, FM tuner, DAC (with Apple certification, so you can get the digital bitstream from your iPod for the best sound) and a music streamer all under the hood. Cute indeed.

Focal Maestro Utopia

\$60,000/pair www.focal.com

Two steps down from the flagship Grande Utopia EM, the Maestro forgoes the EM woofer technology for a Utopia monitor that is somewhat easier on the back and the wallet, yet lacks none of Focal's award-winning technology.

A three-and-a-half-way design, the Maestro retails a similar form factor and uses the identical beryllium tweeter that graces the rest of the Utopia speakers and woofers made from Focal's proprietary W-cone material. Thanks to a 93dB sensitivity rating, even a small, yet high-quality power amplifier will produce near concert levels.



PREVIEW



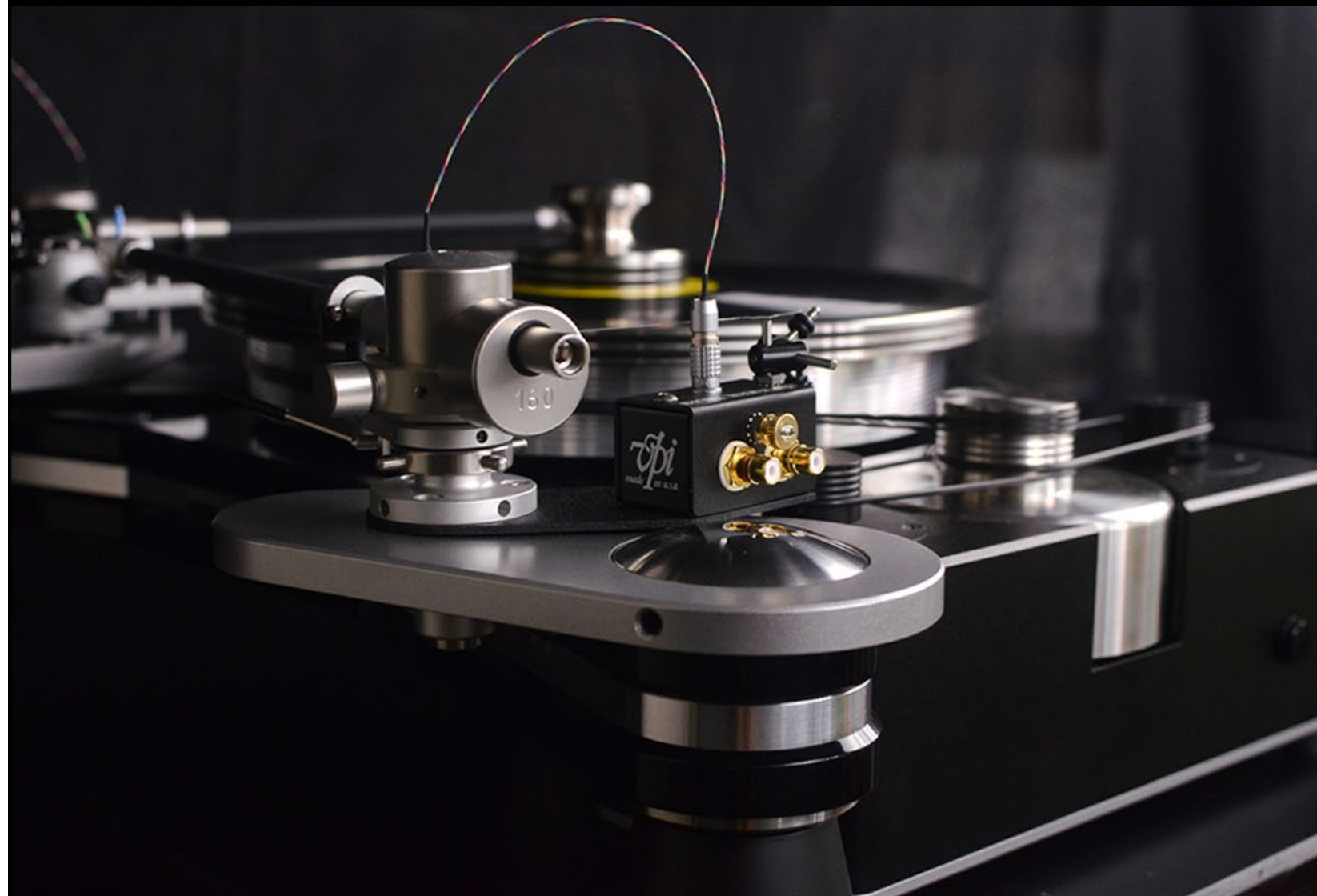
Sennheiser HDVD 800 Headphone Amplifier/DAC

\$2,195 www.sennheiser.com

Who better than Sennheiser to get the best sound out of their legendary headphones? This sleek, solid-state design, with its onboard DAC (featuring 4 inputs: RCA/SPDIF, Toslink, AES/EBU and USB) also has a pair of analog inputs and a pair of balanced XLR outputs, so it can be used as a full-function preamplifier.

An extensive review is in process, utilizing the HDVD 800 as a headphone amplifier as well as the cornerstone for a high performance, yet compact control center with a bevy of different power amplifiers. Stay tuned.

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PREVIEW

Torque t103z Headphones

\$179 www.torque-audio.com

One of the toughest thing every headphone designer and user faces is taking into account the different shape of everyone's ear. Sure, you can buy four figure IEM's (in ear monitors) custom made to your ear, but for everyone else, the Torque solution of using their patented Passive Audio Valve Technology actually allows you to custom tune the frequency response with one of their supplied adaptors to suit your listening taste.

Initial listening proves this to be a highly successful solution, more to come.



Wadia Intuition

\$7,495 www.wadia.com

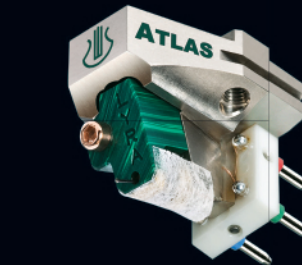
Introduced at this year's Consumer Electronics Show, Wadia's Intuition was by far the coolest approach to the integrated amplifier/DAC combination and it sounded fantastic as well. While sometimes initial prototypes can be deceiving, the final iteration of the Intuition is even better than what we heard in Vegas. Full review online shortly.



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Lighting the Way

WOO AUDIO WA7 FIREFLIES

By Jerold O'Brien

W

oo Audio makes incredible headphone amplifiers in all shapes and sizes. The American manufacturer, which is based in New York, recently introduced its WA7 Fireflies headphone amplifier, which is especially cool. Priced at \$999, it incorporates a 32-bit/192-kHz USB DAC and tube-based amplification into a cube that measures about 5 inches on all sides

The Right Phone

Regardless of headphone choice, there's plenty of tubey delight going on here, and the WA7 includes a big, beefy external power supply to keep its dual 6C45 tubes glowing. Getting funky from the start, with "Shaft's Cab Ride," from the *Shaft* soundtrack, shows the top end of the WA7 to be slightly harsh, which the plethora of horns in this piece exacerbates. Neither the Sennheiser HD 800 nor HD 700 phones do much to quell this harshness.

Moving to the HD 650s (cabled by ALO Audio) proves a much more synergistic match, with a smoother response overall. And thanks to a high/low impedance switch on the WA7's rear panel, a perfect match is even easier to accomplish.

Sifting through the reference pool of phones at the *TONE* studio provides more insight. The HiFiMAN HE-6 phones lack dynamics with the WA7, but this is no slight to the cube—most headphone amps cannot drive these bad boys. The Grado GS1000 and PS500 phones have a nice, smooth and airy overall balance through the WA7, which even breathes a bit of life into the \$15 Star Wars stormtrooper headphones.

Switching to the Audeze LCD 2 and LCD 3 phones is not a bad choice; however, this combination proves a touch recessed in the midrange and at low volumes, and flipping the high/low impedance switch has no effect on these phones. This pairing accentuates well-recorded musical selections. Jack White's *Blunderbuss* album comes alive with the LCD 2s, as does Iron and Wine's *The Shepard's Dog*. Led Zepelin's classic "Stairway to Heaven" is brilliant, but Iron Maiden's "Public Enemy Number One" falls short, deteriorating into a ball of midrange.

Before you start blaming the source, you should note that I'm using our publisher's dCS Vivaldi stack as a digital source, via the line-level RCA inputs. High-res files are supplied by the Aureneder S10 server via USB, which does not tilt the results terribly. Putting the WA7's DAC through the paces via the S10 is indeed fruitful.

Bottom line: We observed the best results from the WA7 with modest-impedance, dynamic headphones. This is where it really shines.

Down to the Sound

Judged strictly on amplifier performance, the WA7 will not be mistaken for a solid-state product, with a palpable and dimensional midrange that helps to make the headphones disappear. Once your phones of choice are settled upon, concentrating on the WA7 is relatively easy.

Overall bass response is solid and tight with good control. Thomas Dolby's "I Scare Myself" is weighty through the HD 650s, yet the WA7 keeps the pace locked down, never allowing the meandering piano line to wander out of coherence. Perhaps the weakest part of the WA7's tonal profile (as mentioned earlier) is the upper register. But again, considering that you are getting a wonderfully performing amp *and* a great DAC for just under a thousand bucks, the Woo is exceptional.

There really isn't a major substitution for the 6C45 tube, so this is not a tube-rollers dream amplifier in that respect. Sniffing around the web reveals the Western Electric WE437A as a suitable replacement; however, a pair of these in great shape will set you back half the price of the WA7, so this exercise will have to wait for another day. We are keeping the WA7 in the ever-growing fleet of headphone reference gear, so at some point we will report back if a pair of 437s can be acquired at a reasonable cost. *(continued)*



REVIEW

Midrange is the WA7's greatest strength, as you might expect for a tube amplifier, with its ability to stretch out into three-dimensional space being a close second. Tosca's "Me & Yoko Ono" feels as if the LCD 2s have earpads the size of garbage-can lids, with all the little electronic bits zooming past my head. And as Yoko Ono writhes through the title track of *Yes, I'm A Witch*, proclaiming, "I'm a witch, I'm a bitch," she sounds scarily larger than life.

Nice DAC

The MA7's 32-bit/192-kHz asynchronous USB DAC does a great job with all of the high-res files at our disposal, via the Auren-der S10 server and a nearby MacBook Pro running Pure Music. While the external power supply is linear, it does benefit from power conditioning and an upgraded power cord. Adding a new Venom 3 cable from Shun-yata and a Hydra 2 line conditioner removes a layer of grain and lowers the noise floor of this already quiet amp enough that the upgrades are well worth investigating, especially if you decide to invest in premium headphones.

The amp's high-resolution digital capability allows you to clearly hear the difference between standard and high-res files. Those with a major investment in HD material will be very happy with the WA7. Listening to practically every Rush album available in HD, I find it tough to go back to straight 16/44.1 files.



INTRODUCING

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Tone Audio

> Model shown - 826W
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Chorus 700V

Chorus 800V

Chorus 800W

Electra 1000 Be

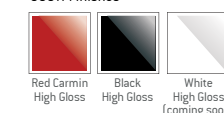
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REVIEW

WA7 Fireflies
MSRP: \$999

MANUFACTURER
Woo Audio

CONTACT
www.wooaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources
dCS Vivaldi stack, Meridian Control 15, Aurender S10, MacBook Pro

Analog Source
VPI Traveler turntable, Ortofon Rondo Red cartridge, Naim StageLine phonostage

Phones
As listed in review

A single set of line-level RCA inputs makes light work of connecting the WA7 to an analog source. While it defeats the compactness of the setup, adding a VPI Traveler/Ortofon Rondo Red and Naim Stageline MC preamplifier makes for a more complete system that is arguably smoother than the digital presentation. Spinning the MoFi copy of Beck's *Sea Change* is eye (or rather ear) opening, revealing a few details that you'll never hear with your favorite \$2,500 amplifier and \$2,500 pair of speakers.

Fantastic!

For anyone wanting a high-performance, compact and aesthetically pleasing desktop or bedside headphone audio system, there's no better choice than the WA7. It doesn't matter whether you order it in black or silver; the Woo Audio WA7 Fireflies is a hot little number, with good looks matched by great sound and extreme ease of operation. The only thing missing is an S/PDIF input, which may irk some audiophiles, but as so many headphone listeners use their laptops as a source these days, it's probably a moot point. ●



TRUE TO SOUND

The KEF M500 Headphones

By John Darko



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Alan Sircom, HiFi+ Issue 99

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REVIEW

A

lthough traditionally a loud-speaker manufacturer KEF has joined the likes of B&W and Martin Logan, extrapolating in-house expertise to the personal audio market. The M500 (US\$299) are KEF's first supra-aural (on-ear) headphone; it rides tandem with the M200 IEM to form KEF's M-series.

KEF has always been a company that makes products true to sound, and as music lovers they wanted to make a product that reflects the sound of their speakers. As a speaker manufacturer, the 'phone was designed in-house by the same team that produced the award winning LS-50 and Blade speakers. "We were after a look that was stylish but not bling-y," comments KEF US marketing manager Stephanie Scola. A quick comparison to these speakers easily reveals the lineage.

Right out of the box there are no positioning quirks or foibles with the M500. It's comfortable and unfussy about placement – just unfold, plug in and go. The nicely padded headband doesn't grip the head too tightly. *(continued)*



As a speaker manufacturer, the 'phone was designed in-house by the same team that produced the award winning LS-50 and Blade speakers. "We were after a look that was stylish but not bling-y," comments KEF US marketing manager Stephanie Scola.

However, Audeze owners will know that keeping your head upright is essential at all times. Although not as heavy as LCD-2/3, the M500 is similarly susceptible to gravity's pull – hunch too far over a laptop and the M500 will tumble off your noggin. Similarly – and head-size depending – you won't find yourself rocking out to the M500 during super-vigorous gym workouts, but you should be fine with a more gentle treadmill regime. Flipping this loose fit on its head: here is a headphone that's the just the ticket for long-haul flights.

KEF clearly intended the M500 to be a comfortable and durable product. A cool, industrial aesthetic means this is not your son's Beats by Dre. The all-aluminum structure behind the "smart hinge" technology means the M500 won't fall apart after a few months' use – there is no plastic shell to crack.

Listening to L.S.G.'s *The Unreleased Album* via Resonance Labs Concero HP and Macbook, the KEF cans are not quite the last word in low bass definition, especially when compared to my budget reference AKG K-702. However, the AKG can't run on iPhone juice – it's best suited to home listening with dedicated headphone amplification. In contrast, the M500 is for folks on the go. The closed-back design ensures minimal sound-leakage – that's good news for regular users of public transport.

Our publisher reveals that the M500 does provide more heft in the lower registers when paired up with other headphone amplifiers,

the Bryston and the new Studio Six from ALO in particular. It also makes an incredible mate for your favorite vintage '70s receiver, turning in an incredible performance with a freshly restored Marantz 2270.

Unzipping the clamshell carry case reveals the M500 (neatly folded), airline adaptor, 1/8" to 1/4" adaptor and two tangle-resistant flat-ribbon cables: one with in-line controls and microphone for use with Apple devices and one without. I used the latter with an Astell&Kern AK120. Here the KEF underscored the AK120's dexterity with textural information more than any other 'phone used with this high-end portable media player. That's good news for listeners who like to tinker with sources and cables. Want to upgrade the stock KEF cable? The headphone connection socket is located behind the left ear cup, so L-shaped terminations are a must.

KEF's Kent-based engineering team voiced the M500 to retain the company's house sound. I found the overall presentation to be much like the X300A powered loudspeaker – clean-cut and beguiling. Mission accomplished.

Like the X300A, initial impressions might be a tad underwhelming. The M500 doesn't "wow" with an aural fireworks show. Instead, it draws you in over a number of weeks. KEF engineers clearly understand the long game when it comes to customer satisfaction. *(continued)*



During late-night listening sessions, the KEF M500 was compared to another similarly priced headphone from Martin Logan. The Mikros 90 overeager upper-mid range is far more likely to polarize listeners, while the M500 is more evenly balanced throughout; there's zero evidence of bumps or shelves. The Martin Logan tends to favor the lighter side of musical life: a diet of jazz and acoustic plays best – one might liken them to the BBC-inspired LS3/5a speaker designs. The KEF offers more low frequency heft and meatier acoustic mass. Being true all-rounders the KEF is just as comfortable with Judas Priest as it is with Joni Mitchell.

KEF has done a bang-up job in pitching to the more discerning customer with this, their first full-sized headphone model. If you're seeking long-lasting, commuter headphones with a distinctly British sound – a sound which doesn't clobber you with bass but favors midrange clarity and treble delicacy – I'd consider the M500 damn-near essential. ●

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Top of the Mountain

ALO STUDIO SIX

By Jeff Dorgay

Let's get right to the point, Motown style, and put the hit on the first track. The Studio Six from ALO Audio redefines what headphones are capable of delivering, from the least expensive to the most exotic cans in your collection. Even the modest Grado SR-80 is turned in a head turning, or perhaps head banging, performance when using the Studio Six to provide the signal. And that's immediately after powering it up, fresh out of the box. About 50 hours later, it improves even further, with still more frequency extension, delicacy and low level detail available.

Yes, \$5,000 is a lot of money for a headphone amplifier, but the Studio Six delivers a level of performance well beyond all of the headphone amplifiers in the \$2,000 - \$5,000 range that we have auditioned. Don't give this one a listen unless you're ready to plunk the gold card down on the table. It will spoil you for anything else. On the bright side, compared to what high-end two channel separates cost these days, with world class separates commanding five- and six-figure price tags, the Studio Six truly is a bargain, delivering the best your headphones are capable of.

THE FIFTY



1961 - 2011



www.kef.com/thefifty

REVIEW

To assure top quality source material, the \$110,000 dCS Vivaldi digital player was used for digital files, and the AVID Acutus Reference SP turntable with TriPlanar tonearm and Lyra Atlas cartridge via the Indigo Qualia phonostage provided equally primo analog tracks, making it easy to get down to serious listening.

A wide range of music from reggae to classical, and everything in between was sampled to find out exactly where the rocks in the road are, or aren't. About 15 pairs of headphones from the Grado SR-80i to the Audeze LCD 3 put the Studio Six though its paces, along with the notoriously difficult to drive HE-6 phones from HiFi Man. Nothing in our headphone collection presents a challenge to the Studio Six, which delivers stellar performance with whatever is plugged in.

Out of the can

"Natural" describes the Studio Six in one word. I am typically *not* a headphone listener (though at last glance I do have 15 pairs of reference headphones) because of that cooped up, claustrophobic feeling – not unlike putting on a motorcycle helmet – that always keeps me away from this experience. Yet from first listen, I've been hooked on the Studio Six; this was so much more exciting than my previous headphone experiences that it was easy to just get into the music. The funky intro to Curtis Mayfield's "Pusherman" from the *SuperFly* sound track, with bongos floating around the soundstage, punctuated with horns, guitar and fiery cymbal shots is truly mind expanding. This amplifier becomes addicting as the listening sessions continue, often late into the evening. *(continued)*

Where many headphone amplifiers, both tube and solid state, tend to favor one type of headphone design, the Studio Six delivers top fidelity with everything.



Just as I would suggest that serious analog listeners have a solid foundation and purchase the best turntable and tonearm they could possibly afford, upgrading the phono cartridge as their budget allows, I submit you do the same with your headphone collection – buy a great amp first as the rock to your system. I’d rather listen to the Studio Six with a pair of budget Sennheiser HD 414s than my Audeze LCD 3s with a modest amp.

Though about 20 pairs of phones were plugged into the Studio Six during the review period, every one gave its top performance

in comparison to every other amplifier we’ve had the privilege to use. Where many headphone amplifiers, both tube and solid state, tend to favor one type of headphone design, the Studio Six delivers top fidelity with everything. Phones you thought previously tough to drive (the HE-6, some AKG models, etc.) sail through without issue.

Thanks to the four output jacks on the front panel, you can even drive them all at once. A group listening session, using the AKG-701, HE-6 and LCD-3 all playing simultaneously proved effortless for the Studio Six, with no difference in

sound quality as the other phones were plugged in. Truly amazing.

It’s all in the details

Listening to a six-figure reference system on a regular basis spoils one for low level resolution, and while often donning a pair of headphones reveals an additional level of low level resolution, it does so at losing the glorious sense of soundstage and three dimensionality that a big pair of speakers in a big room provides. Utilizing the Studio Six goes further to convince me that I’m doing just that, without resorting to any kind of channel crossfeed circuitry that is

starting to become commonplace with other headphone amplifiers.

This is a great tube amplifier, executed to perfection. The amplifier delivers one watt of pure SET power, with output transformers capable of delivering about 20 watts of power, had they been utilized in a standard amplifier circuit. Who knows, maybe ALO will venture into another direction in the future? A low powered amplifier based on this circuit would be equally enticing.

Revisiting well-worn tracks continuously delivers previously unnoticed gold. Berlin’s “Sex (I’m A...)” is a treat; the additional layers of cool

synthesizer and vocal information now on tap combined with a seemingly endless amount of decay gets you further into the music than you might have thought possible – and makes it so easy to forget you actually have headphones on, that you might not notice until you get up and realize you are, in fact, tethered. This is headphone listening at its finest.

Regardless of whether you are listening to Daft Punk or Miles Davis, your music collection becomes a new world again, and this is what makes the Studio Six worth the price asked. *(continued)*

REVIEW

Vocals take on incredible clarity, and the massive soundstage now available goes well beyond the normal confines of the head space. Richard Thompson's vocals on *The Old Kit Bag* come through solidly placed out in front of the listening position, with backing vocals creeping in softly from the outside edges of the soundstage, just behind your head, while the drum and bass tracks remain firmly anchored – those worshipping the concept of pace and timing will have found a new haven with this amplifier.

The Studio Six not only provides big bass, essential to those listening to a steadier diet of electronic music, but a level of control and texture, again usually limited to high-end speaker systems driven by stellar electronics. The amount of control provided is impressive, whether listening to deep synth bass or acoustic. You may actually hear for the first time what your phones are truly capable of. Again, we were constantly surprised at how much bass detail even modest phones could provide with the Studio Six driving them. There's plenty of speed on tap, too – the title track of Stanley Clarke's *If This Bass Could Only Talk* features bass runs that are quicker than most lead guitar players, punctuated by Gregory Hines tap dancing in the background as percussion. Both are reproduced with stunning accuracy.

Last, the sheer dynamic range of this amplifier goes a long way in eliminating that last bit of sensation that you are listening to headphones instead of speakers, and is an area in which so many others fall short.
(continued)



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Again, because this headphone amplifier is built more like a power amplifier to drive loudspeakers, it has drive to spare.

Robustly designed to last a lifetime

As good as the Studio Six sounds, it looks like a premier audio component inside and out. Precisely hand wired, with a combination of point-to-point and PCB topology, it follows in the tradition of classic gear from McIntosh and Marantz, with everything overbuilt. Top quality parts are used throughout, with an impressive amount of good taste, paying homage to current and classic design cues. The somewhat large, jeweled power lamp speaks old school, yet the rounded corners on the casework and the laser-cut volume and input knobs are firmly rooted in the 21st century.

The complement of glowing tubes on deck make this a pleasure to look at as much as listen to, but again, it all follows function. A 5AR4 tube rectifier and pair of OB2 gas regulators add additional delicacy to the presentation and provide an organic soft start function as well. The amplifier circuit utilizes a 6SN7 driver tube, powering a pair of 6V6 output tubes. While this tube will be more familiar to the guitar players in the audience, here it provides a level of drive and cleanliness, rather than the crunch that might normally be associated with it. But the best news is that this tube is readily available, and at reasonable prices. You could tube roll until your ADD gets the best of you, but rather than chase the rabbit, I suggest you just enjoy the Studio Six as it comes from the factory.

This attention to detail and numerous circuit revisions over the last two years before settling on the design you see here underline the commitment that went into this product. When pestering ALO's Ken Ball for a review sample for the last year, he would calmly say, "It's almost there." The end result has been well worth the wait. *(continued)*

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VPI Classic 1



AVID Acutus



Rega RP3



VPI Traveler



REVIEW



While not an issue for this headphone user, the lack of a balanced headphone output may raise an eyebrow for some. For most, it should only be a matter of affixing a different cable to your favorite phones, as I did with my HE-6s. I did not consider this to be a shortcoming – the sound quality and incredibly low noise floor (actually, make that nonexistent noise floor) never had me wanting for a balanced option.

It's made a headphone lover out of me.

I've always been lukewarm about headphone listening – until the Studio Six entered my reference system. Completely floored by how much resolution and musical accuracy can be extracted from even the least expensive headphones, I'm convinced that these qualities make the Studio Six a true destination amplifier as the foundation of a headphone system that should never need replacement.

Its ability to drive every type of headphone also makes the Studio Six an incredibly versatile tool as a reference component, so expect to hear more about this landmark product in the issues to come as it will be my reference amplifier by which to evaluate all other personal audio gear. ●

The ALO Audio Studio Six
MSRP: \$5,000

MANUFACTURER

ALO Audio, Inc.

CONTACT

www.aloaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital source dCS Vivaldi stack, Sooloos Control 15, Aurender S10

Analog source AVID Acutus Reference SP Turntable w/TriPlanar arm and Lyra Atlas cartridge

Phonostage Indigo Qualia

Power IsoTek Super Titan

Headphones HiFi Man HE-6, Cardas EarSpeaker, Grado GS500, GS1000, RS-1, Koss Pro 4AA (ha!), Audeze LCD 2, LCD 3, Sennheiser HD 414, HD 650 (w/ALO Audio cable), HD 700, AKG 701

Sennheiser Momentum On-Ear Headphones

By Ian White



The audiophile portion of Sennheiser's headphone business has grown steadily over the last few years, due in part to the fanatical attention that its full-size HD 800s and in-ear IE 800s have received. The German manufacturer, which generated \$700 million in global sales in 2012, indeed produces some of the best-sounding headphones money can buy.

Sennheiser's \$230 Momentum On-Ear headphones are the result of trickle-down technology derived from the company's \$300 circumaural model of the same name. The larger Momentum headphones, which feature gorgeous plush ear pads from British leather purveyor Pittards, provide an even greater degree of isolation than the on-ear versions, but the two models share a similar house sound. This sonic characteristic almost immediately draws comparison to Sennheiser's full-size HD 600 and 650 models, which possess a warm sounding midrange, excellent detail retrieval and a slightly closed-in top end that takes the edge off bright recordings, and brings a degree of airiness to more neutral recordings.

Mobile Design

The Momentum On-Ear headphones feature a closed design. They do a fairly decent job of keeping the music between your ears without disrupting others, but they will not provide the same level of isolation as a pair of solid noise-cancelling headphones. Sennheiser designed the Momentum On-Ears for listeners who rely on their laptop, iPhone or portable player, and don't want to lug around a huge pair of headphones. These phones weigh in at just 6 ounces, which should make them very popular with commuters and business travelers. I find them to be extremely comfortable on my large head. *(continued)*



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REVIEW



The Momentum On-Ears' rather benign 18-ohm impedance indeed makes it easy to pair them with smart phones, tablets, laptops and portable headphone amplifiers, like the AudioQuest DragonFly. Sennheiser does not supply a 1/4-inch adapter with Momentum On-Ears, and it does not use the same plush leather ear pads with the on-ear model, but the stock Alcantara pads, which are filled with two layers of foam, are extremely soft and comfortable for long listening sessions. The pads create a nice seal, and the stainless-steel sliders make it easy to adjust the fit.

To counter the garish-looking models from Beats by Dre, Sennheiser offers

the Momentum On-Ears in a variety of sleek-looking colors, including subdued shades of green, ivory, pink, and blue. The headband is also covered with Alcantara and it stays quite dry from sweat as I take the review pair on a morning stroll along beach in the blazing sun with my newborn daughter.

The Momentum On-Ear headphones come with two 4.6-foot detachable cables; one of the cables features an in-line smart remote and microphone for iPod and iPhone users. Android-based devices work just fine from a playback perspective, but the supplied remote only works with iOS-based devices.

(continued)

Get Lucky

Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* has rather quickly become one of the most popular albums of the year, with the hit single "Get Lucky" enjoying way too much airplay—even for those of us who enjoy dance and electronica. But this album does provide fantastic demo material that will quickly reveal whether or not a pair of headphones can deliver the low-frequency goods.

The Momentum On-Ears sound slightly lumpy cold out of the box, but given some time, the bass tightens up significantly, trimming some of the excess weight from bass-heavy material.

The presentation is also slightly laid-back sounding compared to the Beats Solo headphones. And while that may sound boring to those looking for greater presence in the midrange and top end,

it is ultimately easier on the ears for the long haul and far less fatiguing with dance, metal, electronica and punk.

Through the Momentum On-Ears, the sacred mid-range is consistently clean sounding with music such as Guy Clark's *My Favorite Pictures of You* and the late R.L. Burnside's *Rollin' and Tumblin'*. Both of these albums really benefit from the combination of midrange clarity and mid-bass punch provided by the Momentum On-Ears, which makes these otherwise dry-sounding releases far more engaging.

The Momentum On-Ears have far more in common with my reference Grado RS1i headphones than any of the closed models from

Beats, thanks to a warmer overall sound and far superior reproduction of detail and spatial depth. Horrible recordings won't suddenly become reference quality, but they won't shred your eardrums either.

Pop music like Lana Del Rey's *Born to Die* is far more hypnotic through the Momentum On-Ears—and this is generally the case with similar recordings from Tori Amos, Samantha Crain, Alela Diane and Emmylou Harris. It is amazing what happens when a headphone doesn't attempt to overpower vocals, instead allowing them to unravel as originally recorded. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

Rather than just bringing a sleek-looking pair of headphones into an already oversaturated market, the folks at Sennheiser took their time with the Momentum On-Ear headphones and crafted a sophisticated-sounding product that will only get better with time. Solidly built, comfortable and easy to drive, the Momentum On-Ears succeed with all types of music. They are well worth their \$230 asking price, especially if you value your ears and have been craving a portable partner for those dreary commutes. ●

Momentum On-Ear Headphones
MSRP: \$230

MANUFACTURER
Sennheiser

CONTACT
www.sennheiser.com

PERIPHERALS

Sources 24-inch Apple iMac, Samsung Series 7 Chronos laptop, Astell&Kern AK100

Amplifiers Schiit Audio Valhalla, Wadia 121decoding computer, Peachtree Audio musicBox, AudioQuest DragonFly USB DAC

Headphones AKG K701, Polk Audio UltraFocus 8000, Grado RS1i, Beats Solo



Quality is the Agenda

The NuForce HAP-100 Headphone Amplifier

By Paul Rigby

Over the past couple of years, there have been two principle driving forces within the hi-fi industry. The first is the maturation of digital technology in the form of DACs and streaming-related systems; the second has revolved around headphones. The latter is partly the result of the plastic-coated biscuit tins overtaking the ears of MP3-centric teenagers. Whatever the impetus, the current headphone boom is one that the hi-fi world has welcomed. NuForce distinguishes itself from the pack by offering such idiosyncratically designed products as the HAP-100, which is based around a single-ended class-A stage and, at \$595, is priced reasonably.

At the front of the HAP-100's low-profile box is a volume control that uses the same switched-resistor ladder network as the company's flagship P-20 preamp, which provides low noise, a thin-film resistor array and a total of 100 steps in gain. The HAP-100 also promises low distortion, being backed by a toroidal power supply with large capacitor reserves and high-speed regulation. The front panel is complete with a full-size 1/4-inch socket, plus a display indicating the number of the selected input and the volume level, from zero to 99.

You can select the input and turn the unit on and off via its dinky remote control. From the chassis, you turn on the HAP-100 by pressing in the volume knob, and turn it off by holding the knob for three seconds, and you select the input by pressing this hard-working knob from one to four times. These functions are not immediately obvious without the instruction booklet. On the rear are four sets of inputs that allow the unit to be used as a preamp, plus a pair of outputs with a rocker power switch and power socket.

Say What?

Spinning the Beatles' "Free As A Bird," via my Densen B-475 CD player and Sennheiser HD 800s (and an Icon HP8 MKII valve-based headphone amp as a reference), I'm not surprised to hear tighter bass frequencies from the solid-state HAP-100. Ringo Starr's percussion, from his trusty Ludwig drum kit, is snappy, taught and sharp. In fact, transients are fast and pacy throughout the entire song. *(continued)*



This particular track, from the *Anthology 1* collection, has a midrange that is rather elevated, and the NuForce does nothing to rein that in. It keeps the midrange right up there and even gives it a forward feel—nothing too bright, mind you; just a feeling that the mids have all been pushed slightly toward the front of the soundstage.

George Harrison's solo, on his Fender, is detailed and informative while flirting with brightness but never becoming uncomfortable. Similarly, John Lennon's spiritual presence—the song was produced posthumously from takes he recorded before his death—is accented to emphasize his role in the mix, and the NuForce retains that effect,

sometimes reacting to Lennon's crescendos with a slight harshness. Paul McCartney's bass is successfully enhanced within this environment, honed and full of character, while his work on the analog Oberheim synthesizer becomes more prominent within the mix and his vocals are clean and concise.

I switch to Bing Crosby's "At the Jazz Band Ball," from *Bing in Dixieland*, on which the brass backing is noticeably forceful and rather clinical in its approach. Again, the HAP-100 does not cross any lines to make this section unattractive; the brass adopts an almost textural position, allowing for extreme examination. The piano on "Sometimes I'm Happy" is bouncy, nimble

and almost frisky. A set of keys on amphetamines, the piano is sunny and perky, almost to the extreme. Crosby's vocals are warm, smooth and focused. With the help of the NuForce, Crosby doesn't just sing; he climbs inside my head.

Onto Analog

Spinning the original release of Colin Blunstone's *Ennismore*, I find the introductory acoustic guitar work to be nothing short of sublime. The NuForce tweaks the warmth of the vinyl reproduction by providing a much-needed dash of extra focus that allows it to spring to life. And the waterfall of upper-mid information is a

pure delight. Similarly, the lower frequencies from the bass guitar and percussion provide a new grounding for the entire track, giving it both structure and drive. The bass especially gives the song new depth and richness that also expand the soundstage. Through the HAP-100, Blunstone's vocals are emotionally enhanced, revealing a new fragility, along with new lyrical meaning and emphasis. The song's rhythmic strings also now hold a more important position within the mix, adding a portentous, almost foreboding tone that was not nearly as present before.

It seems that vinyl and the HAP-100 are equally delightful and transparent. But I'm still not

totally convinced, so I reach for *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Rodgers and Hart Songbook*. On "Johnny One Note," the brass in the big band is delicately textured, evoking a similar feeling as when you run your hand over an embossed piece of lettered card. Thanks to the NuForce, the ear hears the orchestra in a similar way, with each instrument raised from the soundstage, stimulating and tickling the senses beautifully. Fitzgerald gives a serene performance that is smooth but with an impassioned glow that surrounds the song like a large sonic umbrella. Her sense of timing and emphasis provides a delivery that the NuForce tracks perfectly. *(continued)*



Home Stretch

I try other headphones with the NuForce that have much lower price points, just to see how it responds to lesser hardware. The \$200 B&W P3s offer good value for the money while still being able to provide bass emphasis, but with these headphones the NuForce doesn't play ball. The HAP-100 seems to take great delight in highlighting what the P3s do badly rather than what they do well. Bass is all I receive with the P3-NuForce combo, and detail is nowhere to be found. Upper mids? What upper mids? I then take a gulp and plug in a pair of roughly \$50 Sennheiser PX 100s, which are brilliant for their price. They usually hold their own, but with the NuForce I find myself yawning. There is apparently no point in using this amp with budget phones.

But don't let that sway your opinion of the HAP-100 too much, for it is indeed an intriguing headphone amplifier. It will provide the truth, but it will spare no blushes while doing so—this is an amp that sees itself as the center of the universe.

In many respects, the HAP-100 demands that you build your interest in music around it and that you do things by its rules. That means providing it with the highest-resolution source possible and the best headphones that you can afford. If you do, it will provide a blissful musical experience. ●

NuForce HAP-100 headphone amplifier
MSRP: \$595

MANUFACTURER

NuForce

CONTACT

www.nuforce.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

Avid Acutus turntable, SME IV tonearm, Benz Glider cartridge

Digital Source

Densen B-475 CD player

Headphones

Sennheiser HD 800, B&W P3, Sennheiser PX 100

Headphone Amplifier

Icon HP8 MKII

Preamplifier

Aesthetix Calypso

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Grado RS1i Headphones

Where Tradition Meets Technology

By Ian White





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Over the past few years, the world of high-quality personal audio has experienced an explosion, due partly to the success of Beats by Dre headphones, which seem to have inspired hope for an industry that previously failed to even attract a fleeting glance from the millennial generation. And while it is exciting to see consumers reaching for brands in the Apple store aside from Beats—which is good news for manufacturers such as Bower & Wilkins, Bang & Olufsen, and Sennheiser—the headphone market has become flooded. For one manufacturer in Brooklyn, business hasn't been this good since the 1980s.

The Grado RS1i headphones have been around for a few years—which feels like an eternity in the current personal-audio environment. At \$695, the RS1i phones certainly qualify as expensive, but with competing products from the likes of Sennheiser, Stax, HifiMAN, Audeze and Beyerdynamic ranging from \$700 to \$2,000, the Grado headphones actually do look like a bargain.

Brooklyn Grown

The RS1i phones are dynamic open-ear transducers. They weigh in at a paltry 9 ounces and feature handcrafted mahogany earpieces. They come with an 8.5-foot cord terminated with a 1/4-inch stereo plug, but the package also includes a 15-foot cord, and a 1/8-inch mini-plug adapter.

Not everyone loves the traditional Grado flexible leather-covered headband, but I find it to be amazingly comfortable on my large head. The metal height adjusters make it easy to fit the headphones and I really like the ability to rotate the earpieces 360 degrees so that you can lay them flat in a laptop bag or suitcase. The foam earpads are removable (and there is a great deal of discussion online about how using different sized earpads affects the sound quality).

All of the Grado designs feature a vented diaphragm with a large air chamber that extends the bass response. The proprietary voice coils are manufactured from Grado's long-crystal, oxygen-free copper. The diaphragms are manufactured from a low-mass polymer and they utilize high-powered neodymium magnets for higher sensitivity, making the 32-ohm RS1i phones extremely easy to drive.



Although the headphones sound a lot better with a dedicated amplifier, smartphone and tablet users will have zero difficulty driving them.

Every brand of headphone (at least the good ones) has a distinct house sound; Grado is no exception. Naysayers have often criticized Grado headphones for an overly ripe midrange, which allegedly obscures layers of inner detail that more neutral-sounding (and more expensive) examples present with breathtaking clarity.

While the RS1i phones may not place all of your favorite music under a microscope, exposing every last wart in the recording, they are certainly more than capable of unraveling the complexity of large symphonic works. They are equally adept with stripped-down folk and blues recordings, leaving only the space between you and the performers. Grados do detail; they just do it with dirtier hands and some extra cheese—this is Brooklyn we're talking about.

Down to Business

The Best of John Fahey 1959–1977 is a wonderful compilation from the eccentric guitarist, whose unique picking style is a mixture of blues, folk, and country. “Sunflower River Blues” and “Poor Boy, Long Ways from Home” showcase Fahey’s technique and the disquieting tone of his music. The RS1i phones are more than up to the task, putting real meat on those notes and allowing them to decay in a manner that makes Fahey seem hauntingly present between your ears.

(continued)

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REVIEW

These headphones get tone right, and do so with remarkable consistency. Whether you happen to favor Mark Knopfler over Eric Clapton, or Wes Montgomery over Grant Green, the Grados put sufficient distance between the artists and make each of them stand out.

When it comes to the midrange, everything that has ever been written about the rich, velvety and colorful presentation of Grado headphones and phono cartridges rings true. Vocals have a palpable sense of realism that leans toward the darker, more romantic side of the spectrum. While that may not be everyone's bottle of root beer in this era of sterile-sounding headphones and Bluetooth-enabled loudspeakers, it's far less fatiguing if you plan on listening for extended periods of time.

Modern pop recordings, such as Rhye's *Woman*, Laura Mvula's *Sing to the Moon*, and Lana Del Rey's naughty *Born to Die*, benefit tremendously from the RS1i's warmer and rather bold presentation. The title track of Del Rey's second studio album, for example, pulsates with the intensity from the open-air design of the Grados.

But not everything about the RS1i headphones is tidy or neat. They suffer from a degree of wooliness in the bass if pushed too hard—and push I did with the 24-bit/96-kHz versions of Green Day's *American Idiot* and Rush's *Clockwork Angels*. The Green Day tracks "Jesus of Suburbia" and "Give Me Novacaine" are demanding for most full-range loudspeakers to pound out, and while the RS1i phones preserve Mike Dirnt's bass licks at moderate levels, they do lose some low-end definition when I crank the volume.
(continued)





As long as you keep the volume at a sane level, the RS1i phones have remarkably taut and well-defined bass that has me listening to Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* and Deadmau5's *4x4=12* all night long. Electronic and dance music usually causes me to run from the room screaming (unless it starts and ends with Kraftwerk or Tangerine Dream), but these headphones succeed at hypnotizing me to the point that I venture onto eMusic to expand my collection.

The RS1i phones do an excellent job from a spatial

perspective, though I have heard greater soundstage depth from the more expensive Audeze LCD-2 and HiFiMAN HE-500 planar magnetic headphones, and the AKG K702s (which were my long-term headphones until they mysteriously disappeared from a hotel room in 2009).

Grado's top end is generally pretty smooth sounding, but I did experience some hardness in the upper midrange and lower treble for the first 50 to 60 hours before that began to diminish. These phones are slightly cold out of the box, which you'll notice with vocals, horns and cymbals.

And while, without a dedicated amplifier, the Grados don't exhibit that ultimate level of airiness that other headphones are capable of, they are still way above average in that department when plugged into a source with lossy downloads.

The Final Score

Very much like the colorful neighborhoods that make Brooklyn a microcosm of our topsy-turvy and complicated world, the Grado RS1i headphones offer an equally colored and nuanced presentation of whatever they are fed. They may not appeal

to those who crave the see-through transparency of the \$1,000 Audeze LCD-2s, but there is something inherently special about the RS1i phones that makes them a solid bet for the long haul.

Supremely comfortable to wear for long listening sessions, easy to drive and designed to last a lifetime, these clearly differentiate themselves from the hundreds of competing products that are starting to become a little lost in the ever-growing world of personal audio. ●

Grado RS1i Headphones
MSRP: \$695

MANUFACTURER

Grado Labs

CONTACT

www.gradolabs.com

PERIPHERALS

Sources Apple iMac, Samsung Series 7 Chronos laptop, Astell & Kern AK100 personal music player

Amplifiers Schiit Audio Valhalla, Wadia 121 decoding computer, Peachtree Audio musicBox, AudioQuest DragonFly USB DAC

Headphones AKG K701, Polk Audio UltraFocus 8000



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By Jeff Dorgay



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Many great bands and product designers have suffered the “sophomore slump,” stumbling after producing a great product or releasing a great album, with the follow-up never meeting the promise of the debut. The new, updated version of AURALiC’s premier headphone amplifier easily breaks through that barrier, building on the strengths of the original while adding significant upgrades throughout. The result is an incredibly liquid, musical headphone amplifier that will have you shaking your head, wondering if there really isn’t a vacuum tube or two under the hood.

Seriously, there isn’t. In the famed tradition of Mark Levinson, the Taurus features discrete Class-A gain and buffer stages that contribute heavily to the high dynamic range and low-noise sound of the Taurus MKII. A quick listen of the clunky piano on the White Stripes’ “Forever for

Her (Is Over For Me)” reveals the immediacy that the Taurus can muster, responding to Jack White’s spastic playing with ease and painting a broad sonic picture of this fairly dense recording.

Switching program material to the jazzier side, with Wayne Shorter’s *Speak No Evil*, the clarity and high-frequency smoothness of the Taurus makes it easy to listen to the whole album straight through. An edgier setup usually leads to bouts of audio ADD, but the Taurus lets me listen to album after album without glare or fatigue—and that is a wonderful thing.

The Taurus does not have the last bit of “reach out and touch it” that my reference ALO Studio Six does, thanks to its all vacuum-tube design, but the AURALiC does come *damn* close. And it is stunning in its own way, both for a solid-state design and for its much lower price tag of \$1,899, compared to \$4,900 for the ALO. *(continued)*



Inner and Outer Beauty

This solid-state design will appeal to those more predisposed to plug-and-play components. You'll never have to replace tubes (or agonize over tube rolling). The Taurus is also tidy and compact, and it looks great in any setup. Those wanting an all-AURALiC high-performance headphone system would do well to consider the brand's Vega digital audio processor. The Vega is equally impressive and matching in form factor. (We have a full review in process.)

I've been living with the AURALiC gear for a while now, and it's purposeful, tidy appearance and high build quality brings Nagra to mind. The front panel is finely machined, with a semi-spherical volume control that feels as luxuriously damped as it looks. With so many new manufacturers missing this aspect of product design, it is refreshing to use a component that has such a pleasing aesthetic.
(continued)

A m a d i s

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

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

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

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

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



Around back is an equally concise layout, with balanced XLR and single ended RCA inputs and outputs—a nice touch that provides maximum flexibility. Listening duties were split between AURALiC's own Vega digital processor, the Light Harmonic Da Vinci DAC and an AVID Volvere SP turntable with SME V tonearm and Lyra Kleos cartridge, via the Audio Research REF Phono 2SE.

Quickly Down to Business

Break-in time for the Taurus is brief. Slightly closed in at initial turn on, our test sample sounds its best after about two days of continuous play. As the Taurus' power consumption is minimal, you can leave it on without suffering any eco-guilt.

Once the unit is fully stable, it provides a high-resolution, no-

nonsense sound. Again, the comparison to the Studio Six comes to mind. Where the ALO amplifier offers a presentation that is ever so slightly on the warm side (never a bad thing in this reviewer's notebook), much like my reference Pass monoblocks, the Taurus is slightly more natural, more like a Boulder component. The amps will appeal to different listeners for different reasons.

The Taurus gets high praise for having both single-ended and balanced outputs on the front panel, but even more for its ability to drive a wide range of headphones. This is one of the few amplifiers we've auditioned that can do this with ease.

For those not familiar with the HiFi MAN HE-6 headphones, they are a planar style with a difficult impedance curve—a tough load

that most headphone amplifiers make sound mushy and uncontrolled when trying to drive them. The Taurus sails through, with its high-current, Class-A output stage providing enough grip and delicacy to showcase these premier phones at their finest.

The Taurus even beats the HiFi MAN amplifier designed specifically for the HE-6 at its own game, revealing more music and a smoother, more delicate and more nuanced presentation.

Fiona Apple's *Extraordinary Machine* is full of small instrumental vocal effects and layered harmonies that put any system to the test, whether headphones or speakers are delivering the music. The title track is littered with violin and percussion riffs, all layered behind and in front of Apple's quirky, breathy voice. (continued)

The Taurus keeps everything locked in place with the proper amount of space and texture. The bell at the end of the track rings with perfect clarity, making any pair of headphones feel much larger than they are—a very cool effect, and one of the reasons many of us appreciate the presentation of a great pair of headphones via a high-performance amplifier.

Running the Gamut

Equally great results are on tap with all the other phones in my collection; there is nothing that the Taurus can't drive with aplomb, making it a perfect reference amplifier for those with a large headphone collection (or for those considering expanding their current collection). My other reference phones, the Audeze LCD2s, work equally well with the Taurus, serving up a massive inner-head soundstage, with sound floating all around my head in a pleasantly trippy manner. Joni Mitchell's "Talk to Me," from the *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* album, illustrates this effect perfectly. Jaco Pastorius' fluid bass line is firmly anchored, sounding as if emanating straight out of my cerebral cortex, while Mitchell's vocals float in front of my head, with her guitar sounding otherworldly and mind-expanding.

While many headphone fanatics swear by balanced operation, and the Taurus offers it (thoughtfully, I might add), the single-ended performance is so good that I struggle to hear a major difference—which proves to be more dependent on the headphones being used. The Sennhieser HD 650s (re-cabled by ALO Audio) show the most marked change for the better of anything else tried here, so the balanced option is definitely worth investigation.



It is also worth mentioning that, because of its high output (1 watt into a 600-ohm load and 4.3 watts into 32 ohms), there is always plenty of headroom on tap, regardless of what phones you are using. And we should also make the necessary public service announcement about watching the volume control: With this much clean power on tap, it's easy to overdrive your ears.

The key to the Taurus' excellence is balance. This amplifier delivers the full range of sound at a high level of quality. It offers enough low-frequency drive to keep the biggest bassheads happy, with mids that are silky smooth (though not embellished) and with a high-frequency response that is extended and detailed but that never crosses into harsh, strained territory.

Not to Trivialize Tech

The Taurus is equally gorgeous under the hood. Removing the top panel reveals high-quality parts, thick circuit boards that are concisely laid out and a massive power supply that would look more at home in a modestly sized power amplifier than in a headphone amplifier. The Class-A modules feature massive heat sinks to stay within their proper operating temperature. Nothing has been scrimped on in the least.

All this science serves the music quite well. It will only take a short test drive to not only convince you what a great product this is, but to also get you to forget about what's inside the box—as it should be. And for this, we are happy to present AURALiC with an Exceptional Value Award for this remarkable headphone amp. ●

Taurus MKII
Headphone Amplifier
MSRP: \$1,895

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AURALiC

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www.auralic.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Source

AURALiC Vega digital processor, Light Harmonic Da Vinci DAC, Meridian Control 15, Aurender S10

Analog Source

AVID Volvere SP turntable, SME V tonearm, Lyra Kleos cartridge, Audio Research REF Phono 2SE preamplifier

Headphones

Audeze LCD2 and LCD3; HiFiMAN HE-6 and HE-400; Sennheiser HD 414, HD 650, HD 700 and HD 800; Grado GS500; AKG K 701

Cable

Cardas Clear

Power

Running Springs Dmitri

Audeze LCD-3 Headphones

\$1,995 www.audeze.com

Anyone following our headphone commentary for the last two years knows we're a big fan of the Audeze LCD-2, which turned the industry on its ears upon introduction, with its lifelike, electrostatic style sound that doesn't carry the electrostat price tag.

A magnetic planar design, not totally unlike that of a Magnepan speaker, the Audeze phones feature all the positive attributes of that type of speaker: a wide, open soundstage, fantastic stereo imaging and great low level detail retrieval. The LCD-3 builds on the success of the LCD-2, albeit at a higher price, but once you're hooked, you'll want a pair!

● [Read the full review here.](#)





Primare I22 Integrated Amplifier

\$2,295 www.primare.com

Those wishing to build a system around digital media, streaming content from their laptop or computer, need look no further than Primare's I22. With 80 watts per channel on tap and an optional built-in 24/192 DAC under the hood, (and for those wishing different digital options, the DAC can be omitted, with a drop in MSRP to \$1,799) the I22 offers a stylishly understated solution.

Already have a great CD player, DAC, or want to add a turntable? There are four RCA inputs on the rear panel that allow further connectivity. ● [Read the full review here.](#)

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