

TONE Audio

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No. 58 October 2013



Topless Tunes

JAGUAR'S F-TYPE WITH SOUND BY MERIDIAN

SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE In-depth reviews of new albums from Pearl Jam, Elvis Costello and the Roots, Sleigh Bells, Janelle Monae, Miley Cyrus, and More

A TALE OF TWO REUNIONS: The Pixies and The Replacements Live

SOUND & STYLE ISSUE **Solid Billet Sound:** The Devialet 110 **Miniature Marvel:** Naim's Uniti QUTE2, **Orange Audio Sorbet:** The KEF Blades, and D'Agostino's Momentum, Plus More Stylish Gear from the *TONE* Archives

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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



This issue marks our first “Sound and Style” edition, in which we formally celebrate audio equipment that offers both state-of-the-art sound quality and cutting-edge aesthetics. For years, one of the biggest roadblocks to having a major high-end system was that so many components lacked a visual appeal. The industry has made light of this shortcoming—and jokingly coined the phrase “wife-acceptance factor”—but we at *TONE* maintain that hi-fi doesn't have to look dreadful.

Back in the late 1960s and early '70s, so many homes were awash in shag carpeting, wood paneling and overstuffed La-Z-Boy recliners. But today, even La-Z-Boy has stepped up its design game, and so we applaud the manufacturers that have entered the 21st century by building products into shapes worthy of the sound that emanates from them. Let's face it, we live in an incredibly visual world, and great design does not have to be limited to products with five-figure price tags. The \$400 Peachtree deepblue Bluetooth music system and the \$2,000 Naim UnitiQute 2 all-in-one player are both testaments to that philosophy.

Audiophiles have for too long placed the blame on wives, girlfriends and significant others when it comes to requiring a sense of style from an audio system. I'm going to stick my neck out and guess that, if you've got the scratch to buy a \$30,000 D'Agostino Momentum amplifier, then you probably drive a pretty cool car, own a fine wristwatch or two and might even be a somewhat snappy

dresser who enjoys a premium beverage of some sort from time to time—so why have a boring-looking hi-fi system?

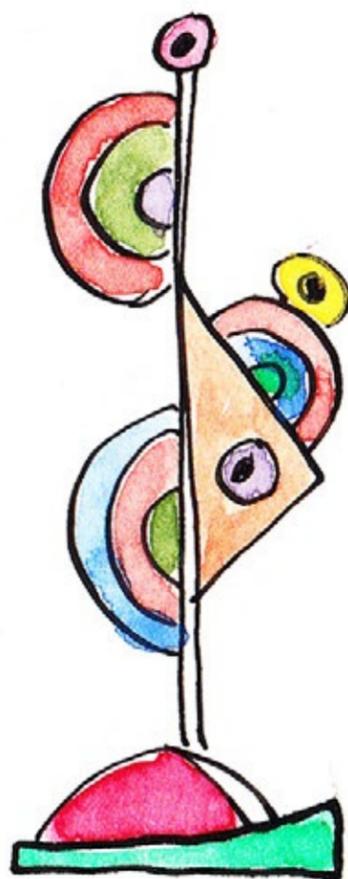
And while I'm all for a fully equipped man cave (the bigger the TV screen and the bigger the beer fridge, the better), hi-fi gear can complement your living space much like a piece of fine art does—and make no mistake, these components are pieces of electronic fine art, as well. But take note: We at *TONE* would love to see more fun finishes and sophisticated shapes from our industry's best and brightest as we move forward.

And so, in this issue, we have a wide selection of new gear that conforms to this mantra of fantastic audio performance and museum-worthy aesthetics, as well as a recap of past components that fit this profile, with links to said reviews.

Of course, some audiophiles feel that elaborate casework and remote controls constitute frivolous spending. Duly noted. However, as someone who has a thing for great industrial design, I hope those of you who share my affection will appreciate the components featured in this issue for more than just their sonic beauty.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.

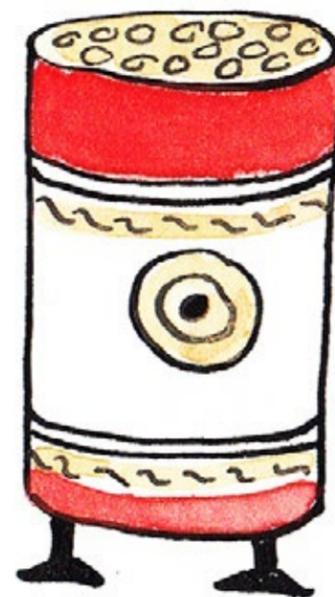
SPEAKER ATTEMPTS - INFLUENCED BY THE MASTERS



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MUDHONEY

Mayne Stage
August 31, 2013
Chicago, Illinois

By Bob Gendron
Photos by Dana Yavin

N

ow, that's class. Mudhoney symbolically and sonically toasted the underdogs at an invigorating 90-minute concert in Chicago held on the last day of summer. Few bands better understand the ordinary stiffs that continue to be shafted and the losers that can't win for losing than the long-running Pacific Northwest veterans.

Commemorating their 25th anniversary, guitarists Mark Arm and Steve Turner raised wine glasses during the encore in salute to the near-capacity crowd. The humble looks on their faces—as well as those of original drummer Dan Peters and beer-swilling bassist Guy Maddison—spoke volumes.



In the sweepstakes that was the late 80s/early 90s Seattle scene, Mudhoney served as the dark horse: second fiddle to each of its nationally hyped peers (save, possibly, for kindred spirits Tad) and the last of the first-wave artists to score a major-label deal. But here the odds-beaters stood, mixing the intensity of their youth with the focus that comes with maturation, outlasting and outperforming nearly every group with which they've shared a bill.

Of course, longevity only counts for so much. A band cannot remain vital on nostalgia alone. Arm and company seemingly recognized this, airing material from this year's excellent *Vanishing Point* album and interlacing it with established favorites. Bold and adventurous, Mudhoney didn't follow the tossed-off plan embraced by countless legacy acts by simply playing one or two new tunes to try and give the illusion of creativity and relevance. Eight recent songs—including an opening one-two punch of the greasy "Slipping Away" and chant-inviting "I Like It Small"—anchored a set ensconced in punk attitude and chased with shots of garage-rock psychedelia.

Always up for a party, Mudhoney isn't as sloppy, drunken, or raucous as it was two decades ago. But tradeoffs for tighter, more disciplined rhythms and direct, searing deliveries have made it a better band. Mudhoney's trademarks—primal arrangements, catchy hooks, menacing humor, off-kilter beats, fuzz-drenched distortion—remain in tact. So

does the rawness. And Arm, apparently immune to vocal changes usually wrought by aging, still yowls and wails like a savvy outsider disgusted at the caliber of humans and privileged actions surrounding him. He's also honed a tart sneer on par with peak-era Iggy Pop and Johnny Rotten. And he's got the body language to accompany it.

When freed of guitar duties, Arm bent himself into pretzel-twist positions, his arms, shoulders, and legs jutting from multiple angles. He spun around on one leg, leaned forward on another as if practicing advanced yoga, and got to face-to-face with the crowd. Singing as if possessed, the frontman entered search-and-destroy mode on the confrontational "The Only Son of the Widow From Nain," using his eyes to scan and his howled refrains to threaten. He alternated between leaning forward and backward, contracting and surging with the music, lashing out ("Chardonnay") with the same contemptible urgency he invested in grimy, wrong-side-of-the-tracks narratives ("Here Comes Sickness").

Arm's slide guitar fills provided an ideal foil to his six-string partner's crunchy chords and stun-gun wah-wah pedal effects. Turner's death-ray blasts on the cosmic "In This Rubber Tomb" recalled the sonic language that fills comic-book dialogue balloons. He turned the zig-zagging "Get Into Yours" into a push-and-shove match and kicked the blues into reverse

during "Judgment, Rage, Retribution and Thyme." Peters played it equally cool, proving his era's Charlie Watts during the march-and-chug signatures of "Suck You Dry" and playing off the dirty, scuffed Arm-Turner dynamic on "Sweet Young Thing Ain't Sweet No More"—a song that came on as the bastard child of the protagonist in the Rolling Stones' "Mother's Little Helper." For "You Got It," the group's collective rumble gave the impression of a train wreck in which one freight car piles into the other. Only this accident was intentional, and kept in check by Arm's bitter jabs at an adversary.

So, rock n' roll is only a young person's game? Nope. Mudhoney relayed frustration, disillusion, resentment, and the associated consequences of such conditions with the authoritative confidence and humorous disposition of a band that's seldom known any other realities, but which is grateful for never having flirted with the trappings of vapid celebrity or auto-pilot existence.

"I want to be a star/I'm going to have a car/And you'll have to admit/I'll be rich as shit," Arm deadpanned on a cover of Fang's "The Money Will Roll Right In." Along with the emotionally liberating "Hate the Police," Mudhoney has made the sarcastic send-up of fame, fortune, and fakeness its own. As the band well knows, money can't buy everything. Integrity and originality are worth far more.

THE PIXIES AND THE REPLACEMENTS AT RIOT FEST CHICAGO

September 15, 2013

Humboldt Park
Chicago, Illinois

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Robert Loerzel

For the Pixies, it was a chance to demonstrate any surviving shred of relevance. For the Replacements, it was an opportunity to give fans a dream come true. For both influential artists, it was an exercise in nostalgia. And when it was over, 35,000 rain-soaked people witnessed the breathless highs and sour lows often generated by band reunions. More important than the music played, the groups' back-to-back headlining performances on the final evening of Chicago's three-day Riot Fest conjured the unwritten rules and risky consequences that accompany every musical Second Act.

Having decided to give it another go nearly ten years ago, the Pixies' comeback jaunt has lasted longer than the quartet's initial run—a stretch that witnessed the release of two of the most influential records (*Surfer Rosa*, *Doolittle*) in rock history and another two full-lengths (*Bossanova*, *Trompe le Monde*) that stand up to most anything recorded by peers. However, until the weeks leading up to Riot Fest, the Pixies had for nearly a decade strictly milked the past, issuing just one forgettable song while touring on the back of material devised while Reagan and Bush were in office. They teetered on transforming into their generation's Eagles, an act content to sell seats on the basis of playing favorites such as “Debaser,” “Here Comes Your Man,” and “Monkey Gone to Heaven” for listeners that missed them in the late 80s or arrived too late to see them open for U2 in 1991, right before they split.

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Running on empty, the Pixies were desperate for a shakeup—or, better, the alarm-sounding awareness that they were soiling a once-infallible legacy. This summer, circumstances turned both awkward and promising. In June, the stunning news that original bassist Kim Deal departed hinted the band received the jolt it needed to shock itself off life support. Another sign arrived in early September with the immediate release of *EP-1*, the Pixies' first new music in an eon. Alas, everyone's worst fears soon became reality. The sorry songs on *EP-1* are embarrassingly bad, caricatures of the group's defining work. Suddenly, Deal's decision to leave—she said she didn't want to do it anymore—looked brilliant. Who could blame her? What, exactly, would the Pixies resemble going forward?

If the depressing showing at Riot Fest looms as an indication, the foursome is in the process of succumbing to the paint-by-numbers stasis welcomed by aging pop acts that ink deals to play Las Vegas residencies. Singer/guitarist Frank Black can no longer hit frenzied high notes and, approaching lyrics in the unfeeling way one recites a memorized poem in high-school English class, displayed none of his former zaniness. As a whole, the collective sounded lifeless, flat, punch less, uncaring, and devoid of dynamics. After beginning the set with two covers—the Fall's "Big New Prinz" and the Jesus and Mary Chain's "Head On"—the Pixies sleepwalked through familiar fare like the once-great "Subbacultcha" and "Wave of Mutilation," draining

the life blood out of the very tunes responsible for hot-wiring so-called "alternative rock" into a movement.

To her credit, Deal's replacement, ex-Muffs leader Kim Shattuck, tried to ease concerns related to her predecessor's absence. She tossed her head to and fro, plugged away at her bass, and attempted to elicit sparks of enthusiasm. Yet Shattuck came across like she's filling a role rather than fully enmeshed in the collective fabric, and can't spell Deal on background vocals. The Pixies' stabs at recent work ("Indie Cindy," "Bagboy") only underlined how far they've fallen. Given his inaudibility and tired showing, guitarist Joey Santiago might as well been unplugged. Save for Shattuck, none of the Pixies moved. No, the Pixies were never a remarkable live band even in their creative heyday. But now, they are a stiff bore, a group fattened by the lucrative paychecks nostalgia begets, and far better experienced on record and remembered for what once was, not for what they've become.

For these and other credibility-staining reasons, and the inescapable void left by two deceased members, the Replacements resisted persistent calls for reunions—even turning down rumored high-six-figure paydays to head up Coachella and Lollapalooza. This is a band, after all, that literally broke up onstage at its final show in Chicago in July 1991, ending in a shambolic fashion befitting a group renowned for disorganization, drunkenness, in-fighting, self sabotage, and all manner of erratic behavior. In the time since, solo careers sprouted and withered. *(continued)*

For these and other credibility-staining reasons, and the inescapable void left by two deceased members, the Replacements resisted persistent calls for reunions—even turning down rumored high-six-figure paydays to head up Coachella and Lollapalooza.

Singer/guitarist Paul Westerberg lived a largely reclusive existence in Minneapolis while bassist Tommy Stinson joined the post-*Use Your Illusions* lineup in Guns N' Roses, where he's stayed since signing on in the early 2000s.

Of course, unlike the bitter hostility preventing the longed-for reunions of the Smiths and Husker Du, Westerberg and Stinson actually get along. While the former adamantly downplayed the possibility of getting back together, the amicable relationship of the 'Mats' two surviving members always meant hope existed for fans—particularly those born after the group imploded. And, when last year Westerberg and Stinson collaborated on an EP to benefit guitarist Slim Dunlap, people again began to wonder. Wishes were finally granted this summer as Westerberg announced the 'Mats would perform three shows. In addition to reflecting the band's do-it-on-our-own-terms history, its choice to bow at Riot Fest rather than one of the larger, commercialized gatherings spoke to an indie-derived integrity and punk-honed background that inform the 'Mats' early albums.

"I'm a music-business professional," cracked Westerberg as he reached towards his feet, tore out a clock installed to keep the band from exceeding curfew, whirled its cord around, and tossed the device aside shortly into the group's 75-min-

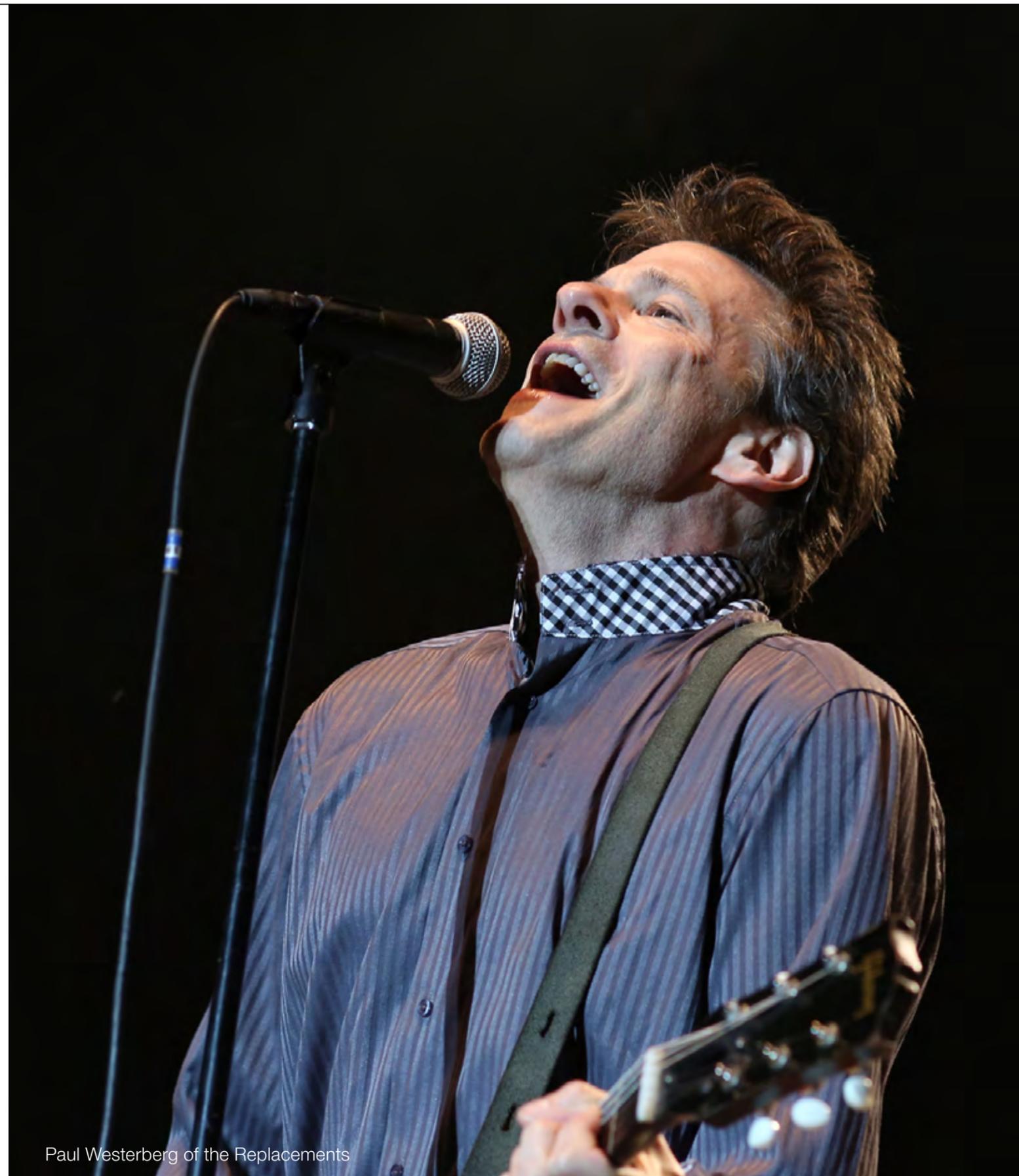
ute set. His spontaneous actions drew loud applause and laughter, intimating that, after all these years, the frontman remained brash and unpredictable. He also entertained with other clever jokes and humorous remarks, going as far as to note that the watery guitar tone on "Swingin' Party" resembled that of the Cure—and not in a good way.

It almost seemed too perfect. For slapdash moments and self-deprecating traits always went hand-in-hand with the 'Mats and, to the extent that the slouching Westerberg and Co. embraced a tossed-off persona, the music was anything but. The band stomped, snarled, strutted, and serenaded through 25 well-rehearsed songs punctuated with the type of soulful investment and ragged-but-right vibrancy usually lacking in Second Act appearances. With guitarist David Minehan and drummer Josh Freese filling in the personnel gaps, the 'Mats sounded strong and, gulp(!), professional. They were having fun, and didn't embarrass themselves or their music.

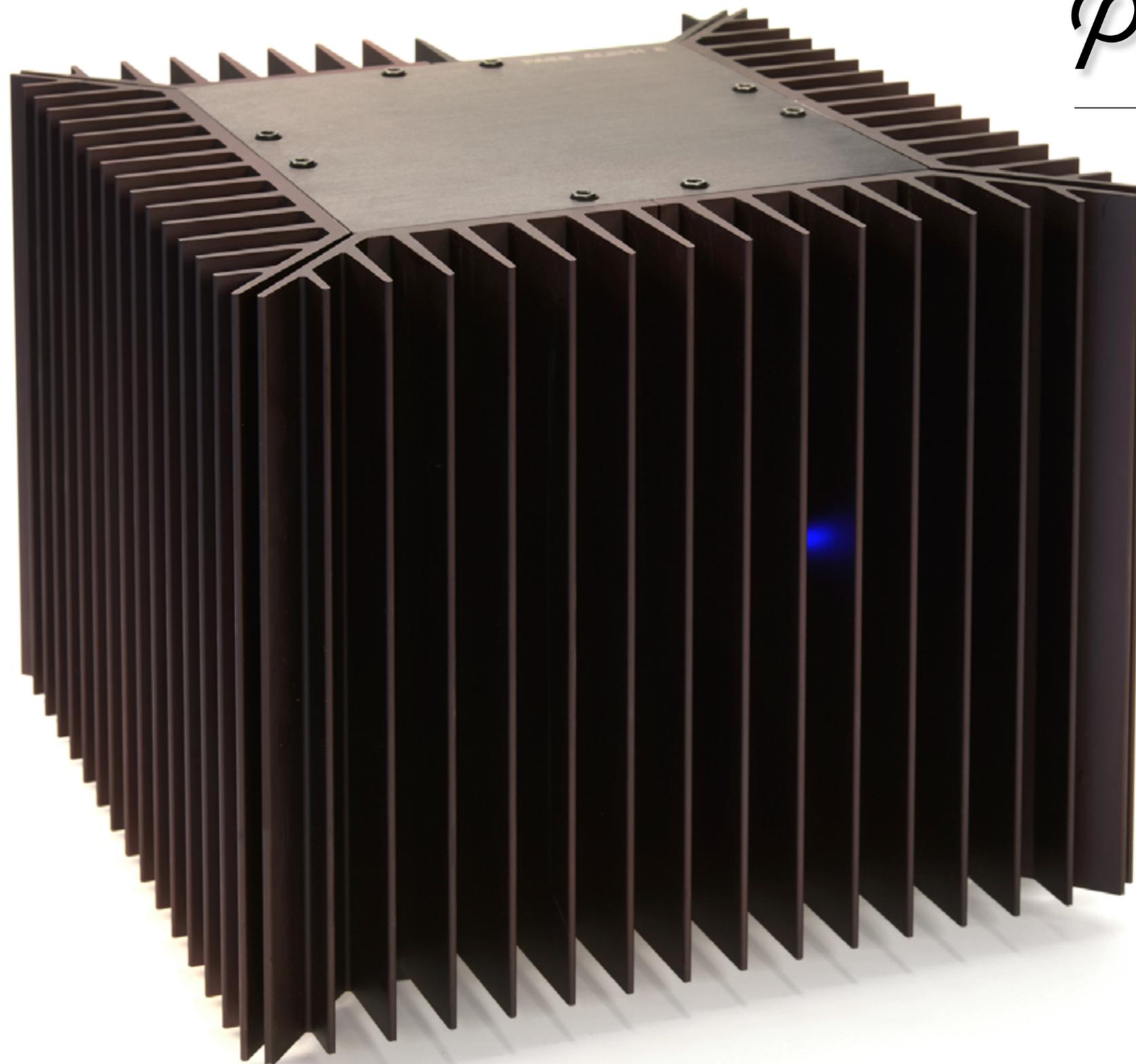
In touching on garage punk ("Love You Till Friday"), jukebox ballads ("Waitress in the Sky"), glam-splotched rock ("Kiss Me On the Bus"), gritty pop ("Color Me Impressed") and tipping their collective hats to country (via Hank Williams' "Hey Good Lookin'") and early rock n' roll (by way of a sped-up rendition

of Chuck Berry's "Maybellene"), the Replacements served notice that their diverse body of work is still vital. Westerberg's sturdy voice negotiated the gaps between vulnerability and guardedness, sarcasm and seriousness, and daring and safety that many of the group's tunes address with head-on inertia and honest emotion. A few forgotten words and stray chords added to the impression that what transpired came straight from the heart, and not from any sense of obligation (contractual or otherwise) or want for further recognition.

At present, the Replacements have no further shows scheduled, begging the question of whether they're leaving well enough alone and refusing to fall into the predictable cycle that ensnared countless acts that reunited and fell short of expectations. Every band should be entitled to one comeback, one shot at the big payday, one chance to please new and old fans. The Replacements seized those opportunities and akin to Led Zeppelin in 2007, limited the number of their concerts to make them destination events to which audiences traveled to experience, knowing full well it was a now-or-never venture. Time will tell how much the 'Mats value the showbiz adage "leave them wanting more," an important lesson that, to their detriment, the Pixies failed to heed. ●



Paul Westerberg of the Replacements



Pass Labs Aleph 5

By Jerold O'Brien

The Aleph 5 amplifier probably won't win any beauty contests. It's a basic black cube surrounded by heat sinks, and the only indication that it's operating (aside from its temperature after it's been on for a while) is a single blue LED. This retired model is a far cry from what you could purchase from Pass Labs today. I suppose the nearest amp in the current Pass lineup is the comparatively gorgeous XA60.5 amplifier. Both the 60.5 and its forebear deliver 60 watts per channel of pure Class A power into 8 ohms.

But isn't the older model just what angry audiophiles clamor for? Internet forums are filled with people bashing high-end audio companies for making beautiful-looking amplifiers with expensive casework. "I don't want to pay for all that. I just want good sound—and it want it cheap." Well, Mr. Audio Curmudgeon, step right up. The Pass Aleph 5 is the perfect amp for you.

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FEATURE

Passing It On

I honestly can't think of a single person who has done more to probe the limits of solid-state amplification than Mr. Nelson Pass. Since the inception of Threshold Corporation back in the 1970s, he's been on a continual quest to perfect the art and science of solid-state amplifiers. Threshold was one of the first companies (if not *the* first) to manufacture a truly refined solid-state amplifier. The company quickly rose to the top of the heap with pure Class A amplifiers like the 400A, as well as with its various patented Stasis designs. Threshold products were built with care, looked good and sounded great.

After Pass retired from Threshold, he rethought amplifier design—and the seeds for Pass Labs were sown. In 1991, he released the first Aleph product, the Aleph 0, to widespread acclaim. This and subsequent Aleph models were unusual looking, but they won the press and dealers over by virtue of their outstanding sound quality. I remember visiting a number of high-end retailers in the '90s and seeing these Aleph products on display while sales people raved about the sound.

The subject of this column is the Aleph 5, which is a single-ended Class A effort that succeeds on virtually every level. The design brief for this product is as ambitious as I've ever seen for an amplifier design. The output section is a patented design, which is exceptional for its simplicity in that there are only two gain stages. Typical solid-state designs have four or five gain stages. Remember, every stage takes a toll on sound quality. *(continued)*



FEATURE



The Aleph 5 offers absolutely no adjustments, and neither bias nor DC offset can go out of whack unless something catastrophic happens—hardly likely given the robust character of the amp’s power supply, which uses a 600-watt toroidal transformer and filter capacitance totaling 120,000 uF. This is a robust amp indeed. And for such a compact cube, it’s quite heavy.

Hooking up the Aleph 5 is easy. The back panel features the AC input socket, the on/off switch and a set of gold-plated binding posts, plus single-ended RCA and balanced XLR inputs. I chose to run the amp balanced throughout my listening sessions.

One word of caution: this amplifier runs HOT! Give it plenty of ventilation and breathing room. Pass recommends that, if you have one of these or happen upon one that hasn’t been looked over by

either the factory or a good technician, you do so in short order. Thankfully, Pass offers full support for all Aleph products.

Ready, Set, Go

After giving the amp about an hour of warm-up time, I play my usual compilation discs just to make sure that everything is operating as it should. It quickly becomes apparent that, following the warm up, this amplifier gets to the music’s essence without delay. I find myself with a total lack of “yeah, buts” as I go through the initial listening phase.

Every selection I play has a harmonic integrity and an overall richness of character that reminds me of the better tube amps I’ve heard. However, there is a level of grip in the low bass and a linearity in the mud bass (my phrase) that a lot of tube amps just can’t correctly handle. *(continued)*

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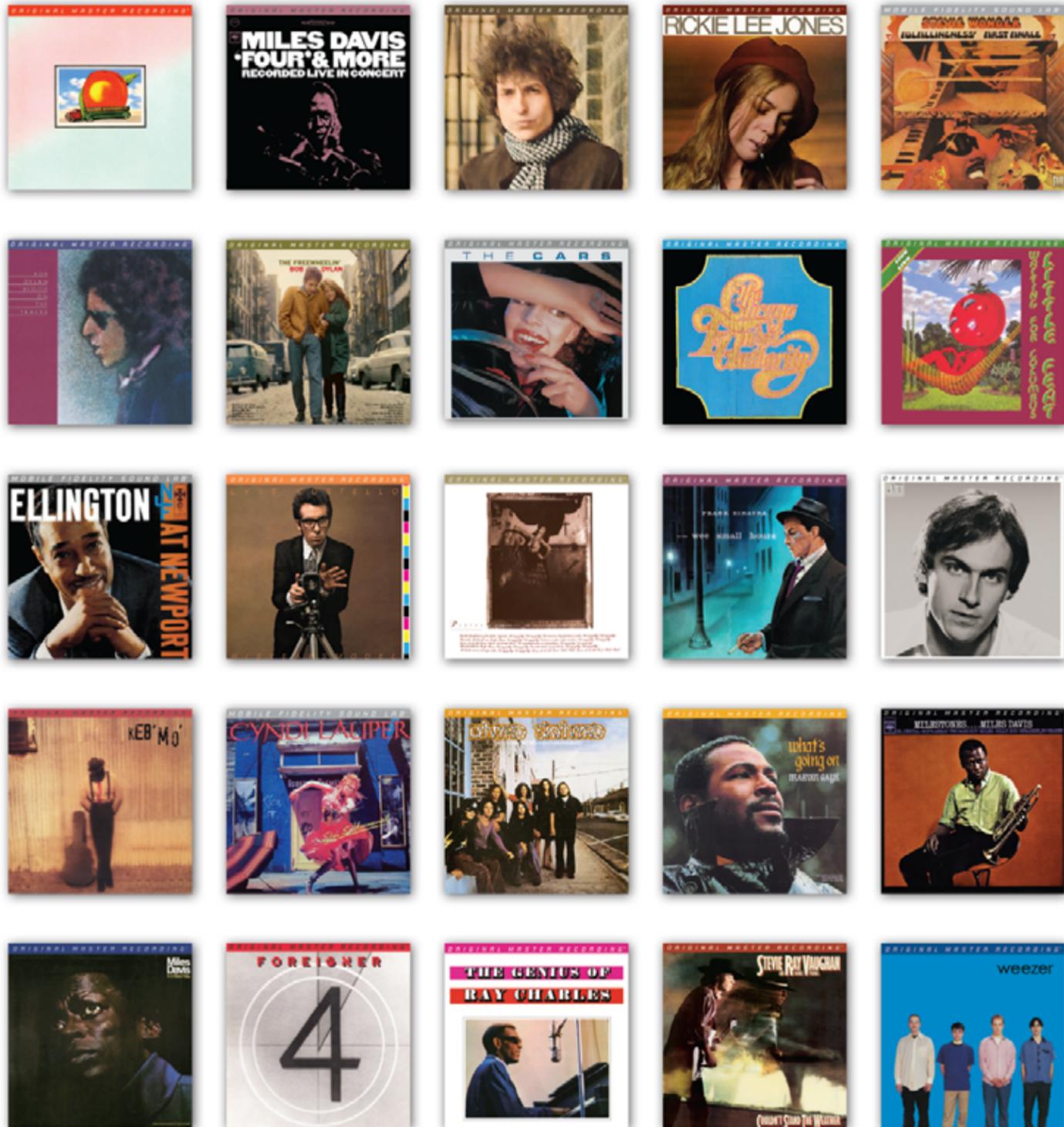
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FEATURE

The Aleph 5 also exhibits the vaunted midrange bloom that tube amps are noted for, but it does so with a bit more speed and gusto. The high-frequency region is smooth yet offers as much detail as one could possibly want.

As I listen at length, all of my audiophile selections sound fabulous and have air and space, as well as wonderful bass and shimmering highs. But these recordings bore the heck out of me, and so I quickly realize that I need to take off the audiophile hat and start enjoying myself. This amplifier basically says to me, "Stop analyzing and start with the head bobbing," which is not to imply that the amp exhibits any kind of coloration; it simply makes music. This *should* be a fun hobby, right?

Since prog and fusion are what pushes my buttons the hardest, that is the sonic sea upon which I eventually set sail. First up is the DVD-A recording of King Crimson's album *Red*. This is the best version I've heard of this masterpiece and, with the Aleph 5 in play, I'm able to hear Bill Bruford's unique snare drum tuning with all of its dynamic punch. On the live selection "Providence," John Wetton's signature bass sound is captured intact. The same goes for the self-titled first album from Emerson, Lake & Palmer. The big, fat and tactile Hammond organ is right there in all its majestic fullness.

I'm a big fan of moe., and so I thoroughly enjoy the band's album *The Conch*. On "Wind It Up," the interplay of the two guitar soloists is especially revealing in that it shows not only the style of playing but also the slightly different sound each player pours out. (continued)



FEATURE

One of the most under-appreciated guitar players out there today is Derek Trucks. I honestly don't know why. I've followed him for quite a while and he keeps getting better and better. My favorite album by him is *Songlines*, which is a fascinating collection of excellent compositions. It's not the greatest recording, but with the Aleph 5 delivering the music, who cares? Every bass line, every cymbal crash and every biting staccato guitar run is perfectly portrayed.

Just as I finish up my time with the Pass, the newly reissued version of Freddie Hubbard's *Red Clay* LP shows up on my doorstep, giving me a chance to fire up the turntable and feed the Aleph 5 some analog goodness. The track "Delphia" never sounded so good as it sounds here. I'm especially pleased with the way the Aleph presents Lenny White's cymbal work, which is sweet and detailed.

In the same package as Hubbard's album is Rory Gallagher's self-titled album, his first after his time with the band Taste. I push the Aleph 5's limit with some of the songs on this record. Here, and only here, the lone short-coming of the Aleph 5 shows up: The amplifier clips—but I'm encouraged by the fact that it doesn't fall apart. Rather, it behaves like a tube amp in that it becomes soft and compressed instead of ragged and distorted. This is something I could live with long term.

As my speakers have a sensitivity of 90 dB and as I have a relatively large room, the Aleph 5 is sufficient for 95 percent of my listening. However, if your speakers are in the 84- to 87-dB range and you listen loudly in a large room, some extended demo sessions

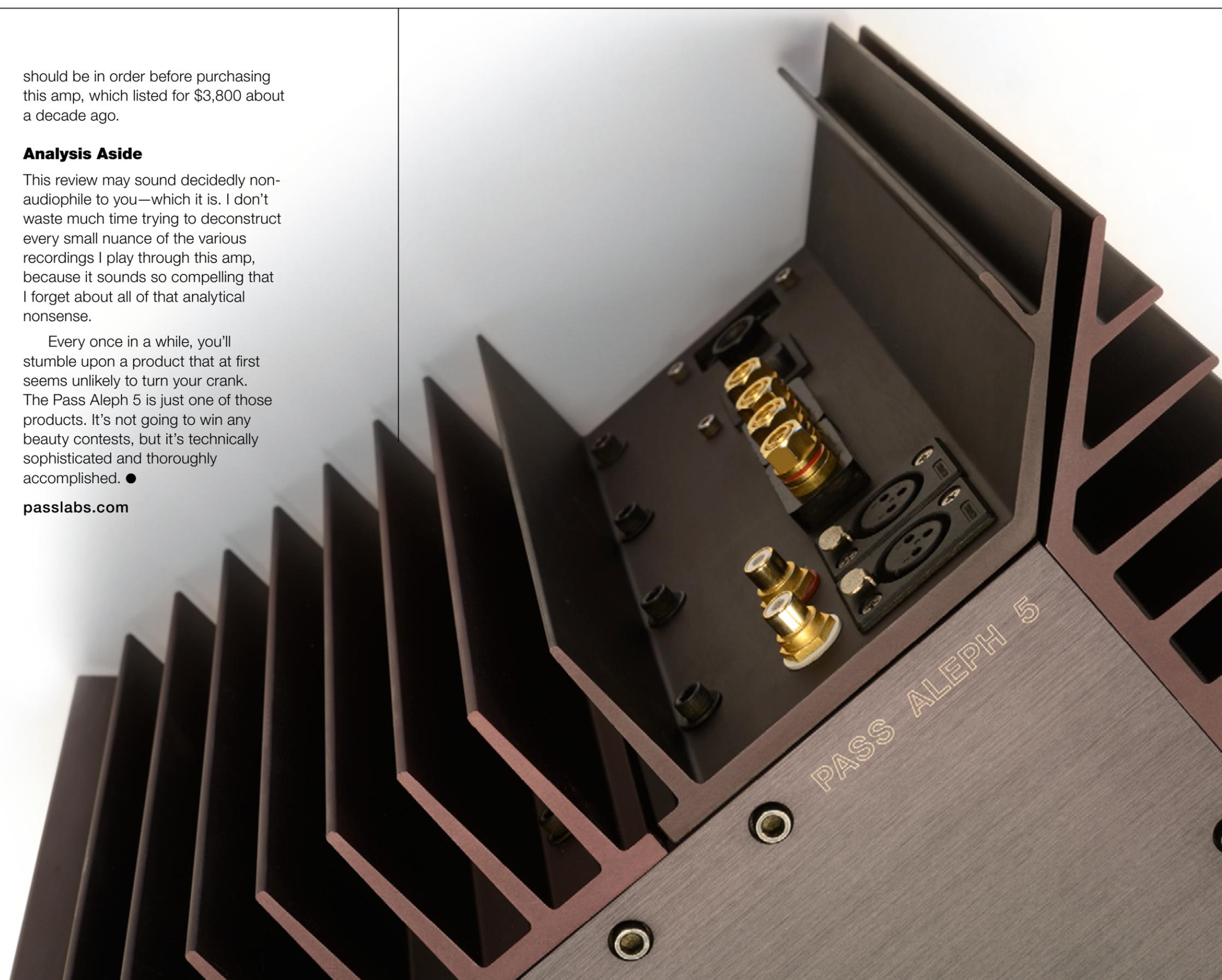
should be in order before purchasing this amp, which listed for \$3,800 about a decade ago.

Analysis Aside

This review may sound decidedly non-audiophile to you—which it is. I don't waste much time trying to deconstruct every small nuance of the various recordings I play through this amp, because it sounds so compelling that I forget about all of that analytical nonsense.

Every once in a while, you'll stumble upon a product that at first seems unlikely to turn your crank. The Pass Aleph 5 is just one of those products. It's not going to win any beauty contests, but it's technically sophisticated and thoroughly accomplished. ●

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NEW RELEASES

**Pearl Jam***Lightning Bolt*

Monkeywrench, LP or CD

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P

earl Jam's rather sudden, later-career consistency has been a pleasant surprise. *Lightning Bolt* isn't as lean as 2010's *Backspacer*, and it lacks the ferociousness of the band's Bush-era efforts, but there's more to like than not on Album No. 10, postponing, for at least another a few years, Pearl Jam's preordained ascension into the role of classic-rock arena fillers. Heck, Eddie Vedder even brings out his crowd-pleasing ukulele on break-up ditty "Sleeping By Myself," and the song doesn't feel like a novelty. Some victories, especially for a band more interested in fine-tuning a sound rather than pushing boundaries, are minor.



©Photo by Danny Clinch

As is the band's norm of late, the record starts brisk and heavy, with the first three songs propelled by Matt Cameron's hard-and-fast drumming. It's less intense that it is reassuring, since Pearl Jam remains a band that believes in the power of the drum fill. As trends have shifted and the shaggy, hearty feel of grunge now feels more dated than revolutionary, Pearl Jam too, has grown. A song like the title track, which quickly ramps up its musical layers and swiftly settles into a solo before hitting the 90-second mark, comes across

like the earnest preservation of an art form. It's a lovingly crafted ode to an era when musical transcendence was six strings and 45,000 people in box seats.

Throughout, the tone is reflective, with Vedder looking ahead by looking back and not always liking what he sees. He's recovered from a fall from grace in the bluesy "Let the Records Play," where music is religion, and he's splitting town after learning how to "put all your faith in no faith" in the guitar howler "Getaway." (continued)



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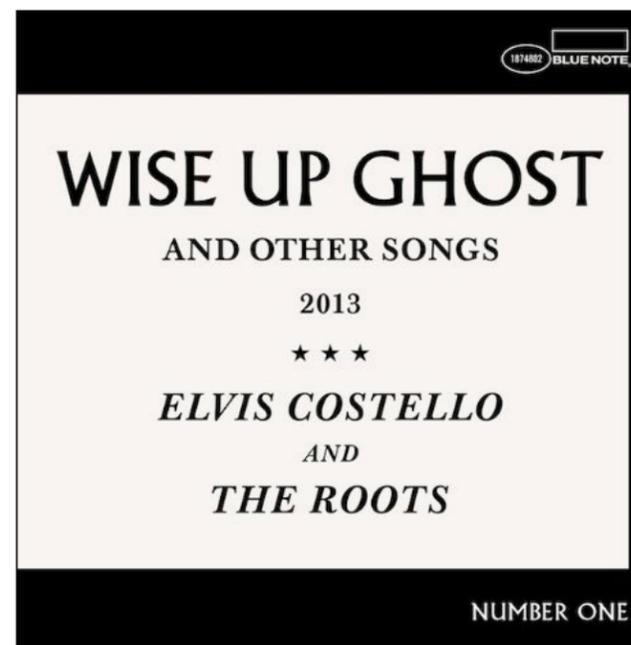
Selfishness gets addressed with some Heartbreakers-inspired piano revelry on “Lightning Bolt,” and “patience is tried” on “Mind Your Manners,” on which Mike McCready’s punk-rock guitar skids to a halt in deference to Cameron’s cymbal-banging fireworks.

Sure, there’s one too many moments on which the band indulges its softer side. “Sirens” is a mild offender, saved by some moonlight guitars and Vedder’s open-wounded falsetto as he fears his impending mortality. “Yellow Moon” and “Infallible” aren’t as lucky, more like mid-tempo seat-fillers than necessities. A passable lighter-in-the-air episode arrives on the violin-graced fireside strummer “Future Days,” as well as the slightly more interesting atmospheric diversion that is “Pendulum.”

When Pearl Jam revs up, the band still does so as effortlessly as anyone around. While nothing here is immediate as the *Backspacer* track “The Fixer,” album centerpiece “My Father’s Son” comes close and should be a tour favorite for years to come. Jeff Ament ricochets his bass around the equivalent of a tortured mental funhouse while Vedder curses his hand-me-down genetics. It’s not a paternal rant, but a call for freedom and tolerance for mistakes. “Can I get a reprieve?” Vedder yowls, even as he’s already answered his own question. —**Todd Martens**



©Photo by Danny Clinch


Elvis Costello and the Roots

Wise Up Ghost
Blue Note, 2LP or CD

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In *Mo' Meta Blues*, the recent autobiography from Roots drummer Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson, the musician defends his diverse tastes, writing, "You'd think at this point there'd be an understanding that I'm not faking, that I love music of all kinds."

He's not lying. The drummer's list of collaborators stretches from Bay Area hip-hoppers Blackalicious to piano balladeer Fiona Apple, and from rap royalty (Jay-Z, Q-Tip) to pop radio megastars (John Mayer, Christina Aguilera). Considering Elvis Costello's own reputation as a serial collaborator (he's recorded alongside Burt Bacharach, Allen Toussaint, Michael Tilson, etc.), it was only a matter of time before these two crossed paths, which they finally did due in part to the Roots' ongoing role as the house band on "Late Night with Jimmy Fallon."

Despite the obvious chemistry between the musicians, the atmosphere throughout is far from celebratory, and the players spend much of the album reacting to a world they see sliding into chaos. "You're either for or against us," Costello sings amidst the march to war of "Tripwire," which borrows a melody from his own "Satellite." "And that is how the hatred begins."

Things only grow bleaker from there. A would-be bride turns terrorist on the haunting "(She Might Be a) Grenade," while the Latin-spiced "Cinco Minutos Con Vos" includes mentions of drones and endless hails of gunfire. "Come the Meantimes," in turn, finds Costello ready to meter out some biblical justice of his own, suggesting it's time to "gather some stones and make them atone."

The musical backdrop is steeped heavily in soul and R&B, yet you can tell Questlove, who wrote and produced the album alongside Roots producer Steven Mandel, has done his homework on Costello. This shouldn't come as a surprise. The drummer is a notorious workhorse, and he prides himself on his level of preparation. "The second I find out a band has been booked [on 'Fallon']," he pens in *Mo' Meta Blues*, "I go to Rdio or Spotify and listen to their albums. I look for interviews on YouTube. I want to make sure I'm well versed by the time they arrive." (continued)



©Photo by Danny Clinch

As a result, musical and lyrical nods to Costello's past are scattered throughout. The moody "Stick Out Your Tongue," for one, includes musical references to "Pills & Soap" off 1983's *Punch the Clock*. Other songs, like the piano ballad "If I Could Believe," are merely suggestive of the past, and the gorgeous tune sounds like it could have been lifted from any Costello set from the last several decades.

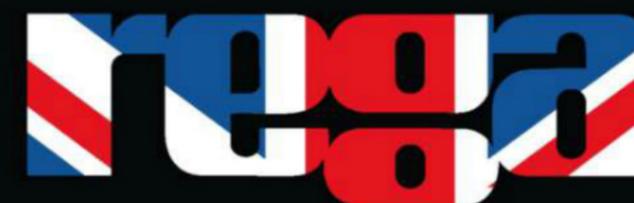
Despite the Roots sharing co-headliner status, however, it often feels like Costello leads the charge. In retrospect, it would have been nice to see Roots MC Tariq "Black Thought" Trotter stop by for a guest verse or two to shake things up, particularly as the record meanders through its less-focused second half ("Can You Hear Me" clocks in at over six minutes, but feels much, much longer). Regardless, it's a pleasure to listen in as these likeminded souls exchange musical ideas—even if many of them inspire a lingering sense of unease. —**Andy Downing**

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Near the end of *Bitter Rivals*, the third album from New York noise-pop partiers Sleigh Bells, vocalist

Alexis Krauss expresses shock and dismay at running into an old partner. “When I heard you were still alive, I must admit I laughed, I cried,” she sings, her permanently upbeat voice once again rising above the vague semblance of a heavily distorted riff behind her.

That sense of surprise—one somewhere between happiness and bewilderment—could also be applied to the mere existence and approach of Sleigh Bells itself. Opposite emotions tug at each other throughout *Bitter Rivals*, and if it’s not quite a new look for these lovers of arena wailing and rudimentary hip-hop, there’s enough digital tweaks to indicate that Sleigh Bells still has room for growth, albeit not without awkwardness.

When the duo of Krauss and Derek Miller shredded onto the scene into 2010 with their full-length debut *Treats*, the ear-splitting bombast of the album’s mix of trashcan synths, bargain-basement guitar effects, and muffled, sloganeering vocals had a one-and-done feel.



Sleigh Bells

Bitter Rivals

Mom + Pop, LP or CD

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Krauss’ accessibly cheery vocals provided a beacon of light into the mess of noise—a mélange of 80s metal and 80s hip-hop that sounded as if it were mixed by the old Shea Stadium soundboards. But where to go when everything has already been cindered?

Last year’s *Reign of Terror* provided some guidance, as the album’s best tracks saw Sleigh Bells creating near-ballads out of the cacophony. Melodies, never the band’s strong suit, were abstracted, and vocals were further buried and layered, yielding a trancey, borderline art-punk feel. *Bitter Rivals*, the mere title of which implies the combustion of polar opposites, attempts to split the difference while adding some warmth, often in the form of bringing Krauss to the fore or fleshing out keyboard arrangements. *(continued)*

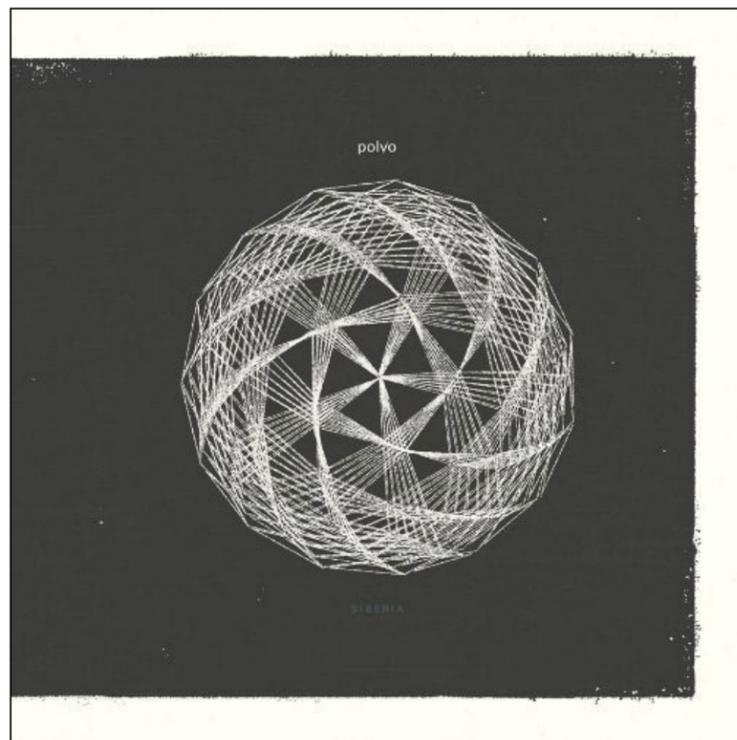


MUSIC

Emphasizing anything other than Krauss or the guitars proves disastrous on “Young Legends,” where the synthesizers channel reggae at its most cartoonish and recall novelty throwaway acts such as Aqua. Adding more space and clarity also puts a greater focus on the lyrics, which doesn’t always work in Sleigh Bells’ favor. Witness the Dickens-quoting title track or the “hole in my chest” heartache of “Love Sick,” where two-dozen shifts in direction can’t make up for the lack of one good one.

Not all is lost. “Minnie” has a ticking time-bomb beat and the requisite guitar terror, while piano twinkles and heavily sampled call-and-response vocals cause the song to burst with little flourishes that have the listener looking in different directions. Actual audible guitar strumming brings balance to “Sugarcane,” and “You Don’t Get Me Twice” is a less a song than an assembly of bits and pieces of a dance routine. Here, Krauss is alternately whisper-sweet and conversationally cold. Handclaps and fingersnaps keep the focus on the movement.

Similarly, the approach works well on “24,” where the album is its most hypnotic. Guitars sound like instruments played with knobs, and Krauss, the piano, and the effects seem to circle around one another. “Sing Like A Wire” is even more forceful, as the act’s penchant for cheeseball effects tries to match the duo’s hot-and-cold nature. It all makes *Bitter Rivals* a draw, the mixed results making the move feel more lateral than forward. —**Todd Martens**



Polvo
Siberia
 Merge, LP or CD

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In spite of its title, there's little desolate about *Siberia*, the second album Chapel Hill-based math-rock quartet Polvo released since reuniting in 2008. Much like its predecessor, 2009's *In Prism*, the record is dense and knotty, packed with twitchy guitar passages, dissonant outbursts, and complex time signatures. Even when the music is at its scruffiest, however, it's still played with impressive precision, conjuring images of Bill Murray's well-drilled band of misfits in *Stripes*.

Members Ash Bowie and Dave Brylawski continue to split singer/guitarist duties, and the two spend much of the album locked in an epic duel. Opener "Total Immersion," which stretches out over six winding minutes, sets the tone. The guitarists seemingly jab at one another, tumble to the floor, and bounce back on their heels in a defensive posture. Polvo still incorporates unusual tunings, but its sound, much like most people, has thickened with time.

"The Water Wheel," in particular, sounds beefed up and

ready to rumble, the dual front men growling at one another atop oddly melodic brambles of guitar for nearly eight minutes. The song's defining moment (as well as that of the album) arrives precisely at 5:02 when the two guitarists briefly trip over one another before regaining their footing and locking horns in an off-kilter jam session that's near-dizzying in its majesty.

Fans of the band's mid-90s work—particularly the still-vital *Exploded Drawing*—that harbored concerns about the ongoing reunion (just look to the Pix-

ies to see how these things can quickly devolve into lazy cash grabs) needn't anymore. While there are missteps (the synth-driven "Light, Raking," for one, comes on like an alternate score to some cheesy 80s sci-fi flick), there's never a sense the musicians are content to till the same old ground.

Instead, they push forward, weaving electronic jams as delicate and intricate as spider webs ("Blues Is Loss"), rolling out mystic acoustic numbers that hover like mist over water ("Ancient Grains"), and embracing a more

primal, roughhewn side (witness "Some Songs," a skeletal guitar throwdown built on corroded riffs that cough, sputter, and stampede). Considering the band's on-again/off-again past, it's advised you enjoy the ride, however long it might last.

—**Andy Downing**

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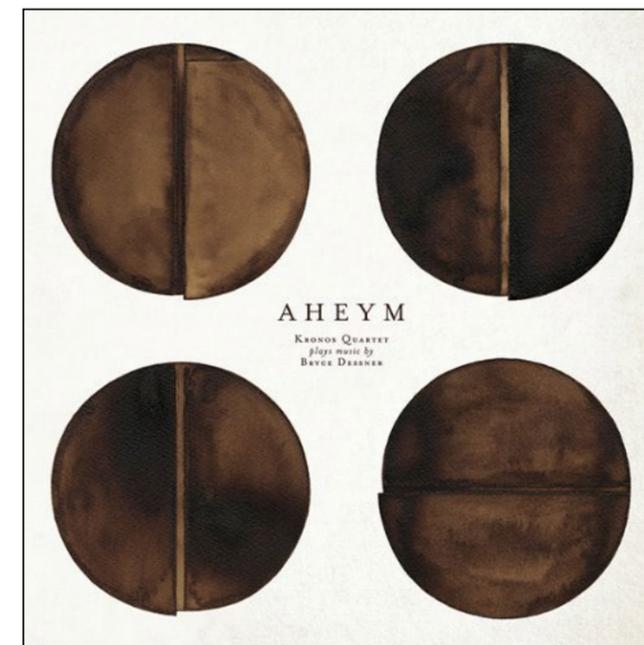
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Bryce Dessner and Kronos Quartet

Aheym
Anti-, 2LP or CD

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The title piece is named after the Yiddish word for "homeward" and its source materials are stories from Dessner's grandparents about immigrating to the United States. In some ways, the piece can be heard as reflecting traditional Jewish refrains—especially in David Harrington and John Sherba's minor-key violin lines. But there are no obvious, say, klezmer, riffs. Perhaps previous Kronos collaborator John Zorn deserves more credit for using his Radical Jewish Culture concept to expand how the music should be defined. More compelling is how the quartet's unison moves repeat the basic melodic theme and slowly grow in intensity toward Jeffrey Zeigler's cello solo. *(continued)*

Bryce Dessner, guitarist of The National, and chamber ensemble Kronos Quartet share considerable common ground. Along with his main gig in the Brooklyn-based indie rock band, Dessner serves as composer in residence at the Dutch Muziekgebouw Frits Phillips. One could also point to his classical training as a reason why strings and unusual time signatures work on The National's recent *Trouble Will Find Me*.

Meanwhile, Kronos has made its affinity for such modern minimalist composers as Steve Reich and Terry Riley extend to rock covers and collaborations. Four years ago, Dessner produced the 2009 Red Hot AIDS relief compilation *Dark Was The Night*, which included Kronos' version of Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground." So, his four compositions that comprise *Aheym* resulted from close affinity, if not outright inevitability.



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At seven and a half minutes, “Little Blue Something” is the shortest piece. It’s dedicated to two other minimalist composers, Czech viol da gamba players Irena and Vojtech Havel. Sort of a cross between a small cello and violin, their instrument is relatively rare in chamber ensembles nowadays. While no passages obviously replicate the viol’s resonance, the quartet’s sparse tones build a sense of tension that is retained toward the piece’s stirring conclusion.

Although twice as long and built as a suite with different sections, “Tenebre” follows a plan similar to “Little Blue Something.” It begins with Yang’s quietly stuttering cello part before Harrington, Sherba, and viola player Hank Dutt

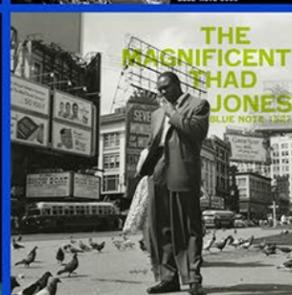
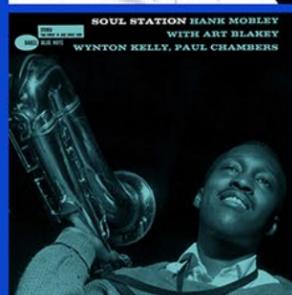
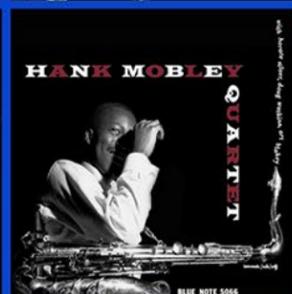
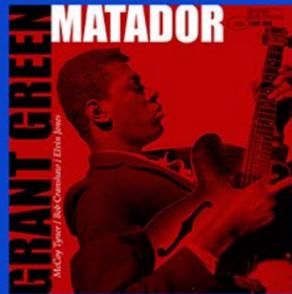
come in to subtly modulate repeated phrases. Then, their high-pitched held notes turn eerie. But when Sufjan Stevens’ multitracked voice enters, the result sounds too precious, as if it’s trying to make the performance reach toward the ethereal. It doesn’t fit in with the quartet’s own four-way conversation.

Brooklyn Youth Chorus performing Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro’s “Tour Eiffel” is far more effective. The ensemble starts unaccompanied, but Dessner slowly joins in on guitar alongside pianist Lisa Kaplan and low-key percussionist David Cossin. The quartet moves gracefully from background to foreground, creating a cultural exchange that sounds like a true partnership. —**Aaron Cohen**

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Drake titled his latest full-length studio album *Nothing Was the Same*, but a far better name might have been *Nothing Has Changed*.

Not that this is a bad thing, necessarily. The 26-year-old Canadian remains a respectable rapper, a smooth singer, and an excellent curator of sounds. (His beats, largely courtesy of longtime producer Noah Shebib, are universally fantastic, lacing together everything from house to downcast R&B so chilled it appears to be frozen in polar ice.) He also continues to pack songs with a healthy dose of pathos. This is the guy, after all, who spent nearly six minutes emoting about getting liquored up and drunk dialing an ex on his 2011 breakthrough “Marvin’s Song.”



Drake
Nothing Was the Same
Young Money/Cash Money/Republic, CD

These days, the rapper is still beating himself up over his romantic failings, and he spends his time pining for a handful of former flames, most memorably Courtney “from the Hooters on Peachtree” Street in Atlanta, a reference so specific even the Facebook overlords might raise privacy concerns. As a matter of habit, Drake has always walked the line between have-it-all bluster and on-my-own despondency, and he doesn’t stray from the template here. One minute he’s boasting “my life’s a completed checklist” with chest-thumping authority, the next he’s professing a need to cut ties with the world before his inevitable breakdown.

He’s also, like most celebrities, wholly enamored with the concept of fame, and spends large chunks of the album opining on his trending status. On “Started From the Bottom”—an odd sentiment coming from a guy who’s been a star since landing a role on a Canadian soap opera as a teenager—he professes the “story stayed the same through the money and the fame.” That the first instinct isn’t to

LOL at this proclamation is a testament to Drake’s ability to remain relatable in spite of his massive fortune. He’s like the anti-Mitt Romney in this way.

At times, however, his tortured-baller persona starts to wear thin, and there are far more cringe-worthy lines here (here’s looking at you, “Girl, you know I’ve seen you naked”) than on any other Drake album, which says something. Of course, over-sharing has always been the rapper’s thing, which makes him the ideal star for this me-first Internet age, and he doesn’t disappoint on suave confessionals like the aptly titled “Too Much.”

As with many web-savvy youngsters, Drake also isn’t afraid to do a little trolling, which is exactly what it feels like when the rapper samples Wu Tang Clan’s “It’s Yourz” for a track called “Wu-Tang Forever” and turns it into a sing-song ballad miles removed from the cold concrete streets of Shaolin. It’s flawed, to be sure, but Drake somehow pulls it together, which serves as an accurate description of the rapper’s utterly unique career. —**Andy Downing**



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f a little crazy goes a long way, then Janelle Monae's *The Electric Lady* illustrates how far a lot of it can go. The short answer: A 19-track album that feels as if it's a time-traveling trip through R&B's past and present. If there's a genre, Monae likely touches upon it, if even for a brief layover. She'll drop a soul-stopping rap, sweetly serenade a lover, and then lead a girl-group stomp and complete it all as if she's R&B's answer to James Bond—her suit never wrinkled, her pompadour always in place. And speaking of spies, there are spy overtures, too.



Janelle Monae
The Electric Lady
Atlantic, CD

Monae's gift on this, her second full-length album, and the fourth and fifth parts of her still-growing sci-fi epic (we warned there was some crazy), is that she's able to finesse her way through disco, soul, gospel, classical, jazz, rock, and whatever smooth, loungey vibes are found in-between it all. For all the genre bending, *The Electric Lady* feels remarkably pop-minded and accessible. If 2010's *The ArchAndroid* had a little classical-meets-ambient weirdness, *The Electric Lady* sticks closer to the groove.

Those who have been with Monae since the 2007 EP *Metropolis*, which introduced the planned seven-part storyline of the sent-from-the-future Cindi Mayweather, may find the Monae of *The Electric Lady* a little more earthbound. There's one—OK, two—too many ballads, and, yes, the skits have got to go. But as Monae makes it clear on the title track, this is a “classic kind of crazy.”

There's humor, as one moment, she'll be calling out for more wine. And there's an underlying social conscious. *(continued)*

©Photo by Marc Baptiste





©Photo by Marc Baptiste

Witness the overworked janitor on the warped synth-rap of “Ghetto Woman” or the shimmering tune of economic decline that is “Dance Apocalyptic,” where maxed-out credit cards and bomb threats hint that there’s more to Monae’s silliness than marrying acoustic strumming with the colorfulness of the Ronettes. If the world is going to hell, this isn’t a bad party for its finale.

Beyond the stylistic globetrotting, there’s also a heck of a guest list. Prince slings up beside Monae on “Givin’ Em What They Love,” where fireside crackles and shakes give way to guitar solos and an orchestra.

“Q.U.E.E.N.” features an assist from another R&B adventurer in Erykah Badu, not to mention a beat that is driven by finger snaps and what may or may not be a kazoo. “Primetime” gets sensual, “It’s Code” is teleported from the 60s (complete with sugar-meets-vamp crooning from Monae), and “Dorothy Dandridge Eyes” bridges laidback funk and jazz without schmaltz. Fine, with a little schmaltz, but if you’ve made it to the end, you’ve already long surrendered to Monae’s anything-goes journey.

—**Todd Martens**

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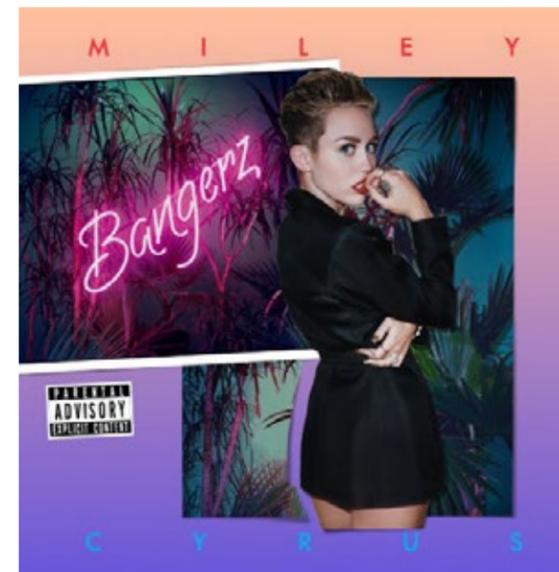
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Miley Cyrus
Bangerz
RCA, CD

When *Bangerz*, the third Miley Cyrus record to not contain any “Hannah Montana” branding, was officially made available for streaming in the days before its October 8 release, it was okay to feel a bit dirty. The media, after all, has been treating Miley’s transition from a virginal teen brand (one who loves her country-singin’ pops!) to a corporate sleaze peddler as if the spectacle amounts to the equivalent America’s Royal Wedding. Miley seemed ghoulishly eager to exploit it all.

She grinded on teddy bears, talked balk to Sinead O’Connor, and did some very un-Disney-like moves with a foam finger. So when *Bangerz* hit the Internet, it triggered a universal pop-culture curiosity to see how crazed, how sexy, and just how downright adult it was going to sound. Our little Hannah Montana is all grown up, so pull up a chair and watch this former daddy’s little girl make the leap into a self-described “female rebel.” What a disappointment: *Bangerz* turns out to be a rather boring show.

The album has the correct ratio of midtempo tracks to club tunes (just shy of half, if you get the 16-song expanded edition that clocks in at an overstuffed hour), and lyrics that needle but never really provoke. A tune such as “4x4” won’t sound too bad among the din of clinked glasses and conversation in a crowded bar, although it will likely be indistinguishable from “Cotton Eyed Joe” when relegated to background music. (Apparently, the country doesn’t come off as easily as Miley’s clothes.) Later, “FU” finds Miley bringing her rasp into Amy Winehouse territory but serves as a reminder that Miley the rock singer (see Top 10 hit “See You Again”) has more bite than Miley the pop singer (see all of *Bangerz*).

Here, liberation is choosing a “battery pack” over a man on the “Push It”-referencing “SMS (Bangerz),” on which Miley raps. The collaboration with Britney Spears also sees both artists digitally processed to the point of anonymity. As evidenced by “#Getitright,” vulnerability is handled even more poorly. Hitmaker-for-hire Pharrell Williams rips off Michael Jackson’s “Black or White” to leave Miley writhing around in bed waiting for her man to hang up the phone and pay attention to her. One surprise is that *Bangerz* contains very few actual bangers. “Maybe Your Right” is a ballad that reaches

for “Simply the Best” grandeur and “Adore You” tries to make the argument that there’s no orchestra a MacBook can’t improve.

The biggest offense is that none of it feels much fun. Even the hit “We Can’t Stop” is the veritable party song at its most fatalistic—its tone woozy and slowed down. Like Weezer’s “Can’t Stop the Party” or even “Key & Peele’s” LMFAO parody “Non-Stop Party,” it’s a party because we’re too dead inside to do much of anything else. This is tragic because Miley is actually quite personable and, by all accounts, has a genuine appreciation of music history, as her elegant, stripped-down tackling of classics such as “Lilac Wine” and “Jolene” has made clear.

Bangerz, however, seems to exist for two reasons. One, because “Party in the U.S.A.” was a bigger hit than her pop-rock tunes, and two, because Miley, while no longer starring in a television show, is still following a script. From Annette Funicello to Selena Gomez, many a teen star has taken the show-some-skin path to adulthood, and while there’s no shame in wanting to dance along to *Bangerz* at a party, we should all feel embarrassed we’re still hungry for the same ol’ song and dance.

—Todd Martens



©Photo by Julie Moe

A

couple of songs into Lindi Ortega's new album, she sounds like a talented neo-cowpunk with an Ennio Morricone soundtrack fixation. That's cool enough in its own right. But then, the fifth track, the ethereal tearjerker "Lived and Died Alone," rolls around. It's a mind-bending piece of forlorn goth-country that proves she's clearly in a league of her own.



Lindi Ortega

Tin Star

Last Gang Records, LP or CD

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"I know someday when the sun has set I will go dig up the dead/Lift their bodies from their graves and I'll lay them in my bed," she muses. "To fill their hollow hearts with all of my broken parts/And all the love that they were never shown." Hello!

Ortega, a critically acclaimed Canadian singer-songwriter, is a Nashville transplant. But, as she shows time and again on *Tin Star*, she's not just anyone's typical Music Row chanteuse. Which is also why she's not on a major country label. Where a country star like Jason Aldean sings about generic partying on a dirt road, Ortega takes a detour into the graveyard itself to "search for sweethearts underneath the dirt."

The girl's got serious brass. There's much to love here. Ortega possesses a haunting soprano that moves from wistful whisper to full-bore sass. On the lush and dreamy title track, her quavery ache invokes classic Skeeter Davis singing against a muted mix of piano and strings. On the upbeat "Voodoo Mama," she lists toward the sparkling dynamism of Dolly Parton.

Although Ortega nails sad like nobody's business, she's also no reticent wallflower. The brash, bluesy "I Want You" is punkishly demanding. Ortega and crew summon the ghosts of swamp-punk icons the Gun Club and the Cramps.

Grammy-nominated producer David Cobb—who has also worked with Secret Sisters and Shooter Jennings—frames Ortega with sympathetic and inventive arrangements. Together, they reference a number of touchstones. You can almost see the Sergio Leone tumbleweeds blowing past the reverb-drenched guitars of "Hard As This." And the strummed guitars of "Gypsy Child" hark back to Buck Owens' "Streets of Bakersfield."

In "This Is Not Surreal," Cobb sets her haunted vocals against a sweetly picked Spanish guitar. "One must always suffer for the sake of their art," she sings. Coming from Ortega, this isn't lip service to an ideal. It's a statement of fact from a singer-songwriter that takes real risks and sticks to her artistic guns. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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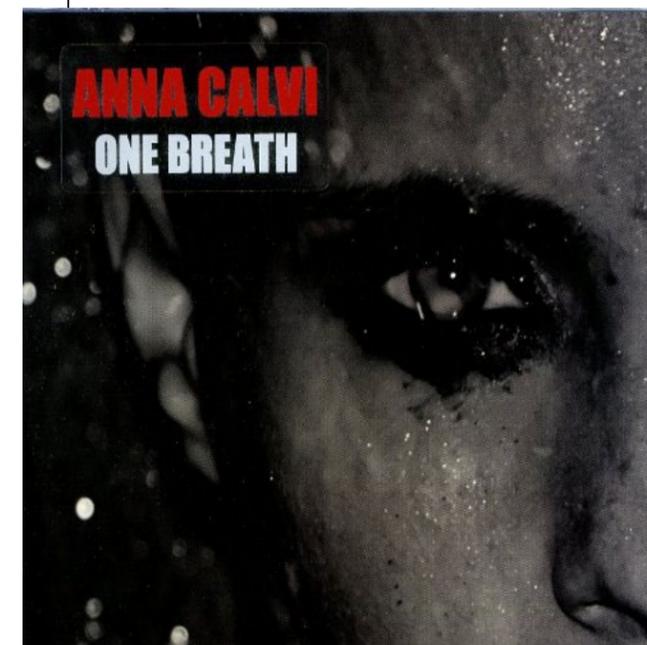
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T

here's drama in the work of Anna Calvi.

In one instance on *One Breath*, stressed guitars and breathy lyrics give way to a Stravinsky-inspired string arrangement. In another, sparse, water drop-like rhythms build to a sweeping lovesick ballad only to disintegrate into something eerily similar to Mike Oldfield's "Tubular Bells," known to most as the theme for *The Exorcist*. Yet another tune is a little more than an angelic choir, and it comes only moments after a track in which a vampiric, dirty guitar riff raises all sorts of hell.

The British singer/songwriter isn't lacking for theatricality. She sings unsympathetically, her alto blood red in its vivacity, her tone elegant in that Nick Cave, David Lynch, PJ Harvey-like blue, and her orchestrations as ornate as "Downton Abbey" but as recklessly lustful as "Game of Thrones." Forgive the visual references, but the onetime film composer hopeful takes a widescreen approach. Perhaps that's why her criminally small fan base may consist almost entirely of fashion designers.



Anna Calvi

One Breath
Domino, 180g LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct



One Breath, Calvi's second album, builds on the elegant sinfulness of her 2011 debut, where tension is raised but never fully released. "Is it so cruel to see your cry?" she sings early on, an administer of anguish but also the key to its relief. Church organs simmer, rattlesnake grooves taunt, and Calvi leaves the final act to the imagination. "Show me where it hurts," she coos on "Cry," just as guitar strings sound as if they're being skinned rather than strummed.

It's all, as Calvi describes in a press release, trying to channel "the moment before you've got to open yourself up." Such emotion inspires a multitude of sonic variations. "Eliza" is a Western romp on which rhythms

echo as if recorded in a tomb, and "Piece by Piece" is oddly warm in its dissonance, the string orchestrations dreaming of a happily-ever-after even as studio-aided instrumentation twitches all about.

On the title track, momentum builds on a slow march of whistling, teasingly relaxing digital landscapes and vocals so intimate you can practically see the cracks in Calvi's scarlet lipstick. "It's gonna change everything," she sings, her voice just above a whisper as guitars lurk like vultures. Then the rug is pulled, and a classical orchestra springs to life. Some may marvel at its beauty, other may feel manipulated, but the journey is gripping. —**Todd Martens**

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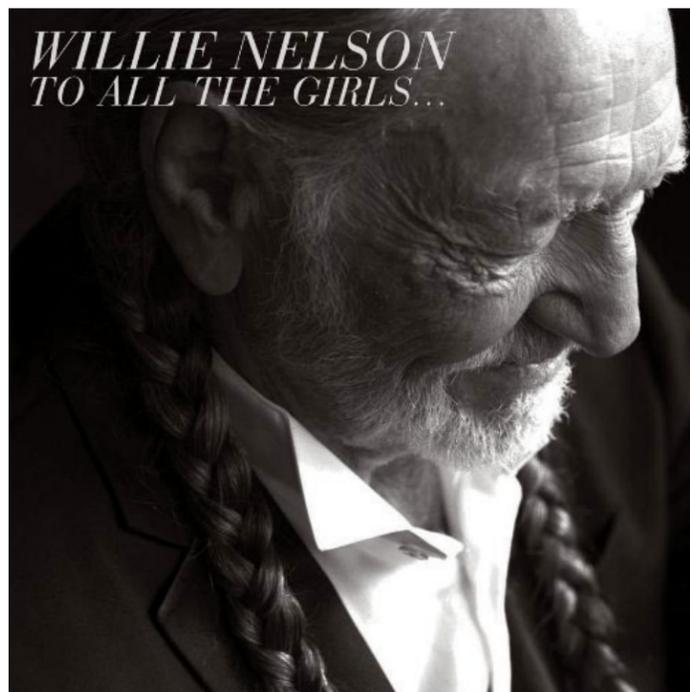
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M O O N





Willie Nelson

To All the Girls...
Legacy Recordings, 180g 2LP or CD

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ver the years, Willie Nelson has recorded with a disparate list of artists without losing his own style or credibility. His choice of duet partners ranges from variously unnerving (Toby Keith) to legendary (Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard) to downright odd (Julio Iglesias). Regardless of singing partner, however, Nelson always comes out smelling like a rose.

The Red Headed Stranger celebrates his 80th birthday this year by continuing to crank out new material at a furious pace. His latest, *To All the Girls...*, is a duet album with 18 country-pop female singers. It's his third release in 16 months. Maybe that's part of the problem: Too much, too fast. God bless Willie on his b-day, but the duet king delivers another decidedly mixed bag here.



l-r Norah Jones with Willie Nelson

Of the youngsters joining in on the party, Miranda Lambert shines through the weeping steel of "She Was No Good For Me." A current star of the genre, Lambert is a real-deal singer who can hold her own with the elder statesman. The same can't be said for the bland Carrie Underwood on "Always On My Mind." The original song is classic and understated, yet the new arrangement gets middle-of-the-road lounge treatment. Underwood has big pipes, but there's little emotion in her perfectly slick notes.

Wynonna Judd and Nelson's sassy take on "Bloody Mary Morning" fares better. Similarly, Rosanne

Cash delivers a vulnerable reading on the pensive ballad "Please Don't Tell Me." Not to be left out, Sheryl Crow does a worthy Rosemary Clooney imitation to Willie's Bing Crosby on "Far Away Places."

Arrangements throughout are low-key and tasteful. Several are filled with tinkling piano and sweet strings. But a sameness sets in on many tracks, a detriment to many of the talented women assembled here—including Secret Sisters, Paula Nelson, and Brandi Carlile. Worse, two of the greatest singers alive—Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn—get lost in the shuffle.

Other flaws find Emmylou Harris injecting her trademark vocals into the bittersweet Tex-Mex outing "Dry Lightning" only to suffer from an annoyingly brief time slot. Likewise, Alison Krauss is underused on the slinky "No Mas Amor." It takes the titanic Mavis Staples to finally blow through the surrounding gauze with the southern-fried gospel-soul number "Grandma's Hands."

Yes, it's good to see Nelson so productive at his age. But next time out, less really would be more. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Peachtree Audio's deepblue Bluetooth Music System

By Rob Johnson

Some audio fans crave a stereo experience courtesy of multiple components. Of course, more equipment means more money. Plus, each component needs its own power cord, interconnects and shelf space. For those who seek a smaller, more portable home-audio experience—or for those who simply want a more manageable music system outside of their primary listening room—a single-box wireless audio product, like the Peachtree deepblue, is a great solution.

FEATURE



The elliptical cabinet of the deepblue measures 8 inches tall, 6 inches deep, and 16 inches long, and it is slightly flared at the bottom. The unit weighs a substantial 16 pounds. This form factor makes this Peachtree portable and it can bring a lot of sound to any size room.

The deepblue's facade comprises a black plastic case with a metallic grille, which extends the full width and height of the unit. The result is slightly cheap looking, but those who believe sound is more important than appearance will easily forget the unit's aesthetic. The grille protects the forward-facing drivers neatly packed behind it. On each side of the unit resides a small tweeter placed above a midrange driver. These four drivers flank a centered 6.5-inch woofer. Thanks to the deepblue's onboard amplifier, the package can put forth a hefty 200 watts.

Peachtree's design for button controls on the deepblue is a model of simplicity. There's a power button nestled between a volume up and a volume down button. That's it. And that's all you really need. The deepblue's remote control enables a few additional and helpful adjustments. In addition to selecting standby power and volume from the remote, the user can adjust the unit's bass output for various types of music or preference. It's also nice to have the ability to adjust bass to compensate for placement near a wall or inside an enclosure, which sometimes result in bass "loading," or boominess. *(continued)*

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Connecting and Disconnecting

The only wires a user needs to contend with for the deepblue are the power cord and the mini-jack auxiliary stereo connector. This 3.5-mm input allows users to connect an external source manually. But for those who want to scale down to just the power cord, deepblue also accommodates Bluetooth pairing with devices like an iPad, iPhone, or a computer, as long as those devices support A2DP Bluetooth audio. The remote also enables source switching so that the listener can choose between the connected auxiliary source and the Bluetooth source from the comfort of a listening chair.

Bluetooth setup is very simple: activate Bluetooth on an external music source; press and hold the deepblue's power button for five seconds (or just press the remote control's "Pairing" button for two seconds); and then the unit's light flashes slowly and initiates the coupling process. Peachtree notes that the deepblue has a maximum Bluetooth range of around 30 feet, although obstructions and walls can reduce that distance.

Those who opt for Bluetooth and commit their phone as the music source need not worry about missing a call while enveloped in the listening experience. The deepblue recognizes the call and will fade and stop the music, alerting the listener. Once the call is complete and disconnected, the unit resumes playing music. It's a marvelous capability and it works flawlessly.

Testing Bluetooth functionality on an iPhone 4 with iOS7, I find that the process is just as easy and seamless as advertised. After holding down the "pairing" button on the remote at 15 feet away, the deepblue flashes its blue LED and "Peachtree BT" appears among the connection options on my phone. *(continued)*



The one.



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FEATURE

After I touch that source listing on the phone and after a brief pause, the phone connects. Selecting some music on the phone produces immediate and good quality sound from the Peachtree.

With a Bluetooth source, the paired communication enables the remote to advance or pause the song playing. So, when listening to the Police's album *Synchronicity*, it's easy to skip the song "Mother" before it has a chance to claw its way out of the speakers. When I test this functionality, the remote has some trouble interfacing with my iPhone 4's controls, but I'm sure newer mobile devices will have less of a problem.

Diving In

Being accustomed to a large stereo reference system, I reset my expectations for the single-box deepblue. After much listening, I'm mighty impressed with what's achievable for the \$399 cost of the unit. Even in my large listening space—17 feet deep by 20 feet wide by 10.5 feet high—the deepblue puts out plenty of sound to fill the room without any perceivable strain. Whether the source is a Bluetooth-paired phone with songs ripped at 128 kbps, an iPod with lossless files or a CD player connected to the auxiliary port, the sound remains very good. The better the source material the more the Peachtree rewards the listener.

Given the deepblue's design as a compact, single-box unit, a listener can expect inherent limits in stereo imaging and soundstage. All musical elements sound compressed together; however, considering that limitation, the deepblue offers a reasonable soundstage.

The deepblue's portrayal of music remains generally relaxed, but it is not without punch. Throughout hours of listening to many types of music, stridency is limited. *(continued)*

FEATURE

High frequencies, in some cases, sound a bit rolled off, but there's still plenty of treble to satisfy most listeners. Vocals are nicely rendered and very present in the mix, but some vocal test tracks expose a bit of sibilance. Regardless of music type—be it classical, jazz, electronica or rock—the balance of instruments remains very well portrayed.

Even through a Bluetooth connection, the cymbals on the Dave Brubeck Quartet's "Blue Rondo à la Turk" offer a surprising amount of sparkle and decay, which appropriately jump out from the overall mix. Playing Big Bad Voodoo Daddy's debut album tests the Peachtree's ability to handle a multitude of simultaneous instruments and vocals—and it does not disappoint. It's still easy to pick out each instrument sonically, despite the limited soundstage separation.

Exploring the Depths

As mentioned earlier, the bass adjustment is a lot of fun to experiment with. While a small physical box has some limitations in the lowest frequencies, the Peachtree is definitely no slouch. Jean Michel Jarre's album "Rendez-Vous" leads in with a hefty, synthesized bass roar. With the deepblue's bass turned up, even at 15 feet away, the sound causes the sofa to vibrate slightly and unexpectedly.

On some tracks, I enjoy listening with the bass accentuated a bit, though some boominess and muddiness is occasionally the result. The overall sonic presentation



FEATURE

is tighter with a solid, stable surface beneath the unit. For testing, I place the deepblue on a 26-inch-tall spiked speaker stand, allowing the tweeters to hover near ear-level. For home listeners, some placement experimentation is worth the time to find the balance that best serves a user's needs and preferences.

Hidden Treasure?

The Peachtree deepblue is not a system intended for audiophiles seeking the greatest level of stereo reproduction, imaging and nuance. It is designed to be a simple, plug-and-play solution to fill any room with music. It meets its intended goals very well, and then some.

At \$399, the deepblue offers very good sound for its price point. Notable benefits are authoritative bass, enough horsepower to play at substantial volumes and solid rendering of all music types. This Peachtree does all of this with great user-friendliness. Plus, a listener can place it anywhere an electrical outlet is near. For those seeking a flexible, unobtrusive and turnkey audio solution, do yourself a favor and check out the Peachtree deepblue. You might find it to be a perfect fit. ●

deepblue Bluetooth Music System
MSRP: \$399

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GRADO LABS FACTORY TOUR

A Brooklyn Success Sixty Years in the Making

By Ian White
Photos by Samantha Marble

Sitting with a rather antsy John Grado in the third floor listening room at Grado's factory in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn, one gets the sense that the storied manufacturer of headphones and phono cartridges has not been this busy in decades. Grado, who took over the company from Uncle Joe; the inventor of the world's first stereo moving coil cartridge back in 1953, has a reputation for being incredibly blunt and candid with his thoughts on all-things audio, and it's a perspective with a lot of weight behind it.

Apple's iTunes celebrated its tenth anniversary this past April and the folks at Grado will be the first to admit that the impact on their business was profound; the first three years of their headphone business in the early '90s was a real struggle and Grado admits that they made no money. The explosive growth of the iPod and portable audio has turned what was a struggling part of their business into a major revenue source and based on all of the product that was awaiting shipment, it is clear that Grado is running at full capacity.

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FACTORY TOUR



With the exception of the iGrado and their in-ear models (GR10, GR8, and the iGi) which are manufactured in China, everything else Grado makes is manufactured in the United States and the company goes to great lengths to market that aspect of their business.

The Grado “factory” in Brooklyn is a converted unassuming multi-story home/fruit store/machine shop that Grandpa Grado purchased in 1918 and with the exception of the steep and narrow stairways, almost every inch of the building is used to maximize the cramped space.

The basement machine shop where headphone molds are produced, and the deliberate and patient work required to produce their award-winning phono cartridges takes place looks dated and it is hard to

imagine how the technicians are able to produce thousands of headphones and cartridges each year in such an old-school set-up, but the reality is that the dedicated employees get it done with great efficiency.

The cartridge and headphone assembly stations are split up over multiple floors and while it all seems a little chaotic with so many employees working on seventeen phono cartridge models and ten different headphone models, the amount of product that gets produced on a daily basis is rather astounding.

Grado may not be selling as many phono cartridges these days compared to the 1970s and 1980s, but business has picked up significantly from 1990 when their business dwindled to 12,000 units for the entire year. *(continued)*



“In the 1970s, we were producing 10,000 phono cartridges a week and were back-ordered for six months,” remarked Grado when we broached the subject of vinyl’s resurgence. “1980 was certainly the peak for us when we were still selling 10,000 cartridges a month, but with the advent of digital audio, that business took a major dive and by the mid-90s, we were certainly in a bad situation.”

While Grado is thrilled with the newfound interest in vinyl, he takes it all in stride and is realistic about business ever returning to past levels.

“We sold 60,000 units in 2005 and our issue now is keeping anything in stock. It’s a real challenge to have enough stock for dealers, and sufficient parts to meet demand,” replied Grado.

Grado’s most popular cartridges are still the Prestige Gold1 (\$220.00) and Prestige Green1 (\$80.00) and while audiophiles have prized the more expensive wood body Platinum and Sonata models for their punchy and colorful midrange, the millennials that have Grade up at night are sticking with the entry-level cartridges for now.

“Let’s be honest. The current generation of kids doesn’t even know what a hi-fi store is and they are far more comfortable shopping online for a pair of headphones or their first phono cartridge. This is a generation that grew up with Beats by Dre and an iPod and while we’re excited to see them interested in vinyl as a format, it is still very niche. *(continued)*”



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These kids are not running out and spending \$3,000 on their first turntable, but we are in a good position because we sell high-quality cartridges that are affordable and are compatible with a lot of good tables and phono preamps.”

While the growth in cartridge sales has Grado swamped, John Grado is surprisingly less optimistic long-term of about the growth of headphones sales.

“We’ve had ten years of growth and it has certainly put our business on solid footing for the future, but we’ve already seen the headphone market begin to plateau and with so many new products entering the market, we have had to take a step back and rethink what we plan on offering in the future.”

Grado has a number of new headphone models in the development stage; an acknowledgement that not every customer wants a pair of open-ear headphones, and there are plans to ramp up production of their headphone amplifier which has taken a backseat to the insane demand for their headphones and phono cartridges.

Grado’s marketing approach has also changed thanks to the efforts of Marketing Director, John Chen, who has been extremely active building relationships with manufacturers like VPI who offer table packages with Grado cartridges and headphone amplifier manufacturers such as Woo Audio who sell Grado headphones on their website and display at trade shows. *(continued)*



John Chen, Marketing Director at Grado Labs

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FACTORY TOUR

Grado has an enormous and loyal base of brick and mortar and online retailers that have made the brand a global success story, and while online sales now account for 75% of total product sales, the company has no plans of abandoning the retailers who have been loyal for so many decades.

Grado doesn't do the audio show circuit, but there is no shortage of their products at shows and compared to more expensive products from competitors such as Audeze, AKG, and Sennheiser, the venerable SR60i which I schlepped around the globe for almost ten years before they were stolen somewhere between Eilat and Jerusalem, are a major bargain.

The more expensive "cork-screw" Grado headphones such as the RS1i (reviewed in issue 57) and the GS1000i offer a more transparent window into the sound with more potent bass response and better detail retrieval, but all of the Grado products share a similar house sound that has made them popular with music lovers around the globe.

John Grado may be correct that the headphone business will eventually begin to swallow itself and products will become a commodity and consumers will ultimately vote with their wallets, but he is far too busy to worry about that eventuality at this point in his life. The graduate of John Jay College who wanted to spend his life as a lawyer has instead spent decades selling the art of sound reproduction and that's a Brooklyn story with a happy ending. ●

Naim UnitiQute 2 All-in-One Player

By Jerold O'Brien

W

hen Naim introduced its all-in-one UnitiQute player a couple years ago, everyone here went bonkers over the damn thing, drawing the obvious references to the legendary Naim Nait. The original Nait, with only 15 watts per channel, came packaged in a similarly sized (i.e. small) chassis and had the ability to drive a pair of moderately sensitive speakers to musical heights not experienced for that price tag. Back in the mid 1970s, a Naim Nait fetched about \$699 at your favorite hi-fi dealer, but it was worth every penny to those who owned it. Today, a spotless example still commands nearly the same price and loyalty. That's product longevity.



FEATURE



The original Qute substituted a high-quality DAC for the phono-stage and allowed streaming, in addition to providing an FM tuner and a sweet sounding 30-watt-per-channel power amplifier. Adjusted for inflation, this is still a bargain at \$1,995—especially if one takes into consideration all those power cords and interconnects that you won't have to buy. You can read our review of the original UnitiQute here.

The Qute 2 nudges the sticker price up slightly to \$2,195. While the power rating remains 30 watts per channel, the circuit board has been redesigned to decrease noise levels. Similar refinements have been made throughout, making the Qute 2 even sweeter sounding than its predecessor.

The Qute 2 is a perfect solution for anyone wanting a compact yet high-performance component, essentially a receiver, that can power your favorite pair of speakers and call it a day. It is tastefully styled, well built and highly functional. And best of all, it's easily expandable, should you desire to build a more elaborate system at some point—a hallmark of Naim products. Those living in a small space will appreciate the subwoofer output, making it easy to add a sat/sub speaker system with a powered subwoofer. This is almost always ignored on even more expensive all-inclusive components. *(continued)*

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— Ed Kobesky *Positive Feedback Online*

"... it makes no apologies to stereo amplifiers costing three times as much. It is my current benchmark in integrated tube amplifiers."

— Dick Olsher *The Absolute Sound*



A Little System Matching

As part of a compact high-performance system, with the KEF LS-50 speakers, the Qute 2 proves impressive, however, it does require a few days of constant play to sound its best. Right out of the box, the sound is slightly constrictive, but it opens up quickly. I push the Qute 2 even harder by replacing the LS-50s with a pair of 3-ohm MartinLogan Aeries i speakers, which are notoriously tough to drive, and the Qute 2 doesn't miss a beat.

Listening to Graham Parker's 2001 release *Deepcut to Nowhere* quickly reveals the Qute 2's ability to create a believable three-dimensional soundstage and maintain rock-solid pace, which are Naim hallmarks. A similar effect is realized when listening to the last set of remastered Beatles CDs. At the beginning of "All You Need is Love," the violins, horns and chorus all have a distinct placement

between the speakers, while John Lennon's vocals stay anchored slightly stage left and McCartney's signature bass brings up the foundation of the track.

It should be noted that, for the Qute 2, you will need a pair of speaker cables with banana plugs on at least one end, as the Qute 2 is pressed for real estate on the rear panel. Like the Wadia Intuition we recently reviewed, the Qute 2 only has space for a pair of banana plugs. On one level, this pays homage to Naim's past and keeps the setup tidy. There wouldn't be any room for massive audiophile plugs behind this petite amplifier even if the clever Naim engineers could squeeze a pair of binding posts back there. We ran the same pair of AudioQuest Meteor cables that were used on the original Qute review with excellent results. Long gone are the days that you have to use Naim's own speaker cables to properly interface with your speakers.

FEATURE

When keeping things at a reasonable pace and volume level, there is nothing in the *TO-NEAudio* arsenal (or my own collection of speakers) that the Qute 2 can't push effectively. Bringing back a friend's Qute reveals that the original still possesses a bit more midrange sweetness (which can easily be taken for coloration, depending on what side of the fence you're on), but the extra power far outweighs a smidge of midrange magic for this reviewer, who really does like to rock.

Broadening the perspective and taking advantage of the Qute 2's analog input, I add a Naim StageLine phonostage and a Rega RP6 turntable with Exact cartridge to the system, nearly doubling the cost of the Qute 2/LS-50 combination—which will also double the pleasure for the analog lover. Spinning the recent MoFi remaster of the Allman Brothers' *Eat a Peach* is a ton of fun, and the Qute 2 delivers more than enough resolution to provide a great analog experience.

It certainly resolves enough musical detail to easily discern the difference between the \$2,000 Rega table and the \$500 Pro-Ject I also have on hand. With the Rega in the mix, the soundstage is more expansive in all three dimensions, with a more airy, fleshed out and better-defined upper register. Don't let this compact package fool you; the Qute 2 has far more substance than its small size suggests. It's a full-bodied Naim component in every sense. *(continued)*

FEATURE

The Qute 2 is Apple friendly, so it will snag the digital bitstream from you iPod or iPhone, making it easy to take advantage of your music collection. MP3s with 320 kbps play back with startlingly good clarity. Upping the game to CD-quality files demonstrates just how good the iPod can be in an audiophile environment when loaded with better software.

Taking advantage of the Qute 2's high-resolution DAC makes listening to high-res audio files via the Astell&Kern AK100 and AK120 portable players a real treat, and this arrangement is in keeping with the compact ethos of this component. Listening to the slinky vocals on the recent HDtracks download of Joni Mitchell's *Hissing of Summer Lawns* reveals layer upon layer of detail when compared to the original CD rip.

A Joy to Use

Even though the Qute 2 features a wide range of functions, it is surprisingly easy to use. While it is critical that you don't lose the remote, as none of the functions can be accessed from the front panel, the app that is available for iPhone users is far more handy and convenient to use, giving a graphic display of the Qute 2's functions. When synced with your home network, the Qute 2 app allows you to control inputs and volume anywhere within range. This comes in handy when the phone rings, and it also means you can have one less remote control lying around.

Once the Qute 2 is powered up, a quick run through the front panel allows you to optimize its settings. You can select relevant sources and choose big or small speakers; the bass rolls off a tad for small speakers, giving you some extra headroom in the process. Should you be leaving the Qute 2 unattended, I suggest taking full advantage of the maximum volume setting, which will save you from blowing a tweeter or upsetting the neighbors.

If seven digital inputs and an analog input aren't enough, you can also use the USB socket on the front panel to play music from a USB flash drive. You can also summon files from an UPnP music server via a hardwired connection or via the built-in Wi-Fi. Naim suggests a hardwired connection for best digital performance and we concur, especially if your music collection consists of CD-quality and HD-quality digital music files. Those with large collections of low-res MP3s will not suffer terribly from the wireless connection, should a wired connection not be convenient. Those not streaming digital files, or if you're just listening to music via a CD player (like Naim's excellent CD5si, which we currently have in for review), can still use the Wi-Fi antenna to connect your iPhone to the Qute 2 for full remote functionality.

Running the Qute 2 through a gaggle of different headphones reveals that the on-board headphone amp is up to snuff and that it will drive all but the most difficult headphones with ease. *(continued)*



FEATURE

While it is critical that you don't lose the remote, the app that is available for iPhone users is far more handy and convenient to use, giving a graphic display of the Qute 2's functions. When synced with your home network, the Qute 2 app allows you to control inputs and volume anywhere within range.

No other headphones come close

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

— Jeff Dorgay **TONE**Audio



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FEATURE



The only ones we really had trouble with are the HiFiMan HE-6 headphones, which are notoriously tough to drive with even some of the world’s best dedicated headphone amplifiers, so no fault there. Those of you with Sennheiser, Grado, Audeze and Beats phones will thoroughly enjoy the headphone performance of the Qute 2.

Last but not least, the built in FM tuner (DAB for our European friends) does a spectacular job foraging for signals, providing high-quality sound in the process. Those having decent FM stations nearby will be pleasantly surprised at just how good the Qute 2 sounds in this mode—far better than satellite radio any day. Adding a modestly priced Terk antenna to the Qute 2 further improves performance.

Little It Can’t Do

After living with Naim’s UnitiQute 2 for a couple of months, I have found that its luster remains. The quality of sound provided is utterly fantastic and the range of functionality is tough to beat.

Though not packaged in as sexy of a shape as the Wadia Intuition, or the Devialet 110 also featured in this issue, the Qute 2 is mega-affordable and keeps with the easy-to-use yet high-performance ethos that we think the high-end audio industry desperately needs. For less than a top of the line Bose system, you can pair the Naim UnitiQute 2 with a great set of speakers and have a serious hi-fi setup. And for all the same reasons we found the original UnitiQute worthy of merit, we award the Qute 2 one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013. ●

UnitiQute 2
MSRP: \$2,195

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AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

By Jeff Dorgay



De La Soul
3 Feet High and Rising
 Tommy Boy, 2LP
 ● Purchase LP from Music Direct

De La Soul

Sounding like they were taped via a cassette recorder placed in front of an AM radio, the original digital and LP copies of this hip-hop classic sound positively dreadful, with not much useful information above about 5kHz. The new “remastered” version has to be better, right?

Wrong. It sounds even more lifeless and rolled off, as if someone recorded the original on a cheap tape deck, re-broadcast it on AM radio, and then taped those results on a cheap cassette recorder.

In short, this is the worst vinyl pressing we’ve heard in years, and a huge waste of thirty bucks. Pass.

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Despite being on the leading edge of digital, we love having our ears tickled by good vinyl through a LYRA phono cartridge. AudioQuest is proud to be LYRA’s North American distributor.

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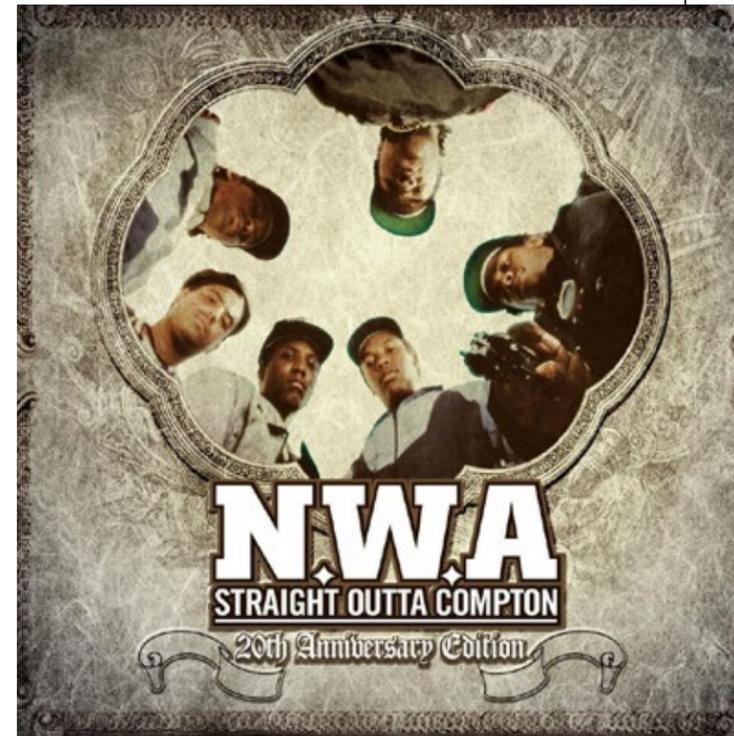


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MUSIC

N.W.A



N.W.A

Straight Outta Compton,
20th Anniversary Edition
Profile, 2LP

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Ground zero for gangster rap, *Straight Outta Compton* set the tone and style for everything else that followed, with explosive dynamics and lyrics that stand the test of time 20 years later.

The original LP is one of the better early hip-hop records in terms of production, showcasing Dr. Dre's skills even then. Those wanting more high-frequency extension and a bigger soundstage will enjoy the original LP. By contrast, the CD is the only choice if you crave the maximum, hardest-driving beats; it has crushing LF energy.

The current remaster squashes most of the dynamic swing out of the record, and while the high frequencies aren't terribly rolled off and the surfaces quiet, there is no punch, ultimately robbing the album of the energy it requires to get the messages across. The only saving grace is the fourth side, with bonus tracks from Bone Thugs-N-Harmony and Snoop Dogg, as well as a live version of "Compton's in the House." But you can get these tracks on the remastered CD, too.

Snoop Lion

You can take the boy out of hip-hop, but you can't take the hip-hop out of the boy. Snoop's current record has more of a reggae flavor, but there are plenty of hard-hitting grooves here to keep loyal fans satiated. If anything, this album sounds like it was influenced more by Katy Perry than Bob Marley.

And much like his legendary *Doggystyle* (perhaps the most well-recorded hip-hop record in history), *Reincarnated* is brilliantly recorded, and mastered by Sterling Sound. Some care is put into this one.

Combining very quiet surfaces with an extremely solid bottom end, the LP outperforms the CD across the spectrum, with that same expansive soundstage that Snoop has always provided. You may not dig Snoop Lion's current direction; if you don't, you probably don't care about what formats are available. However, if you find *Reincarnated* to be your cup of tea, the LP is clearly superior to the CD.



Snoop Lion

Reincarnated
RCA, 2LP

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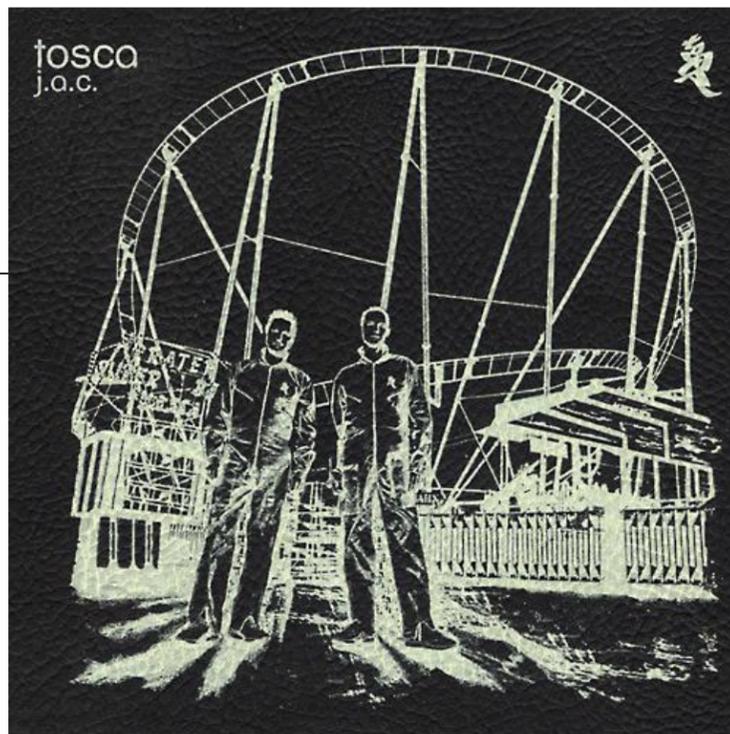
Tosca

Tosca

j.a.c.

K7, 3LP

● Purchase LP from Music Direct



Richard Dorfmeister of Kruder & Dorfmeister is half of Tosca, and his influence on this record is clearly obvious, given its ethereal rhythms, heavy yet lazy bass lines, and a soundstage full of ambient effects that stretch way beyond speaker boundaries.

j.a.c. was mastered at Caylx Studios in Berlin. Combining ultra-quiet surfaces and spreading the tracks out over three slabs of vinyl, this album breathes in a way the CD does not, and gives the music a much more open, organic feel. There is much dynamic range here; it begs to be played at club levels. The original CD is even slightly quieter, but

feels more compressed through the midband and high frequencies, sounding crunchier and more digital on top.

Vide, "Zuri," with its opening percussion and cymbal play. Where the CD sounds lifeless and flat, the LP possesses a much more realistic timbre. When the acoustic guitar eases into the mix, it has a very distinct space on the LP. On the CD, it is decidedly vague, sounding almost out of phase. This is typical of the entire album, going back and forth between LP and CD, with the analog always getting the nod for palpability.

If you're a fan of *The K&D Sessions*, you'll want to add *j.a.c.* to your vinyl collection. ●

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THE WINO

By Monique Meadows

Vini Italiani!

Italians are fond of saying, “Eating without drinking is like thunder without rain.” And they make a point. My first memorable Italian food-and-wine moment was many years ago, when I first tasted a bowl of Cioppino paired with a Chianti Classico in a restaurant in San Francisco.

I knew nothing about the Sangiovese grape back then or that a red wine could go with certain fish dishes—but who’s to argue with a passionate sommelier? Fast forward to just a few years ago, when I truly started investigating the breadth of Italian wines and their regional nuances.

Recently, a friend and I spent two hours navigating the wine list at a new Italian restaurant. Several small plates of Italian cuisine and several shared glasses later, I was reminded that good food and wine are best enjoyed in good company. Here are four Italian wines that recently caught my attention. Fill an empty table with good family, friends and food, and I think these selections will catch your attention, too.



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TONE STYLE

**Fratelli Lunelli Ferrari
Metodo Brut NV**

Trentino-Alto Adige, \$24

You may know Prosecco, light sparkling wine made from Italian grapes, but you may not know the Ferrari sparkling wine made from Chardonnay. It's a spectacular and affordable alternative to French Champagne. In 1902, after studying in France and returning to Trentino in Northern Italy, Giulio Ferrari planted Chardonnay, a key grape in many Champagnes that had never been planted in Trentino. Marrying Chardonnay with the local *terroir*, Ferrari succeeded in making world-class sparkling wine. Ferrari chose friend and local merchant Brunello Lunelli as his successor, and today a third generation of the Lunelli family continues to produce award-winning sparkling wines.

The Ferrari Metodo Brut NV is 100 percent Chardonnay and has familiar aromas to Champagne, including hints of citrus zest, flowers and fresh bread. "That vanilla-cream-versus-citrus juxtaposition is what sets this fantastic bubbly apart," states *Wine Enthusiast*, which gives this sparkling wine 90 points. The wine has wonderful finesse and is the perfect start to a meal, though you may want to enjoy it through a few courses.



TONE STYLE



Alois Lageder Pinot Bianco Dolomiti, 2012

Alto-Adige, \$16

Many people are not as familiar with Pinot Bianco, called Pinot Blanc in France, Austria and the U.S., as they are with Pinot Grigio. Pinot Bianco has a bit more crispness and a steeliness of sorts, with bright acidity and more floral aromatics. Some of the best Pinot Bianco comes from Italy's high-alpine Alto-Adige region. One of my favorite producers from this region is Alois Lageder, which the Lageder family has owned for five generations.

Notable moments in this winemaking family's dynamic history include their experimentation with the aging wine in small oak barrels after an inspirational meeting with California's Robert Mondavi in 1981 and the opening of their high-tech winemaking facility in 1995 at the historical Löwengang estate in Magrè. The family also adheres to the principles of biodynamic agriculture for its grapes, which come only from selected vineyard sites in the southern part of the Alto-Adige appellation and those situated on the cooler slopes of the Adige valley in the most northern part of Trentino. And last year was a good one for northern Italian white wine.

The 2012 Lageder Pinot Bianco is bright in the glass, medium bodied and elegant. Appetizers, salads and an array of seafood—especially a dish of pasta with clams—are all great choices to enjoy with this wine, as is asparagus. Discovering a wine match for asparagus is like finding a date for an interesting but socially awkward friend. Pinot Bianco pairs perfectly with asparagus, as it will with an array of foods, so remember this one for your next feast.

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Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio Magazine*, January 2013



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Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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TONE STYLE

Cecchi “Bonizio” Sangiovese di Maremma, 2011

Tuscany, \$11

Many people have not explored Sangiovese wines beyond a bottle of Chianti. Sangiovese, a wonderfully plummy and earthy grape, is the star of Tuscany. The Maremma region in southern Tuscany, which is known for its distinct soil, coastal climate, and the alkaline- and sandstone-heavy soil of its rolling hills, gives Bonizio its charming personality. Brothers Cesare and Andrea Cecchi, along with their mother, Anita, continue the business that their great grandfather Luigi started in 1893 in the Castellina area of Chianti. Today, the Cecchi winery focuses on Sangiovese.

While some producers in Tuscany blend Sangiovese with French Bordeaux varietals such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, for some of its blends Cecchi uses Cilieggiolo and Sagrantino, ancient grape varieties that are almost extinct in Italy. Bonizio, which is Sangiovese blended with Cilieggiolo, is fermented in stainless steel and aged three months in bottle before release. The result is a fresh wine with intense and complex aromas of cherry and earthy notes, and flavors of fresh berries, plums, and spices, along with a vibrant acidity and firm tannins. This wine goes well with everything from pizza and pasta to barbeque. Tuscans suggest pairing this with Italian wild boar, known as *cinghiale*, but Bonizio will not disappoint matched with chicken, pork, wild mushrooms or aged cheeses.





Villa Pozzi Nero d'Avola, 2012

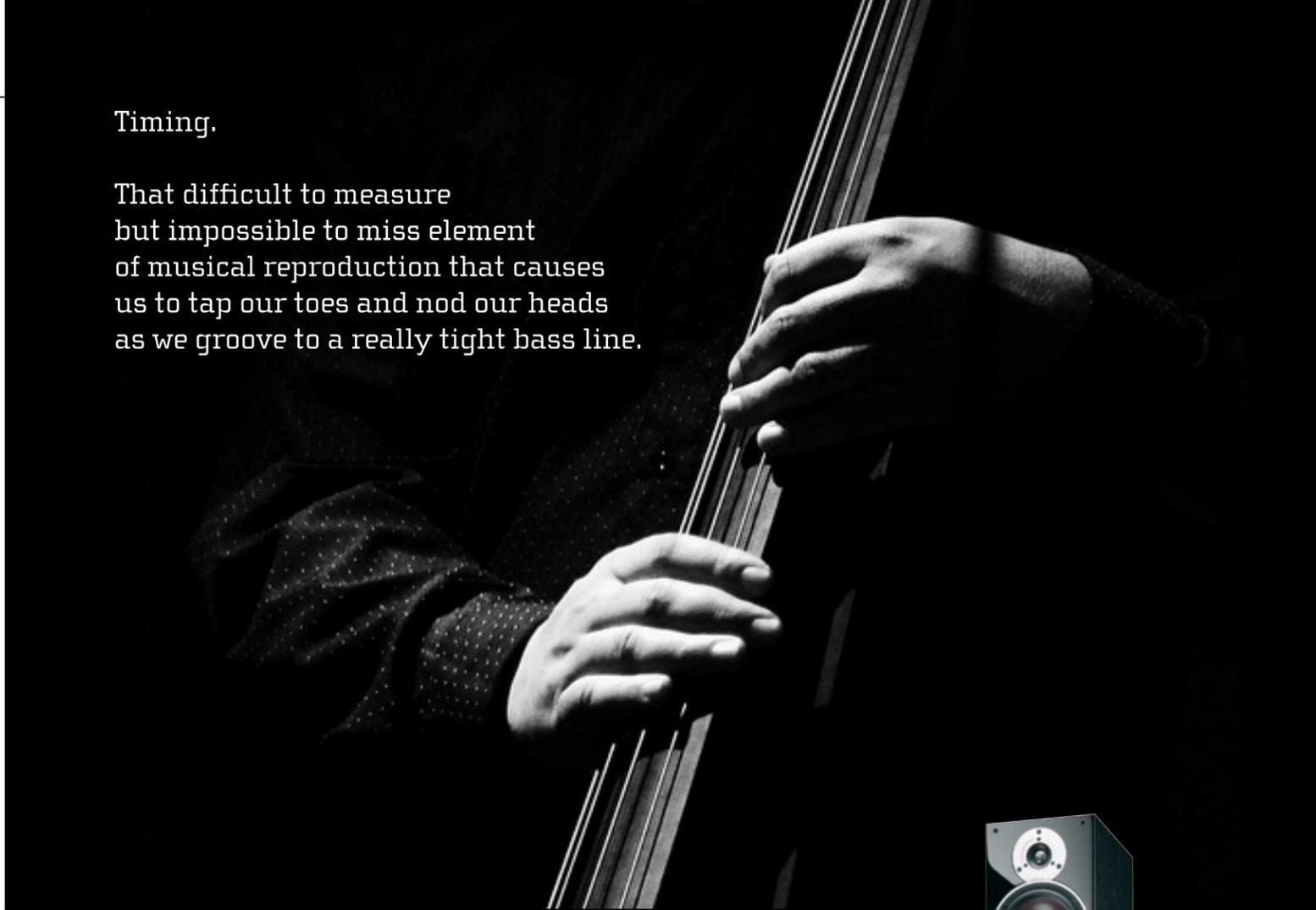
Sicily, \$11

If you haven't had the pleasure of enjoying a Sicilian wine, the Villa Pozzi Nero d'Avola is the perfect glass to start with. The island of Sicily is actually Italy's largest wine region, both in acreage and production, and Nero d'Avola, (meaning black grape of Avola, a village in the southeastern part of Sicily) is one of its indigenous and most beloved grapes. The Pozzi Family, originally from Northern Italy, is in its fourth generation. Its vineyards are in western Sicily on hillsides surrounding the towns of Marsala, Salemi and Mazzara del Vallo, where grapes ripen in a Mediterranean climate and are all harvested by hand. The original winery was constructed in 1860 and completely rebuilt in 2000.

Characteristically, Nero d'Avola produces deep-colored, full-bodied wines with an abundance of berry flavors, with hints of black pepper and spice. The 2012 Pozzi Nero d'Avola delivers just that. This is a velvety smooth, easy-to-drink wine that some people compare with Australian Shiraz. While that will give you an idea of the style and body of this wine, it doesn't describe the brightness or the Mediterranean *terroir* that Nero d'Avola shows. Try this wine with grilled Italian sausages, beef, lamb, meaty pasta dishes like Bolognese, or stews.

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The Jaguar F-TYPE

Featuring Meridian High-Performance Audio

By Jeff Dorgay

The new F-TYPE is a seductive, capable addition to the Jaguar fleet. It delivers the raw, sensuous beauty of the E-Type from the 1960s and '70s—considered by many, even the great Enzo Ferrari, to be one of the most beautifully shaped cars ever conceived—with 21st century performance and accouterments. Best of all, the F-TYPE sheds Jaguar's 20th century reliability issues; the British manufacturer is a top performer in JD Power's initial quality surveys.

With the F-TYPE, Jaguar has indeed produced a brilliant success. I have spent a lot of personal time with Jag's retired S-Type—in both its 380 hp supercharged V-6 and 495 hp supercharged V-8 variants—and I found it to provide a highly enjoyable ride. For the automotive journalists assembled for the debut of the F-TYPE, the comparison between the new model and the S-Type polarized the group in terms of which car provides the ultimate setup. Both models weigh around 3,500 pounds, so these are big cats indeed, but they are so lithe that they hide their weight incredibly well.



Now it's My Turn

Jaguar's current ad campaign in the U.S. features the tagline, "Now it's your turn," with a fellow returning from a test drive and flipping the keys to the first person in a long line of people waiting to drive the car. Fortunately, Jaguar has plenty of cars available at this event—in both the 380 hp V-6 and 495 hp V-8 trim, and in a plethora of colors—so we don't have to wait long. With a few of the cars on display in Firesand metallic (aka bright, shiny orange), I am assured that orange is indeed the new red. A surprisingly gorgeous variation on the classic British Racing Green, the trademark shade of the E-Type is also available.

The new car is available in three trim levels: The base model, priced at \$69,000, features a 340 hp supercharged V-6; the 380 hp V-6 Sport model, priced at \$81,000; and the 495 hp V-8 Sport model, priced at \$92,000. While this review *should* concentrate on the F-TYPE's sophisticated Meridian sound system, the car's active sport exhaust system, which essentially bypasses the mufflers briefly when you mash the throttle to the floor, uncovers a cacophony of enticing sound that is worth noting.

As the only audio writer in a crowd of automotive journalists, I am interested to hear their take on the car. *(continued)*



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The F-Type strikes a perfect balance of personal luxury and coddling that the 911 can't muster, yet the Jag's claws come out in earnest the second you mash the gas pedal to the floor, proving that the car is indeed a sporty performer.

Almost all of them favor the V-8 version, some claiming that 380 hp is just not enough—an interesting take, considering that many of these same journalists went bonkers over the 400 hp Porsche turbo about 15 years ago. It would seem that we remain corrupted by power, even in the day of \$4.00-per-gallon gasoline in the U.S. and double that in Europe.

Not a 911

Throughout the course of the presentations, representatives from Jaguar

repeatedly make comparisons between the F-TYPE and the Porsche 911. As a Porsche owner, I submit the F-TYPE is a wholly different car, more than deserving evaluation (and adoration) on a different level. The current 911 has become heavier and more posh over the years, especially in its latest iteration, with many core Porsche enthusiasts feeling it has become much more of a GT car in the process.

Where the 911 is a sports car with luxury aspirations, the F-Type is a luxury roadster that is highly sporty, if that

makes any sense. Many of my acquaintances who own 911s lament the same thing—the car is rarely a big hit with wives or significant female friends. The F-Type, by contrast, strikes a perfect balance of personal luxury and coddling that the 911 can't muster, yet the Jag's claws come out in earnest the second you mash the gas pedal to the floor, proving that the car is indeed a sporty performer. Doing so clearly illustrates that the optional free-flowing exhaust on the test

vehicle keeps the car very civil in tight traffic yet free to roar on the open highway.

And roar it does, the V-8 sounding more like a NASCAR engine at full song, encouraging inappropriate behavior and a major decrease in fuel consumption. As I pass a scowling Prius driver at full throttle, I casually glance at the “instantaneous mpg” figure on the Jag's dashboard—it reads 5.3 mpg. But what an incredible way to dispose of fossil fuel.

In light of the conversations of those loving New York and hating Los Angeles, I love both coasts equally for different reasons. Similarly, if I had the cash, I'd have a 911 and an F-TYPE in my garage.

Just Posh Enough

The F-TYPE strikes a wonderful balance of cutting-edge design and fashion-forward styling, while achieving an exterior look that I suspect will be as timeless as that of the E-Type. *(continued)*

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TONE STYLE

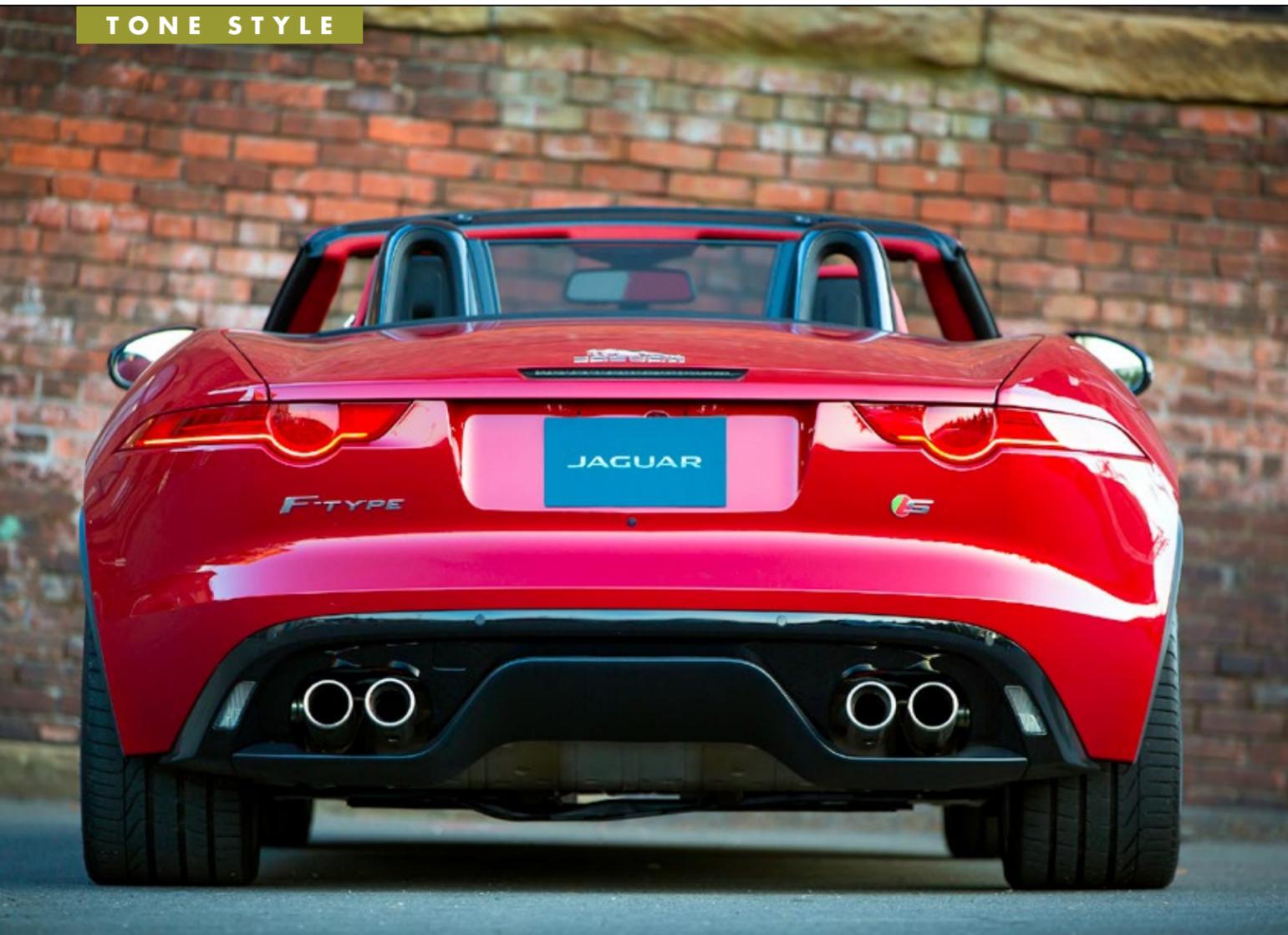
I doubt this will be a car that long-term owners will ever tire of looking at. The only question mark is will all the hardware and software under the bonnet be supported 40 years from now? While the E-Type had a reputation for being somewhat unreliable, it can still be repaired today.

Automotive design aside, the star performer here is the optional 770-watt Meridian audio system. The 380-watt standard system is by no means rubbish, but it can't be played as loud as the optional system. In real life, this means you can only blast Megadeth up to about 35 mph before road noise takes over, but with the bigger 13-speaker Meridian system, you can still rock the casbah at about 60 mph.

This is exactly what I did, using the title track of Megadeth's *Countdown to Extinction* as my first test. Derived from Meridian's system in the Range Rover Evoque (reviewed in issue 45), this audio system is optimized and custom-tuned specifically for the F-TYPE.

Meridian's DSP (digital signal processing) experience works wonders here. The sound is dynamic, engaging and enveloping, even with the car's top down and the throttle at a moderate position. But when you mash the throttle, forget about it. Top-down motoring and high-fidelity listening are two great tastes that don't always taste great together. No offense to my friends at Meridian, but the F-TYPE is just too damn fun to drive fast with the top down to care about the audio system. *(continued)*





Jaguar has done a marvelous job with noise control on the soft top, so top-up motoring is highly enjoyable, making the F-TYPE almost as quiet as a fixed-roof car. This is when you can truly enjoy the marvel of the Meridian system. The cabin is quiet enough to listen to classical music in a meaningful way. When tracking through Brahms' *Symphony No.1 in C Minor*, I find myself easily swept into the grandeur of the piece, able to enjoy the quiet bits almost as much as I do in my home system, with precious little road noise creeping in. The soundstage

is big, bold and very dynamic, reproducing the loudest kettle-drums with authority and then seamlessly transitioning back to the moderate oboe passages. Rifling through a set of Blue Note XRCDs and a fair share of solo female and male vocalists proves equally compelling, with an excellent degree of stereo imaging throughout the front cabin—which, in the Jag, feels more like a large mobile set of headphones, while the system in the Range Rover Evoque provides a more cavernous experience.

Bottom line, the \$1,200 for the upgrade to the top Meridian system is a pittance in terms of the total sticker price. And if you love music, I guarantee you will enjoy this car so much more with the Meridian system installed that you will quickly forget about the extra dough. It is wonderful to see Meridian doing its part to make a highly enjoyable sports car that much more enjoyable with a sound system worthy of the Jaguar marque. ●

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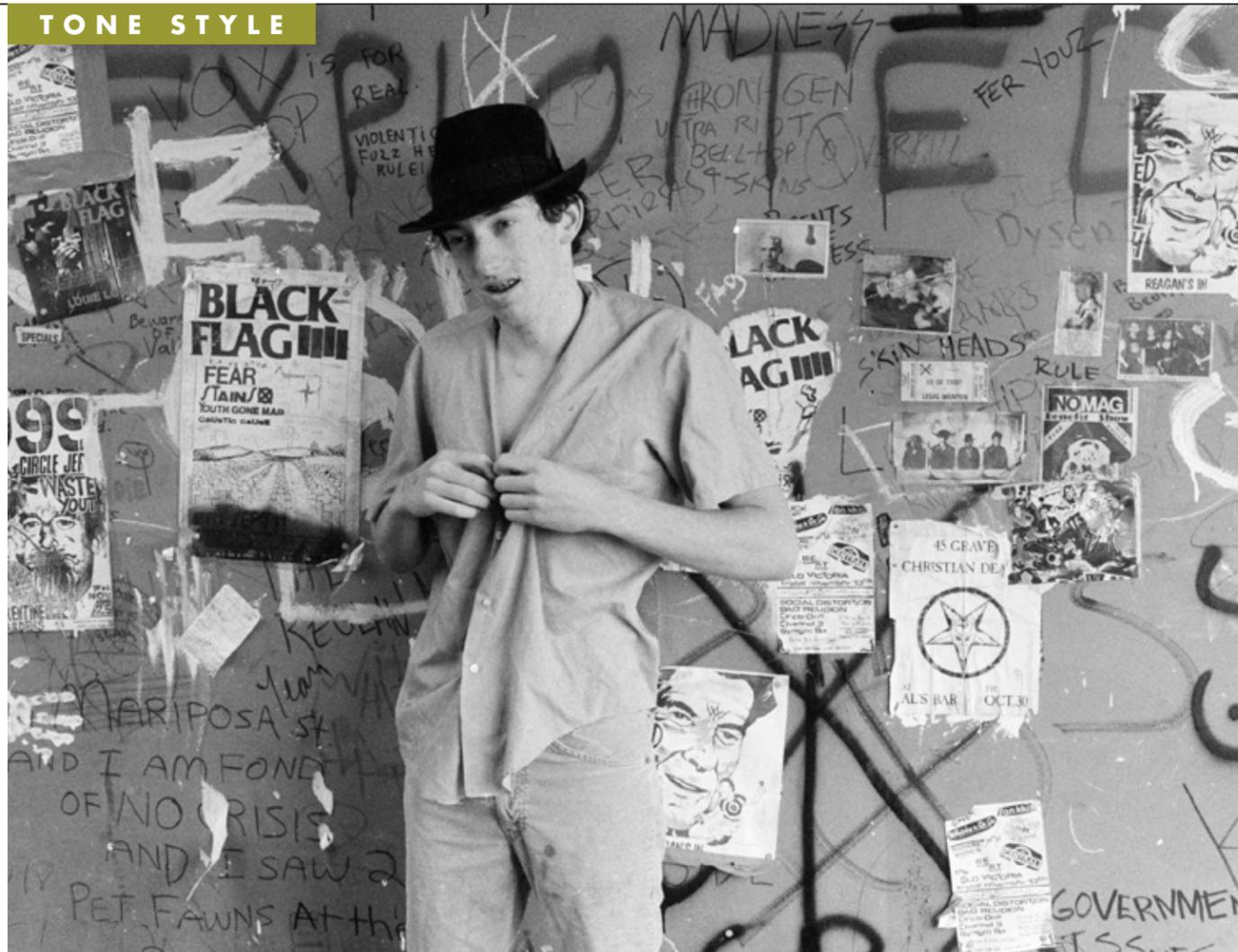
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128 TONE AUDIO NO.58



Most 11-year-olds spend their time watching cartoons or hanging out with their friends, not in the throes of honing technical and creative skills. This was not the case for David Markey, who spent all his time at this age shooting photographs with his Kodak Instamatic, making 8mm short films and producing a zine called *The Neighborhood Journal*. By the time he and Jordan Schwartz met in their hometown of Santa Monica a couple years later, the stage had been set for creative collaboration. It was a few years later that the two discovered the LA hardcore punk scene, when Markey and Schwartz went to see X play live. As Schwartz describes it: "It all exploded and it was all happening in LA right in our own

backyard. We already had the skills to do our own stuff so we just focused our energy in that direction."

Throughout their teen years they feverishly photographed and documented the scene around them and created *We Got Power!*, a fanzine canvassing the punk movement. Markey says, "The argument could be made that I was doing DIY work before I even knew what DIY was from the age of 11 or 12." So by the time he and Schwartz decided to launch their zine, he already was seasoned in the process. In the most DIY and manual approach, the two ran 1000 copies of each edition and delivered the zines to the record stores around LA. The rest, as they say, is history. *(continued)*



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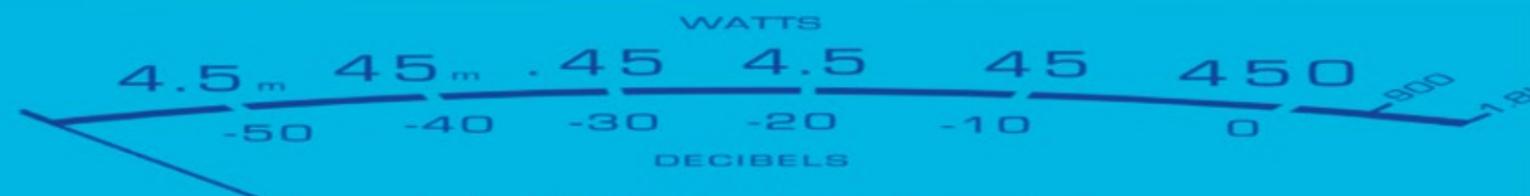
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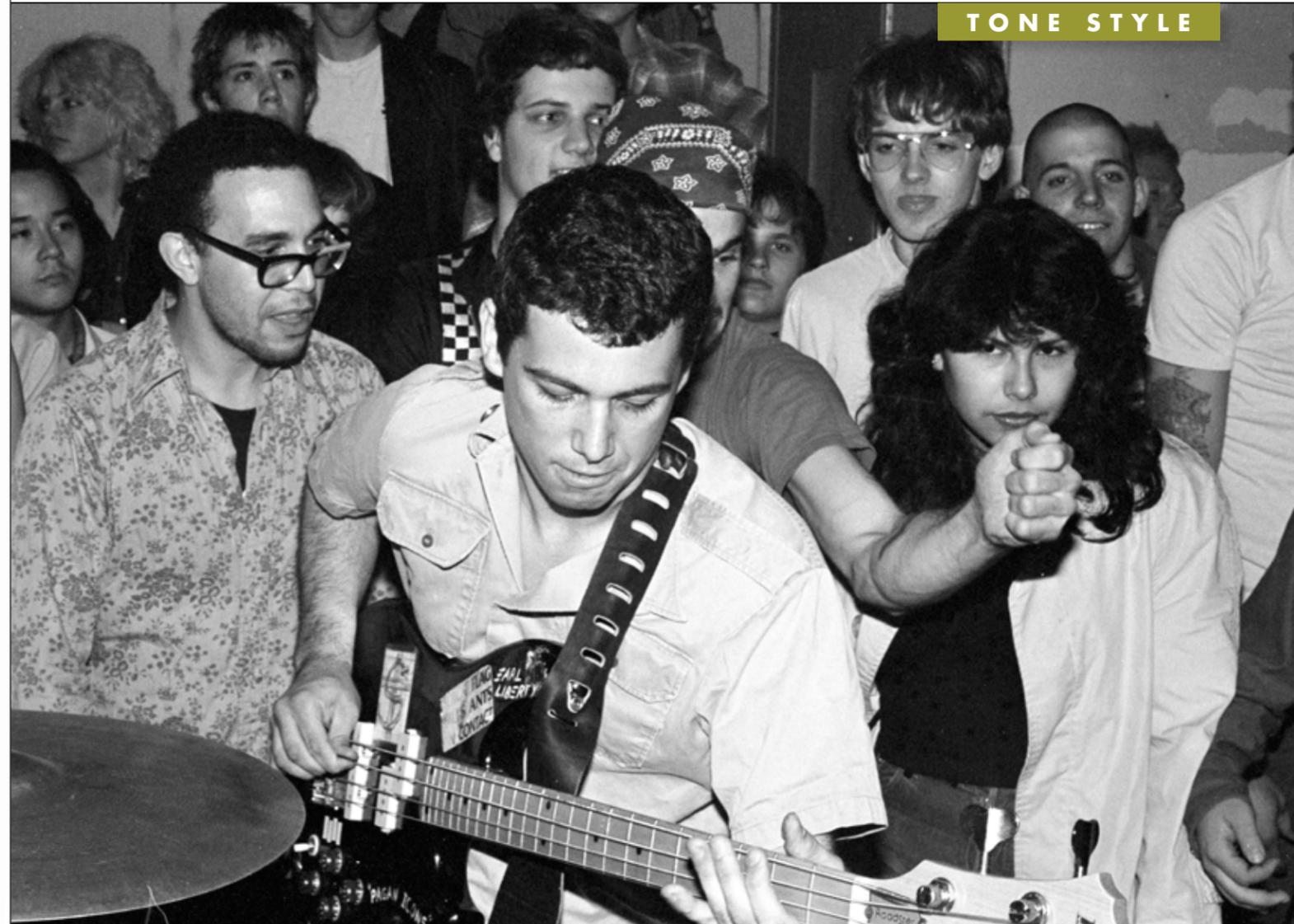
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TONE STYLE



Fast forward 30 years, and the photographs and zines created by Markey and Schwartz as teenagers have been hulled together, combed through and published in a time capsule of a book that fully echoes the energy of the scene. *We Got Power! Hardcore Punk Scenes from 1980s Southern California*, edited and published by Ian Christie of Bazillion Points Publishing, provides a biographical window into this pivotal moment in music, art and cultural history through the lens of Markey and Schwartz, and with words from a myriad of figures in the movement. The collection of photographs (which is about a tenth of their archives) is completed by biographical and reflective text written by

the people who were there immersed in it all. Contributors include Henry Rollins and Keith Morris, among others.

The book has been released alongside a traveling exhibit of the photographs, which I had the immense pleasure of viewing recently in my hometown of Phoenix at Modified Arts. The show was put together by Perihelion, owned by two longtime punk music fans Amy Young and Douglas Grant (Young is also a longtime drummer in punk bands, currently playing with the French Girls). Strung across the art space was a selection of photographs from a deep and expansive archive of a scene and movement of which we can still feel the rippling effects today. *(continued)*



Musicians, fans and surrounding moments from the early '80s LA hardcore punk scene, as well as from the early '90s, lined the walls, offering a glimpse inside a time that was evidently ripe for creativity, energy, aggression and artistic revolution. Scenes of bands including Black Flag, The Circle Jerks, Sonic Youth and The Adolescents captured in their raw environments are strewn about. As Jordan Schwartz says, "Punk is establishing itself as a valid art form, several decades down the road."

We Got Power!: Hardcore Punk Scenes from 1980s Southern California chronicles the work they did from 1981–1983, although Markey informs me that most of the images are from '82, which was the peak of the movement. According to him, around 1984 the intensity of the movement had begun its decline, hence the end of *We Got Power!* fanzine. However the reverberations of the music and its message have inarguably spawned newer movements, and their presence can be felt in much of the music that followed the early onset of punk.

After Markey and Schwartz moved on from *We Got Power!*, Markey followed a natural creative current into filmmaking, and Schwartz went on to work for a period of time with SST Records, booking gigs for many of the bands he had documented as a photographer. Markey's films include the iconic underground documentary *1991: The Year Punk Broke*, filmed on tour with Sonic Youth, as well as *My Career as a Jerk*, a documentary on The Circle Jerks. Markey also happened to create one of this writer's favorite music videos for "Mildred Pierce" by Sonic Youth, which features a cameo of Sofia Coppola as Joan Crawford.

We Got Power!: Hardcore Punk Scenes from 1980s Southern California encapsulates the rawness, the sweat, the passion, the aggression and the urgency of a movement that has been validated as a relevant piece of American culture and history. And as multifaceted as the punk movement was, *We Got Power!* reemerges to echo that spirit: with the book, the art exhibits, the films and the literary contributions of punk icons. ●

Wegotpowerfilms.com



BABY YOUR VINYL

Rob Johnson

The ubiquitous milk crate serves many vinyl fans at some point during their lives. Any why not? It is inexpensive, sturdy, and offers an eerily ideal size to accommodate a record collection. It's hard to imagine that anyone could taint such a perfect audio storage solution with actual milk bottles!

For those who want all the functionality of their much-loved milk crates, but who want a huge step-up in aesthetics, Steidle Woodworking Company in Vancouver, British Columbia, offers an exceptional solution. The company's owner, James Steidle, hand builds each crate from reclaimed wood or trembling aspen with a birch bottom panel. While sizes and designs vary, the standard crate protects 70 to 80 LP-sized records in style. Different versions are made to embrace 7-inch records. With the natural grain and color variance inherent in wood, each crate has its own unique and beautiful appearance.

In order to accommodate a bulky, heavy load of vinyl, Steidle fortifies each creation with attractive and sturdy dovetail joints which bind sides and bases together with exceptional durability. This approach also eliminates the need for metal hardware which could otherwise detract from the organic aesthetics. Simple, ergonomically cut handles grace the sides, making these crates portable even when hauling a full capacity of records.

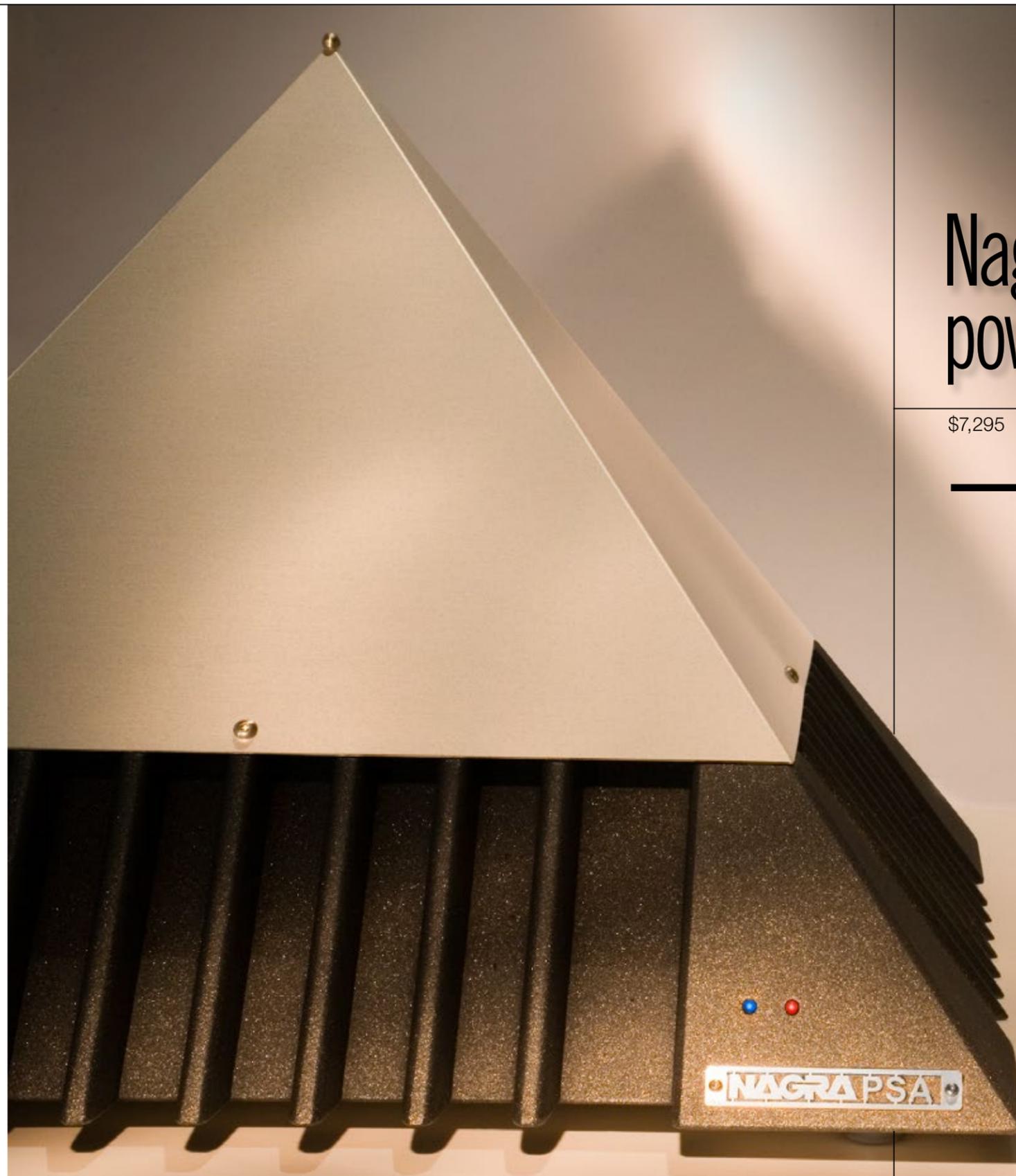
James Steidle sells his handcrafted creations through Etsy.com. Designs start at \$79.

steidlewoodworking.com

More Stylish HiFi!

By Jeff Dorgay

Here at TONE, we're often accused of being lovers of high style just as much as great music and high performance audio, and that's why it's always exciting to find gear that looks as great as it sounds. Perusing the back issues, we've covered a number of components that fit the bill and we've recently uploaded those reviews to our website, so we are offering a bit of a "refresher" here, complete with web links.



Nagra PSA stereo power amplifier

\$7,295 www.nagraaudio.com

The PSA's pyramid shape is instantly polarizing. You either love it or hate it, but you can't ignore it. When I asked Jean Claude Schlup, the designer of the PSA about the shape, when I visited the Nagra factory, his response was not what I expected. "Of course the shape helps aid cooling, but I chose the shape, so no one would stack another piece of equipment on top of it." And then he played "Smoke on the Water." Pretty cool dude.

Its 100 watts per channel should be sufficient for most listeners, but for those requiring more power, there are 200 watt PMA monoblocks available. They won't sharpen your razor blades, but they will be the perfect match for a high style listening space.

[Click here to read the full review.](#) ●

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● TONE STYLE

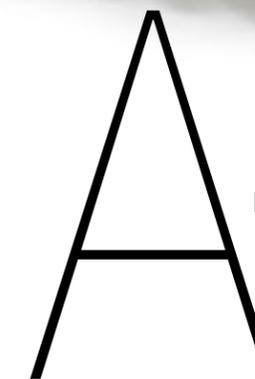


Burmester 911 mk.3 stereo power amplifier

\$29,995

www.rutherfordgroup.com

www.burmester.de



All of Burmester's gear is fabulous, with jewelry – like finishes that strike the uninitiated as blingy at first, but once you set a group of Burmester gear into your environment, you realize the

beautifully polished front panels just disappear into your room, as Dieter Burmester intended them to.

The 911 has been a reference component here for years, providing superior sound in a robust package that can drive any loudspeaker with aplomb, and should the need for more power arise, these 350 watt per channel stereo amplifiers can be bridged into 700 watt mono amplifiers. Much like the Porsche of the same moniker, the 911 is a timeless classic that will never go out of style.

Click here to read the full review. ●



Luxman SQ-38u integrated amplifier

\$6,000
www.soundstagedirect.com

If classic 60's style is your thing, look no further than this Luxman integrated. Featuring a quartet of EL-34 tubes, a stellar preamplifier section and a great MM/MC phonostage on board, all you need is your favorite source component (or two) some speakers and you are rocking. However, we think this amp just begs to have an Eames lounge chair and a reel to reel tape deck somewhere in the room, just because.

Click here to read the full review. ●



PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium Integrated

\$2,195
www.upscaleaudio.com

Should your taste lean even more vintage than the aforementioned Luxman, and you prefer your vacuum tubes exposed, consider the PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium. It combines the retro styling of Marantz and McIntosh from their golden years with 21st Century build, parts and reliability.

We've been using the original ProLogue amplifier that the Premium is based upon for ten solid years without issue, a testament to PrimaLuna quality. It's timeless dark blue metallic finish works in any environment and the overall fit and finish remains impeccable.

Click here to read the full review. ●

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TONE STYLE



B&W Zeppelin

\$995

www.bowers-wilkins.com

B&W invented the stylish iPod dock/ powered speaker platform with the Zeppelin and they continue to be a benchmark, improving the sound and functionality, the current model now being fully Apple AirPlay compliant.

The Zeppelin now has almost 100 watts per channel of power and outperforms all of the sound bars we've auditioned from other manufacturers, and is certainly more interesting from an aesthetic perspective as well. The first remains the best choice for a high performance, high style, small footprint hifi system.

You can read the full review here. ●

TONE STYLE



AMG V-12 Turntable

\$16,000

www.musicalsurrroundings.com

While a newcomer under their own moniker, the people behind AMG have been building turntable parts for a number of other companies for some time now, with high success. The 12-inch arm is solid as a rock, yet light as a feather, putting to rest most of the common knowledge going along with a longer tonearm.

This table provides midrange and HF delicacy that is tough to beat at any price, with tons of LF slam, making it a perfect all round table for the analog lover that would like to settle down with only one table. Speed is easily set from the front panel, and it can accommodate another arm via the highly resettable arm board mechanism.

However, the combination of compact size, stylish proportions and high performance make the AMG V-12 the obvious choice when you want a turntable that not only sounds like a work of art, but looks like one too.

You can read the full review here. ●

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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.

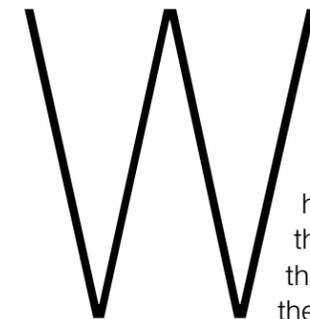
But even as we move from spinning vinyl to CDs to streaming hi-res music files throughout the home, we will never lose sight of what truly matters:

the music.



Estelon XA Speakers

\$43,900/pair
www.estelon.com



When we introduced the Estelon speakers to the world back in 2011, their shape was fresh

and controversial, their cabinets made from a unique composite material, created specifically to minimize cabinet resonances and distortion. The product range has been expanded to include XB, XC and X Diamond (featuring a diamond tweeter) models, but the family sound and look is still intact.

Estelon has also branched out, offering a wider range of colors and finishes. If you've had the chance to see their matte finish (especially the white) speakers at a recent hifi show, you know how truly beautiful these speakers are in person. And these are not beauties incapable of high musical performance – we came away highly impressed with the XA; Alfred and Partners have only built on their strengths along the way.

You can read the full review here. ●



JAZZ & BLUES



Gregory Porter
Liquid Spirit
 Blue Note, 2LP or CD

During the past couple of years, Gregory Porter has become the jazz singer that jazz fans were anticipating. He possesses a commanding baritone, but never uses it for empty drama. Porter infuses standards with his own personality, yet is also a compelling songwriter. He started to receive attention in the jazz media around 2010 with the release of *Water*, an applause that kept building with *Be Good* two years later. Both discs are on the respected indie label Motéma, but with Porter's signing to Blue Note, the potential for a global audience has skyrocketed.

On *Liquid Spirit*, Porter keeps the same approach he took on his earlier efforts. He's held onto his working group and producer Brian Bacchus. Eleven of the 14 tracks are Porter's own compositions. Yet his phrasing keeps getting stronger, and time has made his band more cohesive.



©Photo by Shawn Peters

On the opening "No Love Dying," Porter's conversational approach matches the sense of determination in his lyrics. Only at the coda, on top of Chip Crawford's intuitive piano lines, does he delve into the gospel moans that were part of his early training. But on the title piece that follows, Porter has a more aggressive delivery, as if he's left the choir for the pulpit. Like Oscar Brown, Jr., he also uses the vernacular pronunciation—rhyming "drink" and "tank"—and makes it work. Aaron James' bass line provides an ideal melodic counterpoint. Porter's band also shines on its

interpretation of Abbey Lincoln/Max Roach's "Lonesome Lover." Considering the source, drummer Emanuel Harrold sounds more prominent here. Alto saxophonist Yosuke Sato also emerges as more fully integrated into the group than he sounds on *Be Good*.

Porter's key strength may be his sense of restraint, like on the ballad "Water Under Bridges," when he waits until the coda to drag out the vowel in the word "burned," or how his voice conveys vulnerability in "Wolfcry." *(continued)*



©Photo by Shawn Peters

He's just as convincing projecting defiance on "Musical Genocide." His sharp songwriting on the succinct "Hey Laura" and "Movin'" owe as much to R&B as jazz. Indeed, if radio programmers had the latitude and influence they held in the 70s, Porter could be marketed along the lines of one of his heroes, Donny Hathaway.

Of course, none of this takes away from his improvisation throughout *Liquid Spirit*. On "Free," he attacks the song's lines from different directions at an incredible pace. He expands on the Ramsey Lewis and Dobie Gray hit "The In Crowd" without resorting to pseudo-hipster jive, the unfortunate domain of other contemporary male jazz vocalists.

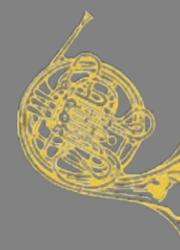
Liquid Spirit ends with a triumphant version of Sammy Cahn's jazz standard "I Fall In Love Too Easily." With just Crawford and James' accompaniment, Porter's deft use of space makes his sudden leaps that much more compelling. Minimalism suits him. —Aaron Cohen

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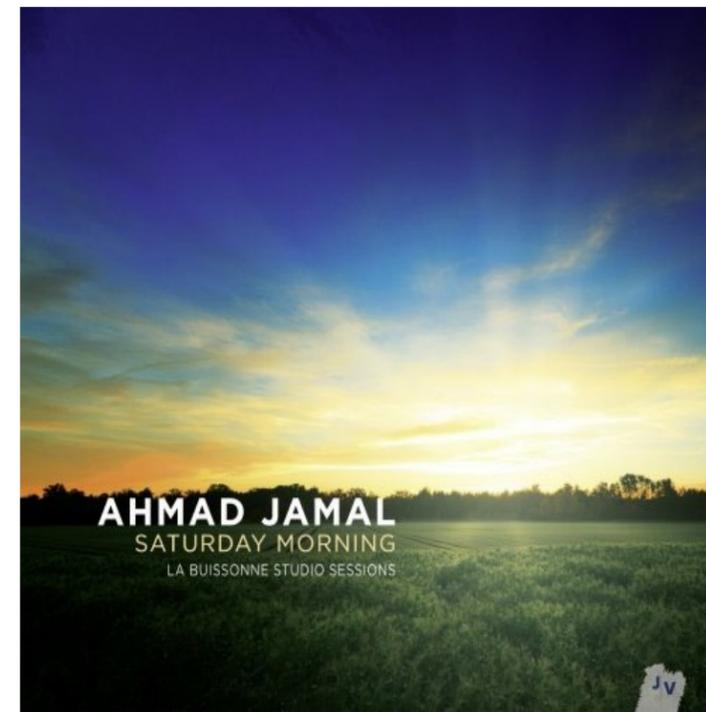
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MUSIC



Ahmad Jamal
Saturday Morning
Jazzbook Records, CD

Songs within songs within songs within songs: For more than a half century, Ahmad Jamal has made his mark by peppering standards and originals with inventive asides. Rather than developing a theme and hurdling to some elaborate and emotional dénouement, he drills into a melody to further its features, basing his art on added value. Listening to the music on *Saturday Morning*, which finds the 83-year-old virtuoso typically leading a small ensemble, you get the feeling there are 50 or so tracks on the album. Each of the micro excursions Jamal takes within the 11 pieces seems elaborate and catchy enough to be its own song.

OK, that's a smidge of an overstatement, but it conveys the thoughtful design sensibility that guides Jamal's improv process. The songs themselves are ditties or mood pieces or riff tunes. The pianist seems to have little commitment to the starting point of these tracks. He's much more focused on what he gets to concoct along the way. And he's pithy about it. A double-time storm of notes here, a bouncy breakdown there. Idea after idea flies by. You never know where he's going to turn, only that the turning will be continual.

"One (Ahad)" is all about groove, with bassist Reginald Veal, drummer Herlin Riley, and percussionist Manolo Badrena setting up a glorious rhythm pattern and letting the boss use it as a toehold for all sorts of eruptions. There's a Morse code flavor to the rather astonishing flurries that leap from his keyboard. Even a warhorse like "I'm In The Mood For Love" gets shaken a bit. Jamal accents unexpected passages, reframes chunks of the original structure, and messes with the tune's emotional impact. Each of the flourishes is insightful, lasting just a moment, but long enough to add perspective.

—*Jim Macnie*



Ralph Alessi

Baida
ECM, CD

Trumpeter Ralph Alessi has played a crucial part in New York as a musician and teacher for more than a dozen years. He's worked alongside saxophonist Steve Coleman and pianist Uri Caine while also serving as founder and director of the non-profit School For Improvisational Music. But while his tone, resourcefulness, and educational initiatives have earned him his colleagues' respect, Alessi has yet to receive the wider recognition he deserves. That should change with the release of his ECM debut.

Here, Alessi keeps the same core group from *Cognitive Dissonance*, released on the Italian CamJazz label three years ago. The big change? The entire set is comprised of his own compositions. They sound written as if to give all the accomplished players in his quartet plenty of stretching room.



l-r Nasheet Waits, Drew Gress, Ralph Alessi and Jason Moran

The disc begins with the title track. (After a frustrating Google search for a translation of "Baida," the disc's press material reveals it's Alessi's infant daughter's term for "blanket.") Alessi's slurred notes hover faintly above drummer Nasheet Waits. Pianist Jason Moran builds from an initially delicate upper register as the group circles around him, Alessi gliding between an open and muted attack.

Seemingly, the quiet tone of "Chuck Barris" (named after the "Gong Show" host and "Palisades

Park" songwriter) doesn't match the subject's persona. But even if Alessi refrains from overt gags (like Barris, or, for that matter, trumpeter Steven Bernstein), there is humor here: It's in how the band mates chase each other before Drew Gress' bass lines kick in, and the way Alessi's muted tone contrasts Waits' martial rattle before it all coalesces at the end. On "Gobble Goblins," Alessi and Moran's repeated staccato phrases sound as if the two are egging each other on. Alessi takes flight, Moran

doesn't. Moran then expands on the theme over subtle shifts from Gress and Waits. Likewise, the trumpeter makes astute use of adding such effects as growls and blending them into Moran's warm melodic lines on "I Go, You Go."

Alessi has done considerable work in refining such instrumental dialogue this year. He also released a strong duo with Fred Hersch a few months ago, *Only Many* (CamJazz). But on *Baida* he also revisits unpredictable trumpet and drum exchanges from the days

of Don Cherry and Ed Blackwell, contrasting upper register squeals with Waits' rolls on "11/1/10."

The group also excels on such slower pieces as "Sanity" and "Maria Lydia." On the latter, Alessi and Moran's facility with classical technique opens the composition, a tribute to Alessi's late mother, Maria Leone, an opera singer. No doubt she'd be proud.
—Aaron Cohen

Astell&Kern AK120 Mobile Music Player

A long-overdue solution to the portable hi-fi problem.

By Bailey S. Barnard

By now, you've likely heard of Astell&Kern. The sub-brand of Korean electronics manufacturer iRiver launched late last year, with its \$700 AK100 mobile touchscreen player capable of delivering 24-bit/192-kHz music, thanks to a single Wolfson WM8740 DAC and the ability to store up to 96 gigabytes worth of audio files. The AK100 is not the first portable hi-fi player to market—HiFiMAN has some worthy players based on Sabre DACs—but it is certainly the first one to have successfully married high-resolution playback with iPod-like usability and simplicity. With its new AK120 portable player, Astell&Kern has upped the ante.

At \$1,300, the AK120 is not for everybody. It is about a grip more expensive than the 160-gigabyte iPod classic, but the 5-ounce AK120 is slightly smaller than an iPod classic and only 3 grams heavier. Also, with a brushed-aluminum shell and a complimentary Italian leather sheath, the AK120 has the look and feel of a luxury product. Its 2.4-inch touchscreen—no, you can't watch movies or look at photos—allows you to easily browse your music, with a proprietary Astell&Kern interface that is every bit as easy to use as Apple's iOS. A sturdy side-mounted volume knob and buttons for power, play/pause, forward and rewind supplement the touchscreen controls. The AK120 does offer Bluetooth connectivity, but with wireless playback you will of course lose most of the fidelity you gained when forking over a paycheck to have full-resolution music in your pocket.



Double the Fun

The AK120 offers two of the Wolfson DACs (one per channel), as well as twice the capacity of its predecessor. The new player has 64-gigabytes of internal storage, plus slots for two 64-gig microSD cards, bringing its total capacity to 192 gigabytes. That's twice as much storage space as the AK100, 32 gigs more than an iPod and 64 gigs more than HiFiMAN's top-of-the-line player. That translates into about 1,000 tracks with 24/192 resolution.

Music is supremely easy to load onto the AK120. You can use iRiver's iTunes-like software to organize and upload your music, or you can simply drag and drop files onto the device, as you would with an external hard drive. When not using the iRiver software, just have the AK120 do a library scan and it will find the music you uploaded, organizing everything by artist, album, genre, etc. After a 6.5-hour charge (via a supplied Mini-USB-2.0 cable), you've got as many as 14 hours of consecutive listening to look forward to.

If you're so inclined, you can also use the AK120 as an external DAC. Just connect the Mini-USB cable to your computer and connect the device to your home system using AK120's 1/8-inch optical output located next to the headphone jack. *(continued)*

FEATURE

Just Add (Good) Headphones

You wouldn't play your five- or six-figure home stereo system through a pair of speakers you bought at Walmart, so get yourself a decent set of ear cans or buds to pair with the AK120. Astell&Kern recently announced its first headphones, a \$200 pair of ear buds, which I haven't heard yet, but I imagine they'll do the job just fine.

The Grado GR-8 ear buds (\$300), quickly reveal the extra depth and detail that the AK120 delivers. A 24/192 version of *Pet Sounds* from HDtracks (www.hdtracks.com) has levels of clarity and precision that I've never experienced without being glued to a listening chair. Anxious to take this obviously remarkable player to an even higher level of performance, I reach for my reference AKG 3003 ear buds (\$1,300). This now



\$2,600 portable music system has me dancing around my apartment, with my girlfriend and her little Bichon Frisé looking at me like I've lost my mind. (If they could only hear the musical realism being delivered to my eardrums...)

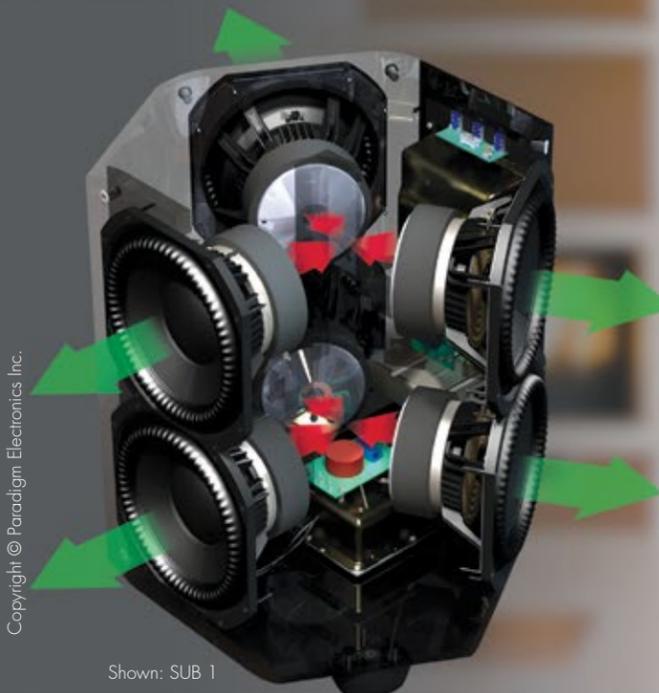
On "I've been Waiting for the Day," Brian Wilson and the boys sound as good as I've ever heard them. The complex vocal harmonies are easily identified, as well as being distinct from one another; yet, they still remain a cohesive part of the overall mix. The low doo-dooos in the left channel and the high ahh-ahhs in the right channel are crystal clear and detailed, with Wilson's lead vocals still prominently front and center. Then, during the bridge, the flute dances around my head, displaying the ability of the AK120 to portray a real three-dimensional soundstage. As the strings lead out of the final verse, an anticipatory silence ensues that is then interrupted by the bang of the floor tom before the gusto of the whole arrangement explodes back in. With the right headphones, the AK120 will change your perception of portable audio.

"You didn't think that I could sit around and let him work..."

TONE publisher Jeff Dorgay has confessed to me on a few occasions that *Pet Sounds* is not his favorite album. While this iconic record may not suit his musical tastes, I have a feeling that the AK120 will at the very least have him oohing and aahing at the extremely detailed and nuanced production, which the HDtracks version highlights even further. Jeff also has bigger and better full-size headphones at his disposal, so he'll be able to take the AK120 to even higher levels of fidelity. Let's see if this player wins him over like it has won my affection. (continued)

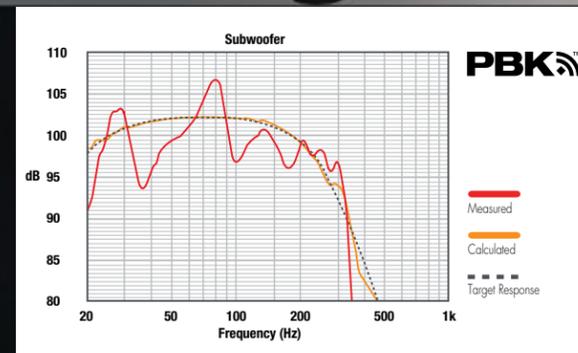
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From Paradigm, the #1 Speaker Brand†



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Shown: SUB 1

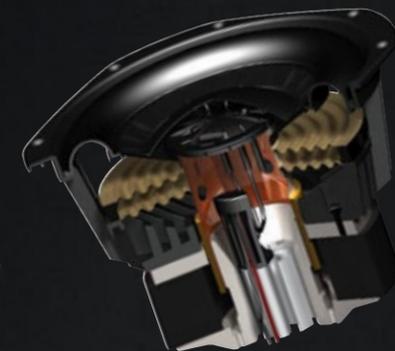


"Audibly better bass through science"
—Chris Martens, AV Guide

Room dimensions, dead spots, archways, furniture placement have a negative effect on bass performance. Until now. In a process that takes just a few minutes, Paradigm's **Perfect Bass Kit** puts the sub through a frequency sweep to highlight problem areas, determines necessary adjustments and saves configurations to your connected PC. Optimized solutions are uploaded to the sub. A scientific approach to perfect bass.

Physics trumps mechanics, with help from Paradigm Signature SUB 2 (and its slightly smaller sibling SUB 1) are movers not shakers. Massive air movement, massive output, vibration free. Six identical, perfectly balanced state-of-the-art drivers radially aligned (two on each side) inside the cabinet in a **Vibration Canceling Architecture**. As powerful opposing forces of equal magnitude, the vibration-reaction forces effectively cancel each other out. Barely a ripple disturbs the contents of the glass placed on top of the cabinet, such is the degree to which unwanted, distortion-inducing vibrations are reduced.

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.



*Connected to a 240-volt line



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

Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

Not on a boat not on a goat. I still hate *Pet Sounds*. Even the \$110,000 dCS Vivaldi can't get me closer to this rock classic that it seems everyone but me adores. Now listening to the HD Tracks 24/192 version of *Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway*, that's a different story.

The AK120s \$1,300 pricetag has a lot of people freaked out. It's been a topic of incideary discussion on many an audio forum, but I submit those people don't get the product. It's *not* a \$1,300 iPod, and yes you *could* buy a Mac Book Air and have a bigger screen, but that won't give you a pocket sized player with high res capability and the sound of a much more expensive desktop player.

You are paying a premium for the size and cool factor, but the AK120 does deliver the goods in terms of sound quality.

Comparing it directly to my favorite reasonably priced digital player, the Oppo 105 (also about \$1,300) the AK120 holds its own.

Goin' Mobile

Personally, I've enjoyed the AK120 the most on the road, demoing high performance audio systems from Burmester, Meridian and Naim. A recent test drive of the new Range Rover Sport, with the 23 speaker Meridian system proved breathtaking, now able to take full advantage of what high resolution audio can deliver. Equally exciting results were had on a recent short trip in a new Porsche Cayman S, decked out with the latest Burmester system.

While it might disappoint my fellow Porsche aficionados, the Burmester system can overpower the mighty Porsche six cylinder engine behind the seats and really rock. Cranking up the latest HD Tracks release of the Rush catalog at speed, taking full advantage of the additional resolution was fantastic.

And that's really what the AK120 is all about. It's a high tech, high performance marvel that's priced accordingly. You'll either love it or hate it. Love it and bought it. Check and mate. ●

Astell&Kern AK120 mobile music player
MSRP: \$1,300

www.astellnkern.com

(available for purchase through
iRiver: shop.iriverinc.com)



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Simaudio Nēo 380D DAC

\$3,900 – \$5,700 (depending on configuration)
www.simaudio.com

Simaudio's new Nēo series of components puts the company's depth of engineering and metalworking skills into a more affordable package, one that does not sacrifice as much as you might think compared to Sim's flagship MOON series. With a plethora of inputs and full 32-bit asynchronous operation, this DAC can handle everything but direct DSD files.

The 380D can be configured with variable outputs (for an extra \$600) and Simaudio's new MiND streamer (\$1,200) to make a complete digital front end that only requires a power amplifier. Those without a turntable could easily just roll with this and cut down on clutter and expense by doing so. We will have a full review in issue 59.

...are you listening in 3D yet?



"I took a listen after 20 hours of break-in, and I hereby declare the 3D wand to succeed the Rim Drive as the "Best sounding VPI upgrade of all time!" I'm absolutely mesmerized over what I'm hearing. It is so good, and so revolutionary as to defy description! A must upgrade for all VPI customers!!"

"You have erred upon the name of the new VPI wand: it should be called "the revelation" - all lps sound better than ever. There is a detail retrieval, little cues of sound that are now much clearer; there is a separation of instruments - a layering of the individual instruments in their own cushion of air (space info); individual voices, or sections of vocal pieces, have separation - instead of being one amorphous entity. Along with this there is less vinyl noise. Also, if one speakers are, let us say 5 to 6 feet from the side walls, one can hear information seemingly coming from the sides. Lastly, the timbre of instruments, from organ to piccolo, sounds more like the real thing!"

"The best way I can put it is that this arm reduces resonances to a point where playback simply sounds more like analog tape than a mechanical interface. Tonal colors fully bloom and there is more information but there is a huge reduction in distortion ... distortion that I didn't know was even there before. Or I thought it was part and parcel of LP playback. The noise floor on this thing is incredibly low. So far it seems to track like a dream and that's even with the light counterweight hanging off the back."

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

"Congratulations for having the guts and innovative minds to go out and try something so new!"

“The first “3D” printer product I know of in audio, which does a remarkable job of limiting vibration thanks to its seamless rigidity...

The end result is as close to mastertapeq sound as any analog front end I've ever heard. ”

-Anthony H. Cordesman





Dynaudio Evidence Platinum Speakers

\$85,000/pair
www.dynaudio.com

Dynaudio's latest flagship has been a fixture here at the *TONEAudio* studio for some time now, and the speaker shares all of the characteristics of previous models. But all that natural tonality and explosive dynamics is taken to a new level in the Evidence Platinum model, where no compromises have been made to the design brief. Watch for a full review in the beginning of 2014.

Passive Progressive

"I've not heard a better preamp, and I've been looking for 30 years"

- Sam Tellig, *Stereophile*

"I started this review with the notion that digital can spell the end of the preamplifier. The Music First Audio Baby Reference exposes this as abject nonsense"

- Alan Sircom - *Hi-Fi+*

"the story of the passive pre-amplifier has just been re-written"

- Andrew Harrison - *Hi-Fi News*

"Auditioning was a delight, fully vindicating the careful design work and the advanced manufacturing techniques required to produce it"

- Martin Colloms - *Hi-Fi Critic*

"This is nothing less than a landmark product"

- David Price - *Hi-Fi World*

"...in the right circumstance, the Music First is the best preamp I've heard"

- Srajan Ebaen - *6 Moons*

Finest quality audio products, hand made in Great Britain





Gato Audio DIA-250 and DIA-400

\$4,500 and \$6,000 respectively
www.gato-audio.com

These Danish beauties also manage to pack high power (250wpc or 400wpc) and high quality Digital to Analog conversion in compact, stylish enclosures. In addition to SPDIF, USB and Toslink digital inputs, both amplifiers feature two pairs of RCA line level inputs and a balanced XLR input. Variable outputs also make these amplifiers easy to integrate into a system utilizing a powered subwoofer.

And they are priced right, considering the wide feature set. Adding your favorite pair of speakers is all you need to round out the package, making a system that looks and sounds beautiful, let takes barely any space. The perfect thing for the music lover that doesn't always have access to a gargantuan listening space.

Watch for a full review of both amplifiers very soon. ●

Bottles of Beauty

The Nagra 300p Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

A visit to Nagra is a very special thing indeed. The factory is cleaner than a hospital, with highly organized workstations populated by happy and highly skilled workers calmly assembling some of the world's finest audio gear. There's almost a reverence about the place, and with the Montreux Jazz Festival nearby, there's always plenty of access to fantastic live performances as an absolute reference.

On my last visit a few years ago, Nagra had something special in progress. The company's engineers were just finishing the final prototype of a new vacuum-tube power amplifier—a push-pull design featuring a pair of 300B output tubes and producing 20 watts per channel.



“With the wideband output transformers designed for the 300p, [the amp] has incredible control for a 300B design,” explains Nagra’s Matthieu Latour. “And it will surprise you with the wide range of speakers it will drive.”

Surprise Indeed

Magic is more like it. Toward the end of the title track of Pat Metheny’s *Offramp*, as Naná Vasconcelos’ gentle, twinkly percussion bits intertwine with Dan Gottlieb’s delicate brush work, it’s clear that this amplifier is able to capture the essence of what fans of the 300B SET sound clamor for, while exhibiting plenty of substance and control. From the top to the bottom of the frequency spectrum, especially the lower end, it’s instantly obvious that this amplifier has none of the shortcomings that plague even the best SET designs.

Steve Rodby’s signature acoustic bass has major weight and texture through this amp; you can almost feel his hand run up the fretless neck as the notes glide out into the soundstage. This is even more spectacular when you consider that the 300p is not driving a high-efficiency set of horn or single-driver speakers, but my reference KEF Blades. Though fairly efficient, with a 90-dB-per-watt sensitivity rating, the Blades require an amplifier with current reserve and low-end grip—something the 300p provides with ease.

Massive Attack’s “Karmacoma,” with its deep, slippery beats, underlines how well the 300p can take control of the Blade duos eight total woofers, moving some serious air without the presentation becoming weak or smeared. An equally enjoyable performance is rendered with selected tracks from Deadmau5, Skrillex and Tosca. This compact amplifier delivers potent bass response. *(continued)*



Beyond Bass

Ellen Reid, the female vocalist behind the Crash Test Dummies, produced a solo album in 2001 called *Cinderellen*. Reid stretches out a bit further as a lead vocalist here and most of the tracks are grittier than typical CTD fare. On “Defense of the Wicked Queen,” the 300p achieves a perfect balance between her complex voice and the accompanying piano. The 300p is a master of pace and timing, allowing the Blades to disappear effortlessly into room.

Much of this is the result of the attention to detail that Nagra paid when producing the amp’s output transformers, which are wound in

house at Nagra. The rest comes from the prodigious power supply that is the foundation for the 300p, which has a nearly 11-by-11-inch footprint and weighs 31 pounds. Fortunately, Nagra ships it with the output transformer modules packed separately to avoid damaging the amplifier during shipping. As is the case with every other Nagra product we’ve had the pleasure to own or review, no detail, no matter how small, goes unnoticed.

At \$16,900, the Nagra 300p is not inexpensive. Those thinking in terms of watts per dollar are missing the gestalt of this masterpiece. In the context of products from, say, Shindo or Audio Note, the

Nagra is an absolute bargain—and is produced by a company with 60 years of experience and a comprehensive support staff, ensuring your Nagra products will always be in top shape.

As Ella Fitzgerald coos “April in Paris,” the luscious midrange depth of the 300p rivets your attention to the musical performance, and when Louis Armstrong joins her on the latter half of the track, awash in texture and tonal richness, it’s so easy to forget about the gear completely and just dig this classic tune. And that is the essence of the 300p: It always gets out of the way and celebrates the music.

(continued)

INTRODUCING

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Tone Audio

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REVIEW



Nuts and Bolts

As mentioned earlier, the 10.9-by-10.8-inch chassis has the same form factor as many of the other Nagra components, such as the PL-L preamplifier, PL-P phono stage and the new Jazz preamplifier, which we are now reviewing. It's a basic, classic look that never goes out of style and pays homage to the famous Nagra field recorders of years past. I'll stick my neck out and postulate that you will either gravitate to the Nagra design ethos or you won't. If you fall into the latter camp, preferring massive boxes with enormous rack handles, the 300p is not for you.

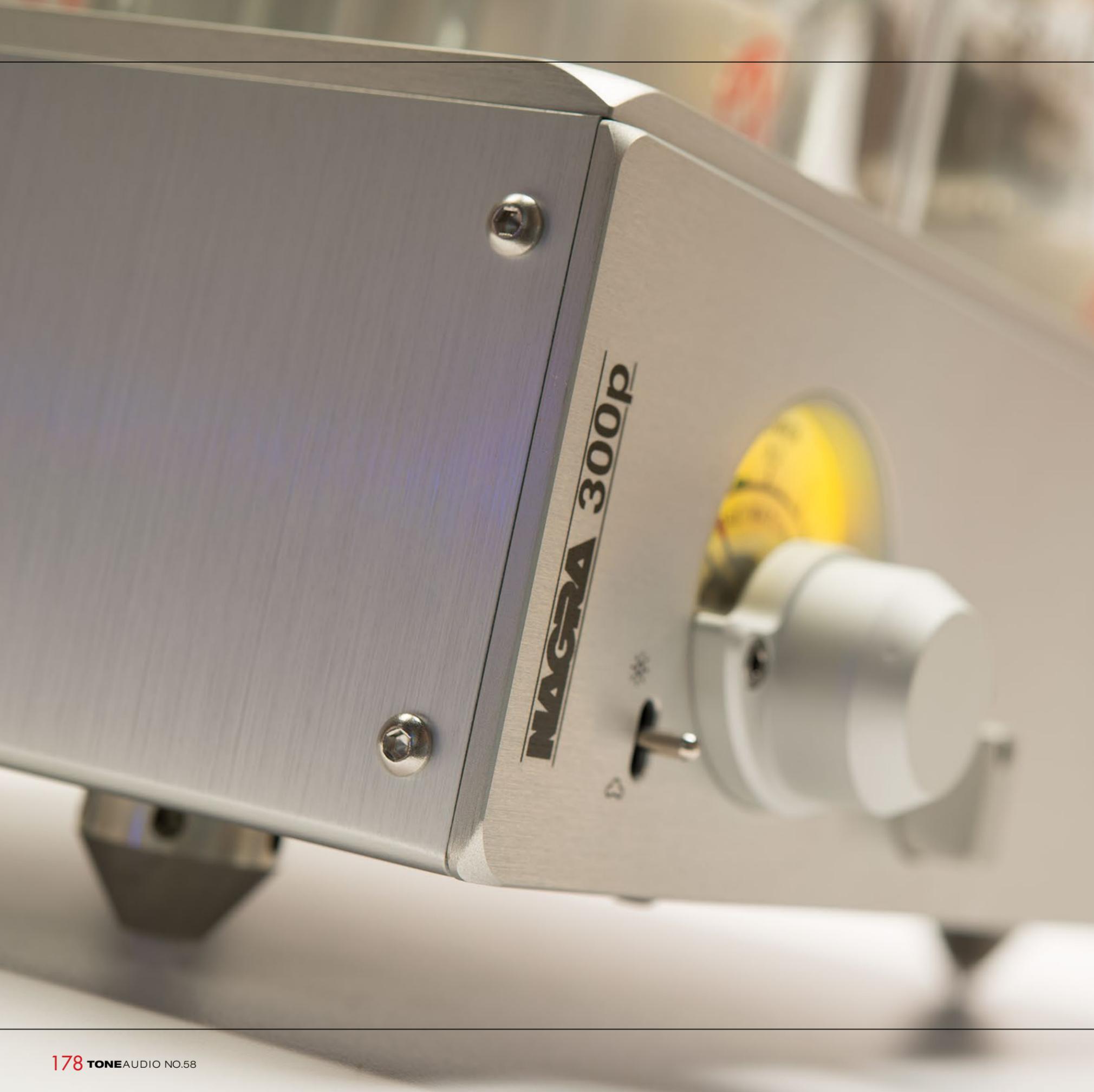
Those of you who do appreciate the compact elegance and

performance that is Nagra will revel in the sound of this petite music machine, and I suspect that you'll do so for some time. This is not an amplifier to purchase casually, only to sell on Audiogon three months later. Like a fine watch or a Leica camera, the Nagra 300p is a treasure—something to be handed down to the next generation. Viewed in the light of permanence, the purchase price becomes somewhat irrelevant.

The front panel of the 300p features a slightly modified version of Nagra's famous modulometer, which displays power output, allows biasing of the output tubes and assists with setting the load factor to optimize the amplifier for the speaker load being driven. All

of this is quite handy and helps the owner get the most performance from the amplifier. The rear panel is equally Spartan, with user-selectable RCA or XLR inputs and output taps, suitable for driving 4-, 8-, or 16-ohm speakers.

Particularly interesting is the hybrid design of the 300p, with its solid-state input stage and power supply that work harmoniously, offering a wide bandwidth and incredibly low noise. Past pure-tube 300B designs we've auditioned have been on the noisy side compared to a push-pull EL34 amplifier, but the 300p is nearly dead silent when I press my ear up against the tweeter of the Blades—highly impressive. *(continued)*



Stepping up to the Focal Maestro Utopia speakers that have just arrived for review, with their 93-dB sensitivity rating, makes the 300p seem almost supercharged, with twice as much headroom on tap. But the amp really comes into its own with the 100-dB ZU Audio Soul Superfly speakers, which are able to coax near-stadium-level volume and dynamics out of the 300p's 20 watts per channel. The ZU's 16-ohm impedance provides a benign load, transferring power easily from amplifier to speaker.

Surprisingly, the 300p can still drive the 85-dB Harbeth Compact 7s to a very reasonable level without breakup in a small to medium sized room. The Nagra now seems worlds apart from my 9-watt-per-channel Wavac amplifier.

Quality First

In the end, it's about tonal purity and richness. Just like the small dog with a big heart that acts like it's a Labrador, the Nagra 300p feels like a big amplifier until it is pushed to its absolute limit, which will ultimately be determined by your room and speakers.

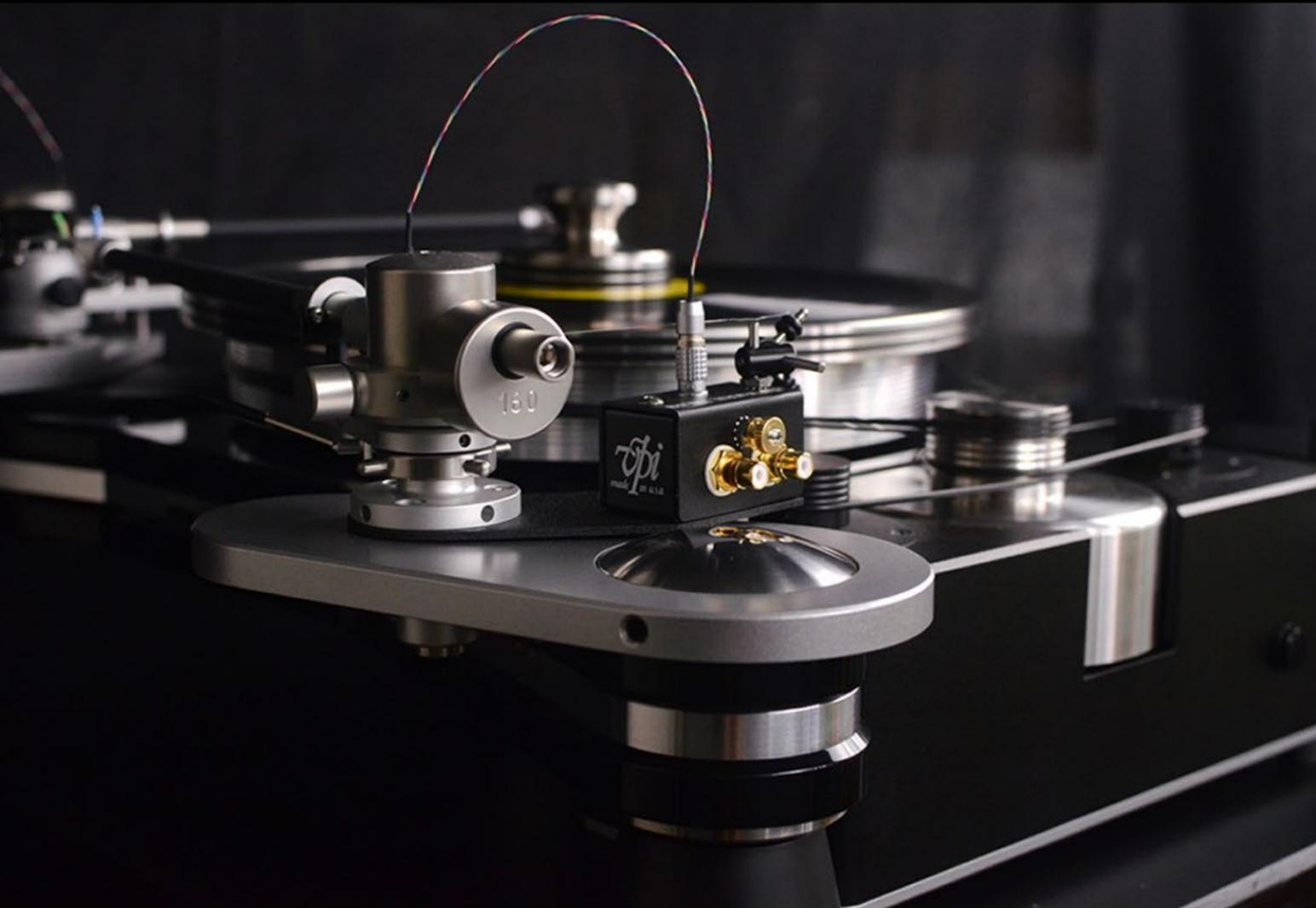
I'm able to fool more than one guest into thinking that my 300-watt-per-channel Pass Xs 300 monoblocks are playing, when in fact the

Nagra amplifier is what's behind the music. The inner detail that this amplifier is able to reveal continues to impress, even after a couple of months of listening. Acoustic guitars have much more heft and resonance, with quicker attack and longer, more graded decay.

Tube rollers will find intrigue with the 300p; however, the hand-matched JJs that are supplied provide an excellent balance of tonal purity, dynamics and extension at the frequency extremes. Should you have a few extra thousand dollars lying around and feel inclined, a recent vintage set of Western Electric 300Bs or EAT 300Bs, though expensive and tough to find, will take the 300p even further, providing even more inner detail.

Those wanting to simplify even further can purchase this amplifier as an integrated—called the 300i—for \$21,250, eliminating the need for a linestage. Both units come supplied with Nagra's VFS (Vibration Free System) platform to minimize interaction with the room environment. As with all other Nagra components we've used, the VFS is highly worthwhile, offering slightly quieter backgrounds and a more open soundstage, allowing you to peek even further into the musical picture. *(continued)*

Quality engineering...



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REVIEW

Perhaps it's the large filament structure on the 300B tubes, but the VFS seems to make a greater improvement on Nagra preamplifiers than it does on others, so make sure and use it with your 300i/300p.

Regardless of which power tubes you settle on, if you have a pair of speakers with the necessary sensitivity for the Nagra 300p to offer enough dynamic range, this can certainly be your destination amplifier—and become the heirloom that the Nagra engineers intended. ●

300p amplifier

MSRP: \$16,900 (\$21,250 for the 300i integrated version)

MANUFACTURER

Nagra

CONTACT

www.nagraaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

AVID Acutus REF SP turntable, TriPlanar tonearm, Lyra Atlas cartridge

Phonostage

Indigo Qualia

Digital source

dCS Vivaldi stack

Preamplifiers

Nagra Jazz, Audio Research REF 5SP, Robert Koda K-10

Speakers

KEF Blade, Focal Maestro Utopia, Zu Soul Superfly

Cable

Cardas Clear

Power

IsoTek Super Titan



A YEAR WITH THE KEF BLADES

By Jeff Dorgay

Time flies when you're having fun. And the fun hasn't stopped since the bright orange KEF Blades arrived in our studio almost a year ago. Let's cut to the chase, shall we? For those of you who skip straight to the conclusion anyway, we'll save you the bother. We're giving the KEF Blades one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013, and they are one of our most enthusiastic choices.

Giving a \$30,000 pair of speakers an award for *exceptional value*? You heard right. Often, newcomers to the scene can build a "giant killer" product because, during the infancy of such products, manufacturers can cut corners on things like casework, support, inventory, etc., and actually build a \$5,000 box for \$2,000. Everyone freaks out, thinking they are getting something for nothing, but should said company make it past the first round, the price goes up, often dramatically.

Has the luster fallen from this product? Hardly. But business is business and parts are parts. There really is no way to cheat death, taxes or cost accounting. However, there is another way to build exceptional value into a product, and that requires a company with depth. This is precisely the approach taken at KEF with the Blades.

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AVID Acutus



Rega RP3



VPI Traveler



REVIEW

Having been in the speaker business since dinosaurs roamed the streets of London, KEF is a real speaker company with decades of engineering and manufacturing expertise. (For a complete history, I highly suggest *TONE* contributor Ken Kessler's excellent book, *KEF – 50 Years of Innovation in Sound*.) KEF also produces speakers in large enough quantities to enjoy an economy of scale that smaller manufacturers cannot. If the company produced 10 pairs a year and asked \$100k for them, I'm positive they would sell. However, being able to amortize the raw research and development of the Uni-Q driver across a wide range of models makes the \$30k price of the Blades feasible.

Granted, 30 grand is still a lot of money for a pair of speakers. (Those thinking this is sheer insanity are also free to tune out now.) But if you're the kind of audiophile and music lover who would enjoy six-figure speaker performance for 30 grand, I enthusiastically submit the Blades. If you've had the chance to experience the small but amazing KEF LS-50 speakers, you know KEF can work miracles for \$1,500. And I've listened to my share of six-figure speakers over the years, so I'll stand by this decision.

Major Drive

The meter needles bounce fervently on the Pass Xs 300 power amplifiers as I crank Steel Panthers' "Death to All But Metal," and my listening room is all smiles—the Blades can move serious air when asked. *(continued)*



Having the opportunity to use the Blades with about 30 different power amplifiers, ranging from low-powered SET's to massive monoblocks, I have found that the key to successfully interfacing with the Blades is twofold: first is current drive; and second, yet equally important, is amplifier quality. The Uni-Q driver is not ruthless, but it is highly revealing of the signal path, so a substandard amplifier or source component will be revealed. This accounts for some of the comments I've heard on the Blades (e.g. "they don't have enough bass" or "they sound kind of bright"), yet I submit that this is the character of the electronics connected to them.

The deep notes on the album *11i*, from the Supreme Beings Of Leisure, confirms what the *Stereophile Test Disc* reveals: With a bit of room gain on my side, I'm getting solid low-frequency response all the way down to 25 Hz. Again, some kudos go to the Pass Xs 300s, which have been bass monsters with every speaker I've mated them to, so it's like stacking the deck. However, even with the 20-watt-per-channel Nagra 300p, the Blades produce prodigious bass, though they can't play as loud as they do with 300 plus watts per channel at their disposal.

Tracking through White Zombie's *Supersexy Swingin' Sounds* leaves no doubt that the Blades move major air, and do so in a chest-pounding kind of way. KEF marketing director Johan Coorg and I are convinced that we need two more speakers for a quad setup—and I've got the quad open-reel deck at the ready.

In a Word, Coherent

For those just tuning in to *TONEAudio*, I'll reiterate that my personal bias has always been towards electrostatic speakers, full-range ESLs in particular.



I've always been able to forgo that last bit of extension at both ends of the frequency range to get that luscious, reach-out-and-touch-it midrange, which a great ESL does more convincingly than anything.

Compared to my Quad ESL 57s, the Blades give up precious little in terms of overall coherence, bass response and their ability to play loud, damn loud. At a point where the 57s would liquefy and my Acoustat 2+2's would lose any sense of soundstage depth, the Blades are solidly hitting their stride. Even at incredibly high volume, these speakers hold their poise like few others I've experienced.

This gives the bright orange Blades you see in the photos the ability to disappear in the room in a way few speakers at any price can. Too many large, multi-driver speakers I've experienced sound exactly that way—sitting in the listening chair, it's as if you can distinctly hear the woofer, midrange and tweeter.

Just as you might with an ESL, you'll fall in love with the Blades after listening to your favorite vocalist. Listen carefully to David Lee Roth's closely miked vocal in the classic Van Halen tune, "Ice Cream Man." His voice is rich with echo and larger than life, going way beyond the speaker boundaries, while Eddie Van Halen gently strums along on acoustic guitar off to the left of center, perfectly capturing the intimacy of this performance.

In addition to the high coherence that these speakers provide, they also have a very low level of distortion and thus fatigue. This is a speaker that reveals the finest nuance, allowing me to evaluate different components with ease, yet is also a speaker with which I love to just sit and listen to music for pleasure, even after a 12-hour day of component reviews. *(continued)*



This is the highest compliment I can pay the Blades—they have promoted many late-night listening sessions after the work at *TONE* was done.

Setup and Placement

Auditioning long- and short-wall placement with the Blades in my 15-foot-by-25-foot listening room reveals the long-wall placement to be the winner, offering up the biggest, widest soundstage—highly reminiscent of the MartinLogan CLX speakers that I enjoyed as a reference for many years.

It didn't take much time to figure out that placing the speakers roughly 10 feet apart (from center to center of each Uni-Q driver) and about 4 feet from the wall was the optimum spot; the Blades are incredibly easy to set up. Thanks to the extra-wide dispersion, something you *don't* get with an ESL, the Blades offer a fantastic presentation on and off of the listening-room couch. Even sitting down on the floor, well off center, you can still enjoy the music.

The short wall proved trickier to optimize in my room, requiring the Blades to be further out into the room to avoid bass bumps. Following Co-org's suggestion, I didn't toe-in the speakers when they were on the short wall and that worked well. Long-wall placement worked best with a few degrees of toe-in and delivered a wider, deeper soundstage than short wall placement in my listening space. As with any speaker, I suggest optimizing for low-frequency coupling first and letting the stereo image fall where it will. *(continued)*

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Lurking Behind Those Orange Cabinets

Though the Blades curvy shape is purpose built to minimize resonances, it has probably been the biggest hit with my non-audiophile friends. The speakers are almost unanimously appealing to both men and women, with most women gravitating to the orange and other brighter colors and most men preferring white or black. But hey, if you're going to get funky speakers, I say paint them a funky color.

More technologically speaking, the Blades four 9-inch woofers are symmetrically placed in the vertical and horizontal planes so that the center of their output radiates from the center of the Uni-Q driver, further reinforcing the "point source" concept. The crossovers feature mild order slopes and, from our hands-on experience, we can confirm that they are indeed incredibly easy to drive with nearly any amplifier producing about 15 watts per channel or more. Those wanting further, more in-detail commentary can click here. There is more tech talk and a few video clips of Blade designer Jack Oclew-Brown outlining the bass cabinets and the KEF concept of "single apparent source," which is the underlining principle of the speaker system.

A welcome favorite feature of the Blades is their lack of jumpers between the Uni-Q and the woofers. It always seems shortsighted to build a \$30k pair of speakers with cheesy jumper wires or strips that you have to replace later anyway. All that is required with the Blades is merely tightening two jumpers on the rear face of the speakers and getting on with the show. Bravo, KEF; no jumpers to lose or upgrade later. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

A Great Long-Term Choice

Winding up this review with Wang Chung's *To Live and Die in L.A.* soundtrack, I realize that these speakers work well with everything in my music collection, no matter how inspiring or cheesy. The KEF Blades are not fussy audiophile speakers that are limited to a short list of audiophile favorites in order for them to give their all.

Having the privilege of listening to them for the better part of the year worked well on many levels: Not only have I purchased the Blades to be my new reference speakers, but having them on hand also gives me the opportunity to put them through their paces with so many different combinations of amplification, making it that much easier to get a solid handle on their performance.

The Blades are easy to set up and work incredibly well with almost all amplifiers, making them a great choice for a system anchor from which you can build and improve as your time and budget allow. After a year of living with these speakers, I just don't see the need to spend more money on a speaker—ever. And, to us at *TONE*, that level of value deserves an award. ●



The Blade loudspeakers
MSRP: \$30,000

MANUFACTURER

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

AVID Acutus Reference SP turntable, TriPlanar tonearm, and Lyra Atlas cartridge via Indigo Qualia phonostage

Digital Source

dCS Vivaldi stack, Sooloos C15, Aurender S10, Light Harmonic DaVinci

Preamplifier

Audio Research REF 5SE, Robert Koda K-10

Power Amplifier

Pass Labs Xs 300s, Burmester 911, Nagra 300p, Octave Jubilee monoblocks

Cable

Cardas Clear, Nordost Frey

Power

Running Springs Dmitri, IsoTek Super Titan

Accessories

Furutech DeMag, GIK acoustic treatments, Audio Desk Systeme RCM

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



We know. Sorting through the jungle that is pre-owned hi-fi gear can be tough. Myriad Internet forums and online shopping sites just don't offer the expertise required to make sound decisions.

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While we will certainly ship any of our gently used classics directly to your door, we invite you to stop by our shop in beautiful downtown Portland, Oregon to browse our inventory in person. Thanks to an in-house service department, we not only service everything we sell, but every piece of used gear is thoroughly checked before being put on display. Consider our white-gloves treatment your guarantee against potential problems.

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Simply Exquisite

D'Agostino Momentum Stereo Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

Flanked by the wall of monstrous amplifiers here for evaluation, the compact D'Agostino Momentum stereo power amplifier stands out from the pack. As the Hammond organ solo in Mighty Sam McClain's "Too Proud" crescendos from the softest touch to full force and back, the sound, awash in texture and decay, takes me to that magical place where I'm truly convinced that I'm not just listening to a hi-fi system; this is real music unfolding in front of me.

Even at high listening levels, when pairing the Momentum with my reference KEF Blades, the dual indicator needles of the amp's sexy lime-green power meter barely come off of their rest stops—and I pause, wondering if perhaps they are defective. This amplifier seems to have an endless reserve of power on tap, along with thunderous but controlled and defined bass response. Remember, this amp is from the same man that gave us Krell amplifiers in the 1980s—amplifiers that redefined what solid-state amplification could achieve.

Luckily, I still have an original Krell KSA-50 on hand for comparison (covered in the Old School column in issue 53), and I enjoy jumping in the time machine to revisit the inception of this mighty amplifier. All of the Momentum's core attributes are here in the KSA-50. While Krell amplifiers always received much fanfare for their prodigious bass response, the KSA-50 also has a smooth, grain-free top end, with a wealth of inner detail to boot. Comparing these two amps is a lot like comparing an early Porsche 911 to a current model; driving them back to back brings home the level of refinement that's taken place over the years.

He's Done It Again

The D'Agostino monoblocks, released about two years ago, caused quite a stir in the industry. Even at \$55,000 a pair, they made believers out of everyone who heard them. The Momentum Stereo, priced at \$30,000, makes this performance available to a more prudent and space-conscious audience. Best of all, should you decide that the extra juice of the monoblocks is necessary, you can send your stereo amp back to the factory and have it converted to a monoblock. Then just add the second monoblock, which makes for an easy and cost-effective upgrade from the single-amp solution.

At the risk of deterring you from spending more money with Mr. D'Agostino (unless you have terribly inefficient speakers), I will say that you may never need to go with the monoblocks. All of the speakers at my disposal are in a sensitivity range of 86 dB to 90 dB per watt, and no matter how far I crank the volume, I never hear even the slightest hint of compression or clipping. And I do listen to my music fairly loud on occasion.

Going back to the recent LP remaster of ZZ Top's *Tres Hombres*, I do just that—and as great as the massive drums and guitars sound through the Momentum, the telltale bit comes at the end of the track, when Gibbons' guitar gently fades over a bed of wind chimes tinkling in the air.
(continued)

Products clockwise from top: Feickert Woodpecker (piano black), Okki Nokki Record Cleaner, Blue Horizon ProFono, Acoustical Systems SMARTRactor and Feickert Firebird (rosewood)



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Wow! The incredibly detailed three-dimensional perspective again fools me into thinking I'm listening to an actual musical object floating in space. But the real test comes when I play "Sam the Wonder Dog," from the first Stereophile test CD, which has the neighbors' dogs howling away!

We could go on and on about all the technology that makes the Momentum so special—from the unique design of its heat sinks to its two big banks of 69-MHz output transistors—but you can read all of that on the D'Agostino website here.

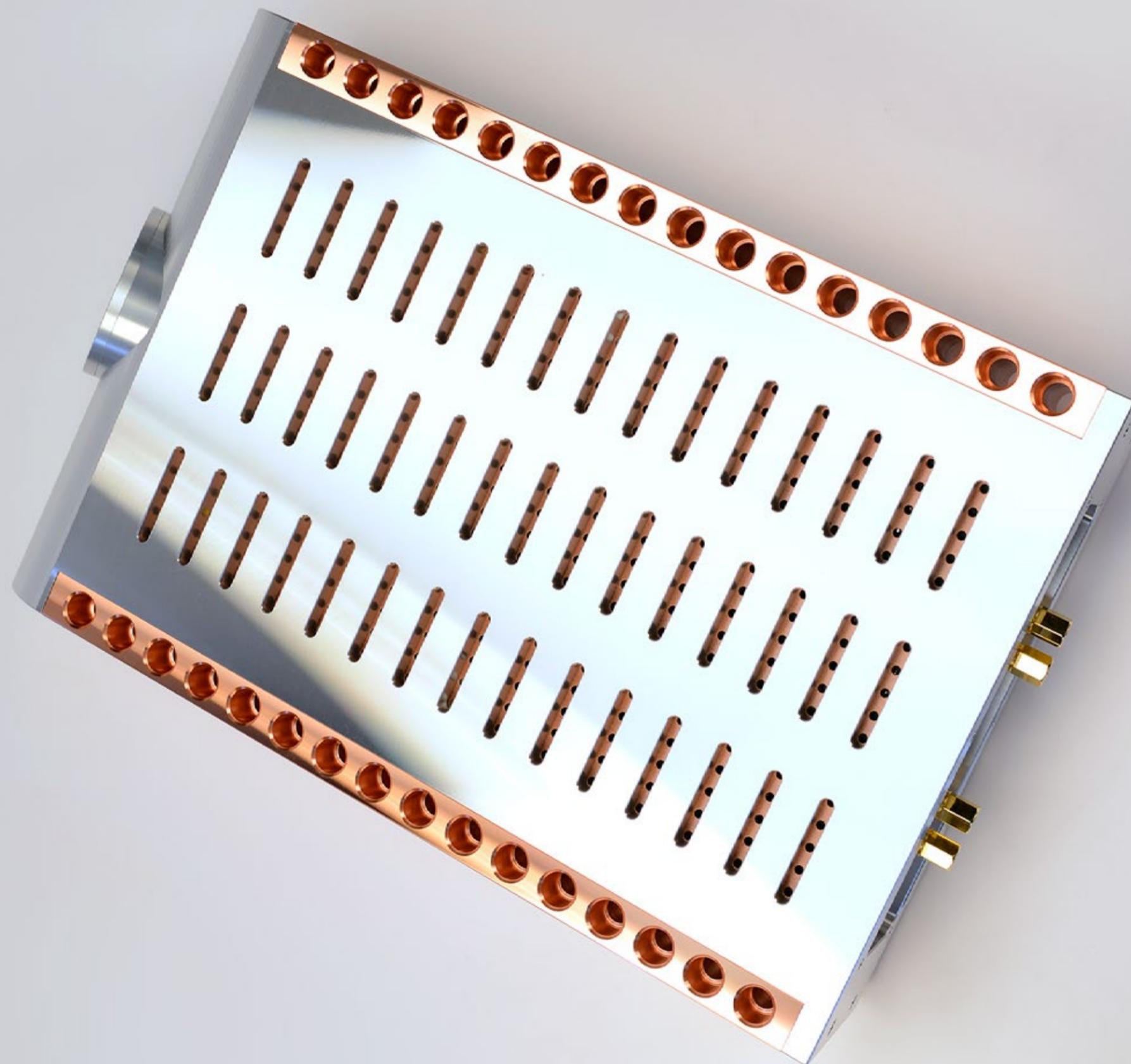
I should note that our review sample spent time at a few trade shows, so it arrived fully broken in and ready to go, so I can't comment on how long a fresh amplifier takes to sound like the review sample.

A Sight to Behold

Don't let the diminutive form factor of the Momentum fool you. This slender amp is all business, weighing nearly 100 pounds. We normally don't hesitate to pop the top off of most amplifiers, but the Momentum's case has no exposed screws, so rather than risk a highly embarrassing call to D'Agostino, I decide to settle for pictures of the amp's gorgeous exterior.

And gorgeous it is. The entire chassis, save for the side-mounted heat sinks (machined from copper billet), is all CNC machined from solid aluminum. Chances are high that you will be spellbound by the refined-steampunk look of the Momentum.

Rocking SBTRKT's self-titled album brings the listening room alive with major beats that punch you in the stomach, yet the finesse of the Momentum creates a massive ball



of sound that feels like multi-channel audio emanating from only two speakers. With the music approaching club volumes, the Momentum's needles now move in earnest, inching halfway up each side of the power meter—but there's still plenty of juice on reserve. Again, the KEF Blades crank out heavy, controlled bass that you feel as much as you hear.

Highly Sophisticated

Much like the sports cars of the early 1980s, most power amplifiers were one-trick ponies that don't offer anywhere near the same amount of finesse as today's best designs. What makes the Momentum amplifier so dandy is that it offers no compromise in any aspect of sound reproduction or even day-to-day use. Thanks to some new power-management circuitry from Mr. D'Agostino, the Momentum only draws one watt when in idle mode—which is less than an iPhone charger!

D'Agostino doesn't list a spec on power draw at full output, but being a Class AB design (a radical departure in itself for Mr. D'Agostino), this amplifier probably only draws about 500 to 700 watts from the AC line, which means that it doesn't require anything out of the ordinary in terms of power. After hours of play at relatively high volumes, the copper heatsinks get warm to the touch, but nothing like any of the Class A amplifiers at my immediate disposal.

But again, all the technology under the hood of the Momentum stereo amplifier is lost on this writer the minute that the music begins to play. After months of listening to the Momentum with a plethora of ancillaries, I find it completely without fault of any kind, on any level. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

Listening to the hardest rock or the subtlest solo vocalist, this amplifier delivers power, punch and nuance, all with equal aplomb. The best amplification components I've experienced make it impossible to identify them with your eyes closed. The Momentum is one of these rare amplifiers that will leave you scratching your head, with a non-existent sound signature that resembles neither tubes nor transistors. The Momentum is in very rare territory indeed.

Grooving on "Twisting with James," from the Dr. No soundtrack, the drumming stays right in the pocket, while the full-on surf guitar and sax easily occupy their own private space in the soundstage. Cranking both sides of Judas Priest's *Screaming For Vengeance* on LP usually leaves me desperate for some earplugs, but the Momentum reproduces the layers of driving lead guitars so effortlessly, keeping the voicing of Glenn Tipton and K.K. Downing's guitar distinctly different. This is something that many amplifiers cannot achieve, especially at high volumes. It's metal at its finest.

Spinning a pile of Motown records, settling on some Supremes, I find it intriguing to hear how much detail lurks in these classic tunes. The Supremes' collaboration with the Temptations, "I'm Gonna Make You Love Me," is fantastic; it not only reveals the vocal stylings of these legendary artists, but it also puts some meat on the bones of the presentation. This tune now has a solid bass line that was not apparent before.

The percussive sounds at the beginning of Tom Waits' "Town With No Cheer" hang in the air effortlessly, as the bagpipes fade to Waits' young, vibrant voice, which keeps a subtle distance from the harp and accordion playing in the background. This sense of space is what separates the Momentum from lesser amplifiers, this delicacy again making it so easy for the amplifier to just disappear and become a conduit for whatever music is being played.
(continued)

THE FIFTY



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REVIEW



Geeky Bits

While the Momentum definitely benefits from adding premium cable, as does any great amplifier, it is not overly cable sensitive when it comes to power or signal cables. However, its highly resolving nature allows the differences between various cables to come through loud and clear. The Momentum does not prove highly sensitive to the various power-line conditioners on hand, either—a testament to the high integrity of its power supply's design. The Momentum does experience a slight increase in high-frequency smoothness and liquidity when plugged into either the Running Springs Maxim or the IsoTek Super Titan conditioners (both via a dedicated 20-amp circuit), but this effect is

nowhere near the dramatic difference experienced with some even more expensive amplifiers.

Perhaps the only piddly complaint with the Momentum is that, because it's such a compact amplifier, the rear panel reveals a sparse complement of connectors: 12-volt triggers, a pair of XLR inputs and a pair of copper binding posts that do not allow for banana plugs. It's all tucked in fairly tight quarters, so those with massive speaker cables may need to rethink their termination. I would highly suggest adding the stylish aluminum base that D'Agostino developed for the amplifier. The base will assist in cooling and get the amplifier up off the floor or shelf, providing much easier access to the speaker terminals. *(continued)*

Around front, the power switch hides underneath the crown jewel of the Momentum, the magnificent power meter, which is backlit in bright green. If there were ever a place that the term “audio jewelry” applied, it’s here. I suspect that this amplifier will be as compelling to look at years from now as it is the day you remove it from its padded flight case.

The day of \$30,000 amplifiers is here to stay. While some will whinge about the price, the question remains: Does this amplifier provide performance and build quality in keeping with the price asked?

To that ultimate question, the answer is unquestionably yes. We’ll even stick our necks out and say that the D’Agostino Momentum stereo amplifier is possibly one of the best amplifiers available at any price. If you don’t believe me, I suggest you take one for a test listen. ●

Momentum stereo amplifier
MSRP: \$29,000 (silver); \$31,500 (black)

MANUFACTURER

Dan D’Agostino

CONTACT

www.dagostinoinc.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog source AVID Acutus Reference SP turntable, TriPlanar tonearm, Lyra Atlas cartridge

Digital source dCS Vivaldi stack

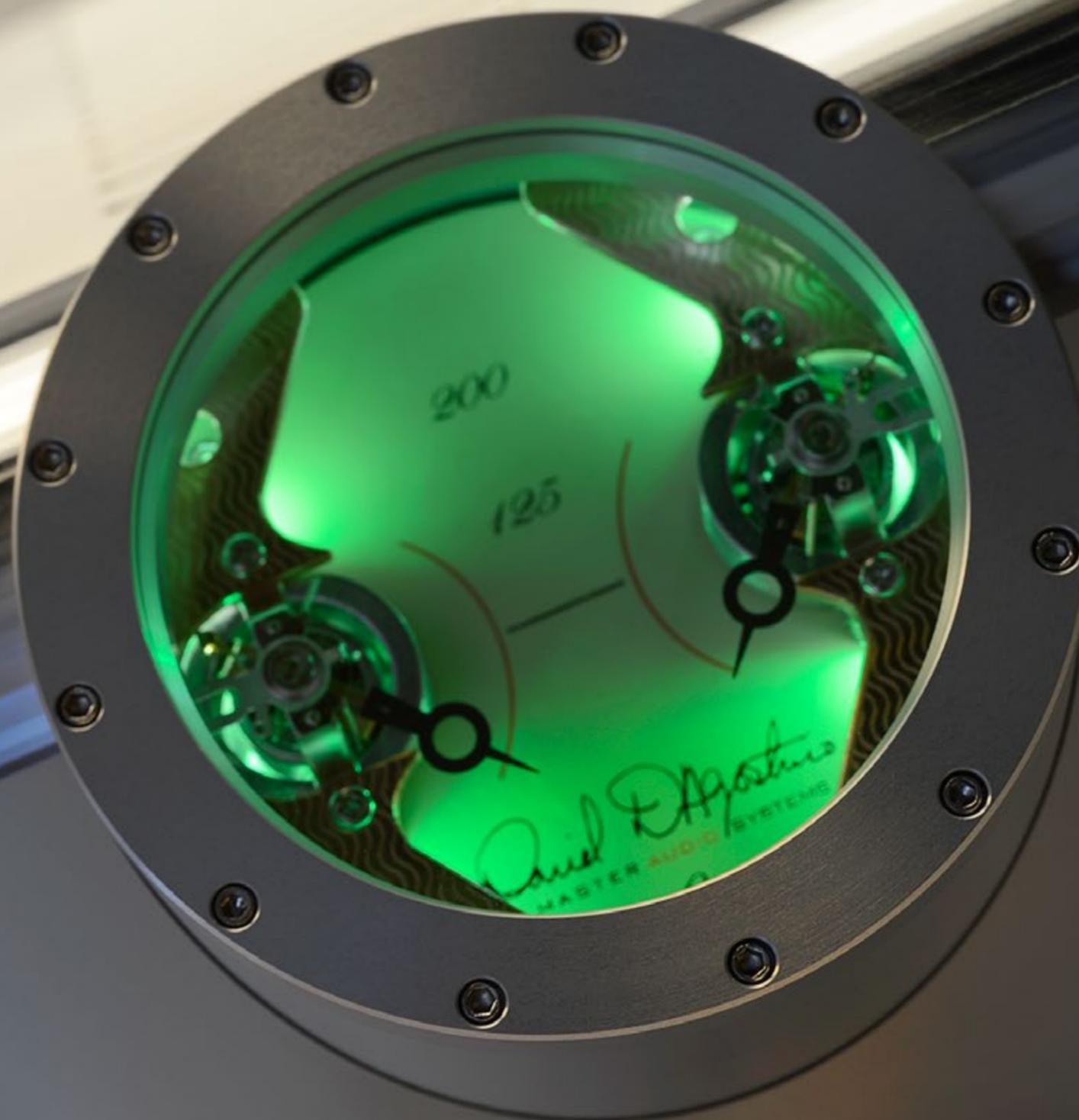
Phonostage Indigo Qualia

Preamplifier Audio Research REF 5SE, Burmester 011, Robert Koda K-10

Speakers GamuT S9, KEF Blade, Dynaudio Evidence Platinum, Focal Maestro Utopia, Sonus faber Guarneri Evolution

Power IsoTek Super Titan

Cable Cardas Clear



Très Sleek

Devialet 110 Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

Two years ago, Devialet defined the high-style/high-performance audio category with its D-Premier amplifier, which provides high power and functionality in a single sleek and sexy package—proving that a component worthy of display in the Louvre can also deliver music to appease the most sophisticated of audiophiles. We had one of the world's first review units of the D-Premier, which we reviewed back in issue 35, and we came away highly impressed, as did every other reviewer that had the privilege of living with this French masterpiece. The initial demo at the 2011 Consumer Electronics Show was a knockout, and the D-Premier is one of those rare components that is so visually stunning that it grabs your attention from across the room.



And it does not disappoint when unpackaged. The D-Premier proved it could drive any load with ease, never losing its composure. With 350 watts per channel on tap and with the ability to be bridged for mono configuration and used with multiple units for even more power, it is endlessly scalable.

While we saw the \$16,000 purchase price as an incredible bargain, considering that the D-Premier includes a full-function preamplifier, DAC, streamer and MM/MC phonostage in one compact chassis, this is still out of the reach of some audiophiles with more modest needs.

Enter Devialet's 240, 170 and 110 models, each with less power and capability, for those wanting high-quality sound in Devialet's distinctive form factor. John Bevier, director of sales for Audio Plus Services (the North American importer of Devialet), notes that all four Devialet models utilize the same amplification circuitry and that they sound identical, with the difference between the models one of more power, so even the entry-level 110 does not sacrifice anything in terms of quality.

Focusing here on the 110, which is priced at a comparatively reasonable \$6,500, I feel that it is an excellent place to begin your journey with Devialet, and a great destination for all but the most power-hungry music lover. For an additional \$1,200, you can add the Devialet Air streaming board, adding full wi-fi access to and control of the 110 via your iPhone or Android phone.



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Again, keep in mind that you are getting a full-function preamplifier, *with tone controls* (more about that later), a 110-watt-per-channel power amplifier, a 24-bit/192-kHz DAC, and a MM phono stage built in—not to mention all the cables you don't have to buy or the rack space you'll save. The 110 is easily mounted on wall with an accessory wall bracket that works somewhat like the ones used to mount a flat-screen TV.

Spinning LPs

The Devialet configurator, found on the company's website, allows you to optimize the 110 to your needs. One of the two analog inputs can be configured as a phono stage and, while the flagship D-Premier is prepared for moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges, the 110 is limited to MM duty, which should be more than adequate for most users, especially in light of how many great MM cartridges are available these days.

A cursory run-through of MM carts on hand reveals excellent compatibility with the Ortofon 2M Black and Bronze, as well as the NOS Ortofon VMS Mk. II cartridges. The higher-output Grado Master 1 cartridge also proves highly compatible, with an excellent balance of dynamics and high-frequency extension. The only MM cartridge in my stable that is not immediately compatible is the Rega Exact II, mounted to the Rega RP6 turntable. Because maximum phono level can be adjusted down to 1 mV, the Devialet 110 works particularly well with Grado's .5 mV output moving-iron cartridges, as they have a 47k impedance.

Settling in with the Ortofon 2M Black, mounted on the VPI Classic 1 turntable, is a ton of fun. Spinning XTC's classic song "When You're Near Me I Have Difficulty" proves enlightening, with a wonderfully lush three-dimensional soundstage. *(continued)*





Even though the Devialet works in the digital domain, upsampling everything to 24/192 first and then applying the RIAA equalization in the digital domain, there is no sacrifice in the analog magic—perhaps this is the future after all?

Cycling through a wide range of musical fare proves as enticing as it is on my all analog systems, and great results are achieved with a MC step-up transformer, with the phono gain set to maximum, this time utilizing a .5 mV Sumiko Palo Santos cartridge and the SME 10 turntable. Dylan's *Blood On The Tracks* (courtesy of the latest remaster from Mobile Fidelity) is glorious. The acoustic guitar on the intro of "Simple Twist of Fate" has plenty of air and texture, with Dylan's voice gently wafting into the mix—underlining the fact that you can use a turntable costing more than the Devialet 110 and be very, very satisfied with the results.

Controlling Tone

Fortunately, the tone controls in the Devialet 110 are also configurable, and act more like a two-band parametric EQ than just standard bass and treble controls, which is perfect for slightly bumping up a rolled-off phono cartridge or taming a slightly bright or boomy speaker. The bass control can be set from 20 Hz to 500 Hz, and the treble control can be set from 1 kHz to 20 kHz, which works well at taming the slight mid-bass bump that the KEF LS-50s have in my 10-foot-by-13-foot home listening room (aka room three). Room treatments would just not fix this issue, but a slight decrease in the 90 Hz level cleans things up nicely, letting the system play much cleaner than it could before. *(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.





The combination of modest room treatments and a slight tonal correction makes the Devialet 110 incredibly adaptable to a wide variety of environments. These are the most effective tone controls I've ever used this side of a Cello Audio Palette, and they add tremendous value to the Devialet 110. Once you become accustomed to using these controls, you will be forever spoiled.

Master of the Digital Domain

In addition to offering a USB and two optical inputs, the Devialet 110 features a pair of line-level inputs that can be configured as analog inputs, a phono input or a pair of S/PDIF inputs, along with the two straight digital inputs, making the Devialet 110 incredibly flexible.

Digital files can also be streamed via Ethernet or wirelessly, if the streaming board is installed, as it is in our review sample.

Every option works flawlessly. Streaming files from the Meridian Digital Music Server (formerly Soloos), via MS200 network bridge and optical connection, passes 16-bit/44.1-kHz files and 24/96 files with notable ability. The Aurender S10 serves up 24/192 files, which sound fantastic through this amp.

Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway's duet "Where is the Love?" clearly illustrates the Devialet's ability to resolve fine detail, while not crossing the line into overly analytic or fatiguing digital, keeping these two delicate voices in distinct spaces throughout the recording.

Discs played through the MSB digital transport reveal an even greater sense of ease, suggesting to this writer that there's still some life in those shiny discs after all.

Ample Amplification

The 110 watts per channel, rated into 6 ohms, prove up to the task of driving all of the speakers here, and the Devialet even does an acceptable job with the Magnepan 1.7s, though they do give a more grandiose performance with the more powerful D-Premier. All the other speakers, with sensitivity ratings ranging from 85 dB per watt to 92 dB per watt, sound marvelous.

KEF's small but amazing LS-50 speakers are an incredibly

synergistic match for the Devialet 110 in listening room three. This combination, in concert with some modest room treatments from GIK, delivers a huge soundstage that on some music lacking the lowest of bass notes or massive dynamic swings goes a long way toward fooling me that someone snuck the Blades into this small listening room!

A perfect example of this is Seu Jorge's version of David Bowie's "Rebel, Rebel," from the *Life Aquatic* soundtrack. This gentle vocal rendition, along with acoustic guitar and a bit of surf rolled in the back of the mix, sounds open and spacious, feeling so much bigger than the system suggests.

Thanks to the Devialet's ADH amplifier topology, which uses a Class A stage to set the amplifier's voice in tandem with a Class D stage to do the heavy-duty amplification, results in an extremely neutral character with no embellishment. The 110 always feels natural and dynamic, no matter what the program source, and on the rare occasion that I am able to drive it to clipping, the effect is gentle.

Best of all, you can set the maximum power level of the Devialet 110, so that when you're away, your kids can't destroy your tweeters, even if they choose to have a house party. A quick trip back to the configurator and it's handled. *(continued)*



3050 Mono Power Amplifiers

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www.boulderamp.com



A Brilliant Success

The Devialet 110 succeeds on every level. Aesthetically stunning yet understated, it will easily integrate into any décor scheme, though its beautiful black finish begs to be displayed. The equally attractive remote can be used anywhere in the immediate listening area and is a joy to use, yet the app for Android and iPhone/iPad operating systems makes it easy to control anywhere—perfect for when you'd like to lounge somewhere else in the home and have background music going.

The only disadvantage to using the app is that it is limited to input control, volume level

and mute. It would be nice to see an upgrade so that balance and tone controls could be accessed from your phone.

For the music lover that doesn't want to sacrifice sound quality for aesthetics, I can think of no finer choice than the Devialet 110, except maybe one of the higher-powered units, should your speakers require it. The journey doesn't end here, either. The 110 will be easily upgradable via software as the Devialet engineers develop new functionality, so this is an investment you can live with for the long haul. Lifestyle is no longer a dirty word when it comes to hi-fi. ●

Devialet 110 amplifier
MSRP: \$6,500

MANUFACTURER
www.deviale.com

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Rega RP6 Turntable/Exact Cartridge

Digital Source Sooloos MS200, Aurender S10, MacBook Pro

Speakers KEF LS-50, KEF Blade, GamuT S9, MartinLogan Aeries i

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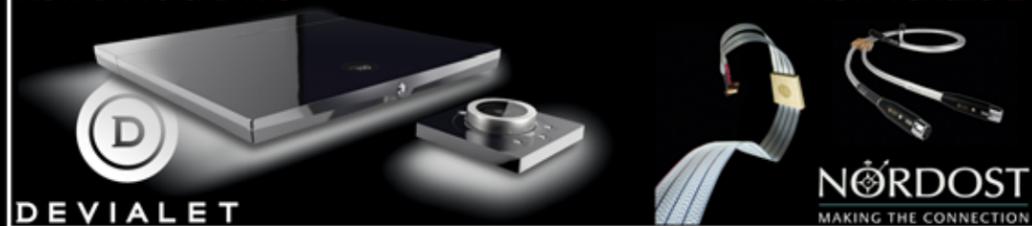
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Gear editor Bailey S. Barnard takes the lead on this review, putting the ELACs through their paces with his reference Burmester gear, and comes away highly impressed.

A three-way system, with a pair of 7-inch woofers, a 5.5-inch midrange driver and the magical Air Motion JET tweeter, the FS 249s offer up speed, dynamics and clarity in abundance. And thanks to a 90-dB sensitivity rating, they will mate well with nearly every amplifier producing more than about 25 watts per channel, which makes them a perfect dance partner.

Read the full review here. ●



Wadia Intuition Power DAC

\$7,495
www.wadia.com

We've been living with the Intuition for some time now, and have had the opportunity to pair it up with a wide range of speakers with excellent results. This Italian-designed, Apple-inspired beauty manages to fit a 350-watt-per-channel amplifier and the latest version of Wadia's Digitmaster software all in a coolio chassis that should impress any user, whether hardcore audiophile or design fanatic.

Read the full review here. ●



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Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

Damn, we love cassette decks—but unfortunately they make no sense. And while a few hipster labels are releasing new material on tape, it's like the cab driver in *Spinal Tap* said: "This is a fad."

But it's such a fun fad, isn't time? There's still something inherently tactile about making a mix tape. Taking the time to physically sequence those tracks and burn them to tape just feels so right.

And you don't need to spend a ton of money to get in on the fun. Reel-to-reel decks, even at their best, feel like cheap dates that make expensive wives, but a fully functioning cassette deck can be yours for under \$100. And, best of all, when it breaks, you can just throw it out—or send it to us to blow up on *Monthly Equipment Sacrifice*.

Here's a great place to start your cassette-deck journey. We found this one at a recent garage sale:



Nakamichi BX-100

\$35

This two-head deck, complete with a full logic transport, sounds great and has the benefit of all the lights working properly. Back in the mid 1980s when these were new (and carried a price tag of \$349), the BX-100 offered a frequency response out to 20 kHz with metal tape. Today, an NOS C90 metal tape cassette will set you back more than the cost of this deck.

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The Cable Company: www.thecableco.com

Cardas Audio: www.cardas.com

Conrad Johnson: www.conradjohnson.com

Dali: www.soundorg.com

dCS: www.dcsltd.co.uk

Dynaudio: www.dynaudio.com

Echo Audio: www.echohifi.com

GamuT: www.gamutaudio.com

JM Labs/Focal: www.audioplusservices.com

JL Audio: www.jlaudio.com

KEF: www.kef.com

IsoTek: www.isoteksystems.com

Lyra: www.lyraanalog.com

MartinLogan: www.martinlogan.com

McIntosh: www.mcintoshlabs.com

Meridian: www.meridian-audio.com

Mobile Fidelity: www.mofi.com

Mystere: www.mystere-usa.com

Music Direct: www.musicdirect.com

Music Matters: www.musicmattersjazz.com

Nordost: www.nordost.com

Nagra: www.nagraaudio.com

Naim: www.soundorg.com

Octave: www.octaveaudio.de

Paradigm: www.paradigm.com

Primare: www.vanaltd.com

Qualia: www.qualia-highend.com

Red Wine Audio: www.redwineaudio.com

Rega: www.soundorg.com

Rogers HiFi: www.rogershighfidelity.com

Rutherford Audio: www.rutherfordaudio.com

Simaudio: www.simaudio.com

Soul Custom: www.soulcustom.com

SoundStage Direct: www.soundstagedirect.com

Totem: www.totemacoustic.com

Upscale Audio: www.upscaleaudio.com

Vicoustic: www.vicoustic.com

Wadia: www.wadia.com

Wireworld: www.wireworldcable.com

Vienna Acoustics: www.vanaltd.com

VPI: www.vpiindustries.com