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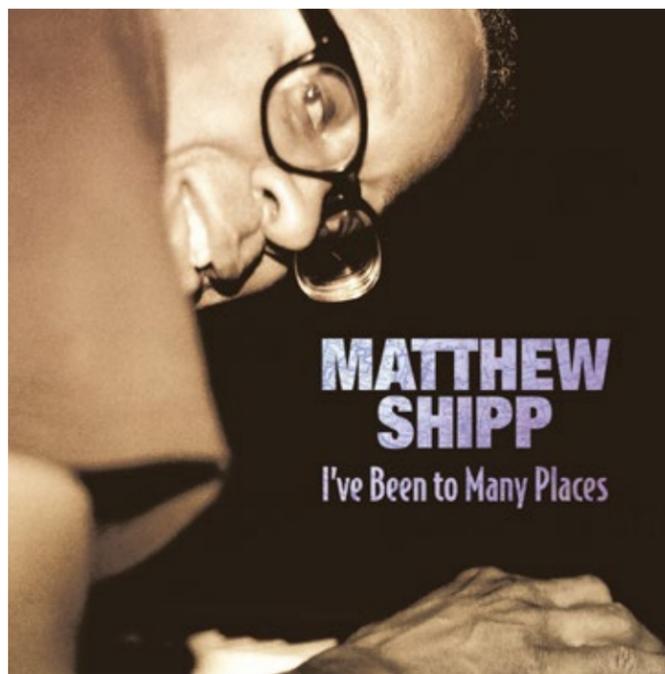
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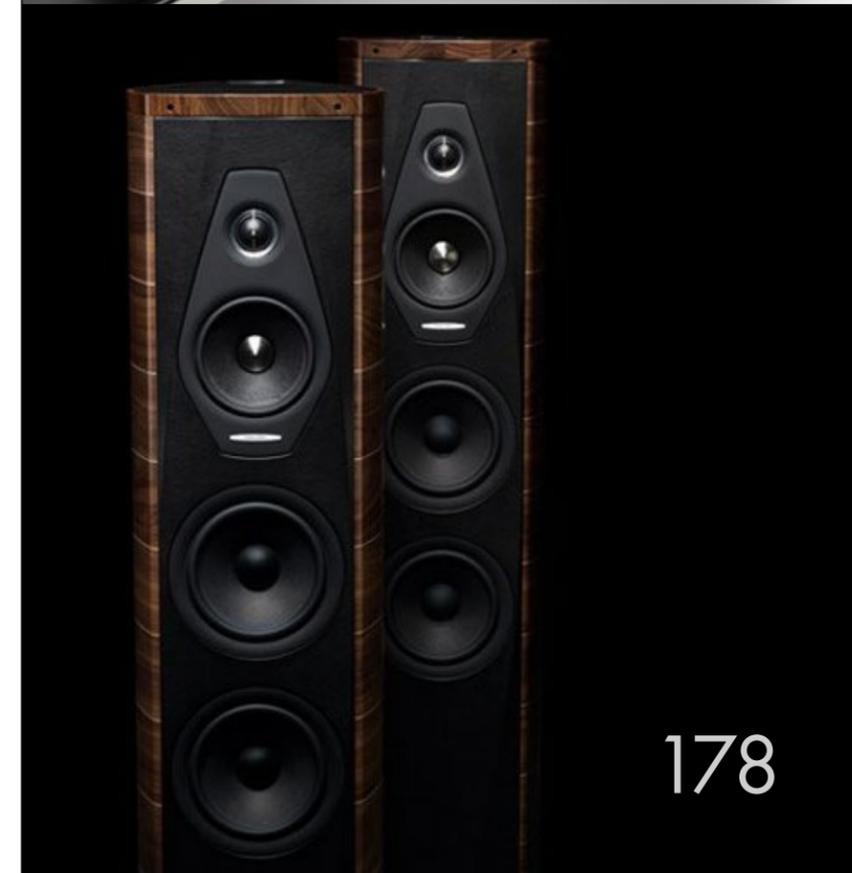
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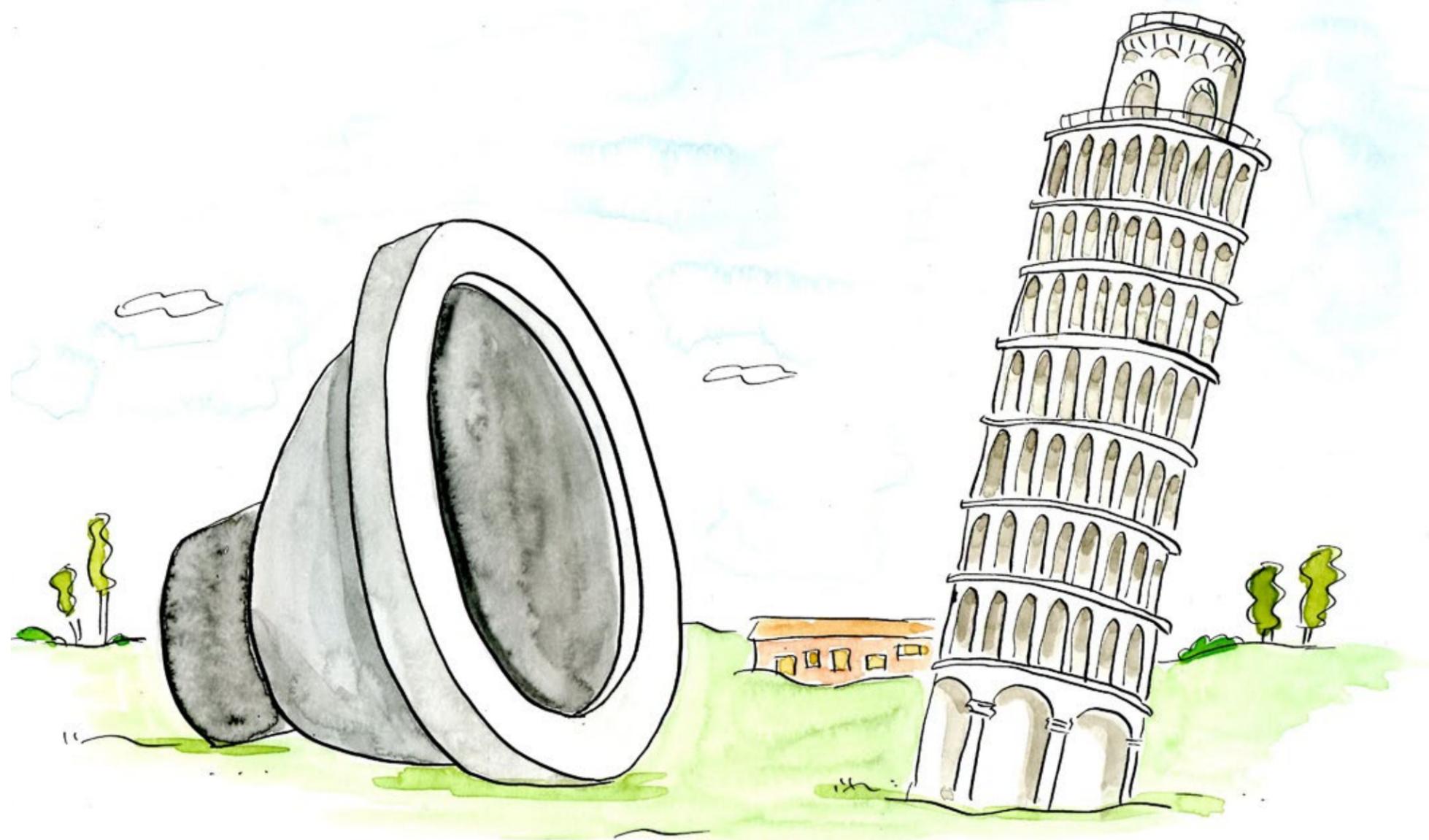
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Rewriting History: The Impact of Big Bass

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Derek Trucks

April 28th, 2014

Photo by Jerome Brunet

Slide guitar virtuoso Derek Trucks performs live with the Grammy award winning Tedeschi Trucks Band at the legendary Olympia Hall in Paris, France.

You can find more of Jerome's work at www.jeromebrunet.com

Limited edition prints are available.



KISS

**FIRST MIDWEST BANK AMPHITHEATRE
TINLEY PARK, ILLINOIS
AUGUST 16, 2014**

By Bob Gendron
Photos by Keith Leroux

The past decade has witnessed a concert-downsizing trend, with artists playing smaller theaters and audiences preferring to patronize intimate halls in favor of large-scale shows at impersonal venues. Somebody clearly forgot to tell Kiss.

Performing on a gorgeous mid-August night at First Midwest Bank Amphitheatre outside of Chicago, the arena-rock pioneers ignited a decadent bonanza of concussion bombs, ear-ringing explosions, airborne fireworks, and ceiling-licking fireballs during a 90-minute set that culminated in a blinding storm of smoke and confetti. While Kiss practically guarantees pyrotechnic displays on the overblown level of "Sharknado," the band's health and chemistry have not been as certain of late.



LIVE MUSIC

As recently as last year, frontman Paul Stanley croaked his way through concerts, his once-limitless falsetto ravished by time and throat surgery. The New York native sounded awful, and his band tired. To help ameliorate the situation, his co-founding partner and the group's lone other remaining original member, Gene Simmons, picked up some slack at the microphone. Yet the entrepreneurial Simmons couldn't tame his infamous brontosaurus-sized ego or shut his mouth long enough to realize his marketing obsessiveness and polarizing outspokenness kept threatening to permanently turn the band into what its harshest critics always labeled it: a parody.

Fissures also surfaced last fall when Kiss received news it secured induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. For the band and its fans, the recognition served as long-awaited retribution in the face of myriad naysayers that insist Kiss lacks musical merit. However, due to bad blood with original mates Peter Criss and Ace Frehley, Stanley soon insisted any performance at the event would involve current guitarist Tommy Thayer and drummer Eric Singer—a hardline position that contradicted Simmons, who initially stated he'd be open to a one-off reunion. *(continued)*



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LIVE MUSIC

Kiss later announced it wouldn't play at the ceremony, a flabbergasting decision some fans felt smacked of selfishness but which ultimately kept relations civil.

Drama and disagreements aside, something this year—probably a combination of the group's 40th anniversary and Hall honor, which even prompted perennial Kiss cynics *Rolling Stone* to finally put the greasypaint-caked foursome on its cover—triggered a dormant spark within the band. Commanding the stage, Kiss sounded energetic, heavy, forceful, and cohesive. If not what could be accurately deemed youthful sway and swagger (after all, Simmons and Stanley are in their 60s), the quartet's rhythms touted qualities at least shaded more towards the earlier than the later side of the middle-age spectrum.

Songs gut-punched with on-point dynamics and midrange wallop. Wisely bypassing ballads, the band kicked and stomped like a horse confined in a stall, conveying edginess that instilled leather-tough fare such as the barreling "War Machine" and chest-thumping "I Love It Loud" with requisite ruggedness. Of course, Kiss being Kiss, hedonism received its due, with a revived "Lick It Up" surging with lustful persuasion, the thinly disguised "Love Gun" firing rounds of battering-ram percussion, and the interlocking "Detroit Rock City" building to a fiery climax.

For all the clamor for Kiss to welcome Criss and Frehley back into the fold—their cheerleaders often fail to mention that both already received second chances after substance-abuse issues and still again failed to keep their contractual promises—the band is better at this juncture in its career with Thayer and Singer. Diehards may cringe, but the two replacements afford Kiss a rejuvenated attack and synchronized crunch. They understand their place (and wear their predecessors' makeup and costumes) and get out of Stanley and Simmons' way when needed.



LIVE MUSIC

Yet they also know the song structures inside and out, whether it's how to give "Hotter Than Hell" a street-worthy strut or "Calling Dr. Love" a glam-metal grind.

Just as importantly, Stanley and Simmons again appear to recognize what Thayer and Singer mean to the brand. Constantly engaging the large crowd, the *eminence grise* figureheads played with something to prove. Stanley's voice no longer hit the choirboy high notes, but it remained steady—save when he over-embellished with banter shtick. He also shuffled and danced in high platform heels with the ease of a runway model, occasionally stopping to roll on the ground or drop to his knees with guitar in hand. His most symbolic gesture, however, was subtle—not a trait for which Kiss is recognized. When he high-fived Simmons in the midst of "Deuce," it suggested all was again right in the Kiss family.

Augmented by the addition of an ominous tolling bell, bathed in dim vomit-green lighting, and hoisted several stories above the stage, Simmons transformed his customary blood-spitting sequence into a demonic moment worthy of a 1920s German Expressionist horror movie. His traditional fire-breathing bit resonated with comparable anticipation and excitement. Nearly everyone knew what was coming, but Kiss demonstrated that not even high-definition video can substitute for witnessing a larger-than-life performance in the flesh. Correspondingly, years of familiarity couldn't diminish the make-believe imagination and forget-your-troubles fun wrought by the costumed ensemble when its hard rock comes across with the similar jubilant rush one gets after hooking up with a much-desired lover.

Indeed, the painted faces, spiked boots, tasseled jackets, winged capes, rising drum platform, elevating harnesses, and mobile spider-legged lighting rigs occupy the same cultural terrain as currently popular Marvel Comics franchise films, sci-fi graphic novels, and fantasy board games. In an age when many people are opting to vicariously live life through tablets and smartphones rather than getting out and experiencing it unfiltered, Kiss' indulgent escapism feels refreshingly creative—and collectively triumphant. ●



Sansui's G-22000

By Jeff Dorgay

Believe it or not, this two-chassis monstrosity is *not* Sansui's biggest Pure Power receiver – that title falls to their G-33000. Weighing in at about 100 pounds, the G-22000 had a retail price of \$1,400 USD back in 1978, when you could buy a Volkswagen Rabbit fairly loaded for \$2,995. An interesting comparison for those whining about gear costing as much as a car today – 35 years later, a Golf fairly well appointed is about \$23k, and a Devialet 120 will set you back \$6,495. Doing a double take at a recent trip to Echo Audio in Portland, Oregon, and seeing this baby on the shelf brings back great memories.

FEATURE

Car nerds argue about the superiority of the small-block Chevy versus the Ford 351 Cleveland or the Mopar 340, but we audio nerds reminisce about the great receiver power wars of the late '70s. Pioneer, Marantz, Kenwood and Sansui all had 'em. Every few months a bigger, more powerful model was released with enough buttons, meters and jacks to launch the space shuttle.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the G-22000 is its two-chassis design, separating the power amplifier from the rest of the receiver. Perusing the original product literature, there is much talk about isolation, interference and "keeping the musical signal intact." Seems like the folks at Sansui had their hearts in the right places after all.

Have you ever tried to *lift* a Pioneer SX-1980? Yikes. While this two-chassis design seemed a little silly at first, it truly is easier to deal with a behemoth receiver that you can move in two pieces. Summoning my inner geeky audiophile, I did substitute the mediocre RCA umbilical cord for a pair of AudioQuest interconnects with a very noticeable increase in resolution.

Damn near everything under and over the hood

The G-22000 was AM-stereo ready and had the ability to link a four-channel decoder and additional amplifier to your system as well. *(continued)*



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FEATURE



With FM in its heyday, the tuner section was massively overbuilt, with specs, charts and graphs galore. Even the AM section was built with pride, claiming “sound quality to rival your turntable.” Big words there. The ability to plug in two turntables (and a microphone) as well as three tape decks with deck-to-deck dubbing made this receiver an essential part of your cool-guy pad.

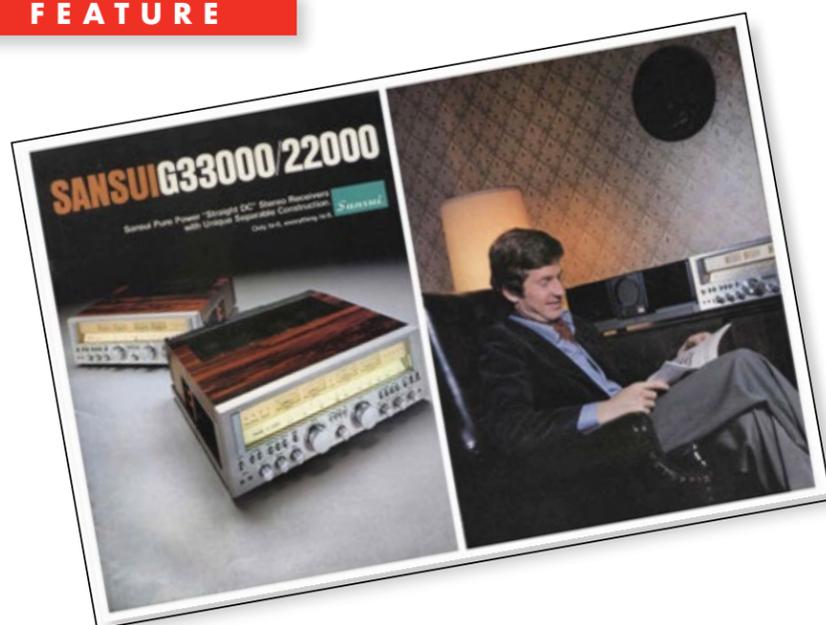
The enormous front panel is brimming with brushed aluminum, a gaggle of switches and a line of meters. The incredible control flexibility is rounded out with a set of bass, treble and midrange tone controls, which can be switched out. While this suggests taking a purist approach, using the big Sansui with your favorite pair of vintage speakers (like my JBL L-100s, for example) will have you switching them back in the loop before you can say Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Better than expected

Though this receiver was built right about when all the major Japanese manufacturers discovered TIM (transient intermodulation distortion) and a war on low distortion specs paralleled the horsepower war on wattage, the G-22000 sounds surprisingly good with both new and old speakers.

There is still no substitute for raw power, and pairing the vintage Sansui with our Vandersteen 1Cis proved to be a ton of fun. Bass was deep and well controlled, mids were clean and the high end relatively smooth. As this receiver used no capacitors in the signal path, I still think because of its age, those 15,000uF electrolytics in the power supply are probably getting tired. I'd be curious as to what this monster would sound like with a rebuilt power supply.
(continued)

FEATURE



Bringing a pair of vintage JBL L-100s to the party was even more fun as these were a pair of speakers you might have bought back in 1978 to go along with your G-22000. And with 220 watts on tap, chances are you probably blew a tweeter or two as well. However, the synergy between these two components and a recently restored Thorens TD-125 from Vinyl Nirvana made going down memory lane with a set of my favorite albums from this time period an extremely pleasurable experience – the overall tonality and groove were spot-on. As much as I hate the Eagles' *Hotel California*, it's inviting through this vintage system.

So regardless of how you stack it, if you still enjoy listening to FM and spinning records, the Sansui could be a great anchor to a primary or secondary system. These days a clean one will set you back about \$1,300 to as high as \$2,000 for a spotless example.

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NEW RELEASES

**Weezer**

Everything Will Be All Right in the End
Republic, LP or CD

Weezer's first album in four years begins with what could be mistaken as a parody—only, it probably is parody. Twenty years removed from its landmark debut, (*Weezer*) *Blue Album*, alt-rock's long-standing nerds are now geek conquerors and festival headliners that still appear to be flying the girls-don't-like-me flag.

Less than 60 seconds into the opening "Ain't Got Nobody," bespectacled frontman Rivers Cuomo gripes that he's searched all over the world for someone to love and there "ain't no one in all creation." You'd be forgiven for thinking you've heard this song before and reached the conclusion that it's a lot easier to stomach when presented by 20-somethings that were writing odes to playing *Dungeons & Dragons* in the mid-90s. And then, Weezer throws a curveball.

Everything Will Be All Right in the End, which sees the band again working with Cars anchor and Blue Album producer Ric Ocasek, isn't a reread. The underlying theme in many of these 13 songs concerns a band trying to articulate the inspiration and magic of what it means to be four guys still playing rock n' roll together at a time when singing competitions dominate, members have settled down, and peers tinker with disco makeovers. It's a sort of *Blue Album* revisited by the successful, the hesitatingly content, and those now weighed down by expectations.

The interest level of such themes is directly proportional to one's Weezer fandom, as there's a sense of pulling back the curtain on "Back to the Shack" and "Eulogy for a Rock Band," where Cuomo and Co. come to grips with the prospect of potentially dying in obscurity as fading guitar-carrying dinosaurs. Each nods to various facets of Weezer's career. The former is built around a semi-ironic-but-not-really heavy-metal crunch while the latter zips along with fluidity of a mid-80s MTV pop hit.



Sentimental influences prevail. "Ain't Got Nobody" is a not-so-subtle wink to where it all began, complete with chirpy voiceovers that recall 1994's "Undone (The Sweater Song)" and thick, engine-revving riffs from Cuomo and Brian Bell that aim to defy the background murmuring implying "guitars are dead." "The British Are Coming" nostalgically looks back on the punk-rock invasion with Revolutionary War imagery and falsetto crooning, while "Return to Ithaca" reeks of late-career rock excess. Everything hits at once, and all of it is over-the-top, with brightly twisted keyboards that echo Manfred Mann's version of "Blinded by the Light" trying to keep pace with crunched-for-time rhythms.

Ocasek's high-concept production seems to proudly channel that of Robert John "Mutt" Lange,

whose work with Def Leppard and Shania Twain is crisp, clear, and turned to 11. "Cleopatra" shifts from bare strumming to purposefully cheesy arena-rock countdowns. "The Waste Land" serves as an unnecessary head-banging instrumental that plays as a hair-metal overture to the multi-guitar front and operatic harmonies of "Anonymous." By album's end, Weezer presents us with a band that's gone from singing puppy-dog tales of rejection to one sounding fit for a Broadway show.

Only the theater here is that of a band playing the role of a rock n' roll band, and the songs that make for the best drama on *Everything Will Be All Right in the End* turn out to be the ones grounded in reality. The sing-along charmer "Da Vinci" grapples with courtship in the social networking era, with Cuomo

even copping to looking up a girl's history on Ancestry.com. "Go Away," a duet with Best Coast's Bethany Cosentino, brings a rather welcome female counter-punch to Weezer's woe-is-me tales.

Stronger still is "I've Had it Up to Here," a stop-and-start rant—maybe at girls, maybe at fans, maybe at the music industry—that toys with the shifting definitions of the term "compromise" as one ages. The band sounds serious, but with Weezer, it's always anyone's guess, and *Everything Will Be All Right in the End* gets by with bringing a middle-aged sheen to Weezer's trademark self-awareness. "Give it a try," Cuomo tells a lady rejecting his advances on "Lonely Girl." "I'm not gonna die."
—**Todd Martens**


Sallie Ford

Slap Back
Vanguard Records, CD

Like an alt-rock Anita O'Day singing lost garage-rock classics from a "Pebbles" compilation, Sallie Ford damns the torpedoes and charges full-speed ahead on *Slap Back*. Her solo debut for Vanguard Records is fast, furious, and smart. It's also the rarest of things: an incredibly fun record.

Last December, the singer-songwriter-guitarist called it quits with her former band, Portland-based the Sound Outside. That outfit helped spread her name, but its rep as a neo-rockabilly band also hemmed in the multi-faceted frontwoman. With *Slap Back*, Ford expands her sound and bursts from the gate as a ferocious, wide-ranging rocker. She draws on the bracing talents of her new all-female backing band: keyboardist Cristina Cano, bassist Anita Lee Elliott, and drummer Amanda Spring. *(continued)*

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BY PLINIUS AUDIO



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MUSIC



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Produced by multi-instrumentalist Chris Funk (the Decemberists, Black Prairie), tracks on *Slap Back* cherry-pick from a number of golden rock periods, including classic 60s surf and 70s punk. Ferocious energy and intelligence elevate it all above retro mimicry. Ford cuts loose like the soul daughter of girl-fronted punk eccentrics the Slits, Delta 5, and Siouxsie and the Banshees.

There's nothing clean or prissy here. Ford and Funk manhandle the past and get their hands dirty. The sound is raw and the ragged edges show. Buzzing guitars, throbbing bass, smacked beats, and Farfisa-like keyboards snake and stagger through the mix. These are irresistibly catchy songs recorded in defiant lo-fi. Crammed with infectious melodies, the blistering tunes come alive in the room.

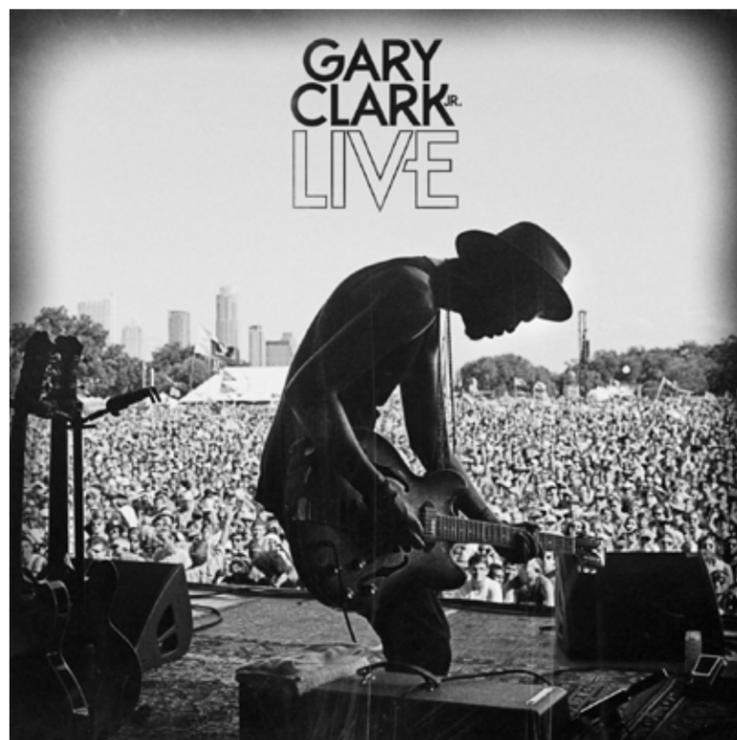
“Oregon” is a big, greasy, glorious stomp that at times threatens to short-

circuit the soundboard. With its gum-smacking girl-group insouciance, “Give Me Your Lovin’” functions as a nasty, fuzzy wonder that wears its influences on its sleeve. Akin to iconic post-punk band X recording the Doors classic “Soul Kitchen” with producer and former Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek, Ford and Funk achieve a deftly rendered hybrid that marries several eras of music.

As a songwriter, Ford takes on love in all its messiness. In “An Ending,” her lyrics cut like a serrated knife. “You saw me at my worst,” she observes, glancing back at a love affair gone south. “Just remember me the best way you can.”

Nothing sounds ironic or tongue-in-cheek. Ford is too honest and direct for such tricks. And it's exactly why her music sounds so very thrilling.

—*Chrissie Dickinson*



Gary Clark Jr.

Live

Warner Bros., 2LP or CD

This is how it should've gone down in the first place. Rather than issue 2012's *Blak and Blu*, an over-arranged albeit strong studio debut that showcased many attention-worthy talents of Gary Clark Jr., Warner Bros. would have been better served by focusing on the burgeoning guitarist/singer's greatest strength—namely, his scorching onstage performances. Well, as evidenced by the mesmerizing *Live*, better late than never.

Granted, few unknowns make their entrance with a concert album. Then again, few musicians possess the potential and promise of the Austin-based Clark Jr., who created massive buzz by opening for dozens of acts and playing countless festivals. Critics and fans alike came away from shows asking, "Who was that?" Alas, due to his blues-based sound, Clark Jr. immediately and unfairly became the subject of cliché "blues savior" pressure and hype. Momentum stalled when the crossover-minded *Blak and Blu* attempted to do too much and tried to be everything to everybody.

Doubtlessly recognizing the need to expose Clark Jr. to a larger audience and clean up any confusion rendered by *Blak and Blu*, Warner Bros. pursued an unconventional strategy by affording a still relatively obscure artist a live album as his sophomore release. In every respect, the 14-track set deserves to be heard—particularly in a contemporary rock environment that welcomes the likes of Jack White and the Black Keys.

Again demonstrating to hoary purists exactly why Clark Jr. can't be beholden to a single genre, *Live* strikes with the electrical charge, sudden surprise, and breathtaking power of a lightning bolt. It begins with the hum of an amplifier and a finger touching bare wire. Clark Jr. then proceeds to slow-throttle Muddy Waters' "Catfish Blues," foreshadowing the grit, rawness, menace, and passion that follow. On a majority of the effort, an equally hungry and boundary-crossing band accompanies the Grammy winner. *(continued)*



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And while a handful of covers—including a steamy version of B.B. King’s “Three O’Clock Blues” that demonstrates Clark Jr. is as adept with fluid, elongated lines as he is with maximum volume and stomp-box overdrive—further affirm the 30-year-old knows his history, the originals are the tracks that will, as he declares on the swaggering “Ain’t Messin’ ‘Round,” cause folks to “remember [his] name.”

Picking up where Creedence Clearwater Revival left off, Clark Jr. buckles up and boogies down on the sassy strut “Travis County” while filling in the narrative details of an unsavory run-in with the law. Chords ricochet and souped-up wah-wah effects threaten to consume the quartet whole on the soulful “When My Train Pulls In,” the guitarist utilizing sustain to hold long, single notes before unleashing torrents of fuzz-drenched flurry.

Mississippi hill country surfaces on the horizon of the push-and-pull of “Next Door Neighbor Blues,” one of multiple occasions on which Clark Jr. exercises controlled chaos over his instrument.

He and his mates also dabble in pedal-steel-inspired twang in advance of unleashing a maelstrom of extreme feedback on the ferocious “Numb,” and utilize Jimi Hendrix as a springboard into a modern hybrid of funk, rock, hip-hop, and Eastern music on an overhaul of Johnny Taylor’s “If You Love Me Like You Say.” Clark Jr.’s lone miss comes on the sensitive ballad “Things Are Changin’,” treading the same retro crooner grounds that hindered his debut. While *Live* does away with the overproduced strings and horns that smooth out *Blak and Blu*, the singer still sounds like he’s mimicking the style rather than making a convincing statement.

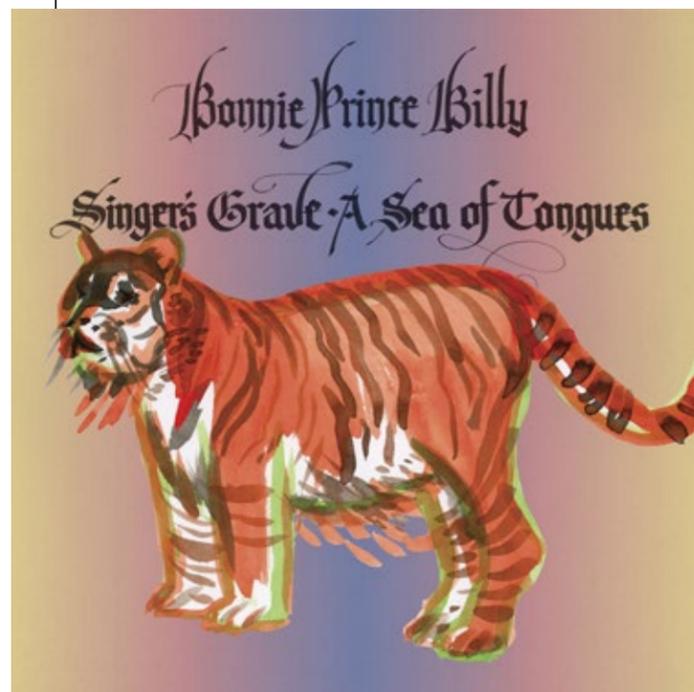
Besides, Clark Jr. needn’t concern himself with throwback R&B and velvety tones when he plays guitar and tells stories with such intensity. Just consider the backed-up braggadocio of “Bright Lights,” on which he bends and mauls passages, twists and chops riffs, and sends VU meters scurrying into the red. Clark Jr. possesses speed, dexterity, and vision to spare—but, more importantly, he’s also loaded with spunk and bite. On the jump, jive, and wail of “Don’t Owe You a Thang,” the guitarist rebuffs a woman’s material and commitment demands.

“Oh we ain’t getting married/I ain’t buying you no diamond ring,” Clark nonchalantly declares, quick to pull the trigger on a wellspring of ripping slide-guitar distortion to drive his point across. Take that, Beyoncé. —**Bob Gendron**

In *Old Joy*, a 2005 film from director Kelly Reichardt, Will Oldham plays Kurt, a 30-something free spirit longing to reconnect with his past. He plans a Pacific Northwest camping trip with college friend Mark, and the two visit hot springs, spend some time in the woods shooting at cans with a pellet gun, and struggle to rediscover whatever connection had been lost.

A similar quality bleeds into *Singers Grave a Sea of Tongues*, Oldham's latest effort under the Bonnie Prince Billy banner. It's a gorgeous, homespun recording that finds the singer revisiting and striking up new connections with his own musical past.

"There had been a time when the world knew my name," he sings in his weathered, rustic voice on "So Far and Here We Are." "They may know it somewhere still, but I ain't the same."



Bonnie Prince Billy

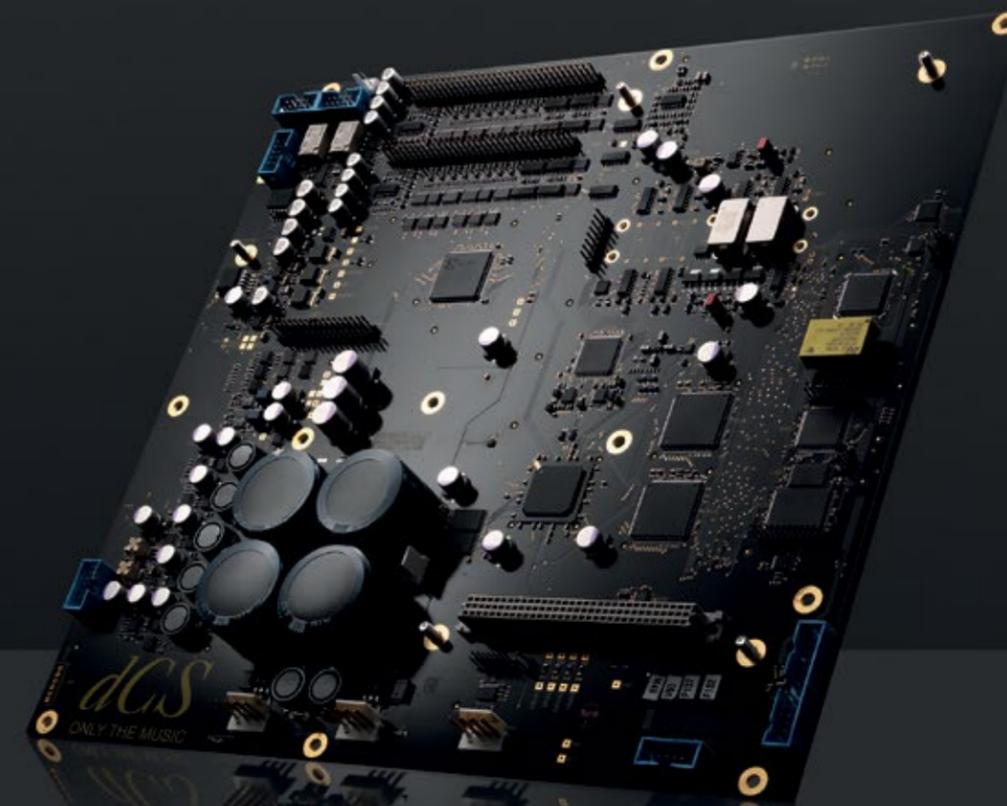
Singers Grave a Sea of Tongues
Drag City, LP or CD

Fittingly, many tracks here appeared in radically different form on 2011's *Wolfroy Goes to Town*, a sparse, desolate album that often played like an alternate soundtrack to the Dust Bowl. Lyrics reference god's cruelty, hidden pasts, and the nature of manhood. Oldham, joined by collaborators Angel Olsen and Emmett Kelly, among others, delivered his words like a gravedigger reading last rights. Here, however, the songs are transformed, Oldham's stark language given new life amidst a gurgling mountain spring of stirring backwoods instrumentation.

"Night Noises," which originally closed out *Wolfroy Goes to Town*, arrives like dawn at the onset of *Singers Grave*, Oldham delicately stepping amidst acoustic guitar and graceful swaths of pedal steel. *(continued)*

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“Quail and Dumplings,” in turn, evolves into a roots prayer dotted with sporadic violin that charts an unpredictable course like a housefly lazily circling the dinner table.

Even the deeply melancholic “We Are Unhappy”—a song on which Oldham sings of shattered faith replaced by a yawning, empty chasm—sounds lighter, buoyed by plucky banjo and a beaming gospel chorus of female backing singers. Similar themes crop up in “It’s Time To Be Clear,” a simple, meditative tune where Oldham again questions the existence of a higher power, singing, “God isn’t listening, or else it’s too late,” accompanied by little more than windswept violin and shuffling acoustic guitar.

Instead, the imperfect characters in Oldham’s songs seek out comfort in their fellow man—“I’m in love!” he cries at the apex of the euphoric “Whipped”—nature (“There Will Be Spring” arrives like a seasonal thaw at winter’s end), and, at times, music. On “Old Match,” a joyous, tent revival of a tune, the narrator resists everything from godless men to the ravages of time by holding tight to a simple tune.

“As long as I do not let the song die there’ll be no match for me,” he sings. This stirring album serves as testament to that point. —**Andy Downing**





©Photo by Thomas Neukum

S

ome people joke that they're so sentimental, a TV commercial can bring them to tears. Show them an image of a baby with a puppy, or give a clip of a grandpa and a grandkid at a baseball game, and all bets are off. The writer of this review is one of those people, and Caribou's *Our Love* is one of those records I'm sometimes scared to hear. It taps open an emotional well that's warm, nostalgic, comforting and, if you're alone, positively heartbreaking.

While the opening track "Can't Do Without You" ultimately ends on an euphoric note—Yay! You!—the song hits on a surprising spectrum of passion in under four minutes. Beginning with a bluesy sample, and one that aches with just the right amount of longing, the tune then adds one-by-one a bounty of tender elements: falsetto vocals, a swinging, cymbal-driven beat, and digital rushes that envelop the voices like some sort of professional hugger.

Here's an album that opens with the sound of infatuation, the rush and the fear of it all at once, and moments later, goes straight for the soul with "Silver." Old-school hip-hop supplies the track's foundation—imagine a deceptively simple synth beat given to a New York City beat-boxer—but the unknown female voice looped to only say "here" serves as the centerpiece. As the song ends with buzzing techno lines desperately trying to seduce, the listener is left only with the word "here." And then again: "Here." It's the word of another as our own personal heartbeat.

Our Love is the fifth effort Dan Snaith has recorded under the Caribou name. Known as the Manitoba before that, and as Daphni to the more club-going set, Snaith's career alternates among laptop psychedelics, avant electronics, and dance-the-night-away celebrations. Caribou's 2010 set *Swim* hits all on three elements at various points, but has a tendency to fall back on weirdness, lacing modern computer-savvy tunes with vintage tweaks as if the latter had been forgotten oddities.

More cohesive, this record is Snaith's most consistent and thought-provoking work to date—a grown-up meditation on love, longing, and loss for when the youngest of today's EDM set find themselves wondering what happens after the hangover. It's soulful, yes, and for the way it sometimes appears to rescue long-lost samples—the gospel hollerer of "Julia Brightly" or communal chants of "Mars"—the obvious reference point is Moby's mid-90s work, such as *Play*.

Snaith may be occasionally looking back, but he's always looking inward. "All I Ever" comes across as an electronic maestro's bedroom recording. It isn't quite minimalist, but it's not exactly lush, as handclaps and tear-jerking falsettos about the "best I ever had" reverberate



Caribou
Our Love
Merge, LP or CD

around a rubbery groove that makes it clear this one is going to leave a mark. The Jessy Lanza-voiced "Second Chance" certainly does, all breathy R&B and trippy, washboard-like soundscapes that never stop distorting.

Everything doesn't suffer from a heartache. Even the cynics among us know love can be pretty great. "Dive," for instance, becomes lost in hip-hop inspired hypnotics. "Back Home" is whisper-like sweetness, the title track aims to join two on the dancefloor, and all intentions and miscommunications get erased on "Your Love Will Set You Free." What sounds like piano strings one second morph into guitar strings the next, and synthesizers mimic organs, horns and wind chimes. Snaith's goal isn't to obscure. Rather, he lays all the sounds bare, using technology as an aural dissecting tool to get straight to the heart of the matter. —**Todd Martens**

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Justin Townes Earle
Single Mothers
Vagrant, LP or CD

In a recent interview, Nashville singer-songwriter Justin Townes Earle stressed the importance of writing about subjects he knows firsthand.

"I don't need to be writing about farming or riding four-wheelers out in the country, because that was never my life," he said. "I've never ridden a tractor, and when I was a kid I had no clue how big a goddamn cow was. I thought they were like a big dog or some shit."

The things this songwriter does know—heartache, busted families, suicidal thoughts, the pain of abandonment, and the unforgiving pull of addiction—formed the backbone of his most recent albums, including 2012's *Nothing's Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now* and 2010's *Harlem River Blues*. Earle's latest, *Single Mothers*, doesn't stray far from this template. Yet a lingering sense throughout suggests the weather is finally starting to break.



©Photo by Joshua Black

Part of the change reflects the singer's current lot. He's been happily married for a year, and his wife's steadying presence caused him to go back into the material and, in his own words, "remove some of the bitterness." Which isn't to say the album is a jaunty affair—far from it, actually—and the lightest Earle gets arrives on the honky-tonk burner "My Baby Drives," about yielding some semblance of control in a relationship. The largely downcast tone is purposeful: Earle constructed *Single Mothers* as the first part of a double LP, and a second album, tentatively titled *Absent Fathers*, might be released as early as next year. Collectively, the two are expected to paint a picture of a fall into and steady climb out of depression.

For now, however, listeners are left largely with half of the equa-

tion, Earle singing: "It's cold in this house/All the lights are out"; "Everyone who walks out takes a bit more of you with her"; "I'm not drowning/I'm just seeing how long I can stay down"; "It don't take a twister to wreck a home." Most songs here read as universal rather than baldly autobiographical, existing as snapshots or vignettes portraying a range of damaged characters. Vide, the guilt-wracked narrator excavating the remains of past relationships on "Burning Pictures," the lost soul searching for connection on the Billie Holiday-inspired "White Gardenias," the strangers seeking shelter from the storm on the simmering, country-soul-flecked "Worried Bout the Weather."

Occasionally Earle dips more explicitly into his own past. Such is the case on the achingly forlorn

title track, on which he appears to takes aim at his father, famed singer-songwriter Steve Earle, who left his mother when the younger Earle was only two, breeding a resentment Justin Earle has held to throughout his ascendant career. "Absent father/Oh, never offer even a dollar," the younger Earle sings, flashing a careful, nuanced approach to his vocal phrasing. "He doesn't seem to be bothered/By the fact that he's forfeit his rights to his own."

While the emotions in the songs can spike as the characters unravel knotty internal issues, the music remains even-keeled—and Earle's songwriting exhibits a steadfast and hard-won grace in the face of great turmoil. It may have taken some time, but it's finally starting to sound like the kid is alright. —**Andy Downing**

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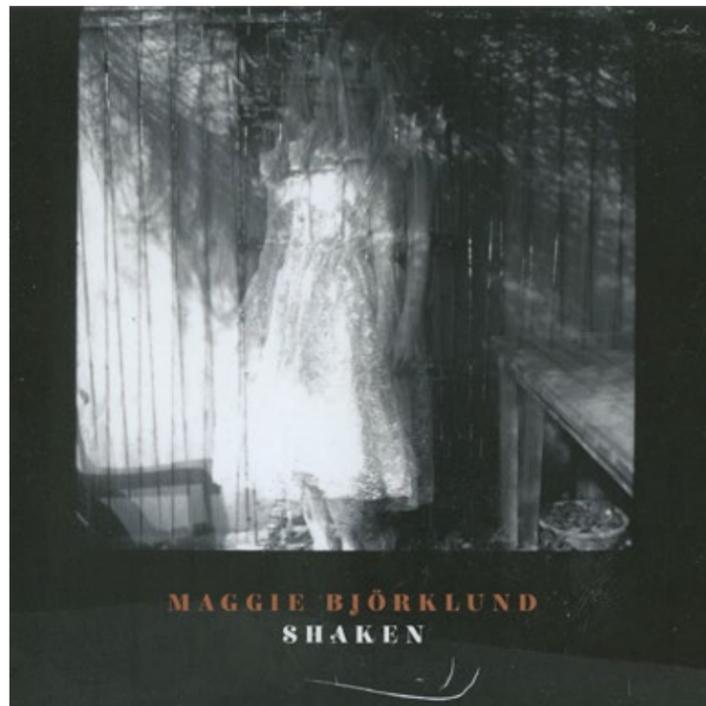
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Maggie Björklund

Shaken

Bloodshot, LP or CD

Like experimental guitarist Kaki King, Maggie Björklund happens to be a gifted musician that also insists on singing. In both cases, the underwhelming vocalists would be better off letting their axes do the talking. Björklund's *Shaken* isn't without its highlights. The Denmark native's second album overflows with mystical-sounding prairie dream-pop made for a Scandinavian arthouse film soundtrack.

By day, Björklund is a sought-after as a pedal-steel guitarist that's toured with Jack White. For her new release, she enlisted a rock snob's Who's Who of guests, including PJ Harvey cohort John Parish and Portishead bassist Jim Barr.

©Photo by Jam Stuhr



They contribute to an album that, at least instrumentally, sets a hypnotic background mood. The hushed production is light-handed and lovely. And Björklund remains judicious with her playing, carefully weaving guitar sonics throughout webs of quiet percussion and bowed strings.

If you're a pedal-steel aficionado looking for classic western swing style playing ala Leon McAuliffe or Speedy West, this is not the record for you. Björklund uses her guitar as an atmospheric instrument. The headliner's eerie slide work glides over clippety-clop percussion on "The Road to Samarkand," an instrumental that demonstrates her sure feel for restrained riffs. On the aptly titled "Missing at Sea," she conjures whale sounds.

The fly in the ointment pertains to Björklund's less-than-arresting voice. Featured on several tracks, it recalls the slight pipes of 1960s French chanteuse Claudine Longet. But at least Longet's plaintive wisp stayed in tune during the course of a song. The same can't be said for Björklund. She's the kind of singer "American Idol" judge Randy Jackson would diplomatically call "pitchy."

A marquee duet does not help. Björklund's vocal partner on "Fro Fro Heart" is Lambchop frontman Kurt Wagner, himself a polarizing singer with a painfully mannered delivery. Pairing a weak singer (Björklund) with a precious one (Wagner) only makes matters worse. Oddly, Björklund seems to draw inspiration from the collaboration. On the stark and sad "Ashes," she apes Wagner's halting style and whisper-sings so closely into the microphone you can almost hear her saliva smacking. It's unfortunate and distracting.

"I'm a gypsy looking for a spell," Björklund admits on "Bottom of the Well," but there's no magic in her voice. The real spell is the one Björklund casts with her steel guitar.

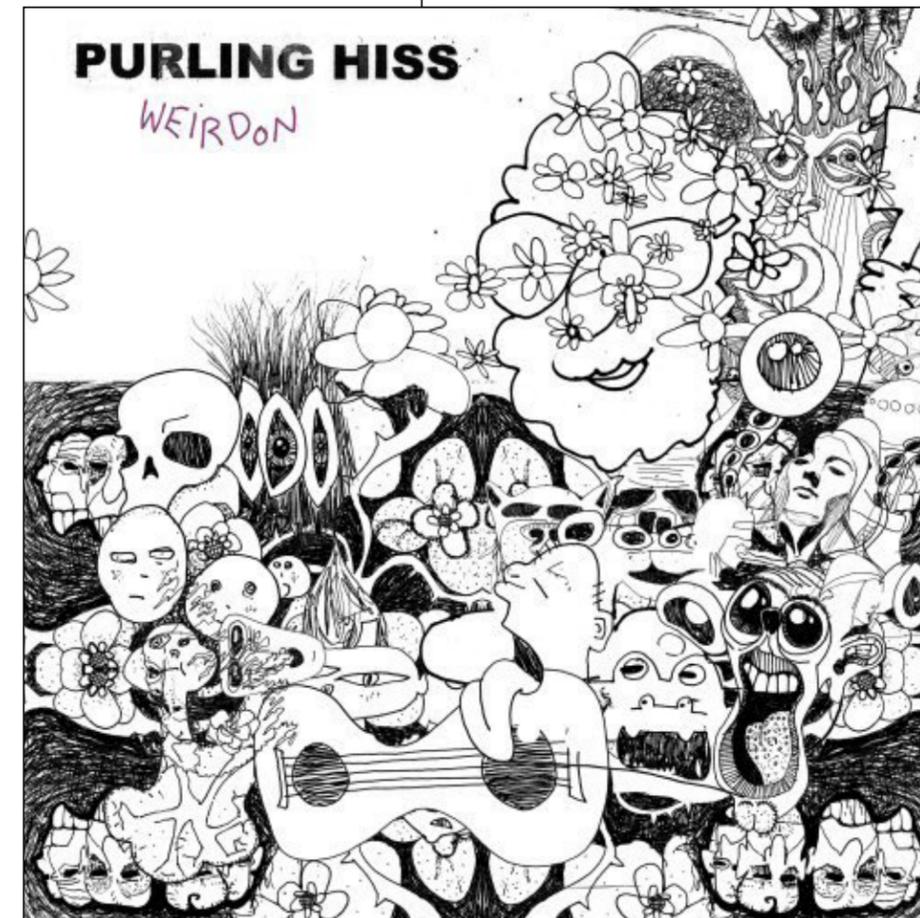
—**Chrissie Dickinson**



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Purling Hiss
Weirdon
 Drag City, LP or CD

Purling Hiss' *Weirdon* opens with what has to be one of the most adorable garage-rock rave-ups made this year. After all, how many air-guitar-ready anthems begin with a pledge to “turn down the radio”? Such is life in this stream-first, EDM-dominant pop landscape, where a long-standing East Coast six-string slinger like Mike Polizze and his trio Purling Hiss feel almost as if they're keeping alive a dying art form. Polizze, like the West Coast's more prolific Ty Segall, is able to keep things chirpy—for much of the record, anyway—by keeping the approach varied.



©Photo by Aaron Biscoe

“Sundance Saloon Boogie” is all stop-and-start fuzz boasted by crunchy vocals and a straight-ahead, shout-along chorus. “Another Silvermoon” lets the bluesy strings crisscross one another like a train changing tracks, and comes complete with ringing notes that echo *Raw Power*-era Stooges. Or maybe that’s the Rolling Stones’ “Time is On My Side”? Take your pick, as heroes are all fair game for a re-imagining.

“Where’s Sweetboy” doesn’t waste nearly as much time with a buildup, as the song hits the pavement running like two motorcyclists drag-racing. Riffs double as skid marks, and cool, lazy-eyed vocals build to a shout-along chorus of “I have no inhibitions!” Later, “I Don’t Wanna Be A…” lets the listener fill in the blank during a dead-eyed, call-and-response number. Throughout, Purling Hiss views scrappiness as the key to a full orchestral spectrum—the

harshly downtrodden feel of “I Don’t Wanna Be A…” versus the celebratory fireworks of “Learning Slowly.”

The album’s first half is stronger, and the few slower-paced tunes drift more toward tea-time reveries than the stand-and-deliver punches on much of the record, but “Running Through My Dreams” and “Reptilli-A-Genda” are in the minority. Besides, the quiet moments are like breathers. With already about a dozen albums credited to the Purling Hiss name, Weiridon is as fine as place to start as any.

Just take the spacey jangles-in-knots of “Aging Faces” or clap-along rush of “Airwaves.” The latter is in and out in 90 seconds, and as Polizze shouts “this is my radio” over and over, it becomes a gleeful celebration of the guitar, bass, and drums. If you have the nerve to contradict him, shame on you.—**Todd Martens**

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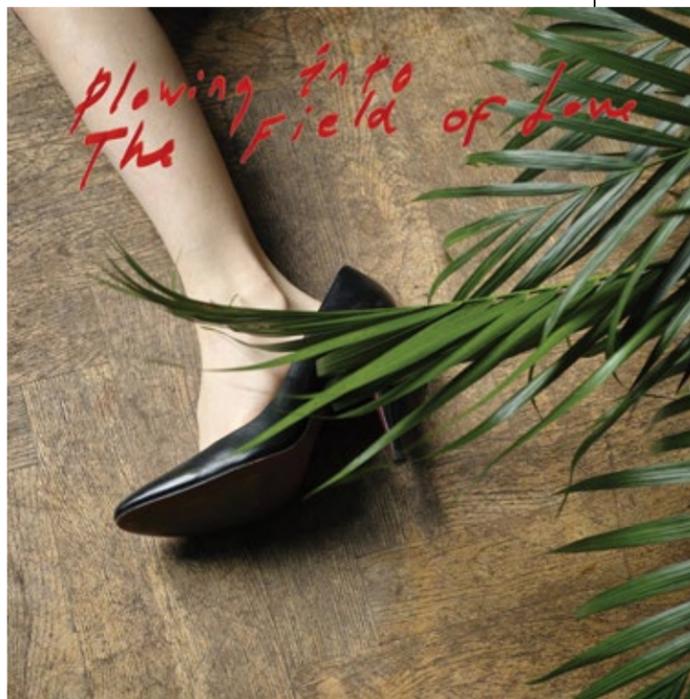


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**Iceage**

Plowing Into the Field of Love
Matador, LP or CD



Know even the slightest bit about raucous Danish punk outfit Iceage, and you'd be forgiven for being conflicted. The bratty 20-somethings certainly understand how to critic-bait, citing influences as far ranging as dead French philosophers and abstract musicians such as Brian Eno. They also know how to provoke, early on pairing songs of young rebellion and recklessness with troublesome racist imagery. Question Iceage—or the band's PR folks or label reps—and the response is more often defensive rather than articulate, falling into some sort of justification that Iceage traffics in extremes and teenagers, especially teenagers with guitars, do dumb things.

That's true, and three albums into its career, the band continues to have the support of Matador, still one of the more esteemed and progressive indie-rock brands around. But if obnoxious kids with a penchant for surface-sloppy arrangements that are, in actuality, rather refined aggression don't exactly inspire you to head straight to the search engine, don't stop reading yet. With *Plowing Into the Field of Love*, the Copenhagen-based group, now in its early 20s, has made its best-ever justification for paying attention to what has thus far been an overly praised entity.

The key to the newfound success: a little Americana. If the dozen songs here aren't exactly a full-on mix of country and punk, this is hostility with

space, music in which a greater emphasis on rootsy, open-strung guitars—and even a flash of piano and the occasional stringed instrument—add a bit of heft to, generally speaking, working-class songs about drinking one's life away. "I keep pissing against the moon," sings Elias Bender Rønnefelt toward album's end. If that isn't exactly Shane MacGowan-inspired lyricism, the *femme fatale* of a horn section that tries to lure him away into having one more round certainly does its part to add a dollop of late-night consequence.

Throughout, bad things happen to feral horses, and dead-beat dads try to pass on terrible advice, but the characters in *Plowing Into the Field of Love* all make bad de-

isions in the hope of some sort of redemption. "Let it Vanish" is a galloping churn of howls, charging bass notes, and fierce guitar breakdowns that lurk like vultures, all of it meant to wipe away one's one lineage of poor choices. "The Lord's Favorite" is evidence snarling punk rockers haven't yet tired of Johnny Cash, as Rønnefelt slurs that he's "positively God's favorite one." It's unclear if he's trying to persuade himself or if that's a pickup line.

This effort is unlike anything Iceage has recorded to date, with drummer Dan Kjær Nielsen kicking out a rhythm built for wooden floorboards. There are even half-attempts at hard-edged ballads—the organ-addled horror soundtrack

that is the walk-through-the-alley of "Stay" and elbows-on-the-bar bitterness of "Cimmerian Shade"—and tracks like "Simony" and "How Many" are high energy albeit plain-spoken, with saloon-like pianos and beats that sound as if they're scraping on barroom stalls.

It all adds up to an album that makes the case that these once-brash and problematically outspoken teens now deservedly have the floor. And the view from the gutter isn't all that bad. "When I fall, I'll bring it all down here with me," sings Rønnefelt on "Abundant Living," a tale of anguish, sarcasm, and mandolins that does what rock n' roll at its best has always done: illuminate the lives of the forgotten.

—**Todd Martens**



Bedhead

Bedhead: 1992-1998

Numero Group, 180g 5LP box set or 4CD box set

Dallas slowcore band Bedhead adopted the ideal name considering a bulk of its catalog sounds as if it's shaking off a deep, Rip Van Winkle-esque slumber. The impression reasserts itself time and again on *Bedhead: 1992-1998*, a comprehensive new box set assembled by Chicago-based label Numero Group that—according to a press release—gathers “every cymbal crash, guitar brush and whisper” recorded by the group.

The collection, available as either a five-LP (limited to 2000) or four-CD set, includes the quintet's three full-length studio albums—*WhatFunLifeWas* (1994), *Beheaded* (1996), and *Transaction de Novo* (1998)—as well as a disc comprised of EP tracks, B-sides and bonus cuts. A 40-page book with photographs, poster reproductions, and an expansive 25,000-word essay courtesy of author Matthew Gallaway round out the package, similar in size and scope to the Codeine box released by the label a few years ago.

Bedhead emerged as a fully formed entity, and the crew's 1994 debut establishes the template to which it would hew for much of its existence. Songs like “Liferaft” and the slow-rolling “Crushing”—a title that references the tune's emotional impact rather than its sonic heft—tend to be reflective and restrained, combining patient guitars, shuffling drums, and frontman Matt Kadane's conversational, oft-whispered words, which he has a tendency to mumble like a cast member in an early Mark Duplas film.

Issues of faith loom large, and Kadane frequently fills songs with lines that paint a bleak picture for humanity and/or question the existence of any higher power. He softly sings: “In the ocean of the dark I...pray to god knows what”; “I've never known him to have anything to say/Which is why I've never felt any need to pray”; “Every time God makes a fist/He thinks of better things he's missed/And how he has messed up.”

At times, the music matches the ominous tone. Guitars gather like towering storm clouds on the horizon roughly three minutes into “Liferaft,” a moody, tension-building exercise whose musical DNA has filtered down into the likes of Explosions in the Sky. More often, however, Kadane's vocals offer a counterpoint to the guitars, which skip along cheerily on “To the Ground” and blossom like a spring garden on the oddly gorgeous “Powder.”

Beheaded further refines the group's approach, with songs such as “Withdraw” and “The Rest of the Day” finding the band stretching things out even further, teasing out long, winding intros that inevitably give way to crashing waves of guitar. There's also an increased focus on dynamics, with quieter moments moving as stealthily as a tiptoeing child and louder moments arriving akin to noisy houseguests stomping and hollering and crashing around the room with little concern for their surroundings.

As on *WhatFunLifeWas*, countless moments of beauty unfold—the slide-guitar-kissed “Roman Candle” and slowly dissipating “Smoke” are particular highlights—that can't quite mask Kadane's despondent words. “The light burned out,” he mutters in one typically downcast aside. “I couldn't see how to change it.”

On the band's third and final album, *Transaction de Novo*, the vocalist finally finds his way out of the dark, and his words often allude to some greater universal understanding. (*continued*)

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MUSIC



"My guardian angel has finally arrived," he sings with previously unheard optimism on "Lepidoptera," a meditative number built on loping drums, chiming guitar, and conversational vocals. The music, in turn, tends to be less chaotic, and most tracks are assembled with a craftsman's eye. It's an observation noted by producer Steve Albini, who is quoted in the liner notes: "No detail was too small to sweat, no crack in the veneer not worth gluing and clamping."

There's also a sense throughout *Transaction* that the band's musical journey is nearing its end. The tone is deeply meditative—save for "Psychosomatica," a punk-leaning rumbler awash in cranky, serrated guitar and rubbery drum volleys—and the last words uttered suggest a grim finality. "But this year I think I'd rather be a relic," sings Kadane over gently buzzing guitars and warm, mutating organ, "than part of the present."

The bonus tracks exert a similar pull, though, for obvious reasons, the collected songs are more scattershot than any of Bed-head's carefully composed official releases. Even so, there's hardly a tossed off number in the bunch, and the best—"I'm Not Here," where the guitars make good on the title, gradually swallowing Kadane whole; the majestic "Dead Language"; and "Inhume," a sonic sliding scale of sorts that grows in volume like a distant figure steadily making its way into the foreground—could slot comfortably onto any of the band's studio albums.

—Andy Downing



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Ultimate Painting

Trouble In Mind, LP or CD



Early on in the self-titled record from Ultimate Painting, a moment arrives that's both decidedly modern and charmingly old-fashioned. It goes down easy—as much of the 10-track debut does—as if the song and album were born of a casual late-night mid-60s recording session in Andy Warhol's New York studio, the Factory. On "Talking Central Park Blues" a slightly nasally, slightly lonely voice sings of wandering the city, bumping into exes, and curling up at bars with a pen and notepad. The narrator attracts the attention of a "reeeeeeal couple," the word drawn out, as if to suggest that the sight of commitment in our hip, socially connected world is like spotting an unicorn.

Things get weird, but that hunt for a connection and love of tangible items in an iCloud era never goes away—and never gets easier. This duo of James Hoare and Jack Cooper, names that will only mean anything to fans of jangly, garage-based indie-pop acts the Veronica Falls and Mazes, don't stray much from their comfort zone of loose, urban melodic songcraft. Dreamy harmonies hover over a rudimentary electronic beat on "Riverside," where one wants to unplug with only a compass

and a canteen. High-tinged guitar notes bring not brightly colored warmth but pins-and-needles sensations to the fatal attraction tale of "Jane," on which a would-be lover haunts our brain.

Continuing on a relationship tract, the relaxed, front-stoop feel of the title track and brooding "Can't You See" deal with our tendencies to focus on the emotional scraps given to us by another rather than the more difficult task of actually taking care of ourselves. "She's a Bomb" is more fun,

lighting up the speakers with the old-timey keyboard luminescence of a hippie's rainbow scarf. And "Rolling In the Deep End" adds a sense of getting-older urgency with "California Dreamin'" harmonies while fretting over the reliance on "instant gratification."

If Ultimate Painting doesn't actually transport us to a simpler time and place, it's a nice reminder that it once existed, even if only in our heads.

—**Todd Martens**



Chris Thile and Edgar Meyer

Bass & Mandolin
Nonesuch, CD

Both mandolin player/guitarist Chris Thile and bassist Edgar Meyer have been around more than a few different musical neighborhoods. Thile, a member of the recently reunited Nickel Creek and co-founder of Punch Brothers, has his own vision of bluegrass, rock, and chamber music. Meyer, who also doubles on piano, sounds just as comfortable as an improviser, having transposed and recorded Bach's cello suites on the double bass. The pair has sporadically performed together for about 15 years and recorded their duo debut, *Edgar Meyer & Chris Thile*, in 2008. They have also received the same distinction of MacArthur Foundation fellowships. And while they have little to prove with *Bass & Mandolin*, Thile and Meyer often perform with the energy of upstarts.

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MUSIC

“Why Only One?” sets the tone, and like nine of the 10 tracks, Thile and Meyer share composition credit. The piece begins slowly, with Thile’s determined-sounding downstrokes all based on single-note leaps that remain in unison with Meyer’s arco bass lines. Similarly, on “Tarnation,” Thile’s bluegrass-tinged high-register forays are synchronized with Meyer’s furious low-end bowing. Their fast-thinking improvisation also reflects jazz absorption. The duo even adds in bits of blues phrasing on “Big Top,” the disc’s best headphones track. Having the two channels pressed against your ears is the ideal way to hear Thile’s plucking and sliding along with Meyer’s simultaneous response.

Such high level of intuitive dialogue also works on slower tempos, as on “The Auld Beagle,” which sounds based around Thile’s use of space and Meyer’s lyricism. On Meyer’s “Friday,” the drama stems from Thile commenting in the background over the bassist’s series of low tones. Similarly subtle, the pair’s creepy dissonance does wonders on “It’s Dark In Here.” Thile also quietly shows he can stretch his instrument with the same facility that he crosses genres, and makes the mandolin sound more like a Chinese ehru on “Monkey Actually.”

Meyer switches to piano on “Look What I Found” and “I’ll Remember For You,” unhurried tracks based on his repeated motifs. While the parts fit together, and the musician accomplished at the keyboard, these tracks are not as exciting as when the two masters manipulate their strings in ways that are all their own. —**Aaron Cohen**



©Photo by David McClister

Simaudio MOON 180 MiND Streamer

By Andre Marc

S

imaudio has a distinct place in high end audio due to the company's unique industrial designs, proud North American manufacturing base, and innovative products. The recently reviewed Neo 380D DAC has become a part of the TONEAudio team's reference system, and that model is currently being updated to DSD-capable status. Simaudio has also introduced several new products since that review was published, including the Neo 430HA headphone amplifier.

Simaudio especially is on the cutting edge of digital, with their disc players and DAC units impressing sophisticated ears across the world. In for review is the standalone 180 MiND network streamer from the MOON line, which includes phonostages, a DAC, and a power supply. The MiND costs \$1300. Note that the Neo 380D DAC as reviewed by TONEAudio comes equipped with an optional MiND module internally, for the same cost.



FEATURE



In case you are wondering, MiND stands for MOON Intelligent Network Device, and its architecture is unique to Simaudio. The company authors its own firmware, and most impressively, its own control app. The unit is designed with a minimalist approach, with the goal of pure audio performance at the top of the list. This means no noisy touch screen or display, or other accoutrements.

The 180 MiND is equipped with an Ethernet jack, wireless receiver, coaxial, TOSLINK, and most importantly, AES/EBU digital outputs. Simaudio feels this is the best quality digital connection.

The MiND is not a DAC; it must be connected to an outboard converter as it is tapped to perform one function as well it can, and that is to stream music files from music library via your network. The MiND supports resolutions up to 24 bits, 192 Khz, and basically all formats including WAV, FLAC, AIFF, ALAC, MP3, etc. There is also a SimLink input and output so that the unit can be integrated with other Simaudio products and controlled via the MiND app.

The 180 MiND is stoutly made, with an attractive logo attached to the front aluminum faceplate and only a blue LED power light to indicate when the unit is on.

FEATURE

All connections on the back panel are well laid out with a WiFi antenna attached, but the preferred method of connecting is wired Ethernet. Connect the 180 MiND to your network with a good quality Ethernet cable, CAT7 in my case, and with just a few additional setup steps, you are ready to start streaming tunes.

The Simaudio control app, available for iOS only, is free to download. You can use the app of your choice – and there are many to pick from – but I found the MiND app to be stable and easy to use with an intuitive graphical interface. *(continued)*

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Shown here is one of our newest award winning products. The Aquarius incorporates six unique conditioning stages, a reduction of RFI noise by 60db and removal of Common and Differential mains noise. KERF™ circuitry assures that equal power and resistance is delivered to each of the six outlets (two high current). Further isolation between all outlets ensures that crosstalk and noise produced by different components is eliminated. This is especially critical in our new era of computer audio in which computer products are utilizing the same electrical circuits as other more critical audio components.

FEATURE

All that is left is server software running on your networked host computer or Network Attached Storage device, and you are ready to stream music files. Your final step is to connect the MiND to an external DAC. A Bryston BDA-1 and Simaudio's own remarkable Neo 380D is used, via AES/EBU, for the review.

The 4TB music library for the reference system is housed on several hard drives attached to a 2011 Mac Mini running Mavericks, with MinimServer server software. All files are in FLAC format, with resolutions from Redbook CD all the way up to 24 bit, 192 KHz PCM.

Using the MiND app on an iPhone 5 and an iPad Air to navigate the library is a cinch, and with a few taps you can create playlists, play a whole album, shuffle, and repeat. The ability to browse and select files from a vast music collection quickly becomes addicting. It is especially neat that the file type and resolution are displayed right on the app. Our entire library is tagged with metadata, and the MiND app displays artwork and other information to make the dream of easy navigation a reality.

As user-friendly as the navigation process is, what is most important is sound quality. The 180 MiND does not disappoint in this regard. As a matter of fact, the 180 MiND offers pound for pound some of the best digital sound experienced in the reference system.

Music emerges from amazingly dead-quiet backgrounds, and regardless of resolution, well-mastered material has a palpable presence. There is a sense of space to recordings that one generally finds in upper-tier digital.

One of the 180 MiND's greatest strengths is allowing the music to flow gracefully with natural timing. Along with that, instrumental timbres are superbly presented, and acoustic music is especially well rendered. This is exemplified in the way the MiND handles selections from Blue Note's 192 kHz remasters of their classic catalog. Iconic albums by Sonny Rollins, Wayne Shorter, and McCoy Tyner sound wonderful, and you can practically see the tape spinning.

The MiND is no one-trick pony, and it essentially streams all genres of music with equal finesse. Everything from varied recent offerings from the Felice Brothers, Benjamin Booker, Quilt, Jason Mraz, Puss n Boots, Ty Segall, and Chrissie Hynde are loads of fun. That touches on what also makes a component great: its ability to become invisible, literally and figuratively, and just let the party continue. Being able to instantaneously throw together playlists at your whim and have instant access to your music is the definition of fun.



The 180 MiND delivers on the promise of computer audio in spades. And the clincher is that no computer is needed in the listening room. This may be the MiND's secret weapon: total physical isolation from consumer grade computers, hard drives, playback software. Remove noise from your source, and you win a big battle.

The MiND removes general angst from computer audio without the need to worry about computing platform, playback software, O/S updates, or interface. The only maintenance that was done during the review period was a firmware update, which was initiated by the push of a button and took all of ten minutes to complete.

Comparisons to more modest streamers prove definitive. The 180 MiND is superior sonically in just about every department, with more flesh and blood in the presentation, and a total absence of digital hash. This comes back full circle to Simaudio's purist approach, with no display or on-board DAC. The AES/EBU digital output also gives it a leg up, providing superior sound quality. The MiND is very stable, never dropping from my network, and ergonomically it is headache free.

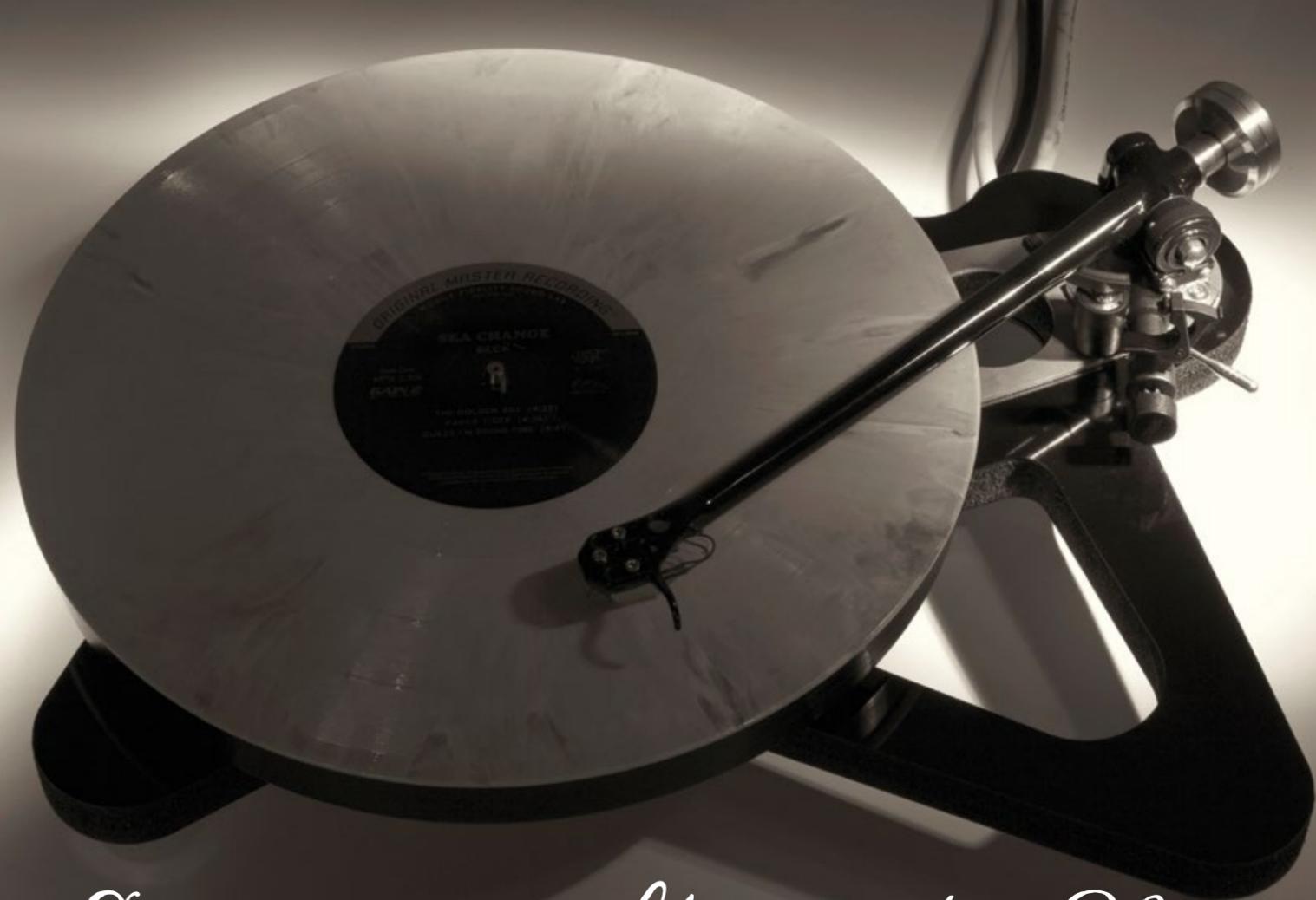
If you are looking for a low-stress, plug-and-play, cost-effective way to stream your music files in virtually any format, the Simaudio MiND fits the bill. *(continued)*

FEATURE

It is an audiophile-grade streamer in every respect, letting you choose the DAC of your choice, so that is not a limiting factor to future system upgrades. Simaudio's own iOS app is brilliant, yet being DLNA/UPnP compliant, those feeling more geeky are certainly free to use the control app of your choice.

Whether you connect via cable or wireless network, the MOON 180 MiND gives you access to your digital music library, freeing you from direct interface with your computer. If budget permits, and you are seeking a one-box solution, the Neo 380D with the optional, onboard MiND module is tough to beat. And at the time of this publication, the Neo 380D will have been updated to be able to decode DSD.

The MOON 180 MiND is an easy recommendation. The 180 MiND will let you spend more time streaming tunes and less time in computer geekville. At \$1,300 it offers excellent flexibility, future-proof design, and a small, elegant footprint. That is one neat trick. ●



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The Mercedes-Benz S550 with Burmester Hi-Fi System

By Jeff Dorgay

Cruising towards the Oregon coast with my female companion lounging in the *rear* seat of the Mercedes S550, I can't help but think everyone should have a sound system like this in their car. Seriously, everyone should have a sound system like this in their home. But most of all, everyone should have a car with heated massage seats.

Thanks to the extremely quiet cabin provided by the new Mercedes S-Class, you can enjoy classical music without road noise. *Dvořák in F Minor*, one of my personal favorites by the Jung Trio, is a stellar recording of piano and violin, full of open space and lush tonality. It's a tough one to get right, even on a great home system, but the integration of 24 drivers powered by 1,540 watts of analog and digital power in the S550 delivers the goods, from delicate orchestral passages to bone-crushing metal.



tone style

A 13-speaker, 590-watt Burmester system is standard on the S-Class, so musical enjoyment will be yours no matter what. But if you are going this far to purchase Mercedes' flagship, I suggest ponying up for the \$6,400 3-D Burmester system, which is installed in our test vehicle. The cost is roughly the same as a pair of first-class upgrades for your next trip overseas and the improved sound will provide a world of enjoyment.

Just as with the models in the Porsche lineup, Dieter Burmester himself does a lot of careful listening to fine-tune the sound system in each Mercedes model. And as much as I've enjoyed his sound systems in Porsche cars, it goes to another level of gratification in the S-Class, because the car is so quiet. Sports-car enthusiasts might not appreciate the amount of road and engine noise purged from the S-Class cabin, but music lovers certainly will!

Speaking of Metal

The S550 at our disposal arrives in Ruby Black Metallic, which looks almost dark brown in the bright sun. Unfortunately, color options are limited on the S-Class. You won't see our German friends at Mercedes being as daring as Bentley, offering British Racing Green or Bright Orange on an S-Class—no way. This car is all about understatement; you either want that or you want a different car. Color choices are limited to white, two shades of silver, six shades of black and two shades of very dark blue. *(continued)*



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"These headphones are capable of great delicacy and vocals sound incredible through the X."

— Jeff Dorgay, Publisher Tone Audio

Considering how many movie villains have been seen driving or riding in black Mercedes sedans over the years, you'll be in good company with the British bad guys in their Jaguars, should you choose an S-Class. And you'll certainly trounce them in a stereo competition. The Meridian systems in Jags and Range Rovers pale in comparison to the Burmester system in the S-Class, with its massive musical delivery.

I put this to the test at a stoplight here in Portland, pulling up to a gentleman in a new F-Type convertible. He was basking in the sunlight and smooth jazz, clearly annoying the pedestrians forced to endure his dreadful choice of music as they waited for the signal to change. I then cranked up the Burmester system with a healthy dose of Iron Maiden, forcing him to concede defeat and put his top up. I knew the battle was won when his passenger rolled down the window back to tell me how immature I was.

But why stop with Iron Maiden? The big Burmester system has as much drive (if not more) than that of the 449 hp, twin-turbo V8 engine under the hood—and thanks to the front-firewall-mounted subwoofers, the system rattles your pants legs (as well as your insides). Listening to the heartbeat at the beginning of *Dark Side of the Moon* feels like I'm back in my home listening room with a pair of JL Audio Gotham subwoofers. Yeah, it's that good.

Before heading off into the sunset, I decide that there's still more metal in store and so I reach for Judas Priest's *Screaming for Vengeance*. Hint: Switching the system to 3-D mode from regular stereo makes all the difference in the world. Though this processing might annoy purist audiophiles, it makes for a much more immersive sound field, now feeling like a bunch of Marshall amplifiers are piled in the back seat, angled at the driver's seat, and like Rob Halford is lying on top of the car with his head in the sunroof, screaming the chorus of the title track. You used to have to take hallucinogenic drugs to get music to sound this good; now all you have to do is check a box on your MB order form.



Eyes on the Road

As much fun as music is in this car, we highly suggest you keep your eyes on the road at all times, so that your shiny new S-Class does not become an insurance claim. Fortunately, just in case you nod off due to exhaustion from playing too much air guitar, the combination of Attention Assist and Collision Prevention Assist Plus quickly and gently applies the brakes, should you stray past the dotted line on either side of the street. These digital sentries also beep and send a rumble through the steering wheel to let you know if anyone or anything gets too close to the car, whether you're driving or parking. A handy backup camera is also included and that red line on the 12-inch dash screen means you're about two inches from a ding, so pay close attention there.

Even at night, to warn you of any approaching gorillas in the mist, the S550 uses thermal and infrared imaging that it relays to you via the left dash display, between the speedometer and tachometer. It even discovers small raccoon-sized animals, though possums were able to slip under the radar in our test car.

High-tech goodies aside, there's still no substitute for your own two eyes and ears. And the MB engineers made the window pillars sleek enough to ensure a phenomenal view from the driver's seat but still strong enough to do their job of protecting you in a crash. Every passenger who receives a demo drive makes a point to comment on the excellent visibility. This, combined with an ultra quiet cabin and mega-comfortable seats (that you can customize to your heart's content), makes for a refreshing driving experience, with safety and peace of mind galore. *(continued)*



Analog and Digital Options

The Burmester system allows connectivity to whatever source you have at your disposal, including analog, thanks to a set of analog AV inputs tucked inside the center console. Unable to resist, I drag out my Sony Walkman TC-D5 Pro and queue up some of my favorite needle drops—made with the AVID Acutus Reference SP turntable and Lyra Atlas cartridge, via a short run of AudioQuest Sky interconnects—and the results are indeed splendid. In fact, this was the most lifelike sound we achieve in the car.

Uncompressed files from my iPod and CD are strong competitors for second best, though I would give the silver medal to CD playback, via the six-disc onboard changer. Much like my new BMW, the S-Class has an internal 10-gigabyte hard drive that allows you to rip your favorite CDs to a playlist. I don't know why MB couldn't go the extra mile and make this a terabyte drive while they were at it—and while I'm complaining, I'll put a digital input on my wish list for the next generation Burmester system, so I can jack in my Astell&Kern player for 24-bit/192-kHz native files. Who knows, by the time I can afford this baby, maybe they will!

Last but not least, there is the full option for satellite radio, which is acceptable sound-wise, and it's great for when you forget to walk out the door with your iPod or a pile of CDs. *(continued)*

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Major and Minor Adjustments

The Burmester system is highly adjustable: In addition to the four sound modes, you have control over bass, midrange and treble (in minute increments), along with the ability to bias the best listening position for any of the four main passenger positions. (Someone sitting in the middle of two people in the back seat will just have to deal.)

As mentioned, there are four different modes in which you can experience the Burmester system in the S-Class. Pure mode offers no processing whatsoever and is either straight up stereo, or 5.1, should you still have some DVD-A discs in your collection. Easy Listening mode claims to offer “relaxed listening” over longer periods, and this is very subtle, with the extreme highs slightly rolled off. I can’t tell much difference between this mode and just turning the treble down slightly. Live mode is said to offer a wider dynamic range, more like live music; and Surround mode provides a synthesized surround-sound experience.

Surround mode activates the additional speakers in the roof of the car and feels a lot like what the latest movie theaters with Dolby Atmos offer. Some traditional audiophiles might cringe at the thought of this processing, but the S-Class is so

quiet, the effect is so subtle yet trippy, even at modest volume, and the 3-D surround option is just so enveloping that it’s tough to hate.

And the car, well, it’s got more adjustments than you’ll ever know what to do with. I’ll have a full report on My Car Habit, just click [here](#).

Suffice it to say that the car’s performance is as breathtaking as its sound system. Having spent a fair amount of time with various iterations of the Bentley Continental, I think Mercedes has beaten the Brits at their own game. It just depends on what you want from a car. If you’d like a little more “dig me” in your game, go for the Bentley—at twice the price. If you’d like a little more sports car, consider the new BMW M6. But if you’d like unadulterated luxury in its stealthiest form, the S550 is best way to achieve it. Take the badge off the deck lid and most un-car-savvy types will think you’re just driving an E-Class—which is usually how those millionaire-next-door types like it.

Whichever shade of black you choose for your S Class, don’t wimp out on the stereo system. Go for the upgraded Burmester system and disappear for a long road trip. You’ll be glad you did. ●

www.mercedesbenz.com
www.burmester.de

THE WINO

By Monique Meadows

FRANCE, ITALY AND MACEDONIA

FOUR ADVENTUROUS PICKS

There are over 10,000 wine grape varieties in the world. Among the best known of these are Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, Syrah, and Grenache for red wines; and Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Pinot Gris, Viognier, and Muscat for whites. For this issue, I thought it would be fun to explore some of the lesser-known varieties—two reds and two whites.



One of the selected wines is a white from Saint-Pourçain, France, and made from Chardonnay and the local grape Sacy, also known as Tressallier. The other white wine is from Macedonia, made from the Rkaciteli grape, which dates back to 3000 BC and thrives in this mountainous region of southeastern Europe. One of the reds is made from the Lagrein grape and comes from northeastern Italy. I often steer Pinot Noir lovers to Lagrein when they're looking for a medium-bodied, light-earthy red. The other red selection is a fresh and alluring little bistro wine from southern France near the Mediterranean coast, and made with a sun-seeking grape called Carignan, known as Carignane in the United States, where it tends to be grown in California's hot and dry Central Valley. All four of these selections are worth seeking out at your favorite wine shop—or ask for similar suggestions made from other lesser-known grapes. Cheers to divergence.



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- JEFF DORGAY, TONE AUDIO

“RARELY HAVE I HEARD SUCH PRECISE, DYNAMIC, COHERENT SOUNDS FROM A MONITOR SPEAKER.”

- ANTHONY KERSHAW, AUDIOPHILIA



2013 Grosbot-Barbara “Vin d’Alon” Saint-Pourçain Blanc

Loire, France – \$16

The “Vin d’Alon” Blanc—a blend of 80 percent Chardonnay and 20 percent Tressallier—is fermented in temperature-controlled stainless-steel vats and left on its lees (residual yeast), giving the wine a little extra richness, until the wine is bottled in the spring. The wine is crisp, comparable to a white Burgundy, with notes of lemon and apple. The Tressallier creates a more exciting blend than a pure Chardonnay. It is truly spectacular all on its own yet begs to pair with shellfish. As with any white wine, don’t drink this wine too cold and risk missing the aromas and flavors that come from letting the wine warm just a bit.



2012 Tikveš Rkaciteli Special Selectio

Republic of Macedonia – \$14

Tikveš Winery was first founded in 1885 and then, in 1968, a new version of the winery was founded, becoming the largest winery in Southeast Europe. The Tikveš Rkaciteli (pronounced ruh-KAT-see-TELL-ee) is made entirely from the local Rkaciteli grape. It is one of the most refreshing and fascinating white wines I have tasted in a long time, with intense citrus aromas and flavors of peach and nectarine, and a surprise mango note on the finish. It is outstanding with seafood, but also goes well with Thai and Vietnamese dishes such as Massaman curry.



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TONE STYLE

2012 Erste & Neue Lagrein

Alto Adige, Italy – \$17

Founded in 1900 near Italy's border with Austria, the Erste & Neue winery now has some 500 growers. The wine is made entirely from Lagrein—a local grape and one of 13 used by the winery—which lends the wine dominant aromas and flavors of cherry. After fermentation in stainless-steel tanks and barrel aging, those notes meld with the wine's soft tannins. A soft, almost bitter chocolate note is present on the finish, giving this medium-bodied red wine an earthy complexity and making it a really nice choice with slow-roasted meats and hard cheeses.



2011 Château d'Oupia "Les Hérétiques" Red Wine

Pays d'Hérault, France – \$12

Winemaker André Iché inherited a 13th century castle in the French village Oupia and, in his 60s, he began producing wine from the property's very old vines. Iché passed away in 2007, but his daughter Marie-Pierre has continued his winemaking tradition.

"Les Hérétiques" is made from 100 percent Carignan grown on 40-plus-year-old vines. Half the wine is fermented in barrel with a maceration of 30 days; the other half is made by carbonic maceration, a winemaking technique famously used in France's Beaujolais region to create fruity wines with low tannins. Les Hérétiques is a beautiful purple and crimson color in the glass, and it bursts with aromas of blueberry, blackberry and black currant. The finish offers earthy notes and a hint of Mediterranean herb. This bistro wine is a gem—and certainly something off the beaten path. ●



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Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio Magazine*, January 2013



"Oozes quality in both construction and sound"

Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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\$99–\$399 (configuration dependent)
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The moral of this story is still “nothing’s perfect.” As a device, the new iPhone 6 and 6 Plus are better in every way than the previous iPhone 5 series. The new phones are thinner, lighter (though they bend a little easier), and faster; however, the new iOS 8 has some major gremlins plaguing it. You would think that after all these years, Apple would have learned its lesson not to deliver a new device with basic issues like cellular and WiFi connectivity being a problem. Especially considering so many people are still waiting up all night to get the damn thing. If only our loyalty was rewarded.

But that’s the penalty of being an early adopter. As David Byrne once said, “same as it ever was...” Software grumpiness aside, the phone is slick and cool. Much like the jump to the iPad Air, the new iPhone 6 feels considerably lighter in your hand than the 5 that it replaces, even with the standard 6, sporting a 4.7-inch diagonal screen. Unless you were one of the lucky few that got your hot little hands on a 6 Plus day one, most sources say we won’t be seeing delivery on the 5.5-inch screened model ‘til Black Friday. How much is that extra .8 inches worth to you? Wait for the big screen, or be out in the cold with that oh-so-old iPhone 5. First world problems for sure.

Thanks to the new processor, all apps are considerably snappier, and when you can connect to the web, response is now lightening fast. As much fun as the new industrial design is, Apple has always been about display performance, and the iPhone 5 is perfectly dingy in comparison. The colors jump off the screen on the new phone when placed side by side, with more saturation and better tonal scale.

If you use your iPhone to take photos as much as I do, all sins will be forgiven once you take a picture. Even though the megapix-

el count is the same on front and rear cameras, the picture quality is tremendously improved in every way. Dynamic range, sharpness and color fidelity take a major leap forward with the iPhone 6. Comparing photos shot under similar lighting situations with the iPhone 5 and the Galaxy Note 3 aren’t in the same league.

Images captured with the iPhone 6 have the contrast and saturation of the Galaxy phone, with far increased sharpness and an even wider tonal range than what was offered by the previous iPhone. Video fanatics will love the slo-mo and time lapse modes, no longer needing to get a third party app to achieve these effects.

Bottom line, get the 128GB model; forget about the rest, especially if you get the Plus. The new screen makes it so much more fun to take and share photos, you’ll want to keep your whole life on this phone – and let’s not forget about music. There’s quite a bit of talk on the internet that this phone has the best sounding DAC that Apple has ever put in an iPhone, and cursory comparisons between the iPhone 5 and 6, via the new OPPO PM-1 planar headphones, reveal a major jump in clarity. Going from the headphone output to line level input on my reference audio system

reveals the same thing: the overall graininess to the iPhone’s sound is greatly reduced. Even using it this way, when listening to Apple Lossless files or WAV (another reason to get that 128GB model), the iPhone 6 sounds like a proper CD player.

Should you have a DAC that can accommodate the digital bit-stream, the iPhone 6 is a stunner for digital playback with high quality files, and there are a number of rumors that Apple just might pull the 24/96 button soon, so hopefully this will all be no more than an iOS update away. God knows, we’re going to go a few more of these anyway before the iPhone 6 is right as rain.

Despite all the complaining, Apple has done it again, and in the end it’s down to ease of use. If you follow the Android religion, you’ll turn your nose up at the iPhone 6, but if you enjoy the ease of use that comes with the Apple universe, it’s better than ever. And yes, the battery life is finally commensurate with the competition.

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But why stop there? How about Roberta Flack or Courtney Love? Let's hope we see more of this from the Post Office!

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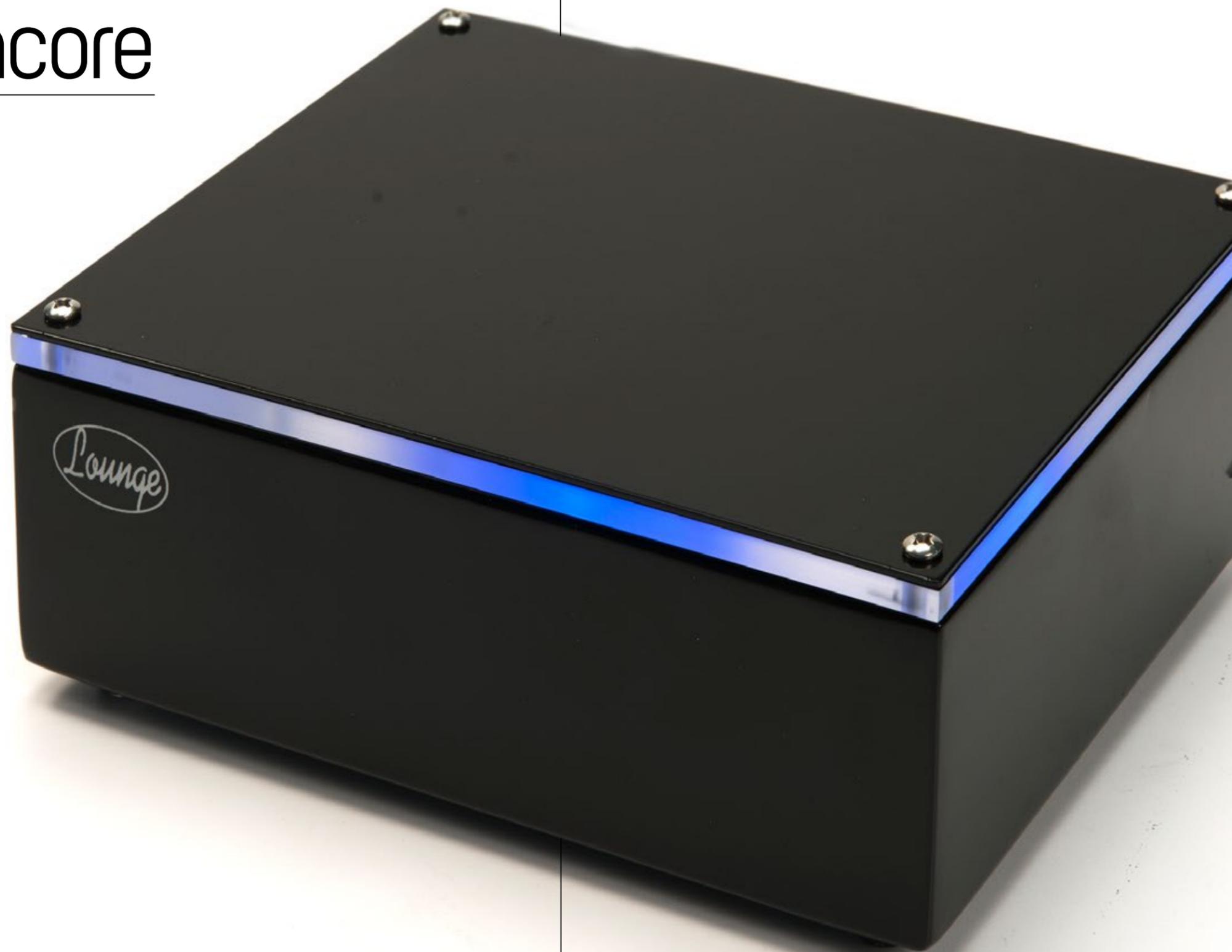
A Perfect Encore

The Lounge Audio mk.III Phonostage

By Jerold O'Brien

As much as the cliché “giant killer” gets overused in the pages covering our industry, there are indeed a few products that offer performance well beyond the pricetag put upon them. More often than not, this is at the beginning of a company’s career, when they don’t have a big building, staff, inventory or advertising budget. There’s no free lunch – capacitors, resistors and transformers cost what they cost. But when you catch a new product at the beginning of its lifespan, there are deals to be had. Enter the Lounge Audio mk.III phonostage.

Last year, I was knocked out of my chair by the mk. II version of Lounge Audio’s LCR phonostage. This refers to the passive network used to provide RIAA equalization for the delicate phono signal, and it has been the hat that Lounge has hung their hat on since day one.





With good reason. I warned you to buy the mk. II before the price was raised. Now that they have ramped up production somewhat, the price has gone up to a whopping \$300, but this amazing little phono stage has been improved even further. For a refresher on the mk. II, click here:

www.tonepublications.com/review/lounge-audio-phonostage/

Still in a small, black box with a cool band of blue light around the top, this diminutive phono stage is a David in a sea of Goliaths. Everything the mk.II did, the mk. III does better: a bigger deeper soundstage is served up along with phenomenal transient attack, an incredibly natural tonality is painted, and this little jewel is quiet, quiet, quiet.

Rather than try to be everything to everyone, designer Robert Morin has made an amazing MM phono stage, rather than a mediocre \$300 phono stage that can do MC as well, though I shudder to think of what this guy would come up with on a thousand dollar budget.

Great mate

Running the gamut of MM phono stages at my disposal, from the \$99 Shure M97 to the \$800 Ortofon 2M Black, there are no stinkers in the mix, though I have to admit to loving the 2M Black *and* the \$1,100 Sumiko Blackbird high output MC cartridge with the Lounge – the Sumiko cartridge is downright sexy sounding through the Lounge.

Pretty impressive for a \$300 box, and you'd swear the combination to be much spendier than it is.

Thanks to its small size, you can put the Lounge fairly close to your turntable, and if you have a high quality pair of interconnects, it will drive ten feet of cable easily, a testament to its output stage. In my second room, where the table has to be about 8 feet away from the preamp, this proved invaluable.

The test rig for most of my listening was either a recently rebuilt Thorens TD-125/SME 3009 and Ortofon VMS 20mk.2 or the Rega RP6 with Exact2 cartridges, running through a vintage ARC LS-3 linestage, Pass Aleph 5 amplifier and a pair of Acoustat 1+1 speakers, augmented with a REL subwoofer.

Most \$300 phono stages pass signal through from the cartridge to the preamplifier and precious little more. Most sound like digital, but there's only so much one can expect for this low of a price tag. Because the Lounge is sold direct from manufacturer to you, they can cram a lot more in the box for the price. The Lounge mk. III actually brings music to life. I certainly haven't heard many thousand-dollar phono stages that reveal this much music. Spinning a series of Blue Note reissues instantly illustrates the way this phono stage creates an actual three-dimensional soundstage in the listening room. *(continued)*

I'm so intrigued with not only the timbral accuracy of this phonostage, but the way it recreates spatial cues and the impression of size in the musical picture painted. Bringing it out to the main listening room, through the Pass Labs Xs300 mono-blocks and Dynaudio Evidence Platinum speakers, my impromptu listening panel is all amazed at what is offered in the context of a two hundred *thousand* dollar system. Talk about solid fundamentals!

Whether listening to the subtle vocal shadings of Ella Fitzgerald, or the layered, rapid fire guitars of TOOL, the Lounge mk. III delivers a high degree of coherence and dimensionality, with everything in its place, in a way you would expect with a much more expensive device.

Satisfies the music lover and audiophile

No matter what kind of music you enjoy, the Lounge mk.III doesn't miss a beat. The only thing it lacks that the really big bucks phonostages offer, is resolution. Keep in mind I am now comparing it to \$5,000 and up units, with equally expensive MC phono cartridges to match. *(continued)*



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FEATURE



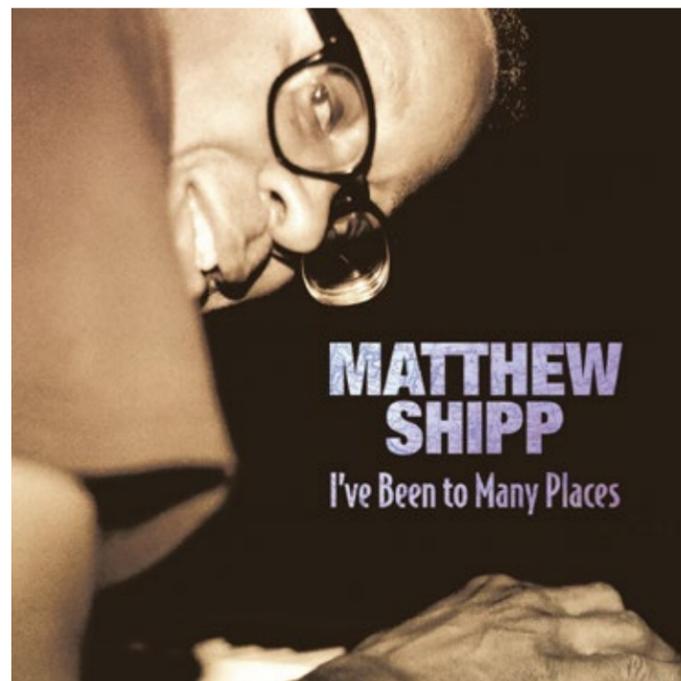
Whether you are a music lover on a tight budget, or an audiophile that doesn't want to get knee deep in analog, yet still wants great sound, there's no better choice than the Lounge Audio mk. III phonostage. If there's something out there for \$300 that's truer to the music in the black grooves, I certainly haven't heard it. I said it a year ago, and I'll say it again, buy one of these *now*, before Morin ramps up production, adds staff and starts going to more hifi shows.

The Lounge will cost at least a grand then. It will still be worth it, but like buying Facebook stock, you'll be kicking yourself for not buying it when it was really inexpensive.

Again, we have to award Lounge Audio and Exceptional Value Award for this phonostage, but it's really more than that – this is one of the best values going in audio today. ●

www.loungeaudio.com

JAZZ & BLUES



Matthew Shipp

I've Been To Many Places
Thirsty Ear, CD

The title of Matthew Shipp's solo disc indicates a look backward but also suggests a sense of finality. Nothing in the phrase indicates where he thinks he might be going in the future. *I've Been To Many Places* also revisits works that have been personally foundational, some of which he wrote and recorded more than half his lifetime ago. In addition, he incorporates standards that he has played in different contexts—including with powerful tenor saxophonist David S. Ware during the 1990s ("Tenderly"). His look at this personal history is filled with surprising inflections.



Here, Shipp emphasizes the lyrical. The title track, which opens the disc, is built around hesitations and lingering spaces between notes. That singular approach to pauses also shapes "Symbolic Access." His "Web Play" revolves around the lighter notes of his right hand making as much of an impact as the heavy lower-register rumbles of his left—the latter of which was key to Shipp's tense approach when he started to become known to international jazz listeners. He also reaches back to interpret

two of his early ballads, "Waltz" and "Reflex," which reveal how much his romanticism matches the mysticism he freely discusses in this issue's interview. Similarly, his version of John Coltrane's "Naima" sounds more about reworking the ode rather than trying to replicate the saxophonist's sheets of sound.

None of this means Shipp has softened. He just takes his time building into dramatic passages, like those on "Life Cycle." His revisit of George Gershwin's "Summertime" conveys a sense

of ominous mystery, as his solo becomes a barrage of repeated taut chords before returning to the familiar melody. While "Brain Shatter" does not convey the dangerous results of its title, Shipp's hammering quickly becomes intense before he immediately cuts it. On another original, "Brain Stem Grammer," his left-handed dive into the piano's lowest notes are set against intervals not far removed from Thelonious Monk—a technique he returns to on "Blue Astral Bodies." And on "Pre Formal," Shipp conveys a

different way for chamber techniques and Monk's inclinations to work together. That said, his arpeggios and rough bass notes on the R&B hit "Where Is The Love" won't make anyone think of Roberta Flack.

While Shipp has said that he would like to cease recording and focus on performing, *I've Been To Many Places* affirms that any planned change in presentation will not stop his flow of new ideas. —**Aaron Cohen**



Bill Frisell

Guitar In the Space Age!
Okeh, CD

A few years ago in a *DownBeat* interview with Nels Cline and Marc Ribot, I asked the esteemed guitarists about their first inspirations. Their eyes lit up when the Ventures popped into the conversation. Each player marveled over absorbing the iconic instrumental band as teens. Both are Baby Boomers, as is their contemporary, Bill Frisell, whose new *Guitar In the Space Age!* opens with “Pipeline” and closes with “Telstar,” two of the Ventures’ most famous tracks. Seems the music we all grew up with is always rolling around in our brains somewhere, often attached to a big dose of affection.

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MUSIC



©Photo by Paul Moore

Guitar In the Space Age! milks such sensibility. Frisell, who was 12 in 1963 and did a good job recasting John Lennon's music a couple years ago, rolls through more 60s jewels here. Call it New Frontier music as played by a graying progressive as unencumbered by sentiment as he is unafraid of experimentation. From gems by Duane Eddy to the Beach Boys to Link Wray, these songs are laced with shimmer and spark.

Team Frisell includes bassist Tony Scherr, drummer Kenny Wolleson, and guitarist Greg Leisz. Together they circle 'round the melodies while offering a bit of expansion in the groove department. No flipping the apple cart here. The boss's longstanding genuflection to melody wins on each track, and rightly so. The essence of the originals needs to be sustained for this squad to work its magic.

Politeness dominates. Even performances that could turn agro—"Rumble"

and "Messing With the Kid," say—stay calm. And ballads such as "Surfer Girl" and "Tired Of Waiting" glide on a sheen that finds Leisz and the leader melding their strings as if consonance was nirvana.

The country tracks that bubble up swing with bar-band nonchalance. "Canonball Rag" and "Bryant's Bounce" are snuck into the program to remind us of the kind of brilliance that lurked in twangville during that period. Song-wise, Frisell is always on a treasure hunt (see his update of Madonna's "Live To Tell" from '93), and these nuggets from the "duck and cover" era gather steam when corralled together.

Heard as a suite, *Guitar In the Space Age!* is a portrait of a long-ago time painted by a guy that always has an eye on the future, whether it includes a jet pack or not. —**Jim Macnie**



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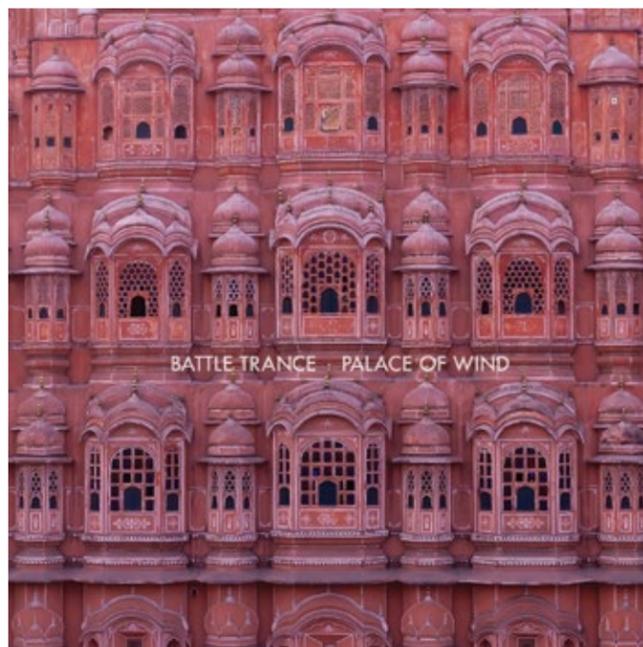
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Battle Trance

Palace Of Wind

New Amsterdam Records/NNA Tapes, LP or CD

Saxophonist Travis Laplante (of Little Women) has said that this quartet came from a spontaneous idea. He just wanted to see what it would be like to form a band that included Matthew Nelson (Tune-Yards), Jeremy Viner (Steve Lehman, John Hollenbeck Large Ensemble), and Patrick Breiner. That all of them play the same instrument—tenor saxophone—wasn't a barrier.

Of course, assembling a small group of reeds with no rhythm section is not unprecedented. The World Saxophone Quartet has been around since the mid-1970s. But the WSQ represents the gamut of the saxophone family, similar in design to a classic chamber ensemble. Also, that band has worked its way through different compositional structures—short tunes to extended works.



On *Palace Of Wind*, Battle Trance performs one album-length piece with three different parts. Minimalism is the order of the day here—not just in instrumentation, but in this group's frequent passages of single-note drones. Remarkably, the players take that scheme in constantly surprising directions.

As much as Battle Trance's improvisational acumen comes from its background in jazz, the group's minimalism echoes such new-music composers as Charlemagne Palestine.

And each of these three parts convey compelling shapes that add up to a striking whole—even if it takes a few listens to absorb it all. This is also a group that has no room for solo stars. Each member sounds indistinguishable from one another, and it's undoubtedly meant to be that way.

On Part I, Battle Trance starts out slowly on the low end of their instruments. A few flutters creep in, and the quartet's harmonies slowly build to a near-crescendo. The members

also engage in a melodic call-and-response before moving into higher notes. Sometimes a soloist's other melodic ideas sound like they're yearning to break free from the barrage of the other three horns. Then the part takes on a lyrical, almost hymnal, conclusion.

Part II also begins with an almost-meditative tone and continues for a few passages. But then, recognizable jazz phrasing emerges underneath combined higher-end lines. While the group suddenly

explodes into discordant polytonality, it's never a mere exercise in dynamics—it's more about building a piece through unexpected sources. The third part also has its own creaky melodies, kind of like how Albert Ayler may have sounded if he were facing serious on-stage pressure from three other saxophonists. The conclusion is suitably introspective.

While this album-length piece makes a considerable debut statement, the possibilities for the group already seem immense. —**Aaron Cohen**

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Charlie Haden and Jim Hall

Charlie Haden-Jim Hall
Impulse!, CD

Bill Evans and Jim Hall's *Undercurrent* was a key text in my early jazz listening decades ago and, ever since then, the late guitarist's music has been an ongoing pleasure—especially his work in duo settings. The less that surrounds him, the easier it is to hear the personality of his instrument, invariably hushed, limpid, and certain. For me, that sound is just as seductive as the deeply inspired lines Hall is known for, and the trait is particularly obvious when he works with a bassist. Such deep simpatico—first documented in the 70s with Ron Carter and Red Mitchell—is central on this newly issued performance with Charlie Haden from the 1990 Montreal Jazz Festival.



©Photo by Jan Thijs

Hall was Haden's senior by eight years (the bassist passed in July), and a case could be made that while they came from different aesthetic mindsets, their skill at reshaping melodies made them superb partners. Throughout their careers, clarity remained paramount. Whether soloing or comping, each had a way of delivering interplay hallmarked by certitude. When Hall joined Haden in Montreal, these parallels became extremely obvious. Their dovetails through "Skylark," the lift Haden gives Hall (and the way he reciprocates) on "Big Blues"—each is indicative of shared perspective being squeezed into singular focus. To some degree, that distillation is the essence of performance art. Here, at their first full concert together, these guys feel like they've been together for ages.

Another parallel: Each of these masters

boasts a similar carriage when it comes to crafting a solo. They're formal but folksy. Their "Body and Soul" could almost be a campfire song, something you'd sing to a sweetie on a summer night. And when you follow them through the liquid permutations of "Down From Antigua"—at 12-minutes-plus the longest track on the album and, thanks to Hall's unusually aggressive strumming, a rarity that needs to be heard by anyone that calls themselves a fan of the guitarist—they couldn't sound any more colloquial.

Maybe its just magical Caribbean breezes working their way up to Canada. But one thing's certain: By the time the open-ended escapades of "In The Moment" subside, these 10 strings perform dazzling hand-in-glove maneuvers. Empathy, it seems, is everything. —**Jim Macnie**

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Marcia Ball

The Tattooed Lady And The Alligator Man
Alligator, CD

Marcia Ball sounds like she knows how to have a good time. She certainly knows where to have it. Born in Texas, but a longtime Louisianan, she's become an indefatigable advocate for the bayou's musical culture. Her new disc continues in this vein, as it embraces New Orleans R&B, zydeco, Gulf Coast blues, and gospel. Ball features her own songwriting more frequently now, so that even if she's traveled these roads many times before, her trip on *The Tattooed Lady And The Alligator Man* does not sound formulaic.

©Photo by Mary Keating Bruton



Ball's rollicking piano lines drive the title track, filled with kind of boisterous energy that matches her colorful lyrics (seemingly inspired from vintage circus posters or films). Such tempo and mood permeate throughout much of the disc and, no doubt, tracks like as "Like There's No Tomorrow" and "Can't Blame Nobody But Myself" will rock New Orleans house parties and Americana music festivals for the foreseeable future. But she and her band change the delivery, inflections, and even the musical influences on each song.

She assertively declares "Clean My House" in a way that combines her way of blending singing and speaking as saxophonist Thad Scott's horn arrangements recall the 1960s glory years at Memphis' Stax Records. On the sassy "He's The One," Ball's piano echoes such Crescent City legends as Professor Longhair. Here, Michael Schermer's electric guitar solo packs fire, but he's just as effective sounding understated on "Lazy Blues." Schermer also blends in with Red Young's B-3 organ crunch during Ball's sex-of-the-wrong-kind depictions on "Hot Springs."

As a vocalist, Ball seems to be just getting stronger. When she sings about financial troubles on "The Squeeze Is On," she understands how to cut her vocal lines short in just the right ways to emphasize Terrance Simien's accordion. But her best moments come during quieter laments, like the closer, "The Last To Know." She draws on phrasing from New Orleans soul queen—and longtime colleague—Irma Thomas on "Just Keep Holding On." Another slower piece, "Human Kindness," is seeped in the Southern gospel tradition with an egalitarian theme.

Whether Ball's stories are personal, universal, or taken from her imagination, *The Tattooed Lady* reaffirms that she has the energy to tell them for years to come.
—Aaron Cohen



The OPPO HA-1

Triple Threat

By Jeff Dorgay

Listening to the complex timbre of Joni Mitchell's voice, it's hard to believe that the \$50,000 hifi system I'm listening to is utilizing the OPPO HA-1 headphone amplifier as its front end. Headphone amp you say? It's more than a headphone amplifier, but if the HA-1 were *only* a \$1,199 headphone amplifier, it would still be a screaming good deal.

As the classic TV guy likes to say, "but wait, there's more..." A lot more. The HA-1 also includes a fantastic DAC, capable of decoding every kind of file you might have on your computer or music server, including DSD and a full-function, fully balanced line preamplifier. Running a set of Cardas Clear balanced interconnects to the Nagra 300B power amplifier via the Alta Audio speakers that are also reviewed in this issue, I'm floored by how much music this compact, yet powerful, preamplifier lets through.

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FEATURE



While I must confess to only being an armchair headphone enthusiast, I love the concept of the HA-1, because it's the perfect segue to a great in-room system for the advanced headphone enthusiast. Start out with a system built around a pair of premium headphones (like OPPO's own PM-1), a source for digital music files and add an amp and speakers when the mood strikes you.

Precious little the HA-1 can't do

The tidy rear panel of the HA-1 contains one single-ended RCA and one balanced XLR input along with one of each for the output, but that's only part of the story. In addition to the four hardwired digital inputs (Toslink, USB, SPDIF and AES/EBU) the HA-1 can accept signal via Bluetooth as well, taking advantage of the aptX codec, if your device supports it, making the HA-1 a

handy streamer. And, for those of you living in Apple world, the front panel USB input is Apple MFi certified, so it will grab the digital bitstream from any iDevice, allowing a first-class combination between the two.

Removing the cover of the HA-1 reveals a tidy layout, densely packed with a massive power supply and a full class-A headphone amplifier built with discrete transistors, while the linestage uses high quality, balanced op amps. The front panel's LCD readout can be configured in a number of different ways, either displaying inputs, volume level, a spectrum analyzer, or a pair of classic VU meters. Of course, the purists can turn the display off, but why would you want to? The display adds a nice touch of fun to the HA-1, and in homage to the '70s, I left it in spectrum analyzer mode, always a conversation starter at a party. *(continued)*

FEATURE



As with OPPO's physical disc players, the HA-1 has an app to control all major functions. While the included remote is sleek and easy to use, controlling the HA-1 via your phone is a no-brainer. Rather than implementing this via Bluetooth, as OPPO has done here, I'd love to see this work via your network, as Devialet has done. This is my only complaint with the HA-1, and it's minimal, as I suspect most users will use it as a headphone amplifier instead of a control preamplifier, in which case the limited range of Bluetooth is more than adequate. You just can't adjust the volume of the system when you're soaking in the bathtub at present.

Let's put some phones on, shall we?

As awesome as the HA-1 is as a preamplifier and DAC, it really is a headphone amplifier. Again, front panel functionality wins the day here, with an output for balanced and 1/4" headphone cables, along with a USB socket, in case you're listening to some of your favorite tunes via an iDevice.

A firm believer in class-A operation and discrete output stages, the HA-1 delivers great sound from every phone I plug in, from my reference Audeze LCD-3s to OPPO's own PM-1, which was reviewed in Issue 64. *(continued)*



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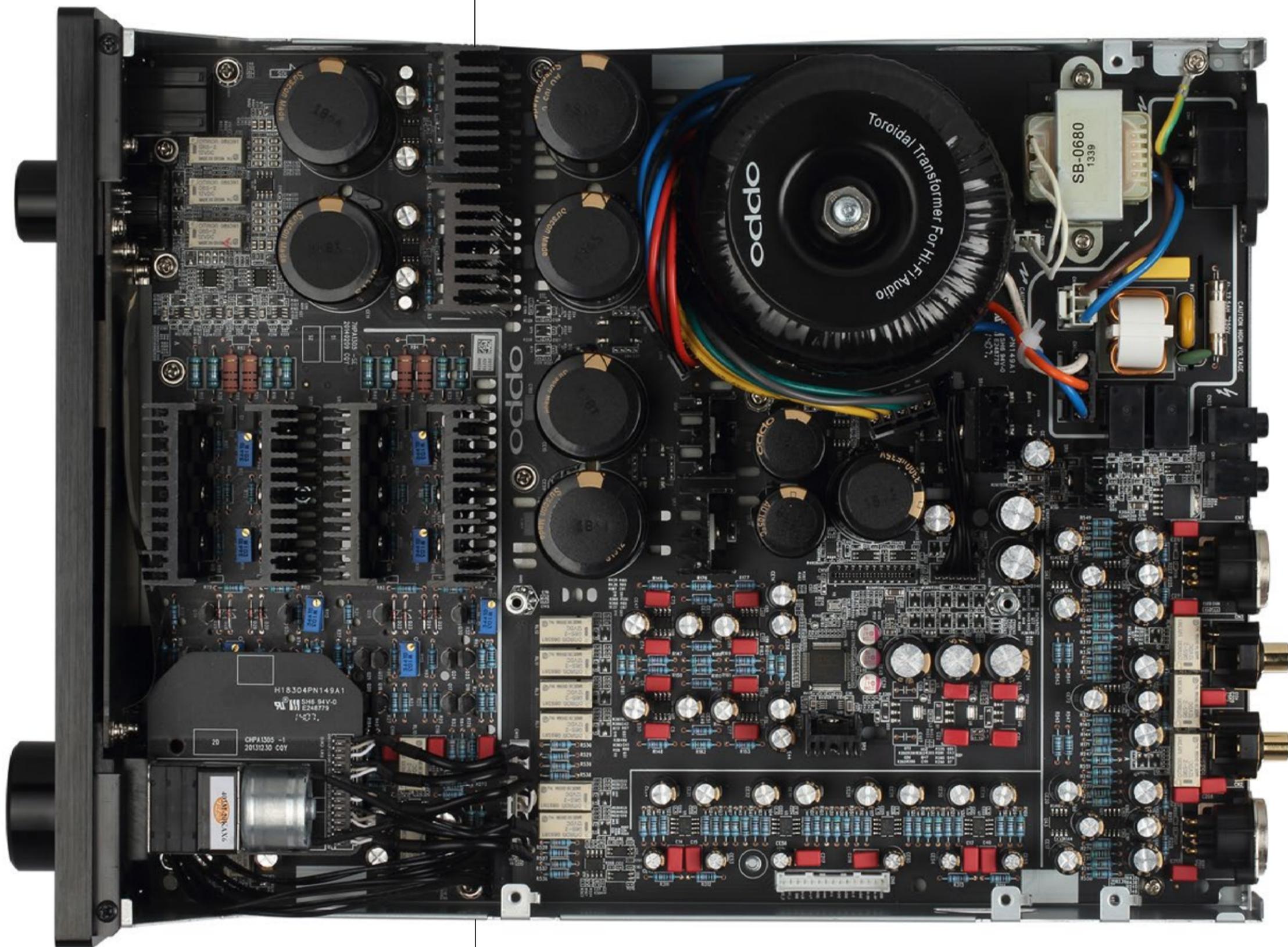


FEATURE

As you might suspect, the HA-1 provides not only perfect synergy for OPPO's headphone, but it proves equally exciting with everything else in my headphone arsenal. If you have a balanced cable for your favorite phones, there are a few more molecules of music to be revealed via that output, but it's not a deal breaker either way; it's more about compatibility. I applaud OPPO for incorporating both outputs neatly on the front panel.

The overall presentation is consistent, regardless of phones used, indicating a robust output stage. Even my old AKG 701s – which are notoriously tough to drive – and the HifiMan HE-1s don't prove problematic loads to the HA-1. The HA-1 is as close to perfection as it gets for the price asked, with nary a glitch – it's great across the spectrum, offering a smooth frequency response, excellent transient attack, and a solid, linear response at both extremes of the frequency spectrum.

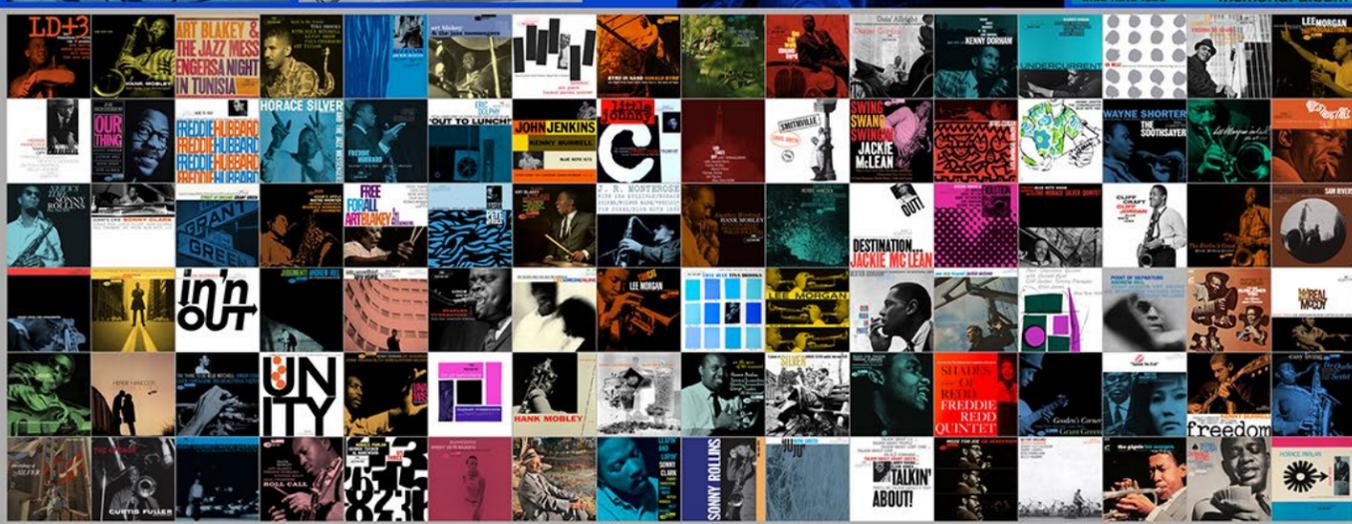
The solid-state design provides another plus: virtually unmeasurable background noise, critical when listening to headphones. If there were ever a place you didn't want noise creeping in, it's here. Those listening to a lot of electronic and rock music might not notice, but classical lovers will really appreciate the dead silence provided by the HA-1. *(continued)*



groove thyselves



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Easy listening

Again, not being a headphone maniac, the highest compliment I can pay to the HA-1 (or any solid-state amplification product, for that matter) is that it is resolving, yet non-fatiguing. The sonic signature is much closer to what I am used to with my reference Burmester and Pass Labs reference amplifiers than anything else I've auditioned. Where the competitors from Benchmark and Bryston have a slight bit of edge and glare in comparison, the HA-1 is smooth sailing all the way.

Tracking through some of my favorite classical pieces via digital recordings, the absence of background hiss makes this ultimately more pleasurable than switching to analog, even though the highest frequencies are smoother when rendered from an LP.

The HA-1 has more than enough resolution to easily tell the difference between analog and digital signals.

Utilizing the Rega RP10 turntable in for review, via the Simaudio LP610 phonostage is particularly stunning. Keeping a bit more in line with what someone might spend on a system built around the HA-1, swapping the Rega/Sim combination for the Lounge Audio LCR phonostage and our Thorens TD-125 (lovingly restored by Vinyl Nirvana) is delectable.

Grooving on some of my favorite headphone records is a total blast with the HA-1. Going for *big* stereo separation, I can't resist a '60s and '70s marathon of Pink Floyd, Genesis, Hawkwind and a little Cheech and Chong, to make it complete. Cheech and Chong's classic *Big Bambu* is funnier than it's ever been with all the little sound effects floating around the room. The massive three-dimensional soundstage rendered by the HA-1 is completely immersive, giving you that special presentation that you can rarely achieve with even the world's best speakers. *(continued)*



BLUE NOTE The Definitive 45 rpm Reissue Series
You listen, you look, you're there...

FEATURE

Much like Porsche's incredible Cayman S, the OPPO HA-1 offers balance as its highest virtue. Yes, there are a few headphone amplifiers providing more resolution or more bass extension and grip, yet they cost so much more – it's tough to justify the stretch to any but the most maniacal of headphone listeners. If you aren't going to lay down the big bucks for something like the ALO Studio Six, or those massive 300B monoblocks from Woo Audio, I can't see spending any more than the \$1,199 price tag on the OPPO HA-1. It's that good. OPPO could easily unbundle the HA-1, sell the DAC and pre as standalone components for about \$2,000 each, and they would still be class leaders.

OPPO has always stood for solid engineering, great audio performance and smart packaging. The HA-1 headphone amplifier continues this tradition, and if anything, takes OPPO's version of performance to an even higher standard than they have on their past award-winning components. I can't suggest this component highly enough. ●

MSRP: \$1,199
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NEW



M O O N

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M O O N

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MUSICAL ECSTASY

ON A CONTINUUM

A Conversation With Pianist Matthew Shipp

By Aaron Cohen

Pianist Matthew Shipp found himself in a somewhat unusual situation for an early evening solo performance a few months ago. The New York-based musician was in Chicago for a series of concerts. His first gig occurred in the PianoForte Foundation's recording studio, just south of downtown. Shipp had been invited to participate in the organization's salon series, which includes several notable classical and jazz artists playing a recital on its exquisite Fazioli grand.

For about an hour, Shipp performed a mix of original pieces, classics, and lengthy free improvisation, with standards like "My Funny Valentine" becoming almost unrecognizable via his dark, left-hand clusters and off beats. While his approach sounded furious on the surface, a strong melodic sense held everything together, even as the pianist twisted melodies around. His diverse audience comprised traditional jazz fans, a few well-versed in Shipp's own music, and the historic avant-garde lineage sitting alongside an older contingent of chamber-music followers. After the performance, he answered a few questions onstage, smiling as he suggested, "I put pieces in a new puzzle and come up with a Frankenstein." The response seemed to satisfy everyone.

©Photo by Peter Gannushkin



Even if Shipp had not provided such a description, his own career embraces the different factions the PianoForte crowd represented. His recent solo disc, *I've Been To Many Places*, is a look back on his three decades during which he remained a determined and singular voice on his instrument. And, if he had his way, this will be the last CD anybody hears from him. Now 53, he says he'd like to stop recording and just perform, preferably solo or with his trio. Or, the album title could mean that he has always looked at everything—especially his musical past and future—as one ongoing circle.

"My whole view of the universe is that it's one chip of information," Shipp said over coffee a few days after the concert. "It's a traditional mystic concept: That anything that exists within the diversity of everything is variation from that one chip of information. I view the piano that way, too. That it's on some other dimension, it's one continuum of whatever. And anything we extract from it, whether it's a Cmajor7 or whatever, is an extraction from that gestalt. I don't think you're ever supposed to get close to it. You can always deal within the realm of limitations you're entrenched in."

For Shipp, all the concepts began in Wilmington, Delaware. His parents had a few jazz and classical albums, and his mother went to high school with the brilliant trumpeter Clifford Brown. As a child, he wanted to grow an Afro similar to his heroes in the Jackson 5, but he also played piano in church while starting to study jazz history. Shipp still sees those two impulses—jazz and faith—as complementary.

"In all societies, music serves some type of function to deal with the mystery of life," Shipp said. "In jazz, it's interesting how there are very specific instances of that. John Coltrane took Hinduism and universal consciousness and geared it toward a very specific mode to explore those religious impulses. From my early beginnings with church music and then becoming a jazz musician, I naturally gravitated to the Coltrane type of mode of using music to explore those things. I don't think you can get away from that."

He also credits some early divisions within his home for his continued musical pursuits.

"I love my father, but he's an ex police captain and a little rigid in how he does things," Shipp admitted. "And my mother was completely not rigid in the way she saw things. He used to always complain about certain things she inculcated in me that would tend to make you believe more in your right hemisphere than left hemisphere. He'd say, 'Your mother taught you this and life is not like that.' I was very lucky to have a situation where I grew up and had parents who were stern about certain things and told you there were rules, but you have freedom to approach things in your own way."

Shipp delved deeper into jazz history on his own, and during the course of a conversation, the advances of Thelonious Monk and Coltrane frequently arise as topics. But so does Sun Ra, the focus of a centennial celebration at this year's Chicago Jazz Festival, which coincided with the pianist's visit. *(continued)*

“Sun Ra created a whole mythology around the language as a language and when he’s taking themes from Egyptian mythology, science fiction and the idea that jazz is this mystic language,” Shipp said. “And he put it together in this kind of stew, where the actual building of a musical composition or a musical universe can be seen the same way as building a pyramid. The language is trans-African and he created a figure of himself that’s past civilization. Where he’s giving Western Civilization the middle finger.”

Shipp briefly explored the Western method of education. He attended the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston for about a year to conceive his own style before relocating to New York. One day in August 1983, he realized he had “this stylistic thing that was mine—not as developed as it is now, but was always there.” Shortly thereafter, he moved to Manhattan’s Lower East Side, where he still lives.

“Even though the jazz thing was difficult, to say the least, there were all kinds of social things going on that were so exciting that mitigated it,” Shipp said. “I had confidence that today, or tomorrow, I would get that phone call. A lot was going on in my life at that time. Even if I didn’t become a jazz star like Wynton Marsalis, I was having a lot of fun.”

He also scored significant performance gigs. In the early 1990s, tenor saxophonist David S. Ware asked around for a pianist who did not sound like Cecil Taylor. Shipp filled that role and joined his quartet, which also included bassist William Parker and rotating drummers. While Ware had a wide, enveloping tone, the group’s melodic sense and Shipp’s chordal structures often served as the band’s anchor.



©Photo by Glen Tollington

“That quartet was just a whole matrix of paradoxes,” Shipp said. “David was a huge paradox within himself. He wanted people in the group who were strong and had their own way of doing things and gave us a lot of freedom. On another level, it was about David S. Ware. All the paradoxes happened simultaneously. That’s kind of where a lot of the magic came in.”

The Ware quartet’s audience drew from longtime adherents of jazz’s outer fringes along with curious younger people that experienced the volume of punk and indie rock and yet looked for something deeper. Shipp transformed that energy for his own small groups on dozens of recordings in the 1990s. Some include the duos with Parker, *Zo* (1994, Rise Records) and *DNA* (1999, Thirsty Ear), and one, a trio with Parker and violinist Mat Maneri, *By The Law Of Music* (1997, HatArt).

“All these opportunities came up and friends of mine said, ‘You may become the next David Murray,’” Shipp said. “I saw his ability to gig constantly and had the name recognition he did because he could record so much. Back then, you had what James Carter did, a deal with Atlantic, or you had to just generate tons of stuff and hope that opens up for you. Obviously, my choice was the second one. I was also trying to put income together to make a living and try to make it add up to something.”

With the subsequent major-label downfall, Shipp’s independent model—stemming from 20 years ago—turned out to be prescient. He became a director at Thirsty Ear, overseeing its Blue Series of jazz titles, which includes his collaborations with electronics programmers Antipop Consortium (*Antipop Vs. Matthew Shipp*, 2003) and FLAM (*Nu Bop*, 2002). He’s also inspired a newer generation of jazz musicians. While in Chicago, he performed at a series of open-ended jam sessions alongside drummer Mike Reed and such veterans as saxophonist Kidd Jordan at Reed’s venue, Constellation. And he’s also recorded with alto saxophonist Darius Jones on his *Cosmic Lieder* (Aum Fidelity, 2011) and *Cosmic Lieder: The Darkseid Recital* (Aum Fidelity, 2014).

“I’ve gained a lot from Darius,” Shipp said. “He makes decisions I would not have made, and I’m like, ‘Oh wow, I would never have thought of it.’ He’s very bright, very clear about what he wants to do and I think my example is helpful to him because he knows it can be done. It was hard in my generation, but I think it’s even harder for somebody of his generation to make a niche. It’s kind of weird when someone like him or [saxophonist] James Brandon Lewis said I was a formative part of their development. Because, in a certain way, I still feel like this kid who just moved to New York.” ●

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PREVIEW

Pass Xs Preamplifier

\$38,000
www.passlabs.com

We've been living with Pass Labs' statement Xs 300 monoblock amplifiers for the last year now with excellent results. There is no limit to their performance, and unlike some ultra refined components, musicality has not been sacrificed for resolution, the Xs300s offer both.

The matching Xs preamplifier is cut of the same cloth. It's massive, two chassis design incorporates new semiconductors than the ones previously used in the XP-30 with a power supply that weighs more than a lot of power amplifiers on the market. Watch for our full review soon.



VPI Classic Two Turntable

\$4,000 www.vpiindustries.com

VPI's Classic One set the standard for analog performance at its price a few years ago when introduced and one is still in service at TONEAudio as a reference component, recently revised by Harry Weisfeld to accommodate an Eminent Technologies tonearm. (More on this later)

The Classic Two builds on the success of the Classic One, with the primary difference being the ability to adjust the VTA on the fly while the record is playing, giving the analog enthusiast more control and adjustability than the One does. Sound quality is very similar, so if you are a more monogamous audiophile who tends to stick with a single setup, the One may be all you need. But, if you love to change and tweak your system on a constant basis, the Classic Two is the way to spin. It will make your adjustments much easier to execute.



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\$1,195/pair www.martinlogan.com

MartinLogan continues to expand their phenomenal Motion series of loudspeakers to the new 35XTs you see here, featuring a 6.5" woofer and their incredible folded motion (ribbon) tweeter, all in a solid wood cabinet, available in a variety of colors, including high gloss black.

As with every MartinLogan speaker, these are painstakingly crafted and reveal a level of music that is above and beyond their modest price.

Voiced to match the floor standing speakers in the Motion line, these can either function as a high performance/minimal form factor pair of rear surround speakers in an all Motion system (though they do mate very well with MartinLogan electrostatic speakers as well) or a great pair of stand mounted speakers in a dedicated two channel system.

Watch for the whole story in issue 68.



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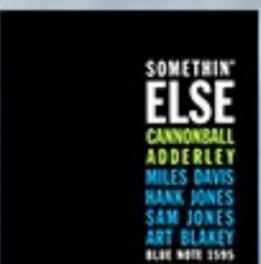
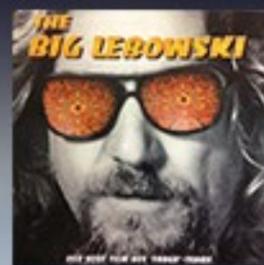


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PREVIEW

Woo WA234 Monoblocks

\$15,900
www.woaudio.com

Sixteen very large bills for a pair of very large amplifiers that make up a headphone amplification system. Don't think of it as crazy money for a headphone amplifier, because the WA234 can drive a pair of efficient speakers when configured with 300B output tubes. Think of the WA234 as the way to get an SET amplifier that sounds better than a \$125,000 pair of Wavac amps for the price of a slightly used VW Golf. That's our rationalization.



The Eggleston Works Emma



\$3,950/pair
www.egglestonworks.com

Eggleston's Jim Thompson has been building speakers for a long time now with great success, however many of their models have been fairly expensive, statement type speakers. But the company has been back with a vengeance, and their popular Dianne (about \$5,000/pair) has been winning over music lovers around the world.

Their latest effort, the Emma, is under \$4k a pair, built in the US and features drive units developed in-house at Eggleston. This speaker utilizes a pair of 6-inch drivers and the Eggleston tweeter. We heard them at the Consumer Electronics Show and Newport Beach shows this year and they were very impressive. Beautifully built with sound to match, these are on our short list for an affordable, reference quality speaker system. And they look pretty cool too...

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



DR. FEICKERT ANALOGUE



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No high performance analog system would be complete without a selection of high quality accessories. For these essential items we work with several manufacturers including Acoustical Systems from Germany, Blue Horizon from the United Kingdom and Okki Nokki also from Germany.

Acoustical Systems produces both the most accurate setup protractors available as well as the revolutionary *Axiom* tonearm and *Arché* headshell. Blue Horizon produces a fine line of audio accessories ranging from a simple anti-static record brush to their *ProFono* phono preamp. From Okki Nokki we have their second generation *Record Cleaning Machine*. This new record cleaner features greatly improved vacuum power as well as better aesthetic fit and finish.

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RIBBON PERFECTION

The Alta Audio FRM-2

By Jeff Dorgay

The arrival of the Alta Audio FRM-2 loudspeakers exposed a certain prejudice or bias of mine against ribbon tweeters. But it's a valid one, as I'd never heard a ribbon tweeter that was properly integrated with the rest of the drivers in the system, nor had I ever experienced a ribbon tweeter with a natural high end. My audio pals with a penchant for razor-sharp transients swear by them, but I'd always come away from them fatigued. So I must admit that when I was unpacking these scrumptious speakers, my heart sank just a little bit.



And speaking of scrumptious, to someone who spent his formative years in an auto-body shop, and later as a photographer around some of the world's finest automobiles, the finish of the FRM-2s almost defies definition. The finish on the review samples exceeds that of anything I've seen on a Bentley or Aston Martin, and the new Mercedes S-Class sitting in the driveway looks pathetic in comparison. The same goes for the audio world: let's just say the FRM-2s have the finest finish I've seen applied to a set of loudspeakers. And I know that takes a lot of hand work to get right.

While our test samples arrived in a Spinal Tap-like "how much more black can these be?" finish, Alta's head designer Michael Levy has told us nearly any automotive color can be accommodated.

However, a pretty box is meaningless without sound to match, and I'd buy a pair of FRM-2s if they looked like Blumenstein Thrashers. Fortunately for \$13,000 a pair you get great looks *and* great sound. These little speakers have destroyed all of my preconceived notions as to what a modest sized speaker is capable of.

Keith Jarrett's *At the Blue Note* has a wonderful sense of ambiance, with just enough of the audience mixed in to feel dimensional, and is accompanied by a cast of phenomenal musicians. I'm instantly struck at how completely natural his piano sounds, as well as the cymbals – they just float in the air perfectly, without the slightest hint of sibilance or being goosed for effect. As wonderful as the instruments come through, the telltale sign is Jarrett's trademark groaning.

As much as I love Jarrett's work, this is always aggravating, yet through the FRM-2s, it creeps in gently and then is quickly gone, almost like a whisper. I've never experienced this effect in any speaker before.

Charlie Haden's double bass work on the Jarrett album sends me in the opposite direction, digging out Shellac's *At Action Park* to sample the machine-gun bass line in "Crow." Again, the speed of the FRM-2s six-inch bass driver, utilizing Alta's XTL bass tuning system along with a highly inert cabinet offers up serious bass grunt and definition. As the rest of the staff trickled in to audition these speakers, they all offered up the same descriptions without being prodded by yours truly. Four staff members all remarked, "these sound like great electrostats, but with bass!" And I would add great dynamics, too.

Plumbing the depths of these speakers' LF capabilities lead me to the last Simian Mobile Disco album, *Unpatterns*. Cranking up the Devialet 120 used for most of the review had me looking around for the subwoofer and the supermodels. I felt like I was at Fashion Week with the powerful, grinding bass coming out of these relatively small speakers, REL subwoofer (review next issue) unplugged from the AC mains. The FRM-2s move major air.

More than just bass

Another fun test track here at *TONE-Audio* is Dead Can Dance's "Yulunga (Spirit Dance)" from the recently remastered SACDs. The opening is ominous and creepy, with an incredibly wide soundfield. *(continued)*



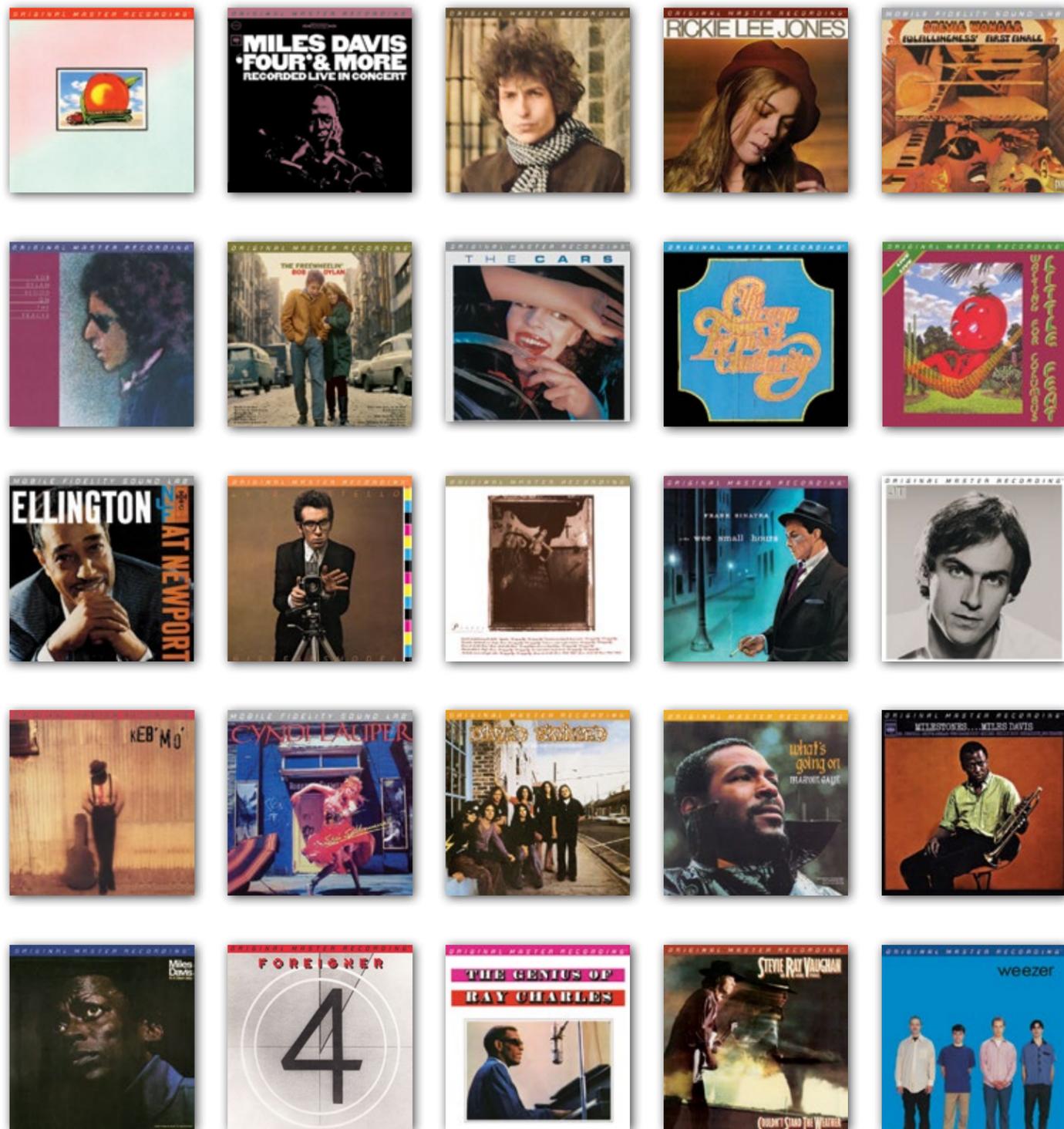
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REVIEW



This track features a great balance of real and electronic sounds that don't necessarily reveal everything about tone and timbre, but a great pair of speakers will disappear completely, rendering a wealth of spatial cues. Check and double check.

Devo's debut, *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!* produced by Brian Eno, does the same thing, yet in a wackier way. Mark Mothersbaugh's trippy vocals float all over the room, with ethereal synth effects and overprocessed guitar everywhere. Not a single natural sound here, yet the speed of the FRM-2s presents this classic in a truly psychedelic way. Big, big, fun on tap. Go straight to "Shrivel Up."

Much like one of Todd Rundgren's Utopia albums, the *Little Village* album reveals highly layered vocals with three

guys that sound very similar. John Hiatt, Nick Lowe and Ry Cooder all have a very similar phrasing and tone that can blend together on a speaker lacking in resolution, yet through the FRM-2s, these three voices all have a distinct sound.

No matter what the program material, the FRM-2s never cross that line that every other ribbon driver based system I've experienced crosses. These speakers have an intoxicating ability to render inner detail, with plenty of transient attack, yet have a relaxed quality like a pair of soft dome tweeters. It's very close to magic. This is one of those rare speakers that has me agonizing between exploring new music and wanting to revisit so many favorites, just to see what treasure would be revealed through this new lens. *(continued)*

REVIEW

Easily integrated

With a rated sensitivity of 87.5 dB @ 2.83 volts @ one meter, you'd think the Altas need a ton of power to work their magic, but again, the preconceived notion is wrong. Even the 35 watt per channel Van Alstine Ultravalve amplifier provides highly pleasing results in a smaller room, and while bone crushing volume isn't achievable, they play loud enough on all but really heavy rock records to be engaging.

The first half of this review was conducted in my new home listening room that only measures 11 x 14 feet, with modest GIK room treatments. Bass traps in the corner, a few diffuser panels behind the listening chair and one 242 panel at each first reflection point. The FRM-2s proved easy to set up, and even with the speakers placed somewhat randomly in the room, threw an excellent three dimensional image. Utilizing the supplied stands (an extra \$5,000 expense) put the tweeters right at ear level, and even with a slight toe-in, proved excellent in this small room. Because these speakers are capable of such solid low frequency response, they can be placed a bit farther out in a small room than one might do with something like a KEF LS-50.

Again, the benefit is getting the punctilious imaging of a small monitor with the bass response of a full-range speaker. An even bigger surprise was how well this performance translated into a large room. For those just tuning in to *TONE*, my main listening room is 16 x 25 feet, with a pitched roof and a nice blend of absorption and diffusion, removing the slap echo without being dead and overdamped. (continued)



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REVIEW

Powering the FRM-2s with the prodigious Pass Labs Xs300 monoblocks was an eye opener. Much like putting the pedal down in a base model Porsche Boxster and then climbing into a 911 Carrera S, there's just more oomph there. The speakers still had great LF traction, and upon spinning the Stereophile test disc, there was indeed solid output at 30hz, though it did drop off sharply after that. No shame at all for a speaker like this.

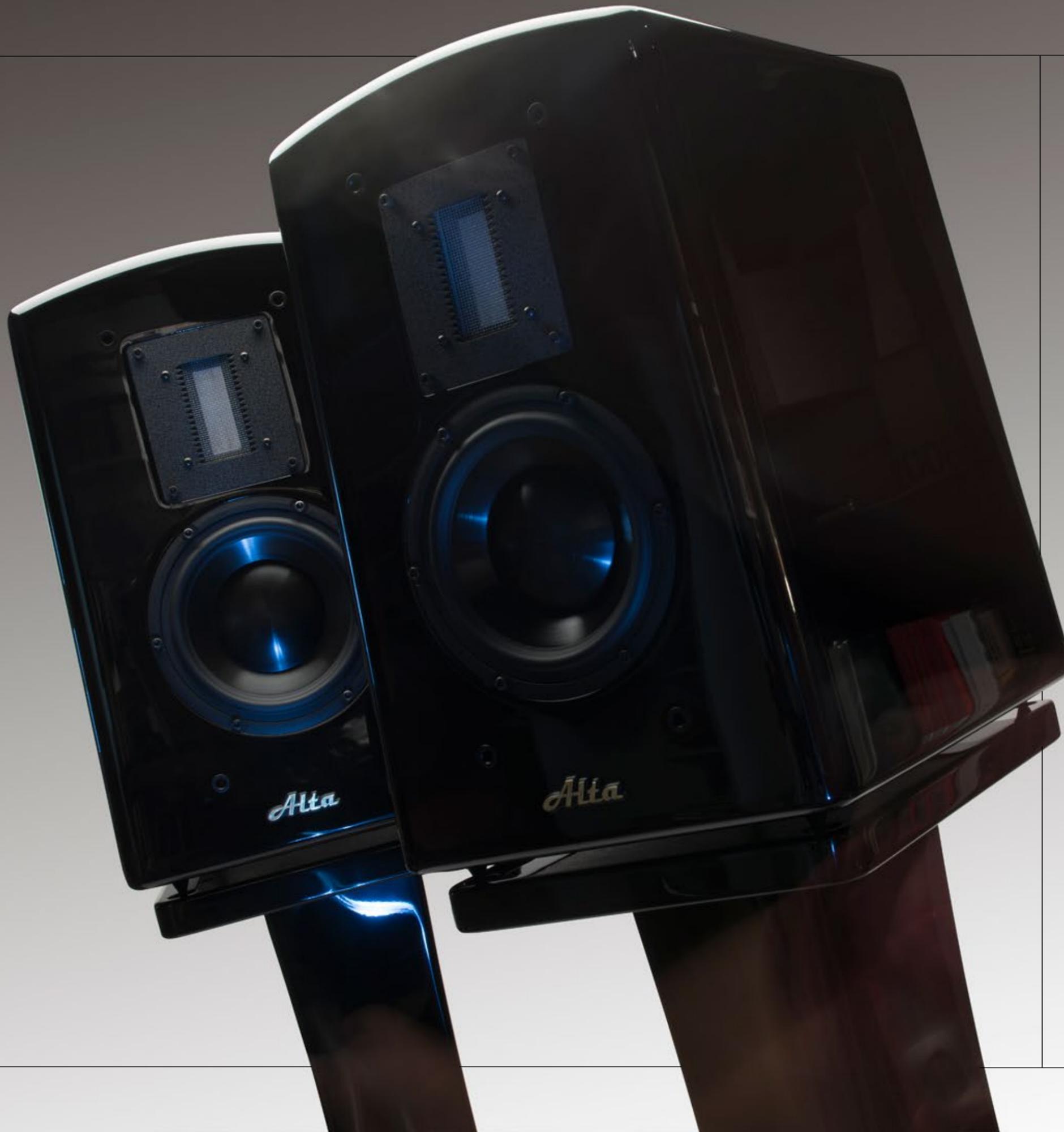
Should you have more clean power at your disposal, these mighty little speakers will not disappoint you. Running through some heavier rock records, I was constantly surprised at how far I could push them without breakup or collapse. AC/DC, Van Halen and the White Stripes were all highly satisfying.

The FRM-2 is the perfect speaker for someone wanting state-of-the-art performance without having to deal with a pair of massive, floor-standing loudspeakers. Even in the context of a six-figure system, the Alta Audio speakers are never the weak link in the chain. It is as easy to hear the subtle differences between ARC, Burmester and Robert Koda preamplifiers as it is between phono cartridges and cables. These speakers could be an incredible reviewing tool. Hint, hint to Santa Claus: I'd love a pair of these under the Christmas tree.

In a word, awesome

The Alta Audio FRM-2s shatter every preconceived notion I've ever had about ribbon tweeters and associated issues. Having had the pleasure of listening to some fantastic speakers from Dynaudio, Focal and Sonus Faber – all in the \$12,000 to \$20,000 price range – the FRM-2 is easily at the head of the class. And one of the most musically engaging speakers I've heard at any price.

Considering the performance that these speakers have turned in, I can't even imagine what Alta Audio designer Michael Levy has in store for us with his new flagship speaker. I can't wait to find out. ●



REVIEW

The Alta Audio FRM-2 Speakers

\$13,000/pair

Low Profile stands,
\$2,000/pair

OnyxBlack stands,
\$5,000/pair

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Cable

Cardas Clear

Rega's RP10 Evolution of the Breed

By Jerold O'Brien

Our publisher has been a Rega fan since the fateful day in the mid-'80s when we happened by our local dealer (Audio Emporium in Milwaukee, Wisconsin) to find them opening a shipment of Planar 3 turntables. As they lifted a bright, fluorescent green table out, the sales guy quipped, "What *idiot* would buy a turntable in this color?" Little did he know that's been publisher Dorgay's favorite color since age 6. He solemnly replied, "I'm that idiot!" and we took that little British table back to his listening room and were subsequently blown away, being Technics SL-1200 guys at that moment in time, thinking there couldn't possibly be anything better than direct drive.

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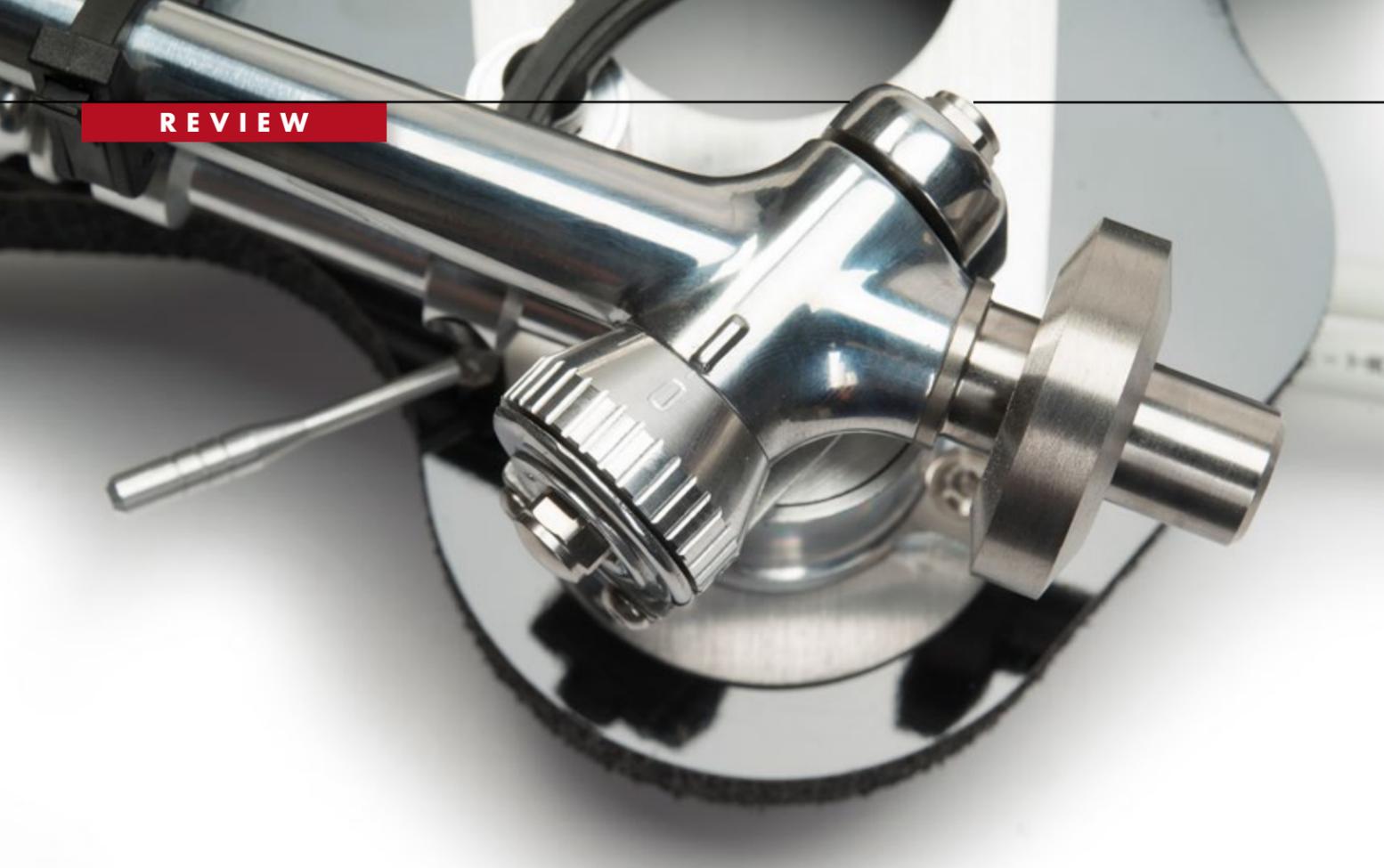
Words like pace and timing weren't even part of our vocabulary back then, but there was a ton of inner detail coming through those Magnepan MGII speakers that wasn't there the day before, and to this day, both of us have always owned at least one Rega turntable. For the record, my current reference is a P9 with Apheta cartridge, and it has served me well for some time now.

Evolution no. 10

Someone once said that an elephant is only a mouse built to military specifications, and on one level the same could be said for the P9 – you could think of it as a fully geeked-out P3. The platter, drive mechanism, tonearm and power supply are all highly evolved

versions of the basic Rega turntable. For those of you that aren't familiar, the tonearm on the earlier P3 and P9 shared the same basic casting, and now the new RP10 uses a highly refined version of the new casting for the RP3 (and is secured with the same red tape Rega has used for decades), yet the new RB2000 is completely handmade and finished to the highest of tolerances, as was the RB1000.

According to Rega, the RB2000 arm "is designed to have a minimum of mechanical joints while using the stiffest materials possible in all areas." Like its predecessor, the bearings are hand fitted and of highest quality, all handpicked for tolerance before insertion into the arm. *(continued)*



A new twist on the Rega platform, beginning with the RP3, is the mechanical brace: magnesium in the RP10, going between the tonearm mount and the turntable bearing, assuring maximum rigidity between these critical areas, while taking advantage of the new, skeletal plinth (further refined from the RP8 design) having seven times less mass than the original Planar 3.

An ex-automotive engineer, Rega principal Roy Gandy has always taken the advantage that less mass means more energy transferred from the record groove to the stylus tip, an opposite philosophy of the “more mass is better” approach embraced by some other manufacturers. Gandy’s approach has

always worked well, but in the past, the P3 and variations have always been accused of being somewhat lightweight in the lower register. The former flagship P9 has always featured the liveliness that their tables have always been known for, with additional heft in the low frequencies. Combined with a set-and-forget ethos, there’s no wonder the P9 has won the hearts (and ears) of so many music lovers that just want a fabulous turntable without the setup anxiety.

The race is on

So as much as we wanted this to be a standalone review, the question on the tip of everyone’s tongue – and on our Facebook inbox – has been, “How does the

RP10 stack up to the P9?” As the title of this review suggests, it is an evolutionary move. Listening to the P9 and RP10 side by side easily shows the additional resolution present in the new table.

A speed check was the first test on our list, and utilizing the Feickert iPad app showed the RP10 to be dead-on for both 33 and 45 rpm speeds. It’s still somewhat of an urban legend that Rega tables run “a bit fast” to provide a zippier sound. In our experience, this just hasn’t been the case in the last 15 years or so, and the RP10 keeps them batting a thousand. So, if you’ve had any internet-related anxiety about the speed of the RP10, forget about it. *(continued)*



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Ease as always

Should you opt for the Apheta MC cartridge, which comes pre-installed (at least for US customers), it's a winner on two counts. The Sound Organisation, Rega's US importer, sells the two as a package for \$6,495, saving you almost a thousand bucks in the process – and they install the cartridge for you. Even though this is super easy, because the Apheta features Rega's three-bolt fastening, and as all Rega tables come from the factory optimized for correct VTA, the RP10 is possibly the only no-fuss, no-muss premium turntable. All you need to do is set the tracking force to 1.75 grams and fiddle a little bit with the anti-skate if you feel so inclined. If it takes you more than five minutes

to play records on an RP10, you are overthinking it.

If the Apheta is not your bag, rest assured that there are a number of other great cartridges available that will provide excellent synergy with this table. Here at *TONE*, we've used everything from the ZU Denon 103 cartridge all the way up to the \$10,000 Lyra Atlas cartridge on both the P9 and RP10 with fantastic results. You can read the Apheta review here to get more of a feel for this cartridge, but for those not wanting to dig back, here's a short synopsis: The Apheta is a very fast, neutral cartridge with a lot of HF energy. If you don't have an MC phono stage capable of going down to somewhere between 25 and 50 ohms, the Apheta will

make a poor showing and sound somewhat shrill. Load it correctly and you will be rewarded with clean, detailed sound.

The P9 and the new RP10 are awesome for music lovers who want great sound without a fuss. While I've listened to a lot of megabuck tables at the *TONE* studio, \$5,000 is my sweet spot – and let's be clear: I do not consider this the point of analog diminishing returns; however it is all the more I'm comfortable spending on a turntable. So for me, personally, the RP10 gives me enough of a glimpse into the price-no-object tables for comfort. Considering Rega has only raised the price \$500 over the cost of the P9 speaks volumes for their manufacturing efficiencies.

More listening

As hinted at the beginning of this review, the RP10 does reveal more music throughout the range. Transients are cleaner, the bass carries a bit more weight, and the high end is even crisper than before. Regardless of program material chosen, the improvements made feel like going from ISO 200 to ISO 100 on your favorite digital camera (or film for those of you still embracing the medium).

Should you trade up from your trusty P9? That's a question only you can answer, and it will probably depend on what your dealer will give you for a trade-in and how wacky you're feeling with the checkbook.



Additional Listening

I am probably more anxious than most people to finally get my hands on the RP10, as I saw the prototype of this turntable at Roy Gandy's home about six years ago and it was fantastic back then. You'll either love or hate the skeletal design; I love it because it looks so un-Rega, but those of you wanting a more traditional-looking turntable can leave it in its full base. Me, I'd rather see it in its naked glory and cast a few spotlights on it, letting the shadows fall where they may.

As Mr. O'Brien mentioned, this table, though more radical in design, is definitely evolutionary. You won't mistake the sound of the RP10 for an SME or Clearaudio table and that's a good thing. Most of the improvements to the tone-arm and power supply are not easily seen from the outside, as is the second generation ceramic platter, but Rega tables are always more than the sum of their parts.

In my reference system through the Audio Research REF Phono 2SE, I noticed the same sonic improvements in the RP10/P9 comparison, but what I

did notice on a more resolving reference system than Mr. O'Brien's was that the RP10's new arm and table design will accommodate an even better cartridge than the P9 could. Where the Lyra Kleos was about the limit of what I'd mate with the P9, the RP10 could handle the Atlas. I'm sure most RP10 customers aren't going to drop \$10k on a phono cartridge, but you could, and it can resolve more music than a Kleos will let through. And that's part of the magic with the RP10. It's a sleeper.

I've always enjoyed the Apheta with the P9 and now the RP10, but I found absolute bliss with my Dynavector XV-1s cartridge, offering a slightly warmer overall presentation than the Apheta. Again, this will be decided by your ultimate sonic preferences and the RP10/Apheta combination is really tough to beat for the money. Rega has hit a pretty interesting run with the RP10, as there are a lot of great turntables in the \$10k–\$15k range, as well as in the \$2k–\$3k range, but this price point is pretty wide open.

We could talk tech for hours, but do we want to?

Put a record on and relax. Much like my P9, the RP10 has that extra amount of LF weight and drive (torque maybe?) that really makes this table a blast to listen to rock records with. Going back to Deep Purple's classic "Smoke on the Water" from their *Made in Japan* album was incredibly convincing when those famous chords were played.

Extended listening with a wide range of program material reveals a table that gets it right on so many levels. Mounted on an SRA rack, there were no feedback issues, no matter how loud I played music, so the table's design is working as it should.

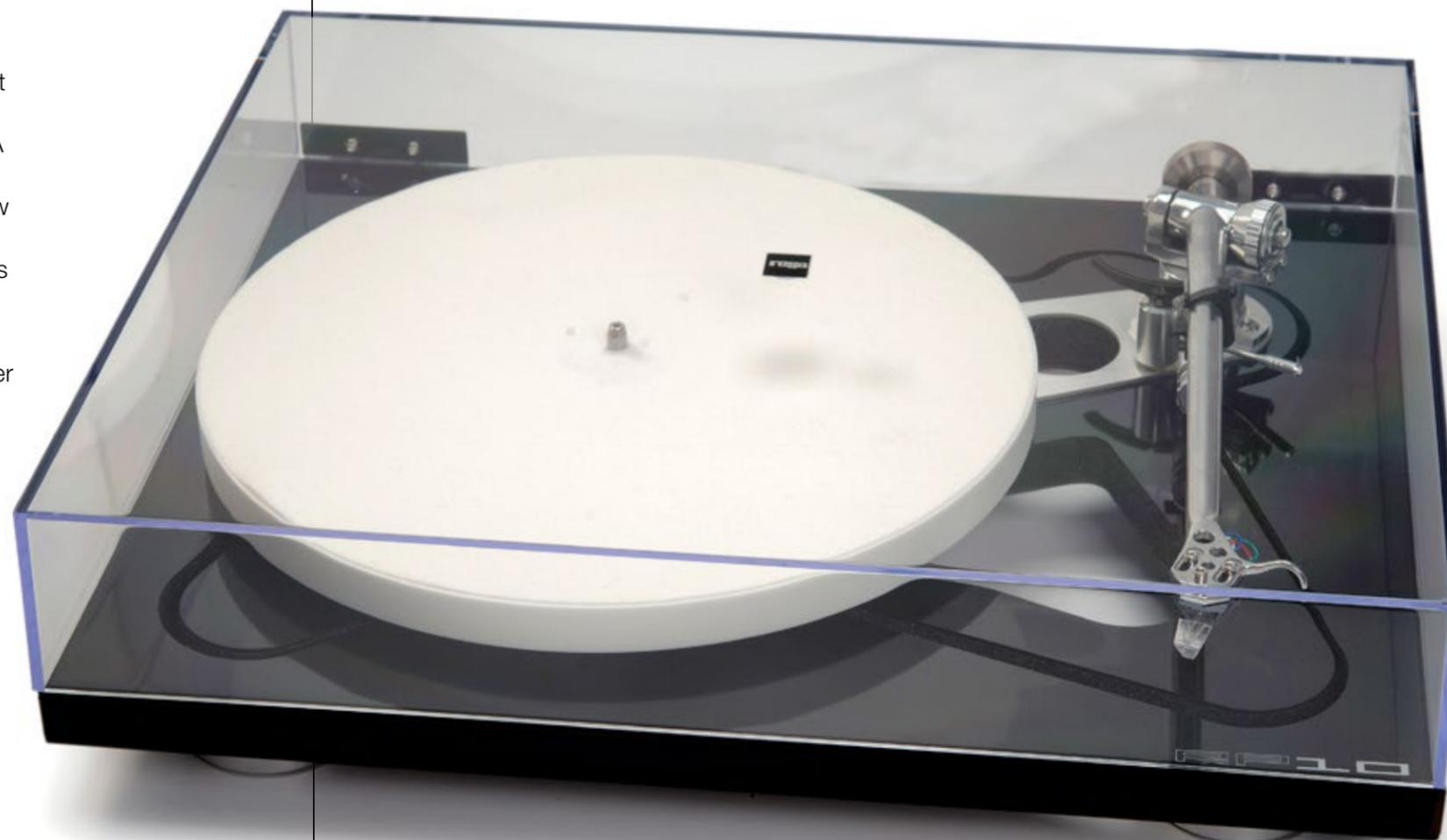
Reflecting on my time with the RP10, I just wonder when Mr. Gandy and his crew will run out of ideas? They remain fresh as ever, and I can't believe that after more than 30 years, I'm just as smitten with Rega as I was the day I brought my first one home from the hifi store. Now, can they just make it in lime green? I'm happy to give the Rega RP10 one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2014. —Jeff Dorgay

The Rega RP10
MSRP: \$5,495 (without cartridge)
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WATCHING THE BIRTH OF THE RP10 TURNTABLE

A Quick Visit to Rega

On the heels of our RP10 review, a visit to Rega was in order to check out the many changes they've made at the factory since our last visit in issue 28. With their workforce now expanded to nearly 100 people, Simon Webster meets us at the front door to show off the new bits.

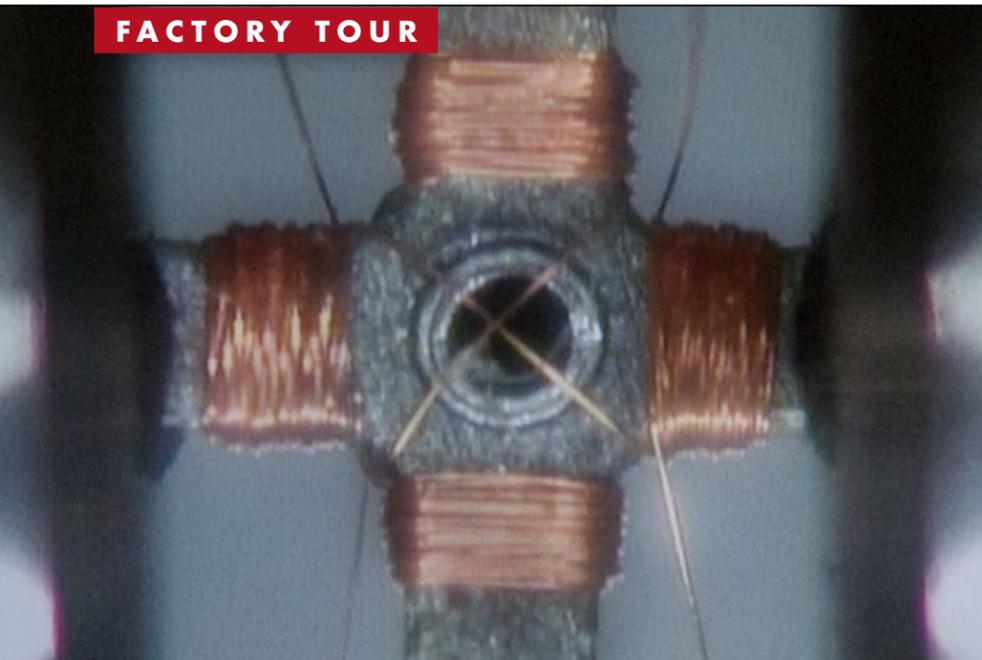
Shipping over 100 RP1 turntables per day, there is now an entire area of the plant dedicated to RP1 production. Like the tables further up the range, everything is QC'd 100%, to ensure that the only thing coming back to the mothership is because of shipping damages. Webster smiles as he says, "well we can't control *everything*."

Yet the rest of the factory is well sorted, now with an updated computerized inventory control system keeping track of over a million pounds of raw parts on the front end of the factory and all of the finished turntables and electronics on the other side, that once finished, ship to all parts of the globe. If you had to describe Rega in one word, it would be organized. Another great description for Rega would be compassionate.

With many of their employees having been there more than half of the company's 40-year history, owner Roy Gandy's philosophies of how to take care of his employees are just as solid as the ones surrounding his turntable designs. Everything at Rega is built in house now, and all of their employees earn a decent wage. For those of you conscious about how your favorite goods are produced, Rega is a stunning example of how a company does not have to sacrifice their workers to build fantastic products.

Much like Google in the US, Rega employees have somewhat flexible hours to work around families and rush hour traffic, and everyone gets a free lunch daily. Taking the option of making slightly less profit and keeping production in the UK has paid off for their workers and their suppliers. Most of the recent expansion is a result of Rega pulling a number of processes, like polishing and machining, back in house. Webster confirms that this is a result of their growth. *(continued)*

FACTORY TOUR



“Back when we only needed 100 bits from a supplier, it was easier to manage delivery times and quality control. Now that we need 4,000, it’s become too hard to keep it together. Bringing it back in house gives us the economy and the quality control our dealers and customers demand.”

Our visit proved extra special for analog lovers, as they were just installing a bank of high-powered HD cameras to oversee coil winding in the cartridge department. On our last visit, they were making one or two Apheta cartridges per day. Now, they produce ten times this, and at a much lower reject level than before. An impressive feat, considering the coil wire in the Apheta is one-third the diameter of a strand of human hair. The fellow winding coils has the skill of a fine jeweler and the steadiness of a surgeon. Incidentally, his Mom has been at Rega for a number of years.

The design department works away, with many different parts and drawings everywhere. There were a few new projects going on, so unfortunately, we can’t share a photo of this area, and as we walk through the door, Phil Freeman and Roy Gandy are intensely pondering a set of drawings pertaining to Rega’s flagship Naiad turntable. 40 have been pre sold in honor of Rega’s 40th anniversary, even though the cost has not been finalized yet. It represents a culmination of everything Rega has learned about turntable design and manufacturing over their history. *(continued)*

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FACTORY TOUR

Freeman points out that while Rega has always built the best product they know how to build while keeping costs contained, it was an incredibly fulfilling design exercise to build a product with no cost constraints whatsoever. And he assures us that everything learned bringing the Naiad to fruition, will be incorporated into future Rega designs.

Those paying close attention to our website might remember that we saw and heard the prototype of this turntable about five years ago, and much of that design became the RP8 and RP10 turntables of today.

The rest of the factory shows off similar upgrades, from the three large polishing machines downstairs, to a complete wing built above the RP1 assembly area to build electronics. As we visit the final assembly for loudspeakers, Webster is thinking out loud about adding mezzanine space here as well and mentions more space being added out back in the very near future.

After a full tour, it becomes obvious that there isn't one square meter of wasted space at Rega. Our trip ends where it began, in the RP10 assembly area, where about a dozen RP10s are finishing final assembly and testing. Asking if the RP10 might ever be available in the cool colors like the RP3 and RP6 models, Webster grins and says, "You know us, anything's possible." ●

Sonus faber Olympica III

Beauty in Shape and Sound

By Rob Johnson

Going for the gold

At *TONEAudio*, we've had the pleasure of testing Sonus faber's flagship Aida speaker (\$150,000), the Guinari Evolution (\$22,900), and one of their more entry-level offerings, the Venere 3.0 (\$3,500). In each of these cases, the sound and build quality represents a high bar for their respective price tags.

Not wanting to neglect a middle child in the Sonus faber family, we put the new \$13,500 Olympica III floorstanders to the test. The Olympica line of products makes available three models. The Olympica I is a stand-mounted, two-way design. Olympica II is a three-way floorstander with a single bass driver. The Olympica III is the biggest of the bunch with two 7.1-inch (180mm) bass drivers supplementing the 1.1-inch (29 mm) tweeter and a 5.9-inch (150mm) mid. A center-channel speaker rounds out the lineup should a prospective buyer seek a home theater option.

While there are several great companies producing speaker drivers, and many other speaker manufacturers build cabinets around them, Sonus faber takes a different approach. All their drivers are designed in-house, and each is mated with a cabinet shape which gets the most from it. As a holistic package the Olympica is designed from the ground up with system synergy the priority.

Grace of a figure skater

Made entirely in Italy like Sonus faber's flagship series, the Olympicas receive the same attention to detail at each level of the build process. Cabinet woodworking is gorgeous, and the resulting products have the appearance of fine furniture. Our sample pair sport the walnut finish. Panels of grain-matched wood curve delicately from the front to the back of the cabinet.



Eleven pinstripe-thin maple joints separate the 12 walnut sections on each side of the cabinet, providing an elegant and subtle contrast. For those who prefer a darker colored cabinet, Olympicas are also available with a graphite finish. Even with the greyish-black stain, the wood grain remains beautiful and clearly visible. Regardless of color, several layers of clear lacquer provide a protective and attractive semi-gloss coat.

A top-down view of the leather-topped and backed speaker cabinet reveals a uniquely engineered shape to minimize cabinet reflections. For lack of a better descriptor, it's an angled teardrop shape with the rounder edge toward the front and the point out the back. The rear portion is asymmetrical with a bit more swoop to one side. This configuration facilitates the addition of Sonus faber's unique perforated port design on one rear edge. Unlike most small and round bass ports, the Olympica sports a two-inch wide metal-grated port that extends the full length of the speaker. Gracing the cabinet base, a metal four-point outrigger configuration creates additional stability for the narrow towers. Tightening and loosening the spike height facilitates leveling so the speakers keep all four tiny feet firmly anchored to the floor.

Even the metal speaker cable binding posts offer a unique design. With a teardrop profile that mirrors the speaker shape, it's easy to get a good grip on the posts and tighten them firmly by hand. Dual posts allow for bi-wiring or bi-amplification, and an included, stamped-metal jumper connects the two.

The sum of all these parts assigns the Olympica III a 97 lb. (44 kg) weight and dimensions of 44 inches (111 cm) in height, 16 inches (40 cm) across the widest part of the cabinet, and a 20-inch (51 cm) depth. *(continued)*

REVIEW

Warming up

Speakers are always a tricky piece of equipment to review because each speaker interacts a little differently with a listening space. After a few hours of scooting them around the room in small increments left, right, backward, forward and with varying degrees of toe-in, they finally landed in a location I marked immediately with painter's tape. To facilitate the process, the Olympica manual suggests some sample speaker and listening seat placement suggestions. These ideas do offer a good starting point for your quest. While the placement process remains a little tedious, these speakers will reward you for the effort.

The aforementioned speaker port can aim to the outsides or insides of the speaker pair since there's no specific left and right speaker configuration. Trying the ports to the outside first, then swapping the speakers to aim the ports toward the space between speakers, I find the latter configuration offers best sound in my room. Owners should try both and decide for themselves what sounds best to them. Once in place, the Olympicas reveal all they are capable of. And they have a *lot* of capability.

The Decathlon

Decathletes are like the Swiss Army knives of the sporting world. They must do very well at ten different events in order to win. Of course, each individual will have his or her own weaknesses and strengths to bring to the table. *(continued)*



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Like these athletes, the Sonus faber Olympicas perform very well regardless of the musical genre or source material. In some cases, they truly excel as a reference.

For instance, once the speakers are placed optimally, the sound-staging ability defies expectations. First, the speakers draw no particular attention to their physical location. Sound floats around them without bunching up around the speakers or at the midpoint between them. Second, musical elements of my favorite songs, panned to the extreme left and right, wrap far into the room and sometimes even startle me with their reach toward the rear of the room. Hooverphonic's "One Way Ride" offers the illusion of movement as some synthesized tones ping-pong back and forth. With the Sonus fabers, sound transits far beyond the speakers themselves as if it somehow broke free of any barriers and traveled at will. My Piega P-10 reference speakers are no slouch in this characteristic, but the Olympicas exceed them by a significant margin.

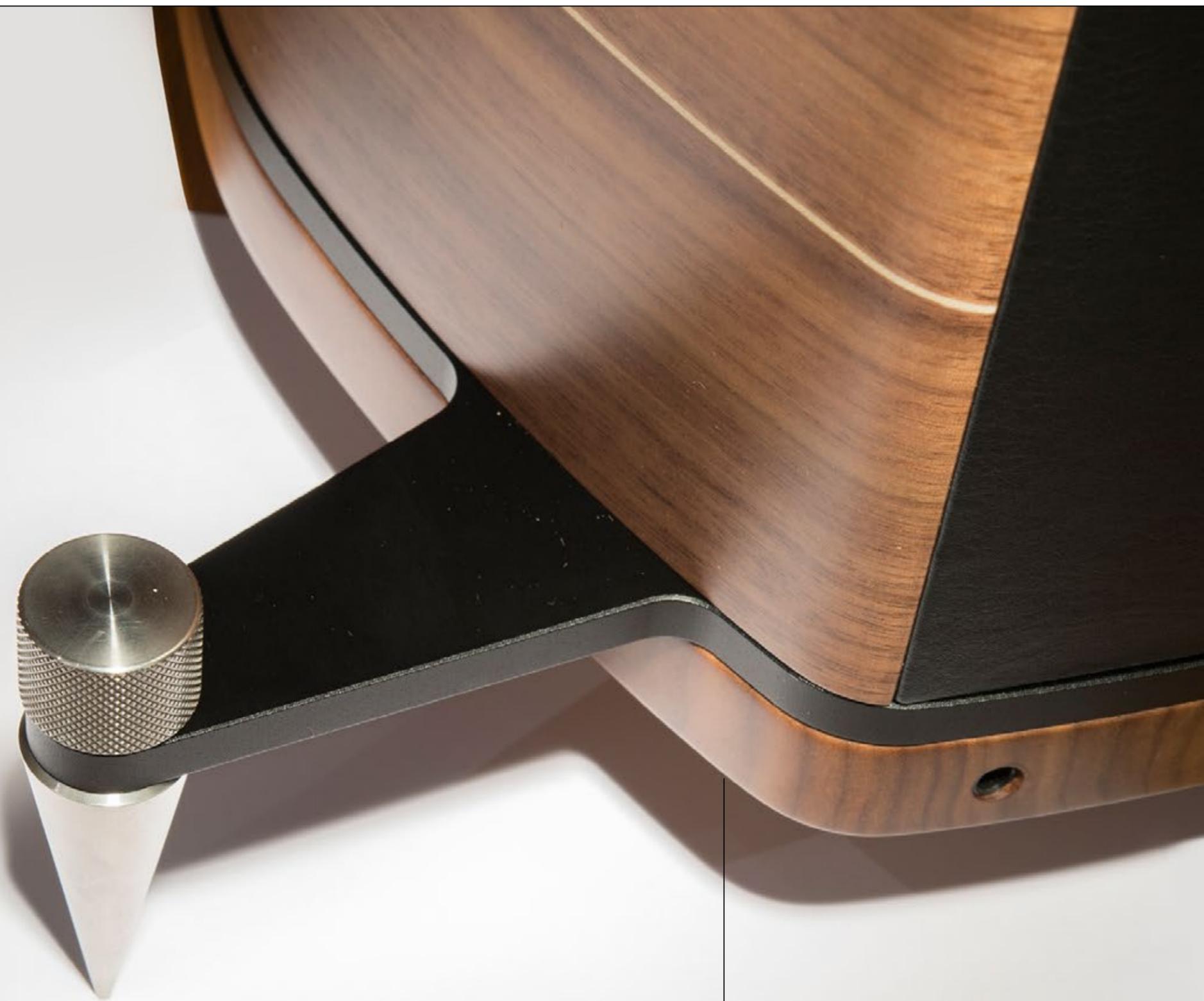
Sonus faber's specifications for these speakers indicate a frequency response of 20kHz down to 35Hz – not quite full range, but close to it. When listening, I long occasionally for the feeling of extremely low and heavy bass on tracks like "Substitute for Love" from Madonna's *Ray of Light* album. But honestly, I have little non-electronic music in my collection that delves that deep. For most of the music I enjoy, the subterranean bass extension is not missed. The rest of the Olympica bass spectrum proves excellent. There's no shortage of rumble in the sofa and floor, and the level of tight, tuneful tangibility projected from the Olympicas

is marvelous. On the opposite end of the audio spectrum, highs, too are very well extended but not hot in the mix. Bell strikes, like those on Ben Harper's "Alone," have a tuneful decay that reverberates so long that – like fossil dating – a listener almost needs to define it by a half-life.

Vocals and instruments with frequencies residing in the middle of the spectrum are never neglected in favor of the extremes. Unlike my reference speakers with a ribbon tweeter and midrange, the traditional cone shape of the Olympicas offers a slightly more tangible presence. As with the ribbons, sound remains natural, but Sonus faber drivers add a degree of palpability and up-close sense of the musical performance. The album *Perennial Favorites* from the Squirrel Nut Zippers represents an interesting challenge for speakers. With multiple vocals, percussion, strings, piano, harp, a horn section, and many other instruments spread across the stage and layered on top of one another, there's potential for a sonically muddled mess. The Olympicas manage to sort out all that information, across a wide dynamic range, to present each individual element with a convincing illusion of a live performance.

Final score

There's no such thing as a best speaker. Upstream component synergy, interaction with the room, music genre, and a listener's personal sonic preferences all weigh into the equation. In my case, I knew a day would come when a set of visiting speakers would unseat my current reference at a price point I can manage. Apparently, that day has come. *(continued)*





Through the Olympicas, there's only one real downside for me: I'm truncating the lowest bass frequencies. However, other positive characteristics outweigh my quibbles. Sound-staging prowess, palpability, and pure musical enjoyment in my listening space remain top-notch through the Olympicas. There are certainly speakers out there – including Sonus faber's own flagship designs – which can reproduce full frequency response, a bit more close-to-the-action musical detail, and perhaps more overall sonic heft. However, they will likely cost significantly more.

The Sonus faber Olympica IIIs are marvelous speakers. At \$13,500 per pair, they should be. However, there's a lot to consider as part of that price tag. First, the build quality and finish are stellar – more like a piece of carefully rendered artwork than a speaker. Secondly, a lot of research and development went into their design, including the creation of in-house drivers. Finally, this package's performance in my listening room exceeds that of some more expensive speakers which have visited. For those like me who value their stereo more than their car, the Olympica III speakers are worth saving for.

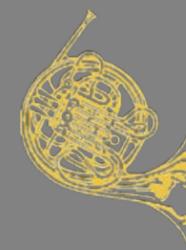
If you are investing in speakers to live with for a long time, and this price range is within your reach, be sure to audition the Olympica III. Perhaps like me, you'll find they are speakers to long for. I'm purchasing the demo pair.

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REFERENCE 75

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Additional Listening

Sonus faber's \$120,000-a-pair Aida is one of the most breathtaking speakers I've had the pleasure to spend time with, but like my GamuT S9s or the equally enticing Focal Grande Utopia EM, all of these speakers are out of reach for most audiophiles. Yet after listening to the Olympica IIIs for a month before handing them off to Rob Johnson, it's very exciting to see just how much of the Aida special sauce is present in these speakers at a much more affordable price. Yes, yes, I know we'll get all kinds of flak for saying "affordable" and "\$13.5k a pair" in the same sentence, but it's all relative. I know plenty of people that have spent way more than this on a motorcycle, jet ski, wristwatch or a Leica M and a couple of lenses. If you love music, these speakers aren't out of reach for a decent number of people and the pleasure they bring is well worth the asking price.

Best of all, these speakers perform well with a wide range of amplification, so if you have a modest system and are looking at these as your ultimate speaker that you will buy now and upgrade electronics around as you go, consider this – they sound awesome with a 35 watt per channel PrimaLuna integrated or a Rega Brio-R. Their 90dB/1 watt sensitivity allows even modest amplifiers enough headroom to fill a room with sound.

If you were listening to something like Crosby, Stills and Nash, or your favorite solo female vocalist, you might even be challenged to hear the difference between the \$120k/pair Aida and the Olympica. All the major attributes of the flagship speaker are here in spades.

For this price, you should expect great sonics, and the Olympicas deliver. Yet they also manage to be perfect examples of industrial art as well, with no part of their design or construction less than exquisite, and that's what makes the Olympica shine above every other speaker I've spent time with at this price, save Focal's Diablo Utopia. This is a product you'll love to look at and have as part of your life, even when not playing music!

I am thrilled to grant the Sonus faber Olympica III speakers one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2014. They are certainly a personal favorite. —Jeff Dorgay



Sonus faber Olympica III
MSRP: \$13,500

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PRIMARY CONTROL TONEARM

Bespoke Style

By Richard H. Mak



If you are lucky enough to have tried bespoke tailoring in Savile Row, you will know that nothing off the rack really comes close to it. The term “bespoke” originates in Savile Row, a street in Mayfair, Central London, famous for prestigious tailoring for the individual customer. It is understood to mean that a suit is custom measured, cut and made by hand to provide a perfect fit where it literally hugs one’s body. In the world of high-end analog audio, if there is such a thing as a “bespoke tonearm,” the Primary Control tonearm from the Netherlands fits this description.

Primary Control is an Amsterdam-based company that specializes in exquisite custom-made tonearms. Its owner, Bernd Hemmen, is an electrical engineer whose lifetime passions are music and audio. His fascination with the mechanics of turntable and tonearm design led him to create a tonearm that gives users precise management of every conceivable setup parameter, or, as he calls it, “Primary Control” over adjustability in order to allow a cartridge to retrieve signals accurately. After eight years of research and development, the Primary Control tonearm is born.

The “bespoke” process begins with a consultation with the designer (or the dealer) about your specific turntable needs, as there really isn’t a standard model of the tonearm.

REVIEW

The options are plentiful: 9", 10.5" or 12" lengths; the metal parts come in matte, shiny, or black; and the armwand in carbon graphite or an exotic wood of your choice. My first review sample took a little over four months to arrive, a 12" model with a Macassar ebony armwand. A few months later, a second 10.5" model made of carbon graphite and titanium followed. The armwand is made of a titanium tube and a carbon graphite outer layer, separated by carefully inserted damping material to optimize resonant characteristics. These two arms are the first to land on North American soil.

Immediately Engaging

The Primary Control's exquisite elegance can be felt right away as you unwrap the shipping box. Unlike most tonearms packed in molded Styrofoam boxes, the Primary Control is housed in a wooden box with pre-cut foam inlays. It looks and feels expensive, reminding me of the now discontinued DaVinci Grandezza. From afar, the arm itself looks almost like a Schröder Reference tonearm with a nicer finish. The head shell mounting plate and the armwand look remarkably similar, and are both situated to the left of the mounting column.

The Primary Control employs a unique proprietary two-point pivot, similar to Basis Audio's Vector arm of the '90s. The entire bearing structure is hidden within a round housing made of Delrin, making the bearing mechanism invisible to the naked eye.

(continued)



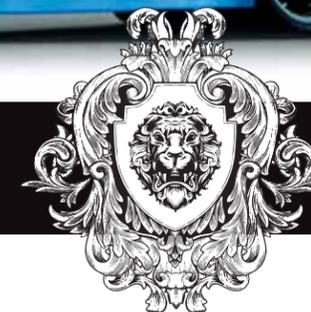
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It wasn't until I disassembled the entire bearing housing (a task not recommended by the manufacturer) that I began to understand the working mechanisms of the arm. The arm has a bearing cup mounted on the underside of armwand, which sits on a vertical sapphire bearing that points upward, based on the concept of most unipivot tonearms on which the entire armwand is balanced on a single point of contact.

Distinctly Different, Yet

Proponents of unipivot tonearms often argue that these tonearms provide a better top-end extension and a more vibrant presentation. But the free multi-directional movement of a unipivot arm is as much a nuisance as it is an advantage. Without horizontal stabilization (as in the case of the Moerch UP-4), the armwand wobbles from side to side during play resulting in measurable distortions and increased crosstalk between channels; therefore, the newer unipivot designs will have some sort of horizontal stabilization mechanism to remedy the problem. The Graham Phantom and the Durand Talea use magnetic force to stabilize the arm, whereas the Reed 3P adds on additional side bearings to restrict horizontal movements. The Primary Control incorporates a lower horizontal ball bearing into the pivot housing which makes the armwand "lean" continuously onto a right pivot, virtually eliminating side-to-side wobbling.



The horizontal bearing also creates a center of gravity offset from the main pivot, which will improve stability and balance. By turning the counterweight assembly, you can adjust the "leaning force" which essentially changes the horizontal damping of the tonearm. Too much damping causes the sound to become muddy and lifeless, while too little makes the sound thin and nervous.

The instruction manual is short, concise, and filled with detailed diagrams. If one follows the 16-page manual closely to perform cartridge alignment, VTA, Azimuth, VTF, anti-skating and horizontal damping, even a novice will achieve a relatively good setup. Fortunately, some parts of the manual will tell you what sonic changes to expect with certain adjustments—something very few owner's manuals will do.

There are two important points which should be mentioned with regard to the mounting position of the armpost and the relative idle position of the armwand to the platter. The Primary Control is designed with the armwand situated to the left of the main column, meaning the mounting position of the main column has to be further away than normal. Both my JC Verdier La Platine and TW Raven tables require an 8" armboard to be made long rather than the normal 6" to 7"; otherwise the optimal position prescribed by the mounting template cannot be achieved on the 12" arm. The anti-skating mechanism has been carefully designed to incorporate the use of several opposing magnets to provide for a non-linear force across the record surface. If the idle position of the arm deviates too far from the template's optional position, the anti-

skating force may be applied too early or too late, depending on whether the head shell position is too close or too far out relative to the platter. This is why the tonearm is "bespoke tailored" specifically for your specific turntable.

The Proof Is in the Listening

How does the arm sound? To put it simply, the ebony version is musical, elegant and soothing, whereas the graphite/titanium version is accurate, straightforward and lively.

Unlike other reviews I have written in the past in which a general sonic description can be pinned down, in this case it would be unfair to assign a blanket sonic description because every bespoke Primary Control tonearm will have sonic variations. Both arms display exceptional finesse, detail, and frequency extension which tonearms with less adjustability can only aspire to achieve. Depending on the type of music I'm playing, the seductiveness of one may draw me away from the other.

The ever-so-romantic display of poignant emotions was gracefully displayed with the 12" Macassar ebony Primary Control when the violin in the Andante in Act 3 of Delibes's *Sylvia* was played (Decca SXL 6635/6, Bonyngé – New Philharmonic Orchestra). Paired with the Dynavector XV-1T bamboo body cartridge, the ebony version gives a vivid display of organic qualities which are distinctively more prominent than with the graphite armwand. Though the sonic image appears more smudged and with less clearly defined edges, it makes up for the deficiency by presenting a picture which offers more human-like qualities, drawing you closer to the music. *(continued)*

REVIEW

Yet, when the grand finale in Act 3 of the same ballet is played, the graphite arm is decidedly more neutral, accurate and dynamic, but not so much as to veer towards the direction where it becomes analytical and hard sounding. It delivers a soundstage which is more upfront, yet extends further into the room. The sonic image has more three dimensional qualities. The bass goes deeper and carries more definition, texture and less boominess to the sound.

With vocal-dominant recordings ranging from 1950s Victoria de los Angeles recordings to 2011 Adele albums, I find myself caught in the same dilemma. The ebony

arm exceeds the graphite version on organic qualities, but loses out on dynamism and speediness of response. The same can be said with Fleet Foxes' *White River Hymnal*, with which the graphite version offers a more upfront presentation than does the ebony version, which puts you in a few rows back. Halfway through the review, I like the arm so much I will add one of these to my reference system, but I am having difficulty in deciding which one.

The More Care, the More Sound

If there is ever a time in which the veteran can excel over the layman, the Primary Control

would be the apt instrument for such a demonstration. With the meticulous attention to details and clarity in setup instructions, the layman can certainly achieve a pretty high level of sonic achievements by following setup procedures. But the Primary Control is also a tonearm which will allow a person with a bit more experience to take the sonic performance to a much higher level. Given the numerous bespoke customizable configurations available, combined with the precise adjustability of the Primary Control, it is a tonearm which offers limitless potential—and you can be sure it will never be the bottleneck of any analog setup.

There is always a downside to anything elegant and exclusive. Just like the bespoke suits of Savile Row, the Primary Control comes with an elegant price tag. The price ranges from around \$5,500 to approximately \$8,000, depending on the configuration. Ten years ago, if I were to mention an \$8,000 tonearm, it would likely have raised some eyebrows. But in 2014, where a slurry of new tonearm models have gone past the \$10,000 mark, such as the Graham Elite, Triplanar Mk VII, or the Vertere Reference—just to name a few—they do make this bespoke work of art appear less exorbitant. ●

Primary Control Tonearm
MSRP: \$5,500-\$8,000
(depending on configuration)

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BARGAIN

SLUMMIN'

This issue, my overexcitement got the best of me... Discovering this rare treat in a garage, I tried to needle the owner down from the \$50 price tag and lost out on the sale. Later, our friend Kurt at Echo Audio let me know exactly what this little jewel is. Mady in 1959 with an original price tag of about \$200 (in 1959 dollars!) used six 12AX7s, a 5V3 rectifier and four EL34 tubes. It even has a tape head input!!

Super cool, but we missed it. Kurt at Echo says, "It's like a PAS 3 and a Stereo 70 rolled into one chassis, but better sounding. Expect to pay as much as \$1,200 for one in this condition."

You've been warned. ●



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