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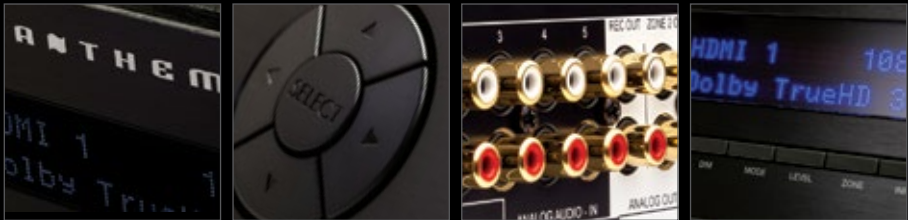
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AWARDS
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

W

ow, time flies when you're having fun! And this year has flown faster than the past 9 years during which we've been producing TONEAudio. With

2014 being more of an evolutionary rather than revolutionary year, so many manufacturers have stepped up their game, making it even tougher to pick the top components out of the ones we've chosen for review this year.

Streaming is the one solid trend that has really blossomed this year. While the mainstream press has just figured out that “vinyl is making a big comeback,” streaming CD quality music, thanks to Tidal, has really changed how many of us will look at music going forward. I know a lot of you like the physical sensation of thumbing through your record collection, but I fear that the CD is done for. As Richard Colburn of AURALiC said at this year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, “You're either listening to records or streaming; there's no in-between anymore.”

This year, our overall POY award goes to a pair of components: the OPPO HA-1 headphone amplifier and the companion PM-1 headphones that we reviewed earlier this year. OPPO continues to set the standard for high value, high performance and reasonable cost. Like their award winning disc players, these two components offer so much sound and value, yet they come packaged in the same fashion you'd see in a \$20,000 component from Meridian or dCS.

I'm often accused of being too gaga over mega-expensive gear, but I was thrilled by the OPPO amp and phones because they offer



such a high level of sound and build quality, that they make a great anchor for a full-blown two-channel system, going well beyond just a top-notch personal audio listening station.

Let's not forget about the reason we bought all this stuff in the first place – music. Music editor Bob Gendron has put together his annual list of favorites for the year, and as always, there's not a clunker to be found. Bob always goes the extra mile with his writers to seek out the most interesting music available, and that's what makes TONEAudio stand out amongst its peers. No one takes the time to cover as much music as we do, and no one is more excited to read the music section as it comes across my desk when everyone is working on the issue as I am. As much fun as it is to sample new gear, it's even more of a privilege to have such a great staff, hand-picking so much music. For those needing a recap, our music annual will be out shortly – just download it to your phone or pad and head for your favorite record store!

From all of us at TONE, we wish you happy and safe holidays, as well as a very productive 2015. Thank you again for your support.



"Well he wouldn't be stuck if you didn't have to have those Pass Xs mono blocks."

PUBLISHER Jeff Dorgay

MUSIC EDITOR Bob Gendron

GEAR EDITOR Bailey S. Barnard

MANAGING EDITOR Rob Johnson

WEB EDITOR Ellen Green

ART DIRECTOR Jean LaCrosse

MEDIA SUPPORT Terry Currier
Tom Caselli

TECHNICAL DIRECTOR Chris Petrauskas

RESEARCH Earl Blanton
Ken Mercereau

AUDIO HISTORIAN Ken Kessler

SENIOR CONTRIBUTOR Ben Fong-Torres

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS Aaron Cohen
John Darko

Lawrence Devoe

Chrissie Dickinson

Andy Downing

Jacob Heilbrunn

Jim Macnie

Richard Mak

Andre Marc

Mark Marcantonio

Todd Martens

Monique Meadows

Jerold O'Brien

Jaan Uhelszki

Connor Willemsen

SOCIAL MEDIA CONTRIBUTOR Monique Dorgay

CARTOONIST Liza Donnelly

WEBSITE bloodymonster.com

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Christina Yuin
toneaudiosales@gmail.com

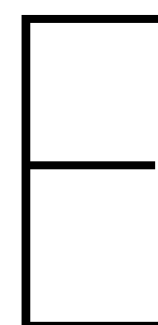
Editor Questions and
Comments:
tonepub@yahoo.com

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The Marantz 2215B

By Jeff Dorgay



very now and then, smaller is better. Such is the case with a lot of the Japanese receivers from the '70s. Pioneer, Marantz, Sansui and the like were on a power race similar to the Cold War of the same period, releasing receivers with more and more power all the time. Some of the large models went up to and even exceeded 200 watts per channel, yet their smallest offerings had a special, almost delicate sound.

Two of my personal favorites were the Pioneer SX-424 and the Marantz 2215. In this case, we have the later 2215B model, and while you can start a major argument on any hifi forum as to which model was better, the 2215B is still pretty sweet indeed. Without schematics and parts count in front of me, I'll go out on a limb and guess that with these amplifier sections, in the early days of solid state, simpler was definitely better.



In tandem with the pair of NOS JBL L26 speakers I wrote about back in issue 49, the mellow sound from the 2215B is beguiling in the sense that it's not quite as warm as a Dynaco Stereo 70/PAS 3 combination, yet is still very smooth. When listening to a modern 24/96 recording via the OPPO 105 disc player, the Marantz's modest power rating is fairly easily exceeded, even at a modest listening level. Yet,

with your favorite classic rock records found in the budget bin or thrift store, played via a Shure M44 cartridge which is already somewhat warm and round in its presentation, nothing sounds bad at all. Even the Eagles classic *Hotel California* (there, I admitted it) sounds pretty damn inviting, but whatever your fancy, the 2215B will never come across as harsh—even with an early-generation CD player.

15 watts per channel won't power a pair of Magnepans, but a pair of Klipsch Heresy's, JBL's or even a pair of Dynaco A25 speakers makes for an incredibly pleasant system that might even have you questioning why you're chasing the hifi grail in the first place. Keep it simple and you'll be well rewarded.

Blending the old and new worlds even further, streaming from Spotify, with its slightly un-

derwhelming 320kb/sec audio quality, is definitely embellished by the lack of resolution that this vintage Marantz offers. This makes the 2215B a perfect anchor for a dorm room, garage, office or den system. Its bass and treble controls are especially useful, extending the capabilities of whatever inexpensive speakers you might pair up with it, and the phono section is surprisingly quiet. *(continued)*

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FEATURE

The FM Tuner section, while not as good as the legendary Marantz tuners, is still quite good—and if you live in a market where there are still good stations to be heard, the 2215B fits the bill. Local stations with a modicum of signal strength here in the Portland area are clean and clear, with more than ample stereo separation. Way better than what you'll ever experience with satellite radio.

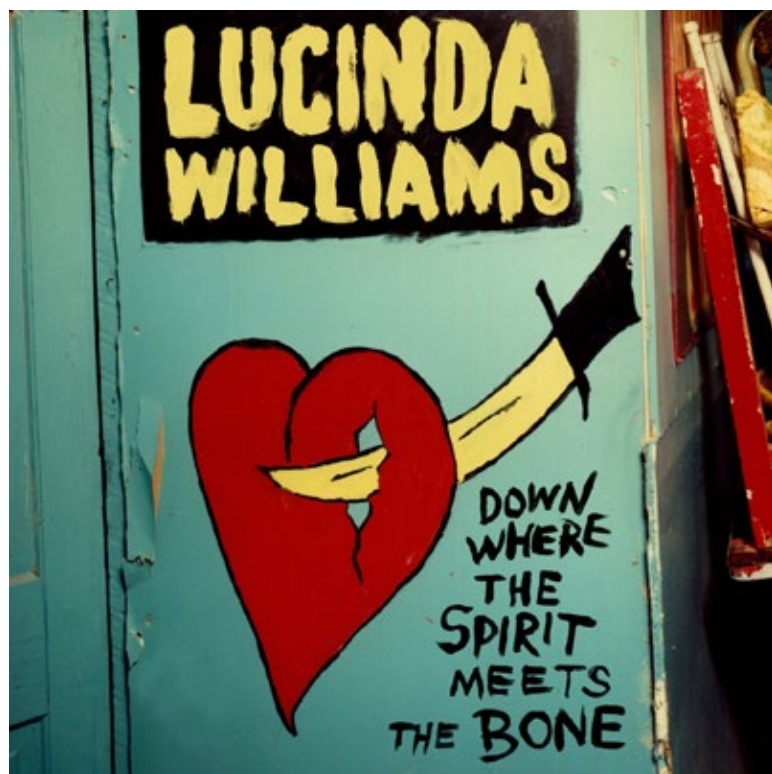
As with any piece of vintage gear, try to shop for the cleanest one you can find cosmetically, as all the trim parts are long gone—it's like trying to buy parts for a Porsche 356. Those vintage items that have the nice bits command a premium price, making a \$50 budget find a \$400 receiver in a hurry. The example you see here fetched a price of \$215 on Ebay and not only features a slew of new capacitors under the hood, but a fresh set of aftermarket LED lights, assuring that the blue Marantz glow will be intact for years to come. ●



2014'S BEST POP AND ROCK ALBUMS

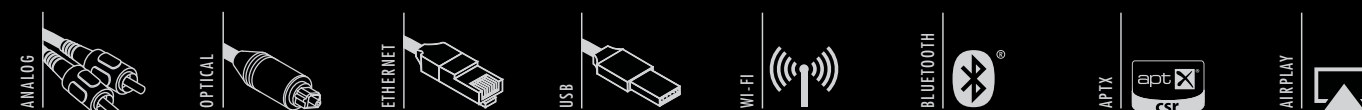
No single human being could hear the thousands of albums released in a single year. The best a critic can do is hear as much of the field as possible, keep an ear to the ground, and react accordingly. Here are the albums that most frequently caught and kept my attention during 2014, and which should enjoy long shelf lives in the years to come.

—Bob Gendron



1. Lucinda Williams *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*
2. Sharon Van Etten *Are We There*
3. Run the Jewels *Run the Jewels 2*
4. The War on Drugs *Lost In the Dream*
5. Bob Mould *Beauty & Ruin*
6. Lydia Loveless *Somewhere Else*
7. Benjamin Booker *Benjamin Booker*
8. St. Vincent *St. Vincent*
9. Fucked Up *Glass Boys*
10. Protomartyr *No Passion All Technique*
11. Angel Olsen *Burn You Fire For No Witness*
12. Spoon *They Want My Soul*
13. Archie Powell *Back In Black*
14. Parquet Courts *Sunbathing Animal*
15. Cloud Nothings *Here and Nowhere Else*
16. The Afghan Whigs *Do to the Beast*
17. Leonard Cohen *Popular Problems*
18. First Aid Kit *Stay Gold*
19. Electric Wizard *Time to Die*
20. Kelis *Food*
21. The Muffs *Whoop Dee Doo*
22. Ex Hex *Rips*
23. Gary Clark Jr. *Live*
24. Drive-By Truckers *English Oceans*
25. Robert Plant *lullaby and...the Ceaseless Roar*

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NEW RELEASES

She & Him's first album for Columbia Records, and fifth overall, is essentially the act's mission statement. Every song here stems from another era, some dating to the 30s. Whether tackling the jazz age or swing era, She & Him has always been the musical embodiment of nostalgia—nostalgia at its most swoon-inducing. So it's no surprise that the act feels at ease on each of these 13 tracks, diving into songs as recognizable and varied as the Righteous Brothers' "Unchained Melody" and Dusty Springfield's "Stay Awhile" with the same mix of conversational sweetness and starry-eyed effervescence.



Explaining the appeal and unexpected durability of She & Him, especially to the cynical, takes some doing. There's more at play than just the pairing of a famous actress, namely Zooey Deschanel, who has learned to market adorability, and an indie-rock musician, M. Ward, who traffics in endearingly vintage originals.

Since their 2008 debut *Volume One* on Merge Records, She & Him has taken a fantastical view of the past. That's no different here, as evidenced by the twinkling piano and wedding-day orchestra that sparkle-up Johnny Mathis' "It's Not for Me to Say" and the dreamy, stretched-out guitar notes

and tastefully placed cabaret back-up singers on "Teach Me Tonight." The latter, once in the more-than-skilled wheelhouse of Frank Sinatra, unfolds a cheerily spacious group effort here, glowing like the stickers of the sun, the moon, and the stars that adorn the ceiling of a many a child's bedroom.

Such innocence comes from Deschanel, whose approach to singing is relatively controlled. Her not-quite-high, not-quite-low voice is never less than engaging, at least if one takes their vocalists with a spoonful of sugar. Even in

moments in which others would go from drama, such as "Unchained Melody," Deschanel approaches it more like a lullaby. On "I'll Never Be Free," a song given an ever-so-slight punch by Van Morrison, Deschanel confronts hopeless devotion like a cool and confident slow-dance. On the jazzy standard "It's Always You," Deschanel isn't the sexy Jessica Rabbit/Lana Del Rey type. Rather, she's someone sitting at the table next you.

All of this plays to She & Him's advantage, as Ward peppers songs with unexpected guitar

shadings here and there. He's at his restrained finest on *Classics*, where songs are colored with flutes and horn sections, creating a brunch-in-heaven effect.

Think of the record as a fast-pass to "Dapper Day." If you're unfamiliar with the term, just know that it's an annual gathering at Disneyland in which guests are encouraged to don formal attire from the 30s, 40s, and 50s. Nostalgic? Yes. But there's an art to reminiscing, and if one is going to play in the past, it may as well be a fantasy version of yesterday.
—**Todd Martens**



She & Him

Classics

Columbia Records, LP or CD


Antony & the Johnsons

Turning
Secretly Canadian, CD

Antony Hegarty's songs often dwell on the concept of transformation. In the past, the Antony & the Johnsons frontman has penned tunes about shedding his male form—"One day I'll grow up and be a beautiful woman," he offered amidst the group's 2005 album *I Am a Bird Now*—and about the transition that takes place as one passes from this life to the next ("The Spirit Was Gone," off of 2010's *Swanlights*).

So it makes sense Hegarty's music is continually undergoing a similar evolution, with the singer rearranging, reworking, and refining the material in concert settings. *Turning*, the companion album to a stage show and a documentary of the same name, captures this ongoing process, often presenting songs drawn from the first three Antony & the Johnsons recordings in stripped-down form.

Born of a collaboration with conceptual video artist Charles Atlas, *Turning* was originally staged at New York's Whitney Biennial exhibition in 2004, though the live recording here was captured during an encore performance at the Barbican in London in 2006. In the production, Antony & the Johnsons provided the soundtrack for Atlas' visuals, which the auteur constructed by filming 13 women, some of them transgendered, and interweaving the projections with external images to create entirely new forms. *(continued)*

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BY PLINIUS AUDIO



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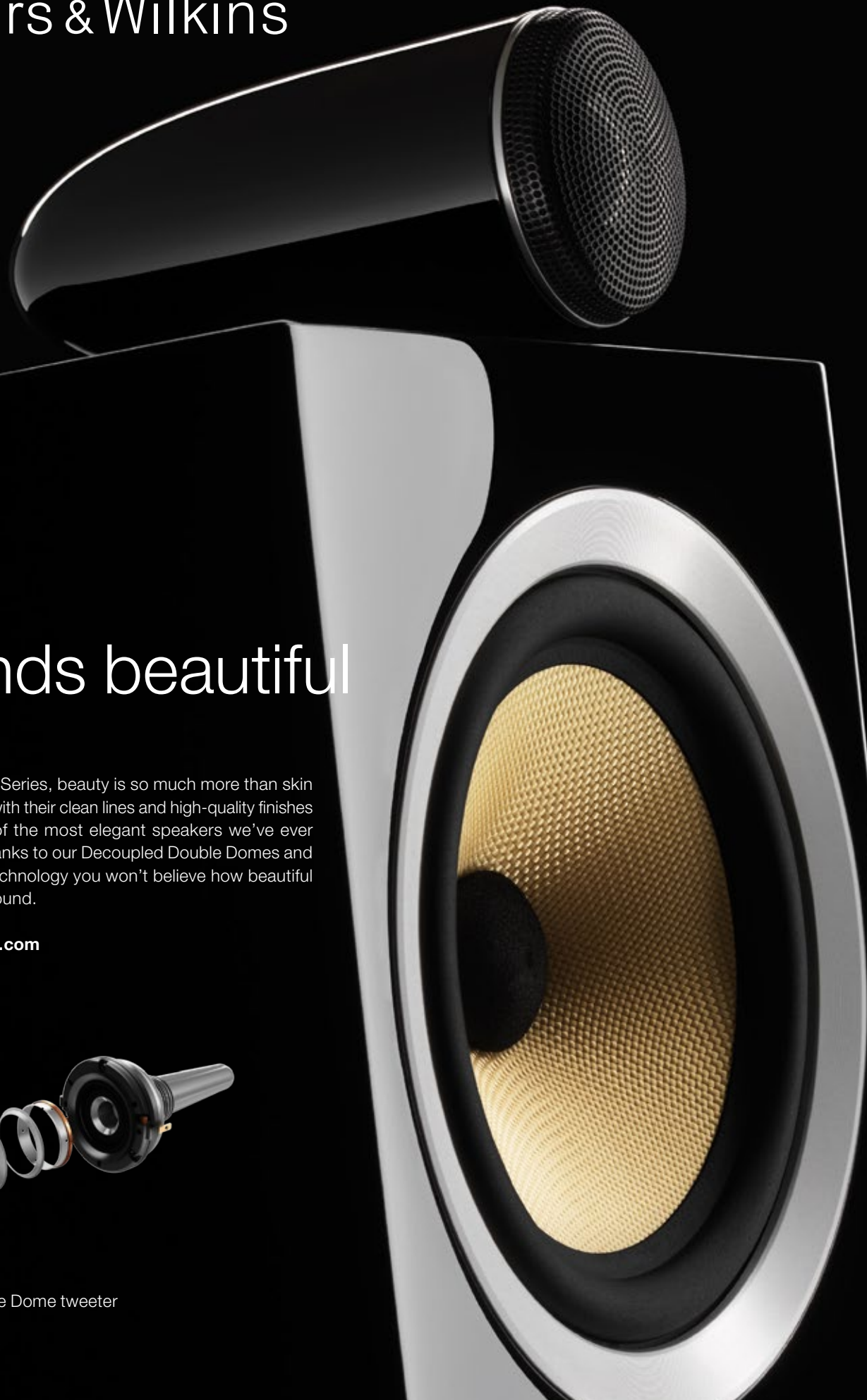
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MUSIC

Songs like “Cripple and the Starfish” and “One Dove” undergo similar transformation, with the players stripping the tunes back to their austere, lovely bones. On record, Hegarty’s music can occasionally come across as overly precious, with the singer handling tracks as delicately as rarified museum artifacts. In these live readings, however, the songs sound far more vital and immediate. “I am very happy, so please hit me,” Hegarty begs on “Cripple and the Starfish,” his voice quivering and wounded. It’s almost impossible to not offer a comforting hug.

Musically, the arrangements tend to be sparse, and most of the songs are appointed with little more than cautious piano and resonant strings. The approach leaves plenty of room for Hegarty to roam, and the singer, whose Viking-esque physique belies the tender, feminine quality of his voice—think Nina Simone lurking in the frame of a six-foot-something androgynous white man—repeatedly delivers.

Throughout, Hegarty effortlessly swings between fare as fragile as Derrick Rose’s ankles (the prayerful “Spiraling,” the elegiac and heartbreaking “Hope There’s Someone”) and more forceful moments like “You Are My Sister,” where he puffs his chest and sings with weather-altering power.



©Photo by Richard Soldier

Songs find Hegarty confronting heartache, discomfort, violence, death, suffering, and, at times, joy. And while he’s tread similar ground before, he’s never sounded this relatable, this approachable, and, frankly, this human. Chalk it up in part to the presence of the female models, whose exposed forms serve as both a musical blueprint and source of inspiration, pushing the singer to leave some blood of his own on the London stage.

—**Andy Downing**

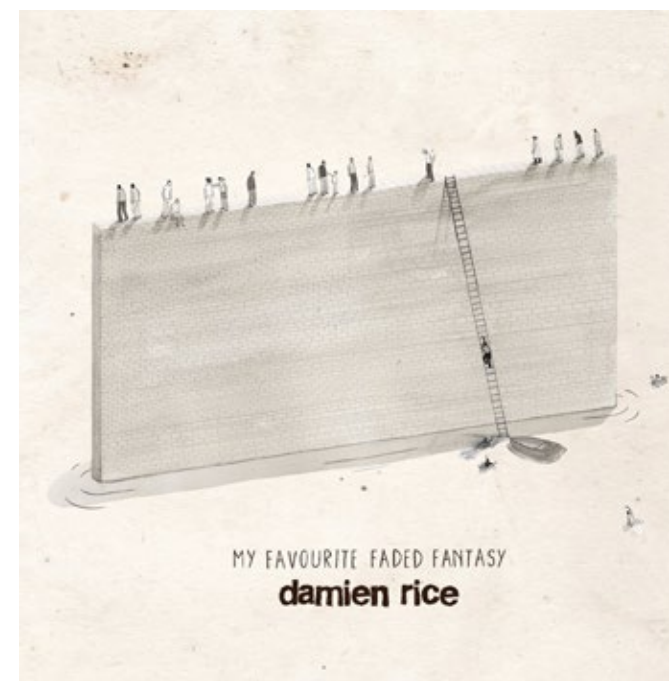


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In the second song on his third album, and first in eight years, Irish vocalist Damien Rice asks listeners to buckle-up. Clocking in at just a hair under 10 minutes, “It Takes a Lot to Know a Man” lays bare the record’s ambitions.

First, there’s Rice, a dusky-voiced singer/songwriter, singing quietly about gender relations. And then there’s the arrangement, a violin-enhanced horror soundtrack of a ballad—a sound that promises a spectacle. At the end of some of the verses, Rice’s vocals overlap to create a ghost-like effect, all while a choir lingers in the background. The whole episode disintegrates near the five-minute mark, at which the listener endures 20-30 seconds of raindrops before the orchestra goes all fire and brimstone.

It’s all built to seem rather important, and Rice does his part to signal significance. “The mother and the child,” he sings, his voice patiently letting go of each syllable in an attempt to further draw the listener in.



Damien Rice

My Favourite Faded Fantasy
Warner Bros., LP or CD

“The muse and the beguiled.” Lyrically, it’s not really a puzzle or all that revealing, as instead of looking inward, Rice comes off as detached. The calculated arrangement, full of digital ticks and symphonic flourishes, likewise tries to draw attention to itself, only to leave the listener out in the cold—or, in this case, soaked in a rain-storm.

Rice’s press story has always made for a grand rock n’ roll show. He’s a hermit, a recluse, and an artist that hates interviews. He regularly slams his record labels, but sold millions worldwide and ran away from it all. He’s also a man with an acoustic guitar that sounds as if he took all the wrong lessons from Radiohead records: Namely, that left turn after left turn plus a lot of noise equals substance.

My Favourite Faded Fantasy is certainly darker and more ex-

perimental than Rice’s previous records. The black-as-night strings and electronic soul of “I Don’t Want to Change You” dig deeper than any of the artists Rice is blamed for influencing, be it David Gray or Ed Sheeran. But this is an effort that never stops telling us how hurt, how damaged, and how serious it is without ever actually showing us or letting us in. References in “I Don’t Want to Change You” pull from religion and nature—there are mangers, waterfalls, and more—but the closing realization that “if love is not for fun then it’s doomed” equates to a shrug-inducing observation that’s not worth the five-and-a-half-minute emotional workout.

Musically, there’s quite a bit of tension throughout these eight songs and 50 minutes, Rice’s first major solo work without bandmate and one-time romantic partner Lisa

Hannigan. While he strays from the coffeehouse anger of some of his earlier work, Rice didn’t trade-up in swapping Hannigan for superstar producer Rick Rubin. The studio legend brings microscopic focus to nearly every sound—the twisted finger-picking of the title track, the panting falsetto on the same—to needlessly add pressure that Rice the songwriter isn’t capable of matching.

In addition, there are some cheap juxtapositions. The warmest song, “The Greatest Bastard,” is also its most crass, with Rice singing “I helped you open out your wings, your legs, and many other things” only to moments later turn out to just be a self-proclaimed bad boy begging for forgiveness. *Like all of My Favourite Faded Fantasy*, it’s drama without a plot worth following.

—**Todd Martens**



Marianne Faithfull
Give My Love To London
 Easy Sound, LP or CD

Marianne Faithfull is celebrating 50 years in the music business, but there was a time when such longevity wasn't a given. It's actually hard to think of a more compelling rock n' roll comeback-cum-transformation story than that belonging to the British native.

Faithfull burst on the scene in the 1960s singing a cover the Rolling Stones' "As Tears Go By" and, for a time, was Mick Jagger's girlfriend. But hard living and a heroin addiction destroyed the waifish warbler. The artist that rose from those ashes was part damaged diva and part devouring goddess, confounding everyone with her 1979 record *Broken English*, a ferocious *cri de coeur* that ranks high among the rock's greatest reinventions.

Since then, Faithfull has released a string of albums that feature her singular scorched-earth alto. Like Leonard Cohen and Emmylou Harris, she's a heavyweight that seemingly only gets better with age. Unfortunately, her 20th studio album, *Give My Love To London*, is not the most cohesive showcase for her talent. Too often, hopscotching arrangements detract from Faithfull's main-event voice. *(continued)*

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MUSIC



Produced by Rob Ellis and Dimitri Tikovoi, and mixed by Flood, the set is packed with notable names—including co-writers Steve Earle, Nick Cave, and Anna Calvi and studio musicians Brian Eno as well as alums from Portishead and the Bad Seeds. Therein lies at least part of the problem. There are too many cooks in the kitchen, resulting in an effort that lacks focus and ranges across the map in too many different directions.

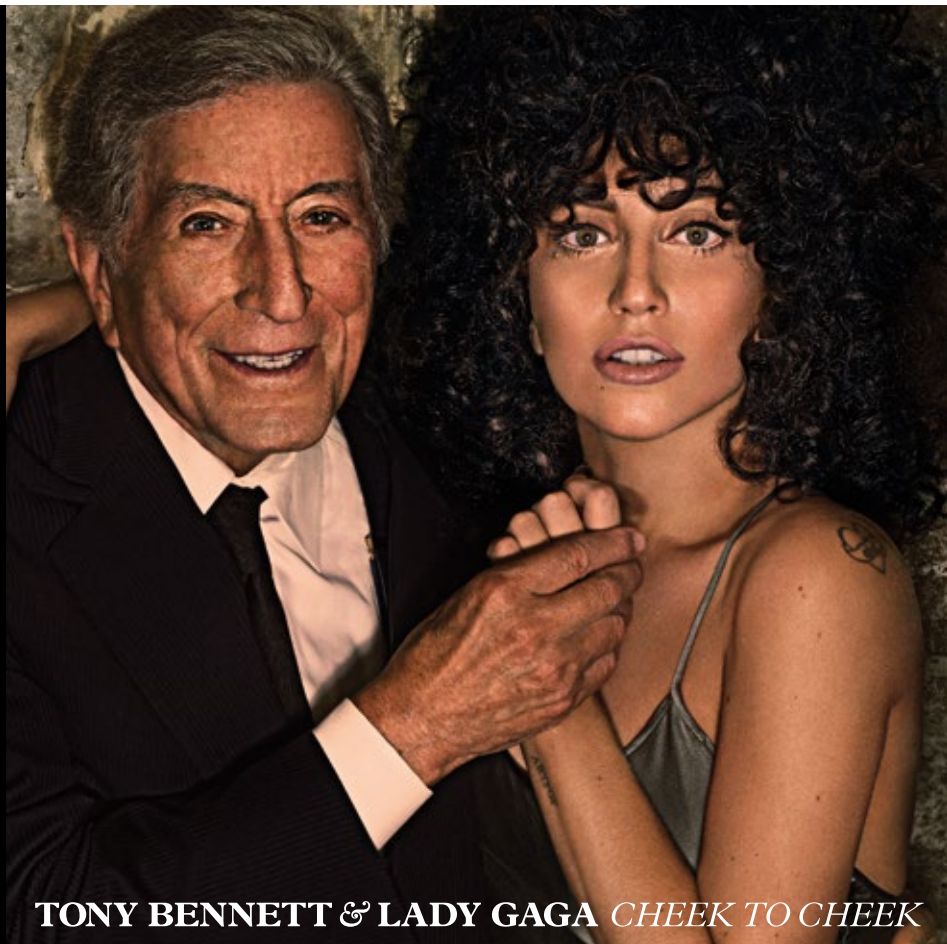
A few songs are great. Others, not so much. That latter category counts the sing-songy title track, written with Earle. Faithfull struggles to shoehorn too many words into a generic melody. Her producers also occasionally submerge the singer in too much studio business. Roger Waters' "Sparrows Will Sing" gets drenched in washes of pretty orchestral pop. Faithfull strikes a ghostly tone, half-singing and half-reciting the words,

but in the end, she's straining against a torrent of sound. On Hoagy Carmichael's "I Get Along Without You Very Well," the producers gild the lily by piling on reverb.

Faithfull is at her best when the studio guys back off from sonic noodling and frame her 100 proof voice in spare settings. The instant classic here is the exquisite and simply rendered folk song "Love More or Less," on which she emotes with touching melancholy. Other highlights include Cave's weighty gothic "Late Victorian Holocaust," and "Mother Wolf," a dark rocker that bristles with menace and righteous anger.

Less is more works best here. When an artist of Faithfull's caliber is present, nobody needs a crowd in the studio.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



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"The jewel runners," raps El-P on the first track of the second album from hip-hop duo Run the Jewels, "will always stay rude." Now that that's out of the way, it's simply a matter of how much abrasion and tension listeners can handle. But like British punk rock band the Clash, which declared, "anger can be power," Run the Jewels are fury with a point of view.

At times, it is thrilling. "Lie, Cheat, Steal" takes a panoramic view of the working class, with Killer Mike's voice rising as he fails to find a money trail worth following. "Who really run the man that say he run this?" he queries. It's not conspiracy-theory ranting, as the brutal soundscapes, buzzing amidst throbbing beats that emerge like drones hot on your tail, make it clear that the is a song about having no way out.

At times, it hints at violence. "Close Your Eyes (and Count to Fuck)" sees Killer Mike and El-P trading verses as if they're taking turns landing left and right hooks. Fashion, religion, the police, and more are just a sampling of the targets, as the track bustles along like a jackhammer being dragged by a fire truck. Rage Against the Machine vocalist Zack De La Rocha drops by on this corporate assault, which finds El-P slamming those that "look good, posing in a centerfold of a crook book."

No, nothing is taken lightly when Killer Mike and El-P, two heavyweights of independent hip-hop, get together. The pair's second go-around as Run the Jewels—El-P produced Killer Mike's politically scathing 2012 album *R.A.P. Music*—continues the duo's tradition of poking, prodding, and hollering at accepted truths. They do it so well, in part, because El-P as a producer is a master of mayhem. The rhythms of "Blockbuster Night Pt. 1" slide and bang like a 2014 makeover of the classic video game "Space Invaders." "All My Life" doesn't pound so much as hover, and "All Due Respect" goes intergalactic just before what could have been a cheerleading routine gets sliced apart.



Run the Jewels

Run the Jewels 2

Mass Appeal, LP or CD

At times, it is topical, and eerily so. "Early" treats police brutality as an everyday occurrence, a causality of living in the wrong part of town. All the players are here—the nagging cops, the bystander recording with a cellphone, and the victim looking on in horror as his son screams out. Grunts and sirens resound in the background, but the feel owes more to that of stunned silence as the song takes a left turn into dreaminess with stretched-out synthesizers and hazy effects.

At times, it is frisky. "Love Again," punctuated by bracing horns that sound born in a subway, channels hip-hop misogyny and then, flips it on its back. Gangsta Boo provides a much-needed female counterpoint, treating the men like disposable toys all while a digital hum snakes underneath. Is the tune about swapping gender roles? A disavowal of male-dominated sexual aggressiveness? There's no right or wrong answer. Run the Jewels live in the space between, and it isn't gray. It's beautifully bleak. —**Todd Martens**



Various Artists
*While No One Was Looking:
 Toasting 20 Years of Bloodshot Records*
 Bloodshot Records, 3LP or 2CD

In the mid 90s, Bloodshot Records felt like the start of a movement. At the time, Nashville was well on its way to what would eventually be a full-fledged makeover into top-40 adult rock, as the likes of Shania Twain and Garth Brooks brought twang—at least a dash of it—into arenas. The latter laid the groundwork for everyone from Taylor Swift, who took the crossover torch straight into dance-pop, to Darius Rucker, the one-time genial 90s bandleader for backyard-rock band Hootie and the Blowfish. Today, Rucker is still doing the same thing, only now it's labeled country.

That Bloodshot came into this landscape in 1994 is all the more admirable. Started by a trio of friends that had held various jobs in the indie music community, from drumming to publicity to promotion, Bloodshot could be viewed as a reaction, a chance for a misfit record label from Chicago to do for country what Nirvana's *Nevermind* did for rock n' roll.

But a revolution cannot be willed, and the niche Bloodshot soon began to fill was given various ill-fighting names, be it alt-country or insurgent country. All of the tags were a roundabout way of saying Bloodshot was the country music that time—and Nashville—had forgotten. Various names linked to the label over the years became stars, often of the cult variety. The distinguished list includes Ryan Adams, Neko Case, Old 97s, Alejandro Escovedo, Justin Townes Earle, and Lydia Loveless, among others. Snapshots of their work, and that of many other musicians, are represented on *While No One Was Looking: Toasting 20 Years of Bloodshot Records*, a compilation that sees other artists covering the Bloodshot stable.

How to connect two decades of Bloodshot's lineup? When it's done right, the best of Bloodshot is rootsy rock n' roll, with no filter, no filler, and often, too much sweat and too much booze. That's not to say it's always rowdy—this is country music, after all—only that Bloodshot likes its artists to build songs with a little elbow grease. "Plenty tough and union made," as Bloodshot regulars the Waco Brothers once put it, or artists out to "kill Saturday night," as another, Robbie Fulks, once sang. With that kind of attitude, it's no surprise that some of the artists who make the biggest (and loudest) impression on Bloodshot's nicely priced (\$17.99) 38-song collection are those with roots in punk. *(continued)*



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MUSICAL ECSTASY

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Nan and Rob from Bloodshot Records

©Photo by Jacob Boll

Foremost among the standouts would be Superchunk, the anchors of venerable indie imprint Merge Records, that adds an electric jolt of bitterness to Adams' "Come Pick Me Up," as well as upstarts Diarrhea Planet, a group that treats the Waco Brothers' "Dry Land" as all high-energy longing. As a celebration of two decades of music from a label whose catalog stretches into the hundreds, *While No One Was Looking* is as fine as anniversary party as one can hope.

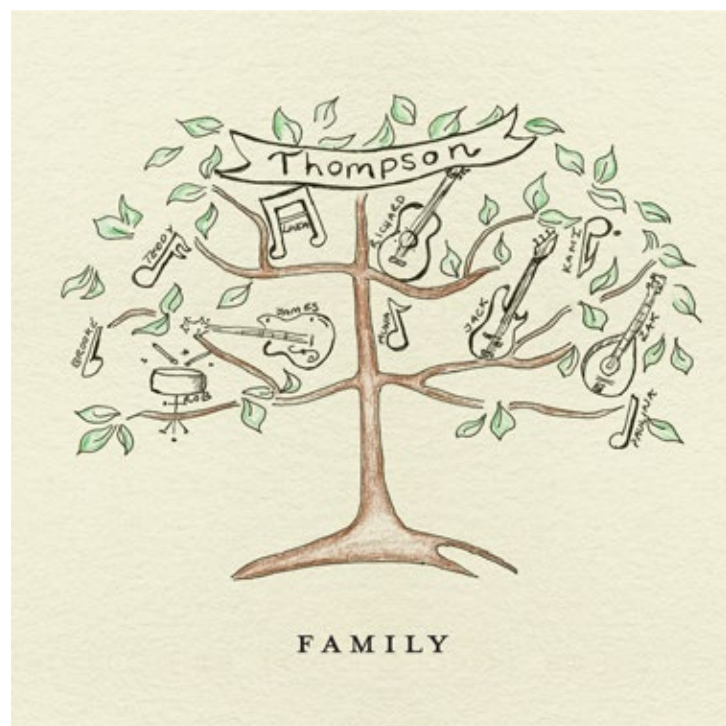
Eclectic compilations can be grab bags of hits and misses, especially a release with a track listing that stretches from folk rockers such as Blitzen Trapper

and Shakey Graves to Interpol drummer Sam Fogarino. But the over-arching accessibility is reflective of Bloodshot's emphasis on songwriting. Or, maybe it's the fact that most artists, many of whom are little known, don't try to get too pretty with the songs.

Still, there are highlights. The always-haunting Handsome Family turn the Bottle Rockets' "\$1000 Car" into a tale of pure comedic cynicism. Split Single, an indie super-group featuring Spoon's Britt Daniel and Jason Narducy of Bob Mould's band, treat Nora O'Connor's "My Backyard" as an empowering anthem for singledom. Country singer/

songwriter Carolyn Mark breaks hearts with Escovedo's "Last to Know," and Ted Leo brings requisite working-class stomp to "Dragging My Own Tombstone," another from the Waco Brothers.

Ultimately, what *While No One Was Looking* indicates is that Bloodshot doesn't actually represent an alternate history. Hard-edged country didn't die, it just went underground, and Bloodshot isn't some sort of attempt by indie rockers to stage a mutiny on the Nashville establishment. Rather, Bloodshot's ambitions are as old as folk itself: It's simply keeping a tradition alive. —**Todd Martens**



Thompson

Family

Fantasy Records/Concord Music Group, CD

Singer-songwriter Teddy Thompson has built a respected music career in his own right, but for *Family*, he gathered together members of his illustrious musical clan. Performing under the collective name Thompson, the impressive crew here includes Teddy's towering parents, British folk-rock legends Richard and Linda Thompson. Also on board are Teddy's younger sister Kami and her husband James Walbourne, his brother Jack, and his nephew Zak Hobbs.

Teddy is the producer and project wrangler for these sessions. He asked his kin to contribute two songs apiece. The results are uniformly moving and cut from a similar cloth. Like the extended McGarrigle-Wainwright-Roche brood, Thompson family members make emotional folk-rock that is wholly their own.

Guitar virtuoso Richard Thompson began his career in Fairport Convention during the 1960s before going solo. He and Linda performed together to critical acclaim until their divorce in 1982. Both have continued their impressive bodies of work. Teddy addresses this legacy in the album's title track. A lovely acoustic track rendered in waltz time, it's an honest and moving assessment of his acclaimed parents and the rewards and burdens of his famous pedigree: "My father is one of the greats to ever step on a stage/My mother has the most beautiful voice in the world/And I am betwixt and between...born to the manor and never quite clamoring free."

Given these are all gifted musicians, it comes as no surprise that, across the board, the playing is superlative. The music leaps out with fresh vitality. Teddy's strong vocals mesh with the walking bass lines and bracing rockabilly-ish beat of "Right."

Kami's "Careful" comes on as a blend of sparkling pop and country-rock inflection. Richard offers up his own biting observations on the jangly and earthy "One Life At a Time": "If you're busy living yours, you won't be living mine."

Linda, meanwhile, is a force of nature, wielding a laser ability to reduce listeners to tears. Piercing like an arrow to the heart, "Bonny Boys" quivers with the concern of a mother sending her children off into the world. "Here you are my bonny boys/You're all dressed up to seize the world and all its toys/I hope it's roses all the way."

Intense, warm, introspective, and accessible, "Family" is a monument to generations of a talented family. Solo and together, these Thompsons know how to strike emotional bone.
—**Chrissie Dickinson**

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The Afghan Whigs in 1993 by D.A. Fleischer

Warning: This review is going to briefly break any hints of objective criticism and momentarily use first-person. It will tell a story about Greg Dulli, the dapper, bar-owning crank that has anchored the on-and-off-again Afghan Whigs since the late 80s. The setting for this brief tale is the El Rey Theatre in Los Angeles, not more than a couple miles from Fountain and Fairfax, an addict's crossroads hangout memorialized/demonized at the midway point on the Afghan Whigs' 1993 masterpiece *Gentlemen*.

With the lights off, the El Rey is the sort of place you'd want to set a cabaret scene if you were filming a black-and-white noir film. The stage is draped in red curtains, which romantically glisten when the chandeliers are illuminated. It's as dank and dirty as any rock club, but like the Afghan Whigs, it cleans up nice, even if no one is fooled into thinking the grime is gone.

There, in the late 90s, a 20-year-old version of this writer stood holding a CD jewel case of *Gentlemen*, pleading a case to security that I needed to meet Dulli. The singer, I reasoned, could help me win back my ex. Dulli, the cad, was her rock n' roll dream man, and even in his late 20s, when *Gentlemen* was recorded, had a robust albeit scratched voice that was accelerating into the shadows of cigar smoke.

He also had a way with words. "She wants love," he sings on the seducer's strut "Be Sweet, "and I still want to fuck." Only Dulli doesn't say that last word so it come off as tactless. He lets air take over the middle syllable, as if it hurts to say it, and as if he has no choice. Guitars zigzag like drunks in a saloon. And wait, was that a piano, or the sound of bottles breaking?

The Afghan Whigs were her favorite band, not mine, and I desperately wanted to understand how this misanthrope had a hold over her. Was it the soul? There's plenty of soul in the Afghan Whigs. Recently, the likes of Usher and Van Hunt have played with the group, and Rhino's just-released two-disc collection *Gentlemen at 21* contains a bracing cover of James Carr's strutting rhythm & blues classic "The Dark End of the Street." If I had heard it at the time, it would have provided some clues to Dulli's appeal, as he rarely sounds as relaxed and as comfortable as he does when he coos "in the shadows, where we belong."

That night at the El Rey, however, what I really needed was Dulli to give me an autograph—and maybe, if I were lucky, vouch for me in his signature. She'd laugh, take me back, or at least have a conversation. The comeback story needs to start somewhere, right? Security seemed amused. I was told to hang around. An hour went by. Just wait, they told me. Eventually, I was whisked to the after-party, where Dulli, surrounded by empty glasses, a guy, and an older woman, waved me over. He asked me something, I don't remember what, and I told him I wanted to win back my ex.

"Can you sign this for her? Put in a good word for me?" Dulli took it, asked the waitress for a pen, and asked me where she was, why wasn't she here. I said, "Right now? She's at school in



The Afghan Whigs
Gentlemen at 21
Rhino, 180g LP or 2CD

Columbia, Missouri." Dulli wrote, "Nicole, meet me in St. Louis, Greg." No last name. He laughed, and handed me back the liner notes. To this day, this is what I remember most about Dulli. Ask the man to do you a favor, and instead, he'll flirt with the girl you like.

Then it started to make sense. In the past two decades since *Gentlemen* was released, there's been much written how the Afghan Whigs approach relationships at their most macabre. Not bloody, at least not always, just emotionally wrenching and, more importantly, painfully knowing. There's the redemptive piano that contrasts with Rick McCollum's serrated guitars on "What Jail is Like," and the shrewd snarl as Dulli sings, "If I inflict the pain, then baby only I can comfort you," on the hypnotic "When We Two Parted," where those same guitars of McCollum sound like birds circling overhead.

You can go track by track. How about "My Curse," where

drummer Steve Earle's jazzy groove scores opening verses in which Dulli is haunted by the smell of a lover's perfume. What follows is nearly six minutes of relationship theater—"kiss me," "scourge me," "curse softly to me"—and you don't know whether to help or run, all as the guitars get vague and the piano comes undone. Dulli doesn't sing it on the album. Those duties are handled with fire by Scrawl singer Marcy Mays. An outtake here presents an early version, one in which Dulli sounds like he's finally been broken. Even the beast has a heart.

By now, I've practically forgotten about the girl. You, reader, probably have, too. The autograph, which I had framed, worked. At least for a bit. Maybe she liked me. Maybe she wanted to be closer to the singer she idolized. Or maybe, like Dulli, deep down she knew all the best love stories have a little torment.

—**Todd Martens**

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With each

release, Scott Walker ventures further from the polished 60s pop of his former group the Walker Brothers, plunging deep into dark, avant-garde sonic torture chambers. Considering the subterranean nature of his late-career explorations, it was only a matter of time before he crossed paths with drone-metal pioneers Sunn O))), a band whose black, bleak output stands in stark contrast to its light-producing namesake. Stephen O'Malley and Greg Anderson, the core anchoring the black-hole Sunn O))), provide an expectedly nightmarish backdrop for Walker's out-there meditations, building vibrating nests of ominous, down-tuned riffage that spread like thick, inky tar.



Scott Walker and Sunn O)))

Soused
4AD, 2LP or CD

At the age of 71, and after logging more than five decades as a recording artist, Walker has fully embraced the I-don't-give-a-damn-what-people-think-of-me stage of his career. He employs his still-killer voice as an operatic art project of sorts, turning melodies inside-out rather than charting a more predictable course. By comparison, the avant, mechanized explorations of his 1995 album *Tilt* now almost sound like the singer playing it straight.

Soused, in turn, rarely walks a straight line. The album-opening "Brando" sets the sludgy tone, with Sunn O))) constructing a droning guitar bed that crackles like low-burning coals as Walker lets loose tortured, emotive lines like "a beating would do me a world of good." The scene is interrupted only by the steady, sublime snap of a bullwhip wielded by circus performer Peter Gamble—an admittedly ridiculous touch that somehow works.

Elsewhere, Walker continues to explore familiar topics, be it governmental overreach (the mother hiding her children from "the goon from the

MUSIC

Stasi" on "Herod 2014," a song that comes on like Sunn O)))'s attempt to recreate the feel of a long, dread-filled night); isolation (the deeply unsettling "Lullaby," which could traumatize children if used as advertised); and the inherent cruelty of mankind, which surfaces everywhere from "Brando's" bullwhip-fueled beatings to "Bull," a theatrical cut that centers on a crucifixion.

As with *Lulu*, the late Lou Reed's much-maligned collaboration with Metallica, at times the ridiculousness of the lyrics upend the proceedings. To be fair, however, there's nothing quite so egregious as Reed's *Penthouse Forum*-esque outbursts ("I swallow your sharpest curdle like a colored man's dick") or James Hetfield repeatedly howling "I am the table" like the world's least-convincing character actor. Still, Walker's words occasionally come on like those of an English doctoral candidate trying a bit too hard to impress. "The nurseries and crèches are heaving with lush lice," he mews on one number, like a Cormac McCarthy wannabe.

The occasions on which Walker dials it back ever so slightly prove leagues more effective. Such is the case on "Fetish," a buzzsaw of a track where the singer delivers oblique poetry—"He feels it tugging and clinching/Hears it rustling and rising"—against a menacing backdrop that mimics the pull of his words, the latter shifting, moving, and receding like a stalker trying to hold to the shadows. It's a fitting visual for a collaboration between uncompromising artists content to exist on the darkest fringes, and a high point on a deeply unsettling album ideally suited to winter's deep-bone chill. —Andy Downing


Foo Fighters

Sonic Highways
RCA Records, LP or CD

Congratulations, Foo Fighters. You are the first rock n' roll band in history to sell an infomercial masquerading as a documentary series to a major cable network. At least the feat brings something new to discuss when it comes to *Sonic Highways*, the Foo Fighters' eighth studio album and sixth consecutive work to sound almost exactly like its predecessor (1995's self-titled debut had a little rough-around-the-edges spontaneity and something-to-prove momentum).

The good news: Dave Grohl, the affable TV personality, today is more exciting than Dave Grohl, the affable rock n' roll bandleader. *Sonic Highways*/"Sonic Highways" is a combination album and HBO series in which the Foo Fighters explore the musical histories of eight different cities, including Chicago, New Orleans, Seattle, and more. Then, as either a homework assignment or a gimmick, Grohl and bandmates Taylor Hawkins, Nate Mendel, Chris Shiflett, and Pat Smear write a song supposedly based on what they learned. Watching Grohl interact with cantankerous Chicago producer Steve Albini—the opinionated studio technician who worked on Nirvana's *In Utero*—or happy-go-lucky Nashville personality Dolly Parton brings a much-welcome sense of unpredictability to the Foo Fighters' canon. *(continued)*



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The same cannot be said for the album. It also reveals a rather disappointing truth: You can put the Foo Fighters in eight different cities and with eight different artists—Cheap Trick’s Rick Nielsen in Chicago, country star Zac Brown in Nashville, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band in Nashville—and while the setting and cast may change, the assembly line depressingly remains the same. An optimist may say that few rock n’ roll bands are this consistent, as *Sonic Highways* contains more of the familiar loud/soft dynamics that Grohl has been professionally working out

for the better part of the past two decades.

A realist may wonder if the Foo Fighters are out of ideas, as the eight songs on *Sonic Highways* plod too long and build too slow. “Something from Nothing,” apparently inspired by Chicago (see the references to the Great Chicago Fire and Muddy Waters), has riffs that teeter like a rocking chair, hinting at a hard-rock breakout that takes forever to arrive and then, puzzlingly, includes a funky bass line. “I Am a River” is a string-enhanced hard rock ballad begging for a Grammy. “In the Clear” works

overtime to dress-up a rather thin melody—horns from the Preservation Hall Jazz Band here, a chorus of “whoa-ohs” over there.

What we’re left with is a series that laudably salutes a number of greats, and an album that doesn’t deserve to stand in their shadows.

—**Todd Martens**



The Kinks

Muswell Hillbillies (Legacy Edition)
Legacy/RCA, 2CD/1DVD

From the group's origins in early 60s London pubs to its unlikely '80s incarnation as arena rockers, the Kinks were always oddballs. And they were at their best when they may have been at their most isolated, especially on *Muswell Hillbillies*.

While the album's songs and Ray Davies' expressions of nostalgia for an imagined past sound as striking today as they did 43 years ago, how *Muswell Hillbillies* reflects the Kinks' estrangement from its contemporaries, as well as from the band's previous work, is equally remarkable.

This celebration of older traditions arrived just as glam rockers were starting to apply their makeup. And while Black Sabbath were cranking up the kind of effects that began when guitarist Dave Davies' slashed up his amp in 1964, by the early 70s, Kinks performances included a horn section and accordion. But the Davies brothers were also too quirky to fit in with roots-oriented bands that had sprung up across the Atlantic.

Muswell Hillbillies stands the group's first album for RCA and included relatively new bassist John Dalton and keyboardist John Gosling. But it also marked a continuation of Ray Davies' provocative conceptual ideas, which began with The Kinks are the *Village Green Preservation Society* three years earlier and continued through 1975's *Schoolboys In Disgrace*. If his lyrics revolved around big themes—the decline of British imperialism, bureaucracy replacing village idyll—he went for wry humor over bombast.

The music on this album serves as the ideal complement to such sensibility. On the opening track, "20th Century Man," that pointed understatement comes across through Dave Davies' acoustic slide playing, which warrants as much attention as his earlier electric innovations. His brother's vocal shifts convey a mix of fear and contempt with contemporary culture and institutions.

But while Ray Davies' plea to build a new world based on fantasies of the past or wanting to live in a movie Western ("Oklahoma U.S.A.") reverberate, the band's sense of empathy is expressed through a mix of early 20th century rags, Tin Pan Alley, and pre-World War II British dance halls—all of which are a tribute to vanishing generations. This approach is also key in how Gosling's different keyboards and the horn section (The Mike Cotton Sound) drive "Acute Schizophrenia Paranoia Blues" and "Alcohol." Drummer Mick Avory also deserves more credit for gently elevating the tempo on both "Here Come The People In Grey" and the title track.

The *Legacy Edition* reissue includes eight additional tracks and a radio ad. Some, like "Lavender Lane," had been previously unavailable in the United States. With its highlight on Gosling's organ, an alternate version of "Uncle Son" sounds better than the take on the original *Muswell Hillbillies*. A bonus DVD presents a few Kinks performances from 1972. These gigs are fairly low-key but also include "Waterloo Sunset," which remains more wonderful than worlds Davies could have ever invented. —**Aaron Cohen**

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MORE RENEGADE THAN BEFORE

A Conversation With Producer and Musician Daniel Lanois

By Andy Downing

Daniel Lanois titled his new album *Flesh and Machine*, and the music frequently traverses that ground between the two. Throughout, Lanois, a skilled solo artist best known for producing landmark records by the likes of Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and U2, combines acoustic instruments with electronic processing that gives the heavily textured tracks a warped, other-worldly feel. Even when voices appear, they rarely sound human, the musician applying them in the mix like one more paint color smeared on the canvas.

It's possible to hear the influence of the ambient recordings he laid to tape alongside Brian Eno in the early 80s. Reached by phone for a conversation at his Ontario home in late November, Lanois even admits those albums, *On Land* and *Apollo: Atmospheres and Soundtracks*, helped inform a blossoming sense of creative freedom.

"At that time, [Eno] decided he did not need to be in a pop band to make music, which is much what I'm going through now," says Lanois, 63. "He went to what he saw as a pure form, and isn't it nice when you find that in your work? That's the new Daniel Lanois: Still driven by quality, but more renegade than before."



©Photo by David Leyes

***Flesh and Machine* is an ideal title for the new record considering you really blur the line between the two.**

Yeah, I must finally be admitting I'm a studio rat but I still love people as well [laughs].

Was that a difficult realization for you to reach?

You know, I've always made an effort to hide the sutures of my work so I could present a perfectly formed little baby, but I like that there are a few risks taken this time around where the technology is so evident.

What inspired you to let some of those seams show?

I think I've just come into a whole new meadow of freedom. On this record I went back to the values I was operating with on those records I made with Brian Eno, where we weren't pop-song driven. We were just trying to make something as beautiful and elevating as possible. By going back to that I was able to feel the same sense of courage, and to be brave about this direction and realize what I love about records is when they take me on a journey.

Are you familiar with the guitarist Chris Forsyth?

I'm not, no.

I interviewed him recently, and he spoke about pushing his music to the point where you could see where the edges are, and that's something I really hear on this album.

That's a nice way to describe it, yeah, to push the boundaries. We have so many great years of rock n' roll under our belt...but we still owe it to ourselves to challenge form, really. You have to push the boundaries and see what else exists out there. I wake up every morning thinking that's part of my job.

What's the last piece of music you encountered that felt new or alien to you?

To be honest, there's not a lot we've been listening to. We actually shut the whole sound system down because we decided we wanted to be part of the cultural revolution that embraces silence. Have you ever been anywhere, ever, that didn't have music? Maybe someone in the arctic, once. Or the desert. I always had this back and forth with Brian Eno, and he'd say, "What every city needs is a quiet club where you can go in and converse with your friends in a quiet way." Every table would have a chessboard. We're starting the quiet club wherever we go, so you don't always have to be bombarded.

There's no conversing on this album, either. Even the vocals serve purely as a textural element.

The idea with this was to go the source material, take samples and then manipulate them and put them back into the track in the appropriate harmonic position. *(continued)*

That's why it sounds a little out of body, and sometimes you don't know if you're hearing a human or an animal, like on "Sioux Lookout," for example. I'm not sure where that takes the listener, because

I might be getting a bit too mystical here, but it's jumped on me a few times where I felt something had spoken to me, and I knew I should go a specific direction.

sometimes it sounds like a village chant and other times it sounds like a wild animal. Even though there are no lyrics on this album, I wanted there to be some sense of a universal language, where anyone anywhere could be transported.

Did you grow up fascinated by technology? Were you the kid taking apart the radio and the toaster?

[Laughs] My brother Bob was the one taking apart the toaster and the car. I was always interested in operating the equipment. We started a studio when we were kids. By the time I was 12 I had a recorder at home, so we were constantly fiddling with equipment. My brother was the scientist, and I got the musical gift. We never went to school for it. It was all just trial and error. That's where the madness started. We didn't know what we were doing, and the interfacing of our equipment was not manufacturer recommended, so early on we hit on a few things you would only bump up on by disobeying the manual. We didn't mind breaking the rules, though, because we never fully understood them to begin with.

Do you find different things inspire you to create as you get older?

Well what's happened is I've come across a new wave of courage and purpose. I've sat in that

[producer's] chair my whole life making records for other people. Hey man, I'm

a French-Canadian kid from small-town Canada, and the next thing I know I'm working with Bob Dylan and U2 and Peter Gabriel—these very established artists I grew up with. And in some ways, even though I was in the fast lane, I was still the insecure little kid sitting in that chair. I will not ever again walk on shells. That's a new bravado that's come upon me. I've always been lucky enough to feel the force somehow. I call it the force. I might be getting a bit too mystical here, but it's jumped on me a few times where I felt something had spoken to me, and I knew I should go a specific direction. I think anyone who has talent feels that at a certain point. It's something that lives outside education or business. Not to put myself in the prophetic seat, but to have the capacity to receive information that says, "I will provide you with...a glimpse into the unknown, and now it's up to you to do something about it."

How much of that new wave of courage stemmed from the motorcycle accident in 2010? I gather that was a fairly transformative incident.

(continued)



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There's no doubt about it, if you come to death you readjust your values pretty quick. But that's not the only thing, of course. I've noticed in my time chapters last five to seven years, a chapter being a specific time of devotion. I have fond memories of my ambient music-making chapter with Eno from 1979 to 84, for example. We won't make those records again, because they

he moved to ambient music. He got hit pretty bad, and his skull was fractured. Recovering in the hospital there was classical music being played very softly, so he only heard the crescendos and nothing else. He thought there was something sweet about the rise and the disappearance of it, and it became part of this music made of randomness, and we embraced that.

What a compliment, and it means so much to me. I won't let go until the music reaches that point of power. It's waiting for that invisible moment most will miss, where the artist jumped a little higher on the trampoline than expected. It's just that little moment of something special, and it's my job to make sure we catch it. It's a very difficult thing to talk about, because no textbook will teach it to you

Anyone I've worked with has been excited about a given angle at a particular time, and my job was to embrace the angle and build some kind of vehicle for them to ride in on the back of.

stand for what we stood for at that time, and you can't go back. You never know if you're in a chapter or not until it's gone by. I've been lucky to have been involved in a few chapters or a few scenes, and it's after the work is done you realize, "Oh, there was something going on here we were a part of." And I'm sensing that right now. I feel a wave of freedom and a wave of expression coming over me.

You've mentioned Eno a couple of times. When people discuss him he's almost portrayed as this alien creature. What was your impression of him when you first connected?

I worked with Eno after he put the Roxy Music costumes away [laughs]. He was wearing sensible English walking shoes. Brian had been through an accident at that time. That's part of the reason

Time and again in your life you seem to cross paths with these people I'd describe as seekers: Dylan, Peter Gabriel, Neil Young. What is it about these searching types to which you're drawn?

Well, all of those people you mentioned are interested in responding to what they're going through in a given time. Anyone I've worked with has been excited about a given angle at a particular time, and my job was to embrace the angle and build some kind of vehicle for them to ride in on the back of. Of course we all wanted to make masterpieces, and we did our best to do that.

In *Chronicles*, Dylan wrote this about you: "He seemed like the kind of cat who, when he works on something, he did it like the fate of the world hinged on its outcome."

and no school will embrace it. You have to experience it. It's seeing a crack of light under the door, and realizing the potential in something that just flew by. I need to earmark that one little spot, and if I'm right—and my intuition has served me well—you keep on it until you see the excitement of a room hitting the point of strike, and that's when you snap the picture. That's where the magic lives. ●

FEATURE

The Ultimate Portable Speaker

BOWERS AND WILKINS T7

By Jeff Dorgay



FEATURE



Listening to Bryan Ferry's recent release through the T7, it hits me. Bowers and Wilkins has finally outdone Apple. The fit, finish, quality *and* packaging exceed everything I've come to know and love from the Cupertino giant. Like Apple, B&W completely understands that in order for a product like this to be fully integrated into your life, it needs to be seamless in every way—and the T7 succeeds brilliantly. You'd expect one of these to be in a Grammy award ceremony gift bag.

An iPad like quick start guide is included, but setup is as easy as pairing a phone with your car's audio system. Plug it in, turn it on, hit the Bluetooth button on top of the T7, enter the code in your device's Bluetooth menu and go. It's that quick and that easy to enjoy music on the T7. Those with non-Bluetooth devices can connect to the T7 via the analog mini jack on the rear panel, though this does take away from the compact ethos of the device. Just for giggles, we hooked up a VPI Nomad turntable, going from the mini headphone jack out on the Nomad to the T7 and it made for a pretty cool, impromptu record spinning session. *(continued)*

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PASS

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Oscar Wilde



Xs 300: Dual chassis monoblock
Xs 150: Dual chassis monoblock
Xs Preamp: Dual chassis preamp
Xs Phono: Dual chassis phonopreamp

FEATURE



Streaming 16/44.1 content via Tidal through the T7 provides the highest quality playback, yet streaming 320kb/sec MP3s from various streaming provider isn't all that bad either—the T7 does have enough resolution to tell the difference. Fortunately, the T7 uses the latest aptX Bluetooth drivers for the best sound possible. Unfortunately Apple isn't using this Bluetooth protocol yet, so you'll get even better sound from your Android phone or other device so equipped.

With 12 watts per channel, the internal class-D amplifiers power a pair of bespoke 2-inch drivers with a pair of square, auxiliary passive bass radiators that produce ample low frequency output, especially in light of the T7s diminutive size.

This can be augmented somewhat when put on a tabletop or on the corner of room, to pick up additional room gain. Brad Roberts's deep baritone on the classic Crash Test Dummies track "mmm mmm mmm mmm" is easily convincing with plenty of weight to adequately convey his quirky vocal style.

The T7 does have some limitations, but they are to be expected with such a diminutive enclosure. You won't be playing Iron Maiden at earsplitting levels, but Pat Metheny at a moderate level will thrill you. Kept within reasonable limits, the T7 is impressive, throwing a large soundfield into the room. Fortunately, battery life isn't a limitation. We can confirm the claimed 18 hour battery life,

so the T7 should outlast any party you can throw.

The only quandary facing the potential T7 owner is the price, at \$349 it is a premium product and priced thusly, leaving you with the ultimate question: supreme portability or the ability to play bigger and louder. If you want B&W quality and ease of operation in a tiny package that you can put in a suitcase and take with you wherever you are, the T7 is unmatched. However, those really wanting to rock the house and have the additional counter space to do so will be better served with a B&W Zeppelin for \$399—but you can't take it with you easily. I know I want one.

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2014's Best Rock Box and Multi-Disc Sets

By Bob Gendron

Packaged media may be on the decline, but an assortment of box sets issued during 2014 again prove that listeners opting only for downloads and streaming continue to miss out on more than high-quality sound. While many labels now realize that such releases need to feature an amalgamation of compelling music, excellent visuals, deluxe packaging, sought-after rarities, in-depth focus, and insightful liner notes—not to mention affordability—multiple sets, including the colossally overpriced second volume of *The Rise and Fall of Paramount Records*, opt for exoticism that generates short-lived buzz yet falls short in terms of practicality and repeat listenability. And still tens of other multi-disc releases either exclusively targeted an esoteric fan base or resorted to cheap content recycling that resembled early, outdated box-set releases from the late 1980s.

Chaff aside, many music lovers would like to own every box set manufactured. They're cool, and serve as an ultimate expression of fandom and seriousness. But a majority of record buyers have limited funds and time. In choosing this year's best sets, and deciding to omit the titles those you should ignore, we concentrate on high value as well as longevity potential. Like go-to studio albums, box sets should warrant interest for years to come and not simply set on a shelf as decorative pieces.

In addition to the sets covered below, the following titles previously featured in *TONEAudio* during the past eleven months come equally recommended: Bedhead *Bedhead 1992-1998*; Michael Bloomfield *From His Head to His Heart to His Hands*; Super Deluxe Editions of *Led Zeppelin I, II, and III* (as well as *IV* and *Houses of the Holy*); and Johnny Winter *True to the Blues: The Johnny Winter Story*.



David Bowie

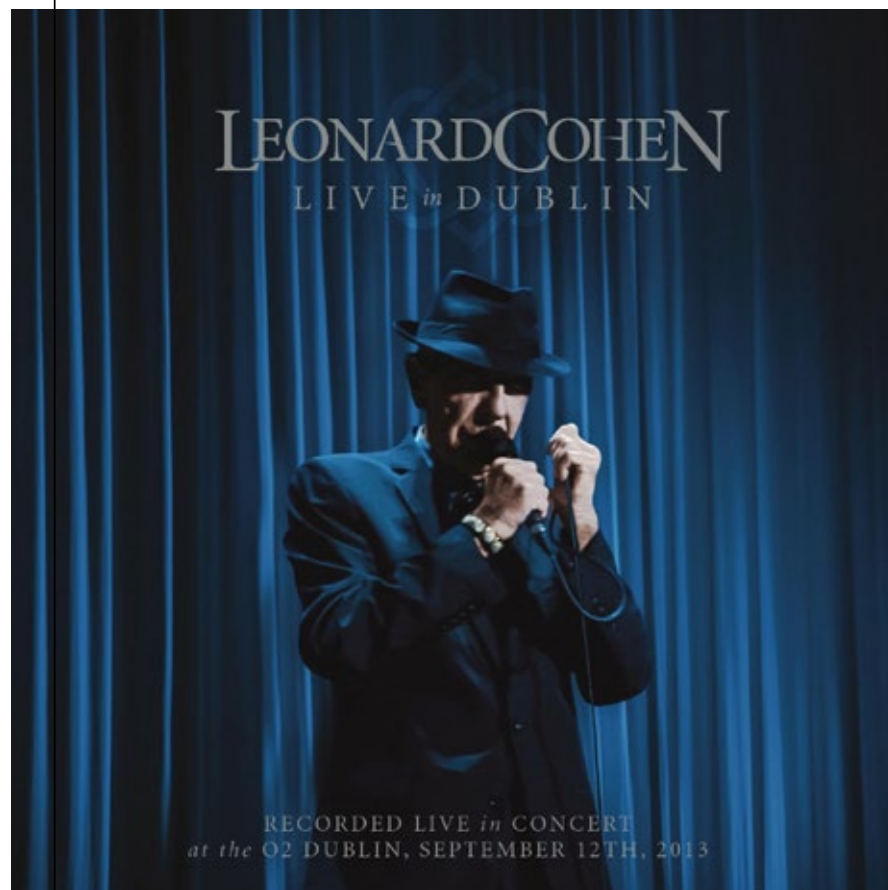
Nothing Has Changed
Columbia/Legacy, 3CD

The 49-track *Nothing Has Changed* overshadows previous David Bowie compilations by way of career-spanning breadth and ingenious organization that challenges listeners to view the sonic chameleon anew—no small feat given the familiarity of the Thin White Duke's fare. Nearly all of the requisite hits are here, but what really makes this triple-disc set a worthy endeavor is that it begins with the present (Bowie's brand-new "Sue (Or In a Season of Crime)") and ends with distant past (his somewhat obscure debut single, "Liza Jane"). By reversing the typical chronological order most anthologies follow, containing surprise arcana, and spanning every phase of Bowie's solo output—including 2013's winning *The Next Day* and still-underrated work from the 2000s—the compilation presents the singer in yet another, entirely different light.

Leonard Cohen

Live In Dublin
Sony/Legacy, 3CD/1DVD

What more can possibly be gleaned from Leonard Cohen's odds-defying, twilight-of-his-career tours after the release of 2009's transcendent *Live In London*? Much, as evidenced by the equally transfixing *Live In Dublin*. Recorded five years later than its live predecessor on September 12, 2013, this 30-song set finds the then-79-year-old singing with the expertise, rhythm, and poise of a vintage-era jazz crooner. Cohen's deep, craggy voice is huskier than on *Live In London*, and his pacing slightly slower, yet his rapport with his virtuosic band and soulful backing singers stronger. Given he issued another spectacular studio album in 2014 (*Old Ideas*), Cohen can't be ruled out from returning to the road. However, from the vocalist's old-school Sinatra-like phrasing to the culminating rendition of "Save the Dance for Me" and sense of finality that wafts through much of the performances, one gets the feeling *Live In Dublin* serves as Cohen's last stage bow. That we get to hear—and see—it all befits the classiness of an artist whose consummate skill, songwriting, and passion won't again be experienced anytime soon.

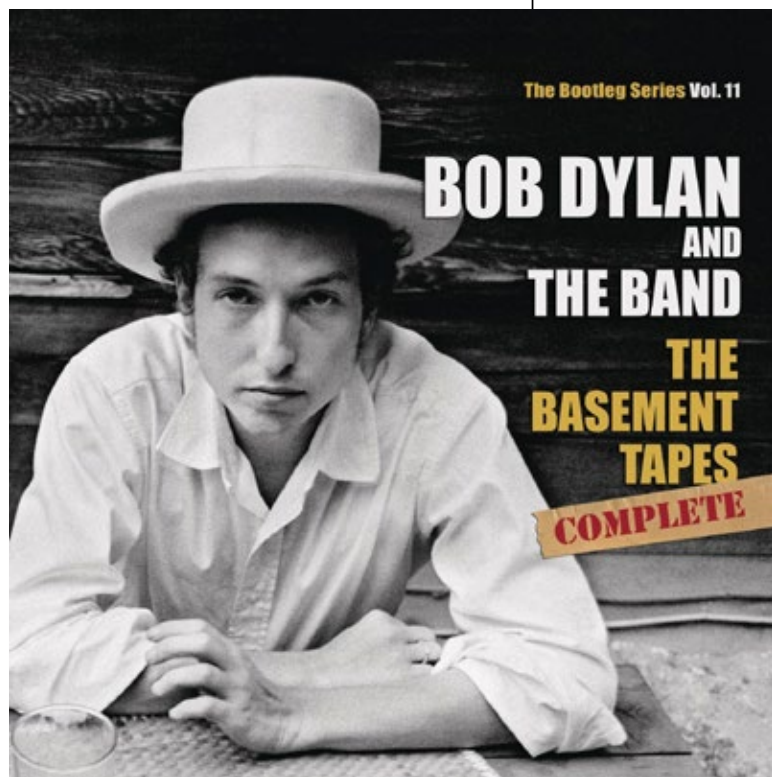


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Bob Dylan and the Band

The Basement Tapes Complete:
The Bootleg Series Vol. 11
 Columbia/Legacy, 6CD

Bob Dylan and the Band never intended what soon became dubbed “The Basement Tapes” to be heard outside their inner circle. Yet shortly after their recording during the summer of 1967—a period in which Dylan recovered from a motorcycle accident, retreated from the public, and enjoyed the company of musicians equally enthused about taking stabs at stripped-down originals and down-home, rustic songs largely lost to time and circumstance—the sessions gave birth to the bootleg industry. It’s likely no performances have been illegally copied and sold more times than these captured via loose, convivial interplay by the Bard and the Band. Even those in possession of the underground *A Tree With Roots* collection don’t have everything on the seminal *The Basement Tapes Complete*—138 tracks largely captured on Garth Hudson’s reel-to-reel tape machine, 117 previously unreleased in official form, nearly every one speaking to what Greil Marcus famously deemed “the old, weird America.” Inseparable from one other, the tunes and band channel an otherworldly innocence, mythological coziness, freedom, and spirit that modern technology appears to have all but made impossible to witness again. Literal books have been penned about the music (start with the liner notes, then move to Marcus’ *Invisible Republic* for more) so what matters most here is the sound. Producer Steve Berkowitz and company did everything right, restoring the music sans overdubs (opposite the way it’s presented on the original, polished, 16-track 1975 *The Basement Tapes* album) and leaving it stand as among the catchiest, unbound material ever made by legends.



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MUSIC

William Onyeabor

William Onyeabor

Luaka Bop, 180g 4LP and 180g
5LP or 9CD

Arriving on the heels of last year's warmly embraced *Who Is William Onyeabor?* compilation, specialty label Luaka Bop goes whole-hog with analog and digital sets that chronicle all the albums the mysterious Nigerian cult figure released between 1977 and 1985. For the initiated, Onyeabor's appeal partially relates to his prompt decision in the mid-1980s to quit music in favor of devout Christianity and insistence to let the past live in the past. But there's no denying the inventiveness and persuasiveness of his electro-funk dance cocktails—unique aural blends of analog synths, African percussion, off-kilter rhythms, hypnotic melodies, trance-inducing psychedelic grooves, unfussy production, space-age textures, disco accents, and the occasional political lyric. So while the mysteriousness surrounding Onyeabor's biographical details and continued reclusiveness make for entertaining speculation, the visionary's music lingers long after his bizarre story is told. Still relatively unknown in his home country and in America, Onyeabor is the unlikely recipient of 2014's most irresistibly curious box sets.





Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-1959
Dust-to-Digital, 2CDs

The slave-labor prison camp Parchman Farm remains one of the ugliest chapters in 20th century American history. Folklorist, archivist, and historian visited the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman on three different occasions, always armed with a reel-to-reel tape deck and, for his final visit in 1959, a camera. This striking 44-track set of work songs, chain-gang blues, and field hollers exist as examples of what Lomax correctly said is “a vivid reminder of a system of social control and forced labor that has endured in the South for centuries” as well as sobering lessons of inconceivable resilience, spirit, and humanism. Incredibly, the soul-affirming music on *Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-1959* plays second fiddle to a 124-page hardcover book containing 77 stunning black-and-white photographs and three engrossing essays. Collectors might note that the latter and 32 of the songs were included on previous releases, yet everything from Dust-to-Digital’s top-notch packaging to Lomax’s images to the new remastering mutes any concerns of duplication.



Soundgarden

Echo of Miles: Scattered Tracks Along the Path
A&M, 3CD

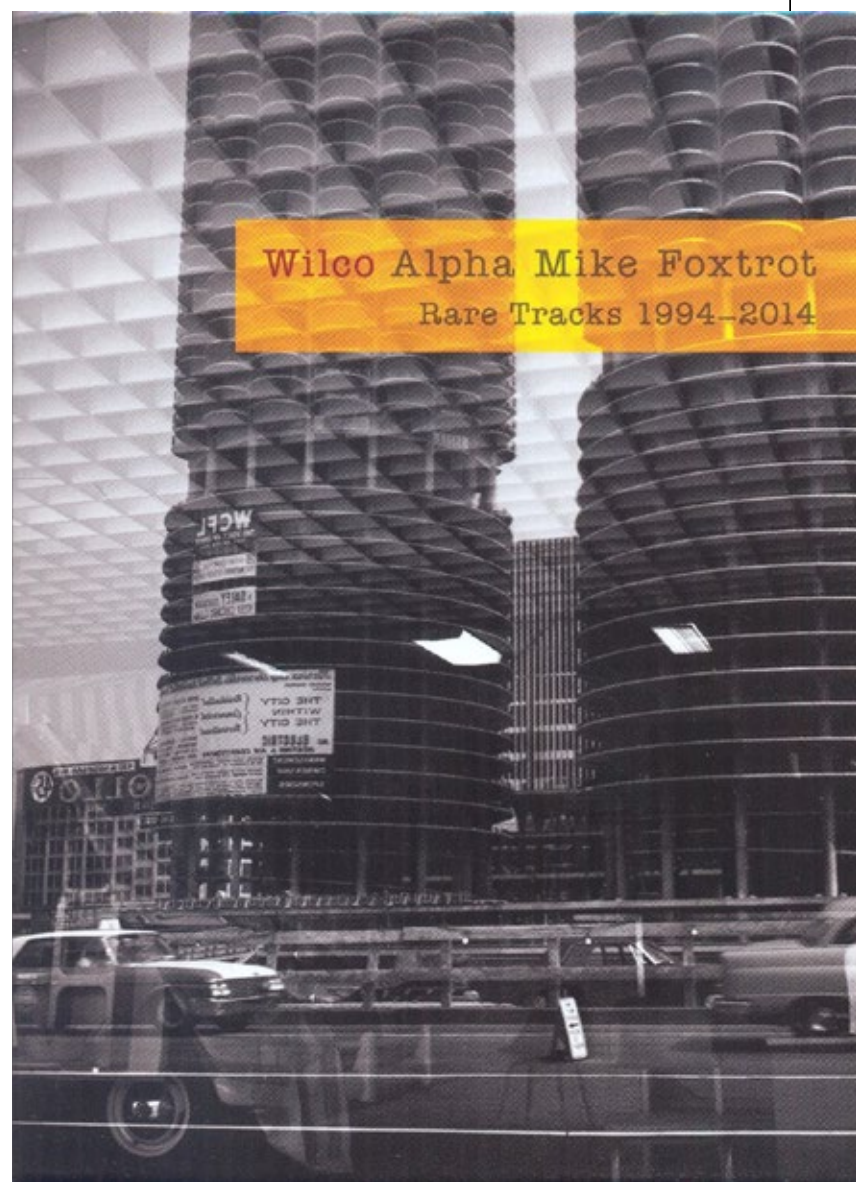
View *Echo of Miles: Scattered Tracks Along the Path* as the final word on Soundgarden, as the odds-and-sods compilation joins both greatest hits and live album releases since the ensemble’s 2010 reunion. While the Seattle band technically remains active, it’s safe to say the quartet’s fruitful period looms in the rear-view mirror. Intelligently organized across three themed discs (Originals, Covers, Oddities), these 50 tracks further attest that the group’s creative peak spanned from its late 80s inception through 1994’s *Superunknown*—after which its powerful mix of wailing hard rock, sludgy metal, basement-reared punk, and guitar-driven psychedelia devolved into blasé commercially minded fare that functioned as a clear transition for vocalist Chris Cornell’s tenure in the forgettable supergroup Audio-slave. The good news is a majority of material here stems from the band’s resourceful heyday and reflects a sense of humor (live versions of Spinal Tap’s “Big Bottom” and Cheech and Chong’s “Earache My Eye”) absent on later studio efforts. Diehards might already own most of the excellent B-sides and choice covers—along with one-off tracks originally on compilations and soundtracks, they’re the highlights—but their relative obscurity makes their inclusion welcome. One caveat: Guitarist Kim Thayil’s haphazard liner notes appear in a minuscule font size, marring the otherwise stylish packaging.

Bruce Springsteen

The Album Collection Vol. 1: 1973-1984
Columbia/Legacy, 180g 8LP or 8CD

Sometimes it takes a box set to place what seems obvious back into a context that renews ongoing dialog and forces experts to reconsider where an artist stands—and what he or she represents—to history and culture. As the last superstar outside of Prince whose pivotal music lacked the remastering treatment given his peers and predecessors, Bruce Springsteen benefits from such a project in the form of the indispensable *The Album Collection Vol. 1: 1973-1984*. Doing nothing else than presenting the Boss' first seven albums (1973's *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.* through 1984's blockbuster *Born In the U.S.A.*) in audiophile-quality sound marvelously transferred from the original analog master tapes by Bob Ludwig with supervision from Springsteen and engineer Toby Scott, the collection makes a strong case for Springsteen being underrated and further implies that, due to the fact he's been a constant vital presence for more than four decades, the importance and genius of his initial-period music is taken for granted. The set's producers intimate as much by choosing to completely bypass traditional liner notes in favor of filling the accompanying 60-page book with a scrapbook assortment of memorabilia, photos, interviews, and reviews. After all, what can be said in a few thousand words about these quintessential works that hasn't already been stated? Here, wisely, the music speaks for itself, and it speaks volumes.





Wilco

Alpha Mike Foxtrot: Rare Tracks
1994-2014
Nonesuch, 4CD

For reasons pertaining to its comprehensive scope, under-\$40 price, handsome packaging, amusing track-by-track liner notes, and, above all, convincing manner of presenting the alternate history and evolution of one of the finest American rock bands of the last five decades, the honor of the year's best overall box set belongs to *Alpha Mike Foxtrot: Rare Tracks 1994-2014*. Stocked with B-sides, demos, live cuts, and one-offs, the four-disc compendium plays as an insider history to the inner workings, creative process, and musical progression of a group that retains just two original members and sounds almost nothing like the wet-behind-the-years, country-influenced roots quartet that rose from the ashes of Uncle Tupelo. "Listening back to stuff like this, I don't know how we got from where we were to where we are," writes leader Jeff Tweedy in his refreshingly frank and often humorous liner notes. Via song and text, *Alpha Mike Foxtrot: Rare Tracks 1994-2014* provides if not a conclusive answer than many satisfying hints to the singer's pondering remark. Wilco also deserves credit for including a few throwaways (chiefly, horrifying label-ordered remixes of *Summerteeth* tracks) that shine revealing lights on the group's development. Even with such misfires taken into account, nearly every note here—particularly the handful of pop gems that should've been put on the studio records—is worth hearing. Again and again and again. ●

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THE WINO

By Monique Meadows

Portugal!

FOUR MODERN TABLE WINE PICKS UNDER \$15

Portugal sits on the western border of Spain, like a gladiator helmet's nosepiece facing the Atlantic Ocean. Just under 400 miles long and just over 100 miles wide, the country is 14th in global wine production with over 200 grape varieties, including many extremely old and rare varietals growing in vineyards that blanket a landscape of varied terrain. Its key red grape, Touriga Nacional, is to Portugal what Cabernet Sauvignon is to California's Napa. The grape gives flavor, color and abundant tannins to its wines. Tinta Barroca and Tinta Roriz (aka Tempranillo), are also widely used red grapes, while Loureiro, Trajadura, and Alvarinho (aka Albariño) are important white grapes – especially Loureiro in Vinho Verde, a refreshing white known for its slight spritz. Portugal's alluring geography, breadth of grape varietals, and an extensive winemaking history has allowed the country to build itself into a formidable wine producer and exporter.

Portugal has historically been known for its “fortified” wines – especially Port, made by stopping fermentation by adding a grape brandy to create a sweet wine. The history and traditions of Port, produced in the country's Douro region, and Madeira, produced on the namesake island just off Portugal's coastline, are rich.

And while nothing can take the allure and reverence away from these wines and their many styles, a new light is beaming on the diversity of table wines being produced in Portugal. While the Douro region has had the spotlight for Portuguese wine production, other regions such as Lisboa near the southern coast and Dao, Bairrada, and Alentejo to the southeast are producing delicious, approachable wines, mostly using indigenous varietals but often with a few international ones as well. If your memory of Portuguese wines is a ceramic bottle of Mateus, Portugal's famous sweet sparkling rosé popular in the 1980s, or even its Lancer's red – think again. Modernization of their winemaking production is producing interesting, delicious, wallet-friendly sips, and are attractive choices up against those California Cab/Zin kitchen sink blends.

These modern wines make some of the best partners for our comfort food favorites. I was introduced to Portuguese eats as a kid visiting Massachusetts grandparents living in the heavily Portuguese-populated mill town of Fall River, and often made it to the nearby fishing and whaling port of New Bedford. Aromas from dishes like carne de porco à Alentajana (pork marinated in wine and clams), cozido à Portuguesa (beef, sausages, potatoes, vegetables and rice) and Feijoada (a popular Portuguese meat and bean stew) infused dining tables and even whole neighborhoods. It would be years later before we would discover modern Portuguese wines and find them to be perfect partners for fish, meats and stews – or just a great glass at the end of the day. Here are four wines to get you started, all of them warriors on the value front.



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TONE STYLE

J Portugal Ramos "Lima" Loreiro, Vinho Verde

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You might already know Vinho Verde – that spritzy Portuguese white, most popular in the summertime but also a year-round winner. Lima, from acclaimed winemaker João Portugal Ramos, is a surprise find in that it hails from Portugal's Vinho Verde region, but unlike the popular spritz version made from a blend of local grapes, Lima is made from just one of those grapes – Loreiro. There's no spritz here, just a beautifully dry, crisp drink. With only occasional oak aging, these wines are made to preserve and highlight the grape's natural fruit flavors. Ramos has vineyard sites in the Alentejo region, prized for its schist and limestone soil and a continental climate, ideal for the grapes. Lima is his latest endeavor, naming the wine after the famous river that runs through the region of Galicia. It is fermented in stainless steel tanks creating a captivating fresh white with mouthwatering acidity and playful notes of mineral, lemongrass, citrus and Mediterranean herb. Shellfish is a natural match, and the Portuguese would be quick to suggest Pulpo a la Gallega, a regional octopus dish, or simply enjoy this one on its own.





Carlos Santos Lima "LAB" Red, Lisboa

\$10

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Granadeiro, Tapada dos Ganhões, Alentejano Red 2012

\$13

Now owned by the Grandadiero family, this wine estate has a rich cultural history as home to a 16th century Portuguese historian, Damião de Góis, and later to the 20th century composer Luís de Freitas Branco. The property is located in Alentejo, the hot, dry region in eastern Portugal known for its rich red wine blends. It is a wine producing area region that has also embraced international varietals, in this case the French Rhône varietal Syrah. Granadeiro's winemaker, Pedro Baptista, did his formal wine studies in France, and in 2010 received the Winemaker of the Year Award by the Portuguese magazine *Wine*. Baptista creates Tapada dos Ganhões from a blend of Aragonez (Tempranillo), Trincadeira, Alicante Bouchet and Syrah grapes. The wine is a delicious, full-bodied sip with aromas and flavors of ripe, red fruits accented with hints of vanilla and oak. The tannins are soft; the acidity is bright – which makes this pick a perfect food companion, especially with something packed with flavor such as a spicy stew.



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TONE STYLE

Casal Monteiro Forma de Arte Reserva 2011 DOC Tejo \$14

In 1979, Quinta do Casal Monteiro became the first producer in the former region of Ribatejo to make limited-production wines from estate-grown grapes. Considered one of the top growing areas in Portugal, the Tejo region takes its name from the Taugus River flowing through it. Here, the combination of soils and microclimate from the vineyards' proximity to the river lends the wines rich fruit characteristics and excellent acidity, making the wines superb food partners. For the 2011 vintage, winemaker Pedro Guimarães blends equal amounts of two charismatic grapes: Touriga Nacional and Cabernet Sauvignon. The blend is fermented in stainless steel and given a touch of French and American new oak aging. The result is a fresh, full-bodied, modern-style wine of juicy dark fruit, smooth tannins and a pleasing long finish. The striking label isn't the only thing that gets noticed, as what shows in the glass has garnered several awards including Silver Medal at Vinalies Internationales 2013, Gold Medal at Tejo IV Wine Competition 2013, Bronze Medal *Decanter* World Wine Awards 2013, 87 points from eRobertParker.com *Wine Advocate*, and 89 points from *Wine Enthusiast*. Wines that receive wine critics' scores under 90 shouldn't be dismissed, especially those at 88–89 points. The 90 and above earners will get the attention, but the 88-point wine can be a delightful, wallet-friendly repeat favorite at your table.





Sony Short Throw 4K Projector

\$50,000
www.sony.com

I want it, I want it, I want it, but I can't have it – for two reasons, mainly. First, it's not available quite yet (Sony is limiting distribution to metro NYC in spring of 2015 when it *is* in stores) and second, I just can't bring myself to spend \$50k on a television set.

But for now, those living in ultra chic Manhattan penthouses that are pressed for space can put their hands on the coolest piece of video playback hardware ever – Sony's Short Throw 4k projector. Along with the Danish inspired projector in the center, a pair of speakers is also included in the middle, with a pair of cabinets on the end to house your electronics. This couldn't be more sleek and unobtrusive, and yes, it does do 3D.

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Product: 122 Integrated Amplifier

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TONE STYLE



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Even if you've hopped on the streaming bandwagon, chances are you still have a pretty major collection of CD's, digital downloads and ripped files, and they need to be backed up somewhere.

The QNAP comes highly recommended by all of our more nerdy friends for ease of use, flexibility and quick setup. Just plug the drives you need in the five bays and roll. We suggest going with five drives and formatting as a Raid6 array, so that up to two drives can fail without data loss. The one we use at *TONE-Audio* uses five 3TB drives, making for a 9TB array that has no data loss with two of the five drives down. The likelihood of three drives failing at the same time is very slim, so it's safe to say that a NAS configured thusly will not need additional backup.

Though the QNAP is very quiet, the crazed audiophiles in the crowd will want to hide it away, outside of the listening environment. Its compact form factor will fit anywhere, the only requirement being power and a network connection. It's amazing at how the prices on premium storage have plummeted, so there's no excuse *not* to move your data to one of these!



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JaCivas Chocolate is a family owned, Portland, Oregon institution that's been around forever. While they specialize in wedding and party cakes, they are equally well known for their chocolates and custom chocolate creations. Along with the guitar you see here, they have every style and shape of animal you can imagine, along with some pretty awesome chocolate hedgehogs. Maybe we can talk them into making some chocolate vacuum tubes?





Microsoft Surface 3 Pro

\$799 - \$1,999

www.microsoft.com/surface

As a dyed in the wool group of Apple enthusiasts, it's tough to ignore the new Surface 3 Pro from Microsoft. We can argue the Windows vs. Mac interface until we become exhausted, so let's leave that out of it, shall we – that's a great way to waste hours of your life on an internet forum some evening.

From a strictly hardware perspective, both the Apple MacBook Air and the Surface 3 Pro fall down for the power user, only offering 8GB of memory as the maximum.

And, neither allows you to upgrade the memory once you've made your choice, so there's no point in getting less than 8GB. However, if you can live with 8GB, the Surface is an intriguing way to bridge the gap between laptop and tablet in more ways than one.

First, the Surface 3 Pro is almost a pound lighter than the 13-inch Mac Book Air, though its screen is an inch smaller – not a deal breaker, but those doing a lot of intense Photoshop or Excel work will grudgingly give up that extra inch, begging the question, why don't these guys make a 17-inch version? Where some audiophiles like to argue that bits are bits, many computerphiles will argue that pixels are pixels. However, the Surface 3 Pro's screen looks a lot more like the Retina display on the

MacBook Pro, with more snap and saturation than what's fitted to the MacBook Air.

Connectivity is roughly the same, as is processor speed – the Mac using the Intel i7 processor and the Surface 3 Pro the i3, i5, or i7, depending on model chosen. Again, computer geekazoids will argue this point, but casual use of Word and Photoshop proved equally perky on both platforms. The Surface 3 Pro claims a battery life of 9 hours, losing a bit of ground to the MacBook Air, but still more than enough to go from New York to Europe with ease.

The keyboard is critical to any laptop, and unlike all of the dreadful iPad keyboards we've auditioned, the keyboard/case cover offered with the Surface 3 Pro is exceptional, feeling better than the Apple laptop keyboards albeit with keys a little bit closer together – but not too much to stop you from typing frantically. What the cute ads don't come right out and tell you is that the keyboard is another \$129, pushing the top model over the \$2,000 mark and straight into MacBook Pro Retina territory. Food for thought.

Extra touches abound that make the Surface 3 Pro a highly sophisticated portable computing platform. The ability to fold it into a tablet, and one that is slightly larger than an iPad is extremely useful. Using both a MacBook Pro and an iPad on trips, the ability to have one device that only weighs 1.76 pounds than can perform both duties is very enticing indeed.

Even though Microsoft's Surface 3 Pro is a better portable computing device than the MacBook Air, dedicated Mac users probably won't switch.

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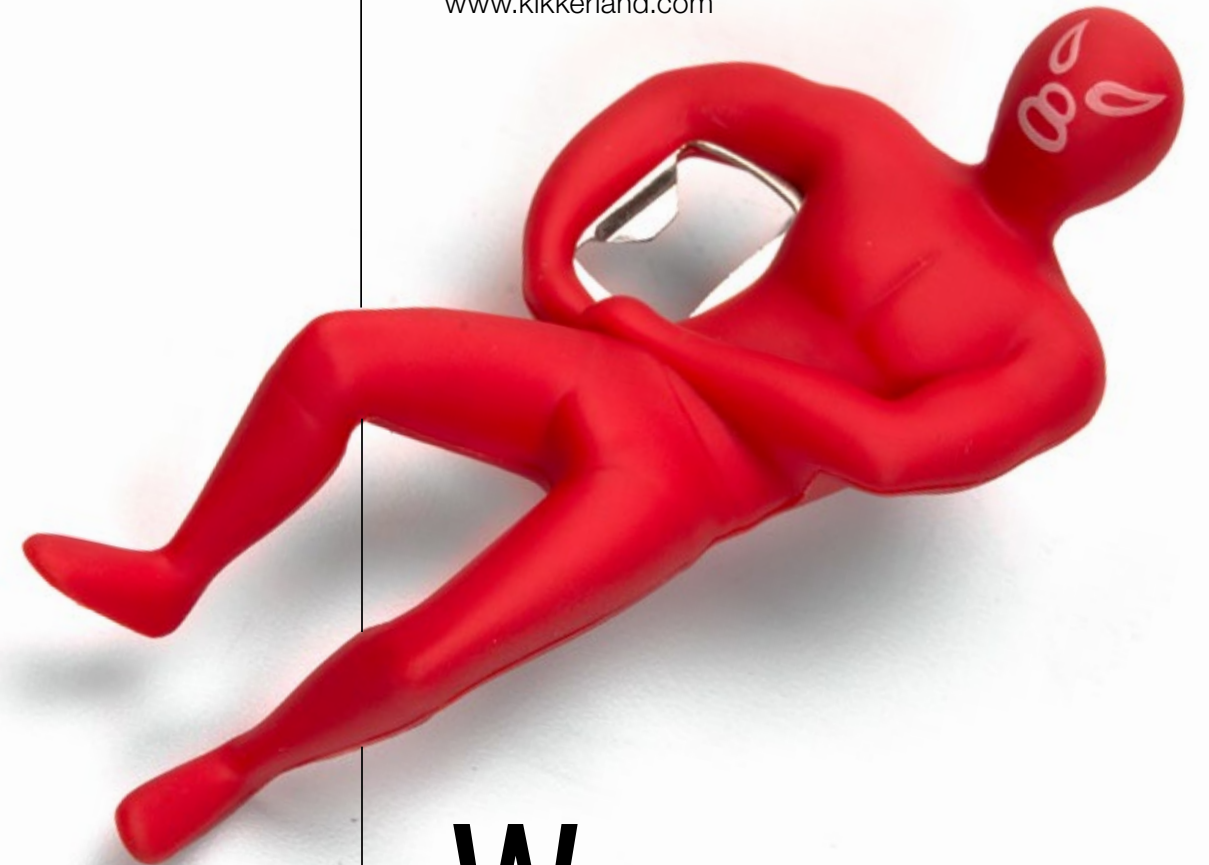
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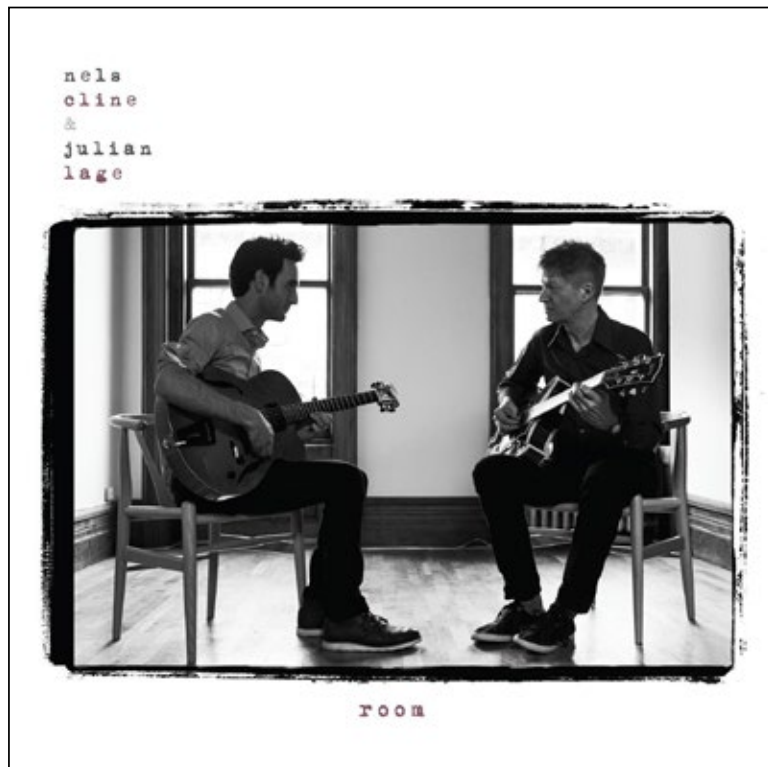
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JAZZ & BLUES

**Nels Cline & Julian Lage***Room*

Mack Avenue, 180g LP or CD

Nels Cline's position as one of free improvisation's most gifted guitarists is so solid, it's mildly shocking when he turns eloquent in comparatively traditional situations. That said, I guess I should qualify the "comparatively" part of my previous sentence. There's no "I Remember April" or "All The Things You Are" found on this new duet date between Cline and fellow string player Julian Lage. But neither do aggressive freak-outs, dissonant storms, or ornery skronkathons mark these 10 tracks. With one guitarist in the left channel and one in the right, *Room* is all about a pair of improvisers reveling in their rapport when it comes to working the lyrical side of abstraction.



©Photo by Sean Lennon

The opening moments of "Whispers From Eve" help tell the story. It's a spot where rumination takes on a glistening edge before the duo drops into an overtly charming melody. The partners find a way of offering enough personal filigree to keep the prettiness sounding edgy. Something similar happens in "The Scent of Light," on which a postmodern sense of balladry comes to fruition— forlorn phrases and blue asides enjoying lots of elbowroom. In the large, mood and design get a big say when it comes to where the next set of plinks and plunks will venture.

Clarity looms as one of the record's calling cards. Much

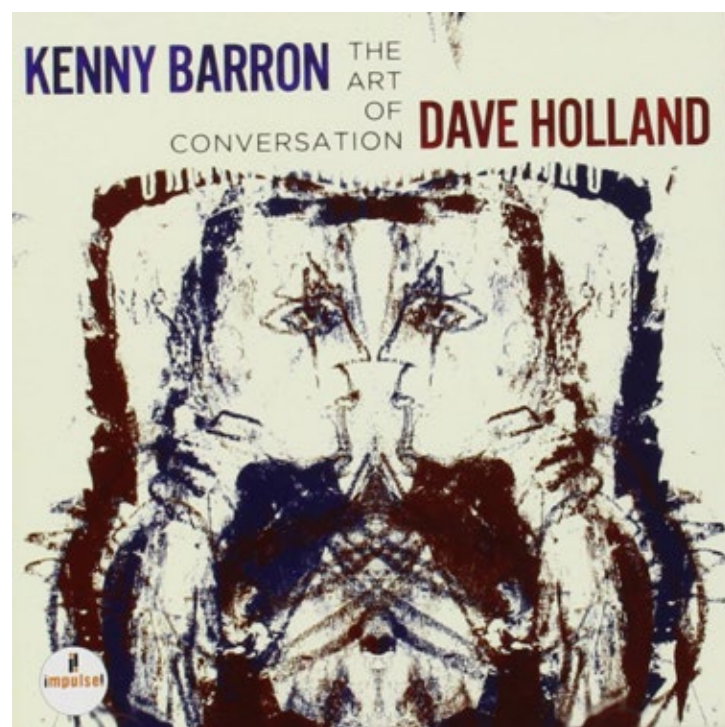
of the action is sorted out, enhancing the opportunities for grace to dominate. Waxing folksy, with ringing chords supporting a nimble lead, is part of the act's aesthetic. The emotional arc of "Freesia/ The Bond" cultivates a near-classical vibe, shooting off echoes of John Abercrombie and Ralph Towner's *Sargasso Sea*. And, like that almost-40-year-old ECM opus, deciding to sustain the open sections keeps things intriguing.

Accord is also paramount. In a somewhat amusing way, the duo's affinity for second-guessing each other defines the delicate oddities of "Blues, Too," where the

freebop parlance takes a spin around the block. The guys tinkle their way through upper-register maneuvers while making sure their conversation always stays taut, the single lines quickly entwining. Then, in a flash, the breeze picks up, blowing in a gust of strumming and soloing, as if Bruce Cockburn were trying his hand at Pat Metheny's *New Chautauqua*.

Making a pitch for delicacy without belying their prog instincts, Cline and Lage deliver an edge-of-your-seat recital with plenty of recognizable beauty.

—Jim Macnie


Kenny Barron and Dave Holland

The Art of Conversation
Impulse, CD

Piano-bass duos remain atypical, but Kenny Barron and Dave Holland have stood far above anything resembling the ordinary for decades. They've also worked in this kind of setting before—Barron with the late bassist Charlie Haden on *Night and the City* (1996) and Holland with pianist/vibraphonist Karl Berger on *All Kinds of Time* (1976). But with *The Art of Conversation*, the two musicians create a lyrically mesmerizing dialogue that turns around the format's perceived limitations. Without a drummer to fill the traditional rhythmic role, Barron and Holland create their own approach to time on a disc sure to become an inspiration to future generations of jazz players.

(continued)

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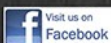
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MUSIC



The pair's musical empathy gets established on the opening "The Oracle." Barron takes the lead with a bright, but firm, touch. Holland responds with deep resonance and quick-thinking flexibility, and both add in a Cuban clave pattern toward the coda. The pianist's "The Only One"—a quasi-update on Thelonious Monk's "Well, You Needn't"—also features the two veterans filling each other's spaces in ways that would make even the most melodically sensitive drummer superfluous. When the duo interprets Monk's "In Walked Bud," its lively exchange on a familiar theme concludes with a quietly furious run from Holland that dazzles without lessening the duo's intuitive communication.

While Barron's luminous tone is unmistakable on such tracks, he is equally compelling on his minor-key ballad "Rain." On another ballad, Holland's "Waltz For Wheeler," the tribute to departed trumpeter Kenny Wheeler becomes anything but

mournful as Barron's progressions convey a deep sense of joy.

Barron and Holland's congenial approach is not without its own edges. The disc is loaded with surprises that become more apparent with each listen, including the way the cohorts rephrase Charlie Parker's "Segment" without imitating obvious bop chord changes. Holland also includes a different take on Latin rhythms on "Dr. Do Right." The album's quiet farewell statement comes via an interpretation of Billy Strayhorn's "Daydream," which alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges made famous in the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Even though fewer musicians perform the piece here, they don't sacrifice an ounce of soul.

Along with their roles as performers, Barron and Holland's production provides *The Art of Conversation* with an ideal balance. They should take on the same responsibilities for the sequel.
—Aaron Cohen



Joe Morris
Mess Hall
 hatOLOGY, CD

As a fan of the imagination and agility that Joe Morris has brought to improvised music since his 1983 *Wraparound* debut, I've always marveled at the guitarist's free-flowing lines. Teeming with notes, their ardor spills forward in an inviting manner. In the best circumstances, their accrued subtleties possess the ability to swoop down and scoop up even slightly intrigued listeners.

Morris has been refining this lyrical approach for decades, and the acclaim he's earned in the last ten years suggests his eloquence is becoming more reliable. But from time to time, he has also invested in a brash group sound that revels in volume. With a smile on his face, he's deemed these aggressive tacks his "Big Loud Electric Guitar" experiments. *Mess Hall* is the conclusion of a trilogy Morris began mapping out in the 80s, one that uses nuanced particulars of music theory and the combative pleasures of noise to celebrate the joy of group interaction. Like its precursors, *Sweatshop* and *Racket Club*, *Mess Hall* delivers a fetching jumble of sound, both can-tankerous and captivating.

In his liner notes, the leader recalls being inspired by Jimi Hendrix when first approaching his instrument in 1969. While the string forays on *Mess Hall* include plenty of fluid fuzz, such parallels end there. Comprised of drummer Jerome Deupree (he also drove the *Sweatshop* and *Racket Club* bands) and keyboardist Steve Lanter (an occasional Morris associate and inventive pianist), this is a trio that romps through these tracks to milk a collective vehemence—and a wonderfully nasty one at that. Forget the "soloist out front with backing rhythm support" formula. As "Advanced Animal" and "Response Arena" indicate, it's all about the shared roar.

Taut, implosive, vicious at points—Morris' three-some burrows straight into abstraction, betting the farm on expressionistic fervor. Lanter's electric keyboards momentarily conjure the delirium of Sun Ra's "The Magic City"; Deupree's pummel makes allusions to the knotty thud of Captain Beefheart's Magic Band. Morris, who uses effects pedals (a break from his *au natural* norm), points out that one of his goals is to let pure sound impact the music's "formulation."

In this way, *Mess Hall* is a textural rumpus room, smitten with distortion, the older, angrier brother of recent discs by Slobber Pup and the Spanish Donkey on which Morris participated. One thing's sure: The articulation he gets when waxing specific and seductive in his comparatively quieter work doesn't forsake him on these fierce tracks. As the violence gets unpacked, the poise is revealed. —**Jim Macnie**

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Marcin Wasilewski Trio w/ Joakim Milder Spark Of Life

**Marcin Wasilewski Trio with Joakim Milder**

Spark of Life
ECM, CD

Pianist Marcin Wasilewski frequently reaches for the lyrical higher-end notes, but in his hands, this seemingly gentle approach never becomes ethereal—especially on his trio's new disc. His quiet touch and apparent comfort with interpreting pop songs serve as vehicles for a firm rhythmic sense. All of which sounds directly inspired from Bill Evans (and, of course, Wasilewski is far from the only contemporary pianist to follow that model). Of course, that influence also includes a strong blueprint for how a piano-based trio should communicate, and Wasilewski's group has been creating such three-part dialogues for close to 20 years.

Wasilewski, bassist Slawomir Kurkiewicz, and drummer Michal Miskiewicz started working together when they were teenagers. They became active shortly afterward in Poland's jazz scene, including doing extensive work with trumpeter Tomasz Stanko. The world became aware of the group's low-key conversations on its American major-label debut, 2005's *Trio*. On *Spark of Life*, which also features Swedish saxophonist Joakim Milder, they apply the same principles and never sound formulaic.

The trio and Milder know that building an open sense of space and mixing up instrumental textures remain key, even while they adhere to slow and medium tempos. On Wasilewski's opening "Austin," his astute pauses emphasize the melody. Miskiewicz responds with telling brush strokes on the cymbals. Another Wasilewski original, "Three Reflections," highlights Kurkiewicz's pizzicato lines, which lead into the pianist's flowing crescendos as Miskiewicz's drums serve more as a melodic frame along with his traditional time-keeping role.

The title track—performed twice, with different inflections—features the kind of arpeggios that resemble those of label-mate Keith Jarrett, yet the surprising directions in the solos are Wasilewski's own. Milder also builds from the airy to the determined, especially on his "Still." Sometimes his tone echoes Charles Lloyd's approach to harmony, but he also unveils a quietly bluesy side on top off Wasilewski's off-kilter chord changes. On earlier discs, the trio covered Bjork and Prince. Here, the group pumps life into Sting's "Message In A Bottle" with odd intervals and bits of dissonance. A lesser-known rock tune, "Do rycerzy, do szlachty, do mieszczan" (by the Polish band Hey) becomes almost wistful. The group also instills a quiet fury to Herbie Hancock's "Actual Proof" and quietly soar on composer Grazyna Bacewicz's "Largo."

Even with two decades under its collective belt, this group is energetic enough to sound like it's just getting started. —**Aaron Cohen**



FEATURE

Another Listen to the iFi Audio iPhono Mini Phonostage

By Richard H. Mak

When the little iFi iPhono box first landed on my desk, I thought it was my wife's new iPhone. From its outer appearance to its packaging to its name, the iPhono could indeed be mistaken for an Apple product. The \$399 iPhono is part of the iFi Microline series of affordable palm-sized products made by the U.K. firm Abington Music Research (AMR). It was designed by Thorsten Loesch using technology trickled down from AMR's nearly \$12,000 Reference PH-77 phonostage. The iPhono may be small, but it is loaded with features that you will be hard pressed to find in other similarly priced phonostages.



FEATURE

The iPhono offers both MM and MC inputs with 40 dB and 60 dB of gain, respectively. The underside of the device has three banks of DIP switches that offer myriad adjustments. You can even add an extra 6 dB of gain to the MC inputs, for compatibility with 0.3 mV output cartridges. The MM section features five capacitance choices (100 to 500 pF) to help match your phono cable, and the MC loading choices have an equally wide range, with settings at 22, 33, 75, 100, 250, 300, 1K and 47K ohms. Don't know which settings to use? Let your ears be your guide.

Furthering its appeal and flexibility, the iPhono makes the RIAA, Columbia and Decca curves available. This is a feature rarely seen on phonostages priced less than

\$5,000 and is very impressive in this application. As many users may not be familiar with these curves, start your journey with the DIP switches located at the rear for the standard RIAA setting, since the vast majority of modern LPs are produced with this equalization. In general, unless you are playing a pre-mid 1950s recordings, you should be safe with the standard RIAA setting. As with all things audio related, it is better to spend time enjoying the music, so if a particular record sounds better to your ears with any given equalization setting, there is no harm in using it. (Once you get comfortable and feel more adventurous, you may want to research the various on-line descriptions of the different EQ curves.)

In terms of performance, the iPhono meets my number one requirement of a great phonostage: It is quiet. Unlike most phonostages in the sub-\$500 category, the iPhono does not portray noticeable white noise or hum. However, the iPhono is not without its imperfections. While it can run MC cartridges as low as 0.3 mV, it failed to deliver enough dynamic contrast and rhythmic pace when playing large-scale orchestral performances via my 0.29 mV Sonic Lab Ultra Eminent BC cartridge. The results were much better when paired up with the Dynavector XV-1T (0.35 mV) and the Clearaudio Goldfinger (0.9 mV). I found that cartridges with an output level upwards of 0.4 mV provided the most favorable response. *(continued)*



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FEATURE

The iPhono does have a couple of other minor shortcomings. Its diminutive size positions the RCA inputs extremely close together, making some RCA plugs difficult to insert. Also, the owner's manual is overly simplified, making it difficult to decipher the various DIP switch combinations.

But sonically, the iPhono exceeds all my expectations for a phono stage of its size and price. Compared to the \$599 Project Tube Box Phono SE II, the iPhono is considerably less warm, with a wider frequency response and great high-frequency extension. It lacks the harsh graininess associated with competitively priced solid-state phono stages and carries some of the organic characteristics of the much more expensive AMR PH-77, doing so without grain or edginess.

The iPhono is a fantastic anchor for your first analog setup. Few others can compete with its sonics and there is nothing near its price that can compete with its feature set. It also offers a great way to experiment with the various EQ curves for those with a wide range of recordings in their collection. All of this considered, we are happy to award the iPhono our last Exceptional Value Award of 2014. ●

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PREVIEW



VPI Classic 2 Turntable

\$4,000

www.vpiindustries.com

We've always loved VPIs Classic 1 turntable, and our publisher still uses one as a reference table. It's big, weighty, slightly warm sound is not unlike what an early Linn LP12 offers, with more bass heft and *none* of the setup hassles. The VPI tables are a marvel of simplicity in that respect.

Adding another \$1,000 to the price tag puts you in a Classic 2, which sonically is identical to the Classic 1, but adds the adjustable VTA tower to the mix. Those tending to stick with one cartridge for a long period of time will be better served by the Classic 1, but if you have or are planning on building a stable of different cartridges the extra dough spent to be able to swap arm wands at will, keeping track of the respective VTA settings will be a godsend.



Pass XA160.8 Amplifiers

\$26,000/pair
www.passlabs.com

The Pass Labs website says the new .8 series amplifiers have bigger power supplies, and more output transistors, allowing them to operate “further into class-A operation than before.” The XA160s were no slouch, and served as reference amplifiers here for quite a while, followed by the XA200s and now their flagship Xs300s.

Still a one chassis per monoblock design, the XA160.8 delivers more of that seamless, tube like magic that the Xs300s do, for a lot lower than the \$88,000/pair cost of the big boys. Our review of these exciting amplifiers is in progress now.

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PREVIEW



Dynaudio XEO 4 Speakers

\$2,600/pair
www.dynaudio.com

Dynaudio made a big splash with their wireless XEO speakers two years ago, but their engineering staff has not been sitting on their laurels. The new second generation speakers feature more wireless bandwidth, better drivers and more extensive tuning. Our recent visit to the Dynaudio factory in Denmark found their engineers intensely involved in wireless development, so you know this is a solid path for Dynaudio's future.

The new XEO range, introduced at this year's Munich High End show builds on Dynaudios initial success, making wireless audio a much higher performance option than ever before. Watch for a full review very soon.



VPI Classic 3

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"The Classic 3 wasn't as quiet as the Continuum Caliburn at more than 20 times the price, but it came closer than any table I can recall that costs under \$10,000-without a tonearm."

- Michael Fremer



vpiindustries.com
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Benchmark AHB2 Power Amplifier

Tiny But Tough

By Rob Johnson

AHB2

POWER

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TEMP

MUTE

MUTE

TEMP

CLR

Benchmark



Cardas Audio, Bandon, Oregon



The first thing you notice about the new Benchmark AHB2 is its diminutive size. Even with feet and binding posts, it's only about 11 inches wide, 4 inches tall and 9 inches deep. And the heat-sink fins account for about a third of that width, making it even more incredible that Benchmark was able to jam so much oomph into such a small body. Regularly lifting amps that leave my back barking for Tylenol, I chuckle with relief when carrying the 12.5-pound AHB2 to my audio rack.

At about \$3,000, the Benchmark AHB2 is a substantial investment, and it certainly demonstrates many musical characteristics one would expect at this price point. But the amp's size makes it appealing when shelf space is limited or when you simply want to minimize your gear real estate. If more

power is desired, you can buy a second AHB2 and configure them as monoblocks.

Benchmark offers the unit with a black or silver anodized faceplate and black heat-sink fins. A studio version is also available, with a wider front plate to fit equipment racks. Other than its tiny power button, the front of the amp has no other controls, just a few LEDs to indicate aspects of operation. Each channel has three LEDs to indicate clip, temperature and mute. In the event of an amp overload (which happened once during my testing), the amp shuts itself down and the LEDs indicate the nature of the problem. Powering the unit off, waiting a few seconds and pressing the power button puts the amp back into operational mode.



Setting the Benchmark

As Benchmark products are used regularly in recording studios, all of the AHB2's connections are balanced. A couple audio designers have explained to me that balanced XLR connections usually prove superior to single-ended RCAs, since XLRs offer inherent noise canceling and they won't come loose once clicked into place. If the rest of your system doesn't offer XLR connections, Benchmark also makes cables and adapters.

Setup is fairly straightforward: Connect a preamp and speakers, ensure the stereo/mono toggle is set to the desired position, and then set the three-position sensitivity switch to match the signal levels from your preamplifier; the sensitivity switch also optimizes the amplifier's gain for controlling volume from your preamplifier.

Because of the amp's size, its back panel can get crowded, making connections a little tricky—especially with my speaker cables, which have soldered spade connections that don't bend. As such, I have to place the amp at the back edge of my audio shelf so the cables can hang below the amp (though I've had this same problem with other amps I've tested).

The AHB2 also offers twist-lock NL4 ports for speaker connection. Benchmark says NL4s provide lower resistance and higher current handling than connection via binding posts, as well as a more secure connection. As most speakers don't have an NL4 connection option, Benchmark makes speaker cables with NL4 connectors for the amp side and standard connections for the speaker side.

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John Bamford, HiFi news, 2014



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www.gamutaudio.com

Once everything is connected, simply push the power button on the front panel to activate the start-up sequence. When configured as a stereo amp, the AHB2 pushes out 100 watts into 8 ohms and double that into 4 ohms. For those wanting a 12-volt trigger for remote power-up, the AHB2 has you covered.

The AHB2 features a Class-AB/Class-H design (hence its name), which facilitates bridging a pair of the amps to use as monoblocks, pushing 380 watts into 8 ohms. This scenario is very useful if your speakers need some extra juice and you want to provide a dedicated amp for each, or if you want to drive a center-channel speaker in a home-theater setup. When using this setup method, consult the manual to ensure the proper connections and settings.

Meeting the Benchmark

Among Benchmark's design goals for the amp were extremely low distortion and quiet operation. From the get-go, the amp lives up to its design specs by providing a very clean presentation. The Benchmark does a good job of layering vocals and instruments in all dimensions, with each element supported by a solid and convincing image. The amp's designer, John Siau, is quick to mention that the third

goal was to achieve a ruler-flat high-frequency response—and the AHB2 is completely flat all the way up to 200 kHz. Siau says these qualities are vitally important in delivering high-resolution performance.

As desired in a studio setting, the sonics from the AHB2 are neutral, and in my home setup, there is no observable emphasis in any particular frequency range. I would not characterize the AHB2 sound as warm or romantic, though it's not stark or emotionless either. Between these two ends of the spectrum, the amp leans toward the latter but with a sweeter top end. Those seeking an amp that emphasizes fullness and richness that will augment slightly thin sound from your preamp or source might consider other amp options. But if accurate portrayal is a listener's goal, this Benchmark does the trick.

When reproducing poor-quality recordings, the AHB2 does a nice job of limiting digital glare. Lucinda Williams's album *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* demonstrates the AHB2's ability to offer edge-free portrayal of vocals with a very fluid mid-range. Her voice resides upfront in the soundstage and it is well separated from the instruments accompanying her.

Regardless of music type, bass through the Benchmark offers a taught presentation with the snap and punch one expects from percussion. Depeche Mode's "Personal Jesus" is engaging through the AHB2, with all the subtle synthesized sounds popping into position in the soundstage. This makes me curious about running a pair of the amps as monoblocks—which still wouldn't take up the rack space of a single traditional amplifier.

The Benchmark brings to life the voice of the Martin Logan Motion XT35 bookshelf speakers. Considering its recording-studio applications, it makes a lot of sense that this amp pairs well with smaller stereo monitors. Combined with the speakers I have on hand for testing, the AHB2's sound flavor profile remains consistent.

In the case of the AHB2, system synergy is an important factor to consider, since no amp is universally perfect for all speakers. For large and demanding speakers, a prospective AHB2 owner may need more power. In the case of the AHB2, you can add another unit and configure the two amps as monoblocks.





Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

I was curious to hear how Benchmark's design ethos of compact products would translate into designing a power amp. A couple years ago, the Devialet shattered my bias that amplifiers had to be massive to sound good, and so today I find myself much more open-minded to smaller amps like the Benchmark.

My initial exposure to the AHB2 was at this year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, where Benchmark was playing the amp in an all-Benchmark system that included its new mini-monitor speakers. Back in my own listening rooms, the AHB2 did a fantastic job driving the KEF Blades, Dynaudio Evidence Platinums and even my Acoustat 2+2s, which are notoriously tough to drive, though a pair of AHB2s would have been even better for the 2+2s.

As both my reference systems are balanced, I actually prefer the XLR connections of the AHB2. If you're working with single-ended RCAs connections, the Cardas adaptors are my favorite. I agree with Rob's conclusions on tonality, etc., and will add that the AHB2 definitely has the bass drive necessary to achieve convincing full-range performance, even from big speakers.

In the end, the Benchmark AHB2 can become a great anchor to your system, offering high performance in a compact box. With an extremely neutral tonal balance, you can use it straight, or warm it up with a tube preamplifier, should that be your preference. Either way, the AHB2 is a stellar performer from a company known for excellence.

Benchmark AHB2 power amplifier
MSRP: \$2,995

MANUFACTURER

Benchmark Media Systems, Inc.

CONTACT

benchmarkmedia.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources

Mac mini, dCS Debussy DAC, JRiver Media Center 20, Tidal music service

Analog Source

SME 10 turntable with SME 10 tonearm and Dynavector 17D3 cartridge

Amplifier

Burmester 911 MK3

Preamplifier

Coffman Labs G1-A

Speakers

Sonus faber Olympica III, Martin Logan Motion XT35

Cables

Jena Labs

Power

Running Springs Audio Haley power conditioner, RSA Mongoose power cords

Accessories

ASC tube traps, Mapleshade Samson audio racks

Corrupting Absolutely

SIMAUDIO MOON 820S POWER SUPPLY

By Jeff Dorgay

A handful of manufacturers offer additional or upgraded power supplies for their components; the 820S is a new offering in the Simaudio MOON lineup. It provides extra power-supply capacity and regulation to any pair of Sim components—either a mixture of analog and digital, or two of the same type. The rear panel has a pair of four-pin connectors marked *analog power* and a pair of five-pin connectors marked *digital power*. Unplugged from the wall, the original device connects to the 820S via umbilical cord, with power still controlling it as usual. Your configuration will depend on whether you mate the power supply to the 610LP or 810LP phonostage, the 650D or 750D DAC/transport or the 740P preamplifier.

Oddly enough, *Stereophile's* resident analog expert Michael Fremer put the 820S through its paces with the MOON 650D *digital* player, while I have conducted my listening with Sim's fantastic MOON 610LP and MOON 810LP phonostages. I will have a follow-up report when my own personal 650D arrives as a reference component.



Beginning with the 610LP and a record I know well, the Classic Records 45-rpm remaster of Peter Gabriel's fourth album (known to some as the *Security* album on their clear "clarity vinyl"), I go straight to "Lay Your Hands on Me." The increase in all three dimensions of the soundfield is dramatic—as it should be for an \$8,000 upgrade—pushing it slightly ahead of the 810LP's performance without the external power supply. As the 820S can power two devices simultaneously, it is very easy to switch back and forth between and observe the results.

If you've got a system capable of high-resolution playback, and I'm assuming you do if you already own either the 610LP or the 810LP, suffice it to say that both of these fantastic phonostages benefit equally from the 820S. Of course, if you've already dropped \$13,000 on the 810LP, you might not be so ready to spend another \$8,000 to push the boundaries even further. But consider yourself warned: There's no turning back once you hear the improvement the 820S makes, especially if you have a mega cartridge like the Clearaudio Goldfinger or the Lyra Atlas.

A Major Change for the Better

With the 820S in the mix, both of the aforementioned cartridges go from *wow* to *kapow*, particularly in terms of dynamic impact, low-level detail retrieval and overall soundstage size. The most amazing thing about analog is that there's so much information in those tiny grooves. Every time you think you've reached a plateau, the barrier is shattered, and this is what the 820S brings to the picture. *(continued)*



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Get to Know Dali.



The Sound Organisation

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REVIEW



During “Lay Your Hands on Me,” when Gabriel’s synthesizer comes in after about a minute, it has height and plenty of texture with the 810LP by itself, but bringing the 820S online separates it from the mix so it feels about three feet in front of the couch and just above ear level. All of us auditioning this new setup keep going back to tracks we know well and continue to be dumbfounded by the 810LP/820S combination.

Perhaps the best way to audition something like this is to drag out the warhorses that you know intimately—those tracks that are burned into your psyche so deeply that you know immediately when something’s been changed. During another favor-

ite, Pink Floyd’s *Wish You Were Here*, everyone present instantly agrees that the intro to “Welcome to the Machine” sounds more like an elevator than ever before, especially when it comes to the resounding *thud* at the bottom of its journey. These are the analog moments you live for, geeky though they might be.

Soundstage size and dynamics are easily recognized, but another benefit of the 820S that should not be discounted is the ease it brings to the overall presentation, which is especially apparent with acoustic instruments. Violin and piano recordings are always tough to reproduce, but with the 820S, they sound more natural than ever. Violin can sound harsh and stri-

dent, even on the best systems, and while the added impact of the 820S pulls me in, the decrease in listener fatigue is what keeps me convinced that it’s a winner.

Tracking through some of my favorite Blue Note reissues, I can’t help but notice how much more lifelike cymbals sound from a textural perspective. The leading and trailing edges of transients on the piano and drums are crisper, and the transitions from soft to loud and back are smoother. On one level, it’s like going from experiencing a great 16-bit/44-kHz recording to hearing it again in 24/192. I am hoping to hear the same delta with the 650D. *(continued)*

Maximizing the Investment

Still, \$8,000 is a lot for just a power supply, no matter how good it is. What really makes the 820S a killer deal is if you have *two* Sim components to plug into it. You get even better performance for the dollar by spreading the expense across two components. While I can't comment yet on any performance drop with a digital and analog component connected simultaneously, I do not notice any collapse in soundstage or dynamics, or an increase in background noise level, when using the unit with the 610LP and 810LP at the same time.

No matter what I listen to, more information is available with the 820S and either phonostage, and it is now tough to live without.

Usually, once a component offering major resolution is no longer in my reference system, it's easy to forget the improvement it made and get back to business as usual. Even after days without the 820S absence, I found it nearly impossible to listen to records, so I had Sim send it back—and it's not going home to Montreal until they send the RCMP.

Even if you only pair the 820S with one Sim component, the upgrade is substantial enough to invest. As Mr. Fremer mentions in his review, should you borrow one of these from your Simaudio dealer for a weekend demo (which I highly suggest, to really put it through its paces), I doubt you'll be returning it on Monday. It's that good. ●

Simaudio MOON 820S
power supply
MSRP: \$8,000

MANUFACTURER
Simaudio Ltd.

CONTACT
www.simaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier
Robert Koda K10, Pass Labs Xs

Power Amplifier
Pass Labs Xs300
Monoblocks

Speakers
Dynaudio Evidence Platinum

Cable
Cardas Clear

Analog source
AVID Acutus Reference SP turntable, TriPlanar tonearm, Lyra Atlas and Clearaudio Goldfinger cartridges

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Expanding the Range

MartinLogan Motion 35XT Bookshelf Speakers

By Rob Johnson

Many people know MartinLogan for its svelte, even avant-garde-looking electrostatic floorstanding speakers, which have earned the company a large and dedicated fan base. But, like a good scientist at work, MartinLogan does not rest on their laurels, continuing to experiment with new designs, like the Motion 35XT, that give potential customers great sound for the dollar. These speakers are designed to sound great as a stereo pair or with other speakers in the Motion line as part of a home-theater setup.



Under the Microscope

These mini Martins combine the brand's Folded Motion Transducer tweeter with a more conventional-looking 6.5-inch woofer sporting an aluminum cone and ported out the back. The 35XT specifications state that the frequency response ranges from 50 Hz all the way up to 25 kHz. Into a 4-ohm load, they can handle amplifiers delivering 20 to 250 watts. Each speaker measures 13.5 inches tall, 7.6 inches wide and 11.8 inches deep, including the length of the binding posts. With solid construction and a substantial magnet for drivers, each weighs in at 18.5 lbs, which is relatively hefty for speakers this size.

Appearance-wise, the speakers don't command the sculpture-like attention that their big electrostatic brothers do; the XT form factor is nondescript by comparison. ML finishes the cabinets in piano black or black cherrywood gloss. The last visual element to consider is the metal perforated grilles, which lend the speakers a look similar to ML's electrostats, though they are magnetically attached and can be easily removed if desired. (Sonically, I found little difference with the grilles on or off.) But if you have small children who enjoy pushing elevator buttons and doorbells, the exposed center of a woofer cone can look mighty tempting.

Experimentation

As with ML's ESL speakers, the XT's manual offers concise setup instructions. Each speaker comes with four adhesive pads for easy grip on a shelf or a speaker stand. *(continued)*

Once the general location is determined, ML suggests toeing in the speakers directly at the listener, which works splendidly in my listening room with the tweeters at ear level. The size of your room will determine how close you place the speakers to the side walls to maximize imaging and bass performance.

The speakers are easily connected to an amp, with ML's oval-shaped five-way binding posts making light work of torquing down the speaker cables without damaging the cable or binding post. Two sets of binding posts allowing for bi-wiring or bi-amplification, should the listener prefer that configuration. The binding posts are offset on the speaker body, which makes this task even easier, whether you choose bi-wire or single-wire operation.



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Paradigm

Testing in Vivo

The MLs immediately impress with their ability to disappear into the soundstage and music drifting in all directions around the speakers. The resulting sound portrayal enables a wide left-to-right stereo image complemented by an equally compelling sense of depth. Depending on the recording, there are some instances where musical elements project well in front of the speakers.

The 35XTs uncover a lot of fine detail and nuance in recordings, which contributes to the sense of ambient sound around them. At the same time, they do not lean toward ear-singing fatigue, a testament to ML's years of ESL design and voicing. In the context of gear at my disposal, female vocals retain a natural, non-exaggerated musical presence, as demonstrated through Pink Martini's album *Hang On Little Tomato*. Cymbal shimmer, horns blasts, harp plucks and piano notes showcase the speakers' high- and mid-frequency extension.

As with most small-box designs, bass has its limits, so those craving deep and powerful bass might consider alternate or supplemental speaker options. Below 50 Hz, bass loses its growl through the 35XTs and a subwoofer like those offered by ML will pick up the slack. But what bass the 35XTs do reproduce comes in tight and tuneful. Like a seat further back in an auditorium, drum impacts sound quite real, but they lack an up-close level of punch and slam. Electronica tracks from Deadmau5 and Armin Van Buuren offer plenty of snap and excitement.

The balance of all these elements proves delightful during long listening sessions. These speakers do offer some surprises, as guitar strums and background vocals spring forth from the blackness and into the periphery.



Perpetual Motion

Though ML is known better for its more expensive ESL speakers, it's marvelous to see the company price a set of speakers under \$1,200, putting them into the reach of many audio enthusiasts seeking high-quality monitors. The gloss-finished wooden cabinets and metal speaker grilles alone give the outward impression of a more expensive design. And of course, fantastic sonics for their price point reinforce that assessment.

Used as a stereo pair, the ML 35XT speakers offer a lot of sound for the dollar. Other than limits to bass frequencies, the rest of the audio spectrum proves very enjoyable. The speakers may even beguile a listener toward couch-lock, repeating the phrase, "Okay, I'll play *just one more song*."

For those who want a stereo pair of speakers now, but are considering a home-theater setup in the future, it's also great to know you are preserving your speaker investment. If budget allows later for the floorstanding version of the XTs, the smaller speakers can always be utilized as surrounds. In that scenario, a user can also rest assured knowing that the common drivers used in the Motion XT series speakers will offer a perfectly synergistic match. Our publisher has also mentioned that the XTs work very well as rear speakers in a multichannel system with MartinLogan ESLs as the front channels.

By simply filling out the warranty card and sending it to ML within 30 days of purchase, an owner receives a five-year insurance policy against problems with the speaker, which underlines the company's commitment to its customers' long-term satisfaction—whether an owner chooses the high-end or entry-level models. With that level of confidence behind the speaker, and the marvelous sound they produce, these ML speakers are a great option to consider. ●

REVIEW

Martin Logan Motion 35XT
bookshelf speakers

MSRP: \$1,200 per pair

MANUFACTURER

MartinLogan, Ltd.

CONTACT

www.martinlogan.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources

Mac Mini, dCS Debussy,
JRiver Media Center 20,
Tidal music service

Analog Source

SME 10 turntable with SME 10
tonearm and Dynavector 17D3
cartridge

Amplifiers

Burmester 911 MK3,
Benchmark AHB2

Preamplifier

Coffman Labs G1-A

Speakers

Sonus faber Olympica III

Cables

Jena Labs

Power

Running Springs Audio Haley,
RSA Mongoose power cords

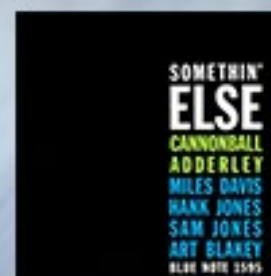
Accessories

ASC tube traps, Mapleshade
Samson audio racks



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The Rega DAC-R

A STEALTHY UPGRADE

By Jeff Dorgay

W

hen Rega launched its compact DAC two years ago, it was a \$1,095 miracle, offering incredible performance for its size. Its only drawback was that it lacked high-resolution playback from the USB port, as Rega's engineers didn't feel computer audio was a major thing at that time. Times have rapidly changed and the computer audio/streaming market is bigger than ever. Moving faster than normal for the Rega camp (remember, these guys were the last major manufacturer to produce a high-performance CD player), the new DAC-R is here, featuring full 24-bit/192-kHz capability via the USB input. There's no option for DSD, but this time I agree with Rega; it's a moot format. Flame suit on.



REVIEW

Just like Rega's turntables, the DAC-R is an evolutionary product. The original DAC delivered excellent sonic results and the DAC-R builds on that foundation. Its three front-panel digital filters give you the option to switch between a linear-phase half-band filter, minimum-phase half-band filter and linear-phase aphodizing filter. While these filters have minimal overall effect, the differences are more noticeable at higher sampling frequencies—something perhaps best discussed on your favorite Internet forum.

For those needing the techie bits, the DAC-R features improved circuitry for its parallel pair of Wolfson WM8742 DACs, which are driven into a buffer stage. To keep signal processing to a minimum, the DAC-R processes the input signal in its native resolution and does not upsample the data stream. And the USB input is galvanically isolated from the DAC to keep the computer interaction/interference to a minimum. All of this results in an extremely quiet DAC.

We used the DAC-R with quite a few different digital sources: an Astell & Kern AK120 portable player, Oppo 105, Apple TV, Meridian MS200, and even a Comcast cable box. In every instance, it made substantial improvements to the overall sound, with easy switching between the five inputs: *(continued)*



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REVIEW

USB, two coaxial S/PDIF and two optical, so you can easily use the DAC-R as a digital hub for multiple sources. And the addition of a remote control makes it a breeze to switch sources from your favorite comfy chair.

Other than the DAC-R's three filter choices (instead of five on the original DAC), the new model looks identical to its predecessor, with the same casework derived from that of Rega's Brio-R integrated amplifier. It's standard procedure at Rega to utilize the same enclosure material for multiple components, thus maintaining product-line consistency and keeping prices down, so putting the DAC-R on the same shelf as your Brio-R makes for a nice and tidy system.

Another upgrade to the DAC-R is the addition of a standard IEC connector in place of the wonky three-prong mini connector of the original DAC. While we can argue till the cows come home as to how much a good mains cable will improve the sound, now you at least have the option to investigate.

But Is It Better?

At first listen, the DAC-R has a very *un-digital* sound, not unlike Rega's excellent CD players, with a natural and organic, almost analog sound—not rolled off but easy to listen to for long periods of time and free of fatigue. Remember, these guys have been making great turntables for over 40 years now. *(continued)*



Tonally, the DAC-R renders acoustic instruments with good tone and texture, never sounding mechanical or digital. Miles Davis's horn on "Pinocchio" is well placed, slightly to the left of center, with the cymbals splashing in and out of the mix ever so delicately. Female vocals fare equally well through the DAC-R, whether playing Christine McVie or Chrissie Hynde. Top to bottom, the sound is evenly balanced, with nothing out of place and no specific segment of the frequency range overly embellished or understated.

This is such an unobtrusive DAC (as was its predecessor) that it's tough to decipher where the improvements are coming from without a direct comparison—so we do just that. Borrowing the original from a friend, we discover that the side-by-side listening reveals a significant upgrade everywhere but in the noise floor. *(continued)* Both DACs are super quiet and, while they share a similar overall tonality, the new model is much more refined. It's like going from a Rega RP3 turntable to RP8—for those of you with more of an analog point of view.

Another aspect of the DAC-R that really stands out is the performance of its optical input, which is incredibly good. While it's easy for audiophiles to pooh-pooh the lowly TOSLINK input, a lot of consumer devices still sport a TOSLINK output. With the help of the DAC-R's optical input, both the Meridian MS200 (linked to a Meridian digital music server) and the Apple TV (now sporting Tidal streaming) offer performance that I would normally associate with S/PDIF, making the DAC-R an easier upgrade to justify.

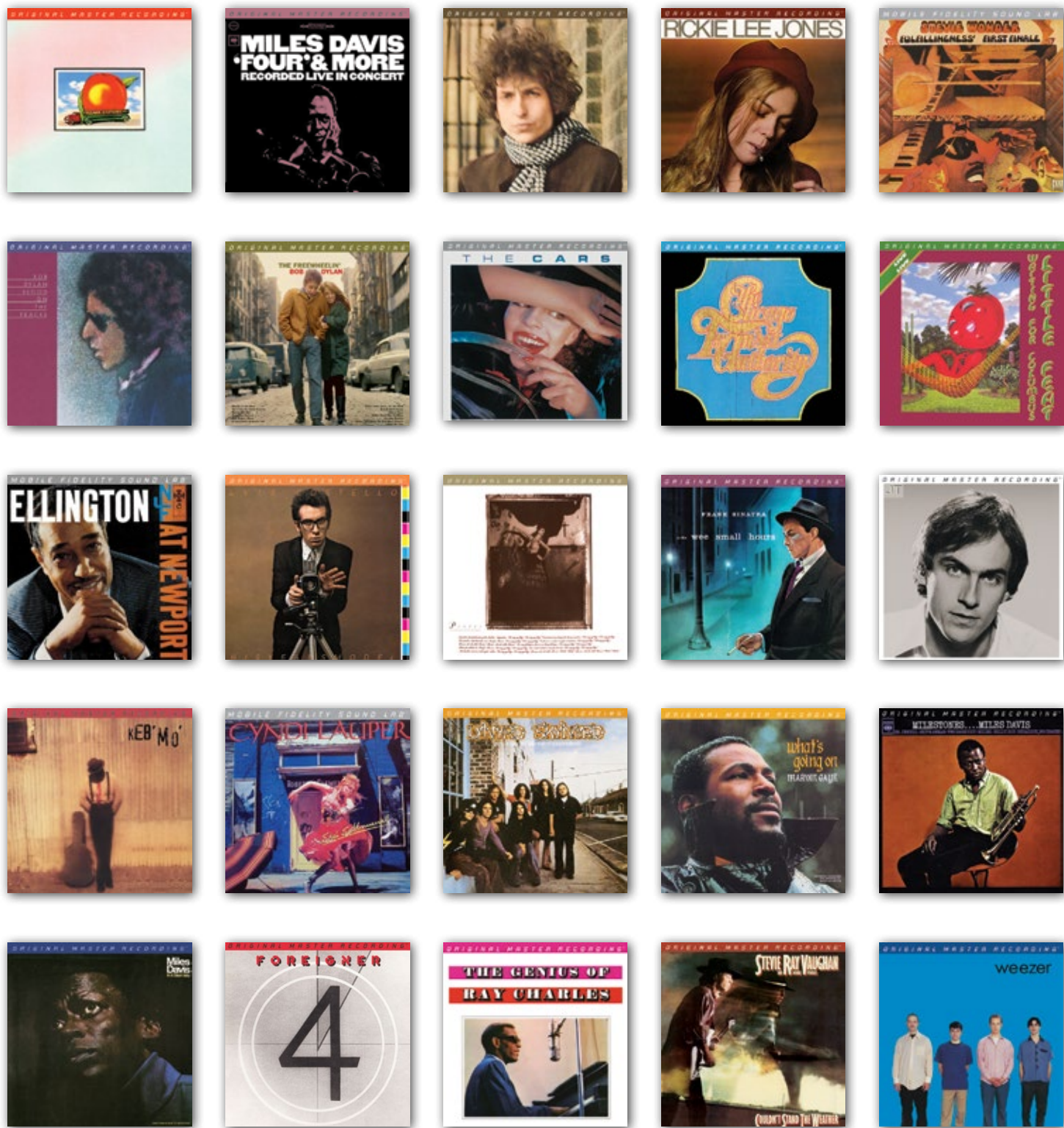
Tracking through dense recordings immediately gives the DAC-R the upper hand, especially with relatively poor quality recordings. *(continued)*



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It digs deeper into good and bad recordings, revealing more low-level information. The softest passages in Mighty Sam McClain's *Give it Up to Love* now have their own specific space; with the original model, they blend into the noise floor and are more diffuse.

Dynamic passages also uncover the DAC-R's superiority. Drums hit harder and have more texture, attack and slam—which is particularly noticeable as the drumstick lifts from the drumhead. Percussion in general comes through more clearly and with more definition than before. And through the original DAC, the soundstage collapses somewhat.

Because the original model is an excellent product, buyers will ask themselves the eternal question: “Should I upgrade?” The answer in this case is an unqualified yes. Rega’s new DAC-R is better in every parameter. And it’s amazing that the company only upped the price by \$100. Mistakenly, I was under the assumption that the new DAC-R carried a price tag of \$1,795—but when I found out that it’s only \$1,195, I was quick to give it an Exceptional Value Award.

Rega DAC-R
MSRP: \$1,195

MANUFACTURER
Rega Research Limited

CONTACT
www.rega.co.uk (factory)
www.soundorg.com (U.S.
distributor)

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier
Robert Koda K-10,
Burmester 011

Power amplifier
BAT VK-655SE

Speakers
PMC twenty.26

Cables

Cardas Clear

PLINIUS

LINE 2



Plinius Inspire 980 Integrated Amplifier

By Rob Johnson

New Zealand's Plinius Audio has a track record of delivering products that offer great sound for the dollar—and its Inspire 980 certainly offers a lot, especially for \$4,450. In addition the power and preamp capabilities of a standard integrated, it also features an onboard MM phono stage and an internal DAC. With all those elements built in, this beauty can serve as a fantastic system hub—just add speakers and sources.

As with other Plinius products, the 980 features simplistic aesthetics, despite a wealth of internal capabilities. The smooth, bead-blasted aluminum faceplate is interrupted only by a volume knob and two buttons to toggle source selection. The 980 comes with a remote, but the \$7.99 Plinius Arataki app (available on the iTunes store) makes controlling the unit from your listening chair even easier.



The unit's dimensions are modest—about 18 inches wide, 14 inches deep and 3 inches tall—though the slender frame is somewhat deceptive when lifting the unit. It weighs in at a surprising 22 pounds, a result of its burly transformer and the breadth of electronics its versatile capabilities require. The unit's Class A/B amplification section delivers 80 watts per channel into 8 ohms and roughly 100 watts into 4 ohms. While I'm used to a reference amplifier offering much more juice, the 980 has no trouble holding its own. It maintains command of the Sonus faber Olympica III speakers and leaves me not wanting for extra power.

Setup? What Setup?

As one would expect from this four-in-one integrated, the setup process is quick. Just plug in sources and speakers and start listening. Its back panel accommodates a turntable, two optical inputs and two single-ended line-level sources. There's also a set of XLR inputs for a CD player, plus an Ethernet port and a USB input for networking from computer-based audio sources and DLNA-capable devices. As a nice bonus, the 980 also offers a wireless connection option.

I will note that the RCA inputs for the line-level sources are bit close together, making large-diameter interconnects a tight squeeze.

My only other complaint is that my spade-terminated speakers wires present a challenge with these bidding posts. The spades I use are actually soldered to the rest of the speaker wire, so they aren't exactly flexible and so they must be inserted from underneath, as the binding posts are at the very base of the unit's short frame and have very little clearance. I have to place the 980 at the rear edge of my rack so the cables can dangle downward instead of kinking. Of course, using bare wire or non-soldered banana terminations would not present this problem.

Sonic Notes

After the break-in period, the Plinius sounds neutrally voiced, with little glare, grain, or stridency. Regardless of source or the quality of the recording, I find the sound extremely easy to live with. It does not romanticize music or lean towards euphony. There's just a slightly forgiving and relaxed quality to the sound, which strikes a delicate balance between warmth and stark realism.

With its internal 24-bit/192-kHz DAC employed, the 980 remains very tuneful. Compared unfairly against more expensive dedicated DACs, it offers a little

less ambient detail and refinement; however, it does manage to render even poor recordings in a musical and enjoyable way. To my ears, Norah Jones's vocals on "Don't Know Why" were recorded a little hot, meaning that crescendos sometimes have an ear-tinging singe. During CD-quality digital playback, this stridency is somewhat diminished, giving the song a greater sense of musicality.

The 980 has no noticeable roll-off among high frequencies. On Hélène Grimaud's rendition of Rachmaninov's "Piano Sonata No. 2," key strikes in the upper region have the requisite plink, ring, and ambient decay. *(continued)*

Emerge From the Darkness

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



REVIEW



With complementary bass prowess, the 980's portrayal is deep and punchy with a solid grip on speaker drivers, especially on rock tracks like Electric Six's "Dance Commander." The Plinius delivers the full energy of this song with little (if any) compromises.

The soundstage portrayed—front-to-back layering, perceived width, and extension beyond the speakers—also proves excellent. Though I listen to Chris Isaak's "Go Walking Down There" in regular rotation, I find myself startled by the 980's portrayal of the cymbals panned to the far left and right of the recording; in my listening space, the sound bursts into the room. While the crash, shimmer and decay of the cymbal strikes may not have all the nuanced resolution of a more expensive and dedicated DAC (like the dCS Debussy, for example), what's there is nicely rendered.

The phonostage section proves to be another really nice addition, given the price tag of the 980. While it's limited to MM cartridges and has a fixed loading and gain, it is a wonderful feature to have incorporated in such a compact package. With all the experience Plinius has building great phonostages, like its marvelous Koru, there is undoubtedly some trickle-down technology lending the 980 solid analog playback. (See "Additional Listening" for notes on the phonostage performance.)

A Lot to Love

The Inspire 980 costs \$4,450, which is not chump change. But given the quality of all the elements within—amp, preamp, DAC and phonostage—it's actually something of a value-oriented purchase. Yes, you can get greater realism and refinement from more expensive standalone equipment, like Plinius's own reference-level products. But from a price-performance standpoint, the 980 is a great option. For those who don't need wired or wireless home networking capability for music retrieval from a networked drive, the Inspire's little brother, the 880, offers the same functionality and sonics as the 980, but for \$3,650.

If you have limited space to dedicate to your hi-fi system or if you simply want to scale down the number of components in your audio arsenal, this all-in-one component offers a lot to love. The 980 is also well suited as a launching point for prospective buyers who might be looking to upgrade to a larger system down the road. Given all of its capability and versatility, I can easily recommend this component—and I'd even put it on my own short list.

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Additional Listening By Jeff Dorgay

Every Plinius product we've auditioned has been fantastic, and the 980 continues that tradition. As Rob is a MC-only guy, I wanted to spend some time listening to the 980 with the Ortofon 2M Black MM cartridge, which is currently mounted to the refurbished Thorens TD-125 table (courtesy of Vinyl Nirvana) and revitalized SME 3009 tonearm (courtesy of SMEtonearms.com).

As a listener who loves analog as much as digital and as someone about to move to a small space, I will say that

the Plinius 980 is a fantastic solution for those wanting to keep sound quality way up and the footprint way down. Streaming music from the Meridian MS200, which is barely the size of a glasses case, and using my turntable makes this a true desktop situation. A 15-foot run of Cardas Clear speaker cable (admittedly worth more than the amplifier) and the Franco Serblin Accordo speakers round out an amazing system in my 11-by-13-foot living room.

Don't sell yourself short on the MM thing; there are quite a few \$600 to \$1,000 MM cartridges that, if you aren't going to drop thousands of bucks on a table, will fit the bill very nicely. I'm partial to the 2M Black, which mates flawlessly with the Plinius. Having spent a lot of time with the massive Plinius Class-A monoblocks, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree with the 980. The Accordos perform their best with a lot of current and the 980 delivers the control

necessary to really rock these small but mighty speakers.

But most importantly, the phonostage is dead quiet and, like the rest of the amplifier, it does not exaggerate or embellish. The Ortofon 2M has a similar sound, so if that's your fancy, I can't suggest this cartridge highly enough. Those wanting a bit more mellow/warm/euphonic sound should consider the Grado Reference Master 1 Moving Iron cartridge. With a 5-mV output and requiring 47K loading, the Grado will add a

bit of warmth to your system's tonality, which is especially useful if your record collection consists of mostly jazz and classic rock.

Whatever your taste, the Plinius Inspire 980 is a fantastic bargain, especially for those utilizing both digital and analog sources. An external DAC and phonostage of this caliber would easily set you back \$1,000 each, so it's like getting an 80-wpc integrated amp thrown in for \$2,450—not to mention all that cable you won't need. Enthusiastically suggested! ●

Plinius Inspire 980 Integrated Amplifier

MSRP: \$4,450

MANUFACTURER

Plinius Audio Limited

CONTACT

www.pliniusaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Source

Mac mini, dCS Debussy

Analog source

SME 10 turntable with
SME 10 tonearm

Amplifier

Burmester 911 MK3

Preamplifier

Coffman Labs G1-A

Speakers

Sonus faber Olympica III

Cables

Jena Labs

Power

Running Springs Audio Haley
power conditioner and RSA
Mongoose power cords

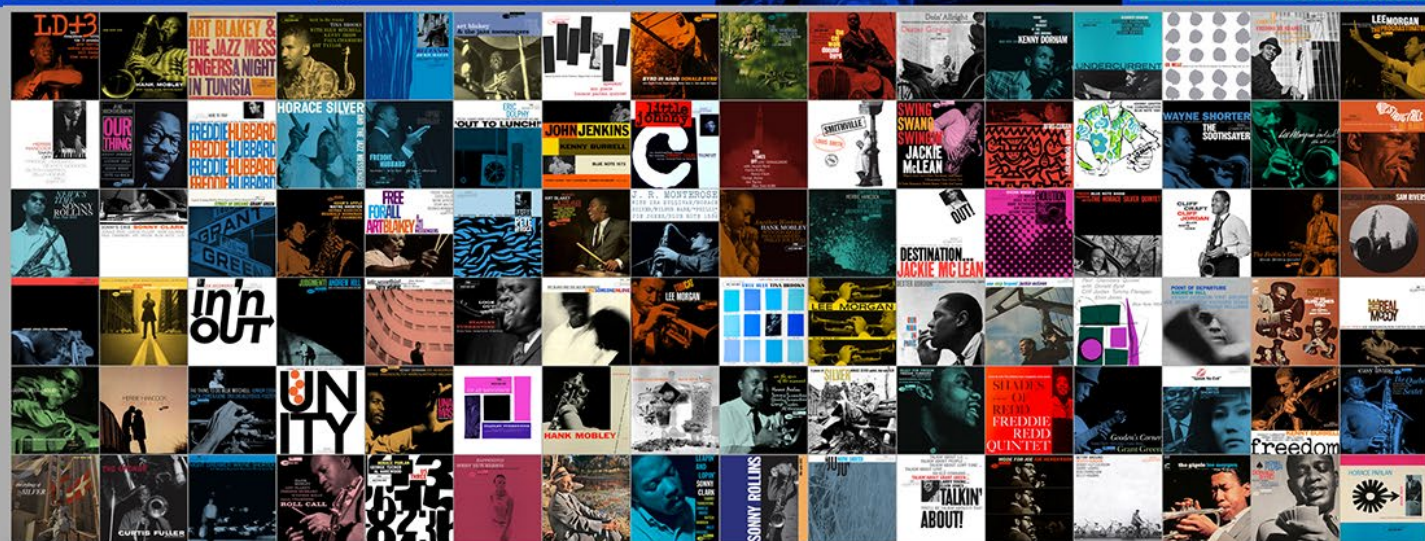
Accessories

ASC tube traps, Mapleshade
Samson audio racks

grive
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AWARDS

TONEAudio AWARDS 2014

Another year has zoomed by and we've had the privilege of listening to a lot of great gear to report on. Choosing a Product of the Year always carries the dilemma as to whether we bestow the title on something relatively unobtainable, or something modestly priced that we feel offers such over-the-top performance that it can't be beat by a long shot. Over the years, we've done both, and this year we're taking the latter approach with the OPPO HA-1 headphone amplifier and their PM-1 phones.

We like to keep the trophies to a minimum in the hope that they remain meaningful, and we've actually handed out fewer than last year, with only five items in the Publisher's Choice column. As we've said in the past, we are always on a quest to help you find the most intriguing products for your short list, so on one level, everything we've taken the time to review is award worthy.



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

2014 Product of the Year

OVERALL

OPPO HA-1 Headphone Amplifier and PM-1 Headphones

www.oppodigital.com

OPPO has been producing award-winning disc players for years now, producing components that not only sound the part, but look, feel and are packaged like components costing a *lot* more. If the HA-1 headphone amplifier had a McIntosh or a Meridian badge on the front panel, you wouldn't even blink at an \$8,500 price tag. It's an absolute steal at \$1,195, including a DAC, streamer and line level preamplifier — with a headphone amplifier that, by itself, is worth more than the \$1,195 asking price.

Coupled with the \$1,095 PM-1 planar magnetic headphones that give the competitors a major run for their money, these two components not only give you a world class personal audio system for a tick over two grand, they give you the foundation for a fantastic two-channel hifi system as well — just add your favorite power amplifier and speakers. With fully balanced XLR outputs as well as RCAs, the HA-1 is compatible with everything. And it's so good, we'd even suggest the HA-1 as a system anchor even if you *aren't* a headphone enthusiast. There's no better building block for a reasonably priced, high performance audio system than the OPPO HA-1.



AWARDS

2014 Product of the Year ANALOG



Rogers PA-1 Phonostage
www.rogershighfidelity.com

Roger Gibboni builds great stuff, and at \$8,500, his PA-1 takes on the world's finest. An all-vacuum tube design gives you the option to modify the gain (and overall tonality) by a bit of tube swapping, and the controls are all on the front panel to keep the hardcore analog enthusiast happy.

Proudly crafted by hand in the USA, the PA-1 is as much of a work of art underneath the chassis as it is on the outside. With an input for MM and MC, the PA-1 could be used as a two-input phonostage, if you were so inclined. But in the end, it's the sound that will win you over. Gibboni has achieved the perfect balance, incorporating the tonal saturation that tubes are famous for (without overdoing it), a dead quiet background and dynamic swing that will knock your socks off.

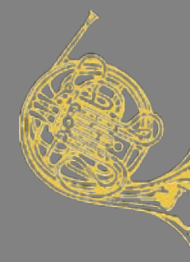
Its only limitations are RCA-only outputs and essentially one input, but if you only have one table, the PA-1 renders sound quality that you'd expect from a \$30k phonostage. And that's why it's our analog product of the year.

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REFERENCE 75

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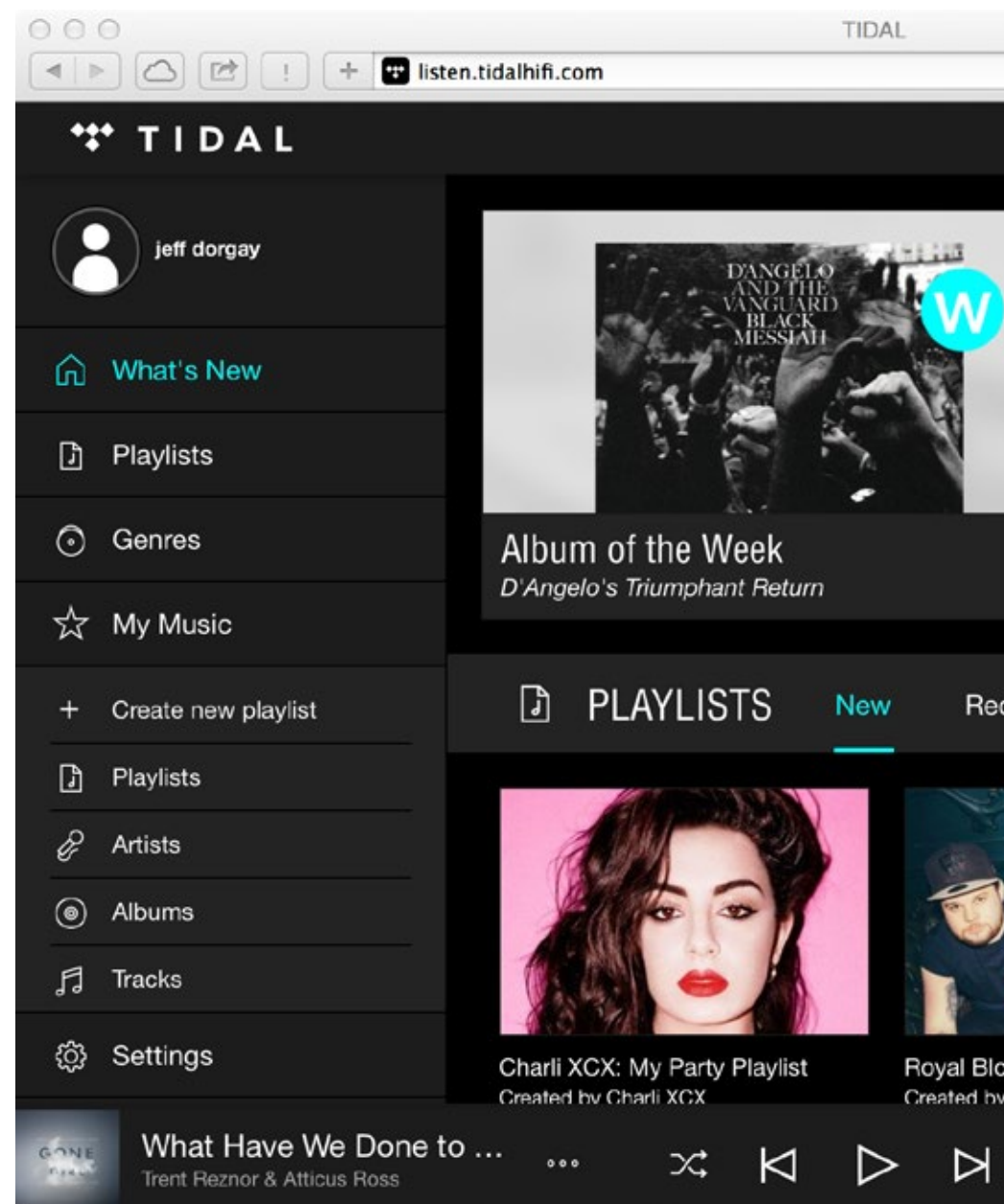
Fine Sounds Group

3900 Annapolis Lane North · Plymouth, MN 55447 · www.audioresearch.com

2014

Product of the Year

DIGITAL



Tidal Music Streaming

www.tidalhifi.com

After years of screwing around with iTunes, Pandora, Spotify, etc., we're still left with the agony of choosing convenience over quality. Now, with Tidal, we get a major song catalog that's constantly evolving, as well as an incredible catalog of music videos delivered at 16/44.1 resolution. For 99% of us, this is incredibly cool, and while no one at Tidal is 'fessing up, I'll bet that they will be offering high resolution downloads at some point in the future.

For all but the most dedicated music collectors, this is the way to finally free yourself from physical media. There will always be those who want to thumb through album covers romantically, and you can still do that. But now the music lovers who would like access to a ton of music with audiophile quality can have their cake and eat it too.

This is the best twenty dollars a month you will ever spend. And Tidal is only in its infancy.

2014

Product of the Year

SPEAKER

Dynaudio Evidence Platinum

www.dynaudio.com

I'm proud to say that Dynaudio's flagship speaker has also been my reference for this year and looks like it will continue to be so for some time to come. For \$85,000 a pair, said speakers should be without compromise, and the Evidence Platinums deliver the goods. They feature full-range frequency response, massive dynamic range, natural tonality and are easy to drive with anything from 15wpc on up.

And of course, being Danish, the Evidence Platinums are a visual work of art as well as an auditory one. You'll need a fairly good-sized room for them to fully work their magic, but you will be rewarded with a musical destination that you never need to leave. There's no reason to spend over twice as much on a pair of Wilsons, once you hear the Evidence Platinum. And you'll have a much easier time convincing your wife to put them in the living room, too.



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—Sam Tellig, *Stereophile*, June 2013

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

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

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AWARDS

2014
Product of the Year

BUDGET



Lounge LCR Phonostage

www.loungeaudio.com

It shouldn't be possible to make something this good, this inexpensively, but Lounge Audio is a small but mighty California company that is building a great reputation with this killer phonostage for analog lovers on a tight budget.

At some point, as they grow and take on more operating expenses, these babies will ultimately get more expensive, so grab one now while they are priced at \$300. Whether you have a basic or mega system, you owe it to yourself to hear what can be accomplished when sound quality is the only goal. And when Lounge Audio becomes a household word, remember, you saw it here first!

AWARDS

2014

Product of the Year

PREAMPLIFIER



Pass Xs Preamplifier
www.passaudio.com

A companion to their Xs power amplifiers, the Xs preamplifier is a tour de force in every aspect. And like the Xs amplifiers, the Xs preamplifier has that slight bit of warmth, magic, and tonal saturation you might expect from a “cost is no object” vacuum tube linestage, but there are no tubes inside!

Kiss your tube-related problems goodbye forever, and say hello to incredible flexibility and the ability to drive any power amplifier with ease. If the Xs is like every other Nelson Pass product we’ve owned or reviewed over the last 30 years, chances are it will never leave your equipment rack to visit the Pass mothership.

This should be the last preamp you ever buy.

AWARDS

2014

Product of the Year

PERSONAL FIDELITY



**Woo Audio
 WA234 Headphone
 Amplifier**
www.woaudio.com

The OPPO amp and phones get our overall award this year because they offer unbeatable performance for the dollar, but the Woo Audio headphone amplifier gets the nod here because it’s so over the top. It’s the most amazing headphone amplifier period, end of story – and it should be for \$16,000. And with a pair of 300B tubes it produces enough power to drive a pair of high efficiency speakers to glory. So don’t think of it as a \$16,000 headphone amp. Think of it as a \$125k pair of Wavac amps that you stole for 16 grand that just happen to drive headphones too.

AWARDS

2014 Product of the Year AMPLIFIER



Decware Zen Mystery Amplifier

www.decware.com

Steve Deckert has been building some of the world's finest tube amplifiers forever, and he's still one of the best-kept secrets in high end audio. Until you talk to someone who owns one of his amplifiers, that is. Just try and pry it from their cold, dead hands.

His Zen Monoblocks put out 60 watts per channel, cost a cool \$12k a pair, and are worth every penny. The Zen Mystery Amplifier, is a single channel design producing 40 watts per channel and has a lower price tag of only \$5,695. Decware amplifiers all carry a lifetime warranty, but the odds of your ever needing to take advantage of it are very slim. These amplifiers are hand built and tested 110%.

As for the sound, there's nothing like a Zen amplifier. If you can live with 40 watts per channel, these are the most glorious 40 watts you will ever hear.

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



bluehorizon

Okki Nokki

HIGH PERFORMANCE ANALOG

With over a century of combined experience working with analog, we decided to embark on building a new collection of high performance analog products for distribution in North America. In addition to outstanding sonic and build qualities, we also require each product to possess high value. This does not mean that we shy away from the exceptional and more expensive. Instead, this means that every product we work with is available for a fair and consistent price relative to performance.

At the foundation of our analog offerings is Dr. Feickert Analogue from Germany. We have worked with Chris Feickert to create new high performance and unique packages that are specific to our North American market. Each of our new models are available in standard high gloss piano black lacquer or in an upgraded rosewood finish. Performance is at the heart of each of these new turntables.

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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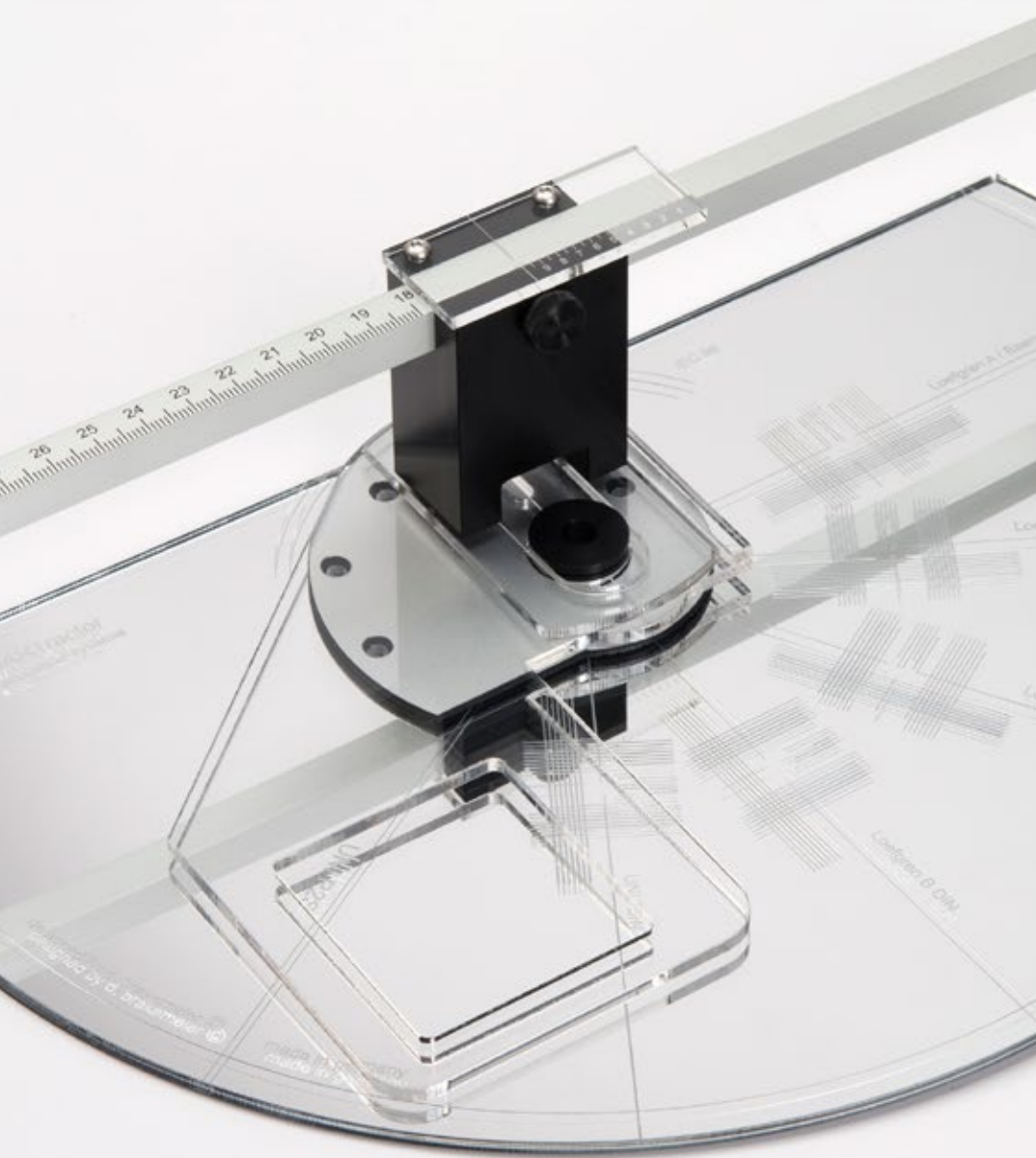
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AWARDS

2014

Product of the Year

ACCESSORY



Acoustical Systems SMARTractor

www.vanaltd.com

While we've all been arguing about whether to align our phono cartridge to Lofgren A, B or Baerwald spec, Acoustical Systems has gone back to the drawing board, looking at the problem from a new light: updating phono cartridge alignment from the perspective of modern designs, materials and stylus profiles.

The result is their UNIDEN alignment geometry, implemented with their SMARTractor. Nope, you won't find this profile for free on your favorite internet forum; you're gonna have to buy it. Granted, \$795 is a little spendy for a user with one table and one tonearm, but we guarantee you will never hear a more profound improvement to your analog system than this provides for anywhere near this price.

The reduced distortion provided by the UNIDEN alignment is a revelation, a quantum leap beyond what you've been using. Before you buy some wacky-priced piece of wire, buy a SMARTractor. You won't regret it.

AWARDS

2014

Product of the Year

PORTABLE DEVICE



Bowers & Wilkins T7

www.bowers-wilkins.com

Imagine Prada and Apple having a baby. It would look like the B&W T7 and sound like a Zeppelin Mini, which is exactly what the T7 is. This sexy, stylish portable bluetooth player is encased in matte black and framed in aluminum honeycomb. The 12 watt per channel power amplifier powers a pair of 2-inch drivers and square woofers, both custom made for the T7 and they belt out way more sound than you would ever expect from such a compact enclosure.

The built in li-ion battery provides about 18 hours of playback, so it should be able to outlive any party you invite the T7 to. Sure, there are less expensive Bluetooth players, but nothing as sleek as the T7. If you want elegance and performance, look no further than the B&W T7.

FRANCO SERBLIN ACCORDO SPEAKERS

\$12,999/pair
www.axissaudio.com

These diminutive Italian beauties will not be everyone's cup of tea, but for those who treasure what they do best, nothing else will do. If you've ever heard a pair of Quad 57 speakers, you know exactly what I'm talking about. For those that haven't, the Accordos provide a beguiling midrange combined with flawless coherence that rivals the 57 in many ways, yet still offering the dynamic push that a cone speaker does.

Those wanting the major dynamics of a

great floorstander, will be better served by the Sonus faber Olympica IIIs we reviewed last issue, or the lovely PMC twenty.26, reviewed here. They both have a similar pricetag and offer a much more full range response. But bass isn't everything and if you want a tonal purity matched by few other speakers at any price and have a musical palette to match, the Accordo is the speaker you will want to be buried with.

● You can read the full review here.



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PMC TWENTY.26

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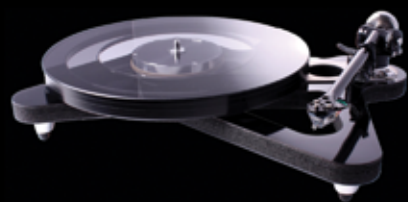
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