

CHROMA: OFC

FUTURE SPEED

STARLIGHT: SILVER-CLAD OFC

AVAILABLE NOW

PLATINUM STARLIGHT: OCC-7N SOLID SILVER

new CATEGORY 8 ETHERNET CABLES

with Tite-Shield™ Technology

Patent-pending triple-shielded design

Thin, flexible, easy to assemble and install

Solid 23 gauge parallel conductors

2GHz bandwidth, 40 Gbit/sec @ 30 meters

Surprisingly lifelike sound and imaging



Other cables filter your music.
Wireworld cables let the most music through.

Technology that channels musical expression.

© 2017 Wireworld, Inc.

www.wireworldcable.com

WIREWORLD®
CABLE TECHNOLOGY

Engineered for Reality™

TONEAudio

Music.Gear.Style.

No.82 February 2017

Magnifique!

Focal's Sopra No.3
Challenges the World's Finest

SPRING STARTS EARLY: Authoritative Reviews of New Albums from Granddaddy, Alison Krauss, Nikki Lane, Laura Marling, Tift Merritt, Imelda May, The Regrettes, Sleaford Mods, John Abercombie, and More

50 SONG MEMOIR: The Audacious Artistry of the Magnetic Fields' 5LP Autobiographical Opus

Audiophile Pressings Returns with Bob Dylan, RUN-DMC, and More

American Muscle from MartinLogan and McIntosh

VINTAGE BRILLIANCE FROM CONRAD-JOHNSON

A Sneak Peek at Esoteric and Sonus faber

Listen to Your Speakers In A New Way

Don't let your existing wired loudspeakers miss out on high-resolution streaming audio. Paradigm's new PW AMP delivers 200-Watts of Ultra Class-D power and lets you wirelessly stream high-resolution audio to existing loudspeakers over your home Wi-Fi network. Set-up is simple, app control is easy, and your options are unlimited. Go wireless, with Paradigm-level performance.

Exclusive **Anthem Room Correction (ARC™)** technology uses a digital microphone with advanced DSP algorithms to correct for room distortions in any space.

You'll actually hear the difference ARC makes.



Wireless Freedom. Paradigm Performance. A Better Audio Experience.

Stream music to any **Paradigm Premium Wireless Series** product using your Android, PC or iOS device. Only Paradigm delivers wireless performance that is truly on par with traditional non-streaming audio systems.

PREMIUM
WIRELESS series



ANTHEM
ARC Room Correction Technology

Paradigm
Visit paradigm.com for more info.

CONTENTS



11. PUBLISHER’S LETTER



features

- 14 Old School:
Conrad-Johnson’s MV-60SE
By Jeff Dorgay
- 62 Journeyman Audiophile:
The G-Lab Block Amplifier
By Jeff Dorgay
- 106 995: **Sounds That Won’t Break The Bank**
Gold Note’s Vasari Gold
By Jeff Dorgay

CONTENTS



tone style

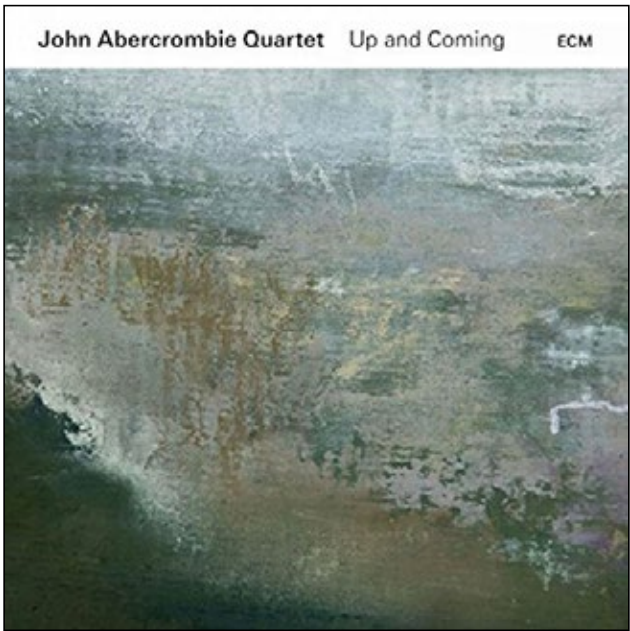
- 70 WINO: Malbec
The Argentina Star Grape with French Roots
By Monique Meadows
- 83 Panono 360-Degree Camera
Add New Dimensions to Your Photos
- 84 Epson Home Cinema Projector
Budget Big Screen Fun
- 86 Charge Tech Classic
Portable Power for Your Tech
- 87 Dyson V6 Handheld Vacuum
Faster Charge for Going the Distance
- 88 *The Art of Jay Ward Productions*
1000 Cartoon Images in One Book
- 91 John Varvatos Suede
Morrison Sharpei Boots
Step Out in Rock n’ Roll Style
- 92 Anker Lightning Cable
Extended iPhone Reach at Half the Price
- 93 New Wave Ornament Set
Add Musical Character to Next Year’s Tree



CONTENTS



©Photo by Jessica Lehrman



98. John Abercrombie Quartet
Up and Coming

music

- 22. SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE:**
Reviews of New Pop/Rock and Country Albums *by Chrissie Dickinson, Bob Gendron and Todd Martens*
- 94. JAZZ & BLUES:**
Mostly Other People Do the Killing, John Abercrombie Quartet, and Tania Chen, Henry Kaiser, Wadada Leo Smith & William Winant *by Jim Macnie and Kevin Whitehead*
- 112. AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS:**
Kruder & Dorfmeister, Bob Dylan, Run-D.M.C., and the Rolling Stones *by Jeff Dorgay*

CONTENTS

gear previews

- 120. Sonus faber Venere S Speakers**
121. Esoteric F-07 Integrated Amplifier
122. Conrad-Johnson TEA 1 Series 2

gear reviews

- 124. Viola Labs Sonata Preamp**
A Quiet Masterpiece
By Greg Petan
- 134. Focal Sopra no.3 Speakers**
A Sonic and Stylistic Triumph
By Jeff Dorgay
- 144. McIntosh MB50 Streamer**
Flexible in Every Scenario
By Greg Petan
- 152. Audio Physic Tempo plus Speakers**
Super Sound That Won't Break the Bank
By Rob Johnson
- 162. The Technics SL-1200G**
Turning the Clock Back and Forth
By Jeff Dorgay
- 172. MartinLogan's Expressions ESL 13A**
Solid Advancement in Every Way
By Jeff Dorgay



162

from the web

- 184. Shinola Runwell Turntable**
186. Graham Audio Chartwell LS 3/5
189. Sygyzy SLF-850 Subwoofer
- 191. Slummin'**
192. Music Links
195. Manufacturer Links



Nonchalance. Corner composition in leather, design Roche Bobois Studio.
Agrafe. Cocktail table and end table, design Cristián Mohaded.
Full Moon. Lamp and floor lamp, design Cédric Ragot.
Manufactured in Europe.

PORTLAND - 1025 SW Washington Street - Tel. (503) 459-0020 - portland@roche-boboïs.com

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Though we never bother with hifi show reports, I must admit there was some great sound going on in nearly every room visited at this year's Consumer Electronics Show. While attendance was down and accompanied by moderate grouching, the people that did show up to the dance were well prepared, with more attention paid to system setup and room aesthetics. It was nice to see high-end audio paid the respect that it's due, and this is a trend that I hope to see more of in the months to come.

There's a lot of fun between the pages this issue, but I must express a personal favorite that might minimize some of the anxiety that befalls all of us, the more serious we get about sound. I praise the benefits of a low-resolution system. Think of it as a palette cleanser for your ears and your perspective.

While you can head substantially down market to achieve this goal, I suggest a vintage system for so many reasons. First, it's an excellent way to revisit hifi's past. Second, seeking out a great pair of vintage speakers and a receiver can be a fun treasure hunt, and third, there's just something about the old-school aesthetic that is inviting. This is why we've covered vintage gear in-depth since TONE's inception.

As I edit the photos for this issue, bathed in the light of four big flat screen monitors, I'm sitting at my desk between a pair of ADS L400 speakers powered by a Marantz 2245 receiver that was lovingly restored by Erik Owen and his staff at Gig Harbor Audio.



Much like restoring an old house, car or motorcycle, there's a connection from resurrecting something that could have been easily scrapped that you just don't get from a new component. It's certainly not the only way to go, but I suggest you give it a try if you haven't already.

Yes, the bass is a little muddy and the highs slightly rolled off via that old Marantz, but damn if that glowing FM dial isn't cool. Nearly everything I stream on TIDAL, or spin on my old Technics SL-1200mk.2 (check out the review on the revised version of this classic on page...) sounds remarkably inviting. I'm not thinking about imaging, VTA, or anything else, just the music. What's bad about that?

Finally, the most fun part (at least for me) is going back to the reference system and not only being even more excited about what it can accomplish but reflecting on just how much progress the people that have dedicated their lives to make hifi gear sound better. It's pretty awesome when you think about it. And that's what keeps me working every day.

See you at the nearest yard sale.

PUBLISHER Jeff Dorgay

MUSIC EDITOR Bob Gendron
GEAR/WEB EDITOR Ellen Green

ART DIRECTOR Jean LaCrosse

MEDIA SUPPORT Terry Currier
Tom Caselli

RESEARCH Earl Blanton
Ken Mercereau

AUDIO HISTORIAN Ken Kessler

SENIOR Jaan Uhelszki
CONTRIBUTOR

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS Bailey S. Barnard
Aaron Cohen
John Darko
Paul DeMara
Lawrence Devoe
Chrissie Dickinson
Andrea Domanick
Andy Downing
Rob Johnson
Jim Macnie
Richard Mak
Andre Marc
Mark Marcantonio
Todd Martens
Monique Meadows
Jerold O'Brien
Kevin Whitehead
Annie Zalewski
Jeff Zaret

CARTOONIST Liza Donnelly

WEBSITE bloodymonster.com

Editor Questions and
Comments:
tonepub@yahoo.com

©2016 TONE AUDIO MAGAZINE
All rights reserved.

Follow us on Facebook.

(You never know what we'll get into next.)



www.facebook.com/tonepub2

IL CREMONESE

Ant. Ferdinani



History, remade.

Sonus faber

WOM

sonusfaber.com

Conrad Johnson's MV-60SE

By Jeff Dorgay

For those of you that haven't been reading this column for years, my enjoyment of the small Conrad-Johnson tube power amplifiers goes back. Way back to 1986 when I purchased a new MV-50, after years of thinking solid-state was the way to go. I've been using C-J preamplifiers since the first PV-1, but it took me a while to wrap my brain around a tube power amplifier. The MV-50 had so much three-dimensionality compared to the Adcom 555 I was listening to at the time, I couldn't resist it. That little gold power amp anchored my system for years, only to be replaced by an Audio Research D-79. In the meantime, I managed to live with the earlier MV-45 and MV-75, along with the MV-52, MV-55 and (a stretch) the LP70s. Suffice to say; I've spent a lot of time with this configuration. Blame it on Stereophile's Sam Tellig. He always had so much affection for the smaller C-J amps; it was tough to ignore them.



FEATURE



FEATURE

The amplifier always missing from my experience was the MV-60 or MV-60SE. The MV-60 used four EL-34 tubes to produce 55 watts per channel, through a pair of output transformers very similar to what C-J used in the much more expensive Premier 11 power amplifier. The SE model has an identical power rating, but utilizes a pair of 6550 tubes per channel, with a correspondingly different tonal balance; the 6550/KT88 offers a bit more oomph in the lower register, and many feel does not provide quite the midrange “sweetness” of the EL-34. I know, you say potato.

When introduced in 2000, the SE model had a price of \$2,995, going up to \$3,500 when discontinued a few years later. Compared to so much of what is available today, this was a steal. The beautiful example you see before you was purchased on Ebay for a few hundred bucks because the owner claimed it did not work. Fortunately, it survived dreadfully inept packaging to make it my way, and only needed a set of tubes. Whenever the UPS man delivers a piece of electronics that is rattling about in the box, you tend to suspect the worst. But the amplifier (tubes still in sockets, yikes!) came out of

the box unscathed.

Though compact in size, only 17.625" wide, 13" deep and 7" tall, the MV-60SE looks like a baby Premier amplifier, with the removable tube cage making up part of the front panel design. Should you decide to run without the cage, be sure to stop by Home Depot and get some nuts to secure the two hex bolts that attach to the cage. This looks better than just a pair of holes in the front panel. Around back, the rear panel gets a major facelift over the MV-50 and 52 models. The familiar barrier strip offering 4, 8, and 16-ohm taps is now gone, with a single pair of Cardas binding posts in their place.

The amplifier is permanently connected to the output transformers' 4-ohm taps but can be sent back to C-J to be configured for a higher setting. Like its predecessors, the MV-60SE can also be internally rewired to operate in triode mode, offering a slightly softer sound, but with lower output. It will only produce 25 watts per channel in triode mode, so think twice before making the commitment. As I recall, my MV-50 was pretty sweet in triode mode with a pair of Quad 57s but didn't have enough juice for the dynamic speakers at my disposal. *(continued)*

FEATURE

With no 6550 or KT-88 tubes on hand, a quick call to Bill Johnson reveals that the MV-60SE can work with current KT-120 tubes without issue. Johnson claims “It might only produce a couple more watts, but it will sound just fine.” Procuring some 6550s for comparison, Mr. Johnson is indeed right. The level of volume produced by the KT120 is indistinguishable from the 6550, but the KT-120s provide more grip on the lower bass region and slightly more bass extension. I wouldn’t scrap a perfectly good set of 6550s to upgrade, but if you are re-tubing anyway, I would suggest the KT-120s. I did notice that these do require dialing the bias up a bit higher than the 6550 though, so you won’t have as much room to increase bias as the KT120s age.

Extended listening reveals the MV60SE has much more in common with the tonal character of my current C-J reference, the LP125sa+ than the MV-50 from decades ago. The MV-50 is delectable, with a tonal richness similar to a vintage McIntosh or even the legendary Marantz 8, the MV60SE is a modern tube amplifier. Thanks to staffer Jerold O’Brien who has a pristine example of the MV-50 on hand to compare, the improved circuit design and newer output transformers, it’s easy to tell the difference. *(continued)*

FEATURE



FEATURE



Where the MV-50 loses control in the lowest bass, the MV-60SE musters more extension and control. The driving bass line of Grace Jones' *Nightclubbing* is tough to pinpoint using the Focal Sopra no.1 speakers, yet a quick swap to the MV-60SE keeps things in check and produces more low frequency output as well. The studio effects are more of a revelation on the new amplifier, and the three-dimensional sound field painted is much broader and deeper.

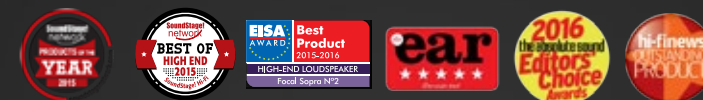
All of the beautiful midrange that you might remember from early C-J amplifiers is still here with the MV-60SE, yet more musical information is available at both ends of the spectrum, so that's progress! Hailing from the early part of the 21st cen-

tury, think of the MV-60SE as a recent classic, more like an E46 BMW M3. With a current example in excellent shape running around \$1,400, this amplifier is an excellent way to begin a journey with vacuum tubes. It's basic layout of four KT120 output tubes along with a pair of 6SN7s and 12AX7s, those wanting to experiment with tube rolling can have a lot of latitude.

And, if you'd like to take your MV-60SE into the present, Conrad-Johnson offers an upgrade to their famous CJD Teflon caps. I've done this before on an MV-50 with stunning results, so we'll be sending this one back home for an update. Watch for the details when it returns. No matter which way you go, here's to your journey. ●



WELCOME N°3 TO THE ACCLAIMED SOPRA FAMILY



SOPRA N°1

SOPRA N°2

SOPRA N°3



www.focal.com

USA • Distribution by Audio Plus Services — CANADA • Distribution by Plurison

NEW RELEASES

M

ore than 100 instruments played, a dozen-plus collaborators involved, and a chronological account of one man's life documented by one song for each year of his existence. It's tempting to measure the improbable *50 Song Memoir* in numbers, but quantitative figures don't come close to capturing the unhinged ambition, scope, and humor of the Magnetic Fields' autobiographical opus. Originally the idea of Nonesuch's then-president, Bob Hurwitz, the trove serves as a year-by-year chronicle of bandleader Stephin Merritt's life from the time he turned one through his 50th birthday. The idea seems even crazier given record labels' bottom lines and tightened budgets in the download/streaming era—who, really, gets invited to make five-LP studio records—until one considers Merritt's background and following.

Best-known for penning fantastically smart songs, Merritt emerged from the indie underground in 1999 with *69 Love Songs*, a triple-disc concept album released more than a decade after the group formed. It remains a signpost of his prolific output. In addition to owning 11 albums under the Magnetic Fields name, Merritt has released original music under various side projects—the Gothic Archies, Future Bible Heroes, and 6ths included. He's also responsible for music theater pieces, contributions to NPR's "This American Life," and soundtracks. The openly gay 52-year-old musician does a majority of his work in his home studio, graced with rooms filled with eccentric instruments that, along with Merritt's deep baritone and deadpan delivery, stamp songs with a distinctiveness teetering between the lines of idiosyncratic, ironic, and intellectual.

Merritt's poker-faced vocals, old-fashioned melodies, and meticulous arrangements are among the key elements that sew *50 Song Memoir* together and provide consistency. But the reasons to invest hours absorbing the content—even if you're unfamiliar with the singer—extend beyond such hallmark aspects found on other Magnetic Fields efforts. Akin to an alluring literary biography that never takes itself too seriously, and whose themes touch on universal thoughts and concerns, *50 Song Memoir* takes the form of a true-fiction history of growing up in

a nomadic, oddball family during the 1960s and 70s, and, subsequently, surviving as an adult amidst a mine field of romantic disasters, self-doubts, and daily challenges. Like a novel that leads to late nights spent curled up reading on the couch, the record tells a damn good story.

The bigger hook? Merritt's dagger-sharp wit and uncanny way of filtering experiences, recollections, and sentiments into tidy, digestible songs punctuated with exacting details, stimulating digressions, and palpable honesty. His approach affords needed focus and fluidity. *50 Song Memoir* revels in the benefits afforded by anal-retentive organization. By doing so, it improbably avoids becoming boring, dense, or circuitous. Every song is attached to a year. Each LP or CD contains 10 songs—one for each decade of Merritt's life. Rhymed couplets and one-liner zingers abound. Crises, both emotional and situational, continually reoccur. No subject appears off-limits.

Particularly not the string of dubious male figures surfacing in Merritt's younger days. Or series of unfortunate circumstances that conspire to shape a long-established gloomy outlook that, by the time he was only six, encourages him to withdraw, fantasize, and escape into his own realm ("71 I Think I'll Make Another World"). Sometimes, Merritt frames a year

**The Magnetic Fields***50 Song Memoir*

Nonesuch, 5LP box set, 5CD box set, or bound book with download

via an entertaining memory such as residing in Hawaii ("73 It Could Have Been Paradise") and uses the account to show a prevailing notion false. Other times, he draws on a particular 12-month period to serve as a straightforward depiction of past events ("93 Me and Fred and Dave and Ted").

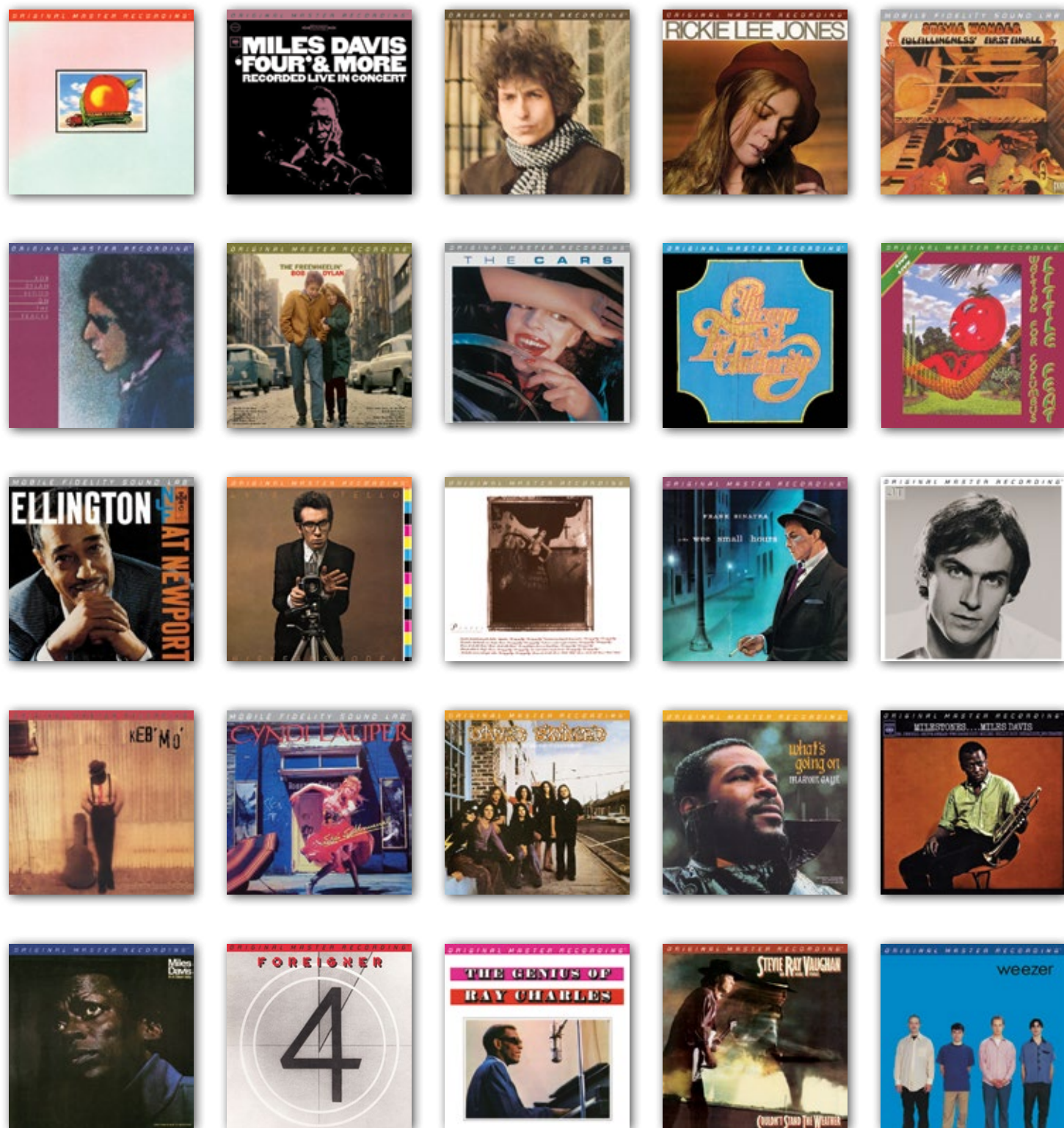
The lyrical tactic brims with possibility and Merritt doesn't disappoint. He also views years as conduits for metaphor ("90 Dreaming in Tetris"), instruction ("81 How to Play the Synthesizer"), cynicism ("79 Rock'n'Roll Will

Ruin Your Life"), homage ("83 Foxx and I"), equality ("69 Judy Garland"), desire ("15 Somebody's Fetish"), dance ("76 Hustle '76"), heartbreak ("09 'Til You Come Back to Me"), drinking ("02 Be True to Your Bar"), vengeance ("77 Life Ain't All Bad"), companionship ("68 A Cat Called Dionysus"), love ("95 A Serious Mistake"), beauty ("01 Have You Seen It in the Snow"), sadness ("05 Never Again"), hardship ("94 Haven't Got a Penny"), and health ("92 Weird Diseases").
(continued)

Mobile Fidelity

The Original Audiophile Record Label.
Still Producing the World's Finest
LPs, SACDs and 24K Gold CDs.

www.mofi.com



Whimsy, subversion, and slyness emerge via deft touches an interior decorator would appreciate. Merritt proves himself an expert arranger and scene setter.

Magnetic Fields' colorful parade of compositions is equally fine. Drawing from baroque, synthpop, chamber pop, folk, new wave, gospel, showbiz, disco, and other disciplines, and tethered to Tin Pan Alley and Stephen Sondheim traditions, *50 Song Memoir* comes on as a multifaceted cabaret of sound, texture, and effect. Merritt used whiteboards and Post-It notes to keep tabs on the instruments. He attempted to employ seven instruments per track and limit the appearance of each one to seven tracks. In total, he played more than 100 devices—National Resonator ukulele, log drum, Andes melodica, Roland TR-606 Drumatix drum machine, charango, bowed psaltery, wind chime, Farfisa organ, electric sitar, glockenspiel, prepared piano, Sequential Circuits Prophet-5 synthesizer, Oscar Schmidt autoharp, and cowbell among the sonic armada.

Given the undertaking's heft, Merritt and friends occasionally stumble. But those moments are rare on a record elevated by astute songwriting, plot advances, and wild albeit well-centered stylistic variation. Both the analog and digital box sets include facsimile handwritten lyrics and a lengthy, thoroughly amusing, insightfully rewarding interview with Merritt. Eat your heart out, Broadway. —**Bob Gendron**

©Photo by Marcelo Krasilnic



Alison Krauss

Windy City
Capitol, LP or CD

Listening to *Windy City*, Alison Krauss' lovely new album of classic country covers, took me down memory lane to the very source of one of the songs. In the late 1990s, at a luncheon at the governor's mansion in Nashville to honor that year's batch of Country Music Hall of Fame inductees, I found myself seated next to Cindy Walker, a previous winner and one of the greatest songwriters the genre ever produced. Walker—who passed away in 2006—was 80 years old at the time. Frail yet lovely, she remained a shining light of country's golden age.

Although I had interviewed famous people for years, Walker's legend was so immense I remained tongue-tied. Except for some friendly introductions, I was rendered as speechless as the narrator in her greatest creation, "You Don't Know Me." Based on a title and an idea by country singer Eddy Arnold, the song is an extraordinary monologue about unspoken desires and the secret interior worlds we build. The lyrics are written from the perspective of a man too afraid to reveal his feelings to the woman he loves. She sees him as a friend. In the end, he watches helplessly as she walks away with "the lucky guy." The narrator's private world soundlessly collapses while his love remains unspoken.

On *Windy City*, Krauss puts her stamp on this epic with lyrical adjustments that reverse the genders and make the bereft narrator a woman. Her exquisitely sad and softly pulsing version reminds us why "You Don't Know Me" mattered in the first place and still matters today—heartache always hurts the same. With it, Krauss proves herself an artist with the subtle insight to refresh this operatic tragedy for a new generation.

A seasoned singer and fiddler equally at home in bluegrass, country, and pop, Krauss continues to be a keeper of the flame of country's history. "You Don't Know Me" has been recorded by many artists through the years, but the singer draws inspiration from the two most resilient versions: Arnold's country-politan torch song and Ray Charles' R&B heartbreaker. *(continued)*

mu-sic mil-len-ni-um

a place where the music & people still matter



#9 on the List of Best Record Stores in the Country



One of America's Best Record Stores

www.musicmillennium.com

3158 E. Burnside
Portland, Oregon 97214
Phone: (503) 231-8926

Reference

Reorchestrated



THERE IS ONLY ONE REFERENCE®

Audio Research introduced its first Reference Series components in 1995 with the intent of elevating the state-of-the-art to a new plateau, providing the most realistic and engaging musical experience possible. Those Reference products became iconic. Now, more than twenty years later, our singular goal remains.

The new **Reference 6** line-stage and the **Reference Phono 3** phono preamp are the latest products that advance the art of music playback.

Here are just some of the latest advancements:

- Reengineered analog stage featuring six 6H30 tubes
- Larger power transformers and power supply
- Proprietary coupling capacitors designed specifically for each product
- Rigid, mass-loaded chassis for superior mechanical and electrical isolation

Everything we have done is simply a means to an end, to provide an unparalleled listening experience so real and engaging that you won't want it to end.

Visit your Audio Research dealer to understand - There is only One Reference®

audio research
HIGH DEFINITION®

www.audioresearch.com

MUSIC



Krauss' approach is mindful and delicate, her quivering soprano an arrow to the heart. She avoids histrionics. By refusing to overstate the case, she quietly unearths the emotional catastrophe occurring at the heart of the tune.

The singer maintains such bittersweet precision across the other nine tracks on this warm, frequently heart-wrenching, and always moving set. Veteran Nashville producer Buddy Cannon surrounds her with a modern A-Team of session players, including pianist Matt Rollings and guitarists Richard Bennett and Brent Mason. Many of the arrangements are slightly modernized versions of the Nashville Sound, the country-goes-uptown style that began in the 1950s and emphasized lush country-pop crossover arrangements over harder honky-tonk. Iconic vocalist Patsy

Cline counts as one of its greatest exemplars, and Krauss is a worthy acolyte.

Windy City teems with sensitively conveyed lovelorn tales. On the tearjerker "Losing You," Krauss resuscitates the piercing ache of the Brenda Lee original. For the title track, Krauss takes on the persona of a sad woman who has lost her man to the lure of a city's nightlife. Written and recorded in 1964 by Willie Nelson and a reminder—in case you need one—of his arresting songwriting chops, "I Never Cared For You" witnesses Krauss ruefully singing "the sun is filled with ice and gives no warmth at all...and I never cared for you" against a Latin-tinged arrangement.

Joyful moments are tucked among the tears. John Hartford's remembrance of love without

strings, "Gentle on My Mind," was most famously recorded by Glen Campbell. Krauss honors that version while adding her own glistening spin with a cascade of piano notes, restrained horns, and sadly plucked guitar. "It's Goodbye and So Long to You" emerges as up-tempo country-bluegrass kiss-off with backing vocals courtesy of Krauss' Union Station bandmate Dan Tyminski. "Poison Love," originally recorded by the father of bluegrass, Bill Monroe, hits a subdued Tex-Mex groove.

Krauss has always been a class act, eschewing the flashy move for the deeply considered statement. *Windy City* is a fine addition to her considerable body of work that has earned her a record 27 Grammy Awards. She might want to make room on the shelf for a few more.
—**Chrissie Dickinson**



©Photo by Jessica Lehrman

love. I hate you.

Prepare for emotional whiplash when listening to Nikki Lane's *Highway Queen*, the third and most polished album from the country-leaning rock n' roller. From the excitement of a new crush to the dissolution of a marriage, Lane in 10 songs hits on all the drama, pain, and exhilaration that course through grown-up life—and does so with more than a hint of hellraising. Tapping into a tradition fermented by the likes of Rosanne Cash, Neko Case, and Lucinda Williams, Lane with *Highway Queen* should leap to the top of the current rootsy Americana revival led by the likes of Sturgill Simpson, Chris Stapleton, and Kacey Musgraves.

Highway Queen is a highly passionate rollercoaster, and the key to the album's success relates to how such ricocheting never seems contradictory. Instead, *Highway Queen* captures the spirit of a restless heart and a wandering soul—the tales of a modern cowboy looking for love and breaking hearts all while hoping to come across a bit of dough, depending on the hour. Feelings change as frequent as the weather. Where Lane stands from song to song—and where she heads musically—remains unexpected. Heck, it's not even clear if she likes her fans.

Lane immediately sets high expectations with “700,000 Rednecks,” a sundown-weary, blues-meets-Western put-down of modern fame and success. Her seen-it-all vocals are laced with bitterness. Ryan Ake's guitar unfolds like a middle finger extending in slow motion. While she appears to be singing about making it to the top of the charts, the sentiment works if she were referring to, say, winning elections. Her view of the populous? Suspicious, to say the least. It takes 700,000 rednecks, Lane tells us, “to get to the top.” “Tell me,” she sings, her tone a mix of anger and shame, “do you wanna see him play?” It's a bold move, opening an album with a song that may in fact be slamming some folks that buy it. Yet brazenness ranks as one of Lane's strongest qualities.

So yes, there's rage on *Highway Queen*. But Lane, based in Nashville, where she also runs a vintage clothing store, largely keeps it reserved, opting for the tension of a clinched fist rather than the release of a punch. “If you can tie her down, you can bottle lightning,” Lane sings on the title track, where incendiary choruses give way to expansive pedal-steel vistas. Things get darker and more ruminative during “Lay You Down,” on which a man's last night gets met with a mix of tears and indifference. “We've left it all up to the toss of a dime,” Lane sings with the detached and stern feel of a narrator. The song, a mini-orchestra of about six guitars, mixes acoustic warmth with more assertive electric tones, all building to a country-&-western-like version of the Rolling Stones' “Sympathy for the Devil.”



Nikki Lane

Highway Queen

New West Records, LP or CD

A good portion of *Highway Queen* devotes itself to more personal matters of the heart—from the gamblin' and settlin' nature of romance that is “Jackpot,” graced with fiery, Jerry Lee Lewis-inspired keyboard notes—to the mistrust of one's own feelings on “Foolish Heart,” a slow-burner with a fiddle built for a dirge. Lane, approaching her mid-30s, also takes a wide-angle view on numbers such as “Forever Lasts Forever,” a ballad dedicated to a fading marriage and loaded with evocative imagery. “The only ring left on my finger is a lighter shade of skin,” she sings over a weeping slide guitar, her normally hard-hearted voice aching with vulnerability.

Highway Queen continues the freewheeling approach Lane brought to *All or Nothin'*, her 2014 album produced by Dan Auerbach of the Black Keys. Whereas Lane's aggressive, non-country influences take center stage there, *Highway Queen* chooses a subtler approach. Here, Lane's more diverse tendencies casually drift in and out—the proto-rock n' roll, old-timey pop of “Companion,” the rough-and-tumble rhythm-&-blues feel of “Big Mouth,” the charming, lullaby feel of “Send the Sun.”

This is music that lets you know what it wants to say upfront, but then keeps you guessing along the way. —**Todd Martens**



Grandaddy

Last Place

30th Century Records, LP or CD



Grandaddy delights in the fine art of contrast. Back at the turn of the century, the band captured the zeitgeist of the emerging technology age with *The Sophtware Slump*, a groundbreaking album that dared address the soul-hollowing consequences of the constant stream of digitally advanced products and next-best things that continue to dominate the landscape. Leader Jason Lytle laced songs not with anger or proselytizing, but with warmth and wit, a combination that still feels bizarrely beautiful and modernly nostalgic.

The collective revisits related themes of obsolescence, isolation, and waste on the exceptional *Last Place*, its first album in more than a decade and first since initially breaking up in 2006. In the time since, Lytle issued a handful of lukewarm solo efforts and bounced around a few cities. He also endured a painful romantic breakup, an experience that provides inspiration for multiple works here. Yet personal heartbreak—and the accompanying feelings of depression, resentment, and bitterness—serves as a larger steppingstone for broader concerns involving the environment, identity, and dreams. Or, more specifically, their loss.

For Lytle, clever turns of phrases and warped scenarios provide further opportunity for dichotomy. No matter the dystopian construct or fractured imagery at hand, Grandaddy chases them with wraparound-360 melodies that suggest bewilderment—if not twisted optimism. Indeed, the band's swirled blend of manipulated sounds, gauzy synthesizers, shambling acoustics, and power-pop riffs position *Last Place* as a cross between a space-rock journey and pocket symphony.

ELO and Jeff Lynne would be proud even if they might not recognize the lower-key production.

Lytle's gentle, unthreatening, cough-syrup haze of a voice floats above songs akin to misty fog hovering over a mountain lake. His non-saccharine albeit sweet falsetto nearly masks the lyrical content while his lullaby tones serve to catch the listener off guard. At once oblique and straightforward, Grandaddy's approach exposes a chasm between the elegant arrangements, the tragedies relayed by the narratives, and the ability to survive bleakness by way of black humor. For all the pulsing keyboards, reverse-direction tape loops, and Casio blips, *Last Place* sounds remarkably human.

Aptly, human behavior resides at the core of the album-opening "Way We Won't," a clever tale of a couple that sets up permanent camp on the roof of a big-box store. Smear with gleaming keyboards, lilting harmonies, and crunching notes that mimic the sound of walking in freshly fallen snow, the tumbling-forward tune functions as a sniping retort of suburbia and too-real account of the

meaningless material pleasures and events that dictate the joy in many people's lives.

Contemporary mores and gloom also dot the oddly soothing "The Boat Is in the Barn" wherein an adversary's identity can be allegedly erased simply by pressing the "delete" button on a smartphone. Grandaddy delves into related melancholy during the tense piano-based "This Is the Part," where Lytle's whispers and sighs seemingly fall off a cliff and faux strings carry the composition away into epic territory.

Loneliness echoes throughout the 11-track set. Peace usually proves elusive. The edited electronic soundscapes of "Jed the 4th," a sequel to *The Sophtware Slump*'s "Jed the Humanoid" that extends its predecessor's alcoholic motifs, express displacement and brokenness. Grandaddy plays Lytle's autobiographical "I Don't Wanna Live Here Anymore" without a trace of irony. The tractor-beam pull of the corrugated grooves belies its emptiness and dissatisfaction. Failure, and self-berating, similarly colors the think-piece "That's What You Get for Gettin' Outta Bed." (continued)



Not to worry, however. The steadily looped “Evermore” initially promises what went astray isn’t forgotten and that, yes, there’s more to be had. But Granddaddy soon turns everything on its head. On one hand, the assurance is only an illusion—a con, just like so many marketing claims and online-dating personalities. On the other, the pledge rings true in that yesterday’s items do still linger—clogging waterways, spoiling scenic byways, emitting gas in landfills. And more keep arriving everyday.

“You grieve like a freeway tree/Old and grey, no love in your leaves,” Lytle observes, extending the stark connection between actions, consequences, and nature. The video for the song constantly depicts a plane flying over an unspoiled open pasture and dropping garbage into the valley below. Welcome to the bright future, Granddaddy style.

—**Bob Gendron**

Balanced Audio Technology

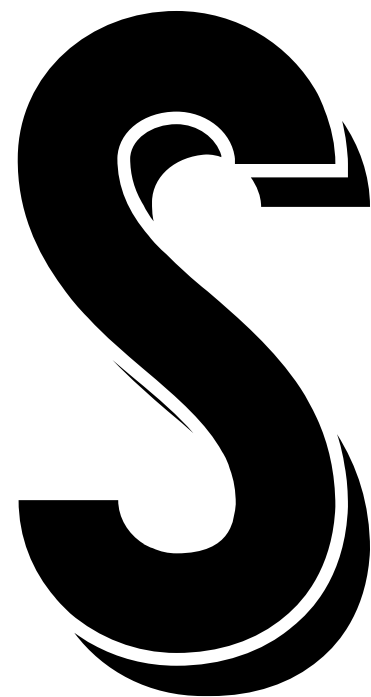
ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS LISTEN



CHECK OUT OUR NEW SITE BALANCED.COM


Sleaford Mods

English Tapas
Rough Trade, LP or CD



Sleaford Mods traffic in a modified form of English. No, that isn't a reference to Jason Williamson's thick, dense British accent that will likely send you running to the lyric sheets. Rather, it's about the fact the minimalist noise-punk beat-focused duo only speaks in anger.

Current cult favorites after a string of small-scale releases, the duo of Williamson and Andrew Fearn signed with esteemed U.K. indie Rough Trade in 2016. Sleaford Mods are certainly considered an act on the verge, and the duo will stage its first-ever U.S. tour in 2017.

The great strength of *English Tapas* is that it has a point-of-view—and that it sticks with it. Imagine a sort of amalgam of leftist folkie Billy Bragg and riotous hip-hop group Run the Jewels. Sleaford Mods present a hard-edged, low-to-the-ground digital soundscape for Williamson's orator-like delivery.

Williamson's ire is untamed throughout. His rapid-fire sing-rapping channels the cynic at the end of the bar, taking aim at everything from Brexit to organic meat to pretentious twats on social media. But his fury isn't necessarily unfocused. His quarrels are of the everyday sort: The concerns and frustrations of living paycheck to paycheck outside the purview of a seemingly detached ruling class. Good news: Williamson is funny when he's mad.

"I'm making sure I don't give my kids anything to feel...embarrassed about," he sings of his approach to Snapchat. A father of two and in his mid-40s, Williamson also has a rather varied crop of battle scars and even brings a sense of humor to his assessment of the current political climate. "I didn't mean to pray for...anarchy," he snaps. His remains an out-sized, abrasive, love-it-or-leave-it personality. And it permeates *English Tapas*—rhyming, hollering, and scatting over deceptively simple electronic-based backdrops.

The album feels of the moment, tapping into the with-us-or-against-us tone of modern Western politics. Its on-the-nose

©Photo by Roger Sargent



fury engenders a side effect in that the album's running time feels longer than 37 minutes. It's a workout, meaning a little of Sleaford Mods goes a long way. That's not a criticism but a word of caution. It takes patience to stay on top of Williams' rapid-fire poetics and English slang. The vision, while laced with sarcasm, is bleak.

"Carlton Trouts," where people drink because it's all they can afford to do, sounds like a car scraping off a highway guardrail. The poverty documented on "Dull" is so oppressive that souls can't even be sold anymore; the groove shakes and shimmies like a brush thrown in a coffee tin. "Drayton Manored," taking its name after a theme park and constructed around a disconnected-phone-like beeping, zeroes in on the emptiness of mass entertainment. "BHS" compares the wealth of the working class to a defunct British department store, with Fearn's beats moving like a lie detector in panic mode.

Sleaford Mods aren't necessarily meant to be a comfort. Jarring and coarse, *English Tapas* challenges our attachment to escapism. It asks to be considered as a document of daily life, daring you to question why it's a difficult listen.

—Todd Martens

Beyonce's *Lemonade* the Regrettes' *Feel Your Feelings Fool!* is not. But make no mistake: The Los Angeles band's infectious, live-in-and-for-the-moment debut functions as a nearly equally empowering female-led statement of independence, assertiveness, and vulnerability. Free of glossy production, the co-ed quartet's high-energy songs come across with a mix of unabashed honesty, outspoken urgency, and moody flippancy. They're the equivalent of natural, casual conversations—all of which involve Lydia Night.

Led by the fearless frontwoman, the Regrettes marry classic elements of 50s soul, 60s girl-group pop, early rock n' roll, and garage rock with punk brashness, rough-around-the-edges simplicity, and contemporary spirit. The music—which evokes cult favorites such as the Muffs, the Fastbacks, Joan Jett, and *Celebration Skin*-era Hole—doesn't break any ground. And it needn't when the hooks come this big and blustery.



The Regrettes

Feel Your Feelings Fool!
Warner Bros., CD

Or when the heart-on-a-sleeve emotions and straight-from-a-diary lyrics make such personal-to-public connections. The exclamatory title of the quartet's album doubles as an overarching theme: The Regrettes prize feelings and genuine expression. In an age in which many artists seem afraid to share their thoughts and hide behind studio trickery, the Regrettes' candor, confidence, and rawness take on even greater significance.

"I'm not a bitch for stating what is real," Night declares on "A Living Human Girl," a potent tango-etched tune that finds the vocalist cataloging her traits—physical and emotional—with attention-getting brazenness. For most of us, features like pimples, stretch marks, shaving bumps, and moodiness are meant to be hidden. For Night, they're badges of genuine personhood. As is her period, a matter-of-fact event that, like many circumstances revealed on *Feel Your Feelings Fool!*,



©Photo by Jen Rosenstein

Night turns into a proud proclamation of feminine autonomy and esteem. "I'm still gonna be here even after your best shot," Night declares toward song's end before spending the remainder of the 16-track set demonstrating why. Her bandmates have her back at every turn.

Not one to mince words, yet cognizant of the delicacy of relationship partners, Night couches a slight apology within a firm rejection on the splashy "I Don't Like You," her bubblegum-chew voice rattling with a sass and sensuality that mirror the group's fuzz-blasted melodies. "How It Should Be" starts as a stumbling, dazed stupor in advance of revving up into a fist-pumping manifestation of self-sufficiency and self-worth.

"Lots of girls feel so worthless/ They depend on him to make them feel again," Night laments. She and the Regrettes then proceed to lead by example, transforming the song into a joyful ruckus about saying goodbye, damning expectations, and reclaiming identity. Equally sharp, the cool prance of "Picture Perfect" rebukes conceited women all the while gliding on a cocky groove hijacked from Salt-N-Pepa's "Push It."

For all the disdain for loser boyfriends, egos, gossip, and social typecasts, the import of the Regrettes' messages always circle back to authenticity—a motif that helps account for why *Feel Your Feelings Fool!* sounds so insistent,

intrepid, and sincere. The band condemns fakery and plasticity on "Bronze," where thick, bluesy structures and elongated vocal phrasing echo those of the Heartless Bastards and their frontwoman, Erika Wennerstrom. The Regrettes prove equally engaging when letting everything hang out and allowing fast-paced songs to explode like backyard-launched fireworks across a dark sky. Their punchy, warts-and-all music bubbles over with enthusiasm, rushes in unannounced, interrupts formalities with invitations to dance, and spells out desires on its own terms. It's the sound of living life rather than just virtually experiencing it. *(continued)*



©Photo by Lindsey Byrnes

The hopped-up, neuron-exploding “Hey Now” fizzes with retro organ passages and handclap beats en route to impulsive destinations. “Juicebox Baby” serves as the aural counterpart of the first blush of a goose-bump-inducing crush, its quick deliveries and jittery rhythms engendering dizzying sensations. The harmony- and crunch-rich “Seashore” pays homage to influences such as the Ronettes while flaring with a bad-girl attitude Ronnie Spector only could’ve dreamed of putting on tape in the 1960s. Night and company further dig in their stiletto heels on the do-da-da buzz of “Lacy Loo.” The singer demonstrates an innate ability to be both weak-kneed and biker-gang tough, ultimately proclaiming “I don’t need your maybes/I need someone to dance with me, baby.”

The lyric, and the emphatic way Night sings it, traces a line back to the unforgettable commencement of Madonna’s “Express Yourself,” a directive the Regrettes espouse throughout *Feel Your Feelings Fool!* This is a band that knows what it wants and shows no obvious insecurities. The collective sags only once, on the overly drawn-out “Pale Skin,” a minor blip on an otherwise impressive record made by individuals that range from 16 to 19 years old. No, Night isn’t yet even able to vote. If you’re even tempted to let age color your opinion—or, just as worse, become the main story of the band or album—consult Night’s forthright declaration on the chorus of “Seashore”: “I’m like nobody else/So you can just go fuck yourself.” Amen, sister. —**Bob Gendron**

Forefront Audio

THE FINEST AUDIO AVAILABLE IN WESTERN NEW YORK

PLINIUS HAUTONGA 200WPC
INTEGRATED WITH PHONO



PLINIUS

The heart of music
www.pliniusaudio.com

PLINIUS, VPI, SOTA, PRIMALUNA, BALANCED AUDIO TECHNOLOGY,
SPENDOR, VANDERSTEEN, QUESTYLE, SILTECH, TORUS POWER

3255 Brighton Henrietta Town Line Rd, Suite 202, Rochester, NY 14623
Ph (585) 216-5881 www.forefront-audio.com



Crystal Fairy

Crystal Fairy

Ipecac Recordings, LP or CD

Teri “Gender Bender” Suarez is an in-demand vocalist. And with good reason.

Her work with Le Butcherettes established her as the sort of punk rock voice that could grab listeners by the throat, a force as visceral as Iggy Pop and as verbose as Joe Strummer. As electric as she could be on stage, you also feared for her well being. In concert, she ran atop bars barefoot, climbed lighting rigs, and took a scissors to her hair. That her music—born in Mexico, honed in Los Angeles, and now based more or less in El Paso, Texas—taps into a politically-inspired generational rage only makes the young artist (she’s now in her mid-20s) feel all the more vital and necessary.

Suarez, in fact, is such an energizing figure that she may very well be the least well-known member of Crystal Fairy, a band that features bassist Omar Rodriguez-Lopez—a frequent collaborator who rose to fame as a member of At the Drive-In—as well as guitarist Buzz Osborne and drummer Dale Crover, aging hard rock/punk vets and members of the Melvins. They, too, know a thing or two about rage. Crystal Fairy certainly features the latter. See the opening moments of “Chiseler,” which begins the album with the focused intensity of a lion pouncing on its prey. Nuance exists amid the construction-zone rush, as a faint keyboard struggles to keep the pace with Suarez and guitars shift into various shades of aggressiveness.

Yet everyone here seems smart enough to realize Suarez remains the star of the show. The unrelenting cymbal crashes and dooming tones of “Moth Tongue” get propelled by her vocals. She twists syllables, stares down the melody, and effortlessly jumps register, conveying a low-down strut one moment and an all-out holler the next. Suarez occupies the center of attention again in “Necklace of Divorce,” a song equipped with time-tested metal riffs.



©Photo by David Goldman

It’s a trusty, almost-vintage sound—the sort of entertainingly showy strumming that begs to be played at full-blast from a Trans-Am. And it’s all steered by Suarez’s varied approach. She’s sometimes muffled, sometimes loud and clear, sometimes at full rasp. The range makes for a riveting listen, and as the tune changes direction, the singer only becomes more unpredictable.

For those that have been caught smitten by Le Butcherettes—or even the Melvins or At the Drive-In, for that matter—Crystal Fairy comes on as

a more-than-competent diversion. Not quite as extreme as either the prog-influenced At the Drive-In or off-the-wall hard rock of the Melvins, and seemingly not as topically inclined as Le Butcherettes, Crystal Fairy serves as the work of experts that know how to keep things loud and just a little bit weird. Check the droning vocals and tick-tock guitars of “Under Trouble,” where a chorus results in completely unexpected handclaps, or the head-jerking dementedness of “Posesión.”

Impressive, too, is “Secret Agent Rat,” with Latin vocals,

unrelenting riffs, brief solos, and rhythms that don’t quit. “Sweet Self,” in contrast, teases with a relaxed vibe and Biblical references, increasing the momentum with each verse. Then there’s “Vampire X-Mas,” in which guitars are caught in a call-and-response war and Suarez’s vocals appear as vicious as a wolf’s teeth in moonlight.

Ultimately, Rodriguez-Lopez, Crover, and Osborne create a showcase for Suarez in Crystal Fairy. It’s further evidence that if you let her loose, rock n’ roll pandemonium will likely ensue.

—**Todd Martens**



Imelda May
Life Love Flesh Blood
 Verve, LP or CD

In her 1960s and 70s heyday, the great southern singer-songwriter Bobbie Gentry gave voice to some of the most complex female characters in song. Her southern gothic classic “Ode to Billie Joe” and ahead-of-its-time feminist anthem “Fancy” captured dark aspects of the distaff experience while offering no apologies. Even when Gentry’s characters were down, out, lost, or scorned, they managed to rise through the devastation.

There’s more than a bit of Gentry’s brio—along with her smoldering rootsy soul—in the work of the Irish singer-songwriter Imelda May. She croons, cries, and burns across the eleven tracks of the aptly titled *Life Love Flesh Blood*, never shying away from expressing her losses and desires. Here, May has fully transitioned from her earlier style as a neo-rockabilly performer into a soulful, mature artist unafraid to mine her own life for source material. She’s accrued a lot of experience in the last few years, from first-time motherhood in 2012 to the disintegration of an 18-year marriage in 2015. She channels the ups and downs of her existence into sensuous, ethereal soul and pop songs. *(continued)*

The new 800 Series Diamond didn’t get better by chance. It got better by change. 868 changes to be precise.

Bowers & Wilkins

bowers-wilkins.com





EAT

European Audio Team's C-Major

Exceptionally engaging, endearing sound.*

"It looks stunning...
Best of all it sounds fantastic.
Highly recommended."

Exceptional Value Award Winner

Jeff Dorgay
Tone Audio

"...screams sophistication,
and while it's EAT's least
expensive turntable, it's
still obviously a luxury
product.... a winner and a
wonderful component."

Highly recommended."

*Jason Thorpe
SoundStage! HI-FI

 VANA LTD
vanaltd.com

MUSIC



©Photo by Roger Deckker

Unsurprisingly, May attracted a number of A-listers to her cause. T Bone Burnett, an Americana kingpin that has become one of the most influential figures in contemporary roots music, produced *Life Love Flesh Blood*. He assembled a passel of name-brand session players, including guitar god Jeff Beck and revered piano man Jools Holland. The record throbs with confessions of the heart. Fear, hope, sadness, lust, ecstasy, and heartbreak—they're all here. Musically, May moves through pulsating noir-rock ("Human"), slow slinky surf ("How Bad Can a Good Girl Be"), and bittersweet nostalgic folk ("The Girl I Used to Be") with convincing passion.

The album opens with the yearning confessional "Call Me." Its narrator hangs on emotional tenterhooks, desperately waiting for the phone to ring. The simmering song could pass for an outtake from

the iconic Dusty Springfield opus *Dusty in Memphis*. Things only get better from there. "How did it all go wrong?" May cries on "Black Tears," her voice a husky ball of confusion. Bending out crying notes on guitar, Beck channels a mournful Duane Eddy on the tour de force torch ballad.

"Tell me, who takes care of me?" May asks on the soaring "It Shoulda Been You." The gaiety of the 1960s-style pop production can't mask the volatile mixture of heartache, disillusionment, and empowerment resting at the center of the song. May's protagonist sounds like a woman headed out the door as her voice blasts into a cracked roar on the unflinching chorus, singing, "I'm the best thing that you ever had." It's impossible to argue with her.

Life Love Flesh Blood serves notice that May is an artist that's fully come into her own. This is one helluva record.
—Chrissie Dickinson



Allison Crutchfield

Tourist in This Town

Merge Records, LP or CD

This is an inviting, promising debut, one centered on Crutchfield's genial nature and easygoing ability to swing between genres. She dabbles one moment in country-inspired folk and, in another, uplifting power pop. There's also a nod or two to 90s-era alt-rock, but the overall tone—friendly, relaxed, here to console—remains the same regardless of style. Much of the vibe can be attributed to Crutchfield's soft voice and ability to probe rather than point fingers.

Even when she debates skipping town, as she does on "Expatriate," she keeps things bright with cymbal smashes and a not-quite-vintage pop sound. Guitars glide ahead, and a propulsive, shimmering rhythm resides just outside glossy production work reminiscent of Phil Spector's Wall of Sound. "Yeah, I still worry all the time," Crutchfield sings, as if sitting across from the listener at an outdoor cafe. But her self-esteem doesn't take a hit. "The things you used to hate about me are all heightened now, but I love myself," she declares an instant later.

Getting comfortable—with a relationship, with a place, with oneself—functions as a heavy theme throughout *Tourist in This Town*. The narrator of "Broad Daylight" can't stop herself from overhearing unwanted conversations and, on "I Don't Ever Wanna Leave California," Crutchfield confesses, "I keep confusing love and nostalgia," a rather common affliction of heartache. For "Dean's Room," she builds a chorus out of the phrase "you just want to catch me alone," as if knowing that situation is only going to inflict more self-damage.

©Photo by Jonathan Purvis



Delivered with ease and familiarity, many passages convey a desire to maintain companionship even when things look dismal. "I was angry with you, but I still wondered if you missed me," Crutchfield sings on the delicate acoustic ballad "Charlie." Background vocals descend over the melody like shooting stars, and good and bad times are handled with equal care throughout. "Broad Daylight" begins with a romantic feel, implying Crutchfield may be going into Jenny Lewis territory. But then, the tune accelerates into a more magical realm with crushing rhythms and bright synthesizers. "Secret Lives and Deaths" bursts with thoughts of new beginnings as well as uplifting robotic grooves.

Tourist in This Town gradually picks up the pace as it progresses, and Crutchfield saves some of the angrier moments for the second half—the buzzy, echoing rhythms and synthetic pick-me-ups of "Dean's Room," the 50s lilt of "Expatriate," the 58-second blast of energy that doubles as "The Marriage," where Crutchfield admits her love for an ex is "unquestionable" even though their relationship is no longer recognizable. The closing "Chopsticks on Pots and Pans," with a marching-band beat and pensive guitars, seems to come to grips with nostalgia and the tricks it can play on the mind. No wonder Crutchfield sounds so composed when it comes to being ill at ease. —**Todd Martens**

There are plenty of songs about love and loss. There are fewer about all the awkward little moments in between—the fears, say, of running into a former lover, or catching someone out and about with someone new, or just wanting some peace and quiet from the waiter at the local restaurant. The daily anxieties of constantly feeling just a little out of sorts permeate Alison Crutchfield's *Tourist in This Town*, her first proper solo album after long sharing the stage with her sister Katie, better known as the singer-songwriter Waxahatchee.



W

hile not a household name, Tift Merritt has been turning heads since the beginning of her career in the 1990s. Alt-country bad boy Ryan Adams and Americana queen Emmylou Harris have praised her. The singer-songwriter has also recorded with members of Tom Petty's band and been nominated for a Grammy Award.

On her sixth studio album, Merritt proves why she still earns such kudos. *Stitch of the World* transpired as a peripatetic project with Merritt penning songs during stays in Texas, California, and New York. She was six months pregnant with her first child when she returned to California to record the tracks before moving back home to North Carolina.

©Photot by Alexandra Valenti

As a whole, the effort features a few raucous upbeat moments. But it's mostly a bittersweet and graceful sojourn through mid-life. A subtle, confessional tone emerges within the piercing poetry. Merritt's honeyed soprano, a voice that darts between the disarming emotionalism of Dolly Parton and child-like vulnerability of country-folk divas Julie Miller and Victoria Williams, remains at the center.

Throughout, Merritt gets ace backing from a number of top-notch musicians, including pedal-steel player Eric Heywood (Son Volt, Pretenders) and go-to guitar-man Marc Ribot (Tom Waits, Elvis Costello). The venerable crew possesses a skillful, light touch, surrounding Merritt with thoughtfully composed arrangements.

In such surroundings, the singer sways along to the easy groove of "Heartache Is an Uphill Climb," an infectious and semi-slick blues-rocker that recalls Bonnie Raitt's deft balance of art and commercial appeal. "I heard that it was step by step," Merritt sings, ruminating on the slow healing process of a broken heart. The lovely bauble "My Boat" serves as a sweet mix of rustic and classical flourishes (brushed drum, rumbling tympani, plaintive plucked guitar) that tinkles like a music box. Merritt dreams aloud of a boat to call her own, on which she can cruise down the coast "listening to the Rolling Stones." Similarly appealing, the title track emerges as a quietly beguiling number dusted with a bit of Stevie Nicks' mysticism. Earthy percussion and sparkling guitar picking conjure a dreamy world-music vibe.



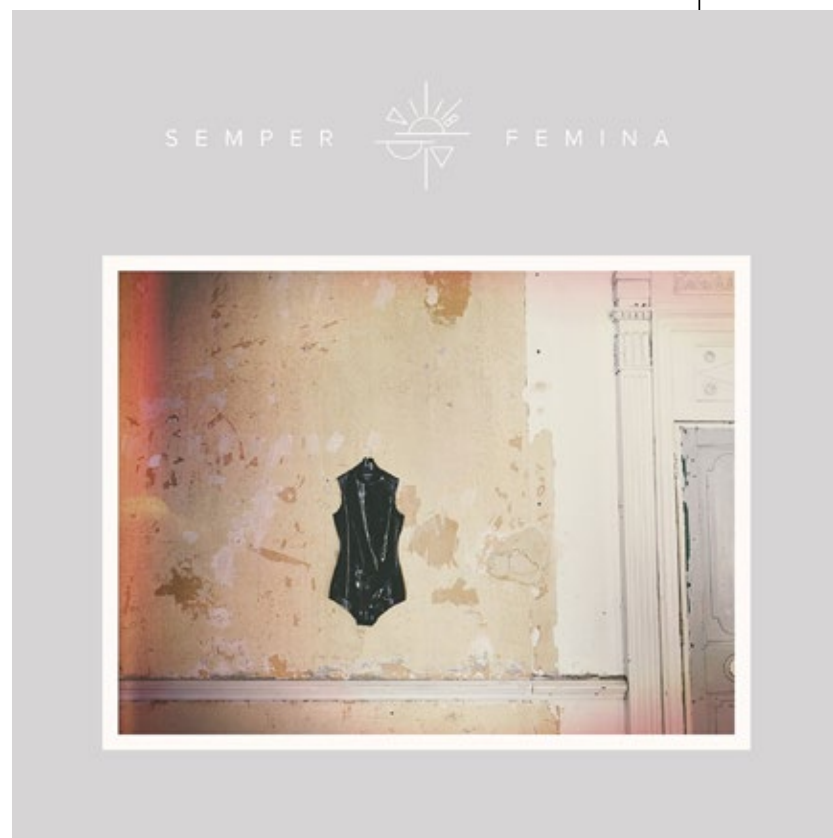
Tift Merritt

Stitch of the World

Yep Roc Records, LP or CD

Sam Beam, the alt-folk musician better known as Iron & Wine, joins Merritt for three songs. On "Eastern Light," the two sing against a muted production of strummed guitar and echoing beat, their voices entwined in close harmony. With or without Beam, Merritt's best songs feel both fragile and optimistic. In "Love Soldiers On," Merritt's words tumble out in an emotional rush. Bruised by heartache, the narrator nonetheless remains a hopeful romantic. She counsels the listener that when love seems lost for good, you realize it's just outside "waiting to come in."

Like the rest of this lovely album, the sentiment is honestly and beautifully expressed. —**Chrissie Dickinson**


Laura Marling
Semper Femina

More Alarming Records/Kobalt Music, LP or CD

Laura Marling's music is often soft, delicate, reassuring, and even relaxing. The way she intertwines the acoustic and electric remains contemplatively complex albeit melodically soothing.

Yet there's a push-and-pull in her works, especially on *Semper*

Femina, her sixth studio album in nine years.

If not quite tense, Marling finds much cause for reflection among one's solitary nature, the need for company, and the cultural expectations such situations seem to inspire, especially regarding women. "I was wild once, and I can't forget it," Marling sings midway through the album on "Wild One," a line that comes tinged with guilt, nostalgia, and the recognition we're all human. Her acoustic guitar churns and spins like blades on a windmill. Strings and pianos arrive to soothe, but Marling plows ahead, wondering how her responsibilities—"I might be someone's daughter," she sings—contradict with her behavior.

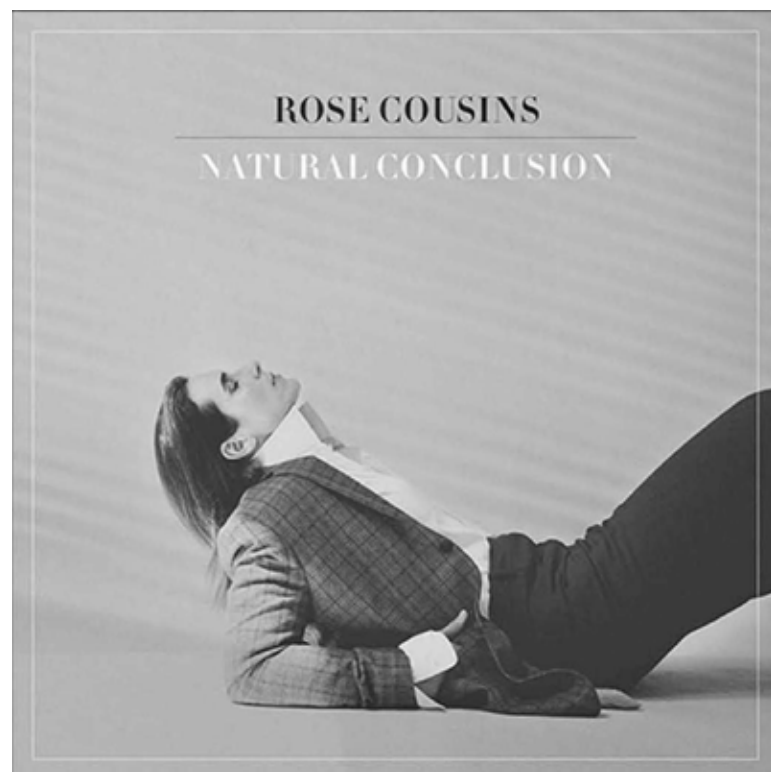
Marling's songs grapple with big ideas centered on adulthood, and do so with intricately subtle arrangements. The 26-year-old asks many questions, and several reoccur. Is it okay to feel alone? Am I fulfilling my potential? And just whose idea of potential is it? "Wouldn't you die to know how you're seen?/ Are you getting away with who you're trying to be?" she queries on "Wild Fire," which implies the written word serves as her preferred mode of conversation. A booming drum cackles over a softly humming keyboard and a supportive acoustic backbone keeps the pace.

Close listening isn't just suggested; it's required. The London-based artist recorded the work in Los Angeles with artist/producer Blake Mills (Alabama Shakes). Musically, it sees her deftly blending electric, acoustic, and lightly symphonic touches. She primarily deals in twilight moods. Quiet, elaborate touches abound. "Don't Pass Me By" has a smoky, bluesy guitar tone that contrasts with patient cymbal flourishes, creating a mysterious sense of time that wouldn't be out of place on the "Twin Peaks" reboot. During the song, Marling appears to confess that her oldest friend may in fact be a guitar.

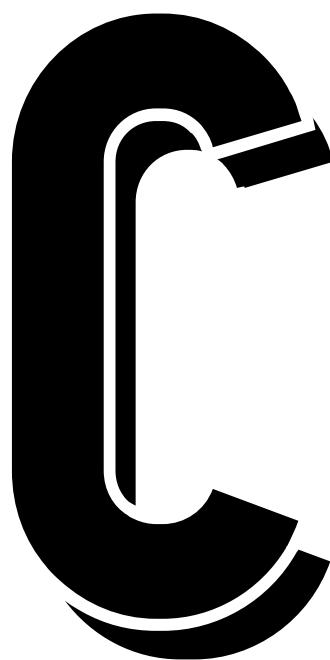
By extension, the loneliness of "Nouel" gets framed by an acoustic guitar that flickers in and out like a candle flame, alternately bright and apprehensive. "Nothing Not Nearly," broken up by fuzzy blasts of electric guitar noise and a forceful solo, hints at territory still to be uncovered. "Next Time" features a homey, music-box-like beat. The circular arrangement hints at history repeating itself, at least until a dooming symphony disturb the proceedings.

"Am I really so unkind, to turn around and close my eyes?" Marling wonders. "I'll do better next time." Maybe, maybe not. But from the point of view of a listener, as long as the questions keep coming, the music should remain just fine. —**Todd Martens**





Rose Cousins
Natural Conclusion
 Old Farm Pony Records, CD



Canadian singer-songwriter Rose Cousins possesses a great gift of a voice. Supple, warm, and jazz-inflected, it's an instrument equally capable of power and restraint. And it doesn't fail her on *Natural Conclusion*. But when it comes to the songs, Cousins proves only partially successful at making a unified artistic statement. As writer or co-writer on all of the tracks, she offers a mixed bag of lyrics that veer from piercingly insightful to impenetrably abstract.

Noted producer Joe Henry surrounds Cousins with atmospheric and delicately textured soundscapes built on a stately chamber-pop mix of viola, violin, piano, upright bass, and percussion. Eerie lines of pedal steel, reverbed electric guitar chords, and full-throated organ notes waft through the soundscapes. It all makes for a haunting and appealing sound, even as many songs lack solid bone structure. Meandering along on mood over melody, the weaker numbers too often fade into the background like sonic wallpaper.

But the better songs manage well-crafted poetry without getting bogged down in overcooked phrasing. "Chosen" opens like a whisper, with a gently strummed acoustic guitar, before slowly rising with the addition of ghostly guitar chords and staggered drumbeats. Cousins builds up steam as the arrangement rolls along, her pipes soaring as she voices uncertainty. "Someone's carving a statue in my likeness," she sings. "I will never live up to this portrait, I'm just posing."

Affairs of the heart are a complicated and contradictory bit of business. The theme hangs like a shadow over the album. "Love is the cure and the disease," she intones on the sultry ballad "Lock and Key."
(continued)

Weekend Pro-Ject



MaiA
 My audiophile integrated Amplifier



MaiA is an all-in-one integrated amplifier, combining an XMOS-based true asynchronous USB DAC, a Pro-Ject quality phono stage, high performance headphone amp, aptX Bluetooth streaming, and remote control (via app or included IR remote). Listen to music from your phone, from your computer, from a turntable or a CD player, via speakers or headphones. With nine inputs, MaiA does it all.

True audiophile sound quality, with amplification based on the legendary Flying Mole amplifier design. Also available are a preamp version, a high-power version with upgradeable power supply, as well as a matching CD transport and streamer.

Perfect for limited spaces, desktop audio, as a second system in a vacation home or office. MaiA represents the high performance, high value design philosophy music lovers have come to expect from Pro-Ject.

Not every weekend project has to come from a to-do list.



Pro-Ject
 AUDIO SYSTEMS

distribution in the U.S.A. by
SUMIKO
 2431 Fifth Street
 Berkeley, CA 94710
www.sumikoaudio.net

DIFFERENT CLASS

★★★★★



A49 A lifetime of electronics design expertise has led to Arcam's finest ever amplifier, the new A49 integrated amplifier. Its ultra-refined class G topology* represents the pinnacle of Arcam's engineering heritage and sets new standards of performance. An audition will confirm that power is nothing without control.

ARCAM

www.arcam.co.uk

G Arcam's G class amplification provides the perfect balance of ultra low distortion and enormous power. You can read all about this world class technology by visiting our website.

BRINGING MUSIC AND MOVIES TO LIFE



**THE SOUND ORGANISATION IS
THE EXCLUSIVE US DISTRIBUTOR OF**
Arcam • Chord Company • DALI • Melco •
ProAc • Quadraspire • Rega • Wilson Benesch

www.soundorg.com
facebook.com/TheSoundOrganisation
972-234-0182
info@soundorg.com

MUSIC

"Always there to break my fall/Push me from the highest wall/You're the best and worst of all." The title of the stately, piano-driven "White Flag" suggests surrender and defeat. But it's impossible to know if Cousins' narrator gives herself over to love—and acknowledges its annihilating power— or laments the heartbreak of lost love.

The highs and lows of Cousins' songwriting skills are on display in "The Grate." Akin to a taut noir thriller, the tune opens promisingly enough—a woman secretly listens through a grate to a man that lives on the floor below. It's late at night. Who is he talking to on the phone? In the first two verses, Cousins creates a compelling tableau of a woman obsessed. But the next two verses devolve into confusing disconnected phrases: "I shift my weight to the side/Futile my tears to your pride." Huh? It's a shame to set such a powerful and suggestive scene, only to toss it aside for pretentious babble.

On the surface, it's hard to argue with the pretty music on *Natural Conclusion* or Cousins' sad, lovely voice. But lacking a strong editorial hand, too many works sound more like promising first drafts than fully realized songs.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

©Photo by Vanessa Heins

**Ne-Hi***Offers*

Grand Jury, LP or CD

A

lot of what we hear on Ne-Hi's second album sounds familiar. Guitars create fast-paced, chiming riffs so razor-thin they feel as if they were written with fine-point pens. Then there are high-energy and upper-register vocals, resulting in a welcome-home feel for fans of rock acts such as Superchunk and Built to Spill. Yet the 90s-era nostalgia ends there. While Ne-Hi doesn't re-invent the wheel, the Chicago-based quartet certainly gives it a spin. And it's rolling right into paranoia.



©Photo by Bryan Allen Lamb

For a group that essentially began on a lark, having joined together a few years back to score a friend's film, it seems to be turning into a formidable little rock band of feral-but-tamed recklessness. While its music is so needle-point wiry that the band can occasionally feel a little yelpy—see the stomping “Out of Reach,” which comes off as alarming and discomforting as emergency-vehicle sirens—*Offers* puts the overall put the emphasis on songcraft.

To be sure, Ne-Hi's concerns regard the of-the-minute sort. The act talks not of wars.

Instead, the band sings of watching war films such as *The Guns of Navarone* alone and of being overly self-conscious about the opinion of a mate's sister. Or dealing with downright agoraphobia, as leader Jason Balla tells of avoiding telephones and locking himself in his house on “Don't Wanna Know You.” The general mistrust of *Offers* comes to a head on “Prove,” with its repeating refrain, “Why did you want to talk about it?” It seems specifically tuned-in to a time when knowing the answer could be more stressful than simply remaining ignorant.

The collective's tone—in-deed, the whole package—feels jumpy. Guitars from Balla and Mikey Wells run around one another as involved in a hectic playground game. They're lean and sharp, instruments that want to put up a fight but also, on the defensive. “Everybody Warned You” tones things down just enough to allow James Weir's bass to anchor the melody. Balla, too, feels more conversational, and the iron-like guitar lines become flowery.

Harmonies emerge on “Drag.” Well, somewhat. The group vocals are more barked

than sung, but still open up other avenues for Ne-Hi to explore. Balla and Wells knit their way around the rhythms from Weir and drummer Alex Otake, all while again taking a path to avoidance. “We don't talk, talk about it!” the act shouts. “Every Dent” gets more adventurous, with riffs that almost seem to curl around vocals that raise a central Ne-Hi question: “Is it hard to ignore when you've been told these are people to know?”

Welcome to garage rock for our fearful and mistrustful days.
—**Todd Martens**

“GoldenEar’s New Triton Reference Redefines Ultra High-End Performance and Value!”

CES 2017: All four Absolute Sound writers (N. Gader, R. Harley, J. Mullins and J. Valin) honored Triton Reference as “Best Sound (for the money)”!

“The Triton Reference presents a serious challenge to speakers in the multi \$10K range”

— Robert Deutsch, *Stereophile*

GoldenEar’s Triton One is one of the best selling high-end loudspeakers ever, consistently thrilling listeners and reviewers alike and winning an enviable and unmatched collection of the industry’s most prestigious awards, including “Loudspeaker-of-the-Year” and “Product-of-the-Year” from key publications all around the world.

Clearly, we knew that the One would be a very hard act to follow. There was a spirited discussion within our product development group about an all-out assault on the ultimate, cost-no-object, state-of-the-art, to produce a six-figure loudspeaker to do battle with the most esoteric and expensive loudspeakers on the planet. However, after much soul-searching, rational minds won out, and the decision was made to create a new GoldenEar flagship, positioned above the Triton One (of course still current and available), that would joust with the best, but still stick to our trademarked slogan, “We Make High-End Affordable.” We are pleased and proud to introduce the new Triton Reference. The Reference has begun gathering its own collection of honors, winning the prestigious and coveted CES Innovations Design and Engineering Award, Digital Trends Best Home Audio Tech at CES, HD GURU Best High Fidelity Loudspeaker at CES and What HiFi Stars of CES!

“Undeniably stellar ... Yes, it does deliver the sort of performance previously delivered only by cost-no-object speakers.” — Dennis Burger, *Home Theater Review*

The Triton Reference is an evolution of everything that we have achieved with the Triton One, but taken to a stunning new level of sonic performance and sophisticated visual design. All the components in the T Ref: including larger, more powerful, active sub-bass drivers with huge “Focused Field” magnet structures, upper-bass/midrange drivers with “Focused Field” magnet structures, and High-Velocity Folded Ribbon tweeter with 50% more rare earth neodymium magnet material, are brand new, and have been specifically developed for use in the Reference. The powerful 1800 watt subwoofer amplifier, with level control to fine tune the bass to your room, and 56-bit DSP control unit are a significant evolution of those in the Triton One and our SuperSubs.

There are a myriad of other significant upgrades and refinements, including: new internal wiring with a specially developed twist, further development of our signature balanced crossover including film capacitors bridged across the high-pass section on the upper-

bass/midrange drivers, a unique proprietary mix of long-fiber lamb's wool and Dacron for more effective internal damping, intensive work with a high-resolution accelerometer to determine the most effective implementation of complex internal bracing, a 3/32" thick steel plate built into the mediate base to further stiffen it for increased stability, new stainless steel floor spikes and cups, all of which results in higher resolution of subtle details ... and the list goes on and on.

“GoldenEar is taking on the stratospherically priced five figure super-systems that define high-end audio.”

— Mark Henninger, *AVS*

Visually, the Reference offers a strikingly beautiful upgrade to the classic Triton styling, with a gorgeous hand-rubbed piano gloss-black lacquer finished one-piece monocoque cabinet. Sleek, statuesque and refined, the Reference is simply an elegantly gorgeous statement piece that will excite listeners with its dynamic visual presence, as well as its extraordinary sonic performance.

Sonically, the Reference has been engineered to perform with a dramatic and authoritative voice, comparable to speakers that sell for ten and more times its surprisingly affordable price. T Refs completely disappear, with superb three-dimensional imaging that will open up your room, stretching from wall to wall and beyond, and depth that makes the wall behind them seem to vanish. The astonishing bass is rock-solid, with low-frequency performance that is tight, quick, highly impactful and musical with extension flat to 20Hz and below. Another GoldenEar signature is a silky smooth high end that extends to 35 kHz with a lifelike sheen but no trace of fatiguing hardness, sibilance or stridency so common with lesser tweeters. Tremendous time and energy has been put into the voicing of the speaker and the seamless blending of the drivers, for unmatched musicality with all types of music, and home theater perfection. Rarely do speakers excel at both, but with their world-class neutrality, the Reference absolutely does. A special bonus is the Reference's extremely high 93.25 dB sensitivity, which gives them tremendous dynamic range and allows use with almost any high-quality amplifier. You must experience T Ref for yourself!

GoldenEar Technology®
We Make High-End Affordable!™

www.goldenear.com

PO Box 141, Stevenson, MD 21153 (410) 998-9134

 Like us on Facebook!
facebook.com/goldenear

 Follow us on Twitter!
twitter.com/goldeneartech

Call us or check our website for your nearest dealer

Two 6" High-Definition Cast-Basket Bass/Midrange Drivers w/ Multi-Vaned Phase Plugs

Optimized Dual-Chamber Upper Bass/Midrange Enclosure with Angled Rear and Side Walls

High-Gauss High-Velocity Folded Ribbon Tweeter (HVFR™) w/Zobel Network

Open-Cell Polyurethane Foam Damping Pads

Proprietary Mix of Long Fiber Lamb's Wool and Dacron Internal Damping

Three 6" x 10" Quadratic Sub-Bass Drivers w/ Massive Focussed-Field Magnet Structures

Elaborately Braced Accelerometer Optimized Non-Resonant Cabinet

Linear-Phase Balanced Crossover Network w/ Film Capacitors and Bridging Cap

Four Inertially-Balanced 10-1/4" x 9-1/2" Quadratic Planar Infrasonic Radiators

Two on Each Side of Cabinet

Hybrid Phase-Perfect Electronic/Passive Low Frequency Crossover

1800-Watt DSP-Controlled Class D Digital Amplifier with Programmable Logic Device Based State Machine

Elegantly Sleek Piano Gloss Black Lacquer Finish Cabinet

Massive 3/32" Thick Steel Plate Built Into the Bass for Exceptional Structural Rigidity

Triton Reference
\$4249 ea.

FEATURE

FEATURE

THE G-LAB BLOCK AMPLIFIER

Square But Not Square

By Jeff Dorgay

Audio equipment typically follows a pretty specific format; rectangular box, a couple of control knobs and these days, LED screens have crept into the mix. Occasionally, something upsets the applecart with a striking departure from the norm. Nakamichi's wedge-shaped 600 series in the 70s immediately comes to mind, the Proceed PCD disc players were out of the ordinary, and Nagra's pyramid-shaped power amplifiers are cool too.

The G-Lab Block amplifier falls squarely into this category. Its stunning design looks more like a futuristic building from a Sci-fi movie, with its stark shapes and vacuum tubes popping out of the top, glowing in the room. It looks like an architect designed it, and very few components I've lived with have been more of a conversation piece than this one. Not one person visiting my home ever said "not in my house" with this amplifier. The Block is as much fun to look at as it is to listen to, maybe even more.

FEATURE

A solid block of...

Stark and compact, your first surprise is picking up the Block. It weighs 45 pounds, thanks in part to a massive power supply transformer. The beautifully machined chassis features a power button, large volume control, and three input selectors. The logo and controls are tastefully understated, with the tubes protected by cubistic cages, and while this is for safety reasons, I suggest leaving them in the shipping carton so you can enjoy the beauty of the glowing tubes. Even the Block's packaging is cool; if you didn't know better, you'd swear this was an Apple product.

Around back are a pair of speaker binding posts, which are somewhat close together, so depending on your speaker cables, you might want banana terminations. Cables with large spade lugs will not work. Three sets of RCA inputs are on tap; two high-level inputs and an MM phono input. We'll get back to this jewel in a minute.

The Block has a straightforward circuit, using a pair of 6N6P tubes, a pair of E88C (6922) tubes and a pair of EL34's in the output stage. In this case, a single EL34 is used in each channel in a single ended triode configuration, producing 5.5 watts per channel. The 6N6 doesn't have any options for substitution, but fortunately, this tube is plentiful and inexpensive, running about \$15 each. The E88/6922s can be equally reasonable, or you can spend big bucks, should the need to tube roll take hold, as it does with the EL34. Fortunately, with only two in the Block, even a pair of premium NOS EL34's won't kill you. *(continued)*

FEATURE



FEATURE

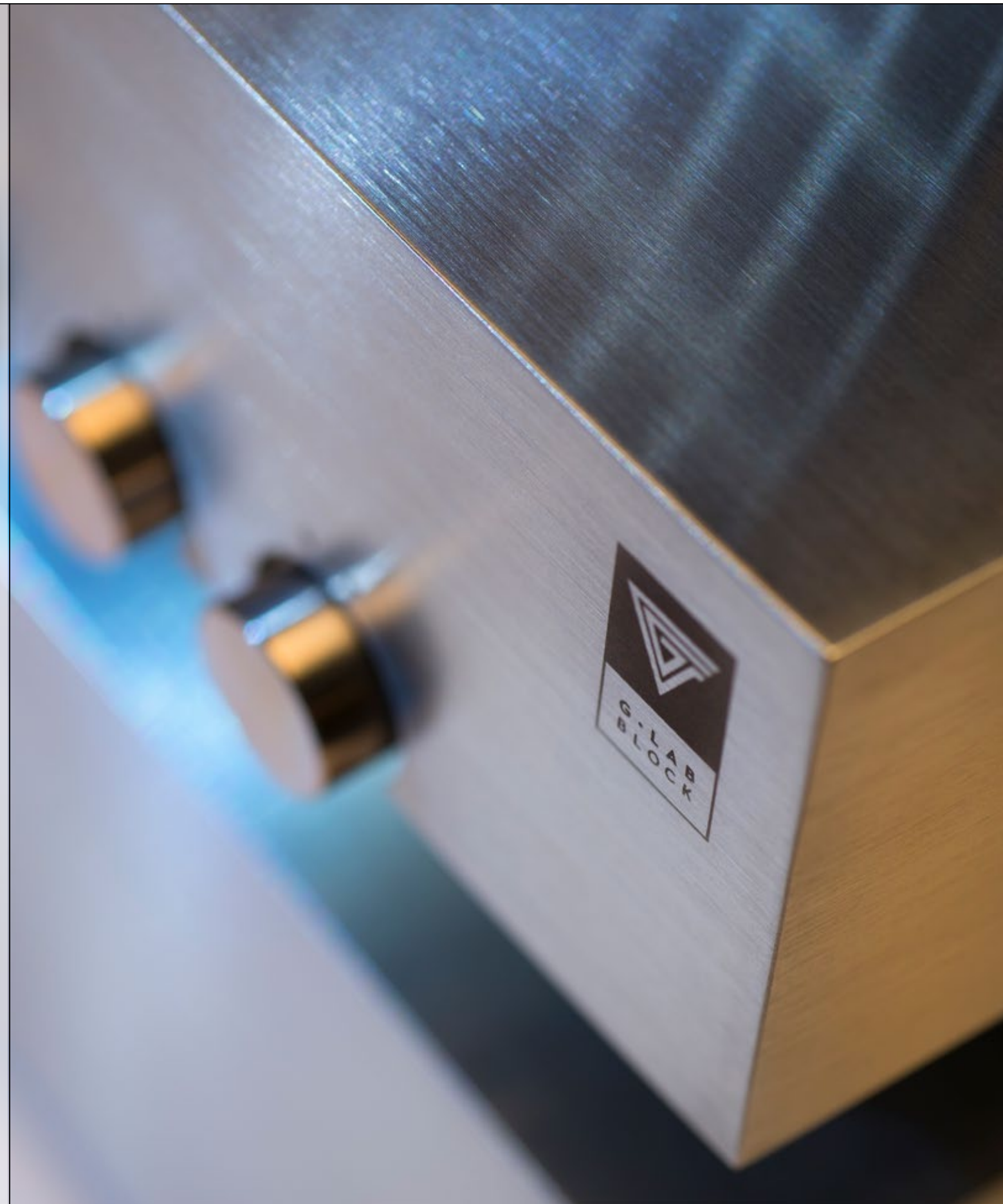
Experimenting with a few examples of both proved the changes to be more different than an overall improvement, so my suggestion is to enjoy the Block stock.

Speaker and source suggestions

With low powered SET amplifiers, speaker selection is critical. With only 5.5 watts at your disposal, you need to make the most of them. Trying the Block with a broad range of speakers proved interesting, and sensitivity ratings don't tell the whole story. Mating the Block to the 92db/1 watt Focal Sopra no. 3s seemed like a match made in heaven on paper, yet the amplifier is easily driven into clipping, and the highs very rolled off.

Moving on to the 87db/1 watt Graham LS5/9s proves much more inviting. The amplifier was much more at ease, and the high frequencies re-appeared. The less sensitive Graham LS3/5 (83db/1 watt) is equally pleasing when combined with the Block for a desktop system. The magic that only a SET can provide comes through immediately with both British speakers. Impressive performances were also turned in with the vintage speakers on hand; our recently refurbished B&W 803s and particularly with the JBL L-100s, so the Block could indeed become the cornerstone for a blend of modern and retro gear. Bottom line, choose your speakers wisely, and the Block will make you very happy.

It's also worth noting that high-level sources should be of 2-volt output or lower. When using the dCS Rossini DAC as a source, the output level must be set to be set at 2V and then attenuated slightly, where the Simaudio 260D, also with a 2-volt output did not drive the Block into overload.



FEATURE

Extended listening

The Block has been here for quite some time, so we've had the chance to run it through its paces with some different speakers, cables, and turntables. The MM phonostage mentioned earlier delivers fantastic performance with a wide range of cartridges. More often than not, preamplifiers and integrated amplifiers around this price add a modest phonostage as a "me too" option, yet the Block's phono section proves much more musical and capable than an entry-level phonostage can provide.

Such a high-quality phonostage gives you a wider range of turntable and cartridge options as well. Three cartridges were used, from budget to premium. The Rega Planar 3 table with Elys 2 cart works well for a \$300 MM cart, as did our heavily modded Technics SL-1200 with Rega RB-303 tonearm, the Gold Note Vasari Gold and the far end of the scale, the \$3,500 Grado Signature 1 Moving Iron cartridge.

Brian Eno's recent work *Small Craft on a Milk Sea* captivates with the Block revealing Eno's gentle synthesizer work with texture and depth. The combination with the Grado Statement 1 put this little amplifier in a league of its own. The single ended triode configuration is beguiling when system synergy is achieved; while this is not for everyone, every time I listen to a SET system I see why its fans are so intoxicated. Moving on to the title track of Anne Bisson's *Blue Mind*, the delicate phrasing that makes Ms. Bisson's voice so luscious is tenderly rendered with a realistic, three-dimensional quality. Having heard her perform live a few times, it's safe to say that the Block does a beautiful recreation. (continued)

FEATURE

This amplifier is all about detail instead of brute force. Little things in your favorite recordings will reveal themselves in a way that you may never have heard them before. The wood block in Bad Company's "Rock Steady" floats in the air, defined by distinct placement, and the layers of jangly guitars overdubbed in Matthew Sweet's "Walk Out" stay sorted. Sometimes bigger isn't better.

Is it for you?

Six grand for a high-quality amp, preamp and phonostage isn't crazy money, but 5.5 watts per channel isn't for everyone. Just as my buddies with the new, 650 horsepower Z06 Corvette think the new Miata with only 155 horsepower is crazy. Different strokes.

The Block amplifier is beautifully built and beautifully executed. I suspect someone living in a more sparse, design conscious environment might even buy it for its aesthetic beauty alone. I know I would. I can see this amplifier as the focal point in an ultra elegant living room, up on a pedestal with a spotlight on it, with an equally cool turntable nearby. Mate the Block to the right speakers, and it will give you a very elegant slice of audio heaven.

Should you be the music lover that wants something ultra cool that you won't see everywhere else, the Block is the ticket.

The G-Lab Block Amplifier
MSRP: \$5,995
www.wellroundedsound.com



The next classic.



Impressive performance capabilities, highlighted by its detailed high frequency resolution, incredible transparency, powerful dynamics and remarkably deep bass extension make the X18 ideal for small to medium sized rooms and simply one of the finest compact loudspeakers Dynaudio has ever developed.

The new **Excite X18**.

DYNAUDIO

WINO

by Monique Meadows

Malbec

The Argentina star grape with French roots.

Four picks from the two countries.

I recently came across an online ad for a t-shirt with the words “You had me at Malbec.” I guess most people would assume that to be Malbec from Argentina, the darling red wine from South America and Argentina’s number one grape. The Malbec grape’s heritage is French, and the variety is used for blending in Bordeaux alongside the five other red wine grapes allowed in Bordeaux wines: Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot and Carmenere. But a little over 100 miles southeast of Bordeaux in France’s South West, in the Cahors (pronounced “kah-OR”) region, this dark, inky grape is known locally as “Côt” and has a reputation for its equally dark, tannic and rustic wines. In this small region, the grape is often blended with Merlot and Tannat to help soften its harsh edges. When the grape made its way to Argentina in the mid 19th century, it met its soul mate, expressing itself as juicier, plusher wines with velvety tannins than it did across the Atlantic in Europe.

Influential wine critic Robert Parker, Jr., confidently predicted, in a piece with Food & Wine, Argentine Malbec's rise to fame, stating that "By the year 2015, the greatness of Argentinean wines made from the Malbec grape will be understood as a given. This French varietal, which failed so miserably on its home soil in Bordeaux, has reached startling heights of quality in Argentina. Both inexpensive, delicious Malbecs and majestic, profoundly complex ones from high-elevation vineyards are already produced," he further added, "and by 2015 this long-ignored grape's place in the pantheon of noble wines will be guaranteed." 2017 is here, and I don't see the demand for Malbec letting up anytime soon.

In the past, Argentineans consumed most of the wine their country produced, happy they were with what could be called simple, nondescript wines. But the country's economy needed a reboot and Argentina took a cue from neighboring Chile, a country that had reinvented their wine industry, now producing wines for international tastes and markets. That focus and commitment drew investors and an infusion of modern wine making equipment. This energy and passion took the two countries beyond their adequate yet lacking wine industries, propelling Argentina to its international status as the leader of Malbec wines.

Mendoza is Argentina's leading wine region and the drumbeat of its wine industry. It sits at the foothills of the Andes with vineyards sitting near 1,000 feet elevation, some of the highest in the country in view of the year-round snow-capped mountain range. "The Malbec grape was largely a failure in France because vintners could never coax a delicious wine from it," states Parker. "But Malbec flourishes in Mendoza. Characterized by a spicy, dark fruit, these Malbec wines can be complex, intense, and worthy of aging. In fact, they can compete with Bordeaux several times the price."

Back in the vineyards of Cahors, things are not as quiet as one would think. With a new generation of "vignerons" (the French not having a word for "winemaker," in spirit they are both keepers of the vines and makers of the wines) and momentum in the "natural wine" movement, several producers in Cahors are retooling their approach to their beloved Côt grape. Known during the Middle Ages as "The Black Wine of Cahors," for color so dark in the glass that one could barely see one's hand, many of the wines today are far from the what has been called "brooding" Cahors



wines of the past. After many setbacks in the region, and presently with an infusion of new talent and investment, many of today's Cahors wines show more softness than tannic hardness, and showcase fruit and floral accents, all the while being faithful to the grape's dark hue. Wines are more approachable now, ready to be enjoyed without needing to age for several years. Regionally, Cahors is the wine for Cassoulet - a traditional sausage, duck and bean stew, and is a great match with roasts, game, grilled sausages and always a great pairing with strong cheeses. Argentine Malbec is the perfect partner to Argentina's culinary past time: Beef, as done at an Argentina "Asado" - the grilling of meats using an enormous grill, a parrilla, placed over flame and coals - their version of BBQ, loaded with meats of all kind, especially Argentine beef.

Both worlds and flavors of Malbec are worth exploring. I have selected four bottles; two from Cahors and two from Mendoza for you to give a swirl. If you love them, and others that you try, you'll be in good company and may want one of those Malbec t-shirts.

naim

Mu-so Qb

COMPACT WIRELESS MUSIC SYSTEM

Unleash 300 watts of music from
a sound system smaller than a milk crate!



naimaudio.com/mu-so-qb

TONE STYLE

Fabian Jouvès, Mas del Perie “Malbec Invaders” Vin de France

2015, Cahors, France \$19

“Artisan vigneron” Fabian Jouvès began making wine in 2006. From a family with a long history in farming and grape grown, Jouvès created his winery Domaine Mas del Périé on the high slopes of Cahors in southwest France north of Bordeaux. Known for his biodynamically-produced wines with creative labels and wine names such as “You #%\$& My Wines?!” and “Tu Vin Plus Aux Soirées” (meaning “You’re no longer welcome at this party”) his latest Malbec blend uses Cabernet Franc, a once regional grape. While this grape is paramount in Bordeaux, it is no longer permitted for winemaking in Cahors.

Originally with aspirations to become a doctor, he instead took over his parents’ vineyard and steered its future path to organic and biodynamic winemaking, coaxing from the Cahors limestone terroir the regions natural expression of Malbec. Jouvès harvests his grapes by hand, makes wines using only the natural occurring yeasts on the grapes for fermentation, uses little to no additives, and does not filter the wines. It is this purist approach and care that has given his name almost celebrity status in “natural wine” circles. “Malbec Invaders” is 100% Malbec or Côt as it is called locally. “Fabien Jouvès is a young, passionate, sometimes rash guy making wine in a very tradition-bound rural wine region,” comments New Swain, owner of Devenish Wines, an enthusiastic distributor of wines from smaller, artisanal and natural wine producers. “My opinion is only based on tasting his wines and reading a bit about him, but sometimes that’s more accurate than asking someone face to face; actions (wine in this case) speaking louder than words.” Though from rustic Cahors country, Jouvès’ earthy “Invaders” surprises with a more elegance touch yet still delivers Malbec notes of dark berry, with good tannic structure, a touch of earth and a hint of smoke.



Clos Siguier

2013, Cahors, France \$14

As the Cahors region of France is starting to make a comeback with its Malbec-driven wines, winemaker Gilles Bley sets a tone for a more gentle, delicate version of the regions' typically rustic wines. Bley is a Cahors native, with winemaking roots going back many generations, and grows Malbec (Côt) and Tannat grapes on his 15-hectare estate, a country wine farm, which includes the former family homestead built in 1779 where his parents still reside. Bley focuses on growing the classic grapes of the region and making wines organically, including using wild yeasts and adding no sulfites. His Clos Siguier is made from handpicked and de-stemmed grapes, here 95% Malbec and 5% Tannat, from vines averaging 60 years. Siguier is lighter on its feet, softer and with brighter fruit than many of the dark and intense Malbec wines historically produced in Cahors. Bley's winemaking style was propelled by a "desire to create wine that highlights this storied region's unheard of potential for delicacy," shares his importer Jenny and François Selections. The fruit-driven Siguier rests in barrel before bottling, and in the glass welcomes the nose with notes of black cherry and herb, leading to flavors of both red and black fruit – plum and cherry and the blackberry notes of Malbec fruit, mingled with a suggestion of black tea, in a wine of dark color. The tannins here are softer than many Cahors, making for a delightful, easy-drinking taste of Southwestern-France at a table of cheeses and meat-driven dishes.



SONIC PRECISION & SOPHISTICATED STYLING




Motion® 60XT / 50XT / 35XT
MARTIN LOGAN

XT stands for *extreme*, and for good reason. Our new Motion® XT speakers play louder, lower, and with unflinching accuracy. Larger woofers and cabinets, paired with our most accurate Folded Motion™ XT driver, deliver an engaging and encompassing experience that cuts straight to the emotion locked inside your favorite recordings.

www.martinlogan.com

MARTIN LOGAN®
Truth in Sound



The world-class speaker manufacturer you probably never heard of. Until now.

Why does anyone start a loudspeaker company?

Good question. Ignoring the obvious answer (because they're nuts), it might just be because they felt compelled to.

Dali's first designs were originally created for a Danish hifi store. This retailer wasn't entirely happy with the loudspeakers then availables, so they decided to build their own.

You're thinking what does a retailer know about manufacturing, right?

Well, actually, quite a lot as it turns out.

Three decades later, Dali are one of the world's leading loudspeaker manufacturers, with a list of international awards the envy of their industry, including several from EISA (The European Imaging and Sound Association), voted for by expert journalists from over 20 countries.

More importantly, European music lovers are huge fans too, which explains why Dali has sold over a million pairs of loudspeakers to date.

Dali control every stage of the design & production process, while drivers, crossovers and the cabinets themselves are engineered in-house.

At Dali the company motto states, 'In admiration of music.'

And now you can discover why we think you'll be hearing a lot more about Dali at one of our network of carefully selected dealers.



Stereo
Lifestyle
Home Cinema
Wireless
& Active
Speaker Systems



The Sound Organisation • facebook.com/TheSoundOrganisation
• call: 972.234.0182 • email: info@soundorg.com • website: soundorg.com

Exclusive US distributors of : Certon Systems • Chord Company • Dali • PMC • Quadraspire • Rega • Wilson Benesch

TONE STYLE

Altocedro Año Cero Malbec

2013, La Consulta, Mendoza,
Argentina \$16

The winery and vineyards of Altocedro are located in the premier region of La Consulta, in Mendoza's Valle de Uco, a cooler, high-elevation vineyard zone at the base of the Andes. In a very artisanal approach, winemaker and owner Karim Mussi Saffie use sustainable growing practices to produce limited-production wines from vines that range from 7 to 70 years old. The harvesting, sorting, and crushing of the grapes are done by hand in individual small batches. Of Lebanese heritage, Mussi was born in Chile and the family moved to Argentina when Karim was young, where his father pursued the bulk wine business. "Altocedro represents real artisanal winemaking, a boutique operation with some serious talent behind the wheel," writes Wine Spectator. Amidst the many Argentine Malbecs, between the boring and varietally-ambiguous or overly bold and heavy-handed, the Altocedro Año Cero is an elegant, subtle and exciting guest at the table, garnering attention with its eloquent complexity; produced from 100% Malbec grapes from 7-49-year-old vines. 30% of the wine is aged in French oak barrels for 12 months, giving this medium-bodied red a brush stroke of spice and leather notes alongside the ripe black fruit of Malbec. There's a sweet note of cocoa dust on the finish. This is a super Malbec value under \$20. Also look for their Reserva Malbec, a blend of grapes from three older-vine vineyards.

Luigi Bosca Malbec D.O.C.

2012, Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza,
Argentina \$26

Alberto Jr. and Alberto Sr. Arizu, the third and fourth generations of the Arizu winemaking family, manage Bodega Luigi Bosca, an estate founded in 1901 by Don Leoncio Arizu. Many Argentine families have European heritage, as is with the Arizu family, who, back in the 18th century, were winemakers in the small Spanish Basque town of Unzué. Today's Bosca vineyard sites include old-vine plantings cultivated from the family-owned European vines, dating as far back as 1863. Luigi Bosca is Argentina's oldest family-owned winery and was a collaborator in creating the Lujan de Cuyo Denomination of Origin – the only one in Argentina and adheres to strict regulations in winemaking that global D.O.C.'s do. Here vines must be from a single vineyard and average 50 years of age or older. The wines must also age a minimum time in barrique of 12 months, and each bottle must be numbered. Sustainable and Biodynamic practices are employed at the estate. Winemakers José Irrera and Vicente Garzia produce Bosca's D.O.C. Single Vineyard Malbec from grapes from the winery's La Linda vineyard, one of the estate's seven vineyard sites in top areas in Mendoza including Maipú and Valle de Uco, where vines average 70 years of age and spends time in new and used French oak barrels. Wine critic James Suckling, in his review of Top 100 Wines of the Andes, gives this full-bodied single vineyard Malbec 93 points, praising "a finely crafted red with blackberry, white pepper, and spice character. Full and dense with tightly textured tannins. Long and flavorful finish. Drink or hold." I suggest enjoying a bottle soon and set another bottle aside for future grilled steaks. ●



Get ready for music, **lots** of music.



THE FINEST SOUNDING AND MOST COMPLETE
"ALL-IN-ONE" MUSIC PLAYER. THE NĒO ACE WILL BE
THE "HEART AND SOUL" OF ALL YOUR MUSICAL INDULGENCES.



MOON
by SIMAUDIO

simaudio.com

Internal processing 5,6 MHz, 72 bits

Formats PCM 24 bits

up to 384 kHz, DXD, DSD 2x



Nagra HD DAC converter. High definition, unlimited emotion!

It is time to rediscover the pleasure of listening to music,
whatever the format, from red-book CD to DSD 2x.

Extensive connectivity possibilities, from SPDIF to proprietary
USB inputs. Output volume control, inter-stage Nagra transformers,
vacuum tube output stage, state-of-the-art headphone amplifier.

NAGRA
Swiss Made



Panono 360-degree Camera

\$1,999

www.panono.com

The panorama function in the latest iPhones is really cool, but here's a way to take 360 degree photography to the max. Looking somewhat like a futuristic bicycle helmet, the Panono captures 36 images simultaneously and then stores them in your Panono cloud account for access by your laptop or smartphone, where you decide how you would like them stitched

together. You also have control over resolution and thanks to its HDR function, a wide tonal range is guaranteed, which goes a long way in creating convincing panorama photos with difficult lighting.

No matter how you choose to deploy it, the Panono camera is sure to add a new dimension to your photographic endeavors.



Epson Home Cinema Projector

\$499

www.epson.com

Sure, you can spend thousands, even tens of thousands of dollars on a great home theater projector, but for five hundred bucks, you can have a ton of fun. Whether you're not sure if the big, big screen is for you, or you're just a budget cinema enthusiast, there's nothing like throwing a 14-foot (diagonal) image up on the wall to watch your favorite show or sporting event.

Color fidelity and contrast are surprisingly good for such an inexpensive

projector and when you aren't watching *South Park*, the Home Cinema projector makes a great way to display ROON on the wall in your listening room. I'd buy one of these just for that purpose alone, though there is a bit of fan noise.

Standard inputs, including HDMI are included and you can have this projector set up in about 60 seconds. Consider this one a gateway drug to a big boy projector. I warned you!

$$\Sigma \left(\begin{array}{l} \text{future proof +} \\ \text{benchmark performance +} \\ \text{superlative sound} \end{array} \right) = \text{Rossini}$$



Future Proof

We are pioneers who are constantly developing new technologies to improve the quality of reproduced sound. Our unique approach to product design means that Rossini can anticipate and support new formats and innovations in audio.



Benchmark Performance

Every *dCS* product must meet the extraordinarily exacting standards demanded by our military heritage. As a result Rossini delivers levels of consistency and reliability like no other.



Superlative Sound

When you listen to Rossini our state of the art technology, manufacturing effort and rigorous testing combine to create a magical experience that perfectly recreates every last emotional nuance of whatever music you choose to listen to.

When you listen to Rossini from *dCS* you will believe that the world has stopped and there is...

ONLY THE MUSIC

dCS
ONLY THE MUSIC

@ info@dcsLtd.co.uk | [dCSonlythemusic](https://twitter.com/dCSonlythemusic) | www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Imported by Data Conversion Systems Americas Inc.
T +1 617 314 9296

Manufactured in the UK by Data Conversion Systems Ltd
Unit 1, Buckingway Business Park, Anderson Road, Swavesey, Cambridge, CB24 4AE



Charge Tech Classic

\$149

www.chargetech.com

There are a number of batter extenders and auxiliary batteries to give you iPhone or iPad more time on the go, but what do you do with your laptop when you need that extra hour or so and there's no outlet on the plane?

With an inverter to give you 120 vac power as well as DC, not only can you power your accessories anywhere, it just might save you a laptop upgrade. By extending your MacBookPro's mobile time by about 100%, this is the perfect solution for those not wanting to replace a perfectly good laptop because a charge only lasts about 3 ½ hours instead of the original 5.

Dyson V6 Handheld Vacuum

\$199

www.dyson.com

Like everything else in our wacky, electronic world, upgrades are an inevitability. This time, it's for the better. The original Dyson handheld was pretty good for sucking dog hair and cobwebs out of the corners, but the battery life was perilously short (about 10 min) and recharge uncomfortably long (about 3 hours). Looking past these shortcomings, it was still a handy tool except for one weakness – the joint where the snout plugs into the body of the vacuum is incredibly weak.

All of these issues have been solved with the V6. It charges in about 20 minutes and has about 20 minutes worth of suckage available. With a much more solid connection between body and accessories, you can bear down a bit more in hard to reach spots. Best of all, it still comes in purple!



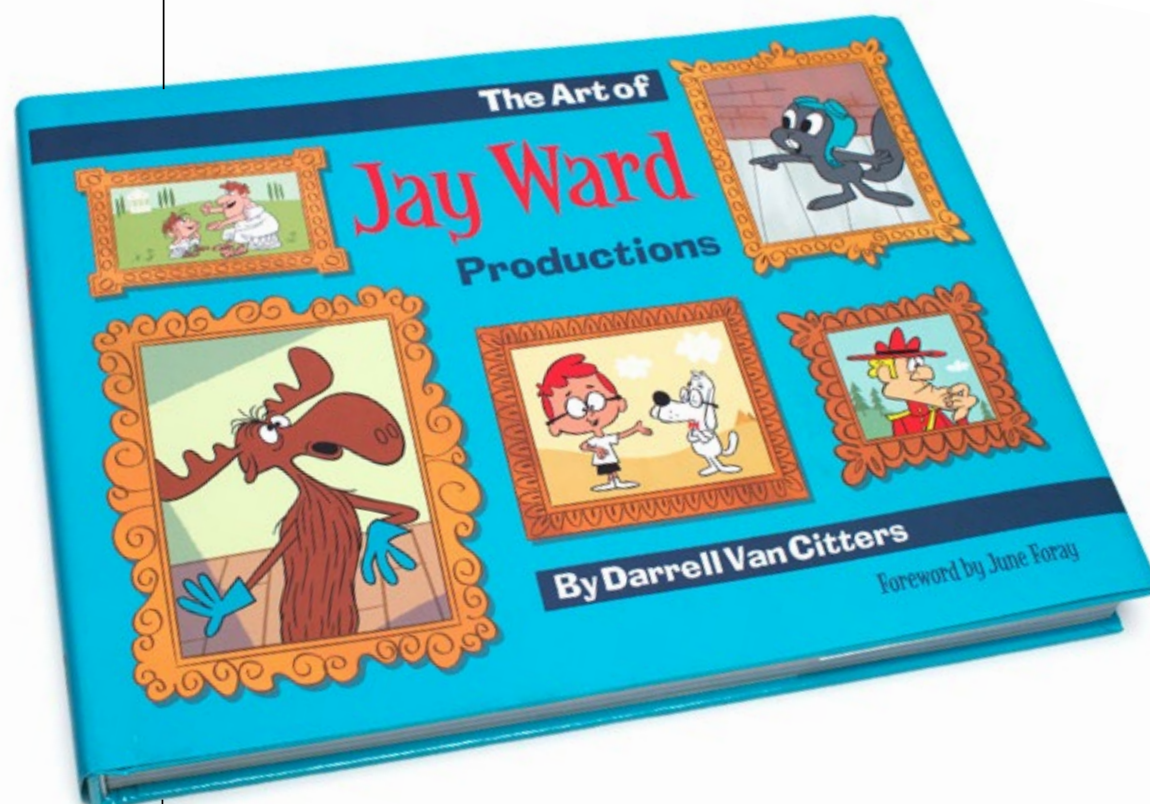
The Art of Jay Ward Productions

\$50

www.amazon.com

This one might be a bit much for the 20-some-things in the audience, but anyone who's uttered the words "get moose and squirrel" with a straight face, this will be right up your alley.

With nearly 1000 images, many never before seen, this book offers an amazing insight into all of the characters created by the legendary Jay Ward, including George of the Jungle, Dudley Do-Right, and of course, Super Chicken. Who knows, with the current political climate, Boris and Natasha might just be making a big comeback. You saw it here first.



2015
NEW
PRODUCT



aurender
REFERENCE MUSIC SYSTEMS

N100H Caching Network Music Player

- 2TB internal storage
- 120GB SSD for caching playback
- Cached playback of internal and NAS music files
- Clean USB audio class 2.0 output
- Full linear power supply
- Machined aluminum case; 3.0 inch AMOLED display
- Gigabit Ethernet LAN Port for Network Connectivity
- Aurender Conductor App controls a variety of modes, including artist name, song title, etc, including TIDAL lossless streaming

Aurender App Aurender comes with a dedicated Aurender Conductor App, hailed by reviewers worldwide, which has been specially tuned for performance and convenience. The Aurender iPad and Android app has been developed with a huge music database in mind and exceptionally fast browsing/searching of your favorite music. It's very intuitive and easy to use.

TIDAL Enjoy 25 million lossless CD quality music tracks with the world's best sounding Music Server. All Aurender Servers and Players support the TIDAL service fully. You can easily play music from your NAS, on Aurender's HDD or music from the TIDAL service using the same app.

www.aurender.com

209 N. Victory Blvd., Burbank, California 91502



AUTHENTIC BBC MONITORS

Transparent...Uncolored...Accurate. This is what made the sound of the original British Broadcasting Corporation monitors legendary. Graham Audio has made it their mission to continue this legacy, and to bring the LS5/8, LS5/9 and LS3/5 to a broader global audience. Drawn from many years of BBC research, and through the engineering genius of Derek Hughes, these speakers have been recreated using state of the art materials and technology under license from the BBC. The LS5/9 is now available in the U.S. along with the LS5/8, and the never commercially produced LS3/5.

At Graham Audio the legend lives on...



Distributed in the United States by Graham Audio USA
www.grahamaudiousa.com | info@grahamaudiousa.com



John Varvatos Suede Morrison Sharpei Boots

\$680

Well, you can't be Jim Morrison, but you can ape a bit of his style with these boots, inspired by his look. John Varvatos is the master of understated rock and roll style, so stop by the site and look around. Better yet, check out one of his botiques around the world. Up your game a bit for the new year.



Anker Lightning Cable

\$16.99 (6-foot)
www.amazon.com

Chances are you've got one cable bandit around your house. We all do. And if you don't, you probably wear the damn things out if you're on the go or sharing with multiple users. Either way the stock Lightning cable that came with your device has a pretty short half-life, as do the \$39.95 replacements at the Apple store. What? \$40 for a cable?

Here's an answer that's half the price and ten times better in the durability department – the Anker braided Lightning cable. Who knows maybe it even sounds better? Nah.

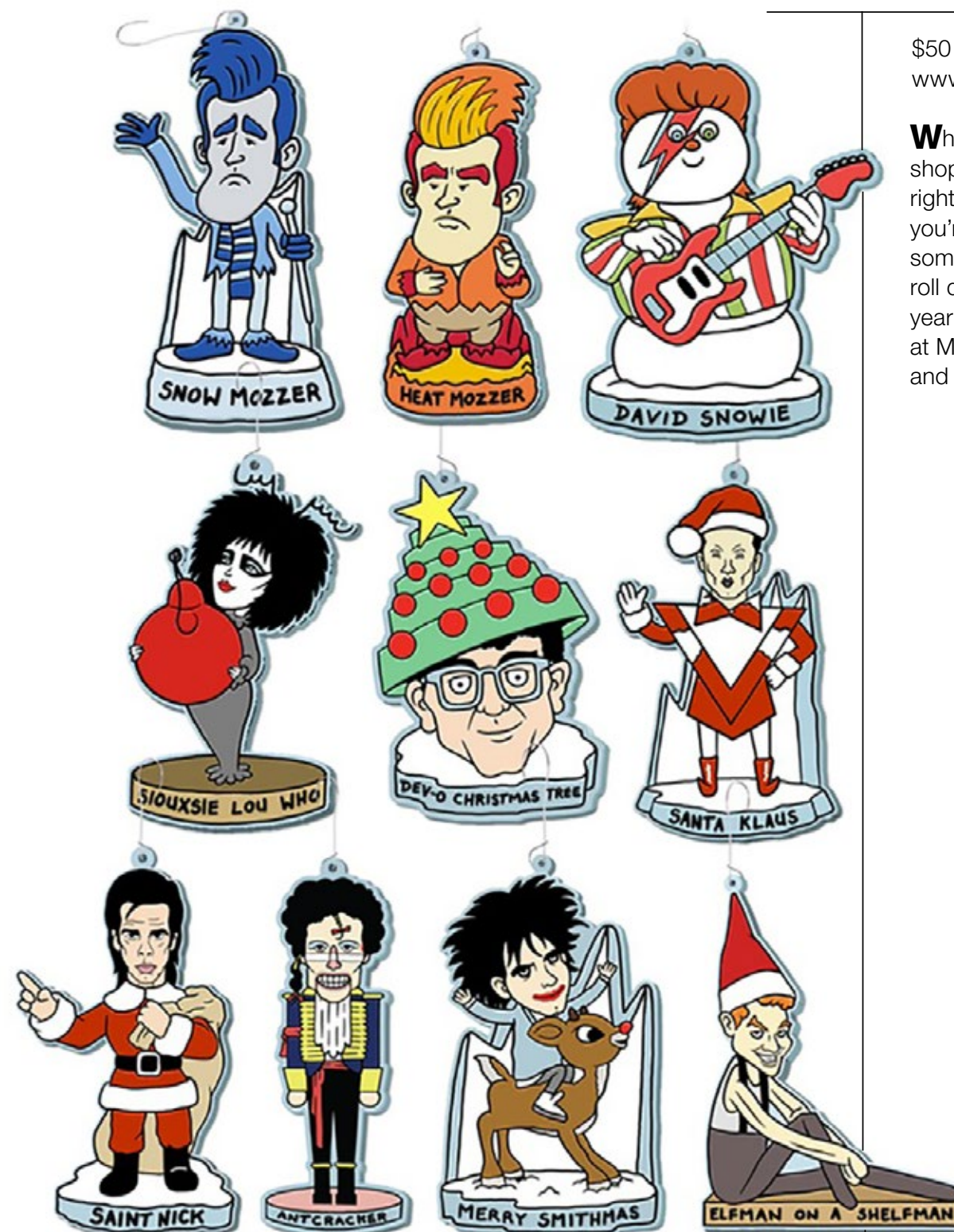
These beauties are well built and thanks to the bright red color, they stand out in a suitcase or briefcase incredibly well.



New Wave Ornament Set

\$50
www.mlinehamart.com

Why not start holiday shopping for next year right now? And while you're at it, why not get some super cool, rock & roll decorations for next year's tree? There's more at M. Lineham art. Devo and Morrissey too!



JAZZ & BLUES



Mostly Other People Do the Killing

Loafer's Hollow
Hot Cup, CD

Bassist Moppa Elliott's longtime quartet, the serious/ridiculous Mostly Other People Do the Killing (MOPDtK), hit pay dirt with 2013's *Red Hot*. There, an expanded seven-piece edition played original music purporting to recreate the sound of a forgotten early jazz band from Western Pennsylvania. Even good Dixieland is rife with anachronisms, a fact that gave these cut-ups license to freely step out of and back into a traditional-jazz frame. They kidded both the latter music's stodgy rhythm and formal intricacy all the while making room for McCoy Tyner and Evan Parker jokes. Jazz humor often falls flat, but *Red Hot* possesses some of the dada sensibility and love for inept, amateur enthusiasm as the 1960s' great Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band.



©Photo by Bryan Murray

MOPDtK has a second helping of early-jazz evocations and send-ups with *Loafer's Hollow*. The band likes parody album art. *Red Hot*'s cover took off from a 1926 portrait of Jelly Roll Morton lecturing his Red Hot Peppers, and the *Loafer's Hollow* cover sends up that of *Red Hot*, with guest Steve Bernstein literally standing in for now-departed trumpeter Peter Evans. The copycat image makes fun of the album's same-river-twice strategy. (A press release claims *Loafer's Hollow* "owes a great deal to the music of the swing era, and Count Basie's many ensembles in particular." If you buy that, I've got a bridge with Sonny Rollins practicing on it to sell you.)

It's not that the players aim for authentically archaic solo styles, or even caricatures of same (not often, anyway), or for Dixieland's stylized way of interweaving three horns. It's more about stomping two-beat attitude, vocalized brass muting, easy-scale melodies, and frequent interludes and instrumental breaks—as if Jelly Roll really were giving them tips.

"Five" gets presented with archaic tinny sound, the players sticking to the upper end of the pitch spectrum to be heard—until the bass frequencies come flooding in halfway through, liberating the musicians to roam farther below. It serves as a subtle reminder that early jazz records were themselves stylized portrayals of a live band's sound. Even the authentic old records are fakes in that sense. *(continued)*

MUSIC



©Photo by Peter Gannushkin

Bernstein doubles as a comedian that knows his way around a plunger mute and raucous interplay, so he fits right into the concept. Ditto returning bass trombonist Dave Taylor, a studio veteran with a beatnik streak, who occupies the honored Morton position on the cover. Those brass guests deftly blend with or diverge from the quartet's ever-game and extravagantly talented Jon Irabagon, on beefy tenor and teeny sopranino saxes. (On "Kilgore," the little horn sounds like Evan Parker battling a mosquito.)

As on *Red Hot*, the expanded band's secret weapon remains Brandon Seabrook on banjo. His frantic double-stroke picking of single notes or chords comes across as ridiculously fast in the best way, recalling forgotten novelty ace Eddie Peabody. Seabrook's hyper-strumming and acute timing add a manic

edge even to the lyrical line of "Meridian." Pianist Ron Stabinsky—a guest last time, now a full bandmember—gets the rhythm section's serio-comic rhetorical ploys. He can play a solo with a different rhythm and feel in each hand ("Kilgore") but will execute vanilla rock-and-roll triplets if needed. Kevin Shea's drum explosions keep everyone awake.

"Kilgore" is for author Kurt Vonnegut and "Meridian" for Cormac McCarthy. Given Elliott's own made-up lore of the PA hinterlands and reimagined (music) history, it's fitting he salutes Thomas Pynchon with "Mason and Dixon," a melody to fit the lyrics to one of the many imaginary songs sprinkled through his novels. If a movie ever is made of Pynchon's surveyors' epic *Mason & Dixon*, MOPDtK should do the music.

—Kevin Whitehead



oppo Pocket Power.

We took the power of our award-winning HA-1 headphone amplifier, and shrank it down into a stylish and portable pocket-sized design that's perfect for great listening on the go. With the mobile version of the same DAC chip as its big brother, a hybrid class AB amplifier, and a clear signal path, the HA-2 turns your smartphone or other device into a high performance digital audio player capable of 384 kHz 32-bit PCM and DSD256. Visit us at oppodigital.com today to learn more about our tiny audio titan.



HA-2 Portable
Headphone
Amplifier
\$299

[f](#) [t](#) [i](#) @oppodigital

OPPO Digital, Inc. | www.oppodigital.com | Menlo Park, CA

John Abercrombie Quartet Up and Coming ECM

**John Abercrombie Quartet***Up and Coming*

ECM, 2LP or CD

You don't expect septuagenarian artists to amend their work much. After a full career of music making, one's style is solidly in place. But refinements bubble up, especially in jazz. Respected guitarist John Abercrombie has turned a corner of late, beveling the tone of his playing and making his instrument radiate with a soft glow rather than the rounded fuzz that marked his approach for the last several decades. The latter proved attractive enough. But this newish complexion is enticing indeed, and parallels the charm of the music created by his latest quartet on *Up and Coming*.

While things occasionally get heated on this pithy program (eight tracks under 50 minutes), the guitarist shapes his dreamy ballads and midtempo gambols with the kind of measured manner that might beget stretches of grey in the hands of a lesser improviser. But Abercrombie has a little magic on his side when it comes to keeping the lid on things. He fully sidesteps flashy runs, but the music never sounds tepid. Here, he shows us he's a tasty player by banking on the idea that forcefulness can be squeezed from a gentle touch, a soft insistence, a lithe volition.

The tack doesn't always yield a sure thing. Last time out, on 2013's *39 Steps*, he and his quartet of pianist Marc Copland, bassist Drew Gress, and drummer Joey Baron fell prey to the listlessness that propriety sometimes generate. The record offers plenty of hushed charm, but lacks in the liftoff department. Everything seems a tad too ethereal.

Up and Coming, a wry title given he's cut more than 30 albums under his own name and participated in an similar number of sideman dates, possesses a perpetual bedrock tension. The band's élan is obvious on a thoughtful frolic

such as "Silver Circle," where Abercrombie and Copland sanction some overt animation for themselves, and Baron reminds us just how nuanced a powerhouse can be. The interplay on "Flipside" swings with the kind of propulsion that hints at tumult but gets tempered by grace. That said, the bulk of the album remains comparatively humble, if not demure. I fell for the opening "Joy" after hearing echoes of Lou Reed's "Magician" in its first four notes. Each piece unfurls with a somber poise. Such balance marks "Sunday School" as well. *(continued)*

©Photo by Bart Babinski

PASS



HPA-1

- All Discrete
- Class A Design
- Pass Labs Sound
- Smaller Package

Pass Laboratories, 13395 New Airport Rd. Ste G., Auburn, CA 95602 - (530) 878-5350 - www.passlabs.com

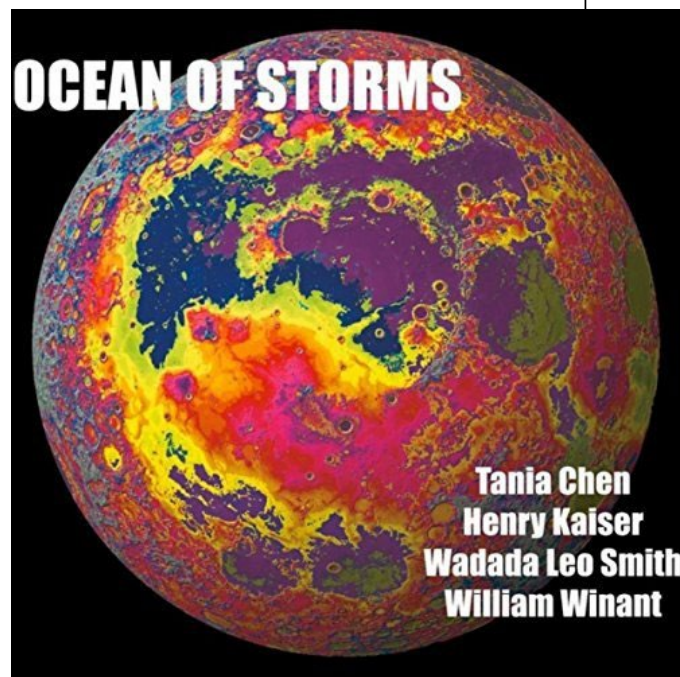
MUSIC



©Photo by Bart Babinski

Copland is an apt foil for the guitarist. He's long hitched his wagon to introspection, but always manages to bring a dollop of verve to the table. His extensive string of albums demonstrates how cagey he can be when braiding sensitivity and splash. He's certainly not shy about injecting Miles Davis' "Nardis" with a bit more hubbub than you might assume, but his enviable sense of touch allows it to still come off like a rumination.

Maybe it's a band trick. Time and again, the foursome manages a show of dynamics while providing an aura of privacy. Ultimately, the latter texture defines the music. Whether the quartet is responsible for a momentary ruckus, or merely strategizing the next collective exhale, the members never betray their commitment to the splendor of serenity. —**Jim Macnie**



**Tania Chen, Henry Kaiser,
Wadada Leo Smith &
William Winant**

Ocean of Storms
Fractal, CD

Hard to say exactly when the practice of free improvisation ceased to be seen as novel, or controversial (“tennis without a net”), or courageous (“wire-walking without a net”), and became one more accepted way to make music—albeit one that lets musicians from different disciplines come together. Every fresh combination doubles as an opportunity to rethink the process, to find a method that suits the specific players best. So it goes with *Ocean of Storms*, by a new quartet with some history behind it.

Plaintive trumpeter and celebrated composer Wadada Leo Smith and guitarist Henry Kaiser have made their share of loud music together since the 90s in their electric Miles Davis repertory band, Yo Miles! Bay Area stalwarts Kaiser and percussionist William Winant have crossed paths umpteen times (though not much on record) and played in quintet with English pianist and new-music interpreter Tania Chen on 2015’s improvised *Megasonic Chapel*. That’s a very different record from this one—its sound defined by Soo-Yeon Lyuh on haegeum, Korea’s voice-like upright fiddle—yet it often shows similar restraint.

Smith continues to enjoy a well-deserved later-career renaissance, recording often in diverse settings.



(He indulges his electric Miles side a bit, sitting in with the power trio Harriet Tubman on its new *Araminta*.) Smith can spray the notes around, but generally doesn’t overplay; for him, silence can be as powerful as sound. He’s less apt to carry on at length than to let a short pithy statement sink in. Smith’s concise pronouncements are like bugle calls: short blasts full of meaning.

Consciously or not, his concept of sound-silence equivalence infects the other players—but then Chen had studied with John Tilbury, pianist with often-ultra-quiet improvisers AMM. Sonic interconnections mirror the personal ones. The music possesses a mysterious air, partly because it’s not always easy to tell who plays what. As on *Megasonic Chapel*, Kaiser can blend seamlessly with piano, using harp guitar—a big acoustic model augmented by resonating, unfretted bass strings that are retunable on the fly, as on a concert harp. Chen sometimes plays directly on the piano strings (something she’s been doing since she was a kid), and on “Sea of Crisis,” she favors a few recurring well-spaced notes, like a guitarist droning on open strings. Either Chen or Kaiser will thump a string or scrape it lengthwise. At times, it’s as if the two play one giant instrument. *(continued)*

MUSIC



Winant is a changeling too, bringing not a drum set but a percussive array including gongs, tympani, frame drums, and what sounds like a bass mbira, with its plucked metal tongs. He emerges as the rare percussionist willing to be the quietest person in the room, coloring rather than punctuating or pushing the action. You can miss where piano and guitar end and percussion begins in these deep-field soundscapes.

Selections include two pieces for acoustic quartet and two duets. Early in the duo "Lake of Time," Chen sounds a three-note figure with which she and Smith run, a loose pitch set to reference and develop while improvising. Smith ranges from signature cracked high notes to plunging lows, his tone at once full and fragile. Only on the quartet's "Al-Kwarizimi" does Kaiser play electric guitar, sometimes echoing the wavelike pitch changes of Winant's kettle drum, sometimes sliding in behind trumpet like another horn, their long tones harmonizing. It's the only piece where the quartet approaches the knockabout frenzy of free-jazz stereotype—and even there you may be unsure who's doing what. These four are that tight.

—Kevin Whitehead



Introducing PRESTIGE[™] SERIES

Respect for the original source.

For over 30 years, Paradigm has set the standard for innovation and technology in loudspeaker manufacturing. The new Prestige[™] Series builds on this history by combining new technologies with smart engineering, for astonishing performance at an incredible value. And Prestige[™] is designed and crafted right here in our Canadian facility.

Visit paradigm.com to find your local Authorized Paradigm Dealer.



Prestige 75F shown



Paradigm

FEATURE

POWER CHORD

GOLD NOTE'S VASARI GOLD

By Jeff Dorgay

W

ith so much happening at the pinnacle of the analog world these days, and so much excitement around the mega dollar turntables, phonostages, and cartridges, there hasn't been much buzz on the entry level. Many of us lament the days of walking into a record store and finding some great records for four bucks, but the same goes for phono cartridges. With decent cartridges in the four-figure range, what's the new audio enthusiast to do?

Four words: Gold Note Vasari Gold. And you can get one for \$385. Too often the moving magnet cartridge is overlooked, and with this example, the team at Gold Note has put a lot of the ethos that is in their top range cartridges into a cartridge for the enthusiast on a bit of a budget.

FEATURE

When super size won't do.

Getting great sound in a smaller space requires extra placement and planning. Large speakers usually won't do, components often need to be stealthier and neighbors in close proximity might not appreciate your need to rock out at all hours of the day and night.

We're here to help those living in smaller spaces find solutions that will keep smiles on everyone's faces.

Check out our website, and join our growing community on Facebook.

 **The Audiophile Apartment.**
Sonic solutions for small and stylish spaces.

AudiophileApartment.com Facebook.com/AudiophileApartment

FEATURE

Forgoing the boron cantilever and a few other exotic bits, the Vasari Gold is still assembled by the same staff of craftspeople that produce the entire Gold Note line, and it shows. Comparing it directly with the Machiavelli Gold (\$3,000) and the Donatello Gold (\$1,075), the family resemblance is clear. The Gold Note cartridges all share similar sonic attributes: a full-bodied sound, with high dynamic swing, solid tonal contrast, and saturation.

Directly comparing the Vasari to the other two Gold Note offerings reveals less fine resolution and extension at the frequency extremes as well as less delineation of fine detail, but this is to be expected. If the \$385 cartridge sounded as good as the \$3,000 cartridge, what would the point be? Comparing the Vasari to a few cartridges in its price range, such as the Ortofon 2M blue, the Ortofon Quintet Blue, and my other favorite, the Denon DL-103r is illuminating.

If you find the sound of the Denon a bit too warm and the Ortofon offerings a bit cold, the Vasari will be your Goldilocks – just right. And it doesn't need a step up device. Not that it's a bad thing, per se, but when you are trying to put a top notch analog rig together as cost effectively as possible, adding an MC phono stage or a step up transformer isn't terribly frugal. *(continued)*

FEATURE

There is an immediacy to moving magnet cartridges that most music lovers find engaging. What the Vasari lacks in ultimate resolution, it makes up for in jump factor. The Vasari captures all of the raw energy of Oingo Boingo's classic, "Only a Lad," mounted to the current Rega Planar 3 just reviewed. Staying in the 80s groove, the Sincero's "Take Me To Your Leader" is equally punchy and engaging. Slowing the pace with Nick Drake's classic album, *Pink Moon*, the Vasari brings out the depth in Drake's vocal work here, producing an expansive sonic landscape for this acoustic adventure to unfold between your speakers.

The Vasari is an excellent tracker, zipping through the peaks of Stanley Turrentine's *Sugar*, keeping the sax, drum and bass bits all in perspective, allowing each instrument to shine individually, yet not letting the stereo image fall apart when all four musicians are playing at full tilt. Not every MM cartridge can handle this, yet throwing all of my tortures at the Vasari proves no problem.

You can get all the Vasari's specs here, but most important to get you up and rolling is the 2.0-gram tracking force suggestion. This proves perfect on both the Planar 3 and the VPI Traveler (That I use for portable applications, but I'm NOT a DJ!) turntables. The Vasari also proved an excellent update to the cartridges mounted to those tables, so if you are currently sporting an entry level MM cartridge, this could be a quick and easy upgrade to your system.



FEATURE

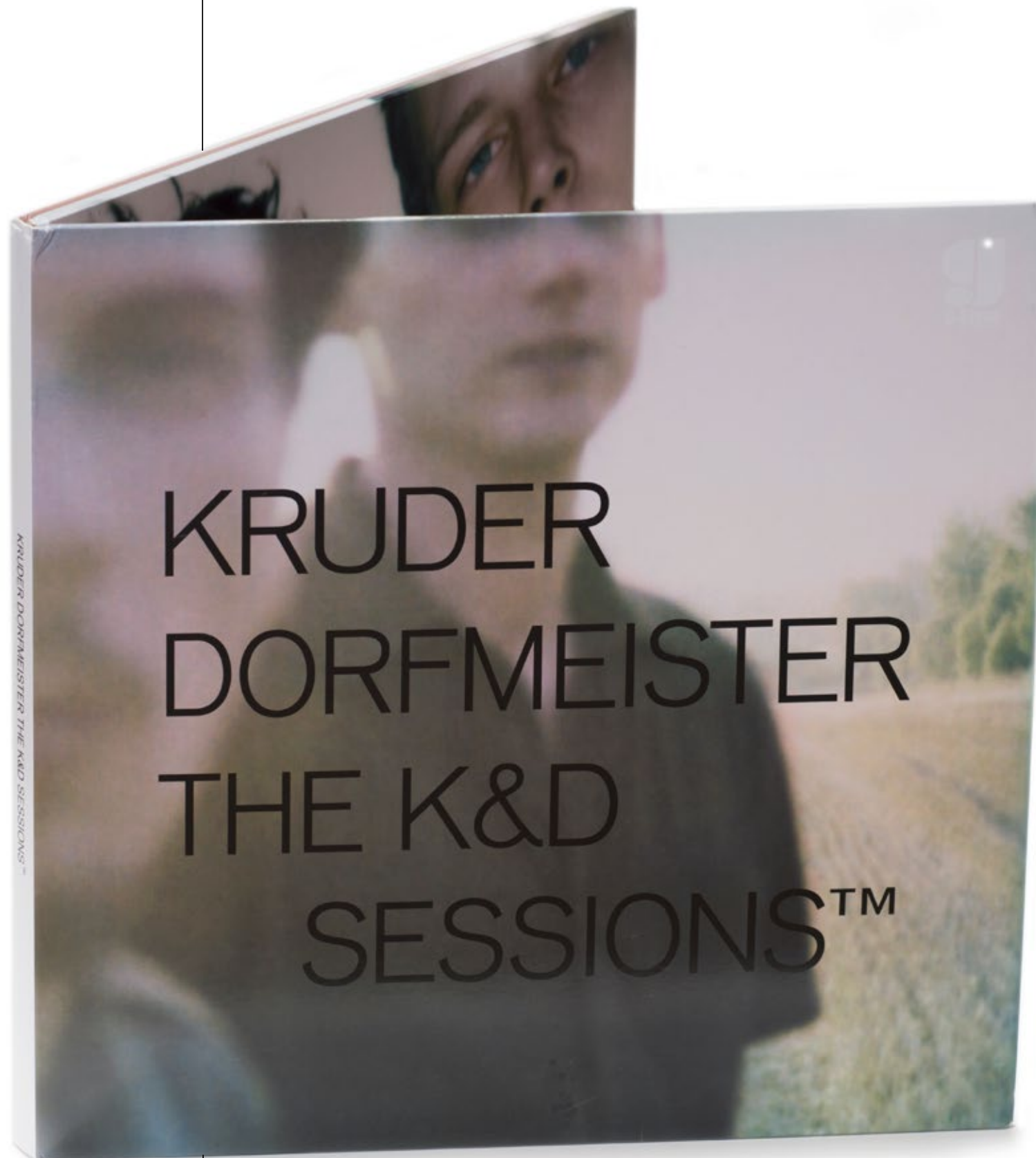
With 4.0 mV of output, the Vasari should provide no problem to any MM input. We put it through its paces with everything from a recently restored Marantz 2245 receiver, all the way up to the mighty Pass XS Phono. While you probably won't be using the Vasari as the top dog in your arsenal on a mega system, it proves an excellent daily driver cartridge. Even at this level, and I was surprised when putting either the Pass XS Phono or the Audio Research REF Phono 3 in the system, how much music the Vasari can reveal.

The Vasari is easy to set up, and using merely the supplied VPI and Rega tools works well. Should you have more accurate tools, the Vasari will reward you with better channel separation and an even smoother top end. So, if you can talk your dealer into setting it up, or you have access to the right tools, the Vasari is a finer paintbrush than its modest price suggests.

As good as digital is getting, modest analog gear doesn't always convey the elusive analog magic, but it's a pleasure to report that the Vasari Gold delivers on all levels. Whether you are building a frugal analog front end or just upgrading that \$99 cartridge your turntable might have come with, I suggest putting the Vasari on your list. It's just right.

www.goldnote.it

AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS


Kruder & Dorfmeister

The K&D Sessions
K7, 180g 5LP box set
www.k7.com

If you know and love this album, there's not much I can add. The 126-minute-plus compilation contains some of trip-hops' finest tracks, remixed with care and flavor. Not to mention some of the best bass grooves ever recorded. Initially released in October of 1998, the off-tempo two-CD set became a worldwide smash, selling more than a million copies. Initially, K7 Records produced a 4LP edition that quickly sold out and now fetches \$300-\$500 on the secondary market.

While laying down a digitally mastered album onto vinyl seems slightly counterintuitive, this record has been transferred into a five-record set by no other than Bernie Grundman. The result: sheer sonic beauty. If you've never dipped your foot into this pool, there's no better place to start than *The K&D Sessions*. The original 2CD edition teems with beats, hooks, and sound bites, and has above-average production values. But these five records come alive on your turntable in ways the original can't muster. What was trippy now comes on akin to a sonic overdose. Miniscule bits now float around your listening room like something from Pixar on an IMAX screen. Do not use headphones while listening; you might short circuit.

The care invested in this pressing can't be overemphasized, either. Along with a massive increase in the size of the sound-field, the bass is more defined, giving it extra punch. And while the high frequencies were once slightly crunchy, they are now silky smooth. So smooth, you'll think this thing was originally recorded on a two-track analog machine.

This version of *The K&D Sessions* is by far the best. But don't be one of "those guys," and buy one copy to play and one to leave in shrink-wrap in order to drive up the price. Let everyone else in on the fun.



Dynamic - energetic - alive

GamuT®

Handcrafted in Denmark

RS3 - The ultimate standmount

"The new GamuT RS3 stand-mounted two-way. Finished in beautiful cabinetry with integral stands, the \$19,000 RS3 was one of the show's musical highlights, with a spacious yet focused presentation, natural timbres, and engaging musicality."

Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound - October 2015

"GamuT's RS3 standmount monitors are one of the two finest loudspeakers I've ever had in my home. I've prized the time I've spent with them because, in very many ways, they've shown me a way forward toward higher levels of performance that I thought possible"

Chris Martens, Hi-Fi+, September 2015

"If I didn't know better, I would have sworn I was listening to much bigger speakers! These (RS3) are stunning small monitors that deliver big speaker sound!"

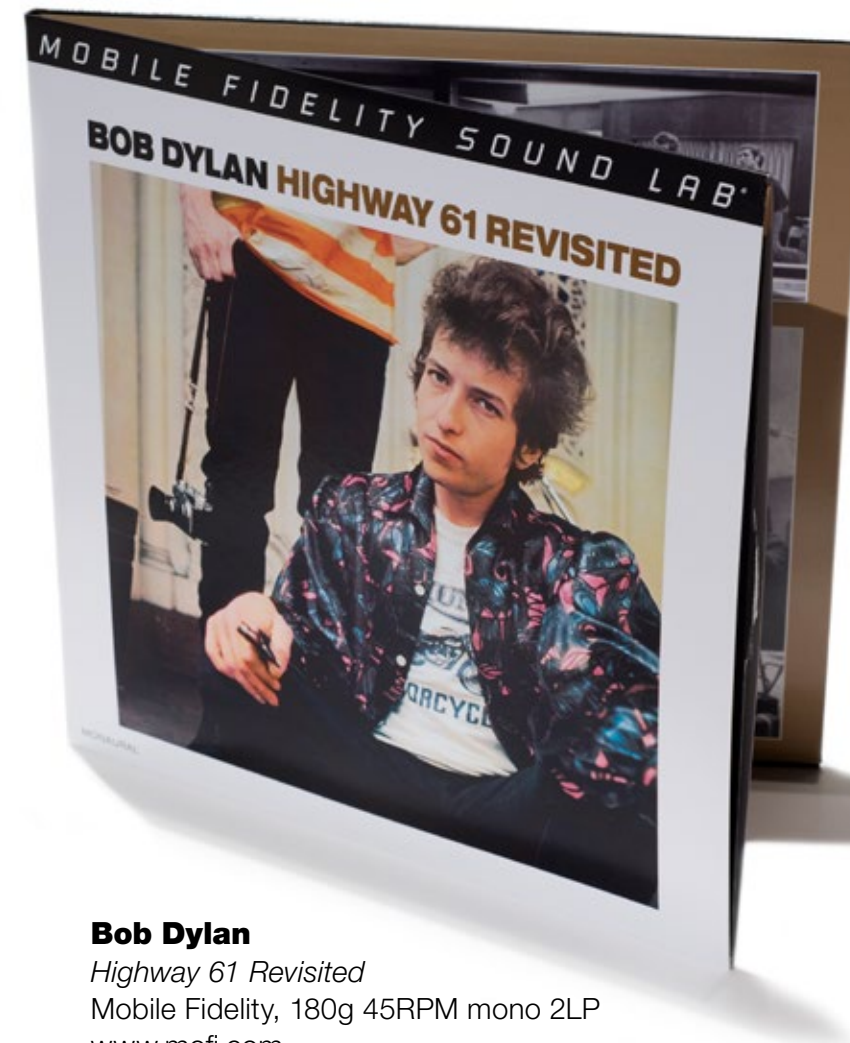
Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio - THE SHOW, Newport 2015

"The (RS3) speaker proved so wonderfully descriptive of the textures and timbres of acoustic and electronic sounds that it was never anything other than wholly captivating."

John Bamford, HiFi news, 2014



MUSIC



Bob Dylan

Highway 61 Revisited

Mobile Fidelity, 180g 45RPM mono 2LP

www.mofi.com

We could get all nerdy, pick the pepper flakes out of the fly caca, and forever argue about what pressing of this classic Bob Dylan album stands as the definitive version. I must confess: I don't own any copies of *Highway 61 Revisited* beyond the original MoFi, the original Sony SACD, and a rotgut pressing from the late 70s with precious little sonic character. But who cares? It's Dylan. It's about the songs.

There's something about a well-executed mono record that comes alive in a way that a stereo record never quite does. While more sonic pyrotechnics remain available from a stereo "mix," a great mono record always seems to have a warmer bottom end and a more homogenous, coherent feel. Oddly enough, a great mono record always seems to feature an image thrown between the speakers that is anything but sound just coming from between the middle of the speakers. And this is a great mono record.

Mobile Fidelity remastered this title with even more than its usual excellence. The surfaces are incredibly quiet, with tons of detail across the audio spectrum. Should you have a mediocre stereo copy like mine, you will be flabbergasted by what's here. Splitting the album up into a pair of 45RPM discs makes for a dynamic presentation, and Dylan records have never been known for dynamics. His voice sounds incredible nuanced, you can finally hear the drums, and the usually flat record erupts with life. Not to mention the locked-in bass groove.

If you have 20 copies of *Highway 61 Revisited*, you may not need this one. But if you love Dylan, they're only making 3,000 copies and I've got one. Fair warning about availability. And if you're curious, the other three analog titles in Mobile Fidelity's Dylan mono series—three more are coming—sound equally exquisite.

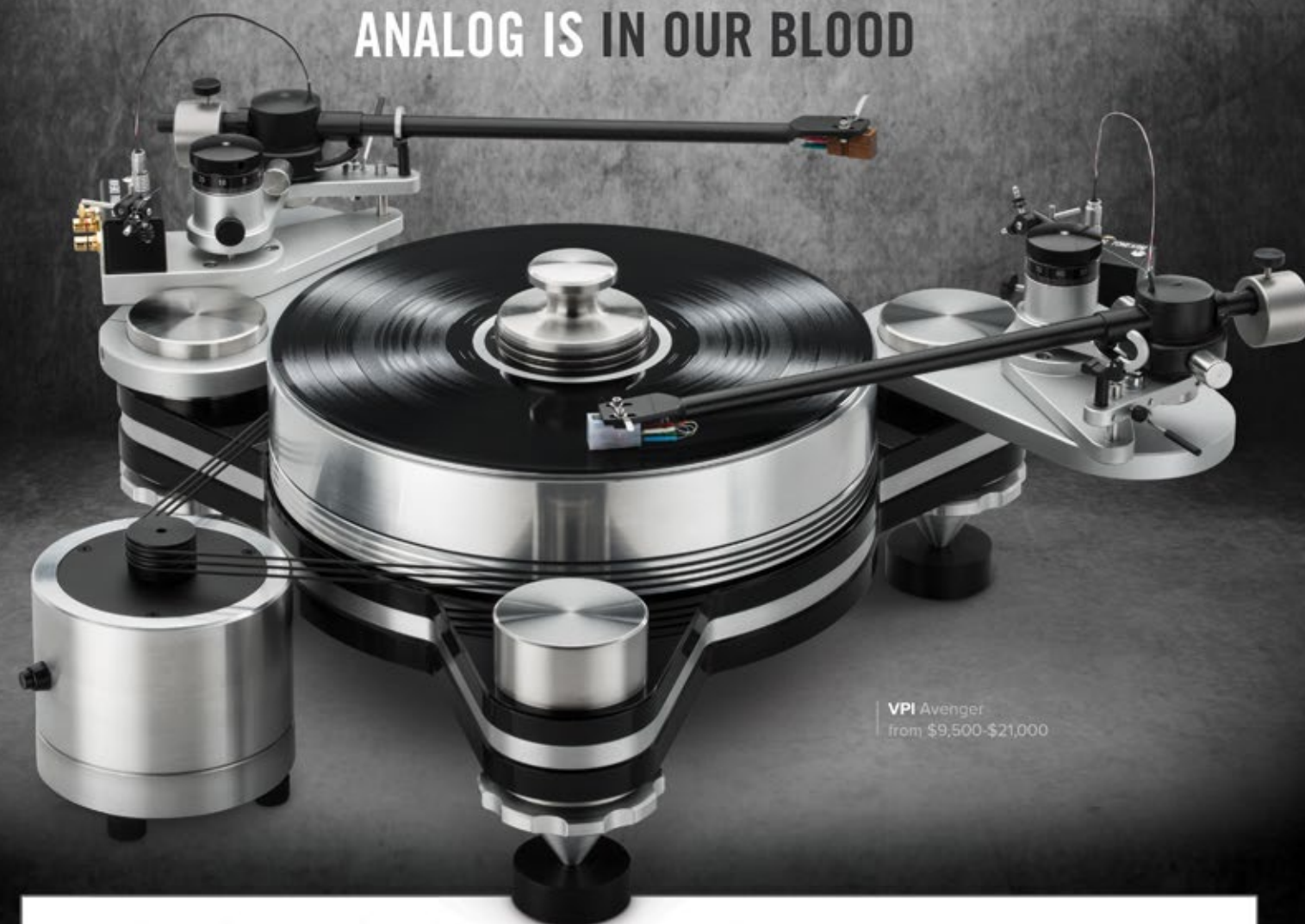
**RUN-DMC***The Singles Collection*

Get on Down, 5 x 45RPM 7" box set
www.amazon.com

Originally a Record Store Day release, *The Singles Collection* is still languishing on shelves. And if you are a fan of RUN-DMC, it's a must. What's better than spinning 7-inch 45RPM records on a Technics SL-1200 'table complete with a 45 adaptor? Nothing. And you won't see this box set in "heavy rotation." Know what I'm saying?

Featuring a healthy cross section of the Hollis crew's hits, *The Singles Collection* only scratches the surface of the group's total output. The sound quality is good, but the singles sound digitally mastered and reworked, lacking the life of the originals on LP—or, if you're really crafty, 45RPM maxi singles. The bottom end feels somewhat lackluster, with a compressed soundstage compared to the maxis, but, fortunately, these don't sound as flat as the early CDs. Slip on your Adidas and give 'em a spin.

ANALOG IS IN OUR BLOOD



VPI Avenger
 from \$9,500-\$21,000



CLEARAUDIO Concept
 \$1,599



MUSIC HALL MMF-2.2
 \$299



AVID Acutus Reference SP
 \$26,995



VPI Prime
 \$3,799



REGA RP10
 \$5,495



PRO-JECT Debut Carbon DC
 \$399

musicdirect

800-449-8333 | MUSICDIRECT.COM



-introducing-

Intervention
 (Re)Living Music RECORDS

“the NEW antidote to the same old reissues of the same old albums”

AAA VINYL FOCUS

MASTERING BY KEVIN GRAY & RYAN K. SMITH

DEAD QUIET 180-GRAM VINYL
 PRESSED AT RTI

EXQUISITELY RESTORED COVER ART
 PRINTED AT STOUGHTON



The Rolling Stones' reputation for producing less-than-audiophile quality recordings won't be tarnished by the vinyl edition of *Blue & Lonesome*. This pressing sounds like it was mastered on one of the cassette decks featured in our Slummin' column. What's so sad about this fact is that this record is damn good, etched with some of the most energetic playing these guys have done in decades. What's worse is these guys have the budget to do it right.

Tracking through the compressed and rolled-off tracks on what might very well be the Stones' last studio effort feels like they just knocked out a vinyl version to be trendy and tick all the boxes. Stick to the TIDAL download. This is an epic fail.



The Rolling Stones
Blue & Lonesome
 Interscope, 180g 2LP set

Sonus faber Venere S Speakers

\$5,499/pair (walnut)

\$4,999/pair (gloss black or white)

www.sonusfaber.com

While some found fault with Italian speaker virtuosos Sonus faber in creating a more value oriented line of loudspeakers, assembled in China, the critics agreed that they did offer the essence of the Italian models at a much more approachable price.

The Venere S bridges the gap. Designed and built in their Italian factory, the only thing left on the table is the mega gloss wood finish that the top line Sonus faber speakers are well known for. However, if the matte walnut is not to your liking, a gloss black or white finish is available at a slightly lower cost.

First impressions are great; these speakers are turning in an impressive performance so far. Watch for our full review shortly.



Esoteric F-07 Integrated Amplifier

\$7,499

www.esotericusa.com

TONE staffer Tom Caselli swears by his Esoteric DAC and transport, and there is no question that the entire line of Esoteric components is built with an incredible amount of attention paid to the details, inside and out.

This massive integrated includes a 100 watt per channel power amplifier (into 8-ohms, 170 WPC into 4) along with a full function preamplifier, including tone controls and an excellent MM/MC phono stage. There is even a provision to add an on-board DAC.

Whether you want to minimize rack space or are downsizing from a major set of separates, the F-07 does not disappoint, offering tremendous value for the sticker price. Our full review will be in issue 83.

PREVIEW



PREVIEW

Conrad-Johnson TEA 1 Series 2

\$15,000

www.conradjohnson.com

Years ago we ran the original TEA 1 through its paces with excellent result. The Series 2 version is an evolution of that original design, and like the GAT Series 2 that we've just finished reviewing, the TEA 1 Series 2 takes everything C-J has learned to another level of refinement.

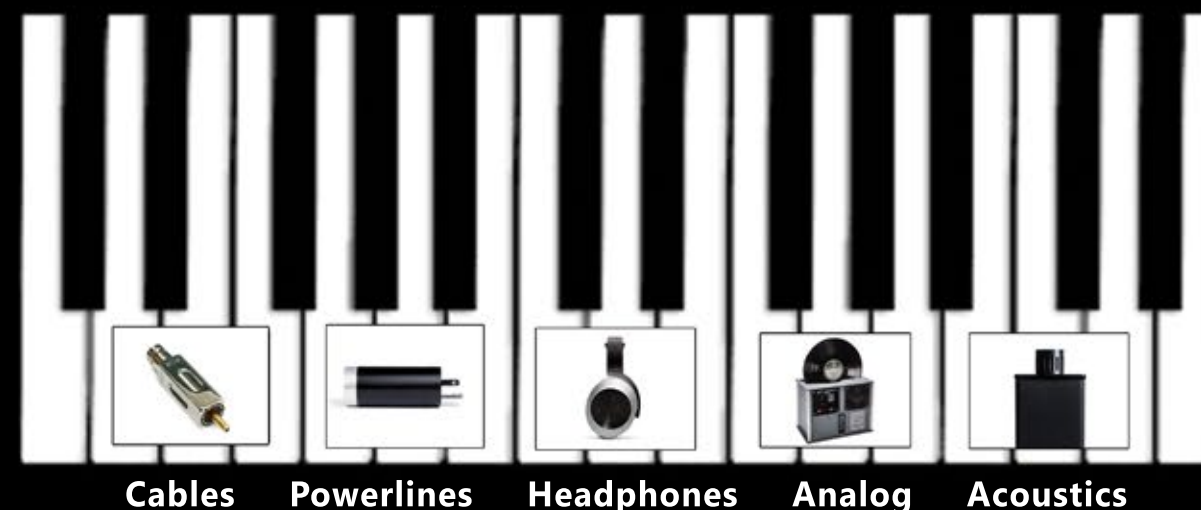
Featuring low and high gain inputs (54db and 66db respectively) the TEA 1 Series 2 will work with any MC cartridge at your disposal. An enormous, dual mono power supply gives the TEA 1 Series 2 a delicate, yet dynamic presentation. Review in process.

WHATEVER YOU ARE INTO...



You Can Play It Better

At home in your system with the only
Headphone, Powerline, Acoustics, Components and Cable Lending Library



- 60+ brands of cables and \$2.5 million of products in The Cable Library.
- Evaluate cables, headphones, line conditioners and more at home.
- Connect with our experts for a free system consult, and enjoy their combined 100+ years of audiophile experience.



Only at The Cable Company

800-FATWYRE or 215-862-4870 cable@TheCableCo.com New Hope PA 18938 USA www.TheCableCo.com

Viola Labs Sonata Preamp

A Quiet Masterpiece

By Greg Petan

Making a great preamp is not as easy at it seems. Despite the seemingly modest demands of switching inputs and providing gain, maybe balance control and possibly a polarity switch, attaining a reference level of fidelity from preamps remains elusive. How hard can it be? Plenty. So many preamps that wandered through my sound room over the years either exhibit distinctive distortions, making themselves quickly apparent, or at the least, are accompanied by sonic colorations that are more misdemeanor than crimes; still robbing the recording of its authenticity. The Viola Labs Sonata preamp flies into the world of audio perfection, a club populated by very few and sadly, all seem to come at a very dear price. In this case, \$35,000.





Viola Labs founders have a rich and storied history in high-end audio. Paul Jayson and the late Tom Colangelo began their careers at Mark Levinson Audio Systems in the 1970's. Mark Levinson is widely credited with being one of the founding fathers of modern high-end audio and helped to develop the market for separate components at a time when the US hi-fi business was on the wane and Japanese integrated receiver-style components ruled the roost. In 1984 Mark Levinson left his namesake company to form Cello (The Cello Pallet preamplifier being one of the most sought after classic elements in all of high-end audio). While there, Paul and Tom formed the core of the Cello design team and it was during this period that Paul became Managing Engineer as Tom led Research and Development. Cello came to an untimely end in the late 90's, and by 2000, Viola Labs was formed.

The Ins and Outs of things

A 4.3" TFT color touchscreen provides navigation along with a high-quality optical encoder using a magnetic indexing mechanism for volume and balance control. The Sonata can be controlled by using the Viola Remote Apple iOS™ application or RS-232. To its credit, the app is highly intuitive. While I prefer the analog buttons of an old school remote, the Viola app closes the usability gap considerably. A +12V trigger output is offered to remotely control power amplifiers as well. Viola Link bus connectors also provide control of the external Sonata power supply and Viola Concerto power amplifiers. USB master ports are available for firmware updates only. *(continued)*

The Sonata preamplifier uses separate regulated power supplies for the analog circuitry and digital control functions, with the main analog power supplies use a choke input design followed by a dual tracking discrete regulator. Printed circuit board mounted low ESR capacitors handle supply filtering. Inputs include 3 XLR balanced, 3 RCA. 1 RCA and 1XLR balanced variable outputs are available, along with one fixed output for those still craving a tape machine.

Based on the topology of the Crescendo preamplifier, the Sonata uses the OPA-1 discrete low noise, high-speed operational amplifier module. The OPA-1 high current output stage will drive high capacitance cables and power amplifier input stages with ease. The Sonata volume and balance control use discrete high precision resistors. An additional dual tracking regulator is used for local power supply regulation. Aesthetically, the dual, satin finished aluminum chassis configuration, with set back center panels is more Spartan than artisan, so this will appeal or not, though a higher level of visual design and refinement would be welcome at this price.

Listening impressions

Utilizing the HT pass through of my D'Agostino Master Audio MLife integrated, in this case as a power amplifier, works like a charm. Late in the review cycle, a pair of Pass Labs XA200.8 amplifiers arrived for review, and I can say the Viola/Pass combo is equally impressive. *(continued)*





[audio physic]

No loss of fine detail

THE EVOLUTION OF A LEGEND

Introducing the new Tempo plus FANTASTIC SOUND!*

*"Tempos sing with a beguiling and satisfying voice...and image exceptionally well...music seems to emit all around them, seamlessly projecting a convincing stereo image. It is rather eerie to have a speaker disappear in the soundstage like the tempos do. They are among the **best speakers I've experienced** in this respect. A terrific value..."*

- *Rob Johnson, Tone Audio



Vana is proud to represent Audio Physic in the USA

For more information on Audio Physic and the re-engineered Tempo, please visit vanaltd.com

REVIEW

Sitting on a weighty 1-1/4" slab of Black Diamond racing carbon fiber, wired with MIT ZII power chords and MIT MA-X SHD balanced interconnects, the Sonata was poised to give its best. Components at this price can often present expectation bias, so letting it warm up for a few hours with Krell's Connect streamer (one of my favorite, best-kept secrets in high-end audio) proves exciting.

Like the Sonus Faber Liliu speaker I recently reviewed, the Sonata's silence is striking; allowing for an extremely low level of noise and distortion. Music played through this preamplifier possesses a subtlety, purity, and transparency I have yet to experience at this level in a stand alone preamp. Transient performance is outstanding, and overall transparency is beyond reproach. The soundstage presented by the Sonata builds layer by layer, coming out of a deep silence as if it were created by a 3D printer; this level of sonic involvement adds interest and spontaneity to any listening session, regardless of program material.

Though the Beatles' *Let It Be*, on vinyl is not an audiophile chestnut, the guitars sparkle and sear with each strum on "While My Guitar Gently Weeps." George Harrison's vocals add a lilting, pleading quality, oozing emotion. Despite the flawed engineering, the musical meaning and a wealth of detail is revealed through the Sonata. The layered imaging and the distinct timbre of Paul McCartney's voice on "Let it Be," is satisfyingly dense, rich, and slightly smooth. Though the recording has its limitations, the sheer amount of detail resolved by the Sonata goes a long way to convince you that you're in the studio with George Martin and company. *(continued)*

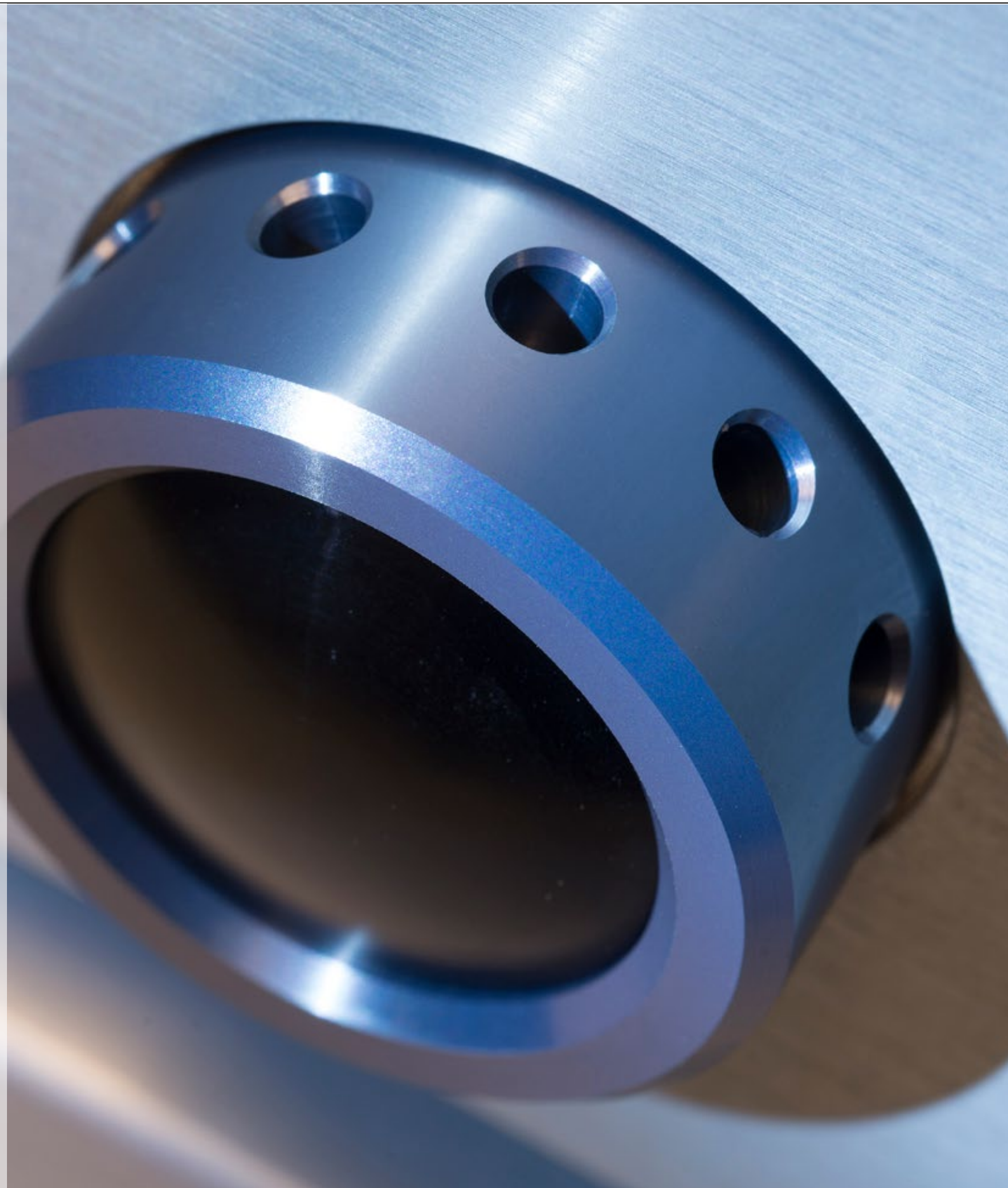
The Sonata reveals the most subtle of nuances related to the performance, without crossing the line of being merely analytical; a tough accomplishment for a solid-state preamplifier. The Sonata gets the big picture right, recreating the thrust of the performance dynamically while capturing an instrument's timbre within a given space. If I had to verbalize a coloration on the Sonata it could be just a tick to the cool side. The Grateful Dead's *Terrapin Station* yanks the sound back to the impression of neutrality or even possessing a touch of warmth, re-igniting the internal battle my brain wages while trying to pin down the character of the Sonata. This one is certainly capable of being a final destination component.

Even tube lovers can swoon over the Sonata; the way it untangles microscopic detail, subtle timbral colors and tonal contrast, is right there with the best bottle equipped preamplifiers. Music played through the Sonata is untethered and free from restriction. In the context of the amplifiers at my disposal and the Sonus faber Lillium speakers offered an audiophile experience that for the first time got me to turn the volume down and enjoy the presentation at more restrained levels.

Bass follows perfectly yet distinctively in suit; while all the time well integrated into the

rest of the frequency spectrum. Following the bass line in any piece is a breeze, with subtlety and slam always on tap. This is holy grail bass performance, folks. The title track from Disturbed's *Asylum* has been getting more than it's fair share of play lately, striking like a menacing visit from down below. The Sonata not only nails the weight but the mid bass punch, keeping me forcibly immersed in the mayhem presented, without the track devolving into noise. In a calmer vein, the more expressive dynamics of Donald Fagan's *Nightfly* floors me with large and small scale expression, and it's always a pleasant journey to revisit a recording you've heard hundreds of times, discovering something new.

Lastly, the Sonata renders the ambiance and space of a recording with perfect integration into the whole of the performance. Performers are immersed within a halo of space that seems to wrap all the way around the image rendered. This creates a level of dimension and depth to the image and stage that is very believable, the last bit of implied reality that eludes lesser preamplifiers. In a large listening room, the title track of Grover Washington Jr.'s *Winelight*, much like *Nightfly*, reveals a sense of space that feels new again.



Spend em if you've got em

It's not necessary to spend 35K on a preamp to be musically satisfying. However, if you're setting your sights on a no compromise reference system and can incapacitate your accountant long enough, the Viola Sonata Preamplifier brings music to life in a way that few other preamplifiers can. ●

**The Viola Labs
Sonata Preamplifier
MSRP: \$35,000**

MANUFACTURER
Viola Labs

CONTACT
www.violalabs.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source
Triangle Art Signature/Osiris Arm/
Ortofon Cadenza Black

Preamplifier
Pass Labs XP-25

Power Amplifier
Pass Labs XA200.8

Cable MIT

Focal's Sopra no.3

A Sonic and Stylistic Triumph

By Jeff Dorgay

Many think of France as a center of art and culture, famous for their wine, cuisine, and style. Two hours from Paris, as the high-speed train goes, is the city of St-Etienne, where Focal is headquartered. In this high-tech mecca, lurks a company with both feet firmly planted in the latest technology and hands-on craftsmanship. There are precious few companies of any kind in 2017, where you can see someone in a clean room producing pure beryllium domes for tweeters, and yet in another see another worker hand finishing a cabinet for final production. This harmony of new and traditional tech has brought us a wide range of loudspeakers culminating in the \$220,000/pair Grande Utopia EM.

I have had the opportunity to listen to the Grande Utopia EM quite a few times in different locations around the world. Though I have rarely used the word "best" in my tenure at this magazine, I must say the best hi-fi system I've ever experienced is in the main sound room at Boulder Amplifiers. It consists of their amazing 3050 monoblock amplifiers delivering over 1500 watts per channel of pure class-A power through the Focal Grande Utopia EM speakers. Is it the world's best hi-fi system? I can't make that call, but it is the most musically engaging system I've yet heard.

Near the end of this review, a scheduled visit to Boulder's new factory and sound room makes for a poignant reflection on the \$19,995/pair of Sopra no. 3s you see here, in all of their orange glory. No snide comments about the color, my wife loves them. What proves illuminating is playing a handful of tracks on the Sopras after spending a few months with them, getting on a plane and listening to many of them on the Grande Utopias, then sitting back in my listening room the next day to repeat that playlist for comparison.

(continued)

Dynamics aren't everything, but if you don't have them...

Granted auditory memory isn't perfect, and my reference Pass XS300 amplifiers are not Boulder 3050s, but they are no slouches either, and the overall characteristics of both speakers are easily revealed. One of the most impressive aspects of the Grande Utopias is the way they respond to transients, reproducing drums with the necessary impact to sound believable, in a more realistic way than I've ever heard a cone speaker accomplish. A similar, yet slightly diminished effect was had when the Stella Utopias were here a few years ago. Playing AC/DC's "Rock and Roll Ain't Noise Pollution" at relatively high volume, the solitary pounding on a single snare drum rings true, with all of the force, tone, and decay that the Grande Utopia offers.

Turning the volume down to reasonable level reveals the same dynamic immediacy, indicating a linear speaker. Where some mega speakers only sound great cranked to the max, the Sopra no.3s go all the way down to a whisper with ease, not losing the effortless they display at high volume. Thanks to a 92db/1-watt sensitivity rating this three-way system does not need a ton of power to play at high level, and it is also very tube friendly. Even my 20-watt per channel Nagra 300p works splendidly.

While the warmer tube amplifiers in my collection provide a slightly more friendly, if somewhat colored presentation, when connected to my reference Pass Labs XS300 monoblocks, they are capable of delivering a truly epic sonic experience. They aren't quite Grande Utopias, but with a lot of power and control behind them, I am always amazed at how much of the flagship Focal sound is present here. *(continued)*



Setting the record straight since 1978.
40 years of American craftsmanship
from our family to yours!





Midrange is another key

After discussing the Sopras design with the Focal engineering team and reading through the white paper accompanying them, it's obvious that a tremendous amount of refinement has gone into this design, and in some areas, the Sopra range incorporates some new technologies that are not even in the Utopia range yet. At last year's Munich High-End show, (at the Sopra launch) their engineers made it clear that they were trying to take what they've learned with Utopia further and make it more compact as well, without sacrificing the prodigious bass response their Utopia speakers are famous for. They have succeeded on all counts.

Focal makes it a point in their white paper to discuss just how important midrange clarity and linearity both are to their overall sound. Utilizing "tuned mass design," a concept derived from Renault Formula 1 in 2005 (Then deemed unfair by the FIA and subsequently banned) Focal can optimize damping of the critical midrange driver without sacrifices in either transient response or tonal coloration. This gives the entire Sopra range clarity and coherence that rivals the best ESL speakers.

The full, in-depth analysis is available here:

www.focal.com/en/home-audio/high-fidelity-speakers/sopra/floorstanding-speakers/sopra-ndeg3

For those not so technically inclined, it only takes a brief listen to your favorite vocal track, or a bit of acoustic music to see that the Focal team has exceeded their goals. The delicate piano work on Keith Jarrett's *Shostakovich: 24 Preludes and Fugues*, Op.87 floats between these orange beauties, with a wonderfully accurate sense of tone and scale. Where some speakers capable of wide dynamic swings can overblow the image of acoustic instruments, the Sopras keep things in proper perspective. Consequently, when an overblown, studio recording with a colossal sonic landscape are played, such as K.D. Lang's *Ingenue*, or Kraftwerk's *Autobahn*, all of the grandeur is maintained.

Setup and placement

At 154 pounds each, you will probably need a bit of help getting the Sopra no.3s out of their cartons and out into your listening room. While not perfect sonically, I suggest if you have a carpeted floor, to slide them around a bit on their glass bases until you achieve the best placement you can. Then, screw down the integral spikes to optimally adjust speaker rake angle. Thanks to the wide dispersion of the Sopra tweeter, this is only a minor adjustment. For those who have more experience with the Utopia series, and are used to removing the protective grille on the tweeter, resist the urge to remove it on the Sopra series. (continued)



The tweeter was voiced with the grille in place and sounds too forward sans grill. I was warned not to do this but gave it a whirl anyway. They were right. Leave the tweeter grilles on.

My listening room is 16 x 25 feet, and I made it a point to try the Sopra no.3s in both orientations; placing them on the long and short walls. Both offered satisfying performance, and your preference will determine what works best. Situated on the short wall about five feet from the back wall and about six feet apart, with slight toe-in made for slightly more powerful bass response, with the listening couch about 10-12 feet back.

I prefer a more immersive, nearfield experience, so moving the speakers to the long wall with the help of Audio Plus Services John Bevier was easy. Orienting the speakers now to about ten feet apart and the tweeters nine feet from the listening position with a lot more room on both sides, the presentation opens up tremendously. Zammuto's last release, *Anchor*, now goes beyond the speaker boundaries, out to the side walls and on some tracks feels as if the room has been enlarged. Big fun.

The bottom and the top

Focal has been refining their beryllium tweeter for many years now, and with each iteration, it gets better; smoother and more extended without fatigue. Ten years ago, the beryllium tweeter was a bit much, but they've tamed it entirely. It now offers a stunning degree of resolution without any bite. Cymbals, strings, and percussion sound stunningly real, and the integration with the midrange and woofers is equally flawless. The level of coherence the Sopra no.3 offers is world class.



The lower part of the frequency response of the Sopra no.3 is listed as 33hz (-2db) with a useable frequency limit of 26hz. Listening to test tones proves this to be spot on, though the output is still strong in my room at 25hz, yet drops off quickly at 20hz. Seriously though, how much music do you have with 20hz tones, or do you have the room to render them anyway? I can't imagine these speakers not having enough bass for anyone, and all of the bass heavy tracks I auditioned proved highly satisfying.

Oh yeah, they are beautiful

With so much talk about sonics, which the Sopra no.3s excel at, I forgot to mention the sheer physical quality of these speakers. All three of the Sopra speakers give no quarter to the flagship Grande Utopia EM; they all feature \$200,000 speaker build and finish quality. The layers of orange applied to my review samples (as with every other pair of Sopras I've seen in dealers and shows around the world) looks like liquid glass. For those wanting something a bit more subdued than bright orange, white, black and red, along with one wood veneer finish; Dogato Walnut. All with the same high quality.

\$20,000 is a lot of money to spend on a pair of loudspeakers. However, considering the level of performance offered for the price asked, it's easy to award the Focal Sopra no. 3 one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2017. Focal's level of in-house build and engineering expertise allows them to produce a speaker with this level of quality and resolution that is unattainable by few other manufacturers for anywhere near this price. Even if you were planning on spending \$50,000 on a pair of speakers, I would not count the Sopra no.3 out. I think you'll be as surprised as I was at just how good these speakers are. ●

REVIEW

The Focal Sopra no.3
MSRP: \$19,995

MANUFACTURER

Focal

CONTACTS

www.focal.com (factory)
www.audioplusservices.com
(NA Distributor)

PERIPHERALS

Analog source

Brinkmann Bardo
w/Koetsu Jade Platinum

Digital source

dCS Rossini DAC
w/Rossini Clock

Preamplifier

Pass Labs XS Pre

Phonostage

Pass Labs XS Phono

Amplifiers

Pass Labs XS
300 Monoblocks

Cable

Tellurium Q
Silver Diamond



The Best Computer Audio Gear and a Generous
60-DAY SATISFACTION GUARANTEE



SONY HAP-Z1ES
High-Res Digital Audio Player
\$1,999



MUSICAL FIDELITY MX DAC
\$800



PS AUDIO PerfectWave DirectStream
DSD DAC \$5,995



BENCHMARK DAC2 HGC
DSD DAC \$1,995



REGA DAC-R
\$1,195



MARANTZ HD-DAC1
DAC/Headphone Amplifier \$799



CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DacMagic Plus
DAC/Preamplifier \$499

musicdirect

800-449-8333 | MUSICDIRECT.COM

McIntosh MB50 Streamer

By Greg Petan



It has never been a better time to be a music lover and audiophile. With the multitude of sources available to play back your favorite music, there is something for everybody. Whether you choose vinyl, CD, laptop, even cassette or reel-to-reel tape, the music lover is free to indulge their passion in any which way they feel fit. The latest entry into the world of musical sources is the digital streamer. With wireless operation from a handheld device and the ability to explore hundreds of thousands of songs at the touch of a finger, the streamer has opened a gaping chasm into the world of music in a way that was simply unimaginable in the past.

The McIntosh MB50 streamer is a compact component that despite its diminutive stature, is all McIntosh; the glass front panel and glowing green logo is in keeping with the rest of the herd. As does hassle free set up and operation, and sound quality which is pure McIntosh. Having reviewed the MC301 mono amplifiers and the C52 preamp from McIntosh (issue 79), the MB50 is in keeping with where McIntosh is going sonically with their latest offerings. That combination possessed a sweet, smooth, colorful and organic presentation that was anything but “solid-state” in the worst sense of the word. Like that powerful duo, the MB50 has an accessibility, a musically rewarding character that gets out of its way putting the music first.



Analog outputs for both balanced and unbalanced cables connect the MB50 to your system's amplifier or preamplifier; digital outputs are also included if you choose to use an outboard DAC. One analog, plus two digital inputs let you connect audio components such as CD players to the MB50, allowing it to act as a mini-preamp; a very handy feature. Two Wi-Fi antennas help ensure a secure network connection for smooth playback; the MB50 can be hardwired to your network via a USB-to-Ethernet adapter (not included).

A significant advantage of DTS Play-Fi compared to many other

streaming options is that with its Critical Listening mode, native playback of up to 24-bit/192kHz high-resolution files is available with no down-sampling as of January 2017 (Existing Play-Fi customers only need to update your Play-Fi app to the latest version to utilize this feature). Many common audio formats are compatible with the MB50, including mp3, m4a, FLAC and Wav files; along with support for DLNA.

Don't let the size fool you

I first heard the MB50 confidently take control of a system made up of Audio Research amplification and Sonus Faber speakers at the McIntosh Group's WOM (World of

McIntosh) townhouse around the corner from my home in SOHO NYC. I was a bit shocked that such a little box could provide such big musical sound and when the ever enthusiastic Joshua Delinger, McIntosh Group Experience Director for WOM installed an MB50 in my system, we had music within a matter of moments. While I still had some lingering reservations solely based on its small size, they quickly melted away. What we have here is relatively modestly priced (\$2,000 MSRP) streamer that easily holds its own in my reference system.

With Spotify and TIDAL pre-installed in the DTS Play-Fi App

along with Apple Air-play, a universe of music is available in a flash. Delanger's great taste in music and the ability to download his recommendations at will has expanded my library in some unexpected ways. The Techy yet always soulful James Blake and modern prog-rockists Animals as Leaders are just a couple of hip, super cool additions to my classic rock and Jazz heavy playlists. While not every customer will have access to the factory guy's set up savvy, worry not. The few minutes required to install and configure the DTS-Play-Fi app is all you need. If you can install Angry Birds on your iPhone, you can

set up the MB50.

The MB50 joined the duo of the now discontinued Krell Connect, and the streamer section of the Dan D'Agostino Master Audio MLife integrated amplifier/Streamer/DAC in my system. Each component possesses a sonic profile; a way with the sound that defines the manufacturer's musical point of view. The Krell Connect's dynamics give music a propulsive thrust and "Jump" that is incredibly engaging. The MLife streamer, while unable to isolate the streamer section from the integrated amplifier section, is uber-resolving and controlled from the very top to the deepest depths. *(continued)*



Extended listening

The MB50 competes on its own playing field. It's priorities lay in the way it liquifies textures and renders densely colored instrumental timbre. Instruments and voices sound incredibly real in a way that allows the brain to relax and become deeply engaged. These qualities were unheard of from modestly priced digital a decade ago and still evades some even more costly designs of today. The MB50 is a digital source neutral enough to clearly define each recordings inherent character while squeezing musical nuggets from even badly flawed re-

cordings, expanding the musical universe in all directions. It has enough resolution to offer something special when you feed it a great recording.

Listening to the above mentioned James Blake "Voyeur" From *Overgrown*, the MB50 presents the swelling, looping themes with lucidity and smoothness. Textures and musical color fill the room, and instrumental lines remain distinct and un-tangled from one another. The ability to effortlessly follow each musical idea is very compelling particularly in music as densely packed as this. Deep bass pours

into the room in a more organic way rather than the D'Agostino's presentation handles low bass. The layers of swirling synth chords surround the vocal line, yet the whole piece holds together superbly. Mr. Blakes "Ret-rograde" follows the recipe with a build up of circulating themes adding up to a deep, dense, intensely musical if a bit dissonant experience.

The MB50 handles classic rock with ease as well. "Hold on loosely" from .38 Special flat out rocks. The MB50 has a temporal rightness that is never slow or plodding. *(continued)*



Clear Reflection

*The geometry of Golden Reference.
The technology of Clear.*

cardas.com/reflection



STOP Fake Auto Bias

Most music lovers crave a tube amplifier but are overwhelmed by the task of biasing output tubes. **So they buy an amp they think is “auto bias”** when most are actually **cathode bias**: An inexpensive design usually found in **budget guitar amps**. Cathode-bias amps are **cheaper to build**, plus they **lose about 30% of the tube’s power** as heat. Many run in **Class A**, which means **shorter tube life**.



In 2003, PrimaLuna engineers rocked the audio world with the first ever truly **Adaptive AutoBias** system which not only **eliminates biasing**, but **compensates for aging tubes**. Adaptive AutoBias is not in the signal path and **dramatically improves sound quality by lowering distortion over 50%**.

In 2009, we went even further. If Adaptive AutoBias senses a tube failure, it tells the user which one with a **Bad Tube Indicator LED** and puts the amplifier into Protection Mode. **No guesswork, blown resistors, trips to the shop, or to UPS**. True plug and play. Plus, Adaptive AutoBias enables users to switch between **EL34** and **6550, KT88, KT120**, or even **KT150** tubes.... **it’s like Five Amps in One!**

So what have we done in 2016? Wait till you see! We’re the only company that **takes you on a tour inside** our products. Go to www.primaluna-usa.com and learn why audio critics and experts from around the world use PrimaLuna as their personal reference.

info@primalluna-usa.com 909.931.0219



Our Name Is Sound. You Know It.



REVIEW

The music has great swagger, and the guitar solo is gripping. The MB50 at holding a recording together with great cohesion and musicality. There are no odd distortions, be it upper midrange glare or high-frequency grain that irritate the ear destroying the immersive experience. Transients are clean, clear, and utterly natural. The music feels a bit more relaxed without being sleepy or bogging down the presentation. When necessary, the soundstage provides a significant expanse from front to back in addition to providing plenty of left to right information. The Mlife has a bit more focus down to a granular level giving images slightly more inner detail and presence, but the MB50 matches it punch for punch when it comes to over all stage size. Very impressive.

Love it

These days in high-end audio, the term “Value” is thrown about with casual abandon. \$20K amplifiers and \$30K speakers are often referred to with such terms. My system is an excellent example of modern high-end audio excess. In this context, the only way to characterize the McIntosh MB50 Streamer is that of a flat out steal. Whether your

system has evolved into one like mine, populated with uber-expensive components, or you are just beginning to build a modest system with hopes to expand up the food chain down the road, you can rest assured that the MB50 will rise to the demands of either and all scenarios. Add the fact that it has optical inputs and outputs as well as volume control capability makes recommending the MB50 the surest bet in some 20 years of reviewing gear. Would I still love a \$100K DCS digital stack? Sure I would but for now I’m having a ball with the MB50.

The McIntosh MB50 Streamer
MSRP: \$2,000

MANUFACTURER
McIntosh Laboratory, Inc.

CONTACT
www.mcintoshlabs.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source
Triangle Art Signature/
Osiris Arm/Ortofon
Cadenza Black

Preamplifier
Pass Labs XP-25

Power Amplifier
Pass Labs XA200.8

Cable MIT



Audio Physic Tempo plus Speakers

Super Sound That Won't Break the Bank

By Rob Johnson

In the nineties, I owned and loved a pair of Audio Physic's Virgo speakers. Their warm and engaging musical portrayal overshadowed their limitations at both ends of the frequency range. One thing they did excel at was a massive stereo image representation, making marathon listening sessions a regular and always enjoyable experience. A friend still uses this very pair of Virgos today, so she can attest to the fact they have performed flawlessly for over two decades. Superb engineering, build quality, and sound delivers an unbeatable combination. That speaker is a tough act to follow, but the Audio Physic designers have never rested on their laurels.



Based in Brilon, Germany, and sold in North America by VANA, Ltd. Audio Physic continues this tradition of excellence with their newest speakers, improving substantially on their past designs. Taking advantage of trickle-down technology from AP's bigger and more expensive siblings, the Tempo plus preserves the family legacy of great sound and construction at a price point that makes these speakers accessible to a wide range of music lovers.

Looking backstage

Tempo plus speakers are available in a range of colors to best match your décor. The most economical finish choices are the cherry or walnut wood veneer at \$5,995/pair. Black or white gloss and ebony wood will set you back a modest \$500/pair upcharge. Our review samples in black gloss are stunning, flawlessly executed. No matter which cabinet finish you choose, you cannot go wrong.

Tempos feature a three-driver design. As with most speaker layouts, the tweeters are stacked above the mid-range at the top front of the speaker body. Audio Physic's third generation 1.75" (39mm) tweeter design, dubbed the Hyper-Holographic Cone Tweeter (HHCT III), is comprised of ceramic coated aluminum. The same material graces the 5.9" (150 mm) midrange driver. *(continued)*

Real High Fidelity. brinkmann

*"The World's Finest Turntables...
endorsed by the world's greatest Mastering Engineer"*



"Brinkmann's Bardo Turntable and 10.0 Tonearm are essential reference tools in my evaluation of test pressings. They simply let more of the music through."

—Bob Ludwig, Gateway Mastering Studios



brinkmann Brinkmann-USA.com

"The World's Finest Turntables...and more!"

Take TONE With You

Experience TONEAudio Magazine in
higher resolution on the Apple Newsstand.

Download the TONEAudio Magazine App
to your iPad or iPhone and read up on all
the latest music, gear, and style reviews.

All that richness blended into each issue
for less than the price of a good latte.

TONEAudio
bit.ly/toneaudiomagazine



REVIEW

Deviating from a traditional layout, the Tempo's woofer assembly aims a pair of 7" (180mm) drivers out the lower sides of the speakers. While this driver placement is not new to Audio Physic speaker designs, the new woofer construction brings welcome sonic changes. Improved vibration control and cone dampening give these woofers greater articulation and definition. Now, the Tempo plus delivers bass notes solidly down to 32Hz. In my room, some roll-off becomes evident at the lower limit. However, the bass remains in splendid balance with the rest of the frequency spectrum. Those audio fans craving subterranean bass notes may want to consider the addition of a subwoofer, or perhaps the larger speakers in the Audio Physic lineup.

According to the Audio Physic team, the narrowest possible front baffle improves the Tempo's sound-stage definition. Therefore, the type, size, and placement of the Tempo Plus driver complement allows Audio Physic to achieve a slim cabinet face, measuring just a scant wider than the midrange driver itself. The larger woofers placed on the speaker sides require more breathing room. As a result, the Tempo's depth, 12.6" (320mm), is almost twice its width. *(continued)*



Assisting further with time alignment and sonic coherency, the entire speaker body leans slightly backward, putting the midrange a bit closer to the listener than the tweeter. Even though the various Tempo drivers may fire in different directions, angles, and distances from the listening seat, the overall musical presentation remains cohesive. The music coming out of these 39.4" (1,000mm) tall speaker bodies flows with ease and grace, rendering the technology behind them transparent. Audio Physic recommends pairing the speakers with an amplifier delivering 20-150 watts into four ohms. While each listener has their amplification preference, the upper end of that power range offers a bit more sonic authority and control. With the amp in place, connecting the speakers is a breeze. A single pair of five-way binding posts protrudes from the rear of the speakers, facilitating connections to banana, spade, or bare wire speaker cables.

Let's dance

As with all speakers, the Tempos cannot deliver their best voice without appropriate placement in the listening room. Audio Physic offers a helpful setup guide on their website which proves very useful in getting the most from their speakers. I suggest starting with the manufacturer's guide and fine-tuning accordingly should the need arise.

Once placed optimally, the speakers do a marvelous job of casting a broad and accurate stereo image both side-to-side, and front-to-back. Even when moving my body a few feet to the left and right of the "sweet spot" listening seat, the music retains a very pleasant sound and precise stereo imaging. Those audiophiles who regularly listen to music with friends or family, or who use their main speakers as part of a home theater setup, will enjoy this characteristic. Supplementing their musical capability, the Tempos are likely to reduce the number of household arguments about who gets the best listening seat!



Sing to me

One of the most remarkable sonic characteristics of the Tempos is that sound never bunches up around the physical speaker bodies. Instead, music seems to emit all around them, seamlessly projecting a convincing stereo image. It is rather eerie to have a speaker disappear in the soundstage like the Tempos do. They are among the best speakers I've experienced in this respect.

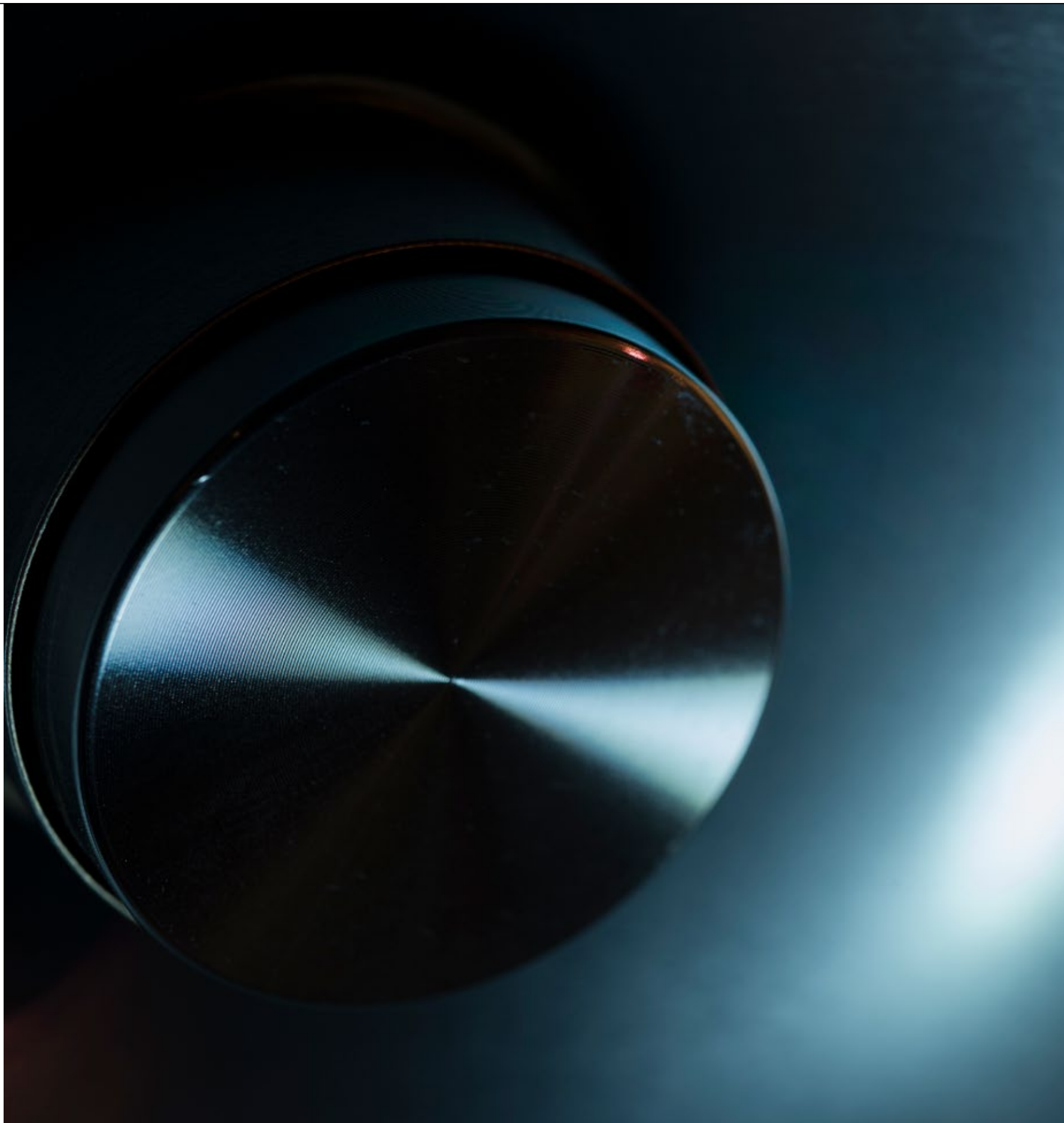
The Tempo's sonic signature leans to the warmer side of neutral. Especially for older and harsher-sounding tracks, the voicing engineered by AP is a welcome choice. The Tempos take what music is thrown at them, and makes the most of it. For instance, listening to Fugazi's *13 Songs*, "Margin Walker" never turns a harsh-sounding corner, while retaining all of the punk rock energy encapsulated in the recording.

Jumping genres, *In a Silent Way* from Miles Davis, portrays instruments with delicacy and subtlety. Similarly, female vocals like those on Bliss's album *No One Built This Moment* are rendered without etch, glare, sibilance or stridency. What is projected captivates, and it is easy to settle into the Tempo's voice. Like me, you may find yourself couch-locked and want to listen to entire sides of albums. (continued)

Listening to bass-heavy tracks like “Way of Life” from Kick Bong offers surprises through the Tempos. Those 7" side-firing woofers certainly do their job to fill the room with substantial, and well-controlled bass.

After a few weeks with these speakers playing almost non-stop, enjoyments are many and quibbles are few. One cannot expect the world for under \$6,000. More expensive speakers, including those in the Audio Physic lineup, can offer a listener a greater magnification of musical detail, and more robust bass in the lowest octaves. For those who enjoy live musical performances, think of it this way: The Tempo’s sound is akin to a seat several rows back in the auditorium, with ample detail and texture to capture the emotion of the music. However, those wishing to hear in detail every string pluck, and every microsecond of cymbal decay might prefer the front row seat at the concert.

Personally, I prefer the voicing choice made by the AP design team, favoring a view of the proverbial forest rather than scrutiny of the moss patches on each tree. Despite a few restrictions inherent in a speaker design required to meet a budget-conscious price point, the



Tempo plus speakers do so much, so well, it’s easy to forget about nitpicks and get lost in the grip of music. Regardless of musical genre, the Tempos sing with a beguiling and satisfying voice as dictated by the recording at hand.

Take a bow

If it’s not obvious by now, let me just say it. I’m a big fan of the Tempo plus speakers. For all the musical satisfaction Tempo plus delivers at \$5,995 they represent a terrific value. They offer fantastic sound; they image exceptionally well, and their forgiving sonic signature will mate well with a variety of components. As better upstream gear trades in and out, these speakers have the potential to rise to the challenge and deliver the musical goods. If you are seeking speakers in this price range, be sure to audition the Audio Physic Tempo plus. Once you do, you may find these speakers in your home for many years to come.

Ed. Note: We had so much fun with the Tempo plus, that we’ve asked the folks at VANA to send us a pair of the smaller, bookshelf version, the Step plus. Watch for this review soon!

Audio Physic
Tempo plus speakers
MSRP: \$5,995–\$6,495

MANUFACTURER

Audio Physic

CONTACT

www.audiophysic.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

SME Model 10 with SME V and Model 10 tonearms. Dynavector 17D3 and Denon DL-103R cartridges

Digital Sources

Mac Mini, Roon Music Service, dCS Debussy

Amplification

Burmester 911 mk3

Preamplification

Coffman Labs G1-B

Speakers

GamuT RS3, JL Audio Dominion Subwoofers

Cables

Jena Labs

Power

Torus AVR 15 Plus, RSA Mongoose power cords

Accessories

ASC tube traps, Mapleshade Samson audio racks, Coffman Labs Equipment Footers, AudioQuest Jitterbug, Atomic Audio Labs Mac Mini stand

Turning the clock back and forth

The Technics SL-1200G

By Jeff Dorgay

The older we get, the more difficult it is to remember some of life's firsts. Once, while chatting with Jerry Seinfeld about his Porsche collection, a big smile came across his face recalling his first 911; a red, early 80s Carrera, and how hard he had to work to get that car. "You never forget stretching for the first one."

So it goes for me with turntables. A full summer of chores put enough money in my wallet to walk into Pacific Stereo and plunk a shiny new Technics SL-1200 (with Stanton 681EEE cartridge) into the hatch of my Gremlin back in 1976. Ok, I'm not as famous as Mr. S, but I kinda know how he felt. Rushing home at a hurried pace, a quick set up with the enclosed alignment tool, and *Frampton Comes Alive* was blasting out of my JBL L-100s. I had never even heard the term VTA and my wallet was empty, but I was really, really, happy.





A little more than 40 years later, weaving through Portland's rush hour traffic, trying to get to FedEx before they close, I feel the same sense of excitement on the way to pick up today's SL-1200G. Last year, Technics released a limited quantity of the classic table, model SL-1200GAE. They sold out almost instantly, with a retail price of about \$4,000. Yeah, that's a lot more than I paid for mine, but all things considered, \$400 back in 1976 is about \$2,300 in today's money. So, is the new 1200, \$1,700 better than the old one? We're about to find out.

Fortunately, between staff member Jerold O'Brien and I, we pretty much keep *everything*, or we know how to get our hands on it. Mr. O'Brien just happened to have a 1200 lying about from 1980, so that's close enough. To make this even more interesting, I still have a 1200 mk.II that's had some modifications courtesy of Sean Casey at Zu Audio, as well as a TimeStep power supply from Sound HiFi in the UK. (you can read that article here), so there will be none of that "well, I can't really remember what a 1200 sounded like, but blah, blah, blah." that you hear from the other so called experts. It's 1200 fest at TONEAudio. We do our homework.

Attention to detail

Seinfeld is fond of mentioning what he calls "density of thought." Comparing the 1200 mk.II to the current 1200G is much like comparing an 80s Carrera to a current 911. Most of the visual cues you know are still there, right down to that same cartridge alignment tool, but everything is finished to a much higher standard. *(continued)*

Those that like to geek out the older 1200s usually concentrate on a couple of areas first; dampening the platter and the chassis; the former being tougher than the latter, because of balance issues. Along with a greatly improved direct drive mechanism, Technics addresses both of these issues with the 1200G. The new platter is fully balanced, filled with a layer of deadening rubber and has a brass top layer to the platter. Popping the platter from the original 1200 mk.II on the current table quickly reveals the progress made. Images fully rendered on the 1200G shrink dramatically and a level of low level image focus and quality disappears. The delta is like going from a pair of Nordost Odin cables to a pair of Radio Shack interconnects.

The original 1200 benefited tremendously from having the tonearm rewired with premium wire, but thanks to a pair of RCA jacks underneath the table, a-la VPI, swapping the fifty cent interconnect for a pair of Cardas Clear interconnects brought the sound of the 1200G to the head of the class. Last but not least, for the perfectionists in the crowd (and I know you're out there) replace the standard issue head shell and associated wire. In this case, a wooden Ortofon LH-8000 fills the bill nicely.

While the new G model's tonearm looks remarkably similar to the one fitted to the original 1200, the bearings and counterweight are machined to a much tighter tolerance, and where the original arm was made from aluminum, the magnesium arm from the limited edition SL-1200 GAE is retained here. Even the dampening feet are greatly improved over the original model.

Just like any other high performance machine, the SL-1200G benefits from numerous small improvements that you can't see. Better bearings along with refined motor and drive control circuitry all add up to more music revealed.

Anticipation

Considering all the fun I had taking the photos of this table, I kept wondering how it would

sound on initial power up. In a word, dark. However, this is not the table's fault. After the folks at Technics delivered a huge bag of cash to my doorstep via Fed Ex it sounded much better. Just kidding.

However, in all seriousness, setting up the SL-1200G with the tools in the box and a modest cartridge will not get you to audio heaven, but this would be like assembling a 911 engine

with a pliers, and an adjustable wrench. That project would go equally poorly. Though the new 1200G looks a lot like it's distant relative, all the verbiage in the manual is true; this table is a much more precise instrument.

Get your hands on some decent setup tools - now. A precise protractor like the Feickert or the Acoustical Systems SMARTractor, a good test record and a digital stylus force

gauge. If you are a master of the Feickert setup software, that won't hurt either. 30-60 minutes spent fine tuning the new 1200 will pay a world of dividends. Lastly, throw out the stock power cord and fit something a little better while you're at it just for good measure.

I can't fault Technics for any of this; they did their homework and built a solid deck. *(continued)*





"In the end, everything is subjective, but in my humble opinion there is no better brand out there for innovative design, military spec like build quality and outstanding sound performance. In this case, if you also consider the astonishing value realized when compared to the best, we have something very very special."

Robert S. Youman

INT-60 Review
Positive-Feedback Issue 79

Pass Laboratories
13395 New Airport Rd. Ste G., Auburn, CA 95602
(530) 878-5350 - www.passlabs.com

REVIEW

In their defense, the last \$5,500 *tone-arm* I purchased from SME resulted in throwing the packaged tonearm cable in the circular file, to be replaced with a \$1,200 cable from Furutech. The good news is that you can at least get the 1200G up and running with the tools and cables included; but properly set up, it's a sweetheart of a table.

Nothing but fun

The SL-1200G is so easy to use, it's made vinyl playback a blast. Thanks to the three inputs on the Pass Labs XS Phono, and a set of three Rega Elys 2 cartridges, comparing the three variations on the SL-1200 theme is not only a breeze, but enlightening. Queuing up three copies of MoFi's self-titled *Santana* (only a few pressing numbers apart, to keep it all as close to identical as possible) quickly shows the progress the Technics engineers have made.

Immediately the new table's massive stereo image makes itself known. The mk.2 creates a somewhat small sonic landscape that is limited to the space between the speakers; it feels more like VHS. Where the gentle piano at the beginning of "Treat" feels small and uninvolved on the mk.2, moving up to the 1200G brings it alive, the piano now sounding much bigger and livelier. As the guitar is folded in, a similar effect is displayed and even the non-audiophiles in my impromptu listening sessions stood up and took notice.

All three tables exhibit great speed accuracy, but again the new model (and the TimeStep modded version) offer a much lower noise floor, resulting in a greater dynamic range.
(continued)



REVIEW

When tracking through a new, 45 r.p.m. copy of Kruder and Dorfmeister's *The K&D Sessions*, the new table shines, with incredible bass weight that the other two can't match.

Finally where I would never have mounted a premium cartridge to the original 1200, because of its general lack of resolution, this is now a welcome addition to the current model. Upgrading the standard issue Technics head shell with something from Ortofon or another specialty manufacturer, and some better head shell wires (in this case, a set of silver ones from Furutech) takes it all to the next level.

Switching from the \$300 Rega MM cartridge to the \$6,000 Transfiguration Proteus cartridge brought about quite the "ah-ha" moment, and convinces me that this is a world class table in the \$4,000 price category. The Technics SL-1200G has the ability to resolve the difference between cartridges with ease, and thanks to the easily removable head shells, this was not a terribly difficult task. Even if you don't invest in a \$6,000 cartridge for your new 1200G, know it is up to the task.

Should you be of the "get a great table first, add the mega cartridge later" mindset, one budget cartridge that delivers astounding sonics with the 1200G is the \$379 Denon DL-103r. It won't offer the last bit of fine detail that the four figure cartridges will, but it's level of sheer musicality and bass weight should keep your ears perked up.

I've never been a DJ, but...

I can't resist a good 45 r.p.m. maxi single. The well recorded ones offer up a level of dynamics that is usually a cut above a standard album. Radiohead's "High and Dry" proved a perfect place



REVIEW

Across the board great

As with a great sports car, much is to be said for balance. Those rare cars with an equal amount of stop, go, handling and feel are often much more fun on a curvy road than a high horsepower car that is a monster beyond your capabilities. The Technics SL-1200G is like the new generation Miata. It offers up such a balanced amount of analog performance, that you'll never notice you aren't listening to a \$30,000 turntable.

If you haven't considered a direct drive turntable for audiophile duty, I can't suggest the Technics SL-1200G highly enough. I'm happy to award it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2017 and not only have I purchased the review sample, I'm thinking of a second one, just because. ●

The Technics SL-1200G
MSRP: \$4,000

MANUFACTURER

Technics

CONTACT

www.technics.com

PERIPHERALS

Phonostage Pass XS Phono, Audio Research REF Phono 3

Cartridges Rega Elys2, Ortofon Scratch, Denon DL-103r, Sumiko Blackbird, Grado Reference 1, Transfiguration Proteus

Preamplifier Pass XS Pre

Power Amplifier Pass XS 300 monoblocks

Cable Tellurium Q Silver Diamond and Cardas Clear

to start. A mere push of the button is all it takes to get to 45 right now, and it goes without saying, the speed accuracy of the new 1200G is perfect – the red strobe now replaced by a rich blue.

As you might suspect, the rock-solid speed accuracy provided by direct drive makes not only for explosive transients, but sturdy bass response. Zipping through a handful of Prince 45s delivers a special quality, weight and texture to the lower register that I haven't experienced with tables at this price before.

Yet the 1200Gs sole attribute is not solid bass response as the early mk.2 was. Where the original still provides a rock solid musical foundation, it's not an audiophile turntable in stock form. The current G model adds the nuance that you'd expect from a great belt drive table. While the 1200G doesn't have the level of finesse that my reference Brinkmann Bardo possesses, it grooves in that direction.

Switching the program material to solo piano underlines the 1200Gs solidity. It's like taking the speed stability of a great digital recording and adding the tonal saturation of analog. It's a compelling combination.

Lastly, I just couldn't resist the urge to do a little bit of scratching, so the Ortofon CC Scratch came off the shelf and after resetting tracking and anti-skate (Ortofon suggests a 2-gram anti skate setting and 4-gram tracking force "because of the abnormal behavior of the tonearm when backcuing." Try that on a \$100,000 turntable.

The Next Generation MartinLogan's Expression ESL 13A

By Jeff Dorgay

Listening to the Kruder and Dorfmeister classic, "Going Under," I feel like someone just dropped a hit of LSD in my Mountain Dew. Sounds are bouncing all over the room, and the lead vocal is coming right out of the inside of my skull. It's like standing inside a pair of headphones that would fit the statues on Easter Island. When the bass line hits at about 1:48, it hits hard. Knock you in the stomach hard. This is the kind of slam I was getting from my MartinLogan Summits with a pair of their Descent i subwoofers. I can't resist going all the way back to the 80s and digging out my Soul II Soul maxi single of "Keep on Movin'." That's bass, and the level of integration between the pair of 10" woofers and the panel is sublime. What's the secret? Read on.

Appearances can be deceptive.

Rega products are elegantly simple in appearance. Deceptively so, in fact. Everything is straightforward to setup, easy to use and utterly consistent in performance.

Yet underneath that apparent simplicity lies some of the most radical thinking, advanced engineering and innovative materials development you'll find anywhere.

Based on 40 years of continuous research and unwavering commitment to UK manufacturing, everything Rega does is there for one reason alone.

Quite simply, if it doesn't sound better, it doesn't happen. (If it does sound better, but is considered 'impossible,' they'll figure out how to do it anyway. There's a very good reason the company's named Rega Research).

Rega's view is that hifi's simply a tool for listening to your music.

So we think you'll quickly forget all about the technology. But we're 100% sure you'll remember the performance.



Record Decks
CD Players
DACs
Amplifiers
Loudspeakers



rega



The Sound Organisation • facebook.com/TheSoundOrganisation
• call: 972.234.0182 • email: info@soundorg.com • website: soundorg.com

Exclusive US distributors of : Certon Systems • Chord Company • Dali • PMC • Quadraspire • Rega • Wilson Benesch

REVIEW

MartinLogan ESLs offers better dispersion than other stats, and while they still don't quite have the sweet spot of the best cone speakers, these are not one-person speakers. Where the original CLS was immersive, provided you sat still in that one spot, the ESL 13A is good all over the couch. Of course, the sweet spot is still the most engaging, but the transition from on to off axis is nothing like some we've used. This is a speaker that you can play at parties. And you will want to party on with these.

Staying in the party mode, The Crash Test Dummies' "Just Chillin'" provides more gut punching bass, and again, these speakers do not disappoint. Ditto for Me'Shell Ndegocello's *Plantation Lullabies*. This whole record is full of infectious bass grooves and dynamic contrast. Damn, these speakers can rock out.

Too much fun

The only caveat here is that the 13's play so clean, they are also like headphones in the sense that it's so easy to plunge into listening sessions with such fervor, you don't pay attention to the sound level. Hooked up to the massive Pass XS 300 monoblocks, my guests don't realize just how damn loud these things are playing until we attempt conversation. Quick, reach for the remote. Or not. (continued)





Brain still swimming from this much hi-fi jollification, all the major audiophile clichés apply to MartinLogan’s latest creation, these speakers are almost too much to come down from. Everything else lurking around the studio now (except the Focal Sopra no.3’s) feels small, really small by comparison. Lovely as the time spent with the award winning Neolith was, my room was just not big enough for these speakers to deliver 100% of what they are capable of. While they have more ultimate resolution and I feel they are worth every penny asked, in my 15 x 26-foot room the 13As hook up perfectly. If you’ve spent any amount of time with panels, you know that the room volume to panel ratio is critical. Depending on your room, you may have better luck with the one size smaller Impression ESL 11A speakers, or the one size bigger Renaissance ESL 15A, but in my room 13 is indeed the lucky number.

Big love

At the risk of sounding too biased, I fell for MartinLogan speakers on the first audition, with the CLS in the late 80s. Considering the speakers leading up to them were all panels; Magnepan, Acoustat and Quad, it made perfect sense. It’s like driving a Porsche 911, no matter what model, what vintage, I always feel at home behind the wheel of a 911. Granted, some versions of the 911 are markedly better than others. They’ve made a few zigs and zags along the path, but overall, they remain compelling. And like that legendary German car manufacturer, MartinLogan keeps improving their products in a similar fashion, pulling more performance out of a platform that you might think has been taken as far as it can go. *(continued)*

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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

That’s where Echo Audio comes in. We have more than 20 years of retail experience in selling hi-fi equipment the way it should be sold: In a brick-and-mortar environment that provides you with personalized attention.

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

So, when you are looking for high-quality, lightly used hi-fi gear, look no further than Echo Audio. Be sure to check out our Web site for current products and new arrivals.

echo)))
audio

www.echohifi.com 888.248.echo



Following their evolutionary journey for the better part of the last 25 years, I am always impressed with their progress in mating a cone woofer to an ESL panel. As far back as the Aeries, I knew they were on to something great. The current versions are something else indeed.

The jewel

The addition of MartinLogan crossover designer Joe Vojtko's 24-bit DSP engine with Anthem's ARC room correction straddles the gap that always kept those woofers ever so slightly detectable. It's the factor that takes these speakers "to 11" as they like to say. I've been fortunate that past MartinLogan designs work well in my listening room, but this is not always the case in other environments. No matter who's panel speakers you lust after, setup is always a bit more critical than it is with a cone speaker.

A dedicated room offers the convenience of being able to place speakers where they need to sound their best, but not all of you have that luxury; your gear must integrate with your living environment. More often than not, this means compromising speaker placement.

A quick visit to the Dollar Times inflation calculator, \$11,000 in 2008 is equal to about \$12,500 in 2017. Having just listened to a friend's pair of Summits recently, I can say with zero reservation that the Expression ESL 13A is worth an extra \$2,500. If you have Summit or Summit X speakers and feel

like stimulating the economy a bit, I suggest heading out to your favorite MartinLogan dealer right now and giving these a listen. It won't take Darth Vader to convince you that you'll need a pair. Are you feeling a tightness in your throat? Ha. I've been practicing for a long time.

While a different flavor than the Focal Sopra no.3s, also reviewed in this issue, I tip my hat to both Focal and MartinLogan for giving the serious music lover so much speaker at this price. I know \$15,000 is still a lot of money for most people, I've heard \$100,000 speakers that on balance don't offer this much. You could spend more money than this on a pair of interconnects in 2017. Or you could live for ten years in Bali. I'll take the speakers.

I always fall victim to whatever magic they achieve with each new model, always getting better at integrating the cone woofer with the ESL panel. Even as far back as the Summit, which I reviewed in issue 30, MartinLogan has been doing an incredible job with what many consider to be a daunting if not impossible mission, providing killer dynamics from an ESL panel.

The current Expression ESL 13A (\$14,995/pair), the Impression ESL 11A (\$9,995/pair) and the Renaissance ESL 15A (\$24,995/pair) take advantage of all the current MartinLogan technological advances; powered force woofers, and their latest X-Stat panel, which maximizes radiating panel area. *(continued)*

Quick setup

Though the CLS and CLX prove tedious to set up to perfection, the hybrid speakers have always been much easier. Of course, taking about 30-45 minutes to make sure speaker rake is not only correct for your listening position, but as close to identical on both speakers still provides dividends. That patience will be rewarded, offering a bigger soundstage in all three dimensions, though the ESL 13A is much better at sounding good right out of the box than past models.

As previously mentioned, the toughest thing for hybrid ESLs to overcome is achieving the best compromise of smooth bass response and woofer/panel integration. Thanks to the onboard ARC (Anthem Room Correction) you no longer need to be as fussy with placement, though if possible, getting the best sound you can without using ARC will yield the best results after. You will need to go back to the ML website or your ML dealer and purchase their PBK (Perfect Bass Kit) to calibrate your woofers. This may be a bit confusing, but you need to use the MartinLogan kit for proper results.

I performed two tests. First, setting the speakers up poorly on purpose and engaging ARC, then going for the best setup I could before running the program, which incidentally needs a Windows box to run.



This is probably my only complaint with the speakers; it's a bit presumptuous to think we all own a Windows PC. Fortunately, there are plenty of cheap Windows laptops, or you can run Windows on your Mac, but this will be an additional expense.

Computer complaints aside, the results are fantastic. Merely throwing the speakers in the room with no regard to placement and then running ARC was amazing, this is the lazy person's way to roll with the ESL 13s and will deliver more than acceptable results.

However, I was not prepared for how much better the ESL 13s would sound after an hour of fiddling for what I thought was excellent sound, then applying ARC. This is the magic, and once you hear it, you won't be able to go back. I've always been a huge fan of JL Audio subwoofers for the same reason; it manages the bass response in a completely positive respect, there are no drawbacks. During calibration, ARC overrides the bass controls on the back of the woofer cabinets. When finished, these can be used to further fine tune by ear, but honestly, all I did was screw up the results.

Running back through my favorite bass heavy tracks, I was rewarded with deeper, more powerful, more defined bass across the board. (continued)

THE SOURCE

AUDIO VIDEO DESIGN GROUP

THE ART OF DESIGN



1-310-534-9900



THESOURCEAV.COM

Good as this is, the big bonus is the level of woofer to panel integration increases dramatically, and this is what really takes the ESL 13s to a new level of performance in comparison to past MartinLogan models.

MartinLogan has also improved the sheer drivability of the ESL 13. Where older designs were tougher to drive with some tube amplifiers, the new speaker shines with everything at my disposal, from a Dynaco Stereo 70 to the Conrad Johnson LP125sa+. The \$4,400 PrimaLuna HP integrated with KT150 tubes proved a reasonably priced solution with plenty of power and headroom, with that lush sound that only tubes can provide. You can rest assured whatever you have at your disposal; it will provide pleasing results.

A major triumph

The MartinLogan Expression ESL13 is an outstanding speaker and a bargain for the price. If you like panel speakers, ESLs in particular, chances are high you'll fall for these. If you've avoided ESLs in the past because they were too hard to drive, too hard to set up, or couldn't play loud enough, I suggest an audition. Let me know if you think my enthusiasm is warranted! ●



REVIEW

MartinLogan Expression ESL 13A
\$14,995/pair

MANUFACTURER
MartinLogan Ltd.

CONTACT
www.martinlogan.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Brinkmann Bardo turntable, Koetsu Jade Platinum Cart

Digital Source Gryphon Kalliope DAC

Phono stage Pass XSPHono, Audio Research REF Phono 3

Preamplifier Pass XSPre

Power Amplifier Pass XS300 Monoblocks

Cable Tellurium Q Silver Diamond and Cardas Clear

FROM THE WEB

Shinola Runwell Turntable

\$2,500

www.shinola.com

Shinola's joint venture with American turntable legend VPI is finally here, and regardless of what the basement dwellers on the internet say, it's a damn good turntable. Gorgeous as it is, the Runwell delivers the goods sonically, and with its integral phonostage and pre-mounted Ortofon 2M Blue mm cartridge, playing records has never been easier. Attach the tonearm wand, drive belt and plug it in to your favorite amp, receiver or powered speakers. Here's to this American manufacturer's continued success.

● Our in-depth analysis is right here.



A MASTERPIECE OF DESIGN AND ENGINEERING



Renaissance ESL 15A represents a major evolution in electrostatic design. A 15-inch Curvilinear Line Source (CLS™) XStat™ vacuum-bonded electrostatic transducer with advanced MicroPerf™ stator technology and ultra-rigid AirFrame™ Blade construction provide the heart of this exceptional loudspeaker.

A powerfully dynamic low-frequency experience is rendered with unflinching accuracy and authority courtesy of dual 12-inch low-distortion aluminum cone woofers, each independently powered by a 500-watt Class-D amplifier, and controlled by a 24-Bit Vojtko™ DSP Engine featuring Anthem Room Correction (ARC™) technology. Hear it today at your local dealer.

martinlogan.com



Graham Audio Chartwell LS3/5

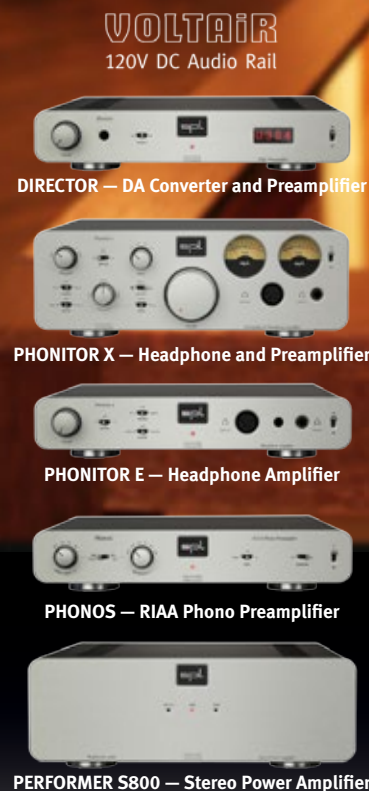
\$2,399
www.grahamaudiousa.com

We've been using the Graham LS5/9 speakers as reference components for over a year now, and they present an incredible testimony to the original BBC design brief, as do the LS3/5s you see here.

Compared to original issue LS3/5as, the contemporary version does a fantastic job, arguably with some improvements, thanks to modern materials. These tiny monitors ooze understated elegance from top to bottom and sound lovely. Ideally suited for a small listening room nearfield, they take desk-top listening to an entirely different level. A few hours behind the desk with a pair of these, and you'll never want headphones again.

● Click here for the full review.

Studio quality for your living room



Professional Fidelity

Sound Performance Lab (SPL) has been designing and manufacturing professional audio equipment in Germany for more than 30 years for some of the world's top studios.



PRO-FI SERIES

USA • Distribution by Audio Plus Services — CANADA • Distribution by Plurison

Telefunken 6922/E88CC
Made in Ulm, Germany in 1968, these are the most sought after and rarest 6922 type ever. An incredible upgrade to your gear. Find a HUGE inventory of vintage tubes only at: www.upscaleaudio.com



SONUS FABER
All Models in Stock



MANLEY
Chinook Special Edition Phono Stage
An Upscale Audio Exclusive

PrimaLuna HP
The World's Finest Tube Integrated \$4399



KISEKI
Purple Heart N.S.
\$3499

All cartridges in stock. No waiting.



AUDEZE
LCD-3



VPI
Largest inventory
of VPI in the U.S.A

SONUS FABER
Lillium
In Stock



Upscale Audio is always on the hunt for new products. Check our website for the latest.

IN STOCK: ACOUSTIC ZEN, AES, AH! TJOEB, ANTHEM, ARCAM, ATMA-SPHERE, AUDEZE, AUDIO QUEST, B&K, BEL CANTO, BENZ MICRO, CARY, CHANG LIGHTSPEED, CLEARAUDIO, COINCIDENT, DH LABS, DYNAVECTOR, ERA, EQUI-TECH, EXACTPOWER, GALLO, GRAHAM, HIFIMAN, JL AUDIO, KEF, KIMBER KABLE, LYRA, MAGNUM DYNALAB, MANLEY, MARTIN LOGAN, MUSIC HALL, MYSTÈRE, NITTY GRITTY, NOLA, NORDOST, NOTTINGHAM, OPERA, PATHOS, PEACHTREE, PRIMALUNA, PRIMARE, PS AUDIO, QUAD, REGA, REL, SME, SOOLOOS, SONUS FABER, SUTHERLAND, TRI-PLANAR, VPI, VINCENT, AND VIENNA ACOUSTICS

UPSCALE
AUDIO
HIGH FIDELITY • MUSICAL SYSTEMS

www.upscaleaudio.com

2508 Wright Ave • La Verne CA 91750
[909] 931-9686 FAX: [909] 985-6968

FROM THE WEB

Sygyzy SLF-850 Subwoofer

\$799

www.sygyzyacoustics.com

Industry vet Paul Egan has started his own firm, Sygyzy Acoustics, to create a line of subwoofers that combine high performance and understated aesthetics at a very reasonable price. All controlled from your smart-phone, their subwoofers are a breeze to install. And thanks to a fully integrated DSP to custom tune the crossover point and correct for room anomalies, it's never been easier to add a subwoofer to your system.

● Our full review is here.





Vandersteen Powered Speaker System: Model Seven Mk II Speakers \$62k/pr., M7-HPA Amplifier \$52k/pr.

"Our amazing Model Seven speakers required *a leap forward* in amplification to hear what they can really do, so the liquid-cooled M7-HPA monoblock is something completely new," says Richard Vandersteen

"... true full-range sound, superb transparency and soundstaging, and a magically palpable way with recorded voices."
—John Atkinson, Stereophile Magazine

1. The Best Speakers Use the Best Materials. Vandersteen's patented Perfect-Piston™ driver cones use a radical carbon-fiber-over-Balsa core for superior performance. A "super speaker" using paper cones today is bringing a horse and buggy to a Formula One race.

2. Your Very Own Time Machine. Every Vandersteen speaker since 1977 is time-and-phase correct by design. The M7-HPA is a time-correct zero-feedback design. Remove time-domain distortion and the listening room becomes a time machine, transporting the listener to the musical performance.

3. Unmatched Coherence & Voicing. The Model Seven Mk II uses identical carbon-clad cones for the mid-bass, midrange and tweeter drivers. No other super speaker approaches this level of coherence and "dimensional purity."

4. Dead Quiet Enclosures. Speaker cabinets shouldn't "sing along" with the music.

Vandersteen's "cabinet-within-a-cabinet" construction with dual layers of carbon fiber is the most sonically inert speaker enclosure available from any speaker at any price.

5. Perfect Bass in Any Room. Vandersteen's "unbeatable powered bass" system features a 400-watt powered subwoofer with 11-band Room EQ in each speaker. Hear all the low-frequency power and detail in music without compromise in any other area of performance.

6. The Perfect Amplifier for the Model Seven. The M7-HPA and Model Seven form a Powered Speaker System with perfectly tailored amplification from the deepest bass to the airiest highs.

7. Liquid Cooling. Precise temperature control keeps the M7-HPA's output transistors operating within +/- 0.5 degrees Fahrenheit for stability and peerless musical purity.

8. Purist Circuit Design. Vandersteen's M7-HPA uses only 5 parts (per phase, balanced) in the delicate signal path for unrivalled sonic purity.

9. Complete Mechanical Isolation. The M7-HPA's electronics rest on an extremely clever suspended truss system. Even the smallest musical details are revealed by freedom from vibrational influences.

10. Attention to Every Detail. Inside and out. Radical new power conditioning technology is built into each M7-HPA & solid-silver speaker cables are included. These crucial complementary components typically cost enthusiasts (sometimes tens of) thousands of dollars after-market.

VANDERSTEEN
vandersteen.com • 559-582-0324
Made in the USA. Contact a Vandersteen Dealer Today
facebook.com/vandersteen-audio

BARGAINS

SLUMMIN'



Tascam 112 Ebay, \$49

T EAC's pro division, TASCAM has been known for years as a producer of great tape and digital recorders for studio and location use. Part of this has been a line of workhorse cassette decks with hearty transports, and even pitch controls. The 112 series was produced until the early 90s and they seem to be trading for considerably less than Nakamichi or Revox cassette machines.

Best of all the factory still supports them and will do a complete overhaul for a very reasonable price. This one even arrived in perfect cosmetic shape, a bonus when you're talking vintage cars or tape decks!

In an effort to help you find the albums we've been reviewing, we've started this handy index at the back of the magazine. This issue, we have a listing of all the albums available, and as we go forward, we will try and link to all of the music that our gear reviewers use in their hardware reviews, in an effort to help you listen for the same things we are.

Wherever possible, each title will have a link to directly purchase the vinyl from Music Direct, as we have done in the past. To make the game even more interesting, we also have links to Tidal's digital music service, allowing you to stream if that's the way you prefer, or just to take a good listen or two before plunking down your hard earned cash for physical media.

Either way, we hope this helps expand your musical enjoyment.

Pop, Rock & Country

Rose Cousins

Natural Conclusion

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/66261095>

Allison Crutchfield

Tourist in This Town

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/allison-crutchfield-tourist-in-this-town-vinyl-lp>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/66175484>

Crystal Fairy

Crystal Fairy

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/crystal-fairy-melvins-crystal-fairy-vinyl-lp>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/70124455>

Grandaddy

Last Place

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/grandaddy-last-place-vinyl-lp>

Alison Krauss

Windy City

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/alison-krauss-windy-city-vinyl-lp>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/70282205>

Nikki Lane

Highway Queen

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/nikki-lane-highway-queen-vinyl-lp>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/69927476>

The Magnetic Fields

50 Song Memoir

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/magnetic-fields-50-song-memoir-vinyl-5lp-box-set>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/67197300>

Laura Marling

Semper Femina

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/laura-marling-semper-femina-vinyl-2lp>

Jazz

John Abercrombie Quartet

Up and Coming

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/john-abercrombie-quartet-up-and-coming-180g-vinyl-lp>

Tania Chen, Henry Kaiser, Wadada Leo Smith & William Winant

Ocean of Storms

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/68539118>

Imelda May

Life Love Flesh Blood

Purchase LP from Music Direct
[https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Imelda-May-Life-Love-Flesh-Blood-\(Vinyl-LP\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Imelda-May-Life-Love-Flesh-Blood-(Vinyl-LP))

Tift Merritt

Stitch of the World

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/tift-merritt-stitch-of-the-world-vinyl-lp>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/64981698>

Ne-Hi

Offers

Purchase LP from Music Direct
[https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/NE-HI-Offers-\(Vinyl-LP\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/NE-HI-Offers-(Vinyl-LP))

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/track/68900519>

Sleaford Mods

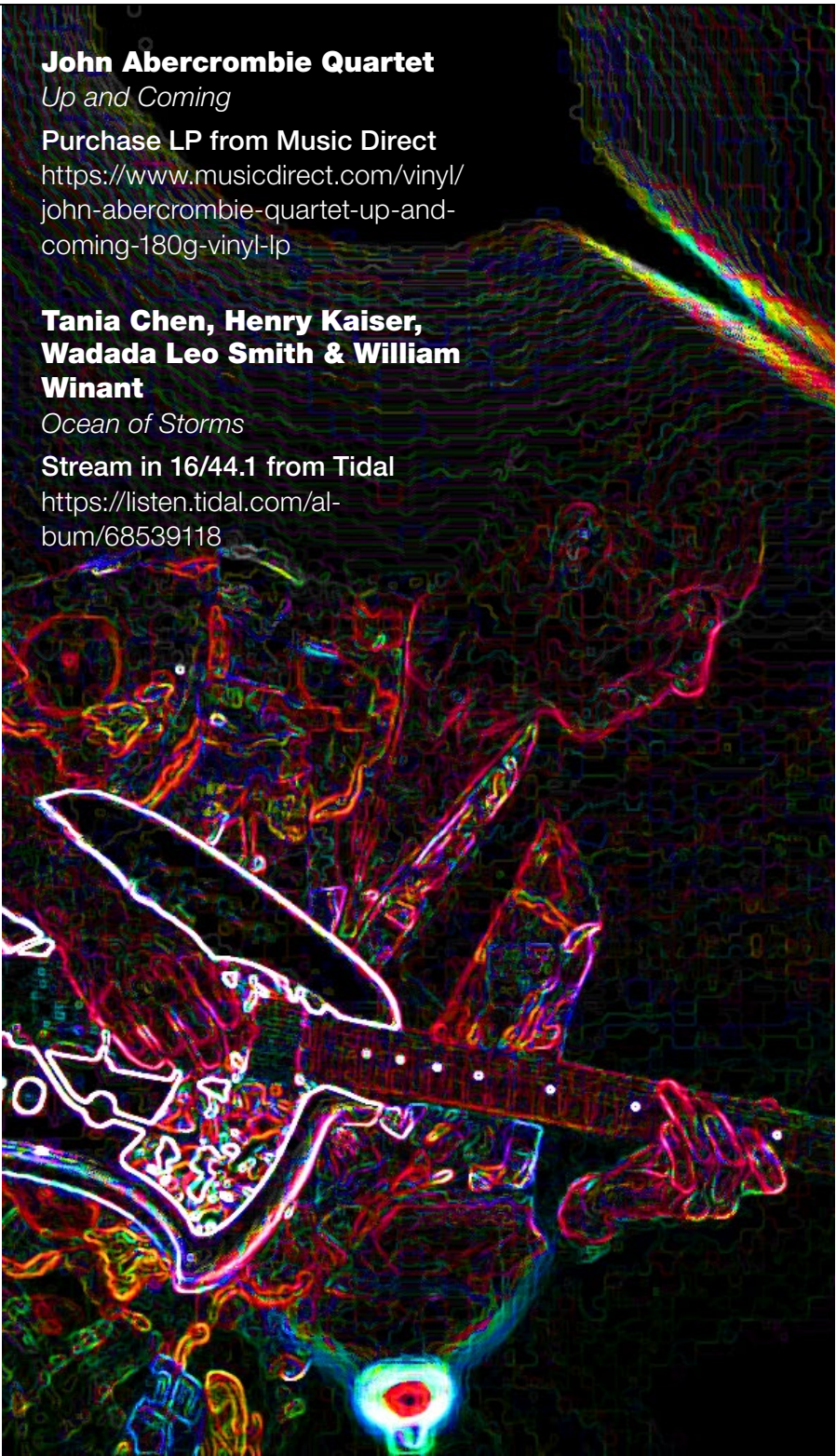
English Tapas

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/sleaford-mods-english-tapas-vinyl-lp>

The Regrettes

Feel Your Feelings Fool!

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/68619996>



CLEARANCE SALE!

Take an Additional 10% off already
discounted Floor Sample/Used/Demo
items!



Check our *Specials* section of our website
for a list of all items..

<http://www.audiovisionsf.com/?page=specials>

1628 california st. (on the cable car line)
san francisco, california 94109

www.audiovisionsf.com

abyss
audio physic
dali
davone
dynaudio
gallo
grado
hifiman
janzen electrostatic
jl audio
kef
kingsound
mrspeakers
nola
psb
raidho
rel acoustics
triangle
ultrasone
arcam
astell & kern
audioquest
bel canto
b.m.c.
burson
cambridge
cardas
cary audio
chord electronics
clearaudio
crystal cable
devialet
dr. feickert
funk firm
h.r.s.
ifi
integra
kiseki
lyngdorf audio
lyra
marantz
margules
micromega
moon by simaudio
naim audio
nordost
nuforce
octave
pear audio
pono
primaluna
pro-ject
ps audio
quadraspire
rega
richard gray
sonos
soundsmith
stillpoints
unison research
woo audio

LINKS

Where to find the gear you've seen in this issue.

Anthem: www.anthemav.com

Arcam: www.soundorg.com

Auralic: www.auralic.com

AudioVision SF: www.audiovisionsf.com

Audio Research: www.audioresearch.com

BAT: www.balanced.com

Brinkmann Audio: www.brinkmann-audio.com

Cambridge: www.audioplusservices.com

Dali: www.soundorg.com

dCS: www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Dynaudio: www.dynaudio.com

Echo Audio: www.echohifi.com

GamuT: www.gamutaudio.com

Graham Audio: www.grahamaudioUSA.com

Focal: www.audioplusservices.com

MartinLogan: www.martinlogan.com

Mobile Fidelity: www.mofi.com

Mystere: www.mystere-usa.com

Music Direct: www.musicdirect.com

Music Matters: www.musicmattersjazz.com

Nagra: www.nagraaudio.com

Naim: www.audioplusservices.com

Nordost: www.nordost.com

OCTAVE: www.octave.de

Oppo: www.oppodigital.com

Paradigm: www.paradigm.com

Pass Labs: www.passlabs.com

Plinius: www.pliniusaudio.com

PrimaLuna: www.primaluna-usa.com

Primare: www.vanaltd.com

Rega: www.soundorg.com

Simaudio: www.simaudio.com

SPL: www.audioplusservices.com

Upscale Audio: www.upscaleaudio.com

Wireworld: www.wireworldcable.com

Vandersteen: www.vandersteen.com

VANA Ltd: www.vanaltd.com

VPI: www.vpiindustries.com

Manufacturers Links