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Audioarts



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cd/sacd player



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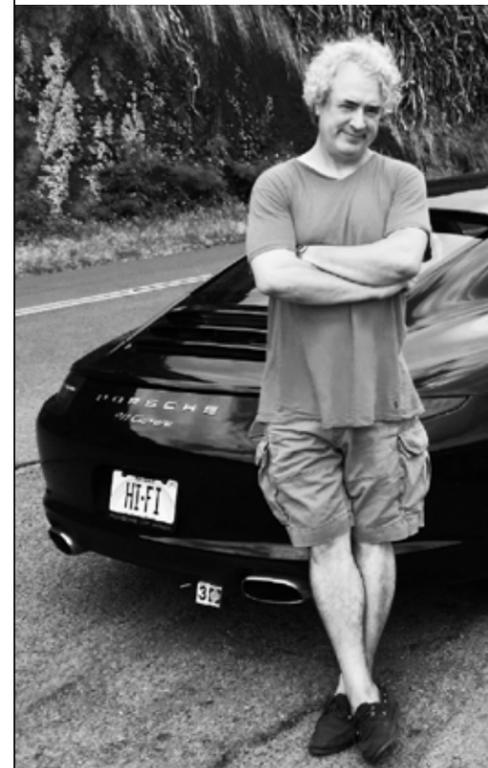
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



There's no question that I'm intrigued by great tech and state-of-the-art performance in just about anything—be it a car, camera or turntable—but a great piece of music is always compelling. And I find this to be the case regardless of the platform it's delivered on. That is why we continue to cover so much music, both live and recorded, as well as gear in all price ranges. As Graham Nash said recently in his autobiography *Wild Tales*, "It's always about the music, man."

The experience is the key, but fun is always the catalyst. While some of these experiences can indeed be solitary ones, I submit that sharing them with friends enhances the journey. With that in mind, we harken back to the concept of the great salons of the late 19th century, when people gathered in the living rooms of some of the world's most prominent homes in Europe (a concept that quickly gravitated to the United States, New York in particular) to discuss their world views, their vocations, their passions and more, in a relaxed yet engaging environment.

I would like to bring that spirit of camaraderie to the world of music and audio next year, in a variety of locations around the world. And the best news is that you don't have to be an aristocrat to join our party, but the attendance will be limited. While hi-fi shows are still valuable tools for our industry to propagate,

and the various "music matters" events springing up are encouraging, I feel that we need something more multidimensional than mere product demos can provide.

Keep a close eye on the magazine, website, newsletter and Facebook page for the details on the upcoming series of *TONESalons*, which will be scattered throughout next year. Our first will be in Honolulu, Hawaii, early in February, with others on the calendar for New Zealand, Tokyo and San Francisco, as well as a few locations not confirmed yet.

I promise that these will be special evenings, centered on music, discussion and most of all fun. I look forward to seeing you there and hope that you will discover some new music, embrace a new idea or perhaps make a new friend.

Note: While we're still on the subject of fun, I'd like to personally thank Shane Drew of HiFi Hawaii (the location of our first *TONESalon*) for the use of his Porsche 911 Carrera and Lill Madland for capturing me in a very relaxing moment. It's about time I updated the damn picture after nine years, don't you think?

A handwritten signature in black ink.

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NEW CONTRIBUTORS

Jay Blakesburg

Jay Blakesburg hails from the East Coast but San Francisco is home. Having shot a virtual “who’s who” of music and show business over the years, we are proud to showcase his work on this issue’s cover as well as illustrating Jaan Uhelszki’s coverage on the Bridge School Concert.

To see more of Jay’s work, or to purchase some of his killer merch, please stop by www.blakesberg.com

Richard H. Mak

Richard H. Mak bought his first turntable in 1983, and have been an audiophile and music lover ever since.

For the last 10 years, Richard has been committed to analog based systems, performing over 600 turntable setups in the past 5 years, and probably over a thousand in his lifetime. From basic visual based setups to sophisticated setups using spectrum analyzers, Richard’s knowledge is “hands on” rather than textbook based.

As a founding member of the Greater Toronto Area Audiophile Club, and his own audio blog *Stereopal.com*, Richard is friends with thousands of audiophiles from around the world, and has been invited into the homes of hundreds of audiophiles.

Richard is a full time investment manager by trade, and lives in Toronto with his wife, and 2 children.



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"It's a VERY limited edition boxed set."

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NEIL YOUNG'S 27TH ANNUAL BRIDGE SCHOOL CONCERT

October 27, 2013

Shoreline Amphitheater
Mountain View, California

By Jaan Uhelszki
Photos by Jay Blakesberg

Neil Young's 27th annual Bridge School concert proved a much more somber affair this year. Usually, when Young and his long-suffering manager of more than 40 years handpick performers for the celebrity-packed two-day benefit show held outside of San Francisco, they do it with a wicked gleam in their eye, choosing a few high-wattage performers that are coerced to unplug in order to fit the parameters of the mandatory all-acoustic show.

Then they sit back and watch acts like Tom Petty, Green Day, Bruce Springsteen, and the Who struggle to convert their high-decibel bombast into more temperate fare. Such forced acoustic marches are always highlights of the shows, as iconic bands attempt to overcome the limitations imposed by unplugging and apologize for their ineptitude at reconfiguring their biggest hits into more pacific renditions. Who among us doesn't enjoy seeing a preening rock god cut down to size as he sheepishly admits his inadequacies to a 20,000-strong crowd?



STEPHEN STILLS & NEIL YOUNG

And, whatever it is, something about this particular challenge impels some of rock's biggest bruisers to blabber away about their not-so-deep-seated fears. For instance, back in 1997, when Metallica's strapping lead singer James Hetfield confessed the heavy-metal stalwarts didn't have a clue what they were doing. "Does somebody know that song? Because it sure wasn't us," he said after completing a rather dainty version of the group's epic stomp "The Four Horsemen."

This, however, wasn't one of those years. Whether by accident or design, the bill—which included Jenny Lewis with the Watson Twins, fun, Diana Krall and Elvis Costello, Heart, My Morning Jacket, Tom Waits, Queens of the Stone Age, and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young (with whom Young hadn't performed since 2006)—lent a certain gravity to the affair. It was launched in 1986 by Young and his wife, Pegi, to fund the Bridge School for kids with severe physical and speech impairments. Their son Ben, who has cerebral palsy, was the first student.

You could blame the mood on the unseasonable October chill the week before Halloween, the Killers' last-minute cancellation, or Lou Reed's sad and unexpected death from liver failure that very morning. It was as if Young had prescient knowledge about the billing this year, as he choose acts with appropriate gravity and presence—almost as if the Canadian native knew Reed's ponderous and restless ghost would hover for a while before flitting off to the astral regions, demanding an appropriate and respectful send-off. Which it got.

If this solemn mood wasn't immediately apparent, all you had to do was listen closely to the three songs Young opened the show with. You can always gauge



QUEENS OF THE STONE AGE

the tone of the event by the songs he plays. Yes, Young speaks in code. In a lighthearted year, he'll walk out onstage in his worn jeans, flannel shirt, and well-loved acoustic guitar, and open with "Sugar Mountain" or "I Am a Child," maybe "Heart of Gold." On a moodier year, the fare is likely to be his own personal note to self: "Long May You Run" or "Needle and the Damage Done," or even "The Loner."

This year, the tone was even more affecting, with Young covering Phil Ochs' "Changes," the same song he sang in his fractured voice at this year's Farm Aid, along with a heartfelt and solemn preamble about Kurt Cobain and Ochs' suicides. He followed it with Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and his own "Comes a Time," each posing more questions than answers. He was joined by Pegi, revealing an intimacy and sweetness in the way their two voices fit together, enhanced rather than hindered by the few off notes in the chorus of "Comes a Time."

Rilo Kiley's winsome singer Jenny Lewis, looking like a diminutive Irish Sea witch with her streaming red mermaid hair, was up next in a band that included the Watson Twins dressed in identical Morticia gowns. While they swayed to a beat only they seemed to hear, Lewis sang with an ancient ache in her voice, running through songs including the title track from her 2008 solo album *Acid Tongue* as well as "Head Under Water" and "Rise Up With Your Fists." The standout was the closing "Silver Lining" from Rilo Kiley's 2007 album *Under the Black Light*, a song that channels Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* and its deliciously wicked soap opera. (continued)

HEART

Heart showed why a day doesn't go by when you don't hear one of their songs on Classic Rock radio. While singer Ann Wilson may have lost her lithe figure, she gained stature, becoming an even better singer with more depth and complexity in her pure, strong voice than she had when the group topped the charts. She prowled across the stage like a jungle cat, defiantly tossing her perfect ringlets and pawing the boards in high-heeled shoes as she launched into Heart hits such as "Even It Up" and "Crazy On You." The band skipped the signature "Barracuda" (reportedly written as a homage to the Led Zeppelin song "Achilles Last Stand") but covered Zeppelin's most beautiful ballad, "The Rain Song." The only mishap of an otherwise perfect set occurred when Young joined the Wilson sisters for a rendition of his "Man of War," and Ann muffed the words of the first verse. *(continued)*



Etna = Time Travel



Lyra designer Jonathan Carr is his own worst taskmaster. Two years ago he drove himself to create Atlas, a new phono cartridge which would surpass even his previous world-renowned Titan i. No sooner was this accomplished, than Jonathan set about following the smashing success of Atlas with a lower-cost design whose performance would also recalibrate the world's understanding of the LP, and just how convincingly a phono cartridge can reach into the groove and serve up life, love and music.

Etna is the proud result of Jonathan's insight, inspiration and very hard work. Brought to life by Lyra master craftsman Yoshinori Mishima, Etna features the most sophisticated application of Lyra's core technologies, including the asymmetric design and X-shaped coil formers which debuted in Atlas. Etna is built from a solid titanium core encased in an outer body of aircraft-grade aluminum. This "constrained-layer" construction ensures that no single material's sonic signature rises to aural awareness.

Etna is another astonishing advance on the always-moving frontier of LP playback, a 'time machine' of a moving-coil cartridge, bringing a previous musical performance to living, breathing life in the oh-so-beautiful here and now.



DELOS



KLEOS



KLEOS MONO



SKALA



ETNA



ATLAS



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MY MORNING JACKET

LIVE MUSIC

Five hours went by until anyone gave Reed a proper salute, and it came from an unexpected corner—My Morning Jacket's Jim James, who has unexpected depths. He was the only artist on the eight-hour bill to acknowledge the icon's passing, explaining that Reed was "one of the greatest composers, artists, musicians that walked the face of the earth. So this one's for you, Lou." He then led Young, Elvis Costello, Lewis, and the Watson Twins in a chant-like rendition of the Velvet Underground's "Oh! Sweet Nuthin'." So trancelike was the playing that Young seemed in an altered state, waging a guitar dual with James, much like the ones he had with Stephen Stills in the past. He played so hard he dropped his guitar, which Costello swooped in to retrieve.

Killers bassist Mark Stroemer, whose acute back pain caused the Las Vegas quartet to bow out a month before the event, gets credit for this year's high point: Tom Waits' first public appearance in five years. The cancellation forced Young and Pegi to do some quick maneuvering to fill the void. They rounded up Arcade Fire and

languid folk-rocker Jack Johnson to step in on Saturday night, and called on Waits, because he's more or less a neighbor.

Well, that's not the whole story, according to Waits, inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame by Young in 2011. No, the wily raconteur insisted he was there to work off a debt he owed Young—something he didn't address until five songs into his 10-song set.

"I volunteered to come here. Long story," Waits told the crowd. "Back in the 1970s, I borrowed a lot of money from Neil. For me, it was the days of long hair and short money. He loaned it to me so I could start a restaurant. I lost a lot of money on that restaurant. Let me rephrase that: I lost a lot of Neil's money. And you don't wanna see Neil mad. Anyway, it was a small restaurant, sort of a specialized place. We were gonna have eel and donuts and fish scales—just fish scales, sautéed and all gluten-free. But it went under, so Neil said, 'Listen, you owe me a lot of money, so I have three ideas for you: Jail time, or you can come work in my yard, or you can do the Bridge School.'" *(continued)*

While one wonders how the yard would look, Waits' 10-song set turned into a wonder of eccentric storytelling. Pushing his battered hat on the back of his groomed head, the musician began his set without preamble, giving a nod and a downbeat to an ad hoc band especially assembled for this show: Primus' avant-rock bassist Les Claypool (he's Waits' neighbor, and played on three of his albums, but never played live with him), Los Lobos' Dave Hidalgo, and drummer Casey Waits, Waits' 28-year-old son.

In a little under 50 minutes, Waits took fans through a well-edited and mandatory unplugged reading of his catalog, lopping off verses and compressing others as he skittered across the present and past, reaching back as far as 1976's *Small Change* with the blurry, slurry autobiography of "Tom Traubert's Blues." Whether it was strategic or just random, he managed to include something from each decade of his 40-year career. Yet the preponderance of the songs came from 2011's *Bad as Me*, including two—"Last Leaf" and "Talking at the Same Time"—that had never been played live before.

From the rattling speed-rapped sea chantey "Singapore" to the busted but beautiful falsetto of the yearning, geopolitical blues of "Everybody Talking at the Same Time," from the ghoulish "Cemetery Polka" off *Rain Dogs* to the hot Latin samba of "Come Up to the House" from *Mule Variations*, Waits was a blur of story, color, and eccentric imagination. He upstaged Queens of the Stone Age's expensive suits and slowed-down metal, and even headliners Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

This marked the seventh time the supergroup played Bridge School, and perhaps qualified as the most temperature-impaired set. "We're fucking freezing here," David Crosby complained. They played the same set as they did the night before, but happily, it was not an exercise in tired nostalgia. The old friends sparked off each other with humor and ease, seamlessly moving from CSN's "Just a Song Before I Go" to Young's "Human Highway." While Stills doesn't have the range or tonality he once did, his guitar playing has only gotten better, something evident on "Don't Want Lies," which Stills wrote for his other supergroup, The Rides, featuring Kenny Wayne Shepherd and Barry Goldberg. Young encroached on Stills' personal space, stalking him with his guitar, weaving in between him and Nash, creeping behind each of them like a hoodie-shrouded sea creature.

"From time to time, people have accused us of being political," Crosby claimed. "But shit, all we ever write are love songs. OK, maybe one, two. Maybe nine political songs. I'm dedicating this to our country," he said, before four voices coalesced on a single note during an a cappella version of "What Are Their Names," chilling in both message and delivery.

"Come out, we're almost toast!" Young called to the artists huddled in the wings, waiting for the annual last-song jam. Bundled up against the cold, most of the day's performers—sans Waits—came out to blend their voices with CSN&Y's near-perfect harmonies on Graham Nash's timeless anthem "Teach Your Children," dedicated, naturally, to the Bridge School faculty. ●



TOM WAITS

LUXMAN'S LUSCIOUS MB-3045 MONOBLOCKS

By Jeff Dorgay

The sound of a classic vacuum-tube amplifier always beckons, and a recent trip to Echo Audio in Portland turned up a pair of gorgeous Luxman MB-3045 monoblocks. When Echo owner Kurt Doslu coyly told me to “check out the new arrivals,” he knew I would find the catnip on the shelf. And there they sat, staring back at me.



FEATURE

“This is the cleanest pair I’ve seen in a *long* time,” Doslu laughs. The hook is set and I can’t escape. Clean they are, indeed—and knowing that tube mastermind Tim DeParavicini designed these in his younger years, when he was at Luxman, makes them even more inviting.

The big but—and there’s almost always a big one with all things vintage—is that the 8045G triode output tubes that NEC made specifically for this amplifier are tough (if not impossible) to find. And those who do have the tubes want way too much money for them, as is usually the case with such rare and sought after items. So unless you have a stash of the 8045G tubes yourself, you may have to pass on these particular Luxman monoblocks, should you ever come across a pair in working or restorable order.

But then Doslu pulls me back in. “These have had the factory modification, so they use KT-88s,” he informs me. Of course, the 6240 driver tubes for the amp are as tough to find as the 8045Gs, but multiple sources reveal that the 6CG7/6FQ7 tube is a suitable replacement.

You Had Me at Hello

Some say the magic of these amplifiers is in the 8045 tube, which others say is no more than a 6550 with internal jumpers. And there are others still who claim that Luxman’s expertise in winding output transformers is the key to its success with amplification. *(continued)*



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FEATURE



Not having heard a pure pair with the original tubes myself, I can't be sure. But I can tell you that the configuration of this pair is indeed seductive, and I'm sure these lovely monoblocks are more than the sum of their parts and the creative ethos behind them.

The Luxman MB-3045s are relatively compact, measuring just 8.5 inch deep, 14 inches wide and 6 inches tall. The front panel has only a bright-orange power indicator (the lit vacuum tubes also indicates that the juices are flowing). Around back, the configuration is relatively Spartan: a simple barrier strip for speaker output, with 4-, 8-, and 16-ohm taps, a solitary RCA input jack and a level control, along with a two-prong power cord receptacle. It should be noted that the original power cord supplied with the amps are rather wimpy, so an upgraded chord is a good idea.

Built from 1975 to 1978, the MB-3045s feature a caged chassis, with the matching

chassis finished in chocolate brown (as in our samples here), or in black. It appears that the black ones are tougher to find, but they don't look quite as vintage.

Shaking the Cobwebs

Having sat on the shelf at Echo for some time, these amplifiers need a few solid days of playing to reveal their true character. They sound very dark and withdrawn at first run through the MartinLogan Aerius i speakers in my home listening room. However, after about 50 hours, the Luxman monos come to life in a present, palpable way that never disappoints.

Listening to the Tom Waits classic “Jockey Full of Bourbon” reveals a dense musical landscape, with bongos out front and Waits’ signature gravelly voice hiding behind the projected plane of the speakers. No matter what your favorite type of vocal recording, these amplifiers portray a tremendous sense of depth and space. *(continued)*

NEW RELEASES

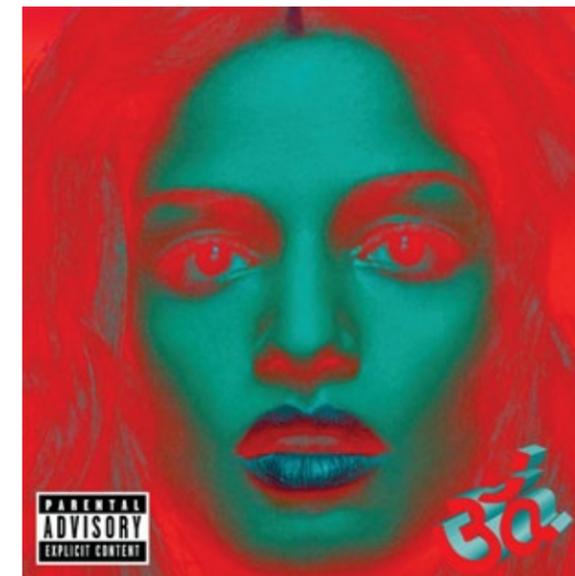
Label mates and champions of fashion-first pop, Lady Gaga and M.I.A. plot different courses to the dance floor. A middle finger on the Super Bowl halftime show for one; a flying dress named Volantis for the other. Each instance is evidence of their knack for generating headlines. They share more than outsized personalities—the core thesis of each artist is that we deserve a better class of pop star.

It's a noble cause, but seems especially necessary in 2013, when hot producers are interchangeable and clothes are deemed a necessary nuisance. While the artists may operate on separate ends of the spectrum—Gaga fills arenas and M.I.A. is still relegated to clubs—when it comes to cake-and-eat-it-too pop, M.I.A. and Gaga may be our best bets.

They open their new albums with big ambitions. “If you’re gonna be me, you need a manifesto,” M.I.A. sings, delivering the line like a casual brush-off amid the cacophony of a third-world market. “Enigma pop-star is fun,” Gaga declares gleefully, and then mixes up religion, oppression, and sex by referencing a burqa as a piece of erotic fashion. Such lines indicate what follows may not always be well thought-out, but sure is going to be ear-catching.



©Photo by Daniel Sannwald



M.I.A.

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Artpop

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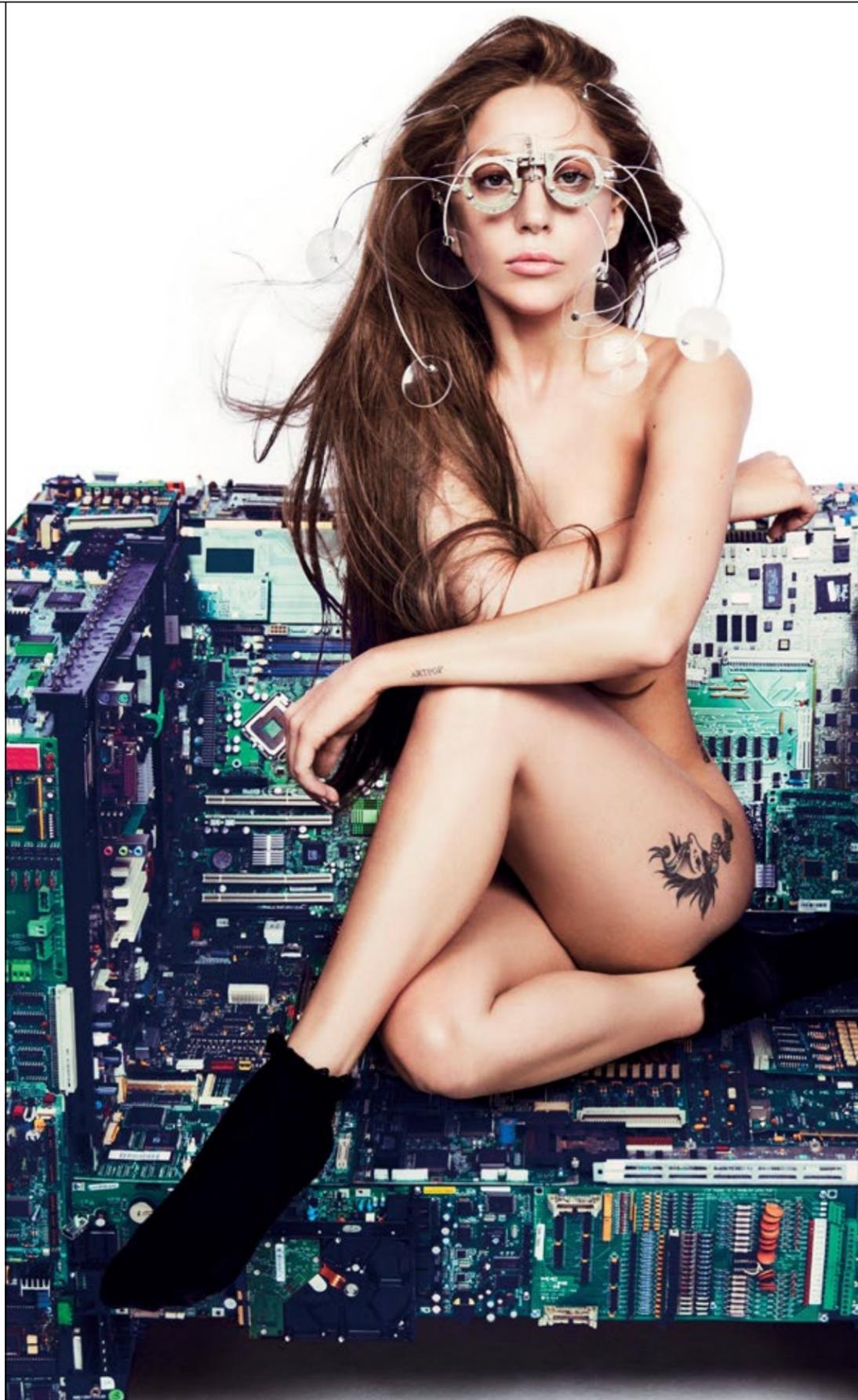
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Consider it the art of provocateuring. And both artists' history offers evidence that they can deliver. M.I.A.'s "Paper Planes" and Gaga's "Born This Way" are rare hits that can double as pieces of activism. Gaga's politics were of the gender variety while M.I.A. took gangsta clichés and applied them to class warfare and imperialism.

Yet *Matangi* and *Artpop* capture each artist at a potential crossroads. M.I.A.'s 2010 effort *Maya* found the artist at her most aggressive but was a sales dud, and Gaga's *Born This Way* (the album) didn't quite hit on the cultural level of her less socially conscious works—you know, the ones that contain the lines about "disco sticks" and such. Both performers take the paths to less resistance on their latest works: turn up the beats, tone down the thoughtfulness.

While it's sometimes dangerous to go looking for meaning in Gaga's lyrics, her high-art references and tendency to accentuate her flaws rather than her glamour shots always present an intriguing challenge. Mixing modern art and classicism, as she does on the Jeff Koons-meets-Sandro Botticelli album cover that graces *Artpop*

©Photo by Inez and Vinoodh



(which also throws in a little disquieting, robotic nudity for good measure) works well in imagery, less so on the Top 40.

But conflict is fine. Laziness, however, isn't, and *Artpop* retreats to the more simplified electro-pop of her "Poker Face" days. It's rough early on, as Gaga plays with images of Uranus and her ass on "Venus." For every good idea, there are two of the cringe-inducing variety. "G.U.Y." employs plenty of hook-inducing moments, utilizing electronic drops, whizzes, and spoken-word runway struts as Gaga distorts images. "Fashion!" deviates from the programmed norm to feel alternately soulful and operatic, while "Manicure" takes Gaga's puzzling love of 80s hair metal and makes it palatable with pulse-racing beats and downright combative handclaps.

But the fun is derailed when Gaga tries to dig deeper. The addiction ballad that is "Dope" manages to be over-the-top even though it utilizes little more than piano and voice, Gaga channeling Axl Rose to forcefully sing any meaning right out of the tune. "Do What U Want" is intended as a take-down of tabloid culture, with the vocalist willing to surrender her image but not her mind

to the masses. An intriguing idea, perhaps, but one that falls apart with a lusty R. Kelly guest spot.

The album's title track is even more muddled—the mission statement, such as it is. The huffs and slight disco pull make it catchy enough, but when Gaga declares that her "artpop could mean anything," it all starts to feel a cop-out, an argument that her art is infallible because it's simply up to the listener to interpret. Fine, but then leave out T.I., Too Short, and Twista on the downright anonymous "Jewels N' Drugs," please.

M.I.A. fares better, but *Matangi* is unfortunately her least consistent work. Throughout, she tells us over and over again that she is going to screw with us, surprise us, and that any of your ideas have already "been did and done." Yet for too much of the album, she seems at a loss to find something to sing about other than her own individualism. That works once or twice, especially when it sounds as good as it does on a sing-along such as "Come Walk With Me," which mixes up nature sounds, cool dub grooves, and Far East breakdowns. Eventually, however, one wants M.I.A. to start showing rather than telling.

Matangi can still sound vital, if only because few other artists pull from global influences in the same way. Sounds and images—the uncle that took the boat to Iran on the bottle-breaking "Bring the Noise," the hip-hop-meets Middle East mash-up of the arresting "Bad Girls"—are worn like party camouflage. She sounds less passionate on the ravey "Y.A.L.A.," which brings too much new-age mysticism to the dance tent. The hippie vibe continues on "Lights" when she declares herself a "counter to the counter" over sleepy, droning, stoner hand-drumming.

And still, both artists still have our attention. Gaga because she hints at more, and M.I.A. because she's starting to question if she even needs more. Nearly an hour into her album, M.I.A. drops "Sexodus," a slow-burner with spy-movie horns and lost-in-orbit electronics. She's drinking fancy tea, living the high life, and sounds insecure about it.

"What'd you want it all for?" she asks repeatedly as the record fades to the black. It's a question hopefully both she and Gaga will think on before they head back to studio.

—Todd Martens

**ARCADE FIRE***Reflektor*

Merge, 180g 2LP or CD

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“Do you like rock ‘n’ roll music?” slurs Arcade Fire frontman Win Butler in the midst of the band’s fourth album, *Reflektor*. “Cause I don’t know if I do.”

While the group’s first three albums found Butler and Co. weaving countless Big Ideas (death, religion, war, and suburban sprawl all factor) into a host of surging rock anthems—and even winning a surprise Album of the Year Grammy for their efforts with *The Suburbs* in 2011—its latest is generally weirder and more rhythmic, steeped in elements of dance rock, disco, and reggae. At 14 songs and 86 (!) minutes, it is also bloated, indulgent, and, at times, oddly detached.

This is stranger still because Arcade Fire sounds particularly obsessed with human connection this time around. Some of Butler’s lyrics are even rooted in philosopher Soren Kierkegaard’s writings about a “reflective age” that values lip service to ideals over direct action. “The individual...does not have the passion to rip himself away from either the coils of Reflection,” he writes in *The Present Age*, a concept Butler takes and applies to digital technology. “We fell in love when I was 19,” he sings on the pulsating title track. “And now we’re staring at a screen.”

Yet for all Butler’s hand-wringing over the digital miles between us, the sprawling Canadian crew has never felt this distant or this unapproachable. Perhaps it was inevitable. Arcade Fire started small, after all, transforming its much-buzzed-about club shows into sweaty, communal sing-alongs. Now it’s arguably the biggest “indie” act on the planet, fully capable of packing arenas.

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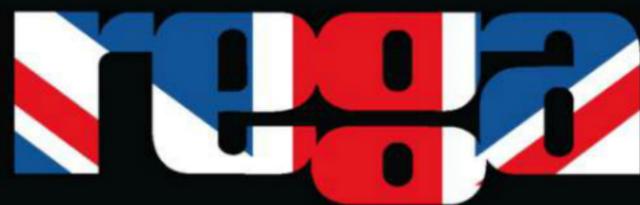
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Such physical distance between band and audience somehow carries over into *Reflektor*. Like awkward high-school teens fumbling through conversation at the prom, Arcade Fire tries to narrow this widening emotional gap with dance—an approach that works, to a degree.

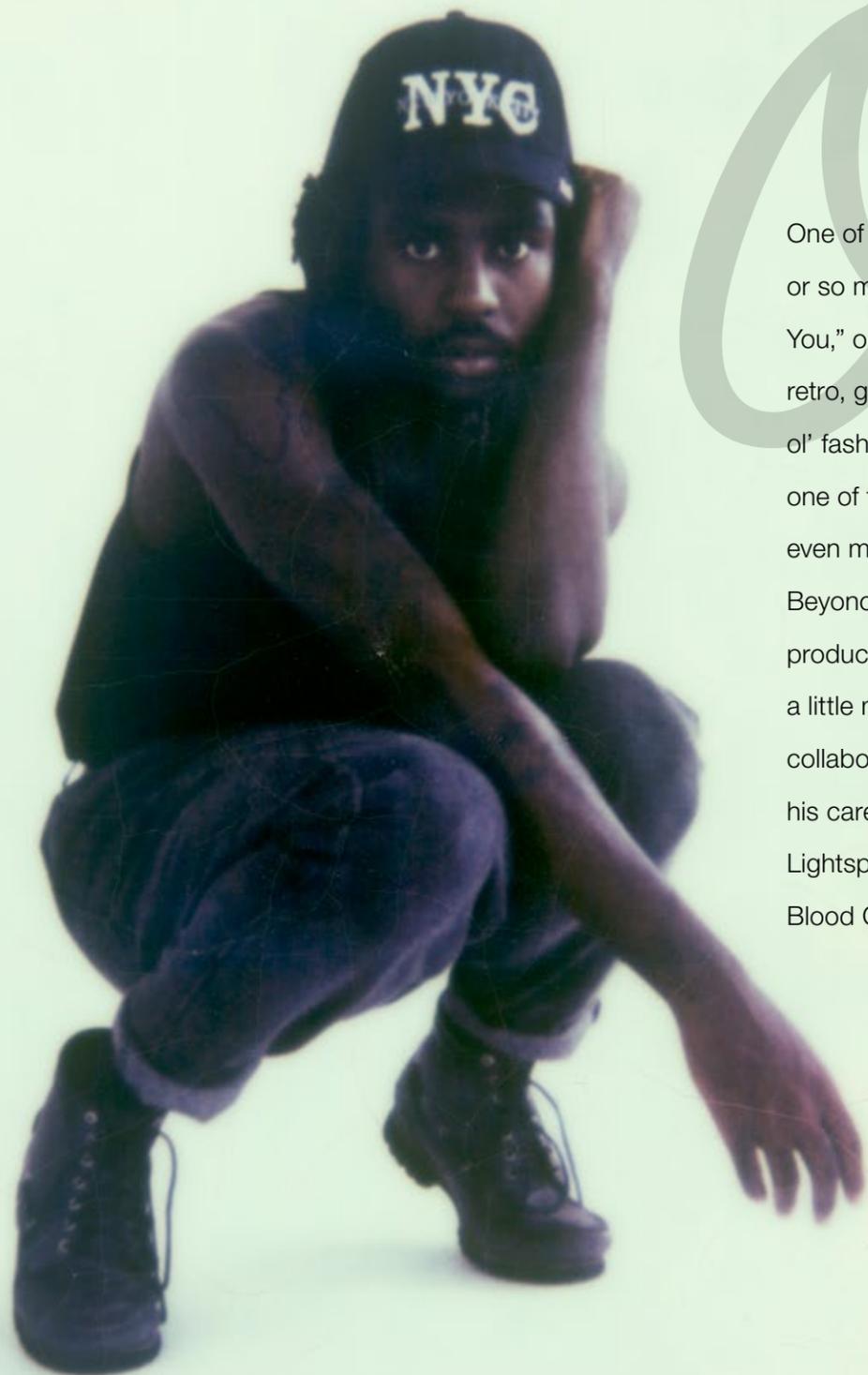
It certainly helps that the band enlisted LCD Soundsystem mastermind James Murphy to help produce. His fingerprints are heard all over *Reflektor*, from the shimmering title track, which, quite honestly, bites heavily from Murphy's former group, to the

rapturous and Haitian-flavored "Here Comes the Night," which sounds like Talking Heads frontman David Byrne ditching his big suit for a pair of Bermuda shorts.

Actually, the Talking Heads serve as something of a touchstone throughout, and at least two songs make lyrical allusion to the band's afterlife ballad "Heaven." "If this is heaven, I don't know what it's for," sings Butler on one tune. Then, a couple songs later: "If there's no music up in heaven, then what's it for?"

On "Afterlife," however, Butler and wife Regine Chassagne

don't sound eager to meet their maker, hissing, "Afterlife/Oh my god, what an awful word." So instead they rage against death's inevitability ("Can we just work it out? Scream and shout 'til we work it out?") and cling to one another as darkness falls, the song's shimmering synths gradually giving way to an atmospheric drone that mimics gravity exerting its steady pull. It's a beautiful moment, and a rare human one on an album so intensely focused on the brain and the body that it quite nearly forgets about the heart. —**Andy Downing**



©Photo by Stacey Mark

One of the better pop songs of the past 12 or so months remains Solange's "Losing You," on which Beyonce's little sis goes retro, gets minimal, and shows that a little ol' fashioned Prince-inspired heartbreak is one of the better ways to get over it and, even more importantly, get down. Whereas Beyonce is known to utilize only the top producers money can buy, Solange leans a little more indie. "Losing You" was a collaboration with Dev Hynes, who, over his career, has alternately been known as Lightspeed Champion and, more recently, Blood Orange.



Blood Orange

Cupid Deluxe

Domino, 2LP or CD

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Hynes, on his second album under the Blood Orange moniker, continues to straddle the line between pop and R&B. But what goes on in the nightclub isn't his source of musical inspiration. Blood Orange captures something later in the evening, a lightly pulsating sound born of blurred senses. A Londoner currently living in New York, Hynes has spoken of shaping the songs of Blood Orange on "long walks I would take around the city at night." Fittingly, *Cupid Deluxe* feels comprised of fleeting glances at the lost loves and lost souls one encounters in such moments.

These are characters that "break down and pray, hoping something comes your way" after leaving work at 9 p.m. and look lovingly (or suspiciously—

it's not quite clear) at their "sweet un-careful friends." Piano notes are airy, splashing like a late night drizzle, and Hynes shape-shifts his voice into a yearning falsetto one moment, a husky spoken-word seducing instrument the next.

As evidenced by "Uncle Ace," flashes of disco emerge, but Hynes keeps his genres vague and gender roles undefined. "Not like the other girls," he sings at his most manly on "Uncle Ace," where some deft, Nile Rodgers-like guitar prancing surrounds him until a horn section envelops the groove. "Chosen" is alternately Parisian and jazzy, but gets even weirder when a choir joins in on the action. "One the Line" channels 1999-era Prince with retro synths, a funk guitar, and Wendy and Lisa-style backing vocals.

Hip-hop assists come courtesy of Clam Casino. Indie-rock singers Caroline Polachek (Chairlift) and Samantha Urbani (Friends) take turns as Hynes' go-to-soul vocalists for much of the album. But for all the stylistic hopscotch, *Cupid Deluxe* is ultimately a mood piece on which the synthy, worldly R&B of "Chamakay" and smoky hip-hop haze of "High Street" are different shades of bruised.

It's downbeat, and Hynes' looks in the mirror aren't always pretty (see "You're Not Good Enough," perhaps the year's most self-destructive, hook-filled middle finger to an ex). Yet Hynes retains the good sense to know that if you're out walking in the middle of the night, you keep moving. —**Todd Martens**



Sky Ferreira

Night Time, My Time
Capitol, LP or CD

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It's fair to say Sky Ferreira has had an interesting year. The singer experienced her share of success. She finally released her long-in-the-works debut, *Night Time, My Time*, toured alongside Vampire Weekend, and was handpicked to open for esteemed hammer-licker Miley Cyrus when the former Disney star kicks off her arena tour next year.

Offstage, things got a bit dicier. Ferreira, 21, cancelled concerts due to throat issues, stirred controversy by posing nude for her album cover, and dealt with the fallout from a September arrest for possession of ecstasy in upstate New York. (In the same stop, her boyfriend, DIIV's Zachary Cole Smith, was arrested for possession of heroin.) Against this backdrop, portions of *Night Time, My Time* have taken on deeper meaning. "I blame, blame, blame myself," Ferreira sings on one tune. "For my reputation."

Throughout the album, the singer excuses those that place judgment on her while directing all of her ire inward. On the aforementioned "I Blame Myself," she sings, "I know it's not your fault/That you don't understand." Then on "Ain't Your Right," she sets aside her personal grievances, allowing, "I'll let you slide this one time."



©Photo by Grant Singer

Meanwhile, Ferreira flagellates herself for an inability to hold onto happiness ("24 Hours"), frets that no one has her best interests at heart (the bruised "Nobody Asked Me (If I Was Okay)"), and admits to weakness ("Ain't Your Right"). It's not all genuflecting, however, and she gloriously brushes aside all the haters on "I Will," a fiery cut directed at anyone that expects her complete deference.

Even at its heaviest, *Night Time, My Time* never sounds dour or leaden. It helps, of course, that Ferreira served her time in the major-label machine. While the singer has obvious issues with Capitol—in a recent interview, she compared being on a major with drowning, surmised she might be better off on her own, and dismissed label honchos by saying, "I'm not afraid of them"—working amongst people that know a thing or two about how to craft a radio hit has undoubtedly affected her approach.

Aside from "Omanko," a Suicide-influenced burner with tossed-off lyrics ("I'm gearing up for a Japanese Christmas") and the introspective "I Blame Myself," every song here builds to a massive, sing-along chorus. Take "You're Not the One," a soaring breakup cut with a melody eerily reminiscent of Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." Then there's "Heavy Metal Heart," a chipper goth-pop tune (think the Cure minus the fear of the sun) where the singer fully cuts ties with the prefab pop star that the label attempted to market her as embodying in the past, singing, "The way I was before/I'm not her anymore."

Fans should be glad to hear it. While this current incarnation of Sky Ferreira might occasionally be messy, she's rarely dull, and it's thrilling to listen in as this complex artist slowly, painfully comes into her own. —**Andy Downing**

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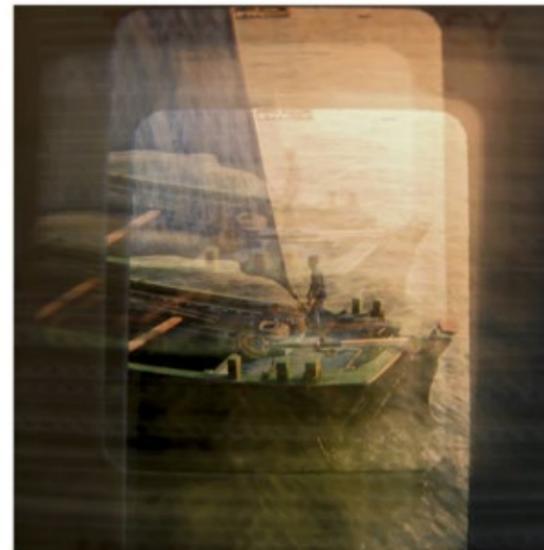


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MUSIC



The Autumn Defense

Fifth

Yep Roc, LP or CD

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However simple, *Fifth* proves an apt title for the Autumn Defense's fifth record. While fans of the duo comprised of Wilco's John Stirratt and Pat Sansone will likely embrace it, anyone looking for music with a bit more weight may find themselves reaching for a fifth of Jim Beam after wallowing in the group's throwback mellow rock.

Yes, Stirratt and Sansone are gifted players. But in service to what? The Autumn Defense lands in the softest territory of 70s rock. There are washes of such lite-radio monsters as America and Bread. "Calling Your Name" is a mash-up of the Doobie Brothers and Steely Dan. This is iffy ground to say the least, a stone's throw from the twee rabbit hole filled with Sammy Johns' "Chevy Van" and Michael Martin Murphey's "Wildfire."

But the real problem is that the Autumn Defense falls far short of the "laid-back" pantheon it references. The meandering, cluttered songs lack the solid bone structure that at least makes a song like America's affably propulsive pop hit "Sister Golden Hair" hookish and memorable. *(continued)*



©Photo by Chloe Aftel

There are also times when the Autumn Defense seems to be reaching for the evocative, quasi-psychedelic highs of the later-career Beatles, the underrated Badfinger, and select solo Beatle moments. With its jangly, buzzing guitars, "This Thing That I've Found" sounds like a grandchild of George Harrison's "What Is Life." But the Autumn Defense lacks what Harrison achieves in that memorable hit—namely, the payoff of piercing lyrics, an unforgettable melody, and an irresistible sing-along chorus.

Stirratt and Sansone are afflicted with studio-itis throughout. They busy their songs with jazzy detours and easy-listening overkill. Unable to let a pop bauble be, they gild the lily on songs that would shine with simpler arrangements.

There's beauty in the melancholy pop of "Under the Wheel," but needless instrumental layers mar the presentation.

The pair also proves slight but earnest singers. Lyrics veer between the oblique and the simplistic. Awkward rhymes abound, including such amateurish observations as "Well I know with what you've written/I am absolutely smitten/ With the warm endearing feeling of you" and "Something strange happens in my brain/And I find myself calling your name."

Sure, whether the Autumn Defense's breezy quirkiness is clever or cloying is a matter of opinion. But given a choice—and I can't believe I am writing this—I would opt instead to listen to David Gates' "Diary." —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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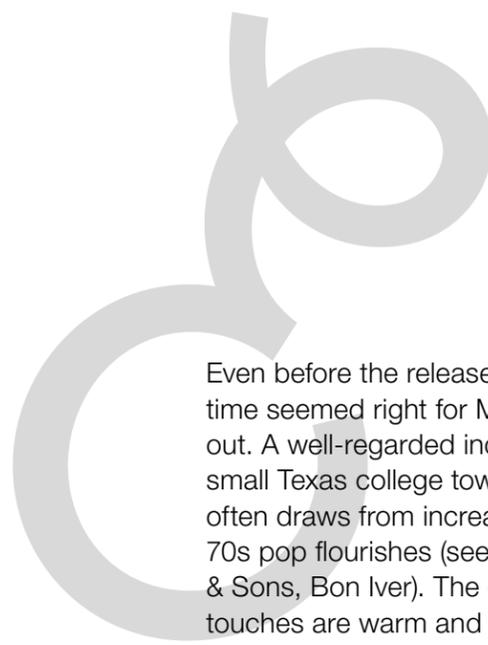
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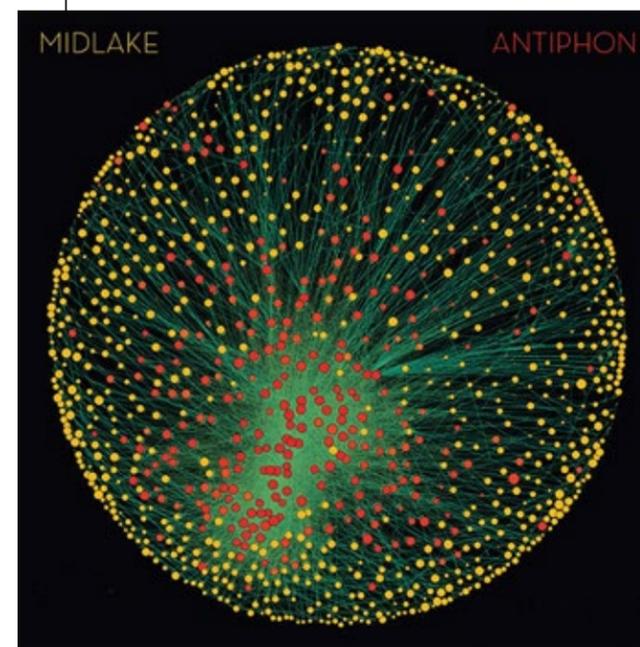
DIGITAL (r)EVOLUTION...again from Wadia



Even before the release of *Antiphon*, the time seemed right for Midlake to break out. A well-regarded indie band from a small Texas college town, its rich folk-pop often draws from increasingly in-vogue 70s pop flourishes (see Haim, Mumford & Sons, Bon Iver). The group's orchestral touches are warm and harmonies equally opulent. At its core, Midlake's intricate sound takes root in Neil Young's *After the Gold Rush* and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumors*.

But then, the band imploded in 2012, losing songwriter and lyricist Tim Smith. One year later, however, Midlake returns, boasting a record deal with Dave Matthews' ATO Records and tour dates with Pearl Jam. Maybe all the band needed to accelerate its momentum was a near-disaster. And still, for all the drama that surrounded the making of *Antiphon*, the album primarily lacks any. It's calm and consistent even when it's nearing recklessness, and Midlake is still not afraid to use a flute.

When anchor Smith left in late 2012, taking with him nearly two years of aborted songs, the band had been moving towards a backwoods folk direction. Acoustics were laced with a sense of mysticism, as if a *Lord of the Rings*-inspired vista loomed just around the corner. That sense of magic is still here at times—the rumble and thump of “The Old and the Young,” for instance, is a loud-soft clash of marching rhythms and moonlit guitar hues—but too often, the 10-track record emphasizes little more than collective precision. (continued)



Midlake

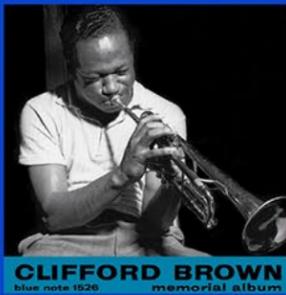
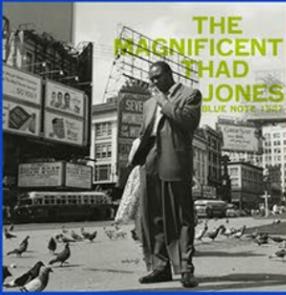
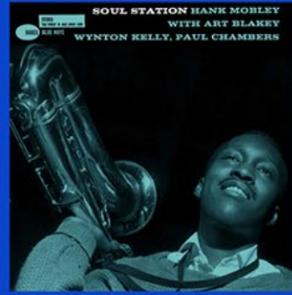
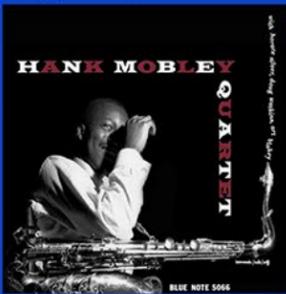
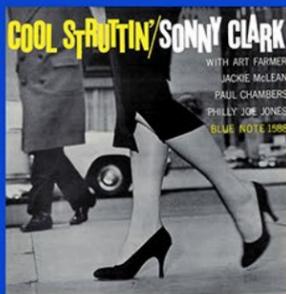
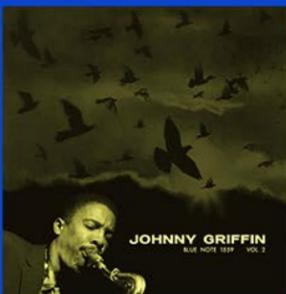
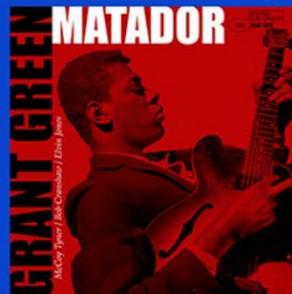
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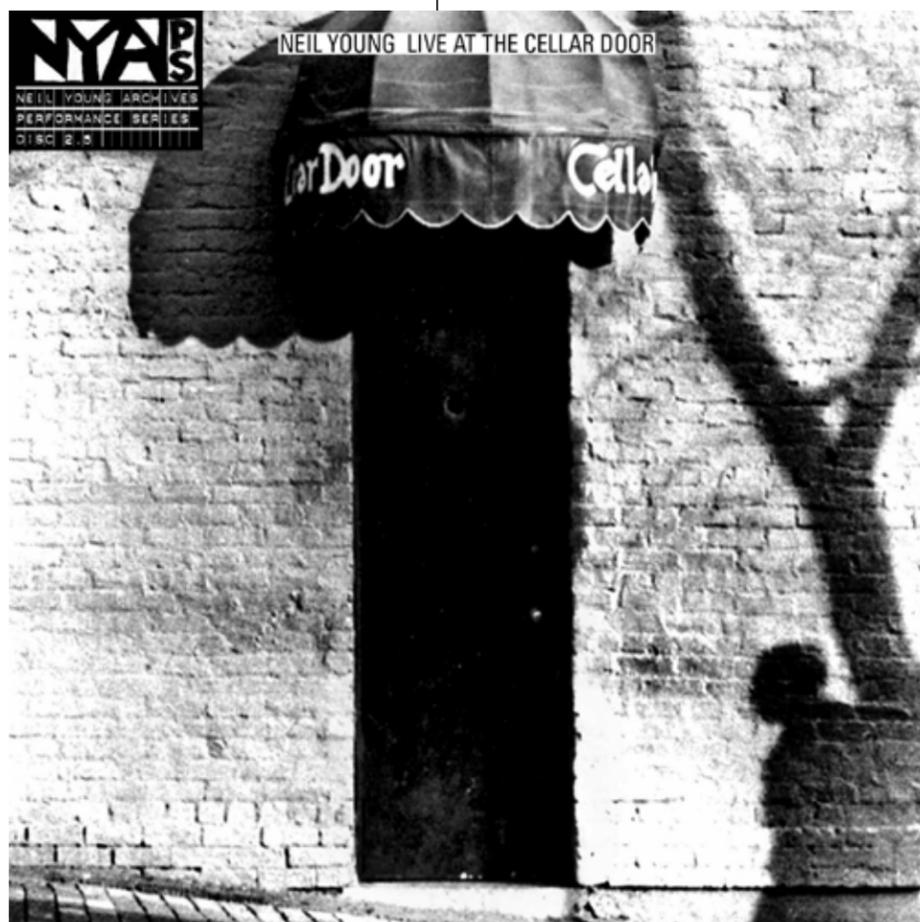
That's not to say the band doesn't play with something to prove. The title track, after all, has Midlake repeatedly harmonizing that it's going to "fight a war." There, references to foxholes and the presence of feedback-laced guitars abound. "Provider" picks up all sorts of obtuse notes and spellbinding chimes as its rhythm coarsely yet artfully tumbles along. "It's Going Down" forgoes a clear-cut melody to instead plant a guitar spike in the ground, only to send it spiraling like a wooden tip-top toy around a bewitching autoharp.

But every aforementioned song is on the album's first half, and it's telling the most striking tune on *Antiphon* is "Vale," an instrumental where a guitar torrent gives way to soothing woodwinds. It plays like an overture, giving everyone's instrument a say. That's bad news for a band that excels at vocal harmonies, and the fault doesn't necessarily lie with former lead guitarist-turned-frontman Eric Pulido. His vocals are unobtrusive, he rarely sings without accompaniment. Consider the characteristic emblematic of a new trait Midlake picks up at the album's midpoint and can't quite shake: anonymity.

—Todd Martens



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Neil Young

Live at the Cellar Door
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“That’s the first time I ever did that one at the piano,” announces Neil Young, shortly after completing “Cinnamon Girl” on the 88s. The ultra-rare version of the beloved favorite is the most obvious draw on the latest volume in the eclectic icon’s erratic Archives Series. But it’s far from the only reason the 13-track set—recorded live over the course of a solo six-concert run captured at the Cellar Door in Washington, D.C. in late 1970—seems to be the equivalent of stepping into Young’s living room shortly after he released *After the Gold Rush* and became the decade’s definitive artist.

Akin to his *Live at Massey Hall* set, *Live at the Cellar Door* enchants with unfettered intimacy and naked solo performances. Given Young played a half-dozen shows during the three-day stint at the club, the only thing lacking here is more material or, at the least, different takes of songs he repeated during the residency. Clocking in at 45 minutes, the album appears to end too soon, particularly when other performances remain locked in the vaults. But as his most ardent fans know, Young is nothing if not unpredictable. His justification for why this otherwise stellar volume is confined to one LP is anyone’s guess. And pining for extra content is missing the forest for the trees.

A veritable time machine, *Live at the Cellar Door* brings listeners face-to-face with Young’s singing, piano, and guitar. His vocal timbre sounds plainly younger and still noticeably innocent, the nasal accents detectable but not as prominent as they’d become in later years. His talent on the ivories shines. Young’s fingers hit the keys as if they’re speaking their own language, one that

serves the poetry of the song and introduces mystery and uncertainty to then-recent compositions now recognized as standards.

On “See the Sky About to Rain,” his touch echoes the “whistle blowing through [his] brain” he lyrically describes. Young spins a gorgeous Dixieland theme that foreshadows the final verse before waltzing into the final chorus, where his digits strike with a bigger, bolder thunder that threatens to break the instrument’s hammers and strings. During a pensive “Expecting to Fly,” the Canadian native turns a bridge into a brief ballet. His pensive vocals float like vapor and convey a piercing emotion that culminates in a dramatic second stanza during which the piano’s inner cavity vibrates with trepidation.

“If I never said I loved you/Now you know I’d try,” he quivers, the song falling somewhere between an apology and a plea. Similarly, Young affords “Birds” finality at the piano, the repeated “it’s over” refrain and minimalist feel driving home a loneliness no amount of whiskey can soothe.

Young’s six-string excursions provide nearly as insightful. The then-unreleased “Bad Fog of Loneliness” unfolds as a concise fever dream; the thumb-picked “Only Love Can Break Your Heart” speaks to a near-paralyzing simplicity. Throughout “Down By the River,” his voice suggests sadness and the dead silence of disbelief while his right hand strums and thrums, the choppy motion hinting at violence and rawness.

“You’d laugh too if this is what you did for a living,” Young says before journeying through “Flying on the Ground Is Wrong,” his half-joking demeanor underlining a fading doubt and shy humor that would soon give way to supreme confidence and poker-faced seriousness. —**Bob Gendron**

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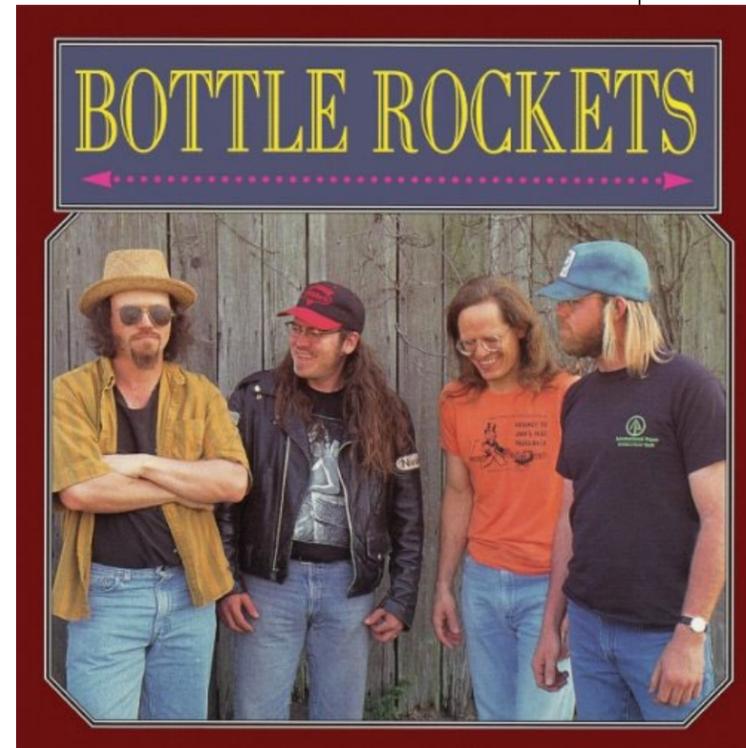


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Bottle Rockets

Bottle Rockets/The Brooklyn Side
Bloodshot Records, 2CD

Twenty years ago, the long-running Bottle Rockets released their self-titled debut and followed it a year later with *The Brooklyn Side*. Both albums are smart manifestos of the emergent alt-country movement. Bloodshot Records has reissued both of these long out-of-print gems in a deluxe two-CD package with bonus tracks.

Seldom has time-capsule material sounded so fresh. Revisiting the early work of these scruffy sons of Festus, Missouri—Brian Henneman, Tom Parr, Tom V. Ray, and Mark Ortmann—proves revelatory. With their mix of raw full-throttle country, punk attitude, and conscientious southern rock, this would be bold, strong material in any era. Like that of the Replacements, the Bottle Rockets' sophisticated songcraft emerges from under a raggedy veneer.

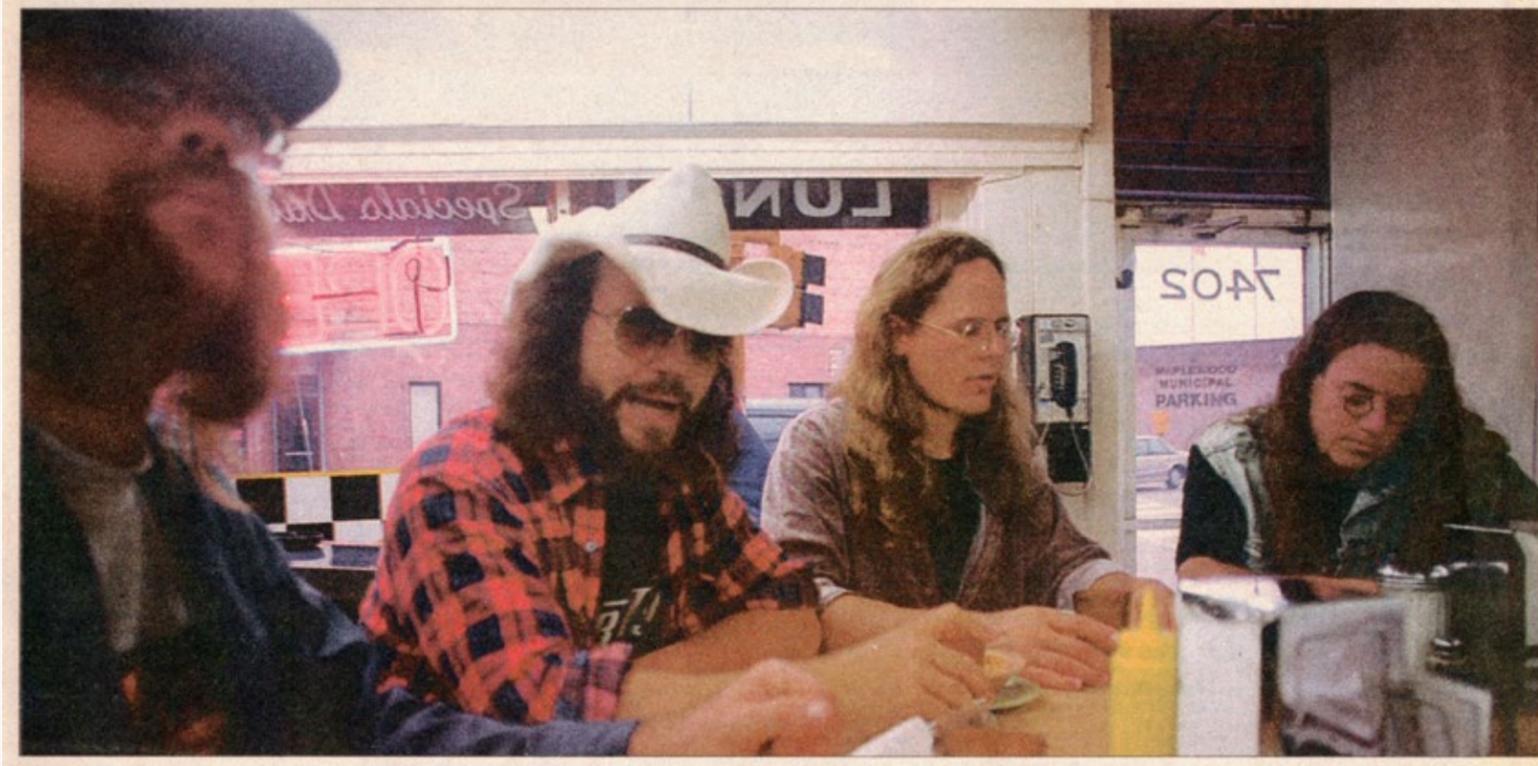
"Early In the Morning" rockets out of the gate with double-time punkish gusto and shouted vocals. Coming on like an aggressive auctioneer, there's power in frontman Henneman's hard, articulated twang on "Gas Girl." For all his punk brio, Henneman has a firm grip on the classic country love song.

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He plays a hilarious hilljack suitor on “Every Kinda Everything,” a finely realized piece of intricate wordplay. But love is not always treated as a goof. The hindsight cheating song “Got What I Wanted” teems with palpable regret.

Henneman is extremely funny, but he also throws down in a deeply serious way. The band comes on like a gnarlier Lynyrd Skynyrd with a sharp social conscience on “Wave That Flag.” Henneman’s voice is sharp and hard: “You can whistle ‘Dixie’ all day long/If the tables turned/Wouldn’t ya hate that song?” The gently strummed “Kerosene” tells the story of a tragic trailer fire and is no less searing in its message. These two songs are not just classics of the alt-country movement, but of modern country, period.

The Brooklyn Side extends all the triumphant promise of the group’s debut. Henneman and crew are complex, compassionate observers of lives lived on the fringe, most prominently in the rustic “Welfare Music” and painfully humorous “1000 Dollar Car.” The latter tale is a sly, scathing indictment of marginalized American life: “A thousand-dollar car ain’t even gonna roll/Until you put at least another thousand in the hole/Sink your money in it and there you are/The owner of a two-thousand dollar thousand-dollar car.”

Timely as ever, the Bottle Rockets’ early output remains shockingly timeless. A ragged-but-true heart never goes out of style.
 —**Chrissie Dickinson**



When I was a freshman at Ohio University in the late 90s, upperclassmen would occasionally talk about Athens, Ohio being a hotbed of occult activity. Over the course of my year there, I heard whispers suggesting five city graveyards matched up to the five points of a pentagram. Rumors had it that Satanists regularly held moonlight rituals on the outskirts of town.

Then there was the presence of the Ridges, an abandoned mental hospital that looked like the setting for virtually every horror film ever made. (The complex, which opened in 1868, was littered with long-forgotten psychiatric equipment; the wall of one holding cell was painted with an elaborate mural marked with the words "Let the sun shine through.") Still, the biggest argument for the small Ohio town being the center of all things evil might be the existence of Athens' own Skeletonwitch, which recently released its fifth album, the mostly excellent *Serpents Unleashed*.

As always, the band sounds out of control and yet in complete command of its surroundings, like X-Men's Storm controlling a massive hurricane. "Beneath Dead Leaves," for one, is downright primal, piling on lead singer Chance Garnette's demonic growl, slicing metal riffs, and drums that mimic a herd of Clydesdales stampeding through a slaughterhouse. "This Evil Embrace" is practically nuanced by comparison, swinging from torrential downpours of crunching metal noise to downright melodic passages courtesy of dual guitarists Nate Garnette and Scott Hedrick.

On past albums, the band had a Metallica-like tendency to ignore the low end. But producer (and Converge guitarist) Kurt Ballou beefs up the crew's sound here, helping tracks like "Born of the Light That Does Not Shine" hit like musical dark matter. In other words, these tunes are seriously heavy.

"Blade on the Flesh, Blood on My Hands" lives up to its hyper-violent title. Garnette and Hedrick wield their instruments like bloodied battle axes, and Chance Garnette howls in a voice designed to manufacture nightmares in small children. If Pixar ever animates a film about death, we've got its Reaper right here. On "Unending, Everliving," the frontman continues his onslaught, commanding someone "open the gates of hell" as the music thunders forward like a horde of fork-tongued, fire-breathing beasts. Best of all is "I Am of Death (Hell Has Arrived)," a punishing behemoth that sounds like the soundtrack Satan might play when he returns to the surface and begins leveling cities, countries, and continents. One imagines, however, he'll spare Athens his wrath. —**Andy Downing**



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2013 Christmas Music Wrap-Up

By Todd Martens

It's that time of year again, when veteran musicians seek a little career bump by going Christmas. Results are sometimes mixed, but Tone won't let you put on a holiday record that's going to drive away the party guests. Unless, of course, that's your desired intention. Here's a look at some of the season's new Christmas music.



Bad Religion
Christmas Songs
 Epitaph, LP or CD



©Photo by Myriam Santos

The overriding feel of these eight punk rock takes on holiday tunes such as “O Come All Ye Faithful” and “Little Drummer Boy” is irony, and therefore, one can’t help but wish Bad Religion took the project more seriously. After all, why should Susan Boyle have all the Christmas song fun? Surprisingly, Bad Religion largely focuses on non-secular offerings. The group turns “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” into a minute-and-a-half call-and-response for the mosh pit and then finds a place to decorate “What Child is This?” with an alarm-bell guitar solo. Even as a novelty, there is, however, a glaring missed opportunity: Why not cover the Ramones’ “Merry Christmas (I Don’t Wanna Fight)”?

We all agree “White Christmas” is a classic, and it’s nice that Bad Religion quotes the Ramones’ “I Wanna Be Sedated” in its opening riff, but the chance to treat a punk tune as a holiday standard is wasted.



©Photo by Jeremy Cowart

Let the following statement always be true: As long as the public must endure reality-singing competitions, the winning contestants must record holiday records. If one is going to over-sing on highly polished old-fashioned arrangements, well then, the holidays might as well be the cause. But chances are not good that many such vocalists will have the good taste of Kelly Clarkson and producer Greg Kurstin, a team that, despite the presence of five originals, resists the temptation to modernize things. These are holiday songs in as classical of a mode as possible, many with subtle touches that allow them to easily slip into any Christmas music rotation. Clarkson brings “Blue Christmas” back to its country roots, nicely handles the jazzy-cool inflections of “Baby, it’s Cold Outside,” and remakes “Please Come Home for Christmas (Bells Will Be Ringing)” into a rather enjoyable symphonic R&B cut. The original ballad “Just for Now” is the one overwrought stinker, but the Tinkerbell-meets-Ronettes-vibe of “Underneath the Tree” is all cheer.



**Kelly
Clarkson**
Wrapped in Red
RCA, CD



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Nick Lowe

Quality Street: A Seasonal Selection For All the Family
Yep Roc, LP or CD

The one-time Brit-pop hitmaker has largely aged gracefully, and the third decade of his career has seen Nick Lowe deliver sincerity with just a dash of wryness. It's not always clear what side wins out on his first-ever Christmas record, especially when Lowe treats "Silent Night" as if it were written for a New Orleans street parade. Organs brim, horns get frisky, and Lowe steps lightly, even tossing in some Western guitar licks. Not all is so eccentric, although the finger-snapping lounge pop of Ron Sexsmith's "Hooves on the Roof" comes close. Still, much of this collection is laced with gentle takes on Americana, from the rockabilly gospel of "Children Go Where I Send Them" to the Palm Beach topicality of the approachably goofy original "Christmas at the Airport." Credit Lowe for digging deep, too, resurrecting Boudleaux Bryant's lovely slow dance "Christmas Can't Be Far Away" as well as the heart-achingly nostalgic "Old Toy Trains," a little-known tune associated with Glen Campbell.





Mary J. Blige
A Mary Christmas
 Verve, CD

Give Mary J. Blige credit. Despite the fact pop producer/composer David Foster gives the album the kind of gloss that makes it sound as if the R&B star is trapped in the worst Home Shopping Network segment ever aired, the stern vocalist doesn't let the twinkles get her down. Sure, the band-member callouts in "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" are a little much, but she brings a stand-up-and-take-notice drama to "Mary, Did You Know," transforming a song of wonder into one of a mother's anguish. She also gives "Little Drummer Boy" an impassioned, tale-of-the-underdog reading. "My Favorite Things" sounds a little too sinister, but Blige is in her comfort zone on the Donny Hathaway soul number "This Christmas" while collaborations with Barbra Streisand and Chris Botti on "When You Wish Upon a Star" are surprisingly swinging. ●



FEATURE

U-Turn Audio Orbit Turntable

A 179 Dollar Miracle

By Jerold O'Brien

First and foremost, the people at U-Turn Audio are to be commended for bringing a domestically manufactured turntable to market at an unbelievably low price. The Orbit, which is manufactured in the USA, is completely manual and comes with an Ortofon Omega cartridge ready to play records. At \$179, this represents a miracle of sorts.

I have to admit that I was a bit skeptical of this product being any good. After all, how good can a brand new sub-\$200, plug-and-play turntable be? The Orbit quickly dispels visions of cheap analog-to-USB-to-MP3 toys, thanks to the virtue of its decent build quality and good performance. Moreover, it offers those unfamiliar with analog playback an inexpensive and uncomplicated way to find out what the fuss is all about.

FEATURE

The fit and finish on the Orbit is unexpectedly good at its price point. The plinth is made of a "high performance" plastic that is non-resonant and painted with semi-gloss black paint. The platter is CNC-machined MDF finished with black textured paint and covered with a felt mat. Surprisingly, the tonearm is a unipivot affair and features silver-plated internal wiring. (The other domestically manufactured unipivot tonearm that comes to mind is VPI's JMW, whose starting price is around \$1,000.)

The Orbit's motor is a low-voltage AC synchronous device with a machined pulley allowing for 33- or 45-rpm playback. Supporting the Orbit are three rubber feet/isolators to keep structure-borne vibration from interfering with playback. The whole package is topped off with a clear molded dust cover attached at the rear with a pair of hinges. U-Turn also supplies a pair of RCA cables for the left/right outputs. There is no ground wire, as the Orbit is internally grounded.

Setup couldn't be easier: simply install the platter, mat and string the belt, and you're off. One feature that is missing from the Orbit is a cueing lever. This cautions the owner to use a steady hand when lowering and lifting the tonearm. The Orbit reminds me of the very first Rega turntables—no frills (just turn the record at the right speed), no strobe, no automatic functions, no anything but playing the record. *(continued)*

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FEATURE

Listening to the Orbit begins on headphones through a newly restored Apt Holman preamp, renowned for its good phono stage and quiet operation. Nothing untoward is revealed during this first stage—no groans, no creaks and no emphasis of surface noise, with excellent isolation. Giving the plinth a vigorous knock with my knuckle yields no transference of the shock to the tonearm—pretty impressive, though there is the slightest bit of inner groove mis-tracking on difficult selections. However, re-balancing the tonearm and setting the tracking force to 1.8 grams, as recommended by Ortofon, cures this anomaly.

Putting the Orbit into my main system is a bit of a shock, because the turntable it replaces is a superb performer. But, as listening progresses, certain

characteristics are revealed; the Orbit is a little light in overall dynamic heft, but it's certainly quick on its feet. The presentation is that of swiftness and agility, yet there is some congestion in the mid-bass region, especially when the bass guitar and drums are at an energetic pace. A change of interconnects easily solves this problem, and changing out the supplied RCA cables for a pair of \$59.95 KAB/Cardas interconnects brings detail to the congested areas and also renders a larger and more stable soundstage. Now I feel that I'm hearing more of Orbit's capabilities. Another characteristic that becomes plainly audible is the overall absence of rumble. The arm/cartridge interface is a good one, with precious little woofer pumping, regardless of program material.

Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony* (Michael Tilson Thomas conducting the London Symphony Orchestra on CBS Masterworks) is the first selection and the hall ambiance seems a bit truncated compared to the big boys, but the overall character of the strings and woodwinds is believable. Moving on to Al Di Meola's *Land of the Midnight Sun* (Columbia Records), the Orbit unravels the frenetic pace on "Suite-Golden Dawn" handily, with Alphonse Mouzon's drum attack and Jaco Pastorius' bass lines intertwined with Di Meola's staccato guitar riffs.

Next up, Vintage Trouble's LP, *The Bomb Shelter Sessions*. On the cut "Still and Always Will," Ty Taylors voice is clearly presented above the pounding drums of Richard Danielson and Rick Barrio Dill's muscular bass. (continued)

FEATURE

Crosby, Still and Nash's first album (Rhino Records, 180g edition) proves a bit more difficult. The guitar sounds and vocal harmonies are well done, if a bit compressed on the Orbit. Finally, I try an old stalwart of mine, *Tommy Newsom, Live From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*. This is a direct-to-disc (Direct-Disk Labs) recording cut at a very high level. Even on an inner track like "Lay Down Sally," the blatting horn section presents no problems in the tracking department and the Orbit continues to impress.

Tweaking a bit further, replacing the felt mat with a GEM Dandy mat from George Merrill, who is no stranger to turntable building, brings back a lot of missing musical foundation, and the soundstage becomes more focused. But isn't my tweaking sort of subverting the basic premise of the Orbit? Well, yes and no. The entry price is \$179. Adding the RCA cables and the mat bring it to \$299, still a bargain for a brand-new table if you eliminate the DJ tables that are out there. When looking at the belt-drive competition, there's the Project Debut Carbon at \$400 and the Rega RP-1 at \$445—still more than the tweaked Orbit. A neophyte audiophile would add the tweaks over time as he or she became more familiar with analog playback. The upgrades reveal that the basic platform of the Orbit is a good one.



FEATURE

The inevitable question as to choice is, "What about vintage?" Being no stranger to vintage turntables, I can say that going that way is a crapshoot. Yes, if you get lucky, you can score a great turntable at a great price. But face facts, these things are 30 and 40 years old. The moment they break, the bargain goes out the window—nice to have a warranty, no? Even buying a new dust cover for a vintage table can cost \$150. Comparing a Dual 510 on hand, a semi-automatic belt drive model made in the late 1970s, fitted with a NOS Stanton 600e cartridge seemed a perfect foil for the new contender. The printed specs on each table were identical and about \$175 was invested in the vintage piece, though the Dual had the edge in lower wow and flutter, on sustained piano notes. For now, slight edge to the vintage table.

Using the same GEM Dandy mat on both turntables, the Dual/Stanton combination has more precision in its playback, especially in the low-bass and mid-treble regions. However, the Orbit's has character in its favor. Indeed, each table provides different presentations and there is no clear winner for 175 bucks. Some people would prefer the Dual/Stanton, while others would prefer the Orbit/Ortofon. Further investigation demands the same cartridge on both tables, but that's another story for the Analogaholic section of our website. Stay tuned. *(continued)*

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FEATURE



Back to tweaking - adding the RCA cables and mat to the Orbit brings us to \$299. What would adding a better cartridge bring to the Orbit? The Ortofon 2M Red is available for \$99 and was named an *Absolute Sound* Product of The Year in 2010. Okay, we're now at \$399 for a really tweaked-out Orbit. Can it go toe-to-toe with the Pro-Ject or the Rega? I can't answer that yet, but I have a feeling that it would acquit itself very well.

Reviewing the Orbit is a pleasant surprise. It demonstrates that, with thoughtful engineering and good materials, a thoroughly competent entry-level turntable with only the essential ingredients for LP playback can be offered at an excellent price point. Combined with the possibilities of tweaking and upgrading over time, budding audiophiles can now experience the joys of record playing without risking a major out-of-pocket expense. Kudos to U-turn Audio for being brave enough to offer the Orbit to a crowded market. I have a feeling that we'll be hearing more from this company in the years to come. ●

Orbit turntable
MSRP: \$179

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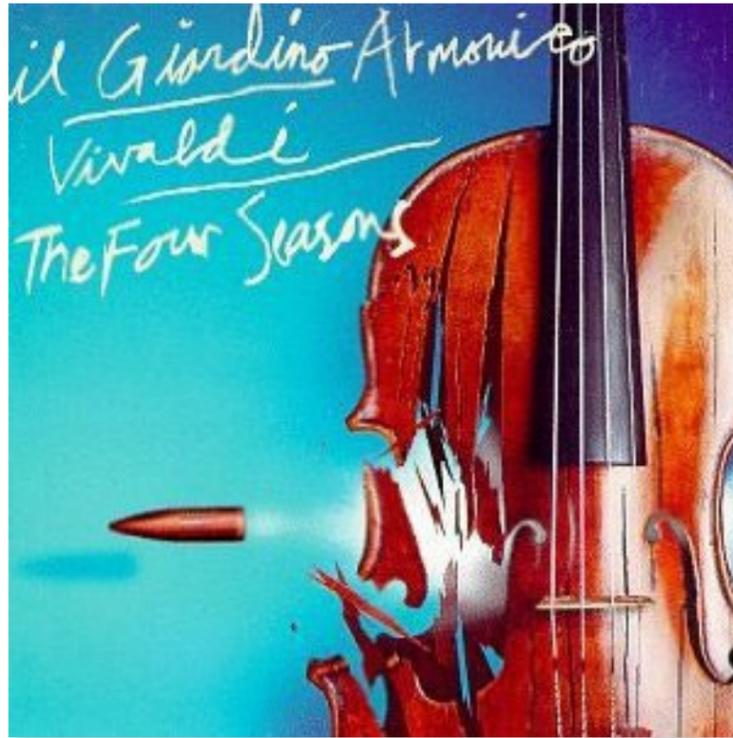
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M

ON CLASSICAL No.2

By Madelaine Coffman

Classical music encompasses a wide variety of styles, time periods, and cultures. For listeners both new and experienced, exploring the lesser-known byways of this world can yield unexpected gems. Each column will delve into two contrasting recordings that represent different perspectives on the same theme. In this issue, we'll take a look at two unusual interpretations of well-known musical compositions from the late Baroque period. Comments, questions, or suggestions for future themes/recordings can be sent to classicaldustbin@gmail.com.

**Il Giardino Armonico, Vivaldi: The Four Seasons**

"The peasant celebrates with song and dance the harvest safely gathered in.

The cup of Bacchus flows freely, and many find their relief in deep slumber."—*The Four Seasons*

Background: The word "baroque" (from the Portuguese "barocco," meaning deformed pearl) was first coined by an anonymous music critic in 1733 to complain that Phillipe Rameau's opera *Hippolyte et Aricie* was noisy, overly complex, and full of unnecessary discursions. In the latter half of the 18th century, the term grew to describe a very diverse cultural period that stretched from 1600-1750. This post-Renaissance flourishing fostered great innovations not just in music, but also in literature, theater, painting, sculpture, philosophy, science, and mathematics.

However, it wasn't until the 19th century that Jacob Burckhardt and Karl Baedeker's art criticism replaced Baroque's negative connotations with an appreciation of the flamboyance, exuberance, and, yes, very decorative sensibility of the era.

Known as "il prete rosso" ("the red priest," for his red hair), Antonio Vivaldi was an incredibly prolific and imaginative composer of the late Baroque period. His compositions were controversial during his lifetime for their dramatic contrasts, experimental techniques, and florid expression. After his death, his music waned in popularity until its influence nearly became forgotten. But the forms he helped to establish endured, and in the early 20th century, a resurgence of interest helped reestablish Vivaldi as one of the Baroque era's greatest composers.

Music: These days, it's easy to dismiss *The Four Seasons* simply because we've all heard it playing in the background many times—in the store while shopping for the holidays, on hold while waiting to talk with a customer service representative, or drinking wine with a friend that yearns to prove his or her cultural merit. Ubiquity aside, the composition is genuinely engaging and thrilling. Based on four sonnets (likely written by Vivaldi himself, and copied into the musical score to indicate when each event takes place), the four concertos describe a pastoral scene where the seasons pass in

all their beauty, terror, and glory. Although often played with stately reserve, the score lends itself equally well to wild imaginings and vivid passions. Il Giardino Armonico, playing on period instruments and with an ensemble about the size that Vivaldi would have envisioned, emphasizes the emotional core rather than a literal approach. Robust and vigorous, the music sweeps listeners along into a vivid and sensuous reverie on pastoral life. Beginning with a lively and joyous spring, a languorous summer transitions into genuinely terrifying storms; harvest celebrations are beguilingly giddy; and the contentment of the hearth keeps the bone-clenching cold of winter at bay—until the next exhilarating walk outside.

Available: on iTunes, Amazon, Spotify, and in many fine retailers.

Suggested contrasting selection: *Isaac Stern Plays and Conducts Vivaldi: The Four Seasons*, with the Jerusalem Music Center Chamber Orchestra. Performing a subtler examination of the text, Stern details a compassionate rendering of every character alluded to in the score—whether the wounded stag felled in the autumnal hunt or the peasant that falls while crossing a thinly iced pond. If you are unfamiliar with the sonnets, reading them along with this recording is strongly recommended.

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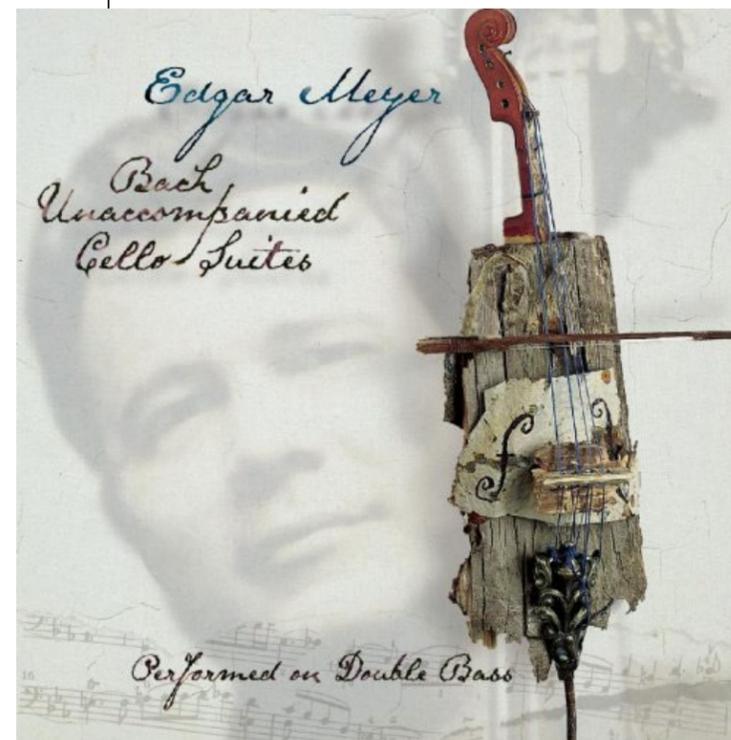
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MUSIC



Edgar Meyer, Bach: Unaccompanied Cello Suites, Performed on Double Bass

“Creativity is more than just being different. Anybody can play weird; that’s easy. What’s hard is to be as simple as Bach. Making the simple, awesomely simple, that’s creativity.” —Charles Mingus

Background: Johann Sebastian Bach’s cello suites are arguably the most easily recognized music for solo cello ever written. And yet, for a long time, they were not well known, thought only to be sketches or student exercises. Enter young Pablo Casals, who went on to become one of the greatest cellists of his time. At the turn of the twentieth century, when he was only 13, Casals found a manuscript containing the suites in a bookstore in Barcelona. He practiced the music daily for 12 years before performing it in public, and did not record the suites until he was in his sixties. Since then, Bach’s cello suites have enjoyed ever-increasing popularity and sparked scholarship into the instrument for which they were originally written.

This instrument was most likely the viola da spalla, then called the violoncello, an apparatus smaller than a modern cello and played similarly to a viola or violin. Not that it matters—the suites have been transcribed for and performed by just about every instrument imaginable.

Music: Edgar Meyer also began practicing the cello suites at a very young age—in his case, 12 years old. But playing this music on a double bass constitutes a different kind of technical test. For one, the intervals are spaced too far apart to play the suites in the same manner as on cello. The thicker strings also resonate more slowly, which provides a challenge in sections with myriad decorations and melodic flights of fancy. But Meyer, an accomplished composer in his own right, manipulates the greater dynamic range and power of the bass with a deft hand. I’ve watched him play the suites live. He is a large man and, in comparison, his instrument seems almost the size of a cello. Occasionally the two bodies sway together, giving the impression they are dancing—oddly appropriate for music based on a series of courtly dances. Such looseness and ease extends to his interpretation of the suites, by turns contemplative, melancholy, convivial, and tempestuous. At times, a stately propriety creeps in, often tinged with playfulness. The rich tones and depth of the bass are well-suited to the music, lending the melodic line a vigor and immediacy that can be intoxicating.

Available: On iTunes, Amazon, Spotify, and in just about any brick-and-mortar classical music retailer.

Suggested contrasting selection: Pablo Casals’ original recordings, which remain just as fresh and compelling as when they were first recorded in the 1930s. Be sure to listen to Casals mutter or hum along in parts while he is playing. It’s quite charming. ●

AURALiC VEGA Digital-Audio Processor

Reaching For the Stars

By Rob Johnson

Vega is the name of one of the brightest stars visible from Earth. If you live in the Northern Hemisphere, there's a very good chance that you regularly witness its vibrant twinkle. Sometimes called the Harp Star, Vega lies in the constellation Lyra, which resembles the harp used by the mythological Greek musician Orpheus. According to legend, nobody could turn away from the music once Orpheus started playing his harp. The Hong Kong-based manufacturer AUARALiC has set the bar sky high for its Vega DAC if the product is going to live up to its lofty name.

FEATURE



Preparing for Launch

Despite all the features under its hood, the Vega has modest dimensions. It measures 11 inches wide, 9 inches deep and 2.6 inches high, and it weighs just 7.5 pounds.

It's easy to be impressed with the multitude of connection options this DAC offers. They include USB, AES/EBU, S/PDIF Toslink and S/PDIF coax. This array of options not only provides flexibility for use in virtually any audio system but it also helps future proof the Vega. Even if an audio system evolves with varying components, the Vega will always have a home somewhere in the chain.

It's important to note that the USB input is capable of accommodating PCM 32-bit/384-kHz files, while DSD 64 streams at 2.8224 MHz and DSD 128 streams at 5.6448 MHz. The other inputs are limited to 24-bit/192-kHz files. Perhaps "limited" isn't really the best descriptor since that resolution is certainly a huge step up from the 16-bit/44.1-kHz quality of standard CDs.

For outputs, the Vega offers both single-ended RCA and balanced connections. As a huge bonus, it also offers a variable output volume. For those who listen to music in the digital realm only, it's possible to hook the Vega directly to the amp and effectively use it as a pre-amplifier. For users piecing together a new audio system around the Vega, it's nice to have the option to get by without a preamp and associated cables, so you can put your hard-earned dollars to work elsewhere in the audio chain.

All Systems Go

While the star Vega is 25 light years away, the AURALiC Vega is a just a few feet away, connected to my computer via USB. I try all of the Vega's connections, except the Toslink, and find that they each provide very good sound. However, the high-speed USB from my computer proves the best overall option, given its maximum sampling rate and its ability to stream a variety of formats including DSD, lossless and WAV. *(continued)*

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FEATURE



The stock USB cable that comes packed with the Vega puts forth good sound, but a reasonably priced aftermarket USB cable like the Cardas Clear provides a noticeable improvement.

AURALiC includes a driver disc for computer setup and a detailed set of instructions to get everything configured. Despite the manual, I encounter some trouble getting my computer to recognize the AURALiC. It takes quite a bit of finagling with the Windows 7 sound settings to get the computer to make the connection. I'm sure the experience varies depending on the computer, operating system and type of digital files being transmitted. But after 30 minutes of frustrated troubleshooting with everything connected, the Vega proves itself worth the wait.

Liftoff!

As with other AURALiC products, the Vega has a sleek and futuristic appearance. Its front panel sports a single knob and a darkened screen from which all information is conveyed to the user. When the Vega is powered up and connected to a digital source, four amber indicators appear: power, selected input, signal type/bitrate, and volume level, the latter of which displays the numbers large enough so that they can be read from a listening position 10 feet away. When powered down, the Vega goes into standby mode to keep critical elements warm for optimal sound at the next power-up.

While the Vega's operations menu is accessible by pushing and twisting the knob on the front panel, I find that the remote control is the most effective way to make changes. All the adjustments you'd expect from a remote are there at the ready, but two unique capabilities capture my attention.

The first offers access to four digital filters, which impart slight sonic variances to the analog outputs. If using DSD files, two additional filters appear. AURALiC offers recommendations for the type of music best suited to a particular filter, but I find that trial and error is the best way to determine the preferred setting.

The second noteworthy feature allows adjusting digital clock settings. The Vega defaults to *Auto*, with *Course*, *Fine* and *Exact* settings also available. The latter two are available on the menu only after the DAC has been warmed up for an hour or so. Experimenting with the higher clock settings on low-jitter signals, I notice a bit more smoothness, imaging depth and detail when using a USB source. Just as the Vega manual warns, when the Vega's coax input receives a lower-quality jittered signal from my computer's coax output, the AURALiC is not able to maintain the higher level of precision, which results in some skipping. Once again, the larger USB "pipe" proves itself the best source, so I recommend taking advantage of it. *(continued)*



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— Ed Kobesky *Positive Feedback Online*

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

— Dick Olsher *The Absolute Sound*

FEATURE

One of the major technological highlights of the VEGA is its utilization of a Femto master clock, that features an aerospace grade crystal oscillator. It does take an hour of warm-up time for the clock to fully settle and deliver optimum performance. While the VEGA sounds great upon power up, there is a marked improvement once stable, with soundstaging and imaging performance tightening up. Because it uses so little power, we suggest leaving the unit powered at all times.

Identical to the Taurus headphone amplifier we reviewed recently, the VEGA uses the same Orfeo Class-A output stage modules. These are patented by AURALiC and have an impressive open loop distortion figure of less than .001%, allowing the VEGA to output 4 volts RMS at a very low output impedance (4.7 ohms at the RCA output and 50 ohms at the balanced output), giving it the ability to drive any power amplifier to full volume with ease.

Achieving Orbit

All features aside, the Vegas delivers impressive sound. Like Orpheus's harp, the Vega proves difficult to turn away from once I start listening. Other than the \$20,000 Light Harmonic DaVinci DAC, I've never wanted to permanently swap out my own digital front end for a piece of review equipment. Other, newer DACs offer some strengths over my pieces of reference gear, but not enough to wholly unseat them.

With setup complete, it seems apropos to test the Vega on some space-themed music, and so I start with *Dark Side of the Moon*. Any decent stereo equipment reveals the footstep sounds during "On the Run," which move left and right in the soundstage. (continued)



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However, the sonically perceived front-to-back movement can get buried by some digital equipment. The Vega does a great job digging out those details. Air's song "Venus" has the ability to throw a very wide soundstage, which the Vega portrays well. Perceived musical boundaries wrap around my listening area, enveloping the space with sound.

Using the Vega in DSD mode, I find that Norah Jones's song "Lonestar" sounds better than I've heard it rendered digitally. The combination of high-resolution format and a great decoder provides some unexpected pleasure. I enjoy listening to the album *Come Away With Me*, but at a CD-level bitrate, vocal passages can expose some stridency. The AURALiC tames that down, rendering Jones' voice in a smooth, lifelike and extended manner, and with a significant reduction in that "wince factor."

When using the JRiver Media Center 19 to send a DSD stream to the Vega, I find it worthwhile to increase JRiver's buffer settings via the pull-down playback menu. With the smaller default buffer setting, the recording interpreted through the AURALiC has a tendency to skip. Standard CD recordings, like the B52's "Planet Claire" or Bill Laswell's "Galactic Zone," consistently get an audio makeover through the AURALiC. Especially when setting the JRiver software to output a 192-kHz signal, the Vega does a fantastic job coaxing out improved sound from the subterranean bass from Laswell's guitar.

Willie Nelson's voice on *Stardust* proves equally beguiling. Vocal presence remains at the front of the soundstage, extending forward into the room with an almost physical presence. Guitars and percussion retain a similar level of realism and palpability. *(continued)*



FEATURE



Listening to several hours of classical, jazz and blues recordings, I am never disappointed with the Vega. Regardless of the music thrown at it, the Vega consistently excels at bass retrieval and reproduction of high notes, while maintaining a generally neutral sound. In my setup, the Vega never seems to over emphasize any particular frequency. With this blank canvas to work from, the user has the opportunity to use the digital filter and clock settings to slightly tailor the sound to their liking—and experimentation proves a lot of fun.

While the Vega's sound is not as smooth, refined, nuanced, and three-dimensional as the \$20,000 Light Harmonic DaVinci, the AURALiC more than holds its own for its price, delivering great sound for its class. I could live with it happily.

Among the Stars

Can the AURALiC VEGA serve as a northern star in your home audio system? In short, the answer is yes. For all its versatility and raw audio prowess, the Vega is worth serious consideration if the \$3,499 price is within your budget. With a future-proof design and variable volume output, the Vega is likely to remain in your audio system for years to come, which makes it a great investment for those who love the convenience and sonics of high-quality digital music. Like Orpheus' audiences, I suspect that you will find it difficult to turn away from the Vega once you start listening. ●

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Comfortable Concert Hall

The Range Rover Sport with Meridian Sound

By Jeff Dorgay



As much fun as it was zooming around in the Jaguar F-Type—which appeared on the cover of our last issue and which is also equipped with a magnificent audio system from Meridian—the visceral experience of driving with the top and gas pedal down made it difficult to concentrate on anything but the sound of the engine. For this writer, the roar of a big V-8 always trumps whatever tunes are playing.

But the new Range Rover Sport is an entirely different animal. With a cockpit nearly as quiet as that of a Bentley, the Sport makes for the perfect spot to take advantage of what the Meridian system can deliver. It's a \$1,950 option that you should not be without.

TO NE STYLE

Joining some of motoring's most noteworthy journalists, we sit through a presentation that an outsider might think is comprised of a bunch of unlikely tourists being pitched on the idea of vacation time-shares. It's awfully quiet in the room as Range Rover's best and brightest share all the techie bits about what makes this new Sport model even more Range Rover-y. They also make a point to tell us that the Sport is back-ordered for *months*—which seems to impress the highly enthusiastic audience.

The design brief concentrates on the Sport's ability to deliver more off-road capability than Range Rover loyalists might be used to, as well as more boulevard-friendly cruising abilities for those pursuing more civil driving (i.e. Kim Kardashian and the country-club crowd). The new Sport is nearly 800 pounds lighter than the model it replaces, which becomes immediately apparent at the gas pump. Friends with the departing model tell me that they struggle to get 12 mpg; the new model will deliver close to 20 mpg in mixed driving environments—a major improvement.

But this enhanced performance is not just due to weight loss; it also comes from higher efficiency in all areas, from the engine management to the new and improved transmission, combined with better software controlling the drivetrain.

(continued)



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TO NE STYLE

Just Get the V-8

While I truly preferred the supercharged V-6 power plant in the Jaguar F-Type—feeling that it was more lithe overall and hardly worth the gas-mileage penalty for the 0.5-second quicker 0-to-60-mph time of the V-8 version—the exact opposite is true with the Range Rover Sport. The 1-to-2-mpg penalty you'll pay for the big motor is a small price to pay for the posh feel that accompanies it. The 6-cylinder car feels fine at cruising speed, but when it's necessary to overtake the car next to you, the weaker engine's struggle is apparent in the cabin, feeling somewhat labored, whereas the V-8 version jumps ahead effortlessly.

And while the extra horsepower of the V-8 only shaves about 0.5 seconds from the 0-to-60 time in the Jag, it delivers a nearly 2-second quicker time in the Range Rover. Again, it's more about the way the power is delivered than the power itself. You never think about the engine in the V-8 model, as it should be in a luxury ride like this.

Both the V-6 and V-8 engines are based on the ones used in the Jaguar, yet in the Range Rover they are tuned more for maximum torque and a broader response curve, which benefits a wider range of driving experiences. You aren't going to be burning rubber when the tires are knee-deep in mud anyway—what you want is smooth, torque-heavy power delivery so you can leap out of the slimy spots with ease. Yet, where the V-6 feels fine most of the time, when you put the pedal down, you still feel the engine. By comparison, the V-8 has an effortlessness of power delivery that just seems oh so much more in keeping with the sporty ethos.

That's what the Range Rover Sport delivers: No matter how steep a hill we chose to climb or how slippery the conditions, this damn thing does not get stuck—*ever*. As a neophyte to off-roading (though I've ridden my share of dirt bikes through hellish conditions), I'm flabbergasted at the capabilities of this 5000-pound vehicle, which can sprint from 0 to 60 mph in 5 seconds flat—something that the Porsche Boxster in my garage cannot accomplish. *(continued)*

If there was ever a vehicle that can do damn near everything, the Range Rover Sport is it. Now, if we could only have the 35-mpg turbo diesel model that our European neighbors enjoy...

The Ultimate Mobile Concert Hall

Thanks to 1,700 watts and 29 speakers, all tailored to the Range Rover's interior environment, there is no better way to take the music to the street, or wherever. Most of our test vehicles have the standard Meridian system, which is no slouch, and adds \$1,995 to the sticker. For all but the most die-hard music fans, this should suffice, but if you want to rock while you're rolling, you need the top-of-the-line Meridian Signature Audio Enhancement Package, which adds \$4,995 to the MSRP—a small price to pay to be a major player.

And rock it does. Thanks to all of the DSP modeling performed by Meridian, an expert in this technology, each one of those 29 speakers is custom tuned to the Sport's luxurious cabin. Cranking up the new Nine Inch Nails album *Hesitation Marks* conveys the sheer industrial energy present on this disc, and even at near maximum volume, nothing in the Sport's cabin rattles or makes any kind of mechanical noise.

Next up, it's classic Scorpions—*Love at First Sting*. It might be a little bit out of



character for this proper British vehicle to be blasting "Rock You Like a Hurricane," but again the Meridian system delivers the goods, providing maximum SPL and minimum distortion. Seriously, this system can generate major sound pressure, so we'll leave it up to you to establish your own definitions of reasonable and prudent while behind the wheel.

Because this is a surround-sound setup, those with 5.1-channel DVD-Audio discs can take full advantage of that functionality. The 1990s classic *Toy Matinee* is a ton of fun on this system, with vocals seeming to come up from between the front seats and with sprinkles of synthesizer fills coming from all over the cabin—brilliant!

You Know You Want It

I come away spoiled from my time spent with the Range Rover Sport equipped with the Meridian sound system—any other SUV now disappoints. I've driven them all and they pale in comparison. Nothing else has the versatility, the reputation or the panache. Granted, the Range Rover Sport may not be for everyone, but if I were writing a check for seventy large, this would be in my driveway in a heartbeat. ●

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iPad Air

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www.apple.com

Yes you need *another* iPad. Now dubbed the iPad Air, Apple claims their new baby is “leaner and definitely meaner.” Marketing hyperbole aside, it is 28% lighter, weighing in at a mere one pound. While some find this new svelteness enticing, the beauty of the new iPad is truly skin deep.

Those stepping up from an earlier generation pad will immediately notice the crispness of the retina display. Even if you’ve already had the retina experience, you’ll be excited by the processor upgrade, providing a big jump in overall performance. Web pages load decidedly faster when comparing to the last model, and wifi performance seems improved as well, when transferring files. Perhaps the biggest benefactors will be the gamers in the audience, which is where all of this functionality converges, but the new Pad is enough of a star performer, that those relying more heavily on the pad than a laptop should give this one serious consideration.

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ONE STYLE

Tito's Handmade Vodka

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And just when y'all thought Austin, Texas was a place for music, it turns out they are getting equally famous for making vodka. Proprietor Tito Beveridge (yeah, that's his *real* name) left a career in the financial services industry to follow his passion for vodka, and we're probably all better off for it.

Labeled a "sippin vodka," Tito's is smoother than anything we've come across, tasting almost like Vodka flavored wine. Equally good mixed with your favorite combination; orange juice, cranberry juice or even Gatorade, Tito's Handmade Vodka should be on your list if you're a vodka aficionado.



Samsung Galaxy Gear

\$299 www.samsung.com

If you've got one of the latest Samsung Galaxy phones, you have to get the companion watch. While some may view this as over the top nerdiness, and others the first step to wearing Borg implants, the Samsung engineers have done a remarkable job at streamlining what could have been a major dork move.

Available in stylish orange, bright yellow, black, white, and grey, the Galaxy Gear watch pairs with your phone via Bluetooth and gives you multiple display options, from full on digital watch (complete with outside temperature) to the analog version you see here. And, it includes a wrist camera, which is mega cool.

The downsides of this product are few, but significant. First, it has to be charged via the charging cradle and wall wart, which is cumbersome. Having a watch that

needs to be charged is inconvenient. Second, the watch face does not stay lit, you have to push the button on the side of the bezel to illuminate it.

Hopefully, the next release (or software update) will address these issues. For now, we only suggest this one for the most obsessive mobile technology enthusiasts.



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STONE STYLE

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Shinola Watches

By Rob Johnson

Cars aren't the only things being produced in Detroit these days. Earlier this year, Shinola began offering a variety of items including bicycles, leather goods and watches, all produced at its Detroit manufacturing facility. And its watches in particular caught our attention.

Named after the 1940s-era shoe polish brand, Shinola is backed by a larger Dallas-based company and has an ultimate production goal of 500,000 watches annually. Shinola has partnered with Detroit's College for Creative Studies, which is helping to interject creative approaches in the company's manufacturing process. And while not all the parts in Shinola's watches are sourced from U.S. suppliers, the company hopes to bring more U.S.-based companies into the fold. As one example, a well-established watchband maker in Florida, Hadley-Roma, produces all the leather bands for Shinola's watches.

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Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio Magazine*, January 2013



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Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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TONE STYLE

It is not uncommon for U.S. manufacturers to buy parts from sources around the world and assemble them here. Many companies even have the entire assembly process done overseas where expertise and labor costs can make small-scale production more economical. Shinola's manufacturing approach bucks this trend in order to create jobs locally. And Shinola's watches have generated a strong following from those who favor the watches' neo-retro designs.

Shinola takes special care in building its movements, which is kind of like a watch's engine, allowing the watch to maintain time and date, and in some cases enabling stopwatch functionality. All the movements in Shinola's current lineup are quartz-based and required the battery to be changed every few years. Companies like ETA (Swiss) and Miyota (Japanese) produce very reliable pre-built movements and are the go-to options for some U.S. watchmakers. Another large movement manufacturer is Ronda (also Swiss), and its movements serve as the basis of Shinola's own Argonite series of movements, which Shinola assembles at its Detroit factory. Keep in mind that each Argonite movement requires 40 to 80 tiny parts.

To prepare the team in Detroit for such a large and delicate undertaking, Shinola brought in several experts from Ronda to get the process rolling and to help train the local team. A substantial amount of hands-on labor is required to build each movement—and considering the care and time that the team in Detroit puts into each Shinola watch, a price tag starting at around \$500 is very reasonable. Given the quick growth and popularity of the company, it appears that many happy Shinola customers agree.

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WEIRD BEAUTY

ARTIST OLIVER HIBERT COLLABORATES WITH THE FLAMING LIPS' WAYNE COYNE

By Kristin Bauer

If you've listened to any of the Flaming Lips' albums—*The Soft Bulletin*, *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*, *At War with the Mystics*, etc.—then you've entered into the trippy universe that is their unique sound. I'm fairly certain that, wherever this universe lies, it's just a hop, skip and rainbow-colored jump from the portal that artist Oliver Hibert's crisp, colorful and psychedelic artwork opens up.

The Flaming Lips have created and delivered a strong sense of visual and auditory magic through their cotton-candy wonderland aesthetic for decades. And if you've been following the band at all in the past year, you've seen a whole new design dimension unfold with the addition of Hibert, who has been collaborating with Flaming Lips front man Wayne Coyne on everything from posters to shirts to album art.



Their most recent collaboration is *Peace and Paranoia Tour 2013*, a limited edition EP from the Flaming Lips and Tame Impala, on which Hibert, Coyne and George Salisburay (who has done design work with Coyne for years) worked together.

The album features one side of Tame Impala covering two Lips' songs; the other side is vice versa. Collaborations seep through relentlessly in the visuals and sound of this album, which is not easy to track down—only 2,000 copies were produced and they were only sold at the Halloween shows that the two bands co-headlined.

Hibert's designs—which I became familiar with several years back, as we both hail from Phoenix—are unlike any others I have seen. Hibert is a self-professed hermit who has monastically and nocturnally refined and honed his work in the incubator of his studio. He is beyond a perfectionist, much to the benefit of his artwork. Hibert filled me in recently on the nature of his collaborations and artwork with Coyne:

"Early in 2012, I woke up one day to a tweet from Wayne and email saying, 'Call me!'" the artist recalls. "I was a huge Flaming Lips fan to begin with, so I was kind of freaking out. Eventually, after I slapped myself in the face a couple of times, I called him. He was on tour in Argentina, when the psychedelic art book I was in got released. He saw my work and was flipping out over it." *(continued)*

FEATURE

Coyne and Hibert began by collaborating on a poster for a Deerhoof and Flaming Lips show, and they have not stopped since. The creative synergy between the two is fluid and obvious. The polarities of their creative processes serve as a balancing element, while their collaborations deliver a unified vibe of futuristic yet throwback psychedelic weirdness.

“Wayne’s a totally weird guy and my art’s weird,” says Hibert. “He does his art a lot differently from me, but we’re kind of on the same wavelength, even though our styles are different.”

Indeed, Coyne’s process is far more organic and drippy, fluid and full of movement, while Hibert’s work is a symphony of pop-style prismatic colors, with recurring themes of snakes, eyes and often faceless women—all intricately placed together in a bizarrely kaleidoscopic dance of symmetry.

In discussing his inspirations, Hibert says that, as an introvert and a homebody, he pulls mostly from the imagery in his head, although he does say that the 1973 cult art movie *The Holy Mountain* blew his mind with its symmetrical and surreal display of composition and imagery.

“My stuff is so technical,” Hibert explains. “And I think that’s part of the beautiful marriage between [Coyne and I] when we collaborate, because he takes an approach that I would never, ever take—but I really appreciate it and respect it and like it, probably even more because I know I could never do that.”

(continued)



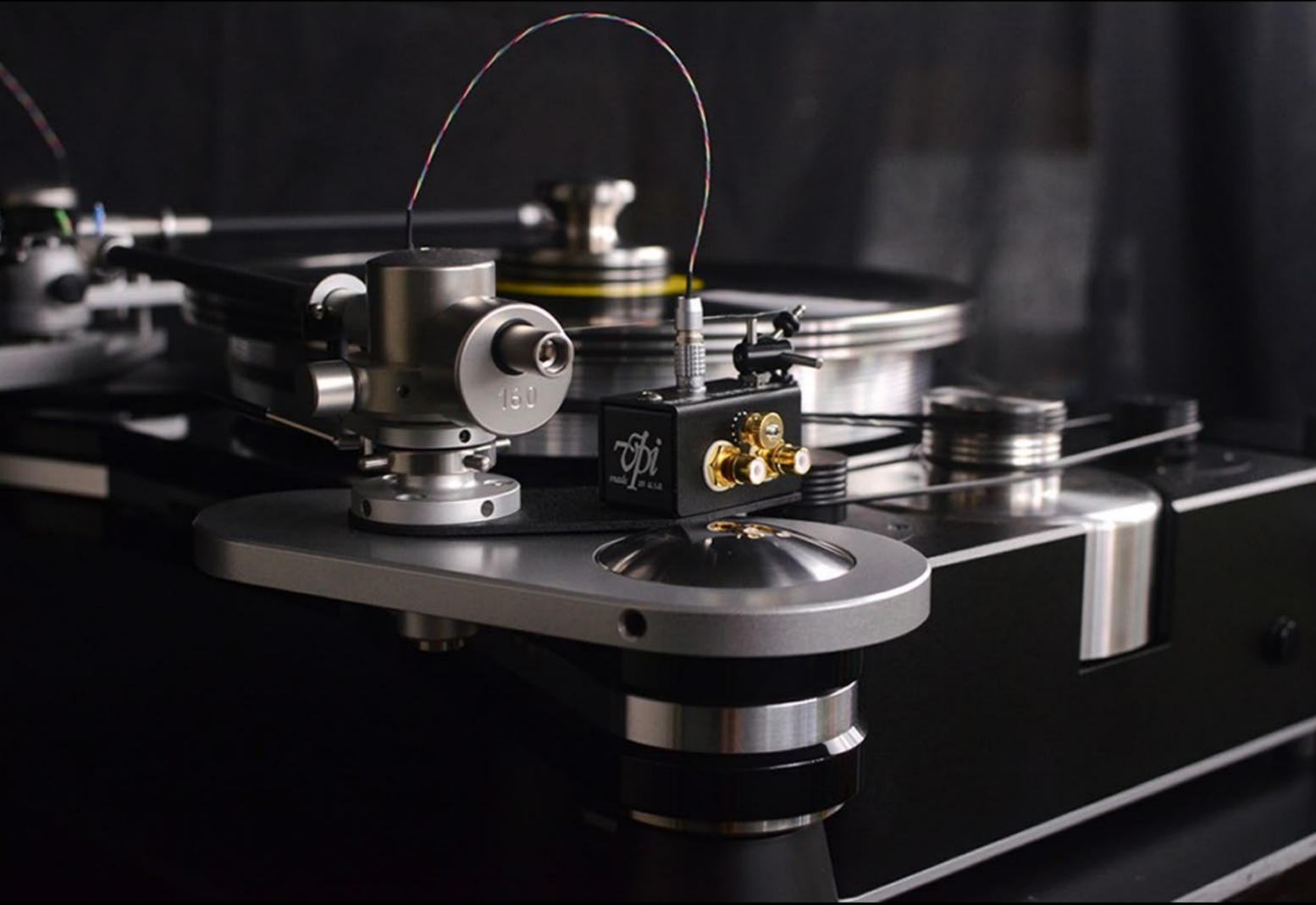
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FEATURE

Having spent years doing design work for the likes of MTV, Nike, Adidas and countless others through the London-based design agency Début Art, Hibert doesn't feel like he's done too much work with musicians until recently.

"Since I started working with Wayne, I've gotten a lot of exposure in that industry," he says. In addition to working with the Flaming Lips, Hibert is now working with the Wooden Shjips and Starfucker, along with some new music labels.

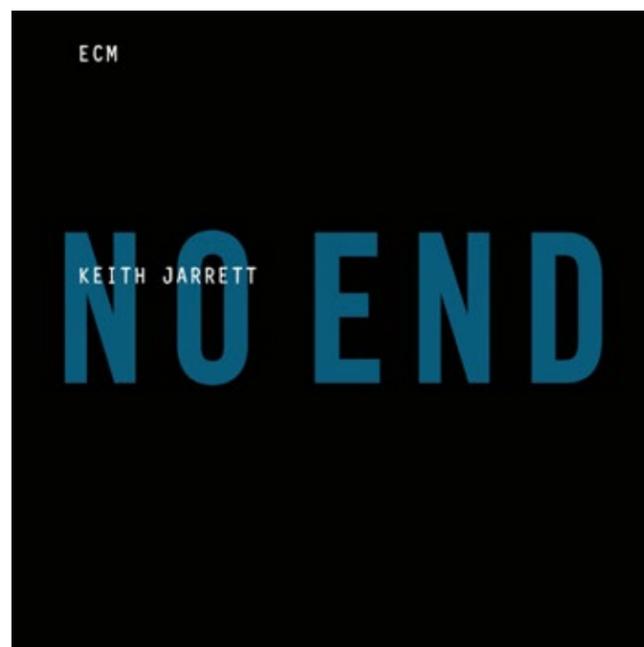
Some of Hibert's artwork is currently installed in a huge art exhibition at Coyne's multipurpose, warehouse-sized Womb gallery in Oklahoma City. Hibert's brother, Spencer, is also an incredibly talented artist who shares a similar psychedelic-pop aesthetic. They have been working on a collaborative art exhibition for the Womb called "Bad Trip," which is slated to open November 15th and will be on exhibit for a month. The gallery is far outside the standard white cube model of many commercial galleries these days, being highly experimental in nature. It has exhibited the works of internationally known artists like Bigfoot, Dalek and Maya Hayuk, who painted the building's exterior in wild colors and geometric patterns.

Preparing for the show on short notice, Hibert laughs and says, "Wayne's been sending me pictures and all kinds of weird ideas of what's gonna go on in there. I can't even say yet. But who knows? There's a room called the Womb Room. You walk through this big vagina into this big pink craziness. It's kind of like the Korova Milk Bar from *A Clockwork Orange*. It's a place to put on an experience, a place to have a happening." ●

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JAZZ & BLUES

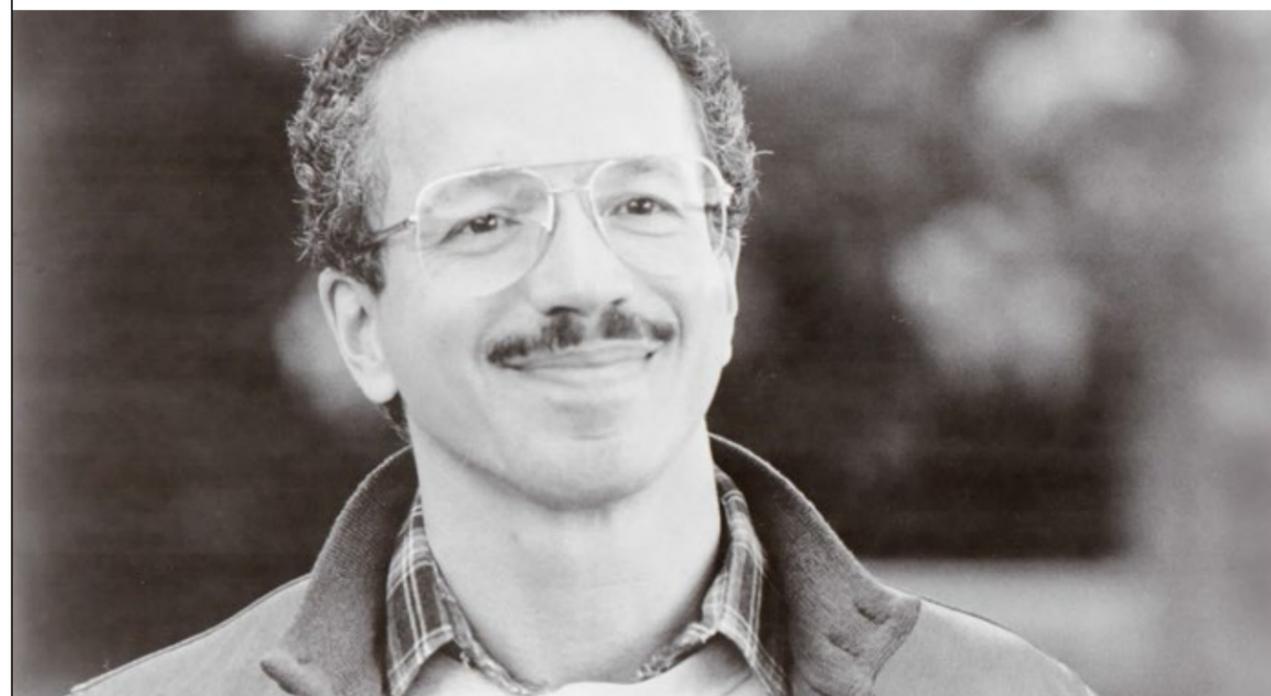


Keith Jarrett
No End
ECM, 2 CD

Keith Jarrett has been known for always taking different detours—leaving aside even his unpredictable performances. But *No End* may be the strangest recording of the jazz and classical pianist's career.

The two-disc set documents home studio recordings he made in 1986. Jarrett overdubbed himself playing electric guitar, bass, and percussion. While there are no fully formed pieces as such, he assigned a Roman numeral to each of the 19 tracks spread across the collection. Only at the end of "X" does he include a piano. So for his legions of admirers that hang on his every touch of a keyboard, *No End* comes with a considerable caveat. And while this kind of project lends itself to some directionless noodling, more goes on here than mere self-indulgence.

In the liner notes, Jarrett explains "although I have a reputation for being in the acoustic world, I have always loved the electric guitar."



Keith Jarrett (circa 1986)

©Photo by Toshinari Koinuma

He also traces his percussive compulsion to when he tapped celery sticks on the dinner table at the age of three (same age that he started his piano lessons). And Jarrett displays distinctive voices on these instruments, even if they're not as formidable as his main one.

Perhaps it's the drumming, the way Jarrett's notes seem to weave around the scales, or his background ululations, that make *No End* seemingly convey Middle Eastern tonalities, especially on "I" and "XI." Then there's "V," which sounds like an off-kilter calypso. Other tracks convey a propulsive sense of movement, especially via the way he uses cymbals on "IV." Even though Jarrett has never been a rocker, "III" sounds like if Creedence

Clearwater Revival jammed at the coda of "Born On The Bayou." He also gets surprisingly funky, like on "II." On "X," his strident piano chords buttress his sharp guitar lines.

A few tracks, like "XII," contain sketches of what could have become great compositions. (If they mutated into such on subsequent albums, he doesn't say so in the notes.) Likewise, the progression of tracks on the first and second disc doesn't convey a discernible arc. Then again, such a structure would contradict the nature of *No End*. Still, about 20 minutes of the package could have been easily cut to make it all fit on a single disc without any artistic diminishment.

"VI" and "XVII," in particular, could be removed without artistic compromise.

What may be more frustrating, however, is that this project indicates some missed opportunities. Listening to this recording today makes one wonder what a collaboration between Jarrett and, perhaps, Jerry Garcia and Mickey Hart would have sounded like. The notion isn't far-fetched—the Dead members jammed with Ornette Coleman and David Murray in the early 1990s. Say what you will about lengthy Grateful Dead jams. By the 1980s, they had become old pros at this sort of thing.

—**Aaron Cohen**



Mostly Other People Do The Killing

M

odernist deconstructions of a trad jazz genre aren't exactly new, but in the right hands, they can still be a hoot. Such is the general vibe of these two unruly and dizzying albums. The joyous blare of free jazz is acknowledged by both acts, but it's used in support of overt swing rhythms that hark to the early days of King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and other New Orleans outfits.

Mostly Other People Do the Killing (MOPDTK) has a lock on messing with accepted jazz designs. The quartet is made up of killer players who've earned a rep for blending sass and silliness. To some degree, the original tunes on *Red Hot* make hay by going too far over into the giddiness department. They milk the razzmatazz aspects of Dixieland while cranking out super-tight and ultra-witty solos. Augmented by banjo player Brandon Seabrook, bass trombonist David Taylor, and pianist Ron Stabinsky, the quartet sounds richer than it has on its previous five discs. Each newcomer proves an asset, bolstering the polyphony and bringing specific textures to the table.

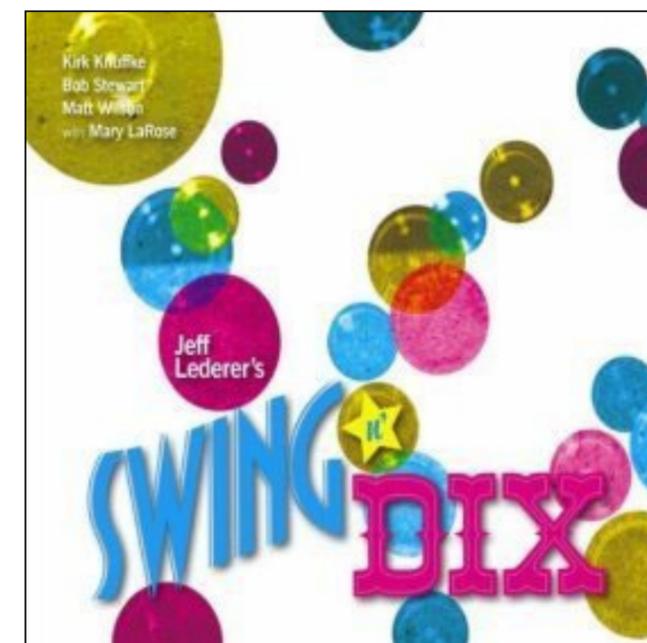
To a certain extent, the action plays like John Zorn's early Naked City experiments—genres get chopped and channeled quick. Stabinsky's "King of Prussia" solo conflates everything from Scott Joplin to Joe Jackson in the blink of an ear. Listen particularly to the intro nattering of "Turkey Foot Corner," which morphs into the melody with as much gnarly grace as anyone could ever expect. *(continued)*

©Photo by Alexander Richter



Mostly Other People Do the Killing

Red Hot
Hot Cup, CD



Jeff Lederer
Swing n' Dix
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Kirk Knuffke, Bob Stewart, Matt Wilson, and Jeff Lederer of Swing n' Dix

The interplay on Jeff Lederer's *Swing n' Dix* is similar. The Brooklyn saxophonist grabs tuba pro Bob Stewart, drummer Matt Wilson, cornetist Kirk Knuffke, and singer Mary LaRose for a romp through tunes that hark to NOLA laments and Chicago stomps. An inverted "Honeysuckle Rose," a boo-hoo "Pee Wee's Blues," and a swaggering stroll around Duke Pearson's "E.S.P." all nudge animation front and center.

However, the group sounds most valuable when playing its own pieces. Wilson's "Nibble" lets the bandleader uncork a sweet clarinet rally, and Knuffke's "Silver Spade" is a funeral march that opens the door to an ethereal wail from Stewart. It's right around here that the smirks become secondary and the heart of the music emerges.

Indeed, that's the best aspect of these projects. As the music grows on you, the twain really does meet. It's hard to tell where the trad designs begin and pomo perspectives end.

—**Jim Macnie**



Robert Glasper Experiment

Black Radio 2

Blue Note, 2LP or CD

Pianist Robert Glasper took a successful turn with his 2012 *Black Radio* album. Calling his new group the Robert Glasper Experiment and delving into contemporary R&B, rap, and anthemic rock, he deliberately put his considerable skills as a jazz improviser in the back seat. Usually, the guest vocalists—rather than his technique—were front and center. What he retained from his jazz experience is the principle that tracks should be recorded live.



©Photo by Janette Beckman

Glasper repeats the plan on the sequel. He's also strengthened the project's core. The rhythm section—especially bassist Derrick Hodge and drummer Mark Colenburg—especially sounds more solidified. Most of the record is also comprised of Glasper's own, or co-written, compositions (except for the closer, a cover of Stevie Wonder's "Jesus Children"). However, the work ebbs and flows with the varying abilities of each guest.

Like with the first volume, several singers on *Black Radio 2* emerged during the 1990s' hip-hop influenced neo-soul movement, and some sound stronger here than they had when they burst on the scene a dozen or so years

ago. Brandy casually shows off a solid range and sharp rhythmic dialogue with Colenburg and Glasper's Rhodes on "What Are We Doing." Jill Scott improvises fine scatted lines on "Calls." Others, like Anthony Hamilton on "Yet To Find," tend to over-emote, but even here, Glasper's simmering lines provide a fine instrumental frame.

Rappers also show up on *Black Radio 2* to mixed results. Common delivers the consciousness-minded lyrics of "I Stand Alone" with usual convincing determination; Glasper's chords and Colenburg's accents provide astute commentary. Still, Snoop Dogg, as always, sounds somnambulant on "Persevere."

Sometimes, contrasting approaches within a given track works. Norah Jones' slow drawl on "Let It Ride" is set against rapid electronic beats, and the outcome gives *Black Radio 2* a needed jolt of energy. Interestingly enough, Jones is part of a similar dichotomy with the fast sitar lines on her sister Anoushka Shankar's new *Traces Of You*. Lalah Hathaway closes *Black Radio 2* by appearing on "Jesus Children." The singer's delivery so closely resembles her departed father Donny that can't she can't help but invoke chills. Glasper's understated piano lines add the right amount of accents and shadings.

When Glasper brought the Experiment to the Chicago Jazz Festival this past summer, his heavy reliance on the vocoder ruined the performance—the device makes singers sound like they're gargling with polyurethane. Casey Benjamin uses it sparingly here. Still, it almost derails "Baby Tonight (Black Radio 2 Theme)." And rather than an array of electronic effects and army of guest vocalists, *Black Radio 2* could have used a greater variety of beats. Aside from "Let It Ride," the tracks generally move along to a slow, or midtempo, groove. A frenzied appearance from someone like Janelle Monáe would have done wonders to shake things up. —Aaron Cohen



Astell&Kern AK10 Portable Smartphone DAC

By John Darko

In the past year, a healthy section of the audiophile headphone community has gone gaga for iRiver's Astell&Kern AK100 and AK120 portable media players. And rightly so—they're both terrific. But what if you are committed to music playback on your phone or you want to extract better sound quality from MOG, Spotify, Rdio or Pandora?

Cheekily borrowing from KEF's exhortation to "Hi-fi your computer," Astell&Kern is now inviting us to hi-fi our smartphones. The South Korean manufacturer has essentially gutted its AK100, stripped out the file storage and playback and shrunk it down to the size of a matchbox. The result? The \$299 Astell&Kern AK10—a super-portable headphone amplifier and DAC for your existing iPhone 5/5S/5C, 5th-gen iPod touch, Samsung Galaxy S3/S4, or Galaxy Note 2/Note 3. Users of iPhone 4/4S note: Support for a 30-pin connector is apparently coming soon.

An elastic band straps the AK10 to the back of your phone, and the device's diminutive size doesn't impede taking a phone call while on the move. The AK10 offers iPhone folk onboard transport controls: the silver disc on the face attenuates volume; buttons for play/pause, previous and next are found along one side. Inside, a Wolfson WM8740 chip takes care of digital decoding, while the all-important headphone socket output impedance is reportedly much lower than the AK100's 22 ohms—the

Astell&Kern engineers have the AK10's output down to a very respectable 1.1 ohms, so it will play nicely with a broader range of headphones.

There's just enough juice on tap for Mr. Speakers' Mad Dogs over-ear headphones, and the circuit is sufficiently quiet to accommodate C-Ear X custom in-ear monitors. However, I note the biggest improvement with V-Moda's Crossfade M-100. With the AK10 on digital decoding and headphone duties, Laurie Anderson's "Only an Expert" comes across as more refined and better separated than when listening via my iPhone's headphone output, which is washed out and congealed compared to Astell&Kern's natty digital audio interpreter.

Astell&Kern supplies a USB OTG (on-the-go) cable for Android phone users. Google's latest Nexus 5 doesn't recognize the AK10—such is the hit-and-miss nature of Android's USB audio code. No such recognition issues are present with a Galaxy S3. The AK10 affords the Samsung smartphone greater sound-quality amelioration than the iPhone. Samsung smartphones aren't the best-sounding units around, tending to deliver a softer, more diffuse musical presentation. Astell&Kern-ing the S3 allows James Murphy's epic, pulsing remix of David Bowie's "Love Is Lost" to regain its poise and definition, even when played back via a Spotify stream—terrific. *(continued)*

FEATURE



With iOS 7 now leaking digital audio to Lightning or camera-kit-connected USB DACs, the AK10's competition is rapidly stiffening. Case in point: An iPhone 4 with Apple's Camera Connection Kit has no trouble parsing ones and zeroes to an HRT microStreamer or Resonance Labs Herus. The Herus is tonally the meatiest of the three but has been largely rejected because it draws too much power from the iPhone when volume levels are pushed close to maximum. The less power-hungry HRT presents no such troubles; it sounds crisper, relying more heavily on transient incision than the AK10, which sounds smoother and more laid back.

The AK10's internal rechargeable battery means it won't burden your smartphone with power draw. Users will find themselves listening for longer with the Astell&Kern dongle than with the aforementioned USB DAC hacks.

And onboard transport controls ice the Astell&Kern cake.

Powerful, well-featured rivals to the AK10 include Cypher Labs's Theorem 720 DAC and CEntrance's HiFi-M8, and while they might be ideal for the Audenze or Hifiman user about town, their brick-like size prohibits them from being slipped into pants pockets. If on-the-go portability is of high priority and you're prepared to compromise a little on raw power, the AK10 could be the phone solution you've been waiting for. ●

AK10 portable smartphone DAC
MSRP: \$299

MANUFACTURER
Astell&Kern

CONTACT
www.astellnkern.com

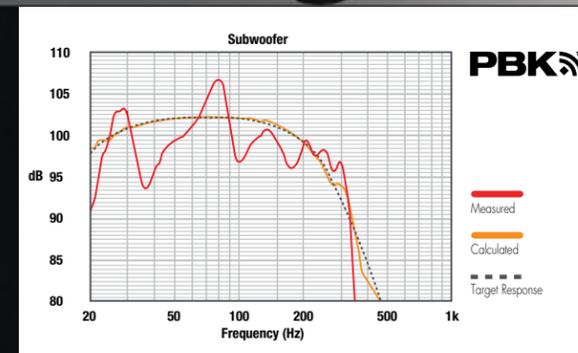
SUB 2: THE WORLD'S MOST POWERFUL SUBWOOFER*

From Paradigm, the #1 Speaker Brand†



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Shown: SUB 1



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

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

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

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



*Connected to a 240-volt line



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



Apogee ONE

Hi-fi playback and recording on the go

By Mike Liang

Those not well versed with the world of professional audio may not be familiar with the name Apogee. Founded in 1985, Apogee Electronics is highly regarded by audio professionals and recording musicians for its advanced, high-performance AD/DA converters and audio interfaces. Apogee's award-winning audio interface, the Symphony, is widely considered to be a reference standard in major recording studios around the world.

FEATURE

The new ONE is the latest portable audio interface and microphone from the company, which is based in Santa Monica, Calif. The original Apogee ONE is packed to the gills with pro-friendly features: A/D and D/A conversion at 24 bit/44.1 kHz (or 24 bit /48 kHz); a 1/8-inch stereo output for headphones or unbalanced powered monitors; an internal reference condenser microphone; line-level instrument outputs; and microphone connectivity via breakout cable—not to mention Apogee’s legendary recording quality. But it only works with Mac computers.

The new ONE, priced at \$349, is designed to interface with most Apple products, including the iPad, iPod touch, iPhone, and Mac computers, and it comes with all the necessary accessories and interconnects in the box. The device—which is just over 6 inches tall and 2 inches wide and less than an inch thick—is encased in die-cast aluminum housing for improved durability. It boasts recording and playback at 24/44.1 and 24/96, and it also allows for battery operation, so you can create studio-grade quality recordings wherever you go. *(continued)*



...are you listening in 3D yet?



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

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

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

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

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

“The first “3D” printer product I know of in audio, which does a remarkable job of limiting vibration thanks to its seamless rigidity... The end result is as close to mastertapeq sound as any analog front end I've ever heard.”

-Anthony H. Cordesman





Passive Progressive

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

- Sam Tellig, Stereophile

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

- Alan Sircom - Hi-Fi+

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

- Andrew Harrison - Hi-Fi News

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

- Martin Colloms - Hi-Fi Critic

"This is nothing less than a landmark product"

- David Price - Hi-Fi World

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

- Srajan Ebaen - 6 Moons

Finest quality audio products, hand made in Great Britain



Why, ONE, Why?

Now, you may be wondering why *TONEAudio*, a consumer audio magazine, is reviewing a device made for professionals—or amateurs who want an easy and convenient way to record their music? While there is often crossover between the people who make music and the people who listen to it, we audiophiles always have our eyes out for new pro technology that might trickle into our home or mobile systems at some point. Recent examples of this occurrence include Benchmark's DAC1 and DAC2—studio-grade DACs that made the crossover to the home hi-fi world.

Setting up of the ONE requires running Apogee's Maestro 2 application on your Mac computer, but that's it—you don't need the software after the initial setup configuration. When using the ONE as a DAC/amp with headphones and your Mac computer, no batteries or external power are required. It is bus-powered via USB for this configuration. For iOS mobile devices, a pair of AA batteries is all you need to power the ONE.

If you haven't already noticed, there's been no mention of Windows so far. That's because, like all current Apogee products, the ONE runs on Apple devices exclusively. Sorry, Windows fans.

And the Sound?

While there are a lot of DAC/amp combos on the market today, most are not iOS compatible—and most aren't also a microphone. But for the purpose of this review, we're more concerned with the audio output than the input.

So how does it sound? When paired with my iPhone 5 and Focal's new Spirit Classic headphones, the sound from the ONE is absolutely stunning. It has no trouble driving the headphones well beyond my comfort level, doing so with plenty of headroom to spare. The ONE has a, dare I say it, ruler-flat response. Its performance is on par with some desktop DAC/amps that are many times more expensive. Mind you, the ONE is powered by a pair of AA batteries with an iPhone as the source—and the whole rig fits comfortably in my front pocket.

Moving on to balanced-armature in-ear headphones—the 8-ohm Sony XBA-4 in-ear monitors—I do not hear any noise or hiss, which is also the case when the music is paused and the volume all the way up. It's just dead quiet! Through the ONE, Lady Gaga's new album *Art-pop* sounds alive and dynamic. Its low noise floor allows the music to come through with depth, dimension and just the right amount of decay.

Get Up and Go!

What I love most about an iOS DAC/amp system is that I can travel with my 64-gigabyte iPad (128-gig iPads are also now available) as my main computer. With the help of the ONE, I can listen to high-quality music files from my iPad—and it sounds great. It's a no-brainer for audiophiles who travel a lot and don't want to lug around their MacBook. Not a road warrior? Not a problem. The ONE also works great as an audio engine for a clean and simple rig on your bedroom nightstand—or anywhere. ●

www.apogeedigital.com



Rogue Audio Sphinx

\$1,295
www.rogueaudio.com

TONEAudio staffer Andre Marc has a great eye and ear for high-performance components, especially when it comes to shopping on a tight budget—and he says that the Sphinx integrated amplifier from Rogue is quite the superstar.

Made in America, this 100-watt-per-channel hybrid amp also features a great phono section, so it can easily become the anchor to a system featuring digital and analog sources. You'll have to wait until early next year to read Andre's full report, but he is very excited about this one.

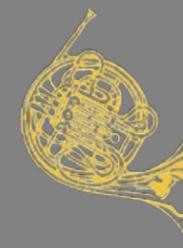


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Along with our review of the stellar dCS Vivaldi stack, we've upgraded our reference digital front end and system to use Nordost's latest, mid priced cable. Sure, everyone goes on and on about the megaprice tag on their Odin cable, but Nordost is not a one trick pony. The Frey 2 series incorporates much of what Nordost has learned developing their flagship cables at a more down to Earth pricing structure.

And the result is fantastic. Watch for a full review shortly, along with insight on how Nordost improved the sound of our reference dCS front end as well.

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PREVIEW

Audeze LCD-X

\$1,695

www.audeze.com

America's planar headphone manufacturer continues to push the envelope with yet another interesting set of phones—this time making a pair with an all new driver. Utilizing Audeze's newest Fazor drive elements (patent pending), the LCD-XC phones promise better phase response and imaging, along with an easier load to drive, which makes them compatible with an even wider range of sources.

We've just unboxed them, and preliminary listening is very promising. Stay tuned to find out just how well they stack up to the exemplary LCD-2 and LCD-3 models.



Simaudio MOON Evolution 610LP

\$7,000
www.simaudio.com

Derived from the award-winning flagship 810LP, which we have been using as a reference component for some time, the 610LP is a single-input phonostage. To keep cost down, it does not utilize the 810's M-Octave gel suspension or its exotic power supply. But, like the 810, it does come with Simaudio's 10-year warranty. We're very excited about this one.



Product: I22 Integrated Amplifier

P R I M A R E

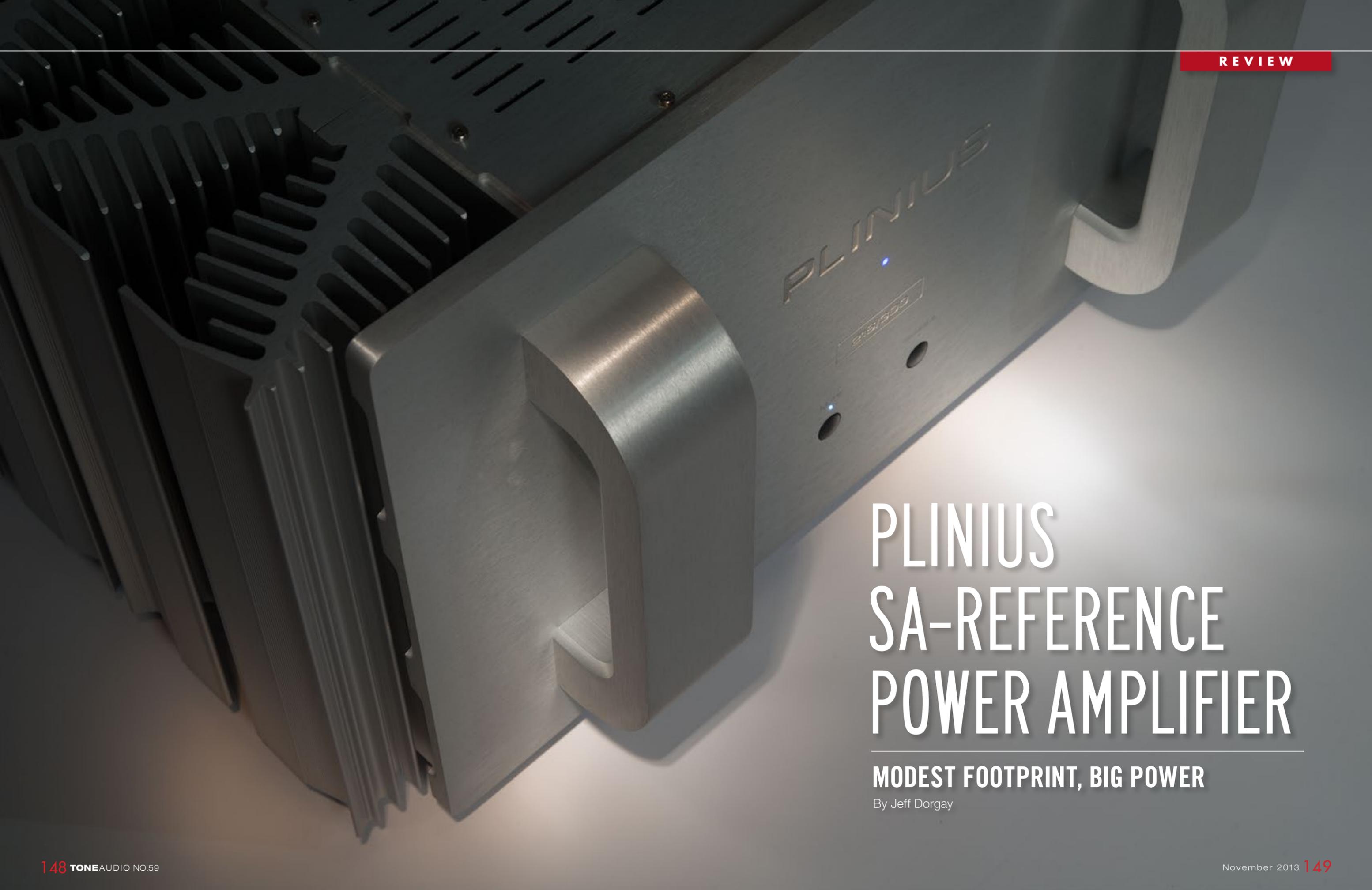
THE SOUND AND VISION OF SCANDINAVIA

Primare began in the mid 1980s by producing some of the audio industry's most celebrated products with their famed 900 and 200 series. These products not only broke new ground in presenting music in a new clean manner, but also proved that audio components could be beautiful works of art. In the same way that sound was presented with a new philosophical approach of "no sound," the aesthetic also had to be absent of unnecessary clutter and noise; simplicity in circuit design combined with simplicity of aesthetic design.

Today Primare embarks on a new era of two-

channel playback with a full range of new products. With continued belief in the importance of physical media, Primare has created three revolutionary new series of products each designed to take advantage of newer high-resolution music formats provided by computer audio. While these may be the frontier, Primare has created a full range of new sources designed for the many different media from analogue to BluRay as well as products that focus on musicality and simplicity in high-performance multi-channel.

Primare - It's the silence between the notes.



PLINIUS SA-REFERENCE POWER AMPLIFIER

MODEST FOOTPRINT, BIG POWER

By Jeff Dorgay

Located in New Zealand, Plinius has been making great components for years, and the brand has a loyal customer base that sings the Plinius praises on most of the audio forums. And with good reason. Every Plinius product we've had the privilege to audition at *TONEAudio* has always exceeded expectation.

The company's top-of-the-line power amplifier, the SA-Reference, is no different. Plinius has always stood for great value and high performance, but this amplifier is in an entirely different league. Tipping the scale at 125 pounds and costing \$20,900—both reasonable figures compared to some of its competitors—this is truly a destination product. Every SA-Ref is hand built and tested in the New Zealand factory. These massive amplifiers are available in a finish that Plinius refers to as “linishing,” and is offered in a black or silver anodized color as the one you see here. With large and conveniently placed handles on both the front and rear of the amp make it easy enough for those who aren't Olympic deadlifters to move the amp into place.



Flanked with distinctive heat sinks on both sides, this Class-A masterpiece lives up to its nature by producing a lot of heat. But, in comparison to my reference Pass Xs 300 monoblocks, the heat is manageable. For those feeling a bit greener, there is a switch on the front panel that allows the amplifier to be run in Class-AB mode, which drops the idle power consumption down from 1,100 watts to 184 watts. During the course of this review, I leave the amplifier on in AB mode all the time, switching to Class A at the beginning of the day. This shortens the time to thermal stabilization and dramatically cuts power consumption. Operated thusly, the SA-Ref takes about 30 minutes to come out of the fog and do its thing.

At first blush, the difference in sound quality going from A to AB doesn't seem as great, but extended listening validates burning the extra electricity. Again drawing the comparison to the Pass amplifiers, the SA-Ref goes from great to sublime in Class-A mode. I say drive a few less miles or keep the lights low if you're feeling guilty about the power consumption. Your ears will thank you.

Major Microdynamics

Even with a musical selection that is relatively lacking in dynamics, like the Zombies' "Tell Her No," the wealth of texture that the SA-Ref provides will have you immediately under its spell. *(continued)*

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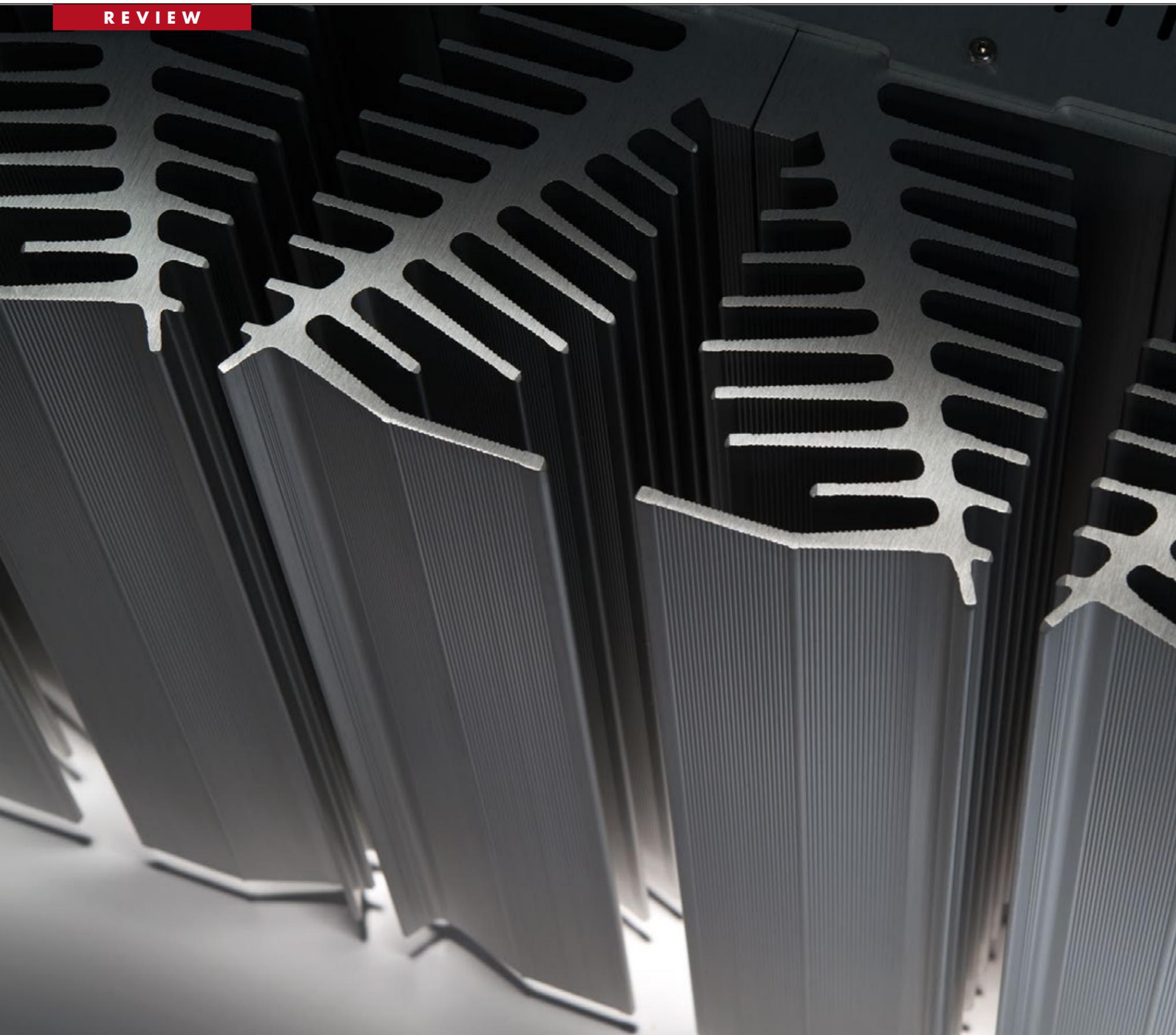


A similar effect is achieved with Neil Young's classic bootleg *Time Fades Away*. This recording has lackluster quality at best, yet when delivered via an amplifier that can extract so much musical detail, the music feels closer than ever without sounding etched. On the title track, the piano in the background is usually almost indecipherable, but the combination of the SA-Ref and the \$85,000-per-pair Dynaudio Evidence Platinum speakers gives this flat recording some depth, helping those small, fun details rise to the surface.

Let's face it—we all have records in our collection that we love, even though they might not live up to audiophile standards. The SA-Ref goes a long way towards making a wider range of your music collection more enjoyable—and that's a great thing.

Going upscale with source material reaps even bigger rewards. Tracking through a 24-bit/192-kHz version of Neil Young's *Harvest* reveals precious levels of detail and ambience, which bring new life and renewed clarity to this brilliant recording. The grungy, distorted guitar at the beginning of "Alabama" blasts off the walls of my listening room. I can almost hear the grill cloth on Young's guitar amplifier move—fantastic. It's this wealth of nuance that makes the SA-Ref a world-class component.

Admittedly, this reviewer is a huge fan of Class-A solid-state amplifiers; the additional tonal warmth (over most Class-AB amps), combined with the tremendous bass grip of properly designed amps, makes you wonder if the glass bottles are really necessary. The SA-Ref is one of these rare amplifiers indeed. *(continued)*



Plenty of Punch

The SACD of the Art of Noise's *Daft* features a lot of trippy, spatial effects, with organic and synthesizer sounds floating around all three axes of the soundstage via the dCS Vivaldi digital player. The track "Who's Afraid (of the Art of Noise)" is perhaps the biggest sounding of the bunch, with playful female vocals thrown in the mix far left and far right, with plenty of giggling and heavy breathing punctuated by the occasional "boo, boo" added for good measure. No, this amp won't necessarily reveal the tonality of a Stradivarius violin, but it is big fun—and through an amplifier that can't throw a massive soundstage, this recording sounds incredibly dead. The SA-Ref passes this test easily, with the big Dynaudios disappearing in the listening room like a pair of minimonitors.

On Elvis Costello's duet with Burt Bacharach, "What's Her Name Today?" the piano floats slightly in front of the imaginary line between the tweeters, with the strings just behind Costello's voice, which takes on a height that makes it feel like he's standing in the room singing. Every breath of his delicate falsetto, which grows to a major bellow at the end, is reproduced with just the right amount of dynamics and effort, again suggesting the real thing.

When I switch the program to heavy rock, the SA-Ref delivers the goods. And what better way to prove it than with the Audio

Fidelity 24 Karat Gold CD of Judas Priest's *Hell Bent For Leather*? Cranking the ARC REF 5SE preamplifier up to 70 (forget about 11) drives the KEF Blades, which are now back in the system at bone-crushing levels. While I find myself looking for a lighter to hold up, the SA-Ref motors through.

After about an hour of listening at levels well beyond reasonable and prudent, sifting through Black Sabbath, the Black Keys and Black Country Communion, I turn down the volume to reflect. My ears have given up, but the SA-Ref simply cannot be pushed to clipping when driving a pair of speakers with 88 dB or 90 dB sensitivity ratings. And so—while they are unsuitable matches for an amplifier of this quality—I bring out the power-hungry Magnepan 1.7s, just to probe how far the SA-Ref can be pushed.

Should you manage to push this amplifier to clipping, it does so softly and gently, with only a slight reduction in the overall soundfield. Fortunately, if you require this much power, the SA-Ref can be converted to mono operation with the flip of a switch on the rear panel. It is now capable of delivering 1,000 watts into an 8-ohm load and 1,800 watts into 4 ohms. The SA-Ref is a model of simplicity, allowing balanced XLR or standard RCA inputs, and it proves compatible with all of the preamplifiers at my disposal, from Audio Research, Burmester, Conrad-Johnson, Nagra, Robert Koda and Simaudio. *(continued)*

REVIEW

The Art of Relaxation

As days roll by with the SA-Ref in the system, it is clear that this is one of the few solid-state amplifiers that combines a freedom from distortion with effortless dynamics, and that it can just get out of the way of the music and quickly get you into the relaxation zone. And isn't that the ultimate pleasure a premium hi-fi system should provide?

Pressurizing the sound room can be captivating for many listeners, but those subscribing to the "first watt" philosophy of sound will not be disappointed either. Even at low volume, the SA-Ref has plenty of finesse and acquits itself like a low-parts-count, low-power amplifier, providing a richness of tonal contrast that will make you want to pop the top to see if there really aren't some tubes lurking inside. I briefly return to the Black Keys and discover that the guitar on the gentle intro of "Lies" just floats between the speakers while dripping with echo and decay.

Easing back into the couch with Arnold Bax's *Symphony No. 4* is even more soothing. That extra power on tap, combined with a very neutral tonality, makes this amplifier a delight when delivering large-scale orchestral pieces. It paints a big soundscape with both width and depth, and it is able to keep the smallest details rendered while easily and adequately capturing the scale of even the loudest passages.

(continued)

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216/300

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A Little Comparison Shopping

How does the SA-Ref stack up to some of its similarly priced competitors? Quite well, in fact. The Pass Xs300s are a bit unfair, as they break the bank at \$84,000—and, in all honesty, when I switch back and forth, the Pass amps take the lead in terms of resolution and a more dreamy, more realistic presentation. The SA-Ref sounds slightly etched and small in this unfair comparison.

However, when I go back to a couple of comparably priced competitors—the Burmester 911 MK3 (\$29,900), the D’Agostino Momentum Stereo (\$29,000) and the Audio Research REF 250s (\$25,000 per pair)—the SA-Ref holds its own to the point of simply differing from these other amps. It would be like comparing the Audi S4, BMW M3 and Mercedes AMG C Class, which are all high-performance machines, to be sure, but each has its own take on how said performance should be delivered.

When paired with all the speakers at my disposal—KEF Blade, GamuT S9, Dynaudio Platinum and Focal Maestro Utopia, which are all reference speakers in their own right—the SA-Ref provides a sound slightly warmer than the tubed ARC monos can, yet not quite as warm as that of the Burmester. The D’Agostino is probably the most neutral of the four, but these are very, very fine hairs we are splitting here. Considering that the SA-Ref will set you back a comparatively less expensive \$22,000, it really is a bargain for the sticker price.

In the End...

...We’re all dead, but while you’re still living and possessing decent hearing and cash flow, I highly suggest considering the Plinius SA-Ref amplifier. If you want a destination amplifier that can convert to monoblock (should you need more power at some point) and if you love the concept of a Class-A solid-state amplifier that will never need tubes replaced, this just might be your baby. ●

SA-Reference Power Amplifier
MSRP: \$20,900

MANUFACTURER
Plinius Audio

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www.pliniusaudio.com

Peripherals

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

Phonostage
Indigo Qualia

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

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

Speakers
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Gato Audio DIA-250 Integrated Amp/DAC

A Danish Triumph of Style and Function

By Jeff Dorgay

Part of the mission here at *TONEAudio* has always been to remain on the lookout for magnificent hi-fi gear that not only performs well but is also a piece of visual art able to blend into any décor. Gato's amplifiers caught my eye at this year's Munich show, where I met importer Michael Kelly (of Aerial Acoustics), who was very proud of Gato's latest creations. And lovely they are.

Hailing from Denmark, the DIA-250 features a small form that is remarkably able to contain a 250-watt-per-channel Class D amplifier and a 24-bit/192-kHz DAC, doing so at a very reasonable price of \$4,500. Those requiring more power can step up to the DIA-400, which offers 400 wpc and has an MSRP of \$6,000.





With ease and precision, the DIA-250 implements Class D amplification and upsampling signal conversion—two technologies that are big personal preferences of mine. It also provides major input and output flexibility to allow your system to grow, should the need arise. With a pair of balanced and XLR analog inputs to go along with USB, TOSLINK and S/PDIF digital inputs, the DIA-250 is a fantastic system hub. It also includes balanced and RCA variable outputs for those requiring an additional power amplifier or amplified subwoofer. HT bypass is also included for those needing to make the DIA-

250 part of a multichannel setup, a feature sometimes overlooked.

Its gentle, curved shape—which combines brushed aluminum extrusions and a highly polished wooden top panel—is stunning, with one main control in the center to adjust volume level and two tastefully small buttons to select inputs and switch the amplifier into standby mode. The slightly blue-tinted display is easy to read from across the room, and it can be dimmed via an adjustment on the rear panel, or set to switch off completely after a few seconds. For those unhappy with the font

choice, I submit (perhaps from a 50-something's perspective, guilty as charged) that this feature is handy beyond belief, especially when living with a component for a long time. Those tiny readouts on other components might look a bit more stylish at first, but if you can't read them, then what's the point?

Setup, Sources, Speakers

I utilize a plethora of digital sources to evaluate the DIA-250, from a modest OPPO BDP-103, all the way up to the \$36,000 dCS Vivaldi transport, with a few music servers and a MacBook Pro thrown in

for good measure. All sources perform flawlessly, regardless of the chosen input.

With all of the digital sources being upsampled to 24/192 and then decoded by the DIA-250's Burr-Brown PCM1794 converters, the sound is decidedly old school—and, for these ears, it is highly musical. My former digital reference, the Naim CD555, uses this setup brilliantly, proving that it's all about implementation when it comes to the digital world.

Along with a variety of digital sources, the latest vacuum-tube phonostage from Van Alstine

(\$1,295), combined with a Rega RP3 turntable and Exact MM cartridge, proves an excellent match, giving analog and digital sources an equal voice during playback. The smooth character of the DIA-250 proves a perfect fit when spinning the latest releases from Music Matters Jazz, which I find enthralling. Lee Morgan's trumpet on *The Gigolo* solidifies the fact that analog remains king, even on a journeyman rig like this. As much as I enjoy the digital section of the DIA-250 and its convenience, I would still highly suggest adding an analog front end to a system built around it. *(continued)*

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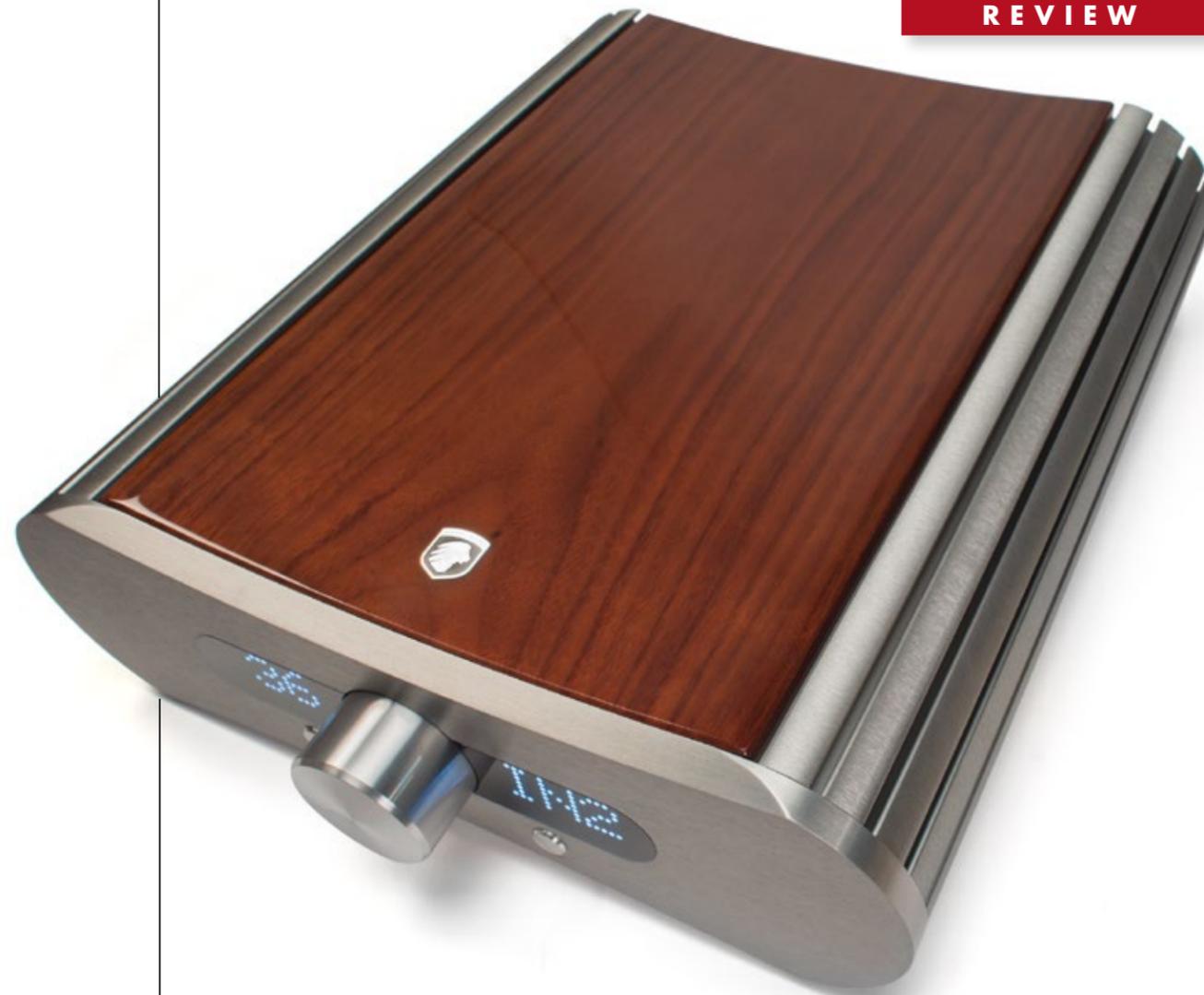
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The only area that the DIA-250 falls slightly short of its higher priced, Class-A or vacuum-tube competitors is in the area of image depth, but this is still endemic of the breed to some extent. And the DIA-250 is delivering music to the \$85,000 Dynaudio Evidence Platinum speakers, which are not likely what this amp would be paired with—though you could with good result. For its \$4,500 price tag, this is indeed a rocking little amplifier with integral DAC. Pair it up with your favorite speakers in the \$3,000-to-\$10,000 range and your music server of choice and you've got all the ingredients of an incredible system on a relatively reasonable budget.

Moving a bit downstream with the \$8,500-per-pair Paradigm Signature S8 speakers also proves highly synergistic. The DIA-250 controls these tower speakers with aplomb, providing a rock-solid bass response and smooth highs. Combined with the S8s 92-dB sensitivity, the DIA-250 never feels the least bit strained, even at concert-hall levels. *(continued)*

Those using a sat/sub system will appreciate the additional flexibility of the variable outputs. The DIA-250 handles the JL Audio Fathom in-wall subwoofer mated to a pair of KEF LS50s with ease, so any powered subwoofer on your wish list should match equally well. And those of you using a REL subwoofer will have no problems connecting through the speaker outputs.

Getting Better All the Time

Class D continues to not only get more natural in its ability to reproduce sound but also in its ability to drive complex speaker loads. Just a few years ago, many Class D amplifiers were as finicky as any SET amp, but they have since come a long way. Full-range ESL and Magnepan are equally easy to drive with the DIA-250, though if you really like to push your Maggies, I suggest spending a few extra bucks and going for the DIA-400 to have the extra headroom at your disposal.

Regardless of which Gato amplifier you choose, Magnepan owners will be impressed at the amount of grip and drive these amplifiers provide. All too often the Class D/Magnepan combination comes across with a lack of timbral engagement, sounding somewhat flat—but that is not the case here. *(continued)*



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REVIEW

Spinning the Volume Control

When I crank Metallica's classic self-titled black album in a 24/96 format, it becomes instantly apparent that the Paradigm/Gato combination can satisfy those craving high sound-pressure levels. The first drum thwacks in "Wherever I May Roam" are highly convincing, pushing me back in my listening chair like the Maxell man. Bowie's *Scary Monsters* keeps the classic-rock groove rolling and exposes yet another facet of the DIA-250: its ability to effortlessly uncloak inner detail. Robert Fripp's guitar work on "Teenage Wildlife" is reproduced brilliantly, easily occupying its own space in the far left of the soundstage, while Bowie is anchored dead center in the mix.

Leaning heavily on an old audiophile classic, Dave Grusin's "Sun Song," from the recently remastered XRCD, reveals just how smooth this Class D amplifier and DAC combination can be. The opening triangle *clangs* float in the air, gently filling the room with sound. It's amazing how far this amplifier technology has come in the last few years—saying Class D and DAC in the same sentence is no longer an audiophile faux pas. The delicate brushwork on Dave Holland's "Overtime" is equally enthralling, and the extremely low noise floor of the DIA-250 enhances this effect. *(continued)*





The Bottom Line

The Gato Audio DIA-250 ticks all the boxes: It's compact and gorgeous, and it sounds great—and, best of all, it's priced right. With a comparison review in process between the DIA-250 and its companion, the higher-powered DIA-400, we look forward to hearing more of what Gato Audio has to offer. Whatever your power needs, both of these amps are highly recommended. ●

DIA-250 integrated amp/DAC
MSRP: \$4,500

MANUFACTURER

Gato Audio

CONTACT

www.gato-audio.com (factory)
www.aerialacoustics.com
 (US Importer)

PERIPHERALS

Digital sources

Meridian Control 15 server, Aurender S10 server, dCS Vivaldi transport, Oppo BDP-103, MacBook Pro

Analog source

Rega RP3/Exact cartridge/AVA Phonostage

Speakers

KEF LS-50, Magnepan 1.7, Paradigm S8 Signature, KEF Blade, Dynaudio Evidence Platinum

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PS Audio NuWave DAC

STAND AND DELIVER

by Rob Johnson

W

orking as a DJ for hire in the eighties, I was exposed to more than my share

of New Wave songs, upturned collars, pastel colors, and hair gel. During those years the early CDs started taking hold. With them came forth the digital music revolution for the consumer, challenging the dominance of beloved records and cassettes. While analog will forever have a place in the hearts of audiophiles, the raw convenience of digitally stored files enables and maintains a solid grip. Digital-Analog Converters (DACs) today bring forth a great deal of musical pleasure from the latest high resolution digital files and also breathe new life into older standard CD-quality 16bit/44.1kHz material.

With all my fond memories of the New Wave era, the NuWave moniker on PS Audio's latest budget DAC has a lot to live up to. Could it provide the same high level of musical enjoyment I associate with my past?





The Ghost in You

The NuWave carries high quality internals, though it serves as the entry level DAC in PS Audio's product line. Its big brother, the \$3,995 PerfectWave, has handed down one of its strengths – its low-jitter clocking circuitry – to its smaller sibling. The benefit of this capability is pulling from the source the best possible digital stream to be processed. From there it is sent to the analog section which is fueled by a very substantial power supply; then it's translated into music.

Close to Me

On close inspection, the NuWave is a petite 14" long x 8" wide by 2.5" high. It weighs in at around 12 pounds. Once placed on a shelf the front profile is quite modest. The metal case of the test unit is coated in a matte black finish. Silver is also available from PS Audio. The front panel has aesthetically pleasing curved edges wrapping around to the sides.

Buttons on the front, and the PS Audio logo on the left side, glow blue. With some equipment I've experienced, LEDs have the potential to scorch a retina, but not with the NuWave. In this case, the overall appearance is both pleasant and subtle.

The package does not include a remote, which makes sense given the basic in-and-out philosophy of the NuWave's build. There's not a lot to adjust or control after a source is selected and a standard or up-sampled signal chosen. One additional LED indicator notes whether the PS Audio has a solid lock on the signal.

I was surprised that no USB cable comes with the NuWave. You'll definitely want to have that on hand for setup. I found the Cardas Clear USB a good match. PS Audio does include a very basic power cord, but it's likely one you will want to upgrade later to get the most from the unit. *(continued)*



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One Thing Leads to Another

Physically connecting the NuWave to the rest of the audio system proves straightforward. The PS Audio offers three inputs for digital sources including USB, S/PDIF coax and TOSLINK. The USB connection provides the greatest flexibility for high resolution files and will serve most users as the best option for computer-based music. While there is not an AES/EBU digital input on this DAC, the RCA coax input serves well as a secondary input source from CD players and other devices with a stereo digital output.

Despite the small size of the unit, this DAC has both balanced XLR and RCA outputs giving it helpful flexibility in an audio system.

With all cables connected, it's a simple matter to choose the input source from the front panel selector button. If only one source is con-

nected, the NuWave defaults to it. If multiple sources are connected to the DAC and one is playing, NuWave's autoscan feature will pick the input receiving a signal.

Once that's done, the user has another toggle to select one of two modes. "Native" mode creates a straight pipe from the source so a 16 bit/44.1kHz signal remains exactly that. Another option is 24bit/192Khz up-sample mode. PS Audio recommends that users try both and decide what sounds best to them. Most of my listening took place on the "native" setting.

Work for Love

Once physically connected to sources, the final step is configuring a bit of software. PS Audio claims the NuWave acts in a plug-and-play fashion with a Mac computer, but a bit more human intervention is required for Windows-based systems. First, a driver must

be downloaded from PS Audio's website and saved to the computer. Once that driver is installed, a quick visit to the Windows 7 control panel's "Sound" settings offers the PS Audio DAC as an output option. A right-click of the mouse gives a user the option to make the NuWave the default recipient of the audio signal.

Once complete, JRiver needs a small adjustment too. Clicking on the Player menu, and selecting "Playback Options," a window opens which allows the user to make a few more minor changes. The "Playback Device" pull-down menu allows a user to select the NuWave as the default for music output. On the same window, I selected a larger buffer size than the default setting to encourage and maintain the best streaming quality. Accepting these changes and closing the configuration windows, the only remaining step is selecting what music to enjoy. *(continued)*



In total, the configuration process took no more than five minutes, with most of that time consisting of driver download and installation. PS Audio does a nice job here to make the setup process streamlined for the NuWave DAC owner.

PS Audio suggests leaving the DAC powered on all the time so that it maintains optimal readiness for the best sound.

We Got the Beat

Testing begins with CD-quality source files. In the spirit of this review's theme, it seems only fair to begin with Blondie's "Heart of Glass" which many consider the first true New Wave song. Given the age of the recording and the CD's limitations of a 16bit/44.1kHz signal, the right-to-left soundstage exceeds my expectations by extending well beyond the speaker limits. Perceived front-to-back layering is reasonable; however, it's not the NuWave's strength. Debbie Harry's voice is recessed into the mix and when blended with the guitars and drums the result remains largely two-dimensional. This characteristic seems consistent throughout my Redbook CD test tracks.

Rock This Town

Stray Cats frontman Brian Setzer and his Orchestra provide a good test for the sonic portrayal of guitars, drums, and horns. His remake of "Rock This Town" offers significantly more polished recording quality than the original, though still limited to CD-quality. The NuWave captures all the energy and excitement of the performance.

The NuWave's decoding process leaves the music enjoyable and fatigue-free. However this characteristic exists at the expense of some detail. In comparison with other, more expensive DACs on hand, the woodiness in saxophones diminishes. Bass, while quite deep, is not as tight. Similarly, the complex sounds of cymbals are truncated to a significant degree in comparison with the impact, ring and decay I'm used to hearing. Vocals are a bit hot in the mix. But at the NuWave's \$995 price tag, these are relatively minor quibbles considering what you do get. Especially from a price-performance perspective the PS Audio does a mighty good job and has the finesse to hold a listener's attention through hours of listening.

Dancing With Myself

As the saying goes, "garbage in, garbage out," so playback shifted to test higher resolution material. Though the NuWave there's a huge sonic improvement in virtually every attribute.

For example, Stevie Ray Vaughan's "Texas Flood" on 192kHz throws an impressively huge soundstage, both wide and tall. Vocals remain front and center where they should be, while drums step to the rear. The richness of the guitar on "Dirty Pool" reveals the level of emotion entrapped in the recording.

Similarly, Bob Marley's "Is This Love" in 192kHz emerges with deep, plucky bass. Well-rendered, sonically convincing drum and tambourine pour forth. Background vocals complement and showcase the emotional undertones in Marley's voice.

(continued)



This is especially evident during “Redemption Song.” While vocals remain a bit forward, individual strums of the guitar are almost tangible.

NuWave’s rendering of Norah Jones’s “I’ve Got to See You Again” layers vocals, piano, strings and percussion adeptly blended together in a cohesive and compelling sonic experience.

For those who have a lot of high resolution digital content, the NuWave will surprise you with its capability. If you don’t have high resolution content yet, you owe it to yourself to try it!

Make a Circuit With Me

After spending time with several DACs over the last couple

months – the Chord Chordette Qute (\$1,800), AUARALiC Vega (\$3,500) and Light Harmonic DaVinci (\$30,000) – some interesting comparisons emerge. Although a native 44.1kHz signal may not be a stellar source, each of these DACs takes what bits it’s given and outputs highly enjoyable, refined sound. At a cost multiple times more than the NuWave, a user *should* expect more from them.

When listening to high resolution content, the gap does shrink a bit and the NuWave showcases what it’s capable of resolving. It’s a big step up from CD-quality experience. The NuWave won’t unseat the other DACs, but it leaves a listener with a very satisfying musical experience for a small

fraction of the price.

In essence, more money buys a user additional capabilities like DSD decoding, variable output, custom filters, and/or a remote. It also enables more natural sounding, three dimensional and nuanced portrayal of the music. In the case of the DaVinci, opulently so, but at 30 times the price.

Take Me, I’m Yours

Caveats considered, the PS Audio offers a lot of value and does a very good job providing a no-fuss setup and usage experience. It offers all the basic functionality most users need a DAC to do, and the sound is mighty good for a component under a thousand dollars. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

It's easy to see just how much progress has been made in the world of thousand dollar DAC's when comparing the NuWave to PS Audio's first DAC, the Digital Link - the first real outboard DAC available back in the early 90s. You can see from the photo that the form factor is similar, though in 1990 there were no options for resolution or inputs. And there was only a solitary SPDIF input, with a small outboard power supply. Comparing old and new illustrates how far PS Audio has come, but how on target they were from the beginning. We covered the Digital Link in the Old School column of issue 27 if you'd like to read more. Just click here.

The Smiths made famous the New Wave classic song, "How Soon is Now?" How apropos for this review. For those seeking a high quality DAC under \$1k, especially those who want to delve further into high resolution digital content, give the PS Audio NuWave DAC a try and you might find it in your home system sooner than you think. ●



PS Audio NuWave DAC
MSRP: \$995

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Phasemation PP-1000 MC Phono Cartridge

By Richard Mak

My quest for the Phasemation PP-1000 cartridge started four months ago, when I was perusing photos from a good friend's recent excursion to Asia and the exotic analog setups he saw on his journey. Most were the usual suspects in mega analog systems: the Koetsu Onyx Platinum, Lyra Atlas and Clearaudio Goldfinger.

However, one cartridge stood out—the Phasemation PP-1000, which I initially mistook for a Denon DL-103R. My friend informed me that the Phasemation is extremely popular in Asia at the moment.

I had the good fortune to talk to Nobuyuki Suzuki, the president of Phasemation, who offered insight into his company's products. He revealed that the designer behind the PP-1000 is Satoshi Kanno, who has 30 years of cartridge design under his belt. One of his premier creations in the 1980s was the JVC Victor MC-L1000, a benchmark in its day. Phasemation's parent company, Kyodo Denshi Engineering Co. Ltd., has been making precision measuring equipment and OEM step-up transformers for over a decade now.



Suzuki-san makes it clear to me that accurate portrayal of acoustic space is Phasemation's primary goal, with a strong emphasis on the relative positioning of voices and instruments within that space. Like many listeners, he wants to know where the musical instruments are located and he wants to feel their presence during playback. The key to good cartridge design is "to increase the electric-generation efficiency of the cartridge mechanism," he says. In layman's terms, that means Phasemation is trying to achieve the highest output with the smallest coil possible. The specs indicate that the company has succeeded: the PP-1000 produces an output of 0.29 mV, with an internal impedance of only 4 ohms. (Lower impedance reflects fewer coil windings.)

"The specs do not necessarily reflect the actual efficiency of the cartridge," says Suzuki-san, "because it is not representative of the entire audible frequency spectrum. The PP-1000 is a well-designed cartridge because it is able to deliver an efficient output at all the frequency ranges that express music."

In this regard, the PP-1000 does seem to produce a much higher output level compared to the two similar cartridges I compared it with. When paired with the Burmester 100 phono preamp, the PP-1000 requires only 60 dB of gain to achieve the same volume level as my Sonic Lab's Ultra Eminent BC, which has an output of 0.29 mV, or the ZYX Universe II, at 0.24 mV. Interestingly, the 0.29-mV PP-1000 produces a volume level comparable to my 0.56-mV Lyra Atlas, which goes to show you can't judge a cartridge by its specs alone.

(continued)

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



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

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Setup and Break-in

Removing the PP-1000 from its exquisite Rosewood box, I take note of its rather large size. It has one of the largest cartridge bodies I have ever seen: 22 mm by 17 mm by 14.3 mm, with a close resemblance to Denon DL-103R, as I mentioned. This large body makes it more difficult to achieve optimum alignment. While the cantilever itself is not small, it is hidden somewhat within the body, making visual alignment rather difficult, reminding me of the Kondo IO-M cartridge and the Dynavector 17D3, which are equally difficult to align. The PP-1000 is one of only a handful of cartridges I have mounted that requires the mirror reflection of a mounting template like

the Uni-Protractor. Those using a non-reflective template or protractor will find this process much more difficult, though not impossible.

The instruction sheet does not specify a torque tolerance for the mounting screws, something I wish all cartridge manufacturers would note. My experimentation yields optimal results at 0.6 to 0.65 pounds per inch, which I gauge using a precision micro-torque meter. This measurement is consistent with the readings that Nakasukan-san of ZYX provided me a while ago for the Universe II cartridge. If the torque is too high, the music becomes tense and agitated, with a reduction in ambience; if it's too low, the cartridge comes loose. *(continued)*

Phasemation recommends setting the tracking force between 1.7 and 2.0 grams; my review sample sounds optimal at approximately 1.86 grams. This cartridge is considered low compliance (8.0×10^{-6} cm/dyne), but Suzuki-san says the PP-1000 is relatively unaffected by the mass of the tonearm and that it can be used with any tonearm on the market.

During this review, I use the DaVinci Master Reference Virtu and the Schroder TA-1L tonearms mounted on a TW Raven AC turntable. The PP-1000 only requires about 10 hours of break-in to sound great—much less than the 20 to 50 hours that most cartridges require for the cantilever suspension to settle. This greatly affects frequency extension and makes the overall presentation feel more relaxed. The PP-1000 remains stable at an input loading of 100 ohms, which should make it easy to integrate with any MC phono stage or step-up device.

The Magic

As the needle lands on the record surface, the PP-1000 immediately displays a lively and transparent sound quality. Tonally, it does not sit at the romantic end of the spectrum, a space typically occupied by Kondo and Koetsu cartridges, yet the PP-1000 does not veer towards the analytical side, like my reference Lyra Titan i. The Phasemation renders music without any artificial warmth or coloration. I sample everything from the operatic Victoria de los Angeles' "Ich liebe dich" (EMI ASD 651), to the folksy Brothers Four's "Try to Remember" (Columbia CS 9179) to the modern indie rock of the Lumineers' "Ho Hey." The PP-1000 always renders vocals with natural sibilance together with human imperfections, but not the point of sounding lean or hard.



On Erick Friedman's *Virtuoso Favorites* (RCA LSC 2671), and Maurice Gendron's *Schumann Concerto* (Philips 835 130 AY), the PP-1000 delivers a rich and full-bodied sound with plenty of harmonic decay, although the cartridge may not have the last word when it comes to rendering the details embedded in these two recordings. The My Sonic Lab Ultra Eminent BC has a faster transient response in terms of the subtle intricacies of string instruments, and the Goldfinger Statement and the Kondo IO-M make the strings sound smoother. The PP-1000 has more rawness and less tonal contrast, but without ever being coarse or flat. You will hear the good and the bad with this cartridge.

True to its design goals, the PP-1000 renders holographic images with solid rigidity, where instruments occupy their rightful place firmly rather than with a faint haze, and without any overlap or smudging of the edges. Benjamin Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (Capital SP8373 Cisco Reissue) does a fantastic job revealing tonal contrasts. It's as if the instruments are appearing right in front of your eyes with a realism you can almost feel. The already wide soundstage of the recording is stretched ever so slightly with the PP-1000, and it extends further beyond the space confined by the walls of my listening room, with layering and rightful proportions.

The second movement of Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 11* (EMI SLS 5177) portrays the grim events of the bloody Sunday massacre and subsequent uprising that took place in St. Petersburg in 1905. The performance is not for the faint of heart and it grips the listener with power and intensity. The PP-1000 renders the mass strings with texture in a perfect rhythmic pace that reflects the intensity of Paavo Berglund's conducting endeavor, without ever being laid back or rolled off. *(continued)*

THE FIFTY



1961 - 2011



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REVIEW

PP-1000 MC Phono Cartridge
MSRP: \$3,800

MANUFACTURER

Phasemation

CONTACT

www.phasemation.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog sources

JC Verdier La Platine Vintage,
TW Raven AC

Tonearms

Schroder TA-1L, DaVinci Master
Reference Virtu

Phonostages

ARC Reference 2, FM Acoustics
FM-122 Mk II, Burmester PH100

Power amplifier

McIntosh MC2KW

Preamplifier

McIntosh C1000

Speakers

Dynaudio Temptation

Cables

Purist Audio Design Aqueous
Auries, Venustas

Accessories

McIntosh MPC1500

Percussive instruments are solid, with good definition and bass texture. While the PP-1000 does not have the explosive dynamism of the Goldfinger Statement and the V2, nor the frequency extension of the Universe II, it does shift your focus to the music itself by delivering a fundamentally realistic performance that closely resembles the characteristic of the Lyra Olympos cartridge.

Delivering on its Promise

Realism is not a word I use lightly. It represents more than lifelike instruments and vocals. It is the cohesive musical force of instruments coming together in such a way that you forget about the individual parts of the performance. The unique combination of liveliness and vivid presence of the PP-1000 makes it difficult for me to identify the component parts of the music portrayed.

Those using a rim clamp or large center clamp on their turntable should be aware that the large footprint of this cartridge will have you jumping up quickly at the end of the record and being extra careful at the beginning, as you would with an Ortofon SPU or Ikeda cartridge.

While the PP-1000 may not be the most dynamic, the most detailed or the most romantic cartridge I have heard, it holds its own among cartridges many times its cost, delivering an immediate and realistic performance that only a few cartridges can best. With an MSRP of \$3,800, the PP-1000 is significantly more attainable than the other premium cartridges I have on hand. If anything, the PP-1000 is underpriced. It has many qualities that rival the big boys and it delivers a level of satisfaction I've never experienced in this price category. I will be keeping the PP-1000 as a permanent reference. ●



Bring on the dancing horses

For audio fans who believe sonic reproduction should be heard but not seen, a large-scale component system just isn't practical. Many component systems require significant space and can be obtrusive in a main living area or in a small room. For those individuals, Bel Canto's e.One series just may be your entrance ticket. The e.One series makes available components of substantial capability but petite form factor.

We had the opportunity to test the C7R. It's a bit challenging to categorize this unit given its versatile combination of features and functionality. While Bel Canto's website labels it a "DAC Integrated Amplifier," the nomenclature proves understated since the unit offers quite a bit more functionality than the name summarizes. If "under-promise and over-deliver" represents the goal of the product name, Bel Canto has set itself up well to exceed user expectations.



The Bel Canto C7R DAC Integrated Amplifier

By Rob Johnson

A m a d i s

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

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

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

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

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



Under the big top?

Well, perhaps a better descriptor for the C7R is the "small top." Unboxing, examining, and reading the manual for this Bel Canto leaves a user with a degree of amazement. Like a multitude of circus clowns cascading forth from a Volkswagen Beetle, the capabilities of the C7R just keep emerging. How could such a small box host such an array of functionality?

The C7R measures a placement-friendly 8.5" (216mm) wide, 12" (305mm) deep, and 3.5" (88mm) high. The entire package weighs in at a mere 13 lbs (6.5 kg). Inside, the Bel Canto's amplifier offers 60 watts at 8 ohms, and double that into 4 ohms.

The C7R's back panel is a marvel of space usage and planning, enabling a generous number of input options. For the digital realm, this Bel Canto packs five digital inputs into the back panel including two SPDIF and two TOSLINK connections supporting 24/192 resolu-

tion. Complementing those is a USB input enabling 24/96. All of these signals are converted with its built-in DAC. An AES/EBU digital input option would be a welcome addition, but it's not available on the C7R. Perhaps there just wasn't space for it!

Analog fans will also appreciate how the Bel Canto delivers. The expected RCA input is flanked by an MM phono input. While an MC input is not included as part of the package, it's still hard to fault the C7R too much considering all the versatility it does offer. On top of this, somehow, the team at Bel Canto managed to squeeze in an FM tuner with 10 user-chosen presets.

In addition to the rear panel speaker outputs, the Bel Canto features an RCA line output which can be configured to enable home theater bypass capability. As a really nice bonus, C7R includes a quarter-inch headphone output on the front panel.



Three rings? No, just one!

Controls on the unit body are minimalistic. After power is connected, a short boot-up process leaves the C7R ready for action. A single wheel on the right side of the front panel, with a handy indentation for one-finger speed-spinning ease, controls both volume and input selection. An inward push on the wheel center brightens the left-side input selection display, and the subsequent wheel movement glides through the input options making selection a breeze. Another push of the wheel switches to the volume control, and that transition is acknowledged with a brightening of the digital volume readout. For such a small unit I applaud Bel

Canto for making the display large enough to read from across the room.

The digital display assigns each input a default abbreviation for easy identification as a user toggles among them, but the C7R does allow the user to create personalized four-letter words – well, perhaps I should say “abbreviations.”

The need for a large display becomes clear once the user examines and uses the remote control. Like the back panel of the C7R the remote has a well-executed layout which makes many options adjustable from a favorite listening chair. In addition to volume, mute, input selection, phase selection, and digital source con-

trols, there’s an option of FM station scanning and a few extra buttons enabling balance adjustment.

Taming those lions

With so much functionality to choose from, it’s easy to assume the setup process for such an animal bears some sharp claws and pointy teeth. Therein lies the irony of the C7R. The experience is mostly plug-and-play with intuitive labeling on the back panel.

Connecting a USB computer music server, a digital coax input from a CD player, a line-in from a Light Harmonic DaVinci DAC, and a Marantz TT-15 turntable with a Clearaudio Virtuoso MM cartridge, the back gets mighty crowded. *(continued)*

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VPI Traveler



With the addition of large, braided Jena Labs Twin 15 speaker cables, the C7R's rear panel transforms in appearance from a few-vined garden to something resembling wild shrubbery.

Impressively, unlike many DACs I've experienced, the Bel Canto's DAC requires no special drivers to install. Once the USB connection is made from the computer to the C7R, Windows 7 and JRiver Media Center recognize it immediately. Once the C7R is selected in JRiver's playback, music starts without delay.

It took some assistance from the user manual to become familiar with all the setup features and to get everything working. All things considered, though, the learning curve never feels steep. The trickiest elements are saving FM radio presets and custom labeling inputs. Once completed, though, the user isn't likely to make too many changes. Consider it a tiny amount of pain resulting in a lot of pleasure.

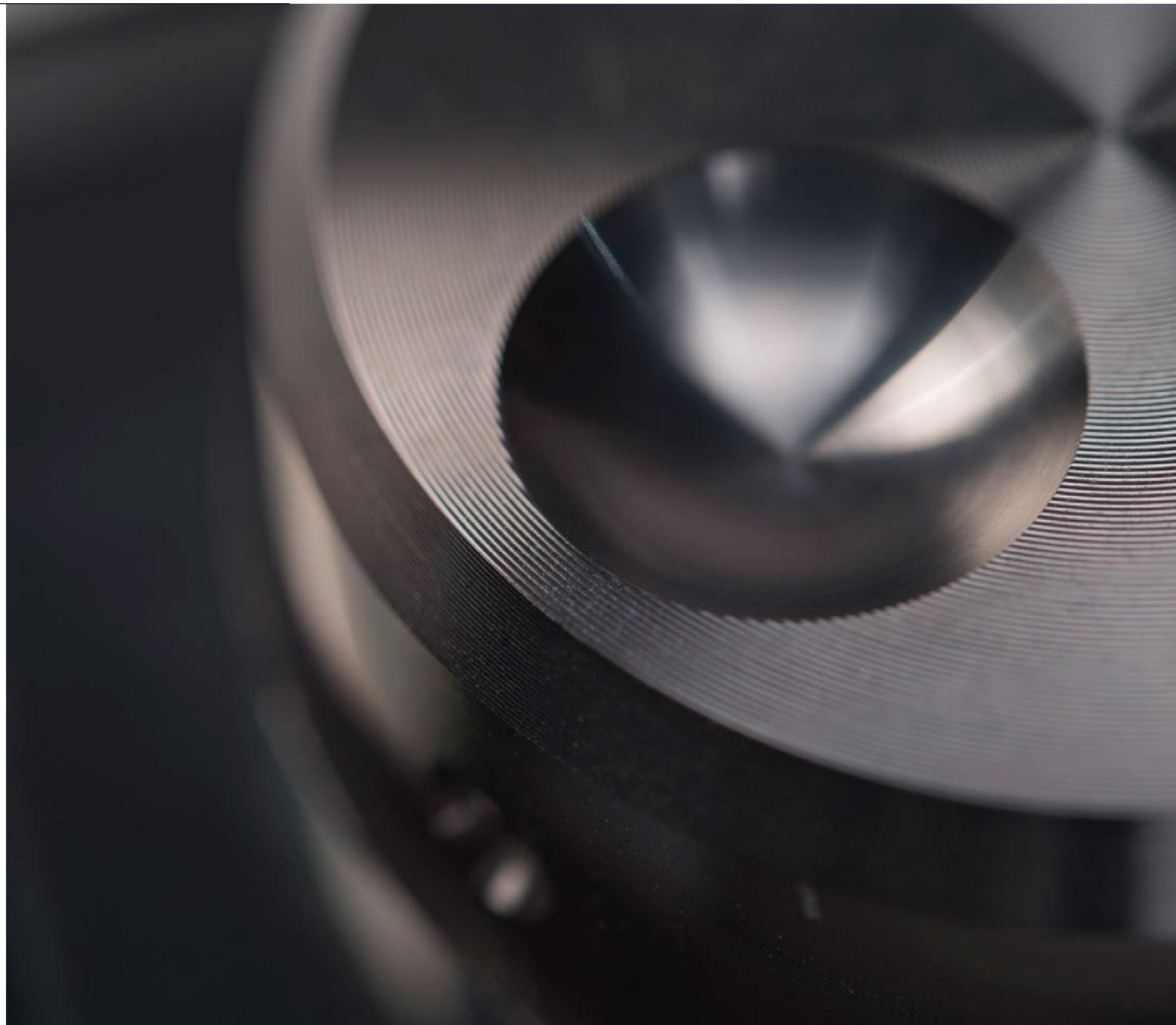
The flying trapeze

Once hooked up and configured the Bel Canto is ready to swing. Starting with the analog output of Light Harmonic DAC connected to the C7R, in my initial impressions of the Bel Canto I noted its smooth, non-fatiguing and refined sonic signature. It would be a mistake to classify it as laid-back, though. The sonic portrayal is one of energy and drive when the music dictates. Even when pushed to maximum volume, C7R shows little strain or stridency.

Pink Martini's song "Una Notte a Napoli" begins minimally with piano and spoken vocals, later exploding in crescendo adding more vocals, harp, horns, guitar and percussion. The Bel Canto allows all instruments to sing out from the mix, while keeping vocals very present and out front. China Forbes's vocals render beautifully, preserving the recording's detail and delicacy. Compared with my reference, the soundstage width and depth truncated somewhat, and some detail like cymbal decay, or the subtle sound imparted by the recording space, are reduced. But then again the C7R is one-fifth the cost of my amp and preamp combination, demonstrating Bel Canto's extremely good price-performance ratio.

My Piega P-10s are normally fed 500 watts into 4 ohms, so I reduced my expectations of bass punch, heft, and control with the C7R's 120 watts swapped in. Even in this system's context the Bel Canto performs admirably with deep, tuneful, and defined bass. With less power-hungry speakers like NHT Super One bookshelf model on hand the C7R offers quite a bit of punch. Albeit in this case, the Bel Canto reveals all the NHT speakers' shortcomings. Clearly, the C7R can encourage and enable great sound from high quality loudspeakers and deserves to be paired with them.

Using the Bel Canto's built-in DAC, the sound remains quite impressive. *(continued)*



REVIEW

While 16/44.1 material piped in from a CD player's coax output portrays some digital glare, better quality digital sources reward the listener. USB sound though the C7R emerges detailed, with a rich and pronounced presence.

When I listen to radio stations at home, it's usually a digital stream from the computer and not a native FM broadcast. So it's a lot of fun to fire up the Bel Canto's tuner and listen to Portland's KGON and KNRK as a radio station was first intended to be heard. With the included antenna, the C7R has no problems getting a solid lock on FM signals and filling the living room with opulent sound.

As Queen's "We Will Rock You" started pouring forth from the radio, I ran for the Sennheiser HD-650s to give the C7R headphone output a test drive. The Bel Canto's sound is very engaging and one I could listen to for many hours with minimal ear fatigue. It's a fantastic bonus to the C7R's great all-around package.

Spinning plates

The MM phono stage is another welcome surprise. Listening to Eric Clapton *Unplugged*, or Beck's *Sea Change* MoFi pressing, the Bel Canto demonstrates its ability to expand the soundstage beyond the speakers. Music retains a non-fatiguing quality with the preservation of detail. The C7R's sonic rendering provides very good bass and highs, and a very satisfying overall musical experience.

(continued)



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Bel Canto C7R DAC Integrated Amplifier
MSRP: \$2,995

MANUFACTURER

Bel Canto

CONTACT

www.belcantodesign.com

PERIPHERALS

Sources Marantz TT-15 Turntable with Clearaudio Virtuoso MM Cartridge, Audio Research CD3 mk2, HP desktop computer with Windows 7, JRiver Media Center 19

DACs Light Harmonic DaVinci, EAD 9000 Professional Mk 3

Preamplifier/Phonostage

Coffman Labs G1-A

Amplification Mark Levinson #335

Speakers Piega P-10, NHT Super One

Cables Jena Labs Symphony and Valkyrie Interconnects, Twin 15 Speaker Cables, Cardas Clear USB

Power Running Springs Audio Haley, Cardas Golden, Golden Reference/Mongoose Power Cords

Headphones Sennheiser HD-650

Headphone Amplifier ALO Rx Mk 2

Green Day's "Holiday" shows that the C7R can get up and go when pushed, transmitting the energy of the performers.

In absolute terms, compared with my reference phono stage, the Bel Canto has a few limitations. The overall sound is slightly veiled, and instruments are not separated as well across the soundstage. It just doesn't sound as close to a live music experience. I need to keep reminding myself that the Bel Canto – of which the phono stage is just one facet – costs \$2,995 in total. Especially if you listen to digital sources primarily, the included phono stage is a big bonus for those with a vinyl collection or those about to start one.

You pay for the whole seat, but need only the edge.

Mated with the right set of speakers and a good source, the Bel Canto is a stellar performer, especially from a price-performance point of view. For \$2,995 the C7R gets you a high quality amp, linestage, DAC, FM tuner, MM phonostage, and a headphone amp. It's a phenomenal value. The task of finding all those components, near this quality, for under that price tag would prove exceedingly difficult – if not impossible. On top of that, the C7R wraps everything in an attractive, compact, and user-friendly package. Given all its versatility and fantastic sound, for the price the Bel Canto C7R is easy to recommend. ●



3050 Mono Power Amplifiers

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 Boulder, Colorado
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www.boulderamp.com





Nagra Jazz Preamplifier

www.nagraaudio.com
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Replacing the well-established PL-L preamplifier, the Jazz takes its predecessor's already refined preamplifier circuit to another level of resolution, frequency extension and tonal purity, thanks in part to a new power-supply module.

The Jazz retains the familiar Nagra Modulometer, which is also slightly redesigned, but the big cosmetic change is that the inputs and outputs are now on the rear panel—a step away from the pro-audio roots of the PL-L, which placed the inputs on the right side and the outputs on the left. No matter, it's a Nagra through and through.

● Read Jeff Dorgay's full review here.



Channel Islands Audio Transient DAC MKII

www.ciaudio.com
\$699

You might just call this the little DAC that can. Channel Islands Audio has always been famous for eliminating the casework and the high price tag to produce gear that performs well beyond its sticker price. The Transient is another product upholding that tradition. Like the DAC before it, the MKII allows the addition of an outboard power supply that will only set you back an extra \$329. If the Transient is anything like its predecessor, the performance gain will be significant and the expenditure will be well worth the price.

Give one a listen and you can see why we've given it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013.

● Read Andre Marc's full review here.

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Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay



Pioneer CTF-2121 Cassette Deck

Yard sale, \$9

Staffer Jerold O'Brien gets the nod, trying to rescue this artifact for duty in one of our garage systems, but it was not meant to be. Firing it up produced this horrible shrieking sound through the speakers, leaving it unusable. But it just might show up on Monthly Equipment Sacrifice, so stay tuned.

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